Civil Society Under Russia's Threat: Building Resilience in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova

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Contents

Summary

- Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, constituting the western rim of the EU's Eastern Partnership group of countries, are at the front line of a heated battle for their own future. They are highly exposed to various threats emanating from Russia, which deploys a set of tools aimed at weakening their sovereignty.

- State cohesion and stability in Eastern Europe are key to wider European security. Building societal and institutional resilience to Russia's negative influence in the three countries represents a potentially viable strategy for more secure and less damaging cohabitation with the current Russian regime.

- Civil society has an important role to play in building social cohesion, and in insulating the three countries against Russian influence. The ability to recognize Russian interference, design effective responses and prevent damaging trends from taking hold is key to strengthening country defences.

Ukraine

- **Ukraine** can be viewed as a political 'laboratory' in which Russia has tested a variety of measures to exert influence, and at the same time as an example of resilience. Since 2014, many of the levers of Russian influence have weakened as a consequence of civil society mobilization associated with Ukraine's 'Revolution of Dignity' and subsequent reforms.

- Vulnerabilities remain in Ukraine. These include high levels of insecurity stemming from the Russia-fuelled conflict in the Donbas region; a predatory and fractured political environment (the turbulence from which creates the risk of further internal destabilization); and weak information security alongside susceptibility to Russian disinformation.

- Strengthening and sustaining Ukraine's resilience to Russian influence is a long-term project. Key opportunities for improvement exist in the wide popular support for Ukraine's democratic identity; in an ongoing process of administrative decentralization, aimed at improving governance; and in the continued pursuit of measures by the state and civil society to mitigate vulnerabilities related to the conflict. High mobility across the line of contact, and citizens' openness to some political compromise, offer ample opportunities to prepare the ground for future reintegration of parts of Donbas into Ukraine proper.

Belarus

- Of all the Eastern Partnership countries, **Belarus** is by far the most vulnerable to Russian influence. This reflects its structural dependence on Russia in the economic, energy, geopolitical and socio-cultural spheres.

- Alongside structural dependence, Belarus displays other characteristics that allow Russia to have a strong impact on civil society. These include a weak national identity, issues around language, the pervasiveness of Russian information in the media, exposure to Russian

information warfare, and the presence in Belarus of Russian government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and the Russian Orthodox Church.

• Opportunities to strengthen Belarus's resilience at the level of civil society include what can be termed 'soft Belarusianization'. This self-organized movement seeks to promote national characteristics, using affirmative action in support of Belarusian culture and language. However, civil society activity and the actors involved remain vulnerable to arbitrary repression by the regime.

Moldova

• In **Moldova**, the vulnerabilities exploited by Russia to exert negative influence are generally well known. Strong linkages between politics, the media and the Moldovan Orthodox Church render Moldovans a captive audience for Russia's propaganda. Moldovans' already low trust in institutions is being further undermined, creating a legitimacy crisis for the state.

• In Moldova, there is a large discrepancy between the level of response from civil society organizations (CSOs) and the more limited efforts of the authorities to address vulnerabilities to Russian influence and propaganda.

• Opportunities to strengthen resilience are limited, but some exist around information campaigns, and measures to promote education and civic awareness. This could help to build what we can term 'cognitive resilience' – broadly, developing citizens' critical thinking, especially in terms of building awareness about Russian disinformation – using the Western-based diaspora as a spearhead for change.

This paper provides policy recommendations principally to donors supporting the development of civil society in the Eastern Partnership countries. It focuses mostly on 'soft' elements of resilience, such as people and ideas, with the aim of building inclusion, promoting the circulation of information, and strengthening the leverage of Western assistance.

Among specific policy gaps, there is a need for more inclusive state-building; media reform (including capacity-building for independent media); civil society support; and the linking of financial and technical assistance to tangible progress in policy reforms via 'smart conditionality'. Encouraging the creation of a cadre of 'active citizens' in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova will help increase social cohesion and build cognitive resilience from the ground up.

1. Introduction

State cohesion and stability in Eastern Europe are key to wider European security. Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, constituting the western rim of the EU's Eastern Partnership group of countries,[1] are at the front line of a heated battle for their own future and over the role of Russia in the region. As Russia's leadership has embarked on a mission to restore the country's great-power status, its goals with regard to Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova focus on keeping Western influences 'out' and ensuring that Russian ones, conversely, have maximum traction.

The concept of buffer zones and spheres of influence persists in Russia's worldview and in its political calculus towards the former Soviet republics. Limiting the sovereignty of its neighbours is central to its geopolitical thinking and approach to the region.[2] In the cases of Ukraine and Moldova, Russia is determined to obstruct their integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. With Belarus, which is already part of both the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Union State with Russia, the Kremlin is seeking to insulate society from Western influence and ensure that an autocratic system of governance endures.

Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova are highly exposed to various threats emanating from Russia, which continues to deploy a set of tools aimed at weakening their sovereignty, undermining their economic development and impeding institution-building.[3] This paper identifies five areas of vulnerability for the three countries, across the following categories:

1. Quality of internal political systems (political parties, government-organized NGOs, prevalence of corruption, interconnection between elites).

2. Security, conflicts and Russian military presence.

3. Economic interdependence (energy, trade, business ties).

4. Media sector (Russian disinformation, public support for pro-Russia narratives, Russian positioning in national media landscapes).

5. Identity (history, language, minorities, role of Russian Orthodox Church).

From among these five categories, our research identified the three areas of greatest *local* vulnerability for each country. The shortlist of top vulnerabilities was identified after extensive desk research, field trips to the target countries, and an expert workshop in London.[4] Each category was assigned a 'high', 'medium' or 'low' level of threat based on interviews with local experts.[5] Our research also looked at Russia's impact

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[1] The EU's Eastern Partnership consists of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

[2] Sherr J. (2017), 'Geopolitics and Security' chapter, in Ash. T., Gunn, J., Lough, J., Lutsevych, O., Nixey, J., Sherr, J. and Wolczuk, K. (2017), *The Struggle For Ukraine*, Chatham House Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/struggle-for-ukraine.

[3] Giles, K. (2016), *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russias-new-tools-confronting-west.

[4] After a review of existing literature and data, research trips were undertaken in April and May 2018. A selection of experts, stakeholders and local representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) were interviewed in each country. A summary of preliminary findings was consequently shared with a small group of local experts in the three countries via an online platform, to solicit feedback and exchange ideas. This was followed by an expert workshop at Chatham House on 18 June 2018, which comprehensively reviewed the preliminary findings and offered detailed comments and recommendations for the final paper.

[5] The authors interviewed 21 experts in Ukraine, 27 in Belarus and 39 in Moldova.

on civil society in respect of variables such as political polarization (especially along the pro-EU/pro-Russia divide), influence on public opinion, fragmentation of existing ruling coalitions and the political landscape, radicalization and anti-Western sentiment, apathy and absence of mobilization, and populism.

Building the resilience of societies and institutions offers a potentially viable strategy for the three countries analysed in this paper to achieve more secure and less damaging cohabitation with the current Russian regime. With Russia routinely using various measures of subversion in an effort to influence 'hearts and minds', the ability of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova to recognize threats, design effective responses and prevent damaging trends from developing is key to strengthening their social cohesion.

Civil society can play an important role in building this cohesion, and in insulating countries against Russia's negative influence. Civil society is a key piece of the resilience puzzle worldwide, and in the Eastern Partnership countries – where weak and ineffective institutions prevail – it often drives change and innovation. In Ukraine, for example, civil society resilience was a notable feature of the Euromaidan protests of 2013–14, and a significant contributor to the Ukrainian response during the first phase of Russia's military aggression in 2014. NGOs and active citizens are often more acutely aware of the risks and implications of Russian influence on the ground. Local groups tend to be more agile and represent a diversity of views that are key to designing effective responses. By building resilience to current crises, moreover, civil society may have a broader and longer-term impact in enabling social transformation that better prepares countries for future disruptive events.

> Building the resilience of societies and institutions offers a potentially viable strategy for the three countries to achieve more secure and less damaging cohabitation with the current Russian regime.

What do we mean by the term 'resilience'? Resilience is the capacity of any entity – an individual, a community, an organization or a natural system – to prepare for disruption, to recover from shocks, and to adapt and grow from the disruptive experience.[6] The concept originated from the need to develop preparedness for natural disasters, but it is increasingly applied to civil disorder and other social turbulence.

Events in Ukraine in 2014 demonstrated the Russian leadership's readiness to cause serious security disruption in order to obstruct integration into European structures of the countries it considers part of its 'near abroad'. It is estimated that the economic cost to Ukraine resulting from Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing military conflict in the east may be nearly $100 billion in lost assets, should the occupied Ukrainian territory never be recovered.[7] (In comparison, the cost of the damage from Hurricane Sandy in 2012 was an estimated $65 billion.)[8] On top of the economic losses suffered by Ukraine, the conflict has displaced around 1.5 million Ukrainians from annexed Crimea and occupied Donbas. It has also negatively affected around 600,000 people who live along the contact line between Ukrainian-controlled areas and de facto Russian-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine.[9]

[6] Rodin, J. (2015), *The Resilience Dividend*, Profile Books.
[7] Åslund, A. (2018), *Kremlin Aggression in Ukraine: The Price Tag, Report,* Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/kremlin-aggression-in-ukraine-the-price-tag.
[8] Rice, D. and Dastagir, A. E. (2013), 'One year after Sandy, 9 devastating facts', *USA Today,* 29 October 2013, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/10/29/sandy-anniversary-facts-devastation/3305985/.
[9] Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018), *Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine*, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/ReportUkraineMay-August2018_EN.pdf.

Despite Western sanctions and Ukrainian political, military and civic mobilization against Russian aggression, Moscow is showing hardly any signs of readiness to change its strategy in the region and beyond. A disruptive Russia means that neighbouring countries must better prepare for a long-term struggle if they want to assert their true independence and develop into prosperous, rules-based societies.

This paper assesses the state of resilience to Russian influence within the societies of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. Awareness in the three countries and among Western donors and policymakers is key to resilience, so knowledge of the main domestic vulnerabilities and strengths in each country can facilitate the development of effective responses. The paper focuses on the top three areas of vulnerability in each country, outlining recent and/or current responses on the part of both the state and civil society. It further identifies opportunities for each country to better manage crises, strengthen resilience, and prepare more effectively for potential future challenges arising from Russian interference. The paper also delivers recommendations: principally for donors supporting civil society development, and to a lesser extent for governments and civil society in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. It proposes ways to leverage resources better, with the aim of unlocking civil society's potential to boost state resilience in the face of continuing Russian belligerence and subversion in the region.

2. Ukraine

Ukraine can be viewed as a political 'laboratory' in which Russia has tested a variety of subversion measures, and at the same time as an example of resilience against foreign aggression. For decades, the Kremlin has sought to use its influence to deter Ukraine's Westernization and integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Russia has adapted its toolbox of destabilization techniques – from trade blockades to vicious disinformation – to developments inside Ukraine.

Prior to the 2013–14 'Euromaidan' protest movement – in which Ukrainians took to the streets following the suspension of a planned association agreement with the EU – Russia had actively sought to exploit Ukraine's political, cultural and economic conditions in the pursuit of its own interests. Specific weaknesses targeted by Moscow included Ukraine's non-consolidated and ambivalent national identity, its economic dependence on the Russian market and, most importantly, its exposure to Russia as its only energy supplier. Moreover, Russia had a dominant position in Ukraine's information space, and deployed Russian government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) in efforts to fracture the country, undermine support for the national leadership, and promote a pro-Russia orientation in policymaking on economic integration and foreign affairs.[10]

Since 2014, many of these levers of Russian influence have weakened. This partly reflects the consolidation of Ukrainian identity in response to the conflict. It is also a consequence of policy actions that have included anti-corruption reforms in the gas sector, the sanctioning of Russian GONGOs, and the reorientation of Ukraine's trade towards the EU and other markets. However, there remain vulnerabilities affecting Ukraine's resilience to foreign influence. The top three are: high insecurity, stemming from the Russia-fuelled conflict in the eastern region of Donbas; the turbulence associated with Ukraine's predatory and fractured political environment (creating the risk of further internal destabilization); and susceptibility to Russian disinformation (aggravated by weak information security). These problems obstruct Ukraine's transition towards more sustainable national development and civic self-expression.

A. Key vulnerabilities and responses

1. Insecurity and the conflict in Donbas

The operation by Russian special forces, in coordination with various paramilitary groups, to occupy parts of eastern Ukraine started right after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Since then, the conflict has persisted at various levels of intensity. Around 50 per cent of Donbas is occupied by pro-Russia separatist groups or their allies, with the major cities of Donetsk and Luhansk remaining outside Ukrainian government control.

Low-intensity conflict continues, with the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) and civilians suffering fatal casualties on a regular basis. As noted above, the conflict has displaced around 1.5 million people internally, adding serious pressure on an already fragile social infrastructure. The conflict has led to

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[10] Lutsevych, O. (2016), *Agents of the Russian World*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-04-14-agents-russian-world-lutsevych.pdf.

a collapse in Ukraine's GDP of almost 25 per cent, and the loss of access to critically important coal reserves. Ukraine has lost control of nearly 500 kilometres of its border with Russia – leaving a gaping hole for the transit of arms and munitions, as well as for coal smuggling and other criminal activities.

Beyond the human and economic losses, the conflict's impact on Ukraine's resilience as a state has been mixed. On the one hand, it has helped to rally Ukrainians around the idea of nationhood and has catalysed the process of national identity-building. Over 68 per cent of Ukrainians say they are proud to be citizens of Ukraine.[11] The conflict has also created solidarity among citizens who – despite economic hardship of their own – have provided donations and support to the UAF, volunteers and displaced persons.

> In recent months, three high-profile killings in the centre of Kyiv – of a leading journalist, a former member of Russia's parliament and a senior intelligence official – have sown further doubts about the state's capacity to protect citizens.

On the other hand, a significant majority of society lives in a state of insecurity.[12] Ukrainians are highly concerned over the war in the east, the security of the country overall and high crime rates.[13] Many social interactions reflect a zero-sum approach, involving a focus on survival, suspicion of diversity, paternalism, a sense of victimization and deep-seated fear of change. Smuggling, trafficking in small arms and drugs, and the diffusion of weapons to government-controlled parts of the country contribute to the sense of insecurity. In recent months, three high-profile killings in the centre of Kyiv – of a leading journalist, a former member of Russia's parliament and a senior intelligence official – have sown further doubts about the state's capacity to protect citizens. These events and trends have further diminished trust in public institutions.

