

**DISINFORMATION
RESILIENCE INDEX**



**CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPE**

DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX

IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPE IN

2021

Edited by

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Andrei Yeliseyeu



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Preface

Disinformation is one of the key ills of our times. Throughout the world, societies and polities find themselves challenged by the intentional spread of falsehoods. These falsehoods manipulate public opinion and derail open discussion and informed decision making. Propelled by rapid technological progress, renewed ideological contest, and hardening geopolitical confrontation, modern-day disinformation distorts public debate, impedes democratic processes, undermines societal cohesion, and threatens the integrity and security of entire countries. Consequently, it is of vital importance to improve the resilience of states and societies to this onslaught.

Central and Eastern Europe is more exposed to widespread disinformation than perhaps any other region on earth. This half of Europe is a key battleground in the renewed geopolitical contest that an aggressive and revisionist Russia, joined increasingly by China, has launched against the West. Part of a larger toolbox of political, military, economic and social meddling, disinformation serves to sabotage the democratic transformation and European and transatlantic integration of the region. To this end, it utilises agents and channels inside and outside of individual countries, it injects fake news, feeds populism and extremism, questions democratic values, and advocates authoritarian ideas. The result over time is social polarisation and political paralysis.

Just as importantly, Central and Eastern Europe is highly vulnerable to disinformation. Depending on individual countries, the post-Cold War reform process towards democracy, market economy and open society has remained unfinished, was halted mid-way, or has never really begun. To differing degrees, state institutions, political processes, media landscapes, and social sentiments continue to lend themselves to manipulation from within and from without. In turn, domestic mechanisms for countering harmful disinformation remain insufficient as, all too often, persistent state and political weakness cannot be sufficiently compensated for by civil society and independent media. In short, resilience remains an uphill struggle across the region.

It is this interplay that is systematically tracked and analysed by the Disinformation Resilience Index for Central and Eastern Europe. In its second edition, now covering the Visegrad and Eastern Partnership regions, it provides a comprehensive overview of how disinformation manifests itself in individual countries, and how states and societies across the region have responded, or failed to respond, to this challenge. In addition, the comparison with the 2018 results of the first edition provides a dynamic perspective on how disinformation and resilience have recently evolved across the region.

With this wealth of regional insight and comparison, as well as recommendations for shaping effective responses, the 2021 Disinformation Resilience Index also contributes to the broader European and Western debate on the issue. As both the European Union and NATO have identified disinformation as a critical challenge, the perspectives and experiences of Central and Eastern European members, partners and neighbours carry particular currency and weight. This makes the new edition of the Disinformation Resilience Index an indispensable resource for all those – policymakers, experts, and observers – who care about democratic strength, stability, and the security of the European and transatlantic community.

Dr. Joerg Forbrig
Director for Central and Eastern Europe
The German Marshall Fund of the United States

Introduction

Since the first edition of the Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI) research, published in 2018,¹ significant developments in the political landscape, international relations and media consumption patterns have taken place in a number of Central and Eastern European countries. In the states which experienced modest changes in this respect, remarkable cases of foreign malign influences were observed. The Covid-19 pandemic helped to expose weaknesses in the institutional responses which, under normal circumstances, would not be obvious.

The concept of resilience has become a popular subject in scientific and academic circles, with a number of studies written on the topic, including those relevant for Central and Eastern Europe. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of interconnected studies in academia, which focus on the resilience of democracies to authoritarianism,^{2,3} resilience in a security sense of the meaning,^{4,5} connected also to the hybrid threats and disinformation, as well as emergency and extraordinary situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic.⁶

Since 2018, the concept of resilience has also received further examination and discussion in a policy and international environment. Many of the EU and NATO analytical, strategic and policy documents mention resilience. This is

¹ Andrei Yeliseyev, Volha Damarad (eds.), "Disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe," *Ukrainian Prism* and *EAST Center*, 2018, https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

² Wolfgang Merkel, Anna Lührmann, "Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges," *Democratization*, 28:5, 869–884, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1928081

³ Anna Lührmann, "Disrupting the autocratization sequence: towards democratic resilience," *Democratization*, 28:5, 1017–1039, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1928080

⁴ Sarah Bressan, Aurora Bergmaier, "From conflict early warning to fostering resilience? Chasing convergence in EU foreign policy," *Democratization*, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1918108

⁵ Eric Stollenwerk, "Preventing governance breakdown in the EU's southern neighbourhood: fostering resilience to strengthen security perceptions," *Democratization*, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1928079

⁶ Gabriele De Angelis, Emellin de Oliveira, "COVID-19 and the "state of exception": assessing institutional resilience in consolidated democracies – a comparative analysis of Italy and Portugal," *Democratization*, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1949296

one overarching theme of the EU policy towards the Eastern Partnership in the post-2020 period.⁷ Its origins, however, might be traced back to the 2015 EU Global Strategy, which began using the concept in the EU's external affairs, including vis-à-vis Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods.⁸ Even if approached from a different angle,⁹ NATO has started operationalising resilience in its adaptability to the new strategic and security environment, including as part of the NATO 2030 Strategy.¹⁰

In response to calls from the European Council in June and October 2018 to develop a coordinated response to the challenges in this field, the European Commission and the High Representative adopted the Joint Communication setting out an “Action Plan against Disinformation.” It focuses on how to deal with disinformation within the EU and expresses an interest in working with partners in three priority regions: the Union’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans. The Action Plan maintained the mandate of the East Strategic Communication Task Force and called for a review of the mandate of the other two Strategic Communications Task Forces (Western Balkan and South).¹¹ The June 2019 the Report on the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation specifically mentioned the Strategic Communication Task Forces and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell in the European External Action Service as the EU agencies which played a key role in strengthening its capabilities to identify and counter disinformation.¹²

⁷ “Eastern Partnership: a renewed agenda for recovery, resilience and reform underpinned by an Economic and Investment plan,” An official website of the European Union, 2 July 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news_corner/news/eastern-partnership-renewed-agenda-recovery-resilience-and-reform-underpinned_en

⁸ “Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy,” EEAS, June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

⁹ Dionis Cenusă, “Resilience in the Eastern Partnership – the NATO version vs. the EU approach. Analysis,” *IPN*, 29 July 2020, https://www.ipn.md/en/resilience-in-the-eastern-partnership-the-nato-version-vs-the-7978_1075135.html

¹⁰ “NATO 2030,” NATO, June 2021, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf

¹¹ JOIN(2018) 36 final, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Action Plan against Disinformation,” European Commission, 5 December 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu-communication-disinformation-eu-co-05122018_en.pdf

¹² “Report on the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation,” Official Journal of the European Union, 14 June 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TX/?uri=CELEX%3A52019JC0012>

Among the analytical products, the study “Covid-19 disinformation response index”¹³ is worth mentioning, which focused on the Eastern Partnership countries. Another study on democratic resilience reviewed the drivers and vulnerabilities of democracies to withstand domestic and international pressures.¹⁴ A special focus has been paid to the Eastern neighbourhood and assessment of resilience as a means to solve local conflicts and crisis situations.¹⁵

The 2018 study identified national vulnerabilities to the pro-Kremlin disinformation, stemming from deficiencies in national legislation, incomprehensive institutional framework, and susceptibility of certain groups of population to the pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives. This edition focuses on changes in the institutional setup, regulatory framework, and media landscape, which took place since 2018. A section with analysis of potential vulnerabilities to Chinese disinformation is introduced as a new element of the study.

As in the 2018 DRI edition, disinformation resilience is understood as the adaptability of states, societies, and individuals to political, economic, and societal intentional pressure and falsehood spread in various formats of media, including television, radio, traditional and online media, as well as social media, to influence political and economic decisions, including through targeting particularly vulnerable demographics.

The study covers four Visegrad countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and six Eastern Partnership states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine). Country chapters are context-sensitive but follow an identical structure, and beyond an opening abstract and concluding recommendations section, they consist of the following sections:

- **Disinformation studies.** It gives a concise review of the most relevant studies in the field of countering disinformation since 2018.
- **Relations with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities.** This section analyses the major trends in political and economic relationships with

¹³ Hanna Shelest (ed.), “Covid-19 disinformation response index,” *Ukrainian Prism*, 2020, http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DRI_11_10WEB.pdf

¹⁴ “Democratic Resilience Index. A pilot project in Romania, Hungary and the Republic of Moldova,” *Global Focus*, March 2021, <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Democratic-Resilience-Index.pdf>

¹⁵ Kornely Kakachia, Agnieszka Legucka, Bidzina Lebanidze, “Can the EU’s new global strategy make a difference? Strengthening resilience in the Eastern Partnership countries,” *Democratization*, 2021 DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1918110

Russia and China and reviews contexts which facilitate a country's vulnerability to pro-Kremlin and Chinese influences and the spread of their narratives.

- **Changes in the media landscape.** It focuses on how the impact of pro-Kremlin and national media has changed since 2018. Important changes in media consumption patterns and media ownership, development of the situation with media freedom over the last three years are also reviewed here.
- **Changes in the legal and institutional framework.** This section examines the most important changes in the national legislation and institutional setup pertaining to countermeasures to disinformation in 2018–2021. Apart from that, it discusses the effectiveness of the legal and institutional anti-disinformation framework as of early 2021. Examples of successful or failed responses to Covid-19 related disinformation are also given here.
- **Responses by media and civil society.** This part focuses on responses by traditional, social, and digital media, as well as on civil society responses to disinformation. Achievements of local fact-checking initiatives and media approaches to tackling disinformation in the last three years are briefly reviewed here too.

Beyond the desk research, the country chapters are based on a series of in-depth interviews with representatives of the media community, specialised NGOs, and officials of relevant state bodies. The names and affiliation of the quoted individuals are mentioned if they agreed to speak on the record.

A quantitative Disinformation Resilience Index across the Central and Eastern European countries is measured based on online expert surveys (a minimum of 12 responses per country). Changes in the methodology of DRI and its composite indicators were introduced compared to the 2018 DRI study, which are explained in detail in the corresponding section.

Veranika Laputska

EAST Center

**Disinformation
Resilience
Index 2021**

Introduction

Since the first Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI) edition in 2018, major international think-tanks have established or expanded their numerous projects researching, monitoring, and analysing foreign-led disinformation in Europe and elsewhere.¹ Many more domestic research institutions, think-tanks and NGOs now operate in this field, with many operating on a more local level. The European External Action Service Department's East StratCom Task Force has continued and considerably expanded its flagship project, EUvsDisinfo,² over the last few years. An important addition to such activities is the evaluation of the resilience of those states who can be particularly prone to foreign-led disinformation due to historical, cultural, and political reasons, which is the main goal of this study.

In June 2020, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) of the European Union was called upon to reinforce the resilience of Europeans to disinformation.³ The EESC expressed the opinion that European institutions should create better information campaigns and highlight the important role the EU played in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. The EU's role has

¹ See e.g. "Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard," *Alliance for Securing Democracy*, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>

Alina Polyakova, Daniel Fried, "Democratic Offense Against Disinformation," *CEPA*, December 2020, <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CEPA-Democratic-Offense-Disinformation-11.30.2020.pdf>

"Beacon Project: Media Monitoring in the Age of Disinformation," *International Republican Institute*, <https://www.iri.org/beacon-project-media-monitoring-age-disinformation>

² EUvsDisinfo, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu>

³ "EU should invest more to make Europeans more resilient to disinformation," European Economic and Social Committee, 17 June 2020, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/eu-should-invest-more-make-europeans-more-resilient-disinformation>

See also Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "Tackling online disinformation: a European approach" COM(2018) 236 final, European Commission, 26 April 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0236&from=CS>

often been overshadowed by anti-Western disinformation, promoted by the Kremlin and Beijing.

Furthermore, when the Covid-19 vaccination period started, the ‘vaccine diplomacy’ adopted by the Russian and Chinese governments⁴ intensified, questioning the resilience of the European countries and their inhabitants to foreign disinformation.

Since the publication of the first DRI edition in 2018, assessing disinformation in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, Visegrad group, the Baltic states and Romania, the European region underwent a number of changes both politically and technologically. One of the most pressing challenges for Europeans since then has been the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, numerous lockdowns, and the consequent need to operate in a ‘new normal’, with governments increasingly reliant on the internet and digital tools.

Numerous crucial processes, such as election campaigns, mostly moved into the online space of social networks. Simultaneously, online and social media have become the main source of obtaining news information for many people, while also constituting one of the leading sources of disinformation. Digital and media resilience to disinformation have reached a new level of importance for every state. This indicator was added to the 2021 research edition.

As a result, the 2021 DRI edition studies states’ resilience to foreign-led disinformation, with a specific focus on digital threats orchestrated by Beijing and the Kremlin. The 2021 Disinformation Resilience Index embraces **the resilience** of the specific spheres of a concrete country:

- the resilience of the **society**, including the civil society – Indicator A,
- the resilience of **legal framework and institutions** of a concrete state – Indicator B,
- the resilience of **media sphere and digital field**, including new actors in that area – online activists, bloggers, and influencers whose role has grown dramatically since 2018 – Indicator C.

⁴ Michael Leign, “Vaccine diplomacy: soft power lessons from China and Russia?” *Bruegel Blog*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.bruegel.org/2021/04/vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-from-china-and-russia/>

DRI Structure: Variables and Indicators

The present index focuses solely on different components of a country's resilience to foreign digital warfare. The multifaceted framework of the study analyses a country's resilience to foreign-led disinformation from various perspectives. The presented set of indicators has a **descriptive** (describing a situation or trend) and **performative** (providing an assessment of progress) character. This model has certain limitations due to various factors, notably bias, and lacks evidence-based scoring parameters for many variables. For this reason, for each of the ten countries covered in the study, from 12 to 26 respondents (depending on a country), representing a large number of fields, took part in this segment of the research. Thus, media experts, academic researchers, journalists, representatives of NGOs, think-tanks, and government institutions answered 21 questions.

A number of questions also assessed the progress a country made since 2018. All of them touched upon the situation with the Kremlin-led disinformation, overall preparedness of a state to resist the foreign-led digital warfare, and the effectiveness of the national media's resilience:

Please estimate the effectiveness of projects to fight disinformation and propaganda introduced by the country's civil society organisations and initiatives since 2018 (Question 1.4 Indicator A).

How effective have your country's long-term measures been to increase the information resilience of vulnerable / targeted groups for the Kremlin-backed disinformation since 2018? (Question 2.3 Indicator B).

What is the degree of improvement of the legal framework in terms of detection, prevention and disruption of information threats and vulnerabilities coming from foreign-led disinformation since 2018? (Question 2.5. Indicator B).

Please estimate the level of improvement in information security on the institutional level in your state since 2018 (Question 2.6. Indicator B).

Please assess how effective your country's regulations are when countering pro-Kremlin propaganda content on websites and social media accounts since 2018 (Question 3.4. Indicator C).

Please estimate the change in the effectiveness of national media resilience (e.g. by introducing fact-checking programs, trainings for their journalists, etc.) to the pro-Kremlin propaganda content since 2018 (Question 3.5. Indicator C).

The survey presents a five-point Likert scale where each variable is measured within the score from 0 to 4, where 0 corresponds to less resilient and 4 to

the most resilient to foreign-led disinformation. The survey also included the “Not Certain/Do Not Know” option and a possibility to add a comment for every answer if there was anything specific the respondents wanted to underline. This approach was adopted for all the questions in such a way that the answers would enable the research to evaluate which states were the most resilient, according to the sample.

For these purposes, some answers use “0” to indicate “Very high” (for instance, in the case of popularity of pro-Kremlin and Chinese disinformation), whereas others use “0” to indicate “Very low” (for instance, in the case of the effectiveness of legal regulations aimed at fighting against pro-Kremlin and Chinese disinformation). As both variables assess the resilience level from a different starting point, combination of the two opposite scales make the outcome much more comprehensible. Thus, the popularity of the pro-Kremlin and Chinese disinformation determines a high level of societal susceptibility to disinformation. The same happens in the case of a very low level of effectiveness of legal regulations which aim to fight the foreign-led disinformation.

Disinformation Resilience Index

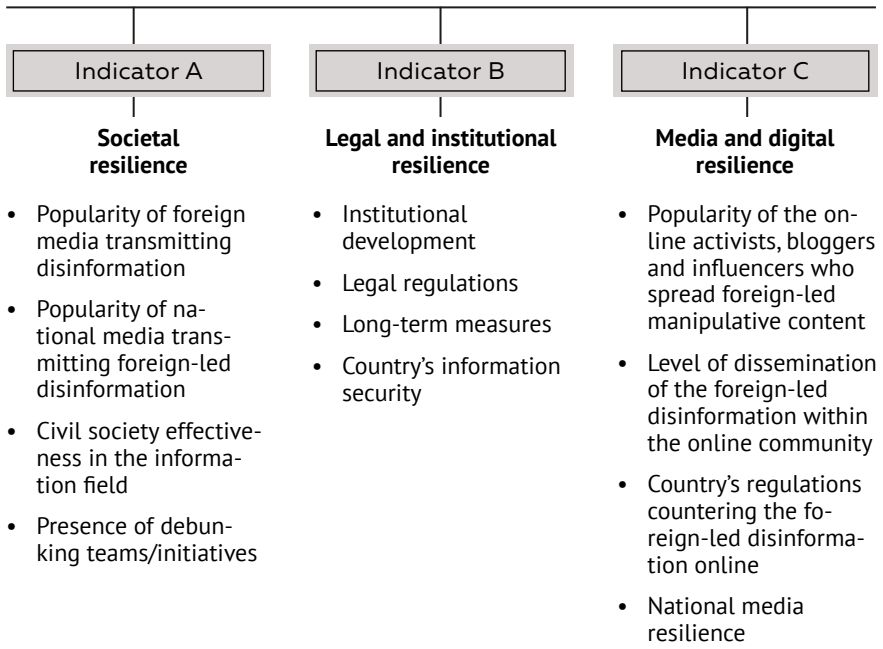


Figure: the DRI structure

Indicator A

Societal resilience

This indicator estimates how resilient a society is towards foreign-led disinformation, particularly Chinese and Kremlin-led disinformation. It assesses both the susceptibility of the society as a whole to such narratives, and the level of response by the civil society to such challenges. Several questions also assessed the level of progress in the fight against pro-Kremlin narratives by the civil society in a country since 2018.

The following variables are used to measure this indicator for each country:

- popularity of the pro-Kremlin and traditional digital media and the level of trust towards them,
- popularity of the national traditional media and media transmitting pro-Kremlin narratives,
- number of debunking teams/initiatives which aim to identify and debunk fake stories based on both pro-Kremlin and Chinese narratives,
- the effectiveness of civic initiatives and NGOs in countering foreign-led disinformation at the present moment.

The following variable specifically measures the changes since 2018 within this indicator: effectiveness of projects to fight disinformation and propaganda introduced by the country's civil society organisations and initiatives since 2018.

The Indicator A is the combined mean score of variables relative to the questions stated below.

1.1. What is the general level of the pro-Kremlin traditional and digital media (*RT, Sputnik, etc.*) popularity in your country?

Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Very low

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very high and 4 for Very low

1.2. How high are the trust ratings of the pro-Kremlin traditional and digital media (*RT, Sputnik, ect.*) among your country's population?

Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Very low

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very high and 4 for Very low

1.3. How popular are national traditional and digital media transmitting and spreading pro-Kremlin narratives?

Very popular | Popular | Moderately popular | Unpopular | Not present

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very popular and 4 for Not present

1.4. Please estimate the effectiveness of projects to fight disinformation and propaganda introduced by the country's civil society organisations and initiatives since 2018.

Highly effective | Effective | Moderate | Ineffective | Absence of countermeasures

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Absence of countermeasures and 4 for Highly effective

1.5. How many digital debunking teams/fact-checking websites or social media accounts in your country aim at identifying disinformation and debunking fake stories based on the Kremlin-led narratives?

Five and more | Four | Three | Two | One or none

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for One or none to 4 for Five and more

1.6. How many digital debunking teams/fact-checking websites or social media accounts in your country aim at identifying disinformation and debunking fake stories based on Chinese narratives?

Five and more | Four | Three | Two | One or none

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for One or none to 4 for Five and more

1.7. How effective are civic initiatives and NGOs in counteracting foreign-led disinformation in your country? (Counteractions can be in the form of advocacy of effective state regulations, organisation of media literacy trainings, addresses to the public on the topic of disinformation, etc.)

Highly effective | Effective | Moderate | Barely Visible | Absent

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Absent to 4 for Highly effective

Indicator B

Legal and institutional resilience

The quality of national legislation and institutional setup are crucial when assessing a country's preparedness to counteract disinformation threats. Scientists and policymakers pay special attention to the relationship between legal resilience and hybrid threats.⁵

This indicator estimates how resilient a state system is towards Kremlin-led and Chinese disinformation through its legal and institutional mechanisms, as well as the level of danger such threats pose to the democratic development and national security of a certain country. Several questions also assess the level of progress in the fight with pro-Kremlin narratives by the state institutions and legal regulations by a concrete country since 2018.

The following variables are used to measure this indicator for each country:

- level of threat towards national security and development posed by pro-Kremlin and Chinese propaganda for a country,
- level of comprehensiveness of the legal framework in terms of detection, prevention and disruption of information threats and vulnerabilities coming from the foreign-led falsified and manipulative

⁵ See more e.g. "GCSP Security and Law co-organises conference on Legal Resilience and Hybrid Threats," Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 7 May 2019, <https://www.gcsp.ch/global-insights/legal-resilience-era-hybrid-threats>
Edda Humprecht, Frank Esser, Peter Van Aelst, "Resilience to online disinformation: A framework for cross-national comparative research," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3):493-516, 2020, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219900126>

content (here it includes any foreign-led content, i.e. Kremlin-led, Chinese and other relevant one for a country),

- level of preparedness of state institutions for the disinformation and foreign-led digital warfare attacks in your country (here it includes any foreign-led content, i.e. Kremlin-led, Chinese and any other relevant threats).

The following variables specifically measure the changes since 2018 within this indicator:

- how effective a country's long-term measures have been to increase the information resilience of vulnerable / targeted groups for the Kremlin-backed disinformation since 2018,
- degree of improvement of the legal framework in terms of detection, prevention and disruption of information threats and vulnerabilities coming from the foreign-led disinformation since 2018,
- level of improvement of the information security on the institutional level in your state since 2018.

This indicator is based on the average of seven variables, which are answer choices to the following questions:

2.1. Please assess how dangerous pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives are for the national security and democratic development of your country.

Very dangerous | Dangerous | Moderately dangerous | Not dangerous | Not present
.....

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very dangerous and 4 for Not present

2.2. Please assess how dangerous Chinese disinformation narratives are for the national security and democratic development of your country.

Very dangerous | Dangerous | Moderately dangerous | Not dangerous | Not present
.....

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very dangerous and 4 for Not present

2.3. How effective have your country's long-term measures been to increase the information resilience of vulnerable / targeted groups for the Kremlin-backed disinformation since 2018?

Highly effective | Effective | Moderate | Ineffective | No such countermeasure

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for No such countermeasures to 4 for Highly effective

2.4. What is the level of comprehensiveness of the legal framework in terms of detection, prevention and disruption of information threats and vulnerabilities coming from the foreign-led falsified and manipulative content?

Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Very low

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very low to 4 for Very high

2.5. What is the degree of improvement of the legal framework in terms of detection, prevention and disruption of information threats and vulnerabilities coming from the foreign-led disinformation since 2018?

Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Did not improve

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Did not improve to 4 for Very high

2.6. Please estimate the level of improvement of the information security on the institutional level in your state since 2018.

Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Did not improve

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Did not improve to 4 for Very high

2.7. Please assess the level of preparedness of the state institutions for the disinformation and foreign-led digital warfare attacks in your country.

Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Very low

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very low to 4 for Very high

Indicator C

Media and digital resilience

This indicator estimates how resilient traditional and digital media are towards Kremlin-led and Chinese disinformation. Unlike the previous DRI study of 2018, this time the research specifically includes bloggers, digital influencers, and online activists, whose importance and popularity has grown tremendously in all ten countries studied in the project.

Several questions also assess the level of progress in the resilience growth towards pro-Kremlin narratives by the national media and on social media platforms and digital media in a concrete country since 2018. The indicator is the combined mean score of variables relative to the questions stated below.

The following variables measure this indicator for each country:

- popularity of the online activists, bloggers and influencers who spread the pro-Kremlin and Chinese manipulative content,
- level of dissemination of the Chinese disinformation in the social media and by the online activists, bloggers, and digital influencers in a country,
- level of effectiveness of your country's regulations countering the foreign-led falsified and manipulative content on websites and social media accounts (here it includes any foreign-led content, i.e. Kremlin-led, Chinese and other relevant threats),
- level of effectiveness of the online activist community (e.g. bloggers, influencers, and others) in fighting foreign propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theories in a country.

The following variables specifically measure the changes since 2018 within this indicator:

- level of effectiveness of your country's regulations countering the pro-Kremlin propaganda content on websites and social media accounts since 2018,
- the change in the effectiveness of national media resilience (e.g. by introducing fact-checking programs, trainings for their journalists, etc.) to the pro-Kremlin propaganda content since 2018.

The average of the variables measured as response options to the following questions construct this indicator:

3.1. Please estimate how popular the online activists, bloggers and influencers who spread the pro-Kremlin falsified and manipulative content are in your country.

Very popular | Popular | Moderately popular | Unpopular | Not present

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very popular and 4 for Not present

3.2. Please estimate how popular Chinese falsified and manipulative content is on the country's traditional and digital media.

Very popular | Popular | Moderately popular | Unpopular | Not present

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very popular and 4 for Not present

3.3. Please estimate the level of dissemination of Chinese disinformation in the social media and by the online activists, bloggers and digital influencers in your country.

Very high | High | Moderate | Weak | Not present

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very high and 4 for Not present

3.4. Please assess the level of effectiveness of your country's regulations countering the pro-Kremlin propaganda content on websites and social media accounts since 2018.

Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Very low

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very low to 4 for Very high

3.5. Please estimate the change in the effectiveness of national media resilience (e.g. by introducing fact-checking programs, training for journalists, etc.) to the pro-Kremlin propaganda content since 2018.

Very strong | Strong | Moderate | Weak | Absent

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Absent to 4 for Very strong

3.6. Please assess the level of effectiveness of your country's regulations countering foreign-led falsified and manipulative content on websites and social media accounts.

Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Very low

Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Very low to 4 for Very high

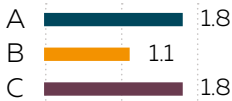
3.7. How effective is the online activist community (e.g. bloggers, influencers, and others) in fighting foreign propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theories in your country?

Highly effective | Effective | Moderate | Barely Visible | Absent

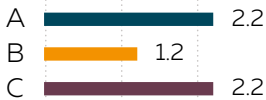
Numerical values (0 to 4 scale): 0 for Absent to 4 for Highly effective

Disinformation Resilience Index

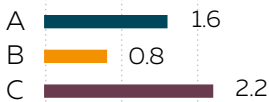
Armenia



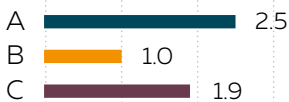
Azerbaijan



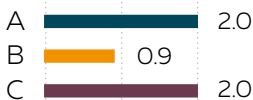
Belarus



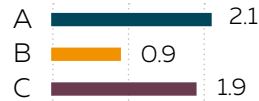
Czechia



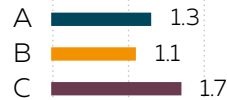
Georgia



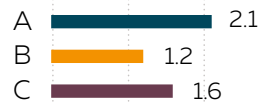
Hungary



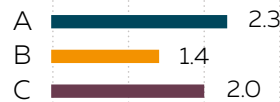
Moldova



Poland



Ukraine



Slovakia



A Societal resilience

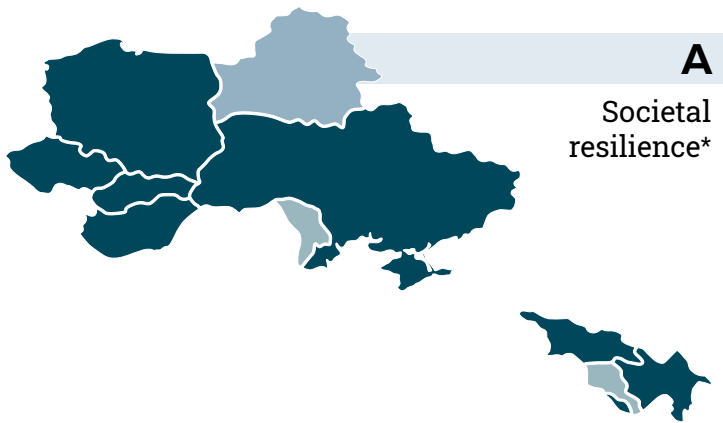
the higher the more resilient a society is towards foreign-led disinformation campaigns.

B Legal and institutional resilience

the higher the better the quality of national legislation and institutional setup to counteract disinformation threats.

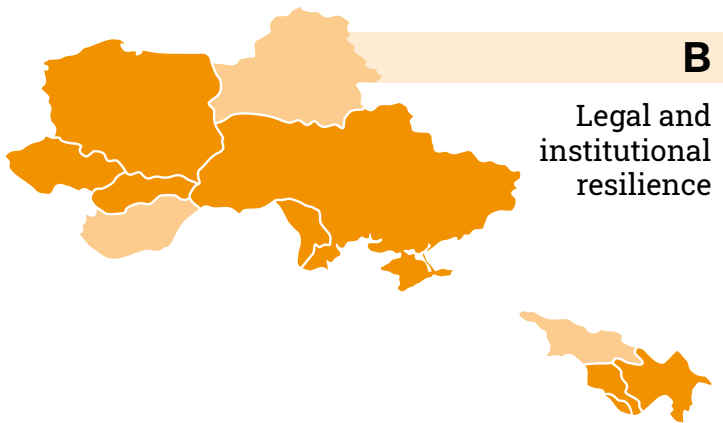
C Media and digital resilience

the higher the more resilient traditional and digital media are towards foreign-led disinformation campaigns.



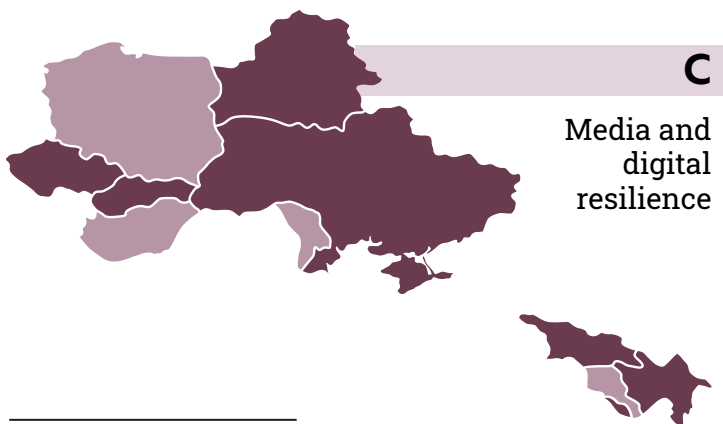
Armenia,
Belarus,
Moldova

Azerbaijan,
Czechia,
Georgia,
Hungary,
Poland,
Slovakia,
Ukraine



Belarus,
Georgia,
Hungary

Azerbaijan,
Czechia,
Hungary,
Moldova,
Poland,
Slovakia,
Ukraine



Armenia,
Hungary,
Moldova,
Poland

Azerbaijan,
Belarus,
Czechia,
Georgia,
Slovakia,
Ukraine

* The higher the indicator the darker colour is on the map

Summary

The results of the 2021 DRI survey showed that the vast majority of respondents from all ten countries were not satisfied with the progress their states made in the resilience to the foreign-led digital warfare. Most of the respondents expressed the opinion that the changes in legal regulations were insufficient.

In the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine, societies demonstrate the highest levels of resilience to foreign-led disinformation, thus societal resilience prevailed over the other two indicators, namely the resilience of state institutions and legal systems as well as the media and online space resilience.

In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova, the media and digital sphere are the strongest in terms of their resilience, compared to the other two indicators (societal and legal and institutional resilience).

All ten countries, according to our respondents, suffer mostly in their institutional and legal framework fields, which are unable to counter the foreign information threats effectively. This indicator is the lowest in all ten countries. Hence, the governments of the Eastern Partnership and Visegrad countries have not instigated sufficient legal norms and mechanisms to strengthen the institutional structures to protect their systems and their citizens against foreign-led information warfare.

The highest level of societal resilience is in Czechia among other studied countries. Slovakia boasts the best legal and institutional resilience. Interestingly, the highest levels of media and digital resilience exist in Azerbaijan and Belarus, the countries where media undergo almost permanent repressions from the authoritarian authorities.

The monopolisation and control of the media by authoritarian regimes in both Azerbaijan and Belarus might even be useful to defend the states from foreign-led disinformation, but at the same time are unlikely to be sufficient

to protect their citizens from home-grown disinformation. Although this study does not focus on local and national disinformation, it is worth keeping in mind this factor, which is an important issue when assessing the condition of media, media landscape and access to objective information in certain countries.

According to the 2018 Disinformation Resilience Index, among the ten countries presented in this study, Belarus and Moldova had the overall worst indicators and were the weakest in their ability to sustain the foreign-led information threats, whereas Azerbaijan, Czechia, Poland, and Ukraine were the leaders in the general assessment. The 2021 DRI results indicate that Ukraine demonstrates the strongest resilience, followed by Azerbaijan, Czechia, and Slovakia. Belarus and Moldova remain the weakest in their ability to withstand foreign-led information threats.

In terms of the Chinese disinformation, the respondents from the studied countries did not consider it a major issue for their societies, governments, and media. However, the DRI survey results suggest that the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia are the most susceptible countries to Chinese disinformation, whereas Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are the least susceptible.

In conclusion, the most and least resilient states have not changed since 2018. Despite many endeavours and efforts in Belarus and Moldova by domestic and foreign organisations promoting media literacy and the development of journalism, these two countries remain the least resilient, which might be especially dangerous for them as both states are undergoing drastic political changes at the moment. Armenia and Hungary rank in the middle with no progress.

Armen Grigoryan

Centre for Policy Studies

Armenia

Abstract

This chapter reviews institutional arrangements in Armenia regarding freedom of speech and tackling disinformation, with a focus on the changes since 2018 and particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in the period after the war in September–November 2020. The chapter builds upon results of recent media monitoring, sociological surveys concerning the popularity of different media, and assessments by international organisations. The role of domestic and foreign disinformation and propaganda sources is also analysed.

The study shows that the use of Russian propaganda narratives has increased during the last three years. Armenian media linked to domestic anti-democratic forces have been playing the principal role in disinformation and propaganda, but while Russian funding of propaganda activities is relatively small, other channels of influence allow the Kremlin to maintain a strong influence. Despite some efforts by state institutions and civil society, disinformation resilience has decreased, especially in 2020–2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the ensuing political instability. China's disinformation impact can currently be considered negligible but may be expected to increase in the longer term, and there would likely be a lack of resilience in the face of it.

The chapter also reviews the efforts of civil society institutions and the media in the fight against disinformation. Finally, some recommendations for policy makers, civil society, media, and international institutions are presented.

Disinformation Studies

Considering the basic categories of disinformation identified in previous studies – unsourced or falsified claims; non-credible claims with sources; claims based on earlier unsourced or non-credible information; and conspiracy theories¹ – it may be noted that the political discourse in Armenia has included all of the above since the 1990s. The role of disinformation and propaganda with domestic origins was particularly important for the facilitation of a regime change in 1998. Afterwards, an ‘imported’ propaganda narrative about a ‘perfidious West,’ trying to corrupt Armenia’s national and ‘spiritual’ values, became a recurrent one.

And since 2018, two major factors have been key contributors to the success of disinformation campaigns. First, the increasingly high level of political polarisation after the ‘Velvet Revolution’ led by Nikol Pashinyan, which was aggravated by widespread control over the media by anti-democratic forces related to the previous ruling elite, including the Republican Party and other structures affiliated with former presidents, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. Second, significant Russian presence in Armenia’s media space, as well as the ongoing expansion of social networks.

The Media Initiatives Centre’s project, Media.am, has been actively monitoring and debunking disinformation spread by many printed and digital media sources, as well as social media networks. In a recent study focusing on Armenian online media, it reviewed the main false narratives circulating in recent years, noting that four topics prevailed: social and cultural issues, civil society and democracy, and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Notably, common trends regarding false narratives about all of these topics were found, particularly the tale of ‘Western agents’ and George Soros trying to demolish the state and national traditions.²

The Media Diversity Institute has published a report with an analysis of the disinformation trends related to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as focusing on some aspects of the government’s response to the crisis, which has

¹ Andrei Yeliseyev, Volha Damarad (eds.), “Disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Ukrainian Prism and EAST Center*, 2018, https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

² “The patterns of disseminating disinformation in the Armenian online media,” *Media Initiatives Centre*, 12 March 2021, <https://media.am/en/laboratory/2021/03/12/26670/>

been seen by many as incongruous with the protection of freedom of speech.³ The Centre for Policy Studies has covered some aspects of disinformation, particularly those related to media control by representatives of former Armenian authorities and Russian propaganda, also in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴ The Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC) monitored Armenian and Russian print and digital media. The first two stages of monitoring in November–December 2017 and November 2018 focused largely on Russian television, while during the third stage between 1 November and 1 December 2019, the focus shifted towards Armenian media. The latest report noted an increased spread of hate speech and propaganda.⁵

Most recently, a study supported by Freedom House also analysed some of the false narratives surrounding social and cultural issues, civil society and democracy, and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The report states that the phenomenon of disinformation has been pervasive for the past three years, to such an extent that it was discussed by civil society, media experts, human rights activists and politicians on numerous occasions. However, although the state has made some attempts to legislate against the problem, “efforts have been neither comprehensive nor indicative that policymakers have understood disinformation as a form distinct from, for example, hate speech or defamation.”⁶ The study demonstrates how members of the former ruling elite have been trying to portray civil society organisations as a national security threat, bearers of the so-called ‘Soros ideology,’ and anti-Russian propaganda. Particularly in the post-war period, the Republican Party’s spokesperson, Eduard Sharmazanov, has portrayed critics of the Kremlin as ‘automatically pro-Turkish,’ and other public figures have labelled such critics as ‘enemies of Armenian people.’⁷

³ “Armenian government’s handling of the infodemic,” *Media Diversity Institute – Armenia*, February 2021, <https://mdi.am/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Armenian-Governments-Handling-of-The-Infodemic.pdf>

⁴ Some materials in Armenian were published within the scope of the project Disinformation analysis and development of analytical skills; discussions in English were organised within the scope of the project Protecting democratic values by tackling pandemic-related disinformation (see <https://centreforpolycystudies.org/en>)

⁵ “III monitoring report: Detecting propaganda and fake news in Armenia,” *Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation*, 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NXCP-xfWt-nykceuxrLCIXPgJ4-PsqTY/view>

⁶ “Disinformation and misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the power of false narratives,” *Freedom House*, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Disinformation-in-Armenia_En-v3.pdf

⁷ *Ibid*

As for non-Armenian sources, in 2019, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) completed the first detailed research into the disinformation campaign run in Armenia by some far-right groups.^{8,9} The EU vs. Disinfo initiative of EEAS has been covering Armenia quite comprehensively. Regrettably, its materials have not been getting much attention from the Armenian media. Noteworthy publications in April and May 2021 covered pro-Russian propaganda in the Armenian newspaper *Iravunk*,^{10,11} disinformation regarding the recent visit of the Lithuanian foreign affairs minister to Armenia, published by Sputnik in Lithuanian and Russian,¹² and a recurrent topic of Russian propaganda: US-sponsored biological research laboratories in post-Soviet countries, including Armenia and Georgia.¹³

Relationship with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

Despite Russian state-controlled media's attempt to discredit the 'Velvet Revolution' of April 2018, labelling it as 'another Maidan orchestrated by the West,' the Russian political establishment showed considerable restraint as the mass protests forced Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan to resign. Shortly after, it also quickly abandoned the attempt to support the acting Prime Minister, Karen

⁸ "Armenia assailed by deceptive 'fact-checking' groups, part 1: the players," *DFRLab*, 2 May 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/armenia-assailed-by-deceptive-fact-checking-groups-part-i-the-players-2ce03daf2d28>

⁹ "Armenia assailed by deceptive 'fact-checking' groups, part 2: the coordination," *DFRLab*, 3 May 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/armenia-assailed-by-deceptive-fact-checking-groups-part-2-the-coordination-2276bb6e3b2e>

¹⁰ "Disinfo: CIA and MI6 changed power in Armenia in order to oust Russia from the region," *EU vs. Disinfo*, 13 April 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/cia-and-mi6-changed-power-in-armenia-in-order-to-oust-russia-from-the-region>

¹¹ "Disinfo: The falsification of the Great Patriotic War is directed by the West," *EU vs. Disinfo*, 9 May 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-falsification-of-the-great-patriotic-war-is-directed-by-the-west>

¹² "Disinfo: Lithuanian minister of foreign affairs visited Armenia to see how to isolate Russia in the post-Soviet area," *EU vs. Disinfo*, 29 April 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/lithuanian-minister-of-foreign-affairs-visited-armenia-to-see-how-to-isolate-russia-in-the-post-soviet-area>

¹³ "Disinfo: Biological weapons are being developed in US-controlled biological laboratories around the world," *EU vs. Disinfo*, 26 April 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/biological-weapons-are-being-developed-in-us-controlled-biological-laboratories-around-the-world>

Karapetyan's – a former Gazprom executive with extensive connections to Russian officials and oligarchs – bid for power. Apparently, the Kremlin chose a more pragmatic approach, one which aimed not to antagonise the Armenian public, which was highly mobilised at that moment.¹⁴ Following the revolution, Pashinyan's cabinet made concessions to Russia, such as sending some military personnel to Syria as part of a 'humanitarian' mission shortly before the parliamentary elections in December 2018.

The following years, however, witnessed massive disinformation campaigns against both the government and Armenian civil society. While media and activists linked to Armenia's former authorities played a principal role in the disinformation campaigns, it could be argued that some of the main narratives, such as the allegation that the government and civil society maintain strong links with Western governments, George Soros, and the LGBT community, as well as conspiracies surrounding the so-called 'Dulles plan,' 'Russophobia' and some other narratives in fact originated from Russia, with Russian media often contributing to such campaigns, especially when the West could be vilified. After the recent Nagorno Karabakh war, some opposition groups and interconnected media started a propaganda campaign in favour of a stronger Russian military presence in Armenia, and even deeper integration with Russia, including calls to join the Russia-Belarus union.

An increase in the use of Russian propaganda narratives was also noted by Gegham Vardanyan, the editor of Media.am, who was interviewed as part of this research. He believes that the number of actors promoting Russian narratives has been growing. At the same time, he considers that in Armenia, the Russian methods seen in the Baltic States, Georgia, and Ukraine are not needed, with retransmission of major Russian channels and a strong presence in the local media, which are already ready to use materials borrowed from Russian sources in coverage of international events. Therefore, Russia does not even need to invest significantly in Armenia in order to promote disinformation. The Armenian diaspora in Russia, as well as numerous guest workers, promote Russian narratives actively. Furthermore, according to Vardanyan, in 2020–2021, Armenia's vulnerability has increased further because of domestic and foreign disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Karabakh.¹⁵

¹⁴ Armen Grigoryan, "The Armenian 'Velvet Revolution': What Next?" in *South Caucasus: Leveraging Political Change in a Context of Strategic Volatility*, Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (eds.), Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2019, pp. 53–54.

¹⁵ Interview with Gegham Vardanyan, editor of Media.am, 23 March 2021.

Seda Muradyan from the Public Journalism Club considers that resilience has diminished, particularly because overall spending on the promotion of disinformation and conspiracy theories far exceeds that invested in countermeasures. There is a fact-checking community, but its capacity is too small, keeping in mind the scope of the work and the amount of (dis)information to analyse.¹⁶

Another media expert stated that in the last few years, disinformation campaigns targeting Armenia, attempting to discredit pro-democratic political forces and civil society institutions, have intensified. He also mentioned the role of mass media and other actors repeating Russian narratives, the role of the diaspora, as well as ethnic Armenians working for Russian state institutions and in pro-Kremlin circles. Additionally, the growing popularity of social media adds to Armenia's vulnerability: the intensive expansion of numerous Telegram channels in the last year is just one example.¹⁷

After the 2020 war, Armenia's dependence on Russia has been deepening. On 27 May 2021, the government allocated three plots of land in the southern region of Syunik to the FSB, free of charge, in order to expand the presence of Russian border guards.¹⁸ Economically, the dependence on Russia remains significant as well. The proportion of remittances from guest workers in Russia kept decreasing for years, and went from over 60 per cent in 2017¹⁹ to 45 per cent in 2019,²⁰ but nonetheless a number of households remained dependent on such remittances. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a loss of jobs for many guest workers, and then the war made the socio-economic conditions even worse. The loosening of travel restrictions has therefore become vital for many Armenian families, giving Russia additional leverage.

China's information impact in Armenia can currently be considered to be negligible. The Freedom House Nations in Transit 2020 report, which paid particular attention to the Chinese influence in a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and in Central Asia, mentioned three

¹⁶ Interview with Seda Muradyan, project manager at the Public Journalist Club, 31 March 2021.

¹⁷ Interview with anonymous political analyst, 22 March 2021.

¹⁸ Government decree 876-A [in Armenian], E-government portal of Armenia, 27 May 2021, <https://www.e-gov.am/gov-decrees/item/36268/>

¹⁹ Richard Giragosian, "Armenia," in: Andrei Yeliseyev, Volha Damarad (eds.), "Disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe", *Ukrainian Prism* and *EAST Center*, 2018, p. 30.

²⁰ Sona Hergnyan, "2019: A record \$1.454 billion in overseas bank transfers from Armenia," *Hetq*, 12 February 2020, <https://hetq.am/en/article/113230>

specific influence tools: surveillance technologies, ‘debt diplomacy’ and influence campaigns, with the report considering the latter two absent from Armenia.²¹ Regarding surveillance technologies, a Eurasianet report revealed in 2019 that the Pashinyan government was continuing negotiations with Huawei, which had begun in 2017, during the administration of former president Serzh Sargsyan, to bring ‘Smart City’ technology to Yerevan. That could entail, inter alia, the deployment of a CCTV network with artificial intelligence-driven facial recognition software, so there were concerns that the data harvested could be transferred to China. Following the report, an official from the office of the mayor of Yerevan stated that the negotiations were suspended.²²

During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, some pro-Chinese narratives played a central role in Russia’s fairly aggressive propaganda campaign, but no direct Chinese involvement could be observed in Armenia. It could be suggested that considering the capacity to run influence campaigns in Armenia and the wider region, Russia outperforms China, but is also willing to symbiotically share certain capabilities, and, as a result, China does not need to engage in a disinformation competition with Russia.²³

Gegham Vardanyan has not observed China’s information impact, except for Covid-19 related issues, but suggests that the Armenian public view China largely positively, perhaps because of the widespread Russian media coverage. Vardanyan assumes that China’s influence may increase in tune with their growing regional interests.²⁴ Another interviewed expert suggested that, as it stands, China is unable to compete with Russia in Armenia, given the large Armenian diaspora and guest workers in Russia, the remaining popularity of the Russian language in Armenia, and other factors. At the same time, should China choose to engage in intensive propaganda, elements of the Armenian population inclined towards authoritarianism could be susceptible and multiply its effect. Even pro-democracy elements of the Armenian public have

²¹ “Nations in Transit 2020,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>

²² “Freedom on the Net 2020,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-net/2020>

²³ Armen Grigoryan, “Disinformation and other tools of antidemocratic influence: an Armenian outlook in the EU and Eastern Partnership context,” *Centre for Policy Studies EaP Monthly Bulletin* #2, April 2020, https://centreforpolycystudies.org/gallery/CPS_EaP_bulletin2.pdf

²⁴ Interview with Gegham Vardanyan.

expressed positive thoughts towards China and Chinese foreign policy, which can be perhaps explained by a lack of public awareness, with many Armenians considering China to be a peaceful, non-aggressive and constructive actor.²⁵

A nationwide poll conducted by the International Republican Institute's Centre for Insights in Survey Research between 8 April and 4 May 2021 included the question on the current state of the relationship between different countries and the European Union. The relationship with Russia was believed to be the best by the second largest number of respondents ('very good' – 10 per cent, 'good' – 60 per cent; France received the highest score – 19 per cent and 60 per cent respectively). China ranked in fourth place ('very good' – 3 per cent, 'good' – 61 per cent), surpassed by the U.S. (6 per cent and 59 per cent respectively). In China's case, the number of uncertain respondents or those refusing to answer that question (difficult to answer/refuse to answer) was the highest – 27 per cent; for France and Russia that number was equal, 14 per cent, and for the U.S. – 20 per cent.²⁶

Changes in the national media landscape

Armenia ranked 61st in the World Press Freedom Index 2020 released by Reporters without Borders (RSF), which measures freedom of speech globally. In comparison, before 2018's 'Velvet Revolution,' Armenia ranked 80th. In the 2021 edition of the Index, however, Armenia has fallen to 63rd place. RSF's narrative report reads:

Media diversity has blossomed but the government that emerged from Armenia's "velvet revolution" in the spring of 2018 has failed to reduce the media's polarization. The editorial policies of the main TV channels coincide with the interests of their owners. (...) The involvement of the security services in combating disinformation, followed by arrests of social media users, and attempts to legislate without prior discussion with civil society and journalists are alarming. However, investigative journalism is flourishing online and is well placed to play a major role in a national offensive against corruption.²⁷

²⁵ Interview with anonymous expert, 22 March 2021.

²⁶ "IRI Armenia poll shows concerns for political instability, skepticism for COVID-19 vaccines, strong voter enthusiasm," *IRI*, 2021, <https://www.iri.org/resource/iri-armenia-poll-shows-concerns-political-instability-skepticism-covid-19-vaccines-strong>

²⁷ "Diversity but not yet independence," *RSF 2021*, <https://rsf.org/en/armenia>

Armenia has also maintained the 'partly free' status in the Freedom in the World 2021 score by Freedom House, yet with the score downgraded to 55 (from 53 in 2020). Regarding media freedom, Freedom House noted that independent and investigative outlets operate relatively freely, but generally publish online, while most print and broadcast outlets are affiliated with political or larger business interests.²⁸ It should be noted that most digital media independent from such interests have to rely on funding from the Open Society Foundations – Armenia or foreign foundations such as German Marshall Fund's Black Sea Trust, European Endowment for Democracy, National Endowment for Democracy, Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), USAID, and others.

Internet access has been growing: *"In 2019, the number of broadband internet subscriptions increased by 6.7 percent over 2018, to 3.09 million [...] 96 per cent of households in Armenia have access to the Internet. 3G service is widely available, covering about 90 percent of the country (excluding mostly unpopulated, mountainous regions). 4G+ networks, meanwhile, now cover 89.5 per cent of settlements. [...] Connection speeds improved during the coverage period."*²⁹

Region Research Centre's public opinion poll conducted from 10 January to 10 February 2019 studied the population's media preferences and primary sources of information, media consumption frequency, and content preferences. The poll involved respondents from all regions of Armenia with proportional representation of urban and rural settlements based on actual population numbers. The internet was mentioned as the primary news source by 58.9 per cent of respondents, while 35.7 per cent mentioned television. The role of radio and newspapers as primary news sources was negligible: 1 per cent and 0.3 per cent respectively. The preference for the internet was highest among respondents in the age group of 18–29; the proportion decreased depending on increasing age. The majority of respondents aged 50 and over mentioned television as the primary source of information. Preferences also depended on education levels and social background. Among university graduates, twice as many people preferred the internet compared to those who mentioned television. 25.4 per cent of the respondents watched Russian television on a daily

²⁸ "Freedom in the World 2021," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2021>

²⁹ "Freedom on the Net 2020," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-net/2020>

basis, while local television channels had a smaller audience (21.4 per cent); 53.8 per cent said they never watch local television channel.³⁰

As that poll did not measure the popularity of different channels, it could be noted that all Armenian telecommunication companies providing cable internet connection (currently available in all urban settlements) and a number of smaller cable companies with monthly subscription prices starting from AMD 3,000 (about EUR 5), provide access to Russian thematic satellite channels, including about a dozen around-the-clock film channels (mostly showing American and European films), channels specialising in football, tennis, or other sports, etc. So, larger popularity of Russian television compared to Armenian television does not necessarily entail a larger exposure to the propaganda content of *Rossiya-24* and other state-controlled channels. Additionally, many Armenian channels (including some around-the-clock channels) also show foreign films dubbed into Russian.

As demonstrated in the 2018 DRI study, in 2012, over 50 per cent of Armenians favoured English-language instruction in secondary schools, while only 44 per cent preferred Russian.³¹ A Caucasus Barometer survey conducted in 2020 showed a further shift in favour of English: when asked which foreign language, if any, should be mandatory in secondary schools, 59 per cent mentioned English while 33 per cent preferred Russian.³² So, Richard Giragosian's observation remains valid: "*Knowing the language does not necessarily make the Armenian population inclined to easily accept the disinformation script. Even Russian language proficiency is a more complex factor.*"³³

Among the respondents to the recent IRI poll, 41 per cent replied 'every day' to the question 'How often do you use television for getting political news,' while 32 per cent replied 'never.' In terms of popularity, the poll measured only Armenian channels. As in the previous case,³⁴ *Public TV* (mentioned as the 1st or 2nd choice by 39 per cent), *Shant TV*, and *Armenia TV* remained

³⁰ "Media consumption and information preferences in Armenia – 2019," *Region Research Centre*, <https://www.regioncenter.info/sites/default/files/OP%20Media%20Consumption%202019%20-%20ENG.pdf>

³¹ Richard Giragosian, op. cit., p. 29.

³² 'Caucasus Barometer' is an annual household survey about social economic issues and political attitudes conducted by CRRC, 2020, <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2019am/FLMANDSC/>

³³ Richard Giragosian, op. cit., p. 29.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

the most popular ones (37 per cent each), followed by *ArmNews*, *Yerkir Media*, *TV5* and *Kentron TV*.³⁵ It could be stated that privately owned *Armenia TV*, *ArmNews*, *Yerkir Media*, and *TV5* are strongly biased in favour of former presidents, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, and their ally, the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaksutyun, and *Kentron TV* represents the interests of large business owner and leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party, Gagik Tsarukyan.

The poll also showed that many respondents preferred social media networks as their daily source of political news: 47 per cent mentioned Facebook, 23 per cent – Youtube, while Instagram and Telegram were mentioned by 9 per cent each, and Twitter – by 3 per cent. The poll did not cover VK or Odnoklassniki. The strongest preference for social networks was expressed by the age group of 18–35, closely followed by the 36–55 group, with almost equal distribution between Yerevan, other urban settlements and rural areas. At the same time, when asked which media, such as a specific television channel, radio station, newspaper, website, social media network, etc. they considered most trustworthy for political information, less than 3 per cent mentioned social media as either 1st or 2nd choice: the most popular answers were *Public TV*, *Shant TV* and *Armenia TV* (19 per cent, 18 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively), followed by *Azatusyun (RFE/RL Armenian Service)* with 9 per cent.³⁶

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

The new National Security Strategy adopted in 2020 contains a one-page section titled ‘Ensuring open and safe information and cyber domains,’ which views cyberattacks by foreign states, international terrorist organisations, criminal groups and individuals as threats for information security, and acknowledges that ‘information wars, including propaganda, manipulations, fake news, and other disinformation tools are becoming more prevalent, and often target democratic values.’ The report also says, “A major challenge is the imperfection of a comprehensive state policy regulating the information and cybersecurity sector.” The strategy pledges to develop national information and cyber

³⁵ “IRI Armenia poll ...”, op. cit.

³⁶ Ibid

capabilities.³⁷ The strategy formulation may be considered advanced compared to the previous one adopted in 2007,³⁸ yet, regarding practical steps, little progress has been achieved.

