

# Russian Disinformation War in Europe, Its Determinants, and Consequences



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In light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it seems that other European states are finally being forced to take action against Vladimir Putin's dictatorial regime and confront Russian influence both on and off their soil. While in 2014, following the events of the Euromaidan, the subsequent Russian attack and support for separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk were questioned, or, perhaps objected to as to the necessity or effectiveness of sanctions. In the case of current events, there is an overwhelming consensus among European countries as to the necessity of sanctions.

The spreading of Russian disinformation is a phenomenon by which Russia is trying to control European countries and undermine the level of freedom there. Mapping trends in the spread of disinformation and proposing possible solutions therefore has an important role to play in countering Russian influence on European levels of freedom and trust in institutions, factors that ultimately affect the overall well-being of these countries. The specificity of the disinformation disseminated with the war in Ukraine is also intended to end Western support for Ukraine and to reduce the level of freedom in that country as well. Preventing the spread of disinformation about this specific event is so important to the overall defeat of Russia as we know it today.

The massive expulsion of the majority of the so-called 'Russian diplomats' (even though they were operating in various European countries in excessive and unnecessarily large numbers for their roles) was also a strong message and a step against Russian influence. Rather than diplomats, these people served as intelligence officers and spies for the Russian Federation, so their expulsion is not only a logical step, but a necessary one.

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IT IS PRECISELY AS A LOBBYING TOOL OF RUSSIA THAT DISINFORMATION CAN BE PERCEIVED EVEN AFTER THE START OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Although public opinion was strongly on the side of Ukraine in the initial stage of the war, more than a year after the invasion began, a change and a gradual decline in support for Ukraine in European countries may be observed. Even at the beginning, one could see a milder resistance from Hungary – and even Germany – to the speed and decisiveness of certain steps, while Serbia never made a secret its support for Russia, and the same was true for the public opinion in the Serbian society. However, at the moment, the mood in these countries is getting even bleaker, as public opinion is shifting toward support of Russia in countries where, initially, support for Ukraine was strong and the societies were on board with the pro-EU and pro-Ukraine position.

Meanwhile, disinformation, which had already been a common tool of Russian war and power methods before the war even began, has undoubtedly played



## HUNGARIAN PRIME MINISTER VIKTOR ORBÁN HAS BEEN LINKED TO PROMOTING NATIONALIST AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES, OFTEN USING FEAR-MONGERING TACTICS TO BOLSTER HIS POLITICAL STANDING

a significant role in this shift, and its role and quantity increased since then. The motivation behind its dissemination is, undoubtedly, to sway Western public opinion in favor of Russia and against Ukraine, so that voters in Western countries will support those politicians who openly advocate an end to support Ukraine or indirect actions that directly threaten Ukraine's struggle for freedom. Certain politicians (for example, far-right Marine Le Penn in France, or the Austrian Freedom Party, which was forced out of government because of the scandal over its links to Russian oligarchs) had already been secretly supported by Russia before the full-scale war broke out, and their core electoral clientele and power has, therefore, long been built by Russia.

Nonetheless, the massive spread of Russian disinformation and bribery of politicians is not in itself the real reason why some countries are susceptible to disinformation and Russian influence while others are not. It is only a symptom, not a cause. It is, therefore, crucial to map out the strengths of information dissemination and Russian influence, as well as identify the determinants and consequences of these factors in selected European countries.

A vertical relationship between weak institutions, strength of disinformation dissemination, support for pro-Russian politicians, and lower support for Ukraine can be assumed. Therefore, it is important to examine this hypothesis and its individual parts more closely in selected countries with current particularly low support for Ukraine by public opinion. Only then can possible policy recommendations that could break this relationship and prevent the spread of Russian influence be proposed.

### **RUSSIAN MOTIVATION FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION AMID WAR IN UKRAINE**

First of all, it should be noted that the function of spreading disinformation for the Russian Federation is twofold – internal and external. Internal disinformation can be seen as propaganda to influence its own citizens and maintain power, whereas external disinformation as a lobbying tool to counter Western interference or sanctions. Even before the war waged on Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's regime had already been struggling with severe internal problems, which stemmed mainly from international isolation, a poorly functioning economy, pervasive corruption, and the oligarchizing of the entire country<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/putins-created-economic-crisis-and-left-moscow-no-easy-way-out>

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Opposition and dislike of the regime have been suppressed both by brute force and repression (as is the case of the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny, the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, among others), but also by propaganda – including the spread of disinformation. The second, more obvious function of disinformation is external, which is to alibi Russian policy abroad and thus mitigate possible sanctions and other actions that Western states are taking (or might take) against Russia for its violations of human rights and international agreements.

