



Diasporas as targets of Putin's media:

Categorizing the EU's response to Kremlin-led disinformation

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Author's declaration

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1. Introduction

1.1. Subject of the study

Russia's relation to the West and to the EU has increasingly been deteriorating. Scholarly literature even mentions the waging of a 'hybrid war' between both parties. Unlike traditional conflicts, hybrid wars do not take place in physical spaces, such as battlefields. Instead, they operate in a non-physical space, something that renders them 'non-linear', 'irregular' and 'immaterial' (Galeotti, 2014). Such wars require the use of 'non-kinetic weapons', developed to harm the enemy from afar (Marangé, 2017, 14): cyber-attacks, cyberespionage, etc.

Disinformation constitutes one of such weapons used in Russia's hybrid warfare against the West. Although its definition sparks debate, disinformation is described by the European Commission (2018) as 'the creation, presentation and dissemination of verifiably false or misleading information for the purposes of economic gain or intentionally deceiving the public, and which may cause public harm'. Thus, disinformation is viewed as a significant threat, which is only being reinforced by the increased sophistication of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Hoorickx, 2021). Such sophistication has led to creating two forms of disinformation methods: some more 'alluring' (echo chambers, filter bubbles,...), some more 'coercive' (hacking, deepfakes,...). This study shall cover a specific form of Russian disinformation which belongs to the 'alluring' category.

More precisely, the type of disinformation addressed in this study shall be **that spread by the Kremlin, via media outlets that it controls, towards Russian diasporas found in European states**. This type of disinformation will henceforth be referred to as **DATM disinformation** (i.e. 'Diasporas As Targets of Media'). This expression was especially coined for this study and shall be used in the remainder of this work.

The word 'Diasporas', in DATM, is understood as encompassing those that the Kremlin calls 'Russian compatriots'. In the 1999 act 'On the State Policy of the Russian Federation with Respect to Compatriots Abroad', such individuals are described broadly as 'persons living beyond the borders of the Russian Federation having spiritual, cultural and legal connections with Russia' or demonstrating commonality of language, history, cultural heritage, traditions and customs with the Russian state and their direct relatives' (Zakem et al., 2015). 'Compatriots' are often grouped in diasporas that are scattered around Europe and often develop their own media consumption habits, which lead them to follow Russian media instead of national media. Such habits expose these diasporas to disinformation and information manipulation conducted by media outlets at the hands of the Kremlin. These outlets broadcast their content not only in Russia but also in other States across Europe.

Given the deceiving content that they often spread, Russian news outlets constitute a threat to democracy. Thus, significant are the responses that have been issued to counter their influence.

1.2. Puzzle, research question and hypothesis

A review of the existing literature on disinformation draws attention to a number of issues. Serious and protracted cases of DATM disinformation are reported to mostly take place in countries neighboring Russia, such as the Baltic States or Ukraine. Little mention is made to instances of DATM disinformation elsewhere in Europe. One could argue that this is due to the higher presence of Russian diasporas in Eastern Europe; yet, such diasporas are found all over Europe and, though they are not as large, instrumentalizing them could still be of use for the Kremlin. Furthermore, as disinformation is a hybrid tool that can be easily used thanks to the rapid evolution of technology, it would seem unlikely that only Eastern European States would be targeted by the Kremlin. Could it be that, in some countries that fall victim to disinformation threats, these threats are immediately removed? What is, then, the EU's role in countering these threats? It would be reasonable to assume that the EU, as a protector of democracy and human dignity, tries to curb a scourge such as disinformation. However, if the EU endorses such role, why are some DATM disinformation campaigns still ongoing at its external border and within some of its easternmost Member States? Has the EU enacted any measure to help these countries? If so, have they been effective enough? Does the EU react in the same way when removing disinformation threats in other European countries?

In light of the above, the main research question of this study is the following: is there a variation in the EU's response to DATM disinformation depending on the country where such disinformation takes place?

The main hypothesis surrounding the research question posits that the EU response is less substantial and efficient when tackling DATM disinformation in Eastern European countries. Indeed, the protracted cases of DATM disinformation in this part of Europe seem to indicate that the issue did not receive a proportionate response from the EU. Simultaneously, this paper argues that, in other European countries, the EU's response to DATM disinformation is more substantial, which is why they are less frequently targeted by such disinformation.

1.3. Methodology

Objectives

The objectives of this study are threefold.

- Firstly, illustrating concrete cases of disinformation led by Kremlin-owned media towards Russian diasporas in European States (or DATM disinformation).
- Secondly, describing the EU's response to such disinformation.

- Thirdly, establishing a categorization of the EU's reaction in different countries to highlight the variations in its response.

The relevance of establishing such objectives shall be explained further in this introduction, as two clarifications concerning this study should be made first: the agreed time frame and the choice of the case studies.

Time frame

This study will cover the EU's response to DATM disinformation from February 20, 2014 to February 27, 2022. The first date marks the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula, which highlighted the danger of disinformation. Only then did the world open its eyes to the disarming threat of disinformation, an acknowledgement which resulted in the EU's establishment of the East StratCom Task Force (ESCTF). The second date, February 27, 2022, marked Ursula Von der Leyen's announcement of an EU-wide ban on RT and Sputnik, two Kremlin-sponsored outlets. At the time of writing, this represents the latest and most stringent measure dealing with the type of disinformation studied here.

Of note is that, although disinformation abounded in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, COVID-related disinformation is excluded from this study as 1) it was mainly spread online, through social media (Tagliabue et al., 2020), and 2) it saw the Kremlin mobilize different narratives than usual, namely 'medico-scientific conspiracy narratives' (Grimes, 2021).

Selected case studies

The focus of this study was narrowed down to three countries. These three case studies needed to be countries with a Russian diaspora on their territory and they had to be commonly agreed as being embedded in the European continent (although they did not all need to be an EU Member State). This already removed some countries from the list of candidates, such as Luxembourg and Denmark, which have an insignificant Russian diaspora on their soil (Statista, 2022b), and Georgia, whose embeddedness in the European continent is not unanimously agreed on (Rosenberg, 2019). Therefore, the countries selected were threefold: Germany, Latvia and Ukraine. Each of these cases fulfilled the criteria hereabove and presented specificities.

Analytical process

Before assessing each of the objectives and the methodology that was adopted in order to achieve them, a conceptual framing of disinformation was established. Through a state of the art reviewing existing literature on disinformation, several of its specificities and shapes were outlined. The conceptual framing

tackled disinformation as a general strategy; then as a tool mobilized by the Kremlin; then as a threat perceived by the EU.

The first objective that was highlighted hereabove consisted in exemplifying cases of DATM disinformation in the countries selected as case studies. Such exemplification bears much relevance, as the EU's response may sometimes be either constrained by internal factors, or crafted so as to adjust to these factors specifically. For that purpose, scholarly literature was reviewed extensively. This document analysis aimed at producing general knowledge about several factors crucial to this study. Information was retrieved on the Russian diasporas in the case study countries, on their level of integration, on their composition, on their history and their media consumption habits. The presence of Russian media in either Germany, Ukraine and Latvia was also documented, with the aim of specifying which media outlets are spreading DATM disinformation. Moreover, information was also extracted from scholarly literature to gain knowledge on the different narratives mobilized by the Kremlin in order to deceive its audience. Lastly, national initiatives to counter disinformation were also listed.

The second objective of this study sought to describe the EU's response to DATM disinformation in the studied countries. Therefore, EU documentation (Directives, Action Plans, European Council (EC) conclusions,...) was thoroughly assessed, along with scientific articles. These documents revealed that the EU response could take many forms and shapes: it could result in a verbal statement, in the adoption of sanctions, in the implementation of anti-disinformation policies, etc. Such documents were the main first-hand documents used in this study. A careful textual analysis was conducted to check whether these initiatives and responses actually stemmed from cases of DATM disinformation in one of the selected States. In some cases, the link was explicitly formulated in the document or article; in others, any association with a particular case of DATM disinformation had to be hypothesized. In those cases, explanations were provided as to why a given EU response could be assumed as being a response to DATM disinformation in one of the case studies. Based on the work of scholars, think tanks and civil society organizations, among others, a critical assessment of the identified EU responses was conducted. This aimed at pinpointing their failings, so that recommendations for improvement could be formulated later.

The third and final objective consisted in categorizing the EU's response to DATM disinformation in Germany, Ukraine and Latvia. In light of the findings of the preceding parts, a final table was created, as a way of summarizing the EU's response. This allowed for a better comparison of the variations in the EU's reactions, depending on the studied country.

2. Disinformation: conceptual framing

2.1. Disinformation: general overview

Commonly agreed features

In 1984, J. Barron defined disinformation as ‘the conscious and deliberate spreading of incorrect data and opinions which the spreader knows are wrong’ (Cathala, 1986). Based on this definition, and looking at the ones provided by other scholars, four commonly agreed features of disinformation emerge:

Disinformation presupposes the spread of inaccurate content. This content should still create a ‘false reality’ that fools the enemy (Cathala, 1986) by omitting parts of an information, for example, (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2017, 1) or completely distorting it. A popular strategy is that of the ‘four Ds’: dismiss, distort, distract, dismay. This concept is used to qualify Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Syria and Georgia (Richey, 2018, 102).

The spreader of disinformation is aware of the inaccuracy of the shared content. This tactic is attributed to the spreader’s intention to deceive its audience by framing a situation in a way that benefits the spreader (Fallis, 2014, 141). Therefore, the sources of disinformation can be called ‘manipulative actors’ and their content can be deemed ‘harmful’ (MacCarthy, 2019).

Disinformation is spread with the intention of deceiving an audience. The deception of audiences is usually subordinate to the attainment of wider political objectives (Erhardt & Pentland, 2021), such as influencing a social group’s political behavior (Cathala, 1986). This might result in this group adhering to the disinformator’s cause. This usually happens in the context of a crisis, when the instigator of disinformation denies the existence of the crisis or attributes it to a given actor (Dornan, 2017).

Disinformation was mostly facilitated by the development of ICTs. The democratization of content creation and the creation of filter bubbles¹ explains why disinformation is best spread on ‘new media’ (Akers et al., 2019; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017, 1027). However, instigators of disinformation tend to also rely on psychological factors, such as the ‘backfire effect’, which posits that when people are confronted with ideas that go against their beliefs, this confrontation will make them hold that belief more strongly (Lord et al., 1979).

Metalinguage and synonyms

Let us now try to describe what disinformation *is not*.

Two important concepts to begin with are propaganda and public diplomacy. Disinformation is often considered to be a synonym of the term ‘propaganda’. Although these concepts share the same objective

¹They are defined as a personalization of the online content (on social media, on search engines,...) which progressively leads to the ideological isolation of the user (Bruns, 2019).

(deceiving an audience to make it potentially join a cause that it initially rejects), disinformation attains it by provoking fear and anger. It is not the case of propaganda, which focuses on more positive emotions in order to create sympathy for the cause one rebukes (NED, 2017).

Public diplomacy also differs from disinformation. According to Jeangène Vilmer (2017), the former involves the promotion of values and interests held by a political actor with the aim of making relations to that country appealing. The author claims that this cannot be considered as disinformation since public diplomacy is based on accurate information and is not harmful. He also explains that public diplomacy does not aim at deceiving anyone and is part of each country's foreign policy.

