Resilience building in the V4 against disinformation about the Russian-Ukrainian war

Dorka Takácsy *

Contents

Summary

Visegrad countries face immense Russian disinformation pressure that aims to break the popular support for helping Ukraine. If Ukraine lost Western support, it would most likely lose the war; hence, Russian disinformation aims to end this support. Economic hardships are present in the V4 countries, along with a rising fatigue of war news. This policy brief lists policy recommendations for increasing the general understanding of people of the war, the EU's stance, and the necessity of supporting Ukraine; and on strengthening resilience against Russian disinformation. This piece is a result of a series of interviews conducted in Brussels with an MEP and experts on Russian disinformation in Europe. As preparation, prior to the research trip, an in-depth desktop research was carried out on existing disinformation narratives in the region. Personal interviews gave the opportunity of scrutinizing the country-specific situation, and discussing possible desirable policies in details. The paper seeks to help agents actively shaping the public life of the Visegrad countries.

Introduction

Visegrad countries were exposed to Russian disinformation even before the country's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. Some fatigue in the public opinion regarding this topic is unfortunately a normal human reaction to a protracted series of horrific news, but it should be fought against. Disinformation and noise - described among others by the firehose of falsehoods model[1] - have a serious impact in the V4; threat perception and views on the war country-wise significantly differ, according to Globsec Trends[2].

While it is often taken for granted that people in the V4 do understand basic facts about world politics and realistically see the strength and power of EU and the West, and the EU's foreign policy is clear to them, it is often not the case. Social groups in Central-Eastern

---

[1] Christopher Paul, Miriam Matthews, The Russian „Firehose of Falsehoods" Propaganda Model, RAND Corporation, 2016 https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html
[2] Globsec Trends 2022, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf

Europe that nurture an underdog-feeling towards the West – partially due to the lack of total economic convergence countlessly promised by the countries' leading politicians – are an easy target to Russian propaganda that seeks to convince them that they should stop supporting Ukraine.

Pro-Russian sentiments stem predominantly from disappointment in the West, and sometimes pan-Slavic ideas. In Poland, positive affiliation to Russia was not dominant even before the invasion due to historic reasons. Both the elites took a lead in advocating for quick and robust international help to Ukraine, both the population makes enormous efforts in supporting the millions of refugees that arrived to the country. Pro-Russian disinformation hence, can hardly find a grab on Polish society at the moment and is only sporadically present. In the Czech Republic, general discourse was strongly pro-Ukraine, yet certain political actors such as Andrej Babiš running for president used strong anti-West and pro-Russian narratives to challenge the mainstream opinions. In Slovakia, still about the third of society sees Russia as a strategic partner that shows the receptiveness to Russian disinformation.[3] SMER openly criticizes Western help to Ukraine, hence, there is a certain receptiveness to such narratives. It is common in the three countries though, that the general discourse is overwhelmingly pro-EU, pro-West and anti-Russian that builds on the fact that Ukraine has to be supported.

Hungary is an exception to all this. War-related disinformation is spread by the government itself and its robust propaganda empire, it is much more difficult to counter it than in other Visegrad countries. The government built a robust propaganda campaign on scapegoating the "Brussels sanctions" for any current inconvenience Hungarians face, how the West is responsible for the prolonging war. Government representatives often talk about that Russia is going to win, "Hungary has to stay out of the war". These rhetorics work and show the Hungarian population's defenselessness against disinformation: according to an

---

[3] ibid.

opinion poll by Political Capital, 50% of governing Fidesz are convinced that the Hungarian government did not vote in favor of the sanctions.[4]

It is crucial to strengthen the resilience against disinformation, hence, in accordance with the Strategic Compass,[5] this brief offers several policy recommendations for this end.

The research focuses on the following questions:

1) How to increase the general understanding of the EU's stance on the war, the sanctions, and the necessity of supporting Ukraine?

2) How to strengthen pro-European sentiments and counter the Russian strategic narrative in the region?