Before the start of the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine, the internal function of disinformation was more important, but after the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the external function slowly began to gain

momentum, as it was essentially a lobbying tool against the Western states. It is precisely as a lobbying tool of Russia that disinformation can be perceived even after the start of the war in Ukraine, when the external function of disinformation became as important as the internal one.

The recently revealed *Ukrainian Government Office for Combating Disinformation* report<sup>2</sup> on the dissemination of Russian disinformation in Europe exposed a concerning list of individuals associated with such activities. In addition to former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and Prague-based journalist Bradley Blankenship, other names featured on the blacklist include Hungarian politician Viktor Orbán and economist Jeffrey Sachs.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been linked to promoting nationalist and anti-immigrant narratives, often using fear-mongering tactics to bolster his political standing. His rhetoric aligns with the narratives often propagated by Russian disinformation campaigns, which seek to sow division within the European Union and undermine its unity.

The association of these figures with Russian propaganda is not accidental. Russian disinformation campaigns have a history of exploiting political divisions and amplifying fringe narratives to destabilize European nations and erode public trust in their governments and media. By utilizing these figures as conduits for their messaging, the disinformation networks can reach a wider audience and manipulate public perceptions.

<sup>2</sup> Kačmár, T. (2022) "Kdo ve světě šíří ruské dezinformace? Na černé listině jsou Fico i novinář z Prahy", [in]: CNN. Available [online]: [https://cnn.iprima.cz/kdo-na-ve-sve-te-siri-ruske-dezinformace-na-cerne-listine-jsou-fico-i-novinar-z-prahy-114148?utm\\_source=www.seznam.cz&utm\\_medium=sekce-z-internetu](https://cnn.iprima.cz/kdo-na-ve-sve-te-siri-ruske-dezinformace-na-cerne-listine-jsou-fico-i-novinar-z-prahy-114148?utm_source=www.seznam.cz&utm_medium=sekce-z-internetu) [in Czech]



## THE VERY WORD 'DISINFORMATION' AND ITS ORIGINS ARE UNDOUBTEDLY LINKED TO RUSSIA

As the spread of Russian disinformation continues to pose a significant threat to European democracies<sup>3</sup>, identifying and challenging the fallacies espoused by these politicians is paramount. It necessitates robust efforts from governments, media outlets, and civil society to foster critical thinking, media literacy, and transparency to counter the corrosive impact of disinformation on Europe's political landscape. Only through collective vigilance and collaboration can Europe fortify itself against the insidious influence of Russian disinformation campaigns.

### EAST VERSUS WEST?

It could be said that Russia's influence is stronger in the former communist states that were under Soviet domination for a long time, and Russia still feels a form of superiority towards them and tries to bring them under its influence. This is evidenced by the frequent appearance of the names of Eastern politicians on the list above. This hypothesis should, therefore, be confirmed in the case of the spread of disinformation about the war in Ukraine.

According to the Eurobarometer survey<sup>4</sup>, conducted among EU member states and focused on questions related to the war in Ukraine, there is some skepticism towards material support of Ukraine or Ukraine's possible EU membership. Moreover, there are issues related to trust in sources of information about the war in Ukraine – such as trust in the government, the EU, journalists, and NGOs.

In the first group of opinion questions, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia are profiled with particularly low support for Ukraine. These are the countries that also stand out with a high level of distrust towards the information about the conflict from the government, journalists, and NGOs, among others. Interestingly, the same low level of trust is also displayed by the countries where Ukraine's assistance enjoys high support (like the Czech Republic). Thus, distrust of institutions is certainly a factor in why the support for Ukraine is low in these states. However, it is not the only reason.

