EU Monitor

# THREE RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Global politics, as it exists today, is inseparable from disinformation. This has always been the case. Disinformation has been a concern for centuries, even prior to the invention of the Printing Press in Gutenberg in the 1450s. Similarly, foreign interference ranging from misrepresentation (misinformation), espionage, or the funding of foreign paramilitary groups which destabilize a region have all become regular occurrences that most governments, including openly democratic ones, have utilized for their self-interest. The present threat is more dire than in these previous cases, however, because of the algorithms of social media. Social media picks up on unique human frailties, like our obsession with negativity and our proclivity for (often justified) outrage over the content we frequently find on these sites, and propels this content to the most viewers. Increasingly, observers are realizing that this, too, has the potential to undermine democracies.

In recent memory, Russian foreign intervention in domestic politics reached top news coverage when it was revealed that Russia intentionally meddled in the 2016 US federal election, as the Democrat nominee, Hillary Clinton, stood against the soon-to-be US president, Donald Trump. The research firm Cambridge Analytica used Facebook data for research that was then used to create political ads based on our preferences online that helped Trump ultimately win the federal election. This served as a much-belated wake-up call to the possibility of foreign governments potentially altering the result of an election. A study by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute showed that between November 2016 and April 2019, at least twenty countries with elections and referenda experienced attempts at interference.[1] Some of this is directly Russian interference and included highly consequential votes like the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, and the French and German elections of 2017. One common theme between all of these

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[1] F. Hanson, S. O'Connor, M. Walker, L. "Courtois, Hacking Democracies: Cataloguing Cyber-Enabled Attacks on Elections." *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2019. www.aspi.org.au/report/hacking-democracies

is that Russia has increasingly used social media as a means to a political end, namely to create a polarized voting base who are prone to sympathize more with political candidates who have extreme/extremist views.[2]

Hybrid and cyber-attacks are as much of a  threat since they have shown to be effective at key junctures, as was the case when in light of Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014, cyber-attacks against Ukraine's power grid exposed hundreds of thousands to limited or no electricity for long stretches of time.[3] Other Russian cyber-attacks in Estonia on its banks, government agencies, and media resulted in the Estonian state being "effectively shut down."[4] Many could not make simple bank transactions; the government could not communicate with its citizens; and the media could not amend or counter the Russian narrative at the time.[5] Here, these attacks will be put to the side, with more of a focus on disinformation as a conflicting narrative tool against the democratic agenda in the Visegrad Group.

## Disinformation Narratives against Ukraine, Ukrainians, & NATO

Since the beginning of Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, much of the anti-NATO, anti-Ukraine, and anti-Ukrainian refugee speech has continued and even grown in the Visegrad Group. Some of this includes rhetoric like "Yankee trainers

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[2] Notably, single-member plurality voting, also known as "First-past-the-post" voting, contributes to this problem in Canada, the US, and the UK, among other places.

[3] Park, Donghui, and Michael Walstrom. "Cyberattack on Critical Infrastructure: Russia and the Ukrainian Power Grid Attacks." *The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies*. October 11, 2017. https://jsis.washington.edu/news/cyberattack-critical-infrastructure-russia-ukrainian-power-grid-attacks/.

[4] Sean, Nottoli."Countering Russian Disinformation in the Baltics." *International Republican Institute*. October 4, 2019. https://www.iri.org/news/countering-russian-disinformation-in-the-baltics/

[5] Sean Nottoli."Countering Russian Disinformation in the Baltics." *International Republican Institute.* October 4, 2019. https://www.iri.org/news/countering-russian-disinformation-in-the-baltics/

trained the Ukrainians," "Ukraine is just a US/NATO colony," or "Russia had no choice but to defend itself."[6]

There are at least two reasons why these views are popular in the region. First, many hold pro-Russian views or are largely sympathetic to Russian narratives against the West. As Tomasz Chłoń explains in his article, "Does the West Need a Coherent Response to Russian Disinformation?", Slovakia is "deeply rooted" in pro-Russian sympathies that go back to the 19th century because of Hungarian domination and the countering ideology of Pan-Slavism that emerged in the region as a result.[7] Second, many are already inclined to believe in misinformation. One GLOBSEC study found that 56% of Slovaks are prone to believe in misinformation – the highest among the V4 (with the Czechs at 29 %, Poles at 34 %, and Hungarians at 35 %).[8]

However, the most exposed to Russian disinformation are the Baltic States, arguably because of their proximity to Russia as well as their membership in NATO, the EU, and the sizable Russian minority in their countries. They have thus had to grapple with effective anti-disinformation strategies to counter erroneous narratives.

Among the Visegrad states, Poland is most targeted by Russian disinformation. However, the other members are exposed to regular Russian disinformation as well. Disinformation intensified in Slovakia following the events of Maidan in Kyiv

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[6] "Different Countries, Similar Messages. How Kremlin's Propaganda Spreads in Baltics and Poland – LRT Investigation." 2022. Lrt.lt. November 4, 2022. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1813845/different-countries-similar-messages-how-kremlin-s-propaganda-spreads-in-baltics-and-poland-lrt-investigation.

