Fake news and online disinformation

Report on the IED Seminar -Budapest, 29 April 2019

On Monday 29 April, in Budapest, the Institute of European democrats (IED) organized an internal Seminar on fake news and online disinformation.

The seminar was opened by François PAULI, IED Board Member, who welcomed the participants. He recalled the audience that it was not the first seminar which the IED organised on the topic. Last year, the IED organised two events, one in Poland and one in the Basque Country on the very same topic. Therefore the present discussion continues the reflexions launched previously.

Johanna TOUZEL, IED Head of Brussels Office, moderated the discussion among experts. She recalled that less than one month before the European elections, it is important to address the issue again focusing this time round on foreign electoral interference and interventions by State and non-state actors. What is going to happen now in Europe? Which countries are going to be targeted and how ?

The phenomenon of tribalism

According to Andrzej Potocki, it is important to make a clear distinction between the two notions. Cyber-attacks and Disinformation campaigns are two different activities however similar and somewhat connected.

- Cyber Attacks are simply projected to make a mess in computer systems of Western companies, parties, or any other Government service...
- Disinformation campaigns are made to make a mess in human minds, to deepen the existing phenomenon of tribalism.

Tribalism is connected with changes

During the XXth century, the pyramid of knowledge was rather tall but did not have a very wide basis : from the 1920s and until 1990s, western societies enjoyed a limited number of TV Channels and restricted number of newspapers : the sources of knowledge were not as numerous as today.

With internet, every single body can share its views on the world and everybody can project its own vision of the world. On one point of view, it is a good thing because it encourages to involve people but also allows people to create and spread plot theories. All these theories are on equal foot with enlighten intelligent and serious knowledge and cognition.

Along the previous seminars on the matter, the concept of "*war 3.0*" emerged, because however we do not use lethal weapon, we are under threat and there are weapons against human *rationale*.

Tribalism is a Mechanism through which people are closed in their respective bubble. They have their own vision of the world and their own set-up cognitive tools. Their vision of the world is rather connected to fears and an inability to understand the more and more complicated reality.

What are the aims of Russian disinformation campaigns?

Swinging the boat. The aggressor does not want to keep us in a specific political stand : then aim of Russia is not to make us all Vladimir Putin supporters. On the contrary, they do not care about our position on Putin but they want to make us weak enough to make us easily manipulated. Therefore the big part of polish public is exposed to disinformation which targets people that are sceptical about Russia, enthusiastic about Europe and who are absolutely democratically minded.

Loosening the ties between Poland and its allies. For some historic reasons, anti-Americanism and anti-Israeli rhetoric plays a leading role. Therefore, it is important for Russia to loosen ties between Poland and the US but also with the EU. It cannot do it in a direct way, or with too primitive messages but rather by strengthening the already existing prejudices.

Policies of the EU in the field of Human Rights in general and more specifically regarding the LGBT community seem rather incompatible with the average Catholic conservative political scene in Poland. Describing the EU as an entity whose sole political goal is to give rights to gay people makes the job. Even if it is completely false or outside the rationale.

On the other hand, the US are constantly depicted as close allies of Israel and therefore defending Israeli or Jewish interests in Poland. It does not impact anyone directly but it exposes to the problem of the recovering of property losses of polish Jewish during WW2.

One aspect of disinformation is about the fear polish people have to lose their house after Jewish formally were expulsed. What tools and guarantees do they have to understand that this won't happen ? Some disinformation campaigns strengthen the feeling of fear of losing something as important as property, and the source of living. This is not an explicit nor directly anti-Semitic but the effects are the same. It is just about making you feel less secure.

The fear against the refugees. The less you have refugees in your area the more you have fear; in Germany, where there were many refugees the mainstream political parties got good results whereas the AFD scored where there were few refugees. You always fear of unknown.

Poland is relatively free of refugees compared to other countries and we only have two millions of foreigners living in the countries.

By diffusing anti-german policy and describing Germany as the country who welcome the most refugees in Europe, it is a way to present it as a threat to Poland in the extent that many of them will come.

The Disinformation does not focus or aim to promote Russia or building positive picture of Russia.

The use of Russophobe term is that massive and divides the political debate between those who are in favour and the others who are against.

What is the goal of disinformation?

Kamil GORYN is a Researcher and lecturer at University of Bialystok (Poland), specialist of national security issues combined with technology development. He explains that the goals are still relevant however the tools used by the Russian are new.

