

DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX



**CENTRAL
AND EASTERN
EUROPE**

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IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPE IN

2024

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Introduction

In recent years, the concept of resilience to disinformation has continued to attract the attention of policymakers, journalists, regular consumers of information and the worldwide media. In December 2021, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 76/227 which expressed concern over the proliferation of disinformation. The resolution called for states “to counter all forms of disinformation through policy measures, including education, capacity-building for prevention and resilience to disinformation, advocacy and awareness-raising”.¹ Following the resolution, in August 2022 the UN Secretary-General submitted a report on countering disinformation. The document described the challenges posed by disinformation, outlined the relevant international legal framework and discussed measures to counter disinformation. The report stated that countering disinformation requires lasting investment in building societal resilience as well as media and information literacy. It also claimed that “The spread of disinformation can have a devastating impact on our societies, undermining a broad range of human rights... When disinformation threatens human rights, States have a duty to take appropriate steps to address these harmful impacts”.²

The website of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) maintains a database of digital solution guides and some of which are used to tackle disinformation. For example, the iVerify platform, a joint initiative of the European Commission and the UNDP, is a fact-checking tool used by national stakeholders to identify false information and prevent and mitigate its spread. Since 2021, it has been used in nine countries including Honduras, Sierra Leone and Pakistan. iVerify allows the public to submit requests for news and online information to be fact-checked by the professional team. In addition, the eMonitor+ platform offers digital tools to monitor and analyse online content and identify issues such as hate speech and misinformation. It has been deployed in Lebanon, Libya,

¹ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 24 December 2021 Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. A/RES/76/227, 10 January 2022.

² Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms Report of the Secretary-General. A/77/287, 12 August 2022.

Tunisia, and Peru, in partnership with state authorities and civil society organisations. By late 2024, more than 10,000 online publications were fact-checked using eMonitor+.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's research defines resilience to disinformation as a 'society's ability to understand, resist and recover from threats within the information space.' It refers to the importance of a whole-of-society approach to fostering resilience to disinformation. This approach requires governments to cooperate with both the public and non-governmental stakeholders with the aim to strengthen media and digital literacy skills, to develop proactive and public communication free from political goals, and to strengthen public participation in information integrity efforts.³

The European Union (EU) has recently adopted a number of notable regulations and initiatives in the field of tackling disinformation. In June 2022, a strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation was signed by major online platforms, major advertising groups, fact-checkers, research bodies and civil society organisations. Aiming to achieve the objectives outlined in the May 2021 European Commission's Guidance, the new Code sets 44 commitments and 128 specific measures to counter online disinformation.⁴ In October 2022, the EU's regulation known as the Digital Services Act (DSA) was adopted which regulates online intermediaries and platforms such as marketplaces, social networks and content-sharing platforms. The DSA's goal is to prevent illegal and harmful activities online and the spread of disinformation. From the end of August 2023, the DSA rules were applied to designated platforms with more than 45 million users in the EU. As of February 2024, the DSA rules were applied to all platforms.

In October 2022 and in an attempt to strengthen the role of education and training in tackling disinformation, the European Commission published guidelines for teachers and educators in primary and secondary schools on how to address disinformation and promote digital literacy throughout their classrooms. The guidelines are intended for educators across multiple subjects and with different levels of experience and knowledge in the field.⁵ In April 2024, EU regulation

³ OECD (2024), "Fostering societal resilience to disinformation", in *Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity*, OECD Publishing, Paris. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/79812dd0-en>

⁴ The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>

⁵ Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/28248>

on the transparency and targeting of political advertising came into force. The regulation states that, “Political advertising can be a vector of disinformation, in particular where the advertising does not disclose its political nature, comes from sponsors outside of the Union or is subject to targeting techniques or ad-delivery techniques”. The regulation harmonises the rules on the transparency and related due diligence obligations for the provision of political advertising services. Likewise, the rules on the use of targeting techniques and ad-delivery techniques, as well as rules on its supervision and enforcement have also been harmonised.⁶

Academic interest in understanding and preventing disinformation has continued to grow. One recent scientific research paper argues that applying the concept of resilience to disinformation provides a better understanding of why audiences believe or share disinformation. The study defines resilience to disinformation as a “capability that manifests in the process of encountering disinformation and results in either questioning or recognizing disinformation and consequently dismissing it”.⁷ Based on a systematic literature review, researchers identified twelve factors that influence an individuals’ resilience and vulnerability to disinformation:

- (1) thinking styles,**
- (2) political ideology,**
- (3) worldview and beliefs,**
- (4) pathological traits, such as schizophrenia,**
- (5) knowledge,**
- (6) emotions,**
- (7) (social) media use,**
- (8) demographics,**
- (9) perceived control (perceived lack of control correlates with conspiracy theory belief),**
- (10) trust,**
- (11) culture,**
- (12) and environment.**⁸

⁶ Regulation (EU) 2024/900 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 March 2024 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/900/oj>

⁷ Kont, J., Elving, W., Broersma, M. & Bozdağ, Ç. What makes audiences resilient to disinformation? Integrating micro, meso, and macro factors based on a systematic literature review, *Communications*, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2023-0078>

⁸ *Ibid.*

Importantly, several controlled studies (an experiment in which two groups are used for comparison purposes) have recently been published. One study showed that psychological inoculation campaigns on social media are effective at improving disinformation resilience. Scholars developed short videos that exposed manipulation techniques commonly used in misinformation such as emotionally manipulative language, false dichotomies, and scapegoating. They found that these videos improved manipulation technique recognition and increased people's ability to discern trustworthy from untrustworthy content.⁹

Leading publishing companies have also paid greater attention to this field of research. From 2019 to 2024, twelve editions have been released in Routledge's book series on research in media literacy and education. For example, "Disinformation Debunked. Building Resilience through Media and Information Literacy", is a topical study of French, Romanian, Spanish, and Swedish initiatives in the fight against disinformation. It reviews both media and information literacy theories and discusses the role of fact-checkers in combating disinformation.¹⁰

Since the 2021 edition of the Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI) research, major changes have taken place in the political landscape and international relations of countries throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a groundbreaking event that has challenged and shaken Europe's security and stability. The current 2023–2024 study covers the same ten countries as the 2021 DRI edition did, four of which belong to the Visegrad Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and six to the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine).

Each country chapter follows an identical structure, and in addition to an abstract and a concluding recommendations section, they consist of the following sections:

- **Overview of the latest topical studies.** This section provides a concise review of the most relevant studies in the field of countering disinformation since 2021, focusing on material published by national research institutions, think-tanks and state institutions.

⁹ Roozenbeek, J., van der Linden, S., Goldberg, B., Rathje, S. & Lewandowsky, S. Psychological inoculation improves resilience against misinformation on social media, *Science Advances*, 2022, 8(34), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abo625410.1126/sciadv.abo6254>

¹⁰ *Disinformation Debunked. Building Resilience through Media and Information Literacy*. Eds. Frau-Meigs, D. and Corbu, N. Routledge, 2024.

- **Effect of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation.** This section discusses how Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has affected national vulnerability to disinformation in each country. It reviews changes in the national context which have either facilitated or limited the spread of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives; details public opinion surveys which indicate the degree of societal susceptibility to disinformation related to the war against Ukraine; and analyses the evolution of the topical disinformation narratives.
- **Changes in the national media landscape.** This section explores recent developments in media consumption patterns and media ownership. It assesses the significance of Russia's war against Ukraine in the national media environment, and the impact of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives on the national media space since 2021.
- **Changes in the legal and institutional framework.** This section assesses the most significant changes in national legal and institutional measures aimed at countering disinformation in 2021–2024. It also evaluates the effectiveness of the existing laws and institutions in the fight against disinformation and showcases both successful and failed national responses to disinformation.
- **Responses by the media and civil society.** This section reviews the contribution of civil society actors and the media in the fight against disinformation, particularly in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The UN General-Secretary's 2022 report on countering disinformation stressed that the media and digital literacy initiatives would play a crucial role in enhancing the capacity of citizens to identify misleading information.

For the preparation of country chapters, country experts conducted at least three in-depth interviews with media experts, representatives of specialised NGOs, and/or officials. The names and affiliation of the quoted individuals were referenced only if they agreed to reveal their identities.

A quantitative Disinformation Resilience Index across the Central and Eastern European countries was measured based on online expert surveys (a minimum of 10 responses per country). In comparison with the 2020–2021 DRI study, certain changes in the methodology of DRI and its composite indicators were introduced. These are explained in detail in the following section.

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Methodology of the Disinformation Resilience Index

The 2024 DRI consists of three composite indicators: **societal resilience**, **legal and institutional resilience**, and **media and digital resilience**. Three identical composite indicators were used in the 2018 and 2021 DRI editions. The current DRI study, however, differs notably from the previous DRI editions in respect to what these indicators assess.

The past DRI editions estimated the **state of national resilience to disinformation**. Some of the variables of the 2021 DRI assessed the progress a country had made since 2018 but most of the variables were descriptive. The measurements captured general trends and determined how well countries were doing in fighting disinformation. However, it was difficult to conduct a comparative analysis of each featured country. Surveyed experts made assessments of respective countries' vulnerability and preparedness to tackle disinformation across multiple national contexts. Furthermore, many variables lacked evidence-based scoring parameters which also contributed to biased responses. As a result, DRIs for some societies with quite different levels of resilience to disinformation were barely distinguishable from each other.

The 2024 DRI edition took this into consideration and in contrast to the past DRI editions, it aimed at assessing the **extent and direction of changes since 2021**. Each of the ten questions in the 2024 DRI survey intended to evaluate the direction of change of a given variable. The main goal of the 2024 DRI indicators were therefore to establish whether regress, progress, or no change had taken place in respective countries since 2021.

For each country, at least 10 respondents completed the DRI survey. Respondents were approached on the basis of their high expertise in the field of combating disinformation. Among them were members of the analytical and scientific community, specialised civil society organisations, experienced journalists and media experts, and current and former officials.

Disinformation Resilience Index

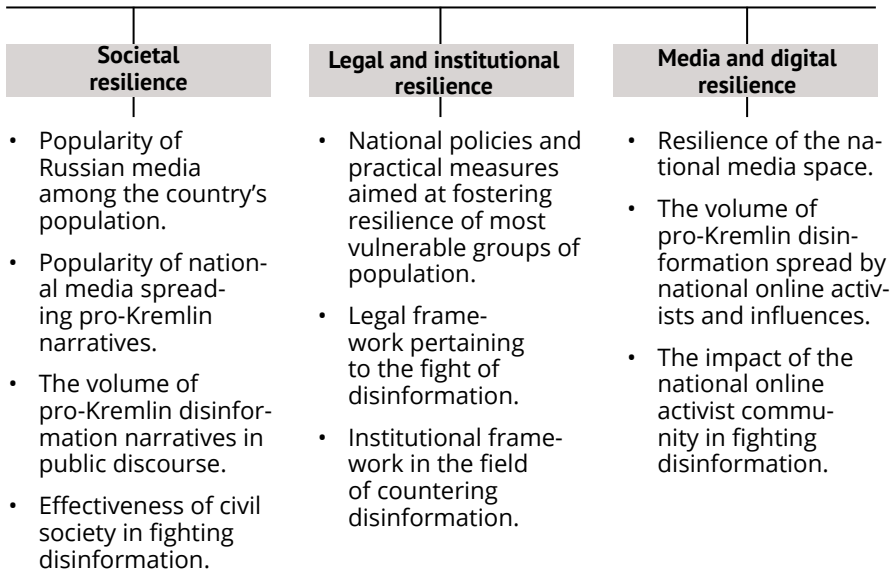
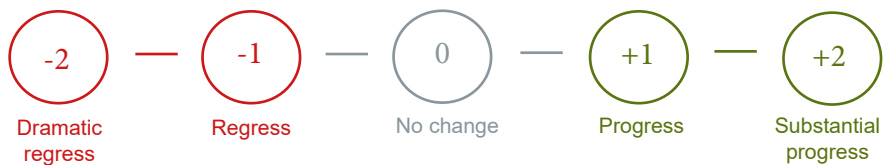


Figure: the DRI structure

The five point Likert scale was used to provide five possible responses to the survey questions. A rating system from “-2” to “+2” was used, with “0” corresponding to no change since 2021. The survey also included the “Not certain/Do not know” option for each of the questions.



The most negative judgements to all relevant questions expressed by all surveyed experts would therefore result in the lowest grade (“-2”), whereas the most positive judgements by all would amount to “+2” grade.

(A) Societal resilience. A progress / regress in societal resilience since 2021 was estimated based on the perceived changes in the following variables:

- Popularity of Russian media among the country's population.
- Popularity of national media spreading pro-Kremlin narratives.
- The volume of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives in public discourse.
- Effectiveness of civil society in fighting disinformation.

The DRI questions relevant for the Societal resilience indicator were:

(1) How has the level of popularity of Russian traditional and digital media and their trust ratings changed among your country's population since 2021?

(2) How has the level of popularity of national traditional and online media transmitting and spreading pro-Kremlin narratives changed since 2021?

(3) How has the volume and frequency of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives, particularly those concerning the invasion of Ukraine, in public discourse of your country changed since 2021?

(4) How has the visibility and effectiveness of your country's civil society (both formal organisations and informal initiatives) in fighting pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda changed since 2021?

(B) Legal and institutional resilience. A progress / regress in legal and institutional resilience since 2021 was estimated based on the perceived changes in:

- National policies and practical measures aimed at fostering resilience of most vulnerable groups of population.
- Legal framework pertaining to the fight of disinformation.
- Institutional framework in the field of countering disinformation.

The relevant DRI questions included:

(1) How have your country's policies and practical measures, aimed at increasing the resilience of targeted / most vulnerable groups to pro-Kremlin disinformation, changed since 2021?

(2) How has your country's legal framework dealing with foreign information manipulations and interference evolved since 2021, particularly in response to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine?

(3) How has the level of preparedness of state institutions responsible for counteracting foreign, predominantly Russian, information manipulations and interference changed since 2021?

(C) Media and digital resilience. Either progress or regress in legal and institutional resilience since 2021 was estimated based on the perceived changes in:

- Resilience of the national media space.
- The volume of pro-Kremlin disinformation spread by national online activists and influences.
- The impact of the national online activist community in fighting disinformation.

The relevant DRI questions included:

(1) How has the level of resilience of the national media space (e.g., through the establishment of fact-checking units or training programmes for media workers) to foreign information manipulations and interference changed since 2021?

(2) How has the volume and visibility of pro-Kremlin disinformation and manipulations spread by national online activists, bloggers and influencers changed in your country since 2021?

(3) How has the impact and visibility of the national online activist community (e.g., bloggers, influencers) in fighting foreign information manipulations and interference, particularly disinformation related to the Russia-Ukraine war, changed since 2021?

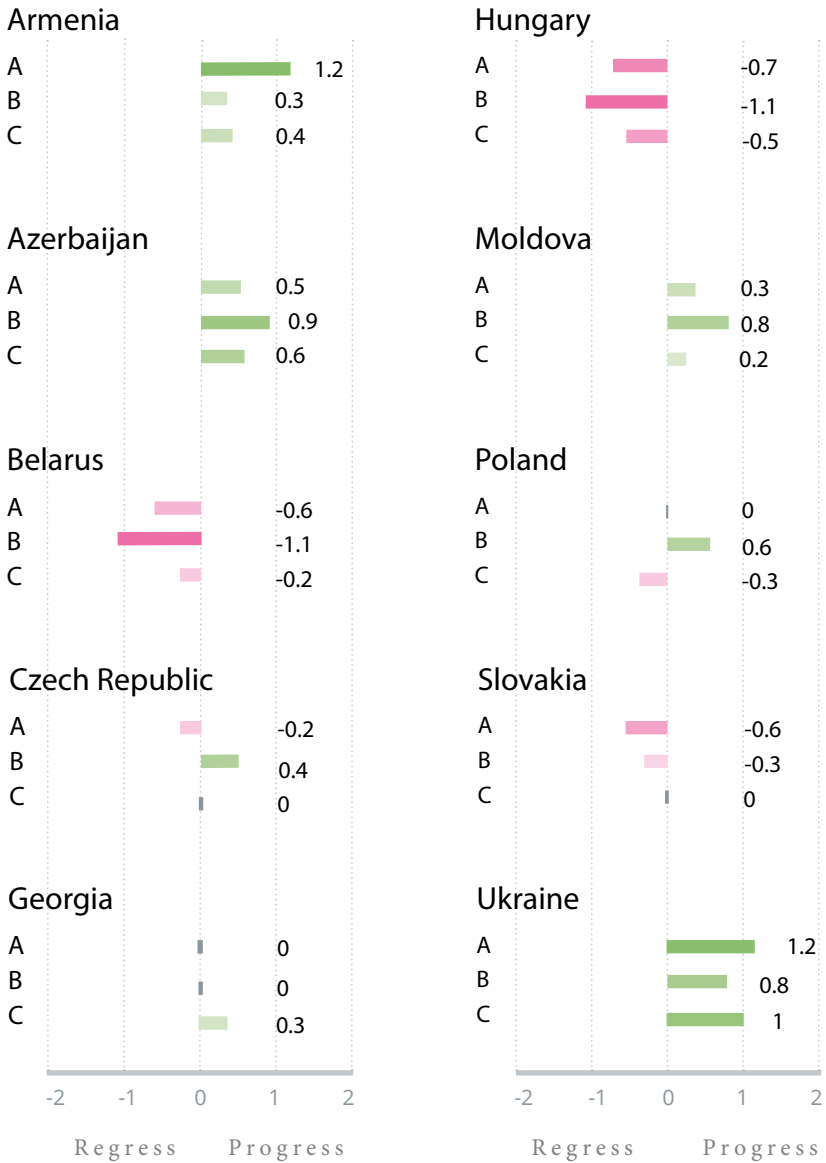
Depending of the question, either of the following two sets of responses were proposed:

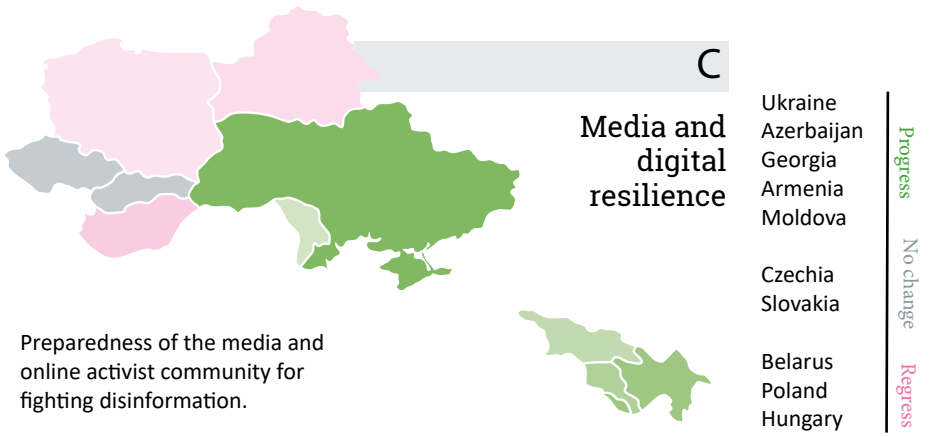
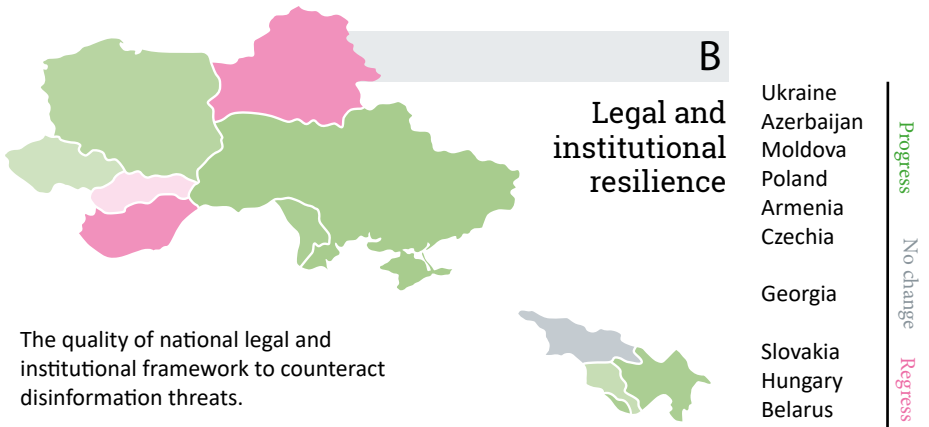
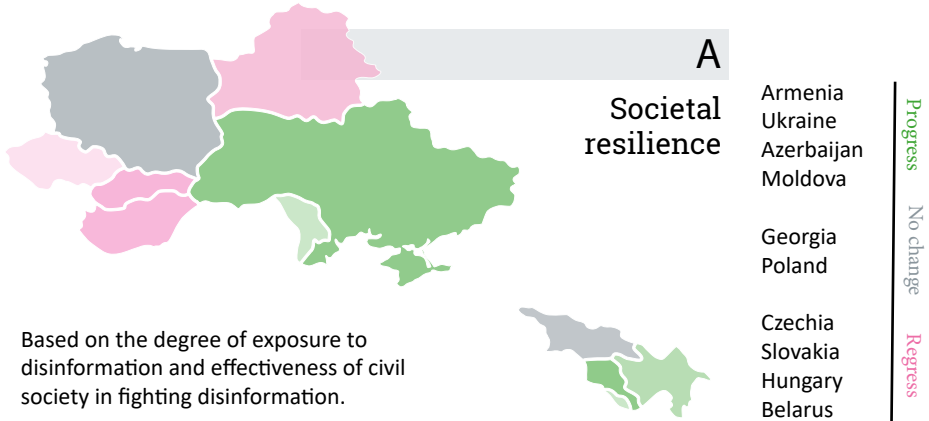
- Decreased significantly | Somewhat decreased | Hardly changed, remains fairly low | Hardly changed, remains fairly high | Somewhat increased | Increased significantly
- Greatly deteriorated | Somewhat deteriorated | Hardly changed, remains fairly weak | Hardly changed, remains fairly strong | Somewhat improved | Greatly improved

Each of the three indicators were calculated based on the average of relevant variables.

Disinformation Resilience Index 2024

The extent and direction of changes since 2021, web-based expert survey





Summary

The 2024 DRI survey indicated that the ten focus countries of Central and Eastern Europe made only negligible progress towards improving their resilience to disinformation. The average rates for each of the three composite indicators (societal resilience, legal and institutional resilience, and media and digital resilience) across the ten countries in question were approximately 0.1. While several countries made considerable progress in some of the DRI indicators, others experienced regress. For half of the countries, at least two of the three composite indicators barely changed.

It should be stressed that the 2024 DRI measured the extent of progress or regress with regards to resilience to disinformation and the results should be interpreted correspondingly. For example, the much higher **societal resilience** rate for Armenia (1.2) compared to the Czech Republic (-0.2) does not mean that Czech society fares worse than Armenia in that respect. Instead, the DRI results highlight that experts assessed Armenia's progress in that sphere since 2021 as more significant than that of the Czech Republic. This was largely the result of Russia's policies towards Armenia, particularly in the context of the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh war, which were very negatively received across Armenian society. As a consequence, the popularity of the Russian media and their trust ratings among Armenia's population decreased significantly, reducing the country's overall exposure to pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives. Conversely, the Czech Republic demonstrated the highest level of societal resilience in the 2021 DRI index and therefore with such a high base, further significant progress was always unlikely.

Similarly, readers may note Moldova's high rating (0.8) in **legal and institutional resilience** in comparison with a negative score (-0.3) for Slovakia. However, these scores should also be treated as indicators of the degree of progress or regression from the state of affairs the countries found themselves back in 2021. Whereas the current study showed a minor regression for Slovakia in legal and institutional resilience, in the 2021 DRI study Slovakia scored the highest ranking among ten countries on this sub-index. Moldova, together with Belarus, scored the lowest in that category in 2021. Thanks to improvements in its legal and institutional framework, Moldova has made greater progress than Slovakia has done in the same period of time. However, Slovakia still arguably fares better in the current state of legal and institutional preparedness to tackle disinformation.

The 2024 DRI results demonstrate that the situation in Belarus has significantly deteriorated. Back in 2021, the country was already lagging behind other countries in resilience to disinformation. The degree of its regression since then, particularly in the **legal and institutional resilience** sub-index, corroborates expert views

on the deplorable state of the country's international standing in combating disinformation. The results for Azerbaijan, particularly with respect to its legal and institutional resilience, should be approached cautiously as they appear to be more positive than the actual changes in the country's resilience to disinformation suggest, as described in the corresponding country chapter.

The societal resilience rates for the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine were the highest among other CEE countries in the 2021 DRI study. The 2024 DRI results showed that the Czech Republic and Poland have hardly progressed while Hungary and Slovakia have seen a regression. Overall, despite being under Russian all-out aggression for more than two years, Ukraine demonstrated the best progress among the ten CEE countries which is a remarkable achievement since Ukraine scored the highest rate in the 2021 DRI study.

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Armenia

Abstract

This chapter reviews institutional arrangements in Armenia regarding freedom of speech and tackling disinformation, with a focus on the changes since 2021. It builds upon the results of recent topical studies and media monitoring, sociological surveys concerning the popularity of different media, and assessments by international organisations.

The study concludes that in the past three years the principal role in disinformation and propaganda, including the use of Russian propaganda narratives, has been played by the pro-Russian opposition and its affiliated media. The main propaganda narratives have shifted. Greater emphasis is placed upon narratives against Armenia's attempts to diversify its foreign policy, including the expansion of cooperation with the European Union, as well as political and military cooperation, including military procurements, with partners other than Russia.

While the institutional response has been insufficient, and state institutions' communication methods still need to be developed, some media initiatives and the work of civil society organisations have contributed to the improvement of Armenia's resilience to disinformation. Open criticism of Russia's policies, including by high level state officials, particularly in the context of the Azerbaijan's repeated military incursions into Armenian territory since May 2021, the displacement of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, and Western mediation efforts, have also contributed to a change in foreign policy perceptions among Armenians.

The chapter also includes some recommendations for policymakers, media and civil society.

Overview of the latest topical studies

While reviewing the research and analysis in the field of countering disinformation in Armenia, it is worth considering that in the recent period, disinformation and propaganda of foreign (mainly Russian) origin, supplemented by Armenian partisan media affiliated with the former ruling elite, has essentially shifted its focus, with repeated attempts to reverse the development of EU-Armenia relations and other attempts to diversify Armenia's foreign policy.

Among the notable recent publications on disinformation in Armenia is a Freedom House policy brief, which revises the best international practice, the legal and regulatory framework, and some of the measures to counter disinformation.¹ A report, prepared by Internews in collaboration with CyberHub-AM, a Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) for Armenian civil society, analysed the political context and the media landscape. The report paid particular attention to cybersecurity issues, including the use of Pegasus spyware on the devices of several politicians and journalists. In November 2021, when Apple released notifications about nation-state activity targeting a select number of iPhone users, the initial reports blamed the Armenian government. In 2023, CyberHub-AM, together with international partners, obtained evidence suggesting that the Azerbaijani government was behind the use of Pegasus in Armenia.²

The Centre for Policy Studies has covered several aspects of foreign and proxy disinformation and related hybrid threats in a collection of articles supplemented by the findings of online expert discussions with the Executive Director of MEMO 98, Rastó Kužel, and research fellow of the Association for International Affairs, Pavel Havlíček.³ The findings were also covered in detail in public discussions with Armenian experts. Particularly, it was noted that the false dilemma 'security vs democracy', i.e., the notion that democracy is contradictory to Armenia's security interests, already an important feature of

¹ Avedissian, K., "Armenia's fight against disinformation: Towards a whole-of-society approach?," *Freedom House*, November 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/Armenia's-Fight-Against-Disinformation_EN.pdf

² "Armenia digital threat landscape: Civil society and media", *Internews*, October 2023, p. 7, <https://mdi.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Armenia-Digital-Threat-Landscape-Report.pdf>

³ "Advancing democratic resilience," *Centre for Policy Studies*, December 2023, https://centre-forpolicystudies.org/gallery/democratic_resilience_hybrid_threats.pdf

the opposition's rhetoric ahead of the 2021 elections, remained widespread. Such rhetoric is based on demands to keep the alliance with Russia as the exclusive security framework and to surrender some elements of state sovereignty, while abstaining from the development of ties with the West. More recently, this kind of propaganda has focused on attempts to discredit Western mediation efforts in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), and the government's careful attempts to diversify its foreign policy.⁴

The Media Initiatives Centre's project, *Media.am*, which was covered in the previous DRI edition (including an interview with the editor),⁵ has released a series of topical publications debunking disinformation spread by print and digital media, as well as via social networks. Particularly, the origins of the narrative that Armenia supported Russia in the war against Ukraine,⁶ and some recurrent Russian propaganda narratives have been analysed.⁷ One of its recent publications scrutinised the public opinion surveys carried out by the Armenian branch of the Gallup International Association, misrepresented by several media as the respected American polling company Gallup Inc. *Media.am* revealed that the Gallup International Association survey results, presented at press conferences involving some opposition politicians, were misleading.⁸ *Media.am* has also studied the level of media literacy since the 2020 war, such as changes in the public perception of the war and the subsequent events, and other related issues.⁹ The example of *Media.am*, a comprehensive and reliable source active over an extended period of time through support from USAID, as well as other platforms receiving continuous funding, such as the Public Journalism Club and the Fact Investigation Platform (*Fip.am*) run by the Union of Informed Citizens NGO, underscores the importance of institutional, or at least long-term project funding for civil society organisations.

⁴ Gabrielyan, E., "Security-related concepts constructed on false narratives: Security or democracy," *Aravot*, 12 December 2023, <https://www.aravot.am/2023/12/13/1388170/>

⁵ Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", *EAST Center*, 2021, pp. 32–52.

⁶ Grigoryan, A. "Operation Z' in Armenia: how an image of a Russia supporter is created," *Media.am*, 29 August 2022, <https://media.am/hy/verified/2022/08/29/33830/>

⁷ Ghazaryan, M., "Russian propaganda narratives in Armenia in September and October 2023," *Media.am*, 28 December 2023, <https://media.am/hy/verified/2023/12/28/37256/>

⁸ Simonyan, O., "To what extent are the Armenian 'Gallup's surveys' reliable?," *Media.am*, 16 May 2024, <https://media.am/hy/verified/2024/05/16/39219/>

⁹ Yeghiazaryan, A., "The transformation of media literacy after the war and nowadays," *Media.am*, 4 October 2023, <https://media.am/hy/medialiteracy/2023/10/04/36275/>

Since late 2022, as the consultations with the European Union to deploy the EUMA (eventually deployed in February 2023) began, it became one of the principal targets of propaganda (particularly of Russian and Azerbaijani origin), along with the ratification of the Rome Statute (approved by the Constitutional Court of Armenia in March 2023 and adopted by the National Assembly in October 2023) and joining the International Criminal Court – a procedure staunchly opposed by Russia. Since late 2022, Armenia has abstained from participation in the work of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Instead, Armenia has sought other frameworks for political and military cooperation, including military procurements from France and India. More recently, state officials and the expert community have been openly discussing the possibility of leaving the CSTO. In an interview with France 24 in February 2024, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Armenia’s participation in the CSTO was ‘essentially frozen’, and he suggested the possibility of leaving the organisation.¹⁰ This issue has also become one of the targets of fierce Russian and proxy propaganda. The speaker of the National Assembly, Alen Simonyan, noted at the Conference of Speakers of EU Parliaments that, along with Azerbaijan, Russia has been engaged in a hybrid war on Armenia, while “numerous Russian government officials presume to dictate Armenia’s interests and speak on behalf of the Armenian people”.¹¹

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has had contrasting effects on the spread of disinformation in Armenia. Members of the former ruling elite, primarily the former President, Serzh Sargsyan – ousted by the widespread public protests of 2018 – his predecessor, Robert Kocharyan, and their associates, and the media and affiliated bloggers have continued with their existing propaganda narratives. These narratives allege that cooperation with the West threatens

¹⁰ Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s interview with France 24 TV, 23 February 2024, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2024/02/23/Nikol-Pashinyan-Interview-France-24/>

¹¹ “The hybrid attack mounted by Russia and Azerbaijan against Armenia related to the trilateral meeting in Brussels on April 5 involving the Armenian Prime Minister, the President of the European Commission, and the US Secretary of State is a case in point - Alen Simonyan,” *Aravot*, 23 April 2024, <https://en.aravot.am/2024/04/23/346061/>

Armenia's national and 'spiritual' values, and that 'Western agents' were trying to demolish national traditions, civil society, and those critical of the Kremlin were traitors.¹² In addition, these narratives have been supplemented with claims that the Ukraine war is, in fact, taking place between Russia and NATO (or the 'collective West'), often combined with the argument that Armenian membership in a union state with Russia was becoming 'unavoidable'.

The former ruling Republican Party's spokesperson, Eduard Sharmazanov, is particularly keen on making repeated statements of this kind. Soon after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine¹³ and on numerous other occasions, more recently also in combination with invectives against contacts with Ukraine, Sharmazanov has made allegations about attempts to open a 'second front' against Russia upon the West's request, as well as the narrative equating the criticism of Russia's policies and the CSTO by Prime Minister Pashinyan and other politicians with 'treason' against Russia.¹⁴ In February 2024, Sharmazanov also headed the Armenian opposition's delegation at the "First international inter-party forum against modern neo-colonialist practices 'For Freedom of Nations'", organised in Moscow by the United Russia party, where he accused the 'collective West' for the 'colour revolution' in Armenia in 2018.¹⁵ Other opposition politicians have also made allegations about the 'betrayal' of Russia and doomsday predictions because of the criticism of the CSTO and the supposed intention to leave the Russian-dominated bloc.¹⁶ Such allegations, along with conspiracy theories and hate speech, are repeated on daily basis on the *Hayeli Akumb* talk show broadcast by *H2 TV* and online at <https://hayeli.am/>, in similar broadcasts by *TV5* and *Yerkir Media*, as well as other broadcast and digital media.

An expert from the media sector interviewed for this study noted that aside from hate speech in the domestic politics context, hate speech against Indian immigrants has been increasing, especially in the last 1–1.5 years, as military and technical cooperation with India, including military procurement, has increased. This phenomenon can likely be linked to Russian and proxy propaganda.

¹² Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, pp. 34–35.

¹³ Sharmazanov, D., Facebook post, 18 March 2022, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=503347774488861&id=100044409284560

¹⁴ Seiranyan, S., interview with Eduard Sharmazanov, *168.am*, 26 February 2024, <https://168.am/2024/02/26/2002586.html>

¹⁵ *24 News*, 16 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwhVxdDXnml>

¹⁶ Address of the head of the "With Honour" faction Hayk Mamijanyan to the National Assembly of Armenia, 27 February 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=438727475192953>

The president of the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE), Ashot Melikyan, has also noted that several media outlets associated with various political groups and specialising in disinformation activities repeatedly publish unsubstantiated claims about the current state of military procurement, other defence related issues or otherwise sensitive social issues, and often also reproduce disinformation originating from foreign sources. The use of such methods is justified by claims that demands to adhere to certain principles of journalist ethics are tantamount to censorship.¹⁷

Such narratives appear as the logical development to those dating back to the 2021 parliamentary election campaign, when one of the main narratives of the campaign by the Armenia bloc backed by ex-President Robert Kocharyan was the allegation that the EU's decision to allocate a 2.6 billion euro assistance package for Armenia was 'against Russia', and later claimed that the money was allocated for "changing Armenia's foreign policy vector", or "for damaging the relations with Russia".¹⁸ Days before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kocharyan and others also suggested that joining the union state with Russia was "the solution for having influence in the region".¹⁹ During the Eastern Partnership's Euronest parliamentary assembly session in Yerevan, Kocharyan demanded Armenia withdraw from the Eastern Partnership, specifically mentioning that Belarus had done so a few months earlier.²⁰ Later on, in March 2022, there were speculations about the possibility to become "one of Russia's most developed regions",²¹ and similar statements combined with accusations against the 'collective West' were also voiced during opposition rallies organised in the spring and early summer of 2022. Another narrative used in the same context was that the EU's mediation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan could actually

¹⁷ "CPFE president: Freedom of speech should not be used in a way harmful for the society," *Public TV*, 31 July 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yq-KSTVtcNk>

¹⁸ Barseghyan, A., "Why does Armenia receive 2.6 billion euros from the EU" [in Armenian], *Media.am*, 16 September 2021, <https://media.am/hy/verified/2021/09/16/29518/>

¹⁹ Tosunyan, G., "One of the solutions for having influence is joining the union state" [in Armenian], *Civilnet*, 17 February 2022, <https://www.civilnet.am/news/650356/գործոն-դառնալու-լուծումներից-մեկը-կարող-է-լինել-միութենական-պետության-ձևավորումը-քոչարյան/>

²⁰ "Edgar Ghazaryan: After Aliyev's statements Armenia could have avoided providing security guarantees for Azeri delegates" [in Armenian], *Aravot*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.aravot.am/2022/02/21/1249024/>

²¹ "If the union state membership becomes unavoidable, how to become a prosperous region like Tatarstan, and not like one of Russia's poor regions" [in Armenian], *Tert.am*, 15 March 2022, <https://www.tert.am/am/news/2022/03/15/ruben-wardanyan/3777539>

“provoke a war”.²² The opposition continues to repeat allegations made by Russian officials that the EUMA focuses on spying against Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran. Particularly, the allegations have been voiced by the director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, in July 2023,²³ October 2023,²⁴ March 2024,²⁵ April 2024,²⁶ and on other occasions.

However, expert discussions, publications and blog posts about Armenia’s need to diversify her foreign policy, and, most importantly, the dissatisfaction expressed by several state officials with Russia’s policies vis-à-vis Armenia, has appeared to reduce the influence of pro-Russian propaganda. IRI surveys demonstrate that while in 2021 Russia was still believed to be a friendly state by the second largest number of respondents (‘very good’ – 10 per cent, ‘good’ – 60 per cent, ‘bad’ – 13 per cent, ‘very bad’ – 2 per cent).²⁷ In 2023 the numbers were ‘very good’ – 10 per cent, ‘good’ – 40 per cent, ‘bad’ – 34 per cent, and ‘very bad’ – 15 per cent.²⁸

The *Infocheck.am* website, previously managed by the government-funded Information Checking Centre, has not been updated since January 2022. Although the website held a degree of pro-government bias, it was recognised as a useful reference point for journalists, particularly for fact-checking related to COVID-19.²⁹

A large influx of Russians entered Armenia in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with approximately 65,000 of the new entrants remain-

²² Grigoryan, A., “Sustainability of the EU-Armenia cooperation: Disinformation resilience component,” *Open Society Foundations-Armenia fellowship paper series*, 2022, p. 5.

²³ “Maria Zakharova: The EU monitoring mission does not contribute to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict resolution” [in Armenian], *Azatutyun.am*, 26 July 2023, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32520851.html>

²⁴ “Zakharova: The EU observers gather intelligence on Iran and Russia” [in Armenian], *Panorama.am*, 26 October 2023, <https://www.panorama.am/am/news/2023/10/26/Մարիա-Զախարովա/2917381>

²⁵ “Zakharova: The EU observers are ‘spying’ on Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan” [in Armenian], *Mediamax.am*, 20 March 2024, <https://mediamax.am/am/news/region/54268>

²⁶ “Zakharova: The EU observers in Armenia are involved in intelligence activities” [in Armenian], *Tert.am*, 18 April 2024, <https://www.tert.am/am/news/2024/04/18/eu-mission/4110976>

²⁷ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia”, *IRI*, 2021, p. 47.

²⁸ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia”, *IRI*, 2023, p. 50.

²⁹ Grigoryan, A., “Armenia”, in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), “Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021”, EAST Center, 2021, p. 45.

ing in the country.³⁰ However, the presence of more Russians has not appeared to increase the prevalence of sources spreading disinformation. The small politically active part of the Russian community is openly critical of Russia's policies. While the majority of Russian immigrants in Armenia avoid participation in political actions, including online activity, possibly because it may result in criminal prosecution and trials *in absentia* in Russia, including a recent legal amendment leading to the confiscation of property. Although some of the immigrants are likely loyal to Russia's policies, they also abstain from visible demonstrations of their political preferences, so as to avoid possible tensions with many Armenians whose antipathy towards the Kremlin has become increasingly obvious.

Changes in the national media landscape

Armenia's ranking in the World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has improved since the publication of the 2021 DRI: from 63rd place in 2021 to 51st in 2022, 49th in 2023 and 43rd in 2024.³¹ Yet, according to the report, "the media remain polarised. The country is facing an unprecedented level of disinformation and hate speech". Social media, accessed daily by two-thirds of the population, is the main source of information for a majority of Armenians. As regards to other media:

*The polarisation of the media mirrors that of the political scene ... Only a handful of media demonstrate independence. Two political topics are especially sensitive: the Nagorno-Karabakh war and the Russia-Ukraine war. Some political groups run disinformation operations and attack journalists.*³²

The CPFE recorded three cases of physical violence against journalists between January and September 2023, and no other incidents followed in 2023.³³ CPFE later reported that 14 journalists experienced physical violence in the second quarter of 2024, while no such cases were recorded in the first quar-

³⁰ Grigoryan, A., "How many Russians moved to Armenia: checking the claims made by [minister] Kerobyan" [in Armenian], *Civilnet*, 20 March 2023, <https://www.civilnet.am/news/695196/դրբան-ռուսաստանցի-է-տեղափոխվել-հայաստան-բերրոյանի-պնդումների-հետքերով/>

³¹ Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, p. 40.

³² "Armenia", RSF 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/armenia>

³³ "Freedom in the World 2024," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2024>

ter.³⁴ These statistics were the result of the alleged use of excessive force by the police on 12 June, when a group of radical protesters broke a fence while attempting to enter the National Assembly compound.³⁵

Armenia has maintained the 'partly free' status in the Freedom in the World 2024 report by Freedom House, with the score of 54 sustained in 2023-2024 (from 55 in 2021-2022).³⁶ Similar to previous reports in the 2021 DRI,³⁷ "Independent and investigative outlets operate relatively freely in Armenia, and generally publish online (...) By comparison, most print and broadcast outlets are affiliated with political or larger commercial interests." While the parliament had criminalised insulting and defaming officials and public figures in July 2021, those provisions were removed from the criminal code a year later.³⁸

According to the Freedom on the Net 2023 report:

*Disinformation about or related to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine has spread online since early 2022. For example, Russian state-controlled media and bloggers initially claimed that the Armenian government supported the full-scale invasion, which was false. In addition, Armenian media linked to the political opposition, Russian state-backed media, Russian government officials, and some Armenian political parties have claimed that US-run laboratories in Armenia are producing biological weapons, mirroring a disinformation narrative about similar facilities in Ukraine.*³⁹

A nationwide poll conducted by the International Republican Institute's Centre for Insights in Survey Research in January-March 2023 showed that the most popular sources of political information were Armenian TV, social media, online media, relatives or friends, and Russian TV: 76 per cent, 57 per cent, 46 per

³⁴ "Ashot Melikyan: 14 cases of physical violence against journalists in the second quarter of this year," *Factor TV*, 25 July 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cO1CSO74vx8>

³⁵ "Reporters injured by targeted police violence while covering protest in Armenia", RSF, <https://rsf.org/en/reporters-injured-targeted-police-violence-while-covering-protest-armenia-0>

³⁶ "Freedom in the World 2024," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2024>

³⁷ Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, p. 41.

³⁸ "Freedom in the World 2024," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2024>

³⁹ "Freedom on the Net 2023," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-net/2023>

cent, 44 per cent and 40 per cent, respectively.⁴⁰ While the previous polls only measured Armenian channels, other data showed that as late as 2019, Russian TV used to be more popular than Armenian.⁴¹ As regards the media outlets considered as the most trustworthy for political information (mentioned as the 1st or 2nd choice), those that scored the highest at the time of the 2021 DRI publication have improved their position. The most popular answers were *Public TV, Armenia TV, Shant TV* and *Azatutyun* (RFE/RL Armenian Service): 33 per cent, 25 per cent, 21 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively.⁴² These figures compare with 19 per cent, 11 per cent, 18 per cent and 9 per cent in 2021.⁴³

It could be argued that *Public TV* and the media outlets considered close to the current leadership, as well as *Shant TV* and *Azatutyun*, tend to broadcast seemingly neutral news stories about the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which might be perceived as false balance or 'bothsidesism'. However, their talk shows, especially those broadcast on *Public TV* and pro-government sources, regularly host experts who are sharply critical of Russia. At the same time, the ongoing practice of using Russian video footage while reporting about events in third countries (including beyond Ukraine) remains problematic. As regards the media affiliated with the former ruling elite, including *Armenia TV, H2 TV, TV5, Yerkir Media*, and a number of other broadcasters, printed and online outlets, which routinely vilify the government and its attempts to diversify foreign policy, as well as the 'collective West', they fully follow the Russian script. This includes the use of terms such as 'special military operation', 'Kyiv regime'. In addition to the already mentioned *Armenia TV*, the popularity of *H2 TV* and *TV5* has been estimated by the latest available IRI poll, respectively, 3 and 4 per cent.⁴⁴ In 2021 each channel was mentioned by less than 1 percent of the survey respondents and were included in the 'other' category. Although the increase in their popularity may be due to the audience which moved from another channel affiliated with the former ruling elite, *ArmNews*, which used to have a rating of 5 per cent in 2021, but lost its slot in the public domain in 2022.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia", *IRI*, 2023, p. 63.

⁴¹ Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, pp. 41–42.

⁴² "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia", *IRI*, 2023, p. 62.

⁴³ Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, p. 43.

⁴⁴ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia", *IRI*, 2023, p. 62.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The experts and civil society representatives surveyed for the purpose of this study noted that the level of popularity of Russian media and their trust ratings among Armenia’s population has decreased. Two thirds of those interviewed consider the decrease significant. Many additionally noted the decrease as a consequence of the general disappointment with Russia. Two thirds of the survey participants noted that the volume and frequency of pro-Kremlin public disinformation narratives, particularly those concerning the invasion of Ukraine, have decreased. Half of the respondents consider that the impact and visibility of the national online activist community in fighting foreign disinformation and interference has improved.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

In April 2023, a four-year project funded by the European Union was launched to assist the government of Armenia with public administration reforms in accordance with the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Among the project objectives is the consolidation of the government’s analytical and policy development capacity, as well as improving the strategic communication capacity of the government.⁴⁶ Since September 2023, the project has included EU experts on communication architecture formation. The chief of the Prime Minister’s staff, Arayik Harutyunyan, has noted that the experience of Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Sweden and the United Kingdom has been studied, and it has been proposed to create a public communication office within the structure of the Prime Minister’s Office. The purpose of the new office would be to support the government and state departments in coordinating their communications.⁴⁷

The Public Relations and Information Centre under the Prime Minister’s Office has been cooperating with the International Republican Institute to organise strategic communication courses for small groups of public servants, and a memorandum has been signed with the Yerevan State University to establish

⁴⁶ “Support to CEPA monitoring, implementation, and communication,” EU for Armenia project, 2023, <https://eu4armenia.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1925>

⁴⁷ Government of the Republic of Armenia, “Arayik Harutyunyan presents the priorities at the base of the new communication architecture and the planned programs in the field”, 16 April 2024, <https://www.gov.am/en/news/item/10523/>

a masters-level qualification in strategic communication.⁴⁸ An expert from a public institution interviewed for this study, noted that some measures have been taken, although without legal or institutional amendments in place, when the preparation of the National Strategy Against Disinformation began in 2022. The national strategy has involved training seminars for public relations officers of the state institutions on the methodology of work against cyberattacks and disinformation. In addition, a media literacy hackathon took place in 2022 in cooperation with civil society organisations, and there was an international conference focused on developing measures against disinformation and propaganda.

Beyond these measures and events, no significant institutional developments have taken place. More than 90 per cent of the experts and civil society representatives surveyed for this study consider that the legal framework dealing with foreign disinformation and interference remain weak and have hardly changed since 2021. Two thirds also consider the level of preparedness of state institutions dealing with counteraction to foreign disinformation and interference insufficient.

The National Strategy Against Disinformation for 2024–2026 and the enclosed action plan were adopted by the government in December 2023. Its objective is to ensure an “appropriate response against disinformation by means of preventing, reducing and neutralising the related risks”. Accordingly, the strategy envisages civic education on a national level, improving the availability of official information and proactive accountability, employing international best practice in preventing and curbing disinformation and hybrid attacks, and the development of the state bodies’ capacity to detect and analyse disinformation.⁴⁹ It has been noted that some steps towards addressing cyber and digital security issues have been made, but progress remains partial and insufficient.⁵⁰ The government’s counter-disinformation strategies have so far been fragmentary and reactive, rather than comprehensive and future-proofed. As the new national strategy was being developed, a draft section suggested a framework for greater engagement between the government and the private sector as well as improving public resilience through education and media literacy. Yet

⁴⁸ Public Relations and Information Centre, 24 June 2024, <https://iprc.am/ստորագրումներ/կայացել-է-ռազմավարական-հաղորդակցու/3426/>

⁴⁹ “National Strategy Against Disinformation 2024–2026”, p. 9, *E-gov portal*, 2023, https://www.e-gov.am/u_files/file/decrees/varch/GV65-3FA5-9437-87B6/1319.1.pdf

⁵⁰ Avedissian, K., “Armenia’s fight against disinformation: Towards a whole-of-society approach?”. *Op.cit.*, p. 3.

even this draft strategy failed to offer an institutionalised and comprehensive approach to disinformation.⁵¹ Overall, there is evidently a drive to improve the state administration communication structure, and the choice of the studied models, including examples from the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, suggests a preference towards a whole-of-society approach. However, any initiative to employ these models would need to take into account the local context in Armenia, such as the cultural differences and the deeply polarised media environment.

The Freedom on the Net 2023 report states that blocking of social media platforms is not common in Armenia. Although in September 2022, during border clashes in which Azerbaijani forces attacked Armenian territory, access to TikTok was disrupted. Likewise, during the 2020 armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, some users were unable to access *TikTok*. The single case of a domain name and website being blocked took place in December 2022 on the orders of the National Security Service. The website, *Przdnt.am*, was used by a Russian theatre troupe to promote their play, 'Lay Down, Mr President.'⁵² The play was considered offensive towards the Russian leadership and therefore provocative. The website migrated to the *Przdnt.com* domain and has not been restricted since.

Meanwhile, public debate has intensified on the topic of stopping Russian TV channels from broadcasting. Notably, various government officials may have changed their mind as the discussion about the issue intensified in the autumn of 2023. During the autumn the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was displaced and so-called Russian peacekeeping forces turned a blind eye. The result was a deterioration in Armenian public attitudes towards Russia, including the existing security architecture such as the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Limiting the broadcast of Russian TV has long been advocated for by several experts and a large segment of civil society, yet a loophole in the Law on Audiovisual Media adopted in 2020 was used to keep the Russian TV channels in the public domain.⁵³

An additional factor in favour of limiting Russian TV could be the provocative content of the broadcasts. The debate intensified after a programme broadcast by the Russian *First Channel* on 23 October 2023, which contained extreme

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵² "Freedom on the Net 2023," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-net/2023>

⁵³ Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, pp. 44–45.

invectives against Prime Minister Pashinyan and several other government officials. In particular, the programme highlighted 'anti-Russian' actions such as a recent visit to Ukraine by Pashinyan's wife, Anna Hakobyan, and the broadcast essentially called upon the citizens of Armenia to start a rebellion.⁵⁴ In response, the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, Sergey Kopyrkin, and handed a note of protest stating that the broadcast "included offensive and absolutely unacceptable statements addressed to high-ranking officials of the Republic of Armenia".⁵⁵

However, similar insinuations have been repeated by Russian officials, including the director of the information and press department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Maria Zakharova, who called the participation of the Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia, Armen Grigoryan, in the conference on Ukraine in Malta "a demonstrative anti-Russian gesture".⁵⁶ Few weeks later, in December 2023, the National Commission on Television and Radio suspended the licence of the local broadcaster of Sputnik Armenia for 30 days and issued a fine for offensive remarks and encouragement of illegal acts by Russian political commentator Tigran Keosayan.⁵⁷ In January 2024, the head of the National Commission on Television and Radio, Tigran Hakobyan, said in an interview that licences for Russian TV broadcasts could be revoked.⁵⁸ Prime Minister Pashinyan also commented on the controversy in an interview with France 24:

During the events of September 2023, the highest-ranking representatives of the Russian Federation directly called on the citizens of Armenia to go to the streets and overthrow the elected legitimate government. Russian TV channels, not for a few days, but for 6 years, in fact, have been carrying out systematic

⁵⁴ "Nikol Pashinyan: The harbinger of doom," *1tv.ru*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/kukly-naslednika-tutti/vypuski/nikol-pashinyan-predvestnik-bedy-kukly-naslednika-tutti-vypusk-ot-23-10-2023>

⁵⁵ The Ambassador of the Russian Federation was summoned to the MFA of the Republic Armenia," *MFA of the Republic Armenia*, 24 October 2023, https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2023/10/24/Arm_Rus_Amb/12296

⁵⁶ Armenia's participation in conference on Ukraine in Malta anti-Russian gesture — MFA," *TASS*, 2 November 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1700761>

⁵⁷ "Armenia suspends licence of Russian broadcaster Sputnik," *Euractiv.com*, 21 December 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/armenia/news/armenia-suspends-licence-of-russian-broadcaster-sputnik/>

⁵⁸ "What does it mean 'would you dare'? We will revoke the Russian media's licences if they give us a reason," *Factor TV*, 27 January 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/factor.am/videos/893775048814765/>

*and consistent, purposeful anti-propaganda against the Armenian government, the elected authorities and me personally.*⁵⁹

Violations committed by Russian media outlets were also discussed during the Q&A session with the cabinet members at the National Assembly on 27 February 2024. It remains to be seen if practical actions will be taken.

