

Populist Conspiracy Narratives and Other Forms of Disinformation in Croatia



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Disinformation affects many Western liberal democracies. It undermines public trust in important values of free societies, the institutional frameworks of the European Union (EU) and NATO, civil liberties, different minorities, and the market economy. Disinformation

activities derive primarily from populist advocates of authoritarian solutions, including the Kremlin regime.

In this context, populist conspiracy narratives in the Croatian political context may also be relevant for a broader EU and NATO framework.

The article describes the context of disinformation and populism, the EU and Croatian policy to counter disinformation, the Croatian political context and mentions certain examples of disinformation.

Policy solutions for Croatia and the European Union could include counterintelligence measures focused on detecting, confronting, containing, and downsizing this issue, all in line with the EU policy framework. While Croatia has started to develop its institutional structure and tackle disinformation by fostering media literacy, there is still an open space for a comprehensive policy direction, which could include nongovernmental and the private sector, and create a multidisciplinary policy network.

Such an inclusive solution would foster voluntary cooperation and a strong civil society, instead of restricting freedom of expression. This article represents the first Croatian initiative in the liberal policy direction.

UNDERSTANDING DISINFORMATION AND POPULISM

Disinformation is false or misleading information, which if left unverified, has the potential to sow confusion in public dialogue, political polarization and distrust of the political system and democratic institutions¹. It can also be used to question the existence

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¹ Atlantic Council, Disinformation. Available [online]: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/issue/disinformation/>



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of the European project². Moreover, as European Commission's Vice President Věra Jourová framed it: most disinformation activities aim to "blur lines, polarize, make us indifferent". Moreover, it shall be borne in

mind that: "Democracy is not given, and we have to fight for it if we want to preserve it"³.

Disinformation is often connected with populism, according to which a society is divided into two homogeneous and opposing groups – honest people and a corrupt elite. Although they may acknowledge differences between individual political elites (e.g. Christian Democrats, Liberals, or Social Democrats), populists do not differentiate politicians and claim that all of them are "the same". They often use the rhetoric of chaos, crisis, and hopelessness, blame "corrupt and incompetent" political elites ("oligarchy, cliques") for the situation, and they want to "return alienated politics to the people".⁴

Populists often use generalized, simplified and polarizing conclusions with regards to political, economic and sociological facts, as well as standards of liberal democracies throughout the Western world. Therefore, they often trivialize specific (positive) information about public policies, in order to justify their completely negative understanding of reality, which consists of creating exaggerated, irrational, imprecise and meaningless ideological dilemmas.

At the same time, it is worth to mention that a growing number of organizations, think tanks, and institutions have been involved in the detection of and fight against disinformation, such as the Czech think tank European Values within the Kremlin Watch project, The Kremlin Playbook⁵ of the

² European Commission (2018) "Action Plan Against Disinformation", [in]: JOIN, No. 36. Available [online]: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

³ Jourová, V. (2020) *Dinsinfo Horizon: Responding to Future Threats*, a conference paper. Available [online]: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_160

⁴ Grbeša, M. and B. Šalaj (2020) *Ideološki izazov; Agencija za elektroničke medije*, UNICEF. Available [online]: <https://www.medijiskapismenost.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ideoloski-izazov.pdf>

⁵ European External Action Service, EU vs Disinfo. Available [online]: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>

Centre for Strategic & International Studies', the European External Action Service with the EU vs Disinfo portal⁶, and the Atlantic Council's Disinfo Portal⁷.

DISINFORMATION'S 100+ YEAR-OLD BACKGROUND

One could claim that there is nothing new regarding disinformation. It is true. However, such generalizations often ignore, relativize, and trivialize this increasingly common political phenomenon, which has a specific source. Although not always, disinformation activities often derive from advocates of authoritarian solutions, including the Kremlin regime. There is a deep and complex background, which has already created narratives before, mostly by Soviet and then Russian intelligence, in order to undermine liberal democratic institutions and civic values of open societies.