[7] Tomasz, Chłoń. "Does the West Need a Coherent Response to Russian Disinformation?" In:

 Legucka, A., & Kupiecki, R. (Eds.). *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus* (1st ed.). Routledge, 2022, 181

[8] Hajdu, D., Klingová, K.: Voices of Central and Eastern Europe. In: *Globsec*, 23.06.2020, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-readversion.pdf.

in 2013 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.[9] In Hungary, Viktor Orban's autocracy is intimately linked to Russia through its business and media outlets. In the Czech Republic, among the chief disinformers, Sputnik CZ, was established by the state-owned news agency, *Rossiya Segodnya*, in 2014. During the last quarter of 2021 between 1.9 mil. and 2.35 mil. viewers visited Sputnik CZ's Facebook page, which has more than 139,000 followers, as of writing. Once again, Sputnik CZ makes sure to keep a fairly neutral and informative tone when commenting on everyday news, thus combining aspects of truth in their narrative. As Kristina Sefcikova from the Prague Security Studies Institute explains, political manipulation mainly comes from Sputnik CZ's 'Opinions' website category.[10] In it, we see the authors criticizing Petr Fiala's government in the Czech Republic as a "dictatorship of the minority" and a "servant to Brussel's whims."[11] Eurosceptic views are not new in the Czech Republic; they have continued from Vaclav Klaus' legacy through Milos Zeman and others. However, their popularity in the present moment is concerning because they reinforce "Ukraine fatigue" when hundreds or even thousands of Ukrainians continue to be killed by Russian forces and artillery shelling on a daily basis.

A report that analyzed hostile narratives across social media by the International Republican Institute (IRI)'s Beacon Project, shows that from August 25 to November 7, 2022, the most engaged posts had to do with anti-NATO, anti-sanctions, and *us-vs-them* narratives against Ukrainian refugees.[12] There were a

[9] Pisklová, Miroslava, and Juraj Sýkora. "Disinformation and the V4." Accessed January 7, 2023. https://www.sfpa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Disinformation-and-the-V4.pdf.

[10] "The New Czech Government in Pro-Kremlin Media — a Case Study of the Sputnik CZ 'News Site.'" *Visegrad Insight*. 2022. https://visegradinsight.eu/sputnik-czech-republic-government/.

[11] "The New Czech Government in Pro-Kremlin Media — a Case Study of the Sputnik CZ 'News Site.'" *Visegrad Insight*. 2022. https://visegradinsight.eu/sputnik-czech-republic-government/.

[12] "Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine." *IRI*. 2022. https://www.iribeaconproject.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/15.%20Hostile%20Narrative%20Brief%20-%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20%28Nov%2007%29..pdf

number of hostile narratives circulating about Ukrainians, especially on their preferential treatment over domestic citizens, which has been a common trope when it comes to the Roma population in the Visegrad Group. The energy crisis, contributing to soaring double-digit inflation, has no doubt contributed to these sentiments among the population. Protests against supportive Ukrainian policies have rippled across numerous cities in the EU. In Prague, for example, demonstrations organized by more outspoken right-wing groups voiced opposition to sanctions against Russia as a result of the war. Approximately 70,000 people made their way to Prague's Wenceslas Square in early September 2022.[13] Opposition parties and political extremists alike have used this wave of unrest to their advantage, as one report notes, in "an attempt to undermine the government and score political points which could fuel increased political instability."[14]

Other reports have shown similar trends. An international study by Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT) together with Newsweek Poland and TVnet in Latvia shows that across several thousand posts on social media, most highlight (1) US and NATO "participation" in the war and (2) demonizing rhetoric toward Ukrainian refugees.[15] An elaborate summary includes a number of other related narratives:

1. "Russia is actually fighting the US and NATO in Ukraine."

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[13] "Tens of Thousands Protest in Prague against Czech Government, EU and NATO." *Reuters*, September 4, 2022. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/tens-thousands-protest-prague-against-czech-government-eu-nato-2022-09-03/.

[14] "Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine." *IRI*. 2022. https://www.iribeaconproject.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/15.%20Hostile%20Narrative%20Brief%20-%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20%28Nov%2007%29..pdf

[15] "Different Countries, Similar Messages. How Kremlin's Propaganda Spreads in Baltics and Poland – LRT Investigation." 2022. Lrt.lt. November 4, 2022. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1813845/different-countries-similar-messages-how-kremlin-s-propaganda-spreads-in-baltics-and-poland-lrt-investigation.

2. "The US is as much of an aggressor as Russia, as evidenced by Washington's involvement in conflicts in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere."

3. "The Ukrainian military has been killing civilians in Donetsk and Luhansk since 2014."

4. "Russia is winning the war; Moscow's "special military operations" is going according to plan."

5. "Ukrainian refugees are causing problems in host countries."

So, what are some steps that could help East Central and Eastern European countries protect their democracies from foreign disinformation?

## Steps to Protect Democracy

The most important part would be a *cohesive* response across the EU that combines a number of different avenues, including governmental, non-governmental, and private sector responses. Previous attempts, like the EU's 2018 Action Plan on Disinformation, revealed that without a cohesive response, the threat of disinformation will not be effectively curbed. So, the EU has to combine (1) governmental and NGO responses across the EU, (2) continue to press social media companies to counter disinformation and hate speech online, and (3) enact a robust media literacy education.