Another reason that may help uncover why these states are more reluctant to support Ukraine is identified by the World Press Freedom Index<sup>5</sup>. Here too, the aforementioned countries rank lower in journalistic freedom and are more susceptible to the influence of Russian disinformation due to their lack of independent media, combined

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<sup>4</sup> The Eurobarometer survey was conducted among EU member states and focused on questions related to the war in Ukraine, skepticism towards supporting Ukraine, or Ukraine's possible EU membership. Also examined trust in sources of information about the war in Ukraine, such as trust in the government, the EU, journalists, and NGOs. See: European Commission (2022) *Eurobarometer: Europeans Approve EU's Response to the War in Ukraine*. Available [online]: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_2784](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_2784)

<sup>5</sup> *The World Press Freedom Index* measures press freedom using political, economic, legislative, socio-cultural, and security indicators among 180 countries worldwide. See: <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2022>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, disinformation claiming that Ukraine and NATO are to blame for the war occurs. See: <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/fake/>

with low trust in traditional institutions and sources of information. Furthermore, the economic situation undoubtedly plays a role as well – Greece, Slovakia, and Hungary are among the less developed (in the case of Hungary and Slovakia, post-communist) countries<sup>6</sup>, which may account for the general resistance to such forms of foreign aid.

### **UNDERSTANDING AND RESISTING RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION: FOUR DETERMINANTS**

The very word ‘disinformation’ and its origins are undoubtedly linked to Russia. The term ‘disinformation’ means dissemination of deliberately false information, especially by state actors or their offshoots vis-à-vis a foreign state or the media, with the aim of influencing the decisions or opinions of those who receive it<sup>7</sup>. It is noteworthy that this now internationally used term probably derives from the Russian дезинформация (*disinformation*), which was first recorded in 1949 (as reported, for example, in the Oxford English Dictionary).

Despite its prominence in today’s Europe and the world, there are, however, several aspects that may help resist Russian disinformation and propaganda. These include unbiased media, economic stability, trust in institutions, and appreciating freedom.

#### ***THE 1<sup>ST</sup> DETERMINANT: UNBIASED MEDIA***

According to the 2023 World Press Freedom Index<sup>8</sup>, Bulgaria placed 71<sup>st</sup> in the ranking of press freedom, whereas Hungary ranked 72<sup>nd</sup>, Cyprus –55<sup>th</sup>, Greece

<sup>6</sup> Blaha F., Pánek M., and M. Opatrný (2022) *Strategic Autonomy and the V4 Economies*, Prague: Center for Economic and Market Analysis.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/disinformation>

<sup>8</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2023) *The World Press Freedom Index*. Available [online]: <https://rsf.org/en/index>



RUSSIAN-BACKED POLITICIANS AND GROUPS OFTEN ATTACK AND SEEK TO SMEAR THE CREDIBILITY OF THE MEDIA AS A SOURCE OF RELIABILITY

– 107<sup>th</sup>, Slovenia – 50<sup>th</sup>, and only Slovakia is doing well as it boasts 17<sup>th</sup> place. Thus, the situation in most countries cannot be described as ideal in terms of journalistic freedom. The media cannot fully fulfil their role as a source of information either because of repression or because of the government’s denigration, whereas society does not have or does not trust the media as a source of information and more easily believes disinformation sources.

It is clear, therefore, that one determinant of the spread of disinformation is indicated by the possible plateaus where disinformation can spread. To this end, in many countries, Russia operates its own websites or indirectly funds domestic ones<sup>9</sup>. However, this factor can be neutralized to a certain extent if there is a sufficient degree of

<sup>9</sup> Klepper, D. (2022) “Russian Disinformation Spreading in New Ways Despite Bans”, [in]: apnews.com. Available [online]: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-misinformation-european-union-government-and-politics-e5a1330e834fde428aab599b5c423530>