The background of modern disinformation warfare is rooted in the world's premier communist regime, more than hundred years ago. The most relevant source is John Sipher, head of the CIA station in Moscow, with a 28-year career in the CIA's National Clandestine Service. As he explained,

"[a]fter the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Vladimir Lenin established a secret police service called the Cheka to be his main weapon of repression and terror. Over the decades, the Soviet and Russian secret services developed tools and habits based on their Chekist experience that set them apart from their counterparts in the West. Rather than focusing on collecting and analyzing intelligence, they developed expertise in propaganda,

*agitation, subversion, repression, deception and murder. The Cheka and its successors sowed chaos abroad with propaganda, disinformation and sabotage while managing mass arrests and gulags at home. Indeed, the Kremlin deployed an army of spies and recruited informants around the world to steal secrets, spread disinformation and support terrorists and rogue regimes"*⁸.

The methods Cheka used were continued after the Cold War by the KGB, mainly by confronting the CIA as the central place for confronting the spread of communism. One K.G.B. spy is current Russian President Vladimir Putin. He ultimately had a hard time with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as his entire secret service. As Sipher adds:

⁸ Sipher, J. (2019) "Putin's One Weapon: The 'Intelligence State'", [in]: *New York Times*. Available [online]: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/opinion/putin-russia-security-services.html>

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⁶ Atlantic Council, *Disinfo Portal*. Available [online]: <https://disinfoportal.org/>

⁷ Sipher, J. (2019) "Putin's One Weapon: The 'Intelligence State'", [in]: *New York Times*. Available [online]: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/opinion/putin-russia-security-services.html>

"A decade after the Soviet Union fell, Mr. Putin rose to power and recruited many of his former K.G.B. colleagues to help rebuild the state. The result is a regime with the policies and philosophy of a supercharged secret police service, a regime that relies on intelligence operations to deal with foreign policy challenges and maintain control at home"⁹.

The Baltic and the Central Eastern European countries that belong to the Three Seas Initiative immediately turned to the West when the totalitarian Kremlin-led control disappeared. In addition to close relations with the neighboring Nordic and Western European countries, these states have developed a strong and geopolitically important foreign policy partnership with the United States, without which communism would not have fallen. The spread of U.S. led liberal democracy, the EU and NATO enlargement to these countries has been a source of disappointment for Russia. Therefore, President Putin has used the strengthening of his authoritarian and crony regime to put pressure on Baltic and Eastern European countries that are now part of the EU and NATO, or have ambitions to become members, such as the countries of the Eastern Partnership.

Croatia is a part of the Three Seas Initiative and its EU and NATO membership additionally serves as an obligation for solidarity with Eastern European countries, which have suffered under Soviet rule. Although Croatia, within former Yugoslavia, was not a part of the Soviet bloc and had a domestic "peoples" style of communism or socialism, Croatia has been facing populist advocacies for closer ties with the authoritarian Russian regime while undermining the EU-NATO framework. Therefore, Croatia, the Western Balkan and the whole Eastern Eu-

rope region face the same national security challenge.

EU POLICY AGAINST DISINFORMATION

Based on the previously mentioned vulnerabilities towards disinformation it is important to look at the role the EU plays in fighting the influences of disinformation. The European Commission's Action Plan Against Disinformation provides four policy guidelines for the EU and its member states:

- I. **Improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyze and expose disinformation** – the Strategic Communication Task Force and Intelligence and Situation Center within the European External Action Service, Member States);
- II. **Strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation** - Rapid Alert System for addressing disinformation, working within the existing networks, the European Parliament and NATO, stronger Member States' communication on Union values and policies, strategic communications in the Union's neighborhood;
- III. **Mobilizing private sector to tackle disinformation** (online platforms and advertisers tackling the disinformation and increasing transparency of political advertising);
- IV. **Raising awareness and improving societal resilience** (better understanding of the disinformation sources, specialized trainings, conferences, debates, supporting independent media and quality journalism, supporting multidisciplinary teams of independent fact-checkers and researchers, cross-border cooperation and functional European network of fact checkers,

⁹ Ibid.

digital platforms connected with fact checkers, rapid implementation of the revised Audio-visual Media Service Directive which requires promotion of media literacy skills.

