

Toward a Unified European Response to Russian Disinformation: Building a Pan-European Media System and Public Sphere

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Abstract

We have long since thought to have untangled Russia's general disinformation strategies and tactics, and have constructed a range of countermeasures, some more or less successful. This article addresses three intimately connected elements essential to successfully addressing Russian disinformation, however it might evolve, but none of which are currently present in Europe: (1) fully manufacturing consent, (2) a genuine pan-European public sphere, and (3) a pan-European media. The focus is on the Eastern and Central European, and Baltic members of the EU, and on potential mini-regional public spheres and accompanying media that could benefit from and sustain battling Russian disinformation through the manufacturing of consent.[1]

Confronting Russian disinformation

Since 2000, when Vladimir Putin first assumed the presidency of Russia, the barrage of Moscow's disinformation has skyrocketed, reaching historical proportions with his invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the rest of Ukraine in February 2022. Russia's malignant encroachment in the domestic politics, foreign policy, and public spheres of European and other countries has been aided by the expansion of social media and uncontrolled digital spaces.[2]

[1] This article is based on a similarly titled paper presentation delivered by the author at the IIIrd Annual Conference of the Romanian Centre for Russian Studies, "War in Ukraine. What Does the Future of Central and Eastern Europe Look Like," 7-9 November 2024, University of Bucharest.

[2] Putin served as president from 2000 to 2008, and again from 2012 until today - he was re-elected in 2024 to two consecutive six-year terms.

Both encourage and nourish group, network, and information conversations. We have known for decades that the most effective communication is transmitted horizontally, which is precisely what the new information carriers do better than traditional media. As such, social media and digital spaces are concurrently dangerous disseminators of disinformation and propaganda, and potential avenues to counter both.[3]

The addition of cyber-enabled political and informational weapons augmented the Kremlin's already copious dissemination of disinformation via its traditional domestic media, those explicitly intended for foreign audiences like Russia Today and Sputnik, and the few pro-Kremlin media in other countries.

In Romania, for example, (wittingly or not) Romania TV, Realitatea Plus, and Antena 3/CNN all enabled Moscow's propaganda/disinformation when they embraced a topic centered on the rights of minorities, in a religious context, that involved "Romanian Orthodox priests," who were in fact ethnic Romanian priests representing the Moscow Patriarchate being persecuted in Ukraine. One of the goals of Russia's propaganda was temporarily achieved: "Romanian society, which is quite religious and conservative, was swept up in a wave of offence. Even the Romanian Orthodox Church needed to explain the situation of Romanian priests in Ukraine." [4]

These technology-driven political and informational weapons have added to the potential impact a handful of pro-Russian and Kremlin-paid politicians may have in some countries - and those of other agents of influence, trolls, and bots attached to its army of influencers.[5] They may also have reinforced some of the *initial* sentiments in Eastern-Central European countries that hold perplexing sympathies for Russia, notwithstanding previous experience with past Russian aggression, e.g. Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary.

For instance, according to a 2022 independent Budapest-based Political Capital Policy Research and Consulting Services survey, thanks to the Orban government's criticism of EU sanctions against Russia, "36% of the total [Hungarian] population and 50% of government party voters (incorrectly) thought that Hungary did not vote in favour of the sanctions." Additionally, government accounts minimizing Russia's accountability for the war led to "governing party voters to put Russia only in third place on the imaginary ranking of parties possibly responsible," and to place greater blame on Ukraine and the USA for the war.[6]

[3] Jacques Ellul. (1965). *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. New York: Knopf.

[4] Marianna Prysiashniuk. Kremlin propaganda in Romania rears its head again. 9 February 2023. New Geopolitics Research Network. <https://www.newgeopolitics.org/2023/02/09/kremlin-propaganda-in-romania-rears-its-head-again/>; Ciprian Cucu. Disinformation Landscape in Romania. September 2023. EU DisInfo Lab. https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230919_RO_DisinfoFS.pdf

[5] Soňa Muzikářová. Why some EU countries in the east are still pro-Russia. 6 February 2023. Al-Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/2/6/why-some-eu-countries-still-harbour-pro-russian-sentiments>; Brindusa Armanca. Extensii ale Moscovei in Romania, 'Clubul de Gandire Gold' impinge propaganda si in teritoriu. 29 August 2024. PressHub. <https://www.presshub.ro/extensii-ale-moscovei-in-romania-clubul-de-gandire-gold-impinge-propaganda-si-in-teritoriu-343465/>

[6] Gábor Polyák, Ágnes Urbán, Petra Szávai and Kata Horváth. (2024). Disinformation under the guise of democracy: lessons from Hungary. In Martin Echeverría, Sara García Santamaría and Daniel C. Hallin (eds). *State-sponsored Disinformation Around the Globe. How Politicians Deceive Their Citizens*. Routledge.

