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## Disinformation as Geopolitical Risk for Transatlantic Institutions

### *Abstract*

Disinformation has become a geopolitical risk for transatlantic institutions and for the global democratic alliance. Russia and China as authoritarian powers have had a long-standing interest to undermine the institutions of the liberal international order, led by the United States, the European Union and the NATO alliance. That way, disinformation can undermine trust in the liberal democratic system, including free market economy, individual liberty and open society. This geopolitical risk poses a significant threat to fact-based and evidence-based policymaking in many areas, including economy and security. Comprehensive counter-intelligence policy solutions can detect and mitigate this risk by ensuring broader institutional and societal resilience through lifelong civic education.

**Key words:** disinformation; geopolitical risk; transatlantic institutions; EU; NATO; liberal international order; authoritarian powers; fact-based policymaking

### Introduction

Disinformation is much more than just false information. It would be easy to argue that the world's history, as well as social, and especially political, relations have been full of false information and lies. That way, the geopolitical problem of modern-day disinformation could easily be relativized and even ignored. In fact, the goal of actors behind disinformation is to undermine and relativize liberal democratic institutions of the transatlantic world and its democratic allies. The analytical approach toward disinformation requires deep understanding of the context, political risks and the motives of actors. While fake news and false information can be relatively easily debunked, disinformation requires stronger and more systematic analytical efforts to detect and reduce the risks of promoting massive false dilemmas, often combined

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with populist narratives, conspiracy theories, public apathy and hostile intelligence influence from authoritarian powers. The author describes the risks associated with disinformation and policy solutions proposed at the EU level, the NATO level and by other stakeholders.

## **Defining the complex context behind disinformation**

Deep roots of disinformation date back to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 when Vladimir Lenin established a secret police service called Cheka. Over decades, Soviet and Russian secret services developed Chekist practices through propaganda, disinformation and sabotage abroad (Sipher, 2019). For example, during the late 1980s, the Soviet Union coordinated a global campaign aimed at propagating that the United States had created AIDS as a biological weapon. The campaign was intended to stir up anti-Americanism in developing countries (Nemr and Gangware, 2019) and to protect pro-communist and anti-liberal narratives.

Disinformation as a term date back to the 1950s and the Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, which means dissemination of false reports intended to mislead public opinion. This word is a part of propaganda, based on the use of irrational arguments for advancing or undermining political ideals. Disinformation also contains public cynicism, distrust, apathy and paranoia, all of which discourages civil engagement (Jackson, 2017) and liberal democratic development.

Disinformation represents an intentional spread of false and misleading information, while misinformation is unintentional. Unchecked disinformation can confuse public communication, exacerbate political polarization and promote distrust in democratic political institutions. Moreover, disinformation can manipulate perceptions of reality and intensify social conflict (Eurasia Foundation, 2020). The problem of disinformation is in its immaterial harm, which can damage a person's credibility, misuse content (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2021) and reduce social trust.

While misinformation and disinformation contain false information, influence operations can contain truthful information, put out of context, within coordinated efforts to deceive a target audience (Pamment, 2020). Accordingly, disinformation is often a part of deceptive intelligence influence operations coordinated by domestic actors and/or foreign interference (European Commission, 2020). Furthermore, disinformation can contain biased messages that range from half-truths to conspiracy theories and even outright lies, to manipulate public opinion and public policy, create divisions and blur the truth. However, disinformation is not always connected with fabrications but can consist of facts that show a distorted view of reality, often based on emotions and biases (Nemr and Gangware, 2019), as well as decontextualization used to satisfy partisan positions (Hameleers, 2020) of politicians and populist ideo-

logical activists. Therefore, even if information is factual, contextual manipulations can create misleading communication based on popular emotional perceptions and false dilemmas. This can pose a risk to fact-based and evidence-based policymaking, especially in less developed political cultures.

## **Populist narratives and conspiracy theories behind disinformation**

Disinformation and deception are integral to politics, just as bacteria are central to the inner constitution. There is no such thing as unbiased and non-ideological communication, and narratives with escalating accusations of disinformation are not exceptions in international politics. Accordingly, building social and institutional resilience is important (Shires, 2021) to tackle rising populism, instead of relying on zero disinformation expectations.

Populists divide people between “good” people and “corrupt” elites. Blaming political “elites” increases anti-media sentiments. Populism often involves conflicts of people’s feelings and experiences with empirical evidence and expert analyses. That way populism engages in anti-expert, evidence-free, fact-free, conflict-focused, emotionalized and people-centric discourse (Hameleers, 2020). These risks can directly affect policymaking in any liberal democracy, hinder economic development projects and block institutional reforms.

Many countries are witnessing rising numbers of populist politicians and parties who campaign on the loss of identity and sovereignty (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021). Revolving around such binary societal divides, populism involves an attribution of blame that the “elites” are responsible for depriving the “ordinary” people. Thereby, right-wing populists are the ones who discredit the elites and create alternative realities (Hameleers and Minihold, 2020). Moreover, right-wing populism goes beyond the left-right divide with their economic nationalism, which is opposed to free market economy (Schroeder, 2019). That way right-wing populism (mostly) follows the narratives of left-wing populists and socialist radicals who usually put blame on “neoliberalism.” Both groups are able to produce serious resistances to free market reforms, competitiveness and economic freedom.