Moreover, disinformation should not be equated with 'fake news'. Unlike disinformation, these serve a financial goal since they are created by websites which profit off of advertising and thus release fake sensational content to gather views (Jackson, 2017). One should also note that disinformation differs from advertising and deception. Advertising, unlike disinformation, does not hide its origin nor its goal, its existence being justified by the need to stand out amidst the wide range of competitors on the market, as Cathala (1986) writes. As for deception, Cathala says that it differs from disinformation, since it is exclusively used in the context of military services. Similar to this is the term 'intoxication', which refers to the same strategy but in the sphere of intelligence services (Klen, 2016).

Furthermore, disinformation differs from indoctrination, since their source does not have the same intention. While the spreader of disinformation knows its content to be false, the same cannot be argued for indoctrination, the source of which is utterly convinced of the veracity of the idea that it wants to spread (Cathala, 1986). Finally, a distinction exists between disinformation, on one side, and malinformation and misinformation, on the other. Misinformation, for its part, consists in inadvertently spreading information which is verifiably false (Fallis, 2014, 136; Weedon et al., 2017). Malinformation involves spreading information which is known to be true in order to deceive an audience (this implies, for example, leaking secret documents to create distrust) (Colomina et al., 2021, 5).

The context of hybrid warfare

If we want to further study disinformation, we must take into consideration the overarching context in which it is placed. Scholarly literature often place disinformation in the context of 'hybrid warfare', a new form of conflict enabled by the perfectioning of ICTs. In a 2013 article, Russian general Valery Gerasimov qualifies hybrid wars as 'asymmetric', 'ambiguous' and 'non-linear'. Hybrid warfare is defined by the general as a war combining both kinetic and non-kinetic tools (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017, 4). Gerasimov also states that these wars break out immediately and take place in information spaces rather than in battlefields (Marangé, 2017, 17). Hybrid warfare also heavily relies on horizontal legitimacy (whether or not nationals feel like they belong in their country) and vertical legitimacy (whether or not a population accepts its leaders) (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017, 10). Among the non-kinetic used in hybrid warfare, 'influence operations' are a key concept. According to Jankowicz (2020), they

are characterized by their use of emotion as a weapon and a more general intent to mislead and manipulate for someone's own gain. Jankowicz adds that they can be undertaken in different ways: via espionage, military actions or disinformation campaigns. The repeated use of 'influence operations' between two parties can be referred to as 'information warfare': a form of conflict which consists in seeking to have an advantage over an enemy via the use of ICTs (Marangé, 2017, 14). This is precisely where disinformation is embedded.

Types and categories

Every scholar seems to have a personal conception of the existing types of disinformation. For example, it is possible to identify three types of disinformation based on the **nature of their target**. Thus, disinformation can be 'domestic' (i.e. aimed at your compatriots), 'for the neighbors' (i.e. aimed at the nationals of a State neighboring your own) or 'West-oriented' (i.e. aimed at the US and the EU) (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2017, 3-4). Other types of disinformation can be found based on **whether or not the source of disinformation is known** ('covert' vs 'overt' disinformation), according to Fetzner (2004). The author also adds that **the means to create disinformation** can also be considered, distinguishing five types of disinformation, such as sharing information without giving any other contrary information to nuance it, not revealing one of the core features of a concept to create a biased opinion, etc. Finally, several types of disinformation can be found **based on the spreader's goals**. Meiselman et al. (1987) and Erlich & Garner (2021) outline and define four kinds of disinformation: political, economic, military and historical. Political disinformation aims at making an audience turn against a country's institutions. Economic disinformation vilifies the management of a country's economy by its government. Last but not least, while military disinformation lures people into wrongly believing that actions by the armed forces are imminent, historical disinformation glorifies a country by altering its history.

Enabling factors

Scholarly literature agrees on the fact that disinformation has been able to permeate our societies more easily than in the past, due to a series of factors closely intertwined. The first notable factors are psycho-sociological mechanisms which are a feature of all human beings (Kapantai et al., 2021). For example, humans tend to believe that they can hardly be deceived by false information (Jang & Kim, 2018). They have a confirmation bias and are likely to believe information that moves them (Pennycook et al., 2018). It is also compelling to note that isolated populations are more likely to still hold their beliefs when they are shown proof that the opposite is true (Freelon & Wells, 2020, 151) and that they tend to think that the only vision of reality is their own ('naïve realism') (Humprecht et al., 2020). This behavior can thus be easily exploited by deceptive actors for disinformation.

Hostile relations to national media services may also fuel disinformation. Scholars agree to say that disinformation is also often situated in a context of ‘crisis of public communication’, or ‘post-truth order’ (Harsin, 2015). This is linked to the ICTs’ increasing role as substitutes of the ‘traditional’ media, which adds a ‘for-profit’ dimension to information (Freelon & Wells, 2020, 145). The last enabling factor is no other than a population’s distrust of its own government (Blanchette et al., 2021; Etling et al., 2018). This mostly involves a conservative audience, which sees local institutions as weak and do not feel correctly represented at the political level (Freelon & Wells, 2020, 151). The polarization between the pro and anti-government can also fuel disinformation. (Humprecht et al., 2020).

2.2. Perspectives from Moscow

Russian definition

The first definition given of disinformation in Russia dates back to the 1920s, when ‘dezinformatsiya’ was used to refer to a ‘false information’ disseminated ‘with the intention to deceive public opinion’ (Gregor, 1986; Mahairas & Dvilyanski, 2018). This definition seems to be echoed by the 1994 Russian Code of Professional Ethics for Journalists, which speaks of ‘the malevolent distortion of facts’ (Profjur, 2020). Therefore, it seems that these definitions match the definition of disinformation hereabove.

However, there are reasons to think that Russia’s definition of disinformation is not yet full-fledged. Indeed, in March 2022, when the Duma adopted the infamous ‘Law on Fake News’ (Jack, 2022), the so-called ‘fake news’ were given a similar definition to that of disinformation, without nuancing what both terms entail individually. It is important to note that the Kremlin can sometimes deny that disinformation does exist, saying that information can always be accurate according to one’s interpretation of it (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017, 23). This is referred to as ‘extreme perspectivism’ (The Guardian, 2015).

Instigators of Russian disinformation

The Kremlin is in almost all cases behind Russian disinformation; yet, it is often hiding behind other actors. As done by Treygen et al. (2022), these can be described as either ‘state actors’, ‘non-state actors’ or ‘state-affiliated actors’. The authors claim that the first are directly dependent on the Kremlin and that, among these actors, a distinction can be made between the Kremlin intelligence services (such as the FSB), on one side, and the Ministry of Defense, on the other. Non-state actors, on a general level, can be individuals, armed groups or religious institutions (Hybrid CoE, 2020) (Vilmer et al., 2018). In the case of Russia, they are usually ultra-nationalists and oligarchs which echo the Kremlin’s worldview independently, according to Treygen et al. (2022). The latter go on to say that ‘state-affiliated actors’ consist of agencies that, though not entirely dependent on the Kremlin, may still go in its favor, such as

Russia Today or Gazprom. Despite these categories being neatly identified, most of Russian disinformation and influence operations seem to be organized very loosely by actors with a varying level of dependence to the Kremlin (Stelzenmüller, 2017).

The Kremlin's general aims

One of the main goals of Russian disinformation resides in combatting the eastwards spread of the EU and NATO, which have been worrying Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Perhaps a key moment was the year 2007, where increased NATO and US presence in the Middle East threatened Putin, who had previously been angered by ‘color’ revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine (Richey, 2018, 103). Marangé (2015) adds that these threats seemed even more imminent when, in 2008, NATO opened discussions over the possible membership of Ukraine and Georgia and when the EU expanded further to the East by launching its Eastern Partnership in 2009. As Marangé writes, in 2013, the EU seemed closer after concluding Association Agreements with four ex-Soviet States and after China agreed to open to Europe. This might explain the Kremlin’s need to counter the influence of the West on its sphere of influence, what Russia calls ‘a confrontation with the West’ (Marangé, 2017, 16) or the ‘hegemony’ of the US (Yablokov, 2022), whose liberal economic system is not to the Kremlin’s liking (Downes, 2018). All in all, many narratives are constructed by the Kremlin to discredit the West: some amount to conspiracy theories, some aim at showing the decadence of the West, some are ad hominem attacks, etc. (Vilmer et al., 2018).

Russia also uses disinformation campaigns to acquire a ‘concentric influence’ on the rest of the world (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014) and become a ‘viable alternative to Western civilization’ (Shevtsova, 2014). The Kremlin describes its desire to expand its influence as ‘existential’ (Kalenský, 2022). This influence would be more powerful over Russia’s neighboring countries and more diffuse over Western Europe and the United States (Gerrits, 2018). What is more, this influence would be established through the weakening of the countries’ cohesion and state of democracy (the narrative of a ‘failed state’ where citizens no longer have any impact on political decisions) and through ‘reflexive control’ (Giles, 2016), i.e. conveying a more positive, nostalgic image of Russia and the USSR to exert control over a particular actor (Morkūnas, 2022). The latter also implies criticizing perceived Russophobia among Western governments (Bozalka, 2022). The Kremlin hopes that disinformation in that regard would dissuade the West from challenging its actions (Richey, 2018, 103). This involves an important discourse over the cultural, ethical and moral foundations of the Russian population, as well as Russia trying to reach ‘informational heresy’, i.e. casting doubt on the veracity of the authorities’ discourse in some countries (Volkov, 2018).

Targeted audiences

Russian diasporas living abroad constitute a first target audience. In fact, according to Marangé (2017), they can prove useful in the transmission of certain ideas put forward by the Kremlin via the Rossotrudnichetsvo (an agency within the Ministry of Interior which promotes Russian culture and language) and the Russkiy Mir Foundation. Marangé adds that these diasporas are easy to target since their disconnection to their host country can be exploited and that Russia is also be certain that these countries will be less likely to implement harder measures against pro-Kremlin disinformation. Indeed, this would stir up the indignation of the Russian diaspora which would see these measures as threats to its identity (Pamment, 2020). On a broader scale, targeting the Russian diaspora in ex-Soviet States might indirectly be a way of targeting the government of these States.

Russia is also targeting right-wing parties in Europe (Marangé, 2017, 47), which often support the Kremlin. This is linked to the common interests they hold, i.e. the will to overthrow the current Western model in a country and to offer an alternative for the enemies of that model. Therefore, Russia has been getting closer to parties such as the Front National in France, the Freedom Party of Austria, Fidesz, the Lega,... (Gerrits, 2018).

The ‘bigger actor’ in question is no other than the Western elite and citizens, as Marangé (2017) writes. She claims that Western elites are targeted by Russia so as to make them see the Kremlin in a positive way and that, in that regard, several platforms were created, all intending to favor dialog with Russia: the Valdai Discussion Club, the Council for Foreign Policy and Defense, the Gorchakov Fund for the support of Public Diplomacy,... It has also created the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and politicized think tanks such as Rethinking Russia² (Audinet, 2017). Western citizens are mostly targeted through social media and as a result, become increasingly isolated from the ‘real world’ (Bitioukova & Sosnina, 2015). They are potentially exposed to anti-Western hate speech from the Kremlin (Baumann, 2020).