The continuation of the conflict in the east, with no clear prospect for a viable resolution, is increasing social stress and social/political polarization. It has deepened existing societal divides and is creating new ones, with the main clashes occurring between liberal/progressive and conservative/'patriotic' groups. The conflict's polarizing effect has been reflected in varying popular attitudes towards a possible resolution, depending in part on residents' proximity to the fighting. In Donbas, 59 per cent of respondents to a 2015 poll said they were ready for 'any compromise' with the leaders of the separatist Luhansk and Donetsk 'People's Republics', whereas in central Ukraine the number was only 17 per cent.[14]

The deadlock in the Minsk Process for resolving the conflict, and the stalling of international talks about modalities for an international peacekeeping mission, has contributed to Ukrainians' frustrations with their current leadership. Russia, aiming to reinforce this sentiment and spread division, misleadingly promotes a narrative of the conflict as a 'war of oligarchs' in which President Petro Poroshenko supposedly has a personal interest in sustaining hostilities. The terms of

[11] Ukrainian News (2016), 'Bilsh nizh 30 per cent opitanykh ukraintsiv boiat-sia zhyty po susidstvu z tsiganamy, – opytuvannaia' [More than 30% of polled Ukrainians are afraid to live next to the gypsies], 7 June 2016, https://ukranews.com/ua/news/432767-bilsh-nizh-30-opytanykh-ukrainciv-boyatsya-zhyty-po-susidstvu-z-cyganamy-opytuvannya.
[12] Nestor Group (2015), 'Pryntsypy sotsialnoi vzaiemodii v umovakh zahrozhenosti bezpeky, stalosti bezpetky ta stalosty rozvytku' [Principles of social cooperation in the conditions of threatened insecurity, sustainable security and sustainable development], https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://nestorgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ProMova_presentation_FinalFinal-1.pdf.
[13] *Ukrainskaya Pravda* (2018), 'Naimenshe ukraintsiv turbuie rosiiska mova ta vidnosyny z YeS' [Ukrainians are least concerned about Russian language and relations with the EU], 4 July 2018, https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2018/07/4/7185308/.
[14] Democratic Initiative Foundation (2015), 'Stavlennia naselennia do podii na Donbasi: tsina myru I shliakhy podolannia konfliktu' [Attitude of the population towards the conflict in Donbas: The price of peace and ways to overcome conflict], 13 November 2015, https://dif.org.ua/article/stavlennya-naselennya-do-podiy-na-donbasi-tsina-miru-i-shlyakhi-podolannya-konfliktu.

reference used in the mobilization of Ukraine's Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) at the start of the conflict – in effect, to provide a makeshift legal framework for hostilities with an irregular enemy and mercenaries – have contributed to societal uncertainty while presenting operational/policy challenges in respect of an ambiguously defined aggressor. Military coordination has been hampered by the lack of a unified command structure and inadequate rules of engagement. It took almost four years for Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, to pass legislation formally defining Russia as an aggressor state and reconstituting the ATO within a single chain of command under the Ministry of Defence.[15]

Social cohesion is at risk due to high levels of displacement, poor integration of the displaced, and weak re-assimilation of ATO veterans into civilian life. Displaced persons struggle acutely with inadequate access to housing, healthcare, social benefits and pensions, and also suffer a lack of redress for violations of property rights.[16] After more than four years of conflict, more than 300,000 Ukrainian solders have taken part in military operations in the east. Many return with post-traumatic stress disorder and face difficulties re-entering civilian life. Employment is the most problematic issue for ATO veterans, who are consequently susceptible to recruitment by dubious political protest campaigns or radicalized nationalist groups.

Response

To date, the state's response to its vulnerabilities around security and the conflict in Donbas has mainly focused on strengthening Ukrainian defence capabilities and enhancing the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). The UAF are undergoing substantial reform, with an emphasis on building a professional army and future interoperability with NATO forces. The SBU has become more effective against covert operations and small-scale terrorist groups in government-controlled territories. In 2016, its counter-intelligence efforts identified 599 Ukrainian citizens suspected of working as agents of foreign powers. The agency has confiscated over 61,000 units of ammunition.[17]

In 2016, the government established a Ministry of Temporary Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons; it is also in the process of setting up a Ministry for Veterans. A weak political mandate, low capacity and insufficient funding prevent the former from being effective. Delivery of services and improvements in infrastructure at crossing points along the line of contact are often impeded by failures in governance, especially at the regional level. Due to the state's loss of control over parts of Donbas and Luhansk oblasts, the legal jurisdiction for some land and state assets remains in limbo.

Resilience is undermined by the lack of a clear national strategy for conflict resolution. Citizens claim they do not have enough information about the government's vision for resolving the conflict. This creates fertile ground for disinformation and manipulation of public opinion. The situation is complicated by the presence of competing reintegration strategies for the occupied territories: the

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[15] *Ukrainskaya Pravda* (2018), 'Rada ukhvalyla zakon pro reintegratsiiu Donbasu' [The Rada passed a law on the reintegration of Donbas], 18 January 2018, https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2018/01/18/7168749/.

[16] Kuznetsova, I., Mikheieva, O., Gulyieva, G., Dragneva, R. and Mykhnenko, V. (2018), *The Social Consequences of Population Displacement in Ukraine: The Risks of Marginalization and Social Exclusion,* Policy Brief, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, https://zenodo.org/record/1217838#.W1YZS359hE5.

[17] Sluzhba Bespeky Ukrainy (2016), 'Resultaty okremykh napryamkiv roboty Sluzhby bezpeky Ukrainy' [Results of the separate directions of the work of the Security Service of Ukraine], 23 December 2016, https://ssu.gov.ua/ua/news/1/category/2/view/2474#.zp9sE2B0.dpbs.

official one approved by the cabinet of ministers;[18] and a separate strategy promoted by the minister of interior, Arsen Avakov.[19]

At the non-state level, active citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) focus on providing support to displaced persons and assistance to the front line, as well as on the development of more democratic local governance in the east. Groups such as Krym SOS, Legal Hundred, Vostok SOS and the Centre of Employment of New People provide counselling on housing, employment, pensions, medical help and inheritances. Fifty-six per cent of such CSOs rely on funding from Western donors, while only 16 per cent receive private donations from domestic sources. A significant majority of the groups are new, having emerged since the start of the conflict.[20]

Several independent think-tanks are researching the situation in the occupied territories and discussing possible reintegration strategies. The Centre for Research of Donbas Social Perspective, Factory of Donbas Thought, Kalmius Group and the Donetsk Institute of Information, among others, are key groups working on the issue. Similarly, the online newspaper Euromaidan Press runs a major international campaign (Let My People Go) for the release of more than 80 Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia.

Box 1: Bright spot – community centres in Ukrainian regions

New community centres in the cities of the east – such as Teplytsia in Sloviansk, Khalabuda in Mariupol, Lampova in Pokrovsk, Free UA in Kramatorsk and Space Friends in Kostyantynivka – have emerged thanks to assistance from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These independent spaces provide a platform for active citizens at the grassroots level to network and collaborate. The tools that have been found to work best in promoting cohesion and resilience are people-to-people exchanges among various regions; inclusive open-air cultural events; and the provision of financial support to local grassroots community projects, conditional on their effectiveness. By creating new cultural events, setting up independent community centres and developing innovative exhibitions in local museums – all offering a cultural product relevant to Donbas communities – these initiatives demonstrate that change is possible, even in such a complex environment. More importantly, they have created a new dynamic involving initiatives from non-state and non-oligarchic sources, in an arrangement that benefits the wider community.

2. An opaque political culture

Ukraine's corrupt political system and ineffective governance form another area of state vulnerability. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, what can be described as a 'limited-access' political order took shape, in which different institutions were captured by newly formed proto-capitalist business groups.[21] In order to preserve their financial interests, these groups had to 'acquire' control of media outlets and political parties at the national and regional levels. They also had to maintain access to pliant judges at all levels of the judiciary, and cultivate links to

[18] Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2017), *Pro zatverdzhennya planu zakhodiv, spryamovanykh na realizatsiyu deyakykh zasad derzhavnoi vnutrishnoi polityky shchodo okremykh raioniv Donetskoi ta Luhanskoi oblastei, de organy derzhavnoy vlady tymchasovo ne zdiisniuiut svoi povnovazhennya* [Approval of the plan of measures aimed at the implementation of certain principles of the state internal policies for certain districts of Donetsk and Lugansk regions, where the state authorities temporarily do not exercise their powers], Ministerial Order, 11 January 2017, https://www.kmu.gov.ua/ua/npas/249657353.
[19] Avakov, A. (2018), 'Strategy of restoration of the integrity of Ukraine and de-occupation of the Donbass: 'Small Steps Mechanism'', avakov.com, 7 June 2018, https://avakov.com/strategy-of-restoration-of-the-integrity-of-ukraine-and-de-occupation-of-the-donbass-small-steps-mechanism.html.
[20] Kuznetsova, I. and Mikheieva, O. (2018), *NGO Representatives' View of the Social Consequences of Forced Displacement in Ukraine*, Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research, March 2018, https://zenodo.org/record/1247928#.WzpA2X59hE5.
[21] North, D., Wallis J. J. and Weingast, B. (2009), *Violence and Social Orders*, Cambridge University Press.

the security services and the Prosecutor General's Office. The groups were diverse in their political alignment and agendas: some had a clear pro-Russia agenda and lobbied for Ukraine's integration into the EAEU; some pushed for neutrality and a 'special Ukrainian way'; and some declared support for integration with the EU.

This system was – and, to a significant extent, still is – fuelled by cash flows from high-level political corruption. This undermined real accountability and allowed the protection of monopolies established by well-connected financial groups. Elites from across the political spectrum benefited from the system. They included members of groups loyal to Russia that promoted the Kremlin's message in the political space.

Since the Euromaidan movement of 2013–14, Ukraine has started to dismantle this system. Although much of the inherited political infrastructure remains in place,[22] the space that previously existed for divergent geopolitical agendas has been constrained. Ukrainian society at large has consolidated its choice of pro-European alignment, and the country's association agreement with the EU (including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, or DCFTA) has come into effect. More than 57 per cent of Ukrainians say they support EU integration,[23] and 47 per cent say NATO membership would guarantee Ukraine's security.[24] This means that overtly pro-Russia parties now have little chance to compete in the political space nationwide. Instead, they are relegated to deploying other tactics, such as supporting a de facto surrender to Russian interests through the promotion of peace at any price, disingenuously advocating compromise, and promoting a narrative that the West will not help Ukraine to regain lost territory and rebuild its economy.

The 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections will offer ample scope for Russian operations to seek to influence the political process, and will be another test of Ukraine's resilience. Russia will aim to recapture de facto control of a substantial segment of the political spectrum, potentially exploiting election gains by parties loyal to Moscow with the aim of creating a fractured parliament. Such an outcome could result in an incapacitated parliament unable to produce a viable governing coalition. It could even herald the creation of a government of national unity promoting the Russian agenda of federalization, as well as special status for the Russian language and for Donbas. This could deepen the conflict and further polarize society. Russia will also aim to undermine the legitimacy of Ukraine's election process by staging cyberattacks on electoral infrastructure.

Of other specific risks relating to the elections, the most significant concern collapsing support for pro-European parties, low trust in all parties across the political spectrum, and disengagement of citizens from politics. For example, support for the Narodny Front of the former prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, has plummeted from 23 per cent in 2014 to about 1 per cent in 2018. With no viable liberal-democratic alternative to the current transitional leadership on the horizon, and with huge public demand for 'new faces', the political playing field remains wide open to manipulation of various kinds.

[22] Lough, J. (2017), 'Anti-corruption Reforms' chapter, in Ash et al. (2017), *The Struggle For Ukraine,* https://reader.chathamhouse.org/struggle-for-ukraine#anti-corruption-reforms.

[23] Uriadovyi Portal (2017), 'Ukraina zatsikavlena v takykh rishenniakh samitu Skhidnoho partnerstva, yaki buly b vzaiemovyhidnymy yak dlia krain-partneriv, tak i dlia Yevrosoiuzu – Ivanna Klympush-Tsyntsadze' [Ukraine is interested in Eastern Partnership summit decisions, which would be mutually beneficial both for partner countries and for the European Union – Ivanna Klimpush-Tsintsadze], 18 November 2017, https://www.kmu.gov.ua/ua/news/250435478.

[24] Democratic Initiative Foundation (2017), 'Gromadska dumka naselennia Ukrainy pro NATO' [Public opinion towards NATO in Ukraine], 5 July 2017, https://dif.org.ua/article/gromadska-dumka-naselennya-ukraini-pro-nato.

The pre-electoral narratives of the pro-Russia parties are already exploiting promises of peace with Russia, as well as closer economic relations with the EAEU. They are appealing to nostalgia for Soviet stability and greatness, and seeking to nurture Euro-scepticism. These parties also provide platforms in Ukraine for foreign anti-EU nationalist parties, such as Germany's Alternative für Deutschland.[25] For an electorate dissatisfied with Kyiv's policies, Opposition Block and For Life have emerged as the leading contenders to secure substantial shares of the vote. In July, Viktor Medvedchuk, an oligarch widely acknowledged as Russia's frontman in Ukraine, joined For Life, which is led by Vadym Rabinovych and Nestor Shufrych.

Lack of accountability makes it easier for political interests to advance covert agendas. Medvedchuk has substantially boosted his presence in the public space in advance of the 2019 elections, and is actively accumulating media resources.[26] When a Swiss holding acquired the major news channel 112 TV in April 2018, an independent investigation showed that the end beneficiary was a German citizen who runs a second-hand-car business in a small provincial town in central Germany. The management team appointed after the acquisition has strong links to Medvedchuk, and his presence on this channel has substantially increased.[27] The national regulator did not initiate any investigation or query with regard to this ownership.

In Ukraine's regions, Vladislav Surkov, a special adviser to Vladimir Putin and the coordinator of separatist groups in Donbas, has used Russia-linked groups to extend support to local parties that advocate more local autonomy. This is encouraging what might be described as 'centrifugal' forces in Ukrainian politics, designed to weaken Kyiv's hold on the country as a whole. The political parties involved include New State (a rebranded Communist Party), Zakarpattia Kraj, Odesa Porto-Franco, Socialist Zaporizhzhia, Bessarabska Republic Budjak, and the Galicia Party in Lviv oblast.[28]

In addition, Russia supports political disruptors who can help create the kind of 'managed chaos' proposed by Valery Gerasimov, chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.[29] The disruptors include the former president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, and Nadia Savchenko, a former volunteer pilot turned Ukrainian politician. Saakashvili was invited by President Poroshenko to share Georgian experience in anti-corruption reform, and his last position in Ukraine was as governor of Odesa oblast. Saakashvili's alleged links to Serhiy Kurchenko – who now lives in Moscow and was widely known as a frontman for financial deals of the former Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovych – are under investigation in Ukraine. In February 2018, Saakashvili was extradited to Poland after illegally crossing the border. Meanwhile, Savchenko – who started disruptive activity in Ukraine after her release from almost two years of imprisonment in Russia – is under arrest in Ukraine with her alleged co-conspirators for plotting a bombing inside the parliament in Kyiv.

The disruptive activities of both Saakashvili and Savchenko aim to mobilize radical segments of the electorate, especially ATO veterans, and include demands for the impeachment of President Poroshenko. Vladimir Ruban, one of Savchenko's alleged co-conspirators and a former active

[25] *Segodnya* (2015), 'Iz evropeiskogo vybora nye stoit delat' mif – politolog' [Do not make a myth from the European Elections – Political Scientist], 7 July 2015, https://www.segodnya.ua/politics/iz-evropeyskogo-vybora-ne-stoit-delat-mif-politolog-629744.html.
[26] 'Medvedchuk podbiraet dlya Putina novogo presidenta Ukrainy' [Medvedchuk selects for Putin a new president of Ukraine], YouTube, 2 July 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXFyhPQGoVs.
[27] Radio Svoboda (2018), 'Khto kupyv telekanal 112 Ukraina?' [Who bought the 112 Ukraine Channel?], 20 September 2018, https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/schemes/29439621.html.
[28] Unian (2017), 'Rossia finansuye stvorennya v Ukraini politichnikh partii – SBU' [Russia finances the creation of political parties in Ukraine], 21 February 2017, https://www.unian.ua/politics/1788556-rosiya-finansue-stvorennya-v-ukrajini-politichnih-partiy-sbu-audiozapisi.html.
[29] GaldvRed (2018), 'Delo Savchenko-Rubana: vyyasnilos', kto stoit za 'khaosom, kotoryi nuzhno poseyat' khaos v Ukraine" [The case of Savchenko-Ruban: It turned out that who stands behind the 'chaos in Ukraine'], 25 March 2018, http://glavred.info/politika/delo-savchenko-rubana-vyyasnilos-kto-stoit-za-haosom-kotoryy-nuzhno-poseyat-haos-v-ukraine-496699.html.

member of Medvedchuk's movement, has referred to their main goals in Ukraine as creating internal destabilization and political chaos.[30]

Fringe radicals and 'weaponization' of ethnic minorities

Military conflict and economic and social hardship have enabled the spread of radical groups in Ukrainian society, and have rendered them more visible. Some groups, such as Sich (C14)[31] and Trident, have been in operation since 2003, while others, such as National Corps and Karpathian Sich, are newly formed from members of voluntary battalions fighting in the east.