As the Russian war went on, these feelings appear to have changed.[7] A Pew Research Center survey revealed that in 2023 73% of Hungarians perceived Russia in unfavorable terms, yet despite that, only 33% saw it as a major threat, and 35% as a minor one.[8]

With Russia's piratical takeover of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014 and its accompanying crescendo of disinformation, Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard concluded in 2022, "Putin has succeeded in putting the question of the European security order on the table." [9] Moscow-initiated disinformation is indubitably an intrinsic part of the security concerns for democracies worldwide, as a 2024 Carnegie Endowment paper reiterated.[10] Also in 2024, buttressing this reality, a Center for Strategic and International Studies report affirmed that "combating the resilience of Russian disinformation" is among five major strategic problems that must be specifically addressed.[11]

Combating Russian disinformation, with its chameleon ways specific to culture, country, and ideology, nefarious messages, lies, and histrionic fakery, among other fabrications, has prompted a string of policy suggestions, practices, and experiments focused on how this is to be successfully accomplished.[12] Each has its merits.

Some tactics are to be applied by state and/or government institutions, supranational organizations, and NGOs, while others are to be practiced by both traditional and social media outlets, and still others focus on media audiences and educational institutions.[13] Fact-checking, supporting journalists, media literacy, having social media content labeled, counter-messaging, and other practices are outlined in several different works.[14]

[7] Soňa Muzikárová. Why some EU countries..., cit.

[8] Moira Fagan, et al. Poles and Hungarians Differ Over Views of Russia and the U.S. 2 October 2023. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/10/02/poles-and-hungarians-differ-over-views-of-russia-and-the-us/>

[9] Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard. The Crisis of European Security: What Europeans Think About the War in Ukraine. 9 February 2022, European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-european-security-what-europeans-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine/>

[10] Jon Bateman and Dean Jackson. Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide. 31 January 2024. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/countering-disinformation-effectively-an-evidence-based-policy-guide?lang=en>

[11] Benjamin Jensen and Elizabeth Hoffman. Victory in Ukraine starts with addressing five strategic problems. 15 May 2024. The Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/victory-ukraine-starts-addressing-five-strategic-problems>

[12] Jon Bateman and Dean Jackson. (2024). Countering Disinformation..., cit.; Ilie Florin Ceuşan. (2023) European Union Policies and Strategies to Counter Russian Propaganda and Disinformation. L'Europe Unie. 19: 113-122; Thomas Kent. (2020). Striking Back: Overt and Covert Options to Combat Russian Disinformation. Washington, D.C: The Jamestown Foundation; Zviad Adzinbaia. How to Terminate Russian Disinformation. 12 May 2022. Center for European Policy Analysis. <https://cepa.org/article/how-to-terminate-russian-disinformation/>; NATO. (2023).

NATO's approach to countering disinformation. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_219728.htm

[13] NATO. (2023). NATO's approach..., cit.

[14] Jon Bateman and Dean Jackson. (2024). Countering Disinformation..., cit.

Emphasizing the urgency of finding more encompassing and cohesive responses to disinformation, the May 2024 proposal by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) for a “European Democracy Shield,” outlined its resolution to two unresolved obstacles. While (to date) short on conceptual and operational specifics, it recognized,

- (a) the need to “break down the existing silos in the EU’s approach,” and have EU member states “work towards a collective strategy on countering foreign interference as called for by the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany, Poland 1991);” and
- (b) “work with like-minded third-country partners through the European External Action Service’s Digital Diplomacy efforts by sharing relevant insights and exchanging best practices.”[15]

Mirroring the sentiments expressed by the ECFR’s proposal, Mircea Geoană, former deputy secretary general of NATO, said that NATO and the EU should be “even closer strategically, in using the respective [toolboxes] of the two organizations, we have to work with many of our partners.”[16] Indeed, both the EU and NATO have outlined cooperative programs to combat the Kremlin’s disinformation, as have Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine in their summer 2024 agreement to join forces to counter it.[17]

