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Disinformation and the V4

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Information and media literacy as a tool to counter disinformation in the V4

Disinformation – false or misleading information intentionally spread for profit, to create harm, or to advance political or ideological goals – is not a new phenomenon; yet, it is nowadays an issue of great reach and impact. The expert community and the majority of policymakers are aware of the increasing presence of this threat and of the harm that disinformation causes to society. However, the politicians who will act to effectively counter the disinformation threat, demanding the introduction of a variety of tools and a whole-society approach, is still alarmingly low. The V4 countries have not avoided this trend. In fact, the Visegrad Region, in part due to historical reasons, is significantly susceptible to disinformation and its citizens are exposed to it every day, while often not having the capacity to process this information properly. The prevalence of disinformation in the V4 countries originates in the Russian Federation, which significantly boosted its disinformation campaigns directed towards the European Union after its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and has increasingly intensified the quantity and quality of disinformation to the very present day. Today, Russia is using this campaign to justify its hostile actions in Ukraine, but in wider terms, also to break the unity of the European Union, to erode the societal trust in national and international democratic institutions, and to achieve a reality where people cannot recognise what is true and what is not, and start to become indifferent.

Even though disinformation is not a new phenomenon and has existed over centuries, both in times of peace and war, our societies are still not successful in combatting the problem. One of the reasons for this is that we are holding the wrong end of the stick. One of the standard ways of countering disinformation tends to be reactive rather than pre-emptive. This is because it is quicker and thus easier to launch a counter-narrative information campaign, or to restrict the access to disinformation or extremist websites. As we will never be able to prevent the occurrence of disinformation, there will always be some part of society persuaded by the “alternative truths”. However, once we recognise the importance of implementing long-term and deep-rooted solutions to the issue, we should be able to find a more balanced way to protect our values, freedoms and democracies.

It can be argued that the disinformation spread could be decreased by shifting the focus from the daily combat against disinformation to building media literacy and critical thinking

among our citizens. Never has this need been more crucial than in the current times of digitalisation.

The susceptibility of the V4 countries to disinformation goes hand in hand with the fact that their citizens not always able to completely understand or process the information they have received. Thus, this research project builds upon the assumption that the education of all segments of society to develop critical thinking and media literacy can prevent people from falling into the disinformation net. To achieve a clear picture of the disinformation environment in the V4 region, the level of media literacy and critical thinking among the population, as well as the challenges these countries face in dealing with the disinformation threat, the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association organised an expert roundtable, which experts from governmental and non-governmental sectors in the Visegrad countries attended. Importantly, their discussions were aimed at looking for ways the V4 countries could cooperate to increase the level of critical thinking and media literacy in the whole region. The related case studies, as well as the final recommendations for areas to cooperate on the V4 level, can be found in this publication.

Disinformation and the Slovak Republic

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Disinformation began to appear intensively in the Slovak virtual space after 2014, when Russia annexed part of the Ukrainian territory. However, the annexation of Crimea itself did not incite a significant reaction in the European Union, and the disinformation campaigns at that time were not as pronounced as they are at present. Therefore, Slovak institutions and the expert community did not pay much attention to the proliferation of disinformation within the Slovak society, nor did they immediately act to introduce new tools to suppress disinformation. Such conditions created a space for the Kremlin to systematically expand its desired narratives towards the Slovak society, influencing public opinion and establishing a presence in the alternative media. At that time, based on a leaked recording from a meeting at the Russian embassy, it was already known that the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Zem a vek* was requesting financial support from Russia to spread the pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation.¹ Astonishingly, both the print and electronic versions of the *Zem a vek* magazine are still being published 8 years after the leak of that recording and the conviction of the editor-in-chief for racial vilification last year – and of course, this is only the tip of the iceberg. In recent years, the spread of disinformation narratives has moved mainly to social networks, through actors who are pursuing their own ideological, political or financial interests.

Nevertheless, the disinformation in Slovakia is not only focused on spreading pro-Kremlin narratives. The period of the COVID-19 pandemic provided clear proof of this. The Slovak society went through an interesting development: the citizens were initially cohesive and supportive, hand-sewing face masks to protect themselves and their loved ones, applauding healthcare workers from their windows and impatiently waiting for the development of vaccines. However, the pandemic quickly became a political topic, with campaigns from ultra-right parties urging people not to wear masks and questioning the very existence of the COVID-19 virus. After the development of the vaccine, an anti-vac campaign was launched, labelling it “corona-fascism”. It spoke about the harmfulness of the vaccines, which were supposedly causing impotency and contained microchips. These disinformation actors managed to control the minds of a significant part of the Slovak population, to such an extent

¹ Ako je to s údajnou nezávislosťou Tibora Rostása [How it is with the ostensible independence of Tibor Rostás]. In: *Denník N*, 22.02.2016, <https://dennikn.sk/blog/378330/ako-je-to-s-udajnou-nezavislostou-tibora-rostasa/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

that they marched to the National Council of the Slovak Republic and the Presidential Palace in times of curfew, and protested against the then valid pandemic measures when the prevalence of COVID-19 and the death rate were rapidly increasing. At the time, attacks were reported, both verbal and physical, on healthcare workers who were treating patients with COVID-19, many times by the very same people who had succumbed to the aforementioned misinformation. The vaccination rhetoric changed slightly after Russia developed the Sputnik vaccine, which did not pass European Union registration, but became something that the pro-Russian channels could suddenly tolerate. It is an intriguing fact that part of the population which had succumbed to the anti-vaccination campaign nevertheless got vaccinated with the Sputnik vaccine.

Disinformation actors managed to achieve this state in society by taking advantage of that discomfort of citizens and the insufficient strategic communication of the state authorities. Closures of the HoReCa sector, as well as lockdowns and other restrictions accompanied by confusing and contradictory communication from governmental bodies and institutions, alongside the economic costs of the pandemic for the population, created fertile ground for the dissemination of disinformation narratives in the society.

A similar case could also be observed in the days ahead of signing the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Government of the United States of America, when the communication of the relevant institutions was significantly better, but as it turned out, was still insufficient against the massive dissemination operation of the pro-Kremlin narratives. The announcement of the intention to sign the agreement caused an unprecedented anti-American reaction on social networks from several forms of alternative media, left-wing politicians and extremist parties. The prevalence of negative interactions about the DCA grew significantly and resulted in protests taking place in January 2022, organised mainly by the SMER-SD and Republika parties, where disinformation regarding the defence agreement and pro-Kremlin narratives were spread further afield.² Surprisingly, these protests with several thousand participants took place at a time when 24 other countries (including Hungary, a country admired by the aforementioned actors for its amicable approach to Russia and its authoritative style of governance) had signed a similar agreement with the US, and when 190 thousands of Russian soldiers were gathering on

² Russian propaganda network in Slovakia. In: *Gerulata*, 03.03.2022, <https://blog.gerulata.com/russian-propaganda-network-in-slovakia/> (accessed on: 28. 11. 2022).

the Ukrainian border with the clear goal of attacking their neighbour.³ This only confirms the illogical nature of some of the disinformation narratives, and how uncritically they can be accepted by the recipients of the content from the disinformation channels in Slovakia.

Once Russia actually invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the disinformation actors who had strictly rejected that scenario, such as the leftist MP Ľuboš Blaha, were inactive for several days. Seemingly, this provided the time frame needed to create an advocacy for the Russian attack. In a short time, a massive pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign was launched, which has continued to this day. Its goal is to weaken solidarity with the defending Ukrainians who need military and humanitarian aid, as well as to demonise the Ukrainian regime and the country's political leadership, its citizens fleeing the country, and the EU and NATO for their past and current actions. This campaign works on several levels, through the pro-Kremlin media and politicians, and also through smaller singular agents⁴ who are willing to accept a small amount of financial support from the Russian embassy in Slovakia for their services in further spreading the malign narratives. The same formula used during the anti-vaccination campaigns has been successfully applied in the case of the war, and we have again observed a shift from initial support towards a range of conflicting opinions. The disinformation actors have also started to blame the EU regime of sanctions and our help in defending Ukraine for the rising prices of energy, groceries and other goods, and are advocating for cooperation with the aggressive Russia.

The disinformation actors have managed to create a network of spreaders in Slovakia, gaining a significant audience, whose members are often shining examples of the Dunning-Kruger effect and are now amplifying the narratives even more broadly. In addition to the popular political and foreign policy narratives, they are also effectively disseminating their attitudes in relation to social topics, such as the recent terrorist attack on two members of the LGBTI community in Bratislava.

