Zarifa Behbudzada

Lund University
Department of Political Science

STVM23
Supervisor: Rikard Bengtsson

Analysis of the EU Countermeasures vis-à-vis Russia's Information Influence Activities in the Western Balkans

Zarifa Behbudzada

Spring 2020

Abstract

The European Union is challenged by systematic, well-resourced, and large-scale information influence activities emanating from Russia. Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda activities discredit the EU reputation, erode Western values, and impede European integration. Russia's use of information operations traces back to Soviet propaganda. As propaganda is an old concept, there is overarching literature addressing techniques, tools, as well as social, cognitive, and political effects of propaganda. However, less research has conducted to analyze the counter-strategies in the face of information campaigns, and there are even fewer studies addressing the context of the Western democracies. Given the self-image of the EU based on Western values, this research aims to understand the nature of the EU response to Moscow's disinformation and propaganda. A qualitative case study of the Western Balkans is chosen to illustrate the information battlefield between the EU and Russia. To answer the research question, this paper applies a constructive understanding of the democratic deterrence theory. The theoretical discussions guide the development of the analytical framework, which is used to categorize the EU counter-approaches. The research method is a document analysis that allows examining the deliberate public communication of the EU attitude. The study conclusion is that the Union adopts diverse approaches to counter Russia's information influence activities. The Western Balkans are on the agenda of the EU, and most of the Union's counteracting efforts are extended to the region. The research results also reveal that the EU response to Kremlin's information operations primarily incorporates elements of increasing the defense capacity rather than relying on aggressive measures. This could be explained by the fact that EU official documents are carefully formulated not to contradict the Union's identity and values.

Keywords: EU response, information influence activities, propaganda, disinformation, information warfare, the Western Balkans, constructivism, and democratic deterrence theory.

Word count: 19302

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

ABBREVIATIONS

CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EP	European Parliament
ERPS	The European Parliamentary Research Service
EU	European Union
HLEG	High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation
IATE	Interactive Terminology for Europe
IR	International Relations
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
SAP	Stabilisation and Association Process
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America

1. INTRODUCTION

Information has been the most popular tool of contemporary political manipulation. The use of information to affect the adversary's public opinion and decision-making is not a new phenomenon, yet technological advancement has increased its "sophistication and intensity" (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016). New technology and improved communication means have facilitated particularly authoritative states' hostile interference in the liberal and open societies. Information influence activities are often accompanied by broader campaigns, including cyber-attacks, financing extremist and separatist forces, electoral meddling, and occasionally even military escalation[1]. The core characteristics of democracies such as free and independent media, restrained state role, pluralistic society, and pluralistic public debate create the vulnerabilities in the face of foreign interference (Wigell, 2019).

Evolving the 'gray' zone with blurring lines between war and peace in the modern world is reminiscent of Cold War and hybrid warfare[2] between the Soviet Union and the Western World. Gerasimov (2016), the chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, presents information warfare as an integral part of Moscow's current military doctrine. For the benefit of this study, 'propaganda' and 'disinformation' terms will be used interchangeably referring to Russia's manipulative information operations. Kremlin diffuses conspiracy narratives to discredit the Western alliance; increase Euroscepticism[3]; promote extremism and radicalism; undermine democratic values.

The European Union, with "self-image" linked to democratic and liberal values, is drawn into information warfare by the Russian Federation (Wagnsson, & Hellman, 2018). Moscow's ongoing information campaigns pose a security threat to the EU and its allies, urging the Union to take counter actions on this concern (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016). The EU recognizes that Russia is

[1] For an example, see Ukraine case: Woo, P.K. (2015). The Russian Hybrid War in the Ukraine Crisis: Some Characteristics and Implications. *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 27(3), 383-400.
[2] See Chapter 3 for more information on hybrid and information warfare.

[3] Euroscepticism is defined as a "a 'catch-all' synonym for any form of opposition or reluctance toward the EU" (Leconte, 2010, p. 4). To read more: Leconte, C. (2010). *Understanding Euroscepticism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

responsible for most of propaganda and disinformation activities across the EU and its neighborhood, and thus "inaction is not an option" (EC, 2018b, p. 6). There is an inconclusive debate over how the EU can respond to Moscow's hybrid interference without compromising its core values based on democracy and liberalism (Diez, 2014). Some scholars have criticized the EU for the lack of constructive and robust strategy against Moscow's propaganda and disinformation efforts, while others have warned that some counteractions might be self-contradictory with the EU's definition of itself.[4]

This paper aims to understand the nature of the EU response to information influence actives emanating from Russia, in a particular context of the Western Balkans. Given its strategic geopolitical position, the region holds importance for both the EU and Russia, being a good illustration of the information battlefield between these two actors (ECPS, 2018). The EU High Representative (2014-2019), Federica Mogherini has raised alarms that "the Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played" (Rankin, 2017, p. 2).

The Western Balkans states constitute Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia, which are targeted by the Union's enlargement policy. The EU aims to promote stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans by means of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Despite growing EU ambitions, the region is a vulnerable target of the Kremlin's influence with strong economic, historical, cultural, and religious ties with Russia, which are often exaggerated by pro-Kremlin media. Russia's information operations inhibit the EU plans to ensure peace and security in the region and impede the region's further integration to the Union.

1.1. Russia's Information Influence Activities in the Western Balkans

Bechev (2017) states that "Russia is not returning to the Balkans because it never left" (p. 2). The region is placed as one of the geopolitical and strategic priorities on Russia's agenda (Nartov et al. 2007). The romanticism of Orthodox-Slavic brotherhood generates a stimulus for Russian engagement in the Balkans in an opportunistic manner (Jashari, 2019, pp. 33-34). Ethnic conflicts,

[4] See Chapter 2.

struggling economics, internal instability, fragmented society, weak rule of law, and fragile democracies provide a fertile ground for Kremlin's influence activities. Using the internal chaos, Russia attempts to reach two objectives in the Western Balkans: hindering the region's further integration to the EU and Western allies, and in this way enhancing Moscow's sphere of influence in the Balkans peninsula (Klieman, 2015, p. 101-104).

To reach these objectives, Russia employs extensive information campaigns in the region as a part of a broader hybrid war paradigm aimed at undermining the EU and Western cooperation. As a complementary strategy to active measures in Europe, Russia uses information operations in the Westerns Balkans to assert its political interests as well as acquire "potentially bargaining chips" with the Union (Galeotti, 2018, p. 1). Disinformation and propaganda are the central elements of Moscow's efforts for "destabilizing the region [the Western Balkans], fostering anti-European sentiment, and strengthening its voice" (Eisentraut & Leon, 2018, p. 2).

In 2014, a Russian news agency, known as Rossiya Segodnya, launched Sputnik Srbija for the broadcasting pro-Kremlin program in the Serbian language. With the slogan of "telling the untold", Sputnik's Belgrade outlet spreads conspiratorial narratives framing the EU and Euro-Atlantic structures as imperialist thinkers who erode Serbian identity and sovereignty. Moscow's news agency constantly reminds the NATO bombing of Belgrade, presents Western initiatives as Anti-Serbian projects, and promotes Russia as an only natural ally of Serbia (Eisentraut & Leon, 2018, p. 2). Although the primary target is the Serbian population, those narratives reach a wider audience including Serbian ethnic groups in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Republika Srpska, a constitutive entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina with predominantly Serb population (Jashari, 2019, p. 35). Sputnik Srbija has also been condemned for involvement in the disinformation hub in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cvjetićanin, 2019, p. 8). In 2016, Kremlin-sponsored news supplement, "Russia Beyond the Headlines," has launched a free mobile application operating in 14 languages, including Serbian and Macedonian (Eisentraut & Leon, 2018, p. 3).

Along with the Russian news agency, Moscow's propaganda and disinformation efforts include supporting and financing pro-Kremlin local entities such as media outlets, civil society organizations, and Christian Orthodox Church in particular. Such local ties are used to enforce and strengthen the influence of Moscow's narratives. USA Senate Report (2018) revealed that in

Serbia, over 100 news outlets and NGOs hold pro-Russian attitudes (p. 83). Russia-sponsored media, civil society groups, and the Orthodox Church are considered to play a significant role in supporting and encouraging the 2016 secessionist referendum in Republika Srpska (Jashari, 2019, p. 35). Besides, Moscow supported media outlets sow seeds of suspicion and distrust between ethnic groups by spreading disinformation about "Greater Albania" ambitions of ethnic Albanians residing in Macedonia (Eisentraut & Leon, 2018, p. 2).

1.2. Why are the Western Balkans important for the EU?

The EU engagement in the Western Balkans is in line with the Union's aims "to promote peace, stability, and economic development and open up the prospect of EU integration" (EP, 2020, p. 1). The policy instruments of the EU in the Western Balkans include Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), the accession prospect, regional cooperation, and visa-free travel prospects (EP, 2020, p. 1). In 2013, Croatia became the first Western Balkan country to join the EU. Amongst the rest of the Western Balkan states, which are the primary focus of this paper, Montenegro, Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania are official candidates, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo[5] are potential candidates for the EU accession. The accession negotiations were opened with Montenegro and Serbia, in June 2012 and 21 January 2014 respectively. In March 2020, the European Commission welcomed the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, which further proves the EU commitment in the region (EC, 2020). The countries' further integration into the Union highly depends on their merits and progress on the EU-based reforms addressing democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law (EP, 2020, p. 2).

Ensuring stability and prosperity in the close neighborhood is one of the policy priorities of the EU. Hence, EU communication emphasizes that "Western Balkans remains on the agenda and is a matter of mutual interest" (ERPS, 2016, p. 1). At the Thessaloniki in 2003, it was stated that the

[5] Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 17 February 2008. The independence of Kosovo is not recognized by Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the region and five Member States of the EU. Kosovo holds a potential candidate status in the light of Belgrade–Pristina negotiations. To read more:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans

Balkan states are likely to become the EU members as the "the EU has never really had a policy towards its neighbors, except enlargement" (Charlemagne, 2006, p. 1). However, increasing disinformation activities in the Balkans disrupts internal coherence, weaken democratic ambitions, impair the EU reputation and Western values, and hence hinders Union's plans upon the region.

Moscow's meddling in the Western Balkans poses a threat to the Union's security and vital interests. Firstly, instability in the Balkans directly affects European security, the recent 2015 refugee crises being one of the vivid illustrations. Lying between Europe and the Middle East, the Balkan route is a transit corridor for thousands of migrants on their path to the EU. The refugee crisis showed that the government with internal instability, namely Serbia and Macedonia, are "reluctant crisis managers", and thus close cooperation and consultation with those countries are necessary for the management of future security crisis management (Eisentraut & Leon, 2018, p. 4). Besides, the Western Balkans can challenge EU security through being "an exporter of extremism and radical ideas" (Eisentraut & Leon, 2018, p. 4). Given ethnic and religious mix background, the Western Balkans can breed radicalization in South-East European neighborhoods as a result of extensive information campaigns often inciting ethnic conflicts.

Along these, Russia's information engagement in the concerned region erodes the EU values and reputation. The EU uses the prospect of the accession as a means to promote peace and democratic reforms in the Western Balkans. However, with declining confidence and aspiration upon the EU, the cooperation and integration process delays, and hence regional stability remains in question (Turrión, 2015, p. 12). There is also a danger that increasing Kremlin's influence in the region would strengthen Russia's bargaining power over the Union (Galeotti, 2018, p. 6). For these reasons stated, the EU is concerned about Moscow's hostile information activities in the Western Balkans.

1.3. Research Purpose & Research Question

This study intends to bring an understanding to the nature of the EU counter-strategies against Russian information operations. The strategies, tools, and effects of propaganda have a wide reach in the existing literature. Nevertheless, there is an academic gap in terms of a systematic analysis of counteracting approaches to cope with the pollution in the information space. This paper aims

to address the research gap by shedding light on the EU approaches in this concern, which will disclose how an actor with the self-image of Western democracy communicates its counteracting strategies. The Western Balkans is an interesting case study to understand the extent of EU measures beyond the Member states, covering the potential accession countries. Future research can benefit from the systematic analysis of this paper to analyze the other actors' attitudes toward hostile information campaigns. A context-specific question is formulated as following:

What is the nature of the EU response to Russian information influence activities in the context of Western Balkans?

To answer this question, I will apply a constructive understating of democratic deterrence theory. The EU official documents will be analyzed through the developed framework to reveal the nature of the EU approach toward Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda activities in the Western Balkans.

1.4. Thesis Outline

In this part, I briefly introduce the thesis outline for the following parts of the paper. Chapter 2 consists of the relevant literature to this study. Chapter 3 begins with the conceptualization of the main concepts. Following this, the chapter presents constructivism a general guiding theory, and democratic deterrence as an operational theory of this thesis. The theoretical discussions lead to the development of the analytical framework. Chapter 4 explains all methodological issues related to this paper, which ends with the operationalization of the analytical framework for the analysis part in Chapter 5. The analysis is a descriptive study in which I categorize the Union's strategies according to the relevant approaches and themes developed in the previous chapter. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a summary and the reflections of the main findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter consists of three parts presenting the literature related to this study. The first part provides an overview of the countermeasures that the existing studies suggest. The following two

subchapters discuss classical deterrence theory and deterrence in the hybrid environment, serving as an introduction for the theoretical stance of the paper.

2.1. Counter Propaganda and Disinformation Measures

While the study of disinformation and propaganda received ample attention in the literature, counter-strategies have been less systematically overviewed. There have been even fewer studies on countermeasures in the context of Western democratic values. European democracies are committed to liberal values such as free media, independent journalism, open society, and diverse political debates. Thus, democratic lands open gates for foreign information influence activities, and democratic countermeasures remain highly limited within the same context (Giles 2016; Richey 2017).

There is an inconclusive debate, albeit limited studies, on how the democracies need to respond to propaganda and disinformation, without sacrificing their democratic values. Some academics believe that the hostile narratives, which undermine democratic institutions and values, should be fought back with counter-narratives that reveal the "truth" and promote the understanding of democratic motives (Bittman,1990; Taylor, 2002; Wigell 2019). Indeed, the truth is a complicated concept to identify in the context of propaganda, as there is never a whole truth, albeit one's own truth. The democracies' engagement in counter-narratives can also be perceived as Western propaganda (Bittman, 1990). Taylor (2002) raises the question of the blurred difference between strategic communications and democratic propaganda and argues that democracies need to "embrace propaganda as a reality of the function of the modern state in the information age" (Taylor 2002, p. 441). Democracies have been reluctant to engage in information operations; however, they need to adopt a systematic approach considering the increasing influence of anti-liberal and anti-democratic information campaigns emanating from authoritarian regimes (Walker, 2016, p. 41).

