GLOBSEC
IDEAS SHAPING THE WORLD

Drivers of narratives undermining democracy and Transatlantic cooperation in the Central European information space in 2021
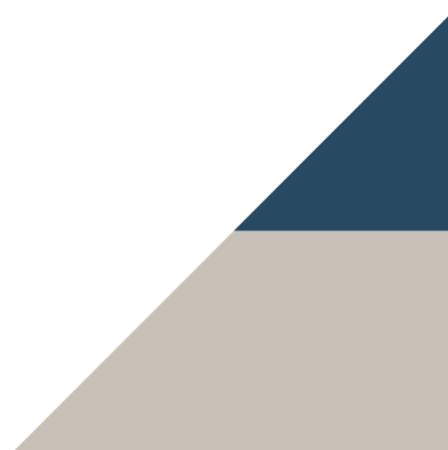
Democracy & Resilience

Narratives travelling the information space

Authors:

Dominika Hajdu, Policy Director

Katarína Klingová, Senior Research Fellow

Centre for Democracy & Resilience
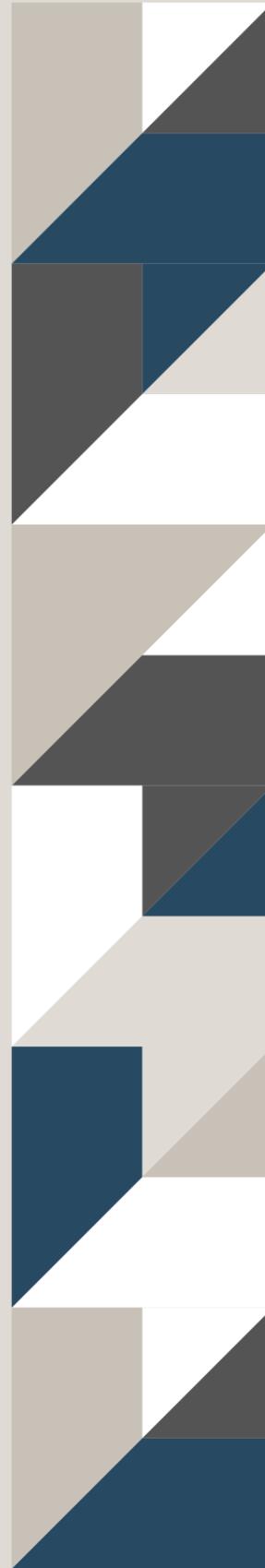
Contents

Summary

According to multiple reputable assessments of the state of democracy throughout the world, democracy is undergoing a period of decline.[1] While the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive measures related to it have, undoubtedly, contributed to the deficit, democratic backsliding and dissatisfaction with democratic governance extend beyond lockdowns and closings. Rising polarisation, populist motivated policy decisions targeted towards quick political victories and the proliferation of information manipulation have all eroded societal interpersonal trust in public institutions. This public confidence is, notably, an essential ingredient that otherwise safeguards democratic processes and the delegated powers of government.

Data from the Economist Democracy Index reveals that many younger European democracies, which have only enjoyed EU and NATO membership for 15-18 years, are slightly more vulnerable to these currents. Across most former post-communist states[2], widespread dissatisfaction with how democracy works is fuelled by ever-present corruption and education systems still playing catch-up from communist era restrictions on critical thinking. While there are exceptions, such as Estonia, comparisons

between most post-communist countries and Austria point to stark differences in democracy resilience.

GLOBSEC Trends 2021, which measured trends and shifts in public attitudes in 10 Central European countries, also found widespread distrust in public institutions, dissatisfaction with how national governments are managing the COVID-19 pandemic and knowledge gaps regarding the meaning behind democracy. The results come as an intensive smear campaign is waged across the region against liberal democratic principles and policies.

To better understand these patterns, GLOBSEC, in cooperation with nine organisations from the region, explored how narratives undermining democracy and/or cohesion travel the information space in 10 countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Case studies on specific countries were conducted by researchers from respective organisations. This report, however, provides an overarching assessment of similarities and central patterns concerning the Central European landscape vis-à-vis actors and messages weakening democracy and unity in the transatlantic space.