According to several experts, including the co-founder of CyberHub-AM, Arthur Papyan, and the editor of *Media.am*, Gegham Vardanyan, Armenian state institutions and other entities have in recent years been subject to cyber-attacks by Russian government-backed groups.⁶⁰ Besides, several experts and civil society organisations have been sharply critical of Russian investments in the hi-tech sphere, which potentially carry the risk of undermining national information security. Examples include the establishment of a Rostelekom data centre and a Wildberries (largest Russian online retailer) logistics centre, which were quickly greenlighted by the Ministry of High-Tech Industry and the Ministry of Economy. Perhaps coincidentally, both ministers responsible were removed from office in December 2023 and February 2024 respectively. State officials have refused to comment on these cases. Yet, so far it would be premature to claim that any meaningful actions have been taken to diversify the economy and reduce the dependence on Russia, particularly in sensitive sectors such as energy and IT services.

Responses by the media and civil society

One topical study noted that “Armenian civil society has been part of anti-disinformation efforts through initiatives that strengthen independent media, achieve transparency in media ownership and financing (...) establish fact-checking programs, and provide media literacy education”.⁶¹ However, most of the institutions addressing these issues are dependent on project funding. Therefore, their activities are generally limited to short-term projects that span periods of a few months.

⁵⁹ Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s interview with France 24 TV, 23 February 2024, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2024/02/23/Nikol-Pashinyan-Interview-France-24/>

⁶⁰ “Cyber attacks from Russia: Armenian state institutions and representatives of various structures have been targeted,” *Public TV*, 6 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X37g-MW0RleI>

⁶¹ Avedissian, K., “Armenia’s fight against disinformation: Towards a whole-of-society approach?”. *Op.cit.*, p. 4.

In addition to the previously mentioned fact checking platforms such as *Media.am* and *Fip.am*, special attention should be paid to *Hetq.am*, an independent online media specialising in investigative journalism, which has also mastered open-source intelligence. While, as noted by Reporters Without Borders, some state officials tend to limit release of information (by refusing to respond or instigating delays),⁶² the staff at *Hetq.am*, with its dedication to the principles of investigative reporting, manages to obtain information while upholding journalistic integrity. It has achieved this distinction while avoiding the methods of the partisan media. Another known online news agency, *CivilNet*, became the first Armenian media outlet to join Meta's third-party fact-checking programme. This move has allowed native Armenian language fact-checkers to start reviewing news content on *Facebook* and *Instagram*.⁶³

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SELF-REGULATION IN THE MEDIA

Discussions about adherence to journalistic standards and ethics have recently focused on the need to create a functional media self-regulation body. An existing body, the Media Ethics Observatory, created in 2007 and with 82 members as of May 2024, is not particularly effective as it has neither a legal status nor official recognition.⁶⁴ While in April 2022 ten specialised NGOs, the Ministry of Justice, and the standing committee on science, education, culture, diaspora, youth and sport of the National Assembly signed a memorandum of cooperation on future media development policy and legal reform.⁶⁵ However, the discussions have made little progress, as the NGOs disagree with an earlier concept put forward by the Ministry of Justice, in December 2021, which proposed mandatory membership and considerable state involvement in the regulatory processes.⁶⁶ At the same time, greater transparency of media ownership and funding has not been achieved, and many

⁶² "Armenia," RSF 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/armenia>

⁶³ Grigoryan, A., "CivilNet Joins Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program in Armenia," *Civilnet*, 2 July 2024, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/784132/meta-announces-third-party-fact-checking-program-in-armenia/>

⁶⁴ Balasanyan, G., "Introduction of a media self-regulation mechanism is on the agenda," *Hetq.am*, 28 April 2023, <https://hetq.am/hy/article/155509>

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Danielyan, M., "The self-regulation concept must reduce the state's involvement in the media's activities," *Media.am*, 10 July 2023, <https://media.am/hy/viewpoint/2023/07/10/35636/>

media outlets are uninterested in the development of self-regulation.⁶⁷ Regarding the latter issue, interviewed media experts note that since some of the media affiliated with the former ruling elite (one of their usual practices involves making unsubstantiated claims by one outlet with references to ‘our sources’, which are often Facebook groups or other social media accounts created for sharing disinformation – author’s note) abstain from or try to obstruct the discussions, the media outlets close to the current leadership reciprocate by similarly abstaining.

The Armenian media coverage of the Russian aggression towards Ukraine largely depends on the political position of each outlet. An important distinction is the split between those promoting an even closer attachment to Russia and those calling for gradual detachment along with a diversification in Armenia’s foreign policy. Depending on their ideology, TV channels are either actively involved in spreading disinformation about international affairs, or attempt to refute false claims through expert interviews and talk shows. The latter group, however, do not have specialised fact-checking units. At the same time, most of the media, including the previously mentioned fact-checking platforms, do not focus specifically on the issue of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In late 2022 and 2024, online media groups *Aliq Media* and *1in.am* sent reporters to Ukraine, including cities which had witnessed massacres by Russian troops.^{68,69} Both groups published a series of documentaries, with the number of views ranging from few hundred to 20,000. In addition, *1in.am* dedicates a significant portion of its coverage, including both the publication of articles and online broadcasts, to the war in Ukraine. The group produces regular podcasts featuring its staff along with interviews from Armenian experts and politicians, and their counterparts in Ukraine. Some media outlets, such as the web-based *Factor TV*, also cover the war in Ukraine via expert interviews rather than through fact-checking teams.

⁶⁷ Balasanyan, G., 28 April 2023. *Op. cit.*

⁶⁸ “Ukraine: War,” *Aliq Media*, 2023, <https://www.aliqmedia.am/programsgrp/ukrwar/>

⁶⁹ “Russia vs Ukraine,” *1in.am*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-GBYOTOHsl-1AdPVAAA8kxAlcHe8qy6eH>

In 2023, the Armenian Institute of International and Security Affairs foundation and the think tank Centre for Policy Studies introduced strategic communication courses for Armenian civil servants. The courses are funded by the International Visegrad Fund and the Lithuanian Development Cooperation and Democracy Promotion Programme. The curricula were developed jointly with several partner institutions from the European Union and were specifically tailored for the audience's needs. Several state agencies have been eager to nominate participants, and consultations about the possible expansion of professional education and capacity-building programmes, with possible involvement of additional partners, remain ongoing.

Various experts and civil society representatives who are critical of Russia, particularly because they view Moscow as having a negative impact on Armenia's regional security, have been closely covering the war in Ukraine, especially in relation to the future of European and Armenian security. This includes livestreamed discussions by the Armenian Institute of International and Security Affairs, such as the discussion organised on 27 February 2024.⁷⁰ In addition, various video blogs have gained significant audiences: the blog run by the director of the Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation, Stepan Grigoryan, launched in January 2023 and has more than 54,000 subscribers.⁷¹ The blog of the chairman of 'Asparez' Journalists' Club, Levon Barseghyan, has counted more than 10,000 subscriptions since October 2023.⁷² In general, the Russian war in Ukraine and the broader Armenian disappointment with Russia have led to an increase in alternative online sources beyond the mainstream media's limited coverage.

Recommendations

Despite the recommendations of the 2018 and 2021 DRI studies, transparent media ownership has yet to be achieved. The possibility of punitive moves

⁷⁰ "Two years into Russia's war: the current situation and the expectations," *AIIISA*, 27 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkiwBQAsGmE>

⁷¹ <https://www.youtube.com/@stepangrigoryanarmenia>

⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/@levon.barseghyan>

against Russian media responsible for spreading disinformation has grown, yet calls to apply legislative measures or other state policies against Armenian proxy media spreading Russian disinformation have only been voiced by some experts. There is still a need to create a more coherent state communication strategy, and the authorities' cooperation with civil society groups, though currently insufficient, is a positive development. Several Armenian media outlets continue the troubling practice of using Russian video footage and text sources while reporting on events in third countries.⁷³

The following recommendations to the state authorities are proposed with the view of increasing Armenia's resilience to disinformation:

- To continue to cooperate with civil society towards the implementation of the measures outlined in the National Strategy Against Disinformation, and to further develop strategic communication capabilities. Such cooperation may also have an impact at a grassroots level and help overcome one of the issues caused by deep polarisation. For example, as the 2021 DRI study noted about Georgia: "due to high political polarisation, public officials avoid discomfort and prefer meeting loyal citizens, so the effectiveness of strategic communication is diminished."⁷⁴ At the same time, it is recommended that legislation be developed to ensure access to information.
- To consider measures similar to those adopted in Moldova, which from 2022 has banned TV stations from broadcasting news and analysis programmes from Russia. In total, the licences of six domestic TV channels have been suspended, and, more recently, over 50 websites were blocked for "online content used in the war of information against the Republic of Moldova".⁷⁵
- To establish an agency for identifying disinformation, analysing the information and digital security risks, and understanding the consequences of foreign interference. As previously noted, a media exposé helped to prevent the introduction of Huawei's 'Smart City' technology

⁷³ Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, pp. 50–51.

⁷⁴ Tughushi, L., "Georgia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyev (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, pp. 128–129.

⁷⁵ Grigoryan, A., "Foreign and economic policy diversification: A priority for Armenia", in: Mihaela-Adriana Pădureanu, Iulian Oneaşcă (eds.), "From synergy to strategy in the Black Sea region. Assessing opportunities and challenges", European Institute of Romania working paper 51, 2024, p. 16.

to Yerevan.⁷⁶ Considering some of the mentioned investments in the hi-tech sphere, as well as the ongoing expansion of CCTV systems, which in some cases use Russian hardware or software, the recommendations formulated in the Freedom House Nations in Transit 2020 report remain relevant: civil society and independent news outlets should keep monitoring elite co-optation, technology transfers, dubious investments and infrastructure development. In addition, the government is urged to abstain from adopting certain electronic surveillance methods.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Grigoryan, A., "Armenia", in: Pavel Havlíček, Andrei Yeliseyeu (eds.), "Disinformation resilience index in Central and Eastern Europe 2021", EAST Center, 2021, p. 39.

⁷⁷ "Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the democratic façade," *Freedom House*, 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf

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Abstract

Foreign-led disinformation in Azerbaijan is limited by the country's quite strongly regulated media environment. Although the Russian language is broadly spoken in Azerbaijan, the influence of the pro-Kremlin media ecosystem in the country remains limited. In the reviewed period, the authorities and people of Azerbaijan placed more importance on information relating to the Karabakh war than the war in Ukraine. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, public distrust of Russian media sources, particularly among residents aged 18-35, increased. However, a lack of empirical research on disinformation in Azerbaijan has prevented decisionmakers from formulating more targeted responses. A low level of professionalism among a part of the national journalist community has hampered resilience to disinformation. Recent legislative and institutional changes have tried to address this challenge. A greater awareness within Azerbaijan's media community and society at large to the dangers of disinformation, and an increase in cooperation between civil society and state authorities are essential for a more effective response to disinformation.

Overview of the latest topical studies

It follows from the investigation of national studies and topical reports released by international organisations and foreign academics that research on disinformation and its impact on Azerbaijan's society remains rare. Since 2021, most of the published material and research on disinformation in Azerbaijan have focused on Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and the Karabakh war.¹ Rather than solely focusing on disinformation campaigns undertaken by Russia, a large number of published materials covered disinformation campaigns by Armenian sources during and after the Karabakh war, more so in the international arena, as compared to national media.² Also, due to the lack of research on the topic within Azerbaijani academic community, disinformation is often explored largely on a theoretical basis with very few analytical or data driven studies.^{3,4}

Research on disinformation in Azerbaijan by international organisations and foreign research institutions is also limited. While Russia is at times viewed as an occasional source of disinformation and propaganda campaigns in Azerbaijan,⁵ Russia's capabilities have been questioned in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁶ Existing studies recognise Russia as a possible actor in formulating and spreading disinformation, but a broader view of the entire Southern Caucasus is usually taken. The region is seen as important for Russia's geopolitical aims but cultural and societal differences among the countries of the region have not been sufficiently taken into account. Therefore, the impact of Russian disinformation and media manipulation campaigns in Azerbaijan have been overestimated.⁷

¹ Nasirova, A. & Huseynova, X., "Fake news in the media: causes of spread and methods of combating it" [in Azerbaijani], QHT, 2023.

² Veliev, C., "Azerbaijan still under disinformation attack," *Modern Diplomacy*, 2022, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/12/15/azerbaijan-still-under-disinformation-attack/>

³ Mammadov, A., "The Armenian factor in the global investigative journalist and human rights network's activities against Azerbaijan" [in Azerbaijani], *Social Research Center*, 2021, [https://stm.az/storage/common/1645173164.PANDORA%20ESAS_compressed%20\(1\).pdf](https://stm.az/storage/common/1645173164.PANDORA%20ESAS_compressed%20(1).pdf)

⁴ Nasirova, A. & Huseynova, K. (2023). *Op.cit.*

⁵ Shiriyev, Z., "Russian soft power in Azerbaijan," *Chatham House*, 2019, <https://www.chatham-house.org/2019/03/azerbajians-relations-russia-closer-default-0/5-russian-soft-power-azerbaijan>

⁶ Scotti, S., "Azerbaijan and Russian migration: Between old and new trends," *ISPI*, 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/azerbaijan-and-russian-migration-between-old-and-new-trends-151283>

⁷ Interview with a representative from a government agency, December 2023.

Research by Azerbaijani experts and organisations on disinformation is limited in scope and primarily focuses on disinformation campaigns related to the Karabakh war. This tendency in Azerbaijani research can be understood when taking into consideration the infancy of the research sphere regarding disinformation along with Russia's decreasing influence in the region of Southern Caucasus after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

While Russian-controlled media outlets, including a local branch of the state-owned Sputnik agency, operate in Azerbaijan, the scope of Russia's disinformation campaigns in the country should not be overestimated. In a 2024 report published by the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, the authors discussed how Russian state-run media outlets such as RIA Novosti and Sputnik were temporarily blocked in Azerbaijan in 2022 after publishing materials which questioned Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, as well as on other politically sensitive issues.⁸ Public trust towards Russian media remains limited in Azerbaijan.

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not cause a significant shift in the Azerbaijani authorities' response to countering disinformation. The national media space remains tightly controlled, difficult to penetrate, and bureaucratic procedures for registering as a media outlet are burdensome. The establishment of the Cyber Security Centre in Azerbaijan in 2023 can be seen as an indirect consequence of the Russia-Ukraine war and is an attempt to adapt to the prominence of cyber warfare in modern conflicts.

As part of the national development strategy focused on the year 2030, Azerbaijan approved a strategy on information and cyber security for the years of 2023-2027. Its main objective includes "elevating the assurance level of information security within the information space".⁹ This regulation, however, does not address disinformation and is specifically focused on cyber security measures.

⁸ von Essen, H., "Russia in the South Caucasus: Losing, Adapting, Overcoming," *Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies*, 2024, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeus/russia-in-the-south-caucasus-losing-adapting-overcoming.pdf>

⁹ "The first strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan on information security and cyber security has been adopted," *AKTA*, 2023, https://akta.az/en/view/18/109/the_first_strategy_of_the_republic_of_azerbaijan_on_information_security_and_cyber_security_has_been_adopted

At the same time, Azerbaijan's public opinion has arguably taken a more negative turn towards Russia. All interviewees for this research representing specialised NGOs, media and state agencies stated that they had noticed a widespread condemnation of the invasion of Ukraine and a more negative shift in public attitudes towards the Kremlin's activities in Azerbaijan. One interviewee stressed that "Azerbaijan's government has countless times acknowledged Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity".¹⁰ A civil society representative stated that "The conflict has resulted in a further weakening of Russia's public reputation, which has significantly reduced the audience of Russia-affiliated media, as well as the credibility of their information."¹¹

While the share of Russian language speakers is estimated to be as high as half of the country's population,¹² it should not be necessarily treated as overly susceptible to pro-Kremlin disinformation claims. As a December 2022 survey showed, negative perceptions of Russia among Azerbaijan's young people aged 18–35 were on the rise. Quite surprisingly, 81 percent of respondents named Russia as the country which they thought posed the highest security risk to Azerbaijan, an even larger answer than Armenia (74 per cent).¹³ As one of the interviewed experts noted, Azerbaijanis make a strong distinction between their perception of the Russian authorities and the Russian people, as well as cultural attributes such as the Russian language. Being a Russian language speaker therefore does not necessarily translate into a reliance on the news produced by Russia's state-owned media.

Notably, the number of monthly visitors of *Sputnik.az* (Russian-language version) decreased from 900,000 in 2021 to 314,000 in 2023, and only 13 percent of visitors were from Azerbaijan.¹⁴ Azerbaijan's Sputnik branch has been active in publishing Ukraine-related news,¹⁵ and it was reported in the 2021 DRI edition to be the principal source of pro-Kremlin disinformation targeting Azerbaijani citizens. *Sputnik.az* is the only media outlet directly linked to the Russian state after access to *RIA Novosti* and *EurAsia Daily* was restricted in Azerbaijan. The

¹⁰ Interview with a government agency representative, December 2023.

¹¹ Interview with a civil society representative, December 2023.

¹² Koymfman, S., "How many people speak Russian, and where is it spoken?," *Babbel Magazine*, 2021, <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/how-many-people-speak-russian-and-where-spoken>

¹³ Fabbro, R. "Analysis: How Azerbaijan's youth feels towards different countries and the conflict", *OC Media*, 2023, <https://oc-media.org/features/analysis-how-azerbaijans-youth-feels-towards-different-countries-and-the-conflict/>

¹⁴ <https://www.similarweb.com/website/az.sputniknews.ru/>

¹⁵ *Sputnik Azərbaycan*, <https://sputnik.az/search/?query=ukrayna>

EUvsDisinfo database reports that the local *Sputnik* website is the main source of pro-Kremlin disinformation in Azerbaijan, with almost a half of approximately 60 debunked cases in the database (as of early 2024) based on Sputnik news.¹⁶ More than half of *Sputnik.az* cases are related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The remaining cases in the database are based on the content of multiple other online media outlets. Over 40% of the cases originated from the news published across 14 Azerbaijani outlets and most of them promoted conspiracy theories. Over 10% of the cases were based on the *Musavat.com* website associated with Azerbaijan's opposition party *Musavat*.

Overall, less than 20% of EUvsDisinfo cases originating from Azerbaijani news outlets are related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, most cases are related to Western countries.¹⁷ France and the United States of America have been targeted most frequently, particularly after the French decision to increase weapon sales to Armenia,¹⁸ and the US's claims of ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Karabakh¹⁹ which were disputed by Azerbaijan.²⁰ Among the Southern Caucasus countries, Azerbaijan has the lowest number of disinformation cases in the EUvsDisinfo database.

Changes in the national media landscape

In 2021, Azerbaijan ranked 167th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index. The ranking improved in 2023 when Azerbaijan was ranked 151st out of 180 countries. From 2017 to 2021 the country was placed between 162nd to 167th.²¹ Despite a recent noticeable improvement, there remains significant room for the development of media freedom in Azerbaijan. The RSF report stated that "[Azerbaijan's] media sector is under state

¹⁶ [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_language\[\]=Azerbaijani](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_language[]=Azerbaijani)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Kayali, L. & Gavin, G., "France plants flag in Russia's backyard with Armenia arms deals," *Politico*, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-seeks-to-up-ante-in-former-soviet-union-with-new-weapons-for-armenia/>

¹⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/5686/text?s=1&r=25&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22hr+1%22%7D>

²⁰ <https://turan.az/en/politics/karabakh-armenians-are-invited-to-register-electronically-and-use-azerbaijans-public-services-769881>

²¹ "Azerbaijan," *Reporters without Borders*, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/azerbaijan>

control, and state-owned television is the most popular information source”.²² However, some private media outlets such as *Baku TV*, *ARB* and *Real TV* have even higher viewership.²³

Few changes have taken place in the national media landscape since 2021 and no new influential media organisations have recently been established. *Az TV*, *Xezer* and *Ictimai TV* have remained among the most popular media outlets; their online content, such as associated YouTube channels, have reached greater audiences in recent years.²⁴ *Baku TV* is one example of the growth in popularity of online media outlets. The channel started as ‘internet television’ on YouTube and later began to broadcast as a satellite television station due to an increasing number of viewers and demand.²⁵

One negative trend is the growing popularity of unregistered and therefore unreliable media outlets operating on social media platforms such as *Instagram* and *Telegram*. These outlets often prioritise sensational news and manipulative content to increase their popularity. In an attempt to reach audiences quicker, such outlets happen to republish news from other sources, without duly verifying the facts, thus amplifying disinformation, often inadvertently. One civil society representative interviewed for this study stated that several Azerbaijani news outlets had been identified with the spread of disinformation related to the Karabakh War and the war in Ukraine. This disinformation often originated from Russian sources.²⁶ A media representative referenced similar cases involving online newspapers which inadvertently spread disinformation originating abroad.²⁷

Official media outlets such as *apa.az* and *report.az* follow more diligent verification procedures in place but this can slow their reporting of news. When citizens are not able to quickly find sufficient information on issues important to them, they may be attracted to unreliable social media outlets capitalising on the situation. An interviewed civil society representative suggested that this

²² *Ibid.*

²³ <https://globalinfo.az/azerbaycanda-tv-lerin-youtube-reytingi-aciqlandi-bu-kanal-liderdir/> [in Azerbaijani]

²⁴ *Facemark*, 2023, <https://facemark.az/site/news/15264/azerbaycan-telekanallarinin-youtube-baxislari-uzre-illik-reyting-cedveli-15264.html> [in Azerbaijani]

²⁵ “Baku TV Started Broadcasting on Azerspace Satellite in Test Mode” [in Azerbaijani], *Yeni Sabah*, 2023, <https://yenisabah.az/baku-tv-azerspace-peykinde-test-rejiminde-yayima-basladi>

²⁶ Interview with a civil society expert, November 2023.

²⁷ Interview with a media representative, December 2023.

problem may be mitigated if closer cooperation between the state authorities and the media industry is developed, although this may require considerable resources.²⁸

One expert for this study deplored the poor standard of journalism in the local media. They claimed:

*“The sphere for countering disinformation is very primitive in Azerbaijan, and the emergence of a weak and unreliable media is a very serious side effect of it. One of the most obvious indicators of the weakness of the media was evident during the anti-terrorist operations in Azerbaijan in 2023, the delay in communicating Azerbaijan’s position to the international community and harmed its reputation as a ‘reliable source’.”*²⁹

Russian media are much less popular among Azerbaijan’s residents than national media outlets. In the last quarter of 2023 local Sputnik webpage sputnik.az had on average 78,000 monthly Azerbaijani visitors. Numbers for the national news outlets *baku.ws* and *apa.az* were 720,000 and 575,000 respectively.³⁰ Although Russian is broadly spoken in Azerbaijan, the popularity of news outlets operating primarily in Russian (for example, *zerkalo.az* had 120,000 monthly visitors in 2023) is also lower compared to media outlets operating primarily in the Azerbaijani language (for example, *caliber.az* had 240,000 monthly visitors).³¹

Although institutional weaknesses may lead to the accidental spreading of disinformation in Azerbaijan, its media has largely taken a favourable position towards Ukraine. Some media outlets refrained from using editorial judgments, whereas others have voiced their concern over the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Pieces in various online news agencies have used critical statements directed at the Kremlin after the invasion. For instance, *Report.az* wrote in one article that “It is no secret to anyone that Russia is unjust in the war”.³² One publication of the *Haqqin.az* website stated, “According to the Ukrainian authorities, Russian troops continue to blindly fire at the civilian population of the city with the sole aim of achieving what they want - to capture the impregnable and

²⁸ Interview with a media representative, December 2023.

²⁹ Interview with a civil society expert, December 2023.

³⁰ https://pro.similarweb.com/#/digitalsuite/websiteanalysis/overview/website-performance/*/999/3m?webSource=Total&key=apa.az,baku.ws,sputnik.az,caliber.az,zerkalo.az

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Ismayilov, S., “Russia-Ukraine War - West Failing to Protect Allies” [in Azerbaijani], *Report.az*, 2022, <https://report.az/analitika/rusiya-ukrayna-muharibesi-muttefiqlerini-qoruya-bilmeyen-qerb/>

rebellious Russian-speaking Kharkov”.³³ The *Trend news agency*, a private media outlet established in 1995, published an article which quoted an Azerbaijani citizen living in Ukraine who said that Russian troops are bombarding civilian infrastructure in Ukraine”.³⁴ Due to their critical coverage of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, *haqqin.az* and various other Azerbaijani media outlets were blocked in Russia in 2022.³⁵ The Azerbaijan’s Press Council reacted with a statement that “A number of Azerbaijani news websites are prohibited in Russia; the reason behind it is Russia’s dissatisfaction with Azerbaijani media reporting on Ukraine and their objective stance on the Russia-Ukraine crisis.”³⁶

Azerbaijan’s authorities have repeatedly blocked foreign media outlets citing disinformation and incitement of unrest. In 2022, Azerbaijan blocked access to Russia’s state-owned *RIA Novosti* website³⁷ and in 2023 restricted access to *EurAsia Daily*, cited as a pro-Kremlin media outlet.³⁸ In a comment on the restrictions placed upon *RIA Novosti*, Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated in 2022 that “the spread of provocative statements by the Russian state news agency *RIA Novosti* casts a shadow over efforts to bring peace to the region.”³⁹ Previously, in October 2021, an Iranian state-owned TV network was blocked for spreading disinformation with the intention of causing internal unrest.⁴⁰

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

In the institutional realm, the Media Development Agency was set up in 2021. Its main goal is to increase the professionalism of media through supporting

³³ Eminoglu, E., *Haqqin.az*, 2022, <https://haqqin.az/news/237359>

³⁴ Aghjajev, S., “Russian troops shell not only military facilities, but also civilian infrastructure in Ukraine -- eyewitness,” *Trend.az*, 2022, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3565474.html>

³⁵ Sitdikov, R., “Azerbaijani resources minval.az and haqqin.az came under restrictions in Russia” [in Russian], *Sputnik Armenia*, 2023, <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/20220317/minvalaz-i-haqqinaz-popali-pod-ogranicheniya-roskomnadzora-39864793.html>

³⁶ <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/ria-novosti-blocked-in-azerbaijan.html>

³⁷ Isayev, H., “Azerbaijani, Russian State Media in Tit-For-Tat Attacks,” *Eurasianet*, 13 June 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijani-russian-state-media-in-tit-for-tat-attacks>

³⁸ “Access to the Russian Propaganda Resource “EurAsia Daily” Is Restricted in Azerbaijan,” *Turan.az*, 21 December 2023, <http://turan.az/en/politics/access-to-the-russian-propaganda-resource-eurasia-daily-is-restricted-in-azerbaijan-767103>

³⁹ “RIA Novosti blocked in Azerbaijan,” *Caucasus Watch*, 2022, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/ria-novosti-blocked-in-azerbaijan.html>

⁴⁰ “Azerbaijan Blocks Iran-Related Shia Websites,” *The Cradle*, 2021, <https://thecradle.co/articles/azerbaijan-blocks-iran-related-shia-websites>

journalists with training and seminars and providing internship opportunities for journalism students.⁴¹ In March 2023, the Azerbaijan Cyber Security Centre was established.⁴² There are plans for more than 1,000 training places at the centre across the next three years.

A new Media Law came into effect in February 2022. Under this law, journalists can voluntarily register in a media registry run by the Media Development Agency. When interviewed about the Media Law, Ahmed Ismailov, the Agency's Executive Director, said the regulation's goal was "to improve the quality and distribution of domestic [media] products, adapting it to the principles of the country and the requirements of the time".⁴³ One issue which the new legislation is expected to address in Azerbaijan's media sector is copyright laws. Stricter regulations could enhance the rights of original publishers and decrease the spread of disinformation.

The law also regulates the activities of social media users and bloggers. It has led some journalists to believe that the Agency could hinder the activities of freelance journalists by limiting their space to operate.⁴⁴ The Agency denies the allegation and claims that journalism-related activities can be carried out without a registration.⁴⁵ In the previously referenced interview, Ismailov said that journalists can continue their activities even if they are not registered with the media registry and therefore have not been issued a press card.

NEW MEDIA REGULATIONS FOR MEDIA WORKERS

The Media Development Agency, established in 2021, aims to introduce reforms to the media sector. The benefits of registering with the Agency include the opportunity to participate in seminars, roundtables and other training programs, including on the topic of combating dis-

⁴¹ Main page, *Media Agency*, 2023, <https://media.gov.az/haqqimizda/>

⁴² Ganbay, A., "Cyber Security thrives in Azerbaijan due to strong measures," *Azernews.az*, 2023, <https://www.azernews.az/analysis/215252.html>

⁴³ "What is the law on media, and what will it change?," *Yeni Azərbaycan*, 2021, https://www.yeniazərbaycan.com/Arxiv_e63684_az.html

⁴⁴ <https://turan.az/ru/politika/skandalnyi-zakon-o-media-priniat> [in Russian]

⁴⁵ <https://reyestr.media.gov.az/Home/Faq>

information.⁴⁶ The Agency also offers competitions where journalists are awarded prizes in various categories, as well as in financial support programmes for print and online media outlets.⁴⁷ To register with the Agency, journalists must hold a degree in journalism, as it is believed that education in the field will create an environment where journalists adhere to copyright regulations and ethical codes of conduct. Through higher education, future journalists will be expected to be more aware of issues such as copyright and the importance of producing original news content. It is however not compulsory for journalists to register and failure to do so will not lead to restrictions being placed on their activities.⁴⁸

In 2023, the new national Strategy for Information and Cyber Security was adopted for the years 2023-2027.⁴⁹ The strategy tasks state institutions with specific responsibilities and establishes mechanisms to monitor their progress. One interviewed expert explained that the strategy does not specifically target the problem of disinformation: “it lacks a comprehensive set of issues related to disinformation and instead, focuses on the technical side and defining the roles of several ministries”.⁵⁰

Responses by the media and civil society

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war has demonstrated vulnerabilities and challenges faced by Azerbaijan’s public to the spread of disinformation, predominantly due to the broad use of social media throughout the country. The state responded by providing the media industry with more capacity building programmes, training sessions and forums dedicated to tackling disinformation. One example was the Global Media Forums held in July 2023 and July 2024 in the city of Shusha. The first forum, organised by the Azerbaijani government, gathered over 150 individuals from 50 countries. One of the panels, hosted

⁴⁶ “A Round Table on the Rise of Disinformation: Impact on the Media and Effective Response Strategies was held,” *Bizim Yol*, <https://www.bizimyol.info/az/news/399726.html>

⁴⁷ <https://media.gov.az/musabiqeler/>

⁴⁸ <https://reyestr.media.gov.az/Home/Faq>

⁴⁹ “Information and cyber security strategy for 2023-2027 approved in Azerbaijan - order,” *Azernews.az*, 2023, <https://www.azernews.az/nation/214096.html>

⁵⁰ Interview with a civil society representative, December 2023.

by experts in the field of communication and media studies, was dedicated to methods of combatting disinformation and fake news.⁵¹ Topical seminars were organised under the aegis of the Media Development Agency in cooperation with public universities.⁵² Azerbaijan has cooperated with international organisations in the field of combatting disinformation, such as the June 2023 participation of Azerbaijan's press and diplomatic officials in briefings and roundtable discussions organised at the NATO headquarters, Brussels. The purpose of the NATO meeting was to explore best practices in "countering disinformation and the usage of social media".⁵³

In recent years Azerbaijan's civil society has shown an increasing interest in the topic of combating disinformation. The 2022 UNDP report listed two Azerbaijan's initiatives active in the field of combatting disinformation: *Azerbaijan Internet Watch*⁵⁴ and *Fakt Yoxla*⁵⁵ of the Institute for Democratic Initiatives.⁵⁶ One example of short training programmes for media and university workers was a September 2023 event organised by the Azerbaijan's Information and Communication Technologies Industry Association. Analytical centres, such as the Social Research Centre, continue to release occasional reports on the topic of tackling disinformation.⁵⁷ Some projects carried out by civil society actors tend to focus on debunking popular stereotypes rather than disinformation in the news. For example, the project "Decolonize your identity",⁵⁸ which started in 2023 on the "Var-Yox" culture and art platform initiative and is funded by the EU, focuses in part on combating popular myths and stereotypes associated with

⁵¹ "Shusha Forum Discusses Methods to Combat Disinformation and Fake News," *Azerbaijan24.com*, 2023, www.azerbaycan24.com/en/shusha-forum-discusses-methods-to-combat-disinformation-and-fake-news/

⁵² Mirayiq, A., "Training was held on media literacy and fight against disinformation" [In Azerbaijani], *Musavat.com*, 2023, https://www.musavat.com/news/media-savadliligi-ve-dezinformasiya-ile-mubarize-movzusunda-telim-kecirildi_979392.html

⁵³ "Officials of Azerbaijani state authorities study NATO's experience in countering disinformation in Brussels," *Report News Agency*, 22 June 2023, <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/officials-of-azerbaijani-state-authorities-study-nato-s-experience-in-countering-disinformation-in-brussels/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.az-netwatch.org/>

⁵⁵ <http://idi-aze.org/en/>

⁵⁶ "Mapping and Analysis of Efforts to Counter Information Pollution in Europe and Central Asia Region," *UNDP*, 2022, <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/publications/information-pollution>, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Mammadov, A., "The Armenian factor in the global investigative journalist and human rights network's activities against Azerbaijan" [in Azerbaijani], *Social Research Center*, 2021, [https://stm.az/storage/common/1645173164.PANDORA%20ESAS_compressed%20\(1\).pdf](https://stm.az/storage/common/1645173164.PANDORA%20ESAS_compressed%20(1).pdf)

⁵⁸ 'Decolonize your identity' series, *VarYox*, 2023, <https://varyox.az/analysator/decolonize-your-identity-series/>

the dominance of foreign languages over Azerbaijani, and is aimed at promoting national art and music.

In 2022 a notable case of resistance to the editorial policy of *Sputnik Azerbaijan* took place amongst its employees. Back then several of its Azerbaijani editors resigned in protest following the instruction to publish a statement by Russia's Defence Ministry accusing Azerbaijan of violating the ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Azerbaijan's authorities refused to extend the work permits of the media outlet's editor-in-chief and its producer. Their names were also added to the list of 'persons who are denied temporary residence permits'.⁵⁹

There remains a lack of coordination and practical initiatives on the part of the media industry towards combatting disinformation. In a topical article, media expert Yunis Allahverdiyev deplored insufficient attention media outlets paid to following ethical codes of conduct. He argued that "fact-checking and presenting information objectively should be a top priority" for news agencies.⁶⁰

Recommendations

Since the 2021 DRI edition, certain initiatives aimed at enhancing Azerbaijan's resilience to disinformation have been put in place. International actors, including the EU, have been active in contributing to developing and improving the skills of Azerbaijani journalists, other media personnel as well as public servants. Civil society organisations and universities have been involved in tackling the issues of disinformation on a local level, through writing reports and providing capacity building training programmes for media workers. At the same time, the recommendation made by the 2021 DRI to develop a closer cooperation between the media outlets of Azerbaijan and Western countries has not been implemented. Only occasional capacity building training programmes, briefings and meetings with international organisations on the topic of industry professional standards and media resilience to disinformation have taken place.

Legislative initiatives proposed by Azerbaijan's authorities can be seen as promising steps towards the adoption of a long-term national strategy to prevent

⁵⁹ "Sputnik Azerbaijan Editors Resign after Refusing to Publish Russian Defense Ministry Information," *Caucasus Watch*, 2022, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/sputnik-azerbaijan-editors-resign-after-refusing-to-publish-russian-defense-ministry-information.html>

⁶⁰ Allahverdiyev, Y., "Information Pollution: The False Colors of Disinformation, Eastern Gate" [In Azerbaijani], 2023, <https://serqqapisi.gov.az/xeberler/melumat-kirililyi-dezinformasiya-nin-yalanci-rengleri-1>

the spread of foreign-led disinformation. The 2023-2027 Strategy for Information and Cyber Security, which focuses on combating threats related to cyber-attacks, mentioned the danger not only to state institutions but the general public as well. The Media Development Agency, created in 2021, is tasked with promoting professionalism and coordinating efforts by media outlets through training programmes, some of which specifically focus on combatting disinformation.

The following recommendations are proposed with the aim of increasing Azerbaijan's resilience to disinformation:

- To develop broader cooperation between media representatives and civil society on educating Azerbaijan's population on the methods of identifying and preventing the spread of disinformation on social media. Addressing criticism by national media outlets and civil society organisations to events in and around Azerbaijan on the international arena is important but the domestic impact of disinformation should not be neglected.
- To increase the capacity and professionalism of regional media outlets. Through capacity building training and educational programmes, journalists should become better equipped to deal with disinformation. These programmes would also increase the overall quality of Azerbaijan's media.
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| EAST Center

Belarus

Abstract

Belarus's approach to the issue of disinformation has deteriorated in recent years. The country's policies towards disinformation were already in a deplorable state by the time of the 2021 DRI study. At the time, experts questioned the country's degree of sovereignty in the information sphere and argued that the authorities and state media frequently served as multipliers of disinformation. These concerns have only increased further. The state media were entirely aligned with their counterparts in Moscow during coverage of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This position therefore was in contradiction of the Belarusian information security concept. While the Belarusian state media were closely integrated with Russia's propaganda in the first weeks and months after the February 2022 invasion, over time some minor differences became evident. Changes in the institutional framework were minimal and those relating to the legal framework concerned additional restrictions for non-state media actors and greater state control over information flows.

The Belarusian state administration continued to suppress civil society and the independent media industry. Hundreds of NGOs were closed on court rulings and virtually all independent media outlets which covered socio-political news were classified as 'extremist' organisations. The national media landscape has therefore witnessed profound change, independent media groups have either relocated abroad and resumed their activities in foreign countries, or ceased to exist. The activities of bloggers reporting on social or political events from within the country were also silenced by criminal penalties. Users of Russian-based online and social media have become more exposed to disinformation, particularly anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western narratives. Despite further restrictions against the activities of independent media and increased punishments for citizens who follow their content, non-state media remained an important provider of opinions and news – even if this content is silenced or manipulated by state media – for Belarusian audience.

Overview of the latest topical studies

Based on a summer 2022 online survey of the Belarusian internet audience, the Baltic Internet Policy Initiative (BIPI) found that 58 per cent of respondents considered social media to be the most common place to encounter fake news and misinformation, followed by TV (49 per cent). When asked the same question in February 2022, prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, more respondents selected TV (54 per cent) than social media (40 per cent). The BIPI hypothesised that following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the amount of disinformation in social media greatly increased and, given the suspended access to Belarusian independent media and the dangers associated with following them due to their 'extremist' status, the significance of social media as a source of information for Belarusian audiences increased.¹

A February 2023 online survey conducted by the EU regional Communication Programme for the Eastern Neighbourhood (EU NEIGHBOURS east) revealed that approximately one in three Belarusian respondents considered various Ukraine-related disinformation claims to be true. Around 35 per cent agreed with the statement that "NATO has provoked Russia to take military actions in Ukraine" (28 per cent disagreed), while 36 per cent agreed that "Russia had no choice but to intervene to protect the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine" (33 per cent disagreed). Asked whether "Ukraine is an independent country, defending its territorial integrity", 47 per cent answered affirmatively and 24 per cent disagreed. Around 26 per cent of respondents believed that US biological laboratories are producing bio-weapons in Ukraine.² Notably, approximately one in three respondents chose not to answer. It is likely that a large share of uncertain respondents leaned towards disagreement with the statements which were supported in official communication but feared potential repercussions if they openly stated their views. The same opinion poll also found that despite intensive anti-EU propaganda in Belarusian state media, twice as many Belarusians have a positive image of the EU than negative (33 per cent compared to 16 per cent), these results are nearly identical to the 2018 EU NEIGHBOURS east survey.

¹ "Disinformation in Belarus, summer 2022," *Baltic Internet Policy Initiative*, https://www.e-belarus.org/docs/disinformation_belarus_summer2022.pdf

² "Annual Survey 2023 – Belarus. Perception of the European Union," EU NEIGHBOURS east, September 2023, <https://eunighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2023-belarus/>

An August 2021 survey by BIPI focused on Belarusian internet users aged between 15 to 74 and revealed that 51 per cent of respondents believed that they are able to identify manipulations, fake news and disinformation in the media, 16 per cent answered negatively and 33 per cent were uncertain.³ Male responses were more optimistic than the opinions of female respondents. While 22 per cent of males responded that it's very easy to identify misinformation and an additional 39 per cent believed it is rather easy, the figures for female respondents were 14 per cent and 30 per cent respectively. Quite unexpectedly, older respondents felt more confident in identifying disinformation. While 19 per cent and 39 per cent of survey participants aged between 55–74 stated it's very easy or rather easy to do so, the figures for respondents aged 18–24 were 16 per cent and 31 per cent. Asked which news sources they used most frequently, 71 per cent answered websites, 54 per cent responded with social media, 34 per cent for Telegram and 31 per cent for TV. Additionally, for 35 per cent of respondents, contact with relatives, friends, and acquaintances were an important source of news.⁴

The November 2022 study by the International Strategic Action Network for Security reviewed the changes in pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It concluded that while the set of disinformation narratives about Belarus, Ukraine, and Western countries which existed prior to February 2022 largely remained unchanged, in the aftermath of the February 2022 invasion reporting about Ukraine and the West received much greater priority over Belarus-related themes. New propaganda themes included a justification of the Russian aggression, the "genocidal" effect of Western sanctions and Belarus's contribution to global food security, allegations that the West is responsible for the war, and a variety of anti-Ukrainian disinformation narratives. The study concluded that propaganda in Belarus was synchronised with Russia's narratives immediately after the February 2022 aggression against Ukraine.⁵

MediaIQ has published regular analytical pieces and monitoring reports on the topic of disinformation in Belarus. Among the trends in Belarusian propaganda in 2023, the MediaIQ report listed:

³ "Attitude of the Belarusian Internet Audience Towards Fake News," *Baltic Internet Policy Initiative*, November 2021, https://www.e-belarus.org/docs/fakenews_belarus.pdf

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Kalikh, A., "From "fortress" rhetoric to the rhetoric of "war". Changes in the main pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives in Belarus before and after the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine," *International Strategic Action Network for Security*, November 2022, https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/from-fortress-2-rhetoric-to-the-rhetoric-of-war_changes-in-by-propaganda_isans-report_nov2022_eng-1.pdf

- A slight disengagement from Russia's official Ukraine-related narratives, compared to the 2022 coverage of the events in Ukraine which was almost entirely aligned with Moscow's position. The Belarusian state media somewhat downplayed its militaristic rhetoric and smeared Ukraine less frequently in 2023. Belarus was more often portrayed as a country which cares about Ukrainian refugees and is actively pushing for a peaceful resolution of the military conflict.
- There was a larger degree of criticism towards the West and United States than in preceding years, with a greater emphasis on alleged immorality, hypocrisy and the aggressiveness of Western countries. State media also frequently used conspiracy theories and tended to blame the "collective West" and the US for various domestic and foreign events, including the war in Ukraine. The alleged threats posed by the West were often used to justify unpopular and controversial state actions.
- The report noted further flagrant violations of professional standards and judicial journalism by state media. This includes the "information warfare" openly proclaimed by state officials and state media, with the latter intensifying its use of hate speech and calling for violence against political opponents.
- There has been a notable revision of Belarusian history, particularly historical episodes which manifested Belarus's aspiration for sovereignty. A more active discrediting campaign of the 1863 January Uprising and its figure Kastus Kalinowski as well as of the Belarusian People's Republic proclaimed in 1918 are two examples. This approach aimed to reinforce Russian cultural and political influence in Belarus.
- Prioritised coverage of the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, whereas activities of the Catholic church and other religious denominations were not covered in state media as frequently as before.⁶

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) produced reports related to the Belarusian media sphere, including overviews of restrictions on the online and print media activities in Belarus, and annual reports on trends in the mass media.⁷ Its report, based on the monitoring of news programmes on three key Belarusian state TV channels (*Belarus 1*, *ONT*, *STV*) broadcast in February 2024, found that Russian-made programmes continued to account for a sizable por-

⁶ "Belarusian media's compliance with reporting standards and state propaganda trends in 2023," *MediaIQ*, 26 February 2024, <https://mediaiq.info/belarusian-media-s-compliance-with-reporting-standards-and-state-propaganda-trends-in-2023>

⁷ https://baj.media/en/aglyady_category/annual-reports/

tion of the content broadcast by Belarusian TV channels. The average portion of Russian content for the monitored three TV channels was 50 per cent. The rates for 2019 and 2020 were 61 per cent and 66 per cent. The most important themes on the news programmes were the war against Ukraine and Belarus's relations with Western countries and Russia. The study revealed that the share of news items which contained propaganda ranged between 34 per cent to 38 per cent. During the monitored period, among stories with propaganda messages on *Belarus 1 TV*, 36 per cent were classified as anti-Western, 17 per cent as anti-Ukrainian, and 8 per cent as anti-US. Approximately 26 per cent of stories promoted the message about the importance of Belarus' alliance with Russia.⁸

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

In the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the spread of pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus significantly increased. The coverage of Ukraine in Belarusian state media changed dramatically. Without any neutrality or objectivity, the war of aggression was presented as Russia's rightful cause while Ukraine was smeared and became the subject of several disinformation narratives. For instance, one news programme aired on *Belarus 1 TV* said that "the Nazi ideology has become a state policy" in Ukraine that the country had turned into a "part of the wide-scale Western genocidal campaign against historical memory".⁹ Another programme claimed that biological laboratories in Ukraine carried out "criminal military activities" and that in 2019 tuberculosis-infected money, likely produced in a Kharkiv laboratory, was supplied to the Russian-occupied Luhansk region.¹⁰ The programme also broadcast Olga Shpilevskaya, chairperson of the key government-controlled Belarusian Women's Union and Director of the *Mir TV*, stating that: "Putin is great! If the special operation had not started, it would have been nasty for our territories. We

⁸ "Monitoring pro-russian propaganda on Belarus state television," *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, 21 June 2024, <https://baj.media/en/aglyady-manitoringi/monitoring-pro-russian-propaganda/>

⁹ Belarus 1 TV, 4 May 2022, reference time: 0:30, 3:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaG0x6QoZTI> [in Russian]

¹⁰ Belarus 1 TV, 12 May 2022, reference time: 00:00-00:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-xfzyNznGI> [in Russian]

prevented a bloody war on our territory thanks to the timely start of the special operation".¹¹

In 2022, the state media also released dozens of reports which claimed that Western sanctions against Russia had had disastrous effects on Western countries. Among other items, news reports stated that Latvians and Lithuanians frequently travel to Belarus to buy cheaper bread and salt.¹² Other false narratives have alleged that 40 per cent of Germans are about to stop eating meat and fish due to shortage of money,¹³ that people in the UK are making open fires in their houses to save money on heating,¹⁴ and that the state of Texas is discussing the secession from the US because of a poor economic situation in the country.¹⁵

Online opinion polls among Belarusian urban residents conducted in 2022 and 2023 by Chatham House, the UK-based think tank, revealed that approximately one in three respondents held supportive views of Russia's military operation against Ukraine. Approximately 40 per cent held negative views and roughly one quarter of respondents were indecisive.¹⁶ The views on Russia's invasion of Ukraine strongly correlate with media consumption patterns. Among state media consumers, the percentage of those who supported Russia's military actions in November 2023 was roughly 59 per cent, while the figure for non-state media audiences was as low as 5 per cent. Among the segment of Belarusian society which rarely followed either type of media, 20 per cent were supportive, 40 per cent were not and 41 per cent indecisive. Among those who follow both state media and non-state media, the corresponding results were 33 per cent, 41 per cent and 26 per cent.¹⁷

¹¹ Belarus 1 TV, 20 May 2022, reference time: 8:30-8:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKTLuAwp1oE> [in Russian]

¹² Belarus 1 TV, 4 June 2022, reference time: 18:55-19:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VzhRfUtCHI> [in Russian]

¹³ Belarus 1 TV, 15 June 2022, reference time: 3:00-3:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXczadW007I> [in Russian]

¹⁴ Belarus 1 TV, 15 May 2022, reference time: 5:20-5:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZeKXAq2_B8 [in Russian]

¹⁵ Belarus 1 TV, 26 June 2022, reference time: 2:10-2:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-1kvcvobOlg> [in Russian]

¹⁶ "Belarusians' views on the war in Ukraine and foreign policy," *Chatham House*, p.5, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lojZvBq6Ah4tjDkklwLIRZx6xqeyCuTW/view>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Consumers of different media held contrasting views on Russia's goals in the war against Ukraine. The audience of the Belarusian state media believed that Russia aimed to protect civilians living on Ukrainian territory (44 per cent), defend itself from attacks (33 per cent), de-Nazify Ukraine (33 per cent), restore peace in Ukraine (33 per cent), and restore historical justice (18 per cent). Among the non-state media audiences, respectively 6 per cent, 7 per cent, 14 per cent, 2 per cent, and 5 per cent of respondents answered the previous statements as being Russia's war goals. At the same time, large portions of non-state media followers believed that Russia wanted to destroy Ukraine as a state (54 per cent), ensure Ukraine remains in Russia's geopolitical sphere of influence (51 per cent), expand the territorial boundaries of the Russian state (48 per cent), destroy the Ukrainian people as a nation (44 per cent), and prevent Ukraine from joining NATO (40 per cent).¹⁸

Similarly, public opinion on the Ukrainian government's goals differed dramatically by citizens' choice of media. While the two most popular options selected by non-state media followers were "preserve the independence of Ukraine" (72 per cent) and "restore the 1991 borders" (60 per cent), the most popular responses for viewers of state media were "Ukraine does not have its own goals, it's just following orders from the West" (34 per cent), "join the EU and NATO" (28 per cent), and "suppress the Russian language and the Russian-speaking population" (20 per cent).¹⁹ Followers of state media who have no access to alternative sources of information therefore tend to repeat the disinformation narratives that portray Ukraine as a Nazi country, as a puppet of the West, and active in suppressing the Russian speakers. Interestingly, despite consistent anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda broadcast on Belarusian state media, Belarusians holding negative attitudes towards both Ukraine and Western countries were a minority. Asked how they felt about Ukraine, Poland and the US, the figures of those who chose either "very bad" or "somewhat bad" options were 26 per cent, 24 per cent and 35 per cent respectively. The share of respondents who rated each country as either "somewhat good" or "very good" were 54 per cent, 55 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively.²⁰

Followers of Russian television channels, which remain popular throughout Belarus, were also heavily influenced by an increase in pro-Kremlin propaganda. The Belarus Freedom of the Net 2023 report explained that "With its 2022 inva-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

sion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has limited the diversity of news and information offered by Russian sources by imposing a tightly-controlled, single narrative regarding any war-related topic".²¹ This was largely true for Russian-owned news aggregators, such as Yandex, and social media networks (*Vkontakte*, *Odnoklassniki*, and *Mail.ru*). A 2022 monitoring report of the 20 largest Belarus-related disinformation-spreading *Odnoklassniki* groups, which had approximately 200,000 followers in total, found that the rhetoric of nearly every group became increasingly militaristic following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As the groups started to disseminate Russian military propaganda and question Ukraine's statehood, their content became barely indistinguishable from the news posted in *Odnoklassniki* groups targeting Russian audience.²²

Belarusian users of other social media platforms were also targeted by disinformation.²³ The 2024 report of the International Strategic Action Network for Security, based on the monitoring of approximately 400 *TikTok* accounts geolocated in Belarus between August 2023 and January 2024, revealed that the central themes in the pro-regime *TikTok* channels were events in Ukraine and anti-Ukrainian narratives. Among many themes, these false narratives portrayed Ukraine as a Nazi country, questioned Ukraine's sovereignty, discredited the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and speculated about an imminent Ukrainian defeat. The report concluded that similar anti-Ukrainian content occupied an even prominent position in the output of pro-Kremlin *TikTok* accounts. On *TikTok*, the anti-Ukraine content went hand in hand with the glorification of Russia's historical heritage, such as the romanticisation of the Second World War and nostalgia for the Soviet era. By early 2024 the number of *TikTok* users in Belarus exceeded 5.6 million, an increase of more than 2.5 million since 2022.²⁴

²¹ "Belarus. Freedom on the Net 2023," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2023>

²² "Odnoklassniki: the top 20 toxic public pages in Belarus have fused with the 'Russian World'," *International Strategic Action Network for Security*, 10 October 2022, <https://isans.org/social-networks/odnoklassniki-the-top-20-toxic-public-pages-in-belarus-have-fused-with-the-russian-world.html>

²³ See, e.g., section B2 of the Belarus in the Net 2023 report for examples of how Twitter/X, Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook acted to limit inappropriate content.

²⁴ "Analysis of political propaganda on TikTok: Identification and monitoring of pro-regime, pro-democracy and pro-Kremlin narratives," *International Strategic Action Network for Security*, March 2024, <https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/analysis-of-political-propaganda-on-tiktok.pdf>

A February 2024 review of Ukraine-related articles that featured in the largest state newspaper, *Belarus Segodnya*, concluded that the media outlet had no independent editorial policy on its coverage of the war and mostly published stories from Russian news agencies. Its coverage claimed that Ukraine had committed genocide in Donbas, and that Russia was liberating territories in Ukraine and winning the war.²⁵ A February 2024 monitoring report of the three major Belarusian state TV channels found that Ukraine-related narratives on Belarusian TV somewhat differed from those spread by Russian propaganda media and, despite many similarities, exhibited some distinctive features. For instance, the state TV channels emphasised the peace-loving characteristic of Belarus. The report identified three principal anti-Ukrainian messages on Belarusian state TV. The first is that Ukraine is in a state of chaos, and the struggle for power and money is intense. It's been ten years since the Maidan riots, and the country has fallen apart. The second is that the war in Ukraine is the West's war against Russia. The West is attempting to prolong the fight in Ukraine while it is itself in decay. The third emphasises that Ukraine is losing Western support and the political consensus in favour of Ukraine is becoming increasingly fragmented in the West.²⁶

A media expert interviewed for this study supports the findings of the mentioned report on Belarusian state TV. While Belarusian state propaganda on TV was hardly distinguishable from the broadcasts made by their Russian counterparts in the weeks and months following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it later became more disengaged from the pro-Kremlin line, the expert argued. He stated, "While the Kremlin media continued airing about the war, [Belarusian state media] preferred stating that Lukashenka will not make Belarus's participation in the war possible and that Belarus assists Ukrainian refugees... About two weeks [after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine] Belarusian state media in their reporting began a larger focus [than in the Russian media] on humanitarian aspects, and stated that Belarus was not a co-aggressor."²⁷ Belarusian state propaganda placed greater emphasis on portraying Poland as a main external enemy in contrast to Russian state media which were more focused on the US in that respect, the expert added.

