

Disinformation campaigns in the European Union: Lessons learned from the 2019 European Elections and 2020 Covid-19 infodemic in Romania

Radu Magdin¹

Abstract: *Against the backdrop of the current Covid-19 challenges and their long-tailed effects, the article uses lessons learned from Russian disinformation in the period 2014-2020, including the European Parliament 2019 campaign in Romania and the Covid-19 infodemic, to discuss possible future Russian disinformation approaches and narratives against the European Union (EU). The accent of the analysis and recommendations falls on the instrumentalization by Russian disinformation of the EU's internal strivings for sovereignty against the backdrop of the economic fallout due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and how European leaders are pushed in directions contrary to continental strategic interests. Early opinion surveys seem to indicate an increased favourability of Europeans towards Russia as a result of soft power campaigns during the Covid-19 outbreak in Spring 2020 – in what we reveal was, in fact, a staged media show orchestrated by including lessons learned from the Chinese ways of strategic communication.*

Keywords: *Disinformation, Infodemic, Sovereignty, EU-Russia relations, political cohesion.*

Introduction

Peter Kenez, in *Birth of the Propaganda State*², states that the Bolshevik press transformed propaganda in “an instrument of the dictatorship of the proletariat”³; that the indoctrination campaigns have become an omnipresent feature of the new political system. The same rhetoric is what we find these days present across the European Union (EU), this time as a mixture of reactions to Covid-19 lockdowns, conspiracy theories and other Russian disinformation campaigns, and people's own genuine dissatisfaction with the strain of the pandemic and its economic effects, as well as the geopolitics predating Covid-19. The same rhetoric is present both with people with right leanings – expressing discontent with the internationalist elites, too open to Russia, China, and migration, as well as with left leaning people, who feel insufficiently supported

¹ **Radu Magdin**, international analyst and consultant, has worked as an honorary advisor to the Romanian Prime Minister (2014-2015) and was an advisor to the Moldovan PM (2016-2017) on a range of strategic issues, from political strategy and communications to reforms implementation and external affairs. Radu, who spent five years in Brussels (2007-2012) with the European Parliament, EurActiv and Google, is a NATO Emerging Leader with the Atlantic Council of the US (2014), a Forbes Romania Trendsetter (2014) and a Warsaw Security Summit Leader (2015). Radu is a PhD student with SNSPA and a globally cited regional analyst. E-mail: radu.magdin@thesmartlink.org.

² P. Kenez, *The birth of the propaganda state: Soviet methods of mass mobilization 1917-1929*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

³ For heuristic effect, we are conflating ‘proletariat’ and ‘Bolshevik’, to depict simultaneously a member of the masses and of the many – the original meaning of the term ‘Bolshevik’, a member of the working masses – as in, not the leadership, as well as, to some extent, a proclivity towards left-of-centre leanings.

socially, and who are asking for more equity, equality, and distribution of wealth and/or protection from the potentates leading the democratic world. The “politically correct dictatorship” meets the “stoicism of the frugals”.

This is how much of the population feels with regard to EU and national institutions, and their leadership – the ‘new political system’ described by Kenez. In this paper, we will look at how the European Union got to be in this situation. Based on the lessons learned over the past few years from monitoring and analysing Russian propaganda – particularly the way it evolved around the 2019 European Parliament elections (EU19) – as well as the Covid-19 infodemic phenomenon, we endeavour to outline possible future vectors of attack against the EU’s image and legitimacy. We shall recommend concrete measures to increase the resiliency and preparedness of the EU to deal with the incoming information operations, to ensure maintained levels of allegiance of the population to the symbols of European unity as well as intra-European cohesion.

