



# DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

ARMENIA  
AZERBAIJAN  
BELARUS  
CZECH REPUBLIC  
ESTONIA  
GEORGIA  
HUNGARY  
LATVIA  
LITHUANIA  
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# DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

This research is aimed at assessing national vulnerabilities and preparedness to counteract foreign-led disinformation in 14 countries of Eastern and Central Europe. The Visegrad states (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), Eastern Partnership countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Romania are covered.

An integral part of the research is the **Disinformation Resilience Index**, which is quantitative assessment of exposure to Kremlin-led disinformation and the level of national resilience to disinformation campaigns.

KYIV, 2018



# CONTENT

<b>Foreword</b> .....	5
<b>DRI Methodology</b> .....	13
<b>Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI)</b> .....	23
Armenia .....	27
Azerbaijan .....	51
Belarus .....	69
Czech Republic .....	101
Estonia .....	117
Georgia .....	135
Hungary .....	157
Latvia .....	171
Lithuania .....	189
Moldova .....	209
Poland .....	237
Romania .....	265
Slovakia .....	281
Ukraine .....	301
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	329
<b>On research team</b> .....	335



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# FOREWORD

Recently, the notion of resilience has been extensively researched and discussed in relation to information warfare,<sup>[1]</sup> a comprehensive concept incorporating far-reaching varieties of actions, from planned and coordinated information operations in times of war and peace by a wide range of state or state-affiliated and non-state actors to sporadic actions centred on information influence, attempting to affect societal and political processes. The most recent examples of the use of such warfare include the Lisa case in Germany (2016),<sup>[2]</sup> US presidential elections (2016),<sup>[3]</sup> activity of Kremlin media and bots during the UK referendum (2016)<sup>[4]</sup>, and the French presidential elections (2017).<sup>[5]</sup>

The NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016 highlighted the issue of ‘resilience as a core element of collective defence’<sup>[6]</sup>, which has become a progressing mode of security and strategic communication studies. The European Commission in its Communication ‘A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s External Action’ (2017) defines resilience in a broader sense as ‘the adaptability of states, societies, communities and individuals to political, economic, environmental, demographic or societal pressures, in order to sustain progress towards national development goals’.<sup>[7]</sup>

For this research, the definition of ‘disinformation’ proposed by Bennett and Livingston is applied, understood as ‘intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals.’<sup>[8]</sup> Accordingly, **‘disinformation resilience’ is the adaptability of states, societies, and individuals to political, economic, and societal**

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- [1] For this paper, the term ‘information warfare’ should be understood as ‘coordinated and deniable activities that are initiated by a state actor and which are aimed at influencing the decisions, perceptions, and behaviour of political leaders, the population, or particular target groups (such as experts and media) with the objective of achieving the state actor’s security policy objectives, mainly through the dissemination of misleading or incorrect information, often complemented with other actions tailored for the purpose that is being pursued.’ – Adopted from Čížik, Tomáš, ed. 2017. *Information Warfare: New Security Challenge for Europe*. Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs. <http://www.cenaa.org/data/databaza/Information%20Warfare%20+%20cover.pdf>, cited in Pernik, Piret. 2018. “Hacking for Influence: Foreign Influence Activities and Cyber-Attacks.” International Centre for Defence and Security. [https://www.icds.ee/fileadmin/media/IMG/2018/Publications/ICDS\\_Analysis\\_Hacking\\_for\\_Influence\\_Piret\\_Pernik\\_February\\_2018.pdf](https://www.icds.ee/fileadmin/media/IMG/2018/Publications/ICDS_Analysis_Hacking_for_Influence_Piret_Pernik_February_2018.pdf).
- [2] Janda, Jakub. 2016. “The Lisa Case. STRATCOM Lessons for European States.” Berlin: Federal Academy for Security Policy.
- [3] “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections.” 2017. National Intelligence Council. [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA\\_2017\\_01.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf).
- [4] “Putin’s Brexit? The Influence of Kremlin Media & Bots during the 2016 UK EU Referendum.” 2018. 89up. <https://www.slideshare.net/89up/putins-brexite-the-influence-of-kremlin-media-bots-during-the-2016-uk-eu-referendum>.
- [5] “Patterns of Disinformation in the 2017 French Presidential Elections.” 2017. Bakamo. <http://bit.ly/z1RSHFU>.
- [6] Shea, Jamie. “Resilience: A Core Element of Collective Defense,” 2016. <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/nato-defence-cyber-resilience/EN/index.htm>
- [7] Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council ‘A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s External Action.’ 2017. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/join\\_2017\\_21\\_f1\\_communication\\_from\\_commission\\_to\\_inst\\_en\\_v7\\_p1\\_916039.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/join_2017_21_f1_communication_from_commission_to_inst_en_v7_p1_916039.pdf).
- [8] Bennett, W Lance, and Steven Livingston. 2018. “The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions.” *European Journal of Communication*, 2018.



**intentional pressure and falsehood spread in various formats of media, including TV, radio, print and online media, (and) social media, to influence political and economic decisions, including thought-targeting particular vulnerable groups’.**

The aim of this research is to assess the level of resilience to foreign, foremost Kremlin-led, disinformation in 14 countries of Eastern and Central Europe, including the Visegrad states (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), Eastern Partnership countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), Baltic states, and Romania.

Based on an analysis of data collected by the EU’s East StratCom Task Force in its Disinformation Reviews, four basic categories of disinformation were singled out, namely:

- a) unsourced or falsified claims;
- b) non-credible claims with sources;
- c) claims based on earlier unsourced or non-credible claims; and,
- d) conspiracy theories.<sup>[9]</sup>

Consequently, scholars argue that Kremlin disinformation is effective thanks to a variety of methods, which all can be classified within three categories, namely, exploiting differences in media systems (*strategic asymmetry*), targeting of disenfranchised or vulnerable audiences (*tactical flexibility*), and having the ability to mask the sources of disinformation (*plausible deniability*).<sup>[10]</sup>

It follows that a national digital containment strategy is able to undermine Kremlin efforts to weaponise information if it is effective in three key components, namely closing the strategic asymmetry gap, obstructing tactical flexibility, and denying deniability. The country chapters’ and DRI indicators’ design partly reflects these considerations.

The *exploratory research design*<sup>[11]</sup> is based on desk research, in-depth expert interviews, and online expert surveys. Such triangulation serves as *confirmation* to overcome any potential problems with validity and bias and *completeness* in clarifying and justifying the obtained

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[9] Bjola, Corneliu, and James Pamment. 2016. “Digital Containment: Revisiting Containment Strategy in the Digital Age.” *Global Affairs* 2 (2): 131–42.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Kothari, C.R. 2004. *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*. New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, Publishers.

data.<sup>[12]</sup> The country *desk research* is aimed at giving a systemic analysis of a country's media landscape, legal and institutional framework, as well as a statistical overview and data on the existing fact-checking, digital-debunking initiatives, and media literacy programmes and projects. *In-depth interviews* are aimed at providing insight to information 'to understand the sense that actors give their actions',<sup>[13]</sup> and for a 'naturalist vision'<sup>[14]</sup> of a particular issue. Country experts conducted at least 10 in-depth interviews with representatives of the media community (media experts, editors of national media outlets, renowned journalists), specialised NGOs (fact-checking initiatives, national associations of journalists, NGOs working in the field of media literacy, etc.) and officials of relevant state bodies. The names and affiliation of the quoted individuals are mentioned in the chapters if they granted their informed consent to country experts to be mentioned. *Online expert surveys* were conducted with the aim to construct a quantitative Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI) across the CEE countries.

All country chapters follow the same structure and include the following sections: Introduction, Vulnerable Groups, Media Landscape, Legal Regulations, Institutional Setup, Digital Debunking Teams, and Media Literacy Projects. Conclusions and Country Recommendations are proposed per country. Furthermore, chapters are enriched with specific country cases describing illustrative examples of disinformation activities targeting some country or successful countermeasures to such activities. Country chapters (a) *identify* risks and risk events based on analysis of a country's historical, societal and economic background, and media environment; (b) *detect* existing structures and practices aimed at counteracting foreign-backed disinformation activities, such as digital-debunking teams, media-literacy projects, and fact-checking initiatives; (c) *propose* to state bodies, national journalist and civil-society communities measures to combat and prevent disinformation.

The *Introduction* section provides a concise overview of a country's affinities (or lack of) for Russia, be they historic, political, economic, cultural, religious or ethno-linguistic. They give an understanding of the context that facilitates the spread of pro-Kremlin discourse or are used to influence a country's specific groups. Scholar Christopher S. Chivvis argues

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[12] Arksey, Hilary, and Peter Knight. 1999. *Interviewing for Social Scientists*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

[13] Della Porta, Donatella. 2014. *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[14] *Ibid.*

that '[c]ultural affinities may also make some nations more open to the Russian point of view, as may historical affinities, even where cultural affinities are more limited'.<sup>[15]</sup> For a number of objective reasons (historical, political, linguistic, etc.), the state of things in different Central and Eastern European countries in this regard varies substantially. Different levels of availability and popularity of Russian state-sponsored media content among the countries' populations define their conditions for fighting disinformation.

When a linguistic factor prevents large parts of a population of a given Central European country from finding themselves in the Russian media orbit, Russia aims to transmit its messages to the audience by abusing media structures in the given state by means of misleading and biased articles. To spread specific narratives in counties with a very low number of Russian-speakers, the Kremlin exploits loopholes in regulation of the media market throughout the EU.

The *Vulnerable Groups* section gives an overview of population groups detached from mainstream media and more susceptible to pro-Kremlin media content than the population in general. As put in recent research, 'of particular importance ... is the vulnerability of specific audience groups due to their disenfranchisement from mainstream media or lack of access to balanced information sources'.<sup>[16]</sup> This allows contextualised messages to the specific profile of the target audience, be it an ethnic or linguistic minority, specific social or professional groups of a population in a given country. Consequently, elaborated coherent narratives towards vulnerable groups of a population and the existence of media literacy programmes are important components of countermeasures to Kremlin-led information involvement.

*Media Landscape* reviews a country's most popular media (TV, radio, print, online, social media) and analyses the media regulatory framework, answering the question of if there are any regulations in place to effectively observe compliance of local media with journalism ethics codes, which is an important tool to combat the spread of disinformation.

Without an effective institutional structure and comprehensive legislation in place, misinformation channels cannot be duly scrutinised by the relevant regulatory agencies for their compliance with national

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[15] Chivvis, Christopher S. 2017. "Hybrid War: Russian Contemporary Political Warfare." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

[16] Bjola, Corneliu, and James Pamment. *Ibid.*

legislation. Institutional capacity and relevant legal mechanisms of a state to resist, recover and adapt from unlawful practices, sometimes called ‘normative resilience’<sup>[17]</sup>. It means the ability to introduce or improve legislation concerning information security and to set up effective institutions able to operate within the established institutional and legal frameworks. Part of the scholarship prefers calling it ‘organisational resilience’, meaning ‘a management system that is designed to assist an organisation to deal with adverse, disruptive or surprising events that cannot be prevented’<sup>[18]</sup>. National information security strategies are the first level of preparedness to any acts of information infringement, whereas the existing specific legal acts and regulations make the legislation accomplishable and realistic for the institutions. *Legal Regulations* and *Institutional Setup* analyse national laws pertinent to information security and institutional framework including how effective an intra-agency cooperation is.

Bjola and Pamment name plausible deniability as one of three most-important methods of Russian disinformation, defining it as ‘the ability to mask one’s digital identity or to decline responsibility for actions involving deliberate deception or disinformation (and) could be a valuable asset when engaging in digital warfare.’<sup>[19]</sup> Digital debunking teams can use a variety of techniques (cluster analysis, diffusion mapping or anomaly detection) to expose online nodes of propaganda dissemination, which may be subsequently blocked or restricted. This way they ‘can deprive these nodes of an important communicational advantage (i.e., promoting one-sided views without challenge), increase the costs of the other side for sustaining their message and disrupt the communication lines.’<sup>[20]</sup> The *Digital Debunking Teams* sections review existing fact-checking, myth- and hoax-busting initiatives, and analyse how effective they are in exposing and combating disinformation, including in social media / online forums, etc. by anonymous users or botnets.

*Media Literacy Projects* sections within country chapters examine existing media literacy programmes as part of formal or non-formal education,

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[17] Heldeweg, Michiel A. Normative Alignment, Institutional Resilience and Shifts in Legal Governance of the Energy Transition, Sustainability, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su9071273>

[18] McLellan, Alex B., and Meir Elran, eds. The International Symposium on Societal Resilience. Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Societal Resilience. Homeland Security Studies and Analysis Institute, 2011. [https://www.sintef.no/globalassets/project/nexus/2010-the-internal-symposium-on-societal-resilience-social\\_resilience\\_book.pdf](https://www.sintef.no/globalassets/project/nexus/2010-the-internal-symposium-on-societal-resilience-social_resilience_book.pdf)

[19] Bjola, Corneliu, and James Pamment. Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

including analysis of school curricula and civil-society vocational training. For this research, a broader definition of ‘media literacy’<sup>[21]</sup> was taken while a distinction needs to be drawn between ‘digital literacy’, ‘social media literacy’, and other approaches to literacy related to media and internet.<sup>[22]</sup> It should be admitted that critical media-literacy skills have become a ‘prerequisite for people to participate effectively in society’.<sup>[23]</sup> Media literacy consists of many components, including instrumental skills (such as the ability to manipulate with technology), operational skills, internet skills, structural and strategic skills (ability to proactively look for information and make information-based decisions), and basic content-analysis skills.<sup>[24]</sup>

On March 3, 2017, the United Nations Special Rapporteur of Opinion and Expression, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organisation of American States and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights adopted the Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and ‘Fake News’, Disinformation, and Propaganda.<sup>[25]</sup> The Declaration, among other issues, highlighted the importance of the promotion of critical media literacy education for all stakeholders, including intermediaries, media outlets, civil society and academia.

**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions expressed in the country chapters reflect only the position of the respective authors.

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[21] Media literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts. Definition from: Livingston, Sonia. 2004. “Media Literacy and the Challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies.” *The Communication Review* 7 (3): 3–14.

[22] Bauer, Alfred Thomas, and Ebrahim Mohseni Ahooei. 2018. “Rearticulating Internet Literacy.” *Journal of Cyberspace Studies*, 2018.

[23] Givskov, Cecilie, and Mark Deuze. 2018. “Researching New Media and Social Diversity in Later Life.” *New Media & Society* 20 (1): 399–412.

[24] Bauer, Alfred Thomas, and Ebrahim Mohseni Ahooei. *Ibid.*

[25] “Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and ‘Fake News’, Disinformation, and Propaganda.” 2017. the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. <https://www.osce.org/fom/302796?download=true>.



\* *Methodology is elaborated by the research team  
under the leadership of Volha Damarad and Andrei Yeliseyeu*

# DRI METHODOLOGY

Resilience is a complex concept, being in a constant process of refinement and redefinition. Disciplines like the humanities, environmental science, ecology, and information technology employ different definitions of resilience and develop different indices of resilience and vulnerabilities, which are constructed using dissimilar variables.<sup>[1]</sup>

An index is a way of simplifying the complexity of the resilience phenomenon. Indeed, many components of resilience are hard to assess and an index is only a proximal representation of the actual subject of assessment. For this reason, most indices, including the Disinformation Resilience Index, only yield a relative measure rather than an absolute measure.<sup>[2]</sup>

Although measuring resilience, including foreign-led disinformation, is certainly a complicated endeavour, there are several reasons why it is worth doing. Indices are useful in identifying trends and drawing attention to particular issues, including to the need for greater resilience as in this case. They can also be helpful in setting policy priorities and in benchmarking or monitoring performance of policy designed to build resilience. Easier interpretation than a battery of many separate indicators and the ability to assess the progress of countries over time are additional important pros of composite indicators.<sup>[3]</sup>

While consulting the Disinformation Resilience Index is instrumental for these purposes, drawing simplistic analytical or policy conclusions based on ‘big picture’ results should be avoided. Composite indicators must first be seen as a means of initiating discussion and stimulating public interest.<sup>[4]</sup> The DRI may not explain a lot about the actual state of national vulnerability and resilience to disinformation. Instead, the respective country chapters are indispensable for a comprehensive review of vulnerable groups of the population, the specifics of the media landscape, which facilitates the spread of foreign disinformation, the respective institutions and legal regulations, and other issues related to information security.

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[1] Tim Prior and Jonas Hangmann. 2012. “Measuring Resilience: Benefits and Limitations of Resilience Indices.” Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich., [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173644/Focal-Report\\_-8-Measuring\\_Resilience\\_2013.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173644/Focal-Report_-8-Measuring_Resilience_2013.pdf)

[2] Ibid.

[3] Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators. Methodology and User Guide. OECD 2008. <https://www.oecd.org/std/42495745.pdf>

[4] Ibid.



# DRI STRUCTURE

## VARIABLES AND INDICATORS

A *variable* is ‘a characteristic of a unit being observed that may assume more than one of a set of values to which a numerical measure or a category from a classification can be assigned’.<sup>[5]</sup> *Indicator* is a quantitative or qualitative measure derived from a series of observed facts that can reveal relational positions (e.g., of a country) in a given area.<sup>[6]</sup> A *composite indicator* is formed when individual indicators/variables are compiled into a single index on the basis of an underlying model. The composite indicator should ideally measure multidimensional concepts that cannot be captured by a single indicator.<sup>[7]</sup>

The DRI is presented in the form of the three following composite indicators, each combining several variables:

- Population exposure to Kremlin-backed media;
- Quality of systemic responses;
- Vulnerability to digital warfare.

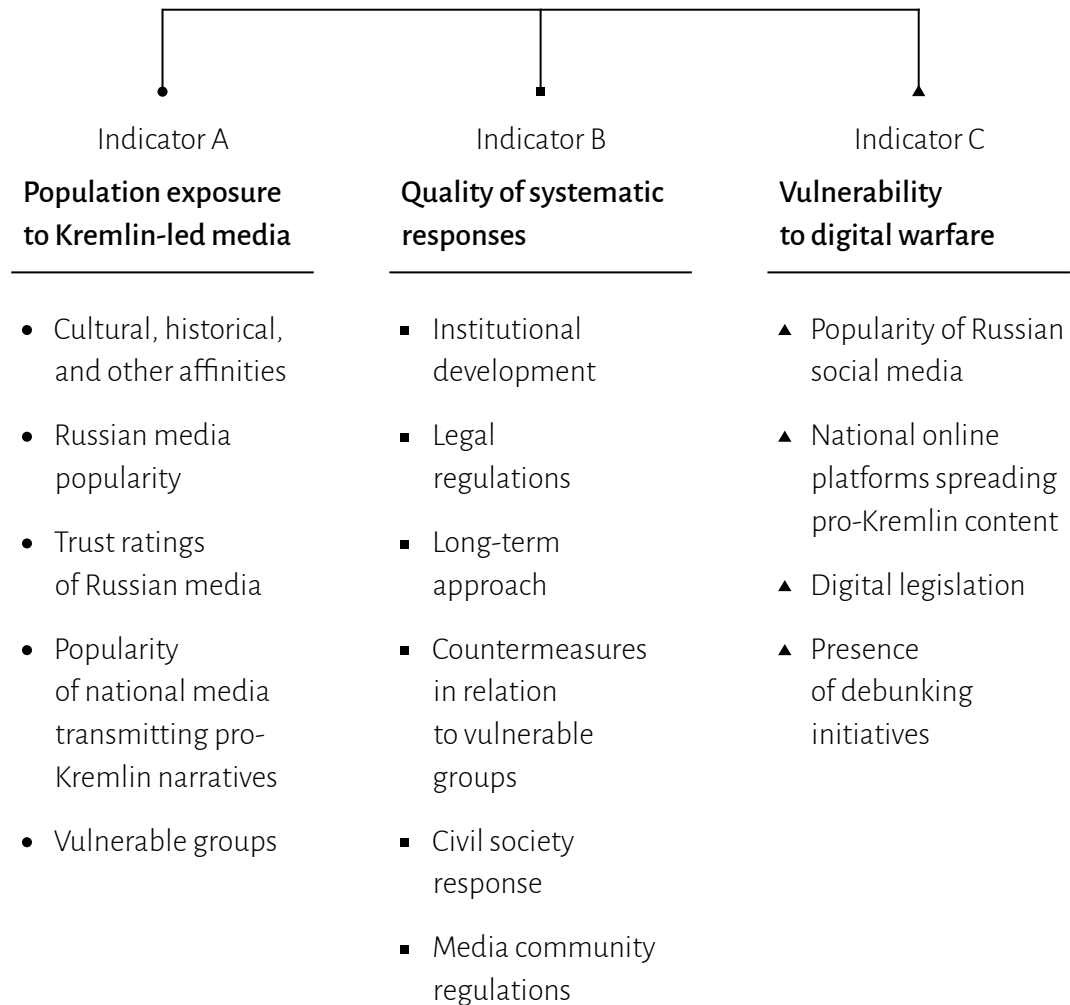
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[5] “UN Glossary of Classification Terms.” 2018. United Nations Statistics Division. 2018. [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/class/family/glossary\\_short.asp#V](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/class/family/glossary_short.asp#V)

[6] Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators. Op.cit.

[7] Ibid.

## Disinformation Resilience Index



**Figure: The DRI structure**

The multifaceted framework is chosen to analyse a country’s vulnerability to Kremlin-led disinformation from various perspectives. The presented set of indicators has a *descriptive* (describing a situation or trend) and *performance* (providing an assessment of progress) character. This model has certain limitations due to various factors, notably opinion, and not evidence-based scoring decisions on many variables.

Three composite indicators are measured on a 5-point scale from 0 to 4, the higher the worse. Each is built as a simple average of all its aggregated

variables, which are treated as interval variables. Variable numerical values are the online survey response options provided by at least 20 respondents in each of the 14 CEE countries. Respondents were selected based on their substantive knowledge and professional experience. They represent government service, analytical, consulting and research institutions, media, NGOs, pressure groups, or quangos. Expert judgments ensure comparability across time. A five-point rating scale is proposed in the survey, where each variable is allotted a score of 0 to 4 depending on the answer choice, along with an “uncertain” option.

A simplistic way of calculating the composite indicators and assigning weight to each of the variables would be to consider each of the variables equal. This is appropriate if each variable is equal in importance. However, because different variables contribute differently to resilience or vulnerability, their values require assigned weightings based on its relative importance. The existing literature offers a variety of alternative weighting and aggregation methods.<sup>[8]</sup> As in the case of many other indices, from a theoretical point of view, the ideal weighting scheme would be based on impact analysis.<sup>[9]</sup> The problem with such a choice lies in the absence of a statistical or an empirical basis for precise impact estimates of certain variables to be made. Mindful of these considerations, the proposed model opts for a simplistic way, i.e., all variables within a given composite indicator are considered to be of equal weight.

## INDICATOR A

### POPULATION EXPOSURE TO KREMLIN-LED MEDIA

This indicator partly determines a country’s vulnerability to disinformation and propaganda. The heavier the exposure of a country’s population to a specific set of media narratives and disinformation, the wider the opportunities to influence societal processes and decisions of state bodies. Substantial consumption of Kremlin-led TV channels or webpages by a country population per se limits national resilience to disinformation attacks, even with good quality systemic responses in place. This is even

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[8] Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators. Op.cit.

[9] Massimo Geloso Grosso, Frederic Gonzales, Anna Jankowska, Rainer Lanz, Molly Leshner, Sébastien Miroudot, Hildegunn Kyvik Nordås, and Alexandros Ragoussis. 2009. “Methodology for Deriving the STRI. OECD Experts Meeting on the Services Trade Restrictiveness Index (STRI).” OECD. <http://www.oecd.org/trade/services-trade/42935959.pdf>

more true if the Russian government-supported media enjoy a high level of trust among a country's population. In other words, the more Kremlin-led media consumed and the more they are popular among the population of a given country, the lower its ability to withstand hypothetical Kremlin-led disinformation campaigns.

This indicator is assessed based on such variables as Russian media popularity and trust ratings among the country's population, the popularity of national media (not affiliated with Russian media) which transmits and spreads pro-Kremlin narratives, the presence of vulnerable/targeted groups of the population susceptible to Russian disinformation, as well as the country's cultural, historical, and other affinities for Russia. It is worth mentioning that resilience is closely linked with the notion of vulnerability. Resilience and vulnerability are often thought to be converse to each other, which is nevertheless not always the case.<sup>[10]</sup>

The indicator's unit of measurement is a rating on a 5-point scale from 0 to 4, *the higher the more exposure*, i.e., a higher level of vulnerability due to more significant exposure and susceptibility to Kremlin-led media by a country's population. The indicator is the combined mean score of variables relative to the following questions:

- 1.1** *Do Russian media exploit the country's (1) economic, (2) historic, (3) societal, (4) ethnolinguistic, and (5) religious context to spread its narratives? (Examples: references to a large share of mutual trade, common past, big numbers of labour migrants working in Russia; similarity of languages, popularity of the Christian Orthodox church, etc.) as a background for targeting your country's audience with the pro-Kremlin messages)? If so, how many of these are exploited?*

Numerical values: from (0) if one or none of the contexts is exploited by Russian media to (5) in the case of all five contexts.

- 1.2** *What is the general level of Russian media popularity in your country?*

Numerical values: Rate from (0) if very low to (4) in case their popularity is assessed as very high.

- 1.3** *How high are the trust ratings of Russian media among your country's population?*

Numerical values: Rate from (0) if very low to (4) in case the trust ratings are very high.

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[10] Tim Prior and Jonas Hangmann. Op.cit.

- 1.4** *How popular are national media (not affiliated with Russian media) which transmit and spread pro-Kremlin narratives?*

Numerical values: Rate from (0) if very low to (4) in case their popularity is assessed as very high.

- 1.5** *How many vulnerable targeted groups are exploited by the Kremlin-backed media (e.g., religious, ethnic, business, political, regional, families of labour migrants, Russian passport holders residing in the country)?*

Numerical values: (0) if none or one, (1) two (2) three to four (3) five (4) more than five.

## INDICATOR B

### QUALITY OF SYSTEMIC RESPONSES

The quality of systemic responses to disinformation defines a state's preparedness to counteract Kremlin-led disinformation. Systemic responses include the level of institutional development in the sphere of information security, legal framework comprehensiveness, existence of a state's long-term approach to information security as well the quality of countermeasures by the media community and civil society.

As the recent report rightly points out, 'the challenge of disinformation should be viewed as a systemic challenge and the search for possible solutions should therefore focus on systemic responses'.<sup>[11]</sup> Furthermore, key elements of a country's preparedness for Kremlin-led narratives and disinformation are coherent narratives towards vulnerable groups of the population and the existence of media literacy programmes and initiatives.

The indicator's unit of measurement is a rating on a 5-point scale from 0 to 4, where (0) stands for the best level of development, i.e., the higher the lower the quality of systemic responses. This composite indicator is built from the average of six variables, which are based on the answer choices to the following questions:

- 2.1** *What is the level of institutional development in the sphere of information security in your country?*

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[11] Flemming Splidsboel Hansen. 2017. "Russian Disinformation." Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, <https://www.diiis.dk/en/research/russian-disinformation>

- 2.2 *What is the level of comprehensiveness of the legal framework in terms of detection, prevention, and disruption of information threats and vulnerabilities?*
- 2.3 *Please estimate the level of effectiveness of your state's long-term approach to information security.*
- 2.4 *How effective are your country's long-term countermeasures applied in relation to vulnerable/targeted groups?*
- 2.5 *How effective are media community regulations as pertain to compliance with existing journalistic codes and standards?*
- 2.6 *Please estimate the effectiveness of countermeasures to disinformation and propaganda as introduced by the country's civil-society organisations and initiatives.*

## INDICATOR C

### VULNERABILITY TO DIGITAL WARFARE

The vulnerability to digital warfare concerns the prevalence and counteraction to masked sources of disinformation. While television remains the main source of obtaining information and entertainment throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the role of social media and the internet is constantly rising. The popularity of online media, social media, and various types of communication on the internet makes the country's ability to withstand digital warfare an important component in assessing national resilience to Kremlin-led disinformation.

In the past few years, investigative journalists have shed light on different forms of government-sponsored or organised activity on a variety of social networks. Adrian Chen most notably investigated a Russian operation in St. Petersburg that was alleged to be where hundreds of employees were paid to post comments on articles, write blog posts, and attempt to influence political debates on social media in a variety of ways.<sup>[12]</sup> A recent study reports, 'The Russian authorities are reported to be operating "troll factories", where hundreds of

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[12] Robert Gorwa, "Computational Propaganda in Poland: False Amplifiers and the Digital Public Sphere." Samuel Woolley and Philip N. Howard, Eds. Working Paper 2017. Oxford, UK: Project on Computational Propaganda. <http://comprop.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Comprop-Poland.pdf>

state-employed cyber commentators praise the Russian government and criticise its opponents, domestic as well as international. The messaging is amplified through the use of automated botnets, which serve to disseminate the comments and posts still further with the aim of overwhelming the debate and achieving maximum reach'.<sup>[13]</sup>

The indicator's unit of measurement is a rating on a 5-point scale from 0 to 4, the higher the rating the higher the country's vulnerability to masked sources of disinformation. The indicator is constructed as an average of the variables measured as response options to the following questions:

- 3.1** *Please estimate the level of popularity of Russian social media (VKontakte, Odnoklassniki), which are used by botnets and anonymous users to spread pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-produced falsified and manipulative content.*<sup>[14]</sup>

Numerical values: Rate from (0) if very low to (4) in case their popularity is assessed as very high.

- 3.2** *Please estimate the level of popularity of national online platforms (forums, commentary sections), message boards outside social media actively used for spreading pro-Kremlin falsified and manipulative content.*

Numerical values: Rate from (0) if very low to (4) in case their popularity is assessed as very high.

- 3.3** *Please estimate the level of effectiveness of your country's procedures and regulations in countering the Kremlin-produced falsified and manipulative content on websites and social media accounts.*

Numerical values: Rate from 0 to 4 on a 5-point scale, in which (0) stands for the greatest level of effectiveness.

- 3.4** *How many digital debunking teams/fact-checking websites or social media accounts in your country do you know are aimed at identifying misinformation and debunking fake stories?*

Numerical values: (0) five or more (1) four (2) three (3) two (4) one or none.

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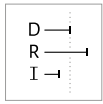
[13] Flemming Splidsboel Hansen. Op cit.

[14] In some CEE countries (e.g., Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Moldova) the Russian social media (VKontakte and Odnoklassniki) are popular due to linguistic and other factors, while in other countries (e.g., Armenia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Poland) Facebook—as the online social communication platform—is more popular. Therefore, for those countries where Facebook is more popular the question was asked as "Please estimate the level of popularity of public groups/pages in Facebook and other social media which are used by botnets and anonymous user to spread pro-Kremlin falsified and manipulative content".





DISINFORMATION  
RESILIENCE  
INDEX



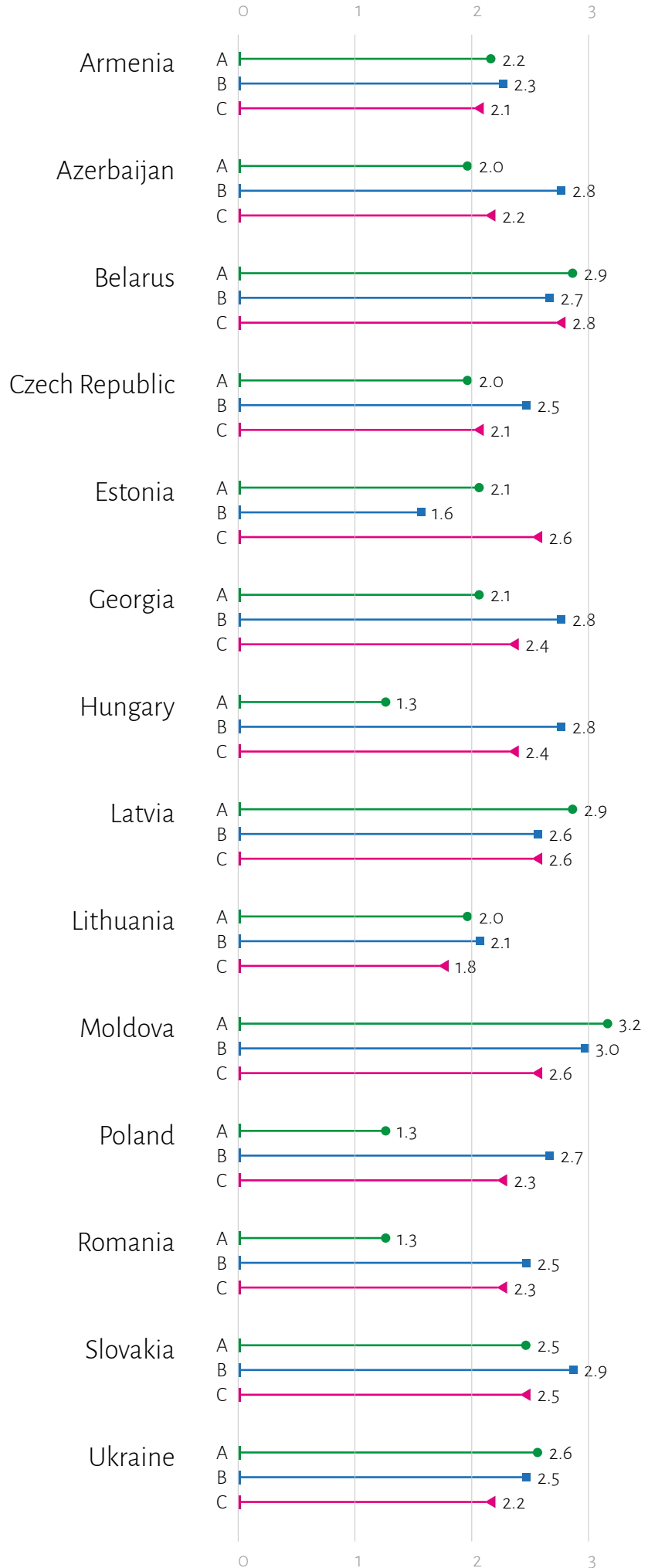
**Disinformation Resilience Index**

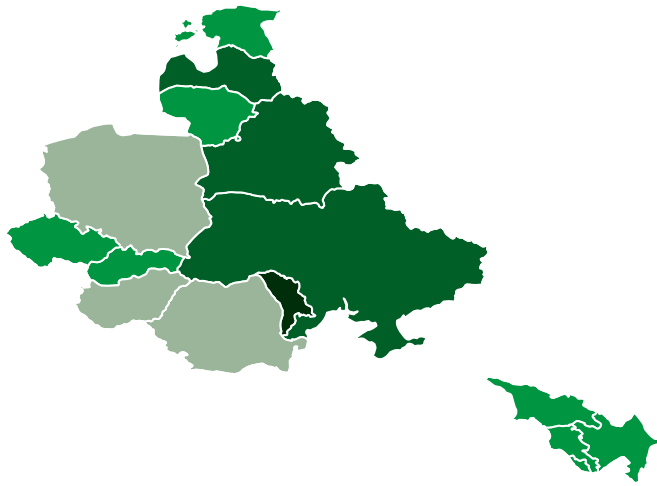
**A** **Population exposure and susceptibility to Kremlin-led media**, the higher the larger vulnerability due to more significant exposure and susceptibility to Kremlin-led media by a country's population.

**B** **Quality of systemic responses**, the higher the worse quality of systemic responses (the level of institutional development in the sphere of information security, legal framework comprehensiveness, existence of state long-term approach to information security as well the quality of countermeasures by media community and civil society).

**C** **Digital warfare vulnerability**, the higher the larger a country's vulnerability to masked sources of disinformation.

\* The **hither** indicator the **darker** color on the map





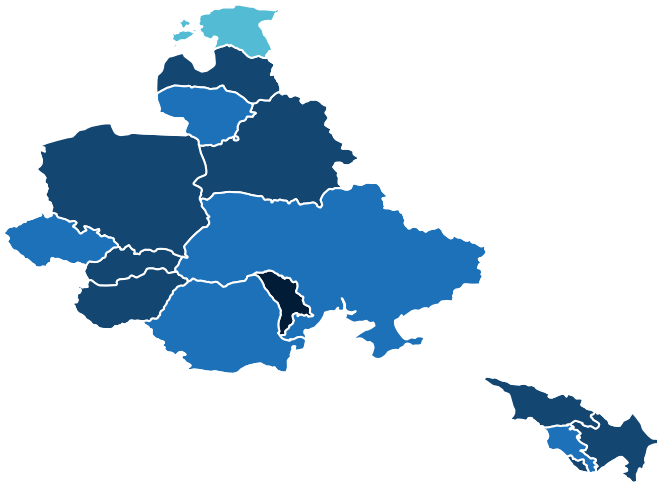
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Ukraine

Moldova



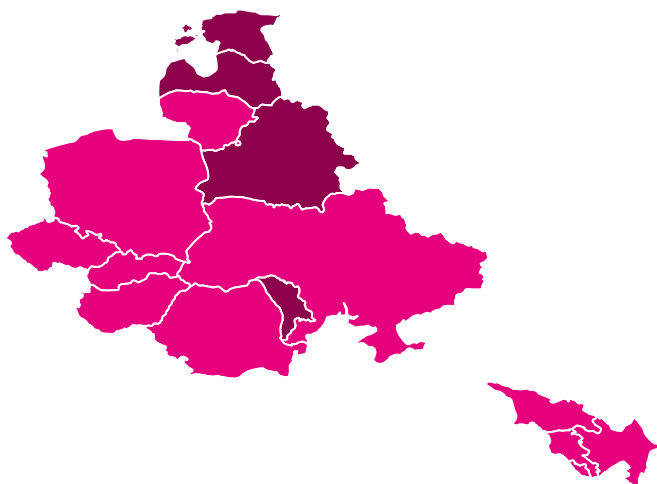
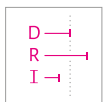
B

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Czech Republic  
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Romania  
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Georgia  
Hungary  
Latvia  
Poland  
Slovakia

Moldova



C

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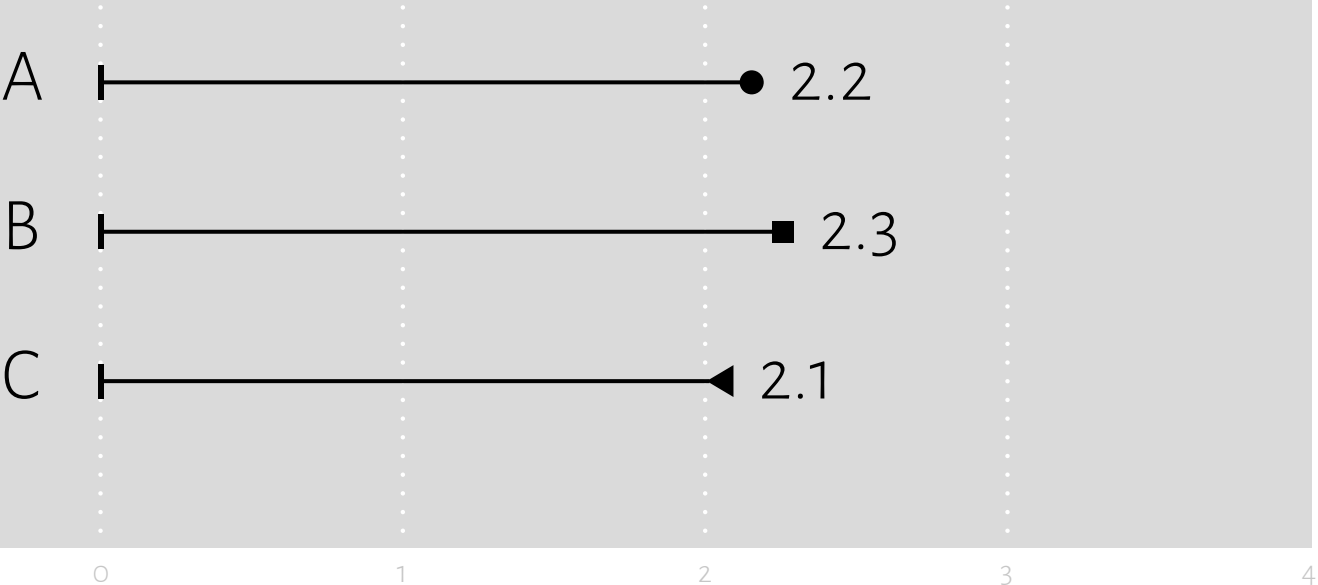
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RICHARD  
GIRAGOSIAN

*Regional Studies Center*

# ARMENIA



# INTRODUCTION

For Armenia, the onset of independence in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union came as an abrupt shock. Even prior to independence, Armenia faced the dual and daunting challenges of outright war over Nagorno-Karabakh with neighbouring Azerbaijan that erupted in February 1988, and was struggling to recover from a devastating earthquake in December 1989. While each factor tended to distort democratisation and economic development, they also significantly reinforced the country's dependence on the Soviet Union, and then deepened its reliance on Russia. And that reliance on Moscow was also matched by a fairly entrenched pro-Russian feeling among much of the population, further driven by Armenia's historical fear of Turkey, which was only exacerbated by Turkish support for Azerbaijan during the Karabakh war.

Despite this initial combination of pro-Russian sympathy, however, independent Armenia never had any significant Russian minority, with even a marginal presence of some 51 000 Russians in Armenia in 1989 being reduced to a mere 12 500, although even that figure includes Russian military personnel at the military base in Armenia. Therefore, in the absence of any significant Russian presence, Moscow's policy of seeking influence in Armenia has largely centered on a reliance on 'hard power', defined by the Armenian insecurity from the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In practice, this led to the emergence of Armenia as Russia's foothold in the region, as demonstrated by the fact that Armenia is the only country in the region to host a Russian base and to be a member of both the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and (under Russian pressure) the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).<sup>[1]</sup>

Despite the stereotype of Armenia as a country fully loyal if not totally subordinate to Russia, there has been a deepening crisis in Armenian-Russian relations in recent years. The foundation for the crisis is rooted in years of a steady mortgaging of the country's national security and complicity in the Russian acquisition of key sectors of the economy by previous Armenian governments over the past two decades. Such a deepening crisis in Armenian-Russian relations suggests, however, that Moscow may be tempted to shift policy and adopt a more assertive

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[1] Giragosian, Richard. 2014. 'Armenia's Strategic U-Turn.' European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) Policy Memo. ECFR/99. 2014. [www.ecfreu/page/-/ECFR99\\_ARMENIA\\_MEMO\\_AW.pdf](http://www.ecfreu/page/-/ECFR99_ARMENIA_MEMO_AW.pdf)

stance toward Armenia, with a likely application of ‘soft power’ tools and disinformation techniques.

Although disinformation can only work if there is a natural and receptive audience, this is present in Armenia, as roughly 70 % of the population can speak Russian.<sup>[2]</sup> Despite this natural audience, the efficacy of Russian disinformation is not guaranteed, as knowing the language does not necessarily make the Armenian population inclined to easily accept the disinformation script. Even Russian language proficiency is a more complex factor, as less than 1 % of the population speaks Russian as a first language and less than 53 % of Armenians speak Russian as a second language, according to official census data.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, English is more popular in Armenia, with about 40 % of the population having a basic working knowledge of English. As demonstrated by the 2012 data, over 50 % of Armenians favour English-language instruction in secondary schools while only 44 % preferred Russian instruction.<sup>[4]</sup>

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

Armenia has neither any significant ethnic Russian minority nor any serious pro-Russian groups. Moreover, there are no pro-Russian parties or Moscow-directed politicians in Armenia. This is largely due to the Russian strategy of relying not on parties or individuals, but on leveraging pressure and influence over the Armenian government. This policy stems from the Russian control over key sectors of the economy (especially energy), the Armenian dependence on subsidised Russian gas, and the reliance on remittances from Russia for many Armenian families.

This is also reflected in the recent emergence of Russia as the country’s largest trading partner, with bilateral trade in 2017 of over 26 % (1.7 billion USD), and as the primary source of remittances to Armenia. The latter factor of remittances is particularly significant, which for January–November 2017 reached 1.56 billion USD, an 18 % increase from the same period in 2016, and accounts for roughly 15 % of Armenian

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[2] ‘МИД России о борьбе и гибели русских СМИ в странах бывшего СССР: Армения.’ 2010. Regnum. 2010

[3] Republic of Armenia State Census. 2011. [http://armstat.am/file/article/sv\\_03\\_13a\\_520.pdf](http://armstat.am/file/article/sv_03_13a_520.pdf)

[4] ‘The South Caucasus between the EU and The Eurasian Union.’ 2013. Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD). Number 51–52. 2013. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/166585/CAD-51-52.pdf>

Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with over 60 % of total remittances coming from the approximately 125 000 Armenians working in Russia.<sup>[5]</sup>

Nevertheless, aside from the economic leverage, in terms of the paucity of vulnerable groups in Armenia, Russia has limited capacity for implementing effective disinformation campaigns. For example, the Armenian Apostolic Church has vehemently prevented past attempts of influence by the Russian Orthodox Church and remains independent.

A second limiting factor stems from the influence of the (largely Western) Armenian diaspora and the strong sense of Armenian nationalism. The separation and marginalisation of isolated pro-Russian groups (cultural foundations and dubious NGOs) has also created a vicious circle for Moscow. The lack of direct Russian patronage has left these groups small, fragmented, and divided, but their very weakness and marginalisation has discouraged Moscow from more actively financing or supporting them in any significant way.

Nevertheless, in the event of any possible change in Moscow's approach, there is still potential for reverting to Russian soft-power influence and pressure within Armenia. And there are both willing and unwitting individual political figures that may welcome such Russian backing and support. In this context, the past experience of defending the Armenian president's decision to join the EEU has revealed that a few pro-Russian groups and some marginal organisations were utilised in a subtle Russian disinformation campaign aimed to promote the EEU in Armenia and by downplaying the costs of abandoning the Association Agreement with the EU. As one noted analyst observed,

*'the EU should make greater efforts to communicate the benefits of cooperation with the EU as widely as possible to the Armenian people, in part to counter Russian-led disinformation campaigns, citing these groups, and including the Integration and Development or Eurasian Expert Club'.<sup>[6]</sup>*

Although these groups were eager to curry favor with the Armenian government and were able to play a supportive role coinciding with the defensive reaction by the Armenian government, which was eager

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[5] Anonymous officials, Armenian Central Bank, February 13, 2018.

Danielyan, Emil. 2018. 'Migrant Remittances to Armenia Soar.'

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Armenian Service. 2018. [www.azatutyun.am/a/28954720.html](http://www.azatutyun.am/a/28954720.html)

[6] B. Poghosyan, Armenian Political Science Association, February 19 and March 12, 2018, In-depth interviews. Poghosyan, Benyamin. 2008. 'Tailor-made cooperation? Armenia's new partnership agreement with the EU.'

European Policy Centre (EPC) Policy Brief. 2008. [http://www.epc.eu/pub\\_details.php?cat\\_id=3&pub\\_id=8275](http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=3&pub_id=8275)



to defend its decision, this was a temporary ‘marriage of convenience’ and these groups remain marginal and isolated within Armenia.<sup>[7]</sup> Another potentially important element of leverage for use in any future Russian disinformation campaign is the threat perception rooted in the last several years of ‘netwar’ and cyberattacks between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Yet, even on its own, according to a prominent expert,

*‘the information war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is going to continue. Both sides acknowledge that information is becoming more influential in the context of modern armed conflicts. This suggests that more substantial means and measures, as well as professionals and specialists, are going to be involved. It is already obvious that not only propaganda but also cyberattacks and hacking operations are going to play larger roles’.*

And although neither side has an ‘official cyber army’, the expert warns that:

*‘nevertheless, the increase both in the quantity and quality of cyberattacks and intrusions already attests to the fact that both sides are preparing for an even greater cyber war’.*<sup>[8]</sup>

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In order for any disinformation campaign to be effective, there needs to be at least a minimum degree of receptivity, with a natural ‘audience’ capable of being influenced. In the case of Armenia, for example, one ‘lesson learned’ from the 2015 surprise decision by President Serge Sarkisian to sacrifice the Association Agreement with the EU was the clear lack of any effective communications strategy. In that case, the population generally was unaware and not very well informed of the concrete benefits of the Association Agreement.<sup>[9]</sup> Additionally, practical advantages for the ordinary consumer and citizen from such an alignment with the EU were never articulated until an information campaign undertaken by the Armenian government in defence of its about-face, with inspiration if not support from Russia. This transformed the lack of information into

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[7] S. Grigoryan, S. Safaryan and H. Danielyan, Analysts, March 12 and 13, 2018, In-depth interviews.

[8] Martirosyan, Samvel. 2017. ‘Armenia, Azerbaijan and the War on Information.’ EVN Report. 2017. <https://www.evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/armenia-azerbaijan-and-the-war-on-information; http://panarmenian.net/eng/news/58235>

[9] Anonymous informant, EU Delegation to Armenia, March 14, 2018. Personal conversation.

disinformation, even distorting the fundamental EU values into an ‘attack on traditional Armenian values’.<sup>[10]</sup>

More recent assessments of public opinion in Armenia have found the reverse, and confirmed an increase in positive perceptions of the EU. For example, according to the ‘2017 Annual Survey of Perceptions of the European Union, Public Opinion in Armenia’, an overall positive perception of the EU increased from 44 % in 2016 to 48 % in 2017. There was also a dramatic fall in negative responses, from 13 % to 5 % in the same period. A clear majority also held positive perceptions of the EU in terms of human rights, freedoms, and civil liberties, and a high level of trust.<sup>[11]</sup> Against that backdrop, however, the long-term sustainability of such positive perceptions also depends on measures capable of countering and combating future disinformation campaigns that will rely on a compliant or at least conducive closed media landscape.

For the overwhelming majority of Armenians, television remains the dominant source of news.<sup>[12]</sup> With two main public television networks and Russian channels widely available,<sup>[13]</sup> there is a near total lack of objective news coverage, especially in terms of domestic politics and international affairs. This is directly attributable to the fact that the main Armenian state channels are solidly pro-government in their coverage and editorial position, with a total absence of any neutral or opposition television stations and due to the much weaker influence from the country’s 25 private stations, which have much more limited reach, as their signals do not reach national audience.

The two main public networks (H1 and Ararat), as well as the private, but generally government-subservient Armenia TV and Shant networks, have a combined reach and penetration of more than 85 % nationally.<sup>[14]</sup> There are also five Russian channels, two of which (Channel One Russia and RTR) have full retransmission rights throughout territory of Armenia, while the other three (RTR-Planeta, Kultura, and Mir) are limited to the

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[10] G. Abrahamyan, freelance journalist, February 12, 2018. Personal conversation.

[11] See: [https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2017-10/EU%20NEIGHBOURS%20east\\_AS%202017\\_Factsheets\\_Armenia\\_EN\\_0.pdf](https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2017-10/EU%20NEIGHBOURS%20east_AS%202017_Factsheets_Armenia_EN_0.pdf)

[12] More than 80 % of Armenians have estimated to rely on TV as their primary source of news, current events and information.

[13] Russian TV channels available in Armenia include ORT and RTR with full retransmission, as well as Kultura and Mir, and the Russian-language version of EuroNews.

[14] Cable TV in Armenia has a very limited range, while satellite TV is widespread but only in Yerevan and major cities, as well as being costly for most of the rural population.

capital Yerevan.<sup>[15]</sup> In addition, ownership of the main TV networks is also a problem, as the leading networks beyond the two state-affiliated public stations are either directly linked or owned outright by government-connected individuals or pro-government political parties. For example, as the Open Society Foundation (OSF) – Armenia found in an October 2017 assessment,

*‘media ownership is still not transparent; the law does not require disclosing media ownership. The main shareholders of television companies are either representatives of political elites or large businesses, which leads to full control of broadcast media. The broadcast legislation does not guarantee independence of the national regulator.’<sup>[16]</sup>*

In terms of popularity, as measured in Yerevan by AGB Nielsen Media ratings,<sup>[17]</sup> the top ten most popular TV stations, ranked in descending order, are: Armenian Public TV (H 1), Shant TV, Armenia TV, H2 TV (second public broadcaster), ‘Dar 21’ TV, Yerkir Media TV, Kentron TV, Arm News (Euro News), ATV, and Yerevan TV.<sup>[18]</sup> Most significantly, each of the top ten TV stations are Armenian, with no foreign, or Russian, TV stations listed. This may be at least partially explained by the fact that Russian TV and Russian-language programming is only available in Armenia for cable and satellite TV users, with no presence on regular (free) digital TV.

Moreover, according to the respected ‘Caucasus Barometer’ public opinion survey conducted in October 2017, despite access to the Russian RTR Planeta and Russian 1st/ORT stations, to which 84 % and 75 %, respectively, of respondents indicated that they had access, only 38 % stated they regularly watch Russian 1st/ORT and 37 % said that they watched RTR Planeta on a regular basis.<sup>[19]</sup> The same survey found higher numbers for respondents indicating that they use Russian TV channels as a daily source of news, but with 51 % stating that Russian TV was their source for daily news and current events compared to 87 % of respondents saying the same for Armenian TV channels.<sup>[20]</sup>

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[15] Melikyan, Anais. ‘Media Landscape. Armenia.’ European Journalism Centre (EJC). [http://ejc.net/media\\_landscapes/armenia](http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/armenia)

[16] ‘Monitoring report on implementation of ENP in Armenia in 2015-2017.’ 2017. Open Society Foundations (OSF)-Armenia. 2017. [http://www.osfam/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ENP\\_report\\_20.10.pdf](http://www.osfam/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ENP_report_20.10.pdf)

[17] For Armenia, AGB Nielsen Media utilizes the TAM (Television Audience Measurement) methodology, which is a specialized branch of media research, dedicated to quantifying (size) and qualifying (characteristics) this detailed television audience information. <http://www.agbnielsen.com/aboutus/whatistam.asp>

[18] According to non-published information from the local Armenian staff of the AGB Nielsen Media group in Yerevan.

[19] ‘Caucasus Barometer’ is an annual household survey about social economic issues and political attitudes conducted by CRRG; See ‘Caucasus Barometer.’ 2017. CRRG, 2017. [www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/codebook](http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/codebook)

[20] Ibid

Far behind television, but the second source of news and information, is radio, which has widespread reach. There are six Russian-language radio stations, ranging from re-broadcasters of Russian stations, such as Russkoye Radio. There is also a small, but growing audience for the Russian-language Radio Sputnik (with content tailored to Armenia, including local reporting), as well as for music in Russian from Auto Radio FM 89.7 and programmes on Kavkaz FM/Кавказ ФМ.

Russian-language radio is neither very popular nor widespread in Armenia. Instead, for news and information, the most popular radio outlets by far are local Armenian programmes and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Armenian service. The latter broadcasts on air for over 20 hours a week and reaches much of the country as a result of re-broadcasting arrangements with local and regional radio stations. Additionally, French-language programming on Radio France Internationale (RFI) has also been growing in popularity, but is limited to Yerevan.

In terms of newspapers, public consumption has been steadily declining, as reflected by low circulation (with about 2 000–3 000 daily copies the average), and they are not available outside the capital Yerevan and the major cities. Newspapers are further constrained by financial vulnerability, with little advertising revenue and occasional state pressure on prospective advertisers during election campaigns. Due to the lack of audience and limited influence of the country's print media, there is an ironic degree of press freedom, although a more dangerous trend of violence against journalists has been a serious concern for several years.<sup>[21]</sup> This in turn has fostered an environment of fear and intimidation, leading to some cases of journalistic self-censorship. There is also a widespread perception that professional conduct and journalistic capacity are seriously underdeveloped throughout much of Armenian media, which is also matched by a documented degree of mistrust and a lack of reliability in much of the media's coverage and news reporting.

There is a significant degree of freedom regarding the internet as a source for news and information, with matching popularity of electronic news agencies and sites.<sup>[22]</sup> Internet access in Armenia continues to grow and as of 2017 there are an estimated two million or more Armenians online. This accounts for over 73 % of the population. Social media are also popular

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[21] 'Armenia: RSF calls for end to impunity for police violence against journalists' 2016. Reporters Without Borders. 2016. <https://rsf.org/en/news/armenia-rsf-calls-end-impunity-police-violence-against-journalists>

[22] Popular electronic news agencies and sites include Hetq online, A1+ online, PanArmenian Network, News.am, Armenia Today, Panorama.am, and Tert.am.

and relatively free from restraint, with many users accessing social media and the internet via mobile devices. In fact, although national internet penetration from home or office computers is only about 62 %, the availability of mobile phone internet access has contributed to a dramatic expansion of users, with the mobile 3G service widely available, covering 90 % of the country.<sup>[23]</sup>

While the Russian-language Odnoklassniki platform is widely used, Facebook is one of the most popular social media platforms for news and commentary, and Twitter is not yet a serious factor in Armenia. Overall, the option to freely launch an online publication without a license and with largely basic regulatory requirements has also fostered limited state control or pressure. This has encouraged the startup of many independent online media outlets in Armenia.

Originally a radio station, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Armenian Service, made impressive gains in the areas of internet-based TV and video news coverage. This further expanded its influence and popularity in the Armenian media sector beyond radio transmission, and website-based news and commentary. As the only objective news source with online video coverage, RFE/RL also stands out for its impressive live coverage. This live coverage goes beyond traditional elections or events, such as the July 2016 hostage crisis at a police station in Yerevan. For RFE/RL's Armenian service, the audience has grown dramatically. Since 2016, it has seen a record number of website visitors (5 633 588), YouTube views (18 million), and Facebook users (17.7 million views). Such efforts have been followed by others, including the smaller *CivilNet* (<https://www.civilnet.am>), etc.

An interesting observation of the Armenian media landscape by Manana Aslamazyan, the head of 'Alternative Resources in Media', argued that,

*'for Armenia, the problem of the quality (of TV media) is aggravated here by some other elements',*

including that,

*'the number of media outlets in Armenia exceeds its needs and possibilities from the point of view of the content'.*

In this context, she stressed that,

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[23] 'Freedom on the Net 2017.' 2017. Freedom House. 2017. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/armenia>

*'young journalists are not motivated to improve the quality of their work as they realize they won't be paid more. And as far as these media don't possess much money and have a small staff, they have to manage to do a lot of things during the day, and this is one of the reasons for the low quality of their work: the journalists are running from one news conference to another, hurry to their offices, they write with mistakes, which are later copied by many other websites. On the whole, today, Armenian journalism is based on news from press conferences without personal analysis, without attempts to gather various opinions, tell the story from various viewpoints. There are a few serious columns and analytical articles.'*

Aslamazyan went on to add,

*'the second serious problem affecting media quality is responsibility. Today, the opposition media outlets in Armenia use the term 'responsible media' only in a negative context, which can be justified to some extent. Though, you know very well that the term 'responsible reporting' is widespread in the West and is one of the basics of good journalism. Generally speaking, one edition may write tomorrow that during our interview you got mad and left, slamming the door, and if no one refutes it, the author of that 'item' will remain in full confidence that next time he can get away with it. There is an atmosphere when journalists sinisterly believe they have the right to lie. On the other hand, there are debates in Armenia over the law on defamation, which seems to fail to resolve the problem either.'*

It is clear that in countries with closed or limited media freedoms, there is a related tendency for 'conspiracy theories' or other cases of unreliable information and rumours. In such cases, the impact of disinformation can be especially serious, as the lack of reliable information only promotes misinformation and disinformation. For Armenia, this is a problem, as demonstrated in Freedom House's recent report, 'Freedom on the Net 2017'. This report found that, 'Internet freedom declined in Armenia after users experienced temporary restrictions on Facebook while <sup>[24]</sup>online manipulation increased in the lead-up to parliamentary elections'.

Beyond the impact on internet freedom, this survey also revealed Armenia's relative cyber insecurity, exposing the vulnerabilities to both internal interference and external manipulation. In the case of 'temporary

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[24] Ibid.

restrictions on Facebook', the Armenian authorities were suspected of interfering with the social media platform. This made it 'unavailable for almost an hour on several ISPs during protests' related to the two-week hostage situation in Yerevan in July 2016.<sup>[25]</sup> This is significant, not in terms of the duration of the outage or even in the fact of the interference, rather, this is the first demonstrated display by the Armenian authorities of the capacity to intervene and interfere with Facebook users within Armenia.<sup>[26]</sup> Unlike an earlier, and much more crude or primitive episode in 2008, when the authorities were able to block online content.<sup>[27]</sup>

A deeper and related problem is media freedom and the vulnerability that stems from a lack of public trust or confidence. In October 2017, the well-regarded 'Caucasus Barometer' public opinion survey aimed to gauge TV news as a source of information and in terms of 'informing the population.' This survey indicated that 39 % of respondents stated that TV does a very poor or quite poor job while only 13 % said they did quite well or a very good job.<sup>[28]</sup> Additionally, in terms of 'trust in the media', overall it revealed that another 39 % of respondents either fully distrust or rather distrust the media, with only 23 % indicating that they fully trust or rather trust the media.<sup>[29]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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### **Russia Picks Fight with Armenia over Nazi Collaboration**

Armenians responded with a vigorous defence that mostly glossed over the liberation hero's alliance with the Third Reich.

A historical dispute between Armenia and Russia over Armenia's liberation-hero-turned-Nazi-collaborator has reignited, injecting tendentious World War II politics into the two allies' uneasy relationship.

A senior Russian lawmaker wrote a piece in the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, published on February 6, 2018, headlined '*The Return of Nazism*

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[25] Solis, Steph. 2016. 'Armed men seize police station, hostages in Armenia, reports say.' USA Today. 2016. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/07/17/armed-men-seize-police-station-hostages-armenia/87216734/> and 'Freedom on the Net 2017.' 2017 Freedom House. 2017. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/armenia>

[26] A. Papyan, RFE/RL's Armenian Service, February 13, 2018, Personal conversation.

[27] Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). 2008. 'Observation of the Presidential Election in Armenia.' 2008.

[28] See 'Caucasus Barometer.' 2017. CRRC. 2017. [www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/codebook](http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/codebook)

[29] Ibid.

*from the Baltics to Armenia*'. The theme is not a new one for Russia, which in recent years has made great efforts to delegitimise nationalist fighters who collaborated with Germany in World War II in the cause of liberating their countries from Soviet rule.

But while that has become an old story in the Baltics and Ukraine, it's a new one in Armenia. Armenia, unlike those other states, is a close ally of Russia and until recently has been spared criticism for its heroes' dabbling in Nazi collaboration.

That may now be changing. 'Armenia, a strategic ally of Russia, has erected a monument in the center of Yerevan to the Third Reich collaborationist Garegin Nzhdeh', the lawmaker, Lyudmila Kozlova, wrote. Nzhdeh, she wrote, 'has the blood of thousands of our grandfathers and great grandfathers on his hands'. That followed an event in January in Russia's Duma, in a roundtable discussion on '*The Fight Against Valorisation of Nazism and the Return of Neo-Nazism: Legislative Aspects*', at which the participants called on Armenia to take down the statue of Nzhdeh, which was put up in 2016.

These salvos reopened a battle that appeared to have resulted in a ceasefire last year, when a Russian military television station aired a programme making many of the same allegations against Nzhdeh. After Armenia vociferously complained that time, Russia quickly backed down, removed the programme from the TV station's website and issued an apology. This time, though, the accusations are coming from higher up in the power structure, and Russia has not apologised.

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## LEGAL REGULATIONS

Officially, Armenia has constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and of the press. Legally, the constitution also guarantees that the 'freedom of mass media and other means of mass information shall be guaranteed' and that 'the state shall guarantee the existence and activities of an independent and public radio and television service'. The constitution also extends guarantees that prohibit 'incitement to national, racial, and religious hatred, propaganda of violence'. Yet as with the shortcomings of the country's judicial system there is a serious gap between the legal and constitutional guarantees, and their fair and compete application.



The real vulnerability for Armenia, in terms of disinformation campaigns, stems from the fundamental lack of policy awareness and institutional preparedness. For example, despite gains in both legislation and regulatory, as well as monitoring of money laundering and cybercrime,<sup>[30]</sup> there are serious deficiencies in other key areas. This includes data protection and the safeguarding of critical infrastructure from cyber-assault.<sup>[31]</sup> Moreover, despite progress in developing and passing new legislation in the field of information security over the past decade, the absence of any clear understanding of the difference between information security and cybersecurity remains a basic and lingering impediment. Even more of an obstacle for a more robust defence against cyberattack and intrusion is the inactivity of relevant state bodies and entities. For example, an interdepartmental working group on information security that was established has neither sufficient resources nor the policy influence that it requires.

Similar to such inactivity, where the interagency body rarely meets, the Armenian National Security Council (NSC) is a marginal and ineffective body. This lack of institutionalised national security can be rooted in the infrequency of NSC meetings, although there has been a marked increase in the role of parliamentary committees with jurisdiction over defence and security policy in recent years. However, the sheer dominance of the executive branch in general, and the defence minister in particular, over all aspects of security has only meant that the dysfunctional nature of the national security process remains uncorrected. The first problem is structural. The Armenian NSC is rarely convened as a full consultative body, and even when it convenes, the deliberations are largely focused on the implementation of a decision already made.<sup>[32]</sup>

Overall, despite some gains in the legal framework and regulatory oversight, Armenia is generally far behind other countries in the field of cybersecurity. According to the Global Cybersecurity Index 2017, Armenia is ranked only 111<sup>th</sup> out of 165 nations in a global index that measures the commitment of nations across the world to cybersecurity.<sup>[33]</sup>

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[30] Anonymous officials, Armenian Central Bank, February 8 and 9, 2018. Personal conversations.

[31] Anonymous officials, Armenian National Security Service (NSS) and Ministry of Defence, February 21 and March 1, 2018. Personal conversations. Giragosian, Richard. <https://nanopdf.com/download/giragosian-cyber-security-powerpoint-presentation.pdf>.

[32] Giragosian, Richard. 2006. 'Redefining Armenian National Security.' *Demokratizatsiya*. Volume 14 Number 2. 2006. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/cc52/5bfaea8c5a1273838b2c2ab0bb576920ac8.pdf>

[33] The Global Cybersecurity Index 2017 (GCI-2017) is published by ITU, the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technology, and is a multi-stakeholder initiative to measure the commitment of countries to cyber-security. [https://www.itu.int/dms\\_pub/itu-d/opb/str/D-STR-GCI.01-2017-R1-PDF-E.pdf](https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/str/D-STR-GCI.01-2017-R1-PDF-E.pdf)

That ranking placed Armenia as the second-worst performing country in terms of cybersecurity throughout the former Soviet Union, ranked only above Turkmenistan. This also places the country behind all of its neighbours (Georgia is ranked 8<sup>th</sup> and Azerbaijan is 48<sup>th</sup>) despite the seemingly obvious motivation from ‘the hype about Armenia’s booming IT industry, as well as constant threats from Azerbaijani hackers’.<sup>[34]</sup>

However, Armenian officials routinely argue that the country is committed to cybersecurity, as demonstrated by its National Security Strategy. The strategy includes such platitudes as ‘ensuring the reliability, security and safety of communication infrastructure’, but reflects no specific recognition of either the nature of evolving cyberthreats nor the necessity to safeguard critical infrastructure and networks from cyberattack.<sup>[35]</sup> Thus, the 18-page National Security Strategy is largely a missed opportunity for presenting a guiding framework for security in a difficult and dynamic new threat environment, further reflected in the fact that the strategy has not been updated or modified since its adoption in January 2007.<sup>[36]</sup>

Beyond the National Security Strategy, there was a more focused attempt to address cybersecurity through the formulation of the country’s ‘Information Security Concept’. This attempt, through the development of Armenia’s ‘Concept of Information Security’ in June 2009, reflected an emphasis on the formal recognition that,

*‘the national security of the Republic of Armenia depends considerably on information security, which encompasses components such as information, communication, and telecommunication systems. The concept also includes a general assessment of the problems of information security of the Republic of Armenia, current challenges and threats, and their root causes and peculiarities, as well as methods to address them in different spheres of public life’.*

Yet this too was a flawed document and has been criticized by observers, including a recognized expert, Albert Nerzetyan, who has recently argued that the concept is

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[34] According to Artur Papyan, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Armenian Service staff.

[35] Republic of Armenia National Security Strategy, [http://www.mfa.am/ru\\_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf](http://www.mfa.am/ru_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf)

[36] Anonymous informant, former Armenian Minister of National Security, February 8 and 9, 2018. Personal conversations.

*'a rather lengthy document, with no clear assignment of duties and responsibilities. More importantly, it was a copy-paste of Russia's 2000 'Information Security Doctrine'.<sup>[37]</sup>*

The implementation of the concept was reliant on the formation of an intergovernmental committee that was created to coordinate all programmes related to the concept of information security. In causation, the effort quickly stalled, similar to the National Security Council, due to its flaws in a lack of authority, absence of activity, and infrequent and inconclusive meetings. The Armenian government also sought to address the issue by developing a 'concept' on the 'Formation of Cyber Society', which was approved in February 2010. The adoption of the concept also ordered the formation of a new 'Council of Electronic Governance,' to be tasked with carrying out activities for ensuring the cybersecurity of the state through yet another state committee and a group of experts.

More recently, there have been some achievements, mainly due to the initiative of the Armenian National Defence Research University. In this instance, the University worked on a new and more innovative 'National Cybersecurity Strategy' in close cooperation with the U.S. National Defense University (NDU) and Harvard University, with a final version completed in 2017. Also in 2017, the Armenian National Security Council adopted the 'Information Security and Information Policy Concept', whose provisions envision the development of a national strategy (including specified roles, responsibilities, etc.).<sup>[38]</sup>

Although criminal liability for defamation was eliminated in 2010, the civil code of Armenia imposes high monetary penalties of up to 2 000 times the minimum salary. Additional criticism centres on the 2010 'Law on Television and Radio', which was negatively assessed for failing to promote media pluralism in the digital age. Its shortcomings included 'a limit to the number of broadcast channels; a lack of clear rules for the licensing of satellite, mobile telephone and online broadcasting; the placement of all forms of broadcasting under a regime of licensing or permission by the Regulator; the granting of authority to the courts to terminate broadcast licenses based on provisions in the law that contain undue limitations on freedom of the media; and a lack of procedures and terms for the establishment of private digital channels'.

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[37] Nerzetyan, Albert. 2018. 'Information Security or Cybersecurity? Armenia at a Juncture Again.' EVN Report. 2018. <https://www.evnreport.com/economy/information-security-or-cybersecurity-armenia-at-a-juncture-again>

[38] Ibid.

For the country's broadcast media, there is a legal and regulatory requirement of state-issued licenses from the National Commission on Television and Radio (NCTR). This has been widely seen as an obstacle to media freedom and diversity. Additionally, the NCTR is discredited by several cases of state interference and pressure over licensing, although print and online media are exempt from licenses. The two most glaring cases involved the independent Gyumri-based GALA TV and the opposition A1+ TV station, which in 2002 and 2015 were forced off the air after their licenses were revoked or not approved. A1+, however, was able to forge a unique agreement for broadcasting some limited hours of programming with the ArmNews broadcaster, supplemented by online video coverage.

Furthermore, in 2010, the Armenian government passed a set of controversial amendments to the Armenian law on broadcasting that enabled the government regulators to grant or revoke licenses with little or no explanation, and to impose programming restrictions that would confine some stations to narrow themes. This included culture, education, and sports.

## INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

Armenia's Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC) is an independent regulatory authority whose legal and regulatory jurisdiction over the telecommunications sector is derived from the 2006 'Law on Electronic Communication' (revised and updated in 2014), and supplemented by the 2003 'Law on State Commission for the Regulation of Public Services'. Despite the possibility of concern over the presidentially appointed nature of the PSRC commissioners, most independent evaluations have found that the commission's performance in overseeing the telecommunications sector,

*'are transparent and have generally been perceived as fair.'*<sup>[39]</sup>

In terms of combating cases of disinformation, there are few effective institutional safeguards in Armenia. This is because of the absence of any consistent evidence of cases of disinformation, as the lack of any effective Russian soft power in Armenia to date and Moscow's preference

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[39] 'Freedom on the Net 2017.' 2017. Freedom House. 2017. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/armenia>

to pressure a submissive Armenian government rather than to invest directly in politics or to back individual parties or politicians. Also, there is a structural vulnerability in the face of future disinformation campaigns. But, the transformation to a new parliamentary form of government in Armenia has created a unique opportunity for initiatives related to parliamentary oversight and safeguarding against disinformation.

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

The Media Initiatives Center (MIC), which has been working in the media sector of Armenia for more than 20 years, supports the freedom of expression and the development of independent media. MIC is involved in the improvement of media legislation and the protection of journalists' rights, and aims to support current and future journalists to develop their skills in information verification and fact-checking by promoting more accurate information dissemination. Most notably, it has implemented the project '*Debunking Disinformation*'.

The main component of the project is the *International School of Information Verification*. A project that includes international experts and is organised for 16 participants from Armenia and Georgia who are presented with best practices, learn to apply different tools and methods for information verification, and produce journalistic material. In parallel, the MIC staff also work with several Armenian universities helping professors to develop and implement new modules of information verification during the teaching process.<sup>[40]</sup>

A second related effort is carried out by *Sut.am*, which is an independent fact-checking media founded by the 'Union of Informed Citizens', a consulting NGO. This group, whose project is an independent effort that does not represent the interests of any political party or other group, specifically seeks to prevent the spread of obvious disinformation.<sup>[41]</sup>

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[40] For more details, see: <http://mediainitiatives.am/en/projects/debunking-disinformation-en/#>

[41] See: <https://sut.am/en/>

### **Disinformation on Twitter before elections**

In April 2017, a series of Russian-linked moves that seemingly sought to influence the coverage of the Armenian parliamentary election were seen as a coordinated campaign of outright disinformation. This case was different, however, as it involved external interference in real-time coverage of the elections, ‘possibly automated accounts spread misinformation’ about the vote via Twitter and ‘independent media accounts’ were hacked or disabled. This was especially egregious at the onset of the Armenian elections when, ‘beginning two days prior to the vote and escalating through election day itself, a steady stream of disinformation and trolls by Russian-based and Russian-language Twitter and Facebook accounts besieged coverage and commentary of the election on the internet.’

This flurry of electronic disinformation was largely focused on the dissemination of a fraudulent and crudely faked ‘letter’ purporting to be an official document from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) instructing voters to elect the opposition in Armenia.

That email document was immediately refuted by the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan, which pointed out grammatical and spelling mistakes in the text and stressed that any genuine USAID email would not be sent from a private Gmail account.

And as quick and effective refutation, the U.S. Embassy’s response also reiterated the need for such vigilance by the Armenian authorities. As media reports noted at the time, ‘although the text accompanying the image varied, at least 43 accounts that shared the image used ‘НПО готовятся сорвать выборы в Армении’, which translates to ‘NGOs prepare to disrupt elections in Armenia’. And the accounts were also found to have a number of features which gave them the appearance of a network of automated ‘bot’ accounts, rather than genuine users, with one featuring an avatar image copied from a stock online photo of actress Barbara Mori.’<sup>[42]</sup> And in addition, the original fake USAID post was shared by a set of Russian accounts<sup>[43]</sup>.

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[42] DFR Lab. 2017. ‘Fakes, bots, and blockings in Armenia.’ 2017. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/fakes-bots-and-blockings-in-armenia-44a4c87ebc46>.

[43] ‘Manipulating elections via Twitter in Armenia.’ 2017. Coda Story. 2017. <https://codastory.com/disinformation-crisis/information-war/in-armenia-a-snapshot-of-digital-manipulation-ahead-of-the-election>.

As the Armenian media and analytical community learned, this is unlikely to be the last such exercise in Russian disinformation targeting Armenia.<sup>[44]</sup> A second, related development occurred less than 12 hours before the start of voting, when several leading independent Armenia Twitter accounts that serve as regular sources of objective news and information were suspiciously ‘suspended’. After a strong protest was lodged with Twitter, the accounts were re-activated in the early morning hours. Most notably, the affected Twitter accounts included analyst Stepan Grigorian (@StepanGrig), the *CivilNet* online news portal (@CivilNetTV), the *Hetq* online news agency (@Hetq\_Trace), and independent journalist Gegham Vardanyan (@Reporteram).<sup>[45]</sup>

## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

There have been some small and fairly sporadic media literacy projects in the recent past. The most significant effort was undertaken by *MIC*. This effort was ‘aimed at developing and deepening the concept of media education development in Armenia with a view of clarifying the steps and further actions directed towards the increase of the level of media literacy jointly with the state authorities, schools, higher education institutions, training centers, media, and other interested stakeholders’. It also includes a series of workshops and specifically targets the broader need for ‘public education’, consisting of training for teachers, the development of a manual and related computer game for classroom use, and collaborating with media, libraries, and other relevant groups.<sup>[46]</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the limitations and impediments to Russian disinformation and the application of ‘soft power’ in Armenia, there are some worrisome developments of note. What we have seen, moreover, is a steady yet subtle increase in the application of Russian ‘soft power’ in Armenia. An increase

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[44] Stepanyan, Suren. ‘Bots, Blockades and Blackouts: How Armenia’s Media Copes’ Chai Khana. <https://chai-khana.org/en/bots-blockades-and-blackouts-how-armenia-media-copes#WUpsOm7-TYc.twitter>

[45] Vardanyan, Gegham. 2017. ‘Russian trolls hijack #armvote2017 hashtag.’ Media.am. 2017. <https://media.am/en/russian-trolls-armvote17> and Giragosian, Richard. 2017. ‘Assessing the Outcome of Armenia’s Election.’ Vocal Europe. 2017. [www.vocaleurope.eu/assessing-outcome-armenias-election/](http://www.vocaleurope.eu/assessing-outcome-armenias-election/)

[46] Information provided by Media Initiatives Centre staff in Yerevan, and from the Yerevan Press Club (YPC), February 16, 2018 and March 7, 2018. Personal conversations.

driven by efforts to promote the Russian language (as an official second language),<sup>[47]</sup> the proposed renaming of streets, and erection of monuments glorifying the Soviet past, and defined by a more effective assault on ‘European values’ that argues that Russian ‘family values’ are closer to the (more conservative) traditional Armenian culture than the alien ‘European values’ (even arguing there is a threat from same-sex marriage, LGBT rights, and other elements to the Church and to the Armenian family unit). Although this effort has largely failed, it is again seen in the recent debate over the government-backed legislation deepening the criminalisation of domestic abuse.

Beyond the limited returns of these efforts to leverage Russian soft power, there has also been a more active economic-centred effort to maximise Russian capital and investment. This activity is aimed at both strengthening the prime minister personally and bolstering the Russian image politically in Armenia. Yet, this has still been only marginally effective, as real investment has continued to be significantly less than promised or expected, and has been limited in the face of the harsh reality of declining remittances from Russia and the loss of jobs for many Armenian labourers in the Russian construction sector. Moreover, the so-called ‘Russian investment club’, a pilot project of the prime minister as an attempt to channel ethnic Armenian capital from Russia into several flagship projects in Armenia, has also been damaged by media reports exposing criminal links and dubious backgrounds of so-called ‘businessmen’.<sup>[48]</sup>

Yet most distressing, as a crisis or at a least a problem in Armenian-Russian relations only continues to fester. Moscow may be tempted to adopt a more assertive stance toward Armenia, with a likely application of ‘soft power’ tools and disinformation techniques. And in that case, Moscow lacks a dependable and natural partner on the ground. But Armenia’s vulnerability, and the absence of either effective safeguards or a robust response to earlier attempts at Russian disinformation, will only continue to limit and weaken efforts at forging real resiliency in Armenia.

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[47] Ishkhanyan, Vahan. 2016. ‘Foreign Language Yerevan: Capitalism Speaks English.’ Hetq online. 2016. <http://hetq.am/eng/news/73087/foreign-language-yerevan-capitalism-speaks-english.html/>

[48] Muradian, Anush. 2017. ‘Armenia Confirms Issuing Diplomatic Passport to Alleged Crime Figure.’ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Armenian Service. 2017. [www.azatutyun.am/a/28493464.htm](http://www.azatutyun.am/a/28493464.htm)



## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is fairly clear that with the crisis in Armenian-Russian relations, the possibility of a new Russian campaign of disinformation and a related investment in Russian ‘soft power’ may be a logical, and expected response by Moscow. In light of such a scenario, and despite the natural partners and instruments for Moscow to use in Armenia, the country’s vulnerability and absence of effective safeguards against disinformation will undermine attempts at forging resiliency.

Therefore, the following recommendations are essential:

First, a move towards a new and unprecedented parliamentary form of government. Parliament should assume oversight responsibilities to enforce measures aimed at combating especially negative aspects of disinformation, including hate speech, but also broaden it to cover bias and subjective ‘fake news’ reporting.

A second measure would be a more comprehensive but legally sound monitoring of Russian media outlets in Armenia. A measure that includes the capacity to impose punitive moves when and if the coverage was found to be an example of disinformation.

And legislatively, a third recommendation would be for a fresh review of problems with prior legislation, such as the laws on mass media and on the freedom of information, which are each plagued by poor enforcement and implementation, and for a strengthened defence of reining in the inordinate regulation on ‘new media’ (electronic media especially). This is important because a more even ‘playing field’ for an open and transparent media environment is one of the more basic defences against disinformation.

Additional measures are also necessary for the Armenian parliament, which highlight the imperativeness of legislative changes to the following areas:

### **Regarding the transition to digital broadcasting:**

- Offering a financial assistance package for needy families to afford the transition to digital TV.
- A comprehensive information campaign explaining the new standards and parameters for digital broadcasting in Armenia.

### **Regarding broadcasting regulators:**

- Introducing and safeguarding a higher level of independence of members of regulatory bodies.
- Reduction of licensing procedures to decisions of purely technical or commercial character.
- Armenia's sole independent regulatory authority for telecommunications, the Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC), is in need of reform in two key areas: with an absence of term limits, the presidentially appointed PSRC commissioners enjoy unchallenged authority and can only be dismissed in unusual or difficult-to-document cases of crime or blatant incompetence.

### **Defence of intellectual property (copyright):**

- Implementation of corporate mechanisms for action.
- Even before these mechanisms begin, intensive practical application of updated legislation, including the harmonisation of intellectual property protection principles and the rights of citizens to obtain information.

### **Improving the protection of civil rights in conjunction with the guarantees of freedom of expression:**

- The introduction of the concept of moral damage compensation in cases involving libel or slander, privacy protection, the safeguarding of sources and whistleblowers, and the presumption of innocence.
- Promoting methods of solving information disputes through media self-regulation bodies and arbitration in Armenia.