²⁵ Markovsky, E., "Two years of the war: Propaganda is changing the masks. The deconstruction of narratives" [in Russian], *MediaIQ*, 28 February 2024, <https://mediaiq.info/2-goda-vojn-y-propaganda-menyaet-maski-dekonstrukciya-narrativov>

²⁶ "Monitoring pro-russian propaganda on Belarus state television," *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, 21 June 2024, <https://baj.media/en/aglyady-manitoringi/monitoring-pro-russian-propaganda/>

²⁷ Interview with media expert Pauluk Bykoŭski, August 2024.

In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the segments of Belarusian population which were more vulnerable and susceptible to pro-Kremlin disinformation, such as active Orthodox church followers or active and former military servicemen, arguably became even more exposed to this disinformation. This was because of an increase in the intensity of propaganda targeting these groups. The followers of the Belarusian and Russian state media and social media accounts which spread similar messages were also heavily targeted by reinforced propaganda.

Changes in the national media landscape

Amid considerable decline of Belarus's overall human rights situation since 2020, the media freedom in Belarus deteriorated further during the coverage period. Belarus continued to fall in the World Press Freedom Index by the Reporters Without Borders (RSF). In 2024, with a score of 26.8 points out of 100, the country ranked 167th out of 180 countries. In the 2020 index Belarus ranked 153rd with 50.25 points. The RSF's Belarus's fact-file claimed that "The Belarusian authorities have changed laws to give a legal veneer to attacks on press freedom. The justice system, under complete government control, has begun equating independent journalism with "extremism", which is punishable by up to seven years in prison".²⁸

As a BAJ 2022 report on mass media in Belarus stated, "The continuous repressions against the Belarusian independent media sector were characterised by consistency and cruelty".²⁹ The 2023 report of the Reporters Without Borders listed Belarus as having imprisoned 39 journalists, ranking the country in the top three nations with the highest number of detained journalists, following China (121) and Myanmar (68). These three countries also handed down the longest judicial sentences to journalists. Belarus, according to the same report, as of late 2023 held the most women journalists (10) after China (14).³⁰

Belarus's internet freedom rankings have also deteriorated markedly in recent years. Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2024 report listed Belarus among

²⁸ "Belarus," *Reporters Without Borders*, <https://rsf.org/en/country/belarus>

²⁹ "Mass media in Belarus in 2022," *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, March 2023, <https://baj.media/en/aglyady-manitoringi/mass-media-in-belarus-in-2022/>

³⁰ "Round-up of journalists killed, detained, held hostage and missing in 2023," *Reporters Without Borders*, 2023, https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2023/12/Round-up_2023_EN.pdf

the countries with the largest decline. With 22 points out of 100, the country was followed only by Cuba (20), Russia (20), Iran (12), China (9), and Myanmar (9). According to the report, “The government intensified its suppression of online voices, blocking of independent media outlets and information sources, and use of legislation to criminalize online materials produced by what it deemed to be “extremist” or “terrorist” groups and individuals”.³¹ Among the key developments related to internet freedom in Belarus in 2022–2023, the Freedom on the Net report from 2023 listed the increased use of laws on extremism and terrorism to restrict online content, an intensification of propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theories to manipulate the online information space, increased penalties against journalists, bloggers, activists, and ordinary users for their online activity, and an increased use of forced “repentant videos” of detained people to humiliate and silence dissidents and critics.³²

In March 2023 the state media started filming and distributing “confession videos” featuring political opponents. The detained people were called “extremists” and “radicals” while they themselves claimed that all they had done was follow now disbanded media sources.³³ Since 2020, such content has been spread by anonymous social media accounts without being attributed to state institutions or state media. As of late 2024, thirty-three media organisations were recognised as “extremist formations” including the most popular independent media outlets, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, and the Belarusian office of Deutsche Welle. Even following prohibited online media or social media accounts by ordinary users was declared an administrative offence, subject to a fine, 15 days of arrest, and the confiscation of the device.

Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka repeatedly demanded the state media to carry out more active propaganda activities. During a May 2022 meeting with high officials on the topic of propaganda he urged state media to draw upon experience gained during the Soviet era. He said that “The most important

³¹ “Belarus. Freedom on the Net 2024,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2024>

³² “Belarus. Freedom on the Net 2023,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2023>

³³ Pechinin, A., “TV news started showing forced repentances. The content of unofficial Telegram channels run by siloviki moved to the state TV” [in Russian], *MediaIQ*, 16 March 2023, <https://mediaiq.info/prinuditelnye-pokayaniya-poyavilis-v-telenovostyah-kontent-neofitsialnyh-telegram-kanalov-silovikov-perekocheval-na-gostv>

[strategy] is to be able to carry out counterpropaganda, as it was called in the Soviet Union".³⁴ In September 2022, he spoke about the ongoing "information war", criticised his administration for not being sufficiently active in that respect, and urged the Security Council to play a greater role in the information sphere.

The Media IQ report on Belarusian media consumption trends in 2023 stated that the share of the weekly audience of Belarusian state media (37 per cent) exceeded that of the Belarusian independent media (25 per cent).³⁵ Despite high consumption levels, trust in Belarusian state media was low. According to a June 2023 national phone survey, approximately one in four "fully trusted" state media and an equal proportion of respondents held no trust and 43 per cent claimed partial trust. Independent media were partially trusted by 48 per cent, distrusted by 24 per cent and enjoyed the "full trust" of 9 per cent respondents.³⁶ The sociological results were likely distorted due to the social desirability bias and sensitivity of the topic given the criminalisation of independent media in Belarus. A large share of uncertain respondents (18 per cent) for the question about trust in independent media was symptomatic in that respect. The researchers therefore assumed that the actual trust levels to state and independent media might have been about equal in 2023.³⁷ The study also concluded that Russian media continued to be popular among Belarusian audiences.

Experts argue that one reason for the lack of trust in state media is the detachment of their agenda from national topics of interest, and an inability to give a comprehensive picture of events. One topical report emphasised the contradictory messages broadcast by state media: "Belarusian propaganda simultaneously demonstrates Minsk's non-participation in the military actions in Ukraine and retranslates the ideological justification of the Russian aggression, calls on "fugitives" to return and threatens them with long prison terms, calls sanctions the reason for the decline in living standards and the driver of the development

³⁴ "Lukashenko speaks about information security: We have to be capable of carrying out counter-propaganda" [in Russian], 31 May 2022, *Belta News Agency*, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ob-informatsionnoj-bezopasnosti-my-dolzheny-umet-vesti-kontrpropagandu-505016-2022/>

³⁵ "Belarusian media consumption trends in 2023," *MediaIQ*, 26 February 2024, <https://mediaiq.info/media-consumption-trends-in-2023>

³⁶ "Trust in the media" [in Russian], *Belarusian Analytical Workroom*, 2023, <https://bawlab.eu/research/316-doverie-k-sredstvam-massovoj-informacii>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

of the national economy”.³⁸ This approach demotivated the audiences in seeking the correct interpretation of events and eroded trust in the media. According to an interviewed media expert, despite a very repressive environment, by 2024 many exiled Belarusian media have achieved their 2019 audience levels and some even exceeded them.³⁹ At the same time, their news agenda has changed as many non-state media avoid publishing on politically sensitive topics due to the concerns of their Belarus-based audience.

It follows from the August 2021 online survey that among social media users the most popular online platforms were *Vkontakte* (63 per cent), *Instagram* (53 per cent), *Odnoklassniki* (33 per cent), *Facebook* (28 per cent), and *TikTok* (18 per cent).⁴⁰ The most popular messengers used to receive news were *Viber* (66 per cent), *Telegram* (66 per cent), *WhatsApp* (28 per cent), *Facebook Messenger* (14 per cent) and *Skype* (13 per cent).⁴¹ By 2024, the popularity of *TikTok*, *YouTube* and *Instagram* greatly increased while *Telegram*'s popularity remained high. The topic of the war against Ukraine remained a dominant topic in the Belarusian media, irrespectively of political affiliations. The content analysis of the 57 largest Belarusian *Telegram* channels showed that over 300,000 posts, or approximately 30 per cent of their content published from February 2022 to March 2024 concerned the topic of the war.⁴²

All non-state media outlets covering socio-political news were forced into exile, but they continue to reach their audiences in Belarus through websites, social media and messaging applications. However, the content distribution policies of technological giants have limited the outreach of the exiled Belarusian media. Belarus as a localisation remained missing in *Google News*. In late 2022, *Google News* algorithms contributed to a worse representation of Belarusian non-state media in the news feed of Belarusian users than even the Russian-owned *Yandex (Dzen)* news aggregator. The “Belarus news” query in *Google News* pro-

³⁸ “Belarusian media’s compliance with reporting standards and state propaganda trends in 2023,” *MedialQ*, 26 February 2024, <https://medialq.info/belarusian-media-s-compliance-with-reporting-standards-and-state-propaganda-trends-in-2023>

³⁹ Interview with Pauluk Bykoŭski.

⁴⁰ “TikTok Audience in Belarus,” *Baltic Internet Policy Initiative*, October 2021, https://www.e-belarus.org/docs/TikTok_Belarusian_Audience.pdf

⁴¹ “Messengers Used to Get Information in Belarus,” *Baltic Internet Policy Initiative*, October 2021, https://www.e-belarus.org/docs/belarus_messengers_information.pdf

⁴² “‘The war share in the Belarusian Telegram community is 25-30 per cent’. Content analysis of the Belarusian segment of Telegram during the two years of war in Ukraine,” *MedialQ*, 5 March 2024, <https://medialq.info/dolya-vojny-v-belarusskom-telegram-soobshhestve-25-30-analiz-kontenta-v-belarusskom-telegram-za-dva-goda-vojny-v-ukraine>

posed one in four publications from Belarusian non-state media, while the rest were Russian and Belarusian state media content.⁴³

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

The DRI 2021 edition found that legal regulations intended to counter disinformation actually served to restrict the activities of independent media and information sources outside the circle of state media and sources aligned with the state propaganda. The Information Security Concept, which was adopted in 2019 and declared the “principle of information neutrality” as its foundation, was not amended in the reviewed period. The coverage of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in state media was in direct conflict with the said principle and was contrary to the Belarusian information sovereignty. “One could argue that until 2022 signs of violations [of the Information Security Concept] were evident but it was not the case that Belarus explicitly sided with either of the sides. It was a matter of discussion if [information security] was infringed. However, as [Belarusian state media] joined the frenzied anti-Ukrainian [media] campaign, this became obvious and impossible to hide”, one interviewed expert said.⁴⁴ In the reviewed period, the following legal trends and developments should be mentioned which negatively affected non-state media and civil society:

- The May 2022 decree On Media Development introduced a 10 per cent fee for outdoor advertisements and advertisements in transport and a 20 per cent fee for other types of commercial advertising. The fees are used to subsidise the state media. Given that any advertisement of international brands in Belarus would therefore indirectly sponsor state propaganda, the adopted regulation was believed to instigate the further withdrawal of international brands from the Belarusian market.⁴⁵

⁴³ Parfyonenko, P., “How Google leaves Belarusians in the Russian media sphere” [in Russian], *MediaIQ*, 19 September 2022, <https://mediaiq.info/kak-google-ostavlyayet-belarusov-v-rossijskom-mediapole>

⁴⁴ Interview with Pauluk Bykoŭski.

⁴⁵ “Will brands leave to not sponsor propaganda? (...)” [in Russian], *Zerkalo.io*, 4 April 2022, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/12165.html>

- The amendments to the Criminal Code increased penalties for libel, actions deemed harmful to national interests, and other existing crimes. The amendments also criminalised “distribution of false information” which discredits the state. The anti-extremist legislation was considerably broadened to threaten journalists, bloggers, and ordinary users with prison sentences for speech-related offences. The January 2023 amendments to the law on citizenship introduced the possibility to deprive people of their Belarusian citizenship for the alleged participation in the activities of an “extremist formation”.⁴⁶ The journalists who reside in exile and work for independent media may therefore be affected by the law.
- The July 2023 amendments to the media law have established a tighter state control over online news aggregation services and online publications. The goal of this greater control is to prevent the spread of banned content or transmission of foreign TV channels which are not allowed to broadcast in Belarus. The amendments also introduced additional grounds for restricting access to websites and revoking the media registration of accredited foreign media outlets.⁴⁷

These and other legal changes and practices led to the creation of a highly repressive environment for the activities of non-state media and bloggers. One topical study stated that in 2023 the Belarusian media witnessed the continuation of the ‘war’ which was declared against them in 2020.⁴⁸ The report argued that the main tools used in the war were the prosecution of journalists, threats and pressure on their relatives who remain in Belarus, and the application of anti-extremist legislation to criminalise media consumption. According to the report, the most common charges against media employees included treason against the state, the organisation and preparation of actions grossly violating public order, calling for actions aimed at harming the national security, the creation of extremist groups and participation in them, and incitement of racial, national, religious or other social hatred or discord.⁴⁹

Minor changes took place with respect to the structure of state media. A new state TV channel called *Pervyi Informatsionnyi* (“First Informational”), established

⁴⁶ “On amendments to the Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Belarus” [in Russian], *Pravo.by*, 5 January 2023, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300242&p1=1&p5=0>

⁴⁷ The entire media law following the amendments is available at <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=h10800427> [in Russian]

⁴⁸ “Belarusian media environment in 2023,” *MediaIQ*, <https://mediaiq.info/media-environment-in-2023>

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

in September 2024, was added to the obligatory publicly accessible package of TV channels. Given that the state media agenda is tightly controlled, the news agenda and content of *Pervyi Informatsionnyi* is unlikely to differ from other state TV channels. There have been official comments that the new TV channel will dedicate a larger portion of air time to news programmes including lengthy telethons. In the same month, the national video hosting platform *videobel.by* was launched which was officially called the Belarusian analogue of YouTube. In 2023, former minister of information Uladzimir Piartsou announced plans to optimise regional state media and create six media holdings. No progress on this idea has occurred as of late 2024.

State media workers and Belarusian propagandists started playing a greater role in state decision-making. This trend was exemplified, for instance, in positions that they received in the state “return commission” which was created in early 2023 to review requests from Belarusians living abroad who are willing to return to Belarus but are concerned with possible prosecution related to “protest-related crimes”. This body can soften or drop charges against a person; although a public repentance was mentioned as a requirement in the decree.

In the reviewed period, Belarusian ruler Lukashenka and other high-level officials regularly met Russian propagandists in their capacity as experts in international affairs. One example is the meeting of former Belarusian foreign minister Uladzimir Makei with Yaakov Kedmi. A statement released by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) described Kedmi as an “Israeli political scientist” and stated that the two had a “detailed exchange of opinions about the topical issues of regional and global agenda”.⁵⁰ In October 2022, Lukashenka discussed ideological activities with the far-right Russian political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin.

In the monitored period a closer coordination of activities in the media sphere between Belarus and Russia took place. In February 2023, the Supreme State Council of the Union State, an integration body of Belarus and Russia, approved the Concept of Information Security of the Union State. It proclaimed its purpose as protecting the national interests of the Union State members in the media landscape. Belarus and Russia also progressed with establishing the Union State’s joint media holding company which is expected to come into existence

⁵⁰ “On the meeting of Belarusian foreign minister V. Makey with political scientist Y. Kedmi” [in Russian], *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 20 June 2022, https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/fed-2a53756f2cd9b.html

in 2025. Furthermore, in April 2024 the Belarusian National Security Concept was amended, mentioning the spread of “Nazi” ideology as a significant security challenge. One analysis found this example and other changes to the National Security Concept as evidence of an alignment with the security threats identified by Russia.⁵¹ Although the Information Security Concept was not revised in the reviewed period, changes in the National Security Concept have directly influenced state information policies, an interviewed expert said.⁵²

Changes in the institutional framework related to the fight against disinformation were insignificant. The authority of the inter-agency Commission on Information Security was expanded in 2021 allowing it to restrict access to websites and close media outlets based on a broad list of potential threats. The March 2022 decree adjusted the Commission’s configuration, in which a representation of the security agencies was reinforced.⁵³ In March 2023, the Council of Heads of National Mass Media at the Belarusian State University was established to supervise the training of journalists including through the revision of journalism educational programmes.⁵⁴

Responses by the media and civil society

Regular reporting of non-state media on social, economic and (geo-)political issues for the Belarusian audiences, beyond strict fact-checking activities, remained an important alternative of news for Belarusian residents and diasporas. Despite negative trends in the Belarusian media space, non-state media demonstrated very high compliance with professional standards. In 2023, five out of seven monitored non-state media outlets received from 4.92 to 4.99 points out of 5. In contrast, the scores for the three main state TV channels, *Belarus 1*, *ONT* and *STV* were 3.33, 3.43 and 2.65, respectively. The proportion

⁵¹ Dyner, A. M., “Belarus Updated Security Strategies Identify Threats from the West,” *PISM*, 21 May 2024, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/belarus-updated-security-strategies-identify-threats-from-the-west>

⁵² Interview with Pauluk Bykoŭski.

⁵³ Decree № 129 of 29 March 2022 [in Russian], *Pravo.by*, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P32200129>

⁵⁴ “‘Today, media is the battlefield’. Lukashenko spoke about training of journalists” [in Russian], *Belta News Agency*, 9 February 2023, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/sejchas-smi-eto-pole-borby-lukashenko-vyskazalsja-o-podgotovke-zhurnalistskih-kadrov-549271-2023/>

of propaganda content in the total number of studied messages for state TV channels reached 60 per cent.⁵⁵ The monitoring report of the first half of 2024 similarly found that most non-state media outlets “have shown a strong commitment to upholding reporting standards”. All seven media outlets operating outside Belarus (in exile) scored from 4.92 to 5 out of 5 points in the rating on compliance with news reporting standards.⁵⁶ The percentage of manipulated and conspiratorial content on key state TV channels exceeded 50 per cent and reached 77 per cent on the *ONT TV channel*.⁵⁷

Despite restrictions against non-state media and heavy punishments against citizens for accessing their content, many Belarusian non-state media have maintained the levels of readership since 2019. Asked to explain this trend, an interviewed media practitioner stated,

*“I remember how twelve years ago Andrei Bastunets, chairman of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, said that only Belarusian independent journalists needed Belarusian independent journalism. Most people were fine with the worldview provided in state media, it used to match their living experience. This is not the case any longer. Today, the wild news on state TV does not give them the answers to questions they are concerned with. So, we [independent media] are demanded by them”.*⁵⁸

It has become harder for independent media to carry out interviews with experts and citizens, especially due to a growth in self-censorship. At the same time, according to the same interviewed expert, if one compares the situation that state media faced in the reviewed period, the latter seemingly had an even narrower choice of guest commentators and therefore did not do better than non-state counterparts. The media practitioner said that “Paradoxically, in the current situation we [Belarusian non-state media] are still competitive”.⁵⁹

The non-state media in exile such as *Zerkalo.io* (formerly *Tut.by*), *Nasha Niva* and *Reformation*, as well as media targeting Belarusian audience originally

⁵⁵ “Belarusian media’s compliance with reporting standards and state propaganda trends in 2023,” *MediaIQ*, 26 February 2024, <https://mediaiq.info/belarusian-media-s-compliance-with-reporting-standards-and-state-propaganda-trends-in-2023>

⁵⁶ “From ‘Extremism’ Tactics to a South-East Shift: Dominant Information Manipulation Trends in H1 2024,” *MediaIQ*, 14 October 2024, <https://mediaiq.info/from-extremism-tactics-to-a-south-east-shift-dominant-information-manipulation-trends-in-h1-2024>

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Interview with a media practitioner, July 2024.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

headquartered in foreign countries such as the *Belsat TV*, *European Radio for Belarus* and *RFE/RL's Belarus Service* continued to publish fact-checking and investigative articles. At the same time, non-state media rarely employ the tactic of prebunking – where individuals are taught how to recognise false claims before encountering them, an interviewed expert said.⁶⁰ As a media initiative that carried out regular fact-checking activities and reporting on specific cases of disinformation and manipulative techniques, MediaIQ stood out. Labelled “extremist” in June 2024, the project continued to monitor media and identify disinformation campaigns.⁶¹ Among other media organisations, NGOs and research centres which have carried out disinformation reviews, conducted media literacy and employed fact-checking activities were the Belarusian Association of Journalists, International Strategic Action Network for Security, and Nastaunik.Info. Generally, in the reviewed period, due to a more repressive media environment, the visibility of fact-checking initiatives for the public have decreased.

The Belarusian media community continued to advocate for a change in the policies of the large technological companies whose algorithms hardly feature Belarusian non-state media in search engines and news aggregator services. These advocacy efforts were eventually supported by the EU. It was reported in early 2024 that the European Commission urged Google and other big tech companies to reconsider their Belarus-related policies.⁶²

Recommendations

Since 2021, Belarus's state administration's political will to fight disinformation has deteriorated further from an already bad position. The period has seen the introduction of an even greater, more comprehensive state system of control over information flows, and further restrictions placed upon news and opinions which contradict the state media agenda. Therefore, all the recommendations proposed in the 2021 DRI study with the view of strengthening the national resil-

⁶⁰ Interview with Pauluk Bykoŭski.

⁶¹ “Media IQ to keep working despite extremist designation – editor in chief,” *MediaIQ*, 27 June 2024, <https://mediaiq.info/media-iq-to-keep-working-despite-extremist-designation-editor-in-chief>

⁶² “EU urges Big Tech to promote opposition media in Belarus,” *Financial Times*, 8 January 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/0b33b19f-6ded-4458-be0b-b335cdf31f17>

ience to disinformation remain relevant. Broadly speaking, the return to information neutrality, proclaimed in the 2019 Information Security Concept, is advisable.

Nearly all areas of concern in respect to state efforts to address disinformation, mentioned in the 2022 UN Secretary-General's report on countering disinformation,⁶³ are applicable to Belarus. They include a lack of effective participation in the legislative process, vague definitions of disinformation, excessive or disproportionate punishment, internet shutdowns/blocking of websites and outlets, and role of public officials. The following points call for corresponding changes in state policies:

- To consult civil society groups and other stakeholders on legislative processes. In Belarus, regulatory responses to disinformation were adopted without such participation.
- To remove vague definitions of disinformation and the broad and vague scope of anti-extremism legislation. The current definitions allow for widespread misapplication and abuse. In official rhetoric information produced by non-state media is generally equated to be 'fake news'.
- To repeal both excessive and disproportionate punishment set out in the regulations which seek to tackle disinformation and the spread of "extremist" views. The UN report explained that "In particular, the risks of harsh, excessive or disproportionate sanctions may deter journalists and human rights defenders from carrying out their key roles in free and democratic societies and encourage self-censorship",⁶⁴ therefore the government should follow a softened approach.
- To end the practice of indiscriminately blocking websites and outlets. According to the UN report, such measures have broad negative impacts and very rarely meet the human rights requirements of necessity and proportionality.
- For public officials to be more diligent in public communication. As stated in the UN report, "Disinformation can be particularly pernicious when it is spread by political or public officials, yet addressing it in such contexts poses significant additional challenges".⁶⁵

For the journalism community and civil society, it is important to increase coordination in the fight against disinformation and to promote media literacy and

⁶³ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/459/24/pdf/n2245924.pdf>

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

critical thinking activities among the segments of Belarusian population which remain outside of current initiatives. Mobile interactive games can be used to reach new audiences. The 2021 recommendations for the international community as for the assistance to the Belarusian non-state media and civil society remain relevant. It is also advisable to further advocate for policy changes within international big tech companies regarding the fair representation of Belarusian non-state media in search engine and news aggregation algorithms.

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Abstract

This chapter explores the Czech Republic's ongoing battle against disinformation. It does so by examining recent legal and institutional developments, as well as the contribution of civil society and the media to the nation's resilience. It reviews the progress made since the last edition of the DRI and highlights the ongoing challenges in tackling disinformation, including the impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The chapter argues that the Czech Republic's battle with disinformation has not significantly shifted from the last DRI report. The country's resilience has remained strong, even in the face of a surge in disinformation and propaganda, particularly from pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing sources covering the conflict in Ukraine. Civil society continues to actively address a broad spectrum of disinformation challenges and the media landscape remains varied and pluralistic. Notably, the number of disinformation websites remains on the decline, and state institutions continue to show a commitment to defending the country against information threats.

However, on a less positive note, the same obstacles and challenges continue to impede the progress in the fight against disinformation. Czech civil society, while active in addressing disinformation, faces a resource shortfall that hampers timely responses to new disinformation trends, such as the slow recognition of Telegram as an emerging platform for disinformation and the challenges posed by the use of AI in spreading false information. Moreover, the efforts of Czech civil society are often fragmented and have a limited impact due to a lack of coordination and sharing of best practices. Likewise, although the media landscape remains diverse, public trust in the media is alarmingly low, with concerns about media owners' personal and economic agendas. Additionally, Czech political leadership has yet to muster the political will needed to implement effective strategies that would enhance societal resilience and strengthen the country's defences against hybrid threats.

Furthermore, new challenges have emerged due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Despite sociological reports indicating that the resilience of the Czech Republic has remained consistent with levels prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the conflict has undoubtedly had substantial economic and social effects on the Czech population. This has initiated a trend that could eventually increase the vulnerability of the country, contributing to a rising sense of uncertainty within Czech society and a growing distrust towards the state, its political leaders, the media, and even among Czech citizens themselves.

Overview of the latest topical studies

The studies released since the 2021 DRI edition indicate that Czech society remains largely resilient to disinformation. Research conducted in 2022 by the sociological institute STEM, and a 2023 collaborative analysis by the Czech Radio and research institute SYRI, reveals that only about 10 per cent of Czechs believe in disinformation and conspiracy theories.¹ Notably, the latter study categorises these believers into distinct groups, evidencing that some of them may endorse anti-migration narratives while dismissing COVID-related ones, emphasising that different audiences are susceptible to distinct disinformation narratives.

The Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) echoes this study, placing the Czech Republic among the most resilient societies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). However, their 2023 findings also note a slight decrease in the number of Czechs who perceive Russia as a threat since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, falling from 84 per cent to 79 per cent, which may reflect a growth in fatigue towards the war. Nevertheless, the percentage remains significantly higher than before the war, indicating the Kremlin's war propaganda has only a limited impact.² The previously mentioned analysis by STEM supports this resilience, showing that the majority of Czechs do not believe the Kremlin's official narratives justifying the war.

Likewise, according to the 2023 PSSI analysis, the perception of China as a threat has increased from 50 to 60 per cent since the full-scale invasion, signalling the ineffectiveness of Beijing's charm offensive in the CEE.³ A study by the MapInfluenCE project, which focused on Beijing's digital diplomacy in the region, similarly concluded that China's efforts to leverage the Ukraine war for its own ends have largely failed.⁴ These findings were complemented by another study

¹ Hořejš, N., "Disinformation threatens our Security, Czechs Think" [in Czech], *STEM*, 2022, <https://www.stem.cz/dezinformace-ohrozuj-nasi-bezpecnost-mysli-si-cesi-vetsina-souhlas-i-s-omezovanim-dezinformacnich-zdroju/>;

"Society of Distrust" [in Czech], *iRozhlas*, 2023, <https://www.irozhlas.cz/neduvera>

² Tkáčová, N. & Šefčíková, K., "United (For Now): What Connects and Divides Czech Society" [in Czech], *Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI)*, 2023, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/119-pssi-perspective-29-zatim-jednotni-co-spojue-a-rozdeluje-ceskou-spolecnost>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Blablová V., "China's Twiplomacy in Europe in the Shadow of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *MapInfluenCE*, 2023, <https://mapinfluence.eu/en/chinas-twiplomacy-in-europe-in-the-shadow-of-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>

from the Association for International Affairs (AMO), which examined Beijing's proxies in spreading its agenda, including by local politicians and alternative media.⁵ Further, AMO research has detailed the *modus operandi* of these proxies.⁶ The European Values⁷ and the MapInfluenCE project⁸ add academia and research institutions to this list of proxies, offering guidelines to curb Chinese information influence.

The war in Ukraine has highlighted how Russian and Chinese disinformation strategies converge. The Institute of International Relations (IIR) compares these strategies in NATO member states,⁹ while AMO¹⁰ and PSSI¹¹ delve into the Kremlin's narratives spread in the Czech Republic since the full-scale invasion, including a case study on the Bucha Massacre by PSSI.¹² Complementing this research, EUROPEUM provides a guide to countermeasures against Russian disinformation,¹³ and IIR compares Czech and Norwegian resilience strategies in the post-invasion context and provides a list of best practices.¹⁴

⁵ Šebok, F., "China's Narratives on Russia's War on Ukraine in Central Europe," *Association for International Affairs (AMO)*, 2023.

⁶ Blablová, V. et al., "From East with Love: Dissecting Pro-China Bias in Czech and Slovak Alternative Media," *Association for International Affairs (AMO)*, 2022, <https://www.amo.cz/en/map-influence-en/from-east-with-love-dissecting-pro-china-bias-in-czech-and-slovak-alternative-media/>

⁷ Plášek, D., "How Chinese Entities Influence Academic Institutions and How to Prevent Related Security Threats," *European Values*, 2022, <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/how-chinese-entities-influence-academic-institutions-and-how-to-prevent-related-security-threats/>

⁸ Karásková, I. et.al., "How to Do Trusted Research: China-Specific Guidelines for European Stakeholders," *Association for International Affairs (AMO)*, 2022, <https://www.amo.cz/en/how-to-do-trusted-research-china-specific-guidelines-for-european-stakeholders-2/>

⁹ Daniel, J., Bahenský, V. & Turcsányi, R.Q., "Dragon's Roar and Bear's Howl: Convergence in Sino-Russian Information Operations in NATO Countries?," *Institute of International Relations (IIR)*, 2023, <https://www.iir.cz/dragon-s-roar-and-bear-s-howl-convergence-in-sino-russian-information-operations-in-nato-countries>

¹⁰ Nemečková, N. et al., "Major Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Narratives and Their Transmitters in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia," *Association for International Affairs (AMO)*, 2023.

¹¹ "Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine," *Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI)*, 2023, <https://www.pssi.cz/projects/84-hostile-narrative-brief-war-in-ukraine>

¹² Webrová, N., "Bucha Massacre Narrated Through the Eyes of Pro-Kremlin Media: A Case Study of Sputnik CZ," *Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI)*, 2022, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/74-pssi-perspective-19-bucha-massacre-narrated-through-the-eyes-of-pro-kremlin-media-a-case-study-of-sputnik-cz>

¹³ Takácsy, D., "Resilience building in the V4 against disinformation about the Russian-Ukrainian war," *EUROPEUM*, 2023, <https://www.europeum.org/articles/detail/5539/policy-paper-resilience-building-in-the-v4-against-disinformation-about-the-russian-ukrainian-war>

¹⁴ Daniel, J. et al., "Czech and Norwegian Perspectives on Resilience in a Post-invasion-of Ukraine Context," *Institute of International Relations (IIR)*, 2023, <https://www.iir.cz/czech-and-norwegian-perspectives-on-resilience-in-a-post-invasion-of-ukraine-context>

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine was also exploited during the Czech Presidential elections along with other polarising topics. PSSI and *Demagog.cz* provide an overview of the most popular narratives and actors spreading them in their monitoring briefs and fact-checks.¹⁵ The Ministry of Interior also monitored the information space during the election and drafted an internal report focusing on a Telegram channel with Kremlin ties, which actively spread war-related disinformation to discredit presidential candidate Petr Pavel.

In addition, the impact of the Ukraine war on the economy and energy security of the Czech Republic has revived climate and environmental disinformation in the country. A joint study by PSSI and EUROPEUM concludes that the European Green Deal has become a scapegoat exploited by Czech disinformation actors. Given the lack of communication by the state, the public discourse on this topic has been hijacked by local disinformation actors. To fix the situation, the report offers recommendations for Czech stakeholders on how to improve public communication about the Green Deal and other EU climate initiatives.¹⁶

Based on the CEDMO's research on the impact of disinformation, the most trusted narratives among Czech society were linked to already existing views and assumptions. These narratives focused on the socio-economic tensions in the society as well as the consequences of the Russian war against Ukraine.¹⁷ One consequence of the war has been a major wave of refugees entering the Czech Republic, which hosts the highest number of refugees per capita in Europe. Many popular disinformation narratives in the Czech Republic are related to the topic of Ukrainians who fled the war.¹⁸

Since the 2021 DRI edition, the communication strategies of state institutions, including their strategic communication, have emerged as another key area in Czech research. AMO, European Values, and Reconstruction of the State have

¹⁵ "Czech Elections in the Disinformation Era: Presidential Elections 2023" [In Czech], *Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI)*, 2022, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/81-psi-perspective-23-ceske-volby-v-ere-dezinformaci-prezidentske-volby-2023-predstaveni-projektu>

¹⁶ Šefčíková, K., "The European Green Deal and the Energy Crisis in the Czech Information Space," *Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI)*, 2023, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/88-the-european-green-deal-and-the-energy-crisis-in-the-czech-information-space>

¹⁷ "CEDMO Trends," *CEDMO*, 2023, <https://cedmohub.eu/cs/cedmo-trends/>

¹⁸ Pika, T., "What Disinformation are the Most Believed in Czechia? Narratives about Migration Resonate the Most" [In Czech], *iRozhlas.cz*, 2 January 2024, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/overovna-hoaxy-fake-news-nepravdy-overeni-dezinformace-propaganda_2401020500_cib

published a manual on strategic communication for state bodies,¹⁹ followed by PSSI's assessment of Czech strategic communication capabilities and needs.²⁰

Despite these varied research topics, several areas remain underexplored. The growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in disinformation spread has yet to receive significant attention in Czech research. Similarly, topics like the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) currently implemented in the Czech Republic and other member states, demonetisation of disinformation (only explored in detail by PSSI and NELEŽ), and the rising prominence of *Telegram* after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, still lack proper investigation.

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

Despite the surge in disinformation following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the resilience of the Czech Republic — both at the governmental and societal levels — has largely remained as it was before the conflict. However, the war has undeniably led to significant economic and social impacts on the Czech population, introducing a trend that could heighten Czech vulnerability over time. This includes a growing sense of uncertainty within Czech society and increasing distrust towards the state, its political representatives, the media, and even among the Czech people themselves.

At the state level, the Czech government's initial proactive and strong response to Russian aggression and the accompanying disinformation campaign began to fade in the months that followed, culminating in a significant shift at the start of 2023. Although the government moved quickly after the invasion to counter the wave of war propaganda by banning websites known for distributing problematic content, these actions and the subsequent draft legislation were

¹⁹ Havlíček, P. et al., "Strategic Communication of the State" [in Czech], *Association for International Affairs (AMO)*, 2022, <https://www.amo.cz/cs/agenda-pro-ceskou-zahranicni-politiku/strategicka-komunikace-statuu/>

²⁰ Tkáčová, N. & Šefčíková, K., "Assessment of Strategic Communication Structures and Capabilities in the Czech Republic," *Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI)*, 2023, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/120-assessment-of-strategic-communication-structures-and-capabilities-in-the-czech-republic>

poorly communicated to the public. This lack of clear communication allowed anti-system actors to dominate the narrative, accusing the government of infringing on free speech, which ultimately led to the government abandoning the initiative.²¹

A similar fate befell Michal Klíma, the governmental representative for media and the fight against disinformation, whose position was established in March 2022 but was discontinued just several months later.²² Despite the government's proactive establishment of this role shortly after the Russian invasion, Klíma's objectives, responsibilities, and authority were poorly conveyed to the public, leading to accusations of censorship and the eventual termination of his role by the government.

The same challenges extend to the Czech government's efforts to sever economic and energy ties with Russia and to implement the EU sanctions regime. Despite its vocal support for a firm stance against Russia at both the European and national levels, government policy has lacked effectiveness, partly due to staffing shortages in teams responsible for sanction enforcement.²³ This has led to multiple reports by investigative journalists of sanction evasion taking place in the Czech Republic.²⁴ Likewise, despite prior commitments to reduce dependence, the Czech Republic has seen a sharp rise in Russian gas imports. Data from the Czech Statistical Office indicate that, as of January 2024, Russian gas accounted for about 62 per cent of the country's imports while the figure prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was as high as 97%.²⁵

²¹ Cibulka, J., „We Do Not Have a Law or Analyses. Anti-Disinformation Legislation Will Have Limited Impact, Lawyers Warn“ [in Czech], *iRozhlas*, 18 April 2023, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dezinformace-blokovani-cenzura-zakon_2204180500_cib

²² Bartoniček, R., “We Do Not Need a Law Against Disinformation. Fighting with Truth Is Enough Says Benda from ODS“ [in Czech], *Aktuálně*, 23 March 2023, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/zakon-proti-dezinformacim/r~739a7c12c71611ed8b4e0cc47ab5f122/>

²³ Pšenička, J., “Czech Sanctions Against Russia Stalled“ [in Czech], *Seznam Zprávy*, 9 June 2023, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-ceske-sankce-proti-rusku-se-zadrhly-ministerstvo-nema-lidi-232220>

²⁴ Dohnalová, A., “Money Through Exchange Offices, Goods Through Central Asia. Czech Companies Avoid Sanctions“ [in Czech], *Aktuálně*, 20 June 2023, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/sankce/r~8c58840c0c4311eebe29ac1f6b220ee8/>;

Skýpala, M., “The Czechs are massively abusing anti-Russian sanctions“ [in Czech], *Forum 24*, 21 January 2024, <https://www.forum24.cz/cesi-masivne-parazituji-na-obchazeni-proti-ruskych-sankci-neviditelna-ruka-trhu-zanecha-krvavou-stopu>

²⁵ “Russian Gas in Czechia Amounted to 62% in January“ [in Czech], *ČTK*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2476378>

Consequently, despite the Czech government's early efforts to counter disinformation stemming from Russian aggression as well as its commitment to severing ties with Russia and its vocal support for sanctions, the country's resilience has largely remained at its pre-war level. This is due to a gradual decline in the pursuit of these efforts and a number of shortcomings in their practical implementation.

The situation at the societal level presents a similarly mixed picture, with the resilience of the Czech population largely the same as before the full-scale invasion. According to the GLOBSEC Trends 2023 survey, the Czech Republic ranks among the countries least susceptible to manipulative narratives in the region, maintaining its pre-war status.²⁶ This resilience extends to narratives that support the Kremlin's position on the war. For instance, 71 per cent of Czechs hold Russia accountable for the Ukraine conflict, only 15 per cent believe the West provoked Russia, and a mere 8 per cent blame Ukraine for allegedly oppressing the Russian-speaking population.²⁷ Moreover, the percentage of people swayed by disinformation and conspiracy theories remains relatively stable, fluctuating between 10 and 15 per cent in sociological studies.²⁸

However, the war has significantly shifted some Czech perceptions, with citizens increasingly aware of the threats posed by the Kremlin and other authoritarian regimes. As of 2023, 79 per cent of Czechs view Russia as a security threat, a sharp increase from 43 per cent in 2020. The proportion of Czechs who view Russia as a strategic partner has plummeted to 6 per cent, while support for sanctions against Russia has surged to 72 per cent. Concurrently, there's a growing concern over the People's Republic of China (PRC), with the percentage of Czechs considering Beijing as a threat having risen from 50 per cent to 60 per cent over the past year.²⁹ As noted by Kristína Šefčíková, an analyst at the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), "This shift can be attributed to a heightened awareness of authoritarian dangers, underscored by the war and the lessons from reliance on Russian energy, which also spotlighted the Czech

²⁶ Tkáčová, N. & Šefčíková, K. *Op. cit.*

²⁷ Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, Jana Kazaz, „GLOBSEC Trends 2023,“ *GLOBSEC*, 2023, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2023-united-we-still-stand>

²⁸ „Society of Distrust“ [in Czech], *iRozhlas*, 2023, <https://www.irozhlas.cz/neduvera>; „The Czech society is divided on the issue of support for Ukrainian refugees. The perception of Russia as the main culprit of the war is not decreasing“ [in Czech], *STEM*, 2023, <https://www.stem.cz/ceska-spolecnost-je-rozpolcena-na-tematu-podpory-ukrajinskych-uprchliku-vnimani-ruska-jako-hlavniho-vinika-valky-neklesa/>

²⁹ Tkáčová, N. & Šefčíková, K. *Op. cit.*

and European dependency on Chinese supply chains and their potential future impact.”³⁰ Additionally, the PRC’s increasingly threatening rhetoric and actions towards Taiwan, coupled with high-profile events such as US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei, have cast further attention on the tensions between the West and the PRC. Lastly, the strengthening of Czech-Taiwan relations has further underscored the concerns regarding the PRC as a partner.

However, the growing awareness of the dangers posed by authoritarian states such as Russia and China, including the spread of disinformation, is being offset by a concerning trend that threatens the Czech population’s future resilience: rising uncertainty and distrust within society. Since the full-scale outbreak of war in Ukraine, trust in the government has plummeted to 17 per cent as of December 2023,³¹ and trust in Prime Minister Petr Fiala is only slightly higher at 19 per cent, similar to other governing party leaders.³² Trust in the media has also declined, with only one-third of Czechs expressing confidence in the industry. An increasing number of people are intentionally avoiding the news,³³ and a majority of Czechs are steering clear of news about Ukraine,³⁴ making room for manipulative narratives to take root over credible and verified information. Additionally, analysis by STEM reveals a deep mistrust among Czechs towards their fellow citizens, with trust decreasing significantly in recent years. A staggering 85 per cent of Czechs perceive their society as divided and polarised.³⁵ This widespread distrust towards the state, political figures, the media, and even fellow citizens creates fertile ground for disinformation and conspiracy theories. Furthermore, it plays into the hands of Russia and similar actors, advancing their goal of fostering a divided society that is both distrustful and disunited.

The situation is further complicated by the heightened sense of uncertainty within Czech society, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. The conflict’s economic

³⁰ Interview, July 2024.

³¹ “Trust in State Institutions - Autumn 2023” [in Czech], *CVVM*, 2023, <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/z/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/institute-a-politici/5765-duvera-ustavnim-institucim-podzim-2023>

³² “Trust in Politicians” [in Czech], *Deník N*, 18 October 18, <https://denikn.cz/minuta/1261214/>

³³ “Number of People Avoiding News Raising” [in Czech], *iRozhlas*, 19 January 2024, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zivotni-styl/spolecnost/socialni-site-vyhybani-zpravodajstvi-diskuse-cejko-va-rozhovor_2401192331_afo

³⁴ Doubravová, B., “More Than Half of Czechs Avoid News on Ukraine” [in Czech], *Aktuálně*, 14 June 2023, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/pruzkum-pres-polovinu-cechu-se-vyhyba-zp-ravam-o-ukrajine/r~4f24982609d911ee93abac1f6b220ee8/>

³⁵ Gavriněv, V., “Record Distrust to Fellow Czechs on Rise” [in Czech], *Seznam Zprávy*, 12 December 2023, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-zivot-v-cesku-spolecnost-je-rozdelena-mysli-si-cesi-ale-neshodnou-se-proc-to-tak-je-241470>

and social repercussions have left many Czechs feeling uncertain and fearful about the future. This state of emotional vulnerability is not only a breeding ground for disinformation but also a fertile field for populist parties and politicians. Additionally, a significant portion of the Czech population, about a third, expresses uncertainty about the country's direction on key issues.³⁶ The risk that these individuals could be swayed by manipulative narratives that erode democratic values is a significant concern. This risk is particularly acute if such narratives capitalise on economic grievances, dwindling trust in the government, or perceptions of media bias.

In fact, political figures like Tomio Okamura of the right-wing SPD party and Jindřich Rajchl of the right-wing PRO party have been leveraging these societal anxieties, often employing pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian narratives to score political points.³⁷ As noted by Veronika Víchová, an analyst at the Centre for Informed Society (CIS), “we see more and more manipulative narratives exploiting Russian aggression against Ukraine, and not only from marginal disinformation websites or extremists, but also often from the ranks of aspiring or incumbent politicians.”³⁸ In general, political actors have found a new momentum to ride the wave of public dissatisfaction and frustration. These actors have exploited the widespread criticism of the current government and have portrayed themselves as representing the only viable alternative and solution to the Czech Republic's current challenges.

Changes in the national media landscape

The Czech Republic remains a pluralistic and diverse media ecosystem with a relatively strong and independent media space.

A traditional advantage of Czechia has been its strong public broadcasting sector, which is dominated by Czech TV and Czech radio. Both of these services operate independently from the influence of the government and are funded by concession fees paid directly by citizens. This independence has been further strengthened since the 2021 DRI thanks to the so-called small media council

³⁶ Tkáčová, N. & Šefčíková, K. *Op. cit.*

³⁷ Havlík, V. & Kluknavská, A. “Our people first (again)! The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic,” *European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.populismstudies.org/our-people-first-again-the-impact-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-on-the-populist-radical-right-in-the-czech-republic/>

³⁸ Interview, July 2024.

reform. The reform has further restricted opportunities for undue political interference and has given additional responsibilities to the upper chamber of the Parliament (Senate). A bigger plan to make the media councils and other observatory bodies even more independent from political interference remains in the government's tray for now.

Despite some level of criticism, both Czech TV and radio remains an open platform for both the government and opposition politicians and also other political forces from outside of the government, which would otherwise struggle to find media airtime. Their function remains primarily educational and serves to raise public awareness of different topics across society. This has proven useful in the fight against disinformation, malign influence and hybrid threats more widely. In addition, several new private media outlets, including most prominently *Deník N*, continued to grow thanks to their focus on reaching their consumers online.

However, the mainstream media in the Czech Republic continues to be dominated by the interests of their owners with their own agendas and economic interests.³⁹ This was only partially addressed by a new law forbidding active politicians (including the former PM Andrej Babiš, hence nicknamed *lex Babiš*) to own media and publishing houses, due to the risk of a conflict of interests between holding political power and wielding media influence. In the case of the former PM and minister of finance Babiš, the law finally prevented him from having control over the media.

Apart from the mainstream media, the Czech Republic continues to be influenced by dozens of disinformation sites, which grew in importance during the COVID-19 pandemic and gradually focused on other false narratives after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022. Online outlets, such as *AC 24*, *CZ 24 News*, *Infokurýr*, *Nová republika*, and *Protiproud*, fermented distrust towards the Czech government and undermined its policies, especially in relation to its support of Ukraine.⁴⁰ However, the impact and readership of these outlets remains rather limited when compared to the mainstream media. As noted by Vojtěch Bahenský, a hybrid threats researcher at Charles University in Prague, “the lack of resilience of Czech information space has more to do more with the structural problems in the media industry (poor adaptation to the internet and

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Full list of disinformation websites active in Czechia compiled by Foundation for Independent Journalism (Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky NFNZ) can be found here: <https://www.nfnz.cz/dezinformacni-a-konspiracni-media/>

social media; a dysfunctional funding model; the oligarchization of the sector) than with the impact of disinformation websites or a lack of fact-checking.”⁴¹

Another missing link has been the decline of the local and regional press, which was hit hard not only by the earlier economic crisis starting in 2008 and 2009 (and continuing onwards), but also by the digitalisation of the news and information space away from offline and print publications. However, thanks to efficient fundraising and donor activity, various new projects for local media have emerged, including by Jan Žabka who has started a new regional press bureau in Silesia. Moreover, as noted by Peter Jančárik, the anti-disinformation coordinator at Seznam, one of Czech Republic’s major media companies, “Few big media outlets are noticing this trend too and working to counter it. For example, *Seznam* has started working closely with local news agencies to incorporate more localised and regional content into its coverage.”⁴²

Last but not least, the Czech media ecosystem has been influenced by two concrete pieces of legislation, including the copyright act, which – unfortunately – was less favourable to small and medium-sized media entities. On the other hand, new opportunities have emerged thanks to the digital regulation of social media platforms, including by the Digital Services Act or the Digital Markets Act, which – however – the Czech government has only gradually started implementing.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

The battle against disinformation at the state level has not significantly progressed beyond the position described in the 2021 edition of the DRI. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was an initial surge in government measures to counter disinformation, supported by public solidarity with Ukraine. However, as war fatigue has grown and the economic and social impacts of the war have become more apparent, public support has declined. Anti-system actors have exploited these circumstances to undermine measures against disinformation, framing them as government overreach and censorship.⁴³ This has tainted the

⁴¹ Interview, July 2024.

⁴² Interview, July 2024.

⁴³ “Government Wants Censorship. We Want to Counter Disinformation Endangering State Security” [in Check], *Rozhlas*, 11 January 2023, <https://www.mujrozhlas.cz/interview-plus/>

term ‘disinformation,’ rendering it increasingly negative and polarising, complicating the fight against false narratives.⁴⁴

This situation is well illustrated by the blocking of 22 disinformation websites after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, including *Eronet.cz*, *Protiproud.cz*, *Ceskobezcenzury.cz*, *Voxpopuliblog.cz*, *Prvnizpravy.cz*, *Czechfreepress.cz*, *Exanpro.cz* and *Skrytapravda.cz*. On the one hand, the Czech state acted decisively against websites spreading deceitful and manipulative content, blocking them barely a day after the invasion. On the other hand, this effort was later stalled after a backlash from anti-system actors and the public.⁴⁵ Moreover, while the blocking of these websites initially led to a drop in traffic, the sites quickly moved to new URLs (often beyond .cz domain operated by CZNIC) that the government and the ISPs could not block again, and ultimately their web traffic increased even further.⁴⁶

Despite these challenges, the Ministry of Interior worked on transforming these measures into a law. The legislation proposed in the autumn of 2022 outlined what actions could be taken against online content. A key focus was on whether the content was produced or spread by individuals or states under international sanctions, or entities controlled by them. The legislation aimed to pinpoint sources linked to countries such as Russia.⁴⁷ For an intervention to occur, the website would need to disseminate harmful content “on a large scale” or be established or used with a significant harmful purpose. While not a perfect solution, this legislation appeared to be a promising step forward in combating disinformation and foreign interference. However, as accusations of censorship and “totalitarian” practices escalated, the law’s progress was stalled and ultimately the legislation failed to materialise.⁴⁸

vlada-nechysta-cenzuru-jde-nam-o-dezinformace-ohrozujici-narodni-bezpecnost-rika

⁴⁴ Doubravová, B., “Government Got Scared, It Will Not Counter Disinformation, Expert Warns” [in Czech], *Aktuálně*, 23 July 2023, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/konci-analytik-na-dezinformace/r~1944633a257211ee9ae20cc47ab5f122/>

⁴⁵ Valášek, L., “Hammer on Russian Propaganda. Ministry of Interior Plans to Block Websites Endangering Czechia” [in Czech], *Aktuálně*, 3 October 2022, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/vnitro-zakon-propaganda/r~aeff69a83f7511edba5b0cc47ab5f122/>

⁴⁶ Šlerka, J., “Firehose of Lies in CEE Countries” [in Czech], *Investigace*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.investigace.cz/ohnostroj-lzi-v-evrope/>

⁴⁷ Valášek, L., 2022, *op.cit.*

⁴⁸ Hodulík, J., “Law on Blocking of Disinformation Websites Should Protect Democracy, But Experts Warn About Side-Effects” [in Czech], *Respekt*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.respekt.cz/kontext/zakon-na-blokaci-dezinfoweby-ma-branit-demokracii-ale-podle-odborniku-ji-zatim-spis-ohrozuje>

ESTABLISHMENT OF NEW CRISIS COMMUNICATION UNIT (KRIT) UNDER THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR

At the government's level, the Ministry of Interior has since December 2021 significantly stepped up its involvement in the fight against disinformation as well as its strategic and crisis communication. To achieve this progress, the team responsible for crisis communication saw its capacities expanded. The team brings together professionals from different areas involved in public policy and communication and over the past two years have been involved in a number of crises facing the state. These included not only the Russian war against Ukraine and its consequences, but also the inter-ethnic violence between the Ukrainian and Roma communities in the Czech Republic and the mass shooting incident at the Charles University in December 2023. In each situation, the team focused on fine-tuning the crisis communication: coordinating with all responsible bodies and finding the best response while communicating and responding to the given issue.

A similar set of events unfolded with the March 2022 establishment of a government representative for the media and the fight against disinformation. However, the position was abolished just months later. Michal Klíma, a former journalist, was appointed to the role with the primary objective of developing a state system of strategic communication and to draft legislation aimed at addressing information threats. The proposed legislation was intended to introduce legal tools for prosecuting disinformation, provide financial support to credible media and civil society organisations combating harmful content, and to stop state institutions from inadvertently financing disinformation websites through advertising. However, due to both unclear and inconsistent communication about his role, Klíma was quickly branded a "censor".⁴⁹ Among other issues, the situation deteriorated further when parts of Klíma's Action Plan were leaked, drawing severe backlash from various sectors including media and advocacy groups, which led to his dismissal at the end of 2022.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Prchal, L., "How to Fight Conspiracies in Czechia: State Wants to Prosecute Their Sources" [in Czech], *Deník N*, 27 December 2022, <https://denikn.cz/1039555/jak-chce-cesko-celit-konspiracim-vlada-hodla-stihat-jejich-sireni-i-davat-desitky-milionu-mediim/>

⁵⁰ Pika, T., "Destined to Fail: Klíma Dismissed From His Role" [in Czech], *iRozhlas*, 17 March 2023, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/michal-klima-media-dezinformace-stratkom-vlada-petr-fiala_2303170500_pik

Ironically, on the day of his dismissal, a report was released by the Ministry of Interior highlighting the Czech Republic's unpreparedness to combat a serious disinformation wave due to a lack of clear strategy, proper coordination mechanism, and legal framework.⁵¹ An expert from the state sector interviewed for this research confirmed the prevalence of these challenges and noted: "The tools we have are not effective; they're not formalised, roles are unclear, and coordination is mostly informal and ad hoc."⁵²

Subsequently, Klíma's counter-disinformation duties were handed over to Tomáš Pojar, the newly appointed national security advisor, known for his scepticism about the efficacy of fighting disinformation. The responsibilities related to the media agenda were assumed by Miloš Gregor, a political scientist from Masaryk University, who was appointed as a new adviser to Prime Minister Fiala. Gregor's duties focus mainly on information and media literacy. Yet, his role comes with no executive authority and is largely reliant on the Prime Minister's receptiveness to his recommendations.⁵³ This transition has underscored a further step back in the government's measures against disinformation.

