

62
DECEMBER
2024

DISINFORMATION AND EU ENLARGEMENT: Instability and the Battle of Narratives in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Balkans

Javier Borràs, researcher, CIDOB

Disinformation has a damaging impact on both the European Union enlargement process and the internal image the EU has of itself, and the external image it conveys to the world. This CIDOB Briefing presents the main conclusions of the seminar "Disinformation in Enlargement Countries: Sowing Instability, Distorting EU's Perception", which was organised by CIDOB on 4 October 2024 and funded by the CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) Programme of the European Commission. Bringing together researchers and journalists, the seminar analysed the problem of disinformation on two key EU fronts, namely the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. In both these zones, disinformation affects local realities while also being part of regional trends. These include a noticeably greater interaction between domestic and external actors, strong discursive connections with new global antiliberal narratives, and the use of local and regional divisions for the benefit of domestic and external political stakeholders.

CIDOB
BARCELONA
CENTRE FOR
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS



Co-funded by
the European Union

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. DigiDem-EU - Digital Democracies: At the intersection between technology, democracy and rights in the EU (Grant Agreement 101140646)

The problem of disinformation has been identified by the European Union as one of the greatest challenges facing the continent's democratic governments and civil society. While there is a tendency to speak of disinformation primarily as an external threat, fuelled *inter alia* by the Russian government in an attempt to destabilise the European project and its support for Ukraine, the issue of fake news does not have clearly defined internal-external boundaries. The campaigns of external governments interact with the messages of domestic actors in such a way that disinformation becomes a phenomenon that is both international and local. The methodologies, tools, and strategies of manipulation are employed on a global scale, while the messages are tailored to fit local realities. These dynamics are clearly observable in the two geographical areas of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans.

Battle of narratives in Russia's shadow

In the Eastern Neighbourhood of the EU, the disinformation phenomenon is set against the background of the war in Ukraine. Since the Russian invasion in 2022, the main objective of the Kremlin's disinformation strategies in

neighbouring countries has been to weaken diplomatic, economic, and military support for the Ukrainian government. This occurs in addition to Russian efforts of previous years to undermine the European project in countries deemed by Moscow to be in its "sphere of influence", among them Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine itself. Russia's disinformation project also targets key EU member states with more Kremlin-friendly governments, among them Slovakia and Hungary, as well as European political forces at the extremes of the political spectrum.

Russia's disinformation strategies in the Eastern Neighbourhood have undergone changes in recent years, in particular when giving a more important role to local actors in disseminating fake news and pro-Kremlin stories. In discussions about disinformation, the role of foreign governments is especially singled out, but it is important to remember that by far the greatest part of the disinformation that is circulating is produced at the local level. Within this domestic production of false content, the Kremlin can benefit by amplifying information that strategically favours it. In this regard, local channels are not only a mechanism for unilateral dissemination of Russian-generated content. Furthermore, there are domestic stakeholders with

an autonomous political agenda who are producing their own disinformation and, if it creates instability and division, it is further disseminated by the Russian propaganda system. And in order to counter the effects of news verification services, new agents like “alternative fact checkers” are being promoted in efforts to discredit factually correct news.

In addition to this dynamic of interaction between internal and external actors is the use of transnational tools and channels, among them social networks with Russian links like Telegram. At the international level, Russia’s increasing disinformation activity in the Global South, by means of generating content in European languages like Spanish in Latin America, and French in West Africa, is also affecting the EU. For example, in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Colombia, Russia **has produced** disinformation that seeks to influence local perceptions of Russia and discredit the Ukrainian government. The reach of this content goes beyond national borders as it aims to be reproduced in Latin American communities in the United States and in the diaspora communities of European countries like Spain.

Russia’s disinformation strategies in the Eastern Neighbourhood have undergone changes in recent years, in particular when giving a more important role to local actors in disseminating fake news and pro-Kremlin stories.

