

COUNTERING GREEN DEAL DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES IN BULGARIA

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Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has once again highlighted the risks associated with the EU's considerable dependence on conventional energy supplies from Russia. Although the current energy crisis began before the war, Russia exacerbated the situation in an effort to blackmail the EU and its members to abandon their common energy security strategy, green transition plans, and foreign policy stance in support of Ukraine.¹ The invasion has, however, served to expedite the EU's diversification away from Russian energy and has also shown signs of potentially hastening the transition away from fossil fuels. As such, the European Green Deal has taken on a new significance as a means of addressing the implications of the war and of reducing the EU's dependence on Russian energy and its vulnerability to the Kremlin's authoritarian overreach.

Nevertheless, Russia's near total gas supply cut to Europe and the resultant risk of unaffordably high energy costs have also led to a resurgence of coal and liquefied natural gas (LNG) use in European economies, which remain highly carbon intensive. Significant discrepancies in public support for climate change policies remain across the EU. Members in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), in particular, have prioritized other socio-economic issues related to poverty and economic prosperity.² The Kremlin and its European proxies have sought to exploit this divide and have systematically pushed through disinformation narratives that portray the Green Deal as utopian and economically counterproductive.

KEY POINTS

- Following Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, the **European Green Deal has taken on a new significance** with respect to ending the EU's overreliance on Russian energy and exposure to the Kremlin's authoritarian influence.
- Content on the Green Deal in the Bulgarian Facebook space is **dominated by negative and misleading narratives** driven by pro-Kremlin and ultra-nationalist political actors and media, while **strategic communication** by democratic institutions and civil society organizations is sorely lacking in both volume and popularity.
- Bulgarian political actors **amplify and normalize disinformation narratives** opposing the Green Deal both domestically and internationally.
- Anti-Green Deal narratives are frequently deployed alongside anti-liberal and far-right ideologies and as part of **wider information operations** targeting democratic actors.
- Countering recurrent authoritarian disinformation requires a **multi-stakeholder approach** across society, which integrates efforts by government, civil society, and the private sector, and deploys both deterrence and preventive measures in a coordinated fashion.

¹ Center for the Study of Democracy, [European Energy and Climate Security Risks](#), 2022.

² European Commission, [Citizen support for climate action](#), 2021.

Bulgaria remains one of the most vulnerable EU and NATO member states to foreign authoritarian influence.³ The country has long been among the Kremlin's favorite targets and playgrounds for its information warfare. The Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation in the country has increasingly targeted the European Green Deal, as part of its ongoing campaign of promoting large-scale Russian energy projects.⁴ In 2021 most of the local disinformation related to the Green Deal in Bulgaria was produced and disseminated by Bulgarian media and political and economic entities known for systematically amplifying the Kremlin's influence.⁵ Given Bulgaria's significant vulnerability to disinformation and the low levels of information literacy in the country, these activities cast doubt on Bulgaria's ability to abide by its commitments regarding the Green Deal. The present analysis updates and expands our understanding of the key disinformation narratives related to the Green Deal and the actors that drive them, as well as provides recommendations for public policy solutions.

Key narratives and actors

From a total of 479 monitored posts, which gathered a total of 73,033 interactions, 42% opposed, 40% supported, and 18% were neutral to the Green Deal. However, the posts opposing the Green Deal or expressing a neutral stance toward it were considerably more popular, accounting for 64% and 22% of all interactions, respectively. In fact, of the top 10 most-interacted-with posts, seven were opposed to the Green Deal and all seven contained disinformation. Some 34 posts conflated opposition to the Green Deal with opposition either to NATO, the United States, or Ukraine, including some of the most-interacted-with

posts (totaling 3,601 interactions). Additionally, 24 posts promoted energy trade with Russia or Russian energy projects, with a total of over 3,039 interactions. Political actors published only seven of these 24, but their posts accounted for 73% of the 3,039 interactions, including one post in the top 10% of posts with the most interactions.

Media outlets published a total of 231, or 48% of all posts, accounting for 47% of all interactions. Despite making up only 20% (or 98) of all posts, those published by political actors accounted for 31% of all interactions. Government entities and civil society organizations, which tend to be the actors that support the Green Deal, published only 23 and 17 posts respectively, showcasing a notable lack of strategic communication. Together, they accounted for only 8% of all interactions, with civil society accounting for less than half a percent of all interactions. Private companies published only 15 posts mentioning the Green Deal, which accounted for 1% of all interactions.