The interviewed experts note that there is a lack of articulated information policy, except some guidelines vis-à-vis Azerbaijan,³⁹ and the government's approach is rather unskilful and non-systematic, so while some wishes have been expressed, there is a lack of a strategic thinking.⁴⁰ Even though, for example, media literacy has been included in the currently discussed pre-school educational standards, which may be assessed as positive, there is no comprehensible strategy, neither is there one regarding digital and information security, which can be seen each time there is a crisis, for example, in case of hacker attacks.⁴¹

Article 44 of the Law on Audiovisual Media adopted in 2020, which regulates broadcasting, television and radio, stipulates that only Armenian media companies may get slots in the public multiplex, unless stipulated otherwise by international agreements concluded before the article's codification (by a transitional provision, the specific clause excluding foreign broadcasters would enter into force from 1 January 2021).⁴² Before adoption of the law, media and other entities connected to the former authorities made accusations regarding the ostensibly 'anti-Russian' nature of the law, as it was expected that two of four state-controlled Russian TV companies (the fifth Russian channel, *Mir*, had been established by an intergovernmental agreement within the Commonwealth of Independent States, so it would be exempted) would lose their slots in the public multiplex (although *CNN* would also fall of the air). Officials refuted such allegations. Deputy speaker of the parliament, Alen Simonyan, asserted that including foreign-language TV channels in the public multiplex, which has limited coverage compared to the internet and cable networks,

³⁷ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia, Ministry of foreign affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2020, pp. 29–30, <https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/security%20and%20defense/Armenia%202020%20National%20Security%20Strategy.pdf>

³⁸ Richard Giragosian, op. cit., p. 40.

³⁹ Interview with Gegham Vardanyan.

⁴⁰ Interview with an anonymous expert.

⁴¹ Interview with Seda Muradyan.

⁴² Law on Audiovisual Media [in Armenian], Armenia's legal information system Arlis.am, 6 August 2020, <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=145079>

would be 'nonsensical.'⁴³ The head of the National Commission on Television and Radio, Tigran Hakobyan, noted that no other country allowed politics-oriented foreign broadcasters on the public multiplex, but still licences could be issued based on international agreements.⁴⁴ In any case, within days after the Russia-brokered ceasefire in November 2020, an intergovernmental agreement allowing all Russian channels to continue broadcasting was signed.

Regarding responses against Covid-19 disinformation and conspiracies, "while the attempts to control the flow of information with regulation mostly failed, the Armenian authorities also implemented certain steps, which turned out to be much more successful."⁴⁵ Establishing the Armenian Unified Information Centre with the objective to "provide reliable and urgent information to the public" was one of such steps: daily live press conferences broadcasted live on many channels helped to deliver the government's key messages, while providing easy access for journalists. Daily updates on Covid-19 statistics were widely disseminated on social media platforms and republished by much of the media.⁴⁶

Additionally, the government-funded Information Checking Centre (Infocheck.am) also focuses on fact-checking; it has been noted that despite some degree of pro-government bias, "it has been a useful reference point for journalists," particularly regarding fact-checking related to Covid-19.⁴⁷ At the same time, using state-of-emergency powers in March 2020 to restrict the media from reporting information from non-official sources, and compelling several outlets and journalists to edit stories and social media posts, were examples of failures in the response. The pressure from journalists and media advocacy groups resulted in the removal of that restriction within a month.⁴⁸

In 2020, parliament adopted an amendment to the Criminal Code proposed by the Ministry of Justice, recognising public calls for violence based on

⁴³ "Alen Simonyan: It is nonsense that the multiplex includes foreign language channels, yet the ministry of foreign affairs is negotiating having Russian channels" [in Armenian], *Tert.am*, 30 June 2020, <https://www.tert.am/am/news/2020/06/30/Alen-simonyan/3332501>

⁴⁴ Narine Ghalechyan, "In no other country does the public multiplex include foreign TV channels mainly focused on politics" [in Armenian], *RFE/RL Armenian Service*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30755516.html>

⁴⁵ "Armenian government's handling of the infodemic", op.cit.

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ "Freedom in the World 2021", op.cit.

hate speech as a criminal offence. However, there are no effective legal mechanisms against other aspects of hate speech: “hate speech, disinformation and fake news, insults and defamation continue to be widespread in the highly politicised and polarised media. The authorities, deciding to counteract these phenomena, have come up with a number of legislative initiatives in recent months, which were assessed by the journalistic community as disproportionate, threatening freedom of speech, and not in line with international standards.”⁴⁹

Recently, representatives of journalist NGOs additionally outlined some of the problematic issues. Chairman of the Committee to Protect Freedom of Speech, Ashot Melikyan, said that, over the past year, the government drafted or enacted a number of ‘regressive’ bills. One such bill would make it harder for journalists to use anonymous news sources, and another would triple maximum fines for defamation. The chairman of the Yerevan Press Club, Boris Navasardyan, also asserted that the authorities have been seeking stronger influence over the media’s coverage of their activities.⁵⁰

Responses by media and civil society

The scope of fact-checking initiatives and debunking units, as well as media literacy projects in Armenia is essentially limited to NGOs and media outlets mentioned above, as well as to the previous study on this matter.⁵¹ The Armenian Unified Information Centre, established in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, has the widest coverage thanks to its official status, which ensures its daily presence on Armenian Public TV channel, and a number of other media with larger audiences. It mostly focuses on communicating official statements and statistics rather than counteracting disinformation and conspiracies.

⁴⁹ “Quarterly report of CPFE on Situation with Freedom of Expression and Violations of Rights of Journalists and Media in Armenia (January–March, 2021),” *Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression*, 2021, <https://khosq.am/en/reports/quarterly-report-of-cpfe-on-situation-with-freedom-of-expression-and-violations-of-rights-of-journalists-and-media-in-armenia-january-march-2021/>

⁵⁰ Satenik Hayrapetian, “Armenia slides in press freedom rankings,” *RFE/RL Armenian Service*, 3 May 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31235927.html>

⁵¹ Richard Giragosian, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–45.

COVID-19 MISINFORMATION EXPOSED

Investigative journalist Tatev Hovhannisyan exposed that a US-funded health news website was spreading Covid-19 misinformation. The website, *Medmedia.am*, was launched in 2019 by an NGO called Armenian Association of Young Doctors, with support from the Democracy Commission Small Grants programme. There were not sufficient background checks with the NGO's leader, Gevorg Grigoryan, being known for his far-right connections and homophobic social media posts. *Medmedia.am* claimed that the Covid-19 vaccines being developed were 'biological weapons' and called the readers to 'refuse all potential vaccination programmes'.⁵²

Projects such as *media.am* and the Fact Investigation Platform (*Fip.am*), run by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Union of Informed Citizens, have become more visible to the public, although their audience is likely limited to active internet users. *Media.am* continuously monitors false narratives and conspiracy theories in the Armenian media and social networks. Regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, it exposed false narratives surrounding the potential dangers of 5G telecommunication technology, about Bill Gates' alleged responsibility for a defective polio vaccine which ostensibly left 400,000 children in India paralysed, and regarding the conspiracy theory that the Armenian health authorities bribed the relatives of deceased persons, so they would accept falsified statements about the causes of death, etc.⁵³ It also noted cases of disinformation originating from Russian sources, including claims about Covid-19 being a part of a conspiracy to bring down Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump and Xi Jinping,⁵⁴ about US-sponsored bio-research laboratories being the source of Covid-19,⁵⁵ etc., mostly shared by websites related to the former political elite.

⁵² Tatev Hovhannisyan, "Revealed: US-funded website spreading COVID misinformation in Armenia," *OpenDemocracy*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/us-money-armenia-misinformation-covid-vaccines/>

⁵³ Karine Ghazaryan, "Famous IT figure spreads myths" [in Armenian], *Media.am*, 5 May 2020, <https://media.am/hy/verified/2020/05/05/21224/>

⁵⁴ Karine Ghazaryan, "Media translate disinformation about COVID-19 almost word by word" [in Armenian], *Media.am*, 22 April 2020, <https://media.am/hy/verified/2020/04/22/21014/>

⁵⁵ Karine Ghazaryan, "Regional false and manipulative news about Armenia, and not only" [in Armenian], *Media.am*, 30 April 2020, <https://media.am/hy/verified/2020/04/30/21123/>

Fip.am covers disinformation and manipulative publications and statements in weekly reviews (some larger stories are covered in separate articles). One of the recent examples was the debunking of claims that AstraZeneca's vaccine had been banned in the EU because of health risks it allegedly carried.⁵⁶ AstraZeneca has been imported to Armenia within the framework of the EU-supported COVAX programme (the other vaccines currently available in the country are Sputnik V and the Chinese CoronaVac).

A more recent initiative is CyberHUB-AM, a digital support helpdesk established by the Media Diversity Institute – Armenia (MDI) in 2019, with the aim to document the general trends in digital security and targeted cyber-attacks against the Armenian civil society.

VACCINE SCEPTICISM IN ARMENIA

Despite efforts by government agencies, civil society's awareness-building campaigns, and media coverage, communication about the benefits of vaccination against Covid-19 has not been effective, and the effects of disinformation can be observed as the number of shots in arms remains low. Voluntary vaccination of adults began from the second week of April 2021, and as of 27 June 2021, only 74,814 shots were given (of which 16,196 have been second shots).⁵⁷ That is to say, only a little more than 2 per cent of the adult population have requested to be vaccinated.

Furthermore, vaccination is also free for foreigners, and beyond the foreigners permanently residing in Armenia, some Iranians have been travelling to the country to get vaccinated. The authorities do not keep separate statistics for citizens and non-citizens, obscuring the real effectiveness of the programme.⁵⁸ A May 2021 IRI poll also showed that 1 per cent of the respondents had already been vaccinated,

⁵⁶ "From not banned AstraZeneca to Kocharyan's diplomatic passport. Last week's manipulations: who, what and how" [in Armenian], *Fip.am*, 17 May 2021, <https://fip.am/15581>

⁵⁷ "As of 27 June, more than 74,000 vaccine shots have been given in Armenia" [in Armenian], *RFE/RL Armenian Service*, 28 June 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31329818.html>

⁵⁸ Robert Zargaryan, "'Here it is free': The number of Iranians willing to get vaccinated in Armenia is growing" [in Armenian], *RFE/RL Armenian Service*, 14 May 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31254502.html>

and 18 per cent were willing to do so, while 71 per cent did not want to be vaccinated, with 10 per cent unwilling to answer the question.⁵⁹ Remarkably, another survey in May 2020 showed that 36 per cent would choose vaccination, and 32 per cent would refuse it.⁶⁰ Apparently, the disinformation campaign in general, and, more recently, targeting the AstraZeneca vaccine, could have contributed to the increase in vaccine scepticism in Armenia.

Most of the online media, which, unlike broadcast television and radio, do not need licence to operate, do not have formulated codes of journalistic standards and ethics. As shown by a 2020 research project, out of 60 studied media organisations, only three had formulated ethical codes. Moreover, although there is a legal requirement to publicise the year of establishment, the founders,' editors' and staff members' names, addresses of editorial offices, contact emails and telephone numbers, only nine of 60 (five of which also have printed versions) have published all the required information. Several websites only show an email address or a phone number.⁶¹

⁵⁹ "IRI Armenia poll ...", op.cit.

⁶⁰ "Survey shows 1/3 of Armenians will refuse vaccination against COVID-19," *Mediamax*, 18 June 2020, <https://mediamax.am/en/news/society/38197/>

⁶¹ "Armenian online media's 'identity certificates'" [in Armenian], *Region Research Center*, 2020, <https://www.regioncenter.info/hy/node/1750>

Recommendations

While the transition to digital broadcasting has been completed, partial measures to combat hate speech have been taken, and licensing procedures for broadcast media have become more transparent, there has been little progress as regards most of the recommendations of the 2018 DRI study. Transparent media ownership has not been achieved, despite the repeated promises of cabinet ministers to adopt appropriate legislation. Considering the previous recommendation regarding monitoring of Russian media,⁶² even before the recent war in Karabakh, there was little chance that any Armenian state agency would move in that direction, especially by ‘impose punitive moves when and if the coverage was found to be an example of disinformation,’⁶³ and in the current situation such expectations would be even less realistic.

The probability of applying legislative measures or other state policies against Armenian proxy media spreading Russian disinformation has been diminished as well. Moreover, as noted by several experts during a recent discussion organised by Freedom House, the government formed after the 2018 revolution kept relying on old logic, which counterposes the idea of democracy to the idea of security, and that has resulted in a lot of disinformation. This is due in part to the ruling elite who, instead of being pro-active, became simply reactive when responding to democracy’s opponents’ propaganda.⁶⁴

In this setting, the role of civil society and the media in countering disinformation, promoting media literacy and defending democratic values in general became even more crucial. The work done in this field so far is hardly

⁶² Richard Giragosian, op. cit., p. 47.

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ “The current narratives about the correlation of democracy, human rights and security in post-war Armenia: true or false? Summary and conclusions,” *Freedom House*, 11 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/2Vhmgfx>

satisfactory from the point of view of outreach and effectiveness, as the majority of the citizens remain exposed to a lot of disinformation, often without preparedness to assess the information critically. Yet at the same time, considering the limited resources available, some NGOs, think tanks and media have been performing quite well, and additional capacity building and resources might help to expand the scope of activities, reach a larger audience, and improve overall effectiveness.

Therefore, the recommendations formulated in the previous DRI study may be amended with the following.

- To create a more coherent and less contradictory state communication strategy, in order to not undermine public trust. Fundamental rights and freedoms must not be compromised. The authorities should cooperate with civil society, particularly in order to expose disinformation and conspiracy theories.⁶⁵
- Civil society organisations and media should cooperate more closely with each other, and exchange information and best practices regarding the analysis and debunking of disinformation, as well as the promotion of media literacy courses. Concerning the latter, the expansion of an advocacy strategy, aiming at cooperation with state agencies and underlining the need to develop media literacy at different levels, including formal educational institutions, is important.
- Media not willing to engage in disinformation activities should abandon the practice of using Russian video footage and texts while reporting about events in third countries. In this case, international cooperation may be suggested as well. Partnerships with reliable media and NGOs in the concerned countries should be developed, possibly with some support from international foundations and supra-national structures, in order to perform fact checks, identify and use relevant, freely available sources, or additionally secure opportunities to buy licences for the use of copyrighted materials.

⁶⁵ The recommendation was previously suggested in the author's policy paper "Some lessons about civil society's role during the pandemic" published by the Black Sea NGO Forum in March 2021, <https://blackseango.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Armen-Grigoryan-Some-Lessons-about-Civil-Society%E2%80%99s-Role-during-the-Pandemic-1.pdf>

- International cooperation should not be limited to the funding of some media outlets, debunking initiatives and media literacy courses. Information and know-how exchange with foreign research institutions, NGOs and debunking initiatives is vital as well.
- While Chinese propaganda is currently not relevant in Armenia, civil society and media should be prepared to deal with it and should aim to develop cooperation with international partners. This is especially important in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic given the increased probability of Chinese disinformation campaigns globally, with the aim of distracting attention from investigations regarding the origins of the Covid-19 virus.

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Abstract

This article reviews foreign-led disinformation influences in Azerbaijan and countermeasures taken by the state and civil society, focused on the period of time since 2018. Despite some developments in national legislation and institutional framework over the past years, no major changes have been observed, neither in the disinformation field as it is, nor in Azerbaijan's state and society countermeasures. Whereas China-led disinformation in Azerbaijan is currently non-existent and was only barely noticed during the Covid-19 pandemic, the challenges linked to pro-Kremlin disinformation influences remain. Only an insignificant part of the recommendations proposed in the 2018 DRI study has been put into practice by state agencies. A comprehensive national strategy to counteract disinformation, more extensive connections of local NGOs and the journalistic community with western counterparts in the media sphere, and more room for independent high-quality journalism are needed to increase Azerbaijan's resilience to disinformation.

Relations with Russia and China: Potential Vulnerabilities

Russia

Azerbaijan has close economic and political relations with Russia that have been reinforced lately thanks to Russia's involvement in reaching the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh ceasefire agreement. Signed on 9 November 2020 by the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, the agreement ended hostilities in the Nagorno Karabakh region and provided for a deployment of an approximately 2,000-strong Russian peacekeeping force to the region for a minimum of five years. Russian FSB's Border Guard Service would exercise control over the transport communication between mainland Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Therefore, Russian influence in Azerbaijan, from a security standpoint, has increased.

Trade relations have also intensified over the past years. Trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia reached over USD 2.6 billion in 2020, compared to USD 2.1 billion in 2017.¹ Following the meeting between Ilham Aliyev and Russian deputy prime minister Alexei Overchuk in January 2021, it was announced that the two parties discussed deepening cooperation in areas including the economy, energy, transport and agriculture in 2021.²

On the other hand, Azerbaijan continued hosting plenty of international projects in the areas of transportation, energy, and logistics which contributed to economic cooperation with western countries. Initiatives such as the Nabucco and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipelines, as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway that Azerbaijan participates in, do not always correspond to Russian interests in the energy and communication spheres.

Although the Russian language has lost its power as Azerbaijan's lingua franca among the majority, it still remains the second most spoken language in Azerbaijan, which facilitates Russian information influences. Many Azerbaijani journalists continue working with information from Russian language

¹ The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <https://www.stat.gov.az/source/trade/?lang=en>

² "President Ilham Aliyev met with Deputy Prime Minister of Russian Federation," *Azertag*, 3 January 2021, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/President_Ilham_Aliyev_met_with_Deputy_Prime_Minister_of_Russian_Federation_VIDEO-1680133

sources, which indirectly influence what they publish.³ Yet the presence of Russian-language media outlets in Azerbaijan does not mean that all of them are Kremlin-controlled, as in many cases their political language and messaging originates in Baku, and in some cases, they happen to take an anti-Russia stance.⁴

According to Similarweb data, monthly views of *Sputnik Azerbaijan* website in January–June 2021 ranged between 700,000 and 1.1 million. However, the majority of visitors (over 70 per cent on desktop) originate from Russia and only around 13 per cent of traffic comes from Azerbaijan.⁵ Therefore, *Sputnik Azerbaijan* is mostly followed by Azerbaijan’s diaspora in Russia, while its readership in Azerbaijan is fairly insignificant.

Amid mostly neutral Azerbaijan-related news, some *Sputnik Azerbaijan* publications promote anti-western sentiments,⁶ speak about western aggressiveness,⁷ and spread Covid-19 related propaganda.⁸ In December 2020, the Delegation of the EU to Azerbaijan published a list of 61 publications by pro-Kremlin sources in various countries which tried to undermine public trust in vaccines.⁹

In addition to news websites, foreign-led information influences in Azerbaijan via social media have risen over the past years. Their increasing role in the spread of disinformation pushed Azerbaijan’s authorities to discuss stricter policies targeting social media. Although Russian, Turkish and western television channels remain available to Azerbaijan’s population through cable television, a state campaign promoting national broadcasting companies was organised.

³ Zaur Shiriyev, “Betwixt and between: the reality of Russian soft-power in Azerbaijan,” *Heinrich Böll Stiftung in the South Caucasus Region*, 16 October 2017, <https://ge.boell.org/en/2017/10/16/betwixt-and-between-reality-russian-soft-power-azerbaijan>

⁴ Zaur Shiriyev, “Azerbaijan’s Relations with Russia: Closer by Default?” *Chatham House*, 14 March 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/03/azerbaijans-relations-russia-closer-default-0/5-russian-soft-power-azerbaijan>

⁵ <https://www.similarweb.com/website/az.sputniknews.ru/>

⁶ “Disinfo: European solidarity does not exist,” *Euvdisinfo.eu*, 16 March 2020, <https://euvdisinfo.eu/report/european-solidarity-does-not-exist>

⁷ “Disinfo: The US plans to take over Kaliningrad region,” *Euvdisinfo*, 23 November 2019, <https://euvdisinfo.eu/report/the-us-plans-to-take-over-kalinigrad-region>

⁸ “Disinfo: Coronavirus – the end of globalisation,” *Euvdisinfo*, 18 March 2020, <https://euvdisinfo.eu/report/the-end-of-globalisation-country-borders-closed-due-to-coronavirus>

⁹ “Pro-Kremlin disinformation: Covid-19 vaccines,” Delegation of the European Union to Azerbaijan, 22 December 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/azerbaijan/90950/pro-kremlin-disinformation-covid-19-vaccines_en

Particularly during the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, the state authorities urged the people of Azerbaijan to follow official sources and avoid using information from unreliable sources.

China

Azerbaijan's geographic location makes it one of China's gates to the South Caucasus and eastern Europe. Azerbaijan's participation in the China-led Belt and Road Initiative started with the "Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Encouragement of the Establishment of the Silk Way Economic Belt" signed between two countries when Aliyev visited China in 2015. Since then, Azerbaijan's ruler repeatedly pointed out that the country fully supports China's initiative.¹⁰

As part of the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, which took place in Beijing on 25–28 April 2019, Azerbaijan secured Chinese investment in a number of sectors. Azerbaijani representatives signed ten agreements with Chinese companies, cumulatively worth USD 821 million.¹¹

In 2020, the trade turnover between the two countries reached USD 1.8 billion compared to USD 1.3 billion in 2017. While China exports a wide array of products, Azerbaijan's exports to China mostly consist of crude oil and petrochemical products. As a result, the trade balance is negative for Azerbaijan (USD 1.4 billion in 2020). In April 2021, Azerbaijan opened its third trade mission in China, where Azerbaijan's domestic products, investment opportunities, and tourism potential are promoted.¹²

Despite Huawei's interest in developing a 5G network in Azerbaijan, in December 2019, a three-year 5G Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Azerbaijani communications service provider Azercell and Swedish telecommunication company Ericsson. By that time Ericsson and Azercell had partnered to deliver a test 5G network in the Baku center.¹³

¹⁰ Bahruz Babayev and Fariz Ismailzade, "Azerbaijan's contribution to the Chinese Belt Road Initiative," *Munich Personal RePEc Archive*, 13 May 2020, p. 3, https://mpr.a.ub.uni-muenchen.de/100415/3/MPRA_paper_100415.pdf

¹¹ "Azerbaijan, China sign deals worth \$821 million," *Azertag*, 24 April 2019, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijan_China_sign_deals_worth_821_million-1274262

¹² Ayya Lmahamad, "Azerbaijan opens third trade house in China [PHOTO]," *Azernews*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.azernews.az/business/178402.html>

¹³ "Azercell and Ericsson partner to develop 5G in Azerbaijan," Ericsson, 3 December 2019, <https://www.ericsson.com/en/news/2019/12/azercell-and-ericsson-5g-mou>

Azerbaijan-China cultural cooperation is quite limited. In 2011, a Confucius Institute was opened at Baku State University, which serves as a platform for organising China-related conferences and Chinese language learning activities. When it comes to China's information influences in Azerbaijan, they are barely noticeable. As one of the interviewed experts said, "*Chinese disinformation influences in Azerbaijan are insignificant, one can even say they are not present.*"¹⁴

Changes in the media landscape

Azerbaijan slid to 167th place out of 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, down from 162nd place in 2017.¹⁵ As Reporters Without Borders argues, the post-election crackdown, the Covid-19 crisis, and then the war in Nagorno Karabakh all contributed to an increase in censorship and a worsening of the situation for journalists.¹⁶

Several national and foreign media outlets were blocked in recent years in Azerbaijan. In August 2018, the news sites *Arqument.az*, *Az24saat.org*, *Monitortv.info*, and *Xural.com* were blocked on account of publishing allegedly defamatory stories about government officials. Soon after, *Arqument.az* won a rare reprieve from a judge. It was subsequently blocked in April 2019.¹⁷

In July 2018, the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and High Technologies (MTCHT) blocked *Bastainfo.com*, *Criminalaz.com*, *Topxeber.az*, and *Fia.az* following the opening of criminal proceedings by the Prosecutor General's Office for "spreading false information" and "spreading unfounded, sensational claims in order to confuse the public." A fifth news outlet, *Teref.az/Teref.info*, was also blocked in July 2018.

Furthermore, in 2018, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the government's 2017 decision to block several other online news outlets, including *Azadliq.org* (the website of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service), *Azadliq.info* (the website of a daily newspaper), *Meydan TV*, *Turan TV*, and Azerbaijani

¹⁴ Interview with a civil society expert, February 2021.

¹⁵ 2021 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters without borders, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>

¹⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/azerbaijan>

¹⁷ "Azerbaijan. Freedom on the net 2019," *Freedom House*, 2019, https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-net/2019#footnote5_7wgh7lg

Saadi TV.¹⁸ In 2019, the website of the newspaper *Yuksəliş Naminə* was also blocked. Further limitations in the online sphere were introduced in 2020 amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Nagorno Karabakh.

One of the interviewed experts spoke about the benefits that a free press provides for fighting disinformation: *“As there is no national strategy against disinformation, I believe that the existence of free press in Azerbaijan is the best tool to fight it.”*¹⁹

As of 2019, the number of channels broadcasting across the whole territory of Azerbaijan was fifteen. All major Russian television channels are available through cable television in Azerbaijan. The number of cable television subscribers continued to increase, and exceeded 232,000 households in 2019, official statistics suggest.²⁰ Over 8 million people had internet access in 2020.

Minor developments have taken place in the presence of Russian television channels in the package of channels broadcast via the Azerspace-1 satellite. In 2020, two Russia-based television channels (*Yuvelirochka* and *TNV Planet*) were added to the list.²¹

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

In 2020, several regulations concerning mass media, television & radio broadcasting were amended with the declared goal of ensuring the use of the state language in broadcasts. Stricter sanctions and fees were imposed for violations of the laws surrounding television & radio broadcasting, and instructions to provide more broadcasting time for educational and medical topics, as well as patriotic content, were introduced.²² Azerbaijan's parliament also amended

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Interview with a media expert, February 2021.

²⁰ The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <https://www.stat.gov.az/source/communication/?lang=en>

²¹ Huseyn Veliyev, “Two more Russian TV channels to be broadcasted via Azerbaijani satellite,” *Apa.az*, 30 January 2020, <https://apa.az/en/xeber/infrastructure/Two-more-Russian-TV-channels-to-be-broadcasted-via-Azerbaijani-satellite-310398>

²² “On changes in the laws” [in Azerbaijani], Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Unified electronic base of legal acts, 8 May 2020, <http://e-qanun.az/framework/45267>

the law on information protection by adding additional boundaries to counter the spread of prohibited information.²³

The legal amendments provoked contradictory reactions concerning the rights of broadcasters. As they preserve broadcasters' right to cooperate with third parties providing additional services, the room for spreading false information remains. Hence, broadcasters' freedom was restricted, with governmental approval now required if broadcasters wish to cooperate with third parties.

During the 2020 war over Nagorno Karabakh, the law on information protection imposed bans on spreading information concerning the Covid-19 pandemic and political issues. Since the beginning of military clashes in Nagorno Karabakh on 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan's authorities started limiting internet access.²⁴

Whereas Azerbaijan's authorities argued that a more thorough supervision of the media space was in the public interest as it would prevent the spread of disinformation concerning the Covid-19 pandemic and Nagorno Karabakh, international institutions pointed out that under the pretext of safety measures against the Covid-19 pandemic, freedom of expression was restricted and tighter control over political opponents was established.²⁵

The two most important institutions in charge of monitoring the media space are the National Television & Radio Council (NTRC) and the Press Council. The NTRC issues broadcasting licenses and can effectively control which foreign television channels are allowed to broadcast in Azerbaijan. In 2020, the NTRC allocated an additional 3 million manat (USD 1.76 million) to several private nationwide television and radio broadcasting companies, including Khazar TV LLC, Space Independent Television and Radio LLC, 'Azad Azerbaijan' independent TV and Radio company.²⁶ The NTRC also adopted decisions to temporarily

²³ "About information, informatisation, and information protection" [in Azerbaijani], Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Unified electronic base of legal acts, <http://e-qanun.az/framework/3525>

²⁴ Arzu Geybullayeva, "Azerbaijani authorities disrupt internet nationwide amid Nagorno-Karabakh clashes," *Global Voices*, 29 September 2020, <https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/29/azerbaijani-authorities-disrupt-internet-nationwide-amid-nagorno-karabakh-clashes/>

²⁵ "COVID-19: PACE monitors warn Azerbaijani authorities against abuse of pandemic to crack down on opposition," PACE, 14 May 2020, <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/7888>

²⁶ Elchin Mehdiyev, "Amount of 2020 state budget allocations to Azerbaijani TV channels revealed," *Menafn.com*, 8 February 2021, <https://menafn.com/1101566195/Amount-of-2020-state-budget-allocations-to-Azerbaijani-TV-channels-revealed>

suspend broadcasting of some national television channels (e.g., *Apa.tv*), citing the need to prevent the spread of disinformation.

During the parliamentary elections in 2020, only public television channels could provide airtime for paid campaigning, setting the price between AZN 22 to 65 (around USD 13–32) per second of airtime, making the per minute price around USD 780. Only political parties and blocs which had registered candidates in more than 60 of 125 constituencies were eligible for their shares of free airtime on state-owned television and in print media. Therefore, existing legislation prevented many political forces from getting a larger presence in the media.

One of the interviewed experts argued that Azerbaijan encounters the same challenges in the field of information security as other countries and found the existing institutional setup to counter disinformation quite well established: *“I do not think that our country has serious institutional deficiencies related to information security.”*²⁷ Others advocated for a more comprehensive state response to the disinformation challenge. As one of the experts said, *“There is a need to create a national strategy to counter disinformation. It may take the form of an action plan or a roadmap.”*²⁸

Responses by media and civil society

Like many countries, Azerbaijan’s society was affected by Covid-19 related disinformation. During the 2021 World Press Freedom Day event, famous Azerbaijani journalists discussed how to deal with data flows and the ways to distinguish false stories.²⁹

Amid the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan’s society was confronted by the serious need to get accurate information. To bypass the disruption of the internet imposed by the state authorities, some used VPN services and continued the exchange of views online. State bodies repeatedly urged the population to avoid using non-official information, and to stop spreading unverified news, published by foreign sources.

²⁷ Interview with an anonymous media expert, February 2021.

²⁸ Interview with a non-governmental organisation expert, March 2020.

²⁹ “The second year of COVID-19 in Azerbaijan: fake news versus real problems,” *EU Neighbours east*, 3 May 2021, <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/stories/second-year-covid-19-azerbaijan-fake-news-versus-real-problems>

COUNTERING FALSE CLAIMS AMID THE WAR IN NAGORNO KARABAKH

During the 44-day war in Nagorno Karabakh, Armenia tried to negatively influence Azerbaijan by spreading false information concerning the alleged exodus of Azerbaijanis from Ganja and Tartar amid missile attacks on these cities. It was refuted thanks to live broadcasts from Ganja and Tartar which were organised by groups of local residents and posted on social media.

A group of Azerbaijani developers created a website to fight the spread of Armenian based fake news during the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. It gathered information from Azerbaijani audiences and verified it.³⁰

Several of Azerbaijan's NGOs continued organising training sessions in the areas of media literacy and civil journalism. The International Eurasian Press Fund, Baku Press Club, and others provide educational opportunities for journalists and media workers. The Women Journalist Association of Azerbaijan, the organisation aimed at providing professional skills and services to female journalists, continued raising awareness about the importance of equal professional access for men and women. One of the reasons for slow development of media literacy programs in Azerbaijan is limited funding opportunities for local NGOs.

As one of the interviewed civil society experts said, there is a need for broader communication between the state and NGOs: *“There should be a long-term program of action at the national level, conditions should be created for free media, more open debates and discussions need to be organised. A permanent dialogue between the government and civil society should be established and all topics should be open for discussion.”*³¹

While the state agencies are mostly focused on traditional media in combating the spread of disinformation, specialised NGOs should be more engaged into fact-checking activities on social media, especially given their increased popularity as a source of information. Therefore, a more fruitful and coordinated cooperation between state bodies and NGOs is needed to make Azerbaijan's society more resilient to disinformation.

³⁰ Online Azerbaijan Community on Fake Detection, <https://www.fake.az/>

³¹ Interview with a civil society organisation expert, March 2021.

Recommendations

Whereas Azerbaijan is to some extent affected by the Kremlin-led disinformation campaigns, Chinese information influences are barely seen. Azerbaijan's authorities continued attempts to pursue relations with various international actors without excessive reliance on just one. Media and broadcasters continued to be under tight state control, and the impact of foreign media players remained limited.

There is room for improvement for the national legislation and institutional setup in the sphere of combating disinformation and the need for a larger support for independent media. The recommendations provided in the 2018 DRI report have only partially been taken into account by the state authorities. They mostly remain relevant, and the following recommendations to state bodies and the national media community are proposed:

- To develop closer cooperation between Azerbaijani and Western media outlets. The establishment of additional cooperative links between Azerbaijan and the West in the media sphere would contribute to improvement of professional standards of the local media. Exchange of best practices and development of local capacity building in the media sphere would contribute to the quality of Azerbaijan's media.
- To increase engagement of international organisations in the media sphere in order to improve the skills of national media workers. Television and radio remain the main source of information for the elderly population, and improving the skills of national media workers would potentially decrease Azerbaijan's society's exposure to disinformation and propaganda. Azerbaijan's NGOs have access to limited opportunities in the media sphere. They could be included in the foreign-led programs and training courses aimed at Azerbaijan's media workers to a larger extent than they have been until now.

- To prepare a long-term national strategy for preventing the spread of foreign-led disinformation and propaganda. Although the government and specialised state bodies apply a set of countermeasures to the spread of disinformation, a long-term national strategy in this sphere is lacking. It needs to ensure the presence of comprehensive monitoring activities and an objective attitude to avoid politicisation of decisions.

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Abstract

Since 2018, the information consumption patterns of Belarusian society changed significantly, as the popularity of independent online media as well as of Telegram, Instagram, and other social media as sources of information increased dramatically. By contrast, the popularity and trust ratings of Belarusian state-owned and Russian media eroded. State-owned media have increasingly served as multipliers of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives, particularly following the rigged 9 August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus. Overall, the detachment of the state authorities from Belarusian society has reached unprecedented levels. Instead of adopting the measures aimed at increasing societal resilience to pro-Kremlin disinformation, the state information agenda was largely aligned with the Kremlin's disinformation agenda.

As of early 2021, Belarusian independent media were the most trusted social institution among Belarusians living in cities, despite unprecedented repression against these outlets. The trends of media consumption signal that Belarusian society has become less exposed to propaganda and disinformation than it was a few years ago, despite the worsening state policies in the information arena. At the same time, the larger consumption of news on social networks potentially allows Belarusians to become more exposed to disinformation, as fact-checking there is complicated if not impossible.

Due to the Kremlin's support of the unpopular Belarusian ruler and inadequate reporting of Belarusian events by Russian media, a decline of pro-Russian attitudes among Belarusians accelerated in autumn 2020. At the same time, military and political ties between the authorities of Belarus and Russia have grown in the last few years, and the two countries have advanced a new comprehensive integration deal which threatens Belarus's sovereignty. Despite increasingly disadvantageous Belarus-China economic relations for Minsk, the Belarusian authorities have continued strengthening political and military ties with Beijing.

While the institutional setup towards resilience to disinformation has barely changed since 2018, new legislation has significantly limited journalists' rights, and their work has been greatly complicated in practical terms, particularly after August 2020. Given the continuous crackdown against independent media and civil society and a looming threat to Belarusian sovereignty stemming from potential deep integration with Russia, Belarusian journalists are advised to continue efforts to build a stronger Belarusian national identity, debunking disinformation, and exposing foreign-led malign activities.

Disinformation studies

Since the 2018 Disinformation Resilience Index research, a number of landmark studies and dozens of monitoring reports and analytical articles concerning Belarus-related disinformation on television and in online and social media have been published.

In 2018–2020, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) monitored major television channels as part of the register of mandatory public television program packaging. Monitoring activities lasted for three periods from mid-November – mid-December 2018, mid-October – mid-November 2019 and November 2020 – December 2020. The monitoring reports revealed that despite the state authorities' intention to increase the share of domestic television content, Russian television programs still prevail on most Belarusian television channels.¹

The BAJ report showed that in 2018, over 60 per cent of prime time on four out of nine television channels were Russia-produced programs. The situation barely changed in 2019 – over 60 per cent of prime time on four of the five most popular television channels in Belarus filled with Russia-produced TV content. The 2020 monitoring report found that the share of Russia-made content in the airtime of the most popular television channels remained the same as in 2019, or even increased. For instance, the share for the *ONT* television channel increased from 72 per cent in 2019 to 79 per cent in late 2020.

The 2020 BAJ report found that the most frequent pro-Kremlin propaganda claims on Belarusian state television channels were the following: Ukraine and the Baltic states have aggressive intentions towards Belarus and Russia and they are puppets of the EU, US, and NATO, that the Belarusian opposition and activist are Western puppets, that Western civilisation is in decay and suffer from authoritarian trends, and that alliance with Russia is the only beneficial way of development for Belarus.²

The International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS) monitoring of weekly news programs on state-owned television channels *Belarus 1*, *ONT* and *STV* in August – November 2020 found that the majority of guest commentators

¹ The BAJ monitoring reports can be found on the BAJ website at <https://baj.by/be/analytics/44> [in Russian]

² Monitoring of pro-Russian propaganda on state TV in Belarus [in Russian], *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, 3 May 2021, <https://baj.by/be/analytics/monitoring-prorossiyskoy-propagandy-v-gosudarstvennyh-televizionnyh-smi-belarusi>

were Russian and Ukrainian public figures and publicists, whereas Belarusian nationals – mostly employees of state institutions or pro-governmental organisations – were a minority.³ According to the study, many of the Russians and Ukrainians commentators who spoke about political events in Belarus were well-known pro-Kremlin propagandists, radio and television presenters who were either rarely seen, or absent on Belarusian news programs prior to the August 2020 elections.

The iSANS report concludes that this set of guest commentators spread recurring propaganda messages aimed at discrediting the Belarusian protest movement, Western countries and Ukraine and present Belarus-Russia relations in a positive light. Throughout 2020–2021 iSANS also published a number of analytical materials detailing propaganda and disinformation techniques by Belarusian state-owned television channels.⁴

In 2019–2021 the Media IQ project released a number of monthly and quarterly reports on the three state-owned television channels (*Belarus 1*, *ONT* and *STV*) and Poland-based *Belsat*.⁵ The latter was an object of monitoring until August 2020. These channels' compliance with journalistic standards when reporting on political news, disinformation and manipulative techniques were analysed. Their prevalence in the news reported by state-owned channels was very high. For instance, one report in March 2020 concluded that 71 per cent of *ONT* news reports contained either propaganda, or manipulations.

The Baltic Internet Policy Initiative (BIPI) published a series of analytical articles concerning the proliferation of online disinformation and propaganda in Belarus and overall online media trends in the country. One understudied area the BIPI looked into was the impact of Russian-language news aggregators (for instance, *Fb.ru*, *News-fancy.com*, *Novate.ru*, *Mgid.com*, *Syl.ru*, *Topnews.ru*) on Belarusian internet audiences. The article concluded that one in four Belarusian internet users aged 15–74 visited at least one such service during the monitored period (November 2020).⁶

³ Andrei Yeliseyev, “Talking heads” on state television channels: Who they are and what they are broadcasting,” *iSANS*, May 2021, <https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/monitoring-report-eng-final.pdf>

⁴ Analytical columns are available at <https://isans.org/columns-en>

⁵ The monitoring reports are available at <https://mediaiq.by/monitoring>

⁶ Mikhail Doroshevich, “The behavior of the audiences of the Russian news recommendation services in Belarus,” *E-belarus.org*, December 2020, https://e-belarus.org/article/ru-newsaggregators_nov2020.html

The April 2019 EAST Center's and iSANS's study⁷ reviewed the network of nearly 40 websites with systematic anti-Belarusian disinformation content and analysed the Belarusian regional network of disinformation. The report concluded that in 2018 a fully-fledged coordinated network of regional online portals was established which mimicked legitimate regional websites. They regularly posted publications, which questioned the existence of an independent Belarusian ethnic group and language and discredited and distorted the history of Belarus. Their publications contained hate speech against various social, political, religious, and professional groups in Belarus.

The report found that at least four domains of regional disinformation websites are likely associated with the Russian CIS-EMO organisation⁸ and the Soyuz ("Union") civic initiative formed in 2018; their activists maintained connections with the Russia's Embassy in Belarus. Soyuz tried to register as a pro-Russian political party in Belarus but its application was turned down by the Belarusian authorities in May 2021.

The 2020 study of pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus⁹ proposed the classification of major propaganda content into 25 narratives, assembled into four groupings. The one concerning Belarus includes propaganda claims about Belarusians as part of the Russian nation, the Belarusian history as disgraceful or linked to Russia and pro-Nazi historical symbols. The other propaganda groupings concern Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states, and the collective West. The study laid the foundation of the structure of the online debunking platform *Fakeby.org*.

In late 2020, iSANS released a report based on monitoring of the largest propaganda public pages on VKontakte during the first half of 2020. It discovered about 3,800 posts that promoted the Russian world, contained propaganda regarding Belarus, Ukraine, and Western countries and/or contained hate speech, sometimes including calls for violence against certain individuals and groups

⁷ Andrei Yeliseyev, "Fundamental Shifts in Anti-Belarusian Disinformation and Propaganda: Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Changes," *EAST Center & iSANS*, April 2019, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Belarus-Disinformation-Propaganda-2019-ENG.pdf>

⁸ CIS-EMO positions itself as the one in charge of independent electoral monitoring missions. It served as an umbrella organisation for the so-called international observers during the 2014 Crimea referendum, and took part in the electoral missions to unrecognized South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria.

⁹ Andrei Yeliseyev, "Pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus: Classification of narratives," *iSANS*, November 2020, <https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/propaganda-in-belarus-eng.pdf>

on professional, ethnic, and political grounds.¹⁰ The initiative also published a number of analytical articles and reports analysing propaganda on social media in Belarus.

Relations with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

Russia

Belarus-Russia relations have had their ups and downs throughout the period of 2018–2021 but critically Belarus's economic dependence on Russia, close political ties between the two countries' leadership, and a strong Russian cultural influence in Belarus, have remained unvarying. Whereas Russia's share in Belarus's imports decreased from 57.2 per cent in 2017 to 50.2 per cent in 2020, the share of Russian exports slightly increased during the same period and reached 45.2 per cent in 2020. This data is provided by the Belarusian Statistics Committee.

Perhaps the most problematic episode in Belarus-Russia relations took place in spring and summer of 2020 during the Belarusian presidential election campaign. Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka repeatedly criticised Russia for closing its borders for Belarusians as a countermeasure to the Covid-19 pandemic and accused it of supporting and financing his political opponents.

Despite Belarus's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, Russian oil subsidies and economic preferences have declined over the years due to a drop in oil prices and Russia's oil-sector tax reform. The Kremlin resisted Belarus's pressure to compensate it for decreased oil revenues through reducing gas prices. In response to Belarusian demands for compensation, in December 2018 the-then Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev proposed close political and economic integration between the two countries within the so-called Union State.

The comprehensive integration deal threatens Belarus's sovereignty as its powers in a wide range of spheres would likely be ceded to Russia. Whereas the negotiations slowed down in the first half of 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic,

¹⁰ Andrei Yeliseyev, "Anti-Belarusian propaganda and hate speech: Results of monitoring VKontakte toxic public pages," *iSANS*, November 2020, <https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/monitoring-toxic-publics-eng.pdf>

negotiations over an ambitious integration deal accelerated soon after the 9 August 2020 Belarusian presidential elections. As Belarusian prime minister Raman Halouchanka stated in May 2021, “over the last six months we brought our positions closer to a much larger extent than over a few preceding years before that.”¹¹ He also said that 26 out of 28 integration roadmaps were ready by that time.

Despite previous disagreements, the Russian authorities were quick to recognise the official results of the highly disputed Belarusian presidential elections of 9 August 2020. During the unprecedented mass protests, which followed the massive election fraud in Lukashenka’s favour, the Kremlin provided political, economic, and information assistance to Lukashenka. In late August 2020, Vladimir Putin declared the creation of a “military and police” reserve to support the Belarusian authorities if necessary.¹² In August 2020 the Russian authorities sent a dozen correspondents and technical staff to Minsk to replace the local employees of state-owned television channels who had either gone on strike, or resigned in protest.

In November 2020, the Russian National Guards and the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs signed an agreement,¹³ which opens the legal way for Russian military intervention if the Kremlin “assumes that such assistance is in the interest of the other side.” Furthermore, in March 2021 Belarus and Russia agreed to set up three joint military training centers, one of which is in Belarus.¹⁴

According to both independent and government-controlled sociological services, in 2019 pro-Russian sentiments among Belarusians began gradually declining.¹⁵ The major reason seemed to be the reduction of Russian

¹¹ “Belarus stated it does not wish to postpone the approval of integration maps with Russia” [in Russian], *TASS*, 2 May 2020, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/11298365>

¹² Putin announced the creation of a siloviki reserve for Belarus [in Russian], *RBC*, 27 August 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/08/2020/5f478b809a7947e8079f1cb7>

¹³ The cooperation agreement between the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus and the Federal service of the National Guard troops of the Russian Federation [in Russian], *Belarusian legal internet portal pravo.by*, 18 December 2020, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=102000029&p1=1&p5=0>

¹⁴ “Russia and Belarus will establish three joint military training centers” [in Russian], *Interfax*, 5 March 2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/754743>

¹⁵ “Assessments of foreign policy vectors of Belarus (according to monitoring studies performed by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus)” [in Russian], *Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus*, 14 August 2020, <https://socio.bas-net.by/dinamika-otsenok-vneshnepoliticheskikh-vektorov-belarusi-po-dannym-monitoringovyh-issledovaniy-instituta-sotsiologii-nan-belarusi/>

energy subsidies, which provoked a more negative coverage of Belarus-Russia relations by Belarusian state media.

The erosion of pro-Russian attitudes among the Belarusian population continued in late 2020 as a consequence of the support that the Kremlin offered to the increasingly unpopular Lukashenka. The Belarusian Analytical Workshop revealed that the share of Belarusians who believe that alliance with Russia would improve the well-being of people decreased from 51.6 per cent in September 2020 to 40 per cent in November 2020.¹⁶ The online survey of November 2020 commissioned by Chatham House found that 46 per cent of respondents took a more critical view of the Russian leadership due to its supportive policies towards Lukashenka.¹⁷

There has been no change in the economic, linguistic, and cultural policies of the Belarusian authorities in the period under review, and these policies continue to make Belarusian society receptive to information narratives spread by Kremlin-supported media. The most vulnerable groups in this respect largely remain the same as specified in the 2018 DRI report and include retired people, active Orthodox Church believers, military servicemen, and people who lost their income and job. However, the influence of pro-Kremlin media on Belarusian society as a whole has decreased.

China

Belarus-China relations have not seen major changes since 2018. The Belarusian authorities view Beijing as a source of investments and as a political heavyweight capable of balancing Belarus's dependence on Russia and compensating for limited and unstable relations with the West. The three major pillars of Sino-Belarusian economic cooperation are bilateral trade, Chinese investment projects, and the China-Belarus 'Great Stone' industrial park. Each has become increasingly troubled for Belarus in the last few years.

The trade deficit has increased from USD 2.4 billion in 2017 to USD 3.0 billion in 2020. In 2020, China was the third-largest Belarusian trade partner after Russia and Ukraine, accounting for 7.2 per cent of Belarus's trade turnover.

¹⁶ "Why have pro-Russian sentiment decreased in Belarus?" [in Belarusian], *RFE/RL's Belarus Service*, 25 November 2020, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30968865.html>

¹⁷ "Belarusians' views on the political crisis. Results of a public opinion poll conducted between 13 and 18 November 2021," *Chatham House*, November 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VVEfR3raAlkJrMRo-t_vkjOzNmrhDKvN/view

Raw materials, such as potash and wood, account for around two thirds of Belarus's exports to China. This trend in Belarus's trade with China, which has grown since 2018, sees increased agricultural exports, mostly dairy products.

Whereas the volume of Chinese direct investment with Chinese FDI into Belarus's economy remains insignificant, many of the most problematic large investment projects in Belarus were financed with Chinese loans. These include the construction of the Svietlahorsk pulp and paper plant and the modernisation of the Dobrush paper plant, involving loans of USD 654 million and USD 350 million from Chinese banks, respectively. The Great Stone Industrial Park, which was established in 2012 with the aim of showcasing bilateral cooperation, has not achieved much success in bringing in new technologies and investment.¹⁸

Beijing is interested in preserving the transit status of Belarus, as in 2020 about a half of all goods transported from China to the EU by railroads went through Belarus.¹⁹ China is the second-largest provider of loans to the Belarusian economy, after Russia. In March 2020, Minsk owed Beijing USD 3.3 billion, which was equal to 19 per cent of its external public debt.²⁰ China reaffirmed its political support to Lukashenka and Chinese president Xi Jinping was reportedly the first foreign leader to congratulate Lukashenka with victory.²¹

Despite increasingly disadvantageous economic relations with China, the Belarusian authorities maintain a strategic partnership with Beijing, including in the political and military spheres. The two countries created the Polonez multiple launch rocket system in 2015 and Beijing also financed Belarus's satellite program.²²

The level of people-to-people contacts between Belarus and China has increased greatly in the last decade. The 2018 bilateral visa-free agreement

¹⁸ Andrei Yeliseyev, "China Fails to Deliver on its Promises in Belarus," *CHOICE*, 31 July 2020, <https://chinaobservers.eu/china-fails-to-deliver-on-its-promises-in-belarus/>

¹⁹ "Belarusian Railways in 2020 increased the volume of container traffic by 1.4 times" [in Russian], *Belta*, 11 January 2021, <https://bit.ly/JHwL95>

²⁰ "The Ministry of Finance revealed data: to whom and how much does Belarus owe?" [in Russian], *OfficeLife*, 25 June 2020, <https://officelife.media/news/18154-the-ministry-of-finance-revealed-the-structure-of-the-external-debt/>

²¹ "Xi Jinping congratulates Lukashenka on victory in elections" [in Russian], *Belta*, 10 August 2020, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/si-tszinpin-pozdravil-lukashenko-s-pobedoj-na-vyborah-402262-2020/>

²² Belintersat, <https://www.belintersat.com/about-belintersat-5>

allows Belarusian and Chinese citizens to stay in each other's country for up to 30 days visa-free. The visits of Belarusian local authorities, businessmen and scholars to China has become widespread.²³ In 2020, 4,500 Chinese students studied in Belarus, and about 1,000 Belarusians studied in China. Six Confucius Institutes operate in Belarus, although their activities receive quite limited publicity.

Despite the growing political and economic cooperation, Chinese influence in the Belarusian media sphere is insignificant and will hardly grow in the near future. As one of the interviewed experts said, *“China does not work, and will not work soon with Belarusian traditional media. There are several reasons for that, including differences in culture, language, and physical appearance. China works by other means, based on their culture. [...] Chinese politicians work based on the long term perspective, they cultivate loyal ruling elites.”*²⁴

China has a rather positive image in Belarusian society. In the November 2020 opinion poll conducted by Chatham House, China was placed second in the ranking of allied countries, after Russia.²⁵ Almost a quarter (23.8 per cent) of Belarusians perceived it as friendly. However, Belarusians do not see China as a model to follow. In the survey conducted by the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, only 4.8 per cent of respondents declared that Belarusian foreign policy should be guided by China.²⁶

Changes in media landscape

Belarus remains one of the most restrictive countries in the media sphere. A 2019 report by the Committee to Protect Journalists placed Belarus on the list of the 10 most censored countries. It holds 158th place out of 180 countries in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index. The country's ranking in the Freedom in the World Index also decreased in the past few years.²⁷ The 2021 Reporters

²³ “Belarusian-Chinese interregional cooperation and twinning relations” [in Russian], Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the People's Republic of China, <https://china.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral/regional/info/>

²⁴ Interview with Ihar Tyshkievich, Ukrainian Institute of the Future, 31 March 2021.

²⁵ “Belarusians' views on the political crisis ...,” op.cit.

²⁶ “Assessments of foreign policy vectors of Belarus ...,” op.cit.

²⁷ “Freedom in the World 2021, Belarus,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-world/2021>

Without Borders report called Belarus “the most dangerous country in Europe for media personnel.”²⁸

In Belarus state communication concerning Covid-19 fell victim to Lukashenka’s personal views. He repeatedly diminished the dangers of Covid-19 and proposed a number of false remedies including playing hockey, drinking vodka, eating greasy food, steaming in the sauna, and working in the countryside. Belarusian state media consistently spread Covid-19 related disinformation and conspiracy theories and used a number of propaganda techniques to downplay the danger posed by the epidemic and portrayed Belarus in a better light than other countries.²⁹

The inadequate communication campaign about the risks posed by Covid-19 by the Belarusian authorities and media greatly undermined public trust. “Previously Belarusians just consumed content from state-owned media without much reflection. In 2020, due to the mistrust in official information on the Covid-19 pandemic and mass protests, media consumption and the attitude of people towards information has changed,” one interviewee said.³⁰ Sociologists even before the pandemic had paid attention to the growing interest of Belarusians to get political and economic news from internet sources.³¹

SEPARATING FACTS FROM FICTION ON COVID-19

Belarusian state media websites repeatedly reposted Covid-19 related content from controversial Russian online sources. In April 2020 Belarusian state news agency Belta posted a story from *Trendru.net* citing an Italian professor who spoke against social distancing measures, doubted

²⁸ “Bad time for independent journalism,” *Reporters Without Borders*, <https://rsf.org/en/belarus>

²⁹ Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina, Oleksii Kovalenko, Lela Saralidze, “Government communication and public resilience to propaganda during COVID-19 in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine,” *EAST Center*, January 2021, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Government-communication-COVID-19.pdf>

³⁰ Interview with Barys Haretski, vice chairman of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, 30 March 2021.

³¹ “Belarusian TV viewers are turning to Telegram. Gemius spoke about the behavior of the Internet audience in November” [in Russian], *Marketing.by*, 21 December 2020, <https://marketing.by/analitika/kompaniya-gemius-nazvala-itogovye-tsifry-o-povedenii-internet-auditorii-v-belarusi/>

the benefits of medical masks and gloves, and ridiculed the development of an anti-coronavirus vaccine.³² In some cases Belarusian state media removed tendentious content following critical response by the national media community. In March 2020 the website of ONT reposted news from *Medikforum.ru* citing a Russian dietologist who claimed that baking soda is effective against Covid-19 and that the virus goes hand in hand with the US-created bacteria “sintia.”³³ Following the exposure as false news by Belarusian independent media,³⁴ the *ONT* article was quickly deleted.

Following the August 2020 presidential elections, the Belarusian authorities and state media largely aligned their rhetoric with pro-Kremlin media. They presented mass protests in Belarus as a manifestation of Western hybrid war against Belarus and Russia, discredited Belarusian opposition and activists and called them Western puppets, accused Ukraine and Western countries, foremost Poland, of rewriting history and glorifying Nazis and alleged that historical Belarusian national symbols, the white-red-white flag and Pahonya coat of arms, were associated with the Nazis and generally drew parallels between protesters and Nazi collaborators during WWII.³⁵

STATE PROPAGANDA DISCREDITS THE HISTORICAL FLAG

The state authorities used other means to spread propaganda narratives beyond traditional and new media. In April 2021, Minsk residents received utility bills, which contained sections on “debunking the myths” concerning the historical Belarusian white-red-white flag. The flag was

³² “An Italian professor speaks about the pandemic: Life under the lock will kill more than coronavirus” [in Russian], *Belta*, 13 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ctoMtC>

³³ “A simple remedy for coronavirus named. This product is in every home!” [in Russian], *ONT.by*, 30 March 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20200330130327if_/https://ont.by/news/nazvano-prostoe-sredstvo-protiv-koronavirusa

³⁴ “ONT TV channel offered a remedy for coronavirus – baking soda!” [in Russian], *Nasha Niva*, 30 March 2020, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=248956&lang=ru>

³⁵ “‘We remember this, and this is our strength’ – Lukashenka’s speech at the requiem rally in Khatyn” [in Russian], *Belta*, 21 March 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/my-eto-pomnim-i-v-etom-nasha-sila-vystuplenie-lukashenko-na-mitinge-rekvieme-v-hatyni-433684-2021/>

created back in 1917 and was banned during Communist times. It was the state flag from 1991–1995 before being replaced with the current one as a result of the Lukashenka-organised referendum in 1995. The white-red-white flag immediately became the main symbol of the Belarusian protests following the disputed 9 August 2020 elections.

The public authorities claimed on the utility bills that the flag was used by Nazi collaborators in WWII in massacres of the population. *“This is the flag of traitors and executioners of their people. The blood of innocent women, old people and children will remain an indelible curse and shame on the white-red-white flag,”* the payment orders said.³⁶ Historians say there is no evidence proving that the white-red-white flags were used during punitive operations against Belarusian civilians in WWII.³⁷ Linking Belarusian national symbols and activists to Nazis is a classic disinformation narrative used by pro-Kremlin and Belarusian state media.

