The European Sentiment Compass
Culture clash: Russia, Ukraine, and the fight for the European public

by Pawel Zerka
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Summary

- Russia's war on Ukraine is a test of Europe's values of openness, freedom, solidarity, and individual responsibility.
- According to ECFR's research, European sentiment is strong in the EU today; the public holds positive attitudes towards the EU and Europe; and most governments are dedicated to European cooperation.
- European citizens and governments have shown unprecedented support for Ukraine, but European leaders face various dilemmas about how to handle Russian culture, disinformation, and people in the context of the war – and their responses to these challenges have consequences for European sentiment.
- Their approach can either reassert European values, helping to sustain European unity and support for Ukraine. Or it can undermine these values, presenting the EU as weak and hypocritical, and eroding Europeans' confidence in the EU and solidarity with Ukraine.
- Rather than follow their protective instincts, European governments should display confidence in liberalism and in the European civil society which, over the past year, has demonstrated its resilience.

Introduction

"When Russia invaded, it wasn't just Ukraine being tested," President Joe Biden declared during his visit to Warsaw in February. "The whole world faced a test for the ages. Europe was being tested. America was being tested. NATO was being tested. All democracies were being tested." Biden was right in recognising the major implications this war has for the world, but he was wrong to suggest these implications are broadly similar for Europe, America, and other democracies. All of these have faced fundamental questions about sovereignty and democracy. But given the everlasting question of whether Russia is or is not part of Europe, the complex (and often very tragic) history of Russia's relations with its European neighbours, and its continuous soft power across

much of the region, Russia's war on Ukraine has become a major challenge for European culture, values, and identity as well.

More specifically, the war has tested Europe's credibility in its declared attachment to the ideas of openness, freedom, solidarity, and individual responsibility. European countries and citizens have demonstrated unprecedented support for Ukraine and Ukrainians – but European authorities have faced major dilemmas too. Should they boycott Russian culture as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine? Should they crack down on Russian media in the fight against disinformation? Should they impose sanctions on Russian citizens to make them pay the consequences for their government's war of aggression? The way they respond to these and other similar dilemmas can either reassert or undermine European values.

Vladimir Putin repeatedly [presents Europe](#) as declining, losing, weak, and hypocritical. He frames his idea of Eurasia in opposition to Europe. According to the historian, Timothy Snyder, for at least a decade Putin has been engaged in an [ideological war](#) with the West more broadly, and with Europe specifically. In that fight, the war in Ukraine might provide an opening – and perhaps a decisive one.

Europe's response is not just key to its image in the eyes of the world and of Europeans themselves. The sustainability of its unity and support for Ukraine is also at stake.

When asked how European countries should help Ukraine, Ukrainian officials typically call for the delivery of weapons and ammunition. Understandably, military equipment is seen as solely capable of making an immediate difference on the battlefield. But the longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the more important it will become to ensure that European support remains acceptable for European citizens and convincing for Ukrainians. This will require a strong 'European sentiment', to borrow an expression from some of the architects of Europe's post-1945 integration. It would be short-sighted for the European Union to neglect that part of the struggle.

Russia is actively seeking to undermine European sentiment in some ways, for example spreading disinformation across the EU in an attempt to divide the public. But Russia can also influence Europeans' perceptions of the EU and the war without doing much. Russia's soft power, including its so-called traditional values – which appeal to much of the European far right – and its high culture, provides channels for Russia and its sympathetic allies to legitimise the Kremlin's actions. And by responding in the wrong way to these influences, the EU and member states could inadvertently play into Putin's hands.

When responding to the war in Ukraine, Europeans therefore need to confront not only Russia's active interference but also – and perhaps more often – their own vulnerabilities. In some countries, these consist of a "[fatal fascination with Russia](#)". Elsewhere, they involve a tendency to denigrate and essentialise all Russians. But European authorities' tendency to adopt defensive and protective measures when dealing with the multifaceted challenge that Russia represents for the EU is also an important vulnerability.

For these reasons, this year's European Sentiment Compass – the second edition of our annual publication and a joint initiative by ECFR and the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) – explores how Europe is responding to the challenges that Russia's war on Ukraine constitute for European sentiment, culture, and values.

The paper starts with an assessment of the state of European sentiment over a year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It then examines the difficulties the EU and its member states have experienced in responding to three key dilemmas: how to handle Russian disinformation, Russian culture, and Russian people. The paper ends with recommendations for how European countries can address these challenges without compromising their values. Their key message is that European governments need to look for solutions that vindicate – and do not undermine – their values. Otherwise, they risk damaging the European sentiment on which the continent's unity and its solidarity with Ukraine depend.

European sentiment under strain

One of the founding fathers of the EU, Jean Monnet, predicted that "Europe will be forged in crises." The war in Ukraine, and Europe's response to it, will shape the EU one way or another.

European sentiment can be understood as a sense of belonging to a common space, sharing a common future, and subscribing to common values. This has clearly been on display in the great solidarity that European countries and citizens have demonstrated towards Ukraine, and one another, since Russia's invasion last year. Research conducted for this study reveals a robust European sentiment, including when compared to its strong performance [one year ago](#).

But our study also shows that the war has been a great clarifier, prompting Europeans to look at their continent with a fresh and more sober gaze. It has demonstrated the strength of European civil society. But it has also uncovered Europe's various mistakes and weaknesses that may affect how the region responds to the challenges that the war represents for its culture and values.
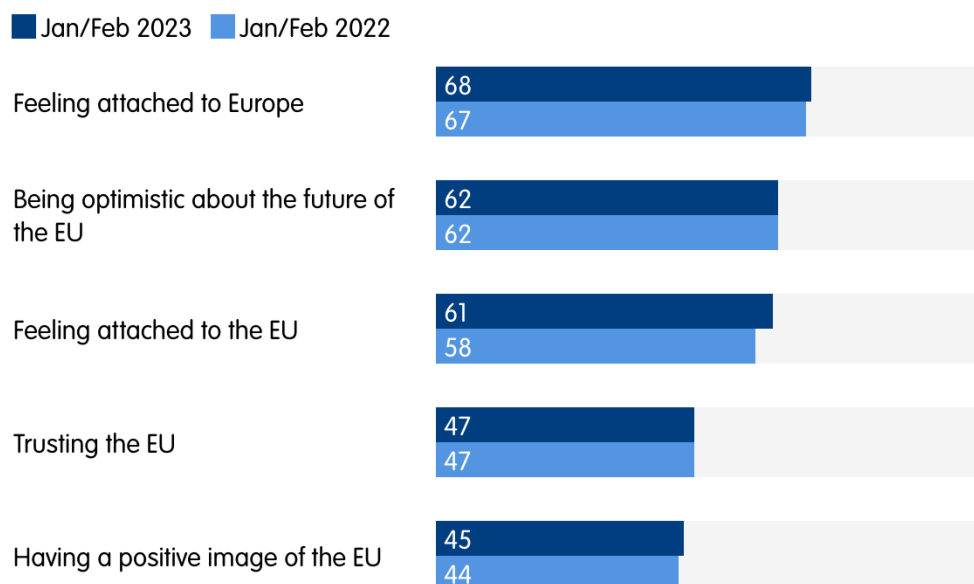
Moment of clarity

Over the past year, the war has shown European citizens the benefits of EU membership. It has posed a palpable threat to European values and reminded Europeans of what unites them. The values of democracy, rule of law, human rights, civil society, and freedom went from abstract terms to something very tangible. Europeans have come to see the fundamental differences between democracy and authoritarianism, openness and repression, and integration and empire.

In that context, it might be surprising to see almost no change in public attitudes towards Europe and the EU compared with one year ago. But public attitudes were already strong back then. It is therefore encouraging to see that a clear majority across

Europe continues to feel attached to Europe and to the EU, and is optimistic about the EU's future. The developments of the past year have not managed to undercut this.

Change in public perceptions of Europe
Across 27 EU member states, in per cent

■ Jan/Feb 2023 ■ Jan/Feb 2022

Feeling attached to Europe	68 / 67
Being optimistic about the future of the EU	62 / 62
Feeling attached to the EU	61 / 58
Trusting the EU	47 / 47
Having a positive image of the EU	45 / 44

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 96 and 98.
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However, the results are not uniform across the EU. In France and Greece, less than 50 per cent of respondents feel optimistic about the future of the EU. Attachment to the EU is also relatively low in the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Greece.

To assess European sentiment across the 27 EU member states in 2023, ECFR gathered data on ten variables. Our analysis shows that, in the vast majority of countries, the public holds positive attitudes towards the EU and Europe. With the exception of Hungary – and, to some extent, Poland and Bulgaria – the governments of EU member states are pro-European. The governments of four countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Slovakia, and Slovenia) have grown more attached to Europe over the past year, while only Bulgaria has become more sceptical. When it comes to supporting Ukraine, 12 EU member states have dedicated at least 0.5 per cent of their GDP to the cause. Overall, Denmark displays the most strengths when it comes to European sentiment in 2023, while Greece shows the fewest.

