

There is no easy way out of the disinformation threat

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The European Union has long been the target of disinformation, mainly disseminated by Moscow and pro-Kremlin media, and extremist European forces. Russia's post-2014 disinformation offensive against the EU prompted the establishment of the East Stratcom Task Force within the European External Action Service, a unit tasked with countering these efforts. However, the equation has only become even more complicated since then: besides China entering the fray as a considerable non-EU player in information space, some of the governments of EU member states have also started to centrally disseminate manipulative anti-EU narratives. Thus, the EU will need to take further steps to counter the disinformation threat.

A weak Europe is music to the Kremlin's ears

The relationship between the Kremlin and the European Union started deteriorating rapidly after the former's aggression against Ukraine. As a response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, the downing of flight MH17, and the Kremlin's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, the European Union introduced a series of sanctions against Russia with the unanimous approval of all member states. Ever since then, Moscow's information operations aimed to disrupt this unity by turning both European elites and the public against the measures. Sanctions, however, are not the only point of contention between the two sides. The Kremlin, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [openly admitted](#), would prefer to negotiate with individual EU member states rather than the entire bloc. While Russia is far removed from the prowess of the Soviet Union, it would have considerably more lobbying power vis-à-vis individual states than the EU as a single entity. Thus, Moscow's key interest is weakening the EU and supporting forces backing the '[Europe of nations](#)' concept, a political program seeking to move towards primarily unanimous decision-making in the bloc and a return of competences to member states. A weaker EU, for instance, would not be able to implement regulations that Gazprom must follow; for instance, the rule forcing Gazprom to give [access](#) to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to third parties.

The Kremlin's Nazi, left-wing Europe

To achieve its goals, Russian information operations against the European Union use three types of messages. The first seeks to discredit the *raison d'être* of the EU, claiming that it was established to fulfil dubious or malicious aims. The second wants to depict the European Union as an anti-democratic actor that is grossly misgoverned. The third type is a conclusion drawn from the previous two: the Union is destined to failure, it will soon disintegrate.

The more than 1,000 EU-related disinformation pieces collected over the year by the East Stratcom Task Force reveal how these narrative types materialize in practice. To question the European Union's right to existence, pro-Kremlin media allege that it was [founded](#) by a secret elite aiming to form a world government. The head of this elite, one piece says, is [Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi](#), who wanted to extend control over people by mixing races or [committing genocide](#) against European nations, which was financed by US secret services. "The destruction of European identity is the foundation of EU integration" – concludes one portal. Others suggested that the European Union has [Nazi roots](#) because the first president of the Commission of the European Economic Community, Walter Hallenstein was a key member of the NSDAP. Meanwhile, according to RT Spain, the EU is simply the [occupying organization](#) of the US government in Europe.

Allegations of Nazism in the EU do not stop here, they are also used to describe how the Union is being governed. Some pro-Kremlin portals claimed that the world would soon be facing the [Fourth Reich](#), as Germany has extended its own legal order over the entire EU. Other articles simply emphasize that EU member states want to stay on [their sovereign path](#) instead of following political decisions made by two or three central powers. Allegedly, EU member states are forced to [overcome](#) Christian values, and – instead – creating a migrant society or a “[gay dictatorship](#).” This “[totalitarian regime](#)” in Europe accepts [no criticism](#) of its policies.

Naturally, when it comes to EU governance, the criticism of EU sanctions levied on Russia remain a constant presence on pro-Kremlin sites. Part of these articles claim that Russia is [unshaken](#) by these [sanctions](#), however, in contrast, a large proportion of them is trying everything to prove that these sanctions were implemented unlawfully, since there is no evidence for Russia’s involvement in the [downing of MH17](#) or the [eastern Ukrainian](#) crisis. Thus, the decision was made to increase “[Russophobia](#)” or represent “third party interests” – those of the [US](#), [NGOs](#), or “[transnational capitalist corporations](#).”

Thus, pro-Kremlin propaganda concludes that the EU is facing disintegration, [collapsing under the weight of its problems](#), largely because of the [authoritarian practices](#) of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Pro-Kremlin portals are also advocating for individual member states to [leave](#) the Union, for instance, to avoid “the migration crisis generated by the United States and Israel.”

For the Hungarian government, the key is “defeating” Brussels

In contrast to pro-Kremlin efforts, the Hungarian government’s anti-EU efforts generally focus on the EU’s alleged misgovernance and advocating for a ‘Europe of nations’ with more competences for member states and less for Brussels.

The Hungarian ruling party and its media empire rarely casts into doubt the EU’s right to exist or advocate for Hungary leaving the Union, although such narratives are sometimes disseminated by members of pro-government circles. For instance, one analysis of the pro-government think tank XXI. Század wrote an analysis [praising](#) Brexit, as the EU-UK agreement on the UK’s exit from the Union “puts an end to dependence on EU bureaucrats, and allows for the UK regaining sovereignty in the fields of migration, trade policy and fisheries.” Government-friendly opinion-leaders, such as Zsolt Bayer, have often argued against the EU, which – Bayer [said](#) – was “only the unprecedented dictatorship of financial interests, cold calculations, and idiotic ideologies.”