Current disinformation narratives in the V4

The main narratives Russia uses did not change content-wise significantly since 2015 but are recycled again and again. Since the invasion there were three key narratives based on the assessment of EU vs. Disinfo[6], and which were countlessly debunked by the site. These grand schemes do not differ to a large extent for domestic use and abroad:

(1) Ukrainians portrayed as Nazis. As the Great Patriotic War has a distinguished role in Russian collective memory and memory politics, this resonated very well for the greater public. When it started to lose its strength, it was transformed into Ukrainians are Satan-possessed/sent- hence, from then on, the mission of the "special military operation" was "de-Satanization", and the orthodox church started to agitate and campaign for it even more actively than before. Next step of this evolving narrative is targeting the LGBT+ community.

[4]Political Capital, A Fidesz-szavazók fele szerint a kormány nem szavazta meg a szankciókat- kutatás az orosz-ukrán háborúval kapcsolatos attitűdökről, 2022
https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=3107
[5] European External Action Service, Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, 21/03/2022.
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf
[6] EU vs. Disinfo https://euvsdisinfo.eu/

(2) Ukrainians allegedly commit genocide against ethnic Russians in Ukraine;

(3) Biolabs in Ukraine develop viruses against Russians.

The narratives remained more or less the same, but the disinformation system's tactics and the industry evolved. The number of proxies and social media profiles skyrocketed.

The disinformation ecosystem today

The disinformation ecosystem aims to weaken the West's support to Ukraine, since without this support Ukraine could not keep up its self-defense. Hence, Russian propaganda seeks to exploit and exaggerate existing cleavages and cracks, trying to convince the Western countries to withdraw and end their backing to Ukraine.

The noise this ecosystem generates does not primarily aim to convince people Russia is doing the right thing but to rather confuse European citizens whether they need to support Ukraine, or that their support for Ukraine comes at their own detriment. One way to do it is discrediting Ukraine, another is to reverse and mix up the reasons and consequences. For masses that only superficially follow news and/or do not possess enough background information, it is often enough to make them uncertain, and/or channel their just frustration to the wrong actor, so that they would not blame the real wrongdoer but a handy scapegoat instead.

This is palpable when disinformation systems blame everything on the sanctions against Russia. Expensive energy is a direct consequence of the sanctions according to this narrative. Moreover, even the waves of refugees having to leave their homes in Ukraine is misconstrued as a consequence of them suffering from the energy crisis caused by the "Brussels' sanctions". (Obviously, not because of the military aggression and the systemic bombing of civilian infrastructure.) [7]

---

[7] EU vs. Disinfo. Ukraine-related disinformation narratives: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ukraine/ and https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=&date=&disinfo_countries%5B%5D=77547&per_page=

Another common modus operandi in the Russian disinformation playbook is pretended fact checking: Russian official channels try to depict themselves as bearers of critical thinking. To relativize facts even more than their disinformation activities already do, they promote fake fact-checker sites where facts are being "proven" to be fake and fakes are being presented as truth with hashtags #thinkforyourself and #seeforyourself. This is not a new method either and parallels can be drawn between the current war and disinformation around COVID-19. We witnessed anti-establishment and anti-intellectual messaging that seek to elevate one's authority while eroding trust in the institutional knowledge. Russian propagandistic efforts in this regard build on the rise of social media and its impact on how people regard expertise,[8] and the achievements of far-right thoughtstream too that made questioning scientific and other authority more mainstream.

Policy recommendations

- **The aggressor should be constantly named and shamed.** The frustration of masses should be directed at the actor that caused the hardship, and, hence, responsibility should be attributed accordingly. It should be done so by every single actor talking about this issue: Russia and its unprovoked invasion should be called out every single time the problem is mentioned. Disinformation narratives in the Visegrad countries are built on personal anxieties (difficulties in covering bills, etc) but rarely put on geopolitical level. Hungary is the exception where a whole governmental campaign was built on scapegoating the "Brussels sanctions" allegedly causing the increase of energy prices. Up until now three directions were observed: (1) blaming of local mismanagement, (2) Brussels and (3) Russia. It is a low-hanging fruit that does not require resources or serious shifts in policy making. And while certain actors already emphasize it, those who do not, should do it consequently and consistently.

---

[8] See more about these trends at: Tom Nichols, (2017). *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. Oxford University Press.

