

MIND THE GAP: RETHINKING EU STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS ON SANCTIONS

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Executive summary

This report examines the challenge of countering Russian disinformation and populist narratives on the European Union's (EU) sanctions policy. As the EU intensifies its role as a global security actor, maintaining public support for sanctions is crucial, yet vulnerable to manipulation. The report presents three policy proposals: enhancing EUvsDisinfo for internal communication; establishing a public board to monitor media sanctions; and creating a Civic Resilience Network (CRN) to foster public understanding of strategic decisions. These initiatives aim to strengthen EU-citizen communications, counter disinformation and populist narratives on sanctions, and bolster democratic resilience in the EU.

critical for facing post-truth politics since they can erode public trust in EU foreign policy, fuel populist stances and, as a result, [weaken the credibility](#) of the EU's actions on the global stage.

This report proposes feasible policies to counter Russian disinformation on the EU's sanctions policy. The report is structured into four parts. First, I define the EU sanctions policy and its use in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Second, I describe three possible scenarios – most probable, worst, and best case. Third, I introduce three policy proposals to improve EU-citizen communications on sanctions: an enhanced EUvsDisinfo for internal communication; a public board to monitor sanctions against Russian media; and a Civic Resilience Network to explain sanctions to the public. Finally, the report concludes by assessing the policy priorities to improve democratic resilience in the EU.

Introduction

Sanctions are one of the EU's most relevant foreign policy tools because of the lack of traditional hard power. The so-called restrictive measures – the EU bureaucratic term for sanctions – impose economic and political pressure on third actors, aligning with the [EU's broader normative agenda](#) of promoting peace and stability. Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the EU has used sanctions to curb Russia's destabilising actions in Ukraine.

Following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU significantly intensified its sanctioning efforts, reflecting its ambition to redefine its role as a [global security actor](#) in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical landscape. However, the effectiveness of this transformation depends heavily on public support, which Russian disinformation seeks to undermine by exploiting the economic costs of sanctions and creating divisions within and among Member States. Tackling these misleading narratives is

A contested tool

The sanctions policy is part of the EU's Common Security and Foreign Policy (CFSP) and represents the most coercive tool in the absence of military power. Brussels has [refined sanctioning practices](#) since the 1980s, as the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties institutionalised the practice in the unanimity vote rule at the Council of the European Union. However, sanction effectiveness – i.e. how to measure the impact of the desired goal – is controversial and has become a target of post-truth discourses following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. Pro-Kremlin narratives have questioned their usefulness by underlining the negative impact on national economies. Populist parties in European countries have [amplified this kind of disinformation](#) to undermine EU support for Ukraine and its sanctions policy.

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has been game-changing because of the EU's commitment to becoming a security actor, with

'Brussels launching unprecedented economic pressure on Moscow. Until now, the EU has deployed seventeen sanction packages, of which the latest [was agreed](#) on 14 May 2025. The restrictive measures have included the media as a strategic sector. Russian state media and pro-Kremlin outlets were targeted to counter disinformation and information manipulation, especially during the [2024 European Parliament elections](#). The decision is unprecedented because the war's hybrid nature targets public opinion to [undermine political support for Ukraine](#).

This attention to Russian disinformation is not groundless. Since 2022, the EUvsDisinfo database has registered more than 3,400 disinformation cases regarding the war in Ukraine. [Almost 250 of them](#) have regarded the EU's sanctions policy. Similar to the past, Russian disinformation blames the illegality and uselessness of the European sanction regime. However, allegations of 'Russophobia' and patriotic claims about Russian economic resilience [have become more present](#). These anti-sanctions narratives affect all Member States regardless of their level of support for Ukraine. Although they have different positions on the war in Ukraine, many populist parties exploit anti-sanction narratives to fuel distrust in EU policies by encouraging a [reset](#) of EU-Russia relations.

The challenge of defining sanction effectiveness is also political because of the economic costs that public opinion should bear to continue the sanction regime and the possible gap with the expected outcomes. The most critical risk is the '[politicisation trap](#),' where seemingly supportive public opinion can shift to explicit dissensus if policy decisions clash with latent expectations. This point is particularly relevant for sanctions since public opinion can change quickly if the economic costs of sanctions increase. The [latest Eurobarometer survey](#) shows that public support for sanctioning Russia varies significantly across Member States as

socioeconomic cleavages play a relevant role in shaping the support for the EU's sanctions policy. Public opinion on sanctions is driven not only by security concerns but also by [economic and political factors](#) that underpin its stance.

Possible scenarios

The EU's ability to maintain political unity and public opinion approval around sanctions will be a critical test of its credibility. The most likely scenario is that sanctions against Russia will retain political and public backing as the EU can demonstrate their legitimacy and effectiveness. However, the current approach relies on a simplistic narrative – that sanctions alone will force Russia to change its behaviour – which creates unrealistic [public expectations](#). If these expectations are unsatisfied, Russia will politicise the issue, eroding public trust in the EU's foreign policy.

If these problems remain unchecked, the worst-case scenario might be a significant loss of credibility for the EU among its citizens. Populists could exploit Russian narratives to achieve political gains by advocating for the [end of sanctions](#). Nevertheless, this move would incur high political costs, undermining the EU's broader foreign and security policy. In the long term, the growing consensus of populist parties, who embrace these anti-sanction narratives, could weaken the commitment to Ukraine and compromise the European global influence.

