



RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The complicated period the states are facing, caused by the onset of the SARS CoV-2 pandemic, has produced changes in the behaviour of some countries, while others have kept their preferences for old practices. The Russian Federation is among those that have identified in recent developments on the world stage the opportunity to exploit the vulnerabilities its targets face, the aim being to obtain strategic advantages. Thus, from the campaign entitled "From Russia with Love" to the disinformation campaign, the European Union is in Moscow's attention, which through its actions tries to create instability within the EU and to discredit the organisation through actions meant to make it look like a failed project.

Keywords: the Russian Federation; the European Union; disinformation; fake news; information warfare;



DISINFORMATION – RUSSIA’S POWERFUL WEAPON

Generally, disinformation refers to deliberate, often orchestrated, attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them. Such an activity is very dangerous because it is used usually by countries in situations with significant stakes, so disinformation has in most of the cases well-organised and resourced actions at the base (UNESCO, 2018, p. 7). Today, in a profoundly technologised world, terms like fake news and disinformation can be perceived as a matter of relative novelty, and in the case of the first, indeed, we can say that it appeared more recently, people being aware of it with the deepening of digitalisation and the increasing use of the social networks. But disinformation is a tool used many years ago, being preferred to the detriment of military actions for the important advantages it can offer to the actor which uses it.

And if we are talking about disinformation, whether we are referring to the present or bygone times, we cannot exclude from the discussion one country, for two reasons: the occurrence of this type of action and the intense use of disinformation today, both situations having a common denominator: the Russian Federation, as *de jure* and *de facto* heir of the USSR. Bringing the Russian state in this discussion cannot be avoided, given that even the appearance of the term is related exclusively to the USSR. More accurately, that term came into use in the early 1960s, and became widespread in the 1980s, being based upon a Russian word: *Dezinformatsiya*. According to sources in the intelligence field, the term was invented by Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin after the World War II, while the 1952 Great Soviet Encyclopaedia explains the disinformation being the “*dissemination (in the press, on the radio etc.) of false reports intended to mislead public opinion*” (Taylor, 2016).

But the disappearance of the USSR in 1991, as a subject of international law, did not decrease the propensity of Russia, the heir of the Soviet Union, for this type of practice, especially as developments at the international level after the end of the Cold War rather claimed

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The pandemic the world is currently facing, the most challenging crisis since the World War II, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned recently, goes beyond the patterns of a medical crisis through the effects it has on all aspects of people's lives: political, financial, demographic, economic, social and others.

policies that ensured the strategic advantages targeted by states without using hard power actions.

For Russia, such a situation meant changing the actions that involved the use of force or the threat of the use of force with “*more subtle*” actions but with no less things to offer in terms of the advantages brought to Moscow. Therefore, through the use of disinformation, which is an action with deep roots in the Soviet practices, Moscow is taking advantage of the technology and digitalisation to strengthen its position and gain major strategic benefits without using force. Moreover, developments in recent years reveal that in the highly digitalised world in which we live, Moscow uses disinformation as a weapon aimed at enemies that Russia cannot dominate through hard power actions.

A DANGEROUS GLOBAL PANDEMIC – DISINFORMATION DURING THE CORONA TIMES

The pandemic the world is currently facing, the most challenging crisis since the World War II, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres (Lederer, 2020) warned recently, goes beyond the patterns of a medical crisis through the effects it has on all aspects of people's lives: political, financial, demographic, economic, social and others. Moreover, if for the vast majority of the countries the pandemic is a very negative event, as can be seen in the case of the states severely affected by the novel Coronavirus, like the US, Italy, Spain, India and others, for actors such as Russia and China, the pandemic is an opportunity to gain, or at least attempting to gain, strategic advantages.

“FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE” CAMPAIGN

Thus, although the pandemic came with major complications, for the Russian Federation included, the situation was perceived by Moscow as advantageous for Kremlin's interests to increase its regional and international profile. This is how the “*From Russia with love*” campaign started, which was officially intended as an altruistic initiative to help countries in difficulty because of the pandemic, but which later revealed Russia's less philanthropic purposes. The first target of this campaign was Italy. On 22 March, at Vladimir Putin's request, the Russian Army began flying medical help to Italy. Sputnik posted on Twitter a few images with the following text: ““*From Russia*

with love'. With these stickers on the sides, Russia's two military planes with experts and equipment take off from Chkalovsky airfield and are heading to Italy to assist in combating the Coronavirus pandemic. Photos courtesy of the Defense Ministry" (Euractiv, 2020). A manoeuvre which, in Italy's situation, inevitably brought Moscow the reputation of a great saviour of a country which, despite belonging to the EU, flirted with the idea of developing good relations with the Kremlin, an idea that the Italian state has also put in practice in recent years. Inevitably, the aid delivered by the Russians was received in Italy with great enthusiasm. The Italian Defence Minister Lorenzo Guerini has officially thanked his Russian counterpart, Serghei Shoigu. Then, famous people in Italy praised Moscow for its support: the famous singer Pupo posted on his Facebook account a video in which he sang a famed Russian song ended with the phrase "I love you Russia. Thank you", while a Russian newspaper wrote that Al Bano said that Italy would never forget Russia's help (Luxmoore, 2020).

But beyond this situation and the image campaign carefully orchestrated by the Kremlin, Moscow's actions can be included among the manoeuvres that transcend the humanitarian sphere, being found rather in the dimension of Russia's foreign policy, at the intersection between strategic interests and the information warfare that Moscow maintains actively concerning the Western rivals.

THE "DIVIDE ET IMPERA" ACTIONS TARGET THE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

So, beyond the altruistic aspect of the Moscow's actions, which was inevitably perceived in a positive way given the situation in which Italy, for example, was in the spring of this year, there are clear elements that incriminate Russia for its real intentions hidden behind the support offered to some countries. In the case of the Italian state, for example, Moscow's actions targeted two levels: the internal and the external. In the first case, playing the "saviour" role, the Kremlin intended to cultivate good relations with the Italian state both in terms of the political class and the population, in both cases with strategic gains for Russia. Thus, in a pragmatic interpretation, the support offered by Russia is not purely altruistic, but rather an action aimed at obtaining a relaxation from the EU of the measures taken against Moscow's bellicose policy in the region. Italy, which had the misfortune to face a



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regrettable period at the beginning of the pandemic, was not chosen out of the blue, given that the regime in Rome has preferred in recent years to have a close relationship with Moscow, to the detriment of its membership of the European Union, hence Russia's decision to focus on the Italian state from this perspective.

Also, the Russian support to Italy is related to the Kremlin's attempt to attract as much sympathy as possible from the Italian people but also from the political class, which considers that it is appropriate to maintain good relations with Russia, here being targeted especially the Lega Party, in the perspective of good results obtained in the next elections in Italy (Ellyatt, 2020).

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As for the external dimension targeted by Moscow, here things are inextricably linked to Italy's EU membership, the Kremlin aiming to contribute to undermining the image of the European colossus in favour of its strategic interests. In other words, Russia aimed to highlight the failure of the European Union in identifying and implementing a rapid response to the major problems caused by the onset of the pandemic in some member countries, Italy being one of them. At the same time, Moscow relied on the fact that this support would help improve the image of the Russian Federation at the regional level, while Vladimir Putin benefited from unprecedented publicity both at the European level and domestically.

But beyond the surface elements, Russia's move is directed against the European Union, Moscow's goal being to make its position vulnerable and reduce its attractiveness concerning both its members and the states that have expressed their intention to become part of the great European family. In all cases, these are countries the Russian Federation wants to keep under its sphere of influence in one way or another, whether we are talking about those located in the Eastern Europe or the Western Balkans.

Therefore, the contextual elements in which the Kremlin offered to help Italy, as well as the pragmatic analysis of such an action, reveal that Moscow's support rather has a strategic stake, meant to allow the Kremlin to return at the table of the great players by regaining the ability to expand its influence (Emmott, Osborne, 2020) at the regional level, to the detriment of the EU and NATO implicitly. At least in the case of the population of the Italian state, the Kremlin won a stage win, because its ability to act quickly, at a time when the European Union

was struggling, delaying in identifying and implementing pandemic response options, favoured the rise of scepticism of the Italians and their dissatisfaction with the hardship with which Brussels sought its resources to support the EU member states (Togoh, 2020). Last but not least, the multifaceted nature of Russia's actions in Italy was perceived as having a feature related to intelligence. The idea was contradicted by the Kremlin but interpreted as such by those who claimed that the presence of the Russian forces on the territory of an EU/NATO member state, even in non-military missions regarding equipment and medical items transfer, is an opportunity to collect information on the military structures of a country which is part of the North Atlantic Alliance (Cristiani, 2020).