Belarusian television channels copied techniques used by their Russian counterparts.³⁸ A worrying trend that started in late 2020 is the growing use of hate rhetoric on television. By October 2020, state television began systematically applying the label “zmahary” (‘fighters’ in Belarusian) with derogatory connotations in relation to Belarusian protesters and generally to all people who disagree with state politics. Until then this label was used by pro-Kremlin public pages on social network Vkontakte and marginal propaganda websites. “Zmahars” became a Belarusian analogue of “Banderites” from anti-Ukrainian propaganda. State media have used a whole arsenal of propaganda methods to slander zmahars, attributing to them many humiliating qualities.³⁹

³⁶ “The flag of the traitors and executioners of their people.’ Minsk residents receive very strange payment orders for March” [in Russian], *TUT.BY (archived version)*, 12 April 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210412221801/https://news.tut.by/society/726107.html>

³⁷ “Lukashenka said about the genocide of the Belarusian people under the white-red-white flag. We explain what happened during the war” [in Russian], *TUT.BY (archived version)*, 22 March 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210322182218/https://news.tut.by/culture/723348.html>

³⁸ “How Russian propaganda took over Belarusian TV and what journalists from Russia got to do with it” [in Russian], *Current Time*, 3 September 2021 <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/russian-propaganda-on-belarus-tv/30816615.html>

³⁹ Andrei Yeliseyev, “‘Zmagars’ as a universal expression of evil: Belarusian propaganda has put a halter on a long-standing pro-Kremlin label,” *iSANS*, 9 November 2020, <https://isans.org/articles-en/zmagars-as-a-universal-expression-of-evil-belarusian-propaganda-has-put-a-halter-on-a-long-standing-pro-kremlin-label.html>.

Available sociological surveys show that the popularity of state media has declined significantly since 2017. In April 2017, the Belarusian Analytical Workshop survey showed that 71.3 per cent of respondents used Belarusian state media as a source of information and 67 per cent trusted these outlets. The websites of Belarusian independent media became a source of information for only 27.4 per cent of respondents (with 73 per cent trust rating), while the Russian state TV was followed by 43.8 per cent (with a 75 per cent trust rating).⁴⁰

The December 2020 online survey by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) found that 70.6 per cent of Belarusians living in cities with over 20,000 inhabitants use social networks and independent websites as primary sources of information. State-owned and Russian television channels were primary sources of information for only 12.7 per cent of respondents.⁴¹ These findings were corroborated by the representative January 2021 online survey among Belarusian citydwellers commissioned by Chatham House. (The urban population in Belarus is about 78 per cent of the population). It found that the most trusted social institutions were independent media (49.5 per cent) while state media were only trusted by 16.3 per cent of respondents.⁴²

Telegram's popularity as the source of political news in Belarus has significantly increased in the last few years. By November 2020, 10 per cent of internet users used Telegram.⁴³ The number of Telegram channels focused on Belarusian topics has grown from around 100 at the end of 2017 to 1,500 at the end of 2020.⁴⁴ The largest Belarusian Telegram channel *Nexta Live* became the largest Russian-language Telegram channel globally with 1.2 million followers

⁴⁰ "Opinion poll: Belarusians trust state media less and less" [in Russian], *TUT.BY (archived version)*, 22 May 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170522182219/https://news.tut.by/economics/544272.html>

⁴¹ Julia Langbein et al, "Belarus at a crossroads: attitudes on social and political change," *Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS)*, 25 March 2021, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/belarus-at-a-crossroads-attitudes-on-social-and-political-change>

⁴² "Belarusians' views on the political crisis. Results of a public opinion poll conducted between 14 and 20 January 2021," *Chatham House*, February 2021, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f48Bx2sal1VpWDhSGPdqnfrqhddrw6x/view>

⁴³ "Belarusian TV viewers are turning to Telegram. Gemius spoke about the behavior of the Internet audience in November" [in Russian], *Marketing.by*, 21 December 2020, <https://marketing.by/analitika/kompaniya-gemius-nazvala-itogovye-tsifry-o-povedenii-internet-auditorii-v-belarusi-/>

⁴⁴ Oksana Shelest, Andrey Shutov, Yulia Nazarenko, "Messenger Telegram as a tool of communication and self-organisation during the political crisis in Belarus" [in Russian], *Center for European Transformation*, 8 December 2020, https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2020_TG_Belarus-l.pdf

in May 2021. The number of its subscribers exceeded 2 million in August–September 2020 during the active stage of the Belarusian protests. Telegram has become an important tool for self-organisation of local communities in Belarus. By early 2021 over 900 local activists Telegram groups were active.⁴⁵ They united residents of courtyards, urban districts, and participants of grass-roots social initiatives.

While the Internet is becoming the dominant source of information in Belarus, intergenerational differences have increased. The September 2019 survey found that two thirds of people aged 18–45 receive news mostly on the Internet, while among people aged 61–75 the share of active internet users is only 14 per cent. The most actively looking for news on the Internet are the people aged 30–45.⁴⁶

According to SimilarWeb data, the most popular online news media in Belarus in April 2021 were *Tut.by* (68.5 million user sessions from Belarus), *Onliner.by* (31.9 million), *Yandex.ru* (29.2 million), *Kp.by* (5.9 million), *Lenta.ru* (5.6 million), *News.mail.ru* (4.1 million), *Sputnik.by* (3.7 million), *Nn.by* (3.3 million), *Rambler.ru* (3.1 million), *Belta.by* (3.2 million). Hence, six out of ten of the most popular online news services in Belarus were Russian or Kremlin-controlled.

Until recently the two domestic online giants *Tut.by* and *Onliner.by* outpaced the other popular websites. The *Tut.by*'s development became severely threatened as a result of the devastating crackdown by the Belarusian authorities on 18 May 2021 and the following days and weeks. A criminal case was started against the internet portal based on dubious charges over tax evasion; *Tut.by* was also accused of repeatedly violating the media law. Its editorial office and homes of handful *Tut.by* personnel were raided, *Tut.by* domain was blocked, and a dozen of *Tut.by*'s employees, including editor-in-Chief Maryna Zolatava, journalists, engineers, and accountants were arrested.

It is widely believed that the tax evasion claims are a convenient pretext used by the state authorities whereas the actual reason behind the heavy blow against the largest independent media outlet is political. *Tut.by* has carried out high-quality reporting of mass protests and state repressions and did not play down political reporting following the August 2020 events, to the discontent

⁴⁵ Dze.chat – Discussions with Neighbours, <https://dze.chat/>

⁴⁶ “What Do Belarusians Think? TV and Internet Compete for the Minds of Belarusians,” *PACT*, 28 February 2020, <https://www.pactworld.org/news/what-do-belarusians-think-tv-and-internet-compete-minds-belarusians>

of state authorities. As *Tut.by* bank accounts were frozen in mid-May 2020, all personnel were made redundant. The restoration of the *Tut.by* website by its former employees is probable, but will likely be based abroad.⁴⁷ Some Belarusian media experts raise concerns that the annihilation of the biggest Belarusian news website will benefit Russian media outlets.⁴⁸

The most popular social networks in February 2020 were V Kontakte (3.9 million user accounts), Instagram (2.7 million), OK (1.6 million), and Facebook (0.7 million).⁴⁹ It is important to note that the increasing exchange of political news on social media was not accompanied by the growing popularity of pro-Russian groups in social networks. In January 2021, the numbers of followers of the largest pro-Russian accounts in V Kontakte (*Zdorovaya Rus: Ukraina, Rossiya, Belarus; Politring; Aдекватnyi Vitebsk*, etc.) ranged between 4,000 and 9,000, which was slightly less than they had back in 2018.

Similarly, the popularity of both the dozen little-known pro-Russian websites targeting the Belarusian audiences that were created after 2015, and pro-Kremlin Telegram channels, have seemingly not increased over the past years. *Trykatazh*, the largest pro-Kremlin Telegram channel with 33,000 users, announced the suspension of its services in November 2020. Two other popular Telegram channels, *Minskaya Siemiboyarshchina* and *Bulba prestolov*, increased their audience from 5,000–7,000 in 2019 to around 13,000 by early 2021, however, these figures are many times lower than independent Telegram news channels enjoy. At the same time, the Telegram channels presumably controlled by the Belarusian security services – *Zhioltyje Slivy* being the largest with 80,000 followers as of late May 2021 – turned into regular amplifiers of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives.⁵⁰

The decline in popularity of the Belarusian state TV channels most probably indicates that their agenda does not resonate with the actual needs of

⁴⁷ “We had to lay off literally everyone.’ A talk with one of *tut.by* owners” [in Belarusian], *RFE/RL’s Belarus Service*, 1 June 2021, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31284316.html>

⁴⁸ “The authorities do whatever they want with journalists.” Why TUT.BY is destroyed – the largest media in Belarus [in Russian], *Current Time*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-tutby-detention/31261863.html>

⁴⁹ “Media in Belarus 2020” [in Russian], *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, May 2020, https://baj.by/sites/default/files/event/files/2020/report_media2020_rus.pdf

⁵⁰ “‘Their content is equally vulgar’: How the authorities insult Belarusians through their Telegram channels” [in Russian], *The Village*, 1 October 2020, <https://www.the-village.me/village/city/zabauki/284939-tg-vlasti>

the Belarusian population. Instead of factual reporting about ongoing Belarusian events and the ways out of the political and economic crisis, state media largely discuss alleged Western provocations, socio-economic difficulties in the Western countries and Ukraine, and glorify personal achievements of Aliaksandr Lukashenka – all of which cannot help addressing the major concerns of the Belarusian society.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

In the institutional framework pertaining to counteraction to disinformation activities, only minor changes have taken place in Belarus since 2018. The amended legislation of April 2021 provided the Prosecutor's Office with the right to block websites, which earlier only the Ministry of Information had. A new Information Security Concept of March 2019 contains some nominally positive developments. It declares non-interference into the information space of other countries and the defence of national information space as the main principles of Belarus's information policy, and contains provisions on the importance of promoting Belarusian language and culture, and countering disinformation and cyberattacks.⁵¹ However, as the events following August 2020 demonstrated, its provisions largely remained on paper and failed to ensure a meaningful defence against Kremlin disinformation.

The DRI 2018 study recommended that the state authorities should liberalise access to information by introducing regulations that ensure that cable television channels provide a certain percentage of non-Russian content. Little was done in this respect until 2020 and even minimal positive changes were reversed in 2020–2021.

In January 2019, the Ministry of Information added Ukrainian *UA|TV* in the list of permitted foreign TV channels. However, this step did not give a start to the positive trend. On the contrary, in April 2021, *Euronews*, the most popular western TV news channel in Belarus, was removed from the list of broadcasters and replaced with the Russian TV channel *Pobeda* ("Victory"), with the focus on

⁵¹ The Concept of information security of the Republic of Belarus [in Russian], *Belarusian legal internet portal Pravo.by*, 18 March 2019, https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/P219s0001_1553029200.pdf

“classics of Soviet military cinema, Russian films and TV series, and documentaries about the Great Patriotic War.”⁵²

Amendments to the Media Law of December 2018 and April 2021 have made media regulation in Belarus more restrictive. The 2018 changes increased the state control over the internet by making website owners legally responsible for posts by users in the comments section.⁵³ New legal provisions also required websites to make it technically possible to identify such internet users. This prompted a number of news websites to either restrict comment sections or shut them down completely. An intended consequence of this legal change was to make the spread of disinformation via social networks and websites’ comment sections more difficult.

The December 2018 amendments also changed the rules relating to online media. Online media obtained the legal right to register and receive the same benefits as traditional media, which enables them to request accreditations from state agencies, to keep the identities of their informants secret, etc. At the same time, costly registration requirements prevent the overwhelming majority of Belarusian online media from applying for official status. Without it, unregistered websites remain subject to all of the requirements imposed on registered media but have none of the additional rights. The new media law required Belarusian TV channels to offer domestically produced content for at least 30 per cent of weekly broadcast time, but this norm is often violated.

The April 2021 amendments to the media law forbid publishing the results of surveys related to the socio-political situation in Belarus if they were carried out by organisations with no official permission to conduct surveys. Hence, reports about independent survey results are banned, whereas the officially registered polling companies provide highly unreliable data. The new media law also prohibits journalists from reporting from unauthorised public gatherings, with journalists and protestors considered equal.⁵⁴ Furthermore, additional

⁵² “Euronews TV channel stops broadcasting in the Republic of Belarus and POBEDA TV starts broadcasting” [in Russian], Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus, 12 April 2021, <http://mininform.gov.by/news/all/v-respublike-belarus-prekrashchaet-veshchanie-tele-programma-euronews-i-nachinaet-translyatsiyu-pobed/>

⁵³ The Law on amendments and additions to some laws of the Republic of Belarus No. 128-Z [in Russian], *Belarusian legal internet portal Pravo.by*, 17 July 2018, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H11800128&p1=1&p5=0>.

⁵⁴ “‘War on the Media’: Streams and vox pops will be banned for journalists in Belarus” [in Russian], *Deutsche Welle*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/vojna-so-smi-zhurnalistam-v-belarusi-zapretjat-strimy-i-blicoprosy/a-57180672>

restrictions on the establishment, registration, and spread of foreign media were introduced, and the types of banned information were broadened.⁵⁵

Regardless of the legislative framework, amid the widespread repressions against the protest movement in 2020–2021, the work of journalists in Belarus has become much more difficult in practical terms. During 2020, journalists in Belarus were subject to nearly 500 detentions and around 100 administrative arrests, and at least 62 media workers suffered from violence at the hands of law-enforcement agencies, according to data from the Belarusian Association of Journalists. The Ministry of Information restricted access to more than 50 websites, and four independent media outlets were removed from the state-controlled distribution network.⁵⁶ As of 5 June 2021, twenty-three journalists remained imprisoned, including twelve *Tut.by* web portal editors and staff members.⁵⁷

REPRESSIONS AGAINST JOURNALISTS

Tut.by correspondent Kaciaryna Barysevich was arrested for publishing an article about the circumstances surrounding the death of 31-year-old protester Raman Bandarenka. Bandarenka was brutally beaten by unknown masked individuals, widely believed to be Belarusian security officers.⁵⁸ An independent investigation later suggested that Bandarenka was attacked by people from Aliaksandr Lukashenka's inner circle.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ “BAJ commented on the bill ‘On amendments of laws concerning media’” [in Russian], *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, 5 May 2021, <https://baj.by/be/analytics/kommentariy-bazh-k-proektu-zakona-ob-izmenenii-zakonov-po-voprosam-smi>

⁵⁶ “Figures of the year. Persecution of journalists and media in 2020” [in Belarusian], *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, 13 January 2021, <https://baj.by/be/analytics/lichby-goda-perasled-zhurnalistau-i-medyya-u-2020-godze>

⁵⁷ “Repression against journalists in 2021” [in Belarusian], *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, June 2021, <https://baj.by/be/analytics/represii-suprac-zhurnalistau-u-2021-godze-tablica-spis-znyavolenyh>

⁵⁸ “A doctor of the emergency medical aid hospital: “Raman Bandarenka had 0 alcohol, it was not found”” [in Russian], *TUT.by (archived version)*, 13 November 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201113074613/https://news.tut.by/society/707715.html>

⁵⁹ “New circumstances of Bandarenka's murder from ByPol: the guy was not drunk, and the results of the forensic examination were lost” [in Belarusian], *Belsat TV*, 27 January 2021, <https://belsat.eu/news/novyya-akalichnasti-zabojstva-bandarenki-u-dvary-byli-ejsmanty-amapautsy-shlusili-shto-hlopets-p-yany/>

The *Tut.by* publication referred to reports from the hospital where Bandarenka was treated. Documents provided by a local doctor stated that no alcohol was found in Bandarenka's blood, contradicting the official version of the incident. Barysevich and the interviewed doctor were arrested by the KGB and charged with leaking confidential medical data. On 2 March 2021, Barysevich was sentenced to six months in prison and fined over USD 1,100.

Poland-based *Belsat TV* channel journalists Kaciaryna Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova were arrested in a Minsk apartment on 15 November 2020 as they were airing live images of the brutal dispersal of protesters who were gathered in memory of Raman Bandarenka. On 18 February 2021, they were sentenced to two years of prison for ostensibly violating public order. The presidential administration newspaper, *Belarus Segodnya*, reacted by publishing the op-ed authored by its regular publicist, Andrey Mukovozchik, which compared the Belsat journalists to foreign “secret service agents and artillery spotters,” and called their criminal sentences “too humane.”⁶⁰

The most popular Telegram channels *Nexta* and *Nexta Live*, as well as a number of other large Telegram channels (*MotolkoPomogi*, *Belarus Golovnogo Mozga*, *Palchys*, etc.), were declared extremist by the Belarusian authorities.⁶¹ A dozen popular bloggers were imprisoned in 2020–2021,⁶² including those who actively countered pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation (Ihar Losik, Eduard Palchys, Dzianis Ivashyn).

On 23 May 2021, Raman Pratasevich, the editor of *Belarus Golovnogo Mozga* Telegram channel and former editor of *NEXTA* Telegram channel, was arrested after Ryanair flight 4978 from Athens to Vilnius was diverted under the

⁶⁰ Andrey Mukovozchik, “Who speaks for the criminal? His accomplices and only them” [in Russian], *Belarus Segodnya*, 19 February 2021, <https://www.sb.by/articles/s-vrazheskoy-agenturoy-ne-tseremonyatsya-nigde.html>

⁶¹ “E-bulletin “Mass Media in Belarus”, №3, 2020. Mass Media during Elections and in the Post-Election Period” [in Belarusian], *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, 19 November 2020, <https://baj.by/be/analytics/elektronny-byuleten-smi-u-belarusi-no3-2020-cmi-padchas-vybarau-i-u-postvybarchy-peryyad>

⁶² “Political prisoners in Belarus are prisoners of Lukashenka's regime” [in Russian], *Deutsche Welle*, 22 January 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/politzakljuchennye-v-belarusi-uzniki-rezhima-lukashenko/g-56282551>

pretext of a bomb threat.⁶³ A Belarusian MiG-29 fighter jet was scrambled to escort the passenger aircraft.⁶⁴ The act was denounced by the international community, including the EU, NATO, UK and United States, and by some civil aviation authorities in the world.⁶⁵ The EU and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency issued directives halting European airlines from flying over Belarusian airspace.

Table 1. State countermeasures against the most popular Telegram channels in Belarus

Name of Telegram channel	Number of subscribers as of mid-June 2021	Measures taken by the Belarusian authorities
<i>NEXTA Live</i>	1.2 million	In October 2020, the Belarusian authorities declared the Telegram channels and their logos extremist. Two co-founders, Sciapan Putsila and Raman Pratasevich, were put on the Belarusian wanted terrorists list.
<i>NEXTA</i>	580,000	
<i>TUT.by</i> <i>Novosti</i>	580,000	A major crackdown against <i>Tut.by</i> and its employees, including journalists in charge of social media accounts, took place on 18 May 2021. In June 2021, the Ministry of Interior called for courts to recognise <i>Tut.by's</i> website and social media accounts as extremist.

⁶³ “Ryanair plane’s forced landing in Minsk results in arrest of journo Raman Pratasevich. Belarus authorities list him as ‘terrorist,’” *Belsat TV*, 23 May 2021, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/23-05-2021-ryanair-plane-s-forced-landing-in-minsk-results-in-arrest-of-journo-raman-pratasevich-belarus-authorities-list-him-as-terrorist/>

⁶⁴ “Lukashenka commented on the incident with the Athens-Vilnius airplane and revealed new details” [in Russian], *Belta*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-prokomentiroval-intsident-s-samoletom-afiny-vilnjus-i-raskryl-novyie-podrobnosti-443021-2021/>

⁶⁵ “Western powers voice outrage as Belarus accused of hijacking plane,” *BBC*, 24 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57224452>

<i>Belarus Golovnogo Mozga</i>	262,000	In April 2021, the Telegram channel was declared “extremist.” The channel’s founder and editor, Ihar Losik, has been in prison since June 2020; he is recognised as a political prisoner. Raman Pratasevich, former co-editor of <i>Nexta</i> Telegram channel, became the Telegram channel’s chief editor in February 2021. He and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega were arrested on 23 May 2021 as a result of the Ryanair flight 4978 incident.
<i>Chaj z Malinavym Varennem</i>	152,000	No repressive measures have been reported.
<i>Onliner</i>	142,000	No repressive measures have been reported.
<i>LUXTA</i> (channel with humorous content belonging to NEXTA group)	133,000	In October 2020, the Belarusian authorities declared the Telegram channels and their logos extremist. Two co-founders, Sciapan Putsila and Raman Pratasevich, were put on the Belarusian wanted terrorists list.
<i>Motolko-Pomogi</i>	132,000	In March 2021, the Telegram channel was declared “extremist”. Its founding blogger, Anton Matolka, was put on the Belarusian wanted terrorists list.
<i>Maya Kraina Belarus</i>	129,000	The channel’s founder, Siarhei Biaspalau, escaped Belarus in July 2020 to avoid persecution at the hands of the Belarusian authorities. Iryna Shchasnaya, one of the Telegram channel’s editors, was detained in November 2020 on a criminal charge of organising ‘mass riots’. She is recognised as a political prisoner.
<i>Tipichnaya Belarus</i>	130,000	No repressive measures have been reported

Own compilation

In October 2020, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs withdrew the accreditations of all journalists working for foreign media. Later, the accreditations were returned only to foreign nationals, while Belarusian contributors to international media lost their journalist status. This was the same month the Ministry of Information stripped the largest Belarusian news portal, *Tut.by*, of its officially registered media status. State media and government-controlled Telegram channels repeatedly called for harsher measures towards *Tut.by* accusing it of aiding and abetting the so-called “colour revolution.” These threats materialised in May 2021, when the web portal was blocked and a criminal case against its staff was opened.

In April 2021, Uladzimir Piartsou was appointed as a new minister of information. Piartsou previously chaired the Belarusian office of the *Mir TV* channel, which was jointly set up by ten post-Soviet countries to cover the events in the Commonwealth of Independent Countries (CIS) states. Soon after Piartsou’s appointment, a number of journalists loyal to the Belarusian authorities announced the establishment of an online platform tasked with promotion of pro-government regional bloggers.⁶⁶ It remains to be seen if this step will translate into more significant activities in the near future.

Responses by media and civil society

Since 2017–2018, when the previous DRI report was produced, the Belarusian media and expert communities, supported by international actors, have significantly intensified the work on fact-checking, exposure of disinformation and propaganda activities, and enhanced self-regulatory mechanisms to raise professional standards.

The Media IQ project, launched in 2018 with the goal of raising journalistic standards and promoting media literacy, has systematically monitored a dozen Belarusian media organisations for their compliance with journalistic standards, the use of manipulation techniques, and spread of pro-Kremlin propaganda.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ “An information war has been declared on us? We will respond” [in Russian], *Belaya Rus Public Association*, 11 April 2021, <https://belayarus.by/news/glavnye-novosti/blogery-i-lidery-mneniy-vsekh-regionov-obedinyaytes/>.

⁶⁷ “‘We did not allow tragedy on a national scale’: how national media broke standards in February” [in Russian], *Media IQ*, 2 April 2021, <https://mediaiq.by/article/ne-dopustili-tragedii-v-nacionalnom-masshtabe-kak-nacionalnye-smi-narushali-standarty-v>

It created rankings of the media outlets based on a set of indicators and published short videos and articles exposing striking disinformation and manipulation cases. In December 2020, four members of the Club Belarus Belarus, an organisation in charge of the project, including its founder Yuliya Slutskaya, were arrested under dubious charges, with human rights campaigners condemning the arrests as political. They remained in prison until mid-August 2021. The project continued running despite the arrests.

A number of Belarusian media have established separate sections on their websites, dedicated to fact-checking and debunking disinformation. Since November 2019, popular program *Lukavye Novosti* on *Belsat TV* has focused on debunking fake news.⁶⁸ The *European Radio for Belarus*, *Reform.by*, *Nasha Niva*, *Radio Liberty*, and others also regularly publish fact-checking materials and analysis of disinformation. In August 2020, as Belarusian authorities increased propaganda rhetoric and began actively multiplying pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives, the national media community started focusing more on debunking domestic disinformation claims rather than those promoted by the pro-Kremlin media.

Yet the pro-Kremlin media remain an important issue for the expert community and civil society. In 2020, the Belarusian online debunking platform *Fakeby.org*⁶⁹ was launched, which classifies individual cases as one of the major 25 pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives, as identified by an iSANS study. The platform is focused on debunking the content of pro-Kremlin websites, which publish either articles concerning Belarus, or foreign news stories for the Belarusian audience. As of August 2021, *Fakeby.org* had published over 300 articles, debunking publications by over twenty pro-Kremlin media outlets.

National NGOs collaborated with foreign organisations to allow Belarusian journalists and media activists to exchange knowledge of best practices in the media sphere with their foreign counterparts. The largest event of this kind was a three-day international media conference, the Media Management and IT Forum, in October 2019, which was organised in Minsk by the EAST Centre, the Johannes Rau International Centre for Education and Exchange (IBB Minsk), Deutsche Welle Akademie, and the Practical Competences Studio, in partnership with the Belarusian Association of Journalists. It gathered over 100 media and NGO representatives, data activists, and media experts from all Eastern Partnership countries and beyond. The conference consisted

⁶⁸ Lukavye Novosti [in Russian], *Belsat TV*, <https://belsat.eu/ru/tag/lukavye-novosti/>

⁶⁹ Fakeby.org, <https://fakeby.org/>

of five sections, including seminars on investigative journalism and IT tools, as well as open-source investigations.⁷⁰

In late 2019, the iSANS released an interactive map showing the largest public Belarus-related propaganda pages on VKontakte, which has been periodically updated since then.⁷¹ The largest disinformation-spreading Telegram and YouTube channels, accounts on Instagram and Tiktok, and Odnoklassniki public pages – over 200 in total – were added in mid-2021. The initiative also published an online manual for the editors and administrators of VKontakte public pages, which explains the main ways disinformation gets intentional and unintentional attention.⁷² Throughout 2020–2021, it also published regular reviews of Belarus-related disinformation and propaganda in pro-Kremlin online media, with hundreds of disinformation-promoting publications identified.⁷³

The EUvsDisinfo, the flagship project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force, has added around 600 Belarus-related disinformation cases into its database since 2018. It has also published a dozen Belarus-related analytical articles discussing the propaganda campaign targeting post-election protests, Belarusian historical symbols, and the Ryanair flight diversion, etc.

Since January 2018, the Belarusian branch of OSINT community InformNapalm has published a series of articles debunking disinformation in Belarus. During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, InformNapalm revealed fabrications in the report of the Belarusian state television about Chinese humanitarian aid.⁷⁴ One of the reports investigated the attempts of pro-Kremlin politicians to promote their views about Belarusian history.⁷⁵ It is unclear how the March 2021 detention of the head of InformNapalm's Belarusian branch, Dzianis Ivashyn, will affect the website's activities.

⁷⁰ "MMIT Forum gathers more than 100 media professionals from 14 countries," *EAST Center*, 14 January 2021, <https://east-center.org/mmit-forum/>

⁷¹ "Toxic publics of Belarus" [in Belarusian], *iSANS*, <https://isans.org/toxic/>

⁷² "Penetration of propaganda and hate speech into VKontakte publics" [in Russian], *iSANS*, <https://isans.org/ugrozy-vk>

⁷³ The monitoring reports are available at <https://isans.org/analysis/monitoring>

⁷⁴ "AntiFake: "humanitarian flight" from China to Belarus to fight COVID-19 (Fact-checking)" [in Belarusian], *InformNapalm*, 4 April 2020, <https://informnapalm.org/by/antifake-humanitarny-rejs-belarus-kr-ovid-19/>

⁷⁵ "Forced "reunification": the propagandists of the "Union State" use the events of 1939" [in Belarusian], *InformNapalm*, 20 September 2019, <https://informnapalm.org/by/17-verasnia-prapahandysty-sg/>

Recommendations

The Belarus's section of the 2018 DRI study proposed thirteen specific recommendations to the Belarusian authorities, the national media community, and international organisations focused on strengthening the Belarusian society's resilience to disinformation. Their importance remains as significant today.

None of the seven recommendations to the Belarusian state authorities, including the start of genuine dialogue with the journalist community, facilitation of access to non-Russian TV content, more active promotion of the Belarusian language and culture, etc., have been implemented. The situation has rather changed for the worse as the state policies have become more restrictive and non-cooperative, and the presence of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives in Belarusian state media has greatly increased.

Considering the continued repressions against independent media, several additional recommendations to the democratic international community are proposed:

- To continue supporting the Belarusian media and online activist community, particularly regional ones, including in the form of relocation assistance to foreign countries and with training on digital security and personal safety measures in repressive environments.
- To support citizen reporting, fact-checking initiatives, and journalist investigations, including on the topics of Belarus-China economic and political relations and exchange of information control and other authoritarian practices between them.

The recommendations to the Belarusian journalist community are the following:

- More training in digital security and online step-by-step guidelines on digital security measures on Telegram and other social media platforms.

- To increase fact-checking activities on messengers and social media, which increasingly serve as sources of information for Belarusians.
- To promote Belarusian national identity and culture to serve as a shield against ubiquitous foreign narratives in national media.

The recent initiative by a number of national media outlets to publish a larger share of news in the Belarusian language each Sunday might be a hopeful beginning. Fighting the Belarus-related regular clichés in pro-Kremlin sources, such as inability of Belarusians to survive without a close alliance with Russia or even without ceding a significant portion of sovereignty to the Kremlin, is also instrumental in counteracting the malign Russian influence. Exposure of pro-Kremlin disinformation and clichés can be made through factual analysis and satire- the latter is often an even more powerful tool. Publishing more success stories about Belarusian entrepreneurs, scientists, civic activists, etc. is also helpful in opposing the inferiority complex narrative (Belarusians and Russians’ “little brothers”) spread by pro-Kremlin media.

Pavel Havlíček

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the legal and institutional order, civic space and media environment as well as the fight against disinformation as key elements in the efforts to enhance Czech society's resilience. It describes not only the current state of play and the limits of the Czech response to disinformation – limits which were fully exposed during the coronavirus pandemic – but also analyses problems related specifically to the Czech environment and foreign perpetrators, namely Russia and China. The paper also examines the area of civil society response and good practice, which has been implemented since 2018.

The paper finds that in the Czech debate on disinformation, and in the reaction to this phenomenon, there are several blind spots that the government should focus on. By addressing these blind spots, the government can return to its former role of “champion” in the fight against disinformation, or at least get this area back under control. These are primarily the issues of strategic and crisis communication, as well as the central coordination, or regulation, of social networks. That is to say, the Czech state focuses more on the business interests of Czech entities, rather than security issues, and their implications for democracy and public space online.

Finally, the paper shows some new opportunities, through which the Czech state could strengthen its resilience. These include stronger cooperation with civil society, better synergies with partners in the EU, as well as investment in Czech monitoring and analytical capabilities, and the creation of actionable institutions that could help reduce the spread of disinformation.

Disinformation studies

Over the past three years, there have been several relevant research projects conducted by the Czech civil society and research community, a sector which is particularly rich in the Czech Republic. The most notable examples related to disinformation and social resilience are mentioned below, even if the list of relevant studies cannot be fully exhausted due to the scope of this study.

In recent months, the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) has focused mainly on how disinformation is monetized, and has examined the business models of disinformation websites, as well as their content. The Institute has developed methodology to evaluate the *Konspirátori.sk* counter-disinformation network, classifying 86 media institutions¹ into four different categories according to their position during the Covid-19 crisis: traders, healers, preachers and conspiracy theorists.² At the same time, PSSI looks at the issues of financial motivation and ideology, proposing some specific measures, such as reducing advertising revenue and website traffic by cutting them off from the main source of income – corporate financing. This is mainly in the hands of private companies, but with increasing levels of public pressure, these companies are increasingly alert to the issue, and the situation is gradually improving.³

The Association for International Affairs' Pavel Havlíček writes⁴ that although the Czech state has in the past been considered a “champion” in the fight against disinformation, the pandemic has called into question the country's status, revealing the weaknesses in the resilience of Czech society. A lack of political will and systematic work on this topic, combined with weak strategic and crisis communication, has eroded people's trust in the state and its structures, prompting the realisation that the Czech Republic is not coping well with the situation. Political impetus must be found to fuel investment in social resilience and the strengthening of Czech defences against these

¹ “List of sites with questionable content” [in Slovak], *Konspirátori.sk*, <https://www.konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok>

² Jonas Syrovatka *et al*, “Disinformation as a business” [in Czech], *Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI)*, March 2020, https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8207_751-dezinformace-jako-byznys.pdf

³ “Who are we?” [in Czech], *Fair Advertising*, 2019, <http://fairadvertising.cz/>

⁴ Pavel Havlíček, “Combating disinformation as a topic for strengthening the resilience of Czech society: Waiting for change” [in Czech], *Association for International Affairs (AMO)*, December 2020, <https://www.amo.cz/boj-s-dezinformacemi-jako-tema-pro-posileni-odolnosti-ceske-spolecnosti-cekani-na-zmenu/>

disinformation and hybrid threats, including when implementing still relevant recommendations from the 2016 National Security Audit. The study also suggests a number of areas where the government should pay closer attention.

Dominik Presl of the Association for International Affairs adds that in the Czech Republic, disinformation has had a negative effect on democracy, the functioning of the state and the cohesion of society. The absence of meaningful government communication during the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that Czechia needs a comprehensive, robust and synchronized system of strategic communication at the national level. The strategies of the United Kingdom and Taiwan, the two democracies with the most advanced systems for using strategic communication as a tool against disinformation, share similar characteristics in their strategies. In order for Czechia to have an effective system against disinformation, a crucial step is the development of a central unit of strategic communication, whose task will be analysis, decision-making, monitoring and coordination at a high level. Modeling its system according to best practices from the UK and Taiwan would allow Czechia to use best practices and avoid costly mistakes. The research analyzes elements of the strategic communication of the British and Taiwanese systems against disinformation and their feasibility in the Czech context.

The European Value Center for Security Policy prepared several relevant studies mapping the disinformation sphere in the Czech Republic and its development over the past years.⁵ The Center also continuously works on describing and analyzing the Russian and Chinese influence operations in Czechia and the wider region and summarizes their similarities and differences.⁶ During the last year, the EVC team also focused on how the Czech government failed in its strategy against the Covid-19 pandemic,⁷ which has had powerful consequences for public trust in public institutions, and their ability to cope with the disinformation challenge.

⁵ Veronika Krátka Spalková, "Annual report on the state of the Czech disinformation scene in 2019," *European Values Center for Security Policy*, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3eKWYqh>

⁶ "Go vs. Blitz: An analysis of Russian-Chinese influence co-operation in Europe," *European Values Center for Security Policy*, 2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/go-blitz.correction.pdf>

⁷ Veronika Krátka Spalková and Zuzana Cincerovala, "Year 2020: How the Czech government lost to two waves of misinformation about coronavirus," *European Values Center for Security Policy*, 2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/covid-final-9.4-2021.pdf>

The sociological center STEM, together with Transitions Online, analysed the impact of disinformation on Czech society, with a particular focus on older generations.⁸ STEM prepared a deep dive into the mindset of actors of disinformation and what their motivations to spread disinformation are.⁹ Their work also looks at Covid-19's relationship with disinformation, with STEM clustering actors spreading pandemic disinformation. The research is unique in its in-depth look at the vulnerable categories of the Czech citizens, its data-driven analysis based on sociological polling, as well as the different layers of the problem with consumers of the manipulative narratives.

The team of MapInfluenCE prepared a number of studies related to the Chinese influence in CEE, particularly the V4 countries. In their most recent piece of work, the project focused on Chinese investment as well as the issue of 5G technology and how it is reflected by mainstream media sources in Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary.¹⁰ In addition, the team has focused on the Chinese propaganda in the V4 countries and its evolving nature.¹¹ Previously, the team also worked on data analysis of media landscape in the V4 countries, parliamentary debates relevant to China, as well as the Chinese tactics employed in the V4 countries and beyond.¹²

A study by Semantic Visions¹³ – a private company dealing with the analysis of big data- maps the origin of initial disinformation associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, and its spread around the world and to Czechia. The study identifies Russian websites, connected to Russian state institutions, as the creators and disseminators of the first disinformation, especially in relation to the origins of the virus. The study also documents how this disinformation spread to other languages as other disinformation ecosystems took over. Most recently,

⁸ Jaroslav Valuch and Nikola Horejs, "Covid, rumors, conspiracies and Czech society" [in Czech], *Transitions Online and STEM*, <https://sway.office.com/9rzFG7PLSaulMJ8Z?ref=Link>

⁹ "COVID-19 and Conspiracy Spreaders," *STEM*, 15 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3kD7C3>

¹⁰ Ivana Karaskova *et al*, "Careful or careless? Debating Chinese investment and 5G technology in Central Europe," *MapInfluenCE*, May 2021, <https://bit.ly/36VvAdK>

¹¹ Ivana Karaskova *et al*, "China's Propaganda and Disinformation Campaigns in Central Europe," *MapInfluenCE*, August 2020, <https://mapinfluence.eu/en/chinas-propaganda-and-disinformation-campaigns-in-central-europe/>

¹² Ivana Karaskova *et al*, "China's Sticks and Carrots in Central Europe: The Logic and Power of Chinese Influence," *MapInfluenCE*, June 2020, <https://mapinfluence.eu/en/chinas-sticks-and-carrots-in-central-europe-the-logic-and-power-of-chinese-influence/>

¹³ "Russia Leading from behind: Coronavirus-Focused Case Study of cross-Border Disinformation Spread," *Semantic Visions*, 27 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/36U0aBX>

Semantic Visions also focused on the Russian attack on the Czech ammunition depots and how that influenced the information ecosystem.¹⁴

Relations with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

The Czech relations with Russia and China have been long troubled by increasing assertiveness and acts of open aggression of both actors. Either in the information and hybrid domain, or even physically, Czechia has faced many conflicts with both countries. The most notable example of physical Russian interference in the Czech Republic was the series of explosions at the Vrbětice ammunition depots in 2014. Based on the evidence presented on 17 April 2021 by the Czech Prime Minister and First Deputy PM, Russia's GRU intelligence agency was involved, and the Russian state's attack against the Czech territory left two dead, with around EUR 40 million of economic damage over the last seven years, as calculated by the government. The consequent bilateral escalation with Russia, which has led to more than 80 Russian diplomats being expelled from the Czech territory, has to a large degree paralyzed the bilateral relations and has cast doubts if it is going to be even possible to restore the relationship in the future. The affair added to an already extremely tense relationship between Czechia and Russia and signified the last nail in the bilateral coffin. However, the affair also offers a potential opportunity for rethinking and recalibrating Czech foreign policy.

In a similar vein, Sino-Czech relations were affected by several major incidents and acts of diplomatic and political disputes in the past, such as the recent visit of the Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil to Taiwan in September 2020. The visit, combined with contested Chinese involvement in the 5G networks and the wider issue of Chinese investment in the Czech Republic, underscored the split in the Czech elite, which is having two completely different positions on the bilateral ties. There is a rather narrow group of political actors, particularly around President Miloš Zeman, who favours closer cooperation with China and Russia. However, the political mainstream, and majority of

¹⁴ "Report: Pro-Kremlin Disinformation about GRU Terrorist Attack in the Czech Republic," *Semantic Visions*, 4 May 2021, <https://semantic-visions.com/resource/report-pro-kremlin-disinformation-about-gru-terrorist-attack-in-the-czech-republic>

wider society,¹⁵ is more skeptical and antagonistic¹⁶ towards closer cooperation with the authoritarian actors. Identity politics, thanks to the nation's history, is heavily involved.

The two eastern authoritarian states are also the biggest challengers of the Czech resilience and have an open interest in weakening Czechia, the EU and the West.¹⁷ They use a whole range of tools, from influence and hybrid operations, to disinformation, corruption and elite capture to undermining public institutions or confidence in a liberal democratic establishment.¹⁸ Although the two actors differ to some extent in the degree of their assertiveness and the tools used, in many respects they became more comparable. In addition, numerous experts and politicians have recently agreed on the existence of coordination and cooperation between Russia and China, even if too often shallow in nature,¹⁹ e.g. in the area of disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the exchange of worst practical examples when dealing with the West.²⁰

In the Czech case, there is traditionally more information and higher level of awareness about Russian influence operations, Russia's engagement in local politics and business, and the manipulation of public opinion through direct or indirect channels. For several reasons, including historical experience and cultural proximity, the Czech authorities, which have long struggled with Russia and its influence, should also be relatively well prepared for the challenges coming from Russia. However, recent examples, such as the so-called

¹⁵ Zdenka Trachtova, "Survey: Most Czechs see Russia as a threat and support the exclusion of Rosatom from the tender for Dukovany" [in Czech], *iRozhlas.cz*, 22 April 2021, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/pruzkum-median-rusko-cesi-bezpecnost-hrozba-rosatom_2104220605_tzr

¹⁶ "Nations in Transit 2021: The Antidemocratic Turn," *Freedom House*, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2021/antidemocratic-turn>

¹⁷ "European Democracy Action Plan: making EU democracies stronger", European Commission, 3 December 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2250

¹⁸ Mathieu Boulègue and Alina Polyakova, "The Evolution of Russian Hybrid Warfare: Executive Summary," *CEPA*, 29 January 2021, <https://cepa.org/the-evolution-of-russian-hybrid-warfare-introduction/>

¹⁹ Bobo Lo and Edward Lucas, "Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe," *CEPA*, 28 April 2021, <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Russia-China-Partnership-5.7.21.pdf>

²⁰ Jakub Kalensky (Atlantic Council), "Toxic sites "wash" disinformation. They help to cover up their Russian origin" [in Czech], *Lupa.cz*, 7 December 2020, <https://www.lupa.cz/clanky/jakub-kalensky-atlantic-council-toxicke-weby-perou-dezinformace-pomahaji-zakryt-jejich-rusky-puvod/>

“Ricin Affair”²¹ or conflicts in historical memory,²² have shown that the Czech authorities find it relatively difficult to deal with coordinated operations of the Russian state. The main reason is the unstructured and not well-established strategic and crisis communication, as well as insufficient capacity and ability to act and the general lack of political interest to respond effectively to these challenges.²³

THE CZECH “VRBĚTICE CASE”

The public was made aware of the new Czech-Russian crisis at a press conference on 17 April 2021, when the government announced findings from the Czech security community about the involvement of the Russian GRU in the 2014 explosions at Vrbětice depots. In response, Czechia decided to expel 81 Russian diplomats from its overstuffed embassy.

The diplomatic asymmetry represents a long-term issue in the bilateral relations, with at least 18 diplomats identified as Russian GRU or Foreign Intelligence Service agents – though Czech experts and secret services say the vast embassy complex in Prague serves as a regional base for spying on neighbouring states. In response, Russia sent home 20 Czech diplomats, paralyzing the much smaller Czech mission in Moscow, and the future of Czech-Russian relations too.

Until today, the Russian foreign ministry accuses Czechia of open lies and disinformation, which, Russia says, has several other motives for publicizing the case now. Russia claims that Czech actions are under the influence of the United States, or in an effort to cover the so-called putsch against the Belarusian authoritarian leader Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Such language was used even by the President Vladimir Putin in his speech to the Russian parliament.

²¹ “Czech Government Orders Out Two Russian Embassy Staff Over Ricin Plot Hoax,” *RFE/RL*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/czech-republic-expels-two-staff-members-from-russian-embassy/30654670.html>

²² Pavel Havlíček, “Russian Spring Offensive,” *Visegrad Insight*, 6 May 2020, <https://visegradinsight.eu/russian-spring-offensive-czechia/>

²³ Anna Jordanova, “If Konev had not come... Czech actors, Russian media” [in Czech], *Stop-Fake CZ*, 16 December 2019, <https://www.stopfake.org/cz/kdyby-konev-tehdy-neprijel-cesi-akteri-ruska-media/>

The Czech President Miloš Zeman also commented on the Vrbětice affair and put more fuel in the fire of Russian propaganda. His actions confused the situation, opening the doors for alternative explanations and narratives, and provided an opportunity for the Russian media and proxy groups to attack the official government lines. He attacked the Czech secret services, undermining the position of the government when introducing another version of the investigation. This revealed the weaknesses of the state, which was unable to speak with one voice and lacked a strong coordination mechanism with the international partners too.

In the past years, Czechia has been even less able to manage the influence of China. This was repeatedly demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which the Czech state not only failed to properly explain China's role to its citizens, but also found itself under pressure from disinformation narratives stemming from websites replicating Chinese and Russian interpretations.²⁴ Another example of this problem were issues surrounding the procurement of protective equipment, which were facilitated by particular players connected with the Czech political and business establishment. The names of Jaroslav Tvrdík in the Chinese vector and Martin Nejedlý in the Russian vector resonated loudly in the public space. Both are related to the Czech President Miloš Zeman, who is well-known for his sympathies for both countries, as well as for his support for the Russian Rosatom and the Chinese CGN to be invited to submit a tender for the completion of the Dukovany-II nuclear power plant, the largest investment in the Czech history. The president also heavily lobbied in favour of the unregistered Russian and Chinese anti-Covid-19 vaccines.²⁵

In the past years, Czechia has also witnessed a number of attempts to manipulate the public opinion and improve the Chinese image in the society, including when improving PR based thanks to cooperation with Czech PR agencies and PPF business corporation.²⁶ The Chinese Embassy also promoted the Belt and Road Initiative and sponsored conferences organised by the Charles

²⁴ "EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19 Pandemic (Update 23 April–18 May)", EEAS, 20 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TROH4F>

²⁵ Jaroslav Spurny, "How to satisfy the president. The government is working hard to find a way to let the Russians into Dukovany," *Hospodarske Noviny*, 31 January 2021, <https://bit.ly/3BuLmYw>

²⁶ Lukas Valasek and Jan Horak, "Home Credit of wealthiest Czech Petr Kellner has paid for a campaign promoting China," *Aktualne.cz*, 11 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3rrtI3c>

University in Prague and one of the advisers to the ruling social democratic party Milos Balaban.²⁷ In addition, the Embassy has invested in cultivating the disinformation scene, e.g. the AC24 disinformation website, to promote the positive picture of China in an effort to localise the propaganda in the Czech information environment.²⁸ China also established Confucius Institutes or the Czech-Chinese Centre at the Charles University in Prague or invested in academic exchanges and hosting students and academicians in China.²⁹

Czech experts and practitioners working in the field of foreign influence agree that the last couple of years did not mean a fundamental shift in the perception of the Chinese and Russian threat by the Czech state. On the contrary, experts point to the more active involvement of civil society, independent media, and non-profit organisations, which are continuously working to analyse and explain the problem to the public and bring both topics into public discourse.³⁰ This is often the case in parallel and without sufficient coordination with the government and state institutions.³¹ Therefore, there is still significant room for improvement of the understanding and analysis of behaviour of malign actors and the challenges they present.

As one of the interviewed experts said, *“Now, much more attention is paid to the Chinese influence, which is now intensively discussed and better understood than before. Despite this, the Czech state still has much to achieve and a lot of domestic homework to fulfil before its capacity to respond to authoritarian regimes is sufficiently enhanced.”*³²

²⁷ Lukas Valasek and Jan Horsk, “Conference organised by the rector of Charles University Zima was secretly supported by hundreds of thousands by the Chinese Embassy” [in Czech], *Aktualne.cz*, 25 October 2021, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/konferenci-uk-platila-ci-na-stredisko-bezpecnostni-politiky/r~79c2b80ef4b311e9858fac1f6b220ee8/>

²⁸ Filip Sebok, “Czechia: A Case Study of China’s Changing Overseas Propaganda Efforts,” *The Diplomat*, 30 April 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/czechia-a-case-study-of-chinas-changing-overseas-propaganda-efforts/>

²⁹ Ivana Karaskova, “Influence of China on the Academic Environment and How to Prevent It” [in Czech], *Chinfluence.eu*, December 2019, <https://www.chinfluence.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Vliv-Ciny-v-ceskem-akademickem-prostredi-a-jak-se-mu-branit.pdf>

³⁰ Samantha Bradshaw, Lisa-Maria Neudert, “The Road Ahead: Mapping Civil Society Responses to Disinformation,” *National Endowment for Democracy (NED)*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.ned.org/mapping-civil-society-responses-to-disinformation-international-forum/>

³¹ Marketa Rehakova, “Disinformation hunters are done with the government. Ministers do not listen to our advice, they say and go to help the U.S. Department of State” [in Czech], *iHned.cz*, 8 February 2021, <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66879470-lovci-dezinformaci-konci-s-vladou-ministri-neposlouchaji-nase-rady-rikaji>

³² Interview with the representative of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 January 2021.

Recently, there has been a slight shift in the Czech expert environment, from attributing some domestic problems to third parties and focusing on the domestic nature of problems, including the issue of vulnerable groups in Czech society. This trend was reinforced, among other things, by the coronavirus pandemic, which fully revealed the potential of the domestic disinformation sphere and the impact of proxy groups on the public debate in the country.³³ The impact of the domestic polarisation and the spread of disinformation was obvious not only in Prague, but also during the 6 January 2021 attack on the US Capitol, as well as elsewhere in Europe and the world.

In connection with the Covid-19 pandemic, strategic and crisis communication was elevated to the top functions of the state. The ability to communicate effectively with citizens and proactively pass on information has become essential in the current situation for the protection and basic functioning of society. Unfortunately, the crisis also revealed many weaknesses that both the Czech government and the state administration have in this regard, both in their proactive approach to strategic communication as well as efficient explanation of solutions to painful public affairs in the reactive crisis communication mode.

The issue of strategic communication has become a problem for not only Czech foreign policy, security interests and the Czech Republic's *soft power*, but has also been reflected in citizens' everyday lives. The chaotic and unsystematic communication of the Czech government, exemplified by lengthy press conferences and briefings to the media, has become the main subject of political³⁴ and expert critique.³⁵ However, the general lack of coordination, inefficiently set up communication processes at the national level and poor coherence between civilian and military administration have already proved problematic in the past.³⁶

³³ "Coronavirus: An Overview of Major Disinformation Messages" [in Czech], Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, 2020, <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/koronavirus-prehled-hlavnich-dezinformacnich-sdeleni.aspx>

³⁴ Ludek Niedermayer, "Sad Czech covid reality – really almost the worst in the world" [in Czech], *Nazory Aktualne / Blogy*, 25 January 2021, <https://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/ludek-niedermayer.php?itemid=38754>

³⁵ Marek Baco, "We had the best intentions, but it turned out as always." Winners and losers of the "campaign," which the Office of the Government has commissioned influencers" [in Czech], *Denik N*, 1 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3eMAE5Y>

³⁶ Dominik Presl, "Teaching the state to speak: lessons for the Czech Republic on how to use strategic communication as a tool in the fight against disinformation" [in Czech], *Association for International Affairs (AMO)*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.amo.cz/en/policy-paper-teaching-the-state-to-talk-lessons-for-the-czech-republic-on-using-strategic-communication-as-a-counter-disinformation-tool/>

Up to this day, Czechia has had practically no comprehensive strategy or one single body at the governmental level that would be responsible for the disinformation agenda. This seems somewhat paradoxical, considering that a few years ago Czechia was considered one of the European “champions” in the fight against disinformation.³⁷ This was not only due to its past active involvement in a number of EU processes, such as the Rapid Alert System or activities of the EU disinformation unit of the EEAS (East StratCom Task Force),³⁸ where Czechia had its representative since the beginning, but also with regard to realisation of the National Security Audit and establishment of the Center for Combating Terrorism and Hybrid Threats.³⁹

In addition, Czechia was perceived as an active supporter of independent media, including Russian-speaking ones, and a state relatively assertive towards Russia, and partly assertive against China; the two main perpetrators of international disinformation. Czechia also has the great advantage of an active civil society, which has been raising public awareness of disinformation and foreign propaganda, above the standards even seen within the EU context.⁴⁰ However, despite some positive elements, the Czech government has not been able to make use of this potential in the past.

On the other hand, the most recent trend related to the pandemic and the new challenges stemming from Covid-19 shows that Czech bureaucracy and politicians are becoming more active and returning to some proposals from the national security audit, in order to put some of its still relevant recommendations into practice. A good example of this trend is the initiative of the Czech Ministry of Defence (MoD), which has developed a new National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference and is currently working on an action plan that should translate it into practicable and specific tasks for individual settings. The MoD, which is formally responsible for the issue of hybrid threats, has thus reaffirmed its responsibility for the implementation of the security audit.

³⁷ Jonas Syrovatka, “Wasted chance” [in Czech], *Nazory Aktualne / Blogy*, 27 January 2021, <https://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/jonas-syrovatka.php?itemid=38781>

³⁸ Robert Brestan, “Czech representative for combating Russian disinformation in Brussels quits, the Government seeks” [in Czech], *HlidaciPes.org*, 12 October 2020, <https://hlidacipes.org/cesky-zastupce-pro-boj-s-ruskymi-dezinformacemi-v-bruselu-konci-vlada-hleda-nahradu/>

³⁹ “Disinformation campaigns” [in Czech], Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, 2020, <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/dezinformacni-kampane.aspx>

⁴⁰ Adela Denkova and Pavel Havlíček, “Europe should do more to combat Russian disinformation” [in Czech], *Euractiv.cz*, 20 June 2018, <https://euractiv.cz/section/politika/news/pavel-havlicek-evropa-by-pro-boj-s-ruskymi-dezinformacemi-mela-delat-vice/>

Another good example of this trend is the recent ratification of the Act on the Examination of Foreign Investments,⁴¹ which should protect key sectors of the Czech economy and critical infrastructure from foreign acquisitions, especially from the malign actors in the international arena. This area lies within the responsibilities of the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic, which has already strengthened its relevant internal capacities. As another example of good practice, a new position of Coordinator of the Countering Hybrid Threats at the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic was created, which should address crisis communication and issues of proactive strategic communication and coordination with other ministries.⁴²

CZECH STRUGGLE FOR THE NEW STRATEGY

On 19 April 2021, the Czech government approved a new National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Threats⁴³ prepared by the Czech Ministry of Defense in coordination with several other state actors. It defined the key problems and challenges that it sees in responding to the multiple threats to the ideological and values basis of the state, constitutional and legal order, national economy as well as security and defence of the country.

Among concrete issues, the strategy lists disinformation and information manipulation, cyber-attacks against public institutions, economic dependency on authoritarian regimes and their investment in critical infrastructure and areas of national importance, such as 5G networks and AI-related projects. The document also speaks about interference by malign actors in domestic political processes, including in the form of secret services and in the mobilisation and infiltration of groups of particular interest or vulnerable nature.

⁴¹ "The Chamber of Deputies has passed The Act on Foreign Investment Screening" [in Czech], *CTK*, 19 January 2021, <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/snemovna-stvrdi-la-zakon-o-proverovani-zahranicnich-investic/1984650>

⁴² Jana Magdonova, "Coordinator Matous: Hybrid threats are a race against innovation. Communication with foreign countries is the key" [in Czech], *iRozhlas.cz*, 25 January 2021, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/hybridni-hrozby-kyberutok-hackeri-urad-vlady-nukib-petr-matous-rozhovor_2101250906_gak

⁴³ "National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference," *Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic*, Prague 2021, <https://www.mocr.army.cz/assets/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/national-strategy---aj-final.pdf>

Its aim is to raise public awareness of these challenges and to start to systematically prepare the state to cope with these issues in coordinated efforts across the state institutions, as well as with the help of civil society. The strategy also underscores the importance of analytical and monitoring capabilities to better understand these challenges and prepare the Czech society to cope with them. This should be achieved through closer coordination and wider exchanges of information, as well as through the establishment of a number of indicators to evaluate the threat and its nature.

Concrete steps should be outlined in the corresponding Action Plan, which is currently being discussed at the level of state institutions, and should give concrete tasks to individual actors, with regular monitoring, evaluation and update of the set of deliverables.

Finally, the Czech Republic now has a good opportunity to create a more efficient system of coordination and networking within the state administration, which is preparing for the upcoming Czech EU Presidency in the second half of 2022, which demands substantial resources to invest in the communication dimension too. Nevertheless, even in this domain, there are problems with establishing partnerships across the state institutions and connecting the wider framework with the political level of the issue.

