

KREMLIN'S ANTI-DEMOCRATIC MESSAGING AND DISINFORMATION IN EUROPE

Policy Brief No. 100, May 2021

Democracy in Europe has encountered a wide array of internal and external challenges in recent years. The continuing rule of law problems and democratic backsliding, the rise of domestic populism and extremism, disruptive social media and technological developments, and authoritarian-state-driven influence operations have undermined democratic governance on the continent.

Europe's rule of law crisis has undercut the EU's cohesion and its capacity for implementing common policies, thus ensuring ample entry opportunities for foreign malign powers. This has been particularly true for the EU's Eastern flank, which has attracted the most malign authoritarian state-driven interference from global adversaries, such as Russia and China. Russia, in particular, has posited conservatism and authoritarianism as an ideological and strategic alternative to liberal democracy, forging ties to right-wing or extremist politicians and movements across Europe.

A major component of the **Kremlin's toolbox for the exercise of its state capture power** has been to push nationalist, anti-migrant, misogynist, and economically illiberal messaging into European information spaces and thus erode the publics' commitment to democratic values.

Technological developments have raised at least two sets of concerns. **Market monopolization practices** have provided some of the largest tech platforms, such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon, disproportionate economic leverage vis-à-vis customers and govern-

KEY POINTS

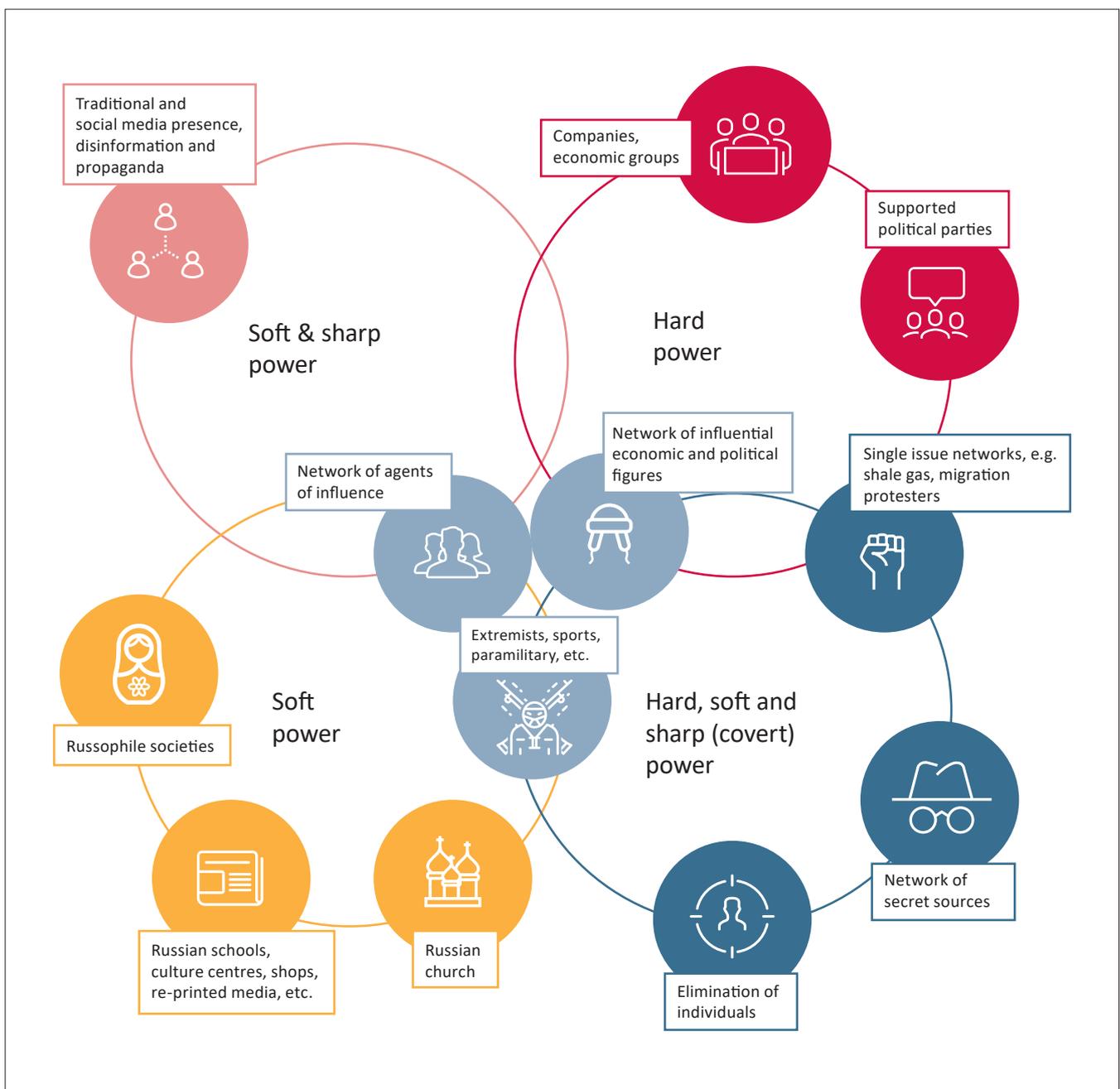
- In the context of a broader **state capture power mix** framework, the Kremlin has launched the most consistent and aggressive disinformation campaign in Europe. The Kremlin disseminates **similar anti-democratic disinformation narratives** across the continent.
- Russia's state-owned media and diplomatic outposts have parroted and amplified official Kremlin mis- and disinformation narratives creating a disruptive **white noise in Europe's digital information ecosystem**.
- Pro-Russian anti-democratic disinformation can be most effectively countered through a **coordinated and cooperative strategy** on governance and policy-making, civil society action, participation in, and contribution to European/international institutional initiatives.
- Countries in Europe have demonstrated a widely varied **response capacity to Russian disinformation**. For example, the Czech response has been one of the most diverse, combining both government and civil society action, whereas Germany has mounted vigorous, yet somewhat uncoordinated with others federal government action.