Methodology

This article relies on a qualitative explanatory research approach, making use of secondary sources, such as analytical reports on disinformation and influence operations – primarily from think tanks, academic texts focusing on the methods of disinformation, and news articles reporting on disinformation or shifts in perception; and, as primary sources, opinion surveys by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and European Institutions, as well Sputnik articles to exemplify distortion stories. The aim of the paper is to expand the understanding of cohesion risks for politics and political processes across the European Union, under the influence of disinformation, in light of the most recent shifts in the phenomenon since April 2019 through to summer of 2020.

The research foundation uses the knowledge about Russian techniques of disinformation used between 2014-2019^{4,5} and includes the lessons learned from the disinformation campaign observed in Romania for the 2019 European Parliament elections⁶ and, tentatively, incorporates observations from the ongoing 2020 Covid-19 infodemic⁷. Previous studies have explored the development and impact of disinformation techniques in contemporary contexts, such as the Brexit referendum⁸ or

⁴ Center for Strategic & International Studies: The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe, 2016. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook> (vol. 1) & The Kremlin Playbook 2, 2019. <https://www.csis.org/features/kremlin-playbook-2>. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

⁵ R. Baiduk, Chapter Seven: Divide et Impera: Russia’s Big Geopolitical Game with Europhobic Movements in the EU. The case of CEE. In *The New European Union and its Global Strategy: From Brexit to PESCO*, Valentin Naumescu (ed.), 156-174, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

⁶ A. Bendiek and M. Schulze, Disinformation and elections to the European Parliament, in SWP Comment, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, no.16, 2019, pp. 1-8. swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2019C16_bdk_she.pdf (Accessed 22 June 2020).

⁷ First use, 2003, Washington Post column by David Rothkopf, meant to depict “a blend of “information” and “epidemic” that typically refers to a rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about something”. It became associated with the 2020 Covid-19 rampant disinformation flagellum [merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-were-watching-infodemic-meaning](https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-were-watching-infodemic-meaning). (Accessed 22 June 2020).

⁸ A. Bărgăoanu and L. Radu, Fake News or Disinformation 2.0? Some Insights into Romanians’ Digital Behaviour. In *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 1, June 2018, pp. 24-38. http://rjea.ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/articole/RJEA_vol.18_no.1_June2018_art.2.pdf (Accessed 22 June 2020).

the US presidential elections of 2016⁹. However, in such a dynamic and ever-changing landscape, additional research is of utmost importance, in order to empirically analyse how disinformation is constantly morphing, and thus help in the creation of tailored policies. It is still too early for a wide and significant academic literature to have been written about the changes anti-Western propaganda has undergone since the emergence of Covid-19 in January 2020. For this reason, we endeavour to contribute to the understanding of the newly gained agility, localisation and targeting features improvements by Russian propaganda by stacking “classical” digital disinformation with the lessons learned from the 2019 European Parliament electoral campaign, and the first observations about the Covid-19 infodemic.

The article has the following structure: First, the paper will establish a baseline by giving some context to Russian propaganda in Europe. Second, the analysis section will be divided into three parts, which will (1) outline the most important EU19 disinformation themes, (2) discuss the two case studies, namely the 2019 European Elections and the Covid-19 infodemic together with the lessons which emerge from them, and (3) contain proposed recommendations for future EU actions against influence operations. The paper will conclude in its final section with some concrete policy recommendations.

The main added value of this paper is that it brings into focus observations from the S-E corner of the EU, a region that is not well monitored by central organisms of the EU and is insufficiently included in surveys by major European and international organisations (like the Atlantic Council, or the European Council of Foreign Relations) that have programmes targeting disinformation. The relevance premise is that what has been observed and tested in one member state will later be used across the EU. Empirical observations since 2019 indicate that Russia has been piloting new techniques, approaches, and narratives first in small political or geographical units, adjusts and recalibrates, and then deploys the disinformation campaign at a larger scale.

The limitations of the research stem naturally from wanting to describe a phenomenon that is ongoing and constantly evolving, with the majority of the analytical and technical instruments used by professionals for the detection of the phenomenon come from the ITC and cybersecurity world, while we are trying to depict societal effects (long spans of time) determined by the use of communication (fuzzy logic) and by psychological processes (latent).