When you live in a democratic country, you are vulnerable by definition , because freedom of speech allows to make statements. It forces us to allow people to speak.

The most important is to understand how modern technology change the war.

They know anything they want to know. When we use social media or services provided by google for instance, we create information about us. Those companies profile us by interests, by what we like or dislike. They profile us by gathering many information about us. The problem is that they are selling those information to anyone who wants to pay.

Anyone who wants to can buy information and get to know therefore a lot of information on specific groups of people, based on interests, believes, on what they like or what they hate.

A most common use of this information is advertising: 99% of the time, it is bought by advertising companies. But 1% of the time, it is bought by State actors who want to change the minds of Western societies. These pieces of information are used against us.

The technologies that push us forward Western countries develop make us more vulnerable to disinformation because disinformation is tailor-made. Any disinformation is precisely tailored for any particular group, that is a target.

In this regard, the US Presidential election of 2016 is a good example. The preparation of minds was already prepared two years before.

Few years before the election, Russian formed an Institute on informational warfare

That institute was based in Russia: they don't need to be based in the US. That institute wanted to disinform US society by spreading not only disinformation but also by moderating the discussion on particular topics: Multiculturalism, Muslim society... Russians motivated this discussion in order to divide society and heat up the discussion in the US.

What are they doing exactly?

They do not only moderate the discussion, but they also hire specialists who know a lot about American culture and society, and use of achievements in social science, psychology, technology and those data are available for everyone. During the elections, they managed to hacked the democrat party computers,

They wanted to steal data and those data were published by a third person (Lucifer 2.0) and those data were published with consequences on the election.

Those pieces of information managed by Russia started to manipulate US society.

It is very cheap : 15 million dollars to manipulate American society : it is very cheap and very efficient the main problem is that actions are very complex and they do not only involve the social media specialist but also people who have ability to hack computers systems.

The situation in Donbass

Philippe Michel Kleisbauer is a Member of French Parliament. As a member of the NATO-Ukrainian inter-parliamentary committee, he is meeting members of Ukrainian Parliament three times a year, either in Ukraine or in Brussels. He has been three times in Ukraine, among those once on the Donbas front, last year in March. A month ago, he was in Kiev for the first round of presidential elections : he checked fifteen polling stations. he started to get involved in the troubles encountered by Ukraine on it Eastern part the Donbas.

The Donbas is at war. Some might call it a cold war but it is a war. There are dead soldiers for several years, but although there is a conventional war, there is a cyber war simultaneously. We found out that Russia disturbs the spirit of the Ukrainian soldiers in a criminal way through social media.

They attract and catch soldiers attention in a way they can go inside their social medias. They bring them in to a big cause old soldiers hero dead soldiers who were moved social groups and you have groups about this caus. All the soldiers come. They are irrational about this. They attract soldiers through social media and causes relayed on social media (old soldiers...) and there are cyber attackers that identified soldiers and attract them through fake accounts (girls..) they take the control of recently dead or wounded soldiers to send messages in groups who can disturb and demotivated...

Russian authorities identified death soldiers, hacked their Facebook accounts and spread messages of abandon... in a couple of days after, family and friends who saw those desperate messages believe those after they know the death. Those messages are very often about the hierarchy that abandoned them in the front. They forgot us. They blame the hierarchy and induce that the opponents might defend better cause.

When we doubt we are not acting anymore.

What is happening in the Donbas area with soldiers should warn us about what could happen in EU countries where citizens take part to elections : those are a potential target for Russia.

When there are elections, protests, crisis, the people citizens are looking away and are opened

It's happening in every elections, in France, in Italy, In the UK... the cyber manipulation is a kind of attack and it is a European attack. Most of the attacks suffered by European countries were coming from other EU members states : the answer must be European.

Final recommendations

- We have to be cautious with the tendency to call *fake news* everything that we disagree with. It blurs the entire picture and you allow distributors of fake news to act freely.
- In eastern and central Europe, it is often heard that all politicians are thief all politicians are corrupted. It is true that some are but by calling them all thief and corrupted those who really are relived of responsibility.
- Legislation. We need new regulations for both European and national legal systems. A network of courts that sanctioned abuses against policies of fake news.
- We need a European defence strategy towards cyber attacks on cyber security