ments. In terms of **socio-political impact**, unrestricted social media platform growth has provided fertile ground for the spread of polarizing populist-nationalist ideas, frequently inciting violent action.

Hence, reining in the circulation of disinformation and moderating content has figured as a central concern in debates about the (self)regulation of social media platforms. However, uncertainties remain: (1) the type and scope of speech moderation permissible without infringing on fundamental rights;

(2) the most effective means through which content moderation should be achieved, particularly in terms of ensuring the right balance between human and automated monitoring; (3) the uneven geographical diffusion and applicability of rules on the operation of social media platforms, with Europe’s less popular languages remaining blind spots for (self-)regulation; (4) the persistent dangers to privacy stemming from the digital infrastructure of tech companies, especially, in relation to data storage and the functioning of algorithms.

Figure 1. Kremlin’s state capture power toolbox in Europe



Source: *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

Russia has tried to actively exploit these multiple vulnerabilities in Europe in order to sow confusion among its societies and disrupt its democratic development. In its drive towards a global power competition, **the Kremlin has revived and deployed in Europe a state capture power influence mix.** This mix ranges from the more traditional elements of Russia's hard power, such as aggressive military and political posturing, to covert operations or "active measures", to propaganda, disinformation, and media influence. The Kremlin has been cultivating ties (both official and unofficial) with European political parties, in a bid to challenge the existing European order from within. These include engagements with opposition extremist parties, as well as with anti-establishment, anti-European governing parties. Russia has also aggressively promoted its strategic gas projects in Europe (Nord Stream II and TurkStream) by providing lucrative jobs to top European political leaders on the boards of Russian state-owned and private companies and offering exclusive business deals and access to its markets among European majors.

