



# Fighting foreign malign influence in democratic states

Policy Report

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## **About the project**

This policy report is part of a series of briefs aiming to map the best (and in some cases, worst) practices in Europe in self-defence against the malign influencing practices of authoritarian states; primarily China and Russia. The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author; GLOBSEC does not assume any responsibility for them or their subsequent use.

## Improving resilience against malign influence

In this policy report, GLOBSEC takes a look at the main challenges democracies face regarding foreign malign influence and best practices in countering these activities. Based on our research, the following measures are recommended if democratic societies wish to improve their resilience against hybrid threats:

- **Long-term strategic thinking is crucial.** Democratic states and institutions must consistently evaluate the security ramifications of their policy decisions. Severe dependencies on autocratic states, especially Russia and China, make it more costly to respond to anti-democratic manoeuvres when they occur and must be avoided at all costs. Governments, therefore, need to immediately begin reducing the exposure of their economies to Chinese markets and manufacturing before the next crisis gives them no choice. Both municipalities and strategically important companies should be engaged too. Governments should start incentivizing companies to return production to the EU and diversify their supply chains. Businesses, meanwhile, must formulate and regularly review strategies to manage decoupling from authoritarian markets should it be needed.
- **Addressing polarization and building trust in public institutions are essential to combatting foreign malign influence.** Hostile actors, notably, excel in exploiting numerous vulnerabilities to expand their influence in targeted states. These perceived weak points may include financial inequality, cultural and ideological polarization, democratic shortcomings, economic turmoil, and divisive views on migration. The response, meanwhile, must include legislation directed at bolstering democracies by stemming the deterioration of citizen trust in democratic governance, mainstream political forces, and public institutions and then rebuilding this public confidence.
- **More coordination is required between stakeholders seeking to develop resilience.** The best practices, at present, in combatting malign influence appear to be a patchwork of solutions. Democratic states must step up their efforts in sharing successful policies from their respective countries between themselves; these governments subsequently need to do more to implement these lessons learned. National, regional, and local hubs, meanwhile, should be established to facilitate this work within and across borders. It is important that these hubs also integrate a range of policy experts across different issues – fostering resilience against multi-layered threats requires a multidisciplinary approach. This exchange of ideas would go a long way towards ensuring that effective policies, no matter the size of the town they come from, can influence national and regional practices over the long term. Democratic states should also increase their cooperation with Taiwan to improve their responsiveness to hybrid threats: Taipei boasts invaluable experience in this field. Though governments should heed the fact that simply reproducing solutions, without adjusting the measures to local circumstances, will often encounter hurdles, the general directions of resilience-building policies should be coordinated more closely.
- **The EU needs a “Buy Democratic Act”.** EU rules must be revised to ensure that authoritarian actors cannot exploit their unfair advantage to win public procurement tenders (in member states) against EU companies operating in a free-market environment. There is a similar need to restrict investments in the EU by authoritarian regimes: the current foreign direct investment (FDI) screening mechanism must be revised to make it compulsory for member states to adopt national mechanisms, with the current voluntary approach failing to yield results.

- **Elevate corruption to a national security issue.**

Corruption is not only a crime against taxpayers but also a national security problem that opens pathways for authoritarian regimes to “buy” policies that suit them. Apart from important steps already taken by the EU (e.g. rule of law mechanism), the Union’s directive against money-laundering must be strictly enforced and assessed; there is also a strong need for an EU-wide lobbying directive that applies to European institutions and politicians too. The “Qatar scandal” affecting former EP Vice President Eva Kaili, among others, indicates that stronger measures to ensure that lobbying remains within legal boundaries must be implemented as soon as possible. Democratic states themselves, moreover, must ensure that they put in place robust and independent anti-corruption authorities. Should an EU member state not possess such an authority, the Union must stop all financial transfers to the state in question until the issue is remedied.

- **More must be spent on fighting**

**disinformation.** There is a vast gulf between the budgets of state-backed disinformation actors and the national and EU authorities combatting them. But the odds can be evened out by allocating additional resources towards efforts to curtail opportunities for malign foreign actors to exploit societal tensions. There is a heightened need for a more sizeable budget for the East Stratcom Task Force – these funds would enable the institution to conduct additional research, translate its work to all EU languages, and improve its visibility to journalists and publics.

- **The independence of public broadcasters**

**is crucial.** Ensuring that public media outlets within democratic countries are financially and editorially independent is critical to combatting foreign malign influence, especially information operations. The higher the public’s trust in the public broadcaster, the less likely they are

compelled to seek “alternative” sources for their news. It is also crucial to ensure that traditional media entities receive state funding based on clear and objective criteria, rather than political considerations, to ensure they provide balanced coverage on both domestic and international topics. The Commission’s recently proposed European Media Freedom Act could be a step in the right direction but questions remain concerning how rogue members will be forced to adhere to the spirit of the regulation.

- **European media literacy guidelines are needed in all local languages.**

The EU must translate its recently published media literacy guidelines<sup>1</sup> for educators into all official EU languages, the languages of Western Balkan countries, and Ukrainian and promote them far and wide. The Union, moreover, must organize regular online and physical trainings for teachers in all EU languages to give them the skills to talk about the issue in schools – alone the guidelines are not enough. These trainings can, of course, be depoliticized, as general critical thinking skills concerning information are the same regardless of the topic of the materials.

