

Disinformation ahead of the EU Parliamentary Elections: A snapshot from Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy

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Table of contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	4
Disinformation in European and national contexts	4
Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine	5
False claims undermining western support for Ukraine	7
Manufacturing discontent on the energy transition	9
Disinformation and election dynamics: What possible impacts ahead of the elections?	10
Strengthening resilience against disinformation in the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections	11
Conclusion	13
Endnotes	14

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Executive summary

With the 2024 European Parliament elections just around the corner, the erosion of trust in institutions and information sources could undermine the integrity of the electoral process, posing a challenge to the democratic values upon which the EU is built.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has had far-reaching implications across Europe, bringing forth a new set of multifaceted challenges. These include widespread disinformation campaigns aimed at eroding public consensus for national and EU policies supporting Ukraine.

This Discussion Paper delves into disinformation trends ahead of the EP elections in Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy. It highlights the nuances of disinformation surrounding refugees, military support for Ukraine, and energy-related topics, shedding light on the potential impact on public sentiment and electoral dynamics. It also highlights national and EU efforts to counter disinformation, emphasising the need for comprehensive strategies to increase resilience against disinformation and safeguard the integrity of the upcoming elections.

Introduction

As the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections approach, the threat of disinformation looms large in several EU countries' political landscapes and media environments. This discussion paper provides a snapshot of disinformation narratives in the run-up to the European elections in three countries – Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy – focusing on three topics which have attracted large volumes of disinformation in connection to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: persons fleeing Ukraine and the conflict, Western military support for Ukraine, and concerns about the energy crisis.

Disinformation is widely seen as a threat to Europe's democracies.¹ In 2016, the EP described disinformation as putting an 'increasing systematic pressure' on societies and their electoral stability.² Ahead of the 2019 EP elections, the then European Commissioner for Security, Julian King, forewarned that the elections were a tempting target for malicious actors.³ But arguably, those fears did not materialise as expected. There is little evidence of a heavy impact of disinformation campaigns on the last European elections.⁴

While the impact of disinformation on voters' behaviour remains difficult to gauge,⁵ the 2024 European Parliament elections will take place in a different setting compared to 2019.⁶ Since then, several studies, for instance, have highlighted the correlation between disinformation and the results of the Brexit referendum and former US President Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election.⁷

In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the Kremlin's use of disinformation has become another warfare tool alongside propaganda. Several reports have also pointed out that disinformation is home-bred and may be further amplified by local politicians and legacy media.

This invites reflection on future disinformation narratives, the risks they pose to democratic processes and,⁸ whether the EU is equipped to address them effectively given the fact that next year 82 elections will take place in 78 countries. This includes the highly anticipated US presidential election, as well as electoral processes in other nations such as India, Indonesia, Taiwan, Mexico, the UK and, potentially Ukraine.

This Discussion Paper focuses on disinformation related to the conflict in Ukraine, which has had far-reaching social, economic, and political repercussions as a major geopolitical event. As such, disinformation relating to Russia's war on Ukraine also poses a threat to democracy in Europe. While disinformation has been detected in virtually all European countries, the report examines the cases of Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy. These three national cases shed light on the threat posed by disinformation as they have very different historical and cultural backgrounds and yet show the emergence of similar trends and challenges. The focus is on narratives, with select instances of disinformation illustrating broader discourses.

Disinformation in European and national contexts

Recognising disinformation as a significant challenge, the paper analyses disinformation spreading across Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy on three topics: refugees from Ukraine, Western military support for Ukraine, and concerns about the energy crisis.

Although each country has a different socio-political landscape and historical context, as the analysis shows, they all display vulnerabilities to disinformation relating to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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The political scene in Germany is characterised by declining support for mainstream parties, particularly those in government - the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the liberal Free Democrats (FDP). The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which campaigns on a platform opposing immigration and green policies, is on the rise.⁹ In addition, some political groups show a pro-Russia stance, with some representatives having significant ties to Russia.¹⁰

Germany has also been a focal point for Russian information operations dating back to the Cold War. German conspiracy theorists have shown a markedly pro-Russian (and anti-American, anti-Western) attitude when discussing Russia's war on Ukraine.

On the face of it, disinformation narratives may not have impacted public attitudes. According to a May 2022 Eurobarometer, for example, 54% of Germans expressed sympathy for Ukraine, in line with the EU average.¹¹ In September 2023, the percentage of Germans who thought Russian authorities should be

held accountable for the situation in Ukraine were the majority, amounting to 59%, slightly more than the EU average. Yet, public support for specific policies may still change, whether in relation to refugees or other subjects of disinformation.

