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The Rise of Russian Disinformation in Europe

The generation and the spread of online disinformation is becoming a worrying, wide-reaching phenomenon which can result in having a serious impact on many European countries. In the last few years, formal steps towards tackling this issue have been intensively taken.[1] The European Commission warned, that "An orchestrated propaganda campaign by the Russian government has been extremely successful at spreading disinformation throughout the European Union". The Kremlin is trying to regularly and continuously deliver the same disinformation stories in as many languages as possible, through as many channels as possible according to the EU Security Commissioner Julian King.[2] In his opinion, the Russian-driven disinformation campaign is aimed at turning open democratic systems against themselves. Disinformation attempts include threats in cyberspace like hacking attacks and malicious software, terrorist online propaganda, which are disrupting the democratic systems.[3] The problem of online spread "fake news" became apparent in the context of the crisis in Ukraine and gained visibility at a global level during the 2016 United States presidential election campaign. EU Member States such as Spain and the UK have already accused Russia of conducting fake information campaigns. The number of EU citizens, who are following news on social media is growing year by year (46 % on average in 2016) and Russia diligently continues with its hybrid war against the EU and the West. However, the Kremlin denies allegations of interference in the US election campaign as well as in the UK referendum on EU membership. According to the Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu, an information warfare force has been established within the Ministry of Defence in 2013. There is a wide-spread concern of targeting the 2019 European elections with disinformation. *Facebook* and *Google* have introduced fact-checking tools, and *Twitter* banned ads from Russian state media companies *RT* and *Sputnik*. The German Parliament passed an Act in 2017 in order to improve enforcement of the law in social networks. This act makes it possible to issue fines up to €50 million by the authorities regarding social media companies that omit removing hate speech in 24 hours.[4]

The European security experts have appealed to the EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini to start taking the Russian disinformation threat seriously in 2015.[5] Later that year, the European Council asked the EU High Representative for an action plan regarding strategic communication targeting Russia's ongoing disinformation efforts.[6] These actions resulted in the launch of the East *Strat-Com* task force in 2015, set up under the European External Action Service (EEAS). *StratCom* is issuing a Disinformation Review that collects examples of pro-Kremlin false information articles in Europe and allocates where disinformation has appeared. It also analyses how pro-Kremlin media perceive the world and focuses on key trends on Russian social media.[7] The *StratCom* team does not dispose with its own budget but rather draws on the existing EU strategic communication budget. A network of volunteers collect the disinformation stories and publish them in its weekly newsletters. The task force has an additional task and aims also at promoting the European Union's policies mostly in the EU's eastern neighborhood. In order to make the *StratCom* more effective, the European Parliament at the end of 2016 called for the need to reinforce the task force and to provide adequate budgetary resources for the team. The Parliament also proposed amendments to the EU budget for 2018 in regards to the pilot project '*StratCom* Plus', trying to increase capacity to fact-check disinformation.[8] East *StratCom* is gradually expanding and has around 27,000 followers on *Twitter*.[9] The East *Stratcom* managed to gather 3500 examples of disinformation stemming from the Kremlin in over two years.[10] Further efforts were made in 2017, when the Commission launched a public consultation on online disinformation and launched a high-level expert group representing online platforms, news media and civil society organizations, with publishing a communication on "fake news" in 2018.[11] This Expert Group will gather opinions on actions that could be taken at EU level to provide citizens with an effective tool to ensure reliable information and to handle the challenges of the digital age easier. Experts will also analyze the problem, and investigate how citizens are aware of online disinformation, or how they trust different media.[12]

Russia is aware of the "benefits" of its disinformation campaign for achieving its own political goals and views "fake news" as a non-military measure, for example the Gerasimov doctrine and the statements of certain Russian generals made it clear that the destabilising propaganda is a legitimate tool of Russia to achieve success. Disinformation can be viewed as another type of armed forces, which is trying to destabilise and create divisions in the West. Although there is only insufficient systematic research on the types and tools of disinformation, "*Kremlin Watch*" and "*Stop Fake*" stress that not only big media outlets like *RT* or *Sputnik* are deployed but marginal fringe websites, blog sites and *Facebook* pages as well. "Trolls" are often deployed to amplify disinformation messages. Russia uses different means of tools in different countries. For example, in the Baltics the Russian speaking minority is being targeted as this is the most effective way of achieving impact in the countries of the region. When it comes to Central Europe the use of "alternative "websites is popular, while "trolling" is most prevalent in Scandinavia.[13]