To date, few studies and journalistic assessments have comprehensively examined the efficacy of existing anti-disinformation programs and plans.[18] Those that have done so, like The German Marshall Fund of the United States, whose Alliance for Securing Democracy online research tool, known as the “Information Laundromat,” showed that “even efforts by transatlantic governments and technology platforms to sanction, ban, deplatform, and downrank Russian state-sponsored propaganda fall short of shutting off the firehose of information manipulation.”[19]

There are other studies that point to Russia’s own ineptitude, underlining the limitations of the Kremlin’s disinformation.[20]

[15] Irene Sánchez and Giorgos Verdi. Digital deceptions: How a European Democracy Shield can help tackle Russian disinformation. 28 May 2024. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/article/digital-deceptions-how-a-european-democracy-shield-can-help-tackle-russian-disinformation/>

[16] Allyson Park. NATO Summit News: NATO to Adopt ‘Overarching Russia Policy’ at 2025 Summit. 11 July 2024. National Defense Magazine. <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2024/7/11/nato-to-adopt-overarching-russia-policy-at-2025-summit>

[17] Iurie Rotari. “Republica Moldova, România și Ucraina fac front comun contra dezinformării rusești. 5 July 2024. Radio Free Europe/Moldova. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/republica-moldova-romania-si-ucraina-fac-front-comun-contra-dezinformatii-rusesti/33023538.html>

[18] Olivia Wee. Lessons from Russia’s Hybrid War Against Sweden and Finland NATO Membership. 13 March 2024. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/7525897.html>

[19] David Salvo. The NATO Washington Summit and Disinformation. 2 July 2024. The German Marshall Fund of the United States. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/david-salvo-in-gmf-the-nato-washington-summit-and-disinformation/>

[20] Wing Commander James Brown and Dr. Robert S. Hinck. (2023). (Un)Powerful Propaganda: Russia’s Ineffective Use of Information Activities Against NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence. Wild Blue Yonder. Online Journal (Air University, U.S. Air Force). <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Wild-Blue-Yonder/Articles/Article-Display/Article/3521788/unpowerful-propaganda-russias-ineffective-use-of-information-activities-against/>

Overall, Eastern and Central European audiences in 2023 were more disposed to believing the verifiable facts connected to Russia's war on Ukraine than the Kremlin's falsehoods, according to GLOBSEC, a global think-tank with offices in Bratislava, Brussels, Kyiv, Vienna, and Washington D.C. However, concurrently a "substantial segment of the population... displays insecurities and dichotomies in simultaneously believing true and false narratives," as GLOBSEC points out.[21]

What all of this indicates is that the crux of successful resistance to Russian disinformation is the establishment of three essential interrelated realities.

Manufacturing consent

The first reality is a more comprehensive and reliable manufacture of consent, or the management of public opinion, as an efficacious requisite for defending democracies.

The author of the concept of manufacturing consent, American social scientist and journalist Walter Lippmann, explained in the 1920s why this is necessary: "The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance." [22] If anything, the contemporary environment in which one must recognize, respond, and defend against cascading disinformation is even more complex and difficult to fully understand.

Consequently, the manufacture of consent, or the management of public opinion, is not only necessary regarding resisting the deluge of Russian disinformation, but specifically in understanding every strategy, tactic, goal, motivation, its daily expression, why it is important to combat it, and the ways in which to do so. As Lippmann correctly noted, "we cannot rely upon intuition, conscience, or the accidents of casual opinion if we are to deal with the world beyond our reach." [23]

A European Public Sphere

The second reality is the presence of a single public sphere - or related, collaborating, overlapping, or at the very least imbricated ones - working synergistically with a hybrid, social/digital media, and traditional media, i.e. the third reality dealt with in the next section.

[21] GLOBSEC. (2023). United we (still) stand. GLOBSEC TRENDS 2023, 6. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>
[22] Walter Lippmann. (1922). Public Opinion.
[23] Walter Lippmann. (1922). Public..., cit.

