ENoP
EUROPEAN NETWORK OF POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS

Hybrid Threats to Democracy Conference

Event report

16 September 2022

Despite the strong efforts of democracy defenders to protect democracies around the world, as well as the international solidarity in support of Ukraine, non-democratic regimes continue to reinvent their methods of warfare and propaganda.

A combination of coercive and subversive actions linked to disinformation, aim to bring confusion and contradiction in political adversaries, leading to a weakening in the credibility of democratic institutions.This mix of unauthorised methods of interference that undermine democratic processes, can be labelled as "hybrid threats to democracy".

With the urgency to stand for democracy, the ENoP session explored the non-military notion of "hybrid threats to democracy". It brought a variety of representatives from the EU institutions and experts from political foundations and their partners to discuss how to respond to disinformation threats and foreign election interventions. It also look into our role as political foundations in empowering civil society and political actors in facing such realities, and discussed the role of China and Russia in this new geopolitical context.

The conference was opened by **Jana Weber**, ENoP Deputy Coordinator, who introduced ENoP and the main topic. With regards to hybrid threats, political foundations are litmus for the state of democracy in partner-countries – with their long-standing local partnerships they are the first to signal signs of a shrinking democratic space & best at identifying the entry points for support to pro-democratic forces. They work closely with CSOs on uncovering and protecting against disinformation & implementing democracy actions beyond election observations, aimed at improving democratic processes in the long-term. ENoP's session will explore the non-military notion to hybrid threats to democracy, focusing on fighting disinformation & external electoral interference.

The session was moderated by **Milosz Hodun**, ENoP Steering Committee Member, Projekt: Polska, who took the floor to share his expertise and the importance of the topic. These introductory remarks were followed by the keynote.

In his keynote speech, Mr **Lutz Güllner**, Head of Division Strategic Communication, Task Force and Information Analysis (SG.STRAT.2), EEAS, focused on 3 areas: 1)placing hybrid threats and the challenge of information manipulation into context; 2) exploring the role of different actors in society in tackling the issue; and 3) shared his thoughts on the way forward in that field.

Mr Güllner gave a brief introduction to what a hybrid threat is, and how disinformation falls in there. In his words, the problem faced in past years is that these terms have been used and partly misused for political purposes. The term 'fake news' and disinformation have now become a synonym for the view of the 'other'. As such, the term has lost its objective indicators and has become very prone to interpretation. In terms of defining hybrid threats, there is a shared agreement that they are non-military in nature, and come in 3 forms: physical, digital, and cognitive threats.

He stressed the importance of understanding that the challenge of hybrid threats and information manipulation is not just a communication issue. As such, these state-sponsored activities are deployed in a very targeted and intentional way, very often in combination with other activities. They go beyond a view and a narrative, as a deliberative activity aimed at interfering in the information space of another side. Often these include a long-term strategy of creating confusion in society and, in turn, undermining the stability and democratic structures.

In terms of the European Institutions' work on the topic, it was mentioned that a great coherence exists between the actions and strategies of the Institutions. The EEAS works in close cooperation with the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE), set up by the European Parliament. In terms of the recent State of the Union speech, it was mentioned that there was a clear reference to hybrid threats.

Mr Güllner outlined that the issue is of a complex nature, and the focus of his keynote is on the external aspects of hybrid threats, which account for a large part of the issue. Disinformation in itself is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the ways, means and strategy of how it is used and deployed. In his view, the digital possibilities have a big role in this, but this goes beyond social media. We are seeing new forms of production, dissemination, reach and amplification. As such, he outlined that the focus should be put on identifying those techniques, tactics and strategies that are being used to undermine free speech and boost certain narratives.

Mr Güllner shared the 4 areas identified by EEAS as crucial to tackle hybrid threats, around which they organize their work:

1. Situational awareness
2. Strengthening the resilience of society and our democracies
3. Regulation and Disruption of malign activities
4. Diplomatic tools of the EU (including sanctions and international cooperation)

Lastly, the future development of the issue was addressed. While it is difficult to say, Güllner shared that we need to be prepared for a continuous development. There are examples of new trends that we see from China, where hybrid threats take a less obvious, rather subtle forms and cannot be deemed as "illegitimate". The focus is placed on capturing the influence, controlling the narrative rather than a heads on activity. The EU is mindful of the new tools used and is in continuous monitoring of the new trends.

Ivana Karásková, Founder and Leader of MapInfluenCE and China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), gave an insight into the state of Chinese propaganda and disinformation efforts in Europe. In her words, while Russia has been in the spotlight for a number of years for very objective reasons, what China is attempting to do in Europe has the potential to be much more crucial for democracy. Ms Karaskova and her colleagues have been mapping hybrid threats since 2016, focusing on Central and Eastern European countries and particularly EU and NATO member states. Through continuous mapping, they have gained insight into how Chinese propaganda and disinformation campaigns function and have evolved.