There is a thin line between disinformation and populism. They feature in various conspiracy theories and narratives about the dominance of the “elites” over the people, about foreign centers of power, national assets being sold out, as well as secretive forces ruling people. Populists regularly use generalized conclusions, without understanding the relevant political science, economic and sociological facts. Moreover, they often trivialize public policies in order to justify their overly negativistic perceptions, which consist of senseless and irrational ideological dilemmas (Hinšt, 2020). Likewise, there are popular recipes that do not take into account the public policy process, especially

those with initiatives to exclude politics from the process (Hill, 2010). That way populism feeds “apolitical” apathy rather easily, which erodes political culture and the civic readiness to participate in the democratic process. Populists usually take responsibility away from the people and give it to their democratically elected politicians by producing various narratives in which political participation is portrayed as worthless, with somebody else governing, etc.

Accordingly, populism refers to conspiracy theories and “hidden truths,” denying expert knowledge and mainstream sources. That way factual reality becomes subject to fabrication and manipulation, while expert opinion receives labels of fake news. This is in contradiction with the principles of rational exchange of arguments, since populist communication speaks to emotions and simplifications. Since opinions are a part of democratic decision-making, they should be fact-based. What is more, populist constructions prioritize certain issues over others, not worth considering. Conspiracy theories blame powerful elites for hiding the truth from the people and collaborating with corporations and banks. The EU is blamed to be unresponsive and deceptive. All this leads to an uninformed electorate, which can represent a danger for democracy (Hameleers, 2020). Therefore, the ability of voters to make informed choices is undermined (DeConinck et al., 2021). Also, conspiracy narratives can pose a risk to public health (Veriter et al., 2020), by decreasing trust in public health institutions, science, experts and vaccination.

Based on many conspiracy theories, Dickey (2020) argues that Freemasonry faced brutal oppression during fascism and communism, while flourishing in Scotland, England, France and the United States, as an integral part of democratic capitalist nation-states.

Considering the rising populist influence, disinformation can create many societal problems. For example, stakeholders can resist political and economic reforms, which can undermine free market economy and sustainable economic development with decent job and investment prospects if certain actors hinder particular projects and reforms. Well-lobbied investments from authoritarian countries can foster economic dependency on crony enterprises connected with authoritarian governments. Disinformation can question minority rights and civil liberties, disrupt the rule of law and transparent fact-based policymaking processes. This can lead to political polarization and undermine basic trust in democratic institutions. Geopolitically, disinformation can undermine the U.S.-led liberal international order created in the EU and the NATO.

Populist disinformation can produce many politicized narratives with apparent conclusions. Anti-EU narratives state that it is being decomposed; a neoliberal formation that sees the interest of capital instead of people. There are also many anti-American narratives that the CIA and the U.S. Army have created Covid-19 (Hinšt, 2020).

Disinformation can also influence human rights, minorities, free market economy, U.S. foreign and defense policy, Covid-19 vaccines (European Commission, 2020), consumers and health (Jourová, 2020). Furthermore, anti-EU narratives emphasize that the EU is hegemonic and weak, paralyzed by disagreements and unable to address crises and deliver enlargement promises (Greene et al., 2021). Anti-EU narratives also claim that the EU does not have democratic legitimacy, even that it is totalitarian. Although certain criticisms against the EU can have factual bases, anti-EU sentiments are often based on blurring and repeated populist perceptions among the masses, without a democratic and rational approach and clear argumentation.

## **Social media manipulations and deepfakes**

While disinformation is not new, the advent of social media and online advertising has weakened traditional media in favor of unprofessional outlets (Jackson, 2017). Social networking technologies, such as automation, algorithms and big data, change the scale, the scope and precision of transmitting information. Meanwhile, in many authoritarian countries, there is already computational propaganda together with censorship, surveillance and violence against political dissidents, journalists and the broader society, with aims to suppress their fundamental rights and discredit the political opposition (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019).

Disinformation is relevant in the context of media transformation and the rise of online platforms, without necessarily considering editorial frameworks. Economic incentives lead to the capturing of a large base of users, the quantity of information being preferred over quality. Accordingly, sensational content, appealing to emotions and even disinformation, normally attracts more attention, as algorithms display information driven by the business model of platforms. This is also relevant in the case of automated bots that artificially amplify disinformation (European Commission, 2018).

For example, the sources of Russia's disinformation and propaganda are state-funded media outlets, false social media personas, proxy websites, bots and cyber operations (U.S. Department of State, 2020), informal groups and communities on social media, radio broadcasts and non-governmental organizations. These multiple sources are resolutely anti-Western and most frequently target the United States by using conspiracy theories and combining facts and half-truths, predicting a bleak future. On the other hand, the goal of pro-Russian campaigns is to shift public opinion against democratic institutions and to point out media biases, while Russia emerges as a guarantor of political stability (Smoleňová, 2016).