In short, it can be seen that the Commission's Action Plan is focused on strengthening European and national institutions, especially policy coordination among different institutions, improving online media transparency and raising awareness, especially through media literacy, quality journalism and supporting fact checkers.

Besides the Commission, the Council of the EU regularly provides its conclusions regarding disinformation related topics. The Council's 2019 Conclusions on democracy see disinformation as a growing challenge to democracy, together with issues related to the undermining of democratic institutions and legitimizing autocratic regimes, interference with judiciaries, reducing me-

dia pluralism, and reduced transparency of financing political campaigns¹⁰.

Moreover, the Council's 2020 conclusions (during the Croatian EU Presidency) state that

*"the exposure of citizens to a large amount of disinformation, especially in times of a major global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They also emphasizes the importance of a systematic approach to the development of media literacy, the importance of collaboration between online platforms, experts and competent authorities as well as the importance of developing an independent fact-checking procedure in order to limit the spread of online disinformation campaigns, while respecting freedom of expression.. it is necessary to intensify work on empowering citizens of all ages with media literacy and critical thinking" and even "strengthening professional journalism, independent media, investigative reporting and media pluralism, facilitating citizens' access to quality, credible and diversified information sources and building public trust contribute to the protection of democracy"*¹¹.

In short, Council conclusions focus on the importance of media literacy, professional quality journalism, including independent media pluralism and information diversification. This clearly proves that the EU does not aim to reduce freedom of media by regulating their content, but to foster its transparency and responsibility in relation

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¹⁰ Council of the European Union (2019) *Council Conclusions on Democracy*, October 14, No. 12836/19; Available [online]: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12836-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

¹¹ Council of the European Union (2020) *Council Conclusions on Media Literacy in an Ever-Changing World*, May 26, No., 8274/20. Available [online]: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44117/st08274-en20.pdf>

to the challenge, which undermines democratic institutions, including free media.

CROATIAN POLITICAL CONTEXT AND RISKS OF DISINFORMATION

Since Croatia is a member of the European Union, a closer look will be taken at Croatian policy towards disinformation. According to the findings featured in the Kremlin Watch¹², a strategic project conducted by the Czech think tank European Values¹³, which includes policy assessments of Croatia with regards to Russian disinformation activities, Croatia has signed a letter, which warns about disinformation problems, its efforts to discredit the EU and the transatlantic community. As the authors of the analysis observe: "Croatian leadership thus understands the threat posed by Russia, even if actions fall short of the required efforts"¹⁴. Moreover,

"a systematic approach to the development of media literacy, the importance of collaboration between online platforms, experts and competent authorities as well as the importance of developing an independent fact-checking procedure in order to limit the spread of online disinformation campaigns, while respecting freedom of expression...it is necessary to intensify work on empowering citizens of all ages with media literacy and critical thinking" and even "strengthening professional journalism, independent media, investigative reporting and media pluralism, facilitating citizens' access to quality, credible and diversified information sources and



POPULISM HAS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

*building public trust contribute to the protection of democracy"*¹⁵.

Taking this fact into account, the Croatian government's political commitment to tackle disinformation is a very important first step to deal with this rising problem for the whole EU. While Croatia wants to keep good relations with Russia, it "understands the threat posed by Russia"¹⁶. Although Russia is aware of Croatia's commitment to the EU and NATO, and therefore mostly focuses on trying to block Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro on their EU paths, Russia is still playing its role in supporting disinformation in Croatia. So far, this problem is not as large as in the Baltics or in the Czech Republic. Therefore, Croatia has a solid footing on which it can tackle this problem, so long as it is not large and to learn from experiences from Eastern European countries.

