

## Resilience Against Influence Operations in the Eastern Partnership Countries

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# Executive Summary

The focus of this study are the potentially subversive and less transparent dimensions of the geostrategic toolbox which states may apply in order to influence and shape the political and security development in the European Union's Eastern neighbourhood. It examines the various vectors of influence that operate in the public space, nominally independent but in practice controlled and funded by foreign states or non-state actors. In other words, the report is limited to what may primarily be considered the external threat environment, the associated risks, and how these interact with and influence local developments in the Eastern Partnership countries.

Three Eastern Partnership countries are struggling democracies – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, while three are more or less authoritarian states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. All states face non-negligible challenges in fighting corruption, enforcing private property, reforming courts, police and legislature, and building Western-style state capacity. Although several or most of these issues have domestic and historical roots, outside threats to the countries' reform agenda cannot be ignored. The primary focus of this study is on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Additionally, the study offers suggestions for counterbalancing this influence and promoting democratic development in the targeted countries.

The first section describes the various economic and business interests in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, with a particular focus on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The section describes the economic interests of other countries in the region, including Russia, Turkey and China, but also the role of the EU. Particular emphasis is placed on issues such as corruption, political and business risks, and the economic consequences of military conflict.

The main factor behind economic underperformance in the Eastern Partnership countries since 1992 has been the lack of political reforms, and the countries can be expected to proceed more slowly and unevenly with reforms than what many Western modernizers would ideally prefer. The attractive position of the European market, however, will perhaps remain the primary pull factor for further modernization. At the same time, trends suggest that other countries, such as China and Turkey, will be able to improve their relative weight in the region as well. Russia, meanwhile, has experienced a decline in its economic role in historically important

markets such as Ukraine and Georgia. These changes can be expected to alter the geostrategic environment, as new actors compete to shape local conditions to their advantage.

Russia's economy has an international competitiveness problem, and the Kremlin lacks in traditional soft power influence. Russia is, however, able to undermine further integration with the EU. Moscow has a range of instruments at its disposal – from the military to the economic, political, diplomatic and informational – which can be deployed simultaneously to varying degrees in order to hinder reform or stimulate counter-reforms. Especially notable are business connections between Russian elites and political leaders in virtually all the Eastern Partnership countries. The increasing presence of other important actors, such as China, Turkey or Iran, can likewise disinterest regional elites in the pursuit of EU integration, which may potentially threaten their ability to capture rents and maintain the political status quo.

The second section gives short introductions to the political landscapes in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, with a focus on vulnerabilities to influence operations. Attempts to influence politics comes in different shapes: direct support of parties, politicians or influence groups; financial influence via businesspeople in politics, or corruption; strengthening of separatist movements and trouble-makers, etc. Factors such as corruption, volatility and person-orientation affects the countries' vulnerability to such influences.

Instead of the traditional left-right divide, politics in the region is defined by key figures and their geostrategic orientations. The presence of strongmen and high corruption creates a volatile political environment, making the future difficult to predict. Lack of trust in the political elite is a general characteristic in these countries, creating fertile soil for the emergence of radical movements that promise to change the political orientation of their countries. In the long-term, it is crucial to rebuild people's trust in both politics and official institutions in order to create lasting democratic resilience.

The third section discusses how civil society is influenced by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), so-called Government Organized NGOs (GONGOs), and religious denominations. The use of state-sponsored NGOs, or GONGOs, has become a conventional component of the geostrategic toolbox of many countries. In

the Eastern Partnership countries, they are visible in the form of nominally independent think tanks, religious organizations, and educational institutions. Although Russia is the leading country within this domain, countries such as Belarus, Turkey and China are embracing similar methods. GONGOs can be used to build connections to local organizations, promote anti-EU narratives, disrupt multilateral negotiations and deploy fake election monitors in order to promote their interests. Religious organizations such as the Russian Orthodox Church play a key role in promoting pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives in the region.

The fourth and final section investigates media consumption in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. It addresses the issue of news reporting influenced by domestic and foreign political interests, as well as entertainment containing elements of propaganda. In the Eastern Partnership countries, television has long been the dominant medium, but the Internet and social media are catching up as major news outlets. Hence, we pay special attention to social media usage. The three countries in this study have chosen different paths in tackling foreign propaganda, with Ukraine as the most radical example.

The media sector in the Eastern Partnership countries has been highly affected by foreign influence operations for several reasons. The media landscape of these countries is in most cases characterized by an overconcentration of ownership in the hands of powerful oligarchs and/or politicians. Cultural and linguistic proximity has allowed Russian propaganda outlets to actively disseminate their narratives in these countries, both directly and through local media.

Traditionally, news consumption has been dominated by television channels throughout the region, with a strong presence of Russian propaganda channels such as RT and Sputnik. However, the use of social media is increasing in all three countries. The three countries in question have opted for different solutions to tackle the problem of disinformation, ranging from an outright ban on Russian media in Ukraine to softer regulative measures in Georgia.

Some examples from Ukraine show the risks of government-supported projects against disinformation. Civil servants engaging in counter-propaganda, troll attacks against independent journalists, and legislation violating the principles of free speech and media freedom are all pitfalls.

## Recommendations

The level of quality of a country's institutions is key to building resilience. Weak protection of property rights, corruption, absence of rule of law, poor safeguards for human rights, and inequality in options create the most conducive local conditions for outside attempts to shape political developments. In its negotiations with the Eastern Partnership countries, the EU needs to make clear its commitment to reform and democratization. Furthermore, it needs to be stressed that for the EU, its targets and demands require commitment and strict conditionality. Recent revelations of corruption schemes in Moldova and Ukraine should be met with resolute countermeasures by the EU, such as the withdrawal of financial and political support, if not adequately managed.

In Georgia and Moldova, a sense of EU-fatigue is spreading, amplified by Russian media. Anti-Western politicians are gaining new ground, the European path is seen as a dead end, and European values are portrayed as essentially different from traditional Orthodox values. Such tendencies could be taken into consideration in official communication from embassies and the European Union. Strong messages about core values such as gender equality and tolerance risk becoming counterproductive if they fail to take local conditions into account, because anti-Western actors pick up such stories and turn them against the European Union.

Since groups at the far ends of the political spectrum are often interlinked in complex networks, it is essential to identify their connections and operational methods. In many countries in the Eastern Partnership-region as well as Western Europe, specialized think tanks, scholars and journalists have begun to investigate these networks. Such initiatives should be supported, and regional cooperation between specialists, especially in the Eastern Partnership countries, should be encouraged.

In many cases, it is suspected that pro-Russian parties or groups receive funding from the Kremlin. It is, however, difficult to prove financial ties. Legislation concerning foreign funding and financial transparency of national political activities could be reviewed.

Mapping the links between organizations, their board members and financial sources is needed in order to distinguish between transparent and partial entities. To detect these connections, the media, civil society, academia and the intelligence community should enhance their communication and information-sharing capabilities. Knowledge generated through such cooperation could be used to help media avoid framing GONGO representatives as neutral experts, reporting about fake election observers, etc. It could also be used to strengthen the role of representatives to multilateral organizations, such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe and, not least of all, to help Western states ensure that funds intended to support civil society do not go to GONGOs.

Examples from Georgia demonstrate the importance of ongoing dialogue with religious groups at risk of being turned into tools of influence for authoritarian states.

In order to tackle the issue of disinformation in the long term, countermeasures should focus on educational and training efforts. Long-term resilience must be established by increasing the media literacy of the general public, which requires active engagement and cooperation at all levels of society. National, regional and international networks of experts would facilitate exchange of best practices and sharing of knowledge of the latest developments in the quickly changing field of disinformation, in turn substantially increasing the effectiveness and competitiveness of the fight against disinformation.

National, regional and international platforms for organizations working to debunk disinformation and to conduct research on influence operations should be supported and encouraged in order to substantially increase the effectiveness and competitiveness of the fight against influence operations in media. The success of debunking initiatives depends on two factors: 1) the ability to reach the necessary audiences, either online or offline; and 2) the ability to accumulate knowledge that can help journalists (and others) to detect fake news and stop them from reaching established media – a *proactive* rather than *reactive* approach. There is, however, a risk with debunking initiatives, especially if they have close ties to a government, namely that they engage in counter-propaganda rather than merely debunking fake stories.

# Introduction

Starting in late 2013 and continuing with the tumultuous events that culminated in Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014, the Ukraine crisis exposed the wider conflict between the respective goals and ambitions of the EU and Russia in their shared neighbourhood. The Kremlin's belligerence towards Ukraine brought to the fore limitations of the EU's traditional foreign policy approach – characterized by an emphasis on shared values, international law and norms, and a technocratic approach to reform, and forced EU governments to address the unintended geostrategic implications of the Eastern Partnership program covering Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In a challenge to the EU's integrative logic of voluntary cooperation, Russia seems to be striving for recognition of the primacy of great power interest at the expense of smaller states and their sovereignty. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov has openly declared the Eastern Partnership a challenge to the Russian traditional 'sphere of interest', and the space for finding common ground is limited. Notably, as EU leaders recognize the differences between their own foreign policy logic and that of Russia, Russian leaders insist that beneath the liberal approach, the EU is pursuing a geopolitical agenda. Furthermore, developments in the region reflect broader global currents, where other ambitious actors such as the US, Turkey, Iran and China also compete for influence, resources and a stake in the future international order, as well as their own place in it.

This report aims to shed light on the different action logics and competing geostrategic interests in the Eastern Partnership countries. In particular, the report explores a number of different domains where these different action logics may be identified – a 'geostrategic toolbox' of sorts. The purpose of this approach is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors at play in the regional dynamics, and the potential risks or opportunities that these may create for different state or non-state actors.