- **Social media companies must be forced to**

**act.** The efficiency of the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation must be monitored constantly and adjusted based on practical experiences. The Code of Practice should be made mandatory to ensure companies refrain from using it merely as a PR stunt. Social media companies must be forced to be as rigorous in smaller markets as they are in larger ones, for instance, regarding the removal of potential inauthentic networks from their sites.

1 European Commission. (2022). Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training. Last accessed on 21 October 2022. Link: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a224c235-4843-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

- **Remain proportional.** Legislation mandating jailtime for spreading disinformation or action to shut down propaganda outlets could have a contradictory effect, especially if citizens lack trust in the justice system. Jailing “the purveyors of disinformation” has become a tactic deployed by authoritarian systems that use such powers broadly. Liberal democratic states must ensure that any punitive measures are proportional to the wrongdoing to avoid lending credence to the claims of malign actors about so-called “liberal dictatorships” or reinforcing the views of disinformation actors about alleged censorship.



## The real test for malign influence

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has severely tested Moscow's years-long effort to extend its influence in the EU and its member states. The results are less-than-encouraging for the Kremlin: The European Union delivered a remarkably swift and united response including sanctions that appear to be gradually crippling the Russian economy<sup>2</sup> and, crucially, hampering its ability to develop and manufacture advanced weapons systems.<sup>3</sup> The EU's sanctions remain in place despite the Kremlin's efforts to fight back by limiting Europe's access to natural gas, thereby causing European utility prices to skyrocket.

The EU's sanctions policy against Russia enjoys broad public support. According to the Flash Eurobarometer 506 survey,<sup>4</sup> 80% of European citizens are in favour of economic sanctions against Russia. The GLOBSEC Trends 2022 poll indicates that the populations of seven of nine Central and Eastern European countries surveyed back the sanctions even if it leads to price hikes in their respective countries.<sup>5</sup> And in Germany, nearly 70% of those asked in a ZDF-commissioned survey said they backed German support for Ukraine even amid higher energy prices.

Regardless, the war for European "hearts and minds" is not over. As mentioned above, there are already two countries in the CEE region where supporters of sanctions are the minority: Hungary and Bulgaria. The Flash Eurobarometer also indicates considerable variation between member states: while only 44% of Bulgarians support economic sanctions against Russia, 93% of Portuguese respondents feel this way.

It is important, moreover, to recognize that the full impact of the economic crisis will only be felt by

EU citizens in the coming months – this potential downturn could shift public opinion substantially and put more pressure on European elites to reconsider their policies. This scenario is also likely what the Kremlin is hoping for. There is already one government in the European Union, Hungary, which has openly talked about potentially vetoing the extension of sanctions or just "rethinking" them. Budapest, in fact, already vetoed the addition of Patriarch Kirill to the Union's blacklist and multiple member states (e.g. Hungary, Greece, Cyprus<sup>6</sup>) have slowed down the adoption of new sanctions packages in lieu of real or perceived national interests.

There will, undoubtedly, be more political forces that seek to politically exploit the economic turmoil caused by Russia's war in Ukraine. They will argue that while they disapprove of the war, the EU's sanctions are causing more harm to Europe than to Russia and therefore must be reconsidered. Italy's Lega political party used such talking points in the 2022 Italian general election campaign and opposition parties in many countries, including Slovakia or Czechia, similarly deploy these types of narratives to score political points and stir up dissatisfaction with the current system among citizens.

These issues will prove to be a significant challenge, especially in light of substantial gaps in the capability of European Union member states to counter foreign malign influence attempts. They are hobbled by a combination of inherent faults within their own democratic systems, popular dissatisfaction with how democracy works in their countries, legislative deficiencies, and the

2 Economist. (2022). Western sanctions will eventually impair Russia's economy. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2022/08/24/western-sanctions-will-eventually-impair-russias-economy>

3 Sytas, Andrius. (2022). Sanctions hamper Russia's ability to make advanced weapons, NATO says. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sanctions-hamper-russias-ability-make-advanced-weapons-nato-says-2022-09-16/>

4 European Commission. (2022). Flash Eurobarometer 506 on EU's response to the war in Ukraine. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2772>

5 Globsec. (2022). Globsec Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>

6 Brzozowski, Alexandra. (2022). Seafaring member states continue to delay new EU sanctions decision. Euractiv.com. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/seafaring-member-states-continue-to-delay-new-eu-sanctions-decision/>

predisposition of local actors to sacrifice foreign policy on the altar of domestic political competition.

In parallel with the Kremlin, China is another authoritarian state looking to influence European policies in its favour. Beijing is seeking to exploit the potential economic impact of Russia's energy war on the EU by following the same strategy it used in 2008: the promise of an economic revival to EU member states, especially poorer ones more vulnerable to influence operations. As Political

Capital noted in a recent study, China has been relatively successful in its "efforts to – at the very least – create the perception that Beijing offers advantages to states that support its interests, and benefits for local elites via economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts."<sup>7</sup> The Chinese Communist Party will likely double down on these efforts as the economic conditions in Europe deteriorate, even as it generally downsizes its investments abroad.