Disinformation often uses advantages provided by digital platforms since their business models are reliant upon clicks, which ensures audience penetration. Moreover, bots and fake profiles also amplify the messages. The reach of false stories is six

times faster than that of factual stories. Moreover, the problem may lie in belief perseverance, i.e., the inability of people to change their minds after receiving new information since facts matter little when faced with strong social and emotional dynamics (Nemr and Gangware, 2019).

Deepfakes and other forms of synthetic media can damage trust in the sphere of shared information, and political bots can distort public discourse by supporting extremist viewpoints and hate speech. The spread of propaganda on digital media, including online rumors, can even result in cases of harassment and murder. Future political risks lie in emergent technologies such as AI, deepfakes, machine learning, automated voice systems, virtual reality, interactive memes and augmented reality. These technologies could make digital disinformation more effective and even harder to combat (National Endowment for Democracy, 2018). Moreover, deepfakes have the ability to influence elections, spark violence and civil unrest, which can have strong implications for foreign affairs, military operations and security. Additionally, deepfakes do not require mass audiences to conduct reputational sabotage (Chesney and Citron, 2018).

Policymakers from the EU and the United States should target disinformation with a focus on disruptive technologies and artificial intelligence, where there is significant risk of manipulation of digital content by deepfakes. A particular problem is that of algorithms and SEO manipulations, which can place false, extremist and unreliable information on top, including search results from RT and Sputnik as Russian government's propaganda outlets. While research activities of governments, NGOs and journalists focus on documenting the mechanisms and actors behind disinformation, by identifying bots, trolls and media narratives, a deeper assessment of the "back end" could be undertaken. Such assessment would include problems related to algorithms, the online advertising market, SEO manipulation and data brokers. Potential policy responses would include funding research and development concerning AI and information warfare, preventing misinformation on decentralized applications and pushing reforms of the digital advertising sector (Meserole and Polyakova, 2018).

## **Risk of erosion in Enlightenment values and rationality**

Any open society, or one that strives to become open enough, needs to understand hidden forces of the Enlightenment and rationalism, which built western liberal democratic institutions, since disinformation mostly goes against such forces of freedom. The liberal democratic idea is a story of the modern western world, or just a handful of nations that created powerful political ideas behind this world. Humanism, Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation became the driving forces of the New Age, paving the way for the Enlightenment and further civic revolutions

against absolutist and clerical regimes. While Western and Northern Europe were the birthplaces of classical liberal ideas, with a strong Judeo-Christian heritage, it was America that put that heritage and the enlightened ideas into practice, much more so than Europe. While the ideals of individual liberty, democratic governance and human self-improvement have been the dominant driving forces of western development since the founding of the United States of America, historical complexities arrested the initially enlightened Europe, which culminated in two world wars and totalitarian systems. Initially isolationist, America stepped up twice (during two major wars) and finally helped Europe unite and put its hidden philosophical knowledge about liberal democracy into practice by shifting its foreign policy toward liberal interventionism. That is how American foreign policy created the liberal international order, which led to the formation of international organizations and transatlantic institutions such as the EU, the NATO and the OECD. This tradition of political institutions is the dominant force behind U.S. and EU foreign policies, while authoritarian powers aim to undermine them.

The erosion of Enlightenment values could diminish and threaten good intelligence systems, essential to liberty. Alternative-fact and post-truth narratives lead to the refusal of fact-based intelligence assessment, and toward ideological authoritarianism and “deep state” narratives, focusing against career professionals who work within the rule of law, while Russian information operations undercut democratic processes and erode confidence in institutions like the EU and the NATO (Hayden, 2019). Such lack of political science literacy undermines confidence by spreading disinformation that encourages anti-system and “deep state” narratives.

Disinformation usually supports illiberal politicians and extremist discourse to crowd out rational debate and fact-based reporting. Accordingly, disillusioned citizens can lose trust in democracy, which can contribute to political apathy and retreating from politics (Butcher, 2019). This can even lead to negative perceptions of politically active citizens and parties since it becomes desirable not to show interest in politics and mainstream media news. That way political apathy leads to passive understanding of democracy, reduced simply to the direct will of (ordinary) people, in line with populist misunderstanding of representative democracy.

Since disinformation and misinformation have a potential of weakening trust in science, it can affect global economic recovery, which depends on widespread vaccination. Consequently, fake news, conspiracy theories and hate speech pose risks to democratic governance, democracy itself and civil liberties, elections, security and public health (World Economic Forum, 2021). These problems are mostly present in social media, while certain populist actors try to blame mainstream media for disinformation about the crisis. This creates a circle of distrust, leaving many people confused about relevant and reliable sources of factual information. Moreover, attempts

to fact-check information are widely considered, by populists, to be a way of “controlling” people, limiting freedom of speech and imposing “totalitarianism.”