Strengths of European sentiment in 2023

	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	GR	HU	IE
The government has a positive attitude towards Europe[1]	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓
The government's attitude towards Europe has improved over the last year[1]						✓	✓							
There are no major anti-European political forces[1]														
Anti-European political forces have become less popular over the last year[1]						✓	✓	✓						
The public feels attached to the EU[2]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
The public feels attached to Europe[2]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
The public trusts the EU[2]				✓			✓		✓				✓	✓
The public has a positive image of the EU[2]							✓							✓
The public is optimistic about the future of the EU[2]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
The government has provided major support to Ukraine[3]			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓					

	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE
The government has a positive attitude towards Europe[1]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The government's attitude towards Europe has improved over the last year[1]										✓	✓		
There are no major anti-European political forces[1]		✓		✓	✓								
Anti-European political forces have become less popular over the last year[1]					✓						✓		
The public feels attached to the EU[2]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The public feels attached to Europe[2]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
The public trusts the EU[2]		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
The public has a positive image of the EU[2]			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
The public is optimistic about the future of the EU[2]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The government has provided major support to Ukraine[3]		✓	✓			✓	✓			✓			✓

Source:
[1] based on responses provided by ECFR associate researchers;
[2] at least 50 per cent positive answers, according to Standard Eurobarometer 98, winter 2022-2023;
[3] at least 0.5 per cent of GDP, according to Ukraine Support Tracker, IFW Kiel, February 2023
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Despite this, it would be a mistake to look at European sentiment only through rose-coloured glasses. As one commentator put it, "war has a way of un-obscuring things". Over the last year, many Europeans have realised the mistakes that the EU and its member states have made in the past, including relying excessively on Russian fossil fuels, under-reacting to Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014, and neglecting the need to beef up their military strength. In Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, this has led many people to question German and French leadership in Europe more openly, reactivating old stereotypes. But it has also provoked some soul-searching in Finland, Austria, and Germany – which led the German government to declare a *Zeitenwende*.

Strength of European sentiment in 2023

< 3 strengths   3–6   ≥ 6
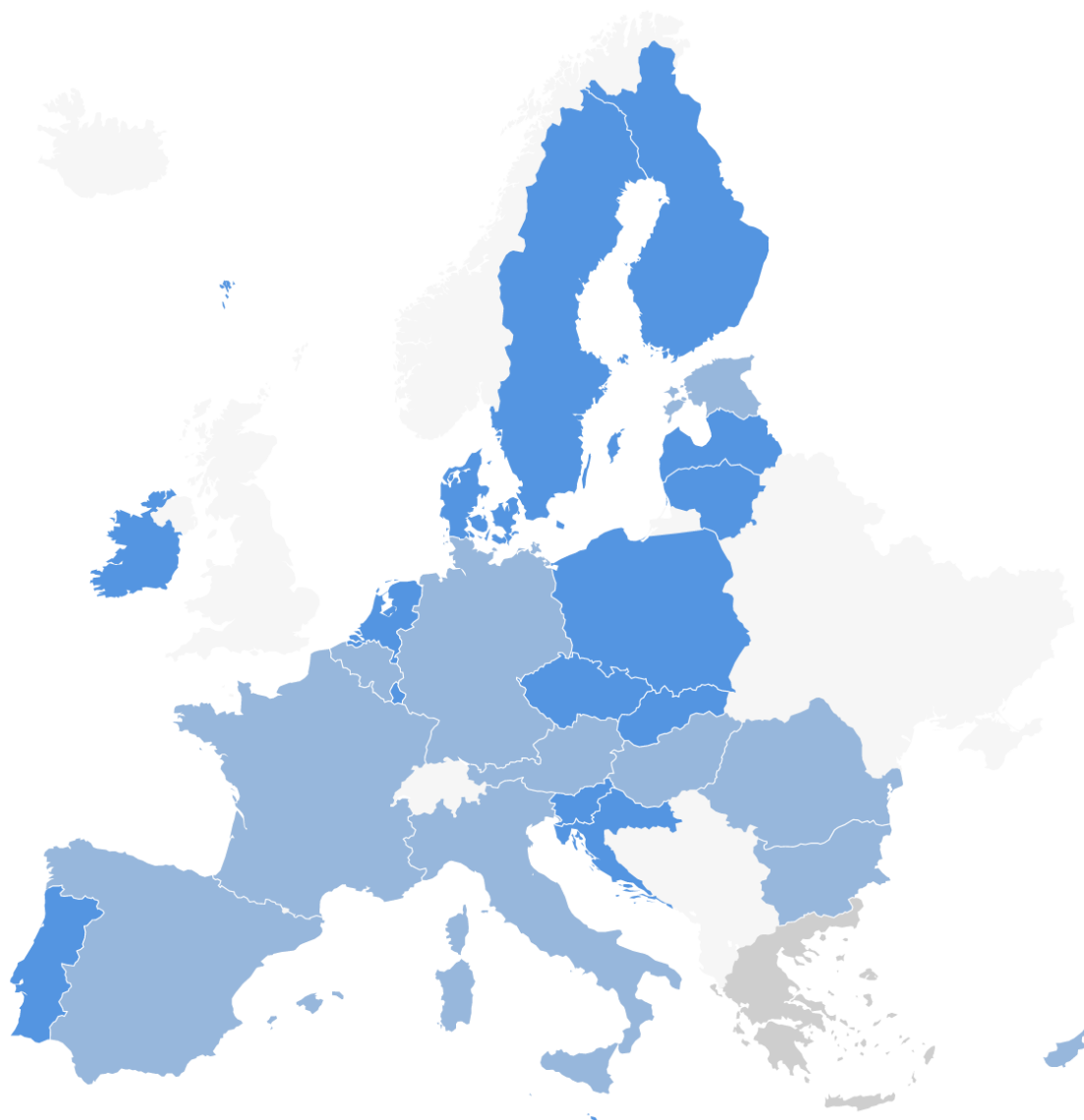
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The last year has also been just the first round of a struggle that is likely to last much longer. The EU's current unity may prove fragile if cost-of-living concerns begin to dominate political debates. Support for Kyiv may also wane if the Ukrainian counter-offensive, expected in the coming months, proves ineffective. And while the political parties that lambasted the EU in the past have initially struggled to adapt to wartime politics, they may regain momentum, undermining European unity. In April, the far-right Finns Party came second in Finland's parliamentary election. In Slovakia, current polls show that a pro-Russian coalition could be formed after the country's parliamentary election in September. In Austria, the Russia-friendly, extreme-right Freedom Party is

currently leading in the polls ahead of the general election in 2024. And, across the EU, anti-European parties are already preparing for the elections to the European Parliament in May 2024, which could help them boost their popularity.

Although European sentiment remains strong, we should not overlook the challenges ahead and the vulnerabilities of European countries to them. As part of our comparison, we collected data on a further ten variables that reflect the risks to European sentiment in 2023.

Risk factors to European sentiment in 2023

	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	GR	HU	IE
Large Ukrainianian population[1]						×		×						
Large Russian population[1]				×				×			×			
Cultural affinity or fascination with Russia[2]	×		×	×				×		×	×	×		
Historical grudges against Ukraine[2]													×	
High level of distrust towards the EU[3]	×	×	×	×	×	×				×	×	×	×	
Russia-friendly government[2]													×	
Low media freedom[4]			×	×	×							×	×	
Low media literacy[5]			×	×	×							×	×	
Heated national political context[2]			×			×				×		×		
Major cost-of-living concerns[6]	×		×	×		×		×				×	×	

	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE
Large Ukrainianian population[1]							×						
Large Russian population[1]		×											
Cultural affinity or fascination with Russia[2]	×	×	×							×			
Historical grudges against Ukraine[2]							×		×				
High level of distrust towards the EU[3]	×									×	×	×	
Russia-friendly government[2]													
Low media freedom[4]	×				×		×			×	×		
Low media literacy[5]					×					×	×		
Heated national political context[2]					×	×				×		×	
Major cost-of-living concerns[6]		×	×				×	×	×	×			×

The results show that concerns about the cost of living are strong across much of the EU – including in wealthy Austria and Sweden. Anti-European parties are worryingly strong in at least ten member states (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Netherlands, France, Romania, and Slovakia). Overall, Bulgaria and Hungary are the two member states in which European sentiment is currently most vulnerable – whereas Denmark, Finland, Ireland, and Luxembourg are the only ones where such risks are

minimal. The country profiles at the end of the paper explain each country's strengths and risk factors for European sentiment in more detail.

