



Vilnius Young Leaders Meeting

September 25-29, 2017

Summary and findings

About VYLM

On September 25 - 29, 26 young professionals from the Baltic states, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine attended the 1st Vilnius Young Leaders Meeting (VYLM). Participants were carefully selected from a pool of over 300 applications. Applicants were chosen based on their interest, experience, and ideas for resolving disinformation- and propaganda-related problems in their respective countries and in the region as a whole.

VYLM offered participants a platform to exchange ideas and further develop their skills and knowledge via multiple meetings and discussions with leading media practitioners and analysts from the Baltic states, Belarus, Russia, Sweden, and Ukraine. Discussions focused on the approaches of the European Union, its member states, and the Eastern Partnership countries to the challenges raised by propaganda, disinformation, fake news, and reality-distorting myths. In their comparative raising and comparing various examples of successful responses to these challenges, VYLM participants laid the foundation for their successful future cooperation and established a strong pattern to be followed in future years.

Participants included 10 journalists and bloggers focused on investigative reporting on social, political, and economic issues and on directly refuting disinformation; 4 members of civil society organizations working to develop resilient societies and fight corruption, 4 political analysts and 3 academics analyzing disinformation, including its effect on different groups of society, and 3 public servants bringing a governmental perspective into approaching the threat. Despite their differing professional backgrounds, all participants are outstandingly motivated individuals dedicated to strengthening democracy, ensuring civic rights and freedoms, and increasing transparency and accountability in their respective countries. VYLM was organized by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre in co-operation with the International Elections Study Centre, and the online news portal DELFI; it was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, the Embassy of Sweden in Vilnius, and the Swedish Institute.

Main findings

Over four days of meetings and discussions, many interesting insights were offered by invited speakers and by VYLM participants. Some of the most important were as follows:

- ✓ **Currently, our information space lacks engagement from defense and security experts that could share expertise and shape more reasoned and well-grounded discussions.** This situation can be exploited by Russia and possibly lead to defeat in a propaganda war, a possibility that should not be ignored.
- ✓ **Disinformation and propaganda can radicalize targeted people by exploiting their existing fears and mental unpreparedness.** If one constantly repeats a lie or at least a partial truth, it seeds doubts and makes it harder to differentiate truth from fiction.
- ✓ **At the same time, propaganda seeks to drastically change or reinforce the worldview of the targeted audience while leading it into drowsiness.** While banning or suspending television programs/stations or online/social media channels is always possible (as has been done by, for example, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine); however, in the opinion of VYLM participants, it only creates bubbles of isolation distanced from reality. It is impossible to combat propaganda by creating misleading messages and imposing rigorous censorship, since the other side can turn around to use these measures to create an even wider gap in society.
- ✓ **For a long time, the Russian-led campaign of disinformation and propaganda was not taken very seriously.** It took wars in Georgia, and Ukraine for the EU and its leaders to begin to view Russian actions as ideological warfare. As a result, Eastern Partnership countries, specifically Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, became ideological, political, and economic fields of competition between the West and Russia.
- ✓ **Europe consists of different cultural, political, and economic regions, a fact of which Russia is aware; accordingly, it treats every society and even small community as a different entity.** Many different propaganda tactics are tested and tried in various regions; those that are successful are then deployed more widely. Russian information warfare uses two types of narratives:
Regional narratives – general messages that resonate with all countries in the post-Soviet space, such as Soviet nostalgia.
Tailored narratives – targeted messages for each country, exploiting anti-Roma sentiment in Moldova or the controversial figure of Stepan Bandera in Ukraine.
- ✓ **Since most disinformation issues are local, solutions also must be.** Sometimes the best response to propaganda comes from local journalists, who know the issues of their local communities and can find the fastest solutions to problems. This approach can even be the cheapest one as it does not require any deep analysis of the region or situation from the outside.
- ✓ **Information warfare is a larger issue than media and news manipulation** and includes socio-cultural, socio-political, economic, security, and foreign affairs aspects. In order to tackle this problem, there needs to be a comprehensive approach that combines the efforts of government, civil society, private sector and development partners.

Overview of propaganda and disinformation in VYLM participants' countries of (and Sweden)

The following section provides information on each country (or in the Baltic case, group of countries) based on the personal observations and experiences of VYLM participants. The Swedish journalist trainers were present and contributed the insights presented below.

Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania)

Russia often tries to influence the whole Baltic region at the same time; accordingly, many of the examples provided by participants from the three countries overlap. Earlier this year NATO created a short film about the Forest Brothers, a partisan movement in the Baltics that fought against Soviet occupation after the Second World War. Subsequently, Russia's government and media began a massive disinformation campaign against Baltic societies that included efforts to discredit and accuse the partisans of various crimes. Russian propaganda also creates many temporary information sources on the internet during election campaigns in order specifically to support pro-Russian ideas and candidates. These sources and websites often feature material by unknown authors and provide unconfirmed information.

Furthermore, in Lithuania, the Russian- and Polish-speaking audiences are very distinct from the rest of society. They are completely dependent on Russian media content, even the Polish minority in Lithuania, which generally does not consume media sources from Poland. While this led the Russian and Polish groups to grow closer, it has created a huge informational gap in Lithuanian society as a whole. In response, several years ago the Lithuanian parliament changed its law on financing LRT, the country's public broadcasting service. The new law ensures both an increase in financing as well as a guarantee that regardless of the economic situation in the country or even of the ratings/popularity of LRT itself, the total amount of state support cannot fall below the total from the previous year.

Belarus

Propaganda in Belarus is still based on old Soviet ideology, still popular in the country, that includes an emphasis on the role of a strong leader. Virtually since he took office in 1994, a strong leader's cult has been practically formed around President Aleksandr Lukashenka, who has fostered the impression that no one is capable of replacing him. As a result of Soviet nostalgia, propaganda in Belarus often seeks to justify Russian legal or even illegal actions while promoting a return to the way of life of Soviet times. For instance, as one participant stated, Belarusians are often attracted to collective farms by fake and unrealistic salaries. While the media states that a simple tractor driver can earn €1000 a month, people are being deceived - such sums are simply enormous in Belarus.

Furthermore, pro-Russian youth organizations are very active in the country; supported by the state, and provided with free access to all universities in the country - thereby allowing them to hold lectures or organize politicized events - they have been able to achieve a great deal of influence.

Georgia

In Georgia propaganda often portrays the EU and NATO as bad and harmful; pro-Western organizations are blamed for destroying Georgian identity and independence by promoting "rotten" values. One example is the attempt to present NATO as a cohesive single army that extensively promotes homosexuality. According to one propaganda item, NATO has created special units for gay men that even features a special and unique uniform. There have also been attempts to cause fear about technological innovations. One participant pointed to a propaganda story alleging that new biometric passports with microchips were designed to track people and provide their personal information to Western countries.

Moldova

Compared to Ukraine, information warfare in Moldova is in a latent phase, featuring fewer targeted disinformation campaigns and fake media stories of foreign origin. Nonetheless, it is highly effective at manipulating public opinion and undermining social cohesion, harming political and economic infrastructure, and eroding confidence in democratic institutions. The most often recurring propaganda themes in Moldova are: the ostensible dangers Western influence and “warmongering,” the purported advantages of security through neutrality, and the alleged prevalence of Russophobia and Romanian nationalism. The aim of propaganda in Moldova is similar to that in other countries: to create divisions among the Government, local politicians, and the population as a whole. As a result, Moldova has the highest level of socio-political polarization in the region. This situation was perfectly reflected during the presidential election in 2016, where the population was evenly split into pro-Western and pro-Russian camps. During this election, an active disinformation campaign demonized the pro-Western candidates by presenting a negative image of the European Union. One of the best examples in this regard was a fake story that if a pro-European candidate had won, Moldova would have made a deal to accept 30,000 refugees from Syria—completely anathema for the majority of Moldovans. The next big challenge ahead for Moldova is to resist disinformation during the 2018 parliamentary election, which will decide the country’s fate—or at least its European integration prospects.

Russia

Russia is best known as a source of propaganda and disinformation. In addition, as in Belarus, there is strong state censorship in the country. United Russia, the dominant party, continuously attempts to consolidate its position in the political system and works to prevent the emergence of any potential unfriendly opposition. During parliamentary elections, Russian government invites so-called independent international observers, who usually provide “professional” assurances to local Russian communities that the votes were completely transparent and free of violations. This creates artificial transparency, bolstering the legitimacy of the government even in the absence of real democracy.

