

**GLOBSEC POLICY BRIEF**

# THE DRIVERS OF DISINFORMATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND THEIR UTILIZATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

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*Research so far<sup>1</sup> shows that the Central and Eastern European region is receptive to disinformation and conspiracy theories. But are there any region-specific drivers behind that? How can malign superpowers abuse the current situation to build their image, and exploit the already existing vulnerabilities?*

The supply-side of disinformation – the producers – has always driven more hype and attention in the press and policy discussions alike. At the same time, for sound policy responses, the demand side – the social and psychological drivers of disinformation – should be well understood. As a recent [study](#) by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) Forum on demand-level drivers has underlined, “Curbing the worst effects of disinformation will also require a better understanding of demand.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I try to identify some important drivers of disinformation on the demand side in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), although not claiming that the drivers mentioned here are unique to the region. Furthermore, not all the factors listed here are equally present in every CEE country. The combination of these factors is important to understand the vulnerabilities of CEE<sup>3</sup> though. Last but not least, this study sheds some light on how these vulnerabilities are being exploited by external actors aiming to influence the societies in CEE, mainly from Russia and China.

## WHY IS CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IMPORTANT FOR RUSSIA?

CEE is strongly exposed to Russian subversive and active measures and disinformation for several reasons.

First, the region was part of the socialist block, and even more: positioned in between the Soviet Union and the Western world. Russian decision-makers and operatives still possess a good knowledge about these countries and have extensive networks there. Also, these societies had been brainwashed by Soviet propaganda for forty years. According to more optimistic opinions, experience with totalitarianism and communist era disinformation makes people suspicious and builds immunity against disinformation. But unfortunately, we see the very opposite: it rather made these societies more receptive to mass-scale deception and disinformation, coming from a domestic or an international source. The success of state-sponsored disinformation in Hungary these days in shaping public opinion (e.g. on the [migration crisis](#)<sup>4</sup>, George Soros and [Russia](#)<sup>5</sup>) illustrates this.

Second, CEE countries are close to Ukraine, some directly neighboring it (as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania). These states can be rather efficiently used as tools in a grand destabilization strategy. The very existence of the strategy has been repeatedly proven by many both official and unofficial documents, especially the “Surkov-leaks” – the leaked emails of the former advisor of Putin<sup>6</sup>, a former grey cardinal who was responsible for the Ukraine strategy around the annexation of Crimea.<sup>7</sup>

1 Klíngová, Katarína; Hajdu, Dominika; Milo, Daniel (2019) Globsec Trends 2019: Central & Eastern Europe 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2019/>

Lessenski, Marin (2019): Just think about it. [https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/MediaLiteracyIndex2019\\_-ENG.pdf](https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/MediaLiteracyIndex2019_-ENG.pdf) (;)

Globsec (2017): The Vulnerability Index: Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe (;) <https://www.globsec.org/publications/vulnerability-index-subversive-russian-influence-central-europe/>

2 Wooley, Samuel; Joseff, Katie (2020): Demand for Deceit: How the Way We Think Drives Disinformation, <https://www.ned.org/demand-for-deceit-how-way-we-think-drives-disinformation-samuel-wooley-katie-joseff/>

3 When mentioning „Central Eastern Europe”, I mostly focus on the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), but in some cases, refer some other EU and NATO member states as well (e.g. Romania).

4 Juhász, Attila; Szicherle, Patrik (2017): Migrációs álhírek, dezinformációk és összeesküvés-elméletek politikai hatásai, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES\\_PC\\_FakeNewsMigrationStudy\\_HUN\\_20170711.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES_PC_FakeNewsMigrationStudy_HUN_20170711.pdf)

5 Krekó, Péter: Russia in Hungarian Public Opinion [https://www.tarki.hu/sites/default/files/2019-02/358\\_371\\_Kreko.pdf](https://www.tarki.hu/sites/default/files/2019-02/358_371_Kreko.pdf)

6 Shandra, Alya; Seely, Robert (2019): The Surkov Leaks The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine, [https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201907\\_op\\_surkov\\_leaks\\_web\\_final.pdf](https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201907_op_surkov_leaks_web_final.pdf)

7 Krekó, Péter; Györi, Lóránt; Zgut, Edit (2017): From Russia with Hate: The activity of pro-Russian extremist groups in Central-Eastern Europe, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

Third, these countries are part of the ‘Eastern Flank’ of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and, at the same time, members of the European Union (EU). Due to their position, the intelligence and counterintelligence (active measure) operations by Russia have an opportunity to go beyond these nation states with the aim of weakening and undermining Western alliances.