Italy has been perceived as one of Europe's 'Russia understanders,' largely due to the sympathetic stance of many Italian politicians towards the Kremlin's positions, ranging from right to left-wing.¹² Far-right politicians, such as the leader of the anti-immigration League, Matteo Salvini, have typically shown sympathetic attitudes towards Putin, who they portray as a guardian of traditional values.¹³

Yet, Italy's conservative parties have strategically repositioned since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine, with Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni consistently expressing public support for Ukraine and seeking close alignment with its allies in facing the challenges arising from Russia's war of aggression.

Bulgaria is in a challenging political landscape characterised by frequent political crises and unstable coalition governments – including five parliamentary elections in the last two years. This has fuelled deep anxieties about national identity and widespread discontent towards national institutions in the Bulgarian population. An entrenched distrust of mainstream information sources leads many Bulgarians to seek alternative perspectives on websites and social media platforms.¹⁴

Bulgaria's susceptibility to disinformation can also be traced back to historical, cultural, and religious ties. Sympathetic sentiments for Russia are deep-seated in a large part of the population.¹⁵ The support that the country received from Russia during its struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire still has a significant place in the population's historical memory.¹⁶

Prevalent discourses in Bulgaria and Italy may explain the more ambiguous attitudes. Markedly less than Germans and the EU average, those who think Russian authorities are accountable for the situation in Ukraine in Italy and Bulgaria were 43% and 33%.

Governments and public bodies in Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria have taken some steps to address disinformation. However, these efforts have arguably failed to fully address these risks.

Shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine, the German federal government instituted a task force on hybrid threats and disinformation,¹⁷ identifying Russian narratives which reinforced fact-based communication and increased public resilience. Italy has also adopted a gradual response with a similar focus on foreign manipulation and interference,¹⁸ building on the establishment of its Agency for National Cybersecurity in 2021.¹⁹ These initiatives, which primarily concentrate on threats stemming from outside the countries, may fall short to counter domestic sources of disinformation which tend to mirror and amplify the narratives promoted by foreign actors.

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Under Kiril Petkov's government in Bulgaria established a legal framework to combat disinformation. A Ministry of E-Governance was established with the task of monitoring the content of media and social networks for targeted disinformation and fake news. However, the country lacks a robust anti-disinformation infrastructure.

While welcome, these initiatives show limits, too. At the same time, the threat posed by disinformation is not declining, almost two years since Russia's full-scale invasions. On the contrary, the opportunities for malicious actors to influence public opinion and electoral dynamics are growing.

In the current European context of geopolitical insecurity and deep concerns about the cost of living, disinformation can use deep-seated anxieties in the EU population about security, well-being and the economy to increase its resonance and visibility.

Disinformation about Refugees from Ukraine

Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine started circulating in the EU immediately after Russia's invasion started in February 2022.²⁰ Narratives have continued circulating since then, with new peaks in recent times.²¹ Across European countries, Ukrainian refugees have

been portrayed as rich and spoiled, ungrateful to host countries, or involved in criminal activities. For the most part, these narratives have been promoted using similar manipulation techniques or even the same misleading photos or videos.²²

Nevertheless, disinformation about Ukrainian refugees has also been tailored for specific national contexts and concerns. This warrants a closer look at national variations while also looking for similar trends and manipulation techniques.

Disinformation about refugees remains generally rampant in Germany. In fact, the depiction of refugees as a source of problems and threats, promoted by far-right groups, had already gained considerable traction before Russia's war against Ukraine. Following Russia's invasion, fake news about refugees from Ukraine mostly pictured them as violent and dangerous.²³ As the war draws on, with no apparent end in sight, a particularly widespread narrative – also present in other national contexts – portrays Ukrainian refugees in Germany as receiving more generous social benefits from the government than German citizens.

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This narrative may resonate with those segments in the population, in Germany as elsewhere, who may struggle to make ends meet. Recent reports by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) reveal that, across European countries, disinformation targeting Ukrainians and other groups of refugees use similar narratives that exploit the real social and economic needs of citizens to steer hostility against displaced persons.²⁴

Illustrating this trend in Germany, a social post on Facebook was shared dozens of times in May 2023 falsely claiming that Ukrainian refugees received pensions without contributing to the system and that they benefitted from pensions earlier than Germans.²⁵ An email to the job centre employees – which was proven false – was used as 'evidence'. These 'reverse-discrimination' narratives are meant to instil a sense of economic insecurity in local communities, alleging that they are discriminated against in their own country.