For democracy to function, there needs to be a space for rational public discourse and debate, as Jürgen Habermas argued.[24] And from a holistic perspective, Hannah Arendt wrote that such a space represents the “common world” that “gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other.”[25] With more specificity, scholars view this space not only for sharing information and ideas for debate and deliberation but also for circulating “collective emotions whose cohesion is based on the simultaneity of the subjects and questions that informs conversations, discussions, and moods.”[26] Adding to this view, others argue that such a public space is a cultural space “characterized by particular configurations of public and private.”[27]

Each of these conceptions of a public sphere is *apropos* not solely to a democratic society but in larger terms to a democratic EU that has long been accused of a democratic deficit, i.e. a separation between a “European” public, one that is still in the making, and EU institutions. In this circumstance, managing public opinion on any issue, including Kremlin disinformation, is difficult.

Progress in creating a pan-European public sphere is amorphous. Claims by some scholars that there is a “de-territorialized public sphere ecology” where the traditional separation between foreign and domestic, or global and national, have ceased to be pertinent, are far too optimistic, if not outright mistaken. They are certainly premature conclusions.[28]

In fact, the reality of the 2024 EU Parliamentary elections once again affirmed the North-South and East-West regional differences that it has exhibited in past elections. None of the variances are more glaring than those between the countries of Eastern and Central Europe and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the Baltic states, and their older, more established Western European democratic partners.[29] Additionally, as in 2019, the 2024 “European” election remained predominantly the aggregate of national elections for EU representatives, with all that this implies.[30]

Some common themes were certainly present in the 2024 EU parliamentary elections - economy and inflation, international conflict and war, immigration and asylum seekers, reducing inequality, and climate change.

[24] Jürgen Habermas. (1962). *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

[25] Hannah Arendt. (1952). *The Human Condition*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

[26] Corinne Doria. Public Sphere and the European Project. 22 June 2020. *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe*, <https://ehne.fr/en/node/12287>

[27] Anna McCarthy. (2001). *Ambient Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[28] Ingrid Volkmer. (2019). The Transnationalization of Public Spheres and Global Policy. In Diane Stone and Kim Maloney, (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Global Policy and Transnational Administrations*. Oxford University Press.

[29] European Parliament. (2024). European election results Constitutive session - 20/08/2024. <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/index.html>

[30] Peter Gross. (2020). The European public space and elections: media and changing communication policy. In Nicolas Pelissier and Philippe Maarek (eds.) *L'Europe face au populisme national*. La communication politique centrifuge des élections de 2019. Paris, France: L'Harmattan.

However, they were *not* embraced in every country, nor were they subject to an equal level of mediated communication and public discussion and were certainly ranked differently in importance.[31] Overall, according to Eurobarometer data, what heightened interest in the 2024 election was a focus on defense policy, “tightly linked to overarching geopolitical tensions.”[32]

Furthermore, these issues were predominantly assessed by the EU electorate through the lens of country-specific concerns and politics, as well as regarding the individual candidates and their party affiliations. Some were evaluated separately from extreme Left and Right ideological inclinations or even combined with them.[33] That said, it is undeniable that in restricted, irregular, and qualified ways, the trans-nationalization of the public sphere in 2019 which continued into 2024 is not to be dismissed.

In 2019, Volkmer described a phenomenon which was once again demonstrated in the 2024 EU elections: that the “networked sphere of ‘data’ flows is structured around the thematic ‘threads’ and engages a ‘fluid’ community of like-minded ‘peers’ who are ‘concerned’ citizens of diverse societies and come together to deliberate on issues of national and global relevance...”[34] It is also undeniable that a good number did so from an ideological perspective.

Thus, we can assert that to some extent, theme-based public spheres are expressions or intersections of the echo chambers created by social media and in digital spaces. This restricts the degree of transnational actions aimed at managing opinion formation and EU law making, which remain less than institutionalized, and as such, it also inhibits the creation of a cohesive pan-European public sphere.[35]

Many scholars agree that first and foremost, a true continental public sphere necessitates “a common language, a shared identity,” and most importantly, “a common infrastructure, i.e. a pan-European media.” It is evident that these “vital elements” are not fully present or likely to develop soon.[36]

[31] Kate Abnett. Economy, migration, war top voters' concerns in EU election – survey. June 10, 2024. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/economy-migration-war-top-voters-concerns-eu-election-survey-2024-06-10/>

[32] Theo Bourgerie-Gonse. Eurobarometer: Citizens increasingly interested in EU elections, prioritise defence. 30 May 2024. Euractiv. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eurobarometer-citizens-increasingly-interested-in-eu-elections-prioritise-defence/>

[33] Ella Joyner. EU parliament lurches right, but center holds. 10 June 2024. Deutsche Welle. <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-elections-2024-results/a-69318175>

[34] Ingrid Volkmer. (2019). The Transnationalization..., cit.

