

Understanding the Weaponization of (Dis-) Information in Present-Day CEE



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Fake news! The phrase has been thrown about so much lately that it lost most of its meaning and gravitas. But what does it actually mean? One definition explains it as “deliberately presenting false information as news”¹ and differentiates it as a subset of disinformation, which includes the spread of false information as a whole.

Now, more than ever, disinformation poses a threat to society, democracy, media freedom, and – during the COVID-19 pandemic – even to healthcare. Its meaning and definition must not be diluted, but conserved and, thus, require due attention as a credible threat. This was exactly our aim while working on the *4Liberty.eu Review* no. 13.

In the presented issue, experts throughout Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) analyze the spread of disinformation in an attempt to answer such questions as: Who spreads false information and to what purpose? What forms can disinformation take? What can governments and liberals do to combat it?

To this purpose, the published articles provide excellent analyses on how disinformation plays out in the current political context. The authors go beyond pure theory and suggested pragmatic approaches while advocating for liberal values.

Some of the contributors shed light on how Russia – one of the most prominent sources of disinformation – is influencing and perpetuating this phenomenon and sowing discord among citizens and across nations – in relation to the Hungarian minority in Ukraine as an instrument in achieving its foreign policy goals (as evidenced in the article by Patrik Szicherle), through establishing and supporting “alternative” media in the Czech Republic

¹ <https://medium.com/dfrlab/fake-news-defining-and-defeating-43830a2ab0af>

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(Roman), and closely how the reliance on foreign media outlets for the country’s reporting has, among others, led to the rise of these so-called “alternative” media (as described by Michal Hejl). The dispersed nature of disinformation is one of the main reasons why it is such a threat and is, therefore, so difficult to control, as suggested by Aleksy Przybylski.

Needless to say, disinformation is not only used by Russia or Kremlin-associated proxies – through changes to the media system in Poland, under the current Law and Justice (PiS) rule, disinformation has become a weapon, which is also used by governments of the European Union. The public broadcaster (TVP) has been transformed by the ruling party into a channel communicating PiS propaganda, dividing the country and society (as illustrated by Miłosz Hodun). Even though the governing party intends to tighten the political grip before its second term in office ends in 2023, labeling systems marking false news could help consumers discern facts from false statements that are featured on public broadcasting – observes Piotr Beniuszys). Not only public broadcasting has been subject to the spread of disinformation, also online media outlets in Po-



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land have made use of the strategy, falsely marking the term “liberalism” as the source of political evil – a phenomenon examined by Marcin Chmielowski.

On the other hand, countries such as Croatia, which have been spared a disinformation flood in their political discourse, need to watch out and create pre-emptive policy measures and networks – as recommended by Daniel Hinšt. This is where the European Union becomes an important force for this global challenge: European disinformation policy has evolved and expanded in important ways. However, in order to efficiently tackle future endeavors, more funding is needed, argues Márton Schlanger. It becomes even more pressing during a time marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has proven how disinformation can harm the efforts in gaining control over the spread of the virus. In this situation, state authorities need to embrace freedom of information by means of increasing transparency, in order to respond effectively to the crisis and regain trust of its citizens – points out Tanja Porčnik. Indeed, regaining trust has become ever more important, as reliable, well-researched content competes with free, quickly available, chaotic, and false information online, it accelerates citizens’ uncertainty over what information

to believe and is channeled into distrust and hate against media in general. After all, if people question the truthfulness of governments and the public media, which are supposed to provide objective information, citizens are much more likely to migrate to “alternative” news sources spreading disinformation.

As this issue shows, both the EU and the governments of member states must work together on the problem of disinformation, while simultaneously making sure that the freedom of information and expression suffers no blows in the process. Liberals, for whom these freedoms are paramount, must ensure that the Kremlin’s propaganda image of the EU does not become a reality, and that the European Union will be one of the torchbearers in granting freedoms of liberties.

Overall, the bottom line is this: we must all act united to combat the threat of false information, whether it is spread out of malicious intent or sheer ignorance. In order to be efficient, we must thoroughly understand this phenomenon and its implications. We hope this issue of the *4Liberty Review* gives you ample possibilities to dive into the subject.



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