The overall strategy is to increase narratives trying to make their way into mainstream European media with the goal to rewrite the discourse and challenge Western narratives. In terms of tactics, investment into traditional media was mentioned, giving the example of Chinese investments into local media companies in the Czech Republic. Other means of interference include insertions of supplements in local media and setting of social media accounts for reproduction of official Chinese narratives.

China has initiated cooperation with Russia on certain narrative spreading even before the war in Ukraine. Some of their messaging is aligned in terms of focusing on anti-NATO and anti-West narratives, which has a result the eroding trust in democracy and democratically elected representatives. An example of this is China Today and Russia Today media outlets sharing in Bulgaria. Hits of their cooperation is also seen in Chinese media publishing in various European languages more often citing Russian voices and vice versa.

Chinese interference evolves further, with disinformation and the propaganda apparatus becoming prominent in Europe in 2019, in connection with Hong Kong protests in 2019 and the spread of Corona virus in 2020. There have been more visible attempts to influence the discourse such as the creation of false accounts, but also more covert techniques such as hiring PR companies, vloggers, consultants, and think-tanks. These efforts are accompanied by attempts to localise, and frame into domestic audience how certain narratives should be understood.

Concluding her remarks, Karásková stressed on the importance of monitoring the evolving trends on China's role in spreading disinformation particularly with regards to their financial and technologically advanced capabilities.

Lisa Gürth, Deputy Director of Russia Programme, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), shared her background and reflected on how quickly the political situation changed in Russia over the past couple of years. The focus of her intervention is on the practical work of FES in Russia, as well as how propaganda in Russia works. Understanding its working in Russia is relevant as they often employ the same techniques for European space as they do with their own audience. In addition, her input sheds light on what techniques are used by their partners to counter disinformation since the start of the war in Ukraine.

According to Gürth, propaganda within Russia gives the illusion of diversity of opinions. Russia attempts to replicate this strategy in other countries as well. This results in a population which is not mobilized behind one idea, rather having a big political apathy in the middle. When it comes to the Russian opposition and free media, they are in a difficult position as they do not have any position in the official narratives. All major news outlets are closed, they have to find a way to still reach the audience and present a real different opinion. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, FES partners have tried to compile different information on as a manual of counteracting false narratives. There is a rise of new media techniques, with exile media using Search engine optimization (SEO) to reach people within Russia.

Looking at Germany, there are the same strategies: using disinformation and existing social problems to split the society, as it is done in many European countries. It was shared that these attempts are not as successful, largely due to the lack of understanding the different societies. Based on FES surveys of the general population, about 20-30 % are prone to conspiracy theories.

Gürth shared that to counteract propaganda there is a need for both defensive policies and building up democracies in our own countries. To address it, on the one hand we need defensive policies, but on the other we have to build up democracies within our countries. In addition, there is a need to understand the actors producing it. Concluding her remarks, it was pointed out that a lesson learned has been the need to learn more about the digital sphere to make our work better.

Milan Jovanović, Analyst at Digital Forensic Centre, Montenegro, brought the perspective of Russian interventions in the Western Balkans. In his words, this has become a strategically important region where the clash of East and West happen.

Russia, and its proxies, have been implementing their hybrid strategy in the Western Balkans for years, especially in those countries where Serbia, as a key Russian partner, has a strong political and religious influence. In Montenegro in particular, hybrid threats have been carried out since 2015 many different domains, disinformation being only one of them. Some examples include cyber-attacks during 2016-17 elections, phishing attacks targeting of Montenegro's Ministry of Defense, as well as coordinated moves with local politicians, media, and other pro-Russian actors in light of Montenegro's NATO invitation in 2015. It was pointed out that in the case of Western Balkans, Russia exploits the very visible pro-Russian sentiment. According to Jovanović, Russia is part of the problem, also pointing towards the failure of the US and EU to clearly articulate a coherent and consistent approach to Western Balkans. This has opened the way for a lot of foreign interference, both from Russia and China alike. As a result, Russia and its proxies have been undermining countries in the region's chances of NATO and EU membership. Their greatest success is exploiting the divisions and in society and the dissatisfaction of EU membership process.

Concluding his initial remarks, Mr Jovanović stressed on the importance of remembering that the fight to preserve pro-European and pro-democratic values must be a continuous and timeless process.

As a closing of the discussion, the panel speakers were asked to recommend a book or film that would allow the participants to continue the learning on the topic. Recommendations included "The Great Hack" on Netflix, the European Digital Media observatory and podcasts.

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