---

1   Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, Freedom House Indexes, World Press Freedom Index, etc.
2   https://www.globsec.org/publications/voices-of-central-and-eastern-europe/

Domestic drivers

State and media capture

The (successful) attempts of state capture in some CEE countries have largely contributed to the spread of narratives undermining democracy and Transatlantic unity. The governments, which have succeeded in filling crucial democratic institutions with loyalists are now capable of controlling the narrative consumed by the majority population about anyone who dares to criticise their undemocratic moves. This is the case of Poland[3], where the capture of the public broadcaster is coupled with judicial reform enabling removal or appointment of judges on political grounds[4], Hungary[5], where independent media are getting scarce due to government-initiated measures, or Slovenia, which is following a similar playbook.[6]

Hungary[7] has declined from 25th to 92nd in the World Press Freedom Index between 2009 and 2021[8], indicative of the impact of state capture of key mainstream media outlets on democratic decline and public opinion. Around 500 media outlets are now concentrated under the umbrella of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), which, under the government's influence, tends to frame issues in a carefully targeted way. An analysis from Political

Capital found this strategy often translates into the generation of narratives that uncritically promote Russia or China, or, on the contrary, criticise the European Union. That said, fringe outlets, which often disseminate anti-democratic or pro-autocratic narratives in other EU countries, have struggled to develop a substantial audience in Hungary – their typical role rather has been assumed by mainstream outlets.

"Overall, Hungarians' positive views on Russia and China, as well as their distrust of the United States, could most likely originate from a top-down pro-Kremlin, pro-Beijing campaign that has been waged by the Hungarian ruling party."[9]

Populism

Poland's distinct historical ties with Russia, including widespread awareness of Kremlin influence operations and potent historical memories of Soviet occupation, have rendered their relationship a special case. The Polish public broadcasting service, for example, has refrained from peddling narratives directly supporting autocratic regimes. As the Kosciuszko Institute's case study confirms[10], however, partial media control has enabled narratives criticising and undermining the EU

to seep into the public space - the overall virality of posts mentioning #Polexit has increased nearly tenfold since 2017, confirming a growing presence of this discourse in public discussions.

"The ruling coalition led by the Law and Justice party has openly criticised the European Union and its institutions, which has fuelled anti-European groups in Poland and related debate."[11]

A study by the Austrian Society for European Politics, meanwhile, concluded[12] that the COVID-19 vaccination issue, though to a lesser extent in Austria than other countries in the region, was used by key government officials in the country to lampoon the EU for its capability deficit during the crisis. This take was also promoted by an official Sputnik V vaccine Twitter account to spread narratives and posts supporting the growing interest of Austrians to get the Russian jab.[13]

---

3   https://rsf.org/en/poland
4   https://www.dw.com/en/eu-fines-poland-1-million-per-day-over-judicial-reforms/a-59635269
5   https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/The%20threat%20that%20does%20not%20exist%20(for%20some)%20-%20Russia%20and%20China.pdf
6   https://rsf.org/en/slovenia
7   Case study by Political Capital:
      https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/The%20threat%20that%20does%20not%20exist%20(for%20some)%20-%20Russia%20and%20China.pdf
8   https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/h3f86901f?country=HUN & indicator=32416 & viz=line_chart & years=2001,2021
9   Case study by Political Capital:
      https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/The%20threat%20that%20does%20not%20exist%20(for%20some)%20-%20Russia%20and%20China.pdf
10   Case study by Kosciuszko Institute: https://ik.org.pl/publikacje/czy-polexit-to-operacja-infromacyjna/
11   Ibid.
12   Case study by Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE):
      https://www.globsec.org/publications/austria-and-the-eus-joint-covid-19-vaccine-strategy/
13   Case study by Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE):
      https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Austria-and-the-EU%E2%80%99s-joint-COVID-19-vaccine-strategy.pdf

"Although Chancellor Kurz always emphasised that his criticism [of vaccine procurement] did not refer to the EU's vaccine strategy and to Commission President von der Leyen, this was the way it was perceived publicly by many in Austria. In February 2021, only 37% of Austrians said in an ÖGfE survey that the joint vaccine procurement had been a good decision, whereas 42% answered that it would have been better if each member country had ordered vaccines on its own."[14]

Right-wing nationalism

Despite their exclusion from government coalitions, political parties close to the far- or extreme-right have been able to wield significant influence on debates concerning democracy and Western alliances - Romania and Slovakia are notable examples. In Romania, despite generally broad support for NATO and EU, the right-wing nationalist AUR[15] party has proven effective in disseminating narratives combining traditionalism and nationalism that undermine both organisations. The tropes primarily gain traction on social media where they are diffused to hundreds of thousands of users.[16] They include assertions that Romania exerts little influence in Brussels and suffers from an infection of "faulty foreign ideas" (i.e. neo-Marxist and politically correct beliefs) that threaten traditions.