These groups are not large (for example, National Corps claims 1,000 members), and have hardly any chance of winning seats in parliament. However, they are well positioned to recruit from among more than 300,000 ATO veterans, many of whom are disillusioned with mainstream parties and suffer economic hardship. The radical groups also target young people and host various so-called 'patriotic' summer camps. Their actions could disrupt future elections, increase popular feelings of insecurity, and inspire violent attacks on left-wing, liberal, feminist and LGBT activists, human-rights defenders, and ethnic and religious minorities. Such attacks are already increasing.[32]

The existence of radical groups also helps sustain the narrative, promoted by Russia via its state media channels and private 'troll factories', of Ukraine as a 'fascist, neo-Nazi' state. Russia also uses EU-based right-wing groups to exert influence in Ukraine. Two members of the neo-fascist Polish Falanga organization came to Uzhgorod to attack the Hungarian cultural centre in February. The leader of the anti-US, anti-Semitic and ultra-Catholic group, Bartosh Beker, visited the Donetsk 'People's Republic' in 2014 and has links to Russia.[33]

> Military conflict and economic and social hardship have enabled the spread of radical groups in Ukrainian society, and have rendered them more visible.

Ukraine is a pluralistic, multi-ethnic polity with Hungarian, Bulgarian, Polish, Romanian, Azeri, Greek and Russian minorities. Some of these, in particular the Hungarian minority, reside in compact settlements. For example, Zakarpattia oblast has 59 schools in which Hungarian is the language of instruction, and 79 in which Romanian is the language of instruction. The integration of the Hungarian minority into the Ukrainian cultural and educational space is abysmal. In 2016, 42 per cent of graduates from Hungarian-language high schools did not take a Ukrainian-language graduate examination; and among those who did, most did not pass.[34] Students from these schools typically either go abroad to study or struggle to develop careers in Ukraine. In contrast, the Romanian and Polish communities score much higher in Ukrainian-language knowledge.

[30] BBC Ukraina (2018), 'Sprava Savchenko: hranaty, seks i zvynuvachennia Lutsenka' [Case of Savchenko: grenades, sex and accusations of Lutsenko], 22 March 2018, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-43498330.

[31] Shtohrin, I. (2018), "S14'. Natsionalisty-radikali chy neonatsysty?' ['S14'. Radical-Nationalists or neo-Nazis?], Radio Svoboda, 19 March 2018, https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/29109819.html.

[32] Likhachev, V. (2018), *Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy*, Nations in Transit Brief, Washington, DC: Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy.

[33] Babakova, O. (2018), 'Polska falanha Putina: khto stoit za pidpalom spilky uhortsiv v Uzhhorodi' [Putin's Polish Phalanx: Who is behind the burning of Hungarian associations in Uzhhorod], *Evropeiska Pravda*, 1 March 2018, https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2018/03/1/7078237/.

[34] Zog, O. and Kulchynskii, R. (2017), 'Ne rozumiiut. Ukrainski uhortsi ta rumuny u shkolakh praktichno ne vyvchaiut ukrainsku' [They do not understand: Ukrainian-Hungarians and Ukrainian-Romanians practically do not study Ukrainian in schools], Teksti.Org.Ua, 23 November 2017, http://texty.org.ua/pg/article/editorial/read/81080/Ne_rozumijut_Ukrajinski_ugorci_ta_rumuny_u.

Despite a lack of visible conflict between ethnic minorities, the levels of declared tolerance for other groups remain low. Around half of Ukrainians polled (46 per cent) say they do not trust people of another nationality, and a similar share (49 per cent) do not trust people of another religion.[35] This makes it easier to stir tensions and conflicts between different groups. For example, individuals supported by Russia have instigated tensions between Ukrainian activists and the Azeri community in Odesa; their provocations have been amplified by Russian propaganda channels.[36]

Response

Political reform is long overdue in Ukraine. It partially started after 2014 in respect of political party financing, most prominently with the introduction of state funding for parties that enter parliament and the obligatory reporting of party expenses to the National Agency for Prevention of Corruption. This allowed for more civic oversight of party financing.

The high volume of corrupt cash flows in politics, and the privileged access of some politicians to TV stations owned by powerful business groups, distorts the electoral system. According to some reputable sources, campaigning to be elected mayor in the smallest oblast-level city costs the equivalent of around $2 million.[37] The new electoral code, approved at its first reading by the parliament in November 2017, proposes open party lists that allow voters to rate candidates, but it does not address the issues around TV advertising for candidates. Currently, over 4,000 amendments have been proposed to the draft law.

The new Law on National Security, adopted in June 2018, also allows for better civic and parliamentary oversight of the security sector. Opening up the security sector to more scrutiny is key to fighting corruption and malpractice, as well as to improving the sector's efficiency.

Decentralization and nationwide reform of local governance have begun, with one result being improved rules on transparency and accountability for the newly amalgamated local communities. These administrative units have been created from settlements, rural areas and cities of district-level significance. Public opinion polls already reveal higher levels of satisfaction with local authorities. In one recent survey, residents of the cities gave substantially higher approval rates to mayors than to the president of Ukraine. Similarly, many believe that their city is moving in the right direction, and Ukraine in the wrong direction.[38]

The integration of minorities into Ukrainian cultural and political space is weak. A new law on education, approved in September 2017, attempts to address this issue. It permits study in minority languages only at pre-school and elementary-school levels. Starting from middle school, the language of instruction must be Ukrainian, with the exception of a few subjects, which can be taught in the relevant minority language. The Hungarian government has reacted harshly to the new legislation, and Hungarian schools and cultural organizations in Ukraine have also opposed it. In protest, Hungary has blocked meetings of the Ukraine–NATO Commission several times in 2018.

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[35] ZN.UA (2017), 'Ukraintsi ne duzhe tolerantni naibilshe nenavydiat narkomaniv, alkoholikiv i homoseksualiv' [Ukrainians are not very tolerant and most hate drug addicts, alcoholics and homosexuality], 12 April 2017, https://dt.ua/UKRAINE/ukrayinci-ne-duzhe-tolerantni-i-naybilshe-nenavidyat-narkomaniv-alkogolikiv-i-gomoseksualiv-239488_.html.
[36] Inform Napalm (2017), 'SurkovLeaks (part 3): analiz perepiski pervogo zamestitelya Surkova Inala Ardzinby' [SurkovLeaks (part 3): Analysis of the correspondence of Surkov's first deputy Inal Ardzinba], 2 November 2017, https://informnapalm.org/29702-surkovleaks-part3/.
[37] Author's interview in Ukraine, July 2018.
[38] International Republican Institute (2018), 'Ukraine Poll Shows Rising Economic Optimism, Continuing Satisfaction on Local Level', http://www.iri.org/resource/ukraine-poll-shows-rising-economic-optimism-continuing-satisfaction-local-level.

The state response to violence by radical groups has been mixed. The SBU monitors inter-ethnic crime and the activities of xenophobic groups, and members of some groups have been arrested. Those detained include members of Torpedo, an organized crime group linked to former parliamentarians from the Party of Regions (the party of former president Yanukovych) who have fled to Russia. Torpedo was targeting Jewish, Polish and Hungarian cultural sites.[39]

At the same time, some other groups are tolerated or even supported. Hate crimes with xenophobic motives are often classified as simple hooliganism by law enforcement. Human rights advocates report such cases to the Ministry of Interior and the Prosecutor General's Office, but often receive pro forma responses or none. Even more striking than the impunity enjoyed by some radical groups is that those responsible for crimes against Roma have received state funding under a programme for the 'patriotic education of youth'. The Ministry of Youth and Sport provided funding to the C14 and Golossivska Kryivka groups, both founded by the nationalist Svodoba Party, to organize summer youth camps.[40]

Ukrainian authorities have substantially limited the space for Russian quasi-state actors to influence domestic politics. As part of the 'de-communization' effort, the Communist Party was banned in 2015. And in April 2017, 460 organizations – comprising Russian commercial entities, state TV channels, military companies, and various Russia-funded GONGOs and groups linked to separatists in the east and Crimea – were sanctioned.[41] Nonetheless, Russia continues to destabilize Ukraine by recruiting individuals throughout the country.

The non-state sector is pushing for deeper political and law enforcement reforms. Groups such as Opora, the Committee of Voters of Ukraine, and Centre UA monitor party financing and advocate the establishment of a new electoral code with open party lists. Civic media organizations, such as Hromadske TV and Euromaidan Press, report on and monitor violence by radical groups.

3. The media space: disinformation and disillusionment

The Ukrainian information space remains fragile. It is characterized by the presence of strong vested interests represented by privately owned TV stations, a high share of paid content, a proliferation of pro-Russia narratives, and poor-quality journalism. The penetration of Russian disinformation remains high, especially via social media and media outlets owned by Ukraine's oligarchs, whose interests stand to be undermined by ongoing and proposed reforms.

Over 80 per cent of Ukrainians take their news from national TV. Citizens trust Ukrainian media sources more if there are conflicting news stories. However, only 27 per cent say that Ukrainian media provide trustworthy information about events in the country and the conflict in the east.[42] Residents of some cities, such as Odesa and Kherson, strongly disapprove of the Ukrainian media.[43]

[39] Shandra, A. (2017), 'Ukraine's law enforcers bust gang plotting to blow up Hungarian monuments', Euromaidan Press, 3 October 2017, http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/10/03/ukraine-claims-it-detained-gang-plotting-to-exacerbate-ukrainian-hungarian-tenstions/.

[40] More, A. and Pyrlik, H. (2018), 'Derzhava finansuie radikalnikh natsionalistiv: yak 'C14' otrimala maizhe pivmiliona?' [State is financing radical nationalist: how C14 received almost half a million], Hromadske Radio, 13 June 2018.

[41] Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy [Decree of the President of Ukraine] (2017), 'Pro rishennia Rady natsionalnoi besneky i oborony Ukrainy vid 28 kvitnia 2017 roku 'Pro zastosuvannia personalnykh spetsialnykh ekonomichnykh ta inshykh obmezhuvalnykh zakhodiv (sanktsii)' [On the decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine dated April 28, 2017 'On the application of personal special economic and other restrictive measures (sanctions)'], 28 April 2017, http://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1332017-21850.

[42] Media Sapiens (2017), 'Yak rosiiska propahanda vplyvaie na suspilnu dumku v Ukraini' [How Russian propaganda influences public opinion in Ukraine], 13 February 2017, http://ms.detector.media/mediaprosvita/research/yak_rosiyska_propaganda_vplivae_na_suspilnu_dumku_v_ukraini_doslidzhennya/.

[43] International Republican Institute (2018), 'Fourth Annual Ukrainian Municipal Survey 20 January – 10 February 2018', http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-3-22_ukraine_poll.pdf.

Pro-Russia narratives abound on private TV channels owned by Russia-friendly anti-government groups – in particular, NewsOne, 112 TV and Inter. Their producers design popular shows and infotainment that exploit nostalgia for the Soviet era and sustain a Russian view of the Soviet legacy and historical narratives. For instance, Inter's promotion of the Russian 'Bezsmertny Polk' movement aims to copy the Russian way of commemorating the Second World War. The movement started in Russia in 2012, with the aim of publicly glorifying veterans and promoting the role of Russia in saving Europe from fascism. Inter's TV shows increase popular mistrust of the Ukrainian leadership, and create a feeling of confusion and chaos.

Certain parts of the population are especially susceptible to Russian propaganda. They include people who have more traditional and conservative values, believe that neither Russia nor the West will help Ukraine to overcome the crisis, and believe that there is no Russian propaganda.[44] According to experts, Russian propaganda owes its effectiveness to the fact that it is backed by substantial resources, exploits a lack of critical thinking on the part of key audiences, and offers superficially convincing content.[45]

Russia promotes narratives of despair with the aim of extinguishing hope in Ukrainian reforms. Its media agenda focuses on demanding the impeachment of President Poroshenko, insisting on the responsibility of Ukraine's leaders for starting the war, presenting Ukraine as a failed state, and portraying the EU as a collapsing bloc. As a result, 54 per cent of Ukrainians in the east say they 'do not know who started the war in the east'.[46] Disinformation and manipulated news nurture pessimism. A recent survey shows a substantial drop in optimism in the south and east of the country in 2017 compared to 2016.[47]

> Russia promotes narratives of despair with the aim of extinguishing hope in Ukrainian reforms.

Ukrainian cyberspace is particularly targeted and remains vulnerable. The SBU recorded more than 200 cyberattacks in 2016, targeting the diplomatic service, critical infrastructure and law enforcement agencies. Their intensity continues and culminated with the major 'not-Petya' attack in June 2017, which has been attributed to the Russian military. This attack targeted mainly Ukrainian state and private organizations, but also international companies.[48]

Fake news about Ukraine is also actively propagated by Russia in the West, for example in connection with key international events. Ahead of a meeting of President Poroshenko with the head of the EU's Political and Security Committee in June 2018, Russia-affiliated trolls flooded social media with disinformation about the supposed plans of the UAF to shoot down the EU helicopter and blame it on the separatist Donetsk People's Republic. This fake news in Russian, English and German reached more than 600,000 people on Twitter.[49]

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[44] Interview with National Democratic Institute representatives in Kyiv.

[45] Media Sapiens (2017), 'Yak rosiiska propahanda vplyvaie na suspilnu dumku v Ukraini'.

[46] Grushetsky, A., Kruglashov, A., Lygachova, N., Paniotto, V., Petrenko, G. and Shutov, R. (2018), *Protydiia Rosiiskii propagandi ta mediagramotnist:resultaty vseukrainskoho opytuvannia gromadskoi dumky* [Countering Russian Propaganda and Media Literacy: National Public Opinion Poll], Detector Media, p. 39, March 2018, https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2016/136017/DM_KMIS_engl__WEB-2.pdf.

[47] National Democratic Institute (2017), 'Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition: Nationwide Survey with six local oversamples, July 2017', https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-research-opportunities-and-challenges-facing-ukraine-s-democratic-transition.

[48] Ng, A. (2018), 'US: Russia's NotPetya the most destructive cyberattack ever', cnet.com, 15 February 2018, https://www.cnet.com/news/uk-said-russia-is-behind-destructive-2017-cyberattack-in-ukraine/.

[49] EU vs Disinfo (2018), 'Dehumanizing disinformation as a weapon of the information war', 28 June 2018, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/dehumanizing-disinformation-as-a-weapon-of-the-information-war/.

Social media remains the main space for spreading disinformation. Almost a quarter of Ukrainians receive news about the country and work events from social networks. After the banning of Russian social networks in 2017, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki lost about half of their audience in Ukraine, but bots and Kremlin-funded groups migrated to Facebook, which is now the most popular social platform, with 35 per cent of Ukrainians using it. Pro-Russia bots are targeting not only Russian speakers but also nationalist and 'patriotic' groups. The bots increasingly use Google Translate to post content in Ukrainian.