Risks to European sentiment in 2023

< 3 risk factors   3–6   ≥ 6

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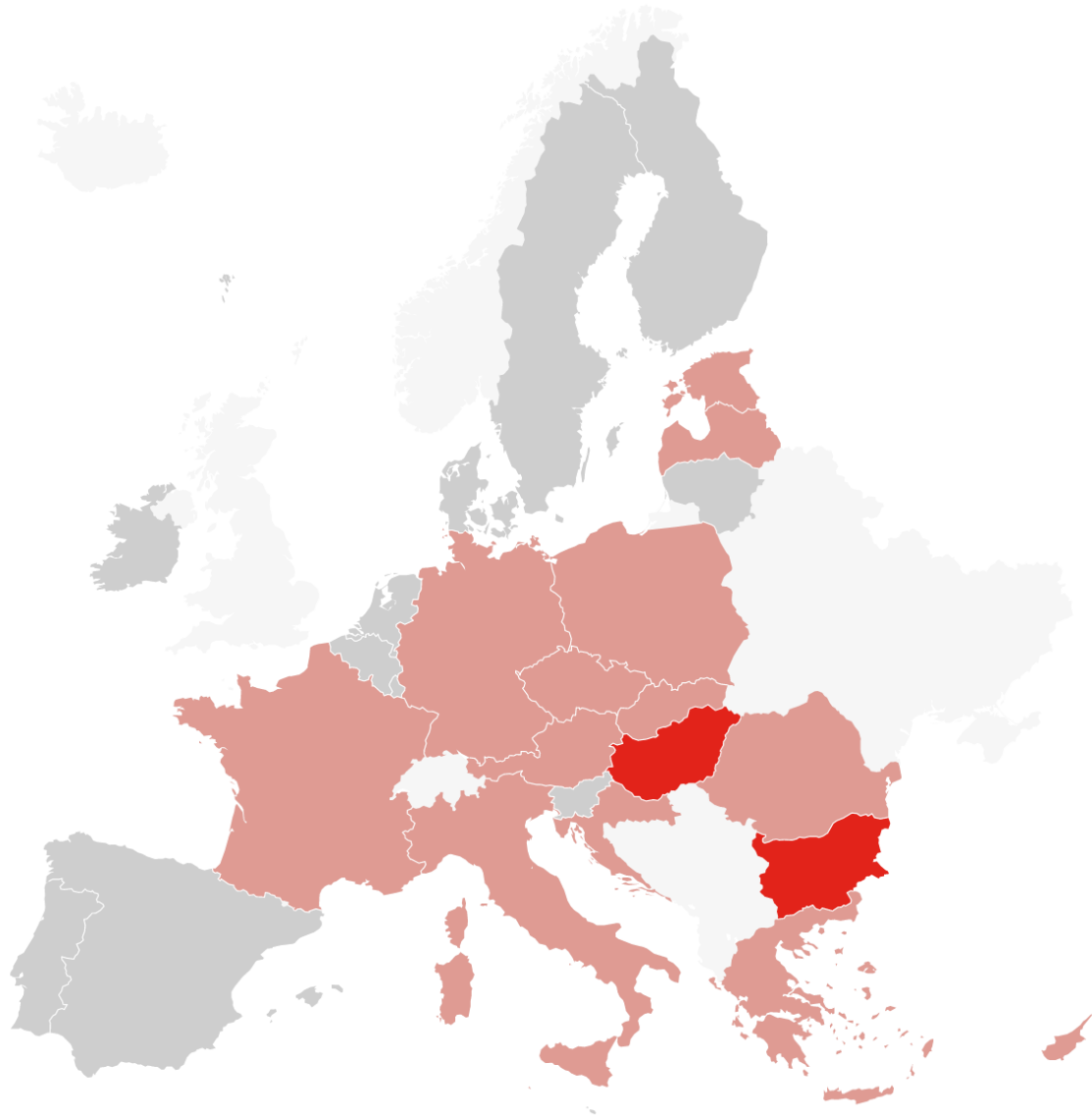
The Russian challenge

Russia has an interest in undermining European sentiment. In the context of the war, Moscow desperately needs to weaken Europe's solidarity with Ukraine. But already before the war, it worked hard to generate divisions within European societies and to amplify public distrust towards the EU as part of its ideological fight with Europe. Its support for the European far right and major disinformation campaigns, for example during past elections in France and the Netherlands, illustrated that effort.

The Kremlin has some active tools of influence at its disposal – such as these disinformation campaigns, or direct links to European politicians, journalists, and businesspeople – to undermine European sentiment. Several of the risks to European sentiment in 2023 included in our study therefore relate to member states' vulnerability to Russian influence. European authorities are right to try to stop these active forms of influence. But they should not assume that these constitute the main risk.

Because, simultaneously, Russia can undermine European unity and the EU's support for Ukraine without doing much – simply by way of its soft power and countries' vulnerability to it. Some European societies, such as Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Greece, may be receptive to the Kremlin's narratives because of a strong historical or cultural affinity with Russia. Further west – in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, or Belgium – the elites often have a soft spot for Russian culture, which may inadvertently affect their perception of Russia and its actions. In Latvia and Estonia, the presence of a significant Russian population and people's post-Soviet habits of watching Russian television channels, provide another avenue of influence. And several European far-right parties replicate Russian narratives, including about the war, because these may further their own political goals. Despite being only casual allies of Putin, they are part of Russia's soft power too.

In most of these cases, the risk to European sentiment is not about Russia's actions – but about European reactions. In an effort to block Moscow's influence, European authorities might be tempted to encourage a boycott of Russian culture, to crack down on all Russian media, or to stop Russians from coming to Europe. But such reactions have major trade-offs and can prove counterproductive. They would clash with the values that Europe stands for – those of openness, freedom of speech and cultural expression, and individual responsibility. Eventually, they would undermine European sentiment too – by calling into question the validity of these values; by promoting the perception that Europe is weak, vulnerable, and hypocritical; and by making Europeans wonder whether the war in Ukraine is about anything more than crude power politics.

The following three sections explore how the EU and its member states have dealt with three major dilemmas related to Russian influence in Europe: Russian disinformation, culture, and people.

Dealing with disinformation

Over the past few years, European actors have taken various steps to defend the European information sphere from Russian influence. Several institutions and NGOs –

including the [European External Action Service's East Stratcom Taskforce](#), or the [European Digital Media Observatory](#) – have been working efficiently to identify Russian disinformation across the EU, especially on social media.

In February 2022 – in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – the EU banned the media outlets Russia Today and Sputnik, while the Baltic states banned many other Russian-speaking media outlets. Later that year, the EU introduced strict regulations for technology platforms to combat online disinformation under the [Digital Services Act](#) (whose preparation started long before the war). The European Commission also launched a pilot version of a [media ownership monitor](#), which aims to enhance the transparency of news media ownership and control in EU countries. European authorities also exposed further cases of Russia's active disinformation efforts – most recently, the [Kremlin's plan](#) to build an anti-war alliance between the far right and the far left in Germany.

But despite restricting Russia's direct propaganda and making major efforts to uncover its activity on the internet, Russian disinformation is still present in Europe. In some countries – including Italy, Slovakia, Portugal, and Austria – some journalists, commentators, and politicians are allegedly bankrolled by the Russian state. The Russian media often relay their interviews to demonstrate what 'serious' European politicians are saying. The Kremlin's diplomats, who are spread across Europe, have become more active on social media, and local radicals often share their messages. In [Italy](#) and [Bulgaria](#), some media and journalists may have links to Russian businesses, which could explain their pro-Russian stance.

However, Moscow and St. Petersburg do not centrally direct all disinformation in Europe. More often than not, Russia can tacitly appeal to political actors and independent media that have their own interest in discussing taboo issues and other uncomfortable topics.

Over the last decade, several European far-right or anti-European parties have cozied up to Russia. While some of them – for example, the French National Rally – have received loans from Russian banks for their campaigns, others have simply found a casual ally in Vladimir Putin. Some admire him for the defence of what they call "traditional values" and the world of "civilisations". Since Russia's invasion, some of them (including the National Rally's leader, Marine Le Pen) have distanced themselves from the Kremlin. But their typical ideological orientation continues to overlap with the anti-liberalism of Putin's regime. The same goes for emerging 'anti-taboo' media, such as [Ongehoord](#) in the Netherlands or [Omerta](#) in France. These actors promote many Russian talking points, even if most probably on their own behalf.

Since February 2022, some EU member states have increased their efforts to deal with this sort of disinformation too. For example, the German authorities have cracked down on some Russian 'influencers'. In May 2022, the public prosecutor's office [launched](#) investigations against one for "rewarding and approving criminal acts" concerning Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. In the Czech Republic, those who deny Russian atrocities can now be prosecuted under legal restrictions on free speech.

But dealing with Russian narratives that are promoted by actors other than the Kremlin has become a major headache for the EU and its member states. All too often, they have taken radical steps that do not sit well with Europe's attachment to free speech – and which may present Europe as weak and vulnerable.

For example, last year, a Latvian media watchdog cancelled the licence for a popular Russian opposition television channel, TV Rain (Dozhd), leading to major controversy. The watchdog justified this on the basis that the channel had spread several Russian imperial narratives – which was questioned by several civil society organisations in Europe. In the end, TV Rain was allowed to broadcast throughout the EU from the Netherlands.