There has been, however, some progress in recent years. For instance, the establishment of the strategic communication unit within the Office of the Government.⁵⁴ Similar units were also created in other state institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which launched its stratcom unit in April 2022. Similarly, the Ministry of Defense has also been active in its stratcom efforts, with the Army of the Czech Republic playing a crucial role.⁵⁵

Despite these advancements, there remains a notable gap in integrating these efforts into a broader, more cohesive strategy. Issues such as resource constraints and poor collaboration between units hinders effectiveness, and unlike Slovakia, the Czech Republic lacks a national concept of strategic communication. This absence weakens the state's ability to respond to crises effectively,

⁵¹ "Analysis of the Czech Readiness to Face a Significant Disinformation Wave" [in Czech], *Ministry of Interior*, 2023, <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/soubor/analyza-pripravenosti-ceske-republiky-celit-zavazne-dezinformacni-vlne.aspx>

⁵² Interview with a public official, July 2024.

⁵³ Koutník, O., "PM Wants to Strengthen Counter-Disinformation Efforts. He Called in an Expert from Brno" [in Czech], *Seznam Zprávy*, 11 October 2023, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-premier-zesili-boj-s-dezinformacemi-povolal-experta-z-brna-238169>

⁵⁴ Pika, T., 17 March 2023. *Op cit.*

⁵⁵ Tkáčová, N. & Šefčíková, K., "Assessment of Strategic Communication Structures and Capabilities in the Czech Republic," *PSSI*, 2023, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/120-assessment-of-strategic-communication-structures-and-capabilities-in-the-czech-republic>

such as the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis, leaving critical communication areas vulnerable and often uncoordinated. Additionally, there is ongoing confusion between strategic communication and public relations within the government. Guiding documents should therefore make a clearer distinction between these two functions, helping the teams working on the two areas.

However, unlike disinformation, strategic communication has not developed a strongly negative connotation among the Czech public. This presents an opportunity to move beyond the current political leadership's stalled disinformation efforts, which are hindered by fear of public backlash. Embracing strategic communication thus could revitalise the fight against information threats, shifting from reactive to proactive measures.

Another promising development is the demonetisation of disinformation. The Ministry of Regional Development has embraced this strategy, working in collaboration with experts from the non-governmental sector. In June 2023, the ministry introduced a revised media contracting methodology, incorporating a new chapter that advises state companies on how to avoid placing advertisements on websites known for disseminating disinformation, thereby preventing the use of taxpayer money to fund such sites.⁵⁶ Like other initiatives from Czech state institutions, this methodology has its positives and negatives. It is encouraging to see the state adopting various approaches to combat disinformation, drawing on the expertise of civil society and the non-state sector to develop counter-disinformation tools. However, the introduction of this methodology might be seen as somewhat outdated, it comes at a time when the prevalence of disinformation websites in the Czech Republic is on the decline and these sites are no longer the primary platform for disinformation.

Similar limits to progress are also evident in efforts related to media and digital literacy. Educational budgets have been slashed, and the revision of educational frameworks have stopped short of making media literacy and critical thinking mandatory subjects.⁵⁷ The revision also overlooks the significant role of AI in information manipulation and the need to enhance AI literacy and skills in education.

⁵⁶ "Conspiracy Websites Will Not Get Any Money from the State. Ministry of Regional Development Comes with a New Methodology" [in Czech], *Ministry for Regional Development*, <https://mmr.gov.cz/ostatni/web/novinky?tagid=238>

⁵⁷ Dolejší K., "Will Czechia Become a Frontier State? Government Stalled its Counter-Disinformation Efforts" [in Czech], *Forum 24*, 29 September 2023, <https://www.forum24.cz/ceka-nas-udel-frontoveho-statu-vlada-rezignovala-na-boj-proti-dezinformacim-s-ruskem-provozuje-stinovy-box>

This tentative and slow approach has been a significant barrier to progress in combating disinformation at the state level for years and remains a challenge. While strategic documents acknowledge the country's vulnerability to information threats and foreign influence, concrete actions remain scarce, and many improvements are often too little too late. A key issue is the lack of political will, driven by concerns over alienating the electorate. However, 76 per cent of Czechs believe disinformation poses a threat to national security and needs to be addressed,⁵⁸ which suggests that resistance to counter-disinformation measures comes from a vocal minority rather than the broader public.

Responses by the media and civil society

If there is one area that can be identified as functioning and delivering, it is the work of the non-governmental actors, which are often assisting state institutions in their fight against disinformation, malign influences, and hybrid threats. Civil society organisations and the pluralistic media sphere are supported by a strong public media sector led by Czech TV and Czech radio. According to most sociological polls, Czech TV and radio are considered the most trustworthy sources of information. This trustworthiness has proven crucial during recent years, which have included multiple crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, socio-economic challenges across society, the energy crisis, and the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine and the West.

Due to the fear of political backlash and ideological struggles among different factions within the government, the agenda of the fight against disinformation has largely been dropped from high-level politics. There is little coordinated attention to the issue within the government. That is why the initiative to increase national resilience and inform the general public of ongoing and developing challenges in the informational and technological area remains with non-governmental actors.

A number of civil society organisations have continued exposing disinformation-spreading actors as well as trying to explain the general phenomenon of disinformation and its mechanics. For example, the Czech-based European Values Center has focused on the activities of the Chinese communist regime and its malign operations in the Indo-Pacific as well as Europe and the wider West. The Prague Security Studies Institute has researched the economic and ideological

⁵⁸ Gavriněv, V., 12 December 2023. *Op cit.*

aspects of disinformation, such as monetisation and the reasons why actors engage in the spread of false narratives. The Association for International Affairs runs initiatives aimed at understanding the role of Russia and China in spreading disinformation as well as the wider issue of Czech Republic's resilience, including in relation to the European Parliament elections in June 2024. Finally, the newly created Center for Informed Society established in 2023 aims to combat disinformation, including in the digital space. The Center draws upon a wide range of expertise from many different organisations and so its work against disinformation is comprehensive.

Multiple non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operate in the area of non-formal education, and hope to increase digital and media literacy skills. For example, People in Need, the Czech NGO, organises the One World Festival, which includes a strong educational element. Civil society and outside-of-system educators continue to share important skills such as critical thinking, information literacy, and AI literacy.

ASSOCIATION NELEŽ

In the non-governmental sector, one of the most visible and notable efforts was conducted by a number of NGOs led by the Association NELEŽ, which focused on demonetisation of disinformation content and raising public awareness of the issue throughout society. Their activities, also supported by Fair Advertising and the Prague Security Studies Institute, involved engagement with the Czech business community, financial and banking institutions or private donors all of whom had not previously explored that their paid advertising might have ended up funding disinformation actors. Thanks to the efforts of NELEŽ, the government passed non-binding guidance for state institutions and agencies which listed a number of websites to avoid when publishing advertisements online. This guidance was a landmark development in the effort towards the demonetisation of online disinformation content.

Similarly, the media and publishing houses continue to make a positive contribution. Positive contributions have been made not only by those affiliated with the public broadcasters but also by new and smaller media projects and online outlets. These outlets help to inform citizens not only about current affairs, but also about new trends in disinformation and how to avoid these false narratives.

A whole series of dedicated shows and reportages have been produced by multiple outlets – illustrating a high degree of media interest and public appetite. For example, one successful project, *Ověřovna* (literally meaning Verification Office) operated by the Czech radio (*iRozhlas.cz*) continues to debunk misleading statements and hard-to-verify facts. Other media houses have also started to invest in in-house fact-checkers.

In a similar vein, a project operated by *Demagog.cz* continues to review and verify speeches and claims made by Czech politicians, especially during crucial political debates and hotly contested topics. Thanks to its cooperation with META, the owner of Facebook and Instagram, *Demagog.cz* has expanded its outreach and is now an official fact-checking partner of the social media group, working together with Agence France-Presse journalists based in Prague.

Finally, civil society together with the Association of Communication Agencies (AKA) and other business actors, have lobbied the government to engage further in the area of strategic and crisis communication. Further engagement in this area will limit the available space for the spread of disinformation and manipulative narratives. Also based on the government's coordinated advocacy and communication efforts, most of the institutions – including most notably the security-oriented ones but also the Ministry of Social Policy – started investing in strategic communications and promoting its capacities to act in the public domain beyond political speech and statements.

Recommendations

The Czech Republic's struggle against disinformation remains largely unchanged from the situation described in the 2021 DRI report. Similarly, the recommendations suggested in the previous report have only been partially implemented. The Czech Republic's leadership has yet to muster the political will necessary for introducing effective strategies to boost national resilience and strengthen the country's defences against hybrid threats. Numerous tasks and recommendations laid out in analyses by both state institutions and non-state actors are yet to be addressed. These measures have the potential to transform the country's approach to disinformation and national security more broadly, but for the time being they remain on the drawing board. At the same time, recognising that a whole-of-society approach is essential for effectively combating disinformation,

Czech civil society and media also need to contribute more to bolstering the Czech Republic's resilience to disinformation.

There are several areas that the state, media, and civil society need to address to boost the Czech Republic's resilience against disinformation, including:

- To address ambiguities in legislation which stems from difficulties in defining disinformation and a lack of agreement among governing parties. In addition, areas which have not been subject to public backlash or which do not hold negative connotations, such as strategic communication and AI literacy, could be the subject of greater focus.
- To strengthen strategic communication, the government's efforts should target enhancing the coordination and the exchange of information. Despite some progress, the absence of a unified, systematically coordinated strategy remains evident. Challenges such as limited resources and weak cross-departmental cooperation significantly hinder progress. Addressing these critical components is necessary for successful strategic communication but remains unfulfilled in the existing framework. Furthermore, there's a pressing need to separate and distinguish the state's strategic communication from the government's political public relations, a distinction that is currently blurred.
- To highlight solutions and positive outcomes, rather than problems, in the government's strategic communication. An essential component of this approach should be to foster positive narratives that bolster national identity, drawing from Czech history and culture. These narratives ought to reflect values that sociological surveys show unite Czech society, such as democracy, equality, human rights, personal freedoms, and the rule of law. Actively crafting a positive national story can help undermine the environment that allows anti-democratic disinformation to flourish, especially among insecure, frustrated and vulnerable groups.
- To develop clear, proactive, and precise communication regarding governmental activities, including explaining decisions and their goals. The shortcomings of the state's counter-disinformation initiatives have been amplified by a lack of effective communication. These shortcomings have allowed anti-system actors to misrepresent government policy as censorship and as an infringement of freedom of speech. Providing unified, transparent, and consistent communications is essential to improving public trust, preventing the negative framing of counter-disinformation efforts by anti-system actors, and will help to limit public backlash.

- To embed media and information literacy in the formal education curriculum with the view of improving media literacy among Czech students. This need becomes even more pressing with the rise of AI, as students must be equipped to skillfully navigate the information landscape as soon as possible. Additionally, engaging media specialists and other experts in the field could enhance the practicality and effectiveness of these courses.
- To target the middle-aged population with media and AI literacy efforts, along with other initiatives to counter disinformation. Such campaigns should not solely focus on students and the older generation, who are typically the main target groups. For middle-aged people, it is particularly vital to rebuild trust in institutions, lessen bureaucratic hurdles, and enhance the quality of state services, especially during crises. Raising awareness about AI can help this group not only navigate the increasingly complex information space but also alleviate their concerns about job security in the face of automation. Employers can play a key role in targeting initiatives towards this age group. Such efforts could concentrate on practical and relevant topics, such as the financial motivations behind disinformation actors and courses on how to leverage the power of AI to boost the skills of Czech citizens.
- To consider a more viable business model for the media, which would enable the sector to more effectively produce independent, high-quality journalism amidst the growing reliance on social media for news. With trust in the media and its independence on the decline, there is a pressing need for a new business model to counteract this trend and uphold journalistic standards. The competitive pressure of the fast-paced media environment frequently results in the premature release of unverified information, contributing to a decline in journalistic ethics, and a rise in sensationalism. This has been particularly evident in times of crisis and uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, the emergence of AI-generated news anchors, texts, images, and videos adds a layer of complexity to the sector. Media organisations should develop and enforce guidelines that address potential biases embedded in AI tools, the risk of inadvertently spreading disinformation and codify ethical standards.
- To increase operational funding to support the research activities of non-governmental organisations working in the field of disinformation. The effectiveness of non-governmental organisations in counter-disin-

formation efforts is currently hindered by project-based funding, which does not allow for quick responses to emerging situations. Ideally, this funding should originate from independent or supranational sources to prevent potential constraints being imposed by national, business, or social media interests upon the research organisations.

- Czech civil society needs to increase its focus on coordination and sharing best practices in combating disinformation and in enhancing public awareness. This approach is crucial for achieving greater sustainability and a more significant impact on Czech society, as current efforts tend to be fragmented and have limited reach.

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Abstract

The country chapter focuses on the spread of anti-Western disinformation in Georgia since 2021. It reviews related studies, describes the main tools used in the process, reflexes and counteractions of public structures and non-governmental organisations with regard to hybrid challenges. Drawing upon expert interviews, this study reviews the country's achievements and challenges in tackling disinformation and offers recommendations to national political actors on improving Georgia's future resilience. The process of Georgia's aspirations to join an enlarged EU as well as Russia's damaging war in Ukraine, have provided a fresh impetus to anti-Western disinformation campaigns by pro-Russian groups. The main goal of these campaigns has been to undermine the public's faith in democratic values, as well as sow fear of Russia's regional power and ultimately make citizens oppose alignment with Western values in both Georgia's domestic and foreign policy.

Overview of the latest topical studies

Recent analytical studies and expert reviews largely agree about the aggressive nature of Russian anti-Western propaganda and disinformation. Russia's disinformation campaign has intensified in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine and in response to the granting of EU candidate status to Georgia in December 2023.

A number of studies have investigated anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation narratives in Georgia, including how they are spread and their main circulators.¹ Other studies have analysed the proliferation of anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives through both conventional media and social media.² One study concludes that in Georgia, Russian disinformation is mainly spread in the Georgian language, and circulators include political parties and politicians, public organisations, media, far-right groups, clergy, as well as fake pages and accounts proliferating on social networks.³ The same study anticipated that the promotion of homophobic messages may increase public aggression towards minorities and contribute to skepticism towards Georgia's Western partners. The study urged government officials to change their rhetoric and to counteract anonymous homophobic campaigns on social media.

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the dominant narrative spread in Georgia has presented the West as having abandoned Ukraine. This narrative has ignored the support Ukraine has received from the international community and the unprecedented level of Western sanctions imposed on the Russian economy. Moreover, such a narrative was integrated with the idea that Georgia – in case of joining the Western sanctions – would also be

¹ E.g., Tsetskhladze, S., "Spreading Disinformation in Georgia - State Approach and Countermeasures", *Transparency International Georgia*, 2023, https://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/disinfo-en_0.pdf

² E.g., "Pro-governmental and Anonymous Actors Run Homophobic Campaign on Social Media" [in Georgian], *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy*, 7 July 2023, <https://isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/prosakhelisuflebo-da-anonimuri-aqtorebis-mier-tsarmoebuli-homofoburi-kampania-sotsialur-mediashi->

³ "Russian Information Operation in the South Caucasus: Accounts Operating in Social Networks and Their Messages" [in Georgian], *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy*, 16 January 2023, <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-samkhret-kavkasiashi-sotsialur-qselebshi-moqmedi-angarishebi-da-mati-gzavnilebi->

left alone vis-à-vis Russia.⁴ This narrative has developed with Russian claims that Ukraine has been largely destroyed as a country.

Disinformation in favour of Georgian neutrality, which is mainly supported by far right and anti-liberal political groups, has also strengthened in recent years. On 21 February 2022, three days before the full-scale invasion, 53 organisations and opposition parties based in Georgia addressed Russia's President Vladimir Putin with an open letter in the Russian language. The appeal said that neither Georgia nor Ukraine should join NATO, while Georgia should declare itself as neutral.⁵

In the context of the war in Ukraine and Georgia's negotiations on accession to the EU and NATO, the second front disinformation narrative has become more widespread. For example, one popular claim suggests that "Georgia is not given the EU membership candidate status due to being punished for not joining the war in Ukraine, and the European Union wants to open a second front in Georgia".⁶ With regard to the USA as the major military actor, claims are spread that Washington "wants to involve Georgia in the war, since the funding from the USA is aimed at creating an agents network in Georgia".⁷ The idea of opening a second front, as a far-fetched explanation of the delays to Georgia's integration with the EU, has become mainstream, and has been referenced by both the state political leadership and the media under their control.

The political situation changed in December 2023, when the European Council granted candidate status to Georgia. In response, the second front idea was transformed into a political debate whereby pro-government voices portrayed the ruling party as a responsible political actor which maintains peace in the country. These narratives combined with Russia's wider propaganda arsenal – about its greatness and invincibility – that has been deeply rooted in the region for years. Such narratives are noteworthy insofar as they influence widely spread arguments such as: "If Georgia declares strong support for Ukraine, Russia will start a war here as well because of it" and "Our western aspirations do not make

⁴ Gozalishvili, N. & Kalandzadze, M., "Tendencies of Russian Disinformation in Georgia Along with the War in Ukraine," *Institute for Development Freedom of Information*, 4 April 2022, https://idfi.ge/en/tendencies_of_russian_disinformation_in_georgia_along_with_the_war_in_ukraine

⁵ Facebook post by Irma Inashvili, leader of the political party "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia", 21 February 2022, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1360813664364021&id=100013062005932&paipv=0&eav=Afb3wCxHRfScRH0gYsCOgaY1U-szetsrJhx_gwtGVWlgDVIhokToCwcc85MDYvy8knM&_rdr

⁶ "Tendencies of Russian Disinformation in Georgia Along with the War in Ukraine", 2022. *Op.cit.*

⁷ "Spreading Disinformation in Georgia - State Approach and Countermeasures", 2023. *Op.cit.*

sense, because Russia still dominates in the region, so we just have to accept it and establish peaceful relations”.⁸

Existing studies highlight that disinformation is a powerful tool to convince the public that the West poses a major threat to Georgian identity, such as the destruction of the state’s Christian identity and influence on the sexual orientation of younger generations. In February 2022, the leaders of the ruling coalition announced the initiation of a “anti-pseudo-liberal” bill in parliament to “protect people from perverse western influence”. According to Mamuka Mdinardze, the leader of the parliamentary majority, it will “protect society from pseudo-liberal ideology and its inevitable harmful consequences”.⁹ Consequently, in April 2024 constitutional amendments were initiated in Parliament, and in June 2024, a draft law On Family Values and Protection of Minors as well as amendments to a further 18 laws were initiated by the Georgian Dream party. The legislative package included a ban on the registration of alternative marriages, the adoption of children by non-heterosexuals, gender reassignment surgery, and the indication of a gender in identity documents that does not match biological sex. In addition, “LGBT propaganda” was banned in the education system and the media. The initiative also banned intimate scenes between persons of the same sex and incest scenes in television programs and cinemas. More broadly, the amendments also included restrictions upon freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

The ruling party favoured the adoption of the proposed legislation. According to Giorgi Tsagareishvili, first deputy chairman of the Georgian Dream parliamentary faction: “The problem of LGBT propaganda, which is absolutely unacceptable, must be solved. It should not get into schools, kindergartens, and higher educational institutions. Hereby, we also emphasise that the rights of sexual minorities will be protected in this country, we will not restrict freedom of expression, and we want to find a middle ground here”.¹⁰

Part of the opposition called the submitted draft law “another pre-election farce” of the Georgian Dream and stated that proposed changes had nothing to do with the protection of children’s rights.

“This idea has recently been given a campaign character by the ruling political power, increasingly attacking liberal views, labelling them as pseudo-liberal and

⁸ “Tendencies of Russian Disinformation in Georgia Along with the War in Ukraine”, 2022. *Op.cit.*

⁹ “According to Mdinardze, Dream is preparing a draft law “to protect against pseudo-liberal ideology” [in Georgian], *Formula TV channel*, 29 February 2022, <https://formulanews.ge/News/106957>

¹⁰ “The problem of LGBT propaganda, which is absolutely unacceptable, must be solved - Giorgi Tsagareishvili” [in Georgian], *Rustavi-2 TV channel*, 4 March 2024, <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/276725>

upholding conservative values. That is an attack on the main Western idea”, one of the interviewed experts said.¹¹

The vicious labelling of liberalism with pseud-liberalism is particularly noteworthy as it is a kind of manifestation of the anti-liberal narratives.

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has strained Georgia’s domestic political scene. In the past two years, a number of large-scale demonstrations took place in Tbilisi and other cities to demonstrate the support of the Georgian people for Ukraine.¹² The response to the war has increased political polarisation and led to societal concerns about a new round of Russian aggression against Georgia. As one interviewed expert said:

*“The war waged by Russia in Ukraine has a strong effect in Georgia. It further increased the hybrid challenges [for Georgia]. Pro-Russian messages try to aggravate the feeling of fear and weakness in the population. Therefore, it is important to resist and debunk them continuously”.*¹³

At the initial stage of the war, questions were most often asked about the ultimate goals of the Kremlin, the possible consequences of the war, the scope and limits of Western support, as well as the geopolitical trajectory of Georgia.

According to a 7 March 2022 survey carried out by the sociological research organisation CRRC, 43 per cent of respondents believe that Russia is responsible for the war, while 37 per cent believe that President Putin is personally responsible for it (only one answer was allowed). The first three leading answers to the question regarding the reason for the start of the war pointed to the perception of Russia as an Empire by the citizens of Georgia. Here 34 per cent

¹¹ Expert interview.

¹² “Actions in support of Ukraine” [in Georgian], *Georgian Public Broadcaster*, 2022, https://1tv.ge/news_tag/ukrainis-mkhardamcheri-aqcia/
“A rally in support of Ukraine near the parliament” [in Georgian], *Youtube channel of Mtavari Arkhi TV*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSUj-uA6qdl>
“Action in support of Ukraine in Tbilisi” [in Georgian], *Youtube channel of Georgian Public Broadcaster*, 24 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQ9hCGlyrJE>

¹³ Expert interview.

of respondents named expansion of territories as a reason, 25 per cent said it was the desire to conquer Ukraine, 20 per cent and 14 per cent considered restoration of the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire, respectively.¹⁴

The sense of danger has mounted with the increase of Russian emigrants and visitors to Georgia. With the end of the pandemic and the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, the number of visitors from Russia increased significantly. In 2022, 1.1 million visits by Russian nationals were registered. This was five times higher than in 2021 but 26 per cent less than in 2019. In 2023, 1.4 million visitors arrived from Russia, which is 30 per cent more compared to 2022, and 3.6 per cent less than in 2019, before the pandemic. In the fourth quarter of 2023 a decrease of 12 per cent was recorded compared with the same period in 2022. In 2022, Russian's accounted for 20 per cent of all visitors to Georgia. In 2023, the proportion remained at 20.1 per cent.¹⁵ These figures should be treated with caution though as most of them were short term or transit visits rather than long-term immigration.

The attitude of Georgian society, including political actors, towards Russian visitors has been mixed. According to public opinion research conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in November 2023, the vast majority of Georgians are concerned about the presence of Russian citizens in their country. The IRI reported that 73 per cent of respondents believe that Russian citizens should not have the right to enter Georgia without a visa, and register a business or buy property. According to the research, 51 per cent of the respondents believe that the current government policy in the country is aimed at polarising the society.¹⁶

In September 2022, the opposition political party Lelo initiated a draft law in the Parliament on the introduction of the visa regime for Russian citizens. The law was preceded by Putin's decree on the introduction of a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens and the restoration of direct flights. Davit Usupashvili, the former chairman of the Georgian Parliament, explained at a briefing that it is

¹⁴ "Public Opinion on War in Ukraine", presentation of the phone survey results [in Georgian], *Youtube channel of the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC)*, 15 March 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sqjG1sMaXI.

¹⁵ "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Summary of 2023," *Transparency International Georgia*, 2023, <https://transparency.ge/ge/blog/sakartvelos-rusetze-ekonomikuri-damokidebuleba-2023-clis-shejameba>

¹⁶ "Public Opinion Survey," *International Republican Institute*, 7 November 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia-september-2022/>

necessary to introduce by law “a special regime for the citizens of the Russian Federation to enter Georgia as a state carrying out military occupation”.¹⁷

In August 2023, Zurab Kadagidze, a member of the People’s Force (in coalition with the ruling Georgia Dream), welcomed the restoration of air traffic between Russia and Georgia in sponsored videos shared on the pro-Russian propaganda page Sakartvelo Today News. As an argument, he cited the creation of favourable conditions for representatives of the Georgian diaspora in Russia. He also stated that the flights would facilitate two-way communication for those wishing to do business both in Georgia and Russia.¹⁸

The disinformation campaign links the inevitability of Russia’s victory to the non-fulfillment of the West’s promises. For example, it was claimed Israel had supplied weapons to Ukraine before the full-scale invasion, on the condition that the US would adequately supply Israel with arms; and that when Israel got involved in the armed conflict in Gaza, it nevertheless did not get the promised weapons from the US.¹⁹ There are many similar conspiracy-driven and disinformation claims, which send a signal to the people of Georgia that the Western countries will fall short on their promises.

As internal political conflict intensified in Georgia, the political opposition began to refer to the ruling political power as “Russian dream”, mocking its actual Georgian dream title. While the ruling party often spoke of the opposition as a destructive and radical force.²⁰

Changes in the national media landscape

The past few years have been characterised by amplification of disinformation in both conventional and non-conventional media platforms. The management of information flows of anti-Western, pro-Russian narratives became highly orchestrated after the start of the large-scale Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While earlier anti-Western messages used to come from marginal groups, in recent years they

¹⁷ “Facebook post by political party “Lelo for Georgia” [in Georgian], 30 September 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=645842370442302>

¹⁸ “A Russian Informational Operation in Georgia against the European Union,” *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy*, 29 September 2023, <https://isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/ganakhlebuli-rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-saqartveloshi-evrokavshiris-tsinaaghmddeg->

¹⁹ “Georgia’s Reform Associates,” *GRASS*, 13 October 2023, <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2023-10-13/1677.pdf>

²⁰ Expert interview.

have become mainstream and are visible not only on social media platforms but also on the main television channels controlled by the Georgian authorities.²¹ Social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *TikTok*, *Instagram*, and *Telegram* are actively used by pro-Russian groups to influence Georgian audiences.

At the end of October 2023, in the weeks prior to the European Commission decision on Georgia's EU candidate status, a sponsored campaign to spread anti-EU propaganda and disinformation on social media platforms in Georgia was launched. There are traces of Russian involvement in the campaign.²² Founders of the said campaign are known to act systemically in a networked and coordinated manner. It was revealed that the activities of pro-Russian pages, accounts and channels on *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Telegram* and *TikTok* were coordinated across the three South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Actors within this network published identical materials in respective national languages. The various pages and accounts were mostly managed from abroad, including from Russia. Likewise, some of the accounts were created in Russia. The main goal of the network was to present the states of the region as strong potential allies of Russia and to add negative connotations to any association and cooperation with the West.²³

Pro-Russian propaganda networks target every Georgian social group and age range. Their activities on *TikTok*, which is mainly used by young people, have become more noticeable in recent years. *TikTok's* role has increased since *Facebook* has restricted the posting of certain types of misinformation, and has banned some pro-Russian pages on its platform.

The main propagators of disinformation are a series of groups related to the political party Alt-Info as well as other pro-Russian groups and conspiracy-driven sources. Alt-Info is active on *TikTok*. In order to spread its narratives, several TikTok channels have been created, including *Altinfo*, *Altinfo2*, and *alt_info.konservatori*.²⁴

These communication channels are not only used to spread pro-Russian and anti-Western disinformation, but have been known to promote violence. The pages controlled by Alt-Info have distributed videos with anti-Ukrainian content. For example, one of their video posts is accompanied by the following caption:

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² "A Russian Informational Operation in Georgia against the European Union", 2023. *Op. cit.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "TikTok's Growing Prominence as a Channel for the Spread of Anti-Western Disinformation and Pro-Russian Propaganda in Georgia," *GRASS FactCheck*, 3 December 2023, <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/42417-tiktok-i-saqartveloshi-antidasavluri-dezinformaciisa-da-prorusuli-propagan-dis-mzardi-gamtari>

“The most pitiable in this war is the Ukrainian soldier, who is forced to fight because of transgender civilization”.²⁵ Ukraine-related disinformation claims targeting Georgian audiences have often been homophobic. The victims of the Russia-Ukraine war were at times portrayed as fighters for homosexual rights, and disinformation was spread about the introduction of LGBTQI issues in schools in an anti-American context, the same study found.

Discrediting, fake intimate materials of famous public Ukrainian figures and their family members have also been spread.²⁶ Similar tactics are also used by anti-Western sources against Georgian politicians, leaders of civil society organisations, and prominent journalists. These fake stories were often sexist or homophobic.²⁷ Such fake stories did not provoke any tangible response from state authorities which was usually limited to the launching of formal investigation by the personal data protection inspector. However, very few updates, if any, on these cases have been made public.

According to the Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, in 2022 Georgia was ranked 89th among 180 countries, and in 2023 it moved to 77th place. The progress had seen an increase in Georgia’s score from 59.3 to 61.7. The 2022 was noticeably lower because of a notorious attack on journalists covering demonstrations in July 2021. In response to the attacks, Georgia’s score in the journalist safety component increased from 41.3 to 61.9 and this allowed the country to advance by 12 places in the ranking. The most negative development in the media environment was attributed to a growth in polarisation and media owners’ interference in editorial policy.²⁸

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

From the legal point of view, the “pro-Europeanness” of Georgia is guaranteed by the Constitution (Article 78).²⁹ The granting of the EU membership candidate

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Kintsurashvili, T., “Gender Disinformation,” *Media Development Foundation*, 2023, <https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/Genderl-Report-GEO-2022.pdf>

²⁷ Kintsurashvili, T. & Gogoladze, T., “Anti-Gender and Anti-LGBTQI Mobilization in Georgia,” *Media Development Foundation*, 2023, <https://mdfgeorgia.ge/geo/view-library/239>

²⁸ “World Press Freedom Index,” *Reporters without Borders*, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/region/europe-central-asia>

²⁹ Constitution of Georgia, Legislative Herald of Georgia, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/30346?publication=36>

status to Georgia was accompanied by nine new tasks for opening accession negotiations. The first one is ‘tackling disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference against the EU and its values’.³⁰ Since accepting the “assignment”, no legal steps have been taken by Georgia.

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the documents published by two Georgian state agencies deserve particular attention. The first one is the 2022 report by the State Security Service of Georgia, which states that “disinformation campaigns have become more frequent amid the ongoing large-scale war in the region”.³¹ The second is the 2021-2024 Communication Strategy of the Georgian Ministry of Defense. The document noted that “the Russian Federation uses all the means at its disposal to create a favourable information environment for achieving its strategic goals, including an attempt to weaken the support of Georgian citizens for joining NATO and the European Union and incite disagreement on these issues in a small part of the society”.³²

However, some research centres characterise the Georgian government as clearly “cautious” on tackling Russian disinformation. For example, the analytical organisation Gnomon Wise writes in its research³³ based on official documents that StratComs actually no longer mention Russia and its disinformation threats. They cite the 2024-2027 Communication Strategy of the Georgian Government as an example, where “not even once in the entire strategy it is mentioned that the source of disinformation is primarily Russia”.³⁴

Generally, no major legal or institutional changes in the field have taken place since 2021, although the scale of disinformation activities in Georgia increased amid Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

³⁰ “EC Spells Out Nine Steps for Georgia to Start Accession Negotiations,” *Civil.ge*, 8 November 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/568417>

³¹ Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 2022 [in Georgian], https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillPackageContent/38924?fbclid=IwAR3eJ6qj3CqjGbV9ArYmyomOvtArffQFm6Bcg4fY4-CmP9OV-3pHE1Kdq_t0

³² Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia (2021-2024), *Ministry of Defense of Georgia*, [https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/uploads/uploads/sakunikacio_strategia/Communication_Strategy_of_the_Ministry_of_Defence_of_Georgia_\(2021-2024\).pdf](https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/uploads/uploads/sakunikacio_strategia/Communication_Strategy_of_the_Ministry_of_Defence_of_Georgia_(2021-2024).pdf)

³³ “Strategic Communication Against Disinformation and Propaganda - Recommendations for State Policy” [in Georgian], *Research Institute “Gnomon Wise”*, 2024, <https://gnomonwise.org/public/storage/publications/March2024/R06BBoOMpGxmQo6qOtTO.pdf>

³⁴ The 2024-2027 Communications Strategy of the Government of Georgia, *Government of Georgia*, https://www.gov.ge/files/429_86924_831685_CommunicationsStrategyofGovernmentofGeorgia.pdf

Responses by the media and civil society

The response to the so-called bill on ‘foreign agents’, initiated by the “Georgian Dream” parliamentary majority, should be mentioned here. Although the legislation has no direct relation to the disinformation activities, it affects the political environment and activities of media and civil society, including those relevant for combating disinformation.

The draft law, which was adopted in its first reading in March 2023, concerned any civil society or media organisation which received more than 20 per cent of their funding from abroad. According to the draft law, any organisation within this criterion would be registered as an agent of foreign influence. The proposed legislation was followed by large street protests organised by NGOs and civil society activists. The bill was commonly called ‘the Russian law’ because of its similarities with a law previously adopted in Russia. The bill was criticised as problematic by many who argued it will lead to the stigmatisation of civil society organisations and the media, which have already become the subject of disinformation campaigns directed against them.

ADVOCACY AGAINST THE ‘FOREIGN AGENTS’ LAW

In 2023, an enormous effort within Georgian society helped to delay the adoption of the draconian law On the transparency of foreign influence in Georgia. Georgian media and civil society have been highly active in resisting efforts of the ruling party, thus demonstrating a high degree of resilience. Although the law eventually came into force in May 2024, Georgian civil society and society at large remain highly committed to defending Georgia’s integration with the EU.

Many NGOs considered the draft law as directed not only against them but also more broadly against democracy, human rights and the pro-Western orientation of Georgia. At the end of May 2024, over 200 organisations, including those working on debunking of anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda, an-

nounced that they would not obey the law.³⁵ The bill was also criticised by the EU and on international forums. According to the Venice Commission, the term ‘foreign agent’ refers back to the rhetoric used during the communist period, stigmatises civil society and damages Georgia’s international reputation. The European Court of Human Rights stated, in turn, that the use of this term is an unjustified interference into the freedom of association, insofar as it creates the impression that the respective organisations are under foreign control.³⁶

Eventually, the law On the transparency of foreign influence was adopted in May 2024 and consequently followed by the largest public protest in Georgia’s modern history. The law came into effect in early August 2024. A number of NGOs and media outlets declared that they would not obey the authorities and register as a ‘foreign agent’, the consequence violating the law would result in the imposition of sanctions and a fine of 25,000 Georgian Lari (approximately €8,300). The law was heavily criticised by the EU representatives and the USA.³⁷ The US State Department has announced personal sanctions against ‘dozens’ of Georgian officials and their family members.³⁸

In Georgia, cable TV does not rebroadcast Russian political channels, such as Channel One Russia. Nevertheless, according to a study by the Programme for the Promotion of Information Reliability in Georgia, in total, 30 per cent of the population watches at least one Russian TV channel per week, while 11 per cent of respondents say that they trust at least one Russian channel.³⁹

Hybrid channels such as Alt-Info are especially problematic in terms of disinformation spreading. Initially an online portal operating since 2017, over time it became known as an openly anti-Western and pro-Russian organisation which was registered in Georgia in January 2019. In November 2021, Alt-Info received the status of a political party known as the Conservative Movement party, and

³⁵ “NGOs: “Agents Law” will remain a piece of paper, we declare defiance” [in Georgian], *Accentnews.ge*, 28 May 2024, <https://accentnews.ge/ka/article/114276-ngo-ebi-agentebis-kanoni-darcheba-paratina-kagal>

³⁶ “Mdinardze: “Dream” will support the bill “On the Agents of Foreign Influence,” *Publica.ge*, 20 February 2023, <https://publika.ge/mdinaradze-ocneba-uckhour-i-gavlenis-agentis-kanonproe-qts-mkhars-dauchers/>

³⁷ “International Reactions to Reintroduction of Draft Law on Foreign Agents,” *Civil.ge*, 17 April 2024, <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/589841>

³⁸ “Domestic Reactions to First Tranche of U.S. Sanctions on Georgian Individuals,” *Civil.ge*, 7 June 2024, <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/612001>

³⁹ “In total, 30% of the population watches at least 1 pro-Russian channel every week - Research” [in Georgian], *On.ge*, 11 May 2022, <https://rb.gy/woix3t>

in April 2022 it changed its name to the Conservative Party/Alt-Info. One expert spoke about the importance of media and civil society referring to Alt-Info activities:

*“In this country, only independent media and civil society organisations have acted responsibly. Alt-Info organised anti-Maidan protests and called for paramilitary groups to meet Georgian soldiers who were supposedly preparing to return home after volunteering in Ukraine. Only the media and the NGOs debunked this information”.*⁴⁰

One notable example is an internet platform Factcheck which in 2022 created a section dedicated to the events in Ukraine and attempted to expose pro-Russian disinformation found in the Georgian media.⁴¹

COUNTERACTING PROPAGANDA-SPREADING FACEBOOK PAGES

In 2023, Myth Detector, is a Georgian fact checking portal of Media Development Foundation (MDF), revealed suspicious pages on Facebook which had appeared on the social network in January 2022 and were using sponsored posts to spread anti-Western messages. These Facebook pages, which often used social media memes, attempted to amplify and reinforce stereotypes in Georgian society. They acted identically and claimed that joining the EU was a rejection of traditional Georgian values and would strengthen the protection of LGBTQI rights. Three of the Facebook pages were eventually deactivated, while the other pages continued to operate.

In the beginning of 2023, a coordinated group of pro-Russian pages, accounts and channels operating on *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Telegram* and *TikTok* were revealed by a Georgian NGO International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED). As a result of ISFED’s investigation, this network of pro-Russian

⁴⁰ Expert interview.

⁴¹ #UkraineFacts, *GRASS FactCheck*, <https://factcheck.ge/ka/%E1%83%A3%E1%83%99%E1%83%A0%E1%83%90%E1%83%98%E1%83%9C%E1%83%90?page=14#>

disinformation was removed from *Facebook* and *Instagram* by parent company Meta.⁴²

In March 2022, the Media Advocacy Coalition, which unites 17 NGOs focused on media issues and defending media rights, appealed to the Parliament, the Communications Commission, and to electronic communications network operators to take efficient measures to stop Russian state-controlled and other Kremlin propaganda media in Georgia.⁴³ However, the authorities did not respond.⁴⁴

The Georgian civil society and media community therefore make an important contribution to combatting disinformation amid a largely indifferent approach by the government.

Recommendations

In recent years, both public institutions and the independent regulator, the National Communications Commission of Georgia, have been carrying out certain activities in line with the recommendations provided in the 2021 DRI edition. These activities, held within the framework of StratComs and the media literacy programme, included public meetings with citizens, seminars and workshops for representatives of media and political parties. It is, however, difficult to assess the effectiveness of these activities. At the same time, the activities of ministerial communication units have been barely visible over the past years. Moreover, the increasing tension between Georgia's ruling party and the EU has produced negative consequences, with anti-Western disinformation and propaganda proliferating across the country.

The following recommendations are proposed to the state authorities:

- To prohibit the activity of Russian political foundations in Georgia. These should be treated as organisations representing the occupying force.

⁴² "A Russian Informational Operation in Georgia against the European Union," 2023. *Op. cit.*

⁴³ Statement by Media Advocacy Coalition, 1 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/MEDIACOA-LITION.GE/posts/pfbid0KSapRbYWkmbm6oufN1nTqg8sAuj5op3y8K9KZpvGP2DGtA3oxw5LTAoM-jhPsNRTI>

⁴⁴ "Spreading Disinformation in Georgia - State Approach and Countermeasures", 2023. *Op. cit.*

- To develop the capacities of civil society organisations and independent media, including those which are engaged in fact checking disinformation and countering anti-Western propaganda.
- To abstain from initiating legislation directed against freedom of speech and expression, as well as from discrediting and undermining the activities of civil society organisations and the media.
- To end the smear campaign in the controlled media against pro-Western media and journalists as well as civil society organisations.
- To task Stratcoms with preventing the interference of Russian actors in the electoral processes of Georgia.
- To end the spread of anti-Western narratives, particularly statements about an alleged plot to open a “second front” and the presentation of reforms relating to EU integration as an infringement of Georgia’s sovereignty.
- For the ruling coalition to increase cooperation with Georgian media affiliated with the opposition and pro-Western views.

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Abstract

Hungary's resilience towards pro-Kremlin disinformation has considerably decreased since the 2021 edition of the Disinformation Resilience Index. Despite Russia's war against Ukraine, the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has continued to prioritise Hungary's relations with Moscow, whilst undermining Ukraine's defence efforts by calling for immediate peace.

Pro-Russian narratives have continued to find fertile ground in the country's media environment which remains dominated by pro-government influence and ownership. Pro-government commentators and government-linked social media influencers have taken the lead in spreading anti-Ukrainian narratives, with a significant share of disinformation focused on Ukraine's right to defend itself, the EU's sanctions regime against Russia and accusations against the Hungarian opposition.

The institutional framework in the country continues to have major deficiencies, with no intention from the government to recognise pro-Kremlin disinformation as a threat. In addition, Hungary's Sovereignty Protection Office, established in early 2024, has been focusing on investigating government-critical actors over alleged foreign interference instead of targeting Russian malign influence. This approach continued against the backdrop of cyberattacks launched by Russian actors against the Hungarian government between 2021 and 2022.

Largely due to the war in Ukraine, independent media outlets have been increasingly focusing on covering and countering pro-Kremlin disinformation, with fact-checking becoming more prevalent. However, an estimated one third of Hungarians have remained vulnerable to war-related disinformation narratives.

Overview of the latest topical studies

Hungary's close political ties to Russia have been a major factor in the country's increased exposure to pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns over the past decade. Moreover, the past few years have been no exception in this regard. As suggested by a number of different research studies published since February 2022, pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives around the war in Ukraine have continued to find fertile ground in Hungary.

According to a joint study by Hungary's Political Capital Institute (PCI) and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) published in September 2023, nearly a third of Hungarians believe that Kyiv is to blame for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹ In addition, 22 per cent of respondents were also receptive towards disinformation narratives involving the alleged role of the US in the war. Published a month after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, an earlier PCI study found that 27 per cent of Hungarians believed that instead of Russia, the US and NATO were responsible for the neighbouring war.² A fifth of Hungarians were also inclined to believe an alternative explanation, according to which Russia launched its "special military operation" to prevent NATO from capturing Ukraine. As for more recent data, an October 2024 poll published by the Závecz Research Institute, an independent pollster, found that 65 per cent of Hungarians consider Russia's war an act of aggression. However, a relative majority of ruling party voters (44 per cent) believe Russia is fighting a "defensive war".³

The above results confirm a lasting trend regarding the receptiveness of Hungarians towards pro-Kremlin disinformation. The 2021 edition of the DRI concluded that a considerable share of Hungarians is vulnerable to disinformation

¹ "Susceptibility vs. immunity: disinformation and conspiracy theories in Hungary" [in Hungarian], *Political Capital*, September 2023, https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FNF_PC_KutatasiJelentes_230912.pdf

² Szicherle, P. & Molnár, C., "The state of public discourse about NATO" [in Hungarian], *Political Capital*, March 2022, https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/USEmb_PC_NATO_Tanulmany_2022_03.pdf

³ Németh, M.S., "Index obtained a research that shows what Hungarians think about the war" [in Hungarian], *Index.hu*, 17 October 2024, <https://index.hu/belfold/2024/10/17/kozvelemeny-kutatas-zavec-research-haboru-oroszorszag-ukrajna-honvedseg-nato-europai-unio/?to-ken=b6494453c56dd52b8b614c6f4aefdbda>

influences.⁴ This diverse group continues to include both politically-minded news consumers (particularly ruling party voters) and the apolitical ruling population, as well as voters and citizens with anti-establishment thinking (especially those supporting the far-right).

Another recent study published by the Bratislava-based GLOBSEC Institute argued that, while Hungarians overwhelmingly support their country's membership of the EU and NATO, Ukraine "is one of the most contentious issues in the country's domestic politics."⁵ The study revealed that 22 per cent of Hungarians believe Ukraine is responsible for the war, while an additional 16 per cent said that the West provoked Russia into attacking Ukraine.

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

Despite being a member state of both the EU and NATO, Hungary maintains close political relations with a number of authoritarian powers, including the Russian Federation. Under the rule of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose right-wing Fidesz-KDNP alliance has been governing Hungary since 2010, the country has seen a serious decline in its democratic values and a shift in foreign policy towards Russia. This policy shift is characterised by regular meetings between the leadership of the two countries, closer political cooperation and the implementation of flagship economic projects in the transport and energy sectors.

While Orbán was quick to condemn Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Hungarian government – unlike the vast majority of European countries – decided to maintain its close political relationship with Moscow. Although the Hungarian government largely supported the joint EU response against Russia, Budapest also tried to water down a number of EU sanctions before reluctantly accepting their adoption. Simultaneously, the Hungarian government consistently argued against a tougher response to the Russian aggression, with Orbán calling for immediate ceasefire talks and a peace deal. Notably, the Hungarian PM – shortly after Hungary assumed the Presidency of the Council of the EU in July 2024 –

⁴ Istrate, D., "Hungary", in: "Disinformation Resilience Index 2021," *EAST Center*, September 2021, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/DRI-report-2021.pdf>

⁵ Szicherle, P., "GLOBSEC Trends 2024. CEE: A Brave New Region?," *GLOBSEC*, May 2024, <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202024%20Hungary.pdf>

embarked on unsanctioned trips to Kyiv and Moscow under what he called a “peace mission”, with the intention of bringing both the Russian and Ukrainian leadership to the negotiating table. The visits were controversial within the EU and NATO because Orbán’s trip to Moscow created the impression that Hungary represented the whole of the European bloc during his negotiations with the Russian President.⁶ Under the bloc’s rules no member state holding the rotating Council Presidency has an exclusive right to represent the EU in foreign and security talks with third parties. Orbán had already become the first EU leader to meet with Vladimir Putin in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, having met the Russian President at a Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in October 2023.

Orbán’s approach towards a settlement of the war was also put forward during the election campaign of Hungary’s latest parliamentary elections in April 2022. Russia’s war against Ukraine immediately became the single most important issue in the campaign, to which the ruling Fidesz party was quick to position itself as the “party of peace” and frame a six-party opposition alliance (its main challenger at the time which has since disbanded) as the “party of war”. Pushing this disinformation narrative was instrumental in Fidesz’s 2022 election victory, which resulted in another two-thirds majority for the pro-Orbán ruling bloc. Accordingly, the domestic political context facilitating the spread of pro-Kremlin disinformation has remained largely unchanged with the continuation of Hungary’s political ties to Moscow. Similarly, the economic factor in Hungary’s Russia policy has remained largely unchanged. Although economic ties have been limited by the 14 rounds of sanctions the EU has imposed on Russia (with Hungary’s consent), Orbán aims to preserve as much as possible from the existing economic cooperation, including oil and gas imports, as well as Russia’s involvement in the extension of Hungary’s nuclear power plant at the city of Paks.

As a consequence, those segments of the Hungarian population who were already receptive or vulnerable towards pro-Kremlin narratives, have become even more exposed, primarily regarding disinformation against Ukraine. This entrenchment applies especially to the supporters of the ruling Fidesz party (and the supporters of Our Homeland, a far-right party in the Hungarian parliament). A poll in May 2023 by the opposition-linked IDEA Institute revealed that 36 per cent of ruling party voters believe Ukraine is to blame for the war, while

⁶ Kayali, L. & Moens, B., “Von der Leyen slams Viktor Orbán over trip to Russia,” *Politico*, 18 July 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-slams-viktor-orban-trip-russia/>

another third said that the EU and the US/NATO were responsible.⁷ This sentiment was continuously fueled by not only the ruling party and the government but also pro-government media outlets, which promoted the above messaging, largely without any critical analysis of Hungary's response to issues regarding Russia and Ukraine.

Simultaneously, the pro-Western section of the Hungarian electorate has become even more opposed to any form of cooperation with Russia. The aforementioned IDEA poll also revealed that 89 per cent of opposition voters believe Russia is responsible for the war in Ukraine. As for the whole of the Hungarian electorate, 40 per cent say Russia is responsible for the war, while 17 per cent put the blame on Ukraine and 14 per cent blame the EU and the US.

The Hungarian government's embrace of pro-Kremlin narratives has had a profound impact on how Hungarians view Ukraine. While Hungarians continue to overwhelmingly support remaining a member of the EU and NATO, Ukraine's domestic reputation has taken a serious hit. According to a July 2024 report by Policy Solutions, a Hungarian think tank, 52 per cent of Hungarians either moderately or fully oppose advancing their country's relations with Ukraine.⁸ (Interestingly, the same figure for Russia is 44 per cent). Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of ruling party voters believe that Ukraine poses a threat to Hungary. Another and more recent poll published by the Závecz Research Institute, however, found that the share of those fearing a potential military confrontation with Ukraine is 11 per cent.⁹

Changes in the national media landscape

From a structural point of view, the Hungarian media landscape remains largely unchanged in recent years. The government's grip over the sector remains strong, with the ruling Fidesz party and those close-to-government circles holding indirect control over an estimated 50 to 78 per cent of all media outlets

⁷ Cseke, B., "IDEA: One in three Fidesz voters believe that the war broke out because of Ukraine" [in Hungarian], *Telex.hu*, 11 May 2023, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/05/11/dk-idea-in-tezet-felmeres-orosz-ukran-haboru-megitelese-feelosseg>

⁸ Keller-Alánt, A., "Fidesz voters are turning away from the West" [in Hungarian], *RFE/RL Hungary*, 5 July 2024, <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/kulpolitika-putyin-zelenszkij-nyugat-orientacio/33022804.html>

⁹ Németh, M. S., 17 October 2024. *Op cit.*

capable of shaping the public discourse.¹⁰ Hungary ranked 67th in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2024 edition of the World Press Freedom Index.¹¹ The RSF research noted that although Hungary made slight improvements compared to its 2023 edition, press freedom in the country is stagnating, with independent media outlets facing political, economic and regulatory pressures. According to the latest Nations in Transit report by Freedom House, which has been ranking Hungary as a hybrid regime since 2019, “pro-government news outlets spread the government’s false narratives and continue to dominate the media landscape thanks to advertising revenue from the government.”¹²

While no major changes have occurred in terms of media ownership and the state of press freedom, a recent and adverse tendency is the growing social media influence of government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs). According to an interview with a leading Hungarian expert on pro-Kremlin disinformation, the pro-government media sphere has been increasingly dominated by social media influencers linked to Megafon, a group of pro-government journalists, commentators and media personalities. Influencers at Megafon have been using professional social media tools (well-edited, short and scripted videos) to echo the government’s narrative. Megafon-linked commentators, who are very active in topics around Russia’s war and often spread anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western narratives, operate with an extensive budget and are highly active during election campaigns. Operating since 2020 with the official aim of countering “liberal propaganda”, the group – as confirmed by data from the Meta Ad Library – has spent more than HUF 2 billion (nearly €49.8 million) since its foundation.¹³ In the run-up to Hungary’s EU parliamentary and local elections, the ruling Fidesz party and its linked supporters – including Megafon – spent €4.3 million on Meta and Google adverts, while total spending on these platforms by the 14 opposition parties also running in the election was less than 20 per cent.¹⁴ A significant share of Fidesz’ spending was allocated on spreading war-linked disinforma-

¹⁰ Istrate, D., 2021. *Op cit.*

¹¹ “World Press Freedom Index 2024,” *Reporters Without Borders*, 3 May 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure>

¹² Végh, Z., “Nations in Transit: Hungary,” *Freedom House*, 11 April 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/nations-transit/2024>

¹³ Hanula, Z., “Another record: Megafon’s (...) advertising bill is over two billion forints” [in Hungarian], *Telex.hu*, 25 May 2024, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/05/25/ujabb-rekord-ketmilliard-forint-felett-a-megafon-facebookos-hirdetesi-szamlaja>

¹⁴ “Fidesz & Co flood social media with anti-Western disinformation,” *Political Capital*, 8 June 2024, https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3389

tion narratives, predominantly on *Facebook*, which remains one of the primary sources of news for Hungarians.