[35] Lennart Laude. (2021). Creating European public spheres: legitimizing EU law through a reconfiguration of European political parties. *European Papers*. 6 (2):1151-1172. https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/system/files/pdf_version/EP_eJ_2021_2_4_Articles_Lennart_Laude_00517.pdf

[36] Katrin Auel and Guido Tiemann. (2020). Europeanising European Public Spheres. Executive Summary. Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs. European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU\(2020\)654628](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2020)654628)

Additionally, nationalism, identity politics, and “social media and information disorder” are impactful elements diminishing the *present possibility* of a continent-wide public sphere. In this atmosphere, the increased politicization of EU integration meant to heighten “public awareness and interest in EU politics” aimed at reinforcing “the connection between the EU and its citizens” is having a yet-to-be-addressed negative outcome.[37] It is argued that it restrains national leaders from compromising to solve policy problems, because of their political interests and/or for fear of domestic backlash. This is chiefly because Eurosceptic actors and political parties are intent on rallying national publics against additional integration with the EU.

The Eurosceptics’ success, many observers maintain, could cause an increase in Euroscepticism in EU institutions, impeding their decision-making process. In the extreme, even “threatening the EU itself.”[38] However, as has been asserted, today’s Eurosceptics advocate for the decentralization of power, greater EU accountability (primarily financial) and efficiency, the creation of new jobs, respect for the sovereign rights of member states, cooperation with global partners, etc.[39] In short, with some very extreme exceptions - mostly on the extreme right and some on the extreme left - their programs correspond to European values, as they are already the result of a compromise between various national parties united into one party group in the EU parliament. The second reason why Euroscepticism has generally been blunted is institutionality. Having gone through the European elections’ procedure, it entered parliament and became involved in this institutional game, thus was forced to soften its rhetoric. Consequently, Eurosceptics have become a systemic opposition, rather than an alternative to the EU.[40]

In the absence of a pan-European public sphere, there are arguments for expanding the overlaps between national public spheres and increasing their interconnectedness. This, too, is quixotic. It is an exceedingly demanding proposition even in the digital age, given language and cultural barriers, and in some cases the unconsolidated national public spheres.

Yet another option is the Europeanization of national public spheres, principally by increasing the visibility of EU actors, institutions, and their issues and salience.[41]

[37] Jan Erik Kermer and Rolf A. Nijmeijer. (2020). Identity and European Public Spheres in the Context of Social Media and Information Disorder. *Media and Communication*. Open Access Journal. 8 (4): 28-39. <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/3167>

[38] Katrin Auel and Guido Tiemann. (2020). *Europeanising...*, cit.

[39] Darya Moiseeva. Eurosceptics in the European Parliament: A Failed Alternative for Europe. 5 June 2024. Valdai Discussion Club. <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/eurosceptics-in-the-european-parliament-a-failed-a/>; Simon Hix, Richard Whitaker, and Galina Zapryanova. (2024). The political space in the European parliament: Measuring MEPs’ preferences amid the rise of Euroscepticism. *European Journal of Political Research*, 63(1): 153-171; A. Szczerbiak and P. Taggart. (2024). Euroscepticism and anti-establishment parties in Europe. *Journal of European Integration*. 1–21.

[40] Darya Moiseeva. (2024). *Eurosceptics...*, cit.

[41] D. Braun and C. Schäfer. (2022). Issues that mobilize Europe. The role of key policy issues for voter turnout in the 2019 European Parliament election. *European Union Politics*. 23(1), 120–140.

However, this Europeanization, fundamentally tied to national media coverage in the EU, has been only marginally successful. It battles difficulties that range from national media reporting “regularly, albeit selectively, on plenary debates on EU issues” to “parliamentary actors playing a minor role” on the national scene.[42] The EU parliament is on the losing side for media attention in its competition with national parliaments.

Furthermore, setting aside EU parliamentary elections, EU activities in which national parliaments are engaged appear to be of greater interest for the media than those of the EU parliament. Partly, this is because journalists appear to find it difficult to cover a Parliament that is so different from the national parliaments, which are familiar to their readers.[43] In brief, the Europeanizing of the national public spheres of member countries that are arguably connected to one another appears to be limited for now.