## STRONG INSTITUTIONS ARE A DETERMINANT OF SUCCESSFUL ECONOMIC GROWTH AND A WELL-FUNCTIONING COUNTRY

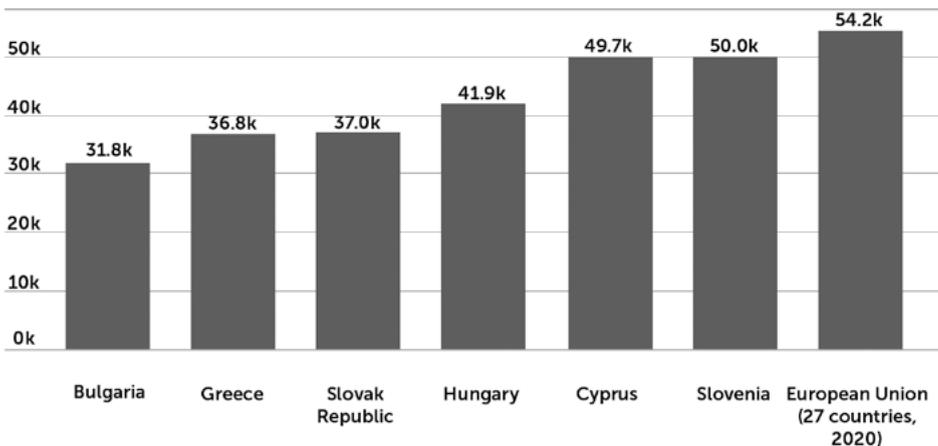
journalistic independence and reliable and strong independent media in the countries themselves, which report truthfully and set the record straight. Citizens then primarily draw their sources of information from these media.

On the other hand, countries with less independence and credibility of mainstream media will then, logically, be more susceptible to the spread and strength of Russian information warfare. This is also why Russian-backed politicians and groups often attack and seek to smear the credibility of the media as a source of reliability, as this is one of the determinants of the success of the spread of their disinformation. These are also countries with weaker civil societies whose development is, or has recently been, blocked by the government.

### ***THE 2<sup>ND</sup> DETERMINANT: IN POORER COUNTRIES, PEOPLE TEND TO LOOK FOR THE FALSE CAUSES OF THEIR DISCOMFORT***

Another factor influencing the speed and strength of the spread of Russian disinformation is the country's economic maturity. After all, public opinion is more favorable towards Russia in eastern countries, where GDP per capita is still often lower than

Figure 1: GDP per capita in selected countries compared to the EU average (2022)



Source: OECD<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> <https://data.oecd.org/gdp/gross-domestic-product-gdp.htm>

in western countries, which did not go through communism and its negative economic consequences [See: Figure 1].

Moreover, the richer states can afford a much greater and more robust level of education, which serves as a useful antidote to the spread of disinformation. Because of greater wealth per capita, there are also fewer socially excluded groups that are more easily influenced by disinformation, and after all, a strong economy also produces a large media that can reliably disseminate truthful information.

All countries whose support for Ukraine in the Eurobarometer survey was particularly low have a GDP per capita below the EU average. While the reasons why this is the case vary, there is some correlation between the strength of the reluctance to support Ukraine and the low strength of the economy.

In stronger economies, there is also a greater demand for more luxurious goods – such as private forms of education, special interest lectures, scholarly articles, books, and other sources of information that develop critical thinking. This is a logical phenomenon, where poorer countries are more likely to demand material security and simply forfeit it to those who offer it or impose it on those who do not (as disinformationists often do, using the example of the need for Russian imports and their banning).

### ***THE 3<sup>RD</sup> DETERMINANT: TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS PREVENTS THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION***

According to many economists<sup>11</sup>, strong institutions are a determinant of successful economic growth and a well-functioning country. Institutions such as the govern-

ment, courts, among others, or society's trust in these institutions, are also important factors in the spread of disinformation and the susceptibility of the country and society to Russian efforts to wage information warfare.

Trust in institutions serves as a powerful counterforce to the spread of Russian disinformation. As evident from the OECD report<sup>12</sup> on trust in institutions, societies with higher levels of trust are better equipped to resist the allure of false narratives and propaganda. When citizens have confidence in their governments, media, and other public institutions, they are more likely to critically evaluate information sources, discern credible news from disinformation, and resist manipulation by external actors.