### **General reforms in existing media legislation:**

- The progressive liberalisation of legislation, approximation of the principles governing the media industry to those areas of economic activity that do not require special regulation.
- Harmonisation of communication and media legislation to make the regulation of traditional and new media more uniform and fair.

### **Develop media as a business model:**

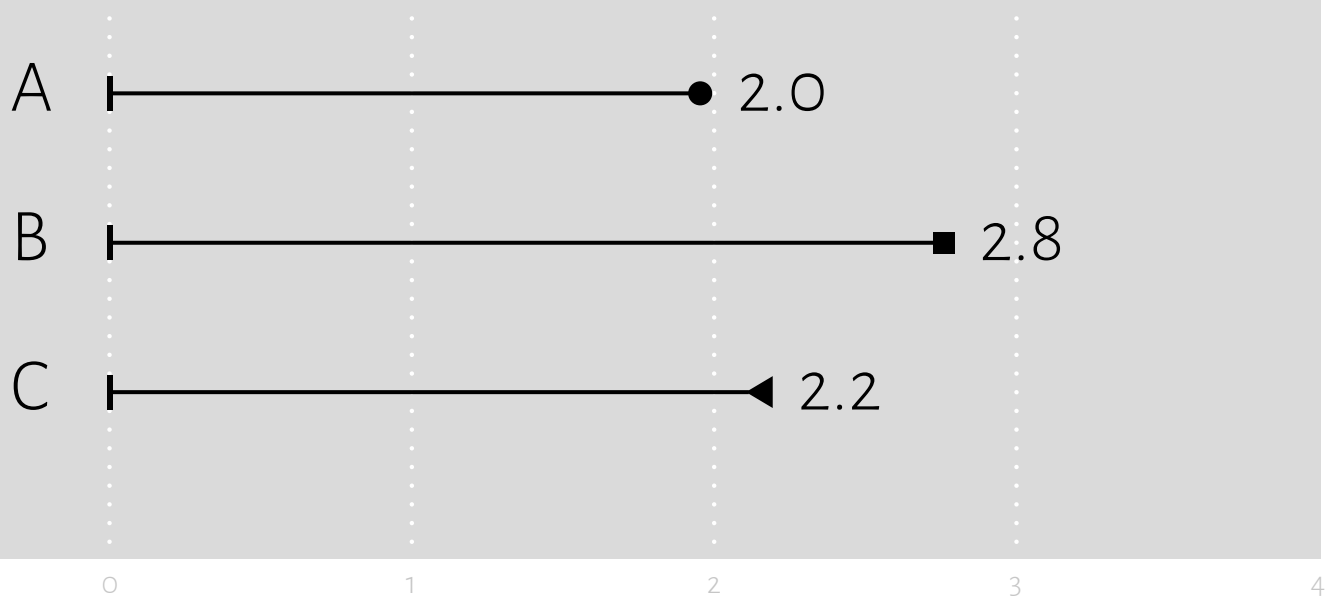
- The formation of industrial committees, with regular consultations with representatives of the media industry, to discuss the situation on the basis of objective data and research.
- The creation of funds (both by government, donors, and alternative means) designated for the ordering (through tenders) of media production important to the public. Aimed at creating competition in this field for the Public Broadcaster of Armenia, both to ensure quality consumer demand and to overcome the monopoly of PTRC on government orders.
- Increase the depth of media measurement methodology with the prospect of targeting advertisements, while promoting the fragmentation and segmentation of the advertising market, using progressive technologies of measuring the audience of the new media, and the implementation of special trainings for the introduction of modern methods of attractive advertising.



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# AZERBAIJAN



# INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical location of Azerbaijan, the only route for the Caspian oil and gas resources to reach the world markets avoiding both Russia and Iran, makes it an alluring destination for Kremlin-inspired propaganda. This is because the Kremlin tries to monopolise all energy and transit routes to and from Europe, hence making it essential to hold an advantage over Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan used to be a central piece of the Soviet Union's Middle East policy. Its shared borders with both Iran and Turkey, the large number of the Azerbaijanis living in Iran (where they are the second largest ethnic group after the Persians), and historical and linguistic ties with Turkey were all vital for the Soviet decision-makers.

During the Second World War, the Red Army was stationed in northern Iran, in the area inhabited by the Azerbaijanis. At some stages of history, including modern times, Azerbaijani elements were used against both Iran and Turkey. Russia used a variety of means to maintain its influence.

In the 1990s, Russia tried to keep Azerbaijan from joining the Western economic and political projects. At that time, Azerbaijan tried to attract some foreign investments in the region, and to build platforms for cooperation with the EU countries and the United States.

In response, Russia attempted to use the existing media institutions in Azerbaijan and, in some cases, to create new media institutions to increase its impact on society. However, Russia was not successful in this. There was a very negative public perception of Russia and its role in the South Caucasus. Russian support for Armenia during its war with Azerbaijan, in addition to other factors, created an unfavourable environment for the Russian media influence.

A significant majority of the Azerbaijani public perceives Russia as an aggressor due to its activities in the region in the early 1990s. The public image of Russia deteriorated even further after its invasion of Georgia.<sup>[1]</sup> According to a 2016 survey, only 16 % of the population supported Azerbaijan's integration into the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, whereas the accession to NATO and the EU were supported by 72 %

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[1] Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Azerbaijan: Treatment of ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan (1998–2002). (2002) <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4beof28.html>

of respondents.<sup>[2]</sup> According to a 2017 nationwide survey, 32 % and 51 % of the Azerbaijan population respectively tend to trust NATO and the EU, while 26 % favour the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>[3]</sup>

The statement made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, that Russia's border does not end anywhere', raised particular concerns in Azerbaijan, as Russian military activity in the Caucasus was on the rise.<sup>[4]</sup> Azerbaijan sided with neither the EU nor NATO, but neither was it connected to any Russian-led organisations (the Eurasian Economic Union or the CSTO), leaving the country susceptible to Russian political and economic pressure, as it was experts interviewed at the time mentioned. So far, Azerbaijan has pursued a balanced policy, which has helped to establish friendly and effective relations with regional and international powers.

Azerbaijan also plays a significant role in the North–South transit corridor between Russia and Iran, as these three countries recently held a forum. There are some beliefs among Azerbaijan's expert community that Russia wants to see Azerbaijan in the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>[5]</sup> The issue of the Azerbaijan's membership of the Russian-led organisations was raised several times by Russian officials, including Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>[6] [7]</sup>

On the other hand, Russia is a vital economic partner for Azerbaijan. While oil and gas dominate Azerbaijan's exports (around 90 % of the total) and the main buyers of carbohydrates from Azerbaijan are Italy (the EU) and Israel,<sup>[8]</sup> Russia is the major importer of the Azerbaijani non-oil products. According to the Centre for Economic Reforms and Communication and Committee of Customs, Russia was the main destination for Azerbaijan's non-oil export in 2017 (553 million USD). The second country, Turkey, imported only 292 million USD worth.<sup>[9]</sup>

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- [2] İsmayılov, Sədrəddin. 2016. "Atlas" Araşdırmalar Mərkəzi: "Vətəndaşlar 5 Dövləti Azərbaycanın Dostu Sayırlar:" (Atlas Research Center 2016 Surveys) Report.Az. <https://report.az/xarici-siyaset/atlas-arasdirmalar-merkezi-vetendaslar-5-dovleti-azerbaycanin-dostu-sayirlar>.
- [3] Annual Survey Report: Regional Overview (2017). OPEN Neighbourhood—Communication for a Stronger Partnership: Connecting With Citizens Across the Eastern Neighbourhood.
- [4] Utiashvili, Shota. 2017. "New Russian Weaponry in the Caucasus and Its Impact on Georgia's NATO Aspiration." <https://www.gfsis.org/blog/view/668>.
- [5] "Rusiya Azərbaycanı Aii-Yə Dəvət Etdi." 2017. <https://sputnik.az/azerbaijan/20171120/412829984/rusiya-azerbaycani-aii-de-gormek-isteyir.html>.
- [6] "Ереван назвал условие для вступления Азербайджана в ЕАЭС." 2017. ИА REGNUM. <https://regnum.ru/news/2348851.html>.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] State Customs Committee. Statistical Bulletins. <http://customs.gov.az/az/faydali/gomruk-statistikasi/statistics-bulletin/>
- [9] Center for Economic Reforms and Communication. Export Summary Report for January, 2018 Vol 1 (10).

To sum up, despite its negative image as Armenia's strategic partner, Russia tries to maintain its influence in Azerbaijan, focusing specifically on several groups with which it may be able to hold sway.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

There are certain groups inside and outside Azerbaijan that are particularly vulnerable to the Russia's state-run propaganda machine. Basically, these are the Russian community in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis living and working in Russia. In addition, Russian is the second most spoken language in Azerbaijan, and although it does not have official status, it remains the *lingua franca* for several groups in Azerbaijani society, including members of the local political, economic, and cultural elite.

In the early 1990s, the Russian language lost its status as an official language in Azerbaijan. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the atrocities committed by the Red (Soviet) Army involving the death of the civilians, known as 'Black January' in Baku, and Russia's position regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in general, created a public outcry amongst the people. These events drastically diminished the prominent role of the Russian language in Azerbaijan, especially in urban areas. Due to a national awakening among Azerbaijanis and the mass emigration of ethnic Russians, the popularity of the Russian language deteriorated to a great extent and it lost its status as a language of communication in Baku.

However, Russian remains the most popular second language in Azerbaijan; 72 % of the population speak at least basic Russian, while 7 %, particularly concentrated in the urban areas,<sup>[10]</sup> have advanced skills. The language is preserved and allowed to develop further due to the government's current state policies, as it is widely taught in schools and at universities.<sup>[11]</sup>

According to data published by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan, there are 15 Russian language secondary schools and 314 secondary schools that provide education both in Russian and Azerbaijani. Within the Azerbaijan independence period, not a single Russian language school

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[10] Ramazanova, Aynur. 2014. "Social Science in the Caucasus: Knowledge of Russian in Azerbaijan." Caucasus Research Resource Centers. <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2014/04/knowledge-of-russian-in-azerbaijan.html>.

[11] "Russian Language in Azerbaijan: Intensive Training." 2017. Vestnik Kavkaza. <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/articles/Russian-language-in-Azerbaijan-intensive-training.html>.



was shut down; however, a decrease in the enrolment was observed. Overall, 82 535 pupils<sup>[12]</sup> chose Russian as their language of instruction. Additionally, more than 450 000 pupils study Russian as a second language.<sup>[13]</sup>

Due to its public image, Russia was unsuccessful in consolidating its influence among the larger social groups. Nevertheless, there are very specific groups that did fall under Russian influence.

There were 119 300 (1.35 % of the total population) ethnic Russians living in Azerbaijan as of 2009, making them the third largest ethnic minority in the country. Experts interviewed for this research project believe that this group remains very susceptible to Russian propaganda, due to its continued use of the Russian language.

The latest official statistical figures put the number of Russians at 119 000, while the other major ethnic minorities, Lazgins and Talishes, comprise 112 000 people. Among ethnic-Russian Azerbaijanis, 98.9 % consider Russian to be their mother tongue, and only 42.6 % can speak Azerbaijani.<sup>[14]</sup>

Several institutions reinforce the position of the Russian language in Azerbaijan. The Russian Orthodox Church is among those religious institutions which receive sympathy from the local authorities and the community at large. Russian speakers currently enjoy great availability of Russian-language literature and schools. Additionally, most universities in the country offer higher education programmes in Russian alongside Azerbaijani.

There are no special media tools or public influence mechanisms designed for Russian speakers living in Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, the role of this group in the formation of public opinion in the Azerbaijani and Russian media is obvious. In many cases, they try to display the reputation of Azerbaijan as a 'country non-threatening to Russia', and normalise relations between the two. According to interviews, many local media experts believe that, in many ways, Russia's influence is very subtle and not openly traceable, as relies on diplomatic channels and other mechanisms to build

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[12] Mirzəyev, Fərid. 2016. "Azərbaycanda 90 Min Şagird Rus Dilində Təhsil Alır" APA–Nazir. [https://apa.az/sosial\\_xeberler/nazir-azerbaycanda-90-min-sagird-rus-dilinde-tehsil-alirhtml](https://apa.az/sosial_xeberler/nazir-azerbaycanda-90-min-sagird-rus-dilinde-tehsil-alirhtml).

[13] "Rus Dili Azərbaycanın İkinci Dilidir." 2016. Sputnik. <https://sputnik.az/life/20160303/404009856.html>.

[14] AzeriStat. (2017). Demographic indicators. Retrieved from [http://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/az/001\\_11-12.xls](http://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/az/001_11-12.xls)

contacts and deliver a message to the wider public through groups such as the ethnic-Russian minority in Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani government is somewhat concerned about pro-Russian sentiment among the Caucasian ethnic minorities. There are large numbers of Lazgi communities living in the regions straddling northern Azerbaijan and the Russian Caucasus. Russia was also relatively hospitable towards the nationalist members of the Talish communities. Many such nationalists reside in Moscow and other Russian cities. These two non-ethnic Russian groups are among the most vulnerable to Kremlin-led misinformation, influenced by Russia's position.<sup>[15]</sup> <sup>[16]</sup>

Today, the Azerbaijani community residing in Russia consists of the ethnic Azerbaijani Russian citizens and the Azerbaijani economic migrants (long-term, short-term, and seasonal). According to the 2010 Russian Census, there are 603 070 Azerbaijanis residing in Russia, making it one of the top ten most numerous ethnic groups in the country. As pointed out by an expert consulted on the topic:

*'There are some social classes that are more vulnerable to Russian disinformation. Particularly, considering that some Azerbaijani citizens live in Russia, and Russia has a greater ability to influence them.'*<sup>[17]</sup>

The Azerbaijanis in Russia are well integrated in society and moderately active on the political scene; they have strong ties with the political establishment in Russia. The political discourse between Azerbaijan and Russia directly affected the lives of the Azerbaijanis living in Russia. From time to time, the group faced persecution from the Russian authorities,<sup>[18]</sup> and there is evidence that the Azerbaijani community in Russia was used as a tool to influence decision-making in Azerbaijan.

The annulment of the registration of the *All-Russian Azerbaijani Congress* by the Russian Supreme Court caused a great concern for the Azerbaijani authorities.<sup>[19]</sup> The organisation played a major role in strengthening

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[15] Shafee F. (2008) Inspired from Abroad: The external sources of Separatism in Azerbaijan. *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*. Vol 2(4).

[16] Noonan, Joshua. 2015. "The Danger of Russia Plotting More Ethnic Separatism in Azerbaijan." *The Hill*. <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/235547-the-danger-of-russia-plotting-more-ethnic-separatism-in>.

[17] Anonymous Informant, January-February, 2018. In-depth interview.

[18] Braux, Adeline. 2013. "Azerbaijani Migrants in Russia." No. 57. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-57-5-7.pdf>.

[19] Ismail, Alman Mir. 2017. "Why the Sharp Downturn in Russian-Azerbaijani Relations?" *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center*. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13456-why-the-sharp-downturn-in-russian-azerbaijani-relations?.html>.

socio-economic ties between the two nations, and its shutdown provoked several negative responses from the Azerbaijani government, which was known for its close association with the Congress.

The Azerbaijani community in Russia is heavily influenced by Kremlin-backed propaganda. As pointed out by an international relations expert:

*'The Azerbaijanis working in Russia are becoming the mediators of the disinformation exchange.'*<sup>[20]</sup>

The Azerbaijanis in Russia contribute quite a hefty sum to the economy of Azerbaijan. The ethnic Azerbaijanis in Russia are influential in building economic ties between the two countries. More than 80 % of agricultural products originating in Azerbaijan are exported to Russia.<sup>[21]</sup> The above-mentioned group established influential business contacts in Azerbaijan.

According to the World Bank, remittances to Azerbaijan are largely sent from Russia and total 2.2 billion USD. For the present, Russia hosts the largest workforce of Azerbaijani migrant labourers. Thus, the ethnic Azerbaijanis in Russia form a group which can have a significant impact on the domestic Azerbaijani situation.

Many Azerbaijani migrants working in Russia come from the country's rural areas, and send their remittances to the rural areas of Azerbaijan, accounting for 1.8 % of Azerbaijan's GDP. Due to the petroleum price decrease, trade between those countries also shrank from \$4 billion USD in 2014 to \$2.8 billion USD in 2015.

Today, 600 Russian companies operate in Azerbaijan, 200 of them backed by 100 % Russian investments.<sup>[22]</sup> One of the interviewed economic experts mentioned this factor, pointing out the vulnerability of these social groups to Kremlin-led narratives<sup>[23]</sup> and their subsequent prominent position from which they are able to influence Azerbaijan's domestic developments.

There has been some increase in cooperation between Azerbaijan and Russia in education, characterised by intensive Russian courses financed by the Azerbaijani government and Moscow-funded educational

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[20] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

[21] Nazarli, Amina. 2016. "Azerbaijan's Major Exporters of Agricultural Products Named." AzerNews. <https://www.azernews.az/business/106769.html>.

[22] "Relations between Russia and Azerbaijan Are Those of Strategic Partnership." 2016. AzerNews. <https://www.azernews.az/nation/100441.html>.

[23] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

and professional exchange programmes.<sup>[24]</sup> The Azerbaijani students in Russia make up one of the largest foreign student groups in the country: while there are 72 000 foreign students in Russia, 20 % of them, or roughly 14 000,<sup>[25]</sup> are from Azerbaijan.

In many cases, the Azerbaijanis who got their education in Russia are members of the current cultural, economic and political elite in Azerbaijan. The Russian language actually became a cementing element for some of them. The new generation representatives who join the Russian-language schools or other educational programmes are mainly influenced to do so by this community. Hence, despite having no ethnic or other ties to Russia, the use of Russian as a language of the Azerbaijani elite makes those who pursue such a path vulnerable to Russian cultural and even political influence, through the media content to which they are exposed.<sup>[26]</sup>

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In the second half of the 1990s, due to the Azerbaijan's pro-Western stance, a decrease in the number of students using Russian, the emigration of ethnic Russians and strict media control, Russia was able to exert some limited influence on the Azerbaijani media.

In the early 2000s, with the increasing popularity of news portals on the Internet, the local government started sponsoring several Russian-language websites. Their main aim was to disseminate pro-Azerbaijani narratives in the post-Soviet countries where the Russian language still held prominence. Nevertheless, this development led to intensified contacts with Russian media outlets, and allowed Russian disinformation to spread in the Azerbaijani media.<sup>[27]</sup>

After 2012, Russia changed its strategy towards Azerbaijan, supporting several media outlets operating in Azerbaijan. For example, in 2015, the Russian-sponsored media channel *Sputnik Azerbaijan* started to operate

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[24] Grove, Jack. 2017. "Russia Focuses on Soft Power in Its International Student Strategy." Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/16/russia-focuses-soft-power-its-international-student-strategy>.

[25] Shirinov, Rashid. 2016. "Baku Hosts Discussions on Azerbaijani-Russian Cooperation in Education, Science." AzerNews. <https://www.azernews.az/nation/105724.html>.

[26] Shiryev, Zaur. 2017. "Betwixt and between: The Reality of Russian Soft-Power in Azerbaijan." Böll South Caucasus. <https://ge.boell.org/en/2017/10/16/betwixt-and-between-reality-russian-soft-power-azerbaijan>.

[27] Ibid.

in both Azerbaijani and Russian. Overall, the main goal of the Russian media outlets in Azerbaijan is to create a positive image of Russia among the public.

According to *Alexa.com*, Sputnik.az does not rank among the Top 50 websites in Azerbaijan. Only the following Russian-language news sites are in that listing:

- Oxu.az
- Milli.az
- Big.az
- Musavat.com (opposition party newspaper website)
- Haqqin.az (in Russian, pro-governmental)
- Yenicag.az
- Qafqazinfo.az
- Day.az (in mixed languages, but mainly Russian, independent)
- Axar.az
- Lent.az
- Sonxeber.az<sup>[28]</sup>

Sputnik.az is ranked as 94<sup>th</sup> in Azerbaijan.<sup>[29]</sup> The Russian ‘Sputnik’ news agency is gaining momentum, but not yet among the most influential sources.

The country enjoys free access to the social networks. However, some members of parliament have recently called for limits on access to social media platforms to avoid a ‘foreign-sponsored uprising of a kind similar to the Arab Spring’. Nevertheless, in May, 2017, the authorities limited access to websites such as RFRL, Meydan TV, and other online TV channels. In 2017, the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Index placed Azerbaijan 162<sup>th</sup> out of 180 in its ranking. In 2017, Freedom House ranked Azerbaijan as ‘*partly free*’, granting it an overall Internet freedom score of 58 out of 100.

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[28] Alexa. Top Sites in Azerbaijan. 2017. <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/AZ>

[29] Alexa. Sputnik.az. Traffic Statistics. 2017. <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/sputnik.az>

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 10 reporters are currently imprisoned in Azerbaijan. In previous years, there were several high ranking cases involving journalists being arrested, namely connected to Eynulla Fatullayev, Avaz Zeynalov, and Mehman Aliyev. All were later freed. According to government officials, the reasons for these journalists arrests were not related to their media activity. Officially, they were charged under articles of the Criminal Code, including in relation to tax evasion.

The majority of the news agencies and online sites also publish information in Russian (and English).

Alongside the state-owned broadcasting company AzTV and public broadcasting company Ictimai TV, several other TV broadcasting companies exist:

- 14 district TV broadcasting companies
- Five national non-state TV broadcasting companies

In addition, ATV International is a private satellite broadcasting company, while Idman-Azerbaijan and Medeniyyet-Azerbaijan are TV channels specialising in sport and culture, respectively. There are also about 30 Internet TV channels in Azerbaijan.

The prominent print media outlets are the following:

- Ekho (in Russian)
- Azerbaijan (a government newspaper)
- Yeni Azerbaijan (the ruling party's newspaper)
- Azadliq (grouped around opposition parties)
- Yeni Musavat (grouped around opposition parties)

Basically, all major Azerbaijani information agencies have a page for publications in Russian:

- Azertac (official state news agency)
- APA
- Turan
- Trend
- APA

Additionally, all major Russian TV channels are available through cable TV in Azerbaijan.

The main problem for the pro-Russian media outlets is the generally negative image of Russia. Even a cursory review of the daily media reveals that the Azerbaijani media openly view Russia as the main international force to help Armenia to gain control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Hence, there is little public favour towards Russia, and Russia cannot be influential in the Azerbaijani media simply by spreading pro-Russian news.

There are several factors which may work in favour of Russia to get Kremlin-backed messages to the public more successfully. One important point in this regard is that the living standards of journalists and media workers in Azerbaijan is low. According to some NGO and trade union reports, a print media journalist earns about 400 AZN per month (450 EUR before devaluation, and 350 EUR currently). The average salary for a broadcast media journalist is around 600 AZN (840 EUR before devaluation, 520 EUR currently). Given the high cost of living in Azerbaijan, these salaries place reporters in the lower middle class.<sup>[30]</sup>

The underlying reason for such low salaries is that media management advertising practices are not yet fully mature. This makes media companies financially weak, with rather low salaries for their employees. As a result, the majority of media outlets employ semi-professionals, and thus investigative journalism is weak and fact-checking desks are largely absent.

Due to the lack of the social security programmes (except the government-funded housing projects for a limited number of media professionals) targeting journalists and improving their living standards, journalists tend to seek external financial sources. This creates an opportunity for them to be recruited by external interest groups, including Russian ones.

The media trade union in Azerbaijan is also relatively weak. The legacy of the Soviet-era trade unions still persists, even though current understandings of their purpose and functions are not the same. Thus, journalists lack the skills to obtain fair job contracts that could ameliorate their work and living conditions. This is why the quality of journalism in Azerbaijan is poor.

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[30] "Azərbaycanda Jurnalistlər Nə Qədər Maaş Alır?" 2016. Femida.Az. <http://femida.az/az/news/16625>.

Even though media in Azerbaijan is quite diverse, it is in fact highly politicised. The media bodies grouped around the government and opposition parties set the media agenda in the country. As a result, editors-in-chief completely dominate the tone and content of the print media entities, and lack any interest in actual news reporting, while the political process results in media being highly biased and strongly focused on special interests.

## LEGAL REGULATIONS

In 1998, the official media censorship left over from the Soviet era was revoked by presidential decree. This became a turning point for the independent media in Azerbaijan. From then on, media content was mainly in the hands of the media outlets' editorial offices. In most cases, the legal media owner in Azerbaijan is also its editor-in-chief. In other words, this person is both a news reporter and an entrepreneur. The Azerbaijani ownership model does not follow the standards of European countries, in which ownership/business matters should be separated from editorial policies.

Currently, independent media bodies (see Institutional Setup) consist of professional journalists and managers regulating media.

The main legal regulatory documents for the media are the following:

For the broadcasting media:

- Law on Radio and TV Broadcasting (N 345-IIQ), adopted in 2002<sup>[31]</sup>
- Law on Public TV and Radio Broadcasting (N 767-IIQ), adopted in 2004<sup>[32]</sup>

For the print and online media:

- Law on Mass Media (N-231), adopted in 1992<sup>[33]</sup>

One of the legal problems regarding media in Azerbaijan is the lack of media ownership transparency. According to the law on the state

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[31] "345-IIQ—Televiziya və Radio Yayımı Haqqında." 2018. Azərbaycan Respublikası Ədliyyə Nazirliyinin Qanunvericilik Baş İdarəsi. (Electronic portal for legislative acts of Azerbaijan) <http://e-qanun.az/framework/1125>.

[32] "767-IIQ—İctimai Televiziya və Radio Yayımı Haqqında." 2018. Azərbaycan Respublikası Ədliyyə Nazirliyinin Qanunvericilik Baş İdarəsi. (Electronic portal for legislative acts of Azerbaijan) <http://e-qanun.az/framework/5546>.

[33] "231 – Kütəvi İnformasiya Vasitələri Haqqında." 2018. Azərbaycan Respublikası Ədliyyə Nazirliyinin Qanunvericilik Baş İdarəsi. (Electronic portal for legislative acts of Azerbaijan) <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/7512>.



registration of legal entities, ownership information can only be disclosed with the owner's approval. This makes it extremely difficult to publish a list of owners of media entities. Hence, it is not clear if there are any media organisations in Azerbaijan owned by foreign groups.

In spite of that, the country tries to protect its media sphere from foreign influence and, especially, from foreign funding. In 2014, the Azerbaijani parliament passed a law restricting the financing of non-governmental and civil society organisations and, subsequently, largely limiting their influence on individuals and the public. The incentives targeting foreign influence (including Russian) in the country came directly from the government. Russian influence in the media of Azerbaijan is limited mainly due to the high level of state control.

Nevertheless, despite the state control of media, some experts believe that there is much more to deal with:

*'There is a need for a national strategy. I do not think we have any effective counter-influencing measures. There is a need for programmes to improve the professionalism of journalists, and the first initiative should come from the government. There is also a need to identify the short-term targets. Some counter-influencing measures should be implemented as well.'*<sup>[34]</sup>

Another expert mentions the late response of the government institutions to the information challenge:

*'The operative response of state agencies is a problem. When the event occurs, the social media is very quick to react. During that time, after half an hour, one day, half a day, while public authorities do not provide any information on the issue, people start to panic.'*<sup>[35]</sup>

The Law on Information Security was adopted in 1998 (N-432-IQ), and is generally considered to be inadequate. Expert opinions differ in some cases, and rather than seeing the overall legislative base as being inadequate, they criticise its implementation and the technology behind it:

*'According to the mass media law, the establishment and dissemination of information through investments from abroad is prohibited. The media budget cannot have more than 30 % of funds from abroad... the attacks*

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[34] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

[35] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

*cannot be technologically avoided. From a technological point of view, the safety of our information space has never been provided for.*<sup>[36]</sup>

In 2017, following parliamentary amendments to the law, the online media were considered equal to the print media, with the same regulation for content.

## INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

Since Soviet censorship was abolished, two self-regulatory bodies have been established:

- the Press Council for the print-media
- the National Broadcasting Council for broadcasting companies

The main objective of the Press Council is to execute the ‘Ethical Code of Azerbaijani Journalists’, adopted by the First Congress of Azerbaijani journalists in 2003. At a later stage, a joint working group was established by the OSCE Baku Office and the Press Council, where the latter’s role was to promote and enforce the Code. The chair of the Press Council of Azerbaijan has since 2015 been a member of parliament.

The National Television and Radio Council was established in 2002 ‘to provide the implementation of state policy in the field of television and radio broadcasting, and to regulate this activity’. Its board members are appointed by presidential decree, but the president cannot dismiss them. The Council is fully funded by the state budget, but declares itself independent in its activity. The Council is responsible for providing broadcasting licences. Hence, this limits the options for foreign-funded broadcasting companies, including those from Russia, to operate in Azerbaijan. However, it is also worth mentioning that the major Russian TV programmes are available via several cable television companies in Azerbaijan.

There is also the State Fund for Support of Mass Media Development under the Azerbaijani President (KIVDF). This is designed to improve the financial stability of media entities in Azerbaijan. One of the main aims

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[36] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

of the Fund is to limit the activity of foreign influence groups in the media sector by providing some alternative funding options.

## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS AND DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

The overall civil society environment in Azerbaijan severely restricts the capability of local NGOs to function and implement various projects, including media literacy projects. Since there are very limited options (mainly for non-political issues) for foreign funding, the media NGOs are not capable of carrying out full-scale media literacy projects.

Due to the limitations imposed on civil society institutions, there is barely any source of information on non-governmental organisations, research institutions or digital debunking teams that openly counter Kremlin-backed propaganda in the country. Some experts interviewed for this research pointed out the importance of striking a balance between media freedom and the information security.

Previously, several projects implemented within the framework of the UN and the Council of Europe, and addressed the need to increase media literacy among the general population. Nowadays, such programmes are harder to come by. In previous years, some organisations (including the Journalists' Trade Union and Press Council) also implemented projects on ethical journalism standards and an ethical code for the journalists, increasing the professionalism of journalism and the capacity to withstand the foreign propaganda pressure.

In terms of digital debunking, a 2016 event hosted in Tbilisi (involving some young politicians from Azerbaijan) included two-day training provided by *StopFake* project members, on the detection and confrontation of foreign propaganda and the political fact-checking.<sup>[37]</sup> The StopFake project periodically includes information relevant to Azerbaijan on its website. Another initiative from 2017 came on the part of the U.S. Embassy, providing scholarships allowing Azerbaijani journalists to take an e-course to help them improve their skills in recognising fake news and exposing

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[37] "StopFake Trainers Told Journalists in Kazakhstan, Politicians from Georgia and Azerbaijan about Fact-Checking, Combating Propaganda." 2016. StopFake.Org (blog). 2016. <https://www.stopfake.org/en/stopfake-trainers-told-journalists-in-kazakhstan-politicians-from-georgia-and-azerbaijan-about-fact-checking-combating-propaganda/>.

inaccuracies, and to study best practices in debunking and communicating the truth around the misinformation.<sup>[38]</sup>

Despite the aforementioned sporadic initiatives, organised efforts and systematic debunking are hard to implement. There are several news sites and forums which report the wrong statistics, such as the *Azerbaijani Language Forum* on *disput.az*, where there are examples of users presenting dubious information and debating its veracity.<sup>[39]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While Azerbaijan did not align itself with either the EU or NATO, neither did it join any Russian led-projects. Without protection from NATO yet cooperating with the EU, particularly on the energy market, Azerbaijan has become a hot spot for Russian interests.

Up until now, Azerbaijan's balanced politics have helped it to build neutral and friendly relations with all regional and global powers. Azerbaijan did not choose sides, and continues to be a part of strategic energy projects, providing alternative gas routes to the global market, and irritating Moscow.

In Azerbaijan, Russia is largely considered to be a power that meddles in regional conflicts, and its role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not viewed as neutral. Hence, there is relatively low public support for the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, and Russia's image in Azerbaijan is rather negative in general.

Civil society has taken a strong hit in Azerbaijan in recent years. The role of NGOs and the influence of think-tanks in the society has been seriously degraded. Hence, the majority of incentives for limiting the Russian influence in Azerbaijan come from the government, and not from civil society members.

Tight state control over broadcasters and limited foreign funding have helped the government to balance out Russia's direct influence in Azerbaijan.

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[38] "TOL Education | Online Course: Become An Expert Fact Checker and Hoax Buster." 2018. <http://toleducation.org/courses/online-course-become-an-expert-fact-checker-and-hoax-buster/>.

[39] "Azərbaycanda İşsizlərin Sayı Açıqlandı." (Azerbaijani Language Forum) 2016. Disput.az. <https://www.disput.az/index.php?app=forums&module=forums&controller=topic&id=979807>

There is no legal document imposing censorship on the mass media in Azerbaijan, and, as it is declared, it is regulated by the reportedly independent bodies:

- National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council (for the broadcasting companies)
- Press Council (for the print and online media)

The State Support Fund for the Mass Media Development (KIVDF) also plays an important role in regulating media in Azerbaijan.

The media is diverse, but camped around the political parties and highly marginalised. Since there is no political force openly supporting Russian politics, the media outlets dependant on these political parties do not express any sympathy toward Kremlin.

The use of the Russian language (alongside other foreign languages, including Turkish and Persian) is prohibited on nationwide and regional television and radio channels. The Azerbaijani language predominates in the mass media. Many newspapers are published in Russian, and in many cases, they are on the top of the rating lists, shadowing the Russian sponsored agencies such as 'Sputnik'.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **1. To increase the effectiveness of the state agencies and their work with the media and public agents.**

In many cases, the operative responses of the media outlets addressing some social and political issues are provided very late, creating room for speculation. Such speculation is shared and discussed by the 'yellow pages' and social network users. This gives some opportunities for foreign influence groups to take over the information sphere in Azerbaijan and feed it with the fake news, to effectively advertise their own values.

## **2. To develop journalists' professionalism.**

Journalists' professionalism and adherence to ethical rules of remain low. Many reporters are inadequately trained and lack professional experience. Unprofessionalism damages public confidence in local media bodies, as pointed out by interviewees taking part in this study. This also increases the opportunities for foreign players to spread 'catchy' but fake news.

## **3. To strengthen the social security of media workers.**

According to reports of the journalists' trade union organisations, media workers' salaries remain rather low. Due to social security issues and low living standards, media workers tend to fall under the influence of foreign groups.

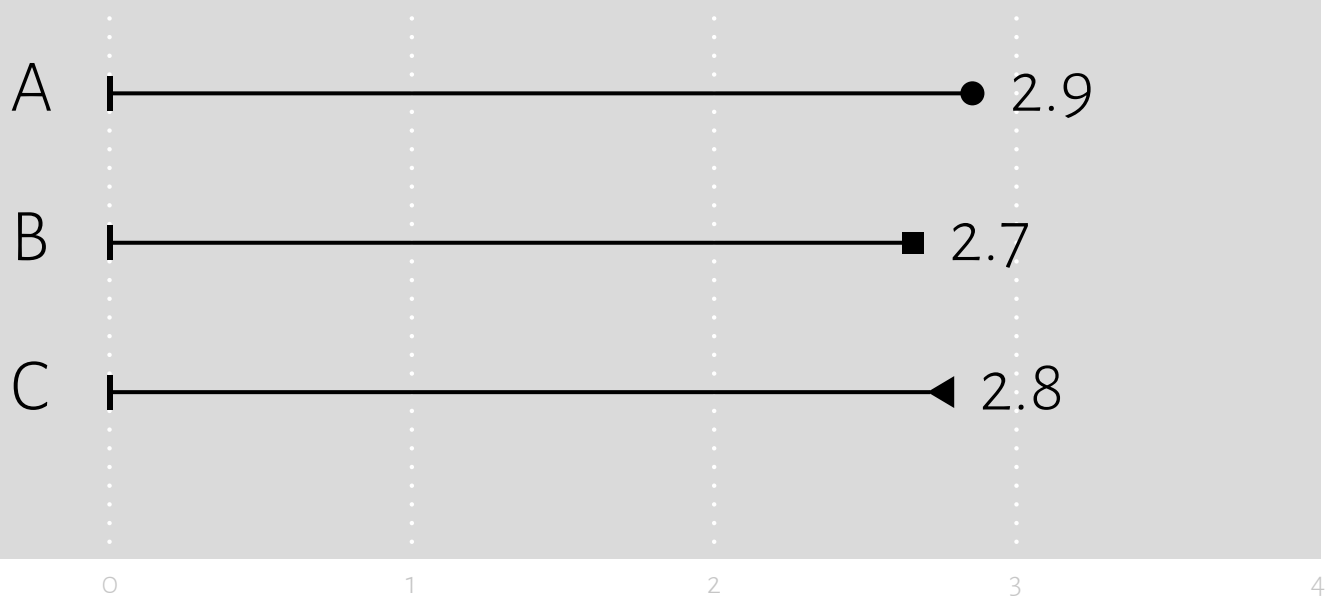
## **4. To prepare a long-term strategy for tackling Kremlin-led propaganda.**

Despite the existence of media regulatory bodies (both print and broadcasting) several pieces of legislation relating to online and print media, and the ethical codes for journalists, Azerbaijan still lacks a comprehensive information warfare strategy designed to counter Kremlin-led messages and narratives in Azerbaijan.

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# BELARUS



# INTRODUCTION

Belarus gained independence in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Nations in Transit 2017 report defines the political regime in Belarus as consolidated authoritarianism.<sup>[1]</sup> The president of the country, Alexander Lukashenka, has ruled since 1994. Belarus is heavily dependent on Russia economically, politically, militarily, culturally, and ideologically. However, a well-functioning bureaucracy, the relatively low level of corruption and high degree of centralisation allow Belarusian authorities to adapt to the changing economic situation and geopolitical environment.

In 1996–2000, the Belarusian authorities strived for political, military, and economic integration with Russia with a declared goal of establishing a union state. This integration process was put on hold in the early 2000s. However, the two countries maintain close ties. According to the Belarusian Statistical Committee,<sup>[2]</sup> the country's export and import shares to Russia in 2016 amounted to 46.5% and 55.4%, respectively. Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) together with Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as a member of the-Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military alliance.

The Russian language is prevalent in the country because of Russification carried out in the days of the Russian Empire, the Soviet period, and continued by the Belarusian government after the referendum of 1995. The referendum secured the official status of the Russian language in addition to Belarusian. In reality, the Russian language occupied a clearly dominant position in public life. In the 2009 census, more than 70% of Belarusians declared that they speak Russian at home. However, these figures may be much higher in reality.<sup>[3]</sup> In the 2016/2017 school year, 86.6% of pupils in Belarusian secondary schools had Russian as the language of instruction, an increase from 80.9% in 2010/2011.<sup>[4]</sup> According to the SATIO 2015 survey, more than 57% of Belarusians

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[1] Kazakevich, Andrei. 2017. "Belarus. Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores". <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/belarus>.

[2] Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь. 2017. Распределение экспорта товаров по странам – основным торговым партнерам в 2016 году. <http://bit.ly/2kY3ovP>, <http://bit.ly/2u81u3x>.

[3] "По официальным данным, белорусский язык использует 23% населения страны" 2012. Naviny.by. [http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2012/02/21/ic\\_news\\_116\\_387459](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2012/02/21/ic_news_116_387459).

[4] Марціновіч, Ягор. 2017. "Моўная катастрофа: за 10 гадоў колькасць беларускамоўных школьнікаў скарацілася ўдвая." Наша Ніва. <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=191559>.



prefer to receive information exclusively in Russian. The number of Belarusians willing to receive communication exclusively in Belarusian is only 4 %. The share of the population preferring the Russian language is significantly higher among people aged 18–45. Therefore, the linguistic factor facilitates the frequent usage of Russian media by Belarusians.

The cultural influence of Russia in Belarus is reinforced through religion. More than two-thirds of Belarusians declare themselves Orthodox Christians of the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>[5]</sup> About 60 % of Belarusians subscribe to the Russophile ideology of the pan-Russian nation,<sup>[6]</sup> which considers the three branches of Rus' people, namely Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, a single ethnicity. This concept was propagated by the Russian Orthodox Church and Moscow's rulers for centuries. Finally, the ideology of Lukashenka's political regime for a long time was rooted in the Soviet legacy, the ideas of "Slavic brotherhood", and opposition towards Western democracies. Recent national polls show that 65 % of Belarusians prefer integration with Russia as opposed to EU accession, which is supported by 19 %. The preferred mode of integration with Russia for most Belarusian citizens means having amicable political relations between the two states as well as the absence of border and customs controls. A negligible share of Belarusians (1.7 %) supports Belarus' full accession to Russia, meaning it would lose its sovereignty.<sup>[7]</sup>

The economic crisis in Belarus and Russia's aggressive stance towards Georgia and Ukraine have made the Belarusian government more open to the West. Worried about resurgent Russian nationalism, Belarus started cautiously implementing a very limited policy of promoting Belarusian culture and strengthening national identity. But the current language situation and cultural, historical, and religious affinity to Russia provide Russian media with considerable influence on the Belarusian population, which makes Belarus very susceptible to Kremlin propaganda.

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[5] "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe." 2017. Pew Research Center. 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

[6] Drakokhrust, Yuri. 2015. "Paradoxes of the 'Russian World' in Belarus." Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies. <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=846&lang=en>.

[7] "Опрос: 65 % белорусов за союз с Россией, 19 % – за вступление в Евросоюз." 2017. TUT.by. <https://news.tut.by/economics/532361.html>.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

The economic, linguistic, and cultural policies of the Belarusian authorities in the last two decades have made Belarusian society receptive to information narratives spread by the Kremlin-supported media. As the deputy editor-in-chief of *Naša Niva* newspaper, Zmicier Pankaviec, explains,<sup>[8]</sup> the domination of the Russian cultural framework in Belarus makes Belarusians very susceptible to Kremlin-produced narratives:

*'In Belarus they do not translate films to the Belarusian language; they do not make local Belarusian versions of world-known magazines, like Cosmopolitan or Forbes. And it doesn't matter whether they are in the Russian or Belarusian language—such local versions simply do not exist. Films we watch are made in Russia or dubbed, books we read are also printed in Russia. Only a small number of them are translated locally. There is no Belarusian version of the BBC or EuroSport TV channels. We lack the whole layer of people making cultural products.'*<sup>[9]</sup>

There is a deficit of empirical data and scientific research on this topic, but the results of national surveys and our analysis as social scholars allow us to define a number of socio-economic, professional, and cultural groups that are the most susceptible to the Kremlin's narratives. Various surveys conducted in recent decades show that the idea of integration with Russia finds the strongest support among the people who find it difficult to adapt to the market economy, are afraid of market reforms, and therefore want to preserve the existing Belarusian economic model based on strong links with Russia. These are people older than 40, with relatively low income and education, residing in small towns and rural areas.<sup>[10]</sup>

Surveys relating to the media preferences of Belarusians partially correlate with these findings. Russian TV channels and websites enjoy more

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[8] Within this research, 17 in-depth interviews were conducted with experts in media fields in August–November 2017. The list of respondents comprises 12 journalists of national media (including four editors and deputy editors), two heads of specialised NGOs and professional associations, two media consultants, and one director of a sociological research centre.

[9] Zmicier Pankaviec, *Naša Niva* Newspaper. August 26, 2017. In-depth interview.

[10] Коровенкова, Татьяна. 2017. "Белорусы предпочитают любить Россию на расстоянии." БелаПАН. <http://naviny.by/article/20170527/1495871256-belorusy-predpochitayut-lyubit-rossiyu-na-rasstoyanii>.  
Melyantsou, Dzianis. 2015. "REFORUM: Geopolitics and Reforms: Who Do Reformers Have to Rely On?" Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. <http://belinstitute.eu/en/node/2530>.  
"Belarus and the World: Geopolitical Choice and Security in the Light of Economy and Culture." 2010. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. <http://belinstitute.eu/en/node/835>.

popularity among the inhabitants of small towns (population between 10 000 and 50 000 people) and regional centres. The popularity of Russian media is higher in the east of Belarus bordering Russia—Vitebsk, Homiel and Mahiliou regions.<sup>[11]</sup> This might be explained by the larger labour migration to Russia in these areas as compared to other Belarusian regions and stronger family ties of the local inhabitants to Russia.

It seems pertinent to suggest that Kremlin-led propaganda finds fertile ground among individuals who are culturally predisposed to it, actively consume Russian media, and do not believe that their individual efforts may improve their economic situation while assuming that Russia is capable of bringing positive change to their life.

The first group particularly vulnerable to Russian government propaganda is the *Belarusian Armed Forces and internal troops* (e.g., the militarised forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs). In terms of the organisational structure, ideology, and culture, the Belarusian Armed Forces are the continuation of the Soviet military. The Belarusian army officers remain nostalgic about the Soviet Union, where the military was a much more prestigious social group. Army ideology is still based on the idea that Russians and Belarusians are “the same nation”.<sup>[12]</sup> Military officers still perceive the West as the main common enemy of both countries.<sup>[13]</sup> They often have a hostile attitude towards the Belarusian language.

The second group receptive to Russian government propaganda is *retired people*. Many of them are heavy consumers of Russian TV channels, nostalgic for Soviet times, and find themselves in a difficult economic situation, making them more reliant on government assistance. According to the director of the Belarusian Analytical Workroom, Prof. Andrei Vardomatski, the Belarusian elderly possess a unique set of values evolved during USSR times. They are vulnerable to Kremlin-supported messages, not because of media techniques but rather due to self-identification with such narratives, reinforcing their beliefs and fears.

The third very diverse and vulnerable group consists of people who have recently *lost a stable income and job* due to the economic crisis. This group includes small business owners, workers of the nearly bankrupt state-owned enterprises, and individuals laid off from industry or public

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[11] Белорусские средства массовой информации: количественный анализ.

[12] Княнец, Эміцер. 2017. “Беларускі рэзервіст: 12 урокаў войска.” Наша Ніва. <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=144528>.

[13] Ларчанка, Міхаіл. 2014. “У нашай арміі не любяць Лукашэнку.” Charter97.org. <https://charter97.org/be/news/2014/5/4/97313/>.

administration. These people are particularly present in regional centres. Some of those who find themselves unable to find a new job put their hopes of advancement on Russia.

Finally, messages spread by Russian media are particularly popular among *active Russian Orthodox Church believers*. In recent years, there were numerous reports about several Russian Orthodox parishes helping pro-Russian nationalists organise military training sessions for Belarusian youth<sup>[14]</sup> or meetings with known propagandists of Russophile ideas.<sup>[15]</sup>

In addition to these groups, Prof. Vardomatski pointed out that younger Belarusians display lower critical thinking skills compared to people of middle age and therefore are more susceptible to disinformation and propaganda disseminated by the Kremlin.<sup>[16]</sup> Education is not a key factor in this case and often has no influence on the opinions of young people.

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

According to opinion polls conducted by the Belarusian Analytical Workroom in April 2017, the primary source of news for Belarusians is state-owned TV channels (71.3%). Russian TV channels come in third (43.8%), after relatives and friends (62.1%) as a source of information. Social networks and blogs (42.4%) is yet another important news source. Independent media online are positioned sixth (27.4%) after state-owned newspapers (28.6%).<sup>[17]</sup>

Sociological studies show that the Russian outlets enjoy a high level of trust among Belarusians. In April 2017, 75% of respondents either fully or partially trusted Russian media. At the same time, the degree of confidence in domestic independent media and state-owned sources stood at 73% and 67%, respectively.<sup>[18]</sup> The influence of the Russian outlets in Belarus is strengthened by the relatively weak national identity and the precarious status of the Belarusian language. In Belarus, there are

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[14] Гарбацэвіч, Арцём. 2016. "Беларускіх школьнікаў адпраўлялі ў Расію ў трэніровачныя лагеры пад кіраўніцтвам неанацистаў." Наша Ніва. <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=170171>.

[15] "Прысутныя тут мужчыны возьмуць удзел у вайне за Святую Русь". «Падпалкоўнік ГРУ» выступіў у мінскім праваслаўным манастыры." 2017. Наша Ніва. <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=197200>.

[16] Andrei Vardomatski, Belarusian Analytical Workroom. 7. November 2017. In-depth interview.

[17] "Соцопрос: Белорусы все меньше доверяют госСМИ." 2017. TUT.by. <https://news.tut.by/economics/544272.html>.

[18] Ibid.

only 32 broadcasters and publications in the Belarusian language, while 837 use solely the Russian language. Another 526 media outlets publish materials both in Russian and Belarusian.<sup>[19]</sup>

The most popular media in Belarus are TV or internet-based. The impact of all other types of media outlets is significantly lower. Television in Belarus is still first, although its popularity is steadily decreasing, especially among the younger, better educated, and wealthier population. According to surveys by the sociological company SATIO in September 2015, the TV audience in Belarus equalled 84.7% of the adult population. The internet was second with 63.8%. Newspapers had a share of 40.9%, while radio attracted the attention of only 36.6%. The share of internet media in Belarus continues to increase while the audience of all the others is rapidly shrinking.<sup>[20]</sup>

Freedom of speech in Belarus is severely restricted. In 2017, the World Press Freedom Index placed Belarus 153rd out of 180 countries. According to the Ministry of Information, almost 1 600 periodicals were registered in the country in 2016, and only 437 were state-owned. However, according to the Belarusian Association of journalists, there are only 30 independent journals and newspapers in Belarus covering socioeconomic and political issues. The rest are entertainment-oriented, dealing with advertising, crosswords, fashion and social life, etc.<sup>[21]</sup>

The situation with radio and TV is even more striking. Out of 273 radio stations, 190 of them and all TV channels are state-owned. The independent outlets are limited to foreign media broadcasting in Belarus: Czech-based *Radio Svaboda* (RFE/RL) as well as the *Radyjo Racyja*, the European Radio for Belarus, and Belsat TV, based in Poland.

The internet remains the only environment where independent Belarusian media (e.g., *TUT.by*, *Onliner.by*, *Charter97.org* portals) are dominant. However, the Belarusian authorities have developed a large set of legal and technical tools allowing them to block any critical media, including online ones (see the section *Legal Regulation* below for details).

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[19] “Масмедыя ў Беларусі № 3(49). СМІ ў перыяд выбараў у палату прадстаўнікоў. (Ліпень – Верасень 2016 г.)” 2016. Беларуская асацыяцыя журналістаў. <https://baj.by/be/analytics/masmedyya-u-belarusi-no-349-smi-u-peryyad-vybarau-u-palatu-pradstaunikou-lipen-verasen>.

[20] Белорусские средства массовой информации: количественный анализ.

[21] “Масмедиа в Беларуси №2(48). СМІ в прэддверіі выбаров – 2016. (Апрель – Іюнь 2016 г.)” 2016. Беларуская асацыяцыя журналістаў. <https://baj.by/ru/analytics/massmedia-v-belarusi-no248-smi-v-preddverii-vyborov-2016-aprel-iyun-2016-g>.

As our interviewees explained, state-owned and independent media function according to different logic. State-owned media are non-pluralistic and hierarchy-based. Journalists spread messages designed by the authorities and represent an official point of view. Publications on political and economic matters require the permission of editors-in-chief. Hierarchy and dependence on official sources significantly reduces their speed of reaction to events, as one of the state media employees explains:

*'If something happens, we do not question witnesses, because different witnesses may have different points of view. They are emotional and not objective. We are waiting for the confirmation from official sources. Of course, we would like to get this confirmation faster than we get it now.'*<sup>[22]</sup>

The independent media are more autonomous regarding their information policy. Their news feed is not as selective and is closer to real-time, providing a voice and tribune for different social groups in comparison with state-owned media. However, they experience pressure from the authorities and have difficulty in accessing official information.

*'The situation has improved a lot in the last couple of years, but many institutions still perceive their press offices as tools to protect state officials from journalists. In some cases, they react days and weeks after an inquiry. For a Belarusian journalist, it is easier to get information from a foreign government institution than from a domestic one.'*<sup>[23]</sup>

As has been already mentioned, in Belarus there is no independent local TV and radio broadcaster. State-owned Belarusian TV and radio outlets transmit predominantly Russia-originated news and entertainment content.<sup>[24]</sup>

In 2016, the deputy head of the presidential administration, Ihar Buzouski, acknowledged that the share of this content reaches 65%.<sup>[25]</sup> State-owned Belarusian TV channels do not only show Russian movies, TV series, and other entertainment

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[22] Anonymous informant, a state-owned media outlet. August 2017. In-depth interview.

[23] Anton Trafimovič, Radyjo Svaboda (RFE/RL). October 2017. In-depth interview.

[24] "Media Sustainability Index 2017. The Development of Sustainable and Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia." 2017. <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2017-full.pdf>.

[25] "65% контента в белорусских СМИ – российский." 2016. Marketing.by. <http://marketing.by/novosti-rynka/65-kontenta-v-belorusskikh-smi-rossiyskiy/>.

programmes, they also broadcast prime-time news services and political talk shows produced by Kremlin-controlled media.

The Belarusian experts we spoke to openly declared that the worldview of the average Belarusian is formed by Moscow, not Minsk:

*‘The opinion of Belarusians on the most important topics of international affairs, geopolitics, conflicts in the region, and even the most important issues related to Belarusian national identity is formed by Russian TV. Opinion polls suggest that 60 %–65 % of Belarusians look at the world through the prism of Russian TV networks. I think even [President] Lukashenka is worried about it, because he realizes that he does not have control over the information disseminated in his own land’.*<sup>[26]</sup>

The majority of our interviewees stated that the Belarusian government is aware of the possible information threats coming from the east. However, the Belarusian authorities seem to refrain from open censorship of Russian media. They monitor and eliminate messages directly attacking the Belarusian regime. At the same time, they allow Russian mass media to distribute their products and spread the Kremlin’s point of view.

Both the Belarusian Association of Journalists, an associate member of the European Federation of Journalists, and the pro-government Belarusian Union of Journalists have Commissions on Ethics designed to fight manipulation and maintain professional standards. However, as our experts confessed, journalists and media largely do not respect the decisions of either commission and therefore these bodies do not play any regulatory role. This duty could to some extent be performed by the Civic Coordination Council of the Media established in 2008 by resolution of the Council of Ministers.<sup>[27]</sup> The Council was supposed to meet at least once a quarter and to coordinate the activities of government bodies, NGOs and other media-related organisations.<sup>[28]</sup> However, in practice it has met only a few times and exists only on paper.

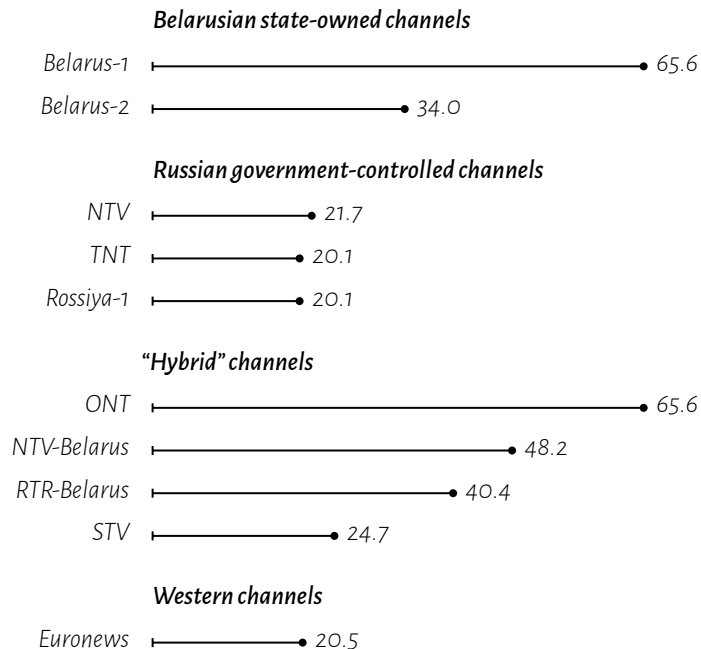
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[26] Valer Karbalevič, Radio Svaboda (RFE/RL). August 2017. In-depth interview.

[27] Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь от 29.10.2008 №1625 “О создании общественного координационного совета в сфере массовой информации”. <http://pravo.newsby.org/belarus/postanovsm4/sov488.htm>

[28] Ibid

Based on the SATIO survey,<sup>[29]</sup> the most popular TV channels among Belarusian viewers are presented below.<sup>[30]</sup>



### Top 10 most popular TV channels

Audience – % of the population · September 2015

The so-called 'hybrid' channels are a Belarusian media phenomenon. These networks are registered as Belarusian legal entities and combine Russian content with domestically produced programmes. They emerged in Belarus in the early 2000s. One of the goals of the Belarusian authorities when they established them was to pre-moderate the content and eliminate messages criticizing the Belarusian regime. The censorship relates only to information about Belarus. All the entertainment and information on international and domestic Russian issues are not subject to restriction. As several experts interviewed argued, a large part of the Belarusian population does not distinguish between genuine Russian TV channels and those modified by the Belarusian authorities.

In the package of nine generally accessible TV channels broadcast in Belarus, four networks (*ONT*, *NTV-Belarus*, *RTR-Belarus*, and

[29] Белорусские средства массовой информации: количественный анализ.

[30] The audience of media outlets is understood here as the share of population which used each particular source of information at least once in 30 days preceding the survey.



STV) broadcast news and political talk shows produced in Russia. The uncensored Russian channels in Belarus are broadcast by cable television providers; they are also accessible via satellite. Their total audience is about 43 % of the population.<sup>[31]</sup> It is important to note that often around 90 % of the content in the packages offered by all cable TV providers in Belarus consists of Russia-originated channels. The Russian-language versions of *Euronews*, *Viasat Nature*, and *Viasat History* or the Israeli Russian-language *RTVI* are some of the notable exceptions. Ukrainian, Lithuanian, or Polish TV is absent from the Belarusian cable networks.

Since 2014, the Belarusian authorities have been trying to limit political content on the “hybrid” channels more actively than before. For instance, they moved TV shows with strong propaganda, such as Russian journalist Vladimir Solovyev’s programme on *RTR-Belarus* and *Vremia pokazhet* (Time Will Tell), a talk show on ONT, from prime time to late night. Nevertheless, Russian content clearly dominates Belarusian media. Almost all of the most popular TV programmes in Belarus are Russia-produced.<sup>[32]</sup>

According to *gemiusAudience* data, in January 2017, the number of internet users aged 15 years and older in Belarus exceeded 5 million people.<sup>[33]</sup> The level of internet penetration reached 70 %. The share of internet users in Belarus is higher than in Hungary, Ukraine, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, and Latvia.<sup>[34]</sup> Among the Belarusian population aged 15 to 39 years, the proportion of internet users already exceeds the audience for television.<sup>[35]</sup>

The share of the Belarusian internet audience that uses the internet at least once a day has reached 91 %.<sup>[36]</sup> The internet audience is young (although penetration among older social groups is growing) and largely apolitical. Political news is of interest to 46 % of the internet audience. It is important

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[31] Белорусские средства массовой информации: количественный анализ.

[32] Литвинович, В.М., В.В. Аржиник, В.И. Ермак, И.В. Пинчук, О.Ф. Шеремет, Н.Н. Сухотский, И.О. Метелица, and Д.В. Савотеев. 2014. “Медиа сфера Беларуси: Социологический аспект” Минск: Информационно-аналитический центр при Администрации Президента Республики Беларусь. [http://iac.gov.by/sbornik/Mediasfera\\_Belarusi.pdf](http://iac.gov.by/sbornik/Mediasfera_Belarusi.pdf).

[33] “Анализ Рынка IT в Беларуси.” 2017. Агентство интернет-маркетинга «Кропа». <http://cropas.by/content-marketing/analiz-rynka-it-v-belarusi/>.

[34] Ibid.

[35] “ТВ vs Интернет: Агентство Optimum BY исследовало частоту просмотра телевизора и интернет-активности среди белорусов.” 2017. Marketing by <http://bit.ly/2GoSgaT>.

[36] Белорусские средства массовой информации: количественный анализ.

to note that this kind of information is more popular among older people (and particularly among those aged 60 years and older).<sup>[37]</sup>

According to the survey conducted by SATIO, the most popular news website in Belarus is a Belarusian privately-owned portal, *TUT.by*, with 39 % of respondents having declared they use it as a source of information. It is followed by the privately-owned Belarusian portal *Onliner.by* (21.9 %) and Russian portals *News.mail.ru* (18.5 %) and *News.yandex.by* (14 %).<sup>[38]</sup> The SATIO survey heavily underestimates the popularity of the Belarusian independent portal *Charter97.org*, whose editorial staff relocated abroad in 2010 due to repression by the Belarusian authorities. According to this survey, *Charter97*'s audience equals 2.2 % of the population. This data contradicts information from other sources. According to the figures provided by the SimilarWeb.com platform, *Charter97*'s popularity exceeds that of the abovementioned Russian portals.<sup>[39]</sup> Therefore, *Charter97* should also be listed among the top five news websites in Belarus. Although the majority of Belarusian respondents did not mention independent national websites (*TUT.by*, *Onliner.by*, *Charter97.org*, *NN.by* and others) as a primary source of information, their combined audience in Belarus is close to 50 % of the population.<sup>[40]</sup>

The presence of Russian media in Belarusian internet usage is below that of TV. They are represented mainly by the Belarusian versions of *Yandex.ru* and *Mail.ru* portals, which aggregate news from Belarusian and Russian media sources. The participants of the SATIO survey mention the *Lenta.ru* portal among other popular Russian media outlets in Belarus.<sup>[41]</sup> It covers events in the West and Russia's 'near abroad' from a pro-Kremlin position.

The *Lenta.ru* audience in Belarus is several times smaller than that of the *TUT.by* or *Onliner.by* portals, but is far from being insignificant. In October 2017, this website had 5 million visits from Belarus,<sup>[42]</sup> which exceeds the popularity of the independent online newspaper *Naša Niva* (*NN.by*) and the state-owned news agency *BelTA* (*Belta.by*), listed among the three top-10 Belarusian news websites.<sup>[43]</sup> Another Russian media source, *Sputnik*.

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[37] Медиафера Беларусі: Соцыялагічны аспект.

[38] Беларускія сродкі масавай інфармацыі: кольцавы аналіз.

[39] SimilarWeb statistics. <https://www.similarweb.com/website/charter97.org>.

[40] Беларускія сродкі масавай інфармацыі: кольцавы аналіз.

[41] Ibid.

[42] SimilarWeb statistics. <https://www.similarweb.com/website/lenta.ru>.

[43] "Рэйтынг наведвальнасці беларускіх інфармацыйных сайтаў у кастрычніку" 2017. Наша Ніва. <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=200153>.

*by*, launched at the end of 2014, is actively promoted by the *Yandex.by* and *News.mail.ru* portals. Thanks to referrals from these portals, in October 2017, *Sputnik.by* reached 1.5 million visits from Belarus. However, with 2.78 million page views per month, it has not yet reached the top 10 most popular Belarusian news websites.<sup>[44]</sup>

Some experts we have spoken to are worried about the growing popularity of this portal. One of the respondents stated the following:

*‘Currently, Sputnik operates as a news agency. Belarusian authorities invite its journalists to official events. At the same time, they do not extend such invitations to, for instance, the Belarusian independent agency BelaPAN. Sometimes, Sputnik is the only source of government information(!). Its journalists attend an even bigger number of official events than BelTA [Belarusian Telegraph Agency]. I have the impression that some official institutions give Sputnik more exclusive information than they provide to any genuine Belarusian media outlet.’<sup>[45]</sup>*

The Russian information presence in Belarusian internet consumption is far from negligible due to the high popularity of Russian social networks. About 2.8 million Belarusians (56 % of all internet users in the country) use social networks at least once a day.<sup>[46]</sup> At the end of 2015, the most popular social networks in Belarus were Russian *Vkontakte* (vk.com) and *Odnoklassniki* (ok.ru), with 32.3 % and 30.2 %, respectively, of adult users. The Facebook audience in Belarus was half that (14.9 %).<sup>[47]</sup>

*Vkontakte* is more popular among the young male population (aged 16–30) living in cities while *Odnoklassniki* is preferred by an older audience, especially women residing in small towns and rural areas.<sup>[48]</sup> However, in recent years the usage of *Odnoklassniki* in Belarus has grown among younger social groups and people living in big cities.<sup>[49]</sup>

In Belarus, there have been no academic studies focused on the groups disseminating pro-Kremlin messages on social networks. Some of these groups on *Vkontakte*, for instance, *Slavianskiy virtualnyi klub* (Slavic Virtual

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[44] SimilarWeb statistics. <https://www.similarweb.com/website/sputnik.by#overview>.

[45] Anonymous informant, a Belarusian radio station. August 2017. In-depth interview.

[46] “Анализ рынка IT в Беларуси.” 2017. Агентство интернет-маркетинга «Кропас». <http://cropas.by/content-marketing/analiz-rynka-it-v-belarusi/>.

[47] Белорусские средства массовой информации: количественный анализ.

[48] Медиафера Беларуси: Социологический аспект.

[49] “Что ждать от «Одноклассников»? Особенности белорусской аудитории в цифрах и графиках.” 2017. Marketing by <http://bit.ly/2GouYlq/>.

Club), *Za npravstvennost i sotsialnuyu spravedlivost* (For Morality and Social Justice), and *Etu stranu ne pobedit* (This Country is Invincible), have between 7 000 and 70 000 members from Belarus. According to calculations made by Belarusian bloggers, these groups are more popular in the eastern regions of the country.<sup>[50]</sup>

Then there is the activity of so-called “Kremlin trolls” on online message boards. The chief moderator of the *talks.by* forums for the largest Belarusian web portal, *TUT.by*, recently stated that coordinated groups of politically engaged commentators from Russia are permanently present on their forum.<sup>[51]</sup> The increased activity of “Kremlin trolls” in Belarus was also noted by Freedom House in its latest “Freedom of the Net” report.<sup>[52]</sup> Therefore, one should not underestimate the capacity of the Russian government to spread misleading information in Belarus via social media and online message boards.

The role of print media in the Belarusian information space is continuously decreasing. This source is in demand among people older than 45 with a lower income and living in rural areas.<sup>[53]</sup> The most popular print media in Belarus are Belarusian versions of large Russian newspapers *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi* (readership is 15.1 % of the population) and *Argumenty i Fakty* (10.2 %),<sup>[54]</sup> as well as the Belarusian state-owned newspapers *SB-Belarus Segodnia* (14.9 %), *Respublika* (4.5 %), and *Narodnaja Hazieta* (2.7 %).<sup>[55]</sup> The interviewees did not perceive the Belarusian versions of Russian periodicals as actively transmitting Kremlin political narratives. They argue that the editorial staff of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Argumenty i Fakty* have large autonomy in creating content. For instance, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi*, while covering the war in Donbas, uses publications from *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine*. *Argumenty i Fakty* abstains from publishing the most biased articles from the Russian version of the newspaper and supports projects promoting the use of Belarusian language.

Public institutions in Belarus (schools, hospitals, police, army, etc.) as well as their employees are mandated to purchase subscriptions to Belarusian

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[50] MaksimStefanov1.Twitter. <https://twitter.com/maksimstefanov1/status/906492788291895297>.

[51] Дракахруст, Юры. 2017. “Як форумцы TUT.BY перавыхавалі «ольгінскіх» троляў.” Радыё Свабода. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/28856122.html>.

[52] Freedom House. (2017). Freedom on the Net. Belarus Country Profile. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/belarus>.

[53] Белорусские средства массовой информации: количественный анализ.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

state-owned periodicals. Such periodicals include both specialised branch newspapers and journals (e.g., *Meditsinskaya Gazeta* (Medical Newspaper) for medical staff and *Nastaunickaja Hazieta* (Teacher's Newspaper) for school teachers) as well as the main state-owned political newspapers. Hence, the large subscription volume to state-owned periodicals does not reflect their popularity. The figures provided by social surveys seem to give a much more useful picture of the influence of print media on Belarusian society.

Radio is the least popular media source, with about 30 % of Belarusians tuned in. However, the number of listeners may vary significantly depending on the locality. Nationwide, the most popular radio stations include the state-owned *Radius-FM* (10.3 %) and the *First National Channel of Belarusian Radio* (7.6 %), as well as the private *Radio Roks* (10.7 %), *Pilot FM* (5.7 %), and *Russkoye Radio* (5.3 %). Only one of these radio broadcasters (First National Channel) covers political, social, and economic topics. The rest are focused on entertainment. It is important to note that Belarusian FM radio stations in their news programmes are supposed to distribute information provided by the state-owned news agencies and are not allowed to broadcast information published by independent media. In 2015, it was reported that a *Radio Unistar* presenter was fired for occasionally airing news from the privately owned news agency *BelaPAN*.<sup>[56]</sup>

## LEGAL REGULATIONS

Belarus' Mass Media Law does not mention the concept of information security. The main legal document providing the definition of this notion is the National Security Concept of the Republic of Belarus adopted on November 9, 2010.<sup>[57]</sup> Chapter 1 Article 4 of the document specifies various types of security, including information security, which is "the condition when balanced interests of an individual, society, and state are safe from external and internal threats in the information sphere". Chapter 2 Article 14 states that the main national interests in the field of information security are:

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[56] "Вядоўцу радыё Unistar звольнілі за навіны з незалежнага інфармагенцтва." 2015. ЕўРАРАДЫЁ.  
<https://euroradio.fm/vyadoucu-radyyo-unistar-zvolnili-za-naviny-z-nezalezhnaga-infarmagenctva>.

[57] Концепция национальной безопасности Республики Беларусь, Указ Президента Республики Беларусь 9 ноября 2010 г. №575.  
<http://mvd.gov.by/ru/main.aspx?guid=14961>.

- Realization of the constitutional rights of citizens to receive, store and disseminate complete, credible, and timely information;
- formation and gradual evolvement of an information society;
- equal participation of the Republic of Belarus in the world's information affairs;
- transformation of the information industry into an export-oriented branch of the economy;
- efficient information support of state policy; and,
- securing the credibility and reliability of crucial information objects.

Chapter 4 Article 27 of the concept mentions the destructive impact of information on the individual, society, and state institutions among the main threats to national security.

In addition, Articles 34 and 42 of the concept also recite internal and external sources of threats to information security as follows:

- Dependence of the Republic of Belarus on the import of information technologies, means of relaying information and information security, and uncontrolled usage in the systems' destruction or failure, which may harm national security (Article 34);
- the quality of national information content falls short of global standards (Article 34);
- ineffective maintenance of information about state policy (Article 34);
- openness and vulnerability of the Belarusian information space to external influence (Article 42);
- domination of the leading foreign states in the global information space, monopolisation of key segments of information markets by foreign information structures (Article 42);
- information activities of foreign states, international or other organisations, and persons who undermine the national interest of the Republic of Belarus; targeted development of information aiming at discrediting the state (Article 42);
- intensification of confrontation over information between leading foreign actors, preparation for and the conduct of information warfare (Article 42); and,

- the development of technologies on information manipulation (Article 42).

The very fact that the regulations on information security are an integral part of one of the key legal documents of the Republic of Belarus—the National Security Concept—stresses its importance in the internal and external policy of the Belarusian state. Other binding legal documents in Belarus specify different aspects of the freedom of speech and the functioning of mass media in the country.

Article 33 of the Belarusian constitution guarantees the freedom of thought and belief and free expression. In addition, Art. 33 proclaims that ‘no one shall be forced to express one’s beliefs or to deny them. No monopolisation of mass media by the state, public associations or individual citizens, and no censorship shall be permitted.’<sup>[58]</sup>

Despite that, the Belarusian legal framework challenges freedom of expression and press and does little to prevent the monopolisation of media in Belarus. Thus, Article 6 of the Mass Media Law does not define real anti-monopolisation mechanisms in the mass-media sphere.<sup>[59]</sup> The Belarusian Criminal Code contains provisions on insult, defamation, and libel.<sup>[60]</sup> Since 2014, online media in Belarus have the same obligations and restrictions as traditional media, except for mandatory registration.

In addition, the Ministry of Information enjoys wide discretionary powers to limit access to internet outlets without a court decision.<sup>[61]</sup> For instance, in January 2017, the ministry limited access to the Russian web portal Sputnik i Pogrom in Belarus, arguing that the materials published there contained extremist views and aimed at stirring up national hatred, which is forbidden according to Article 38 of the Mass Media Law.

However, such practices are especially popular during periods of mass protest<sup>[62]</sup> and are often aimed against independent media. The ministry can also issue warnings to internet blogs and demand authors delete

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[58] “Civic Freedom Monitor: Belarus.” 2017. The International Center for Non-for-Profit Law. <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/belarus.html>.

[59] Агеев, Олег, Андрей Бастунец, Павел Быковский, Александр Жук, Алексей Криволап, Ольга Сехович, and Михаил Янчук. 2016. “Модернизация медийного законодательства Республики Беларуси в сфере защиты национального информационного пространства.” Минск: Беларуский институт стратегических исследований. [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_SA05\\_2016ru.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_SA05_2016ru.pdf).

[60] OSCE/ODIHR (2016). 2016 Parliamentary Elections in Belarus. Final Report. <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/287486>.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Закон Республики Беларусь “О средствах массовой информации,” 17 июля 2008 г. № 427-3. <http://www.pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&po=H10800427>. Most recent instances occurred during social protests in spring 2017 when Charter-97 and Belarusian Partisan were blocked. <http://spring96.org/be/news/86301>.

specific information, including comments containing alleged false information and can eventually block web pages or blogs.<sup>[63]</sup>

Another common practice is to replace certain Russian TV channel programmes with Belarusian content (see ‘Media Landscape’ for additional details on ‘hybrid’ channels) depending on the current censorship needs. For example, an infamous TV report, ‘A Call to a Friend’, which was shown to discredit those accused in Patriots’ Case’ – former members of the dissolved ‘White Legion’ patriotic organisation – was broadcast instead of a very popular humour TV show KVN (Club of Funny and Inventive People, in English).

A recent dispute between Belarusian journalist Hleb Labadzienka and a petrol station operator in the Minsk region, where the Rossiya-24 channel was being broadcast,<sup>[64]</sup> revealed important facts concerning television regulation in Belarus. The Ministry of Information is in charge of a special register of foreign channels (204 channels as of December 12, 2017)<sup>[65]</sup> that can be broadcast in public spaces in Belarus. But to have the right to show one of these channels in public, the legal entity has to be among those included in the special register.<sup>[66]</sup> Therefore, businesses like cafeterias or petrol stations are only allowed to show nine compulsory, generally available TV channels defined in the Council of Ministers Resolution adopted on May 13, 2015.<sup>[67]</sup> It also turned out that channels such as Rossiya-24 or REN-TV, known for their pro-Kremlin stance, are not among the foreign channels allowed in public spaces in Belarus. However they can be watched at home on satellite.

According to earlier research, legal regulation of the media sphere allows the Belarusian authorities to limit the spread of any undesirable information. They enumerate a dozen measures that allow the government to isolate the national information space. These instruments include:

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[63] См. Заявление Министерства информации относительно блокировки сайтов: Информационные сайты приравнили к СМИ. Депутаты в двух чтениях приняли поправки в закон о СМИ. 2014. <https://news.tut.by/society/428267.html>.

[64] Паварот у канфлікце Лабадзенкі і ўладальніка АЗС: тэлеканал «Россия 24» увогуле нельга трансляваць у Беларусі. 2016. <https://baj.by/be/content/pavarot-u-kanflikce-labadzenki-i-uladalnika-azs-telekanal-rossiya-24-uvogule-nelga>.

[65] Список иностранных средств массовой информации, получивших разрешение. 2017. (The list of licensed foreign media). <http://www.mininform.gov.by/ru/channels-ru/>.

[66] Паварот у канфлікце Лабадзенкі і ўладальніка АЗС.

[67] Перечень телепрограмм, входящих в обязательный общедоступный пакет телепрограмм, Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь 13.05.2015 № 407. [http://www.pravo.by/upload/docs/op/C21500407\\_1431723600.pdf](http://www.pravo.by/upload/docs/op/C21500407_1431723600.pdf).



- a requirement to register both domestic and foreign media outlets to obtain broadcasting licenses from the Ministry of Information;
- prohibition on foreigners establishing media outlets in the country (only possible in cooperation with Belarusian entities);
- prohibition on Belarusian and foreign citizens working for foreign media without accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and,
- the right of the Ministry of Information to request a court close down a print media outlet following two official warnings.<sup>[68]</sup>

As the head of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, Andrei Bastuniec, stressed:

*'Belarusian laws allow for the silencing of any media and for jamming any flow of information, both from within the country and abroad. These regulations are used very arbitrarily. They are applied only when the government wants to punish its opponents. Usually those are media that promote pro-European democratic values. We do not see many cases when they are applied against broadly understood pro-Kremlin forces.'*<sup>[69]</sup>

In the past 20 years, the Belarusian authorities have used these tools mainly against domestic mass media critical of the government. However, the execution of such measures against major foreign media companies may cause significant political problems. Furthermore, the experts believe that shutting down foreign TV channels and blocking websites will not protect Belarusian society from the influence of foreign propaganda and disinformation.

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[68] Агеев, О., Бастунец, А., Быковский, П., Жук, А., Криволап, А., Сехович, О., Янчук, М. 2016.

[69] Andrei Bastuniec, Belarusian Association of Journalists. August 28, 2017. In-depth interview.

# INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

According to one of the experts we spoke to, there are three main state bodies responsible for interaction with Belarusian media: the Operational Analytical Centre<sup>[70]</sup> the Presidential Administration,<sup>[71]</sup> and the Ministry of Information.<sup>[72]</sup>

In April 2008, President Lukashenka decreed the establishment of the Operational Analytical Centre (OAC) affiliated to the Belarusian president.<sup>[73]</sup> It superseded the State Centre for Information Security, also affiliated to the president and charged with the protection of classified information and the registration of websites to the by top-level domain.

OAC activities include the elaboration of standards in information security, monitoring of new developments in the field, control of crucial spheres of public life, and informing the president about its findings on a regular basis with a special emphasis on information security. As Lukashenka acknowledged in 2013, the fact that the centre was controlled by his eldest son, Viktor Lukashenka, demonstrated the significance of this state body.<sup>[74]</sup> In practice, one of the centre's main tasks is monitoring the Belarusian internet, including online media. In collaboration with the Ministry of Information, the OAC regularly drafts laws and regulations restricting access to various internet sources.<sup>[75]</sup>

As one of the experts we spoke to stated, the Presidential Administration also plays an informal role in controlling and monitoring Belarusian state media. This state organ embodies three main functions related to state-owned mass media:

1. implementation of personnel policy, thus directly influencing the allocation of key job positions within state media;

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[70] Оперативно-аналитический центр при президенте Республики Беларусь. <http://oac.gov.by/>.

[71] Администрация Президента Республики Беларусь. [http://president.gov.by/ru/administration\\_ru](http://president.gov.by/ru/administration_ru).

[72] Министерство информации Республики Беларусь. <http://www.mininform.gov.by/ru/>.

[73] Оперативно-аналитический центр при президенте Республики Беларусь. История. 2018. <http://oac.gov.by/info/history.html>.

[74] "Лукашенко: ОАЦ контролирует мой старший сын. И по закону ему подконтрольна верхушка спецслужб" 2013. TUT.by. <https://news.tut.by/politics/353683.html>.

[75] Агеев, О., Бастунец, А., Быковский, П., Жук, А., Криволап, А., Сехович, О., Янчук, М. 2016.

2. realisation of ideological policy through weekly meetings with the editors of the main state media outlets; and,
3. direct subordination of chief editors to the Presidential Administration on an ad hoc basis.

Finally, the main duties of the Ministry of Information include the direct oversight of several state-owned media outlets and the monitoring of the rest of the national media. The ministry applies punitive actions against media deemed too critical of the authorities. This state body rarely takes the initiative on its own but rather executes orders given by the Presidential Administration, and thus primarily carries out the role of a supervisor.

On November 16, 2017, Lukashenka signed Decree No. 413 “On the Inter-Agency Commission on Security in the Information Field”.<sup>[76]</sup> The official commentary to the decree stated that the commission was established to increase the effectiveness of the subjects dealing with the provision of security in the information field and will enable the Belarusian state to elaborate legislation on information security in a more timely manner.<sup>[77]</sup> State Secretary of the Belarusian Security Council Stanislau Zas was appointed the chair of the Commission. He was joined by other security officials and representatives of the Presidential Administration and state-run media, and the Minister of Information.<sup>[78]</sup>

The creation of an inter-agency state body dealing with information security and composed of high-ranking officials shows that the Belarusian authorities take the issue of information security very seriously. The fact that only a few people representing media were included (none from independent outlets) revealed the reluctance of the Belarusian government to share the responsibilities in the information security sphere with mass media and the lack of understanding regarding how important cooperation between mass media and the state apparatus is on this matter.

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[76] Положение “О Межведомственной комиссии по безопасности в информационной сфере,” № 413 Указ Президента Республики Беларусь. 2017. <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=200736>.

[77] Комментарий к Указу № 413 от 16 ноября 2017 г. 2017. [Официальный интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь]. [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/kommentarij-k-ukazu-413-ot-16-nojabrja-2017-g-17483/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/kommentarij-k-ukazu-413-ot-16-nojabrja-2017-g-17483/).

[78] Namely, two deputy heads of the Security Council, Uladzimir Archakau and Aleh Makarau, Maksim Ryzhankou from the Presidential Administration, the president’s press secretary Natallia Eysmant, director of the Ideological Department of the Presidential Administration Aliaksandr Iliasevich, head of Belarusian KGB Valery Vakulchyk, Defence Minister Andrei Raoukou, Minister of Internal Affairs Ihar Shunevich, Investigation Committee deputy head Siarhei Azemsha, editor-in-chief of the editorial board of the official state-run newspapers Pavel Yakubovich, ONT head Marat Markau, and Minister of Information Aliaksandr Karliukevich.

Hence, information security remains a sphere monopolised by the state where no external actors, such as independent journalists or associations, are welcome. Thus, together with the restrictive measures specified in Belarusian legislation, state bodies in Belarus play a rather restrictive role when monitoring and controlling the local media landscape. The declared partnership is putative and demonstrates the reluctance for cooperation.

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

A Belarusian media expert interviewed by us listed media analyses conducted by the EAST Center<sup>[79]</sup> and the recent series of articles on the **1863x.com** website headed by Eduard Palchys<sup>[80]</sup> as the main resources for information debunking. In 2016–2017, the EAST Center also contributed to the EU Strategic communication project *euvsdinfo.eu* covering Belarus.

In addition to that, Belarusian media such as *Naša Niva* (e.g., debunked the alleged rape of a girl by Russian soldiers in Homiel during the **Zapad 2017** military exercises)<sup>[81]</sup> and Belarusian *Radyjo Svaboda* (RFE/RL) occasionally publish investigative reports aimed at demystifying Kremlin-produced disinformation, thus partially filling the fact-checking niche in Belarus.