Against the background of the multiplicity of challenges afflicting democracy in Europe, the assertion of a **commonly forged European response** continues to be plagued by a lack of scale and coordination. The continuing proliferation of policy initiatives on the EU level (the *European Democracy Action Plan*, the *Digital Services Act*, and the *Digital Market Act*) demonstrates a growing recognition of the major steps that need to be taken to improve the health of the democratic information ecosystem, including greater regulation of tech platforms, creating rules for ensuring equitable digital markets, safeguarding data privacy, and promoting cybersecurity. Yet, the major obstacle to the realization of these initiatives remains legal fragmentation (and varying implementation capacity), whereby member states exclusively follow national laws for tackling disinformation threats.

Common Patterns of Kremlin Anti-Democratic Messaging

The Kremlin's anti-democratic discursive confrontation in Europe is characterized by **overarching commonalities of disinformation narratives**,¹ which are similarly

identifiable in the pro-Russian spectrum of the media landscapes of four EU member states: Bulgaria, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Some of the most prominent messages claim that:

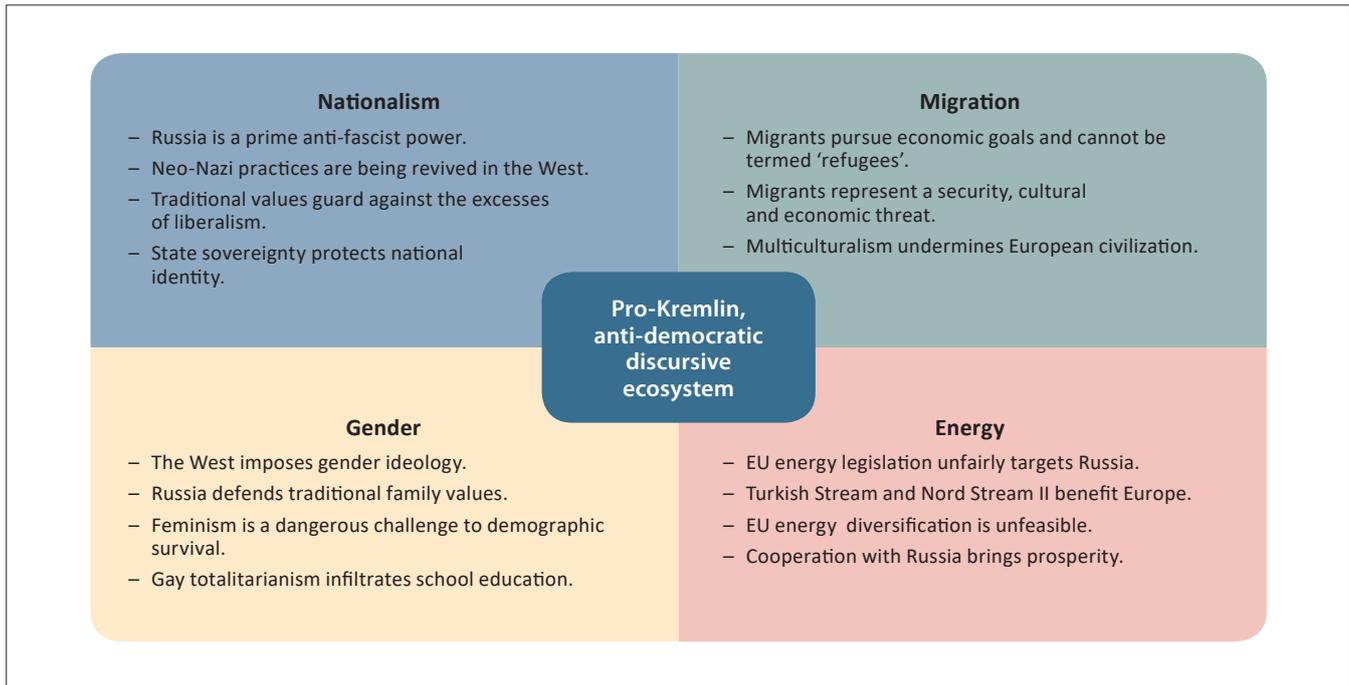
- The resurgence of nationalist sentiments and practices in Europe is accompanied by growing fascist tendencies.
- Sovereignty is the ultimate safeguard of national identity from external influences – unlike the EU's drive towards supranationalism.
- The Russian ethnic model exemplifies the successful practice of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims.
- The EU aggressively disseminates gender ideology, while Russia is a defender of traditional family values.
- The Russian-led large-scale energy projects are economically beneficial to Europe and are not informed by political calculations, unlike US shale gas interests.
- It is paramount for Europe to build business and economic ties with Russia as a way of propping up national sovereignty and interests against the rapaciousness of "globalists".