Response

Overall, Ukraine's resilience to disinformation is strengthening.[50] The state is taking steps to improve information security and counter disinformation. Most notably, the sanctioning of Russia's major state TV channels and banning of its social media, as well as the withdrawal of accreditation for Russian state media at Ukrainian government agencies, have led to a substantial drop in the audience for Russian disinformation. However, such restrictive measures should be the method of last resort; there is a danger that continuing such a policy could present a real threat to internet freedom in Ukraine. Ukrainian media organizations are concerned about a new draft law that allows websites to be blocked at the discretion of state investigators or prosecutors, without a court decision.

The reform to create a new public broadcaster, Suspilne TV, started in 2016. However, the channel is still underfunded and needs substantial investment in technological modernization, as well as deep organizational reform of its overinflated personnel structure. It also has a small viewership, with its reach nationwide measured in single digits as a percentage of the media market.

The Law on Transparency of Media Ownership was introduced in 2015. This was a very important step, since most Ukrainians do not know who owns the major TV channels. Information published under the new law exposes the complex, often offshore structures of most media companies – structures designed to protect ownership rights and disguise end beneficiaries. The new law is also positive for media reform in that it prevents Russia from owning media in Ukraine and exposes the political influence underpinning media ownership.

The Ministry of Information has been tasked with restoring the transmission of broadcast programming to the occupied territories. The Army FM station was set up to provide news to the UAF and residents near the line of contact. The ministry has installed three new TV towers and more than 100 transmitters, and has provided satellite transmission to the occupied territories. The effectiveness of these efforts is hard to access, since there are no reliable public opinion data from the region.

Right after the start of the conflict, non-state actors led the fight against Russian disinformation. New groups, often created by media and PR professionals, undertook the task of debunking fake stories and providing information domestically and to the West. Groups such as StopFake, the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (UCMC), Inform Resist, Inform Napal, Ukraine World, Euromaidan Press, Hromadske TV and Hromadske Radio are the leaders in the sector. StopFake alone has uncovered more than 1,000 fake news items about Ukraine, and has trained 10,000 media professionals in fact-checking.[51]

[50] Ukrainian Prism (2018), *Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*, http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf.
[51] Yurkova, O. (2018), 'Inside the Fight against Russia's Fake News Empire', Ted Talks, 10 April 2018, https://www.ted.com/talks/olga_yurkova_inside_the_fight_against_russia_s_fake_news_empire#t-299646.

The cooperation between civic media organizations and the state was quite strong at the start of the conflict. Many experts from the private sector entered government agencies to assist with strategic communications. Unfortunately, many of them resigned for various reasons in 2016. One early initiative was at the Ministry of Defence, in partnership with the UCMC. Law enforcement agencies also cooperated with Cyber Alliance and Rukh8 in monitoring the internet and preventing cyberattacks.

Civil society is very active in developing media literacy programmes. More than 15 programmes are currently in operation.[52] Citizens support the idea of media literacy; however, only a quarter of them are ready to take such courses.[53]

Figure 1 represents the impact of the drivers of Russian influence and of state and civil society responses in Ukraine, using a scale from 0 to 5, with 5 representing the greatest impact.

Figure 1: Drivers of Russian influence in Ukraine, and state/civil society responses
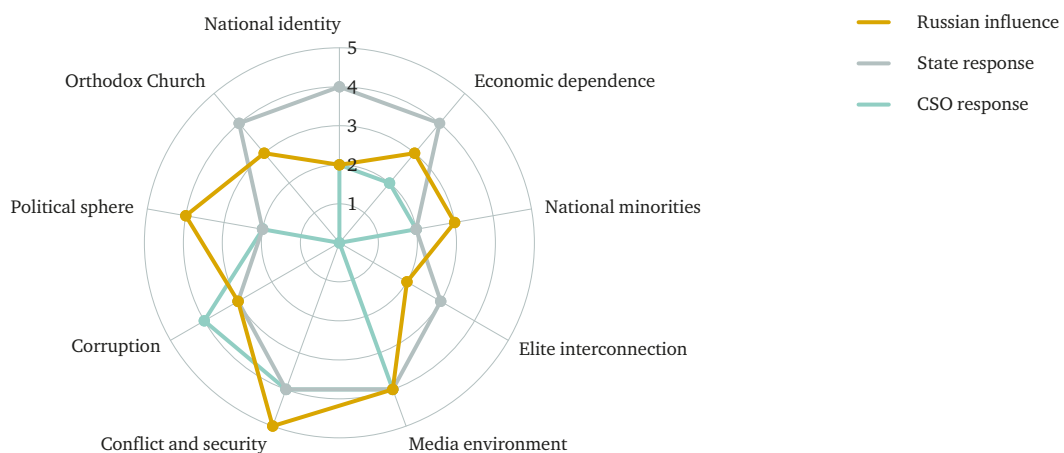
Source: Based on interviews with experts in the target countries. The chart maps levels of various vulnerabilities to Russian influence as perceived by the experts, on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 = 'non-existent', 1 = 'minimal', 2 = 'moderate', 3 = 'substantial', 4 = 'critical' and 5 = 'most prevalent'. State and civil society responses are rated on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 = 'no response', 1 = 'minimal response', 2 = 'mild response', 3 = 'moderate effort', 4 = 'substantial effort' and 5 = 'high-level effective effort'.

B. Opportunities to strengthen resilience

Strengthening and sustaining the resilience of Ukrainian society to Russian influence is a long-term project. A resilient society should have strong adaptive qualities that enable it to cope with uncertainty and nurture the capacity for self-renewal.

One key opportunity to strengthen resilience derives from the wide popular support for the country's democratic identity. Over 86 per cent of Ukrainians say that it is important to have a 'fully functional democracy'.[54] Democratic identity is also expressed in growing activism, support to the charitable

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[52] See, for instance, '15 Top Ukrainian Media Literacy Projects', https://medium.com/@postinformation/.
[53] Grushetsky et al. (2018), *Protydiia Rosiiskii propagandi ta mediagramotnist:resultaty vseukrainskoho opytuvannia gromadskoi dumky*.
[54] National Democratic Institute (2016), 'Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition: Nationwide Survey with eight local oversamples, November – December 2016', https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine per cent20Research per cent20December per cent202016 per cent20web per cent20 per cent282 per cent29.pdf.

sector, and the development of various tools of local democracy. Ukrainian civil society is evolving so that it can adapt to new realities and various challenges. The sector could be an even stronger source of state resilience if aided in a sustainable and strategic way.

At the national level, Ukraine's leadership has announced a reform master plan for reconstituting the country. Progress is slow, but things are moving in the right direction. Accountable and effective governance is still far from a reality, but one of the most important reforms, that of public administration, has started. A new cohort of officials was hired to lead strategic planning units, and new state secretaries have entered the system. If sustained, this reform has the potential to gradually change the image of public institutions and revive trust in the state. It also presents an opportunity to develop a truly inclusive policymaking process.

Another opportunity to improve governance lies in decentralization. The 750 or so recently amalgamated communities already function according to new rules on accountability. Local council members are democratically elected, and tasked with managing communities in close cooperation with citizens. These communities are developing various informal engagement events. They are also using e-petitions to launch local initiatives, holding public hearings, and practicing 'participatory budgeting' (in which public consultation feeds into budget decision-making). All these tools of local democracy give citizens a voice and enable conflicting positions to be addressed in a more civil and democratic way.

> A resilient society should have strong adaptive qualities that enable it to cope with uncertainty and nurture the capacity for self-renewal.

The most challenging issues concern the military operation in Donbas, and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Several opportunities exist for mitigating vulnerabilities related to the conflict. High mobility across the line of contact creates an opportunity to launch work on various 'soft power' projects that could help with the reintegration of temporarily occupied and annexed territories into Ukraine proper in the future. A recent report noted the openness of citizens to finding a compromise in order to restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine and reconcile residents in the occupied Donbas with those in the rest of the country.[55]

Social activities and associations among communities of displaced people and military veterans provide opportunities to reach out to vulnerable groups. There are over 1,200 new veterans' associations and many groups supporting displaced persons. Such groups provide services, often offer legal aid, and advocate policies related to social support and integration of veterans and internally displaced persons into the workforce. This presents an opportunity for social service reform, entailing higher-quality support for vulnerable groups and more outsourcing to the non-profit sector. Already this year, after pressure from veterans' associations, the Ministry of Social Policy for the first time ran a competitive tender process for non-profit organizations of veterans. It has awarded UAH 19 million ($692,000)[56] to 80 such organizations.

[55] Kalmiuska Grupa (2018), 'Kalmiuska grupa predstavyla resultaty doslidzhennia pro zv'iazky z myrnymy meshkantsiamy okupovanoho Donbasu: zberehty ne mozhna vtratyty' [The 'Kalmius group' presented the results of the study 'Relations with civilians of the occupied Donbas'], 13 April 2018, https://www.kalmiusgroup.org/2018/04/blog-post_13.html.
[56] Exchange rate of UAH 1:US$0.0364 as of 18 October 2018, at https://uk.reuters.com/business/currencies.

3. Belarus

Of all the Eastern Partnership countries, Belarus is by far the most vulnerable to Russian influence. This is due to its structural dependence on Russia in several fields: economic, energy, geopolitical and socio-cultural.

Russia is Belarus's main trade partner (accounting for 50 per cent of its foreign trade and 60 per cent of its imports). Belarus has limited export outlets outside the EAEU, save for oil products (refined from Russian crude oil imported at, for now, discounted prices) and potash fertilizers. Energy dependence is a key vulnerability since Belarus imports almost all of the gas it consumes from Russia; no alternative supply arrangements are in prospect. The planned opening of a nuclear power plant in Astravets will only increase Belarus's energy dependence since Russia is providing the financing, technical expertise and nuclear fuel.

> Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus has remained in Russia's sphere of interest, without ever trying to break fully free from it.

Belarus's vulnerability is also a consequence of the geostrategic choices made by the regime over the past 25 years, involving ever tighter political and military integration with Russia. The terms of the existing patchwork of bilateral agreements actually provide Russia with potential formal justification for military intervention in the event of a 'colour revolution' or power vacuum in Belarus. Should the Belarusian regime be unable or unwilling to oppose a 'Czechoslovakia 1968', Prague Spring scenario, these legal agreements could even be used to justify Belarus's de facto absorption into the Russian Federation. Whereas many Russians have clearly outlined this threat, growing awareness of it in Belarus has not yet led to a full acknowledgment of the danger.[57]

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus has remained in Russia's sphere of interest, without ever trying to break fully free from it. At best, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's diplomatic oscillations have succeeded in raising the bidding for his country's loyalty towards Russia. His regime pretended to be looking West, feigning rapprochement with the EU or promising democratic reforms, thereby prompting Russia to resume subsidizing the Belarusian economy for fear of losing a strategic ally. Yet this balancing act came at the price of reduced sovereignty.[58] Lukashenka deliberately made the country more vulnerable to Russian soft power. Alongside structural dependence, other vulnerabilities also allow Russian actions to have a strong impact on Belarusian civil society. Efforts at enhancing its resilience should thus focus primarily on several entry points, outlined below.

[57] Kłysiński, K. and Żochowski, P. (2016), 'The end of the myth of a brotherly Belarus? Russian soft power in Belarus after 2014: the background and its manifestations', OSW Studies, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 7 November 2016, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2016-11-07/end-myth-a-brot-herly-belarus-russian-soft-power-belarus-after.

[58] Marin, A. (2013), 'Trading off sovereignty? The outcome of Belarus' integration with Russia in the security and defence field', OSW Commentary, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 29 April 2013, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-04-29/trading-sovereignty-outcome-belaruss-integration-russia.

A. Key vulnerabilities and responses

1. Weak Belarusian identity and the language issue

Given Lukashenka's admiration and nostalgia for the Soviet Union, Belarusians remain emotionally connected with their Russian 'brothers' and many have Russo-centric worldviews. Russophile narratives about the common Soviet past abound in Belarus. Due to the limited circulation of alternative discourses and textbooks about the country's European identity, historical interpretations coined by Russia and cultural patterns spread by Russian media remain dominant.

Related to this cultural dependence is the language issue. The use of Belarusian is marginal in the public and even private spheres. According to official censuses, the share of people who use Belarusian daily at home dropped from 53 per cent in 1989 to 23 per cent in 2009. This is the result of deliberate discriminatory policies by the regime, which always associated Belarusian speakers with the nationalist opposition. Russian remains the lingua franca. The Belarusian language is an academic subject, not a medium of instruction. In 2016/17, 86.6 per cent of pupils were being educated in Russian, and only 600 university students followed a curriculum in Belarusian.[59] Russian language domination over the socio-cultural landscape contributes to the spreading of 'Russian world' (*Russkiy Mir*) narratives and is a key medium facilitating the impact of Russian propaganda.[60]

The situation has changed somewhat in recent years, however, as Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 has forced Belarusians to reflect on what makes them different from Russians. Using and promoting their national language is a way to distance themselves from Russian warmongers. Fearing for its sovereignty, Belarus is now experiencing a national awakening of sorts. Labelled 'soft Belarusianization', this initially bottom-up movement has accelerated as the authorities have refrained from repressing it.

In fact, for the first time in two decades, the regime is building on the spontaneous patriotic mood to rally the population around the flag. This, in turn, has raised the ire of Russian propagandists and politicians who see Belarusian nationalism as anti-Russian. They are threatening Belarus with a fate similar to that of post-Euromaidan Ukraine (revolution, regime overthrow, chaos and ultimately war), should the regime fail to halt the process.[61]

Response
Having hitherto always advocated Russophile views, the regime has limited room for manoeuvre. It cannot challenge Russia directly on the identity issue, but it has recently multiplied symbolic countermeasures. In 2014, President Lukashenka delivered his Independence Day address in Belarusian for the first time in 20 years, in an attempt to signal a distancing of his administration from Russia following the annexation of Crimea.[62] Since then, the authorities have taken additional steps, such as banning Soviet symbols or 'indigenizing' them with Belarusian colours. Yet the authorities are still unwilling or unable to set out a Belarusian national ideology and counter-narratives to Russian

[59] Lapitko, V. and Papko, A. (2017), 'Информационная безопасность Беларуси: проблемы и пути улучшения' [Information security of Belarus: challenges and ways to improve], Варшава: EAST Research Center, http://east-center.org/information-security-belarus-challenges/, p. 3, note 4.
[60] Drakokhrust, Y. (2015), 'Paradoxes of the 'Russian World' in Belarus', analytical presentation of an opinion poll conducted in June 2015 by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, Vilnius: NISEPI, www.iiseps.org/?p=846&lang=en.
[61] Yeliseyeu, A. and Laputska, V. (2016), *Anti-Belarus disinformation campaign in Russian media: Trends, features, countermeasures*, Warsaw: EAST Research Center, 20 December 2016, http://east-center.org/media-analysis/.
[62] This was the case with the St George's ribbon worn on Victory Day throughout the former Soviet Union, and which since 2014 is associated with Russian bellicosity *vis-à-vis* its neighbours. In 2018, the authorities went further in banning the so-called Immortal Regiment march (when descendants of Second World War heroes and martyrs walk the streets with the portraits of their ancestors).

ones. As a result of this inertia, the Russification of public space has been going on since the 2010s. Russia maintains a discourse that what it terms 'Byelorussia' is a non-viable state outside the 'Russian world'.

Without openly supporting the promotion of a more distinctive national identity, the Lukashenka regime has become more tolerant of soft Belarusianization. In the context of the regime's typically repressive authoritarianism, this laissez-faire turn was particularly striking in March 2018, when the authorities allowed public celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic. Crowds (at least 30,000 in Minsk alone, including families with children) walked the streets with white, red and white flags[63] without fear of being arrested – such a scene would have been unimaginable even one year earlier, when dozens were indeed beaten and arrested on 25 March 2017.