## The framework for foreign malign influence in the EU

As we already hinted above, the main purpose of foreign malign influence, regardless of the methods used, is to aid the attacking state in covertly and illicitly nudging the policies of the target into the preferred direction of the attacker. Hostile states generally combine and synchronize their actions specifically targeting "systemic vulnerabilities in democratic states" to achieve their goals. The actions can focus on the economic domain (e.g. the establishment of dependencies, foreign direct investment), cyber space, intelligence, the media, education (e.g. influence on school curricula), or public administration, all to undermine or influence the target state's decision-making capabilities.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the Kremlin has long sought to gather a substantially large group of allies in EU member states to veto the extension of sanctions against it and thwart potential new sanctions.<sup>9</sup> Moscow, however, achieved only very limited success in this area (e.g. Hungary's veto concerning Patriarch Kirill). China, meanwhile, has also failed to completely shield itself from EU criticism. Some European governments, nonetheless, are committed to Beijing to some extent due to (the perception of) high levels of economic cooperation between both sides and

multiple countries have blocked joint EU statements on atrocities committed by the CCP.<sup>10</sup>

In the political and information spaces, however, China faces a substantial obstacle, namely its commitment to communist ideology, which makes it unattractive to most European societies. The GLOBSEC Trends 2022 poll results reveal that, at best, only about one-fourth of the populations of Central and Eastern European countries see China as a source of inspiration for their countries.<sup>11</sup> Political Capital's study on the votes of MEPs also found that elites are listening to their populations here: numerous openly pro-Kremlin parties, such as Lega, have adopted more stringent stances against China.<sup>12</sup>

### "Networking" with money

The Kremlin has employed a wide variety of methods to shore up its support in the European Union, NATO, the individual member states in the two organizations, and countries seeking to join the Western alliance system. In autumn 2022, the US Department of State revealed that Russia had spent over \$300 million on covert information operations

7 Patrik, Szicherle et al. (2021). The Specter of Authoritarian Regimes is Haunting Europe. Political Capital. Last accessed on 11 October 2022.

Link: [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_The\\_Specter\\_of\\_Authoritarian\\_Regimes\\_is\\_Haunting\\_Europe\\_STUDY\\_2021\\_08.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_The_Specter_of_Authoritarian_Regimes_is_Haunting_Europe_STUDY_2021_08.pdf)

8 European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. (2020). The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model. Last accessed on 24 October 2022. Link: <https://euhybnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Conceptual-Framework-Hybrid-Threats-HCoE-JRC.pdf>

9 Istrate, Dominik et al. (2021). A battering ram against the EU? Hungary through the eyes of propagandists. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/A\\_battering\\_ram\\_against\\_the\\_EU\\_2021\\_12.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/A_battering_ram_against_the_EU_2021_12.pdf)

10 See, for instance: <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-foreign-minister-slams-hungary-for-blocking-hong-kong-conclusions/> or <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/18/greece-eu-criticism-un-china-human-rights-record>

11 Globsec Trends 2022.

12 The specter of authoritarian regimes is haunting Europe.

since 2014, including on attempts to influence the outcome of European elections. They add that the Kremlin has been using Brussels as a “hub for foundations and other fronts” to back candidates sharing Russia’s worldview.<sup>13</sup> Similar allegations were levelled specifically against the Italian Lega party, a member of Italy’s new ruling coalition, back in 2019 when an audio tape was leaked about a party official discussing how Russia would funnel money into Lega’s coffers.<sup>14</sup> Claims were also made in 2022 in Bulgaria that the Kremlin paid both politicians and other opinion-makers including known journalists and analysts to propagate its propaganda.<sup>15</sup>

Disadvantaged politically, Beijing needs to rely even more on its economic clout. Prime targets include several countries who want to partake in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, such as Greece, Hungary, and Serbia. Through this scheme, China seeks to use the promise of future investments to increase its political support in Europe. The key from the CCP’s perspective is to create the perception of possible economic benefits for European countries and their publics. Greece and Hungary are home

to substantial Chinese investments (e.g. the port of Piraeus and the Budapest-Belgrade railway project) and both vetoed some of the EU’s critical statements on matters related to Beijing’s policies in past years.<sup>16</sup>

A second important component to Beijing’s economic influence revolves around the high dependency of Europe broadly and especially the German economy on China, including in strategic sectors such as medicine. These countries further rely on their ability to access the Chinese market, which is controlled almost entirely by the CCP. In the first half of 2022 alone, German industry invested over €10 billion in China, though ten large companies, primarily in the chemicals and auto manufacturing industries, are responsible for most of it.<sup>17</sup> Berlin, correspondingly, has given a green light to the Chinese Cosco’s purchase of a stake in the port of Hamburg.<sup>18</sup> This move makes it more unlikely that the EU or its member states will take tough action against the communist regime in Beijing for fear of the economic fallout that may ensue.



