European Union Policies and Strategies to Counter Russian Propaganda and Disinformation

ILIE FLORIN CEUŞAN, PhD student

GEORGE EMIL PALADE UNIVERSITY OF MEDICINE, PHARMACY, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY OF TÂRGU MUREŞ., ROMANIA

Abstract: Contemporary Russian propaganda and disinformation are part of a broader historical phenomenon, in which information has been used as an essential means to achieve Russia's foreign policy goals. Thus, there are elements of continuity and innovation between the communist propaganda of the Soviet period (1917-1991) and that of the hybrid war in Crimea (2014), which escalated with the aggression of 24 February 2022.
The propaganda and disinformation actions carried out by the Russian Federation against the European Union represent a major threat to the European project aimed at undermining and eroding citizens' confidence in European construction.
We attempt to reconstruct, from a historical perspective, and analyse, in a documentary and interpretative manner, the evolution of the approach to Russian disinformation at EU level, starting from the challenges related to the operationalisation of concepts, the creation and consolidation of the institutional architecture, as well as the existing challenges in the implementation of response policies and strategies.
Key Words: EU policies, Russia, Disinformation, Propaganda, East Stratcom

I. RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA. OLD TRICKS IN A NEW CONTEXT

In Russian strategic planning, long-term perspectives are significant but often ignored and continuity can be expressed in different ways depending on time, opportunity, events and context.[1]

Propaganda and disinformation as part of information warfare have been widely used since the Soviet era, then refined in the Cold War to justify Russia's geopolitical actions and interests, and now to legitimize Russia's claimed great power state of imperialism and a revisionist policy, accelerated with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin, who has labelled the breakup of the USSR as the greatest catastrophe of the last century[2].

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[1] Cristina Juola (eds.), Hanna Smith, "Hybrid CoE Trend Report 1: Putin 4.0 Trends – Is there anything new?", European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2019, p.8 accessed on 11.10.2022 https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Hybrid-CoE-Trend-Report-1.pdf.

[2] Legucka Agnieszka, "Russia's long term campaign of Disinformation in Europe", 2020 accessed at 26.11.2022 https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/81322 . Maria Costea, Costea, Simion (2015, ISI Journal article) "Ukraine between EU and Eurasian Regional Project in 2013", p.113-131, in Transylvanian Review (Center for Transylvanian Studies and the Romanian Academy), Vol. XXIV, Supplement No. 1, 2015. Costea, Maria, Costea Simion (2011, ISI journal article), „The Management of the EU's Eastern Partnership Project: A New Stage in the European Neighbourhood Policy", p.409-433, in Transylvanian Review (Center for Transylvanian Studies and the Romanian Academy), Vol. XX, Supplement No. 4, 2011. Costea, Maria, Costea, Simion, (2015, ISI proceedings article), „Challenges of the EU in the migrant/Refugee Crisis in 2015", p.166-175, in vol. Discourse as a form of multiculturalism in litterature and communication. History ad cultural mentalities Tîrgu-Mureş, Arhipelag XXI Press, 2015.
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Russian narratives are based on alternative discourses that question the legitimacy of the European project by discrediting its core values: democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms. The aim is to polarise society within the Member States and influence the EU's internal decision-making processes to Russia's advantage, for example to abolish the economic sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea and Russia's aggression against Ukraine and to include Russia in the public debate on European security.

The means and instruments used by the Russian Federation in the information war against the European Union are diverse and include several levels, both public and private, but all linked to Russian status: diplomats, secret services, state-funded think tanks and foundations (such as Ruskiy Mir, Rossotrudnichestvo), multi-language TV stations (such as Russia Today), fake news agencies and multimedia services (Sputnik), social media, social and religious groups and cross-border structures, funding of far-right political parties and other organisations, capture of institutional elites within the EU and/or Member States to undermine the European project[3].

The Kremlin's information strategy complements the policy of accelerating bilateral relations, economic cooperation and joint projects with some EU Member States in order to weaken coherence and undermine EU policies, a concrete example of which is Hungary[4].