The geostrategic toolbox may consist of different instruments ranging from soft power and diplomacy to economic assets, political leverage and the use of military force. The instruments can be used separately or in combination. More crucially, these instruments may – for the most part – be utilised for coercive but also benign purposes. Although Russia's leaders have openly declared their view of international relations as a zero-sum game,

there is nothing inherently 'geopolitical' or confrontational in actions directed at a certain region. States usually adapt to an alteration in their geostrategic environment, but they can always define the logic of action they choose to pursue.

For the EU, the shift from managing a cooperative to a confrontational relation with Russia has been particularly challenging. The EU is not a state and is not usually characterized as a major power; it lacks the ability to project military force and rejects confrontational logic in foreign affairs. Another conundrum is the fact that several challenges in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood defy a simple state-centred approach. Many vulnerabilities in the region have domestic roots, and are not the outcome of outside interference. Furthermore, so-called hybrid threats have become more prevalent in the last ten years.

The 'hybrid tactics' developed by Russia have been identified in a number of different domains: cooperating with political parties in the EU (primarily on the far right and far left), creating and assisting NGOs, think tanks and youth groups which support Russian policy agendas, use of investments and business to influence policy makers (primarily in former Soviet republics), and broadcasting Russian media outlets in different languages to target groups abroad. Furthermore, the Kremlin has used energy, sanctions and boycotts as different coercive tools in order to further its geostrategic interests. Notably, Russia legitimizes its behaviour as partially defensive measures, regarding them as necessary responses to a similarly subversive influence from the West. In Russia's view, the 'colour revolutions' in Georgia (2003), Kyrgyzstan (2005) and Ukraine (2005 and 2014) were not spontaneous events but carefully organized coups by Western-backed proxies operating under the cover of 'democracy promotion.'

The EU's geostrategic toolbox has emphasized a commitment to international law and diplomacy as the way to resolve conflicts. Underpinning this approach is the EU's economic power, which has been used both as a carrot and a stick. On the one hand, trade and visa liberalization have been used as carrots to stimulate reforms towards good governance and rule of law in the Eastern Partnership countries. On the other hand, the EU applied its economic leverage as sharp power when imposing sanctions against Russia in 2014.



The importance of building state resilience was emphasized in the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels on 24 November 2017, which noted ‘the importance of strengthening state, economic and societal resilience both in the EU and the partner countries, and the role of the Eastern Partnership in this respect in the European Union’s neighbourhood as also outlined in the Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy and the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy.’ The declaration also affirmed the non-confrontational action logic of the EU, noting how the ‘Eastern Partnership aims at building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation and is not directed against anyone.’ Russia’s envoy to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov, dismissed the Eastern Partnership as a ‘propagandistic shell and a set of bilateral projects’ of little political or economic import.

The essence of the Eastern Partnership since its launch in 2009 has been the transfer and implementation of specific values, norms and institutions, including democracy, rule of law and human rights, but also a market economy, sustainable development and good governance. Implementation in all domains remains unfulfilled. Three Eastern Partnership countries are struggling democracies – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, while three are more or less authoritarian states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. All states face non-negligible challenges in fighting corruption, enforcing private property, reforming courts, police and legislature, and building Western-style state capacity. Although several or most of these issues have domestic and historical roots, outside threats to the countries’ reform agenda cannot be ignored.

Russian anxiety about losing ground to Western influence in the post-Soviet space is unlikely to go away in the foreseeable future. The Kremlin supported the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014, an economic union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, as an alternative to the EU. The member countries share a common Eurasian Customs Union, or the EACU, which facilitates cross-border trade but implies no specific reforms or ambitious political integration.

In recent years, Russia has been particularly active in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – the three countries in the region that have declared their intention to integrate with the West. These three countries have in common

the partial occupation or lack of control over parts of their territories. The Russian military currently occupies the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia (since 2008), as well as Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine (since 2014). Russia also maintains a military presence in Moldova’s Transnistria, in the wake of the 1992 peace agreement that ended the short war that had started in the same year. The conflicts are partially fluid; a ‘creeping borderization’ by Russia servicemen is ongoing in the Georgian Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia since 2008, where, among other things, part of the BP-owned Baku-Supsa pipeline came under Russian-occupied territory in 2015.

The focus of this study is not the broad panoply of ‘soft power’ instruments that states employ in their foreign relations, i.e., culture, language, tourism, economic connections and other traditional routes of diplomacy. The focus of this study is rather the potentially subversive and less transparent dimensions of the geostrategic toolbox states may apply to influence and shape the political and security development in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood. It examines the various vectors of influence that operate in the public space, nominally independent but in practice controlled and funded by foreign states or non-state actors. In other words, the report is limited to what may primarily be considered the external threat environment, the associated risks, and how they interact with and influence local developments in the Eastern Partnership countries. Additionally, the study offers suggestions for counterbalancing this influence and promoting democratic development in the countries that are targeted.

The first section of this study gives an overview of the economic and business climate in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, with special emphasis on foreign ownership and assets, and their associated risks. The second section describes the political climate and the various networks that operate in the region. Section three outlines the role of civil society and religious organizations, and their international context. The final section describes various media channels of influence.

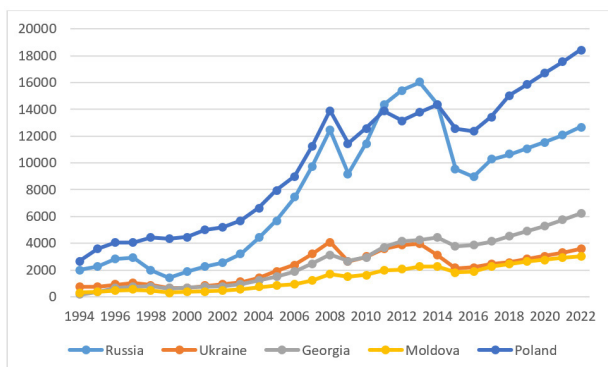
# An Economic Overview: Political and Business Risks

This section describes the various economic and business interests in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, with a particular focus on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The section describes the economic interests of other countries in the region, such as Russia, Turkey and China, and also the role of the EU. Particular emphasis is placed on issues such as corruption, political and business risks, as well as the economic consequences of military conflict. At the end of the section, we discuss policy implications.

Arguably, the most serious challenge to democratization and pro-market reforms in the Eastern Partnership countries since 1992 has been from within. Entrenched establishments, their informal networks, the post-Soviet legacies, inequality in political and economic opportunities, and the outsize influence of businesspeople capturing the political decision-making process have, taken together, constituted the greatest threat to stability and success. Russia, which has relied on energy exports to achieve economic growth, and Poland, which efficiently ridded itself of its socialist legacy and joined the EU in 2004, are two examples of countries which were able to achieve higher levels of income per capita in the last 25 years compared to the Eastern Partnership countries.

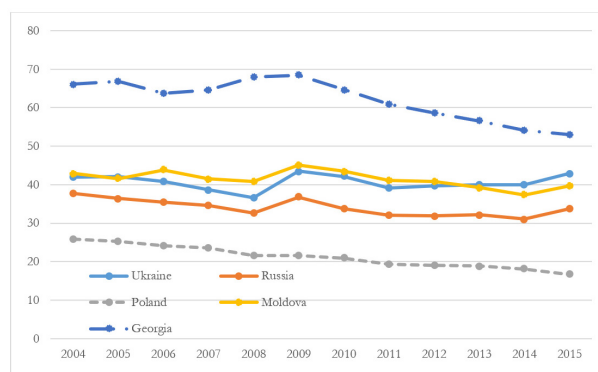
Figure 1 shows GDP per capita in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Russia and Poland, from 1994 to 2022 (USD, current prices, where the years 2017-2022 show the IMF growth estimate). Within this group, the three Eastern Partnership countries constitute a separate category with comparatively low levels of income per capita in 2016 – from 1,900 USD per capita in Moldova to 2,200 in Ukraine and 3,870 in Georgia. Although Russian income levels fell by nearly 50 % between 2013 and 2016 – due to the lower price of oil, sectoral sanctions and uncertainty over the Russian government's future actions – at 8,500 USD per capita in 2016, they remain significantly higher than those for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

Figure 1. GDP per capita (current USD)



Economic inequality remains a key concern in Georgia, where a 2016 World Bank report put national poverty rates at 21 % of the population in 2015. Poverty in Ukraine increased from 15 % of the population in 2014 to 22 % in 2015, but has since declined somewhat following resumed growth. Paradoxically, official income statistics for post-Soviet states may inflate the poverty problem, as a non-trivial share of all transactions occur outside government control and are thus not subject to taxation or registration. According to historical data collected by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), shown in Figure 2, the size of the shadow economy in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine has varied from circa 40–60 % of GDP since 2004, with the Georgian economy having the largest estimated share of undisclosed incomes. Since joining the EU in 2004, Poland saw the share of its shadow economy decline from circa 26 % of GDP in 2004 to 17 % in 2015, which is on a level not dramatically higher than in Western European states (where the shadow economy on average accounts for 10-12 % of GDP).

Figure 2. Size of Shadow Economy as Share of GDP



## Trade and Foreign Direct Investments

The EU has been able to capture a growing share of trade in its Eastern neighbourhood. In 2012, 24.9 % of Ukraine's exports and 30.9 % of its imports were to



and from the EU, a figure that increased to 37.2 % of exports and 43.7 % of imports in 2016. Although Russia remains Ukraine's main trade partner, its share has declined from 25.7 % of exports and 32.4 % of imports in 2012 to 9.9 % of exports and 13.1 % of imports in 2015.