13 BBC. (2022). Russia covertly spent \$300 million to meddle abroad. Last accessed on 10 October 2022. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-62897570>

14 Horowitz, Jason. (2019). Audio Suggests Secret Plan for Russians to Fund Party of Italy’s Salvini. NY Times. Last Accessed on 10 October 2022. Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/world/europe/salvini-russia-audio.html>

15 Nikolov, Krassen. (2022). Bulgarian secret services: Russia pays public figures to spread propaganda. Euractiv.com. Last accessed on 10 October 2022. Link: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/bulgarian-secret-services-russia-pays-public-figures-to-spread-propaganda/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgarian-secret-services-russia-pays-public-figures-to-spread-propaganda/)

16 See, for instance: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/06/19/europe-divided-china-gratified-as-greece-blocks-e-u-statement-over-human-rights/>

17 DW. (2022). Is Germany’s Economy too dependent on China? Last accessed on 10 October 2022. Link: <https://www.dw.com/en/is-germanys-economy-too-dependent-on-china/a-63209592>

18 Rinke, Andreas and Schwartz, Jan. (2022). German go-ahead for China’s Cosco stake in Hamburg port unleashes protest. Reuters. Last accessed on 28 October 2022. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/deals/german-cabinet-approves-investment-by-chinas-cosco-hamburg-port-terminal-sources-2022-10-26/>

“Gratitude” payments can potentially come too even after a politician’s career is over: Germany’s ex-chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who has long been a proponent of close relations with Russia, only quit the board of directors of Russia’s state-owned Rosneft in May 2022,<sup>19</sup> followed by Austrian ex-Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl a few days later.<sup>20</sup>

## Cheap energy to build dependence

Another way the Kremlin has sought to exert financial leverage over the EU is through joint economic projects with member states, specifically their local elites.<sup>21</sup> The energy sector has assumed a particularly prominent role herein – the Kremlin has attempted, for instance, to use Germany’s demand for cheap energy sources to achieve its ends. The Russian-German joint Nord Stream<sup>22</sup> venture especially played a key role in increasing Berlin’s dependence on cheap Russian natural gas. The Nord Stream pipeline and Russia’s successful efforts to mask itself as a “reliable energy supplier” likely contributed to persuading German political and economic elites to put off searching for alternative sources even after Russia occupied Crimea in 2014.

The still ongoing Paks II Nuclear Power Plant project in Hungary is a further illustration of this tactic – the project consists of two new nuclear blocks that are to be constructed by Rosatom and financed by a Russian credit line. Hungarian media revealed that the firm responsible for the construction has frequently selected companies with ties to the country’s ruling Fidesz party to complete specific jobs.<sup>23</sup>

## The network of lies

Political and economic network-building are frequently aided by largescale information operations involving state-backed media outlets, local “alternative” portals, local opinion-leaders, and social media trolls. Participation comes with benefits – opinion-leaders/local politicians can, for instance, receive invitations to (paid) election observation missions as a reward for paying lip-service to Russian interests.<sup>24</sup> Naturally, not all pro-Kremlin or pro-China voices are paid, many join efforts to disseminate propaganda out of conviction.

The extent of Russian disinformation efforts, which are more prevalent in Europe compared to China’s operations, are difficult to pin down at present. But the European Union’s Strategic Communications unit specializing on disinformation had debunked over 14,000 articles from media outlets with ties to the Kremlin as of October 2022, though their geographical scope is broader than just the EU.<sup>25</sup> In 2020, the budget for RT, formerly known as Russia Today, stood at about €320 million,<sup>26</sup> which is comparable to what the BBC spent on its news and current affairs TV coverage over 12 months in 2019-20.<sup>27</sup> Although the EU suspended the broadcasting activities of five Russian state-owned outlets in its territory (Sputnik, Russia Today, Rossiya RTR, Rossiya 24, TV Centre International),<sup>28</sup> RT in Europe was never a particularly popular network (the British Broadcaster’s Audience Research Board gave them about 413,000 weekly viewers in a week in mid-November 2017 compared to over 7.3 million

19 Al-Jazeera. (2022). German ex-Chancellor Schroeder leaves Russian oil firm. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/20/german-ex-chancellor-schroeder-leaves-russian-oil-firm>

20 RFE/RL. (2022). Former Austrian Foreign Minister, Who Danced with Putin, Leaves Rosneft Board. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rosneft-kneissl-putin/31863516.html>

21 Conley, Heather A. et al. (2016). The Kremlin Playbook. CSIS. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: [https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications\\_library/files/23060.pdf](https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/23060.pdf)

22 Nord Stream. (n.d.). Our Shareholders. Last accessed on 10 October 2022. Link: <https://www.nord-stream.com/about-us/our-shareholders/>

23 See, for instance: <https://atlatzo.hu/kozpenz/2017/09/13/a-kozerdekvedelmi-kozpont-kozzetette-a-paksi-bovites-elokeszites-e-soran-kotott-szerzodeseket/> or <https://atlatzo.hu/2021/09/20/paks2-meszarosek-ujabb-milliardos-tendert-huztak-be-most-portat-epitenek/> The first reveals that in the early days of the project, the Paks project firm

24 Szczepaniak, Patryk et al. (2019). Elections under the Polish and Russian watchful eyes. Vsquare. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://vsquare.org/under-polish-and-russian-watchful-eye-what-were-the-observers-doing-in-madagascar/>

25 EUvsDisinfo. (n.d.). Disinfo database. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=&date=&per\\_page=](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=&date=&per_page=)

26 EUvsDisinfo. (2019). Figure of the week: 1.3 billion. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/figure-of-the-week-1-3-billion/>

27 National Audit Office. (2020). The BBC Group. Last accessed on 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Departmental-Overview-2019-20-The-BBC-Group.pdf>

28 European Commission. (2022). EU sanctions against Russia explained. Last accessed on 21 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>

for BBC news<sup>29</sup>). The real value of RT has likely been as a source for the committed European pro-Kremlin audience who could then disseminate Russian propaganda via their local networks. However, the Sputnik ban is likely to inflict a bigger hit, as the outlet had gained considerable readership and influence in some countries. To circumvent the ban, the Kremlin is maintaining smaller proxies in Europe, such as News Front, which are used as sources by local “alternative” sites.