Fourth, as GLOBSEC research shows, there is a degree of ambivalence towards these alliances. Considerable segments of the population of these countries do not feel as they are part of the Western Block entirely – and this “in-between” identity can be easily exploited<sup>8</sup>. **Whether we like it or not, the region, while institutionally belonging to the West, psychologically — in terms of its attitudes, values and identity — is still a buffer zone between the Western, democratic world, and the Eastern autocratic world.**

And fifth, these are young and fragile democracies. Mistrust towards institutions and politicians is endemic, and cynicism is running high. Therefore, exercising “sharp power”<sup>9</sup> - corruption and disruption of democratic institutions through penetrating the public and political space - is easier.

In this paper, I identify four demand-side factors that are important to understand and tackle disinformation in the region. These are: 1) feelings of insecurity and inferiority, 2) mystification of Russia 3) tribalism and “conformation bias”, 4) territorial disputes from the past. In the paper, I also offer some examples of how the COVID-19 pandemic creates unprecedented opportunities for malign superpowers to exploit these weaknesses.

## 1) FEELINGS OF INSECURITY AND INFERIORITY

As it was mentioned before, an important feature of the CEE region lies in its ambivalence towards the West. Disinformation narratives spread by Russia and China aim to exploit this tendency more than ever before in the whole region<sup>10</sup>, with “news stories” commenting that only Russia is helping Italy, while the EU is reluctant to do anything. The Chinese conspiracy-based disinformation attempts<sup>11</sup>, coming even from the highest ranks of Chinese diplomacy, blaming the US for spreading the virus, also fall on fertile ground in CEE, where disinformation sites translate<sup>12</sup> these message to local languages.

While there is an existing resilience to pro-Russian narratives in CEE, this resilience is extremely fragile, as the Political Capital Institute found in a social listening analysis<sup>13</sup> focusing on Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic<sup>14</sup>. Pro-Russian arguments are still highly salient in public online discussions, not independently of strong Russia-supported voices in the media. “Russian fanboys” and “Admirers of Russia”, who accept the values and/or the strength of Russia, are present in online public discussions – even if, luckily, they are far from being the majority. While the former group expresses an affinity towards the Russian military and masculinity, the latter admires the big Eastern brother’s culture. It is also connected to the uncritical acceptance of the Kremlin’s self-projected image of being the bastion of Christianity and traditions against a weak, liberal West that is destroyed by illegal immigration.

Also, “Russia is the safer bet than the West” is an existing opinion in these countries. Advocates of this idea say that given Russia’s geopolitical proximity and economic or military power, and the fact that the United States is too far away to defend us, the better strategy is to get along well with Russia. Soviet nostalgia is still present in these societies, especially in the older generations, as Pew’s polls also found.<sup>15</sup>

8 Klingová, Katarína; Hajdu, Dominika; Milo, Daniel (2019) Globsec Trends 2019: Central & Eastern Europe 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2019/>

9 Walker, Christopher; Kalathil Shanthi; Ludwig, Jessica: The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Cutting-Edge-Sharp-Power-Walker-Kalathil-Ludwig.pdf>

10 EU vs Disinfo (2020): Corona Virus: Stay Up to Date, [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo\\_keywords%5B%5D=106935&date=&disinfo\\_language%5B%5D=cze&disinfo\\_language%5B%5D=hun&disinfo\\_language%5B%5D=pol&disinfo\\_language%5B%5D=svk](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=106935&date=&disinfo_language%5B%5D=cze&disinfo_language%5B%5D=hun&disinfo_language%5B%5D=pol&disinfo_language%5B%5D=svk)

11 Molter, Vanessa; Webster, Graham (2020): Coronavirus Conspiracy Claims: What’s Behind a Chinese Diplomat’s COVID-19 Misdirection, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/china-covid19-origin-narrative>

12 Krekó, Péter; Szicherle, Patrik (2020): Gone viral: COVID-19 in the disinformation ecosystem, <https://www.eurozine.com/gone-viral/>