"The spread of disinformation on social media seems to have launched a process of "normalisation" of false and malign content by having various narratives and conspiracy theories spread by official representatives influencing policy decisions. This might mean that narratives such as ROEXIT or the anti-European Union attacks could gain traction..."[17]

Slovakia, for its part, has seen various domestic actors, including far-right[18] and anti-system political figures[19], seek to obstruct Western cooperation and challenge the geopolitical orientation of the country. Recent negotiations between Slovakia and the US over the Defence Cooperation Agreement to be signed by both countries, for example, were met by protests, an intensive disinformation campaign and demands that a referendum be held over whether this cooperation should go forward. Attempts to weaken cooperation between Slovakia and one of its most important allied security guarantors, in fact, play directly into the hands of Kremlin influence operations, considering the heightened tensions between Ukraine, NATO and Russia.

Lack of awareness in public administration

In countries with satisfactory press freedom, like Slovakia, harmful narratives may often be the product of other factors including ignorance on the part of key officials. One GLOBSEC analysis examining the purchase of Sputnik V vaccines in Slovakia, for example, unveiled minimal awareness that Kremlin hybrid warfare could, if taken to the extreme, ignite a government crisis and change in government.

GLOBSEC's Vulnerability Index, which assessed the resilience of public administrations in eight countries, further demonstrated[20] that officials throughout the region were unaware of the fact that actors may seek to intentionally erode democracy. The absence of situational awareness and a one-track-mind perception of threats can mean that the good intentions of various public institutions and officials comes to be exploited by foreign propaganda that targets both the societies of the autocratic countries themselves and audiences on the other side of the world.

Foreign drivers
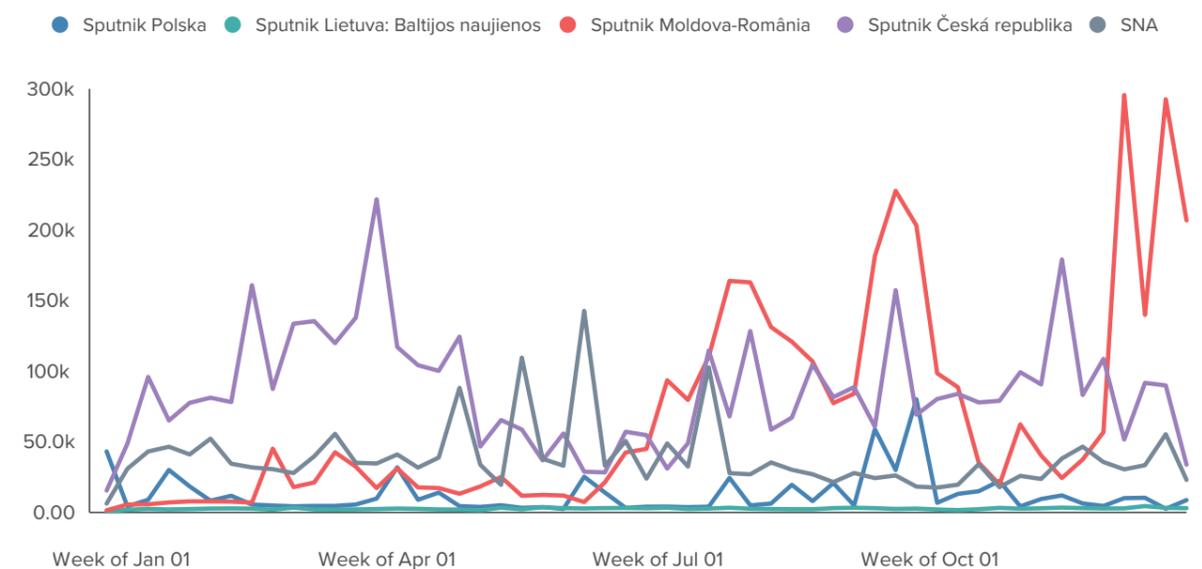
Large foreign owned outlets

Sputnik News, a Russian-owned news agency infamous for spreading disinformation, remains a prominent voice aimed at, among other goals, weakening the democratic West[21]. The outlet currently operates online, among languages from Central Europe, in Czech, Latvian (and Russian for the minority), Lithuanian (and Russian for the minority), Polish and Romanian (intended for the Romanian-speaking part of Moldova). Considering that the Czech version also reaches the Slovak audience and that the German version includes an Austrian section, Sputnik News boasts the potential to reach 7/10 societies studied by this project. Estonia, where the site was shut down following pressure from Tallinn, marks an exception.[22]