Hellman and Wagnsson (2017) introduce an analytical framework on how European democracies can respond to Russian false narratives while providing empirical examples of states' engagement and disengagement on counter-narratives. The authors propose four ideal-type models that democratic states can adopt: blocking (actively blocking hostile narratives), confronting

(producing and disseminating counter-narratives), naturalizing[6] (constructing advantageous narratives), and ignoring (no-narrative strategy). Hellman and Wagnsson (2017) acknowledge that blocking and confronting strategies might be criticized by the supporters of democracies.

Lucas and Pomeranzev (2016) provides an extensive study on an examination of Russian-sponsored propaganda and disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe and found out that Russia employs a tailor-made strategy in each country according to its main vulnerabilities. According to the researchers, Russian propaganda does not rudely promote the Kremlin's agenda but instead aims to "to confuse, befuddle and distract", and undermine "public support for Euro-Atlantic values" (Lucas and Pomeranzev, 2016, p. 2). At the end of the study, the authors provide comprehensive recommendations for the EU and Western allies which include a "systematic analysis of propaganda, ensuring media quality and literacy, creating new agencies and new cooperation, and carrying out strategic and targeted communication" (Lucas and Pomeranzev, 2016, pp. 43-52).

Some studies urge EU and Western allies to employ more severe measures to counter hostile information campaigns that erode Western reputation and values. According to Jashari (2019), insufficient EU and NATO efforts to counter disinformation "creates a dangerous void, one that Russia is filling aggressively" (p. 33). Neal (2019) further argues that democracies need to draw red lines to alert the adversary that if the hostile activities cross the line, serious punishment measures will be carried out (2019, pp. 21-23). Military actions are too high-level vis-à-vis low-level disinformation engagement; however, there are other means of inflicting pain in the adversary, including but not limited to economic and legal implications. Using "the key vulnerabilities of the opponent" the punishment measures need to be tailored and proportionate to hostile aggression (Sørensen & Nyemann, 2019, p. 3).

Surprisingly overview of counter disinformation measures invites an old friend - deterrence back to the discussion table. Despite its inherited link to the nuclear age, deterrence becomes relevant again amid increasing hostility. The posture of the EU and NATO vis-à-vis Russian influence

[6] Naturalizing strategy differs from confronting strategy; "it is far less engaging, since projecting its own narrative without directly contrasting it with the narrative projected by the other" (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2017, p. 159)

activities could be labeled as "21st-century deterrence" (Sørensen & Nyemann, 2019, p. 2). Below the classic understanding of deterrence and relevance of deterrence in the hybrid environment will be introduced.

2.2. Classical Deterrence Theory

In practice, deterrence aims to alter another's behavior in one's own benefit through interacting cost-benefit analysis. Hence, deterrence is a psychological tool to have a strategic interaction with the opponent. Morgan (2003) believes that despite there have been different approaches and strategies of deterrence, they all are under the umbrella of the same theory. Both early (e.g. Brodie 1959; Schelling 1966; Kahn 1961; Snyder; 1961) and more recent (e.g. Powell 1990; Gray 2003) deterrence literature explain deterrence through "the assumption of a very severe conflict, the assumption of rationality, the concept of a retaliatory threat, the concept of unacceptable damage, the idea of credibility, and the problem stability" (Morgan 2003, p. 1-20).

Deterrence aims to induce voluntarily behavioral changes on adversary through employing *communication*, *credibility*, and *capability* (coined as the "three Cs). *Capability* refers to the deterring actor's capability to carry out said-threat (Schelling, 1966). Historically, the *capability* has been less complicated category to deter, as it has been depicted with military power. Although there are odds that the state may exaggerate its military capability or subterfuge, and secrecy may hinder effective deterrence. *Communication* between actors is crucial to build boundaries, show expectations, and inform about the results of unwanted actions. *Credibility*, on the other hand, is the most challenging criteria, which implies that the threat should be carried out if the offense occurs to prove that noncompliance has consequences. Otherwise, deterring actor will lose his credibility concerning his future deterring threats (Brodie, 1959)

There are two fundamental deterrence approaches: *deterrence by denial* or *deterrence by punishment*. *Deterrence by denial* implies deterring through having and showing the capacity to disrupt the aggressor's actions, which will render his objectives unfeasible or unlikely to succeed. For example, sufficient military deployment can deter adversaries from launching an attack (Beaufre, 1965). This approach stimulates adversaries to rethink about cost-benefit calculations and be doubtful about the likelihood of their victory. *Deterrence by punishment*, on the other hand,

threatens the adversary with severe penalties, which are including but limiting to nuclear escalation, economic sanctions, or political measures. Unlike deterrence by denial, which employs a defense approach, deterrence by punishment elevates the cost of an attack through exerting severe penalties. The literature suggests that denial has been more effective approach than punishment, as capability is clear and straightforward, while the willingness to carry out the threat might be open to questions; the deterrence is undermined if the opponent has doubts about the deterring actor's will to impose penalties (Schelling, 1966; Huth & Russett, 1988).

Huth (1988) is usually credited for the conceptualization of the 'extended deterrence', in which the actor deters the hostile aggression against friends and allies. Extended deterrence is beyond focusing one's own homeland security, and concerned about protecting the other countries from the attacks. Huth (1988) also distinguishes "extended-immediate deterrence" from "extended-general deterrence" (p. 424). The former occurs when an adversary is actively considering a potential attack, and the deterring actor employs an overt threat to prevent that attacker. Whereas the latter form of deterrence is relevant when there are existing adversarial relationships and risk of a potential attack, but there is no active escalation of hostile aggression. In this case, the deterring actor would carry out extended-general deterrence to continue the defense support for the allies. It can be done through maintaining deployed forces, strengthening the alliance, or the official declaration showing that allies are in the security interest (Huth, 1988, p. 423).

Amid the fears of the Cold War, deterrence theory served a core principle of international affairs. The underlying premise of the theory is the use of threats to preclude the states from performing unwanted actions, particularly military adventurism. Deterrence theory has been mostly linked to nuclear deterrence, which holds that acquiring nuclear weapons deter adversaries from launching a nuclear attack, under the possibility of retaliation and mutually assured destruction[7]. In 1965, a military strategist and systems theorist Herman Kahn described the nature of the feasibility of war and argued that deterrence would allow decision-makers to understand the associated levels of risk

[7] The use of nuclear weapons by two or more opposing parties can lead to complete destruction for the all parties of the conflicts. To read more: Parrington A. (1997). Mutually Assured Destruction Revisited, *Airpower Journal, 11*(4), 4-19.

of waging war and weight possible alternatives (1965). The concept was useful to assess possible Cold War scenarios.

2.3. The Revival of Deterrence in the Hybrid Environment

In the current era of the hybrid environment, there is academic debate over the renaissance of deterrence theory (Gray, 2003; Paul & Morgan & Wirtz, 2009; Wilner, 2015; MCDC, 2018; MCDC, 2019). Military strategist Colin S. Gray (2003) believes that "deterrence is out of retirement", not due to its great promise of success, but mostly because of limitations of "other leading alternatives" (p. vi). Gray's (2003) manuscript on *Maintaining Effective Deterrence* allows rediscovering deterrence theory in the modern world. He argues that despite deterrence sounds like "yesterday's solution to yesterday's dominant problem", more empirical deterrence would be still relevant in the current security environment (Gray, 2003, p. v).

Traditional deterrence was customized to past conventional conflicts, which is no longer relevant. Most of today's security challenges fall below traditional war and have considerable political implications at both national and international levels. In the context of hybrid warfare, nonmilitary means are the most favored tools of aggressors. Moving beyond the classical understanding, deterrence needs a revision to embrace the significance of the hybrid threats and offer practical strategies to current and evolving security concerns.

The complexity of modern threats is characterized by non-heretical, non-linear, unpredictable, and emergent nature. As hybrid threats are "diverse, distributed and networked", diffuse and deliberate approaches are needed to identify and respond to the threats (Prior, 2018, p. 70). Today scholarly debates argue that the world is entering into the fifth wave of deterrence, through building "resilience"[8] to "establish socio-technical systems with the dynamic ability to anticipate and respond proactively to potential hybrid threats by learning and adapting" (Prior, 2018, p. 64). Resilience is the coordinated approach of government and civil society, and it is a long-term strategy "addressing vulnerabilities, building a strong and adaptive infrastructure, ensuring social

[8] The origin of "resilience" traces back to the Latin *resilire* which means jump back or bounce back. The basic definition of resilience refers to ability to return back to normal functioning following a disruption (Prior, 2018, p. 68).

cohesion and sustaining trust in government" (Jackson, 2012). Building resilience is useful in a hybrid environment, where setting up "a coping mechanism" is more successful than "preventing threat" (Prior, 2018, p. 65).

Although all waves of deterrence deserve more insights analysis, this paper limits its focus on a democratic understanding of deterrence in the hybrid environment, which will be elaborated in the theoretical part of the paper.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter consists of four essential parts. Firstly, conceptualization is introduced to bring understanding to the key concepts of this thesis: hybrid and information warfare and information influence activities. The second subchapter discusses constructivism as a general guiding theory of the paper. Following this, the democratic deterrence theory is presented for an operational purpose. In the last part, the theoretical discussion is supplemented by comprehensive literature overview to develop the analytical framework.

3.1. Conceptualization

3.1.1. Hybrid and Information Warfare

The definition of hybrid warfare is one of a complex nature, as there is not a unique definition. The roots of hybrid warfare trace back to the time when neither International Relations (IR) theories nor international security was established. Sun Tzu (545–470 BC) said that: "Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists inbreaking the enemy's resistance without fighting" (2000, p. 8). Historians define hybrid warfare as a mix of conventional and irregular modes of warfare. In 1832, Carl von Clausewitz used the metaphor of 'fog of war' to describe increasing uncertainty, complexity, and asymmetry in the new age of the wars. According to Frank Hoffman (2007), a chief American proponent of the

phenomenon, hybrid threats incorporate a tailored mix of "conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, and terrorist acts" to reach certain political objectives (p. 8).

Hybrid warfare, in the Western terms, is often used to refer all kinds of Russian hostile activities — "from the covert use of special forces to election manipulation and economic coercion" — causing the security concerns for the Western World (Wither, 2019, p. 7). The 21st-century warfare creates a 'gray area' blurring the lines between traditional and non-traditional armed conflict, as well as peace and war, which is often linked to the Cold War. With technological advancements, the Western world faces a revival of Soviet *maskirovka* — military deception, as Russia employs a wide range of available tools to achieve its political and strategic goals. Kremlin's hybrid tactics incorporate the elements of "the traditional combination of conventional and irregular combat operations, but also the sponsorship of political protests, economic coercion, cyber operations and, in particular, an intense disinformation campaign" (Wither, 2019, p. 8).

The main focus of this paper is Russia's information warfare, which has emerged as a cornerstone of contemporary hybrid warfare. Russia employs extensive information operations to create an ambiguity between the truth and falsehood, and promote Kremlin's narratives as an alternative reality (Wither, 2019, p. 8). Russia's information tools are not novel; however, increasing technological opportunities and expanded use of social media provide a more favorable environment for manipulative information activities (Bertolin, 2015). Kremlin's advanced tactics exacerbate already existing social grievance and extremist campaigns in the host country to weaken the trust in the mainstream media and undermine the credibility of public institutions and leading ideas (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016).

3.1.2. Information Influence Activities

In the course of information warfare, information influence activities include all kinds of harmful communication efforts of foreign actors to influence public opinion and decision-making in the other countries (Pamment et al., 2018). In 2016, "post-truth" was declared the word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries, defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". The

term is useful to capture "the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth" (Sean, 2018, para. 3).

This paper uses 'disinformation' and 'propaganda' to refer to Moscow's hostile information circulation, as a critical assessment of the literature suggests that these two terms are most commonly used in this context (Bayer et al., 2019, pp. 22-29). Although propaganda and disinformation are two interconnected terms, there is a slight difference: propaganda is defined as "purposeful dissemination of information and ideas", whereas disinformation refers to "systematic and intentional deception" (Bentzen, 2015, p. 1). The use of 'disinformation' and 'propaganda' is increasing in the discourse of the national and supranational institutions such as the European Parliament, European Commission, Media and Sport Committee, as well as the Member States (Bayer et al., 2019, pp. 25-29). The European Council, EC, and EEAS often use the term 'disinformation', while NATO and EP appear to use both terms interchangeably within the same context (Bentzen, 2015, pp. 1-2).

Russia's contemporary information campaigns are often regarded as "new wine in old bottles" reminding of Soviet propaganda (Lucas and Pomeranzev, 2016, p. 6; Kuzio 2019). Propaganda has a wide range of definitions in the literature. According to Leonard Doob (1948), an American specialist, propaganda is "an attempt to affect the personalities and to control the behavior of individuals towards desired ends" (p. 390). Ellul (1962) argues that propaganda does not only aim to change the opinion but "arouse an active and mythical belief" (p. 25). Jowett and O'Donnell (2006) define propaganda as a "deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions . . . that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (p. 27).

Disinformation is less "politically-charged" term to describe Moscow's information influence activities (Bayer et al., 2019, p. 25). In the report of Commission's High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (HLEG, 2018), the term 'disinformation' is used to refer "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (p. 5). The report favors the term 'disinformation' over the 'fake news' term because of the following reasons. Firstly, the 'fake news' term is inadequate to describe the current complex phenomenon, as not all disinformation campaigns involve "actually or completely fake" content but manipulative stories "blended with facts"

(HLEG, 2018, p. 11). Disinformation is also a useful term to capture information activities beyond the "news," including fake accounts, bots, the network of trolls, and targeted advertisements. Besides, fake news can be misleading as politicians can use the term to disregard the criticism and intervene in independent media (HLEG, 2018, p. 11).

Disinformation should not be confused with misinformation. Misinformation is used to refer to the spread of false and inaccurate information without recognizing it. The EU's terminology database IATE (InterActive Terminology for Europe) emphasizes that misinformation with no intention to inflict harm should be differentiated from deliberate deception (Bentzen, 2015). Thus, this thesis uses 'disinformation' and 'propaganda' terms alike to address Kremlin's information influence activities.

3.2. Constructivism

Amid the end of the Cold War, neorealism and liberalism, the widely accepted theories of the time, turned out to be insufficient to predict or explain the future development of world politics. Stemming from the scholarly discussions, constructivism emerged as a mainstream IR theory to understand clear patterns of states' behavior in the Post-Cold War World. Unlike the other school of thought, constructivism stresses the socially constructed nature of IR rather than material ones. Nicholas Onuf (1989) is credited to introduce the term of constructivism to the IR discourse. The most remarkable constructivist work accepted by mainstream scholars is Alexander Wendt's article (1992) with his popular statement: "Anarchy is what states make of it" (p. 395). In rejection of neorealist views, Wendt (1992) argues that anarchy does not necessarily generate a self-help system with inherent competitive dynamics of power and security, as the states fail to conform to this logic (p. 392). For Wendth (1992), social practices "create and represent the structure of identities and interests rather than another; structure has no existence or causal powers apart from the process" (p. 395). The underpinning principle of constructivism is that states' actions are based on the intersubjective knowledge and meanings reproduced through social interactions. Each actor acquires an identity in the socially constructed world, and this identity determines the "understanding and expectations about self and other" (Wendth, 1992, p. 397).