Vehicles of Russian disinformation

The Kremlin has developed many tools to reach its target audience, some more ‘coercive’, others more ‘alluring’. The first category of tools include, for a start, troll farms (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017, 1033), which use hate speech and jokes to discredit mainstream media. They are opaque actors, since, as stated by Poe’s Law³, it is almost impossible to know whether a troll is being serious or not (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In the case of Russia, troll factories are used to spam websites and forums with pro-Kremlin

² Rethinking Russia is a Russian think tank created by the Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (ISEPR) in 2015, advocating for stronger ties between Russian and the West (Vendil & Oxenstierna, 2017).

³ Poe’s Law refers to a statement made by author Nathan Poe on an online forum, deploring the struggle to differentiate genuine extremism from extremism ‘as a blatant display of humor’ on the Internet (Mager, 2016).

messages (or any message that goes against the dominant discourse (Volkov, 2018)), which are then amplified by automated botnets (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017, 22). The effectiveness of this method relies on the fact that the trolls use websites where they know the content's accuracy will not be checked. In addition to troll farms, the Kremlin also uses bots, i.e. pieces of software which imitate human behavior online (Doublet, 2019). Deceptive videos from conspiracy theorists can also be uploaded to platforms such as YouTube. Other tools include hacking (Petratos, 2021), manipulating search algorithms (Lysenko & Brooks, 2018), and deepfakes (European Commission, 2018).

Disinformation sometimes uses 'alluring' tools such as 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles' in social media, which isolate users with the same belief, leading them to think that their vision is the norm (Chitra & Musco, 2019). Specific agencies can also be considered vectors of disinformation. In the case of Russian disinformation, the Internet Research Agency (IRA) is a private company funded by the Kremlin and spreading pro-Kremlin messages on social media such as Twitter, under false identities (Freelon & Lokot, 2020). In a study, the EU DisinfoLab (2020) also mentions InfoRos, a press agency that covers economic, political and socio-cultural topics should also be mentioned and that has a considerable reach on European countries as it is linked to the French website *Observateur Continental*. The same study also mentions the Russkiy Mir Foundation, created in 2007 to promote Russian culture and language globally, as a vector of influence.

Finally, the last 'alluring' vehicles for Russian disinformation are (mostly Russian-language) audiovisual media such as newspapers (Russia Beyond the Headlines, Rossiskaya Gazeta,...), TV channels (Russia-1, Russia 24, RTR,...), radio stations (Sputnik News, The Voice of Russia,...) and news agencies (Rossiya Segodnya, TASS) (Peters, 2018; Veebel, 2015; Vilmer et al., 2018).

Milosevich-Juaristi (2017) details the common characteristics found among all these state-owned media outlets are threefold. Firstly, the accuracy of their content is seldom checked by relevant authorities. Secondly, these outlets focus more on attacking the opponent's weaknesses, rather than on detailing sheer facts. Finally, they are characterized by the lack of credible sources and often rely on impersonal formulations (such as 'it is being said that...').

2.3. Perspectives from Brussels

EU definition

A relevant definition of disinformation is found in the EU's 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation, the first EU action plan on the matter. Building up on previous efforts by the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) (the 2015 East StratCom Task Force, the 2018 Communication on tackling online disinformation,...), the plan defines disinformation as 'verifiably false or misleading that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public and may cause harm' (European Commission, 2018a). The High-Level Group on

Fake News and Online Disinformation, set up in 2018 as well, established a definition which is also relevant: ‘false, misleading and inaccurate information promoted to cause, knowingly, public harm’ (Kapantai et al., 2021).

These two definitions detail the same characteristics of disinformation as those found in scholarly literature. Indeed, they emphasize the presence of inaccurate content, its spread and its alteration by a deceptive actor. However, the definition found in the 2018 Action Plan introduces two new subtleties. Firstly, it adds the notion of ‘economic gain’. Secondly, this definition is the first to frame disinformation as ‘verifiably false’, which gives a more positive connotation as it emphasizes the decipherable nature of disinformation.

A brief history of institutional responses

OVERVIEW OF THE EU’S ACTIONS AND INITIATIVES AGAINST DISINFORMATION (Selected milestones, 2015-2020)

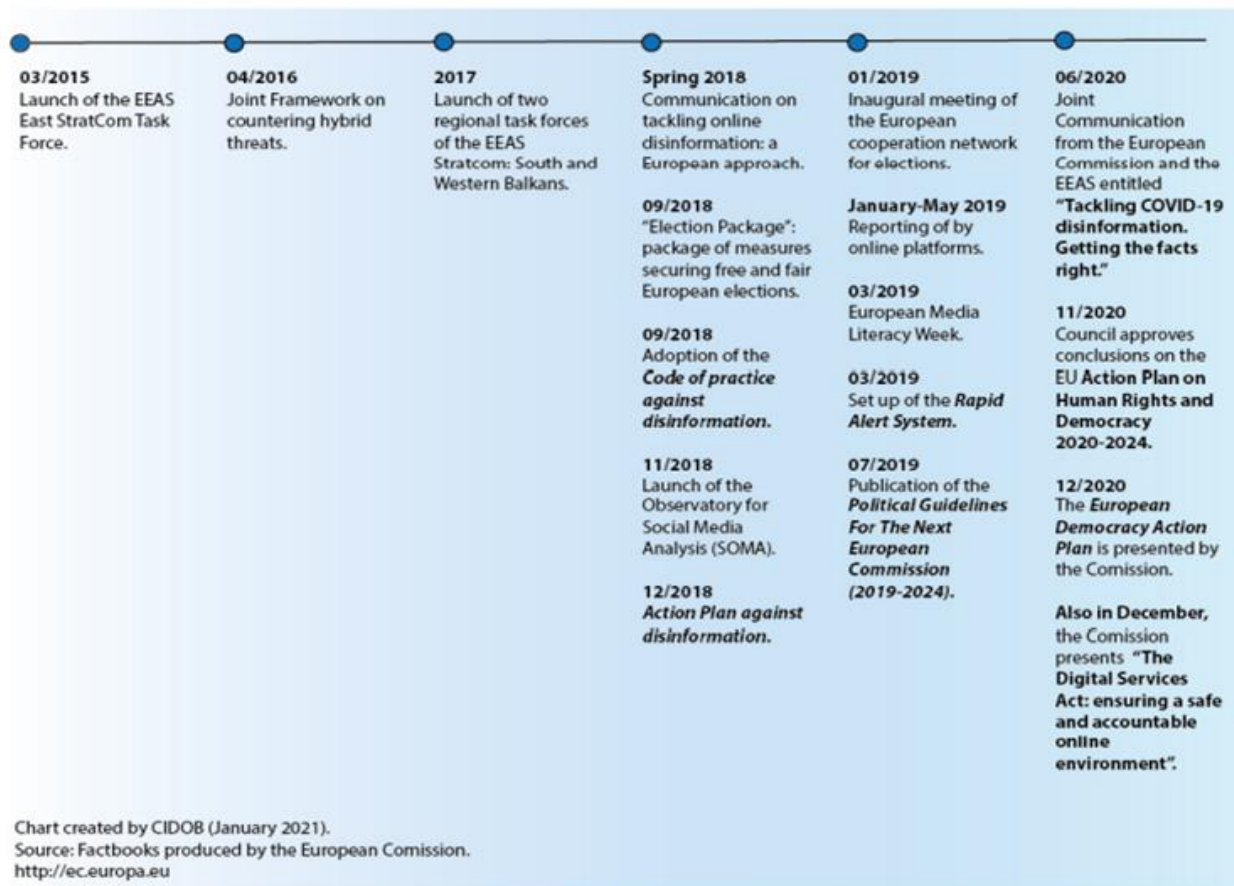


Figure 1: EU's actions and initiatives against disinformation, source: Colomina et al, 2021, 31.

The EU had not undertaken much in the field of disinformation before 2015. However, the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula pressured the Union to act, giving rise to the EEAS East StratCom

Task Force in 2015, followed, in 2017, by two regional task forces in the Southern Neighborhood and in the Western Balkans (Colomina et al., 2021, 31).

Crucial is the publishing of a EESC in report in 2018, in which the EU recognized the threat of disinformation (EESC, 2018). As Nenadić (2019) adds, this recognition coincides with the overturning of a referendum in Switzerland: in that case, the Swiss Supreme Court had estimated that the voters had not been fully informed and that they were unable to participate in the referendum. Nenadić writes that the overturning revived the fear of disinformation which had been lingering since the 2016 US elections and Brexit referendum. This fear was all the more justified since the European elections were taking place that same year.

As shown in the image above, made by Colomina et al. (2021), this led to the adoption of the ‘Election Package’ to ensure fair European elections, a Code of Practice against disinformation and a Communication on tackling online disinformation. The authors add that, that same year, the EU adopted the Action Plan against disinformation, followed by the European Democracy Action Plan and the EU Action Plan in Human Rights and Democracy, in 2020. The very last observable step in the EU’s responses to disinformation is linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors write. Indeed, several measures were adopted in 2020 to counter disinformation about the coronavirus. These include a Joint Communication titled ‘Tackling COVID-19 disinformation. Getting the facts right’ and the Digital Services Act.

As it appears, the EU mostly issues responses to disinformation in the context of imminent crises which might harm the critical thinking and security of its citizens. This was the case in crises such as the annexation of Crimea, the Russian interference in the US elections and Brexit referendum and the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Case study 1: Latvia

3.1. Contextualization

Latvia is particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation since, as one of Russia’s direct neighbors, it is part of what the Kremlin calls the ‘Russian world’, a space where Russian language and culture are widespread (Aron, 2015; Bokša, 2019). Latvia is also more exposed to Russian disinformation as, similarly to other Baltic countries, it hosts a sizeable diaspora of ‘compatriots’, accounting for about 40% of the total population (Ellis, 2022). This diaspora results from migrations in the period of the USSR and is mostly found in the Latgale region in the east of Latvia (Murinska et al., 2018, 69). Of note is that the Russian diaspora in Latvia should not be seen as a homogenous group (Mix, 2020, 16).

The Russian diaspora is quite poorly integrated in Latvia, which leads to disparities with native Latvians themselves. The integration of the diaspora is itself undermined by two issues. The first of them is the strong nationalism of native Latvians, stemming from the Latvians’ ancient fear of being overshadowed

by Slavic migrants and becoming a diaspora in their country (Plasseraud & Pourchier-Plasseraud, 2021). The second obstacle to the integration of the Russian diaspora in Latvia is the ‘non-citizens’ issue. De Jong et al. (2017) remind us that the Latvian Citizenship Law sees all who do not hold Latvian citizenship as ‘non-citizens’ and that this special status deprives its holders from participating in national elections in Latvia and exposes them to discrimination, notably in the field of public services. De Jong et al. add that currently, non-citizens account for 12% of the total Latvian population, two thirds of which are ethnic Russians. Going through the Latvian naturalization procedures, however, does not seem like a viable alternative: these procedures are long and cumbersome (Kerikmäe et al., 2018).