Still in Germany, another false story circulated in October 2023 about preferential treatment for Ukrainians, this time concerning car insurance policies.²⁶ According to a false message shared widely on WhatsApp and echoed by several posts on social networks, Ukrainian drivers who caused an accident received full coverage from car insurance free of cost for them, and this would cover both the car they damaged but also theirs, regardless of their fault

or behaviour. The message also suggested that the insurance company would later recover the money from a state fund. Similar false stories about preferential treatment widely spread on social networks concerned child benefits,²⁷ maintenance advances,²⁸ parental benefits²⁹ and housing benefits.³⁰

Disinformation about refugees in Germany has been disseminated by methods that, while common in other European countries as well, have been particularly used in Germany. A telling example is 'Operation Doppelgänger'.³¹ This refers to a Russia-based influence operation network active in Europe since at least May 2022. This uses multiple 'clones' of authentic media and institutional websites to influence users with pro-Russian fake articles, videos and polls on several topics.³² For example, a fake Der Spiegel article circulated online in August 2023 claimed that Germans were being increasingly pushed out of the country by migrants.³³ In the same month, a video with the logo of Deutsche Welle (DW) started circulating on X and TikTok. The video claimed to report on an anti-Ukrainian 'flash mob' in Warsaw, Poland. Allegedly, Polish citizens renamed Wi-Fi networks with offensive phrases against Ukrainian refugees, such as "Ukraine is hell", "Murderers from Ukraine", "Ukrainians, go home".³⁴ Both outlets denied having ever produced and published such content. In a similar case, a false video allegedly published by the German Citizens' Association (DSB) showed demonstrations against the admission of refugees from Ukraine. The DSB federal chairwoman made known that the video was false.³⁵

Disinformation about Ukrainian refugees in Italy has similarly adapted since the beginning of the conflict to local experiences and concerns. For example, a narrative common at the beginning of the war, underpinned by misleading content, was that refugees from Ukraine were going to re-ignite the COVID-19 pandemic because they were poorly vaccinated. The narrative was designed to exploit the fears of the Italian population, the first in Europe to be hit hard by the spread of the virus and impacted by severe restrictions imposed to minimise its effects.³⁶

Health-related stories continued to circulate later, although they changed as the salience of the COVID-19 pandemic declined. In some cases, they referred to the experience of other European countries in dealing with the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. In July 2023, for example, false information circulated on social networks about refugees spreading Legionnaire's disease in Poland.³⁷

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Other disinformation narratives prevalent in Italy instead focused on the number of refugees in the country, trying to instil fears of a continued invasion. These narratives may be sustained by out-of-context, misleading or factually incorrect information circulated by politicians.³⁸ These ‘invasion narratives’ can then be exploited to project or amplify solidarity fatigue towards refugees.

Illustrating this, a pro-Kremlin Telegram channel posted a video falsely depicting a demonstration by Ukrainian refugees and showing Italian residents frustrated by these demonstrations. The video went viral. However, the reality was quite different: the footage showed a protest by a pro-environmental group that had nothing to do with Ukrainian refugees.³⁹

Disinformation has tried to promote the views that refugees are underserving or unfairly exploiting Bulgaria’s support while Bulgarian nationals do not receive comparable help.

As one of the closest places of refuge, Bulgaria experienced a large influx of Ukrainians transiting through the country after Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, although, as of November 2023, only around 50 thousand Ukrainians are recorded in the country.⁴⁰ This has nevertheless been used to depict Bulgaria as overwhelmed by refugees. At the same time, disinformation has tried to promote the views that refugees are underserving or unfairly exploiting Bulgaria’s support while Bulgarian nationals do not receive comparable help.

False claims undermining Western support for Ukraine

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was accompanied by an information war and a battle of narratives about the conflict, not only about its origins but its consequences. In this context, disinformation narratives often reflect Russia’s propaganda, aimed at shifting the blame for its illegal and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine.⁴⁵ NATO countries, for example, have been accused of posing a major and pressing threat to Russia because of the eastward enlargement of the Alliance and its growing military presence in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴⁶

From the outset, disinformation recorded across the EU has also falsely and repeatedly accused Ukrainians of being nazis, along with their President Volodymyr

Since February 2022, the Bulgarian government implemented several measures to assist the refugees. These include temporary housing for those in need. As most of the facilities for receiving and accommodating refugees were inadequate, the government also offered accommodation in hotels, with the costs covered by the state. In this context, refugees are falsely described as affluent and not genuinely in need of assistance. They have been accused of abusing their hosts’ generosity, e.g. staying in luxurious hotels - and treading on Bulgarian beaches - even though they allegedly drive expensive cars in large numbers and are exempt from paying for fuel.⁴¹

These narratives patiently try to capitalise on the discontent of Bulgarians, whose living standards are among the lowest in the EU.⁴² More broadly, disinformation about refugees is intimately linked to the denunciation of the precarious economic situation of the country, which is presented as the result of economic policies that have allegedly benefited Western countries and their economic interests at the expense of Bulgarian citizens. In this narrative, Bulgaria is portrayed as an EU ‘colony’ invaded by refugees from other EU countries not wanting to host them.