In addition to the rise of Megafon, pro-Russian *Facebook* pages, which were already active before the war, have seen different development paths. *Orosz Hírek (Russian News)*, a news portal covering news from ex-USSR countries with a pro-Kremlin perspective, has seen growth in terms of Facebook followers, now standing above 100,000. At the same time, its impact – along with the influence of fringe conspiracy and greyzone outlets – remains limited. In parallel, one of the most vocal pro-Russian *Facebook* pages with 89,000+ followers (*Számok – a baloldali álhírek ellenszere / Numbers – the Antidote to Left-Wing Fake News*) ceased its pro-Fidesz operations in April 2023 over its dissatisfaction with the government’s unwillingness to vote against EU sanctions.¹⁵

Another major platform used to spread disinformation narratives is *TikTok*, which has risen in popularity among Hungarians in recent years, especially amongst those below the age of 35. With an estimated two million Hungarian users, *TikTok* offers fertile ground to Kremlin-leaning content promoted by Megafon-linked and other influencers such as *@szia_privet*.¹⁶ The latter is a Hungarian-speaking Russian *TikTok*er whose widely shared videos contain manipulative information about how Russian everyday life remains unaffected by the EU sanctions. These videos were later shared by pro-government media outlets to reinforce the government’s anti-sanction stance.

Russia’s war against Ukraine became a hugely important topic for all media outlets immediately after the full-scale invasion in February 2022 and the war has remained a recurring topic ever since. The past two and a half years have been marred by a significant amount of pro-Kremlin narratives, predominantly spread by pro-government media outlets, pro-Fidesz political commentators, social media influencers and an army of online trolls. These narratives are predominantly linked to three issues: the war itself, the April 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election and the EU’s sanctions regime against Russia.

As for the first group of narratives (which, in terms of quantity, was more prevalent in 2022), pro-government media outlets – particularly Hungary’s government-con-

¹⁵ Szalay, D., “It was like an air for Fidesz; one of the well-known Fidesz propaganda sites stops updating” [in Hungarian], *Média 1*, 3 April 2023, <https://media1.hu/2023/04/03/levegonek-nezte-a-fidesz-felhagy-a-frissitessel-az-egyik-ismert-fideszes-propagandaoldal/>

¹⁶ Neuberger, E., “An old message on a new channel, the pro-government media appears on the favorite Moscow *TikTok*” [in Hungarian], *Lakmusz*, 4 August 2023, <https://www.lakmusz.hu/uj-csatornan-a-regi-uzenettel-jelentkezik-a-kormanyparti-media-kedvenc-moszkvai-tiktokkere/>

trolled public media *MTVA* – had a leading role in spreading narratives aimed at questioning Ukraine’s decision to fight back against the Russian invaders. On 25 February 2022, Georg Spöttle, a pro-government security commentator, compared Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Adolf Hitler, arguing that his call to defend the country was “a hitlerian solution”, with other pro-government commentators echoing that the Ukrainian response will lead to a world war.¹⁷ Simultaneously, *MTVA*-linked channels and online news dailies repeatedly cited Russian state sources such as *RT* or *Sputnik* in their coverage, going against the European mainstream practice of banning Russian state propaganda channels. Throughout 2022, several attempts were made by or within the pro-government media sphere to relativise the war crimes committed by the Russian army against the Ukrainian population. These attempts included the downplaying of Russian connections to the Bucha massacre in March 2022. Other commentators also tried to whitewash Russia by pointing to alleged Ukrainian atrocities against ethnic Russians in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022, claiming that the mistreatment of ethnic Russians led to the invasion in February 2022.

In parallel, social media trolls actively spread “traditional” pro-Russian narratives in the online sphere, such as Ukraine not being “a real country”, an alleged genocide of ethnic Russians by the Ukrainian government, as well as the Ukrainian government being a puppet government of the United States.¹⁸ The latter claim was also spread by Philip Rákay, a media personality-turned-social media influencer linked to the pro-Fidesz Megafon group, who claimed that it is in the interest of the US to destabilise the region.¹⁹

Linked to the April 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election, the second group of narratives suggested that the then six-party opposition alliance wanted to drag Hungary into the neighbouring war. These claims were based on an interview given by Péter Márki-Zay, the 2022 opposition candidate for Prime Minister, in which Márki-Zay said that Hungary may send soldiers to Ukraine if NATO demands so (although adding that there were no current proposals

¹⁷ Rényi, P.D., “Zelenskyy as Hitler, calm Russians, Ukrainian threat of the world war” [in Hungarian], *444.hu*, 25 February 2022, <https://444.hu/2022/02/25/kezdodik-az-elmebaj-a-kozmedaban-zelenskij-mint-hitler-higgadt-oroszok-ukran-vilaghaborus-fenyeketes>

¹⁸ “The Kremlin’s troll army never sleeps” [in Hungarian], *Political Capital*, 28 October 2022, https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3088

¹⁹ “Russian propaganda supported by the Hungarian state” [in Hungarian], *Lakmusz*, 16 May 2022, <https://www.lakmusz.hu/orosz-propaganda-a-magyar-allam-tamogatasaval-hazai-dezinformacio-az-orosz-ukran-haboru-es-a-valasztasok-idejen/>

to do so).²⁰ Márki-Zay's statement was then twisted by pro-government media outlets, falsely accusing him of being a pro-war candidate, while positioning the ruling Fidesz party as the party of peace. Several Hungarian commentators argued that this interview was instrumental in shaping the results of the country's latest parliamentary elections, which resulted in a devastating defeat for the Márki-Zay-led opposition alliance.²¹

This narrative against the Hungarian opposition was further used by the pro-government media sphere in the run-up to Hungary's EU parliamentary elections in June 2024. "War or peace" was the message pushed by the ruling Fidesz party for the EU election campaign, arguing that the main interest of the opposition parties – along with "pro-war European politicians" – was to continue the fighting instead of aspiring for peace and conflict resolution.

Predominantly spread in 2023 and the first half of 2024, the third group of narratives – promoted by ruling party politicians, government officials, as well as government-linked media outlets and commentators – argued that the EU's various sanctions packages against Russia are fuelling the war instead of contributing towards peace. Notably, while Hungary did not eventually stand against any of the sanctions packages when it came to voting on their adoption, the government in Budapest argued that the sanctions are ruining the Hungarian economy. In a controversial state-funded billboard campaign conducted in late 2022, the government portrayed sanctions as missiles that target Hungary. This campaign was so "successful" that – according to a survey by Political Capital conducted in late 2022 – 36 per cent of Hungarians and 50 per cent of ruling party voters believed the government did not even vote for the sanctions in the Council of the EU.²² On the contrary, despite its efforts to reduce the breadth and scale of the sanction, the Hungarian government eventually endorsed all of them.

²⁰ Bozzay, B., "The government's basis is that 'the left will send soldiers to Ukraine'" [in Hungarian], *Telex*, 24 February 2022, <https://telex.hu/ellenorzo/2022/02/24/marki-zay-fidesz-media-propaganda-nato-magyar-katonak>

²¹ Tóth, C. T., "Márki-Zay's partisan speech about NATO decided almost everything" [in Hungarian], *Mérce*, 10 April 2022, <https://merce.hu/2022/04/10/marki-zay-partizanos-elszolasa-a-nato-rol-eldontott-szinte-mindent/>

²² "How informed are Hungarians about the sanctions?" [in Hungarian], *Political Capital*, 18 November 2022, https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3112

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

Hungary's legal and institutional framework continues to have major limitations when it comes to addressing pro-Kremlin disinformation, with no serious willingness from either the government or the ruling parties to publicly recognise the threat. While Hungary has introduced changes to the framework in recent years, these were introduced for domestic political reasons rather than to curb the spread of pro-Russian narratives.

In December 2023, the Hungarian parliament – with support from the ruling Fidesz-KDNP alliance and the far-right Our Homeland – adopted the so-called Sovereignty Protection Law, a controversial piece of legislation that was strongly contested by Hungarian civil society. The law established Hungary's Sovereignty Protection Office (SZVH), which has since been tasked with screening and investigating the activities of any person or organisation it considers a threat to Hungary's national sovereignty. The SZVH has the power to inform relevant authorities that in turn may launch criminal proceedings. Under additional provisions in the law, parliamentary candidates who receive campaign funds from abroad could be subject to a three-year prison sentence, while civic organisations have also been banned from receiving foreign funds for electoral purposes.

Politically, the adoption of the Sovereignty Protection Law is widely seen as a response to campaign funds collected from the United States for the Everybody's Hungary Movement (MMM), the civic organisation behind Márki-Zay, the 2022 opposition candidate for PM.²³ Independent observers agree that MMM did not breach Hungarian law when using these funds but it did circumvent campaign financing rules and exploit legal loopholes.²⁴ Reacting to the fallout and a series of (politically motivated) investigations that followed, Márki-Zay acknowledged that MMM had exploited a loophole, arguing that the government does the same, only from much more and taxpayer money.

²³ In the run-up to the April 2022 Hungarian elections, Márki-Zay's MMM received HUF 1.8 billion (nearly €4.5 million) from Action for Democracy, a US-based pro-democracy movement and advocacy organization with links to the Hungarian opposition. While Action for Democracy said they were collecting funds from Hungarians living abroad (who remain unnamed), the government and ruling party politicians claimed the funds came from either the United States or the US government itself.

²⁴ Teczár, S., "What does the law say about the American support of the Márki-Zay family?" [in Hungarian], *Lakmusz*, 8 December 2022, <https://www.lakmusz.hu/mit-mond-a-jog-marki-zayek-amerikai-tamogatasarol/>

A Hungarian expert interviewed on the country's relations with Russia argued that the creation of the SZVH has dramatically harmed Hungary's institutional framework in the fight against disinformation influences. According to the expert, the Orbán Government has essentially weaponised the concept of sovereignty, which is being used as a central element of ruling party campaigns to convince the electorate that only the ruling Fidesz party can protect Hungarian interests. A central element of this narrative is to claim the opposition is funded from abroad (the EU and the US) and that they only represent foreign (Western) interests. Simultaneously, critics argue that the SZVH, whose President, Tamás Láncki, is a former pro-Fidesz media commentator, has no real intention to investigate Russian (or Chinese) malign influence in the country. Instead, the SZVH – as widely expected by critics of the Sovereignty Protection Law – started investigating government-critical NGOs and independent media outlets. In June 2024, the SZVH launched formal inquiries into both the activities of Átlátszó, a Hungarian online news daily known for its investigative journalism, and the Hungarian branch of Transparency International (TI). Both Átlátszó and TI Hungary refused to cooperate with the SZVH investigation, which they called politically motivated. In a report²⁵ published in October 2024, the SZVH wrote that TI Hungary “engages in harmful, stigmatising and disinformation activities”, claiming that its activities serve to enforce US economic and political interests.²⁶ Most recently, the European Commission also criticised the controversial legislation and referred the Hungarian government to the Court of Justice of the European Union over the issue, arguing that the Sovereignty Protection Law breaks EU law.²⁷

In May 2022, Hungary's institutional framework experienced another setback. This was because Antal Rogán, the Minister of the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office (PMCO) and an influential figure within the Orbán Government responsible for government communications, was granted oversight of the country's civilian secret services. According to an interview with a Hungarian national security expert, the strengthening of party's political control over state institutions means that formerly NATO-friendly institutions, such as the secret services as well as

²⁵ Haász, J., “The Sovereignty Protection Office (...) came to the conclusion that Transparency is harmful, stigmatizes and spreads disinformation” [in Hungarian], *444.hu*, 14 October 2024, <https://444.hu/2024/10/14/a-szuverenitasvedelmi-hivatal-alaposan-megvizsgalta-a-dolgozat-es-arra-jutott-hogy-a-transparency-karos-stigmatizal-es-dezinformat>

²⁶ TI Hungary contested the findings of the SZVH report, also noting that it was not sent to them for comment in advance, despite clear provisions from the law on the SZVH.

²⁷ “Commission refers Hungary to the Court of Justice”, EC Press Release, 3 October 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_4865

agencies operating under the Ministry of Defense, could become less efficient in executing their activities to counter Russian influence-seeking efforts.

The institutional framework had already suffered considerable harm in 2021–2022 when Hungary’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade was targeted by a series of cyberattacks. As revealed in March 2022 by *Direkt36*, an investigative journalistic platform, Russia gained full access to Hungary’s Foreign Ministry networks and stole invaluable national security data, entirely compromising the Ministry’s internal correspondence. While the Hungarian government called the report fake news, it was revealed in May 2024 that it was not only aware of the Russian attacks but tried to counter them.²⁸ Discussing the security incident, an interviewed Hungarian foreign affairs specialist argued that “not even the close ties Hungary has to the Kremlin can prevent such attacks since Russia often treats its partners the same way it treats its adversaries.” Accordingly, the attacks are also proof that the Russian-Hungarian relationship continues to be asymmetric, with Moscow looking to exploit a relationship to gain leverage over Hungary’s principal alliance, NATO.

Responses by the media and civil society

Largely due to the rise of health-related disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical disinformation over Russia’s war against Ukraine, independent and investigative Hungarian media outlets have increasingly focused on countering pro-Kremlin disinformation. Among independent outlets, the issue of Russian disinformation is a recurring and already well-known phenomenon, which is often reported on, mainly in the context of the war in Ukraine.

One direct impact of the war on the Hungarian media is that fact-checking (both pro-government and anti-government figures, news and sources) has become visibly more significant across independent outlets, with two outlets – *Telex*²⁹ and *Lakmusz*³⁰ – taking the lead. Formed in 2020 after the alleged pro-government takeover of *Index.hu* (Hungary’s most popular online news daily), *Telex*, an influential online news platform, launched a dedicated fact-checking section

²⁸ Bánáti, A., “Internal documents prove that the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew about the Russian cyberattacks” [in Hungarian], *Telex*, 16 May 2024, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/05/16/orosz-hekkerek-kibertamadas-kulugyminiszterim-szijarto>

²⁹ *Telex.hu*

³⁰ *Lakmusz.hu*

on its website, with an extensive focus on debunking both domestic political and geopolitical disinformation narratives and cases. By focusing on traditional fact-checking, *Telex* has regularly reported on war-related disinformation cases, introducing the fake item and then disproving it through authenticated sources and substantial evidence.

Unlike *Telex*, *Lakmusz* is an investigative platform that is primarily dedicated to fact-checking, with a focus on countering disinformation narratives rather than individual cases. In addition, *Lakmusz* also publishes in-depth reports on how domestic political and geopolitical disinformation works, providing greater context for those looking for a deep-dive into the phenomenon. Launched in early 2022 under the Hungarian Digital Media Observatory project which receives partial funding from the European Commission, *Lakmusz* cooperates with five other Hungarian and international organisations with the dedicated aim of countering disinformation and misinformation. While *Lakmusz* itself is not specifically known among Hungarian news consumers, its articles are republished on the website of *444.hu*, one of Hungary's most popular online news dailies, thus ensuring that its content reaches a wide domestic audience.

In recent years, independent media outlets have tried to feature more credible and reputable Russia experts in their coverage of both the war in Ukraine and pro-Russian disinformation attempts. One such notable case occurred when Péter Magyar, the leader of the recently emerged TISZA party (Hungary's largest opposition party), made factual inaccuracies about the war in Ukraine during an April 2024 interview.³¹ During the interview, Magyar said Ukraine does not comply with EU values and regulation "in any way", also referring to "US missiles installed in Ukraine" and alleged mass US ownership of Ukrainian agricultural lands. Responding to these claims, András Rácz, a reputable Russia expert, quickly debunked these allegations on social media, which was later widely covered by several media outlets.³² Rácz believes Magyar, who was a Fidesz insider and broke away from the ruling bloc in early 2022, made these claims because he fell victim to anti-Ukrainian propaganda spread by the pro-government media. (At the same time, Magyar has repeatedly condemned the Russian aggression and paid a charity visit to Kyiv but has chosen not to advocate for military aid to Ukraine in fear of losing voters.)

³¹ Ivánkai, M., "I agree with my ex-wife about how this state works" [in Hungarian], *Klubrádió*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.klubradio.hu/adasok/egyertek-a-volt-feleseggemmel-abban-hogyan-mukodik-ez-az-allam-mondta-magyar-peter-a-klubradioban-143395>

³² Kerner, Z., "András Rácz corrected Péter Magyar's mistakes regarding Ukraine" [in Hungarian], *24.hu*, 14 April 2024, <https://24.hu/kulfold/2024/04/14/racz-andras-helyretette-magyar-peter-tevedeseit-ukrajnaval-kapcsolatban/>

As for civil society, the response to disinformation related to Russia's war against Ukraine has been limited but both reactive and proactive examples exist. Witnessing the surge of pro-Kremlin disinformation surfacing on Hungary's public media outlets after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, Political Capital Institute, a leading Hungarian think tank with a dedicated focus on countering foreign malign influence and pro-Kremlin disinformation, partnered with the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (TASZ), a prominent human rights NGO, to file a formal EU complaint against MTVA, Hungary's public media broadcaster.³³ The complaint to the European Commission was filed in March 2022 after MTVA-linked news outlets continued spreading disinformation, especially content linked to *RT* and *Sputnik* despite these outlets being under EU sanctions since 2 March 2022.

Political Capital is also taking a leading role in the fight against pro-Russian disinformation by regularly publishing corresponding materials (which are regularly cited by independent media outlets) and advocating for efforts to curb Russian malign influence. The institute is also one of the consortium members behind *Lakmusz* and was one of the 105 civil society organisations which condemned the Hungarian government's sovereignty protection law over its potentially adverse impact on the country's democracy.³⁴

A less prominent but still active and self-organised initiative is NAFO Hungary, the local division of the North Atlantic Fella Organisation. NAFO is a social media movement aiming to counter pro-Kremlin disinformation by actively responding to the posts of pro-Kremlin online influencers. NAFO Hungary's "fellas" often use mockery, trolling and memes to "hit back" once a pro-Kremlin post emerges, not necessarily to debunk them but to take the initiative in steering away the conversation from the pro-Kremlin content. However, the impact of NAFO Hungary remains limited. With nearly 9,400 followers, the platform mainly operates on *X* (formerly *Twitter*), which is a less popular social media platform among Hungarians.

³³ "Russian disinformation in the public media" [in Hungarian], *Political Capital*, 29 March 2022, https://politicalcapital.hu/sajtoszoba.php?article_read=1&article_id=2978

³⁴ "Joint statement of civil organizations regarding the Sovereignty Protection Act" [in Hungarian], *Átlátszó*, 13 December 2023, <https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2023/12/01/civil-szervezetek-kozos-kozlemenye-a-szuverenitasvedelmi-torveny-ugyeben/>

Recommendations

For as long as Hungary maintains closer political ties with Russia than any other EU country, no major recognition of Russia as a source of disinformation and malign influence can be expected. Taking the findings of the 2021 Disinformation Resilience Index into account, no progress has been made by the Hungarian government towards improving the country's institutional framework or enhancing potential regional cooperation within the Visegrád Group (V4). Moreover, state capture and media capture continue to pose major obstacles towards sufficient progress. In order to decrease Hungary's vulnerability to disinformation, we advise the following steps to be taken:

- To improve legislative and institutional frameworks for combatting disinformation. Since Hungary continues to prioritise its relations with Moscow despite the continuation of Russia's war against Ukraine, there are no expectations of a revised approach in the country's national security, cybersecurity and information security policies. The adverse impact of pro-Kremlin influence-seeking efforts and disinformation narratives need to be recognised at the highest possible level by an institutional framework that actively focuses on building the resilience of state agencies and relevant government institutions. The country's Sovereignty Protection Law should be reviewed and eventually replaced with legislation which prioritises countering Russian disinformation. Dedicated institutions should recognise nongovernmental anti-disinformation actors as partners and establish a cooperation format that is capable of meaningfully enhancing Hungary's resilience.
- For the EU, US, and international organisations: to continue supporting Hungarian initiatives focused on improving media literacy and fighting disinformation. EU funding was instrumental to the establishment of the fact-checking site *Lakmusz*, while it also remains crucial for the non-governmental sector in Hungary, which is generally underfunded. US funding is equally significant for Hungarian media outlets, several of which – *Telex*, *444* and *Átlátszó* – received funding for 2024 from the Embassy of the United States in Budapest under the US government's Free Media Grant Programme. Until 2023, the US Embassy also supported *Nyugati Pályán* (On the Western Track), a social media project followed by more than 30,000 Facebook users that used visual and audiovisual content to respond to war-related disinformation spread by the Kremlin.

- For national and regional media outlets: to establish/extend their cooperation in the field of combating disinformation. Fact-checking pro-Russian content is a well-known necessity among all Hungarian media outlets, yet only a portion regularly publish fact-checking articles. Independent outlets should consider seeking closer cooperation with each other to ensure that their fact-checking reaches greater audiences. Such cooperation would also benefit those outlets which have limited capabilities for covering topics such as disinformation or foreign influence. Taking fact-checking to the regional level is also recommended but there are major obstacles: only a handful of Hungary's regional media outlets operate independently, with most of them functioning under indirect government control.
- To keep the issue of adverse pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns on the agenda. It would be beneficial to increase public, political, and policy discussions around the overall impact of disinformation, while it would also raise general public awareness. The latter remains crucial as the most vulnerable groups identified by the 2021 DRI edition (ruling party voters, Hungarians with anti-establishment views and audiences receptive towards conspiracy theories) continue to be subject to a considerable number of distorted narratives.

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WatchDog.MD Community

Moldova

Abstract

Moldova's resilience against disinformation has increased since 2021. It has done so in response to the rising threat of disinformation after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moldovan authorities have taken several important steps, such as a ban of TV stations that rebroadcast Russian propaganda or were controlled by Moscow-affiliated oligarchs, a ban on all Russian informational, analytic or military content, and the blocking of websites spreading disinformation. State authorities, including the Ministry of Defense, have significantly improved their communication capacities. Moreover, a new Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation was established in 2023. In addition, Russia was finally named as a threat to Moldova in the new National Security Strategy, adopted in December 2023.

In response to not only the war but also the accelerated process of European integration, Moldovan mass media have expanded their coverage of foreign affairs. Civil society organisations have continued their work on fact-checking, debunking, media monitoring and media literacy projects, while also becoming more involved in policy-making processes under Moldova's new pro-European government.

TV remains the most important source of information for Moldovans, but the public's trust in Russian TV has decreased. Russian propaganda was forced to migrate to less-regulated online platforms, where it continues to be very effective. Meanwhile, other foreign TV channels, including Romanian ones, remain insignificant as sources of news to the Moldovan public. In an attempt to destabilise the social-political situation in the country, Russia has shifted its tactics of hybrid aggression against Moldova to the direct bribery of voters and public officials. Despite the numerous positive developments, public opinion polls show that Russian disinformation narratives and fake news remain deeply entrenched in the consciousness of a large portion of the Moldovan public.

Overview of the latest topical studies

The topic of disinformation and the state of the Moldovan media has gained significant attention from the domestic and international analytical community. Several topical reports have been published since 2021. One of the most recent was Internews Moldova's "People's Perception of Mass Media and Media Skills in the Republic of Moldova" study, which covers 2023. According to the report, 57 per cent of respondents were fairly or very dissatisfied with Moldovan media and only 40 per cent were fairly or very satisfied. The number of people who said they informed themselves from independent sources increased only slightly from 16 per cent in 2020 to 18 per cent in 2022. Around 49 per cent of the survey participants did not know if the sources they followed were independent and 73 per cent thought it was difficult for the Moldovan public to distinguish fake news from real news. The study also tested the respondents by asking them to identify whether five news stories were real or fake. Only 12 per cent got all five right, while 9 per cent did not identify any of the news correctly. Overall, the test results were slightly better than in 2020.¹

In 2023, a WatchDog.MD study found that while the general public's level of trust in Russian media has decreased after the war in Ukraine, the groups most vulnerable to Russian disinformation remained loyal to it. These groups traditionally include Russian-speakers, the elderly, and people with a lower level of education and income. These demographics have not changed significantly since 2021. Russian language speakers in particular perceived the ban of several Russian TV stations as a violation of their right to choose their sources of information. As a result, many of these people have migrated to unregulated online sources such as *Telegram*.²

The monitoring of anti-EU narratives on social media pages and channels carried out by WatchDog.MD in 2023 concluded that pro-Russian propaganda did not focus extensively on discrediting the EU itself, instead it focused on undermining the idea of European integration in Moldova. The main narrative could be summarised as follows: "Incompetence/corruption/dictatorship is

¹ 2022 Internews Final Report, *Internews*, 2023, https://internews.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2022-Internews-val-3_Raport-Final_ENG_29.03.2023.pdf

² "In the Republic of Moldova, Russia still feels at home," *Watchdog*, 2023, <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/In-the-Republic-of-Moldova.pdf>

hidden under the guise of EU integration". The study also discovered that the monitored sources did not focus on fake news or agenda-setting, but mostly on framing the weekly national news agenda within the same anti-EU and anti-government narratives.³

The Center for Independent Journalism's 2022 edition of the Index of the State of the Press in Moldova (ISPM) found that the situation in the media industry remained difficult and plagued by problems, despite a significant improvement across most of the seven measured indicators.⁴ On a scale of 0 to 50, the results for each indicator were as follows:

- Legal framework regulating media activity: 29.33 (25.33 in 2021)
- The political context: 28 (19 in 2021)
- The legal environment: 22.5 (17.5 in 2021)
- The professional environment: 33 (26.33 in 2021)
- The quality of journalism: 29.7 (27 in 2021)
- Information security from a media perspective: 26 (19.5 in 2021)
- Safety of media institutions and of journalists: 32.5 (unchanged from 2021)

The biggest improvement, according to the ISPM, was in the political context. As one expert interviewed for this current study stated: "The biggest impact on resilience has been the coming to power of a new political leadership, which, I think, truly wants to increase the country's resilience and to fight disinformation campaigns."⁵

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

Moldova's pro-EU government, which has been in power since 2021, expressed solidarity with Ukraine and condemned Russia's full-scale invasion after 24

³ Mapping Anti-EU Narratives in Moldova, *Watchdog*, 2023, https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Report_Mapping-anti-EU-narratives-in-Moldova_by-WDMD_November-2023.pdf

⁴ Index of the State of the Press in the Republic of Moldova in 2022, *CJI*, 2023, <https://cji.md/en/index-of-the-state-of-the-press-ism-in-the-republic-of-moldova-in-2022/>

⁵ Interview with Victor Gotișan, independent media researcher, December 2023.

February 2022. However, Moldova joined Western sanctions against Russia somewhat belatedly, gradually and sometimes without publicly announcing it. The main obstacle for economic relations with Russia is geographical, since traditional trade routes transited Ukraine. Therefore, the war has forced cargo companies to choose longer, pricier routes to reach Russia and bypass Ukraine's territory (such as through Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Georgia). Nevertheless, pro-Russian forces in Moldova have accused the government of sacrificing trade with Russia and the people's well-being in order to please its "Western curators".

The most pressing issue was the energy crisis, as energy prices skyrocketed all across Europe after the invasion and Moldova was no exception. Pro-Russian politicians and media argued that a pro-Russian government in power would have shielded Moldova from the exorbitant energy prices. A November 2022 poll found that 45.6 per cent of respondents blamed the government in Chişinău for the energy crisis, twice as many as those who pointed the finger at Russia (22.2 per cent).⁶

THE GAS WARS

For Moldova, the energy crisis started even before the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In September 2021 its contract with Gazprom expired and the government had to negotiate a new, less favourable agreement. The main narrative put forward by pro-Russian media and politicians was that President Sandu had to travel to Moscow and beg for cheaper gas. When prices skyrocketed after the war, polls showed that this narrative still dominated the public opinion in Moldova. In November 2022, 45.6 per cent of respondents blamed the government for the energy crisis and only 22.2 per cent pointed the finger at Russia.⁷ In the same poll, 66,6 per cent of respondents agreed with the idea that President Sandu had to go to Moscow to ask for better gas prices.

Even after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a majority of Moldovans did not blame Russia for the high energy prices, ignoring its role in the energy crisis and the atrocities it was committing in Ukraine. Instead,

⁶ November 2022 BOP Survey [in Romanian], IPP, 2022, <https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Sondajul-BOP-noiembrie-2022.pdf>

⁷ *Ibid.*

they blamed the Moldovan government and wanted it to negotiate with President Putin's regime. This showed how effective Russian propaganda in Moldova was and how the Moldovan authorities failed to counter this narrative in any significant way.

As the pro-EU government gradually withdrew from specific treaties pertaining to the Commonwealth of Independent States, the pro-Kremlin forces doubled down on the idea that Moldova needed Russia for trade and cheap energy, and that the ruling party in Chişinău was provoking Russia unjustifiably. A qualitative sociological study conducted by Watchdog.MD in August 2023 revealed that most participants, regardless of their geo-political preferences, agreed on the idea that Moldova needed Russia economically.⁸ In fact, Moldova has been decoupling itself economically from Russia for years. The idea that the Moldovan economy is dependent on the Russian market is a myth actively maintained by Russian propaganda. In fact, Moldova's proportion of trade with Russia has fallen significantly in the past decade and in 2023 represented only 3.7 per cent of Moldova's total trade. The share was 18 per cent back in 2014. In 2023, the EU market absorbed 65.4 per cent of Moldova's exports.

Regarding Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the mainstream pro-Russian political forces such as the Socialists and the Shor Party did not openly support Russia's actions. Instead, their main message was that Moldova should not take a stance because otherwise the country might get "drawn into the war". They opposed sanctions both against Russia and closer cooperation with Ukraine. The parties also objected to Western donations to the Moldovan military and restrictions being placed upon pro-war propaganda in Moldova. Online pro-Kremlin media outlets were more straightforwardly biased and they worked to spread conspiracy theories against Ukraine and the West. Due to the fact that Russian media had shaped the Moldovan info-space for most of the period between the 1990s and 2022, the Kremlin's conspiracy narratives found fertile ground across the country.

⁸ "In the Republic of Moldova, Russia still feels at home", Watchdog, 2023. *Op cit.*

Table 1. The Ukrainians and the Americans were developing biological weapons in secret labs in Ukraine

	True	False	Don't know
May 2022 ⁹	36.3%	34.7%	27.4%
January 2023 ¹⁰	34.3%	27.6%	37.1%

Own compilation

The poll results showed that the number of people believing Russia's disinformation claims remained stable, but also that an increasing number of people were confused and less willing to say that the conspiracy claim was false.

Overall, there is a consensus among interviewed experts that while pro-Kremlin narratives and the main actors spreading them have largely remained the same, many of the tactics behind disinformation have changed. Victor Goțișan has pointed towards the new party of Ion Ceban, the Mayor of Chișinău, as a kind of "Trojan horse": its ties to Moscow are well-documented, but it has recently adopted a "pro-EU" stance.

The Association of Independent Press chairman Petru Macovei highlighted another new tactic, which was the illusion of a grassroots movement. "If previously, the authors of these narratives were pro-Russian politicians, activists and media, or priests from the Metropolitan Church of Moldova, now we see more unknown faces, whose messages are amplified by the supporters of pro-Russian politicians and activists." He explained that "They make it seem like these messages are coming from ordinary, politically unaffiliated people."¹¹

Meanwhile, Liliana Vițu, chairwoman of the national media regulator, pointed out that the tactics employed by pro-Russian actors have changed from spreading disinformation narratives to more direct interventions. These actors, in particu-

⁹ May 2022 Socio-Political Survey, *Watchdog*, 2022, <https://watchdog.md/polls/205955/sondaj-socio-politic-mai-2022/>

¹⁰ January 2023 CBS-AXA Survey [in Romanian], *Watchdog*, 2023, https://www.watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Sondaj-CBS-AXA_WD_ianuarie-2023_ro.pdf

¹¹ Interview with Petru Macovei, chairman of the Independent Press Association, December 2023.

lar the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor and his associates, pumped illegal money into anti-government protests and tried to destabilise the situation in the country.¹² Later, during the November local elections, they bribed both voters and local politicians to join their parties, as shown in a report of the Security and Intelligence Service¹³ and an investigation by the police.¹⁴ On the eve of the elections, the Commission for Exceptional Situations banned one of Ilan Shor's parties from fielding candidates, but the fugitive oligarch had many back-up candidates.¹⁵

Changes in the national media landscape

Since 2021 the main changes in the national media landscape have occurred in the TV industry. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the government suspended the licences of 12 TV stations, accusing them of holding ties to Russia or to local oligarchs. The list included the three most popular stations that rebroadcast Russian channels: *NTV Moldova*, *Primul în Moldova (Pervyi Kanal)* and *RTR Moldova (Rossiya-1/Rossiya-24)*. According to a 2021 study, they were the second, fifth and sixth most popular channels by market reach.¹⁶ In tandem, the government banned the rebroadcast of informational, political, analytical and military content emanating from Russia.

According to Liliana Vițu, even before the March 2022 announcement of the ban on the Russian content, the editorial teams of the pro-Russian TV stations already self-censored themselves immediately after the beginning of the full-scale. Overall, after two years and multiple restrictions, Vițu thought that TV was no longer as important for Russian propaganda as before the war: "If TV

¹² Interview with Liliana Vițu, chairwoman of the Audiovisual Council, December 2023.

¹³ "The results of a complex operation undertaken in the context of the hybrid war" [in Romanian], *Security and Intelligence Service*, 2023, <https://sis.md/ro/content/rezultatele-un-ei-opera%C8%9Biuni-complexe-desf%C4%83%C8%99urate-de-c%C4%83tre-sis-%C3%AEn-contextul-r%C4%83zboiului-hibrid>

¹⁴ "Moldova's chief of police exposes attempts to manipulate local elections and cites illegal financing, voter bribery, and fake signatures," *Government of Moldova*, 2023, <https://gov.md/en/content/moldovas-chief-police-exposes-attempts-manipulate-local-elections-and-cites-illegal>

¹⁵ "Moldova Takes Further Steps To Ban Members Of Pro-Russian Party From Local Polls," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-pro-russian-party-banned/32670205.html>

¹⁶ "National mass media audience study," *Magenta Consulting*, 2021, https://consulting.md/files/reports/53/CJI_Raport_studiul_de_audienta_decembrie_2021_1.pdf

used to be the main tool, now it's peripheral. Influence operations have evolved, switched gears and are now completely different. Local elections and elections in Gagauzia showed us that they directly bribe voters. TV is no longer the main medium for corrupting and hijacking the democratic process in Moldova."¹⁷

Meanwhile, public opinion surveys also indicated that respondents' trust in Russian media eroded after the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine.¹⁸

Table 2. Poll results: How much do you trust Russian media (TV, radio, newspapers, internet)?

	A great deal of trust + somewhat trust	Somewhat distrust + highly distrust	Don't know
February 2021	42.9%	43.8%	13.3%
November 2022	27.3%	62.6%	10.1%
August 2023	27.5%	62.1%	10.4%

The ban on Russian TV channels did not result in these audiences switching to higher-quality alternatives. Instead, a Watchdog.MD study found that these audiences migrated to online media, such as Telegram, where they could consume the same type of content or often even more aggressive forms of pro-Russian propaganda. The ban seems to have had a positive effect for moderate audiences, who became less exposed to Russian propaganda, yet a negative one for the loyal core of pro-Russian audiences, whose informational isolation only increased and are now at risk of further radicalisation.¹⁹

Liliana Vițu also noted that political micro-targeting on social media nowadays can be done relatively cheaply with little oversight on the origin of the funds for these advertisements.²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Barometer of Public Opinion, *IPP*, 2023, <http://bop.ipp.md/en>

¹⁹ "In the Republic of Moldova, Russia still feels at home," *Watchdog*, 2023, <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/In-the-Republic-of-Moldova.pdf>

²⁰ Interview with Liliana Vițu.

While the Security and Intelligence Service has repeatedly blocked various disinformation websites, these efforts have had a limited impact. For example, *Sputnik Moldova* immediately created several mirror websites after its original domain, sputnik.md, was taken down.²¹

The picture on social media is even more complicated, where the fugitive pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor has frequently pumped money into anti-government political advertisements. His various political parties regularly create new *Facebook* pages and accounts with generic names, which they use to publish a high number of paid advertisements, before discarding these disposable accounts.

Aside from the transition of pro-Russian disinformation from TV channels to online platforms and to street-level operations, the media environment in Moldova remains largely unchanged since 2021. According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World report, Moldova remained only a "partly free" country with a score of 61 out of 100 in 2021, followed by a score of 62 in 2023. The score for media freedom and independence remained unchanged, with two out of four points. Some persistent problems include the domination of "outlets connected to political parties and oligarchs". The 2023 report also noted the restrictions on Russian media imposed after 24 February 2022, as well as the 2021 amendments that made it easier for the Parliament to dismiss members of the Audiovisual Council.²²

Comparing Moldova's 2021 and 2023 scores in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index is difficult because of RSF's major methodology change in 2022. In the latest report, Moldova is ranked 28th out of 180 countries, with a score of 77.62, a considerable improvement over the 73.47 score (40th position) in the 2022 Index. Nevertheless, the report noted a significant number of problems such as political influence on editorial policy, a high level of polarisation within media, the dominance of oligarchs in the advertising market, the financial insecurity of independent media, difficult public access to official information, arbitrary defamation lawsuits and self-censorship on sensitive topics including the full-scale war in Ukraine or the COVID-19 pandemic.²³

²¹ "SputnikMD Clones Can No Longer Be Accessed," *Anticoruptie.md*, 2023, <https://anticoruptie.md/en/news/following-the-cijm-investigationsputnikmd-clones-can-no-longer-be-accessed>

²² Moldova Country Report, *Freedom House*, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2023>

²³ Moldova Report, *Reporters Without Borders*, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/moldova>

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

Several major legal changes, some unrelated to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, have taken place since 2021. In the fall of 2021, the Parliament adopted several amendments²⁴ which increased parliamentary control over the media regulator (allowing Parliament to remove members of the Audiovisual Council), and over the leadership of the national broadcaster (lawmakers now appoint and can fire the *Teleradio-Moldova* director). The pro-EU government argued that these measures were necessary to remove political and oligarchic appointees from the two institutions, but also to increase their accountability.²⁵ The amendments were criticised by several civil society organisations at the time as a simplistic, heavy-handed solution bordering on blanket censorship.²⁶

The ban on rebroadcasting of foreign informational, analytic, political and military content from countries that did not sign the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (ECTT) – with the exception of the US, Canada and countries within the EU – marked a significant U-turn for the government. In 2020, the Moldovan government had removed a similar ban. The full-scale Russian aggression however changed the authorities' mind and the ban was initially reinstated in March 2022 via a decision by the Commission for Emergency Situations, it was then made permanent through a legislative amendment.²⁷

The revision of the Code of Audiovisual Media Services also included a new definition of disinformation as “the deliberate dissemination, by any means, in the public domain, of information which is verifiably false or misleading and likely to harm national security”.²⁸ This was meant to empower the national media

²⁴ Law no. 158/2021, *Legis.md*, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=128490&lang=ro; Law no. 121/2021, *Legis.md*, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=128048&lang=ro

²⁵ “Why Is Teleradio Moldova Returned Under Parliamentary Control?” [in Romanian], *Radio Europa Liberă Moldova*, 2021, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/de-ce-teleradio-moldova-este-readus%C4%83-sub-control-parlamentar-/31528744.html>

²⁶ “Media NGOs Concerned About Changes to Audiovisual Media Services Code” [in Romanian], *IPN*, 2021, https://www.ipn.md/ro/ong-uri-de-media-ingrijorate-de-modificarile-la-codul-serviciilor-media-audioviz-7967_1084608.html

²⁷ “Moldova Bans Russian Media to Counter Propaganda Over Ukraine,” *Balkan Insight*, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/20/moldova-bans-russian-media-to-counter-propaganda-over-ukraine/>

²⁸ Law no. 248/2023, *Legis.md*, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=138540&lang=ro

regulator to apply stricter penalties for media outlets that run afoul of the new definition.

The Commission for Emergency Situations also suspended the broadcast licences of six TV stations in December 2022²⁹ and another six in October 2023.³⁰ Each channel was directly or indirectly affiliated to either pro-Russian parties or local oligarchic groups. The prime minister accused them of “promoting foreign interests”. The manner in which the suspension was introduced was somewhat controversial, but Petru Macovei argued that the decision was “justified, necessary and even a bit too late”.³¹

On the other hand, Victor Gotișan found the use of the emergency situation mechanisms “irritating” because it showed “there is no long-term vision on how to deal with these agents of influence that are waging a hybrid war in Moldova”.³²

Most experts agree on the end goal of tackling disinformation but sometimes disagree on the counter measures that the Moldovan authorities should employ. While the emergency situation mechanisms allow for swift, efficient actions, they do not put in place permanent, structural solutions. This has also created uncertainty about what will happen after the end of the emergency situation.

After Parliament decided not to prolong the state of emergency into 2024, Prime Minister Dorin Recean promised that 12 banned TV stations would not be allowed to resume broadcasting.³³ Then the Investment Agency used the screening mechanism for strategic investments of relevance to national security to demand the temporary suspension of all licences and authorisations issued to the six com-

²⁹ “Moldova Temporarily Bans Six TV Channels Over Broadcasts About War,” *Reuters*, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/moldova-temporarily-ban-six-tv-channels-over-broadcasts-about-war-2022-12-16/>

³⁰ “CSE Has Suspended the Licenses of Six TV Stations,” *Moldova1*, 2023, <https://moldova1.md/p/18600/cse-has-suspended-the-licenses-of-six-tv-stations-dorin-recean--we-have-evidence-that-these-stations-pursue-an-interest-from-outside-the-republic-of>

³¹ Interview with Petru Macovei.

³² Interview with Victor Gotișan.

³³ “The Twelve TV Stations With Suspended Licenses Will Not Resume Activity Even After the End of the State of Emergency” [in Romanian], *Newsmaker*, 2023, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/recean-cele-12-posturi-tv-cu-licenta-suspendata-nu-si-vor-relua-activitatea-nici-dupa-anular-ea-starii-de-urgenta/>

panies behind the banned TV stations.³⁴ Given that the suspension is temporary, it is not yet certain whether the government will settle on this or another legal mechanism as a permanent solution to the TV channel ban.

IMPROVED DEFENCE COMMUNICATIONS

Malign online actors regularly tried to exploit any kind of military exercise, training, equipment movement or external donation to spread fear and panic. They argued that Moldova was preparing to attack Transnistria, that it would join the war in Ukraine, that the West was deliberately militarising the country, that NATO would open military bases here, that a mobilisation was underway (with fake summons distributed online) and so on.

The Ministry of Defence, which is traditionally not a prominent communicator, managed to improve its communication capacities significantly not only to debunk fake news about mobilisation or weapons contracts, but also to pre-emptively debunk some disinformation. When military exercises were planned, the Ministry informed the public not only via press releases, but directly by working with the local communities, authorities and media to prevent any misinterpretation and disinformation. While attempts to sow panic still occurred, most notably when a father took his child to the site of a multinational military exercise in an attempt to provoke the soldiers, their impact was successfully limited.³⁵

Another major legal development was the adoption of a new National Security Strategy that, unlike its predecessor, directly named Russia as a threat and called out its “actions of destabilisation of the country via cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns and attempts to disturb public order”.³⁶ This was an unprecedented step, widely hailed among the pro-EU expert community

³⁴ “TV Stations With Suspended Licenses Will Not Be Able to Continue Their Activity” [in Romanian], *Newsmaker*, 2023, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/doc-posturile-tv-cu-licenta-suspendata-nu-si-vor-putea-continua-activitatea-decizia-autoritatilor/>

³⁵ “Pro-Kremlin Actors Amplify Video to Target Multinational Military Exercises in Moldova,” *DFR Lab*, 2023, <https://dfrlab.org/2023/11/28/pro-kremlin-actors-amplify-video-to-target-multinational-military-exercises-in-moldova/>

³⁶ 2023 National Security Strategy Project [in Romanian], *Office of the President of the Republic of Moldova*, 2023, https://presedinte.md/app/webroot/uploaded/Proiect%20SSN_2023.pdf

as both long overdue and a historical milestone. The strategy also sets up “information security and resilience” as a priority for authorities to abide by.

Victor Gotișan welcomed the fact that Moldova finally had a security strategy that did not shy away from designating Russia as a threat, but reserved his judgement until there was a clear plan of action on how to implement the strategy and achieve its goals.³⁷

At the initiative of President Sandu, Parliament also adopted the Law regarding the creation of the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation as an autonomous institution.³⁸ Civil society was involved in writing the bill and currently has two representatives in the Center’s board: Valeriu Pașa of WatchDog.MD and Petru Macovei of the Association of Independent Press. Former minister of the interior Ana Revenco has been appointed as director, but otherwise the Center is still being established.

The Center is tasked with monitoring and analysing information threats, acting as an early warning system, coordinating the strategic communication of public institutions, providing recommendations and training to other public institutions, and acting as a liaison with civil society such as the mass media and tech companies.

While welcoming the creation of the Center, Liliana Vițu pointed out the challenges it would face: “In February [2024], we’re going to be entering the third year of war and we’re just now setting up these institutions. I don’t know how long it will take to get them staffed and running. After two years at the Audiovisual Council, I still have 17 vacancies [out of 58] open. So these institutions will not become functional overnight. They’ll need time to develop their answers, their solutions and measures, they’ll need time to analyse, conceptualise and prioritise.”³⁹

Vițu added that, in the process of EU integration, Moldova would also have to decide which institutions should be in charge of relevant EU legislation such as the Digital Markets Act or the Digital Services Act.

Meanwhile, Victor Gotișan stressed that, even with all the new legislation, online media remained highly unregulated, despite it being the space where much of the disinformation and influence operations took place: “When you say that you

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Law no. 242/2023, *Legis.md*, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=138661&lang=ro

³⁹ Interview with Liliana Vițu.

want to regulate the Internet, everybody gets up in arms. But I think we have reached the point where we have to do it."⁴⁰

Indeed, regulating online disinformation and transposing EU laws into national legislation are major challenges that lie ahead for Moldova. Nonetheless, the pace and quality of legislative change in the area of media and information security suggest that as long as the political leadership shows the necessary will and determination, it can achieve important progress.

Responses by the media and civil society

Before the war, the coverage of foreign news by the independent media was rare and superficial, which allowed Russian sources to have an outsized influence on Moldovan public opinion towards foreign leaders and events. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine made it more necessary than ever to have professional, in-depth coverage of international news, both for the media and for the public. This was perhaps the biggest change since 2021, when the independent and quality media started to pay more attention to foreign affairs.

In the first year of the full-scale war, WatchDog.MD worked with three independent TV stations - *ProTV*, *JurnalTV* and *TV8* - to help them improve their coverage of foreign affairs, especially of the war in Ukraine. This partnership also helped news and talk-show programmes devote more time to debunking Russian disinformation narratives about the war. A September 2022 monitoring report confirmed positive changes were taking place in their coverage of foreign affairs.⁴¹

WatchDog.MD also carried out several monitoring projects, most notably regarding disinformation targeted at the government and the EU or Moldova's EU integration process. Additionally, WatchDog.MD regularly commissioned public opinion polls to measure the penetration and impact of disinformation narratives.⁴²

The Association of Independent Press (API) continued its own media monitoring and media literacy projects, many of which are not limited to Chişinău but also

⁴⁰ Interview with Victor Gotişan.

⁴¹ Report on the Reflection of Key Geopolitical Actors in Moldovan TV News in November 2022, *Watchdog*, 2022, <https://watchdog.md/studies/206072/raport-reflectarea-principalilor-actori-geopolitici-in-stirile-tv-din-republica-moldova-in-luna-noiembrie-2022/>

⁴² Public Opinion Surveys, *Watchdog*, 2023, <https://watchdog.md/en/sondaje/>

involve participants from different regions of the country.⁴³ API's *StopFals* project won the EU Delegation's award for the best project against disinformation at the inaugural Anti-Disinformation Awards Gala in April 2023.⁴⁴

Media education in schools has been one of the main priorities of the Center for Independent Journalism and one example of good practice from the DRI 2021 edition. In addition to improving and updating the curriculum on media education,⁴⁵ one of the changes since 2021 has been the introduction of a new approach aiming to integrate the knowledge and skills of media education, such as critical thinking, into other classes.⁴⁶ This will complement the existing optional course on media education for secondary and high school students.

The Institute for War and Peace Reporting launched the Independent Countering Disinformation Centre in October 2023, which aims to be a physical and digital hub for the coordination and cooperation of the various actors engaged in countering disinformation in Moldova.⁴⁷

Overall, Victor Gotișan reflected that the amount of external support for media and civil society has been crucial to increasing Moldova's resilience against disinformation, but he also noted that these programmes were often uncoordinated and overlapped, which could lead to some degree of inefficiency and redundancy.⁴⁸ This opinion is not isolated and is relevant for other fields where Moldova enjoys important contributions from external donors. Nonetheless occasional inefficiencies, such as separate financing programmes that target the same goals, means greater financial support for more organisations and more professional chances for practitioners in the field.

⁴³ "About Disinformation: From door to door" [in Romanian], *API*, 2023, <https://api.md/despredezinformare-de-la-usa-la-usa/>; "Building Sustainable and Inclusive Peace: Strengthening Trust and Social Cohesion in Moldova" [in Romanian], *API*, 2023, <https://api.md/construirea-pacii-durabile-si-incluzive-consolidarea-increderii-si-coeziunii-sociale-in-moldova/>

⁴⁴ "StopFals.md: Best Project Against Disinformation" [in Romanian], *API*, 2023, <https://www.api.md/api/-/stopfalsmd-best-project-against-disinformation/>

⁴⁵ "Advancing Media Education and Supporting Media in the Republic of Moldova" [in Romanian], *CJI*, 2023, <https://cji.md/avansarea-educatiei-mediaticе-si-sprrijinirea-mass-media-din-republica-moldova/>

⁴⁶ "Strengthening Media Education Competencies in the Republic of Moldova: Piloting an Integrated Approach in Formal Education" [in Romanian], *CJI*, 2023, <https://cji.md/consolidarea-competentelor-de-educatie-media-in-republica-moldova-pilotarea-abordarii-integrate-in-educatia-formala/>

⁴⁷ "New Center to Tackle Disinformation in Moldova," *IWPR*, 2023, <https://iwpr.net/impact/new-centre-tackle-disinformation-moldova>

⁴⁸ Interview with Victor Gotișan.

Recommendations

Many of the recommendations from the 2021 DRI were put into practice: media coverage of foreign news has improved, authorities have involved civil society in shaping information security policy, the Parliament has adopted a new version of the anti-propaganda bill, government authorities have put in place improved public communication mechanisms, such as the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, while civil society has expanded and updated its media literacy efforts.

Progress has been mixed on the other recommendations from 2021. On the one hand, Parliament has limited, to a certain extent, the autonomy of institutions such as the Audiovisual Council. On the other hand, these institutions have become more active and better at their jobs. The same is true for the Security and Intelligence Service, control over which has switched back and forth between Parliament and the President's Office, but the institution has nonetheless become more active in the fight against disinformation and other hybrid threats.

Based on the developments since 2021, this study puts forward the following recommendations.

For the media community:

- To continue to develop and expand their coverage of international news, especially as Moldova is aiming to become part of the EU, a situation which would require Moldovan media to cover political developments in Brussels and across all the EU many states. This would require editorial rooms to employ journalists specialised in foreign affairs on a full-time basis.
- To develop quality Russian-language content along with social media and marketing strategies to reach particular Russian-language audiences (such as Chişinău Russian-speakers, Bălţi and the northern districts, Găgăuzia, Transnistria), which are amongst the most vulnerable and susceptible to the Kremlin's disinformation.
- To integrate fact-checking, pre-bunking and debunking into mainstream programming, such as news bulletins, along with talk shows and entertainment programmes. In addition, "infotainment" content should be developed with the aim of reaching both younger and apolitical audiences.

For the state authorities:

- To ensure that the Center for Strategic Communication and Combatting Disinformation is adequately financed and staffed; to provide political support to help other public institutions cooperate with the Center; to integrate the Center's analyses and recommendations into the actions and communication of public institutions, and to prevent it from becoming an isolated institution.
- To work on regulating online media to reduce disinformation. The Center for Independent Journalism has published a public policy paper on this issue, which can be a good starting point for actual policy-making.⁴⁹
- To be more proactive in their relations with the public and media. Petru Macovei argued this is crucial for the fight against disinformation, but state institutions are not pulling their weight: "For our StopFals campaign, we get answers from the European Commission in two hours and from our national institutions – in two weeks."⁵⁰
- For other relevant institutions, such as the Competition Council or the Prosecutor's Office, to act decisively in cases when suspicious media outlets are financed with criminal money, as these issues extend beyond the remit of the media regulator.

For civil society:

- To improve coordination across organisations, as projects often overlap, resources are divided and some initiatives go to waste. This is a recommendation that equally concerns donor organisations, whose funding programmes and calls for application often lack coordination. This is then reflected in the activity of civil society organisations.
- To focus on vulnerable groups. Elderly people are one of the main demographic groups overlooked by media literacy programmes. Simultaneously, the elderly are among the most vulnerable to disinformation, but also among the most active voters.

⁴⁹ "CJI Launches Policy Document Addressing Online Environment Regulation in the Context of Hybrid Warfare" [in Romanian], *CJI*, 2023, <https://cji.md/cji-a-lansat-documentul-de-politici-ce-vizeaza-reglementarea-mediului-online-in-contextul-razboiului-hibrid/>

⁵⁰ Interview with Petru Macovei.

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Abstract

Since 2021, Russia has visibly intensified its anti-Polish disinformation activities. Poland is actively accused by pro-Kremlin media outlets of historical revisionism, warmongering, Russophobia, of harbouring an imperialistic agenda towards Ukraine and Belarus, and many other alleged anti-Russian actions. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a significant increase in the intensity of Russia's disinformation campaign against Poland. In general, Polish society has shown a high degree of resilience in response to Russia's disinformation campaigns across the country. In late 2022, when the shock of the war and the unprecedented wave of solidarity with Ukraine had subsided, Russian disinformation efforts found a promising area of focus – Polish-Ukrainian relations and the Ukrainian refugees living in Poland.