The decline of Russian trade is partially by design: under President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin has applied targeted trade sanctions against Ukrainian, Moldovan, Georgian, Polish and Lithuanian products, as well as the broad counter-sanctions imposed against the EU in 2014. Georgia and Ukraine have in turn taken steps to reduce significantly their reliance on Russian natural gas; in 2017, around 90 % of Georgia's natural gas originated in Azerbaijan. Ukraine, which suspended imports of Russian natural gas in November 2015 due to a dispute over prices and supply volumes, will resume some imports in 2018 following a recent ruling by the Stockholm arbitration court that lowered mandatory imports and gas prices. Meanwhile, Ukraine's Naftogaz will seek to diversify its sources of natural gas via the EU market.

Foreign direct investments (FDI) in the Eastern neighbourhood follow well-established paths. In 2016, Ukraine's major investors included Russia (37.8 % of FDI), Cyprus (9.7 %), Great Britain (9.2 %), the Netherlands (5.8 %), Austria (5.7 %), Italy (4.8 %), Hungary (4.3 %) and Turkey (2.3 %). FDI from the US was negligible, comprising 1.9 % of FDI in 2016. Furthermore, FDI from Cyprus, Great Britain and the Netherlands are to a large extent recycled earnings from either Ukraine or Russia, and so may be discounted as conventional FDI. The total FDI in 2016 was also relatively meagre, comprising 3.44 billion USD.

Despite the publicity surrounding President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investors have been largely absent in the Ukrainian market until recently. Cooperation exists in tourism – where a 2017 visa liberalization simplified visits from China – and sectors where Chinese investors have identified strategic assets in agriculture and military technology, such as jet engines. The Black Sea ports of Chornomorsk, Odessa and Nikolayev have been upgraded, or are currently in the process of being upgraded, by Chinese construction firms with the expectation that they will be soon carrying more China-bound cargos. Chinese companies will be involved in the 2 billion USD upgrading of the Kyiv metro system and the building of a 400 million USD passenger railway connecting Kyiv with its Boryspil International Airport.

China is also Ukraine's largest purchaser of military equipment, totalling 90 million USD in sales in 2016.

Greater Chinese clout in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood would squeeze EU and Russian influence further, potentially making Beijing the premier geostrategic actor in the region. Fundamental advantages to investors include cheap, well-educated labour, as well as geographic proximity and access to the EU. Ukrainian authorities are wary, however, of hostile Chinese technology transfers. In 2017, Ukraine's security service SBU blocked the Chinese company Skyrizon from buying Motor Sich, a Ukrainian firm which makes engines for cargo planes and helicopters – although the reason could also have been domestic infighting over control of the firm. The potential for further Chinese engagement in Ukraine is large, but the level of engagement would ultimately depend on the degree to which Kyiv accommodates Chinese interests in the country's military technology.

A more comprehensive relationship with China may support Georgia's strategic goal of balancing Russian and Turkish influence in the Black Sea region. Georgian exports to China increased from just 6 million USD in 2009 to 170 million USD in 2016, whereas in the same time period Chinese exports to Georgia increased from 175 million USD to 548 million USD. In 2016, the Chinese market absorbed 8 % of Georgia's exports worldwide, putting it third after Turkey and Russia. The free trade agreement signed in May 2017 will eliminate over 90 % of tariffs on all trade, and can be expected to increase the importance of the Chinese market for Georgian producers. Chinese FDI in Georgia remains relatively small at the current stage (26.4 million USD in 2016), but Chinese companies are particularly strong in finance, telecommunications and tourism. China also has a stake in the future Batumi Bypass Road Project, which will facilitate trade between Georgia and Turkey, and is supported by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

Turkey remains a smaller economic actor than the EU, China or Russia, but its geostrategic significance as one of the largest countries in the Black Sea region should not be overlooked. President Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Kyiv in October 2017 was an illustration of Ankara's pursuit of an autonomous foreign policy. Although the recent detente between Russia and Turkey has received the most attention, the Turkish government has also expressed an interest in joint manufacturing of aircraft

engines, radars, military communication and navigation systems together with Ukrainian corporations. Turkish construction companies have been successful in Ukraine, and tourism between the countries is active: more than one million Ukrainians visited Turkey in 2016, and as of March 2017, Ukrainians and Turks have been able to travel between their countries passport-free, using only an ID card.

## **Economic Inequality and Organized Crime**

The main challenge to economic development has been political. So-called state capture is the attainment of political power by a narrow group of individuals who also own or benefit from control over strategically important economic assets – e.g., energy, industry, telecoms and banks. In 2016, the assets of the 100 richest Ukrainians were estimated to equal approximately 25 % of Ukraine's GDP, and 60 % of these assets belong to only 10 individuals. In Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, leading politicians are also among the wealthiest businesspeople. Georgia's former prime minister, the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, held 1 % of Gazprom stock before entering Georgian politics, and his current portfolio remains unclear. Ukraine's president Petro Poroshenko has, since coming to power in 2014, maintained business interests in Ukraine as well as in Russia. The intertwining of economic interests with political power represents for Russia the potential for sharp power, and could lead to accusations in the future that the respective governments are motivated by personal gain rather than national security.

A related concern is economic crime and corruption. The revelations by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) regarding the so-called Laundromat, a vast money-laundering scheme, showed that between Autumn 2010 and Spring 2014, Russian officials and insiders moved at least 20 billion USD (perhaps as much as 80 billion USD) into Europe, the US and other countries with the help of intermediaries in Moldova and Latvia. Moldovan politics has also offered one of the clearest examples of large-scale corruption in the last decade. In 2014 it was revealed that approximately 1 billion USD had been siphoned from the country's banking system and disappeared in an operation conducted by leading politicians and businesspeople.

Illicit trade has also thrived across the disputed territories in post-Soviet space. Many of the 'self-defence volunteers' who came out on the streets alongside the not-officially-Russian troops in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine during the events of 2014 turned out to be local criminals, and the governing elites there have had close, long-term relations with organized crime. In February 2018 it was reported that the Russia-controlled territories in Eastern Ukraine and Georgia have been conduits of contraband, such as coal from the Donbass, which is suspected of being funnelled through the FSB-controlled port of Ochamchire in Abkhazia to Turkey. Although Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have all taken certain steps to combat corruption and organized crime, it will be many years before the issue can be sufficiently managed.

## **Concluding Discussion**

The main factor behind economic underperformance in the Eastern Partnership countries since 1992 has been the lack of political reforms, and the countries can be expected to proceed more slowly and unevenly than what many Western modernizers would ideally prefer. However, the attractive position of the European market will perhaps remain the primary pull factor for further modernization. At the same time, trends suggest that also other countries, such as China and Turkey, will be able to improve their relative weight in the region. Russia, meanwhile, has experienced a decline in its economic role in historically important markets such as Ukraine and Georgia. These changes can be expected to alter the geostrategic environment, as new actors compete to shape local conditions to their advantage.

The level of quality of a country's institutions are key to building resilience. Corruption, weak protection of property rights, absence of rule of law, poor safeguards for human rights, and inequality in options create conducive local conditions for outside attempts to shape political developments. In its negotiations with the Eastern Partnership countries, the EU needs to make clear its commitment to reform and democratization. Furthermore, it needs to be stressed that the EU's targets and demands require commitment and strict conditionality. Recent revelations of corruption schemes in Moldova and Ukraine need to be met with resolute countermeasures by the EU, such as the

withdrawal of financial and political support if not adequately managed.

Russia's economy has an international competitiveness problem and the Kremlin lacks traditional soft power influence. Russia is, however, able to undermine further integration with the EU. Moscow has a range of instruments at its disposal – from the military to the economic, political, diplomatic and informational – which can be deployed simultaneously to varying degrees in order to hinder reform or stimulate counter-reforms. Especially notable are the business connections between Russian elites and political leaders in virtually all of the Eastern Partnership countries. The increasing presence of other important actors, such as China, Turkey or Iran, can likewise disinterest regional elites in the pursuit of EU integration, which may potentially threaten their ability to capture rents and maintain the political status quo.

# Political Parties

This section gives a short introduction to the political landscapes in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, with a focus on vulnerabilities to influence operations. Attempts to influence politics comes in different shapes: direct support of parties, politicians or influence groups; financial influence via businesspeople in politics or through corruption; strengthening of separatist movements and trouble-makers, etc. The section investigates how factors such as corruption, volatility and person-orientation affect the vulnerability of countries to such influences. Since each political context is unique, the problems are addressed for each country individually. At the end of the section, we discuss possible policy implications.

## Ukraine

In 2010 Viktor Yanukovich won the presidential election in Ukraine after campaigning on a platform of closer ties with Russia. The years that followed were characterized by corruption, cronyism and political conflicts, building up the tensions that culminated on Maidan in 2014.

The pro-Western oligarch Petro Poroshenko was elected president in May 2014. Parliamentary elections in October confirmed the support of the president's political allies. From a Russian perspective, the Euromaidan movement and Poroshenko's win appeared as a Western-fomented coup against its ally Yanukovich. The remains of Yanukovich's Party of Regions transformed into the Opposition Bloc, Ukraine's strongest anti-Western political force, which now has strongholds in the southern and eastern parts of the country.

Russia's annexation of Crimea has divided Ukraine. The western and northern parts of the country are firmly West-oriented, while opinions differ in the east and south, where the common cultural heritage with Russia is stronger. This division is, however, often exaggerated in Russian media, which project an image of Ukraine as a highly polarized country.

