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GEOPOLITICS IS BACK

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EUROPEAN FORESIGHT DAYS

ESPAS European Strategy and Policy Analysis System

DAY ONE

Thursday, 17 November 2022

15.45 -16.45: *The future of global competition: the battle of narratives*

Summary

In the face of new security threats and an emerging future of global confrontation and interfering, the issue of disinformation comes at the forefront. Information manipulation hits close to the topic, as it is one tool out many, which is currently emerging as a geopolitical tool. Hence comes the question: is there really a battle of narratives? Is it more than that?

There is also the aspect of situational awareness and the need for us to understand who is doing what and how we need to understand it. Building resilience to protect society is key, but how do we proceed? What about regulations to tackle these threats? What do we have available in our toolbox as the EU and as liberal democracies? How do we address geopolitical issues?

This panel concludes that the scope of the issue of disinformation sometimes prevents us from dealing with it. However, there are areas we can identify and in which progress is possible. Disinformation is not restrained to a communication challenge. It includes the media, outside influences, the digital world, regulations, a better situational awareness… We must understand the breadth of this challenge, while we are now aware of which first steps are necessary.

What is the most important lesson about Ukrainian resilience against Russian disinformation?

Ukrainian society has become more resilient against Russian disinformation as the threat to physical security posed by the enemy is clear to all. However, there is still room to improve resilience, and one of those vulnerable spaces is popular culture; Russian mass culture has been portraying Ukrainians as uncivilised and inferior for decades, without Ukrainians ever questioning it. This is now becoming obvious. Despite Ukrainians' resilience growing, Russia is using new narratives to sow disbelief in the Ukrainian government and portray the West as not doing enough. These narratives still find their ways into the public, indicating that work remains to be done, notably on educating on propaganda techniques. There is now increasing interest in the topic and already shifts happening. In terms of investment, investing in resilience is very broad; there is no silver-bullet approach. Media literacy remains a long-term solution, but pre-bunking and debunking of disinformation also work. The example for resilience remains Finland, thanks in parts to its long tradition of media literacy; Fins don't pay attention to disinformation as they already identify it as such.

What makes the African continent's information environment vulnerable, is it systemic weakness or outside interference?

China's heavy presence in Africa is also seen in media, with China sponsoring training for African journalists. China is essentially providing opportunities that are otherwise rare, hence journalists are more inclined to accept such offers. These trainings are efficient in changing and shaping journalists' worldviews. China also signed contention agreements with media agencies, ensuring protection against negative coverage of its actions and policies. Africa is also faced with the issue of social media influencers, who are relatively easy to buy and can in turn influence large audiences. South Africa maintains better levels of resilience against Chinese disinformation but is not immune, like the remaining of the continent. The vulnerability is two-fold: regulation and security. In terms of regulation, governments remain inactive, thus empowering journalists, civil society, and academics would build resilience.

How do we see sharp power in the communication environment?

Foreign information manipulation operates in a vast array of challenges in today's communication system. Influence challenges that emerged include strategic corruption, kleptocracy, or technological challenges. In the early 2000s, the belief was that technological advances would serve in democracies' advantage, but while there have been some positives, the intensification of polarisation, disinformation, and digitalisation have opened the door to even more challenges we are still unprepared for. In particular, purposeful actors such as Russia and China have learnt to bring in all of their tools (political, diplomatic, media, technological…) when engaging with open societies, something we did not quite anticipate. Sharp power stems from our assumptions about what media, people-to-people, and cultural engagements were from the conceptual framework of soft power. Terms associated with soft power – attraction, persuasion, volunteerism, pluralism – were often not in view when looking at "outward-facing" powers like Russia and China. These countries seek to monopolise relationships with partners overseas and induce self-censorship in them.

This approach is inconsistent with the dominant concept used by observers from open societies since the end of the Cold War. It would be important to include in our public debate some form of framework that would allow us to recognise the different sorts of outward-facing influence and acknowledge that it is far too aligned with concepts relating to censorship, obedience, and dominance. Responses from open societies need to be more purposeful and aligned among like-minded democracies. Those responses must be imbedded in transparency, accountability, and fundamental human rights principles when we engaged with partners from non-democracies.

How do we build a better understanding and way of dealing with disinformation from China and where to draw the line of behaviour?

China is a relatively new player in terms of disinformation in the non-Chinese world. China has been looking at Russian disinformation techniques for a while and has

joined in on actual cooperation with Russia. China has been directly engaging with Russian propaganda machine and exchanging since 2015, showing eagerness to learn and cooperate.