The Kremlin’s allies not only spread Moscow’s propaganda narratives via online “alternative portals” but in the highest echelons of European decision-making as well. Political Capital’s recent study on the foreign policy-related votes of the current European Parliamentary term revealed around 50-150 predominantly far-right and far-left MEPs willing to support the Kremlin’s views to some extent or another. These politicians, in fact, often brought arguments straight from Kremlin mouthpieces into debates in the European Parliament.<sup>30</sup> These political figures and their local media allies could be powerful tools in their respective countries by voluntarily disseminating

Russian narratives and influencing the behaviour of their local populations.

Additionally, malign actors have been using online trolls to target grassroots communications channels.<sup>31</sup> The inauthentic accounts spread pro-Kremlin or pro-China views far and wide by bombarding the comment sections of websites and social media pages and through tweets aimed at manipulating genuine discussions on political issues. They, therefore, put up a facade of popular support behind a particular opinion or at least depict propaganda narratives as a “legitimate alternative explanation” and not straight-up lies. The practical use of this approach is, for instance, that the Kremlin can “deliver” its messages to the comments sections of mainstream media or non-political sites and expose people who would otherwise not see such narratives. Bots and trolls are also highly useful to exploit social media algorithms that tend to put emphasis on showing people content they are more likely to click on; so, by engaging with content, they can make them more visible to the general audience of real users.<sup>32</sup>



29 Dowling, Tim. (2017). 24-hour Putin people: My week watching Kremlin ‘propaganda channel’ RT. Last accessed 10 October 2022.

Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/nov/29/24-hour-putin-people-my-week-watching-kremlin-propaganda-channel-rt-russia-today>

30 The specter of authoritarian regimes is haunting Europe

31 UK Foreign Commonwealth Office. (2022). UK exposes sick Russian troll factory plaguing social media with Kremlin propaganda. Last accessed on 10 October 2022. Link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-exposes-sick-russian-troll-factory-plaguing-social-media-with-kremlin-propaganda>

32 Lóránt, Gyóri et al. (2022). The Kremlin’s troll network never sleeps. Political Capital. Last accessed on 28 October 2022.

Link: [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc\\_ned\\_study\\_kremlin\\_troll\\_network\\_2022\\_web.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_ned_study_kremlin_troll_network_2022_web.pdf)

The Kremlin has often committed cyber-attacks to steal official documents and recordings that it subsequently uses, often out of context, to justify its false claims regarding key geopolitical events. One example concerned a leaked conversation between former Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and former US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt in 2014 that has since been used as “evidence” that the United States backed the events in the Maidan in Kyiv. Cyber warfare has also featured as a prominent strategy of the war in Ukraine, too, as “patriotic” Russian hackers and the Kremlin worked to take down Ukrainian websites in the early days of the conflict.<sup>33</sup>

Deepfake technology, finally, can be expected to cause serious challenges in the future. Deepfakes include media content that replace a person’s likeness with another.<sup>34</sup> This technology can be used to put words into the mouths of world leaders that they never said, lending it enormous potential to influence the public or even cause widespread panic. In Ukraine, deepfakes of both President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian leader Vladimir Putin appeared in 2022, with each “urging” their soldiers to lay down their arms and go home. Deepfake technology, at this time, might not be developed enough to mislead the masses but it could merit significant concern in the future as it evolves.<sup>35</sup>

## Intelligence agencies will continue playing a key role

Intelligence agencies have long been an important pillar to foreign malign influencing efforts. Contemporary Russia, in this sense, is following the KGB’s Cold War playbook but bolstering their efforts through the use of modern technologies to spread disinformation and obtain sensitive material from its perceived enemies.<sup>36</sup> The same tools and expertise, undoubtedly, are possessed by Chinese agencies although Taiwan is bearing the brunt of their efforts – disinformation-wise at least.<sup>37</sup>

Espionage is an integral issue that needs to be considered too, with an emphasis on industrial espionage. Authoritarian regimes have sought to use Western technology against those that initially invented it. And they often seek to acquire it illicitly. China is looking to become a dominant player on the technology market and may harness this position to make its partners more dependent on it. If successful, it only further exacerbates the costs for standing up to China’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy.

The intelligence agencies of authoritarian regimes, finally, will continue to be involved in active measures ranging from acquiring contacts in the public administrations of targeted states to partaking in coup attempts, as Russian services allegedly did in 2016 in Montenegro.<sup>38</sup>

Insufficient political accountability in many EU member states, corruption and a lack of transparency both within EU institutions and member state governments (including non-existent or wholly inadequate lobbying laws),<sup>39</sup>

33 Tidy, Joe. (2022). Russian vigilante hacker: ‘I want to help beat Ukraine from my computer’. BBC. Last accessed on 24 October 2022. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-60528594>

34 Johnson, Dave. (2022). What is a deepfake? Everything you need to know about AI-powered fake media. Business Insider. Last accessed on 10 August 2022. Link: <https://www.businessinsider.com/guides/tech/what-is-deepfake>

35 Sample, Ian. (2020). What are deepfakes – and how can you spot them? The Guardian. Last accessed on 21 October 2022. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/13/what-are-deepfakes-and-how-can-you-spot-them>

36 Fedchenko, Yehven. (2016). Kremlin propaganda: Soviet active measures by other means. Estonian Journal of Military Studies, Volume 2, 2016. Pp. 141-170. Last accessed on 11 October 2022.