Total visits to different language versions of Sputnik news websites, according to Similarweb[23], stands as follows:

Outlet	Total visits in Jan-March 2021
Czech version	7.685 million
Latvian version	4.760 million
Polish version	3.521 million
German version (SNA)	3.214 million
Romanian/Moldovan version	1.126 million
Lithuanian version	0.1497 million

The Czech website has garnered a particularly robust audience, with 32% of its traffic coming from Slovakia. And, interestingly, 13% of Polish Sputnik views can be traced to Germany and 57% of visits on Latvian Sputnik to Russia.

Much of this news proliferates on Facebook. But the potential reach of Sputnik News on the social media giant remains low in Latvia and Lithuania – in these two countries it garners a follower base, respectively, of 750 and 3,600 users. The affiliate in Czechia (and Slovakia by extension), meanwhile, recorded average weekly interactions of 83,500 visits in 2021 and the one in Moldova (and Romania by extension) 72,400. The charts below illustrate that despite an extensive campaign labelling Sputnik News and Russia Today as sources of Kremlin information manipulation, the press agencies continue to serve as important tools of influence in some countries of the region and could still enjoy even further growth in their popularity.

● Sputnik Polska ● Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos naujienos ● Sputnik Moldova-România ● Sputnik Česká republika ● SNA

Total weekly interactions of posts published between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021. Source: CrowdTangle

14 Source of the data: https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20210217_OTS0020/oegfe-schmidt-die-corona-pandemie-hinterlaesst-ihre-spuren-im-eu-meinungsbild; Austrian case study: https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Austria-and-the-EU%E2%80%99s-joint-COVID-19-vaccine-strategy.pdf
15 AUR = Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor
16 Case study by Funky Citizens: https://www.globsec.org/publications/anti-western-narratives-in-romania/
17 Ibid.
18 https://www.facebook.com/100044386691134/posts/519670146189204
19 https://www.facebook.com/harabinstefan/videos/634587377768083/
20 www.vulnerabilityindex.org

21 https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/sputnik-news-russian-government-owned-controlled-nato-accuses-kremlin-propaganda-machine-disinformation-syria-brexit-refugee-crisis-a7574721.html
22 https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-news-agency-sputnik-closes-estonia-operations-after-employees-quit/30355321.html
23 https://www.similarweb.com/

Name	Total	Reactions	Comments	Shares	
PL Sputnik Polska	684.7K	517.6K	83.1K	84.0K	
LT Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos naujienos	140.9K	97.2K	30.1K	13.7K	
Sputnik Moldova-România	3.64M	2.77M	360.4K	515.6K	
CZ Sputnik Česká republika	4.57M	3.32M	683.8K	561.6K	
SNA	2.05M	1.41M	400.7K	239.2K	

Total interactions of posts published between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021 per Facebook page. Source: CrowdTangle

Name	Total	Growth	% Growth	
PL Sputnik Polska	22.7K	+9.5K	+72.53%	
LT Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos naujienos	3.7K	+539	+17.14%	
Sputnik Moldova-România	28.5K	+10.6K	+59.29%	
CZ Sputnik Česká republika	138.2K	+34.8K	+33.71%	
SNA	217.6K	-2.5K	-1.129%	

Growth of followers per page between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021. Source: CrowdTangle

The turn to smaller foreign-affiliated outlets

In countries exhibiting greater awareness of Kremlin direct influence or where state administrations regularly impose restrictions on Russia-owned state media (e.g. the Baltics), smaller outlets that harbour either indirect or previous links to Moscow are used to shape public opinion. The EESC case study for Lithuania underscored that Baltnews, an outlet indirectly owned by Russia Today[24] and operating in all three Baltic countries, employs any and every opportunity to undermine NATO unity and perceptions about its strategic importance to members. This approach, including the narratives peddled, tracks closely to that adopted by Sputnik News.[25]

"These examples represent only a handful of the many articles published by Russian-controlled media outlets in the Baltics that collectively, by weaving together a web of twisted and false stories, aim to sow distrust towards NATO allies that market arms to the Lithuanian Armed Forces and government. The articles are not particularly sophisticated... [but] it is important to recognise that the simplicity of a lie can make it persuasive to people already disinclined towards doublechecking facts".[26]