3.2.1. A Constructivist Perspective to Disinformation and Propaganda

Constructivism is a useful approach to explain disinformation and propaganda as a civic dimension of hybrid warfare. Flipec (2020) offers a lens of constructivism to analyze how information warfare is used by the actors to reconstruct identities and interests. Constructivist school of thought emphasizes that "the process of interaction produces and reproduces the social structures" (Wendt 1995, p. 81). Information warfare is a war over values, identities, and ideas, which happens under hybridity between actors with conflicting identities (Flipec, 2020, p. 64). Flipec (2020) explains that Russian ongoing information campaigns aim "reinforcement of its own identity and the reconstruction of foreign identities" (p. 65). From a constructivist perspective, reformulating the reality and power of perception are the integral elements of hybrid warfare.

3.2.2. A Constructivist Approach to the European Cooperation

Wendth (1992) believes that the end of the Cold War generated a new European identity, which relies on reconstructing identities and interests based on shared understandings and commitments of the European states (p. 417). Along with Wendth (1992), there have been ample scholarly attempts to explain European cooperation within the constructivist framework. Glarbo (1999) suggests that the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the Union is a result of the social interaction process (p. 636). Checkel and Katzenstein's (2009) book examines to what extent the European identity was shaped by the history, institutions, intersubjective interactions, and the enlargement process. According to the authors, there is a single European identity; however, it is facing challenges in the face of rising nationalism and populism. For Koslowski (1999), federal theories for the EU polity can be developed by paying particular attention to "political practices, intersubjective meanings, and informal norms" (p. 561). Kennedy (1988) explains in his study how the inter-subjective understanding of the material factors (e.g. geography; economy) and common understanding of the threat produced the European integration (pp. 41-45).

Hooghe and Verhaegen (2017) define the European identity through cultural and civic dimensions of the collective ideational forces. Cultural components of the European identity refer to citizens' feeling to belong to a broader European community based on shared democratic values. Whereas,

the civic approach to the European identity refers to the citizens' trust in the EU institutions in bringing economic progress and prosperity (Hooghe and Verhaegen, 2017). The EU is widely accepted as a 'sui generis' institution being distinguished from a state and international organization. The European institutionalism is based on "liberal foundations", and political culture of the Union reflects "democracy, some form of free trade, transnational co-operation, transnational law and institutions, and a respect for cosmopolitan human rights norms" (Wunderlich, 2012, p. 659).

A constructivist would argue that the nature of the EU response to Russian information influence activities would be in accordance with the identity of the Union. Scholars tend to describe the EU as a normative and civilian power, which aims to promote EU norms, values, and rules without relying on traditional hard power means (e.g. Manners 2002; Pace 2007; Diez 2014). According to Diez (2014), the extensive use of military means by the EU would erode its unique characteristics laying on the power of norms and blur the differences between the normative power and traditional powers. An aggressive response to Russian interference might convey feelings that "the EU is waging [information] warfare against Russia" (Wagnsson, & Hellman, 2018, p. 1662). Thus, the Union's communication and actions should refrain using any language or involving any means that might contradict the EU's self-image (Wagnsson, & Hellman, 2018, p. 1663).

3.2.3. A Constructivist Perspective to Democratic Deterrence

This paper uses the concept of democratic deterrence as an operational theory to analyze the EU countermeasures in the face of hostile information operations. Historically, deterrence theory has a rich history in the literature of the realist school of thought. However, deterrence theory and realist paradigm have been often criticized for oversimplification of world politics, treating all the states as unitary actors behaving rationally in case of security threats. The critics of realist deterrence, have conducted case studies to test the context-specific applicability of the deterrence (e.g. George and Smoke 1974; Lebow 1981, Lebow and Stein 1990; Steinbruner 1976). This paper offers a novel approach analyzing deterrence tools through the constructivist lens. The study can contribute to the literature by revealing the EU deterrence strategies within the constructed values and beliefs of the Union.

3.3. Democratic Deterrence

Wigell (2019) customizes the notion of the modern deterrence[9] to the Western democracies. The author presents an original strategic framework in which democratic values are not "the security vulnerabilities", but rather "strengths and tools for a credible deterrence" (Wigell, 2019, p. 3). Democratic deterrence is a useful concept to understand the EU's countermeasures on hybrid threats. Unlike conventional or modern deterrence, democratic deterrence refrains from adopting aggressive countermeasures jeopardizing western values, but instead, it offers a range of policies under the umbrella of the liberal values.

Wigell (2019) believes that Western democracies are under the attacks, as their core liberal values – "state restraint, pluralism, and free media" open the 'doors' for hostile external interference (p. 7). The restrained state role is one of the features of the democracies; the rule of law is the primary mediator between the state and society (Schedler, 1999). With limited power, the state has limited means to protect society from the hybrid threats (Wigell, 2019, p. 8). Pluralism is another characteristic of democratic societies, as democracies institutionalize pluralist conflict[10] through "social solidarity, tolerance and cohesion" (Wieger, 2019, p. 8). In this vein, open pluralism entails a vulnerability for hostile aggressors who exploit the system to escalate polarization, intensify internal conflicts, and accelerate social cleavages. Furthermore, free and independent media provides surveillance, agenda-setting, a platform for dialogue, and plays a watchdog role for an accountable and transparent government. Disinformation campaigns benefit from open media to fuel internal division and challenge the functioning of democracies (Wieger, 2019, p. 8).

Wigell (2019) distinguishes hybrid interference from hybrid warfare, as hybrid warfare conveys a perception of a "military approach" and "indirect war," which is "an unlikely prospect" in the EU (p. 4). He prefers using hybrid interference instead as a more specific concept to capture non-military practices to intervene and manipulate the strategic interests of the other country. The

[9] Deterrence in the Hybrid Environment. See Chapter 2.3.

[10] See more on pluralist conflict:

Linz, Juan J. and Alfred Stepan (1996). Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and PostCommunist Europe. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

hybrid interference instruments are often subtle and concealed to create an attribution problem and complicate a proper response (Wigell, 2019, p. 4).

Wigell (2019) categorizes the hybrid interference into three types: *(1) clandestine diplomacy, (2) geo-economics, and (3) disinformation. Clandestine diplomacy* is about cultivating "counter-elites and local subversive organizations" to disturb internal coherence of the targeted country (Wigell, 2019, p. 5). It can include supporting radical extremist parties or secessionist groups, backing anti-government organizations, intensifying ethnic conflicts, cultivating social protest movements, and eroding public trust in the local government. *Geo-economics* encompasses economic tools to intervene in the internal affairs of the target state. Russian use of energy resources to drive Kremlin-favored policy goals within the EU and neighboring European countries can set an example of this interference (Wigell & Vihma 2016). *Geo-economics* toolbox includes all Kremlin attempts "to capture strategic sectors of the economy, such as critical infrastructure, finance, and media" to create unfair profits – rewarding friends and punishing challenges and in this way gaining higher political influence over the target country (Wigell, 2019, p. 5). For the benefit of this paper, I acknowledge the importance of *clandestine diplomacy* and *geo-economics*, while narrowing down the focus on the third branch – *disinformation. Disinformation* encompasses all the various information influence activities inducing public discontent and distrust, and polarization of the society. Disinformation aims "trust distortion" by spreading "fake news and alternate narratives of events", particularly on political matters (Wigell, 2019, p. 6). Even only some portion of the society is manipulated by disinformation, it is enough to nurture social fractionalization[11] and entail internal instability.

3.3.1. Democratic Deterrence Strategies

Similar to classical deterrence, democratic deterrence relies on a two-tiered approach: deterrence by denial (democratic resilience) and deterrence by punishment (democratic compellence). Although Wigell (2019) believes that building resilience is a necessary component of democratic

[11] Social Fractionalization = (Ethnolinguistic Fractionalization + Religious Fractionalization) See detailed: Anthony Annett. (2001). Social Fractionalization, Political Instability, and the Size of Government. *IMF Staff Papers*, 48(3), 561-592. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/4621684

deterrence, he argues that it alone is insufficient to dissuade adversary, most notably Russia, from unwanted actions (p. 11). To enforce a credible deterrence, deterrence by denial needs to be backed by a renewed punishment strategy. This paper discusses Wigell's (2019) counterstrategy suggestions primarily in the context of the disinformation domain.

Deterrence by denial: democratic resilience

Resilience aims to refrain adversaries from taking hostile actions by conveying a perception that they will not succeed due to the civil preparedness of the target actor. In contrast to state-centered traditional deterrence, democratic deterrence employs the whole-of-society approach bringing together various social actors. In the current security environment with an evolving 'gray' zone, it is hard to achieve deterrence by the state alone. Whole-of-society is an "inclusive model" sharing the security responsibility between all levels of the society, while state adopting "a coordinating role" (Wigell, 2019, p. 10). Resilience serves to build whole-of-society posture, using the strength of liberal democracies: "autonomous civil society, independent media, and inclusive politics" (Wigell, 2019, p. 11).

Western democracies promote citizen activism, which could assist to identify and disrupt disinformation incidents. Citizens are the primary target of hostile influence activities; therefore, there is a need to raise civil awareness and preparedness. Wigell (2019) calls Western democracies to increase civic engagement through measures such as establishing rapid alert systems, promoting media literacy, and providing relevant education. NGOs, civil society groups, and educated citizens can play the "watchdog" role to detect and counteract manipulative information campaigns (p. 11). Social cognitive resilience would allow citizens to recognize foreign hybrid interference.

Efforts to support independent media should include promoting investigative journalism, training media practitioners, and engaging in media-capacity building programs (Wigell, 2019, p. 12). Countermeasures in this sphere should be extended to the regulation of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter (Wigell, 2019, p. 12). To ensure secure and free media environment, it is necessary to identify and monitor troll accounts, manipulative political adds, and other disinformation activities.

Inclusive politics is another democratic value that can contribute to the resilience-building process. Since adversaries address Western democratic pluralism as a vulnerability, "inclusive politics and social welfare" can be used to appeal to all social cleavages (Wigell, 2019). Democratic deterrence should incorporate increasing social coherence, "particularly integrating diasporas and minorities", who are otherwise the target of hybrid interference (Wigell, 2019, p. 13).

Resilience is not a substitute for other deterrence strategies (particularly for deterrence by punishment), albeit a complementary tool. While resilience assists to mitigate the effects of 'predictably unpredictable' threats, it has its drawbacks. First, resilience is a long term investment, and positive social change will not be an immediate outcome. Current increasing polarization, the rise of right-wing parties, nationalism, and Euroscepticism impede a comprehensive approach to social resilience. Second, even a robust resilience is not a shield against information operations. Russian interference has increased in scope and intensity, which challenges not only European neighborhood countries, but also Western democracies. Even though resilience is of the utmost importance, it cannot replace other deterrence tools (Wigell, 2019, p. 13).

Deterrence by punishment: democratic compellence

The reciprocity and punishment practice for hybrid aggressors is not set up yet, which renders hybrid interference more appealing for the adversaries. While resilience aims to change the adversary's cost-benefit calculus by demonstrating the capability to disrupt the hostile actions, deterrence by punishment relies on changing the aggressor's behavior by showing the capability to induce pain or cost on the aggressor. For effective deterrence, the threat of punishment should be present.

Wigell (2019) prefers using the term democratic compellence while discussing deterrence by punishment. Deterrence is usually defined to dissuade adversary taking certain actions, while compellence is concerned coercing the adversary to take desired actions. Although deterrence and compellence are "distinct analytical concepts," their differences are "blurred in reality" as they often are employed simultaneously (Huth, 1999, p. 48). Deterrence and compellence are used to reinforce each other (Lebow & Stein, 1990). Jervis (1979, p. 292) defines deterrence in relevance to compellence: "theory about the ways in which an actor manipulates threats to harm others in order to coerce them into doing what he desires" (as cited in Huth, 1999, p. 48).

Firstly, the deterring actors need to build clear thresholds, as they cannot respond to every hybrid threat. By establishing thresholds, deterrence by punishment would be carried out only against the most severe hybrid threats, when resilience is an inadequate measure. Communication is necessary to set the necessary red-lines and identify which behavior is not acceptable. In this way, deterring actors can alarm the opponents that some actions are beyond the line and will entail punishment response.

The democratic compellence toolbox will not include countermeasures, which sacrifices "Western democratic cornerstones" for the sake of the security (Wigell, 2019, p. 9). Countermeasures will not be symmetrical since non-interference is one of the liberal principles that the Western democracies are committed (Wigell, 2019). However, Wigell (2019) believes that strengthened social resilience in terms of media professionals, informed citizens, NGOs, and civil society organizations will push the western democracies to name and shame the hostile offender and take serious measures in this concern (p. 13).

Unlike traditional deterrence, democratic deterrence employs non-military means and relies on the soft power of Western democracies[12]. As a response to hybrid threats, Wigell (2019) suggests "shifting the battleground to the authoritarian states' home turf through promoting democratic values and human rights" (Wigell, 2019, 13). Authoritarian states feel often threatened by strengthening democratic values as it challenges the core of their power. Revealing the truth over internal propaganda would cover up the authoritarian regime. Western democracies can build their networks in the adversaries' countries through cultivating "cultural institutions, citizen diplomacy, and civil society connectivity" (Wigell, 2019, p. 13). This strategy can be extended to the promotion of Western values in the groups of hostile aggressors' diasporas and supporters residing in other countries. The author provides examples that promoting democracy and human rights in Hong Kong and Belarus could threaten China and Russia accordingly (Wigell, 2019, p. 13). Wigell (2019) acknowledges that democracy supporters can criticize his soft power suggestion as it still can be counted as an interference effort. However, he distinguishes hybrid interference from soft power. While hybrid interference is "covert, and therefore illegitimate", promotion of democratic

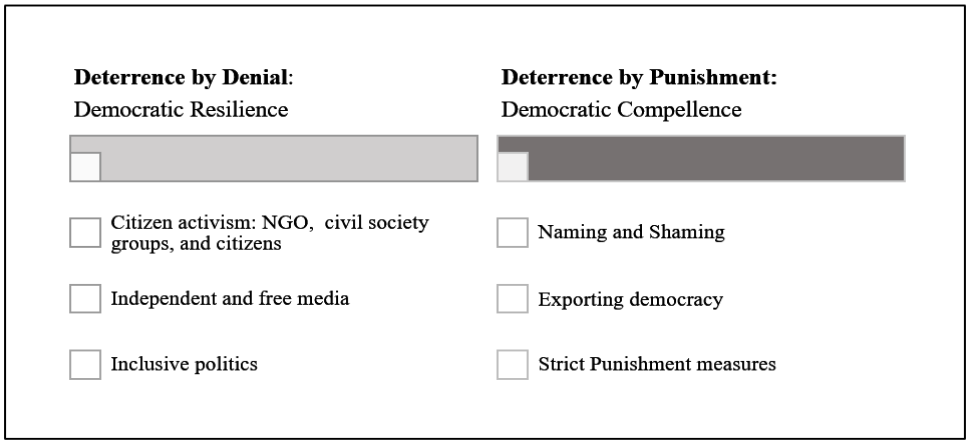
[12] For more information on soft power: Nye, J. (2011). *The Future of Power*. Public Affairs.

values is “overt and transparent, and therefore a form of legitimate public diplomacy” (Wigell, 2019, p. 14).