In terms of changes in the Polish media landscape, the role of social media in the spread of disinformation has only increased since 2021. Social media networks have enabled disinformation actors to reach mainstream parts of Polish society. In terms of institutional changes in the sphere of disinformation, the Polish authorities have created special departments within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Research Institute aimed at fighting disinformation.

The outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine has had a wide-ranging and sometimes contradictory impact upon Polish society. On the one hand, there is now a much stronger understanding that Russia poses a number of threats to Poland's national security, and one particular threat is the Kremlin's ongoing information campaign against the country. Polish society does not tolerate the Kremlin's direct attacks on their country, which attempt to openly humiliate Poland. On the other hand, a serious vulnerability of Polish society towards anti-Ukrainian disinformation activities has been exposed. Such disinformation is aimed at igniting Polish-Ukrainian political, historical, economic and social contradictions. Gradually, anti-Ukrainian messages, previously only popular among marginalised groups, have started to penetrate into mainstream Polish society. In this sphere, pro-Kremlin actors have attempted to capitalise upon factors such as the high political polarisation in Poland, irresponsible statements by politicians from the two countries and the increased social tension with the Ukrainian refugees living in Poland. In this context, Polish society has become less resilient to pro-Kremlin disinformation than it had been before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Overview of the latest topical studies

In 2024, Digital Poland Foundation prepared an extensive study about the current state of disinformation in Poland.¹ According to the findings, 79 per cent of Poles had personally faced disinformation (84 per cent detected fake news and 40 per cent saw deep fakes). The main information sources in Polish society were TV (64 per cent), internet (58 per cent), radio (50 per cent) and social media (46 per cent). Poles encountered fake news mainly on social media (55 per cent), TV (53 per cent) and when dealing with politicians' statements (52 per cent). One out of two Polish people had reported receiving a fake item of news from another person, while 72 per cent of respondents said they checked the reliability of the information. Despite these findings, Polish society remained vulnerable to different types of disinformation. According to the study, a very significant portion of the respondents supported various conspiracy theory statements in the areas of energy (43 per cent), health (35 per cent), new technologies (29 per cent), politics (23 per cent) and climate change (22 per cent). The most popular questionable political theory was the claim that Poland had handed over its sovereignty to the EU (38 per cent). In addition, respondents also claimed that feminism and LGBT are ideologies imposed on Polish society (32 per cent), and that the 2010 Smolensk Air Disaster was staged (29 per cent).

In June 2023, the Polish National Research Institute (NASK), the Polish Press Agency and its FakeHunter project presented a report entitled "Information War 2022-2023". The report covered in detail the development of Russian disinformation activities against Poland since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine.² The report showed that before February 2022, the main Russian disinformation narratives used against Poland were focused on various COVID-19 conspiracy theories as well as the migration crisis on the Poland-Belarusian border. Immediately after the outbreak of the war, a massive number of anti-refugee narratives appeared. In particular, these narratives presented Ukrainian refugees as both a threat to Poland and a financial and social burden on Polish society. The key messages included claims that the Ukrainians were not worthy of Polish aid because of their refusal to apologise for the Wołyń Massacre during the Second World War; that Poland's assistance to Ukraine is carried out at the

¹ "Disinformation through the eyes of the Poles," *Digital Poland Foundation*, 2024, <https://digitalpoland.org/publikacje/pobierz?id=70f40c4e-3fe1-4abd-9a32-02a26c324f18>

² "Information War 2022-2023" [in Polish], *NASK, PAP, FakeHunter*, 2023, <https://nask.pl/magazyn/wojna-informacyjna-2022-2023-przebieg-i-wnioski/>

expense of ordinary Poles; that Poland is getting closer to the direct involvement into the war and that the Ukrainian refugees receive unjust privileges over Polish citizens (access to healthcare, alleged voting rights, “free” apartments). In this way, since the outbreak of the full-scale war, Russian disinformation activities have been aimed largely at encouraging anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee attitudes in Poland.

In 2024, the Mieroszewski Center presented a comprehensive study of the perception of Ukrainian refugees by the Polish society and the various disinformation narratives on this topic.³ According to the report, in the initial stage of the full-scale war, there was a powerful wave of solidarity with Ukraine among most of the Poles. However, by the second year of the war, negative narratives began to emerge, such as the spread of the opinion that the Ukrainians are not thankful to the Poles or that the refugees are expecting higher social and financial assistance from the state. In these terms, Russian disinformation activities effectively manipulated public opinion – this process was very visible on social media, where it was easy to create “information bubbles”. In the report, around 40 per cent of respondents said that their position on the Ukrainians had changed since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion (25 per cent in a negative way and 14 per cent in a positive direction). Notably, 44 per cent of Poles believed that the social assistance provided to the Ukrainian refugees was too high. In addition to social and economic aid, there were other important conflict areas, such as economic disagreements (Polish farmers dissatisfied with the influx of cheaper Ukrainian food products) and historical disputes (the Wołyń Massacre of 1943–44).

Historical revisionism occupies a significant place in Moscow’s anti-Polish disinformation campaigns. The Janusz Kurtyka Foundation addressed this issue in a 2023 report on the main Russian historical disinformation narratives used against Poland.⁴ These narratives included various anti-historical claims about events during the Second World War. They include the accusation that Poland was an ally of the Nazi’s and played a role in provoking the war, that Poland was responsible for the Holocaust, and that the former Soviet Union had no connection to the Katyń Massacre. Moscow’s use of historical revisionism in its

³ “The Poles about Ukraine and Polish-Ukrainian relations,” *Mieroszewski Center*, 2024, <https://mieroszewski.pl/programy/badania-opinii-publicznej/polacy-o-ukrainie>

⁴ “Disinformation and propaganda in the historical policy of the Russian Federation towards Poland and Ukraine,” *Janusz Kurtyka Foundation*, 2023, <https://fundacjakurtyki.pl/dezinformacja-i-propaganda-w-polityce-historycznej-federacji-rosyjskiej-wobec-polski-i-ukrainy/>

propaganda has presented Poland as a Russophobic country with imperialistic ambitions, such as alleged plans for Warsaw to regain control of the “Eastern Borderlands”. In addition, there have been regular Russian attempts to ignite historical tensions between Poland and Ukraine.

Pro-Russian disinformation activities in Poland have tended to intensify during electoral campaigns. In 2023, NASK established an initiative called Safe Elections, which was aimed at the strengthening of public awareness about the manipulation of information during elections. The “2024 Report on the Local Elections” provided examples of disinformation detected during the campaign.⁵ In general, there were 132 detected disinformation posts regarding the elections spread via *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *X* and other social media – the reach of these posts was up to 189,000 users. *X* was the main platform for the spread of pre-election disinformation (78 per cent). The most frequent disinformation messages included the claims that the Polish Electoral Commission was trained in Moscow, that the police were used to prolong the election silence period, and that there was no possibility to vote for the Law and Justice (PiS in Polish) candidates. Overall, a major part of disinformation on social media presented the elections as unfair.

Throughout 2023, the Polish Government Plenipotentiary for Security of the Information Space presented regular weekly and monthly reports on the development of anti-Polish disinformation activities.⁶ For example, one report on 3 December 2023 detailed the attempts by Belarusian and Russian propagandists to fuel tensions between Poland and Ukraine by drawing upon ongoing protests on the Poland-Ukraine border. Since the summer of 2021, Belarusian propaganda has been promoting various accusations against the Polish Border Service. The Kremlin promoted the repeated disinformation narrative that Poland is allegedly preparing to take control of Western Ukraine.

In September 2024, the Info Ops Foundation presented the study of the current Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) challenges faced by Poland and the response of the Polish state institutions to these challenges.⁷ The report references the constant increase of foreign disinformation activities

⁵ “Report on Local Elections 2024” [in Polish], NASK, 2024, <https://bezpiecznowybory.pl/baza-wiedzy/raport-z-okresu-wyborow-samorzadowych-2024>

⁶ <https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/dezinformacja-przeciwko-polsce2>

⁷ “Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). Threats and countermeasures in Poland for 2014-2024” [in Polish], *Info Ops Foundation*, 2024, <https://infoops.pl/obce-manipulacje-informacyjne-i-ingerencja-zewnetrzna-fimi-zagrozenia-i-przeciwdzialanie-w-polsce-za-okres-od-2014-do-2024-r/>

since 2014. The FIMI actors tried to take advantage of typical Polish political, media and social sensitivities such as a high distrust of the Poles to the media, contradictions among the Polish political forces towards Ukrainian issues and insufficient cooperation between Polish state institutions, NGOs, the media and social media platforms.

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

The outbreak of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a true shock for Polish society. Many Poles clearly felt that the war came too close to their borders, and someday, Russia may unleash the same level of aggression against their own country.⁸ During the first months of the war, the Poles presented an unprecedented wave of pro-Ukrainian “euphoria” and solidarity; millions of Ukrainian refugees were welcomed by Polish families, receiving substantial aid and assistance.

During the early months of the large-scale war, Polish society did not tolerate explicit pro-Russian propaganda messages. Therefore, most pro-Russian web-pages (some of them are mentioned in this list)⁹ had to “silence” themselves for a certain period because their pro-Kremlin narratives were too offensive to the general public.

It is important to note that in recent years, the Kremlin has unleashed an extensive disinformation campaign against Poland,¹⁰ accusing the country of historical revisionism,¹¹ crimes during the Second World War, of harbouring imperialist ambitions,¹² of being Russophobic, of warmongering and many other hostile

⁸ “Polish voices about the war in Ukraine” [in Polish], *OKO.Press*, 2024, <https://oko.press/wojna-w-ukrainie-polskie-glosy>

⁹ “Polish portals spreading Russian propaganda” [in Polish], *OKO.press*, 2018, <https://oko.press/rosyjska-propagande-szerza-polskie-portale-znalezlismy-23-takie-witryny>

¹⁰ Kozłowski, A., “Disinformation in Poland on the war in Ukraine,” *Casimir Pulaski Foundation*, 2022, <https://pulaski.pl/pulaski-policy-paper-disinformation-in-poland-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>

¹¹ “The Kremlin this Week: Let’s hate Poland!,” *EUvsDisinfo*, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-this-week-lets-hate-poland/>

¹² “Historical revisionism: ‘Polish imperialism against Ukraine and Belarus,’” *EUvsDisinfo*, 2023, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/historical-revisionism-polish-imperialism-against-ukraine-and-belarus/>

actions.¹³ The Kremlin's propaganda regularly humiliated Poland, making direct security threats to the country, questioning its sovereignty and presenting it as a puppet of both the United States and the EU.

According to Tomasz Chłóń, Polish Foreign Minister's plenipotentiary for countering international disinformation, most Polish people have been resilient to "clumsy" types of Russian propaganda, but Polish society is prone to polarisation.¹⁴ Therefore, Polish society has been very resilient to the direct Russian disinformation attacks on its country's statehood – these attacks are too aggressive and implausible to be accepted across Polish society.

Despite the strong resilience towards direct Russian disinformation attacks against Poland, Polish society has become increasingly receptive to anti-Ukrainian disinformation narratives during the past two years.¹⁵ This receptiveness became clear when the initial shock of the war subsided and the pro-Ukrainian "euphoria" began to disappear. This process was connected to a general war fatigue, the dissatisfaction of many Poles with the scale of financial assistance to refugees, increased economic and social competition with the refugees, irresponsible statements made by Polish and Ukrainian politicians, economic tensions between the two countries, and inflation. Pro-Kremlin media actors have actively used these tensions in order to incite historical conflicts between Poland and Ukraine, to spread anti-Ukrainian attitudes and worsen political relations between Warsaw and Kyiv.

As stated by an interviewed expert, Russian disinformation narratives have gradually become more refined. "Instead of primitive messages about Nazi Ukraine, Russian propaganda has started to target particular interest groups in Polish society. Thus, the farmers were intimidated by the inflow of cheap Ukrainian food products, workers were threatened with increased jobs competition, and Polish

¹³ "Disinformation against Poland in 2020 – special services' view, Spokesperson for Poland's Minister-Special Services Coordinator," *Government of Poland*, 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/disinformation-against-poland-in-2020--special-services-view>

¹⁴ "MFA's disinformation plenipotentiary: The Poles are resilient to clumsy Russian propaganda" [in Polish], *CyberDefence24*, 2024, <https://cyberdefence24.pl/polityka-i-prawo/pelnomocnik-szefa-msz-ds-dezinformacji-polacy-sa-odporni-na-rosyjska-propagande-w-wydaniu-topornym>

¹⁵ "Anti-Ukrainian propaganda being spread online," *Amnesty International*, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/antyukrainska-propaganda-szerzy-sie-w-internecie-rzad-ma-obowiazek-rea-gowac/>

women were told hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian women were arriving to take away their husbands and so on.”¹⁶

The intensification of Polish-Ukrainian tensions (fuelled mainly by irresponsible political statements and pro-Kremlin disinformation) has increased public fatigue towards the Ukraine war and has led to a reduction in general Polish support for the Ukrainian refugees. Between 2022 and 2024, the number of Poles supporting the hosting of Ukrainian refugees reduced from 72 per cent to 54 per cent, while the proportion of Poles who opposed the allocation of Polish aid to Ukraine increased from 17 per cent to 34 per cent.¹⁷

As the full-scale war progressed, anti-Ukrainian messages started to reach the mainstream of Polish society. Previously, these narratives were popular only among marginalised groups. Russian propaganda is very strong in the shaping of images – in Poland, it portrayed the Ukrainians as “totally ungrateful people unwilling to take responsibility for their historical past”. According to an interviewed expert, “The Russian disinformation narratives towards the Ukrainians started to take openly racist forms. The Ukrainians are presented as a biological threat to Poland – for example, Ukrainian grain and food is poisonous and unvaccinated Ukrainians spread diseases. Another important aspect of Russian disinformation is the active use of the “Historical Bomb” – the Wołyń Massacre. These issues have reached a top political and public level”.¹⁸

Therefore, Russian propaganda has detected Polish-Ukrainian relations as the most fertile ground for disinformation narratives in Poland. Several months after the outbreak of the large-scale war, Polish social media started to be full of posts inciting historical tensions between Poland and Ukraine;¹⁹ there were repeated posts presenting the Ukrainian refugees as “parasites” misusing Polish hospitality²⁰ and Polish aid to Ukraine was labelled as disastrous for the economy. As it appeared, a very visible part of Polish society turned out to be open to the populist claim that “the Ukrainians receive more benefits from the state than

¹⁶ Interview with a media expert, July 2024.

¹⁷ “Disinformation through the eyes of the Poles,” *Digital Poland Foundation*, 2024, <https://digitalpoland.org/publikacje/pobierz?id=70f40c4e-3fe1-4abd-9a32-02a26c324f18>

¹⁸ Interview with a media expert, July 2024.

¹⁹ Tyburski, M., “Russian Disinformation War Against Poland After the Invasion of Ukraine,” *Warsaw Institute Foundation*, 2023, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-disinformation-war-against-poland-after-the-invasion-of-ukraine/>

²⁰ “Russia’s key disinformation narratives addressed to Poles,” *FakeHunter*, 2022, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/en/node/19>

the Poles” – for example, free apartments, 2 per cent mortgage credits and even “priority” access to burial places at Polish cemeteries.²¹ The reduction in Polish support towards Ukraine cannot be explained only by the effects of the Russian disinformation activities, but these actions were still an important factor in the inspiration of deeper Polish-Ukrainian political, economic and historical tensions.

Pro-Russian actors have been developing the most effective anti-Ukrainian narratives to put forward to the Polish public. For example, in June 2024, unknown persons contacted the leading Polish public opinion research institutes asking them to hold public opinion polls on very suspicious topics such as Polish attitudes towards Ukrainians, the factors causing Polish irritation towards them, and the position of the Poles towards Russia.²²

According to the 2024 Info Opps report, the high level of political polarisation in Poland has created ground for the spread of disinformation. Although Polish political support for Ukraine has not been challenged at the strategic level, Russia’s disinformation efforts could deepen ongoing disputes in the Polish political scene and undermine the public consensus towards supporting Ukraine.²³

FAKE NEWS ON MOBILISATION FROM THE POLISH PRESS AGENCY

On 31 May 2024, the official page of the Polish Press Agency (PAP) presented the following fake news: “*Prime Minister Tusk: on 1 July 2024, partial mobilisation will start in Poland with 200.000 Poles to be mobilised and sent directly to Ukraine*”.²⁴ This news was quickly removed, but it was published a second time after 20 minutes. The publication of this fake news on the PAP page was a result of an external cyberattack.

²¹ “Information War 2022-2023” [in Polish], *NASK, PAP, FakeHunter*, 2023, <https://www.nask.pl/pl/raporty/raporty/5204,Raport-quotWojna-informacyjna-20222023-Przebieg-i-wnioskiquot.html>

²² “Russia researches Polish attitudes (...)” [in Polish], *Rzeczpospolita*, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/gospodarka/art40535131-rosja-bada-nastroje-w-polsce-podejrzane-pytania-o-opinie-na-tem-at-ukraincow>

²³ “Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (...)”, 2024. *Op. cit.*

²⁴ “False news appeared at PAP page” [in Polish], *Wiadomości*, 2024, <https://wiadomosci.com/tusk-1-lipca-2024-r-zacznie-sie-w-polsce-czesciowa-mobilizacja-taka-falszywa-depesza-ukazala-sie-w-serwisie-pap/>

According to the Polish Defence Minister, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, Poland faced 80,000 incidents in its cyber-space in 2023, and this figure could double in 2024.²⁵ Therefore, Russian disinformation actors have attacked critical Polish online infrastructure in order to spread panic and chaos across the country.

Changes in the national media landscape

Between 2021 and 2024, Poland improved its position in the World Press Freedom Index, moving from 64th to 47th place.²⁶ This progress took place after the 2023 Parliamentary elections and the loss of power by the Law and Justice Party. For the first time in eight years, Poland moved up in the World Press Freedom Index, but its media landscape still faced the legacy of challenges imposed by the previous government, which had turned public media into the “ruling party’s mouthpiece”.²⁷ Among other Polish media problems, Reporters Without Borders criticised existing restrictions on the access of journalists to the border zone with Belarus, an area which had been facing a Lukashenka-orchestrated “migration crisis”.²⁸ According to a ranking by Freedom House, between 2021 and 2024, Poland slightly worsened its position in terms of political rights and civil liberties (from 82/100 to 80/100) – however, the most recent Freedom House ranking did not cover the post-election changes in Poland, and focused instead on the problems connected with the previous government led by the Law and Justice Party (2023).²⁹

It is worth mentioning that large Kremlin-controlled media (such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*) have never been popular in Poland. In this way, unlike the situation

²⁵ “Last year, we had 80,000 cyber incidents” [in Polish], *TVN24*, 2024, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/kosiniak-kamysz-o-incydentach-w-cyberprzestrzeni-teraz-moze-byc-ich-dwa-razy-wiecej-st7942850>

²⁶ World Press Freedom Index, *Reporters Without Borders*, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/index>

²⁷ “Poland moves up in World Press Freedom Index for the first time in eight years but issues remain,” *Notes from Poland*, 2023, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/05/04/poland-moves-up-in-world-press-freedom-index-for-the-first-time-in-eight-years-but-issues-remain/>

²⁸ Poland country report, *Reporters Without Borders*, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/country/poland>

²⁹ Poland country report, *Freedom House*, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland/freedom-world/2024>

in many other European countries, large institutionalised Russian media have never had any visible impact on Polish society.

Immediately after the outbreak of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Polish authorities banned the broadcast of Russian TV channels in the country.³⁰ Instead, Ukrainian channels such as Telemarathon and *Espresso TV* were made available to Polish audiences. Since the outbreak of the war, the Polish authorities have blocked internet access to a number of official Russian media websites.

In September 2023, the Polish-language edition of *Sputnik* was fully closed down by Moscow. We can conclude that *Sputnik's* management acknowledged that the popularity of its service in Poland was too low, so it made no sense to waste resources on a separate Polish-speaking service.

Another traditional channel promoting pro-Kremlin disinformation in Poland is a network of “anti-systemic” online pages, which promote various conspiracy theories and far-right “patriotic” messages. The content of these pages is too radical for the general public. However, these anti-establishment webpages can occupy very influential positions in some isolated social and political niches (supporters of conspiracy theories, anti-vaccine groups, persons with anti-Semitic / anti-Ukrainian / anti-EU views). In May 2022, the Polish investigative portal *OKO.Press* counted 43 such anti-establishment web resources spreading anti-Ukrainian disinformation – most of these pages have minimal popularity, but the largest of them have several million views per month.³¹ The disinformation narratives prepared by these anti-systemic pages have been actively spread via social media, which amplifies their public reach.

After the outbreak of war, the Polish authorities blocked access to some of these anti-establishment resources.³² However, the editors of these pages have been trying to defend their right to “free speech” in the Polish courts. Also, the users of these marginalised pages were motivated enough to use VPNs to overcome existing access limitations.

³⁰ “Additional Russian and Belarusian TV channels are removed from registry of TV programmes” [in Polish], *Government of Poland*, 2022, <https://www.gov.pl/web/krrit/kolejne-rosyjskie-i-bialoruskie-kanaly-krrit-wykresla-z-rejestru-programow-telewizyjnych>

³¹ “43 portals are spreading anti-Ukrainian disinformation” [in Polish], *OKO.press*, 2022, <https://oko.press/antyukrainska-propaganda-po-polsku-raport-z-sieci>

³² “ABW blocks access to pro-Kremlin services” [in Polish], *Wirtualne Media*, 2022, <https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/abw-blokada-stron-polska-rosja-ukraina-wojna-propaganda-panoptykon>

The main source of pro-Kremlin disinformation in Poland are social media platforms,³³ such as *X*, *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *TikTok* and others.³⁴ After 2022, the role of social media in the spread of disinformation has visibly increased. As one interviewed expert stated, “During recent years, social media networks are increasingly dominated by algorithms. In my Polish newsfeed, I started to encounter openly Nazi narratives. The users have a lower influence on the information they find in their newsfeeds. This situation improves conditions for the spread of disinformation. Under Elon Musk, *X/Twitter* became full of information garbage of a radical character. Another popular social media platform, *TikTok*, is entirely based on algorithms formed by China, a country unfriendly to the West”.³⁵

A 2023 study by NASK identified 1,635 harmful social media accounts actively spreading disinformation in the Polish media sphere.³⁶ The algorithms on *X* are able to provide disinformation messages with enormous reach: each like of a tweet leads to a thirtyfold increase in its visibility.

In June 2024, *OKO.press* analysed 4,200 tweets promoted by pro-Russian accounts on *X*.³⁷ According to the findings, 21 per cent of these tweets addressed the situation on the Poland-Belarus border, presenting a negative account about the Muslim migrants trying to cross the border. In addition, 15.6 per cent of tweets focused on the war in Ukraine, promoting claims about apparent Russian military successes on the frontline. The third most frequent tweet narrative was the personal promotion of Putin and his “achievements”. The next category of tweets (11 per cent) attacked the Ukrainians living in Poland, presenting them as criminals and a general threat to the Poles. Finally, around 11 per cent of tweets were focused on discrediting NATO, the USA and President Biden.

According to one interviewed expert, “In many cases, anti-Ukrainian disinformation spread across Polish social media not by anonymous fake accounts but by real persons who do not hide themselves. These people have very strong

³³ Łukasik-Turecka, A., “Disinformation in the Polish media space in the first year of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine,” *Przegląd Strategiczny*, 2023, <http://studiastategiczne.amu.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/17-Lukasik-Turecka-1.pdf>

³⁴ “Russian disinformation two years since the beginning of the war” [in Polish], *Cyber-Defense24*, 2024, <https://cyberdefence24.pl/cyberbezpieczenstwo/rosyjska-dezinformacja-po-2-latach-wojny-w-ukrainie>

³⁵ Interview with a media expert, July 2024.

³⁶ “Information War 2022-2023”, 2023. *Op. cit.*

³⁷ “We have to fear and hate” [in Polish], *OKO.press*, 2024, <https://oko.press/zobacz-czym-infekuje-polakow-rosyjska-propaganda>

anti-Ukrainian attitudes, so they take an active part in online attacks on Ukraine and the Ukrainians. Disinformation content is over-represented in social media, which helps these types of messages to reach the mainstream population”.³⁸

After 2022, Poland has seen a slow but gradual increase in the use of *Telegram*, which is a new threat to the country's information security. *Telegram* is commonly perceived as an “anti-system” anonymous messenger, attracting users with anti-mainstream views. Throughout 2024, dozens of anonymous Polish-speaking Telegram channels appeared and began spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives.³⁹ For example, the Telegram channel of *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny* (“Independent Political Diary”) has more than 12,000 followers and the channel *Wiadomości Czasów Ostatecznych* (“End Time News”) has more than 16,000 followers. However, the number of active daily viewers of these channels is around 1,000 persons. So far, the wider popularity of these channels remains minimal, but it is possible that *Telegram* will gradually attract a much higher number of “anti-system” Polish users.

DOPPELGÄNGER OPERATION IN POLAND

In 2022, Russian disinformation actors targeted Poland through the so-called Doppelgänger operation aimed at undermining pro-Ukrainian attitudes in a number of countries such as Germany, France, the United States and Poland.⁴⁰ The idea of the operation was to spread anti-Ukrainian and anti-EU messages from a series of accounts that cloned the names of large mainstream media such as Le Monde, FOX News, Washington Post, Der Spiegel and others. In Poland, disinformation messages were spread through fake pages of the Polish Radio and the *Polityka* magazine.⁴¹ After the publication, a network of fake X accounts spread the disinformation throughout the Polish audience of X.

³⁸ Interview with a media expert, July 2024.

³⁹ “Anti-Ukrainian disinformation on Telegram” [in Polish], *Demagog*, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/antyukrainska-dezinformacja-na-telegramie-jej-ofiara-sa-rowniez-polacy/

⁴⁰ “Doppelgänger# – the scheme of the Russian influence operation against the West” [in Polish], *OSW*, 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2024-09-13/doppelganger-schemat-rosyjskiej-operacji-wplywu-przeciwko-zachodowi>

⁴¹ “Doppelgänger Operation. We uncover how the Russian services acted in Poland” [in Polish], *Demagog*, 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/akcja-doppelganger-ujawniamy-jak-rosyjskie-sluzby-mieszaly-w-polsce/

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

The Polish authorities clearly perceive Russian disinformation as a major direct security threat. During recent years, the Polish Government has implemented consecutive actions aimed at improving the state's capacities in dealing with this threat. The 2020 National Security Strategy presented the need to strengthen the Polish information security sphere and national disinformation resilience.⁴²

According to the interviewed expert, "The Polish laws and regulations in this sphere are not bad. However, there is a deficit of human resources within the law enforcement agencies involved in the investigation and prosecution of on-line crimes. The most effective way to fight the real persons spreading disinformation is to put them in front of a court".⁴³

Since 2021, the Polish authorities have introduced several institutional steps in the creation of new state bodies responsible for the fight against disinformation. The 2024 research paper by the Info Ops Foundation presented a very detailed overview of the actions of the Polish state institutions aimed at strengthening their capacities in the sphere of disinformation.⁴⁴

In 2022, the Disinformation Prevention Department (DPD) was established within the National Research Institute NASK (subordinated to the Ministry of Digital Affairs).⁴⁵ DPD NASK is a key Polish civilian institution responsible for online security and it regularly addresses disinformation activities taking place in the Polish information sphere.⁴⁶

The Polish Governmental Security Center (RCB)⁴⁷ has continued to develop its anti-disinformation capacities – the main goal of this institution is the early warning of Polish society and authorities about various emergency situations,

⁴² National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, *BBN*, 2020, https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf

⁴³ Interview with a media expert.

⁴⁴ "Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (...), 2024. *Op. cit.*

⁴⁵ NASK, <https://en.nask.pl/eng/about-us/who-we-are/3261>About-NASK.html>

⁴⁶ Weryfikacja NASK, <https://www.facebook.com/WeryfikacjaNASK/>

⁴⁷ RCB, <https://www.gov.pl/web/rcb/>

including disinformation attacks. The RCB presented regular warnings about anti-Polish disinformation campaigns through its Disinfo Radar project.⁴⁸

In September 2022, the Polish Government created the position of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Security of the Information Space,⁴⁹ responsible for the identification of information threats and the coordination of anti-disinformation activities across the various Polish state institutions.

In 2023, Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) established an anti-disinformation unit, which in 2024 developed into the Department of Strategic Communications and Countering International Disinformation.⁵⁰ Throughout 2024, the Department was still being formed. Its two functions are monitoring and countering foreign disinformation, and conducting strategic communications at the state level. Additionally, the Department is responsible for international cooperation in the sphere of countering disinformation as well as the coordination of relevant domestic state institutions. For example, before the 2024 European Parliament elections, the Department created a special working group, exchanging information on disinformation cases with the Polish ministries and state services.⁵¹ The Department plans to establish the Council for Resilience, which would be an advisory body for MFA composed of Polish NGOs.

According to the interviewed official, the Polish state institutions perceive disinformation as a serious threat and the creation of special departments of the state institutions focused on combating disinformation reflect their understanding of the need to take action in this sphere. However, insufficient coordination between these state bodies is seen as a challenge and there is room for improvement in this respect.⁵²

In April 2024, representatives from both the Polish Ministry of Digital Affairs and NASK outlined new steps aimed at increasing the efficiency of their work

⁴⁸ Disinfo Radar, <https://www.gov.pl/web/rcb/disinfo-radar>

⁴⁹ Government of Poland, <https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/premier-powolal-pelnomocnika-rzadu-ds-bezpieczenstwa-przestrzeni-informacyjnej-rp>

⁵⁰ Government of Poland, <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/departament-komunikacji-strategicznej-i-przeciwdzialania-dezinformacji-miedzynarodowej>

⁵¹ "MFA's disinformation plenipotentiary: The Poles are resilient to clumsy Russian propaganda" [in Polish], *CyberDefence24*, 2024, <https://cyberdefence24.pl/polityka-i-prawo/pelnomocnik-szefa-msz-ds-dezinformacji-polacy-sa-odporni-na-rosyjska-propagande-w-wydaniu-topor-nym>

⁵² Interview with a government official.

when dealing with disinformation threats.⁵³ These steps include an additional team of experts and fact-checkers; more profound analysis of Russian disinformation (coming from official institutions, Kremlin-financed institutions and their proxies); deeper analysis of domestic disinformation; fast channels of communication with social media networks and additional training for state and security officials.

In recent years, Polish law enforcement agencies have intensified their monitoring of social media in the fight against disinformation.⁵⁴ According to the 2024 study by DigitalPoland Foundation, 51 per cent of the Poles believed that the government should limit the spread of false information even if it challenges freedom of speech.⁵⁵

In October 2024, the Polish Parliament adopted changes to the law on anti-terrorist activities and the law on the Internal Security Agency (ABW).⁵⁶ According to these changes, the ABW received the right to make individual decisions regarding the removal of online content considered to be related to terrorism. Before, this step required the consent of a Polish court. Since February 2022, a number of blocked far-right portals spreading pro-Kremlin narratives have fought legal battles with Polish special services in the courts, claiming that the bans are a freedom of speech violation.⁵⁷

The Polish authorities have actively developed international cooperation in the fight against disinformation. Recent initiatives include the establishment of a joint mechanism for fighting Russian disinformation within the Weimar Triangle (Poland, France and Germany)⁵⁸ and the establishment of a special US-Polish

⁵³ Government of Poland, <https://www.gov.pl/web/baza-wiedzy/nowe-podejscie-do-walki-z-dezinformacja>

⁵⁴ "Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (...), 2024. *Op cit.*

⁵⁵ "Disinformation through the eyes of the Poles," *Foundation Digital Poland*, 2024, <https://digitalpoland.org/publikacje/pobierz?id=70f40c4e-3fe1-4abd-9a32-02a26c324f18>

⁵⁶ "ABW receives a possibility to censor Internet" [in Polish], *Gazeta Prawna*, 2024, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/9636575,abw-zyska-mozliwosc-cenzurowania-internetu.html>

⁵⁷ "ABW blocks an internet page," [in Polish], *Rzeczpospolita*, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/internet-i-prawo-autorskie/art41214611-abw-zablokowala-strone-internetowa-jest-wyrok-naczelnego-sad-administracyjnego>

⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, 2024, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/the-weimar-triangle/article/meeting-of-the-weimar-triangle-countries-joint-statement-by-foreign-ministers>

communication group focused on Russian and Chinese disinformation.⁵⁹ In June 2024, representatives from the Polish MFA and the US authorities were involved in the establishment of the Ukraine Communications Group, bringing together partner countries and international organisations from a dozen of western countries.⁶⁰ The main goal of this initiative is to strengthen coordination between these countries in efficient exposure of Russian disinformation focused on Ukraine. The Polish authorities implemented the steps outlined in the EU's 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation,⁶¹ which called for the demonetisation of accounts spreading disinformation; greater transparency in political advertising; enhanced cooperation with fact-checkers and improved access of researchers to data.

In November 2024, a new Polish law on electronic communications came into legal force.⁶² Among other issues, this law provides Polish law-enforcement and security agencies with greater access to the data transferred through online messenger applications. In recent years, online messenger applications have become an important source of the spread of disinformation, so this issue needs to be addressed with updated legislation.

A good example of effective governmental activities in the fight against disinformation is the work of the Miosroszewski Centre, a state institution subordinated to the Polish Ministry of Culture.⁶³ This body organised study trips to Ukraine for journalists from leading Polish media organisations. The purpose of the visits was to improve the journalists' understanding of events taking place across the country.⁶⁴ In this way, Miosroszewski Centre focused on the fight against Ukraine-related stereotypes and disinformation through study trips, training and public debates. Another Centre's media literacy program was aimed at Polish teachers.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ "Poland and the USA create a special group" [in Polish], *Polskie Radio*, 2024, <https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/3389541,walka-z-rosyjska-dezinformacja-polska-i-usa-tworza-specjalna-grupe>

⁶⁰ "Ukraine Communications Group activities in Warsaw," *Government of Poland*, 2024, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/ukraine-communications-group-activities-in-warsaw>

⁶¹ European Commission, 2022, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2022-strengthened-code-practice-disinformation>

⁶² "The Clients will receive messages from operators – new conditions after 10 November" [in Polish], *Rzeczpospolita*, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/internet-i-prawo-autorskie/art41290631-klien-ci-otrzymuja-wiadomosci-od-operatorow-od-10-listopada-nowe-zasady>

⁶³ <https://miosroszewski.pl/centrum/o-nas>

⁶⁴ <https://miosroszewski.pl/szkolenia/druga-wizyta-studyjna-polskich-liderow-opinii-w-kijowie>

⁶⁵ <https://miosroszewski.pl/centrum/o-nas>

In September 2024, southern Poland experienced major flooding, which damaged thousands of homes and took the lives of nine people. According to the statement of Polish authorities, “during the first days of the flooding crisis, disinformation from Belarusian and Russian special services increased by 300 per cent”.⁶⁶ The main disinformation narratives included messages about “hundreds of casualties” and a lack of efficient action from the authorities.⁶⁷ On social media, pro-Russian accounts actively promoted anti-Ukrainian messages, claiming that Poland had spent all the money on Ukraine instead of investing it in flood prevention such as reservoirs.⁶⁸ The Polish police and state authorities responded quickly to the spread of these disinformation messages – several authors of such posts were quickly detained.⁶⁹ The police also detained two Polish citizens who decided to use fake flood messages for phishing purposes.⁷⁰ This quick reaction from the police shows that the Polish authorities have established an efficient social media monitoring system, which allows for fast detection of online disinformation campaigns.

Responses by the media and civil society

Since 2022, the Polish media and NGOs have continued to focus on the exposure of disinformation, on enhancing fact-checking and improving media literacy. There was a consensus that these activities were critical in times of large-scale

⁶⁶ “Belarusian and Russian services used the flood” [in Polish], *TVP*, 2024, <https://www.tvp.info/82497730/w-czasie-pierwszych-dni-powodzi-dezinformacja-ze-strony-bialoruskich-i-rosyjskich-sluzb-wzrosla-o-300-procent>

⁶⁷ “Hundreds of casualties – disinformation about flood” [in Polish], *TVN24*, 2024, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polska/powodz-w-polsce-setki-tysiace-ofiar-jak-rozchodzi-sie-dezinformacja-o-ofiarach-powodzi-st8109077>

⁶⁸ “The Kremlin’s disaster disinformation exploits in Poland,” *EUVsDisinfo*, 2024, <https://euvs-disinfo.eu/the-kremlins-disaster-disinformation-exploits-in-poland/>

⁶⁹ “A person was arrested for the spread of flood disinformation” [in Polish], *Interia*, 2024, <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-publikowal-w-sieci-falszywe-informacje-o-powodzi-zostal-zatr;nId,7820197>

⁷⁰ “Authors of phishing about the flood are detained” [in Polish], *CyberDefense*, 2024, <https://cyberdefence24.pl/cyberbezpieczenstwo/autorzy-phishingu-o-dzieciach-porwan-yh-przez-powodz-zatrzymani-akcja-cbzc>

regional war. Therefore, on the one hand, mainstream Polish media and NGOs have become more experienced in dealing with Russian disinformation in recent years. On the other hand, the fight against disinformation has started to receive less financial support and public attention.

According to one interviewed expert, “In 2014-2018, disinformation was a very urgent and topical issue, many NGOs tried to enter this sphere. However, afterwards, disinformation was gradually overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, migration crisis, and the war in Ukraine. In the situation of a “hot” war, disinformation activities receive secondary attention. Thus, today, this sphere receives less funding and attention than it did before”.⁷¹

According to the 2024 Digital Poland Foundation study, one in five Poles have encountered fact-checking organisations, but only 4 per cent of them use fact-checking services as their source of information.⁷² However, 62 per cent of respondents declared that there is a growing need for fact-checking organisations to be active in the fight against disinformation.⁷³

In terms of the media sector, there was an increasing awareness of the need to implement fact-checking and the spread of awareness about Russian disinformation. For example, in 2020, *TVP INFO*, the public television broadcaster, introduced its own fact-checking service.⁷⁴ However, as a result of strong government control over the broadcaster, this fact-checking service focused exclusively on debunking the political statements of the opposition, not the ruling authorities.⁷⁵ In 2024, *TVP INFO* started to broadcast an educational fact-checking programme *Sprawdzamy* (“We check”), focused on debunking of fake news spread in social media and public space.⁷⁶ Another major Polish TV channel *TVP24* continued to develop its own fact-checking service which broadcast regular debunks of disinformation claims concerning Poland.⁷⁷ According to the interviewed expert, “implementation of fact-checking procedures in the media is a difficult task because the modern media are strongly focused on a clickbait approach in their information policy”.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Interview with a media expert.

⁷² “Disinformation through the eyes of the Poles,” 2024. *Op cit.*

⁷³ Demagog’s X account, 2024, <https://x.com/DemagogPL/status/1783483307629367409>

⁷⁴ TVP, 2024, <https://www.tvp.info/tag?tag=fake+news>

⁷⁵ “What fact checking should not look like” [in Polish], *Pravda Association*, 2021, <https://pravda.org.pl/jak-nie-powinien-wygladac-fact-checking-czyli-jak-dziala-tvp-info-fact-checking/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.tvp.info/77454336/sprawdzamy>

⁷⁷ TVN24, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/>

⁷⁸ Interview with a media expert.

According to the statements by a representative of the fact-checking organisation, the Demagog Association, it is necessary to establish deeper cooperation between fact-checking organisations and the media. However, there are numerous barriers to this cooperation resulting from the way the media sector functions. The situation on social media is even worse. For example, on average, 500 hours of material are uploaded to *YouTube* each hour.⁷⁹

Several large Polish NGOs focused on fact-checking and fighting disinformation continue to be active in these areas. In 2024, the Demagog Association celebrated its 10-year anniversary – during these years, the organisation debunked 2,731 fake news items and verified 5,981 statements. Since 2017, it has implemented its flagship project, the Fact-checking Academy, with over 500 events and 10,000 participants.⁸⁰ A more recent project of Demagog is the initiative FakeKnowMore, which includes a set of materials aimed at training disinformation resilience among children and youth.⁸¹

The *Polish Press Agency (PAP)* continued to develop its fake-checking project FakeHunter, which was established in 2020 with the initial goal to fight COVID-related disinformation.⁸² FakeHunter developed its own educational portal for school students, teaching them about disinformation, fake news and safe online behaviour.⁸³ The portal contained special video lessons on how to detect fake news and fake content on social media. This project has been realised in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and GovTech Poland.

Another example is *OKO.press*, which is one of the largest Polish investigative journalism centres. Since 2016, *OKO.press* has debunked 3,580 disinformation messages, and the organisation has published regular studies of Russian propaganda and disinformation activities aimed at Poland. Recent reports include an

⁷⁹ “Demagog Conference – 10 year anniversary” [in Polish], *Demagog*, 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/prawda-kontra-dezinformacja-10-lat-walki-z-falszem-konferencja-demagoga/

⁸⁰ Demagog, <https://akademia.demagog.org.pl/>

⁸¹ “Fake kNOw More (...)” [in Polish], *Demagog*, 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/fake-know-more-emocje-a-podatnosc-na-dezinformacje/

⁸² FakeHunter, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/>

⁸³ FakeHunter, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/edukacja>

overview of conspiracy theories promoted by pro-Kremlin media⁸⁴ and a study of the narratives deployed by Russian propaganda via accounts on X in Poland.⁸⁵

The Info Ops Foundation continued to study Russian disinformation activities in Poland and worldwide. It has made regular topical publications in the service Disinfo Digest. Recent reports on Disinfo Digest include topics such as Russian disinformation activities during elections in Moldova, anti-Polish claims and Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka's disinformation regarding alleged Polish plans to attack Belarus.⁸⁶

As acknowledged by the interviewed official, cooperation between the state institutions and Polish NGOs in the sphere of disinformation is seen as promising but so far, it has been incidental.⁸⁷ The 2022 Code of Good Practice on Disinformation, signed by NASK and eleven Polish NGOs, is a good example of such cooperation.⁸⁸

Recommendations

Many of the recommendations from the 2021 DRI were put into practice: state authorities are paying greater attention to disinformation threats spread on social media; Polish authorities have sent a message to social media companies that they must comply with Polish law; there are more media and anti-disinformation training programmes conducted for both state functionaries and schoolchildren. Polish NGOs continue their active work aimed at countering disinformation and increasing public and political awareness about this problem.

Based on developments since 2021, this study puts forward the following recommendations.

To Polish authorities and relevant state bodies:

- To create an effective mechanism of information exchange between the state institutions which deal with fighting against disinformation. This would maximise their efficiency because so far, they happen to work on similar projects.

⁸⁴ "How Russian disinformation uses conspiracy theories" [in Polish], *OKO.press*, 2022, <https://oko.press/dezinformacja-rosyjska-weszy-teorie-spiskowe>

⁸⁵ "We have to fear and hate", 2024, *op cit.*

⁸⁶ Disinfo Digest, <https://disinfodigest.pl/>

⁸⁷ Interview with a government official.

⁸⁸ <https://www.gov.pl/web/krrit/kodeks-dobrych-praktyk-w-zakresie-dezinformacji>

- To practically implement the European Digital Services Act which is an important legal tool to prevent illegal activities online and the spread of disinformation. More pressure should be exerted on large social media companies, making sure that they introduce more efficient algorithms reducing the spread of disinformation through their networks.
- To employ a higher number of the personnel in the police and other services focused on the investigation and prosecution of persons committing online crimes, including the spread of illegal content and destructive messages.
- To increase the provision of good NGO practices in terms of media literacy and information security – this media education could be focused on schoolchildren, state functionaries and older citizens who are less experienced in the use of non-traditional media.
- To offer more support to local NGOs and public initiatives involved in counteracting disinformation.

To Polish civil society and NGOs:

- To strengthen the “weak spots” targeted by pro-Kremlin propaganda. In the case of Poland, these weak spots include the Polish-Ukrainian relations and the situation of the Ukrainian refugees living in this country.
- To increase cooperation with the Polish state institutions and the educational system to improve information security and reduce the risks posed by disinformation.
- To intensify cooperation with mainstream media outlets and social media networks, sharing good civil society information practices with broader audiences.

To the Polish journalistic community:

- To ensure that the mainstream media becomes more responsible in their information policies. Thus, the media should reduce their “click bait” focus, improve fact verification and avoid deliberate actions aimed at increasing the political and social polarisation of Polish society.
- To support the distribution of quality materials created by mainstream media on social media networks. In many cases, content belonging to large TV channels is not easily available to social media users (paid content), while disinformation content is overly represented on YouTube and other networks. It is necessary to balance this harmful content with mainstream materials created by large Polish TV channels – in this way, social media

sites such as YouTube may become more mainstream in terms of popular content.

- To share more information about the war in Ukraine and the condition of Ukrainians living in Poland, with the ambition to counter the increasing volume of prejudice directed towards them. This content can include translated Ukrainian-made movies, series and TV shows or Polish content on the issues connected to the Ukrainians. A positive example in this sphere is the regular film festival called "Ukraina!", which replaced the Russian film festival "Sputnik over Poland".

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Abstract

Slovakia, grappling with media reforms and persistent challenges, faces the resounding echoes of the war in Ukraine, which reverberate through its media and information landscape. The 2023 World Press Freedom Index highlighted Slovakia's ascent to the 17th position, marking significant progress amid a landscape frequently hostile towards journalists. Legislative reforms such as the Media Services Act and Act on Publications aim to strengthen media transparency, yet entrenched political attacks and legal provisions granting preferential media space to public officials have limited progress and sowed public distrust towards conventional media. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 inundated Slovakia's cyberspace with disinformation, escalating into an online battleground. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, served as key dissemination channels, reshaping public discourse and amplifying distrust in traditional news sources. Politicians, especially within the ruling coalition, endorsed false narratives, further eroding public confidence in the established independent media.

As Slovakia contends with these multifaceted challenges, collaborative networks between government bodies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), targeted media literacy initiatives, transparent communication strategies, the development of legal frameworks against disinformation, and sustained institutional capacity building emerge as crucial policies for tackling disinformation. Against the backdrop of the Ukrainian conflict, this study scrutinises Slovakia's intricate media landscape, institutional obstacles, and the urgent need to strengthen its information ecosystem to effectively combat the evolving threats posed by disinformation.

Overview of the latest topical studies

As observed in the 2021 DRI edition, most investigations and preventative strategies concerning disinformation in Slovakia have been led by NGOs and civil society groups. Nevertheless, there has been a noticeable shift in focus by government bodies between 2020 and 2023, such as the release of annual reports on disinformation compiled by the state police.

Since 2021, GLOBSEC has published two of its annual reports *GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Central and Eastern Europe amid the War in Ukraine* and *GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand*. The 2022 report stated that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered a shift in attitudes: more Slovaks recognise the benefits of the Western alliance as offering safety and prosperity while Russia is increasingly viewed as a threat. President Vladimir Putin's popularity in Slovakia declined from 55 per cent in March 2021 to 28 per cent in March 2022.¹ However, a decline in the public backing for Ukraine and support for EU and NATO membership in 2023 highlights that the positive shift in Slovak attitudes was temporary, and the Slovak population is highly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns. For example, only 40 per cent of the respondents in 2023 believed that Russia was responsible for the war in Ukraine. The 2023 study also revealed Slovak society held historically low trust in public institutions in the country (trust in the government stands at 18 per cent and the president at 37 per cent).²

In 2022, GLOBSEC also published its Analysis of strategic communication in the Slovak Republic. The study evaluated the strategic communication of state institutions, concluding that there had been a general improvement in the strategic communications of government departments and politicians.³ At the institutional level, the establishment of specialised departments for strategic communication – or at least specialised positions within press or communica-

¹ “GLOBSEC Trends 2022,” *GLOBSEC*, 2022, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202022%20Slovakia_0.pdf; “GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand,” *GLOBSEC*, 2023, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2023-united-we-still-stand>

² “Globsec survey: Support for Putin in Slovakia has dropped significantly, NATO's popularity has risen, two-thirds of people see Russia as a threat,” [in Slovak], *Denník N*, 2022, <https://dennikn.sk/2809297/prieskum-globsecu-podpora-putina-na-slovensku-vyrazne-klesla-popularita-nato-stupla-dve-tretiny-ludi-vidia-v-rusku-hrozbu/>

³ Systematic and coordinated use of objective information by verbal and non-verbal means of communication in order to meet the strategic interests of the state.

tions departments – was praised. Failures in coordination, low inter-ministerial cooperation, and a lack of effective exchange of information were identified among the most significant weaknesses, along with insufficient attention paid to improving strategic communication through legislative reforms and internal regulations. The latest non-public version of the study from 2023 confirmed earlier findings.⁴

Infosecurity's study, *Disinformation and Propaganda as a Business: Mapping the Financial and Organisational Background of Disinformation Websites in Slovakia*, stated that in the Slovak information environment, an overwhelming majority of actors engaged in misinformation first became involved through ideological interests. Thus, efforts to defund or reduce the revenue of malignant actors will not necessarily change their behaviour. However, financial countermeasures may limit their resources and capacities and, consequently reduce the spread of harmful online activities which have the potential to polarise society.⁵

Another Infosecurity study focused on mapping the discussion about corruption and the rule of law by the actors of the Slovak information space, specifically on *Facebook* and *Telegram* social networks. Manipulative content constituted 83.4 per cent of all relevant results within alternative sources from the two mentioned platforms. On *Facebook*, manipulative content accounted for 78.4 per cent of the captured ratio, while benign content comprised 21.6 per cent. The results on *Telegram* corresponded to a ratio of 89.2 per cent manipulative and 10.8 per cent benign content. The two most active actors in publishing manipulative content were alternative media, pages, groups, and channels.⁶

Annual reports on disinformation in Slovakia prepared by the Department of Communication and Prevention of the Presidium of the Police Force offered

⁴ "Analysis of Strategic Communication in the Context of Slovakia" [in Slovak], *GLOBSEC*, 2022, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/analyza-strategickej-komunikacie-v-podmienkach-sr>

⁵ "Disinformation and Propaganda as a Business: Mapping the Financial and Organisational Background of Disinformation Websites in Slovakia," *Infosecurity*, 2023, <https://infosecurity.sk/studie/disinformation-and-propaganda-as-a-business-mapping-the-financial-and-organisational-background-of-disinformation-websites-in-slovakia/>

⁶ "False narratives and communication on corruption and the rule of law in Slovakia: mapping actors and narratives on Facebook and Telegram platforms" [in Slovak], *Infosecurity*, 2023, <https://infosecurity.sk/projekty/falosne-narativy-a-komunikacia-tem-suvisiacich-s-korupciou-a-pravnym-statom-na-slovensku-mapovanie-akterov-a-narativov-na-platformach-facebook-a-telegram/>

a general overview of the disinformation scene in the country and informed about the activities of the department in the field of strategic communication. Among others, the reports included a long list of general disinformation narratives, concrete disinformation, and measures adopted by the police to fight disinformation. In addition, it also provided information on the police Facebook page dedicated to fighting disinformation called Hoaxes and scams - Police of the Slovak Republic (*Hoaxy a podvody – Polícia SR*), which is often considered to be the most successful example of strategic communication by the state agency in recent years. The reports also concluded that *Facebook* was the dominant platform to disseminate disinformation in Slovakia in 2023.^{7,8}

The 2023 publication *What is the cost of disinformation? Main actors, strategic communication, and economic aspects of disinformation during the pandemics* by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association analysed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and misinformation and conspiracy narratives on the Slovak economy from 2020 to 2022. The authors claimed that misinformation had prevented higher vaccination rates, which, if it had been reached, would have led to a potential reduction of over 129,000 hospitalisations and might have saved between €2,404 to €60,498 per patient.⁹

In 2022, a research team from the Institute of Experimental Psychology within the Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences of the Slovak Academy of Sciences conducted a study based on a March 2022 survey. Their objective was to gauge Slovaks' confidence in pro-Kremlin narratives that either justified or defended Russian soldiers in Ukraine. The study revealed that around 22 per cent of respondents believed in these reports justifying Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. Notably, factors such as age and gender did not significantly impact the level of trust in pro-Kremlin narratives endorsing the Ukrainian conflict. Moreover, the study found a correlation between trust in these narratives and sympathy towards Russia. A high level of trust in the pro-Kremlin narrative among individuals often coincided with their belief in a number of COVID-19 conspiracy theories.¹⁰

⁷ "Police Force Report on Disinformation of The Slovak Republic In 2021," *Police Force*, 2021, https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/images/slovak-republic-report-dezinfo-2021.pdf

⁸ "Report Of The Police Force On Disinformation In Slovakia In 2022," *Police Force*, 2022, https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/images/sprava-o-dezinformaciach-sr-2022eng.pdf

⁹ "What is the cost of disinformation? Main actors, strategic communication, and economic aspects of disinformation during the pandemics," *SFPA*, 2023, <https://www.sfpa.sk/en/publication/what-is-the-cost-of-disinformation-main-actors-strategic-communication-and-economic-aspects-of-disinformation-during-the-pandemics/>

¹⁰ "More Than One-Fifth of Slovaks Trust Pro-Kremlin Propaganda," *SAV*, 2023, https://www.sav.sk/?lang=en&doc=services-news&source_no=20&news_no=10256

Effect of Russian invasion of Ukraine on the national resilience to disinformation

Despite Slovakia having been the target of Russian disinformation campaigns since at least the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine significantly escalated Moscow's efforts to manipulate public opinion in Slovakia and steer discussions in its favour. The conflict's geographic proximity to Slovakia's borders has exacerbated the nation's susceptibility to orchestrated campaigns of Russian information influence. Russia demonstrated a keen understanding of Slovakia's strategic position within the framework of both the European Union and NATO, aiming to subvert the decision-making processes within these pivotal alliances by pushing for Slovakia to withdraw its support for Ukraine. As a result of its geographical proximity to Ukraine and the rest of the EU, Slovakia has been a focal target of Russian influence initiatives, significantly heightening its vulnerability to sophisticated disinformation campaigns.