The Belarusian version of the *InformNapalm* initiative lead by Dzianis Ivašyn<sup>[82]</sup> is rather part of the ‘International Intelligence Community’ as they call themselves than a debunking service, and is focused mainly on Ukraine. The quality of fact-checking depends on the qualifications of the journalists. Even some employees of large independent media outlets do not possess a deep understanding of politics and believe Kremlin propaganda. Some independent media may voluntarily spread fake news if it is aligned with their ideological views or helps them to gain more clicks, i.e., popularity and ratings. In such a way, they

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[79] Yeliseyeu, Andrei, and Veranika Laputka. 2016. “Anti-Belarus Disinformation Campaign in Russian Media: Trends, Features, Countermeasures.” EAST Center. Eurasian States in Transition. <http://east-center.org/media-analysis/>.

[80] 1863x. <http://1863x.com/>.

[81] “Міліцыя: Мы праводзім праверку па факце фэйкавых паведамленняў ад імя гомельскага УУС.” 2017. Наша Ніва. <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=197600>.

[82] InformNapalm. <https://informnapalm.org/by/>

may assist the Kremlin in spreading panic (e.g., a recent report that armed Russian soldiers without insignia were spotted in a tram in Vitebsk).<sup>[83]</sup>

## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

Although international and foreign foundations and organisations carry out sporadic training on media literacy for various population groups, only a few Belarusian associations conduct regular systematic workshops or professional courses focused on journalists.

According to one of our interviewees, there are two main Belarusian initiatives that fulfill such a role on a regular basis. First, the Belarusian Association of Journalists organises regular workshops on fact-checking practices for journalists. They also have projects aimed at the development of data journalism. Second, Press Club Belarus runs the *School of Digital Management* for journalists, which combines offline and online courses.<sup>[84]</sup> In addition to that, the Press Club often holds various ad hoc meetings on topics related to media literacy and the development of high-quality reporting skills.<sup>[85]</sup> These two projects have served to increase media literacy, but only among the independent journalist community. This leaves not only journalists of state-run media outlets but the vast majority of Belarusian society prone to disinformation and distorted news.

A number of foreign institutions also have schools or offer training promoting media literacy and related skills among Belarusian journalists. One of them is *Transitions Online*, based in the Czech Republic, which organises regular training in media literacy in collaboration with the *Linking Media* foundation registered in Poland. They carry out numerous projects for transition countries, including Belarus, aimed at promoting data-verification skills among journalists as well as courses on infographics.

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[83] “Фотафакт: „Зялёныя чалавечкі” ў Віцебску.” 2017. <https://www.racyja.com/hramadstva/fotafakt-zyalyonyya-chalavechki-u-vitsebsk/>.

[84] “Digital Journalism Course for Eastern Europe Journalists.” 2016. Press Club Belarus. <https://press-club.by/magchymasci/digital-journalism-course-for-eastern-europe-journalists>.

[85] Канспекты. 2018. Retrieved from: <https://press-club.by/kanspekty>.

The Centre for Media Studies at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga and the Human Rights House in Vilnius carry out occasional training sessions for Belarusian journalists. In addition to that, European and American funds, as well as international organisations that focus on Belarus in their various projects, organise workshops covering media literacy projects on an ad hoc basis.

In 2016, the most popular Belarusian online news portal, *TUT.by*, in collaboration with a portal for professional journalism, *mediakritika.by*, translated a Ukrainian version of the game *Mediaznayka*.<sup>[86]</sup> The game was initially created by the Armenian Media Initiatives Centre and then distributed in Ukraine. It explains basic topics related to mass media such as what is news, types of mass media, freedom of speech, and others in a form of game and was designed as a media-education initiative for youth. *Mediaznayka* is a unique initiative, as the Belarusian state has not initiated any media literacy education programmes for the younger population.

The authorities do not seem to be willing to educate the population in the media sphere, which can be proved by the fact that they often spread fake news themselves, as in the so-called ‘Patriots’ Case’<sup>[87]</sup> and a series of related ‘reports’ and a ‘documentary’ by the state-run networks and publications aimed at discrediting ex-members of the ‘White Legion’ organisation.

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[86] “Попробуй себя в роли журналиста. TUT.BY и ‘Медиакритика’ представляют обучающую онлайн-игру”. 2016. TUT.by. <https://news.tut.by/society/505540.html>.

[87] The so-called “Patriots’ case” involved charges against 35 people who had been active in the “White Legion” organisation (which conducted sports activities and paramilitary boot camps in the 1990s and had ceased activities in the 2000s) and the “Young Front” organisation. Some of them were released by the beginning of May 2017, while others were charged with the organisation of an illegal armed formation. The remaining suspects were released from custody before July 1, 2017, with a ban on leaving the country until the trial had ended.

The case was initiated at the time of large social unrest in winter-spring 2017 caused by the so-called “tax for social parasites” that spread all over Belarus. One of the reasons to set up the case was to blame the protests on “young radicals” instead of a general public dissatisfied with the economic situation in the country.

Additionally, several people who had organised a protest against the construction of an office building near Kurapaty (a Stalin-era mass execution and burial site of victims of the regime) were arrested, too. In this way, the Belarusian regime tried to solve two issues with the same method. The case was suspended at the end of November 2017. See Laputskaya, V. The condition of NGOs and civil society in Belarus. Policy Brief. 2017. Bertelsmann Stiftung / Institute of Public Affairs.

<https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/ngos-and-civil-society-in-belarus>.

Справа «Белага легіёну» спыненая, – Следчы камітэт. 2017. Радыё Свабода. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/28887815.html>.

In the materials were shown weapons allegedly confiscated from the accused. State-owned mass media assured the audience that the case involving the military group had been solved. For instance, one of BelTA's articles was titled "Terrorists staging a provocation detained in Belarus",<sup>[88]</sup> while the newspaper SB-Belarus Segodnia stated that 'the investigation is establishing facts which point to a very secret organisation with a rigid hierarchy, strict discipline, members united on the basis of ideology, and possessing weapons'.<sup>[89]</sup> Later, investigators found no evidence to confirm these accusations and the criminal prosecution of all those arrested in relation to the case was stopped on November 27, 2017. Nevertheless, no refutation or apology by state media followed.

One more interesting case of a questionable message reported by Belarusian state-owned media was about an alleged attempt of by people with weapons in an SUV to break through the Ukrainian-Belarusian border on March 20, 2017. Two individuals present in the car were allegedly detained. The Ukrainian border control did not confirm this information and Belarusian officials did not reveal any further details, including the names of the detainees or any other details pertinent to the case.<sup>[90]</sup>

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Thus, the Belarusian state might not be interested in the promotion of media literacy among the Belarusian general public as long as it serves its own interests.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our research shows that Belarus is highly vulnerable to messages spread by Kremlin-controlled media, whether through traditional or digital outlets. Most of the experts we interviewed argue that Belarus is "totally dependent" on Russia in this sphere. Russian TV channels are the main source of information for more than 40% of the Belarusian population. Around two-thirds of all the content, including entertainment, news,

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[88] Матвеев, В. В Беларуси задержали готовивших провокацию с оружием боевиков. 2017. БелТА. <http://www.belta.by/president/view/v-belarusi-zaderzhali-gotovivshih-provokatsiju-s-oruzhiem-boevikov-238543-2017/>.

[89] Имя им – легион. 2017. СБ-Беларусь Сегодня. <https://www.sb.by/articles/imya-im-legion-11042017.html>.

[90] Пилецкий, А. 2017. Куда девался джип с оружием, который прорывался на белорусской границе Еврорадио. <https://euroradio.fm/ru/kuda-devalsya-dzhip-s-oruzhiem-kotoryy-proryvalsya-na-belorusskoy-granice>.

and political shows, broadcast by Belarusian radio stations and TV channels are produced in Russia. Furthermore, around three-quarters of Belarusians at least partially trust Russian media.

The national mass media, which could potentially act as a counterweight to the influence of Russian information, face numerous obstacles. Independent outlets are constrained by limitations on freedom of speech and confronted with various obstacles in access to information. The interviewed experts also stress that Belarusian independent media lack commentators and journalists specialised in a variety of issues (e.g., on trade, the energy market, military, etc.). Consequently, Belarusian journalists are unable to quickly react to information produced by Russian media. Experts from academia, official institutions, and even private firms are reluctant to talk to independent reporters due to political concerns, whereas experts from civil society often lack relevant expertise.

Belarusian media outlets are far from functioning as self-sustaining enterprises. While state-owned media rely on government subsidies, the financing of independent outlets is often based on foreign grants, which have somewhat diminished in recent years due to geopolitical changes in Eastern Europe. Private businesses, however, remain reluctant to invest in media due to the uncertainty of profit and affiliated political risks.

The Belarusian authorities have developed a range of regulation restricting freedom of the press. They have built a centralised hierarchical system of institutions headed by the Presidential Administration, which secure state propaganda and control over the media sphere. For many years, this system has efficiently served the interests of the current political regime. Recently, the Belarusian authorities realized the high level of Russia-related information threats and have turned to a gradual reduction of the share of Kremlin-produced political content in the national media sphere. However, the proportion of Russian media content in the Belarusian media remains enormous.

The share of Russia-originated publications is lower in the internet. However, Russian news aggregators *Yandex* and *Mail.ru* play a significant agenda-setting role for more than 30 % of Belarusian internet users. Moreover, Belarusian portals are primarily focused on domestic issues. When they cover international events, they largely rely on Russian sources. A substantial population exposure to the online information warfare also comes from social



media. The audience of each of the Russian social networks in Belarus (*Vkontakte* and *Odnoklassniki*) is more than twice that of Facebook.

Economic, linguistic, and cultural policies carried out by the Belarusian authorities in the last two decades have made all of Belarusian society very vulnerable to the messages spread by Russian media. However, particular attention should be paid to groups that consume Russian information products more actively, are culturally predisposed to the messages spread by the Kremlin, and whose economic situation has worsened in recent years. Such groups include the military, the retired, unemployed, workers in economically depressed state-owned enterprises, and small business owners or entrepreneurs struggling with financial difficulties, as well as active Russian Orthodox Church believers. The influence of Russian media is also higher in the eastern regions of Belarus bordering Russia.

There are three main state bodies responsible for interaction with Belarusian media: the Operational Analytical Centre, Presidential Administration, and the Belarusian Ministry of Information. The latter has wide authority to punish media outlets for spreading supposedly misleading messages. However, this ministry is primarily focused not on fighting foreign disinformation but on controlling domestic ideological opponents, i.e., non-government-controlled traditional and digital media. Experts interviewed by us questioned the ability of the Belarusian state apparatus to react quickly to present-day information threats from abroad. Interestingly and very recently, in mid-November 2017 the inter-agency state body dealing with information security was created. It remains to be seen how effective it will face the challenges in this respective field.

Belarusian media self-regulation mechanisms are rather ineffective in countering disinformation. There are two associations of journalists, one is state-supported and the other affiliated with the European Federation of Journalists, but neither of their Commissions on Ethics play a significant regulatory role. Media literacy projects are rather infrequent and fact-checking initiatives are in their early stages of formation in Belarus.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

It is not an easy task to make recommendations on how to become more resilient to Kremlin-led disinformation for a country like Belarus, where the freedoms of press and speech are restricted and the influence of Russian media is high. Nevertheless, the study proposes the following recommendations.

## **To the Belarusian authorities and relevant state bodies:**

1. To considerably diversify and broaden the sources of media products available to the Belarusian population. This can be achieved through a comprehensive set of measures including:
  - a) to amend the Council of Ministers' resolution regarding the register of mandatory public television program packaging. TV channels originating in neighbouring countries other than Russia should be added, either unmodified or as new 'hybrid' TV channels, which would include domestically produced content combined with original content. In its current form, the list of nine generally available channels is largely predisposed towards one foreign state. Three out of nine publicly accessible networks clearly belong to the category of so-called 'hybrids' (ONT, RTR-Belarus, and NTV-Belarus) with a prevalence of Russian content, both entertainment and news. Yet another channel on the list (STV), although nominally a national one, can also be regarded as a 'hybrid' considering the large share of Russian REN-TV content re-broadcast by STV on a daily basis. Furthermore, the Mir TV channel was jointly set up by ten post-Soviet countries to cover the events in the CIS states;
  - b) to introduce regulations instructing all cable TV providers to offer in their packages a minimum percentage of TV channels (for instance, at least 30 %) that do not originate in Russia. Furthermore, these TV channels should not broadcast solely entertainment content. Currently, around 90 % of TV channels offered by the Belarusian cable TV providers originate in Russia. There are many foreign TV stations licensed for broadcasting in Belarus but they are normally not included in the cable packages. In addition to that, some of this programming can be broadcast in the original language, thus facilitating the development of foreign language skills among Belarusians;

- c) to systematically revise the Ministry of Information's register of foreign channels allowed to broadcast in Belarus, which would imply the removal of channels frequently disseminating unreliable, biased information and increasing the number of TV channels originating in neighbouring countries other than Russia (Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia). For this purpose, transparent benchmarks identifying foreign channels as transmitters of unreliable information should be established by the authorities in cooperation with local journalists (see Point 5 below);
  - d) to expand the share of Belarusian as well as non-Russia originated content in the programming of Belarusian TV channels. To become more appealing to the domestic audience and competitive, Belarusian TV needs larger investments, both in resources allocated to the creation of high-quality domestic content, purchasing, and dubbing of Western movies and TV series, or acquiring franchises for popular foreign entertainment programmes. This investment can be secured both by providing more public finances and from private sources (see Point 6).
2. To consider imposing limits on the broadcasting of foreign news programmes produced by the so-called 'hybrid' TV channels. The current process of 'hybrid' networks (ONT, NTV Belarus, RTR Belarus) is to follow the Russian news programmes with local Belarusian versions. The approach exercised by the 'hybrid' channels puts Belarusian domestic news in a situation where they are assigned lower priority by the viewers than the Russian ones. This already sends the domestic audience the wrong political message, not to mention contributes to the spread of Kremlin-led narratives and disinformation. State-owned TV channels have already attempted to limit Russia-originated politicised content (i.e., replacing the show of Russian journalist Vladimir Solovyev on RTR-Belarus and the *Vremya pokazhet* talk show on ONT), but further steps are needed.
  3. To scrutinise the content of the national TV channels to prevent them from retransmitting dubious content from foreign channels not included in the registry of foreign TV stations. Otherwise, the very rationale for the existence of this document is compromised. For example, the register of foreign TV channels allowed for broadcasting in Belarus does not contain *REN-TV*. At the same time, a large share of the programming of the national STV channel is currently composed of *REN-TV* content,

including such TV shows as *Military Secret with Igor Prokopenko*, *Chapman's Secrets*, *Russians Do Not Surrender: Special-Purpose Weapons*, *Driving the Russian Way*, etc. This legal loophole should be immediately closed.

4. To increase efforts to promote Belarusian national identity and culture to serve as a shield against ubiquitous foreign narratives in national media. Although almost 60% of the Belarusian population has a very reluctant attitude towards the national language, the rest of society displays interest in Belarusian-language media content. Currently, the Belarus 3 TV network broadcasts mostly in Belarusian but its content is almost exclusively dedicated to culture. Broadcasting diverse programmes in Belarusian, be it national news, sports, fashion, health, or dubbed versions of popular foreign movies, should be expanded to all other national TV channels.

A larger share of appealing entertainment content in Belarusian would increase this language social status. For these reasons, as proposed by some experts interviewed during this research, a Belarusian-language TV channel for children could be set up and Belarusian franchises of world-known print and electronic media (National Geographic, Discovery Channel, Eurosport, etc.) can be developed.

5. To have a permanent genuine dialogue with the journalist community on the topic of information policy and related legislation in this field. This would increase the resilience of Belarusian society to hypothetical foreign information warfare. A number of experts we spoke to within this research advised to revitalise the Civic Coordination Council on the Media. Although the Council of Ministers 2008 decree says that the Council on the Media should convene at least once every quarter, it has met only a few times. The council should include more independent experts and representatives of non-state-controlled media, conduct regular meetings as stipulated in the legislation, and its activities should be reported by the Ministry of Information.
6. To liberalise the media market to make it more attractive for private investors. The development of advertising and media markets as such will increase the sustainability of Belarusian media outlets. If the authorities perceive deregulation and (at least partial) privatisation of the media market problematic for political reasons, they should at least promote competition between the state-owned and private media as well as between the various state-owned outlets. It will make Belarusian journalists more dynamic, professional, responsive to the demands

of the audience, and able to quickly react to the information threats coming from abroad.

7. To raise public awareness about the phenomenon of disinformation and increase media literacy among the Belarusian population. Fake news and disinformation is a serious public policy concern and should be addressed by a set of various measures, including:
  - a) creation of obligatory course for secondary schools and adding it to the school curriculum;
  - b) supporting discussions and training on the topic of media literacy given by specialised NGOs;
  - c) conducting educational seminars dedicated to media for state officials, including those working in regional administrations.

### **To the Belarusian journalist community:**

1. To develop fact-checking initiatives. Civic activists together with professional journalists should permanently monitor social networks and public groups in social media as well as message boards belonging to the largest national portals, such as TUT.by. With the help of special tools, debunking teams will identify trolls and coordinated efforts to spread unreliable and provocative materials on the web. An aggregated database of fake information should be created and the most important cases presented to the existing media and via channels on social media or YouTube.
2. To cover the dissemination of fake news to help address the issue. It is important for media to report on the most illustrative examples discovered by themselves or presented by fact-checking initiatives to increase societal awareness about this phenomenon.
3. To organise professional training sessions for individuals involved with media, to increase the awareness of Belarusian opinion-makers and society in general of the issues of fake news, trolls, bots, and propaganda. Media literacy classes for journalists should be organised by specialised NGOs where the effective ways of identification and debunking fake or unreliable information will be presented and relevant skills are trained. It is important to organise such training not only in Minsk but throughout the country to provide

access to this knowledge for regional journalists. Media literacy courses should be also conducted by NGO activists, especially those who regularly communicate through social networks.

4. To develop effective self-regulatory mechanisms and to promote initiatives aimed at raising professional standards. Several interviewees proposed to engage Belarusian journalists in peer review of their work and that of their colleagues and to evaluate their professional standards monthly using a special methodology and a ranking system. Such rankings will help readers and journalists to distinguish reliable and reputable media from unreliable ones. The rankings may be established in cooperation with existing media community platforms such as *Mediakritika.by*.

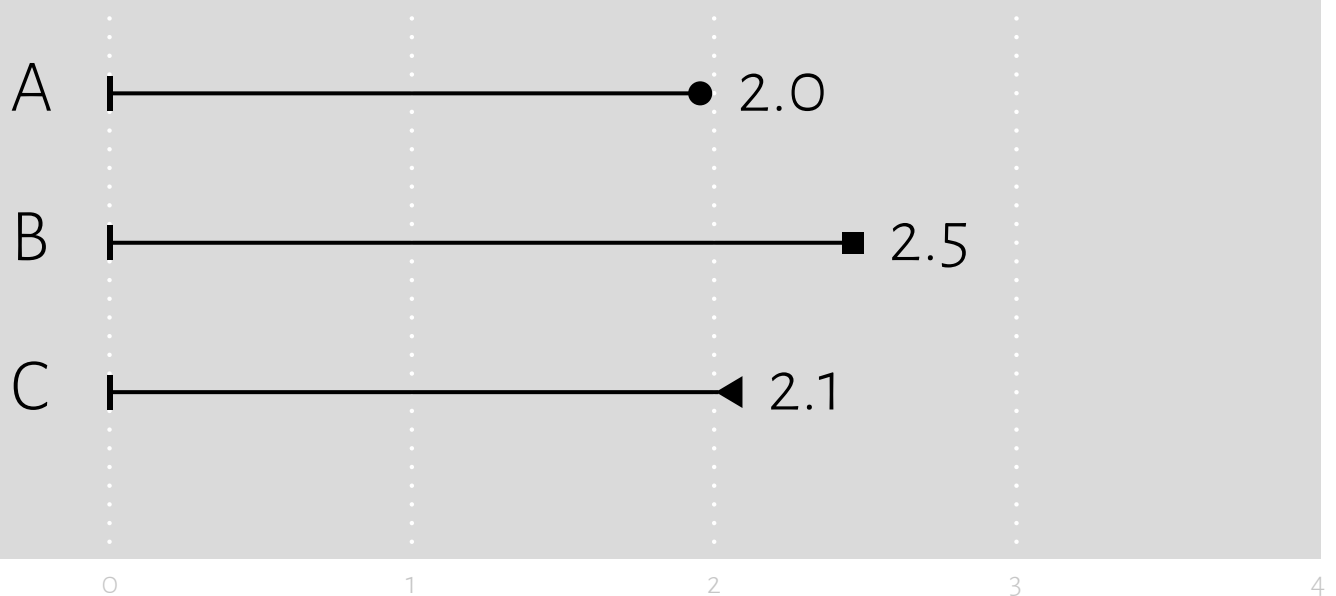
### **To the international organizations:**

1. To support Belarusian civic fact-checking initiatives and promotion of media-literacy programmes. Organisations such as the EU or UNDP could also engage Belarus in celebrating Safer Internet Day, which raises citizens' awareness about threats emanating from social networks.
2. To continue the support of independent media in Belarus. Otherwise, Belarus will find itself more vulnerable to the information threats of foreign origin. More funding should be directed to support investigative journalism and projects promoting Belarusian national culture and identity.

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# CZECH REPUBLIC



# INTRODUCTION

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Czechoslovak officials started the process of orienting the country's foreign policy towards the West. The stress was on building good relations with neighbouring countries, those in the EU and NATO. On January 1, 1993, the federation split, and the Czech Republic was established. During the 1990s and in the first decade of new millennium, official relations with Russia were mostly limited to declarations about the development of the relationship in the area of common interests between the two countries. Special attention has always been paid to bilateral relations in energy security policy, since Russia is the biggest supplier of gas to the Czech Republic.

There is a point of view that the act of the annexation of Crimea brought a certain dynamic to these mutual relations. A resolution approved by 121 out of 200 Czech deputies stated that the annexation of Crimea was recognised as an act of violence by the Russian Federation, breaching international law. This resulted in the Czech government's absolute refusal to officially recognise the Crimean referendum. The Czech Republic also officially supports the EU's sanctions policy towards Russia. This international security issue provoked debates and disputes in the Czech Republic. The position of parliament and government is clear. That is, to criticise the Agrarian Chamber businessmen and representatives in agriculture by pointing out that Czech companies have been dealing with complications due to decreasing prices and loss of access to foreign markets, as well as loss of investments spent on entering the Russian market before 2014.<sup>[1]</sup> Even though imports from and exports to Russia have decreased since the sanctions were imposed, statistics show that Czech foreign trade has risen overall, with Czech companies turning towards other markets.<sup>[2]</sup>

However, the pro-sanction policy has been undermined by Czech President Miloš Zeman. His official statements are considered contradictory, as he mentions that the economic sanctions are harming the economic interests of the Czech Republic. Another example is Zeman's position towards the annexation of Crimea. According to the president, although Russia violated international

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[1] ČTK. 2016. "Českým Zemědělcům Se Nelíbí Prodloužení Protiruských Sankcí". <http://www.investicniweb.cz/news-2016-6-21-komora-prodlouzenim-sankci-budou-postizeni-zemedelci/>.

[2] Český statistický úřad, "Database of Foreign Trade". <http://apl.czso.cz/pll/stazo/STAZO.STAZO>.



law, the return of Crimea to Ukraine is impossible.<sup>[3]</sup> In October 2017, Zeman repeated this statement at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, proposing that Russia compensate Ukraine for Crimea, either financially or with oil and gas.<sup>[4]</sup>

Since 2015, Russia has taken central place in Czech security debates. In the new Czech Security Strategy of 2015, it is mentioned that the Czech Republic is aware of the threat to security posed by some states seeking to change the existing international order. These states are ready to achieve their goals by using hybrid warfare strategies combining conventional and unconventional military means with non-military tools.<sup>[5]</sup> The Russian Federation is directly mentioned in the 2016 report as a state to be watched regarding the national security situation. The Russian propaganda and disinformation campaign is recognised as one of the top 10 threats to Czech internal security.<sup>[6]</sup> The intelligence services monitor attempts to build networks of like-minded people among politicians, state officers, and lobbyists. The Czech Counter-Intelligence Agency BIS (Bezpečnostní a informační služba) claims in its 2015 annual report that Russian information operations in the Czech Republic are focused on weakening the strength of Czech media, strengthening the pro-Russian opposition, weakening society's resistance, and promoting inter-societal and inter-political tensions.<sup>[7]</sup>

All in all, the Czech Republic has become a target for Russian geopolitically-driven hybrid warfare, and has experienced various influences on different scales. These include disinformation campaigns, economical activities, the presence of a wide group of agents influencing decision-makers, and newly introduced cyberattacks.<sup>[8]</sup>

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[3] Echo24. 2016. "Zeman: Rusko Je Součástí Euroamerické Civilizace, Krym Už Vrátit Nelze – Echo24.cz". <http://echo24.cz/a/i/Lmij/zeman-rusko-je-soucasti-euroamericke-civilizace-krym-uz-vratit-nelze>.

[4] Interfax Ukraine. 2017. „Zeman's speech in PACE contradicts foreign policy of Czech government – Czech PM“. <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/454204.html>.

[5] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. 2015. "Bezpečnostní Strategie České Republiky". <https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/brs/dokumenty/bezpecnostni-strategie-2015.pdf>.

[6] Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic. 2016. "Audit Národní Bezpečnosti". <https://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Audit-narodni-bezpecnosti-20161201.pdf>.

[7] Czech Counter-Intelligence Agency BIS. 2015. "Security Information Service (BIS)". <https://www.bis.cz/vyrocní-zpravaEN890a.html?ArticleID=1104>.

[8] Anonymous informant from the Czech security community, February 14, 2018. In-depth interview.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

A number of interviewed experts agree that any group among the Czech population is susceptible to disinformation. It is almost impossible that one campaign could influence society as a whole, but a well-aimed campaign can be very powerful when targeting a specific group of people. It depends on tailoring the tools of the narrative. Considering pro-Kremlin narratives, it is worth mentioning that there is a susceptible Russian minority population living in the Czech Republic. The number of people among the Russian ethnic community has been rising in recent years. Official statistics indicate that there are 36 000 Russians in the Czech Republic (0.4 % of the Czech population). According to the Government Council for National Minorities, this group is considered to be the target of pro-Kremlin propaganda. The annexation of Crimea and other policies implemented by Russia are the reasons for intra-ethnic disputes. It is estimated that the majority of the Czech Republic's Russian population criticises Russian policy, but recent Russians arrivals who do not respect the system of the Czech Republic and aggressively lobby their own interests have been the main cause of recent disputes.<sup>[9]</sup>

Nevertheless, the majority of experts interviewed within the framework of this research confirm that there is no need to prioritise potentially vulnerable groups in the Czech Republic, because pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns can influence a wide range of target groups among the general public. Pro-Kremlin ideology can potentially influence those people who trust neither national political institutions nor European and international organisations. Their criticism of pro-Kremlin statements, and of Russia, can serve as a geopolitical alternative in terms of ensuring the security of Europe. Data from 2017 show that only half of Czech society (48 %) trusts the European Union, and another half (47 %) does not. In the case of the NATO, 58 % of respondents trust this institution and 33 % do not. While comparing the data in a timeline, it is certain that there has been no big shift, and the level of (dis)trust appears to be stable.<sup>[10]</sup>

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[9] Government Council for National Minorities. 2017. "Annual report about the situation of national minorities in the Czech Republic in 2016". [https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rnm/dokumenty/dokumenty-rady/zprava\\_2016\\_tiskarna\\_definitivni.pdf](https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rnm/dokumenty/dokumenty-rady/zprava_2016_tiskarna_definitivni.pdf).

[10] CVVM. 2017. Tisková zpráva. Důvěra v evropské instituce a mezinárodní instituce – duben 2017. [https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c2/a4330/f9/pm170524b.pdf](https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4330/f9/pm170524b.pdf).

Concerning the Czech constitutional institutions, only 21 % of Czechs trust the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of parliament), 25 % trust the Senate and 28 % trust the government. It should be mentioned that the data comes from September 2017, and that a parliamentary election was held in October 2017. Zeman is the most trusted element of the Czech machinery of state (51 % support).<sup>[11]</sup> Low trust in political representatives can create an explosive combination of conservative attitudes and traditionalist values, such as pro-Kremlin statements favouring conservative social attitudes mostly in the context of homosexuality, family and children. Those views stress the decadence, corruption and moral decline of Western civilisation. On the other hand, religious framing of those traditional views and statements does not work in the Czech Republic.

Although some measures have been taken in order to prevent the potential susceptibility of Czech society as a whole, the two target groups that are most affected are youngsters and older generations. Each group can be influenced for different reasons. Youngsters, even though very skilled in ICT, are still in the process of building up their critical thinking faculties and acquiring experiences, so they can easily fall into the trap of disinformation. On the other hand, older people`s vulnerability is caused by their insufficient ICT skills and lack of knowledge on the diversification of potential sources of information in virtual space. For both target groups, high trust in information from a close person or via email is of great significance. In the case of youngsters, this takes the form of sharing information via social networks, mostly Facebook. Among respondents aged between 55 and 64, 35 % forward fake emails warning against danger (such as migration or Islam). Among those over 65, 47 % forwarded such emails (four times more often than those age 35).<sup>[12]</sup> This issue drew attention in the Czech Republic after the presidential election in January 2018, when email hoaxes with political and social content started to circulate in virtual space in order to support Zeman and Jiří Drahoš.

We should also mention that a certain number security force personnel, both at the educational level (i.e. professionals responsible for the education of security forces), and executive level (i.e. professionals on duty)

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[11] CVM. 2017. Tisková zpráva. Důvěra ústavním institucím v září 2017. [https://cvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c2/a4423/f9/pi171003.pdf](https://cvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4423/f9/pi171003.pdf).

[12] Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, Seznam.cz. 2018. Starci na netu. Výzkumná zpráva. (Elder people at the internet. Research report.)

are exposed to pro-Kremlin ideology, and some of them follow it, which implies direct risks for the Czech Republic's national interests.

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The Czech media landscape can be divided in two categories: public media (public television and public radio) and private media. Dominant is commercial television, which attracts about half of the total advertising spend, whereas newspapers are in the hands of local business tycoons. Online media (often online versions of TV, radio or printed newspapers) occupies a big part of the media space. Based on data from a 2016 Digital News Report about the Czech Republic, television has weekly access to 81 % of respondents, radio reaches 35 %, print media 34 %, social media 51 %, and online media in general 91 %.<sup>[13]</sup>

The level of trust in media is generally very low. According to an October 2017 survey, media in the Czech Republic are among the least trusted institutions in public life (30–35 % depending on the type of media). A relatively steady decline in trust has been recorded in the last five to six years. The survey is conducted twice per year, and shows a visible decline in trust. Print media is in the worst position, with a level of trust at its lowest level since data started to be collected in 1995.<sup>[14]</sup>

This low level of trust can be partially explained by the changes in ownership which affect major parts of the Czech print media sector. Local billionaires owning media are suspected of influencing the content, including using media for their own political career. One such is Andrej Babiš, prime minister at the time of writing (February 2018). According to Reporters Without Borders, the concentration of media ownership has reached critical level in the Czech Republic.<sup>[15]</sup> In reaction to the situation, a law designed to combat conflicts of interest and prevent political players from owning media outlets was adopted in 2016. In the World Press Freedom Index, the Czech Republic takes 23<sup>rd</sup> position. In 2016, the country climbed two places, and in 2015

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[13] Digital News Report 2016. Czech Republic. <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2016/czech-republic-2016/>.

[14] Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění. 2017. Tisková zpráva. Důvěra k vybraným institucím veřejného života—říjen 2017. [https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/cz/a4460/f9/p0171127.pdf](https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/cz/a4460/f9/p0171127.pdf).

[15] Reporters Without Borders. Rise of the Oligarchs. <https://rsf.org/en/czech-republic>.

the country took the 13th place.<sup>[16]</sup> A part of Czech society does not trust traditional/mainstream media because of the belief that they lie and manipulate public opinion (this is a common reason for declining trust in media across European countries). All in all, it is necessary to state that those media do not transmit pro-Kremlin ideas and propaganda.

However, experts agree that the level of trust in misinforming news outlets and channels has risen. In 2017, the Slovak non-governmental organization GLOBSEC Policy Institute carried out research on whether Czechs consider misinforming websites to be a relevant source of information, and how strongly the citizens trust them. The survey showed that 9% of Czechs do trust such media, while 49% of respondents do not believe the mainstream media.<sup>[17]</sup> It is necessary to add that it is not obvious what the term 'mainstream media' means. According to the survey and in-depth interviews for the purposes of this research, it was identified that Russian media (RT and Sputnik, both with Czech language content) have very little popularity. Although RT has very low impact, Sputnik managed to influence public debates at the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine. Even in 2016, Sputnik was among the four most readable misinforming online media.

The most dangerous misinforming online media are believed to be conspiracy webpages which support Russian geopolitical views, pro-Kremlin ideas and propaganda, and threaten Czech security interests as defined in the Security Strategy of the Czech Republic. These are not directly linked to the Russian media landscape, and have no definable owner or financial structure. Such media provide a mix of factual and fake news, often anti-EU, anti-U.S., but pro-Russian only in very limited scope, all mixed with lifestyle reports. Such media provide political views and fuel the political emotions of those disappointed with the EU. With some exceptions, these websites do not have large audiences. Most relevant are *AC24.cz*, with 11 500 unique readers per day and *Svět kolem nás* (World around us) with 4 500 unique users per day. Online media outlet *Parlamentní listy* (Parliamentary sheets) exists in the grey zone. It does not spread pro-Kremlin disinformation on purpose. Without any editorial standards or control over authorship, everyone can publish their comments regardless of their factual basis. *Parlamentní listy* has around 150 000 readers each. For context, the most read media outlets have 1.5 million

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[16] World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

[17] GLOBSEC. 2017. Globsec Trends 2017. [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec\\_trends\\_2017.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec_trends_2017.pdf).

unique users per day.<sup>[18]</sup> Although there is a limited number of users, these media outlets have great impact on readers who share the articles in social networks such as Facebook. Facebook campaigns are often based on misinforming links.

The danger of such media outlets can be illustrated with the recent and ongoing case of lithium. Shortly before the parliamentary election of 2017, pro-Kremlin media outlet *Aeronet* published fake news accusing Social Democrats of attempts to capitalise personally on lithium mining in the Czech Republic by selling it to an Australian company. Aeronet called for action in elections: do not vote for this party, but for far right and pro-Russian party Freedom and Direct Democracy. Within 24 hours, the article had been spread via 100 Facebook profiles. The topic became central to the serious political debate of Babiš, Zeman, Communists and Freedom, and Direct Democracy. A special parliamentary session was convened. The result of the election was also influenced. Every tenth voter to decide who to support in last month before the election changed their party preference under the influence of this case (and not in favour of the Social Democrats). The story about attempts to steal Czech national wealth did work.

## IN FOCUS

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### **Radio station Proglas**

In the media sector, the private Christian radio station Proglas deserves attention as a good example. Even though it is a medium-sized radio station with limited budget from contributors, Proglas is aware of changes within media space. It notes the threat of disinformation and actively reacts to it. One of the ways to counteract it is to offer space to local editors and journalists for self-education, such as internships. As a reaction to the growing influence of disinformation, the radio station has employed two new editors for the news section. Proglas, as a member of the association of Christian media, also shares capacities and recorded material with associated media. Last but not the least, since Proglas possesses some webpages where news services can be found and comments of external collaborators are published, it is possible to evaluate the profiles of authors internally. This is a stricter process which enables online trolls to be identified.

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[18] Numbers of unique users come from the metric of the project Netmonitor (netmonitor.cz).

# LEGAL REGULATIONS

The Crisis Law, based on the Cybersecurity Act, exists in order to ensure the protection of the Czech Republic's critical information infrastructure. There is also the Law on the Protection of Classified Information. These laws serve to provide the infrastructure of information security. The Cybersecurity Act, the National Strategy on Cybersecurity, and the Action Plan provide a very good legal and implementation framework. The Czech Republic realises certain needs in this area, which are developed into the National Strategy and Action Plan. This is legal framework to enforce the implementation of the Action Plan.<sup>[19]</sup>

The Cybersecurity Act regulates the rights and obligations of all players involved in cybersecurity in order to protect the functionality of cyberspace (i.e. providers and administrators of electronic communication, as well as state authorities) in general. The National Strategy on Cybersecurity focuses on the formulation of strategic goals and tasks to deepen and advance assurances of cybersecurity for the years 2015 to 2020. The stress is on cooperation between national players, international cooperation, cooperation with the private sector, and public education about cybersecurity. The Action Plan defines practical steps in order to reach the goals. For example, in the area of cooperation on the national level, the Action Plan defines such tasks as the development of a unified methodology of crisis management in the event of cyberattacks, and the development of a communication matrix for all involved. There is also ongoing preparation of legislation relevant for cyberdefence, which is in the competence of Military Intelligence under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence.

Otherwise, the legal environment for the state authorities is framed by laws defining competences for ministries and other executive players. According to experts interviewed in the course of this study, the definition of these competences is sufficient. On the other hand, it is obvious that the legal framework does not cover all aspects of information security, failing in areas such as disinformation and propaganda. Protection against and reaction to disinformation is in the competence of all executive players, based on the content and target group of a given

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[19] Daniel Bagge, NUKIB, February 7, 2018. In-depth interview.

campaign. Disinformation campaigns are therefore not directly covered by the Czech Penal Code. But, for the experts who took part in this study, it is questionable whether it is necessary to further regulate the sensitive area of freedom of speech and expression:

*'We can very easily get in conflict between freedom of speech and protection against abusing freedom of speech.'*<sup>[20]</sup>

Repression is generally understood as a last possible resort. In relation to disinformation campaigns, there is no existing legislation.

As for the regulatory framework for media, prohibition of harmful content, typically racism, is relevant. For radio and TV broadcasting, the Council of the Czech Republic for Radio and TV Broadcasting is the regulatory and executive body. The Council decides who will get broadcasting licences, and is responsible for monitoring broadcast content. If principles and regulations are broken, the Council can decide about fines and other sanctions. The Council is more focused on monitoring balance in broadcasting, and it is not known whether it has any measures in place to deal with disinformation in the media.

For print media, the Syndicate of Journalists binds its members to follow a code of ethics, but there are no tools to enforce this code. A member who does break it can be expelled from the Syndicate.

## INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

Generally speaking, the lead body in this respect is the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic which holds the position as a result of its constitutional position as the highest executive body. The government manages, controls and unifies the activities of the ministries, the competences of which are defined by law.

The National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NCISA) serves as the national authority for ensuring the protection of information systems. As the national authority, it provides cybersecurity, consisting of integrity, availability and protection of information in the critical information infrastructure. NCISA's activities are governed by the National Cybersecurity Strategy of the Czech Republic for the period

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[20] Miroslav Feix, Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, February 11, 2018. In-depth interview.



2015 to 2020 and the Action Plan on the National Cybersecurity Strategy of the Czech Republic. NCISA is also responsible for fulfilment of the Action Plan (together with the ministries of the interior and foreign affairs, and the intelligence services), and is obliged to report annually on the state of the Action Plan.

*'The Czech Republic is intensively engaged in ensuring the protection of critical information infrastructure with the right tools in place. The level of critical information infrastructure protection is at a high level. However, given that it is a very progressive environment in terms of the development and transformation of threats, it is necessary to develop constantly, so the Czech Republic will be able to respond to any new threats.'*<sup>[21]</sup>

The protection of information itself partly stems from the Security Strategy of the Czech Republic and from the National Security Audit and its action plan.

*'The National Security Audit was initiated in 2015, in context of events in Ukraine, and with the emerging awareness that the Czech Republic has also been facing hybrid threats.'*<sup>[22]</sup>

The audit identifies 10 threats to the security of the Czech Republic, including hybrid threats, threats in cyberspace and the influence of foreign powers. The audit also identifies competent players, and evaluates relevant strategies and legislation. The Action Plan, reflecting the findings of the audit, contains tasks to be fulfilled. One of them is to establish teams/units at all relevant institutions which will be responsible for evaluating misinformation campaigns and other forms of influence from foreign powers. This is followed up by the principle that each ministry is responsible for its own reaction to misinformation campaigns, depending on the interests promoted or obstructed by the campaign in question. Thus, the Ministry of Interior Affairs established the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats.

The Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats started to operate from January 1, 2017. It serves as a specialised analytical and communication unit. It monitors threats directly related to internal security, including those related to terrorism, soft target attacks, security aspects of migration, extremism, public gatherings, violations of public order, and misinformation campaigns related to internal security. Its task is also

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[21] Daniel Bagge, NUKIB, February 7, 2018. In-depth interview.

[22] Anonymous informant from the Czech security community, February 14, 2018. In-depth interview.

to disseminate information and spread awareness about the relevant issues among the general and professional public.<sup>[23]</sup>

Other ministries should also establish units responsible for analysing hybrid threats and misinformation campaigns, but this is still a work process. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is a unit responsible for strategic communication. The Ministry of Defence is currently the national authority in charge of countering hybrid threats and their influence on the security of the Czech Republic. Based on an interview with experts, it may be said that information security is currently limited to technical protection of the information itself,<sup>[24]</sup> even though the Ministry of Defence is responsible for the protection of the country against external threats including those arising from foreign influence via misinformation.

The experts interviewed as part of this study agree that there are big gaps in Czech information security policy. First is the poor quality of strategic communication of the country. The Czech Republic is aware of what kind of infrastructure needs to be protected, but it is not active or effective in the formulation of its own national interpretation of history and ideology. Strategic communication is missing, is not related to content, and is very often incorrectly understood as public relations. A functional coordinating mechanism between relevant players is also absent, as reflected in the current Action Plan of the National Strategy of Cybersecurity, which defines the requirement for the development of a communication matrix for the relevant players. To fill this gap, it is also necessary to build a government-level functional coordination group to collect relevant information from all areas and issue decisions and recommendations.

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

In the last couple of years, a few projects and initiatives have been established in reaction to threats to information security and the resilience of Czech society in the context of misinformation campaigns. In the area of fact-checking initiatives, it is necessary to mention the leading project '*Demagog*'. This project is not focused on dealing with misinformation campaigns in the sense of orchestrated influence from abroad, rather

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[23] Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats. <http://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/centre-against-terrorism-and-hybrid-threats.aspx>

[24] Miroslav Feix, Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, February 11, 2018. In-depth interview.

its primary goal is to debunk false statements of politicians and other public figures. ‘Demagog’ teaches the public to think critically about information provided by anybody, and helps to raise awareness about the fact that misinformation can be used in public space.<sup>[25]</sup>

The project *StopFake.org* offers a Czech version of an internationally recognised initiative. The main goal is to debunk myths and fact-check information related to events in Ukraine. Journalists help to uncover fake news and explain the real situation. Lots of texts are translated from foreign StopFake.org branches, but the website also serves as a platform for analysis of pro-Kremlin propaganda in all its aspects and manifestations. The influence of propaganda in terms of Ukraine is also monitored because of its impact on policies in Turkey and EU countries.<sup>[26]</sup>

*Hoax.cz* focuses only on hoaxes circulating in virtual space. The aim of the project is to inform about something that has become an everyday part of Czech people’s lives. The website has a database of the most common hoaxes and is regularly updated. Any hoax is always followed by an expert explanation of what is wrong with the content.<sup>[27]</sup>

*Manipulátoři.cz* (Manipulators) is also focused on hoaxes. The webpage is dedicated to publishing articles which cover issues from such areas as political marketing, public relations, and communication. Some sections are dedicated to the issue of hoaxes. There is a database of hoaxes with debunking and factual explanations. The initiative places stress on correct work with data, and shows that informing society can be based on quality articles. So, it is not only about debunking; the greater part of the initiative is focused on media literacy and support for critical thinking.<sup>[28]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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### Stop fake hackathon

An interesting attempt to involve the private sector in countering disinformation and fake news happened in January 2018, when the private IT company *Ackee*, together with the Endowment Fund for Independent Journalism and the Open Society Fund, organised a hackathon named

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[25] Demagog. [www.demagog.cz](http://www.demagog.cz).

[26] *StopFake.org*. Czech version, [www.stopfake.cz](http://www.stopfake.cz).

[27] Hoax.cz. [www.hoax.cz](http://www.hoax.cz).

[28] Manipulátoři.cz. [www.manipulatori.cz](http://www.manipulatori.cz).

*FakeHacks.*<sup>[29]</sup> During the 24-hour event, IT developers in cooperation with data analysts, designers, and journalists worked in teams to develop applications which would help deal with disinformation. The competitors were able to develop applications which could verify and support the validity of information and sources, and those to identify Twitter bots and fake social network profiles.

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## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

With the rise in disinformation campaigns, the need for media literacy programmes and the reflection of such issues in education in general have also grown.

*‘During the survey of 2016, we have found out that three quarters of respondents between the ages of 15 and 19 obtain information from articles shared by friends on Facebook. Almost 20 % of them do not think about the real source of such information.’*

That’s according to one of the experts interviewed in the course of this research.<sup>[30]</sup> Radka Pudilová, from the Open Society Fund, understands the importance of media literacy and education in general as a means of increasing society’s resilience. On the other hand, she points out that, unfortunately, non-governmental organisations use the same tools and ideas. They also mostly work with people in bigger cities and do not go to regions.<sup>[31]</sup>

The Project *Zvol si info (Choose for the information)* was initiated by students of Masaryk University in 2016, and is aimed mainly at high school students. During workshops, lecturers talk with students about techniques of manipulation and propaganda, show examples, and train students in media literacy.

*‘Our strategy is based on neutrality. We focus on the technical aspect of manipulation in order not to lose contact with some parts of society.’*<sup>[32]</sup>

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[29] Fakehacks. [www.fakehacks.cz](http://www.fakehacks.cz).

[30] Vojtěch Bruk, Zvol si info, February 12, 2018. In-depth interview.

[31] Radka Pudilová, Open Society Fund, February 12, 2018. In-depth interview.

[32] Vojtěch Bruk, Zvol si info, February 12, 2018. In-depth interview.

One of the outcomes of the project is the Surfer`s Guide to the Internet, which serves as simple educational toolkit with five basic rules for recognising manipulation. At the beginning of 2018, the ‘The best book about fake news, misinformation, and manipulation’ was published; it is aimed at the general public and intends to show how disinformation works and why.<sup>[33]</sup>

Another important project is Jeden svět na školách (One world in schools), which is run by the non-governmental organisation People in Need. Since 2001, this project has been providing educational materials to teachers, mostly covering issues of civic education. One part is also dedicated to media literacy. Teachers can use more than 20 audio-visual, ready to use lessons prepared by project lecturers. These lessons are tailored for pupils and students of elementary and secondary/high schools. Analysis of media literacy at Czech high schools was introduced as a part of the project.<sup>[34]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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### **An association of education professionals**

Compulsory education professionals have organised themselves into an association called Občankáři in order to change the way media literacy education is provided. They express dissatisfaction with the way state educational concepts and strategies deal with education in the Czech Republic. The association was founded as a reaction to a reduction in national self-consciousness and the ability to orientate to contemporary social events among students of all types of schools. The association focuses on empowering teachers, on their professional development, and on opening cooperation between schools and teachers. There is a website where teachers can find a broad range of educational materials, including media literacy.<sup>[35]</sup>

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[33] Zvol si info. [www.zvolsi.info](http://www.zvolsi.info).

[34] Jeden svět na školách. [www.jsns.cz](http://www.jsns.cz).

[35] Občankáři. [www.obcankari.cz](http://www.obcankari.cz).

# RECOMMENDATIONS

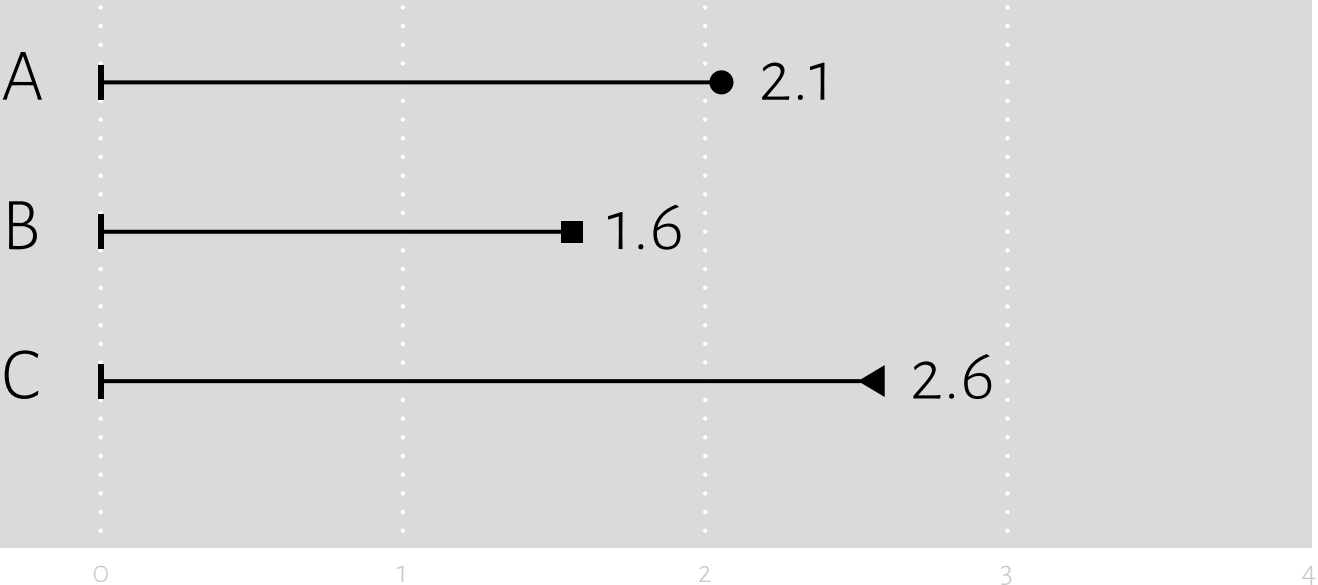
Based on analysis of the situation and in-depth interviews, several recommendations for the state authorities and media community can be made:

1. The Action Plan of the Audit of national security should be fulfilled. Each ministry should create an analytical team/unit responsible for hybrid threats relevant for the area of their competences. At the same time, it is necessary to set up a functional coordination mechanism at the governmental level. The state/government needs to see hybrid threats as a complex issue. Orchestrated misinformation campaigns and operations aimed to influence society are the business of all ministries. Without having a complex picture, counter-measures will never be sufficient.
2. Relevant state bodies should create strategic communication and separate this from public relations. A positive Czech national ideology should be developed.
3. State authorities should involve the private sector in fostering society's resilience information security, e.g. through private bodies and professionals from the IT and marketing sectors.
4. Public figures (politicians and cultural/media icons) should take up the theme of resilience and information security, and work on it with devotion. Then it will truly resonate in society.
5. All involved players and activists should prevent deepening polarisation of Czech society. Issues related to information security should be communicated and explained. Labelling and stereotyping should be excluded from public discussions. Discussions often end with a false dilemma, putting the issue in a black and white perspective of 'us' versus them, and 'them' are labelled with a simplifying sticker which only deepens polarisation. But many issues grow from misunderstanding and lack of information. Media literacy was long absent from the education system of the Czech Republic, so it is wrong to only criticise those orienting themselves to pro-Kremlin ideology. Attitudes and opinions should be deconstructed in order to avoid clichés.

DMITRI  
TEPERIK

*International Centre  
for Defence and Security*

# ESTONIA



# INTRODUCTION

Estonia has been in the orbit of Russia's strategic interests for many years and for many complex historical reasons. As a result, Estonia has experienced various types of influence activities on different scales. Since regaining independence in 1991, Russia's so-called 'soft power' in Estonia is both traceable and observable in several domains, such as the economy, public diplomacy, political life, and culture.<sup>[1]</sup> To pursue Russia's geopolitical goals, it has been using various tools towards Estonia: media influence, cyberattack, compatriot policy, energy dependence, espionage activities, etc.<sup>[2]</sup> In 1998, a comprehensive overview of Russia's attempts to influence economic, societal, and political processes in Estonia was published in the annual reviews of the Estonian Internal Security Service.<sup>[3]</sup>

A classic example is the Kremlin's support and funding of people (e.g., representatives of the Legal Information Centre for Human Rights and the Russian School in Estonia) who actively promote anti-Estonian propaganda narratives at international events abroad. Moreover, counter-intelligence provides evidence about ongoing violent activities against Estonia and the preparation of computer-related crime.<sup>[4]</sup> There is also an acknowledgment of threats posed by activities of pro-Russian GONGOs which focus on the negative impacts on Estonia's internal security.<sup>[5]</sup> Additionally, monitoring of similar attempts has been included in the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service's annual reports on security environment assessments beginning in 2016,<sup>[6]</sup> and the Estonian Information System Authority annual assessments highlighting cybersecurity events.<sup>[7]</sup>

The International Centre for Defence and Security, one of the leading think tanks in the Nordic-Baltic area, has also produced numerous studies and analyses dedicated to the assessment

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- [1] Juhani Kivirähk, 2010. "How to Address the 'Humanitarian Dimension' of Russian Foreign Policy?" Retrieved from <https://www.icds.ee/publications/article/how-to-address-the-humanitarian-dimension-of-russian-foreign-policy/>.
  - [2] Marko Mihkelson, 2017. "Disinformation: Russia's Old but Effective Weapon of Influence". Retrieved from <https://www.diplomaatia.ee/en/article/disinformation-russias-old-but-effective-weapon-of-influence/>.
  - [3] Annual reviews of the Estonian Internal Security Service. Retrieved from <https://www.kapo.ee/en/content/annual-reviews.html>.
  - [4] Estonia's Internal Security Service arrests FSB agent at border in Narva. Retrieved from <http://news.err.ee/641144/estonia-s-internal-security-service-arrests-fsb-agent-at-border-in-narva>.
  - [5] Aleksandr Contšarenko, 2017. "GONGO's negative impact on the Estonian internal security". Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2ptUDg1>.
  - [6] Annual reports of the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service. Retrieved from [https://www.valisluureamet.ee/security\\_environment.html](https://www.valisluureamet.ee/security_environment.html).
  - [7] Annual Cyber Security Assessment 2017 by the Estonian Information System Authority. Retrieved from [https://www.ria.ee/public/Kuberturvalisus/RIA\\_CSA\\_2017.PDF](https://www.ria.ee/public/Kuberturvalisus/RIA_CSA_2017.PDF).



of Russian strategic interests in Estonia.<sup>[8]</sup> Among such interests, experts highlight the creation of tensions, sowing confusion and mistrust within the society, rewriting recent history, and amplifying discrediting lies about Estonia on the international stage. Russia retains a diverse toolbox of influence activities whose intentions are far from friendly. As one of the interviewed experts pointed out,

*‘During the last two decades, Russia’s activities towards Estonia have been either chilly, neutral, or openly hostile, quite often with a hidden agenda to undermine the essence of Estonian statehood, to rewrite our history, to corrupt our politics, and make it in the end more similar to and dependable on Russia.’<sup>[9]</sup>*

There is a general consensus that Russia’s increased military activity and aggressive behaviour is mirroring its hostile influence activities. This can pose immediate threats to Estonia’s security, as it primarily depends on the Euro-Atlantic region’s security situation, relations between its neighbouring countries, and public resilience.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

It is widely recognised that the Russian regime is extremely opportunistic.<sup>[10]</sup> Therefore, it exploits the weakest points and the most vulnerable groups of the targeted societies and countries when planning and executing influence activities.<sup>[11]</sup> This broadly sets the context in which Russia operates. It should be noted that 17 of the 24 surveyed experts agreed that Russian media tend to exploit Estonia’s economic, historic, societal, and ethnolinguistic contexts in an attempt to spread its hostile narratives.

In Estonia, one of the most obvious groups to be targeted and influenced by Russia is the Russian-speaking population, which makes up about 28 % of the general population of Estonia.<sup>[12]</sup> Besides other groups,

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[8] Publications of the International Centre for Defence and Security. Retrieved from <https://www.icds.ee/publications/>.

[9] Extract from the in-depth interviews conducted in August-September 2017 (an expert from the Estonian Internal Security Service). Here and further, the cited quotes are presented anonymously, as requested by the interviewed experts in order to encourage openness and the sharing of their views and opinions.

[10] Andrew Radin, 2017. “Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics. Threats and Potential Responses”. Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/.../RAND\\_RR1577.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/.../RAND_RR1577.pdf).

[11] Joanna Hyndle-Hussein, 2015. “The Baltic states on the conflict in Ukraine”. Retrieved from <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2015-01-23/baltic-states-conflict-ukraine>.

[12] Eesti statistika 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.stat.ee/34267>.

the interviewed experts considered this group particularly vulnerable to Kremlin-backed influence activities. Nevertheless, some ethnic Estonians might be clustered around other small and rather uninfluential groups, which can be considered as a possible target for Russia's activities, with a reference to some business people whose commercial interests are strongly linked with Russia.<sup>[13]</sup> This may also include a small percentage of pacification-minded people who think NATO is just provoking or even irritating Russia. Some other pro-Kremlin narratives might seem to be somewhat appealing to those ethnic Estonians who are strongly nostalgic for their Soviet past, are socio-economically disadvantaged, and/or support xenophobic rhetoric.<sup>[14]</sup>

Still, as pointed out by one interviewed expert, ethnicity provides a cognitive shield of protection:

*'There is a strong sense that, because of a brutal history and fresh memories of the Soviet occupation, because strong anti-Russian narratives remain in many families, almost all ethnic Estonians have a kind of immunity against the totalitarian lies and disinformation campaigns delivered nowadays by the Kremlin. Unfortunately, it is not the case for many local Russians, whose historical background is different. They should start learning and accepting the truth, not a Kremlin version of it.'*<sup>[15]</sup>

For a dozen years, Russian-speakers have been portrayed as quite monolithic and a rather inactive part of Estonia's society. Although, clustered exclusively according to language, this group is indeed very heterogeneous and multidimensional in terms of its ethno-cultural background, citizenship, political activity and preferences, educational and socio-economic parameters, proficiency in the Estonian language, media consumption, etc. The Russian-speaking population of Estonia is one of the most researched groups within the society mainly because of the state-supported and state-directed integration process. Some recent studies give an exhaustive overview on its various descriptive parameters as well as highlight major challenges to the integration process.<sup>[16]</sup> According to one of the interviewed experts,

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[13] Andres Reimer, 2016. "Tiit Vähi: anti-Russia torch of war damaging to business". Retrieved from <https://news.postimees.ee/3752779/tiit-vahi-anti-russia-torch-of-war-damaging-to-business>.

[14] Estonian Human Development Report 2016/2017. Estonia at the Age of Migration. Retrieved from <https://inimareng.ee/en/estonia-at-the-age-of-migration>.

[15] Anonymous independent media expert, August-September 2017, In-depth interview.

[16] Integration Monitoring of the Estonian Society 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.kul.ee/en/integration-monitoring-estonian-society-2017>.

*'Approximately 15 % of Russian-speakers have very weak state identity, they do not affiliate themselves with the Estonian state or society, they do not honour our national symbols, and they prefer to live mentally in the Russian space.'*<sup>[17]</sup>

According to the results of the integration study,<sup>[18]</sup> five main patterns of Russian-speaker integration emerge: (A) successfully integrated (21 %), (B) Russian-speaking patriots of Estonia (16 %), (C) critically minded people (13 %), (D) little integrated (29 %), and (E) unintegrated passive (22 %). Another recent study suggests distinguishing four main clusters of Estonia's Russian-speakers in the following terms: assimilation (23 %), separation (34 %), integration (22 %) and ignorance (19 %).<sup>[19]</sup> Evidently, one of Russia's goals is to obstruct or diminish societal cohesion, because there are such divisions in Estonia.

Until the provocative events of April 2007,<sup>[20]</sup> relations between ethnic Estonians and local Russian-speakers had been remarkably peaceful.<sup>[21]</sup> The next peak of noticeable polarisation between the two groups began in 2013 and was caused by the developments in Ukraine. The crisis, followed by the war, revealed the sizeable influence of ethnic heterogeneity, and the power of minorities to cause severe political unrest when feeling oppressed and underprivileged.<sup>[22]</sup> Until then, many Estonian politicians and policymakers did not fully realize that formal indicators of integration, such as language proficiency or citizenship, are indeed poor indicators of a meaningful sense of belonging among local Russian-speakers or their perceptions of the state and national security.

At the same time, the issues of native language in regards to citizenship or the teaching of the native language at school have been irresponsibly over politicised in almost every election since regaining independence. The recent municipal elections on October 24, 2017, once more demonstrated the trend of the Russian card being widely played

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[17] Anonymous expert, International Centre for Defence and Security, August-September 2017. In-depth interview.

[18] Marju Lauristin, 2011, "The effectiveness of integration process and the target groups: Cluster analysis". Retrieved from <http://praxis.ee/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2011-Loimumisprotsessi-tulemuslikkus-ja-sihtruhmad.pdf>.

[19] Political and socio-psychological determinants of inclusive integration context and their interdependencies. Retrieved from <http://www.tlu.ee/dima> and <https://news.postimees.ee/4306719/joint-project-reveals-fears-of-russians-in-estonia>.

[20] Provocations and riots took place on the streets of Tallinn in a well-coordinated (and arguably pro-Kremlin) response to the moving of the Soviet monument called 'Bronze Soldier'. At the same time, Estonian government agencies and private banks experienced many cyberattacks (mainly DoS, DDoS, defacement of websites, attacks on DNS). There were also physical attacks on the Estonian embassy in Moscow as well as against the Estonian ambassador. Read more from the overview by the ICDS, 2007, "Russia's Involvement in the Tallinn Disturbances". <https://www.icds.ee/publications/article/russias-involvement-in-the-tallinn-disturbances>.

[21] Raivo Vetik, 2011. Citizenship, statelessness and belonging in Estonia. Retrieved from <https://ecpreu/filestore/paperproposal/3e77f4ab-9a20-4440-b23c-0746c8bce314.pdf>.

[22] Thomas Schneider 2015, "Russian Minority in Estonia". Retrieved from <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.40778>.

by several Estonian political parties. The crisis in Ukraine added another dangerous dimension to an already complicated situation. Beginning in 2014, the position and perceptions of local Russian-speakers in Estonia have been publicly discussed and presented through the prism of security both on a national and international scale.<sup>[23]</sup>

The question, “Will Narva be next?”<sup>[24]</sup> suddenly became displeasingly popular. The securitisation of one particular group within the society might raise some unjust concerns about its loyalty and consequently lead to a deepening distrust among other members of society. One of the interviewed experts rightfully noted that Russia makes both visible and hidden efforts to consolidate the Russian-speaking population outside of the mainstream Estonian society. The effects raise the social and political salience of cultural issues, leading to linguistic and ideological confrontation.<sup>[25]</sup> Among the most active means for that is pushing Russia’s compatriot policy<sup>[26]</sup> as well as ensuring Russian media domination and its attractiveness. To quote an expert,

*‘Russian television invites Estonia’s Russian-speakers to join a virtual ‘Russian World’, the same mental universe in which many Russian citizens live, a world united by language, culture, religion, history, and blood.’<sup>[27]</sup>*

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In general, three main media segments can be distinguished in Estonia: national Estonian-language media, local Russian-language media and foreign media (including Russian-language media in Russia). Several indicators lead to the conclusion that in Estonia the media enjoy a high degree of freedom. According

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- [23] David J. Trimbach and Shannon O’Lear, 2015. “Russians in Estonia: Is Narva the next Crimea?”. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2lEwPoY>.  
Hans von der Brelie, 2015. “Concerns over Ukraine in Estonia’s Russian speaking community”. Retrieved from <http://www.euronews.com/2015/03/06/concerns-over-ukraine-in-estonia-s-russian-speaking-community>.
- [24] Estonia’s main Russian-speaking regions are county of Ida-Viru in north-eastern Estonia (including town of Narva) and Tallinn’s suburb of Lasnamäe.
- [25] Anonymous expert, Government Office, August-September 2017. In-depth interview.
- [26] Kristiina Kallas, 2016. “Claiming the diaspora: Russia’s compatriot policy and its reception by Estonian-Russian population.” Retrieved from <http://dspace.ut.ee/handle/10062/58022>.
- [27] Jill Dougherty and Riina Kaljurand, 2015. “Estonia’s “Virtual Russian World”: The Influence of Russian Media on Estonia’s Russian Speakers.” Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2GogFNA>.

to the World Press Freedom Index, Estonia ranks 12<sup>th</sup> as of 2017.<sup>[28]</sup> This is the highest ranking among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Estonia shares first place with Iceland on the global list “Freedom on the Net 2017”.<sup>[29]</sup> There have been no documented cases of violent government interference into media policy, and freedom of the press is generally perceived as an absolute right. Naturally, freedom of expression and freedom of speech are protected by Estonia’s constitution and by the country’s obligations as a member state of the European Union.

While there is a general awareness of Russian information campaigns designed to manipulate public opinion, there have not been any incidents of banning content from Russia. On the other hand, since the Russian-language media are considered by several information-security experts to be a tool for spreading disinformation and hostile propaganda in and against Estonia, it is necessary to take a deeper look at the patterns of media consumption.

In October 2017, data from Estonian media monitoring demonstrated that the most popular TV channels (daily share) among Russian-speakers were: PBK (First Baltic Channel) (15.9 %), RTR Planeta (14.1 %), and NTV Mir (11.4 %).<sup>[30]</sup> The listed TV channels can be reached through normal cable television. Naturally, Russian-speakers also prefer Russian-language radio stations (as of summer 2017): Radio 4 (13.5 %), Russkoje Radio (12.6 %), and Narodnoje Radio (11.5 %).<sup>[31]</sup> In 2014, more than 70 % of local Russian-speakers claimed that an important source of news information was Russian-language TV channels.<sup>[32]</sup>

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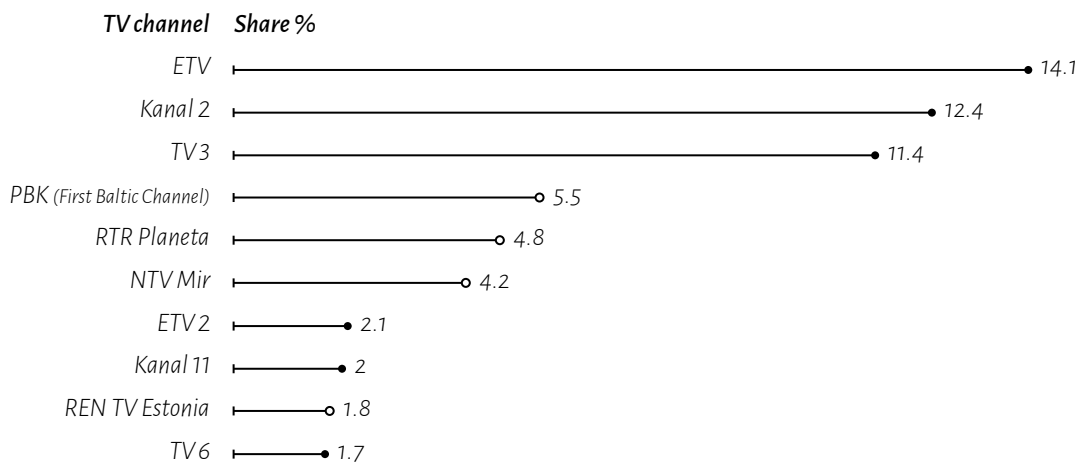
[28] 2017 World Press Freedom Index. Reporters Without Borders. (2017). Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

[29] Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2017. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/table-country-scores-fotn-2017>.

[30] Kantar Emor. Retrieved from <http://www.emor.ee/teleauditooriumi-ulevaade-oktoobrikuus-2017/>.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Open Estonia Foundation & Saar Poll, 2014 “Päevakajalised sündmused ja erinevad infokanalid”. Retrieved from [www.saarpoll.ee/UserFiles/File/AEF\\_aruanne\\_1\\_.pdf](http://www.saarpoll.ee/UserFiles/File/AEF_aruanne_1_.pdf).



### Most popular TV channels in Estonia

Source: ... (October, 2017),

channels transmitting pro-Kremlin narratives narratives —○

The web-portal *rus.delfi.ee* is the most visited by Estonia's Russian-speakers. Other popular websites in Russian include: *seti.ee*, *vecherka.ee*, *ria.ru*, *kinozal.tv*, *mke.ee*, and *kinopoisk.ru*.<sup>[33]</sup> Interestingly, social media networks are a more important source of information for young Russian speakers than for young Estonian speakers.<sup>[34]</sup> Another study indicates that local Russian-speakers write comments to online articles more than ethnic Estonians.<sup>[35]</sup> Overall, there are still some big differences in the patterns of media consumption between ethnic Estonians and Russian-speakers in Estonia.<sup>[36]</sup> For instance, the main conclusion of one recent study is that Russian-language social media networks are being actively used for generating and distributing hostile narratives and toxic disinformation.<sup>[37]</sup>

One of the interviewed experts suggested that the consumption of Russian-language media might prove that the vast majority of local

[33] Combination of data from Alexa and Gemius Audience. Retrieved from <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/EE> and <https://opa.gemius.ee/>.

[34] Estonian Society Monitoring, 2015. Media and information space. Retrieved from <http://www.kul.ee/et/eesti-uhiskonna-loimumismonitooring-2015>.

[35] Kantar Emor. Online-kommentaarisel mojusfaaris elab pool miljonit Eesti inimest. Retrieved from <http://www.emoree/online-kommentaarisel-mojusfaaris-elab-pool-miljonit-eesti-inimest>.

[36] Integration Monitoring of the Estonian Society, 2017. Media use and information fields. Retrieved from [https://www.kul.rik.ee/sites/kulminn/files/6\\_meedia\\_eng.pdf](https://www.kul.rik.ee/sites/kulminn/files/6_meedia_eng.pdf).

[37] Dmitri Teperik and Grigori Senkiv, 2017 "Analysis of Russian-language public posts and profiles in social media in Estonia" (A forthcoming publication). The main results of the analysis were presented and discussed at the adversarial intent symposium "Putin's Russia: The weaponization of society", held in Kingston, Canada on 10–12 October 2017.

Russian-speakers live in Russia's mental space, and therefore, could be influenced by hostile narratives:

*'They are extremely accustomed to obtaining news from, enjoying entertainment, and watching movies on the Russian channels, or spending their time on social media networks like VK or OK, where the content is usually charged with uniquely toxic views and has extremely huge lies or weird versions of the truth. Very often, the picture does not correspond to reality at all.'*<sup>[38]</sup>

Fourteen of the 24 surveyed experts shared the opinion that Russian media is generally trusted among local Russian-speakers in Estonia. Similar assumptions have been made in other studies of media.<sup>[39]</sup> The result of this is that multiple recommendations also have been made focusing on how Estonian society can defend itself from Russia's orchestrated disinformation.<sup>[40]</sup> Some scholars argue that the deregulation of media undervalues the potential of Russian disinformation and fails to fully equip Russian-speakers with the necessary protection against hostile propaganda.<sup>[41]</sup>

## LEGAL REGULATIONS

In general, the Ministry of Culture is responsible for Estonia's broadcasting policy.<sup>[42]</sup> The role of independent media service controller is given to the Estonian Technical Surveillance Authority under the administration of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications.

The applicable EU legislation includes the AudioVisual Media Services Directive.<sup>[43]</sup> There is also a set of specific regulations in Estonia, which along with the code of ethics, affects local media. The broadcasting sector is regulated directly by the 'Media Services Act'<sup>[44]</sup> and 'Estonian Public Broadcasting Act'. These set quite strict regulations on broadcasters

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[38] Anonymous media expert, Estonian Public Broadcasting, August-September 2017. In-depth interview.

[39] Open Estonia Foundation & Saar Poll, 2014 "Päevakajalised sündmused ja erinevad infokanalid." Retrieved from [www.saarpoll.ee/UserFiles/File/AEF\\_aruanne\\_1.pdf](http://www.saarpoll.ee/UserFiles/File/AEF_aruanne_1.pdf).

[40] Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzev, 2016. "Winning the Information War." Retrieved from <http://cepa.org/reports/winning-the-information-war>.

[41] Silviu Kondan and Mridvika Sahajpal, 2017. "Integration Policy and Outcomes for the Russian-Speaking Minority in Estonia." Retrieved from <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/urceu/vol2017/iss1/10/>.

[42] Estonian Ministry of Culture. Retrieved from <http://www.kul.ee/en/activities/audiovisual-field/broadcasting>.

[43] Audio-visual Media Services Directive. Retrieved from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32010L0013>.

[44] Estonian Media Services Act. Retrieved from <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/506112013019/consolide>.

and guarantee freedom of operation, protection of information sources, and the right to reply, etc.<sup>[45]</sup> Media self-regulation consists of the Estonian Press Council.<sup>[46]</sup> In 1998, a Code of Ethics for the Estonian press was adopted, and it is used as the main instrument for media accountability.<sup>[47]</sup>

According to interviewed experts, the current legal foundation provides a solid base for media activities in Estonia; however, there might be some unregulated issues to be potentially exploited by disinformation campaigns:

*'As fake news spreads very quickly and can bring along reputational damage, not just for persons but also institutions and organisations, we might see in the future some regulatory gaps and consequent delays in responding to that.'*<sup>[48]</sup>

Moreover, there are other laws that indirectly regulate the media landscape. Namely, the Estonian Penal Code provides protection from activities that publicly incite hatred, violence, or discrimination based on nationality, race, sex, language, origin, religion, sexual orientation, political opinion, or financial or social status, if the activity results in danger to the life, health, or property of a person.<sup>[49]</sup> Defamation was decriminalised in 2002 and civil defamation cases are regulated by the 'Law of Obligations Act'.<sup>[50]</sup> The 'Personal Data Protection Act' restricts the collection and public dissemination of an individual's personal data. No personal information that is considered sensitive—such as political opinions, ethnic or racial origin, religious or philosophical beliefs, health, sexual behaviour, or criminal convictions—can be processed without the consent of the individual.<sup>[51]</sup>

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[45] Estonian Public Broadcasting Act. Retrieved from <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/530102013075/consolide>.

[46] Estonian Press Council. Retrieved from <http://www.eall.ee/pressinokogu/index-eng.html>.

[47] Estonia passes Code of Press Ethics. Retrieved from [http://www.eall.ee/news/29\\_01\\_1998.html](http://www.eall.ee/news/29_01_1998.html).

[48] Anonymous official, Estonian Parliament, August-September 2017. In-depth interview.

[49] Estonian Penal Code. Retrieved from <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/519012017002/consolide/current>.

[50] Estonian Law of Obligations Act. Retrieved from <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/524012017002/consolide>.

[51] Estonian Personal Data Protection Act. Retrieved from <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/Riigikogu/act/507032016001/consolide>.



# INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

Today, there is broad political consensus on and wide societal acknowledgement of the threats imposed by Russia's hostile activities against Estonia. Many Estonian experts agree on the need to have an adequate and clear understanding of the challenges and current vulnerabilities. A course of action has been stipulated in the Estonian security policy, 'National Security Concept 2017', based on shared views and results of analytical studies.<sup>[52]</sup>

This document addresses the current security environment while framing national diplomacy, military defence, protection of constitutional order and law enforcement, conflict prevention, and crisis management. It also specifically addresses the issues of economic security and the supporting infrastructure, cybersecurity, protection of people, resilience, and cohesion of society. Explicitly, it provides definitions of strategic communication and psychological defence as well as highlighting the importance of generating reliable information and general awareness aimed at strengthening national resilience.

As previously noted, the situation is being continuously monitored by the security services. The same services are informed by the public about the most sophisticated and imminent threats to information and psychological security. According to several of the interviewed experts, the societal resonance to this threat helps to calibrate some countermeasures:

*'We trust our citizens and their feedback provides us assurances for open communication, which is crucial for strengthening national resilience'.<sup>[53]</sup>*

Respective activities are coordinated across the Estonian government's ministries and agencies through the National Security and Defence Coordination Unit. This unit advises the prime minister on national security and defence matters, and coordinates the management of national security and defence. While communicating to the public, each state institution coordinates its actions with the main principles

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[52] National Security Concept 2017. Retrieved from [https://riigikantselei.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Failid/national\\_security\\_concept\\_2017.pdf](https://riigikantselei.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Failid/national_security_concept_2017.pdf).

[53] Extract from the in-depth interviews conducted in August-September 2017 (An official from the Estonian Ministry of Interior)

listed in the Government Communication Handbook.<sup>[54]</sup> Almost all interviewed experts expressed the confidence that they observe a high level of institutional development in the sphere of information security in Estonia. The same applies to the level of comprehensiveness of the legal frameworks in terms of detection, prevention, and disruption of informational threats and vulnerabilities.<sup>[55]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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In 2011, the National Centre for Defence and Security Awareness (NCDSA) established an Estonian non-governmental expert platform for strengthening national resilience by means of applied research, strategic communication, and social interactions. NCDSA's long-term vision is a secure society that is psychologically resilient, socially cohesive, and resistant to hostile influence. The NCDSA runs a state-supported training programme called Sinu Riigi Kaitse. The programme's aim is to inform Russian-speaking communities of Estonian national defence and security issues by initiating and organising public events. It also strives to induce discussions that promote awareness of the Estonian, NATO, and EU security and defence policies among Russian-speakers in Estonia.<sup>[56]</sup> Additionally, the NCDSA monitors and analyses security- and defence-related perceptions of Russian-speakers in Estonia.<sup>[57]</sup> NCDSA's most recent study is an analysis of Russian-language public posts and profiles on social media in Estonia. Among other activities, the NCDSA produces Russian-language materials aimed at inspiring and empowering young Russian-speakers by highlighting personal success stories in Estonia's security and defence sector.

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Among other state institutions and in addition to military means, the Estonian Ministry of Defence plays a vital role by supporting and strengthening the bond between citizens and the state. The ministry has a long-standing tradition of conducting public opinion surveys on national defence, the results of which are also analysed through

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[54] Government Communication Handbook. Retrieved from <https://riigikantselei.ee/en/supporting-government/government-communication>

[55] Extract from the in-depth interviews conducted in August-September 2017 (An official from the Government Office)

[56] National Centre of Defence & Security Awareness, training programme Sinu Riigi Kaitse, Retrieved from <http://kaitsen.ee/programm-2>.

[57] Riigikaitseteemaline arvamusuuring 2017. Retrieved from <http://kaitsen.ee/uuringud/russian-sotsiologicheskoe-issledovanie-obshhestvennogo-mneniya-2017>.

the prism of the native language.<sup>[58]</sup> These results reveal not only the dynamics of public opinion over the last 17 years but also worrying differences between societal groups.

According to the interviewed experts, the major gaps in security perceptions of ethnic Estonians and local Russian-speakers are mainly related to NATO's enhanced forward presence in Estonia as well as relations with Russia.<sup>[59]</sup> For instance, 67 % of local Russian-speakers and just 23 % of ethnic Estonians support stronger security cooperation between Estonia and Russia. At the same time, 73 % of ethnic Estonians and 23 % of local Russian-speakers agree that NATO is the best bet for Estonia's security. Proponents of Estonia's membership in NATO amount to 31 % of local Russian-speakers and 91 % of ethnic Estonians—a threefold difference. Predictably, 89 % of ethnic Estonians and just 27 % of local Russian-speakers approve of NATO's military presence in Estonia.<sup>[60]</sup>

There are also big differences in the views of the two groups regarding the war in Ukraine, with 68 % of local Russian-speakers and just 2 % of ethnic Estonians reporting they think Ukraine bears the most responsibility for the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Meanwhile, 6 % of local Russian-speakers and 78 % of ethnic Estonians viewed Russia as being responsible for the conflict.

There is arguably no coincidence that these are also the topics around which a higher degree of Russian disinformation can be observed.<sup>[61]</sup> As discussed previously, it could be suggested that Estonia's national security-related opinions are largely shaped by pro-Kremlin media channels, taking into account the trust-based receptiveness of many local Russian-speakers in Estonia towards Russian propaganda.

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[58] Estonian Ministry of Defence, Public opinion survey on national defence 2017. Retrieved from [www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article\\_files/public\\_opinion\\_and\\_national\\_defence\\_2017\\_march.pdf](http://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article_files/public_opinion_and_national_defence_2017_march.pdf).

[59] Anonymous official, Estonian Ministry of Defence, August-September 2017. In-depth interview.

[60] Estonian Ministry of Defence, Public opinion survey on national defence 2017. Retrieved from [www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article\\_files/public\\_opinion\\_and\\_national\\_defence\\_2017\\_march.pdf](http://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article_files/public_opinion_and_national_defence_2017_march.pdf).

[61] Urve Eslas, 2017. "How a social media joke became anti-NATO propaganda in Estonia." Retrieved from <http://www.infowar.cepa.org/Briefs/Est/How-a-social-media-joke-became-anti-NATO-prop-Estonia>.

Russian Narratives on NATO's Deployment. How Russian-language media in Poland and the Baltic States portray NATO's reinforcements 2017. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/dfriab/russian-narratives-on-natos-deployment-616e19c3d194>.

Baltics battle Russia in online disinformation war. Retrieved from <http://www.dw.com/en/baltics-battle-russia-in-online-disinformation-war/a-40828834>.

# DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS AND MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

All interviewed experts share the view that the independence and secured freedom of Estonia is strengthened by involving active citizens in the national security conversation. Several initiatives have been adopted and refined across all levels of government and civil society. Non-profit organisations and citizens' voluntary initiatives have an important role to play in reinforcing national resilience. As an interviewed official of the voluntary national defence organisation Estonian Defence League stated:<sup>[62]</sup>

*'Being very creative and flexible, motivated volunteers can achieve some tangible results in supporting the state activities in the field of defence and security. Our contribution plays a vital role in diversifying activities that minimise the harmful effects of pro-Kremlin propaganda'*

The wider dissemination of knowledge and skills related to national security is regularly supported from the state budget. For example, it is coordinated and organised through the *National Defence Course* at schools nationwide.<sup>[63]</sup> Although such training courses are primarily focused on security and defence, there are at least several lessons within the curriculum dedicated to hybrid threats, hostile activities, and the use of information as a weapon. This was (emotive not academic) spotted by an interviewed national defence teacher:

*'My students ask me all the time about some fake news and even about manipulation in social media. Of course, I teach them the basics of media literacy and also present some good examples of debunked myths. It works better when you as a teacher explain it thoroughly, not just suggest boring reading from the internet'.<sup>[64]</sup>*

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[62] Anonymous official, Estonian Defence League, August-September 2017. In-depth interview.