37 Chan, Kendrick and Thornton, Marian. (2022). China’s Changing Disinformation and Propaganda Targeting Taiwan. The Diplomat. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/chinas-changing-disinformation-and-propaganda-targeting-taiwan/>

38 Kajosevic, Samir. (2022). Montenegro Launches Probe Into Suspected Russian Spies. Balkan Insight. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/29/montenegro-launches-probe-into-suspected-russian-spies/>

39 See, for instance: Globsec. (2021). Globsec Vulnerability Index 2021: Comparative report. Last accessed on 10 October 2022. Link: [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index\\_Comparative-report.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_Comparative-report.pdf)

rising societal tensions and polarization, and the deterioration of public trust in both public institutions and the mainstream media are all only aggravating the Union's susceptibility to foreign malign influence, regardless of which authoritarian regime is involved.

Table 1 Summary of foreign malign influencing tools listed above. For a more comprehensive framework, please see the guide developed by the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.<sup>40</sup>

Method	Activity	Example(s)
Financial	Paying local actors to represent the interests of the attacker	Attempts to finance specific political parties; promises of jobs at state-owned companies to political leaders
Political	Building networks of local allies to represent the attacker's interests	Cooperation with "NGOs"
Energy	Building dependence via access to cheap energy	Joint Nord Stream venture
Economic	Joint projects with local political elites susceptible to corruption	Paks II Nuclear Power Plant, Budapest-Belgrade railway renovation
Economic dependence	Building economic dependence through control of market access	German industrial presence in China
Information manipulation	Disseminating biased narratives via state-backed media, local allies, and "alternative portals"	Deepfakes calling on Ukrainian soldiers to lay down arms
Inauthentic online behaviour	Using online trolls to target grassroots discussions	St. Petersburg "troll farm"
Cyber	Stealing official documents to use for propaganda purposes	Claims that Victoria Nuland was a key actor in the so-called "Maidan coup" based on a "leaked" recording

40 Hybrid CoE. (2020). The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model. Last accessed on 28 October 2022. Link: <https://euhybnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Conceptual-Framework-Hybrid-Threats-HCoE-JRC.pdf>

## Best practices across Europe and the democratic world

Democratic states have focused increasingly on building societal resilience even though this is a much more arduous task than in authoritarian states. It is harder to justify severe steps limiting media freedom or measures that constitute economic interference in liberal democratic states. For this reason, until very recently, RT and Sputnik could freely broadcast in EU countries. And Chinese companies can still enjoy lucrative business deals with European states, municipalities, and businesses. Strasbourg Airport, which is often used by MEPs going to plenaries, for instance, recently decided to award a contract to the Chinese firm, Nuctech, to procure airport scanning systems. The company is not only subject to China's domestic intelligence law but maintains ties to the Chinese military, too.<sup>41</sup>

### The EU at the forefront of efforts?

The European Union itself has been at the forefront of combatting disinformation for several years now and much of that activity follows the general strategy put forward in the 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation.<sup>42</sup> The EU has also established the useful EUvsDisinfo platform – though it is underfunded and largely unknown – and put in place a digital regulation package seeking to ensure that large online platforms are better protected from disinformation and that illegal online content is swiftly removed.<sup>43</sup> The real effects of this new regulation package are still to be determined and must be consistently monitored. The legislation can be subsequently adjusted as needed based on findings and feedback. During the pandemic, the EU not only stepped up its support for fact-

checking initiatives but put more pressure on digital platforms to remove COVID-related disinformation and provide people access to factual information on the pandemic.<sup>44</sup>

The war has further brought significant changes, driving the European Commission, national governments, and societies at large to re-evaluate our scrutiny of malign efforts aimed at influencing our policies. The first very significant move on the Commission's part was banning five Russian state-owned outlets, including Sputnik and RT from broadcasting in the Union.<sup>45</sup> As discussed above, the move especially detrimentally impacted Sputnik due to its more sizable readership in some EU countries, such as Czechia. However, the EU still left the door open for some Kremlin proxies with less clear-cut origins, like News Front, which is currently very active in multiple EU and non-EU languages.<sup>46</sup>

The Commission, meanwhile, launched a voluntary initiative called the “Code of Practice on Disinformation” in 2018, which set out non-compulsory objectives for companies that joined. Progress on these objectives have been regularly monitored.<sup>47</sup> The Code was revised in 2022 and now includes 44 commitments and 128 specific measures in the areas of demonetization of purveyors of disinformation, political advertising transparency, and the empowerment of users and researchers, among others.<sup>48</sup> The main issue concerns the fact that the code is completely voluntary and social media platforms play a role in making the rules. This may lead to watered-down sets of regulations that can be used as a PR stunt to show they are addressing the issues at hand.