³ US now claims there are 190,000 Russian troops on the Ukrainian border. In: *The Daily Mail*, 18.02.2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10527633/US-ambassador-Michael-Carpenter-says-Russia-190-000-troops-Ukrainian-border.html> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁴ Ako sa verbujú špióni na Slovensku: Povedal som v Moskve, že si dobrý chlapec ” [How spies are recruited in Slovakia: I said in Moscow that you are a good boy]. In: *Denník N*, 15.03.2022, <https://dennikn.sk/2767779/ako-sa-verbuju-spioni-na-slovensku-povedal-som-v-moskve-ze-si-dobry-chlapec-video/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

Slovak society is extensively polarised, with various lines of division, and is particularly prone to misinformation. With 56%⁵ of Slovaks inclined to believe in conspiracy theories and misinformation, we are the worst culprits not only in the V4 (with the Czechs at 29 %, Polish at 34 % and Hungarians at 35 %), but also in the wider CEE region. However, if the Slovak institutions were able to cooperate as effectively as the disinformation actors have been doing for over two years, the large-scale problems would recede. Of course, before the COVID-19 and war-related conspiracies flooded the Slovak information space and social media, other disinformation narratives were present. The topics of Slovak disinformation have tended to focus on cultural issues, foreign migrants and refugees, the (in)competence of the government and the (dis)trust of state institutions, the European Union and more generally the West/East divide. A long-term pro-Russian sentiment can also be observed, which is connected to an optimistic kind of historical memory.

Media literacy and critical thinking in Slovakia

So far, Slovakia's fight against disinformation cannot be described as success; but on the other hand, it needs to be recognised that a variety of activities have recently taken place and importantly, we can see that initiatives are being taken not only by the civil society, but also by the state institutions. Without the cooperation of these two groups, a real change in the fight against disinformation, especially in terms of the growth of critical thinking and media literacy among Slovak citizens, will be impossible.

For example, part of the population still thinks that Slovakia should cooperate with Russia to achieve lower energy prices. However, one of the problems is still the lack of sufficient political will to solve the problem of disinformation. This is due to either a poor understanding of its seriousness and the economic and social costs that accompany disinformation, or due to some Slovak politicians or political parties actually supporting the alternative media, as the disinformation is helpful to them and makes it easier to promote their causes and achieve their goals. In addition, the strategies of state institutions tend to be rather reactive, so they usually launch a communication campaign aimed at countering the malign narratives and correcting public opinion, in reaction to disinformation which is already spreading and gained momentum. Unfortunately, this reaction often comes too late, so

⁵ Hajdu, D., Klingová, K.: Voices of Central and Eastern Europe. In: *Globsec*, 23.06.2020, <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-read-version.pdf> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

the counter-narratives aiming to refute the false information reach a much smaller audience than the disinformation itself.

However, one of the successful examples of state activities with regard to disinformation in Slovakia involves the Ministry of the Interior, under which the Police of the Slovak Republic and the Centre for Combating Hybrid Threats (CCHT) operate. The Police have managed to create one of the most successful debunking sites on social networks, not only in Slovakia, but also within the EU. The Slovak Police are effectively mapping the current disinformation narratives, misinformation and fake news on a daily basis, and this debunking content has achieved a wide reach of over 140 thousand of followers, thanks to the adequate choices of strategic communication. The Police cooperate with the CCHT, which ultimately has the task of increasing the resilience of the Slovak society through a variety of activities, such as monitoring and elaboration of analytical outputs, especially in relation to the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. However, the list of institutions that are successfully engaging with a wider audience in an effort to work with the general public and fight disinformation currently ends there. Lately, STRATCOM has been developed via the suitable departments of state institutions (such as the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs or the Office of the Government), and the Ministry of Defence published an Action Plan for the Coordination of the Fight Against Hybrid Threats for 2022-2030⁶ that recognises the need to develop the public's ability to think critically and use technology wisely, in order to build a resilient society. However, the steps which need to be taken in this regard still rely on other institutions.

Those institutions that focus on fighting disinformation in Slovakia are not the ones that should be in charge when it comes to improving critical thinking and media literacy among the country's citizens. The Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, which should be the first in line, doesn't have the expertise, preparation or effective strategies for such activity, and has shown no real effort to address the each. What Slovakia needs is to create expert teams based on cooperation among institutions, including the Ministry of Culture, which (unfortunately) also does not deal with this topic. Coordination between the institutions that are already successfully dealing with disinformation, and those that need to start from scratch, would allow a complex strategy to be put in place aimed at improving the information and media literacy rates. But on the other hand, as long as school teachers themselves believe in

⁶ Akčný plán koordinácie boja proti hybridným hrozbám [Action plan for coordinating the fight against hybrid threats], <https://www.nbu.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/AKCNYPAN-KOORDINACIE-BOJA-PROTI-HYBRIDNYM-HROZBAM.pdf> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

disinformation narratives or recommend disinformation portals among reliable sources of information, which was proven to be an issue in Slovakia in several surveys,⁷ it is impossible to expect an improvement of the information and media literacy among school age youth, without the implementation of teacher trainings and other changes first taking place in the educational system.

Importantly, the cooperation between Slovak institutions and NGOs is relatively successful. As a basis, it is promising that a non-negligible part of the experts in the newly-established departments of various state institutions come from the NGO sector, bringing not only the necessary expertise, but also practical experience and a clear will to pursue good relations between the sectors. Selected ministries (such as the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, and the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation) have published calls for project proposals aimed at fighting disinformation in Slovakia. Regular expert meetings organised by Globsec are being held as well, aimed at coordination among the entities that deal with disinformation in the country. However, their serious disadvantage lies in an absence of representatives from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, since they do not have departments or experts dedicated to this issue. Thus, although the state institutions and NGOs in Slovakia are already coordinating a fight against disinformation, these efforts lack the presence of a full spectrum of experts – namely, from the institutions that could contribute to increasing the population’s resilience in the long term. As a result, the core origin of the problem is not being addressed properly, but mainly its consequences. Projects dedicated to increasing media literacy and critical thinking are occasionally supported, but just as sporadic action rather than as a coordinated nation-wide effort. Therefore, even though variety of useful and inspirational initiatives and activities are being implemented in Slovakia, mainly by the civil society or the private sector, focused on inciting critical thinking and societal resilience, they will not be able to reach a wider or even the whole society.

⁷ Prieskum: Prieskum medzi učiteľmi ukázal, že takmer tretina z nich verí konšpiráciám [Survey: A survey among teachers has shown that almost a third of them believe in conspiracies]. In *Aktuality*, 19.10.2020, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/831855/prieskum-ockovanie-je-pripravou-na-cipovanie-ludi-mysli-si-31-percent-ucitelov/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022); Pre komoru učiteľov sú výsledky prieskumu o konšpiráciách a dezinformáciách v školstve alarmujúce [Results of the survey on conspiracies and disinformation in the education system are alarming for the chamber of teachers]. In: *Webnoviny*, 19.10.2020, <https://www.webnoviny.sk/vskolstve/pre-komoru-ucitelov-su-vysledky-prieskumu-o-konspiraciach-a-dezinformaciach-v-skolstve-alarmujuce/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

Recommendations

Importantly, in the case of the Slovak fight against disinformation, the cooperation between the state and non-state sector needs to be preserved and developed further. The necessity to face the disinformation spreading through the Slovak information space effectively and to build a resilient society in the long term, thus protecting our own and the wider European democracy, needs to be recognised regardless of the political representation in the country. Therefore, it is crucial not only for the state institutions and departments which have been established to stay in place across the electoral periods and develop their activities in the upcoming years, but also that new ones are established.

Nevertheless, the most serious and deepest deficiency in the system, as the expert community would agree, lies with the Slovak Ministry of Education. We need to finally draw the attention of the Ministry to the issue of disinformation and the necessity to work on building information and media literacy in schools. There is a need for a complex reform and a coordinated national approach, consisting firstly of a reform of the school curriculum, to one in which more time is dedicated to educating students across different school subjects on information and media literacy, as well as investing in their capacity for argumentation and critical thinking, rather than memorisation. Secondly, it should include the systemic education of teachers – both future teachers as well as those who are already employed in the profession – to make them more resilient to misinformation and train them in the crucial role of media education in today's world.

Of course, it is also important not to forget about other parts of the society. In regard to productive people of working age, we would advocate for the role of private sector, as there is an unaddressed option to systematically educate the workers in the offices of larger corporations.

On a wider level, although solutions always need to be somehow tailored to the local context in order to be effective, Slovakia should look more into possibilities for cooperation with the already existing schemes on the European level. Without a wider degree of European cooperation, it will be impossible to achieve changes on social media platforms, such as the functioning of their algorithms, as their representatives are not showing a willingness to act. There is also still a lot for us to learn from countries which have more experience, or are more successful than us in responding to hybrid threats and in building a strong democratic society that is resilient to misinformation. There are the Centres of Excellence, or COEs (such as

the European COE for Countering Hybrid Threats, Jean Monnet COE on European Security and Disinformation in Multicultural Societies, and the NATO Stratcom COE), which offer simulations to attend, the option of fruitful bilateral consultations, taking over successful foreign initiatives, and more. This is not to say that we are starting from zero, as the international cooperation in this issue has already begun, but there is enough space to develop these efforts further in the future.