Furthermore, Russia suffers from a lack of independent media sources. The main challenge facing small and independent Russian media resources is that they simply are not allowed to exist, as a result some get relocated abroad. The majority - in some estimates 80% - of the Russian media market is owned either by the state or by Russian businessmen who have close links and relations with the Kremlin. In this situation, independent media encounters serious problems, for example: a lack of competent and truly independent personnel, a lack of financing whether private or public, the high political and financial cost of creating a new media organization from scratch, and of course the massive state censorship noted above.

Sweden

There is no evidence of any disinformation efforts in Sweden considering the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2018. However, problems arise when political issues attract considerable media attention, for example – the refugees. The government is often accused by the political opposition and by certain media sources of concealing the true nature of the refugee crisis. This situation weakens the legitimacy of, and public trust in, the government, while creating an environment in which it is easier for uninformed or undecided people to spread false information. It is worth stressing that the earlier-mentioned aim to divide the public is especially relevant in the Swedish context; propaganda has also been targeted at the specific part of the population that is undecided about the need to join NATO.

Ukraine

Pro-Russian propaganda is aimed at fomenting divisions within Ukrainian society in all possible aspects (social, economic, ideological etc.). Russia is presented as a better alternative to Ukraine, which is portrayed as a failed state. The powerlessness of Ukraine and the power of Russia are perfectly reflected in the following example. After the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, one

nearby Ukrainian town, Henichesk, was left without gas supplies during the upcoming winter season—since its reserves, and its only pipeline connection, went through the annexed territory. Russian propaganda created and spread the story that the city’s mayor decided personally to call Putin and kindly ask him to restore the flow of gas. In the story, Putin agreed to help and was portrayed as a powerful and kind-hearted president, acting to assist part of the weak and helpless Ukrainian state. The truth is that such a phone call never took place.

Solutions

VYLM participants identified the following possible solutions of to the challenges of propaganda and disinformation:

- ✓ **Attention paid to case studies and attempts to debunk fake stories one by one are often time-inefficient and distract from the search for new ideas about how societies should fight propaganda and disinformation.**
- ✓ **Humor and small independent media have the potential to counter the Russian influence transmitted by attractive if highly politicized entertainment programs and related means.**
- ✓ **Instead of allowing pro-Russian propaganda to divide societies and regions by exploiting their unique weaknesses, the EU and Eastern Partnership countries should work to foster a common identity, common values, and a common approach to security issues and political cooperation.**
- ✓ **Lack of unity and cooperation, especially among the Eastern Partnership countries, hardens decision-making processes and creates potential space for internal disputes.** People tend to think that needs of society are not so important and usually make their personal interests a priority, leading to the spread of very fragmented international messages.
- ✓ **The democratic freedoms of the West enable propaganda and disinformation.** In fact, various methods of spreading disinformation are perfectly legal. Accordingly, media consumers must exercise good judgment and check reliable information sources while keeping in mind the potential intentions of specific authors.
- ✓ **Independence and sustainability of national broadcasters is a minimum requirement for countries aiming to develop quality information spaces and resilient, aware societies.** The case of Lithuania, which has been able to guarantee stable funding free of political influence for its national broadcaster, could be one example to emulate.

The VYLM effect

In the VYLM evaluation surveys, participants’ reflections about the Meeting were positive. They found it useful, especially as many discussion sessions raised valuable examples of propaganda, disinformation and fake news and allowed participants to learn how to construct counter-messages. Having in mind that many of the participants are promising active professionals already well aware of these problems, it was rewarding to learn that participants, upon completion of the program, believed that their level of awareness and competence increased. The following are the main aspects emphasized by VYLM participants in reporting what newly-discovered information would be of use in their future professional activities:

- ✓ **Humor is a strong tool of conveying reliable, fact-checked information; it can also help authoritative sources to compete with pro-Russian media sources, which usually provide more appealing and attractive content.**
- ✓ **More languages should be used in conveying information, Russian, in order to reach socially isolated minorities.** Russian language news services, operating in European countries, for example, the Russian versions of the portal Delfi's sites in the Baltic states, should be more actively developed.
- ✓ **Examples of initiatives such as StopFake (Ukraine) or Meduza (the Russian-language independent news service based in Latvia) re-confirmed the importance of the internet as a cheap, easily accessible means of connecting with the target audience that is relatively free of government control (and thus, safe).**
- ✓ **Co-operation between independent organizations and the state is also important, and can have greater public affects.** Participants discussed ways to encourage advertising companies to blacklist propaganda outlets, to cite one effective way of encouraging private-sector involvement in counter-disinformation efforts.