- **Proper language usage is key**. It is not "Ukrainian war" or "Ukrainian crisis"- as these transmit the false image that it is a Ukrainian domestic issue or even civil war, whereas it is a defensive war against an aggressor. Improper usage is oftentimes involuntary or a result of carelessness, but still strengthens the position of those in the public arena who seek to downplay Russia's role and responsibility in the full-scale war. This applies to a wide range of actors from economic news portals such as novekedes.hu that still calls the war "Ukrainian"[9] even to the European Parliament, who for example in the Hungarian version of the plenary newsletter of 2 June 2022[10] referred to the war this way.

- **Making people understand the human side of the war.** As abstract and far away it is in the news, people-to-people contacts are key to sensitize the population of the Visegrad countries. While in Poland, for example meeting and seeing refugees from Ukraine is an everyday experience for most people, in Hungary, for instance an average Hungarian barely meets them. To organize visibility and educative events and personal meetings where refugees wanting to spread the world and show their experience could be a way to do it. Depending on the exact venue (ex.: in cities with county rights), information could reach a segment of the population who otherwise is not particularly active in informing themselves from about world politics and the war, therefore are often relying only on the propaganda of the public broadcasters. Obviously, it has to be done maximally taking in account the sensitive and vulnerable situation of refugees, and they should not be further traumatized.

- **Enhancing the visibility and reach of fact-checker sites and strengthening media pluralism**. Even though fact-checker sites are only reactive, their role is crucial. The reach of fact-checking sites could be developed with more advertisement to which the financial coverage could be ensured by small grants from embassies, or

---

[9] https://novekedes.hu/hirek/haboru-uj-szuperfegyvert-vetettek-be-az-oroszok
[10] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/hu/agenda/briefing/2022-06-06/1/ukran-haboru-az-eu-csucs-eredmenyei-unios-kulpolitika

companies that seek to strengthen their progressive, positive, socially responsible image.

- **Empowering people.** Given the possibility to help, people often do that. Making helping for them easy and a rewarding experience can dismantle their fatigue and lethargy that partially stems from the feeling of powerlessness. Empowering people, involving them in problem-solving, creates a sense of responsibility and affection towards the helped group.[11] It is of paramount importance though, to make helping as easy as possible, to enlarge the circle who can get in beyond the socially sensitive few, who regularly help those in need in any given tragic situation. Empowerment might increase the resiliency of a given community.[12] [13]A good example is Vilnius for example, where the city's website offers a wide range of options to support refugees, in an easy-to-use and encouraging way.[14]

- **Developing media literacy of various groups.** Certain V4 countries are ahead of others with regards to teaching media literacy in schools and high schools. Access to it though is often unequal, sporadic, and occasional. Framing it as a common goal, it should be incorporated in the education even where it is not the case yet, involving NGOs for capacity and knowledge, and teachers using the basic guide of the European Commission[15]. While modifying school curricula is a slow and lengthy process, less formal ways of media literacy development could be implemented faster. Schools could be incentivized via small grants for them and NGOs to cooperate, with governmental help or where it is unavailable from embassies or companies. Adults could be reached via programs launched together with

[11] Zastrow, Charles, and Sarah L. Hessenauer. *Empowerment series: Introduction to social work and social welfare: Empowering people*. Cengage Learning, 2022.
[12] Taylor, Janice L. "The Power of Resilience: A Theoretical Model to Empower, Encourage and Retain Teachers." *Qualitative Report* 18 (2013): 70.
[13] Fikret Berkes & Helen Ross (2013) Community Resilience: Toward an Integrated Approach, Society & Natural Resources, 26:1, 5-20, DOI: 10.1080/08941920.2012.736605
[14] Vilnius city's website: 13/01/2023 https://ukraina.vilnius.lt/en/how-can-i-help-ukraine/
[15] European Commission, Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training, 11/10/2022 https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a224c235-4843-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

enterprises and companies for example, these entities could be incentivized to further educate their employees by tax returns. Elderlies could be involved in such activities via local NGOs and community spaces (ex. libraries).

About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making. We are the recipient of institutional funding from the European Commission under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.