Yet Russian disinformation and military aggression, and the threat it constitutes to each nation, establishes a mutuality of concern that Eastern and Central European and Baltic societies could build on to better “Europeanize” their national public spheres. Equally so, it may be a basis for establishing a phased approach to set up targeted inter-nation public spheres, eventually interconnected with others in the three regions. These could be established via bilateral, trilateral, or quadrilateral agreements, like the 2024 Moldova-Romania-Ukraine and the 1991 Weimar Triangle mentioned earlier.

The optimum operationalization of managing public opinion anticipates that a European public sphere or Europeanized national public spheres would be aided or complemented by a European media, regional media, or Europeanized national media. Together, they would also become facilitating companions to previously mentioned plans, practices, proposals for fighting disinformation. Additionally, they are themselves bulwarks against disinformation.

[42] Katrin Auel and Guido Tiemann. (2020). *Europeanising...*, cit.

[43] Katrin Auel and Guido Tiemann. (2020). *Europeanising...*, cit.

A European Media

To provide for the existence of one or more mini-regional public spheres that can deal effectively with Russian disinformation and manage public opinion on identifying, understanding, and countering it, a unified information and communication approach that speaks in several voices needs to be initiated.

The much-heralded globalization of media that new technologies have facilitated is contributing to greater public awareness on several issues. John Keane rightly contends that “global media conglomerates create products for imaginary global audiences: simultaneously, they suppose and nurture a *theatrum mundi*” whose audiences “witness mediated controversies.”[44]

Global media, the Internet, and social media that are disseminating information and opinions as facilitators of traditional media’s global exposure, help individuals in what remains a nebulous global civil society to “become a *bit less* parochial, a *bit more* cosmopolitan” (emphasis added).[45] This cannot be entirely denied, despite the fragile conjecture that this generalization represents. The effect of “global media” depends on the size and nature of their audiences, and the main problem is that it is an atomized institution which is less than global. Furthermore, its effects are subject to ever-changing terms, depending on the issues, the problems, and matters related to the audiences’ own societies, personal daily concerns, experiences and interests, historical memory, and so on.

This is also true regarding the specific issue of disinformation, which is a moving target packaged in hundreds of differently sized, variedly bedecked, and widely or pinpointedly distributed matryoshkas. On this issue, both the ‘global’ and the national media’s successive, uneven, unsteady processes of divulging its daily existence, details, and meanings appear to have audiences place them into largely predetermined frameworks of national interpretations, assumptions, ideologies, and cultures. The outcome of the 2024 EU parliamentary elections, particularly in Eastern and Central European and Baltic states, along with their national media’s general coverage of the contests and issues, supports this conclusion. It implies that citizens in these regions are concurrently both a bit *parochial* and a bit *cosmopolitan*.

We well understand that the Kremlin tailors its messages to the specific cultural, political, social and other real or perceived problems faced by each country, including its minorities, thus requiring local awareness and responses. However, the Kremlin’s information war is also more fundamentally directed at the gamut of values like freedom, democracy, and other Enlightenment principles, and is targeted at the fears related to economic and political insecurities associated with European conflicts. These are shared by a large swath of the EU’s electorate.

[44] John Keane. (2003). *Global Civil Society*. Cambridge University Press. 168.

[45] John Keane. (2003). *Global Civil...*, cit.

Yet the structure of news information and public opinion formation that is arrayed against Russia's bottomless pit of disinformation is first and foremost the loosely stitched and incongruous patch quilt of traditional national outlets, themselves politically atomized. They are perhaps best at serving a bygone era in global existential contests. Still, in keeping with the idea of a united Europe, a harmonization and, better still, a consolidation of member country and supranational organizations' responses to disinformation and their delivery, is imperative to maximize effectiveness.

Unfortunately, pan-European media that would facilitate unified responses are missing. The reach of the few outlets considered pan-European or quasi pan-European – *Euronews (France)*, *Politico (US)*, *EUobserver news (Belgium)*, *EurActiv (Belgium)*, *Transitions (Czechia)*, *The Local (Sweden)*, *Balkan Insight (Serbia)* -remains restricted to the EU elites, some academics and politicians, governmental and non-governmental actors, and only a smattering of the general population.