This event was the culmination of soft Belarusianization to date. In Minsk, it resulted from the initiative of CSOs and volunteers, who had managed in only 23 days to raise funds online for a seven-hour concert celebrating the Belarusian proto-nation state.[64] This illustrates how civil society, when unobstructed, can mobilize in defence of the country's identity.

2. Belarus as part of the Russian media landscape

Belarus's social cohesion is extremely vulnerable to Russian domination of the information space and information warfare. Citizens are conditioned to follow the agenda and trends set by Russian media; 60 per cent of programming broadcast by TV channels available in Belarus consists of content produced in Russia.[65] This includes films and documentaries, entertainment programmes, talk shows and news.[66] A majority of viewers therefore receive exactly the same messages as their Russian counterparts, and tend to see the world through the same prism. The fact that Russian TV shows enhance Russian nationalism increases Belarusians' sense of belonging to the 'Russian world'. What is more, Russian media enjoy a higher level of trust than Belarusian media, whether official or independent.[67]

Belarusians are thus very receptive to the disinformation campaigns about their country that have regularly popped up since 2010 on Russian TV, online information platforms and Russian-language social networks. Russian social networks are by far the most popular in Belarus, with 2.8 million internet users accessing them at least once a day. At the end of 2015, the Russian social media network Vkontakte had a 32.3 per cent share of the adult audience, while Odnoklassniki (also Russian) had a 30.2 per cent share (with rising popularity among young people); in contrast, Facebook had a 14.9 per cent share.[68]

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[63] The bicolour striped flag was the official flag of the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic, and of post-Soviet Belarus until Lukashenka had a variant of the Soviet flag (red and green) restored by referendum in 1995.

[64] In that case, they used Talaka, a crowdfunding and crowdsourcing tool created in 2013 to help individuals get support for their projects. 'People who care' can donate money or contribute their skills and free time for the realization of a project. Projects range from charity for the poor to sponsoring one's favourite blogger or cleaning up a forest. Sixty per cent of the projects deal with cultural or national questions (identity, language, etc.), reflecting what is in societal demand now.

[65] Lapitko and Papko (2017), 'Информационная безопасность Беларуси'.

[66] Given the lack of interesting political talk shows on Belarusian TV, viewers assiduously watch Russian programmes such as the talk show 'Duel' and 'Sunday Evening with Solovyov', hosted by famous TV and radio journalist Vladimir Solovyov, as well as 'Vesti nedeli', hosted by lead Kremlin propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov, both on Channel 1 (Rossia 1).

[67] Belarusian Analytical Workroom, May 2016 focus group poll, quoted in Yeliseyeu and Laputska (2016), *Anti-Belarus disinformation campaign in Russian media,* p. 2.

[68] Quantitative study of Belarusian mass media conducted by SATIO (Minsk, 2015), quoted by Lapitko and Papko (2017), 'Информационная безопасность Беларуси', p. 14, notes 48–50.

Since 2016, several Russian online news agencies – notably Regnum, Eurasia Daily and Imperiya News – have regularly published chauvinistic material containing hate speech against Belarus, questioning its loyalty as Russia's ally as well as its sovereignty. Ironically enough, Belarus's state censors cannot halt the spreading of degrading statements about the Belarusian people, language and culture.[69] In parallel, Russian talk shows gather 'experts' to discuss the alleged rise of Russophobia in Belarus and criticize the Lukashenka regime for it. The main claim of this smear campaign is that Belarusian nationalism is an artificial, anti-Russian construct, the implication being that it could ultimately lead to Russian military intervention, as in Ukraine.

Response

Contrary to practice in some Central European countries, where Russian disinformation and propaganda receive wide media coverage,[70] in Belarus the fact that Russia is spreading fake news is seldom acknowledged by the authorities; it goes unmentioned by official media.[71] As for foreign media, state censorship only filters out content critical of Lukashenka personally; a lack of human resources means that the regime cannot limit the insidious impact of pro-Russia opinion-makers and trolls.

Legal actions have been taken, however. The Ministry of Information has occasionally blocked extremist pro-Russia websites (for example, sputnikipogrom.com in 2017), but only after whistle-blowers pointed to the danger they represented and the fact that they were breaking the law. In 2016, three Belarusians who had published articles accusing Belarus of Russophobia on the Russian online news platform Regnum were detained for 'inciting national hatred'; they remain under partial house arrest.[72] In order for this response not to appear as a provocation, the authorities took similar repressive steps soon after against a Belarusian blogger known for his anti-Russian publications, Eduard Palchys, the founder of 1863x.com.

The state response to Russian media domination is cautious and low-key. Even though a growing segment of the government is aware of the danger, the regime seems unable to tackle it. It either does not know how to, or fears that obstructing Russian soft power would be seen as unfriendly or disloyal. The regime has no strategy; so far it has only taken reactive, isolated measures in response to sporadic Russian information warfare. There are signs, however, that it is getting ready to step up its response with the adoption of amendments to the media law. An Interdepartmental Commission for Security in the Information Sphere was established in November 2017.[73] The state secretary of the Security Council, Stanislav Zas', was appointed to head the commission, which includes representatives from the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Information, the 'force structures' (*siloviki*) and the official state media.[74]

The fact that no independent journalist was invited to sit on this commission illustrates the short-sightedness of the government's response to the Russian challenge. In fact, in Belarus investigative

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[69] Yeliseyeu and Laputska (2016), *Anti-Belarus disinformation campaign in Russian media*. See also Kłysiński and Żochowski (2016), 'The end of the myth of a brotherly Belarus?'.

[70] See, for example, Media Development Fund (2017), *Kremlin Influence Index*, Kyiv: Detector Media, www.tabula.ge/en/story/121067-mdf-publishes-new-report-kremlin-influence-index-2017; and Kremlin Watch (2017), *Guide to Kremlin's disinformation & influence operations in Europe*, Prague: European Values think-tank, www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Guide-to-Kremlins-disinformation-influence.pdf.

[71] Ukrainian Prism (2018), *Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*.

[72] Nimmo, B. and Barojan, D. (2016), 'Slavic Brotherhood?', Digital Forensic Research Lab, Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 20 December 2016, https://medium.com/dfrlab/slavic-brotherhood-1ecd1ece7bc.

[73] Presidential Decree No. 413, http://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/P31700413_1510952400.pdf.

[74] Lapitko and Papko (2017), 'Информационная безопасность Беларуси', pp. 20–21.

journalists (from *Nasha Niva*, naviny.by, Belapan, etc.) and some bloggers remain the best watchdogs in terms of countering Russian disinformation. Acting as opinion-makers in spite of the risks incurred,[75] they play a key role in debunking fake news originating from pro-Russia sources.

Society is still ill equipped for combating this information aggression. This is because those most susceptible to Russian propaganda constitute the regime's core supporters: the military, the elderly and the economically disadvantaged, who rely on state paternalism and therefore indirectly on Russia's subsidizing of the economy.

Box 2: Bright spot – the Belarusian School Society

The best shield against disinformation is education; to make society more resilient, the media literacy of the average citizen must be enhanced. Such a task cannot be left in the hands of journalists or human-rights defenders; teachers fulfil this role better.

Since 2009, the Belarusian School Society has developed a professional training programme for raising media awareness among teachers and pupils, providing the former with tools for teaching how to filter information, identify fake news and keep a critical eye out for potential propaganda. The project has been successful because it focuses on methods rather than content. It relies on innovative – by Belarusian standards – techniques, such as the use of online platforms, a 'pyramidal' mentoring system, 'horizontal networking', the exchange of information on best practice, and massive open online courses (widely known as MOOCs).

With the support of Swedish donors, the Belarusian School Society published a textbook in Belarusian providing real-life examples (such as Russian propaganda material on the war in eastern Ukraine) and exercises in debunking propaganda and fake news.[76] The Ministry of Education investigated the book on grounds of suspected extremism, but in the end did not ban it. Each year, some 200–300 teachers throughout Belarus undertake the training programme. Back in their schools, they share what they have learnt and establish local platforms for training their peers. Pedagogic experts contributed to the development of the initiative, and positive assessment of it has gradually convinced some key officials of its value too.

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3. GONGOs and the Russian Orthodox Church

Unlike in Ukraine, ethnic Russians are spread all over Belarus (with higher concentrations in garrison towns such as Brest rather than, as might perhaps be expected, in the eastern borderlands with Russia). The number of ethnic Russians, and their share of the population, is in decline (from 13 per cent in 1989 to 8 per cent in the last census in 2009). This is mostly due to assimilation as a result of mixed marriage. Dual nationals are believed to be less pro-Russian than average Belarusians. Even though they usually have close emotional or family connections with Russia, ethnic Russians and Russophile dual nationals have never felt the need to organize themselves into lobby groups. Russia is nonetheless trying to use these 'compatriots' as go-betweens for the dissemination of Russophile narratives, possibly with a view to securing their support as a potential Fifth Column infiltrating Belarusian public life. Via the Rossotrudnichestvo[77] federal agency, the Russian foreign

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[75] Belarus ranks among the worst countries in Eurasia in terms of media freedom and freedom of the internet, according to Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/belarus). Independent journalists are frequent targets of repression, according to Reporters without Borders. The latest crackdown occurred in August, when 18 were detained for questioning on suspicion of hacking information from the state-run BelTA news agency. The arrests and house searches aimed to intimidate the whole profession. See the Belarusian Association of Journalists' website for updates on this case (art. 349.2 CC), https://baj.by/en/analytics/belta-case-facts-lists-related-links.

[76] Zaprudski, M., Paleyka, A., Radzevich, A. and Matskyevich, T. (2016), *Медыяадукацыя ў школе: фарміраванне медыяграматнасці вучняў: дапаможнік для настаўнікаў* [Media education in schools: developing pupils' media literacy. Handbook-navigator for teachers], Minsk: Belarusian School Society, www.nastaunik.info/node/15147.

[77] 'Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation'.

ministry controls a network of pro-Russia associations, CSOs and GONGOs in Belarus, several of which operate under the umbrella of 'Russian Houses' in regional capitals. Alongside other public-diplomacy organizations (such as the Russian International Affairs Council and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund), Rossotrudnichestvo organizes seminars, training sessions, meetings and festivals in Belarus. It distributes grants to support projects that promote Russian interests and narratives, especially among youth organizations such as the neo-fascist 'Rus' Molodaya' (RuMol).[78]

Pro-Russia GONGOs are used to camouflage propaganda and provide a civil platform for increasing Russia's legitimacy in the eyes of the wider public. These GONGOs consist mostly of ultra-nationalist and paramilitary groups that train and send volunteers to eastern Ukraine to fight a so-called 'holy war for Novorossia'. In the past decade, 'patriotic' sports clubs run by Russian Cossacks[79] or veterans from the Afghanistan war have mushroomed throughout Belarus. While they officially provide leisure services (for example, shooting clubs at local gun ranges, paintball games, and summer camps for teenagers), they are suspected of conducting paramilitary training.

Smaller paramilitary groups operate locally in close coordination with the Russian Orthodox Church, which fuels them with a clearly pro-'Russian world' ideology and agenda.[80] The Russian Orthodox Church is a powerful channel of Kremlin propaganda and its head, Patriarch Kirill, appoints the Metropolitan of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Two-thirds of Belarusians are therefore under the confessional jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church. Numerous priests who fled war-torn Donbas established pro-Russia communities in Belarusian parishes, notably in the Vitebsk region. The Vitebsk-Osha diocese helped them recruit young Belarusians, who were trained in Russian Cossack camps before joining pro-Russia rebels in Donbas. These groups are not concentrated in the eastern regions; out of the 30 or so that were dismantled by the State Security Committee (KGB) in 2015, 10 were operating in the north-western Hrodna oblast. Representatives and members of the Russian Orthodox Church tend to disseminate anti-Western messages on issues that artificially cleave society – for example, LGBT rights. They also welcome and encourage Russia's aggressive foreign policy towards Ukraine.

Response

Pro-Russia GONGOs remain fairly marginal and disorganized, and the regime has never thought it necessary to dismantle them fully. However, the KGB closely monitors the paramilitary groups established under Cossack and/or Orthodox supervision, and is thought to have taken control of most of them in 2015–16 when it became known that 15 of their camps were operating under the auspices of an Orthodox parish head. The state's response to the influence and actions of the Russian Orthodox Church appears too limited, however. Whereas President Lukashenka always seeks a say in the appointment of foreign envoys, he could not prevent the nomination in 2014 of Metropolitan Pavel, a Russian citizen, as head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church.[81] Official efforts to counteract the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church remain symbolic only. Lukashenka's

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[78] Led by Sergey Lushch, an ultra-right nationalist who was involved in the 2017 coup attempt in Montenegro, RuMol is a Russian GONGO. It has no link with the Belarusian state structures or the KGB, which does not control it.

[79] Cossack regiments are clearly 'imported' from Russia, since Belarus never had indigenous Cossack communities. The most visible and active one is Kazachi Spas, founded in 2010 and headed by Piotr Shapko, an offspring of Russian Cossacks. Ivashin, D. (2015), 'Спецрасследование: воины «русского мира» в Беларуси ждут своего часа' [Special investigation: the wars of 'Russkij Mir' in Belarus are biding their time], InformNapalm, 23 November 2015, https://informnapalm.org/15874-voyny-russkogo-myra-v-belarusy/.

[80] See, for example, Zapadrus.su, which regularly denigrates Belarusian identity by stressing the historical belonging of White Ruthenia to the Russian World.

[81] This was the second time in a row that a non-Belarusian was appointed without consultation from Belarusian believers or local priests. Metropolitan Pavel had visited Belarus only twice before moving to Minsk, has not applied for a Belarusian passport, and does not speak Belarusian.

personal confessor, Fyodor Polnyj, has openly offended Metropolitan Pavel on several occasions and is doing his best to limit the influence of the Moscow patriarchate inside Belarus. Lukashenka, for his part, is courting Pope Francis to please the Catholic minority while also trying to signal to Russia that Belarusians are not its spiritual vassals.

Due to limited institutional capacity, the ability of non-state actors to resist the influence of Russian GONGOs and the Russian Orthodox Church is close to nil. Instead, independent investigative journalists and pro-Belarus bloggers are identifying the most subversive organizations and calling the attention of the authorities to illegal activities.[82] These whistle-blowers and the KGB seem to collaborate unofficially: for example, by exchanging information about paramilitary groups recruiting pro-Russia mercenaries. Once awareness about illegal activities has been raised by bloggers, the KGB has a legitimate pretext to intervene. Whereas it could not crack down on Russian GONGOs on its own initiative without the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) retaliating, the KGB cannot leave such issues unanswered once they are public knowledge.