Establishing a Baseline

The EU Disinfo Lab writes in its reaction to the EU’s Joint Communication tackling Covid-19:

Strategic communications are – in essence – political communication. [...] a central mistake with the Joint Communication is the conflation of political communication with the fight against disinformation. In a conflictual environment, one’s strategic communications will always be qualified by others as its propaganda¹⁰.

⁹ H. Allcott, and M. Gentzkow, Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 2017, pp. 211-236.

¹⁰ EU Disinfo Lab, Our position on the Joint Communication tackling the Covid-19 disinformation, Brussels, 10 June 2020, disinfo.eu/advocacy/our-position-on-the-joint-communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-the-facts-right (Accessed 22 June 2020).

Without adopting their conclusion about the erroneous ways of the Commission, we are choosing to depart from this warning about the inherently conflict-inducing tension between the path to be objective and the need to fight disinformation. In a fundamentally pro-European country like Romania, Russian propaganda is present through various channels, but it takes much more subtle forms than what we can see, for example, in the Republic of Moldova, where Moscow has an easy time exploiting historical, religious, and cultural ties of the two countries in order to push anti-Western narratives.

Russian approaches have been creating new desires for affirmation of sovereignty and self-determination: in Western Europe, as discussed further down, through *Strategic Autonomy & Technological Sovereignty*, and across Europe, through its own example. In the words of Ivan Ksenofontov, PR director of the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund,

“(we) have our own culture and system of values; our own understanding about what the state should be and the functions it should fulfil [...] If we find the way to tell this to the West and to the Orient, this will be the *soft power* of Russia”¹¹.

The results since 2014 are that increasingly more parts of Europe are seeking to affirm their own identity and voice, to feel that they are “standing up to Brussels”.

Analysis

The EU19 disinformation themes observed in Romania we are listing below are those of relevance to the EU and other Member States, by their translatability into other situations people are familiar with:

1) *The return to the glorious past and accomplishments of the Ceausescu regime*¹², with a focus on post-World War II reconstruction. This longing for a glorious past of rebuilding applies to the post-Covid-19 economic relaunch, the development of infrastructure, and possible anti-EC and anti-NATO narratives regarding limitations (standards and quotas) placed upon Member States.

2) *The return to stricter, more traditional Christian values*, shared with Russians – an invitation to anti-multicultural narratives, and attacks on the institutions and capitals that are “imposing foreign values upon us”; incitation to rising against political correctness.

3) The nostalgia for the communist days, more peaceful, with greater human development, with safer jobs and greater income equality. The same narrative works if we swap ‘communism’ for ‘Les Trente Glorieuses’, or Ordoliberalism and Adenauer, etc. Issue targeted: people are looking for the safety and quietude they used to know. This applies particularly to Germany (and the Frugal Four countries inside the EU), as it is departing from its long-held principle of keeping a net positive budget – the price for

¹¹ Interview by Jill Dougherty, Moscow, Russia, 21 February 2013.

¹² Sputnik Moldova, *Nicolae Ceausescu – The Undying Memory of a Genius Romanian*, ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20190126/24347952/Nicolae-Ceausescu-memoria-de-neucis-a-unui-un-roman-genial.html (Accessed 22 June 2020).

European solidarity¹³.

4) The use of cultural similarities (transference technique). In a Romanian-Russian context it was made to be about language¹⁴, while in Romanian-Ukrainian context it was made to be about Romania claiming back the former territory of Bukovina¹⁵. For the rest of Europe, it can be used in a differentiated manner: for some provinces, it will be played to divide countries (Catalonia, Aquitaine, and Flanders), but also to keep countries apart for fear of shifting borders: Transylvania-Hungary, Western Ukraine-Poland, Finland-Sweden, etc.