Most parties are person-oriented rather than idea-oriented. Traditional left-right conflicts are subordinated to geostrategic orientations and the credibility of leading individuals. The party of Petro Poroshenko is named Petro Poroshenko Bloc 'Solidarity', and if the president were to retire from politics, it would likely transform or cease to exist. The political landscape in Ukraine is volatile; parties merge, split, flourish, change shape and die quickly.

These two factors – person-orientation and volatility – combined with a high level of corruption and oligarch/

elite interests render Ukrainian politics vulnerable, not least to economic influences. Russian money is a factor, as well as other financial interests. Poroshenko is seen as firmly Western-leaning, but concerns have been raised over his company trading with Russia-controlled Transnistria. Such double standards serve to weaken trust in the Ukrainian leadership on the part of its citizens as well as of Western leaders.

Following the war in Crimea, Poroshenko has increased his presidential powers. He and his allies now hold considerable control over law-enforcement agencies, the executive, legislative and judiciary branches, the electoral commission and the media.

Presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for March 2019 and October 2019, respectively, and the political elite is strikingly unpopular. According to a recent study by the Razumkov Center for Political and Economic Research, 9.3 % would vote for Poroshenko now, and 9.6% for his party. Considering that he received more than 50 % of the votes in 2014, these numbers are low, yet Poroshenko is still the most popular politician in Ukraine. The period leading up to the elections could become turbulent, and new candidates with or without foreign support are likely to enter the race.

In 2017, former Georgian president Saakashvili challenged Poroshenko, previously an ally who had offered him Ukrainian citizenship after leaving Georgia and helped him become mayor of Odessa. When, in 2017, Saakashvili arranged protests in Kyiv, calling Poroshenko a corrupt criminal, he was deprived of his citizenship. In February 2018, he was banned from entering Ukraine until 2021. Saakashvili has not managed to gather any substantial popular support.

Russia's action logic in its 'near abroad' has not necessarily been effective in influencing public opinion. Support for NATO membership in Ukraine jumped from 13 % in 2012 to over 45 % in 2015, and over 70 % of all Ukrainians in 2015 identified Russia as an aggressor in Eastern Ukraine. 53 % of Ukrainians expressed support for EU membership in 2017, and over 18 % favoured membership in the EACU (with 28 % undecided). In 2017, 80 % of Georgians supported the idea of their country joining the EU, whereas support for NATO membership was 68 %. Moldova has been more evenly divided, with 41 % of the population supporting the EU, 43 % supporting the EACU, and 16 % supporting NATO, in 2015.

## Moldova

As in Ukraine, most Moldovan political parties are person-oriented rather than idea-oriented. The government is constituted by pro-European parties, but in November 2016 Igor Dodon was elected president with an openly pro-Russian agenda. Dodon was elected as a representative of the Socialist Party, but has since left the party and is now independent. The president favours Russia's Eurasian Union over the EU, his first trip abroad was to Moscow and he sat next to Vladimir Putin at the Victory Day parade in Moscow in May 2017. The election of Dodon was generally seen as an effect of growing EU-fatigue in Moldova, where people had started to see the European path as a dead end.

The conflict between the government and President Dodon regarding the country's relation to Russia became obvious in January 2018, when the speaker of the parliament signed a new law restricting Russian media in Moldova. Since Dodon twice refused to sign the bill, the Constitutional Court of Moldova ruled that either the prime minister or speaker, who both represent the pro-Western Democratic Party of Moldova, could sign the bill into law in his place.

Russia's main objectives seem to be to have as many allies as possible in the Moldovan parliament and, in the long run, to obstruct Moldova's path towards the EU. Russia had close relations with and provided financial support to the Communist Party of Moldova for a long time, but moved its support to Dodon's Socialist Party in 2014 after a failed internal coup in the Communist Party, mobilized by the Russian Embassy in Chisinau. The Kremlin has funded anti-EU campaigns for the party and Russian officials attend the party's conferences. The

Communist Party has also a close relation to China, and under its rule the country received a Chinese loan of 1 billion USD in 2009, often seen as indirect support for the party.

The Democratic Party is in general considered to be a firmly West-leaning party, but its chairman Vladimir Plahotniuc, one of Moldova's richest oligarchs, is often criticized for mainly benefiting his own financial interests. He is under investigation by Interpol for possible connections to Russian organized crime, and has been involved in a bank scheme that bankrupted three of Moldova's largest banks as well as in extensive money laundering. Although the Democratic Party stands behind regulation of Russian media, Plahotniuc's ownership of the television channel that rebroadcasts Russian Channel One makes this stance appear hypocritical. The case of Plahotniuc illustrates the problem with corruption and organized crime, which makes Moldova vulnerable to various geopolitical tools.

The conservative Iurie Rosca, a former deputy prime minister for the diminishing Christian Democratic Party (once an informal coalition partner of the Communist Party), is another politician who stands out as a dominant pro-Russian opinion maker. After leaving politics in 2012, he founded the informal Popular University. In December 2017, Dodon and Rusca spoke alongside the Russian ideologue Alexander Dugin, who is heavily influential in radical far-right movements around the globe, not least in the so-called alt-right movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Apart from Moldovan politicians, this meeting was attended by people from the new far-right scene around Europe, the Georgian conservative Eurasianist Levan Vazadse and far-left profiles such as the Swedish writer Jan Myrdal. Dugin has previously spoken at Iurie Rusca's Popular University.

The conservative party Partidul Nostru (Our Party) pushes an anti-European, pro-Russian agenda and has strong links to Moscow. Partidul Nostru got around 10 % of the votes in local elections in 2015, but is not represented in the national parliament.

In Gagauzia, an autonomous region within Moldova, separatist tendencies have developed after the crisis in Ukraine. Most of Gagauzia's 160,000 residents are Gagauzians – a Turkic, Orthodox Christian people – and an overwhelming majority is in favour of strengthening ties with Russia. Since 2015, the region has been governed by Irina Vlah with direct support from Russia.



## Georgia

In 2004 the United National Movement (UNM) formed the government of Georgia and its leader Mikheil Saakashvili entered office as president. The UNM government was intensely dedicated to a Western path and pushed hard for Euro-Atlantic integration. In 2012 UNM lost the parliamentary elections to the Georgian Dream coalition, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili. Saakashvili was prevented from seeking a third term in the 2013 presidential elections, and Georgian Dream candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili entered office. Saakashvili was accused of corruption and authoritarian tendencies, and he is currently wanted on multiple criminal charges, including abuse of power in connection with a 2006 murder case. Saakashvili left Georgia for Ukraine, where he was offered citizenship by President Poroshenko and became mayor of Odessa. In Georgia, he has been sentenced in absentia to three years in prison.

The current government led by Georgian Dream has followed in Saakashvili's and UNM's footsteps on the pro-Western path. Local experts point out, however, that Georgian Dream takes a slightly softer approach towards Russia. One example of this is the incorporation of the Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration into the Foreign Ministry in late 2017.

The UNM-lead opposition criticize Georgian Dream for close relations to Georgia's most prominent pro-Russian force, the Alliance of Patriots, a radical nationalistic party that currently holds around 5 % of seats in the national parliament, and the popular movement March for Georgia. Local experts claim that the Alliance of Patriots is likely funded by the Kremlin, but there is little evidence for this other than two visits made by the party's MPs to the Duma in Moscow in 2017.

Given the ongoing military occupation, there is little fertile soil for pro-Russian statements in Georgia. Hence, the Alliance of Patriots mainly push anti-Western views and the idea that Georgia is fundamentally different from Europe while sharing a common culture, values and traditions with Russia. Good relations with Russia and conservative Orthodox values in line with the Kremlin's agenda are represented as patriotic. The major movement in this context is the Georgian March, which gathers ultra-nationalists in Pegida-like marches, demonstrating against Muslims, homosexuality, the influence of Western governments and George Soros. One of its frontmen, Sandro Bregadze, was formerly a deputy minister in the current government.

The same narratives are voiced by the former speaker Nino

Burjanadze—a leading figure in the 2011 demonstrations against Saakashvili who plans to run for president in 2018. Burjanadze is frequently quoted in Russian news outlets such as RT and Sputnik. She has been declared persona non grata in Ukraine because of her statement that 'Crimea is and always will remain a part of Russia.'

Some smaller parties such as the Democratic League, Party for Neutral Georgia, Protect Georgia, and Free Georgia Party have ties to local pro-Russian NGOs and Russian GONGOs.

## A Shift from Left to Right

Traditionally, both Russia and China have mainly targeted far-left parties in Western democracies, where they have found ideological common ground. This has changed in the past decade for Russia, which now seeks cooperation with various types of parties with which they have common political interests. In Western Europe, there has been a lot of focus on Russia's relations with radical parties on both sides of the left-right spectrum. This is often the case further East, but even here it is possible to find common ground with more established parties.

In many cases, it is difficult to separate relations between governments from the parties in power. The most obvious such case is the Communist Party of China, which is inseparable from the government. The parties FPÖ in Austria and the youth branch of Alternative for Germany have cooperation agreements with Putin's main party of power, United Russia. This means that they essentially have direct relations with the Kremlin, rather than the kind of party-to-party relations which are conventional in Western-style democracies.

In December 2017, the Communist Party of China held a top meeting in Beijing for the World Political Parties, gathering some 600 participants from around the globe. The participants came primarily from communist parties around Asia, but some conservative and far-right parties, as well as United Russia, were also represented. This shows a similar ambition on the part of China to that of Russia: from the authoritarian perspective the traditional political spectrum becomes less important. New common ground is found, and the main aim appears to be to cause disruption and challenge liberal democratic ideas about globalization and economic policies. China's interests in the region can be described as an aim to strengthen its position in the backyard of both Europe and Russia, but countries such as Georgia are also of strategic importance in the creation of new trade routes.