Furthermore, disinformation usually provides narratives about a crisis of liberal democracy and the West, as a part of anti-American and anti-European propaganda. Repeated narratives become increasingly accepted, leaving many people unaware of their background due to a lack of critical thinking against false dilemmas. Moreover, it is not the same if information on a potential crisis of liberal democracy comes from populist and extremist groups of demagogues, who point out the “deep state,” or if it comes with arguments and good will to improve institutions (Hinšt, 2021). Therefore, diverse opinions are crucial for a vital democratic process if they are based on arguments and facts and if they do not contradict scientific facts and expert knowledge. On the other hand, easy conclusions that democracies can function with any kind of political communication and without consolidated political ideas, where all values and opinions have relative values, can lead to anti-democratic and illiberal trends, supported by populism.

## **Values as essential drivers of foreign policies**

It is crucial to start with the basics in order to understand the essential drivers of organizations and systems. Although populists and demagogues easily share false dilemmas according to which foreign policies of the West are based on interests and not on values, it is impossible to dismiss them rationally. Essential reasons behind anti-Western disinformation lie in authoritarian regimes, which have opposite values to those of liberal democratic systems and their political cultures.

Political culture of democracy represents a set of values that substantially influence the political process, whereas civic culture enables democratic effectiveness and stability based on social capital, i.e., the cooperation and trust that lead toward collective action (Hague *et al.*, 1998). Individualism is the “central distinguishing mark of the West” (Huntington, 1996: 95) and its liberal democratic political culture.

Institutional factors related to the Reformation brought about modern institutions, education, secularization, democracy and a rational attitude toward authority (Portilla, 2019). In relation to the main values behind Western civilization, Ferguson (2012) emphasizes individual freedom, Protestant work ethic, devotion to work, accumulation of capital, rational organization, the Enlightenment, Eurocentric scientific revolution, property rights, democracy and representative constitutional government, independent courts, upward mobility and the freedom of worship.

Western values put emphasis on autonomy, dignity, individual liberty and inherent rights, flowing from natural order. This heritage of the liberal democratic model has been supported by Western, and especially American, policymakers, think tanks and



intellectuals (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, American foreign policy puts focus on the belief in democratic capitalism with an open trading system, commitment to human rights, multilateralism and interventionism. Career professionals, including those in the CIA and the NSA, have supported this policy under numerous U.S. presidents, which is consistent with American values. This policy stems from a post-war consensus on American values and interests. An exception from this universalism was Trump's presidency and "deep state" narratives, met with resistance from the national security establishment, career officials and bipartisan professionals who shape foreign policy (Antholis, 2019).

On the other hand, Russian policy involves a revisionist approach toward sovereignty, democracy and the market. Russian values and culture are closely associated with the Russian Orthodox Church, with their close relations to the presidential establishment (Vasudevan and Shaumyan, 2019). This is in contrast with Luther's conception of the church, politics and economy, as three institutional spheres, and ethics, oriented toward the individual and inner faith (Grenholm and Gunner, 2014).

Russia's disinformation system is a collection of official, proxy and unattributed channels and platforms used to create false narratives. This ecosystem reinforces Russia's aims to question the values of democratic institutions and weaken international credibility of the United States and its allies (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Kremlin's desire is "to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order as a threat to Russia and Putin's regime" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). However, Russia does not have the incentive to stop its influence activities because it does not face strong retaliation due to the lack of non-military response from the West, since the coalition of Member States confronting the Russian threat mostly comes from Central and Eastern Europe (Janda, 2018), starting with Baltic states.

Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees an existential problem in liberal international norms. Therefore, China's rationale is to undermine democratic norms by struggling against "American imperialism." The CCP's governance style emphasizes collective well-being instead of individual and minority rights. The CCP sees China as a victim of international misunderstanding and not as a human rights violator since China is under threat of "Western cultural hegemony," "cultural colonialism," "religious penetration" and "export of Western democracies." The CCP has increased their control over both state-owned and private companies. Moreover, Chinese media have been obliged to receive training in ideological Marxist journalism, as gatekeepers and producers of state policies that need to project a positive global image of China. Finally, the national intelligence law imposes an obligation for individuals and organizations to spy for national security reasons and prevent espionage activities (Aukia, 2021). These examples, among others, reveal the authoritarian nature behind the regime, based on completely opposite values to those of liberal democracies.

## **Disinformation among key geopolitical global trends**

Disinformation is already a widespread geopolitical risk, with rapid expansion across public spaces in many western countries. The EU and the NATO have already identified this problem as serious. Since it is hard to combat, and actions to mitigate risk can only reduce its impact, the probability of this risk remains high, especially due to the growing competition between liberal democratic and authoritarian countries, as well as considering the misuse of digital space.

The U.S. Intelligence Community's Global Trends 2040 report predicts that the West will unite its forces in setting international standards in order to limit the negative consequences of disinformation for open societies. Russia and China could use their technological innovations to gain larger control over media content, promote digital repression and surveillance, undermine the importance of democracy and support illiberal regimes (Hinšt, 2021).

The Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community assesses that Moscow will employ influence campaigns and intelligence to undermine U.S. influence, weaken the Western alliance and continue to target critical infrastructure of the United States and its allies. Concerning China, it is increasingly challenging the United States in many arenas and pushing toward a change in global norms. China could also undermine Taiwan's democracy and condemn the increased United States-Taiwan cooperation (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021). The U.S. Intelligence Community's predictions concern the context of a rising geopolitical competition between liberal democracies of the West, led by the United States, versus China, Russia and their authoritarian allies. Relativizing those two differences can undermine the importance of defending freedom and make societies less resilient to authoritarian influences.

## **Political risks for global rankings behind disinformation**

Various forms of political risks, such as wars, ethnic violence, nationalism, terrorism, criminal prosecutions, social unrest, manipulation of natural resources, cyber threats and espionage, regulatory capture and burden, expropriations, discriminatory taxes and foreign ownership rules, all of which can affect business (Rice and Zegart, 2018), foreign investments and economic development, can be driven by populist disinformation as policy inputs from governments. Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) argue that the political process determines economic institutions and that social norms support institutional differences, whereas inclusive institutions support property rights, law and order, broad economic opportunities, a level playing field and low entry barriers, freedom of exchange and education.

These political risks and institutional values affect global rankings of countries according to relevant global reports that assess and measure levels of competitiveness, economic freedom and liberal democracy.

**Figure 1.** Global rankings of competitiveness, freedom and democracy

Global rankings	Organizations
Global Competitiveness Report	World Economic Forum
Economic Freedom of the World	Fraser Institute
Democracy Index	Economist Intelligence Unit

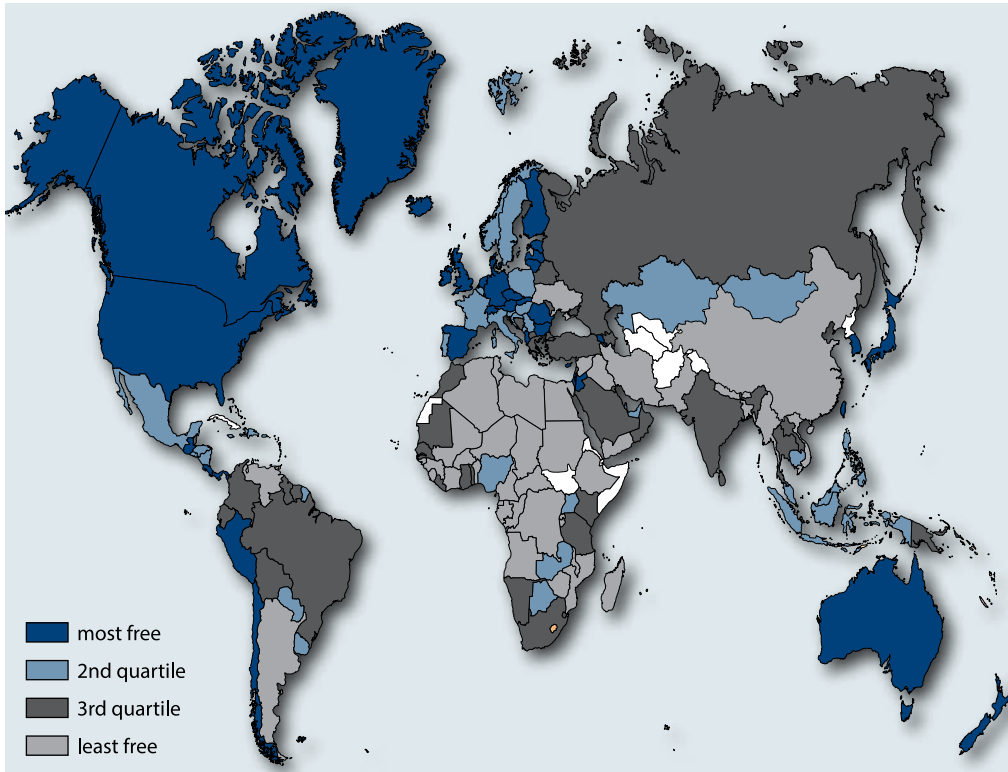
*Source:* Author, 2021

Disinformation can produce populist resistance to many institutional reforms needed to achieve free market economy. Those risks can prevent reductions of public spending, subsidies and state assets, push tax hikes, trade tariffs, new debts, hinder independence of central banks in keeping the stability of monetary and banking systems, obstruct judicial independence and the rule of law and prevent regulatory flexibility for businesses. All those factors influence the level of economic freedom, measured by the Fraser Institute.

Overall economic freedom data show Russia and China, as unreformed authoritarian countries who supported global communism, to be in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quartiles, which indicates a significant lack of economic freedom. On the other hand, Western democracies are in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> quartiles, with relatively high, or satisfactory levels of economic freedom.

Political instability, lack of transparency, corruption and the democracy index are all factors of “Government Efficiency,” part of the World Competitiveness Ranking measured by the International Institute for Management Development. Disinformation can reduce levels of transparency of public institutions, future government orientations, policy stability, market competition, as well as critical thinking in teaching and social capital. These institutional and policy risks can affect the Global Competitiveness Report measured by the World Economic Forum.