Disinformation and the Czech Republic

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As a young and fragile democracy, the Czech Republic faces⁸ many unfavourable internal conditions, including the fact that 48% of the country's citizens hold illiberal or even anti-democratic views. Although the country has so far resisted the slide towards authoritarianism thanks to public and institutional pressure, disinformation and the foreign malign influence still pose a significant challenge. For example, in 2021, about 40% of Czech internet users believed several common false claims about the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

Disinformation is seen as a serious issue by both the government and the public. The fight against disinformation has featured in the current government's programme statement,¹⁰ and last year the Action Plan for the National Strategy to Combat Hybrid Interference was adopted,¹¹ while this year the Office of the Government Commissioner for Countering Disinformation was established¹². Furthermore, disinformation is not taken lightly by the members of the public. According to a STEM survey, 76% of Czechs consider disinformation to be a threat to the security of the Czech Republic.¹³

⁸ Bakule, J: The good, the bad and the ugly: linking democratic values and participation in the Czech Republic. In: *Democratization*. September 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345132640_The_good_the_bad_and_the_ugly_linking_democratic_values_and_participation_in_the_Czech_Republic (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁹ Studie: Covid-19 a šířitelé konspiračních teorií [Study: Covid-19 and the spreaders of conspiracy theories], <https://www.stem.cz/studie-covid-19-a-siritele-konspiracnich-teorii/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

¹⁰ Programme statement of the government [Study: Covid-19 and the spreaders of conspiracy theories], <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/programove-prohlaseni-vlady-193547/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

¹¹ Akční plán k Národní strategii pro čelení hybridnímu působení government [Action plan on the National Strategy for dealing with hybrid action], https://mocr.army.cz/images/id_40001_50000/46088/app_2022.pdf (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

¹² Vládní zmocněnec pro oblast médií a dezinformací [Government Commissioner for Media and Disinformation], https://www.vlada.cz/cz/ppov/zmocnenci_vlady/vladni-zmocnenec-pro-oblast-medii-a-dezinformaci-194841/ (accessed: 28. 11. 2022).

¹³ Dezinformace ohrožují naši bezpečnost, myslí si Češi. Většina souhlasí s omezováním dezinformačních zdrojů [Disinformation threatens our security, Czechs think. Most agree with limiting disinformation sources], <https://www.stem.cz/dezinformace-ohrozuj-nasi-bezpecnost-mysli-si-cesi-vetsina-souhlas-s-omezovanim-dezinformacnich-zdroju/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

In the Czech Republic, disinformation is spread in three specific ways: on social networks (dominated by Facebook); through disinformation websites; and via chain emails, which are received by more than a third of the population.¹⁴

In their attacks, the disinformation channels target,¹⁵ among others, the current government, the security services and the public media. In terms of the most common narratives, in the past year there has been a disinformation campaign about the explosion of ammunition depots in Vrbětice¹⁶ in 2014, in which officers of the Russian secret service GRU were found to be involved; as well as about the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁷, when the safety and effectiveness of the vaccines was questioned and the government became the target of attacks at the time, because of the measures being taken to combat the epidemic.

With the slow retreat of the pandemic, the disinformers began to shift their focus to other topics. At the beginning of 2022, we began to see a slow decline¹⁸ in disinformation spread about the coronavirus, and since mid-January, these posts have been partially replaced by posts about the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The numbers have steadily increased and gained momentum along with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For example, a number of Facebook groups that in 2021 were focused exclusively on spreading disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic have largely shifted¹⁹ to spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation about the Russian aggression in Ukraine. An example of such a Facebook group is "Unvaccinated CZ, SK", which in mid-February was renamed²⁰ "Unvaccinated CZ, SK for Peace! No to War!"

¹⁴ Špalková, V. K. et al.: Annual report on the state of the Czech disinformation scene in 2021. In: *European Values*, 14.06.2022, <https://europeanvalues.cz/cs/annual-report-on-the-state-of-the-czech-disinformation-scene-for-2021/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pastír, M.; Špalková, V: Přehled dezinformačních a pro-kremelských vyjádření o kauze Vrbětice z úst českých poslanců. In *European Values*, 06.10.2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/cs/overview-of-disinformation-and-pro-kremlin-statements-about-the-vrbetice-case-from-czech-mps/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

¹⁷ Špalková, V: Rok 2020: Jak česká vláda prohrála s dvěma vlnami dezinformací o koronaviru. In *European Values*, 29. 3. 2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/cs/rok-2020-jak-ceska-vlada-prohrala-s-dvema-vlnami-dezinformaci-o-koronaviru/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

¹⁸ Bezpečnostní brífink a přehled dezinformační scény [Security briefing and overview of the disinformation scene]. In: *European Values*, 22.02.2022, <https://preview.mailerlite.com/i2c6f0j2i3> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

¹⁹ Covid už netáhne. Z dezinformátorů se stali „přátelé Ruska a míru“ [Covid is no longer dragging on. Disinformers became „friends of Russia and peace“]. In: *Seznam správy*, 23.02.2022, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/koronavirus-covid-uz-netahne-z-dezinformatoru-se-stali-pratele-ruska-a-miru-189457> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

²⁰ ČR by měla v rámci EU prosazovat přijetí tvrdých sankcí proti Rusku za jeho agresi vůči Ukrajině [Within the EU, the Czech Republic should promote the adoption of tough sanctions against Russia for

In connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Czech disinformation channels have begun to disseminate a number of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives, which can be divided into three categories as follows, according to an analysis by the Centre against Hybrid Threats²¹:

1) Narratives directly related to the war in Ukraine

The aim of these narratives is to legitimise the Russian aggression against Ukraine and to influence public opinion in favour of Russia, or to at least worsen the perception of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Czech Republic. Examples include false claims that: 1) Ukraine is a fascist country; 2) the war in Ukraine is a proxy war between Russia and the West; 3) Russia is not attacking civilian targets in Ukraine, and that such attacks are controlled provocations against Russia; and that 4) chemical, biological or nuclear weapons have been developed in Ukraine.

2) Narratives on the Czech support for Ukraine

These narratives are mostly directed against the Czech government and mainly include criticisms of the sanctions and arms supplied to Ukraine. Examples of the pro-Kremlin narratives include claims that: 1) by sending weapons to Ukraine, the Czech Republic is supporting fascism; 2) instead of supporting Ukraine, the government should be helping Czech citizens; 3) the support for Ukraine is of no benefit to the Czech Republic; and that 4) the sanctions do not harm Russia, while they do damage to us.

3) Narratives concerning the immigration of Ukrainians to the EU and the Czech Republic

These narratives are most often focused on attacking Ukrainian refugees in terms of the burden they supposedly represent for the Czech society, economy or security. The disinformers have also tried to link²² the influx of refugees from Ukraine to narratives about the alleged Islamisation of Europe and the replacement of its white and Christian population.

its aggression against Ukraine]. In: *European Values*, 22.02.2022, <https://preview.mailerlite.com/i2c6f0j2i3> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

²¹ An analytical and conceptual workplace whose activities focus on national security threats to the Czech Republic in the area of internal security, such as a foreign influence and disinformation affecting internal security or public order. The Centre was established on the basis of the recommendations of the National Security Audit and falls under the Ministry of Interior.

²² We are building a secure base for Ukrainian experts in Prague. In: *European Values*, 15.03.2022, <https://preview.mailerlite.com/y1y4h1f4g1> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

For example, articles have appeared on disinformation websites claiming that the majority of those arriving in the Czech Republic are in fact from Africa and the Middle East.

Media literacy and education for critical thinking in Czechia

As described in the previous section, disinformation has been shown to be a major problem for the Czech Republic, dividing the society and affecting the elections, among many other problems. While the Czech government has already made several steps to deal with this challenge, disinformation still remains a major issue for the security of the Czech Republic and for democracy.

The question of insufficient media literacy and the need to boost it as one of the effective means of combating disinformation was first raised at a strategic level in the National Security Audit²³ released in 2016. In this strategic document, the level of media literacy was identified as weak or even absent, and the state admitted that it was not able to provide high-quality education in this subject. Therefore, a modification of the elementary and high school curricula was recommended, to establish the appropriate media literacy education.

The data available from research conducted in 2018 confirmed this issue: Czech citizens scored 39 out of 100 points (on average) in media literacy tests.²⁴ The research also showed that women, people older than 60 and those who did not graduate from high school most often scored lowest in media literacy tests.

