



Almanach

www.euawareness.org

#KnowledgeAgainstManipulation

Almanach #10

Sophia Beiter, Ninon Bouteloup

New government, old information warfare?

Countering disinformation and foreign influence in Bulgaria

The opinions and conclusions expressed are of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EU Awareness Centre.

© [2026] EU Awareness Centre. All rights reserved.

11 August 2026

New government, old information warfare?

Countering disinformation and foreign influence in Bulgaria

Bulgaria's new government enters office with something the country has lacked for nearly three decades: a clear parliamentary majority and an equally clear anti-corruption mandate. But with administrative corruption in 2026 at the [highest level](#) ever recorded, political will alone will not be enough. If this rare reform window is to remain open, the government must confront entrenched corruption, as well as the information warfare and networks of foreign influence that have long undermined public trust and sustained state capture. Will this political opportunity, created by the April 2026 parliamentary elections, be seized to break with decades of instability?

Foreign interference, domestic amplifiers and institutional weakness

Sometimes called "[one of the most permissive information environments for non-democratic malign manipulation](#)", Bulgaria remains disproportionately exposed to disinformation.

Not only does Bulgaria face information manipulation from abroad, especially from Russia due to historical and linguistic ties, but it must also deal with an extensive [network of domestic amplifiers](#). These threat actors, rooted in state capture mechanisms, play Russia's game, widely disseminating and reinforcing its manipulative narratives within Bulgaria's borders. Disinformation is thriving online where [platform moderation](#) is poorly effective in the Bulgarian language, leaving plenty of opportunities for narratives to spread. Masked as soft power, Russia also manages to penetrate [Bulgaria's schools](#) through cultural events, essay writing, song competitions, language programmes or Victory Day celebrations. These events serve as entry points or reinforcement mechanisms for Russian influence into the Bulgarian education system. Some [school history books](#) still portray Russia as 'liberator' and 'protector' of Bulgarians, contributing to the fact that the lowest perception of threat from the Kremlin is perceived by 18- to 24-year-olds, according to a survey by the [Institute for Global Analytics](#) from 2025.

Due to its small size and despite its EU membership, Bulgaria's enforcement mechanisms remain extremely weak, with no institutional competency and very slow reactions. The political instability that has marked the past years does not contribute to a safer information environment. With eight general elections in five years, political instability has delayed the adoption of pending national strategies on strategic communication and hybrid threats. The lack of a dedicated national strategy means that countering false information has largely been left to civil society. Under Prime Minister Denkov in 2023, a new Department for Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was established to "[strengthen Bulgaria's resilience against malicious information campaigns of third parties](#)", but the main priorities of the [Directorate](#) now appear to lie in media relations and Bulgaria's EU communication strategy.

Breaking the pattern: Bulgaria's attempt to protect its elections

On 23 March 2026, heading towards yet another parliamentary election, Bulgaria formally requested EU assistance, asking for the activation of the EU Rapid Response System to help counter disinformation and foreign interference during the election campaign. Two days later, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) announced that the investigative journalist Christo Grozev joined the newly established government mechanism for countering disinformation and hybrid threats during the elections. Caretaker Prime Minister Gyurov emphasised wanting to “protect the elections rather than manage them”.

These actions – as well as a stricter approach to combating vote buying, which resulted in around [180 launched criminal investigations](#) (nearly five times the number in comparison to the previous election) – testify to some progress among Bulgaria's political class in the attempt to safeguard the integrity of the elections. The steps taken were necessary despite being reframed as evidence of anti-democratic manipulation. The MFA was, for instance, accused of searching for the ‘[Bulgarian Georgescu](#)’, referring to Romania's annulled 2024 presidential elections.

Despite well-intentioned measures, their effectiveness seems to remain limited when it comes to the integrity of the elections in April this year. With actions implemented less than a month before the vote and, given the [repetitive and predictable pattern](#) of Russian disinformation in elections which spans from up to one year before to several months afterwards, this timing seems rather inappropriate. Even though these were snap elections, the MFA's efforts to counter disinformation should have been more consistent over the past years, given the frequency of elections. In this case, the measures were too late to really affect the electoral environment. The preliminary comments from [international observers](#) suggest that “the risks of cyber threats and foreign interference, gaps in implementation of the EU Digital Services Act and delays in coordination between oversight bodies negatively affected the effectiveness of the mechanisms implemented”.

Between 6 and 31 March 2026, the Center for the Study of Democracy ([CSD](#)), a Sofia-based public policy institute, monitored three high-impact information operations and showed that these operations alone generated approximately 340 million impressions across coordinated media and social networks, meaning approximately three exposures per voter per day. Disinformation and foreign interference were still defining components of these last elections, with methods and tactics that are, frustratingly, well known and predictable. One example of manipulative content is a [chart](#) published on TikTok and Facebook, already circulating since 2025, showing results of a supposed opinion poll. The chart claims a massive victory for Boyko Borisov over Rumen Radev, citing the UN statistics division as a source. These fabricated opinion polls are tools to suppress voters. The manipulation is so obvious – in this case claiming that approximately 6.3 million people participated in the poll while Bulgaria's total population is around 6.6 million – that people end up distrusting the electoral process, leading to demoralisation and thus the demobilisation of voters.

From emergency measures to long-term resilience?

Now the question that remains is whether Rumen Radev's new government will take meaningful steps to counter the very disinformation system that may have aided its rise. The 'TikTokracy Tracker' report, published shortly before the elections by the [Balkan Free Media Initiative](#) (BFMI) stated that even before the official campaign began, Radev outperformed all other political actors in both reach and growth. At the same time, it remained unclear how much of this social media success stemmed from genuine public support and to what extent fake accounts, coordinated posting or other means contributed to it. Of particular concern is that Radev has portrayed EU support for countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) during the election campaign as a form of problematic external interference, rather than as a measure to strengthen democratic resilience. In a social media post, he asked whether "anyone [is] actually observing such interference on the ground?"