Changes in media landscape

Over the last couple of years, the Czech information and media landscape has been suffering from backsliding, higher concentration of ownership in the hands of few, and weak financial resilience⁴⁴ when operating in the relatively small market of 10 million people. The 2020 Freedom House Report reminds us of the politicisation of the field, when several key media outlets were bought by the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in 2013.⁴⁵ Another example was the takeover of the Central European Media Enterprises by the

⁴⁴ "Information Sovereignty," *Visegrad Insight*, <https://visegradinsight.eu/category/information-sovereignty/>

⁴⁵ "Freedom in the World 2020 – Czechia," Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/czech-republic/freedom-world/2020>

PPF Group of Petr Kellner in 2019–2020. The report further describes the media landscape as “relatively free” but points to the ownership problem and abuse of information sources for political goals. Most recently, there is also an increasing number of attacks against the public broadcasters *Czech TV* and *Czech Radio*, outlets that remain free from political control and particular interests of the Czech Republic’s political and business elite.⁴⁶ This new wave of attacks might be somewhat paradoxical since the public trust and support towards the service has peaked during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁷

The Czech disinformation scene has undergone some changes in recent years, but its main pillars have remained largely the same since 2016.⁴⁸ According to the European Values Center for Security Policy, the core of the Czech scene consists of around forty websites that flood the Czech information space with unverified, manipulative and even false information, often in direct relation to Russian disinformation narratives, which these media sources multiply and interpret for the Czech audience. The “laundering of information,”⁴⁹ obfuscation of original sources, or building a network of so-called localisation of information sources, are some of the trends of recent years, although it is not always easy to show these in practice in individual countries, including the Czech Republic.⁵⁰ Among others, the shift to decentralisation and overwhelming of the online space with information, tabloidisation of content and the growing extreme tendency of some projects should be put in the picture too. Politicians and opinion leaders are also playing an increasingly significant role in the Czech disinformation scene, developing their own agenda through disinformation channels, and using it to address their constituents and supporters.

⁴⁶ “Statement on the threat facing Czech TV (Česká Televize),” Global Task Force, ABC, 12 April 2021, <https://about.abc.net.au/statements/statement-on-the-threat-facing-czech-tv-ceska-televize/>

⁴⁷ Delphine Ernotte Cunci, “Public Service Media in the Czech Republic under Threat,” EBU, 9 April 2021, <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2021/04/public-service-media-in-the-czech-republic-under-threat>

⁴⁸ Veronika Kratka Spalkova and Zuzana Cincerova, “Year 2020: How the Czech government lost to two waves of misinformation about coronavirus,” *European Values Center for Security Policy*, 2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/covid-final-9.4-2021.pdf>

⁴⁹ “Information Laundering in the Nordic-Baltic region,” *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, November 2020, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/information-laundering-nordic-baltic-region>

⁵⁰ Jakub Kalensky (Atlantic Council), op.cit.

In addition to the core problem composed of websites producing manipulative content, the Czech disinformation scene is complemented by two other important platforms: social networks – especially Facebook – and the influential, albeit relatively little mapped, phenomenon of chain emails. Within social networks exist groups with thousands to tens of thousands of members, in which disinformation often spreads based on the echo chamber effect. The so-called “super-spreaders,” individual profiles or sites with a large organic reach, play an important role. In the Czech environment, super-spreaders also include profiles of some politicians or political parties, mostly from the fringes of the political scene. Both on social networks and via chain emails, the content from the aforementioned “disinformation websites” is intensively promoted. The individual platforms thus amplify each other, increase their reach and share content with each other, and the Czech disinformation scene thus exists on different platforms but in mutual symbiosis.

A somewhat different role among the disinformation media has long been played by the *Parlamentní listy* website, owned by former senator Ivo Valenta and businessman Michal Voráček. This is a site with more than 8 million visitors a month that produces incomparably more material compared to similar online projects. *Parlamentní listy* serves as a business initiative based on a specific model of operation, which is characterized by a large level of content from external contributors and an extreme level of tabloidisation. For many, this website is a gateway between the mainstream media and the so-called *alternative* (or rather anti-system)⁵¹ information landscape. Investigative journalists and researchers also assume that there is a connection to Russian and Chinese disinformation.⁵²

In addition, Czechia has dozens of websites with hundreds of thousands of followers spreading disinformation, hoaxes and manipulative narratives. Disinformation media also have a relatively significant impact on shaping public affairs in the country. They are popular and have a certain presence on social networks, with their narratives and disinformation often adopted by some high-level politicians and government officials. The aforementioned server *Parlamentnilisty.cz* is also the eighth most influential “information” source in the country. With a few exceptions (e.g. *AC24*), the ownership and

⁵¹ “Category: Anti-system sites” [in Czech], *Atlas konspiraci*, 13 October 2019, http://www.atlaskonspiraci.cz/Kategorie:Antisyst%C3%A9mov%C3%A9_weby

⁵² Ondrej Kundra, “How Parlamentni listy work” [in Czech], *Respekt.cz*, 15 December 2020, <https://www.respekt.cz/special/2017/dezinformace/most-na-druhy-breh>

funding of these disinformation portals is anonymous and is not disclosed in the public domain. Disinformation narratives are then often adopted, recycled and further disseminated by different far-right and far-left extremist groups and political parties.⁵³

The Czech case is also specific for its connection with the Slovak information space and the local disinformation sphere, due to which, for example, *Konspirátori.sk* maps both areas together.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

Although the concept of societal resilience is relatively new in the public debate, indeed, the term has only recently entered political discourse and public awareness beyond security and strategic documents,⁵⁴ the issue of foreign interference in democratic processes and foreign propaganda or domestic disinformation have been widely discussed for quite some time. A number of strategic and analytical documents have been produced by Czech public institutions, including the army and individual ministries, which defined and operationalized the concept.

The starting point for the discussion on Czech resilience and the state reaction to disinformation is the National Security Audit released in 2016.⁵⁵ This comprehensive strategic review process not only analyzed the fundamental threats to Czech society, but also exposed the weaknesses and gaps in national security. The final document proposed a number of recommendations and specific

⁵³ Katarina Klingova and Dominika Hajdu, "From Online Battlefield to Loss of Trust?" *GLOBSEC*, October 2018, https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/From-Online-Battlefield-to-Loss-of-Trust_1by1-1.pdf

⁵⁴ "Security Strategy of the Czech Republic," Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2015, https://www.army.cz/images/id_8001_9000/8503/Security_Strategy_2015.pdf
"The Defence Strategy of the Czech Republic," Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2017, <https://www.army.cz/assets/en/ministry-of-defence/strategy-and-doctrine/defencestrategy2017.pdf>

"The government has approved a cyber security strategy for the next five years", NUKIB, 30 November 2020, <https://www.nukib.cz/cs/infoservis/aktuality/1657-vlada-schvalila-strategii-kyberneticke-bezpecnosti-na-nasledujicich-pet-let/>

⁵⁵ "National Security Audit," Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, 2016, <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/soubor/national-security-audit.aspx>

tasks that the government and its individual ministries were supposed to deal with, so that the vulnerabilities in the Czech resilience could be addressed.

However, most experts and practitioners agree that⁵⁶ although the audit took a significant first step towards strengthening societal resilience and combating disinformation, its recommendations were largely never implemented, despite being on the agenda for the last five years. The expert interviews conducted as part of this research showed that although the analysis clearly described some of the crucial problems and recommended corresponding solutions, they often remained unimplemented. This was the case, for example, when creating a whole counter-disinformation infrastructure and coordination mechanisms that would allow for exchange of information, as well as serving as an axis of the response to the information attacks coming from the domestic and international actors. In most cases, this was due to a general lack of political will and/or a lack of understanding of the importance of these measures and their consequences for national security.

In addition, some recommendations proved to be unfeasible in practice or difficult to implement, e.g. the decentralisation of strategic communication to the level of individual ministries and their subsequent effective coordination. In this respect, Czechia is waiting for new political leadership and energy, which would put this strategic document into practice and start implementing it on a systematic basis. As one interviewed expert said, *“Since 2016, there has been little progress on the side of the state and its capacity, especially when it comes to the implementation of the audit of national security. Unlike in the case of civil society, which has noted some new trends and tendencies in relation to Russia and China.”*⁵⁷

The lack of political will to work on this topic is somewhat paradoxical, especially in the light of ever-increasing tensions in the world and international politics, the Covid-19 pandemic and its corresponding pressure on the public administration, but also significant social polarisation and radicalisation of the population.⁵⁸ In Czech society, these are associated with the so-called migration crisis, which has ostensibly been taking place since 2015, but they were further

⁵⁶ Based on a series of interviews conducted in January and February 2021.

⁵⁷ Interview with civil society representative, 14 January 2021.

⁵⁸ “The attitude of the Czech public towards refugees in CVVM public opinion polls in the wider context” [in Czech], Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, May 2019, <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/postoj-ceske-verejnosti-k-uprchlikum-v-pruzkumech-verejneho-mineni-cvvm-v-sirsim-kontextu.aspx>

fueled by a high level of mistrust in the authorities and the disinformation crisis associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵⁹ The enormous wave of resistance to government measures during the second and third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic further underscores the importance of this problem and, in many respects, the Czech state's poor preparedness. This is best seen in the issue of strategic and crisis communication, where the Czech government learns on the fly, and does not have a clearly defined strategy, strong institutional capacity or effectively set up processes to meet these key challenges for Czech security, especially between the bureaucratic and political levels of crisis management.

The situation is in many respects similar in the area of regulation of the digital space and social media platforms, where the Czech authorities have rather reluctantly accepted the recent EU initiatives of European Action Plan for Democracy, Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act, but have largely approached the topic from the perspective of Czech domestic business interests, while not paying sufficient attention to the digital threats to democracy. The Czech debate and its implications for combating disinformation and strengthening Czech resilience represent one of the other blind spots in the Czech approach to disinformation, which should certainly be changed in the future.

In the upcoming years, a large part of EU regulation in this area will move to the national level, where the Czech authorities should be able process it properly with the help of state institutions. A good example of Czech infrastructure, which unfortunately still suffers from some internal problems, is the Office for the Supervision of the Management of Political Parties and Political Movements (ÚDHPSH). Although it has some capacity to monitor and work with online data and digital political advertising, its current capabilities and competencies are not sufficient to control these key elements of election campaigns, even retrospectively. Due to a number of factors, including politicisation and weak sanction mechanisms, the ÚDHPSH is still not well-equipped to enforce the rules of democratic competition among political actors, nor its decisions vis-à-vis electoral processes – a phenomenon that has proved problematic in the past.

Among the positive points, it is possible to highlight the most recently adopted law, which gave the military intelligence “Vojenské zpravodajství” powers in the cyber security realm. This decision has been long overdue and means that Czechia has finally established who is responsible for the issue of cyber

⁵⁹ “Standard Eurobarometer 94 – Winter 2020–2021 – Public Opinion in the European Union,” European Union, May 2021, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2355>

security,⁶⁰ which is significant for building the state's capacity to defend against, as well as to react to, cyber-attacks and criminal activity. The plan is to build a National Centre of Cyber Operations, which is currently in the setup process.

Responses by media and civil society

Czech civil society has been traditionally at the forefront of the public response to the issue of disinformation, hybrid threats, foreign interference as well as critical thinking and media literacy. This is true also when compared with the broader European context, in which the Czech civic response has been identified as advanced and, in many respects, driving the public debate on these critical issues. A network of dozens of organisations in various spheres has managed to raise public awareness of the disinformation and foreign propaganda, especially after 2014 and the start of open Russian aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.

In Czechia, a group of NGOs, united around the Platform for Media Literacy, has been long active in the area of critical thinking, media and information literacy, and their promotion in formal education. The argument is that the state cannot outsource its basic function to non-formal education, especially in the 21st century's complex media and information ecosystem,⁶¹ which is difficult to understand without the proper skill set that formal education should provide. Unfortunately, until today, the Ministry of Education has not introduced fundamental changes to the curriculum, even if some partial amendments have been made. The system is flexible enough to maneuver, which gives opportunities for the more ambitious and progressive educators to take action,⁶² but does not push the ones less willing to go the extra mile. On the other hand, we have recently also seen some setbacks, especially when it comes to education related to the European Union, NATO, and citizenship education in general.

⁶⁰ Marketa Rehakova, "Russia has prepared in time for the Czech announcement about Vrbětice. We saw it in cyberspace, says the head of military intelligence" [in Czech], *Hospodarske noviny*, 4 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3BuRdwY>

⁶¹ "Open letter to Minister Plaga: Media education has been neglected for a long time, write representatives of thirteen organisations" [in Czech], *Association for International Affairs (AMO)*, 21 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/2UDcfZM>

⁶² "About us," *Obcankari*, <https://www.obcankari.cz>

This problem of information literacy became even more urgent after the 2014 Russian aggression against Ukraine and massive spread of disinformation and Russian propaganda on many topics in an effort to undermine the credibility of the West, its partnership with Ukraine, as well as the role of the US as a partner and ally of the EU. The civic response has been to focus on fact-checking and verification of data and narratives, promoting public awareness of the phenomenon of disinformation, as well as knowledge about the actors involved (Russia, China) as well as enhancing the resilience of the state and its institutions in a number of areas, which should help to properly react and defend the citizens against the malign influences from abroad. This was also how the Audit of National Security came to being in 2016. Over time, the focus has been also extended to the Chinese influence and role of other third actors with foreign interference and state propaganda playing a prominent role in public discourse in the Czech Republic.

“The state offers little meaningful support to civil society, which mostly relies on foreign funding and only ad hoc cooperation with the authorities. The same is true for the private enterprises and business community, which the failed cooperation between the Ministry of Healthcare and Semantic Visions underscored,” one of the interviewed practitioners said.⁶³

A specific position has traditionally been held by the domestic disinformation ecosystem and actors due to different reasons multiplying the foreign-inspired narratives. Also in this domain, there has been a lot of mapping, debunking and raising public awareness by civil society organisations, including when cooperating with partners in Slovakia, with which the information ecosystem is, to a large degree, shared. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the problem of domestic disinformation has been once again exposed and came to the light in full. Additionally, Czech civil society and the business community⁶⁴ engaged in demonetisation of content and downplaying of advertising in order to limit the profitability of spreading manipulative content.

Unlike many other countries, Czechia is somewhat unique in the role played by high-level politicians, including the country’s president, who often serve as promoters of disinformation, which is both the case for the foreign and

⁶³ Interview with the civil society representative, 19 January 2021.

⁶⁴ “Stand up for the truth against disinformation” [in Czech], *Nelez.cz*, <https://www.nelez.cz/en/home-eng/>

the domestic iteration of the problem. The role of public figures, influencers and other prominent personalities and politicians in spreading disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic has also been recognised, which points to the massive scale of multiplication of manipulative narratives and open lies.

Czech media outlets have also engaged with the problem and promoted both trustworthy and fact-checked content, as well as specific initiatives to label problematic content, as exemplified by the search engine and news portal Seznam, which has partnered with civil society projects to promote reliable content and label problematic content.⁶⁵ We could find a number of other media sites that have invested in information resilience and fact-checking in order to deliver quality content and speak about disinformation more.

The fact-checking community in the Czech Republic, which inspired projects in other countries, including in Slovakia and Poland, has engaged with social media companies and partnered with Facebook to verify content, even if only in the case of content detached from politics and political speech. In May 2020, together with French *AFP*, the Czech initiative *Demagog* became an official partner in fighting the spread of disinformation on the social media platform,⁶⁶ even if with limited resources and time to engage in the massive problem existent in the online ecosystem.⁶⁷

Unfortunately, the missing link here is the involvement of the state and its support for civil society, which has remained insufficient and highly problematic despite the resources put into promoting resilience by Czech civil society, often funded from abroad by the EU and US. In terms of coordination, the connection has been limited to individual projects and partnerships, with particular public institutions lacking the desire for long-term impact and sustainable change. There remains an ongoing challenge as to how to better calibrate the partnership between civil society and the state, and establish meaningful cooperation on the topic of disinformation, as well as many other issues.

⁶⁵ “Seznam.cz and the NFNZ joined forces in the fight against conspiracies and disinformation” [in Czech], *Endowment Fund for Independent Journalism*, <https://www.nfnz.cz/seznam-cz-a-nfnz-spojily-sily-v-boji-proti-konspiracim-a-dezinformacim/>

⁶⁶ David Slizek, “The truthfulness of the content for Facebook will also be verified by the Czech demagog.cz” [in Czech], *Lupa.cz*, 26 May 2020, <https://www.lupa.cz/aktuality/overovat-pravdivost-obsahu-bude-pro-facebook-i-cesky-demagog-cz/>

⁶⁷ David Slizek, “Facebook launches fact-checking in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, hoaxes will be penalized” [in Czech], *Lupa.cz*, 12 February 2020, <https://www.lupa.cz/aktuality/facebook-spousti-v-cr-a-na-slovensku-fact-checking-hoaxy-bude-penalizovat/>

Recommendations

The Czech debate on resistance to disinformation so far suffers from some fundamental problems and encounters several blind spots that the Czech government and country's elite have not been able to change since 2016. The best example is the issue of proactive strategic communication, but also the reactive crisis reaction and regulation of the digital environment and the fight against hybrid threats, which has only recently undergone certain changes at the coordination and institutional level. It is primarily a question of political will, the capacity of the state, and public consensus, which in the Czech case is still not efficient to achieve the fundamental change needed.

Recently, some positive processes, including in central coordination when addressing hybrid threats and fighting against disinformation, and the approval of a new strategy against hybrid threats by the Ministry of Defense, have been successfully launched, but it will take far more than basic crisis management and crisis resolution to maintain a favorable path going forward. Political will and leadership is desperately needed to improve the current state of play, for which the upcoming parliamentary elections, as well as the Czech EU presidency in 2022, might provide good momentum.

These opportunities might rectify some of the dysfunctional processes and reverse the negative trend of the recent de facto abandonment of clear and accessible communication and interaction with citizens in the fight against disinformation, which the current establishment does not see as a crucial social problem. However, there might be a new momentum for realizing that issues related to social resilience, strategic communication, hybrid threats of disinformation will become an active part of the campaign and political debate before the October 2021 vote and will be articulated more convincingly than ever before on the agenda of a future government.

Most of the recommendations from 2018⁶⁸ remain valid and the general agreement is that too little has been achieved in practical terms since 2016 and the national security audit, which laid out a set of concrete measures and tasks, which are only now being picked up again by the respective actors on the side of the state, e.g. the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic.

This is also true for civil society and efforts to counter public polarisation, as well as for the involvement of public figures and influencers in raising public awareness and educating society on these challenges and on both internal and external malign influences. The issue of media and information literacy remains an outstanding problem, which has also not been addressed by the state.

- The country's leadership must find the political will to invest in societal resilience and strengthen Czech defences against hybrid threats, including the implementation of still relevant recommendations from the 2016 National Security Audit. Many meaningful tasks and recommendations remain unimplemented, despite the fact that the analysis behind the proposed measures and their implementation would fundamentally change the way disinformation and national security in broader terms is treated.
- Czech authorities need to invest more substantially in the monitoring and analytical capacity to better understand and respond to malign influences, both in the information sphere as well as in other domains of public life. This is also true for regular collection of data and polling of the public in relation to the disinformation and manipulative content.
- The government should focus especially on the issue of coordination and exchange of information in the area of strategic and crisis communication, establish one central point at the Office of Czech Government as a hub for individual ministries and state institutions and establish a concrete and coherent plan of strategic and crisis communication.
- It is necessary to continue investing in some of the positive processes, including the elements of central coordination in the hybrid domain

⁶⁸ Andrei Yeliseyev and Volha Damarad (eds.), "Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe", *Ukrainian Prism and EAST Center*, 2018, https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

and expanding the action plan to complement the new strategy for countering hybrid threats. The current situation, as well as the Czech EU presidency in 2022, might provide momentum for further work on this.

- To achieve a more fundamental change in the information environment, preventing the spread of disinformation, the state should invest in stronger cooperation with Czech civil society, use of new opportunities, including in the realm of EU regulation of social media platforms, but also better coordination and cooperation with civil society, independent media as well as private enterprises. This should also include concrete and transparent funding opportunities and public tenders and offers of cooperation.
- The Czech Ministry of Education should incorporate media and information literacy in the core of the formal education process and improve the quality of citizenship education and history of the 20th century, in order to better prepare the young citizens for the challenges of the current information environment and world affairs.
- Czech civil society should invest more in coordination and exchanging best practice in fighting disinformation, debunking manipulative content, as well as raising public awareness in this area, in order to achieve better sustainability and more meaningful impact on Czech society, since the outcomes are often fragmented and remain limited.

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Abstract

The Kremlin's disinformation represents an acute challenge for Georgia. It has acquired a new, destructive impetus amid the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has manifested itself in the conduct of anti-Western and pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns. The latter aims to discredit Western institutions and counterbalance them by creating a positive image of Russia. Since 2018, the Georgian government and civil society have taken certain measures to address the persisting challenges. It remains a rather complicated task for Georgia, having in mind the difficulty of fighting undemocratic systems in a democracy. At the same time, it is clear that stronger efforts are needed, both from state institutions and the general public, to effectively counter the Kremlin's destructive influence in the country.

This chapter describes the disinformation processes and trends in Georgia over the past three years (2018–2021), as well as achievements and remaining challenges. Based on the analysis of obtained findings, the most acute areas and issues have been identified, which serve as a ground for the formulation of recommendations provided at the end of the study.

Disinformation studies

Studies on pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda clearly show that it remains a widespread phenomenon in Georgia. It traditionally includes anti-Western rhetoric, disinformation against democratic institutions, and obvious encouragement of anti-liberal and anti-secular ideas. Recently, Russian propaganda has intensified amid the spread of Covid-19 pandemic, when it became possible to use the so-called infodemic as one of the hybrid challenges.

The 2020 study by the Democracy Research Institute¹ mainly focuses on Covid-19 related disinformation. The announced creation of a vaccine by Russia was followed by the activation of pro-Kremlin media in Georgia and a manipulation campaign. Russian vaccine Sputnik V is presented in a better light than western vaccines; it is said to be safer and better tested. Russia-based and pro-Kremlin media outlets elsewhere repeatedly stressed that it was the first one in the world go through all phases of testing. Pro-Russian “experts” called on the Georgian government to buy Sputnik V immediately.

Conspiracy theories and falsehoods were also spread against Western institutions and prominent public figures of the West. According to the study produced by the Transparency International Georgia,² pro-Kremlin disinformation in Georgia is an integral part of Russia’s arsenal of hybrid warfare, and its main narratives are centred around identity and values, in particular the rights of the LGBT community, Georgia’s foreign policy vector, and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, as well as the aspirations of Western partners, including the US, NATO and the EU. The same study also argues that the narratives are saturated with pro-Russian propaganda that exaggerates the Soviet past and Orthodox Christianity.

According to the Georgian Reforms Associates’ research^{3,4} devoted to the use of Covid-19 as a tool in spreading disinformation, the key focus is on manipulating

¹ “Identify Disinformation. Social Media Monitoring Results (October–November 2020),” *Democracy Research Institute*, 2020, <http://www.democracyresearch.org/files/821identify%20Disinformation..pdf>

² “Fighting Disinformation in Georgia,” *Transparency International Georgia*, 2019, https://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/dezinpormaciis_cinaagmdeg_brzola_sakartveloshi-e-web.pdf

³ “Report on Russian disinformation about Covid-19 (March–April 2020),” *Georgian Reforms Associates*, 2020, <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2020-08-25/745.pdf>

⁴ “DisinfoMeter 2020 – Annual Report on Pro-Russian and Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda,” *Georgian Reforms Associates*, 2020, <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2021-03-15/878.pdf>

religious sentiments. Disinformation publications alleged that through the issue of coronavirus, non-governmental organisations act as Western agents, to the extent that they ostensibly try to ban church services and discredit the patriarch. One of the anti-Western messages is that the West is helping Georgia in exchange for “fighting the Church.”

The theme of liberalism is also found in other studies conducted since 2018, namely that the ruling liberal elites have an anti-church element and are fighting against the church. A study published by a group of prominent Georgian experts addresses the vulnerability of online media to pro-Kremlin disinformation during elections.⁵ The study aims to map good practices in combating disinformation for the purpose of their adaptation to Georgian realities. At the same time, the authors point out that processes with regard to Russian propaganda and disinformation in Georgia are similar to those abroad.

The fifth annual report by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) reflects the results of media monitoring and fake news debunking.⁶ It reviews sources of anti-Western messages and goes beyond media outlets, focusing on politicians, the clergy, public organisations, and public figures. One of the report’s main findings concerns an upward trend in anti-Western messages, particularly in anti-American and anti-NATO messages on Facebook. Statements in support of Russia increased, conveying messages about the need to revise the foreign policy course of Georgia, and the need to engage one-on-one with the Kremlin in order to settle existing conflicts. The anti-Western narratives are spread by both media outlets and political parties.

The MDF also conducted a survey to study the impact of disinformation and conspiracy theories on public perceptions, and to identify the conspiracy theories that are the most widespread among the population.⁷ It also aimed to study public attitudes towards specific foreign policy issues. The study rests on a non-scientific, anecdotal evidence method, applying evidence collected in an informal manner. The content analysis shows that disinformation and

⁵ Lela Taliuri, Mariam Japharidze, Khatia Lagidze, “Possible risks of online disinformation during election period and best international practice of risk reduction,” *Sector Hub for Development*, <https://sector3.ge/Researches/Download/505>

⁶ Tamar Kintsurashvili, Sopho Gelava, “Anti-Western Propaganda 2019,” *Media Development Foundation*, 2019, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/173/file/eng/AntiWest-Booklet-ENG.pdf>

⁷ Sopo Gelava, “Anecdotal Evidence Survey,” *Media Development Foundation*, 2020, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//Anecdotal%20report%20ENG.pdf>

conspiracy theories mostly concern anti-Western narratives and aims to stir up fears with regard to losing one's identity as Georgia is *"forced to accept migrants, legalise LGBT marriage, revise national values, and change mentality."* Such "technology" is quite effective for spreading pro-Kremlin ideas.

Relations with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

Russia and China play an important role in Georgian political and economic realities. Naturally, the differences in their geopolitical interests sometimes lead to different interactions with Georgia. Russia occupies about 20 per cent of Georgia's territory. It consistently pursues a policy of annexation on the occupied territories by means of concluding illegitimate agreements, in terms of international law, with the de facto authorities of Abkhazia⁸ and the Tskhinvali region. At the same time, it hinders Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration in every possible way, utilising a number of mechanisms to impose pressure on Georgia, including disinformation and propaganda.

Chinese interests in Georgia are more dynamic and are characterised by increasing intensity. Beijing's activity in Georgia has become quite intense in the last few years. China and Georgia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on strengthening cooperation vis-à-vis the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese industry is constantly in need of cheap raw materials, a sales market, and free transport corridors leading to these markets. In the past years, a Free Trade Agreement between China and Georgia was also signed.⁹

China has repeatedly expressed interest in participating in key investment projects in Georgia, a clear example of which is that, in 2016, the Chinese state-owned company, PowerChina, was considered a major candidate to build a multibillion-dollar Anaklia Deep Sea Port in Georgia, but the company failed to win the tender. In 2019, the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, made a statement that Georgia must complete the implementation of the project [deep-water port of Anaklia], which will not allow the country to be under the

⁸ Official website of de facto President of Abkhazia, <http://presidentofabkhazia.org/doc/mezhdunarodnye-dogovory.php>

⁹ "Georgia-China Free Trade Agreement Signed," Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, 13 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/3blZAPQ>

economic influence of Russia or China. Perhaps the U.S. position on China's involvement in Anaklia is clear from this statement. Despite this statement, the project was paused, and its implementation put on hold.¹⁰

The positions of Russia and China in relation to Georgia in terms of foreign trade are interesting. The analysis of the last two years makes it evident that both countries maintain a leading role in the Georgian economy. Moreover, China moved from 5th to 1st place in Georgia's external exports. Russia holds the second place.¹¹ Consequently, these countries might exercise a certain influence on Georgia due to their military, political and economic impact, as well as their different foreign policy anatomy.

At the same time, public opinion polls show that the general acceptance of both Moscow and Beijing among Georgian citizens is not high. According to the International Republican Institute's 2021 public opinion survey, only 8 per cent of the population considers that Georgia should have a pro-Russian foreign policy, including 6 per cent also supporting the relationship with the EU.¹² Although there is no country-wide data regarding attitudes towards China, a public opinion survey carried out by the Liberal Academy Tbilisi in 2020, confirms that negative attitudes in some regions of Georgia are particularly significant, even despite increased exports to China. For example, in Samegrelo,¹³ just 12.6 per cent of the population is positive towards China.¹⁴

These two different external “problems” – Russia and China – have in common the fear they instil in Georgians that their influence may harm their Georgian identity.

¹⁰ “China's growing interests in Georgia, threat or opportunity?” [in Georgian], *National Security Foundation*, 5 December 2020, <https://bit.ly/3y6HYRV>

¹¹ “Foreign trade of Georgia 2020” [in Georgian], *Economy.ge*, http://www.economy.ge/uploads/files/sagareo_vachroba/trade_turnover_2020.pdf

“Foreign trade of Georgia 2019,” Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, http://www.moesd.gov.ge/uploads/files/sagareo_vachroba/trade_turnover_2019.pdf

¹² “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia,” *International Republican Institute*, February 2021, <https://bit.ly/2S2r6LK>

¹³ A region in the Western Georgia with an administrative center in the city of Zugdidi.

¹⁴ “Anti-Liberal Attitudes: Tbilisi, Adjara and Samegrelo,” *Liberal Academy Tbilisi and Institute for Social Research and Analysis*, 2020, <https://ei-lat.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/eng-1.pdf>

Changes in the national media landscape

Unfortunately, there are few quantitative studies in Georgia that would measure the dynamics of Russian or Chinese propaganda and disinformation influence on Georgian society over the past three years. At the same time, according to a 2020 study, *“the Kremlin has used traditional and social media as weapons of disinformation, has financed NGOs and foundations to promote pro-Russian attitudes in the country and has coordinated cyberattacks.”*¹⁵

Although there are certain media outlets characterised by the propaganda they produce, and with “a pronounced pro-Russian editorial policy,” including online media (e.g. online news portals *Sakinform.ge*, *Newspress.ge*, the newspaper *Georgia and the World* and its online page *Geworld.ge*, etc.), which have a certain degree of influence over the entire Georgian information space (according to National Democratic Institute’s (NDI) 2020 public opinion poll) the internet, excluding social networks, is the main source of information for 22 per cent of the population.¹⁶ The NDI goes on to say, *“the findings of qualitative studies carried out so far demonstrate that anti-Western information policy cannot change the Georgian information space as well as have any impact on its agenda.”*¹⁷

At the same time, the pro-Kremlin “disinformation machine” operates dynamically in the information space. Its destructiveness became particularly vivid amid the Covid-19 pandemic, when the anti-Western information trend reached new heights, especially on social media, as mobility restrictions opened up new possibilities online. As one study noted, *“In the wake of the global crisis, the Russian disinformation campaign in Georgia is trying to falsify the reality, demonstrate the need for Georgia to distance itself from the West, discretely attack democratic institutions, divide society, and boost visibility of artificially inspired topics in social media.”*¹⁸

Pro-Russian social media spreads anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-secular messages. This disinformation is allegedly aimed at “demonstrating” threats to identity from the West, which is a powerful tool for stirring up

¹⁵ “Media Environment in Georgia,” *Media Advocacy Coalition*, 2020, p.7, https://osgf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Media-environment_English.pdf

¹⁶ “Public Attitudes in Georgia,” *National Democratic Institute (NDI)*, December 2020, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_December%202020%20Poll_ENG_FINAL.pdf

¹⁷ “Media Environment in Georgia,” op.cit.

¹⁸ “Kremlin’s 10 Disinformation Narratives on COVID-19 in Georgia,” *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy*, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/kremlis-10-dezinformatsia-COVID-19-is-shesakheb-saqartveloshi>

various fears and phobias in society. According to the studies available in the field, there is a feeling in society, especially in rural areas, that the West poses a threat to their identity.¹⁹ A similar method has been used earlier too, even before the pandemic. However, the vulnerability stemming from the infodemic, opened up new opportunities for the Kremlin.

As for the conventional media, local media, whose agenda has not changed in terms of foreign orientation in the last three years, are still in place. No new pro-Russian media has appeared. It has to be reiterated that the Kremlin's messages are mainly found in online media, whose popularity is growing according to available studies. According to the NDI's 2020 public opinion poll,²⁰ 78 per cent of Georgia's population uses the internet (8 per cent more as compared to 2018²¹), while 72 per cent use social media every day.

According to the study produced by the Media Advocacy Coalition, one of the channels *“used for propaganda purposes is Russian controlled news website Sputnik, which disseminates news in about 30 languages, among them in Georgian, and runs an office in the country. Some experts believe that Sputnik's influence on public opinion is minimal, although it shouldn't be underestimated. In April 2020, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy revealed 37 inauthentic accounts allegedly related to Sputnik news agency-among them, 11 disguised Facebook pages and 26 allegedly inauthentic personal accounts that spread materials from Sputnik in an organised manner.”*²²

As for the media ratings, according to 2021 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, Georgia holds 60th position among 180 countries in the world,²³ meaning that the country has moved 44 positions forward since 2012.²⁴

¹⁹ “Anti-Liberal Populism and the Threat of Russian Influence in the Regions of Georgia,” *Liberal Academy Tbilisi and Caucasus Research Resource Center*, 2019, <https://ei-lat.ge/en/prezentacia-qantiliberaluri-populizmi-da-rusuli-gavlenis-saftrhkhe-saqarthvelos-regionebshiq-analitikuri-kvleva/>. Accessed on April 22, 2021.

²⁰ “Public Attitudes in Georgia 2020,” op. cit.

²¹ “Public Attitudes in Georgia,” *National Democratic Institute*, 2018, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Issues%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

²² “Media Environment in Georgia 2020,” op.cit.

²³ “World Press Freedom Index,” *Reporters without Borders*, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

²⁴ “Georgia in International Ratings 2012–2019,” The Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, http://www.moesd.gov.ge/uploads/publications/economy_774326475d10650591bcb6.91945485.pdf

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

According to one report, “*Media legislation in Georgia fully complies with international standards and is one of the best in the Caucasus region.*”²⁵ Overall, Georgian legislation is liberal in this field, which requires even more consolidation of society against hybrid challenges, more knowledge, as well as a strong democratic response. This is a rather difficult task in the context of polarisation and the transfer of political attention and emphasis to internal confrontation.

Hereby, it has to be noted that the Georgian government is currently working on a new version of the “Communication Strategy of the Government of Georgia on Georgia’s EU and NATO Membership for 2021–2024.” The new framework document will consider the new goals, including those stipulated by the state program for 2021–2024 – “Building a European State” – according to which, in 2024, Georgia will apply for full membership of the European Union. The same spirit is shared by the “Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia for 2019–2022,” one of the main priorities of which is the country’s integration into NATO and the European Union.²⁶

INEFFICIENCY OF STRATCOM UNITS

In 2018, Strategic Communication Units were established in all ministries in response to the growing threats of anti-Western propaganda.²⁷ Interviewed experts criticised the government’s efforts in combating pro-Kremlin disinformation, including the inefficiency of ministerial StratCom units. Experts call for harder work on a grass-roots level, by carrying out regular meetings with constituencies in the rural regions to explain to them the benefits of the European and Euro-Atlantic

²⁵ “Media Environment in Georgia 2020,” op.cit.

²⁶ “Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia for 2019–2022” [in Georgian], The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, <https://mfa.gov.ge/getattachment/MainNav/ForeignPolicy/Foreign-PolicyStrategy/2019-2022-clebis-saqartvelos-sagareo-politikis-strategia.pdf.aspx>

²⁷ “Following the decision of the Government, structural units of strategic communications will be established in all ministries,” The Government of Georgia, 2 November 2018, http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=-&sec_id=491&info_id=68608

integration. Such meetings are nominally held, but due to high political polarisation, public officials avoid discomfort and prefer meeting citizens loyal to the government.

There is a lack of convincing explanation and information available about successful cases of Georgia-EU economic cooperation, including those related to exporting goods to the EU by local SMEs, and thereby gaining concrete benefits from the realisation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. More efforts and resources are needed to carry out such communication activities among the people of Georgia, which are clearly currently insufficient.

In February 2019, a thematic inquiry on disinformation and propaganda was set up by the Parliament of Georgia. Civil society experts and officials worked together to share experiences in the fight against disinformation. Analysis of Facebook pages of StratComs of several state bodies (Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Internal Affairs and the government) have revealed that they mainly respond to critical media content such as *Mtavari Arkhi* (Mtavari Channel), *TV Pirveli* (TV First), *Rustavi 2* (when it was affiliated with the oppositional forces), *Formula*, *TV25* and *Tabula*.²⁸ This indicates that often the context of internal political struggle overshadows acute issues such as disinformation and the fight against propaganda, which requires the consolidation, rather than confrontation, of political forces standing on different political tribunes.

The annual reports of the Security Service of Georgia, which are presented to the Parliament of Georgia, deserve attention. According to the latest report of 2020, the “hybrid threats” coming from foreign countries and their intelligence services, using disinformation, “soft power” and clandestine operations, had an essentially negative impact.

According to the document, states interested in extending their influence to Georgia “*periodically attempt to fuel discord among various ethnic, religious or social groups living in the country, incite strife and enhance radical sentiments.*”²⁹ At the same time, there have been active attempts “to spread radical views

²⁸ Tamar Kintsurashvili, Irakli Iagorashvili, Maiko Ratiani, “Fight against “Internal Enemy” and Cohabitation with Russian Propaganda,” *Myth Detector*, 8 July 2020, <https://www.myth-detector.ge/en/myth/fight-against-internal-enemy-and-cohabitation-russian-propaganda>

²⁹ “State Security Service Reports on Internal, External Threats of 2020,” *Civil.ge*, <https://civil.ge/archives/414054>

towards ethnic and religious minorities,” for which various issues of a regular, domestic nature have been put forward, presented in the prism of ethnic or religious grounds and manipulated to provoke anti-Georgian sentiments.³⁰

Given the new threats posed by the rise of Russian influence in the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War, it seems necessary to increase efforts, especially in light of the effectiveness of past critics of the Georgian state in countering disinformation and propaganda, including its legal framework.³¹

Georgia has become a target of Russian disinformation many times in the past. Perhaps one of the most far-reaching disinformation campaigns relates to the functioning of Richard Lugar Public Health Research Centre, a research centre (laboratory) that contains the public health system’s referral library and boasts some of the best biomedical and biosafety researchers, established in Tbilisi with the U.S. support. The allegation that biological weapons are being produced in the Lugar Lab was supported by President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the Russian military, MPs, and the Kremlin’s other propagandists. President Putin has even suggested that the weapons produced in the lab were intended to target Russia.

After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Lugar’s laboratory was turned into a new target, with suggestions that the 2019 coronavirus had been created there. The major propaganda narrative is clearly anti-Western: the Americans are carrying out anti-Russian, anti-human, dangerous activity by means of Georgians. Various media outlets, including local ones, were involved in this campaign by spreading messages similar to the Russian propaganda machines.^{32,33}

As one of the interviewed experts said, “People’s consciousness is already vulnerable during the infodemic. Having added to this multiple online and other sources (including far-right political forces) spreading anti-Western propaganda and we will get a seriously impacted public consciousness in the end.”³⁴

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ “Strengthening State Policy to Address Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda in Georgia” [in Georgian], The Georgian Parliament’s Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda of the Foreign Relations Committee, The Parliament of Georgia, 2019, http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/136132/Disinfo_Report_28.01_2020_ENG_.pdf

³² “Lugar Laboratory – A target of the Russian authorities,” *Facebook page of Myths Detector*, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=293132685441652>

³³ “Anti-Western Propaganda,” op.cit.

³⁴ Interview with media expert Zviad Koridze, 13 April 2021.

Responses by media and civil society

The response of the media and civil society to the challenges of disinformation is mainly manifested in activities to raise media literacy and public awareness in general. As one of the 2020 studies says, “Even though there is no precise information about media literacy level of the Georgian public, based on some data and expert evaluations, it can be assumed to be below average.”³⁵

When the legislative framework does not allow interference in the media content, regardless of whether the information is clearly hostile and destructive, or not, there is still a possibility for the media community and civil society to increase public awareness and help the public to make well-informed and rational decisions.

“Civil society organisations support media pluralism and freedom and believe that in Georgia, critical media outlets play a vital role. They closely monitor the actions of government and politicians to make them more accountable and caring towards citizens. Civil society organisations are also aware that there are ethical matters that affect the work of the Georgian media, but think that such issues should be addressed through self-regulation and the involvement of relevant line agencies and the professional community,” the Media Advocacy Coalition study says.³⁶

There are several civil society organisations, such as the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), the Atlantic Council of Georgia, the Media Development Foundation (MDF), and the media literacy portal *Media-checker.ge*, etc. who conduct debunking activity. It is interesting to see what preventive mechanisms can be used by society against the Kremlin’s influences. Hereby, a debunking initiative by ISFED against the pro-Kremlin media platform *News-Front* should be mentioned. According to ISFED’s head, Mikheil Benidze, the Facebook administration removed the *News-Front* page and twelve fake accounts linked with it who were disseminating disinformation.³⁷

“Last week we informed Facebook about the results of our research, and now [the network] is deleted,” Benidze posted on Facebook. According to ISFED, *News-Front* is a pro-Kremlin network that launched the Georgian version in October 2019, exactly a year before the parliamentary elections. It is note-

³⁵ “Media Environment in Georgia,” op. cit., p. 10.

³⁶ “Media Environment in Georgia,” op. cit., p. 1.

³⁷ Facebook post by Mikheil Benidze, head of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, 1 May 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/mikheil/posts/10223171786864880>

worthy that *News-Front's* online outreach had been sizeable, as it was able to disseminate reported disinformation in 31 open Facebook groups (content visible to non-members), an audience of 521,240 members in total.³⁸

FACEBOOK PAGE REMOVAL

On 1 May 2020, ISFED reported that Facebook had removed from its platform the Kremlin's propagandistic information agency *News-Front's* page, along with a dozen fake Facebook accounts linked to it.

The watchdog had been monitoring *News-Front Georgia* on the social media platform since November 2019. *News-Front*, in violation of Facebook's community standards, was carrying out a "targeted" campaign aimed at sowing discord, fomenting political polarisation and peddling pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda among Georgians through "inauthentic interaction" with social media users, the ISFED stated.³⁹

Furthermore, a "technological resilience" is also noteworthy. There are several effective tools, including mobile applications (e.g. Fact Fake). As one interviewed expert said, "*It is necessary to advance these tools, increase public access to them, as well as clearly define the target groups and act on the basis of a rapid but long-term plan.*"⁴⁰

Ethnic minorities are a particularly vulnerable group to disinformation. "*In the context of Russian disinformation, we try to convey balanced content, for example, to ethnic minorities, who are the most vulnerable group in the country, having a limited or an absolute absence of knowledge of the Georgian language. Hence, a significant part of ethnic minority population watches Russian channels. That is why we also broadcast in Russian,*" another interviewed expert stated.⁴¹

³⁸ "Pro-Kremlin Page Spreading Disinformation in Georgia Removed from Facebook, Watchdog Says" [in Georgian], *Civil.ge*, 1 May 2020, <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/349647>

³⁹ "Russian Information Operation on Facebook Encouraging Political Polarisation in Georgia and Inauthentic Accounts Involved in it" [in Georgian], *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy*, 1 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3yrnv9C>

⁴⁰ Interview with TOK TV journalist Nina Kheladze, 14 April 2021.

⁴¹ Interview with Natia Kuprashvili, Journalism Resource Center, 14 April 2021.

At the same time, some experts are critical of the scale of the struggle with disinformation, believing that it is not enough to meet the challenges: *“The projects of civil society organisations remain one of the main tools that counter disinformation with varying intensity. However, they fail to provide a full-scale response.”*⁴²

⁴² Interview with Nina Kheladze.

Recommendations

Recommendations proposed in the 2018 DRI study have been, to a certain extent, taken into account by relevant stakeholders. In particular:

- In 2018, following the government's decision, strategic communication units were established in all ministries in response to the growing threats of anti-Western propaganda. They were tasked with raising public awareness about the country's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, as well as creating an effective and coordinated strategic communication system in the country.
- In 2019, the Foreign Relations Committee started a thematic inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda, pursuant to the goals set out in the 2018–2020 Strategy of Foreign Affairs Committee and under the Article 155 of the Rules of Procedure of Georgian Parliament. The objective of the thematic inquiry, composed of civil society experts and officials, was to research and analyse the major challenges and problems existing in the country on issues of disinformation and propaganda.
- According to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, the Communications Commission is responsible for the implementation of the Media Literacy Action Plan in the country. In 2018, a Media Criticism Platform, headed by Media Academy, was established by the Georgian National Communications Commission. It is one of the tools to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda which will actively utilise education components, and thus closely cooperate with the education system.
- International donors have allocated funds to support media organisations carrying out fact checking activity.

Considering changes since 2018, the following recommendations are proposed to the state authorities, expert community, and national media to increase societal resilience to foreign-led disinformation:

- To continue scientific studies, including those using quantitative methods, to better understand the specifics and effects of disinformation.
- To thoroughly evaluate the efficiency of existing efforts in countering disinformation in the form of comprehensive impact assessment, and to develop new strategic documents, which would be based on this factual analysis.
- To officially restrict the activities of Russia's foundations in Georgia as their funding is often aimed at undermining the country's sovereignty, encouraging anti-democratic tendencies, anti-liberal activities, in particular xenophobic ones, and spread of disinformation.
- To encourage the teaching of media literacy in the school system in order to develop disinformation debunking skills among the young generation.

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Abstract

This chapter examines Hungary's vulnerability to pro-Chinese and pro-Russian disinformation, the activities and features of pro-Eastern disinformation actors in the country, as well as the broader context in political, economic, social and media perspectives. While Hungary is a NATO and EU member state, the country maintains political and economic proximity to Moscow and Beijing at a uniquely high level, compared to other EU states. Simultaneously, Hungary has not only regressed democratically under the leadership of prime minister Viktor Orbán, but has also seen a deterioration in media freedom, opening new opportunities for the spread of hostile, foreign disinformation. While fringe social groups and news media organisations sympathetic to eastern autocracies exist, their role is being increasingly overtaken by a combination of pro-government media outlets and social media pages as well as the government-controlled public media, all of which advance pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing narratives.

Disinformation Studies

Hungary's exposure to foreign-grown disinformation has increased dramatically since Russia and China started to put a greater geopolitical emphasis on the Central and Eastern European region. With the number of influence-seeking campaigns from Moscow and Beijing on the rise, Hungary has also become a frequent target. According to the Vulnerability Index of Visegrad countries, a comprehensive study published by the Globsec Policy Institute,¹ Hungary ranks the highest in the Visegrad region when it comes to vulnerability towards subversive Russian influence.

Research findings from the Budapest-based Political Capital Institute and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung also showed² that Hungary has a receptive audience towards anti-Western disinformation and conspiracy theories, with a third of Hungarians believing pro-Kremlin conspiracy theories, particularly those involving the current hostilities in Ukraine. The situation is further complicated by the domestic features of the Hungarian media environment. According to the 2018 Disinformation Resilience Index study,³ the room for media freedom narrowed significantly in Hungary. The research also found that the country's leadership, which was exercising a pro-Russian and pro-Chinese foreign policy, was looking to extend its influence over the media landscape, with the danger of pro-Kremlin disinformation heavily outweighing the concerns posed by disinformation narratives favouring Beijing, at the time.

Another piece of research by Political Capital Institute in 2020 found⁴ that pro-Kremlin disinformation actors are actively looking to exploit minority-related conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly between Hungary and Ukraine.

¹ "Vulnerability Index – Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe," *GLOBSEC Policy Institute*, 2017, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/GLOBSEC_Vulnerability_Index.pdf

² "Conspiracy theories, false news, superstitions in Hungarian public opinion" [in Hungarian], *Political Capital & Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 2018, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/rendezvenyek.php?article_read=1&article_id=2323

³ Daniel Bartha, Edit Inotai, Andras Deak, "Hungary," in: Andrei Yeliseyeu, Volha Damarad (eds.), "Disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe," *Ukrainian Prism & EAST Center*, 2018, pp. 161–164, https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

⁴ "Kremlin disinformation campaigns generate territorial revisionism and ethnic conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe" [in Hungarian], *Political Capital*, 2020, https://www.political-capital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=2651

Relations with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

Despite being a member state of both the EU and NATO, Hungary maintains close and rather friendly relations with eastern authoritarian powers, particularly Russia and China. Under the rule of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing Fidesz ruling party, the country has undergone a gradual foreign policy shift, for which economic ties with Eastern powers served as justification. Shortly after returning to power in 2010, Orbán declared that pragmatic economic cooperation based on “interests” with the East outweighs ideological differences. As a result, the government introduced the so-called Eastern Opening Policy (EOP) that became the basis for enhancing economic ties with Eastern powers, but also turned out to be a key element for facilitating political cooperation.

In a bid to diversify Hungary’s exports, the two sides have started implementing flagship projects in energy, transport, and education. These projects have gone ahead without open tenders, and amidst widespread domestic and international criticism⁵ over the lack of transparency, and the potential geopolitical implications. In 2014, Orbán tasked Russian energy giant Rosatom with building two new blocks for Hungary’s sole Paks Nuclear Power Plant⁶ under a EUR 10 billion credit agreement, adding to the country’s already high dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

This was followed by multiple other contracts awarded to Russian companies, primarily in the transport sector. Concerning China,⁷ Hungary has been among the main European supporters of Beijing’s One Belt One Road Initiative. In 2019, the two countries signed a EUR 2.1 billion contract for the reconstruction of a major railway line between Budapest and Belgrade, with 85 per cent of the financing coming from a Chinese loan. The latest addition to the large-scale economic cooperation came in April 2020, when Hungary contracted Chinese

⁵ Justin Spike, “Chinese university plan causes security concern in Hungary,” *AP News*, 2 May 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/hungary-europe-business-government-and-politics-education-35f4d55eca487cc4fb6e02f0b9ed8870>

⁶ Dominik Istrate, “Russian influence in Hungary – The case of Paks 2 and the Kremlin’s influence-seeking efforts through nuclear energy,” *European Values Center*, 25 March 2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/russian-influence-in-hungary-the-case-of-paks-2-and-the-kremlins-influence-seeking-efforts-through-nuclear-energy/>

⁷ Szabolcs Panyi, “Huge Chinese loan to cover the construction of Fudan University in Budapest,” *Direkt36*, 6 April 2021, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/kinai-hitelbol-keszul-a-magyar-felsooktatas-oriasberuhazasa-a-kormany-mar-oda-is-igerte-egy-kinai-cegnek/>

construction giant CSCEC to build the Budapest campus of the Shanghai-based Fudan University under a EUR 1.25 billion credit agreement. Although cooperation in large-scale economic projects remains visible, the EOP has failed in terms of diversifying Hungary's foreign trade. In 2012, PM Orbán set the Hungarian export target to Eastern countries for at least one third of all annual exports, however, this never materialised. In 2018, only 5.1 per cent of Hungary's exports went to the East. This has pushed the government to redefine⁸ the strategy, which is now focusing on attracting Eastern investment.

Largely due to enhanced economic ties, political relations between the Russian and Hungarian governments have remained extremely close. The Hungarian PM has held six bilateral summits with the Russian president, accompanied by meetings at international summits, as well as numerous ministerial-level consultations. The high-level meetings have often been used to express discontent with EU sanctions against Russia, although Hungary never moved to veto the bloc's common sanctions policy.

Enhanced diplomatic relations with China have also gained ground, especially in the last two years. Hungary was also a key target for China's mask, ventilator, and vaccine diplomacy efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic, which PM Orbán has repeatedly used to justify his pro-Chinese stance. The Hungarian Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó, was the first to visit China after the Covid-19 outbreak in August 2020, while Hungary quietly⁹ hosted the Chinese Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe, in March 2021, shortly after the EU agreed to new sanctions against Beijing. Most recently, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó blocked a joint EU statement condemning China for its crackdown on the democracy movement in Hong Kong. Hungary's balancing act between the East and the West, which is manifested by soft or missing statements on hostile foreign actors and their actions against the EU, is likely to continue with Orbán not crossing so-called EU foreign policy red lines, while also maintaining high-level ties with Eastern authoritarian leaders.

The pro-Moscow and pro-Beijing alignment of the government has profoundly impacted societal views on Eastern powers, with ideology becoming an

⁸ Gabor Kovacs, "The government redefined the Eastern opening, so it suddenly became a success," *HVG*, 3 February 2021, https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20200203_A_kormany_ujradefini-alta_a_keleti_nyitast_igy_mar_sikeres

⁹ "Hungary quietly hosts Chinese minister days after EU human rights sanctions," *Reuters*, 25 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/hungary-quietly-hosts-chinese-minister-days-after-eu-human-rights-sanctions-2021-03-25/>

important pillar¹⁰ of Russian-Hungarian relations. Orbán has voiced strong support for ideals such as Christianity, social conservatism and anti-migration – a set of values shared by Russia and reflected in Russian foreign policy. Recent polls also confirmed that the Fidesz voter base, which was previously characterised by a strong Western orientation, appears¹¹ to be the most supportive of cooperation with Russia, while also being the least likely to consider Moscow a threat to Hungary.

Public sentiment towards China, which had long been moderately negative or neutral, is characterised by the same tendencies, with citizens' perception of the country tied strongly to their party affiliation. The previously anti-Chinese voter base, which was founded on the pro-Tibet policies of Fidesz while in opposition, now has the most positive view on Beijing. According to a Sinofon survey¹² published in February 2021, 29 per cent of those viewing China positively identified as Fidesz voters. It is also assumed that China's vaccine diplomacy has positively impacted the views of ruling party voters, while the majority of opposition-minded respondents is believed to be rather critical or at least neutral.

Despite the pro-Russia and pro-China sentiment among pro-government voters, the vast majority of Hungarians support Hungary's EU membership and the EU is the most positively viewed among all major powers.¹³ Simultaneously, Russia is the nation most commonly perceived as a threat, with a third of the population fearing Moscow, while close to half of Hungarians view China negatively. Other polls, including a recent report by Globsec,¹⁴ found that more than two-thirds of Hungarians did not consider Russia a direct threat to Hungary's security, however, the number of those believing that Hungary should be a part of the East instead of the West is only 3 per cent.

¹⁰ Dominik Istrate, "Hungary looks East as PM Orbán welcomes Vladimir Putin to Budapest," *Emerging Europe*, 31 October 2019, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/hungary-looks-east-as-pm-orban-welcomes-vladimir-putin-to-budapest/>

¹¹ Gabor Tenczer, "Fidesz voters say Soros is dangerous, Putin is not" [in Hungarian], *Telex*, 23 March 2021, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/03/20/fidesz-szavazok-soros-veszelyes-putyin-nem>

¹² Tamas Matura, "Who Loves China?" *MapInfluenCE*, 3 February 2021, <https://mapinfluence.eu/hu/ki-szereti-kinat/>

¹³ Gyorgy Farkas, "The majority do not like Viktor Orbán's friends" [in Hungarian], *24.hu*, 28 February 2020, <https://24.hu/belfold/2020/02/28/orban-viktor-szovetseg-kutatas-eu-putyin-trump/>

¹⁴ "The image of Russia in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans," *GLOBSEC Policy Institute*, 12 April 2021, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/image-of-russia-mighty-slavic-brother-or-hungry-bear-nextdoor/>

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

According to Freedom House's latest Freedom of the Press Report,¹⁵ which describes the country as "partly free," the Hungarian constitution "*protects the freedom of the press, but Fidesz has undermined this guarantee through legislation that has politicised media regulation.*" Public media in the country almost exclusively favour the ruling party, while public media outlets are often used to smear political opponents.

An RFE/RL investigation¹⁶ published in December 2020 highlighted the public broadcaster's lack of editorial independence, the existence of forbidden topics, and the continuous pressure to maintain positive coverage of Orbán and Fidesz. Leaked conversations between public media employees also confirmed that independent and opposition-minded colleagues are advised to resign.¹⁷

In addition, the latest Reporters Without Borders (RSF) report on Hungary,¹⁸ which describes the country as the "EU's alternative, repressive model," also pointed out that the deterioration of the freedom of the press has become more visible during the Covid-19 pandemic. Placed the second lowest among EU member states (after Bulgaria) in the RSF ranking, Hungary's position has dropped by 67 since Viktor Orbán took power in 2010 and by 16 since the latest parliamentary elections in 2018.