[63] Riigikaitseõpetus, Retrieved from <https://www.kra.ee/riigikaitseopetus>.

[64] Anonymous national defence teacher, Narva, August-September 2017. In-depth interview.

Additionally, *Senior Courses in National Defence* are held twice per year in both the Estonian and Russian languages for adult audiences of politicians, senior state officials, military officers, local government officials, top economic and opinion leaders, cultural and educational practitioners, journalists and NGO representatives.<sup>[65]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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An international cooperation platform, Resilience League, was established to train young professionals and experts in practical skills and tools for promoting the transatlantic security and defence agenda as well as strengthening national resilience against hybrid threats.<sup>[66]</sup> This programme is supported by the Estonian Ministry of Defence, NATO Public Diplomacy Division and Friedrich Ebert Foundation. It unites experts into a professional network with the goal of developing and implementing innovative methods against hostile ideologies and harmful influence. Additionally, it regularly organises various training events and conducts studies. The format of the international schools includes lectures and interactive seminars based on educational discussions and interactions. This format is led by experienced specialists and recognised practitioners from NATO, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, Georgia, Finland, Ukraine, and other countries.

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Remarkable support is provided to several non-profit organisations that deal with the development of national defence and informational security. For instance, the trilingual (Estonian, Russian, English) blog of *Propastop* is aimed at contributing to Estonia's information space security.<sup>[67]</sup> The blog is run by a group of volunteers, many belonging to the *Estonian Defence League*. Propastop brings to the public deliberately disseminated lies, biased or dis-information in media and other cases of manipulating information. Propastop compares lies with real facts, shows the motives behind the actions and identifies the people interested in manipulating information. Propastop mediates information related to blog topics from state agencies, current media, and literature. Propastop restricts itself

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[65] Estonian National Defence Course. Retrieved from <http://krkk.icds.ee/en/>.

[66] Resilience League. Retrieved from [www.kaitsen.ee/resilience-league](http://www.kaitsen.ee/resilience-league).

[67] Propastop. Retrieved from [www.propastop.org](http://www.propastop.org).

only to exposing propaganda, but does have the ambition to become a web site that contains a compendium on propaganda. The flagship and oldest daily newspaper of the Estonian press, *Postimees*, regularly re-publishes interesting stories from Propastop.<sup>[68]</sup>

Being part of the Estonian Public Broadcasting, Radio 4, one of the most listened to radio channels among local Russian-speakers, recently started a new rubric dedicated to increasing general media literacy and discussing with experts various topics related to disinformation campaigns and fake news.<sup>[69]</sup> The rubric is supported by the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Estonian Ministry of Defence. The CEPA StratCom programme, joined by an Estonian media expert, produces regular briefs and reports on the situation in Estonia. These are often cited in the local press because they are translated into Russian and Estonian.<sup>[70]</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Almost all experts contributing to this research share the common opinion that Estonian society is remarkably resilient because of vivid historic memories and close interactions between the government and civil society. Nevertheless, special attention should be paid to vulnerable societal groups, such as local Russian-speakers, whose informational and psychological resilience might be attacked by disinformation campaigns through hostile narratives or active measures coordinated by Russia or its proxies. Among the realistically applicable recommendations suggested by the experts in this report, the following three deserve particular attention:

1. The Estonian government should continue to involve active members of civil society in practical activities that strengthen national resilience. Different formats of involvement should be supported to capitalise on the synergetic contributions from respective NGOs and volunteers. This should not only be reinforced in national defence but also in areas of internal security, cybersecurity,

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[68] Postimees. Retrieved from <https://www.postimees.ee/search?query=propastop>.

[69] Raadio 4. Retrieved from <http://r4.err.ee//mediagramotnost>.

[70] CEPA StratCom programme. Retrieved from <http://infowar.cepa.org/Countries/Estonia>.

information security, and psychological security. These activities should be perceived as a long-term investment into national security and their effectiveness should be measured in 7–10 years retrospectively .

2. The promotion of national security-related values and virtues within the society should be regularly stated by political leaders and active citizens throughout different levels and on various platforms. These formats should include peer-to-peer, formal education, informal training, embedded in local events and everyday life, community-based approach, tangible presence in social media, recognition of active volunteers in different areas, etc. Such activities should encourage all members of civil society to contribute toward strengthening national resilience.
3. A diverse ecosystem of and continuing symbiosis between state institutions, the private sector, and civil society should be promoted and financially supported as a key element to national resilience. Its reinforcement should be based on eliminating obvious internal and external vulnerabilities, providing qualitative and quantitative situational awareness to the decision-makers, adequately informing the general public about current threat assessments, and preparations for and success stories from minimizing the harmful impact of influence activities against Estonia. The characteristic keywords of the ecosystems must be flexibility, networking, complementary, consciousness, and professional dedication.

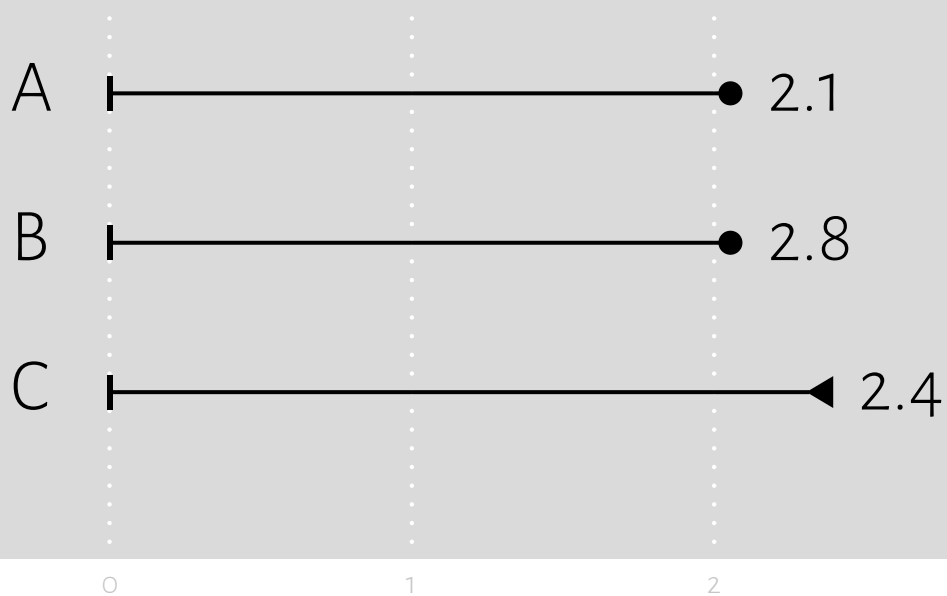




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# GEORGIA



# INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the proclamation of independence by Georgia, the Kremlin continued to actively meddle with the domestic politics of the country. Russia supported separatist forces in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2008, Russia undertook military intervention on the territory of Georgia, followed by war with Georgia. The Kremlin recognised the self-proclaimed sovereignty of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; concluded agreements with the *de facto* governments, by which it strengthened its military, political, and economic positions in the occupied territories.

The occupied territories give Russia major political leverage over Georgia. Russian bases in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia pose serious problem in terms of security of the population. One base is just 20 km away from Tbilisi, in the Akhalkori region. The military units from this base provide major support to the illegal separatist authorities in the regions. Provocations continue periodically, such as the so-called ‘borderisation’, abductions of local people by the Russian troops, etc.

Following the 2012 parliamentary elections, a new political force came to power that actually started ‘to reset’ relations between the Kremlin and Tbilisi. This brought a partial restoration of economic relations, as well as trade between the two countries. According to data from 2017, Russia is Georgia’s largest export destination, with 14.1 % (274 million USD) of Georgian products exported to the country, compared to 2016, when Russia came in third (132 million USD) after Turkey and China.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite an increase in export to Russia, the largest share (24 %) of Georgian export goes to EU countries.<sup>[2]</sup> Russia comes second as the largest importer of Georgian goods, following Turkey (532 million USD). Most imports come from the EU (28 %).

According to data published in 2012, there are up to 800 000 Georgians living in the Russian Federation.<sup>[3]</sup> Whereas, in the same period, Georgia’s

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[1] “Foreign Trade.” 2018. Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia. <http://www.economy.ge/?page=ecoreview&s=20&lang=en>. “Foreign Trade.” 2018. Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia. <http://www.economy.ge/?page=ecoreview&s=20&lang=en>.

[2] “Export-Import Information.” 2018. Ministry of Finance of Georgia. [http://mof.ge/images/File/outlook/Georgia-The-Outlook\\_GEO\\_Oct-2017.pdf](http://mof.ge/images/File/outlook/Georgia-The-Outlook_GEO_Oct-2017.pdf)

[3] Economic Policy Research Center. 2013. Georgian Diaspora Study. [http://eprc.ge/admin/editor/uploads/files/GIZ\\_Georgian\\_Diaspora\\_Study\\_A4\\_Book\\_Print.pdf](http://eprc.ge/admin/editor/uploads/files/GIZ_Georgian_Diaspora_Study_A4_Book_Print.pdf)

population was 4.498 million.<sup>[4]</sup> Seasonal migration is also regular among ethnic minorities.

*'Every year, once they finish cultivation of their land, men leave for Russia to work and return to harvest the crops. It is significant income for their families.'*<sup>[5]</sup>

The number of emigrants is reflected by money transfers: according to NBG data from 2017, the largest number of transfers to Georgia were made from Russia; we get the same picture based on statistics for the last 10 years, e.g., in May 2017, 115.4 million USD were transferred to Georgia, of which 37.8 million USD came from Russia (33.4%), 12.1 million USD came from the US (11.6%) and 11.7 million USD from Greece (10.6%).<sup>[6]</sup>

Similar to Russia, the majority of Georgia's population practices Russian Orthodoxy. In 1917, the Georgian Church regained its independence, which was originally taken from it by the Russian Empire back in 1881. Considering the common religious beliefs, the Georgian population is supportive of nations practising the same religion, including Russians.

The Russian language factor should also be taken into account. In most cases, Russian is the main foreign language for the elderly population in Georgia. Overall, 72% of citizens report their knowledge of Russian language as high. Although the number of those who can speak English is steadily rising (2008, 12%; 2017, 20%),<sup>[7]</sup> especially among the youth, the difference between Russian- and English-speaking skills is still quite visible in the society. Proficiency in Russian increases the dependence on Russian media and contributes to the threat of disinformation from Russian-language media.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

The population of age 50 and older has spent a significant part of their life in the Soviet era. They speak Russian, have people-to-people contacts within society in Russia and many feel nostalgic about the

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[4] National Statistics Office of Georgia. 2018. Summary Vital Statistics 2007–2017. [http://www.geostat.ge/?action=page&p\\_id=151&lang=geo](http://www.geostat.ge/?action=page&p_id=151&lang=geo)

[5] Alexandra Kalatozishvili, Public Movement "Multinational Georgia", February 8, 2018. In-depth interview.

[6] "სტატისტიკური მონაცემები." [Money Transfers by Countries] 2018. საქართველოს ეროვნული ბანკი. 2018. National Bank of Georgia. <https://www.nbg.gov.ge/index.php?m=304>.

[7] "Caucasus Barometer 2017 Georgia." 2018. Caucasusbarometer.org. <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/codebook/>.

Soviet past. In addition, the mentality they built in the Cold War period offers good grounds to cultivate anti-Western feelings and to strengthen loyal attitudes towards Russia as the legal successor of the USSR and an opponent of the West. The majority of the experts interviewed believe that one of the main goals of the Kremlin's disinformation policy in Georgia is to instigate a sense of nihilism about European integration.

Another vulnerable group to pro-Kremlin propaganda in Georgia is ethnic minorities (Armenians, 4.5 %; Azerbaijanis, 6.3 %).<sup>[8]</sup> A lack of knowledge of the Georgian language among the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations, living in the southern and south-eastern parts of the country, is a serious barrier to their integration into Georgian society. As a result, it is difficult to keep this population informed through Georgian sources and leaves space for foreign, including Kremlin-governed disinformation to fill the void. As one of the interviewed state officials put it,

*'for years, the state did not pay enough attention to these people, which distanced them from the process taking place in Georgia. Now we are trying to fill this gap with state programmes. The language barrier is another obstacle and we are working on this too'.<sup>[9]</sup>*

For these reasons, ethnic minorities as well as the Russian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Turkish populations prefer watching programmes where the language is familiar and the content more interesting, this works against Georgia's efforts to counter disinformation.

Economic factors make other groups vulnerable to pro-Kremlin disinformation policy. Of the Georgian workforce, 52 % is employed in the agriculture sector, of which 98 % are self-employed.<sup>[10]</sup> The Russian market, with its size and lower quality standards, plays an important role when it comes to selling products from this sector. As the openness of the Russian market to foreign goods is determined mainly by the Kremlin's political agenda, Georgian entrepreneurs who are dependent on the Russian market have become extremely vulnerable to the pro-Kremlin propaganda.

The large Georgian diaspora and their economic and other links with their families in Georgia provide the Kremlin with favourable means

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[8] "2014 General Population Census Main Results. General Information." 2016. National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). [http://census.ge/files/results/Census\\_release\\_ENG.pdf](http://census.ge/files/results/Census_release_ENG.pdf).

[9] Archil Kharaulashvili, Office of the State Minister of Georgia on European & Euro-Atlantic Integration, February 6, 2018. In-depth interview.

[10] "Strategy for Agricultural Development in Georgia 2015–2020." 2018. The European Union of Georgia. <http://enpard.ge/en/strategy-for-agricultural-development-in-georgia-2015-2020/>.

of provocations in terms of disinformation and exerting other kinds of influence.

We may also consider the conservative portion of active believers belonging to the Georgian Orthodox Church as vulnerable to Kremlin disinformation. The anti-western context is topical for them and a pro-Kremlin narrative is often heard as the alternative. This narrative is often revealed in the preaching of particular clerics.<sup>[11]</sup> But as Metropolitan Andria notes, the Patriarchate of Georgia supports the choice of the Georgian people about the integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic space.<sup>[12]</sup> One of the frequent myths concerns the concept of Moscow as a Third Rome, which gives Russia special religious importance in the Orthodox world.

Although the majority of Georgia's population supports the integration of the country into Western geopolitical structures (according to 2017 data, 80% and 68% of the Georgian population is supportive of integration with the EU and NATO membership, respectively),<sup>[13]</sup> and that the relevant foreign policy obligation has been encoded in the country's constitution,<sup>[14]</sup> yet a part of the society does not agree with it. Individuals who represent mainly the radical part of the nationalist community are major targets of pro-Kremlin propaganda. This group is divided into two sub-groups. There are political and social forces, who overtly conduct pro-Kremlin policy.

*'He put Russia on its feet, ... to tell you the truth, I would wish the same president for my country as Vladimir Putin'*

Nino Burjanadze, former Speaker of parliament and the leader of the Democratic Movement – United Georgia told Deutsche Welle.<sup>[15]</sup>

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[11] "Threats of Russia's Soft and Hard Power Policy in Georgia." 2016. European Initiative—Liberal Academy Tbilisi. <http://www.ei-lat.ge/images/doc/policy%20document.pdf>.

[12] ლიკლიკაძე კობა (Koba Liklikadze). 2016. "მეუფე ანდრია: საქართველოს ეკლესია მხარს უჭერს ევროატლანტიკურ არჩევანს." [Metropolitan Andria: The Georgian church supports Euro-Atlantic Choice] რადიო თავისუფლება. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/sakartvelos-eklesia-mkhars-uchers-natos/28106488.html>.

[13] Thornton, Laura, and Koba Turmanidze. 2017. "Results of December 2017 Survey Carried out for NDI by CRRG Georgia." CRRG Georgia, National Democratic Institution, UKAid, British Embassy Tbilisi. [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll\\_December%202017\\_ISSUES\\_ENG\\_vf.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_December%202017_ISSUES_ENG_vf.pdf).

[14] "საკონსტიტუციო ცვლილებების პროექტით შემოთავაზებული სიახლეების შეფასება." [Assessment of Proposed Initiatives by the Draft of the Constitutional Amendments] 2017. ინფორმაციის თავისუფლების განვითარების ინსტიტუტი. Institute for Development of Freedom of Information. [https://idfi.ge/public/upload/IDFI\\_Photos\\_2017/rule\\_of\\_law/constitutional\\_changes\\_idfi.pdf](https://idfi.ge/public/upload/IDFI_Photos_2017/rule_of_law/constitutional_changes_idfi.pdf).

[15] Немцова, Жанна. 2017. "Нино Бурджанадзе: Грузии Нужен Такой Президент, Как Путин." Deutsche Welle. 2017. <http://p.dw.com/p/2nCA1>

The other part of the radical nationalists stays aloof from clear pro-Russia policy, although they cultivate Euroscepticism and anti-Western feelings. They regard themselves as pro-Georgia forces.<sup>[16]</sup>

*‘These radical right-wing forces are anti-globalists and against Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Their aspirations coincide inadvertently in some issues with the goals of the pro-Kremlin propaganda’,<sup>[17]</sup>*

Malkhaz Gagua, editor of the newspaper Rezonansi said. Given this factor, these groups are the most susceptible to pro-Kremlin narratives.

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Georgia has a broad and diversified media landscape and the most liberal media laws in the entire Southern Caucasus region. There is virtually no direct state censorship, although in some cases, private media reflect the political orientation of media company owners, on whom they depend both financially and politically.

Georgia’s media landscape continues to face major challenges that have only grown since the country signed the EU Association Agreement in June 2014. In that agreement, the Georgian government committed to maintaining European standards of media freedom as well as media law, but neither journalists nor legal experts yet have the ability and experience to ensure that the necessary changes laid out in the agreement have been implemented.<sup>[18]</sup>

Media ownership in Georgia is transparent. None of the major media outlets are directly owned by any political force. Several cable and internet broadcasters are owned by anti-Western organisations. Their declared income is quite small, so it is unclear what kind of resources these channels have for broadcasting.<sup>[19]</sup>

Regarding online media, the transparency requirements of ownership do not apply, therefore citizens do not have information about the majority

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[16] European Initiative Liberal Academy Tbilisi. (2016). Threats of Russia’s Soft and Hard Power Policy in Georgia. Analytical research, p. 39–40. Retrieved from: <http://www.ei-lat.ge/images/doc/policy%20document.pdf>

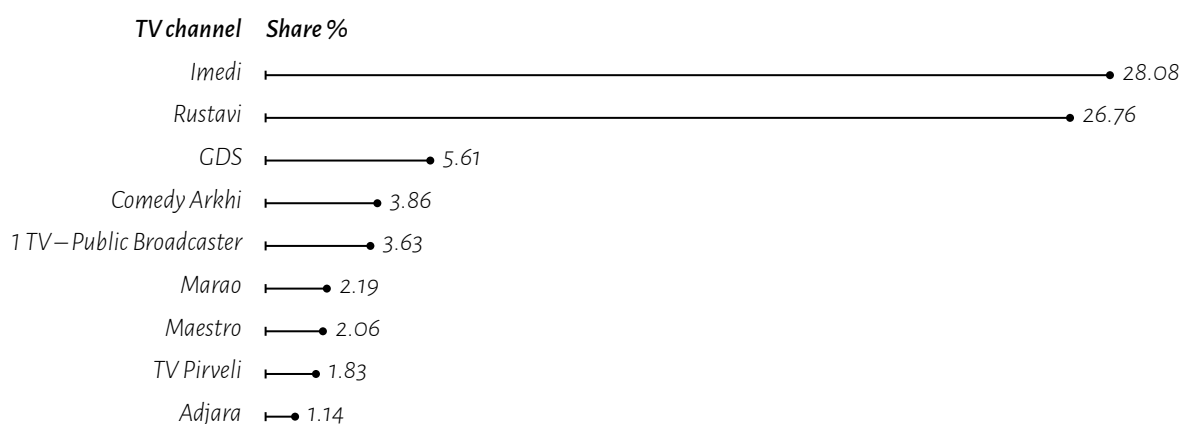
[17] Malkhaz Gagua, Rezonansi, February 17, 2018. In-depth interview.

[18] Deutsche Welle. 2015. “DW Akademie in Georgia.” <http://p.dw.com/p/1Fb01>.

[19] საერთაშორისო გამჭვირვალობა საქართველო. 2014. ვის ეკუთვნის ქართული მედია. Transparency International Georgia. Who owns Georgia’s media. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzmczXAkbwztdUFEQWJWWl9OWms/view>

of websites. Interviews carried out by Transparency International Georgia and systematic observations on information websites have shown that during the last few years, there have appeared media outlets online that are based on political preferences. These groups intensively use social networks to disseminate information. Given their existence, providing audiences with fact-checked and high-quality journalistic information is becoming more difficult.<sup>[20]</sup>

Over the past few years, some news websites have been actively involved in anti-Western propaganda and their rhetoric is often expressed in a xenophobic and homophobic context.



### **Top rated TV channels in Georgia**

Source: TVMR Georgia (2017)

Chart 1 shows the top-rated TV channels in Georgia according to data from in 2017 compiled by the television Audience Measurement official licensee company TVMR Georgia. These channels are less likely to be influenced by Kremlin disinformation. Most of the respondents note that Kremlin propaganda does not spread on the popular TV channels. However, they mention media outlets that often spread Kremlin propaganda. The TV station Obiektivi is one of the most frequently mentioned television broadcasters carrying out a pro-Kremlin, Turkophobic, xenophobic, and homophobic editorial policy. According to the mentioned data (TVMR GE), Obiektivi is not among the country’s popular channels.

[20] Ibid.

Anti-liberal, ethno-nationalistic, and pro-Kremlin propaganda is also spread by print and online media. In this regard, it is important to note the newspapers Asaval-Dasavali, Alia-Holding and online editions Georgia and the World and Saqinform. According to the Media Development Fund's (MDF) Media Monitoring Report 2016, anti-Western messages are spread by the following media outlets: 1) Georgia and the World; 2) Asaval-Dasavali; 3) Saqinform; 4) Obiektivi; 5) Alia-Holding. They publish concepts such as Georgian society, in cooperation with Orthodox Russia, is the guarantee for a better future for Georgia; that by entering NATO, Georgia will be reluctant to live under Turkish dictate; that the US is completely powerless against Russia's military actions; and so on.<sup>[21]</sup>

Since 2012, Georgian media has experienced significant changes to become much more pluralistic, as confirmed by respective international rankings. In the summer of 2015, Georgia fully switched to digital broadcasting, which should definitely be regarded as a positive development for the Georgian media environment. Furthermore, several new TV stations were launched and some old ones resumed broadcasting. The new TV Pirveli emerged in the Georgian television space, while the TV company Iberia resumed broadcasting.<sup>[22]</sup>

There are non-profit organisations in Georgia that fight disinformation, propaganda, and the dissemination of myths through media monitoring. One of the organisations that conducts ongoing media monitoring is the Georgian Charter of Journalist Ethics (GCJE), established on December 4, 2009. GCJE's mission is to increase media social responsibility by observing professional and ethical standards and creating self-regulating mechanisms.<sup>[23]</sup> Representatives of media organisations from the regions and the capital signed on to 11 principles within the scope of the GCJE.

The GCJE allows citizens to appeal cases of journalists' ethical violations. In addition, GCJE conducts surveys in the media space, as well as monitors the usage of hate speech, disinformation, and propaganda. Because of this activity, it became a member of the Consultation Committee established to fight propaganda. The Committee is composed of representatives of

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[21] მედიის განვითარების ფონდი. ანტიდასავლური პროპაგანდა. [Anti-Western propaganda] 2016. Media Monitoring Report. Retrieved from: [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/65/file/Antidasavluri-GEO-web\\_\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/65/file/Antidasavluri-GEO-web_(1).pdf)

[22] "Georgian Media Environment from 2012 Parliamentary Elections till Present." 2016. Transparency International-Georgia. [http://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post\\_attachments/georgian\\_media\\_environment\\_from\\_2012\\_parliamentary\\_elections\\_till\\_present.pdf](http://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post_attachments/georgian_media_environment_from_2012_parliamentary_elections_till_present.pdf).

[23] Nata Dzelishvili, Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, February 9, 2018. In-depth interview.



the self-regulation councils of the following countries: Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia. The committee was set up to fight propaganda.

The GCJE reviews reported cases of a violation of professional standards on request, although it does not impose any sanctions on the offender. Since 2010, the GCJE has reviewed 163 cases by different media outlets.<sup>[24]</sup>

Since 2008, surveys on local media have been carried out by MDF, which, among other issues, supports freedom of expression, ethical journalism, accountability, media knowledge, and diversity.<sup>[25]</sup> Its 'Myths Detector' format, which the MDF created in the framework of the EWMI project, works on identifying myths disseminated in the media and verifying fake information.

The legal, political, and economic environment in the country has a key impact on media. In a democracy with an orderly legislative base, free from state interference in the economy, and with freedom of expression actually practiced, media enjoy true independence. Freedom House is an international organisation that studies these factors and publishes annual reports on the level of freedom of media in many countries.

According to the 2017 media freedom report by Freedom House, Georgia received 50 points and is among the countries where media is partly free, whereas in terms of legislation, Georgia received 13 points out of 30, in the political environment, 21 points out of 40, and in the economic environment, 16 points out of 30. Georgia has been placed among the partly free countries in terms of media freedom for several years now, with the following press freedom indexes: 47 in 2014, 48 in 2015, 49 in 2016, and then 50 in 2017.<sup>[26]</sup> Considering the results of the Freedom House survey of 2017, Georgia has the best indicators of the freedom of press in the post-Soviet space.

Freedom House publishes annual reports on freedom of the internet as well. According to the results for 2017, Georgia received 24 points out of 100 and was assessed as free. In access to the internet, the results have improved compared to 2016. According to the report, 50 % of the

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[24] "Examined Cases." 2018. The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. <http://qartia.ge/en/complaints>.

[25] Media Development Foundation Georgia. <http://mdfjgeorgia.ge/eng/home/>

[26] "Freedom of the Press 2017: Georgia." 2017. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/georgia>.

population in Georgia has access to the internet.<sup>[27]</sup> This may be the result of constitutional amendments adopted by parliament on September 26, 2017, which incorporate access to the internet as a basic human right.<sup>[28]</sup>

The main source of information on political processes and of the current news in Georgia comes from television and the internet. According to the NDI survey, the percentage of information received from traditional media is significantly high compared to the amount of information obtained from internet sources. Nevertheless, according to data from 2017, the share of information obtained from the internet has increased, maybe at the expense of television. While, according to data from 2016, 77 % of the population regarded television as the primary source of information,<sup>[29]</sup> in 2017 this indicator decreased to 72 %, and usage of the internet increased from 14 % to 21 %.<sup>[30]</sup>

Georgian law on broadcasting obliges the public broadcaster, a state-funded television station, to promote the main foreign policy goals of the country, including its European and Euro-Atlantic integration.<sup>[31]</sup> However, it should be noted that the public broadcaster has not done enough to meet this obligation. This is proved by the decision of the public broadcaster's management to close its bureau in Europe, blamed on a lack of financial resources. The bureau was covering important visits in the countries of Europe, broadcasting live from different hot spots, and prepared feature stories on the EU and NATO. This proves that the national media operates in its financial interest.

Natia Kuprashvili, head of the Journalism Resource Centre, believes it is vitally important for the Georgian audience to have access to European media products and that covering issues related to European integration and European values in the Georgian media space is of primary importance for the country.<sup>[32]</sup>

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[27] "Freedom House: საქართველოს ქულა ინტერნეტის თავისუფლების რეიტინგში გაუმჯობესდა." [Georgia's Score of Internet Freedom has Improved] 2017. [https://idfi.ge/443/ge/freedom\\_house\\_georgias\\_score\\_in\\_internet\\_freedom\\_ranking\\_has\\_improved](https://idfi.ge/443/ge/freedom_house_georgias_score_in_internet_freedom_ranking_has_improved).

[28] "საკონსტიტუციო ცვლილებების პროექტით შემოთავაზებული სიახლეების შეფასება." [Assessment of Proposed Initiatives by the Draft of the Constitutional Amendments] 2017. Institute for Development of Freedom of Information. ინფორმაციის თავისუფლების განვითარების ინსტიტუტი. [https://idfi.ge/public/upload/IDFI\\_Photos\\_2017/rule\\_of\\_law/constitutional\\_changes\\_idfi.pdf](https://idfi.ge/public/upload/IDFI_Photos_2017/rule_of_law/constitutional_changes_idfi.pdf).

[29] Thornton, Laura, and Koba Turmanidze. 2017. Ibid.

[30] Thornton, Laura, and Koba Turmanidze. 2017. Ibid.

[31] "საქართველოს კანონი მაუწყებლობის შესახებ." [Law of Georgia on Broadcasting] 2005. საქართველოს პარლამენტი. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/32866>.

[32] Natia Kuprashvili, Journalism Resource Center, February 14, 2018. In-depth interview.

The public broadcaster is also obliged to broadcast programmes in minority languages and about minorities, as well as programmes prepared by minorities in respective proportions. Apart from this, the Georgian government has adopted the ‘State Strategy of Civic Equality and Integration’, which among other goals highlights the importance of increasing access to media and information as a step towards promoting full and equal engagement of ethnic minorities in the civic and political life of the country. The strategy states that ‘media plays a special role in successful progress of the integration process both through its coverage of topics related to ethnic minorities and their involvement’.<sup>[33]</sup> The strategy also envisages improving ethnic minorities’ access to information in their native ethnic languages and their inclusion in the common information space as a part of the integration process.<sup>[34]</sup> The strategy places the leading role on the public broadcaster in this process. Despite all this, there is no clear-cut state policy at this point that would prompt ethnic minorities’ interest in the foreign language-based content. The results of the NDI public survey depicts the popularity of non-Georgian TV channels among the ethnic minority populated regions at 52 %, mostly Russian news programmes. Satellite dishes are used to get information in these regions. However, these regions are gradually switching to digital broadcasting.

It should be noted that after the 2008 war, Georgian cable TV companies stopped transmitting Russian channels upon a verbal directive from the government. All Russian channels were also removed from cable TV packages. However, after the change of government in 2012, broadcasting of Russian channels resumed. For example, nowadays, more than 50 Russian-language channels are available in the 119-channel package offered by the digital TV company Global TV. Also, about 90 Russian-language channels are included in the 222-channel package offered by operator Silknet.

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[33] “სამოქალაქო თანასწორობისა და ინტეგრაციის სახელმწიფო სტრატეგიისა და 2015–2020 წწ. სამოქმედო გეგმის დამტკიცების შესახებ.” [State Strategy for Civil Equality and Integration and 2015-2020 Approval of the Action Plan] 2015. Government of Georgia. <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/2958879>.

[34] “სამოქალაქო თანასწორობისა და ინტეგრაციის სახელმწიფო სტრატეგიისა და 2015-2020 წწ. სამოქმედო გეგმის დამტკიცების შესახებ.” [State Strategy for Civil Equality and Integration and 2015-2020 Approval of the Action Plan] 2015. Government of Georgia. <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/2958879>.

## LEGAL REGULATIONS

The democratic form of government implies that the population makes the decision independently, which is impossible without an accurate, fact-based, balanced, ethical, and responsible media environment. There is no significant problem in Georgia in this regard at the legislative level, as the ‘Law on Broadcasting’ in force since 2004 is liberal. The law provided for the creation of a public broadcaster independent from state interference and builds on the freedom of expression and thought.<sup>[35]</sup> This makes it difficult to fight disinformation and propaganda in the country using legal leverage.

Broadcasting activities are regulated by the National Regulatory Commission, which is independent from any state agency. The legal status of the commission is determined by the law of Georgia on electronic communications, adopted in 2005.<sup>[36]</sup>

Pursuant to the broadcasting law, the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) adopted a ‘Code of Conduct for Broadcasters’, which aims to ensure that all broadcasters have an equal responsibility to observe professional ethical norms and accountability to society. The code helps journalists, publishers, and broadcasters resolve issues related to ethics and also obliges them to provide reliable, accurate, and fact-based information to their audiences. Based on Article 7 of the code, broadcasters are instructed to establish an effective self-regulation mechanism: ‘Broadcasters have the right to choose an effective self-regulation mechanism, in accordance with this Code, which meets high professional standards and provides for transparent and effective complaints handling procedure and ensures timely and substantiated response to them.’<sup>[37]</sup>

The interviewed experts and civil servants unanimously agree that establishing stricter rules in this field will be counterproductive.

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[35] “საქართველოს კანონი მაუწყებლობის შესახებ.” [Law of Georgia on Broadcasting] 2004. საქართველოს პარლამენტი. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/32866>.

[36] “საქართველოს კანონი ელექტრონული კომუნიკაციების შესახებ.” [Law of Georgia on Digital Communications.] 2005. საქართველოს პარლამენტი. 2005. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/29620>.

[37] “საქართველოს კომუნიკაციების ეროვნული კომისიის დადგენილება „მაუწყებელთა ქცევის კოდექსის“ დამტკიცების თაობაზე.” [Decree of the Georgian National Communications Commission on Approval of the Code of Conduct of Broadcasters] 2009. საქართველოს კომუნიკაციების ეროვნული კომისია. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/82792>.

However, Sulkhan Saladze, GYLA Chairman, notes general shortcomings in the constitutional legislative base:

*‘in terms of the security of information, the legislative base needs substantial improvement. A holistic government vision and the taking into account public opinion are the most important for such improvements’.*<sup>[38]</sup>

The Personal Data Protection Inspector of Georgia believes that analysis of the law on ‘Security of Information’, identification of shortcomings and assessment of its implementation is possible. She believes it is important to increase the introduction of standards of security of information and to increase the financing of the relevant agencies to this end.<sup>[39]</sup>

According to media representatives, the media regulations in Georgia are liberal, which promotes media pluralism. They regard the implementation part as the most problematic.

*‘I do not see the necessity to change the law, but I think that the state through the regulation commission should monitor those media means, which contribute to hate speech and controversy’.*

Khatia Jinjikhadze, the deputy executive director of the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) said.<sup>[40]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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Photos used when disseminating propaganda often do not relate to the article in question but are often misrepresented, either by being used out of context or by being doctored, e.g., in 2017 [www.digest.pia.ge](http://www.digest.pia.ge) and Georgia and the World published a statement by Jondi Baghaturia, the leader of Kartuli Dasi, which spoke about raids against Orthodox Christian churches and cathedrals in Ukraine, as well as about physical violence against clergy and congregation. Together with the statement, Jondi Baghaturia had uploaded a photo on social networks, which the news agencies used. *The Myths Detector* revealed that the photo was not related to the raid on the Orthodox church, but an explosion in a church in the town of Zaporizhia, which resulted in the arrest of three criminals.<sup>[41]</sup> Apart from this type of debunking, the Myths Detector

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[38] Sulkhan Saladze, Georgian Young Lawyers Association, February 25, 2018. In-depth interview.

[39] Tamar Kaldani, Personal Data Protection Inspector, February 20, 2018. In-depth interview.

[40] Khatia Jinjikhadze, Open Society Georgia Foundation, February 17, 2018. In-depth interview.

[41] Tamar Kintsurashvili, Media Development Foundation, February 19, 2018. In-depth interview.

works to reveal how Kremlin forces try to spread Turkophobic attitudes in Georgia.

Another example of photo manipulation is from May 29, 2017, when the publication Asaval-Dasavali spread information that NATO had received a new uniform for transgender military service personnel. This information included photos the newspaper claimed were of transgender service personnel from NATO. However, the people in the photo were actually representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union, and not NATO troops.<sup>[42]</sup>

*Mediachecker.ge* published an article titled ‘Trade in Organs and pro-Kremlin Propaganda’ which reported on an article by *Sakinform* on September 12, titled ‘Lonely persons are abducted in Kyiv, ripped into pieces and buried secretly—the underground hiding place of Mikheil Saakashvili’s wife was found!’ The news agency asserts that lonely people were being abducted in Kyiv, ripped apart and then buried secretly, and a well full of human bodies was found near Kyiv. But, this information was not confirmed and similar articles relating to the same story can only be found in Kremlin propagandistic publications—rusgambit.ru, Pravda.ru, news.sputnik.ru, etc.<sup>[43]</sup>

On January 27, 2018, the TV Obiektivi broadcasted a news report prepared by Channel 1 of the Russian State television service. According to the programme’s host, Valeri Kvaratskhelia, the coverage depicts the downing of an American ‘invisible’ aircraft by Soviet weapons, to emphasize US military weakness. Although the Myths Detector found out that the video material provided by TV Obiektivi was not related to the case at all, rather it depicted an air show event in the US state of Maryland in 1997. In fact, the reason for the downing of the so-called ‘invisible’ American aircraft—presumably an F-117 stealth fighter that crashed in the former Yugoslavia—is still unknown..

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[42] მეხტივე მანოვრუზ (Meadveev Manovruz). 2017. “ასავალ-დასავალის” განმეორებითი ფოტომანიპულაცია NATO-ს შესახებ.” [Asaval-Dasavali’s Repeat Photomapping About NATO] მითების დეტექტორი. <http://mythdetector.ge/ka/myth/asaval-dasavalis-ganmeorebiti-potomanipulatsia-nato-s-shesakheb-o>

[43] “ორგანობით ვაჭრობა და რუსული პროპაგანდა.” [Organic trade and Russian propaganda] 2016. Mediachecker. <http://mediachecker.ge/mediacritics/detail/207>.

# INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

A large percentage (45 %) of the experts surveyed within this research project believe that the level of institutional development in the field of information security is low. There is a law in Georgia protecting the security of information,<sup>[44]</sup> which establishes rights and obligations, as well as state border-control mechanisms in this area.

Regarding government bodies, there is the 'Communications Strategy of the Government of Georgia on EU and NATO Membership 2017–2020', in which the Kremlin's information war is considered a significant threat to Georgia. According to the government's 2014–2017 strategy, different structural units were established in various departments with the goal to coordinate EU and NATO integration processes.

There is the National Security Council of Georgia, whose obligation is to deepen cooperation in different areas. However, according to amendments to the constitution, in 2018, following the presidential elections, the National Security Council will be abolished. During peacetime, the functions of the Security Council will be distributed to the executive branch of government, led by the prime minister, and during war-time, responsibility will pass to the Defence Council, which will be subordinated to the president. According to the Secretary of the National Security Council, Davit Rakviashvili,

*'the abolition of the Security Council is a big mistake because there will be no institution where the president, the prime minister, and the speaker of parliament will meet each other to discuss security issues.'*<sup>[45]</sup>

There is a Cyber Security Bureau in the Ministry of Defence of Georgia. Under the umbrella of interagency cooperation, the Cyber Security Bureau cooperates with the Data Exchange Agency, Cybercrime Division of the Central Police Department, State Security Service, State Security, and Crises Management Council, etc. In 2015–2016, within the framework of interagency cooperation, the cyber-exercise Cyber Exe was held

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[44] "ინფორმაციული უსაფრთხოების შესახებ." [Information Security] 2012. საქართველოს პარლამენტი.  
<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1679424>.

[45] საჯაია ნანა (Sajaia Nana). 2018. "დავით რაქვიაშვილი: 'ეროვნული უსაფრთხოების სისტემა მორღვეულია.'" [Davit Rakviashvili: 'The national security system is broken'] VOA.  
<https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/interview-david-rakviashvili/4242321.html>.

at the national level with the involvement of IT specialists from the state and private sector.

Concerning the development of strategic communications, in 2018, the US embassy in Tbilisi began financing the Strategic Communication Programme in Georgia, which is an important mechanism for strengthening cooperation between the US and Georgia.

As the conversation with the interviewed civil servants revealed, the state bodies try to counter challenges related to the security of information on their own, without the assistance of other state agencies.

*'There is no permanent interagency cooperation set up in this field, (and) cooperation may take place only on a specific issue'*

Tengiz Pkhaladze, an adviser to the president of Georgia, said.<sup>[46]</sup>

David Usupashvili, the former Speaker of the Parliament, sees another barrier to the lack of cooperation in the decision to dissolve the Security Council:

*'to counter a major challenge such as the security of information, we need to permanently update methods and develop a common state policy. The Security Council could play an important role, including in terms of cooperation.'*<sup>[47]</sup>

Cooperation between governmental and non-governmental organisations is more intense in the area of information security. Joint campaigns have been implemented mainly on issues related to European and Euro-Atlantic integration to provide accurate information to the public. According to Tamar Kintsurashvili,

*'we cooperate with the information centres of NATO and the EU and we share the results of our daily monitoring.'*<sup>[48]</sup>

There is a different picture when it comes to cooperation within the non-governmental sector. Almost all the interviewed representatives of NGOs confirm they cooperate with other civil-society organisations within various non-governmental alliances and campaigns. Such formats include the Eastern Partnership platform, Alliance of Regional Broadcasters, and the Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia. There are also small-scale partnerships between two or three organisations aimed at identifying

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[46] Tengiz Pkhaladze, Advisor of the President of Georgia – Foreign Relations Secretary, February 6, 2018. In-depth interview.

[47] David Usupashvili, Development Movement, February 16, 2018. In-depth interview.

[48] Tamar Kintsurashvili, Media Development Foundation, February 19, 2018. In-depth interview.



disinformation, strengthening regional media, and implementing objective information campaigns to counter the propaganda activities.

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

Despite active cooperation among civil-society organisations and legal regulations being in place, fake and inaccurate information is still disseminated in the Georgian media space. Chapter 3 of the ‘Code of Conduct for Broadcasters’ refers to the protection of due accuracy—the broadcaster is obliged to take all reasonable measures to ensure that facts are accurate and sources of information are reliable, while Article 5 stipulates that broadcasters should refrain from staging and restaging events in news and programmes in order not to mislead the audience.<sup>[49]</sup> Kremlin disinformation and myths are spread in Georgia in different ways—some of the myths help to disseminate the Kremlin narrative and to cultivate an understanding among society that Russia is the only solution for Georgians; another part attempts to change public opinion and to increase support for the pro-Kremlin narrative by disseminating anti-Western messages. Also, Russian myths often relate to the sense of national identity.

*‘Pro-Kremlin propaganda is spreading in Georgia under the guise of anti-Western propaganda. No one has yet measured the effect of such propaganda, but it is a fact that some part of the population shares such propaganda. We find in certain media anti-Western narratives’*,

Jinjikhadze, OSGF’s deputy executive director noted.<sup>[50]</sup> For instance, on December 27, 2017, the online edition of Georgia and the World published an interview with a cleric in which the journalist says that incest is recognised as a norm in Europe.<sup>[51]</sup>

Another myth, which the Kremlin supports as its main focus of propaganda, is the idea of a neutral Georgia, viewing as a risk its joining NATO. Pro-Kremlin forces actively try to generate scepticism

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[49] “საქართველოს კომუნიკაციების ეროვნული კომისიის დადგენილება „მუწყებელთა ქცევის კოდექსის“ დამტკიცების თაობაზე.” [Decree of the Georgian National Communications Commission on Approval of the Code of Conduct of Broadcasters] 2009. საქართველოს კომუნიკაციების ეროვნული კომისია. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/82792>.

[50] Khatia Jinjikhadze, Deputy Executive Director of Open Society Georgia Foundation, February 17, 2018. In-depth interview.

[51] “დებინფორმაცია, თითქოს ევროპა ინცესტს ნორმად აღიარებს. მითების დეტექტორი.” [Disinformation as if Europe is Acknowledged as an Inspector.] 2018. <http://mythdetector.ge/ka/myth/dezinpormatsia-titkos-evropa-intsests-normad-aghiarebs>

in Georgian society and destroy all expectations related to the country's integration into NATO.

Apart from legislative regulation, monitoring and analysis of journalistic products in Georgian TV stations, online, and print media is done by other means as well. Representatives of media organisations undertake daily analysis of broadcasters, online media (social networks), and print media. OSGF is actively involved in this process. One of the priority areas of the foundation's activity is strengthening and supporting media organisations that operate with accuracy, objectivity, and good quality information.

*'We are not building a counter narrative; we are constructing a correct narrative and helping local media cover the real situation',*

Jinjikhadze explained.<sup>[52]</sup>

The **MDF** fights the dissemination of fake news and myths in the Georgian media space through its '*Myths Detector*' format. The aim of the organisation's members is to react to disinformation and myths and provide the public with accurate, fact-based information.<sup>[53]</sup>

The website *mediachecker.ge* is a platform for media critics in Georgia. The project is funded by the OSGF and implemented by the GCJE. The webpage actively disseminates information about materials containing disinformation and pro-Kremlin propaganda and highlights fake news and inaccuracies used to influence public opinion.<sup>[54]</sup>

The 2017 NDI public poll confirmed that Kremlin propaganda regarding Russia's military power has had a significant impact on Georgian society. According to the NDI survey, 41 % of those interviewed believe that Russia's military power is greater than that of the US, while 36 % believe the US to be stronger militarily than Russia. Such a difference between these numbers is significantly influenced by regions populated with ethnic minorities. In these regions, 55 % of those interviewed believe that militarily, Russia is stronger than the US.<sup>[55]</sup>

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[52] Khatia Jinjikhadze, Deputy Executive Director of Open Society Georgia Foundation, February 17, 2018. In-depth interview.

[53] Tamar Kintsurashvili, Media Development Foundation, February 19, 2018. In-depth interview.

[54] Platform of Media Criticism — Media Checker. <http://mediachecker.ge/>

[55] Thornton, Laura, and Koba Turmanidze. 2017. Ibid.

# MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

Representatives of NGOs believe that enhanced media literacy is closely linked with education, as society should be able to use it as an instrument to filter information and develop critical thinking.

*‘I do not think that media literacy is an important factor, rather I believe the problem is in the level of education; media literacy can be one of its elements. In general, it is more important to raise the level of education and promote critical thinking’*,

Levan Avalishvili, programme director of Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), said.<sup>[56]</sup>

Experts believe that media literacy should start in school and should be taught to pupils as a separate subject or in combination with others.

*‘If media literacy is taught at schools, this will help the country’s development, especially vulnerable groups’*,

the MDF director said.<sup>[57]</sup>

There is no state programme supporting the development of media literacy in Georgia today, but there are media organisations working on this issue, e.g., on the margins of the media literacy programme with MDF elaborated guidelines that aim at assisting media consumers to check fake information and handle disinformation. The organisation, through the support of Deutsche Welle offers courses in media literacy, which include theoretical and practical instruction in the methods of countering propaganda.<sup>[58]</sup>

On August 4, 2017, the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. embassy in Tbilisi invited Georgian non-profit/non-governmental organisations to submit proposals for a project lasting up to 24 months to improve media literacy skills among young Georgians between the ages of 16 and 24 that includes ethnic minorities and people at risk of being socially marginalised. Expected results included an increase of at least 20 % in program participants’ ability to distinguish trustworthy news from fake news

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[56] Levan Avalishvili, Programs Director – Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, February 9, 2018. In-depth interview.

[57] Tamar Kintsurashvili, Media Development Foundation, February 19, 2018. In-depth interview.

[58] Myth Detector Lab. <http://mythdetector.ge/ka/laboratory>

and an increase of at least 20 % of those who cross-check information from the news.<sup>[59]</sup>

On September 9, 2016, Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian students participated in media literacy camps, which formed part of the *Strengthening Independent Media* project in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. While aiming to increase citizens' access to reliable information about local, regional, and international issues of public importance through supporting the independent media sector, the project included components exclusively concerning young people: a media literacy camp and the 'European Café' discussion club, organised at different venues all around Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. In total, 100 participants attended media literacy camps in the three countries, and feedback about the events was mostly positive. Programmes included topics such as: the basics of media literacy, how to develop critical thinking, practical mobile journalism, investigation of media effects, social media and blogging, and verification and fact-checking.<sup>[60]</sup>

On March 12-13, 2017, as part of the EU funded project '*Promoting freedom, professionalism and pluralism of the media*', the Council of Europe (CoE), in cooperation with the GNCC, organised a series of training seminars for the members of the GNCC based on CoE/European Court of Human Rights standards concerning the regulation of 'TV products having detrimental effects on children' and of 'TV-like services'. During the training seminars, the CoE experts working at the European national communications commission, respectively in Poland and Bosnia-Herzegovina, reviewed the best European standards on how to ensure the protection of minors through legislation and self-regulatory mechanisms as well as specified programme labelling and age-rating practices. The experience of setting up the media-literacy networks and the role of the communications commission were also actively discussed during the events.<sup>[61]</sup>

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[59] "Media Literacy Program. U.S. Embassy in Georgia." 2018. <https://ge.usembassy.gov/education-culture/grant-programs-2/media-literacy-program/>.

[60] Gugunishvili, Nino. 2018. "Combating Fake News: Training Students in Media Literacy in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova." Georgia Today. <http://bit.ly/2HbAxz3>

[61] "Trainings for Members of Georgian National Communications Commission." 2017. Council of Europe Office in Georgia. <http://bit.ly/2q3S1VD>

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on our analysis, it seems right to say, in parallel to traditional military power, Russia resorts to the use of soft-power tools more and more often to support its foreign policy interests. These tools are being effectively used to spread the ideology and values of the Kremlin.

The Kremlin information machine influences media, political organisations, and civil society. The main source of Russia's soft-power policy is the propagandistic, aggressive, anti-Western information campaign. In contrast to the pro-Kremlin propaganda, unbiased news agencies operating in the pluralistic media environment in Georgia with comparatively small resources cannot properly counter the massive disinformation flow. Kremlin propaganda has several pillars in Georgia. One of them comprises ultra-nationalistic movements, which are influenced by the Kremlin by manipulating issues of national identity. Russian disinformation has had a significant impact on the population of middle-aged and older people who lived in the Soviet era, can speak good Russian, and have economic and other links with people living in Russia. There are also serious challenges with regard to ethnic minorities. There is a need to strengthen and broaden existing policies and to optimise relevant mechanisms to fight disinformation. The language barrier is a serious factor in the regions, populated with ethnic minorities, as it exposes their vulnerability to disinformation and to their integration with the rest of Georgia.

A shortage of resources within regional NGOs and media also poses a problem. A lack of media literacy stands out as one of the main reasons pro-Kremlin propaganda spreads among the population. There is a serious problem developing the media skills of the population; however, the lack of media skills among journalists working in Georgia is far more important.

The majority of the population in Georgia supports the country's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and the necessary reforms to achieve these goals. However, it should be noted that lately there has been a slight rise in anti-NATO feelings (2014, 15%; 2017, 21%).<sup>[62]</sup> One of the main reasons for this trend could be the spread of pro-Kremlin propaganda.

The survey shows that the state lacks a clear vision to counter disinformation, proved by the fact that there is no national strategy to

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[62] Thornton, Laura, and Koba Turmanidze. 2017. Ibid.

fight such threats. Pro-Kremlin disinformation has not been officially identified as a significant threat, which leads to suspicion that the threat is not duly assessed. Another problem is the ineffectiveness of cooperation between state bodies on this issue.

It is evident that myths are successfully spread in Georgian society. The types and form of these myths have been identified. They have been proven to be effective and efficient in spreading disinformation by delivering results. There are several non-governmental groups in Georgia that try to identify and decipher these myths. However, in an environment of asymmetric resistance, they are unable to tackle the problem fully.

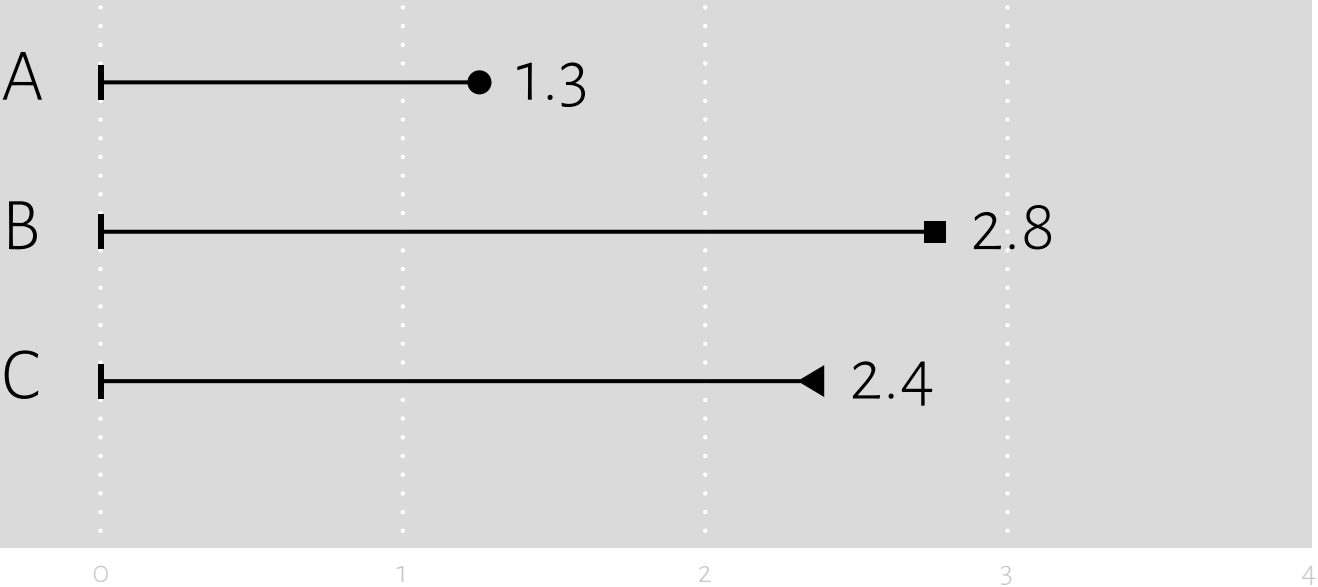
## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognise disinformation as a threat and develop a common vision—a strategy, to counter it.
- Increase cooperation between state bodies and support disseminating objective information (regarding the strategy).
- Introduce measures in the education system aimed at promoting media literacy. Media literacy skills should be taught at educational institutions, be they schools or higher education establishments, in combination with other subjects.
- Intensify coverage of issues related to European and Euro-Atlantic integration in the Georgian media space. The benefits to Georgia from this process should be explained in a way that is understandable to the population.
- Intensify Georgian and English language courses in regions populated with ethnic minorities.
- Support media organisations fighting disinformation and myths in order to expand the scope of their activities.
- Expand EU-related information campaigns targeted to ethnic minorities, e.g., meetings with small entrepreneurs who export their products to the EU market.

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# HUNGARY



# INTRODUCTION

Historically, the presence of Russian culture in Hungary was strengthened by the state during the years of communism. Russian was introduced as an obligatory foreign language, and politically acceptable pieces of Russian literature were widely read. Youth exchange and other forms of day-to-day cooperation existed for four decades. At the same time, Russian cultural rapprochement immediately disappeared after the fall of the Iron Curtain. What remained was mostly a mindset of fragmented models of individual behaviour. In the 2011 census, only 159 947 Hungarian citizens declared that they spoke Russian. Out of these, 28 000 used Russian as their first language, while the majority of the rest studied Russian in the communist era and their language skills were unknown.<sup>[1]</sup> The aggregate number of Russian speaking citizens is equivalent to 1.6 % of the Hungarian population.

Russia's enhanced intention to influence Hungarian media rose after 2012, as the Kremlin tried to influence European policymakers linked to the Nord Stream and South Stream pipelines. This effort evolved with the crisis in Ukraine, and the recent migratory pressure which has posed significant challenges for the European Union. Russia also tried to legitimate its Syrian intervention, by suggesting that the principal goal was to counter the Islamic State. Attempts to contact, infiltrate, and influence individuals and organisations that shape Hungarian public opinion were clear signs of the Russian presence. By 2015, the region's media and politicians were speaking openly about 'hybrid warfare'.

Within Hungary, sentiments towards Russia vary considerably, depending on context. In the latest poll, two-thirds of respondents supported the strengthening of economic ties, but only one-third wished for more political engagement. General openness towards Russia increased significantly between 2006 and 2012, but has since fallen off.<sup>[2]</sup> There are many reasons for this, and Russia was a hotly debated domestic policy issue both between 2007 and 2009 and following 2014. Sentiments overall are more and more related to political preferences, influenced, for example, by meetings between President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Viktor Orban, and the Russian-financed Paks Nuclear Power

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[1] "Census 2011: Data on Spoken Languages." 2018. Central Statistical Office (KSH). [http://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/docs/tablak/teruleti/00/00\\_1\\_1\\_4\\_2.xls](http://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/docs/tablak/teruleti/00/00_1_1_4_2.xls)

[2] Gábor, Stier. 2017. "Nem Mélyíténék a Kapcsolatokat Moszkvával – Magyar Nemzet." <https://mno.hu/kulfold/nem-melyitenek-a-kapcsolatokat-moszkvaval-1383889>.



Plant development,<sup>[3]</sup> which is the single largest development project in modern Hungarian history with a 12 billion EUR budget. The bilateral agreements and contracts are not public, as the government has declared the information to be sensitive, leading the opposition to believe the lack of transparency is due to corruption behind the development. *The Russian Cultural Centre in Budapest* is open to the public. While Russian soft power organisations in Hungary are not competitive in terms of film, exhibitions and performance art when compared to such institutions in the West, they do offer programmes for Russians living in Budapest.<sup>[4]</sup>

*The Russkiy Mir foundation* has become more active in Hungary during recent years. Beyond Budapest, it opened Russian Cultural and Educational Centres in Pecs, and in Debrecen in April 2017. Since the opening of the Russian Consulate General in Debrecen, relationships between Russia and eastern Hungary have intensified rapidly. Beyond political and business relations, the Russian Studies Department of the University of Debrecen is an important partner in these developments, co-organising conferences and hosting the Centre financed by Russkiy Mir.<sup>[5]</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church is present in Hungary, and the last meeting between Putin and Orban, head of the ruling party Fidesz, gave a significant boost to the reconstruction of the Church, as the Hungarian government adopted a decree supporting the initiative with 7.7 million EUR. Politically speaking, though, it is not active and contains very few members in Hungary.

Political relations are on an extremely high level. Orban met Putin on four occasions in the last three years, and a fifth meeting is planned for the summer of 2018, following Orban's re-election on April 8. The main issue to be discussed is the planned extension of the nuclear power plant in Paks.

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[3] Péter, Magyari. 2018. "A Fideszesek Nagyon Megszerették Putyint És Oroszországot." <https://444.hu/2018/03/14/a-fideszesek-nagyon-megszerettek-putyint-es-oroszorszagot/>.

[4] Russian Cultural Institute in Hungary. <http://www.ruscenter.hu/beta/ru/>

[5] Debreceni Egyetem Orosz Központ (Russian Center at University of Debrecen). Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/oroszkozpontdebrecen/>

# VULNERABLE GROUPS

Pro-Kremlin disinformation channels have occasionally supported Hungarian government-controlled media in spreading anti-migration ideas and news, and they resonate well among the Hungarian population. When it comes to migration and the Soros network, such channels are mostly in the form of Facebook pages or webpages that could be linked to administrators with strong pro-Russian attitudes. When it comes to broader European issues, Sputnik and RT often serve as sources of pro-government media. An RT crew was present on the border between Hungary and Serbia during the most tense moments of the migration crisis, and broadcast from Budapest on refugees camping at the city's central train station.

In terms of content, pro-Kremlin and anti-Hungarian sources of disinformation produced surprisingly little content tailored specifically to the Hungarian audience. Disinformers missed the opportunity to play off the anti-Romanian, anti-Slovak, nationalist-revisionist attitudes present in certain layers of Hungarian society. Neither have they focused on inducing or heightening tensions between the Hungarian and Roma parts of the population. We have to note that, as tensions increased between Ukraine and Hungary, following the passage of an education bill that includes restrictions on teaching in minority languages,<sup>[6]</sup> there were a number of articles on potential threats to the Hungarian minority. It is unclear how much of this content were homegrown and taken over by disinformation and pro-Kremlin websites as they served their interest, and how much was created by these sites. Based on this description, we believe the following groups are most vulnerable to pro-Kremlin disinformation:

1. The rural population that access almost exclusively pro-government media. Therefore they can more easily become subjects of pro-Kremlin narratives spread by government channels via traditional media.
2. Voters with anti-establishment attitudes, with limited media literacy and increased distrust in mainstream media are more vulnerable

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[6] As mentioned with the interview with Mr.Gábor Horváth (conducted on February 27, 2018), editor in chief of the Hungarian daily Népszava, Hungarians seemingly have the same interest as Russians on minority issues. However even prime minister Orbán mentioned a number of times that Hungary's interest is a strong Ukraine, which is a buffer between Hungary and Russia.

to alternative news channels on the Internet, which are the main sources of disinformation in Hungary.

3. Fidesz voters accessing information mainly from pro-government sources, because news on Russian disinformation, hybrid warfare, and Russian influence in Hungary is exclusively covered by opposition media. This trend was verified in the latest opinion polls.<sup>[7]</sup>
4. Hungarians living outside Hungary. There are about 2.2 million Hungarians in neighbouring states consuming Hungarian language media, mainly from pro-government sources (1.25 million in Romania, 500 000 in Slovakia, 250 000 in Serbia, and 150 000 in Ukraine).

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

According to Freedom House's Freedom of the Press Report, Hungary's constitution protects freedoms of speech and the press, but complex and extensive media legislation enacted under Orbán's government has undermined these guarantees. Public broadcasters favour Fidesz and its policy goals, and are often used to discredit the party's political opponents, as could be seen in 2018 parliamentary election campaign. The country's media freedom is ranked as the worst in the European Union.

We also have to highlight the shrinking space for independent journalists. There are fewer positions and workplaces for them, and less demand for the job they do. The oligarchic financing of Hungarian media and the vulnerability of advertisers also limit independent media. Therefore, there have been cases of journalists deciding not to publish a story, being afraid of the consequences.<sup>[8]</sup> While in Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and the majority of the EU countries, radio is the most trusted media channel, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) says that television plays that role in Hungary.

There are currently two big commercial television broadcasters with national coverage in Hungary. *RTL Klub* is independent and critical of the government, while *TV2* is owned by an oligarch who also works as a government commissioner in the Orbán government. Their average

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[7] Péter, Magyari. 2018. Ibid.

[8] András Szabó, Direkt-36, March 9, 2018. In-depth interview.

daily news viewing figures are 850 000 (RTL) and 750 000 (TV2).<sup>[9]</sup> Out of the two, only TV2 occasionally spreads pro-Kremlin narratives. The news channel of public television (M1) provides news 24 hours a day, but only has a couple of thousand viewers. There are Chinese and Russian language news hours, but the target group is unknown. Public TV's national sports channel news is the most viewed, with one-minute newsflashes in the breaks of sporting events.<sup>[10]</sup>

Hungary is characterised by a specific phenomenon regarding Russian disinformation channels, namely that the Russian narrative often appears in the mainstream media. This is prevalent primarily on TV channels and in newspapers that are either state-owned or influenced by the government.

Within mainstream media channels, the state news agency *MTI* is the most important, as it is the primary source of news for every Hungarian media outlet. The reason for this is that, in 2011, the Orban government decided to provide MTI content for free, which killed the competition, and led to the closure of alternative news agencies.<sup>[11]</sup> In terms of content, MTI does not publish fake or fabricated news. However, it does give room for Russian opinions, either of leading politicians or influential newspapers, which serve as channels of disinformation on multiple levels. For some reason, statements from *Ria Novosti*, *Interfax*, and even *Russia Today* are published in large numbers without any critical remark or content control in Hungarian.<sup>[12]</sup> This ranges from referring to separatists in eastern Ukraine as if they were a legitimate state to blaming the United States for the civilian death toll in Syria.

A number of major daily political newspapers also contain articles that may qualify as Russian disinformation. However, we should note that readership of print editions of these newspapers varies between 5 000 and 25 000. None of them could operate under market rules, and they are used primarily as political tools of the Hungarian oligarchs who own them. Their importance comes from their online readership and the fact that their articles are shared by the biggest online media. Therefore their impact goes beyond their primary audience.

One of them is *Magyar Hírlap*, a pro-government (almost far-right) outlet belonging to a controversial pro-government oligarch. However,

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[9] "Ratings of top TVs of Hungary". Brand Trend. March, 2011. [http://brandtrend.hu/media/2018/03/RATINGS\\_2018\\_w11.pdf](http://brandtrend.hu/media/2018/03/RATINGS_2018_w11.pdf)

[10] Gábor Horváth, *Népszava*, February 27, 2018. In-depth interview.

[11] Sándor Léderer, *K-Monitor*, March 6, 2018. In-depth interview.

[12] Anita Kőműves, *atlatzso.hu*, March 1, 2018. In-depth interview.

it is a relatively marginal newspaper, with a print-run of around 7 000 to 10 000 copies. There are numerous authors (such as Istvan Lovas and Gyula Mate T.) on the staff who regularly publish pieces of outright disinformation, anti-NATO, and anti-EU propaganda. The background of these journalists is well-known, and many of them have close connections to Russia and Russian ideologies; moreover, the whole editorial staff shares the same political views.

The staff of the other conservative and independent daily newspaper, *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), is often critical of the government and employs few journalists who are well known for their pro-Kremlin sentiments. The outlet's leading foreign policy journalist, Gabor Stier, can be characterised as pro-Russian (though not necessarily pro-Kremlin), and was an informed expert on Russia well before Moscow began its coordinated disinformation operations.<sup>[13]</sup> His publications are a perfect example of how hard it is to distinguish between honest convictions and intentional disinformation operations. The owner of Magyar Nemzet announced the closure of the paper following the elections. The last issue was published on April 11, 2018, but negotiations with possible investors are ongoing.

In addition, the semi-official, but extremely marginal government newspaper *Magyar Idők* (Hungarian Time) has published several pro-Russian articles recently.

Fidesz-linked oligarchs also recently bought the biggest tabloids. These publications have better readership and, although they have changed their attitude, they mostly publish MTI materials when it comes to news. Still, the number of articles with Russia-friendly themes is growing fast. According to Stier, this demonstrates the tabloids' loyalty to Orban.<sup>[14]</sup>

We have to highlight that the readership of tabloids is under 100 000, while political daily newspapers have circulations of between 8 000 and 25 000, so traditional print media might be less important than other channels.<sup>[15]</sup>

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[13] As Mr. Stier stated in his interview:  
"Prior to 2010 I was almost the only one who was sympathetic to Russia, and now there is a large group of colleagues"

[14] Gábor Stier, Magyar Nemzet, March 1, 2018. In-depth interview.

[15] Sprinġe, Inga. 2017. "Small Time Propagandists." Re:Baltica (blog). 2017. <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2017/04/small-time-propagandists/>.

Regarding other channels for pro-Russian disinformation, there are currently about 80 to 100 websites in Hungary spreading the Kremlin's narratives. However, the clear majority of them do not seem to have a serious impact. Among them are here are around six to 10 propaganda websites which have real influence, such as the *Hídfő.ru*, *Oroszhírek.hu*, *Napimigráns.com*, and *Kuruc.info*. Not all of these are active in the social media sphere, at least not directly. Due to the lack of Twitter culture, only Facebook has significant pro-Russian pages and groups in Hungarian.

Russian-inspired websites have an indirect, yet important, impact on the security risk in the region. For example, many predicted that the Ukrainian conflict would spread to Hungary, and claim that the world is run by obscure societies. *The Sputnik News Agency*, a Russian media outlet for foreigners, shows a distorted image of Hungarian official politics. The country's historical experience with the Soviet Union looms large in the public psyche. Russia-linked websites are not new in Central Europe, but the intensity and amount of propaganda increased after the annexation of Crimea in early 2014. The aim seems to be to legitimise the annexation and undermine Ukraine.

## LEGAL REGULATIONS

The Act on Electronic Public Service of 2009<sup>[16]</sup> and the Information Security Act of 2013<sup>[17]</sup> are the two most important regulations linked to information security. The Act on Electronic Public Service highlights the requirement of information security as a basic principle. As a general rule, all public administration bodies have to provide their electronic public services through the Central Electronic Service System, and communicate with their clients through the same system in public administrative proceedings. Hungary's National Security Strategy aims to strengthen the security of electronic information systems, enhance the protection of critical national information infrastructure, and develop adequate cyberdefence.

Furthermore, the government adopted the National Cybersecurity Strategy of Hungary and the National Cybersecurity Act in 2013. In line

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[16] Act on Electronic Public Service of 2009. <http://bit.ly/2HWgq8o>

[17] Information Security Act of 2013. <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1300050.tv>

with its goals, a National Cybersecurity Coordination Council was created to oversee the developments.

Both the Cybersecurity Act and the Strategy focus mainly on cybersecurity issues such as processing data of national data assets, European critical infrastructure elements, and national critical infrastructure elements. The law prescribes the essential items known in the information security field as the CIA triad (confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information security requirements in electronic information systems and data).<sup>[18]</sup> However, it is important to highlight that the threat of information warfare and the need for development to counter this threat effectively were already included in the 2013 Strategy.

Cyberwarfare is present in Hungary. In 2016, government computer servers and a number of state institutions were blocked for a couple of hours, when 62 000 cyberattacks took place in a single day.<sup>[19]</sup> Global ransomware and cyberattacks also have an impact in Hungary, as was the case when *WannaCry* attacks took place all over Europe.<sup>[20]</sup> The pro-Russian *Ukrainian CyberBerkut*, and the globally operating anarchist *Anonymous hacker groups*, are well known in the country as well.<sup>[21]</sup>

Although the government decrees 1035/2012 on National Security Strategy and 1139/2013 on Cybersecurity Strategy mentioned threats related to information warfare, we have to highlight they do not mention Russia at all, and contain no information about countering these threats.<sup>[22]</sup> It is also important to note that there were no major adaptations in the strategy, nor in the act, despite massive changes in the international environment.

At the end of 2010, the Hungarian parliament passed legislation to tighten government control over news.<sup>[23]</sup> It deteriorated slightly in 2014, as the government continued to exert pressure on private owners to influence coverage, and a new advertising tax disproportionately affected a major private television station. However, in the same year, a proposed tax

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[18] Szádeczky, Tamás. 2015. "Information Security Law and Strategy in Hungary." AARMS, Vol. 14, No. 4. 2015: 281–289. [http://real.mtak.hu/50004/7/information\\_security\\_law.pdf](http://real.mtak.hu/50004/7/information_security_law.pdf)

[19] "Hungary Experiences 62,000 Cyber Attacks in One Day." ITV News. 2016. <http://www.itv.com/news/update/2016-04-02/hungary-experiences-62-000-cyber-attacks-in-one-day/>.

[20] "Government Incident Response Team Issues Alert on Global Ransomware Attack." 2017. Daily News Hungary (blog). <https://dailynewshungary.com/government-incident-response-team-issues-alert-global-ransomware-attack/>.

[21] Barabás, János T. 2017. "Information Warfare in Hungary." Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade. [http://kki.hu/assets/upload/02\\_KKI\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_HUN\\_Barabas\\_20170109.pdf](http://kki.hu/assets/upload/02_KKI_Policy_Brief_HUN_Barabas_20170109.pdf)

[22] Lóránt Győri, Political Capital, March 9, 2018. In-depth interview.

[23] "Hungary Passes Law Boosting Government Control over Media." 2010. Reuters. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/oukin-uk-hungary-media/hungary-passes-law-boosting-government-control-over-media-idUKTRE6BK1A220101221>.

on Internet data traffic was withdrawn after opponents mounted large demonstrations.<sup>[24]</sup>

Fidesz has used its majority in parliament to amend the constitution at will, at times doing so to enact legislation that had previously been rejected by the Constitutional Court. In 2013, changes adopted in this manner included a rule that political advertising during campaign periods may only be placed in media outlets free of charge. Critics argued that private outlets would have little incentive to carry such material, further limiting media access for opposition parties in particular.

## INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

Hungary has no special units for dealing with information warfare. Although the government acknowledges the existence of information warfare, it downplay its role in hybrid warfare.

As one member of staff at the Hungarian Ministry of Defence said while being interviewed for this study:

*'Disinformation actions are appearing in various fields of the media as part of hybrid warfare. Therefore, detection and identification of the players (states) is carried out by the local national security services and law enforcement bodies, who share the information continuously.'*<sup>[25]</sup>

Indeed, this was the standard answer when the biggest Hungarian online news portal tried to investigate who is responsible for countering information warfare.<sup>[26]</sup> Our source added that cooperation among the different agencies has been more effective since 2016, which marked the founding of the Hungarian Information Fusion System (Centre for Anti-terrorism, Information and Criminal Analysis – TIBEK). Nonetheless, there is still not a single special task force dealing with the issue.

Existing government agencies such as GovCERT, the National Cybersecurity Centre and others focus exclusively on the cybersecurity aspect of the threat and gave no response to questions about information warfare.

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[24] "Hungary Scraps Controversial Web Tax." 2014. BBC News. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29846285>.

[25] Anonymous informant, Ministry of Defence of Hungary, March 11, 2018. In-depth interview.

[26] Hanula, Zsolt. 2017. "Gyűlöletből És Rettegésből Építik Az Alternatív Univerzumot." Index. [https://index.hu/tech/2017/01/25/gyuloletbol\\_es\\_rettegesbol\\_epitik\\_az\\_alternativ\\_univerzumot/](https://index.hu/tech/2017/01/25/gyuloletbol_es_rettegesbol_epitik_az_alternativ_univerzumot/).



Other professional bodies overseeing media, such as the National Media and Infocommunications Authority, claim they do not have the authority to investigate whether news articles are fake or not.

Whenever MPs from the opposition raise the problem, government representatives downplay the threat and respond that this issue is among the standard operational competences of the national security services. This was also referred to by our sources (including from the MoD) in a number of interviews.

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

There are a number of non-governmental organisations dealing with digital debunking, among which *Political Capital* is the most influential. Unfortunately, thematic debunking sites don't exist in Hungary, so journalists and NGOs (including Political Capital and *CEID*) have focused on countering Russian disinformation in recent years. Investigative journalists largely work on exposing governmental disinformation, but their work is only present on critical opposition websites. The most important media organisations dealing with Russian disinformation are:

- Index (index.hu)
- 444.hu
- Átlátszó (atlatszo.hu)
- Direkt36 (direkt36.hu)

*K-Monitor* has some IT projects to identify and track fake news, and automatically search for patterns and specifics. These are developed for tracking corruption, but are also applicable in the fake news field.<sup>[27]</sup>

One of the closed Facebook groups includes all major stakeholders dealing with counteracting Kremlin-led disinformation in Hungary. These stakeholders are Russia-focused NGOs, experts on transparency, opposition politicians, investigative journalists, and foreign policy journalists. The group currently consists of 25 individuals.

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[27] Sándor Léderer, K-Monitor, March 6, 2018. In-depth interview.

# MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

In December 2015, the Hungarian government adopted the 2012/2015 Government Decree on the *Digital Success Programme*,<sup>[28]</sup> based on which three strategies were defined, two of which affect media literacy. These are the Digital Child Protection Strategy of Hungary and the Digital Education Strategy of Hungary. Both strategies include media literacy elements, primarily through complex programmes targeting students, parents and teachers.

The professional implementation of the Digital Education Strategy is supported by the *Digital Pedagogical Methodology Center*, which provides methodology, a professional background and expert base, and deals with the professional supervision of applications and projects related to the implementation of the Strategy.

With regard to media literacy and online security, the *National Core* contains elements by school grades. It defines when and to what extent it is necessary to deal with issues of media literacy and online safety. Under this theme, students discuss the role of media, the role and issue of advertisements, media addiction, norm violations, and media influence. In practical classes, they also create and publish their own content. The *Accreditation Department of the Educational Authority* organises several media literacy training sessions for educators.

Promoting media literacy and online safety through non-formal and informal learning is also supported by the state. For example, in the framework of an EU Programme 'Future Conscious Media Consumers – Media Literacy and Media Awareness dissemination', the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) established the *Magic Valley* media education training centre, which aims to support the development of media awareness among young people. The first centre was opened in Budapest in 2014, and another in Debrecen in 2017.

The *Media Union*, the association of Hungarian media and advertisement companies, aims to identify and publish research on significant social issues every year, and sets out to support and promote them in the media. The goal is to involve as many media outlets as possible, in order to raise

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[28] "Digital Success Programme." 2017. Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister.  
<http://www.kormany.hu/en/cabinet-office-of-the-prime-minister/hu/digital-success-programme>.

social awareness to the maximum in an effective, unified, and widely accessible manner. The Media Union Foundation's 2014 '*Don't you mind?*' campaign addressed the issue and the importance of responsible media use. From May 2015, the campaign shifted its focus to one of the most pressing challenges of social media: cyberbullying.

Other EU media literacy programmes are also accessible in Hungary, but it is worth noting that neither the Hungarian government nor the EU have extensive programmes available for the older generations. Therefore, the vast majority of Hungary's politically active citizens have never encountered media literacy programmes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Hungary has not developed an immune system to protect itself from Russian information pressure. Although the direct Russian presence is very limited in the country in terms of Hungarian specific content, like-minded individuals and pro-government media often use pro-Kremlin content in support of their own agenda.

Meanwhile pro-government channels are the primary source of the dissemination of pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation in Hungary. Obviously, this means that these outlets' users are the most vulnerable to disinformation.

Although the government has developed and launched a large number of media literacy programmes, their focus is limited to the younger generation.

Thus far, no steps have been made to set up any special units dealing with information warfare. This is because the Hungarian government is often inspired by pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives, and gives no space at all to debunking teams of NGOs or investigative journalists.

That also means that authorities do nothing to limit the spread of pro-Kremlin disinformation. Even when Hungary's vulnerability was revealed, no political steps were taken to limit or reduce exposure. There is not a single institution or special unit responsible for monitoring and countering disinformation, and we are not aware of any case when the prosecutor general called for a special investigation.

In addition to this, attacks against Hungary also lead to the assumption that the government's increasingly Russia-friendly policy line is apparently unable to defend the country from Russian information pressure.

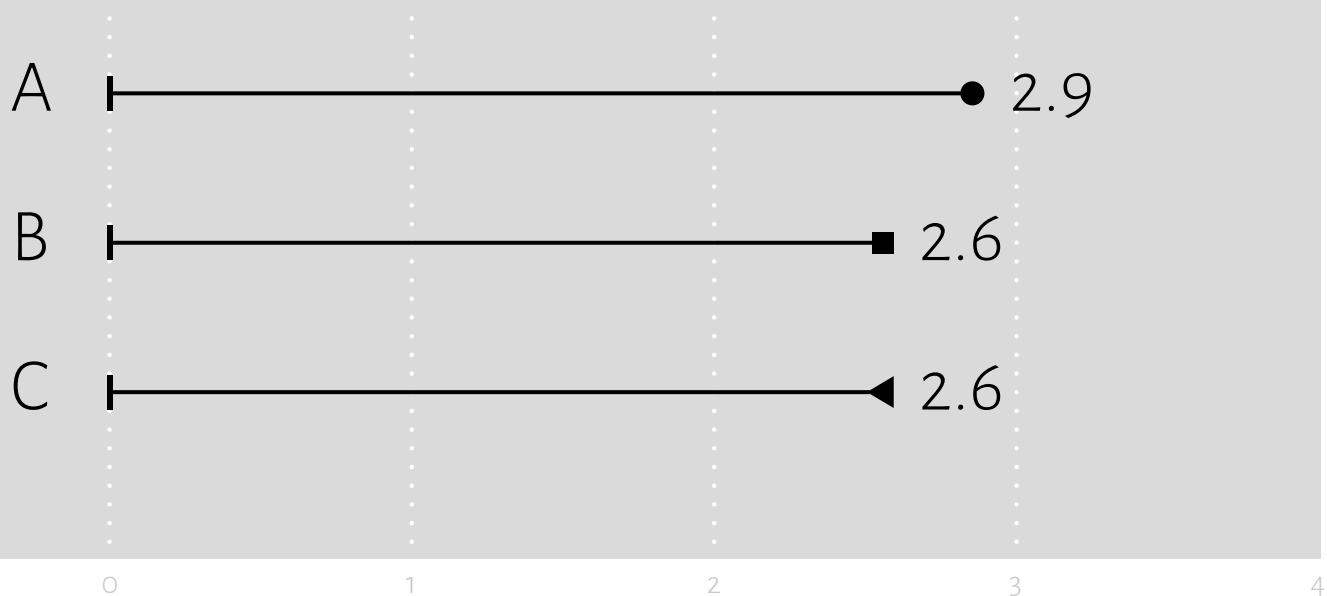
## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. As long as government interests coincide with the interest of the Kremlin, no policy recommendation targeting Hungarian authorities will succeed, and no country-wide programme leading to increased immunity can be implemented successfully.
2. Hungary should be targeted through regional programmes to counter Kremlin-led disinformation.
3. In this process, possible U.S. and Polish initiatives have the greatest chance of gaining government support, bearing in mind the state of bilateral and multilateral relations. As the U.S. State Department is launching new funding programmes to counter Russian disinformation, the involvement of pro-government think tanks in Hungary is probably the best way to access decision-makers. We are aware of ongoing programme developments focusing on information warfare in Central Europe at the Atlantic Council, CEPA and the International Republican Institute (among others).
4. Launching Visegrad Group policy discussions and creating regional teams to counter disinformation has a less professionally-focused but politically logical element. As the core of an institutional framework could be developed in Hungary, the government would be bound to deal with the problem.
5. External funding for projects focusing on countering information warfare should be developed, by expanding both content and funding.
6. Best practices among civilian projects in the region should be transferred to the few active Hungarian organisations in this field.
7. Media literacy toolkits should be developed independently of administrative bodies, to reveal government exposure and responsibility.
8. As the government refuses to deal with the problem, special programmes focusing on raising awareness of the opposition MPs should be launched. In this way, the problem could be kept on the political agenda.

ANDIS  
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# LATVIA



# INTRODUCTION

Since the restoration of independence and statehood, Latvia has achieved remarkable results in democracy-building and overcoming its Soviet legacy. However, problems rooted in the Soviet era persist, making Latvia vulnerable and providing a path for the dissemination of Kremlin-led disinformation and propaganda.

Latvia, along with the other Baltic states, can be regarded as a success story in the transition to a liberal democracy, yet the consequences of Soviet occupation continue to be observed in almost all areas related to the national economy and the development of society. Since the restoration of independence in 1991, Latvia has been aiming to strengthen freedom of media and expression. Article 100 of the Satversme (Constitution) defines the foundations of Latvia's media policy:

*'Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to freely acquire, retain, and distribute information, and express his or her views. Censorship is prohibited.'*<sup>[1]</sup>

According to the estimate by Freedom House in its '*Nations in Transit*', Latvia consistently is third best among the 29 countries tracked in their consolidation of democracy. This puts the country ahead of others, including Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, and only lagging behind Slovenia and Estonia.<sup>[2]</sup>

Accession to the EU and NATO in 2004 contributed to Latvia's consolidation of democracy and diminished Russian economic and political influence in the country. However, one of the remaining problems is the ethnically divided political environment, which diverts attention from other important issues and increases Russia's influence in Latvia. There are other issues within the context of Russia's informational influence to be addressed too, including the divided media space, segregated education system, and unequal regional development. For instance, Latvia's eastern region of Latgale has more economic and social problems than other parts of the country.