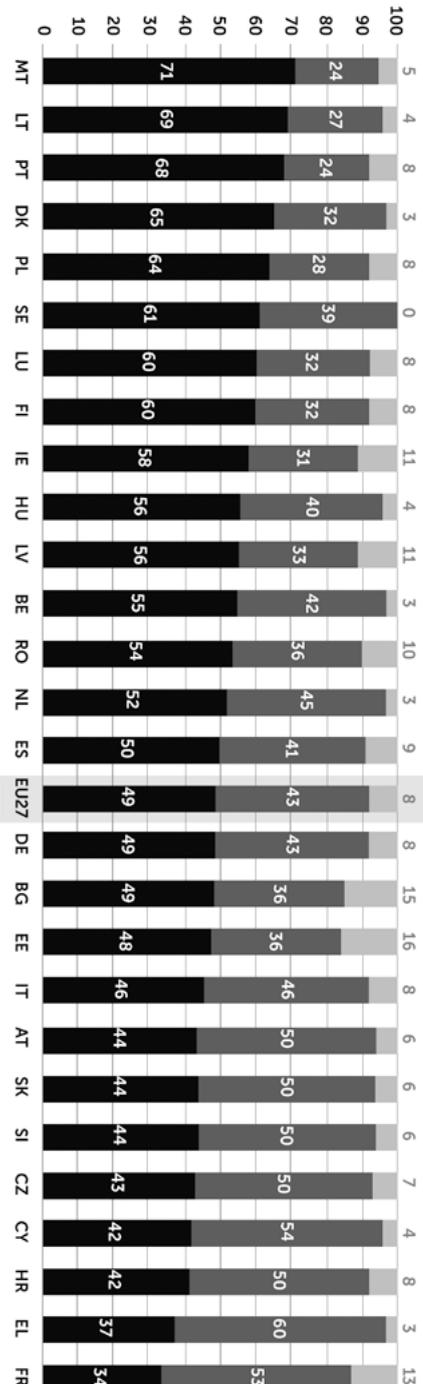
On the other hand, countries where trust in institutions is eroded are more vulnerable to the divisive tactics of Russian disinformation. The report highlights that a lack of trust in institutions not only weakens societal cohesion, but also engenders fertile ground for disinformation to take root [See: Figure 2]. Disinformation campaigns capitalize on the existing grievances and polarizations within a society, amplifying mistrust, and misinformation for their own gains.

Moreover, the impact of disinformation on trust is a two-way street. As disinformation spreads, it erodes trust in institutions and media, further undermining the democratic fabric of a nation. This vicious cycle perpetuates itself, creating a challenging environment for effective governance and public discourse.

<sup>11</sup> <https://economics.mit.edu/sites/default/files/publications/institutions-as-the-fundamental-cause-of-long-run-pdf>

<sup>12</sup> OECD (2021) *Measuring Trust in Government to Reinforce Democracy*. Available [online]: [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b407f99c-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/b407f99c-en&\\_csp\\_=\\_c12e05718c887e57d9519eb8c987718b6itemlGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#figure-d1e889](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b407f99c-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/b407f99c-en&_csp_=_c12e05718c887e57d9519eb8c987718b6itemlGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#figure-d1e889)

Figure 2: Trust in the European Union (national results)



Source: Eurobarometer survey<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2693>



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In the Eurobarometer survey, 60% of citizens in Greece, 54% in Cyprus, 50% in Slovakia and Slovenia, 40% in Hungary, and 36% in Bulgaria do not trust the European Union<sup>14</sup>. In addition to the weak trust in the media, NGOs and the government mentioned above, the majority of the countries selected do not trust the European Union and, therefore, do not trust any policy it undertakes. Logically, their citizens will then be easily tempted not to support Ukraine if it is initiated by the EU.

The premise is then as follows: strong and reliable institutions inspire trust in society and serve as a reliable source of information and legislation for citizens. However, if the institution is weak and trust in it is eroded, citizens and society tend to slide towards alternative sources of information and are more reluctant to believe in misinformation. This premise is borne out by Russia's unending efforts to undermine

trust in traditional political institutions and their representatives by spreading disinformation aimed directly at them or even by bribing and supporting its puppet politicians, who will bury or dominate these institutions. Social institutions include think tanks, which should undoubtedly participate in the public debate on the credibility of institutions and help defend it. This is especially true if Russia is already succeeding in controlling politicians in some countries.