First, the EU must have coherent legislative measures. To a large extent, attempts have been made at this in recent years since disinformation has proven to be so effective. In December 2020, it passed the European Action Plan for Democracy and presented the Digital Services Act, which was passed in 2022. This Act is meant to promote free and fair elections, strengthen media freedom, and counter

disinformation.[16] It would also impose costs on disinformation perpetrators, like the media outlets discussed above and work online platforms to ensure greater obligations and accountability.[17] In 2022, the EU further passed legislation on the Digital Markets Act which would further aim to create a safer digital space, while maintaining a competitive place for innovation and competition. Digital services present a harm to e-commerce if not designed in a way that serves the user rather than merely the advertising-driven algorithms. These Acts also directly tackle the overwhelming presence of hate speech, as defined by the EU.[18] There are a number of other paths individual governments and NGOs can take and have taken.

In Slovakia, the government orchestrated NATO-sponsored information campaigns that actually increased public support for the defensive alliance "by over a dozen percentage points."[19] The Police of the Slovak Republic and the Centre for Combating Hybrid Threats (CCHT) in Slovakia under the Ministry of Affairs actively map disinformation narratives that could harm the public. A number of think tanks and organizations have also devoted considerable energy to countering disinformation, such as the mentioned GLOBSEC in Slovakia, the Polish Institute of International Affairs in Poland, or EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy and the Prague Security Studies Institute in the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic was the first in the EU to open a unit within the Ministry of Interior that tackles disinformation.[20] NATO has also been active as a result of the

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[16] "European Democracy Action Plan." Commission.europa.eu. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en.

[17] "European Democracy Action Plan." Commission.europa.eu. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en.

[18] Hate speech is defined as, "all conduct publicly inciting to violence or hatred directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by reference to race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin." See, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/impact-assessment-digital-services-act

[19] Tomasz, Chłoń. "Does the West Need a Coherent Response to Russian Disinformation?", 181.

[20] Tomasz, Chłoń. "Does the West Need a Coherent Response to Russian Disinformation?", 181.

growing threat of disinformation in global politics as well. Various means of pre-bunking have been successful at countering Russian narratives around the COVID-19 pandemic in Lithuania, for example.[21]

Secondly, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media companies need to continue their censorship of disinformation.[22] The EU has pressured them to counter false narratives and they have done so through a combination of self-regulatory measures, like removing accounts that violate the rules, "moderating content," and "ensuring greater transparency."[23] In pragmatic terms, this means removing content that is bigoted, counterfactual, and violent or that calls for violence.[24] This has forced them to be more proactive in protecting the personal data of users as well as being more transparent about their policies and advertising mechanisms.[25]

The next part is to educate citizens, creating a strong and independent civil society whose interests are aligned with the principles of democracies, namely justice, fairness, and proper representation in the political sphere. It is not enough to have occasional educational workshops in the education curriculum; the Ministry of Education must enact a coherent program throughout much, if not all, of the core education (K-12). That is much easier said than done, but significant steps show that the aspiration is not a lost cause. Estonia has enacted mandatory media

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[21] Pre-bunking is a preemptive expectance of potential narratives in the information space which are countered before they have the opportunity to take place in the imagination of viewers.

[22] Free speech absolutism never was an option in the first place; social media has already actively removed violence, extreme forms of hate speech, pedophilia, and other sexually explicit content from their websites.

[23] Tomasz, Chłoń. "Does the West Need a Coherent Response to Russian Disinformation?", 184.

[24] Critics might imply that it is difficult to get rid of "bigoted" language or hate speech. It is clear that we cannot dispose of all hate speech on social media. But to imply that because we cannot reduce all of it, there is no point in censoring some of it, is a fiercely inaccurate and unhelpful judgment.

[25] Tomasz, Chłoń. "Does the West Need a Coherent Response to Russian Disinformation?" In:

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education in secondary schools in line with the response of Nordic countries like Finland, for example.[26] In as early as 2014, the Finnish government created pedagogical training programs against disinformation, helping them reach the top place in the European Media Literacy Index in 2019. A coherent and robust media literacy education is an important and effective tool for combatting these disinformation narratives.

## Moving Forward

Governmental and social media regulation is entirely necessary; however, we should also rely on the best media literacy education to combat the threat that disinformation poses to our societies. Those who are not in the education system will have to catch up with the young generation, so various media literacy programs should be made available to them, perhaps even with economic rewards and incentives that are increasingly viable.

As seen since Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, anti-NATO, anti-Ukraine, and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric are increasingly palpable to audiences who understandably have economic uncertainties after facing a worldwide pandemic as well as supply shortages and related inflation caused by the war. It is not ultimately their fault many feel this way. And those in positions of political and societal influence should recommit themselves to counter these narratives since the consequences, namely erosion of support for Ukraine, are extreme and more than likely if the people call for it in growing numbers.

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[26] Tomasz, Chłoń. "Does the West Need a Coherent Response to Russian Disinformation?", 180.

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