Narratives of violence are also frequent in this context, also referring to incidents taking place outside Bulgaria. At the end of August 2023, for example, social networks published a video - which was also circulated in Italian - concerning an alleged brawl in Warsaw, claiming that it showed Ukrainians beating a group of Poles. Warsaw police denied this, saying no Ukrainian citizens were involved in the incident.⁴⁵ False stories have also tried to show Ukrainian refugees as ungrateful for the help they receive, claiming that they have burned Bulgarian flags and perpetuated criminal actions.⁴⁴

Zelenski.⁴⁷ Furthermore, false stories reproduced by the Kremlin declared that the war was an attempt at ‘denazifying’ Ukraine.⁴⁸

In Germany, false claims reproducing these narratives have been repackaged as articles from well-established media and presented as representing mainstream views. For example, in September 2023, a Facebook post claimed the appearance of a mural in Berlin depicting Zelensky biting into a bloody arm with the inscription “*kannibale*”, although no such graffiti existed.⁴⁹ The post was nevertheless accompanied by a screenshot of a purported Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) article reproducing the story. Another fake news was about

the German newspaper Handelsblatt. This allegedly featured a caricature of President Zelensky on its cover page, remarking that a change of view was needed. Handelsblatt denied having published the picture.⁵⁰

Disinformation about the consequences of the war has instead been used to try to undermine Western support for Ukraine, discredit Western military aid as unable to influence the outcome of the war or portray military assistance for Ukraine as damaging the national interests of the countries that are providing it, among others.⁵¹ These narratives have contributed to polarising the debate over the war in Ukraine in Western societies.⁵²

Given the strongly pro-Russian and anti-American stance of conspiracy theories in Germany, it is not surprising that much of the disinformation circulating in German-speaking social media and digital channels reflects the attempt to shift blame for the war onto the West or the Ukrainians themselves. According to pro-Russian disinformation accusations in Germany, the Ukrainian army committed war crimes while using weapons supplied by the West.⁵³ Most often, unsubstantiated stories concern territories under Russian occupation, especially the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.⁵⁴ The goal is to depict Ukraine as an unreliable partner to Germany, one which uses the means provided by the West to engage in actions that violate international norms.⁵⁵

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Other disinformation narratives have sought to undermine support for Ukraine by portraying it as incompatible with, or detrimental to, assistance programmes for needy German citizens. For example, a post that circulated on Telegram spread false news about a campaign by the NGO Bunter Kreis Rheinland denouncing that funds for tanks were preventing sick German children from receiving life-saving support. The campaign was based on the equation of the cost of 'ten lives of German children' with that of 'one Leopard' tank. Although the NGO had never carried out any such campaign, the post on Telegram attracted considerable attention, with more than 100,000 hits.⁵⁶

Italian support for Ukraine has also become a target of disinformation. Ukraine has been described as a "terrorist state" that attacks peaceful cities, kills civilians in Russia, and uses chemical weapons in its military operations.⁵⁷

In several cases, disinformation has been directed at demonstrating Russia's strength and the imminent Ukrainian defeat. In October 2023, a false article was published by an Italian website, claiming that thousands of Ukrainian soldiers had surrendered, using a photo showing the scene to 'demonstrate' and dramatise the claim. However, the photo was taken from a video filmed a year before when Russian forces were trying to take Mariupol.⁵⁸ Previously, a Facebook post falsely claimed that Kyivstar, a mobile phone operator, had accidentally revealed Ukraine's actual losses were of 400,000 soldiers.⁵⁹

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False information also targeted the Ukrainian army with the goal of undermining its credibility in the eyes of the Italian public, or to create confusion and incredulity. For example, a video about a military education and training centre in Kremenchuk (Ukraine) was shared on Facebook in July 2023. It showed two soldiers moving a mannequin in a camouflage suit to hide behind a tree while a woman was taking pictures. The accompanying Facebook claimed that the Ukrainian army was staging the scene, implying that the military itself was not to be trusted.⁶⁰

Disinformation narratives concerning Western support for Ukraine are also widespread in Bulgaria. These posts are meant to undermine confidence in NATO or Western allies, foster discord, or create a sense of insecurity in the populations.