A MEDIA GIANT SERVING ORBÁN'S INTERESTS

The Hungarian government's tight grip over the country's media landscape was further consolidated after the creation of the Central

¹⁵ "Freedom in the World 2021 – Hungary," *Freedom House*, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2021>

¹⁶ Akos Keller-Alant, "How Hungary's state news agency whitewashes the news: an RFE/RL investigation," *RFE/RL*, 4 December 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/how-hungary-state-news-agency-whitewashes-news-rferl-investigation/30984420.html>

¹⁷ Akos Keller-Alant, "Editorial instruction to the public: "This institution is not supported by the opposition coalition," *RFE/RL*, 12 November 2020, <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/szerkesztoi-utasitas-a-koztevenel-ebben-az-intezmenyben-nem-az-ellenzeki-osszefogast-tamogatjak-mtva-fidesz/30940923.html>

¹⁸ "Countries – Hungary," *Reporters Without Borders*, <https://rsf.org/en/countries>

European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA).¹⁹ Since 2018, around 500 pro-government media outlets have been incorporated into the conglomerate, which the government declared to be “of national strategic importance.” Combined with non-KESMA outlets, the pro-government media sphere is dominating the media environment, particularly in the regional and local level. Simultaneously, the room for free media has continued to decline, with the latter group struggling to attract advertising revenues in a fundamentally distorted market, as well.

National, regional, and local media outlets have been increasingly dominated by pro-government circles through acquisitions and closures and bans of independent media, which has been a continuing trend. The KESMA establishment was challenged in court, but the claim was rejected. For the ruling elite, KESMA’s importance is exposed by the fact that outlets belonging to the conglomerate are often publishing very similar (or even identically-worded) articles pushing pro-government narratives about both domestic and foreign affairs.

The government’s grip over the media market is strong, although estimates about the size of market share differ. Analysis by the independent Hungarian media policy think tank Mérték²⁰ showed that the market share of pro-government media outlets – including the government-controlled public media, as well as both KESMA and non-KESMA outlets – is close to 78 per cent. Another estimate from investigative news portal *Válasz Online*²¹ claimed that “at least 50 per cent” of all media outlets capable of shaping public discourse are owned by individuals and groups linked to the government, while pro-government businessmen control 44 of the country’s 87 national media outlets. However, the latter analysis gives less significance to regional-level outlets which are almost exclusively controlled by pro-Fidesz circles. Currently, over 500 outlets are controlled by the government, either directly or indirectly, which also

¹⁹ “Report: Establishment of KESMA exacerbates overall pluralism in Hungary,” *CEU School of Public Policy*, 8 August 2019, <https://cmds.ceu.edu/article/2019-08-08/report-establishment-kesma-exacerbates-overall-risk-media-pluralism-hungary>

²⁰ “Ballid overweight instead of Fidesz bubble” [in Hungarian], *Mérték Media Monitor*, 19 July 2019, <https://mertek.eu/2019/07/11/ballib-tulsuly-helyett-fidesz-buborek/>

²¹ Andras Bodis, “NER already controls 50 percent of the press – here’s the big media map” [in Hungarian], *Válasz Online*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2021/01/04/a-ner-mar-a-sajto-50-szazalekat-kontrollalja-itt-a-nagy-mediaterkep/>

fundamentally impacts how the handful of independent media can attract advertising revenues and other media revenues in a market fundamentally distorted by government and pro-Fidesz private spending.

In line with previous trends, the room for independent media and journalism has continued to decrease. The greatest hit was taken in June 2020 by *Index*, Hungary's largest and most-read independent news outlet, when its editor-in-chief was dismissed for his concerns over the portal's independence (in March 2020, a businessman with links to the government bought *Index's* partner company). Almost the entire editorial staff resigned²² shortly afterwards and they were replaced with a new team. Another notable example was the case of *Klubrádió*,²³ Hungary's most-popular (and opposition-minded) news radio station. The station was stripped of its frequency and forced to continue as an internet radio station in February 2021. In addition, government advertising and sponsorships continue to favour pro-government outlets, in order to push competitors out of the market.

INCONSISTENT ANTI-DISINFORMATION EFFORTS

A genuine difference between the pro-government and independent media outlets is how they view foreign-fuelled disinformation. While there is a visibly growing trend within the independent Hungarian media in terms of recognising the importance of tackling foreign disinformation coming from Russia and China, pro-government outlets do not only neglect such influences but often serve as multipliers of pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing narratives.

The scope of the government's grip over the media is not only exposed by the growing lack of independence, but by the stance of pro-government and independent outlets towards foreign-fuelled disinformation. A genuine

²² "Meet Telex.hu: Former Index journalists start fundraiser for new online media in Hungary," *Kafkadesk*, 7 September 2020, <https://kafkadesk.org/2020/09/07/meet-telex-hu-former-index-journalists-start-fundraiser-for-new-online-media-in-hungary/>

²³ Emma Beswick, "Fresh blow to press freedom in Hungary as Klubrádió forced off the airwaves," *Euronews*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/02/09/hungary-s-first-independent-radio-station-klubradio-to-go-off-air-on-sunday>

difference between the two sides is that while there is a growing trend among independent media outlets in terms of recognising the importance of tackling hostile disinformation coming from Russia and China, pro-government media outlets are not only neglecting the threat of foreign disinformation, but they are often multipliers of pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing narratives.

By far the most important player in the pro-government media field is *Origo*, one of Hungary's three most read internet portals, attracting more than half a million daily readers. *Origo* functions as the main online government mouthpiece and is tasked with smearing the opposition, civil society, and independent media outlets. According to data from the Budapest City Court,²⁴ *Origo* lost the highest number of press lawsuits that were launched over its conspiratorial or manipulative coverage in 2019 and 2020. Anti-Western narratives are genuinely predominant, while there is dedicated and high coverage of the government's "successful" relations with Russia and China. Similar to other pro-government channels, an important element of its coverage is that anti-Western messaging is more significant (and frequent) than narratives directly praising Moscow or Beijing. However, while fringe media outlets openly question Hungary's Western orientation, this is a *de facto* red line when it comes to pro-government outlets in the mainstream media. This appears to be the case with only a few, hardliner commentators when it comes to pro-government outlets in the mainstream.

Among public media channels, the state news agency *MTI* continues to have a defining role. It was made the primary news source in Hungary after the government decided to make *MTI* content free of cost, killing competition and rival news agencies. While *MTI* does not publish disinformation, statements from Russian and Chinese news agencies also appear selectively or without editorial guidance. *M1* – a state run, 24-hour rolling news station – is at the centre of pro-government messaging. In line with government messaging, both public and pro-government media outlets focus heavily on promoting cooperation between Hungary and Eastern powers, while presenting a Eurosceptic view, alongside their presentation of the Western liberal order as decadent and amoral.

²⁴ Laszlo Kuti, "The government press lost 57 press papers and the government-independent newspapers lost 7 lawsuits in 2020 at the Metropolitan Court" [in Hungarian], *Média1*, 19 February 2021, <https://media1.hu/2021/02/19/a-kormanysajto-57-a-kormananyfuggetlen-lapok-7-sajtopert-vesztettek-2020-ban-a-fovarosi-torvenyszeken/>

According to a survey by Hungary's national media watchdog, NMHH,²⁵ traditional media has continued to lose its significance over recent years. Close to half of Hungarians consider the internet their primary source of information, however, television has also maintained a commanding position, ranked second with a third of the population considering it their primary source of information. As for commercial news channels, the two biggest broadcasters – *RTL Klub* and *TV2* – have continued to maintain their leading position. While the German-owned *RTL Klub* is Hungary's leading independent news channel with daily, prime time news coverage, *TV2* is controlled by businessmen with close ties to the government. *TV2* is predominant in spreading anti-Western and anti-EU narratives, as well as conspiratorial news in line with pro-government messaging about migration and the “Soros network.” Pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing narratives are also present, especially in light of the Eastern vaccine diplomacy efforts, however, the overall messaging follows anti-EU government talking points instead of directly pro-Eastern ones.

A number of daily newspapers regularly contain pieces that may qualify as pro-Russian and pro-Chinese disinformation. Although the readership of traditional daily and weekly papers is in decline, their information impact is strong since the articles of leading pro-government commentators are promoted and distributed by multiple online pro-government outlets. One of these dailies is *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), the main government mouthpiece in print media, known for disinformation attacks against independent figures, while the other is *Magyar Hírlap* (Hungarian News), a right-wing media outlet. In terms of editorial position, ideological proximity to Russia is more prevalent than to China, however, it has to be noted that both of these publications could contain an element of Chinese disinformation. Both *Magyar Nemzet* and *Magyar Hírlap* have published opinion pieces from China's ambassador to Budapest,^{26,27} criticising the United States and defending China's authoritarian system. While these are marginal cases, this

²⁵ “The proportion of consumers of traditional media compared to the Internet is declining” [in Hungarian], National Media and Infocommunications Authority of Hungary, 23 July 2020, https://nmhh.hu/cikk/213676/NMHHfelmeres_csokken_a_hagyomanyos_media_fogyasztoinak_aranya_az_internethez_kepest

²⁶ Zsolt Kerner, “The Chinese Ambassador wrote a column for Magyar Hírlap, in which she condemned the protests in Hong Kong with reference to 15 March and Viktor Orban” [in Hungarian], *24.hu*, 16 April 2021, <https://24.hu/belfold/2021/04/16/kina-nagykovet-pubicisztika-hongkong/>

²⁷ Duan Jielong, “The lies of the American ambassador” [in Hungarian], *Magyar Nemzet*, 30 July 2020, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemeny/az-amerikai-nagykovet-hazugsagai-8443944/>

also shows that Chinese state actors have access to the main government mouthpieces when required.

Hungary suffers from a continued presence of fringe conspiracy outlets and social media platforms in favour of Russia. Among these fringe media outlets, the most significant is *News Front*, a Crimea-based Russian disinformation platform that is believed to be controlled by the Russian secret services and maintains regular coverage in the Hungarian language. Another example is *Orosz Hírek* (Russian News), a website attracting tens of thousands of readers that echoes Kremlin messages and statements from the Russian government. Marginal pro-Kremlin disinformation websites can also be found among the Hungarian far-right community, however, their information impact continues to be limited to their ideological basis, as is the case with smaller-reaching online groupings in support of Russia, Belarus and the two Russian proxy states in Donbas.

While fringe outlets and Facebook pages had been prevalent in spreading anti-Western, pro-Moscow and pro-Beijing disinformation, their role has been largely overtaken by pro-government media outlets and the public media. There appears to be no need, for instance, for Russia to maintain bureaus of state news agencies such as *Sputnik* or *RT* since pro-government Hungarian outlets draw generally positive pictures of Eastern authoritarian powers. Anti-Western messages spread by these mainstream outlets also coincide with pro-Kremlin disinformation, indirectly fuelling pro-Moscow sentiments.

This case, however, is different with China since Beijing holds no sway among Hungarian fringe media and has not established a dedicated network of pro-Chinese fringe outlets. An exception to the rule is China Radio International that maintains a Hungarian edition and is followed by an estimated 75,000+ on social media, suggesting a growing interest in Beijing to spread its narratives in Hungary as economic cooperation is accelerating with Budapest. While there was no sign of a coordinated influence-seeking information campaign from China between 2010 and 2020, there appears to be – according to our sources – a growing interest in Beijing to express its views through its own channels in Hungary, as well as through both pro-government and independent news outlets.

For instance, *Spirit FM*, a Hungarian radio station which belongs to a media group close to Orbán, runs a bi-weekly segment called From China with Love,

which is produced in partnership with the China Media Group.²⁸ According to PCI monitoring, however, this is an attempt to rehabilitate China's image following the Covid-19 crisis. An interesting coincidence is that some pro-government publications extensively wrote about²⁹ the cultural ties between the two nations.

A new addition to the pro-government media network is the increased use of social media and government-leaning social media pages. The general aim of Facebook pages such as *Patrióta Európa Mozgalom* (Patriotic European Movement) and *ELÉG* (Enough [of the Socialists and Liberals]), that attract an estimated 150,000–200,000 social media users, is to promote the messages of the government, however, several examples of their work suggest³⁰ a sympathetic view towards the eastern authoritarian powers, especially Russia. The most recent example of this – a post praising Vladimir Putin and stating that Russia is “demonised the same way as Hungary” – came³¹ from a popular pro-government Facebook page called *Számok – a baloldali álhírek ellenszere* (Numbers – The Antidote against Leftist Fake News) which has 66,000+ followers.

The vulnerability of certain groups within Hungarian society towards pro-Chinese and pro-Russian disinformation is fuelled by several political factors. Pro-government narratives in Hungary and Russia show a high degree of similarity when it comes to discussing ideology, while political and economic cooperation between the two parties – particularly Russia and Hungary – is extensively covered by both Russian and Hungarian pro-government media. This is predominant in most pro-government publications, including those on the regional and local levels, which are also used as government mouthpieces.

In addition, Hungary's troubled relationship with its neighbours in the Carpathian Basin (over the situation of ethnic minorities in Slovakia, Romania and particularly Ukraine) could also serve as a boost for pro-Kremlin

²⁸ Denes Krusovszky, “Torture,” *Magyar Narancs*, 12 May 2021, <https://magyarnarancs.hu/interaktiv/kinavallatas-238391>

²⁹ Arpad Li Zhen, “The Chinese story of freedom, love,” *Demokrata*, 7 February 2021, <https://demokrata.hu/kultura/a-szabadsag-szerelem-kinai-tortenete-344419/>

³⁰ Marton Sarkadi-Nagy, “Russian-friendly and Fidesz memes were distributed publicly by a Facebook propaganda site” [in Hungarian], *Átlátszó*, 19 April 2021, <https://blog.atlatszo.hu/2021/04/kozpenzbol-osztotta-az-oroszbarat-es-fideszes-memetek-egy-facebookos-propagandaoldal/>

³¹ “US taxpayers 'money was blown away by the wind,” *Numbers – The Antidote against Leftist Fake News* Facebook page, 14 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=739671483376841>

disinformation. Tensions with neighbouring countries are exploited³² by the Kremlin to fuel minority-based conflicts between Ukraine and Hungary. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic and the corresponding Infodemic has genuinely undermined trust in Hungarian public institutions along party lines, while anti-establishment sentiment has become more visible in social media discourse. This has fuelled epidemic-related disinformation on both the right and the left of the electorate. Based on these factors, the most vulnerable population groups to pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing disinformation remained largely the same as identified by the DRI 2018 study³³:

- Mostly apolitical rural population that has limited access to independent media outlets, as well as both urban and rural citizens who are unfamiliar with the biased nature of certain media outlets. Exposure to disinformation in rural parts of Hungary is mainly linked to weak media literacy and the frequent preference of regional instead of national media outlets, which are essentially controlled by the ruling party.
- Voters and citizens with anti-establishment thinking and appetite for fringe media sources, whose distrust for mainstream media and public institutions was further weakened by the Covid-19 infodemic. A 2018 study from Political Capital Institute found³⁴ that a third of Hungarians are responsive towards pro-Kremlin conspiracy theories, including those about alleged CIA involvement in the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine.
- Pro-government voters who are accessing information almost exclusively from government-controlled or government-supportive media outlets since narratives about Russia and China are generally positive. This is also evidenced by the aforementioned polls showing that the highest number of those who trust Russia is among Fidesz supporters.
- Ethnic Hungarians living outside of the country in the Carpathian Basin who consume either local Hungarian-speaking media, financed either

³² Dominik Istrate, Dorka Takacsy, Patrik Szicherle, “How pro-Kremlin disinformation exploits minority-related conflicts between Ukraine and its neighbors,” *4liberty.eu*, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3D3LRcV>

³³ Daniel Bartha, Edit Inotai, Andras Deak (op.cit), pp. 160–162.

³⁴ “Conspiracy theories, false news, superstitions in Hungarian public opinion” [in Hungarian], *Political Capital & Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 7 November 2018, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/rendezvenyek.php?article_read=1&article_id=2323

by the Hungarian state and private actors from abroad, or Hungarian channels broadcast through cable providers. This is especially relevant for Hungarians in Ukraine's Zakarpattia region since Hungary and Ukraine continue to have disputes over the latter's treatment of ethnic minorities in the country – a facilitator of anti-Ukrainian sentiment.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

The legislative landscape on information security has remained largely unchanged over the past years, however, there have been initiatives in relation to certain political events, as well as to the Covid-19 pandemic. Among the key pieces of legislation³⁵ are the 2009 Act on Electronic Public Service, which names information security as a “basic principle,” the 2013 Information Security Act, and the 2013 Cybersecurity Act.

In 2019, Hungary adopted³⁶ a new National Cybersecurity Strategy that prioritises hacktivism and large-scale cyberattacks as a growing threat. The strategy perceives cyber warfare as a national security threat, however, it did not recognise Russia and China as threats. In a continuing trend, cyberwarfare is increasingly recognised as a threat by the Hungarian authorities. Most recently, the Hungarian financial sector and the banking institutions suffered a massive DDOS attack from Russian and Chinese hackers in September 2020, while Russian hackers targeted critical infrastructure in the US through Hungarian servers in late 2020.

The Hungarian government also adopted a new National Security Strategy³⁷ in April 2020. According to the new strategy, while Hungary considers preserving the cohesion of the EU and NATO a priority, it is interested in the pragmatic development of Hungarian-Russian relations and economic cooperation. Concerning China, the strategy aims to “intensively strengthen” Hungary-China ties on a “pragmatic basis,” with a special regard to Beijing's One Belt, One Road

³⁵ Daniel Bartha, Edit Inotai, Andras Deak (op.cit.), pp. 164–165.

³⁶ “Hungary's network and information security strategy has been published” [in Hungarian], *JOGALAPPAL*, 7 January 2019, <https://jogalappal.hu/megjelent-magyarorszag-haloza-ti-es-informaciobiztonsagi-strategiaja/>

³⁷ Magyar Kozlony, “Hungarian Gazette No. 8 of 2020” [in Hungarian], 21 April 2020, <https://magyarkozlony.hu/dokumentumok/c7c34e5eb3b10a739d2ff56fa10d1e6f8942bb8c/megetekintes>

Initiative, which it calls mutually beneficial for the two countries. At the same time, it includes a cautious warning about “factors that evolve” as China focuses on investments in critical infrastructure and the IT sector. It is important to mention that Hungary is the only EU member that has not joined³⁸ the Clean 5G Network initiative of the United States, a policy designed to counter the introduction of potentially threatening Chinese networks. Neither Russia nor China are explicitly categorised as a threat.

While the disinformation domain has not included recognition of the threat posed by Eastern authoritarian actors, the government was actively discussing tackling disinformation in other circumstances. In response to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Hungarian National Assembly, which is controlled by a two-thirds majority of the ruling-party, adopted emergency legislation to allow the government to rule by decree. In addition to this legislation, the Fidesz-controlled majority also approved an amendment to the country’s Penal Code, making “scaremongering” about the Covid-19 outbreak and the handling of the crisis a punishable act.

In accordance with the amendment, there were several minor cases of police action against civilians spreading disinformation online, however, the legislation backfired when two civilians were detained³⁹ who did not explicitly spread disinformation about the pandemic, but only criticized the allegedly ineffective handling of the public health crisis in the healthcare sector. As pointed out by the latest RSF report on Hungary, access to information was made “particularly difficult” for the independent media, while research by the⁴⁰ Political Capital Institute Hungary found that disinformation narratives around Covid-19, which frequently included geopolitical messages in favour of Russia and China and against the EU, in particular, have continued to spread uninterrupted.

The most recent discussion surrounding disinformation came as a response to the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 US presidential election. In line

³⁸ “Which European countries support the 5G “Clean Network” initiative?” *RFE/RL*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/which-european-countries-support-the-5g-clean-network-initiative-/30928122.html>

³⁹ Lili Bayer, “Orbán critics fall foul of Hungary’s controversial corona law,” *Politico Europe*, 14 May 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-critics-fall-foul-of-hungary-controversial-coronavirus-covid19-law/>

⁴⁰ Dominik Istrate, Lorant Gyori, Peter Kreko, “Disinformation after the first wave of the coronavirus in Central Europe,” *Political Capital*, August 2020, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/Covid_disinformation_20200824.pdf

with Kremlin-led disinformation at that time, a significant share of pro-government mainstream and fringe media outlets echoed utterly baseless claims of electoral fraud during the 2020 election, and condemned Twitter’s decision to ban the former US president. As discussions in pro-government circles about the alleged anti-conservative stance of social media giants have accelerated, the Hungarian government, in January 2021, announced that it will introduce draft legislation on tech companies – often referred to as the “Facebook Law” – to ensure that all voices are heard. Discussions involving Hungary’s Ministry of Justice were ongoing for three months, even though no comprehensive study confirmed that Facebook is systemically silencing conservative or pro-government commentators. Claiming that its interests now coincide with upcoming EU legislation on the issue, the government backtracked⁴¹ from introducing the law in April 2021.

Responses by media and civil society

Investigative journalists in Hungary mainly focus on government disinformation, however, the past three years saw an increase in the debunking of a wider range of domestic and foreign-fuelled disinformation cases, most likely as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thematic debunking sites still do not exist in Hungary, nor has there been major and publicly visible cooperation between media outlets in this regard, however, most independent media outlets have been debunking certain pieces of disinformation on a case-by-case basis.

The most influential media outlets dealing with pro-Russia and pro-Chinese disinformation are *444.hu*, *K-Monitor*, *Direkt36* and *Átlátszó*. The latter two play a special role in countering foreign-grown disinformation. While *Direkt36*, as an investigative journalistic unit, has been among the largest contributors in uncovering Hungary’s relations with Russia and China, including untransparent and unscrutinised business deals. Besides functioning as an investigative platform, *Átlátszó*, in June 2020, launched a weekly section called “Weekly Disinfo” – with a great emphasis on debunking pro-Kremlin disinformation and covering the work of the EU’s Eastern Stratcom Task Force in Hungarian. Journalists from *Átlátszó* and *Direkt36* also participate in *VSquare*, an investigative

⁴¹ Marton Jasz, “Government decides to wait for joint EU regulation on social media giants,” *Hungary Today*, 14 April 2021, <https://hungarytoday.hu/hungary-social-media-regulation-facebook-varga-eu/>

network of independent media outlets from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Established in 2017, *VSquare* heavily focuses on the freedom of the press and exposing disinformation campaigns targeting the Visegrad countries.

A new addition in this field is *Telex.hu*, a 24/7 online newspaper that was founded in October 2020 exclusively from crowdfunding by *Index* staff members who left their outlet after pro-government influence over the company increased. *Telex's* science section provides weekly debunks but they mostly cover disinformation on health. Although all of these outlets have made strong contributions in the fight against disinformation, their impact is highly dependent on whether their work is picked up by the most popular news platforms in the country.

Although not established as a domestically founded operation, *RFE/RL* returned to Hungary in September 2020, the coverage of which is heavily dedicated to countering pro-Kremlin and pro-Chinese narratives. Their work is supplemented by a limited number of think tanks – such as the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy and Political Capital Institute – that are focusing on countering both Kremlin-led and pro-Beijing disinformation, although research about the former has remained more significant.

Recommendations

For as long as the domestic and foreign policy interests of the ruling Fidesz party continue to coincide with the interests of the Russian and Chinese leadership, and for as long as the Hungarian media space is dominated by pro-government media, no major recognition of Russia and China as disinformation actors is expected anytime soon. Taking the findings of the 2018 Disinformation Resilience Index on Central and Eastern Europe into account, little progress has been made in terms of fulfilling recommendations for creating a more resilient media environment in Hungary. In addition, the latter has remained tested by the Hungarian government's tight control over the media market and the shrinking space for independent journalism. In order to decrease Hungary's vulnerability to disinformation, we advise the following steps to be taken to increase Hungary's resilience against disinformation campaigns:

- Hungary should develop its legislative and institutional framework. As political and economic relations with Moscow and Beijing are a clear priority of the foreign policy of the incumbent leadership, currently there are no expectations towards a revised approach in the country's national and cybersecurity strategies concerning the disinformation tactics used by China and Russia. At the same time, the overall notion of disinformation, particularly in the online domain, needs to be recognised by and made a priority of government agencies.
- Hungary should be targeted by regional programs aimed at countering disinformation and increasing media literacy. In 2018, the US State Department under the Trump administration was planning to grant Hungary USD 700,000 in grants for expanding independent media outlets in Hungarian regions. The programme was eventually killed

by pressure from the Hungarian government.⁴² In this regard, EU and US funding could be the most efficient (however, gaining government support could also be an impediment to the process). Such a tool is the European Commission's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme that provides opportunities for civil society organisations.

- National and regional-level media outlets should pay special attention to pro-Kremlin and Chinese narratives. While pro-government media actors are essentially neglecting the disinformation threat posed by Russia and China, there is growing recognition among independent media outlets. Increasing the size of digital debunking teams in national and regional media and strengthening the cooperation in terms of debunking foreign hostile disinformation could prove useful in the long-term. A greater level of cooperation between national outlets recognising the problem and the regional media – knowledge sharing, joint media outputs and media training – could also be beneficial.
- With the government continuously refusing to deal with pro-Russian and pro-Chinese disinformation, keeping the issue on the public agenda, with special regards to Chinese and Russian disinformation campaigns connected to the Covid-19 pandemic, would be beneficial to increase public discussions and readers' awareness.
- V4 countries could ultimately play a bigger role in strengthening regional cooperation. Hungary's balancing act between the Euro-Atlantic community and Eastern authoritarian powers remains limited by a number of factors, including Hungary's close political ties to Central European countries and membership in the Visegrad Group. Launching policy discussions, regional-level task forces and sharing best practices would serve as useful additions in the fight against disinformation.

⁴² Szabolcs Panyi, "The 200 million American tender supporting the independent Hungarian media was announced," *Index.hu*, 22 July 2018, https://index.hu/kulfold/2018/07/22/kinyirtak_a_fuggetlen_magyar_mediata_tamogato_200_millios_amerikai_palyazatot/

WatchDog.MD team

WatchDog.MD Community

Moldova

Abstract

Moldova's overall level of disinformation resilience has barely changed since 2018, and remains quite limited, despite a number of legal and institutional changes. A bill banning the rebroadcasting of Russian content was passed in 2018 and then repealed in 2020. The Parliament also adopted a new Code of Audiovisual Media Services and a National Information Security Strategy. Both documents are yet to live up to their potential, as their implementation has been slow and insufficient. Competent authorities, in particular the Council of the Audiovisual and the Security and Intelligence Service, are criticised by civil society organisations for not fulfilling their duties and, on occasion, for acting against the country's information security. The task of fighting disinformation and raising media literacy is mostly an undertaking of civil society organisations.

Television remains the most popular and important source of information in Moldova, although it is slowly but steadily losing ground. The internet, on the other hand, is more and more important as a source of information. During the Covid-19 pandemic, polls show that people's consumption of information has increased both via television and the internet.

Different polls give conflicting figures about Moldovans' trust in the Russia media, but the popularity of Russian television is undisputed. Over the past three years, channels that rebroadcast Russian content have intermittently occupied each of the top three positions in audience measurements.

China has become more present in the Moldovan informational space, largely thanks to some donations of equipment relevant to the fight against Covid-19, as well as vaccines. Chinese influence in Moldova has also benefited from vocal endorsement from erstwhile President Igor Dodon and some Socialist MPs. However, China's involvement in Moldova remains comparatively minor.

Covid-related disinformation and conspiracies have had a major impact among Moldovans, many of whom do not believe the pandemic is real, or think it is part of a secret "cabal's" plan to subjugate the world, as depicted by many popular conspiracy theories. On the other hand, Moldovan audiences seem to have become more critical towards domestic political manipulations.

Disinformation studies

Public opinion and knowledge about media and fake news has been measured in two polls commissioned by Internews in Moldova – one in 2018 and another one in 2020, which includes a comparison of results.¹ The percentage of respondents who think they can identify manipulative information has increased from 51 to 59 per cent, while their assessment of the general population’s ability to do the same has barely changed from 30 to 31 per cent. The respondents’ media literacy was tested by asking them to evaluate the truthfulness of five news titles, two of which were true and three false. Only 9 per cent correctly assessed all five titles. According to the same poll, the European media are the most trusted, followed by Russian sources, while Moldovan media are generally distrusted.

A survey commissioned by the Independent Press Association’s *StopFals* project presents a somewhat different picture: Moldovan media sources are by far the most trusted (66.7 per cent), followed by European sources (46.4 per cent), Romanian ones (43.3 per cent) and Russian ones (40.3 per cent). The same study found that viewership and trust do not necessarily correlate in the case of television channels. For example, *TV8* enjoyed the most trust among respondents, but did not make it into the top 10 most popular channels.²

Audience measurements show the increased popularity of television channels that rebroadcast Russian content. In May 2020, *RTR Moldova*, *Primul in Moldova* (Perviy Kanal) and *NTV Moldova* were the most popular channels both nationwide and in Chisinau.³

Another analysis by *StopFals* points out the failure of the Audiovisual Council (AC) to counteract pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation in Moldova.⁴

¹ “Population perception of media and media skills in the Republic of Moldova,” *Internews*, November 2020, https://consulting.md/files/reports/46/INTERNEWS_Final_report_24.11.20_RO.pdf

² “The study of perception of misinformation and manipulation phenomenon by mass media consumers in rural regions” [in Romanian], *API*, 2019, http://api.md/upload/Studiu_UE-final-web1.pdf

³ “The review of TV audiences” [in Russian], *Nielsen*, May 2020, <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Obzor-televizionnoj-auditorii-maj-2020.pdf>

⁴ “The phenomenon of false news in the Republic of Moldova and (in) the actions of the regulatory authorities in the audiovisual sphere to combat them” [in Romanian], *Stopfals*, May 2020, https://stopfals.md/dashboard/uploads/upload_6281d98ef8f4961f3e2963b67e4fc876.pdf

The study found that the AC has even issued new licenses for the rebroadcasting of Russian television content and has tolerated the illegal activity of *Sputnik Radio*, which does not hold a license for broadcasting, but rents broadcast time from existing radio stations and airs its own content on their frequencies.

In 2018, *Watchdog.MD* published a study that showed how Russian media dominated the foreign news segments in Moldova and had a disproportionate influence over the people's geopolitical preferences.⁵ According to the study's findings, Russian propaganda worked on two levels. First, it presented Vladimir Putin as a "perfect" leader, while discrediting the personalities of Western leaders. Second, it presented an unrealistically positive picture of life and governance in Russia, while criticising Western moral and social decadence. The authors claim the dominance of Russian media in Moldova is so strong that the country can be considered as "integrated in the Russian informational space," at least when it comes to international news.

A similar conclusion is found in the Centre for Independent Journalism's 2020 Press Status Index. The authors state that Moldova's information security remains in critical condition because national assets such as terrestrial frequencies are used to disseminate foreign media products that are "clearly toxic."⁶

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a survey commissioned by *Watchdog.MD* revealed that Covid-related fake news and conspiracy theories were widely trusted in Moldova. For example, 37.8 per cent of respondents agreed that the virus was created by Bill Gates. Such figures are a clear indicator of Moldova's vulnerability to disinformation.

⁵ "The content of the Moldovan TV information space and the way it influences electoral behaviour, including an assessment of Russian influence over geopolitical preferences" [in Romanian], *Watchdog.MD*, 19 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/3A3e1Cu>

⁶ "2020 Moldovan press status index," *Media AZI*, February 2021, <http://media-azi.md/en/2020-moldovan-press-status-index>

Relations with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

The strength of Russia's presence in the Moldovan information space used to accompany stronger ties in other sectors, such as the economy. The situation, however, had started to change over a decade ago and reached a balance that has remained stable over the past three years: the EU is by far Moldova's biggest trading partner, with Romania, Germany and Italy being the top three destinations for Moldovan exports, while Russia comes in fourth place. China is significant only as a source of imports, with a slight growth since 2018.

Table 1. Moldova's trade with China, EU, and Russia

Country/bloc	Imports, per cent of total		Exports, per cent of total	
	2018	2020	2018	2020
Russia	12.50	11.14	8.07	8.73
China	10.40	11.90	0.70	0.50
EU	49.50	45.62	68.80	66.73

Own compilation

At this stage, Russia cannot afford any more large-scale embargoes like in the past, as they would further erode its commercial ranking in Moldova. However, targeted measures can still be used as a tool for political influence. For example, privileges for Gagauz winemakers and for other agricultural companies on a list prepared by the pro-Kremlin Party of Socialists.

Unlike the trade sector, Russia wields considerably more influence in the Moldovan energy sector, which is dependent on Russian natural gas. Gazprom is also the majority shareholder of Moldovagaz, the country's gas importer, distributor and reseller. Its unbundling, in accordance with the EU's Third Energy Package, has been constantly delayed in recent years. Another vulnerability resides in the Transnistrian region's USD 7 billion debt to Gazprom – the spectre of the Russian gas giant demanding this debt from Moldova has haunted local politics for years.

The situation could improve with the interconnection of the Moldovan electricity grid to the European grid (via Romania), and with the finalisation of a gas pipe

from Romania to Chişinău. This would give Moldovan authorities an option to import energy from Europe or to negotiate better terms with the current Russian providers.

Another issue that has been frequently pointed out by the investigative press is that some Moldovan politicians have shady business ties to Russian oligarchs. Former president Igor Dodon's brother, Alexandru, is a serial business associate of Igor Chaika, son of Russia's former chief prosecutor. Several reports also show that they have a cryptocurrency mining farm in Transnistria. In 2020, Igor Chaika also became the official co-owner of two television channels in Moldova, including the one that rebroadcasts Russia's popular *Perviy Kanal*. The Party of Socialists has been accused of receiving Russian money via an offshore company in the Bahamas, while their main rival on the left – Renato Usatîi – has amassed his fortune from unclear Russian. Overall, an aspect of the Moldovan business and political elite is vulnerable to Kremlin's economic and legal pressure because of their dealings with the Russian oligarchy.

For its part, China has been less present in Moldova, but it is still an attractive partner for some political forces. Vlad Plahotniuc, the oligarch who had a hold on power until 2019, had several trips to China and his party mooted a free trade deal with Beijing. In 2020, the Socialists took on the role of China's friends in Moldova, endorsing the Sinopharm vaccine and downplaying vaccine and medical aid from the West. Petru Macovei of the Free Press Association considers Socialist leader Igor Dodon an agent of both Russian and Chinese influence in Moldova.⁷

The Kremlin continues to wield a disproportionate level of influence over Moldova's ethnic minorities, particularly Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians and the Gagauz. Since 2018, there has been little progress in their informational and linguistic integration into wider Moldovan society. Language remains a significant barrier and the different minorities are dependent on Russian-language media. The continued growth of several reliable online media outlets for Russian-speakers – *Newsmaker* in Chişinău, *Nokta* in Gagauzia, *SP* in Bălţi – is a welcome and encouraging trend, but their reach and impact is nowhere near to being able to balance Kremlin's propaganda.

Traditionally, the Gagauz autonomous region and the separatist Transnistrian region have been more dependent on the Russian market than the rest of

⁷ Interview with Petru Macovei, director of the Free Press Association, 17 May 2021.

Moldova, but this is changing at a rapid pace. In January–May 2020, 29.2 per cent of Transnistrian exports went to the EU and 11 per cent to Russia. Over the same period of 2021, the EU share in Transnistrian exports reached 37 per cent and Russia’s share dropped to 8.7 per cent.⁸ As for Gagauzia, in 2019, more than half of its exports (54 per cent) went to the EU.⁹ These economic changes are yet to have a visible impact on the political landscape of the two regions, and being endorsed by the Kremlin remains a prerequisite for any kind of political relevance.

Changes in media landscape

The experts interviewed as part of this research were unanimous in their appraisal that the media landscape in general, and the impact of pro-Kremlin narratives, have not changed significantly in the past three years.

“In 2018, the famous anti-propaganda law was passed and the flow of pro-Kremlin disinformation via newscasts decreased somewhat, but on the other hand, propaganda via social media increased. Overall, things did not change. Resilience remains low, even though polls show a slight increase in critical thinking among the people. This means people are more critical with regards to the media and this is generally a positive thing,” one of the interviewed experts said.¹⁰

His position is supported by Freedom House’s Freedom in the World reports. Moldova’s overall score in 2021¹¹ is identical to the 2018 edition: 61 points out of 100.¹² For the freedom of press chapter, Moldova was awarded 2 out of 4 points in both years. The main problems identified in the two studies are the same: political affiliation of media outlets, lack of access to government

⁸ “External trade of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic with major countries and groups of countries for January–May 2021” [in Russian], The State Customs Committee of the “Transnistrian Moldovan Republic,” June 2021, <https://customs.gospmr.org/2014-3.html>

⁹ “Prime Minister Ion Chicu attends Invest Gagauzia 2020 Forum in Comrat” [in Romanian], The website of Moldovan government, October 2020, <https://gov.md/ro/content/prim-ministrul-ion-chicu-participat-la-forumul-international-invest-gagauzia-2020-desfasurat>

¹⁰ Interview with Petru Macovei.

¹¹ “Freedom in the world 2021, Moldova,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2021>

¹² “Freedom in the world 2018, Moldova,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2018>

information, as well as verbal and legal threats against journalists by some politicians.

In the Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index,¹³ Moldova's score has worsened slightly from 30.01 in 2018 (ranked 81th in the world) to 31.61 in 2021 (ranked 89th). In addition to the issues mentioned above, the WPF report points out that the Covid-19 crisis has further limited access to public information, while political polarisation means that many media are battling each other. As before, "the broadcasting regulatory authority's lack of independence continues to be a source of concern."

Television remained "the most trusted source of information" for 28.7 per cent of the Public Opinion Barometer (BOP) respondents in February 2021,¹⁴ compared to 35.4 per cent in November 2018.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the share of people for whom the internet is the most trusted source has increased from 19.8 to 23.6 per cent in the same time interval. The biggest increase is among people who say they do not trust any source – from 17.8 to 25.7 per cent.

Meanwhile, polls indicate an increase in media consumption, which can likely be attributed to the pandemic and the higher proportion of time spent at home by some people. In November 2018, 64.3 per cent of respondents watched television every day and 47.1 per cent used the internet daily. By February 2021, these indicators increased to 73.2 per cent and 67.3 per cent, respectively.

Russian *Perviy Kanal's* rebroadcast content remains the most popular television content in the country. Before 2019, the license was held by PRIME, the crown jewel in Vlad Plahotniuc's media empire. After he lost power and fled the country, the rebroadcasting rights were taken over by *Accent TV*, part of the Socialists' media holding, which rebranded itself into *Primul in Moldova* (The First in Moldova). This allowed it to quickly surge in popularity.

Trust in Russian media has remained stable over the past three years: 42.5 per cent of BOP respondents trusted Russian media a lot or somewhat in November 2018, and 42.9 per cent responded the same way in February 2021. Trust

¹³ "2021 World Press Freedom Index, Moldova," *Reporters without Borders*, <https://rsf.org/en/moldova>

¹⁴ "The Barometer of Public Opinion" [in Romanian], *Institute for Public Policy (IPP)*, February 2021, https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BOP_02.2021.pdf

¹⁵ "The Barometer of Public Opinion" [in Romanian], *Institute for Public Policy (IPP)*, November 2018, <https://ipp.md/2018-12/sondajul-sociologic-barometrul-opinieii-publice-noiembrie-2018/>

in European media has increased from 33.4 per cent to 39.7 per cent but still lags behind Russian media.

Besides the *Perviy Kanal* license, several online outlets also changed camps after Vlad Plahotniuc left the country. Previously staunch defenders of the latter's officially pro-European government, these sites now actively promote the Socialists' pro-Russian agenda. Many of these outlets have previously spread fake news and disinformation, and have now simply changed their political orientation.

Besides numerous elections – since 2018, Moldova has had local, parliamentary and presidential elections, and an early legislative ballot on 11 July 2021 – the Covid-19 pandemic has also increased the number of manipulations and examples of fake news. A public opinion poll commissioned by *Watchdog.MD* has shown the reach of Covid-related disinformation. For example, 27 per cent of respondents believed that the pandemic was linked to the Masons.¹⁶

Kremlin-backed narratives have adapted to the pandemic quite successfully. In the same poll, 33.8 per cent thought European countries failed to manage the pandemic, 29.7 per cent said the EU would fall because of the coronavirus, and 27.2 per cent agreed that Italy was abandoned by the EU. The mass media affiliated with the Party of Socialists has generally downplayed the Western aid for Moldova, and has criticised Western vaccines, while promoting Russian and Chinese assistance and vaccines.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

In 2017, the Moldovan parliament passed the so-called Anti-Propaganda Bill,¹⁷ coming into force in 2018. It banned the rebroadcasting of foreign informational, analytic, political and military content from countries that did not sign the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (ECTT). Informally, it was directly aimed at Russia, which was not among the ECTT signatories. The pro-Russian governing alliance revoked it in 2020.

¹⁶ "Socio-political trends and disinformation impact during the pandemic," *Watchdog.MD*, June 2020, <https://www.watchdog.md/2020/06/03/socio-political-trends-and-disinformation-impact-during-the-pandemic/>

¹⁷ "Amendment to the Audiovisual Code of Moldova" [in Romanian], *Moldova's legal portal legis.md*, December 2017, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=105636&lang=ro

However, the bill was widely criticised at the time of adoption by opposition members and mass media experts, even pro-European ones, for being undemocratic and for tackling only the surface but not the root of the problem. Media researcher Victor Gotișan was among the bill's initial critics, but now thinks it was better than nothing: *"I was very sceptical, because you must teach people how to consume information, not to limit their right to get information – and, in the end, this is what the bill did. Nevertheless, I think that in our kind of society, at this moment, when there's a lack of critical thinking, of education on media and information consumption, such bills are alright in the short-term. Now it has been repealed, the Russian media product is back. We need to measure the impact."*¹⁸

According to Petru Macovei, the takeover of power from the Democratic Party (PDM) by the Party of Socialists (PSRM), with a short-lived pro-European government in-between, has halted whatever slow legislative progress Moldova was making against Russian propaganda. He points out that despite the Democrats' shortcomings, *"They had started to work on some white papers that might have served as a basis for a national security strategy, starting from the understanding that the Russian Federation is at the moment an unfriendly country to Moldova. Russia is the source of the main potential threats. In the second part of 2019, all these initiatives were blocked. The Party of Socialists and Igor Dodon and his government showed no interest in continuing work on these proposals. We're at a standstill."*¹⁹

Among the projects initiated by the PDM government and approved by parliament in 2018, there is a National Information Security Strategy²⁰ and a National Concept for the Development of Mass Media.²¹ The former has four pillars: 1) cyber-security, 2) media and information security, 3) strengthening of operational capacities, 4) internal coordination and international cooperation. One expert with a background in academia and in state institutions thinks that information security and cyber-security are two very different things and should be treated separately, not lumped together in the same strategy.²²

¹⁸ Interview with Victor Gotișan, independent media researcher, 17 May 2020.

¹⁹ Interview with Petru Macovei.

²⁰ "The Parliament's decision on the approval of the National Information Security Strategy for 2019–2024 and the Action Plan for its implementation" [in Romanian], *Moldova's legal portal legis.md*, November 2018, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=111979&lang=ro

²¹ "The Law on the approval of the National Concept for the Development of Mass Media" [in Romanian], *Media AZI*, June 2018, <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/105449.pdf>

²² Interview with anonymous expert, PhD student in Law, Free International University of Moldova, June 12, 2021.

The third pillar of the National Information Security Strategy mentions coordinated propaganda attacks from abroad, but does not mention Russia or any other country directly. It does however reference, on multiple occasions, the European Parliament's resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda aimed against the EU by third parties (2016/2030(INI)),²³ which has a whole subsection dedicated to "Recognising and exposing Russian disinformation and propaganda warfare."

The Moldovan Information Security Strategy adopted in 2018 acknowledges that such disinformation campaigns are part of hybrid warfare and can create internal instability within the country and damage its reputation internationally. In order to counter this threat, the strategy lists several objectives, the main ones being the development of a national strategic communication mechanism, enhanced cooperation between civil society and national security institutions and better regulation of media outlets, especially on the internet. The concrete actions to be undertaken to achieve each objective are not very ambitious and occasionally unrelated to the objective itself. For example, the first action listed under the objective "Ensuring financial transparency of public authorities, NGOs and companies in the context of ensuring information security" is the expansion of a set of criteria for determining what qualifies as manipulation or propaganda. The logical connection between the objective and the action is not obvious, to say the least.

The National Concept for the Development of Mass Media frequently mentions the term "national information sovereignty," a term which is absent from the strategy discussed above. Presumably, it overlaps to a large extent with the notion of information security, but the exact relation between the two terms is not legally defined. The concept aims to improve the legislative and regulatory framework, to increase the independence of the mass media regulatory bodies, to improve managerial capacities in this sector, to help media outlets achieve financial independence, and so on. The document was received positively upon its adoption, but was not followed-up by measures to achieve the listed objectives.²⁴

²³ "European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties," *The legal portal of the EU*, 27 June 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016IP0441>

²⁴ "Two years of waiting. The Government is stalling the implementation of the National Concept for the Development of Mass Media" [in Romanian], *Media AZI*, February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3s38nh7>

In 2018, the Parliament also adopted a new Code of Audiovisual Media Services,²⁵ which was supposed to be a major legislative overhaul regarding the regulation of mass media and national implementation of relevant EU directives. One of the interviewed experts said he is yet to see significant changes induced by the new code, at least in the field of fighting disinformation.²⁶

Overall, Victor Gotișan thinks that the main issue is not the quality of legislation, which is good enough, but the lack of institutions to actually implement the laws. Chief among the bodies that are not doing their job is the Council of the Audiovisual, which Gotișan labelled as “impotent.”²⁷

On the other hand, Petru Macovei finds the current legislative and regulatory framework wanting: “*We do not have a serious document that could lay the foundation of a healthy and proactive system, that could effectively and efficiently work to protect our national security.*”²⁸

Nevertheless, the API director agrees that institutions, especially the AC, are not making the most of current laws: “*Our media market is oversaturated with Russian-language productions, but the Council of the Audiovisual doesn’t want to take any measures, even though the Code of Audiovisual Media Services, such as it is, provides some possible steps. The issue is that the council members are not willing to enter a conflict with the governing Party of Socialists, which controls a large share of the television media market.*”²⁹

Petru Macovei also stressed the potential role of the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), which could do a lot more in the field of information security. During the pandemic, SIS did block several fake news websites,³⁰ but did not touch the more prominent websites affiliated to political parties.

“*When SIS took action and blocked some fake news websites, after also taking into account some reports by civil society organisations, it was a good thing,*

²⁵ “The Code of Audiovisual Media Services in Moldova” [in Romanian], Audiovisual Council, November 2018, <http://www.audiovizual.md/files/Codul%20serviciilor%20media%20audiovizuale.pdf>

²⁶ Interview with Victor Gotișan.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Interview with Petru Macovei.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ “SIS announces shutdown of over 50 fake news websites – full list” [in Romanian], *Newsmaker*, March 2020, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/sis-anunta-inchiderea-a-50-de-site-uri-care-furnizau-stiri-false-lista-completa-a-acestora/>

in my opinion. But we don't have a transparent mechanism that could explain why some sources could be blocked. And who can control and make sure that these media sources won't be blocked abusively? In my view, this blocking mechanism should also involve the courts of law," another expert argued.³¹

Responses by media and civil society

Given the lack of serious government efforts to stave off disinformation and conspiracies around Covid-19, the burden fell almost exclusively on civil society organisations and independent media.

API's *StopFals* campaign remains one of the most prominent projects in this regard. In 2020, it became a signatory of the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network Code of Principles.³² *StopFals* continues to debunk fake news and conspiracies, with a special focus on the pandemic and politics. It also runs a media education and literacy campaign. For example, in March 2020, it organised a training camp for pedagogy students.³³ *StopFals* also publishes analysis and studies on disinformation in Moldova, thus being one of the most valuable all-round resources in the country.

Watchdog.MD has increased and improved its video output fighting political disinformation and manipulation but has also paid attention to Covid-related propaganda, such as Russia's claim that it had the world's first anti-Covid vaccine.³⁴ Their video format has proved quite popular on social media and has been one of the most effective campaigns in terms of audience reached. As mentioned before, *Watchdog.MD* also commissioned a public opinion poll that explored the impact of Covid disinformation among Moldovans.

³¹ Interview with anonymous expert, PhD student in Law, *Free International University of Moldova*, 12 June 2021.

³² "IFCN Code of Principals," *StopFals*, September 2020, <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/profile/stopfalsmd>

³³ A Facebook post about *StopFals's PedCamp* " [in Romanian], *StopFals Facebook account*, March 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/StopFals.md/posts/936523870435638>

³⁴ "Did Russia create the world's first anti-Covid vaccine?" [in Romanian], *Watchdog.MD*, August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=774712926625505>

CRITICISM OF AC'S INITIATIVE

On 24 March 2020, the Audiovisual Council's (AC) chairman, Dragoş Vicol, signed a directive instructing all of Moldova's media outlets to mandatorily reflect the position of national and international authorities on Covid-related topics, and to abstain from presenting "arbitrary," unofficial positions and opinions.³⁵ Under the guise of fighting Covid-related disinformation, the AC attempted to establish a nationwide censorship regime. The directive had not been open to consultation with media institutions and civil society actors.

The public outcry was immediate and widespread. Numerous journalists and media-related NGOs denounced the directive, and the AC chairman, Dragoş Vicol, withdrew it just two days later, in order "to calm spirits in society."³⁶

RISE Moldova has released a series of three investigations about fake news networks: a group of clickbait sites run by a video editor at *TV8*,³⁷ from which he was fired as a result, a ghost "French company" running several fake news sites hosted in Russia,³⁸ and another network based in Crimea.³⁹ Some of these sites and pages had already been blocked by SIS, others were blocked afterwards.

Sic.md is a smaller project with an intermittent output, but during the pandemic has published graphic⁴⁰ and textual debunkers,⁴¹ as well as a podcast

³⁵ "Directive for audiovisual media services providers under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova" [in Romanian], Audiovisual Council, March 2020, <http://www.audiovizual.md/files/Dispozitie%20CA.semnat.pdf>

³⁶ "A press release of the Audiovisual Council" [in Romanian], Audiovisual Council, March 2020, <http://www.audiovizual.md/news/comunicat-de-pres-43>

³⁷ "The Fake News Lab (I): the creator" [in Romanian], *RISE Moldova*, July 2020, <https://www.rise.md/laboratorul-de-fake-news-i-creatorul/>

³⁸ "The Fake News Lab (II): the man from Crimea" [in Romanian], *RISE Moldova*, August 2020, <https://www.rise.md/laboratorul-de-fake-news-ii-omul-din-crimeea/>

³⁹ "The Fake News Lab (III): the organisation" [in Romanian], *RISE Moldova*, November 2020, <https://www.rise.md/laboratorul-de-fake-news-iii-organizatia/>

⁴⁰ Coronavirus pills, *Sic.md*, March 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=sicwatchdogs&set=a.2980996632126604>

⁴¹ Coronavirus 2020, *Sic.md*, <https://sic.md/tag/coronavirus-2020/>

series about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴² The channels *TV8* and *Jurnal TV*, websites like *Agora.md*, *Nokta.md*, *Newsmaker.md*, *Cotidianul.md*, and the newspaper *Ziarul de Gardă*, have tackled various individual cases of fake news and disinformation, but do not have dedicated projects.

"I'm sure the mainstream media could and should do more than now. My belief is that Moldovan journalistic teams are not sufficiently involved in fighting disinformation. They do it only when there are some projects implemented by NGOs and when they can get some money. Or when there is some fake news concerning well-known politicians," Petru Macovei said.⁴³

A similar opinion was voiced by Victor Gotișan, who regrets that many media projects started in 2015–2016 were dropped as soon as the foreign funding ended.

Moldovan media, be it traditional or online, does not seem to be willing to put money, time or resources into debunking and media literacy projects, unless there is external financing from organisations like the National Endowment for Democracy, the Soros Moldova Foundation, the Black Sea Trust of the German Marshall Fund of the US, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, and other donors. Even when they fund some initiatives, these projects lack continuity and sustainability.

As it stands, debunking fake news and fighting propaganda is primarily an undertaking of civil society organisations, and only secondly of mainstream media outlets, not to mention the government. Despite the best efforts of various NGOs, it takes a coordinated effort involving the authorities and the mass media to fight such a massive flow of falsehoods, such as those generated by the pandemic. Without such efforts, the public remained vulnerable to various conspiracies and fakes. This is confirmed by the results of a survey commissioned by the Ministry of Health in March 2021: one in four respondents said Covid-19 was not real, and only 41 per cent would accept a Covid-19 vaccine.⁴⁴

As for political disinformation, Victor Gotișan thinks that the situation has improved to a certain extent: *"People are becoming more critical towards the information they are consuming. Whether we want it or not, it is visible. That's first – they are more critical. Second – maybe all the programmes and projects*

⁴² "This is the situation" podcast, *Sic.md*, <https://sic.md/tag/podcast/>

⁴³ Interview with Petru Macovei.

⁴⁴ "41% of respondents would accept getting vaccinated against Covid-2019" [in Romanian], *Moldova's Ministry of Health*, May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ihWgt0>

of media organisations are also having an impact. I mean those promoting media education and critical thinking. I think there is a change, and when I say this, I'm thinking about the way people voted during the elections in November last year.”⁴⁵

GOOD PROGRESS WITH MEDIA EDUCATION

The Moldovan experts interviewed as part of this study mentioned the mass media education classes in schools as one of the best and most promising initiatives in Moldova. The project started in the 2017–2018 school year, with optional classes for students in the third and fourth grades. Since then, the project grew and media education classes were made available for secondary and high school students, either as a separate course, or as a module of homeroom and civic education classes. The Centre for Independent Journalism reports that over 7,000 textbooks have been printed so far.

This is an encouraging example, not only because of the usefulness of media education itself, but also because it shows what can be achieved when public authorities, in this case the Ministry of Education, are open to cooperation with civil society organisations.

During the last presidential election, especially between the first and the second round, the Socialists launched a tirade of fake news against the eventual winner, Maia Sandu. Their lack of success can be seen as an indirect sign that such campaigns are becoming less effective, and that Moldovans are consuming information in a more critical and selective manner. While it's difficult to quantify the impact of media literacy projects, as Victor Gotișan suggests, they have certainly helped to some degree.

In 2017, the Centre of Independent Journalism, with the agreement of the Ministry of Education, started optional media education classes in some primary schools, involving 500 students and 53 teachers in the 2017–2018 school year. By 2020, the project expanded to the secondary and high school levels, reaching about 4,800 students and 290 teachers overall. One expert

⁴⁵ Interview with Victor Gotișan.

interviewed within this project stressed that the main advantage of such classes is their preventive function as it prepares young people to think critically and helps them avoid falling into the trap of fake news. *“This initiative must be expanded to include universities, and maybe to vulnerable groups such as pensioners and those with a below average level of education in Moldova,”* one of the experts said.⁴⁶

In terms of self-regulation, a new Deontological Code of Journalists was developed in 2019 by Freedom House and Press Council experts.⁴⁷ It has since been signed by 29 national media institutions, 41 websites, 19 NGOs, and 46 regional media outlets. However, the Press Council – the self-regulatory body of the Moldovan media – lacks the power to enforce compliance with the code. Some of its signatories display the code’s badge on their websites while engaging in political partisanship and slander against political opponents.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Interview with anonymous expert, PhD student in Law, Free International University of Moldova, 12 June 2021.

⁴⁷ “Signatories of the Ethics Code” [in Romanian], *Press Council*, <https://consiliuldepresa.md/ro/page/lista-semnatarilor>

⁴⁸ See <https://sinteza.org/>

Recommendations

Most of the recommendations of the 2018 DRI study have not been implemented so far, or only partially. The legal and institutional reforms that happened over the past three years failed to significantly change the mass media situation. One recommendation that was put into practice was the expansion of media education classes in secondary schools and high schools. Another recommendation that was partly implemented concerns the inclusion of mass media security in the broader concept of information security. The present study can put forward the following regulatory and institutional recommendations:

- The National Information Security Agency needs to be followed-up by a concrete plan of actions. In its current form, the document provides an apt description of the situation and of the major threats, even though it does not specifically mention Russia. The strategy could be amended to bolster the solutions section. An improved action plan should be developed in partnership with civil society organisations, media institutions, international organisations and other stakeholders. Responsibility for its implementation should be clearly defined and competent institutions should be held accountable when there is no progress.
- The Security and Intelligence Service should take a more active role in fighting foreign disinformation, now that media security has been formally recognised as a pillar of national security.
- The Council of the Audiovisual should be given political and institutional independence. Current members are either politically affiliated, or simply unwilling to act against the media trusts of the ruling parties. The AC is the main media regulatory body and essential for any attempt to reduce both domestic and foreign disinformation in Moldova. Its institutional capacity and autonomy must be increased, both in terms of regulation and practice.