Regarding the risk of disinformation, it is important to describe the 2020 Croatian political situation. After the July 2020 parliamentary elections, the newly elected

¹² <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/>

¹³ The project "aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies". See: <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/>

¹⁴ European Values, Kremlin Watch. Available [online]: <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/croatia/>

¹⁵ Council of the European Union (2020) *Council Conclusions on Media Literacy in an Ever-Changing World*, May 26, 8274/20. Available [online]: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44117/st08274-en20.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid.

majority once again¹⁷ gave support to moderate conservative Andrej Plenković (Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) / European People's Party) as the Prime Minister. The parliamentary majority includes all eight representatives of national minorities, HDZ's pre-election classical liberal partner Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLP), as well as post-election support from two centrist liberal parties (Reformists and Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats (HNS)).

The new center-right conservative-liberal government, approved in the parliament, remains in power without the ex-majority blurring mandates of socialist populist Zagreb mayor Milan Bandić. Moreover, despite many poll predictions, the new majority will not need support of the Homeland Movement, which consists primarily of national conservative populists and Euro skeptics. In particular, the Homeland Movement is in its essence a strong opposition to pro-EU political elites, which derives from Croatian foreign and European policy "establishment" and their policies of developing liberal democracy since 2000.

According to the Homeland Movement's programme, the past twenty years have been marked by degradation and collapse of fundamental values, institutions, and the political system of a modern and democratic society. Therefore, the Homeland movement is "a response to the political elites, which do not develop the Croatian state in accordance with its historical, economic, geostrategic and demographic needs, but rather in the interest of foreign headquarters of power that do not respect

the national interest of the sovereign Republic of Croatia"¹⁸.

In other words, these right-wing populists see a problem in 20 years, which could be characterized by as at least semi-consolidated democracy (according to the Freedom House¹⁹) and not in the first ten years of Croatian statehood, which were also characterized by a certain level of authoritarianism. During that era, political structures were creating barriers to the EU integration, due to the promotion of ethnic nationalism and denying Western values of individual liberty and liberal democracy. Therefore, many populists promoted anti-Western propaganda.

Finally, Živi Zid (Human Shield), once the third largest party in the country, has disappeared from the parliament. This party was openly anti-EU, anti-NATO, and in favor of close ties with Russia. Its policy positions undermined property rights and banking system's stability, which have been carriers of political and economic freedom.

Disinformation is not tolerated among the mainstream parties, especially by the center-right government. Moreover, disinformation is not a widespread problem in Croatia. However, there are populist parties and groups, which combine disinformation and populism in order to undermine values of liberal democracy (as described further in the text). These messages are mostly spread via non-mainstream online portals and social media.

¹⁷ Andrej Plenković has been the Croatian Prime Minister since 2016. The new 2020 Parliament approved his second (consecutive) mandate.

¹⁸ Domovinski pokret (2020) *Program djelovanja*. Available [online]: <https://www.domovinskipokret.hr/pdf/program-djelovanja.pdf>

¹⁹ Freedom House (2020) *Nations in Transit 2020, Dropping the Democratic Façade*. Available [online]: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf

CROATIAN POLICY AGAINST DISINFORMATION

Even though disinformation is not an immediate threat, Croatia has developed its institutional framework for tackling disinformation led by the Ministry of Culture and Media²⁰, the Agency for Electronic Media²¹ and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs²².

In relation to the European Commission's Action Plan and the Council conclusions, Croatian policy concretely deals with disinformation by focusing on promoting media literacy, with specific portal "Medijska pismenost"²³, which provides useful information. The portal was founded by the Agency for Electronic Media, in cooperation with several institutions, including the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb (University of Zagreb) and two private schools (VERN and Edwards Bernays).

Prior to the Croatian EU Presidency, the Prime Minister Andrej Plenković emphasized that we are faced with "ever larger spread of fake news, disinformation, intolerance and hate speech on digital platforms", and added that this is a "direct threat to our democratic order because it undermines citizens' trust in institutions"²⁴.