Another factor which may explain Latvia’s vulnerability to DATM disinformation is the country’s institutional and economic situation. Indeed, like the other Baltic countries, Latvia is dependent on Russian gas⁴ (Zeleneva & Ageeva, 2017, 187). Research also shows that there is no Latvian legislation specifically targeting disinformation (Rozukalne, 2021, 21) and that the quality of Latvian media has decreased after the 2008 crisis prevented it from obtaining enough funding (de Jong et al., 2017). Thus, the press in Latvia relies on outdated legislation, such as the 2010 Law on the Press and Other Mass Media (Kudors, 2018).

Finally, a study has proved that post-communist countries tend to be more skeptical towards media institutions as a result of the climate of distrust which prevailed during the Soviet period (Bognar, 2018; Pjesivac, 2017). Therefore, these countries’ populations have a tendency to do ‘triangulation’, i.e. to gather information by themselves through different accessible media (Pjesivac et al., 2016; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2021).

Of the four factors mentioned hereabove, the presence of the Russian diaspora turns out to be the most relevant in explaining why Riga so often falls victim to disinformation. Indeed, the ‘compatriots’ isolation from native Latvians offers a crack for the Kremlin to exploit. More specifically, this isolation has increased the Russian diaspora’s consumption of Russian media, which become thus efficient vectors of DATM disinformation⁵. Among these state-controlled media are news outlets, TV channels and newspapers such as the Krasnaya Zvezda (the ‘Red Star’), Kommersant, RT, Sputnik, Baltnews, NTV, PBK (or Pervyi Kanal, also called Channel One), MK Latvija, TV3+, Russia-RTR, Vesti Segodnya, Subbota, Baltijas Bass... (Hirss, 2021; Morozov, 2012; Zaumane, 2020, 13).

Statistics show that about 97% of the Russian diaspora is informed through these Russian media (Vihalemm et al., 2019) and that, in 2014 already, one third of the Latvian population preferred watching Russian TV channels over those in Latvian (Rostoks & Sprūds, 2015).

⁴ In 2021, Latvia’s dependency rate on Russian gas amounted to 92%, making the most dependent EU Member State on Russian oil supplies (Statista, 2022a).

⁵ In this paper, Russian ‘compatriots’ are considered as the targets of DATM disinformation, so as to keep a coherent approach with that of the articles used for this study. However, information on disinformation spread by ‘compatriots’ in Latvia remains scarcely available.

These news outlets, the content of which is edited and approved by editors-in-chief in Moscow, often cover international issues as tabloids would, framing them as ‘scandals’ or controversial matters (Muiznieks et al., 2008, 39). In addition to this, the content of Russian media often contains approximative or completely made up data, as was the case in a 2003 Krasnaya Zvezda article, which wrongly estimated that one third of Latvia’s population opposed its accession to NATO (Rostoks, 2008). Disinformation is also spread through additional vehicles such as social media. According to Teperik et al. (2018), in Latgale, Odnoklassniki (OK), V Kontakte (VK) and Facebook were the most used social media websites in 2018, their users amounting to 117,000, 65,000 and 47,000, respectively. The authors add that, at the national level, the most popular social media were foreign ones such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram but also the Latvian platform Draugiem. Although all media were targeted by Russian disinformation to some extent, the three most widely used in Latgale were the most targeted, with bots spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian messages (Hanley et al., 2022). Such messages were also spread by troll accounts (Pričins, 2023).

3.2. Narratives

The anti-Latvia narrative: Demonizing Latvia and its treatment of the Russian diaspora in Latgale is one of the topics favored by DATM disinformation (Muiznieks et al., 2008, 146). Moscow has even filed claims of abuse to the European Court of Human Rights but these claims were rejected due to a lack of evidence (Zeleneva & Ageeva, 2017, 185). Russian media depict the diaspora as a sizeable, united group, which they call ‘Russians’ or ‘our compatriots’, implying that the diaspora is still closely tied to Russia (Petrenko, 2008). Latvia is also constantly depicted as ‘plagued by resurgent Nazism’, with NTV Mir describing a 2015 WWII commemoration in Latvia as a ‘march to honor Nazism’ (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016). Lastly, Russian disinformation pushes forward the concept of the ‘domestic failure’ or the ‘destruction narrative’ (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021), which criticizes Latvia for its weak institutions and the inaction of the government regarding the country’s demographic decline. (Zaumane, 2020, 25).

The anti-EU narrative: Generally speaking, Russian media refers to the EU as an economic and political failure (Sultănescu, 2019). Content of all sorts is made up to discredit the EU: from the Norwegian government supposedly promoting pedophilia, to the alleged creation of the coronavirus in a Latvian lab (Bergmane, 2020). Russian media likes to point out that joining the EU has not been particularly beneficial to the Baltic countries since they continue to be plagued by corruption and since dissatisfaction towards the EU is palpable (Sultănescu, 2019). Moreover, the EU is said to be ‘ineffective and divided’ (Mix, 2020, 16), and could well collapse in the near future, which as Russian media contends, will bring the Baltic States closer to Moscow (Bayer et al., 2021). The EU’s Russophobia, mostly illustrated by its implementations of sanctions against Russia, is also tackled by Russian state-owned outlets. Through the inaccurate content spread by Russian media, the Kremlin aims at making

the Russian diaspora in Latvia support pro-Russian parties such as the Harmony Party, which opposes the sanctions (Petrenko, 2008).

The anti-US/anti-NATO narrative: Unsurprisingly, hostility towards the US and NATO held by Russian media often finds itself at the center of disinformation campaigns. Although NATO can be described by Russian media as weak and incompetent (Sultănescu, 2019), criminal stories are also made up to showcase its aggressivity (e.g. the alleged kidnapping of a Polish girl by American soldiers in 2018). (Chuang, 2017; Latvian Ministry of Defence, 2018; Mix, 2020, 16). According to Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019), describing NATO as an aggressor *par excellence* reinforces the threat posed by the West. Both authors add that RT and Sputnik remain the biggest detractors of NATO, with 80% of their articles issued about it in 2017-2018 vilifying its expansion to the East.

3.3. National initiatives

In 2016, several calls for the revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) arose from the Baltic countries (Liepniece, 2016). However, since these calls for action are covered later in this paper, this subdivision shall not expand any further on them.

The year 2019 marked the adoption of a new version of Latvia's National Security Concept. In this document, Latvian authorities acknowledged the threat posed by Russia's hybrid activities (Śliwa et al., 2021). In 2020, the nonprofit organization Defend Democracy (2020) issued a position paper, the signatories of which included Latvia and Eastern/Central European States. All countries urged for cooperative action from the EU, NATO, the G7 and the UN. Referring to the EU, the paper emphasized that the EEAS should gather more evidence on Russian narratives and methods to ensure a public condemnation of Russia's disinformation. The paper also deemed the EU's 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation insufficient and deplored the lack of a regulatory framework on disinformation.

As Zalan (2021) writes, in 2020, a Latvian center-right MEP, Sandra Kalniete, was appointed as a rapporteur under the INGE Special Committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU, including disinformation. Zalan adds that Kalniete was tasked with drafting a report to come up with better solutions against disinformation and that the report mentioned the importance of defending critical infrastructure from disinformation, the need to support independent journalists and to raise awareness among the population. The report acknowledged that 'malicious foreign actors use information manipulation and other interference tactics to interfere in democratic processes in the EU' (European Parliament, 2020). The year 2020 also saw the organization of the Munich Security Conference, wherein Latvian President Egils Levits urged the EU to introduce more measures for the suspension and the blocking of broadcasters of disinformative Russian channels (Nikers, 2020).

3.4. The EU's response

The East StratCom Task Force (ESCTF)

The ESCTF, set up in 2015, aims at promoting EU values in the Eastern Neighborhood, countering Russian disinformation and strengthening the media environment (EEAS, 2015; European Council, 2015a). Although the case of Latvia is not cited explicitly as a reason for creating the ESCTF, its founding document attributes its creation to numerous ongoing disinformation campaigns in the EU Member States and in Eastern Europe (Klum Stelander, 2017). We can therefore view the Task Force as an EU response to DATM disinformation in Latvia.

Critical assessment: Although it has been countering disinformation in the Baltic States, the ESCTF was created with the EU's Eastern neighborhood in mind (Pamment, 2020). This means that cases of Russian disinformation in Latvia might be treated less hastily than disinformation in Ukraine. Furthermore, the ESCTF's budget and staff are relatively small compared to that of Kremlin-owned disinformative bodies, which prevents it from being fully effective. According to Stray (2019), in 2019, the ESCTF hired 14 full time staff members and received about €1.1 million per year. In comparison, Stray adds, the Russian Internet Research Agency employs about one thousand people. Moreover, its budget amounted to \$35 million between January 2016 and June 2018 (de Haldevang, 2018). The ESCTF also does not hold enough power to sanction the instigators of disinformation or to blacklist them (Kalniete & Pildegovičs, 2021).

The EU's financial support for the Baltic Center for Media Excellence (BCME)

An initiative worth mentioning is the EU's support for the Baltic Center for Media Excellence (BCME), an NGO founded in November 2015. The BCME aims at countering disinformation by promoting media literacy and is funded by 23 EU Member States through the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), a grant-making organization created in 2013 (EED, 2022). The BCME was created after a study conducted by the EED which assessed the situation regarding Russian disinformation in countries of the Eastern Neighborhood and in the Baltics (Kudors, 2018).

Critical assessment: The position of journalist differs from that of fact-checker and most journalists working in NGOs such as the BCME lack the ability to use fact-checking or monitoring tools to detect disinformation (Teperik et al., 2022). The EED, for its part, was criticized for having vague objectives and for being incoherent in its funding (Leininger & Richter, 2012).

The revision of the AVMSD

The AVMSD, which coordinates national legislation on audiovisual media in the EU, had originally been adopted in 2010 but the Baltic countries called for its amendment after the annexation of Crimea. There are two reasons behind this request. Firstly, following the annexation, the three Baltic countries were confronted to DATM disinformation, leading Latvia to ban TV channel Rossiya RTR in 2014 and in 2016 (Vihalemm et al., 2019). This was regarded as compatible with EU law, based on the *Mesopotamia Broadcast v. Roj TV* case, which allows the suspension of a channel inciting hatred (Broughton Micova, 2019; Kokoly, 2020). Secondly, as previously mentioned, Latvia does not have any legislation specifically targeting disinformation within its territory (Rozukalne, 2021, 21). By joining the other Baltic countries in asking for a revision of the Directive, Latvia could ensure the creation by the EU of a legislative framework to regulate the functioning of Russian media in Latvia (Kudors, 2018). Following calls for amendments from the Latvian Presidency (2015) and the Saeima (2016) (Vilson, 2016), the new version of the Directive was officially adopted in 2018.