Figure 2: Drivers of Russian influence in Belarus, and state/civil society responses
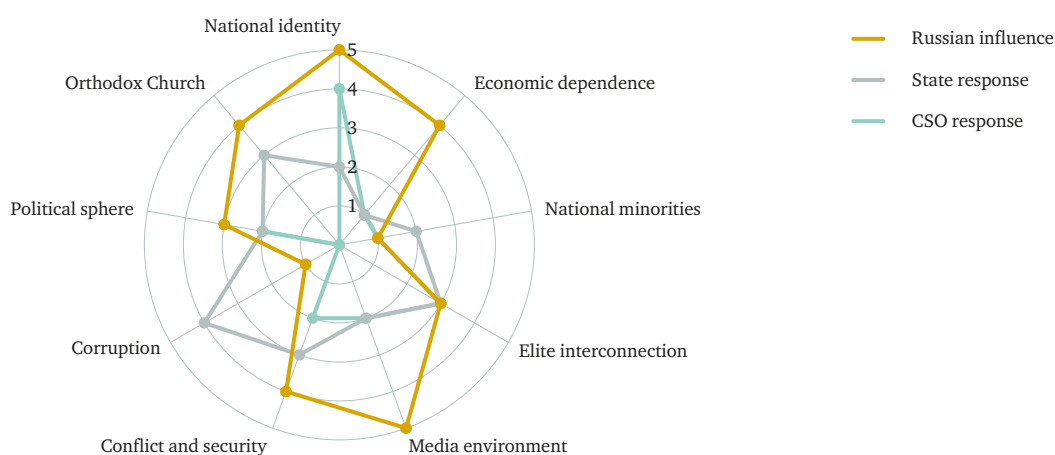
Source: Based on interviews with experts in the target countries. The chart maps levels of various vulnerabilities to Russian influence as perceived by the experts, on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 = 'non-existent', 1 = 'minimal', 2 = 'moderate', 3 = 'substantial', 4 = 'critical' and 5 = 'most prevalent'. State and civil society responses are rated on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 = 'no response', 1 = 'minimal response', 2 = 'mild response', 3 = 'moderate effort', 4 = 'substantial effort' and 5 = 'high-level effective effort'.

B. Opportunities to strengthen resilience

Since the lifting of Western sanctions in 2016, Belarus has reached a turning point: some liberal reforms are unavoidable should the country wish to distance itself further from Russia to protect its sovereignty. There is a consensus within the most progressive segment of the state bureaucracy that change is needed. Yet nobody knows how to effect reforms without threatening the regime itself or offending Russia. The regime must therefore navigate carefully, finding legitimate justifications for taking even cautious steps. Western donors and supporters of democratization should be aware of this constraint.

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[82] 1863x (2014), «'Беларуские казаки' на службе российской разведки» ['Belarusian Cossacks' in the service of Russian intelligence], 27 October 2014, http://1863x.com/kazaki-get-out/.

Identifying the areas in which the authorities' room for manoeuvre is the greatest in relation to Russia is an indispensable condition for tailoring donor assistance to the needs of civil society. Since building the latter's resilience can only succeed if the regime does not obstruct the process, assistance is most likely to be effective if it focuses on apolitical projects and on CSOs towards which the regime is benevolent. In the current political climate, 'soft Belarusianization' appears to offer the best prospects for making the country more resilient in the face of Russian threats, while also encouraging the dialogue and cooperation between state and civil society that are prerequisites for eventual democratization post-Lukashenka.

The origins of soft Belarusianization can be traced back to the early 2010s, with the spontaneous emergence of a self-organizing movement that sought to accentuate a sense of 'Belarusianness' in the public space. Consciousness of national identity issues has picked up in response to Russian actions in Ukraine, and is articulated in the context of soft Belarusianization by affirmative action in relation to the rediscovery, advocacy and teaching of Belarusian culture and language. In 2014 the *Mova nanova* ('Language anew') initiative was launched to promote the use of Belarusian. The initiative enjoys growing popularity throughout the country. Volunteers have set up reading groups, free language classes, online translation forums and self-tests, free Belarusian-language discussion groups over coffee (*Mova ci kawa*) and free libraries (*Mova-box*) in cafés. Several private businesses, such as Velcom, sponsor these initiatives. Nowadays *Mova nanova* clubs and classes operate everywhere in Belarus, and some have started opening in neighbouring countries too. Belsat TV has started airing short films to familiarize viewers with the Belarusian vocabulary in various lexical fields.[83] This also gives Belarusian-speaking professionals a chance to disseminate counter-narratives about the country's history, traditions and indigenous (that is, non-Russian) culture.

> In the current political climate, 'soft Belarusianization' appears to offer the best prospects for making the country more resilient in the face of Russian threats, while also encouraging the dialogue and cooperation between state and civil society that are prerequisites for eventual democratization post-Lukashenka.

People are starting to demand a linguistic Belarusianization of the public space – for example, by requesting that officials answer questions in the language in which they were asked. Belarusian folklore and national heritage are being promoted, the flagship symbol of this initiative consisting of the wearing of *vyshyvanka* (traditional embroidered white and red shirts). Associations also organize medieval balls and battle re-enactments (for example, of the Battle of Grunwald in 1410), aimed at encouraging rediscovery of the country's roots as part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as well as open-air folkloric song and dance festivals (for example, Spiewny Schod, which taps Baltic traditions).

Soft Belarusianization involves a range of civil society activists, business actors[84] and online trend-setters who join forces to organize awareness-raising and marketing campaigns celebrating national

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[83] See https://belsat.eu/ru/program/mova-nanovo/. Belsat is a satellite and online TV channel aimed at Belarus, created in 2007 under the aegis of Polish state TV company TVP. Its aim was to counterbalance state propaganda by offering independent and opposition-minded journalists an outlet for reaching out to the pro-Western minority in Belarus. Belsat mostly operates from Poland, while its reporters in Belarus are regularly harassed, deprived of accreditation and discredited by censors for their alleged Polish bias. In 2017 Poland's foreign minister decreased state funding for Belsat, which threatened it with closure. Having adapted to accommodate Russian-language shows and programmes, and to reach out to Russian-speakers beyond Belarus's borders (mostly in the Baltic states, Ukraine and the Commonwealth of Independent States), Belsat managed to raise other funds and survive. It now aims at competing with other multilingual TV channels in the region.

[84] Market analyses have shown that when an advertising campaign uses slogans in Belarusian instead of Russian, the impact is 15–20 per cent higher because the audience is larger and more receptive.

culture. The campaigns have included 'Budz'ma Belarusami!', which has been running since the early 2010s, and more recently Symbal.by. Restaurants serving traditional Belarusian food, with Belarusian-speaking waiters wearing *vyshyvanka* shirts, have sprung up in Minsk and some provincial towns. This is a fashionable trend that people follow because it is seen (including by the regime) as apolitical. It is mostly an urban-based, 'hipster'-type phenomenon, but it has an extraordinary appeal beyond Minsk; each regional capital has its own 'hub' where Belarusophiles and Belarusian speakers can get together and feel comfortable organizing cultural events – these include the Art Siadziba open space in Minsk, the Kolo syabrau/Centr Kola cultural hub in Mahilou, the Kryly khalopa alternative theatre and gallery in Brest, and the Anti-café in Babruysk.

The caveat to all this energy and activity is that civil society actors and activities connected with the soft Belarusianization phenomenon remain perpetually vulnerable to arbitrary repression by the regime. The government strictly limits fundamental rights of expression, association and peaceful assembly, harasses NGOs that it does not control, and fines or jails their leaders – often on fabricated charges such as tax evasion. This challenging context implies a need for donors to increase support for innovative social, cultural and media projects that stimulate professionalism, sustainability and resilience. For such efforts to bear fruit, donors will have to adapt their offering to the fast-evolving new realities of Belarusian public life: for example, CSOs are now more market-oriented than in the past, and work faster using social networks and innovative platforms (such as crowdfunding). Instead of supporting one-time events or training sessions, donors will likely find it more effective to focus on investment in long-term infrastructure and the development of contingency plans for enhancing civil society resilience; the latter is particularly important given the ever-present risk of another crackdown by the regime or of a Russia-led destabilization campaign.

Synchronizing assistance with existing grassroots initiatives, while encouraging platforms for discussion between CSOs and the regime, will be key to success. In this, Russian attempts at subversion can actually act as an incentive for coordination: even if there is not yet a culture of democratic dialogue in Belarus, state and non-state actors now understand that they can achieve more by uniting against the common Russian threat.

The instances of best practice outlined above could help Belarus to counter Russian encroachments on its sovereignty, by empowering civil society to resist harmful exogenous influences. Assistance projects that contribute to strengthening the self-identity of Belarusians, their national pride and media awareness have the potential to be instrumental in making grassroots civic initiatives more sustainable, given existing legal and other constraints. Building on the trends set in motion by soft Belarusianization – and on the opportunities it presents in light of the authorities' current tolerance of it – represents the best strategy for increasing civil society resilience in the face of the Russian challenge.

4. Moldova

The vulnerabilities that Russia exploits to exert negative influence in Moldova are generally well known in the country. The Kremlin's use of information warfare is targeted, intelligible and comprehensive. Its vectors of influence encompass a variety of forms and actors: identity politics invoking the 'Russian world' narrative and Soviet nostalgia;[85] politicized promotion of the concept of 'compatriots' (involving national minorities and ethnic Russians); language use;[86] appeals to supporters of unification with Romania and anti-Romanian movements alike; instrumentalization of separatism and the frozen conflict in Transnistria;[87] and overall anti-Western sentiment. All of this further undermines Moldovans' already low trust in institutions and contributes to the state's ongoing legitimacy crisis.[88]

In Moldova, the 'Russosphere' accounts for about 50 per cent of the population – broken down into a share of about 20 per cent for the Russian minority and its affiliates, and 30 per cent for pro-Russians including members of the Gagauz (5 per cent) and Ukrainian minorities (7 per cent).[89]

Pre-existing vulnerabilities to external influence are manifest in the strong linkages between politics, the media and the Moldovan Orthodox Church. These linkages render Moldovans a 'captive audience' for Russia's propaganda, and have thereby allowed the Kremlin to invest fewer financial resources in information warfare since 2014, when the war in Ukraine took priority. Moldova's vulnerabilities are compounded by the fact that the current leadership, in the hands of Vlad Plahotniuc and his Democratic Party, is not presenting Russian influence as a potential threat to sovereignty. Conversely, the Russian challenge is politically instrumentalized by the current political leadership, members of which use it to promote their personal agendas. There is also a large discrepancy between the level of response from CSOs and the (much weaker) response from the authorities. With the latter not construing Russia as a threat to Moldova's sovereignty, an increasingly endangered civil society has little scope for meaningful resistance.

A. Key vulnerabilities and responses

1. The political sphere in a captured state

Weak institutions, endemic corruption, a high concentration of power and the presence of entrenched vested interests provide Russian propagandists with an abundance of pressure points to exploit in Moldova. Under the current, nominally pro-European leadership, the state has been

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[85] Soviet nostalgia is still very high and increasing. Positive attitudes towards the Soviet era went from 48.6 per cent of respondents in a 2009 survey to around 56 per cent in 2016. Institute for Public Policy, 'Public Opinion Barometer', http://www.bop.ipp.md/en/.
[86] The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova (2018), 'The Court examined the constitutionality of certain legal provisions on the Use of Russian Language on the Territory of the Republic of Moldova and on the Inapplicability of Constitutional Review of laws passed prior to the entry into force of the Constitution', press release, 4 June 2018, http://www.constcourt.md/libview.php?l=en&id=1213&idc=7&t=/Media/News/The-Court-Examined-the-Constitutionality-of-Certain-Legal-Provisions-on-the-Use-of-Russian-Language-on-the-Territory-of-the-Republic-of-Moldova-and-on-the-Inapplicability-of-Constitutional-Review-of-Laws-Passed-Prior-to-the-Entry-Into-Force-of-the-Constitution/.
[87] Russia is actively engaging the authorities in Transnistria and Gagauzia as well as instrumentalizing mythical separatist constructs such as the 'People's Council of Bessarabia' or the 'Republic of Budjak'. See https://archive.is/w7RPV.
[88] Popescu, O. and Zamfir, R. (eds) (2018), *Propaganda Made-To-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence. A Study of Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova*, Global Focus, February 2018, http://www.ape.md/en/2018/03/propaganda-made-measure-vulnerabilities-facilitate-russian-influence-global-focus-romania-black-sea-trust-regional-cooperation/.
[89] Ukrainian Prism (2018), *Disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*.

captured by a political elite whose members rank among the most culpable in terms of allowing themselves to be influenced by Russia. Politicians across the board exploit the narrative shaped by Russia, and internal political propaganda is often aligned with the Kremlin's influence. In that sense, as one observer has noted, 'the level of Russian influence is proportional with the level of corruption in Moldova'.[90]

This story of pro-Russian alignment is especially true for President Igor Dodon and members of his Party of Socialists, who are the mainstay of Russian political influence in the country. During the November 2016 presidential election, Dodon ran a clearly pro-Russia campaign (for example, calling for closer relations with Moscow and the EAEU, and the recognition of Crimea as part of Russia), met with President Putin and Patriarch Kirill (which considerably boosted the candidate's image and popularity), and used Putin's image in his campaign adverts. Dodon also had the support of Metropolitan Vladimir, the head of the Moldovan Orthodox Church. There is a symbiotic relationship of sorts between the Democratic and Socialist parties: the Democrats legitimize themselves by proclaiming their European orientation and defining themselves in opposition to the Socialists, who in turn use the Democrats as a convenient 'public enemy' to win support for their own pro-Russia agenda.

Locally generated political propaganda has increased social disunity, which is amplified by Russia. Identity politics and political competition remain defined along the pro-EU/pro-Russia divide. Polarization further extends to ethnic and religious minorities, values, language, territory and nationality. Politicians meticulously instrumentalize this divide in order to increase social polarization for their own political purposes and vested interests. This is nothing less than a diversion strategy on the part of the ruling elite, offering a relatable and easily accessible narrative for the population. Russian propaganda magnifies existing anxieties and further undermines social cohesion in the context of a highly fragmented national identity. Keeping society in such a split state serves the interests of both the domestic elite and the Kremlin. Russian propaganda also fuels populism and undermines public trust in democracy and the West.

Response

The state has no willingness to implement positive change in respect of Russian influence in the country, as Moscow's agenda is presented not as a problem *per se* but as part of a wider political narrative in which different vested interests are pitted against each other. It could even be argued that Russia's malign influence provides a politically expedient smokescreen that allows Moldova's leadership to divert the attention of the international community from domestic governance failings and limited reforms.[91] In preparation for the February 2019 parliamentary elections, the leadership is actively promoting a supposedly 'pro-EU' image, and thus its 'fight' against the Russian threat. In this context, it is notable that the leadership adapts its strategy in accordance with its assessment of donor sentiment – for instance, a too openly pro-Russia stance would diminish Western assistance. For now, the leadership's balancing of outward messages favours the Kremlin because the status quo prevails.

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[90] Interview with a civil society expert in Chisinau.
[91] Symbolic moves have included the expulsion of five Russian diplomats in 2017 after Moldova denounced the recruitment by Russia of Gagauzian fighters for Donbas; declaring the former Russian deputy prime minister, Dmitri Rogozin, persona non grata in 2017 for 'controversial public statements' about the country; recalling Moldova's envoy to Russia for consultations in 2017, citing harassment against Moldovan officials; and recent declarations by Parliamentary Speaker Adrian Candu on how to fight Russian influence.

Civil society and CSOs are almost entirely unable to address the nexus between Russian propaganda and its exploitation for political ends within Moldova, as the power differential between civil society and the regime is too vast. There is a clear understanding among CSOs that addressing the 'Russian problem' cannot be done without tackling the source of the problem: corruption and state capture. At the same time, the government is increasing its pressure on, and scrutiny of, CSOs. It wants them to be service providers, not advocates of change. The state is also actively seeking to replace genuine NGOs with pro-Dodon/pro-Russia and pro-Plahotniuc GONGOs in order to discredit civil society actions and dilute their work.[92] Finally, the authorities continue to seek to discredit civil society through mud-slinging campaigns and defamation supported by state-owned media, state-backed opinion-makers and political parties.[93]

2. Disinformation and propaganda in the media sphere

Eighty-five per cent of Moldovans take their information from TV,[94] and 57 per cent consider it as their main source of information; about 40 per cent consider it the most trustworthy source of information.[95] The media sphere is highly permeable to Russian propaganda. Indeed, Russia effectively 'owns' much of this space, dominating TV programming with rebroadcast Russian content and accounting for a large share of infotainment and social media content. Two of the six TV channels owned by Plahotniuc (PrimeTV and STS) rebroadcast Russian programming, mostly from Perviy Kanal, NTV and Rossia 1.[96] According to a survey earlier this year, up to 70 per cent of Moldovans follow the news on Russian mass-media outlets.[97] Russian TV generally has higher production quality, which leaves little room for Moldovan or even Romanian programmes to compete. In this sense, Russia has effected a 'media occupation'[98] of Moldova's informational space, especially since few alternative outlets exist.

