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Russian Disinformation and the 2024 European Elections: Understanding Strategies, Actors and Messages

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The elections for the European Parliament in June 2024 will mark the first peak of the global super election year in Europe. In many countries, such as Bulgaria, national elections will also take place on the very same day. As election day approaches, it is crucial to address a significant and growing threat: Russian disinformation. In April 2024, the European Parliament issued a clear warning that Russia is once again using disinformation to influence the upcoming European elections. These efforts target not only EU member states but also neighbouring countries, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, the Western Balkans, and Armenia. Russian disinformation is not only meant to influence electoral outcomes but also to undermine the democratic processes of nations aspiring to join the European Union. Therefore, it is important for every European citizen—both within the EU and in candidate countries—to understand that Russian disinformation against the EU and the European elections is a threat to a free, united, diverse, and democratic Europe. Influencing elections is only one side of the coin; undermining the very basis of democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and the functioning of society is the other. Understanding the strategies, actors, and messages of Russian disinformation against the EU is thus vital for safeguarding elections, building informed and resilient societies, and ensuring a successful path to EU accession.

Strategies and Objectives of Russian Disinformation

Russia's approach to disinformation in Southeastern Europe is strategic and well-coordinated. The overarching goal is to advance Russian interests by destabilising the unity and democratic integrity of the EU and its candidate countries. This is achieved through various means, including supporting pro-Russian parties and politicians, spreading false information, and undermining EU aspirations in candidate countries. In EU member states such as Bulgaria and Romania, the aim is to push these countries towards a more neutral stance, especially concerning the Russian war against Ukraine, or even to extract them from Western alliances. In candidate countries, the objective is to delay or prevent EU accession by exploiting internal conflicts and presenting the EU in a negative light.

Narratives and Messages

Russian disinformation campaigns are tailored to the local context of each country, leveraging historical conflicts and cultural differences to create divisions. The core messages of Russian disinformation aim to erode trust in the EU and its institutions, to smear EU and pro-EU politicians and to undermine EU values. These narratives are carefully crafted to resonate with

local audiences in Southeast Europe and exploit existing societal tensions. The most important core messages are:

- 1) The EU harms the national interests of the member states.
- 2) The EU favours member states over candidate countries (for example, Croatia over Serbia, Romania over Moldova, Greece and Bulgaria over the Republic of North Macedonia).
- 3) The EU is divided and weak.
- 4) The EU is a vassal of the USA.
- 5) The EU is responsible or co-responsible for the Russian war against Ukraine.
- 6) The EU's military aid for Ukraine is prolonging the war.
- 7) The EU is destroying "traditional values" (for example, through "LGBTQ propaganda").
- 8) The EU's climate policy destroys the agricultural economy of the member states.
- 9) The EU favours refugees and immigrants over EU citizens.
- 10) Accession to the Schengen agreement or to the Eurozone is against national interests.

During the past weeks and months, the Russian disinformation machine did, however, not attack European elections as such. Obviously, officially ignoring the elections is meant to show contempt and downplay the significance of the elections. Instead, leading EU politicians, such as Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borell, are personally attacked and discredited. Such messages, some of which are first published in Russian media, often find their way into the countries of Southeast Europe via web portals and coordinated online networks.

Tactics and Local Proxies

Disinformation messages and narratives are spread within the countries of Southeast Europe by various actors:

1. **Russian Officials and Russian Media:** Disinformation narratives are often first published or broadcasted by Russian media and then spread online via social media and messengers, web portals or official social media channels of high-ranking Russian diplomats. In Bulgaria, for example, the Russian ambassador frequently uses social media or television interviews to smear and insult the EU. Russian foreign broadcasters, such as Sputnik and RT, along with their offices in Serbia, are also important outlets for Russian disinformation.
2. **Local Media and Politicians:** Russian narratives are often picked up, repeated, and spread by local politicians, journalists, and media outlets. In most countries of Southeast Europe, right-wing and nationalist parties, as well as the successors to the former Communist parties, regularly promote Russian interests and narratives. Besides such proxies, Russia is reported to maintain directly or indirectly significant media ecosystems in almost every country, consisting mostly of web portals in conjunction with social media channels to promote disinformation.
3. **Online Networks and Bots:** A significant portion of disinformation is spread through well-organised and partly covert online networks comprising both human-operated ("trolls") and automated accounts ("bots"). These networks are designed to amplify pro-Russian content and engage in coordinated attacks against pro-EU politicians. In

Bulgaria, for example, researchers monitored a network of more than 370 websites, publishing up to nine pro-Russian articles per day.

Implications and Lessons Learned

According to the European Digital Media Observatory, EU-related disinformation reached an all-time high in April 2024. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that Russian disinformation will be able to sway or decide the upcoming elections. It not only affects important debates about topics such as EU accession of candidate countries (for example, Moldova or North Macedonia) but also achieves long-term effects, such as an erosion of public trust and a deepening of societal and ethnic conflict. As Southeastern European countries move closer to EU membership, the threat of Russian disinformation becomes increasingly relevant. By understanding and addressing these challenges, we can safeguard the democratic processes that are crucial for a stable and prosperous Europe. The upcoming elections are not just a test for the EU but also for the democratic resilience of its future members. It is imperative for citizens to be aware of these disinformation tactics and to remain vigilant in the face of such external threats.

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