Western democracies can also set strict punishments to deter hybrid aggressors. As now the world is more interdependent and interconnected than ever, imposing sanctions, limiting economic flows, and other containment policies can increase adversaries’ cost of hybrid engagement. After the initial signaling about upcoming punishments, if the aggressors continue their hostile activities, the threats need to be carried out to ensure the credibility (Wigell, 2019).

To illustrate and sum up Wigell’s (2019) democratic deterrence strategies in the disinformation context, this paper introduces below Figure A.

Figure A: Wigell’s (2019) conceptualization of democratic deterrence strategies



3.3.2. Limitation of Deterrence

A hybrid environment challenges the applicability of deterrence. Firstly, unlike conventional war, hybrid threats are covert and subtle, which complicates to detect and attribute (MCDC, 2019). Detection and attribution are difficult– it takes more time and effort to collect solid trace evidence, yet it is not impossible (Painter, 2018). Public attribution of state misconduct is a useful tool of deterrence and provides legitimacy for response action. However, the problem is a political will to publicly name and shame the hostile aggressor, as hybrid aggressor might not take attribution

seriously and ignore it, or can take it too seriously escalating his hostile activities even more (Painter, 2018). Another nuance is that deterring threats need to proportionate to the hybrid interference: the response efforts should not be too much nor too little (MCDC, 2019). Weak counteraction will not be enough to deter the hybrid aggressor, while too strict measures might exacerbate the hybrid aggression.

3.4. Analytical Framework

Although Wigell's (2019) conceptualization of democratic deterrence provides a theoretical guideline, it alone is insufficient to build a practical framework for the analysis of this study. The differentiation of democratic resilience and democratic compellence offers a sound foundation for the development of the analytical framework but it lacks clear categorization of the counteracting strategies. This paper introduces several different approaches to counter disinformation and propaganda activities found in the literature[13], which would complement and enrich the understanding of democratic deterrence. Below, we categorize countermeasure approaches with respect to democratic deterrence and democratic compellence strategies.

3.4.1. Deterrence by Denial: Democratic Resilience

State Resilience: Legitimate Governance and Resilient State

This approach is primarily concerned with increasing state resilience against information operations through legitimate and resilient governance. Firstly, the democracy-building process can increase public cooperation with the government in light of countering information influence activities. Indeed, the literature suggests that establishing a legitimate government in which citizens have confidence in government and public institutions, is a crucial pillar of the resilience efforts (e.g. Palmertz, 2015; Weinger 2018; Jackson 2019; Filipec 2019; Scheidt 2019). If people

[13] This framework has been inspired by the research report of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) on *Countering Information Influence Activities.* Although the report has been useful to have general understanding and categorization of the approaches, this paper benefits from an extensive literature review to elaborate the identified counter measures. For the MSB report, please see:

Pamment, J. et al. (2018). *Countering Information Influence Activities: The State of the Art: Research Report* (Version 1.4). Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

trust the local government and official resources, they are less likely to be influenced by manipulative narratives; or at least they would later trust corrected information by the government officials (Palmertz, 2015).

Along with legitimate governance, resilient statehood is also necessary to build safeguard against hybrid interference. According to the definition of OECD DAC[14] (2011), "resilient states … are capable of absorbing shocks and transforming and channeling radical change or challenges while maintaining political stability and preventing violence. Resilient states exhibit the capacity and legitimacy of governing a population and its territory" (p. 21). Fragile public institutions, economic stagnation, internal incoherence, and energy dependency entail vulnerabilities in the face of Russian information influence activities (ISS, 2017, p. 87). Firstly, economic and social grievances facilitate the spread of disinformation and aggravate the influence of these activities. Besides, fragile states often fail to identify and effectively respond to hostile information activities.

Considering the experience of the EU Member States, states with consolidated democracies and resilient governance have been more successful at counteracting Russian propaganda and disinformation (such as Finland and Sweden), while the weakened democracies (such as Hungary) have been more vulnerable targets of the Russian influence (e.g. Weinger, 2018; Matthews, 2018). Thus, long-term resilience efforts should involve the process of democracy building, as well as resilient statehood (ISS, 2017).

Civil Society Approach: Civil society and Media

The civil society approach has received ample attention as an extra line of defense against information influence activities. This approach is concerned about raising the resilience of individuals and civil society to respond to hostile influence activities. The bottom-up method slightly shifts the responsibility from the state and other supranational organizations to the society through empowering the civil society to engage in raising awareness, employing source criticism, detecting false narratives, and supporting reliable media (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016).

[14] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Development Assistance Committee (DAC)

Filipec (2019) provides an “organic" approach toward building an “information resilient society” in the context of the Czech Republic. He believes that social resilience is vital because disinformation can entail citizens to make decisions “against their own interest and interest of the state” (Filipec, 2019, p. 4). He depicts disinformation on parallel with the virus in terms of fast-spreading, transmissible and aggressive nature. In analogy with virology, favorable environment and weak immunity induce the spread of disinformation. He believes that increasing media and digital literacy are “the right sort of medicine” in the environment of manipulative information (Filipec, 2019, p. 20). Raising the digital literacy of seniors, providing teachers with appropriate knowledge and skills upon disinformation, and increasing civic education are crucial to building disinformation resilience (Filipec, 2019).

Looking from the USA perspective, a comprehensive security approach vis-à-vis Kremlin propaganda involves a whole-of-society approach through “promoting independent media and investigative journalism and strengthening civil society and civic education” (Congressional Report, 2018). The Report (2018) suggests that publicizing Kremlin-linked propaganda and disinformation incidents will enhance public awareness, and allow the private sector, media professionals, and individuals to detect and distrust hostile narratives.

Indeed, the Nordic states have successfully employed the whole-of-society approach against hostile information activities by promoting critical thinking, media literacy, and public awareness. Finland, most notably, sets a successful example of rendering influence operations ineffective. Despite some Western countries, who have recently “woke up to” the disinformation threat, Finland, sharing a long border, as well as history with Russia, has decades of experience in tackling hybrid threats (Weinger, 2018, p. 1). Finnish officials link their success to their society-oriented strategy “bringing government agencies, civil society organizations, and businesses together to protect and promote national security” (Weinger, 2018, p. 2). The Swedish government adopts a similar “total defense” approach in which “full participation of civilians” is an essential component of preparation for possible hostile information activities (Rossbach, 2017, as cited in Pamment et al., 2018, p. 91).

Collaborative approach

As hostile influence campaigns are getting stronger, there is a need for collaboration of national, multinational, and international networks to strengthen the counter-action capacity. This approach emphasizes collaboration of networks across different levels "to jointly increase the capacity to counter information influence activities by, for example, supporting information and experience sharing, establishing financial structures to scale up capacity development, and to improve coordination between like-minded actors and institutions" (Pamment et al., 2018, p. 83). Lucas and Pomeranzev (2016) also stress the importance of establishing new agencies and new cooperation to enhance resilience capacity in the disinformation age. The cooperation of the EU, NATO, and national states on disinformation such as High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, East Stratcom Task Force, Stratcom Western-Balkans Task Force, and 2016 joint EU–NATO declaration could set examples of the collaborative approach.

3.4.2. Deterrence by Punishment: Democratic Compellence

Regulatory approach

The legal framework is essential to communicate the thresholds of nonacceptable behavior and adhere to appropriate measures against hostile activities. Legal gaps create uncertainties and provide temporary solutions instead of coherent and consistent regulations. Sørensen & Nyemann (2019) argues that legal capacity "can be established if the measures taken are proportional and aimed at bringing the offending actor back in line" (p. 3). To illustrate, France's parliament passed a new law in 2018 on empowering the judges to immediately ban 'fake news' during the election campaigns (McAuley, 2018). Besides, the launch of the Code of Disinformation[15] by the EU Commission is an illustration of the EU's attempt to regulate the social media platforms and advertising industry. Regulatory strategies can be extended to "re-labeling news agencies as a

[15] For more information, please see:

European Commission, "Code of Practice on Disinformation," (European Commission, Brussels, 2018), https://ec.europa.eu/digitalsingle-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation.

propagandist", as the USA required Russian sponsored news outlets - RT and Sputnik to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

Counter Narrative Approach: Strategic Communication and Naming-Shaming

This approach is designed to develop strategic narratives as a reliable alternative to manipulative narratives. The primary focus is formulating and maintaining counter-narratives to communicate with the target audience constantly. The counter-narrative approach offers a less aggressive stance compared to the counter-propaganda approach (see below). It is primarily concerned with debunking disinformation and providing the other side of the story (Taylor, 2002). Chapter 3 briefly introduced the inconclusive debate over the democracies' engagement in counter-narratives, as strategic communication efforts can often be confused with democratic propaganda.

Debunking disinformation may or may not include naming and shaming the perpetrator. Even attribution is troublesome in the case of disinformation diffusion; it is not impossible. Most of the recent experience shows that "the attribution challenge is often primarily a political one, rather than a technical one" (MCDC, 2019, p. 41). The actors often are reluctant to name and shame the hostile aggressor to avoid political implications, as well as "unnecessary escalation" (Wigell, 2019, p. 9).

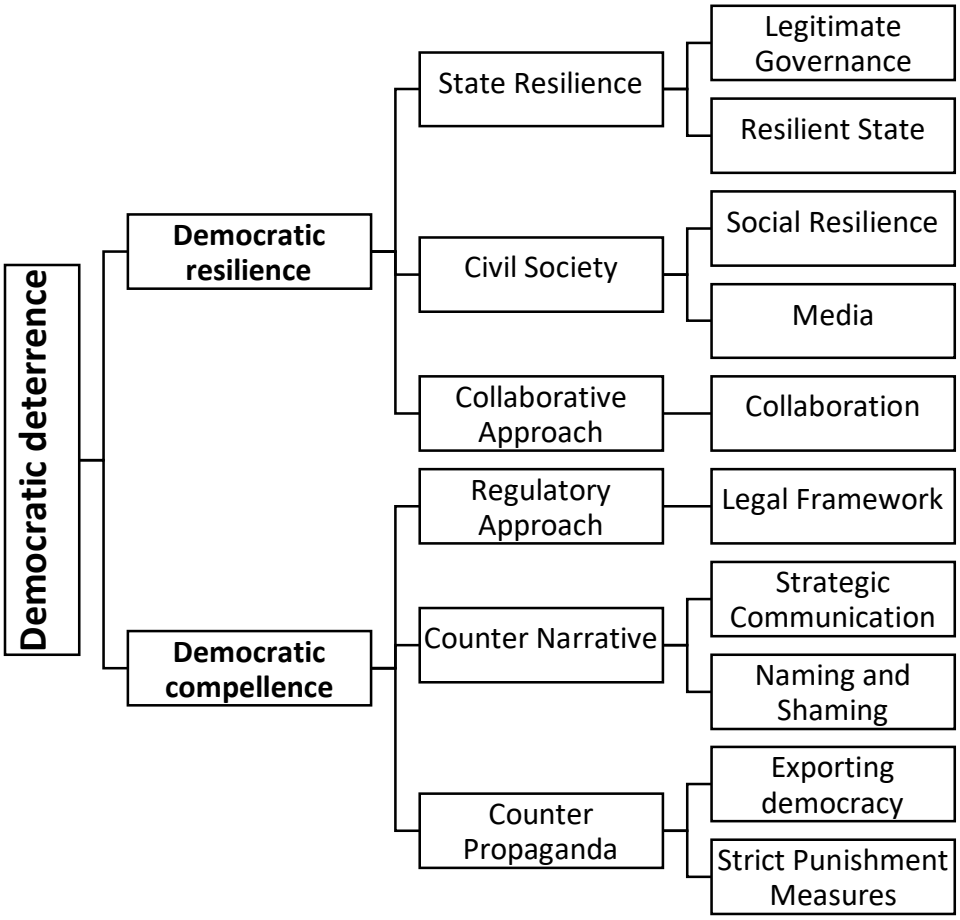
Counter Propaganda Approach: Strict Measures and Export of Democracy

Counter propaganda has a rich history of political warfare, particularly during the Cold War. Counter propaganda historically employs a wide range of techniques including the most basic "the negative act of censorship to the dramatic expedient of reaching into the adversary's society to silence the source of the propaganda" (Cull, 2015, p. 3). The export of democratic values to the authoritative regime can set as one of the counter propaganda strategies (Wigell, 2019, p. 13). For example, Western democracies can increase their civil networks in Russia by revealing internal propaganda of the authoritative regime, promoting human rights and democracy, as well as empowering civil society organizations and NGOs (Wigell, 2019).

In the modern world, counter-propaganda strategies can encompass strict economic, political measures, or other disincentives for perpetrators. For example, in 2016, Latvia shut down Sputnik

based on the claim that it promotes Russian propaganda and is not regarded as a credible media source (Spence, 2016). In January 2020, the Estonian bureau of Sputnik was closed following the warning of Estonian police to open criminal cases against the journalists (Bennetts, 2020). The action of the Estonian government was respective to the EU sanctions on Dmitry Kiselyov, the CEO of Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today). As Sputnik is run by Rossiya Segodnya, under financial sanctions, the banks froze Sputnik related payments including salaries, tax, and rents, which led to the closure of Sputnik in Estonia (Bennetts, 2020).

Figure B: Analytical Framework of Democratic Deterrence Strategies



4. METHODOLOGY CHAPTER

This chapter firstly addresses the philosophical overview of this study, which is followed by a description of the research design and research method of the paper. After this, the data selection process is introduced. At the end of the chapter, the operationalization of the analytical framework is presented to guide the analysis of the thesis.

4.1. The Philosophical Overview: Epistemology and Ontology

Before introducing the research design, it is reasonable to be clear about the ontological and epistemological position of this paper. Ontology examines the nature of reality, while epistemology seeks ways to reach reality (Crotty, 1998). Ontology is our assumption about the existence of social reality; it concerns the question of whether there is one shared social reality or the reality is open to interpretations (Richards, 2003). Whereas epistemology concerns the study of knowledge (Crotty, 1998). Ontology is crucial in the research process since it determines epistemology, which in turn determines the methodology. There is a wide range of epistemological and ontological combinations, and yet academic debates have not reached a consensus over understanding social reality and knowledge. Hence, this paper by no means claims that the below-chosen paradigm is the only true one.