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[1] Latvijas Republikas Satversme. Accessed March 19, 2018. <https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=57980>.

[2] Nations in Transit 2017. FreedomHouse. Accessed September 19, 2017. [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2017\\_booklet\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2017_booklet_FINAL_0.pdf).

# VULNERABLE GROUPS

Russia's information campaigns in Latvia target and spread individualised content to specific groups in society. Among the major ethnic groups in Latvia, 61.8 % are Latvian, 25.6 % Russian, 3.3 % Belarusian, and 2.3 % Ukrainian.<sup>[3]</sup> The highest proportion of Latvians is in the Kurzeme and Vidzeme regions and lowest in Riga and Latgale. It should be noted that the Russian compatriots' policymakers try to cluster all Russian-speaking people into one. Thus, the executives of Russia's information influence policy aim at a large part of the population of Latvia. This includes not only ethnic Russians, but Ukrainians, Belarusians, and others.

Russians living in Latvia are not a homogeneous group in terms of political opinions and values. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, several public surveys about general attitudes towards foreign and domestic policies in Latvia indicate significant differences between ethnic Russians in Latvia.<sup>[4]</sup> Based on the data of these surveys, this part of the population can be roughly divided into three large groups: European-minded Russian-language speakers loyal to the Latvian state and the idea of its existence, 'neutral' Russians who are not sufficiently integrated into Latvian society but at the same time are not pro-Kremlin, and those who consider themselves Russian compatriots and support the ideas to construct a 'Russian World'.

The Kremlin-led propaganda efforts are predominantly aimed at 'neutral' Russians (including Ukrainians and Belarusians), whose dissent over domestic policy and the economic situation in Latvia is used by Russia's public diplomacy agents. However, it must be emphasised that this division is conditional. People may agree on one issue but differ on others, thus not falling into any of the three groups. The main point to remember is that Russia deliberately exaggerates the personification that the entire Russian-speaking population of Latvia always supports Russian foreign policy.

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[3] Centrālais statistikas birojs. Accessed September 17, 2017. [http://www.csb.gov.lv/sites/default/files/skoleniem/iedzivotaji/etniskais\\_sastavs.pdf](http://www.csb.gov.lv/sites/default/files/skoleniem/iedzivotaji/etniskais_sastavs.pdf).

[4] "Mazākumtautību līdzdalība demokrātiskajos procesos Latvijā", nodibinājums "Baltic Institute of Social Sciences" pēc KM pasūtījuma (2015). Accessed September 19, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2lDqg62>; See more "Latvijas iedzīvotāju viedoklis par valsts aizsardzības jautājumiem". Latvijas iedzīvotāju aptauja, (2016), SKDS, Accessed September 19, 2017. [http://www.mod.gov.lv/-/media/AM/Ministrija/Sab\\_doma/2016/SKDS\\_aptauja\\_2016.ashx](http://www.mod.gov.lv/-/media/AM/Ministrija/Sab_doma/2016/SKDS_aptauja_2016.ashx).

# MEDIA LANDSCAPE

According to the international organisation Reporters Without Borders' '2017 World Press Freedom Index', Latvia is ranked as the 28<sup>th</sup> most liberal among the 180 nations surveyed.<sup>[5]</sup> This indicator can be considered a good achievement, but there are several problems on closer inspection. One that has been mentioned by several Latvian media and information-security experts is the disproportionately large presence of Russian media in Latvia.<sup>[6]</sup> Māris Cepurītis, a researcher at the Centre for East European Policy Studies, and Rita Ruduša, director of the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, mentioned in their interviews that the disproportionately large presence of Russian and Russian-language media that attempts to ensure Russia's political influence in Latvia is one of the country's major challenges to its information security.<sup>[7]</sup>

This is especially noticeable in the package offers by cable TV providers. Russian radio stations are also represented in large numbers on FM radio. '*Asymmetry*' is a keyword when talking about the entrenchment of Russian information channels in Latvia. Latvian public media in Russian – *Latvian Radio 4, the United Latvian Public Media internet portal lsm.lv, and the LTV 7 channel*, which broadcasts segments in the Russian language – cannot play the counterweight role to the well-funded and attractive Russian TV channels, such as *RTR Planeta, NTV Mir, First Channel, REN TV Baltija*, and others present in the information space. One of the major problems is the enormous difference between the funding of the Latvian and Russian TV channels. This contest is largely won by the Moscow channels (at least in primarily Russian-speaking markets).

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[5] "2017 World Press Freedom Index. Reporters Without Borders." RSF. Accessed September 17, 2017. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

[6] A. Rožukalne, Dr. - prof., Riga Stradins University, September 2017. In-depth interview.

M. Cepurītis, researcher, the Centre for East European Policy Studies, September 2017. In-depth interview.

O. Ozols, publicist, writer, September 2017. In-depth interview.

A. Dimants, former director, NEPLP, September 2017. In-depth interview.

M. Kaprāns, researcher, University of Latvia, September 2017. In-depth interview.

R. Ruduša, director, Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, September 2017. In-depth interview.

Roberts Putnis, former director, Media Policy Division at Ministry of Culture, September 2017. In-depth interview.

Inga Springe, editor, Re:Baltica, September 2017. In-depth interview.

Sanita Jemberga, executive director, Re:Baltica, chairman, Latvian Association of Journalists, September 2017. In-depth interview.

S. Denisa-Liepniece, expert, Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, September 2017. In-depth interview.

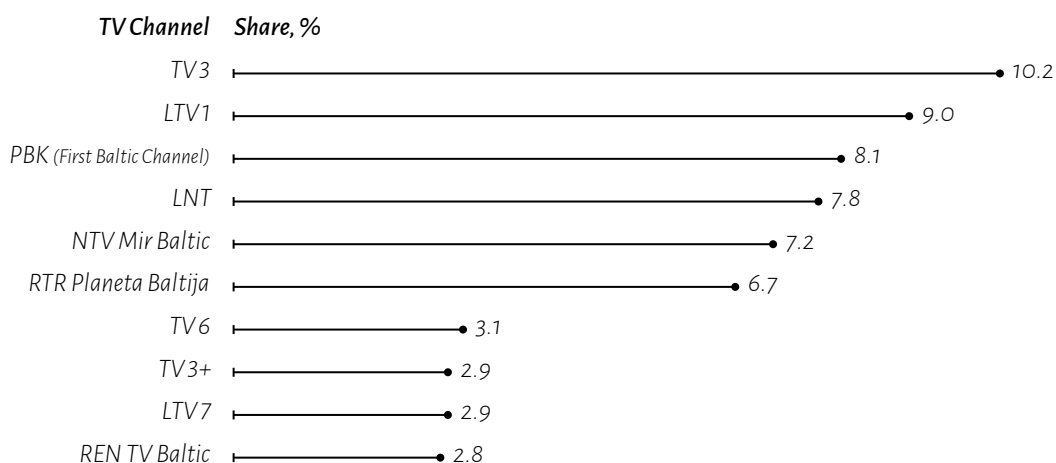
Anonymous high-ranking employee, Ministry of Defence of Latvia, September 2017. In-depth interview.

Anonymous high-ranking employee, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, September 2017. In-depth interview.

[7] Ibid.



Russian TV and radio channels are quasi media because the providers can only be partially monitored for compliance with Latvian legislation. Russian TV channels are provided by the authorised representatives of the Russian TV companies, who consist of Russian and Latvian entrepreneurs cooperating with the Russian channels. They receive permission from various channels to retransmit and attract sponsorship from Latvian advertisers. Within this context, the most significant in the Baltic states are the *SIA Baltic Media Alliance* and *SIA Baltic Media Union*.<sup>[8]</sup>



### Most popular TV channels in Latvia<sup>[9]</sup>

Source: TNS.lv · August, 2017

Chart No. 1 shows that the most popular TV channel in Latvia in August of 2017 was **TV3** (a commercial TV channel belonging to the MTC group) with 10.2 % of the market. The second most-visible channel was **LTV1** (Latvian public media), with 9 % of the total viewership. The third most-viewed channel was **PBK**, which accounted for 8.1 % of the market.<sup>[10]</sup> An important note, PBK is broadcast in Russian and about 70 % of its footage is made in Russia (retransmission of *First Russian Channel ORT*) and presents a position favourable to the Kremlin. However, the local Latvian PBK news programs are politically more neutral than the channel's news broadcasts created in Moscow studios.

[8] Anda Rožukalne, "Krievijas mediji Latvijā: īpašnieki, regulācija, ietekme" in Andis Kudors (ed.) Krievijas publiskā diplomātija Latvijā: mediji un nevalstiskais sektors, Rīga: APPC, LU Apgāds, 2014, p.85.

[9] "Konsolidētās TV skatītākais kanāls augustā – TV3". TNS. 12.09.2017. Accessed March 19, 2018.

[10] Ibid.

*LTV7* channel is the Latvian national broadcaster and parts of its programmes are in the Russian language. However, its 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> place in the ratings indicates it is incapable of competing with the Russian channels *NTV Mir Baltic* and *RTR Planeta Baltija*, which are ranked fifth and sixth, respectively, among the most popular channels. Another important note, TV channels *NTV Mir Baltic* and *RTR Planeta Baltija* are the most active distributors of official Kremlin-backed propaganda in Latvia. *PBK* and *REN TV Baltic* have more entertaining programmes. Nevertheless, the content of their news and political discussion demonstrates they are not far behind the other two channels. Consequently, we can conclude that among the 10 most popular TV channels in Latvia, four spread Russian propaganda and disinformation. It can also be established that Russians and Russian speakers living in Latvia (Ukrainians, Belarusians, etc.) prefer *PBK*.<sup>[11]</sup>

Commercial channels *TV3*, *LNT*, *TV6*, and *TV3+* are ranked among the 10 most popular channels and are part of the MTC group. These channels enrich the Latvian media environment through their news broadcasts and entertainment programmes. However, the control of these channels by a single owner decreases competition on the media market.

This situation distorts the domestic policy process because, in part, constituents live within the disinformation and propaganda space of Russia. This leads to influence on Latvian citizens' formation of their political views and preferences when supporting particular political parties. A 2014 poll showed that *PBK* Latvia's news is very popular among the Russian-speaking population in Latvia. More importantly, this audience trusts it. The data showed that this news is mostly viewed by non-Latvians living in Latvia, and in comparison with other news channels available on Latvian TV channels, the majority of its viewers are non-citizens.<sup>[12]</sup> In contrast, a survey carried out in 2016 concluded that the Latvian-speaking audience showed a lot of trust in *LTV* and *Radio Latvia*. The trust index of *LTV* reaches 72 % (regular *LTV* viewers). The trust index for *Radio Latvia* is 82 % (regular *Radio Latvia* audience).<sup>[13]</sup>

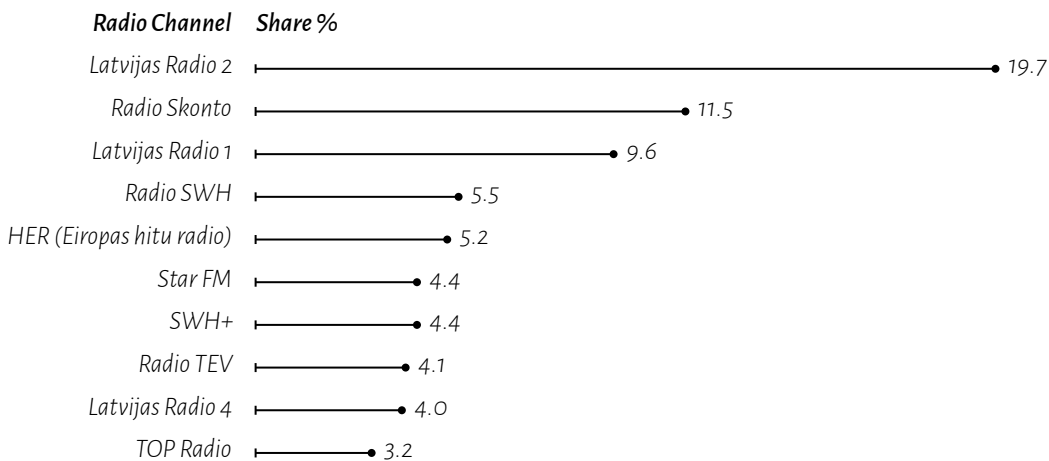
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[11] "Pētījums: Mazāk nekā puse Latvijas iedzīvotāju spēj atpazīt uzticamu informāciju". 18.07.2017. Accessed September 17, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2FQDvvZ>.

[12] Anda Rožukalne, "Kurām TV ziņām uzticas auditorija. Kāpēc?". Accessed September 17, 2017. <https://lvejo-online.eu/2888/etika-un-kvalitate/kuram-tv-zinam-uzticas-auditorija-kapec>.

[13] "Sabiedriskā labuma tests: saglabājas augsta auditorijas apmierinātība un uzticēšanās *LTV* un *LR saturam*". 13.05.2016. Accessed September 17, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2ptQGYSI>.

A relatively large number of radio channels operate in Latvia. This includes Latvian commercial and public radio available throughout the country as well as several regional radio stations. Latvian public media, *Latvijas Radio 1* (news radio broadcasting in Latvian), and *Latvijas Radio 2* (Latvian music radio), were ranked among the three most popular radio channels in spring 2017. This was a remarkable result considering the strong competition.



### Most popular Radio channels in Latvia<sup>[14]</sup>

Source: TNS.lv · Spring 2017

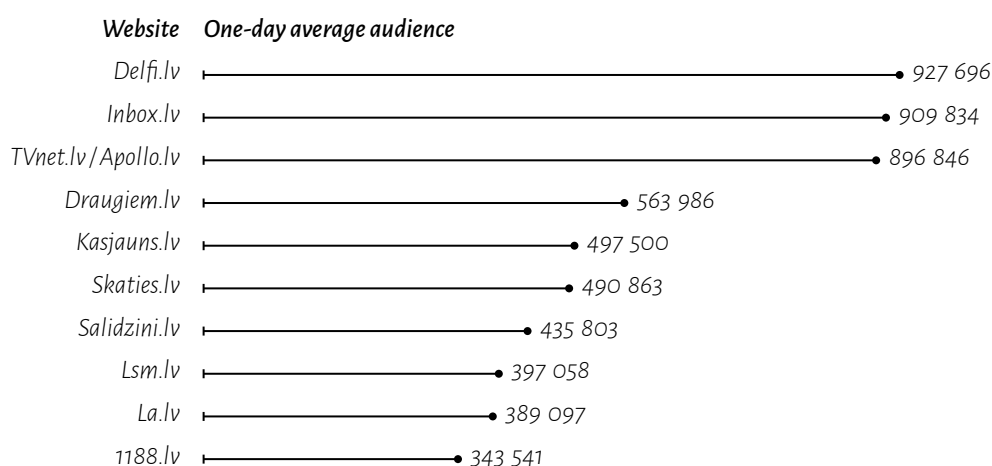
Three out of the 10 most popular radio channels in Latvia (*SWH+*, *Latvijas Radio 4*, and *TOP Radio*) broadcast in Russian. *Latvijas Radio 4* is a public channel that attracts a significant segment of the Russian-speaking audience in Latvia, which is a positive phenomenon in the context of decreasing Russian influence on the airwaves.

The internet is regularly used by 65 % of the population in Latvia.<sup>[15]</sup> According to 2017 figures, the top three websites based on a one-day average were: *Delfi.lv* (a news portal in Latvian and Russian), *Inbox.lv* (in Latvian and Russian), and *TVnet.lv/Apollo.lv* (news portal in Latvian and Russian).<sup>[16]</sup>

[14] "Pavasārī radio vismaz reizi nedēļā klausījušies 78 % Latvijas iedzīvotāju". TNS.lv. Accessed October 16, 2017. <http://www.tns.lv/?lang=lv&fullarticle=true&category=showuid&id=5144>.

[15] "Regulāri internetu lieto jau 68 per cent Latvijas iedzīvotāju". TNS.lv. Accessed September 17, 2017. <http://tns.lv/?lang=lv&fullarticle=true&category=showuid&id=4797&mark=interneta>.

[16] "Interneta lapu Top 25 janvārī", GEMIUS, 23.02.2017. Accessed September 17, 2017. <http://www.gemius.lv/all-reader-news/interneta-lapu-top-25-janvari.html>.



### **Most popular Websites in Latvia<sup>[17]</sup>**

Source: GEMIUS.lv · January 2017

It is essential to highlight the most popular news portals in Latvia were Delfi and TVnet, which make different content in Latvian and Russian. Such an approach does not necessarily contribute to the consolidation of society, because Latvians and Russians living in the same country encounter different reports and interpretations, even within the same media outlet. Both of these portals have a robust comment sections. Part of the comments are rather aggressive and verge on hatred. However, the web pages' comment sections are not visited as intensely as 10 years ago. Many active commenters have moved to Twitter, Facebook, and Draugiem.lv (Latvian analogue). In part, Twitter comments have been automated. In its 2017 research, the Riga based **NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence** drew a significant conclusion that 'Russian-language bots' created roughly 84 % of all Russian messages about NATO in the Baltic states and Poland on Twitter.<sup>[18]</sup>

In 2017, a survey conducted by *Latvijas fakti* (Latvian Facts) showed that Delfi.lv is the county's most popular news source, followed by two other internet sites (Tvnet.lv and Apollo.lv). Next are the TV channels, Latvian public television LTV 1 programme '*Panorāma*' as well as the first channel of Latvian Television, and then the commercial channels (LNT, PBK and TV3).<sup>[19]</sup> The Russian-speaking residents indicated their favourite portal

[17] Ibid.

[18] "Robotrolling 2017/1". NATO StratCom COE. Accessed October 17, 2017. <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/robotrolling-20171>.

[19] "Pētījums: Mazāk nekā puse Latvijas iedzīvotāju spēj atpazīt uzticamu informāciju." September 17, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2FQDvv7>.

was the Russian version of Delfi followed by PBK's, and also the LTV 1 news programme Panorāma, among others. About a third of the respondents indicated they used media in Russian.<sup>[20]</sup> Thus, the overlap between the sources of information used by the Latvian- and Russian-speaking audiences is minimal. The divided information space continues to maintain the split in the political environment among the population and facilitates the dissemination of Kremlin-backed fake news and propaganda in Latvia.

Self-regulation of the media environment in Latvia is aggravated by the existence of two professional journalist associations, the *Latvian Association of Journalists* (LŽA) and the *Latvian Journalists' Union* (LŽS). LŽA was founded in 2010 and has more than 100 members affiliated with newspapers, magazines, radio, TV and internet media. There are also university lecturers among the members.<sup>[21]</sup> Besides these two, there are other media-related associations in Latvia, including the *Association of Press Publishers of Latvia*, the *Latvian Association of Broadcasting Organisations* and the *Latvian Internet Association*. Speaking about safeguarding ethical principles of journalism and supporting the professional growth of journalists, the most active and prominent is LŽA, currently headed by Rita Ruduša. She is also the executive director of the *Baltic Media Excellence Centre*. In general, it has to be concluded that the efforts of professional organisations alone are not enough to counteract the consequences of the massive Russian disinformation in Latvia.

The problem is that LŽS acts rather as a journalists' trade union, not paying much attention to the ethics of its members. In turn, the Rita Ruduša-lead LŽA maintains a higher standard of professional ethics through its Ethics Commission, but not all Latvian journalists are members. The existence of two organisations rather hampers the process of effective self-regulation within Latvia's media sphere.

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Latvijas Žurnālistu asociācija. Accessed September 17, 2017.  
<http://www.latvijaszurnalisti.lv/par-asociaciju/>.

# LEGAL REGULATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

Media regulation in Latvia mainly concerns the financing, monitoring, and management of broadcasting media (especially public media). According to media expert Anda Rožukalne, the press is poorly regulated and regulatory norms for internet media have not been developed.<sup>[22]</sup> The regulatory framework of Latvian media is based on outdated normative acts: the ‘Law on the Press and Other Mass Media’,<sup>[23]</sup> the ‘Advertisement Law’ adopted on December 20, 1990, and the ‘Law on Electronic Media’, adopted on July 12, 2010, which establishes the arrangements and rules for electronic media under the jurisdiction of Latvia. Control of compliance with this law is entrusted to the **National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP)**. The former director of NEPLP, Ainārs Dimants, has indicated in an interview that the Latvian internet media environment is not controlled sufficiently by the state authorities even though it has become an important part of the information space. Dimants also mentioned that it is necessary to raise the NEPLP’s legal capacity to allow it to react effectively to infringements in media activities.<sup>[24]</sup>

Latvia is subject to Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council. This directive coordinates the provision of audiovisual services in EU countries.<sup>[25]</sup> Unfortunately, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive allows media to be registered in any EU country as long as one of the company’s board members resides in one of these countries. This complicates the regulation of particular organisations within a single country because media is regulated in accordance with the legal acts of the country of registration. This means that channels and media companies working inside Latvia but formally established outside the country may not be subject to the Latvian regulator.<sup>[26]</sup>

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[22] Anda Rožukalne, “Krievijas mediji Latvijā: īpašnieki, regulācija, ietekme” in Andis Kudors (ed.) *Krievijas publiskā diplomātija Latvijā: mediji un nevalstiskais sektors*, Rīga: APPC, LU Apgāds, 2014, p.91.

[23] Latvijas Republikas Satversme. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=57980>.

[24] Ibid.

[25] “Eiropas Parlamenta un Padomes direktīva, 2010/13/ES (2010)”, skatīts 05.07.2014. Accessed September 17, 2017 <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=L:2010:095:0001:0024:LV:PDF>.

[26] Anda Rožukalne, “Krievijas mediji Latvijā: īpašnieki, regulācija, ietekme” in Andis Kudors (ed.) *Krievijas publiskā diplomātija Latvijā: mediji un nevalstiskais sektors*, Rīga: APPC, LU Apgāds, 2014, p.93.

NEPLP adopted the ‘National Strategy for the Development of the Electronic Media Sector for 2012 – 2017’ following consultations with industry stakeholders.<sup>[27]</sup> Among the strategic goals are the following: (a) strengthening and reforming public media by increasing their role in bolstering national culture and identity, and (b) providing information space in the Latvian language and the broadcasting of national electronic media throughout the whole territory of Latvia, especially in the eastern border area.<sup>[28]</sup> In 2017, the NEPLP elaborated the ‘National Strategy for the Development of the Electronic Media Sector for 2018 – 2022’.<sup>[29]</sup> One of the most important documents defining state media policy was mentioned in the 2016 ‘Cabinet of Ministers decree No. 667’, which adopted the ‘Latvian Media Policy Guidelines for 2016 – 2020’.<sup>[30]</sup>

There is no distinct information-security doctrine in Latvia. Therefore, all of these concept documents both directly and indirectly affect the security of the information space. The ‘National Security Concept of Latvia’ (2011) also focuses on threats to the information space. For example, the concept concluded that,

*‘Latvian as a state language and a unifying element of society has not been rooted in several areas, for example, in business and the information environment. Separate information spaces diminish the capabilities of the state to address all of society equally effectively; therefore, a certain part does not form a sense of belonging to Latvia’.*<sup>[31]</sup>

The following task is quoted among the array of solutions,

*‘The state must ensure that obstacles are eliminated so that the national information space is accessible to the largest possible part of Latvian society that will take it in everyday use to obtain the necessary information’.*<sup>[32]</sup>

The activities by the NEPLP cover only part of the information-space issues. The ongoing events in the Latvian information space should be regarded in a wider strategic approach. The order by the Cabinet of Ministers

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[27] “Elektronisko plašsaziņas līdzekļu nozares attīstības nacionālā stratēģija 2012.–2017”. Accessed September 17, 2017. <http://neplpadome.lv/lv/sakums/normativie-akti/nacionala-strategija.html>.

[28] Nacionālā stratēģija. Accessed September 21, 2017. <http://neplpadome.lv/lv/sakums/normativie-akti/nacionala-strategija.html>.

[29] “Aptauja par Elektronisko plašsaziņas līdzekļu nozares attīstības nacionālo stratēģiju 2018–2022”. Accessed October 16, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2FQe5hs>.

[30] “Par Latvijas mediju politikas pamatnostādņēm 2016.–2020”. Gadam. Accessed September 19, 2017. <https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=286455>.

[31] National Security Concept. Accessed September 12, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2lDlpe1>.

[32] Ibid.

of Latvia in the ‘Guidelines for Latvian Media Policy 2016–2020’ designates the Ministry of Culture as the institution responsible for the implementation of the guidelines. In 2015, the ministry established the *Division of Media Policy*, whose task is to develop media policy but not to monitor media activity in practice. However, according to most of the interviewed experts,<sup>[33]</sup> Latvia lacks a serious national strategy for information-security policy. This is partly due to a lack of understanding among the political elite about the democratic importance of free media and high-quality journalism. For example, Executive Director of *Re:Baltica* Sanita Jemberga indicates that

*‘Latvian politicians are hardly declaring in public all the high-quality, free, pluralistic activities of media as a value.’*

Jemberga adds that Latvia lacks empirical knowledge on the impact of Russian media on the practical actions of various groups of society.<sup>[34]</sup>

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

There are several projects in Latvia debunking deception by Russian and local media, but given the massive presence of Russian media, one could not say such projects are sufficient. One successful example in news-checking is the ‘*Lie detector*’ section of the Latvian news portal *lsm.lv*, which checks whether Latvian politicians and officials are telling the truth. They select statements and examine the facts contained in the interpretative text.<sup>[35]</sup> However, this is not a project related to Russia’s campaign of deception and lies but contributes to the maintenance of critical thinking of the audience, which becomes accustomed to the idea that facts should be verified.

Latvian media expert Mārtiņš Kaprāns regularly reveals Russian disinformation about Latvia, the Baltic states, and NATO on the website of the *Centre for European Policy Analysis* (CEPA, [www.cepa.org](http://www.cepa.org)).<sup>[36]</sup> Kaprāns both illuminates the lies of Russian media and analyses the methods used by Russian propagandists. Once a month, an analyst with the *Centre for*

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] “Melu detektors”. <http://www.lsm.lv/temas/melu-detektors/>.

[36] CEPA Stratcom Program. Accessed September 17, 2017. <http://infowar.cepa.org/Countries/Latvia>.



*East European Policy Studies* (CEEPS), Arnis Latišenko, gives a few examples of deception from the most popular news portal in Latvia, Delfi.lv.<sup>[37]</sup> Latišenko selects the most striking and typical instances of deception created by Russia while dispelling the lies.

## IN FOCUS

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One of Latvia's success stories was the creation of investigative journalism centre Re:Baltica. For several years, Re:Baltica has been studying various issues of public interest. This includes the social and educational spheres as they relate to media. In the context of Russia's information influence, Re:Baltica's research on the influence of Russian media and compatriots as well as the channels used for it in Latvia—such as the study 'Kremlin's Millions' on Russia's support for radical Russian activists in Latvia and 'Russkiy Mir' about Russian media influence in Latvia—are particularly valuable. Another example of an investigation is the article 'Sputnik's Unknown Brother', revealing the three Baltic Russian-language news sites known collectively as 'Baltnews' that are secretly linked to the Kremlin's global propaganda network. 'Small-time propagandists' is one of the most recent investigative reports about the disseminators of fake news on the internet.

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On Facebook, '*Elves Unit*', led by the former Latvian diplomat Ingmars Bisenieks, started operating in 2017.<sup>[38]</sup> The task of the unit is to uncover internet trolling (messages, fake accounts) that spread fake news on social networks. Volunteer 'elves' communicate with each other about trolls and suspicious news sites on a Facebook group exchange and post relevant publications on their Facebook pages. The 'elves' also hold informative seminars and invite communications and policy experts to share their knowledge. Another example of propaganda illumination is media expert Jānis Polis' project '*Internet propaganda in Latvia*' at the website *ardomu.lv*.<sup>[39]</sup> Polis highlights examples of propaganda in Latvia mostly related to pro-Kremlin political forces. This list can be concluded with one example from the most popular Latvian newspaper, *Latvijas Avīze*, where a separate

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[37] "APPC: Maldināšana – Latvijas gadījums Nr.3". DELFI. Accessed September 1, 2017. <http://www.delfi.lv/a/49196239>.

[38] "Elfu vienība". Accessed September 19, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/374768412896666/>.

[39] "Interneta Propaganda Latvijā. 4. Daļa. Lembergs Un... – Ardomu". Ar domu. Accessed September 19, 2017. <http://ardomu.lv/post/161081315121/propaganda4>.

section, '*LA Atmasko (LA Unveils)*', regularly reviews instances of deception and misrepresentation in Russian media.<sup>[40]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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Another success story is the creation of the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence in 2015, which is a platform for the development of smart journalism in the Baltics, Eastern Partnership countries, and other regions. The aim of the centre is to promote the professional development of journalists and strengthen the competence of media users and critical thinking. The centre collects and generates knowledge about media environments and audiences in the Baltic and other regions. This is also the region's most important player in the field of media literacy.

A successful project in the detection of Russia's lies is the TV3 program series, '*Melu teorija*' (Theory of Lies), which once a week analyses current examples of defamation in Latvia by interviewing communications and policy experts on Russia's disinformation tactics. Understanding Russia's informative influence methods is also enhanced by the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, located in Riga. The centre is headed by an experienced Latvian defence and information-security expert, Jānis Sārts, who previously worked at the Latvian Ministry of Defence. The centre accumulates knowledge of Russian communication strategies and shares it with NATO member state governments.

Awareness of Russia's use of trolls to influence Latvian media and the consequences of its compatriot policy is also enhanced by Latvian think tanks the Centre for International Studies, the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, and Centre for Eastern European Policy Studies. The creation of the *Information Technology Security Incident Prevention Authority* (CERT), which helps reduce risks from cyberspace in Latvia, has been of paramount importance in increasing internet security.

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These examples illustrate Latvian civil society activity with the aim of decreasing the impact and spread of fake news and propaganda organised by the Kremlin. These projects are grassroots initiatives that include journalists, communications and political science researchers,

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[40] "Saakašvili - politiskais bomzis' un citi Krievijā pieprasīti Mamikina jociņi". LA.lv. Accessed September 19, 2017. <http://www.la.lv/mamikina-jocini-pieprasiti/>.

and NGO activists. It should be noted that the experts and non-governmental sector have reacted to the problem faster than the state institutions, thereby demonstrating the very advantages and effectiveness of civil society.

## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

Awareness of the need to improve media literacy has grown in Latvia in recent years. In February 2017, the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence launched the new '*Full Thought*' initiative, aimed at promoting media literacy among Latvia's 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade high-school students and their teachers. The following is the training content created for the 'Full Thought' internet platform: six video presentations on various topics of journalism with examples and exercises for better understanding are provided by leading Latvian journalists and media experts free of charge.<sup>[41]</sup>

In April 2017, the Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with Latvian universities and the British Council, organised a conference cycle on media literacy entitled '*The Power of Media Literacy: How to Obtain and Use It*'. It took place in Latvia's biggest cities (Riga, Valmiera, Rezekne, and Liepaja) where domestic and British media practitioners and researchers outlined their vision while simultaneously analysing how to strengthen the media literacy of each individual and the public as a whole. In the summer of 2017, the Ministry of Culture presented the results of the research on media literacy to the Latvian population. They showed that about half the population of Latvia lacked understanding about how to properly evaluate media information.

The *Office of the Nordic Council of Ministers* in Latvia, in cooperation with the Safer internet centre of the Latvian Internet Association, hosted a seminar on media education for student capacity-building on October 3, 2017, at Rezekne Technology Academy. Guest speakers included Kadri Ugur, an expert on media education in Estonia, and Klinta Ločmele, an expert on media policy at the Latvian Ministry of Culture.

As can be seen from these few examples, projects promoting media literacy have been launched in Latvia at state institutions and expert levels.

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[41] "Uzsāk jaunu mediju pratības iniciatīvu vidusskolēniem un viņu pedagogiem". Accessed September 19, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2FRthL9>.

At the same time, it should be noted that media literacy has not yet been put into formal education programmes.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experts interviewed most frequently mentioned the poor capacity of state institutions related to the media sector. This is partly because of a lack of funding, which makes Latvian information space vulnerable.<sup>[42]</sup> Ruduša, the director of the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, and Roberts Putnis, the former director of the Media Policy Division at the Ministry of Culture of Latvia, pointed out that one of the reasons for insufficient public funding is the lack of understanding among the Latvian political elite of the special role played by independent and professional media in protecting democracy.<sup>[43]</sup> The same circumstance was mentioned as the reason for the absence of a security strategy regarding the information space in Latvia.

The rejection of new media regulation aimed at putting more stringent standards of professional ethics on their activities as well as on the transparency of their actions and ownership by requiring the re-registration of all media working in Latvia was exposed as a legal impediment to this problem. Some experts pointed to the ethnically divided political environment as a factor in Latvia's vulnerability vis-a-vis Russia's information campaigns. On a narrower scale it was pointed out that the Latvian government was not sufficiently supportive of public and regional media.<sup>[44]</sup> Also, among the still-unresolved issues is the disproportionately small use of the Latvian language in the national electronic media environment, which does not correspond to the ethnic composition of the population. Due to the unregulated free media market, there are two different information spaces that have developed in Latvia in terms of linguistic, geopolitical, and democratic traditions.<sup>[45]</sup>

The most frequent recommendations made by Latvian media and communications science experts are to increase the capacity and authority of supervisory institutions while also improving regulation of the

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

media sphere. The quality of content in the Latvian media space would be facilitated by regulation of internet media, which at present does not occur at all. Improvements in the regulation of the television and radio spheres should take place not only at the national but also the EU level. In 2017, the Baltic states prepared recommendations for changes to the EU 'Audiovisual Services Directive' to allow better monitoring and control of Russian television channels registered in the EU (such as those in the United Kingdom or Sweden) but which do business in another country such as Latvia. Another recommendation for the Latvian government is to extend support for media literacy projects through integration into the education system.

There are numerous good examples of how Kremlin-supported misinformation and disinformation campaigns can be undermined at the civil-society level in Latvia and in the actions of some state institutions, but generally there is still a lot to be done at the level of government strategy.

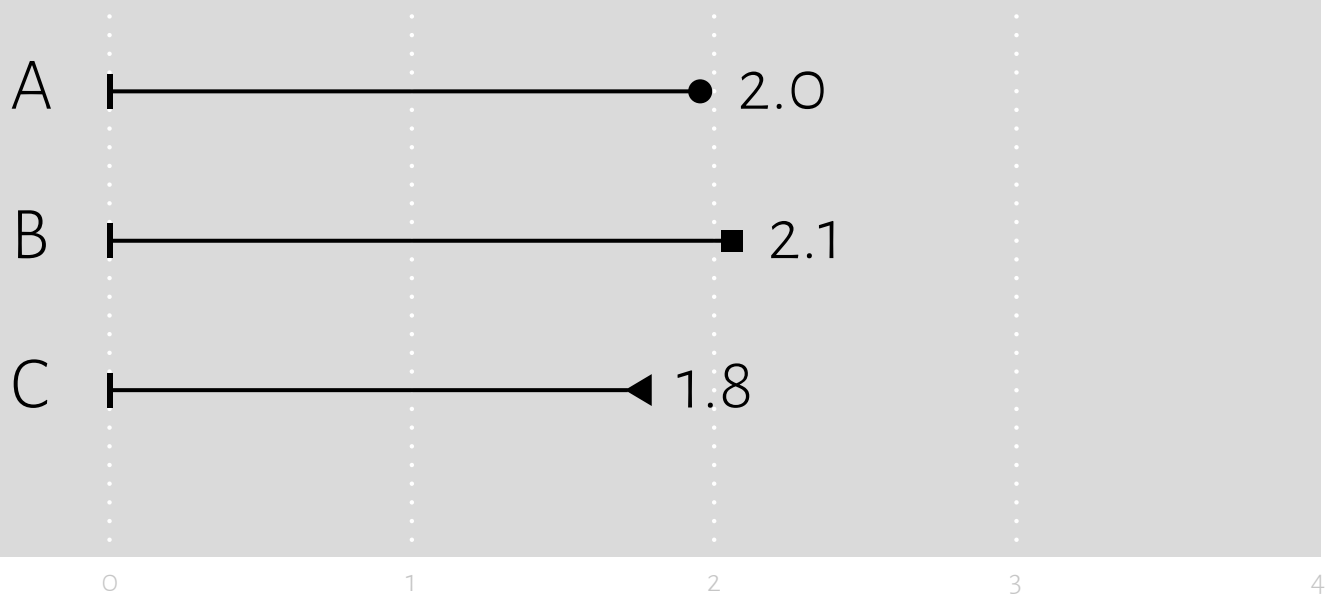
This strategy must apply to several Latvian political spheres: foreign policy, public diplomacy, defence, development of education, and media. Latvian foreign policymakers and implementers should be aware that the activities of Latvian media under Russian control are part of Russia's official foreign policy, so, reaction to it is permissible and necessary. An assessment of Russia's information influence in the context of national security is the responsibility of defence and security institutions. Such assessments and analysis are already ongoing. However, Latvia's leading politicians and officials must take practical steps on education and media policies. In the education sphere, reform of the segregated (Latvian and Russian) system, inherited from the USSR, should be continued to strengthen the position of the Latvian language. This would promote the integration of minorities, thereby decreasing Latvia's vulnerability to Kremlin-led disinformation. Latvian higher-level officials should make announcements on the crucial role of independent, professional and well-sponsored media in a functioning democracy. But the statement should be followed by practical steps to increase support for Latvian public media as well as for the legal and human resources capacity of monitoring institutions.



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# LITHUANIA



# INTRODUCTION

Lithuania was the first Soviet republic to declare the re-establishment of its independence on March 11, 1990. Sometimes Russian media refer to this fact, claiming that Lithuania (and the other Baltic States) 'destroyed the Soviet Union'.

The national diasporas in Lithuania are quite small. Unlike in Latvia and Estonia, Russians (5.8 %, or 176 900 people)<sup>[1]</sup> are not the largest minority group in Lithuania, and are outranked by Poles (6.6 %, or 200 300 people). Other national diasporas in Lithuania include Belarusians (1.2 %, or 36 200), Ukrainians (0.5 %, or 1 400) and Jews (0.1 %, or 3 000). Unlike in Latvia or Estonia, almost all Lithuanian residents were given the right to acquire citizenship after the Soviet Union collapsed. Nearly 90 % of members of the national diasporas<sup>[2]</sup> chose to do so.

Lithuania has seen one of the EU's sharpest population decreases. By 2011, the census indicated that the population had decreased to 3 million from 3.6 million in 1989.<sup>[3]</sup> The size of the national diasporas has also changed considerably since then. In 1989, the share of ethnic Russians stood at 9.4 %, while Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Jews accounted for 7 %, 1.7 %, 1.2 % and 0.3 % of the population, respectively.

There are some regions in which ethnic minorities are concentrated. These include the Salcininkai and Vilnius districts with a sizable Polish minority, and the city of Visaginas (Russians).

The main challenges confronting Lithuania in the field of information security are:

- The Kremlin's disinformation and information influence campaigns. Russia is trying to spread its propaganda narratives in Lithuanian information space.
- Cyberattacks can be used with intent to destroy information channels (e. g. via DDoS attacks), or to intervene in information systems and the activity of trolls. In April 2017, a cyberattack used for the purpose of spreading fake news in Lithuania was detected.

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[1] Statistika. (2011). Retrieved from <https://tmde.lrv.lt/lt/tautines-bendrijos/statistika>

[2] V. Sinkevuus. Teisinės Lietuvos Respublikos pilietybės pagrindai. In Politologija, 2000, vol. 4. P. 36.

[3] Lithuania's population decrease is also used in Kremlin propaganda as confirmation of Lithuania's economical and political 'failure'. For example, in 2015 President Vladimir Putin provided in a public speech fake information that 'in Lithuania there are only 1.4 million inhabitants left' (Retrieved from <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/ai-putin-lithuania-comments/2881531.html>).



Furthermore, experts point to a number of domestic challenges to Lithuania's information security:

- Unsustainable media landscape. Most media channels are dependent on some groups of interests or business within Lithuania's small media market. This could negatively affect professional standards of mass media.
- Insufficient media literacy among Lithuanian society.
- The Lithuanian authorities' insufficient attention to the problems facing national minorities.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

On the one hand, Lithuanian society is well aware of the Kremlin propaganda and disinformation activities.

As one of the experts interviewed in the framework of this research said:<sup>[4]</sup>

*'We are rather sensitive to the threats due to understanding of our geopolitical situation. This understanding was much lower before the Ukrainian events'*

On the other hand, there are some groups in Lithuanian society which are more vulnerable to Kremlin-led narratives and disinformation than the population on average. In the first place, these are Russian and Polish-speaking national minorities, especially those who live in a Kremlin-backed information bubble, i.e. who regularly follow pro-Kremlin media.

The Kremlin tries to attack Lithuanian society in general and by using different kinds of narratives which could affect different parts of society.

Another expert interviewed said:<sup>[5]</sup>

*'One of the common narratives of Kremlin propaganda against Lithuania is that 'our things go bad', 'all people leave Lithuania', and everything develops in wrong direction',.*

Sometimes Russian media presents Lithuania as a 'failed state' or as a country which lost independence to an occupying NATO and EU influence. Some information attacks against Lithuania can be largely

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[4] L. Kojala, Eastern Europe Studies Centre, July 20, 2017. In-depth interview.

[5] O. Erofeev, Delfi.lt, July 7, 2017. In-depth interview.

viewed in the context of information attacks against the ‘Western world decay’ and the discrediting of its values. Noteworthy, identical narratives are used by Lithuanian nationalists (*‘Patikrinta 15min’*). They align themselves with the Kremlin’s anti-gay and anti-same sex marriages policies, as well as with the Kremlin’s ‘wrong European values’ narrative.

## IN FOCUS

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### **Attack against BNS**

On April 12, 2017, unknown computers hacked the systems of the main Lithuanian information agency in the Baltic region, the BNS (Baltic News Service). The cyberattack published fake news in the system saying that ‘American soldiers were poisoned by sulphur (or as it is commonly known mustard gas), the gas used in the production of chemical weapons in Latvia’. This cyberattack was technically successful, but the fake news stories were identified and removed from BNS on the day of publication.

The possible aim of this action was to damage NATO’s image in the Baltic States by showing that NATO uses mustard gas. This propaganda narrative could also be used later in a different context, for example to help Moscow support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who used the mustard gas against the Syrian people. This fake news was supposed to back the Russian narrative that it was U.S. who conducted the chemical attack, not Assad..

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In Lithuania, no political parties which openly support narratives of Kremlin-backed propaganda operate. As the only exception, the Socialist People’s Front (former leader Algirdas Paleckis) can be mentioned, but it received just 1.21 % of votes in the 2012 parliamentary election.

Kremlin propaganda often attacks Lithuania’s version of history. The USSR’s occupation of the Baltic States in 1940 is rebutted, claiming instead that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia voluntarily joined the ‘big Soviet family’. Furthermore, Kremlin propaganda often calls members of the Lithuanian resistance movement ‘fascists’ or ‘Nazis’.

As suggested by another interviewed expert:<sup>[6]</sup>

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[6] M. Martišius, The Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania, July 19, 2017. In-depth interview.

*'The main point is discourse on the Second World War. Kremlin propaganda uses many different topics in this regard – from resistance movements in the Baltic States and Ukraine to the role of Stalin in 'The Great Victory'. It is Soviet-style propaganda when everything was clear: Hitler was an 'absolute evil' and the Soviet Union along with the Allies upset him. If you try to analyse the mentioned historical events deeply, it is actually a rewriting of history'.*

Some of the interviewed experts draw attention to the fact that Kremlin-supported propaganda often uses Soviet nostalgia in its communication as a tool of soft power. Public opinion research<sup>[7]</sup> commissioned by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre in the summer of 2016 showed that today in Lithuania only 26 % of respondents agree that life in the Soviet Union was better than it is now. On the other hand, the research showed that Soviet nostalgia is often felt by representatives of the 46+ age group, and especially by pensioners. Among the latter group, 45.8 % agree that life in the Soviet Union was better.

As one of interviewed Lithuanian chief editors stated boldly:<sup>[8]</sup>

*'If we talk about 50 – 60 years old people and the situation where they live in the Russian information sphere, we can do nothing. They are lost'.*

Among the Russian national minority, 62.2 % miss the Soviet times.

. It should be mentioned that the target group for Russian TV in Lithuania is not only national minorities.

One communication specialist said:<sup>[9]</sup>

*'Russian television is watched not only by Russian-speaking or Polish-speaking people. Some ethnic Lithuanians who like Russian TV due to its attractive entertainment content also watch it'.*

Indeed, Lithuanian commercial TV channels also transmit Russian media products, although they do not necessarily contain any disinformation or propaganda narratives. For example, Russian media products occupied 35.5 % of airtime per week on BTV and more than 7 % at TV6 in March 2017.<sup>[10]</sup>

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[7] Davidonytė, Birutė. Tyrimas parodė: ar lietuviams prie ruso gyventi buvo geriau. Delfi.lt, (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/tyrimas-parode-ar-lietuviams-prie-ruso-gyventi-buvo-geriau.d?id=71898770>

[8] R. Irzikevicius, The Lithuanian Tribune, July 12, 2017. In-depth interview.

[9] A. Suminas, Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University, August 28, 2017. In-depth interview.

[10] Lietuvos televizijos programų struktūra pagal laidų kilmės šalis, (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.rtk.lt/pranesimai-spaudai/lietuvos-televizijos-programu-struktura-pagal-laidu-kilmes-sali/>

Therefore, the following groups can be viewed as more vulnerable to Kremlin propaganda and disinformation than the population on average:

- Members of national diasporas, Russian and Polish-speaking people
- Citizens with far-right political views
- Older people, aged 46+ and especially pensioners (60+)
- People who watch only Russian TV.

Some experts believe that Russia does not have a specific media strategy for Lithuania. A media expert interviewed for this study said:<sup>[11]</sup>

*‘Although we often say that the Kremlin spreads propaganda against Lithuania, in fact, a very small number of [propaganda] ‘products’ are designed especially for Lithuania. The Kremlin often spreads propaganda in general against the Baltic States or the EU.’*

Nevertheless, there are some specific ‘Lithuanian narratives’ in Russian propaganda, such as the accusation that, on January 13, 1991, peaceful civilians near the TV and Radio centre in Vilnius were killed or injured not by Soviet soldiers, but by unknown snipers connected to the Lithuanian movement for independence; or that Vilnius and Klaipeda should not belong to Lithuania because Moscow unjustifiably ‘gave these cities’ to Lithuania (Vilnius before the Second World War and Klaipeda afterwards).

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Lithuania is a democratic country with a high level of media freedom. In 2017, the World Press Freedom Index placed Lithuania 36<sup>th</sup> (35<sup>th</sup> in 2016) out of 180 countries.<sup>[12]</sup> Reporters Without Borders reports that ‘the media in Lithuania are reputedly independent and free to criticise the government, but not always the big business interests’.<sup>[13]</sup>

An expert interviewed for this study agreed:<sup>[14]</sup>

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[11] M. Martisius, The Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania, July 19, 2017. In-depth interview.

[12] 2017 World Press Freedom Index. Reporters Without Borders. (2017). Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

[13] Ibid.

[14] D. Radzevicius, Lithuanian Journalists Union, July 7, 2017. In-depth interview.

*'The traditional mechanisms of media financing and self-financing were destroyed by digitisation'.*

There are some laws regulating Lithuanian media space. For example, the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public<sup>[15]</sup> and the Law on National Radio and Television.<sup>[16]</sup> The principles of freedom of speech and media freedom are also enshrined in Articles 25 and 44 of The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania.<sup>[17]</sup> As stated in Article 25, 'the freedom to express convictions, as well as to receive and impart information, may not be limited otherwise than by law when this is necessary to protect human health, honour or dignity, private life, or morals, or to defend the constitutional order'. It's also mentioned in Article 44 that 'censorship of mass information shall be prohibited'.

Media in Lithuania also has tools of self-regulation. An example of this is the Commission of Ethics in the Provision of Information to the Public. Commission members are representatives of different journalism and media associations, including the Lithuanian Radio and Television Association, the Association of Regional Television, the Lithuanian Journalists Union, and so on. The functions of The Commission are laid down in the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public:

- Take care of fostering the ethics of producers and disseminators of public information.
- Examine violations of professional ethics by producers or disseminators of public information when providing information to the public.
- Examine complaints with regard to activities of producers and disseminators of public information who have allegedly infringed the provisions of the Code, and examine disputes between producers and disseminators of public information regarding violations of the Code.
- Ensure the development of mass literacy in cooperation with state agencies and institutions, dissemination of the principles of critical assessment and analysis of information.
- Organise events in regard to issues related to professional ethics in the field of the provision of information to the public, and participate

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[15] Law on the Provision of Information to the Public (1996, 2015). Retrieved from <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/2865241206f511e687e0fbad81d55a7c?fwid=1clcwosx33>

[16] Law on the National Radio and Television (1996). Retrieved from <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.55469?fwid=-n126u3s9b>

[17] The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (1992). Retrieved from <http://www3.lrs.lt/home/Konstitucija/Constitution.htm>

in the implementation of strategic planning programmes and action plans of state institutions (Article 46).

The Commission cannot fine media, but outlets which fail to follow ethical standards (as ruled by the Commission) may not get any funding or support from the state.

The Lithuanian government also established The Office of the Inspector of Journalism Ethics. The mission of the Office is 'to ensure that public information is respectful of human rights and freedoms, to develop the civil society and critical approach to the public information processes, to raise public legal awareness and the awareness of human rights, to foster sustainable relationship between the public information producers and disseminators and the general public and to promote the public information producers' and disseminators' responsibility'.<sup>[18]</sup>

The main goals of the Office are to examine complaints (applications) from individuals and violations of regulatory laws governing the provision of information to the public, to monitor and analyse public information, to provide expertise in public information, to cooperate with other institutions, and to undertake public education, consulting, and drafting provisions of proposals for laws and other legal acts.<sup>[19]</sup>

The main document of media self-regulation is The Codex of the Ethics of Provision of Information to the Public of Lithuania<sup>[20]</sup> (known as the The Codex of Ethics of Lithuanian Journalists and Publishers until 2016). It regulates the standards of journalists' professional work.

The media market in Lithuania is quite small. Statistics show<sup>[21]</sup> that TV remains the most popular media segment. There are four major media groups in the Lithuanian television market. The two leaders are commercial giants LNK group (channels: LNK, BTV, TV 1, Info TV and Liuks!) with 27.4 % of the market share, and MTG group (TV 3, TV 6 and TV 8) with 20.9 % of the market share. The third position is taken by the Lithuanian public broadcaster LRT group (LRT Televizija and LRT Kultūra) with 9.8 % of the market share.

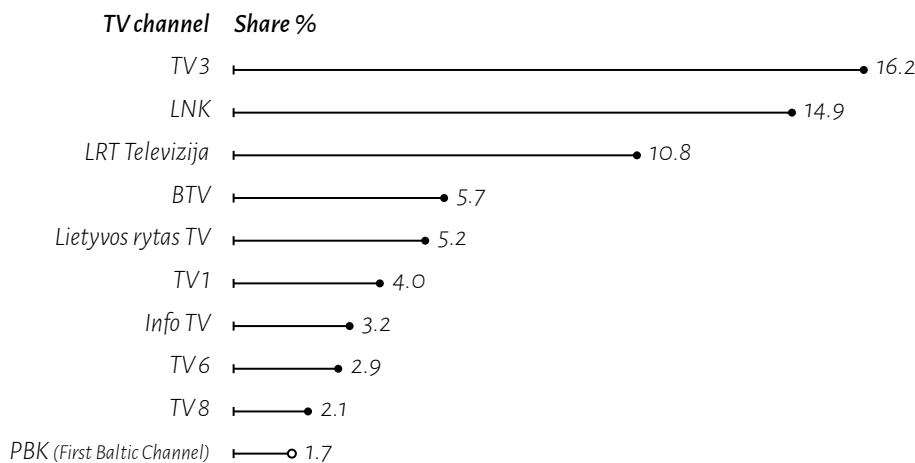
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[18] The Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethic. (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.zeit.lt/en/the-office-of-the-inspector-of-journalist-ethics/262>

[19] Ibid.

[20] Lietuvos visuomenės informavimo etikos kodeksas. (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.etikoskomisija.lt/teisine-informacija/etikos-kodeksas>

[21] Žiniasklaidos tyrimų apžvalga. (2016). Retrieved from [http://www.tns.lt/data/files/Metines\\_apzvalgos/Kantar\\_TNS\\_Metin%C4%97\\_%C5%BEiniasklaidos\\_tyrim%C5%B3\\_ap%C5%BEvalga\\_2016m.pdf](http://www.tns.lt/data/files/Metines_apzvalgos/Kantar_TNS_Metin%C4%97_%C5%BEiniasklaidos_tyrim%C5%B3_ap%C5%BEvalga_2016m.pdf)



### **Most popular TV channels in Lithuania**

Source: Žiniasklaidos tyrimų apžvalga (2016)

channels transmitting pro-Kremlin narratives narratives —○

Special attention should be paid to the BMA group, which holds the fourth position. It broadcasts channels related to Russian state media (or are under indirect Russian state control) which is adjusted for the Lithuanian audience. Their three channels are NTV Mir Lietuva (2.5 % market share), PBK (Pervyj Baltijskij Kanal, 2.3 %) and REN Lietuva (1.1 %). This gives BMA a total market share of 5.9 %. In fact, these channels are the main TV providers of narratives of the Kremlin's propaganda.

There are no such popular broadcasters of pro-Kremlin narratives in other segments of the media market. The radio market is quite depoliticised. There are also two local commercial radio stations for national minorities, RUSRADIO LT (for the Russian-speaking minority) with 10.5 % of the market share, and Znad Wilii (2 % of). However, no cases of deliberate disinformation by these stations have been reported.

In fact, there are just a few media outlets which the State Security Department of Lithuania marked in a 2014 public report as 'tools of Russia's information and ideological influence'.<sup>[22]</sup> These are TV channel PBK and local weekly newspapers in the Russian language, namely Ekspress nedelia (4.2 % market share), Obzor (2.2 % market share) and Litovskij kurjer (no data).

[22] Grėsmių nacionaliniam saugumui vertinimas. (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.vsd.lt/senoji/Files/Documents/635306548879220000.pdf>

There are some Internet sources which also try to provide Russian propaganda narratives to the Lithuanian audience. In 2017, the State Security Department of Lithuania and Second Department of Lithuanian Ministry of Defence published a joint report naming Internet media Baltnews.lt and Sputniknews.lt in this respect.<sup>[23]</sup> Both sources are connected to the Russian state information agency *Rossiia Segodnia*.

Baltnews.lt tries to hide its connection to Russia in order to be seen as ‘independent media’. However, it is not popular in Lithuania. In August 2017, *Baltnews.lt* had only about 700 daily readers from Lithuania.<sup>[24]</sup> The State Security Department of Lithuania evaluates its influence as ‘not significant’.

*Sputniknews.lt* is also unpopular. The report rightly stated that Sputnik, in Lithuanian and Russian, ‘has not many readers yet, its account on the Facebook social network is not popular either’. In August 2017, it had approximately 900 daily readers (Gemius data). As of October 20, 2017, its account on Facebook had 660 likes.

The experts agree that local media outlets which provide Kremlin propaganda reach quite a small percentage of Lithuanian society. In fact, this media category could be referred to as ‘marginal’ in Lithuanian markets, but it could have a big influence in some information bubbles or among some local communities (mostly Russians and Poles).

One expert interviewed for this study said:<sup>[25]</sup>

*‘We see that the audience of local pro-Kremlin media is quite small and that’s kind of a reason to not worry about it. But we should always look at the dynamics of processes. The elements of information warfare are spread via different channels. To look at traditional media only would be a mistake’.*

The experts’ concerns are that, under some circumstances, the popularity of such ‘information sources’ could grow. This could be dependent on growing Kremlin interest in influencing the Lithuanian information space, which could spark new investment in propaganda outlets in Lithuania.

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[23] Grėsmių nacionaliniam saugumui vertinimas. (2017). Retrieved from [https://kam.lt/download/57113/akatskt\\_final\\_beta.pdf](https://kam.lt/download/57113/akatskt_final_beta.pdf)

[24] <https://opa.gemius.lt/>

[25] V. Jurkonys, Freedom House, July 14, 2017, In-depth interview.



## LEGAL REGULATIONS

Lithuania does not have special legislation in the field of information security. However, interviewed experts generally believe that the existing legal environment is adequate for protecting Lithuania's information sphere from potential threats.

Nevertheless, the country doesn't have a special strategy for information security. This topic is mentioned in different official documents, such as the revised National Security Strategy<sup>[26]</sup> and the renewed Military Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania.<sup>[27]</sup>

The National Security Strategy gives a list of information threats, including 'military propaganda spread by certain states and non-state players, warmongering, incitements of hatred, attempts to distort history as well as other unsubstantiated and misleading information directed against the national security interests of the Republic of Lithuania which leads to the distrust of and dissatisfaction with the State of Lithuania and its institutions, democracy, national defence, seeks to widen national and cultural divides and to weaken national identity and active citizenship, attempts to discredit Lithuania's membership of NATO, NATO capabilities, and the commitment to defend its Allies, to undermine citizens' will to defend their state... information activities that are aimed at influencing the country's democratic or electoral processes or the party system, or that are targeted at the societies and policy makers of other Member States of the EU and NATO, seeking unfavourable decisions for the Republic of Lithuania'.

Informational attacks are mentioned among other conventional threats in the Military Strategy, which states: Russia and some other states and non-state players have been aggressively disseminating unfounded and misleading information with the aim of shaping Lithuanian public opinion on national security. Such attacks are used to generate distrust and discontent with the democratic order and the national defence system, to discredit the Alliance, its capabilities and commitments to defend the Allies, as well as to weaken the unity among citizens, undermine their

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[26] National Security Strategy. (2016). Retrieved from [https://kam.lt/en/defence\\_policy\\_1053/important\\_documents/strategical\\_documents.html](https://kam.lt/en/defence_policy_1053/important_documents/strategical_documents.html)

[27] Military Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania. (2017). Retrieved from [https://kam.lt/en/defence\\_policy\\_1053/important\\_documents/strategical\\_documents.html](https://kam.lt/en/defence_policy_1053/important_documents/strategical_documents.html)

patriotism, and their will to defend the country. The spread of information and communications technologies is likely to cause even more information attacks, especially those directed towards specific target groups, in the future’.

The Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania can order channels to be blocked temporarily to stop the spread of propaganda narratives. Such sanctions have been imposed on a number of Russian channels on commercial cable networks. The Commission made every decision after an investigation. The transmission of a channel can be blocked if its content breaks (in the opinion of the Commission) Lithuanian law. The Law on the Provision of Information to the Public under which the Commission functions allows it to block media which spreads war propaganda, instigates war or hatred, ridicule, humiliation, instigates discrimination, violence, physical violent treatment of a group of people or a person belonging on grounds of age, sex, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, race, nationality, citizenship, language, origin, social status, belief, convictions, views or religion’. The decision about temporarily blocking a channel is made through the courts following application by the Commission.

In 2013, sanctions were first implemented in relation to the PBK TV channel. The Commission ruled that, for three months, this channel could not broadcast on Lithuanian territory any media products made in countries that had not signed up to the Television Without Frontiers Convention. It should be mentioned that Russia did not sign up to this Convention.

In 2014, transmission of RTR-Planeta and NTV Mir Lietuva was restricted for three months.<sup>[28]</sup> RTR-Planeta’s transmission was repeatedly blocked for three months at a time in 2015 and 2016. Finally, in 2017, yet another Russian channel, TVCI, was blocked twice, once for a month and later for six months.

According to the interviewed experts, the issue of information security does not only belong in the area of national law. Moscow uses ‘information offshores’ to extend its information influence. For instance, the PBK channel is registered in Latvia, not Russia. In this situation, national legislation is not helpful in protecting a country’s information space.

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[28] In November 2014, Vilnius County Court ruled that The Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania had the right to suppress re-transmission of TV channels.

For this reason, the problem of information security should be addressed in EU legislation as well.

Mantas Martisius, Deputy Chief of The Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania, argues that an understanding the threat of propaganda has finally spread across a united Europe:

*'For example, some years ago colleagues from Great Britain or Sweden did not understand our fears. Now they do.'*<sup>[29]</sup>

Similar views are shared by Skirmantas Malinauskas, an advisor of the Lithuanian prime minister:

*'Lithuania is one of the first states which began to form practice about how to react to propaganda but, in fact, we need European level regulation of the mentioned sphere.'*<sup>[30]</sup>

Experts also warn that decisions on banning and restricting propaganda should be implemented very carefully. Every decision should be based on sound justification because such practice could violate the democratic principles related to freedom of the speech and expression.

As one communication expert warned:<sup>[31]</sup>

*'I'm not a fan of interdictions. We should use them very carefully. In the fight against propaganda there always is a danger of violating the freedom of speech or restricting the possibility of thinking differently.'*

In short, Lithuania is quite active in using its national legislation to restrict Russian disinformation. It is wrong to talk about a national sphere of information as something localised. It is evident in the case of Lithuania that the loopholes used by the Kremlin media can be closed only if the issues are addressed at EU level.

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[29] M. Martisius, The Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania, July 19, 2017. In-depth interview.

[30] S. Malinauskas, Office of Prime Minister of Lithuania, July 17, 2017. In-depth interview.

[31] G. Aleknonis, Mykolas Romeris University, August 10, 2017. In-depth interview.

# INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

The resistance to propaganda's influence is one of the priorities of Lithuania's political agenda. President Dalia Grybauskaitė mentioned this in her interview with 'Foreign Policy' magazine,

*'After Crimea, the investment in propaganda and information warfare was massively increased by the Kremlin. We are already in a non-conventional war because of the [constant] cyberattacks, TV propaganda, and information attacks from Russia. We see this all the time. They try to invest in some politicians. They plant fake news stories.'*<sup>[32]</sup>

As mentioned, some problems are connected to the fact that Lithuania doesn't have a separate strategy for how to react to information threats. Experts think that it is not enough to just name challenges in such documents as the National Security Strategy or the Military Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania. They contend that this will not improve the effective institutional framework.

The problem is a general lack of long-term view.

Evaldas Labanauskas, chief editor of the Internet edition of one of the oldest Lithuanian newspapers, *Lietuvos žinios*, said:<sup>[33]</sup>

*'I don't see any clear strategy, especially if we are talking about long-term strategy. Only ad hoc reactions.'*

According to Lina Kojalas, speaking during an in-depth interview with the Eastern European Studies Centre on July 20, 2017, the strategy is 'under construction' and the biggest problem is that 'we still don't know exactly what our ultimate purpose is'.

The experts also mentioned that different governmental institutions work to increase the level of resilience towards threats of propaganda and information warfare, but that efforts are not strongly coordinated between them.

One expert noted:

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[32] Weymouth, Lally. "Russia Is a Threat... To All of Europe" (2017). Retrieved from [http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/24/russia-lithuania-nato-grybauskaitė-putin-trump-interview/#\\_=\\_](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/24/russia-lithuania-nato-grybauskaitė-putin-trump-interview/#_=_)

[33] E. Labanauskas. *Lietuvos žinios*, August 9, 2017. In-depth interview

*'We still have a lack of integrity, lack of clear priorities, lack of pursuance of the main purpose.'*<sup>[34]</sup>

The governmental institutions clearly see threats of possible communication influence to Lithuania's society from the Kremlin.

Tomas Ceponis, a representative of the Lithuanian military's department of strategic communication, said<sup>[35]</sup>

*'If we lose the information war today, tomorrow we may be fighting with weapons.'*

Raimundas Karoblis, Lithuania's defence minister, added: 'Russia is a threat'.<sup>[36]</sup>

In fact, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania has a Department of Strategic Communication and Strategic a Communication Group, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania has a Department of Policy of the Provision of Information to the Public, the Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania has the Department of Strategic Communication and Public Affairs, and the Lithuanian Armed Forces has the Department of Strategic Communications. All these work separately. The experts think that the current situation is not a rational response to the threat.

Some of the mentioned departments have interesting initiatives. For example, the Strategic Communication Group of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a Twitter account.<sup>[37]</sup> The messages from the account are in English, and mostly aim to challenge the Kremlin's disinformation.

The existence of these institutions shows that Lithuanian government units have the strategic and creative potential to find answers to the challenge of the influence of Kremlin-backed propaganda, and a well-coordinated institutional framework could inspire such actions.

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[34] L. Kojala, Eastern Europe Studies Centre, July 20, 2017. In-depth interview.

[35] Graham-Harrison, Emma. Boffey, Daniel. Lithuania fears Russian propaganda is prelude to eventual invasion (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/03/lithuania-fears-russian-propaganda-is-prelude-to-eventual-invasion>

[36] Ibid.

[37] [https://twitter.com/lt\\_mfa\\_stratcom?lang=en](https://twitter.com/lt_mfa_stratcom?lang=en)

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

The first fact-checking initiatives emerged in Lithuania a few years ago. The news portal 15min.lt runs a fact-checking initiative named *'Patikrinta 15min'* ('Checked by 15min'). This initiative was launched in 2016 by a journalist Liepa Zelnienė. This media outlet also established its own Department of Investigations in 2015. At 15min.lt, fact-checking staff and investigative journalists unmasked not only lies of Lithuanian politicians but also identified Kremlin disinformation. In August 2016, 15min.lt and the International Digital Communication Network organised a conference in Vilnius called *'Truth Matters'*, focusing on fact checking.

There are some other similar initiatives in Lithuania. For example, in the summer of 2017 the biggest news portal Delfi.lt announced that it is going to create a tool against 'false news'<sup>[38]</sup> in cooperation with Google (in the framework of the 'Digital News Initiative'). However, this tool is still under construction. Since 2016, Delfi.lt has also allowed readers to inform journalists of unusual information they see in the public sphere, via *Demaskuok.lt*.<sup>[39]</sup> Journalists investigate these reports, then write about them if fake news is uncovered. Such articles are marked by the word 'demaskuota' ('unmasked').

These examples show that the initiative of fact-checking in Lithuania is in the hands of journalists.

A representative of Lithuania's Journalists Union interviewed for this study said:<sup>[40]</sup>

*'Our media are pro-active. They try to analyse how propaganda works, carry out special projects against fake news and explain where the fake news came from.'*

But, in general, fact-checking activities are still quite new in Lithuania. Only a few media groups have enough resources to attempt the development of fact-checking as a separate genre of journalism.

In the summer of 2017, NATO shared a short video on its social media accounts about anti-Soviet resistance in the Baltic States after the end

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[38] DELFI kuriamas kovos prieš melagingas naujienas įrankis gavo „Google“ finansavimą. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.delfi.lt/verslas/verslas/delfi-kuriamas-kovos-pries-melagingas-naujienas-irankis-gavo-google-finansavima.d?id=75155378>

[39] <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/demaskuok/>

[40] D. Radzevičius, Lithuanian Journalists Union, July 7, 2017. In-depth interview

of the Second World War.<sup>[41]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted hysterically to the movie and published information about the ‘Forest Brothers Crimes’ from 1947, based on reports of the Interior Affairs Ministry of the USSR.<sup>[42]</sup> RF Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova branded Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian Forest Brothers ‘Fascists’ and ‘Nazis’, and accused them of killing peaceful civilians.<sup>[43]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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### Flash mob against propaganda

The well-known Lithuanian journalist Andrius Tapinas, engaged users of Lithuanian segments of the Internet with an online flashmob. The participants were supposed to leave comments with the hashtag #KremliauMūsųIstorijosNeperrašysi (#KremlinYouWillNotRewriteOurHistory) on the Facebook page of the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, Lithuanian users were invited to rate the Facebook page of the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs with one star to make its ranking lower. This event was joined by thousands of Lithuanian Internet users. The Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to remove the option to recover the rating of its Facebook page.

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## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

Media literacy is a hot topic in Lithuania. The sphere of ‘media literacy and critical thinking’ was mentioned as a priority in a government programme.<sup>[44]</sup> The basis of the national strategy ‘*Lithuania 2030*’ is societal input and ideas for success, contributed by communities, non-governmental organisations and proactive citizens. This strategy aims ‘to introduce media literacy programmes in all education institutions’.<sup>[45]</sup>

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[41] Forest Brothers – Fight for the Baltics. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5rQFp7FF9c&t=2s>

[42] Source: <https://www.facebook.com/MIDRussia/posts/1087506378015469:0?pnref=story>

[43] Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10214029522081798&set=a.4365446944032.176170.1523648416&type=1&theater>

[44] Programme of the Government. (2016). Retrieved from <https://lrv.lt/en/about-government/programme-of-the-government>

[45] Lithuania's progress strategy "Lithuania 2030". (2012). Retrieved from [https://lrv.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/EN\\_version/Useful\\_information/lithuania2030.pdf](https://lrv.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/EN_version/Useful_information/lithuania2030.pdf)

Neringa Jurciukonyte, director of the National Institute of Social Integration and coordinator of the journalists education programme '*Media 4 Change*', said:<sup>[46]</sup>

*'Consistent activities should be carried out in order to cultivate critical thinking, starting from nursery schools. Some methods allow doing this in the form of games.'*

In 2014 to 2015, the biggest project connected to media literacy was conducted by the Education Development Centre in affiliation with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania. The project was also realised with the support of Nordic Council of Ministers Office in Lithuania.<sup>[47]</sup> The aim of the project was to create centralised national media literacy projects and initiatives in order to integrate elements of media literacy into regular subjects in the primary school system.

In 2016 to 2017, the National Institute of Social Integration developed special critical thinking and media literacy programmes. Organisers said: 'The programmes ran for one year and brought together 90 students from 45 schools across Lithuania. The programmes consisted of two periods of five-day training and then the much anticipated '*Critical Thinking Festival*'.<sup>[48]</sup>

Other 2016 activities directly or indirectly related to media literacy included a national education project '*Learning from Film*', a gaming culture festival 'GameOn' and the national research project '*News Literacy Education: How to Understand Media (NEWSLIT)*'.<sup>[49]</sup>

Recently, the Education Development Centre announced a number of new media literacy programmes such as the educational programme for primary schools '*Media (s)kills*' and the initiative 'Specifics of Multimedia Journalism, Ethics and Tendencies', in partnership with NGO 'Dokumedia' and 12 primary schools.<sup>[50]</sup>

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[46] N. Jurciukonyte, National institute of social integration, August 16, 2017. In-depth interview.

[47] Media and Information Literacy Education Project in Lithuania. (2015). Retrieved from [http://www.norden.lt/projects/336#media-and-information-literacy-education-project-in-lithuania\\_element\\_845](http://www.norden.lt/projects/336#media-and-information-literacy-education-project-in-lithuania_element_845)

[48] Lithuania: Critical Thinking and Media Literacy Programs (2016–2017). (2017). Retrieved from <http://blog.nohatespeechmovement.org/lithuania-critical-thinking-and-media-literacy-programs-2016-2017/>

[49] Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28. Annex 3—Summaries of 145 "case-study" projects, (2016). Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2oc9z9C>.

[50] Source: <https://duomenys.ugdome.lt/?/mm/dry/med=2>



Interviewed experts say the development of media literacy should be aimed at youths because it will make the biggest impact. An expert stated in a recent interview:

*'We should teach pupils at school that, in order to get information, they should use at least two, better three sources'.<sup>[51]</sup>*

By some experts are of the opinion that a system of warnings, aimed at older people, would be better than educational programmes. One solution could be to mark the content of Russian television programmes on Lithuanian cable networks as untrustworthy. An expert from Freedom House stated:

*'Adults should also get the knowledge on how to find alternative sources of information'.<sup>[52]</sup>*

The issues of foreign propaganda are discussed in the Lithuanian public sphere rather often, including by experts. Some recent examples include a conference at the Lithuanian National Library (*'Literacy in the Digital Age'*), a discussion at the Energy and Technology Museum ('How to transcribe the Soviet Lithuania chronicles?'), and the series of public discussions at Vilnius University about 'elements of propaganda in animation', organised by the Students Scientific Fellowship under the authority of the university's Communications Department. The organisers of such discussions, which contribute to raising media conscience in Lithuanian society, are various NGOs, think tanks and public sector institutions (for example, libraries and museums).

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[51] E. Labanauskas, Lietuvos ziniuos, August 9, 2017. In-depth interview.

[52] V. Jurkonys, Freedom House, July 14, 2017, In-depth interview.

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

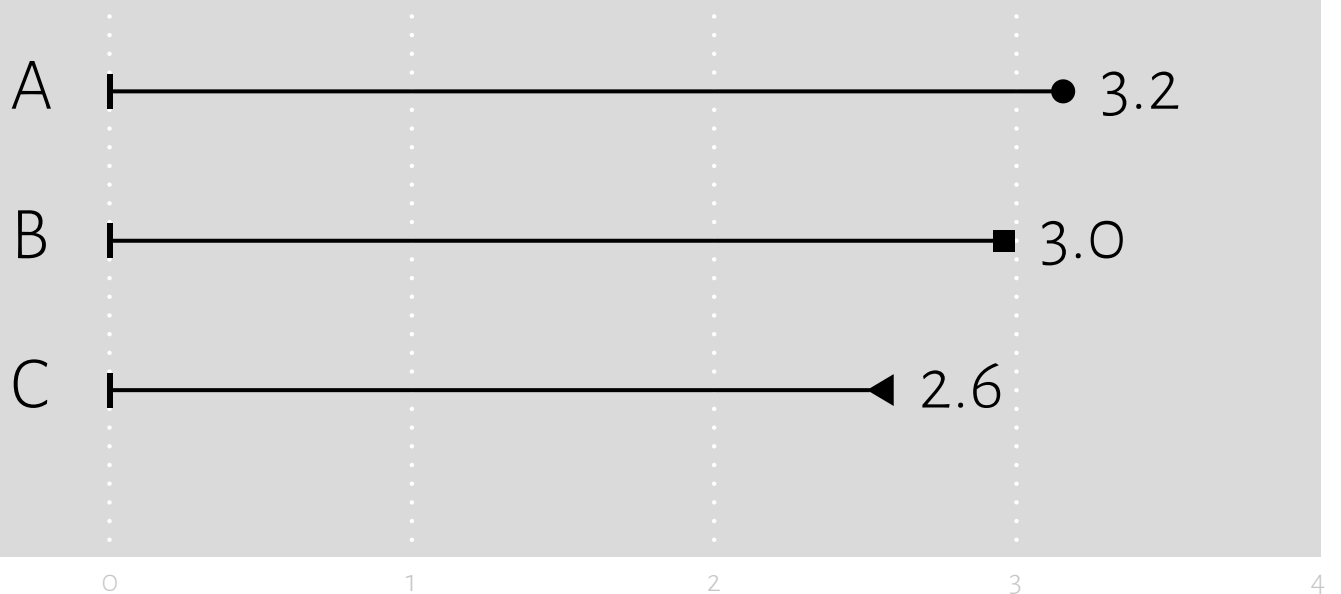
Understanding of the threat posed by propaganda is quite high in Lithuania. But the country's media protection system is inadequate and potentially vulnerable. On the state level, information security is high priority. At the same time, cooperation between the different state agencies and institutions in this sphere is quite low. Below are recommendations focused on increasing national resilience to foreign disinformation, based on analysis and interviews with experts:

1. To create a National Strategy of Information Security, with clear steps about how to improve information safety in Lithuanian society. This should be separate from The National Security Strategy and The Military Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania.
2. To intensify coordination between the different institutions in the area of information security through regular meetings of its heads and/or representatives.
3. To develop Lithuania's media quality by organising courses and extra studies for professional journalists, aimed at improving their knowledge and establishing a 'Quality Media Rescue Fund' in support of professional media in difficult financial situations.
4. To integrate the subject of media literacy into the curriculum of years 9 to 12 at schools.
5. To mark Russian-backed television channels that are directly or indirectly connected to the Kremlin and broadcast on the Lithuanian cable network as untrustworthy sources of information to warn viewers. This could be done by showing a special warning in the corner of the TV screen.
6. To develop social dialogue and further integrate national minorities into society. The message that national minorities are an important part of society should be improved in the public speeches of political leaders and in media discourse.
7. To coordinate activities in the area of information security with other Baltic States (primarily Latvia and Estonia). It would be important to establish a joint coordination centre with expert representatives from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

ANDREI  
CURARARU

*Watchdog.MD Think tank*

# MOLDOVA



# INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Moldova declared its independence from the USSR on August 27, 1991. However, Russian forces have remained on Moldovan territory east of the Dniester River supporting the breakaway region of Transnistria, composed of a Slavic majority population (mostly Ukrainians and Russians), but with a sizable ethnic Moldovan minority. According to the 1989 census, the population of Transnistria was composed of about 40 % ethnic Moldovans, 28 % Ukrainians, and 25 % Russians. In 2004, the authorities of the breakaway region took another census, but the results are disputed due to a lack of transparency of the process. At the current time, we can assess that the breakaway region strives not to be part of Moldovan media space. The broadcasts from the right bank of the Dniester are jammed, and the frequencies of Moldova TV broadcasters have been redistributed to rebroadcast Russian content.

This report does not cover the breakaway region of Transnistria, as it presents a different model and structure of the media landscape, oriented towards pro-Kremlin narratives and direct 'state' support of controlled media outlets. Also, there is a lack of reliable data on media consumption trends as well as a real connection to the Moldovan media market.

Regarding the social structure of Moldova, data from the last census states that over 82 % of the population is Moldovan/Romanian speakers.<sup>[1]</sup> The other ethnic groups are categorised under the artificial ethnolinguistic term 'Russian speakers'. This is reminiscent of the Soviet period when the interaction between different ethnic groups was through the Russian language. This makes them more vulnerable towards manipulation, as they are prone to consume media products coming from the Russian Federation as well as local products aimed at them. For example, the *Sputnik.md* website, a satellite website with connections to Russian power structures, publishes most of its content in Russian and some in Romanian.

A high level of trust in the church is a constant of Moldovan society. According to the Opinion Barometer, over 70 % of the population trusts the church, this being the highest level of trust in any social organisation. The Moldovan Metropolitanate has close ideological and economic

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[1] "Recensământ 2014: 75 % Dintre Cetățenii R. Moldova Se Declara Moldoveni Și Doar 7% – Romani," *realitatea.md*, March 31, 2017, [http://www.realitatea.md/recensamant-2014-75prc-dintre-ceta-enii-r-moldova-se-declara-moldoveni-i-doar-7prc-romani\\_54929.html](http://www.realitatea.md/recensamant-2014-75prc-dintre-ceta-enii-r-moldova-se-declara-moldoveni-i-doar-7prc-romani_54929.html)

relations with the Russian Federation, developing lucrative business models based on its exemption from income taxes. A recent investigation uncovered business ties to Russian companies selling votive candles at dumping prices to the Moldovan church.<sup>[2]</sup> These ties, as well as the political activism of the church, makes it an active player that may be promoting foreign interests in Moldova. One of the experts interviewed within the research explains:

*'Since the declaration of independence of Moldova, the church has backed numerous candidates at every election in the parliament. Be it the Socialist Party or a former Secret Service director turned politician. The church had close ties with the Communist Party when it was in power and ... is promoting interests close to the Russian Federation.'*<sup>[3]</sup>

The country signed and ratified an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, which fully entered into force in July 2016 after ratification by all EU member states. Currently, the parliament of the Republic of Moldova is dominated by an alliance of the Democrat Party and the European People's Party of Moldova, the government is composed almost exclusively from representatives of the Democrats. In November 2016, Igor Dodon, the leader of the pro-Kremlin Socialists Party, became the president of the Republic of Moldova and promotes closer ties with the Russian Federation and the revision of the Association Agreement with the EU. According to one of the experts, the very existence of the Socialists Party poses risks to national information security:

*'Compared to Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova presents a worse political situation in the relationship with pro-Kremlin propaganda. The Ukrainians have banned the pro-Russia Regions Party, and we still have the Socialists Party. Together with President Igor Dodon and the affiliated media holding they represent the key threat to our information security.'*<sup>[4]</sup>

From an economic standpoint, Moldova remains Europe's most impoverished economy. In 2014, 1 billion USD was stolen from three Moldovan banks: Banca de Economii, Unibank, and Banca Sociala. The theft had a political component with the implication of the former prime minister, Vlad Filat, who was sentenced in the case, as well as other high-level officials. As one of our anonymous respondents put it,

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[2] "Mitropolia Lumânărilor: Rise Moldova," accessed December 15, 2017, <https://www.rise.md/articol/mitropolia-lumanarilor/>.

[3] Alla Rosca, Tulane University, December 8, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[4] Mihai Cernencu, Free International University of Moldova, December 9, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

*'poverty is an important factor in the sensitivity to propaganda, as a person striving to feed oneself will not have the time to consume media content, and if one does, it will not be quality content'.<sup>[5]</sup>*

In 2015, protests erupted in the capital Chisinau with participants claiming that all the governing parties had been involved in the theft of the 1 billion USD, asking for early elections. The left pro-Kremlin parties, as well as right extra-parliamentary opposition, have used this narrative both in national and local elections since that period.

While the EU has become the most significant trading partner of Moldova, with over 3.5 billion USD in overall trade, Russia remains one of the most significant destinations for Moldovan economic migrants.<sup>[6]</sup> Also, the Russian market is the second biggest export destination for Moldovan goods with over 11 % of total exports for the first quarter of 2017.<sup>[7]</sup> Another big issue is the country's energy dependency on Russian energy resources and over 6 billion USD of debt accumulated by the country, including the Transnistrian region.<sup>[8]</sup>

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

The groups which are more susceptible to manipulation through mass media than the population in general are ethnic minorities that must consume Russian media products, Orthodox churchgoers, and the elderly. These groups have limited access to alternative media to check facts and they trust media channels that can be used for manipulation.

The Republic of Moldova presents an ethnic diversity common in most post-Soviet countries, with some local peculiarities. According to the last census in 2014, 75.1 % of the population was declared Moldovan, Romanians were 7.0 %, Ukrainians, 6.6 %, Gagauz people, 4.6 %, Russians, 4.1 %, Bulgarians, 1.9 %, Roma, 0.3 %, and other ethnicities, 0.5 %.