At the local level, Russian disinformation seeks to aggravate existing political, ethnic, and social divisions, and to spread home-grown narratives that are favourable to Russia. Political polarisation, for example, simultaneously benefits certain local political stakeholders like the Slovakian and Hungarian governments, and external actors like Russia. Political use by local politicians of the war in Ukraine and the arrival of Ukrainian refugees has meant that in Slovakia, for example, **a majority of citizens** (51%) blames the West or Ukraine rather than Russia (41%) for the war. Only 30% supports Ukraine’s EU and NATO membership, while 36% is positively disposed to the establishment of an authoritarian regime in Slovakia. In a situation of increasingly illiberal European governments like those of Slovakia and Hungary, Russia further benefits from the **erosion** of critical media systems and civil society. It is important to emphasise, nonetheless, that low levels of freedom of expression affect not only the more pro-Russian countries like Slovakia (which dropped from 17th to 29th place in the **World Press Freedom Index**) and Hungary (in 67th place) but also countries that are more aligned with EU foreign policy like Greece (88th place), Bulgaria (59th), and Poland (47th). Apart from the benefits that Russia might accrue from disseminating disinformation, the problem of declining freedom of expression in the EU is also due to internal causes.

Finally, political exploitation of ethnic divisions is one of the factors that explains instability in Moldova, where the Russian disinformation machinery has also taken advantage of the presence of a significant **Russian-speaking community**. One way of attacking pro-European politicians like the current Moldovan president, Maia Sandu, is accusing them of being anti-Russian and of trying to marginalise this community and its language. This story was being pushed by the Kremlin even before its attack on Ukraine.

Russian activity in the Eastern Neighbourhood also engages with battles to dominate global narratives, for example by means of the current trend of global antiliberal traditionalism and nationalist historical revisionism. In the former case, Russia has sought to present itself as an upholder of traditional, conservative values, while promoting a story of a decadent, globalist, and “woke” European Union. Conservative governments and religious institutions in the Eastern Neighbourhood also use this traditionalist discourse as a legitimising tool, thus presenting themselves as protectors of the essence of the motherland, tradition, and national interests.

To return to the case of Maia Sandu, there has been a proliferation of **content** emphasising the fact that she is not married, or **claiming** that she is secretly Muslim, or from a sexual minority, in order to discredit her among the more traditionalist voters. This antiliberal wave has had an impact in other countries of the region, including Slovakia where 50% of citizens **see** their national identity and values threatened by the western way of life. In these circumstances, conservative stakeholders like the Orthodox Church have also played a key role in spreading rhetoric that opposes principles upheld by the European Union. One notable case is the **Orthodox Church of Georgia**.

In the domain of historical narratives, Russia has made attempts at **historical revisionism** to improve its own image and undermine that of Ukraine in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In its efforts to legitimise its influence-seeking manoeuvres, Russia has been pushing pan-Slavic narratives in order to foster ties with countries like Slovakia. Furthermore, it has taken advantage of numerous occasions to present itself as the sole liberator of these countries in the Second World War by means of an “anti-fascist” story that defines its opponents as Nazis or fascists, as in the case of the Ukrainian government. Meanwhile, the Kremlin has identified traumatic historical

experiences linked to the Soviet past and turned them into revisionism against Ukraine. For example, some disinformation campaigns accuse the Ukrainians of **being responsible** for the repression of the 1956 Hungarian revolution and for the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Against European enlargement into the Balkans

In the Western Balkans, disinformation campaigns by both internal and external actors are exploiting the divisions and structural weaknesses of these societies to propagate their narratives. In this region, disinformation significantly appears as a project of a government in power, as is the case of Serbia, the most economically and militarily powerful state of the Western Balkans. Using strategies similar to those employed in Hungary and Slovakia, the Serbian government is promoting its own disinformation discourse, which is having divisive social and ethnic effects, as well as fuelling scepticism about European integration, all of which well suits Russian interests in the region. In Serbia, Russian disinformation activity is

external media groups, with a significant withdrawal of western companies and an inflow of oligarchs with economic interests in Russia.

Russian media outlets including Russia Today, TASS, Ria Novosti, and Sputnik have taken advantage of this media crisis to **increase their presence** by offering free content in local languages to be reproduced by the region's media in their portals. In the Balkans, countries like Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia stand out for the number of local news items that cite Russian media sources. This Russian influence in the sphere of information is achieved not only by means of content placement but also through the movement of capital for "**strategic corruption**", which manages to gain influence over, or ownership of the local media. In this regard, Bulgaria and Croatia stand out as the countries with the highest incidence of "illegal financial flows" coming from Russia.