## Political Parties – Concluding Discussion

Instead of the traditional left-right divide, politics in the region is defined by key figures and their geostrategic orientations. The presence of strongmen and high corruption create a volatile political environment, making the future difficult to predict. Lack of trust in the political elite is a general characteristic in these countries, creating fertile soil for the emergence of radical movements that promise to change the political orientation of their countries. In order to create lasting democratic resilience, it is crucial in the long term to rebuild people's trust in both politics and official institutions.

In Georgia and Moldova, a sense of EU-fatigue is spreading, amplified by Russian media. Anti-Western politicians are gaining new ground, many view the European path as a dead end, and European values are portrayed as essentially different from traditional Orthodox ones. Such tendencies could be taken into consideration in official communications from embassies and the European Union. Strong messages about core values such as gender equality and tolerance risk becoming counterproductive if local conditions are not taken into account, as anti-Western actors pick up such stories and turn them against the European Union.

Since groups on the far edges of the political spectrum are often interlinked in complex networks, it is essential to identify their connections and operational methods. In many countries, both in the Eastern Partnership region and in Western Europe, specialized think tanks, scholars and journalists have begun the work of investigating these networks. Such initiatives should be supported, and regional cooperation among specialists in the Eastern Partnership countries should be encouraged.

In many cases, pro-Russian parties or groups are suspected of receiving funding from the Kremlin. Financial ties are, however, difficult to prove. Legislation regarding foreign funding and financial transparency of national political activities could be reviewed.

# Civil Society

This section discusses how civil society is influenced by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), so-called Government Organized NGOs (GONGOs) and religious denominations. First, we cover influence by Russian GONGOs and NGOs with ties to foreign states operating in the Eastern Partnership Countries. This is followed by an analysis of how such organizations use multilateral organizations such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe to push their agendas. Third, we study how election monitoring is used as a tool to legitimize illegitimate elections and undermine the statements of independent election observers. Fourth, we take a look at influences in higher education, ranging from Russian state-funded organizations to China's Confucius Institutes. Finally, we study the influence of religious denominations, with special attention to the Russian Orthodox Church. This section concludes with a discussion of possible counter-initiatives and policy implications.

In 2013, the role of civil society abroad was for the first time singled out in the Foreign Policy Concept of Russia. Russia's use of GONGOs and supported NGOs as means of soft power has increased heavily since the mid-2000s, in response to a perception of Western influences in Russia and its area of interest. At that same time as the government made it harder for foreign NGOs to operate in Russia, it employed a plethora of GONGOs, NGOs and think tanks with the mission to promote Russia's views of international relations and to maintain relations with Russian compatriots living abroad. Most of these organizations were funded between 2006 and 2011.

Russia is not the only country using civil society to push its agenda. Countries as Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Belarus and China use similar methods. Russia stands out, however, due not least to the extent of operations. There are reasons to believe that other regimes study Russia's examples and apply similar tactics.

There are three categories of Russian GONGOs. Some are directly linked to the presidential administration; others are nominally independent, but receive funding from the state, for example from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A third category of organizations is less transparent, but their relations to the Kremlin can be revealed through their networks and activities: who are the board members, what conferences do they attend, what do they publish, who do they invite to speak, etc.?

## GONGOs and Official Think Tanks

Some organizations are run directly by senior members of the government or the Duma and aim to strengthen the image of Russia and Russian culture abroad. They

are also active in supporting local organizations that promote Russian interests. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Konstantin Kosachev, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Federation Council, are both on the board of four such GONGOs. The deputy chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Vitaly Ignateko, is a member of three boards. Several of these entities enjoy close relations with the Federal Security Service (FSB). Examples of major GONGOs include World Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots, Russkiy Mir, Rossotrudnichestvo, Gorchakov Fund, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and Russian Institute for Strategic Studies.

## Local NGOs in the Eastern Partnership Countries

In all three countries considered in this study, local NGOs operate with support from Russian GONGOs. In accordance with the concept of the Russian World Foundation (Russkiy Mir), a main aim is to coordinate and mobilize ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. Local organizations gathering Russian compatriots operate with support from Russian embassies, Russkiy Mir, World Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots and Rossotrudnichestvo.

One category of NGOs push the agenda of Eurasian integration. The actors behind such organizations often come from far-right contexts and have close international ties – to Russia as well as other countries in the region. For example, Eurasian Choice in Georgia was founded with Ukrainian Choice (run by Viktor Medvedchuk, a pro-Russian Ukrainian politician and friend of Vladimir

Putin) as a role model and is run by Archil Chkoidze, a friend of Alexander Dugin. There are numerous Eurasian organizations in Georgia, the majority of which are run by a small circle of radical conservative nationalists. The Eurasian ideology offers an alternative to Europe, hence anti-EU narratives are as common as pro-Russian narratives from these groups. Local experts claim that the impact of Eurasianists is small but nevertheless significant. They cultivate commitment among their followers and find new ways to organize over time, not least through online media initiatives.

Another category is comprised of Orthodox NGOs related to the Russian Orthodox Church. Many of these are funded by Orthodox oligarchs, either in Russia or the Eastern Partnership countries. The Foundation of St. Vasily and the Dialogue of Civilizations Endowment in Moldova, Orthodox Ukraine, and People's Orthodox Movement in Georgia are examples of such organizations. The idea of political unity among Orthodox countries is closely linked to Eurasian ideology, and there is often an overlap of participants and narratives between the Orthodox and the Eurasian movements.

The World Congress of Families (WCF) is a notable forum where Orthodox opinion makers and radical conservatives from the West meet and cooperate. Most of the leaders are Americans from the Christian right, but WCF receives funding from a number of wealthy Russian businesspeople, among them the ultra-nationalist Konstantin Malofeev, a close friend of several influential Russian leaders, including former minister of communications Igor Shchegolev (sometimes described as Putin's Internet tsar) and the Russian Patriarch Kirill. He is a self-described monarchist who supports the idea of a full return of the Russian Empire.

Ukrainian security services consider Malofeev to be a key financier of rebels in Eastern Ukraine on behalf of the Russian government. The leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and the commanders of the rebel forces have been on Malofeev's payroll. Malofeev's St. Basil the Great Foundation is Russia's largest Orthodox charity, and he is one of the main backers of the Safe Internet League, which uses paedophilia, drugs and violence as arguments for advocating tough control and censorship of the Internet. In Crimea, he has set up theme parks recounting Russian history in a 'family-friendly' way and founded the television channel Tsargrad TV, intended to provide conservative, Orthodox perspectives on the news, with Fox News as a role model. Malofeev

is also the president of Katehon, a radical Eurasian think tank run by Alexander Dugin.

WCF organizes annual conferences, most recently in Tbilisi and Budapest. In 2018 the annual conference will be held in Moldova with President Igor Dodon and Patriarch Kirill as speakers.

A *fourth* category is comprised of groups sympathetic to the Kremlin's agenda for other reasons. Cossack organizations, groups of Afghan veterans, paramilitary or ultra-radical groups, and martial arts clubs have all been found to have, or are suspected of having, close ties to Russia.

## Western NGOs and Think Tanks

In 1992 German counterintelligence stated that Western think tanks were a top-priority target for Russian influence operations. The Russians were aware of the role of think tanks in American politics and realized the potential of influencing such institutions. By doing so, a country can sneak its perspectives into party politics, and by infiltrating think tanks, a mole could potentially be recruited to serve in public administration. In the past, large American think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the Atlantic Council have been targets of such influence operations. American think tanks are especially vulnerable to foreign influences because of their constant need for funding. Think tanks on foreign policy, energy, etc., can easily end up operating as a lobby organization for a foreign government. Since American think tanks are used as a model all over the world, this strategy is most likely employed in countries other than the US. American think tanks are also expanding, and several of the most important think tanks have local offices abroad. From these offices, knowledge is accumulated about the region and expertise is provided to local governments.

One possible example of how such local offices can be turned into tools of influence is the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center, which runs an office in Kyiv. The former director of the Ukrainian office chose to resign in February 2018, publicly claiming that the Institute has been 'downgraded to the role of the Kremlin Institute and instrument of Russia's hybrid war in the very heart of Washington, D.C.'

## GONGOs in Multilateral Organizations

Russia uses transnational organizations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the United Nations

to push its foreign policy agenda. Gunnar Vrang, a Swedish diplomat and former spokesperson for the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, described Russia's three main objectives in the OSCE as 1) securing the survival of the current Russian regime, 2) securing Russia's right to a sphere of interests in its neighbourhood, and 3) establishing a new set of rules that acknowledge Russia as a great power in parity with the US. Russia disrupts various processes within the OSCE in order to cause fragmentation, and it frequently blocks decisions at the ministry level. In 2016, High Commissioner for National Minorities Astrid Thors resigned her post because the Russian delegation indicated that they would block her appointment because of a critical report she wrote after a visit to Crimea in 2014. Russia has also argued for closure of the Special Monitoring Mission to Donbas. Azerbaijan has for many years tried to influence the Council of Europe's reports about human rights. In 2012 the European Stability Initiative published a report on Azerbaijan's 'Caviar Diplomacy', and in 2017 it was revealed that Azerbaijan was involved in a \$3bn corruption scheme, known as the 'Azerbaijan Laundromat', in which representatives in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe were a main target.