Similarly, some experts criticised the European Commission's insistence on a strict approach to fighting online disinformation as part of the EU's landmark Digital Services Act. They argued that by moderating online content, the EU's approach could prompt online platforms to inadvertently remove important, genuine content; encourage users to flee to smaller and less scrupulous platforms; and generate mixed signals if users assume that as a result all the unlabelled content was trustworthy.

Laws on fake news, which various EU countries have adopted in previous years, are problematic in their own ways too. They create the risk that governments can abuse them and interfere with free speech – especially given the very thin line between fake news and what could be considered legitimate opinions.

A Dutch civil-society coalition even contested the ban of Russia Today and Sputnik. It filed a petition to the European Court of Justice, arguing that the decision by European leaders "raises questions about our rule of law and what we stand for as a society". Others asked why European authorities had banned these outlets, but not the Russian state-owned news website TASS.

European authorities tend to reduce the challenge they are facing to the fight with active Russian disinformation. This is why they celebrated the 2022 ban of Russia Today and Sputnik as a major achievement. But by adopting this narrow and defensive approach, they misidentify the sources of the threat that they are facing and ignore the public's receptiveness to such narratives. Instead of reasserting their European values, they risk undermining them – and European sentiment too.

Culture at war

In the summer of 2022, the Portuguese singer, Pedro Abrunhosa, performed an anti-Putin song at a concert, which included the words "Vladimir Putin, go fuck yourself!". The Russian embassy in Portugal contacted the Portuguese authorities and demanded a public apology. But the ministries of foreign affairs and culture replied that, according to freedom of expression, Abrunhosa was permitted to say such things in public. The event showed one of the many ways in which European countries are reacting to Russia's war on Ukraine and exposed the importance of culture as a form of resistance and solidarity. Culture plays an important role in shaping the population's sentiments towards Ukraine

and Russia, and in doing so, contributes to sustaining public support for European policy responses to the war.

But European governments have puzzled over how to react to the continued presence of Russian culture during the war. As with the fight against Russian disinformation, some have adopted radical solutions, such as encouraging a boycott of Russian culture – despite the EU's attachment to the freedom of cultural expression – while most have left Russian culture largely alone.

Cultural solidarity with Ukraine

Since Russia's invasion, European countries have gone to great lengths to help Ukraine and its people. On top of military, economic, and political support, they have welcomed up to 8 million Ukrainian refugees and, by activating the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time in the EU's history, facilitated their access to jobs, healthcare, schools, and accommodation.

But the story of European solidarity would be incomplete if it did not acknowledge Europe's actions in the area of culture and symbols. Many member states – including Germany, Finland, France, the Czech Republic, and Latvia – have launched special funds and programmes to help Ukrainian artists, scholars, and journalists. The ECF and other foundations launched public-philanthropic initiatives, such as the Culture Solidarity Fund. A coalition of cultural organisations called for a European Cultural Deal for Ukraine. The continent has seen a proliferation of exhibitions and film festivals dedicated to Ukraine, as well as performances of Ukrainian ballets and concerts by Ukrainian pop singers. In 2022, the Kyiv symphony orchestra performed in France for the first time in its 40-year history.

Europeans quickly realised the power of symbols too. Thousands of institutions and historical monuments across the country have flown the Ukrainian flag alongside the national and the European one. In Poland, people no longer refer to a certain type of dumpling as Russian dumplings – now widely calling them Ukrainian dumplings instead. UNESCO has also recognised Ukraine's culture of cooking borsch as an endangered Ukrainian heritage tradition. And Ukraine's victory at the 2022 Eurovision song contest showed a Europe-wide display of support too.

These are more than symbolic gestures. They are a way to resist and fight back against Russia's weaponisation of culture in the context of the war in Ukraine. Putin has consistently questioned the Ukrainian cultural identity, claiming that Ukraine is just a part of the "Russian world" (*Russkij mir*), destined to be reunited with Russia under a common church, leader, and language. The Russian army is stealing artefacts from Ukrainian museums, breaching all the international conventions on the protection of cultural property, including those of UNESCO and the Council of Europe, to which Russia is a party. Meanwhile, Russian bombs are destroying Ukrainian cultural heritage, such as monuments and churches.

Russia's cultural allure

Europeans have witnessed Ukraine's domestic efforts to push back against Russia in the area of culture – such as by [demolishing monuments](#) of the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in the country. As a sign of solidarity with Ukraine, European cultural institutions have often been much more cautious and selective about presenting Russian culture too. In the Netherlands, the Haarlem Philharmonic replaced planned concerts of Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky works with a concert for Ukraine – [generating controversy](#). In Croatia, the national theatre removed performances of Pushkin's novel, "*Eugene Onegin*", from its programme, and eliminated Tchaikovsky compositions from the repertoire. The Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre took similar steps.

But most other European countries did not share this approach. In Paris, Russian cultural events – from concerts to exhibitions to book fairs – have largely gone unaffected. Russian culture still has its place in mainstream cultural life, even if Ukrainian culture is increasingly visible too, especially through photo exhibitions. While some institutions cancelled concerts and exhibitions at the beginning of the war, Russian composers are now making their way back to major concert houses and Russian art is still exhibited in major French museums.

European cultural institutions have usually stopped cooperating with Russian artists who are either directly related to the Russian state, or apologetic about Putin. For example, the Russian conductor and friend of Putin, Valery Gergiev, lost his contracts with the German, Finnish, and Dutch philharmonic orchestras. But approaches to these artists varied too: the opera singer, [Anna Netrebko](#) – another long-time supporter of Putin who only [belatedly](#) criticised the war in an online post – had her concerts cancelled in Milan, Munich, and Hamburg, but continued to perform in Austria, Slovenia, and Monaco.

The tricky question for European governments, institutions, and citizens alike is whether Russian culture should be present at all in today's Europe – whether the artists in question are related to the Kremlin or not. After all, Russian culture is part of Moscow's soft power. Many [argue](#) that Russian literature has, for centuries, played an important role in shaping negative stereotypes about Ukraine – including through the works of Russian dissident artists, like Joseph Brodsky. [According](#) to Ukraine's minister for culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko, "Russian culture [is] used to hide what [is] really happening in Russia, to make Russia look interesting, tidy". From this perspective, giving Europeans the opportunity to admire the Russian ballet or a concert could inadvertently lead them to also adopt softer attitudes towards the Russian regime and the war. In particular, they might become more susceptible to the Russian imperial narrative, whereby Russia includes Ukraine, and the war is just a family feud. After all, Russian propaganda promotes the idea that Ukrainian culture is a derivative of Russian culture.

European governments have offered varied responses to this dilemma. For example, in [Latvia](#) and [Lithuania](#), ministers of culture have agreed with the call from their Ukrainian counterpart to boycott Russian culture, inviting cultural institutions in their countries to review their repertoires. Danish and Portuguese ministers initially did the same. Meanwhile, the German government's commissioner for culture and the media, Claudia

Roth, took a different approach, [saying](#) that the "war is being waged by Putin, not Pushkin".

Some cultural institutions have argued that Russian culture can be part of the solution. For example, the Royal Park Theatre and opera house [La Monnaie](#) in Brussels chose to keep their Russian programmes for 2022/2023, stating that their mission is to "unite and defend culture as the cement that binds Europe together". Meanwhile, [a theatre in Warsaw](#), rather than changing its programme, instead modified the script of a play by the Russian playwright, Anton Chekhov, as a form of protest against Russia's military aggression in Ukraine.

Yet other cultural institutions across the EU have engaged in this fight in a different way, by deliberately giving Russian dissidents a platform. In the Czech Republic, public cultural institutions stopped cooperating with artists from Russia and Belarus as a general rule – but oppressed artists were still welcome, as shown by the concert by the Russian performance art group, Pussy Riot, which openly protests against the Russian state, in Prague last year. And several EU countries have simply focused on supporting the presence of Ukrainian culture – as a form of an affirmative action to boost its recognition and visibility.

European governments should resist the temptation to pro-actively limit the presence of Russian culture in the public sphere. Instead, they should respect the freedom of cultural institutions to set their own programming – and to offer ways in which culture could respond to the challenge posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Some of them would remove Russian works and artists from their repertoires. Others would find opportunities to problematise Russian culture, or display artists whom Europeans usually know as Russian but who were in fact Ukrainian, such as Kazimir Malevich, or Belarusian, such as Marc Chagall. If, instead, European governments focus on defensive and protective measures, they risk undermining the very values – such as freedom of expression – that the EU stands for.

Power of the people

European governments have also taken different approaches to their treatment of Russian citizens. In times of war, European leaders might be tempted to make use of a black-and-white rhetoric, distancing themselves from Russian people as a whole. By exploiting the contrast between 'them' and 'us', they might hope to maintain unity among Western governments and keep the morale high on the European and Ukrainian side.

But this sort of 'othering' can undermine the values that the EU stands for, such as openness, diversity, and individual responsibility. And it may prevent Europeans from recognising potential allies from the opposing side.