Russian disinformation, illiberalism and political extremism, is emerging in Europe and is mostly visible in the "Visegrad Four" countries in Central Europe.[14] In order to analyze the vulnerability of the V4 countries to foreign influence, the GLOBSEC Policy Institute conducted an opinion poll

and collected data, based on a measurable set of societal and political indicators. These efforts resulted into a fact-based Vulnerability Index of Central European countries. The Vulnerability Index measures the vulnerabilities of countries on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 represents the highest vulnerability to foreign influence. According to this index, Hungary reaching 57 out of 100 is the most vulnerable country in the Visegrad group to foreign influence.[15] This is caused by several factors, mainly by the attraction of Hungarian political elites towards Russia.[16] The party *Fidesz* switched to an openly pro-Russia stance in 2010 and in 2014 Prime Minister Viktor Orbán called for the creation of an "illiberal" state.[17] Hungary is following Russia in restricting civil liberties and conducting a cultural and legal war against the civil society.[18] In contrast, the public society in Hungary holds a pro-western geopolitical orientation.

Ranked second is Slovakia with an overall score of 51 out of 100.[19] The political elites in this country share opportunistic attitudes towards the EU and NATO, enhanced by the persistent energy ties to Russia, which makes Slovakia a vulnerable state.[20] Slovakia's President Andrej Kiska has criticized Russia's disinformation campaign while the former Prime Minister Robert Fico showed a more friendly pro-Russian stance. Russian disinformation is active in Slovak media, with pro-Russian indicators, for example when it comes to the extreme far-right magazine *Zem a Vek* and the Slovak state media outlet *TASR*, which announced a "content sharing" deal with *Sputnik*.[21]

The Czech Republic ranked third with 38 out of 100.[22] The Czech are not unanimous in their relations towards Russia and show signs of paradox. The society rejects a pro-Russian orientation, however the political spectrum headed by President Miloš Zeman, has a pro-Russian rhetoric. At the same time, the current Czech government supported the setting up of the anti-hybrid threat task force Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats at the Ministry of Interior.[23] This Centre will function as an analytical and communications unit,

which will monitor threats directly related to internal security and will evaluate and detect challenges and introduce proposals for legislative solutions that it will also implement. Last but not least, it should disseminate information and spread awareness about the given issues among the public.[24]

The least vulnerable country to foreign influence is Poland reaching a score of 30 out of 100.[25] Due to the difficult history of Poland in regard to Russia, Polish society is most stably pro-West oriented. However, having a pro-European population the current conservative Eurosceptic government, shares some common features with the Hungarian regime and is gradually rejecting governance by Brussels.[26]

Russian influence is enjoying popularity mostly among the far-right oriented parties, most notably in Slovakia and Hungary," according to Kreko, the Director of the Political Capital Institute in Budapest. The *Jobbik*, a Hungarian far-right party is a pro-Russian party, that introduced a law requiring NGOs with foreign funding to declare themselves as foreign agents and the *People's Party Our Slovakia* an anti-EU, anti-NATO oriented party with pro-Russian views, won eight percent of the vote in the last elections.[27]

In order to counter the spread of "fake news", a Slovak activist Juraj Smatana collected a complex list of disinformation-websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. According to this list, the number of pro-Russian websites in these two countries might be around 100. Alternative news websites, were launched in Slovakia, like the platform *Konšpirátori.sk*. This website is aimed at countering false information coming from the Kremlin and experienced early success as only after two months after its launch, more than 3,000 online campaigns started to use *Konšpirátori.sk*'s automated script that calls attention to untrustworthy websites.[28]

One of the most well know disinformation stories in Central Europe is the discrediting campaign against George Soros, a Hungarian-American Investor. He has

been for many years the target of several conspiracy theories and depicted as the person who wants to destroy the traditional values in Central Europe.[29] The notion of this theory was mostly visible recently in Slovakia, in regards to the Kuciak case, where in order to alleviate the public protests against the government and to counter the statements of the opposition, the former Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico, built his response and counter statements using this theory and accused the President Andrej Kiska of having close ties to George Soros and that Kiska is supporting the destabilization of the country.