The full-scale invasion in February 2022 led to increased activity among state actors in Slovakia, which was particularly evident in crisis communication following the onset of the invasion, as well as in subsequent shifts in strategic communication approaches. Although since March 2020, the state representatives have published over 1,000 posts about Ukraine on *Facebook*, the amount increased significantly after February 2022. In the aftermath of the invasion, most institutions were quick to condemn Russia's aggression. The highest Slovak constitutional officials did so in a joint statement, which sent an important signal about Slovakia's united attitude to the situation. State representatives, along with the majority of state institutions, seized upon the prevailing situation to reinforce their central narratives, aligning them with the core values which the Slovak Republic stands for. Nearly all prominent contributions in terms of strategic communication conveyed a robust narrative echoing these values.¹¹

However, despite the initial solidarity in response to the conflict, public interest gradually diminished, a common trend noticed in prolonged conflicts. Since Russia supplied 80 per cent of Slovakia's energy requirements, Bratislava's emphasis that it was pragmatic to maintain essential energy ties with Russia exposed many of the security vulnerabilities that the country was facing. This

¹¹ "Analysis of Strategic Communication in the Context of Slovakia," *op.cit.*

stance inadvertently granted Russia economic leverage and also enabled the dissemination of disinformation.¹²

The Slovak government's collapse in December 2022 marked a significant turning point. The conflict's impact on disinformation in Slovakia was profound, particularly exacerbated by the spread of anti-Ukraine narratives into the mainstream by politicians during the 2023 election campaign. Both local and international influences, seeking to erode the country's ties with the Western alliances, led to a significant decrease of trust in public institutions, with only 18 per cent of Slovaks expressing confidence in the government and 37 per cent in the president. Furthermore, there was a noticeable decrease in public support for Ukraine, as well as waning endorsement for Slovakia's EU and NATO memberships.¹³

"The disinformation campaigns surrounding the war in Ukraine became a pervasive tool during the Slovak elections, shaping not only perceptions of the military landscape but also influencing viewpoints across economic, societal, and political realms concerning relations with Russia. This led to the integration of disinformation into the mainstream narrative."¹⁴

Recent public opinion surveys revealed concerning beliefs among the population, indicating a high degree of susceptibility to Russian disinformation. A recent study by GLOBSEC found that over half of Slovaks believed that either Western nations or Ukraine were primarily responsible for the ongoing conflict.¹⁵ Additionally, approximately half of the surveyed Slovaks perceived the United States as a potential security threat.¹⁶ In addition, 37 per cent of Slovak respondents viewed Ukrainian authorities as fascists or Nazis, while 35 per cent believed in Russia's right to intervene militarily in historically Russian lands. Additionally, 38 per cent believed that Ukraine's borders lack international recognition, and 43 per cent endorsed the claim of US-funded laboratories in Ukraine

¹² "Slovakia swamped by disinformation ahead of parliamentary elections," *Savage*, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230928-disinformation-swamps-slovakia-ahead-of-parliamentary-elections>

¹³ "GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand," *op.cit.*

¹⁴ Interview with an expert, December 2023.

¹⁵ "GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand," *op.cit.*

¹⁶ "IntelBrief: Is Slovakia's Election a Harbinger of Eroding European Support for Ukraine?," *The Soufan Center*, 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-october-4/>

manufacturing biological weapons.¹⁷ Furthermore, almost 70 per cent of Slovak respondents agreed with the statement, “By providing military equipment and weapons to Ukraine, my country is provoking Russia and bringing itself closer to the war.”¹⁸

According to statistical data, Slovakia welcomed 107,415 Ukrainian refugees between February 2022 and September 2023.¹⁹ This increase in the Ukrainian speaking minority in the country gave rise to more anti-Ukrainian narratives and misconceptions. Among the most prominent ones are that “many criminals among refugees are from Ukraine” (by 53 per cent of respondents) and that Ukrainians are treated “better than citizens of European Union Member States (for example, they have easier access to public health care)” (by 73 per cent of respondents).²⁰ Certain segments of Slovak society were also more likely to believe disinformation. Specifically, both age and gender influenced the susceptibility to Russian narratives, with studies suggesting that women were more receptive or inclined towards these narratives compared to men. Moreover, both education and individuals’ self-assessed material living conditions significantly affected their inclination towards pro-Russian narratives. Specifically, higher levels of education and perceived wealth correlated with greater resilience against these narratives. Overall, the number of people who perceive Russia to pose a threat to identity and values decreased, whereas in 2022, 54 per cent of Slovaks agreed with this notion, and in 2023, it was only 47 per cent.²¹

Disinformation campaigns circulating in Slovakia aligned with Russian interests, echoing narratives by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Several Slovak political figures, including Ľuboš Blaha, Andrej Danko, Marian Kotleba, Milan Mazurek, Milan Uhrík and others, mirrored false narratives used to justify Russia’s actions in Ukraine by emphasising Russia held historical connections to the occupied

¹⁷ Wenzel, M., Stasiuk-Krajewska, K., Macková, V., & Turková, K., “The penetration of Russian disinformation related to the war in Ukraine: Evidence from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia,” *International Political Science Review*, 2024, 45(2), 192-208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231205259>

¹⁸ “Analysis of Strategic Communication in the Context of Slovakia,” *op.cit.*

¹⁹ “Estimated number of refugees from Ukraine recorded in Europe and Asia since February 2022 as of September 12, 2023, by selected country,” *Statista*, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1312584/ukrainian-refugees-by-country/>

²⁰ Wenzel, M. et al. *Op cit.*

²¹ “Analysis of Strategic Communication in the Context of Slovakia,” *op.cit.*

territories in Ukraine.²² One of the principal players spreading pro-Russian disinformation is the highly active Russian embassy in Slovakia, which is particularly active on platforms such as *Facebook*. Just as news surfaced of mass graves in the Ukrainian town of Izium, which revealed the extent of war crimes committed during Russia's invasion, the Russian Federation simultaneously employed a disinformation campaign targeting the Slovak population. The Russian Ambassador to Slovakia, Igor Bratchikov, disseminated false information alleging the desecration of Russian military graves in Ladomirová (a village in north-eastern Slovakia).²³

"These narratives strategically aim to generate sympathy for the Russian population by portraying them as victims oppressed within Europe."²⁴

THE LADOMIROVÁ CEMETERY

The Ladomirová Cemetery incident in September 2022 served as a stark example of a sophisticated disinformation campaign orchestrated by Russia to deflect attention from its war crimes in Ukraine. Due to both early and coordinated responses from the various state institutions, the information operation was stopped in its initial phase.

The cemetery, a reconstructed site for fallen soldiers from World War I, including soldiers from the Russian Empire, became the focus of false accusations fermented by the Russian embassy in Bratislava. The embassy accused the former mayor of Ladomirová of desecrating Russian graves, a charge which the former mayor strongly denied. Although the reality was a mere removal of grave kerbs for maintenance purposes, the Russian embassy orchestrated a disinformation campaign, amplifying the narrative to cover up their army's atrocities in Ukraine.

The manipulation of historical and ethnic sentiments played a pivotal role in Russia's disinformation tactics in this story. By exploiting emotions tied to the cemetery's significance, the Russian operation aimed to portray

²² "Top Pro-Russian Sources in Slovakia," *Gerulata Technologies*, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20230801103506/https://www.gerulata.com/assets/downloads/gerulata_top_pro_russian_sources.pdf

²³ "Russian graves destroyed? Police say embassy is lying," *Novotná*, 2022, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23011720/russian-graves-destroyed-police-say-embassy-is-lying.html>

²⁴ Interview with an expert, December 2023.

itself as a victim of injustice and Russophobia. The hoax was further disseminated by local Slovak actors, including the pro-Kremlin group *Brat za brata* and the Attorney General, Maroš Žilinka. Žilinka “described the steps taken as a ‘display of gross disrespect’, an action ‘worthy of moral condemnation’, and wanted to have the matter investigated to determine whether a crime had been committed. Žilinka acted as a medium of pro-Russian views in the past, for example, in the case of the adoption of the Slovak-US Defence Cooperation Agreement.”²⁵ This disinformation was swiftly countered by coordinated efforts from Slovak state institutions and non-state actors. The Police of the Slovak Republic took the lead by explicitly identifying Igor Bratchikov, the Russian Ambassador to Slovakia, as a hoaxer spreading Russian propaganda regarding the cemetery, followed by similar statements from the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These responses were shared by the media and members of the civil society, quickly reaching a widespread audience and limiting the potential damage of the disinformation. The coordinated response involving multiple state actors and later media and members of the civil society, therefore, constituted an example of good practice.

In early 2023, disinformation spread online that associated routine defence exercises with an imminent mobilisation suggesting Slovakia’s supposed involvement in a military conflict. This led to widespread concern, causing over 40,000 Slovaks to seek exemption from perceived military involvement. The confusion stemmed from misinterpreted official documents which led to public distress. Authorities tried to debunk the false claims and emphasise the routine nature of these exercises for national security. This incident highlighted the challenge of misunderstanding official information, showcasing the rapid spread and impact of misinformation.²⁶

The Russian embassy in Bratislava is a very active player in propagating disinformation and conspiracy theories. Besides spreading misinformation about the war in Ukraine, the embassy has attempted to disseminate fear among the Slovak population using various narratives. One such claim suggested that the

²⁵ “Operation „Ladomirova Cemetery”: Failed Russian Information Cover-Up,” *Res Publica*, 2022, <https://respublica.edu.mk/blog-en/politics/operation-ladomirova-cemetery-failed-russian-information-cover-up/?lang=en>

²⁶ “The police warn of a hoax, no mobilization in Slovakia” [in Slovak], *TASR*, 2023, <https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/policia-upozornuje-na-hoax-na-slovens/685898-clanok.html>

United States was actively developing biological weapons designed to target “primarily Slavic people”. According to this narrative, the alleged intention was to target Slovaks by releasing viruses onto migratory birds.²⁷

Changes in the national media landscape

In 2023, the World Press Freedom Index placed Slovakia 17th out of 180 countries, compared with 33rd place in 2020. The improvement was because the previous government (elected in 2020) introduced a complex legal reform that reflected modern developments in the media environment. Despite this reform, the report stated that “progress has been slow, and journalists continue to work in a hostile work environment. Both public and privately owned media remain vulnerable to interests unrelated to journalism (...) Former Prime Minister Igor Matovič and [current Prime Minister] Robert Fico have been among the sources of political attacks on the media, with the latter going so far as to launch baseless accusations of criminal activity against investigative journalists.”²⁸

Large systematic reform of Slovakia’s media legislation was finally completed in 2022 when the Media Services Act and the Act on Publications were passed by the Parliament. The Media Services Act established regulations pertaining to audiovisual media, encompassing television and radio. Included in the legislation was the requirement for media outlets to ensure the accuracy and veracity of disseminated information. Additionally, the legislation expanded opportunities for self-regulation within the media sphere, enhanced safeguards for minors and strengthened the authority of the regulatory body, the Council for Media Services, formerly known as the Broadcasting and Retransmission Council. This entity was empowered to conduct research and analysis within the media realm to monitor and evaluate the condition of the sector, particularly regarding the propagation of hate speech and misinformation. The rebranded Council no longer confined its oversight solely to television and radio stations but extend-

²⁷ “MediaBriefing: The Russian embassy spread lies about the attack on the maternity hospital in Mariupol, Facebook and Twitter deleted them” [in Slovak], *Denník N*, 2022, <https://dennikn.sk/2763075/mediabriefing-ruska-ambasada-sirila-lzi-o-utoku-na-porodnicu-v-mariupole-facebook-a-twitter-ich-zmazali/>

²⁸ “Digital News Report 2023: Slovakia,” *Reporters Without Borders*, <https://rsf.org/en/country/slovakia>

ed its purview to encompass platforms such as *YouTube* channels. Moreover, individuals using content-sharing platforms for commercial purposes, including influencers, are mandated to seek authorisation from the Council.²⁹

The Act on Publications strengthened the protection of journalists, extended source protection and the right to obtain information from government bodies, and brought greater transparency to media ownership and funding. All media outlets are now required to register as public sector partners, helping the public to know the true proprietors of these outlets and mandating the declaration of any investor or donor who invests more than €2,000 per year.³⁰

The downside of the new media laws, however, is that they confirmed a “right to expression” for public officials, thus securing them more media space than ordinary citizens. In addition, defamation is still considered to be a major legal threat to journalists in Slovakia, which can lead to a judicial sentence of between two to eight years under the current law.

Despite the steady improvement since 2020, the popularity of anti-mainstream media rhetoric among politicians continues to be a persistent problem, similar to the pre-2021 period. Current Prime Minister Robert Fico escalated his battle with the traditional media after he won the early elections in 2023. As a prime minister, he threatened to prohibit access to government offices and participation in his party's (SMER-SD)³¹ political gatherings for *TV Markíza*, along with the news outlets *Denník N*, *SME*, and *Aktuality*. He also labelled the media as adversaries and announced an evaluation of their permissions for entry and work at the Government Office. Later, he announced the suspension of all communication with the mentioned media, noting the official reason was for failing to provide “truthful, timely and comprehensive” reporting.³² Instead, he openly praised “alternative” media and was even a guest of the pro-Russian *Infovojna radio*, where he criticised the mainstream media and anti-Russian sanctions and spread conspiracy theories about the Hungarian-American businessman George Soros.³³

²⁹ “264/2022 Z. z.,” *Slov-lex*, 2022, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2022/264/20220801.html>

³⁰ “265/2022 Z. z.,” *Slov-lex*, 2022, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2022/265/>

³¹ SMER-Sociálna Demokracia in Slovak, SMER-Social Democracy in English.

³² “Fico does not want to let Markíza, Denník N, Sme and Aktuality into the government office. The President defended the media” [in Slovak], *Denník N*, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3675984/fico-nechce-pustit-markizu-dennik-n-sme-a-aktuality-na-urad-vlady-medii-sa-zastala-prezidentka/>

³³ “Robert Fico was again a guest of the pro-Russian Infovojna radio on Tuesday” [in Slovak], *Denník N*, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/3739884/>

Other representatives of the ruling coalition, especially from Smer-SD and SNS³⁴ parties have also openly promoted so-called alternative media, and have spread disinformation. Several representatives of the alternative media scene have even entered politics after the elections, working for politicians and now openly declaring that their channels are both pro-government and exist to spread propaganda.³⁵ To illustrate the situation further, Martina Šimkovičová, a former presenter from the internet-based *TV Slovan*, well known for peddling conspiracy theories and disinformation, became minister of culture in the new Slovak government in October 2023. In one of her first decisions in office, she decided to redirect towards other purposes €300,000 in funding which had been allocated by the European Union towards combatting disinformation and strengthening media education.³⁶

Similar to the pre-2021 situation, attacks from politicians and state representatives have continued to undermine the public trust in Slovakia's traditional news outlets. According to the Digital News Report 2023, trust in news in Slovakia was among the lowest, reflecting decades of interference by business and political leaders. Compared to 28 per cent in 2020 and 30 per cent in 2021, the overall trust in news has dropped even further to 27 per cent, meaning that Slovakia ranks 42nd out of the 46 countries covered by the report. Among the most trusted media was the private *TV station TA3* (56 per cent) and the public broadcaster *Radio and Television of Slovakia* (RTVS) (54 per cent). No alternative or conspiracy media involved in the spread of disinformation were among the top 15 trusted brands.³⁷

“Trust in media has dropped significantly, not only in Slovakia but worldwide, linked to events like pandemics, the war in Ukraine, and the situation in Gaza. People either avoid news entirely or find themselves overwhelmed by information and obtain it only through unreliable sources while scrolling on social media platforms.”³⁸

³⁴ Slovenská Národná Strana in Slovak, Slovak National Party in English.

³⁵ “MediaBriefing: Alternative media are working for the coalition, even officially” [in Slovak], *Denník N*, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3695897/mediabriefing-alternativne-media-pracuju-pre-koaliciu-a-to-uz-aj-oficialne/>

³⁶ “Slovakia will repurpose hoax-fighting money into roof repairs,” *EurActiv*, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovakia-will-repurpose-hoax-fighting-money-into-roof-repairs/>

³⁷ Digital News Report 2023: Slovakia, *op.cit.*

³⁸ Interview with an expert, December 2023.

Data from the Media Pluralism Monitor 2023 showed that, compared with the 2020 Monitor report cited in the previous DRI study, there was a slight improvement in almost every monitored area.³⁹ In fundamental protection,⁴⁰ the risk has decreased by 6 per cent, in the area of market plurality⁴¹ by 4 per cent, and in social inclusiveness by 6 per cent. However, there was a negative trend in political independence,⁴² in which the risk increased by 5 per cent due to concerns related to the independence of public service media. Despite the appointment of a new Director General in 2022, *RTVS*, a nationwide public broadcaster, continues to struggle with accusations of political interference in its operation.⁴³ The concerns over political influences upon the broadcaster were further intensified after *RTVS* underwent a novel state-backed financing framework after the abolition of the licence fee in 2023. Furthermore, in December 2023, Fico's cabinet announced its intention to cut funding to *RTVS* as part of budget savings and to split the broadcaster into separate TV and radio services. This suggestion has the potential to further undermine *RTVS*'s independence and threaten media freedom in the country.⁴⁴

Since 2021, there were no significant changes in the offline, traditional media landscape, and the list of top brands remained relatively stable.⁴⁵ Traditional players continued to hold sway over the television, radio, and print sectors, and notably, none of these major entities were found to be disseminating disinformation or promoting pro-Kremlin narratives. It was, however, still the Internet that was the most popular platform for news consumption for the majority of Slovaks and the place where disinformation was most visible. According to the Digital News Report 2023, news website *hlavnespravdy.sk* (*Hlavné správy*) which

³⁹ Urbániková, M., "Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era : application of the media pluralism monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2022. Country report : Slovakia," *EUI*, 2023, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/75737>

⁴⁰ Regulatory framework, the status of journalists, reach of traditional media, etc.

⁴¹ Transparency of media ownership, prevention of concentration of media ownership, competition enforcement, and state protection of media pluralism, etc.

⁴² Political control over media, regulatory safeguards against political bias.

⁴³ "Marek Vagovič is leaving RTVS (...)" [in Slovak], *Denník N*, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3174965/marek-vagovic-odchadza-z-rtvs-a-riaditela-machaja-kritizuju-politici-ktori-ho-zvolili-preco-pod-povrchom-skoncilo/>

⁴⁴ "Free press groups protest Slovak government's funding cuts for broadcaster," *Reuters*, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/free-press-groups-protest-slovak-governments-funding-cuts-broadcaster-2023-12-13/>

⁴⁵ "Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021," *EAST Center*, 2021, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/DRI-report-2021.pdf>

has been spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation, was listed as Slovakia's 16th most popular online media outlet by number of weekly visitors to the website.⁴⁶ It was among the four disinformation websites temporarily banned by the Slovak National Security Authority (NBU) after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite this, in 2023, the website continued to attract up to 3.7 million visits per month on average, while three more websites spreading disinformation counted above one million hits per month – *BáječnéŽeny.sk*, *eREPORT* and *InfoVojna*.⁴⁷ However, the most important online channels for spreading pro-Russian disinformation in Slovakia were social networks, particularly Facebook, where Slovak users most easily encountered disinformation.⁴⁸

“Despite its lower popularity compared to other social media platforms since the pandemic, and especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Telegram is gaining traction as the major platform for introducing and spreading pro-Russian disinformation narratives in Slovakia. Telegram is notably troublesome as it frequently acts as a primary source from which information is disseminated to other platforms, like Facebook.”⁴⁹

The increasing prominence of *Telegram* was also confirmed by a study published by Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak, which claimed that Slovak Telegram was primarily populated by disinformation channels, anti-establishment politicians, and pro-Kremlin content. Some of the most prominent of these emerged during the initial phase of Russian aggression in Ukraine, as the war and attempts by the Slovakian government to block disinformation sites have led to the creation of new channels and a significant increase in the popularity of existing ones. In addition, the most popular accounts on Slovak Telegram almost exclusively belong to individuals and entities spreading hoaxes and disinformation.⁵⁰

Since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Slovak information space saw an increase in activity by pro-Kremlin channels spreading pro-Russian propaganda on social networks. This campaign was largely suc-

⁴⁶ “Digital News Report 2023: Slovakia,” *op.cit.*

⁴⁷ “Disinformation and Propaganda as a Business: Mapping the Financial and Organisational Background of Disinformation Websites in Slovakia,” *op.cit.*

⁴⁸ “Code of practise on Disinformation: A Comparative Analysis of the Prevalence and Sources of Disinformation across Major Social Media Platforms in Poland, Slovakia, and Spain,” *TrustLab*, 2023, <https://disinfocode.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/code-of-practice-on-disinformation-september-22-2023.pdf>

⁴⁹ Interview with Peter Dubóczy, Senior Research Fellow at Infosec.

⁵⁰ “The flow of lies: the Telegram is a space of unlimited possibilities for disinformation and conspiracies” [in Slovak], *ICJK*, 2023, <https://www.icjk.sk/238/Tok-klamstiev-Telegram-je-priestorom-neobmedzenych-moznosti-pre-dezinformacie-a-konspiracie>

cessful, as demonstrated by a 2023 GLOBSEC study. The March 2023 study found that 34 per cent of respondents considered the West to be responsible for the Russian aggression against Ukraine, while 17 per cent said Kyiv was the main culprit.⁵¹

“Politicians are the most important actors in the spread of disinformation in Slovakia.”⁵²

There is also a correlation between the success of the disinformation campaigns in Slovakia and the result of the early parliamentary elections in September 2023. Among the politicians counting the most Facebook profile interactions in the past year were many who are members of the current coalition and were known for spreading pro-Russian disinformation, conspiracy theories or hoaxes. The one with the highest number of interactions even became prime minister.

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

The term “disinformation” has not yet been codified in the Slovak Republic. Definitions commonly adopted were those presented in scholarly publications or official EU documents, which exhibit some similarities.⁵³ Slovak experts, non-governmental institutes, and several politicians have highlighted not only the necessity of adopting a specific definition within the country’s legislative framework but also that the issue remains a low priority on the national political level, with some politicians resorting to disinformation in their pursuit of voters.⁵⁴

The latest security strategy of the Slovak Republic was adopted in 2021 and acknowledged that disinformation campaigns were targeted against “the democratic establishment and Slovakia’s affiliation with NATO and the EU”.⁵⁵

⁵¹ “GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand,” *op.cit.*

⁵² Interview with Peter Dubóczy.

⁵³ „Disinformation and information operations,” [in Slovak], NBU, 2021, <https://www.nbu.gov.sk/urad/o-urade/hybridne-hrozby-a-dezinformacie/dezinformacie/index.html>

⁵⁴ “To protect democracy and rights in the fight against disinformation, we need new rules, effective control and broad cooperation of experts” [in Slovak], *EC Representation in Slovakia*, 2022, https://slovakia.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/na-ochranu-demokracie-prav-v-boji-proti-dezinformaciam-potrebuje-nove-pravidla-ucinnu-kontrolu-i-2022-06-10_sk

⁵⁵ “Security Strategy of The Slovak Republic” [in Slovak], *Ministry of Defence of Slovakia*, 2021,

Nevertheless, the experts interviewed for this paper argue that a more detailed and in-depth strategy should be drafted and introduced since the 2021 version did not include or discuss any specific steps or processes to tackle disinformation.

“Germany and other nations were revising their national strategies, explicitly identifying Russia as a significant threat. Given the conflict occurring right behind our borders, it’s imperative that our strategies also reflect this reality with explicit wording.”⁵⁶

The Programme Declaration of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2021-2024 stipulated the government’s intention to “explore enhancing the protection of the interests of the Slovak Republic through criminal law standards against the risk of hybrid threats, particularly related to the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation.”⁵⁷ In line with the proposed plan from the Declaration, the Action Plan for Coordinated Countering of Hybrid Threats was approved. According to the then Minister of Defence, Jaroslav Nad, “The adoption of this Action Plan is of great importance – especially at this time when the Russian aggressor unleashed a brutal and unprecedented war in Ukraine and has been attempting to act against our interests through its network of agents and to exert influence over our security.”⁵⁸ The document emphasised the role of strategic communication as one of the main tools in the state’s fight against disinformation, which relied on transparent and understandable communication of departmental, cross-departmental, and governmental policies. A key outcome of this initiative was the formation of a permanent working committee within the Security Council of the Slovak Republic dedicated to hybrid threats.⁵⁹

The Programme Declaration of the newly elected Slovak government was approved by Parliament in November 2023. Even though the Declaration did not mention “disinformation” explicitly, it stated that the interest of the government

p.14, https://www.mosr.sk/data/files/4263_210128-bezpecnostna-strategia-sr-2021.pdf

⁵⁶ Interview with an expert, December 2023.

⁵⁷ “Programme Declaration of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2021-2024,” [in Slovak], *Government of the Slovak Republic*, 2021, p.11, https://www.vlada.gov.sk/share/uvsr/pvvsr_2020-2024.pdf

⁵⁸ “Action Plan for Coordinated Countering of Hybrid Threats is to shore up State and societal resilience against hybrid activity,” *Ministry of Defence of Slovakia*, 2022, <https://www.mosr.sk/51291-en/akcny-plan-koordinacie-boja-proti-hybridnym-hrozbam-posilni-odolnost-statu-a-spolocnosti-voci-hybridnemu-posobeniu/>

⁵⁹ Dubóczy, P. & Ružičková, M., “Disinformation landscape in Slovakia,” *EU DisinfoLab*, 2023, https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230919_SK_DisinfoFS.pdf

“lies in safeguarding the security of its citizens and preventing interference in our sovereignty through the economic, military, diplomatic, and informational tools of hybrid actions. The government is focused on enhancing the resilience of the state and its citizens against hybrid actions from foreign actors. It will establish legislative or non-legislative measures aimed at better protecting the country’s sovereignty and deterring potential actors from hybrid attacks.”⁶⁰

FLAWED NEW LEGISLATION TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

In March 2023, the Slovak Republic’s Ministry of Investments, Regional Development, and Informatization proposed legislation LP/2023/129, an Act to enhance the security and trustworthiness of platforms in the online environment, as well as amend certain laws aiming to counter disinformation.⁶¹ The bill, however, lacks a concise definition of disinformation, relying on vague terms that could lead to subjective interpretation and potential limitations on freedom of speech. It remains uncertain who will assess disinformation or measure the harm it causes, leaving the definition open-ended. One interviewee stressed the ambiguous effect of the new law, stating: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions. While aiming to tackle the problem of disinformation, the ministry formulated a law that created more questions than it resolved.”⁶²

Additionally, in an attempt to curb anonymous discussions, the proposed law would require users to verify their identity on Slovak online platforms. However this requirement raises doubts about the law’s effectiveness against disinformation, disregarding valid reasons for anonymity and presenting cost and efficacy concerns. Furthermore, the legislation expands the regulator’s jurisdiction to address a broader range of illegal online content, although this extension has faced criticism for including acts not defined in the Criminal Code, posing potential inconsistencies.

The proposed Act introduces substantial fines if platforms fail to remove

⁶⁰ “Program Declaration of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2023-2027” [in Slovak], *Government of the Slovak Republic*, 2023, pp.75-76, <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376>

⁶¹ “LP/2023/129 Act on measures to enhance the security and trustworthiness of platforms in the online environment and amending certain laws” [in Slovak], *Slov-lex*, 2023, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/-/SK/LP/2023/129>

⁶² Interview with Peter Dubóczy.

illegal content, which potentially conflicts with the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), which assigns primary sanctioning authority over large online platforms such as Google or Facebook to the European Commission. Moreover, the suggestion for government-led coordination against disinformation could conflict with EU regulations advocating for regulatory independence and might overlap with existing coordinators designated by the DSA. Notably, the development of this law occurred without input from key stakeholders familiar with hybrid threats and disinformation, a lack of collaboration seen as unacceptable and possibly encroaching on the responsibilities of other ministries.⁶³ The proposed law is currently in the evaluation procedure after being submitted to the interdepartmental commenting process.

Regarding institutional frameworks and processes, 70 per cent of respondents from Slovakia believed that communication by institutions with the public lacked an adequate core narrative.⁶⁴ The absence of a strategic communication strategy across institutions, the lack of crisis communication processes, and an overall lack of trust among institutions in information exchange were the main shortcomings of the institutions' communication. "Communication is described as 'sporadic, reactive, chaotic, and ad-hoc. There are no rules or systems. Respondents view institutional capacities as insufficient, and press departments are predominantly set up reactively, lacking a comprehensive approach."⁶⁵ To overcome these shortcomings and to improve institutional communication with the public, the Concept of Strategic Communication of the Slovak Republic was adopted in 2023. The measure aimed to heighten public awareness concerning government initiatives and services, facilitate improved state-citizen communication, formalise cohesive cooperation among governmental bodies in strategic communication, and expedite responses to disinformation. The document delineated fundamental communication principles and themes, outlined coordination mechanisms, and underscored the necessity of collaborating with media, non-governmental organisations, and academic entities within Slovakia.⁶⁶

⁶³ "MediaBriefing: Remišová wants to tackle disinformation and anonymous discussions, but her law is a disaster" [in Slovak], *Denník N*, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3298146/mediabriefing-remisova-chce-riesit-dezinformacie-a-anonymne-diskusie-no-jej-zakon-je-pohroma/>

⁶⁴ "Analysis of Strategic Communication in the Context of Slovakia," *op.cit.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.

⁶⁶ "The Concept of Strategic Communication," *Slov-lex*, 2023, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/SK/LP/2023/56>

Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the National Security Authority (NBU) blocked four disinformation websites (*Hlavné Správy*, *Armádny Magazin*, *Hlavný Denník* and *Infovojna*) under the Cyber Security Act (69/2018 Coll.).⁶⁷ The Act focused on safeguarding vital information systems and countering cyber threats. This law permits the interception of harmful content or activities within or involving the cyber domain of the Slovak Republic and authorises the NBU to implement such measures upon request. Amendments to the Act were proposed in 2022 and 2023 to enhance its effectiveness against hate speech and misleading content, but these amendments failed to progress through the parliamentary legislative process.

Despite shortcomings in institutional communication and legislation, there were notable positive developments. For instance, the disinformation site *Hlavné Správy* faced a setback as the Municipal court dismissed a lawsuit it had issued against *Konspiratori.sk*. The lawsuit alleged damage to its reputation after having been listed among “problematic web pages”. *Hlavné Správy* regularly spread pro-Kremlin propaganda, anti-Semitism, and conspiracy theories and published texts written by extremists and anti-vaxxers.⁶⁸ One of the website’s authors, Bohuš Garbár, was filmed receiving a bribe from a Russian Embassy intelligence officer.⁶⁹ Another positive development was a court decision regarding the politician Ľuboš Blaha. Before becoming a Member of the Slovak Parliament in the 2023 elections (representing the SMER-SD party), Blaha was prohibited by the court from publishing and disseminating disinformation about President Čaputová, which he did mainly via his *Facebook* page. However, due to the rules and community guidelines on *Facebook*, Blaha moved to *Telegram* and *Vkontakte*, where he can bypass content moderation.⁷⁰

According to the experts interviewed for this study, Slovak ministries have increased their capacity to fight disinformation since the previous DRI publication in 2021. Nevertheless, following the 2023 elections, the new government

⁶⁷ “Slovakia loses power to block disinformation websites,” *Spectator SME*, 2022, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23025297/slovakia-loses-power-to-block-disinformation-websites.html>

⁶⁸ “The first verdict in disputes with disinfo websites: Hlavné správy lost the court case with the project Konspiratori.sk” [in Slovak], *Startitup.sk*, 2023, <https://www.startitup.sk/prvy-verdikt-v-sporoch-s-dezinfowebmi-hlavne-spravy-prehrali-sud-s-projektom-konspiratori-sk/>

⁶⁹ “Ten thousand rewards for espionage for the Russians. The accused in the Katuša case was taken into custody” [in Slovak], *Standard*, 2022, <https://standard.sk/181638/za-spionaz-pre-rusov-desattisicove-odmeny-obvineneho-v-kauze-katusa-vzali-do-vazby>

⁷⁰ “Blaha and other disinformers go to the Russians. One of the networks is under Putin’s control” [in Slovak], *Aktuality*, 2022, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/Vr1jTs6/blaha-a-dalsi-dezinformatori-odchadzaju-k-rusom-jednu-zo-sieti-ma-pod-kontrolou-putin/>

and the reorganisation of ministries, many key individuals who were working to combat Russian propaganda and disinformation are no longer in their positions. Following Dávid Púchovsky's departure from his role overseeing the police's "*Hoaxes and Scams (Hoaxy a podvody)*" page, the six-member team led by Miroslava Sawiris, which had directed the Department of Strategic Communication at the Government Office, was subsequently dissolved due to the non-renewal of their contracts. While the department remains operational, it is now staffed entirely by new personnel. Moreover, Daniel Milo, who served as the director of the Center for Combating Hybrid Threats under the Ministry of Interior, was dismissed from his role in December 2023.⁷¹

Responses by the media and civil society

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a virtual battleground emerged whereby Slovak cyberspace was flooded with disinformation. Social platforms like *Facebook* served as key dissemination channels.⁷² According to a GLOBSEC analysis, the five most active profiles communicating with the public are the Police of the Slovak Republic, the Ministry of Interior, Hoaxes and Scams, the Ministry of Defence, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Besides debunking disinformation, these five profiles communicate pro-Western values and information about the EU and NATO. On the other hand, communication about the war in Ukraine has been on the decline. The report noted that "this is an undesirable trend in the context of the ongoing war, as it may create an information vacuum that could be exploited by disinformation actors."⁷³

One of the most prominent disinformation debunking tools is the *Hoaxes and scams Facebook page* of the Slovak Police; it has consistently been the most followed within Slovakia.⁷⁴ Another influential initiative is Infosecurity. A security-focused platform operating in Slovakia since 2019, Infosecurity has served as

⁷¹ "The government is taking revenge on officials who fought against Russian propaganda. Millions of euros are at stake" [in Slovak], *SME*, 2023, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23252927/propaganda-hybridne-hrozby-hoaxy-stat-zmeny.html>

⁷² "The page Hoaxes and scams of the Slovak Police has been the most watched in Slovakia for a long time, Meta is the dominant source of falsehoods" [in Slovak], *SITA*, 2023, <https://sita.sk/stranka-hoaxy-a-podvody-policia-sr-je-dlhodobu-najsledovanejsou-na-slovensku-dominantnym-zdrojom-nepravd-je-meta/>

⁷³ "Analysis of Strategic Communication in the Context of Slovakia," *op.cit.*, p. 26.

⁷⁴ "The page Hoaxes and scams of the Slovak Police (...)," *op.cit.*

the primary initiative of the Adapt Institute.⁷⁵ It has concentrated on combating misinformation and engaging with the Slovak community to provide reliable information amidst the chaos of false narratives. This platform emphasised detecting prominent disinformation and propaganda narratives, especially those linked to Russia, along with uncovering the entities disseminating this content. Beyond routine publication efforts, the project diligently monitored the information landscape and conducted analytical tasks.⁷⁶

Another important player was Gerulata Technologies, which pioneered AI-driven tools to aid democratic institutions in countering disinformation and propaganda, equipping human analysts with informed decision-making capabilities for monitoring and responding to online threats. Gerulata served diverse clients, including democratic institutions, law enforcement, the military, and NGOs, all sharing a common need for accurate data and reliable analytical tools to address the rapidly-changing and extensive scope of the issue.⁷⁷

The platform *Konšpirátori.sk* maintains a public list of websites hosting content that could be considered unserious, misleading, deceptive, conspiratorial, or as propaganda. Founded in 2016, *Konšpirátori.sk* provides a detailed and transparent archive of problematic sites present in Slovak and Czech online spaces. The platform's assessment standards revolve around identifying disinformation, including false health guidance, conspiracy theories, extremism, and content failing to meet fundamental journalistic standards. Furthermore, it advises advertisers against featuring their adverts on such websites.⁷⁸

In addition to these initiatives, there are a number of other noteworthy projects, institutions, and schemes targeting disinformation. Another example is the Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak (ICJK), which is dedicated to enhancing evidence-based and factual investigative journalism. Furthermore, *Demagog.sk* serves the purpose of fact-checking statements issued by politicians and other public figures. Pohň Hlavou was a series of discussion and entertainment shows curated by stand-up comedians aimed at fostering critical thinking and efficient information processing. Finally, *Zmudri.sk* focusing on advancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly among younger demographics and educators. All these efforts have been instrumental in actively debunking disinformation, extending well beyond issues such as the war in Ukraine.

⁷⁵ "Infosecurity," Adapt Institute, 2023, <https://www.adaptinstitute.org/infosecurity-2/>

⁷⁶ "About the page," *Infosecurity*, 2023, <https://infosecurity.sk/o-stranke/>

⁷⁷ "About," *Gerulata*, 2023, <https://www.gerulata.com/about>

⁷⁸ "Disinformation landscape in Slovakia," *op.cit.*

Recommendations

Despite institutional progress such as the implementation of new strategic frameworks and the establishment of specialised units to counter disinformation across ministries and relevant state bodies, Slovak society remains exceedingly susceptible to disinformation. Additionally, the capacity of Slovak society to resist disinformation is projected to diminish in the forthcoming years, largely due to the ambivalent approach of the new Slovak government, elected after the September 2023 elections. This new coalition is expected not only to undermine the countermeasures against disinformation enacted by the former government, but to also actively subvert initiatives within the NGO and media sectors. The prime minister has already articulated his intention to classify NGOs receiving foreign funding as foreign agents and has pledged to cease their state funding. Coupled with intensified verbal assaults on conventional media and the endorsement of alternative media by the highest echelons of state authority, it is highly likely that the gains achieved by positive measures under previous governments will be eroded. Therefore, all of the recommendations suggested in the 2021 DRI study are still relevant to a large extent. In addition, the following measures are suggested:

- **To foster collaborative networks between various sectors:** Fostering collaborative networks between governmental bodies and NGOs is pivotal to addressing the complexities of disinformation. These partnerships lay the groundwork for an exchange of invaluable skills and resources across sectors, culminating in a comprehensive approach to combating false narratives. Bridging the expertise of governmental agencies with the agility and innovation often found in NGOs should help Slovakia foster sustained and impartial efforts in countering disinformation. The goal of these collaborative efforts should be to create a robust ecosystem where both state and non-state entities work harmoniously without compromising on their respective autonomy. Instead, collaboration should involve leveraging the strengths of each sector, crafting a resilient network that adapts to evolving disinformation challenges while upholding independence and impartiality.
- **To empower media literacy across diverse groups:** Investing in comprehensive and tailored media literacy programmes constitutes a proactive step towards combating disinformation. These initiatives should be multifaceted: addressing various segments of society, from schoolchildren to adults, media professionals, law enforcement officials, and digital content creators. Media literacy programmes should attempt to cultivate critical

thinking, improve digital literacy, and equip individuals with the tools to effectively navigate the information landscape. These programmes should focus on enhancing critical evaluation skills, enabling citizens to identify credible sources from misleading or false information. Emphasising media literacy among diverse age groups allows for early education on navigating digital sources, building a culture whereby consumers are both critical and informed when accessing information. Moreover, specialised training for media professionals, including journalists and other content creators, should underscore ethical reporting practices, fact-checking methodologies, and the ethical use of sources. Extending these programmes to law enforcement officials would ensure that authorities are equipped to navigate and effectively address disinformation within the scope of existing legislation. Training initiatives should enable law enforcement to recognise and appropriately respond to instances where disinformation holds criminal implications, thereby bolstering enforcement capabilities.

- **To improve strategic communication:** Ensuring that efforts to combat disinformation remain bipartisan is paramount to safeguarding the integrity and impact of these initiatives. In order to preserve the credibility and effectiveness of strategies to combat disinformation, the Slovakian government should avoid communications which promote political polarisation. This involves a concerted effort to prioritise coordinated and fact-based communication across governmental entities. The goal should be to present information transparently, avoiding biased or politically motivated narratives. Slovakia should also adopt a proactive approach to strategic communication. Instead of merely reacting to disinformation as it emerges, the country should aim to anticipate and counter potential narratives before they gain traction. This proactive stance involves continuous monitoring of information landscapes, enabling authorities to identify emerging threats and prepare effective responses. Such a strategy not only strengthens the nation's ability to combat disinformation but also bolsters public resilience by preemptively debunking false narratives, thereby mitigating their potential impact. By adopting this proactive stance and aligning communication strategies across various governmental bodies, Slovakia would fortify its defences against disinformation threats.
- **To enhance institutional capacity and continuity:** The development of crisis communication processes and mechanisms facilitates seamless information exchange among institutions, bolstering public trust. A priority should be to foster continuity in institutional knowledge and increase capacity-building efforts, especially in the aftermath of elections and the formation of new governments. Sustaining and nurturing the expertise of

individuals combating disinformation ensures a consistent and effective response to evolving challenges. By promoting collaboration, transparency, and knowledge continuity, Slovakia can take substantive steps towards combating disinformation effectively.

- **To further strengthen legal mechanisms:** Slovakia should prioritise optimising legal frameworks to counter disinformation effectively. This involves not just enacting laws but ensuring their implementation and enforcement. The country should prioritise the codification of the term "disinformation" within its legislative framework to provide a clear and specific definition aligned with contemporary challenges. While Slovakia's security strategy adopted in 2021 does acknowledge the threat of disinformation, the strategy should be enlarged to include a more detailed and structured approach. This involves the drafting and implementation of a more comprehensive strategy, outlining specific steps and processes aimed at countering disinformation campaigns targeting Slovakia's democratic establishment and the state's affiliations with NATO and the EU. An enhanced strategy would reinforce the nation's resilience against these evolving threats and lay the groundwork for effective countermeasures.
- **To increase the transparency of media ownership and independence of public media:** Emphasis should also be placed on transparency within media ownership and funding to cultivate an environment whereby sources of information are clear and accountable. A top priority should be to ensure the introduction of new media ownership laws that uncover ownership structures and prevent any circumvention of regulations designed to limit ownership concentration across multiple media platforms. Slovakia can strengthen its information ecosystem by ensuring a clear understanding of who controls media outlets and how they are financed, empowering citizens to make informed judgments and reducing their susceptibility to manipulative narratives. In the realm of public service media, a reform and depoliticisation of the appointment process for RTVS leadership is required. A secure funding system for RTVS, independent of political interference and annual negotiations, should be established.

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Abstract

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has demonstrated significant resilience against disinformation. This resilience was a result of previous long-standing efforts by fact-checking NGOs, the blocking of pro-Russian TV channels, and the creation of new bodies, such as the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy (CSC), and the Centre for Countering Disinformation at the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (CCD). At the beginning of the full-scale war, the Ukrainian government effectively communicated through direct channels, such as daily addresses by President Zelenskyy, military updates on social media, and the United News telethon, produced by six of the major national TV channels. However, as the war continued and public sentiment shifted, these communication strategies became less effective. The decline in trust towards the telethon indicated the need for a strategic overhaul.

Disinformation-fighting bodies frequently duplicate each other's work, while there is still no single coordination centre for communication policy that would ensure the implementation of the "one voice" policy. Although the new Media Law has strengthened regulation across all media types, critical areas such as social media platforms and AI are not addressed. Telegram is particularly problematic as it serves as both a primary news source for Ukrainians and a main channel for disinformation without the government holding any regulatory or supervisory role over the platform. The adopted Information Security Strategy outlined the importance of combating disinformation and fostering media literacy, but its implementation has been vague and it lacks detailed action plans across government agencies.

Civil society continues to play a crucial role through fostering cooperation with state bodies and launching innovative media literacy initiatives. Documenting Russia's war crimes and the genocidal rhetoric of pro-Kremlin propagandists with the aim of bringing them to justice has become a new area of focus. After rising at the beginning of the invasion, citizens' trust in the national media has declined, while radio and local websites have seen a growth in public trust. Senior citizens above the age of 60 years are the most vulnerable group to disinformation.

Overview of the latest topical studies

Annual studies on media consumption by both USAID-Internews¹ and the Media Literacy Index by Detector Media² show a steady increase in media literacy among Ukrainians, with those possessing above-average media literacy rising from 55 per cent in 2020 to 81 per cent in 2022, though declining slightly to 76 per cent in 2023. The findings indicate that media literacy continues to be influenced by factors such as age, education and place of residence. Notably, young adults aged 18-25 exhibited high digital competences, whereas individuals aged 56-65 demonstrated lower levels of media literacy, with rural residents particularly vulnerable to false media content.

Awareness of disinformation among Ukrainians has also increased, with 84 per cent of respondents in 2023 and 83 per cent in 2024 acknowledging its existence. However, there is a significant gap between self-assessed confidence in detecting disinformation and actual ability, as suggested by a practical test in which only 8 per cent of participants correctly identified the truthfulness of all three test news items (12 per cent in 2024).³ In comparison, 78 per cent (75 per cent in 2024) got one out of three news items right (this percentage has increased annually).

Detector Media has conducted deep dives into specific groups vulnerable to disinformation, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), veterans, and senior citizens. Their findings reveal that the media literacy of IDPs and veterans aged between 18 and 65 was higher than the Ukrainian national average, but media literacy was lower among those aged 66 and above.⁴ These results are complemented by a study by the Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication (UMCI) entitled "Media literacy for older adults (60+)", which aimed to develop several educational models for this vulnerable group.⁵

¹ The surveys for 2021-2023 can be found at <https://internews.in.ua/our-works/media-consumption-survey/>

² The surveys for 2021-2023 can be found at <https://detector.media/infospace/article/225738/2024-04-22-indeks-mediagramotnosti-ukraintsiv-20202023-chetverta-khvylya/>

³ The surveys for 2021-2023 can be found at <https://internews.in.ua/our-works/media-consumption-survey/>

⁴ The surveys can be found at <https://detector.media/tag/2348/>

⁵ "Media literacy for senior people (60+)," *Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute, 2023*, https://www.jta.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/UMCI_MediaLiteracy_60_UA.pdf

Research by the European External Action Service (EEAS) has introduced the concept of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). Using Ukrainian case studies, the EEAS has further expanded the scope of disinformation studies in the country. This definition was created by EEAS Stratcom in 2020 for the development of the FIMI toolbox, and published for the first time in March 2022, in the "2021 Stratcom activity report".⁶ The definition of FIMI includes not only disinformation but also the use of diplomatic channels, impersonation of international organisations, and other tactics that target different actors across multiple platforms.⁷ Meanwhile, a second EEAS study has emphasised the importance of a coordinated, networked response to FIMI, given its complexity and the strategic use by Russia and China to undermine security and democracy.⁸

Several studies have exposed the scale and sophistication of Russian disinformation. Texty, an independent Ukrainian media group, has visually mapped networks of Russia's soft power agents and organisations operating in various countries, including in 17 EU members⁹ and the US.¹⁰ The EU DisinfoLab's "Doppelganger" study uncovered a Russian online influence network in Europe, which used 17 clones of legitimate media outlets such as *Bild* and *The Guardian* to spread fake news, videos and polls.¹¹ To do this, the attackers bought dozens of domain names across the internet, similar to authentic carriers, and copied their designs. The core of the cross-platform work was on the web pages, and the extension profiles were on *Facebook* and *X/Twitter*. Since then, it has become a widespread phenomenon highlighted, in particular, in the 2024 Counter Dis-

⁶ "2021 StratCom activity report - Strategic Communication Task Forces and Information Analysis Division," *EEAS*, March 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Report%20Stratcom%20activities%202021.pdf>

⁷ "First EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats," *EEAS*, February 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/1st-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en

⁸ "Second EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats," *EEAS*, January 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2nd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en

⁹ "Doppelganger. Media clones serving Russian propaganda," *EU Disinfo Lab*, September 2022, <https://www.disinfo.eu/doppelganger/>

¹⁰ "Roller Coaster. From Trumpists to Communists. The forces in the U.S. impeding aid to Ukraine and how they do it," *Texty*, June 2024, <https://texty.org.ua/projects/112617/roller-coaster/>

¹¹ "Doppelganger. Media clones serving Russian propaganda," *EU Disinfo Lab*, 2022, <https://www.disinfo.eu/doppelganger/>

information Network report.¹² Similarly, DFRLab identified over 2,300 assets on Facebook and Instagram that directed users to Russian domains or counterfeit websites.¹³ The major themes spread by those fake outlets concerned Ukraine and were fully aligned with Russian propaganda narratives. The BBC revealed a network of Russian websites posing as local American newspapers, initially spreading anti-Ukrainian narratives and later focusing on the U.S. elections.¹⁴ Texty analysed a network of 120 Telegram channels targeting Ukrainian residents with propaganda in the areas Russia intended to occupy.¹⁵ In 2023, DFRLab exposed a network of 12,800 Russian *TikTok* bots spreading fake news about the alleged corruption of Ukraine's former Minister of Defence, Oleksiy Reznikov, in seven EU languages.¹⁶ *Texty* also identified over 2,000 accounts which existed to discredit Ukraine's military mobilisation efforts in 2024.¹⁷ The Centre for Countering Disinformation at the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (CCD) investigated Russia's international disinformation campaigns, focusing on the forced deportation and abduction of Ukrainian children¹⁸ and efforts to discredit both Ukraine and President Zelenskyy in African media outlets.¹⁹

¹² "Fool Me Once: Russian Influence Operation Doppelganger Continues on X and Facebook," *Counter Disinformation Network*, 2024, <https://alliance4europe.eu/russian-influence-doppelganger-june-x-meta>

¹³ "Russia-based Facebook operation targeted Europe with anti-Ukraine messaging," *DFR-Lab*, September 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/russia-based-facebook-operation-targeted-europe-with-anti-ukraine-messaging-389e32324d4b>

¹⁴ "A Bugatti car, a first lady and the fake stories aimed at Americans," *BBC*, July 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c72ver6172do>

¹⁵ "Telegram Occupation. How Russia Wanted to Breed a Media Monster, but Ended up with a Paper Tiger," *Texty*, November 2022, <https://texty.org.ua/projects/108161/telegram-occupation-how-russia-wanted-breed-media-monster-ended-paper-tiger/>

¹⁶ "Massive Russian influence operation targeted former Ukrainian defense minister on TikTok," *DFR-Lab*, December 2023, <https://dfrlab.org/2023/12/14/massive-russian-influence-operation-targeted-former-ukrainian-defense-minister-on-tiktok/>

¹⁷ "#it'snotmyukraine. We have identified a Russian network of 2,000 TikTok accounts created to discredit the mobilization and the Recruiting office," *Texty*, August 2024, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/113076/cenemoyaukrayina2/>

¹⁸ "Forceful deportation and kidnapping of the Ukrainian children," *Center for Countering Disinformation*, June 2023, <https://cpd.gov.ua/en/announcements/analytical-research-forceful-deportation-and-kidnapping-of-the-ukrainian-children/>

¹⁹ "Information influence campaign in the African information space," *Center for Countering Disinformation*, March 2024, <https://cpd.gov.ua/en/announcements/analytical-report-information-influence-campaign-in-the-africaninformation-space/>

Several studies highlighted vulnerabilities in social media algorithms. The joint research by Centre for Strategic Communications (CSC) and Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law (CEDEM) revealed issues in Facebook's algorithms which prioritised demoralising content targeting Ukrainians since March 2023. They have recommended to Facebook a number of improvements.²⁰ Texty has studied how threatening content spreads via YouTube²¹ and TikTok²² through algorithms and before the content can be moderated.

Several studies have analysed Ukraine's responses to disinformation. The Institute of Information Security published the Green Paper, evaluating state information security policy,²³ and the White Paper, offering recommendations to enhance disinformation countermeasures based on lessons learned and international experience.²⁴ The Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute (UMCI) analysed response effectiveness at various levels of state institutions and civil society, providing recommendations to the government, NGOs, and donors.²⁵ The Hybrid CoE report highlighted ten lessons for the West from Ukrainian best practice.²⁶ Olga Tokariuk's research for the Reuters Institute explored how Ukraine used humour in strategic communication against disinformation.²⁷

²⁰ "How Russia Attacks Ukraine with Disinformation through Facebook Ads: Research of the Centre for Strategic Communications," *CEDEM*, April 2024, <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/yak-rosiya-atakuye-ukrayinu-dezinformacziyeyu-cherez-reklamu-v-facebook-doslidzhennya-czentr-u-strategichnyh-komunikaczij/>

²¹ "The Piggyback Trick. How YouTube Algorithms Promote Conspirology and Propaganda," *Texty*, November 2023, <https://texty.org.ua/d/2023/youtube-recommendations/en/>

²² "TikTok algorithms trap: if you want to go viral, make content about Recruiting office," *Texty*, July 2024, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/112992/tiktok-algorithms-trap-if-you-want-go-viral-make-content-about-recruiting-office/>

²³ "White Paper on Countering Disinformation" [In Ukrainian], *Institute of Information Security*, December 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H4d3xOnn7TLPI7tQZ-0SipE9LefQ6MVgP/view>

²⁴ "Green Paper on Countering Disinformation" [In Ukrainian], *Institute of Information Security*, December 2022, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VzRXvQrAuDG91_ofbKpCoS-GrSyjgyYNk/view?fbclid=IwAR0Hzwpl134I5R7Dh7MUA7x4nsn4O7yW10LTXfpOV8nVn-FZs1KTSI1NabXQ

²⁵ "The effectiveness of countering Russian disinformation in Ukraine in conditions of full-scale war" [In Ukrainian], *UMCI*, August 2023, https://www.jta.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/UMCI_-Effectiveness-of-Russian-Disinformation-Counteration-UA.pdf

²⁶ "How Ukraine fights Russian disinformation: Beehive vs mammoth," *Hybrid COE*, January 2024, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/20240124-Hybrid-CoE-Research-Report-11-How-UKR-fights-RUS-disinfo-WEB.pdf>

²⁷ Tokariuk, O., "From memes to morale: Decoding Ukraine's comedy arsenal against disinformation," *Reuters Institute*, June 2023, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/memes-morale-decoding-ukraines-comedy-arsenal-against-disinformation>

Another key research area has been the potential to hold propagandists to account. Think tanks have documented Russian informational influence before and during the full-scale invasion, laying the groundwork for potential legal action. The CSC compiled a daily record of information warfare from 24 February 2022, to November 2023.²⁸ DFRLab traced pro-Kremlin narratives from 2014 to 2021 and 70 days before the full-scale invasion and their links to military actions, demonstrating how Russia weaponized them as its actions on the ground escalated toward war.²⁹ The Institute of Mass Information (IMI) examined the genocidal rhetoric of Russian propaganda, measured its prominence and advocated legal measures similar to those against propagandists in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.³⁰ CSC's analysis of Russian officials' statements during eight years before and after the invasion supported the argument that Russia aims to create conditions for genocide.³¹ Digital Security Lab explored the status of disinformation in armed conflict under international law, suggesting potential legal avenues to counteract it.³²

Effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on national resilience to disinformation

In response to the full-scale invasion, Ukraine severed diplomatic relations with Russia and imposed a visa regime on Russian citizens as of 1 July 2022. Despite efforts to reduce economic links to Russia, breaking commercial ties with Russia and Belarus has been challenging due to their significant influence in sectors such as energy, metallurgy, and telecommunications.