- The Council of the Audiovisual should also increase its media monitoring and fact-checking capacities. In the meantime, it should cooperate with media NGOs that are already doing this.
- A transition from state media to public media, according to the British or Czech model, that is funded through a separate specialised (“licence fee”) tax, could increase the editorial and financial autonomy of the public broadcaster. In turn, this would allow the national television channel to take a more active role in the fight against foreign propaganda, regardless of the geopolitical preferences of the government.
- An improved and updated version of the anti-propaganda bill could serve as a useful temporary measure in order to reduce the flood of Russian political content on television, as Victor Gotișan argues. It would buy time for the implementation of other measures, which will be discussed below.
- National strategic communication mechanisms should be developed to allow authorities to react operatively and efficiently in times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. At the very least, state institutions and representatives should be able to coordinate their messages and cooperate with the media in a timely fashion, so as to prevent the spread of dangerous fake news and conspiracy theories.

The following recommendations for the media and civil society can be made:

- Media NGOs should contribute with expertise and help authorities shape information security policy. Even though civil society organisations are already active in this regard, Petru Macovei thinks they should be able to do it pro bono as well, rather than only with the incentive of a foreign grant.
- Media literacy campaigns should focus on vulnerable groups such as the elderly, ethnic minorities, and rural populations. Much of civil society activity is concentrated in Chisinau and deals with people who are reasonably well equipped to spot disinformation and propaganda. A *StopFals* poll found that their campaigns failed to penetrate the Russian-speaking communities.
- Media outlets should develop permanent sustainable fact-checking/debunking projects. Both Victor Gotișan and Petru Macovei have deplored the lack of continuity of such projects that are stopped as soon as the external funding for them stops.

- Media organisations should strengthen cooperation among themselves and with civil society. The local, financial, technical and human resources of mass media are incomparably smaller than what Russia or China can deploy. Joint efforts are required to stave off the massive flow of foreign disinformation.
- Coverage of foreign news and events should be expanded. Not much has changed since the 2018 *Watchdog.MD* study, and Russian media continue to dominate foreign news segments, which allows them to influence Moldovan public opinion surrounding international affairs.

Aliaksandr Aleshka

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Poland

Abstract

Since 2018, there has been a visible intensification in Russian disinformation activities against Poland. In December 2019, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, started his personal “historical war” with Poland, accusing it of being partially responsible for the outbreak of WWII in an hour-long speech. The Russian special services have continued to carry out hostile information operations against Poland, including the hacking of governmental pages and emails, as well as the spread of destabilising fake news.

The Russian disinformation efforts are aimed at igniting political and social controversies in Poland and creating new divisions in Polish society. For these goals, pro-Kremlin propaganda activities jumped to a variety of issues such as vaccines, LGBT, refugees, Ukrainian migrants, and others. A high level of political polarisation and negative tendencies within Poland’s democracy offer fertile ground for pro-Kremlin disinformation activities.

Chinese disinformation activities against Poland have undergone significant changes over the last years. The Chinese media intensified the spread of ungrounded anti-Polish messages, accusing the country of Russophobia and aggressive policies. These messages entirely coincide with recurring pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives.

Within the last three years, the Polish authorities have continued their efforts in the development of a necessary legal and institutional framework aimed at strengthening the information security of Poland. The Polish media community and civil society continue to implement a number of important projects in the areas of media literacy, fact-checking, and fake news debunking.

In general, Polish society is quite suspicious towards Russian influences, which contributes to its resilience to pro-Kremlin disinformation. It is mainly spread through social media, a number of marginalised websites, and rare Russian state outlets in Polish language (*Sputnik Polska*). Since 2018, the Russian propaganda has tried to increase its reach, hitting much broader parts of Polish society, such as people with anti-vaccine attitudes, with limited success.

Disinformation studies

In 2021, the Kosciuszko Institute published a study, covering the issues of societal resilience to disinformation in a number of European countries, including Poland.¹ It analyses Polish legislation and responses of state institutions, NGOs and social media to information security challenges. According to this study, the Polish state authorities, civil society and media have a high level of awareness of disinformation threats – this situation is largely a result of intense Russian information attacks on Poland. At the same time, it points at a low level of coordination between the state and NGOs, while the state activities in this sphere are mainly focused on monitoring.

In May 2021, the Centre for the Study of the Democracy (Bulgaria), in cooperation with the Centre for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis (Poland), published a report which evaluates² the disinformation resilience capacities of Poland, Bulgaria, Czechia and Germany at the level of governmental actions, civil society, and cooperation with the EU. In the case of Poland, the report demonstrated a serious legislative gap regarding the regulation of online propaganda and disinformation. The Polish state authorities need to form a comprehensive response to disinformation challenges instead of dealing with specific aspects of this problem, the report concludes. It argues that so far, the Polish authorities have shown quite a limited interest in cooperation with the NGOs in terms of the fight against disinformation.

Based on the systematic monitoring of materials published by *Sputnik Polska* from June 2019 to May 2020, the EAST Center identified twelve major pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives spread by this media outlet.³ They concerned Polish imperialist intentions and its huge economic problems, lost sovereignty, Russophobia, and various history-related claims. The study found that disinformation narratives are mostly found in op-eds authored by either *Sputnik* journalists or external contributors, while the majority of news is presented rather neutrally.

¹ Izabela Albrycht, Faustine Felici, Michal Krawczyk, et al, “Europe versus disinformation: Resilience building in selected countries,” *Kosciuszko Institute*, Krakow, 2021, https://ik.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/europe_vs_disinforamtion.pdf

² Ognian Shentov, Ruslan Stefanov, Todor Galev (eds.), “Countering Kremlin’s media influence in Europe. Patterns of anti-democratic messaging, disinformation responses, and resilience assets,” *Center for the Study of Democracy*, 2021, https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2021_05/KP6_ENG.pdf

³ Aliaksandr Aleshka, “Sputnik Polska. Propaganda narratives and cases,” *EAST Center*, July 2020, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sputnik-Polska-Propaganda.pdf>

In April 2020, the press secretary of the Special Services Minister, Stanisław Żaryn, presented an analysis of the top 5 tendencies in the Russian disinformation activities against Poland.⁴ He suggests that Russia purposefully sows information chaos by heating domestic political disputes, playing on people's emotions and fuelling fear. Pro-Kremlin sources attempt to present Russia as a friend and partner in challenging times, and claims concerning Russian aid during the Covid-19 pandemic are a telling example. Another tendency is Russia's intention to worsen Poland's image and weaken its international position by discrediting Poland in front of the EU and NATO allies by spreading false narratives such as alleged plans to attack the Kaliningrad region. The pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign presents Poland as an irrational "Russophobic" actor, capable of inflicting unnecessary harm on the relationship between western countries and Russia. The next tendency is the actions of the Kremlin aimed at fuelling anti-US and anti-NATO attitudes in Poland. Finally, pro-Kremlin sources actively abuse historical issues and present Poland in a bad light, such as claims about Poland's responsibility for the outbreak of WWII.

A 2020 report analysing the Poles' attitude to the ongoing "historical" attacks by Russia on Poland⁵ found that a large number of Poles encountered the Russian disinformation messages in the historical sphere – 73 per cent of respondents came across the message "Poland falsifies history, wiping away remembrance of the Red Army" and 69 per cent saw the claim that "there was no Soviet aggression against Poland in 1939." Almost two thirds of Poles (64 per cent) are aware of the reaction of the Polish authorities to the Russian propaganda. According to the research, the Poles expect the state to react to the Russian propaganda in an active way – only 9 per cent of respondents believe that it should be ignored.

In September 2019, the Polish governmental research centre NASK (Research and Academic Computer Network) published an overview of the disinformation activities of the key Polish state institutions.⁶ The representatives of the Polish National Security Bureau, MFA, Ministry of Defence, Governmental Security

⁴ Stanisław Żaryn, "Poland on the viewfinder of disinformation" [in Polish], *Gov.pl*, 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/polska-na-celowniku-dezinformacji>

⁵ "Information war and historical propaganda. A report of the public opinion survey for the Center of Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding" [in Polish], *Center for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding*, 2020, http://cprdip.pl/assets/media/Wydawnictwa/Raporty/Wojna_informacyjna_i_propaganda_historyczna_raport_z_badan_2020.pdf

⁶ "Phenomenon of disinformation in the age of the digital revolution" [in Polish], *NASK*, 2019, https://cyberpolicy.nask.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Raport_CP_Dezinformacja_ONLINE_s.pdf

Centre and other state services presented the position of their institutions towards increasing threats in the sphere of information security. This publication shows a high awareness among Polish state institutions about increasing threats coming from disinformation activities. The state is looking for ways to react to these threats.

In 2019, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights published the report “Fake news and disinformation during electoral campaigns in Poland in 2019,” which found that the most polarising subject during the 2019 parliamentary elections in Poland was the issue of LGBT.⁷ This issue outpaced the issues of migration and refugees, which dominated the 2015 elections.

Relations with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

Russia

There are numerous political, economic and historical contradictions in the Polish-Russian relationship, and many of them have been artificially boosted by the Kremlin over the past years, in order to reach its foreign policy goals.

In terms of general trade turnover, Russia is one of the top Polish economic partners, but there is a serious trade deficit between the two states. Russia is the third-largest importer to Poland (after Germany and China), making up 6.1 per cent of total Polish imports. At the same time, the Polish exports to Russia are quite limited; it made up 3.1 per cent of total Polish exports in 2020. Poland’s trade deficit with Russia results from imports of Russian energy sources; about 80 per cent of the Russian import to Poland is composed of crude oil and natural gas. In general, Russia is not perceived as an important economic partner to Poland – the Polish export is mainly focused on EU countries and there is a gradual reduction of Polish import of Russian oil and gas.

As a result of the Polish policy of energy diversification, Poland’s dependency on Russian energy imports has been declining lately. Russian gas’s share of

⁷ “Fake news and disinformation during electoral campaigns in Poland in 2019” [in Polish], *Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights*, 2019, https://www.hfhr.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Fake-newsy-i-dezinformacja_final.pdf

the Polish market reduced from 68 per cent in 2018 to 61.5 per cent in 2019.⁸ Moreover, Poland does not plan to prolong the long-term contract with Gazprom after 2023, planning to replace the majority of its Russian gas with LNG deliveries and the Baltic Pipe project.⁹ In response to such unfortunate developments, pro-Kremlin sources initiated an intense disinformation campaign aimed against the Polish energy policy, the Baltic Pipe project, the Polish LNG terminal, and the Polish position on the Nord Stream 2 project.¹⁰

Polish-Russian political relations appear to be at the “lowest possible” level, with Poland repeatedly described by Russia as one of the most “anti-Russian” countries in the world. The Russian authorities are extremely dissatisfied with the active Polish Eastern policy, advanced Polish-American cooperation, NATO’s increasing presence in Poland, Polish energy policy, and other steps of the Polish authorities aimed at strengthening its international position and resilience to Russian interference. In addition, the 2010 Smolensk air disaster remains unresolved as the Russian authorities refuse to return the plane wreck to Poland in order to complete the investigation of this accident.¹¹

The active Polish policy towards Ukraine and Belarus has caused additional irritation in Russia. The Kremlin is highly critical of advanced Polish-Ukrainian cooperation and strong Polish support of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The pro-Kremlin media actively use the issue of the large Ukrainian minority living in Poland (over 1.2 million)¹² in order to disrupt the Polish-Ukrainian relations. After the 2020 Presidential elections in Belarus and the outbreak of massive anti-Lukashenka protests, Poland has faced increasing Russian information attacks in connection with its position on Belarus and support of the Belarusian society.

⁸ Bartłomiej Sawicki, “Poland is reducing its dependence on oil imports from Russia” [in Polish], *Biznes Alert*, 3 June 2020, <https://biznesalert.pl/polska-rosja-import-ropy-lng-energetyka/>

⁹ Tomasz Furman, “Poland will not run out of gas after the end of import from Russia” [in Polish], *Parkiet*, 30 December 2020, <https://www.parkiet.com/Surowce-i-paliwa/312309995-Polsce-nie-zabraknie-gazu-po-zakonczeniu-importu-z-Rosji.html>

¹⁰ “The Baltic Pipe case: Disinformation at the service of the Kremlin’s energy policy,” *EUvsDisinfo*, 2 March 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-baltic-pipe-case-disinformation-at-the-service-of-the-kremlins-energy-policy/>

¹¹ Marcin Gocłowski, Wojciech Zurawski, “Poland critical of Russia 10 years after Smolensk air crash,” *Reuters*, 10 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-politics-smolensk-idUSKCN21S16E>

¹² Marcin Chłopus, “How many Ukrainians are there in Poland? How many left during the pandemic? We have reliable data” [in Polish], *Newsweek*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/ilu-ukraincow-jest-w-polsce-ilu-ukraincow-wyjechalo-z-polski-w-pandemii/9b0gcx6>

“During 2014–2018, the Russian propaganda used the issue of the Ukrainian migrants in Poland in a direct and obvious way. After 2018, this issue became less visible, but the formula stays the same; the pro-Kremlin media actively uses it when they have such a need. After the outbreak of the Belarusian protests in 2020, this formula started to be used against the Belarusians, who are increasingly presented as “Nazis,” “Banderites” and “enemies of Poland,” one of the interviewed experts said.¹³

Historical issues and contradictions occupy a special place in Polish-Russian relations. In December 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin blamed Poland for the outbreak of WWII. Throughout 2020–2021, high-level Russian officials made numerous anti-Polish statements, which can be described as historical revisionism – most of them are identical to the messages promoted by the Stalinist historical propaganda. The USSR is presented as a fully peaceful state, which did not attack Poland in September 1939 together with Nazi Germany.¹⁴

The poll conducted by the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding in 2020 shows that 79 per cent of Poles perceive the Russian position on Poland as negative. Only 9 per cent of Poles positively perceive Putin’s activities, while 60 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, view them negatively and neutrally.¹⁵

Another public opinion survey of 2020 showed that only 11 per cent of respondents describe Polish-Russian relations as friendly.¹⁶ Poles believe that the main ground for disputes between Poland and Russia are historical issues (74 per cent), economic (37 per cent) and political (26 per cent) problems. The recent Russian “historical” attack on Poland does not contribute to any improvement of the Polish perception of Russia; on the contrary, this type of Russian propaganda triggers such emotions as indignation (42 per cent) and irritation (35 per cent).¹⁷

¹³ Interview with Igor Isayev, a Polish-Ukrainian freelance journalist, 13 May 2021.

¹⁴ See many respective examples in Aliaksandr Aleshka (2020), op cit.

¹⁵ “Polish-Russian social diagnosis” [in Polish], *Center for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding*, 2020, http://cprdip.pl/assets/media/Wydawnictwa/Raporty/Polska_Rosja_Diagnoza_spoleczna_2020.pdf

¹⁶ “Information war and historical propaganda” (2020), op cit.

¹⁷ Ibid

HISTORICAL ACCUSATIONS AGAINST POLAND

Since December 2019, a number of high-ranking Russian state officials, including Vladimir Putin, have made direct historical accusations against Poland, promoting various Stalinist messages on WWII history. For example, President Putin accused Poland of the outbreak of WWII (see the article of Putin on WWII¹⁸), Chairman of the State, Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, spoke about Polish responsibility for the Holocaust¹⁹ and the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, made a controversial statement about the Polish vision of the Holocaust.²⁰ The manipulative messages come not from anonymous individuals or internet bots but from the highest echelons of Russian leadership.

The Polish authorities reacted to this situation with repeated diplomatic protests and presentation of the Polish view on WWII. The Polish Institute of National Remembrance took an active part in debunking the Russian historical accusations against Poland, presenting its position on Putin's article on WWII,²¹ the Katyn Massacre,²² etc.

The Polish authorities found themselves in quite an unfavourable position in the battle over historical issues with Russia. The Kremlin's accusations were reprinted in international mainstream media as they came directly from Putin, activating the principle "a lie repeated a thousand times becomes the truth." Poland's counter arguments might have been perceived in foreign countries as weak as it had to "explain itself." Russia managed to introduce to international discourse the most outrageous and false claims, such as the alleged Polish responsibility for the Holocaust and WWII.

¹⁸ "75th Anniversary of the Great Victory: Shared Responsibility to History and our Future" [in Polish], *Sputnik Polska*, 19 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/MMjYnk>

¹⁹ "Russia: Poland should apologize for anti-Semitism in the pre-war period" [in Polish], *Sputnik Polska*, 14 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ctxvMo>

²⁰ "Lavrov: Poland is trying to impose its vision of the Holocaust on the West" [in Polish], *Sputnik Polska*, 17 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/MMjYUm>

²¹ "The statement of the Institute of National Remembrance in relation to the article by President Putin," *IPN*, 19 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/MMjVYG>

²² The Institute of National Remembrance protests against a new wave of blurring the traces of the Katyn Massacre by the current Russian authorities [in Polish], *IPN*, 7 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ctxyb2>

In general, Polish society is perceived to be quite resilient to the Russian disinformation and the Kremlin's narratives thanks to several important factors. These factors include strong pro-European and pro-American views of Poles, a general "suspicion" of Russia due to negative historical experience, and a comparably low demand for highly polarised political agendas. Asked about what countries are responsible for online disinformation campaigns against Poland, 51.1 per cent of Poles named Russia.²³ Yet pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation negatively affect political and societal processes in Poland because of its intentional attempts to sharpen political polarisation and stoke new division.

The segments of Polish society which are particularly vulnerable to the Russian disinformation remain the same as identified in the DRI 2018 edition.²⁴ They include older people nostalgic about the pre-1989 period, people with extreme political views (far-right, far-left, anti-mainstream), and those who believe that politics is based on conflict and mistrust, rather than on mutual trust and compromise.

China

While the Chinese share of Polish exports stood at just 1.1 per cent in 2020, Chinese imports accounted for 12.3 per cent, which made China the second largest importer to Poland after Germany. In addition to trade relations, transit and logistics are important areas of Poland-China cooperation. Poland is a part of the Chinese New Silk Road project and the Belt and Road Initiative, which have a strategic significance for China.

During recent years, China has been strategically interested in the penetration of Polish communications infrastructure (5G network). The Huawei company intensively lobbied for its participation in the construction of Polish 5G infrastructure. As it appeared, the Chinese were involved in espionage activities against Poland using illegal tools of "promotion" of their interests. In 2019, Polish law enforcement detained a Huawei employee from China working in Poland who tried to acquire information about the Polish telecommunication

²³ "Safe elections. Public opinion research about (dis)information on the net" [in Polish], NASK, 2019, <https://www.nask.pl/pl/raporty/raporty/2592,Bezpieczne-wybory-raport-na-temat-dezinformacji-w-internecie.html>

²⁴ Lukasz Wenerski, Volha Damarad, "Poland", in Andrei Yeliseyev, Volha Damarad (eds.), "Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe," *Ukrainian Prism* and *EAST Center*, 2018, pp.239-241, https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

system with the help of a former Polish secret service officer. Both were accused of espionage.²⁵ The Polish authorities reacted to this situation with the introduction of new regulations, limiting the access of “high-risk” companies such as Huawei to the construction of 5G infrastructure in Poland.²⁶ Poland is a part of the US-led “Clean Network” initiative. The Polish authorities fully support the protection of its 5G network within this initiative from the potentially harmful influence of China.²⁷

A public opinion survey from late 2020 found that the Poles tend to negatively perceive China (41.5 per cent), while 31.7 per cent held positive views about China. The level of trust towards China among the Poles is even lower – only 9.4 per cent of the Poles trust China, while 57.5 per cent do not.²⁸ At the same time, the Poles perceive China as a strong economic (84.8 per cent) and military (84.2 per cent) power. About half of Poles have a positive perception of Chinese investment and the Belt and Road initiative, yet, only 32.1 per cent of Poles welcome the participation of Chinese companies in the construction of the 5G infrastructure in their country, the same poll found.²⁹

Chinese influence in the Polish media sphere is insignificant and barely visible. In addition, there is quite a high level of public awareness in Poland about the risks coming from cooperation with China, such as economic and political espionage, as well as the risks of Chinese infiltration through 5G infrastructure. Chinese soft power in Poland is also seriously limited by general awareness about the massive violation of human rights in China, repressive policies of the Chinese Communist authorities, the issue of Tibet and the Xinjiang region, developments in Hong-Kong and Taiwan, etc.

According to the press secretary of the Special Services Minister, Stanisław Żaryn, the disinformation activities of China in Poland focus on two main issues: silencing debate around “undesirable” topics for China (such as human

²⁵ Grazyna Zawadka, Izabela Kacprzak, “Huawei scandal ends with espionage accusations” [in Polish], *Rzeczpospolita*, 18 November 2021, <https://www.rp.pl/Przestepczosc/311189886-Afera-z-Huawei-zakonczy-sie-oskarzeniem-o-spiegostwo.html>

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ “The Clean Network,” US Department of State, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-clean-network/index.html>

²⁸ Adrian Brona, Richard Q. Turcsanyi, Matej Simalcik et al., “Polish public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19,” *Central European Institute of Asian Studies*, 2021, <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PL-poll-report.pdf>

²⁹ Ibid

rights violations, Covid-19 linked accusations, etc.) and promoting a positive image of China. The latter is sometimes dubbed “mask and vaccine diplomacy” and is manifested in the spread of news about Chinese humanitarian assistance to other countries.

Hence, the Chinese disinformation activities are quite different from the Russian information warfare, which is aimed at the inspiration of chaos and destabilisation of foreign countries. As Żaryn noted, lately the Russian and Chinese media seemed to begin coordination of activities. For example, Chinese media actively promoted the Russian disinformation messages regarding the Polish Army exercises “Winter-20,” presenting them as a total failure.³⁰ Furthermore, there is an increasing number of messages about Polish “Russophobia” in the Chinese media, which is one of the recurring pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian and Chinese disinformation activities were aimed at a mutual goal: weakening the EU and the US by presenting them as disorganised and incapable of fighting Covid-19.³¹

Changes in the national media landscape

Over the past years, under the rule of the Law and Justice Party, Poland has faced challenges to freedom of speech and press independence. Between 2018 and 2020, Poland worsened its position in the World Press Freedom Index, moving from 58th place³² to 64th place.³³ According to the Freedom in the World ranking by the Freedom House, between 2018 and 2021, Poland slightly worsened its position in terms of political rights and civil liberties (reduction from 85/100 to 82/100).³⁴

³⁰ “Chinese disinformation activities in Poland – different, but often in line with the Kremlin’s narratives” [in Polish], *StopFake*, 2 June 2021, <https://www.stopfake.org/pl/dzialania-dezinformacyjne-chin-w-polsce-inne-ale-czesto-zbiezne-z-narracja-kremla/>

³¹ Agnieszka Legucka, Marcin Przychodniak, “Chinese and Russian disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic [in Polish],” *PISM*, April 2021, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Dezinformacja_Chin_i_Rosji_w_trakcie_pandemii_COVID19

³² “2018 World Press Freedom Index,” *Reporters without borders*, 2018, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2018#>

³³ “2021 World Press Freedom Index,” *Reporters without borders*, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

³⁴ “Freedom in the World 2021,” *Freedom House*, 2021 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland/freedom-world/2021>

Concerns of media specialists increased about serious politicisation of the Polish public television network, *TVP*. *TVP* is regularly accused of political attacks on the opposition,³⁵ populism, polarisation of society and hate speech.³⁶ The Polish authorities promoted the idea of “repolonisation” of media working in Poland (the foreign-owned media have been repeatedly accused of “treason” and working in the interest of foreign countries).³⁷ One of the ways of implementing the “repolonisation” policy is the purchasing of local foreign-owned media by the state-owned oil company Orlen. This process may violate the EU merger rules.³⁸ The Polish authorities also exerted pressure on independent media through such tools as the “advertisement tax.” The introduction of this tax may result in a dramatic worsening of the financial situation of a significant number of independent media outlets.³⁹

The 2020 International Press Institute’s report on Poland speaks about increasing personal risks for Polish journalists as they work in a highly polarised society.⁴⁰ According to the report, despite serious political pressure from the Polish government, the Polish independent media remain strong and the media freedom situation in Poland is substantially better than in Hungary.

There have been no substantial changes in the Polish media landscape since 2018 in terms of the foreign-led disinformation. According to Polish officials, whereas the volume of pro-Kremlin propaganda has increased, it continued to be spread through online disinformation-spreading websites and social media pages with limited popularity. At the same time, *Sputnik Polska* has been quite active, yet it remained a rather marginalised and unpopular media

³⁵ Marc Santora and Joanna Berendt, “Poland’s state media is government’s biggest booster before election,” *The New York Times*, 11 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/world/europe/poland-election-state-television-tvp.html>

³⁶ “Polish public broadcaster peddles government hate speech in presidential election run-up,” *Reporters without borders*, 24 June 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/news/polish-public-broadcaster-peddles-government-hate-speech-presidential-election-run-1>

³⁷ James Shotter, “Polish media deal revives fears over press freedom,” *Financial Times*, 7 December 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/adc4f78b-c7e0-493c-9735-f8cff4759a50>

³⁸ “Poland: PKN Orlen media purchase violates EU merger rules and media pluralism standards,” *International Press Institute*, 14 June 2021, <https://ipi.media/poland-pkn-orken-media-purchase-violates-eu-merger-rules-and-media-pluralism-standards/>

³⁹ “Poland’s planned ad tax will eliminate some media, publishers say,” *Reuters*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/poland-media-tax-idUSL8N2KF77R>

⁴⁰ “Democracy Declining: Erosion of Media Freedom in Poland,” *International Press Institute*, 2020, https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/20210211_Poland_PF_Mission_Report_ENG_final.pdf

outlet. Occasionally, pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives also get into Polish national and regional media.

Social media networks are the main channel for spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives due to their potential for broad reach, decentralisation, low regulatory level, vitality of content, etc.

The 2019 report of the National Broadcasting Council found that over a half of the Polish internet users have met with disinformation on social media within the recent month and 35 per cent did so within the recent week.⁴¹ It also found that 37.1 per cent of respondents never verify the information seen on social media – only 25.5 per cent of social network users verify the information on a regular basis.⁴² The 2018 IAB report “Disinformation online” shows that social media is perceived by Polish internet users as the main source of disinformation (58 per cent), while the online information portals occupied second place (39 per cent).⁴³

A network of disinformation-spreading websites with unclear ownership, focused on the promotion of various far-right messages and conspiracy theories, remained another important source of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. The *OKO.press* report presents 23 websites of this kind – their real number is much higher, but the majority of them have very limited audiences.⁴⁴ These websites actively cover such topics as migration, LGBT, Euroscepticism, Muslims, Jews, “deep state” and a wide array of Poland-related conspiracies. The messages promoted by these far-right websites largely coincide with recurring pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives, so it is complicated to identify which of them run directly by pro-Kremlin actors and which are local initiatives.

While it is worth noting the radical and destructive pro-Kremlin messages that such websites spread, they remain quite unpopular and their impact on Polish society is limited. The radical, far-right position of these websites limits their

⁴¹ “Fake news – disinformation online” [in Polish], National Broadcasting Council, December 2020, p.33, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/933c6546-69f7-4c5b-8b6d-ffe0eb215aca>

⁴² *Ibid*

⁴³ “Disinformation online” [in Polish], *IAB Poland*, 2018, https://iab.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/IABPolska_RAPORT_DeinformacjaWSieci_20180719.pdf

⁴⁴ Anna Mierzynska, “Russian propaganda is spread by Polish portals. We found 23 sites!” *OKO.Press*, 30 August 2018, <https://oko.press/rosyjska-propagande-szerza-polskie-portale-znalezlismy-23-takie-witryny/>

reach to a very small part of Polish society. However, the main disinformation effect lies in the active spread of their messages on social media. Many of these types of websites are short-lived; by June 2021, eleven out of 23 websites mentioned in the 2018 *OKO.press* report were unavailable.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

Since 2018, the Polish authorities have taken active legal and institutional steps in terms of anti-disinformation activities as the Russian information attacks on Poland have continued to intensify. However, until today, a major part of these state activities is still not visible to the public as the bureaucratic processes are too slow and “clumsy.”

Lately, the Polish state authorities have prepared ground for the adoption of new regulations of the media sphere concerning the fight with disinformation. The 2020 National Security Strategy directly speaks about information security, so this document may push the Polish authorities to engage in more active legislative work in this sphere. In 2021, draft laws on Cybersecurity issues and Freedom of Speech on social media were announced, and debates concerning legal regulations of the media sphere intensified.

The first pillar of the 2020 National Security Strategy speaks about the issues of cybersecurity and the information space,⁴⁵ pointing at the need to increase the resilience of the Polish state and society to cyber threats and to foster good practices, enabling the citizens to better protect their information.

The strategy focuses on the following issues:

- building capacities to protect the information space and systemic fight against disinformation on three levels: virtual (software), physical (infrastructure) and cognitive,
- creating a state system of strategic communication for dealing with various threats,

⁴⁵ “National Security Strategy of the Republic Of Poland,” National Security Bureau, 2020, https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf

- counteracting disinformation through cooperation with social media, citizens and NGOs,
- increasing public awareness of information threats through education.

According to some Polish experts, speaking about the importance of cybersecurity and information space in the new National Security Strategy is a move in the right direction, but these issues were raised “superficially, schematically and predictably.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, the strategy does not speak about concrete actions aimed at the fight against disinformation.

As one of the interviewees said, “*There is an increasing awareness among state authorities about the risks coming from disinformation threats. At the same time, the competencies in the fight with disinformation are somehow dispersed among numerous state services – there is no single institution fully responsible for this activity.*”⁴⁷

As of June 2021, the Polish authorities continued working on changes to the Law on Cybersecurity and Telecommunications.⁴⁸ One of the main expected changes will be the limitation of access to the Polish telecommunications market for companies suspected of illegal activities, including espionage and the illegal gathering of information. This measure comes as a reaction to the 2019 arrest of a Chinese spy, who illegally promoted Huawei interests in relation to Polish 5G infrastructure projects.

In January 2021, the Polish authorities announced the Law on Protection of the Freedom of Speech on Social Media.⁴⁹ One of the proposed changes concerns the regulation preventing social media companies from blocking or deleting accounts of Polish citizens if their posts do not break Polish law. It also plans to introduce a legal mechanism of a “blind” lawsuit, allowing citizens to file a claim against anonymous haters or trolls – this regulation will facilitate the process of identification of anonymous persons spreading fake news or hate speech. According to some experts, the mechanism of the “blind” lawsuit may

⁴⁶ “(Cyber) safe Poland. National Security Strategy in the eyes of experts” [in Polish], *Cyber-defense24*, 1 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/MMjWvl>

⁴⁷ Interview with Michał Kaciewicz, journalist, *TV Belsat*, June 2020.

⁴⁸ “Draft law on the national cybersecurity system and telecommunications” [in Polish], Polish Government, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2ctxwjq>

⁴⁹ “Draft law on the protection of the freedom of users of social networks” [in Polish], Polish Government, 2021, <https://bit.ly/MMjZro>

be quite effective in the identification of anonymous trolls, but many questions and doubts about the use of this legal tool in Poland remain.⁵⁰

The announcement of the draft law on social media caused numerous concerns within Polish civil society as this law could be misused due to its vagueness.⁵¹ Noteworthy, the announcement of the draft law took place soon after Twitter's decision to block President Trump's account. This made Poland's plans to prevent social media companies from blocking Polish accounts seem controversial.

Since 2018, a number of changes in the institutional framework dealing with disinformation have taken place. In 2019, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) established a unit responsible for identifying, preventing and responding to disinformation campaigns. In March 2019, the Polish MFA launched the Rapid Alert System, which coordinates exchange of information on disinformation activities with the EU and NATO allies.⁵²

In 2019, the Polish National Security Bureau recommended five steps aimed at countering disinformation to the state authorities: to establish a StratCom unit responsible for information issues, to actively fight with disinformation through permanent monitoring and response procedures, to increase public awareness and information security education activities, to enhance defence of cyberspace, and to promote Polish soft power as a proactive measure.⁵³

One of the recent public initiatives of the Polish special services in the sphere of the fight against disinformation is the regular publication of all the recent cases of information attacks on Poland. The list is published on the Twitter account of the press secretary to the Special Services Minister, Stanisław Żaryn.⁵⁴ This method of communication with the media and society is quite effective as it quickly spreads information about the disinformation attacks on Poland.

⁵⁰ Agata Lukaszewicz, "New Freedom of Speech Protection Law: Fake news will be fought by a "blind" lawsuit" [in Polish], *Rzeczpospolita*, 16 December 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ctxyl4>

⁵¹ "Minister Ziobro in search of the truth. We have analyzed the government's draft law on Freedom of Speech" [in Polish], *OKO.Press*, 1 February 2021, <https://oko.press/analizujemy-rzadowy-projekt-ustawy-o-wolnosci-slowa/>

⁵² Rafal Babraj, "Phenomenon of disinformation in the age of the digital revolution" [in Polish], *NASK*, 19 May 2019, https://cyberpolicy.nask.pl/dezinformacja-w-dobie-cyfrowej-rewolucji/#_ftn22

⁵³ Magdalena Wrzosek, "Phenomenon of disinformation in the age of digital revolution" [in Polish], *NASK*, 24 September 2019, https://cyberpolicy.nask.pl/dezinformacja-w-dobie-cyfrowej-rewolucji/#_ftn22

⁵⁴ <https://twitter.com/stzaryn>

In 2019, the Polish National Research Institute created the Safe Elections portal, designed to combat fake news and disinformation during the election campaign and the pandemic.⁵⁵

During the Covid-19 pandemic period, the Polish Press Agency and the GovTech Agency established the #FakeHunter project aimed at combatting fake news concerning Covid-19.⁵⁶

RADIATION “ATTACKS” ON POLAND

In April 2020, a number of social media accounts spread information about a dangerous increase in radiation level in Poland because of intense forest fires near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine. At the same time, online rumours about a nuclear incident at the Polish National Centre for Nuclear Research (NCNR) appeared. The Polish Atomic Agency and the NCNR quickly disproved these claims in special statements calling this information fake news.^{57,58}

In March 2021, the official web page of the National Atomic Energy presented the news about the serious increase in radiation level in northeast Poland. It turned out later that this message was fake, and that the webpage of the Atomic Agency had been hacked through a cyberattack. The Polish authorities immediately disproved this fake news.⁵⁹ These fake “radiation” attacks did not cause a panic among the Poles because of the critical perception of this news by a predominant majority of people and a quick reaction by state agencies.

⁵⁵ Safe elections [in Polish], <https://bezpiecznowybor.pl/>

⁵⁶ FakeHunter project, <https://fakehunter.pap.pl/en>

⁵⁷ “PAA’s announcement in connection with false information about the radiation situation in the country” [in Polish], National Atomic Energy Agency, 17 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/MMjX2K>

⁵⁸ “NCNR message: No technical problems, no background radiation anomalies” [in Polish], National Centre for Nuclear Research, 17 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/MMjXzM>

⁵⁹ “Beware of fake news about the alleged radiological hazard” [in Polish], National Atomic Energy Agency, 17 March 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/paa/uwaga-na-fake-news-o-rzekomym-zagrozeniu-radiologicznym>

Responses by media and civil society

Since the previous 2018 DRI report, the Polish media and NGOs have continued to develop their activities in the sphere of the exposure of disinformation, fact-checking and media literacy. On the one hand, there have been no breakthroughs in this area: the cooperation between civil society and the state remained limited and civil society capacities have not dramatically improved.

On the other hand, the NGOs continued to increase the scope of their work, establishing cooperation with traditional and social media, as well as state agencies. This increases the multiplication effect from NGOs activities in the respective areas. *“A big problem with the Polish NGOs involved in the fight against disinformation is that their activities are not of interest to the broad public – they are mostly focused on fact-checking, which is important to journalists and experts, but not necessarily to regular people,”* an interviewed expert said.⁶⁰

Another expert argued that the problem for some NGOs lies in targeting the same segments of the population: *“The Polish NGOs involved in the fight with disinformation need to stop “convincing the convinced” – they need to switch from activities aimed at narrow expert groups to wider social circles.”*⁶¹ The same expert spoke about negative aspects in combatting disinformation in Poland, *“Journalists and politicians regularly accuse their opponents of the “spread of the pro-Kremlin messages” without any reasons – this cliché plays the role of a “whip” used to discredit the opponent. Also, it is a common trait that the Kremlin disinformation activities are presented as “stupid, primitive and idiotic.” At the same time, more fundamental and destructive disinformation narratives remain unseen.”*

By 2020, Polish fact-checking organisation Demagog, inspired by a similar project in Czechia, verified over 4,000 statements by public figures and prepared over 300 reports debunking fake news.⁶² In May 2019, this organisation entered the International Fact-Checking Network. One of Demagog’s initiatives is the Fact-Checking Academy, which organised, between 2018 and 2021, over 150 media training sessions with the participation of 3,500 students and 250 schoolteachers.⁶³

⁶⁰ Interview with Igor Isayev.

⁶¹ Interview with an anonymous media expert, June 2021.

⁶² “Demagog Association – the first Polish fact-checking organisation” [in Polish], Polish Ministry of Education, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ctxwzW>

⁶³ <https://akademia.demagog.org.pl/>

Nowoczesna Polska Foundation⁶⁴ continues to develop its own online media literacy project, *Edukacjamedialna.edu.pl*. This portal offers a database of educational materials and training scenarios for students.⁶⁵

The *OKO.press* initiative is the well-known Polish initiative involved in investigative and debunking activities. In August 2018, it presented a report identifying 23 highly suspicious Polish websites involved in the promotion of the pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives.⁶⁶ In May 2021, *OKO.press* published a report on the Russian disinformation efforts against the AstraZeneca vaccine.⁶⁷

In 2019, the Panoptykon Foundation and the Reporters Foundation prepared a publication “Stop disinformation. A guide for journalists and editors.”⁶⁸ This guide helps Polish journalists to increase their knowledge and skills in the sphere of identification, verification and debunking of disinformation messages.

In October 2018, one of the largest Polish television networks, TVN Group, established its own fact-checking project, *Konkret24*. It publishes journalistic materials verifying the news, and internet users may also submit various examples of fake news for debunking.⁶⁹

The INFO OPS Polska Foundation is actively involved in disinformation monitoring and analytical activities on this issue. It regularly presents all the recent cases of disinformation activities against Poland in the Disinfo Digest.⁷⁰ Recently, this initiative published reports about the Russian disinformation activities aimed at Polish-Lithuanian relations⁷¹ and the disinformation during the pandemic period in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus⁷²

⁶⁴ <https://nowoczesnapolska.org.pl/>

⁶⁵ <https://edukacjamedialna.edu.pl/>

⁶⁶ Anna Mierzynska (2018), op cit.

⁶⁷ “Operation: ASTRAZENECA DOWN. How Russia fought for the European market for the Sputnik V vaccine” [in Polish], *OKO.Press*, 27 May 2021, <https://oko.press/operacja-astrazeneca-down-jak-rosja-walczyla-o-europejski-rynek-dla-swojej-szczepionki-sputnik-v/>

⁶⁸ “Stop disinformation. A guide for journalists and editors,” *Panoptykon*, 13 September 2019, <https://panoptykon.org/wiadomosc/stop-dezinformacji-przewodnik-dla-dziennikarzy-i-redakcji>

⁶⁹ <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/>

⁷⁰ https://twitter.com/Disinfo_Digest

⁷¹ “A short review of the infosphere-based information and psychological operations targeting relations between Poland and Lithuania,” *Infoops*, 12 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/MMjZYq>

⁷² “Russian use of the pandemic for disinformation in Belarus, Poland and Ukraine” [in Polish], *Infoops*, 21 March 2021, <https://infoops.pl/wykorzystanie-przez-rosje-pandemii-do-dezinformacji-na-obszarze-bialorusi-polski-oraz-ukrainy/>

Recommendations

The 2018 DRI report proposed ten recommendations to the Polish state authorities, civil society and media, aimed at increasing the efficiency of their anti-disinformation activities. All of them remain relevant as of 2021.

State institutions partially implemented two out of four recommendations: the key state services introduced anti-disinformation training for their functionaries and the state allocated support to the NGOs involved in media literacy projects. Two other recommendations were not implemented – the state did not create a platform for communication between experts, NGOs and state functionaries concerning information threats, and there is no breakthrough in the introduction of media literacy courses to the school curriculum.

The NGOs and media have been progressing towards the implementation of the 2018 DRI recommendations. There is a high level of awareness about the importance of cooperation between media and NGOs, media literacy projects have been in wider use, and a number of new initiatives connected to fact-checking, investigative journalism and media ethics have emerged.

The following recommendations are proposed to the Polish authorities and relevant state bodies:

- To establish effective legal mechanisms to fight disinformation and hate speech in online spaces, in particular to regulate activities of fake accounts and disinformation-spreading internet pages and social media accounts, as well as those which spread social hatred and defamation.
- To continue cooperation with the EU and social media companies regarding information security. The issue of information threats should be addressed on the macro-level with the active assistance of the EU and the largest social media companies, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.

- To multiply good practices of the specialised NGOs in the education sphere and public media. Media literacy needs to be entrenched in the educational system and receive larger coverage by public media, thereby strengthening the disinformation resilience of Polish society.
- To enhance the quality of democracy in Poland. The state authorities need to understand that the current problems with freedom of speech, political polarisation and the continuation of domestic conflicts create fertile ground for malign foreign-led disinformation activities. They will be more effectively counteracted by strengthened democracy and enhanced respect for democratic institutes, human rights and freedom of speech in Poland.

To Polish civil society and NGOs:

- To implement projects which are of interest to broad audiences. The NGOs should try to find ways to make their projects more interesting for the general public. The fact-checking projects are focused more on journalists and experts, being mostly unnoticed by society. It is possible that a more innovative and interactive approach to fact-checking is required.
- To strengthen the “weak spots” targeted by pro-Kremlin propaganda. The pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts are focused on a number of sensitive topics such as migration, refugees, Muslims, LGBT, Jews, etc. The NGO activities aimed at the development of tolerance and inclusiveness may increase public awareness and societal resilience to propaganda claims concerning these topics, especially if they are supported by the state, mainstream media and the education system.
- To intensify cooperation with social media companies. NGOs should establish more active cooperation with social media companies for more effective counteraction to (dis)information threats.

To the Polish journalistic community:

- To fight against the political polarisation of Polish society. Mainstream Polish media are partially responsible for the polarisation of Polish society. The media should stop using tools similar to pro-Kremlin propaganda. It is very difficult to address foreign-led disinformation if national media openly use manipulative tools aimed at stoking domestic political conflicts in Poland.

- To raise professional standards of small local media. Mainstream Polish media should more actively assist small, regional media organisations in increasing the quality of their work and journalistic standards, which will help prevent their marginalisation and occasional spread of disinformation.
- To increase public awareness about (dis)information threats. Mainstream media have a very broad reach, so they can effectively increase public awareness about disinformation threats and information security. For example, they could cover disinformation more actively and learn from the good practices of NGOs specialising in the fight against disinformation.

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STRATPOL

Slovakia

Abstract

Slovakia has had a roller-coaster experience since 2018 when journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée were killed. It has led to massive protests and ultimately to a reshuffle of the government. In 2019, during the presidential elections, the disinformation scene mobilised mainly in support of the unsuccessful candidate and former judge Stefan Harabin, accusing Zuzana Caputova, who later won the elections, of being paid by Israel, the USA, George Soros and the liberal Brussels elite. The 2020 parliamentary elections have galvanised the state's efforts against disinformation. The government of Igor Matovic declared its commitment to focus on disinformation in its legislative agenda and adopted new strategic documents relevant for countering hybrid threats, disinformation, and identifying Russia as a security challenge and China as a systemic rival of the EU. Together with the preparation of additional plans outlining the development of the institutional and legal frameworks needed to counter hybrid threats and disinformation, Slovakia slowly started to "catch up" in this field. However, especially since March 2021, the former prime minister and current Minister of Finance, Igor Matovic, has been constantly undermining these efforts with his actions, including the purchase of the Sputnik V vaccine. This damage has been further embedded by the fact that Slovakia's aforementioned strategic progress has not yet been fully translated into practice.

Many of the problems Slovakia has been facing were highlighted in the post-2018 period. An already low level of public trust in news and mainstream media has been further undermined by the anti-mainstream media rhetoric and disinformation spread by some of the state representatives and politicians. Despite the fact that the so-called alternative media scene is not particularly influential in the print, radio or television sector, the online space, and specifically social networks, have become a fertile ground for all kinds of disinformation and conspiracy theories. The Covid-19 pandemic has turned the attention of the conspiracy scene to the topic of medicine, with many hoaxes and disinformation about the alleged bad intentions of the various Western actors related to the spread of the virus and vaccination. One of the main beneficiaries of these narratives has been Russia as Sputnik V is considered to be the second most acceptable vaccine among the Slovak population, unlike in other countries of the region. China has also been able to exploit the pandemics to improve its image in the country thanks to health diplomacy. However, besides this PR victory, and unlike Russia, China has been struggling with the lack of Slovakian public interest.

Disinformation studies

The most important studies in the field of disinformation countermeasures have been, since 2018, published mainly by NGOs or civil society groups. In 2018, one of these NGOs, Globsec, prepared the study “Mapping of the Vulnerability of the Slovak Republic in the Area of Hybrid Threats,”¹ which ranks information operations and propaganda campaigns aimed at undermining public trust in state institutions, and at eroding the political and security environment; the most common instruments in the context of hybrid threats. Among the vulnerabilities of the Slovak Republic, the study lists, for instance, the absence of legal regulation of election campaigns and the insufficient attention paid to the involvement of foreign powers in certain types of threat, like disinformation, that endanger the security and stability of Slovakia.

The issue of hybrid threats was addressed by the Strategic Policy Institute and the Slovak Security Policy Institute, which, in cooperation with European Values Center for Security Policy, prepared a study entitled “Evaluation of the Slovak Republic’s Approach to Combating Hybrid Threats.”² The text discusses the issue of building resilience, internal processes, capacities and capabilities of the state administration, and the importance of the international balances of power when combating hybrid threats. It analyses the basic documents regulating the issue and identifies systemic weaknesses and strengths in the fight against hybrid threats. On this basis, a proposal for a strategic framework and institutional model is formulated that would optimise Slovakia’s approach to combating hybrid threats.

The study, “Globsec Trends 2020,”³ analyses the key trends in Central Europe, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. The analysis reveals a substantial spread of pro-Russian narratives, a low degree of public awareness of the threats posed by Russia and China, and an increasingly negative opinion of liberal democracy. Moreover, its results show a correlation between the degree of trust in state institutions and trust in Covid-19 vaccination. Another study

¹ “Mapping the vulnerability of the Slovak Republic in the field of hybrid threats” [in Slovak], *GLOBSEC*, October 2018, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Zranitelnost-SR-v-oblasti-hybridnych-hrozieb-web.pdf>

² Matej Kandrik, “Evaluation of the approach of the Slovak Republic to the fight against hybrid threats” [in Slovak], *STRATPOL*, 2020, <https://slovaksecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/zhodnotenie-SR-hybrid-FINAL1.pdf>

³ “Globsec Trends 2020,” *GLOBSEC*, December 2020, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf

focused on democracy and governance in ten selected EU states also confirms the trend of the decreasing degree of trust in state institutions. In Slovakia, the study has discovered an alarmingly high degree of belief in conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives (up to 56 per cent of the population believes in them).⁴

Globsec prepared, in cooperation with MEMO98, the study “Slovak Elections of 2020 in the Information Space,”⁵ which focuses on the issue of information manipulation as a threat to the integrity of elections in the context of the Slovak parliamentary elections of 2020. Globsec also published a separate study dealing with the topic of the influence of selected websites and actors operating on Facebook on the election campaign. One of the key findings is that content published by news sites (the mainstream media) attracted approximately 45 per cent of all interactions in this period.⁶

The monitoring of social media during the parliamentary elections of 2020, carried out by MEMO98, shows that in the period under examination, active political parties had been publishing approximately 300 Facebook posts per day.⁷ Marian Kotleba, the chairman of the far-right party People’s Party Our Slovakia (LSNS), published the majority of these posts. The chairman of SHO (Slovenske hnutie obrody), Robert Svec, ranked second in the number of posts, followed by SMER-SD politician Lubos Blaha, whose posts managed to gain the highest number of interactions. Milan Uhrík, who had been at that time an active member of LSNS, ranked fourth.

In December 2019, the platform *Infosecurity.sk* prepared an analysis of the virality and toxicity of these actors. According to the analysis, Lubos Blaha had been, at that time, the most toxic politician among the “mainstream” parties.⁸

⁴ “Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of democracy & governance in 10 EU countries,” *GLOBSEC*, June 2020, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-read-version.pdf>

⁵ “Slovak elections in the information space” [in Slovak], *GLOBSEC*, March 2020, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/slovenske-volby-2020-v-informacnom-priestore/>

⁶ “Facebook and website analysis in the context of Slovak parliamentary elections campaign,” *GLOBSEC*, February 2020, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Facebook-and-website-analysis-in-the-context-of-Slovak-parliamentary-elections-campaign.pdf>

⁷ “Social media monitoring. Parliamentary elections 2020,” *MEMO98*, January 2020, https://memo98.sk/uploads/content_galleries/source/memo/slovak-parliamentary-elections-2020/m98_interim-report_final-version.pdf

⁸ “Antisystem monitoring on Slovak Facebook – the most toxic is the MP of SMER,” *Infosecurity.sk*, October 2019, <https://infosecurity.sk/domace/monitoring-antisystemu-oktober-2019/>

He engaged mainly in promoting various conspiracy narratives, attacking the media and civil society, praising totalitarian regimes, and spreading anti-US narratives. Other political representatives identified as actively spreading anti-systemic narratives were Milan Uhrík and the chairman of the Slovenska Narodna Strana party, Andrej Danko.

Relationship with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

Slovak relations with Russia and China are mainly related to two aspects. First, its sovereignty and national interest, and second, its membership of the EU and NATO. Another important factor in the Slovak relations with both Russia and China is the asymmetry of power. The degree of dependence of Slovakia on external suppliers, especially in the area of primary energy sources, is one of the highest in the EU.

EU member states are the most important trading partners of Slovakia. The country is, however, almost entirely dependent on Russia in the area of energy sources. Up to 90 per cent of the primary energy sources are imported, be it natural gas or crude oil.⁹ The majority of these come to Slovakia from Russia. Thus, the energy area defines mutual trade relations.

According to statistics from 2018, the exports from Russia to Slovakia amount to USD 3.89 billion (46.2 per cent crude oil; 29.8 per cent natural gas).¹⁰ Slovakia has a contract with Gazprom effective until 2032, which in 2009, and between 2014 and 2015, was turned into a political weapon. Hence, it presents a hazard for energy and economic security of the Slovak Republic.

According to data from 2011,¹¹ 80.7 per cent of the population is Slovak, but 0.6 per cent corresponds to the Ruthenian minority, 0.1 per cent to the Ukrainian minority, and 1,997 people declared themselves of Russian nationality –

⁹ “Slovak dependence on Russia” [in Slovak], *Denník N*, 11 May 2017, <https://dennikn.sk/blog/761486/slovenska-zavislost-na-rusku/>

¹⁰ “What did Slovakia import from Russia in 2018?” *Atlas of Economic Complexity*, <https://bit.ly/3yZjz0D>

¹¹ The last census in Slovakia was conducted in 2021, but at the time of writing its results have not yet been published.

these are minorities that we could call Russian-speaking.¹² The ethnic composition of Slovakia is relatively homogeneous and does not present a vulnerability that could be exploited by Russian efforts. Important aspects are socio-economic indicators and the existence of anti-systemic political actors that serve as proxies for the spread of Russian influence.

Apart from the rampant disinformation scene, which is already quite willing to take over and amplify disinformation and harmful narratives from pro-Russian sources, a significant addition is the Russian embassy, especially in the sphere of social media. It is important to note that the embassy is active on Facebook, which is often considered beyond the scope of “standard” diplomatic activities, and suggests a focus on furthering Russian interests indirectly, through cultural, historical and political posts (regarding both Russian and Slovakian history).¹³ Recently, of course, attempts to positively portray the Sputnik V vaccine have been a priority. The Russian embassy organises and often informs audiences about cultural and educational activities, awards, or realisation of commemorative (or piety) events, exhibitions, and other similar events.

Pro-Russian sentiment is Slovakia’s greatest vulnerability. *“The opinion polls show us that pro-Russian sentiment is substantially high in our country. Above all, the narrative of Russia as our big brother is present. Most people in Slovakia have this sentiment,”* one of the interviewees said.¹⁴ The concept of Slavic unity underpins the victimhood narrative that portrays Russia as a mere victim of the West. According to the research carried out by Globsec, 42 per cent of respondents consider Russia to be a strategic partner, and 78 per cent of Slovaks perceive Russia as a fraternal nation. Moreover, 50 per cent of the population views the Western accusations against Russia as baseless and 52 per cent of respondents do not agree with the statement that Russia is aggressive against its neighbours and tries to weaken the EU and NATO. On the other hand, 29 per cent of Slovaks feel like part of the West, and only 11 per cent desire orientation towards the East.¹⁵

Slovakia recognises the increasing political influence of China and pays attention to its assertive approach in enforcing its interests. In 2019, President

¹² “Population of the Slovak Republic by nationality,” Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2011, <https://bit.ly/3CWctwe>

¹³ Embassy of Russia in Slovakia, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/ambasadarus>

¹⁴ Interview with Miroslava Sawiris, GLOBSEC researcher, 29 March 2021.

¹⁵ “Globsec Trends 2020,” op.cit.

Zuzana Caputova pointed out China's chequered human rights record at a meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, Wang Im. Both events were criticised by the government coalition, which in the light of benefits from economic relations with China, preferred a more conciliatory tone. However, the Chinese macroeconomic presence in Slovakia is still rather negligible. According to data from 2018, Slovak exports to China roughly amount to USD 3.57 billion (mostly the automotive industry). In contrast, imports from China total USD 2.59 billion.¹⁶ China prefers to deal with Slovakia within the parameters of the 17+1 initiative, but this platform has not proved effective in promoting Slovakia's interests vis-à-vis China.¹⁷ The most important framework for Slovakia is currently, thanks to the EU trade policy (or the European partners), the EU + China level.¹⁸

Chinese interests in Slovakia relate to Chinese nationalism and propaganda, but in terms of foreign direct investments, the Slovak Republic is almost negligible for Chinese investors. According to data from the National Bank of Slovakia, Chinese direct investment amounts to EUR 30.8 million.¹⁹ *“Overall, Chinese investment in Slovakia is marginal, but it exists. However, its real value is difficult to estimate,”* one interviewed expert said.²⁰

Several established Chinese investors operate in Slovakia, mainly in the automotive and electrical engineering industries. Local headquarters of brands like Huawei and Lenovo also play a key role. In 2020, the technology giant Huawei was to become one of the main partners of the GLOBSEC 2020 Bratislava Forum security conference. The key issue was the 2 per cent funding of the conference, due to which President Zuzana Caputova was planning to boycott the event. In the end, the partnership was called off.²¹

In relation to sensitive areas, critical infrastructure, and media space, cooperation with Chinese companies in the field of telecommunications (Huawei and

¹⁶ “What did Slovakia export to China in 2018?” *Atlas of Economic Complexity*, <https://bit.ly/3iYcvvU>

¹⁷ Another communication channel is the V4+China platform.

¹⁸ Matej Simalcik, “Slovakia & China: 10 Issues to Address,” *CEIAS*, April 2020, <https://ceias.eu/sk/slovensko-cina-desatoro/>

¹⁹ “Foreign direct investment,” Slovak National Bank, 2018, <https://www.nbs.sk/sk/statisticke-udaje/statistika-platobnej-bilancie/priame-zahranicne-investicie>

²⁰ Interview with Matej Simalcik, CEIAS executive director and researcher, 24 March 2021.

²¹ Pavol Strba, “After criticism, Slovak Globsec canceled its partnership with Huawei. However, China remains at the conference,” *Aktuality.sk*, October 2020, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/828191/globsec-2020-konferencia-huawei/>

ZTE) can be of interest. The Swan Mobile company has taken out a loan from the Bank of China to build a 4G network.²² Its sister company, Swan, is partly owned by the J&T Finance SE, of which the Chinese state-owned company CITIC (formerly CEFC) owns a 9.9 per cent share.²³ Swan also manages the government communications network Govnet and the Central Public Administration Portal. CITIC, an investment group with a non-transparent ownership structure, is the most notable Chinese investor in Slovakia.