In the absence of a pan-European media, paralleling the earlier mentioned suggestion for the Europeanization of national public spheres, the Europeanization of national media across the EU has made limited, qualified progress. According to some scholars, this has both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, EU actors, politics and policies have become slightly more salient for the national media, but mostly due to the multiple crises, or polycrisis, i.e. the casual entanglement of crisis in multiple global systems.

Whether the project of Europeanization will organically or by design go beyond the level that it has reached today is impossible to prognosticate. While not discouraging the further Europeanizing of national media, the focus should be the establishment of Eastern and Central and Baltic mini-regional hybrid media. Granted, this does not lessen the cultural and organizational problems, and to one degree or another makes the creation of a pan-European media serving 27 countries less than practical; but it shrinks the problems to possibly more manageable ones.

There is common ground. While the countries in the Baltic and Eastern and Central Europe differ culturally, in various ways they are cognitively empathetic towards struggles for sovereignty, and in some cases, establishing national identities. Furthermore, they share the history of Russian and Soviet interference and domination and communist regimes, and given their proximity, they feel the breath of the Russian bear more acutely and see its clawed paws extended towards them.

The necessity of establishing one, two, or more mini-regional hybrid media is predicated on what we know about media consumption in Eastern and Central European and Baltic states and trust in their national media.

As sources of news, print media use is low; television news is still accessed by over 50% of Eastern and Central Europeans, with Hungarians being the sole exception; online media, including social media, have risen to be the predominant news sources and social media alone has also become a significant news provider. In the Baltic states, traditional media continue to have a predominant following. There has been a decline across the board in radio listenership.

The unresolved conundrum is how to reconcile the online and social media preferences of these audiences with some recent findings. We have learned that those who trust mainstream or traditional media are “considerably more likely to align themselves with EU and NATO interests.”[46]

Specifically regarding Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine, we know that the greater trust and perception of independence people have in mainstream media, “the more likely they are to believe that Russia invaded Ukraine and to support Ukraine’s NATO and/or EU membership.”

Additionally, it was found that strengthening independent and investigative media and expanding access to “content to wider audiences will build resilience to disinformation and improve geopolitical awareness.”[47]

On the other hand, digital communication is a catalyst for transforming “public communication” in all societies. Nevertheless, consuming social media news has detrimental effects, where “wider and faster internet connections” exist. And those who trust online social networks and “receive information on EU affairs” from them “have less faith in the EU compared to those in regions with lower-quality internet access.”[48]

This recognition - that social media’s effect of establishing echo chambers has a high potential of resulting in or adding to political polarization - could be turned into a positive by focusing on their “echo chamber” aspect to manufacture consent or manage public opinion on the issue of Russian disinformation.[49]

That said, despite their ascendent use, there are several reasons why social media alone do not rise to the challenge of serving Baltic and Eastern and Central European audiences. One reason is the continued “sharp digital divides in many CEE nations,” with access to the Internet widespread, but “still lower than in the Western parts of Europe (especially broadband access).”[50] In addition, acute rural/urban differences accentuate divides, and certain groups of privileged citizens have unfettered access while others do not.[51] This issue can, and must, be resolved.

[46] GLOBSEC. (2023). United we..., cit.

[47] GLOBSEC. (2023). United we..., cit.

[48] Ingrid Volkmer. (2019). The Transnationalization..., cit.

[49] Amy Ross Arguedas, Craig T. Robertson, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus K. Nielsen, (2022). Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University.

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/202201/Echo_Chambers_Filter_Bubbles_and_Polarisation_A_Literature_Review.pdf

[50] Koc-Michalska, et al. (2023). Digital media, democracy and civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*. 21(1):1-5.

[51] Koc-Michalska, et al. (2023). Digital media, democracy..., cit.

The most recent European Broadcast Union's survey indicated that across EU countries, 54% of respondents have the required level of digital literacy. Additionally, 74% of Europeans believe that misinformation is a national problem, 86% say disinformation is a problem, 71% say they "often" come across disinformation, and 36% have no confidence in recognizing disinformation.[52] Increasing digital literacy may be a cure to these problems, and given that we're at the dawn of mass AI, solid digital skills are essential to help Balkan and Eastern and Central European audiences separate fact from fiction. As described, variations of mini-regional media theoretically have a better opportunity to prepare their audiences to resist disinformation and enhance counter-efforts now being made by supranational organizations, NGOs, and states.