41 van Sant, Shannon. (2022). Lawmakers cry foul as Strasbourg Airport buys Chinese scanners. Politico. Last accessed on 14 October 2022. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/strasbourg-airport-chinese-scanners-european-parliament/>

42 [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/action\\_plan\\_against\\_disinformation.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf)

43 European Commission. (n.d.). The Digital Services Act package. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>

44 European Commission. (n.d.). Tackling coronavirus disinformation. Last accessed on 21 October 2022.

Link: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/tackling-coronavirus-disinformation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/tackling-coronavirus-disinformation_en)

45 EU sanctions against Russia explained.

46 <https://news-front.info/>

47 See, for instance, the COVID-19 reports of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Mozilla, and Google here:

<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/first-baseline-reports-fighting-covid-19-disinformation-monitoring-programme>

48 European Commission. (n.d.). The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation. Last accessed on 11 October 2022.

Link: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>

Further consideration, therefore, will be needed towards making the code compulsory for all.

The European Commission's recently proposed European Media Freedom Act seeking to secure editorial independence, ensure media pluralism and the editorial freedom of public broadcasters, and make state advertising transparent could be a possible step in the right direction. Securing European citizens' access to balanced information and improving the credibility of traditional media, especially public broadcasters, is an important measure in combatting information manipulation. The more people trust their respective public broadcaster and traditional media, the less likely it is that they will seek "alternative" information.<sup>49</sup> Special attention should be paid to ensuring that media outlets can access state funding based on clear criteria, such as readership, to make it harder for governments to finance media outlets based on political proximity rather than performance.

Several EU and non-EU states have had success introducing media literacy into their school curricula and adult education programmes. But there had been no real EU-level guidelines to implement such activities. This changed on October 11<sup>th</sup> when the Commission published its guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training.<sup>50</sup> This development, arguably, addresses a significant gap in some member states: a 2019 Political Capital study found that while both teachers and students in Hungary understand "fake news" as a significant challenge, educators were already overburdened and lacked professional support to teach students about the issue. Teachers told researchers at the time that they would mostly need detailed guidelines or supplementary material to be better equipped to fight the problem.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, the Commission must now concentrate on translating these guidelines in as many languages as possible and get them to teachers. The organization of professional development training courses could, furthermore, support educators in gaining the skills necessary to teach media literacy.

The European Union has been active in other areas of foreign malign influence, too, especially in the economic domain. The Union created a Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) screening framework for investments that could affect security and public order in member states, obliging EU countries to provide information on specific investments upon request and notify the Commission on cases that undergo national screening.<sup>52</sup> However, the framework, for instance, has not established an obligation for member states to implement their own national screening mechanisms; the FDI screening mechanism, therefore, lacks any real effectiveness. The Union will need to go further to close off economic opportunities for authoritarian regimes aspiring to gain more influence over member state decisions.

The EU is in the process of approving a "Chips Act" to spur investment in the semiconductor industry in Europe – the aim is to alleviate dependence on China in this field. Voices have also emerged in Europe calling for "repatriating" some medical equipment manufacturing into the EU in the wake of the COVID-crisis, indicating that the EU has realized the need for ensuring that the continent has adequate supply of crucial equipment even if it may have come too late.<sup>53</sup> The Commission and national governments could together decide on a framework of potential incentives that can be offered to companies across different economic sectors to bring production back to EU territory.

49 Aufderheide, Patricia. (2020). US Public Broadcasting: A Bulwark against Disinformation? *The Disinformation Age*, pp. 213-237. Last accessed on 21 October 2022. Link: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/disinformation-age/us-public-broadcasting-a-bulwark-against-disinformation/OA63AE2A86E0983E9BE3F8BB30115918>

50 The guide is available here: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a224c235-4843-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

51 Bálint Kata et al. (2019). Álhírek elleni küzdelem az oktatásban. Kutatás az álhírek előfordulásáról, veszélyeiről és a jalanség elleni fellépés lehetőségeiről az oktatásban. Political Capital. Last accessed on 21 October 2022. Link: [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc\\_alhitek\\_elleni\\_kuzdelem\\_az\\_oktatasban\\_20191128.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_alhitek_elleni_kuzdelem_az_oktatasban_20191128.pdf)

52 European Commission. (2020). Foreign Direct Investment EU screening framework. Last accessed on 11 October 2022.

Link: <https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/be8b568f-73f3-409c-b4a4-30acfc5283/library/5975e8f0-7679-47a2-9770-a49aed5cef9/details>

53 Fortuna, Gerardo. (2020). Commission aims to bring back medicine production to Europe. Euractiv.com. Last accessed on 28 November 2022.