5) The “failed economic model (Romania) adopted by joining the EU and the capitalist camp” will be a particularly salient narrative to many regions of the EU who will feel the bite of the post-Covid-19 economic downturn, while propaganda emphasises China’s economic prowess.

6) *Second rate country, national humiliation, and EU double standards*¹⁶ – one of the favourite narratives of former social-democrat leader Liviu Dragnea, as well as of the Visegrad Four group of countries and, more recently, the Mediterranean EU. This has become visible as early as March 2020, when French President Emmanuel Macron started talking about “sovereignty and strategic autonomy” regarding not only defence, but also medical equipment and the agriculture¹⁷; the farmers of France followed suit, insulting and complaining about the Spanish farmers, who “are undermining the quality and viability of French agriculture”.

According to the joint EAST and PRISM report *Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*¹⁸, Russian propaganda in Romania concentrates on stimulating nationalist and anti-EU sentiments, anti-NATO themes, on most occasions painting Romania as being a mere vassal of decaying Western powers; other elements include iron branding capitalism, globalisation, political correctness, minorities and gender identities. The effectiveness of this approach is further increased by Romanians often feeling inconsideration from the part of Western European colleagues on topics of strategic interest to Romania.

7) A peculiar problem resides in the channels that do the work of Russian influence operations but are not recognized as such. Such channels promote narratives

¹³ This refers to the issue of ‘Corona bonds’ and the *communautarisation* of the risks and debts of vulnerable EU Member States. The Frugal Four refers to the group of countries – the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark – that insisted in keeping a tight budget discipline and who initially vetoed the proposed debt-based mutual support proposed measures. ecfr.eu/publications/summary/vfc_views_from_the_capitals_how_the_row_over_coronabonds_is_tearing_europe.

¹⁴ Sputnik Moldova, *Russian political scientist: the Romanian language is more than just a language*, 11.04.2016, sputnik.md/moldova_romania_society/20160411/5875823.html. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

¹⁵ Libertatea, *Emergency reunion in Ukraine after propaganda video showing annexation of Bukovina by Romania*, 03.06.2019, libertatea.ro/stiri/alerta-in-ucraina-din-cauza-unui-clip-care-sustine-ca-romania-vrea-sa-anexeze-bucovina-de-nord-2654889. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

¹⁶ Andrei Luca Popescu, *The themes of Russian propaganda in Romania. Expert Forum: In Bucharest, fake news are a governing instrument*, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 14.03.2019, romania.europalibera.org/a/temele-propagandei-ruse-%C3%AEn-rom%C3%A2nia-expert-la-bucure%C8%99ti-fake-news-e-instrument-de-guvernare/29821867.html. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

¹⁷ The article references the statements made by President Macron on 12 March 2020: “delegating our agriculture (to others) is madness”, and goes on to describe the list of arguments and positions about how Spanish agriculture is undermining the French one. marianne.net/economie/romain-dureau-la-crise-du-coronavirus-est-le-grain-de-sable-qui-bloque-l-agriculture. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

¹⁸ Polish EAST Center’s and Ukrainian PRISM Foreign Policy Council’s joint report *Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2017-2018 prismua.org/en/dri-cee/.

of the Russian propaganda, while the treatment of news topics encourages dissent, sedition, public institutions distrust, and anti-science-based opinions; they alternate between extreme leftist and conservative and nationalist positions. The effect is that of polarisation of society and the rejection of any balanced approach to policies, politics, and public opinion.

Across Europe, Russian-controlled media have been identified, but only some have even been shut down – the large majority were online media but only a few television and radio stations. It is very likely that regional and local antennae of legitimate national networks are promoting equally harmful type of news treatment and spreading Russian propaganda themes, but national policies are rarely addressing these.