Conversely, the best-case scenario would reinforce two realms of EU policy-making simultaneously. On the one hand, tackling Russian disinformation on sanctions improves the ability to communicate strategic decisions to European citizens. On the other hand, countering these misleading narratives would facilitate the adoption of new sanctions within EU institutions by strengthening political consensus, a crucial factor for decisions requiring unanimity.

Recommendations

This section presents three options to strengthen the European response to Russian disinformation on EU sanctions and boost democratic resilience through a bottom-up approach. The main goal is to improve the EU's communication on sanctioning by shaping an unbiased public discourse.

EUvsDisinfo+

The first proposal is to expand the EUvsDisinfo project into a dedicated Strategic Communication (StratCom) office for internal EU-citizen communications. This office would track misleading narratives aimed at undermining EU policies and provide clear, fact-based explanations on sanctions and other strategic initiatives like ReArm Europe and REPowerEU. Established in 2015 within the East StratCom Task Force (ESCTF) – a team of journalists and media experts within the European External Action Service – EUvsDisinfo is the [EU's main project](#) to counter pro-Kremlin disinformation and build resilience among European and Eastern Partnership audiences.

The advantages of this approach are twofold. First, it can be implemented quickly, as it builds on an existing project rather than requiring a new initiative. This approach mirrors the creation of the NATO [StratCom Centre of Excellence](#), which institutionalised strategic communications within a pre-existing framework. Second, the project could be multipurpose, with EUvsDisinfo+ structured into thematic chapters beyond sanctions, addressing other strategic priorities like energy independence and military cooperation, making it a versatile tool for internal and external communications.

However, there are notable disadvantages. EUvsDisinfo+ would still rely on reactive

debunking rather than proactive pre-bunking strategies. Fact-checking is typically slower than the spread of false narratives, and attempts to correct misinformation could risk being seen as acts of [censorship](#). Additionally, without transparent criteria to evaluate and correct false narratives, the project risks being perceived as a propaganda tool. The [2016 Fotyga report](#) stressed this point while criticising EUvsDisinfo for potentially undermining its credibility by acting as a “Ministry of Truth”.

A board to monitor sanctions against Russian media outlets

The EU has implemented unprecedented sanctions against Russian media outlets to protect its public opinion from media manipulation. The [European Court of Justice](#) has recently acknowledged the legality of such measures, provided they are temporary, proportionate, and justified. Building on this, the second proposal is to create a public board to monitor these sanctions. Public engagement would be twofold: an open-access portal similar to the EU Sanctions Map, allowing citizens to access transparent information on sanctioned media, and the inclusion of political representatives and civil society figures in the internal structure of the board to ensure diverse perspectives and democratic oversight.

This approach has two main advantages. First, it addresses the technical complexity of sanctions, which can seem elusive to public opinion. In particular, media sanctions [have been criticised](#) as potential censorship, raising concerns about conflicts with freedom of expression. A public board that engages directly with citizens could enhance transparency and reduce perceptions of political bias, making the process more legitimate.

Second, this board could promote closer cooperation between the EU, national governments, and non-governmental organisations. This board could create a [European network of fact-checkers](#), improving the EU's ability to counter disinformation.

However, ensuring the independence of this entity could be difficult, especially in polarised political contexts, where it might be seen as politically biased if the selection process lacks transparency. Additionally, establishing such a board could be costly and bureaucratically complex, requiring significant funding and resources, [which are often limited](#). Its operations might also overlap with existing bodies like the ESCTF, creating potential inefficiencies.

Civic Resilience Network

Overall, tackling disinformation should rely on civil society. Experts have noted that low trust in traditional media and the lack of credible voices in public debate are [significant challenges](#), especially when communicating sensitive issues like sanctions against Russia. In response, the third proposal is to establish a CRN – a network of ambassadors trained to explain complex strategic decisions like imposing restrictive measures. The CRN would include educational hubs in partnership with universities, think tanks, and journalists, providing thematic modules about sanctions, defence, and European security. These hubs would also act as local resilience centres, helping citizens understand strategic decisions through simulation games and interactive learning.

The CRN will be intergenerational, engaging young people and adults, thus ensuring a broader reach and more significant community impact. It will also empower civil society to shape narratives around European security and the CFSP. Local organisations, [deeply embedded in their communities](#) can identify policy gaps and adapt communications strategies more

effectively. The role of local ambassadors also creates a feedback loop, helping these organisations refine their messaging while improving public understanding of EU policies.

However, this initiative requires significant coordination, as Europe's diverse languages, cultures, and political landscapes can complicate consistent messaging. There is also a risk of political co-optation, where local actors might use these platforms to encourage politically biased narratives that undermine the CRN's credibility.

Conclusion

The report has examined the challenge of countering Russian disinformation campaigns targeting the EU's sanction policy and proposed three policies to improve EU-citizen communications and democratic resilience. Sanctions represent an impactful tool employed by the EU to limit Russia's economic and military capabilities in Ukraine, while remaining a debated issue among policy-makers and academic experts.

The second and third recommendations should be prioritised because they directly engage citizens in fostering a more resilient public sphere. As Russia's war against Ukraine persists, the EU faces the challenge of consolidating its role as a full-fledged security actor that also requires a strong, coherent narrative of its strategic choices, like sanctions. By proposing these three recommendations, this brief aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on countering Russian disinformation while reinforcing EU-citizen cohesion on foreign and security policies.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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