False information on social networks, for example, has claimed that NATO had issued an order for the mobilisation of 30,000 Bulgarian military personnel.⁶¹ Also, a Facebook post widely shared in November falsely stated that NATO troops were en route to Bulgaria. Related TikTok videos falsely claimed that Bulgarian territory had been donated to NATO and that US military bases were planned to be built in the city of Yambol. The news was debunked: there was no gift of land to NATO for base construction in the country, although Bulgarian facilities were being used for NATO's activities.⁶²

Anti-NATO messages often aim to convince the public that NATO countries are puppets controlled by the U.S.⁶³ Or, the prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine is portrayed as necessarily leading to Bulgaria's active involvement in the war.⁶⁴ According to the Bulgarian Defence Ministry, disinformation is used to undermine support for the Bulgarian army, leading to fewer recruits.⁶⁵

Overall, underlying narratives of these disinformation stories are that not Russia but the West, or Ukraine itself has to be blamed for the war, or that Russia is pushing

back against the West's expansionist plans, closely matching the pro-Kremlin propaganda. They are meant to undermine support for the alliance or instil fears that the conflict will inevitably expand to Europe.⁶⁶

While a causal connection between disinformation and popular support is not easy to establish, it is worth noting that the citizens of the three countries under examination have more doubts about military support for Ukraine than most other EU countries. According to the Eurobarometer of September 2023, those who wanted the EU to continue providing military support to Ukraine were 52% in Italy, 51% in Germany and 39% in Bulgaria, compared with an EU average of 57%.

Surveys conducted soon after Russia's full-scale invasion also show that close to a quarter of Italians did not consider the Russian authorities to be the main

actor responsible for the war, with an even greater percentage disapproving of military support to Ukraine.⁶⁷ More recent surveys show that lack of military support for Ukraine persists.⁶⁸ The situation in Bulgaria is similar. Soon after the start of the 2022 invasion, only 27% of Bulgarians believed that the Russian authorities were responsible for the war.⁶⁹ In Spring 2023, the country still ranked amongst those least in favour of the EU's support for Ukraine (39% disapproved of the EU's support to Ukraine, against the 21% overall score of the EU).⁷⁰ Moreover, opposition to NATO in Bulgaria appears to be rising.⁷¹

Although public sentiments around the war and its consequences are not necessarily shaped by disinformation, promoting false content online could feed confusion and anxieties, contributing to the erosion of public support for Ukraine, also militarily.

Manufacturing discontent on the energy transition

According to the Energy and Climate Security Risk Index, Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy are among the most vulnerable EU countries for the security of energy supply and overall energy and climate security vis-à-vis Russia – ranking just behind Greece.⁷² Prior to Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU depended on Russia for 24.4% of its total energy needs.⁷³ Russia provided about two-fifths of the EU's gas needs, making it the EU's largest supplier of natural gas, oil and coal.

Russia was Germany's main energy supplier, delivering between 35 and 40% of its total oil, gas and coal imports.⁷⁴ In 2021, Germany's consumption of natural gas was 27% of the country's overall energy mix.⁷⁵ However, the dynamics of energy supply changed significantly in 2022. The Russian state-owned company Gazprom reduced gas supplies through both the Yamal pipeline and Nord Stream 1. Subsequently, natural gas supplies from Russia to Germany came to a complete halt following the explosions on the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines.

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution warned that Russia was using energy concerns as a hybrid tool, actively trying to exploit Germany's energy supply crisis.⁷⁶ A similar risk was detected in Italy where, in 2021, natural gas accounted for the largest share of gross energy consumption (with 41%, followed by oil and petroleum products at 33%).⁷⁷ Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Italian Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic (COPASIR) had warned about the risks of hybrid threats using energy dependencies as leverage.⁷⁸

In the context of the information war relating to the conflict in Ukraine, Russian propaganda efforts have effectively focused on the energy crisis,⁷⁹ claiming, for example, that Europe will eventually "crawl back"

to Russia.⁸⁰ But more broadly, the challenge of the transition to alternative sources and supplies, as well as the consequences of doing so, have become the target of disinformation narratives.