Conclusion

There are hardly easy solutions to the systemic problem of disinformation.[30] It is a growing world-wide phenomenon, a new type of hybrid warfare, which will be used by more and more state actors, trying to achieve their political goals and subvert political processes in other countries, as it is a very effective and "quiet" way of manipulating developments in one's own favor. It takes many forms and is driven by many factors, like fabricated information stemming from the people, domestic politicians misleading their own citizens for political profits[31] governments using it as a weapon in internal political and external diplomatic strategies[32] and its spread via social media and various platforms.[33]

Intended "fake news" is nothing new but is more extensive and harder to identify than before due to the evolving technologies. Digital technologies and the Internet ease the way and the reach of false information misleading citizens and misrepresenting reality.[34] Although there are currently several means available to tackle this problem, there is no real effective tool to reliably stop or reduce the spread of "fake news". The rising speed and reach of the internet can result in worsening the spread of "fake news" and technology-based solutions may find it difficult to overcome them.[35] There is a need to address structural changes and opportunities that the "fake news" present, as the structures change, so must the solutions. Citizens and journalists can contribute by identifying false informa-

tion and filtering it. Important is to invest in new and better ways of connecting people. Moreover, the platforms and networks are now facing a growing challenge of achieving a healthier digital public sphere without censoring the information. *Google, Twitter, Facebook* are focusing on removing offensive, dubious or disruptive information from their networks, which means changing their algorithms to try to promote the "right" content.[36]

The most effective ways to fight state-sponsored media outlets *Sputnik* and *RT*, are to improve media literacy, promote investigative journalism, raise awareness and improve the transparency of media ownership.[37] Disinformation can be tackled with available "soft power" or "hard power" measures, however the latter is considered to be problematic in particular when the target is unclearly defined.   So instead of banning "fake news" and tasking law enforcement with combating disinformation soft power methods should be used. Content regulation of material and censorship can be contradictory to freedom of expression. Therefore, it is essential to realize that soft power measures like encouraging and supporting collaboration of the different stakeholders who are all challenged by different disinformation problems provide an effective response to disinformation as well.[38] Increased resilience to disinformation can be achieved by investing in media and information literacy, increasing the supply of credible information. Moreover, the governments and institutions such as the European Commission should encourage and support collaboration to counter disinformation and increase resilience.[39]

Recommendations

★ Efforts against the spread of disinformation should be conducted at lower levels of state bureaucracy by identifying the threat in documents such as intelligence services' annual reports and national security strategies. The public identification of the problem is important as it is needed for the non-governmental sector and media to enhance public awareness activities.

★ The propaganda network should be exposed to the public in order to increase resilience, because this delegitimizes and thus destroys illicit information channels.

★ Also, of essentiality is the upgrading of the security system needs, including alterations in the legislative and the setup of the government institutions, not to forget the importance of the communication of political representatives from both government and opposition camps.

★ Hybrid warfare is targeting the young generation which is poorly educated, therefore adaptation of the education system should be introduced.[40] A large number of young people lack notion of European Union values and they have no knowledge of critical thinking.[41] An educated young society will be more resilient towards disinformation, and conspiracy theories.[42]

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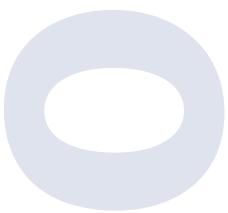40) GLOBSEC. 2016. Russia's information war in Central Europe: New trends and counter-measures.
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