8) The issue of *inconsideration of strategic interests* is of great regional importance and Russia does not need to invest much effort in it to be effective. The impact of the intra-EU dynamics around the topic seem to be heading to a (perceived) increasing rift between the EU and NATO and between the Eastern and Western strategic interests within the EU. In the context of Covid-19 and existing EU-US tensions over trade and geopolitics, narratives purposefully created for France and Germany encourage the “Strategic Autonomy European Dream” in a form that promotes separate defence efforts of Europe from the United States and a rejection of mutually economically supportive measures, such as the imports of US NLG¹⁹ into Europe – hence, favouring the increasing dependence of France, Benelux, and DACH²⁰ on Russia’s Nord Stream energy options.

What has been achieved has been the weaponization of latent anti-Americanism in the target populations to undermine the economic and energy security of Europe, by pushing the public opinion and politicians to rejecting more the thought of cooperating with the US than that of buying from Russia. The continuing encouragement on the path of ‘**strategic autonomy**’ is in fact the application of the ricochet technique of influence operations campaigns – by encouraging Europe to be more “independent”, it is creating a rift between Europe and the US. Various specialists have speculated that a threshold exists in the transatlantic relationship beyond which Europe will not return again to the 1990s-2012 relations it has had with the US²¹.

After the 2019 elections, the EU published a report²² affirming that Russia changed its tactics: instead of pan-European campaigns, as between 2014-2018, the EU19 electoral season was characterised by smaller scale and more difficult to detect campaigns. This tendency was confirmed in the case of the Covid-19 infodemic, when

¹⁹ The importing of US Natural Liquefied Gas into Europe to ease dependence on Russian sources has been an issue of contention since the Obama administration. However, at the time, Russian propaganda was only attacking the issue of pricing and increasing EU dependency on the US. More recent iterations on the theme also pit the Eastern and Western halves of the EU against each other, encouraging one towards imports of US natural gas through the terminals in Croatia and Poland, while encouraging the other side to continue with the Nord Stream 2 project.

²⁰ Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

²¹ The year 2012 corresponds to US President Obama’s “Red Line in the sand” statement regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria – which was never enforced, and which constitutes the moment Europe started planning away from the US.

²² The European External Action Service, *Report on the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation*, the European Commission, 14.06.2019, eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_report_on_disinformation.pdf (Accessed 22 June 2020).

Russia acted asymmetrically from a soft power²³ perspective, by helping²⁴ Italy – a country already vulnerable geopolitically through its participation in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, to then start a disinformation campaign in Italy accusing Poland that it is blocking relief efforts from Russia²⁵. The implementation of the disinformation campaign, with differing international and local content on the same topic, is showing the efforts to spur intra-EU tensions from within by abusing core tenets of European values such as medical relief. For the moment, the full extent to which Russia acted differently in various EU countries is not fully known, as EU efforts concentrated more on the China-originated infodemic²⁶ than on mapping Russia's campaign.

The **Covid-19 disinformation** demonstrated an evolution in sophistication, by the fusion of Russian and Chinese forms of information manipulation. Prior to EU19, Russia was notorious for its micro-targeting and the use of messaging in various national languages, while China was 'blanket messaging', primarily in English. On the other hand, China was notorious for its protocol, marketing, and product design approach to its communication, making an art out of the use of creative media in strategic communication; a matter with which Russia was hardly preoccupied. However, the fusion of the two sets of best practices resulted in exquisite images of product design, product photography and media placement²⁷, targeted and localised communication, and the smart trans-media use of content and hashtags.

Another remarkable aspect is the change of campaign parameters mid-deployment, switching from running according to pre-set narratives to 'rolling with the times'. These changes were described by the G4 Media Romanian news outlet, citing an internal report²⁸ of the Romanian government to which they had access. Dated 30 April 2020, the report was never released to the public. According to the journalists at G4 Media, researchers in cybersecurity from the Cyber Influence Assessment and Strategies Center (CIASC) – a specialised unit under the General Secretariat of the Government – and the Romanian Institute for Research and Development in Telecommunications – a specialised unit within the Ministry of Telecommunications and Transport – picked up signals and identified trends in both overt (propaganda) and covert (influence operations) communication playing on the Romanian population's feelings of frustration with the slow pace of help received from authorities and/

²³ *Soft power*, as coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 1990.