Differentiations in the content and style of Kremlin anti-democratic message transmission are a function of the degree of political, economic, and ideological distance of a given outlet to (pro)Russian groups and interests.

- The **news sources directly owned by Russia** (such as RT, Russia Beyond, and Sputnik) spread Kremlin-sponsored narratives in the most straightforward and undeviating manner. They rarely focus on nationally relevant perspectives and developments.
- **Partisan outlets** (published by a domestic political party with links to the Kremlin or an affinity toward Kremlin-style governance) relate pro-Kremlin messages through a distinctive partisan spin shaped by the ideological and interest-based positions of their party patrons.
- **Broader dailies** with a pro-Russian slant tend to provide wider re-posting of Russian media or pro-Kremlin narratives. However, they will typically also feature more varied discussions that are not solely focused on the Russian perspective in an attempt to appeal to the mix of views within a wider audience.
- In contrast to the above three types of pro-Russian outlets, **outlets that do not maintain connections to Russian interests** are guided by a more impartial treatment of Russia-related topics.

¹ Filipova, R., and Stefanov, R., *Countering Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021.

Figure 2. Pro-Kremlin anti-democratic discursive ecosystem



Source: CSD.

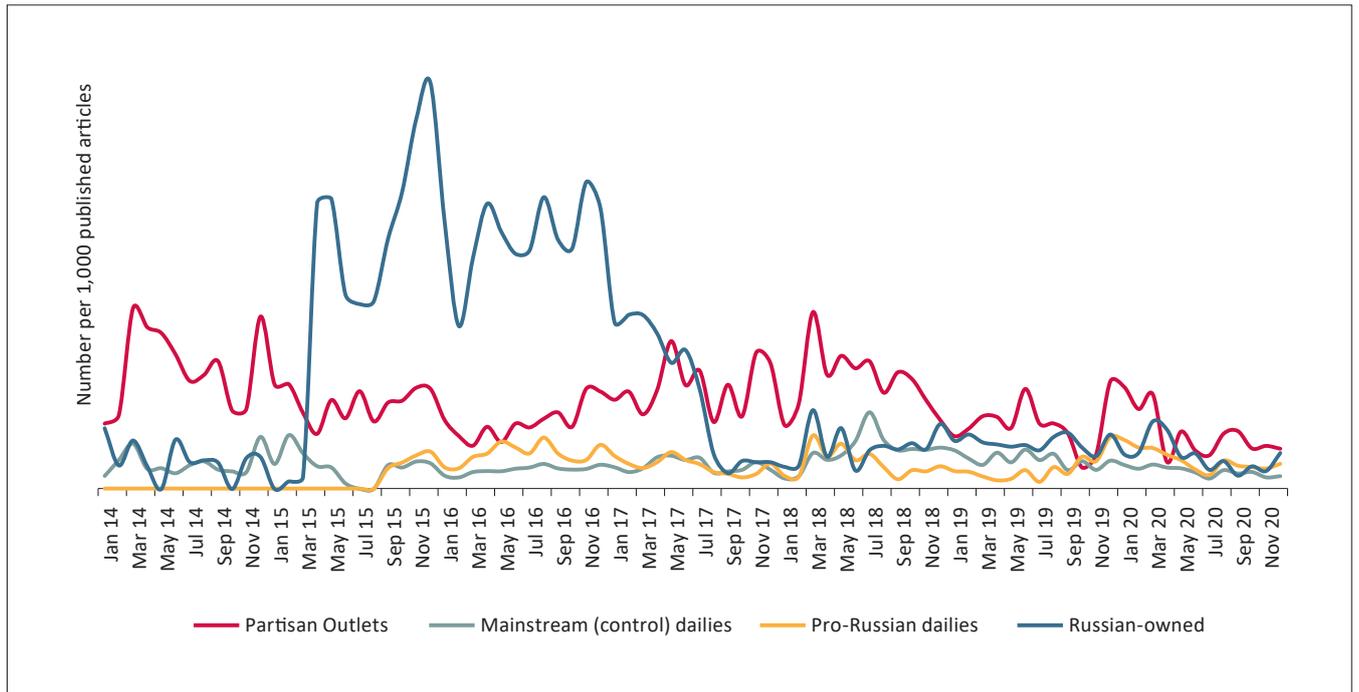
Russian-owned media in Europe are **devotedly focused on spreading the official Kremlin view** of the world. They have been particularly active in the years following the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russian-owned media cover Kremlin topics, identified, for example, by the frequency of their use of the keyword “Putin”, in a much higher share of their articles than any other type of outlet. The volume of Kremlin-related articles in Russian-owned outlets often reaches 90% of their content. They can, thus, ensure a higher and constant inflow of online news reflecting the Kremlin’s viewpoint in Europe’s digital information space. Online media aggregation algorithms and social media echo chambers could then further channel such messages to Kremlin-supportive audiences on the continent, amplifying their impact.