***THE 4<sup>TH</sup> DETERMINANT: FREER COUNTRIES VALUE FREEDOM MORE***

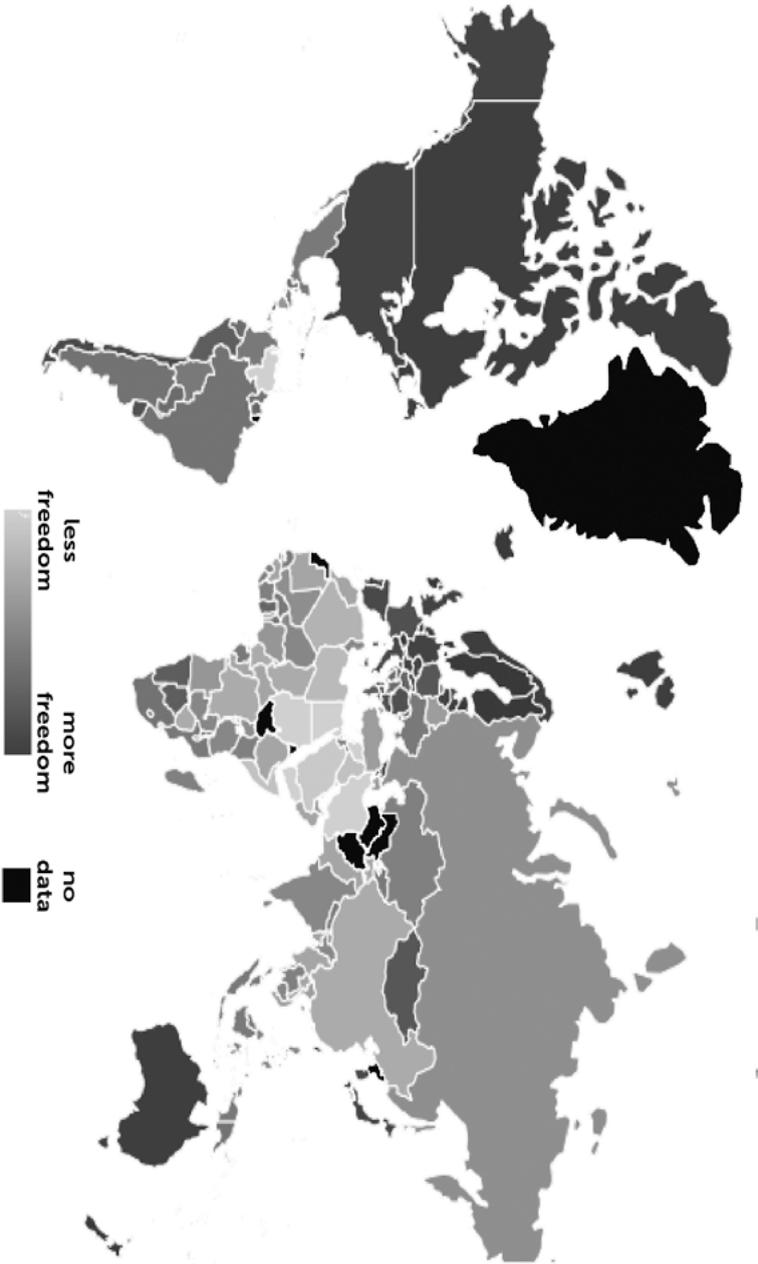
The arguments in this article may seem repetitive, but this is because freedom is a prerequisite for trust in institutions, economic growth, independent media, and, ultimately, quality education. Specifically, the *Human Freedom Index*<sup>15</sup>. A free society is, therefore, an indirect cause of less susceptibility to disinformation. It can be achieved by means of supporting the abovementioned four determinants. If this materializes, it contributes to a stronger civil society through building greater tolerance. Moreover, there is a much more secure and stable environment that does not lead people to fear and panic when threatened with poverty, hunger, or arbitrary invasion, as Russian propaganda often tries to suggest.

The 2022 *Human Freedom Index* ranks Cyprus 28<sup>th</sup>, Slovakia 37<sup>th</sup>, Slovenia 39<sup>th</sup>, Bulgaria 41<sup>st</sup>, Greece 57<sup>th</sup>, and Hungary 67<sup>th</sup>. There are 165 countries ranked in the entire index, so it could be said that this is not a terrible result. However, most of the

<sup>15</sup> *The Human Freedom Index* is conducted by the American CATO Institute and measures freedom among countries by the following metrics: rule of law, security and safety, movement, religion, association, assembly, and civil society, expression and information, relationships, size of government, legal system and property rights, sound money, freedom to trade internationally, and regulation. See: <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/2023-01/human-freedom-index-2022.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Figure 3: Human Freedom Index Worldwide (2022)



Source: Human Freedom Index 2022

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/2023-01/human-freedom-index-2022.pdf>

Western European countries are ranked much higher, and these countries are thus in the company of less developed African and Asian countries [See: Figure 3].