> The media sphere is highly permeable to Russian propaganda. Indeed, Russia effectively 'owns' much of this space, dominating TV programming with rebroadcast Russian content and accounting for a large share of infotainment and social media content.

Trust in Russian media has been broadly stable, while trust in national media is declining sharply every year. For Russian media, the level of trust was 55.5 per cent in 2013, 54 per cent in 2015 and 50 per cent in May 2018. In contrast, the public's confidence in national media has plummeted, from 62.5 per cent of those surveyed in 2013 to 42.5 per cent in 2015; confidence was at 40 per cent in May this year.[99]

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[92] Popsoi, M. (2017), 'Moldova's civil society braces for another attack', openDemocracy, 22 August 2017, https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/mihai-popsoi/moldova-s-civil-society-braces-for-another-attack.
[93] Legal Resources Centre from Moldova (2018), *Radiography of attacks against nongovernmental organizations from the Republic of Moldova* (September 2016–December 2017), https://crjm.org/en/radiografie-atacuri-ong/.
[94] Popescu and Zamfir (eds) (2018), *Propaganda Made-To-Measure*.
[95] Institute for Public Policy, 'Public Opinion Barometer', http://www.bop.ipp.md/en/; IMAS (2018), *Evolution and media preferences in the Republic of Moldova*, March 2018; and Ciochina, S. (2018), *Russian propaganda and media ownership in the Republic of Moldova*, Background Paper, IPRE, February 2018.
[96] Pasha, V., Cantarji, V. and Sterpu, I. (2018), *Republic Of Moldova's Television Content And The Manner In Which It Is Shaping Electoral Behavior: An Assessment Of Russia's Influence On The Country's Geo-Political Options*, WatchDog.MD Community, https://watchdog.md/2018/07/14/republic-of-moldovas-television-content-and-the-manner-in-which-it-is-shaping-electoral-behavior-an-assessment-of-russias-influence-on-the-countrys-geo-political-options/.
[97] IMAS (2018), *Evolution and media preferences in the Republic of Moldova*.
[98] Pasha et al. (2018), *Republic Of Moldova's Television Content And The Manner In Which It Is Shaping Electoral Behavior*.
[99] Institute for Public Policy, 'Public Opinion Barometer', http://www.bop.ipp.md/en/.

Russian trolls and pro-Russia groups are very active on social media accessed by Moldovans, with an especially strong presence on the Russian social networks Odnoklassniki and VKontakte. Not only do such groups have tens of thousands of followers, but they deliver a clear pro-Kremlin message. A study this year showed that the main pro-Russian narratives focus on glorification of the Soviet past, promotion of the 'Russian world' concept and compatriot policy, and classic anti-Western rants.[100] Also, the local offshoot of Russia's Sputnik state-owned news agency accounted for 12.5 per cent of internet traffic and audience in Moldova in October 2017.[101]

Russia's negative influence in Moldova works through a well-known narrative: fostering a personality cult for President Putin and promoting an anti-Western, therefore pro-Kremlin, agenda.[102] This is highly influential in terms of public opinion because it articulates a message that is easily accessible, readily internalized, and emotionally relevant to many Moldovans. Russian propaganda also reinforces the pro-EU/pro-Russia divide and polarizes society even further.

Response

For the political reasons mentioned above, there is little or no willingness on the part of Moldova's leadership to counter Russian propaganda. This reluctance is also partly explained by the fact that media owners in the country are not investing in the development of original content.[103] The media sphere is monopolized by Plahotniuc and Dodon, and media ownership lacks transparency. Moreover, it is widely understood that Plahotniuc personally controls the Audiovisual Coordination Council and owns most of the advertising companies working in the media sphere. The oligarchic nature of the media space creates favourable conditions for the dissemination of malign Russian information, especially since there is no system for the protection of information security in Moldova.

In December 2017, the parliament passed an 'anti-propaganda law' banning the rebroadcast of Russian news, analysis, and politics and military programmes on Moldovan TV channels.[104] However, the law, which represents the main attempt to date to address the 'Russian problem', was little more than a token gesture designed to placate the international community and increase US and EU support for Plahotniuc. Although the amount of Russian content on TV has diminished, the law has many shortcomings.[105] In particular, it does not apply to the print media and internet, nor does it address the rebroadcasting of Russian talk shows and infotainment. If anything, the law puts more pressure on smaller TV channels: it restricts free speech, and can be used selectively to increase the market share of oligarchic media by harassing smaller outlets and driving them into bankruptcy.

In this environment, CSOs working on countering Russian influence in the media and social media spheres mostly focus on monitoring the media landscape, fact-checking, debunking fake news, providing training in media literacy, and seeking to combat information manipulation.

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[100] Institute for Public Policy (2018), *Russian Propaganda on Odnoklassniki: the case of Republic of Moldova*.
[101] See Ciochina (2018), *Russian propaganda and media ownership in the Republic of Moldova*.
[102] Pasha et al. (2018), *Republic Of Moldova's Television Content And The Manner In Which It Is Shaping Electoral Behavior*.
[103] Rosca, A. (2017), 'Media in Moldova: Between Freedom and Monopoly', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 13 September 2017, https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/09/media-moldova-freedom-monopoly/.
[104] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2018), 'Moldovan Parliament Speaker Passes Law Against Russian Propaganda', 11 January 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-parliament-speaker-approves-russia-media-law/28966975.html.
[105] Among other shortcomings, the law does not give enough leeway to punish and deter TV channels continuing to rebroadcast Russian content. For instance, Plahotniuc's Prime TV gave a live broadcast of a speech by President Putin in March but was only fined the equivalent of €3,000.

Several 'bright spots' can be found in initiatives financed by Western donors (see Box 3).[106] However, these projects suffer from critical limitations and constraints, notably a lack of resources and overdependence on Western assistance.[107]

Box 3: Bright spot – StopFals!

Managed by the Association for Independent Press (API), the StopFals![108] online platform was created in late 2015 under the aegis of the Independent Journalism Centre (CJI) and the Association of Independent Television Journalism of Moldova (ATVJI). It is supported by USAID. The platform works on the same basis as StopFake[109] in Ukraine, and focuses on fact-checking and exposing fake news. StopFals! does not, however, primarily address Russian information warfare and propaganda in Moldova, but rather centres on internal politics – this limits its ability to counter the Russian narrative and raise awareness on the issue.[110]

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3. Winning hearts and minds through the Russian Orthodox Church

The Moldovan Orthodox Church, which is subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church, is an active vector for Russian influence and propaganda in Moldova. It accounts for 80 per cent of religious believers and is the most trusted institution in the country, with opinion polling indicating that 70 per cent of respondents consider it trustworthy.[111] The Moldovan Orthodox Church is highly influential, and shapes the hearts and minds of the population along anti-Western lines. It stokes popular fears, notably among the elderly and rural populations, and promotes an anti-EU, anti-West narrative of traditional values that resonates well throughout society.[112] Furthermore, the Church openly supports President Dodon. The Church authorities in Transnistria are openly pro-Russia.

This 'weaponization of religion', so to speak, serves Russia's interest.[113] The anti-West narrative of the Moldovan Orthodox Church seeks to defend the same values that the Kremlin promotes: for example, negative attitudes towards LGBT and minority rights. Social issues in Russia also affect Moldova directly through Church outreach. This was the case, for instance, with the debate around the decriminalization of domestic violence in Russia; the same issue was debated in Moldovan churches and the Moldovan media.

Response
Addressing the information vulnerabilities associated with the political role of the Orthodox Church in Moldova is complicated by the fact that the Church itself is manifestly off-limits to criticism – because of both its political power and the weight of popular opinion. Politicians are unable to interfere in religious matters.

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[106] For example, the Association for Independent Press and its StopFals! project, the Agora.md fact-checker, the Sic.md myth buster, the WatchDog.md platform evaluating public policies, the Institute for Public Policy and its work on Odnoklassniki, the Assist project for media training, the TV channel TV8, etc.

[107] Ukrainian Prism (2018), *Disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*.

[108] https://stopfals.md/#.

[109] https://www.stopfake.org/en/news/.

[110] Ukrainian Prism (2018), *Disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*.

[111] Institute for Public Policy, 'Public Opinion Barometer', http://www.bop.ipp.md/en/.

[112] U.S. Senate (2018), *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy In Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security*, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, S. Prt. 115-21, 10 January 2018; and Higgins, A. (2016), 'In Expanding Russian Influence, Faith Combines with Firepower', *New York Times,* 13 September 2016.

[113] Popescu and Zamfir (eds) (2018), *Propaganda Made-To-Measure.*

For civil society as a whole, denouncing the Church would mean losing credibility and risk alienating the population. Nonetheless, at the local level CSOs find it feasible, without attracting undue pushback, to reach out to young, pro-European and more liberal priests to promote a more progressive voice within the Church. Even if successful, however, this would not directly target Russian propaganda itself.

Figure 3: Drivers of Russian influence in Moldova, and state/civil society responses
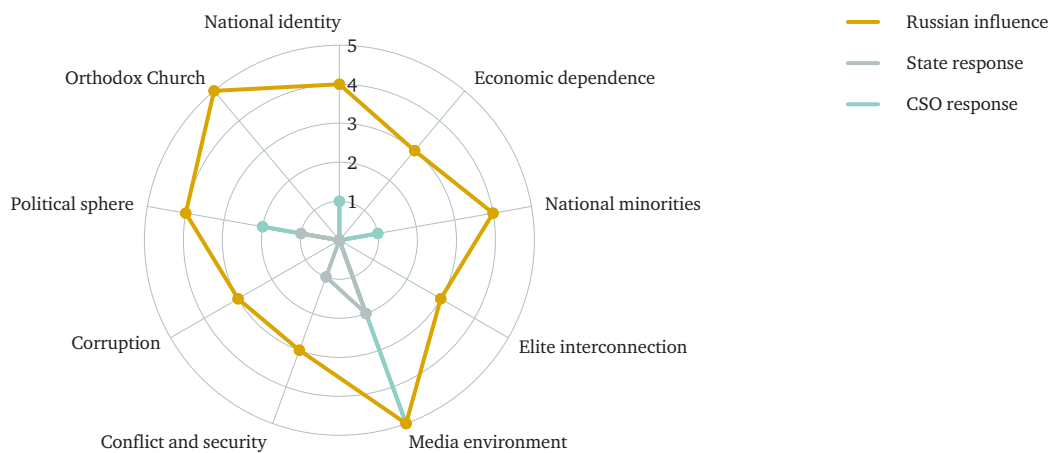
Source: Based on interviews with experts in the target countries. The chart maps levels of various vulnerabilities to Russian influence as perceived by the experts, on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 = 'non-existent', 1 = 'minimal', 2 = 'moderate', 3 = 'substantial', 4 = 'critical' and 5 = 'most prevalent'. State and civil society responses are rated on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 = 'no response', 1 = 'minimal response', 2 = 'mild response', 3 = 'moderate effort', 4 = 'substantial effort' and 5 = 'high-level effective effort'.

B. Opportunities to strengthen resilience

In helping CSOs fight Russian information manipulation, Western donors face the risk of being presented as 'foreign agents of influence' in the Russian media in Moldova. Furthermore, efforts to build civil society resilience can be expected to encounter administrative resistance from the political leadership. This is unsurprising – offering citizens the tools to challenge Russian propaganda will inevitably also help them to challenge Moldovan governmental propaganda. This dilemma limits the options for increasing resilience and donor assistance. It is also a mistake to assume that Moldovan civil society will automatically become more resilient against Russian propaganda if democratic reforms are effected. Change will not happen overnight, and there has to be a long-term agenda. This also relates to the question of popular trust in institutions and social cohesion at the grassroots level.

Efforts to build resilience against Russian influence are likely to be most effective if they start with building 'cognitive resilience' by providing support to media literacy projects and efforts to combat fake news. Only media literacy, critical thinking and systematic fact-checking will help citizens rethink Russian narratives. This implies that existing projects to debunk fake news could usefully be strengthened and scaled up, so that they reach the widest possible audience. It also implies the need to support training for journalists, in order to give them the tools to fact-check systematically. Several such projects are currently supported by donors, but need to be scaled up. Fact-checking and 'myth-busting' activities should further concentrate on exposing the cracks in Russia's narrative towards Moldova.

To have the best chances of success, donor assistance for media literacy projects, critical thinking and fact-checking courses will need to start in high schools and universities. This will require reform of the education sector, to make tuition in these areas not only systematic but mandatory. Focusing on the younger generation through social media will be paramount. Outreach in rural areas is also vital, particularly in Transnistria and Gagauzia, as well as in the Russian language. For instance, any Romanian-language CSOs in Moldova running projects in Russian-speaking communities will fail to be inclusive if they do not offer programmes and activities in Russian.

Another opportunity to strengthen resilience is in the media sphere. The effects of Russian propaganda are amplified by the fact that Russian TV programmes typically have higher production quality than Moldovan ones. Investing in high-quality content and high-quality alternative media production is necessary to counter Russian media influence, and to respond to people's concerns and demands for information. To support this, donors will need to promote capacity-building in independent media coverage and production of alternative content by local CSOs and NGOs. Such projects should take the following factors into consideration:

- **Independence.** Media projects will need to be carried out through CSOs and independent outlets, in order to avoid sending mixed signals that donors are supporting corrupt state-owned media.

- **Training.** Media projects will have to include training on production of high-quality alternative content.

- **Diversity.** Focusing on social advertising and infotainment – especially through social media – is paramount, as both channels are very popular.

- **Inclusivity.** Media production would benefit from promoting inclusivity in respect of language and minorities.

One opportunity to build resilience at the level of civil society could involve using the Western-based diaspora as a spearhead to counter Russian influence and propaganda. The Moldovan diaspora consists of a disunited mass of more than 1 million people. Although expatriate Moldovans are not very active politically, and not focused on a common goal, diaspora groups have recently been increasing their political outreach. Several Western-based groups emerged after the 2015 'stolen billion' scandal.[114] The number of registered voters in the diaspora doubled for the 2016 presidential election, with expatriate groups coalescing around a campaign to mobilize young voters ('Adopt a Vote'). Voters in the diaspora (excluding those in Russia) overwhelmingly voted for the pro-Western candidate Maia Sandu.

The Western-based, pro-European diaspora is a critical amplifier of progressive thinking. As such, it offers the potential, ahead of the February 2019 parliamentary elections, to act as a positive source of influence to counter Russian propaganda. Donor support and encouragement for diaspora-based projects, especially projects associated with expatriates in the West, offer a potentially effective route to countering Russian disinformation. Donor support for expatriate Moldovan thought leaders who convey a strong pro-reform message could also have traction. Such approaches could introduce an alternative narrative for civil society, thereby acting as positive agents for change.

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[114] Rosca, M. (2015), 'Vanishing act: How global auditor failed to spot theft of 15% of Moldova's wealth', *Guardian*, 1 July 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/01/global-auditor-moldova-wealth-franchise-grant-thornton-banks-embezzle.