Critical assessment: The revision of the AVMSD marks the first time that the concerns of Central/Eastern European countries were taken into account. However, the reviewed Directive still retains a problematic aspect, as Kokoly (2020) writes: it posits that, if a broadcasting company is registered in one Member State, it only needs to comply with the rules of that Member State to broadcast its content across the EU. According to Kokoly, this means that Russian outlets registered in Latvia might spread deceptive content to other Member States. The author adds that the AVMSD authorizes the suspension of a broadcaster in cases of incitement to hatred; yet, disinformation does not completely equate with that. Thus, there is a need for a clarification by the EU on the extent to which disinformation is associated with incitement to hatred.

The EU 2022 ban on RT and Sputnik

Unsurprisingly, shortly after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the European Council banned Sputnik and RT (European Council, 2022), recognizing that Russia had been conducting disinformation campaigns, including campaigns targeting diasporas of ethnic Russians (Official Journal of the European Union, 2022). As Voorhoof (2022) writes, the ban was justified by several legal bases: Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights, Article 3 of the AVMSD (which allows the ban on broadcasts inciting to hatred), Articles 3(5) and (6) TEU (which highlight the EU's role in contributing to peace and security) and Article 20 of the UN ICCPR (which forbids war propaganda). Voorhoof adds that, on May 4 2022, after World Press Freedom Day, the EU announced that the ban would be extended to three other Kremlin-owned media: RTR Planeta, Rossiya 24 and TV Center.

This move from the EU was clearly inspired by similar measures taken by the Baltic countries, most notably by Latvia, in previous years. Indeed, in addition to temporarily suspending RT and Sputnik in 2014 and 2016, Riga had also blocked down access to Baltnews in 2019 (EuvsDisinfo, 2020). In 2020, the Latvian National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) banned numerous Russian TV channels allegedly spreading disinformation over the war in Ukraine and Latvia justified the ban by saying that it was part of the sanctions imposed by the EU on RT owner Dmitry Kiselyov in 2014 (RSF, 2020).

Critical assessment: Although the EU's ban on RT and Sputnik proves that small countries such as Latvia can be a source of inspiration for EU-wide legislation in terms of disinformation, the ban itself is not a panacea. Indeed, Pamment (2022) notes that it is easy for the Kremlin to bypass it by using online accounts which mirror the content of RT and Sputnik (e.g. much of the content previously found in these outlets is now being shared on apps such as VKontakte or Odysee). Moreover, as Pamment writes, the ban is not comprehensive enough to apply to all Kremlin-owned media operating in Latvia; therefore, many of these media outlets remain unregulated and continue spreading disinformation. Sarlo (2017) adds that suspending Russian channels like RT or Sputnik could also provoke the wrath of the Russian diasporas in the Baltics since it could be seen as an attempt by the EU (or Latvia) to display Russophobia and suppress a pro-Russia vision which the Union disagrees with.

3.5. Observations

All in all, there is room for improvement in the EU's measures to curb disinformation in Latvia. Some of the bodies tackling disinformation, such as the ESCTF, do conduct their activity in Latvia, yet their creation was not explicitly associated with DATM disinformation in Latgale. In the absence of a clear correlation, it is difficult to estimate whether or not the EU is actually responding to disinformation in Latvia. The role of the Baltic countries as whistleblowers in the field of disinformation is also problematic. Indeed, it appears that most of the EU's reaction to countering disinformation in Latvia only emerged after several alarm calls were raised by the Latvian authorities (this was the case with the revision of the AVMSD and the ban on RT and Sputnik). Furthermore, the solutions implemented by the EU sometimes mimicked those of Latvia. This not only shows that the EU failed to react timely but also that the fight against disinformation is so novel for the EU that it chose to mirror national strategies. Finally, the EU failed in tackling the issue of ethnic divisions in Latvia. As previously stated, this division of society constitutes an enabling factor of Russian disinformation; however, the Union still has not enacted any measure which would clearly identify the link between polarization of society and vulnerability to disinformation. Acknowledging this link might prove beneficial for coming up with viable measures to curb disinformation not just in Latvia, but in any other targeted country. Overall, this analysis of disinformation in Latvia seems to corroborate the initial hypothesis. Because of its geographical and historical proximity to Moscow, Latvia has been more prone to Russian disinformation

and the EU's responses have not been as efficient as one could have hoped. This also explains the proliferation of national initiatives against Russian disinformation in Latvia.

4. Case study 2: Ukraine

4.1. Contextualization

During a 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Vladimir Putin addressed the following words to his American counterpart, George W. Bush: 'You have to understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a country. Part of its territory is in Eastern Europe and the greater part was given by us' (Stent, 2014). This quote illustrates Putin's territorial claims in Ukraine, which would give way to the infamous annexation of Crimea in 2014. In this context of 'reclaiming the land', disinformation appeared a weapon of choice for the Kremlin (Karpchuk & Yuskiv, 2021), with its main target being the conservative Russian-speaking population in the industrial regions of Central, Eastern and Southern Ukraine, which expresses distrust for Ukrainian media (Boulègue et al., 2018, 15; Kulyk, 2019).

A 2001 census showed that approximately 30% of Ukrainians considered their native language to be Russian (Fortuin, 2022). Shapovalova (2013) explains that native Russian-speakers in Ukraine are called 'compatriots' by Russia, an ambiguous term which also refers to the ethnic Russians living abroad, usually in former Soviet states. The authors underline that relations with these Russians living abroad are an important part of Russia's foreign and domestic policy, as described in the 1999 act 'On the State Policy of the Russian Federation with Respect to Compatriots Abroad'. Speaking from his office in July 2014, Putin himself said that Russia had the right to use 'the entire range of available means' to protect the rights of 'compatriots' in Ukraine (Benitez, 2014). Yet, one may find it strange that the Kremlin repeatedly uses the narrative of 'compatriots' in Ukraine needing to be 'protected'. Indeed, compared to other countries of the Russian World, the Russian diaspora in Ukraine is treated quite well. Ukrainian 'compatriots' enjoy the right to participate in the public and political life, they can obtain Ukrainian citizenship easily and the language barrier is almost nonexistent due to most Ukrainians being fluent in Russian⁶ (Batta, 2021). The Russian diaspora in Ukraine is, therefore, quite well integrated into the country. In that regard, a reference to Suslov's diaspora paradox could be made: Mikhail Suslov, former Second Secretary of the Communist Party in the USSR, posits that the more a diaspora is integrated, the more it becomes an efficient vehicle of Kremlin disinformation; however, if a diaspora is well integrated, there are also less chances that it shares the Kremlin's opinion (Robitaille, 2020). This definitely poses a challenge in the Kremlin's spread of disinformation.

⁶ However, in 2019, a bill was adopted by the Ukrainian Rada, which imposed the use of Ukrainian in most aspects of public life (Roth, 2019). The bill marked the loss of Russian's status as an official language in Ukraine and angered the Kremlin and Ukraine's Russian diaspora.

Russian media outlets operating in Ukraine are diverse, albeit 89% of Ukrainians consider television to be their most frequent source of information (Pesenti & Pomerantsev, 2016). Even after the 2014 ban on Russian state-owned TV channels in Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea, it was estimated that around 21% of Ukrainians still acquired information from Russian TV (Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018). Outlets such as Voice of Russia, LifeNews, NTV, Vesti, RTR Planeta, Russia 24, Perviy Kanal and RT constitute efficient vectors of DATM disinformation in Ukraine (Dougherty, 2014; Rostoks & Sprüds, 2015). Bentzen and Russell (2015) state that media moguls owning these channels (such as Margarita Simonyan) frequently meet with the Russian presidential administration for briefings on the content that they publish and also have ‘yellow telephones’ linking them to the Kremlin. Therefore, the authors write, many media outlets that seem independent, such as the ‘Ekho Moskvyy’⁷ radio station, are in fact owned by either Putin or his cronies, and their alleged independence serves to maintain the illusion of media pluralism.

4.2. Narratives

The anti-Ukraine narrative: The Ukrainian government, for one, constitutes a preferred target: it is often accused of being a ‘failed State’ (Boulègue et al., 2018, 16) conducting an ‘all-Ukrainization’ (Ishchuk, 2019) and a ‘cultural genocide’ (Pakhomenko & Tryma, 2016). This ‘oppression’ narrative serves two purposes. First, it aims to urge Ukrainians to take action against their ‘failed’ government and to prevent Ukraine from ever joining NATO or the EU (Haines, 2015; Jacuch, 2021). Second, the ‘oppression’ narrative fuels the metaphor of the ‘Russian spring’, i.e. the idea that Russian diasporas in the post-Soviet space should acknowledge Ukraine’s horrific actions and reconnect with Russia (Fedor, 2015). Another target of choice is Ukrainian nationalism, which is demonized by Russian media and frequently equated with fascism (Görke et al., 2021). Such amalgamation stems from a cunning instrumentalization of historical facts by Russia, mostly relating to WWII, to the USSR and to Ukrainian nationalists (Erlacher, 2019; King, 2018). By repeatedly spreading a narrative vilifying Ukraine’s role in these historical events (and glorifying Russia’s), the Kremlin manages to export the ‘nationalists = fascists’ idea abroad. In some instances, however, the anti-Ukraine narrative is put aside and, instead, Russian media use a narrative claiming the brotherhood of Ukraine and Russia, as states with ‘the same baptismal font in the Dnieper’ (Gagliarducci, 2022). This is a complete U-turn from the previous

⁷ “Ekho Moskvyy”, created in 1990 by journalists who went on to oppose the coup against Gorbachev in 1991, has often been praised as the last stronghold of independent journalism in Russia and has supported the view of liberal pro-Western Russians (Kreishan, 2022). However, it should not be forgotten that Gazprom owns most of its shares since 2001 (Felgenhauer, 2014) and that Putin instrumentalizes it to create an illusion of democracy (Wengle, 2022). As mentioned by author Ann Cooper, when referring to Ekho Moskvyy’s usefulness, ‘some said Venediktov [its chief editor] was particularly adept at negotiating with the Kremlin and keeping Ekho just this side of media red lines. Others suggested the Kremlin wanted to be able to tell its critics: “See, we do have independent journalism”’ (Cooper, 2022).

narrative; yet, it more or less serves the same means: insisting on the link between Russia and Ukraine means erasing any trace of distinct Ukrainian identity and considering Ukrainian nationalism as nonexistent.

The anti-EU/anti-West narrative: Russian media frequently highlight the incompatibility between Ukrainian and Western values (Murinska et al., 2018, 68). They also marginalize political parties that aim at operating a rapprochement with the West (Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018) and portray Western politicians as hypocritical actors supporting the killing of civilians in Ukraine (Sazonov & Kopõtin, 2016). Moreover, Rostoks & Sprūds (2015) add that international organizations linked to the West, such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the UN are portrayed as willing to separate Ukraine and Russia and as remaining passive in the face of the Russophobic sentiment in Ukraine. The authors explain that criticism is also formulated against EU Member States individually and that this anti-EU/anti-West narrative serves as an indirect way of glorifying Russia's past victories over Western invaders. However, according to the authors, this did not prevent the fact that, following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the appeal of the EU and its model of organization was reinforced among Ukrainians.