In this context, two energy-related disinformation narratives stand out:⁸¹ on the one hand, the alleged lack of viable alternatives to meet the EU's needs,⁸² and, on the other, the damaging effects of the transition on ordinary European citizens.⁸³ This, false stories claim, will lead to turmoil and unrest in major European cities as the EU reduces its dependence on Russian energy.⁸⁴

Illustrating the first narrative are stories claiming that European countries have few, if any, alternatives to Russian fossil fuels to meet their energy needs. This narrative is linked to false claims around the alleged blackouts that would follow from the transition.⁸⁵

False online accounts tried to sow panic by claiming that power outages are becoming more frequent.

It is especially in Germany that disinformation stories claimed that the transition – and the sanctions against Russia – would provoke blackouts.⁸⁶ False online accounts tried to sow panic by claiming that power outages are becoming more frequent.⁸⁷ Many incidents reported and commented online were unproven and made-up.⁸⁸ These false claims are also meant to promote a sense of insecurity, suggesting that Europe will descend into chaos. For example, as part of the above-

mentioned Operation Doppelgänger, the network of cloned media sites spreading pro-Russian narratives also reported terrible accidents that allegedly followed the decision to do without Russian energy.⁸⁹

But to spread concerns in the public, disinformation does not necessarily have to point to the risk of violence. It can also use economic anxieties. An example from Germany is a video taken out of context from a ZDF-Frontal programme and subsequently shared on TikTok, Telegram, and Facebook during August and September 2023. This falsely asserted that Germany was bound to gas contracts with Russia worth 40 billion euros annually until 2030 and had to pay for them regardless of whether it received any gas or not.⁹⁰ These narratives may resonate in the current cost-of-living crisis, with more and more taxpayers struggling to pay for their energy bills.

These widespread disinformation narratives closely match the messages promoted by Russia's propaganda machine. Pro-Kremlin media in Germany present Europe's energy crisis as a consequence of the West's solidarity with Ukraine.⁹¹ They argue that people must choose between solidarity with Ukraine and meeting their own basic needs.⁹²

Pro-Kremlin media in Germany present Europe's energy crisis as a consequence of the West's solidarity with Ukraine

Although, disinformation narratives questioning the EU's capacity to transition and the consequences exist across the EU, in each country, they adapt to the local context, concerns and salient issues. False claims from Bulgaria illustrate this.

Disinformation narratives about the transition have also been widespread in Bulgaria. There, coal used to be the main source of electricity production, but this was gradually phased out. Although natural gas played only a marginal role in the energy mix, 94% of the gas supply came from Russian imports in 2021.⁹³ In April 2022, Bulgaria was forced to rethink its energy strategy following Gazprom's decision to abruptly halt gas deliveries in response to its refusal to pay in Rubles.

In this context, false claims have suggested the EU is unfairly forcing Bulgaria to shut down its coal power plants, while other countries continue to use theirs and even build new ones.⁹⁴ These claims are meant to promote resentment, a feeling which may have been exacerbated by misleading videos published online referring to the situation in other member states. For example, more than 11,000 social media users shared a video showing two coal plants in western Germany,

misleadingly suggesting that the latter has no plans to close its own coal plants and is not subject to air pollution restrictions, unlike Bulgaria's coal-fired power stations.⁹⁵

False claims have also been spread by domestic actors,⁹⁶ especially in connection with the reduced natural gas supply from Russia, in an attempt to undermine Bulgaria's membership in the EU.⁹⁷

In Italy as well, disinformation narratives about energy dependency have been present.⁹⁸ The war and sanctions against Russia have been presented as the sole cause of skyrocketing energy prices.⁹⁹ Against a background of rising costs of living, these kinds of disinformation narratives may resonate with more and more Italians, who could end up blaming Ukraine for the worsening of their living conditions. Having said that, disinformation about Italy's energy dependence appears to be less dominant compared to that focusing on refugees, for example.

Disinformation narratives not only put in question EU's capacity to transition away from fossil fuels and Russian supplies. They have been weaponised against the energy transition. More specifically, they targeted the EU's agenda on climate.

The war in Ukraine and the ensuing energy crisis have only highlighted the need to accelerate the shift towards sustainable and renewable energy sources in the EU. Against this backdrop, false narratives about EU actions against climate change have been intertwined with those of the consequences of the transition following Russia's war on Ukraine. For example, Russian state and pro-Kremlin media outlets have been active in spreading disinformation about the green transition, using various narratives, all questioning the EU's efforts to adapt to and mitigate its effects.¹⁰⁰ In fact, false claims have tried to raise doubts that the war has resulted in greater emissions, due to the phasing out from Russian sources.¹⁰¹

These disinformation narratives are especially worrying in a context where many European citizens are grappling with financial difficulties, striving to meet their essential needs, and facing declining purchasing power. Individuals facing economic challenges, but not only, may become more susceptible to disinformation that attributes financial hardships to the sanctions or to EU's commitment to reducing its dependency on fossil fuels.