To deal with the security issues described in the National Security Audit, including insufficient media literacy, the government adopted the non-public National Security Audit Action Plan. Although this strategic document is not available to the public, later documents, such as the abovementioned Action Plan for the National Strategy to Combat Hybrid Interference,²⁵ reveal that the document set out the task to boost the media literacy of state

²³ Audit národní bezpečnosti [Audit of national security], <https://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Audit-narodni-bezpecnosti-20161201.pdf> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

²⁴ Mediální gramotnost je v Česku nízká – pouze čtvrtina dospělé populace v ní dosahuje uspokojivé úrovně [Media literacy is low in the Czech Republic – only a quarter of the adult population has reached a satisfactory level], <https://www.stemmark.cz/medialni-gramotnost-je-v-cesku-nizka-pouze-ctvrtina-dospele-populace-v-ni-dosahuje-uspokojive-urovne/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

²⁵ Akční plán k Národní strategii pro čelení hybridnímu působení [Action Plan for the National Strategy to Counter Hybrid Operations], https://mocr.army.cz/images/id_40001_50000/46088/app_2022.pdf (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

employees, for which the Ministry of the Interior and the intelligence services should be responsible.

However, it seems that at the current moment, the progress in both of the aforementioned tasks, which should have improved the media literacy of the young generations and civil servants, is questionable or hardly detectable. As there is no public data on the media literacy of civil servants, it is difficult to assess the possible improvement. Nevertheless, according to anonymous statements from several employees from the Ministry of the Interior, which should be responsible for educating civil servants, almost no activities have been conducted in this regard.

The situation in the education system is much more transparent. As the official documents reveal, the Ministry of Education has indeed started including media literacy and critical thinking in the framework educational programmes²⁶ for both elementary and high school education. However, according to several pieces of research dedicated to the level of media literacy among the Czech population, the majority of teachers (80%) teaching in elementary and high schools have not themselves received any training in media education, and the subject of media education is also almost non-existent in their schools.

To meet the demand to cover at least the basics of media education, approximately 50% of schools now dedicate some time to media literacy during civic education and IT education classes. However, it is also questionable how much of an improvement can be expected in the upcoming years. While media literacy is mentioned in the Strategy of the Education Policy until 2030,²⁷ and is named as essential, the document does not reveal any details about how the improvement of media literacy education should be achieved.

The fact that the overwhelming majority of teachers (91.6%) agree that media education is important, but only a minority (21%)²⁸ would increase the time allotted to this issue at the expense of other subjects, is indicative of the situation. In an effort to cover the lack

²⁶ RVP – Rámcové vzdělávací programy [RVP – Framework educational programmes], <https://www.edu.cz/rvp-ramcove-vzdelavaci-programy/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

²⁷ Strategie vzdělávací politiky České republiky do roku 2030+ [Educational strategy of the Czech Republic until 2030+], https://www.msmt.cz/uploads/Brozura_S2030_online_CZ.pdf (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

²⁸ Český učitel ve médiích (výzkumná zpráva) [Czech teacher in the media (research report)], <https://e-bezpecni.cz/index.php/ke-stazeni/vyzkumne-zpravy/149-cesky-ucitel-ve-svete-medii-2021/file> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

of media literacy education, a part of the task has been taken over by the NGOs, which have so far been the most active element in the fight against disinformation.

To name a few, People in Need, one of the biggest Czech NGOs in Central Europe, has played a significant role. In particular, it has created an educational platform called *Jeden svět na školách* (JSNS – One World in Schools).²⁹ JSNS is focused on supporting education in schools and its materials are used in more than 4,000 elementary and high schools. Even though media literacy is not the only topic in this programme, it is one of the main ones. The programme has also attracted the cooperation with one of the most famous Czech YouTubers – Kovy.³⁰

Except for People in Need, *Zvol si Info*³¹ and *Fakescape*,³² which were originally student initiatives, have also made a name for themselves by preparing educational materials and workshops for students. What is more, the teachers have stepped in: one of the co-founders of the Teacher's platform³³ that unites Czech teachers fighting for better education created the website Svět médií (The World of Media),³⁴ on which experiences of teaching media literacy are shared and educational materials are provided.

Apart from the NGOs, the rather insufficient role of the state has been supplemented by the public media. According to the annual report³⁵ of the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting, Czech Television broadcast 457 hours of programmes on media literacy on several of its channels in 2021. The topic of media literacy was particularly resonant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Czech Television tried to increase the media literacy and critical thinking of its viewers by debunking the myths and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 that could also present a threat to public health.

In 2020, with the outbreak of COVID-19, Czech Television even launched a special channel for seniors, who were a largely neglected group, despite being very vulnerable to

²⁹ JSNS, <https://www.jsns.cz/o-jsns/o-nas> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

³⁰ Kovyho mediální ring [Kovys media ring], <https://www.jsns.cz/lekce/226333-kovyho-medialni-ring> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

³¹ Zvol si, <https://zvol.si/info/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

³² Fakeshape, <https://www.fakescape.cz/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

³³ Učitel'ská platforma, <https://www.ucitelskaplatforma.cz/o-nas/#vyrocni-zpravy> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

³⁴ Svet médií, <http://svetmedii.info/>

³⁵ Zpráva o činnosti rady pro rozhlasové a televizní vysílání a o stavu v oblasti poskytování audiovizuálních mediálních služeb na vyžádání za rok 2021, In: RRTV, 2022, <https://www.rtv.cz/cz/files/zpravy/VZ2021.pdf> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

disinformation due to the abovementioned lower level of media literacy. Yet only a few NGOs, such as Elpida³⁶, Transitions³⁷ and the Novinářský incubator³⁸ have conducted lectures, workshops and other activities designed to increase their media literacy.

Similarly to Czech Television, Czech Radio launched several programmes³⁹ dedicated to increasing media literacy and debunking disinformation, including a project called “Ověřovna” (Verification Room)⁴⁰ that debunks and explains the most widespread disinformation on the website of the Czech Radio, which also serves as a news portal.

Overall, the topic of media literacy is managed by the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting (RRTV), a public institution which oversees any broadcast content. The RRTV has published several polls and pieces of research, usually conducted in cooperation with Czech universities (namely Charles University and Palacký University Olomouc), mapping the level of media literacy in the Czech Republic, including in the context of disinformation. The RRTV also dedicates one whole chapter to media literacy in its annual reports.⁴¹

At the government level, disinformation is being tackled by the Centre against Hybrid Threats,⁴² which falls under the Ministry of Interior, and by the newly established Office of the Government Commissioner for Media and Disinformation that should start handling the strategic communication of the state.⁴³ Both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence are building their internal capacities for monitoring disinformation and implementing strategic communication, but coordination and a systematic approach are still missing.

³⁶ Elpida, <https://www.elpida.cz/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

³⁷ Medialka, <https://medialka.elpida.cz/o-nas> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

³⁸ Novinářský inkubátor, <https://novinarskyinkubator.cz/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

³⁹ Zpráva o činnosti rady pro rozhlasové a televizní vysílání a o stavu v oblasti poskytování audiovizuálních mediálních služeb na vyžádání za rok 2021. In: *RRTV*, 2022, <https://www.rrtv.cz/cz/files/zpravy/VZ2021.pdf> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁴⁰ iRozhlas: Ověřovna!, <https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-tag/overovna> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁴¹ Zprávy o stavu vysílání a činnosti Rady pro rozhlasové a televizní vysílání. In: *Rada pro rozhlasové a televizní vysílání*, 2021, <https://www.rrtv.cz/cz/static/o-rade/vyrocní-zpravy/index.htm> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁴² Centrum proti hybridním hrozbám, <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁴³ Statut vládního zmocněnce pro oblast médií a dezinformací, <https://apps.odok.cz/attachment/-/down/NANACCAJKWKU> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

Recommendations

If the Czech Republic wants to win its war against disinformation, a significantly higher involvement of the state will be needed, as the NGO sector cannot completely supply its role in the fight. Only effective cooperation between the government and non-governmental sectors can bring success, as the non-governmental organisations have long-term experience, while the state has significantly better resources and potentially higher capacities in the sphere of education, which should play one of the main roles in increasing the media literacy of the Czech population.

First of all, the Czech government has to establish an effective strategic communication system in order to better communicate important topics and to pre-bunk the incoming disinformation narratives, which will also help with increasing the media literacy of the public. At the same time, the Ministry of Education has to prepare a detailed plan describing the full inclusion of media literacy as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools. However, the other demographic groups cannot be left out – as the available research shows,⁴⁴ the level of ability to evaluate media messages declines in accordance with age, a lower education and residence in cities with populations below 100,000.