Here it is important to emphasize social capital, which indicates the quality of social norms, trust and relations (World Economic Forum, 2018). Social trust improves economic efficiency, while low trust leads to reduced cooperation, increased corruption and undermining of democratic political institutions, especially in particularistic societies (Radin, 2018). On the other hand, societies with universal values have clearly applied rules of correct behavior, where decreasing particularism in turn decreases corruption, which is lower in long-lasting market economies and democracies with larger Protestant populations (Rotondi and Stanca, 2015), as can be seen in Figure 4.

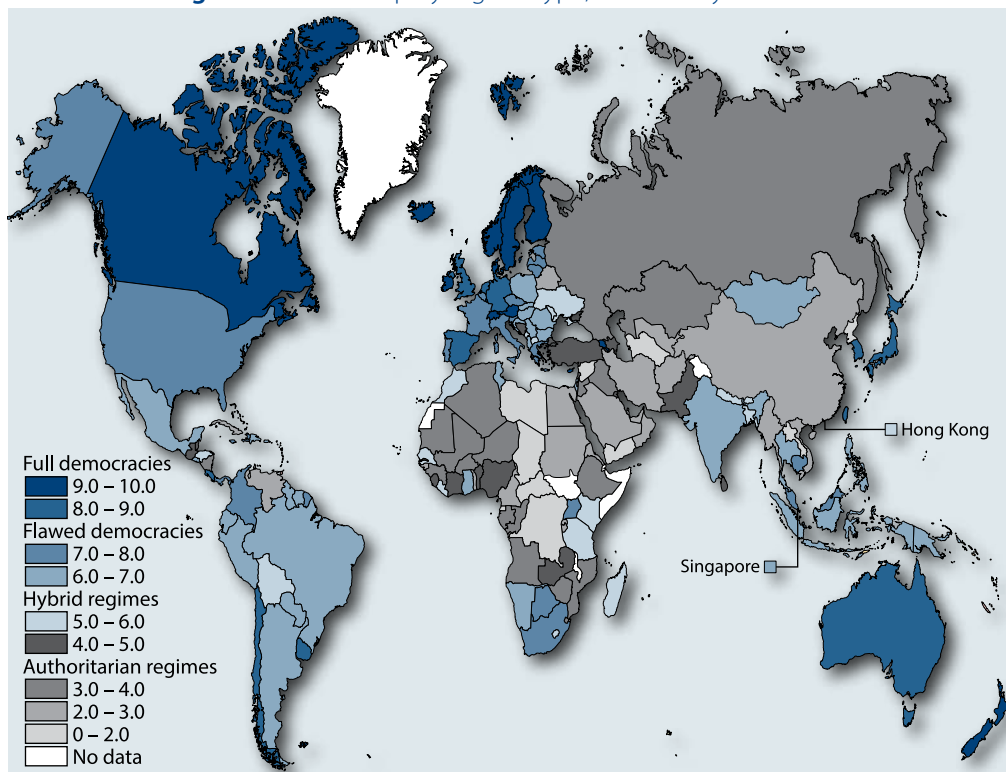
**Figure 2.** Economic Freedom of the World

Source: Fraser Institute, 2020

Since the electoral process is not sufficient for democracy, it is important to emphasize the role of civil liberties, political culture, participation and functioning governments as components of the Democracy Index measured by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The results clearly show that Russia, China and Iran, as key actors in spreading disinformation, belong to the category of authoritarian regimes.

The compilation of average ranking data from relevant global rankings shows a strong correlation between political freedom and economic freedom, liberal democracy and competitiveness. On the other hand, Russia and China show relatively low results in most rankings. Both countries demonstrate a significant lack of personal and economic freedoms due to government repressions and cronyism, as well as the absence of democracy resulting from authoritarianism. Russia is shown to have a significant lack of competitiveness on all levels. China shows comparatively high competitiveness, mainly driven by strengths in technology and innovation, yet not in other areas, such as institutions.

**Figure 3.** Global map by regime type, Democracy Index 2020



Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020

**Figure 4.** Top-ranked countries in global rankings of competitiveness, freedom and democracy (clustered in discrete political-economic models)

Nordic	Continental	Anglo-Saxon	East Asian	Eastern European
Denmark	Switzerland	New Zealand	Taiwan	Estonia
Finland	Netherlands	United States	Japan	Czech Republic
Sweden	Germany	Canada	South Korea	Lithuania
Iceland	Luxembourg	Australia	Singapore	Latvia
Norway	Austria	United Kingdom	Hong Kong	Slovenia

Source: Author, 2021

Figure 4 shows top-ranked countries in key global rankings of competitiveness, freedom and democracy (mentioned in Figure 1), clustered in separate political-economic (and regional) models. Most countries are strong democratic capitalist

societies, while some have certain deficits (such as democratic deficits of Singapore and Hong Kong, frontrunners in economic freedom and competitiveness). Moreover, all countries are either NATO-members or close partners and allies.