This thesis falls under the constructivist ontological position (e.g. Crotty, 1998) and interpretivist epistemological position (e.g. Bryman, 1988). Constructionism stresses that knowledge is "actively constructed by human beings, rather than being passively received by them" (Ritchie and Lewis, 2014, p.13). Similarly, the interpretivist school of thought sees interpretation and observation as the primary means to understand the social world, which is an underlying premise of the qualitative tradition (Ritchie and Lewis, 2014). Given the interpretivism and constructionism philosophical stand of this paper, a qualitative case study is an appropriate research method to dive deeper into the research question and provide a holistic understanding of the EU countermeasures.

This study acknowledges the fact that classical deterrence theory has been linked to naive realism[16] and positivism, which treats the state as a unitary actor, the actor is presumed to be rational, and the peace can be achieved only through a balance of power (Morgenthau 1948). However, democratic deterrence theory can be best explored in terms of interpretivism and constructionism, as the underlining foundation of the theory relies on Western democratic values, norms, and beliefs. Thus, facts are not objective but rather a reflection of the meanings and values that are attached to them. Along with recognizing the fact that the Russian perspective on this phenomenon would be different, this study aims to understand the EU's perception of the threat and preferred counter-strategies to safeguard its own interests and security; thus, constructionism is an appropriate perspective for this thesis.

4.2. Research Design

The research design of this paper has a qualitative and descriptive nature. The qualitative study provides an in-depth analysis of research problem by explaining "why" and "how" the phenomenon occurs (Symon & Cassel, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2000) Descriptive research is an observational study to investigate the patterns of the research phenomenon. Descriptive studies attempt to draw a correlation between variables, which is sometimes considered to be a lower stand than explanatory studies aiming to explain the causality between variables. Teorell & Svensson (2007) argue that a valid descriptive study is a difficult task and can contribute a lot to the academic knowledge. Without a proper description of the phenomenon, it is beyond the realm of the possibility to explain it on a later stage; a descriptive study is a profound foundation for an explanatory study (Teorell & Svensson, 2007).

Empirical studies of deterrence theory have primarily benefitted from case studies (e.g. Lebow and Stein 1989, 1990) and quantitative analyses (e.g. Charles, 1979; Huth & Russett 1988; Danilovic 2002). Although Large N quantitative methods allow testing general applicability of deterrence theory, in-depth case studies can contribute to the scientific community in terms of

[16] See more: Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (2014). *Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers* (2nd. ed). London: SAGE.

providing insight and context-specific analysis of deterrence. I use a qualitative case study to examine the EU deterrence strategies vis-à-vis information influence activities in the Western Balkans, which will be elaborated in the below subchapter.

This study falls under deductive research as developed analytical framework will be applied to categorize the EU strategies into the themes. Deductive approach, also called concept-driven, allow the researcher "to test the implications of existing theories or explanatory models about the phenomenon under study against the collected data" (Graneheim, 2017, p. 29).

4.3. Qualitative Case Study

The thesis is particularly concerned with a single case study to have a deeper understanding of the topic and gain insights into the chosen research problem. Søilen and Huber (2006) pointed out that there is no easy definition of the case study. According to Creswel (2013), "the case study method explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information . . . and reports a case description and case themes" (p. 97).

The particular focus is put on the EU countermeasures against Russian information influence activities in the Western Balkans. The choice of Western Balkans is inspired by the so-called typical or case study, in which the researcher examines the representative case of the phenomenon to explain the correlation mechanism in general (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The Western Balkans is the typical example of the information battleground between the EU and Russia. As the region is in the interest of both actors, coping with Russian disinformation in the Western Balkans is on the extended agenda of the EU on counter hybrid threats[17]. Analyzing the EU actions in this particular case can illustrate a comprehensive view of the EU counteractions on disinformation.

It is reasonable to explain why I treat Western Balkans as a single case study, rather than carrying out a multiple or comparative case study analysis in the concerned region. Firstly, this paper

[17] For more information, please see: Report on the implementation of the 2016 Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats and the 2018 Joint Communication on increasing resilience and bolstering capabilities to address hybrid threats.

attempts to understand nature and extend the EU counter disinformation measures without aiming to measure the effectiveness; thus, the national implications remain relatively less relevant. The EU Western Balkan Strategy and counter disinformation practices are not country-specific, but rather regional, as the Western Balkans is in general interest and security concern of the EU.

Secondly, although Western Balkans states have differences in terms of their economic, social, and political status, as well as their integration progress into the EU, Russian influence remains significant in all these countries (Jashari, 2019). Comparative case studies would be applicable if this paper aimed to understand the relevance of EU integration in terms of limiting Russia's propaganda and disinformation activities. However, there is no fact-based evidence that such an assumption would lead to conclusive research. The Russian influence is not necessarily diminished with relative EU integration, as historical, cultural, political, and economic ties with Moscow also need to be considered. To illustrate, despite Serbia's formal commitment to the EU, political and cultural relations with Russia increase the influence and scope of Kremlin propaganda in the country, which is observable from the country's adherence to pro-Kremlin policies (Rettman, 2014; Jashari, 2019, pp. 33-34). In 2014, Serbia's refused to join EU Ukraine-related sanctions against, whereas Albania and Kosovo followed the EU's sanction alongside Montenegro (Rettman, 2014). Thus, for the benefit of this study, it is plausible to consider the Western Balkans as a single case.

I acknowledge that a qualitative case study is criticized for the potential problems linked to objectivity and representativeness (Aczel, 2016, p. 18). Despite these, a qualitative case study is a useful method "to study complex phenomena within their contexts" (Baxter & Jack, 2010, p. 544). Limiting the scope of the study to the single case would provide more in-depth knowledge about a particular topic and hence can have a significant academic value.

4.4. Document Analysis

As Bowen (2009) defines, "document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents" (p. 27). Similar to the other qualitative studies, document analysis examines and interprets the data to make sense of the meaning and acquire a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Document analysis incorporates the characteristics

of content analysis and thematic analysis by processing content analysis and developing overarching themes that capture the understanding of the phenomenon. However, document analysis distinctly seeks "first-pass document review, in which meaningful and relevant passages of text or other data are identified" (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). The researcher is in charge of selecting pertinent and credible documents, that will address the research problem.

Document analysis is particularly applicable in a single qualitative case study as it produces "rich descriptions of a single phenomenon" (Bowen, 2009, p. 29). The purpose of this study is to identify and categorize the nature and scope of the EU countermeasures; therefore, document analysis is a useful method to recognize the underlying themes.

4.4.1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Document Analysis

Document analysis is an efficient and less time consuming qualitative method as it requires the data selection process rather than data collection (Bowen, 2009). As official documents are usually public and accessible, document analysis is characterized by the availability of data, and thus the feasibility of the research. Furthermore, reflectivity and subjectivity, which are inherent drawbacks of the qualitative studies, are less of a problem in document analysis. Even though qualitative research includes the researcher's interpretation of the data and social construction of the meaning, documents are "unobtrusive and non-reactive", and less affected by the research process (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). Along these, the exactness is another advantage of the analysis because documents usually include names, references, and details of the event (Yin, 1994).

The researcher needs to be aware of the possible shortcomings and challenges of document analysis while opting for this method. Firstly, as documents are not generated for the research study, they might not always provide a sufficient answer to the concerned research question. Thus, the researcher needs to have investigative skills to interpret the data and relate the documents to the research analysis. Furthermore, given the fact it is the responsibility of the researcher to identify which documents will be used, document analysis engenders the risk of biased selectivity (Yin, 1994). In this study, this problem is mitigated as there is a limited number of the official EU documents relevant to the particular research question. Besides, the EU official documents are not self-contradictory and usually observed to enforce and solidify the Union's attitude, which renders

the biased selectivity less of a problem. Being cautious about the possible disadvantages and having a clear planned structure, the advantages of the document analysis is highly likely to outweigh the disadvantages (O'Leary, 2014).

4.5. Data Selection

The following criteria have been constructed for the data selection:

- **Type of documents:** As credible communication of capacity[18] is crucial in deterrence, the selected documents should be official public documents written by the EU institution with deliberate attempt to communicate EU attitude (deliberate public communication). The documents do not necessarily cover all the EU actions since some EU measures might have a covert nature. However, analyzing public open documents will reveal how the EU communicates and explain its countermeasures.

- **Time frame:** As the EU launched the implementation of the concrete countermeasures on disinformation in 2015, and most of the public documents are published starting from 2016, the selected documents will reflect the 2016-2020 time-frame.

- **Scope and purpose:** To understand the relevance of the EU strategies with the developed analytical framework, the documents will be selected based on two categories:

    a. Documents that reflect the EU Western Balkan Strategy

    b. Documents that reflect the EU attitude on counter disinformation and counter-propaganda, which also address the Western Balkans context.

Given the criteria mentioned above, seven documents are selected:

a. EU Western Balkans largely coordinated by following documents of the EU Commission:

[18] See Chapter 2.

- "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", European Commission, 6 February 2018 (a)

- "Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans", European Commission, 5 February 2020

b. The following official EU documents contain all the necessary information on EU' s counter disinformation and counter-propaganda approach, which are also relevant in Western Balkans context:

- "Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats a European Union response", European Commission, 6 April 2016

- "EU strategic communication to counteract anti-EU propaganda, European Parliament", November 23, 2016

- "Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach," European Commission, April 26, 2018 (b)

- "Action Plan against Disinformation", European Commission and the High Representative Joint Communication, December 5, 2018 (c)

- "Follow up taken by the EEAS two years after the EP report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties", European Parliament, 13 March 2019.[19]

4.6. Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

Reliability, validity, and generalizability are essential concepts to assess research quality. Reliability is concerned about the replicability of the research under the same conditions. Although quantitative studies require the exact reliability, qualitative studies allow "a margin of variability"

[19] See the Appendix at the end of the paper.

due to the unique characteristics of the research paradigm (Leung, 2015, p. 325). In qualitative practice, reliability is usually measured with the consistency of the researcher (Ritchie & Lewis, 2014, pp. 354-359). As this thesis relies on the qualitative case study and document analysis, some precautions are taken into consideration to ensure reliability, such as careful data selection, comprehensive analysis, transparent and well-evidenced interpretation. Besides being consistent throughout the analysis, the next subchapter – Operationalization provides a clear description of the approaches and themes that will be used to examine the EU response.

The validity of the research refers to the "appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data" (Leung, 2015, p. 325). Validity questions if the research design is relevant and corresponding to the research aim, and the study result measures what is intended to measure (Ritchie & Lewis, 2014). I have carefully chosen the research design and methodology to ensure the study conclusions will allow answering the research question. Despite some disadvantages[20], the document analysis is a suitable method to study the nature of the EU actions, as it provides a deliberate public communication of the Union's attitude.

Generalizability of the research shows that if the research findings can be generalized to similar settings (Ritchie & Lewis, 2014, p. 348). Qualitative case studies, particularly single case studies, do not necessarily seek for generalizability, as the aim is to achieve in-depth knowledge about a specific phenomenon. Although the purpose of this study is not to provide generalizability, it is likely that the EU response to other hybrid threats shares some similar characteristics with the EU attitude toward information influence activities. Besides, there is a high possibility that the EU approach toward Western Balkans could be pertinent to the case of neighborhood and partner countries.

4.7. Operationalization

The selected documents will be analyzed through the lens of the pre-defined themes to describe the nature of the EU countermeasures against Russian information campaigns in the Western

[20] See subchapter 4.4.1

Balkans. The themes are drawn from the analytical framework developed at the end of theoretical discussion. Wigell (2019) democratic deterrence strategies – ***democratic resilience*** **(1)** and ***democratic compellence*** **(2)** provide the model to categorize the counter disinformation approaches, which are further elaborated into the themes using the existing literature (see the below figure). Pertinent EU public official documents will be carefully examined to understand the relevance of identified themes on the EU counter disinformation agenda.

As a deductive approach is adopted, I acknowledge that there are odds that established themes might not fit the data, or new themes emerge during the analysis (Graneheim, 2017, p. 29-30). If new meaningful data is found from analysis, which does not necessarily fit any dimension of the established framework, it will be still added to the analysis of this paper. As the chosen themes are interrelated, I expect the documents to represent more than one theme.

Figure C: Operationalization (Note: Democratic Resilience strategies are assigned number 1 and democratic compellence strategies are assigned number 2)

Counter- Approaches	Themes	Possible EU activities
1.1.State Resilience	**1.1.1.** Legitimate Governance	- Promoting democracy and public trust in the governance
	1.1.2. Resilient State	- Investing in the region: economy, energy sector, and other critical development areas
1.2.Civil Society Approach	**1.2.1.** Social Resilience	- Promoting social awareness and preparedness - Engagement with civil society groups, local NGOs, think tanks, etc.

	1.2.2. Media	- Efforts to ensure independent, pluralistic, as well as credible media
1.3.Collaborative Approach	**1.3.1.** Collaboration	- Joint efforts with other actors such as the Member States or NATO
2.1. Regulatory Approach	**2.1.1.** Legal Framework	- Regulatory changes to mitigate or halt the diffusion of disinformation
2.2. Counter Narrative	**2.2.1.** Strategic Communication	- Debunking disinformation - Ensuring strategic communication
	2.2.2. Naming and Shaming	- Publicly accusing Russia's engagement in disinformation and propaganda
2.3. Counter Propaganda	**2.3.1.** Exporting democracy	- Democratic engagement in Russia: promoting democracy and human rights, as well as empowering civil society organizations
	2.3.2. Strict Punishment Measures	- Imposing economic, political measures, or other disincentives

5. ANALYSIS

The chapter provides an analysis of the selected documents by means of the developed operationalization framework. It begins with a brief background of the EU approach in tackling information influence activities. To identify the nature of the EU counteracting measures, the

chapter is divided into two sections: **Democratic Resilience** and **Democratic Compellence**. Democratic Resilience strategies will be analyzed through State Resilience, Civil Society, and Collaborative Approaches, whereas Democratic Compellence efforts will be examined by addressing Regulatory, Counter-Narrative, and Counter-Propaganda Approaches. Each approach will be further elaborated into the corresponding themes (See Figure C).

EU vis-à-vis disinformation and propaganda

European Parliament stresses that "media freedom, access to information and freedom of expression" are the indispensable pillars of the democratic system (2016, p. 4). However, increasing deliberate, wide-reaching, and systematic diffusion of disinformation challenge the core of democratic societies. EU defines disinformation as "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm" (EC, 2018c, p. 1). Such massive disinformation campaigns can be depicted as "vehicles for hybrid threats" producing narratives to radicalize and disrupt society (EC, 2016, p. 2). EU's agenda on tackling foreign influence include disinformation campaigns and hostile propaganda mainly emanating from Russia and discrediting the Union's values (EP, 2016, p. 4).

At the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003, the EU clearly stated that the Western Balkans is an integral part of the EU. Thus, the EU countermeasures extended to the region:

"The Union has a significant interest in working with partners in three priority regions – the Union's Eastern and Southern Neighborhood and in the Western Balkans. Exposing disinformation in countries neighboring the Union is complementary to tackling the problem within the Union" (EC, 2018c, p. 4).