Collective responsibility

At times, some European governments have conflated the Russian people and the Russian state, considering them jointly responsible for the war. This has been particularly visible when EU countries had to decide whether to maintain previous visa requirements for Russian citizens and what approach to adopt towards Russian draft-evaders.

The West has tried to impose smart, targeted sanctions on Russia. But some EU member states directed travel bans at the entire Russian society. In Poland, the government debated a travel ban for Russian citizens in autumn last year. Public media and politicians of the ruling party suggested that Russians should bear a "collective responsibility" for the war initiated by their regime. Poland, the Czech Republic, Finland, and the three Baltic states eventually introduced visa bans and urged other EU member states to follow suit.

Various European leaders have been quite explicit in their belief that Russians bear a collective responsibility for the war. In this vein, Lithuania's prime minister, Ingrida Simonyte, opposed accepting Russians who were fleeing the mobilisation into Lithuania. "It would be incomprehensible for me if we allowed people to enter Lithuania on humanitarian grounds only because the war was OK for them when they saw it on TV, sitting on a sofa, but it is no longer OK when your government and your Shoigu call you to join the army," she said. According to the Eurobarometer in 2022, in six EU countries (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Greece, and Cyprus) at least a quarter of the population blamed all Russians – rather than just the regime – for the war. Across the continent, media have often made little effort to distinguish between the Russian regime and Russian citizens, thus promoting the perception that the whole of Russia is united in this war.

At the other end of the spectrum, the prevailing opinion in some countries in Western Europe is that one should clearly differentiate between the people and the regime. France, Germany, Austria, and Luxembourg have opposed the idea of a visa ban for Russian citizens. When Putin announced the partial mobilisation in September 2022, some countries – including Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium – kept their borders open for Russia's draft evaders. In Germany, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees has reported a significant rise in the number of Russian asylum seekers: in the first three months of this year almost as many Russians filed applications (2,381) as throughout the whole of 2022 (2,851).

Recognising the responsibility of ordinary Russians may be, to some extent, justified. Polling by the Levada Center has consistently demonstrated a very high level of support for the war among the Russian population. And while, in an authoritarian country, respondents might feel constrained in their responses, there are other signals that suggest a high popular backing for Putin's "special operation". Protests are scarce; discussions on social media are combative; and several Russian dissidents confirm that the Russian state is conducting this war with the backing of the society, not against it.

There may also be a security rationale for at least some of the restrictions on Russians' access to Europe: for example, since introducing travel restrictions on Russians, Finland

has [reported] a considerable drop in espionage practices. But, whatever the rationale, such restrictions call the EU's attachment to individual, rather than collective, responsibility into question. Furthermore, European societies should not close all channels of communication with Russian society. They should preserve some form of dialogue to facilitate the rebuilding of proper neighbourly relations in a more or less distant future. Especially because there are also brave Russian activists, journalists, and artists who are trying to change their country from within in the face of repression.

Belarus factor

Taking a blanket approach to people and exploiting a strong 'us' and 'them' divide also risks reinstating a new iron curtain and excluding other potential allies, such as the democratic Belarusians. Many of them experience a double whammy: persecuted at home and treated with growing suspicion across Europe. After all, Russian troops are stationed in Belarus and the Russian army has fired bombs at Ukraine from Belarusian territory. And, according to recent [announcements] by Putin and the president of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, Belarus may soon host Russian nuclear bombs. Given Minsk's complicity in Moscow's war on Ukraine, the EU and the United States have included Belarus in several rounds of the sanctions that they have imposed on Russia.

However, these actions stigmatise the Belarusian population too – as demonstrated by the radical deterioration in the [perception] of Belarusians in neighbouring Poland, and by a growing discrimination against them in the EU countries where many have taken refuge. This only plays into Putin's hands. He wants to promote an image of a "Russian world" that extends to Belarus and Ukraine, among other countries. Europeans – and Ukrainians – should insist on their difference, both for moral and strategic reasons.

While Russia has helped Lukashenka to re-establish control over the country since 2020, the Belarusian people (much more than the Russians) continue to be strongly critical of their country's regime. This makes them an [important asset] in the war. And indeed, Belarusian partisans have mobilised against Russia's actions in their country, carrying out several successful acts of sabotage against the transport of Russian weapons through Belarus. Belarusian hackers have been [very active] too. Several thousand Belarusians have [joined] Ukrainian soldiers on the battlefield. They need to feel their efforts are recognised if they are to continue in this way.

Fighting back

It would help Putin if Europe became generally known as a region of hypocrites and underdogs. It would allow him to claim victory in the ideological fight with Europe, could strengthen his grip in Russia, and would undermine European sentiment – and with it, Europe's support for Ukraine. And it could undercut the Ukrainian morale too.

For the moment, such a perception of Europe is prevalent in Russia, but not elsewhere. A major [public opinion poll] that ECFR conducted at the beginning of the year shows that Russians usually perceive the EU in negative terms: as hypocritical, untrustworthy,

aggressive, and declining. But the public in the world's other major powers – China, India, the US, and Turkey – tends to have a much more positive perception of the EU. They typically see it as strong, peaceful, and rising.

Which best describes the EU? Pick up to two. In per cent

	RU	CH	TK	IN	US
Rising	7	11	25	54	17
Strong	11	25	26	36	27
Peaceful	2	21	14	34	21
Trustworthy	2	11	10	26	22
Principled	7	3	3	5	9
Declining	19	17	26	3	12
Weak	12	7	8	5	12
Aggressive	22	7	1	2	4
Untrustworthy	29	15	22	4	5
Hypocritical	37	9	12	1	7

Source: Gallup International Association (US, CN, TR, RU, IN), December 2022/January 2023.
ECFR · ecfr.eu

Moreover, the European public – in the nine EU countries polled – is also predominantly positive about the EU. They most frequently describe it as peaceful and trustworthy. Many see it as strong and principled. And only in Spain does more than a fifth of the population describe the EU as declining.

Which best describes the EU? Pick up to two. In per cent

	DK	EE	FR	DE	IT	PL	PT	RO	ES
Rising	15	11	5	8	7	8	11	11	6
Strong	21	14	13	12	8	14	16	15	11
Peaceful	23	24	14	23	19	28	20	15	11
Trustworthy	25	20	19	23	20	21	27	17	14
Principled	14	14	12	13	18	21	29	12	18
Declining	7	15	14	9	13	8	9	11	21
Weak	10	16	17	11	17	8	5	9	10
Aggressive	1	1	3	3	2	3	2	3	4
Untrustworthy	4	10	7	8	7	7	4	10	12
Hypocritical	5	13	11	9	10	10	5	8	16

Source: Datapraxis and YouGov (DK, FR, DE, GB, IT, PL, PT, RO, ES), Datapraxis and Norstat (EE), January 2023.
ECFR · ecfr.eu

The way Europeans respond to the war can either uphold or refute their image – both in their own eyes and those of others. Europe can prove to be trustworthy, peaceful, and strong. Or it can provide arguments for those who claim it is hypocritical, aggressive, and weak.

This concerns the entirety of the European response to the war. For the moment, Europeans are showcasing their strength and determination when they provide Ukraine with military and economic support, welcome millions of Ukrainian refugees, and adopt far-reaching sanctions against Russia even when these lead to energy shortages and rising prices in their own countries. But European authorities are much more hesitant about how to handle Russian culture, people, and disinformation – demonstrating a lack of confidence and at times flirting with illiberal solutions that do not square with the values that Europe purports to represent.

Recommendations

Make disinformation toothless

Instead of focusing on defensive solutions that verge on censorship, the EU and member state authorities should aim to disarm both Russian and Russia-friendly disinformation. They can do this by addressing the reasons why their publics may believe disinformation and by investing in strategic communication, raising awareness, and promoting media literacy.

In every European country, people have real worries which the Kremlin and its sympathetic allies only have to amplify to reap the political benefits. In Poland, one such worry may be about the growing Ukrainian population. Elsewhere, people may largely be concerned about the cost of living or about the war spilling over to the EU. Skilful actors can operationalise such concerns by linking them to nationally salient tropes – for example, a Soviet-era nostalgia in Bulgaria and Slovakia, or scepticism towards the US and NATO in Italy and France. This is how some of these narratives become impactful. But behind them are real concerns that governments need to address with real policies.

The political mainstream should also be more active in spreading its own narratives on taboo issues, such as the growing Ukrainian diaspora in Europe or Ukraine's potential accession to the EU. Currently, it too often keeps quiet on these matters. And European countries should show more restraint in chasing Russian media. One of the ways to confront the challenge that war in Ukraine represents for European culture and values is by demonstrating that Europe is a place where – contrary to Russia – pluralist debate can happen.

Respond to culture with culture

With Ukraine stepping up its efforts to '[de-Russify](#)', European governments may find themselves under increasing pressure from Kyiv to encourage boycotting Russian culture. But – setting aside the clear-cut cases when artists are directly related to Putin or to the Russian state – Europeans need to be cautious in how they respond to such calls.