On Chinese disinformation, Taiwan is an important testing ground; disinformation is much more pronounced, complex, and comprehensive in terms of influencing public sentiment and developing pro-Chinese assets. Furthermore, China has recently changed from a more defensive narrative to an offensive one. Previously, China focused on promoting its positive narrative on peaceful Chinese rise, while nonetheless also engaging in more assertive and aggressive types of information warfare when related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, China's core interests. Since 2020, and especially since the Covid crisis and the war in Ukraine, China has been changing and becoming much more assertive in terms of building narratives and influencing global narratives on key developments, including on responses to the war in Ukraine. China has entered a war of disinformation and is engaging in crafting purposefully fake disinformation to undermine confidence in official views in the West. With the war in Ukraine, China is intentionally amplifying Russian narratives especially on NATO expansion and alleged biolabs in Ukraine. It is essentially giving a helping hand to Russia, copying into its own official accounts Russian disinformation, which is especially important since Russian media outlets and official accounts have been eradicated from social media in the EU. China is now moving from its old approach of simply disseminating propaganda to a new approach of both disseminating propaganda and disinformation itself but also moving away from official and easy-to-trace accounts to building local intermediaries and concealing the origin of the narrative. This last point is a lesson from the Russians.

Is this not classic disinformation anymore? Do we see a tendency of suppressing voices?

We now see digital repression, where governments seek to use digital information and communication technology to surveil, manipulate, or coerce individuals or groups to control public debate and prevent challenges to their leaders' hold on power. The DNI's primary assessment is that over the past decade of more, many governments, including backsliding democracies, have been using digital repression to control publics at home but also diaspora communities. They have been using a wide range of tools: censorship, manipulation, disinformation, mass surveillance, and invasive software. The key drivers of this surveillance are leaders' fear of their own public and their fear of political and social concerns, which could jeopardise their hold on power. Digital repression is part of the manipulation of information online and the battle of narratives. Consequently, this repression restricts freedoms globally, with digital transnational repression allowing authoritarian regimes to monitor and threaten diasporas, limiting freedom of speech where victims of the regime reside, including in liberal democracies. Besides, there has been a constant decrease in internet freedom since 2010. Internet shutdowns happened in 34 countries last year, amounting to 132

shutdowns, and creating a 5.45 billion USD loss globally. These shutdowns happen for two main reasons: authoritarian regimes may seek to hide illiberal practices, or prevent its public from organising against the regime. Furthermore, especially with personalist leaders, autocracies use internet restrictions to constrain civil society, and use legislations or regulations towards invasive spyware.

The outlook for digital repression is grim, with tools set to become more pervasive, targeted, and complex in the near future. Leaders will also be increasingly concerned about the behaviours and actions their public might take as they struggle to address social and economic challenges. Therefore, the likelihood of rising digital repression is higher.

The issue of disinformation is therefore multi-faceted, from a communication to a digital issue. What is the most important element we need to invest in now? Do we have all the tools in place internationally? Do we need to develop new international norms?

Norms is one of the critical points; there is a lag in the development of norms while technologies change at a rapid pace. Equally important is to develop regulations and laws. Europe and the US have made efforts to develop norms in the digital sphere to protect human rights and the democratic system, which sends a message of hope. However, these are disparate efforts and liberal democracies could come together for stronger impact.

China's main focus remains the battle of narratives to push the US out of Europe and Asia and broaden Chinese influence in the Global South. Liberal democracies need to provide alternative narratives, which acknowledge the Global South's agency in this geopolitical rivalry, to stand up in the battle of narratives.

Do we have other ways of deterring these actors?

Part of these challenges is that they are happening at a global, multi-faceted level, making it difficult for individual countries or institutions to deal with it. Therefore, part of the answer is to accelerate and deepen the way in which like-minded democracies work together. We must build non-governmental and governmental entities and highlight that this challenge is not solely internal or external. Media, the tech sector, or universities are also places to build strength and resilience. In dealing with disinformation, a conceptual approach is most effective, since it is a mutually reinforcing effort.

Resilience training is crucial to building resilience. This training should be offered to journalists, social media actors, civil society, and political actors in Africa. They need to build the capacity to identify misinformation and isolate it. Time for action is now. Africa is already a playing field for malevolent actors. However, regulation remains difficult due to governments' unwillingness to act.

Where is the need to invest in Ukraine? What is expected of international partners?

The current sense of unity helps Ukraine act quickly and in a coordinated way. The enormous support of media, NGOs, civil society, and the government helps. This is something to preserve, but we also need to think longer term, with regards to the reconstruction plan for Ukraine. Despite Ukraine being great at quick solutions, it needs more policy-making, analysing data and planning long-term. The current environment, however, makes this hard. Exchanging experiences, maintaining this dialogue with Ukraine, sharing ideas on increasing efficiency, and generally partners helping Ukraine building and planning long-term policies is what Ukraine needs.