Therefore, the state should support stable and long-term funding for systematic digital and media literacy programmes designed for all generations, as well as special regional educational programmes. What is more, both the state and the NGO sector should encourage citizens across all ages to use all types of media (i.e., not just the Internet), as the research respondents⁴⁵ who used a wider range of media showed better results across all categories of media literacy. Last, but not least, the Czech Republic has to build the capacity to educate teachers and civil servants to be able to teach the subject of media literacy, both in schools and in other state institutions.

⁴⁴ Výzkum a studium mediální gramotnosti. In: *Katedra mediálních a kulturních studií a žurnalistiky*, <https://kmksz.upol.cz/veda-a-vyzkum/vyzkum-a-studium-medialni-gramotnosti/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

A media ecosystem captured by the ruling party

In 2006, Reporters Without Borders ranked Hungary at 10th place in its global media freedom rankings. However, the “honeymoon” of media freedom did not last long: by 2009, Hungary’s last full year under a leftist government to date, the country had already fallen to 25th place. After 12 years of Fidesz-KDNP cabinets, Hungary’s ranked 85th after a long series of efforts were made to line up a broad range of media outlets behind the ruling party.⁴⁶ Media freedom in Hungary also partially suffered because of the post-2008 economic crisis, which left large, foreign publishers weakened and ready to pull out of the Hungarian market.

After acceding to power, the successive Orbán governments used their two-thirds majority to implement measures that would help them gain decisive control of the media market. First, they took control of the public broadcaster, which has since been gradually turned into a propaganda mouthpiece that only depicts the views of the ruling majority. Second, a new media oversight authority was established and was then filled with Fidesz loyalists. The National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and its Media Council have long ensured that their decisions never run contrary to the interests of the cabinet: while the state was helping the expansion of the media empire of PM Viktor Orbán’s former friend, Lajos Simicska, the Council favoured him; while after the friendship between the two broke up publicly, the authority dismantled the Simicska empire and helped create a new one.⁴⁷ In parallel with these efforts, the country’s government-directed, systemic corruption made sure that pro-Fidesz oligarchs had the financial “firepower” to buy the media outlets, which they slowly turned into propaganda machines. The fact that they never actually owned these outlets was proven when within a few days, all the significant pro-Fidesz owners offered their outlets to the then-new Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) for free.⁴⁸ Currently,

⁴⁶ 2022 Global Score. In: *Reporters Without Borders*, 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2022> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁴⁷ Rényi D.P.: Egy megszállt hatóság, ami nélkül nem épülhetett volna ki az Orbán-rendszer [An occupied authority, without which the Orbán system could not have been built]. In: *444*, 28.08.2017, <https://444.hu/2017/08/28/egy-megszallt-hatosag-ami-nelkul-nem-epulhetett-volna-ki-az-orban-rendszer> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁴⁸ Urbán, A.: *Góliát születése: mi lehet Orbán célja a fideszes médiavállalatok összevonásával?* [The birth of Goliath: what could be Orbán’s goal in merging the Fidesz media companies?]. In: *Magyar Narancs*, 13.01.2019, <https://magyarnarancs.hu/publicisztika/goliat-szuletese-115765> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

there are nearly 500 media outlets operating under KESMA's umbrella, with some pro-government media outlets that still exist outside of its auspices, such as the public media or the country's second-largest private TV channel, TV2.⁴⁹ By 2020, the pro-government media operated around three-fourths of the daily newspaper market, all of the regional newspaper market, as well as nearly half of the weekly newspaper market and the online news media.⁵⁰

There have long been claims that most of these outlets are at least indirectly controlled by the cabinet. In 2017, journalists told Mérték Média Elemző that, among others, the PM's chief of staff, Antal Rogán plays a key role in influencing the media outlets.⁵¹ In 2020, Radia Free Europe Hungary published an internal recording of Balázs Bende, at that time the editor-in-chief of MTVA, who told his colleagues that "*in the MTVA, we do not support the opposition*". This revelation led to no consequences.⁵²

Thus, overall, we can say that an unprecedented proportion of the Hungarian media market is under direct or indirect government control. This is not to say that there are no independent media outlets in Hungary at all. High-quality, independent journalism exists, especially in the online space. Moreover, criticism of the government's media policy does not mean that the other parties are faultless: there are clearly biased pro-opposition portals as well,⁵³ albeit with a much smaller outreach, while the leader of the country's most popular opposition party, the Democratic Coalition, has stated he will not give interviews to the independent Telex portal because "they have no common topics and interests."⁵⁴ Thus, there seems to be a demand,

⁴⁹ Így néz ki a kormánypartí hírmédia. Átlátszó [This is what the pro-government news media looks like. Transparent], <https://atlo.team/igy-nez-ki-a-kormanyparti-hirmedia/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁵⁰ Bátorfy, A.; Szabó, K.: Grafikonokon és diagramokon mutatjuk, hogyan alakult át a magyar média az elmúlt 10 évben. Átlátszó. [Using graphs and charts, we show how the Hungarian media has transformed in the last 10 years. Transparent]. In: *Atlantszo*, 07.08.2020, <https://atlantszo.hu/kozpenz/2020/08/07/grafikonokon-es-diagramokon-mutatjuk-hogyan-alakult-at-a-magyar-media-az-elmult-tiz-evben/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁵¹ Soft Censorship in Hungary 2016. In: Mérték Media Monitor, 2016, <https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MertekFuzetek12.pdf> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁵² Kézivezélés a közmédiában, következmények nélkül [Manual control in the public media, without consequences]. In: *Szabad Europa*, 27.12.2020, <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/mtva-botrany-hangfelvetel-kozmedia-bende-balazs-fidesz-vizsgalat/31012003.html> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁵³ Ezen te is elhasalsz: Tőlük retteg Orbán – ilyen az ellenzéki bulvár 1 [You also agree: Orbán is terrified of them – this is how the opposition tabloids say 1]. In: *Szabad Europa*, 11.10.2021, <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/nyugati-feny-ezalenyeg-ellenzel-zsurpubi-bulvar/31497954.html> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁵⁴ Gyurcsány Ferenc azért nem ad interjút a Telexnek, mert szerinte nincs közös téma, közös érdeklődés [Ferenc Gyurcsány will not give an interview to Telex because, according to him, there is no common topic or common interest]. In: *Telex*, 19.10.2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/10/19/demokratikus-koalicio-arnykkormany-dobrev-klara-sajto-interju> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

at least among some opposition actors, for a media system similar to the that one Fidesz built, only with a different political party preference.

A state of permanent campaign

Hungary has been in a state of permanent campaign for almost a decade now. The incumbent Hungarian government has used the media empire under its influence to take, and to maintain, complete control of the domestic political agenda, while painting a near-perfect picture of its policy choices and smearing its opponents. The largest campaign subjects include: (1) the anti-IMF campaign; (2) the utility cost cuts policy; (3) migration; (4) anti-Soros efforts; (5) COVID-19; (6) claims that the opposition wants to force Hungary to participate in the war in Ukraine; and (7) the assertion that sanctions are the only reason for the recent economic troubles. Additionally, these campaigns are used to depict a constant state of conflict between Hungary and its opponents, which are mainly the European Union and the United States, Hungary's closest allies. Hence, the EU and the US are featured in almost all of these campaigns. The narratives published in the framework of the campaigns have frequently included information manipulation; for instance, blaming the EU for its "failed" sanctions policy, while never mentioning Russia's responsibility for the war that led to those sanctions,⁵⁵ or alleging that the opposition is doing the bidding of George Soros.⁵⁶

Anti-sanctions blues

The Hungarian government has argued against the European Union's sanctions for the past six years, starting well before Russia escalated its war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In 2017, before PM Viktor Orbán's yearly meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó stated that Hungary had lost USD 6.5 billion due to the sanctions against Russia introduced since 2014.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Szijjártó Péter: Teljes kudarc az uniós szankciós politika [Péter Szijjártó: the EU sanctions policy is a complete failure]. In: *VG*, 25.09.2022, <https://www.vg.hu/nemzetkozi-gazdasag/2022/09/szijjarto-peter-teljes-kudarc-az-unios-szankcios-politika> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁵⁶ Ezek sátánisták [These are Satanists]. In: *24*, 06.07.2022, <https://24.hu/kozelet/2022/07/06/kover-laszlo-ezek-satanistak/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁵⁷ Nem hiszed el, mennyire ártanak nekünk az orosz szankciók [You won't believe how much the Russian sanctions are hurting us]. In: *Portfolio*, 29.01.2017, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20170129/nem-hiszted-el-mennyire-artanak-nekunk-az-orosz-szankciok-243200> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

At the time, the economic portal Portfolio calculated that this number must have been heavily inflated. For instance, Hungary's exports to Russia had only been USD 4 billion in 2013, so the country's losses could only have amounted to USD 6.5 billion if the sanctions had shattered some extraordinary growth trend.⁵⁸ Later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed Portfolio's calculations, saying that the losses of the potential export growth needed to be taken into account.