The regimes of Russia, Azerbaijan and other countries also send GONGOs to influence the reports and agenda of the OSCE. Daniel B. Baer, U.S. Permanent Representative to the OSCE, has described how GONGOs reduce the speaking time of genuine civil society organizations in plenary sessions by flooding the meetings; deliver false and absurd claims; organize side events and sometimes even book side-event rooms solely to prevent others from arranging them; abuse Q&A-sessions with long and loud statements in support of their governments' views; and not least, team up with state-controlled media to control news reporting from the sessions. According to Baer, 'this synergy of fake news and fake advocates helps repressive regimes create the theatrical illusions they use in support of efforts to justify their grasp on power.' Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are pointed out as active in sending GONGOs to the OSCE.

A noteworthy example of this is Mir bez natsizma, World Without Nazism (WWN), which was founded in 2010 as an international human rights organization with the aim of monitoring early signs of far-right extremism, mainly in the Baltic states and the Eastern Partnership countries. WWN soon managed to gain access to the Council of Europe and the OSCE and used these

as platforms to warn against increasing radicalism, primarily in Ukraine and the Baltic states. In an OSCE session in 2014, WWN and the Foundation for the Development of Civil Society 'People Diplomacy' accused Ukraine's government of 'mass killings of dissidents.'

The Estonian security police noted that the Estonian branch of WWN was run by a small group of pro-Russian radicals as early as 2010, and they classified WWN as a GONGO with the aim 'to create an unusual situation according to which questioning Moscow's version of history is equated with denial of the Holocaust and the results of the Nuremberg trials.'

A closer look at the people and funding behind WWN verifies the statements of the Estonian security service. WWN has received funding from the Russian Compatriot Foundation, and its chairman, Boris Spiegel, an oligarch and member of the Russian Federation Council, received a direct grant from the president in 2014 to arrange an event in Strasbourg. In Finland, WWN was represented by Johan Bäckman, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies' representative to the Nordic countries, and in Poland by the European Center of Geopolitical Analysis, a Eurasianist think tank run by the far-right politician Mateusz Piskorski, currently detained by Poland's Internal Security Agency on charges of cooperation with Russian intelligence services, meeting intelligence officers and undertaking operational tasks as well as accepting payments. In 2017, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project revealed that the European Center for Geopolitical Analysis had received €21,000 from the so-called Russian Laundromat, 'an immense financial fraud scheme that enabled vast sums to be pumped out of Russia. The money was laundered and moved into Europe and beyond through bribery and a clever exploitation of the Moldovan legal system.'

In spite of these facts, the OSCE used material from WWN in its Hate Crime country reports as late as 2014. A much-needed counter-measure would be to support participants in multilateral organizations with knowledge of how authoritarian regimes use GONGOs to obstruct and influence the decision-making process in favour of their own interests.

## Election Monitoring

In the 2013 presidential elections in Azerbaijan, the official election observers from the OSCE reported that 'significant problems were observed throughout all stages of election day processes.' The election observers from



the Council of Europe, on the other hand, used words such as 'free,' 'peaceful,' 'transparent' and 'professional' in their report. In the local media, the report from the Council of Europe was quoted to justify the elections, while there were few traces of the OSCE report. Azerbaijan's bribes in the Council were not for nothing.

Influencing representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council was obviously not impossible, if expensive. A cheaper way to justify dubious elections is through so-called zombie monitors, i.e., fake monitoring groups. Soon after the elections in Azerbaijan, a plethora of infamous or little-known election monitoring groups published their own reports and sent their representatives to speak to media in Baku and justify the victory of President Aliyev. The Inter-Commission Working Group on International Cooperation and Public Diplomacy of the Public Chamber of Russia Elections, Commonwealth of Independent States Election Observation Mission (CIS-EMO), and the Forum of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) all issued positive assessments of the election process, which were, in turn, widely disseminated by Azerbaijani media.

CIS-EMO is the most noteworthy Russian NGO/GONGO engaged in election monitoring. Since 2005, it has observed more than 40 elections in Russia's neighbouring countries (e.g., Ukraine, Moldova and Estonia) other countries (e.g., France and Turkey), and breakaway states such as Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In each case, the findings of CIS-EMO have corresponded with the interests of the Kremlin.

Similar missions come from the European Observatory for Democracy and Elections (EODE), an organization founded by Belgian far-right politicians with close ties to Alexander Dugin, and the previously mentioned European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis – both partners of CIS-EMO. These three organizations cooperated in a monitoring mission to the illegitimate referendum in Crimea in 2014. The participants on such trips are often pro-Russian European politicians, often from the far-right or the far-left. The OSCE condemned the elections on Crimea in 2014 and chose not to take part in monitoring activities, yet Ria Novosti claimed that OSCE observers had arrived in Donetsk. What they referred to turned out to be a 'clone' observer group called Agency for Security and Cooperation in Europe (ASCE), under the leadership of the Austrian far-right politician Ewald Stadler. A handful of similar organizations observed the

illegitimate presidential election in Crimea in March 2018.

A final organization worthy of mention in this context is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, founded by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2001.

The practice described above is a strategic measure on the part of Russia – but also on the part of other authoritarian regimes and parties – to undermine the work of the OSCE and the Council of Europe and to legitimize illegitimate elections and referendums.

Russian GONGOs have also been active in Western Europe, sending election observers to countries or elections they seek to defame or, alternatively, legitimize. Russian experts find it likely that at least some Russian GONGO will send observers to the parliamentary elections in Sweden in 2018.

## Educational Ties

For many students in the Eastern Partnership countries, Russian universities offer an opportunity to get a high-quality education at a low cost. For Russian-speaking students, language is another pull factor. A majority of foreign students at Russian universities come from former Soviet republics, and several universities operate in the Eastern Partnership countries. There are multiple branches of Russian universities in Crimea and Moldova, though none on territory controlled by the Ukrainian government. These are branches of universities offering educational programmes, but they often cooperate with organizations such as Russkiy Mir and Rossotrudnichestvo, which offer tuition-free, extracurricular courses in Russian language and culture. It is a well-known fact that Russian intelligence agencies have worked closely with universities ever since Soviet times, with representatives at every major university. In Georgia, local experts are concerned that civil servants with degrees from Russian universities show signs of dual loyalties.

The educational ties between Russia and the Eastern Partnership countries concern not only students, but also scholars. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept from 2016 declares that Russia's academics and experts should participate more in dialogues with foreign specialists. Local experts throughout the region attribute to this declaration the fact that foreign academics have received invitations to conferences, in either Russia or neighbouring countries, which turn out to be heavily influenced by the

Kremlin or its GONGOs. This has happened to historians in particular.

Historical narratives are central in the work of several GONGOs. For example, such narratives may emphasize Russia's achievements in saving Europe from fascism without discussion of human losses, or exaggerate pro-Nazi sentiments in the Baltic states and Ukraine. Experts speak of the weaponization of history, describing the Kremlin version of history as "a mix of Russian imperial and Soviet legacies." The Russian Association for International Cooperation receives funding from Rossotrudnichestvo to spread this Russian version of history, and arrange events in Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic states.

China has five Confucius Institutes in Ukraine and one each in Georgia and Moldova. The global network of Confucius Institutes aims to promote Chinese language and culture, and typically partners with academic institutions. The first institutes were established in Seoul and Tashkent in 2004, and in 2014 there were nearly 500 active institutes in 120 countries. The Confucius Institutes have raised questions and criticism of the Chinese government's motives, including accusations of serving as a platform for political propaganda as well as of exerting pressure with regard to how certain subjects are taught.

In Georgia, Turkey runs Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centres in association with three universities, promoting Turkish language, literature, history, culture and art. The Yunus Emre Centers are subordinate to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Former minister of culture and tourism Ertugrul Günay has called them the 'civil pillar of foreign policy,' and President Abdullah Gül has referred to them as 'Turkey's invisible power.'

## Religious Organizations

### *The Russian Orthodox Church*

Religious denomination can play a significant role in shaping political beliefs and can thus serve as a tool of influence for both state and non-state actors. It is important to highlight the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the Eastern Partnership countries. It has a close relationship to the Kremlin and often disseminates the narratives of the Russian government. Officially, the ROC is independent from the state, but the clergy have close ties to the political leadership.

A survey from PEW Research Centre shows that Russia is viewed as a protector of Orthodox Christians in

the world by a majority in countries where Orthodox religion is dominant. This is the case in Moldova, for example, where 61 % of the population share this point of view. Two exceptions in the region are Ukraine and Georgia, where only about 20 % see Russia as a protector of Orthodox Christians and Christian values.

Apart from the Orthodox faith, the strongest factor predicting support for a strong Russia is the belief that the respondent's values differ from Western values. Anti-Western narratives are also commonly spread by churches connected to the Moscow patriarchate.

In Moldova, the Metropolitan Orthodox Church, which is closely affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, takes a clear stand in politics, conducting aggressive campaigns against EU politicians. The pro-Russian president Igor Dodon has decorated many high representatives of the Church and met with Patriarch Kirill on several of his trips to Russia.

Even though the Georgian Patriarch Ilya II has met with the Night Wolves and praised President Putin, there is no official connection between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Moscow Patriarchate. The Georgian clergy are divided into a more liberal and a more conservative wing. The conservative wing actively spreads Russian propaganda, in particular the narrative of civilizational unity between Georgia and Russia, and the idea that Georgian traditions are incompatible with Western culture. Patriarch Ilya has also taken part in an international meeting of the World Congress of Families. It is noteworthy that about 35 % of the Georgian population states that the political views of their priests significantly influence their decisions in parliamentary elections.

The Georgian Ministry of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration has conducted study trips to Brussels for Orthodox priests, with the aim of changing their perception of Western values. According to the Ministry, the study trips have been successful and several of the priests who have participated state that the visits changed their perceptions and the way they speak about value conflicts to their parishes. Future plans include study visits to Washington, D.C. and the inclusion of leaders of other churches and religions, such as Muslim leaders.