Two critical moments can be identified when we could have witnessed an increased number of Chinese information operations. In 2019, China spread narratives about the protests in Hong Kong. Chinese press releases, however, did not get into the Slovak media space. The only exception was the *Trend* magazine, in which the Chinese side had bought a space for advertisement and published an article signed by then Chinese Ambassador in Slovakia, Lin Lin. The Chinese embassy had even sponsored this magazine's special issue the year before, with articles promoting a mainly positive image of China.²⁴ The second critical moment came in 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic. This time, however, *Trend* magazine refused to allow China to advertise on its pages. The Chinese diaspora in Slovakia is not numerous and Chinese information operations are aimed mostly at its own population (to facilitate the needs of Chinese nationalism).²⁵

“Compared to Russia, China has no interest in spreading disinformation in order to undermine democratic processes. Rather, the goal is to create a pro-Chinese setting and to achieve ‘self-censorship’ and suppression of information on sensitive topics,” an expert said.²⁶

In the context of the pandemic, Chinese information strategy has gradually shifted its focus to social media.²⁷ In early 2021, new localised accounts of the

²² Martina Raabová, “Swan freed its mobile network from the Chinese,” *SME.sk*, January 2018, <https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/20740222/swan-oslobodil-svoju-mobilnu-siet-od-cinanova.html>

²³ “The J&T Group received 11.5 billion crowns from the Chinese giant CITIC, which were owed by CEFC” [in Czech], *Ceska televize*, May 2018, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/ekonomika/2489695-spor-o-dluhy-cefc-konci-cinsky-citic-odkoupil-pohledavky-ceske-skupiny-jt>

²⁴ Matej Simalcik, Ivana Karaskova, Barbora Kelemen, “Chinese presence in Slovakia: between sugar and whip,” *AMO*, September 2020, <http://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Mapinfluence-policy-paper-SK.pdf>

²⁵ In 2019, for instance, the Chinese media informed the domestic public that an established Slovak media outlet agrees with the narrative spread by the worldwide Chinese campaign.

²⁶ Interview with Matej Simalcik.

²⁷ “COVID-19 and China’s changing propaganda tactics in Slovakia” [in Slovak], *CEIAS*, June 2020, <https://ceias.eu/sk/covid-19-and-chinas-changing-propaganda-tactics-in-slovakia-2/>

Chinese embassy were set up on Twitter. These accounts attempted to spread narratives in compliance with Chinese interests aimed at lessening the negative perception of China as the country of origin of the coronavirus.²⁸ Chinese efforts on social media in Slovak information space can be labelled as unsuccessful – the localisation of messages was missing, and their reach was quite limited.²⁹ Thus far, China has diverted its focus back to the marginal, primarily online media platforms, famous for spreading hoaxes and conspiracy theories.³⁰

*“Beijing’s activities are becoming more sophisticated and broader. They use an ever-widening host of tools. Within the framework of security awareness in Slovakia, Beijing does not figure as a perceived security risk.”*³¹ As added by Tomas Krissak, *“China’s information influence is likely to increase in the future.”*³²

Despite the activities of three Confucian Institutes and one Confucian Class, the general public lacks an interest in China. According to research carried out by Globsec, the majority of Slovaks believe that Slovakia is too small to attract Chinese interest. In 2019, merely 29 per cent of respondents perceived China as a security threat. In 2020, the number decreased further down to 23 per cent. This marks a shift in the perception of the Chinese partner that was also notable at the beginning of the pandemic.³³ According to one interviewee, *“There is not much awareness of China in Slovakia yet. Very few people perceive it as a geopolitical threat. The same goes for Russia.”*³⁴

The Covid-19 pandemic enabled both Russia and China to exploit the uncertainties of the information space to spread their influence, mainly via “mask”

²⁸ Moreover, the accounts spread disinformation narratives implicating the US as the source of the virus, or alternatively the EU or NATO structures being unable to cope with the pandemic.

²⁹ Nevertheless, these messages were appropriated and copied by disinformation websites and anti-systemic actors in the country. Lubos Blaha, member of the National Council for the SMER-SD party, is one example. He is a member of a group propagating friendship with China which in 2019 visited Beijing and Tibet. The visit was labeled as “study stay” and was financed by China.

³⁰ For example Hlavne Spravy or Nove Slovo. In 2020, after being refused by Trend, the interview with the Chinese ambassador was finally published in the weekly magazine Slovenske Narodne Noviny run by Matica Slovenska, controversial scientific and cultural institution focusing on building awareness of the Slovak nation. The interview with the Russian ambassador in Slovakia promoting Sputnik V was published in the same magazine in 2021.

³¹ Interview with Matej Simalcik.

³² Interview with Tomas Krissak, Gerulata Technologies Partnerships & Communities Manager, 24 March 2021.

³³ “Globsec Trends 2020,” op.cit.

³⁴ Interview with Miroslava Sawiris.

and “vaccine” diplomacy. On 19 March 2021, a plane carrying medical supplies (one million masks and one hundred thousand of Covid-19 tests) from China landed at the airport in Bratislava. Public opinion polls, carried out by the Focus agency in April 2020, have shown that up to 67 per cent of respondents believed that China helped Slovakia the most in its fight against the coronavirus. Despite the fact that Russia had not, by that point, provided any aid to Slovakia, as many as 25 per cent of Slovaks believed the contrary. The help of the EU was acknowledged by only 22 per cent of respondents.³⁵

Disinformation narratives about the EU (and NATO) being unable to aid its member states had an impact on public opinion in Slovakia. Similarly, the topic of vaccination has been ridden by conspiracy narratives. After the announcement of the end of development of Sputnik V vaccine, actors from the disinformation scene started to question the quality and effectiveness of Western vaccines. The purchase of two million doses of Sputnik V by Slovakia at the end of February marked a turning point, aptly termed as a “tool of hybrid war” by Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivan Korcok.³⁶

Changes in the national media landscape

In 2020, the World Press Freedom Index placed Slovakia 33rd out of 180 countries.³⁷ That is six places lower than in 2018 when Jan Kuciak, a member of an investigative team at *Aktuality.sk*, was murdered together with his fiancée.³⁸

Despite the change brought by the last parliamentary elections in 2020, verbal attacks by some political figures targeting journalists have been a persistent problem. Besides the members of the opposition, represented mainly by former

³⁵ Vladimír Snidl, “Facts vs. Impressions: How Russia, China and the European Union really help Slovakia” [in Slovak], *Denník N*, April 2020, <https://dennikn.sk/1830536/fakty-vs-dojmy-ako-slovensku-realne-pomahaju-rusko-cina-a-europska-unia/>

³⁶ “Sputnik V is a tool of hybrid war, foreign affairs minister says,” *The Slovak Spectator*, March 2021, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22608719/sputnik-v-is-a-tool-of-hybrid-war-for-foreign-affairs-minister-says.html>

³⁷ “Slovakia,” *Reporters Without Borders*, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/slovakia>

³⁸ The perpetrators have already been convicted but the investigation of the alleged mastermind behind the murder – a mafia-linked businessman Marián Kočner is still ongoing. It has been revealed that there were close links between Kočner and various business, political, and judicial figures, including former prosecutor-general and that Kočner even ordered surveillance of three dozen journalists with the help of data acquired from police databases.

prime minister Fico and his party SMER, it was also the new prime minister, Igor Matovic, who blamed Slovak journalists for hiding behind Jan Kuciak's legacy, accusing them of being hostile to his government.³⁹ This anti-mainstream media rhetoric is often reproduced on so-called alternative media platforms and websites.

"In Slovakia, many still do not understand the importance of the free press as a public democracy watchdog. Politicians are often verbally attacking journalists for doing their job properly, undermining their credibility and integrity. It is also not uncommon to see certain state representatives undermining facts and relativising conspiracies, with some comparing or equating the so-called alternative media with the mainstream media. This further undermines public trust in the mainstream media," an interviewed expert said.⁴⁰

These verbal attacks by the state representatives further diminish an already low level of public trust in news and media in general. According to the Digital News Report 2020, trust in news in Slovakia is among the lowest and *"dropped significantly from an already low level, reflecting the success of sustained critique of the media 'mainstream' by partisan brands and the difficulty of countering this critique without appearing censorial."* Compared to 33 per cent in 2018, the overall trust in news dropped to 28 per cent, meaning that Slovakia is at 32nd place out of 40 countries covered by the report.⁴¹

The most trusted brand in the media sector is the public service broadcaster RTVS (67 per cent) followed by TA3 (66 per cent). Even though no alternative or conspiracy media spreading pro-Kremlin or pro-Chinese disinformation is among the top 15 trusted brands, according to the Digital News Report 2020, a survey from 2019 showed that 57 per cent of teachers would recommend news webpage *Hlavné Spravy* and 53 per cent magazine *Zem a Vek* to their students as a source of trustworthy news.⁴² Both are spreading pro-Kremlin narratives.

³⁹ Igor Matovic, Facebook post, 21 February 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7/posts/10221515031517638>

⁴⁰ Interview with Robert Barca, AFP fact-checker, 22 March 2021.

⁴¹ "Slovakia," *Digital News Report*, 2018, <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf>

⁴² Jakub Goda, "Hlavné spravy and Zem a vek belong according to survey among the most trusted sources for teachers" [in Slovak], *Denník N – Blog*, 3 September 2019, <https://dennikn.sk/blog/1571691/hlavne-spravy-a-zem-a-vek-patria-podla-prieskumu-focusu-medzi-najdoveryhodnejšie-media-medzi-ucitelmi>

The data from the Media Pluralism Monitor 2020 shows that, since 2017, there has been a negative trend in almost every monitored area. In basic protection,⁴³ the risk has increased by 8 per cent points, in the area of social inclusiveness by 17 per cent points, and in market plurality⁴⁴ by a staggering 37 per cent points. The latter has been mainly caused by a lack of clarity in the media market and a lack of transparency regarding media ownership. The area of political independence,⁴⁵ which scored the highest risk in 2017, has been the only area showing a positive trend, with a 6 per cent points risk decrease.⁴⁶ However, before 2020, the political independence of RTVS, a Slovak public television and radio broadcaster, was seriously questioned due to repeated editorial interventions by its management, seemingly in favour of the then coalition parties SNS and SMER.⁴⁷

As of 2021, the majority of the television market in Slovakia is still controlled by four main media groups. However, in 2019, there was a significant ownership reshuffle, involving the acquisition of the Markíza Group, a media company with an approximate 23.8 per cent share of the television market in 2020.⁴⁸ Previously owned by Bermudian CME, it was acquired by PPF, a financial group controlled by Czech entrepreneur Petr Kellner in 2020. JOJ Group, owned by J&T Media Enterprises Group, is the second biggest and had a market share of 20 per cent in 2020, while TA3, owned by Grafobal Group, had 3,4 per cent. RTVS, a public broadcaster, had a 14.1 per cent share.⁴⁹ There have been no signs of pro-Kremlin or pro-Chinese narratives from any of the significant television broadcasters on any of their channels in the Slovak language.

⁴³ Regulatory framework, the status of journalists, reach of traditional media, etc.

⁴⁴ Transparency of media ownership, prevention of concentration of media ownership, competition enforcement, and state protection of media pluralism, etc.

⁴⁵ Political control over media, regulatory safeguards against political bias.

⁴⁶ Martin Zeljko Sampor, "Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania and Turkey in the years 2018–2019, Country report: Slovakia," *Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom*, 2020, http://diana-n.iue.it:8080/bitstream/handle/1814/67817/slovakia_results_mpm_2020_cmpf.pdf

⁴⁷ Ondrej Zacha, "Structural problems threaten the freedom and independence of the media in Slovakia" [in Slovak], *STRATPOL*, 2020, <https://stratpol.sk/strukturalni-problemy-ohrozuj-i-svobodu-a-nezavislost-medii-na-slovensku/>

⁴⁸ Marius Dragomir, "Media Influence Matrix: Slovakia, Government, Politics and Regulation," *CMDS*, 2020, <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1323/slovarieregulation2020.pdf>

⁴⁹ Filip Maxa, "TV Popularity in 2020: We Know Exact Results. Viewers Spent More Time in Front of Their Screens," *Zive.sk*, 2021, <https://zive.aktuality.sk/clanok/151113/sledovnost-tv-v-roku-2020-pozname-presne-vysledky-divaci-stravili-pri-obrazovkach-viac-casu/>

The radio sector in Slovakia has not experienced any significant changes since 2018. However, *Slobodny vysielac* has been overtaken as the most popular 'alternative' radio station by *InfoVojna*, an online radio founded by the former moderator from *Slobodny vysielac*. Their share of the market is, however, still marginal, with around 4 per cent and 2.5 per cent.⁵⁰ Both radio stations share a similar mix of typical disinformation, ranging from the anti-EU and anti-Western to Covid-19 related conspiracy theories.

A very similar situation can be perceived in print media. A few weekly and monthly magazines regularly spreading pro-Russian bias are present, but they are marginal. The Covid-19 pandemic has further undermined an already weak market of the print media through a significant drop in advertising revenue. This further increases pressure on the Slovak print media scene, as the rise in the number of their digital subscriptions cannot compensate for the losses in their traditional domain.⁵¹

According to the Digital News Report 2020, the internet is the most popular platform for news consumption.⁵² However, it is also the place where pro-Kremlin and pro-Chinese narratives are most visible. This is the case especially for social networks.

"The rising influence of the pro-Kremlin narratives has been visible, especially in the online environment, and specifically on Facebook. This trend has been further accelerated by the pandemic," an interviewed official said.⁵³ On the other hand, as Robert Barca pointed out: *"During the pandemic, the number of visitors to credible news sites, such as Dennik N or Aktuality, SME or Dennik N, has increased. It has turned out that at least a part of the population wants to be well informed and consume quality journalism."*⁵⁴

The analysis by Globsec and *Antipropaganda.sk* from 2020 and 2021, respectively, strongly suggest that alternative media and other manipulative pages

⁵⁰ "Viewership through the Applications" [in Slovak], *Radia.sk*, https://www.radia.sk/_subory/prieskumy_radia_sk/2019/10/poradie.pdf

⁵¹ Ivan Krasko, "Coronavirus is changing the Slovak media market" [in Czech], *Mediaguru.cz*, 26 April 2020, <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2020/04/koronavirus-meni-trh-slovenskych-medii/>

⁵² "Slovakia," *Digital News Report*, 2020, <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/slovakia-2020/>

⁵³ Interview with an anonymous government official, 22 March 2021.

⁵⁴ Interview with Robert Barca.

on Facebook, often spreading pro-Kremlin narratives, can gain a similar or even higher number of interactions on Facebook than traditional media.^{55,56} However, the overall reach of the alternative websites is still limited compared to the traditional media. The survey from 2019 shows that 13.4 per cent of the adult population regularly read alternative news websites, including *Hlavné Spravy*, *Zem a Vek*, *Slobodny vysielac* or *Infovojna*, compared to 27.6 per cent who read at least one of the selected traditional media (*SME*, *Aktuality.sk*, *Denník M*) regularly.⁵⁷ The most popular news website spreading pro-Kremlin, and occasionally pro-Chinese narratives, is *Hlavné Spravy*, with 3.89 million visits in February 2021, and a country rank of 49 and category rank (news and media) of 9.⁵⁸ *Aktuality.sk*, as the most popular mainstream news website, had almost 26 million visits.^{59,60}

However, as stated by an anonymous government official: *“By far the biggest problem in terms of the impact of disinformation and pro-Russian narratives are politicians, who, thanks to their authority, often have a greater influence than the so-called alternative media, disinformation portals and websites.”*⁶¹

This is confirmed by Robert Barca, who adds: *“By far the most influential figure spreading misinformation and propaganda in Slovakia is Ľuboš Blaha, followed by Milan Uhrík, both members of the opposition. Unfortunately, this is not solely the problem of the opposition as disinformation narratives have also been shared and spread, from time to time, by the members of at least three out of four coalition parties.”*⁶²

⁵⁵ “Globsec: Articles of disinformation websites are more attractive on Facebook” [in Slovak], *SME.sk*, 20 February 2020, <https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/22330500/globsec-clanky-dezinformacnych-webov-su-na-facebooku-atraktivnejšie.html>

⁵⁶ Matej Spisak, “Russia in the Slovak Disinformation Area (February 2021)” [in Slovak], *Antipropaganda.sk*, 2 March 2021, <https://antipropaganda.sk/rusko-v-slovenskom-dezinformacnom-priestore-februar-2021/>

⁵⁷ “Disinformation websites are regularly read by each seventh person” [in Slovak], *SME Blog*, 6 February 2021, <https://transparency.blog.sme.sk/c/526887/dezinformacne-weby-pravidelne-cita-kazdy-siedmy.html>

⁵⁸ “Hlavnespravysk,” *Similarweb.com*, March 2021, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/hlavnespravysk/#overview>

⁵⁹ “Hlavnydennik.sk,” *Similarweb.com*, March 2021, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/hlavnydennik.sk/>

⁶⁰ “Aktuality.sk,” *Similarweb.com*, March 2021, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/aktuality.sk/>

⁶¹ Interview with an anonymous government official.

⁶² Interview with Robert Barca.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

Regarding the institutional and legal framework, there have been signs of a positive trend regarding countering disinformation, especially since the February 2020 parliamentary elections. However, the core document Framework of the Slovak Republic on Countering Hybrid Threats was adopted by the government of the Slovak Republic as early as 11 July 2018. Besides the description of the security environment in relation to the hybrid threats and the proposed institutional framework to identify and counter these types of threats, the document specifically addresses key vulnerabilities of Slovakia in relation to external propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

According to the Framework, the main role in this domain is reserved for the two institutions: the Situational Centre (SITCEN), established at the Government Office of Slovakia as a national contact point for hybrid threats, and the National Security Analytical Centre (NBAC), established in the Slovak Information Service as a national hybrid threat cooperation centre.⁶³

After the February 2020 parliamentary elections, the new cabinet of Igor Matovic declared its commitment to focus on hybrid threats in their legislative agenda for 2020–2024.⁶⁴ Moreover, updated versions of the Security Strategy and the Defence Strategy were adopted and approved by the parliament in 2021. The fact that both documents had not been revised since 2005 was also caused by the fact that the Slovak National Party (SNS), as a member of the previous coalition government, rejected to approve the drafts in 2017 due to Russia being mentioned as a security challenge.

The adopted 2021 Security Strategy describes Russia as the primary security challenge in the transatlantic domain, while China is identified on one hand as a partner in confronting global challenges, but also as a competitor in the fields of economy and technology, and as a systemic rival of the EU.⁶⁵

⁶³ “Slovak Republic Hybrid Threats Vulnerability Study: Executive Summary,” *GLOBSEC*, 2018, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Slovak-Republic-Hybrid-Threats-Vulnerability-Study_Executive-Summary.pdf

⁶⁴ “Programme of the Slovak Government for 2020–2024,” *NRSR*, 2020, <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=477513>

⁶⁵ “Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic” [in Slovak], *MOSR*, 2021, <https://www.mosr.sk/bezpecnostna-strategia-sr/>

Both documents state that the EU and NATO represent the main geopolitical and societal anchors for Slovakia and mention hybrid threats as an emerging security challenge.⁶⁶ In the case of the Security Strategy, countering hybrid threats, including misinformation and propaganda is specifically identified as one of the strategic security priorities of the state.⁶⁷

As of 2021, the Action Plan For Coordination of Fight Against Hybrid Threats and Disinformation, another important interdepartmental initiative, is being prepared with an ambition to identify problems and provide solutions to hybrid threats. In addition, a Coordinated Mechanism of the Slovak Republic's Resilience to Information Operations has been submitted to the inter-departmental commenting procedure. When adopted, it is supposed to provide complex guidance for the various governmental and non-governmental institutions and to strengthen their capacity and resilience against information operations of various kinds.⁶⁸

A positive trend may be perceived on the institutional level too. A Department for Hybrid Threats and Resilience Strengthening was established in the structures of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs of Slovakia in 2020. In the same year, the Workplace for Hybrid Threats and Disinformation was also built in the structures of The National Security Authority, the central government body for Protection of Classified Information, Cryptographic Services, Trust Services, and Cyber Security.

The legal scope and capabilities needed to tackle hybrid threats were expanded or specified in the case of NBAC and SITCEN. In the near future, we can expect the formation of similar workplaces at the Ministry of Defence and within the intelligence services.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ "Defence Strategy of the Slovak Republic" [in Slovak], *MOSR*, 2021, https://www.mosr.sk/data/files/4286_obranna-strategia-sr-2021.pdf

⁶⁷ "Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic" [in Slovak], *MOSR*, 2021, <https://www.mosr.sk/bezpecnostna-strategia-sr/>

⁶⁸ "Coordination Mechanism for Resilience of the Slovak Republic towards Information Operations" [in Slovak], *Slov-lex.sk*, 2020 <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/-/SK/LP/2020/507>

⁶⁹ Matej Kandrik, "Assessment of the Approach of the Slovak Republic towards Fight against Hybrid Threats" [in Slovak], *STRATPOL*, 2020, <https://stratpol.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/publi-zhodnotenie-pr%C3%ADstupu.pdf>

POSITIVE EXAMPLES OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Communication by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and its representatives has probably been the most successful and consistent case of counter-measures from a long-term perspective. In 2019, the ministry promptly rejected the accusations made by the MP L. Blaha, who argued that the aim of the then-new Security Strategy was to suppress free speech and that it had been drafted by an American think-tank.⁷⁰ On its Facebook page, the ministry further explained why there are no reasonable alternatives to Slovakia's membership of NATO and the EU, debunking Blaha's hoaxes, half-truths, and open lies.⁷¹ On 1 March 2021, the day the Sputnik V vaccine was delivered to Slovakia, Foreign Affairs Minister Ivan Korcok published his reaction on Facebook, describing the press conference of prime minister Matovic at the airport as an inappropriate gesture, as no other vaccines had ever been welcomed in this manner.⁷² He later noted that Sputnik V is not only a vaccine, but a tool of hybrid war encouraging disinformation and pro-Kremlin narratives.

In addition, the website *Slovenskoproticovidu.sk*, established by the Ministry of Health, and the Facebook page *Hoaxy a podvody – Policia SR*, deserve honourable mentions. The website has been providing verified and accurate information about vaccination against Covid-19 and debunking the most popular vaccination myths and mistakes.⁷³ The latter is a specialised official Facebook page of the Slovak Police Force for the fight against hoaxes and fraud in the online space. With approximately 100,000 followers as of April 2021, this has become the most popular debunking initiative on Slovak Facebook.

⁷⁰ Lubos Blaha, Facebook post, 7 January 2019 <https://www.facebook.com/LBlaha/posts/2222354914669742>

⁷¹ Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Reaction to the Post of Deputy L. Blaha about Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic, Facebook Post, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/774128096479848/>

⁷² Ivan Korcok, Facebook Post, 1 March 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/ivan.korcok/posts/4493179824032587>

⁷³ Slovenskoproticovidu.sk, 2021, <https://www.slovenskoproticovidu.sk/en/>

On the international level, Slovakia became a member of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in 2019 and a member of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in 2020.

However, the progress described above is still limited and rather slow. Despite the bold program declaration of the Government of Slovakia regarding the fight against disinformation and the adoption of the new and complex Security and Defence Strategy and the preparation of other strategic documents, the speed of the overall approach and the implementation of these strategic documents into practice has been generally lagging.

An interviewed government official gave the following critical assessment: *“Resilience to external information campaigns has not improved since 2018, with the growing influence of pro-Russian narratives in the online space. The approved strategic documents and willingness of the current government to deal with disinformation have not yet been significantly translated into practice, with the exception of the creation of a limited number of new departments dealing with hybrid threats and disinformation.”*⁷⁴ Another official mostly shared this view saying, *“The impact of the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign in the country has been rising, partly as a result of the absence of effective government mechanisms and policies in the fight against hybrid threats.”*⁷⁵

SPUTNIK V PURCHASE BLUNDER

The most striking example of a case demonstrating poor practices on a state level is the purchase of the Sputnik V vaccine. On 1 March 2021, the then prime minister Igor Matovic personally welcomed the first 200,000 Sputnik V vaccines at an airport and revealed that he had struck a secret deal for 2 million doses of the Russian vaccine, without the approval of the government and prior knowledge of his coalition partners.⁷⁶ The Russian side immediately exploited the situation for its

⁷⁴ Interview with an anonymous government official.

⁷⁵ Interview with an anonymous employee of the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 17 March 2021.

⁷⁶ “Sputnik arrived in Slovakia. Korcok Criticised Matovic, SaS is Perplexed” [in Slovak], *Pravda.sk*, 2021, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/579627-slovaci-poletia-do-ruska-pre-vakcinu-sputnik-v/>

own propaganda goals and the bolstering of its international reputation by spreading disinformation about the alleged registration of its vaccine in yet another EU member state, despite the fact that the Sputnik vaccine was yet to be approved by SUKL (State Institute for Drug Control). Slovak Health Minister Marek Krajci then granted the jab an exception.

This had further deepened the coalition crisis and ultimately led to the overhaul of the government with Matovic becoming Minister of Finance in April 2021. In the meantime, he has been verbally attacking coalition parties, selected newspapers, and the representatives of SUKL for their criticism of the purchase of Sputnik V, arguing that according to the polls, 500,000 Slovaks are willing to be vaccinated only with the Russian vaccine. Matovic also argued that he had decided to buy Sputnik V because otherwise, Slovakia would not have enough vaccines. This is not true since at the same time when Matovic was purchasing the Russian vaccine, the government did not take the opportunity to procure more than two million approved vaccines from the EU.

Matovic's actions have directly promoted pro-Sputnik V Russian propaganda. By bypassing the official channels and acting independently without the approval of his coalition partners, he destabilised an already unstable political situation in the country, further undermining public trust in the state institutions through his verbal attacks on SUKL and his coalition partners. In addition, Matovic legitimised anti-EU and pro-Russian narratives in Slovakia, suggesting that everyone who is criticising Sputnik V does not care about human lives.

According to one interviewee, "The prime minister essentially legitimised the disinformation spectrum in the country, arguing during a press conference that, thanks to Sputnik V, 300,000 more people could be vaccinated in Slovakia. The whole purchase, but especially its implementation and presentation, were exactly what Moscow could have wished for in the context of its propaganda campaign."⁷⁷

In the legislative field, the Ministry of Justice has announced that it wants to deal with disinformation as part of the amendment to the Criminal Codes planned for the second half of 2021. Under the current legislation, disinformation is

⁷⁷ Interview with an anonymous employee of the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic.

punishable only to a limited extent, under the criminal offense of the spread of alarming news or the criminal offense of defamation.

The situation is even worse in regard to the online space. According to an interviewee, *“Besides the prohibition of inciting violence and hatred, and to a lesser extent the criminal offense of defamation of nation, race and belief, the internet is effectively unregulated. Even the criminal offense of the spread of alarming news is not really being enforced in the online space.”*⁷⁸

Among state institutions, the representatives of the Police Forces of the Slovak Republic are the most active in fighting disinformation and hoaxes that have the potential to endanger the safety, health, and property of Slovak citizens. Their efforts are carried out through both the official Facebook profile of the Police Forces⁷⁹ and the profile “Hoaxes and Fakes – Police Forces SR”⁸⁰ which focuses specifically on the fight against hoaxes and disinformation spreading in the online space.

The Slovak Health Ministry is also actively engaged in the fight against disinformation. Via its Facebook profile, it tries to debunk dangerous medical disinformation and hoaxes.⁸¹ During the pandemic, the Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivan Korcok, has also played a crucial role in fighting disinformation. He has constantly tried to strengthen the strategic communication of the state and to opt for an adequate response to hybrid threats that Slovakia has been facing for years.

Responses by media and civil society

Since 2018, the issue of disinformation has been gradually gaining more coverage in the mainstream media. Since 2020, this coverage has focused largely on disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic. As one interviewee noted, *“The pandemic has significantly changed the information environment, facilitating dissemination of disinformation beyond the usual audience in the context*

⁷⁸ Interview with Robert Barca.

⁷⁹ Police of the Slovak Republic, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/policiaslovakia>

⁸⁰ Hoaxes and Deceptions – Police of the Slovak Republic, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/hoaxPZ>

⁸¹ Ministry of Healthcare of the Slovak Republic, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/MinisterstvoZdravotnictvaSR>

of the rising dissatisfaction of the general population.”⁸² However, a complex strategy for fighting disinformation in the media is still missing. Instead, it is mostly individual journalists who deal with the issues related to disinformation in the Slovak information space and inform the public about the trends in the area of information and cognitive security. There is no coherent strategy for fighting disinformation in the media space. According to one expert, “Positive sides that exist and work in this sphere can be seen today as the result of some kind of deviation, not as a rule or a set norm.”⁸³

Nevertheless, the most important role in the fight against disinformation is still played by the civil society and initiatives created by its members, who have for a long time played the role that should be filled by the state, which remains absent in this area. On the expert public level, for instance, the think-tank Globsec operates, which focuses on research activities in the field of global security and security policy.⁸⁴ Media monitoring and analysis, with a focus on disinformation, is covered by the platform MEMO98.⁸⁵

With the pandemic, the focus of the disinformation media has shifted to medical disinformation and the development and distribution of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine and the Chinese Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines.

Medical disinformation is addressed, for instance, by the *Vaxinator* page, which was created in response to anti-vax sentiment evident in Slovak society. Hence, it focuses primarily on the topic of vaccine development, the spread of coronavirus, and the threats it poses.⁸⁶ However, the *Lovci sarlatanov*⁸⁷ initiative, which consists of doctors, paramedics and doctoral students from medical and pharmaceutical faculties, has been focusing on medical disinformation for several years. The aim is to educate people in an easy-to-understand way about the actual functioning of the human body, disease mechanisms, treatment mechanisms and the principles of medicine as a science, while pointing out the obvious nonsense and manipulations used by various “charlatans” and pseudo-experts to lure people to various suspicious and often very dangerous therapies. Their activity also proved successful during the Covid-19 pandemic.

⁸² Interview with an anonymous employee of the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic.

⁸³ Interview with Tomas Krissak.

⁸⁴ GLOBSEC, www.globsec.org

⁸⁵ MEMO98, www.memo98.sk

⁸⁶ Vaxinator, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Vaxinátor>

⁸⁷ Lovci sarlatanov, <https://www.lovcisarlatanov.sk>

Infosecurity.sk, a joint project of SSPI and Stratpol – Strategic Policy Institute, deals with a wide range of harmful disinformation, conspiracies and threats, largely related to, but not limited to, the Slovak information space.⁸⁸ The platform engages in digital investigation, analysis, and publishing activities, with the aim of detecting and drawing attention to security threats in cyberspace and on social networks. *Infosecurity.sk* currently also covers the activities of the Digital Infospace Security Initiative platform which focuses on promoting quality and transparent information through education, research, and advocacy.⁸⁹ The aim of this initiative is, among other things, to strengthen information resilience, and to build a means of defence against manipulation, disinformation, and fraudulent information. An important part of the efforts to build social resilience and strengthen democracy is the project *Sebavedomé Slovensko*, which responds to disinformation narratives spreading through the Slovak information space.⁹⁰

In regard to the 2018 report, the project *Konspiratori.sk* still serves as a publicly available database of websites that provide dubious, deceptive, fraudulent, conspiratorial, and propaganda content.⁹¹ It analyses the degree of relevance of the selected media and warns against placing an advertisement on websites that could damage the reputation of its advertiser. Among the general public, it is possible to find many more platforms and initiatives. Some of them specialise in fact-checking, such as the project *Demagog.sk*, which checks the factuality of statements of various politicians and politically active people, both in the media and online space.⁹²

The *Blbec.online* platform runs a database for assessing the virality of disinformation spread by Czech and Slovak Facebook groups.⁹³ The databases created by *Blbec.online* and *Konspiratori.sk* platforms are also used by the Facebook Messenger bot, known as checkbot, which functions as a detector of fake messages.⁹⁴

The Slovak Security Policy Institute platform oversees several projects aimed at countering disinformation. One of them is the *Antipropaganda.sk* project,

⁸⁸ Infosecurity.sk, www.infosecurity.sk

⁸⁹ Digital Infospace Security Initiative, disi.stratpol.sk

⁹⁰ Sebavedome Slovensko, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/sebavedomeslovensko>

⁹¹ Konspiratori, www.konspiratori.sk

⁹² Demagog, www.demagog.sk

⁹³ Blbec.online, blbec.online

⁹⁴ Checkbot, www.checkbot.sk

which deals with the instances of information war in the Slovak media space. The project draws attention to disinformation, lies and manipulations spread in the online space that run counter to the Slovak national interest.⁹⁵ Similarly, the *CyberSec.sk* project focuses on emerging security threats, it covers topics related to the area of national cybersecurity, and threats brought by new technologies within the Slovak information space.⁹⁶

All these platforms focus on drawing attention to and debunking disinformation and conspiracies about coronavirus, be they related to the spread of the disease, vaccination, the overall strategy for combating coronavirus by the state, and specific measures to prevent the spread of the disease.

⁹⁵ Antipropaganda.sk, www.antipropaganda.sk

⁹⁶ CyberSec.sk, www.cybersec.sk

Recommendations

Despite some progress in the field of relevant strategic documents, not much has been translated into practise regarding the overall approach of the state towards disinformation since 2018. As one government official noted, *“For a long time, there has been a lack of awareness about the security situation among the general population and even politicians, with hybrid threats, disinformation and propaganda not being perceived as critical topics requiring immediate attention.”*⁹⁷

However, besides the negative impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on Slovakia’s resilience against disinformation, the pandemic has also changed the perception of the importance of countering disinformation in a positive way. Disinformation ceased to be a question of politics and became a matter of health, relevant for everybody. This aspect has helped to raise awareness of the problem that disinformation poses for society and the state.

Despite this, the resilience of Slovakia to external disinformation campaigns and propaganda has not been improved in a significant way since 2018. Therefore, all of the recommendations suggested in the 2018 DRI Study are still relevant to a large extent. Besides that, it is suggested:

- To systematise approach and build capacities to fight against disinformation and hybrid threats.

According to the respondents, the sector of state administration, which should deal with the topic of disinformation, is lacking resources in terms of personnel, finance and technology. This requires the completion of personnel, technological and technical capacities that would make tools for monitoring disinformation activities,

⁹⁷ Interview with an anonymous government official.

responding to them and making strategic communication more accessible and effective.

Training of state representatives and state administration employees in matters of information and cognitive security, which are necessarily associated with the completion of sections or departments at the level of individual ministries. It is also possible to transfer staff (skilled individuals), or transfer know-how and experience from the sphere of civil society to the field of state administration, especially in matters of strategic communication.

The overall institutional structure dealing with hybrid threats and disinformation should be expanded and the emphasis should be also focused on the improvement of the communication and cooperation between its parts. It is desirable to create a central entity, such as deputy prime minister for security or national security advisor, responsible for managing the fight against disinformation and hybrid threats on the state level.

- To streamline strategic communication with the general public in order to increase the transparency of the functioning of the state administration and the common awareness of hybrid threats.

The state should focus on a systematic solution of strategic communication, which would move away from the model of 'skilled individuals.' An engaging and clear explanation of the issues before they become disinformation issues is key for combating disinformation and hybrid threats. *"It is essential to focus on proactive strategic communication, as debunking fake news, hoaxes and disinformation has only limited effect, due to cognitive biases impacting how people process and evaluate the news,"* one interviewee said.⁹⁸

The aim should be to inform the public about the activities of Russia and China. The public should also be aware of the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic, and aware of its clear orientation towards the Euro-Atlantic partnership. The public should also understand the factual and historical context related to current topics linked to the disinformation scene.

⁹⁸ Interview with an anonymous employee of the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic.

It is essential to increase the public trust in the state and its institutions. In order to achieve that, transparent and proactive strategic communication between state institutions and the public is essential. Ideally, each ministry should have their own strategic communications department, due to the highly specific nature of their agendas.

- To strengthen the legislative and operational framework to combat unwanted information and hybrid operations.

As far as the legislative area is concerned, the Slovak Republic should start to apply the existing legislation concerning hate speech more effectively. At the same time, however, it should speed up and streamline the preparation of a legislative and operational framework to combat hybrid threats and disinformation.

The hitherto missing legislation on the issues of undesirable information and hybrid operations means that Slovakia should focus on the issue of attributing and sanctioning similar operations at the level of the EU. It also opens up space for participation and use of (forthcoming) legislation regulating the digital space.

Effective implementation of the investment control system, which is currently under preparation, is required. Based on transparency, it will help to deal with the penetration of critical infrastructure and media space.

- To institutionalise the media space and streamline the cooperation between the state, civil society and the media.

In the media space, there is a lack of an institutionalised format that could cover and deal with the issue of disinformation. The lack of cooperation between civil society, the media and the state also proves to be a problem. The creation of ethical standards, that would be able to respond to issues like advertorials (paid content that appears to be editorial), is critical.

- To systematise and reform education reflecting the needs of the XXI century.

In education, Slovakia should focus on reform in line with the needs of the XXI century. The key is media and digital literacy

(or digital citizenship), which should be reflected at all levels of education – primary schools, secondary schools, universities, but also lifelong education of the older generation, which currently appears to be a vulnerable target group.

Increased interest and systematic education about Russia and China as geopolitical actors would also be desirable. E.g. if interested in studying China, this line currently remains almost completely in the hands of the Chinese regime thanks to the Confucian Institutes and classes (apart from the Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava and the Department of Sinology, which is more oriented outside the political issues of modern China). Increasing funding for independent research on China would also be a good step.

- To streamline the international involvement and activities in the fight against disinformation and hybrid threats.

Through its membership in Euro-Atlantic structures, Slovakia has access to platforms that offer the sharing of knowledge, experience and best practices. It is necessary to draw on the resources offered by international institutions that have been active in this field for a long time

Slovakia has the potential to become an established actor in the field of combating hybrid threats, but it must multiply its involvement in the initiatives and projects that are on offer.

Olga Yurkova

StopFake

Ukraine

Abstract

Since 2018, the government and civil society have done much to increase the resilience of Ukrainians to disinformation. The issue of the Kremlin's influence in Ukraine remains high on the political agenda.

Russia's economic influence is declining, while China's is growing. The information influences of these two countries are radically different: whereas Russia uses internal tensions to weaken society, China demonstrates the attractiveness of cooperation and acts implicitly.

Ukraine has become more resilient due to the strengthening of the Ukrainian language and the establishment and recognition of the local Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The work of new cultural institutions plays a significant role as a result of state decisions in 2017–2018. However, experts express reasonable concern about the current government's language and cultural policies. Citizens' trust in the mainstream media continues to decline, with national television channels losing the most respect. Against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, the popularity of social media and messaging apps has grown, offering a favourable environment for the spread of Kremlin disinformation.

A number of strategic documents have been adopted at the state and MFA levels. Whereas the legislative work on information and cybersecurity strategies has been quite active, media legislation has largely remained unchanged since 2005 and does not meet current challenges. There are some hopes for a new media law that should strengthen the regulation of all types of media, including the digital space.

Quite considerable changes have taken place in the institutional setup. In place of the Ministry of Information Policy, which was disbanded, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy (MCIP) was established. In March 2021, two new state agencies were created to counter disinformation: the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security within the MCIP and the Centre for Countering Disinformation, based under the aegis of the National Security and Defence Council.

Ukraine's civil society remains the driving force behind the fight against disinformation. Ukraine's two critical fact-checking organisations have begun to cooperate, and Facebook have amplified their fact-checking efforts, with a particular focus on the Covid-19 pandemic. However, society remains quite vulnerable to manipulation, as evidenced by sociological polling.

Disinformation studies

The key to understanding the resilience of Ukrainian citizens to disinformation are the annual sociological surveys of media consumption, commissioned by Detector Media¹ and USAID-Internews,² the results of which more or less mutually confirm the overall state of play.

Citizens have become less tolerant of media that hold questionable views. The vast majority do not care who owns the media. About two-thirds distrust media and social media reports. 60 per cent of Ukrainians take at least one step to distinguish between information and disinformation.³ The number of people who are aware of the existence of disinformation in the media is gradually growing, and reached 77 per cent in 2021. Among them, the majority (58 per cent) do not consider disinformation a serious problem, and 62 per cent of Ukrainians are confident in their ability to identify it. However, the purported confidence of respondents did not correspond with the results of the practical test: those who were able to distinguish falsehood decreased from 11 per cent in 2019 to 3 per cent in 2020.⁴

Compared to previous years, Ukrainian society has taken a clearer position on the conflict in Donbas and the Euromaidan revolution of 2013–2014, and the share of the undecided has decreased significantly. The share of citizens who positively assess the policy of limiting Russia's cultural influence has significantly increased. Whereas in 2018–2019 the majority of Ukrainians opposed the ban on “certain artists and Russian films in Ukraine,” in August 2020, 43 per cent called such a ban a mistake, while 36 per cent recognised the need for such a decision. There is clear regional demarcation. Researchers have suggested a link between self-identification as a native Russian speaker and political affiliation and preference for Kremlin narratives.⁵

¹ The surveys for 2018–2020 can be found at <https://detector.media/tag/2348/>

² The surveys for 2018–2020 can be found at <https://internews.in.ua/our-works/media-consumption-survey/>

³ “Trends and Changes in the Choices of Media and Consumption of Information of the Ukrainians After 2019 Elections and COVID-19 Outbreak,” *Detector media*, August 2020, <https://bit.ly/37vUbU9>

⁴ “USAID-Internews 2020 Media Consumption Survey,” *USAID-Internews*, August 2020, <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Media-Consumption-Survey-FULL-FIN-Eng-1.pdf>

⁵ “Popular perception of the Russian propaganda messages and social factors that shape it,” *Detector media*, October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3lNVCFM>

More than 80 per cent of respondents encountered disinformation about Covid-19 pandemic. About a third believed these stories to be true, and more than a third shared them with others. As Roman Shutov said in an interview as part of the research, “*Reducing sympathy for the Kremlin does not mean resistance to disinformation. It consists of the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, to weed out conspiracy theories, and to perceive information adequately.*”⁶

In 2021, Detector Media presented a study of the vulnerability of Ukrainians to disinformation, with a particular focus on southern and eastern Ukrainians. According to the findings, pro-Russian disinformation is centralised and pervasive. It is localised in the media, which occupy a relatively small market share, but their audience, and its trust in them, is growing. Propaganda puts pressure on the “pain points” of society. Along with the polarisation affecting the language issues, Euromaidan and the war in Donbas, there are more undecided people. The most popular were the narratives about the “external governance” of Ukraine and George Soros (58 per cent of respondents in the south and east of Ukraine).⁷

The monitoring of media coverage of election campaigns (presidential⁸ and parliamentary elections⁹ in 2019, and local ones¹⁰ in 2020) and Facebook activity of candidates and parties, carried out on a daily basis by the NGO coalition, provides useful insights on external information influences during

⁶ Interview with Roman Shutov, EaP Network Manager at the Open Information Partnership, 29 March 2021.

⁷ “On the other side of the screen. An analysis of media consumption and disinformation in the Ukraine’s information environment,” *Detector Media*, May 2021, https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/188115/On_the_other_side_DM_final_ENG_WEB.pdf

⁸ “Final report on findings of the independent monitoring of media coverage of the presidential election campaign in Ukraine,” *Human Rights Platform, Commission on Journalism Ethics, Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication, StopFake*, April 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/monitoring-report-presidential-campaign-eng/168096fa54>

⁹ “Final report on findings of the independent monitoring of media coverage of the presidential election campaign in Ukraine,” *Human Rights Platform, Commission on Journalism Ethics, Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication, StopFake*, July 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/monitoring-report-parliamentary-campaign-2019-eng/168096fa52>

¹⁰ “Final report of the independent monitoring of local election campaign coverage in Ukrainian online media and Facebook [in Ukrainian],” *Human Rights Platform, Commission on Journalism Ethics, Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication, StopFake, Women in Media*, October 2020, <https://rm.coe.int/final-report-independent-monitoring-online-media-and-fb-local-election/1680a0841d>

elections, as well as StopFake¹¹ and National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS)¹² studies. During the local elections, the coalition conducted such monitoring in the border regions, and Detector Media did it in the eastern and southern regions.¹³ The conclusions are similar: candidates from the “Opposition Platform – for Life” party and related media are the main disseminators of pro-Russian propaganda. At the regional level, the picture depended on whether it was appropriate for local politicians to mobilise voters with pro-Kremlin rhetoric.

Detector Media continued studying media literacy and measured the media literacy index in Ukraine.¹⁴ Its March 2021 study showed that 15 per cent of Ukrainians have a low level of media literacy, 33 per cent are at below average, 44 per cent are above average and 8 per cent is considered high, depending on gender, age and education. The most significant differences in media literacy competences are regarding income.

A number of studies have been conducted on various aspects of the Kremlin's disinformation system. In particular, the White Paper on Special Information Operations against Ukraine was published during 2014–2018, edited by the then Deputy Minister of Information Policy, Dmytro Zolotukhin. This is the concept of a systematic vision of Russian propaganda aimed at undermining Ukraine's integrity and discrediting it in the international arena. The publication shows which topics were most often used in information attacks on Ukraine, how they unfolded, and through which channels disinformation was spread.¹⁵

In May 2021, the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre presented a study entitled “The Evolution of Russian Narratives

¹¹ Anastasiia Grynko, Artem Laptiiev, “Fake narratives in times of presidential elections: how hybrid war reshapes the agenda of Ukrainian TV,” *StopFake*, February 2019, <https://bit.ly/3CzMzOQ>

¹² “Fakes as a tool for influencing elections” [in Ukrainian], *National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS)*, January 2020, <https://niss.gov.ua/en/node/3401>

¹³ Otar Dovzhenko, “Sauron and Saruman of pro-Russian propaganda. Results of the monitoring of disinformation narratives during 2020 local elections” [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3s3FMrX>

¹⁴ “Media literacy index of Ukrainians,” *Detector Media*, March 2021, <https://detector.media/community/article/186437/2021-03-29-media-literacy-index-of-ukrainians/>

¹⁵ Dmytro Zolotukhin (ed.), “White book of special information operations against Ukraine in 2014–2018” [in Ukrainian], Kyiv, February 2018, https://mip.gov.ua/files/pdf/white_book_2018_mip.pdf

about Ukraine and Their Export to the Ukrainian Media Space.” Moscow relies on local agents of influence, including national television channels. Due to the influence wielded by Russian oligarchs, the Ukrainian media market is vulnerable to disinformation. The Kremlin’s narratives resonate with various vulnerable groups because of effective rebranding, and the simultaneous distribution of such narratives through many different channels. In the eyes of the audience, this blurs Russia’s role in the spread of toxic narratives and undermines the perception that Russia’s actions pose a threat to Ukraine.¹⁶

At the end of 2018, *Texty* researched about a million annual texts on “clickbait” websites using machine algorithms. The study showed that the extensive ecosystem of such websites is a favourable environment for Russian propaganda in the Ukrainian media ecosphere.¹⁷

The report of Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies sheds light on the hybrid influences of Russia against Ukraine. It analyses three packages of hacked correspondence between Kremlin officials, most notably Vladislav Surkov, the “gray cardinal” of the Russian president, revealing Russia’s strategy and tactics of subversive activities in Ukraine, and its role in managing the politics and economy of puppet “republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This case demonstrates how different sections of society can become weak links: community activists, think tanks, NGOs, pseudo-journalists, etc.¹⁸

Regarding the Kremlin’s information war against Ukraine abroad, the “Battle of Narratives: The Kremlin’s Disinformation in the Vitaly Markiv’s Case in Italy” is noteworthy. Conducted by journalist Olga Tokariuk, it analyses the impact of the Kremlin’s narratives on the case of a Ukrainian National Guard man in an Italian court, who was detained on suspicion of complicity in the murder of an Italian photographer.¹⁹

¹⁶ “Evolution of Russian narratives about Ukraine and their export to Ukrainian media space,” *Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, May 2021, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x5y7qQjIFW0sCHwjzIoDU_5LL29WZZZd/view

¹⁷ “We’ve got bad news!,” *Texty.org.ua*, November 2018, <https://texty.org.ua/d/2018/mnews/eng/>

¹⁸ Alya Shandra and Robert Seely, “The Surkov Leaks. The Inner Workings of Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine,” *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, July 2019, https://rusieurope.eu/sites/default/files/201907_op_surkov_leaks_web_final.pdf

¹⁹ Olga Tokariuk, “Battle of narratives: Kremlin disinformation in the Vitaliy Markiv case in Italy,” *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, March 2021, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sGK2lLqN46MVMN6qFKvRvJ4buJP1Fu3b/view>

It is also worth noting the Graphika study “Exposing Secondary Infection,” which debunked a disinformation campaign that used fake accounts and forged documents to stoke conflict between Western countries. Ukraine was the most frequent target of the campaign. From 2014 to 2020, the campaign created over 2,500 pieces of content, in seven languages, on more than 300 platforms.²⁰

Relations with Russia and China: Potential vulnerabilities

According to the Military Security Strategy of 25 March 2021, Russia remains a military adversary of Ukraine, carrying out armed aggression against it, temporarily occupying the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, territories in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, systematically using methods that threaten Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.²¹ On 1 April 2019, Ukraine terminated the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership with Russia.

Russia remains the main supplier of energy resources (60 per cent of coal, 38 per cent of oil and more than 50 per cent of nuclear fuel) to Ukraine, allowing the Kremlin to “blackmail” Ukraine by limiting their supply. In addition, about 36 per cent of oil products were imported from Belarus in 2020, which were produced from Russian raw materials.

While trade with Russia is declining from year to year, Ukraine has successfully reoriented exports to markets in other countries. According to 2019 data, Russia is the third largest sales market, with a share of 6.5 per cent. It still attracts businesses with its capacious market, low prices, and well-established ties. According to NISS, even despite the Covid-19 pandemic, smuggling between Ukraine and Russia through the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine is on the rise.²²

²⁰ “Exposing Secondary Infektion,” *Graphika*, June 2020, <https://secondaryinfektion.org/>

²¹ Decree №121/2021 of the Ukraine’s president “On the decision of the Ukraine’s Security Council “On the strategy of Ukraine’s military security”” [in Ukrainian], Official website of Ukraine’s president, March 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1212021-37661>

²² “Transformation of foreign economic relations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation: 2010–2020,” *National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS)*, January 2021, https://niss.gov.ua/sites/default/files/2021-03/foreign-economic-relation-between-ukraine-and-rf-1_0.pdf

Russian investment is concentrated in critical sectors of the economy: energy, banking, metallurgy, telecommunications. In particular, at least two of the three largest Ukrainian mobile operators (Vodafone, Kyivstar and Lifecell) have links with Russia through their owners, making Ukraine strategically vulnerable in this sector.²³

Ukraine's vulnerabilities to Russian information influence are related to three aspects: historical ties and loyalty to Russia; the Russian-speaking population, and to a lesser extent, Russian minorities in Ukraine; religious proximity.

Southern and eastern Ukraine are the most vulnerable, particularly in the areas of mass culture and historical memory. The archetypal vulnerable citizen is a Russian-speaking, low-income citizen of Ukraine, over the age of 45, and from Donbas, Kharkiv or the Zaporizhzhia region. An additional factor is the active agitation of pro-Russian parties.

The position of the Ukrainian language has strengthened over the last couple of years. On 15 April 2019, the then president, Petro Poroshenko, signed a law that aimed to protect Ukrainian as the state language, which confirms its priority in more than 30 areas: public administration, media, education, science, culture, advertising, services etc.²⁴ The law does not regulate private communication. However, the Servant of the People party, with the support of media holdings, regularly introduces bills in parliament to postpone the introduction of certain provisions of the law, or to abolish or postpone fines for non-compliance with them during quarantine.²⁵

In the religious sphere there was a turning point: the local Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was granted the tomos of autocephaly (decree of ecclesial independence) by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Istanbul in 2019. As a condition for granting the tomos, the Church was united at the end of 2018, and included all existing Ukrainian Orthodox major jurisdictions: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kyiv Patriarchate, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, as well as a part of the Ukrainian Orthodox

²³ Dariia Mykhailyshyna, "Russian economic footprint in Ukraine," *Center for Economic Strategy*, 15 September 2020, <https://ces.org.ua/en/russian-economic-footprint-in-ukraine-2/>

²⁴ Ukraine's law "On security the functioning of Ukrainian language as the state language" [in Ukrainian], Official website of Ukrainian parliament, April 2019, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=2704-19#Text>

²⁵ "'People's servants' ask the Supreme Council to postpone provisions concerning the Ukrainian language on TV and movie-making sphere for the lockdown period" [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, May 2021, <https://bit.ly/37u7jJF>

Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). Although the UOC-MP continues to be one of Russia's most powerful channels of influence, it is rapidly losing ground. The OCU is the largest in Ukraine in terms of the number of believers (58 per cent of all who consider themselves Orthodox, or 42,4 per cent of all respondents), while 25.4, or 18.4 per cent of all respondents, belong to the UOC-MP.²⁶ The church as an institution has one of the highest levels of trust among Ukrainians: 64 per cent.²⁷ Pro-Russia media and politicians have been attacking the OCU, which they have opposed to the “single canonical church” of the UOC-MP, since the founding of the local Church.

In February 2021, 41 per cent of Ukrainians perceived Russia positively. Compared to 2017, this figure has increased slightly. Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) director general, Volodymyr Paniotto, suggests that it is a matter of attitude towards Russians, not Russia as a state.²⁸

According to the Ukrainian Prism's forecasts, Russia's main goals for Ukraine are going to remain unchanged – to return it to its sphere of influence through sabotage of the peace settlement in Donbas, shaking the domestic political situation, disinformation and propaganda campaigns, etc. Significant progress on the settlement is unlikely, as Moscow will hope to use the conflict to weaken Kyiv and bring to power Kremlin-loyal political forces.²⁹

Ukraine did not have high-level political contacts with China until December 2013, when former President Viktor Yanukovich visited China and signed a number of strategic partnership documents.³⁰ At the same time, in 2019, China became Ukraine's largest partner in both exports and imports, a position previously held by Russia. The basis of Ukrainian exports to China are agricultural

²⁶ “Religious self-identification of the population and attitude towards the main Churches of Ukraine: June 2021” [in Ukrainian], *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS)*, July 2020, <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1052>

²⁷ “Assessment of the situation in the country, trust in societal institutions and politicians, electoral orientations of citizens” [in Ukrainian], *Razumkov Centre*, March 2021, https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2020_religiya.pdf

²⁸ “Attitudes of Ukraine's population towards Russia and Russia's population towards Ukraine” [in Ukrainian], *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS)*, February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3fPwXNp>

²⁹ “Russian Federation policy towards Ukraine: trends and scenarios 2021,” *Ukrainian Prism*, January 2021, http://prismua.org/trends_russia/

³⁰ “Treaties and legal foundation of relations between Ukraine and China” [in Ukrainian], *Ukraine's embassy in the CPR and Mongolia*, May 2021, <https://china.mfa.gov.ua/spivrobotnictvo/184-dogovirno-pravova-baza-mizh-ukrajinoju-ta-kitajem>

products and ores, while imports largely entail machinery, equipment and transport, plastics and polymers.³¹

China's strategic goals in the world are to strengthen its global economic influence, including access to new markets and access to technology, and in the long run, to replace the US leadership a number of areas. *“China has gained access to the Ukrainian market, monopolises and controls the IT industry. About 80–90 per cent of information and telecommunication equipment of Ukrainian mobile operators is manufactured by Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE, which service and replace it. As a result of long cooperation in the military sphere, China has also gained access to the vast majority of Ukrainian technologies which are of interest to the Chinese defence industry. Exceptions include some of the aircraft engine technologies that China has so far mastered only partially,”* one of the interviewed experts said.³²

The issue of Chinese information influence and resilience to it in Ukraine remains unexplored. According to experts, China's influence in Ukraine manifests itself in historical, cultural, and economic areas. The main channels of information influence are:

- The Chinese Embassy in Ukraine, which promotes official Chinese information focusing on economic issues, and calls for cooperation and openness.
- Ukrainian organisations supported or funded by China. In particular, this applies to the Ukrainian Association of Sinologists, which conducts research and actively cooperates with the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. It publishes a quarterly “Ukraine-China” magazine, which is sent to the national and local authorities of Ukraine, and is funded by the Chinese Embassy.³³ According to Yurii Poita, *“In analytical materials, this magazine promotes official Chinese propaganda narratives. It is an instrument of soft influence on the state*

³¹ “Transformation of foreign economic relations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation: 2010–2020,” *National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS)*, January 2021, https://niss.gov.ua/sites/default/files/2021-03/foreign-economic-relation-between-ukraine-and-rf-1_0.pdf

³² Interview with Yurii Poita, Head of the Asia-Pacific Section at the Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, expert of the New Geopolitics Research Network, 24 March 2021.