In 2022, the Hungarian government's anti-sanctions narrative has become its predominant rhetoric. The cabinet's main claim is that the sanctions levied against Russia have not harmed the latter, as only Europe is suffering from high inflation and a potential recession – without ever mentioning that they approved every single one of these sanctions in the Council of the European Union,⁵⁹ as without their approval, the measures could not have been implemented. The Hungarian government also launched a “national consultation” on the sanctions with seven questions. These claim that Brussels promised that energy would not be sanctioned, but then decisions were made to ban oil imports; or that even Brussels suggesting that they were considering sanctions on natural gas caused energy prices to skyrocket. The questions⁶⁰ never mention that the sanctions are required because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or that the Russian economy might face years of deep recession.⁶¹ The text also fails to mention that Russia had already started pushing up gas prices in 2021,⁶² or that inflation in Hungary skyrocketed in 2021, when “price stops” had to be implemented on several basic products.⁶³ Additionally, the questions are very manipulative in the sense that they ask whether people “agree with the sanctions that are causing higher food prices.” It is not mentioned that

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ A kormány által is megszavazott szankciókról szól a nemzeti konzultáció [The national consultation is about the sanctions also voted on by the government]. In: *Euronews*, 14.10.2022, <https://hu.euronews.com/2022/10/14/a-kormany-atal-is-megszavazott-szankciokrol-szol-a-nemzeti-konzultacio> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁶⁰ Nemzeti Konzultáció: Hét kérdés a brüsszeli szankciókról [National Consultation: Seven questions about Brussels sanctions]. In: *Magyarország kormánya*, 14.10.2022, <https://kormany.hu/hirek/nemzeti-konzultacio-het-kerdes-a-brusszeli-szankciokrol> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁶¹ Russia privately warns of deep and prolonged economic damage. In: *Bloomberg*, 05.09.2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-05/russia-risks-bigger-longer-sanctions-hit-internal-report-warns?leadSource=verify%20wall> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁶² Russia's Gazprom expects 2022 gas prices in Europe to be no lower than 2021. In: *Reuters*, 29.11.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-gazprom-expects-2022-gas-prices-europe-no-lower-than-2021-2021-11-29/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁶³ Hungary to impose fuel price cap as inflation bites. In: *FT*, 11.11.2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/d0cfae8c-9007-4ece-a7b9-f369b6d3294b> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

the causes of the food price hikes are not only the sanctions, so there are few people who would say they agree with the sanctions when asked a question worded this way.

The government's propagandistic statements are supplemented by the narratives in cabinet-influenced media outlets. First of all, these outlets are now ripe with pro-Kremlin messages that pin the blame for the war on the United States or Ukraine,⁶⁴ often using claims sourced straight from the Kremlin. Naturally, if people do not blame Russia for invading a sovereign state, they will have a harder time approving the sanctions levied on that state. Secondly, the outlets are full of statements concerning the effects of the sanctions on the "failing West", such as Germans flocking to gyms to take showers (labelled as "shower tourism"⁶⁵) and having to take their pets to pet shelters because they cannot afford to warm up a vivarium. This paints a very positive picture of the Hungarian energy policy, which ensures that Hungarians have the natural gas needed to heat their homes,⁶⁶ even if they had to lower the utility cost subsidies for the population, contrary to what Fidesz promised in the 2022 general election campaign. Before the election, the Hungarian government claimed that the country needs to be on cordial terms with Russia, to make sure Hungary gets natural gas at below market prices; President Vladimir Putin even said on 1 February 2022 that Russia was selling gas to Budapest at one-fifth of the market price.⁶⁷ However, these claims could already be proven wrong, as experts said at the time that the price Hungary pays for Russian natural gas follows the Dutch TTF prices. After the election, the government changed its narrative, saying that nowadays, the fact that there is natural gas available must be cherished, and the price does not matter.⁶⁸

The permanent propaganda reaching broad layers of the population has profound effects. For instance, according to Special Eurobarometer 506 on the EU response to the war,

⁶⁴ Így szurkol a háborús bűnös Putyinnak a kormányparti media [This is how the anti-government media supports the war criminal Putin]. In: *444*, 01.11.2022, <https://444.hu/2022/11/01/igy-szurkol-a-haborus-bunos-putyinnak-a-kormanyparti-media> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁶⁵ Divatba jött a zuhanyturizmus Németországban [Shower tourism has become fashionable in Germany]. In: *Nool*, 28.09.2022, <https://www.nool.hu/orszag-vilag/2022/09/divatba-jott-a-zuhanyturizmus-nemetorszagban> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁶⁶ Magyarország energiaellátása biztosított [Hungary's energy supply is ensured]. In: *Kormány Magyarország*, 18.10.2022, <https://kormany.hu/hirek/magyarorszag-energiaellatasa-biztositott> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁶⁷ Vlagyimir Putyin simán hazudott a magyar gázárrol [Vladimir Putin simply lied about the Hungarian gas price]. In: *Nepszava*, 05.04.2022, https://nepszava.hu/3152550_gazar-oroszorszag-putyin-orban-kormany (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁶⁸ Szijjártó Péter kiakadt a Népszavára, megírtuk ugyanis, hogy az Orbán-kormány rekordáron vette a gázt [Péter Szijjártó was hooked on Népszava, because we wrote that the Orbán government bought gas at a record price]. In: *Nepszava*, 02.09.2022, https://nepszava.hu/3168064_szijjarto-peter-nepszava-gazar-amerika (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

only 59% of Hungarians back the economic sanctions on Russia, compared to the EU average of 80%.⁶⁹ An IDEA poll in August 2022 found that only 3% of Fidesz voters blamed Russia for the war,⁷⁰ which was the lowest level among any party preference group. As the economic situation gets tougher, it is likely that even more Hungarians will start turning away from the EU's sanctions policy. This could potentially allow the Hungarian cabinet, which sees foreign policy and national security mostly as tools to score political points at home, to demand that the EU phase out some sanctions on Russia.

Difficulties in fighting disinformation in Hungary

Since in Hungary, one of the main sources – but not the only source – of disinformation is the government itself, there are no state structures that are publicly fighting disinformation. This also means that the education system, which is currently in a state of turmoil due to the low wages of teachers and the extreme centralisation of the system,⁷¹ including the national curriculum, does not include any systemic media literacy training. Political Capital conducted a study in 2019 on the subject of “fake news in schools”.⁷² Teachers told researchers at the time that they did believe fake news poses a substantial threat to both their students and to society at large, but they themselves were not properly prepared to educate young people. Moreover, the pedagogues said that they had no time to prepare because of the fact that they were overburdened already. All the respondents noted that they had received no help to deliver the much-needed media literacy classes, and they would need detailed guides and educational materials to be able to do improve the situation. As the situation – especially in terms of the burden – has not improved at all in the three years since the study, there is no reason to

⁶⁹ EU's response to the war in Ukraine. In: *Eurobarometer*, May 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2772> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁷⁰ *IDEA Intézet: Négyyszer annyi Fidesz-szavazó gondolja, hogy Ukrajna felelős a háborúért, mint ahány azt, hogy Oroszország* [IDEA Institute: Four times as many Fidesz voters believe that Ukraine is responsible for the war than Russia]. In: *Telex*, 22.08.2022, <https://telex.hu/kulfold/2022/08/22/idea-intezet-negyyszer-annyi-fidesz-szavazo-gondolja-hogy-ukrajna-felelos-a-haboruert-mint-ahany-azt-hogy-oroszország> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁷¹ Thousands march on Hungary's parliament as teachers' crisis continues. In: *Euronews*, 06.10.2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/10/06/thousands-march-on-hungarys-parliament-as-teachers-crisis-continues> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁷² *Álhírek elleni küzdelem az oktatásban* [Fighting fake news in education]. In: *Political Capital*, 28.11.2019, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=2476 (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

believe that teachers are better equipped nowadays to prepare their students for better digital literacy.

In terms of other state institutions, there is no indication that the Hungarian cabinet is taking disinformation seriously or considers it to be a national security threat, at least not when it comes from the eastern authoritarian regimes. Their relaxed approach to the topic means that there cannot be a whole-government or a whole-society approach to combatting information manipulation, even though both the country's 2020 National Security Strategy⁷³ and its 2021 Military Strategy⁷⁴ address the issue of hybrid threats and the information dimension of such threats. While hybrid threats and information operations are defined fairly well in these documents, and there is even a pledge to adopt a "whole-government" approach to countering them, none of these promises have been implemented in practice – at least publicly.