13 Political Capital (2019): Larger than life - Who is afraid of the Big Bad Russia? [https://politicalcapital.hu/russian\\_sharp\\_power\\_in\\_cee/research\\_results.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2391](https://politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/research_results.php?article_read=1&article_id=2391)

14 This Social’s social listening methodology mapped millions of “natural,” spontaneous online conversations of average citizens related to Russia. The research, with a qualitative focus covered a two-year period (20 November 2016 – 19 November 2018) to understand the hidden societal and psychological drivers of anti-Russian or pro-Russian conversations and perceptions in the general population.[ii]The advantage of the “no questions asked” methodology that focuses on spontaneous discussions. Due to Facebook’s recent restrictions on data access, the research was forced to analyze Twitter and Facebook separately. While Twitter data could be included in the general sample, the analysis of Facebook pages had to be limited to the top 20-20 Slovak, Hungarian and Czech fringe and mainstream sources. The analysis of Facebook posts was carried out using Zoomsphere,14 adding another layer (top-down communication) to the analysis. Read more about the methodology here: [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc\\_larger\\_than\\_life\\_eng\\_web\\_20190410.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_larger_than_life_eng_web_20190410.pdf)

15 Wike, Richard, et al. (2019): European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/>

The narrative that Western, democratic and liberal countries were hit harder by the pandemic than authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China is becoming dominant throughout the world. Russian propaganda aims to capitalize on the narrative in the region by bashing the EU and NATO, claiming<sup>16</sup>, for example, that NATO even lost the reason for its existence as it proved totally unable to deal with the consequences of the crisis (as if NATO were a healthcare organization). A pro-Russian disinformation site in Poland went so far as to claim that the current pandemic made Europe the “sick man of the world” that cannot provide a good example to anyone, therefore the “soft power” of Europe is simply over.<sup>17</sup>

Based on a social listening analysis, Political Capital Institute **concluded that there are two main social psychological drivers behind pro-Kremlin opinions and discussions in the region. First, the feeling of “insecurity”.** This is based on two sets of experiences. On the one hand, the current international environment is full of conflicts, uncertainties, and unpredictability. And on the other hand, the experience in the region of being the battleground for the East and the West. Polls support these claims as well: considerable segments of CEE populations, for example, are skeptical whether the U.S. would defend a NATO ally from a Russian attack – only 39% of Hungarian and 41% of Czech respondents would.<sup>18</sup>

**The second, connected driver of “inferiority,” reflects these countries’ perceived dependence on stronger and bigger “superpowers” and the experience of being their tools and toys.**

Russian disinformation aims at exploiting the drivers of insecurity and inferiority by questioning the advantages of being a member of the transatlantic community, in particular the EU and NATO. Their strategy is to amplify anti-Western views via relativization and “whataboutism” and promoting the idea of “multipolarity” and “neutrality”. **According to the polls of GLOBSEC, around half of the population in Visegrad countries (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) would prefer their respective countries to remain somewhere in between East and West, and this sentiment serves as a fertile ground for this messaging.**<sup>19</sup>

In the region though, “doomsday of the West” stories are not only amplified by clickbait or malign foreign disinformation sites but by state-sponsored disinformation outlets as well<sup>20</sup>. This applies also to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Hungary for example, pro-government pundits are parroting the message that ‘migrant countries are primarily affected by the COVID-19 crisis’<sup>21</sup> – and this is why infection figures on the West are considerably worse than in the East. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán found a good justification for his eastern geopolitical shift, echoing the narrative that while the EU is unable to help coronavirus affected countries now, China and members of the Turkic Council (Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Turkey) help a lot. The myth that authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China are dealing with coronavirus much better than democracies is repeated again and again in the pro-government media.

The role of inferiority in shaping political tendencies in the region is well described in the book of Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes<sup>22</sup> that highlights the dominant norm of “imitation” in the post-transitional period, and the “revolution against imitation” in CEE these days. Populist politicians are playing an identity game by claiming that Western Europe is not the model anymore: they should learn from Eastern Europe and not the other way around. Russia and China are more than happy to fuel this sentiment and exploit the pandemic for this end.

## 2) MYSTIFICATION OF RUSSIA AND OTHER DICTATORSHIPS

The hard power capacities of Russia and China, such as the size and strength of its military and economy, are vastly overestimated in the region – which is another important driver of misinformation.

