

EESC

Eastern Europe Studies Centre

THE STRUGGLE FOR **COVID-19 NARRATIVES** – **IMPLICATIONS** FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY

EASTERN EUROPE STUDIES CENTRE

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Just as we face a pandemic in the real world, we are also faced with an “infodemic” in the information sphere. The coronavirus attacks people’s lungs, disinformation attacks people’s minds. Vast quantities of disinformation and misleading claims flow from both within our own societies and emanate from hostile state entities, all in an effort to undermine the EU and NATO, our governments’ response to pandemic, healthcare systems and trust within and among our societies. Similarly to COVID-19, societies affected by disinformation need treatment, as well as vaccination to avoid future outbreaks. To tackle this challenge, international cooperation is as indispensable as dealing with the pandemic itself.

The EESC hosted a webinar to discuss efforts to combat these challenges in the face of the COVID-19 crisis and lessons to be learned from our current circumstances. The webinar featured comments from the following participants:

- Linas Kojala, Director of Eastern Europe Studies Center
- Nerijus Aleksiejūnas, Lithuanian Ambassador to France
- Rytis Paulauskas, Director of Communication and Cultural Diplomacy Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania
- Daniel Braun, Deputy Head of Vera Jourova’s, Vice President of the European Commission, cabinet
- Anneli Ahonen, Head of the European Union External Action Service’s East StratCom Taskforce
- Edward Lucas, Senior Vice President at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)
- Andrea Margelletti, Chairman of the Centre for International Studies (Ce.S.I.)
- Nicolas Tenzer, The founding president of the Center for Study and Research on Political Decision (CERAP)
- Nicolas de Pedro, Senior Fellow at The Institute for Statecraft
- Luigi Sergio Germani, Director, Gino Germani Institute of Social Sciences and Strategic Studies
- Julie Buzalková, Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic
- Jovita Neliupšienė, Permanent Representative of Lithuania to the European Union

1. Dealing with disinformation internally

This pandemic, just like any major crisis, is an effective shake-up, a stress test for us Europeans, NATO allies and EU institutions. We have begun asking the right questions: how do we respond in a faster and smarter way, do we agree on the key threats, can we be more proactive in our response to the “infodemic”? The coronavirus has presented us with an opportunity to find some common ground and a better understanding of certain challenges.

The coronavirus crisis has clearly displayed how essential it is to provide reliable information to the public. Misleading and fake information related to the pandemic is increasingly revealed to be influencing public opinion and health-related behaviours, thus undermining public health initiatives. The prevailing uncertainty regarding this unprecedented health crisis serves as fertile ground for the proliferation of various conspiracy theories and disinformation.

The circumstances are proving to be a stress test of the European Union’s approach to disinformation, putting on display over five years of work and capacity building in countering this challenge. Institutions such as the European Union External Action Service’s East StratCom Taskforce have proven to be highly successful, but nevertheless, they still greatly depend on the support and expertise of the European Parliament and member states. In order to reach its full capacity, the taskforce needs investment, especially considering that it only has a single Mandarin speaker. Such capacities are important for employing an actor-specific approach, which A. Aho-nen pointed out as a key component of combatting disinformation.

Internal tensions have been amplified under our current conditions. Russia and China are promoting their own goals and agendas while generating disinformation, but they are not the only ones – there are numerous actors within our societies who cultivate conspira-

cy theories. The question is how do we effectively approach them? Furthermore, we ourselves are not necessarily particularly effective in our communication, as sometimes our narratives are limited to our own social bubbles. To handle this, we need to find key influencers in groups outside our own, who could carry information to these “outside” groups, as Rytis Paulauskas noted. He also emphasized the growing importance of local or regional media and the need to invest in its quality. Furthermore, we must work to reinforce the media literacy and awareness of our societies. It is not enough to ensure good channels of information provision if our societies are unable to properly intake what they are provided and distinguish the truthful from the misleading.

Social media platforms have finally been taking action against disinformation and cooperating with the European Union in this regard, particularly where it concerns health-related misinformation. Are these changes sustainable? Do these policies apply to political disinformation? Should governments censor content or the platforms? Or perhaps neither? The key takeaway here is a need to establish a balanced perspective from legitimate, fact-checked sources and ensure support for journalists and news media outlets during this challenging time in which funding for the sector is low due to a variety of challenges, such as reduced advertising.

Fundamentally, we must be cautious in our efforts against disinformation as well, focusing on promoting better, more authoritative content. This particularly applies to steps taken by public authorities because just as the coronavirus provokes an exaggerated response from the immune system, we must also avoid an excessively heavy-handed response to the “infodemic”. We cannot “putinise” our own societies in our response and should avoid overemphasising control and surveillance. As expressed by Edward Lucas, “nothing would please Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin more than if we adopt the measures they use”.

As terrible as COVID-19 is in terms of loss and interruption of human life, the crisis has also led to serious self-reflection and thinking on how we must proceed in our handling of information. Indeed, just a year ago, disinformation was still a relatively “niche” topic, which struggled to gain the attention of decision makers in major Western capitals, only being truly understood in frontline states such as the Baltics. Due to the pandemic, everyone is now aware and concerned

over disinformation. A European Democracy Action Plan, which will present means to counter disinformation and assist independent media, will be introduced by the Vice President of the European Commission Vera Jourova and is expected to be adopted by the end of the year, according to Daniel Braun.