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Disinformation and election dynamics: What possible impacts ahead of the elections?

Disinformation about Russia's war on Ukraine, energy-related issues, Western military support and refugees poses daunting challenges for contemporary democracies in Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria, as in other countries too. The impact of the related narratives on the upcoming European Parliament elections could be significant, as each of them exploits polarising issues that have the potential to mobilise voter sentiment and shape the electoral landscape. Disinformation also has the potential to significantly erode public support for EU and national policies.

The debate over Ukrainian refugees is a telling example. Although discussions about the reception of Ukrainian refugees may not feature prominently in election campaigns in all European countries, disinformation could contribute to eroding overall public support for refugees in Europe in a context marked by a cost-of-living crisis. Or it could give further visibility to parties promoting anti-immigration agendas. As Russia's war against Ukraine rages on, and the displacement of Ukrainian refugees may continue, the growing economic burden of the protracted conflict may reduce sympathy for refugees, creating fertile ground for hostile sentiments fuelled by disinformation.

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However, the impact of disinformation on public discourse and public support could also have significant consequences for other prominent issues in the European agenda, including Western military support and assistance to Ukraine and the EU's climate policies.

Furthermore, the disinformation narratives surrounding the ongoing war could lead to further pressure on governments to reduce or discontinue military support. The fear of an expanding conflict that currently pervades European societies, as well as its social and economic consequences, fuelled by disinformation, may contribute to a general rethink of Western support to Ukraine. This situation has implications beyond the war and beyond military aid, particularly in view of the current push to expand the EU to new members. With Ukraine now an EU candidate, any decrease in Western support would be highly significant from this viewpoint too.

Widespread disinformation may fuel not only the salience of this issue, but may also push the prominence of climate-sceptic messages or those opposing EU actions in this area.

EU citizens will head to the polls in June 2024 and vote on the bloc's climate and energy policy. Polls show that concerns about climate change, which played a role in voters' preferences in the 2019 European Elections, are still widespread among the European electorates.¹⁰² However, as the green transition becomes increasingly politicised, voters may be swayed by more immediate concerns about inflation and rising energy costs.¹⁰³ Widespread disinformation may fuel not only the salience of this issue, but may also push the prominence of climate-sceptic messages or those opposing EU actions in this area.

More broadly, the three topics examined in this paper are also examples of how tensions between national and EU interests can become a political battleground, with disinformation narratives strategically deployed to promote extremists' agendas over collective EU goals.

Strengthening resilience against disinformation in the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections

The European Union plays a central role in the fight against disinformation. Its initiatives provide vital momentum for cross-border efforts to monitor and

address the threats associated with disinformation and stimulate national processes by providing impetus and a shared regulatory framework for EU member states.

It is in this context that the EDMO Task Force on European Parliament Elections has been created to improve the EU's monitoring of disinformation.¹⁰⁴ It complements national initiatives and builds on the experience of the EDMO Task Force on Disinformation on The War in Ukraine, monitoring the information ecosystem in the run-up to the EU elections, and reporting on misinformation and disinformation trends affecting the democratic processes. Moreover, it will carry out a risk assessment ahead of the EU elections, to raise awareness of disinformation.

The EU's regulatory activities are also critical in determining the best way to assess the risk of disinformation, which could jeopardise the integrity of the 2024 elections. The Digital Services Act (DSA), the EU's flagship initiative in the field, identifies disinformation and electoral manipulation as systemic risks for democratic processes, civic discourse, and electoral processes, as well as for public security. Under the DSA, which will become applicable as of March 2024, major digital platforms are required to proactively identify and remove fake accounts and illegal content, contributing to efforts to maintain the integrity of electoral processes.

However, there are problems and questions about what the DSA might do and how it should be used. Among others, concerns have been raised regarding the content moderation of disinformation and its potential effectiveness across digital platforms, large and small.¹⁰⁵ Overall, the DSA may provide useful but limited improvements to combat misinformation.