Kremlin’s viewpoints are most often circulated in Europe through pro-Russian partisan outlets, which seek to define their political orientation and gain votes at home by reflecting the positions expressed by Putin, often rooted in divisive issues, such as migration, gender, family values, etc. These views are also mainstreamed by pro-Russian dailies across Europe, as well as by the mainstream media, which following best media standards feel compelled to provide also the Kremlin’s side to any issues they cover. In this way, the **Kremlin might be able to gain an unfair advantage**, ensuring its mes-

sages and narratives, in particular, on foreign policy issues concerning Russia, can reach European citizens with a higher degree of intensity than even Brussels-oriented views.

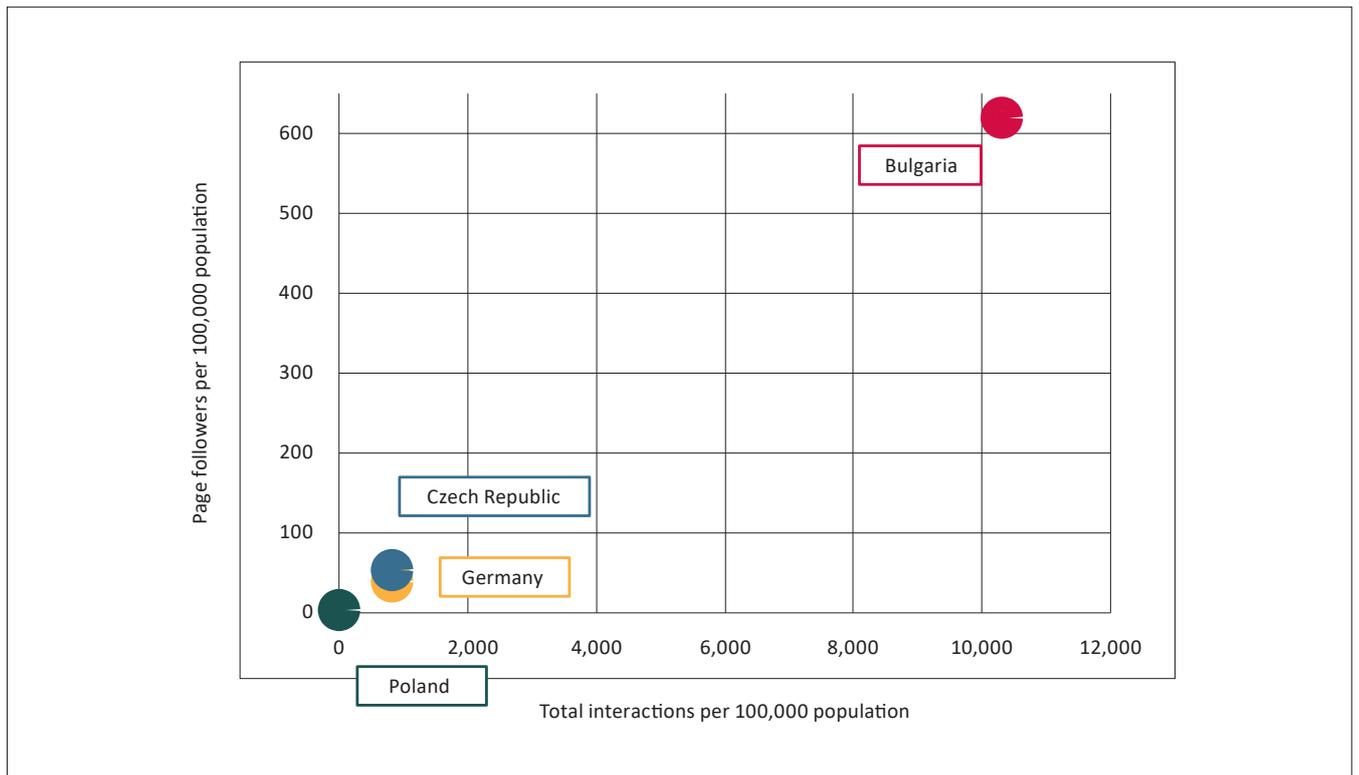
The presence of Russian-owned outlets on social media, such as Facebook, provides a glimpse into the Kremlin’s differentiated media strategy and the outlet’s local acceptance in Europe. In the Kremlin-friendly, culturally close, and economically dependent **Bulgaria**, Russia Beyond has the highest per capita followership and interaction (close to 60,000 per 100,000 people) with its Facebook page. In the **Czech Republic**, which is economically and politically close to Russia, though its population is one of the most Russia-skeptic in Europe, Sputnik’s Facebook presence has managed to achieve similar levels of interaction if not followership. Russia has focused its heavyweight resource RT on **Germany**, which is Moscow’s largest economic partner on the continent. Its FB page has been able to elicit 40,000 interactions per 100,000 of the German population, which is comparable to the presence in Bulgaria and Czechia. Yet, as the only TV channel, RT is much more potent in its reach and shows where the core focus of the Kremlin’s influence ambitions lies. In Russia-critical **Poland**, Moscow has unsuccessfully tried a similar approach as in Czechia, through relying on Sputnik. However, its social media presence in the country is negligible.

Figure 3. Intensity of coverage of President Putin in selected online media in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland



Note: Number of articles per 1000 containing the keyword "Putin".
Source: CSD based on Sensika SaaS media monitoring tool.

Figure 4. Official Russian diplomatic missions' Facebook presence in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland



Source: CSD based on IRI Beacon project Pulsar tool.

In the Kremlin's media influence toolbox, Russian-owned media narratives take their cue and/or are reinforced through official diplomatic channels, including on social media. In this regard, Russia's most active diplomatic outpost is in Bulgaria. The Russian embassy in Sofia has over 10 times more followers and interactions per 100,000 people than the embassies in Prague and Berlin. The Embassy in Warsaw has a Twitter but no Facebook account. The embassy's Twitter account has less than seven thousand followers, while the Facebook presence of the Russian Consulate in Warsaw draws almost no followers or interactions whatsoever. It can be concluded that Russia follows the most active (dis)information campaign in Bulgaria.

Disinformation Response and Resilience Assets

The ability to mount an effective and sustained response to pro-Russian anti-democratic disinformation should be underwritten by a coordinated and cooperative strategy encompassing a variety of stakeholders on three main levels: (1) governance and policy-making; (2) civil society action; and (3) participation in and contribution to European/international institutional initiatives.