Imposing any sort of formal boycott of Russian culture, or even informally encouraging one, would contradict European values – such as freedom of expression – thus also confusing European citizens. It would prevent European artists and institutions from exploring their own creative ways of making culture useful in times of war. It would also deny the European public the valuable experience of dealing with potential controversy.

Rather than focus on such defensive measures, European authorities should actively support Ukrainian culture: for example, through scholarships, events, and preserving Ukraine's cultural heritage. If the war lasts many years, and the European public shows signs of solidarity fatigue, governments might be tempted to make some savings here – but they should not yield to them. With time, the importance of showing cultural support for Ukraine will become more, not less, important, given the need to sustain the Ukrainian and European morale.

View people as allies

European leaders need to be very careful about how they frame the responsibility for Russia's war in Ukraine. They should not suggest that all Russians bear the same responsibility. When the International Criminal Court issued an [arrest warrant](#) for Putin, it sent a powerful signal to the public that some people bear individual responsibility for the war. Rather than focusing their efforts on stopping all Russians from coming to Europe, governments should demonstrate that they intend to bring

those responsible to justice. They should recognise Russian dissidents, artists, activists, and citizens as potential allies, and preserve ways of engaging with them. European media should investigate the role of Russian citizens in the war – rather than simply reporting about the decisions of Putin and his inner circle. European citizens could also become even more active in foreign policy by discussing the issue with Russians around them; not as a means of blaming them but rather to nurture the sentiment of individual responsibility – and to seek understanding.

Similarly, when it comes to Belarus, European leaders should emphasise that they clearly distinguish between the Belarusian regime and the (largely pro-European) society. The EU and its member states should include Belarusian journalists and artists in the programmes that they open to their Ukrainian or Russian peers. They should also remind the Ukrainian government of the importance of cultivating allies among democratic Belarusians. The European media should explain to their audiences the complexity of Belarus's position in the war in Ukraine – rather than just reporting, with little context, about the bombs that are fired on Kyiv from Belarusian territory.

"Viewing people as allies" also refers to the way European leaders should approach the European public. As documented, governments often assume that citizens need to be protected from the pernicious influences of Russian culture and media. This approach is not just paternalistic but also counterproductive. The past year has demonstrated that the European public is more resilient than many would have expected. European leaders should have greater confidence in European societies. European citizens are their main allies in standing up to the challenge that Russia's aggression against Ukraine constitutes for European culture and values.

Conclusion

The EU's high representative and vice-president, Josep Borrell, often says that the EU should "learn to talk the language of power". He seems to mostly mean hard power – including military, diplomatic, and economic tools – in which Europeans are making progress, although they are still some way from being fully autonomous.

But European leaders should not forget that their soft power is a major asset – including the values that Europe stands for. They already speak this language of power, but when they respond to the challenges that the war in Ukraine represents for their culture and values, they should ensure there is a correspondence between the talking and the doing. Restricting the presence of Russian culture, media, and citizens in the EU might give European authorities a temporary feeling of being powerful. But it collides with Europe's image (or, at least, its self-image) as a region of openness, diversity, and freedom. It risks proving Russia right in its claim that Europe is hypocritical and weak. In fact, this approach will simultaneously make Europe weaker by demonstrating its lack of integrity and undermining its soft power.

European countries can and should do better than this, especially with the strength of European civil society on their side. In the face of Russia's invasion, European citizens have proven to be resilient. A strong European sentiment has been crucial to ensuring

the continent's solidarity with Ukraine – and its remarkable unity. European governments and the EU need to preserve and harness this sentiment.

Russia will continue to test European resolve – both actively through disinformation but also passively with its cultural allure and casual allies who help it amplify its messages among the European public. Almost every EU member state is vulnerable to this. People in south-eastern Europe often suffer from low media literacy. Poland's upcoming election provides an opportunity for anti-European actors to test people's solidarity with Ukrainians. Governments should acknowledge the vulnerabilities of their countries (presented, in more detail, in the country profiles below) and tackle them.

However, when responding to the Russian cultural challenge, Europeans should not focus only on the defensive. Notably, they should not fear public deliberations about the presence of Russian culture or about disinformation. In most cases, they should not fear letting Russian citizens into their countries – and could well use the encounter for proactive debate. In turn, Europeans need to be vigilant about their susceptibility to Russia's cultural allure, which could prevent them from seeing clearly what Russia is doing in Ukraine. They also need to avoid the temptation to construct an 'us and them' framing, which appears temporarily useful in mobilising public support and maintaining unity among governments – but goes against Europe's attachment to individual responsibility, alienates potential allies, and plays to Russia's strategic interests.

Ultimately, European authorities need to regain confidence in liberalism and in their own citizens, trusting the public to make the right decisions about Russian culture, media, and people. By showing confidence, Europeans will disarm Russian claims about a weak Europe. By showing both resilience and openness, they will reaffirm the values that Europe is standing for – and refute Russia's claims of European hypocrisy.

There is no better way to ensure that both Ukrainians and Europeans themselves continue believing in Europe and maintain their morale in the face of Russia's aggression. With the 2024 elections to the European Parliament on the horizon, and the risk of war in Ukraine lasting several more years, the stakes could not be higher.

Acknowledgements

Country profiles

Austria

The war in Ukraine is encouraging Austria to rethink its close economic and political links to Russia. Since February 2022, the Austrian government has unequivocally sided with Ukraine and its society has shown solidarity with Ukrainians – the number of Ukrainians in the country [increased](#) from 13,000 before the war to around 80,000.

Nonetheless, Austria remains one of Europe's weak links regarding Russia's influence – which could negatively affect European sentiment in the country. The Austrian public, especially the elites, have traditionally held Russian culture in high esteem. On the country's social media, trolls actively amplify pro-Russian messages, such as blaming the West for the war or claiming that Russian war crimes are fake. The far-right Freedom Party (which is currently leading in the polls) [may have benefitted](#) from Russian funding in the past and is currently criticising European sanctions. Russia is also [believed](#) to have many agents in Austria. Senior Austrian politicians have had business links with the Kremlin, although these are now under increased scrutiny.

Belgium

The Belgian government has demonstrated strong support for Ukraine – and the society has warmly welcomed [some 60,000 Ukrainian](#) refugees. The country's French-speaking public broadcaster, RTBF, has set up a radio station for Ukrainians arriving in the country.

Since the invasion, many cultural institutions have suspended their collaboration with Russian partners, but some have kept their earlier plans, for example the Brussels Royal Park Theatre, which continued with its Russian season for 2022/2023. Belgium has also maintained normal rules of asylum for Russians fleeing mobilisation, making a clear distinction between the Russian regime and the people. Parts of the population are weary from the inflation created by the war in Ukraine, which risks undermining Belgian support.

Bulgaria

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the short-lived Bulgarian government, led by prime minister Kiril Petkov, showed a great level of support: it refused to pay Gazprom in roubles, imposed a no-fly zone over the country for Russian planes, expelled dozens of Russian diplomats, and secretly sent critical fuel and ammunition to Ukraine. However, these policies contributed to the government's collapse six months after it took power.

Overall, Bulgaria is among the [most vulnerable](#) EU member states when it comes to Russian influence – as well as one with the weakest European sentiment. Private and even some public media are notorious for spreading pro-Russian messages. Media literacy among the population is very [low](#), and cost-of-living concerns and Euroscepticism are on the rise. Political instability – with five elections in just two years

– provides ample room for Russian actors and others to spread the Kremlin's propaganda.

As if that were not enough, many Bulgarians have a strong historical and cultural affinity with Russia. The two countries share the Cyrillic alphabet and the Orthodox religion, and the Bulgarian language is closely related to Russian. It is widely acknowledged that Russia's war with Turkey allowed the independent Bulgarian state to emerge in the 19th century, and the period of Soviet rule in Bulgaria after 1944 is often called the "second national liberation". Some 300,000 Russian citizens also allegedly own property in Bulgaria. Nonetheless, the war has prompted recognition of Ukraine's history too: in February, the Bulgarian parliament declared the 1932-1933 famine, the *Holodomor*, a genocide against Ukrainian people.

Croatia

Russia's influence in Croatia is limited. The country's main vulnerabilities consist of low media literacy and an untransparent media sector. But Croatia does not have significant links to Russia – except for some alleged Russian influence in the energy sector.

There is broad support for Ukraine among the Croatian population, which has led to several displays of cultural solidarity. The public is also strongly pro-European. But a high-profile split between the prime minister, Andrej Plenkovic, and President Zoran Milanovic risks contributing to divides among the public about support for Ukraine. Milanovic is a vocal critic of Croatia's support for Ukraine and of European sanctions against Russia. He seems to tap into a real concern of many Croats that a potential spill-over of the war to the rest of Europe would put their country's security at risk.

