

A credible and independent media is the best way to counter Russia's information strategy in the EU

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The concept of 'hybrid warfare', which incorporates traditional military strategies alongside media and information campaigns, has been a feature of discussions surrounding Russia's response to the Ukraine crisis. But if this form of aggressive information warfare is being pursued by the Kremlin then how should the EU and the West respond in defending its interests? [Katarzyna Sobieraj](#) writes that the key to countering Russia's information strategy is to strengthen credible and independent media sources in the EU while resisting the temptation to 'fight fire with fire' by producing pro-EU propaganda in response.



There is a growing anxiety among some observers in the EU that a disinformation strategy pursued by the Russian government since the Ukraine crisis might fragment and disintegrate the Union. It is claimed that Russia's use of targeted disinformation is seeking to influence public opinion within the member states with the aim of paralysing decision-making processes at the EU level.

Several examples of Russia's possible involvement are used to support this hypothesis. These include the recent [referendum](#) in which the Dutch people rejected the ratification of the Association Agreement with Ukraine, and the case of [Lisa](#), a 13-year-old girl of Russian origin allegedly kidnapped and raped by Arabic-speaking men, which caused massive demonstrations against Angela Merkel's asylum policy across Germany.

Russia's disinformation campaign unleashed during the annexation of Crimea is seen as part of its wider 'information warfare' and a key element of so called hybrid warfare – the term that refers to a mixture of military means, support for armed groups, and media campaigns, aimed particularly at Russian-speaking minorities. This has, under this reading, heightened awareness of the degrading effect of Russian state propaganda on Europe and highlighted the pivotal role that free and accountable media play in a democratic society.

Russia's foreign media strategy

How accurate is this reading of events and what really defines Russia's media strategy in practice? State media in Russia have become a core instrument for influencing public opinion. Misleading coverage has a long history of being used to generate public approval for the president; however, Moscow has also invested heavily in recent years in developing media that targets foreign audiences.

The aim of the Russian government is ultimately to develop media that can reach Russian speakers in its "near abroad" and provide them with the Kremlin's perspective on global and regional events. Moscow's determination to invest in its own media networks was reinforced in the 2000s, immediately following the colour revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, which were presented as examples of direct US involvement undermining Kremlin-friendly regimes. From 2013 the [Concept of Russia's Foreign Policy](#) includes media as a tool to influence foreign public opinion:

Russia will seek to ensure its objective perception in the world, develop its own effective means of information to influence public opinion abroad, strengthen the role of Russian mass media in the international information environment by providing them with essential state support, as well as actively participate in international information cooperation, and take necessary measures to counteract information threats to its sovereignty and security.

As a result, massive expansions were seen in media directed at foreign markets such as the television broadcaster [RT](#) and [Sputnik](#), a network of media platforms, radio productions, social media, and news agency content in local languages in 34 countries.

EU media policy

Reliable information that holds all power accountable is believed to be a cornerstone of democratic society and a deeply respected European value. But the evolution of the traditional media model worldwide, accompanied by the development of modern information technology, has resulted in vast amounts of information, often lacking factual accuracy or presenting intentionally misleading viewpoints, being made available for citizens. In many countries the general media environment is dominated by sensationalism and 'infotainment', with opinion often substituted for facts. And this has left an opening for those who wish to exploit the situation for propaganda purposes.



A variety of tools and methods can be used to attack European values, manipulate the public, undermine the concept of free, independent and pluralistic media, and to develop and provoke separatist and nationalist attitudes in the EU's neighbourhood. The impact of such disinformation is often underestimated and the actions to counterbalance the disinformation taken at the national and EU level are frequently insufficient.

As Elmar Brok, the Chair of the EP Committee for Foreign Affairs, has [stated](#): "we don't have an EU media policy and we cannot have such a unified media policy because it's against our principles and our free society. We must be able to create something which takes that into account but gives clear guidelines." And the first step toward this has been the establishment within the EEAS of a taskforce, the so called East StratComm Team, with the aim of monitoring the eastern neighbourhood for cases of disinformation and developing positive narratives to counterbalance these cases. However, much remains to be done.

How can Europe respond?

Ultimately, the EU's strategic communication plan should not focus only on Russia and the post-Soviet sphere, but should also take a broader look at the EU's neighbourhood and the world. The most effective combination would be based on four pillars.

First, to foster democracy, one needs to provide audiences with a plurality of views and options. Therefore, more effort is needed to strengthen the independent media, for instance by supporting independent journalists and developing capacity-building programmes for media actors. A [study by the European Endowment for Democracy](#) provides detailed proposals of what could be done in this area. Additionally, leading European media should expand their permanent network of correspondents abroad, which would enable them to report reliably on location and to counter disinformation with facts.

The second pillar should be to focus on media literacy education and training. This provides knowledge and skills, empowering the public to use its right to freedom of expression, to interpret media messages, and to react to disinformation. Only educated audiences are able to properly understand disinformation.

Third, the EU should continue to develop and reinforce its own soft power. Civil society can be empowered by long-term public and cultural diplomacy actions, such as scholarships and exchange programmes for students and young professionals, and initiatives supporting intercultural dialogue, promoting cultural links with the EU and common

heritage.

Last but not least, EU delegations should strengthen their commitment to explaining developments in the EU to the wider public. The EU must be able to communicate its policies more effectively and in a coherent manner, and ensure access to information in local languages. Moscow plays on various fears and frustrations of Western societies and claims its instruments and techniques are as legitimate as the ones employed by the West. To counterbalance it, the EU should promote its values through partnerships, transparency and education.

Politicians should certainly discuss sanctions against Russia, visas for Russian citizens, and membership prospects for the EU's eastern neighbours. But in parallel, the EU can promote its values by reinforcing its own soft power, developing a coherent and long-term information and cultural diplomacy strategy, and taking steps to improve pluralism in the media space. And above all, it should be emphasised that in no way can propaganda be countered with anti-propaganda.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Katarzyna Sobieraj – *University of Wrocław*

Katarzyna Sobieraj is Head of parliamentary office of Bogdan Zdrojewski, MEP, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation to relations with Belarus. She is a PhD researcher in political communication and media studies at the University of Wrocław, Poland. She tweets at [@ksobieraj](https://twitter.com/ksobieraj).



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