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[5] Anonymous informant, Civil society organization, December 7, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[6] "Moldova Between Russia and the West: A Delicate Balance – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace," accessed September 26, 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/23/moldova-between-russia-and-west-delicate-balance-pub-70056>.

[7] Biroul Național de Statistică, "Comerț exterior," accessed December 15, 2017, <http://www.statistica.md/category.php?l=ro&idc=336&>.

[8] "Dependența Energetică a Republicii Moldova / E-Democracy.md," accessed December 15, 2017, <http://www.e-democracy.md/monitoring/economy/comments/200409031/>.

Compared to the last census, the share of the population that identify themselves as Moldovans decreased by 10 percentage points (pp), and those who declared themselves Romanian rose by 4.8 pp. In the last 10 years, the percentage of those with Russian and Ukrainian ethnicity decreased by 1.9 and 1.8 pp, respectively, and the percentage of ethnic Bulgarian, Gagauz people, and Roma people did not change.

There is still an ideological differentiation between the ethnopolitical terms Moldovan and Romanian. The 'two' languages are the same, a fact confirmed even by the Constitutional Court of Moldova, but some politicians use the 'Moldovan' narrative as an argument against closer relationships with Romania, NATO, and the EU. Another issue with ethnic diversity policies in the Republic of Moldova is that for an extended period all of the minority ethnic groups have been treated as 'Russian speakers' in the educational system and media outreach. Rather than translating legislation into all the minority languages, the state has decided to present it to the public in only Romanian and Russian. At the same time, all the minority language schools in the Republic of Moldova have Russian as the primary language and the minority language as the secondary one.

The language question is a painful one in most ex-Soviet countries, and legislators avoid regulating it outright to prevent provoking a social backlash. At the same time, this has created a situation in which most of the ethnic minority representatives speak their native language and Russian equally, rather than the state language. Moreover, final exams in the Moldovan/Romanian language have in the past caused conflict, for example, between the Moldovan authorities and the leadership of the Gagauz Autonomous Region, which threatened to issue parallel high school diplomas for those who failed them. Thus, by choosing not to deal with the issue of promoting minority languages but rather adopt Russian as a proxy language, the state has led most ethnic minorities to consume media mostly in Russian. This is reflected in voting options as well. The northern districts, densely populated by Ukrainians and people in the Gagauz Autonomous Region, seem to favour pro-Kremlin candidates, both in local and national elections. Based on these factors, we can safely conclude that the Ukrainians and Gagauz people are highly vulnerable to pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Another group sensitive to pro-Kremlin propaganda is the close followers of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which is under the authority of the

Russian Orthodox Church. Hundreds of zealots protested<sup>[9]</sup> against an equal rights law in 2013, claiming it was the first step to legalising same-sex marriages. The law merely guaranteed protection against discrimination in working relationships. Most of the protesters declared that they were blessed by the head of the Church to participate and would do it again if asked. While 90.13 % of the population of the Republic of Moldova claim to be Orthodox, most are not ardent followers. At the same time, a significant number of frequent churchgoers can be influenced by narratives promoted by the Church.

A third group sensitive to media manipulation is the elderly. According to official data, more than 718 000 Moldovans are retired. The media literacy of this category of people is more limited than the general population, as are their internet skills. They rely on traditional sources of information and informal communication to get news. Also, their limited income does not allow them to buy newspapers or magazines. This is exploited by parties that produce papers and distribute them free of charge. Often these publications promote fake news, such as a story about 30 000 Syrian refugees who were supposed to come to Moldova if the pro-Western candidate, Maia Sandu, was elected president. This type of media is hard to track, as many of them do not indicate the number of issues or the authors of the articles they print. One of the interviewed experts stresses the vulnerability of the elderly to media propaganda and disinformation this way:

*'The elderly, especially in rural regions, have a tougher time distinguishing between propaganda and actual information. While the younger generation may use alternative sources from the web, the older people are "bombarded" by Russian and local propaganda. The media education projects should target them for sure.'*<sup>[10]</sup>

According to the last Opinion Barometer (April 2017),<sup>[11]</sup> over 60 % of people older than 60 would vote for joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. For comparison, from the 18–29 age group, only 36 % would vote for the same. One explanation for this situation could be Soviet nostalgia, widely present among older people.

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[9] PUBLIKA.MD, "Protest Bisericesc Împotriva Homosexualilor. Sute de Enoriași Și Preoți Cer Anularea Legii Egalității de Șanse VIDEO/FOTO," PUBLIKA.MD, May 19, 2013, <http://bit.ly/zFKFIUN>

[10] Petru Macovei, Independent Press Association, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[11] *Institutul de Politici Publice, "Barometrul Opiniei publice" April 27, 2017, <http://ipp.md/old/libview.php?l=ro&dc=156&id=820>.*



# MEDIA LANDSCAPE

According to the 2016 Freedom of the Press Index,<sup>[12]</sup> Moldova is partly free. In March 2015, parliament provided the legal background to require TV and radio companies to disclose their final beneficiaries, as well as board members, managers, broadcasters, and producers. The national authorities have also used national-security reasons to bar several Russian journalists from entering Moldova, declaring them ‘undesirable persons’.

In the Reporters without Borders ranking,<sup>[13]</sup> Moldova in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index ranked 80<sup>th</sup>, falling four places compared to 2016. The organisation assesses the Moldovan media market to be diversified but also incredibly polarised. It points out that the editorial positions of the media outlets depend on the interests of their owners or affiliated politicians. An important issue in the media climate is the lack of independence of the broadcasting regulatory authority.

The IREX Media Sustainability Index<sup>[14]</sup> gave Moldova a 2.3 (out of 4) in 2017, comparable to the 2016 score and placing it at the ‘near sustainability level’. The index emphasizes problems with the independence of the Broadcasting Coordination Council (BCC), media ownership, and access to information for journalists. These problems persist, especially in the justice system, which tries to anonymise decisions based on data-protection principles while looking to make it harder to investigate corruption cases.

The EU-funded Media Freedom Watch project’s ranking<sup>[15]</sup> of the Eastern Partnership countries (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) states that Moldova has made significant progress regarding guaranteeing media freedom. This leads to the conclusion that the press in Moldova is relatively free by most accepted standards.

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[12] “Moldova FPI,” March 10, 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/moldova>.

[13] “Moldova: Media as Weapons. Reporters without Borders,” RSF, accessed December 15, 2017, <https://rsf.org/en/moldova>.

[14] Leon Morse, “Media Sustainability Index Europe 2016” (Washington DC: IREX, 2016), <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2016-full.pdf.pdf>.

[15] “Media Freedom in Moldova, Balkanmedia, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung,” Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, accessed November 23, 2017, <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/71.13614/>.

The BCC register includes 126 programme services, including:

70 television stations:

- 32 broadcast via terrestrial channels, including four satellite channels,
- 31 distributed only via cable networks; and,
- 7 broadcast exclusively on satellite.

56 radio stations:

- 55 broadcast via terrestrial frequencies, including one through satellite;
- 1 through wired diffusion.

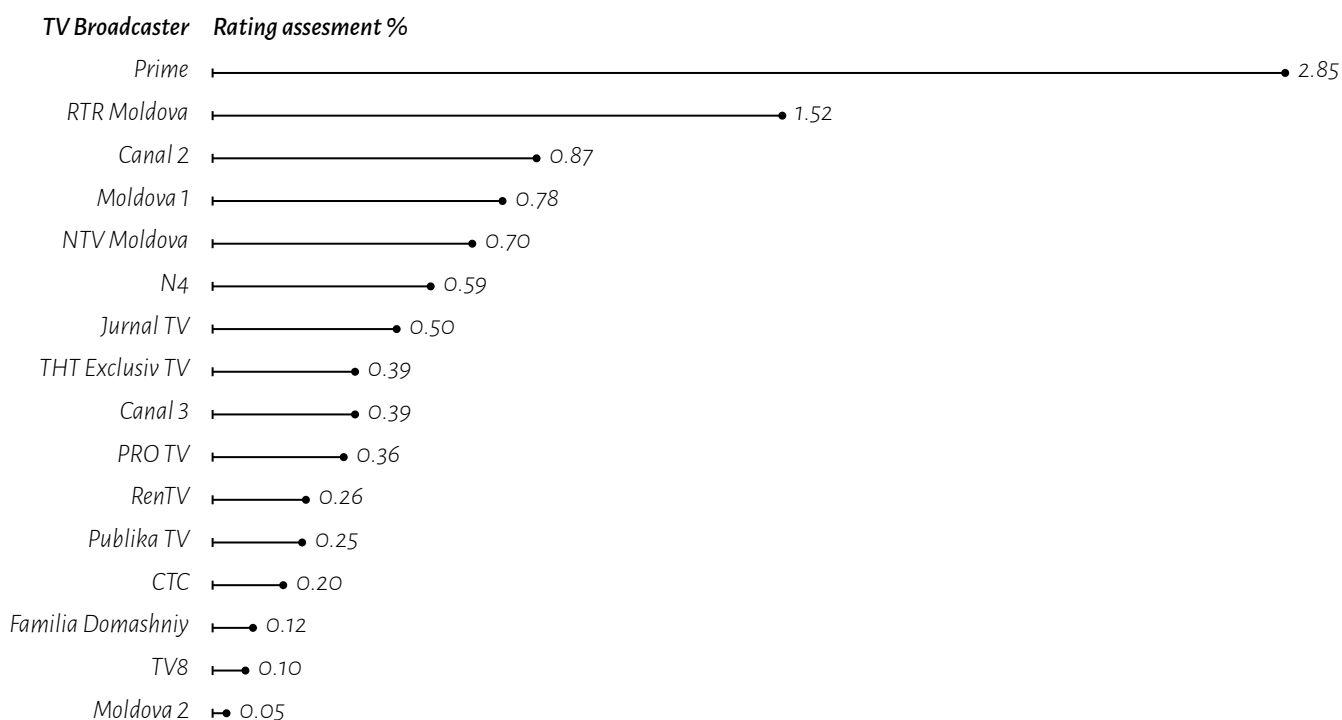
According to the list published by the BCC on its website, of the 70 television stations, five have national coverage: *Moldova 1*, *Prime*, *Canal 2*, *Canal 3*, and *Publika TV*. Of the 56 radio stations, eight have national coverage: *Radio Moldova*, *FM Radio*, *Publika FM*, *Radio Plai*, *Hit FM*, *Vocea Basarabiei*, *Fresh FM*, and *Noroc Radio*.

An audience measurement of television stations in the Republic of Moldova was carried out under the aegis of AGB Nielsen Media Research by TV MR MLD. Some broadcasters and NGOs have questioned the independence and objectivity of the research and development of the results.

According to AGB data, in November 2017, Prime had the highest average daily audience, with a rating of 2.85%. RTR Moldova ranked second with 1.52%, while Canal 2 was ranked third with 0.87%. Four channels—Moldova 1, N4, NTV Moldova and JurnalTV—have average ratings ranging from 0.78% to 0.50%, and the other eight stations have less than half a percentage point each in their respective rankings.<sup>[16]</sup>

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[16] AGB Nielsen Media Research, "Обзор Телевизионной Аудитории" (Chisinau, November 2017), <http://bit.ly/2DwKx24>.



**Figure 1 AGB NIELSEN Ratings Assessment**

Source: agb.md (November 2017)

At least seven TV stations, including five of the top 10, rebroadcast Russian TV channels. These include Prime (ORT), RTR Moldova (RTR), NTV Moldova (NTV), TNT Bravo (TNT), Ren TV Moldova (REN TV), STS Mega (STC), and RenTV.

Experts point to the monopolisation of the media market as one of its challenges:

*‘One of the biggest issues of the Moldovan media landscape is the monopolisation of the market ... There are two main media “holdings”, one representing the government and governing party and another the president and the Socialists that promote manipulative content, both local and foreign ... This multiplies the external factors’ effects tenfold’.*<sup>[17]</sup>

In general, Russian broadcasts dominate most of the top 15 TV channels, as shown by AGB measurement data for November 2017. Basically, for two-thirds of the top television channels (10 out of 15), the most watched are mostly broadcasts and programmes in Russian. They usually originate

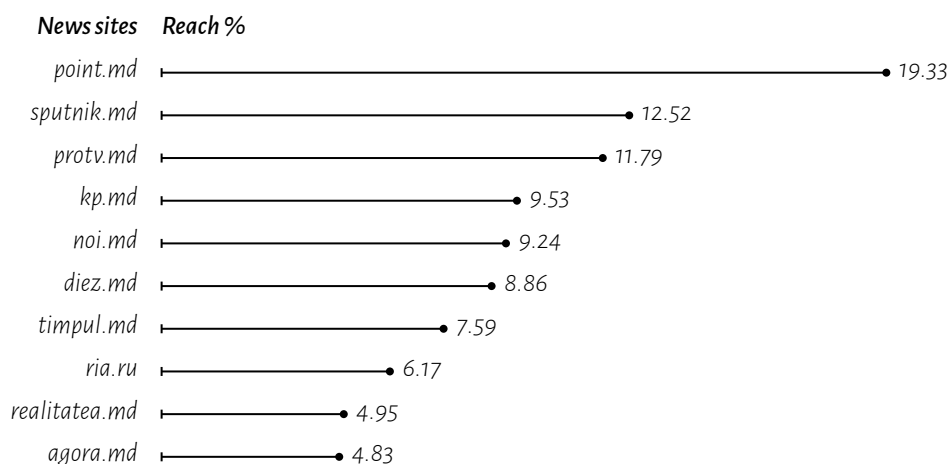
[17] Anonymous informant, Civil society organization, December 7, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

from Russian channels, Soviet-era production films, or TV series produced in Russia. The few exceptions are Moldova 1, Pro TV Chisinau, Publika TV, Realitatea TV, and, partly, Channel 2. Yet another concern is the specifics of the broadcasters' business:

*'One of the biggest issues that promotes manipulative content is the business model of the broadcasters. Most of them are not profitable, but rather rely on obscure models of receiving money for promoting such narratives.'*<sup>[18]</sup>

An eight month study carried out in 2014 by the Electronic Press Association's monitoring of eight television stations (Canal 2, Canal 3, JurnalTV, Moldova 1, Prime, Pro TV Chisinau, Publika TV, and TV7) also confirms the prevalence of Russian TV content.<sup>[19]</sup>

Thus, two of the four private national broadcasters at peak hours transmitted Russian media products (other than artistic films) in a proportion of over 50 % (Canal 3, 50 %; Prime, 77 %). At the same time, if we exclude movies, the programmes broadcast in Russian (including rebroadcasts) from the two television stations varies between 76 % (Canal 3) and 80 % (Prime).



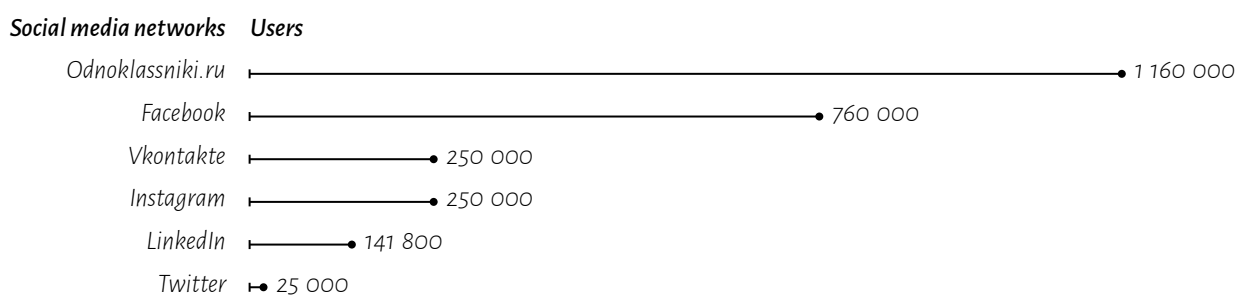
**Figure 2 News sites reach BATI measurement**

Source: Biroul de Audit Al Tirajelor Si Internetului (November 2017)

[18] Dumitru Alaiba, Centre for Policy and Reforms, December 12, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[19] Aneta Gonta et al., "Pluralismul Intern Al Mass-Mediei Din Republica Moldova: Oportunitate și Realitate" (Chisinau: Asociația Presei Electronice, 2014).

In relation to online media, the Audit Bureau of Circulations Moldova (BATI) issued the ratings shown in Figure 2 for October 2017. The ratings show that four out of the 10 most viewed news websites in Moldova, including the most popular site, *Point.md*, promote pro-Kremlin positions. Furthermore, another top site also includes the Russian site *Ria.ru*, which has a reach of over 6% of the population. The sister website of Sputnik.ru, backed by the Russian government, Sputnik.md, has both Russian and Romanian versions to reach a bigger audience. Most of these sites were found to promote fake or manipulative news, according to local debunking initiatives.

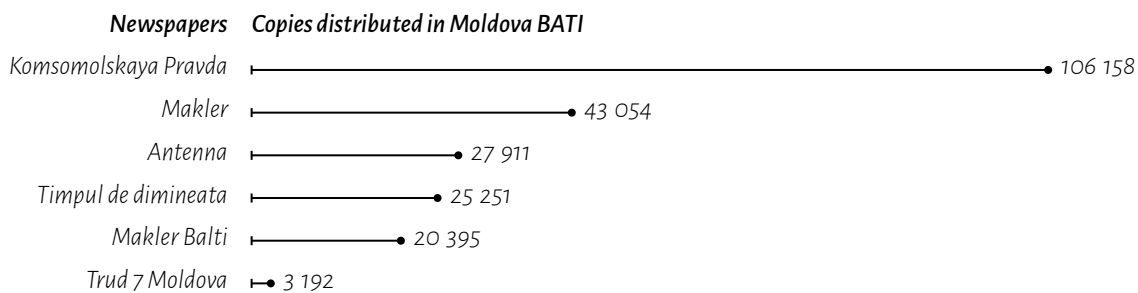


**Figure 3 Social media users by network Source**

Source: Gramatic.md (January 2017)

According to a report published by the digital communications agency Gramatic.md, the most popular social media network in Moldova is the Russian website Odnoklassniki.ru, with more than a million users.<sup>[20]</sup> The Russian social media network Vkontakte ranks third, with more than 250 000 active users. The average profile of an Odnoklassniki user is a high school graduate (over 37%), who lives in the centre of the country (over 54%) and is 20–29 years old (over 31%).

[20] “Gramatic Social Media Report—Ianuarie 2017” (Chisinau, January 2017), <http://gramatic.md/socialmediareport/>.



**Figure 4 Newspapers copies distributed in Moldova**

Source: Biroul de Audit Al Tirajelor Si Internetulu (June 2017)

The newspaper business in the Republic of Moldova, as in most post-Soviet countries, is in decline, since many of the former consumers have switched to online versions of the same newspapers. The BATI statistics for June 2017 show there currently is only one daily newspaper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, which distributed more than 106 000 copies. The weekly publications' statistics include two personal adverts newspapers, *Makler and Makler Balti*. There are also data on three other semi-major newspapers, *Timpul de dimineată*, with over 25 000 copies, *Antenna*, almost 28 000 copies, and *Trud 7 Moldova*, more than 3 000 copies. Only one of the newspapers on this list is published in Romanian. Two of the others, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Trud 7 Moldova*, are known to take a position favourable to Kremlin narratives. Also, we must acknowledge that these distribution figures are voluntary and do not include local and party newspapers.

In the Republic of Moldova, the broadcasting domain began to be regulated in 1995, more than four years after the declaration of independence (1991), when the first 'Law on broadcasting' came into force, creating the BCC and empowering it with regulatory control and licensing functions.<sup>[21]</sup> In the early years of the BCC, it approved numerous licenses for TV and radio broadcast without any limitations on content, including the language and provenance of materials.

In 2006, after the adoption of the new 'Broadcasting Code', the BCC elaborated a 'National Territorial Coverage Strategy'<sup>[22]</sup> that has set some objectives for the promotion of national content and broadcasts

[21] Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, "Codul Audiovizualului," Pub. L. No. 260 (2006), [http://lex.justice.md/document\\_rom.php?id=041D82D8:3A07C731](http://lex.justice.md/document_rom.php?id=041D82D8:3A07C731).

[22] Consiliul Coordonator al Audiovizualului, "Strategia de Acoperire a Teritoriului Național Cu Servicii de Programe Audiovizuale (2011–2015)," 100 § (2011), <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=339368>.

in Romanian, which were significantly lagging the Russian-language content. According to one of the interviewed experts,

*‘the adoption of the new “Broadcasting Code” has been in question since 2010. It was one of the issues stated in the Association Agenda with the EU. In order to have a strategic approach to fighting propaganda, this agreement should be fulfilled and translated into actions.’<sup>[23]</sup>*

Although the strategy was revised in 2011, its objectives of reaching 70 % of broadcasts in the national language have yet to be met. So, from the analysis by AGB Nielsen Media Research, four out of the five most popular TV stations in the Republic of Moldova do not comply with the legal requirements. The schedules of Prime TV, RTR Moldova, NTV Moldova, and Channel 2 are widely dominated by Russian programmes and TV shows. Some of these present programmes acquired from Russian TV stations as ‘own productions’ due to the exclusive rights to rebroadcast on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. This loophole has not been closed by the BCC and is widely used to mask foreign media products as nationally produced while promoting the Russian propaganda agenda. Even entertainment products directly or subliminally support the interests of the Russian propaganda machine. This makes their domination over the Moldovan broadcasting market an avenue for disinformation and outright propaganda.

The Moldovan journalist community’s Press Council adopted the latest version of its deontological code in 2011.<sup>[24]</sup> The document includes a series of rules for obtaining and processing information, as well as ensuring the accuracy and verifiability of the facts presented. Journalists must receive information from a minimum of two sources, quoting them when possible. The implementation of the code is the responsibility of the signatories. The journalists’ professional ethics committee is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the code. Nevertheless, the last published press release by this committee dates from 2008, and the website of the NGO community has been under reconstruction for a long time. This seems to be due to a lack of resources to continue the activity at even the low level of compliance within the code itself. Experts believe that the significance of the deontological code should be increased:

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[23] Anonymous informant, Civil society organization, December 7, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[24] “Codul Deontologic Al Jurnalistului Din Republica Moldova” (Chisinau: Consiliul de Presa, 2011), [http://consiliuldepresa.md/fileadmin/fisiere/fisiere/Cod\\_deontologic\\_al\\_jurnalistului\\_din\\_Republica\\_final.pdf](http://consiliuldepresa.md/fileadmin/fisiere/fisiere/Cod_deontologic_al_jurnalistului_din_Republica_final.pdf).

*'If you have local journalists who join international circles in promoting manipulative narratives, the community should step up and respond to it. While the fact-checking initiatives haven't had it as easy as the "sexy" well-rounded arguments of fake stories, they should continue, as there is a clear need to debunk them.'*<sup>[25]</sup>

According to yet another expert,

*'I would compare the journalists to doctors who swear the Hippocratic oath and then ask for 'gifts' or money after the operations. We are a product of a society where moral rules without sanctions have little bearing. This is the problem with the deontological code.'*<sup>[26]</sup>

An adequate, sustainable system of self-monitoring in the media community relies on the availability of members who comply with the legal codes as well as the importance of ethical rules in the broader social context. Due to the structure of the Moldovan media landscape, it is unlikely that self-monitoring will have a high rate of compliance. A possible role for the application of the deontological code would be through 'public shaming' rather than implying a of journalist's compliance with the respective norms. Nevertheless, the code has other positive functions, for example, the one made within the 'Stop Fals!' campaign, which refers to the code as upholding the standards of 'good journalism'. Strengthening mechanisms monitoring the implementation of the deontological code could possibly enhance the capabilities to deal with propaganda and media manipulation.

## LEGAL REGULATIONS

The primary document that defines information security in the media dimension is the 'National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova', adopted by the Parliamentary Decision No.153 of July 15, 2011.<sup>[27]</sup> Paragraph 47 states that challenges in the media sphere are part of the national security threats to the Republic of Moldova. In this respect, the strategy reported that the normative framework should be

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[25] Andrei Lutenco, Center for Policy and Reforms, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[26] Elena Robu, Unimedia, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[27] Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, "Strategia Securității Naționale a Republicii Moldova," 153 § (2011), <http://lex.justice.md/md/340510/>.



adjusted by the introduction of appropriate, active monitoring, control, and implementation mechanisms to protect Moldovan society from misinformation attempts and manipulative information from the outside. While capturing the essence of the issue, the strategy does not provide actionable and measurable outcomes and is limited to declarations of intent.

The law regarding the Information and Security Service (ISS)<sup>[28]</sup> does not provide a clear framework for dealing with information security. The primary objectives of the agency are to deal with espionage, diversions, and other criminal offences from being attempted against national security. At the same time, most pro-Kremlin propaganda does not fall under the penal code and cannot be criminalised. The tools to monitor and limit foreign media influence are provided in Article 8 of the law, which states that the service can perform both information and counter-information activities. While the fight against foreign propaganda can fall under these two activities, it is not clear whether the service deals with these issues. According to the head of the Independent Press Association, Petru Macovei,

*‘we should have a useful Information and Security Service able to monitor the financing of politicians and broadcasters. During the last presidential campaign, investigative journalists found schemes of offshore financing of broadcasters through the Bahamas, but the service chose not to act on it and “not to be effective”’.*<sup>[29]</sup>

An interesting initiative is the draft law No. 189 of June 13, 2017,<sup>[30]</sup> proposed by the ruling Democrat Party. It puts forward a definition of information security that limits it to all measures to protect individuals, society, and the state from any attempts to propagate misinformation and manipulation from the outside. This definition describes with a reasonably high degree of accuracy two types of propagandistic activities, but it adds some uncertainty and contradicts the terms used in the ‘Information Security Concept’<sup>[31]</sup> drafted by the ISS and adopted by parliament.

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[28] Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, “Legea Privind Serviciul de Informații și Securitate Al Republicii Moldova,” 753 § (1999), <http://lex.justice.md/md/311721/>.

[29] Petru Macovei, Independent Press Association, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[30] Dumitru Diacov et al., “Lege Cu Privire La Modificarea Si Completarea Codului Audiovizualului Nr 260/2006,” Pub. L. No. 189 (2017), <http://bit.ly/2phpFXD>.

[31] “Conceptia Securitatii Informatinale,” Pub. L. No. 396 (2017), <http://parlament.md/LegislationDocument.aspx?id=dda2e662-c948-49c9-950b-724c4b01627d>.

Initially, it is worth mentioning that the set of measures described by project No. 189 refers to the state's reaction to a range of potential security risks. Although useful, this concept cannot be considered 'information security', but instead, state policy to ensure information security. Further, by analysing the elements of hostile information activities described by the project, we note that two essential elements are reviewed: misinformation and manipulative information, which in the context of the definition, results in propaganda. In fact, researchers also distinguish between misinformation and misleading information, the latter being unintentional and, as a result, less prejudicial.

At the same time, this definition does not include propaganda activities that do not necessarily involve the output of erroneous information but the promotion of values and visions hostile to the Republic of Moldova, so-called 'hostile narratives'. Also, there is the situation when two legislative drafts give an alternative definition to the term 'information security', so referring to the 'Information Security Concept' and the legislative draft No. 189 is not advisable.

In the Information and Security Service-promoted document, 'information security' is the state of protection of a person, the society, and country, which determines the ability to resist threats to confidentiality, integrity, and availability in the information space. This concept is used in the West to define cybersecurity and is part of a broader information-security umbrella. The problem is acknowledged by the interviewed experts:

*'There is a lack of consensus on the notion of "information security" and what the state should do about it. Moreover, I would say there is a lack of political will to effectively deal with this issue.'*<sup>[32]</sup>

There seems to be a lack of communication between the principal actors in national security policy in the Republic of Moldova and the non-alignment of draft normative acts in the same field. Also, both projects interpret 'information security' in a way limited to its sectoral aspects.

The only measure provided by draft law No. 189 is the introduction of a ban on the transmission of informational, informative, analytical, military, and political broadcasts from countries that have not ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television, except for the EU, the US, and Canada. One of the legal experts interviewed within this research says:

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[32] Anonymous, Personal interview with a representative of the Administration of the President of Moldova, live, July 10, 2017.

*'I have a more liberal view of the media market. There should be serious grounds on banning the rebroadcasting of some political views and they were not presented yet. If we are to fight propaganda, we should not use similar tools, but go after the final beneficiaries of media companies and ensuring transparency. The broadcasters should take their own obligations under the law more seriously.'*<sup>[33]</sup>

This measure, although easy to monitor, has several apparent shortcomings. Media agents may be re-registered in states that are signatories to the convention, or messages released in the broadcasts concerned may be modified for use in local broadcasts for formal compliance with the legal provisions. Also, the envisaged measures only affect broadcasting media and do not interfere with other media (print and online media, as well as the informal communication environment). In the case of developed propagandistic networks, the expected effect of the legislative changes will be short-term and will not affect the transmission of messages hostile to Moldova.

Another expert that we spoke to says the following:

*'This flagship initiative was speeded through a parliament's hearing and adopted on the first and second reading during one day without respecting the norms on transparency and participation ... Still, I consider that banning a TV broadcast should come through a court decision with respect for human rights.'*<sup>[34]</sup>

Another essential element of the legislative framework is the ability of the BCC to fight media manipulation. According to the 'Broadcasting Code',<sup>[35]</sup> the BCC can license, suspend, or withdraw the licences of TV and radio stations, as well as fine them. Also, it can punish media outlets that promote propaganda narratives in cases when the information comprising the news is not accurate. Reality is distorted through montage tricks, comments, or titles. In some conflicts, the media outlet did not respect the principle of information from several sources.

While the three cases do not cover all the possible types of media manipulation, even these are used sparingly. Most of the circumstances found media outlets do not reflect reality. Instead, they use public warnings. A legal expert explains one of the reasons for the country's vulnerability to foreign propaganda:

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[33] Andrei Lutenco, Center for Policy and Reforms, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[34] Petru Macovei, Independent Press Association, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[35] Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, Codul Audiovizualului.

*'We have a public regulator of the media market that chronically fails to do its job. The situation with the Moldovan mass media is not a recent development. It functions just formally. It has become sterile. This is one of the causes of the fact that Moldova is one of the weakest states within the Eastern Partnership in terms of propaganda.'*<sup>[36]</sup>

For example, the monitoring of the campaign for the local referendum dismissing the mayor of Chisinau, Dorin Chirtoaca, caused the BCC to find irregularities in the news broadcast of five of the monitored TV stations.<sup>[37]</sup> All received public warnings. This 'slap on the wrist' practice makes the existing mechanisms inefficient and favours impunity for media outlets promoting 'fake news'.

Another issue with the current 'Broadcasting Code' is that the BCC does not have a clear mandate for monitoring broadcasts except during electoral periods. This can contribute to using it as a tool to 'control' the opposition press, as there is no certainty and predictability in the monitoring process:

*'The first problem of the BCC is that the nominations are highly politicised. It does not provide transparency in the decision-making process and does not require public hearings with the participation of civil society. This leads to politically motivated decisions like, for example, suspending the licence of the opposition TV station Jurnal TV.'*<sup>[38]</sup>

Another essential legislative act relevant to propaganda vulnerability is the 'Law about the Press No. 243', adopted on October 26, 1994.<sup>[39]</sup> While it requests news agencies register with the Ministry of Justice, it does not make it compulsory and does not provide sanctions for failing to do so. The ministry could be, according to a representative of the Association of the Independent Press, a critical threshold for limiting the creation of 'cloned' news sites and deceiving 'satire' sites that promote propagandistic messages:

*'Many Russian entertainment TV shows and publications subtly promote pro-Kremlin narratives. This makes the efforts taken by the government less useful, as they target mostly political and military TV broadcasts.'*<sup>[40]</sup>

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[36] Dumitru Alaiba, Centre for Policy and Reforms, December 12, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[37] "Raport referendum local 27.10–05.11.2017" (Consiliul Coordonator al Audiovizualului, 2017), <http://cca.md/files/Raport%20referendum%20local%2027.10-05.11.2017.pdf>.

[38] Valeriu Pasa, Watchdog.md NGO, September 10, 2017. In-depth interview.

[39] Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, "Legea Presei," 243 § (1994), <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=311633>.

[40] Alla Rosca, Tulane University, December 8, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

In principle, in the Republic of Moldova, there is no mandatory registration for the online press and any site owner can pose as representing mass media. In recent years, there has been a massive build-up of bloggers whose messages promote pro-Kremlin themes and favour the governing parties. Sometimes they are the sources of fake news or 'leaks' against the opposition:

*'Anyone with a limited amount of money could open up a website to promote fake news and get away with it. The legislation has no limits on it and no sanctions. I consider that there should be fines or other types of penalties for those who make it a profitable activity.'*<sup>[41]</sup>

The legislative framework of the Republic of Moldova is outdated and needs to be adjusted to the emerging threats to information security. But these efforts need to take a systemic approach, shaped by the updated 'National Security Strategy' to avoid legislative conflicts and provide sufficient mechanisms of control to ensure both adequate countermeasures and respect of freedom of the press.

## INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

The main actors dealing with media vulnerability in Moldova can be divided into three categories: state actors, civil society, and media outlets. Concerning the state actors, the following are critical players:

- Parliament, the representative of legislative power;
- The BCC, the primary regulator of the TV and radio markets;
- Ministry of Justice, the registrar of news agencies and newspapers;
- President, guarantor of national security; and
- The ISS, the body dealing with hostile information activities on the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

The reporting system in place has limited capacity for parliament to monitor the developments in media resilience effectively. Both the ISS and BCC report annually to parliament on general issues. They do not provide detailed sectoral reports and, for example, the BCC report is only

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[41] Elena Robu, Unimedia, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

discussed by the Commission on Culture, Education, Research, Youth, and Mass Media before being presented to parliament. This limits the capacity to focus on the issues in the report and does not provide sufficient access to relevant information to foster media resilience. At the same time, parliament could establish an inquiry committee to investigate hostile media activities on the country's territory, but this does not seem to be the course of actions chosen by the political leadership.

On July 17, 2017, a working group focused on the improvement of mass media legislation was created to deal with a range of issues, including information security. According to the published agenda, the group aims to draft a 'National Information Security Strategy' as well as update legislation on mass media, targeting, amongst other issues, information security. This ambitious agenda, though, must contend with a series of issues. Civil society considers the BCC to be politically dependent, so extending its powers without ensuring its independence may not lead to a better media landscape, rather to undue political control over broadcasters.

Drafting the 'National Information Security Strategy' would be an essential step in promoting a better level of media resilience, but it must stem from the NSS, which needs to be updated since 2015 according to its own requirements. The adoption of this umbrella policy document though seems problematic due to the complex political landscape of the country. President Dodon is openly pro-Kremlin and he has made it clear that he will not accept the NSS because it would antagonise the Russian Federation. He has withdrawn the draft NSS proposed by the former president, Nicolae Timofti, claiming that its contents no longer correspond to the substantial changes that have taken place in the national, regional, and international security environment.<sup>[42]</sup>

The position of the Administration of the President was made clear to us by one of its representatives:

*'The NSS must be geopolitically neutral to be approved by the president. At the same time, the adoption of an Information Security Strategy is a crisis waiting to happen. If it is going to be adopted as law, it must be approved by the president. He will likely reject a bill that will target the rebroadcasting of Russian media outlets. If he proposes a new NSS project that will not comply with the pro-European orientation of the current parliament, it will most likely*

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[42] "Republica Moldova: Igor Dodon a Dispus Retragerea Proiectului Strategiei Securității Naționale—AGERPRES," accessed November 22, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2DwUj4p>.

*be rejected as well. This stalemate is going to affect the process of the formulation of effective policies granting a better media resilience level’.*<sup>[43]</sup>

A third option is to adopt the ‘Information Security Strategy’ based on the existing ‘Information Security Concept’. This document only deals with cybersecurity and the integrity of confidential information. While the Ukrainian example shows that protecting critical information infrastructure is an imperative for the state, such decisions would represent a missed opportunity for parliament to promote a more comprehensive information-security policy:

*‘One of the issues with the government implementing measures to protect information security is that they are not transparent. Earlier this year, some Russian diplomats and journalists were declared persona non-grata. At the same time, the ISS, as well as the government “failed to convince us” why that was needed or useful ... If you declare yourself pro-European, you should act accordingly’.*<sup>[44]</sup>

The incentive policy proposed by parliament to promote national content represents a novel way to foster media resilience against the prominence of Russian content. At the same time, as we have pointed out earlier, the most essential broadcasters on the Moldovan market are closely linked to politicians. Most notable are the four most popular TV channels owned by the leader of the Democrat Party, Vladimir Plahotniuc, and people affiliated to him. The tax incentives might prove to be a way to maximise profits for the broadcasters without affecting the media resilience of the country:

*‘The implementation of the ban on rebroadcasting Russian TV might stumble on economic interests. The Russian TV channels are popular and bring profit through advertising to some politicians. Politicians responsible for making decisions are unlikely to take decisions against their own business interests’.*<sup>[45]</sup>

As described above, the institutional cooperation on issues of promoting information security in Moldova is dependent on political aspects and fails to provide genuinely independent agencies to regulate the media market. This affects the prospects of improving the national policy on enhancing media resilience towards hostile activities.

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[43] Anonymous informant, Administration of the President of Moldova. In-depth interview.

[44] Ion Vasiliu, Sic.md, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

[45] Mihai Cernescu, Free International University of Moldova, December 9, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

In the Republic of Moldova, there are three major initiatives to expose and combat disinformation, including one that deals with reporting fake social media accounts used for promoting hostile narratives. The number of initiatives is not very impressive but the situation will change in time once Moldova will be able to access the Countering Russian Influence Fund (CRIF), estimated at 250 million USD for the fiscal years 2018–2019. The core issues for the local initiatives are essential funding and resources to monitor and efficiently report on ‘fake news’ and promote different narratives.

One of the first and the most significant initiative is the ‘*Stop Fals!*’ campaign initiated by the Association of Independent Press (API). Through this project, API aims to build the capacities of independent media and its network of member-constituents through specialised service provision. It also plans to develop a media campaign against fake and tendentious information (in partnership with the Independent Journalism Centre (IJC) and the Association of Independent TV-journalists in the Republic of Moldova (AITV)). Among the activities to promote these goals, API supports writing and publishing journalistic materials revealing false and tendentious information. It has also produced several videos and audio investigations about propaganda and publishes a monthly newspaper supplement about propaganda.

As a strange sign of the project’s success, we can point to a fake (imitation) site called stopfals.com that appeared, promoting false debunking stories on the web under the real project’s brand. It is important to mention that ‘Stop False’ has chosen not to limit itself to the web and disseminates its findings to local newspapers to reach a broader audience that does not necessarily have the access or skills to use the internet.

Unfortunately, the campaign only deals with local content. This limits the capability of the campaign to fight against all the pro-Kremlin narratives concerning the Republic of Moldova that come from original Russian sources, and sometimes even Western media. This project can be best described as a useful tool to monitor local media and promote ‘fake news’ awareness culture in the country.



The *Sic.md* project has ambitious goals to identify lies, inaccuracies and manipulations in public impact statements and inform citizens in a simple and accessible way. Sic.md also deals with monitoring the public promises of politicians as well as notifying breaches of ethics in media and public declarations.

The website has a very user-friendly interface. The team strives to have daily posts that represent a synthesis of the day and long reads on complex issues linked to media manipulation. The website also has a report section for a user to email the debunking team. As one of the team members explains,

*'it's really hard to convince someone in fact-checking messages with opposite views, if not impossible. Our goal is to equip our readers with arguments for personal interactions based on facts that might make a difference.'*<sup>[46]</sup>

Among the limitations of this initiative is that it is limited to one website, compared to 'Stop Fals!', which publishes its articles on several websites and newspapers. Additionally, it does not have a developed communications component, most likely because of a lack of resources.

Sic.md also can be considered a tool for political accountability, including for pro-Kremlin politicians' declarations, which expands its coverage compared to the 'Stop Fals!' campaign.

The **TROLLESS** project was developed during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Media Hackathon 'The Fifth Power', organised by the Centre for Independent Journalism and Deutsche Welle Akademie. The primary purpose of the project, a browser extension, is to identify the sources of manipulation in new social media spaces and to isolate them.

The extension helps track false profiles or those who display suspicious or trolling activity on Facebook and other platforms. Users can report them for promoting interests, parties, ideas, causes, misinformation, manipulation, and distraction. This does not affect the availability of the fake accounts, but the people using the extension can see that those accounts have been reported and can analyse the situation accordingly. The Trolless community has more than 800 users on the Chrome platform, and the authors are considering extending it to other platforms like Mozilla or Safari. This project deals exclusively with social media

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[46] Ion Vasilica, Sic.md, December 11, 2017. In-depth interview via Skype.

and is only available to users who have installed the extension in Google Chrome.

The number of digital-debunking teams in Moldova is insufficient because of the limited resources available for this type of activity. All depend on foreign financial support and may not be sustainable for the long term if this support stops. According to the authors of the projects, the state has not shown interest in developing such initiatives and generally ignores the results of their activity.

## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

Media literacy projects are also quite limited in Moldova. In analysing the last three years, we can emphasise the following three developments.

In 2014–2017, the *Centre for Independent Journalism* organised 71 media education lessons, training nearly 2 000 students and teachers from all over the Republic of Moldova. During the activities, the participants learned how media works, what the role of the press is in society, what rules should be observed when writing a news story, how to distinguish false news, and how to avoid propaganda and manipulation in media. Visits were conducted in schools, high schools, universities, and youth centres.

*Novateca* is a network of more than 1 000 public libraries in each of Moldova's 35 administrative regions, providing the public with 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology tools, digital literacy learning resources, and community services that address local needs.<sup>[47]</sup> It has reached more than 450 000 visitors by improving their internet skills and accessing public services online.

The '*Media Education*' course was developed and implemented by the Youth Media Centre in partnership with Deutsche Welle Akademie and the Ministry of Education in November 2015. It has included 63 young people aged 14 to 20 from four educational institutions (three high schools in Chisinau, Drochia, and Cahul, and the 'Alexe Mateevici' Pedagogical College in Chisinau). Among the topics addressed within the course were journalism ethics, use of social media and social networks, and

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[47] "Novateca – Global Libraries Moldova," IREX, accessed November 23, 2017, <http://www.irex.org/project/novateca-global-libraries-moldova>.

manipulation in mass media. This course was also promoted by the TV show 'Abrasive', broadcast by public TV station Moldova 1 in 2015.

During the inaugural Mass Media Forum that took place on October 27–28, 2015, in Chisinau, former Minister of Education Corina Fusu declared that the institution was considering introducing several media education classes within the civic education discipline. This was based on the concept of integrating media literacy into school and university curricula as developed the Center for Independent Journalism. Fusu saw it as a priority to educate young citizens to distinguish sources of information and develop a critical attitude towards mass media. However, this initiative has not come to fruition yet. At present, the Centre for Independent Journalism is piloting some elective media education classes for primary school. The head of the centre believes that the courses should be mandatory and should target high schools more than primary schools.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Moldovan media resilience profile presents a fragmented and uneven landscape. The governing party has declared repeatedly that it prioritises the fight against propaganda but this has yet to transfer into clear policy measures. Some of the prior decisions in dealing with linguistic issues, as well as the lack of political will to implement the requirements of the 'Broadcasting Code' have led to a media market dominated by Russian media. The structure of media ownership suggests that this situation favours a series of political actors who allegedly control some of the most popular TV channels in the country.

At the same time, the implementation of more active measures to counter foreign propaganda may give the regulators means to limit the freedom of the press. Therefore, a prerequisite for implementation of sound policy against media manipulation should be ensuring the independence of the BCC and broad civil-society participation in the process of the selection of its members.

This study has also established a series of other recommendations for enhancing media resilience in the Republic of Moldova in the legal framework, policy measures, and civil society.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Legal framework enhancement:**

1. Review the 'Law on the press' to reflect the realities of the digital age and develop a registration system for news agencies and newspapers. This system should include nudging measures, such as rating media outlets that perform their roles without using manipulation techniques, as well as mechanisms to sanction media outlets that openly promote propaganda. Due to the sensitive nature of this review, it should take place in cooperation with the media community and use the standards of the deontological code promoted by the community. A balanced system would gain legitimacy and trust from the population, as well as discourage local actors who help promote propaganda.
2. Close the loopholes in analysing 'local media products' and ensure the application of existing norms of the 'Broadcasting Code'. This measure might be painful to implement in a short period and might require the BCC to give a grace period to broadcasters to adjust to the legal requirements.
3. Clarify the role of the ISS in fighting foreign propaganda under close parliamentary scrutiny. The ISS can be instrumental in establishing who the ultimate beneficiaries of local media outlets are and monitoring the activities of foreign agents who give aid to local actors in promoting pro-Kremlin propaganda.

## **To the government and competent state bodies:**

4. The National Security Strategy should be revised per legal requirement to reflect the new security environment, which has shifted since 2011. Information security should not be limited to cybersecurity, as it is in the Information Security Concept adopted by parliament.
5. A better reporting system should be created for the BCC, the ISS, and the Ministry of Justice to coordinate their efforts in ensuring information security. Parliament, as the primary democratic supervisor, could take a leading role in the operationalisation of the gathered information into policy decisions.

6. The initiative to ban broadcasts from countries that have not signed the European Transfrontier Television Convention represents a ‘quick fix’ approach and will not lead to positive long-term effects. Media outlets can choose to register in signatory countries or to adapt media content with the help of national broadcasters. National authorities should promote their narratives to counter propaganda by using both official and unofficial channels, including the national public broadcaster.
7. The Ministry of Education should restart the initiative to include media literacy in the school and university curricula, drawing on the success of existing projects in civil society.

**To civil society:**

8. The media community should reactivate the Ethics Committee to analyse the results of monitoring of national media. The Press Council should promote signing the deontological code through a visible brand that the signatories of the code could use.
9. Debunking initiatives should report current findings through official channels to the BCC. Although the sanctions applied by the agencies rarely represent an impediment to the media outlets that promote propaganda, they contribute to the dissemination of the results of the debunking teams and the news behind the false narratives.
10. Media literacy initiatives should expand to include ethnic minorities and the elderly as communities susceptible to media manipulation and who may lack the necessary skills to analyse information critically.

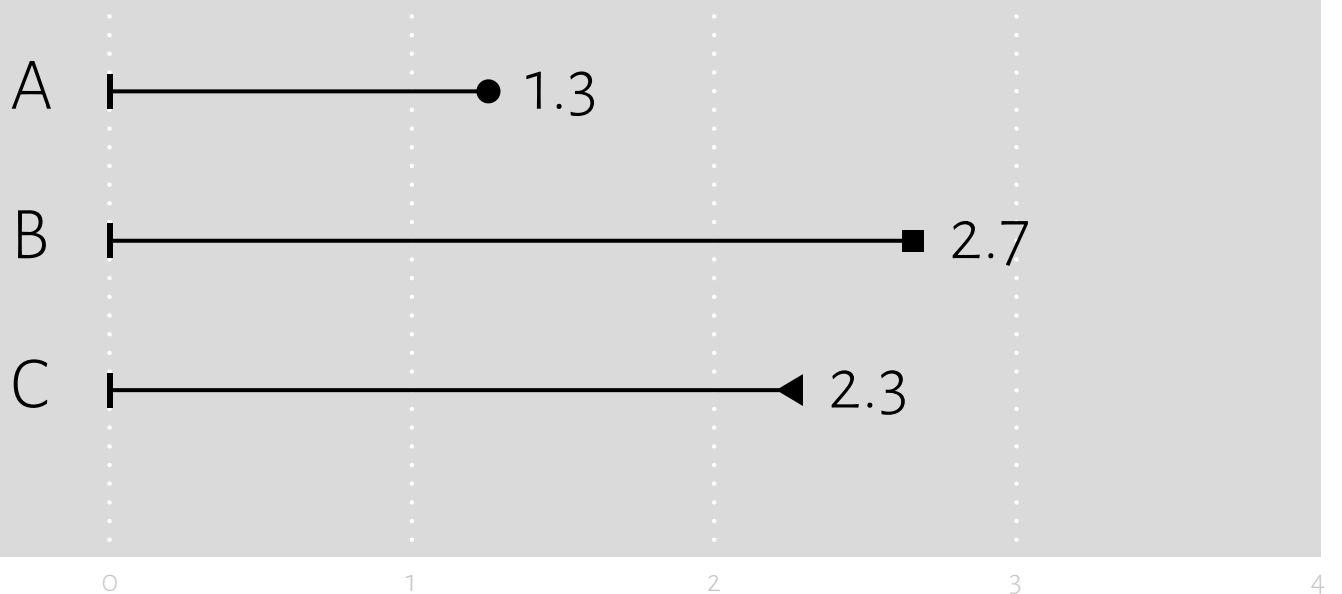


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# POLAND



# INTRODUCTION

Poland's foreign policy and the political discourse after 1989 was built upon two fundamental goals: European and Atlantic integration (in the EU and NATO) and support for the independence and democratisation of its post-Soviet neighbours (Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine). The tensions between Poland and Russia in the 1990s were mostly based on Russia strongly opposing Poland's membership in NATO. Despite this, Poland joined the alliance in 1999 and the European Union in 2004.

Since 2007, the government of Civic Platform tried its own 'reset policy' towards Russia with the launch of the 'Kaliningrad triangle', i.e., meetings between the foreign ministers of Poland, Germany, and Russia, and starting visa-free local border traffic (LBT) between two Polish voivodeships and the Kaliningrad region in 2012. However, the Polish 'reset' was later abandoned because of two main factors: the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the long-term consequences and disagreements between the countries after the plane crash in Smolensk, Russia, in April 2010 that killed Polish President Lech Kaczyński and almost one hundred other high-ranking Polish officials, dignitaries, their family members, and crew.<sup>[1]</sup>

The change of policy affected various areas. A year celebrating Polish culture in Russia in 2015 was canceled. When it comes to the military sphere, Poland strengthened its efforts to attract more NATO attention, as well as the deployment of U.S. troops to Central Europe. Mutual cooperation between Russia and Poland ceased once both the 'Kaliningrad triangle' meetings and the LBT agreement were suspended. Finally, economic cooperation also suffered because the sanctions on Russia and its counter-sanctions affected trade.<sup>[2]</sup>

Polish officials and intelligence agencies acknowledged the role of Kremlin propaganda in Poland and Russian secret service activities in Europe. Back in 2015, the Polish Internal Security Agency published a report stating that the Russian intelligence services remained

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[1] J. Kucharczyk, A. Fuksiewicz, The long shadow of the Kremlin: Polish domestic reactions to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, [in:] *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine conflict*, J. Kucharczyk, G. Meseznikov (eds.), Prague/Warsaw 2016.

[2] M. Kaciewicz, Ł. Wenerski, Russian soft power in Poland. The Kremlin and pro-Russian organizations, Political Capital, Budapest 2017



very active in Poland.<sup>[3]</sup> In 2016, two events within the country were recognized as especially vulnerable to Russian secret service activity and internet trolls. One was the Warsaw NATO Summit. The other event was World Youth Day, a meeting of Catholics from across the world who came to see Pope Francis and celebrate their faith.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 2017, the political situation in Poland was very tense. The judiciary reforms introduced by the government of Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) were found to breach the rule of law by the European Commission and opposed by part of Polish society. What is more, Polish diplomacy had some problems finding a common language with its counterparts from Germany and Ukraine, and with representatives of the EU Commission and the European Parliament. In early 2018, Polish-Israeli relations also grew tense. Considering the Kremlin's mechanisms, one may argue that political and diplomatic controversies inside and outside of Poland in 2017 became and still are fertile ground for manipulation and other disinformation activities.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

Experts who follow and analyse the Kremlin's strategy to influence and shape people's opinions in various countries do not have a solid and unified explanation on whom to consider vulnerable to disinformation in Poland. The problem of a Russian-speaking minority, discussed as a vulnerable group in several other countries, for instance, in Latvia, Estonia, or some Eastern Partnership states, does not exist in Poland.

Russian TV is not popular in Poland since it is unavailable and most Polish people do not speak Russian at all or only at a very low level, so cannot be influenced by Russian-language media. This makes the potential threat of Kremlin manipulation much more blurred. Yet, one may distinguish some groups of people that for various reasons fall under this category.

One group seems to be vulnerable to direct Kremlin propaganda and consists primarily of older people nostalgic about the pre-1989 period when Poland was a satellite country of the Soviet Union.

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[3] Raport z działalności Agencji Bezpieczeństwo Wewnętrzne w 2014 r. [http://info.lupki.pgi.gov.pl/sites/default/files/czytelnia\\_pliki/1/raport\\_2015\\_int.pdf](http://info.lupki.pgi.gov.pl/sites/default/files/czytelnia_pliki/1/raport_2015_int.pdf)

[4] M. Kacewicz, Ł. Wenerski, Russian soft power in Poland...Ibid.

*'This people often were well established in a previous system, working, for instance, in the security services'.<sup>[5]</sup>*

The group is a recent phenomenon on the Polish internet, and its late arrival is explained by two factors:

*'Those people are older than the average internet user and it took some time for them to learn how to use social media' and 'they stopped hiding their political views'.<sup>[6]</sup>*

In the past, the members of this group felt alienated, but once the low level of the political debate helped them to discover that other people may have similar political views, they started to be more open. The members of the group are disgusted with the weak West and praise a strong Russia. They hate the 'fascist' government in Ukraine, but admire the strong hand of President Putin. They also see anti-Polish conspiracies coming from the EU side, the Jewish community, and Germany.

Another vulnerable group consists of those whose beliefs are located at the extremes of the political spectrum, i.e., far-right and far-left. In Poland, the far-right is considered nowadays a much stronger and influencing position than the far-left. The main traits of far-right groups with regard to their vulnerability are closely interlinked with some key characteristics of the first group analysed in this chapter.

The anti-Ukrainian, anti-German, and anti-European attitude is a common thing among this group. They find the West (defined as the EU and the U.S.) as a place of moral decay and view refugees as an existential threat to traditional European values, a 'Trojan horse' of the Islamic revolution sent to Europe. It is worth a mention that this group consists not only of people who live in Poland but also Poles who live abroad, for instance, in the UK.

Although in opposition to the West, the members of the far-right movement do not seek any partnership with Russia. They may favour some aspects of the Kremlin's internal politics (for instance, their imaginary perception of Russia protecting traditional values), but at the same time they often view Russia as a military threat to Poland. This group remains immune to direct pro-Kremlin propaganda, aimed at opposing a 'good Russia' with a 'bad West'. But at the same time, this group remains

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[5] Anonymous informant, Independent journalist/ election observer, January 23, 2018. In-depth interview.

[6] Anonymous informant, Independent journalist/ election observer, January 23, 2018. In-depth interview.

susceptible to an indirect Kremlin narrative, whose goal is not to create a positive image of Russia in Poland but only to seek results beneficial to Moscow.

Finally, we should point out there are people who are prone to believe that politics is based on conflict and mistrust, rather than on mutual trust and compromise. In this category we could find a group that is vulnerable to anti-Ukrainian and anti-German propaganda or any other actions aimed to raise the tension between Poles and some other nations or institutions by presenting them as a threat to Poland, Polish interests, or as Polonophobes in general. This raising of tensions results in Poland's losing its position internationally and slipping into self-imposed isolation. The antagonism was especially noticeable in regard to Polish-Ukrainian relations.<sup>[7]</sup> Once on the fringes, the anti-Ukrainian agenda reached the mainstream of political discourse. Similar developments could be noticed recently with regard to Germany<sup>[8]</sup> or the European Union.<sup>[9]</sup>

It has to be acknowledged that the vulnerability of a certain group of people to the mentioned manipulation is not used solely by the Kremlin. The Polish political authorities (especially the government) stoke these tensions (willingly or not) in Polish society and try to take advantage of it. External actors, such as the Kremlin, are only secondary contributors or beneficiaries of the conflict.

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Freedom House in 2017 ranked Poland as '*partially free*', according to the Press Freedom Report, though a decade prior Poland had the status of '*free*'. This status changed with the political developments in the country after the right-wing PiS came to power in 2015 and, among some other changes, weakened Polish democracy, limited journalists' access

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[7] The tensions between Poles and Ukrainians are based on two areas of dispute. One is their tragic common history. Many Poles claim that the current Ukrainian national narrative is based on anti-Polonism and accuse Ukrainians of choosing as their national heroes people who were responsible for killing Poles during the Second World War. The second is Ukrainian migration to Poland, seen as the 'ukrainisation' in Poland. Ukrainians are also accused of taking away jobs from Poles and causing wages to stagnate.

[8] Germans are accused of forcing the Polish authorities to accept refugees in Poland and of imposing on the EU a negative perception of the PiS government as introducing anti-democratic changes in Poland.

[9] EU institutions, especially the European Commission, but also the European Parliament are accused of interfering in Polish domestic issues by criticizing the current legal changes implemented in Poland by the PiS government.

to lawmakers in parliament, and appointed government-acceptable media managers to Polish public TV and radio broadcasters.

The 'Media Pluralism Report',<sup>[10]</sup> a project co-funded by the EU and implemented by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom at the European University Institute, assessed four dimensions and presented the main risk areas for media pluralism and media freedom: basic protection, market plurality, political independence, and social inclusiveness.

The scholars revealed that the following indicators are at high risk of violation in Poland: (a) media ownership concentration; (b) cross-media concentration of ownership and competition enforcement; (c) commercial and owner influence over editorial content; (d) political control of media outlets; (e) independence of public state media governance and funding; and (i) access to media for women. The report assessed the situation in the country after PiS came to power.

Once PiS took control in October 2015, a new law was passed terminating the contracts of the heads of public television and radio broadcasters. Journalists with state media (TV channels and radio) who criticized the new government and the political course it had chosen were either asked to resign or dismissed. There were also some journalists who resigned due to political reasons in protest against the political changes. As of February 10, 2018, according to the Journalism Society, 234 journalists had lost their jobs.<sup>[11]</sup>

There are two main journalist associations in the country: the *Association of Polish Journalists*<sup>[12]</sup> and the *Journalism Society*.<sup>[13]</sup> As one expert said, they 'produce statements'<sup>[14]</sup> about misconduct in media and concerning media regulation rather than focus on the defence and protection of freedom of information and open government.

On October 27, 2017, amendments to the *Press Act* were introduced almost unanimously. They obliged journalists to obtain the interviewees'

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[10] Klimkiewicz, Beata. 2016. "Media Pluralism Monitor 2016—Results: Poland" Florence: European University Institute. <http://cmpfeui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/mpm-2016-results/poland/>

[11] "Dobra Zmiana' w Mediach" 2018. Towarzystwo Dziennikarskie. 2018. <http://towarzystwodziennikarskie.org/>

[12] Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich. <http://www.sdp.pl/>

[13] Towarzystwo Dziennikarskie. <https://towarzystwodziennikarskie.org/>

[14] Krzysztof Izdebski, ePaństwo Foundation, February 23, 2018. In-depth interview.

approval to publish their responses.<sup>[15]</sup> That made it impossible to publish an interview in Poland without the advance consent of an interviewee. The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, in its decision regarding *Wizerkaniuk v. Poland*<sup>[16]</sup> in early 2011, condemned the provisions requiring the authorisation of interview responses and found them to be a violation of the right to freedom of expression.

Grzegorz Piechota, a research associate at Harvard Business School, warned that the current government, driven by anti-German sentiment, might change regulations on foreign investment in the media field (so-called 're-Polonization').<sup>[17]</sup> This could affect the 'investments of Ringier Axel Springer [the owner of the largest internet portal, *Onet*, and the largest tabloid, *Fakt*], and Verlagsgruppe Passau [the publisher of the majority of the regional newspapers and web portals across Poland via its subsidiary Polska Press]".<sup>[18]</sup>

At the same time, investigative journalism in Poland is underdeveloped. One of the experts informed that there are just six or seven professional investigative journalists in the country and they are mostly concentrated in Warsaw, while there is almost no investigative reports from the regions. The media outlets have no additional budgets to allow investigative reporters to spend months working on a piece. There are two kinds of investigative initiatives created by journalists in Poland: the *Reporters Foundation* (Fundacja Reporterów)<sup>[19]</sup> and *OKO.press*.<sup>[20]</sup> Both mostly rely on foreign funding and crowdfunding.

Meanwhile, it is worth mentioning that the British government 'is ready to improve the UK-Poland cooperation to counter the Russian disinformation *in the region* [emphasis by the author], including some new joint strategic communications projects'.<sup>[21]</sup> The production cooperation between the BBC and Belsat TV (a Polish state-funded TV channel broadcasting in Belarus) is one such

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[15] Ustawa z dnia 27 października 2017 r. o zmianie ustawy – Prawo Prasowe. 2017. [http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie8.nsf/nazwa/1604\\_u/\\$file/1604\\_u.pdf](http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie8.nsf/nazwa/1604_u/$file/1604_u.pdf)

[16] Case of *Wizerkaniuk v. Poland*. Final Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights. 2011. Application No.18990/05. [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{"itemid":\["001-105557"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{)

[17] "Reuters Institute Digital News Report – 2017" 2018. Reuters Institute. [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web\\_o.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_o.pdf)

[18] Ibid.

[19] Fundacja Reporterów. <http://fundacjareporterow.org/>

[20] OKO.press. <https://oko.press/>

[21] "UK Govt to Support Belsat TV Combating Russian Disinformation in Region" 2017. Belsat.eu. <http://belsat.eu/en/news/uk-govt-to-support-belsat-tv-combating-russian-disinformation-in-region/>

initiative. The overall sum of the cooperation equals 10 million GBP, with the UK side contributing 5 million GBP and Poland expected to provide a matching amount.<sup>[22]</sup>

To sum it up, the media environment in Poland is highly politicised and divided. The significant change happened after the presidential elections in 2015, and the situation in media now is deteriorating. The national level of political propaganda and disinformation appears to be a threat and a topic for public discussion more often than any foreign state or party influence.

However, none of the Polish media outlets (TV, radio, print, or digital) obviously relay Kremlin-influenced narratives or messages, unlike those found to be published by individuals in some closed or public groups of special interest on Facebook or by thematic GONGOs, such as the Warsaw Institute Foundation.

According to the Public Opinion Research Centre, ‘the Poles usually get the inland and world news and other information from TV (64 %) and then from the internet (about a third of them – 21 % – as frequently as from TV).<sup>[23]</sup> Only 8 % of the respondents use radio as the first source of information and 4 % of them use print media.

The public survey recently conducted in Poland by the International Republican Institute<sup>[24]</sup> shows that the population uses public and commercial TV (36 % and 32 %, respectively) to get political news while only a quarter of the respondents (21 %) use online media. The senior group (60+) prefers public (55 %) and commercial (29 %) TV, while younger people (18–29) frequently use some online sources (43 %). A third of Poles uses social media as a source of daily news and almost half never uses any alternative source of information, only leading media outlets.

It is interesting to note that the *2018 Edelman Trust Barometer*, assessing the level of trust in traditional and online-only media compared to search engines and social media platforms in Poland, says that Poles trust them almost equally (54 % vs. 51 %

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[22] “PM Announces Landmark New Package of Defence and Security Cooperation with Poland” 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-announces-landmark-new-package-of-defence-and-security-cooperation-with-poland>

[23] “Polish Public Opinion 5/2017” 2017. Public Opinion Research Centre. [http://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public\\_opinion/2017/05\\_2017.pdf](http://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2017/05_2017.pdf)

[24] “Public Opinion Poll. March, 8–14, 2017” 2017. International Republican Institute. [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/poland\\_2017\\_final\\_edits.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/poland_2017_final_edits.pdf)

comparatively)<sup>[25]</sup>. Basically, it means that people equally trust online media (published by journalists) and social media (the opinion of a particular person, usually not a journalist). During an in-depth interview, it was said that the growing number of closed groups on Facebook might be a source of manipulation and disinformation dissemination, where it is more difficult to confirm the identities of accounts holders or the initiators of such groups.

The *2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report* underlines, nevertheless, that the media environment in Poland is 'polarised and increasingly partisan, (while) the news media in Poland continue to be trusted by the public'.<sup>[26]</sup> According to the 2017 Digital News Report, 53 % of the population uses Facebook as a source of information; 32 % prefers YouTube, and 10 % chooses Facebook Messenger for getting news. One of the interviewed experts<sup>[27]</sup> also highlighted this tendency as one of the 'pitfalls' on the way to critical thinking development, and the daily need for diverse sources of objective information.

The Polish TV market is divided between the leading three conglomerates: the public broadcaster *TVP*, the private broadcaster *POLSAT*, and the International Trading and Investments Holding SA Luxembourg Group *ITI*. There are also some minor TV channels that work as joint ventures: Canal+, HBO, EuroSport, Discovery, MTV Poland, and others.

The leading web portal about media and media monitoring is *WirtualneMedia.pl*. It assessed the 150 most popular TV channels in 2017 in Poland. TVP1, TVP2, and TVP Info belong to the public broadcaster (TVP); Polsat and TV4 belong to the private broadcaster (POLSAT); TV Plus and Puls2 are owned by Telewizja Puls, a Polish private commercial channel mostly broadcasting entertainment, series, and documentaries; and TVN, TVN24, and TVN7, owned by the ITI Group (since March 6, 2018, TVN group is owned by Discovery Communications, a U.S. company).<sup>[28]</sup>

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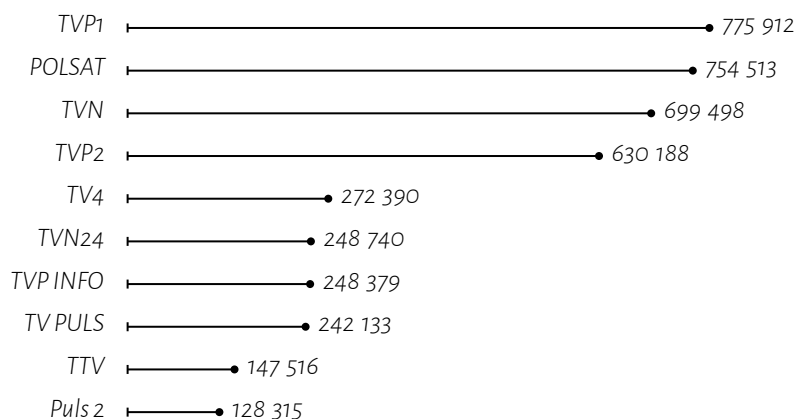
[25] "2018 Edelman Trust Barometer. Global Report" 2018.  
[http://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-02/2018\\_Edelman\\_Trust\\_Barometer\\_Global\\_Report\\_FEB.pdf](http://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-02/2018_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_FEB.pdf)

[26] "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017" 2018. Reuters Institute.  
[https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web\\_o.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_o.pdf)

[27] Beata Biel, Fundacja Reporterów, March, 5, 2018. In-depth interview.

[28] "Discovery Finalizuje Przejęcie Scripps Networks Interactive, Właściciela TVN" 2018. TVN24.pl.  
<https://www.tvn24.pl/discovery-finalizuje-przejecie-scripps-networks-interactive,820317,s.html>

**TV channel** *AMR, average minute rating*



**Top-10 TV channels in Poland in February, 2018**

Source: *WirtualneMedia.pl*<sup>[29]</sup>

The Polish Institute of Media Monitoring ranked the most opinion-forming TV channels in Poland. Of these, TVN24 and TVN are owned by the ITI Group and appeared in the top-10 TV channels list, TVP Info belongs to the public broadcaster (TVP), POLSAT News to the commercial broadcaster Polsat, and TV TRWAM is a regional TV channel owned by the Lux Veritatis Foundation and broadcasts social, religious and musical programmes.

**TV channel** *AMR, average minute rating*



**Top-5 of opinion-making TV channels in Poland**

Source: *Institute of Media Monitoring (2017)*<sup>[30]</sup>

The Polish radio stations are split across ownership. Among those that belong to *public radio* broadcasters is Polskie Radio (both FM and digital), *commercial broadcasters*, including the leading ones

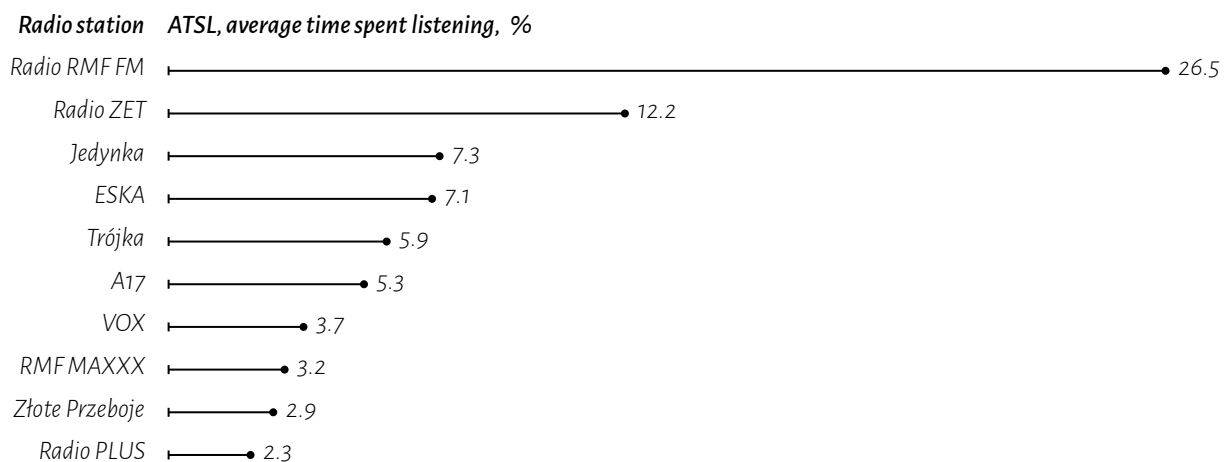
[29] Kurdupski, Michał. 2018. "TVP1 Wyprzedziła Polsat w Lutym, TVN Liderem w 16–49. "M] Jak Miłość" i Skoki Na ZIO Ratingowymi Hitami" *Wirtualnemedi.pl*. 2018. <http://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/ogladalnosc-telewizji-w-lutym-tvp1-wyprzedzila-polsat-hity>

[30] "Najbardziej Opiniotwórcze Polskie Media w 2017 Roku" 2017. Instytut Monitorowania Mediów. [https://www.imm.com.pl/sites/default/files/raporty/najbardziej\\_opiniotworcze\\_media\\_w\\_2017.pdf](https://www.imm.com.pl/sites/default/files/raporty/najbardziej_opiniotworcze_media_w_2017.pdf)



from the Bauer Media Group, Lagardere (Eurozet), Grupa ZPR Media, Time Group, and Agora, and *non-commercial stations*, such as the 20 or so regional Catholic stations, including the biggest, Radio Maryja.

The top-10 radio stations include mostly commercial stations (ESKA, RMF MAXXX, Złote Przeboje, Radio Plus, Radio WAWA, Meloradio, Radio Pogoda, Rock Radio, and ChiliZet), and A17, online radio stations. It is important to emphasize that the popularity of Polish media stations varies depending on the region.



### **Top-10 radio stations in Poland**

Source: *WirtualneMedia.pl*<sup>[31]</sup>

Online media is a growing segment in Poland, with two types of media identified. There are web portals that offer some news services together with a web-hosting service, email, search engine, and online chats. This is a hybrid model of media, combining both online and news services. According to the 'Online Advertising in Poland: Development Perspectives 2016/2017' report, spending on online media maintenance nearly doubled from 2011 to 2017 (from 16 % to 30 %).<sup>[32]</sup>

[31] Kurdupski, Michał. 2018. "Słuchalność Radia ZET Spadła Do 12,2 Proc., Trójki Poniżej 6 Proc. "Wyciągniemy Wnioski" Wirtualnemedi.pl. <http://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/trojka-i-radio-zet-z-rekordowo-niska-sluchalnoscia-traci-tez-jedynka>.

[32] "Reklamy Online w Polsce. Perspektywy Rozwojowe. 2016/2017" 2017. Polska. [https://www.iab.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Raport-IAB\\_20162017\\_Perspektywy-rozwojowe-reklamy-online-w-Polsce.pdf](https://www.iab.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Raport-IAB_20162017_Perspektywy-rozwojowe-reklamy-online-w-Polsce.pdf).

Site	Daily time spent on site	Daily page views per visitor	Traffic from search, %	Total sites linking in
Onet.pl	6:50	3.95	18.60	32,890
Wp.pl	7:36	4.58	12.70	14,949
Interia.pl	6:45	4.26	15.80	15,345
Wykop.pl	14:43	8.88	13.00	7,995
Gazeta.pl	5:41	3.56	11.70	18,485
O2.pl	3:30	2.49	8.90	2,362
TVN24.pl	6:05	2.78	12.80	5,285

### Top web pages in Poland

Source: Alexa Internet. 2018<sup>[33]</sup>

The second type of digital media is subscriptions to print media websites. This is a promising alternative for traditional media losing readership from vending. The largest print media editions provide online subscriptions (with the content identical in print and online), as well as *.mobi* (for MobiPocket Readers and Amazon Kindle Readers) and *.epub* (for smartphones, tablets, computers and e-readers) versions. The top-5 media editions leading in online subscriptions in 2017 were Rzeczpospolita (11 300 online subscriptions), Dziennik Gazeta Prawna (10 722), Puls Biznesu (3 373), Parkiet Gazeta Giełdy (1 729), and Gazeta Wyborcza (1 661).<sup>[34]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

### Radio Hobby

Radio Hobby has been broadcasting since the end of 2008 in Warsaw and its closest suburbs<sup>[35]</sup> – Białoleka, Targówek, Praga Południe, Tarchomin, Legionowo, Secock, Wolomin, and Radzymin (as the ‘Foreigners in Warsaw’ report<sup>[36]</sup> revealed, these areas are inhabited by immigrants from neighboring countries to the east: Belarus, Ukraine, Russia. The target

[33] “Top Sites in Poland” 2018. Alexa Internet. 2018. <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/PL>

[34] Kurdupski, Michał. 2018. “Rzeczpospolita” i vending Głos Wielkopolski” Liderami Sprzedaży e-Wydań Dzienników w 2017 Roku” 2018. [http://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/rzeczpospolita-i-glos-wielkopolski-liderami-sprzedazy-e-wydan-dziennikow-w-2017-roku\\_1](http://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/rzeczpospolita-i-glos-wielkopolski-liderami-sprzedazy-e-wydan-dziennikow-w-2017-roku_1)

[35] “O nas” 2018. Hobby.pl. <http://hobby.pl/o-nas/>

[36] Dudkiewicz, Magdalena. 2016. “Cudzoziemcy w Warszawie, Czyli Jak Zmierzyć Się z Nieuniknionym” Fundację Obserwatorium & Stowarzyszenie Vox Humana. <https://cudzoziemcywaw.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/raport1.pdf>

audience is described as men aged 25–50.<sup>[37]</sup> The radio transmits contemporary music, local business (e.g., how to start your own business and became an entrepreneur), share job vacancies from the regional employment department, promotes an eco-friendly and sustainable lifestyle, and has a special programme for drivers. Every day at 9 p.m., the station transmits a Russian cultural and information programme prepared by Radio Sputnik, promoting the Kremlin interpretation of world events. The editor of the station declined to comment.

Source:

Polskie fejki, rosyjska dezinformacja. OKO.  
Press tropi tych, którzy je produkują.<sup>[38]</sup>

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## LEGAL REGULATIONS

There is a deficiency in the specified legal acts about information security and information threats in Poland. Several corresponding provisions can be found in some legal acts and regulations about particular government offices. It should be noted that in the security documents, ‘information security’ is frequently understood as ‘cybersecurity’. There are two key security documents that require more attention to the information security issue.

The ‘*Concept of Defence of the Republic of Poland*’ (published in May 2017) finds the ‘aggressive policy of the Russian Federation’, ‘including the use of such tools as disinformation campaigns against other countries’<sup>[39]</sup> as one of the main threats and challenges. The Concept does not contain any precise developments or tasks regarding information security.

The ‘*National Security Strategy*’ (published in November 2014) interprets information security as part of cybersecurity efforts (for example, article 84 describes cybersecurity as including ‘the information fight in cyberspace’; article 85 explains ‘information security’ as the ‘security of classified information (...), ensuring the information security of the

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[37] “Ruszyło Radio Skierowane Do Hobbystów” 2008. Wirtualnemedi.pl. 2008. <http://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/ruszylo-radio-skierowane-do-hobbystow#>

[38] Szczepaniak, Patryk, and Konrad Szczygieł. 2017. Ibid.

[39] “Koncepcja Obronna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej” 2017. Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej. [http://www.mon.gov.pl/d/pliki/rozne/2017/05/KORP\\_DRUK\\_v03\\_mn2.pdf](http://www.mon.gov.pl/d/pliki/rozne/2017/05/KORP_DRUK_v03_mn2.pdf).

state by preventing unauthorised access to the classified information, and its disclosure’).<sup>[40]</sup>

The Strategy underlines that the Polish Armed Forces (Siły Zbrojne RP) are responsible for ‘the development of the operational capabilities of the Polish Armed Forces’ including the raising of the ‘level of training and the ability to use professionally advanced (...) information tools’<sup>[41]</sup> (article 117). The *Parliamentary Commission of National Defence* pointed out in February 2015 that the National Security Strategy should be coordinated ‘between the Ministry of Digital Affairs and the military structures’.<sup>[42]</sup> It seems that no further suggestions were made. The new National Security Strategy is now being drafted by the *National Security Bureau (BBN)*. As the head of the BBN, Paweł Soloch, said, ‘there is a need for system changes’<sup>[43]</sup> now since the Strategy was drafted before Russia’s annexation of Crimea, when some new challenges emerged, including hybrid warfare, cyberattack, information warfare, as well as asymmetric terroristic threats’.<sup>[44]</sup> Soloch highlighted that all these menaces are to be included in the new draft.

The ‘*Doctrine of Information Security*’<sup>[45]</sup> was started as a draft in 2015 by the BBN as a response to the increase in hybrid threats, propaganda, disinformation, and psychological influence operation by foreign states and non-state actors. The Doctrine is supposed to be the key document clarifying the scope of responsibilities and the mode of cooperation and coordination between the government, private institutions, and citizens. The Doctrine is still in the drafting phase. According to the draft, the Polish strategy in information security, among other things, should include the ‘creation of compatible media (radio and TV)’<sup>[46]</sup> for minorities in Poland that can be a match for Russian media targeting those groups, as well as the facilitation and support of broadcasting efforts in Belarus (article 31).

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[40] “Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej” 2014. Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego. <https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/SBN%20RPPdf>.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Dura, Maksymilian. 2015. “Sejm Oceniał Zatwierdzoną w Listopadzie 2014 r. “Strategię Bezpieczeństwa RP” Defence24.pl. 2015. <http://www.defence24.pl/sejm-ocenił-zatwierdzona-w-listopadzie-2014-r-strategie-bezpieczenstwa-rp>

[43] Florencka, Katarzyna. “Soloch: Trwają Prace Nad Nową Strategią Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego” 2018. <http://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/debaty/news,1236509,soloch-trwaja-prace-nad-nowa-strategia-bezpieczenstwa-narodowego.html>

[44] Szef BBN zadowolony z awansów generalskich: “To jest krok w kierunku wzmocnienia sił zbrojnych, to porządkuje strukturę wojska” 2018. WPolityce.pl. <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/383920-szef-bbn-zadowolony-z-awansow-generalnych-to-jest-krok-w-kierunku-wzmocnienia-sil-zbrojnych-to-porzadkuje-strukture-wojska>

[45] Doktryna Bezpieczeństwa Informacyjnego RP. 2015. [https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dok/01/Projekt\\_Doktryny\\_Bezpieczenstwa\\_Informacyjnego\\_RPpdf](https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dok/01/Projekt_Doktryny_Bezpieczenstwa_Informacyjnego_RPpdf)

[46] Ibid.

The document says that the detailed tasks will be developed in the 'Political and Strategic Defence Directive', the 'Strategy of National Security Development', and some other tactical regulations.

## INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

The expert said that the

*'Polish government does not openly communicate on the information security issue'*.<sup>[47]</sup>

While working on this report, six government institutions (listed below) were contacted by with an in-depth interview request, but no communication or response was received. Therefore, the information provided in this section is based on the LEX Omega (by Wolters Kluwer Polska) and open sources.

The *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* ensures the 'efficient and continuous circulation of the critical information in the ministry and its foreign branches, in particular, a) acquires the critical information from all available sources, including the constantly monitored media; b) verifies and processes the critical information for the purposes of the recipients' competence; and c) immediately relays the critical information to the competent addresses in the ministry and its foreign branches, as well as, if necessary, in other public administration institutions' (and the *Consular Department* is responsible for this, article 40).<sup>[48]</sup> The Polish MFA is under internal political attack nowadays, first of all being criticized for the politically questionable policies towards many countries, with the most burning ones towards Ukraine ('we are experiencing the biggest crisis in the relationships from the Khmelnytsky Uprising',<sup>[49]</sup> said Paweł Kowal, the former Vice-Minister of the MFA) and Israel ('the relations are broken, wasted', commented Bogdan Borusewicz,<sup>[50]</sup> the deputy speaker of the Senate). The recently published

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[47] Anonymous Informant, February, 28, 2018. Personal conversation.

[48] Zarządzenie Nr 31 Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych z dnia 30 września 2015 r. w sprawie nadania regulaminu organizacyjnego ministerstwu spraw zagranicznych.

[49] "Mamy największy kryzys w relacjach polsko-ukraińskich od czasów powstania Chmielnickiego" 2017. TOK.FM. <http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,103454,22672956,mamy-najwiekszy-kryzys-w-relacjach-polsko-ukrainskich-od-czasow.html>

[50] "Borusewicz: Konsekwencje Tej Ustawy Będziemy Odczuwać Bardzo Długo" 2018. TVN24.pl. <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/borusewicz-ustawa-o-ipn-juz-zmienila-stosunki-polsko-izraelskie,811548.html>

article in *Polityka* magazine's print version, titled 'Zaginione ministerstwo', says that 'barely 40–50 among 2 500 MFA servants graduated from Russian universities'.<sup>[51]</sup>

The scope of the responsibilities<sup>[52]</sup> of the *Ministry of National Defence* does not put any special emphasis on information security. The Department of Strategy and Defence Planning is, among others, responsible for the 'non-military defence preparations programming, and organising of the operational planning process in the public administration bodies for the external security threat and wartime'.<sup>[53]</sup>

The *BBN* (Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego, or National Security Bureau) is the government agency working under the president of Poland regarding national security issues and providing research and organisational support to the National Security Council, the constitutional advisory body of the president on internal and external state security. The BBN, among other tasks, is responsible for 'monitoring and analysing the strategic environment of national security (both internal and external)', and 'developing and reviewing the strategic documents (concepts, directives, plans, and programmes) in the field of national security (...)'.<sup>[54]</sup>

It is important to note that the BBN defines 'information security' as a 'trans-sectoral security area, the content of which refers to the information environment (including cyberspace) of the state; a process aimed to ensure the safe functioning of the state in information space through the domination of its own internal domestic infosphere and effective protection of the national interests in the external (foreign) infosphere. This is accomplished through the implementation of such tasks as: ensuring the adequate protection of information resources, and protection against *hostile disinformation and propaganda activities* (in the defence dimension) [author's emphasis] while maintaining the ability to conduct offensive actions in the area against potential opponents (states or other entities). These tasks are laid out in the strategy (doctrine) of information security (operational and preparatory), and for

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[51] Wójcik, Łukasz. 2018. "Zaginione Ministerstwo" *Polityka*, 02–27.02.2018.