All these factors have ensured that the Western Balkans becomes a big loser in the process of European enlargement. It is important to note that disinformation has not caused

In the Western Balkans, disinformation campaigns by both internal and external actors are exploiting the divisions and structural weaknesses of these societies to propagate their narratives. In this region, disinformation significantly appears as a project of a government in power, as is the case of Serbia.

scant as the Belgrade government itself contributes to the Kremlin's strategic objectives.

However, besides the Serbian case, there are two structural factors that enable disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans. First, there are deep divisions and serious ethnic tensions in the individual countries of the region, and between them and certain EU member states, for example Bulgaria and Greece. In this situation of many stakeholders with nationalist agendas, historic grievances, and revisionism of the past, the presence of disinformation is, in good part, **a symptom** of these existing divisions and their exploitation by political actors.

Second, the Western Balkans media establishment is underfunded, politicised, and linked to economic powers with interests that are sometimes associated with agents of disinformation. Although there are exceptions of high-quality investigative journalism like the **Balkan Insight** network, journalists in the Western Balkans generally work in precarious conditions with little time to check content in the general context of a business model in crisis where funding from non-transparent sources is accepted. In addition, after the 2008 economic crisis, the Balkans experienced major structural changes in funding from

the stalling of European enlargement. In this case, too, fake news and manipulative narratives exploit already-existing grievances and feelings of discontent. For years now, the process of European enlargement into the Western Balkans has been paralysed by European elites that are wary of the costs and risks of further enlargement, together with a European populace that is increasingly in favour of a "fortress Europe" that is closed to the outside world. Existing anti-immigration trends in the EU are used to reinforce anti-enlargement messages. For example, Islamophobia and rejection of refugees by some European citizens is used to promote the idea that "Europe does not want more Muslims". The aim is to mobilise a **majority or a significant percentage** of Muslims in countries of the Western Balkans—among them Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia—against EU enlargement.

Given this indefinite postponement of future accession to the EU, and awareness of the EU's lack of credibility, there is a growing feeling of discontent among the region's citizens, and a search for alternatives beyond the European project. All of this creates a breeding ground where anti-EU domestic and external stakeholders can simply intensify existing concerns and misgivings in order to further undermine the enlargement process.

In the midst of this crisis of credibility of pro-EU voices, increasing numbers of **authoritarian-leaning governments** are offering “alternative” political and geopolitical projects. These governments are wielding a nationalist narrative claiming that joining the EU would mean a loss of national identity and traditional values. As an alternative to submission to a globalist, ultraliberal, and technocratic agenda, they hold out a protective response to globalising processes and increasing risks in the international arena. In this regard, governments like those of Serbia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Georgia are looking for “**alternative**” **international relations** in which the EU would no longer be the main partner, but just one alongside others like the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey. The weakening of the enlargement process and intensifying relations with these alternative powers are especially beneficial for the more autocratic Western Balkan states because they can forget about the democratising and liberalising reforms they need to complete if they are to join the EU without losing the economic benefits of world trade which they can now access through alternative markets.

that acritical agreement with European policies is not equivalent to more pluralism and more democracy. However, a civil society and media that are active and rigorous in public debate do mean more pluralism and more democracy. Within the European Union itself, there are critical views regarding certain EU policies, but they are not labelled as “anti-European” because of this. This critical pluralism is seen as part of European values, and it should be a mainstay of campaigns against disinformation. Contributing to this pluralism would help to counter social division, authoritarianism, and the weakness of media systems.

While there is broad agreement on the structural factors that should be favoured when attempting to build a society that can better resist disinformation, there is greater divergence with respect to specific actions aiming to counteract its general influence and particular campaigns. One of the most important debates concerns sanctions imposed on Russian media outlets like Russia Today and Sputnik, which are accused of promoting disinformation aimed at instigating instability in the EU and undermining efforts

The weakening of the enlargement process and intensifying relations with these alternative powers are especially beneficial for the more autocratic Western Balkan states because they can forget about the democratising and liberalising reforms they need to complete if they are to join the EU without losing the economic benefits of world trade which they can now access through alternative markets.