Europe's resilience to Russian interference and disinformation rests on the capacity and willingness of its member states to identify and tackle authoritarian hybrid threats. Four countries from Central Europe (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany and Poland) have stood out as representative of the commonalities and disparities on Russian state capture and disinformation in Europe. Yet, they have demonstrated widely varying degrees of **response capacity to Russian disinformation**.² The Czech response has been the most diverse, combining government and civil society action. Germany has mounted vigorous, yet somewhat uncoordinated federal government action. In Poland, media and civil society have played the leading role in countering malign influence operations. Whereas in Bulgaria the overall response has been weak and uncoordinated.

Germany has led the way in devising legislative and other instruments to tackle the twin challenges of

social media platform algorithms and authoritarian disinformation offences. It is the EU country most often targeted by Russian disinformation. Russia has sought to incite further polarization on divisive issues for German society, exacerbated in particular through the migration crisis. It has provided media and allegedly financial support to the policies and narratives of the extreme political right and left in the country. Russia has also engaged Germany in its largest European geopolitical project – the construction of the Nord Stream II pipeline, which has become a continuous point of contention with EU and Trans-Atlantic partners, as well as a key Kremlin disinformation topic.

Bulgaria is one of Europe's weakest links in terms of Russian influence and the country's resilience to foreign authoritarian influence. The country has continuously struggled to build an independent judiciary capable of tackling rampant corruption and state capture. In the past decade, Russia has blanketed Bulgaria with an unstoppable wave of disinformation. The Kremlin has bullied Bulgaria into its southern geopolitical gas pipeline TurkStream, as well as other inflated projects, which have served to support local pro-Russian oligarchic networks. Bulgarian authorities have been unwilling or slow at best to actively engage with EU resilience and countermeasures in the cyber, media, or disinformation domains.

The **Czech Republic** has so far been a pragmatic enabler of Russian influence in Europe, with a high Russian investment presence and many business ties. Some Czech politicians have been strong supporters of Putin in Europe. Yet, the Czech Republic has also been among the countries with the most robust institutional response to Russian disinformation in the EU. Most recently, following a diplomatic spat over the suspected participation of GRU in the explosions of Czech ammunitions depot, Russia has included the Czech Republic together with the US in a list of "unfriendly" states. Czech civil society organizations have often been at the forefront of tackling authoritarian interference and disinformation. But lack of ownership transparency in media has made the Czech information space vulnerable to unclear business interests.

Poland has been the most consistent opponent of Russia's overreach. Yet, Poland's own rule of law issues at home have threatened the country's resilience and standing in tackling Russian influence operations and disinformation. Poland, together with Bulgaria and

² Filipova, R., and Stefanov, R., *Countering Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021, pp. 35-44.

Table 1. Core resilience assets for successfully tackling (Russian) disinformation

Governance framework	Civil Society	EU
Political recognition of the problem of disinformation and comprehensive threat assessment	Active NGO sector	Establishing partnerships and fostering consensus among member states on media-related policy issues
Legislative initiative; well-defined and timely legal provisions in the sphere of media regulation	Well-organized journalistic advocacy	Ensuring fair opportunities for member states to put forward their policy initiatives on the EU level
Well-resourced and independent media regulatory bodies	Public awareness of the problem of disinformation	Increasing the competencies of the EU; creating more binding legal provisions
Enforcement capacity	Building of cross-cutting horizontal links among civil societal actors engaged in combating disinformation	Effective communication of EU policy proposals

Source: CSD.

Germany saw its ranking in media freedom decline in 2020. Thus, the country has undermined two of its most critical institutions for fending off Russian interference and disinformation. In addition, the country's internal political polarization and its stark opposition to Brussels have opened wide avenues for the Kremlin's disruption tactics.

Capture Proofing Europe

An effective and all-encompassing response to Russian (and other authoritarian-state) disinformation would require an integrated, multi-stakeholder approach based on cooperation among policy-makers, civil society, and European/international institutional actors. Achieving such a **whole-of-society approach** to countering Russian disinformation in Europe calls for much more coordination, flexibility, and swiftness of responses.