2. External disinformation

Both Russia and China have actively engaged in forming narratives and spreading disinformation for their own purposes. Russia is continuing its long disinformation and propaganda tradition to sow discord, while China's bold and ambitious move to shape the prevailing narrative is quite unprecedented. The wish to compromise democracies and institutions of the liberal West is something that unites both countries. They have clear strategies and narratives prepared and in use, whereas the liberal West lacks cohesion and certainty in this respect. Nicolas Tenzer has emphasized that both Russia and China are striving to create a new world order and rejoice when hearing the increasingly prevalent narrative that the world will no longer be the same after this crisis.

An important point of their strategies is a demand for gratitude for their alleged well-intentioned support. China has been looking to cover up its misdeeds from the initial period of the pandemic, when it sought to conceal and deny the existence of an outbreak at any cost. Its narrative now focuses on the assertion that China is a leading country in containing the virus and the claim that the whole world should be grateful for the country's "determination and expertise", as well as its industrial capabilities to produce indispensable medical and personal protection equipment. China's emphasis is on shifting the narrative away from where and how COVID-19 came from, to how we should be thankful for the country's aid and experience. Chinese aid shipments, often of notably poor quality, are all accompanied by a strong disinformation push, leading to vast shifts in public opinion due to the failure of the West to adequately handle communication matters.

Russia's approach has been more along the lines of business as usual: sowing discord, trying to discredit governments and institutions, giving the floor to extremists, having fake accounts spread misleading narratives on social media, etc. J. Buzalkova shared a [link](#) to an overview of the main disinformation narratives in regard

to the coronavirus in the Czech Republic. The same narratives can be seen operating in various other countries, only in locally relevant forms. While China has focused on polishing its image, Russia has been more inclined toward continuing its subversive activities. On one end, this manifests in promoting narratives which suggest that COVID-19 is a non-issue or that cleaning your hands with vodka is sufficient (the latter contributing to a situation where a third of UK citizens think vodka suffices for hand disinfection). On the other hand, A. Margelletti emphasised that Russian trucks with military medics and supplies were not allowed to freely roam Italy and perform intelligence gathering, as some Western media attempted to claim. He claimed that Italy's institutions have a long history of having to deal with Russian "assistance" and therefore know how to avoid provocations.

The case of Italy is particularly of note. The failure of the EU and allied states to provide aid quickly, even withholding certain resources initially, served to amplify the Russian and Chinese narratives when they sent in assistance of their own. Resources and assistance from allied countries have been forthcoming in the later stages, with critically ill patients being flown to Germany for treatment and doctors from Poland and Romania arriving to provide assistance, alongside other measures. Nevertheless, this failed to remedy perceptions, given how these efforts were not communicated sufficiently to the Italian public. This sort of situation creates openings for China to develop relationships in Italy and seek to expand its influence. Nevertheless, the dubious quality of Chinese aid could prove to backfire.

Russia's real attitude toward other countries has, however, been put on very clear display even aside from its disinformation efforts. Despite the prevalence of the coronavirus in the current information sphere of the Czech Republic, a very different event has come to dominate discourses within the country – the removal of the Ivan Konev statue in Prague. This has been met with massive outrage from the Russian side, going as far as political representatives in the country linked to the move requiring police protection. From a disinformation perspective, this event has even sparked disinformation narratives that describe the statue removal as being a "US-backed attempt to rewrite history," something Russia itself is often accused of.

N. Tenzer highlighted that both China and Russia have been seeking to divert the public's attention from other acute issues. For China there's the matter of its initial handling of the virus and its overall reputation of gradually infiltrating infrastructure, economies and other Western systems. For Russia, it's a diversion from the war in Ukraine, Syria or events in Georgia, seeking to have the sanctions against the regime lifted. In both cases, the perceived endgame is to have us forget past misdeeds.

Russian and Chinese successes were not achieved because the two regimes are strong. As N. de Pedro highlights, we are acting in an asymmetric playing field, allowing Chinese institutions to present their narratives on platforms like Twitter, while the platform is banned in China itself, preventing us from voicing our narratives there. In response, we should address our own weaknesses, such as the failure in stockpiling, in our cohesiveness, our solidarity, and inadequate information on our own efforts and successes. While the Euro-Atlantic community would often have turned to the USA for leadership in such a situation, this was not an option in the current circumstances. Nevertheless, now that our weaknesses have been exposed, there is real concern at the highest levels, which will hopefully lead to an effective response.

3. Conclusions

The pandemic has served to strengthen previously existing disinformation narratives, while also opening up paths for new ones to emerge. While the systems we, as the EU and NATO, have been building since 2014 have proven themselves in our current circumstances, their effectiveness is still by far insufficient. We are increasing efforts at dispelling disinformation, fact-checking contents, exposing and disrupting problematic financial incentives; however, these are largely purely defensive strategies. Our communication should be strengthened and become more proactive. The question stands – what form should a more “aggressive” approach take, and how do we avoid becoming akin to those spreading the propaganda? Good quality and independent media is crucial in this respect.

Despite our strengthened capacity to resist hostile or misled narratives, there is still much work to do. We have to continue building our capacities to uncover and debunk disinformation, such as by supporting professional and authoritative news and investigative media outlets, as well as by furthering media literacy and awareness. Furthermore, our legal basis needs to catch up with contemporary realities, in order to facilitate responses against disinformation attempts. While we cannot be overly heavy-handed in our responses, lobbying activities need further regulation, which would ensure transparency. At the same time, we must find balance in our approach to news media, so that while it is protected from unwarranted and dishonest persecution, we can also ensure that disinformation and propaganda cannot be recklessly spread without any repercussions.

As Jovita Neliupšienė summarised, given that the failure to communicate the European response to the pandemic has been lamentable, it is imperative that the EU finds the resources and improves capacities to address the rising communication challenges.