Moves by the Latvian government[27] to block Baltnews, meanwhile, have raised public awareness about the outlet[28]. A case study from Latvia, however, points to an outlet Baltijas Balss (BB.lv), which, according to the author Martins Hirss, manages to frame content in a manner favourable to Russia and less so to the West. The website was owned by the wife of a former member of the Russian Parliament and Putin's United Russia party until 2019, its current ownership is unknown. Its readership base, nonetheless, makes it the most popular Kremlin-aligned online news source in the country.[29]

"Cases of blatant disinformation are rare. BB.lv, more often, presents one-sided information, omits relevant stories, and uses contrasting framing of Russia and the West... Furthermore, BB.lv often republishes content from Russia-based Kremlin-controlled "media". The Kremlin's propaganda perspective on the EU and US and its version of domestic events in Russia, consequently, are both promulgated to Latvian readers."[30]

The artificial peddling of narratives

The COVID-19 pandemic mobilised governments to produce vaccines and secure purchase deals sooner than the competition. This process, notably, went hand in hand with an intensive Russian disinformation campaign and propaganda aimed at the promotion of its own Sputnik V vaccine.[31] As the GLOBSEC case study on Slovakia notes, Moscow's propaganda machinery and social media accounts established exclusively to promote Sputnik V vaccine have sought to undermine trust in vaccines developed by Western companies and persuade policymakers worldwide to purchase their jab instead.

The procurement of Sputnik V vaccine doses by Slovakia and friendly declarations by various Slovak political figures were later picked up by information operations targeting both Russian and international audiences. When the purchase turned south, however, pro-Kremlin outlets lambasted what they deemed an alleged targeted disinformation campaign waged against the Russian vaccine[32]. The official accounts of Sputnik V further unjustifiably accused the Slovak Drug Agency of sabotage and a deliberate disinformation campaign.[33] These claims were subsequently disseminated by Twitter accounts with characteristics of inauthentic activity, according to the TruthNest application[34]. While the languages and countries of origin of the accounts varied, significant numbers of them employed Spanish and were based in Latin America. By that time, many countries in Latin America had purchased or were in the process of negotiating the procurement of Russian shots. The accounts generally sought to label Russia a victim even as they disseminated false and misleading information assisted by additional accounts with bot-like features.

Exploitation of minority groups

There are numerous national minority groups across CE region – borders have indeed evolved and shifted for centuries. These societal groups, especially in small countries, could be vulnerable to (malign) influence operations attempting to foster social polarisation, sow confusion and/or undermine the authority of government. Vigilance towards such threat is especially present in the Baltics, with relatively large Russian minority groups. Such societal groups, as shown in Estonian analysis[35], then often consume information from Russian-originating and Kremlin-controlled outlets that spread disinformation and pro-Kremlin propaganda. Moscow's actions, significantly, challenge the geopolitical orientation and/or democratic processes of the Baltics. It is imperative that more balanced (and unbiased) information, consequently, reach these communities who otherwise would only engage each other via inter-linked Facebook pages, online communities or local media outlets.

Minority groups, however, are not only cynically used by the Kremlin and Beijing. Hungary's Orbán government, for its part, has increasingly sought to lean on Hungarian minorities living in neighbouring countries to influence the results of local elections,[36] enhance the sphere of influence of Budapest and enlarge the electoral base for Hungarian elections. Some Hungarian public institutions and political figures frequently amplify narratives of the Kremlin and Beijing, affirmed in an analysis of the Hungarian information space. This malign content percolates far and wide in the region through the reposting of information published by Hungarian public institutions and officials.

24   https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/miriamelder/a-network-of-russian-language-news-sites-is-secretly-owned
25   Case study by EESC: https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/In-the-Kremlins-crosshairs-Lithuania-and-trust-in-NATO-ver2.pdf
26   Ibid.
27   https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/access-to-kremlin-mouthpiece-portal-blocked-according-to-eu-sanctions-rules.a326744/
28   https://medium.com/dfrlab/baltnews-latvias-audience-size-decreased-after-domain-suspension-d636018f8a06
29   Case study By Martins Hirss: https://www.globsec.org/publications/kremlin-aligned-media-in-latvia-kingdom-of-crooked-mirrors/