Imperfect solutions, necessary pluralism

In this situation of a faltering EU enlargement process, increasing Russian activity, strengthening of the local authoritarian stakeholders who are disseminating disinformation, and attacks on civil society and the media domain, what measures might reduce the impact of disinformation campaigns in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans?

First of all, it is important to distinguish between having a robust, pluralistic media system and having a pro-EU integration stance. Although both leanings tend to come together, being pro-EU does not necessarily mean being more democratic. In the Western Balkans, a more pro-European agenda and a more plural media system are factors that tend to be linked, but there are social movements, independent media, and civil society organisations that tend to be critical of some EU policies. For example, there have recently been **protests** over mining agreements between the EU and Serbia, with the result that these associations were labelled “anti-European”. Cases like this one are important reminders

to support Ukraine. Beyond disagreements over whether these sanctions are legitimate—due to precedents they may set and the symbolic impact of the fact that a leading liberal power like the EU should be sanctioning media outlets—the most common debate today is about the real usefulness of such measures. On the one hand, some observers consider that imposing these sanctions is not very effective because the content can easily be replicated on new websites, in what is known as “**information laundering**”. There is an additional argument that outlets like Russia Today are easy to identify as Russian, while with pages that replicate content it is more difficult to identify the origin of the information. On the other hand, others believe that imposing these sanctions is better than doing nothing since, whatever the case, they do inflict administrative costs on the Russian disinformation bureaucracy as well as sending a signal to Moscow and its European allies that the EU is not just passively acquiescing. Finally, still others have the view that censorship of Russian media outlets should be accompanied by broader sanctions extending to the Russian energy sector, which still receives European revenue through indirect distribution conduits via third countries like Turkey.

In the field of countermeasures against disinformation, there is further debate about the effectiveness of debunking and of the work of fact-checking bodies. A first problem is asymmetry in the resources and capacity for reaction of these organisations when compared with those of the agents that are promoting disinformation. Deciding priorities when countering fake news and manipulative discourse in a situation of meagre resources, when there is a need to react quickly, is a major challenge. Furthermore, offering factual data and a rigorous version of the events in question **is no guarantee** that citizens will stop believing “alternative facts” or conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, some commentators argue that discontinuing fact-checking efforts would entail the risk of leaving existing disinformation without a factual journalistic response. In this case, the debate is not so much about whether or not debunking activities should exist, but about the quantity of resources that should be allocated to them in contrast to alternatives that might be more effective. Although not presented as a strategy that opposes verification, other ways of countering foreign disinformation, such as that proposed by the EU’s European External Action Service (EEAS), suggest a change of paradigm. The EEAS **plan for tackling FIMI** (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) is less concerned with the narrative and content of disinformation than with the actions and tactics employed to magnify them. The aim is to cut off high-impact disinformation campaigns by quantitatively and qualitatively identifying patterns and strategies, for example coordinated action through bots for disseminating fake news in the social networks.

Finally, there is also heated debate about whether the priority response should be to shore up the strategic communication of European governments and institutions. This would entail creating their own narrative that would seek to have an emotional impact on European citizens, as a way of opposing the information being sent out by Russia and other purveyors of disinformation. This strategy would be in the framework of a pre-bunking stance that considers it necessary to go beyond reactive responses or merely countering disinformation with data and facts. From this standpoint, it is believed that the EU is caught up in a clash of narratives to which it must respond forcefully. While accepting the existence of this discursive competition, other observers consider that there is no clear boundary between strategic communication and propaganda. Certain more emotional stories that define the existing conflict mostly from a “security” standpoint, or a heavy-handed friend/enemy dialectic can be detrimental to pluralism in the public debate while also imposing a framework that excludes critics of European institutional policy.

In both the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans, the European Union is moving in a scenario of tension between countering the influence of external actors while keeping the enlargement process at a standstill; wanting to foster a stronger, pluralist, civil

society while opting for a more homogenous discourse that might robustly counteract the Russian discourse; and taking actions against disinformation while guaranteeing freedom of expression in a context of scarce resources and the protracted nature of the military conflict in Ukraine.