In light of this, perhaps unsurprisingly, the authorities are seeking to restrict political representation for the diaspora. The new electoral law passed in 2017[115] gives nominally equal representation in parliament to expatriates in the West and Russia, but in so doing increases the numerical strength of the Russian diaspora.[116] The new law also prevents the diaspora from financing political parties abroad. Furthermore, the Moldovan Diaspora Bureau, used by the government to officially represent the diaspora in front of donors, is heavily politicized.

The communication strategies of Western donors are weak in Moldova. Very often, credit for successful implementation of grassroots Western projects is taken by local politicians or by Russia. Russian GONGOs, through the Orthodox Church and people-to-people contacts, also claim ownership of projects implemented by Western donors, especially in rural regions and especially in Gagauzia and Transnistria. For instance, local authorities in the latter two regions have been trying – so far unsuccessfully – to remove publicity and advertising requirements for Western donor projects.

As state institutions are likely to remain weak in the near future, and captive to vested interests, building civil society resilience needs to start from the bottom. This means at the local level within CSOs and community-based organizations, as well as in the media sphere. Providing citizens with tools to improve their critical thinking and fact-checking will not only afford them an opportunity to rethink the Russian narrative, but will also allow them to see through state-engineered propaganda and disinformation. Donors' assistance and local capacity-building for such projects, especially in the country's regions, are therefore paramount to strengthening resilience from the ground up.

[115] Socor, V. (2017), 'Moldova's New Electoral Law Could Be Fatal to Pro-Western Parties (Part One)', Eurasia Daily Monitor, Jamestown Foundation, 25 July 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/moldovas-new-electoral-law-could-be-fatal-to-pro-western-parties-part-one/.
[116] The diaspora elects only three seats out of the 51 via a first-past-the post system, which favours the diaspora based in Russia.

5. Policy Recommendations

The recommendations outlined in this chapter are principally aimed at donors supporting civil society development in the Eastern Partnership countries. They mostly focus on 'soft' elements of resilience, i.e. involving people and ideas. When disruptions or challenges to a state's resilience occur, it is of key importance for the effectiveness of response that there be a range of actors with the knowledge and diversity of perspectives to seek solutions to complex problems. The actions proposed below are intended to support greater social inclusion, to allow for the circulation of ideas and information, and to strengthen the leverage of Western assistance.

1. State-building

State–civil society cooperation

- State–civil society cooperation offers a key source of resilience. (In Ukraine, it proved effective in the early stages of Russian aggression, and has also subsequently helped to support reforms.) The level of interaction and cooperation between the state, active citizens and CSOs requires a substantial boost, especially at the national level. State agencies could establish special taskforces with representatives of CSOs, business and government to design effective approaches to information security, cyber safety, education, media literacy, the inclusion of minorities and management of diversity. CSOs bring a variety of perspectives to the table, and enable feedback loops that aid with the design of optimum policy responses.

- Donors should support projects that stimulate the inclusion of citizens in policymaking, effective public consultations and the development of local democracy. To prevent alienation, disillusionment and the growth of populism, various forms of digital and offline engagement should be institutionalized. In terms of country-specific measures, the following apply:

  - In Ukraine, in view of ongoing administrative decentralization, it is key for donors to support regional projects that build capacity for effective cooperation between citizens and the local authorities.

  - In Ukraine and Moldova, donors should increase their support for projects advocating political reform: in respect of electoral practices, local democracy, anti-corruption policies, democratic good governance and the rule of law.

  - In Belarus, with its restrictive environment for CSOs and undemocratic regime, Russia's subversion threat opens an opportunity for a viable discussion between state and civil society about how best to strengthen sovereignty.

Strategic communication

- Governments should aim to inform citizens better about major state policies and key reforms. When communicating reforms, government and civil society should focus on the human impact, deliver practical information, ensure clarity, highlight outcomes and outline solutions. In Ukraine in particular, in view of ongoing reform efforts, effective strategic communication about reforms and major state strategies could boost social cohesion and support for a pro-European

transition. Both CSOs and reformers should capitalize on positive changes (decentralization and upgrades to infrastructure) to build optimism about reforms and the future of Ukraine as a viable democratic state. CSOs are especially advised to reach out to citizens to explain the human dimension of key reforms and their impact on people's daily lives.

Social cohesion

- Donor assistance should aim to support stronger social cohesion. This means increasing funding for projects that enable better integration of minority groups and the promotion of diversity, as well as civic education about human rights. In Ukraine and Moldova in particular, projects should focus on inclusive multi-language education. Donors should ensure partners engage with local communities in their respective prevalent languages.

- In Ukraine, the government should urgently address violent attacks by radical groups and the increased circulation of firearms, and ensure that law enforcement agencies handle cases of hate crimes and xenophobia properly. The country's top leadership should make strong statements that such abuses will not be tolerated and do not belong in a democratic Ukraine. For effective security, more reform of the police is needed, along with further transformation of the SBU into a modern agency with strong civic oversight.

- In Ukraine, in view of the occupation of Donbas and Crimea, it is key to start preparing the ground for the future reintegration of both regions into the state, even during the active phase of military operations in the east and illegal annexation. Citizens seek more clarity on the government's strategy for resolving the conflict. Civil society should develop and expand the use of facilitated dialogue to assist various stakeholders in bridging often polarized positions. Such dialogue, led by professional mediators and skilled facilitators, should engage veterans' associations, think-tanks, security experts, leading political parties, associations of displaced persons, and displaced universities from the east.

New democratic identity

- The concept of 'active citizenship' should be more pronounced in donors' assistance programmes. Promoting citizen engagement and linkages between CSOs and citizens could expand the number of actors involved in civil society. This new dimension of identity will help people express their own voices and feel stronger ownership of their citizenship.

- Since 2014, societies in the region have responded to Russian aggression and subversion by more actively promoting their non-Russian national identities. Donors should focus more on supporting cultural community projects that aim to build awareness about local and national cultures, and that also aim to increase popular knowledge about these new identities. Such efforts would have a positive effect and allow citizens to feel pride in their community, region and nation.

2. Media sector

Media reform and capacity-building for independent media

- Donors should increase funding for high-quality media and information security. Supporting broadcast, digital and print media that are free from political and oligarchic influence is of paramount importance.

  - In Ukraine, donors should provide technical assistance and funding, as well as advocating sustainable public investment in the development of the public broadcaster Suspilne TV.

  - In Belarus, they should resume funding to Belsat TV, as well as the Belarusian-language programmes of foreign radio stations. Donors should ensure these outlets have legitimacy in the eyes of potential new viewers – especially the most resistant ones, namely regime supporters and Russophiles. Enhancing the quality of content is the best way to make TV more attractive.

  - In Moldova, donors should promote and extend support for TV channels such as TV8. Donors should promote CSOs working on high-quality media alternatives in the Russian language, and should also engage Russian minorities and Russian speakers. This also applies to other national minority languages, such as Gagauz and Ukrainian.

- Capacity-building should prioritize improving the quality of content (local news, infotainment) and reporting under pressure of disinformation and fake news (through fact-checking courses, exposure of disinformation, etc.). It should emphasize high-quality video content that could be shared on social media.

- Especially in Belarus, individual investigative journalists and bloggers are in need of essential support, including crisis assistance in case of emergency (arbitrary detention or seizure of their equipment). A platform for rapid sharing of information in the event of a crisis should be established, possibly using the existing nationwide online registry of Belarusian-speaking associations and initiatives.[117]

Counter-narrative to Russian propaganda

- Donors should finance the production of high-quality new content that could replace Russian propaganda. This could both deliver objective information about Russia and fill the gaps in existing content (international politics, developments in the EU, etc.). Assistance should focus on outlets that target Russian-speaking audiences and minorities.

- In Moldova, a positive counter-narrative should refocus the internal debate away from the pro-EU/pro-Russia geopolitical divide and centre it on internal politics and the genuine preoccupations of citizens, such as the economy, healthcare, the rule of law, education and the need to tackle vested interests.

- The nascent Belarusian-language film industry should be supported, since it can reach out to receptive audiences far beyond Belarus – this is illustrated by the success of the Bulba film festival.

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[117] www.svaje.by.

Cognitive resilience

- Donors should increase funding for educational and investigative projects that develop citizens' critical thinking, especially in terms of building awareness about Russia's disinformation and understanding the real intentions behind its 'soft power' projects. Creative media literacy courses, as well as activities promoting critical thinking and the development of skills in fact-checking and assessing the quality of information sources, should be introduced in high schools and universities. Donors could assist the three countries in the development and implementation of such courses; more broadly, assistance needs to support reforms in the education sector.

- Donors should invest in high-quality research by independent international and national think-tanks and academia into Russian propaganda, trends in public opinion and civil society. The focus of research should be on the negative impacts of Russian media influence, on drivers of vulnerabilities, on technologically enabled propaganda, and on the mapping of Russian influence in the media sphere. The need is especially acute for Belarus, where, since the closure of the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies in 2016, experts lack data on major social trends.

3. Civil society support

Modalities of assistance

- Donors should increase the share of assistance that goes to action-based initiatives offering solutions to social and community problems. Currently, the balance is tilted towards more adversarial and advocacy-based types of activism. Projects should be people-driven, not just donor-driven. They should engage local communities and stem from grassroots civic initiatives. Community consultations should be promoted.

- The project-based funding approach should be replaced, where possible, with multi-year core institutional funding to local CSOs. This will allow local implementers to work on the sectors they know best, with much-needed scope to adapt to evolving situations on the ground. This is key to civil society resilience.

- Donor conditionality regarding domestic co-funding should be strengthened. Domestic giving and volunteering manifest local support for civil society and make it more resilient. Donors could set up special funding instruments to co-fund projects that demonstrate a successful crowdfunding history, a high turnout of volunteers and effective corporate fundraising.

- Donors should support enhancements to civil society infrastructure, such as improving access to hardware and software (cloud services, IT hardware), local resource centres, community centres and civic hubs.

- Donors should encourage and provide funding and technical assistance for CSOs to develop contingency plans in case of crisis. These plans should cover strategic communication, financial and human resources, the safeguarding of assets, and adaptation of core activities. In the case of Belarus, plans should ensure there is an external hub for unregistered/deregistered Belarusian CSOs. Donors could support the hosting of such a 'safe haven' in a neighbouring EU country.

- Donors should improve access to grants for projects aimed at countering Russian influence, and introduce streamlined grant application processes that are more flexible and easier to navigate.

- Donors should support exchanges and partnerships between pro-democracy CSOs from Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and Russia, as and when required. CSOs from the different countries have valuable insights and examples of best practice to share in terms of countering Russian subversion and propaganda. Such cooperation could be institutionalized as a network or coalition. A special fund could be set up to support joint civil society projects on communication, education or advocacy – these would be similar to the Russian Language News Exchange or the Creative Content Support Fund, but for civil society projects.[118]

Circle of partners

- Donors should target and prioritize community-based organizations for funding, and reach beyond the national capitals with their assistance. They should reach out to Russian-speaking organizations that share democratic and liberal values.

- Engaging diaspora organizations, especially from Ukraine and Moldova, could contribute to innovation, the development of local sources of funding, and the transmission of democratic values and practices.

- Religious charities and leaders could be more engaged in civil society programmes to build resilience. The likes of Greek-Catholic communities, the Charitas Foundation and Belarus's protestant communities could be partners in projects and activities designed to support social cohesion.

Strengthening legitimacy and building trust

- Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova suffer from a disconnect between citizens and formal CSOs. Closing this gap will ensure civil society can perform its proper role and deliver a 'resilience dividend'. Donors should promote the model of paid membership of CSOs, volunteering, stakeholder consultations and needs assessments of beneficiaries. CSOs should increase their capacity to use social media and other communication tools to reach and engage with wider audiences.

- To remedy the negative public perception that CSOs are biased, donors should promote transparency and conduct more rigorous due diligence in order to exclude grant-seekers who might manipulate assistance for personal enrichment.

4. Delivery of assistance

Smart conditionality

- When offering funding to state institutions for reforms or micro-financial assistance, strict conditionality should be in place to safeguard donor credibility. Conditions should focus on political reform (electoral reform and rule of law), better integration of minorities, development of small and medium-sized enterprises, and efforts to address growing inequality.

- Conditions attached to assistance funding should be widely communicated, and local civil society should closely monitor implementation of the assistance. In cases where a state breaches its conditions, assistance could be rechannelled to civil society projects. This is especially relevant for Moldova, where supporting the country's leadership means indirectly channelling

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[118] http://contentfund.org/.

EU funding to a pro-Russia elite. Donors also cannot be seen as financing efforts to sustain corrupt institutions.[119]

- In the cases of Ukraine and Moldova, Western politicians and policymakers should travel to the countries more often to track the progress of EU-related reforms, visit regions and engage with local media. This would increase visibility and resonate more widely with the population.

- In the case of Moldova, European countries and the US should limit their interactions with consultants and lobbying groups working for Vlad Plahotniuc in Brussels and Washington.

- Donors should invest more in people-to-people contacts and facilitate movement across borders, especially for Belarus. EU countries should introduce short-term visa-free entry for Belarusians and simplify the visa application process, as well as waive the fee for Schengen visas (instead of raising it from €60 to €80 as planned).

Communication strategies

- The EU needs to invest in stronger strategic communication capabilities. It needs to do more to claim full ownership of its development assistance and highlight the positive impact of its engagement on the ground. This is especially true for Moldova, where local politicians and Russian GONGOs alike often take credit when Western assistance yields positive results. Such efforts, if effective, would also help to undermine Russia's narrative that the West has abandoned the region and will not assist countries in need.

- Success stories should be amplified, and the visibility of successful projects improved. There should be more visibility campaigns, adverts, outreach and showcasing of best practice to ensure that the West receives credit for positive developments on the ground.

- The EU needs to develop better 'storytelling', using a localized assistance narrative and highlighting prosperity and positive change at the community level.

Rethinking the future of the Eastern Partnership

- Russia's negative influence in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova challenges the foundation and the future of the Eastern Partnership. The EU needs a strategic vision for ensuring its own resilience in the region, and for achieving a common vision for its eastern neighbours.

- Such a regional cooperation track, alongside bilateral EU assistance, could, if properly designed, give an additional boost to reforms and knowledge exchange between the EU and participating countries. This is particularly relevant in view of the Eastern Partnership's aims of building the resilience of state and non-state institutions, and of increasing civilian security against regional and global threats.

- The Eastern Partnership needs to adapt its expectations and approach to the three countries in the medium to long term, as well as think about what a sound strategy for the next 10 years could be.

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[119] This applies, for instance, to Western assistance to the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) to implement reforms. The decision of the CEC in June 2018 to invalidate the Chisinau mayoral election is a case in point.

About the Authors

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Having trained as a policy and security analyst in the field of post-Soviet affairs, Mathieu regularly publishes articles and papers on Eurasian security and foreign policy questions. He has degrees from Sciences Po Toulouse in France, and from King's College London (MA in international conflict studies).

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Anaïs Marin is a French political scientist specializing in international relations and Russian studies. In 2011, she joined the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA, Helsinki) as Belarus desk officer. She has published academic articles, op-eds and policy briefs on Belarus's domestic and foreign policies, the EU's Eastern Partnership and Eurasian geopolitics. After a Marie Curie fellowship with Collegium Civitas (Warsaw), in 2018 she joined the Centre of French Civilisation at the University of Warsaw as a research fellow. Alongside her academic and policy advocacy activities, she conducts election observation missions with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). As of November 2018, she holds the *pro bono* mandate of UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus.

Acknowledgments

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Cover image: Volunteer camp in Kropyvnytskyi, Ukraine, 2017. Volunteers help reconstruct a house belonging to an activist who had helped the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

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