30   Ibid.
31   Similar behaviour was not observed among other vaccine producers.
32   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/west-criticizes-russian-coronavirus-vaccine-cant-accept-russia-primacy/
33   Case study by GLOBSEC: https://www.globsec.org/publications/sputnik-v-not-just-a-vaccine/
34   https://www.truthnest.com/
35   Case study by Dmitri Teperik, ICDS: https://www.globsec.org/publications/disinformation-networks-of-pro-kremlin-proxies-in-estonia-in-the-russian-speaking-community/
36   https://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/src/files/Globsec_VulnerabilityIndex_online.pdf

Cross-cutting drivers

Use of well-established and emerging polarising issues

An examination of Bulgarian and Czech elections held in 2021 shed light on the repeated campaign reappearance of topics that had already proven polarising and a source of information manipulation, alongside new wedge issues that were trialled for the same purpose. The topic of migration is one of these. The issue gained resonance during the 2015 EU crisis and has remained on the agenda ever since[37], occupying a prominent place in the 2021 elections and the campaign of ANO, the former governing party. Despite no indication of a rise in asylum applications in the country[38], migration was deployed to spread fear in the party's election spots - a *"Refugees welcome"* sign, alongside others, elevated the Brussels dictate and security frames. According to pre-elections polls conducted by PSSI, our Czech partner, and the sociological agency STEM, 51% of Czechs believed the claim that the liberal Pirates Party, the target of numerous disinformation campaigns, "wants to start handing out apartments and other support so that more people from Muslim and African countries could come to Czechia".[39] And half further believed that the "EU"

systematically works towards having more Muslims and Africans in the EU".[40]

"The hoaxes that resonated most with the public were those conforming to long standing stereotypes, such as the one that the EU is trying to destroy us through migration."[41]

The climate crisis (and the EU Green Deal) is an important issue that will be widely utilised by Eurosceptic and populist voices to further sow distrust in the EU and Western unity. It has already been featured in election campaigns in both Bulgaria and Czechia.

Election campaign spot from ANO, 2021[42], claims on the boards include Lower pensions, Make Brussels decide, Abolish cars, Punish the successful, etc.

The case of Estonia on how Russia's use of COVID restrictions and vaccination to further weaken the Russian minority's trust[43] is yet another example underlining the extent to which polarising issues and a range of actors, both domestic and foreign, are involved in these processes.

Facebook groups and active individuals within them

The case studies from nearly all countries demonstrated that many of the narratives undermining democracy and Western cooperation are gaining traction on Facebook groups. Specific articles are often shared multiple times and re-shared in other groups. This "success" on Facebook is undergirded by dedicated individuals, often retirees with abundant enough free time to post an average 12-14 posts per day, trolls who share content into multiple groups at once or people just enthusiastically engaged in their favourite groups with their online peers. The ICDS analysis for Estonia identified a group of 14 individuals particularly active in producing, sharing and engaging with content in Russian-language groups. The Latvian case study, meanwhile, points to the impact that one individual engendered by sharing an article, which deployed negative frames about the US, on three different Russian-speaking groups in Latvia. The story subsequently travelled into other groups of Russian speakers in Estonia and Russia.

"This story is an example of how easily content travels through Facebook communities and among different countries."[44]

There is also a general pattern of anti-democratic and disinformation content appealing to groups already predisposed to this type of information. A Czech article, for example, purported a conspiracy theory concerning revelations from the Pandora Papers about Andrej Babis being an alleged operation orchestrated by globalists like George Soros. The article, according to the Czech case study, was ultimately shared into groups with nationalistic, pro-Russian, anti-vax and anti-EU themes.[45] Similar observations were discerned from the Bulgarian election campaign during which pro-Russian, anti-NATO, anti-EU, religious and ultra-conservative groups shared conspiracy theories linked to COVID-19 measures and vaccinations.[46]

Use of the concept of "traditional values"

Fears of the unknown, nostalgia, personal frustrations and insecurities from a fast-developing world shared among many (not only) Central Europeans are an easy target to exploit.[47] The far-right nationalists, populists, the Kremlin, pro-Kremlin actors and the church and religious authorities alike have been utilising these feelings to establish their role of the beacons and restorers of stability and tradition. The false assumption of the open, inclusive society being in a direct contrast of

the national "values and traditions" is one of the key and most dangerous drivers of polarisation across Europe. This narrative has been used to justify anti-abortion laws in Poland, anti-media and anti-NGO laws in Hungary and anti-LGBTI measures and attacks almost across the entire region, including Slovakia[48], Bulgaria[49] or Latvia[50].