The concerns of the Baltic and Scandinavian states and those of Central and Eastern Europe, which have long been exposed to Russian information warfare, to draw attention to this phenomenon have frequently been labelled as Russophobia by some Western states, but since 2014, with the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, there has been a major shift in European policy on dealing with this seemingly new phenomenon[5].

The European Union needed a new approach to counter Russia's hybrid actions, with disinformation playing a key role.

II. EUROPEAN POLICIES AND STRATEGIES IN KEY PUBLIC POLICY DOCUMENTS

The European Union approaches the fight against disinformation as part of the hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation against European democratic values from a holistic, society-wide perspective, aiming to involve EU institutions, media platforms, civil society and the media in building resilience against this phenomenon.

EU policies and strategies aim at strengthening differentiated strategic communication tailored to the situational context in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Member States, critical media literacy, co-regulating the social media space with key stakeholders and supporting independent journalism.

A constant concern of the EU has been to refine common definitions and methodologies to operationalise appropriate ways of responding to the increasingly complex and diversified forms of foreign interference and manipulation of the information environment by the Russian Federation. In order to combat this phenomenon, it had first to be defined, make the public aware of it and establish appropriate response measures.

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[3] European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties (2016/2030(INI)), accessed on 04.07.2022 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0441_EN.pdf

[4] ING2 Committee Hearing on Russian interference in the UE: THE DISTINCT CASE OF Hungary and Spain. 27 October 2022, Brussels accessed on 02.11.022 www.poltical capital.hu

[5] Vilmer Jean-Baptiste Jeangène, Escorcia Alexandre, Guillaume Marine, Herrera Janaina, *Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies*, report by the Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces, Paris, August 2018, p.49

At EU level the term "disinformation" was initially used in the context of the war in Syria in 2011[6] and 2012[7] in EU Council decisions on some restrictive measures against Syria, referring to media outlets (Cham Press TV, Al Watan, General Organisation of Radio and TV aka Gort) that "participate in campaigns to spread disinformation and incite violence against demonstrators".

In the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, there has been an increase in EU efforts to address Russian disinformation campaigns, but the terminology used at the level of the European institutions was not uniform, which has delayed a coherent approach to the phenomenon.

The European Council referred to "Russian disinformation campaigns"[8], while the Parliament used the term "propaganda" alone or in conjunction with "disinformation" in its resolutions on EU-Russia[9] relations and the review of the Neighbourhood Policy[10].

An additional challenge has been the low level of awareness among some Member States of this phenomenon, a context that, in 2016, led the European Parliament   to call on EU actors to address the current lack of clarity and consensus on what counts as propaganda and disinformation, to develop, in collaboration with EU Member States' media representatives and experts, a common set of definitions and to collect evidence and data on propaganda consumption[11].

Based on the findings[12] of a High Level Expert Group (HLEG) of academics, online platforms, media and civil society, the Commission defined disinformation as "a verifiably false or misleading set of information which is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to deliberately mislead the public and which is likely to cause public harm. Public harm includes threats to democratic political and policy-making processes as well as threats to public goods such as the protection of the health of EU citizens, the environment or security"[13] .

The first concrete response against disinformation came from the European Council in its conclusions of 19-20 March 2015, which underlined "the need to counter Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns and invited the High Representative of the European Union, together with the Member States and the EU institutions, to prepare an action plan on strategic communication in this regard and the establishment of a communication team as a first step of this strategy[14].

In March 2015, the East StratCom Task Force was established within the Strategic Communication Division of the European External Action Service. Its objectives are to effectively communicate and promote EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood; to strengthen the overall media environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Member States, including by supporting press freedom and strengthening independent media; and to improve the EU's ability to anticipate, address and respond to Russian disinformation activities.