Cyprus

Cyprus has aligned with the EU's approach to the war – including by tightening visa requirements for Russian citizens. However, this has not been straightforward for the government, and the population has not widely approved of such measures.

The Greek Cypriot community has traditionally had a strong affinity with Russia, including through their common Orthodox religion. The island has been a major destination for Russian holidaymakers and property investors, and it is currently one of the few EU member states where the Russian population (estimated at 50,000 people) is greater than the Ukrainian population. Cypriots also recognise Russia's support of their cause against Turkey at the UN Security Council.

As a result, many Greek Cypriots have no strong feelings about Russia's aggression against Ukraine. These factors, coupled with low media literacy and a strong distrust towards the EU, make the island vulnerable to Russian influence.

Czech Republic

By the end of 2022, the number of Ukrainians in the Czech Republic had increased to over 600,000, making up around 5 per cent of the national population.

Compared to other countries in the region, Czechs appear to be quite resilient to disinformation and the government has gone to great lengths to clamp down on it, blocking several of the most notorious online media outlets. The Czech parliament is currently discussing a law that would allow the government to block news outlets more systematically. Furthermore, several people have been prosecuted for denying Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The Czech Republic is one of the handful of EU member states where the government has become more pro-European over the past 12 months, and where anti-European political forces have lost part of their appeal, dropping in the polls. Nonetheless, long-established high levels of Euroscepticism, as well as growing concerns about inflation – that have led to several massive anti-government protests – risk undermining European sentiment as well as public support for Ukraine.

Denmark

Denmark is this year's star of European sentiment. The war in Ukraine has consolidated the pro-European orientation of both the Danish government and public – leading to a decision to abolish a 30-year-old opt-out clause from the EU's defence policy, approved by a proportion of 67 to 33 per cent in a national referendum. Denmark is also among the leading European countries in terms of media literacy and a global leader in media freedom, making it resilient to external interference.

In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Danish authorities tightened visa requirements for Russian citizens. They have also encouraged cultural and educational institutions to stop all cooperation with Russian institutions.

Estonia

With Russian-speakers constituting a quarter of the country's population (and 50 per cent in the capital city), the war in Ukraine has become a major challenge for Estonia's national cohesion. This also explains some of the radical steps the government has taken, such as abolishing Russian-era monuments, changing street names, and introducing a visa ban on Russian citizens. Estonia does not even allow Russian artists or journalists into the country, unless they are known for their criticism of the Russian regime.

Not only are Russian-speakers receptive to anti-European messaging, parts of the native Estonian population are also vulnerable to manipulation. Some of the radical media outlets in Estonia blame Russia and Ukraine equally for the war and argue against the Western involvement in what they call a "Slavic civil war". While Estonia – alongside the Czech Republic and Poland – has welcomed the largest number of Ukrainian refugees

per capita, not everyone has shown solidarity with them. The Russian-speaking mayor of Tallinn has openly opposed supporting Ukrainian culture.

Finland

As the EU member state with the longest land border with Russia, and one which hosts a significant Russian-speaking population ([around 90,000](#) people), Finland has taken several radical steps in response to the war. These included restricting the entry of Russian citizens and starting the construction of a wall along the eastern border. It also decided to join NATO in what amounts to a historic shift in the country's approach to, and relationship with, Russia. While senior Russian politicians warned Finland about the profound consequences, their statements had little impact on Finnish debates about NATO.

In the face of Russian disinformation campaigns, Finland's media literacy – which has been incorporated into the country's curriculum for many years – has proven an important asset.

France

The start of the war in Ukraine coincided with the French presidential campaign. This put foreign policy topics at the centre of public debate, encouraged previously pro-Russian politicians to distance themselves from the Kremlin, and paved the way for a national consensus on support for Ukraine.

The French make a clear distinction between Putin and Russia, and Russian art and culture are still displayed in France. Nonetheless, Russia still has an important influence in France. Russian culture enjoys a high standing in the country, potentially making part of the elite vulnerable to Russian narratives. President Emmanuel Macron, who is otherwise an undisputed ally of Kyiv, has argued that Russia should still be treated with respect.

French media outlets have sometimes given a platform to Russian propaganda. In April 2022, the Kremlin's spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, was [interviewed](#) on one of the main French television channels, denying Russian responsibility for the Bucha massacre. Some former French Russia Today journalists created a new media platform, [Omerta](#), which replicates several Kremlin narratives. The heated domestic politics in France and generally high levels of Euroscepticism provide room for malign actors to deepen divisions among the French, and undermine their support for Ukraine.

Germany

Soon after the start of the war, the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, announced a *Zeitenwende* in Germany's foreign policy, which paved the way for a rethink of the country's energy and defence policies. But Germany has been reluctant to become the leader of European support for Ukraine.

Germany hosts [over one million](#) Ukrainian refugees and is home to a large Russian community, estimated at between [250,000](#) and [over one million](#), depending on the source. [Media reports](#) have suggested that the Kremlin planned to bring together the country's far left and far right to weaken Europe's support for Ukraine. The German government reacted belatedly to the threat of Russian disinformation, but is now dedicating major [attention](#) to it.

Greece

Greece is among the EU member states most vulnerable to Russia's influence.

The country has a strong cultural and historical affinity with Russia, and recognises its support for the Greek independence war in the 19th century. The two countries also share the Orthodox religion. During a visit to Greece in 2016, Putin went to an all-male Orthodox enclave at Mount Athos. The Russian state funds one of the monasteries there – known as New Russik, which exclusively houses Russian monks.

Still, the Greek media is predominantly pro-American. The majority of the public condemns Russia's invasion. But public support for the European approach to the war looks wobbly. Greece has one of the least pro-European societies in the EU, and major cost-of-living concerns make people receptive to calls for lifting EU sanctions and seeking a peace deal with Russia.

Hungary

Hungary is a weak link in Europe's response to Russia's war on Ukraine – largely because the government, led by Viktor Orban, maintains close links to Moscow.

Over the past year, the Hungarian government has repeatedly spread propaganda against Europe's support for Ukraine, for example, launching a [billboard campaign](#) claiming that the EU sanctions were ruining the country. The public and pro-government media have also mainstreamed Russian narratives about the war. The government has exploited the issue of Hungarian minorities living in Transcarpathia – a major point of contention between Hungary and Kyiv – to cast a negative light on Ukraine. Contrary to developments in other EU member states, the number of Russian diplomats in Hungary has increased since the start of the war.

To make things worse, media literacy is [low](#) in Hungary, while cost-of-living concerns are high. In such an unfavourable context, it is remarkable how welcoming Hungarian society has been towards the [over 30,000](#) Ukrainian refugees that have registered for temporary protection in the country since the start of the war.

Ireland

Ireland is one of the [leading](#) EU member states for media freedom and media literacy, and has a strongly pro-European public, making it one of the EU countries that is least

vulnerable to Russia's influence. It is also one where European sentiment is at its strongest.

This does not mean that the country is completely immune to Russia's weaponisation of culture and information. The Russian ambassador has been interviewed by Irish media outlets since the start of the war and has used these opportunities, as well as social media, to spread Russian propaganda – leading various lawmakers to call for him to be expelled from Ireland. Two Irish MEPs from the far left are also notorious for their pro-Russian and anti-Western stance – although they have minimal influence on public opinion.

More worryingly, there has been a rise in discontent in certain low-income urban areas in response to the government's efforts to house some 75,000 Ukrainian refugees. Malign actors could potentially exploit this to undermine the country's otherwise strong solidarity with Ukraine.

Italy

Over the past year, Italy's government and society have defied sceptics by displaying strong support for Ukraine. Nonetheless, the country remains one of the weakest links vis-à-vis Europe's response to Russia's influence in the region. In the past, some of the main political parties, including the Five Star Movement and the League, maintained close relations with Putin. Currently they advocate a swift end to the war, and the Five Star Movement opposes sending weapons to Ukraine. Euroscepticism has also been strong in Italy for many years.

More broadly, the Italian public continues to hold Russian culture in high regard, and there has been a widespread acceptance of Russian information – with little attention paid to its reliability. Several popular talk shows have interviewed Kremlin apologists on prime-time television, where they repeated Russian fake news. An Italian television channel broadcast an interview with Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, in which he spread Russian propaganda in May 2022.

Latvia

Given that a quarter of the population identifies as ethnic Russian (and many more speak Russian), the war in Ukraine has become a significant challenge for Latvia's national cohesion.

This explains some of the far-reaching steps that the country's government has taken. It has accelerated existing efforts to make all schools teach in Latvian, rather than Russian. It also demolished the Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia in Riga.

The government has banned the broadcasting of Russian state channels in official public spaces and began to closely monitor all Russian-funded media. In 2022, a Latvian media watchdog cancelled the licence for the Russian opposition channel TV Rain (Dozhd), causing controversy. Latvian state-funded, Russian-speaking news channels and other

official Latvian, Russian-speaking media, including radio and online news, are still operating.