That being said, it is highly likely that the Hungarian intelligence services are working on countering Russian and Chinese information operations, but this is being done behind closed doors. According to the media, it is likely that the Military National Security Service (KNBSZ) is the most active party on the topic; for instance, they have been involved in catching Russian spies in Hungary in relation to their involvement in training a neo-Nazi paramilitary group, who then had to be expelled.⁷⁵

Thus, fighting disinformation remains in the hands of the civil society in Hungary. There are independent think tanks and NGOs who have warned about the threat information manipulation poses to the Hungarian society, and there have been more or less sporadic attempts to deliver media literacy or disinformation-focused training to those who are interested.⁷⁶ However, these efforts are not well coordinated, which hinders their effectiveness, although they are still quite useful. Moreover, the independent media, including the most popular outlets, have regularly been writing about the dangers of disinformation and raising public awareness. Importantly, more and more online media outlets have started a paid service or asked for voluntary contributions from their readers, and as a response, there is now

⁷³ Government resolution 1163/2020 (21st April), <https://honvedelem.hu/hirek/government-resolution-1163-2020-21st-april.html> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁷⁴ National military strategy of Hungary, <https://defence.hu/news/national-military-strategy-of-hungary.html> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁷⁵ Russian diplomats caught spying in Hungary get expelled quietly as unusual. In: *Direkt36*, 20.12.2018, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/orosz-diplomatakat-ertek-kemkedesen-magyarorszagon-es-szep-csendben-ki-is-szoritottak-oket/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

⁷⁶ *Egészségügyi dezinformációs workshop* [Health disinformation workshop]. In: *Political Capital*, 27.04.2022, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/rendezvenyeink.php?article_read=1&article_id=2995 (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

a segment of the society in Hungary who are willing to pay for unbiased news. In the long-term, this will improve the resilience of the Hungarian society as a whole against disinformation, since the payments will ensure that the independent Hungarian media can survive even without state advertisements, which are generally awarded only to those who do not criticise the Hungarian government.⁷⁷

There is a mountain to climb

Overall, the anti-disinformation efforts in Hungary have a mountain to climb. The concentrated disinformation campaigns directed by the Hungarian ruling party (and, to a lesser extent, others) have continued for years, and the massive polarisation of the Hungarian society have put the country in a very tough situation. Even if measures were implemented to combat information manipulation, it would take years for Hungary to catch up to where its regional peers stand right now, as the country would have to start from the very beginning: identifying all the gaps that need to be filled. Thankfully, there are members of the civil society and recognised experts who will be able to take part in this process and help in developing solutions, but it is certainly going to require a very long journey, which has not even started yet.

Recommendations

To improve the situation, the main focus should be keeping the existing, independent, pro-West organisations alive. Consistent support for them can ensure that at least a part of the Hungarian society continues to support Hungary's foreign policy orientation as a firm EU and NATO member, and they can run pilot programmes such as those concerning media literacy.

Secondly, the Hungarian government should start reporting on how they fulfilled the objectives laid out in the country's strategic documents, to ensure that those documents are more than just words.

Third, the country's foreign policy strategy must be updated to reflect the new realities, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The foreign policy strategy should be the result of consultations with Hungary's opposition parties, which could lead to an agreement on at least the very basic directions of the country's international relations.

⁷⁷ Állami hirdetések 2006-2018 [State advertisements 2006-2018]. In: *Alto*, <https://atlo.team/allamihirdetesek/> (accessed: 28.11.2022).

Fourth, media literacy should be built firmly into the education curricula, which should also reflect the needs of the modern job market. Thus, the Hungarian education system should focus more on developing creative thinking skills – which are also important for national information security.

Finally, Hungarians must receive proper information on the effects of the sanctions on Russia, to counteract the effects of the government's anti-sanctions campaign. This is an immediate need, due to the fact that the population seems to be falling into the clutches of the government's narratives,⁷⁸ which might prompt the cabinet to follow up its anti-sanctions rhetoric with concrete actions.

⁷⁸ Milyenek látják a békéhez vezető utat a magyarok? [How do Hungarians see the road to peace?]. In: *Political Capital*, 22.11.2022, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=3114 (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

Disinformation and Poland

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To specify the current disinformation landscape in Poland and to provide relevant policy proposals to enhance media literacy, it's necessary to first understand what type of disinformation narratives and campaigns occur in the country, which most often deal with state-sponsored misinformation or polarised misinformation from both the right and left wing political camps.

For instance, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Poland, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation could be seen everywhere on the internet. The conspiracy theories stating that 5G cellular networks could cause COVID-19, for instance, were clear examples of misinformation, as they presented incorrect and out-of-context information as true. Disinformation tends to take hold at times when people are anxious and want to have the right answers – a group can then capitalise on that moment and offer answers that are detrimental in some way. An example during COVID-19 was blaming the Chinese government for the pandemic, and saying that this virus came from a lab in Wuhan as a means to poison or sicken “the West”.

In Poland, it's necessary to understand what are considered to instances of misinformation versus disinformation, as this can help to decipher the best method of combating them. As a general rule, disinformation narratives are able to utilise the current circumstances – be they political, economic, social or cultural – in an effort to successfully stir up additional chaos and civil unrest. In analysing the current situation in Poland, we can see the following disinformation narratives:

- From 2020, the disinformation campaigns centred on the COVID-19 crisis. A multitude of information came out against vaccinations, spreading the narrative that the vaccine was actually more harmful than the disease itself, or that it served as a means to survey the entirety of the Polish society. Interestingly, an anti-5G movement was created and linked to COVID-19, by exploiting similar health concerns and stressing how much harm this technology would cause to human life. The East vs. West narrative was also seen throughout the pandemic, pitting the two sides against each other in a myriad of ways.
- Poland, as an international actor, has also been bombarded throughout the last few years by Russian disinformation, in an effort to undermine relations with its neighbouring

countries and partners, to destabilise Poland's military cooperation within NATO, and to stir up hostilities between Poland and the US. There has also been a clear blame game happening, in which Poland is blamed as the reason that the relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated so heavily. Internally, the Polish society is told that NATO and EU won't help, that the NATO policy does not work, and that the US is the aggressor and the agitator of international order.

- In 2021, the food and agricultural products sector was the target of disinformation. According to the IBIMS (Institute for Internet and Social Media Research), Polish food producers were, and are, one of the most often attacked targets of pro-Russian disinformation on the internet and social media. This is part of a campaign to target some of the most strategic economic sectors of Poland.⁷⁹
- In 2021, during the weaponised migration stemming from the leader of Belarus on the Polish border, Poland was also targeted by the Kremlin to be smeared in the eyes of the Belarussians. For instance, a multitude of articles were published stating that Polish soldiers were instigating a war with Belarus over the immigration crisis on the border, for the purpose of seizing part of the territory of Belarus.
- During abortion protests in Poland, the leading conservative media outlets, which have direct links to the government, continually showed negative media coverage of those protesting. There was also a full-fledged disinformation and hate campaign against Poland's LGBTQ community at the time, centred on fearmongering about the "LGBTQ ideology".

Most recently, disinformation has been rampant since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This has been instigated by Russians, with Poland being at the centre of this fight. To start with, the Kremlin has consistently tried to create unfriendly relations between the two countries and manipulate the historical past. For instance, there have been many depictions of crowded institutions in Poland as a result of giving Polish IDs (PESEL) to Ukrainians, as well as suggestions that accepting Ukrainian children into schools and pre-schools would disrupt the normal schooling given to Polish children. Poland has also been accused of inciting war and aggression in order to seize the western part of Ukraine, as well as falsehoods being spread about the dangers of accepting refugees from Ukraine into Poland. In addition, entire strategic

⁷⁹ Auchan, Decathlon, Burger King, Leroy Merlin – analiza nastrojów w sieci [Auchan, Decathlon, Burger King, Leroy Merlin – online sentiment analysis]. In: *IBIMS*, 19.03.2022, <https://ibims.pl/auchan-decathlon-burger-king-leroy-merlin-analiza-nastrojow/> (accessed on: 28.11.2022).

sectors have been targeted. The energy sector has been targeted with constant gas blackmail, showing problems with the supply of coal after the introduction of the embargo and escalating fears for the country's energy future among Poles. Other sectors, such as the arms industry and the food-agriculture sector, have also been targeted by rampant disinformation.

Despite the sustained effort over the last couple of years, Poland has remains allied and friendly with Ukraine, and supports its neighbour unconditionally. However, the same cannot be said of the efficacy of other disinformation campaigns, and this signals that the information architecture of the Polish state is lacking in some critical areas in relation to the fight against disinformation.