While Croatia has defined its institutional framework, which cooperates with European institutions, and works on promoting media literacy and quality journalism, there is still space for developing concrete policies for supporting multidisciplinary teams of researchers and fact checkers, including their cross-border cooperation. Therefore, the policy should focus on civil society and private sector solutions. This model of inclusive participation in detecting and countering disinformation can strengthen institutions, further develop the civil society sector, and widen market opportunities for private intelligence services, policy analysts, journalists, researchers, fact checkers, digital marketers, teachers and academics.



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²⁰ Ministry of Culture and Media, International conference "Combating Disinformation in the Digital Media Era". Available [online]: <https://min-kulture.gov.hr/vijesti-8/medjunarodna-konferencija-suzbijanje-dezinformacija-u-eri-digitalnih-medija/18776>

²¹ <https://www.aem.hr/vijesti/zakljucci-vijeca-eu-a-o-medijskoj-pismenosti/>

²² Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (2019) *Press release*, March 19, Brussels. Available [online]: <http://www.mvep.hr/hr/mediji/priopcenja/31980.html>

²³ <https://www.medijskapismenost.hr/>

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (2019) *Press release*, October 30, Zagreb. Available [online]: <http://www.mvep.hr/hr/mediji/priopcenja/32404.html>

All these expert groups would be important since they can work on detecting disinformation, taking into account different scientific perspectives. For example, policy analysts and political scientists could detect how disinformation affects institutions of liberal democracy and concrete public policies, while journalists could participate in fostering media literacy and include fact checkers. Digital marketers could help different organizations in designing and promoting content quality, transparent online advertising and work on analyzing misleading online ads. Teachers and academics in both public and private educational institutions would have an important role in informing new generations and adults how to differentiate facts from fake information and values of open society from attempts to undermine its foundations.

Such inclusive policy solution would foster voluntary cooperation and a strong civil society, instead of restricting freedom of expression. A growing liberal oriented community would especially support this solution because it opens space for the civil and private sector, while avoiding new regulations. This article represents the first Croatian initiative in the liberal policy direction.

Regarding civil society's contribution, one of the Center for Public Policy and Economic Analysis's (CEA) strategically important project is the Think Tank Detektor²⁵, which aims to gather open source information, which can contribute to the education of the Croatian and broader EU public about geopolitical risks and examples of growing disinformation and populist activities. This is vital since these disinformation activities have been focused on weakening fundamental values of individual liberty, open

society, and transatlantic alliance within the EU and NATO framework. Through disinformation, there also lies a risk for human rights, the position of minorities, competitiveness, and the geopolitical security of Croatia, Southeastern Europe and the entire EU. Therefore, the CEA regularly monitors social media, media portals, and other open sources in order to detect and expose disinformation.

PRO-RUSSIAN AND POPULIST CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES IN CROATIA

Populist narratives depend on particular stakeholders. There are many examples, which have been repeated. Overall, populist messages in Croatia may be described through the following narratives:

- a. the European Union is falling apart and has ceased to exist;
- b. NATO lost its meaning after the Cold War;
- c. the EU and NATO enlargement is an aggression towards Russia;
- d. the CIA and the U.S. military produced COVID-19 as a biological weapon;
- e. unlike Russia, the European Union has not helped member states, nor has it responded to the economic crisis (in times of COVID-19);
- f. the EU is a neoliberal creation that looks at the interest of capital instead of people;
- g. the economic crisis was caused by neoliberal capitalism, which is coming to an end;
- h. the government has sold everything through privatizations and colonized the economy in favor of foreigners;
- i. the state government should control imports from the EU market, etc.

However, this is just a general overview of the prevailing narratives in the Croatian public sphere. Needless to say, there are

²⁵ Centre for Public Policy and Economic Analysis (CEA) *Think Tank Detektor*. Available [online]: <https://www.cea-policy.hr/cea-think-tank-detektor/>

many more, which appear mostly in non-mainstream media and social media communications. Basically, there is a standard obsession of conspiracy theories (re-)producing anti-American and anti-European narratives, which may often include disinformation about the Freemasons.