²⁴ The *help* offered by Russia was later to be revealed as a spying mission, through the accused embedding of GRU officers among the personnel sent to Italy. barrons.com/news/italy-and-russia-spar-over-alleged-coronavirus-spies-01585933206. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

²⁵ *Russian Senator Falsely Claims Poles Closed Airspace to Virus Aid*, Polygraph.info, 24 March 2020. polygraph.info/a/russian-senator-falsely-claims-poles-closed-airspace-to-coronavirus-aid-for-italy/30507078.html (Accessed 22 July 2020).

²⁶ The European Commission accused Russia and China of spreading disinformation regarding the Covid19 pandemic and the activities undertaken to address it, consecrating the term of "infodemic", in *Joint Communication on Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right*, Brussels, 10.6.2020, ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

²⁷ With reference to the catchy tag lines and Instagram-perfect photo opportunities with boxes of Russian and Chinese aid on various airports and in various Covid-19 shuttered cities.

²⁸ The report is referenced by the news piece titled *An internal report warned as early as 30 April that Russia is exploiting the discomfort of the population to increase social strife. How Russia changed its disinformation campaign in the middle of the pandemic*, posted 16 May 2020, and can be found in Romanian at g4media.ro/exclusiv-un-raport-intern-a-avertizat-inca-din-30-aprilie-ca-rusia-exploateaza-disconfortul-populatiei-pentru-a-crea-tensiuni-sociale-in-romania-cum-si-a-intensificat-rusia-campania-de-dezinformare.html. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

or international organisations, as well as the unnerving confinement in their homes to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The new messaging describes a technologically advanced Russia that provided help to a number of countries – Romania, implicitly, not among them – and a variety of conspiracy theories and other elements that borderline incite the population to rise and ask for their freedom and their rights.

The Compounding Effect of Simultaneous Crises is the emergent phenomenon that we are starting to observe during the summer of 2020, when this article was written. The ECFR's dedicated Covid-19 survey²⁹ found that the margin of the population across a number of member states that considers European integration to have gone too far has increased. The same survey revealed that, while negative sentiment increased towards China, Russia, the EU and the US, those that advanced the most in a negative sense were China and the US, whereas Europe and Russia received comparatively positive acclaim (though the overall sentiment was still negative).

During the 2019 European Parliament electoral campaign, the Social-Democrat party in Romania, PSD, drove a campaign whose core message was “the erosion of national sovereignty of Romania” by Brussels. Similar occurrences are likely to happen across the EU at every kind of election, particularly against the background of Covid-19. The result of not properly addressing the 2008-2012 financial crisis (and the subsequent euro zone crisis) resulted in Brexit and a deepening in the fracture of EU-US relations. With Covid-19 being bigger and structural, the potential risks are still incalculable.

On 14 July 2020, a European Parliament (Kantar) public opinion survey showed, amid the “Frugal Four vs. Europe” debate prefacing the EU Leaders’ Summit, an almost exact match between the countries that believe the least that the EU should have increased powers and those part of the Frugal group (Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Austria), accompanied by the Visegrad Four traditionally Eurosceptic (over the past few years) Hungary and the Czech Republic³⁰. This shows a clear tendency for some countries to distance themselves from collective action inside the EU.

The concrete recommendations for future EU actions against influence operations that we stress below are not operational counter-measures suggestions, but rather monitoring and awareness activities, which in turn can trigger more adequate policy and/or operational responses. As the the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) outlined in its June 2020 paper³¹, devising warning systems for hybrid threats is significantly difficult, and the task is not helped by the Cold War analytical framework most specialists and policy makers still use today. Consequently, the recommendations presented below depart from empirical examples, and instead try to alleviate the issue of analytical, methodological, or cognitive bias of the analysts by recommending human-agnostic measures.