This, in fact, applies beyond the region: the ratio of those who think Russia is “playing a more important role in world affairs” has significantly risen in 25 countries across the world in the last few years, according to the Pew Research Center.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the popularity of Russia has considerably soured across these 25 countries since the annexation of Crimea. In short: **Russia is getting more unpopular but seems more powerful than before.**

16 EU vs Disinfo (2020) Disinfo: NATO has completely exhausted its reasons to exist during the Coronavirus pandemic, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-has-completely-exhausted-its-reasons-for-existence-in-the-situation-of-the-coronavirus-pandemics/>

17 EU vs Disinfo (2020): Disinfo: Coronavirus catastrophic situation ends 500 years of European global domination, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-catastrophic-situation-with-the-coronavirus-puts-an-end-to-the-500-years-of-the-global-domination-of-europe-in-the-world/>

18 Fagan, Moira; Poushter, Jacob (2020): NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/09/nato-seen-favorably-across-member-states/>

19 Klingová, Katarína; Hajdu, Dominika; Milo, Daniel (2019) Globsec Trends 2019: Central & Eastern Europe 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2019/>

20 Daily Sabah (2020) Turkic Council, China send aid while EU remains ineffective in fight against COVID-19, Hungary says, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/eu-affairs/turkic-council-china-send-aid-while-eu-remains-ineffective-in-fight-against-covid-19-hungary-says>

21 Tompos, Ádám (2020): A köztünk járó mém: a CÖF megkoronázta Soros Györgyöt, <https://magyarhang.org/publicisztika/2020/03/11/a-koztunk-ja-ro-mem-a-cof-megkoronazta-soros-gyorgyot/>

22 Krastev, Ivan; Holmes, Stephen (2018): Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/explaining-eastern-europe-imitation-and-its-discontents-2/>

23 Letterman, Clark (2018): Image of Putin, Russia Suffers Internationally <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/12/06/image-of-putin-russia-suffers-internationally/>

As the Pew poll above indicates, the relative majority of Poles and absolute majority of Hungarians perceive Russia as a rising power. This general phenomenon was confirmed by an in-depth research on a [Hungarian sample](#)<sup>24</sup> as well. This study showed that the majority of the Hungarian population tends to overestimate Russia's military potential and its economic power compared either to facts or the performance of the other countries, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary, and China. Two-thirds of Hungarians put Russian military spending ahead of the United States and China, while half of the respondents ranked the Eastern neighbor among the top six export partners of Hungary- while in fact, Russia is only the 17th. And while a certain level of alarmism is definitely welcome about Russia, the flipside of this phenomenon can be a vast overestimation of Russia's economic and military potential - the biggest sharp power success of Russia so far.

These results on Russia's image are clearly confusing and hint at a deep contradiction regarding the "success" of Russian foreign policy. Despite the Kremlin's best efforts to buoy or buy Western political actors, finance a vast media empire (RT, Sputnik) and its local official or unofficial affiliates, Russian "soft power" is not successful enough.

**Thus, the Kremlin's power projection techniques are less and less about "soft power" than they are about "sharp power,"<sup>25</sup> an ability to influence perceptions through active measures, cyberattacks, and disinformation:** manipulation of institutions and public discourse. Russia does not want to be loved, it wants to be feared. Fear can lead to forced friendships. In the context of information warfare, this false perception is an asset that Russia can easily exploit, creating an admiration based on its perceived strength compared to the weaknesses of the Western world. The same applies to China.

Perception is power in itself, as it can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. If Russia is perceived to be strong, it will be treated as strong, so finally, it will become strong. And Russia seems to be even more dangerous and powerful in its vicinity - in the countries that belonged to its direct sphere of influence for four decades, directly exposed to the brutality and oppression of the Soviet Union.