The general absence of trust in national media across Eastern and Central Europe, somewhat ameliorated in the Baltics, provides the most pregnant opportunity for mini-regional media success. Trust is low thanks to differing degrees of manipulation by media owners, politicians, political parties, and others, including editors and directors, expressed in the framework of journalistic practices.

General distrust of national media stood at 46% in Eastern and Central Europe in 2023. [53] There are some country-to-country variations but overall trust in both traditional and digital media is low. Higher trust is recorded in Estonia (63%) and Lithuania (59%), followed by Latvians (54%).[54]

Particularly regarding the reporting of Russia's war in Ukraine, 2023/2024 data show that national media are given "not much/not at all" trust to tell them the "truth" in Bulgarian (66%), Czech (51%), Hungarian (66%), Montenegrin (55%), N. Macedonian (56%), Romanian (49%), Slovakian (56%), and Slovenian (65%) media. Albanian, Croatian, and Polish audiences have "very much/somewhat" trust in their media on the issue of reporting on Ukraine (54%, 54%, & 53%, respectively).[55]

Thus, there is an opportunity for one of more mini-regional, hybrid media to build the kind of trust not currently enjoyed by the Eastern and Central European and Baltic state media.[56] This, combined with their fact-based information and news, could indeed manufacture consent over time to help their audiences recognize, defend against, and counter disinformation. In this way, they can help establish mini-regional public spheres with shared purposes.

[52] Media Intelligence Service. (2023). Public Service Media: Strengthening Media Literacy. https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/psm/EBU-MIS_Media_Literacy_Report-public.pdf?site=ebu

[53] Dominika Hajdu, et al. (2024). GLOBSEC Trends 2024.

<https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2024-cee-brave-new-region>

[54] Central European Digital Media Observatory. (2023). Perceptions of information chaos in Baltic states and Central Europe.

<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-03/Sociological%20survey%20Perceptions%20of%20Information%20Chaos%20in%20Baltic%20States%20and%20Central%20Europe.pdf>

[55] Nic Newman et al. (2024). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024. Reuters Institute, University of Oxford.

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

[56] Statista. (2024). Social media penetration rate in selected Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1134076/social-media-reach-in-cee-region/>

Conclusion

At this stage in the history of the EU, both the Europeanization of national media and the establishment of mini-regional, hybrid media should be pursued with a high degree of urgency and cooperation among member countries. 2025 brought two salutary developments in this regard.

Two EU supported projects are small, positive steps that should help the pan-Europeanization of information dissemination. The Next Generation of European Affairs, managed by The European Correspondent, was inaugurated in June 2025 utilizing newsletters, investigative journalism, podcasts, and videos to deliver coverage of European affairs in six continental languages. Additionally, it is meant to “build capacity by developing a dedicated learning hub for the next generation of journalists.” The second project was launched in March 2025: AskEurope is creating a new information platform that combines a database of EU media archives integrated in an AI-based chatbot, and its seven-language content includes breaking news, live streams, daily news, including in-depth reporting and investigations. Agence France Press is coordinating the project that involves a consortium of French, German, Romanian, Italian, and Spanish media outlets. [57]

The more difficult task is reducing the trust deficit the East and Central European media continue to experience. This problem is not subject to a quick and perfecting fix. The support for freedom of the press, and media independence and pluralism must be accompanied by an equally insistent rules for news and information to be based on verifiable facts and contexts.[58] It is certainly a tall challenge given the extraordinary mix of social media, which heightens the effectiveness of communication, that are immune to the kind of editorial control that can be established in traditional media.

This requires added attention from those who are intent on harnessing the power of media to combat disinformation, enlarge and contribute to the purposeful establishment of one or more pan-European and regional public spheres, and/or Europeanizing national public spheres. Only by doing so will the necessary, amplified engagement in manufacturing of consent across the 27-nation EU on the issue of Russian disinformation and of the equally insidious Chinese variety, among others, have an opportunity to consistently succeed.

[57] See <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/results-2024-call-european-digital-reporting>.

[58] The 2024 European Media Freedom Act whose rules take effect in August 2025 does not address journalistic professionalism. Nor does it focus attention on the need for verifiable news and information in its noble support for media independence and freedom from political and economic interference. It leaves the gates open to opinion, belief, perspective-driven news and information that is offered as credible representations of daily issues, happenings, ideas, and people.

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