[52] Rozporządzenie Rady Ministrów z dnia 9 lipca 1996 r. w sprawie szczegółowego zakresu działania Ministra Obrony Narodowej.

[53] "Departament Strategii i Planowania Obronnego" 2018. Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej. <http://www.mon.gov.pl/ministerstwo/artykuł/departamenty/departament-strategii-i-planowania-obronnego-032698/>

[54] "Zarządzenie Nr. 2 Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 11 sierpnia 2010 r. w sprawie organizacji oraz zakresu działania Biura Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego" 2010. Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego. [https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dok/Zarządzenie\\_PRP\\_11\\_sierpnia\\_2010.pdf](https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dok/Zarządzenie_PRP_11_sierpnia_2010.pdf).

them to be implemented, the appropriate information security system is maintained and developed'.<sup>[55]</sup>

*The Internal Security Agency* is responsible for the 'recognition, prevention and detection of threats to security essential from the point of view of the continuity of the state, functioning of ICT systems of public administration bodies, or ICT network systems covered by a unified list of facilities, installations, devices, and services included in the critical infrastructure' (para 2a, article 5) and 'obtaining, analysing, processing, and transferring to the competent authorities information that may be essential for the protection of the internal security of the state and its constitutional order' (article 5, para 4).<sup>[56]</sup>

The *Foreign Intelligence Service*, a Polish secret agency tasked with gathering public and secret information abroad, is responsible for 'obtaining, analysing, processing and transferring to competent authorities information that may be essential for the protection of the internal security of the state and its constitutional order' (article 6, para 1).<sup>[57]</sup>

The *Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration (MSWiA)* is the public administration body responsible for the public administration and internal issues, as well as issues connected with national and ethnic minorities. The Department of Public Order<sup>[58]</sup> <sup>[59]</sup> is responsible, among others, for the supervision of activities connected with the protection of people and public safety. This is the only department that might be responsible for information security in the ministry.

The *State Protection Service (SOP)* was created on February 1, 2018, in compliance with the 'Law on State Protection Service',<sup>[60]</sup> introduced on December 8, 2017, and reporting to the MSWiA. The SOP restructured the Office of Government Protection, which was deemed to be ineffective in many issues.<sup>[61]</sup> The service is responsible (article 3),

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[55] "(Mini) Glossary BBN. Proposals of New Safety Terms" 2018. Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego. <https://www.bbn.gov.pl/pl/bezpieczenstwo-narodowe/minislownik-bbn-propozy/6035,MINISLOWNIK-BBN-Propozycje-nowych-terminow-z-dziedziny-bezpieczenstwa.html>

[56] Ustawa z dnia 24 maja 2002 r. o Agencji Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego oraz Agencji Wywiadu.

[57] Ustawa z dnia 24 maja 2002 r. o Agencji Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego oraz Agencji Wywiadu.

[58] Zarządzenie Nr 152 Prezesa Rady Ministrów z dnia 28 grudnia 2015 r. w sprawie nadania statutu Ministerstwu Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji.

[59] "Departament Porządku Publicznego" 2018. Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji. <https://bip.mswia.gov.pl/bip/organizacja/20643,Departament-Porzadku-Publicznego.html>

[60] Ustawa z dnia 8 grudnia 2017 r. o Służbie Ochrony Państwa. 2018 [http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/proc8.nsf/ustawy/1916\\_u.htm](http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/proc8.nsf/ustawy/1916_u.htm)

[61] Brudziński, Joachim. 2018. "Służba Ochrony Państwa Zastąpiła BOR" Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji. 2018. <https://www.mswia.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/16932,Sluzba-Ochrony-Panstwa-zastapila-BOR.html?search=4660223>.

among other tasks, for dealing with crimes against security, *crimes against communications security*, offenses against freedom, crimes against honour and physical integrity, crimes against the public order, attacks and active assault against persons, the recognition, prevention, and detection of crimes committed by SOP officers, and conducting pyrotechnic and radiological reconnaissance of the premises of the Sejm and Senate. According to the law, the SOP can use secret cooperation, among others, with an editor-in-chief, journalists, and other people involved in publishing while implementing their goals and objectives (article 66). This cooperation is possible after obtaining the consent of the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration.

The *Institute of Information Activities*<sup>[62]</sup> at the Academy of War in Warsaw. The institute is responsible for academic and analytical research activities in the field of information security for the purposes of the academy, the Ministry of National Defence, and the Polish Armed Forces, including training for operational, tactical, and strategic specialists and experts in the field of the military and public administration institutions. The institute conducts regular meetings and training, including some guest lectures on the issues, such as a recent one by Dr Sergey Pakhomenko (Mariupol State University, Ukraine)<sup>[63]</sup> or the conference called 'Russian resources in the Intermarium and the Possibilities of their Employment in the Infowars Against Countries in the Region.'<sup>[64]</sup>

There are also some special bodies that focus on strategic communication: the *Government Information Centrum*,<sup>[65]</sup> which is responsible for online and other media communications of the highest government institutions; the *Interministerial Team for the Promotion of Poland Abroad* at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which 'coordinates tasks of the respective ministries regarding such issues as the protection of the good name of Poland [...] (and) drafting a coherent and comprehensive strategy for the promotion of Poland abroad',<sup>[66]</sup> as well as the Chancellery of the President. The scope

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[62] Instytut Działań Informacyjnych,  
<http://www.wwoj.akademia.mil.pl/instytut-dzialan-informacyjnych/instytut-dzialan-informacyjnych.html>

[63] "Wykład: Czynniki konfliktu w Donbasie" 2018.  
<http://www.cbb.akademia.mil.pl/aktualnosci-cbb/wyklad-czynniki-konfliktu-w-donbasie.html>

[64] "Konferencja: Rosyjska dezinformacja na obszarze Trójmorza" 2017.  
<http://www.cbb.akademia.mil.pl/aktualnosci-cbb/konferencja-rosyjska-dezinformacja.html>

[65] Centrum Informacyjne Rządu.  
<https://bip.kprm.gov.pl/kpr/bip-kancelarii-prezesa/organizacja-kprm/sekretariaty-departamenten/1787.Centrum-Informacyjne-Rzadu.html>

[66] "Special Team Set up to Coordinate Promotion of Poland Abroad" 2016. PAP. 2016. [http://www.pap.pl/en/news/news\\_521077\\_special-team-set-up-to-coordinate-promotion-of-poland-abroad.html](http://www.pap.pl/en/news/news_521077_special-team-set-up-to-coordinate-promotion-of-poland-abroad.html).



of the responsibilities of the government spokespersons are defined by a special regulation.<sup>[67]</sup>

To sum up, information security in Poland is a rather legally and institutionally underdeveloped issue. Poland might be categorised as poorly resilient and highly vulnerable to information threats. The developed, ostensibly institutional system lacks clear coordination in the field of information security. More attention was given to cybersecurity rather than to information security. There are two main cybersecurity documents that support this argument: the draft ‘Cybersecurity Strategy for 2016–2022’, and the ‘Cyberspace Protection Policy of the Republic of Poland’.<sup>[68]</sup> The draft document also introduces the establishment of the Cybersecurity College and a Government Representative for Cybersecurity. In March 2018, the Polish prime minister established a new position of Government Representative on Cybersecurity, who will report to the Ministry of National Defence.<sup>[69]</sup>

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

Poland is only at the beginning of the road in the process of developing initiatives that will be primarily focused on fact-checking. Arguably, the most recognizable one is *OKO.press*,<sup>[70]</sup> an internet portal gathering journalists whose job is mostly to verify the statements made by politicians and other public figures. *OKO.press* journalists prepare both short comments and longer analyses regarding the current political situation in Poland and try to cover all important topics, including internal developments and international relations between Poland and other countries and institutions. *OKO.press* was started by five journalists and is financially supported by Agora Holding (whose most well-known liberal media outlets are *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Radio TOK FM*), *Polityka* (the leading liberal weekly in Poland), and private donors.

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[67] Rozporządzenie Rady Ministrów z Dnia 8 Stycznia 2002 r. w sprawie Organizacji i Zadań Rzeczników Prasowych w Urzędach Organów Administracji Państwowej. <https://bip.kprm.gov.pl/kpr/bip-rady-ministrow/organy-pomocnicze/organy-pomocnicze-preze/198,Rzecznik-prasowy-rzadu.html>

[68] Świątkowska, Joanna, Izabela Albrycht, and Dominik Skokowski. 2017. “National Cyber Security Organization: POLAND” Tallinn: NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. [https://ccdcoe.org/sites/default/files/multimedia/pdf/NCSSO\\_Poland\\_2017\\_0.pdf](https://ccdcoe.org/sites/default/files/multimedia/pdf/NCSSO_Poland_2017_0.pdf)

[69] Rozporządzenie Rady Ministrów z dnia 16 marca 2018 r. w sprawie ustanowienia pełnomocnika rządu do spraw cyberbezpieczeństwa. <https://bip.kprm.gov.pl/kpr/bip-rady-ministrow/organy-pomocnicze/pełnomocnicy-rzadu-i-pr/4796,Pełnomocnika-Rzadu-do-spraw-Cyberbezpieczeństwa.html>

[70] <https://oko.press/>

Currently, the project runs on donations and is published by the Centrum of Government Control 'OKO' Foundation (Fundacja Ośrodek Kontroli Obywatelskiej 'Oko'). All the content, including the analyses, investigative reports, and fact-checks, produced by OKO.press is available to its readers for free and is visited by around 2 000 visitors daily (93% from Polish IP addresses), with 46% of the visitors being redirected from social media and 30% being direct traffic.<sup>[71]</sup>

Another fact-checking initiative is *Demagog*.<sup>[72]</sup> Its journalists work as volunteers and their job is solely to verify Polish politicians' statements. By comparing their speech with factual information, Demagog's journalists verify whether the politician has told the truth or misled the audience (intentionally or unintentionally). The initial idea for the project came from U.S. platforms FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com. The students from Masaryk University in Brno (Slovakia) first launched a similar platform called 'Demagog' in 2010, and later others were started in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and in 2014, in Poland. Demagog Poland launched a media-literacy project called 'Fact-Checking Academy'. The academy, supported by the U.S. embassy in Poland, aims to raise media literacy in schools and among young people through workshops and lectures.

*The Observatory of Media Freedom* is a programme launched by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and Article 19 in 2008. Currently, the Observatory is running a project called 'Monitoring of Threats to Free Media in Poland and Strengthening of Local Media Control Function'. The project is supported by the University of Warsaw (Law and Administration Department) and Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (Political Science Department). Its programme aims to raise awareness about media freedom and independence in Poland, including stimulation of public debate on the issue, some educational activities (citizen journalism), and media monitoring, including media-regulation monitoring as well.

Poland, however, does not have a well-developed market of fact-checking initiatives and debunking teams that deals with Kremlin disinformation. There are some initiatives implementing activities aimed at understanding how Kremlin influence actually works in Poland, and the actions of these initiatives are also worth mentioning.

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[71] "OKO. Press. January 2018 Overview" 2018. SimilarWeb.com. 2018.  
<https://www.similarweb.com/website/oko.press>.

[72] <http://demagog.org.pl/>

The famous *Stopfake*<sup>[73]</sup> initiative, responsible for debunking fake news about Ukraine has a version in Polish. Stopfake in Poland works to provide the Polish audience with examples of fake or manipulated news published by pro-Kremlin media outlets in Russia or in Russian-language media in other countries, such as Ukraine. Poland–Ukraine relations also happen to be a subject of such manipulated stories, with fake news coming mostly from the Russian media outlets and very rarely from Polish sources.

Another initiative, the *Infoops*,<sup>[74]</sup> researches manipulation of information about Poland in foreign propaganda. That is a project initiated by the Polish Cybersecurity Foundation. One of its goals is to use social media while communicating about disinformation cases in Poland. The Cybersecurity Foundation launched a Twitter account, *@Disinfo\_Digest*, aimed at providing daily reporting on the fake news produced by the Kremlin and other sources. The reports are not limited to Poland but also include some fake news spread in other countries.

The *Russian Fifth Column in Poland*<sup>[75]</sup> is a Facebook platform whose authors regularly post information about the connections between Polish activists, politicians, and members of academia with some people from Russia and other countries who spread a pro-Kremlin narrative. The editors of Russian Fifth Column in Poland gather and reveal evidence showing examples of promoting anti-Ukrainian, anti-NATO, and anti-EU attitudes and explain their connections to the pro-Kremlin surroundings.

The *Centre for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis*<sup>[76]</sup> is an NGO aimed at raising awareness about manipulation and propaganda mechanisms, and explaining the threats of propaganda to national security. The centre already has published some analysis on information security and disinformation, including the report ‘Russian Disinformation War Against Poland’, and a policy paper, ‘How to Build Information Resilience of Society in Cyberspace while Countering Propaganda and Disinformation’.

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[73] <https://www.stopfake.org/pl/tag/polska/>

[74] <https://www.cybersecurity.org/pl/infoops/>

[75] <https://www.facebook.com/RosyjskaVKolumnawPolsce/>

[76] <https://capd.pl/pl/>

Besides the described initiatives, one should mention the individual reports and analysis prepared by Polish experts or journalists aimed at debunking Kremlin disinformation in Poland, such as the reports 'Threat of Russian Disinformation in Poland and Ways to Counteract it'<sup>[77]</sup> 'Russian Soft Power in Poland. The Kremlin and Pro-Russian Organisations'<sup>[78]</sup> or 'Information Warfare in the Internet'.<sup>[79]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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### **Adam Kamiński's Fake Facebook account**

A person who called himself Adam Kamiński created a Facebook account, stating that he was the editor of *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny* (Independent Political Magazine). He had 1 624 Facebook friends, and the deputy minister of National Defence was among them. This person used to publish and share articles from *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny* but also some fake information or disinformation about the Ministry of Defence as well. In fact, *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny*, in a comment to journalists, said that the person named Adam Kamiński did not work for the magazine and it had no record of him. The Facebook friends of Kamiński reached by the journalists told them they had never seen this person. When the journalists contacted Kamiński, he rejected to meet in person or have a Skype talk and responded only electronically. This case was revealed and investigated by Patryk Szczepaniak and Konrad Szczygieł, journalists of *Oko.press*, who found out that the profile picture of Adam Kamiński was stolen from a Lithuanian orthopaedist named Andrius Žukauskas.

Source:

Polskie fejki, rosyjska dezinformacja. OKO.  
Press tropi tych, którzy je produkują.<sup>[80]</sup>

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[77] <http://bit.ly/2Ovlf0>

[78] [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_PL\\_20170428.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_PL_20170428.pdf)

[79] <http://bit.ly/2K5wbKR>

[80] Szczepaniak, Patryk, and Konrad Szczygieł. 2017. "Polskie Fejki, Rosyjska Dezinformacja. OKO.Press Tropi Tych, Którzy Je Produkują. Niektórzy z Nich Nie Istnieją" OKO.press. 2017. <https://oko.press/polskie-fejki-rosyjska-dezinformacja/>

# MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

The interviewed experts<sup>[81] [82]</sup> confirmed the alarming low level of critical-thinking skills among young people. The primary and higher education curricula demonstrate a lack of special blocs on critical thinking and media literacy, as well as a lack of qualified teachers who can teach those skills. The introduction of such courses is mostly bottom up from civil-society organisations. Such programmes are divided according to the age of the target audience: from schoolchildren to young activists, and from those who do not have any previous knowledge and experience to those who would like to enhance their skills and share the expertise.

*Olimpiada Cyfrowa*<sup>[83]</sup> is a project launched in 2002 by the Modern Poland Foundation (Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska) and funded by the Ministry of Education and Sport and Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The project targets secondary school pupils to raise their awareness about media skills and literacy, including critical analysis of information, media ethics, the language of media, and internet security. The project also motivates teachers to discuss security issues, the internet, media, and digital education in social media.

The *Cybernauci* project<sup>[84]</sup> is aimed at training skills to be safe and secure on the internet. The project was launched by the Modern Poland Foundation in cooperation with Collegium Civitas. Its target audience is described as schoolchildren, their parents, and teachers. The project's team organises various workshops to develop the pupils' skills and competences on the safe use of online sources, soft skills for parents on how to talk with their children about rules on internet usage, and how to use digital resources in education for teachers.

The *Orange Foundation* (Fundacja Orange) is a non-profit organisation created in 2005 by the Polish telecommunications provider. The foundation aims to develop digital education, including children and youth's media skills development. The educational competition

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[81] Krzysztof Izdebski, ePaństwo Foundation, February, 23, 2018. In-depth Interview.

[82] Paweł Terpiłowski, Demagog, February, 22, 2018. In-depth Interview.

[83] <http://olimpiadacyfrowa.pl/>

[84] <https://cybernauci.edu.pl>

'Safe Here and There' (*Bezpiecznie Tu i Tam*)<sup>[85]</sup> was launched by the foundation in 2016 to popularise safe behaviour on the internet and new media. This online course is available for free online.

The *Cogito 21* project<sup>[86]</sup> was launched in 2016 by the Centrum of Innovative Education to strengthen schoolchildren and teachers' critical-thinking skills. The project was in the form of a competition. Any school could register a representative (a teacher) to form a club of pupils. Every competition participant received a handbook, could attend two webinars, and have mentor support. The club had to plan and implement an information campaign in media and make a short video. These materials could be awarded with a prize for the best performance.

In 2018, Facebook will open a new *digital media hub* in Poland. The hub will offer 'training in digital skills, media literacy and online safety to groups with limited access to technology, including older people, the young, and refugees'.<sup>[87]</sup> Similar hubs were opened in Nigeria and Brazil.

On February 16-18, 2018, a hackathon was held for the development of a 'natural shield when it comes to common manipulation techniques on the internet, such as fake news, phishing, clickbait, cyber-extortion scams, etc'.<sup>[88]</sup> Its participants were educators and activists who in 48 hours had the challenge of developing several 'apps, games and quizzes' in groups composed of 3–5 people, including a programmer, an educator, some journalists, a media expert, a copywriter, and an activist. A similar initiative by the *Warsaw Legal Hackers*, under the theme 'Fake News. How to Catch Electronic War Dogs by the Tail?' was held on March 14, 2018.

## CONCLUSIONS

The conducted analysis of the societal vulnerability and government resilience to Kremlin disinformation in Poland revealed the complexity and multifacetedness of the situation. The interviewed experts and national politicians confirm that the Kremlin's influence in Poland is rather 'intangible' and cannot be described as a mere production of 'fake news' or any 'manipulated content'. In many

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[85] <https://fundacja.orange.pl/kurs/>

[86] <http://navigo.org.pl/szczegoly-o-cogito/>

[87] Fioretti, Julia. 2018. "Facebook to Open Digital Training Hubs in Europe" Reuters. 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-europe/facebook-to-open-digital-training-hubs-in-europe-idUSKBN1FA179>.

[88] <https://edukaton.com/#hackathon>

ways, the Kremlin takes advantage of situations that emerge rather than creates or triggers it. In the previous year, Poland was involved in an array of internal and external tensions that heated up the negative atmosphere of relations with Ukraine, Germany, the U.S., Israel, and the EU. Those tensions established fertile ground for foreign manipulative influence in Poland.

At this stage, Poland has limited expertise and capacity to combat such vulnerabilities, as well as a low level of resilience to Kremlin disinformation operations or foreign manipulative media influence. A trend observed among many politicians is a growing tendency to call every information they disagree with 'disinformation' or 'fake news', no matter if the information is true or not. As a consequence, instead of fighting disinformation, some Polish politicians provoke or encourage it.

The underdevelopment of information security institutions (namely, the absence of a specified scope of responsibilities and power-sharing), the lack of cooperation and sustainable partnership among existing ones result in a high level of susceptibility to Kremlin-backed or other third-party information influence or targeted operations.

The lack of well-defined, comprehensive, clearly explained division of responsibilities and authority in legislation and regulations exacerbates Poland's vulnerability in the information security field.

The country's media environment faces a lot of challenges as well. The short-lived interest in information on the internet causes journalists to publish their materials quickly, sometimes without double-checking their sources and facts. While editorial desks struggling with a lack of funding, unable to invest in the investigative journalism, a well-functioning fact-checking body, training to strengthen journalists' skills and competences, continuous media-monitoring, the launch of well-established media-literacy programmes, and other digital-debunking initiatives must be supported and strengthened in Poland on all levels.

The government institutions, as well as the media outlets and civil-society organisations are still in need of stronger cooperation, but, first and foremost, a clear comprehension of the current information threats. In this regard, it is not only the political elite that must

be engaged but the civil sector and media should be ready to share their expertise and knowledge and work in concert.

To increase analytical expertise in the information security field and make civil-society organisations more active in the digital-debunking and fact-checking, the development of effective and well-functioning communications channels is both desirable and required.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **To Government Institutions**

1. Establish a platform for regular meetings of government officials, experts, and civil-society representatives in the information security field. The experts from analytical institutions, academia, and civil-society organisations can share with and update government institutions on the most recent developments in the field, share the best international and national practices, and propose some new approaches and solutions.
2. Introduce changes into the school and higher-education curricula and add obligatory media-literacy courses. Programmes, handbooks, and other materials prepared for established national civil-society organisations and initiatives should be used for this task too.
3. Launch continuous training and sharing of information-security best practices, as well as the related workshops for the government officials and civil officers to strength their expertise and build the capacity to respond to the challenges. The international experience might be used for this task too (for example, from Estonia or Latvia).
4. Support media-literacy projects for all age groups. Thus, civil-society organisations and initiatives will be able to provide their expertise and experience on this issue.

### **To Civil Society**

1. Cooperate on a regular basis in the exchange of expertise and experience with international civil-society organisations and actors who have extensive experience and involvement



in local media-literacy projects and digital-debunking initiatives. Other countries' experience can extend and expand the view of the country's weaknesses.

2. Maintain cooperation with the local civil-society platforms and actors to enhance the level of societal resilience to media manipulation and disinformation.
3. Conduct education activities for all age groups on basic media literacy and media-manipulation awareness. Build up an experienced and professional team of trainers and experts able to conduct on-demand training and workshops for government officials, civil-society representatives and media people on advanced media literacy, psychological media influence, and manipulation.

### **To Media**

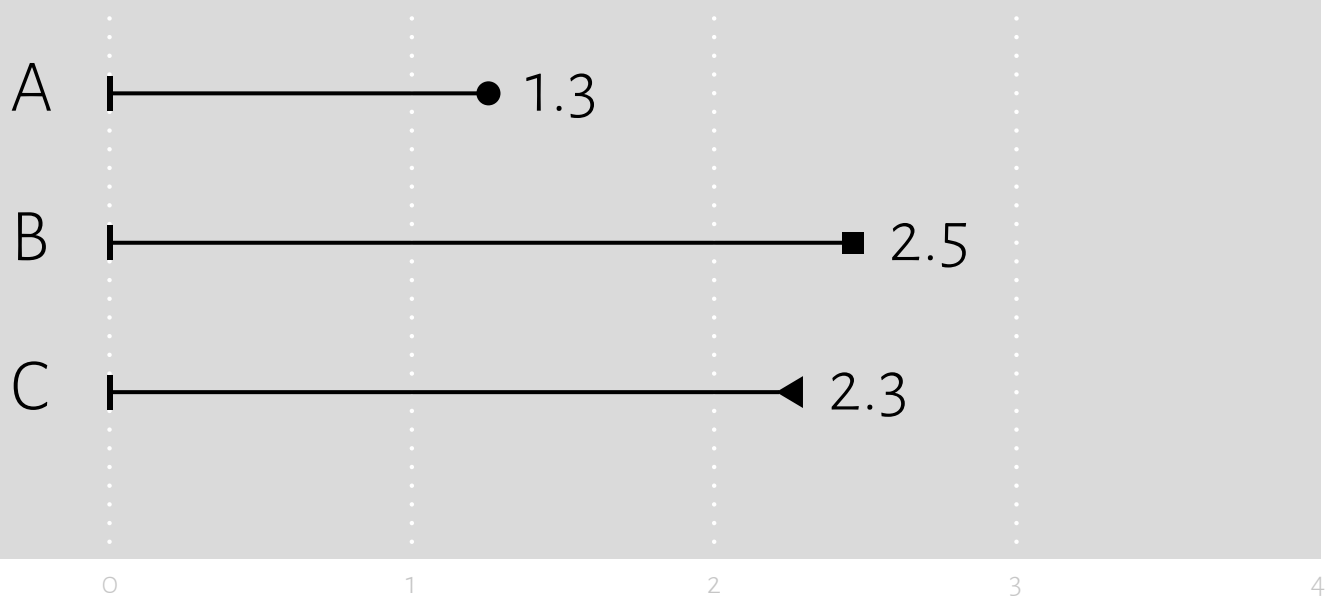
1. Support investigative journalism initiatives and programmes, with a focus on the local level. Engage experienced international and mature national investigative journalists to share their expertise and build new skills and competences of Polish investigative and digital journalism.
2. Conduct training and workshops on media ethics and journalism standards on a regular basis.
3. Launch editorial fact-checking boards in leading media outlets.



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# ROMANIA



# INTRODUCTION

Against the current geopolitical backdrop marked by heightened tensions between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, both Romania and Russia have been looking at each other with suspicion. Romania's participation in the EU and NATO has meant aligning Bucharest's foreign policy options with its Western partners, which often collides with Russia's interests in the region. Moreover, strong cooperation between Romania and Moldova, and Romania's active support of Ukraine post-Euromaidan, coupled with the vocal condemnation of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support of the pro-Russia rebellion in the Donbas region have vexed Moscow and paved the way for a glacial relationship.<sup>[1]</sup> As a result, Romania has not been neglected by the Kremlin's arsenal of disinformation, which includes communication and psychological campaigns aimed at destabilising the domestic environment and changing the attitudes of the population. Given its complicated relations with Russia, Romania has always been wary of Moscow's actions in Eastern Europe. Historically, this dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when parts of the Moldavian principality were ceded to the Russian Empire by the Ottomans. Moreover, after World War II, Soviet aggression towards the integrity of Romania is linked to the incorporation of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia into the USSR, with the advent of communism and the Soviet dominance over Romania during the Cold War.

The economic ties between Romania and Russia have ebbed and flowed. The strong relationship during the communist era was quickly abandoned in the early 1990s. This found Romania struggling to overcome its communist legacy and catch up with the West. Nevertheless, Romanian–Russian cooperation remained significant in the energy field, despite Romania's reduced dependency on Russian resources. Unlike its Eastern European neighbours, Romania imports only about one-quarter of its domestic demand from Russia while the rest is supplied by its own natural reserves. The Ukrainian and subsequent reciprocal economic sanctions between the EU and Russia meant a sharp decline by roughly 34 % in Romanian-Russian trade relations (from 4.998 billion USD in 2014 to 3.309 billion USD in 2015).<sup>[2]</sup>

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[1] Emmott, Robin. 2016. "U.S. Activates Romanian Missile Defense Site, Angering Russia." Reuters. 2016. <http://reut.rs/zhLkjo3>.

[2] "Relațiile Comerciale Și Economice Ruso-Române." 2018. Ambasada Federației Ruse în România. 2018. [https://romania.mid.ru/web/romania\\_ro/economia](https://romania.mid.ru/web/romania_ro/economia).

Romania has undergone a series of socio-cultural changes. While experiencing strong Western influence at the time when the Romanian state was established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it faded away after World War II, when during communist rule Romania came under strong Soviet influence. Besides political and economic policies, socio-cultural institutions put in place by the Soviets were closely adhered to by the Romanian authorities. The 'Westernization' of Romania resumed in the early 1990s, with the country's renewed commitment to Euro-Atlantic values. Nevertheless, Romania's spirituality is strongly influenced by its connections with Eastern Orthodox Christianity<sup>[3]</sup> while the Latin roots of Romania make Romania a distinct case among its mainly Slavic neighbours.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

In Romania, the spread of pro-Kremlin misinformation is very subtle, since the language barrier impedes the precise retransmission of propagandistic messages. Thus, Russian disinformation takes into account country specifics and chiefly exploits local political squabbling, and main institutional and democratic weaknesses.

Among the main vulnerable groups susceptible to being influenced by pro-Kremlin propaganda are Romanian nationalists/right-wingers, who depict themselves as staunch – often inflexible – believers in Romania's uniqueness among nations. They often castigate Romania's alliance with the West, militate for a non-aligned and 'independent' path for the country, and argue in favour of a friendly relationship with Russia. The usual message conveyed is that of a bleak international milieu where the West, by and large, and American hegemony, in particular, is blamed for disguised imperialism, the world's exploitation, many of the existing regional conflicts, and its corrupt leadership and biased media.

Similarly, religious conservatives (usually ultra-orthodox) emerge as another vulnerable group, predisposed to favour pro-Kremlin propaganda. According to this group, the dysfunctionality of the decadent West is evident when compared with Romania's ethically superior traditional society and religious beliefs.

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[3] 82% of Romanians are orthodox according to the last 2011 census.

Last but not least, communist nostalgics (mostly elderly people) constitute another vulnerable group easy to exploit by the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns. Generally, they have been affected by the chaotic transition in Romania, often being economically marginalised, socially discontent, and often manipulated by the political elites.

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The Romanian media landscape appears to be fertile ground for the Kremlin's misinformation network. According to the 2017 World Press Freedom Index, the Romanian press ranks 46 in the world (out of 180) and is considered generally free. In spite of a slight advancement from its 2016 position of 49 to the present 46, the report characterises Romania as being *'manipulated and spied on' and signals the 'excessive politicisation of the media, corrupt financing mechanisms, editorial policies subordinated to owner interests and intelligence agency infiltration of staff—such has been the impact of the media's transformation into political propaganda tools, which has been particularly visible in election years.'*<sup>[4]</sup>

Today, Romania experiences strong competition in the media market, with television as the main telecommunications medium, particularly in rural areas. In 2016, Romanians spent on average 340 minutes a day watching TV channels, with a large portion combining both entertainment and news. The year 2016 also saw a similar hierarchy to 2015 with PRO TV maintaining the leading position (4.3 % rating, 20.9 % market share), followed by Antena 1 (3.2 % and 15.5 %) and Kanal D (1.6 % and 7.8 %).<sup>[5]</sup>

Despite its increased diversity and dynamism, the radio audience remained stable in 2016, particularly at the urban level, reaching roughly 75 % of the population, although listeners spent less than one hour tuned in to their favourite radio station. Radio Romania Actualități maintained its top position at the national level with a market share of 12.7 %, followed by KISS FM (11.4 %), and Radio ZU (8.2 %).<sup>[6]</sup>

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[4] "Romania." 2018. Reporters Without Borders. 2018. <https://rsf.org/en/romania>.

[5] "Media Fact Book Romania 2017." 2017. <http://www.mediafactbook.ro/public/files/MFB2017.pdf>.

[6] "Rezultatele Studiului de Audiență Radio Valul de Vară 2017." 20

None of these traditional media outlets retransmit pro-Kremlin narratives; however, in their search for ‘sensational’ stories, news concocted by pro-Kremlin news agencies (Russia Today, Sputnik, etc.) might be reproduced. For instance, the ‘Soros’ narrative, which stemmed from Russia and expanded all across Central and Eastern Europe, has also made several headlines in Romania.

The digital segment has experienced one of the most rapid expansions in Eastern Europe because of the increased number of internet and smartphone users. According to the National Institute of Statistics, almost 70 % of people aged 16 to 74 in Romania, about 10.6 million, accessed the internet in 2016, despite not being regular users. Roughly 75 % of Romanian internet users participate in social media,<sup>[7]</sup> where Facebook is the most common forum for Romanians, reaching 7 million daily users (13+ years).<sup>[8]</sup>

This rich digital landscape disguises many cyber challenges. According to Iulian Chifu and Oazu Nantoi (2016),<sup>[9]</sup> in Romania, pro-Kremlin disinformation takes the form of online measures that create an alternative reality by re-branding facts, events, and concrete arguments, with the ultimate goal of undermining objective truth, cultivating confusion, and mistrust in Western values and solidarity. To this end, various news websites are used to share phony and manipulative messages using no fact-checking and having no link to journalistic deontology. They also entertain a constant flux of comments, which afterwards generate snowball effect on social networks.

Social media tools are particularly efficient in this case, considering the ease with which they offer vivid platforms where such ‘alternative’ narratives can be disseminated and amplified. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, in Romania, news platforms

*‘compete online for readers’ attention and for advertising money with Google and Facebook, with bloggers and influencers (who often do not make clear their financial interests), and with fake news and conspiracy theorists.’<sup>[10]</sup>*

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[7] “Europe’s Digital Progress Report” 2017. European Commission. 2017. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/european-digital-progress-report>.

[8] On average Romanians spend 316 min. on the internet.

[9] Chifu, Iulian and Nantoi, Oazu. 2016. “Război Informațional. Tipizarea Modelului Agresiunii.” Institutul de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale Ion I.C. Brătianu al Academiei Române. <https://nato.md/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Razboi-Informational.pdf>.

[10] “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017.” 2018. Reuters Institute. <http://bit.ly/2tSeHbl>

Most recently, an online application has been developed in Romania that cross-checks published news and warns users about the accuracy of information found on the websites. More than 71 news websites have been identified so far, which intensively make use of fake news, some of them extremely popular among internet users (e.g. *Antena3.ro*, *Romaniatv.net*, *stiripesurse.ro* or *Dcnews.ro*).<sup>[11]</sup>

Nonetheless, apart from *Sputnik*, which in May 2015 launched its Romanian online news platform in the Republic of Moldova dedicated to a Romanian-speaking audience,<sup>[12]</sup> other websites have no formal, proven ties to Russia, although their motivation to propagate such news is unknown. Yet, there is no transparency either when it comes to their organisational and financial structures. What these websites have in common is their straightforward approach and aggressiveness, particularly when their reasons for disseminating such news are being inquired, since questioning their publication goals is often branded as an attempt to undermine the diversity of opinions or as a counter-attack of ‘politically-correctness’.

Corina Rebegea, an expert at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), believes these are only

*“camouflage” actions aimed at indirectly conveying pro-Kremlin messages,*<sup>[13]</sup>

since overt Russian propaganda would not be positively received in Romania considering the Russophobic sentiment existing in Romanian society. In any case, the narratives these websites and social media tools have in common are similar and range from a pervasive, nationalistic, and anti-EU/NATO/US campaign, mostly depicting Romania as a ‘colony/vassal/puppet’<sup>[14]</sup> of the Western powers, and the decadence of the West, including here a fierce critique against capitalism, globalisation, ‘political correctness’, minority, and gender rights, etc. Western progressive values are portrayed as in obvious antithesis with Romanian society, which is depicted as the holder of ‘true’ traditional, religious, and moral values.<sup>[15]</sup>

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[11] “Lista Site-Urilor Unde Informația Trebuie Verificată de Două Ori Include Și Unul Din Iași!” 2017. Ziaruldeiasi.ro. 2017. <http://bit.ly/2pcDIOM>

[12] Many articles produced by Sputnik.md either favour the opinions of journalists or praise politicians who are vehemently critical about the fight against corruption in Romania and follow a strong anti-Western line. See, for instance, <https://pressone.ro/sectiuni/trei-nume-pe-care-sputnik-moldova-romania-le-elogiaza-constant/>.

[13] Rebegea, Corina. 2017. “Giving Pro-Kremlin Propaganda a Helping Hand.” StopFake.org. 2017. <https://www.stopfake.org/en/giving-pro-kremlin-propaganda-a-helping-hand/>.

[14] “Pleșoianu Se la Tare de SUA: Noua Securitate ESTE Creație de Peste Ocean.” 2017. Sputnik.md. 2017. <https://ro.sputnik.md/politics/20170905/14373687/plesoianu-tare-sua-noua-securitate-creatie-pestocean.html>.

[15] “EURACTIV: Sua isi muta armele nucleare din Turcia in România!” 2016. <http://bit.ly/2Gscg7h>.



In fact, religion is an important soft-power instrument employed by Russia to expand its political influence and deliver its anti-Western messages in countries that share the Christian Orthodox faith. Romania is no exception.<sup>[16]</sup>

According to Rebegea,

*'The Kremlin's arsenal of disinformation in Romania – and across southeastern Europe – includes narratives that are tightly connected with existing home-grown nationalist discourse. Many times, this blurs the lines between various actors (pro-Russian trolls or Romanian right-wingers) and their goals, which in the end provides a perfect camouflage for Russian propaganda.'*<sup>[17]</sup>

For instance, one of the most popular fake-stories injected into the Romanian public by different news outlets (TV channels and websites) inaccurately claimed the imminent transfer of US nuclear warheads from Turkey to Romania, against the background of strained relations between Washington and Ankara. This would have made Romania a first-line target in the eventuality of a war between the West and Russia.<sup>[18]</sup> Another example portrays Romania as a preferred destination for selling American second-hand military equipment.<sup>[19]</sup>

Similarly, some blogs insistently criticised Romania's latest military acquisition aimed at augmenting the capabilities of the Romanian air forces in line with its NATO allies. The purchase of a squadron of 36 F-16s previously used by the Portuguese air force was seen not only as an expensive move for acquiring aged military equipment but also as unneeded, since Romania is not the target of any outside threat.<sup>[20]</sup>

Furthermore, what these websites and blogs have in common is their recurring mission to 'help' Romania get rid of the malevolent influence of George Soros, the well-known Jewish American businessman

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[16] See, for instance, Alexandru Lazescu 2017, A Proxy for the Kremlin: The Russian Orthodox Church, available at: <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/proxy-kremlin-russian-orthodox-church> and Corina Rebegea 2017, Kremlin plays the religion card, available at: <http://infowar.cepa.org/Briefs/Ro/Kremlin-plays-the-religion-card>.

[17] Rebegea, Corina. 2017. "Russian Propaganda Meets Romanian Nationalism." Center for European Policy Analysis. 2017. <http://infowar.cepa.org/Briefs/Ro/Russian-propaganda-meets-Romanian-nationalism>.

[18] Tudor, Iulian. 2016. "SUA Mută Arme Nucleare Din Turcia În România. Ministerul de Externe Neagă. SUA Nu Spun Nimic." Romaniatv.net. 2016. [https://www.romaniatv.net/sua-muta-arme-nucleare-din-turcia-in-romania-euractiv\\_309625.html](https://www.romaniatv.net/sua-muta-arme-nucleare-din-turcia-in-romania-euractiv_309625.html).

[19] Vasilescu, Valentin. 2015. "Marșul Cavaleriei Americane Prin România, În Folosul Complexului Militar-Industrial Al SUA." RussiaToday.ro. 2015. <http://bit.ly/2pgSpzY>.

Țene, Ionuț. 2017. "Informații Trecute Sub Tăcere de Presa Centrală! Războiul Este Iminent." Alternativenews.ro. 2017. <http://bit.ly/2FHSFPt>.

[20] "La Avioane F16 Second-Hand, Pilotii or Fi de Prima Mana?" 2016. Politicscam.ro. 2016. <http://politicscam.ro/avioane-f16-second-hand-romania/>.

and philanthropist. According to the narrative, Soros' network of NGOs and initiatives unceasingly conspire not only against the current political establishment but also against the very existence of the Romanian state and traditional life. The 'Soros' narrative carefully concocted in the Kremlin's laboratories has been very effective in Romania. Subsequently, it has been often employed by politicians from the ruling coalition<sup>[21]</sup> to justify their controversial political moves as a desire to protect the Romanian people from the vested interests of Western multinational companies, which, allegedly, exploit simple and decent Romanians.<sup>[22]</sup>

Perhaps the most well-known narrative was circulated at the beginning of 2017, when massive anti-graft protests took place across the country against the decision by the government to soften penalties for wrongdoing and corruption by officials. This narrative depicted the huge influx of people gathered in the country's biggest cities as directly financed by Soros and other multinationals whose aims would have been the destabilisation of the state.<sup>[23]</sup> According to one of our interviewees, the 'Soros' narrative played well in the hand of the Romanian politicians by being already deeply rooted in their discourse and public statements:

*'The Soros (threat) is a Kremlin-generated problem, which (...) was taken by our politicians and used in their campaigns; they took advantage of it.'*<sup>[24]</sup>

Complementarily, these kinds of messages have been followed by ones aimed at creating the impression that EU accession was in fact an error while the anti-corruption efforts undertaken by Romania in past years are just instruments of foreign interference by Western powers.<sup>[25]</sup> Such allegations are personified by a group of three – the *Ku Klux Klan* of imposters<sup>[26]</sup> – which includes the president, Klaus Iohannis, Laura Codruța Kövesi, the current chief prosecutor of Romania's National Anti-

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[21] Romania is currently governed by the PSD-ALDE coalition with the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SDP) holding a parliamentary majority after the December 2016 elections.

[22] "Dragnea: Totul Pleacă de La Soros, de La Răul Pe Care Vrea Să-l Facă României." 2017. Digi24. 2017. <http://bit.ly/2HyL6Lm>. Ion, Raluca. 2017. "Noua Manipulare a PSD: Multinaționalele Atacă Țara." Republica. 2017. <https://republica.ro/noua-manipulare-a-psd-multinationalele-ataca-tara>.

[23] "L. Dragnea: Am Auzit Zvonuri Că Multinaționalele Au Finanțat Protestele." 2017. Digi24. 2017. <http://bit.ly/2pduQaT>. Dumitru, Adrian. 2017. "VIDEO ȘOCANT! Mîna Dreaptă a Lui Trump Confirmă Implicarea Lui Soros În RomâNia." EVZ.ro. 2017. <http://evz.ro/trump-soros-romania.html>.

[24] Anonymous informant, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania, October 3, 2017. In-depth interview.

[25] Departamentul Zamolxe România 2017, available at: <http://bit.ly/2DpPPwx>; <http://bit.ly/2Dr3dAi> "EURACTIV: SUA ISI MUTA ARMELE NUCLEARE DIN TURCIA IN ROMÂNIA!" 2016. <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/>. 2016. <http://bit.ly/2Gscg7h>.

[26] "Klaus, Kovesi Și Klemm, Un „Klu Klux Klan” Al Impostorilor." 2017. Justitiarul National. 2017. <http://www.justitiarul.ro/klaus-kovesi-si-klemm-un-klu-klux-klan-al-impostorilor/>.

corruption Directorate, and Hans George Klemm, the US ambassador to Romania. Interestingly, the names of the president and chief prosecutor were not chosen arbitrarily. They are both staunch supporters of the Western alliance (President Iohannis has often criticised the aggressive Russian foreign policy), and interestingly, their names have no Romanian origin. In fact, President Iohannis comes from the ethnic German minority. This has lately been a recurring strategy to demonise Romania's pro-Western leaders. One year ago, false information was circulating on the internet that the then-Romanian prime-minister and former European Commissioner, Dacian Cioloş, is the illegitimate son of Soros.<sup>[27]</sup>

## INSTITUTIONAL SETUP AND LEGAL REGULATIONS

Media in Romania are poorly regulated while regulatory standards and norms for the online media environment are absent. There is no functional press law as such in Romania. A press law was adopted in communist Romania in 1974. It was completely ignored after the end of the communist regime, despite never fully being abrogated.<sup>[28]</sup> In the early 1990s, press freedom was guaranteed in Article 30 of the new Romanian constitution from 1991 (amended in 2003). As far as the audiovisual landscape is concerned, regulation is underpinned by an outdated law (Audiovisual Law no. 504/ July 11, 2002), which, nevertheless, sets up the general framework under which media services should be provided. For instance, according to Art. 3, para. 1, 'all audiovisual media service providers must ensure the objective information of the public by correctly presenting the facts and events and they must favour the free formation of opinions'.<sup>[29]</sup> Romania is also subject to the Audiovisual Media Services Directive 2010/13 / EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, which coordinates the provision of audiovisual services in EU countries.<sup>[30]</sup>

Yet, with the exception of the National Audiovisual Council of Romania (CNA), the official regulator for the audiovisual sector in Romania,

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[27] Lazar, Valeriu. 2016. "Dacian Ciolos, Illegitimate Son of George Soros? A Joke with High Stupidity Level, the PM Says." *The Romania Journal*. 2016. <http://bit.ly/2Fy1WNX>.

[28] Ulmanu, Alexandru-Brăduț. n.d. "Media Landscapes - Romania." European Journalism Centre. [http://ejc.net/media\\_landscapes/romania](http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/romania).

[29] The Audiovisual Law no. 504/July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, available at: <http://www.cna.ro/The-Audio-visual-Law,1655.html>.

[30] On the Coordination of Certain Provisions Laid down by Law, Regulation or Administrative Action in Member States Concerning the Provision of Audiovisual Media Services. 2010. <http://bit.ly/28PAfiX>.

other regulatory bodies do not currently exist to examine the quality and accuracy of information for print and online media. Since today most 'fake news' is circulating in the online environment, it is practically impossible to prevent it from spreading due to three main factors: 1) the difficulty to oversee the deontology and responsibility of news websites; 2) the complexity in penalising any kind of toxic interaction occurring online; 3) the process of identifying and counteracting the source(s) of these 'hybrid' risks. For instance, during the anti-graft protests in Romania in January-February 2017, CNA received over 2 000 complaints, nearly 10 times more than the number in the same period of 2016.<sup>[31]</sup>

This worrying trend is not recent and was the subject of an elaborated sociological study in 2009, when the Centre for Independent Journalism and Active Watch identified many irregularities and deviations from professional journalism standards. According to this study, many Romanian journalists do not abide by any ethics code while professional norms are neglected in newsrooms. Moreover, many journalists have complained that they are constantly exposed to political pressure.<sup>[32]</sup> In spite of repeated efforts undertaken by various professional organisations (*The Romanian Press Club, the Convention of Media Organisations, the Centre for Independent Journalism, ActiveWatch – The Media Monitoring Agency, the MediaSind trade union, and the Association of Journalists in Romania, etc.*) to encourage deontological codes,

*'there has not been any comprehensive system of accountability agreed upon by the entire profession, or at least by a significant part of it.'*<sup>[33]</sup>

With respect to the legal regulations concerning information security, Romania has had since 2011 a *National Computer Security Incident Response Team*, a specialised structure aimed at analysing, identifying and preventing/reacting to cyberthreats,<sup>[34]</sup> and starting from 2013 a Cyber Security Strategy.<sup>[35]</sup> Moreover, the *Romanian Intelligence Service* has also developed a department (*Cyberint*)<sup>[36]</sup> for overseeing Romanian cyberspace; however, the country has still not developed a strategy

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[31] Touma, Ana Maria. 2017. "Wave of Fake News 'Fuelling Divisions' in Romania." *BalkanInsight*. 2017. <https://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/fake-news-fuel-political-divisions-in-romania-04-03-2017>.

[32] "Autoreglementarea Presei În România." 2009. <http://bit.ly/2FP4dDN>

[33] Ulmanu, Alexandru-Brăduț. n.d. "Media Landscapes - Romania." European Journalism Centre. [http://ejc.net/media\\_landscapes/romania](http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/romania).

[34] National Cyber Security and Incident Response Team, <https://cert.ro/>.

[35] Cyber Security Strategy in Romania, <http://bit.ly/2pcQ7BL>

[36] Cyberint, available at: <https://www.sri.ro/cyberint>.

to combat or at least to soften the adverse effect of disinformation circulating online.

Our respondents also agreed that such challenges to information security in Romania could have been efficiently countered by more rigorous legislation in place. However, an interviewed expert believes that,

*‘Romania has still not clearly defined all the components of a potential cyber threat, which means that appropriate infrastructure still needs to be developed’.*<sup>[37]</sup>

Furthermore,

*‘Romania does not invest sufficiently in security infrastructure, and real risks are only later learned, which diminishes the efficiency of the security measures put in place. Finally, there is not enough coordination between the regulatory bodies in charge; likewise, there is no clarity about the way escalation points are coped with’.*<sup>[38]</sup>

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS AND MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

Media literacy is rather low in Romania. According to a report undertaken by the Open Society Foundation,

*‘investment in good-news and debate programmes has fallen over the past (few) years’.*<sup>[39]</sup>

particularly since the Romanian television, print, and online sectors were hard hit by the economic crisis of 2008–2009. Moreover, rural areas, where almost half of the Romanian population lives, have limited access to quality print media, while the newspaper market in rural regions is almost non-existent. Concurrently, media education in a broader cultural and critical understanding has not been defined in national policy documents. This only concerns a narrow definition of the integration of ICT education and e-learning

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[37] Anonymous informant, Capgemini Services Romania, Iași, Romania, October 8, 2017. In-depth interview.

[38] Anonymous informant, Capgemini Services Romania, Iași, Romania, October 8, 2017. In-depth interview.

[39] Proteasa, Manuela, and Iulian Comanescu. 2011. “Mapping Digital Media: Romania.” Open Society Foundation. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/mapping-digital-media-romania>.

in teaching and learning methods, in line with the European recommendations.<sup>[40]</sup>

Actually, the noteworthy impact of ‘fake news’ in Romania has been linked by one of the interviewees with the limited media literacy and critical thinking (corroborated as insufficient knowledge about fact-checking),<sup>[41]</sup> while another expert blames low journalistic standards and/or training that results in ignoring facts and giving preference to the ‘sensational’. According to his assessment,

*‘such journalists are vulnerable to disinformation attacks and become, even unintentionally, propagators of false messages, populist or pro-Kremlin’.*<sup>[42]</sup>

In addition, most of the disinformation sources contaminating Romanian mass media are rather domestic, and not externally originating, as

*‘most of the Romanian media holdings do not promote investigative journalism anymore and do not do fact-checking. In fact, the real threat stems from the lack of media literacy in Romania’.*<sup>[43]</sup>

This statement comes in line with one recent GLOBSEC report (2017), which points to Romania’s modest media literacy, since a high number of Romanians tend to trust online disinformation websites as relevant sources of information, while 57 % show a lack of confidence in information provided by mainstream media.<sup>[44]</sup>

Concurrently, another respondent believes that corruption – a deep-rooted problem in Romania – also contributes to the widespread dissemination of propaganda, as

*‘corruption opens the gates to propagandistic messages’.*<sup>[45]</sup>

In spite of the obvious vulnerability vis-à-vis Russian disinformation, the respondent has pointed out the uniqueness of the Romanian case, where domestic political elites often use similar misinformation tools to confuse the public and justify their actions:

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[40] Stanila, Corina, and Nicoleta Fotiade. n.d. “Media and Information Literacy Policies in Romania (2013).” Asociația Edumedia. [http://ppemi.ens-cachan.fr/data/media/colloque140528/rapports/ROMANIA\\_2014.pdf](http://ppemi.ens-cachan.fr/data/media/colloque140528/rapports/ROMANIA_2014.pdf).

[41] Anonymous informant, “Mihai Viteazul” National Intelligence Academy, Bucharest, August 9, 2017. In-depth interview.

[42] Anonymous informant, University of Bucharest, August 11, 2017. In-depth interview.

[43] Anonymous informant, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania, October 3, 2017. In-depth interview.

[44] Actually, roughly 30 % of Romanians consider online disinformation websites as relevant sources of information: Hajdu, Dominika, Katarína Klingová, and Daniel Milo. 2017. “GLOBSEC Trends 2017: Mixed Messages and Signs of Hope from Central and Eastern Europe.” GLOBSEC. <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2017-mixed-messages-signs-hope-central-eastern-europe-2/>.

[45] Anonymous informant, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania, September 25, 2017. In-depth interview.

*'the potential threat faced by our country has to do not solely with Russian influence on the Romanian media/online environment, but with the Russian efforts to influence domestic actors to follow a similar disinformation strategy. Unfortunately, these domestic actors with local credibility can easily serve as opinion multipliers. In other words, Sputnik is not itself a problem; the problem is in fact when the information published by Sputnik is employed internally by the social networks or other media sources to convey a message serving a clear political/ideological purpose.'*<sup>[46]</sup>

For this reason, many volunteer groups of young Romanians decided to launch different initiatives and software applications aimed at identifying 'fake news'.

One of the most successful digital debunking teams in exposing and combating disinformation including on social media, online forums etc. by anonymous users and botnets has been the so-called *Funky Citizens*. This team established the first Romanian fact-checking, myth- and hoax-busting platform ([www.factual.ro](http://www.factual.ro)).

An interesting and useful application developed by another group of Romanian programmers has been '*Not to believe*' (<https://denecrezut.faction.ro/>) aimed at filtering the news and warning the readership about the veracity of the informative content spread on dubious news websites. A similar initiative has been developed by the '*Forum Apulum*' association whose goal is raising awareness about the negative implications of propaganda and disinformation in the media space. They also published a newspaper called '*Fake News*' for investigating this phenomenon and for encouraging civic involvement to combat disinformation.<sup>[47]</sup> Likewise, the *Centre for Independent Journalism* has recently launched a project, entitled '*Teaching Media Literacy*', sponsored by the Romanian-American Foundation, which aims at enhancing media literacy of young adults and at endowing them with critical thinking to identify and defend themselves from political propaganda. More than 11 000 students and 90 teachers across the country are expected to participate and learn to improve their media literacy skills.<sup>[48]</sup>

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[46] Anonymous informant, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania, September 25, 2017. In-depth interview.

[47] Forum Apulum 2017, available at: <http://forumapulum.ro/conferinta-fakenews/>.

[48] Teaching Media Literacy 2017, available at: <http://www.rafonline.org/en/programe/teaching-media-literacy/>.

Nevertheless, these laudable initiatives are not sufficient to tackle the increasing volume of disinformation that seems to have hit Romania hard in the past few years.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When assessing the vulnerability and resilience to Russian disinformation warfare, the Romanian case stands out for many reasons.

First, in Romania an obvious and recurring disinformation and propaganda pattern can be identified. This follows the ‘roadmap’ employed by the Kremlin’s propaganda machine in other Eastern European states where a high share of the population is Russian-speaking. The model features a similar anti-Western narrative aimed at agitating audiences and creating a psychological state of paranoia in which generally Euro-Atlantic frameworks are depicted in cynical terms and contrasted with a friendly and peaceful vision of Russia. In spite of the language barrier, in Romania many narratives elicit a strikingly similar line of argumentation.

Second, compared with the Eastern Partnership states, Romania appears less vulnerable to Russian disinformation campaigns. In fact, there has been no proven formal links between the Romanian media environment and Russian-controlled media outlets. In the same vein, the multiple online sources that propagate pro-Russian messages are still in a ‘grey area’, while the reasons for their extensive online and social media campaigns has so far been unclear, or ambiguous, to say the least. Nevertheless, to date, there has not been any investigative effort to unveil any Russian involvement or other foreign interference to the size and scope of the current investigation taking place in the US on whether Russia-linked actors influenced the 2016 election results. Perhaps, a specialised department to tackle the spread of fake stories and Russian disinformation following the model of the newly founded *Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats* in the Czech Interior Ministry is necessary also in Romania.

Third, in Romania much of the disinformation is generated internally, by local sources. As pointed out above, there have been obvious cases of politicians and persons of influence who, alongside with cohorts of journalists and media broadcasters serving their interests, have frequently made use of and propagated similar misinformation strategies to the ones



employed by the Kremlin-backed propaganda. Defending their political agendas, securing their interests, tightening their grip on power, etc. has often required building-up populist messages where the West, Soros and multinational companies, etc. have been the usual villains.

Based on the data collected from our interviewees, the chapter signals the need for a common effort to counter these threats and requires increased dedicated budgets to enhance infrastructure, educate the population and/or share good practices between institutions and local organisations, and sponsor politically non-affiliated organisations to conduct fact-checking work. According to our respondents, this critical field still has not received sufficient attention while the subject of the negative impact of disinformation is almost ignored, both in the media sphere and in the specific institutions (such as schools, universities, local and regional authorities, ministries, etc.).

In addition, there is a strong need for increased partnership between various government institutions, civil society, and private entrepreneurs for a better alignment of the security information strategies under a clear chain of command available at the national level. Finally, journalistic standards should undergo a complete re-assessment, since a balanced and neutral approach<sup>[49]</sup> based on thorough research is strongly desirable. Without the dedicated support of mainstream media, scattered efforts and/or volunteer initiatives would have only limited effects.

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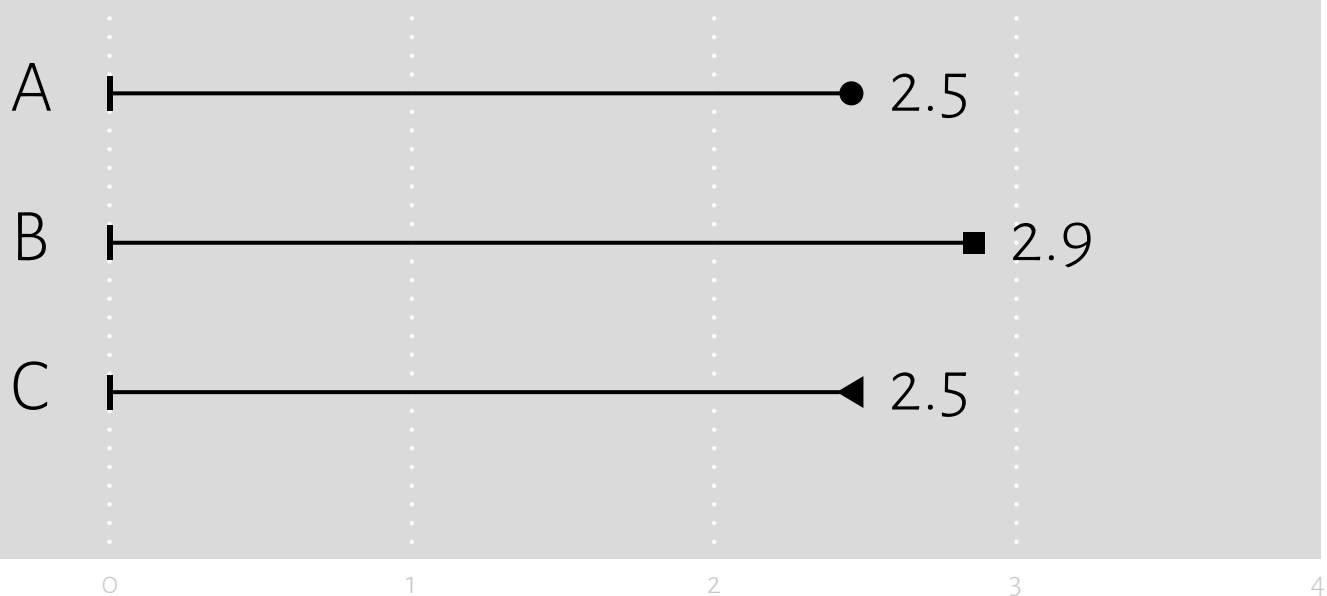
[49] According to one of our respondents, in many European countries "the pro-Russian propaganda is to a certain extent also the result of strong anti-Russian propaganda" (Anonymous informant, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania, July 27, 2017. In-depth interview).



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# SLOVAKIA



# INTRODUCTION

Slovakia is a landlocked Central European country that got its independence after the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Since then, despite being under communist rule and a member of the Eastern Bloc for more than four decades until 1989, the country has reversed its political course completely by becoming a democracy, a member of NATO and the EU in 2004, and of the Eurozone in 2009. However, even in 2017, Slovakia is still branded as a nation in transit according to Freedom House, which gives it a democracy score of 2.61,<sup>[1]</sup> and Democracy Index 2017 compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit,<sup>[2]</sup> which rates Slovakia as a flawed democracy, with a score of 7.16 (44<sup>th</sup> in the world). Quite symptomatic are also the results of a survey<sup>[3]</sup> conducted by the GLOBSEC Policy Institute in 2016, in which 52 % of respondents stated that Slovakia should serve as a bridge between the East and the West, an idea that Martin Sklenár, Director of the Security Policy Department at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, mentioned as one of the most illustrative examples of how pro-Kremlin disinformation exploits long-held beliefs in the country.<sup>[4]</sup>

Slovak society is often described as a traditional one. For example, the two largest demonstrations in Slovakia since the Velvet Revolution in 1989 were national pro-life marches organised by the Episcopal Conference of Slovakia in 2013 and 2015 and attended by approximately 80 000<sup>[5]</sup> and 85 000<sup>[6]</sup> people, respectively. According to the 2011 census, only 13.4 % of the population consider themselves to be atheists, while 62 % describe themselves as Roman Catholic.<sup>[7]</sup> Ethnically, the population of Slovakia is homogenous. The idea of Slavic unity or brotherhood has been present since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the area of present

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[1] "Nations in Transit 2017. Slovakia: Country Profile." 2018. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/slovakia>.

[2] "Democracy Index 2017." 2018. <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>.

[3] "GLOBSEC Trends. Stredná Európa Pod Paľbou Ruskej Propagandy: Skúmanie Postojov Verejnosti v Čechách, Maďarsku a Na Slovensku." 2016. GLOBSEC Policy Institute. [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec\\_trends\\_2016\\_sk.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec_trends_2016_sk.pdf).

[4] Martin Sklenár, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, January 30, 2018. In-depth Interview.

[5] Teraz.sk. 1970. "Na Národný Pochod Za Život Prišli Desatisíce Ľudí." TERAZ.Sk. January 1, 1970. <http://www.teraz.sk/regiony/kosice-pochod-za-zivot/58997-clanok.html>.

[6] "Bratislavské Centrum Zaplnili Desatisíce Ľudí. Pochod Za Život Na Fotografiách – Denník N." 2018. <https://dennikn.sk/245670/desatisice-ludi-pochoduju-centrom-bratislavy-za-zivot/>.

[7] Štatistický úrad SR. 2011. SODB 2011. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2DtwcUf>

Slovakia was under the rule of the Austrian Empire and later Austria-Hungary. Pan-Slavism as a cultural and political movement appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is associated closely with the ideological fathers of the Slovak national revival, including Ľudovít Štúr, who is generally considered to be one of the most important figures in Slovak history. Nowadays, according to an opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in 2015, 31 % of Slovaks trust Russia, which is the highest number among all Visegrad Group (V4) countries.<sup>[8]</sup>

While Slovakia's biggest trade partners are mostly EU Member States, the country is almost completely dependent on imported Russian gas (which supplies approximately 97% of Slovakia's demands) and oil (approximately 98%), which makes the country very sensitive to any worsening in mutual relations.<sup>[9]</sup> The situation is similar in the military area, as the Slovak army remains heavily dependent on Soviet military equipment.<sup>[10]</sup> Even though both energy diversification and modernisation of the Slovak army are high on the agenda of the Slovak parliament, any radical changes are unlikely to happen soon, mainly for financial and technical reasons or, in some cases, lack of political will.

To sum up, Kremlin-orchestrated disinformation campaigns can exploit a shared communist past, the conservatism of Slovak society, the common Slavic ethnic background or the country's economic dependence on Russian gas and oil to spread their narratives in Slovakia. However, it is necessary to understand that most of these contexts have only limited value for pro-Kremlin propaganda. A shared communist past brings not only nostalgia, but also negative memories of occupation (for example, the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion). Conservatism is limited by the different dominant religious beliefs (Orthodox Christianity vs Roman Catholic), and the common Slavic background is problematic because of the geographical distance or the usage of different scripts (Latin vs Cyrillic) that makes Russian hardly understandable in written form, especially for younger generations.

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[8] "PRIESKUM: Rusku Najviac Dôveruje z Krajín V4 Slovensko." 2018. <http://www2.teraz.sk/slovensko/prieskum-rusku-najviac-doveruje-z-v4-s/198140-clanok.html>.

[9] Marušiak, Juraj. 2013. "Slovakia's Eastern Policy—from the Trojan Horse of Russia to 'Eastern Multivectoralism.'" *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* XXII (1–2): 42–70.

[10] Onuferová, Marianna. 2018. "Slovenská armáda je závislá od ruských dodávok." *ekonomika.sme.sk*. <https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/7195940/slovenska-armada-je-zavisla-od-ruskych-dodavok.html>.

# VULNERABLE GROUPS

Despite being a part of the Eastern Bloc in the past, Slovakia does not have any significant Russian population that could be considered as an obvious target audience for pro-Kremlin false and manipulative content. Moreover, there is no other important ethnic group that could be exploited by Russian propaganda on the basis of ethnic grievances, as the largest ethnic minority (8.2 % of the total population) are Hungarians, of which only 11 % think that in Slovakia members of the Hungarian minority have a disadvantageous starting position in every aspect of life.<sup>[11]</sup>

According to the majority of the consulted experts, Kremlin-originated or inspired narratives are exploiting the country's economic, historic, societal, ethnolinguistic, and religious context. Vladimír Snídl, a journalist from Denník N, stated that:

*'It is very difficult to identify any specifically vulnerable group, as disinformation campaigns could be appealing to virtually anyone, regardless of their education, age or occupation.'*<sup>[12]</sup>

However, there are certain segments of the society that could be considered as more vulnerable than others.

The first includes those Slovaks who feel strong nostalgia for their communist past. Many of them feel socio-economically disadvantaged and perceive a low level of social security, especially when compared to the pre-1989 era.<sup>[13]</sup> A typical example is a representative of the lower middle class or working class, with basic education, working manually or unemployed, typically from a rural region. This group has become more and more disillusioned with the current pro-Western course of the Slovak Republic, as its members do not perceive any social or economic benefits of the post-communist era.<sup>[14]</sup> As the results of a poll by Focus in 2007, and another by Focus and the Institute for Public Affairs in 2014 suggest,

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[11] Vrabcová, Marie. n.d. "Maďarov na Slovensku ubúda. Čo ich najviac trápi?" 2018. <https://plus.sme.sk/c/20092327/madarov-na-slovensku-ubuda-co-ich-najviac-trapi.html>.

[12] Vladimír Snídl, Denník N, January 26, 2018. In-depth interview.

[13] "Dvadsaťpäť Rokov Od Nežnej Revolúcie Očami Občanov Slovenskej Republiky a Českej Republiky – IVO – I nštitút Pre Verejné Otázky." 2018. <http://www.ivo.sk/7551/sk/aktuality/dvadsatpat-rokov-od-neznej-revolucie-ocami-obcanov-slovenskej-republiky-a-ceskej-republiky>.

[14] "Press Release: Hodnotenie spoločenskej zmeny po novembri 1989." 2007. Agentúra Focus. [http://www.focus-research.sk/files/72\\_Hodnotenie%20spolocenskej%20zmeny%20po%20novembri%201989%20\\_%20okt2007.pdf](http://www.focus-research.sk/files/72_Hodnotenie%20spolocenskej%20zmeny%20po%20novembri%201989%20_%20okt2007.pdf).

most in this sector of society are retired people (age 60+), but the ratio of the negative perception of the system change in 1989 is also higher than the average in society within the 45+ age group (31.8 %).<sup>[15][16]</sup> According to a survey conducted by GLOBSEC Policy Institute, 42 % of Slovaks would define the country's geopolitical orientation as 'in between', neither West nor East oriented, 59 % want to stay in the EU, and 56 % of respondents would agree that NATO membership is good for Slovakia's security.<sup>[17]</sup>

A surprisingly vulnerable group is composed of young people aged under 25. One of the main reasons, besides systemic flaws in the educational system, is arguably the grim future prospects for students with high school diplomas, and of those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, who are unable to find decent jobs. In September 2017, youth unemployment (under 25s) was at 14.9 % in Slovakia.<sup>[18]</sup>

As the last parliamentary election showed, a higher percentage of first-time voters supported the right-wing extremist party Ľudová strana nase Slovensko (LSNS), whose leader Marian Kotleba openly promotes his pro-Russian, anti-systemic politics based on anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric.<sup>[19][20]</sup> As an example, in 2014 he sent a supportive letter to the then president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich and later, during his term as a chairman of the Banská Bystrica self-governing region, he welcomed members of the Night Wolves motorcycle club with the flag of the president of Russia raised on the government building.<sup>[21][22]</sup> At the same time, 30 % of young Slovaks are undecided about their country's geopolitical orientation, which creates space for potential propaganda exploitation.<sup>[23]</sup>

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[15] Ibid.

[16] "Dvadsaťpäť rokov od nežnej revolúcie o ami ob anov SR a ČR." 2014. Agentúra Focus, Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, Sociologický ústav AV ČR. [http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/vyskum/subor/dvadsatpat\\_rokov\\_novembra\\_tlacova\\_sprava.pdf](http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/vyskum/subor/dvadsatpat_rokov_novembra_tlacova_sprava.pdf).

[17] "Mixed Messages and Signs of Hope from Central & Eastern Europe." 2017. GLOBSEC Policy Institute. [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec\\_trends\\_2017.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec_trends_2017.pdf).

[18] "Press Release: Euro Area Unemployment at 8.9%." 2017. Eurostat. <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8357265/3-31102017-CP-EN.pdf/cc23432e-f918-4f93-9fe7-0c03badb9792>.

[19] Dugovič, Matej. 2016. "U prvovoličov bodoval kotleba, chyba môže byť v školstve – Denník N." <https://dennikn.sk/395832/prvovolicov-bodoval-kotleba-chyba-moze-byt-skolstve/>.

[20] Bútorová, Zora. 2014. "November 1989 v zrkadle verejnej mienky: zisky, straty, vyhliadky." blog.sme.sk. Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://institupre.blog.sme.sk/c/370654/november-1989-v-zrkadle-verejnej-mienky-zisky-straty-vyhliadky.html>.

[21] Vražda, Daniel. 2014. "Kotleba píše ukrajinskému prezidentovi Janukovyčovi: neustupujte – domov. Sme.Sk." Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/7086506/kotleba-pise-ukrajinskemu-prezidentovi-janukovyčovi-neustupujte.html>.

[22] "Do bystrice prišli noční vlci, Kotleba vyvesil na župe ruskú vlajku." 2016. <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/657800-do-bystrice-prisli-nozni-vlci-kotleba-vyvesil-na-zupe-rusku-vlajku>.

[23] Milo, Daniel, and Katarína Klingová. 2018. "GLOBSEC Youth Trends: How Young Central Europeans View the World." GLOBSEC Policy Institute. <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/GLOBSEC-Youth-Trends-How-Young-Central-Europeans-View-the-World.pdf>.

Most importantly, there are political parties in Slovakia promoting pro-Russian views. One of the most significant is LSNS (8.04 % in the 2016 parliamentary election) with its pro-Russian political pan-Slavism and strong anti-EU and anti-NATO stance.<sup>[24]</sup> LSNS is also connected to the rest of the far-right spectrum in Slovakia, which is very pro-Russian in general. However, pro-Russian tendencies can be observed even in traditional parties, especially in nationalist, conservative Slovenska narodna strana (SNS) (8.64 %). Its leader, Andrej Danko, recently stressed in his speech in the Russian State Duma the importance of the common Slavic culture, and expressed a will to cooperate with Russia in many areas, including education.<sup>[25]</sup>

Furthermore, even Prime Minister Robert Fico, the leader of the largest ruling party SMER (socialna demokracia, SMER–SD, 28.28 %), reflected a traditionally positive image of Russia among the Slovak population, and of Slovak dependence on Russian gas in his ‘friendly-pragmatic’ condemnation of the sanctions against Russia.<sup>[26]</sup> Mirek Tóda, a journalist of Denník N, repeatedly stressed the negative impact of this kind of populism on Slovak politics and the public sphere, and even labeled it as one of the key information security challenges for Slovakia. Moreover, he added that:

*‘The majority of the highest representatives of the state, probably only with the exception of the president, are not willing to criticise Russia openly in any situation for various reasons.’<sup>[27]</sup>*

To sum up, even though the main direct target group of Kremlin-inspired propaganda is very limited, as it includes mainly the far-right nationalist anti-systemic spectrum that already has strong pro-Russian views and serves mainly as a proxy for spreading propaganda, a substantial number of Slovak citizens are sympathetic towards Russia.

Other vulnerable subcategories are socio-economically weaker people of 45+ years of age, who feel a sense of nostalgia for the previous regime, and young disillusioned people with grim socio-economic prospects. Those are the people who are dissatisfied with the current situation

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[24] “Naše Názory. Kotleba—Ludová Strana Naše Slovensko.” 2018. <http://www.naseslovensko.net/kategoria/nase-nazory/>.

[25] “Danko ako prvý slovak vystúpil na pôde ruskej štátnej dumy. Televízia TA3.” 2018. <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1116435/danko-ako-prvy-slovak-vystupil-na-pode-ruskej-statnej-dumy.html>.

[26] Krekó, Péter, Lóránt Győri, Daniel Milo, Juraj Marušiak, János Széky, and Anita Lencsés. 2015. “Marching Towards Eurasia. The Kremlin Connections of the Slovak Far-Right.” Political Capital Kft., Social Development Institute Kft. [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC\\_Study\\_Russian\\_Influence\\_Slovakia\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_Study_Russian_Influence_Slovakia_ENG.pdf).

[27] Mirek Tóda, Denník N, February 5, 2018. In-depth interview.



in general, and are therefore prone to believe Russian propaganda as an alternative based on economic, historical, societal, ethnolinguistic or religious similarities. In addition, as some of the interviewed experts emphasised, it is necessary to include active and retired armed forces personnel in the list of groups vulnerable to the effects of Kremlin-led propaganda, as the activities of openly pro-Russian groups such as the Association of the Slovak soldiers (ASV) might pose a significant security risk.

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The World Press Freedom Index placed Slovakia 17<sup>th</sup> in the world rankings in 2017, out of 180 countries. However, compared to 2016, Slovakia has fallen in the ranking by five places, mostly because of the growing number of defamation actions against journalists being brought by businessmen, politicians and judicial officials. Any journalist convicted of such an offence faces up to eight years in prison.<sup>[28]</sup>

According to the Media Pluralism Monitor, Slovakia has good results (22 %, low risk) in the area of basic protection (regulatory framework, status of journalists, reach of traditional media, etc.); medium results (35 %, medium risk) in the area of market plurality (transparency of media ownership, prevention of concentration of media ownership, competition enforcement, and state protection of media pluralism, etc.) and social inclusiveness (34 %, medium risk). The area that scores the highest risk (53 %, medium risk) is political independence (political control over media, regulatory safeguards against political bias), as there are issues with political control over local/regional/municipal media, editorial autonomy, and funding.<sup>[29]</sup>

The recent murder of Jan Kuciak, member of an investigative team at Aktuality.sk, who was found shot dead with his fiancée on February 25, was the first time a journalist had been killed since Slovakia gained independence. This crime shocked Slovak society and could lead to deep political consequences. Kuciak's last published articles uncovered the activities of alleged Ndrangeta mafia members in fraud and corruption

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[28] "2017 World Freedom Index." 2017. Reporters Without Borders. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

[29] Sampor, Željko. 2016. "Media Pluralism Monitor 2016: Slovakia." Media Pluralism Monitor. European University Institute. <http://cmpfeui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/mpm-2016-results/slovakia/>.

allegations regarding EU funds, and involved the relationship with high-ranking individuals in the Slovak government.<sup>[30]</sup>

There are four big media groups who control most of the TV market in Slovakia. The biggest one is Bermudian CME (25.7 % share of the market as of the 51<sup>st</sup> week, December 2017) with the most important channel TV Markíza. J&T Media Enterprises Group controls 23.6 % of market and owns channel TV JOJ. Other significant players include public broadcaster RTVS (13.6 %) with channels Jednotka and Dvojka, and the business giant Grafobal Group (1.3 %) with the news channel of TA3.<sup>[31]</sup> Despite some rumours of a lack of political impartiality, for example in the case of TA3,<sup>[32][33]</sup> there have been no signs of pro-Kremlin narratives from any of the significant TV broadcasters on any of the mentioned channels broadcast in the Slovak language.

The biggest radio broadcasting network is public RTVS (25.9 %). The single most popular radio station is commercial Radio Express (19.3 %).<sup>[34]</sup> Probably the most important 'alternative' radio station is the Internet radio station called Slobodny Vysielač, which serves as a hub for the disinformation spreading community and individuals. Documents regarding NATO information operations, colour revolutions, and Oliver Stone's documentary about Vladimir Putin can be found under the sub-page called Waronline.<sup>[35]</sup> As there are no precise data available about Slobodny Vysielač's popularity, the only indicator for measuring its audience are numbers published by the Radia.sk website, focusing on Slovak radio stations and their Internet streaming applications. According to data from November 2017, Slobodny Vysielač had a 2.7 % share of the app users market with 5 673.68 hours.<sup>[36]</sup>

Regarding mainstream print media, no title has a pro-Russian bias. There are however some marginal weekly and monthly magazines, such as Literarny tyždenník and Nove slovo, which support pro-Russia views. The

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[30] Rezaian, Jason. 2018. "These Are the Corruption Allegations That May Have Gotten a Slovak Journalist Killed." Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/28/these-are-the-corruption-allegations-that-may-have-gotten-a-slovak-journalist-killed/>.

[31] Mediálne.Sk. 2017. "Trhový podiel TV." <https://medialne.etrend.sk/televizia-grafy-a-tabulky.html>.

[32] Daniš, Dag. 2015. "Komentár Daga Daniša: Ako majiteľ TA3 zarába milióny na gastrolístkoch." aktualita.sk. <https://www.aktualita.sk/clanok/310447/komentar-daga-danisa-ako-majitel-ta3-zaraba-miliony-na-gastrolistkoch/>.

[33] Kernová, Miroslava. 2013. "TA3 má na politikov dvojaký meter." blog.sme.sk. <https://omediach.blog.sme.sk/c/320528/TA3-ma-na-politikov-dvojaky-meter.html>.

[34] Mediálne.Sk. 2017. "Rádiá: počúvanosť." <https://medialne.etrend.sk/radia-grafy-a-tabulky.html>

[35] Wars Online. (2018). Wars Online – Slobodný vysielač. <http://warsonline.slobodnyvysielač.sk/>

[36] "Počúvanosť Rádií Cez Aplikácie Radia.Sk." 2017. Radia.sk. [https://www.radia.sk/subory/prieskumy\\_radia\\_sk/2017/11/poradie.pdf](https://www.radia.sk/subory/prieskumy_radia_sk/2017/11/poradie.pdf).

most important one is Zem a vek, a monthly magazine spreading hoaxes, pro-Russian propaganda, and conspiracy theories. There are no reliable data available, but according to Tibor Eliot Rostas, editor-in-chief of Zem a Vek, there 25 000 copies<sup>[37]</sup> were published monthly in 2015, and there were almost 7 000 subscribers.<sup>[38]</sup> In comparison, the most circulated (64 864 copies sold) monthly magazine Novy Cas Krízovky published 91 510 copies in November 2017.<sup>[39]</sup> Andrej Matisak, a renowned Slovak journalist, sees the Slovak media market as rather fragmented and extremely small:

*'We are struggling to find a sustainable business model. Lack of resources, both financial and human, is leading to a situation when a single journalist is expected to master Twitter, Facebook, and of course deliver source-rich, fact-based pieces. Everything is done under huge time stress.'*<sup>[40]</sup>

Slovak print media reacted to the digital era by enhancing business models with paid for online content. Jana Polacikova, a news media researcher and scholar, argues that this model is understandable, but it also leads to a paradoxical situation, in which young people, who consume information predominantly online, naturally prefer free sources, sometimes of questionable quality, rather than the paid content of traditional media.<sup>[41]</sup> According to the Global Trends study by GLOBSEC Policy Institute, 12 % of respondents consider online disinformation sites as a legitimate source of information, while 40 % of respondents do not trust mainstream media.<sup>[42]</sup>

Pro-Kremlin narratives (NATO wants to destroy Russia, Russia is the only protector of conservative values and traditions while the West is decadent, a planned U.S. military base in Slovakia, etc.) are mostly visible on the Internet. In 2015, there were at least 42 web pages of Slovak and Czech (as a result of language similarities, the online space of Slovakia and the Czech Republic is shared to a large extent) origin spreading Russian propaganda.<sup>[43]</sup> One of the most popular websites spreading pro-Kremlin

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[37] Havranovo Talk Show, Hostia: Tibor Eliot Rostas a Juraj Smatana. 2015. Nu Spirit Club. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONr6uHAD-hM>.

[38] "Hlavná stránka." 2018. Zem a vek. <http://zemavek.sk/>.

[39] Mediálne.Sk. 2017. "Tla: mesaníky: predajnos" <https://medialne.etrend.sk/mesacniky-grafy-a-tabulky.html>

[40] Andrej Matišák, Pravda. January 26, 2018. In-depth interview.

[41] Jana Poláčiková, College of Economics and Management in Public Administration. January 12, 2018. In-depth interview.

[42] Milo, Daniel, Katarína Klingová, and Dominika Hajdu. 2017. "GLOBSEC Trends 2017: Mixed Messages and Signs of Hope from Central and Eastern Europe." GLOBSEC Policy Institute. <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2017-mixed-messages-signs-hope-central-eastern-europe-2/>.

[43] Šnidl, Vladimír. 2015. "Proruskú propagandu o zhyralom Západe u nás šíri 42 webov." Denník N. <https://dennikn.sk/57740/prorusku-propagandu-o-zhyralom-zapade-u-nas-siri-42-webov/>.

narratives ('Putin forces out dollar with golden ruble', 'Brits are ready to emigrate to Russia en masse', 'OSCE observers confirmed illegal organ transplant stations in Ukraine')<sup>[44]</sup> is a news website called Hlavne Spravy. According to the Similarweb, Hlavne Spravy has a country rank of 80 with 4.58 million visits in December 2017.<sup>[45]</sup> In comparison, the most popular news website Sme.sk had more than 25 million visits in the same month, while the fifth most visited, hnonline.sk, had more than 17 million.