1. **Monitor** long-established channels and outlets of communication that were legitimate but are now pushing Kremlin-profiting narratives. There are two

²⁹ Susi Dennison, Pawel Zerka, *Together in Trauma: Europeans and The World After Covid-19*, Policy Brief ECFR/328, European Council of Foreign Relations, Berlin, Germany, June 2020, ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together_in_trauma_europeans_and_the_world_after_covid_19. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

³⁰ UNCERTAINTY | EU | HOPE. Public opinion in times of COVID-19. In *Eurobarometer*, European Parliament, 14 July 2020, p. 5 europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2020/public_opinion_in_the_eu_in_time_of_coronavirus_crisis_2/en-covid19-survey2-key-findings.pdf. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

³¹ Sebastiaan Rietjens, A warning system for hybrid threats – is it possible?. In *Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis 22*, June 2020. hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Strategic-Analysis_22_WarningSystem.pdf. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

ways to go about this: either use a series of local and regional networks, similar to EU's Digital Media Observatory³², but use it for traditional media; this kind of triage “by hand” uses human perception and long-history baselines to identify deviancy. Use modern and comprehensive means based on machine systems that combine statistical analysis and natural language processing to automatically and constantly run through text and audio and identify change in linguistic and editorial patterns. The advantage with identifying traditional media is that there are long established recordings, patterns, audiences – so evidence of the normal behaviour previously exhibited.

2. Monitor for the triangular correlation between heightening tensions between Western Europe and the US and the Visegrad Four group, and observe the correlation the bigger the fracture, the more Russia adopts a more appeasing and collaborative tone, particularly on business, towards Western Europe. Even this kind of dynamic (live) multivariate analysis can be automated through machine learning and web scraping – both easy applications of artificial intelligence in this day and age, but it requires custom indices for almost every configuration.
3. Monitor for propaganda narratives equating Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and European leaders such as Viktor Orban and Andrzej Duda with NATO, and the narrative of “taking Europe in the wrong direction”. This is probably among the technically easiest, yet conceptually demanding variations of monitoring, as taxonomy-based automated discrimination of RSS feeds and page parsing have been available to even the civilian world since the mid-2000s. However, in case of need, the model can be undertaken by an ambitious collective of fact checkers and parsed through manually. At the same time, there is significant ‘pollution’ of these narratives by Jihadist “agitprop”, so positive attribution to Russian (agents) may be challenging. The US and the European states most affected by Covid-19 are particularly exposed to the conflation of the Covid-19 infodemic with racial and anti-white/-Christian narratives, and Russian predilection for themes about Western weakness^{33,34,35,36}.
4. Monitor for shifting in propaganda and disinformation effect from increasing rifts and nationalism in Europe to drawing Europe towards Russia and Asian collaborations. The Hybrid CoE experts report on Chinese hybrid threats³⁷ highlights new practices, confirmed at a wider scale since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, that depart from traditional propaganda to the economic

³² Officially became active 1 June 2020 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/european-digital-media-observatory>. (Accessed 22 June 2020).

³³ Mia Bloom, *How Terrorist Groups Will Try to Capitalize on the Coronavirus Crisis*, Just Security, justsecurity.org/69508/how-terrorist-groups-will-try-to-capitalize-on-the-coronavirus-crisis/ (Accessed 22 July 2020).

³⁴ Ebby L. Abramson, Al-Qaeda is suddenly framing itself as Black Lives Matter champion, in *Policy Options Magazine*, Institute for Research on Public Policy, 8 July 2020. policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/july-2020/al-qaeda-is-suddenly-framing-itself-as-a-black-lives-matter-champion/ (Accessed 22 July 2020).