Authoritarian regimes, with a good sense of rhythm, used "mask diplomacy"<sup>26</sup> in a highly clever manner to prove for the West that they are ready to help when it is needed. Cargo planes coming from China with medical equipment were [welcomed everywhere](#)<sup>27</sup> in the broader region, from Prague to Budapest to Belgrade, as a gift from China. Russia brought medical equipment to [Italy](#) and to the [United States](#)<sup>28</sup> and these spectacular "gestures" received considerable attention in the region as well. As it was mentioned before, Russian disinformation then – just before the Russian healthcare sector and state administration totally collapsed under the pressure of the rising pandemic – pushed the messages that the pandemic proves that the EU, US and NATO proved to be totally unable to cope with the challenge of the pandemic. Russian disinformation also [claimed](#)<sup>29</sup> that Russia is the only country in the world to have already invented the cure for the coronavirus, fueling pipedream hopes. This is the general message flooding CEE: [Russia is strong, the EU is weak](#)<sup>30</sup>.

### 3) TRIBALISM AND "TRIBAL MYTHS"

Increasing polarization is also a problem that is feeding tribal narratives in CEE. Research carried out by Political Capital Institute on populism found a more malevolent and problematic phenomenon in Hungary and Poland: [tribalism](#)<sup>31</sup>, the combination of Manichean, black and white narratives that divide the world between good and evil, and authoritarianism that puts trust in a strong leader. Also, voters with a tribal mindset tolerate less political pluralism and are more inclined to accept political violence. Tribalism is rallying around the leader of our own tribe and fighting against the other tribe with every tool possible. Tribalism not only actively undermines democratic processes, it makes winning the tribal political war the sole goal of politics. It also undermines political debates and makes reality irrelevant.

Tribalism, as an extreme form of polarization, is increasingly present all over the Western world. At the same time, it is getting stronger in CEE as well – or at least in Poland and Hungary. Tribalism can be especially destructive in countries where democratic institutions are young and fragile, and democratic norms are weaker. This is especially the case in CEE post-communist countries.

24 Krekó, Péter; Molnár, Csaba, Rác, András (2019): Mystification and Demystification of Putin's Russia, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc\\_mystification\\_and\\_demystification\\_of\\_russia\\_eng\\_web\\_20190312.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_mystification_and_demystification_of_russia_eng_web_20190312.pdf)

25 Walker, Christopher; Ludwig, Jessica (2017): The Meaning of Sharp Power, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>

26 Coratella, Teresa (2020): The dangers of crisis diplomacy: Italy, China, and Russia, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_dangers\\_of\\_crisis\\_diplomacy\\_italy\\_china\\_and\\_russia](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_dangers_of_crisis_diplomacy_italy_china_and_russia)

27 Stojanovic, Dusan (2020): China's 'mask diplomacy' wins support in Eastern Europe <https://apnews.com/76dff4b13e82d85716262895909f151>

28 U.S. Department of State (2020): U.S. Purchase of Needed Supplies From Russia, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-purchase-of-needed-supplies-from-russia/>

29 EU vs Disinfo (2020): Disinfo: Russia invented a cure for coronavirus <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russia-invented-a-cure-for-coronavirus/>

30 Globsec (2020): 'Infodemic' hit Slovakia as well. Fear and uncertainty are fertile ground for spreading of false content and conspiracies, <https://www.globsec.org/2020/04/04/infodemic-hit-slovakia-as-well/>

31 Political Capital (2018): Beyond populism – tribalism in Poland and Hungary, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2277](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=2277)

To win tribal wars, one needs “tribal myths”: weaponized (dis)information against the other tribes, which can raise collective self-esteem of one’s group and mobilize the members of the tribe by fueling strong emotions such as hatred, fear, and hope at the same time. Tribal mindset emerges from highly polarized political environments and is a perfect breeding ground for spread of disinformation. Disinformation then provides raw material for tribal myths—the narratives used to justify transgressive political and legislative acts and mobilize like-minded tribalists against their shared enemy.

For those who view the world through the lens of tribalism, the sense of a challenge to their tribe’s identity makes false explanations totally plausible, and strong emotions, especially hatred, are making them even more receptive to diabolizing narratives.