The anti-US/anti-NATO narrative: Several Russian media depict NATO and the US as being Russia's enemy and also indulge in exposing the US hypocrisy (Wetoszka, 2016). For instance, as Szostek and Hutchings (2015) note, in 2014, Rossiya-1 criticized Woodrow Wilson for having promoted self-determination while also infringing the rights of Native Americans. The authors add that this strategy is often used by the Kremlin: to avoid being punished for its actions abroad, it usually accuses other countries of doing something worse. Moreover, as noted by Kalenský (2022), the Kremlin often accuses NATO of threatening Russia of invasion and this very argument was utilized to justify Russia's military build-up at the border with Ukraine in 2021. Kalenský also writes that condemning Ukraine's potential entry into NATO and framing it as a threat is common among Russian media.

4.3. National initiatives

As previously mentioned, after the annexation of the Crimea, Ukraine's first reaction consisted in sanctioning Russia's major state TV channels. In August 2014, a ban on fourteen Russian channels (including Russia Today and LifeNews) was adopted (Clarke, 2022; Reuters, 2014). Furthermore, the 'Anti-Propaganda' website was created to provide analyses of broadcasts from Russian TV channels (Dougherty, 2014). In December 2014, the Ukrainian Ministry of Information Policy (MIP) was created to counter the hybrid aggressions led by the Russian government (Torychnyi et al., 2021). The following year, Ukraine banned the entry of 44 journalists (both from Russia and other States) on the Ukrainian soil (Oliphant, 2015). It also adopted the Law on Transparency of Media Ownership, which prevents Russia from owning media in Ukraine and, in 2016, the Ukrainian authorities created a new Ukrainian broadcasting company called Suspilne TV (however, despite its intention to reaffirm a better control of

Ukrainian media, the company is still underfunded and has a small audience) (Boulègue et al., 2018, 17). The independent media watchdog Telekritika, the existence of which predates the annexation, proved useful in combating Russian disinformation campaigns, as it pays attention to the biases and lack of evidence in Russian media, as well as the differences between reportage and editorial comment (Pesenti & Pomerantsev, 2016).

Ukraine has also established the Learn to Discern information literacy program (Haigh et al., 2019) as well as other entities: the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC), Inform Resists, Ukraine World, Inform Napalm and independent media outlet Hromadske, which is being partly funded by the EU, though insufficiently (Terentieva, 2018). Another well-known Ukrainian initiative is StopFake which was created in 2014 by students of the Mohyla school of journalism in Kyiv (Bentzen & Russell, 2015; Nocetti, 2015).

The activity of some NGOs based in Ukraine (the Media Reform Center, the Institute for Regional Press Development, the Beyond News Project...) may help to improve the situation in the near future (Teremetskyi et al., 2021). More recent initiatives may also restore some hope. On February 2nd 2021, the Ukrainian authorities decided to ban Ukrainian TV channels ZIK, NewsOne and 112, which were in fact owned by Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk and served as vessels of DATM disinformation (Dickinson, 2021). Furthermore, in May 2021, Ukraine established the Center for Countering Disinformation of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, in order to better monitor the information space (Teremetskyi et al., 2021).

4.4. The EU's response

The East StratCom Task Force (ESCTF)

The ESCTF was established in April 2015 to monitor disinformation narratives linked to Russia or to media groups in Eastern Europe (Ramos & Vieira, 2019). It is part of the Strategic Communication, Task Forces and Information Analysis Division (AFGEN.7) and was improved through two specific documents: 'Tackling online disinformation: a European approach' and 'On the European democracy action plan' (Nitszke, 2022). Its inception started following an action plan by the EEAS in 2015 (Graaf, 2022). It comprises 9 Russian-speaking members who are media professionals and who analyze Russian content in over 15 languages with the help of journalists, think tanks and NGOs (Bentzen & Russell, 2015; Mortera-Martinez, 2018). Since 2017, it has been running its flagship project 'EUvsDisinfo' which debunks fake news and disinformation spread by Russia (Teremetskyi et al., 2021). The EC conclusions of March 19-20, 2015, which gave a political impetus, cited the reason for its creation as the 'need to challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns' (European Council, 2015b).

Critical assessment: The Task Force has repeatedly been described as understaffed and underfunded, leading to requests of expanding the Task Force's size as well as the share of the funds it receives

(European Parliament, 2016). Moreover, Alemanno et al. (2018) recall that, in a complaint to the European Ombudsman, the ESCTF's neutrality was contested as its embeddedness in the EEAS, supposedly made it inherently pro-European. The complaint also stated that the ESCTF's lack of official methodology allegedly went against the International Fact-Checking Network's code of principles. Lastly, the Task Force was said to infringe the right of freedom of expression (article 11.1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and article 10 of the ECHR) and the right to good administration (article 41 of the CFHR).

The EP resolution on 'EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties'

The resolution (European Parliament, 2016) was issued on November 23, 2016 and urges to speed up the fight against hybrid threats, calling for the Rotating Presidency of the Council to add strategic communications to their agenda. It can be argued that this resolution is a direct response to the situation in Ukraine as references are made to the 'annexation of Crimea and the Russian-led hybrid war in the Donbas' and to the 'enhanced role' of Russia 'in the European media environment, aimed at creating political support in European public opinion for Russian action and undermining the coherence of EU foreign policy'. The resolution also mentions the 'intrusion of Russian media', which is 'particularly strong and often unmatched in the countries of the Eastern neighborhood whereas national media in these countries are often weak and unable to cope with the strength and power of Russian media'.

Critical assessment: Mirović (2018) addresses several critiques against the EP's strategic communication. He mentions that the document goes as far as to equating Russia with a terrorist group such as ISIL. Moreover, a reference is once again made to the ECHR and the ECFHR when the scholar deems that the EP's resolution breaches the right to freedom of expression and freedom of information. According to the author, this is an example of a soft law measure (i.e. the resolution) taking precedence over international law (i.e. the ECHR and ECFHR) for political matters. Therefore, in issuing such response, the EU would be, quite ironically, contradicting Josep Borrell's recommendation whereby 'efforts to fight disinformation should not come at the expense of freedom of media and must be done in full respect of fundamental rights and freedoms and following international standards' (Dickinson, 2021).

The Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE)

The Hybrid CoE was established on April 11, 2017, when 9 States signed a Memorandum of Understanding (since then, 33 new states have joined the Center) (Hybrid CoE, 2023; Standish, 2018). It operates by coordinating the activity of the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell and its NATO counterpart, allowing for the sharing of best practices and expertise (Beaulieu & Salvo, 2018). Its creation is not

specifically attributed to the situation in Ukraine. However, the cases of disinformation in Ukraine can still be seen as the catalyst for creating the Center, as one of its founding documents, the Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid threats, vaguely refers to fighting ‘key challenges to peace and stability in the EU’s eastern and southern neighborhood’ (European Commission, 2016).

Critical assessment: One could argue that the Center’s range of activity is too broad to ensure effective responses. In addition, Beaulieu & Salvo (2018) note that Member State participation to the center is done on a voluntary basis and the center lacks a mechanism forcing participants to institutionalize the decisions taken in its framework. The authors add that the Hybrid CoE is also excluded from policy discussions and decision-making structures in Brussels and in the EU Member States. Lastly, Mareşî (2019) argues that the Hybrid CoE is not well connected to other EU-NATO hubs dealing with cyber-security, rendering information flows between them inefficient.

EU-wide ban on Russian media

As mentioned in the case of Latvia, February 27, 2022, marked the imposition of a EU-wide ban on Russian media outlets RT and Sputnik operating in countries where their activity was licensed. A study by Sisu et al. (2022) reveals that, before Ursula Von der Leyen’s announcement of the ban, five Member States (Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) had already called for the adoption of such measure, probably because they felt more vulnerable to Kremlin-sponsored disinformation. The same study points out that, shortly after the invasion, Finland was the only country that did not wait for an instruction from the EU level and chose to single-handedly ban the Russian channels broadcasting on its territory.

Critical assessment: Campion (2022) reminds us that the ban only has a temporary nature. The decision to sanction RT and Sputnik also clashed with the European Federation of Journalists: its General Secretary, Ricardo Gutiérrez, called the EU decision ‘undemocratic’ and violating freedom of expression (EFJ, 2022). Furthermore, though the ban gives the impression that the Member States will henceforth have a common stance towards Russia under the EU umbrella, such thing is not guaranteed. Given the difference in the Member States’ attitude to Russia, already underscored by Naturski and Pomorska (2017), Member States that condemn Russia at the supranational level may well have a less punitive attitude at the national level. Thus, there could be many more situations akin to that of March 2014, when the question of imposing sanctions on Russia was discussed and countries such as Austria and Spain were unwilling to adopt sanctions as they feared the economic consequences that Russia could impose in retaliation (Schult et al., 2014).

Brief overview of other measures

-Although they do not lead to specific initiatives, several documents issued by the EP, the EC and the Commission have strongly condemned Russian disinformation, such as the EP resolution of January 15, 2015, in the EC conclusions of March 19 of the same year and in the Commission's 2018 'Tackling online disinformation: A European Approach' (Graaf, 2022).

-Simultaneously, the EU has also been fighting to ensure media literacy and to support free and independent journalism in countries plagued by disinformation, including Ukraine. The Hromadske channel, which receives a grant from the Union (Terentieva, 2018), was mentioned hereabove. In addition, the EU created in 2018 the High Level Expert group on fake news and online disinformation, aiming, among others, at promoting media literacy and safeguarding the diversity of the EU media environment (Terán González, 2019). The same purpose is attributed to the project that the EU and the Council of Europe have been conducting since July 9, 2021, titled 'EU and the Council working together to strengthen the protection of human rights in Ukraine' (ECPMF, 2023).

4.5. Observations

The lines hereabove seem to contradict the initial hypothesis of this paper. Indeed, the EU has never refrained from lending Ukraine a helping hand regarding the fight against disinformation. As already shown, several initiatives were deployed by the EU in order to assist Ukraine. Even more importantly, the situation in Ukraine could be considered the catalyst of most of the EU's recent efforts in the fight against disinformation (Lexmann, 2017). Indeed, only after the events of 2014 did the EU start to prioritize disinformation campaigns as crucial security issues. We can therefore argue that, unlike our previous case study, Latvia, Ukraine has been at the center of EU lawmakers' attention, with numerous documents and projects being drafted to support it.

However, the EU's efforts against Russian influence operations in Ukraine, though substantial, are not without failings. Firstly, the disinformation that the EU tries to counter through these documents is always defined in broad terms. Little to no mentions are made to any more specific forms of disinformation, such as the one addressed in this report. Secondly, due to vague formulations in the corresponding EU documentation, it can be hard to tell whether the EU's initiatives actually constitute a response to Russian disinformation in Ukraine, or if the responses stem from any form of hybrid aggression led by the Kremlin. Lastly, although the EU has been very responsive, many of its projects to counter disinformation focus solely on its Member States more than they do on Ukraine (the Hybrid CoE, the ban on RT and Sputnik...). This could hinder Ukraine's own ability to tackle disinformation operations on its soil.