The majority of countries of the first three political-economic models (Nordic, Continental and Anglo-Saxon) have applied the New Public Management model in their public policies in order to support market-oriented reforms (Hinšt, 2021). This policy approach of highly democratic countries stands in great contrast to authoritarian countries, including Russia and China, characterized by large and unreformed public sectors, in addition to distortive government involvement and cronyism across many economic sectors, without an independent civil society.

Accordingly, it is evident that authoritarian powers target democratic countries and their open economies and societies. This is largely due to differences in values, norms and institutions that drive these opposing geopolitical, economic and societal systems.

## **EU and NATO policy toward disinformation and in defense of democracy**

After the Russian annexation of parts of Ukraine, the EU has started to deal systematically with disinformation. Russian disinformation started to target the EU population in order to undermine their trust in democratic institutions, as well as the attempts to expand the EU and the NATO toward ex-Soviet countries still under Russian influence and domination.

Several key policy documents directly refer to disinformation and its relation to democracy in Europe since liberal democratic values represent the foundations of the EU.

The Action Plan against disinformation (European Commission, 2018) enhances societal resilience through understanding the sources behind disinformation, organizing specialized trainings and debates, supporting independent media, providing quality journalism and media literacy skills, as well as cross-border multidisciplinary teams of fact-checkers and researchers. Furthermore, the communication on tackling online disinformation (European Commission, 2018) sees the exposing of European citizens to large-scale disinformation as the main European challenge. The main obligation of state actors is to keep the freedom of expression and the media by refraining from interference and censorship, in order to ensure an inclusive, pluralistic and healthy democratic debate, transparent digital ecosystems and high-quality information, as well as safe policymaking processes. Moreover, the European Democracy Action Plan (European Commission, 2020) strives to counter disinformation across the EU by empowering EU citizens to make informed decisions and defend the stabil-

ity of democratic institutions and European values, including the freedom of expression. The plan envisages transparent political advertising, contribution of fact-checkers, online platforms, the academia and the civil society in detecting disinformation, curricula focused on civic education for democracy, critical thinking and digital and media literacy.

The Council of the European Union's (2020) conclusions on media literacy advocate the development of critical thinking, investigative reporting and independent fact-checking. They also support facilitating citizens' access to credible and diversified sources of information and the building of public trust. Furthermore, the European Council's (2021) conclusions call for a break in Russian actions against the EU and third countries, stressing the need for a coordinated response against further disruptive activities. The conclusions also condemn limitations of fundamental freedoms in Russia and support their human rights organizations and independent media.

Together with the EU, the NATO fosters common values of the transatlantic world, including individual liberty, the rule of law and democracy, where disinformation represents a risk for those values and institutions.

The NATO regards disinformation to be a type of hostile information activity in form of narrative and propaganda aimed to cause divisions and undermine democracies. Therefore, the NATO sees its role as one of a values-based organization, with transparent and fact-based public communication. The Brussels Summit of June 2021 confirmed the NATO policy on disinformation. It continues to guarantee shared values of individual liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Summit emphasized a systemic competition from authoritarian powers. In particular, Russia poses as a threat to Euro-Atlantic security due to its interference and political and economic pressures. Moreover, China's ambitions are a systemic challenge to the rules-based international order. In this context, the NATO is concerned with increased hybrid and cyber threats, as well as disinformation campaigns. Finally, they stand for a political dialogue with the EU in order to deepen their cooperation and address the issue of geostrategic competition and disinformation (NATO, 2021).

Just several days before the NATO summit, a new Atlantic Charter, signed 80 years after the original one, affirmed U.S. and UK commitment to sustain and defend their values, principles and institutions of democracy, open societies, open and fair trade and norms of the rules-based international order, in opposition to disinformation (UK government, 2021).

Finally, in December 2021 the U.S. Department of State organized a Summit for Democracy to address the risk of public distrust, political polarization and the rise of authoritarian leaders who undermine democratic norms, spread disinformation and manipulate digital information. The Summit focused on defending democracy

and civil society against authoritarianism, addressing corruption, promoting human rights, free and independent media, fair elections, etc. (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

## **Particular policy initiatives against disinformation**

There are many initiatives across the EU that fact-check and combat disinformation. The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) promotes a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach toward hybrid threats. The term “hybrid threat” stands for coordinated actions of state- and non-state actors aimed to undermine or harm a targeted democratic state, by influencing its institutional decision-making at different levels. These threats exploit the thresholds of detection in order to blur international politics, where there is an ongoing power transition and a conflict of values between the West and authoritarian regimes. They can include disinformation, political interference, critical infrastructure and cyber-attacks, as well as asymmetric warfare (Hybrid CoE).

Leiden University from the Netherlands is part of a cross-border European project intended to tackle disinformation by fact-checking, creating e-learning modules and promoting media literacy. It is also part of the Dutch-Flemish project, supported by the European Commission, aimed to fight disinformation. The project envisages a multidisciplinary hub of fact-checkers, researchers, media companies and other stakeholders (Leiden University, 2021).