³⁵ Catalin Cimpanu, China, Iran, and Russia worked together to call out US hypocrisy on BLM protests, in *Zero Day Security Blog*, ZDNet, 5 June 2020. zdnet.com/article/china-iran-and-russia-worked-together-to-call-out-us-hypocrisy-on-blm-protests/ (Accessed 22 July 2020).

³⁶ Ivano di Carlo, *Extremist and terrorist groups thrive during pandemic chaos*, Europost.eu, 11 May 2020. europost.eu/en/a/view/extremist-and-terrorist-groups-thrive-during-pandemic-chaos-28770 (Accessed 22 July 2020).

³⁷ *Hybrid CoE Trend Report 5: Trends in China's Power Politics*, Hybrid CoE, 10 July 2020. hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/20200710_Trend-Report-5-China_Web.pdf (Accessed 22 July 2020).

and societal realms, but which, in their spill-over effects, still take advantage of the hybrid use of narratives to influence disgruntled or worried nations towards increased cooperation with apparently more stable and/or powerful global actors.

5. Harmonize, at the level of the European Council, the central narratives that the heads of state and government will use in their respective countries, with regard to the European dimension versus the national one. While from a public communication and politics perspective nuances and message flexibility is recommended, in the context of micro-targeting and visuals-driven influencing³⁸, synchronicity and uniformity of core elements of speech and EU central narratives may prove to be a means towards all Europeans getting the same message, decreasing the possibility of wilfully distorted interpretations.
6. EU Institutions should be more inclusive with the topics regarded as being of strategic concern for all its Member States, in order to prevent the reinforcement of the impression (and Russian propaganda theme) that only the preferences of a few, select European Member States are taken into account.

Conclusions

Oscillating between a “values-based Europe” and a “sovereign and autonomous Europe” opens up the population in various Member States to nationalism and a sovereignty-based approaches to identity- and European-politics. This confuses the population about which path the political class is moving on, polarises the population at the antipodes, as each segment of society will take in turn the opposing narratives it prefers, resulting in inevitable intestine clashes. It also allows for the exploitation by the leadership of other Member States and third countries (like Turkey) of the image of hesitancy and non-cohesive Member States – the proverbial lack of a ‘single voice’ on a range of policy issues from migration to the EU budget. While on the short term, due to the Covid-19 outbreak and the seeking of means to deal with China, the current setting is favourable to the encouragement of a more Europe First approach, it is also creating negative medium-term effects with regards to cohesion.

The biggest risk, from a European perspective, regarding the effects of Russian interference and influence operations, resides in the lack of deliberate and purposeful action to increase the resilience of the EU populations to the temptations of populism, nationalism, East-West and North-South divides, etc. Romania, for example, has been feeling the effects of the 2008-2012 financial crisis all the way to the 2019 European Parliament elections; this happened at a time when Western Europe had been enjoying growth and steady financial markets for several years in a row (2014-2020).

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, we can estimate that the majority of EU countries will be under numerous psychological and economic forms of distress. These, possibly in conjunction with racial issues, due to the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and its influence on the racially diverse states in Western Europe, are the ideal conditions for destabilising influence operations. We also need to take into account the long tail of the Covid-19 impact, which will manifest over approximately two years, particularly under the form of lost employment and companies going out of business or being taken over.

³⁸ *Hybrid CoE Trend Report 4: Trends in the Contemporary Information Environment*, Hybrid CoE, May 2020, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Hybrid-CoE-Trend-Report-4.pdf> (Accessed 22 July 2020).

Much of the academic literature focuses on Cold War type of mitigating propaganda effects, while much of the practitioners' literature focuses on either the analysis of contemporary and digital media, or the fighting "perpetrators". There is, thus, a significant gap between the understanding of modern tools, techniques and methods in terms of impacting upon societies and democracy, the instruments that can be mobilised for countering such influences, and Cold War automatism. Future research should seek to bridge together the aspects of contemporary understanding, upgrading of policy, and preventing conditioned behaviours from detracting from true positives solutions seeking.

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