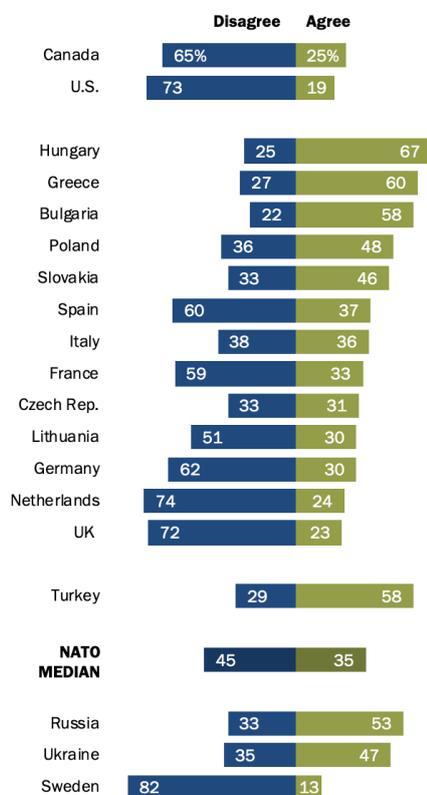
This tribalism is a perfect precondition for spreading disinformation on the coronavirus as well, as disinformation can spread<sup>32</sup> in highly polarized environments. While the immediate impact of the pandemic is more a rally-around-the-flag effect, in the next phase, as a result of the frustrating economic backsliding, we can expect the return of an even stronger polarization than before.

Fact-checking has proved many such “tribal myths” untrue. But to what impact? To tribal voters, the ends justify the means, and in their eyes, political victory validates these myths. In the political evolution of ideas, the fittest survive—and fitness, in this case, is measured by the ability to take and hold political power. Today, the most influential political ideologies and ideas can be predicated upon tribal myths, based on misinformation, disinformation, and wild-eyed conspiracy. When tribalists are winning, how can one persuade like-minded voters that the information on which their beliefs are based is not true? If you are in a war, you are also ready to accept the help of your foreign allies (e.g. Russian disinformation helping you) if they bring you closer to victory. Why should voters with a tribal mindset abandon their beliefs if they appear to work?

#### 4) TERRITORIAL DISPUTES OF THE PAST

##### Europeans divided over whether parts of neighboring countries belong to them

% who \_\_\_ that there are parts of neighboring countries that really belong to us



Note: Don't know responses not shown. Sweden, Ukraine and Russia are not NATO member states.  
Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, Q50f.  
\*NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States\*

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Russia’s strategy in CEE aims at exploiting<sup>33</sup> the weaknesses inherent to the CEE region: the bitter memories of past territorial disputes, nationalist-secessionist tendencies, and the haunting specters of chauvinist ideologies promising to make these nations great again - literally. As polls indicate, not only xenophobic nationalism is widespread in the region, but revisionist, expansionist tendencies also enjoy considerable support. In Hungary, 67% of the respondents say that parts of neighboring countries belong to their country (up from 56 percentage points in 2009), and 58% of Bulgarians, 48% of Poles, 46% of Slovaks and 31% of Czechs think the same way. It is important to note that despite these high figures, no serious parliamentary political force in these countries wants to change the borders these days. Still, these sentiments are exploited by Russian propaganda.

As Bugajski and Assenova noted: “Moscow (...) endeavours to benefit from political, ethnic, religious, and social turbulence in East Central Europe in order to keep governments off balance. Any democratic regression in ECE combined with the growth of nationalism and populism can favour Russia’s regional objectives by weakening democratic institutions, engendering EU divisions, and undermining NATO’s effectiveness.” Russia uses extremist organizations and channels to spread narratives and to directly encourage secessionist sentiments. The internet and the social media are a perfect platform for this messaging.

Since 2014, the Kremlin has been increasingly aiming to turn this territorial nostalgia against Ukraine. To undermine the region’s stability in general and bilateral links with Ukraine in particular, Russia supports the real “troublemakers” throughout Central and Eastern Europe: secessionist, revisionist, and ultranationalist organizations. The more disputes that exist between these countries, the more historical debates over the borders are resurrected - especially

32 Tucker, Joshua A. et al (2018) Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature, <https://hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Social-Media-Political-Polarization-and-Political-Disinformation-Literature-Review.pdf>

33 Krekó, Péter; Györi, Lóránt; Zgut, Edit (2017): From Russia with Hate: The activity of pro-Russian extremist groups in Central-Eastern Europe, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

towards Ukraine - and the more fear and distrust is stirred up in the region, the better it is for the Kremlin. Vladimir Putin himself made some surprisingly frank remarks about Moscow's destabilizing intentions in an [interview to Bloomberg](#) back to 2016: "Someone wants to start revisiting the results of World War II, well, let's try to debate that topic. But then we need to debate not only Kaliningrad but the whole thing, from the eastern part of Germany to Lviv, which was part of Poland, and so on and so forth. There's also Hungary and Romania. (...) Take up the flag and go for it."<sup>34</sup>

The grand strategy of Moscow combines support for political parties, NGO diplomacy, and intense disinformation efforts that aim to amplify secessionist sentiments and poison bilateral relations. In line with these efforts, Polish, Hungarian, Slovakian nationalists did their best to provoke bilateral conflicts with Ukraine, directly or indirectly.