I. DISINFORMATION ABOUT BIOLOGICAL WARFARE AND THE UK, WHILE ADVOCATING FOR PUTIN'S AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

Proponents of the Croatian right-wing movement are influenced by the TV show Bujica (Flash Flood). One episode provides narratives that COVID-19 is a form of biological warfare, China is a victim of "globalist financial oligarchy", Iran is a target of U.S. establishment motivated by Zionism, while Italy was chosen because of the Vatican and Freemasons who want to remove believers from churches, scientists are controlled by an occult oligarchy, all is done by algorithms and that Putin will save us from the occult oligarchy²⁶.

This narrative starts with COVID-19 disinformation, and then blames the West and of course, the Freemasons as fictional rulers and ultimately provides the solution: Vladimir Putin will save Croats from the secret rule of liberal oligarchs. This theory is based on a premise of blaming globalists for producing the virus, while the solution lies in the authoritarian leader, instead of the assistance from the EU.

The European Commission mentions an example of a conspiracy theory with regards to COVID-19: the claim that the coronavirus is "an infection caused by the world's elites"²⁷. Moreover, another episode

provides anti-British narratives, by claiming that someone in the Croatian government wants a conflict with Putin, that a Russian diplomat was expelled due to the *imputation of British secret services* towards Kremlin. Finally, a revenge in a form of erasing Croatian identity is now coming from Brussels because Franjo Tuđman (first Croatian President during the 1990s).

Certain Croatian right-wing conspiracy theorists are preoccupied by the United Kingdom and its secret service (MI6), perceiving it as the enemy of Croatian statehood. Moreover, since 2000, they have blamed Croatian political structures, for pushing for certain political changes needed for the European integration, including full cooperation with the war crimes tribunal and reconstruction of houses where ethnic Serbs lived until 1995. Their target is primarily pro-EU Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, since he is a moderate EPP conservative. Therefore, right-wing populists have considered the process of European integration and moderate political positions to be in direct opposition to the interests of the Croatian statehood. Thus, it becomes clear that they have a very narrow nationalistic and authoritarian understanding of a nation-state, which cannot be accepted within the EU framework of liberal democracies.

Populist advocacy in favor of Putin can also be clearly seen at the Portal Geopolitika (Geopolitics). Examples include statements that only *Putin can preserve Russia's stability* in turbulent global times, that Russia does not need a new fight for power and that many Russians that support Putin question the purpose of democracy²⁸. Therefore, the suggestion in this article is that there is no need for democratic Russia,

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFlsExgrUc>

²⁷ European Commission (2020) *Tackling Coronainformation Disinformation*. Available [online]: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/corona_fighting_disinformation_0.pdf

²⁸ <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/zoran-meter-putin-na-celu-rusije-i-nakon-2024-pod-ovim-uvjetima/>

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because many Russians favor authoritarian democracy (Vladimir Putin's regime), which grants unlimited power to the autocratic leader. Although this narrative is not prevalent in Croatia, it is widely present among right-wing populists, who also influence young people.

II. DISINFORMATION AND POPULIST NARRATIVES ABOUT NEOLIBERALISM AND PRIVATIZATIONS

Populism has political and economic consequences. For example, it can lead to resisting necessary structural reforms towards the market economy. Such narratives and myths typically refer to, at least in the Croatian context, a national treasure or family silver that is supposedly completely sold out. Almost any privatization is equated with the betrayal of national interests

and the loss of sovereignty, especially with regards to foreign owners and investors. Therefore, protectionist economic nationalism, spiced with xenophobic disinformation, directly affects the weakening of competitiveness and economic freedom, thus delaying the transition to a market economy and an open society.

Examples for this discourse, which actually blames neoliberalism, can be also found on the *Portal Geopolitika* (*Geopolitics*). Its narratives blame moderate European elites for being: "preoccupied with struggle for power in the conditions of neoliberal single-mindedness"²⁹.