37   2017 campaign: http://www.old.pssi.cz/download/docs/500_parlamentni-volby-2017-analyza.pdf;
     https://www.median.eu/cs/?page_id=2542; 2018 campaign: https://www.e15.cz/volby/prezidentske-volby-2018/stop-imigrantum-a-drahosovi-zemanova-kampan-odstartovala-na-billboardech-1342348
38   Applications for asylum, since 2014, have remained constant between 1,000 and 2,000:
     https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/statisticke-zpravy-o-mezinarodni-ochrane-za-jednotlive-mesice-v-roce-2020.aspx
39   https://www.stem.cz/velka-cast-obcanu-uverila-predvolebnim-utokum-na-konspiracnich-serverech-ukazuje-novy-pruzkum/#more-6896 (in Czech)
40   Ibid.
41   https://www.stem.cz/velka-cast-obcanu-uverila-predvolebnim-utokum-na-konspiracnich-serverech-ukazuje-novy-pruzkum/#more-6896
42   https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/zahranici/babis-podle-listu-dennik-n-vyuziva-v-kampani-neexistujici-pr/r~f123ac84228b11eca824ac1f6b220ee8/

43   Case study by ICDS: https://www.globsec.org/publications/disinformation-networks-of-pro-kremlin-proxies-in-estonia-in-the-russian-speaking-community/
44   Case study by Martins Hirss: https://www.globsec.org/publications/kremlin-aligned-media-in-latvia-kingdom-of-crooked-mirrors/
45   Case study by PSSI (in Czech): https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9485_pssi-perspectives-15.pdf
46   Case study by CSD: https://csd.bg/events/event/disinformation-narratives-in-the-november-2021-bulgarian-elections-campaign-key-actors-and-amplifie/
47   More about these atttitudes can be found in GLOBSEC polling from 2020: https://www.globsec.org/publications/voices-of-central-and-eastern-europe/
48   https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2014-06-10/slovak-republic-marriage-defined-as-between-one-man-and-one-woman/
49   https://www.euractiv.com/section/non-discrimination/news/foreign-ambassadors-slam-attack-on-lgbtq-centre-in-bulgaria/
50   https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/30/gay-latvian-man-dies-after-homophobic-attack-campaigners-say

Recommendations

- ### Improving situational awareness of civil servants

  Low situational awareness often stemming from a one-track-mind perception of security threats and understanding of the security environment, a lack of developed structures enabling horizontal and vertical exchange of information and inadequate monitoring capacities are common features across countries in the region including Bulgaria and Slovakia. Satisfactory situational awareness, importantly, can be the cornerstone of resilience building, effective whole-of-government policies and strategic foresight. More resources should, therefore, be invested in the peer-to-peer exchange of information and trainings to cultivate important interpersonal, regional and international contacts and strengthen resilience.

- ### Transparent ownership of the media

  Growing media distrust hampers the ability of the press to fulfil its democratic watchdog role. At the same time, many outlets are merely pieces of propaganda machines that promote information operations and peddle hyper-partisan issues (e.g. the opaque media ownership of Baltijas Balss in Latvia). Democratic governments, therefore, would be prudent to ensure complete transparency of media ownership. Among other benefits, these moves could contribute to increased trust and better identification of the potential misuse of outlets for influence operations.

- ### Independence of public broadcaster

  Public broadcasters are an important source of information throughout the CE region and are generally perceived as among the most trusted media sources in many countries.[51] The state-capture and politicisation, however, is leaving its mark and could serve as a vehicle for undermining democracy, witness the case of Hungary. The depoliticisation and professionalisation of public broadcasters, by contrast, could increase media trust and help stave off anti-democratic narratives from permeating far and wide.

- ### Better integration of minorities with more information in their languages

  Language and ethnic minority groups are often exploited by various problematic actors to pursue their interests. The general lack of information and news in minority languages emboldens this nefarious action. The Baltic countries, that said, have exhibited good practices in ensuring the availability of prominent media content in multiple languages.[52] To further enrich the information space and provide equal opportunities for all citizens, including minority access, there is a need to additionally support minority language versions of smaller and more thematic media outlets too.