The Polish Fight Against Disinformation: Method and Tools

Given that Poland faces heavy disinformation campaigns from the Kremlin and other external actors, it's necessary to understand how Poland combats disinformation through its myriad of different state-run or state-sponsored programmes, as well as the critical role that the civil society plays. First, the methods of combating disinformation must be distinguished, before identifying the state institutions dedicated to the fight and the means that they are using.

The methods of combating disinformation tend to be a subject that is quite often missed when discussing how Poland is acting in defence of such hybrid attacks. Combating disinformation seems to occur in two ways: a pre-emptive approach versus a reactive approach. The pre-emptive approach necessitates starting from the proactive step of researching and analysing the vulnerabilities of media literacy in a respective space, time and subject – i.e., the location, current events and the target group of a particular disinformation campaign. Once this has been done and the mapping of these vulnerabilities are understood, a more pre-emptive strategy can then be made which identifies the risks for that society and establishes the capabilities that can be used to overcome these vulnerabilities.

The key to a pre-emptive approach is to focus on the media literacy benchmarks, proper digital safety and the related security practices and infrastructure (i.e., hardware and software), and to ensure that these benchmarks are met in both the target groups and institutions (i.e., governmental offices, banking institutions, etc.). A reactive approach, on the other hand, occurs once a disinformation campaign has come to the forefront, as captured by media monitoring. It then involves reacting to these trolls, bots and deep fakes through immediate action. This entails fact-checking websites or creating alternative narratives in relation to a certain target group.

There are pros and cons to both approaches; namely, the costs involved. However, but the pre-emptive approach is better in terms of curing the disease (i.e., low media literacy benchmarks) rather than treating the symptoms (i.e., disinformation campaigns, deep fakes, etc.).

With this distinction in mind, it's easier to understand how the Polish state combats disinformation. Typically, it takes a reactive approach rather than a pre-emptive one. Interestingly, most of the institutions dealing with disinformation tend to be state-sponsored but not state-led, meaning that independent civil society organisations or private organisations are the “service providers” for the Polish state who engage in building media literacy or fact-checking. For instance, the first programme aimed at increasing public awareness of the threats posed by new communications technologies was implemented by a consortium of private organisations (i.e., Empowering Children Foundation and the Research and Academic Computer Network – NASK). The third sector, comprised of the civil society and private enterprises, tends to be the main actor in creating and building media literacy in Poland due to the lack of a systemic solution offered by the Polish state. A core curriculum has not been implemented on media literacy and no state institution is responsible for the implementation of a policy. While the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage was involved in the efforts to promote media literacy from 2011-2015, it then awarded funding for media literacy programmes to nearly 100 NGOs and cultural institutions. The interest in media literacy among policymakers significantly decreased when the Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power in 2015. Nonetheless, the Ministry of National Education did implement a programme through which 14,000 teachers, 45,000 students, and 17,000 parents and guardians were trained in 2017, led by the Modern Poland Foundation.⁸⁰ However, given that there is no mandatory participation in media literacy classes as part of formal education, it's largely up to teachers themselves to teach their students about the fundamentals of digital literacy. This shows clear gaps in this pre-emptive approach to combating disinformation through media literacy.

Where the majority of combating disinformation activities seem to take place is more in the realm that can be described as a reactive approach. Governmental agencies monitor different media and respond to disinformation campaigns themselves. Given the breadth of misinformation in the media, social media, forums, and so forth, the Polish state and broader EU/US funders also put a great deal of money into fact-checking websites, or into organisations aimed at providing training on fact-checking, which are typically run by private or civil society

⁸⁰ Ptaszek, G.; Lysik, M.: Media Literacy in Poland. In: R. Hobbs, P. Mihailidis, *The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*. NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018.

organisations (i.e., Demagog Association, NASK and Pravda). The cooperation between state institutions and these different organizations runs fairly well, namely because these organisations are understood to be experts in their respective approaches. But while this approach does have immediate impact on countering the present disinformation narratives, it does not address the systemic issue of building media literacy in the general Polish society, making it less effective than an all-society, pre-emptive approach in the long run.

Recommendations

The central recommendation would be to implement policies, in order to mitigate the negative effects of disinformation through a pre-emptive approach. First, extensive research should be done and continued each year, when it comes to understanding and mitigating the media literacy benchmarks and vulnerabilities. Secondly, as a direct result of the media literacy benchmarks, the Polish Ministry of Education should require an education curriculum that necessitates media literacy as a central component. The Finnish approach, for instance, would be a good example to follow – cross-subject components of the national curriculum were introduced in 2016 with great success, and it was recently rated as one of Europe’s most resistant nations to fake news. Secondly, the Polish state should continue to use private and civil society organisations through governmental partnerships, but should also create its own centre that includes experts from these top disinformation organisations. Third, there must be an EU-wide disinformation programme that connects different state institutions in the region, given that different narratives can originate in different states. Finally, the state should continue to ensure effective public relations through strategic communication publicising the strategies that work, and the civil society organisations should continue to build positive narratives around those vulnerable groups that are most threatened by disinformation.

Conclusion: How can the V4 work together to counter disinformation?

The media and information literacy of the citizens of the Visegrad 4 countries is clearly an issue that needs to be urgently addressed, in order to build a critically-thinking society that is resilient to malign foreign influences. This applies especially to the pro-Russian disinformation and sentiment which is widely present in the V4 during the time of war in Ukraine. However, the case of Hungary is different in this regard, as the country's information space is largely dominated by media that are under direct or indirect government control, and which therefore help to spread cabinet-approved messages. These are often pro-Kremlin oriented messages that are critical of the EU and the US, or the West in general. As a result, an improvement of the current situation is most necessary in Hungary, with vast majority of the country's citizens are being manipulated by omnipresent state propaganda and the government, who do not recognise the need to deal with disinformation, as they are the primary disseminators of such information within the country. While the Hungarian civil society sector remains a source of efforts in this area, as many as initiatives from other V4 countries as possible should approach them to engage them in useful projects or initiatives, and to work on networking.

On a wider level, the V4 represents an important part of the European Union, which cannot be forgotten when it comes to supporting the Visegrad countries in creating a stronger society that is more resilient to misinformation and is ready for the digital age. While this publication focuses mainly on identifying ways for the V4 countries to cooperate among themselves in a regional format, it will undoubtedly also find support from the EU.

This publication advocates for the initiation of more fruitful and deeper cooperation among the V4 countries in the area of effectively fighting disinformation, namely by implementing long-term solution in the form of increasing the level of information and media literacy among their citizens. Whether it is the introduction of new mutual efforts on the level of state or non-state V4 actors, or across these levels, the experts discussing this issue have found that there is plenty of unaddressed space to cover, and that the V4 countries can both learn from each other and develop mutual support for their work with external bodies, such as the relevant Centres of Excellences. The V4 countries should highlight their agenda and initiate cooperation on the EU level, by sending their representatives to the EEAS and East Stratcom Task Force to counter disinformation in the EU. Moreover, the V4 institutions should take a look at any useful practices or successful tools they have employed that could be shared with

the three other member states, such as the codes of practices of relevant analytical bodies or state institutions dealing with the topic.

To identify the options for V4 cooperation on this issue more clearly, the experts agree that one possibly crucial step could be using the Visegrad format to exert political pressure on the Hungarian government, with the threat of its political isolation, in order to encourage it to be open for the introduction of at least some changes in the current system. In the case of experts from the Hungarian civil society who are trying to implement relevant activities in the area despite the unfavourable conditions in their country, Slovakia, Czechia and Poland should provide them with extra support via fellowships. In this way, they would get additional useful experience as well as space for their activities, and would gain useful contacts within the V4.

In addition, there should be more joint projects introduced on the V4 level with a focus on this topic. Regional civil society sectors, independent media and investigative journalists should also seek more Western financial support for the activities to raise media and information literacy among the V4 citizens.

On a political level, members of parliaments as well as workers in the relevant ministries should be educated and enlightened about the importance of introducing pre-emptive methods in the fight against disinformation, so that the V4 countries will have a bigger chance to overcome the lack of political interest in the topic that can presently be seen across the countries.

Also, representatives of the V4 could look for platforms which could help with the monitoring of disinformation messages in their countries, as the current capacities are not able to cover everything. We can look into foreign initiatives, but it would be even better to support local ones if possible. The clearer picture we will have of the issue, and the more websites or profiles we are able to detect and deal with, the better.

Lastly, the experts agree that a serious push is needed for educational and curricular reforms in the V4 countries. Without treating the cause of the problem, we will never be able to focus on more than dealing with the consequences. Both the civil society sector and representatives from relevant departments across state institutions should push for the national Ministries of Education to fully recognise the importance of facing the disinformation threat effectively and working on the capacity of students to think critically.