



## Russian Information Warfare in Central and Eastern Europe Needs a Sober Assessment

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Information warfare has received a great deal of publicity in recent years. This is not surprising given the development of technologies that in an increasingly digital media landscape affect and modify how it can be pursued. Russia is the state most commonly associated with information warfare—and understandably so. It makes repeated efforts in the West to utilize disinformation and influence operations in order to exploit divisions within targeted societies, to disrupt the unity of Euro-Atlantic structures, to undermine liberal values, or to promote the notion that finding objective truth on any issue is virtually impossible.

Awareness of Russia's information warfare has been further stimulated by media coverage and the research output of think-tanks. Publicizing the phenomenon has undeniable advantages. The greater the number of people being informed about the adverse effects of information warfare, the harder it is for influence operations to succeed. Heightened public interest also promotes much needed critical thinking and vigilance on the part of all those who access news or information via social media or the internet—the platforms most commonly polluted with disinformation.

Yet, there is a considerable downside to this publicity in the degree of exaggeration, at times even hysteria, associated with it. As a result, Russia has gained the undeserved reputation of being far more competent and capable in information warfare than it actually is. This allows it to further boost its relevance in the eyes of international community—something the Kremlin aspires to. Likewise, its ability to interfere abroad or to shift public opinion beyond its borders should not be overestimated, or even sensationalized as is so often the case.

Russia's efforts to utilize information warfare in general and disinformation in particular should not be trivialized. In fact, its meddling in foreign election campaigns and its direct and indirect support for disinformation portals or social media trolls and bots is clear. But Russia's actions and capabilities should be evaluated without exaggeration.

The first argument for approaching Russian information warfare more placidly and with a certain distance is that there is a significant lack of actual evidence for numerous inflated statements and claims made regarding its efficacy. In a [new paper on Russian information warfare in Central and Eastern Europe](#), I point out that, although disinformation can



exacerbate societal divisions in times of crisis, once tensions or crisis situations subside, the ability of these efforts to have a notable impact in a targeted country (for example, on public sentiments toward its geopolitical orientation) fades away relatively quickly.

To get a clearer picture of Russia's information warfare and malign influence in the countries of the region, the paper dissects its strategies. It also delineates current positive and negative trends occurring within local societies. These range from high awareness regarding disinformation in Hungary and Romania to stagnating disinformation portals in the Czech Republic and Hungary on the positive side—and on the negative side from declining media freedom in Bulgaria and Poland to high levels of trust in online platforms in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

## Lack of Data and Progress

The phenomenon of echo chambers, which has become a key component of the discussion about information warfare, also needs to be looked at more clearly. Although, their existence, especially on social media platforms, is widely accepted, their actual size—meaning the proportion of a society caught within them—and their practical ramifications remain largely elusive and relatively unknown.

Such scarcity of reliable data is one of the key predicaments for any debate on Russia's information warfare and its implications. This has fundamentally contributed to the lack of meaningful progress in developing knowledge about the issue beyond what was already known by at least 2015. It has resulted in the generation of only vaguely defined recommendations, best epitomized by the mantra stressing the need for improved critical thinking, strengthened civil society, and reformed education. Unsurprisingly, it is difficult to provide concrete solutions without solid data.

Perhaps another reason for exaggerating the importance and capabilities of Russia's information

warfare derives from an unconscious desire to find an external culprit for many trends that are regarded as undesirable or harmful by the liberal-oriented parts of Euro-Atlantic societies.

Russia is certainly glad to see these trends, such as, Brexit, the rise of numerous nationalist and far-right parties across Europe, or President Donald Trump's confrontational approach toward the United States allies to gain traction. It undeniably strives to buttress them and will likely continue to support them in the future. However, all indisputably would have emerged with or without Russian backing.

Unfortunately, many of these developments are still portrayed primarily, and wrongly, as the direct result of Russia's information warfare. What is more, scapegoating disinformation does more harm than good as it further obscures the principal culprits for unwanted trends, who can be found within Euro-Atlantic societies rather than outside them. The resulting hysteria only further boosts the image and international standing of Russia, and it downplays the constraints its disinformation activities face.

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