- ### Better presence of Western media in the region

  Rising democratic backsliding and the state capture of public institutions, including public broadcasters, provide an opportunity for officials to manipulate public opinion and undermine the ability of citizens to make decisions based on objective information. Information not coloured by the government's political agenda is, in such an environment, difficult to ascertain, especially when combined with government attempts to gain control of private media outlets too. Though an increasing number of information spaces in the CE region display these tendencies, a positive indicator concerns the emergence of foreign media (re-)establishing offices in the region and offering information in local languages. Examples that should be expanded on include Deutsche Welle restarting their reporting in Hungarian[53] and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reporting in 27 languages and 23 countries including Hungary and Bulgaria.[54]

- ### Limiting the reach of harmful content

  One of the key factors undergirding the success of far-right and nationalist groups in the CE region relates to their large-scale presence and virality on social media. This feat is made possible by two linked patterns. Posts generating anger, namely, attract more engagement from users[55], and algorithms recommend content based on user engagement. These two observations bolster the spread of content generating animosity and hate[56] and risks users getting mired in a spiral of extremist content[57]. EU and civil society alike should advocate and work with big tech on establishing clear rules and algorithm transparency to ensure that they not primarily promote detrimental content. Factual information and quality journalism based on clearly defined trustworthiness indicators rather should be more prominently featured. While these moves will likely impact big tech's revenue stream, the current toll afflicted on democracy is considerably greater.

51   In Czechia and Slovakia, for example: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf

52   https://www.delfi.lt/
53   https://www.dw.com/en/dw-magyar-deutsche-welle-launches-program-in-old-new-broadcast-language-hungarian/a-57358854
54   https://pressroom.rferl.org/rferl-language-services
55   https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/430608-trending-science-social-media-making-us-angrier-study-reveals
56   https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00550-7
57   https://www.nytimes.com/column/rabbit-hole

- **Lifelong digital skills learning targeted to various social and age groups**

Understanding how social media platforms and new technologies work and grasping relevant pointers can prove especially difficult for various social groups including older generations. Those vulnerable can fall down the rabbit hole of social media platforms and (unintentionally) amplify malign content and become online trolls. Continued education programmes focused on developing the digital skills of different societal groups based on the sources they consume and forums they use for communication are, therefore, necessary to help address the problem.

- **Community-building initiatives for the elderly**

The case studies uncovered that key amplifiers of information manipulation in some communities often include elderly individuals of retirement age who spend their free time sharing content on social media. The formation of worldly connections is important for the psychological well-being of the old aged. And a lack of digital skills, combined with the absence of contact with the offline world, can easily trap these individuals in spirals of disinformation content. Community-building initiatives, consequently, should be supported for senior citizens.

- **Open communication of public security threats and defence of democratic principles**

With democracies and democratic principles challenged on multiple fronts, it is paramount that public officials openly communicate about these problems and defend democratic principles. In September 2021, representatives of the Lithuanian Defence Ministry warned public officials and citizens not to use Chinese-made phones due to cybersecurity and censorship risks.[58] The Latvian government, for its part, continuously publicly discredits Kremlin-operated outlets, including Sputnik News and Baltnews, thereby contributing to their low readership in the country.[59] Related communication on security threats and the pitfalls of using the products and services of particular private companies should be foundational to building societal resilience against malign influence.

- **Open communication about hybrid threats posed by Russia and China**

Significant segments of political leadership and society in CE remain ignorant about Russian and even more Chinese influence operations. For example, a total of 46% of respondents in CE have "never heard of" and/or "did not know" who the Chinese president was in the GLOBSEC Trends 2021 survey.[60] People in the region also generally hold very limited knowledge about current events in Russia and China including human rights violations. This ignorance poses a significant vulnerability exploited by both actors. The domestic policies and foreign activities, including malign influence operations, of Moscow and Beijing need to become part of public debate in Central Europe. A shift in this direction would also contribute to more extensive reporting on the matter by mainstream media outlets. Responding to this deficit will entail raising awareness about already ongoing malign activities in the region and sharing experiences on preventing and countering these operations.

- **Pro-active communication about new challenges**

The monitoring of both Czech and Bulgarian elections demonstrated that the measures to tackle the climate crisis is becoming yet another tool to undermine the EU and its policies. The authorities thus must build resilience proactively and communicate about issues that will most probably guide decision- and policy-making in the next decade — be it the climate crisis, role of AI, demographic changes or others.

58   https://www.dw.com/en/lithuania-cybersecurity-agency-warns-against-chinese-made-phones/a-59266470
59   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-prosecution-of-baltnews-and-sputnik-latvia-is-merely-russophobia

60   https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021_final.pdf

Narratives travelling the information space