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[6] Council Decision 2011/782/CFSP of 1 December 2011 concerning restrictive measures against Syria and repealing Decision 2011/273/CFSP accessed on 11.10.2022 available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011D0782

[7] Council Decision 2012/739/CFSP of 29 November 2012 concerning restrictive measures against Syria and repealing Decision 2011/782/CFSP accessed on 11.10.2022 at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/GA/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32012D0739

[8] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11-2015-INIT/en/pdf, p. 5

[9] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0225_RO.html#def_1_5

[10] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0272_RO.html

[11] European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties (2016/2030(INI)), accessed at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0441_EN.pdf

[12] High level Group on fake news and online disinformation, A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation, 2018

[13] Communication of the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach, 26 April 2018, COM(2018) 236 final p1, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0236

[14] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11-2015-INIT/en/pdf, p. 5

The group provides analytical support for evidence-based communications and policy and has a specific mandate to address disinformation and manipulative foreign interference in the information space and raise awareness of disinformation, information manipulation and pro-Kremlin interference, exposing attacks against the EU, its Member States and the EU's Eastern neighbours[15].

EUvsDisinfo is East StratCom's flagship project, and its main objective is to raise public awareness and understanding of Kremlin disinformation operations and to help citizens in Europe and beyond develop resistance to information and media manipulation in the digital environment[16].

In April 2016, the European Commission and the High Representative adopted the Joint Communication on Countering Hybrid Threats as part of the EU's policy of an integrated approach to security and defence, and included massive disinformation campaigns using social media platforms to control political discourse or to radicalise, recruit and coordinate intermediary actors as potential vectors of hybrid threats. Most of the actions defined aim to improve situational awareness, with specialised mechanisms set up to share information with Member States and support EU decisions in the field of strategic communication[17].

The EU Threat Fusion Cell has been established within the EU Intelligence Analysis Centre (EU INTCEN) which is part of the European External Action Service (EEAS) to receive and analyse classified and open-source information from different stakeholders on hybrid threats, which is distributed to Member States and supports decision-making processes at EU level. Since January 2017, the Cell has launched the "Hybrid bulletin", a regular publication on hybrid threat analysis, distributed directly to EU institutions and bodies and to national contact points.

The European Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats was launched by Finland in 2017; along with ten EU Member States, Norway and the US are founding members, while the European Union and NATO have been invited to support the Steering Committee. The Centre's mission is to foster strategic dialogue, as well as to conduct research and analysis, to cooperate with communities of interest to improve resilience and responsiveness, all with the aim of contributing to countering hybrid threats[18].

A series of key policy documents on countering Russian disinformation were developed by the Commission and the High Representative in 2018, which sought to address both the challenges of a common EU understanding of disinformation, to create the appropriate response modalities (institutional, co-regulatory, educational, strategic communication) and to protect European elections from Russian interference.

On 26 April 2018, based on the findings of the HLEG report and an extensive public consultation process, the European Commission published a Communication entitled: "Fighting misinformation online: a European approach"[19] which contains general principles and objectives that should guide actions to raise public awareness of and combat misinformation.

The Commission proposed that a multi-stakeholder Forum (made up of major online platforms, software companies and advertising industry representative bodies) should develop a Code of Best Practice on misinformation, create an independent European network of truth-checkers, ensure secure and resilient electoral processes, boost education through the development of critical and digital skills, including in the media, support quality journalism as an essential element of a

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[15] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/_en
[16] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/
[17] Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council Joint *Framework on countering hybrid threats a European Union response JOIN*(2016) 18 final, p.4 accesed on 11.10.2022 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0018
[18] https://www.hybridcoe.fi/
[19] Communication of the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach*, 26 April 2018, COM(2018) 236 final p1, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0236

democratic society, a coordinated strategic communication policy to counter false narratives about Europe and combat　　disinformation inside and outside the EU.

A self-regulatory Code of Best Practice on Disinformation was signed in October 2018 and the main online platforms that signed up voluntarily committed to improve the transparency, accountability and reliability of their services and to take specific measures before the European Parliament elections in May 2019[20] . This was complemented by the Digital Services Act (DSA) which came into force on 16 November 2022 and classifies disinformation or election manipulation as systemic risks.

A key programmatic document in tackling disinformation is the Action Plan against Disinformation developed by the European Commission and the High Representative on 15 December 2018. It sets out the main actions to combat disinformation through a coordinated approach at the level of the EU institutions and Member States and outlines priority actions to be taken by different actors ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections.