There are several examples of this in the region. Hungary's Sixty-Four County Youth Movement (HVIM), has been engaged in extremist recruitment activity beyond the country's borders. Furthermore, it [released statements](#) claiming that "Transcarpathia is not part of Ukraine,"<sup>35</sup> organized protests in support of the Donetsk People's Republic, and called for the [boycott of chocolates](#) produced by Petro Poroshenko's company Roshen. According to Polish counterintelligence, Mateusz Piskorski, the leader of the Polish leftist party Change (Zmiana), as well as former activists of the far-right Polish Congress of the New Right (KNP) did espionage on the behalf of Russia, and the latter seemed to participate in "active measures" on Ukrainian territory in 2014 to provoke an ethnic conflict against Polish minorities in western Ukraine. In the Czech Republic, the Donetsk People's Republic opened a "consulate" ([not recognized](#) by the Czech authorities<sup>36</sup>) in September 2016 with the help of Czech far-right actors, including the National Home Guard, a paramilitary group. Slovak far-right paramilitary figures went fighting in Eastern Ukraine or promoted the separatists' case in Slovakia, [including](#) Martin Kepřta<sup>37</sup>, a former member of the Slovak Conscripts (Slovenskí Branci-SB), whose organization had earlier received training from ex-members of Spetsnaz, the Russian special forces. Even if it is an indirect link, the [adventures of Putin's favorite biker gang](#)<sup>38</sup>, Night Wolves - that participated in the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia - in Slovakia reveals that the Kremlin is taking every possibility to find vulnerable spots and cause trouble.

Around the 100th anniversary of the Trianon Treaty, disinformation aiming to amplify secessionist tendencies and antagonisms in the region are amplified, especially between Hungary and its neighbors. This was indicated by a case last year when Romanian nationalists with ties to Russia [attacked a commemoration](#) in Transylvania (Úzvölgy)<sup>39</sup>, that provoked a bilateral conflict, and pro-Russian nationalist websites were extensively reporting about the case.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the current situation, the image of Western countries and institutions is under the biggest challenge since the 2008-2009 economic crisis. The perception that dictatorships are more successful in treating the pandemic than democracies is widespread. Russia and China are busy trying to turn public opinion against the West and to create the false impression that CEE countries have their friends only in the East, but not the West. They do it through mask diplomacy, [corrupt economic investments](#)<sup>40</sup> and disinformation alike.

What to do about this challenge? Based on the diagnosis above on the demand-side causes of disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe, the following steps could be useful for public institutions - domestic or foreign - that want to push back against disinformation.

**1) EU institutions should be more active in messaging.** Lack of communication by relevant actors is a reason why Russia and China (with the help of populists) could create the false impression that they are tackling the crisis extremely efficiently while the democratic world is collapsing. It is easy to spread anti-EU messages if the representations of the European Commission and European Parliament - present in every EU Member State - are not loud enough to debunk these lies. EU institutions, and their local branches (EC and EP representations, MEPs), should do more to counter this narrative, and talk about the financial and political measures to tackle the crisis - the image of the EU as a successful project is at stake. Also, Member States<sup>41</sup> should communicate more about their steps of solidarity.