It is common for populists to produce narratives about political elites, while they represent the people. This position undermines the legacy of liberal democracy, which consists of representatives elected by the people. When these representatives aim to be in moderate positions, this helps to consolidate democracy. Moreover, many populists produce narratives on "neoliberalism", which usually serve to resist structural reforms for increasing competitiveness and economic freedom. While the Soviet Union was a protector of communism, which includes political and economic single-mindedness, proponents of Russian authoritarian regime can easily claim that "neoliberalism" is a form of single-mindedness.

Moreover, the same portal claims that:

"politics left the economy" which "further degraded relations between the government and the people". In particular, the portal is blaming the process of demonopolization (liberalization of

²⁹ <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/dr-sc-sanja-ujacic-eu-politicke-elite-zarobljene-izmedu-vladavine-prava-i-neoliberalnog-jednoljja/>

sectors and opening to competition) as a reason why *"politics is no longer at the center, but on the margins of events"*³⁰.

As a follow-up to the previous comment, this narrative tries to explain that people are not in democratic control of their government, since politics lost its mediating role and left the economy. This is a typical narrative of critics of *neoliberalism*. Despite the fact that increasing economic freedom reduces the government's political control over the economy, politics is still present since people can decide which option to choose. Moreover, functional liberal democracies combine high levels of political and economic freedom.

The portal then mentions "the neoliberal revolution", run by Reagan-Thatcher policies of "deregulation, delocalization, and privatization", whose goal was "to bring the USSR to its knees." In this context, the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral, together with Poland, has been blamed for neoliberalism. Further in the text, Poland is connected with Croatia because of the Three Seas Initiative, a way of providing a competitive alternative to Russian gas supply³¹. The portal questions Croatia's interest in supporting this initiative and launching the LNG on the Croatian island Krk³².

The aim of many pro-Russian populists is to gain public support for Russian gas supply as the only or at least dominant source of supply, in order to make European states more dependent on Russia.

A clear connection between narratives about neoliberalism and privatizations can be seen in a portal's article which mentions that the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia proposed the Russian government to start with nationalization. Then, the portal states that, "restructuring of the current neoliberal capitalism begins, which has completely exhausted itself and led to serious global problems" and shows "total insensitivity to the problems of ordinary people who were brought "to the average stick".

Further, the portal predicts bankruptcies of first large corporations during 2021. This is a reason for proposing "a new economic model" and suggesting that, "the Croatian government should consider similar measures, although they would probably be immediately characterized by eternal critics of everything and everyone as a return to

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³⁰ <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/geopolitika/globalno-socijalno-zatopljenje-u-eu-demokracijama/>

³¹ Atlantic Council (2019) *The Three Seas Initiative Explained*. Available [online]: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-three-seas-initiative-explained-2/>

³² <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/dr-sc-sanja-ujacic-europsko-jedinstvo-u-vrtlozima-weimarskog-trokuta-i-inicijative-tri-mora/>

socialism". Finally, in relation to the issue of privatizations, the portal doubts how these measures (nationalization) will help Croatia "if there is nothing strategic in her hands anymore and if everything is in foreign hands"³³. Lastly, and this is a typical narrative among populists and even larger masses, it is mentioned that Croatian government has sold (privatized) everything.

Contrary to these myths and disinformation, there is government's decision on legal persons of special interest for the Republic of Croatia³⁴. In 2020, 39 legal persons were government-run, including large companies in transport infrastructure, woods, water, transport and energy sector, as well as one bank and one IT company. Beside these so-called *strategic* entities, Croatian central government has minority or majority shares in more than 300 companies. They are a part of CERP portfolio³⁵ where the government tries to privatize at least a part of numerous companies. Moreover, a large presence of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) is clearly visible in the OECD's PMR report where the "Scope of SOEs" regulatory restrictiveness score is 3.75 (out of 6), which is among the highest numbers within the EU and the OECD³⁶.