In Ukraine, there is a significant difference between the independent Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The latter is closely affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate and engaged in spreading pro-Russian narratives. It also owns several of



Ukraine's most prominent religious properties. There are some cases in which priests have been accused of harbouring military groups and using church premises for the military. The Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate strives for freedom from Moscow, and President Poroshenko has appealed to the Patriarch of Constantinople, asking for independence from the Moscow Patriarchate. Poroshenko has declared that 'it's about our final independence from Moscow. Not only in religion, but in geopolitics. This is a matter of national security and our defence in a hybrid war.' The appeal met with a harsh reaction from the Kremlin.

The correlation between Orthodox self-identification and pro-Russian beliefs is amplified not only by the churches. There are also several NGOs that work with the same kind of narratives and target groups. Among them, the Moldovan oligarch-funded organizations Foundation of St. Vasily; Dialogue of Civilizations Movement; Orthodox Ukraine; Georgia's People's Orthodox Movement; and Society of Erekle the Second. Both Georgian organizations have close ties to the International Eurasian Movement and cooperate with Russkiy Mir. A typical slogan is "No to gay Europe, long live united, strong and Orthodox Georgia!"

The connections mentioned above indicate that Russia has identified Orthodox clergy and civil society leaders as important players in shaping regional politics. Hence, the ROC is eager to maintain good relations to the local Orthodox churches, or to fund local churches subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. Moscow-based umbrella organizations support local Orthodox NGOs that engage in social work and political activism. These churches and the NGOs function as hotspots for the dissemination of Russian narratives in the region.

### *Other Religious Denominations*

Due to the geographical location, the ROC is by far the most influential religious actor engaged in spreading

anti-Western values in the Eastern Partnership countries and Central Eastern Europe.

It is noteworthy that some of these countries have substantial Muslim minorities, due not only to immigration but also to historical reasons. Large parts of the region have been under Ottoman rule, Turkey is a close neighbour, and the Tatars are an important minority, not least in Crimea. Crimean Tatars have been targeted by Russian security services since 2014, and they have received political support from Turkey.

The All-Ukrainian Association of Social Organizations (Alraid) was founded in Ukraine in 1997. This network is a founding member of the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE). FIOE claims to be independent, but is generally considered to be an umbrella organization for European groups connected with or sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Alraid consists of 11 Islamic centres, 21 social organizations and 2 gymnasiums. The network is engaged in charity and social work, and runs culture and language educational programmes as well as sports and chess tournaments. The Crimean Tatars are an important target group for Alraid, who direct social work, such as repairing and equipping schools, to this group, but the cultural activities and social work are part of a package that is inseparable from religious teachings.

In Georgia, local experts mention as significant Turkish and Iranian influences on the Muslim minority. Both of these countries fund mosques and grant scholarships to young Muslims who wish to travel abroad and study theology.

Turkey's Gulen Movement has some presence in both Georgia and Moldova. The Turkish government puts pressure on local intelligence services to turn the screws on Gulen supporters in these countries. In other countries, Turkish intelligence services have been working to limit the influence of the movement.

## **Concluding Discussion**

The use of state-sponsored NGOs, or GONGOs, has become a conventional component of the geostrategic toolbox of many countries. In the Eastern Partnership countries, they are visible in the form of nominally independent think tanks, religious organizations, and educational institutions. Although Russia is the leading country within this domain, countries such as Belarus, Turkey and China are embracing similar methods. GONGOs can be used to build connections to local organizations, promote anti-EU narratives, disrupt multilateral negotiations, and deploy fake election monitors in order to promote their interests.

Mapping the links between organizations, their board members and financial sources is needed to distinguish

between transparent and partial entities. In order to detect these connections, the media, civil society, academia and the intelligence community should enhance their communication and information-sharing capabilities. The knowledge generated through such cooperation could be used to help media to avoid framing GONGO representatives as neutral experts and reporting about fake election observers, for example. It could also be used to support the representatives of multilateral organizations such as the OSCE and Council of Europe and, not least of all, to help Western states ensure that funds intended to support civil society do not end up in the hands of GONGOs.

Georgia's example of sending Orthodox priests to Brussels shows the importance of ongoing dialogue with religious groups at risk of being turned into tools of influence for authoritarian states.

# Media

This section examines media consumption in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. It addresses the issue of news reporting influenced by domestic and foreign political interests, as well as entertainment containing elements of propaganda. In the Eastern Partnership countries, television has long been the dominant medium, but the Internet and social media are catching up as major news outlets. Hence, we pay special attention to social media usage. The three countries in the study have chosen different paths in tackling foreign propaganda, with Ukraine as the most radical example. We discuss these different strategies and suggest possible counter-initiatives and policy implications.

Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova all struggle with ownership in the media sector – oligarchs and other rich individuals with political connections own many of the major stations and often use them to spread messages that benefit their interests in business or politics. Ukraine's prime minister Petro Poroshenko owns 5 Kanal, one of the first television channels to criticize Viktor Yanukovych in 2004, and has received massive criticism for his reluctance to sell the media company after entering office. In Moldova, the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, who is chairman of the Democratic Party, controls about 70 % of the media market.

Even though there are several influential state and non-state actors operating in the region, Russia stands out as the single most important actor using media to influence public opinion. Russian state media such as RT and Sputnik operate wherever they are allowed, and in countries where they cannot broadcast, online platforms offer a way into the news feeds of ordinary users.

The three countries have chosen three different paths to handle the influence of Russian media. The most radical of the three countries is Ukraine, which has simply banned most Russian media actors. In Georgia, on the other hand, such actions are widely seen as incompatible with an open society. In Moldova, where the influence from Russian broadcast media is highest, a new law regulating Russian media was passed in January 2018.

Apart from Russian media, local media amplify Russian narratives, often driven by the economic and political interests of the media owners. There are also cases of minor media outlets, mainly operating online, that belong to radical contexts either to the left or the right, or in circles of conspiracy theorists. These so-called "alternative" media outlets often have connections to local pro-Russian parties and NGOs, or to organizations in Russia.

"Fake news" is a problem, but fabricated stories are quite rare: the bigger picture consists rather of heavily biased reporting over time both in Russian state media and in local media that support Russia. Flaws are rarely invented, but rather amplified. News items are carefully selected to fit different narratives. In Russian state media such as RT and Sputnik, radical politicians, scholars and activists pose as experts and are given a platform; "people on the street" turn out to be carefully selected to fit different narratives. This sometimes makes it hard to pinpoint individual articles or stories as propaganda, but long-term trends and tendencies are more obvious.

## News Consumption

For a long time, television has been the most significant news source in the Eastern Partnership countries. Almost 90 % of the residents in these countries believe that television shapes public opinion. The Russian television channels available are often directly controlled by the state and should be labelled propaganda outlets rather than news channels. The availability of Russian news channels varies widely among the different countries.

In Ukraine, federal Russian broadcasters have been banned since 2014. Travel bans have been implemented for Russian journalists and pro-Russian television hosts have been arrested. According to local experts, even children's programs, certain channels such as Fishing and Hunting, and Russian entertainment were used to spread propaganda before the ban. Hence, such channels have been banned, and Russian films and TV shows produced after 2010 cannot be broadcasted.

Russian television channels are still available via satellite and the Internet, but the influence of such channels has dropped significantly. The newspaper Vesti, distributed for free, and an affiliated radio station have been pointed

out as a major source for Russian narratives in Ukraine, as well as the television station Inter TV.

According to annual polls conducted by Internews, the consumption of Russian television in Ukraine has dropped from 27 % in 2014 to 5 % in 2016 due to the media regulations.

In the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, on the other hand, the separatists aim to create a closed information environment where they control the narratives spread in the media. One of the first steps after seizing power was to take control over the television towers and replace Ukrainian channels with Russian programs. These broadcasts reach as far as 50 km beyond the borders, and in such grey zones, which are not occupied but host large Russian-speaking populations, the consumption of Russian television remains high. The Donbass News Agency, which mainly targets foreign audiences with biased news from the occupied territories, is run by the Finns Janus Putkonen and Johan Bäckman, who is the Nordic representative of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies and works closely with the far-right ideologue Alexander Dugin.

The Ukrainian debunking organization Stopfake has seen some success in distributing print media in such grey zones. They publish corrections of fake news spread by the Kremlin and the local leadership in Donbass, as well as proper news and general information from trustworthy sources.

In Moldova, Russian television is widely available with local editions of Sputnik, NTV and RTR. 90 % of the population consume Russian news, and 38 % indicate that Russian television is their main source of news and current affairs.

In January 2018, the parliament passed a new media and propaganda law that forbids most television and radio programs not produced in the European Union, the US or Canada, or by states that have not ratified the European Convention on Transborder Television. In practice, the ban will include most Russian media and force a significant change in media consumption. After the law was passed, the State Duma in Moscow presented a declaration accusing Moldova of discrimination against Russia media.

In Georgia, 77 % of the population has television as their main source of information. About 20 % of the population receive information about politics from Russian television stations. There are also local television

stations, as well as online channels, amplifying the Russian narratives. The nationalist party Alliance of Patriots runs its own television channel, Obiektivi, which local experts point out as a main source of Russian narratives, not least about conservative Orthodox values and the similarity between Russian and Georgian culture. Some examples of narratives spread by Obiektivi are: that accounts of Russia's attempts to shift the borders are Western propaganda; that the European Union is undemocratic; and that Russia protects freedom of speech more strongly than the United States. DRO TV is closely related to Eurasian Choice, one of the most active NGOs spreading Russian propaganda in Georgia. The number of viewers of such channels is probably low, but broadcasting creates a long-term relation with viewers and may establish a strong commitment to ideas, not least among elderly people.