5. Case study 3: Germany

5.1. Contextualization

The Russian diaspora in Germany not only represents the largest Russian-speaking population outside of the former Soviet States (Tiido, 2019, 2) but also the highest number of Russian speakers in the European Union as a whole (Tiido, 2019, 7). It is also the first country outside of the USSR where the ‘Russian World’ policy was used (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2021, 2). Although the Bundestag does not publish any data on ethnicity (Decker, 2021, 5), Russian ‘compatriots’ would amount to 3 million (around 4% of the German population according to Mitrokhin (2017,1)). The Russian diaspora in Germany encompasses Russian-speaking migrants from Russia (or other Soviet Republics) with German ancestry; Russian Jews who migrated to Germany as part of the Jewish Program; Russian labor migrants owning an EU Blue Card, etc. (Golova, 2020; Simon & Grabow, 2010, 719).

Russian ‘compatriots’ are scattered all around Germany and represent the biggest linguistic group, behind German speakers (Mitrokhin, 2017, 1). Most of the diaspora holds rather conservative views, thus disapproving of Germany’s modernity (Tiido, 2019, 7) and being ‘understanders’ of Russia (‘Russlandverstehern’) (Wood, 2021). This, however, does not automatically hinder the ‘compatriots’ adaptation in Germany. In fact, they are well integrated, having access to employment, welfare and citizenship, in addition to facing less discrimination than other migrant groups, such as the Turkish group (Simon & Grabow, 2010, 719).

Similarly to other Russian diasporas, the Russian diaspora in Germany has access to a wide array of Russian media, making it a perfect target for Kremlin-sponsored disinformation. From print newspapers (‘Komsomolets Germaniya’, ‘Kommersant Weekly’,...) to TV channels (REN-TV, Rossiya-1 and, since November 2014, RT Deutsch (Elshehawy et al., 2022)), Russian media abounds (Darieva, 2001; Meister, 2016). News Front, a multimedia outlet owned by the Kremlin, is identified as yet another disinformation tool (Shuster, 2017). Funded by the Russian intelligence services since 2013 (Stelzenmüller, 2017, 6), it only broadcasts Kremlin-approved content and was founded by Konstantin Knyrik, a former member of the nationalist, pro-Soviet Eurasian Youth Union (Shuster, 2017).

Disinforming Russian ‘compatriots’ in Germany via Kremlin-controlled media is part of Russia’s general strategy to undermine the West. Indeed, Germany is seen as the EU’s powerhouse and as a country which was essential to the European integration (Newlin et al., 2020, 8). Therefore, controlling Germany is, to some extent, synonymous with controlling the EU. This is why Russia seeks to gain control not only by criticizing the Bundestag, but also by supporting two pro-Russia parties, with ideologies on both ends of the political spectrum: AfD⁸ (far-right) and Die Linke (left-wing) (Newlin et al., 2020, 9). Disinformation ahead of the 2017 German federal elections – the most notorious case of

⁸ In the past, AfD has, for example, supported the Russian annexation of Crimea and has also issued content in the Russian language (Lauzon Chiasson, 2019, 88).

Russian disinformation in Germany – strongly focused on rallying votes for both Die Linke and AfD (Mankoff, 2020), as well for the German anti-Islam movement PEGIDA (The Economist, 2017). The Kremlin seems to think that the more might these parties have within the Bundestag, the more Germany’s policies will be Russia-friendly. Theussen (2020) argues that Germany has, in fact, always been Russia-friendly by promoting a rapprochement with Russia, thanks to platforms such as the German-Russian Forum (since 1993) and the Petersburg Dialog (since 2001) (Polyakova, 2020). According to Theussen, this seemingly pro-Russia stance makes Germany generally less prone to Russian threats than countries of the near abroad. Nevertheless, Timm (2022) does not support this view, stating that Germany is the Kremlin’s main target within the EU and that the ESCTF revealed that 700 disinformation cases had targeted Germany since 2015 (compared to 300 for France and 40 for Spain). A reference was made to the 2017 elections, which disinformation literature covers in great length. Although there was, in fact, no Russian meddling in the elections, DATM disinformation campaigns were widely conducted in the months preceding them, spreading panic among the German government (Schwartz, 2017). Disinformation ahead of the 2017 elections is a case in point and exemplifies the narratives used by the Kremlin.

5.2. Narratives

Anti-EU/Anti-West/Anti-Merkel narrative: Kremlin-owned media attempt at delegitimizing German and Western news outlets (Decker, 2021, 1), in order to stir uncertainty, support extremist groups and create dissent within the EU, hoping that it will lead to a softening of the EU sanctions against Russia (Reuters, 2016). The spread of anti-Western messages supposed to breed dissent among the Russian diaspora, is what Meyer (2017) calls Russia’s ‘Trojan Horse’ strategy. Russia also insists on Germany’s alleged Russophobia, alluding to the so-called mistreatment of the Russian diaspora by the German authorities (Applebaum et al., 2017).

Angela Merkel and the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) often come under fierce criticism too (Brattberg & Maurer, 2018). In 2017, a Rossiya-1 news broadcasts hosted by Dmitry Kiselyov expressed sexist views on the German chancellor and associated her with Nazism for her belief in a ‘Lebensraum’ in Eastern and Central Europe (EuvsDisinfo, 2017a). She was also criticized for allegedly being a ‘puppet’ of the Rothschild family and a ‘vassal’ of the US (EUvsDisinfo, 2018; EuvsDisinfo, 2019), wanting to set up a ‘fascist’ regime in Ukraine (EuvsDisinfo, 2017b). Such attempts to discredit the former German Chancellor are the Kremlin’s way of punishing her for her strong stance on Russia and her condemnation of the 2014 annexation (Mahairas & Dvilyanski, 2018).

Instrumentalization of the refugee crisis and refugees as sex offenders: In war communication, sexual violence is almost systematically weaponized as part of a ‘shock and awe’ strategy. The Kremlin is no exception to this. It has frequently depicted Middle Eastern and North African migrants as brutal rapists, such as in the infamous Lisa case (Polyakova & Boyer, 2018). This kind of narrative has been

essential in instrumentalizing the refugee crisis ahead of the 2017 federal elections. Demonizing migrants is another of Russia's strategy to garner support for parties such as AfD and movements such as PEGIDA, given their strong anti-refugee stance (Karlsen, 2019). It is also a way to flaunt Russia's own handling of Ukrainian refugees, supposedly much better than that of Germany with Muslim refugees (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2018).

5.3. National initiatives

Among the German efforts to curb disinformation, enhancing media literacy skills has been a priority. Many projects were set up, such as the WahlCheck 17 initiative (Haciyakupoglu et al., 2018, 9) and the 'Faktenfinder' team. Created ahead of the 2017 elections, Faktenfinder lists guidelines to help media consumers to spot incorrect information (European Commission, 2018b). Strengthening media competences (Timm, 2022, 33) and subsidizing independent journalism were also a priority (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2020).

The Network Enforcement Act (or NetzDG), passed in June 2017, requires big social media companies to delete illegal content within 24 hours, failing which they can be fined up to €50 million (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). The act was criticized for resembling a form of censorship and for not clarifying what is considered illegal content (Carruthers, 2019, 21). Furthermore, disinformation often operates in a 'legal borderline area, which makes it unclear exactly what is covered by freedom of expression and what is, in fact, legal' (Jaurisch, 2019).

Germany's anti-disinformation efforts are constrained by a number of factors. Firstly, Germany has a policy of 'interweavement' with Russia (i.e. it seeks to strengthen its ties to Russia (Carruthers, 2019, 22)) and a 'naturalizing and ignoring' strategy, whereby it does not confront Russian disinformation and covers it by promoting a good image of Germany (Timm, 2022, 35). Secondly, Germany lacks experience in curbing disinformation, since, unlike Latvia and Ukraine, it was mainly targeted on one occasion, and not during an ongoing period. Thirdly, Germany fears that further responses to disinformation be seen as 'undemocratic', as it happened with the NetzDG Act, which angered Human Rights Watch and other organizations⁹ (HRW, 2018). Disinformation policies often appear to breach the rule of law since they tend to delegate content verification to private, decentralized groups (Monti, 2020) and force the removal of content by authorities who do not possess full information about the context it was issued in (Iglesias Keller, 2022). Finally, Germany has to comply with EU and international law. Art. 11.1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and Art. 10 of the ECHR safeguard the right to (the dissemination of) information and freedom of expression 'even if it is strongly suspected that this information might not be truthful' (Renda, 2018). Restrictions are foreseen for the

⁹ Surprisingly, the Commission refused to publish the document reviewing the NetzDG's compatibility with EU law, saying that the publication would 'damage the mutual trust between the Member States and the Commission' (Reuter, 2017).

dissemination of content undermining public safety and national security (Art. 10(2) ECHR) (Renda, 2018), however, the impact of disinformation on these domains is not always clear enough to prompt an anti-disinformation measure. Moreover, EU provisions that were seen as a legal basis for disinformation policies are used differently according to the context and might not help the case of Germany. For instance, Art. 114 TFEU, which has previously been used to adopt measures against disinformation in the EU, could not be invoked by Germany, as it provides that measures be taken following the distortion of the internal market (Lonardo, 2021); yet, Russian disinformation in Germany has not been proven to cause this.

5.4. The EU's response

EUFactcheck

EUFactcheck is a fact-checking initiative established in 2019 by a professional network of journalists, the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA), which is itself funded by the Commission (EJTA, 2023). Designed to ensure fact-checking ahead of the 2019 European elections, EUFactcheck aims at creating a content checking unit with other European schools of journalism (EUFactcheck.eu, 2019). Although no such information has been confirmed, it could be assumed in this study that the project was created to prevent cases of disinformation, such as those that took place in the run up to the 2017 federal elections. Indeed, these cases might have induced a fear among Brussels officials that something similar would occur near the 2019 European elections, causing the EU to respond by creating the initiative.

Critical assessment: the project relies on new European fact-checking tools, such as the In Vid platform developed by the Thessaloniki-based Information Technologies Institute, and funded by the EU (Rudneva, 2018). Yet, developing and funding such technologies might prove too costly and lengthy for the EU. The content checked by the initiative is also quite limited, since EUFactcheck mostly analyzes political statements by public personalities in the EU (Fass & Peller, 2023; Peteck & Wallenfels, 2022; Walsh & Deleenheer, 2022).

The EU's Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and the European Media and Audiovisual Action Plan (EMAAP)

The EDAP, adopted on December 3, 2020, is based on three pillars: supporting media freedom, countering disinformation and ensuring free and fair elections (Krack, 2021). It foresees, among others, the creation of the Media Ownership Monitor, a database containing information on media outlets (including on who they are owned by) (European Commission, 2020). Although the document does not refer to the cases of Russian disinformation in Germany specifically, it alluded to the evolving threat of disinformation and to election integrity being undermined. It also mentions 'the spread of manipulative information' and election interference (European Commission, 2020). This leads us to believe that the disinformation surrounding the 2017 German elections may have been a catalyst for the EDAP to be drafted, though Germany is never mentioned in the document and the EDAP might as well have been drafted with the 2016 US elections in mind.

The EDAP is complemented by the EMAAP, which means to create a safe media environment by financially supporting media companies and integrating media literacy classes in school curricula (European Commission, 2020b). The simultaneous issuing of both the EDAP and the EMAAP shows that democracy and media now seem to go hand in hand for the EU (Belluati & Morganti, 2022).