For its response to be successful the EU and its member states need to take into account **the overall framework of the Kremlin's state capture power**, of which disinformation is just one element. Given the current high levels of cross-fertilization among TV, radio, online and print newspapers, and social media, appropriate measures should be taken, accounting for all types of media sources. In addition, European policy-makers need to take regular stock and build upon the rapidly growing number of initiatives to tackle disinformation in Europe.

The **EU and member states** should:

- Focus on **addressing outstanding rule of law gaps** in member states in relation to judicial independence, media freedom, civil society development, and the digital information ecosystem. Introduce an **integrated annual national security threat assessment** in relation to authoritarian regimes, similar to the efforts of the Czech Security Information Service (BIS).
- Strengthen and integrate national and European tools for countering Russian interference into a **comprehensive response system** (e.g., through the *European Democracy Action Plan* and the *Security Union Strategy*) including but not limited to disinformation monitoring (East StratCom), investment screening, competition enforcement in relation to critical sectors, such as energy and telecommunications, anti-money laundering, and media ownership and final beneficial owner transparency. The European Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the EU, including Disinformation, could provide the platform for building such a comprehensive response system.
- Strengthen its capacity to target **strategic corruption and state capture** from authoritarian regimes in its member states by expanding the scope of its "Magnitsky" type legislation to include not just human rights violations but also corruption.
- Build **funding instruments** to support the priorities of the *European Democracy Action Plan* by coordi-

nating funding from different instruments, such as the research program Horizon Europe, DG Connect, DG Justice, and DG Home. Consider prioritizing support to member states from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as countries from the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood, through dedicated instruments under the EU cohesion and structural funds (DG Regio) and the pre-accession programs (DG NEAR). The instruments could particularly target: twinning for capacity building between member states in support of the Rapid Alert System; CSOs and their networks for diagnosing, exposing, and counter-messaging Russian disinformation; and national public broadcasters and other media European networks.

- The EU's ongoing legal push to regulate social media platforms (particularly through the *Digital Services Act* and the *Digital Markets Act*) should be completed, enforced, and continuously fine-tuned, specifically in relation to the **boundaries between legislative regulation, platforms' self-regulation, and co-regulation** with regard to persistent problematic areas and thorny issues, such as recommender systems, accumulation of data, and advertising.
- Forge a **transatlantic approach** to countering Russian disinformation, including on social media platform issues.

Civil society should:

- Continue developing **cross-European networks** and learning which combine: research excellence in assessing and exposing Russian disinformation in relation to its overall geopolitical, security, and economic goals; big data and online algorithm capabilities for monitoring online disinformation trends in near real-time; and advocacy skills. CSOs should

work, in particular, with media organizations and the private sector to develop new capabilities and build well-informed policy pressure for action on national and European policy-makers.

- Contribute to **stemming the flow of anti-democratic messaging**, sponsored by foreign authoritarian regimes, by:
 - o Building up **internal capacity for online media monitoring and successful outreach**, for instance, on the basis of international multilateral exchange programs (such as EC's DG Connect facilities or US Department of State-led and deployed technology and media corps).
 - o Facilitating existing and creating new **independent public monitoring tools** (e.g., following the model of the EU Disinformation Review online platform), which consistently highlight, reveal, and challenge Russian propaganda and disinformation, following the rules of impartial news reporting and research.
 - o Developing a set of **counter-narratives** that reassert the values of tolerance and inclusivity.
 - o Recognizing, bringing attention to, and comprehensively investigating the **psychological mechanisms** that facilitate the consumption of disinformation (such as cognitive bias and predisposition to belief confirmation; cognitive laziness).
 - o Providing **legal aid and capacity-building** for vulnerable groups (i.e., women, ethnic minorities) who are at increased risk of discrimination.
- Seek to raise the authoritarian state-sponsored disinformation debate and provide workable solutions within the **Conference on the Future of Europe**. Create multi-citizen stakeholder **fact-checking platforms**, uniting the efforts of expert-led debunking and citizen volunteers who track and expose disinformation.