²⁸ CSC, 2023.

²⁹ "Narrative Warfare. How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine," *DFRLab*, February 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/narrative-warfare/>

³⁰ "After the start of the big war IMI began researching the Russian media's genocidal rhetoric regarding Ukrainians – Romaniuk," *IMI*, February 2023, <https://imi.org.ua/en/news/after-the-start-of-the-big-war-imi-began-researching-the-russian-media-s-genocidal-rhetoric-i51066>

³¹ "Genocidal Rhetoric of the Russian Regime': A Major Study That Will Help Bring Criminals to Responsibility," *Centre for strategic communication and information security*, November 2023, <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/genocidal-rhetoric-of-the-russian-regime-a-major-study-that-will-help-bring-criminals-to-responsibility/>

³² "For whom the bell tolls: responsibility for disinformation in wartime," *Digital Security Lab*, March 2023, <https://dslua.org/publications/responsibility-for-disinformation/>

As discussed in the 2021 DRI edition, Ukraine's vulnerabilities to Russian informational influence stem from historical ties, a significant Russian-speaking population, and religious connections. The invasion dramatically reduced Ukrainian loyalty to Russia. By May 2022, only 2 per cent of Ukrainians viewed Russia positively, a sentiment that persisted into 2024, with 94 per cent expressing negative or critical views about Russia. Additionally, 79 per cent favoured closing borders and implementing visas with Russia, though this sentiment declined to 75 per cent by May 2024. Among Russian-speaking Ukrainians, 71 per cent supported these measures. Only 12 per cent of Ukrainians desired friendly relations with Russia and a mere 0.3 per cent supported unification.³³

Russian media consumption in Ukraine has continued to decline, with only 8 per cent of Ukrainians consuming Russian media in 2023. While some Ukrainians still use Russian social networks (5 per cent) and news websites (3 per cent), trust in these sources remains low. In 2023, between 69 to 79 per cent of Ukrainians said they rejected Russian cultural products, particularly music as well as official and Russian opposition socio-political content.³⁴

UKRAINE AND THE WEST'S COORDINATED RESPONSE TO ARMS SUPPLY DISINFORMATION

Russian media and Telegram channels promoted a narrative that Ukraine had been selling Western arms on the black market since April 2022. These reports appeared in Western media within a matter of weeks, with *CNN*, the *Washington Post* and the *Financial Times*. Russian propaganda and some Western politicians, such as US Congresswomen Victoria Spartz and Marjorie Taylor Green, amplified these claims. In October 2022, the Finnish media outlet *YLE* reported alleged illegal arms transfers from Ukraine but later it was refuted by the Finnish Police and the Finnish Ambassador to Ukraine following the StopFake's request to the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for clarification. On 21 July 2022, Europol's spokesperson mentioned that arms smuggling was de-

³³ "How do Ukrainians see relations between Ukraine and Russia and what associations do Ukrainians have with Russia and ordinary Russians," *KIIS*, July 2024, <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1420&page=1>

³⁴ "Media literacy index of Ukrainians: 2020–2023 Fourth Wave," *Detector Media*, April 2024, <https://en.detector.media/post/media-literacy-index-of-ukrainians-2020-2023-fourth-wave>

tected, but this was later denied after Ukrainian journalists and officials asked the agency to clarify the statement, as no evidence was found.

Russian propaganda, which is likely behind these rumours, aims to disrupt the supply of Western arms to Ukraine, given that they have been so crucial to Kyiv's war effort. In response, Ukraine, the EU, and NATO coordinated an effective action. Ukraine's MFA demanded clarifications, and Valery Chaly, a former ambassador to the US (2015-2019), spoke of a Russian operation to disrupt American arms supplies. Donor countries and the Pentagon have denied the resale claims, and explain that arms tracking was transparent and ongoing.³⁵

The Ukrainian language has gained prominence, with 81 per cent of Ukrainians in 2024 advocating for the removal of the use of Russian in official communications. The Implementation of the law "On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as a State Language", which had been postponed for a long time, has advanced, with increased quotas for Ukrainian-language programming on radio and television and stricter enforcement of language requirements in advertising and consumer rights protection. The 2030 development programme and legal framework for language standards have been approved. However, challenges remain to ensure the consistent use of Ukrainian in official duties, the correct use of Ukrainian place names, and in developing procedures for punishing violators.³⁶

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) has increased its influence, with 42 per cent of Ukrainians identifying with the OCU by 2023, while support for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) has dwindled to 6 per cent. Many former UOC-MP supporters have abandoned the church due to its ties with Russia. Most Ukrainians support the distancing of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy from Moscow, with 71 per cent supporting the termination of the lease between the national reserve Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and the male monastery of UOC-MP in March 2023. Additionally, 55.5 per cent of Ukrainians believed the UOC-MP should be banned due to its connections with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which was seen as complicit in the Russian aggression. In March

³⁵ "Black market weapons," *Center for Countering Disinformation*, November 2023, <https://cpd.gov.ua/en/announcements/black-market-weapons/>

³⁶ "Annual report on the state of compliance with the Law of Ukraine 'On ensuring the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the state language in 2023'" [In Ukrainian], *State Language Protection Commissioner*, May 2024, <https://mova-ombudsman.gov.ua/storage/app/sites/14/3bit%202023/PIЧНИЙ%20BIT%202023.pdf>

2024, the congress of the "World Russian People's Council", held under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church, declared that the war against Ukraine is "sacred" and that Russia is defending the world from "the West, which has fallen into Satanism". On 23 September 2024, the law "On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of Religious Organisations" entered into force, which will terminate the activities of religious organisations associated with the ROC in Ukraine. Such organisations will have nine months to sever all ties with the Moscow Patriarchate.³⁷

KOSMACH VIOLENCE: ANTI-MOBILIZATION CAMPAIGN AND GAPS IN COMMUNICATIONS

On 6 February 2024, a message in the *Viber* messaging platform (according to other accounts, in *Telegram*) supposedly sent from the village of Kosmach, Ivano-Frankivsk region, claimed that six cars were coming to round up men for mobilisation. It was quickly deleted, but the rumour spread throughout the village. The next day, dozens of women blocked the road near the gas station in the village centre to prevent the employees of the mobilisation office from entering. They attacked a 24-year-old woman and her daughter, accusing her of planning to photograph men to "hand them over" to the army.

This violence resulted from Russia's anti-mobilisation propaganda and a lack of communication from the government about mobilisation. Many bloggers such as Ostap Stakhiv, a prominent COVID-19 conspiracy theorist, spread anti-mobilisation narratives that were amplified by the Russian media, "troll factories" and anonymous Telegram channels and messenger chats. Stakhiv, detained by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in November 2021 for destabilisation activities, had his bail set in January 2022 and his legal case remains active.³⁸ Stakhiv established a network of thousands of followers to obstruct mobilisation offices and

³⁷ "Ukrainian Society, State And Church in War. Church and Religious Situation In Ukraine 2023," *Razumkov Center*, February 2024, <https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2024/02/12/2023-Religiya-ENGL.pdf>

³⁸ "Ostap Stakhiv, a failed Ukrainian politician and anti-vaxer, created a multi-thousand-strong anti-mobilization network. Its members block the work of the state bodies," *Babel*, March 2024, <https://babel.ua/en/texts/104396-ostap-stakhiv-a-failed-ukrainian-politician-and-anti-vaxer-created-a-multi-thousand-strong-anti-mobilization-network-its-members-block-the-work-of-the-state-bodies-detailed-analysis-by-babel>

state bodies, and had more than 7,000 Viber subscribers and over 30 *Viber* and *Telegram* chats across Ukraine. Stakhiv and other bloggers spread narratives aimed at delegitimising mobilisation, falsely claiming it was illegal or unconstitutional, while he also attempted to discredit the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the authorities and the military command.³⁹ Between 2022 and 2023, the focus of the disinformation was on promoting the passive evasion of mobilisation, such as ignoring registration and creating false exemptions. By late 2023 and early 2024, the emphasis shifted to active evasion methods, including illegal border crossings and violence against mobilisation office staff.⁴⁰ People such as Stakhiv, through the use of online platforms, created a discourse that led to violence. On 2 October 2024, the court ordered Stakhiv's arrest without bail for 60 days on suspicion of fraud and disseminating information about the location of units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The invasion has also created new audiences who are particularly vulnerable to disinformation, including internally displaced persons, refugees, military personnel and their families, residents of occupied, liberated or frontline territories, and those who have lost loved ones. These groups require increased attention in efforts to counteract disinformation.

Cyber-attacks on critical sectors, state institutions, and mass media were frequent in the reviewed period, but Ukrainian state bodies effectively mitigated the impact of these threats. Despite power and internet blackouts caused by Russian airstrikes, the government has established "invincibility points" to ensure continued access to essential services. Both the diversity of internet providers and the lack of strict government control have helped prevent a collapse of the internet infrastructure.

Changes in the national media landscape

Since the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian state has become a dominant media actor, launching the state-funded 24-hour United News telethon featur-

³⁹ "The architecture of lies. Behind the scenes of the enemy's anti-mobilization propaganda" [In Ukrainian], *Center for Strategic Communication*, February 2024, <https://spravdi.gov.ua/arhitektura-brehni-za-lashtunkamy-antymobilizacijnoyi-propagandy-voroga/>

⁴⁰ <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/how-russian-special-information-operations-try-to-undermine-mobilisation-in-ukraine/>

ing six national TV channels. The content had been produced by four largest media holdings, the *Rada parliamentary channel* and public *Pershyy TV channel*.⁴¹ Since then, the telethon has undergone changes, including the closure of Rynat Akhmetov's *Ukraine channel* in July 2022 and its replacement by the *We — Ukraine* channel, which is now entirely separate to Akhmetov, in November 2022. In May 2024, public *Pershyy TV* channel withdrew due to political pressure. Opposition-affiliated *Channels 5* and *Priamyi*, both associated with ex-president Petro Poroshenko, who was their owner until 2021 when he transferred corporate rights to the Vilni Media holding organised by the labour team were not invited to the telethon. Similarly, *Espresso TV* – owned by the company Atmosphere Entertainment, Inc. of Ivan Zhevago, former MP Kostyantyn Zhevago's son, against whom several suspicions of corruption have been raised in Ukraine – were also not invited to the telethon. The channels were also excluded from digital broadcasting but have continued on *YouTube*. Despite appeals by channels and media associations to restore their broadcasts, the authorities did not respond.

According to monitoring data, opposition MPs were invited only to the public broadcaster's slots, and therefore it is the only service maintaining the balance of political representation on the television network. After its exit from the telethon, MPs of the opposition faction "European Solidarity" were not invited to broadcast the telethon in July–September 2024 even though this is proof of political censorship, according to experts.⁴² At the same time, the share of representatives of the "Servant of the People" faction among the invited MPs has increased by 10 per cent.⁴³ This could also be used by Kremlin disinformation in its attempts to destabilise Ukraine and bolster its narrative that Zelenskyy is building a dictatorship. In 2023, the Ministry of Defence launched the *Army TV* state channel to cover the war.

⁴¹ The media holdings are *1+1* owned by Ihor Kolomoyskyi, who has been in custody since September 2023 and transferred his corporate rights for 5 years to the team represented by channel's director general Yaroslav Pakholchuk, *Starlight Media* controlled by Victor Pinchuk family, and *Inter Media Group*, controlled by Dmytro Firtash.

⁴² "The share of "servants of the people" in the marathon increased to 81% after the exit of Suspilne, — monitoring" [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, October 2024, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/232989/2024-10-03-chastka-slug-narodu-v-marafoni-pislyavykhodu-suspilnogo-zrosla-do-81-monitoryng/>

⁴³ "Monitoring results of the telethon "Yedyni Novyni" for July-September 2024. The second part" [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, October 2024, <https://detector.media/shhodenni-telenovini/article/232964/2024-10-03-pidsumky-monitoryngu-telemarafonu-iedyni-novyny-za-lypenveresen-2024-roku-druga-chastyna/>

Initially effective in resisting disinformation, the telethon began losing its audience: trust dropped from 70 per cent in 2022⁴⁴ to 36 per cent in February 2024, with 74 per cent of viewers seeking information from other sources due to a lack of diverse viewpoints.⁴⁵ Despite this, 71 per cent of the telethon's viewers remained loyal due to its official status and unifying effect. However, interest declined due to perceived censorship, repetitive content, and a lack of no war-related positive news.⁴⁶ As one of the experts stated, "While five oligarchs controlled the television space before, now the state has replaced them. Television viewing and trust in the telethon is decreasing, and it is unclear why so much money is spent on it".⁴⁷ Criticism also emerged over the involvement of journalists from Akhmetov's channels, which had previously promoted pro-Russian views.

The perception that the media serves state interests rose fourfold to 31 per cent in 2022 but decreased slightly in 2023.⁴⁸ The public's need for news surged post-invasion, but news consumption frequency declined in 2023. Social networks became the primary news source for 84 per cent of citizens in 2024, while trust has decreased in almost every source of information. The exceptions are radio and print media due to the disappearance of pro-Russian radio stations and music, the growth of news on the radio, and the availability of print media in the front-line areas.

As television has become a government monopoly, online and local media have grown in importance, doubling their audience in 2022 and remaining stable in 2023. In 2024, with the increase in social media use, audiences for news websites shrank from 41 to 30 per cent, while they slightly increased for the radio and print media.⁴⁹ Journalists, many of whom are now war reporters,

⁴⁴ "Trust in the telethon 'Yedyni Novyny'," *KIIS*, February 2024, <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1369>

⁴⁵ "Media literacy index of Ukrainians: 2020–2023 Fourth Wave," *Detector Media*, April 2024, <https://en.detector.media/post/media-literacy-index-of-ukrainians-2020-2023-fourth-wave>

⁴⁶ "Ukrainian media use and trust in 2023," *Internews*, November 2023, <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/USAID-Internews-Media-Survey-2023-EN.pdf>

⁴⁷ Interview with Oksana Romaniuk, Director of the Institute of Mass Information, March 2024.

⁴⁸ "Ukrainian media use and trust in 2023," *Internews*, November 2023, <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/USAID-Internews-Media-Survey-2023-EN.pdf>

⁴⁹ "Ukrainian media use and trust in 2024," *Internews*, November 2024, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ajys45gFj9AiB9mv7Gx7aNyqskEL_DZx/view

continue to cover social issues and corruption despite facing challenges such as understaffing, slow access to information, and psychological pressure. Local media remains independent thanks to the support of donors, as the advertising market has declined.⁵⁰

The most significant change in media consumption has been *Telegram's* rise as the primary news source for 84 per cent of Ukrainians by 2024, up from 20 per cent in 2021, surpassing news websites (30 per cent) and television (30 per cent).⁵¹ Due to the platform's popularity, government officials and departments established official channels at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, which further contributed to *Telegram's* popularity. However, the rapid expansion of *Telegram* has raised concerns due to its possible ties with Russia's authorities and a lack of regulation over the platform. As the expert said, "The state should stop "feeding" *Telegram*. It is like playing with a trickster with marked cards".⁵² Anonymous channels on the platform, some possibly linked to Moscow, pose risks to national security. Instances such as temporarily blocking Ukrainian special services' chatbots in April 2024 demonstrates these concerns.⁵³

Against the background of the increasing role of influencers in the media space, the full-scale invasion has impacted the content shared by Ukrainian lifestyle influencers. A range of Instagram bloggers with audiences of thousands or millions have switched to the Ukrainian language and begun to organise charity meetings as well as talk about Russia's attacks and share news from the frontlines. At the same time, some bloggers regularly spread pro-Russian disinformation narratives. For example, after the shelling of the Okhmatdyt Children's hospital in Kyiv in July 2024, several Instagram bloggers simultaneously spread calls to "negotiate with Russia to end the war".⁵⁴

⁵⁰ "The State of Local News in Ukraine 2023," *Media Development Foundation*, March 2023, <https://research.mediadevelopmentfoundation.org/en/2023.html>

⁵¹ "Ukrainian media use and trust in 2024", *op.cit.*

⁵² Interview with Ihor Solovei, Head of the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security under MSCS, April 2024.

⁵³ "Popular Telegram - 'a spy in every Ukrainian's pocket'?" [In Ukrainian], *Radio Sloboda*, May 2024, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/telegram-ukrayina-rosiya-shpy-hun/32929484.html>

⁵⁴ "Children are dying, the government is stealing, let's give up.' Instabloggers have once again taken up Russian throwbacks en masse," *Detector Media*, July 2024, <https://antonia.detector.media/mediatresh/post/225253/2024-07-09-dity-vmyrayut-vlada-obkrapdaie-davayte-zdavaty-instablogerky-znovu-masovo-vzylalysya-za-rosiyski-vkydy/>

Anatoly Shariy, the influential pro-Russian YouTuber mentioned in the 2021 DRI, was detained in Spain on May 4, 2022, after being charged with treason in 2021, but was released on bail pending trial. In March 2022, the Shariy Party was banned in Ukraine, but the SSU exposed its underground cells a year later. In 2023, Ukrainian courts began hearing the case in absentia. Shariy continues to run a Russian-language YouTube channel, where he discredits Ukrainian politicians, Ukraine and Ukrainians in general, presenting his stance as a “neutral” pro-Ukrainian position.⁵⁵ Former hosts of blocked pro-Russian TV channels have also created YouTube channels.⁵⁶ A particular threat is a growing demand from TV channels for so-called military experts, who according to an analysis by Texty, most often do not have relevant education and experience, but are increasingly influencing public opinion.⁵⁷

Freedom House downgraded Ukraine's press freedom rating from 60 to 49, keeping it in the “partially free” category, mainly due to the crimes committed by Russian occupation forces against journalists and the media, including attacks, kidnappings, and cyberattacks. At least 15 journalists have died while covering the war.⁵⁸ Despite these challenges, Ukraine's score on the Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders (RSF) improved from 106th in 2022 to 61st in 2024, thanks to a decrease in the number of journalists killed and better political conditions. However, the survival of newsrooms remains threatened by economic pressures, oligarchic control of national TV channels, martial law restrictions, and the silencing of the media in occupied territories.⁵⁹ Instead, experts noted a decline in freedom of speech since 2023,⁶⁰ with investigative

⁵⁵ “‘Rogulestan’, ‘Nazis’ and ‘brainless government’: What messages did the ‘Ukrainian’ millionaire blogger Anatoly Shariy share during the year of the Great War,” *Detector Media*, March 2023, https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/209098/2023-03-20-rogulestan-natsysty-i-bezmozka-vlada-yakymy-mesedzhamy-ukrainskyy-blogger-milyonnyk-anatoliy-shariy-dilyvsya-protyagom-roku-velykoi-viyny

⁵⁶ “Former Hosts of Medvedchuk's and Murayev's Channels Remain a Single Network. Is It Pro-Russian?,” *Detector Media*, September 2024, <https://en.detector.media/post/former-hosts-of-medvedchuks-and-murayevs-channels-remain-a-single-network-is-it-pro-russian>

⁵⁷ “Top of the most popular ‘experts’ on YouTube: from the ubiquitous Zhdanov to ‘good Russians’” [in Ukrainian], *Texty*, August 2023, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/110296/top-najpopulyarnishyh-ekspertiv-v-informacijnomu-youtube-vid-vsyudysushoho-zhdanova-do-horoshyh-rosiyan/>

⁵⁸ Ukraine country report, *Freedom House*, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/freedom-world/2024>

⁵⁹ “2024 World Press Freedom Index – journalism under political pressure,” *Reporters Without Borders*, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure>

⁶⁰ Interview with Oksana Romaniuk.

journalists facing increasing pressure, including provocations, surveillance, and privacy violations.⁶¹ Also, in May 2024, a journalistic investigation revealed pressure on journalists at the Ukrinform state news agency by then director general of Ukrinform, Oleksiy Matsuka, leading to leadership changes.⁶² Freedom of speech on the internet, according to Freedom House's 2023 report, scored 59, compared to 61 in 2021.⁶³

Changes in foreign broadcasting included the launch of the FreeDOM marathon in March 2022 by main national media conglomerates, supported by President Zelenskyy and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, targeting foreign audiences on the Russian-language UATV platform. *The Dom* ("home" in Russian) TV channel, initially Russian-language and focused on the temporarily occupied territories, transitioned to Ukrainian-language *Dim* ("home" in Ukrainian) and now aims to serve refugees and internally displaced persons. However, the Institute of Mass Information (IMI) research found *Dom* and *FreeDOM* ineffective in promoting Ukrainian interests abroad but more useful in influencing internal audiences, for example, during future elections.⁶⁴ In June 2023, the state launched *The Gaze*, an English-language platform to engage Western audiences. However, its relevance was questioned, given the presence of effective English-language media in Ukraine such as *The Kyiv Independent*, the English-language version of *Ukrinform*, and the *Euromaidan Press*, which can be supported instead.⁶⁵

The public broadcaster *Suspilne* strengthened its position, with over a third of Ukrainians consuming its news weekly and 85 per cent of the audience trusting it. In 2023, *Suspilne* joined the EuroVox system of the European Broadcasting Union, where AI translates its news on behalf of 20 influential broadcasters from 17 EU countries, allowing co-production opportunities with other coun-

⁶¹ "Ukrainian media coalition decries "targeting" of journalists critical of authorities," *Euromaidan Press*, January 2024, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/01/17/ukrainian-media-coalition-decries-targeting-of-journalists-critical-of-authorities/>

⁶² "All their own. How the Office of the President takes control of Ukrinform," *Ukrainska Pravda*, May 2024, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2024/05/29/7458080/>

⁶³ "Freedom of the Net 2023. Ukraine," *Freedom House*, October 2023, <https://freedom-house.org/country/ukraine/freedom-net/2023>

⁶⁴ "Internal foreign broadcaster of Ukraine. For whom do the state TV channels *Dim* and *FreeDOM* broadcast" [in Ukrainian], *IMI*, December 2023, <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/vnutrishnye-inomovlennya-ukrayiny-na-kogo-movlyat-derzhavni-telekanaly-dim-i-free-dom-i57418>

⁶⁵ "Money to the wind" [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, October 2023, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/217518/2023-10-01-groshi-na-viter/>

tries.⁶⁶ However, *Suspilne* has faced underfunding and pressure, in particular, the campaign by the MP from the “Servant of the People” Party, Maryana Bezuhla, which included baseless accusations of low ratings and abuse, leading it to exit the telethon in May 2024 and focus on producing its content for the *Pershyi channel* separately, including documentaries and investigations, which can be shown in the telethon.⁶⁷

The National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISD) warned of the risks associated with the monopolisation of information policy and weak communication between authorities and society, which could reduce trust in official sources and increase the influence of unverified information from sources such as *Telegram*, thereby amplifying Russian propaganda efforts.⁶⁸ As one interviewed expert noted, “Discussions are increasingly shifting from TV to *YouTube* and social media, where editorial control is weaker. This leads to a decline in journalism quality, the growth of influencers, and the opening of the door to unethical players. Bringing such discussions back to TV can temporarily affect the governments’ ratings, but in this way, the public tension will be channelled appropriately, enhancing long-term security”.⁶⁹ The NISD identified Russian efforts to destabilise Ukraine by deepening societal divisions, discrediting the authorities, activating pro-Russian experts, for example, on *YouTube*, and using AI to enhance disinformation campaigns.⁷⁰

Changes in the legal and institutional framework

On 6 September 2024, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy was renamed the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications. As the experts

⁶⁶ “In 2024, *Suspilne* plans to recruit journalists, in particular for new projects, — Svitlana Ostapa” [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, January 2024, <https://stv.detector.media/suspilna-korporatsiya/read/8149/2024-01-18-u-2024-rotsi-suspilne-planuie-nabyraty-zhurnalistiv-zokrema-dlya-novykh-proiektiv-svitlana-ostapa/>

⁶⁷ “*Suspilne* quits the United News telethon, remains in the #UARazom project,” *IMI*, May 2024, <https://imi.org.ua/en/news/suspilne-quits-the-united-news-telethon-remains-in-the-uarazom-project-clarified-i61475>

⁶⁸ “Analysis of threats to national security in the field of domestic policy” [in Ukrainian], *NISS*, April 2024, https://www.niss.gov.ua/sites/default/files/2024-04/ad_zagrozi_vnu-tr_polit.pdf

⁶⁹ Interview with Roman Shutov.

⁷⁰ “Analysis of threats to national security in the field of domestic policy”, *op. cit.*

assumed, this may mean strengthening of cultural diplomacy and the fight against disinformation.⁷¹

Created in 2021, the Centre for Countering Disinformation (CCD) and the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security (CSC), were initially designed to complement each other. However, each body frequently saw their functions overlap. Both institutions monitor the Ukrainian and foreign information spaces, analyse threats, prepare informational and analytical materials and disseminate them. Their work includes social media outreach, where they have developed significant followings. Additionally, both centres collaborate with NGOs, media outlets, bloggers, and international partners and conduct training for state bodies and military personnel. At the same time, they have different emphases in their activities.

The CCD, a state analytical centre, focuses more on practical operational measures, most of which remain non-public. This includes anticipating disinformation, developing and implementing countermeasures, and working with big platforms such as Meta, YouTube, and TikTok to block propaganda channels.⁷² On the other hand, the CSC, a non-governmental expert centre, emphasises strategic communication. This includes the development of a “one-voice policy” through distributing daily message boxes to authorities, media, diplomats, NGOs, and the diaspora. The CSC also organises the annual Kyiv Stratcom forum, which gathers experts from Ukraine and NATO countries. It is also involved in internal and external communication campaigns, particularly for residents of the liberated territories. It collaborates with major tech companies such as Google, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Meta to address the spread of disinformation on their platforms, in particular the CSC sends these companies a “white list” of reliable sources.⁷³

An interviewed expert claims that “These two [the CCD and CSC] institutions were meant to cooperate and balance each other – one for rapid response and the

⁷¹ “This is a notorious display of trust on the part of the president and the head of his office.” Experts speak about the appointment of Mykola Tochytskyi as the head of the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications” [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, September 2024, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/231885/2024-09-09-tse-vyyav-osoblyvoivodivry-z-boku-prezydenta-ta-glavy-yogo-ofisu-eksperty-pro-pryznachennya-mykoly-tochytskogo-ochilnykom-ministerstva-kultury-y-strategichnykh-komunikatsiy/>

⁷² Interview with Alina Bondarchuk, Deputy head of the Centre for Countering Disinformation under National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, April 2024.

⁷³ Interview with Ihor Solovei.

other for strategic work – but instead, each expanded to cover both areas”.⁷⁴ Representatives of the centres argue in turn that the full-scale invasion influenced their initial goals, requiring them to increase their presence in the information space. Despite overlapping on some tasks, they claim their efforts complement each other. One can argue that some duplication makes sense because it avoids monopolising functions and ensures the mutual verification of results, which is important during Ukraine’s current wartime conditions.

There is still no single institution with the authority to comprehensively coordinate state strategic communications, including efforts to counter disinformation. None of the specialised state bodies has the authority to shape policies. This has led to a fragmented approach, with no clear strategic vision or interdepartmental cooperation.⁷⁵ Some experts view this as a disadvantage, as it hampers the speed and effectiveness of the government’s response to information threats. However, others see this “swarm” model, characterised by a certain level of chaos and intuitive movement in the same direction, as a strength that allows for flexibility and adaptability in Ukraine’s information strategy.⁷⁶ One interviewed expert argued that “The voice of the state has become louder due to the creation of state media and control of the telethon, but there is no single voice policy. This is a shortcoming regarding the state’s ability to combat disinformation, but we are not slipping into authoritarianism”.⁷⁷ According to another expert, specialised bodies have not become policymakers because the President’s Office does not give them powers, tending to keep all essential functions to themselves and showing a reluctance to delegate, which affects the speed and efficiency of the response.⁷⁸

A significant legislative development during this period was adopting the law “On Media” in March 2023. It replaced six previous laws regulating the media sector and expanded the regulatory powers of the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting to include print and online media. The law introduced voluntary registration for online media and established five co-regulatory bodies, complementing the previous model of state-media relations that only included state regulation and self-regulation. Three such bodies – for television, radio and

⁷⁴ Interview with Roman Shutov, Strategic Advisor at International Media Support, March 2024.

⁷⁵ “The effectiveness of countering Russian disinformation in Ukraine in conditions of full-scale war” [in Ukrainian], *UMCI*, August 2023, https://www.jta.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/UMCI_-Effectiveness-of-Russian-Disinformation-Counteration_UA.pdf

⁷⁶ Interview with Roman Shutov.

⁷⁷ Interview with Halyna Petrenko, Director of Detector Media NGO, March 2024.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

online media – have already been registered. Under this new law, about 200 online media outlets are now registered. The law also legalised the operation of video hosting platforms, social media pages, and channels on platforms such as *YouTube* and *Telegram*.⁷⁹ Media lawyers point out that the law aligns Ukraine with global trends and standardised previously disorganised regulations. Full implementation of the laws should take approximately ten years. Taras Shevchenko, Deputy Minister of Culture and Strategic Communications, assessed the law as successful thanks to balanced sanctions, the absence of norms that provide, for example, the loss of the ability to automatically renew a licence for minor violations, and the reduction of the influence of oligarchs on both TV channels and the regulator.⁸⁰

However, despite these advancements, the concept of “disinformation” remains undefined in Ukrainian legislation. Certain elements or manifestations may fall under the Criminal Code, particularly Article 161 regarding hate speech and incitement to hatred. Attempts have been made to invoke the article of the Criminal Procedure Code regarding the spreading of rumours that may cause mass unrest, but these attempts have not been successful due to legal loopholes. Another element is defamation cases regarding the protection of honour, dignity, and business reputation when the information is directed against a specific physical or legal person, who will be the plaintiff in court. The plaintiff can demand removal, refutation and compensation for moral damage.

The regulation of social networks, messenger applications, and AI remains insufficient and inadequate to meet the challenges facing Ukraine and the Ukrainian society. “We are looking for a solution to this problem together with the democratic world,” an interviewed expert said.⁸¹ *Telegram*, in particular, poses a significant challenge due to its possible ties to Russian authorities, lack of regulatory oversight, and the prevalence of anonymous channels that spread disinformation and manipulative content. Although other platforms engage in dialogue with the Ukrainian government, *Telegram* has remained uncooperative, including after the arrest of Pavel Durov in France in September 2024. *Telegram*’s popularity in Ukraine, coupled with its opaque governance and editorial policies, as one expert says, effectively makes it a parallel media structure that

⁷⁹ “What is new in the law “On Media” for this year and what are the results for last year” [in Ukrainian], *Detector Media*, March 2024, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/224576/2024-03-25-shcho-novogo-peredbachaie-zakon-pro-media-na-tsey-rik-ta-yakymy-ie-pidsumky-za-mynulyy/>

⁸⁰ Interview with Taras Shevchenko, Deputy Minister of Culture and Information Policy, June 2024.

⁸¹ Interview with Halyna Petrenko.

can set the national agenda, creating a platform for Russian propagandists.⁸² Experts think that the government has been reluctant to block *Telegram* despite the risks, as it is a crucial communication channel for Ukrainian authorities.⁸³ This creates a conflict between information security and internal politics. The debate over how to regulate Telegram continues, with opinions divided between implementing registration requirements and imposing outright bans.⁸⁴ Draft law No. 11115, submitted to the Ukrainian parliament in March 2024, requires Telegram to disclose its ownership and funding sources; it is an attempt to regulate social networks in the same way as the media.⁸⁵

As Ukraine has applied for membership of the EU, it must align its regulatory framework with EU standards, including the Digital Services Act (DSA), which addresses issues related to digital disinformation. The Ministry of Digital Transformation has developed a draft law to implement these regulations. In addition, Ukraine should appoint a national coordinator of digital services. However, even after the implementation of the EU laws, the issue of regulating Telegram is expected to remain a challenge, as voluntary registration in Ukraine and cooperation with Ukrainian regulators are essential but currently unresolved issues.⁸⁶

Ukraine has developed several essential documents to guide its efforts regarding strategic communication. In August 2021, President Zelenskyy approved the Communication Strategy for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic Integration which will run until 2025.⁸⁷ In October 2021, the Information Security Strategy replaced the previous Information Security Doctrine and will remain effective until 2025.⁸⁸ Its primary strategic goal is to combat disinformation and information operations that are aimed at undermining Ukraine's independence and sovereignty. The main focus is to create a system for early detection, forecasting, and

⁸² Interview with Ihor Solovei.

⁸³ Interview with Roman Shutov.

⁸⁴ "Telegram in Ukraine: cannot be regulated, not ready to block," *Detector Media*, November 2023, <https://detector.media/rinok/article/219977/2023-11-30-telegram-v-ukraini-regulyuvaty-ne-mozhna-zablokovaty-ne-gotovi/>

⁸⁵ Regulation of Online Platforms in Ukraine: New Draft Law. *Council of Europe*, July 2024, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/-/regulation-of-online-platforms-in-ukraine-new-draft-law>

⁸⁶ Interview with Roman Shutov.

⁸⁷ "Zelensky approves Communication Strategy on Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration until 2025," *Interfax*, August 2022, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/761111.html>

⁸⁸ Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 685/2021 (...) 'On Information Security Strategy' [in Ukrainian]. *President.gov.ua*, December 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/6852021-41069>

the prevention of information threats. It is hoped these efforts will strengthen accountability for spreading disinformation as well as enhance cooperation among authorities, local governments, and civil society. However, the strategy's implementation is stalled due to a lack of practical guidelines for threat identification teams and a lack of consistency in their work. One interviewed expert interpreted the delay as underestimating the systemic approach necessary to ensuring information security: "Despite this, the strategy is a crucial step for future development as information policy evolves through institutional efforts and experience".⁸⁹

The Filter national media literacy project of the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications (MCSC), launched in 2021, has taken on a coordinating role through regular meetings between stakeholders and accumulating resources on its online platform.⁹⁰ This has culminated in the Ministry's Media Literacy Development Strategy until 2026, presented in June 2024.⁹¹ "This reflects growing state-level awareness of the need to institutionalise media literacy policy. However, the strategy's lack of national scope indicates insufficient coordination among government stakeholders. On the bright side, it's integrated into the national information security strategy, with a specific goal, the implementation of which involves many institutions," one interviewed expert said.⁹²

Responses by the media and civil society

The work of the debunking teams since 2014 made Ukrainian society more resistant to disinformation by 24 February 2022. After the invasion, these teams intensified their efforts, focusing on Russian disinformation as it grew in scale, aggressiveness, and reach. Some NGOs expanded their monitoring of Russian disinformation to other countries and increased their efforts to engage international audiences.⁹³

⁸⁹ Interview with Roman Shutov.

⁹⁰ <https://filter.mkip.gov.ua/>

⁹¹ "The Strategy of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine for media literacy development until 2026," *Filter*, May 2024, <https://filter.mkip.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/strategyeng.pdf>

⁹² Interview with Maryna Dorosh, Senior Technical Advisor of the Learn to Discern in Education project, IREX in Ukraine.

⁹³ "The effectiveness of countering Russian disinformation in Ukraine in conditions of full-scale war" [in Ukrainian], *UMCI*, August 2023, https://www.jta.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/UMCI_-Effectiveness-of-Russian-Disinformation-Counteration_UA.pdf

By the time of Russia's full-scale invasion, the CSC and the NDI Disinformation Hub were focal points of civil society efforts to tackle false narratives. Cooperation between these organisations only deepened. The CSC involved fact-checking organisations in that documentation of genocidal rhetoric and monitoring disinformation narratives. Later, the Centre for Countering Disinformation (CCD) also started collaborating with the media and NGOs. Several chat rooms have been created for ongoing horizontal coordination. An inevitable duplication of efforts, according to stakeholders, is not a problem as it strengthens the overall response and mutually verifies the research results.⁹⁴

Many independent "elves" groups in Ukraine and abroad (those who oppose Russia's "trolls" in the information space) have also emerged. These groups work to counter Kremlin narratives on social networks and online communities by sharing accurate information about events, history and the context of Ukraine. While some have disbanded, others became systemic initiatives such as the Creative Forces of Ukraine, which produced professional content on the war. Brand Ukraine, established in February 2022, shifted its focus to war communications, developing the *Ukraine.ua* resource in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and available in eight languages.

NGOs have launched various joint projects to counter disinformation. With EU support in 2023, the organisation Smart Angel initiated a comprehensive educational campaign involving experts, state officials, national television, and opinion leaders. The campaign includes TV and online formats in various genres, expert interventions in prime-time news, educational series, documentaries and cartoons. In 2024, Google and Jigsaw collaborated with a number of Ukrainian NGOs to create videos featuring well-known actors on social media manipulation techniques. The Google News Initiative and StopFake started journalist and fact-checker training in 16 Central European countries.⁹⁵ Both CEDEM and CSC partnered with Meta to remove malicious content and improve network algorithms. CEDEM intensified efforts against online fraud by collaborating with hosting providers.

⁹⁴ "How Ukraine fights Russian disinformation: Beehive vs mammoth," *Hybrid COE*, January 2024, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/20240124-Hybrid-CoE-Research-Report-11-How-UKR-fights-RUS-disinfo-WEB.pdf>

⁹⁵ "Fighting disinformation in Central Europe: StopFake's best practices," *StopFake*, February 2024, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/fighting-disinformation-in-central-europe-stopfake-s-best-practices/>

Media NGOs have also played a significant role. Media hubs were established in Ukrainian cities to support journalists though performing different functions in different regions. In 2022, the Kharkiv Media Hub communication platform was launched in Kharkiv, near the front line, with co-organisers from the local government, academia, and NGOs to aid media work in the region, including assisting war correspondents from international publications. At the same time, the Lviv Media Forum relocated newsrooms from dangerous areas and established the Lviv Media Hub for Ukrainian and foreign media workers. In 2022, IMI launched a network of ten local journalistic hubs (Mediabaza) to support independent journalists under challenging conditions, including providing protective and professional equipment.

Media organisations have also begun to document war crimes, a task previously handled only by human rights NGOs. Investigative journalist groups such as *Slidstvo.Info*, *The Kyiv Independent*, and the Public Interest Journalism Lab started creating media content on Russian crimes for Ukrainian and international audiences, contributing to future legal cases. Internews Ukraine launched the Kremlin's Voice platform, documenting Russian propagandists and their war-inciting statements, information which users can supplement.

Journalists and media associations work to counter Russian disinformation at the institutional level. For instance, in 2022 Mediarukh (Media Movement) called for the dismissal of former Russian state propagandist Harry Knyagnitsky from Voice of America. In 2024, Mediarukh community members supported *Texty* and urged the US Congress to stop pressuring the publication after it investigated Russia's agents of influence in the US.

The full-scale invasion forced media organisations to adjust their work guidelines. Based on post-invasion experiences, the Commission on Journalistic Ethics released a manual in 2023 offering practical recommendations on ethical journalism, including social media posts, gender equality, and wartime journalism.

Efforts to promote media literacy have continued despite war-related adjustments. Filter, the national media literacy project of the MCSC (which is supported by donors), has involved specialised NGOs in its initiatives, such as training sessions, manual development, and strategic planning. There's a growing understanding among stakeholders that media literacy can be integrated into broader projects, such as working with vulnerable audiences, where critical thinking is one of the main themes. Media literacy is increasingly seen as a tool to counter disinformation and hybrid influences during wartime, expanding citizens' skills beyond formal education.

According to an interviewed expert, stakeholders are now reimagining media literacy as a tool to combat disinformation and hybrid threats during wartime,

moving beyond its former association with formal education. Another focus is to develop a common terminology and broader concepts such as cognitive and informational stability. This discussion is valuable as it explores broader definitions of media literacy and its role in countering various informational influences, not just media content, and considers who should lead these efforts.⁹⁶

Experimental formats, such as the anti-fake NotaEnota (Raccoon Note) game and YouTube channels promoting media literacy and critical thinking, have emerged.⁹⁷ Integrating media literacy into business projects is a potential growth area. Filter and Detector Media took steps in this direction by studying business attitudes toward media literacy.⁹⁸

Several courses were launched to enhance Ukrainians' media literacy. IREX and the Association of Innovative and Digital Education have introduced two online courses: "Media literate resistance: building reasoned dialogues", focusing on communication skills and info-media literacy.⁹⁹ In late 2022, Filter released a media literacy course on the Prometheus platform created by fact-checkers, media literacy experts, and educators.¹⁰⁰ The "How Not to Become a Vegetable" YouTube channel partnered with a psychologist to create a family course on information hygiene. As part of the campaign mentioned above by Smart Angel, the Diia.Education platform (Ministry of Digital Transformation) released educational videos on media literacy featuring media literacy experts.¹⁰¹

The Academy of Ukrainian Press (AUP) published textbooks for teachers and trainers on media literacy during wartime (2023)¹⁰² and its practical application

⁹⁶ Interview with Maryna Dorosh.

⁹⁷ <https://notaenota.com/>

⁹⁸ "Fakes, IPSO and other online challenges: what Ukrainian business knows about media literacy," *Detector Media*, December 2023, <https://ms.detector.media/mediadoslidzheniya/post/33860/2023-12-29-feyky-ipso-y-inshi-onlayn-vyklyky-shcho-ukrainskyy-biznes-znaie-pro-mediagramotnist/>

⁹⁹ "Online course "Media literate resistance: building reasoned dialogues," *Education Hub of the city of Kyiv*, April 2023, https://eduhub-in-ua.translate.google.com/courses/onlayn-kurs-mediagramotniy-sprotiv-buduyemo-argumentovani-dialogi?_x_tr_sl=uk&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc

¹⁰⁰ "Media literacy: how not to be manipulated?," *Prometheus*, March 2023, https://prometheus.org.ua/course/course-v1:Prometheus+MEDIA_L101+2022_T3

¹⁰¹ <https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/en/courses/how-to-protect-yourself-from-fakes-and-disinformation>

¹⁰² https://www.aup.com.ua/uploads/Mediagramotnost_pid_chas_viyny_web.pdf [In Ukrainian]

(2024).¹⁰³ In September 2023, AUP launched a free online course, "Express Media Literacy for Teenagers," aimed at schoolchildren aged 13-17.¹⁰⁴

Recommendations

Previous recommendations for government structures, NGOs, and media have seen partial implementation, but the approach to information resilience needs to be more strategic. Uncoordinated communication policies of various departments hinder efforts at coordination. Although the information security strategy addresses disinformation resilience, its practical implementation, especially inter-authority coordination, remains unclear.

Media literacy development is gaining priority in both short and medium-term planning horizons. However, the MCSC strategy for 2026, involving diverse stakeholders, shows a commitment to long-term efforts. While partially improving government-media cooperation, the telethon should be modernised for the new stage of the war. The involvement of independent media in information security is inconsistent. For example, in selective presidential press conference participation, representatives of Telegram channels are sometimes given priority over the traditional media.

The law "On Media" has enhanced the capacity to combat disinformation, but issues persist with unregulated platforms such as Telegram and the use of AI. Projects such as the Kharkiv Media Hub show successful cooperation between activists and state structures but need scaling up in frontline regions to assist foreign media effectively.

Given the changes which have taken place since 2021 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 to international stakeholders:

- To create interdepartmental strategic cooperation in strategic communications, including measures to combat disinformation and involve public organisations, the media, and businesses. Officials responsible for communication must have the appropriate authority to participate

¹⁰³ https://www.aup.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Mediagramotnist_tehnologii_i_practika_posybnic_2024.pdf [in Ukrainian]

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.aup.com.ua/en/novostien/the-aup-presented-the-online-course-express-media-literacy-for-teenagers-and-the-new-aup-platform/>

in decision-making to ensure the “one voice policy” at the level of various state bodies. To manage threats effectively, these efforts must be coordinated across government, local authorities, NGOs, international partners to plan actions and share resources and data.

- To improve the legislative framework for countering external informational influences by considering the problem in terms of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). At the same time, it is crucial to ensure laws do not block credible foreign organisations and media, for example, by applying a co-regulation mechanism. Finally, the government should regulate the censorship necessary in wartime to provide clear guidelines for journalists.
- To establish a regulation framework for social networks and messenger platforms. In addition, the government should continue to engage with platforms to address disinformation and enforce stricter measures against non-compliant channels that are not in dialogue with the democratic government. Telegram's dominance in the Ukrainian information space should be reduced and its use by government agencies as a messenger for internal communications should be limited in order to protect malicious actors' access to sensitive data.
- To continue efforts to establish a regulation framework for the use of AI, particularly in the media, potentially through new co-regulatory bodies, to prevent abuse.
- To strengthen communication countermeasures against external informational threats such as publicising the motives for spreading harmful information. Specific laws or prohibitions may not apply against foreign actors in other jurisdictions. In addition, these foreign actors can use factual information for malicious purposes. For this, it is worth strengthening the Ukraine's MFA role in combating disinformation, for example, by creating a specialised department focused on this, including exchanging experiences with other countries. Currently, only the Department of Public Diplomacy and Communications is engaged in combating misinformation, which shifts the focus of this activity.
- To strengthen the strategic dimension of media literacy development. Involve the Ministry of Education and Science in systematically implementing media literacy projects, including AI literacy, at all levels of formal education in cooperation with the MSCS and civil society to achieve these efforts with long-term sustainability in mind. Continue efforts to implement media literacy training programmes for people aged 60 and above.

- To promote Ukraine's disinformation combat experience and research globally to update international policies that do not meet modern challenges. Engaging with international organisations, government structures, academia, and communication platforms is necessary for this. Also, it is important to ensure effective internal coordination between all domestic stakeholders dealing with issues such as the impact of the genocidal rhetoric of the Russian government and media.
- To rethink the role of the national telethon, refocusing it towards a dialogue with society regarding sensitive issues. To ensure equal representation of political parties on the air of the national telethon.
- To train law enforcement agencies and media professionals to counter propaganda, fake news, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns. The shortage of personnel in the Ukrainian media, caused by the invasion and destruction of the advertising market, entails a problem with the professional level of journalists, particularly media literacy. Investments in short and long-term educational programmes to strengthen media and AI literacy and give new impetus to coordination between journalists and NGOs. In addition, training programmes could help to monetise and support quality local media not only in the frontline areas but also in the rest of the territory of Ukraine. Training journalists and social media marketing specialists in information hygiene on social networks is also essential.
- To conduct impact studies and test different tools under multiple conditions to evaluate effectiveness and outcomes before making significant decisions.
- To develop effective communication strategies and establish channels for systematic communication with Ukrainians abroad, particularly refugees, and Ukrainians in the temporarily occupied territories. To create responsible bodies and establish clear coordination for this communication. At the same time, systematic studies of the impact of Russian disinformation on these audiences are needed.

Conclusions

Across each of the ten CEE countries, the degree of progress in implementing the recommendations proposed by the 2021 DRI has been uneven. While some countries have demonstrated progress by following several of the recommendations, others have shown more mixed results or have even seen a decline in their capacity or political will to combat disinformation.

In **Armenia**, the legal and institutional framework for fighting disinformation has barely improved since 2021. Although opportunities to litigate against Russian media responsible for spreading disinformation have emerged, Armenian proxy media, which spread identical disinformation narratives, have avoided penalties. The state's cooperation with civil society on fighting disinformation has improved in recent years but remains insufficient. Due to the cooling of political relations between Armenia and Russia, Russian media in the country has largely seen its popularity and trust decline significantly.

In the reviewed period, the authorities and people of **Azerbaijan** have placed more importance on information relating to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict than to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The country's media environment is strongly regulated, which limits the exposure of the population to foreign-led disinformation. However, insufficient level of professionalism among a large part of the journalist community has hampered resilience to disinformation, particularly as diligent verification procedures are not exercised by many media outlets. The Media Development Agency, established in 2021, aims to improve the training of national media workers, but the effectiveness of its activities is difficult to determine.

The **Belarusian case** is particularly unique as the country's information sovereignty has become even more vulnerable since 2021. In the light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belarusian public officials and the state media demonstrated very little autonomy from the official Russian position. This was the case in Belarusian coverage of events happening either in Ukraine or internationally. Similarly, the coverage of domestic issues was dominated by disinformation techniques such as attributing Nazi ideology to political opponents. All independent media, professional unions, dozens of NGOs and thousands of private social media accounts have been categorised as 'extremist'. The efforts of NGOs, independent media and bloggers in exile have nevertheless contributed to rather effective debunking of the disinformation available to Belarusian society and the diaspora.

The **Czech Republic's** battle against disinformation at the state level has not significantly progressed beyond the position described in the 2021 DRI study. New measures against disinformation proposed in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine were framed by anti-system actors as government overreach and censorship. Eventually this pressure reduced the scope of these measures. The contribution of Czech civil society and the media in fighting disinformation is of considerable importance. However, civil society actors need to increase their coordination and share best practices in the field of combating disinformation.

In recent years **Georgia's** National Communications Commission has implemented certain activities related to media literacy programmes in line with the recommendations provided by the 2021 DRI edition. Their effectiveness is, however, difficult to assess. The Georgian ministerial communication units have been barely active. Following an adoption of the controversial 'foreign agents' law, the tension between Georgia's ruling party and the EU has produced negative consequences, with anti-Western disinformation and propaganda proliferating across the country, particularly during the October 2024 Georgia parliamentary elections.

The **Hungarian** government has made little progress in combating pro-Kremlin disinformation since 2021. Close political ties with Russia, maintained by Hungary in spite of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, pose major obstacles towards fighting disinformation. Changes to the legal and institutional framework advanced by the Hungarian authorities in recent years are believed to pursue domestic political goals rather than to curb the spread of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives. In the absence of authorities' political will to recognise the threats posed by disinformation, independent media and civil society groups are major actors in tackling disinformation.

Moldova has demonstrated notable progress in the fight against disinformation. In recent years, the authorities established the Strategic Communication Centre, adopted a new version of the Code of Audiovisual Media Services to prevent and combat disinformation, and involved civil society in shaping national information security policy. The Audiovisual Council, an autonomous public authority regulating the public and private audiovisual media in Moldova since 1996, increased its monitoring of the audiovisual space, and a number of disinformation-spreading websites and TV channels have been blocked. Furthermore, Moldovan civil society has expanded and strengthened its media literacy promotion activities. Nevertheless, the coordination of state institutions in charge of fighting disinformation was insufficient and the legal and institutional framework remains underdeveloped.

The **Polish** authorities largely followed the recommendations proposed in the 2021 DRI study. The government compelled social media companies to comply with the Polish laws and authorities started paying greater attention to the proliferation of disinformation through social media. More media and literacy programmes for state officials, schoolchildren and the wider population have been launched in recent years. The legal and institutional framework has improved and this was corroborated by the corresponding DRI indicator. However, coordination between state institutions and their cooperation with civil society groups remains insufficient.

Despite institutional advancements such as the establishment of specialised units to counter disinformation across ministries and relevant state bodies, **Slovak** society remained exceedingly susceptible to disinformation. For example, a 2023 public poll showed 37 per cent of Slovak respondents viewed Ukrainian authorities as fascists. Experts are concerned that under the recently elected Slovak government, the achievements of the previous government may be undermined, and initiatives within the NGO and media sectors may also be subverted.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, **Ukraine** has demonstrated significant resilience against disinformation. The adoption of the law "On Media" has enhanced the capacity to combat disinformation. The authorities established new bodies in charge of fighting disinformation. The country's civil society and the media have made significant contributions. However, experts are concerned about the insufficient level of coordination of communication policies between various departments and the lack of a comprehensive government approach towards developing greater resilience to disinformation.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, trust in Russian media has eroded in most, if not all countries covered by the DRI. This decline has partly limited the exposure and susceptibility of CEE countries' to disinformation narratives. At the same time, the legal and institutional frameworks in virtually all ten countries remain underdeveloped, and the coordination between state agencies is often insufficient. Likewise, cooperation between the state and civil society has been insufficient in many countries, and has regressed in several. Civil society and the media have remained crucial actors in tackling disinformation and have contributed to societal resilience, particularly in those countries where the authorities have demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm or goodwill towards the fight against disinformation.

Contributing
institutions

Leading institution

The Eurasian States in Transition Research Center (EAST Center), Poland

Launched in 2016, the EAST Center 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, particularly, with projects focusing on Central European countries' transition and reform experiences, and their possible application in Armenia in the context of cooperation with the EU. The CPS has also been organising strategic communication courses for Armenian public servants, as well as media literacy courses for various audiences. It 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, Czech Republic

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.

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. In recent 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.

Adapt Institute, Slovakia

The Adapt Institute is a non-governmental, non-partisan, non-profit, analytical think-tank that works on defence and security policy, with a specific focus on strategic adaptations and changes in the security environment. The Adapt Institute aims to develop the Slovak security community through education, expert network development and stimulating expert dialogue at national and international level, and to improve public debate and give space to experts.

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.