Pro-Russian messaging and disinformation that targets Russian-speaking citizens, especially in the region of Latgale, could exacerbate tensions and divisions within the otherwise strongly pro-European Latvian society.

Lithuania

Lithuania has been one of the leading countries in Europe's efforts to support Ukraine against the Russian invasion. This stems from the country's own historical experience of suffering from Russian domination.

Lithuania does not hold any significant grudges against Ukraine, its media environment is strong, and the public displays strong European sentiment. Russian disinformation in the Lithuanian language has been limited, closely monitored, and ineffective.

One potential vulnerability lies in the fact that, until 2022, as much as [half of the population](#) watched at least some Russian television programmes, and the public broadly admires Russian high culture. Since the invasion, the perception of Russian culture has deteriorated, and fewer people watch Russian-language television programmes. Nevertheless, Russia could try to influence the otherwise strongly pro-European Lithuanian public through these two channels.

Luxembourg

As the EU member state with the second smallest population (behind Malta), Luxembourg does not play a significant role in the EU's support for Ukraine – and neither is it a major target of Russian efforts to influence the European public. What is more, its European sentiment is strong.

The country has shown remarkable solidarity with Ukraine. [Several thousand](#) Ukrainian refugees have found shelter in Luxembourg, and the civil society has played a key role in helping them find accommodation. Cultural institutions have also shown solidarity with Ukraine: the 2022 Lux Expo migration festival included Ukrainian events and the 2022 Central and Eastern European film festival featured a special Ukrainian programme.

Several thousand Russians live in Luxembourg and the country's elite has some important business links to Russia. But this does not influence the country's official stance regarding Russia's war on Ukraine.

Malta

As the EU member state with the smallest population, Malta does not play a significant role in the EU's support for Ukraine – and neither is it a major target of Russian efforts to influence the European public.

Both the government and the population have been supportive of defending Ukraine's territorial integrity against the Russian aggression. But they have also displayed major concern about the effects that the EU's approach to the war have had on inflation.

Malta is one of few EU member states with more Russian than Ukrainian residents – but neither community [constitutes](#) more than 1 per cent of the national population. Many Russians acquired Maltese citizenship through the Individual Investor Programme, but the Maltese government excluded them from that programme last year. Malta's National Philharmonic Orchestra has [benefitted](#) from Russian funding and has not severed its ties with Moscow despite having pledged to do so in 2022. Still, Russian cultural allure is very limited, as Malta's population mostly looks to Europe and the United Kingdom as cultural reference points. The European sentiment in Malta is strong.

Netherlands

Over the past year, both the Dutch government and the population have demonstrated strong support for Ukraine.

The Netherlands has also been resilient to Russia's efforts to influence the European public. While some political forces, for example the right-wing Forum for Democracy party, and the media outlet [Ongehoord Nederland](#) give a platform to pro-Russian narratives, their impact is very limited and they act on their own behalf. Media literacy is [strong](#) among the population, and there are no historical antecedents to build a convincing case against Ukraine or in favour of Russia.

There is a growing distrust towards the current government coalition. A new populist party – the Farmer-Citizen Movement – won the provincial elections in April. But, for now, the weakening support for the government does not concern the country's support for Ukraine.

Poland

In a variety of ways, Poland is leading the European effort to support Ukraine against Russia's aggression. The country serves as the primary logistical hub for sending military equipment to Ukraine and it has been the main entry point into the EU for Ukrainian refugees. Poland hosts [at least 2 million](#) Ukrainians (including a significant pre-war population), which is more than any other EU member state in absolute terms. Both the government and the society have displayed formidable solidarity with them. The public also displays strong pro-European attitudes.

However, there are serious risks that malign actors could undermine this solidarity and the otherwise strong pro-European attitudes among the public. With a parliamentary election this autumn, and rising cost-of-living concerns, support for Ukraine and Ukrainians could become highly politicised. "It's not our war" and "Stop the Ukrainisation of Poland" are already among the main slogans of the far right, which is gaining ground in the polls. Complex historical relations between Ukraine and Poland – including the Volhynia massacre committed in 1943 by Ukrainian nationalists against

the Polish minority in eastern pre-war Poland under Nazi occupation – provide ample room for spreading distrust among parts of the society and undermining support for Ukraine.

Portugal

Despite being located far from Europe's eastern borders, Portugal has demonstrated very strong support for Ukraine: including sending three Leopard tanks to the country. In May 2022, the prime minister, Antonio Costa, visited Kyiv to meet President Volodymyr Zelensky. The Portuguese population has also shown great solidarity with Ukraine. This solidarity may be helped by the fact that since 2014 Ukrainians constitute one of the largest foreign diasporas in Portugal.

Portugal's artistic and cultural sectors have mobilised in support of Ukraine. For example, the main national theatre companies have offered scholarships for the integration of Ukrainian artists. And the Ukrainian conductor, Oksana Lyniv, was awarded the Helena Vaz da Silva European Award for Raising Public Awareness of Cultural Heritage in 2022.

Overall, the country's European sentiment is strong and does not seem vulnerable, although the population does have rising cost-of-living concerns. The public mostly blames the national government for this, but it could at some stage prompt a decrease in support for Ukraine.

Romania

As one of the four EU member states bordering Ukraine, Romania became a major entry point for Ukrainians fleeing the war. Over 2.4 million crossed the Romanian border. Most of them travelled onwards but about 100,000 have stayed in Romania. Romanian citizens have demonstrated great solidarity with them.

The Romanian public has perceived Russia very negatively for a long time, despite Orthodox Christianity being the main religion in both countries. In early 2023, the Romanian government ordered the Russian Cultural Institute in Bucharest, which it accused of spreading propaganda, to close.

However, European sentiment in Romania is highly vulnerable. This is largely due to low media freedom and pluralism, limited media literacy, as well as the increased presence of radical nationalist ideas in the public and political space. Major cost-of-living concerns among Romanians could make them receptive to narratives that blame Europe and its support for Ukraine. Cynical politicians could also exploit the history of tense relations between Romania and Ukraine, including the situation of the Romanian minority in Ukraine and disputes about navigation in the Danube Delta.

Slovakia

As one of the four EU member states bordering Ukraine, Slovakia became a major entry point for Ukrainians fleeing the war. In 2022, it issued over 150,000 residency permits for Ukrainian citizens (three times the number issued the previous year). The Slovak public has shown great solidarity with Ukrainians.

Nonetheless, European sentiment is very vulnerable in Slovakia. Almost half of the population reports that the financial situation of their country is bad. Slovaks are also prone to Euroscepticism: 53 per cent say they do not trust the EU and 31 per cent say their country would be better off outside the EU. Coupled with low media literacy, this context gives plenty of room for malign actors to spread divisions in society ahead of this year's parliamentary election, which could lead to the formation of a Russia-friendly government.

Slovenia

According to Slovenian authorities, about 70,000 Ukrainians have registered their residence in the country since the war started – though many do not actually live in Slovenia. The country has provided temporary protection status to 8,000 Ukrainians.

In 2022, the Slovenian government cancelled a bilateral agreement with Russia on cooperation in culture and science; it also ordered several employees of the Russian embassy to leave the country. The closing of the Russian cultural centre in Ljubljana provoked some controversy among the public.

European sentiment is moderately vulnerable in Slovenia. The country's main vulnerabilities consist of non-transparent media ownership as well as increasing Euroscepticism in recent years. Currently, 53 per cent say they do not trust the EU – and 42 per cent believe their country would be better off outside the EU (the highest proportion across the 27 member states).

Spain

Since the start of the war, Spain has welcomed over 170,000 Ukrainians. These have joined over 100,000 Ukrainians who already lived in Spain before 2022. Taken together, this makes Spain the host country of the fifth largest Ukrainian diaspora inside the EU, behind Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Italy.

The Spanish public has demonstrated very positive attitudes towards Ukrainians. The country has also stopped granting 'golden visas' to Russian investors. However, the government has only provided limited support to Ukraine.

European sentiment in Spain is only moderately vulnerable. The main risk factors include rising Euroscepticism (currently, 47 per cent do not trust the EU), and the national parliamentary election, which should take place before the end of the year. The latter could provide avenues for anti-European actors to spread disinformation,

including Russia, which, according to several [sources](), has spread disinformation around Catalan independence in the past.

Sweden

Russia's war on Ukraine has led to a major shift in Sweden's foreign policy, prompting it to apply for NATO membership. Its membership is still awaiting ratification by Hungary and Turkey, which may provoke some uncertainty among the public.

Other than that, Sweden's European sentiment is among the least vulnerable in the EU. Pro-European attitudes are strong among the public. It is one of the global leaders in terms of media freedom and its population has [strong]() media literacy. The nationalist, right-wing populist party, Sweden Democrats (whose members tend to replicate Russian narratives in the media), provides parliamentary support to the current government – but this does not necessarily affect the country's stance towards the EU or Russia. In fact, [74 per cent]() of Swedes disagree that their country would be better off outside the EU, and the public supports European policies vis-à-vis Russia.