The Facebook activity of political actors represented in parliament demonstrates how Bulgarian politicians both in the country and in the European Parliament "normalize" disinformation narratives about the Green Deal while promoting anti-Euro-Atlantic and anti-democratic sentiments in the process. Of the 22,141 interactions that Bulgarian political actors prompted through their Facebook activity, posts opposing the Green Deal generated over three-quarters, or 77%. Moreover, political actors also promoted large-scale Russian energy initiatives, especially the possibility of restarting the Belene nuclear power plant project, as Bulgaria's only solution for energy security.

In cooperation with the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Beacon Project, CSD monitored Bulgarian public discourse concerning the Green Deal, climate change, and energy-related issues from April to September 2022 on Facebook (by far the most dominant social media in Bulgaria). The analytical framework was based on monitoring Bulgarian-language public Facebook pages for mentions of the Green Deal using the CrowdTangle social media listening tool over a five-month period (from 20 April to 20 September 2022). The top 100-most-interacted-with posts from each monthly period were selected and manually marked with a set of narrative tags designated by CSD. These tags corresponded to key contextual information regarding the contents or the publishers of the post, including whether the author was a political actor, the established geopolitical orientation of the actor, and any sentiments regarding Russian energy projects in Bulgaria, as well as attitudes regarding key international actors, including the European Union, NATO, the United States., and Ukraine. This monitoring is part of a larger IRI initiative that has been taking place in five EU countries simultaneously.

³ Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., and Vladimirov, M., *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

⁴ Stefanov, R. et al., *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

⁵ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Disinformation Narratives in the November 2021 Bulgarian Elections Campaign: Key Actors and Amplifiers*, Policy Brief No. 105, November 2021.

ideology, clearly showcasing that anti-Green Deal narratives are part of a wider hostility against democratic actors.

Countering pro-Kremlin and anti-democratic disinformation necessitates a multi-stakeholder approach across society that integrates the activities of policymakers, civil society, and the private sector, and makes effective use of cooperation with the EU, the U.S., and Euro-Atlantic institutions. This calls for the establishment of several layers of defense against the production and spread of disinformation, as well as against the governance gaps that enable it. A functional institutional framework must aim to tackle both the supply of disinformation as well as the demand for it by deploying a combination of deterrence and preventative measures in an integrated manner.

A top priority is increasing the reach of higher-quality reporting by improving the media environment, enhancing media freedom, and facilitating independent journalism. Ensuring the transparency of ownership and business structures of media outlets, as well as implementing restrictions on media ownership concentration, are key steps. Independent media should be supported by building funding mechanisms and sustainable business models, using funds from the private sector, while simultaneously minimizing the media sector's dependence on government support. Guarantees should be created to ensure the independence of media authorities from political pressure and for the implementation of competition and antitrust laws fairly and in strict accordance with the rule of law.

Establishing a basic line of defense against disinformation requires the implementation of a digital forensics infrastructure to detect and investigate disinformation campaigns in near real-time, as well as the actors that produce and proliferate them. This includes deploying media monitoring and audience analysis tools that can measure the volume and reach of recurrent disinformation narratives. A more

sophisticated system would also comprise of tools that analyze the digital infrastructure of online news sources in bulk and automatically detect exploitation and abuse, such as inauthentic contact or ownership information, domain repurposing, and lack of a privacy policy or terms of use, as well as other well-documented signs of malicious actors. Such technological solutions should be leveraged through public-private partnerships with the IT sector.

Data collected from digital forensics should be used to inform national security threat assessments and risk assessments of the dangers posed by disinformation to critical security issues, such as foreign policy, energy security, and Bulgaria's commitments under key EU policy initiatives such as the Green Deal. These efforts should be conducted in the framework of and in cooperation with existing digital security mechanisms established by NATO and the EU, such as the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and the EEAS's Strategic Communication Task Forces and Rapid Alert System.

Deterrence measures must be complemented by preventative measures that aim to increase societal resilience and address the public demand for and appeal of disinformation. Providing strategic communication units in government ministries with the funds and resources needed to consistently raise awareness and clarify policy initiatives is crucial to building trust in democratic institutions. This is particularly important in the context of the Green Deal, which most Bulgarians are unfamiliar with, but whose individual elements are widely supported by the Bulgarian public.⁶ Preventative measures should also leverage the experience and expertise of civil society in the creation of educational resources that increase information literacy and are geared toward different target groups. Government support for regular public awareness campaigns, standard-setting initiatives, and normative appeals will likewise help curb the demand for disinformation.

⁶ WWF and Market Links, *Awareness and perceptions of subjects related to Bulgaria's energy transition*, 2021.