What will happen to the *temporary* mission led by Christo Grozev: will it continue and institutionalise or is it already terminated? Its status remains unclear. Yet the post-elections period is a complex situation where disinformation awareness is usually very low due to voting fatigue. With their votes casted, citizens tend to disengage and therefore to lower their resilience to manipulation.

The tools to fight back disinformation and election interference exist, but only institutional willingness and coordination can turn them into operational preparedness. Bulgaria could follow Romania's path and transform its approach to disinformation to revitalise the struggle. Romania went from having its elections annulled in 2024 to building a huge initiative in 2026 called [Romania Imuna](#) under the patronage of the Romanian President. Political will was crucial in Romania to secure the resources for such a platform, ensure coordination among the various public and private actors involved, and maintain international credibility, thereby enabling international partners such as OpSci.ai, a French tech company, to provide Romania Imuna with its technologies, methodologies, and analysts. The push given by public and governmental backing contributed to bringing Romania into the fight against disinformation at an international level, ensuring cooperation and coordination of actions across borders to address this transnational threat.

Or Bulgaria could follow the path of [Slovakia](#), where disinformation is thriving and leaders serve as megaphones of Russian narratives. Slovakia is also fertile ground for disinformation and foreign influence, as it has been described as the most [conspiracy prone](#) country in Central Europe. Disinformation platforms capitalise on pro-Russian narratives, such as the sense of nostalgia for communism, which helps reinforce the perception of Russia as a "big brother". Political rhetoric plays a crucial role, as demonstrated by the 2023 parliamentary elections, which paved the way for Robert Fico's return as Prime Minister, and the 2024 Presidential elections, which resulted in Peter Pellegrini's election as President. Both politicians have adopted positions that echo Russia's narratives, making Slovakia one of Moscow's [most supportive allies](#) in Europe, as demonstrated by [Fico's visit](#) to Moscow for the Victory Day celebrations, where he was the only EU national leader in visit.

Since the defeat of Orbán in Hungary, Radev has sometimes been presented as the new puppet of Moscow to replace the stronghold it lost in Budapest. Certainly, in his former role as Bulgarian president, Radev repeatedly took positions echoing pro-Russian narratives, particularly regarding Ukraine. He has also repeatedly criticised the introduction of the euro. However, during his election campaign, Radev presented a ‘pragmatic’ approach to foreign policy. And since his election, he has appeared to attempt to maintain a balance between pro-European statements directed towards Brussels and NATO, and more Eurosceptic positions aimed at his domestic constituency, which in parts is sympathetic to pro-Russian narratives. At times, this balancing act has resulted in contradictory messages.

Political willingness is not the only element which will decide the future of Bulgaria’s resilience to disinformation and election interference. Societal resilience is necessary, with Bulgarians trained in media literacy and involved in defending European values in an all-of-society approach. For this to work, trust in politicians and institutions has to be revitalised. Despite being largely elected with 44.6% (31 percentage points more than the second-place coalition GERB-SDF), Radev’s Progressive Bulgaria does not inherently gain people’s trust. The coalition will need to earn it and also convince the rest of the population. Especially as the level of trust in the Bulgarian public is generally low – both towards the government as well as towards media. [Survey results](#) show that 64% have distrust when it comes to ‘standard mainstream media’. And an overwhelming 89% say that Bulgaria should do more to fight disinformation.

Uncertain path ahead

It is difficult to predict exactly how Prime Minister Radev and his government will shape this term in office. He has consistently emphasised the fight against corruption as one of his key priorities; progress in this area is closely linked to the unfreezing of much-needed EU financial support. Given that he has at times benefited from and echoed Russian disinformation and pro-Kremlin narratives, it is perhaps unsurprising that countering disinformation and foreign information interference has not featured among his stated priorities.

Remaining [the most sanctioned](#) EU member state for Russia-linked strategic corruption, despite *de jure* compliance with international standards, Bulgaria is at a decisive moment for its democratic future. Tackling corruption, strengthening institutions and fighting disinformation are interconnected challenges and vulnerabilities that foreign actors can exploit.

This is concerning because the threat of foreign information manipulation and interference is unlikely to diminish in the coming years. On the contrary, the [4th EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference \(FIMI\) Threats \(2026\)](#) concludes that in Europe, “attacks not only increased in frequency and intensity but also became more sophisticated.” The report further identifies elections as one of the primary targets of Russian FIMI operations, underlining the importance of strengthening democratic resilience and countering disinformation.

Bulgaria’s resilience against FIMI will soon enough face another test in the next presidential elections, scheduled for 25 October 2026. Beyond determining whether Radev can consolidate his party’s

dominance following the parliamentary elections, the vote and its implementation might also reveal more about whether the government is willing and able to protect the integrity of the electoral process and what steps it is ready to take.



Sophia Beiter, MA, is a Research Associate at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) in Vienna. Her work spans European integration, EU enlargement, democratic participation and EU reform, with regional expertise in Bulgaria, the Black Sea region and Russia. She coordinates Citizens for EU Enlargement (CitizEn), which advances informed public debate and societal readiness for future accessions. As a Charlemagne Prize Academy Fellow in 2024/25, she developed research on citizen-driven enlargement.



Ninon Bouteloup, MA, is a Research Associate at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) in Vienna. Her research focuses on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), information warfare and hybrid threats. She developed these interests during her master's studies in international security at Charles University in Prague. At the IDM, her work focuses on democratic resilience in the Danube region and on linking this topic to EU integration and enlargement.