Project Kremlin Watch monitors, exposes and confronts Russian influence operations in Europe focused against Western democracies (European Values Center for Security Policy). Hamilton 2.0 monitors Russian, Chinese and Iranian government narratives, including those from their state-sponsored news websites and social media (Alliance for Securing Democracy, German Marshall Fund of the United States). EUvsDisinfo monitors Russian disinformation and electoral interference affecting the EU, its member states and their eastern neighborhood in order to resist digital media manipulation (European External Action Service).

The Czech-based think tank European Values Center for Security Policy emphasizes that pro-Russian narratives aim to undermine trust in democratically elected leaders, governments, political parties and mainstream media, decouple the United States and Europe, neutralize certain European countries, dominate Eastern Europe, influence most of the European far-right and far-left and end the EU and NATO expansion into Western Balkans. Kremlin’s disinformation efforts include influence operations between state agents and local collaborators, blackmail, bribes and intimidations, funding projects such as RT and Sputnik and running economic operations for political gain through state-run companies, especially in the energy sector. The Center sees the democratic response to Kremlin’s disinformation operations through increas-



ing the budget and the capacity of the EEAS East STRATCOM team. Furthermore, using the consent of pro-Atlantic parties to oust pro-Kremlin politicians from security-related parliamentary committees and conducting detailed counterintelligence reports, modeled on the Estonian counterintelligence service, KAPO, would also produce an effect. Finally, it is important to pay attention to disinformation and foreign influence within the armed forces to tackle anti-Atlantic agenda and opposition and to defend the allies against potential Russian aggression (European Values Center for Security Policy, 2019). In addition, the GLOBSEC think tank (2021) emphasizes the need to adopt a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, with comprehensive involvement of the private sector and civil society, investing in intelligence-gathering and pro-active solidarity toward the allies.

### **In search of comprehensive policy solutions**

In addition to these policy proposals, there is a need for high-quality investigative journalism in building public trust and correcting disinformation, without curbing free expression (West, 2017). Democracy-building initiatives to counter foreign interference should focus on fact-checking, media literacy training and digital media monitoring (Pamment, 2020).

State regulation can be counter-productive since it could encourage anti-establishment sentiments. Therefore, resistance to disinformation needs civil society and the private sector. Moreover, commercial motives against disinformation can counteract commercial motives that create disinformation. Digital advertising agencies and consulting companies can find their markets with regard to offering social responsibility (Butcher, 2019).

That way policy solutions aimed at tackling disinformation can be predominantly market-driven, together with strong civil society organizations and think tanks. This market and the voluntary option to tackle disinformation prevent doubts concerning government regulations of the freedom of expression and put focus on the need for a whole-of-society counter-intelligence approach. Moreover, this policy option opens new market opportunities in areas of private intelligence, policy analysis, political risk consulting, journalism, fact-checking, digital marketing, data protection, digital economy, etc. Moreover, instead of relying on significant government regulations, long-term societal investments in widespread lifelong civic education are crucial for the whole-of-society approach, based on multiple actors and stakeholders working together to find sustainable multidisciplinary solutions for increased democratic resilience.

## Conclusions

The rising geopolitical risks associated with disinformation already represent policy challenges for transatlantic institutions and for the global democratic alliance. The disinformation behind derives from institutions of global authoritarian powers, notably Russia and China, who use their foreign policies to undermine liberal democracies of the United States, the European Union and the NATO alliance. Disinformation can affect many policy processes and undermine fact-based and evidence-based policy-making, with significant economic, security and societal risks. While artificial intelligence will increasingly dominate many societies, especially due to disinformation, human intelligence will preserve and even develop its competitiveness in key skills such as civic virtues, critical thinking, argument-based rational public discussions, as well as fact-based and data-driven public policy processes. The liberal democratic system essentially depends upon core civic skills that can significantly help individuals, communities, markets and governments to combat disinformation and show democratic resilience. Therefore, political scientists and other social scientists play an important role in designing multidisciplinary solutions for the strengthening of democratic resilience against disinformation.

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## Dezinformacije kao geopolitički rizik za transatlantske institucije

### *Sažetak*

Dezinformacije su postale geopolitički rizik za transatlantske institucije i za globalno demokratsko savezništvo. Rusija i Kina kao autoritarne sile imaju dugotrajni interes za potkopavanje institucija liberalnog međunarodnog poretka, pod vodstvom Sjedinjenih Država, Europske unije i NATO saveza. Na taj način dezinformacije mogu potkopavati povjerenje u sustav liberalne demokracije, uključujući slobodno tržišno gospodarstvo, individualne slobode i otvoreno društvo. Navedeni geopolitički rizik predstavlja značajnu prijetnju za stvaranje javnih politika na temelju činjenica i dokaza u mnogim područjima, uključujući ekonomiju i sigurnost. Cjelovita rješenja protuobavještajne javne politike mogu detektirati i ublaživati navedeni rizik, osiguravajući širu institucionalnu i društvenu otpornost kroz cjeloživotno građansko obrazovanje.

**Ključne riječi:** dezinformacije; geopolitički rizik; transatlantske institucije; EU; NATO; liberalni međunarodne poredak; autoritarne sile; stvaranje javnih politika na temelju činjenica.