34 Russia Insight, recording of Vladimir Putin interview with Bloomberg on September 1, 2016, <https://youtu.be/79z4wD7Aiol?t=445>

35 Alfabir (2015): Bojkott indult a kárpátaljai magyarokért [https://alfahir.hu/bojkott\\_indult\\_a\\_karpataljai\\_magyarokert](https://alfahir.hu/bojkott_indult_a_karpataljai_magyarokert)

36 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Statement of the MFA on the so-called "Representative centre of Donetsk People's Republic" in Ostrava, 01.09.2016, [https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/issues\\_and\\_press/archive/statements/x2016/x2016\\_09\\_01\\_statement\\_on\\_the\\_donetsk\\_republic\\_ostrava.html](https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/archive/statements/x2016/x2016_09_01_statement_on_the_donetsk_republic_ostrava.html)

37 Krekó, Péter; Győri, Lóránt; Zgut, Edit (2017): From Russia with Hate: The activity of pro-Russian extremist groups in Central-Eastern Europe, [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

38 Orenstein, Mitchell A; Krekó, Péter (2018) How Putin's Favorite Biker Gang Infiltrated NATO, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-10-15/how-putins-favorite-biker-gang-infiltrated-nato>

39 Asboth, Beatrix (2019): Magyar-román feszültség az úzvölgyi katonatemetőnél <https://hu.euronews.com/2019/06/07/magyar-roman-feszultseg-az-uz-volgyi-katonatemetonelel>

40 Financial Times: Hungary to keep details of Beijing-funded rail link secret <https://www.ft.com/content/251314b5-8d6a-4665-a14b-0110dd88754c>

41 European Parliament (2020): Solidarity: how EU countries help each other fight Covid-19 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200402STO76415/solidarity-how-eu-countries-help-each-other-fight-covid-19>

**2) Spreading disinformation can cost lives - naming the actors and sources is a must.** The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a source of disinformation, and the CCP did a lot of damage with its suppression of relevant information to spread the pandemic throughout the world. Russia has been hit hard by the pandemic and things are getting out of control. At the same time, these countries are busy spreading disinformation aiming to sow distrust in EU and national institutions, including healthcare institutions, and sow panic with the worst intentions. Disinformation in times of a pandemic can cost lives. These efforts should be seen crystal clear for European citizens. Journalists should do more to bring these cases to national audiences- e.g. using the EU vs. Disinfo database. The latter institution should be better equipped to be able to have regular local media partners spreading their reports, and disinformation originating from China (not only Russia) should be in the focus of its attention.

**3) Western institutions should acknowledge and tackle the feelings of insecurity - and especially inferiority.** Western institutions and politicians should acknowledge and target “insecurity” and “inferiority” in Central Eastern Europe as important drivers behind anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments. As the era of “democracy imitation” is over, new ways should be found in public diplomacy. Efforts to strengthen alliances can only be successful if they take both of these drivers into consideration. “The West lectures us”, “United States thinks that they know everything better than we do” – these are often-heard sentences in CEE discussions. And it sometimes continues with the sentence: “The West is not any better than Russia”.

One-way knowledge and policy transfer from the West towards the East is not the way to deal with the region anymore. Joint activities should be based on the principle of two-way learning, mutual understanding and involvement. Security-related fears must be targeted through substantial defense cooperation and pro-active, structured and consistent strategic communication. It is noteworthy that NATO has rather a good image in most countries in the region especially due to its promise of defending the region.

**4) We should stop mystifying Russia- let's talk about its weaknesses instead.** While a certain level of alarmism is definitely welcomed about Russia, the flipside of too much emphasis on the threats that Russia is posing can be a vast overestimation of Russia's economic and military potential - the biggest sharp power success of Russia so far. Allegations of Russian interference, for example, in every election are blown out of proportion. Because of this mystification, Russia looks bigger, better and more successful in the eyes of the public. This problem needs a new approach to tackle Russian disinformation and hybrid warfare.

To counter this tendency, politicians, policy-makers, pundits, journalists and Western institutions should talk more about the weaknesses of Vladimir Putin's Russia, especially when it comes to its economic potential, policy outputs such as education, healthcare indicators, but also its self-definition as the last bastion of Christianity with a huge Muslim population and an increasingly secular society. This way, it is easier to take away the popular appeal of Russia in the eyes of many, especially youngsters who are receptive to the image of strength and superpower that Putin projects in the world. More confidence in general would be needed for Western democracies to stop their population from becoming more and more obsessed with “alternative models of governance”.

**5) Social media companies should invest more in fact-checking.** The coverage of the broader region is highly uneven<sup>42</sup> by fact-checking projects. Facebook, the most important social media platform in the region, does not have certified fact-checkers in many EU countries, including Hungary, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania. Also, there are no fact-checkers in potential future EU member states in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, where disinformation poses a challenge. EU institutions should raise the issue of these gaps in their discussions with social media platforms.

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