Despite the large economic presence of state-owned companies, populists can express economic xenophobia by trying to resist foreign ownership and investment (which is mostly present in banking,

telecommunications and the retail sector), which lowers the potential for investment led GDP growth. Although the Croatian government has been run by formally mainstream parties (and its junior partners), both centre-right and centre-left large parties have showed a lack of policy immunity to widespread resistance against market reforms, including privatizations, while resistances to FDI are present in cases of certain local administration (and not in the central government any more).

III. DISINFORMATION ABOUT NATO, THE U.S., AND THE EU

Croatia is a part of the EU and NATO. All mainstream parties support both memberships, while the populist Homeland Movement, even though not particularly enthusiastic, is at least not openly against EU membership. Therefore, Croatia in 2020 should not fear any significant Croxit movement. However, there are examples of populist narratives, which spread myths and disinformation against the EU and NATO. Portal Geopolitika claims that

"NATO serves American interests and speculates about "America's withdrawal from NATO" which would "raise tensions within the EU and further undermine the unity of Member States"³⁷.

It is true that NATO serves American interests (where the U.S. is the largest contributor) and it is true that NATO serves European interests for 70 years now. However, populists do not understand and/or try to undermine and trivialize the postwar security architecture of Europe, which also led to the creation of the European Union. The U.S. withdrawal from NATO is simply not on the agenda.

³³ <https://www.geopolitika.news/razgovori/uoci-puti-novog-obracanja-naciji-ruski-sindikati-predlazu-nacionalizaciju-strateskih-tvrtki/>

³⁴ Official Gazette (71/2018) *Decision on Legal Persons of Special Interest for the Republic of Croatia*. Available [online]: https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2018_08_71_1450.html

³⁵ <http://www.cerp.hr/portfelj-cerp-a/dionice-i-poslovni-udjeli/114>

³⁶ OECD (2019) *Indicators of Product Market Regulation (PMR)*. Available [online]: <https://www.oecd.org/economy/reform/indicators-of-product-market-regulation/>

³⁷ <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/dr-sc-sanja-vujacic-nakon-brexita-nato-exit/>

Furthermore, an article with the headline "Occupation of Europe in the shadow of the corona" is criticizing the U.S. Army's exercise Defender Europe 20 and the EU's aims to foster military mobility through infrastructural adaptations. "While the coronavirus crisis paralyzed European societies, the Anglo-Saxon war fever did not die. Perhaps, on these few pages, a chronicle of the EU's death is written. Which is not the worst"³⁸. The article tries to convince the public that the U.S. Army has occupied Europe (as the title of the article itself suggests), while European societies are paralyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it states that the EU is dead, which is a very common populist fiction for seducing people and their distrust towards the European institutions.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A CROATIAN CALL TO ACTION

In general, disinformation often includes populism and is rooted in conspiracy theories, which can be politically very seductive. Populism usually uses simplifies and trivializes conclusions without a deeper understanding of facts, as well as standards of liberal democracies. This article provides certain examples of disinformation mixed with illiberal populism occurring in Croatia.

It can be expected that there will be continuous Croatian government support to the EU actions against disinformation. While Croatia's policy response against disinformation has been focused on creating its institutional framework and promoting media literacy, there is still space for creating a comprehensive and inclusive solution.

That kind of solution should mean creating a strong policy network of government, non-governmental, and private sector

working together in detecting, downsizing, and disposing disinformation. This network should work together in exchanging and exposing detected information about particular disinformation. A model of inclusive participation in detecting and countering disinformation can strengthen institutions, further develop the civil society sector, and widen market opportunities for private intelligence services, policy analysts, journalists, researchers, fact checkers, digital marketers, teachers and academics. Such inclusive policy solutions would foster voluntary cooperation and a strong civil society, instead of restricting freedom of expression.



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³⁸ <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/dr-sc-sanja-vujacic-okupacija-europe-u-sjeni-korone/>