The limited long-term impact of 'alternative media' is also confirmed by Snídl, which stresses their ability to reach a wider audience through specific topics such as migration.<sup>[46]</sup> According to activist Juraj Smatana, who was first to come up with a list of web pages spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda, it is a decentralised network with three main branches: anonymous websites publishing lies and disinformation, half-anonymous websites without any names, but their owners willing to communicate via email or telephone, and web pages with published real names of the authors. The components of this network are very closely interconnected, with social media being the main tool of connection.<sup>[47]</sup>

## LEGAL REGULATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

The media regulatory framework in Slovakia is based on Article 26 of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, which guarantees the freedom of expression and the right to information. It also provides everyone with rights to express their opinion and declares that no approval process shall be required for press publishing while '[e]ntrepreneurial activity in the field of radio and television broadcasting may be subject to permission from the state'. The rest of the article prohibits censorship, specifies that 'freedom of expression and the right to seek and disseminate information may be restricted by law only if it is regarding measures necessary in a democratic society to protect the rights and freedoms of others, national security, public order, protection of health, and morals', and declares that 'public authority bodies shall be obliged

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[44] "Hlavnespravy.sk: Postupné primiešavanie jedu." Denník N. 2016. <https://dennikn.sk/blog/562295/hlavnespravy-sk-postupne-primiesavanie-jedu/>.

[45] SimilarWeb. 2017. Hlavnespravy.sk. <https://www.similarweb.com/website/hlavnespravy.sk>

[46] Vladimír Šnidl, Denník N, January 26, 2018. In-depth interview.

[47] Majchrák, Jozef, and Eva Čobejová. 2015. "Kto je tu proruský." týždeň. <https://www.tyzden.sk/casopis/17220/kto-je-tu-prorusky/>.

to provide information about their activities in an appropriate manner in the official language'.<sup>[48]</sup>

The most important act for TV and radio providers is the Act on Broadcasting and Re-transmission published in 2015. It regulates 'the status and competence of the Council for Broadcasting and Re-transmission', of which members are nominated by the National Council of the Slovak Republic, and 'the rights and duties of a broadcaster, a re-transmission operator, the provider of an on-demand audio-visual media service and legal entities or natural persons'.<sup>[49]</sup>

Besides the nationwide active media, which received their licences by the decision of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, all regional TV and radio broadcasters obtain their licences and registration from the Council for Broadcasting and Re-transmission, which also has the right to fine them or revoke their licence or registration for re-transmission if they break the rules of the Act on Broadcasting and Re-transmission. Furthermore, ownership of more than one type of nationwide media is prohibited. In 2017, Tibor E. Rostas, editor-in-chief of *Zem a Vek*, was charged with the criminal offence of defamation of a nation, race, and belief because of his article about Jews called 'Klin zidov medzi Slovanmi' ('The Legion of Jews among the Slavs').<sup>[50]</sup>

Unlike TV and radio, the print media environment is not regulated. The only obligation for publishers is to register at the Ministry of Culture and to report all changes. The self-regulation of printed media is based on the Association for the Protection of Journalistic Ethics (AONE) and its executive body the Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic (TR SR), which follows the Code of Journalistic Ethics. AONE was founded in 2001 by representatives of the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists and Slovak Press Publishers' Association. Later, it was also joined by the biggest association in the Slovak digital market, IAB Slovakia (the Association of the Internet Media).<sup>[51]</sup> However, as membership of all these organisations is voluntary, not every journalist or media outlet is a member. Moreover, as Julius Lorincz, a former chairman of the Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic stated:

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[48] Constitution of the Slovak Republic. 1992. <https://www.prezident.sk/upload-files/46422.pdf>

[49] Act on Broadcasting and Retransmission. 2000. [http://www.rvr.sk/cms/data/modules/download/1462523380\\_act\\_on\\_broadcasting\\_and\\_retransmission.pdf](http://www.rvr.sk/cms/data/modules/download/1462523380_act_on_broadcasting_and_retransmission.pdf)

[50] Tódová, Monika, and Miro Kern. 2018. "Konšpirátora Rostása obvinili za hanobenie židov, spravili u neho domovú prehliadku." *Denník N*. <https://dennikn.sk/1040747/konspiratora-rostasa-obvinili-za-hanobenie-zidov-robia-mu-domovu-prehliadku/>.

[51] The Association for the Protection of Journalistic Ethics. <http://www.aonesr.sk/english/>

*'The powers of TR SR are limited in practice with admonition being their only tool of punishment'.*

He added:

*'Better transparency of the funding and ownership of the media has to be implemented, through an obligatory registration at the relevant state agency.'*<sup>[52]</sup>

With regard to the alternative media scene, it became more organised in 2016 when representatives of Zem a Vek, Slobodny Vysielac, Hlavne Spravy and Medzi a Dav Dva established their own organisation, the Association of the Independent Media (ANM).<sup>[53]</sup> Besides media regulation, Slovakia does not yet have a specific legal framework focused on information security.

Information about strategic propaganda practices and the threat of disinformation campaigns can be found in a 2016 white paper about defence regarding the Slovak Republic. The document evaluated previous activities of The Ministry of Defence in strategic communication:

*'Communication concerning national defence lacked strategy, making it underdeveloped, ineffectual and largely reactive. All this in an era when the information channels in the Slovak Republic are being filled by domestic extremist groups and foreign players spreading their message and propaganda aimed against the security interests of the Slovak Republic.'*<sup>[54]</sup>

The updated official documents, Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic (2017) and the Defence Strategy of the Slovak Republic (2017) consider this area specifically, and suggest broad counter-measures. The Security Strategy describes disinformation campaigns as a subtype of hybrid threats. The document suggests developing special strategies to develop resilience against hybrid threats, and building capacity in strategic communications.<sup>[55]</sup> The Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA) created the Strategic Communication Unit in July 2017. The head of this unit, Miroslav Wlachovsky, described the current state of institutional preparedness to counter propaganda influence:

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[52] Július Lőrincz, Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, December 20, 2017. In-depth interview.

[53] Asociácia nezávislých médií. <https://aneme.sk/>

[54] "White Paper on Defence of the Slovak Republic." 2016. Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic. [http://www.mosr.sk/data/WPDSR2016\\_LQ.pdf](http://www.mosr.sk/data/WPDSR2016_LQ.pdf).

[55] Návrh Bezpečnostná Stratégia Slovenskej Republiky. 2017. LP/2017/627. <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/SK/LP/2017/627>

*'We are moving forward. We have adopted a Concept of Strategic Communication of MFEA, and cooperate closely with partners in the international arena. Several ministries are developing their own strategic communication activities, but so far we lack broader concept and strategy. Now we need to move forward and synchronise on a governmental level. The only truly effective approach would be a whole government, whole society approach to disinformation and hostile narratives.'*<sup>[56]</sup>

The planned counter-measures include strengthening the confidence of the population through strategic communication, active dialogue, support of the development of civil society, focus on the younger generation, etc.

*'Positive and assertive narratives communicated from the top down through the political elite should be at the very heart of our communication. Messages and statements coming from the Office of the President of the Slovak Republic are a good example how to do that.'*

Wlachovsky concludes:<sup>[57]</sup>

*'Positive and assertive narratives communicated from the top-down through the political elite should be at the very heart of our communication. Messages and statements coming from the Office of the President of the Slovak Republic are a good example how to do that.'*

However, as Martin Sklenar added:

*'International cooperation on a European level is the only meaningful way for Slovakia to put pressure on huge online platforms such as Facebook and Google to implement additional restrictions and regulations if needed.'*<sup>[58]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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### **Cooperation between Sputnik and The News Agency of the Slovak Republic**

The Sputnik news agency announced the signing of a cooperation agreement with TASR, which is the official public news agency of Slovakia, on April 29, 2017. TASR confirmed the cooperation agreement, which resulted in a strong

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[56] Miroslav Wlachovský, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, January 29, 2018. In-depth interview

[57] Ibid.

[58] Martin Sklenár, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, January 30, 2018. In-depth Interview.

negative reaction from journalists, civil society, and politicians. The minister of culture officially requested an explanation from the director of TASR, and publically criticised the agreement. Shortly after the incident, TASR announced the cancellation of the agreement. While the whole incident ended with public outrage and suspension of the agreement, it is quite disturbing that the Slovak public found out about agreement one month after its approval, and from Sputnik rather than from TASR, established and is funded by the state.

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## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

Fact-checking and debunking initiatives are deeply rooted within Slovak civil society. Some projects were initiated by individual activists, while others were created under research think tanks or NGOs. The first Slovak fact-checking project, *Demagog.sk*, was founded in March 2010, inspired by PolitiFact.com and FactCheck.org, political fact-checking projects monitoring public speeches and political campaigns in the U.S. environment. Since its foundation, the Demagog.sk team has analysed about 700 political debates and more than 13 000 statements.

Project director Lenka Galetova says:<sup>[59]</sup>

*‘Currently, a team of five members of senior staff and ten interns, mostly university students, are involved in the project.’*

The project was initially strictly focused on fact-checking of political debates on TV. Later, Demagog.sk expanded its activities to educational lectures for secondary school students, fact-checking of electoral campaigns together with one of the biggest Slovak daily news outlets SME, and established a special section focused on the European Union and Visegrad policies. There are no other fact-checking projects or initiatives, and no media networks have developed their own capacities for traditional fact-checking. Demagog.sk was able to fill a gap successfully, and has become a synonym for fact-checking in Slovakia.

With regard to fact-checking or debunking propaganda stories, hoaxes, and fake news coming from various sources, the first reaction in Slovakia

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[59] Lenka Galetová, Demagog.sk, December 10, 2017. In-depth interview.



came on an individual level, from anti-corruption and civil society activists. Secondary school teacher Juraj Smatana published the first version of his list of websites spreading disinformation in 2015, and he also created a popular Facebook page focused on debunking hoaxes and fake news (Dezinformacie Hoaxy Propaganda).<sup>[60]</sup> Activist Jan Bencik systematically reveals and publishes stories on his blog about Slovak far-right extremists and their ties to separatists fighting in Donbas.<sup>[61]</sup> As Tomas Cizik, director of the Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, commented:

*‘Civil society and NGOs are most active in countering disinformation campaigns in Slovakia. They are organising public debates, seminars for students and teachers, and leading debunking sites, etc.’<sup>[62]</sup>*

## IN FOCUS

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### **YouTubers against Hoaxes and Hate Speech**

Two popular Slovak YouTubers Selassie and Exploited attacked each other in a series of videos with fabricated claims and fake news on Instagram and YouTube. Their fan-base immediately polarised into two camps exchanging thousands of negative comments, dislikes and messages in a small virtual war. The last video made together by both YouTubers revealed it was all part of a campaign by PR agency Seesame and the GLOBSEC Policy Institute to raise awareness of false information, emotionally driven hate speech, and hoaxes online. The campaign has produced a significant reaction among young people and media.

The website *Antipropaganda.sk* was created in 2015 by a group of individuals from security and foreign policy think tanks, as a part of a broader programme by the Slovak Security Policy Institute. The page publishes regular analysis reacting to hoaxes, stereotypical stories about the European Union, NATO and other topics promoted by Kremlin-inspired disinformation campaigns. There are several other notable projects countering disinformation. The the GLOBSEC Institute website *Counterdisinfo.org* is a virtual one-stop shop, a toolkit for civil society

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[60] “Dezinformácie Hoaxy Propaganda. Facebook Group” 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/Dezinform%6C3%A1cie-Hoaxy-Propaganda-1144754945569773/>.

[61] Ján Benčík: Blog N. 2018. <https://dennikn.sk/autor/jan-bencik/>

[62] Tomáš Čížik, Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, January 28, 2018. In-depth interview.

organisations and active citizens concerned about their information environment.<sup>[63]</sup> The GLOBSEC Institute also developed an online course called Media and Disinformation.<sup>[64]</sup> Blbec.online, a website developed by unknown vigilantes, aggregates and processes open sources of online data from Facebook groups, showing most viral fake news and their sources from the Czech and Slovak online space.<sup>[65]</sup> Project *Konspiratori.sk* is creating a database for individuals and companies who are trying to avoid having their paid online advertisements on websites spreading hoaxes and fake news.<sup>[66]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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### **Konspiratori.sk**

NetSuccess, an online marketing agency, is behind the project Konspiratori.sk. The company was looking for a solution for its customers, who didn't want to have their brands and products associated with controversial, misleading hoaxes and websites spreading disinformation by supporting them financially through paid adverts. Therefore, NetSuccess established a database of websites with controversial content. This database was created and is regularly updated by an expert commission consisting of various professionals from academia, media, the business world and other areas. The commission uses clear and simple criteria for its evaluation. The database, commission and criteria are public and can be found at the website Konspiratori.sk.

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## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

Media literacy and critical thinking are not new topics in Slovakia's public debates or public policies. In the area of formal education, the first experimental programmes can be traced back to the years 2005 to 2007, when the State Pedagogical Institute prepared educational texts, methodological guidelines and workshops for teachers with the

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[63] GLOBSEC Policy Institute. 2018. Countering Disinformation Online Toolkit. <https://counterdisinfo.org/>

[64] GLOBSEC. (2018) Media and Disinformation. Retrieved from <https://globsec.learnworlds.com/course?courseid=cto>

[65] Blbec.Online. blbec.online

[66] Konspiratori. <https://www.konspiratori.sk/>

engagement of journalists, mass media theorists, and other experts.<sup>[67]</sup> It was the first programme of its kind to be implemented in Slovakia. In 2011, the concept of media literacy in the Slovak Republic within the context of lifelong education was adopted by the Slovak government as a key document defining goals, strategy, and assumptions in creating an effective media education system.<sup>[68]</sup>

Media literacy and critical thinking are most often in the curriculum or broader agenda of organisations dedicated to furthering teacher training, reforming Slovakia's educational system and empowering civil society. One example is the *Comenius Institute*, with its workshops on critical thinking and argumentation of what a teacher should know about disinformation. Another is the *Institute for Active Citizenship*, which runs a broad programme of civic education. Another noteworthy initiative is the *InfoKompas* project, created by the Strategic Policy Institute and Demagog.sk.<sup>[69]</sup> The aim of their activities is to provide mentoring for teachers to improve their thinking and media literacy, seminars for students, and an evaluation of the current state of education in media literacy of pedagogics students and secondary school teachers. The *Slovak Debate Association* is creating projects from elementary school to university level, including a special programme for teachers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Two main vulnerable groups within Slovak society can be identified. The first are young people who consume digital information, predominantly from the disinformation-polluted online environment, and who are struggling with challenging economic prospects, and are easily exploited by anti-establishment rhetoric, calling for leaving the EU and NATO. The second group includes people with a strong sense of nostalgia and perceptions that the promises of economic success and standards of living improvements associated with EU membership have not been delivered.

Slovakia's media deal with challenges similar to those faced in other countries around the world. Fragmentation, financial pressures,

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[67] "Mediálna Výchova – ŠPÚ. Ministerstvo Školstva, Vedy, Výskumu a Športu Slovenskej Republiky." 2005. 2005. <http://www.statpedu.sk/files/articles/dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/medialna-vychova-isced-3.pdf>.

[68] "Ministerstvo Kultúry SR – Konceptia Mediálnej Výchovy v SR." 2012. <http://mksrtest.cmsromboid.sk/posobnost-ministerstva/media-audiovizia-a-autorske-pravo-/media-a-audiovizia/koncepcia-medialnej-vychovy-v-sr-1d3.html>.

[69] STRATPOL. 2018. InfoKompas: Navigácia bludiskom dezinformácií. <http://infokompas.stratpol.sk/>

and ownership structures are the defining factors of the internal media landscape dynamics. Alternative media spreading Kremlin-inspired viewpoints are not overwhelmingly popular. While traditional media suffer from a lack of trust, online platforms spreading disinformation and hoaxes do not seem to be a straightforward alternative for the general public.

Slovakia's institutional preparedness is in the first stages of development and capacity building. Relevant official documents do reflect the new threats related to this topic, and a basic framework for strategic communication is being developed. With regard to specific legislation, as some of the interviewed experts have suggested, even the existing media regulatory framework is not in need of improvement, mainly because of the risk of violating freedom of speech and other related issues. If a decision to move toward more restricted and regulated online media environment is made, Slovakia should join the ongoing discussions and look for possible solutions on a European Union level.

The civil sector has served Slovakia well as an early warning system, and still creates a huge part of the country's response to propaganda-induced threats. Debunking and fact-checking initiatives are currently getting follow-up activities focused on developing the media literacy and critical thinking skills of the young generation. The spectrum of third-sector activities is rather broad, resulting in the projects being arguably underfunded, and its long-term sustainability is in question.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. To acknowledge publically the presence of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation campaigns in order to be able to adopt effective counter-measures involving all the relevant subjects including state agencies, media, and NGOs.**
  - The state should develop a robust strategic communication strategy and prepare an adequate institutional framework for its realisation. An assertive, self-confident, both internally and externally-oriented positive narrative of the Slovak Republic should lie at the very heart of such strategy.
- 2. To increase the openness of the state institutions towards the public with open and clear communication.**
  - It is necessary that all the mentioned subjects express clearly that Slovakia is 'Western', and explain the benefits of membership of the Euro-Atlantic structures that are in the interests of the nation.
  - Moreover, to overcome the growing distrust of the general public towards state representatives and institutions, it is necessary to be able to communicate clearly not only through official channels but also through mainstream media.
  - Departments for strategic communication, such as the one which already exists at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should be established at other ministries. These can be led and coordinated by a specialised body on a government level, or by the Security Council of the Slovak Republic, with strategic communication recognised as a vital part of its agenda.
- 3. To improve grant schemes for civil society support.**
  - Relevant ministries should, within their strategic communication departments, develop synchronised grant schemes for civil society support. Aligned grant schemes would allow the state to plan synergic steps in its strategic communication. At the same time, this would be helpful for NGOs and activists in preparing their activities and projects on a broader scale.

#### **4. To improve cooperation between the relevant subjects.**

- NGOs and civil society activists should pay more attention to cooperation. Several projects with almost identical goals, methods, and audiences can be identified in many cases. Close coordination between different organisations should begin at the preparation and planning phases and conclude with the projects' realisation. If NGOs work together, networking and cooperation would help to broaden the projects' reach and make them more effective.
- The state should cooperate actively with mainstream media and relevant NGOs in order to create a platform (i.e. regularly organised round tables) to exchange experiences and knowledge, and to provide some guidance to the mentioned subjects.

#### **5. To raise awareness of disinformation, hoaxes and propaganda campaigns among the general public, and increase the media literacy of the population in general, in particular students at secondary schools and relevant state representatives.**

- To organise workshops and seminars for state representatives and active or retired members of the armed forces, with the involvement of media and NGO experts, in order to increase their media literacy and strengthen their resilience to propaganda or disinformation.
- To improve current media literacy initiatives in the state curriculum, in order to educate not only the students but also their teachers. To do that, the The Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic, as the central body of the state administration, has to cooperate actively with relevant experts from media and NGOs, in order to create an effective and meaningful curriculum for media education as a subject at school level. To create a sustainable model, it is necessary to educate pedagogues in the first place.
- To organise events, workshops, and campaigns for the general public, involving representatives of the media and NGOs.

#### **6. To improve legislation in regard to the ownership and funding of the media.**

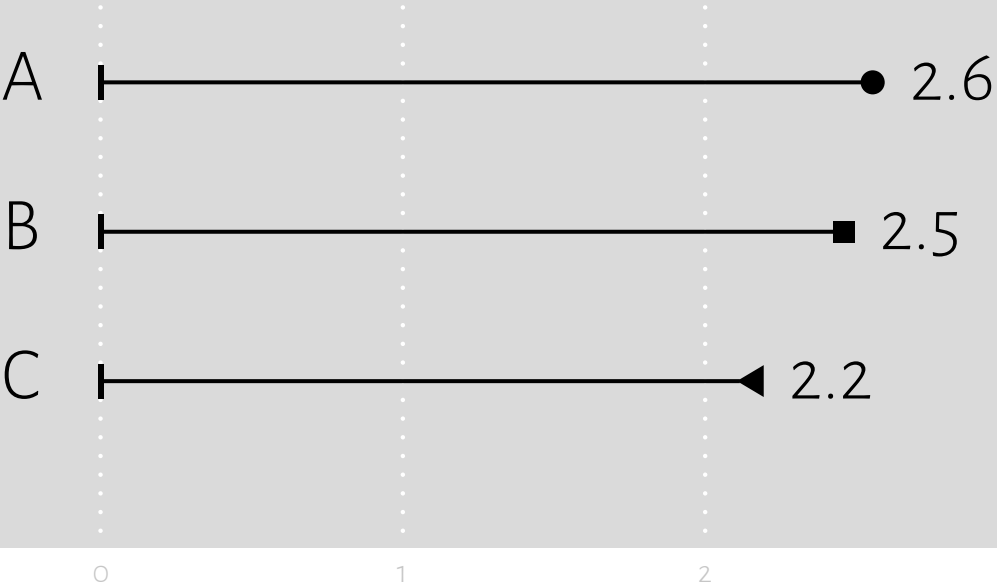
- To cooperate actively on the European level in order to persuade international online platforms to adopt policies against disinformation, hoaxes, and propaganda.

SERGIY  
GERASYMCHUK,

HENNADIY  
MAKSAK

*Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"*

# UKRAINE



# INTRODUCTION

Historically, Ukraine and Russia have been close neighbouring states. Moreover, for the largest part of their histories, Ukraine has been dominated by Russia and its predecessors. Ukrainian attempts to withdraw from the sphere of Russian influence have been rejected by Russia. Furthermore, during the period of its greatest domination, Russia attempted to control Ukraine by exterminating its elites and political opponents. Russia further ensured loyalty through a mixture of intimidation, the Russification of Ukrainian lands, deliberately engineered close economic ties rooted in their Soviet legacy and shared religious values. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is subordinated to the Moscow patriarchy in order to preserve Russian domination on the Ukrainian terrain.

Starting in 1654, Russian/Muscovite tsars began to extend their control steadily over Ukrainian territory, and from this point on Ukraine faced the challenges of Russification and the attempts of assimilation. Russia was successful in imposing an imperial narrative on Ukraine by using existing instruments of control including linguistic proximity and common religion.

The Russian language was promoted as superior to the Ukrainian language, which was associated with lower social status.<sup>[1]</sup> Since the two languages are closely related and share many common traits (vocabulary and grammatical structures), mutual comprehensibility is relatively high. Many Ukrainians are native speakers in both Russian and Ukrainian, and have a lot of exposure to both languages, so bilingualism is prevalent in Ukraine.<sup>[2]</sup>

During the 1920s, many of Ukraine's spiritual leaders, artists and philosophers, who produced some of the nation's greatest works, were either shot or sent to labour camps (gulags) where they would die of hypothermia and/or exhaustion.<sup>[3]</sup> This loss of the Ukrainian elite was later called the "Shattered Renaissance» (a term proposed

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[1] Solonenko, Iryna, and Anastasiia Grynko. 2017. "Freedom of Expression in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine. External Aggression, Internal Challenges." PEN-International. <http://pen-international.org/app/uploads/archive/2017/09/PEN-International-Ukraine-Report.pdf>.

[2] Pereltsvaig, Asya. 2015. "Ukraine's Ethnolinguistic Landscape—and Changing Attitudes towards Russia and the Russian Language." Languages Of The World (blog). April 22, 2015. <http://www.languagesoftheworld.info/russia-ukraine-and-the-caucasus/ukraines-ethnolinguistic-landscape-changing-attitudes-towards-russia-russian-language.html>.

[3] Komarnyckyj, Stephen. 2016. "Ukraine's Executed Renaissance and a Kickstarter for One of Its Modern Successors." Euromaidan Press (blog). March 3, 2016. <http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/03/04/ukraines-executed-renaissance-and-a-kickstarter-for-one-of-its-modern-successors/>.



by the Polish publicist Jerzy Giedroyc).<sup>[4]</sup> Moreover, the Great Famine of 1933 resulted in a further weakening of the Ukrainian nation and its elites. Loyalty to Russian elites was a matter of survival, and it had an impact on the further development of relations between Ukraine and Russia.

The effects of the termination of elites, the Russification and the construction of loyal attitudes through the use of terror and intimidation has created a strong ideological, economical, and political interdependence. As a result, both Russia and Ukraine share close cultural, ideological, and economic ties.

The established historical ties and loyalty towards Russia are so strong that, even in 1991 when Ukraine gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, not that many things changed. Ukraine was a country intellectually decapitated, for which the effects of Russification and artificially constructed loyalty to Moscow (not to mention close economic ties with Russia) assured dependence. This could be further illustrated by the generally positive attitude of Ukrainians towards Russians. However, this started to deteriorate in 2012, and during the period of 2012 to 2015 the number of those holding very positive or positive opinions about Russians decreased from 80 % to 30 %.<sup>[5]</sup> By 2017, only 34 % had a positive attitude towards Russians.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Russian minority population is another instrument of influence which allegedly accompanies the historical dominance of Ukraine. Russians are the second most numerous ethnic group in Ukraine. In 1989, they made up 26.6 % of the population, a figure which had fallen 4.8 percentage points to 17.3 % by 2001.<sup>[7]</sup> Although 2001 was the last time a population census was conducted, polling data from 2017 show that Russians accounted for only 6.3 % of the Ukrainian population in that year.<sup>[8]</sup> Thus, the impact of this factor of influence is gradually decreasing.

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[4] "Executed Renaissance": Today 70 Years of Beginning of Extermination of Ukrainian Elite." 2018. FrontNews. <https://frontnews.eu/news/en/16406>.

[5] Червоненко, Віталій. 2016. "Українці vs росіяни: революція чи еволюція ставлення?" BBC News Україна. [https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2016/01/160115\\_ukraine\\_russia\\_attitude\\_change\\_vc](https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2016/01/160115_ukraine_russia_attitude_change_vc).

[6] "Динаміка позитивного ставлення населення України до Росії і населення Росії до України («Кінець нерозділеного кохання Українців до Росії»)." 2015. Київський міжнародний інститут соціології. <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=550&page=1>.

[7] "All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001." 2018. State Statistics Committee of Ukraine. <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/>.

[8] "В Україні рекордно скоротилася кількість росіян: опубліковано інфографіку." 2017. Апостроф. <https://apostrophe.ua/ua/news/society/2017-06-17/v-ukraine-rekordno-sokratilos-kolichestvo-russkih-opublikovana-infografika/99081>.

If we consider religious proximity, the Russian Empire cooperated closely with the Orthodox Church, which was seen as important tool of legitimisation and stability. Today, Russia continues to follow this policy, using the Orthodox Church as an instrument of its politics of hegemony while supporting the institution's aspirations. In Ukraine, this policy is facilitated by the fact that a majority of Ukrainian Orthodox believers declare themselves members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church headed by the Patriarch of Moscow (there is also a Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate, which emerged in 1992 but remains unrecognised by canonical Eastern Orthodox).

Despite the victory of Viktor Yushchenko (often perceived as an anti-Russian politician) in the 2004 election, Ukrainian political elites abstained from organising anti-Russian media campaigns. Throughout this period (2004 to 2013), Ukrainians never held negative views of Russians, only turning against the Russian state and its leaders because of Vladimir Putin's aggression.<sup>[9]</sup>

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

Based on the above proximities and consequent vulnerabilities, the Russian Federation is shaping narratives which have an impact on the population of Ukraine.

The Kremlin's disinformation campaign targeting Ukraine uses a wide variety of techniques. It adapts its messages to different audiences, whether in eastern Ukraine or Western Europe. It not only brazenly seeds disinformation, but ensures that its lies are entertaining and emotionally engaging, and fits them into a strategic narrative tailored to match the preconceptions and biases of its audiences. In order to make this content appealing, Russia is prepared to fabricate stories entirely, using photos and video footage to suit Russia's needs. A full range of media, from cinema to news, talk shows, print, and social media are engaged in promoting official Russian narratives.<sup>[10]</sup>

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[9] Kuzio, Taras. 2017. "What Do Russians Think of Ukrainians, and Vice Versa?" Atlantic Council. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-do-russians-think-of-ukrainians-and-vice-versa>.

[10] Lukas, Edward, and Peter Pomerantsev. 2016. "Winning the Information War. Techniques and Counter-Strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe." Center for European Policy Analysis. <https://lif.blob.core.windows.net/lif/docs/default-source/publications/winning-the-information-war-full-report-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=2>.

The Russian language and media are used as one of the channels of influence (in particular, the Russian-speaking population and Russian minorities in Ukraine). Russian media dominate in the eastern part of Ukraine, and are almost the exclusive source of information in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, neither of which are controlled by the Ukrainian government. However, according to data obtained by *StopFake*, disinformation is spread throughout Ukraine. A survey conducted by this organisation revealed that the main channels of Russian propaganda are Russian traditional media (identified by 45 % of the respondents) and Russian Internet media (34.5 %).<sup>[11]</sup>

Allegedly, common religion is also a precondition for channelling propaganda. Conscious of the role played by Pope John Paul II in supporting the Solidarity movement in Poland, thereby contributing to the demise of the Soviet Union, the Russian leadership started using the same techniques to strengthen Russian imperial imperatives through the Russian Orthodox Church, which consists of 12 069 parishes.<sup>[12]</sup>

A useful tool for defining vulnerable groups in Ukraine is the Index of the Efficiency of Russian Propaganda, released by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in 2015. According to the results of this research,<sup>[13]</sup> people over the age of 70 are slightly more vulnerable to Russian propaganda. People with a higher education are slightly more resilient to Russian propaganda. Education doesn't play a key role due to a lack of media literacy skills and low demand for alternative sources of information (according to the data obtained by StopFake 58.4 % of the respondents do not feel they need additional knowledge or skills to detect propaganda).<sup>[14]</sup> However, key differences can be identified in geographic terms. The inhabitants of the western and central regions of Ukraine are the least vulnerable to Russian propaganda. The Index of the Efficiency of Russian Propaganda places vulnerability four times higher in southern and eastern Ukraine than in the western part of the country. The authors of the Index suggest that the main counter-propaganda efforts should be applied in the Odessa and Kharkiv regions.

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[11] "Осведомленность и отношение к дезинформации и пропаганде в СМИ: отчет об исследовании StopFake." 2017. StopFake.org (blog). June 12, 2017.

<https://www.stopfake.org/osvedomlennost-i-otnoshenie-k-dezinformatsii-i-propagande-v-smi-otchet-ob-issledovanii-stopfake/>.

[12] Herpen, Marcel H. Van. 2015. *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*. Rowman & Littlefield.

[13] "Індекс Результативності Російської Пропаганди." 2015. Київський міжнародний інститут соціології.  
<http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=510>.

[14] "Осведомленность и отношение к дезинформации и пропаганде в СМИ: отчет об исследовании StopFake." 2017. Ibid.

# MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The Ukrainian media landscape has been taking shape since the country gained independence in 1991. In the course of the initial privatisation process in the early 1990s, which was marred by corruption, a few oligarchs accumulated large amounts of capital by gaining control of the key industries of the country. As a result, the mainstream media outlets were obtained by the business elites who had privileged relations with the authorities.<sup>[15]</sup>

At the same time, efforts to strengthen independent journalism in Ukraine were undertaken. Western donors including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), National Endowment for Democracy, Internews, and the International Renaissance Foundation (Open Society Network) alongside the governments of the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark supported independent media. Funding went to educational programmes for journalists, development of information legislation that meets democratic principles, journalistic projects, and support for investigations.

According to Freedom House, Ukraine was mostly evaluated as partially free in terms of freedom of speech, except for in 2003, 2004 and 2014, when the country was marked as not free.<sup>[16]</sup> The lack of freedom of speech and the dependence of media on their owners, amongst other things, led to the media being used to foster political interests and agendas, with delays in reforming state-owned media, intimidation and attacks on journalists and impunity for the perpetrators.<sup>[17]</sup> However, at the same time a new generation of journalists was gradually emerging.

In 2000, independent journalism in Ukraine experienced a major setback when Georgiy Gongadze, the founder of the opposition website *Ukrayinska Pravda*, was murdered. It was one of the most high-profile criminal cases and attacks on independent journalism in Ukraine. Gongadze criticised the authorities, investigated President Leonid Kuchma and the activities of his entourage. For these actions, journalist received phone threats. On September 16, 2000, he disappeared, and six months later his headless

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[15] Solonenko, Iryna, and Anastasiia Grynko. 2017. Ibid.

[16] "Ukraine. Freedom House." 2018. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/ukraine>.

[17] Ibid.

body was found in the forest near Kyiv. Indirectly, the tragedy led to the Orange Revolution of 2004. Only in 2013 was former senior police officer Oleksiy Pukach, the hired assassin who had killed the reporter, tried, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. Pukach's paymasters still haven't been found.

The vulnerability of the information space in Ukraine was very high at the beginning of 2014 due to some inherited preconditions. First was the formidable dependence on foreign states and media corporations, the vast majority of which were of Russian origin. This primarily manifested in the appointment of Russians as top managers at Ukrainian channels. Also there was a dominance of Russian channels and media products on Ukrainian cable networks. Second, faced with only modest support for the domestic film industry, all national and regional TV channels were filled with Russian TV serials and films transmitting pro-Russian narratives. Third, the Ukrainian media market was characterised by excessive political pressure and a concentration of mainstream and regional media in the hands of oligarchs and businessmen close to Yanukovych. Public media was openly censored by the central and local authorities. In this environment, it is no wonder that Ukraine was forced to start building an information security system from scratch in the media space.

The start of Revolution of Dignity of 2013 to 2014 gave birth to conflict journalism in Ukraine. The journalists required new skills, such as fact-checking in extreme conditions, mastering the basics of safety and so on. By 2014, it was clear that Russia was waging a disinformation war against Ukraine, which included the Russian media's one-sided coverage of events, distortion of facts, outright lies, etc. The realisation of these facts has impacted the development of Ukrainian journalism, for example through the launch of public broadcasting.

A recent poll from Internews Ukraine revealed a steady decline in the number of Ukrainians consuming Russian media (across all outlets) in Ukraine, a trend which has been continuing over the past three years. The levels of trust in Russian television in Ukraine fell from 20 % in 2014 to just 4 % in 2015. For online Russian media, it dropped from 16 % in 2014 to 8 % in 2016, and for print it fell from 8 % to 2 %. Trust in Russian radio also fell, from 8 % to 3 % within the same period.<sup>[18]</sup> In 2017, only

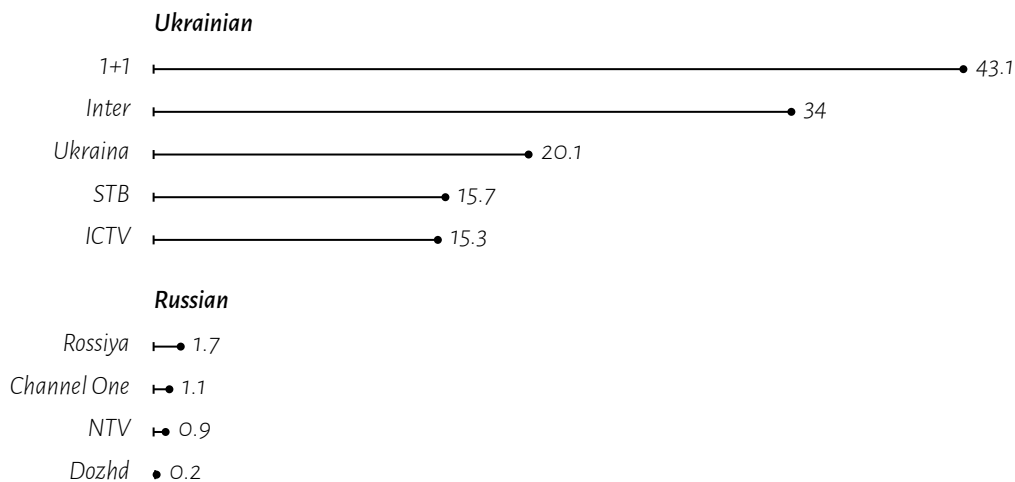
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[18] Bruce, Daniel. 2016. "How 'Generation Z' Is Shaping Ukraine's Media Landscape." Internews. <https://www.internews.org/story/how-generation-z-shaping-ukraines-media-landscape>.

1 % of respondents said they consumed Russian media, compared to 4 % the year before.<sup>[19]</sup> One of the experts interviewed admitted:

*'The restriction of the Russian Federation's influence on the information space of Ukraine had a positive effect. At least, it narrows the window of possibilities for Kremlin manipulators. Therefore, I personally and my organisation support the prohibition of Russian film products and the prohibition of Russian TV channels, as well as language quotas on radio and television.'*<sup>[20]</sup>

**TV channel** % of surveyed



### **TV channels providing information about the military conflict in Donbas or about the Crimea**

Source: Detector Media<sup>[21]</sup>

The Law on the System of Foreign Broadcasting of Ukraine kickstarted the creation of Ukrainian information content for foreign consumers. In October 2015, the Multimedia Broadcasting Platform of Ukraine was launched, incorporating the resources of the TV channel UA|TV and the National News Agency Ukrinform.

[19] "Media Consumption in Ukraine 2017." 2017. Internews. [https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/USAID\\_UMedia\\_AnnualMediaConsumptionSurvey\\_2017\\_FULL\\_eng.pdf](https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/USAID_UMedia_AnnualMediaConsumptionSurvey_2017_FULL_eng.pdf).

[20] Roman Kabachiy, Institute of Mass Information, August, 16, 2017. In-depth interview.

[21] "Survey of Russian Propaganda Influence on Public Opinion in Ukraine Findings." 2017. [http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/detector\\_media\\_en/reports\\_eng/survey\\_of\\_russian\\_propaganda\\_influence\\_on\\_public\\_opinion\\_in\\_ukraine\\_findings/](http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/detector_media_en/reports_eng/survey_of_russian_propaganda_influence_on_public_opinion_in_ukraine_findings/).

In 2017, Ukraine was ranked 102<sup>nd</sup> in the World Press Freedom Index. The situation had slightly improved compared to 2016, when Ukraine was ranked 107<sup>th</sup>.<sup>[22]</sup>

According to an assessment by Freedom House, Ukraine in 2017 was defined as partly free.<sup>[23]</sup> In this regard, Ukraine has made significant progress in comparison to 2013, when it was marked as not free. However, in recent years there has been some slow-down in the progress of reforms related to media freedom (but at the same time more attention is being paid to measures counteracting Russian propaganda and legislation, strategies and doctrines, alongside a special budget aimed at financing the respective measures).

Despite the mentioned positive developments there are still grounds for concern. In particular, with the start of the war in Donbas, Russian project leaders had to rethink their policies and began faking objective journalism, instead of pushing straightforward and crude propaganda. Projects do use the services of some genuinely pro-Ukrainian journalists, who do their work to high professional standards, but in general they on the 80/20 Pareto principle, providing 80 % of neutral information and 20 % of Russian propaganda. Among websites transmitting Russian narratives, InfromNapalm names *Vesti*, *UBR*, and *Strana.UA*.<sup>[24]</sup> According to Ukrainian Internet Association data, in December of 2017 these resources had the following Internet audience: Strana .UA—12 % (ranking ninth in the top 100 Ukrainian news websites), Vesti—8 %, UBR—4 %.<sup>[25]</sup> Research on propaganda in the Eastern Partnership countries adds the TV channel *Inter*, one of the most popular in the country, to this list.<sup>[26]</sup> The National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine ranks Inter sixth among the most viewed TV stations.<sup>[27]</sup>

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[22] "Ukraine : At the Crossroads." 2017. Reporters without Borders. RSF. <https://rsf.org/en/ukraine>.

[23] Ibid.

[24] "Russian Media Lobby in Ukraine: Vesti, UBR, Strana.UA and Ukraina.RU – InfromNapalm.Org (English)." InfromNapalm.org (English), February 20, 2017. <https://infromnapalm.org/en/russian-media-lobby-ukraine-vesti-ubr-strana-ua-ukraina-ru/>.

[25] "Рейтинг ТОП-100 новинних сайтів суспільно-політичної тематики за грудень 2017р." January 16, 2018. <http://inau.ua/news/rejtyng-top-100-novynnyh-saytiv-suspilno-politychnoyi-tematyky-za-gruden-2017r>.

[26] "Мониторинг СМИ стран Восточного партнерства и России." 2016. [http://ypc.am/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2016\\_Monitoring\\_Propaganda\\_Report\\_RUS.pdf](http://ypc.am/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2016_Monitoring_Propaganda_Report_RUS.pdf)

[27] "Рейтинг Телеканалів Загального Перегляду Серед Користувачів IPTV Та OTT (Вересень 2017 р.)." Національна рада України з питань телебачення і радіомовлення, October 25, 2017. <https://www.nrada.gov.ua/rejtyng-telekanaliv-zagalnogo-pereglyadu-sered-korystuvachiv-iptv-ta-ott/>.

## LEGAL REGULATIONS

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, work aimed at creating specific information security documents was launched. In April 2014, the National Security and Defence Council (NSDCU) adopted measures to improve the development of state policy for the information security of Ukraine. It tasked Ukrainian government and state institutions with drafting some legal and conceptual documents: the Strategy for The Development of the Information Space in Ukraine, the Informational Security Doctrine, the Strategy for Cybersecurity in Ukraine, and to draft laws on Cybersecurity in Ukraine. The decision also sought to find legal solutions to counter information aggression by foreign states, by virtue of banning selected foreign television channels from broadcasting in Ukraine or creating special accreditation and protection regimes for journalists.

Since 2014, the Ukrainian authorities have adopted a number of reforms, including media ownership transparency and access to state-held information. The Law on Transparency of Media Ownership was adopted on September 3, 2015, establishing one of the best legal frameworks in Europe.<sup>[28]</sup> Although the legislation is in place, it is often implemented poorly. Transparency in the media sector should be improved. One expert interviewed for this study said:

*'The main threat in information security area is an oligarch controlled media market. In Ukrainian realities, this often turns into censorship by the owners.'*<sup>[29]</sup>

The State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine has been assigned to lead work on developing the Strategy for the Development of the Information Space and the Information Security Doctrine. In September 2014, the State Committee presented the draft Strategy for public discussion. Although the document was prepared following the decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine to react to Russian information aggression, the Strategy was met with numerous concerns from civil society and independent

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[28] "Freedom of Media in Ukraine." Council of Europe Office in Ukraine. 2018. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/freedom-of-media-in-ukraine>.

[29] Roman Shutov, Program director, Detector Media, August, 16, 2017. In-depth interview.



media experts. The core concern was that the draft Strategy greatly echoed the Strategy for Information Society development adopted in 2013.

In 2015, with the establishment of the Ministry of Information Policy, the coordination centre has shifted towards this new institution. A special expert council has been established under the ministry, tasked with the creation of a new draft of the Information Security Concept. Despite international support and the inclusive and transparent process of drafting, the Concept did not become law. But, at the same time, the ministry took up the baton of development of the Information Security Doctrine.

The first stage in securing Ukraine's media space was of a restrictive nature. Since 2017, the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine has restricted the broadcast of 77 Russian TV Channels on cable networks in Ukraine.<sup>[30]</sup> It is important to bear in mind that, as of 2014, there were 82 Russian cable TV channels in Ukraine. The Ukrainian State Film Agency, in accordance with the norms of the Law of Ukraine on Cinematography, cancelled the state registration of films produced in Russia and released after January 1, 2014.

In November 2016, the Law on Amendments to the Law of Ukraine on Television and Radio Broadcasting initiated a gradual introduction of quotas for songs and programmes in the Ukrainian language in radio broadcasts. In October 2017, the Law of Ukraine on Amendments to some Laws of Ukraine Regarding the Language of Audiovisual (Electronic) Mass Media established that transmissions, films and news in Ukrainian must account at least for 75 % of the total length of the programmes and films.<sup>[31]</sup> According to the law, local broadcasters must have at least 50 % of programming in Ukrainian.

In April 2017, the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (NSDCU) added Russian legal entities Yandex, Mail.RU Ukraine, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and others to the sanctions list. The decision of the NSDCU was enacted by Presidential Decree in May 2017.<sup>[32]</sup> According to the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine, this led to a drop in the number

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[30] "Нацрада заборонила 'Дощ' в Україні." 2017. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/2155072-nacrada-zaboronila-dozd-v-ukraini.html>.

[31] "Про внесення змін до деяких законів України щодо мови аудіовізуальних (Електронних) Засобів Масової Інформації" 2017. Голос України. <http://www.golos.com.ua/article/290061>.

[32] "Указ Президента України №133/2017." Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України. <http://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1332017-21850>.

of VKontakte users, from nine million to 300 000, which proves that Ukrainians support the decision.

In 2017, the president of Ukraine signed legislation on the Cybersecurity Strategy of Ukraine, after a number of severe cyberattacks on the telecommunication systems of state institutions and entities of critical infrastructure. In this domain, legal efforts were advanced with the adoption of the Law of Ukraine on Cybersecurity in Ukraine in September 2017.

In February 2017, the new Information Security Doctrine of Ukraine was adopted. It defines the national interests of Ukraine in the information sphere, the threats to their implementation, and the directions and priorities of the state policy in the information sphere. However, despite its progressiveness and relevance, this document has not yet formed the basis for the development of an integral normative system of building information security. Many respondents from Ukrainian state institutions confirmed that they did not take this document into account while planning their activity in information security area.

In June 2017, the government approved the first Action Plan on the implementation of the Concept of the Popularisation of Ukraine in the world and of promoting the interests of Ukraine in the global information space. The document was prepared by the Ministry of Information Policy and envisages very deep inter-agency cooperation.

In this vein, one should also mention the Public Diplomacy Strategy, which the MFA is still in the process of creating.

In 2017, the Strategies of Information Reintegration of Donbas and Crimea were prepared, and the implementation process started. The documents are aimed at the creation of preconditions for the reintegration of Crimea and inclusion of the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts into the Ukrainian informational space and the promotion of pro-Ukrainian narratives, and envisages institutional and organisational steps.

# INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

The Information Security Doctrine (ISD), adopted in February 2017, proposes an enhanced institutional mechanism:

- The National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine
- The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine
- The Ministry of Information Policy
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine
- The Ministry of Defence of Ukraine
- The Ministry of Culture of Ukraine
- The Ukrainian State Film Agency
- The National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine
- The State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine
- The Security Service of Ukraine
- Intelligence Services of Ukraine
- The National Institute for Strategic Studies
- The State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection of Ukraine

The document also acknowledges that the implementation of the Doctrine is possible only with the proper coordination of efforts by all state institutions.

Key measures and activities in accordance with the provisions of the Doctrine will be determined by the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine. In April 2017, the *Service for Information Security* was established within the new structure of the Staff of the NSDCU.

It would be appropriate to mention here *the Committee on the Freedom of Speech and Information Policy of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine* as a part of the institutional framework in the information security domain. This parliamentary body is in charge of preparing and overseeing all draft laws in the information policy and security domain.

On an executive level, one has to include the *press services of ministries and regional state administrations* in the framework. Although absent in the ISD, they are mentioned, along with the parliamentary committee, in the system of public institutions in field of the information policy indicated in the MIP reports and action plans.<sup>[33]</sup>

A significant part of information security coordination and implementation was taken over by the Ministry of Information Policy, established in January 2015. The ministry, for the moment, is the main body in the system of the central institutions of executive power, which forms and implements public policy in the areas of media development and information security. As of 2016, the ministry had formed four strategic directions for the development of information policy:

1. Development of the information space of Ukraine;
2. Public StratCom system development;
3. Information reintegration: annexed Crimea, temporarily uncontrolled territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, internally displaced persons;
4. Popularisation of Ukraine and its values in the world.<sup>[34]</sup>

As many experts confirmed, the existence of the ISD and clear indication of the institutional framework has not contributed drastically to the effectiveness of the implementation of information security policy. As one expert put it during an interview:

*'There are some significant steps towards improvement. This is primarily the Information Security Doctrine, which covers information interests. This is very important because it is the basis, but now we have to look at the division of powers in public authorities. This mechanism, which is prescribed in the Information Security Doctrine, and, in fact, is well-written, should be implemented. However, there are problems with implementation because, if we look at the list of powers, we come to chaos. And I think this chaos in the division of powers in the area of information security is the main regulatory barrier.'*<sup>[35]</sup>

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[33] "Міністерство інформаційної політики України: план на 2016 рік." [http://mip.gov.ua/files/Presentation/MIP\\_activity\\_2016.pdf](http://mip.gov.ua/files/Presentation/MIP_activity_2016.pdf)

[34] "Питання діяльності Міністерства інформаційної політики України." Постанова Кабінету Міністрів України від 14 січня 2015 р. № 2. <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/en/2-2015-%D0%BF>.

[35] Roman Shutov, Detector Media, August, 16, 2017. In-depth interview.

The first and most serious problem is that no functions audit was conducted prior to the elaboration and adoption of the ISD in the realm of information security. Functions sometimes overlap, and there are sometimes gaps in information security performance. As one of those interviewed described it:

*'The doctrine is an important thing for those who made it and for the main executor. It seems to me that this doctrine lacks the involvement of other authorities. Even for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this is not what we use every day. It is not a reference point. I consider this to be the main problem of this document.'*<sup>[36]</sup>

There exists a traditional level of interaction between the state ministries and agencies, as well as with some NGOs, on information security and media issues, but this interaction does not extend to the utilisation and building of an all-encompassing and comprehensive system of monitoring and reaction to information security challenges.

However, some positive developments took place in 2017 after the adoption of the ISD, and these might be considered as progress in implementation in terms of strategic vision and coordination of efforts.

In July 2017, a project team was formed within the framework of the creation of the system of state strategic communications, which included representatives of the MIP, the NSDCU, the National Institute for Strategic Studies and NGO StratCom Ukraine. During meetings in July and August 2017, the overall design of the project was determined and a detailed project plan was developed.

In 2017, the Ministry of Information Policy also created an inter-agency commission for popularising Ukraine in the world, including representatives from ministries, businesses, NGOs and PR specialists. From the outset, the Commission has been tasked with creating the official brand of Ukraine and taking stock of all the initiatives of this kind done by government bodies and business.

In terms of cooperation with NGOs and civic initiatives, one of the experts said:<sup>[37]</sup>

*'Such cooperation exists, but it lacks cohesion and communication channels between civil society and state authorities. On the other hand, one should*

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[36] Oleksii Makeiev, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, August, 16, 2017. In-depth interview.

[37] Eugen Magda, Institute of World Policy, August, 21 2017. In-depth interview.

*realise that the state authorities may not always allow themselves to stick to all the proposals offered by of the public. Let us not forget that democracy does not mean unanimity, but democracy is a precondition for national interests and ways of implementing them. They may be different, but they must at least be somehow agreed’.*

Many experts from NGOs mention a good level of cooperation, although this is highly dependent on their specific project activity.

A. Kulakov, a project director for Internews Ukraine, said:<sup>[38]</sup>

*‘Systemic cooperation starts with projects. For instance, there was a project on freedom on the Internet. A task force was established. We cooperated with the Security Service of Ukraine, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Information Policy and the Internet Association. In other words, it is systemic cooperation. However, when a project finishes contacts are there but cooperation becomes sporadic, which is often the case for the third sector’.*

Civic activists also mention the cooperation platforms created by the MIP and MFA (Expert Council and Public Council under the MIP and Public Council under the MFA).

## IN FOCUS

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### **Russian singer Samoilova banned from attending the 2017 Eurovision Song Contest in Ukraine**

This is a positive example of the coordination of efforts between different Ukrainian public authorities to protect the information space. In March 2017, on the eve of the Eurovision Song Contest in Kyiv, the Security Service of Ukraine issued a travel ban on Yulia Samoilova, a Russian singer with disabilities, who was supposed to take part in the contest. The argument was clear and legitimate from the Ukrainian side. Samoilova had previously taken part in a concert in Crimea after its annexation, crossing the Ukrainian state border outside Ukrainian checkpoints, which is prohibited by Ukrainian legislation. The Kremlin’s aim was to discredit Ukraine by portraying it as immoral and ineffective. The Samoilova case was one in a series that the Kremlin applied in this disinformation campaign. But, due to the well-thought approach to the communication side of the decision, Ukraine succeeded in creating the truthful image.

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[38] Andriy Kulakov, Internews Ukraine, August, 30, 2017. In-depth interview.

## DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

Debunking teams have been serving a crucial role in fighting Kremlin-led propaganda since the start of aggression against Ukraine. Many of these groups appeared spontaneously as a reaction to the Kremlin-backed disinformation campaign surrounding the annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014. Due to the unpreparedness of the Ukrainian state authorities, volunteer and civil society groups performed a lot of activity in this realm. Even now, the ISD acknowledges the importance of civil society involvement in countering Russian disinformation.

There are different types of the initiatives on the ground taking into account the diversity of tools applied by Russia in its disinformation war. They comprise fact-checking teams, open source intelligence communities, investigative journalism groups, media hubs, and expert networking agencies, social media initiatives, cyberactivists, and IT companies with specialised software.

The first initiative to mention is the project *StopFake*, established by Kyiv Mohyla Academy lecturers and researchers in March 2014. The website of the project initially focused on debunking Russian propaganda about events in Ukraine. As time passed, it evolved into an information hub where the team studied all aspects of Kremlin propaganda. StopFake's information products are translated into 10 foreign languages to increase outreach. The initiative states its independent status and non-affiliation with any Ukrainian institution.<sup>[39]</sup>

*Information Resistance* started as a non-government project in March 2014. It aims to counteract external threats to the informational space of Ukraine in the main areas of the military, economic, and energy sectors, and in the sphere of information security. Information Resistance functions as an initiative of the NGO Centre for Military and Political Studies.<sup>[40]</sup> It is operated by Ukrainian reserve officers and is widely known for thorough fact-checking of the news and some inside military information delivered from the occupied territories of Ukraine.

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[39] StopFake. <https://www.stopfake.org/en/about-us/>.

[40] Information Resistance. <http://sprotyv.info/en/about-us>.

*InformNapalm* is a volunteer community that was also launched in March 2014. Its main task is debunking disinformation provided by Russia. The international team is made up of more than 30 people from 10-plus countries. It focuses on fact-checking and investigative journalism connected to aggression and its impact on Ukrainians. Due to close work with other institutions from the information security realm, InformNapalm provides debunking with in-depth analysis and detailed reliable information in more than 20 languages.<sup>[41]</sup> It has also issued a handbook of Russian aggression in Ukraine, called 'Donbas in Flames. Guide to the Conflict Zone'.

Almost at the same time, in March 2014, the *Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (UCMC)* was founded by a group of media experts and civic activists to enhance Ukraine's potential for resistance in the information space. UCMC is widely known for its press centre, which allows Ukrainian and foreign experts, politicians, and representatives of the civic sector to use this platform to inform domestic and external audiences about events in Ukraine. This often helped the Ministry of Defence and General Staff press services to deliver regular briefings and updates about the situation in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) zone.<sup>[42]</sup>

Dating from 2014, *Euromaidan Press (EP)* is an online English-language independent media platform that focuses on events in and around Ukraine and provides translations of Ukrainian news, expert analysis and independent research. Its main tasks are to extend Ukrainian outreach abroad, and to promote non-partisan, non-biased information in the fight against the Kremlin-led disinformation campaign. Many of its news stories are devoted to the Ukrainian military fighting against Russia and its proxies in Donbas.<sup>[43]</sup>

*UkraineWorld* is an overarching initiative proposed by *Internews Ukraine* in 2014 to bring together key Ukrainian and international experts and journalists interested in Ukraine, and to counteract Russian propaganda and disinformation. It functions as a communication network, mainly through the exchange of information. The website accumulates texts and analysis produced as a result of group discussions and debates.<sup>[44]</sup>

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[41] Informnapalm. <http://informnapalm.rocks/>.

[42] Ukraine Crisis Media Centre. <http://ucmc.org.ua/about/>.

[43] Euromaidan Press. <http://euromaidanpress.com/about/>.

[44] UkraineWorld. <http://ukraineworld.org/about/>.



Project *Verify* was launched by Internews Ukraine with the support of the Latvian Journalists Association in 2016.<sup>[45]</sup> It is a verification assistant based on open data and online tools. It helps media users to draw their own conclusions about content needing to be verified.

The educational project *ЛИКБЕЗ. Historical Front* unites professional historians. The project community runs awareness-raising campaigns and debunking projects connected to historical narratives used by Russia. More than 50 Ukrainian historians have taken part in the project.<sup>[46]</sup>

Some volunteer initiatives existed only for a short time in 2014, and aimed specifically to counter Russian propaganda. From March until May 2014, there was a special initiative launched by Ukrainian experts. A project called *Ukrainian Information Front* was devoted to establishing contacts with foreign media, mainly in the post-Soviet space, and delivering analysis and comments about the situation in Crimea and domestic politics in Ukraine. Although active for only a short period of time, the project united about 20 well-known Ukrainian experts from a wide array of policy areas.<sup>[47]</sup> Contacts made by these experts with foreign media have been often used for delivering comments since then.

Since 2017, *Western Information Front* has been engaged in countering Russian information aggression and protecting good relations between Ukraine and its neighbours (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania) from Russian provocations and disinformation.<sup>[48]</sup>

Additionally, we have to mention some social media communities which are very visible in fact-checking and debunking activities. A group of volunteers named *Group #IPSO #Trollbusters* started its activity on Facebook by revealing the botnets used by the Kremlin, and the tactics and methods of their activity in social networks, at the end of 2014. In their posts, they also described changes in the narratives Russia used in its disinformation campaigns.<sup>[49]</sup>

Similar to the previous group's activity the volunteer initiative *TrolleyBust* has been engaged in detecting bots malicious accounts in social networks, and trying to ban them since 2014. In 2015, the initiative launched a special

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[45] Verify. <http://verify.org.ua/en/about/>.

[46] "ЛИКБЕЗ. Историчний фронт". <http://likbez.org.ua/ua/>.

[47] Украинский информационный фронт. Дайджест экспертных мнений №2, 16.04.2014.

[48] Західний інформаційний фронт. [https://zahidfront.com.ua/support\\_fund.html/](https://zahidfront.com.ua/support_fund.html/).

[49] "#Trollbusters #IPSO Охотники за кремлетролями." 2015. Newssky. <http://newssky.com.ua/trollbusters-ipso-ohotniki-za-kremletrolyami/#.VLL66NKsUZ5>.

web service to detect and block Internet trolls and other sources of anti-Ukrainian propaganda. The aim is to give volunteers access to the toolkit and unite their efforts to clear the information space of propaganda oriented against Ukraine and Ukrainians. There are three main areas of focus for the ban: propagandists and pseudo-experts, bots and fake accounts, and other users that doubt the territorial integrity of Ukraine.<sup>[50]</sup>

In 2014, the *Boycott Russia Today* FB community was launched. As well as calling for U.S. citizens to boycott RT, and urging U.S. cable and satellite TV providers to suspend RT from their channel line-ups, they regularly post myth-busting materials.<sup>[51]</sup>

In 2015, under the umbrella of the Ministry of Information Policy, the *Information Forces of Ukraine* started. The aim of this Internet project was to mobilise users of social networks to counter Russian propaganda and extend the outreach of reliable information. Since August 2017, the project has officially been independent.<sup>[52]</sup>

The initiative *Ukrainian Cyber Forces* is a network of Ukrainian IT specialists operating in cyberspace to block the bank accounts of terrorists and web pages with Russian propaganda. They are also active in investigating and reporting on the presence of Russian military personnel and equipment on Ukrainian territory. By the end of December 2017, they had blocked more than 200 websites belonging to Russians and separatists, as well as hundreds of web pages and blogs that published the personal data of Ukrainian servicemen.<sup>[53]</sup>

Yet another very efficient group, *Ukrainian Cyber Alliance (UCA)*, unites cyberactivists from different cities in Ukraine and all over the world. Since 2016, the group has performed a number of successful hacks on separatist web resources, personal emails and profiles. A recent famous flashmob campaign, #FuckResponsibleDisclosure, was launched at the end of 2017. Together with other IT specialists, the UCA has searched for vulnerabilities within government telecommunication systems, public web accounts and sites.<sup>[54]</sup>

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[50] TrolleyBust. <https://trolleybust.com/>.

[51] Boycott Russia Today. [https://www.facebook.com/pg/boycotrussiatoday/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/boycotrussiatoday/about/?ref=page_internal).

[52] "МІП: «Інформаційні Війська України» Стають Самостійним Проектом." Міністерство інформаційної політики України. <http://mip.gov.ua/news/1931.html>.

[53] Personal account in FB of Eugene Dokukin, CEO & Founder "Ukrainian Cyber Forces". <https://www.facebook.com/eugene.dokukin/posts/1985630725036030>

[54] "Activists Publish Results of #FuckResponsibleDisclosure Campaign." 2017. InformNapalm. <https://informnapalm.org/en/activists-publish-results-fuckresponsibledisclosure-campaign/>.

*The Monitoring project OKO* has been created by Ukraine's Image Agency and Together for Ukraine, both of which are NGOs. The project consists of monitoring software based on Google and Bing which sorts articles about Ukraine by language, date, and popularity in foreign media and on Facebook. A specific algorithm automatically processes selected articles by content and its emotional coverage, as well as by frequency of mentions.<sup>[55]</sup>

## IN FOCUS

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### **MH17**

Most of the interviewed experts emphasised that the Ukrainian response to the MH17 catastrophe was a good example of effective and efficient cooperation between government structures, security bodies, NGOs, think tanks, and journalists, which enabled proper, transparent, and open coverage of the catastrophe circumstances that if not prevented then at least minimised the damage from Russian propaganda and Russian attempts to blame Ukraine for shooting down the Malaysian Airlines Boeing. The patterns of cooperation and interaction applied then should be studied and further applied.

### **False suggestion of Ukrainian involvement in North Korea's missile program**

In August 2017, this article appeared in the New York Times. It showed that North Korea's ICBM success had been made possible by illegal purchases of rocket engines probably from Ukraine. Although the material was based on a study by Michael Elleman, of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Ukraine had many reasons to suspect Russian involvement in the story. This case is reminiscent of the Koltchuga scandal (the Ukrainian Passive Early Warning Radar allegedly sold to Iraq), which had farreaching image losses for Ukraine.

Regardless the origin of the fake news, Ukraine reacted in a timely manner and with high level of coordination of messages intended for external audiences.

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[55] Моніторинговий Проект "OKO". <http://www.ukroko.org/>.

**As one of our experts pointed out:**<sup>[56]</sup>

‘It is very good that officials dealing with this issue decided to involve Volodymyr Gorbulin to debunk this fake news. He enjoys a high level of trust and he knows perfectly well all the technical details to dispel it’.

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## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

There are different kinds of media literacy programmes on the government (involving universities and schools) and civil society (educating broad population) levels.

In 2014 to 2017, media education and literacy projects gained some prominence and attention in Ukraine. However, from the outset, one should mention here previous media literacy activity provided by the Academy of Ukrainian Press and *Telekritika* (now *Detector Media*). The web portal Media Sapiens was launched by a Telekritika team in 2010, some time before the Revolution of Dignity. The aim was to enhance the media literacy of the audience, form critical thinking towards media and detect manipulative attempts to impact public opinion. Since then it has become a hub of information about media development, information security, media education, and literacy.<sup>[57]</sup>

The primary goal of the *Academy of Ukrainian Press* (AUP) primary goal is the implementation of media education through the creation and encouragement of a leading media teachers’ network, applying international experience to help implement media education in Ukraine. The AUP focuses on the preparation of handbooks for teachers and the design of academic courses. Since 2013, it has been running the project ‘Media education and media literacy’, within the framework of which an online platform was launched in 2013. The platform was designed to facilitate the exchange of opinions between media teachers who promote transparency and publicity in the media educational environment.<sup>[58]</sup> In 2016, the Road Map for Media Education and Media

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[56] Eugene Magda. In-depth interview.

[57] MediaSapiens. <http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/about/editorial/>.

[58] Медіаосвіта і медіаграмотність. <http://www.medialiteracy.org.ua/index.php>.

Literacy was introduced by the expert group of the AUP.<sup>[59]</sup> This states that, at the moment, media education and media literacy are taught in Ukrainian secondary schools in the form of separate subjects ('Basics of media literacy', 'Stairway to media literacy', 'Media culture', 'Media education', etc.), as well as integrated lessons. Media education and media literacy as a separate subject is taught in about 300 secondary schools.

In 2016, the National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of Ukraine approved a new version of the Concept for the Implementation of Media Education in Ukraine. The previous version of the Concept dated back to 2010. The main goal of media education is to create the foundation for state information security, develop civil society, counter external information aggression, prepare children and youths for the secure and effective use of modern media, and form media literacy and media culture.<sup>[60]</sup> In 2017, the Ministry of Education and Science approved an experiment on media education for 2017 to 2022, entitled 'Standardisation of the cross-cutting socio-psychological model of mass media education implementation in Ukrainian pedagogical practice'. The experiment involves the implementation of media education in educational institutions, including nurseries, schools and higher education entities (153 institutions).

The *OSINT Academy*, a joint project of the Institute of Post-information Society and the Ministry of Information Policy was launched in 2015. A special online course is devoted to enhancing skills when working with open sources intelligence and searching for reliable data to fact-check. It also aims to increase public awareness of information manipulation, and to promote media literacy.<sup>[61]</sup>

In 2016, Detector Media launched a multimedia online textbook for youths, detailing how to use media in day-to-day life and develop critical thinking towards media products.<sup>[62]</sup> Another project, 'News literacy', is a course of lectures that aims to disseminate media literacy among the population in situations of conflict.<sup>[63]</sup>

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[59] "Дорожня Карта з Медіаосвіти і Медіаграмотності." 2016. Академія української преси.  
[http://www.aup.com.ua/ml/Media\\_Literacy\\_Road\\_Map\\_AUP\\_2016.pdf](http://www.aup.com.ua/ml/Media_Literacy_Road_Map_AUP_2016.pdf).

[60] "Концепція Впровадження Медіаосвіти в Україні (Нова Редакція)." 2016. MediaSapiens.  
[http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/mediaprosvita/mediaosvita/kontseptsiya\\_vprovadzhennya\\_mediaosviti\\_v\\_ukraini\\_nova\\_redaktsiya/](http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/mediaprosvita/mediaosvita/kontseptsiya_vprovadzhennya_mediaosviti_v_ukraini_nova_redaktsiya/).

[61] "OSINT Academy: Приєми Поиска и Получения Информации." 2016. Інформаційно-Аналітичний Центр.  
<http://mediarnbo.org/2016/12/24/osint-academy-priemyi-poiska-i-polucheniya-informatsii-videouroki/?lang=ru>.

[62] Медіа-драйвер. <http://mediadriverronline/>.

[63] Он-лайн курс "Новинна грамотність". <http://www.video.detector.media/special-projects/novynna-gramotnist-i22>.

There is an interesting online game called ‘Mission of media literacy’, and a distance learning course called ‘Media literacy for citizens’, created as a joint initiative between IREX, AUP and StopFake. The curriculum of the distance learning course and the online game are based on materials from the media literacy handbook, which was created as a result of cooperation between the three organisations involved in the ‘Media Literacy for Citizens Programme’, which was implemented in July 2015 and ran until March 2016. As part of the project, training seminars took place in 14 regions of Ukraine, primarily in the east and south. In total, more than 14 000 citizens took part in these training seminars.<sup>[64]</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Since the start of Russian aggression in 2014, the Ukrainian authorities and civil society have done significant work in order to build up national resilience in many areas, including in the information domain. One could hardly call the years 2014 to 2015 a successful period in terms of governmental strategic vision or institutional capacity. Some of the positive results should be attributed to volunteer initiatives and restrictions on media outlets promoting Russian propaganda.

It is fair to say that, from 2016 to 2017, the activity of Ukrainian public institutions intensified, as did cooperation with civic initiatives. Strategic planning and coordination became more visible. The Ministry of Information Policy more actively steers the implementation of information security policy. However, there is still room for improvement on all levels of public policy development and execution.

Ukrainian resilience to Russian disinformation is very multi-layered. First, both at state and societal levels, we are conscious that Kremlin-backed disinformation and propaganda as psychological operations (PSYOPS) are part and parcel of hybrid warfare, along with military aggression, trade and energy wars, annexation and occupation, and political destabilisation. Experiencing all these facets at the same time leaves the Ukrainian authorities with no illusions about the gravity of the consequences, or what is at stake. Second, since Ukraine has been placed at the core of the Russian global disinformation strategy, the

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[64] “В Україні запустили дистанційний курс та онлайн гру з медіаграмотності—Медіаграмотність.” 2016. MediaSapiens. 2016. [http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/mediaprosvita/mediaosvita/v\\_ukraini\\_zapustili\\_distantsiyiy\\_kurs\\_ta\\_onlayn\\_gru\\_z\\_medigramotnosti/](http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/mediaprosvita/mediaosvita/v_ukraini_zapustili_distantsiyiy_kurs_ta_onlayn_gru_z_medigramotnosti/).

state differs in the breadth and scope of the areas in which it must resist aggression. That said, in Ukraine there are three main directions in which it is necessary to apply different strategies and instruments to defend Ukrainian national interests. Both state bodies and expert communities have to deliver on information security tasks (1) on the sovereign territory of Ukraine, (2) in the occupied and annexed areas, and, last but not the least, (3) outside Ukraine. All three areas are crucial, but are very different in terms of narratives, channels, and strategic tactics applied by the aggressor against Ukraine.

These two above mentioned arguments are very significant when it comes to comparative assessment of disinformation resilience in the wider CEE region. In quantitative and qualitative terms, the level of disinformation challenges and threats is far higher for Ukraine than for its neighbours. As a result, the number of tasks Ukraine needs to accomplish differs significantly from its neighbours. The number of tasks may partially explain why some of our interviewed experts sometimes feel pessimistic about the steps which have already been taken by the Ukrainian state. While other states have achieved success in countering disinformation using such methods, these alone are not enough in the case of Ukraine. This is especially true when experts refer to cooperation between state institutions, civil society, and the expert community.

As one interviewed expert concluded:<sup>[65]</sup>

*'There are certain systemic problems, which stand in the way of cooperation, when political decisions are made based on the current context and political will. When this is done, little room is left for understanding the real state of the problem, for real reflections on the purpose, means, and possible consequences of state policy. In fact, there is no time left for what think tanks are doing.'*

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[65] Roman Shutov. In-depth interview.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. While the adoption of the ISD might be considered as a breakthrough in development in information security, it does not by itself create the necessary framework for public institutions and other non-government players to achieve the previously identified goals. More work has to be done to bring the necessary strategic documents to individual departments. However, this work should not be scaled down to a purely bureaucratic process. Even if not done in line with strategic planning, the implementation of IDS should be broken down on an operational level, and a clear hierarchical structure of documentation should be developed (information security strategy, information security program, information security short-term and mid-term action plans).
2. In 2017, the Ministry of Information Policy took a more prominent leading role. However, not all state bodies, NGOs, and journalists have recognised this, and therefore policy implementation is still fragmented. Further work is needed to establish a coordinated and coherent strategy. A case in point is strategic communication (stratcom) inside and outside Ukraine. Since the MIP is involved in government stratcom development, it should take the lead in the creation of an intrastate network of stratcom players, including those from the non-government sector.
3. The MFA is currently preparing the Public Diplomacy Strategy and is in charge of the coordination of external communication activity. Thus, it should be the responsibility of the MFA to map Ukrainian NGOs and think tanks to establish the potential for increasing outreach overseas and synchronising debunking and anti-propaganda efforts 'to ensure proper synchronisation of communicators', as stated by one expert.<sup>[66]</sup> Further coordination might be provided under the plan of action on the implementation of the Concept of the popularisation of Ukraine in the world and of promoting the interests of Ukraine within the global information space.
4. Among the recommendations one should mention the necessity of embedding media literacy elements at all levels of primary, secondary and higher education. Every level of education has to be supplemented with adjusted programmes and interactive products oriented towards enhancing skills of responsible media consumption.

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[66] Roman Shutov. In-depth interview.



5. In the Ukrainian media, there is a deficit of personnel who are able to recognise propaganda and fake news professionally, not to mention a lack of professionals in the field of strategic communications. These factors weaken the media sector and make it vulnerable to foreign interference. Additional investment is needed in educational programmes (fact-checking, OSINT courses and Internet security) to strengthen media literacy, and to give new impetus to coordination between professional unions and groups, and cooperation between NGOs. Regular meetings are needed between the authorities and media in order to develop the habit of using unified terminology in fighting disinformation. The educational programmes should be both short-term and long-term. The short-term educational programmes should have the media community as the target audience whereas the long-term initiatives should be oriented towards pupils and students, with the aim of increasing media literacy in general.
6. Apart from the media, the situation in law enforcement should be tackled. Representatives of the police, the Security Service of Ukraine and other relevant government bodies should also be properly trained to be able to counteract propaganda, fake news, and disinformation campaigns. In this regard, cooperation with European and NATO structures working in the field of strategic communications will be of added value. The existing road maps of cooperation have to be enriched with new initiatives in the area. Moreover, improving skills in preventing cyberattacks and responding to them adequately and efficiently is essential for the representatives from all security bodies, not only the 'cyberpolice'.
7. Another field in which the efforts should be applied is preventing the dissemination of fake news about Ukraine in foreign media. This can be done by encouraging the opening of contact points or branches for foreign media, which can learn from local experts. These measures would mean that foreign audiences would be able to get first-hand information about developments in Ukraine and reduce the likelihood of manipulation, fake news, and disinformation being spread. If such contact points are a medium-term goal, the state should immediately encourage the organisation of media tours to Ukraine for foreign journalists.



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# CONCLUSIONS

Among worrying security trends in Central and Eastern Europe cited in its report ‘GLOBSEC Megatrends 2018’<sup>[1]</sup>, the GLOBSEC Policy Institute names heightened confrontation in global security relations, the growing influence of cyber offensive capabilities and increased weaponisation of technologies to achieve political goals. In the recently changed political and security regional environment, national resilience systems in many countries remain fairly fragile to mushrooming sources of destructive foreign-initiated information influence.

In light of the mentioned trends, our study aims at scrutinising the level of national resilience to foreign, foremost Kremlin-engineered, information influence across 14 CEE countries. The sum of the national resilience of the 14 countries reveals *the degree of the defence immune system of the whole region*. While the report centers on Kremlin-led information invasions, it in many respects reveals the ability to resist any foreign-backed information influence.

The *elderly and national minorities are most often presented as the population groups most susceptible to Kremlin-led disinformation and propaganda* than the population at large. Older people in CEE countries tend to display nostalgic feelings for the Soviet/socialist past and usually are inexperienced users of modern technological tools. For instance, a survey conducted in 2016 in Lithuania showed that 45.8 % of the population aged 46 or older tend to agree that ‘in the Soviet Union life was better than today in Lithuania’.

National minorities are considered an easy target for Kremlin-backed disinformation, and this category goes far beyond ethnic Russians across the region. Even in those CEE countries where ethnic Russians represent a sizeable part of the population (Estonia, Latvia), experts rather speak of *Russian language-speaking minorities*, which often include ethnic Ukrainians, Belarusians, Moldovans, etc. It is important to take into account that Russian language-speakers are not a monolithic part of their respective societies but rather a heterogeneous group in many respects, including their political views and preferences and level of integration. In Lithuania, the Polish-speaking minority falls into the vulnerable category as well. In Georgia, ethnic Armenians and Azeris, who comprise around 11 % of the country’s population and are insufficiently integrated into Georgian society, are believed to be vulnerable groups to pro-Kremlin propaganda. In Azerbaijan, vulnerable ethnic groups include the Lazgins and Talish, while in Moldova, ethnic Ukrainians and Gagauz people are

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[1] “GLOBSEC Megatrends 2018.” 2018. GLOBSEC. <https://www.globsec.org/globsec-megatrends-2018/>.

more receptive to Kremlin-led messages than the population as a whole. In the absence of systemic actions to promote minority languages in some CEE states, national minorities have adopted Russian as a proxy language and have become heavy consumers of Russian media.

*Active followers of the Orthodox Christian church* (most notably, in Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) are another prominent vulnerable group to Kremlin-led disinformation. For instance, in Moldova, the church enjoys the highest level of trust among all social institutions. Therefore, it makes it very influential in Moldovan society, and the Moldovan Metropolitanate maintains close ideological and economic relations with Russia through ties with the Russian Orthodox Church.

An equally important societal group susceptible to Kremlin-led narratives is the group of *supporters of far-right ideology and so-called 'ideologies for hire'* – right-wing extremism, racist rhetoric, fascism, ultra-nationalism, 'conservatism', etc. Kremlin-led disinformation and propaganda is highly successful in the identification and consolidation of such groups around these ideological constructs and issues such as identity, religious fundamentalism, economic inequality, social security, immigration, and others.

Several country experts report that *young people under 25* are yet another group at risk. Individuals in this age group experience some emotional and psychological adjustment problems, usually were just graduated and still lack skills to resist various sorts of manipulation, including information and psychological ones. Although they are well experienced with new technology, this age group often lacks real-life competences that would allow them to critically process increasing flows of information. Furthermore, there are some other country-specific vulnerable groups. In Belarus, these include *army officers and military personnel*, while in South Caucasus countries, *those with close business and economic ties with Russia* are named among the vulnerable groups.

While acknowledging the quality and diversity of Kremlin-led disinformation methods, one should not exaggerate their sophistication. Experts express doubt that Russia actually possesses a specific media strategy towards any given CEE country. Usually only a very limited number of media products is designed for specific country-targeting. For instance, many identical narratives target the Baltic states in general rather than Lithuania or Latvia individually.

*The usage and popularity of Russian-language media platforms heavily determines the degree of population exposure to Kremlin-led messages.*

These indicators vary greatly across the countries. While, for instance, in Hungary or Romania, Russian-language media are virtually not present, in Belarus, Russian TV channels are the main source of information for around 40 % of the country's population. In three out of nine publicly accessible TV networks in Belarus, Russia-originated content prevails, while in all the remaining six it is also present to a large extent. In Moldova, five out of the top 10 TV channels heavily rebroadcast Russian TV channels.

In Latvia and Estonia, four out of the 10 most popular TV channels heavily broadcast Russian TV content and, therefore, occasionally spread Kremlin-led disinformation and propaganda. These channels enjoy a combined total viewing time of 24.8 % and 16.3 % in Latvia and Estonia, respectively. The substantial difference between the funding of the Latvian and Russia-originated channels is reported to be one of the reasons for the impressive attractiveness of Russian TV channels in Latvia. Since a Russian-speaking part of the population in Lithuania is many times less numerous than in Latvia and Estonia, Lithuanians are much less exposed to the Russian media environment, rarely use Russian social media, and generally are less susceptible to Russian traditional and digital media.

Virtually all CEE countries *lack quality systemic responses*. National institutions and regulations on information security are often underdeveloped. Often, the regulatory environment is outdated, thus preventing the relevant regulatory agencies from duly scrutinising disinformation channels for compliance with legislative norms. For instance, in Romania, with the exception of the National Audiovisual Council, the official regulator for the audiovisual sector, no other regulatory bodies monitor the quality and accuracy of information. In some cases when the institutional structure is more or less complete (such as in Lithuania), intra-institutional cooperation is inadequate.

Another common feature across the CEE countries is *a deficiency of national long-term strategies aimed at combating foreign-led disinformation campaigns and producing coherent narratives towards vulnerable groups* of the population. Only Estonia stands out with its noticeably better ranking in the respective Disinformation Resilience Index indicator among the 14 reviewed CEE countries due to its well-functioning institutional setup, regulations, and high quality of other systemic responses. In some cases, even if relevant national regulations are in place, they are just not followed.

In Moldova, although the objective to reach a general broadcast of 70 % of programs in the national language is stipulated in the respective national strategy, four out of the five most popular TV stations do not comply with this legal requirement.

To reach its audiences in European countries, *Russia exploits loopholes in EU regulations*. The EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive allows media to be registered in any EU member state as long as one of the media company's board members resides in that country. The Baltic states are vocal that this allowance prevents them from regulating media companies properly, since they are subject to the legislation of other countries of registration (e.g., United Kingdom or Sweden). In some instances, Lithuania and Latvia went as far as to temporarily block the broadcast of certain TV channels with Russia-originated content for spreading messages violating domestic legislation.

*Media self-regulatory mechanisms in the CEE countries are mostly ineffective*, the country analyses show. Although national journalist communities are usually governed by a journalist code of ethics and observing bodies have been established within journalist associations (such as the Czech Syndicate of Journalists or the Union of Journalists of Armenia), experts decry the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms to ensure media outlets comply with the respective decisions. In a number of countries (e.g., Belarus, Latvia) two rival journalist associations exist, which hampers the development of effective media self-regulation.

The experts positively assess *the role of civil society in withstanding foreign-triggered disinformation and manipulation campaigns*. A number of recent government and grassroots initiatives throughout the CEE countries introduced opulently media-literacy programmes and advanced digital skills to their national education systems. One successful example is the launch of the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, in February 2017.

While the populations of Belarus and Moldova are immersed in the Russian media sphere to a much larger extent than elsewhere in the CEE region, even in countries where Russian media are nearly not as present or where their popularity is marginal, *pro-Kremlin narratives occasionally reach local audiences through national media*. They retransmit Russia-originated narratives or unreliable news, either unintentionally as a consequence of flawed editorial policies, or on purpose, often for political reasons. For instance, the 'Soros' narrative has spread

well to media in the Visegrad countries and in Romania. Generally, the most popular radio and newspapers are less frequent transmitters of Kremlin-led disinformation across CEE countries than TV channels and online media.



## On research team:

This book is a result of the research which was carried out in May 2017–May 2018 by the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” and the Eurasian States in Transition research center (EAST Center) in cooperation with other CEE research centers in the framework of the project “Assessing Vulnerability and Resilience to Russian Disinformation Warfare: Practical Overview and Qualitative Evaluation of Critical Infrastructure”.

### **The Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”**,

lead organisation of the project. “Ukrainian Prism” is a network-based non-governmental think tank, the goal of which is to participate in providing democratic ground for development and implementation of foreign and security policies by government of Ukraine, implementation of international and nationwide projects and programs, directed at improvement of foreign policy analysis and expertise, enhancement of expert community participation in a decision-making process in the spheres of foreign policy, international relations, public diplomacy.



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### **The Eurasian States in Transition research center (EAST Center)**,

responsible for the scientific part of the project, including elaboration of methodology and scientific editing of the country chapters. The EAST Center is a Warsaw-based independent, interdisciplinary think-tank focused on Post-Soviet and East European studies. It concentrates on migration, media and communication studies including media disinformation in the Central and Eastern Europe, the study of domestic and foreign policies in the Eastern European countries as well as Eurasian integration research.



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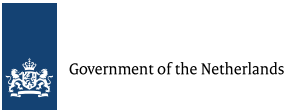
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# Disinformation Resilience Index