In 2020, the Commission reinforced that a credible accession process for the Western Balkans is "a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe" (EC, 2020, p. 1). Considering "heightened geopolitical competition", the Union seeks to strengthen its influence in the region (EC, 2020, p. 1).

Below the selected EU public documents will be examined to identify the applicability of developed countermeasure approaches in the Western Balkans context.

5.1. Democratic Resilience

5.1.1. State Resilience

The state resilience approach is concerned with increasing states' capacity in the face of hostile information activities. The Commission (2018b) highlights that the effect of disinformation "differs from one society to another, depending on education levels, democratic culture, trust in institutions, the inclusiveness of electoral systems, the role of money in political processes, and social and economic inequalities" (p. 4). The counter-information campaigns will only be effective if complemented with strengthened collective resilience "in support of democratic bearings and European values" (EC, 2018b, p. 4).

Legitimate governance and resilient state themes are useful to understand the EU's attempt to increase the states' resilience in Western Balkans. The legitimate governance theme encompasses supporting the democratic process, legitimate and accountable governance, and public trust in the local governance. Resilient state, on the other hand, is an umbrella theme to understand the EU activities to support economic development, energy resilience, and regional cooperation, as well as tackling ethnic conflicts in the Western Balkans. It should be clearly stated that the EU promotion of democracy and positive development in the Western Balkans account for more general security and geopolitical interest rather than only a counter disinformation perspective. While acknowledging these themes have relatively indirect effects on counteracting Russian disinformation and propaganda, these efforts should be considered under increasing states' resilience to cope with foreign interference.

- ***Legitimate governance***

The EU states that false and misleading information can cause "public harm", which include decaying the "democratic processes" (EC, 2018c, p. 1). Thus the EU Action Plan against Disinformation introduces protecting the democratic system and combating disinformation as

interrelated policy goals (EC, 2018c, p. 1). Disinformation challenges democratic societies, polarize public views, and disrupt the democratic decision-making; hence, the EU is committed "to preserve the democratic process and the trust of citizens in public institutions at both national and Union level (EC, 2018c, p. 12).

The Union's attempts to increase resilience against disinformation and propaganda is extended to its neighborhood countries (EC, 2018c, p. 12). The EU pledges the merit-based membership perspective for the Western Balkans states in the light of EU based reforms and democratic progress (EC, 2018a, p. 1). "Strengthening the functioning of democratic institutions is essential" – stated on the document concerning EU Western Balkans Strategy (EC, 2018a, p. 5). One of the first EU ambitions in the region is to ensure accountable and legitimate governments, which are elected with fair and free elections. Roadmap for a More United, Stronger, and more Democratic Union[21] is a clear illustration of the EU initiatives to increase the democratic decision-making processes under the European roof by 2025. The Western Balkans, Serbia and Montenegro in particular as frontrunners candidates with 2025 perspective, have to show the political will to accept and promote the EU values, democratization being an utmost priority (EC, 2018a, p. 2). It would require public administration reforms, which include:

…improving the quality and accountability of administration, increasing professionalism, de-politicization, and transparency, also in recruitment and dismissals, more transparent management of public finances, and better services for citizens. An appropriate balance between central, regional, and local government also needs to be found" (EC, 2018a, p. 5).

The Commission (2020) reinforces its commitment to support "proper functioning of democratic institutions and public administration" in the Western Balkans, which are placed as "fundamentals" in the course of EU negotiations chapters with candidate countries (pp. 2-3). The EU delivers merit-based accession prospect for the Western Balkan states, in which positive or negative conditionality depend on progress or lack of progress of the individual state (EC, 2020, p. 5).

[21] See more: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/roadmap-factsheet-tallinn_en.pdf

- ***Resilient State***

Strengthening the economy is one of the priorities of the EU Western Balkans Strategy. The EU Western Balkans strategy repeatedly reminds that "region's economies are uncompetitive" and suffer from "structural weakness" (EC, 2018a, pp. 3-5). Union's efforts in the region include ensuring a functioning market economy, increasing employment opportunities, and entailing economic development. The region's total trade with the EU hit EUR 43 billion in 2016, with further growth potential, along with EU companies being the biggest investors in the region (EC, 2018a, p. 1). Economic reform programs are set to modernize the economy, support the private sector, limit undue state interference, and ensure a free and competitive market. With the finance of pre-Accession Assistance, The Western Balkans Investment Framework aims to foster the EU investment in the region's crucial development sectors such as transport, energy, private sector, as well as the digital economy (EC, 2018). The Commission (2020) states that increasing funding and investment in the Western Balkans will be provided as "clear and tangible incentives" to induce "political, economic and societal changes" (EC, 2020, p. 5).

Under the EU approach to counter hybrid threats, the resilience of the energy sector is depicted as one of the critical areas: "An essential element for countering hybrid threats is to further diversify EU's energy sources, suppliers and routes, to provide more secure and resilient energy supplies" (EC, 2016, p. 6). The Union's energy security policies are extended to the enlargement countries. The EU connectivity agenda with Western Balkans addresses further economic integration of the region with the Union in terms of key transport and energy connections (EC, 2018a, p. 7).

To promote regional cooperation, the EU pays particular attention to ensure regional cooperation and tackle bilateral disputes between countries, and ethnic conflicts within the countries, which could escalate the influence of foreign information manipulation. Thus, the Commission (2018a) calls the governments for reconciliation, good neighborhood relations, as well as respect to ethnic minorities:

"Regional co-operation, good neighborly relations, and reconciliation cannot be imposed from outside. The leaders . . . must avoid and condemn any statements or actions which would fuel inter-ethnic tension and actively counter nationalist narratives" (p. 7).

The Commission (2018a) further highlights that the enlargement policy aims to "export stability" not to "import bilateral disputes" (p. 7). Notably, the EU facilitated-talks aim to alleviate the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo in the light of Belgrade–Prishtina dialogue. Good neighborly relations and regional cooperation are the prerequisites for the Western Balkan states on their respective EU path (EC, 2018a, p. 7). The EU pledges to strengthen its support in resolving bilateral disputes in the region and urges the Western Balkans leaders to deliver credible efforts for regional cooperation and stability (EC, 2020, p. 2).

5.1.2. Civil Society Approach

In this part, I will review the selected documents to understand the placement of the civil-society approach in the EU counter disinformation measures. Civil society and credible media have critical roles in building long-term resilience, and hence they have received ample attention in the discourse of coping with contemporary hybrid threats, particularly hostile information activities. The social resilience and media themes will be guiding concepts to understand the EU actions under the civil society approach.

- ***Social resilience***

The EU documents repeatedly emphasize the role of social resilience in tackling the problem of disinformation. Action Plan 2018 introduces "raising awareness and improving societal resilience" as one of the key pillars in the coordinated Union's response to the disinformation:

"Greater public awareness is essential for improving societal resilience against the threat that disinformation poses" (EC, 2018c, p. 9). Since the beginning of counter disinformation engagement, the EU stresses the importance of "think tank/academia research, social media campaigns, civil society initiatives, and media literacy" to raise awareness about ongoing information influence activities and their possible negative impacts in the society (EP, 2016, p. 6). Proper education, online media, and information literacy are crucial to enable the citizens to be critical toward the media content and detect disinformation and propaganda in the EU and its neighborhood, Western Balkans being emphasized (EP, 2016, p. 12). Thus, the EU calls people for "active citizenship" in terms of being critical media consumers (EP, 2016, p. 12). Action Plan

(EC, 2018c) further repeats Union's commitment suggesting "specialized training, public conferences, and debates" to enable citizens to detect and react to disinformation (p. 10). To support cross-border cooperation of the media literacy specialists and raise media literacy of the citizens in the Member States, the EU has launched initiatives such as Digital Education Action Plan and Media Literacy for All, and organized Media Literacy Week; however, these efforts were not extended to the neighborhood nor the accession countries (EC, 2018b, p. 13)

"Empowered civil society" is a crucial requirement for the Western Balkan states on their EU path (EC, 2018a, p. 5). In this way, the EU aims to encourage candidate states to enable a favorable environment for civil society organizations. The long-term strategic approach includes enhancing the networks with civil society, NGOs and think tanks, and other local actors and institutions that would help to tackle disinformation and propaganda in the candidate and potential candidate countries. EP stresses that these networks "should be open to like-minded partners of the EU", which could help to identify manipulated information activities, gather findings of the facts, share the experiences, as well as implement EU recommendations in this sphere (EP, 2019, p. 5 (m)).

– ***Media***

"Supporting freedom of expression . . . the right to access information and the independence of the media in the neighboring countries should underpin the EU's actions in counteracting propaganda" (EP, 2016, p. 10).

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right driven from the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Charter)[22], and it incorporates the respect to media freedom and pluralism, along with citizens' right to receive impartial and diverse information without political interference (EC, 2018b, p. 1). Given this respect, the EU calls the Western Balkan states to avoid political interference in the media, and create a favorable environment for independent media, which is curial for the functioning of the democracies (EC, 2018a, p. 3). EP emphasizes that weak media in the European neighborhood render these countries vulnerable to Moscow's intrusion (2016, p. 5).

[22] See detailed: Article 11, Charter. Article 6(1) of the Treaty of the European Union confers binding force on the Charter and states that it "shall have the same legal value as the Treaties."

Thus the Union supports pluralistic, objective, impartial, and independent media in its neighborhood (EP, 2016, p. 18).

According to the EP (2016), "transparency of media ownership and the sources of financing of media are of the utmost importance", which would facilitate the attribution of the disinformation to the perpetrator (p. 4). EP (2016) also calls for a critical assessment of dealing with media outlets which are found continuously diffusing deliberate deceptive information (p. 4). In its following documents, the EU stresses that media transparency efforts should not enforce a "censorship scheme" and be in compliance with media pluralism and freedom of expression (EP, 2019, p. 3 (a)).

A particular focus is put on the development of investigative and quality journalism within improving media efforts. Initiatives are taken, such as capacity development programs and training opportunities for media professionals, and increasing information exchange networks (EP, 2016, p. 10). The Openmediahub project is funded by the Commission to increase journalistic professionalism and editorial ethics in the neighborhood countries. Concerning the Western Balkans, the Commission financially support "a network of journalistic associations, the building of trust in media, and the reinforcing of judiciary systems to defend freedom of expression" (EC, 2018c, p. 11) In these efforts, Commission attempts to contribute open and independent media sources along with quality journalism in the concerned region.

5.1.3. Collaborative Approach

This paper regards the collaborative approach as a complementary strategy of democratic resilience, as joint efforts strengthen the capacity to cope with Moscow's information campaigns. The collaboration theme will be used to identify the key EU partners in tackling disinformation, and the importance of collaboration in a coordinated EU response.

- ***Collaboration***

Commission (2016) stresses that joint efforts are of the utmost importance "to foster the resilience of the EU and the Member States, as well as partners" (p. 2). In the EU discourse, joint

communication complements the Union's holistic approach to hybrid threats facilitating coordination and cooperation of the relevant actors. EU aims to create synergies of the instruments and partners to ensure the exchange of information and best practices and avoid the duplication of similar efforts.

EU calls for enhancing cooperation with NATO both at political and operational level amid hybrid threats. NATO is regarded as a key partner of the EU, as "the two organizations share values and face similar challenges" (EC, 2016, p. 17). Synchronized EU–NATO activities on strategic communication, can strengthen both organizations' resilience to prevent, prepare, and respond to hybrid threats (EC, 2016, p. 17). Along with NATO, the EU calls for greater cooperation of "EU institutions, the Member States, various UN bodies, NGOs and civic organizations" in the coordination of counter-propaganda and disinformation activities (EP, 2016, p. 6).

As an example of the joint efforts, EU Hybrid Fusion Cell was established in EEAS to "rapidly analyze relevant incidents and inform the EU's strategic decision-making processes" about hybrid threats that affect the EU and its neighborhood (EC, 2016, p. 4). Hybrid Fusion liaises with relevant EU bodies, Member States, as well as NATO hybrid cells for effective counteractions. Also, the EU launched of Center of Excellence (CoE) tackling hybrid threats, including information influence activities. The Commission emphasizes that such Hybrid CoE should work in cooperation with existing EU and NATO centers of excellence benefiting from their relevant experience (EC, 2016, p. 5). Furthermore, EEAS, in liaison with the Council and Member states, set up Western Balkans Task Force to ensure strategic communication of the Union's policies, contribute to independent media environment, and cope with Russian disinformation in the region (EC, 2018c, p. 5)

Under the joint efforts, the Commission set up Rapid Alert System calling on each Member state to designate a contact point to promptly alert about ongoing disinformation campaigns, and share relevant and timely information with competent national authorities, Commission, and EEAS (EC, 2018c, p, 8). Along with coordination with existing relevant EU bodies, Commission and the High Representative "will ensure regular exchange of information and best practices with key partners, including within the G7 and the NATO" (EC, 2018c, p. 8).

Document analysis also discloses the EU cooperation with the private sector in response to disinformation, most notably online platforms. Code of Practice[23] was signed between the EU Commission and the online platforms and advertising industry to foster accountability and credibility of the online ecosystem (EC, 2018c, p. 2).

EU encourages the Western Balkans' alignment with cooperative EU actions related to the hybrid threats (EC, 2018a, p. 8). The Commission repeatedly highlights that "joining the EU is a choice" and if the EU path is chosen, it requires sharing Union's values and policy goals, "including full alignment with the common foreign and security policy" (EC, 2018a, p. 8). Thus, Western Balkans are expected to support and follow the EU policies and recommendations on countering Russian information operations.

5.2. Democratic Compellence

5.2.1. Regulatory Approach

The regulatory approach is concerned about the regulations placed against disinformation campaigns and propaganda. Given the era of information pollution, the existing legislation needs to be updated to address new online and offline incitement of social incoherence. The legal framework theme encompasses all attempts to limit, avoid, and outlaw the diffusion of disinformation and propaganda under the legal basis.

- ***Legal Framework***

Along with efforts to promote transparent, diverse, and credible information environment, and fostering resilience of the governments and civil societies, the regulatory adjustments are also expressed on the European approach to cope with disinformation. (EC, 2018b, p. 7). EP (2016) stresses that "Russia is exploiting the absence of a legal international framework" in the information sphere to escalate its manipulative narratives (p. 8). The EU emphasizes that legal initiatives are crucial to creating accountability in the area of disinformation (EP, 2016, p. 11).

[23] Code of Practice will be elaborated more in the discussion of following Legal Framework theme.

Although the freedom of expression and media freedom are the core values of the democratic system, manipulative information campaigns cannot hide behind the democratic principles (EP, 2016, p. 20). According to the EC (2018b), the states need to avoid political interference and censorship and facilitate the process of inclusive, free, and open public debates; nevertheless, massive disinformation campaigns "sow distrust and create societal tensions" causing potential serious security concerns for the Union (p. 1). Commission (2018b) states that there is no one single solution for tackling disinformation; however, there is an urge to action (p. 6).