At the same time, the upcoming EP elections as well as future national ones, in the EU and beyond, could be significantly impacted by new technologies and Artificial Intelligence. The EU's Cybersecurity Agency, for example, has raised concerns about the threats that the 2024 elections may face from AI chatbots and deep fake images and videos.¹⁰⁶

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These technologies have already been used. AI deepfakes circulated ahead of the Slovak and Polish parliamentary elections, held on 30 September and 15 October.¹⁰⁷ An AI software was for example employed to replicate the Polish Prime Minister's voice, without any disclosure of AI's involvement in the clip's production.¹⁰⁸ Just two days prior to the Slovakian elections, social media accounts of the far-right Republika party shared an

AI-generated recording, imitating the voices of the leader of the liberal Progressive Slovakia party, which discussed ways to manipulate the election, such as buying votes from the country's marginalized Roma minority.¹⁰⁹

Against this background, the EU has just reached a political deal on the Artificial Intelligence Act – the first attempt at a global level to regulate AI, to establish an all-inclusive structure that ensures clarity, accountability, and ethical usage beyond the adoption of voluntary self-regulations.

The AI Act may potentially bolster the EU's safeguards against emerging threats associated with AI-driven disinformation campaigns. The new regulations would impose obligations based on the degree of risk posed by AI content (unacceptable, high, or limited). Transparency requirements would legally compel the disclosure of the use of AI in producing digital content. In the past months, the negotiations of this reform at the EU level had encountered opposition from some member states, including Germany, France, and Italy. Seeking to promote domestic AI, these countries favour self-regulation through a code of conduct rather than regulation by the EU.

While this first setback exemplifies the complexity of balancing over-regulation stifling innovation and ensuring adequate protection, the lack of clear rules and obligations could undermine the EU's efforts to increase oversight over AI content.

Despite initiatives undertaken at the EU level, disinformation will not disappear and will continue to pose a threat.

Despite initiatives undertaken at the EU level, disinformation will not disappear and will continue to pose a threat. Disinformation is constantly evolving, adapting to countermeasures, and exploiting new vulnerabilities. This highlights the need for other initiatives to help strengthen resilience against disinformation. These include pre-bunking efforts, which aim to pre-empt disinformation by taking strategic actions before it circulates, as well as media literacy, providing citizens with the skills to distinguish fact from fiction and detect manipulative content.¹¹⁰

However, these are long-term strategies requiring resources and commitment and are unlikely to deliver results ahead of the upcoming European Parliament elections.

Without effective, holistic, and EU-wide actions, in this context, there will be a risk of a domino effect, which the European elections illustrate. EU-level monitoring and regulatory initiatives aim to create a level playing field

across European countries in terms of tools to combat disinformation. Should their efforts fail, weaknesses and shortcomings in one member state may undermine joint efforts and threaten the entire European system. More

specifically, extremist political parties may be able to gain appeal, and seats in the EP in an environment marked by disinformation and polarisation. From there, they could further fragment and weaken the future EU's actions.

Conclusion

As the snapshot of disinformation trends in Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy shows, the three countries share comparable vulnerabilities ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections. Common patterns and trends have emerged, underscoring the pervasiveness of challenges posed by disinformation on contemporary democracies, especially in the context of growing social and political polarisation and the cost-of-living crisis.

Although the empirical evidence on the impact of disinformation on voter choices remains ambiguous, its broader and more worrying implications extend beyond elections and may contribute to the erosion of trust in democratic societies. Disinformation campaigns can undermine overall confidence in the electoral process, its outcomes, and the media responsible for covering it, other than the institutional framework that underpins them.

An examination of both European and country-specific initiatives reveals some progress in efforts to counter disinformation. However, inherent limitations remain that require to be addressed.

To effectively combat disinformation, a comprehensive strategy is required that goes beyond nationally focused approaches and the frequent prioritisation of foreign threats. In addition, it is imperative to ensure robust enforcement of regulatory measures adopted at the EU level, such as the Digital Services Act, and that ongoing attempts to regulate the rapid development and deployment of AI and the risks it poses are finalised.

Additionally, since disinformation has a dynamic nature, a continuous and adaptive approach that anticipates and effectively responds to emerging threats is indispensable. Traditional denial tactics lose efficacy once false information begins circulating; thus, proactive strategies like pre-bunking and inoculation are crucial in establishing a pre-emptive defence against potential disinformation.

Lastly, in the digital age where information is abundant and easily accessible, media literacy proves to be a crucial tool. By promoting media literacy education, individuals can develop vital critical thinking and interpretation skills. This will enable effective questioning of content, the identification of reliable sources, and ultimately empower individuals to make informed decisions.

Critical to this understanding is acknowledging the positive progress made by current initiatives, accompanied by recognising their potential limitations. Disinformation campaigns are constantly evolving, adapting to countermeasures, and exploiting new vulnerabilities. The upcoming 2024 elections provide a backdrop where traditional and new tactics may converge, requiring a sustained and comprehensive strategy to effectively strengthen electoral processes.

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