Link: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/health-consumers/news/commission-aims-to-bring-back-medicine-production-to-europe/>

## Numerous good initiatives in member states

Individual states have made significant contributions to combatting foreign malign influence. One of the most frequently discussed initiatives at the national level include media literacy training programmes. In Finland, these activities are carried out through a whole-of-society approach involving schools, libraries, government institutions, universities, and NGOs.<sup>54</sup> This multi-level approach ostensibly contributes to reaching more people and enables courses to be tailored to the needs of specific target groups. Finland has also introduced media education into its school curricula and ensures that pupils get to learn about media literacy throughout their school careers and that educators can access high-quality material to teach from.<sup>55</sup> These activities are supported by the generally high-quality Finnish education system targeted towards enhancing creative thinking. The Finnish public also expresses relatively high levels of trust towards mainstream media outlets – according to the 2022 Digital News Report of the Reuters Institute, the public broadcaster enjoys the trust of 84% of Finns.<sup>56</sup>

An IREX-run media literacy education programme has led to success in Ukraine, too. Through a nine-month media literacy training course called Learn to Discern (L2D), 361 Ukrainian citizens were taught media literacy skills and subsequently held trainings in their own networks in schools, workplaces, and communities. The 361 trainees were selected from across the country from a broad range of age groups and educational and occupational backgrounds. According to an assessment by IREX, those participating in the L2D training outperformed control groups in three of the four areas examined (disinformation news analysis, news media knowledge, and media locus of control, with the

group slightly trailing in objective news analysis). They were also more likely to cross-check other sources and retained their enhanced skills even a year and a half later.<sup>57</sup>

A third country worth mentioning in the field of media literacy is Taiwan, which has to bear the brunt of Chinese disinformation efforts. In Taiwan, the “front line” of fighting information operations consists of non-governmental organizations and fact-checkers, such as the Taiwanese FactCheck Center (TFC). There is even purportedly a kind of division of labour within civil society, each organization focusing only on their own area of expertise.<sup>58</sup> The Taiwanese also use technology to their own advantage: their NGOs and government cooperated on creating a fact-checker bot for the LINE app, popular among the country’s youth. The bot provides rapid-fire assessments and links to further information from verified sources. TFC and MyGoPen, moreover, created a backend tool for Facebook that alerts the organizations about viral and misleading posts on the platform. There are multiple democratic countries that deploy very similar approaches to media literacy but better coordination would enable the democratic world to still learn considerably more from one another.

Some countries, furthermore, have created government institutions to fight information manipulation. The Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, for instance, was established in the Czech Republic to build national capacities to fight foreign malign influence efforts, including counteracting disinformation and working together with civil society to debunk disinformation narratives. In Slovakia, there is a police-run Facebook page focused on debunking disinformation. The Slovak cabinet, similarly, has established a Center for Combating Hybrid Threats within the Ministry of Interior. These efforts show that governments

54 This is Finland. (n.d.). Educated decisions: Finnish Media Literacy Deters Disinformation. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: <https://finland.fi/life-society/educated-decisions-finnish-media-literacy-deters-disinformation/>

55 UNESCO. (n.d.). Media Literacy in Finland – National Media Education Policy. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/policy-monitoring-platform/media-literacy-finland-national>

56 Reuters Institute. (2022). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2022.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News_Report_2022.pdf)

57 Murrock, Erin et al. (2018). Winning The War On State-Sponsored Propaganda: Results from and Impact Study of A Ukrainian News Media and Information Literacy Program. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*. Vol. 10. (2). Pp. 53-85.

58 Haime, Jordyn. (2022). Taiwan’s amateur fact-checkers wage war on fake news from China. *Al-Jazeera*. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/9/19/taiwan>

are taking the problem seriously. But even if they produce quality content, state-run institutions will (almost) always kindle fears about “official censorship” and “Ministry of Truth” narratives, seemingly confirming wild conspiracy theories. For this reason, these agencies need to cooperate with civil society more closely and delegate key tasks (such as debunking) to non-governmental organizations.

In the economic sphere, too, several countries have more promptly reduced their dependence on authoritarian states ahead of the pack. Lithuania, aided by the creation of a floating liquefied natural gas terminal off the Baltic coast, long worked on cutting ties to Russian gas supplies. These systems can be built in a duration of between one and three years and offer a relatively high degree of flexibility in terms of placement and capacity.<sup>59</sup> However, Lithuania’s achievement was the result of a decision made more than a decade earlier, which shows that long-term strategic thinking is a must to counter malign foreign influence. Similarly, multiple democratic states, including EU members, have decided to ban companies posing a security threat to them from their 5G networks (these cases mostly related to banning the Chinese firm Huawei), stopping the development of another point of dependence on authoritarian regimes.<sup>60</sup>

The intelligence services of liberal democracies, finally, can play an integral role in combatting foreign malign influence. One of the core pillars of this work is the regular publication of intelligence reports, as occurs in the Czech Republic, which spotlight and outline the efforts of authoritarian states to subvert local actors and exploit them to do their bidding. These reports can serve as adequate points of reference for the political elite to step up their efforts against influence peddling by authoritarian states through legislative action and provide crucial information for the population on how state and non-state actors are threatening their daily lives. Authorities combatting disinformation and their unquestionable independence are also vital from

an institutional standpoint since they can shut down attempts by authoritarian regimes to essentially “buy” themselves their preferred policy outcomes.

All told, the anti-malign influence framework emerging among democracies is more of a patchwork and coordination appears to be lacking even though there are fora available for doing so. This will have to be improved upon in the future. Liberal democracies, collectively, can enhance their resilience against malign authoritarian actors and create a culture of strategic thinking that will prevent fiascos, such as the European energy crisis, from happening again.

59 Duxbury, Charlie. (2022). How Lithuania cut its ties to ‘toxic’ Russian gas. Politico. Last accessed on 11 October 2022. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-lithuania-cut-its-ties-to-toxic-russian-gas/>

60 See, for instance: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/huawei-5g-explainer-1.6461391>









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