Critical assessment: The EDAP only regulates the spread of illegal content; however, just as Jaursch (2019) described in the case of the NetzDG Act, disinformation does not always amount to illegal content (Salgado, 2021). In some cases, it can be less extreme and fall under freedom of expression (Skok, 2020); it still remains undeniably dangerous. As for the EMAAP, it was criticized for not directly tackling disinformation, with a narrow focus on journalism funds (ACT, 2021).

The EU's ban on RT Deutsch

Following EU sanctions, RT Deutsch was banned from broadcasting in the EU territory in the beginning of the year 2022 (DW, 2022). The grounds for adopting such measure were the fact that 'the Russian Federation has engaged in a systematic, international campaign of media manipulation and distortion of facts in order to enhance its strategy of destabilization of its neighboring countries and of the Union and its Member States' (Official Journal of the European Union, 2022).

Critical assessment: the EU ban was not really of use to Germany, since the German Commission on Licensing and Supervision (ZAK) had itself already banned RT Deutsch on February 2, 2022 on grounds that it did not have a German broadcasting license (Noyan, 2022). Therefore, the EU's decision did not do much, apart from maybe preventing RT Deutsch from broadcasting its content to other German-speaking audiences in the EU (in Luxemburg or Austria, for example). Furthermore, the ban did not stop RT Deutsch from spreading its content online, with Margarita Simonyan sharing verbatim articles from the outlet on Twitter (Euronews, 2022) or on websites that mirror RT's content (Balint et al., 2022).

In addition, the DNS-blocking used to ban RT Deutsch was easily circumvented and did not prevent the outlet from threatening Germany with suspending DW's broadcasting license in Russia (Roth, 2022).

5.5. Observations

The assessment of the situation in Germany has produced findings which seem to contradict the initial hypothesis, as both the EU's and Germany's response to the disinformation of Kremlin-controlled media are rather scarce. Germany's goal to secure Russia's sympathy as a partner constitutes a relevant explanation to the Union's meager response. Germany's 'interweavement' policy, as well as its 'naturalizing and ignoring' approach, resulted in its unwillingness to confront Russian-led disinformation on its soil too directly. This approach was imitated by the EU through small-scale responses (the EDAP, the EMAAP, the creation of EUFactcheck), wherein neither Germany nor Russia were alluded to and where any association with DATM disinformation in the German territory was simply hypothesized. This also explains the absence of measures taken against AfD's and Die Linke's sharing of Russian disinformation. Moreover, similarly to Germany, the EU is constrained by its own legal framework and by its commitment to values such as the rule of law and freedom of expression. Not only are there few EU legal bases to effectively handle disinformation, the EU must also ensure that such handling be proportionate, failing which it might be accused of breaching human rights. Therefore, this might result in inefficient responses from the EU. A last reason worth mentioning is the heterogeneity of the Russian diaspora in Germany. Due to their geographical dispersion and different migration backgrounds, 'compatriots' in Germany cannot be grouped into a single category, which complicates the Kremlin's attempts to target them via disinformation. The fact that the Russian diaspora is well integrated in Germany also challenges the Kremlin.

6. Final categorization

The countries that were analyzed in this study – Latvia, Ukraine and Germany – all exemplified a different type of reaction from the EU to DATM disinformation. In the following lines, an answer to the main research question will be provided, along with a final categorization of the EU's response to Russian disinformation. Before establishing such categories, the common features of the EU's response in all three countries should be underscored.

For a start, the EU has systematically shown support to media literacy projects at the national level (conducted by NGOs, fact-checking projects, etc.). This signals the EU's compliance with the principle of subsidiarity by helping empower lower-level entities to tackle Russian disinformation. Yet, in every case study, the EU's response has failed at specifying the form of disinformation that it was reacting to.

The EU used the term ‘disinformation’ broadly and ignores the potential vehicles and instigators responsible for its spread.

Moreover, the EU did not always specify the country that its measures were meaning to help or only alluded to it indirectly. Frequently, these measures raised concerns over whether they respected freedom of expression, in the EU and in each case study. It should also be noted that the EU’s response did not always consist in efforts to eradicate disinformation in a targeted country, but rather in measures to ensure the EU’s own protection (cf. the Hybrid CoE).

Finally, the EU also failed at considering the lack of integration of the Russian diaspora as an aggravating factor for disinformation. There is a need to realize the danger that a non-integrated diaspora group might entail, outlined in Suslov’s diaspora paradox.

Despite these common features, Latvia, Ukraine and Germany offered varied perspectives on the ways in which the EU tackles disinformation by the Kremlin.

Latvia’s relevance to the study of Russian disinformation was already highlighted. DATM disinformation in Latvia has produced a more or less substantial response from the EU. Indeed, measures were adopted by the Union to enhance media literacy (cf. the BCME), to ensure fact-checking and to regulate Russian media via a legislative framework (cf. the AVMSD). However, the fact that some of these measures were only adopted after several emergency calls from Latvia, including by Latvian officials within the EU institutions, is bittersweet. On the one hand, it led to Latvia’s realization that it had to denounce disinformation within the EU institutions, to join forces with other Baltic countries and reach out to NATO and the G7. On the other hand, the fact that the EU only reacted after various pleas from one of its Members States shows that it has been slow in realizing the seriousness of the issue. Consequently, Latvia issued many responses to fight Russian disinformation and has been so proactive that some of the EU measures to tackle disinformation simply replicate those taken by the Latvian authorities (the ban on RT, for example). Furthermore, some of the EU’s responses to assist Latvia (cf. the ESCTF) often tie it together with other countries, such as the Baltic States, meaning that the specificities of Latvia’s struggles with disinformation are often erased. This is one of the instances where the EU’s responses, though welcomed in Latvia, still lack precision and timeliness. Such response shall be labeled as the EU’s **Latvia-type response**.

Ukraine also appears to be a case study in point, as it is probably the best documented case of Russian disinformation led by Kremlin-sponsored media. Numerous responses were issued by the EU to help Ukraine, including more declarative ones, such as statements directly condemning Russia’s actions in Ukraine (cf. the EP resolution of January 15, 2015). Overall, the EU’s response to the Ukrainian case can be considered to have launched an increasing securitization of disinformation by the EU. Indeed, it is only since 2014-2015 that the EU has been acknowledging the threat posed by the Kremlin’s information warfare. This acknowledgement resulted in the implementation of a first notable measure, extensively covered by scholars, namely the ESCTF. Other measures soon followed. In this study, most of the EU initiatives covered were merely assumed to be reactions to the Ukrainian case. Indeed,

sometimes, the EU's responses did not directly mention Ukraine and referred to the countries of the Eastern Partnership or to the hybrid conflict waged by Russia. Here again, EU measures lacked precision. This type of response shall be characterized as the EU's **Ukraine-type response**.

The final focus of this study was on the case of Germany. The EU's reaction to DATM disinformation in Germany seems to have been unsubstantial, as only three initiatives were found, none of them being explicitly linked to cases of DATM disinformation in Germany. This evidenced that the EU's effort to curb disinformation in Germany were constrained by several factors, including the EU's and Germany's commitment to the law and fundamental values (such as freedom of expression), and the EU's legislative framework, with a limited use of certain legal bases that could trigger anti-disinformation policies. Germany's 'policy of interweavement' also deterred the adoption of EU measures, as it advocates for stronger ties between Russia and Germany. As in the case of Latvia, the EU's meager responses in Germany were complemented by national initiatives, which have also proved that the country is ready to fend for itself. However, the lack of effective measures to prevent the disinformation spread by such groups as Die Linke or AfD constitutes an outlier. Here again, the EU's responses have not been sufficient. This form of response is categorized as the EU's **Germany-type response**.

The table on the next page might perhaps offer a more concise insight into the different EU responses for each country.

	Latvia-type response	Ukraine-type response	Germany-type response
Similarities	• Support for national media literacy initiatives • No specification of the type of disinformation addressed • Absence of measures ensuring better integration of Russian ‘compatriots’ • Often, no mention or indirect mention of the country assisted • Measures sometimes raising concern over their respect of freedom of expression • Measures often meaning to protect the EU more than to help the targeted countries		
Differences	• More or less substantial EU response • Measures replicating existing strategies at Member State level • Measures following numerous alarm calls at the Member State level • Measures tying the studied country to a larger group of countries with similar situations	• Substantial EU response • Declarative statements verbally condemning Russian disinformation in the studied country • Measures leading to an increased securitization of disinformation, within the EU and the West in general	• Unsubstantial EU response • Fear of direct confrontation with Russia both at national and EU level due to the ‘policy of interweavement’ • Measures constrained by the EU’s commitment to fundamental values, by its limited legal framework and by Germany’s lack of experience with disinformation

Therefore, we can provide an answer to the initial question: there is, indeed, a variation in the EU's response to DATM disinformation depending on the country targeted by such disinformation. However, the variation went against the main hypothesis of this study: the response was substantial in the case of Ukraine, and not so much in the case of Germany, unlike what had been predicted. In the case of Latvia, the EU's response seemed to align with the initial hypothesis. In all cases, the responses' efficiency was sometimes hampered by their lack of precision and structural flaws. Of note is that, although variations occurred, this does not exclude the fact that the EU's reaction to DATM disinformation often presented similarities in all case studies.

7. Conclusion

This study has delved into the specificities of 'DATM' disinformation ('Diasporas as Targets of Media'). Given the discrepancies in the EU's response to DATM disinformation across Europe, this study has sought to analyze the EU's response to such disinformation in Latvia, Ukraine and Germany. The main goal was to identify a possible variation in the EU's response. The main hypothesis argued that such response to DATM disinformation would prove less substantial in Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine or Latvia, than in other European countries. In order to answer the initial question, an analysis was conducted to identify institutional reactions by the EU.

The findings of this study revealed that there was indeed a variation in the EU's response to DATM disinformation; however, this variation did not follow the initial hypothesis. The EU's reaction was felt more strongly in the case of Ukraine, compared to the case of Germany, whereas the Latvian case saw a mixed efficiency in the EU's response. In the final part of this study, a table was drafted, summarizing the types of EU responses: the Latvia-type, the Ukraine-type and the Germany-type responses. This revealed that, although the EU's response varied depending on each country, it nonetheless presented similarities in every case study. The variation observed depended on the particular situation in the assessed countries. In the case of Germany, for instance, the EU's response was less substantial as a result of legal constraints, among others. This did not prevent it from responding more urgently to DATM disinformation in Ukraine, by issuing measures that led to an increased securitization of disinformation. Additionally, the study revealed that the EU and NATO's methods in fighting disinformation were converging, with the creation of the Hybrid CoE. Such cooperation is expected to increase, as stated in the 2023 Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation (NATO, 2023).

Further studies could expand on the present work and categorization. Utilizing the existing categorization and trying to see if it applies to other countries than the ones selected here might prove useful. Furthermore, it may be of interest to see whether similar variations in the EU's response are observed with other types of Russian disinformation, different in their targets and vectors. A closer look

could also be taken to the EU's constraining legal framework in the field of disinformation, in order to identify how such framework could be improved to allow for a more efficient EU response when needed.

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