Serbia's situation should be read in the same key. The country is in the full process of negotiations with Brussels, yet, after receiving support from Beijing in the context of the pandemic, also asked Moscow for help. Thus, if in the case of Italy, the purpose of Moscow's aid was to increase the dissatisfaction of the Italian population and the Euroscepticism, and gain support from the political class for the relaxation of the EU sanctions, as far as the relationship with Serbia is concerned, the Russian Federation's aid in the context of the pandemic was linked to the Kremlin's interest in strengthening the alliance with Belgrade, as well as inoculating the idea of the European Union's inefficiency, in contrast to Russia's ability to meet major challenges such as the SARS CoV-2 pandemic. Moreover, if Beijing used the "mask diplomacy", supporting Serbia in a non-military domain, Russia took advantage of Belgrade's opening for the Russian assistance, which had a military character from the beginning, Russian soldiers being integrated into the operations carried out by Serbia to fight the pandemic (Goble, 2020).

THE SARS COV-2 PANDEMIC CREATES A FERTILE ENVIRONMENT FOR THE RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION ACTIONS. EU COUNTER OPTIONS

Given the complexity of the situation and the people sensitivity to certain issues during a pandemic, Moscow understood that its pseudo-altruistic actions targeting certain Western states could be doubled by measures aimed at achieving its goals – weakening, including from within, the European Union by fuelling Euroscepticism in the



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In addition to “Trojan Horse” actions, which have ensured access to the countries under Russian attention, the Kremlin has resorted to manoeuvres involving disinformation, dissemination of fake news to obtain the targeted strategic advantages, in particular the rise of Euroscepticism and dissatisfaction of member states’ citizens regarding the way Brussels was managing the pandemic crisis.

case of some member states populations, or from outside by reducing the attractiveness of the EU, in the case of the countries aiming at full membership – in all cases, the actions having a major impact on the European Union as well as NATO.

Thus, in addition to “Trojan Horse” actions, which have ensured access to the countries under Russian attention, the Kremlin has resorted to manoeuvres involving disinformation, dissemination of fake news to obtain the targeted strategic advantages, in particular the rise of Euroscepticism and dissatisfaction of member states’ citizens regarding the way Brussels was managing the pandemic crisis. And if in the case of Kremlin’s support for certain states one can see Moscow’s hurry to take action, to quickly capitalise on the advantages pursued, the same feature can be identified in the case of the disinformation campaign launched by Kremlin at the beginning of the pandemic, relying on the fact that its effects would amplify its actions.

Indeed, amid developments in the spring of this year, the pandemic has created a fertile ground for actions involving disinformation, and Moscow has taken full advantage of this complicated context, one of the main targets of the Russian state being the European Union.

The fact that the Russian Federation has rushed to take advantage of the international changes caused by the pandemic is revealed by the information published in the press in March last year, when Reuters mentioned an EU report dated 16 March 2020 and drafted by the *European External Action Service (EEAS)*, which was about the Russian media aiming to launch a real campaign against the West to worsen the impact of the SARS CoV-2 pandemic, by generating panic and sowing distrust in those responsible for the crisis management. The accusations in the Western press were denied by the Kremlin, but they (re)opened a Pandora’s Box, as they add to the list of those already formulated by different actors regarding Moscow’ actions in this domain.

According to Reuters, the EU document talks about the fact that Moscow’s recent disinformation campaign is spreading fake news online in European languages such as English, Spanish, French, German and Italian, which indicates, without any other possible interpretation, the targets of the Kremlin’s actions, as well as contradictory, confusing and malicious reports, to complicate the situation of the European Union in formulating a coherent pandemic response. Thus, according

to the EEAS (2020), “the overarching aim of Kremlin disinformation is to aggravate the public health crisis in Western countries... in line with the Kremlin’s broader strategy of attempting to subvert European societies”.