The Commission set up a High Level Expert Group[24] in 2017 to advise on this concern. In compliance with the proposal of the Expert Group, Commission supported the development of the Code of Practice with the online platforms (namely Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Mozilla) and the advertising industry on adopting self-regulation. Signatories of the Code of Practice are committed to inter alia scrutinizing advertisement placements, ensuring the transparency of sponsored content (particular on political issues), deactivating fake accounts and bots, cooperate with independent fake-checkers, safeguarding against disinformation, and facilitating findability of trustworthy information from diverse and credible news sources (EC, 2018b, p. 8). The Commission monitors the implementation of the Code of Practice with the assistance of the European Regulators Group for Audio-visual Media Services (EC, 2018c, p. 9). The scope of this online media regulation has been limited to the Member States. In the follow-up document, the EP (2019) invites EU neighbors and partner states, to join the Code of Practice to ensure the applicability of the regulation within their borders (p. 5 (m)).

Furthermore, the Regulation[25] on electronic identification addresses the problem of online accountability (EC, 2018b, p. 10) Traceability of disinformation diffusion is necessary to raise accountability, encourage responsible online behavior, and ensure trust on online sources. Commission (2018b) also endorses the uptake of Internet Protocol version 6 (IPv6), which allows identification of internet users according to the assigned unique Internet Protocol address, in

[24] To read more about High Expert Group: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-andonline-disinformation.

[25] Regulation 910/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market and repealing Directive 1999/93/EC.

compliance with data protection rules (p. 10). The EU regulations have a direct binding legal force for the Member States; however, these regulations are not binding for the Western Balkans states unless they voluntarily follow the EU path or achieve the membership status.

The EP (2019) urges the candidate countries "to adopt effective and clear legislation that ensures the transparency of media ownership" in regards to identifying possible links with "authoritarian states operating in the EU and within its partner countries" (p. 5 (o)). While calling the candidate states to sign up for Code of Practice and implement media regulations, the EP acknowledges that removal and banning of the suspicious accounts might be considered as censorship; thus those actions should be always justified under the law (EP, 2019, p. 6 (r)). In liaison with competent authorities and civil society, media companies are urged to inform all the users which contents will be banned and notify the affected users on what ground their contents are removed or their accounts are suspended. These efforts should comply with the "legal order" of the concerned country (EP, 2019, p. 6 (r)).

Regulatory changes are extended to the amendment of electoral laws to safeguard the elections from disinformation campaigns and propaganda. The EU pledges the support the Western Balkans "with best practices as well as human resources and technology to ensure the robust defense of their electoral processes from malicious cyber, disinformation and propaganda activities emanating from Russia and other hostile actors" (EP, 2019, p. 9 (ai)).

5.2.2. Counter Narrative Approach

The counter-narrative approach addresses providing alternative narratives to hostile information campaigns and exposing disinformation and propaganda activities. Strategic Communication theme and the Naming-Shaming theme will be used to understand the relevance of the counter-narrative approach in the EU counteracting strategy. The first theme encompasses identifying and falsifying false narratives and introducing the Union's side of the story. Whereas, the latter theme pays particular attention to name and shame Russian engagement in information influence activities.

- ***Strategic Communication***

The EU response to counter hybrid threats incorporates strategic communication as an essential part of a robust counteracting strategy (EC, 2016, p. 4). Strategic narratives should depict the EU as "a successful model of integration" stimulating the other countries to follow this model and be a part of it (EP, 2016, p. 6). To this end, the EU needs to expand the positive narratives about "its successes, values, and principles with determination and courage" (EP, 2016, p. 6). Propaganda should be differentiated from criticism, as not all political criticism of the EU necessarily accounts for propaganda. However, extensive anti-EU propaganda efforts intensify and aggravate the EU criticism sowing doubts about the reliability of the EU messages (EP, 2016, p. 11). Thus, it is necessary to provide "adequate and interesting information" about the activities and values of the Union using all the means of modern advancements (EP, 2016, p. 12).

The EEAS, in liaison with the activities of East and Arab Stratcom Task Forces, should ensure the targeted communication of the EU in the close neighborhood countries, as well as identify and react to disinformation. For decisive efforts, the Commission (2016) calls strategic communication mechanisms to address both social media and traditional media sources and reflect the local languages in the concerned countries (p. 5). The EP (2016) encouraged increasing investment in the EU Strategic Communication Task Forces for the Eastern and Southern neighborhoods to ensure "proper staffing and adequate budgetary resources" (p. 10).

The East StratCom Task, the most prominent European task force, launched the flagship project - "EU vs Disinfo" to identify, collect, debunk and respond to Moscow's ongoing disinformation campaigns in Europe and beyond (EP, 2016, p. 11). The activities of the EU vs Disinfo are extended to expose disinformation spread in the Western Balkans. The EP further highlights that for effective and coherent communication of EU policies and values, a tailored approach should be adopted, including providing information in the non-EU languages, as well as in Russian, "without using offensive language or value judgments" (EP, 2016, pp. 11-12).

The Western Balkans Task Force, established at a later stage, has received less attention in the EU discourse. The EP (2019) calls for increased support for Western Balkans Task Force and urges for intensifying cooperation of the EU delegations and EU Representatives to share their experience and best practices on strategic communication to assist the Western Balkans Task Force and the candidate countries on their efforts against propaganda and disinformation (p. 8 (ab & ac)).

The Commission (2020) highlights the importance of strategic communication efforts in the Western Balkans to solidify the EU policy goals and "tackle malign third country influence" in the region (p. 2).

As regards to healthy online platforms, the Commission (2018b) supports the network of independent fact-checkers to detect and react to the disinformation promptly. Fact-checkers constitute an integral part of the EU strategy, constantly checking the credibility of information on the ground of facts and evidence (EC, 2018b, p. 9). Independence, as well as compliance with ethical and transparency principles, are of utmost importance for credible fact-checkers.

– ***Naming-Shaming***

Strategic communication and fact-checking efforts expose the disinformation campaigns and propaganda allowing proper attribution of these malign activities to the aggressor. In the EU documents, Russia is repeatedly ascribed to engage in information influence activities in Europe. As stated by the EP (2016):

"Kremlin has stepped up its propaganda war, with Russia playing an enhanced role in the European media environment aimed at creating political support in European public opinion for Russian action and undermining the coherence of the EU foreign policy" (p. 5).

The EP (2016) underlines that Russian information influence activities, being directly or indirectly linked to Kremlin, erode public trust in the EU actions, values, and narratives inciting uncertainty and fear in the citizens of the EU, as well as candidate and partner countries (p. 6). Besides, Russia provides alternative and manipulative narratives of the historical events to justify Russian actions and values, and extend Moscow's conventional influence in the sovereign states (EP, 2016, p. 7). Other state and non-state actors also adopt information strategies "similar to those developed by the Kremlin" to challenge the Union (EP, 2016, p. 6). The recognized Russian information operations tools are, think tanks, government-sponsored organizations (e.g. Russkiy Mir), federal government agency (Rossotrudnichestvo), television networks (e.g. RT), and pseudo-news services (e.g. Sputnik) (EP, 2016, p. 7). The EP (2016) expresses its strong criticism of Russian activities to discredit the Union and impede European integration process (p. 7)

EU Hybrid Fusion Cell has disclosed that Russia constitutes the primary source of disinformation in Europe employing "systematic, well-resourced", and a large scale of information operations (EC, 2018c, p. 4). As of December 2018, East StratCom Task Force detected and uncovered, over 4500 incidents of disinformation emanating from the Russian Federation (EC, 2018c, p. 4). According to the EP (2019), along debunking and exposing hostile information activities, it is necessary to ensure "the clear attribution of such attacks, including publicly naming the perpetrators, their sponsors and the goals they seek to achieve" (p. 6 (t)).

5.2.3. Counter-Propaganda Approach

EU counter-propaganda approach will be analyzed through the EU efforts to export democracy to Russia, as well as applied strict punishment measures in the information sphere. Exporting democracy theme accounts for engagement of the Union to promote human rights, enhance civil society networks and empower civil organizations under Kremlin's turf, which would challenge the influence of Russian internal and external information operations. Strict punishments theme covers all kinds of strong disincentives imposed by the EU at political, economic, or other critical areas to deter Russian hostile information campaigns.

- ***Exporting Democracy***

While condemning Moscow's regular suppression of independent media, professional journalism, and open civil society activities within Russia and beyond, the EU "recognizes that the biggest obstacle to Russian disinformation campaigns would be the existence of independent and free media in Russia itself" (EP, 2016, p. 14). Despite the minority opinion in the EP criticizing propaganda on EU democracy (EP, 2016, p. 15), the EP "calls on the Commission and the Member States to reinforce the protection of journalists in Russia and the EU's Neighborhood and to support Russian civil society and invest in people-to-people contacts" (EP, 2016, p. 14). To this end, the EP (2016) encourages increasing investment in pluralistic media and investigative journalism in Russian, as well as in local languages of the states which are the vulnerable targets of Russian propaganda and disinformation (p. 14). In particular, the EU endorses financial contribution to the study on 'Russian-language Media Initiatives in the Eastern Partnership and Beyond', carried out by the European Endowment for Democracy (EP, 2016, p. 14).

Apart from the EP's report on strategic communication, the other selected EU documents do not necessarily address this matter.

- ***Strict Punishment Measures***

Even though the EU acknowledges that the large scale of information operation in Europe is attributed to Russia, the Union has been somewhat reluctant to adopt severe measures on this concern. On the Action Plan against Disinformation, the Commission (2018c) recommends the use of sanctions, whenever necessary, to avoid illegal use of personal data affecting free and fair European elections[26] (pp. 2-3). Rapid Alert System is also expected to ensure information exchange with the European cooperation election network[27], and assist to determine when imposing sanctions is relevant and appropriate to safeguard the European election campaigns and functioning of the democratic institutions (EC, 2018c, p. 7). The EP (2019) further endorses that legal framework to hybrid threats, including information warfare, is essential at both EU and international levels to build a robust strategy, "also covering targeted sanctions against those responsible for orchestrating and implementing these campaigns" (p. 3 (b)). However, the scope of these measures is limited to only the Member states, leaving out the Western Balkans, and the EU documents do not provide insights about the implications of these measures.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper attempted to bring an understanding to the nature of the EU counter strategies in the face of Russian information operations. The specific research question was raised as "what is the nature of the EU response to Russian information influence activities in the Western Balkans? To answer this question, a constructivist understating of the deterrence theory was applied. Wigell's (2019) conceptualization of democratic deterrence being a point of departure, an overarching literature review was conducted to categorize countermeasures and develop a systematic and clear

[26] "In addition to the ones provided by the General Data Protection Regulation" (Regulation 2016/679).

[27] Set up in 2019 to protect and contribute the integrity of 2019 European Parliament elections.

analytical framework. As noted in Chapter 5, this study acknowledged that some information might not fit the developed model, and new themes might emerge during the examination of the selected documents. In general, the analytical framework was adequate to relate and categorize the EU approaches.

The official public documents of the Union were analyzed to identify two democratic deterrence strategies: democratic resilience and democratic compellence. The analysis results show that democratic resilience approaches are the cornerstones of the EU counteracting disinformation and propaganda strategies. The EU promotes the resilience of the Western Balkans at both state and society levels. As regards to increasing states' capacity in the region, the EU endorses legitimate governance with strengthened democracies, as well as resilience governance with the developed economy, improved energy sector, and alleviated ethnic disputes. The EU's engagement in these activities was very briefly introduced due to the scope and limit of this study. However, the document findings were adequate to reveal the EU attempts to increase the Western Balkan states' resilience vis-à-vis Russia's disinformation and propaganda. To increase the social resilience of the region, the EU addresses the key issues such as greater public awareness, media, and information literacy, active citizenship, empowered civil society, improved media, and quality journalism. Furthermore, the collaborative approach has been an essential part of the EU strategy to jointly increase the capacity of the Union and like-minded partners against Russian information operations. NATO being the key partner, the EU emphasizes the importance of cooperation and coordination with various EU bodies, Member States, relevant UN bodies, NGOs, civic organizations, and the private sector. Western Balkans are encouraged to follow and participate in the Union's joint efforts.

Democratic compellence strategies were also found relevant in the EU response to Moscow's information influence activities. Establishing a legal framework and enforcing regulations in the information sphere are on the EU agenda to discourage and legally punish malign activities. The EU endorses regulations on online media and electronic identification, and amendments in electoral laws to create accountability for the perpetrators and bridge the legal gaps against foreign interference. Furthermore, the EU pays particular attention to strengthen the Union's strategic communication with the Western Balkans, debunking Moscow's manipulative narratives, and publicly accusing Russian involvement in diffusing of disinformation and propaganda. The

Union's activities are extended to move the 'battle' to Kremlin's own turf by supporting democracy, human rights, and civil society organizations in Russia. There are also the EU discussions over imposing sanctions and stricter measures in the case of information influence activities.

The EU appears to acknowledge the perils of Moscow's information campaigns in the Western Balkans for the Union's plans for the region. Most of the EU counteracting disinformation and propaganda measures address the context of the Western Balkans. Even though regulatory changes are usually limited to the Member States, the EU encourages the involvement of the region to follow the EU path in this regard.

In fact, it was possible to identify characteristics of all approaches, which implies that the Union employs diverse strategies in the response to hostile information operations emanating from Russia. Approaches related to democratic resilience appears more prevailing elements of the EU response, which shows that the EU aims to strengthen coping mechanism against hostile interference, rather than leaning on aggressive measures. The Union seems to be relatively reluctant to adopt strict measures vis-à-vis Russian engagement in propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Despite some regulatory changes along with exposing and condemning Moscow's hostile narratives, the EU refrains using counter propaganda strategies or at least publicly communicating its activities in this sphere; only one EU document was found briefly addressing exporting democracy attempts to Russia, while there is a limited discussion over the possibility of the strict punishment measures in this domain. A constructivist perspective would suggest that it is primarily because these tactics run the risk of conflicting with the EU identity, values, and understating of the power.

The document analysis shows that the EU public communication is cautiously formulated not to contradict the Union's self-image relied on Western democracy. The EP (2016) emphasizes that not all the criticism of the Union necessarily involves the characteristics of the propaganda and disinformation (p. 11). The EU repeatedly warn to refrain from imposing unnecessary sanctions or limiting freedom of expression and information. For example, about the removal of fake and suspicious accounts spreading disinformation on online platforms, the Commission insists that these activities should always be under the law, and the account owners should be notified with a

clear explanation of the reason for the ban. The Commission further reminds the Member States and the Western Balkans alike that counteracting propaganda and disinformation efforts should not be a justification for political interference in the media resources. Another example of endorsing the Union's values is from the EP's discourse, which states that strategic communication of the Union should avoid "offensive language or value judgments" (EP, 2016, pp. 11-12).