Therefore, in practice, the abovementioned determinants should be featured high in the states whose societies do not succumb to Russian disinformation and, as a result, their governments and politicians are not discouraged from supporting Ukraine. Meanwhile, it would be low in the states where support for Ukraine has declined significantly or has always been low since the beginning of the war. If this hypothesis is true, then effective countering of disinformation lies in strengthening these determinants and setting robust rules to ensure quality education, media independence, economic growth, trust in institutions, and a free society in the states.

In addition to the rule of law, civil society movements and associations, and therefore think tanks, also help to protect a free society, and through their lobbying and campaigning they can sometimes defend the ideas of freedom better than governments.

### HOW TO BREAK THE CYCLE?

As already suggested, the solution to the unfolding Russian information war, which has intensified especially since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is to strengthen institutions and legislation that ensure trust in institutions, economic growth and wealth, an independent and free media, and an overall strong civil and tolerant society. All of these determinants correlate with the level of trust in disinformation and also support for Ukraine. Therefore, concrete steps to combat disinformation should include:

- **Supporting the independence of media and journalists through freedom of the press and freedom of speech and**

**fighting against Russian-funded media that try to undermine this trust and directly spread disinformation.** Here, in the current situation, a complete ban on Russian funding is necessary; a direct ban on these media outlets would seem counterproductive and, moreover, would not protect their existence. However, limiting their funding and investigating whether their sources come from Russia could eliminate them indirectly and expose them to the whole of society, so that they know where the source of the information actually comes from.

- **Ensuring confidence in traditional institutions (such as the judiciary, government, and media) through greater transparency and independence.** This step is somewhat more complex, because it goes beyond the scope of one or more laws, and in the case of many European ones, it requires comprehensive reform and also long-term work over a period of a few years. However, this does not mean that European countries should not try.
- **The removal of regulations and restrictions that hinder the development of a free and strong civil society, as well as economic development and growth.** This step assumes reducing barriers to freedom both on a personal and economic level. Richer and freer states will lead their citizens to better critical thinking than is the case in economically poor autocracies.

Many of the steps mentioned above go hand in hand or even intertwine on some topics. Moreover, they can help not only against the spread of misinformation, but also have other important benefits. The problem for some of the reforms may be that they require the work of the government to implement, and some European

governments and societies have already been heavily controlled by Russia (for example, Hungary, Germany, or Serbia). In this case, the role of think tanks and civil society movements comes into play to push governments to implement them and help change public opinion from below.

### **CONCLUSIONS: AN UNCERTAIN TIME AND INFORMATION OVERLOAD**

Nowadays, many platforms and tools exist or are being created to facilitate communication and speed up the dissemination of information – be it the Internet, social networks, emails, electronic handheld devices or even live broadcasting. Thanks to these technological advances, people are able to improve the quality of their lives and the way they function in today's societies. The downside, however, is that in a world where information is disseminated easily and on a massive scale, some of it can often be misleading – at times, by design. The solution should not be to try to limit the technological advances that allow this as a side effect, but rather to find new alternative solutions and make society and individuals more resistant to the spread of misinformation.

In Europe, disinformation has long been spread with the support of the Russian Federation, which has used it in its information war to undermine confidence in the institutions of Western states. This, in turn, will then be more easily attacked by the politicians it had already installed or bribed. This approach further undermines trust in state institutions and society, and the citizens of European countries are becoming more inclined to believe these alternative sources of information that Russia will disseminate, and to look for the cause of their misery wherever the Russian Federation wants. At the moment, the Russian Federation wants Europeans to see the causes of the economic crisis and other unpleasantness

in Ukraine. Next time, it may be Poland, Georgia, or the Baltic States, for example.

This is why we need to make our societies more resilient through support for independent media, trust in institutions, a free and strong civil society, and economic growth. By supporting these factors, it will be possible to reverse the horizontal relationship of weak institutions/strength of disinformation dissemination/support for pro-Russian politicians/lower support for Ukraine. The role in this process should not only be played by the government, but also by think tanks, which should try to participate in society-wide reforms and be credible carriers of information and, if necessary, refute untrustworthy sources and arguments.



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