³³ “Ukraine-China” journal [in Ukrainian], <https://sinologist.com.ua/category/publication/journal/>

authorities of Ukraine. I was a member of the association's board, but in 2020 was expelled for expressing the view that Ukraine's relations with China should be based on the national interests of our state, and take into account both the benefits and risks of cooperation."³⁴

- Pro-Chinese experts and researchers from research institutions, including those who prepare analysis documents for the government. As Yurii Poita noted, "*Scientific publications currently have a de facto monopoly on information that is very complimentary to China. The issue of the risks and challenges posed to our country by China is largely ignored by the scientific community, including due to the activities of the pro-Chinese lobby in the scientific sphere.*"³⁵
- Russian-language Chinese media *Xinhua*, *Renmin Zhibao*, complimentary articles in the Ukrainian media that work with China, such as 2000 newspaper³⁶ and 112 Ukraine television channel.
- Six Confucius Institutes and two Chinese classrooms in Ukraine,³⁷ whose efforts are aimed at building a positive image of China.
- In addition, there are likely to be non-public channels of influence on the Ukrainian leadership, for example through lobbies in Ukrainian agricultural and mining companies that are interested in exporting their products to China.

MOTOR SICH CASE AND CHINESE INFLUENCE OF CHINA IN UKRAINE

Motor Sich, being one of the world leaders in the production of aircraft engines for civil and military aviation, is of strategic importance for Ukraine. In 2016, 56 per cent of the company's shares were sold to

³⁴ Interview with Yurii Poita.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ "The key driver of further China's development and progress" [in Russian], 2000.ua, 28 January 2021, <https://bit.ly/3f0EJHn>

³⁷ Stefan Wolf, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for the OSCE," *OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions*, March 2021, p.20, https://osce-network.net/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/China-BRI-Report-2021-fin.pdf

investors affiliated with China's Beijing Skyrizon Aviation. In 2017, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) opened a criminal case under the articles "sabotage" and "preparation for crime," referring to possible transfer of technologies and weakening of Ukraine's defence capabilities. The Ukraine's court seized the Motor Sich shares. In 2019, the US publicly opposed the sale, and in January 2021, the US Department of Commerce imposed sanctions on Skyrizon, calling it a state-owned company. Two weeks later, president Zelensky signed a decree imposing sanctions on Skyrizon's key shareholder, Wang Jing. On 1 February 2021, the Chinese authorities responded with a critical statement. Notwithstanding this, on 20 March 2021, a court seized Motor Sich shares and property and, days later, the company was nationalised.

An interviewed expert believes that Chinese intelligence services were behind Skyrizon. *"When US National Security Adviser John Bolton visited Ukraine, presumably to disrupt the deal, former Chinese Ambassador, Du Wei, stated that the US has no right to "brazenly interfere in Ukraine-China cooperation in the military sphere," and that China is ready to help Ukraine resolving the conflict in the east of the country. Such a reaction confirms Skyrizon's affiliation with the Chinese government,"* the expert said, adding that experts loyal to China, as well as pro-Russian actors, echoed China's position.³⁸

Wang Jing, according to the expert, created and funded several organisations in Ukraine, which actively worked during 2015–2019. These are the Ukrainian Silk Road Association "Silk Link,"³⁹ which positioned itself as a "B2B2G platform for business and political cooperation between Ukraine, China and European countries," the "Tianxia Link" Center for Contemporary China,⁴⁰ which aimed at deepening relations between Ukraine and China, the Ukrainian House in Beijing, and Xinwei Ukraine.

The websites of mentioned organisations have not been updated since 2019, and they have not shown real results in deepening economic ties. This indicates that officially stated goals might be a cover up for Wang Jing's activities to establish control over Motor Sich.⁴¹

³⁸ Interview with Yurii Poita.

³⁹ Sink Link website, <http://silklink.org/en/news/>

⁴⁰ Center for Contemporary China "Tianxia Link," <http://www.tianxia.link/en/>

⁴¹ Interview with Yurii Poita.

The official narratives of the Chinese side, represented by the embassy, are mostly neutral; they emphasise the attractiveness of cooperation with China and the need to restart contacts at the highest political level. At the same time, Ukrainian experts loyal to China tend to promote the following narratives: that Ukraine needs to build a policy independent of the US, or one balanced between the US and China, that Ukraine should avoid public criticism of China for its human rights violations in China, and that if China has closer economic relations with Ukraine, than Russia would not dare to launch an armed aggression, so Kyiv should deepen relations with Beijing. These are narratives which are unfavourable to Ukraine, as they can be aimed at changing or weakening Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic and European course and cooperating with strategic partners, and also require changes in its values, including respect for international law, protection of human rights, etc.

No sociological poll tracks Ukraine's resistance to Chinese influences. According to expert estimates, at the level of highest political leadership, Ukraine is relatively resilient, as there is an understanding of both the prospects and risks of deepening cooperation with China. In view of this, the government is currently cautious about developing relations between the two countries. The Strategy of Ukraine's Foreign Policy, adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers and submitted to the president for ratification, states that in accordance with international agreements concluded since 1991, Ukraine will develop a strategic partnership with China. Experts warn that such a partnership would be incompatible with a strategic partnership with the US and stress the need to make a choice.⁴²

At the same time, according to Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, "China is neither an enemy nor a friend, but simply a partner," which could mean the Ukrainian MFA's efforts to develop trade and investment relations, leaving closed those that contradict Ukraine's EU and NATO course. The Ukrainian leadership has formed the view that China is an important trading partner but can hardly be truly strategic. This vision is, to some extent, implemented in government programs and concepts.

Despite Ukraine's decisions hampering China's strategy to gain access to military technology and increase Ukraine's technological dependence on

⁴² Dmytro Shulga, "Turn to China? Questions about Ukraine's foreign policy strategy" [in Ukrainian], *Evropeiska Pravda*, July 2021, <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/experts/2021/07/2/7125038/>

China, as well as Kyiv's attempts to join the signing of the UN letter condemning human rights violations in Xinjiang, China officially continues to declare strategic partnership relations and readiness for their further development. This may indicate that Beijing is not satisfied with Ukraine's actions, but is trying to increase its influence by deepening its dependence on the Chinese market, investment, vaccine supplies, and so on. It can be concluded that Kyiv is trying to develop a Euro-Atlantic and European integration course, without damaging relations with China, while China is trying to create additional levers to influence Ukraine.

As the interviewed expert explained, *“There is an understanding of the “red lines” and possible risks, which include preventing Huawei from building 5G networks in Ukraine, creating a system for screening foreign investment for threats to national security, the need to limit military-technical cooperation, preventing Chinese contractors from accessing critical infrastructure, government communications, and more. However, resilience is relative, because without the support of Western partners, I think the Ukrainian leadership would, in one way or another, look for a Chinese alternative. Ukraine’s economy needs investments, markets and technology. It is exactly what China is able to propose.”*⁴³

The resilience of middle-level state bodies is weaker as there is no consensus between them on Ukraine's relations with China. Despite a number of bilateral strategic partnership agreements, China is not on the list of strategic partners in the National Security Strategy of Ukraine, and this and other documents refer only to economic cooperation. Hence, there is a need to audit the prospects of Ukraine's relations with China and approve it at the conceptual level.⁴⁴

Some assumptions about resilience at the societal level can be drawn from the KIIS survey on the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic. A very low percentage of respondents believed the Chinese disinformation narrative that the virus is a US biological weapon and was deliberately spread by the US.⁴⁵ A Gallup International Association poll at the end of 2020, which covered 45 countries,

⁴³ Interview with Yurii Poita.

⁴⁴ Decree №392/2020 of the Ukraine's president “On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council “On the National Security Strategy of Ukraine”” [in Ukrainian], Official website of Ukraine's president, September 14, 2020, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3922020-35037>

⁴⁵ “Opinions and views of the population of Ukraine on the origin of coronavirus and its spread in the world: May-June 2020” [in Ukrainian], *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS)*, June 2020, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=952&page=1>

shows that while the world sees China as a mostly destabilising force, Ukrainians see the opposite. 35 per cent consider China a stabilising force, with 29 per cent disagree and the remaining 36 per cent of are undecided.⁴⁶

Since 2019, criticism of China's policy among journalists and experts has intensified. However, experts still assess it as insufficient.

According to the interviewed expert, *"I do not see broad expert discussions on Chinese hybrid influences. The main threat is ignoring them. We may find ourselves in a situation where China has increased its influence, overlooked by society and the state. This is a very threatening situation."*⁴⁷

On 8 April 2021, China joined in spreading disinformation about the alleged existence of US secret laboratories in Ukraine. Although there are no foreign laboratories in Ukraine, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Zhao Lijiang, said at a briefing that there were 16 such labs in which biological weapons could be developed.⁴⁸ This may be a sign of attempts to transform China's information influence into more aggressive and destructive rhetoric, which could damage the international image of Ukraine. False news about secret US biolabs in post-Soviet countries are being actively spread by Russia,⁴⁹ and a statement by a Chinese FM spokesman may indicate coordination of China's information policy with Russia, one of the interviewed experts says.⁵⁰

Changes in media landscape

In 2021, Freedom House classified Ukraine as a "partly free," noting the pluralism of opinions, open criticism of the government and investigation of powerful figures. This estimate has not changed since 2018, fluctuating only

⁴⁶ "Global states no longer guarantee a safer world" [in Ukrainian], *Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives foundation*, March 2021, <https://dif.org.ua/article/globalni-derzhavi-vzhe-ne-garantuyut-bezpechnishiy-svit>

⁴⁷ Interview with Oleksandra Tsekhanovska, head of the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 9 March 2021.

⁴⁸ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on 8 April 2021, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Malaysia, 8 April 2021, <http://my.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1867692.htm>

⁴⁹ "The secret labs conspiracy: a converging narrative," *EU vs Disinfo*, July 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-secret-labs-conspiracy-a-converging-narrative/>

⁵⁰ Interview with Yurii Poita.

slightly. However, many media outlets are still owned and controlled by business tycoons, who use them as a tool to advance their own agendas. The president sometimes refuses to take journalists' questions, and his staff periodically denies them access to the premises they are permitted to enter.⁵¹

Freedom on the internet, according to the Freedom House report for 2020, improved by reaching 61 points compared to 55 points in 2018. The situation in the country has changed insignificantly, but changes in methodology have led to higher assessment (occupied Eastern Donbas was excluded from the analysis).⁵²

In the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index 2021, Ukraine has climbed four positions since 2018 and now is ranked 97th among 180 countries. At the same time, the overall score has worsened by 1.8 points since 2018 and now stands at 32.96 out of 100, with 0 being the best possible score and 100 the worst. Indicated problems included restrictions on access to information, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, news manipulation, violations of the confidentiality of sources, cyber-attacks, "excesses in the fight against fake news," and the fact that murders of investigative journalists Pavel Sheremet, Georgi Gongadze and Vadym Komarov have still not been solved.

The assessment is influenced by the negative consequences of the "information war with Russia," namely: bans on Russian media and social media, cyber-harassment and treason trials.⁵³ However, interviewed experts assess the blocking of Russian social networks as a necessary step: *"It was important to break the trend when schoolchildren en masse created accounts on the Vkontakte social media, which is accessed by Russian intelligence services. Now, although it can be accessed via VPN, it is no longer the main social media in Ukraine, which shows the effectiveness of such measures."*⁵⁴

The ban was extended for three years in 2020. In May 2021, Ukraine also extended for three years sanctions against 138 legal entities, including Russian television channels and IT companies.

⁵¹ "Freedom In The World 2021," *Freedom House*, May 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/freedom-world/2021>

⁵² "Freedom On The Net 2020," *Freedom House*, October 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/freedom-net/2020>

⁵³ "2021 World Press Freedom Index," *Reporters Without Borders*, April 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

⁵⁴ Interview with Taras Shevchenko, Deputy Minister of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, 29 March 2021.

The main change in the media landscape was the imposition of sanctions by the National Security and Defence Council in February 2021 on *NewsOne*, *ZIK* and *112*, the so-called Medvedchuk channels, which are officially owned by MP Taras Kozak.⁵⁵ Until then, they were key platforms for the spread of anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives, and showed growing popularity and trust. They were also banned on YouTube after the SBU appealed to the platform's management. Their teams bought the "First Independent" satellite channel, which was soon shut down and now airs on YouTube.

This did not reduce the amount of disinformation, but on the contrary, simply removed legal restrictions and the degree of manipulation increased significantly. But the coverage has decreased tens or hundreds of times.⁵⁶ One poll shows that 49 per cent of Ukrainians supported the sanctions, while 41 per cent did not.⁵⁷

Most NGOs, particularly those specialising in countering disinformation, supported the sanctions, albeit with some caution.⁵⁸ As one of the interviewed experts noted, *"The state reacted, and it's good. The question is to what extent will the state have enough resources, and attention in particular, to constantly run with a fly swatter and monitor every such step? These are temporary solutions."*⁵⁹

After that, *Nash* ("Our") television channel became almost the main source of pro-Russian narratives on television. Its popularity has tripled, and it had

⁵⁵ Decree №43/2021 of the Ukraine's president "On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council "On the application of personal special economic and other restrictive measures (sanctions)" [in Ukrainian], Official website of Ukraine's president, February 2021, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/432021-36441?fbclid=IwAR1oRmq-Ug4T9RnUiuR0WQo4588UYYSU_1yH03BndOC2qUWck6qaYbqwLE

⁵⁶ Zoya Krasovska, Oksana Ilyuk, Yaroslav Zubchenko, "Anti-Western Rhetoric in Information War. Who is Turning Ukrainians against the West?" *Detector Media*, May 2021, <https://detector.media/in-english/article/188345/2021-05-24-anti-western-rhetoric-in-information-war-who-is-turning-ukrainians-against-the-west/>

⁵⁷ "Poll: 49 per cent of Ukrainians support sanctions against Medvedchuk's channels, 41 per cent are against" [in Ukrainian], *Radio Svoboda*, February 2021, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-sanktsii-telekanaly-opytuvannia/31095637.html>

⁵⁸ "Joint statement of Ukrainian NGOs countering disinformation in regard to sanctions imposed on Taras Kozak and legal entities linked to him," *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, February 2021, <https://uacrisis.org/en/joint-statement-of-ukrainian-ngos-countering-disinformation-in-regard-to-sanctions-imposed-on-taras-kozak-and-legal-entities-linked-to-him>

⁵⁹ Interview with Oleksandra Tsekhanovska.

become the second most popular news channel in Ukraine by March 2021.⁶⁰ It is owned by Yevheniy Murayev, a pro-Russian leader of the Nashi (“Ours”) party, a former owner of the *NewsOne* channel, and chairman of the political council of the “For Life” party before it merged with Medvedchuk’s NGO to form the “Opposition Platform – for Life.”

The *Inter* television channel, which has been systematically spreading Russian propaganda narratives since 2014, saw a sharp decline in the number of disinformation claims in 2020, although they did not disappear completely, in particular with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁶¹

The trend of declining trust in the mainstream media, after a slight increase in 2018, returned in the following years. The pandemic affected the growth of demand for information, and the structure of its consumption. Central television channels remain a source of information for 75 per cent of respondents, but second place went to social media (24 per cent). In 2020, national television channels lost the most trust due to unreliable and biased news.⁶² Instead, trust in regional websites and radio has grown.

Media consumption was affected by the decision of all major broadcasters to encode their satellite signal to develop the pay-TV market in February 2020. Thus, Ukraine entered the Covid-19 pandemic with 2 million households being unable to access the most popular news channels, which were replaced by news television channels (including “Medvedchuk’s channels”) and Russian broadcasters.

One example of the effort to counter the increasing influence of oligarchs over the media was the creation of a public broadcaster in 2017. For four years, the company had underfunding. Only in 2021 did this situation changed.

⁶⁰ Natalia Dankova, “TV ratings detector: STB is already №2, and *Nash* is almost a leader among information channels” [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, March 2021, <https://detector.media/rinok/article/186146/2021-03-20-detektor-telereytingiv-stb-vzhe-2-a-nash-mayzhe-lider-sered-informatsiynykh-kanaliv/>

⁶¹ Petro Burkovsky, “For how long did *Inter* jump out of the needle of the “Russian world”? Review of the penetration of Russian propaganda into the Ukrainian media space in January 2021” [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, February 2021, https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/185332/2021-02-28-chy-nadovgo-inter-zis-kochyiv-iz-golky-russkogo-mira-oglyad-pronyknennya-rosiyskoi-propagandy-v-ukrain-skyy-mediaprostir-u-sichni-2021-roku/

⁶² “USAID-Internews 2020 Media Consumption Survey,” *USAID-Internews*, August 2020, <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Media-Consumption-Survey-FULL-FIN-Eng-1.pdf>

According to one of the interviewed experts, “*The public broadcaster has managed to stay within the framework of quality journalism. This year it needs to show growth in market share and product quality, especially for mass audiences. This is a period that demands responsibility. This must be understood both by the authorities, which should not put pressure on the channel, by those who develop it, and by civil society. It is also the duty of government officials to start appearing on the public broadcaster, rather than avoiding it due to low ratings, and instead appearing on Medvedchuk’s channels.*”⁶³

On 13 January 2020, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy forced foreign broadcaster *UATV* to stop producing programs in five languages, blaming this on their low popularity. Instead, the MCIP has created two new Russian-language television channels: the information and entertainment *Dim/Dom* (“home” in Ukrainian and Russian, since March 2020) for the temporarily occupied territories and “*UATV in Russian*” (since March 2021). The main purpose of the *Dim/Dom* is to provide informational assistance to the reintegration of the occupied territories. *UATV in Russian* is positioned as a foreign broadcaster for audiences influenced by Russian propaganda content.

Regarding the internet media market, the most notable development was the sale of the influential socio-political website *Ukrayinska Pravda* (UP) by the founding editor, Olena Prytula, in May 2021 to the CEO of Dragon Capital investment company, Tomasz Fiala. The company owns the magazine, website and radio *NV*. The total *NV* and *UP* audience exceeds that of other websites and most television channels. Both publications are highly rated by the Institute of Mass Information for compliance with journalistic standards. Experts call this a precedent for the emergence of the first high-quality media holding in Ukraine.

On social media and messaging platforms, the number of manipulations is constantly growing. Among them are dubious insider information, rumours and conspiracy theories. Telegram messenger has become an extremely influential information source, which has already surpassed the once most popular Russian social media in Ukraine, *Vkontakte*, and *Odnoklassniki*, and offers a favourable environment for the active spreading of anti-Western narratives, according to the Detector Media analysis.

⁶³ Interview with Natalia Ligachova, chairman of the Board of the Detector Media NGO, Editor-in-Chief of the “Detector Media” portal, 10 March 2021.

Another study showed a monopolisation of attention on the platforms of pro-Russian blogger Anatoly Shariy on almost all social networks. He heads the Party of Shariy. In the 2019 elections, it did not gain enough support to win seats in parliament. In the 2020 local elections, it managed to enter some city councils in the east and south of Ukraine. In February 2021, the SBU declared Shariy a suspect in treason.

A number of studies note a further decline in the popularity of the Russian media. The level of trust in them is low, but slightly increased in 2020, reaching about 7 per cent.⁶⁴

On 2 June 2021, Zelensky introduced a bill in parliament aimed at weakening the oligarchs' influence on politics and law-making. According to it, an oligarch is a person who participates in political life, has a significant influence on the media, and exercises control over a significant amount of economic activity. Lawyers call this definition vague, and note that the bill does not protect against the influence of oligarchs on the editorial policy of the media under their control.⁶⁵

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

After the presidential and parliamentary elections in September 2019, Zelensky's government transformed the Ministry of Information Policy into the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, assigning it the tasks and functions of the liquidated Ministries of Culture and of Youth and Sports. Later, the institution was renamed the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy (MCIP) of Ukraine, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports was separated again. As the

⁶⁴ "Citizens' assessment of the situation in the country, the level of trust in social institutions and politicians, electoral orientations of citizens (October–November 2020)" [in Ukrainian], *Razumkov Centre*, November 2021, <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-gromadianamy-sytuatsii-v-kraini-riven-doviry-do-sotsialnykh-instytutiv-ta-politykiv-elektoralni-oriientsii-gromadian-zhovten-lystopad-2020r>

⁶⁵ Draft law "On prevention of threats to national security related to excessive influence of persons who have significant economic or political weight in public life (oligarchs)" [in Ukrainian], Official website of the Ukrainian parliament, June 2021, http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=72105

expert says, “*The former Ministry of Information Policy was an unsuccessful attempt because its creation was not part of a comprehensive action plan.*”⁶⁶

However, the ministry has made some progress. According to then Deputy Minister, Dmytro Zolotukhin, a concept for responding to information threats was developed. However, there was too little time for it to be fully executed.⁶⁷

On 14 September 2020, the new National Security Strategy of Ukraine entered into force. Among the current and projected threats mentioned were the following: Russia’s hybrid war with the use of information, psychological and cyber means; external and internal propaganda that incites hostility; lack of a coherent state information policy, and weakness of the strategic communications system.

It notes that the spread of Covid-19 has revealed critical problems in the information sphere, and lists the countering of special information operations and cyberattacks, as well as Russian and other subversive propaganda, as state priorities. The document, in particular, provides for the creation of a system of strategic communications; raising the level of media culture and digital literacy of society; ensuring the safety of journalists in the performance of their professional duties; increase of competition in the field of information services, and the development of a cybersecurity system.⁶⁸

The new strategy, unlike the previous one, does not mention the humiliation of the Ukrainian language and culture, the falsification of Ukrainian history, and the formation of a distorted information picture of the world by the Russian media.⁶⁹

The strategy should constitute a basis for the development, in particular, of new Information Security and Cyber Security Strategies of Ukraine, which are currently under discussion. According to the interviewed expert, “*the information*

⁶⁶ Interview with Roman Shutov.

⁶⁷ Interview with Dmytro Zolotukhin, former Deputy Minister of Information Policy of Ukraine (2017-2019), expert on information wars and competitive intelligence, 22 March 2021.

⁶⁸ Decree №392/2020 of the Ukraine’s President “On the decision of the Ukraine’s Security Council “On the Ukraine’s national security strategy”” [in Ukrainian], Official website of Ukraine’s president, September 2020, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3922020-35037>

⁶⁹ “The new National Security Strategy envisages raising the level of media culture and guaranteeing the safety of journalists” [in Ukrainian], *IMI*, September 2020, <https://imi.org.ua/news/nova-strategiya-natsbezpeky-peredbachaye-pidvyshhennya-rivnya-mediakultury-ta-garantuvannya-bezpeky-i35069>

*security strategy will probably replace the Information Security Doctrine, and, unlike it, will have a certain validity period. Some things will be new, and some will be a direct continuation of the Doctrine.*⁷⁰

Legislation in the media field in general, according to the interviewed experts, is at the level of 2005, and the regulation of the media market does not take into account current challenges. The regulator, the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting, regulates only two types of media. In particular, the state has no influence on websites, except in situations covered by the Criminal Code. Experts assess the response to violations as weak.

ONLINE HYSTERIA AND PROTESTS IN NOVI SANZHARY

Insufficient official communication and Covid-19-related malign influences resulted in scandalous events in the Ukrainian settlement of Novi Sanzhary. On 20 February 2020, 45 Ukrainians and 27 foreigners with accompanying persons (totally 94 people) were placed for observation in the urban-type settlement of Novi Sanzhary, Poltava region. Locals, fearing Covid-19 infection, organised the protest, which included blocking roads and resisting police. Nine police officers and one civilian were injured. The incident was covered in international media and provoked a campaign on Facebook, when users wrote that they were ashamed of Novi Sanzhary residents. This narrative of “shame” was actively spread by pro-Kremlin media outlets.

A journalistic investigation⁷¹ revealed that hysteria originated from seemingly unauthentically promoted Facebook posts, and in groups on Viber, which almost all local residents had been added to the day before the unrest. In one of these chats, false rumours and calls for aggressive resistance were spread every 10–20 minutes, including calls to block roads, railways, make Molotov cocktails, burn the hospital,

⁷⁰ Interview with Taras Shevchenko.

⁷¹ Liubov Velychko, “Masters of panic. This is how the pro-Russian network in Ukraine organized a riot in Novi Sanzhary” [in Ukrainian], *Texty*, February 2020, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/100356/specoperaciya-imeni-portnova-ta-shariya-yak-rozhnyaly-paniku-v-novyh-sanzharah-i-hto-za-cym-stoyit/>

and attack local administrations. The most active were twenty users, who also called to watch pro-Russian television channels *112*, *NewsOne*, *ZIK*, and *Nash*. Journalists found out that the administrators of the Viber groups were not local, and were possibly connected to foreign secret services, which allowed them to obtain the phone numbers of the locals.

There was no official information about the selection of Novi Sanzhary as the evacuation place on 19 February 2020. The head of the settlement council and local officials said they learned about it from rumours on the internet. Harmful rumours filled the vacuum created by the deficit of reliable information and led to dangerous public consequences.

The lack of a legislative definition of disinformation remains a basic problem, which complicates the development of tools to combat its proliferation. However, some experts believe that this would not solve the problem, as information-specific operations are often based on truthful information. The Criminal Code contains articles dealing with calls for violation of territorial integrity, treason, etc. The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) reports on the work of these articles and the exposure of propagandists. In particular, it concerns spreading disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic to sow panic. However, according to media lawyers, cases of harm to national security by information operations are considered by the courts superficially, and only 5 per cent establish their connection with the responsible country.

In 2020, the draft law on disinformation proposed by the then Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Volodymyr Borodyansky, was actively discussed. This law has provoked opposition from journalists and experts, as well as international organisations, as a threat to freedom of speech, primarily due to the criminal punishment of journalists. In addition, as one of the experts noted, *“There was a lack of communication and discussion about what problem we are solving.”* After Borodyansky's resignation in March 2020, the bill was removed from the agenda.

At the same time, a draft of a new Media Law⁷² was proposed, which gives the regulator the power to cover all types of media. The law provides enhanced opportunities to counter Russian disinformation in the context of audio-visual

⁷² Draft law “On media” [in Ukrainian], Official website of the Ukrainian parliament, July 2020, http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=69353

media, online publications, and the print media.⁷³ After in-depth discussions, media NGOs and international organisations supported the project. The law should be put to a vote after consultation with representatives of the media market. Otherwise, there is a risk that it will not be adopted by parliament.

Pro-Russian politicians and the media have criticised the rules on language quotas, blacklists and regulation of online media, as well as the ban on totally positive coverage of the aggressor state's authorities and full decommunisation. Currently, the approval of the law is blocked by oligarchic media groups, which, in particular, criticise the expansion of the regulator's powers and the introduction of new sanctions.

The legal framework in the field of cybersecurity has been significantly updated. During 2020, many important bylaws were adopted, including the creation of a national telecommunications network. However, no others are at the stage of approval or development. In March 2021, the government supported a draft law on critical infrastructure and its protection. But this does not seem to be enough.

An example of the unpreparedness of state agencies for digital attacks is the mass hacking of the official pages of the central and regional police departments in September–October 2020. Then attackers posted false information, such as supposed radiation leaks at the Rivne NPP, and the death of British military advisers during training in the Kherson region. Up to ten regions were attacked. Journalists spread disinformation without verification, as the official website is a reliable source by default.

In March 2021, two special bodies were set up in Ukraine to counter disinformation. As part of the MCIP, the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security was established, headed by Lyubov Tsybulska, who formerly chaired the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre. It focuses on strategic communications, countering disinformation through continuous informing and advocating the state's efforts in this direction at the international level. *“There will be two groups: reactive and proactive. Reactive will quickly analyse news, refute disinformation and create a daily product like posts on social networks and infographics.*

⁷³ Interview with Taras Shevchenko.

The second direction is work on long-term things: information campaigns, training,” Tsybul’ska says.⁷⁴

The Center for Countering Disinformation, headed by Polina Lysenko, was established based on the National Security and Defence Council. Its purpose is to coordinate the activities of various government branches, as well as the MCIP, NISS, and special services. Among the areas of national security that the centre will take care of are the military, the fight against crime and corruption, foreign and domestic policy, economics, infrastructure, health, ecology, science and technology. The centre works according to this scheme ‘information collection – analysis – response,’ which does not involve an active media presence. This applies to cooperation with law enforcement agencies in identifying possible signs of a criminal offense, with the MFA able to involve diplomatic levers to resolve the situation, and so on. It is also planned to prepare a glossary of terms recommended for use by the authorities, unacceptable phrases and names regarding the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The main question that concerns experts regarding the launch of new structures is their ability to act independently of the political interests. Both centres promise to actively cooperate with NGOs and not duplicate their work.

On 24 March 2021, the MFA for the first time approved the Communication Strategy and the Public Diplomacy Strategy,⁷⁵ which systematises Ukraine’s key messages, audiences, formats and communication channels in the world. The strategy sets goals and objectives for 2021–2025 and identifies seven key areas of public diplomacy: cultural, expert, economic, culinary, digital, scientific, educational, and sports. The MFA and MCIP are instructed to promote Ukraine and its potential in the international arena using the “Ukraine Now” brand, which was adopted in May 2018. The idea is to demonstrate Ukraine’s attractiveness for tourism, cultural cooperation and business. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of these newly adopted documents, although the fact that they were adopted can be seen as positive.

⁷⁴ Oksana Kovalenko, Anton Semyzhenko, Kateryna Kobernyk (eds.), “The new Information Security Center will receive 9 people and 10 million hryvnias to fight Russian propaganda” [in Ukrainian], *Babel*, April 2021, <https://babel.ua/texts/61962-na-borotbu-z-rosiyskoyu-propagandoyu-noviy-centr-informbezpeki-otri-maye-9-lyudey-ta-10-milyoniv-griven-yak-iz-cim-zletiti-u-pershomu-velikomou-interv-yu-golovi-centru-lyubovi-cibul’skoji>

⁷⁵ MFA Communication Strategy, MFA Public Diplomacy Strategy [in Ukrainian], Official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, March 2021, <https://mfa.gov.ua/pro-ministerstvo/strategiyi-mzs>

On 20 April 2021, the MCIP presented a nationwide media literacy project for 2021–2022. Its goal is to raise awareness among all age groups about disinformation and the importance of detecting manipulations. It provides training for not only schoolchildren and students, but also teachers and lecturers, integration of the future media literacy program into the humanitarian block and making additions to the legal framework.

It is worth noting the role of the state's cultural policy in strengthening institutional resilience to disinformation. In particular, the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, established in 2017, created a competitive market for cultural products through the provision of state grants to initiatives based on the assessments of independent experts. However, after the change of the Supervisory Board and the Executive Director of the Fund in April 2021, the organisations participating in the competition accused them of changing the rules of selection “manually” and discrediting the fund from within, and called on the authorities to prevent this. Experts warn of an attempt by the “TV lobby” to seize control of this and other cultural institutions with the authority to distribute funds (the Council for State Support of Cinematography, Dovzhenko Center).

An important role in strengthening the subjectivity of Ukraine was played by the Ukrainian Institute, founded at the MFA in 2017, which represents Ukrainian culture in the world and forms a positive image of Ukraine abroad. Priority areas are artistic, cross-sectoral, academic programs, civil society, including strengthening the representation of Crimea and the Crimean Tatar community, the Ukrainian language, the development of cultural diplomacy and its participants, research and analysis.

Responses by media and civil society

The debunking teams still play a crucial role in the fight against Kremlin propaganda. Despite the scale of such activities, the projects lack coordination, both with each other and with government institutions, although cooperation has grown significantly compared to previous years.

A number of organisations including StopFake, InformNapalm, UCMC, Euro-maidan Press, UkraineWorld, Information Forces of Ukraine are actively working in this field. In 2018, the Regional Press Development Institute (RPDI)

created a fact-checking initiative “Behind The News,”⁷⁶ focused mostly on combating urban legends, and is represented by communities on Facebook and Instagram. It is also worth mentioning VoxCheck⁷⁷ – a fact-check project of the VoxUkraine initiative, launched in January 2016, which focuses on verifying the statements of officials and politicians, as well as debunking economic myths in Ukrainian, Russian, and English. Detector Media also pays great attention to disinformation issues, conducting monitoring and research.⁷⁸

In June 2021, the head of the Ukraine-2050 NGO, Yevhen Czolij, announced the establishment of an international media monitoring mission by the Ukrainian diaspora. Observers are to monitor the media and social networks in their countries of residence and send reports to the mission, which will take steps to refute the fake news. The uniqueness of the project comes in its ability to monitor news about Ukraine in many languages, in different parts of the world.

An important development was the StopFake’s and VoxCheck’s entry into the International Fact-Checking Network⁷⁹ and the start of Facebook’s cooperation with them as independent fact-checkers in Ukraine in March 2020. Fact-checkers mark false or manipulative posts on Facebook based on proof. It played a huge role in countering the spread of manipulations related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Organisations and volunteer communities cooperate with each other, as well as with the media and other NGOs in the framework of research, educational and information projects, and also, upon request, advise state structures on their field of expertise.

In particular, several online courses have been created to improve media literacy. VoxCheck, together with the educational platform EdEra, created a course “Factcheck: Trust – Check” 2018.⁸⁰ IREX on the same platform created a “Very Verified: online course on media literacy”⁸¹ in late 2019 with the involvement of fact-checkers from various organisations as authors. By autumn 2021, the UCMC, StopFake and Euromaidan Press plan to present a course on the

⁷⁶ Behind The News’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/behindtheukrainenews/>

⁷⁷ VoxCheck, *VoxUkraine*, <https://voxukraine.org/en/category/voxcheck/>

⁷⁸ Detector Media research, <https://detector.media/tag/2348/>

⁷⁹ The International Fact-Checking Network’s website, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>

⁸⁰ Factcheck: trust-check [in Ukrainian], *EdEra*, November 2018, <https://courses.ed-era.com/courses/course-v1:VOXU-EdEra+FactCheck101+2018/about>

⁸¹ “Very Verified. Online course in media literacy,” *EdEra*, June 2019, <https://verified.ed-era.com/>

Prometheus educational platform, which focuses on the specifics and counteraction of Russia's disinformation.

In March 2021, five initiatives – UCMC, Euromaidan Press, StopFake, Internews Ukraine and Texty.org.ua – launched the Ukraine Explained project to combat disinformation and negative narratives, with the support of the National Democratic Institute. The goal is to fight lies by telling the truth about Ukraine and developing a positive narrative.⁸²

On 5 February 2019, Media Movement for Conscious Choice was established as an informal association of media, journalists and NGOs, the aim of which is to promote journalistic standards, enabling voters to get complete and accurate information in the media. The movement continued to operate after the election, issuing sixteen public statements a year in support of freedom of expression and to protect citizens' right to reliable information.

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, StopFake has started a specialised pandemic debunking section⁸³ on its website. The projects “Behind the news,” BezBrehni, Nashi groshi.Lviv, Kavun.City, and Bukvy launched a website with “COVID” refutations “On the other side of the pandemic.”⁸⁴ All debunking teams actively conducted training and other educational activities to combat the so-called “infodemic.”

Regarding the fact-checkers' cooperation with the media, StopFake provides weekly video digests to twelve local television channels and national websites. VoxCheck is a fact-checking partner of *Forbes Ukraine* and checks the guests' statements in a live political talk show “Countdown” on public television *UA: First*.

Some online media outlets published editorial codes (*LIGA.net*,⁸⁵ *Pravda.com.ua*,⁸⁶ *NV.ua*⁸⁷), pledging to adhere to the standard of accuracy, work responsibly with sources, information from social networks, experts, opinion polls, etc.

⁸² “Ukraine explained,” *Ukraine World*, <https://ukraineworld.org/articles/ukraine-explained>

⁸³ COVID-19_ua section [in Ukrainian], *StopFake*, https://www.stopfake.org/uk/category/covid19_ua/

⁸⁴ “On the other side of the pandemic” website, <https://coronafakes.com/>

⁸⁵ “LIGA.net's editorial code” [in Ukrainian], *Liga.net*, November 2020, https://project.liga.net/projects/editorial_code/#rec246322574

⁸⁶ “Principles and rules of operation of the online publication “Ukrayinska Pravda”” [in Ukrainian], *Ukrayinska Pravda*, November 2018, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/cdn/cd1/rules/>

⁸⁷ “NV Editorial Code” [in Ukrainian], *NV.ua*, July 2021, <https://nv.ua/ukr/project/redakciyna-politika-nv-50174372.html>

The interest of some media in the topic of disinformation has increased, which has raised public awareness of this problem. In particular, in 2019 *Hromadske* and *Slidstvo.info* released an investigative film, “I am a bot,”⁸⁸ about the work of Ukrainian “bot farms.” A joint investigation by *Texty*, *Liga.net* and *IMI* showed that the top five anonymous Telegram channels from which the Servant of the People’s MPs get information are probably directed from Russia.⁸⁹

During the investigation of the protests in Novi Sanzhary in Poltava region, *Texty* and *Liga.net* established an artificial incitement of the conflict through a coordinated campaign on messaging platforms and social media.⁹⁰ A separate aspect of hybrid influences is revealed by the *Bihus.info* investigation⁹¹: former host of *1+1* television channel, Oleksandr Dubinsky, created fake news to discredit protests ordered by Viktor Yanukovich’s entourage (since 2019 – MP from the Servant of the People, but was expelled from the faction in 2021 after the US declared his interference in the US election process).

In 2018 *Texty* developed a neural network, which formed a rating of “clickbait” websites and resources that spread Russian disinformation. The purpose was to help citizens check the validity of the information source. Subsequently, a large-scale interactive tool for tracking Russian propaganda topics was created based on the network, which has been working in a weekly update mode since May 2019.⁹²

The development of media literacy continued to move in the same paradigm as in previous years. In 2018, IREX, together with the Academy of the Ukrainian Press (AUP), NGOs, and the Ministry of Education and Science, launched the project “Learn to Discern in Education.”⁹³ It covered 654 schools in all regions

⁸⁸ “I’m a bot” [in Ukrainian], *Slidstvo.info’s YouTube channel*, September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s50-j0gXtno>

⁸⁹ Liubov Velychko, “‘Telega’ for the Servant. This is how Telegram channels, presumably from Russia, affect the work of the parliament” [in Ukrainian], *Texty.org.ua*, *Liga.net*, supported by *IMI*, July 2020, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/101438/tyelyeha-dlya-sluhy-yak-telehram-kanaly-sho-jmovirno-vedutsya-z-rosiyi-vplyvayut-na-robotu-rady/>

⁹⁰ Liubov Velychko (2020), op.cit.

⁹¹ “Dubinsky produced the “Prostitutes on the Maidan” fake for Yanukovich’s entourage” [in Ukrainian], *Bihus.info*, October 2020, <https://bihus.info/dubinskyj-prodyusu-vav-fejk-prostytutky-na-majdani-dlya-otochennya-yanukovycha/>

⁹² “Hot disinfo from Russia. Dynamics of Russian disinformation topics,” *Texty.org.ua*, updated on a weekly basis, <https://topic-radar.texty.org/#/>

⁹³ “Strengthening Media Literacy in the Ukrainian Education System,” *IREX*, August 2020, <https://www.irex.org/project/strengthening-media-literacy-ukrainian-education-system>

of the country. According to the first results, 38 per cent of students are better able to identify false news. In January 2021, AUP presented a manual on teaching media literacy online.

As for cyber activists, Ukrainian Cyber Alliance stopped cooperating with state services in February 2020 after searches as part of the investigation into the breakdown of the Odesa airport system on 16 October 2019, and the subsequent trials. Cyber activists claimed non-involvement in the hacking and demanded an apology for the prosecution, which, according to them, is political. Ukrainian Cyber Forces stopped active work in 2018 due to lack of financial support.

Recommendations

Recommendations from the Ukraine's state agencies and media community, proposed in the 2018 DRI study, were partially taken into account. However, the information security doctrine has not become a guiding document for all government agencies. Although the activities of the Ministry of Information have become more systemic, its policies have remained fragmented. The establishment of two state bodies to counter disinformation and their powers give some hope that state policies will become more coherent in the near future.

Many promising measures have been taken to introduce media literacy at all levels of education, including strategic planning. Ukrainian media continue to experience a shortage of staff who are able to identify propaganda and fake news. The underlying problem is that independent media producing quality content that is in demand by citizens are not market-based and are therefore unable to benefit from the strings-attached funding provided by oligarchs to other aspects of the media. Stable, alternative methods of funding for independent media must be established. Despite the fact that international donors have invested heavily in the education of journalists, this recommendation is still relevant for maintaining the stability, independence and cooperation of the media.

The need to train law enforcement officials, such as the police, the SBU, etc., to counter propaganda, fake news, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns remains urgent. Work to prevent the proliferation of disinformation about Ukraine in foreign media is currently overwhelmingly performed by the public sector, individual diplomats, and certain social media campaigns. There is still a need for contact points or offices for foreign media, where you can find first-hand information about events in Ukraine from local experts.

Given the changes which have taken place since 2018 and the present challenges Ukraine faces, the following recommendations are proposed to the state authorities, Ukraine's media community and civil society, as well as international stakeholders:

- To establish a coherent and strategic communication strategy, inside and outside Ukraine. This seems appropriate in the framework of the work of the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security. Well-coordinated action by government, local administrations, NGOs, international partners and donors at the national and regional levels is needed.
- To create a working information security system. The Doctrine of Information Security has not become a document that defines operational work and action plans. The Information Security Strategy, which will be the successor of the doctrine, should outline the framework for a system of strategic and governmental communications, which contains three levels of processes: monitoring the situation and the identification of threats; analysis and filtering of data by specific criteria, as well as decision-making; developing and implementing a strategy and a clear response plan. The strategy should include a list of public interests to be protected and possible threats, as well as provide for coordination with government communication systems for joint response, and, most importantly, be fully reflected in government working documents and processes.
- The Information Security Strategy must take into account the promotion of the Ukrainian language and culture, protecting Ukrainian history from falsification, and protecting target audiences in Ukraine, abroad and in the temporarily occupied territories from the distorted picture of the world formed by the Russian media. These aspects are strategically important for increasing resilience to disinformation, however, they are absent in the National Strategy priorities.
- To use the experience of previous governmental administrations and NGOs and not limit the planning horizon to two years. The government should promote media literacy skills at all levels of education, although it is true to say that the state project on the introduction of media literacy looks promising, and significant progress has been made in this field. In the short term, it will not bring rapid changes, but in the medium and long term, it will increase resilience not only to Russian disinformation, but to all its incarnations, such as disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic. Media literacy should be taught starting with kindergartens, following the example of Finland.
- To build trust with the media at the stakeholder level in order to have a coordinated response to disinformation and to make the state

a competitive subject of information space. The resilience of society is a cumulative consequence of government and media policy. First, it is required to ensure the independence and development of the public broadcaster financially and institutionally. Leading national media should also be involved in the process of increasing resilience. Then, it is necessary to establish some dialogue between the government and media holdings, which would have a positive impact in terms of clearing the media discourse from content that threatens critical thinking, as major television channels often spread conspiracy theories and are a platform for populism, that is, they themselves are often the conduits of harmful influences. It is also important to continue the dialogue with major internet platforms for joint solutions.

- Additional investment is still needed in short-term and long-term educational programs to strengthen media literacy and give new impetus to coordination between journalists and NGOs, as well as training programs for monetisation and financial stability of quality local media, mainly at the regional level, first of all in eastern Ukraine.
- To expand the powers of the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting, which regulate only two of the five actual information channels, and to adopt legislation that will regulate all types of media, in particular in the context of combating disinformation. As part of it, it is recommended to improve algorithms designed to block websites with malicious media content, as well as methodology, filters and clear criteria for distinguishing the degree of their harmfulness. The current model of media regulation remains ineffective. Nevertheless, there is a risk to keep in mind: a powerful watchdog can be a politically engaged tool. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the media regulator's independence (now 50 per cent of its members are appointed by parliament, 50 per cent by the president). It is important to continue the discussion with the media co-regulatory body, which may be the National Council or another organisation.
- To pay attention to the policy on Telegram channels. Many popular channels that are positioned as Ukrainian or pro-Ukrainian are likely to be controlled by Russia and pose an information threat. At the same time, it is important to draw a clear line that will ensure information security and at the same time preserve freedom of speech.
- To conduct an impartial audit of the current state and prospects of relations with China and approve it at the level of the state policy.

In particular, there is a need to delineate the “red lines” of cooperation, the intersection of which could lead to threats or risks to Ukraine. This will resolve the contradictions between the documents in which China is identified as a strategic partner and those in which China is an economic partner.

- Ukraine should establish a research centre for the study of Asia, which would study the countries of the region on an ongoing basis, including China, Japan and India. It should be involved in decision-making processes and interact with European partners on these issues.
- It is necessary to develop a system for responding to disinformation on the part of China and to update the issues where risks are possible. It is important to create additional discourse on China regarding not only the prospects but also the threats and risks of cooperation, stimulating the competition of opinions and knowledge.
- Given China’s use of hybrid technologies, the real influence of China in Ukraine should be explored: in the information space, through scientific and public organisations, the Chinese diaspora, lobbyists in Ukrainian companies doing business with China, etc.
- An interdepartmental dialogue and discussion on China should be maintained between the various state bodies of Ukraine, which will reduce contradictions and conflicts of interest between different ministries in order to reach a consensus on understanding the real consequences of cooperation with China.

Conclusion

In terms of state progress in implementation of recommendations proposed in the 2018 DRI edition, none of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries under review have done perfectly. Most CEE countries followed them at least to some extent, but the assessment of state and societal progress in the field of resilience to disinformation is quite mixed. There are, however, a few examples in which the countries actually reversed the positive trend and became even worse prepared to face the threat of domestic and international disinformation. It does not come as a surprise that legal and institutional resilience in all ten countries scored lower than societal and media responses in the 2021 DRI survey.

Polish state agencies have partially implemented some of the recommendations proposed back in 2018, particularly anti-discrimination training sessions for state officials and the allocation of finances to the NGOs involved in media literacy projects. The state authorities of Poland have been enhancing legal regulation and institutional setup pertaining to the fight against disinformation. However, experts point to the lack of comprehensiveness and insufficient cooperation with civil society. The importance of more active measures is made clear by the intensification of pro-Kremlin disinformation activities against Poland over the past years.

Czechia's advancement in the field since 2018 has been modest even if there is a rich debate about the role of foreign powers in the Czech public discourse and society, driven primarily by the civil society and independent media. The state authorities are lagging behind in implementing concrete measures and are slow to adapt state policies designed to counter disinformation and hybrid threats. Despite this, there is some progress driven by national policymakers working on the topic, but this is not representative of the government overall. Nonetheless, this might be changed by the parliamentary elections in October 2021.

The Slovak case is similar to the Czech one in the sense that the state is not sufficiently prepared to tackle the fundamental challenges, even if new efforts are now being made by the government to deal with the long-overlooked issues. Since 2020, the new cabinet has made a number of steps in the realm of strategic thinking, boosting the state's analytical capacity as well as investing

in the policy response to disinformation. However, the state activities have still been rather fragmented and inconsistent, often undermined by individual representatives of the new authorities. Civil society and independent media have played a positive role in plugging some of the holes in Czech and Slovak resilience. They have also shared their know-how and practical experience, helping to find solutions to the burning challenges faced by Czechia and Slovakia.

The authorities of Georgia have been quite active in implementing the recommendations laid out in the 2018 DRI report. Since 2018, among other things, strategic communication units were established in all Georgian ministries, the Foreign Relations Committee of the Georgian parliament started a thematic inquiry on disinformation and propaganda, and media literacy activities received more active state support. However, other challenges, especially related to domestic political polarisation and external interference, have remained unresolved.

In Moldova, media education classes have expanded in educational institutions and mass media security was included in the broader concept of information security, yet the level of disinformation resilience has barely changed since 2018. The most popular television channels in Moldova remain those which rebroadcast Russian content, and Russian media continue to dominate the foreign news provision in Moldova. Political considerations prevented the state institutions responsible for countering disinformation from taking more active steps.

Ukraine's legal and institutional changes in the field of disinformation have been quite significant. They include the establishment of two state bodies to counter disinformation and the adoption of a number of strategic documents. However, state policies aimed at countering disinformation remain incoherent, training of state officials is insufficient, and additional investment in education programs to strengthen media literacy is needed. Ukraine's civil society continued to play a crucial role in exposing and combatting pro-Kremlin disinformation. Cooperation among the debunking teams, and between them and government institutions, has grown significantly since 2018, but an even closer coordination of activities is advisable.

Armenian authorities have taken measures to combat hate speech, completed the transition to digital broadcasting, and made licensing procedures for broadcast media more transparent. Beyond that, victories in the fight against disinformation have been modest despite the hopes that the 2018 revolution brought. This is also because of significant political and security turbulence, which prevented the Pashinyan government from working on the topic.

In the case of Hungary, the outlook is similar to 2018, with the Hungarian government showing only limited interest in and understanding of the severity of the Russian and Chinese disinformation threats. Instead, Hungary has invested political and diplomatic capital in improving its relationship with both authoritarian powers, which acted to limit the capacity of the state to respond to domestic and external challenges, which are increasing in number. Democratic backsliding and the limited capacity of civil society and the independent press to act as a watchdog is crippling the efforts of the society to improve the country's resilience.

Belarus is located on the other extreme. None of the seven expert recommendations proposed to the state authorities in 2018 have been implemented and the situation of state resilience to foreign-led disinformation only became worse. Following the August 2020 presidential election and unprecedentedly massive protests, Aliaksandr Lukashenka desperately sought life-saving Russian assistance and largely ceded Belarus's information sovereignty to the Kremlin. Since August 2020, state-owned media have been serving as a source of a wide array of disinformation claims and conspiracies, and multipliers of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives. Furthermore, the Belarusian state authorities undertook a massive crackdown against civil society organisations, independent media, and bloggers, many of whom were at the forefront of the fight against disinformation and advocated for better media standards.

Azerbaijan's authorities used the fight against disinformation as a pretext to crackdown on domestic dissent, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and 44-day war for Nagorno Karabakh in September–November 2020. Whereas no significant changes have taken place from the institutional standpoint, the environment for independent media and civil society organisations has become more restrictive. Yet, in contrast to Belarus, despite growing authoritarian tendencies and greater restrictions in the media field, Azerbaijan has not aligned its information agenda with the Kremlin or any other external actor.

Considering the slow progress of state authorities in virtually all CEE countries, the importance of civil society and the media in countering disinformation and promoting media literacy is becoming more obvious. Their performance in most countries has been quite successful, despite the limited resources NGOs and media outlets often face. The 2021 DRI survey found that Azerbaijan and Belarus, outsiders in terms of efficiency of state authorities, received the highest scores for media and civil society responses. Acknowledging the crucial role that civil society and independent media play in the two states, their high scores do not necessarily mean that they do better than their peers

in other CEE countries. Instead, a perception bias needs to be accounted for as the responses of civil society and media looked stronger for respondents against the background of insufficient state actions.

Similarly, the DRI survey results concerning susceptibility to Chinese disinformation need to be interpreted with caution. Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia are perceived to be the most susceptible to it, whereas South Caucasus countries are found to be least prone, largely because, so far, Chinese influence gets more attention from the expert community, policymakers, and general public in the respective Visegrad countries than in other CEE countries.

It is clear that the discussion about societal resilience to disinformation and the fight against disinformation and foreign interference, most notably from Russia and China, is to stay with us for the foreseeable future, and the threats posed by disinformation and foreign interference will intensify. This is not only because of the increased activities of the malign actors, but also based on the growing demand for a more robust reaction and changing international environment, e.g. with the new US administration, which is going to demand certain steps from the CEE countries in this regard.

On top of that, both the EU and NATO are instrumentalising the topic of resilience in a wider sense to apply it as a policy framework for their cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries. The EU's recent Democracy Action Plan speaks about "imposing costs" for spreading disinformation against the EU and internationally. Therefore, most EaP countries, as well as EU member states, are expected to continue investing in their capacity to withstand disinformation impacts, both domestic and external, most notably from the authoritarian powers.

About partners

Leading institution

The Eurasian States in Transition Research Center (EAST Center), Poland

launched in 2016, is an independent, interdisciplinary think-tank focused on post-Soviet and eastern European studies. The EAST Center's mission is to produce high quality research on disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe, domestic and foreign policies of the eastern European countries, and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Partner institutions

The Centre for Policy Studies, Armenia

The Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) is an independent research and public policy institution based in Yerevan. It studies, among other issues, Armenia's domestic and foreign policy, as well as disinformation and other contemporary threats, and aims to contribute to democratisation, transition, and good governance by means of developing policy recommendations, expanding the Armenian expert community's capabilities, and improving public awareness. The CPS is a member of the Network of Think Tanks of the EU's Eastern Partnership, launched by the German Council of Foreign Relations (DGAP).

Center for Economic and Social Development, Azerbaijan

The Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD) is a think-tank established in 2005 to research domestic, economic, and social issues, with the aim of positively influencing public policy decision-making processes and helping to share knowledge among stakeholders. The CESD is a leading Azerbaijani think-tank specialised in economic and

social policy issues, working with, and establishing a bridge between, the government and the various representatives of civil society. It closely cooperates with the media, 24 communities throughout Azerbaijan, NGOs providing services at the grass-roots level, international think-tanks, financial institutions, and donors, as well as other think-tanks operating in Azerbaijan.

Association for International Affairs, Czechia

The Association for International Affairs (AMO) is a non-governmental, not-for-profit Prague-based organisation, founded in 1997. Its main aim is to promote research and education in the field of international relations. AMO facilitates the expression and realisation of ideas, thoughts, and projects in order to increase education, mutual understanding, and tolerance among people.

The Liberal Academy Tbilisi Foundation, Georgia

The Liberal Academy Tbilisi Foundation (LAT) was established in December 2006 as a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, committed to promoting core democratic values, supporting peace-building, European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and the promotion of democratic development in Georgia and the whole Southern Caucasus region. The LAT conducts policy research and analysis, with the aim of sparking much needed debates on the European future of Georgia and the South Caucasus. The LAT also contributes to the policy agenda with its independent expertise.

Political Capital, Hungary

Political Capital (PC) is an independent policy research, analysis, and consulting institute, founded in 2001. Based in Budapest, Political Capital specialises in researching foreign malign influence, disinformation, and political extremism. Since its foundation, PC has been extensively focused on Central and Eastern European affairs, as part of both domestic and international projects. The institute is committed to the guiding principles of parliamentary democracy, market economy, human rights and Euro-Atlanticism. Through its various activities, PC aims to promote critical political thinking, raise awareness of political issues impacting Hungary and the CEE region, as well as to contribute to and

develop a critical public discourse and policy-making process that is based on knowledge and evidence.

WatchDog.md, Moldova

WatchDog.MD Community is a think-tank based in the Republic of Moldova. Its main objectives are the implementation and protection of civil, economic, and social rights, and other legitimate human rights and freedoms. Over the last four years, WatchDog.MD implemented various projects aiming to counter propaganda and foster public resilience against foreign and domestic disinformation, advance public debate on key policy issues, promote women in the policy sector, support the development of a network of local watchdog CSOs, strengthen Moldovan diaspora's activism, counter propaganda and disinformation related to elections, and fight disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

STRATPOL, Slovakia

STRATPOL – Strategic Policy Institute – is an independent think-tank based in Slovakia, with a focus on international relations and security policy. Its activities cover the Visegrad Group, European security, Transatlantic relations, and Eastern Partnership countries. Stratpol's research, publications, and events cover issues and developments in Central Europe, Ukraine, South Caucasus, as well as NATO, the United States, and key strategic regions. Stratpol's experts have a proven record in strategic decision-making in their respective governments, militaries, and academia.

StopFake, Ukraine

StopFake is a fact-checking organisation, founded in March 2014 by lecturers, graduates, and students from the Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism, with the aim of refuting Russian propaganda and combating fake news. StopFake is an information hub which examines and analyses all aspects of Kremlin propaganda. StopFake's primary goals are to verify information, raise media literacy in Ukraine, and establish a clear red line between journalism and propaganda. StopFake strives to achieve its goals not only through refuting fakes but also through creating a propaganda archive, conducting research, training media stakeholders to identify fakes, etc. StopFake's content is available in thirteen languages.

This edition reviews disinformation resilience in Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) and Eastern Partnership states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). It focuses on the changes which have taken place in the institutional and regulatory framework and media landscape since 2018. The Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI) provides quantitative assessment of states' resilience to foreign-led disinformation based on the results of online expert surveys for each of the ten countries.

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