



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council



***Second-Order Effects of Disinformation: Perceptions of Disinformation and Trust in the Context of Russian Foreign Influence Operations***  
**ESRC DTP Collaborative Studentship**

***Loughborough University and BBC Media Action***

The Midlands Graduate School is an accredited Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP). One of 15 such partnerships in the UK, the Midlands Graduate School is a collaboration between the Universities of Warwick, Birmingham, Nottingham, Aston, Leicester, Loughborough, De Montfort and Nottingham Trent.

Loughborough University as part of Midlands Graduate School is now inviting applications for an ESRC Doctoral Studentship in association with our collaborative partner BBC Media Action to commence in October 2025.

This 3-year PhD project will explore second-order effects of disinformation associated with Russian foreign influence operations, focusing on citizens' perceptions of (Russian) disinformation and related phenomena (misinformation, fake news), on the impact of these perceptions on people's trust in media and democratic institutions, and on the link between citizen's awareness of disinformation and vulnerability as well as resistance to them.

Utilizing a mixed-method approach (surveys and focus groups or interviews), research will focus on one of three important 'battlefields' in the contemporary disinformation struggle involving Russia: the Baltics, Afghanistan or Libya. All three countries have been targeted by Russian foreign influence operations and constitute locations where BBC Media Action is planning to conduct research over the coming years. The location will be chosen based on the language proficiency and background knowledge of the selected applicant. Fieldwork will be conducted by BBC Media Action's researchers and/or local partners.

Apart from a PhD thesis, the expected outputs include at least one co-authored journal article, a co-authored research report; and public-engagement activities designed to build resilience against disinformation.

Two placement periods at BBC Media Action are envisaged over the course of this doctoral studentship, each of 1.5 month in duration, focusing on collaborative research and public engagement activities.

The student is expected to be based in Loughborough or near vicinity and will be supervised by Professor Sabina Mihelj and Dr Vaclav Stetka from the Department of Communication and Media, Loughborough University, and by Cooper Gatewood from BBC Media Action.

Candidates should hold at least an undergraduate degree in social sciences or humanities, possess at least some of the methodological skills required, be proficient in at least one relevant language (Baltics – Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian; Libya – Arabic, Afghanistan – Pashto or Dari) and have relevant local knowledge. Candidates without all relevant methods skills can apply for a 1+3.5 programme, which includes an MSc in Social Science Research at Loughborough prior to commencing the PhD.

### **Application Process**

To be considered for this PhD, please complete the Collaborative Studentship application form [available online here](#). Please also upload an anonymised CV and a max 1-page anonymized cover letter. Shortlisted applicants will also be required to provide transcripts and two references.

**Application deadline: 24 February 2024**

**Interview date: 10 March 2024 (online)**

### **Midlands Graduate School ESRC DTP**

Our ESRC studentships cover fees at the home rate, a maintenance stipend, and extensive support for research training, as well as research activity support grants. Support is available to both home and international applicants. For further details, visit: [www.mgsdtp.ac.uk/studentships/eligibility/](http://www.mgsdtp.ac.uk/studentships/eligibility/).

Informal enquiries about the research or the Department of Communication and Media, Loughborough University, prior to application can be directed to Professor Sabina Mihelj, [s.mihelj@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:s.mihelj@lboro.ac.uk).