However, mainly, the anti-EU narratives of the government can be understood in the context of its offensive against Brussels. Their goal is to [protect](#) Hungarian sovereignty from what they claim to be Brussels’ “efforts to clandestinely take competences” over from member states. Thus, the government – under constant EU criticism for its rule of law record – suggests that it is in fact the European Union that follows undemocratic practices.

Moreover, the Hungarian government’s media empire and the government itself are regularly criticizing the European Union for its migration policy [because](#) Brussels is “concentrating on managing migration instead of stopping it.” In terms of migration, the cabinet simplified the problem completely. While the debate around migration revolves around balancing humanitarian and public security related arguments, which – in the EU – materializes between the interests of southern and western members advocating for solidarity and eastern ones focusing on the threats of the phenomenon, the Hungarian government only emphasizes public security, and whoever tries to bring humanitarian concerns into the discussion is

automatically categorized as a “pro-migrant” entity. This categorization is aided by the dissemination of manipulative information. For instance, the Orbán cabinet has long claimed that the Council approved the temporary asylum-seeker resettlement scheme [illegally](#) by a two-thirds majority, although the Treaty of Lisbon clearly states that the body can decide on emergency asylum measures with such a majority.

In addition, they regularly suggest that the EU is in fact controlled by [George Soros or the Soros-network](#), who are [turning European nations against each other](#) and [issuing open orders](#) to EU bureaucrats, for instance on migration policy. The government’s claims on migration and the control of the EU by Soros are highly similar to those made by pro-Kremlin portals, and it is not the only similarity between the two.

Hand in hand against sanctions and COVID response

The narratives of pro-Kremlin and Hungarian pro-Kremlin portals also converge on EU sanctions against Moscow. The Hungarian government has claimed for several years that sanctions against Russia are causing Hungary billions of USD in damages, despite several independent outlets [stating](#) that the numbers of the government seem to be wildly exaggerated. These statements clearly resemble the Kremlin’s claims that the EU only shot themselves in the foot with these measures. One article on the Kremlin-backed [RT uses the Hungarian cabinet’s statements](#) to prove its point, although RT did note that this is the effect of Russia’s counter-sanctions and not the EU’s sanctions on Russia, which is missing from the Hungarian government’s rhetoric.

The two sides’ narratives matched on the Union’s COVID response as well, where both claimed that the EU completely mismanaged its efforts to protect Europe against the coronavirus when it failed to [help Italy](#), while [Russia did](#) so instead, proving that globalization had failed, and nation states can cope better with crises. Allegedly, the EU even [hindered](#) its member states’ protection efforts by, for instance, criticizing Hungary’s authorization law, allowing the government to rule by decree. However, neither of them reported frequently about member states’ [later efforts](#) to help Rome. In the case of vaccines, both are claiming that Brussels botched its joint vaccine acquisition, but blame the EU even for problems that it had little to do with, such as a [lack of manufacturing capacities](#). Crucially, both sides have claimed that the EU is representing the interests of big pharmaceutical firms. Neither has mentioned, for instance, that Pfizer has been overdelivering on its contractual obligations in past months.

Thus, both sides are employing narratives that (a) discredit the policy decisions of the European Union as harmful, (b) accuse the EU of representing foreign interests, and (c) claim that the Union is a threat to its own member states. However, these campaigns are unlikely to be coordinated between the two sides, as there are considerable differences between how the Kremlin and the Hungarian government present its arguments. The former, crucially, is advocating for the demise of the EU, while the latter does not. Second, while the Hungarian government’s anti-EU rhetoric is largely focusing on presenting its arguments from a populist right-wing ideological stance, the Kremlin’s narratives, aimed at a much wider layer of the European population, are considerably less ideological, mixing arguments potentially enticing a left-wing audience (e.g., Nazi Europe) with those aimed at a distinctly far-right audience (e.g., “gay dictatorship”). Nevertheless, it must be noted that the Kremlin often likes to feed its own propaganda with manipulative narratives spread by EU member states’ political forces themselves. For instance, the arguments the Orbán regime makes against the EU often [find themselves](#) on RT or [Sputnik International](#), among others, as a validation of what the Kremlin is saying.

It will not be easy to counter disinformation

The European Union's current efforts to counter disinformation are mainly focusing on authoritarian third states. However, it is now clear that the challenge from within the Union might be even more severe, and it even helps hostile foreign actors with their efforts.

As such, the Union needs to make further steps to defend itself from anti-EU narratives. First of all, it needs to speed up legislation on its upcoming regulation package on social media, the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, seeking to slow down the spread of disinformation on these surfaces. Second, the Union must become more active and visible in the information space and clearly refute the most common anti-EU narratives. The decision of EU institutions, particularly the European Parliament, to create partnerships with media in member states to report on EU matters is a good first step, but this scheme must be expanded and its expenditure raised. Third, the EU and member states must work towards implementing a media literacy and civic education course into school curricula, including basic knowledge on the functioning of the EU. This would be crucial to ensure that hostile actors within and outside of the Union cannot exploit European citizen's potentially weak understanding of the EU's operation and policies.

It is not going to be easy to overcome the challenges disinformation poses to democracies in general and the European Union in particular. It will certainly take a lot of time, effort and money to do so, but it is only possible with comprehensive, long-term approach.