This paper provides a descriptive study of the EU counteracting strategies against Russia's information operations. Despite there is ample literature about the influence, tactics, and tools of information influence activities, there is a research gap on a systematic overview of countermeasures in this field. The purpose of this study was to address this gap by analyzing the EU attitude in coping with propaganda and disinformation in the specific context of the Western Balkans. An interesting continuation of this study would be conducting interviews with relevant EU officials to understand how they perceive the Unions counteracting efforts in this concern.

The findings of this study could inspire future research in countermeasure strategies employed by different actors to cope with hostile interference. It would be interesting to compare how different actors deal with information manipulation. Besides, measuring the effectiveness of diverse strategies could also add value to future research in this sphere.

References

Baxter, P. & Jack, S. (2010). Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers. *Qualitative Report, 13(*4), 544-559.

Beaufre, A. (1965). *Deterrence and Strategy*, London: Faber.

Bechev, D. (2017, October 12). Russia's foray into the Balkans: Who is really to blame?, *FPRI Black Sea Strategy Papers*. Retrieved 5 May, 2020 from https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/10/russias-foray-balkans-really-blame/

Bennetts, M. (2020, January 3). Britain is poisoning Estonia against us, says Kremlin, *The Times*, Retrieved 5 May, 2020, from https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britain-is-poisoning-estonia-against-us-says-kremlin-rql7rf6rd

Bentzen, N. (2015). Understanding propaganda and disinformation, European Parliamentary Research Service, Retrieved 5 May, 2020 from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_ATA%282015%29571332

Bertolin, G. (2015). Conceptualizing Russian information operations: Info-War and infiltration in the context of hybrid warfare, *IO Sphere*: *The Professional Journal of Joint Information Operations.*

Bittman, L. (1990). The use of disinformation by democracies. *Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, *4*(2), 243–261. https://doi.org/10.1080/08850609008435142

Bowen, G. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *9*(2), 27-40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

Brodie, B. (1959). The Anatomy of Deterrence, *World Politics*, *11*(2), 173-191. https://doi.org/10.2307/2009527

Charles, W. K. (1975). *International Events and Comparative Analysis of Foreign Policy*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.

Checkel, J. & Katzenstein, P. (2009). *European identity*. Cambridge: *Cambridge University Press*. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806247

Clausewitz, C. (2017). *On War*. Los Angeles: Enhanced Media.

Congressional Report, (2018). *Putin's Asymmetric Assault On Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security*, Minority staff report prepared for the use of the Committee On Foreign Relations United States Senate.

Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. London: Sage Publications.

CSIS (2019). Modern Deterrence, [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O98ApfsgXFs

Cvjetićanin, T. et al. (2019). Disinformation in the online sphere: The case of BiH, *Citizens' Association "Why Not"*.

Danilovic, V. (2002). *When the Stakes Are High: Deterrence and Conflict among Major Powers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Diez, T. (2014). *A different kind of power?: The EU's role in international politics* (Exploring Europe's future). New York, NY: International Debate Education Association.

Doop, L.W. (1948). *Public Opinion and Propaganda*, Henry Holt and Company.

Eisentraut, S. & Leon, S. (2018). Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans: How the EU Can Counter Russia's Information War, *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, *294*, 1-9.

Ellul, J. (1973). *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Trans. Konrad Kellen & Jean Lerner, New York: Vintage Books.

European Commission (2018). Code of Practice on Disinformation. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/digitalsingle-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation.

European Commission (2020). *Commission welcomes the green light to opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia*, European Commission Press release.

European Parliament (2019). Western Balkans Factsheet, Office for Official Publications of the European Parliament, 1-5. Retrieved from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans

European Parliamentary Research Service (2016). The Western Balkans and the EU Enlargement and challenges. [Briefing]. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI%282016%29589791

European Union (2012, October 12). Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 26 October 2012, 2012/C 326/02, Article 11.

Filipec, O. (2019). Towards a Disinformation Resilient Society? The Experience of the Czech Republic, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *11*(1), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v11.i1.6065

George, A. & Smoke R. (1974). *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gerasimov, V. (2016). The value of science is in the foresight: New challenges demand rethinking the forms and methods of carrying out combat operations. *Military Review*, *96*(1), 23-29.

Giles, K. (2016). *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*. Rome: NATO Defense College.

Glarbo, K. (1999). Wide-awake diplomacy: Reconstructing the common foreign and security policy of the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *6*(4), 634-651.

Graneheim, U., Lindgren, B., & Lundman, B. (2017). Methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis: A discussion paper. *Nurse Education Today*, *56*, 29-34. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.06.002

Gray, C.S. (2000). Deterrence in the 21st century. *Comparative Strategy*, *19*(3), 255-261, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930008403211

Gray, S. C. (2003). *Maintaining Effective Deterrence*. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College. Retrieved May 5, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11365

HLEG (2018). *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation, Report of the Independent High Level Group on fake news and online disinformation,* Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation

Hoffman, F. (2007). *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid War*. Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

Hooghe, M., & Verhaegen, S. (2017). The effect of political trust and trust in European citizens n European identity. *European Political Science Review*, *9*(2), 161-168.

Huth, P. & Russett, B. (1988). Deterrence Failure and Crisis Escalation. *International Studies Quarterly*, *32*(1), 29-45. https://doi.org/10.2307/2600411

European Union Institute for Security Studies (ISS) (2017). *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, 1-143. http://dx.doi.org/10.2815/211038

Jackson, N. (2019). Deterrence, resilience and hybrid wars: The Case of Canada and NATO. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, *19*(4), 105-125.

Jordan, D. et al. (2016). *Understanding modern warfare*, CUP, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jashari, J. (2019). Beyond propaganda: Exposing falsehood and fake news, "Balkans Challenge", *Journal of European Security and Defense Issues*, 9 (2), pp. 33-39.

Jervis, R. (1979). Deterrence theory revisited. *World Politics*, *31*(2), 289-324. https://doi.org/10.2307/2009945

Jowett, G. & O'Donnell, V. (2006). *Propaganda and Persuasion* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Kahn, H. (1961). *On Thermonuclear War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kennedy, P. (1988). *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. London: Fontana Press, pp. 41–44.

Klieman, A. (2015). *Great powers and geopolitics* (Global Power Shift). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Knopf, J. (2010). The fourth wave in deterrence research, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 31(1), 1-33. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523261003640819

Koslowski, R. (1999). A constructivist approach to understanding the European Union as a federal polity, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *6*(4), 561-578. https://doi.org/10.1080/135017699343478

Kuzio, T. (2019). Old wine in a new bottle: Russia's modernization of traditional Soviet information warfare and active policies against Ukraine and Ukrainians, *the Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *32*(4), 485-506. https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2019.1684002

Lebow, R. & Stein. J. G. (1989). Rational Deterrence Theory: I think, therefore I deter, *World Politics*, *41*(2), 208–224. https://doi.org/10.2307/2010408

Lebow, R. (1981). *Between Peace and War: The nature of international crisis.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Leung, L. (2015). Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, *4*(3), 324-327. https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.161306

Lupovici, A. (2010). The Emerging Fourth Wave of Deterrence Theory—Toward a New Research Agenda, *International Studies Quarterly*, *54*(3), 705–732. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2010.00606.x

Maria, H. & Wagnsson, C. (2017) How can European states respond to Russian information warfare? An analytical framework, *European Security*, 26(2), 153-170. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2017.1294162

Matthews, O. (2018, Apr 27). The plot against Europe: Putin, Hungary, and Russia's new iron curtain. *Newsweek*, Retrieved 5 May 2020, from https://www.newsweek.com/2018/04/27/putin-kremlin-russia-trump-orban-bannon-nationalism-iron-curtain-eu-891843.html

McAuley, J. (2018, January 10). France Weighs a Law to Rein in 'Fake News,' Raising Fears for Freedom of Speech, *Washington Post*, Retrieved 5 May 2020, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/france-weighs-a-law-to-rein-in-fakenews-raising-fears-for-freedom-of-speech/2018/01/10/78256962-f558-11e7-9af7a50bc3300042_story.html.

Morgan, P. (2003). *Deterrence Now.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morgan, P. (1977). *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Multinational Capability Development Campaign (2019). Countering Hybrid Warfare. MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project.

Multinational Capability Development Campaign, (2018). Can hybrid attacks be deterred? And if so, how do we do it? Information Note.

Nartov, N. A., Staroverov, V. I., & Nartov, V. N. (2007). *Geopolitika*. Moscow: Edinstvo publications.

Neal, J. (2019). Perspectives on hybrid warfare: Deterrence in a hybrid environment. *per Concordiam: Journal of European Security and Defense Issues, 10*(1), 16-24.

Nugent, N. (2006). The government and politics of the European Union (6th ed., revised and updated ed., European Union series). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

OECD (2011), *Supporting statebuilding in situations of conflict and fragility: Policy Guidance.* OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264074989-en

Onuf, N. (1989). *World of our making*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

O'Leary, Z. (2014). The essential guide to doing your research project (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Pace, M. (2007). The Construction of EU Normative Power. JCMS: *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *45*(5), 1041-1064. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2007.00759.x

Painter, C. (2018). Deterrence in Cyberspace – Spare the costs, spoil the bad state actor: Deterrence in cyberspace requires consequences, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, Policy Brief No. 4/2018.

Pamment, J. et al. (2018). *Countering Information Influence Activities: The State of the Art: Research Report* (Version (2018)). Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

Paul, T. & Morgan P. & Wirtz. J. (2009). *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Post-truth (2016). In Oxford Dictionaries.

Prior, T. (2018). Resilience: The Fifth Wave in the Evolution of Deterrence, Strategic Trends 2018; Key Developments in Global Affairs. ETH Zurich: *Center for Security Studies*, pp. 63-80.

Rankin, J. (2017, March 9). Russian destabilisation of Balkans rings alarm bells as EU leaders meet, *The Guardian*, Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/08/top-mep-says-eu-must-do-more-to-stop-russia-destabilising-balkans.

Rettman, A. (2014, October 15). Serbia refuses to join EU sanctions on eve of Putin parade, *EU Observer*. Retrieved from https://euobserver.com/foreign/126078

Richey, M. (2017). Contemporary Russian Revisionism: Understanding the Kremlin's Hybrid Warfare and the Strategic and Tactical Deployment of Disinformation. *Asia Europe Journal*, *16*(1), 101-113. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-017-0482-5

Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (2014). *Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers* (2nd ed). London: SAGE Publications.

Rossbach, H. N. (2017). "Psykologiskt Försvar - Avgörande För Svensk Försvarsförmåga," Strategisk Utblick 7: Närområdet Och Nationell Säkerhet (FOI Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, 2017).

Schedler, A. (1999). The self-restraining state: Power and accountability in new democracies. Boulder: Rienner.

Scheidt, M. (2019). The European Union versus External Disinformation Campaigns in the Midst of Information Warfare: Ready for the Battle? *College of Europe EU Diplomacy Paper* 01/2019.

Sean, I. (2018, August 14). A philosopher explains America's "post-truth" problem, Vox. Retrived 5 May, 2020, from: https://www.vox.com/2018/8/14/17661430/trump-post-truth-politics-philosophy-simon-blackburn

Seawright, J. & Gerring, J. (2008). Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research, *Political Research Quarterly*, 61(2), 294-308. https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912907313077

Snyder, G. (1961). *Deterrence and Defense*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Steinbruner, J. (1976). Beyond Rational Deterrence: The Struggle for New Conceptions. *World Politics*, *28*(2), 223–245. https://doi.org/10.2307/2009891

Sun, T. (2000). *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*. Leiceste: Allandale Online Publishing.

Søilen, S. & Huber, S. (2006). 20 svenska fallstudier för små och medelstora företag – Pedagogik och vetenskaplig metod. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Sørensen, H. and Nyemann, D. (2019). Deterrence by punishment as a way of countering hybrid threats: Why we need to go 'beyond resilience' in the gray zone, *Royal Danish Defense College: Institute for Strategy*, Information Note.

Taylor, P. (2002). Strategic Communications or Democratic Propaganda? *Journalism Studies*, *3*(3), 437-441. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700220145641

USA Senate Report (2018). Putin's Asymmetric Assault On Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security, S. PRT., 115-121.

Wagnsson, C., & Hellman, M., (2018). Normative power Europe caving in? EU under pressure of Russian information warfare. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *56*(5), 1161-1177. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12726

Walker, C. (2016). The Authoritarian Threat: The hijacking of "soft power". *Journal of democracy*, *27*(1), 49–63. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0007

Weinger, M. (2018). What Finland Can Teach the West About Countering Russia's Hybrid Threats, *World Politics Review.*

Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization*, *46*(2), 391-425. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764

Wendt, A. (1995). Constructing International Politics. *International Security*, *20*(1), 71-81. https://doi.org/10.2307/2539217.

Wigell, M.and Vihma, A. (2016). Geoeconomics versus Geopolitics: The Case of Russia's Geostrategy and Its Effects on the EU. *International Affairs, 92*(3), 605-627. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12600

Wither, J. (2016). Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare. *Connections,15*(2), 73-87. http://dx.doi.org/10.11610/Connections.15.2.06

Wunderlich, J. (2012). The EU an Actor Sui Generis? A Comparison of EU and ASEAN Actorness. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 50*(4), 653-669.

Yin, R. K. (1994). Case study research: Design and methods, (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Palmertz, B. (2015). Att Identifiera, Förstå Och Möta Påverkanskampanjer Från Främmande Makt En Översikt Av Verktyg Och Metoder. Stockholm: *Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS)*.

Spence, A (2016, March 30). Russia accuses Latvia of 'blatant censorship' after Sputnik news site is shut down, *Politico*, Retrieved 5 May, 2020, from https://www.politico.eu/blogs/on-media/2016/03/russia-accuses-latvia-of-blatant-censorship-after-sputnik-news-site-is-shut-down/

Schelling, T. (1966). *Arms and Influence.* New Haven: Yale University Press

Appendix: The Selected Documents

1. European Commission (2018a). A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, COM/2018/065 final. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0065

2. European Commission (2020). Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, COM (2020) 57 final. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1588086628899&uri=CELEX:52020DC0057

3. European Commission (2016). Joint Framework on countering hybrid threatan a EU response, Joint Communication to the European Parliamenst and the Council of the European Union, JOIN/2016/018 final. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0018

4. European Parliament (2016). EU strategic communication to counteract anti-EU propaganda, (2016/2030(INI)). Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2016-0290_EN.html

5. European Commission (2018b). Tackling online disinformation: A European Approach, COM (2018)236 final. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0236

6. European Commission (2018c). Action Plan against Disinformation, European Commission and European External Action Service, JOIN(2018) 36 final. Retrieved from https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54866/action-plan-against-disinformation_en

7. European Parliament (2019). Follow up taken by the EEAS two years after the EP report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties. (2018/2115(INI)). Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0187_EN.html