Russia's disinformation actions, framed in a hybrid context, are identified as the biggest threat to the EU and require a strengthened response focused on 4 main areas: 1) improving the capacity of Union institutions to detect, analyse and report disinformation, 2) strengthening coordinated and joint actions to combat disinformation; 3) mobilising the private sector to combat disinformation; 4) informing citizens and improving resilience in society[21].

The Rapid Alert System (RAS) is an important element of the EU's overall approach to combating disinformation and is one of the four pillars of the Action Plan. It is a dedicated digital platform to facilitate the exchange of information related to disinformation campaigns and to coordinate the responses of EU institutions and Member States. The RAS draws on open-source and academic information, fact-checkers, online platforms and international partners[22].

In 2020, the European Commission proposed the European Democracy Action Plan/ EDAP[23] which sets out establishes a strengthened EU policy framework and specific measures to: 1) promote free and fair elections and strong democratic participation; 2) support free and independent media; and 3) combat disinformation.

In order to design[24] appropriate policy responses, depending on the actor, channel used and impact, the Commission refines the definition of disinformation and proposes a distinction between misinformation, disinformation, information influence operations and information interference in space.

Despite the differentiation included in the EDAP, there is a clear need for further work towards more refined common definitions and methodologies. With regard to one of these phenomena - the activities of foreign actors - the EEAS has begun to analyse and bring together in a coherent approach

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[20] Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions on the implementation of the Communication *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach*, COM (2018) 794 final, accesed on 04.07.2022 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0794

[21] Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions *Action Plan against Disinformation* JOIN (2018) 36 final, p.5 accessed on 04.07.2022 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018JC0036& qid=1682541612586

[22] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/factsheet-rapid-alert-system_en

[23] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions *On the European democracy action plan*, JOIN 790 final (2020),　　accessed on 04.07.2022 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX: 52020DC0790

[24] James Pamment, The EU's role in fighting disinformation: Crafting a new disinformation framework, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Working Paper, September 2020 accessed on 10.10.2022 https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/15/eu-s-role-in-fighting-disinformation-taking-back-initiative-pub-82286

and common understanding the different elements with a view to operationalising their use, which will allow for possible future coordinated or joint responses. In this context, it is suggested to use the term 'foreign intelligence manipulation and interference' rather than 'disinformation', as this more accurately captures the issue at hand. Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) describes a pattern of behaviour, mostly unlawful, that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact political values, procedures and processes. Such activity is manipulative in nature, carried out in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity may be state or non-state actors, including their proxies within and outside their own territory[25].

The European Court of Auditors/ECA concluded, on its special report about disinformation, that the EU action plan against disinformation was relevant but incomplete, and even though its implementation is broadly on track and there is evidence of positive developments, some results have not been delivered as intended. EU spending on tackling disinformation has been relatively low to date: €50 million between 2015 and 2020. With reference to the EUvsDisinfo project, the ECA pointed out that it has been crucial in raising awareness about Russian disinformation but the fact that it is hosted by the European External Action Service raises some questions about its independence and ultimate purpose, as it could be perceived as representing the EU's official position. While the rapid alert system has facilitated information sharing among Member States and EU institutions it was not used to its full potential for coordinating joint responses to disinformation and common action. The ECA report recommended the need to improve coordination at EU level, to increase member states' commitment to the use of the Rapid Alert System, to improve the monitoring and accountability of social platforms and to include disinformation as part of a coherent EU media literacy strategy[26].

III. CONCLUSIONS

The European Union has established a coherent and unified framework for action to combat Russian disinformation in which a whole-of-society approach may be the only viable long-term solution. Disinformation is a cross-border phenomenon involving actors, target groups and multipliers and the response needs to be integrated, reinforced and adaptive, involving coherent strategic communication at the level of the EU institutions but also at the level of the Member States who are responsible for translating these policies into the national context.

An essential component of strategies to combat disinformation remains the media education of society through the development of critical skills to identify potentially damaging news, and in this context, an important role falls to university elites in the educational processes of those they educate.

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