## Entertainment

Public opinion is not only shaped by news reporting, but also by entertainment, a traditional soft power tool. Russian films and television series are widely available in the Eastern Partnership countries, contributing to a more positive image of Russian culture and history. Apart from Russia, Turkey stands out as a country that uses broadcast media in its public diplomacy in the region. The main strategy of Turkey is not biased news, but entertainment that creates a positive image of Turkey. Turkish soap operas are not only popular in the Middle East, but exported to about 90 countries, among them Georgia and Ukraine, making Turkey the second largest soap opera exporter in the world after the US. In Ukraine, the popularity of Turkish soap operas has boomed after Russian entertainment was regulated. The Turkish government is open about using soap operas as a tool for nation branding, and these are sometimes even offered at no cost to the television stations. Following the increasing popularity of its television shows, Turkey has seen a large increase in tourism from these countries and a growing interest in studying Turkish language and culture. Turkey has been accused of using soap operas as a tool of influence for pushing the "neo-Ottoman" agenda of former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in countries that belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Turkish journalists point out that the historical dramas all portray the West as Turkey's arch enemy.

The concept *soap opera* was invented by the Procter and Gamble company in the US in the 1930s to sell soap to housewives. With regard to Turkey, the brand for sale is

Turkish values. However, these efforts are substantially different from Russian propaganda, since their purpose is to create a positive image of Turkey, not to distort and amplify the weaknesses of other actors and nations.

## Social Media

In Georgia and Moldova, the usage of social media has increased rapidly. In January 2017, 50 % of the population of Moldova used the Internet and 20 % were active users of social media, an increase of 40 % since 2016. In Georgia, 63 % use the Internet and 55 % are active social media users, a 22 % increase from 2016. In Ukraine, Internet penetration is 49 %, and 36 % are active social media users – a decrease of 18 % since 2016. The drop of social media usage is an effect of the ban on the Russian social networks Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki. It is noteworthy, however, that a small part of the population is so attached to Vkontakte that they use VPN solutions to access the platform. Odnoklassniki is the most popular platform in Moldova, with Facebook in second place. In Georgia, Facebook is the dominant social media platform. The use of Twitter remains low in all three countries.

In all three countries, a large part of the population, in particular the younger generations, follow the global trend of turning to social media for news. Hence possibilities for foreign states to influence opinions grow, and it becomes harder for governments to control newsfeeds. Through online publishing, media outlets like RT and Sputnik can reach audiences even in countries where they are not allowed to broadcast television or radio.

Fake accounts, trolls and bots present a problem in all three countries, and local journalists testify to campaigns against independent journalist and dissidents, not rarely with Russian connections and narratives. In Ukraine, independent journalists also testify to an increase of troll campaigns against media outlets who publish criticism against the current government. The Poroshenko government is outspoken about its strategy of using social media to tackle disinformation and anti-Ukrainian opinions. The Ukrainian Ministry of Information Policy is recruiting Ukrainian social media users for a heavily criticized government-run “Internet army” operating on social media. It is possible that this operation crosses the line and engages in digital harassments against its own citizens.

## Countermeasures

As shown above, the consumption of Russian propaganda is widespread in all the countries examined in this study, but is, in most cases, concentrated to certain regions, ethnical minorities and/or radical political groups. This does not mean that people who do not consume news from Russia are immune from Russian influences. Russian narratives make their way into mainstream media in these countries, and thus supporting journalists’ understanding of the propaganda machinery should be a top priority. The increasing use of social media offers new possibilities for Russia and other countries to find a way into users’ newsfeeds.

### Legislation

The Ukrainian strategy for limiting Russia’s influence as well as its possibility to access data from Ukrainian Internet users is an outright ban on Russian media and social media platforms. Russian media, as well as the anti-virus programme Kaspersky, the search engine Yandex and the email provider mail.ru, have been banned. This strategy originates from the conflict over Crimea. A sense of war motivates the Ukrainian government to take extraordinary actions. Moldova follows in Ukraine’s footsteps and has started to regulate Russia’s presence in the media, while Georgia remains a stronger defender of freedom of speech. However, even Georgia utilises current legislation to limit some Russian attempts to use local broadcasters as hosts of their productions.

Banning Russian networks such as Vkontakte makes some sense: the platform was overtaken by the Kremlin in 2014 and is reported to share data with the FSB. A general ban on Russian media is far more problematic and raises important questions about freedom of speech. Media freedom is a core strength of liberal democracy. Taking a page from authoritarian regimes and using legal measures against publishers serves to damage open society in the long term. At the same time, regulation of social media hardly offers a quick fix to build resilience against influence operations. Another risk associated with the regulation and banning of media is that such measures can be used by authoritarian states to justify actions against independent media. In Belarus, Ukraine’s media regulations have been used to justify the closure of independent websites such as Charter97.

### Debunking/Fact-checking

In Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, several online platforms have been established for the purpose of debunking



myths and fake news, in some cases with support from Western governments and/or organizations. The most well-known example is Stopfake in Ukraine. In Georgia, Mythdetector is probably the most widespread debunking site. On a European level, The East Stratcom team debunk Russian propaganda. From a journalistic perspective, these platforms do a lot of good work to heighten awareness of narratives, methods and strategies used by Russia and other actors who aim to create distortion.

There is little evidence that the publishing of corrections of fake news have any effect on the people who read and believe in fake stories: they rarely reach as many people as a successful fake story, and when they do, they probably reach a different audience. Stopfake is a good example of an organization that uses methods other than online publishing in order to target audiences exposed to Russian propaganda—for example, by distributing print media in the grey zones near the borders.

The success of debunking initiatives depends on two factors: 1) the ability to reach the right audiences, either online or offline; and 2) the ability to accumulate knowledge that can help journalists (and others) to detect fake news and stop them from reaching established media – a *proactive* rather than *reactive* approach.

National, regional and international platforms for organizations devoted to the debunking of disinformation, as well as research on influence operations, should be supported and encouraged in order to substantially increase the effectiveness and competitiveness of the fight against influence operations in media.

A risk with debunking initiatives, especially if they have close ties to a government, is that they engage in counter-propaganda rather than merely debunking fake stories.

### *Media Aimed towards Minorities*

Minorities who feel excluded because of ethnicity, religion, language or values are often the most vulnerable to propaganda, and several authoritarian regimes work

actively on media outreach to such groups, Russia's concept with Russkiy Mir being the most obvious case. The challenge for countries like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is to integrate such groups into society and not abandon them. For example, the most accessible media for Russian-speakers in Georgia is Russian state media. By investing in quality journalism aimed towards minorities in languages they prefer, legitimate media can compete with the Russian propaganda channels.

Examples of best practices can be found in the Baltic states. In Estonia, 74 % of the non-Estonian-speaking population consider Russian-origin television channels to be very important information sources, and 51 % trust Russian media more than Estonian media (2015). This number is high, but has declined from 70 % in 2011. Several media actors in the Baltic states acknowledge this as a problem, and work actively to increase both their outreach to and trust among minorities, not least by offering news in Russian. Such ambitions are much rarer in the Eastern Partnership countries, and the creation, due to media regulations (as in the example of Ukraine-Donbass), of two parallel bubbles with opposing worldviews probably does not bode well for future solutions to the conflict.

### *Proactive Work to Create Long-term Resilience*

In the long run, knowledge has to increase throughout society in order to enhance media literacy and better equip people to identify a hoax. Cooperation between schools, media and civil society should be coordinated to increase awareness at all levels. This kind of long-term relation building is of utmost importance, but can be problematic if it is managed by the state. If the perception is that the government lectures its citizens in order to promote certain values and opinions, it might be perceived as counter-propaganda or even simply propaganda. In countries where democracy is still young and not firmly rooted, such concerns might be justified. Hence, it is best if this kind of long-term accumulation of knowledge can be carried out voluntarily, with civil society actors at the fore.

## **Media – Concluding Discussion**

The media sector in the Eastern Partnership countries has been highly affected by foreign influence operations due to several reasons. The media landscape of these countries is, in most cases, characterized by an over-concentration of ownership in the hands of powerful oligarchs and/or politicians. Cultural and linguistic proximity has allowed Russian propaganda outlets to actively disseminate their narratives in these countries both directly and through local media.



Traditionally, news consumption has been dominated by television channels throughout the region, with a strong presence of Russian propaganda channels such as RT and Sputnik. However, the use of social media is increasing in all three countries. They have opted for different solutions to tackle the problem of disinformation, ranging from an outright ban on Russian media in Ukraine to softer regulative measures in Georgia.

Of the various civil initiatives, the Ukrainian debunking site Stopfake is the most notable one. While debunking is an indispensable tool for raising awareness and informing about strategies of disinformation, these messages often fail to reach the desired audience. Debunking initiatives probably work best when they take a pro-active approach.

In order to tackle the issue of disinformation in the long run, countermeasures need to focus on educational and training efforts. Long-term resilience has to be built by increasing the media literacy of the general public, which requires the active engagement and cooperation of all levels of society. National, regional and international networks of experts would allow for the exchange of best practices while sharing their knowledge on the latest developments in the quickly changing field of disinformation, substantially increasing the effectiveness and competitiveness of the fight against disinformation.

Some examples from Ukraine show the risks of government-supported projects against disinformation. Civil servants engaging in counter-propaganda, troll attacks against independent journalists, and legislation violating the principles of free speech and media freedom are all pitfalls.



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