The same document writes that from 22 January until the time the document was drafted, the EU identified about 80 cases of disinformation about the new Coronavirus, Russian actions being identified to amplify Tehran’s accusations that SARS CoV-2 is a biological weapon developed by the United States (Emmott, Ibid.). Then, in June last year, in the context of the unusual allegations made by Brussels that “foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighbourhood, and globally” (Deutsche Welle, June 2020), Brussels sounded the alarm over the massive wave of health hoaxes, false claims, scams, hate speeches and conspiracy theories about the SARS CoV-2 pandemic identified online, to which there coordinated attempts by third-country actors were added, actions which reveal, according to the document issued by the European Union, the intention to use and disseminate false or misleading information to cause damages for the targeted international actors (Ibid.).

So, although such actions are not new for the EU and the Western countries, the situation created by the health crisis amplified their effects, especially as a result of the way people understood to react to the Coronavirus pandemic, most of those dissatisfied with the way the governments or the authorities in Brussels acted being targets of the disinformation campaign initiated by the Kremlin. But the lack of novelty in the case of these actions does not contribute positively in identifying the best solutions to those problems, both because of the diversity of the nature of so-called aggressors, which can be states, organisations, individuals, as well as the networks they have created to achieve their goals, the false information dissemination mode and their targeting according to the specifics of the societies that such actions target. Moreover, the success of a disinformation campaign also depends on the legal capacity of the targeted states to formulate coherent responses to such threats, given that in many cases this is hampered by legislation, bureaucracy and even by the inability to understand, identify the problem and the pieces of evidence of the



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impact it has on the society (Pamment, 2020).

But the European Union has understood that the mechanism behind disinformation, the dissemination of fake news and narratives can only be fought through coherent and pragmatic measures, able to respond as effectively as possible to one of the most problematic threats. Thus, in June 2020, Josep Borrell sounded the alarm that *“disinformation in times of the Coronavirus can kill” thereby “we have a duty to protect our citizens by making them aware of false information, and expose the actors responsible for engaging in such practices”* (European Commission, 2020). The European official also pointed out an extremely important aspect: *“in today’s technology-driven world, where warriors wield keyboards rather than swords and targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns are a recognised weapon of state and non-state actors, the European Union is increasing its activities and capacities in this fight”* (Ibid.).

To this end, in the months since the pandemic began, the European Commission has stepped up the pressure on Twitter and Facebook, calling for support in stopping the flow of misleading content about the pandemic, virus, vaccine and alleged remedies (Bodoni, 2020). Moreover, in June last year, concrete steps were taken at the EU level in the fight against disinformation, which would contribute in a major manner at the creation of a stronger and more resilient Union, such as cooperation, transparency, distinguishing between illegal and harmful but not illegal content, raising public awareness regarding the problems in this dimension and implicitly of societal resilience, all measures that would contribute to the European Union’s fight against disinformation, with the use of two key components: the European Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act (European Commission, Ibid.).

CONCLUSIONS

Humanity is currently going through one of the worst crises since the second world conflagration, the one generated by the SARS CoV-2 pandemic, which takes place in a highly globalised and interdependent world, thus having major effects beyond the medical field, affecting all aspects of people’s lives. However, if the consequences of the pandemic in the economic, financial, social, demographic etc. fields are self-evident, the security aspect reveals mutations due to the realities on the ground. Specifically, in the context of the level of the

digitalisation that humanity has reached, the access to technology and information means accessible to modern people can be a useful tool for the international actors that are exploiting the pandemic to gain strategic advantages.

The Russian Federation is one of the most eloquent examples, in this case, its actions in recent months highlighting the Kremlin's interest in exploiting the complicated situation caused by the pandemic in its favour and to the detriment of the European Union, the main target of the disinformation campaign initiated by Moscow. The campaign is hiding behind its actions to support the European countries that have encountered difficulties in managing the health crisis. Its main purpose is to exploit the EU's vulnerabilities, as well as to amplify them both through actions carried out inside and outside the European Union. This is also an endeavour through which Moscow is trying to cut the losses suffered after the bellicose adventures in Europe since 2014, which limited Russia's actions because of the sanctions adopted against it.

Yet, for the EU, Moscow's deceptive activities were warnings that (re)confirmed that the Russian Federation was an actor with a different agenda while being an impetus for pragmatic decisions and measures meant to reduce the negative influence of the Russian Federation in the community space regarding the information warfare. At the same time, the Kremlin's actions were an additional argument for Brussels in support of some measures aimed at increasing both resilience within the borders of the European Union and maintaining the attractiveness of the EU both for countries from outside its borders, but especially for its member states.

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