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Information Manipulation and EU Response Effectiveness

This is a summary of Public Deliverable D4.2.

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Communication culture in the EU emerged in a peaceful environment and relatively friendly media landscape. The communication was grouped broadly around a widely shared mission to 'build Europe' and persuade people to support EU objectives. How does this concept work in times of information manipulation and massive spread of disinformation? How effectively does communication correspond with the rapidly changing EU media landscape?

Few would challenge the assertion that the EU is experiencing extraordinary times. Since 2008, the EU has gone through a number of severe crises (economic and financial crisis, migration crisis, terrorist attacks, "Brexit", COVID-19) culminating in Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine. The disinformation accompanied all these crises, and its spread is increasing exponentially. This unthinkable blending of various crises combined with disinformation leads to a mounting Euroscepticism, populism, extremism and shaking popular trust in the European project. In the "fake news" environment it is rather challenging to explain the EU citizens what the EU institutions have delivered to prevent or at least tangibly reduce consequences of a crisis. Faced with Eurosceptic parties in many of the EU Member States, European citizens need to be able to understand whether and how the EU affects their daily lives in hard times. Complexity of the communication experienced in particular during COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine is twofold: explanation based on facts to achieve people's minds and emotional engagement to reach the people's heads. Without strong emotional component, it would be problematic for the EU to win the battle with "infodemic" (a term derived from the combination of the words "information" and "pandemic" and denotes the rapid spread of difficult-to-verify information) and defend European narratives in geo-political struggle for influence with Russia and China.



Propaganda has always been used by world powers to strengthen their influence. The biggest advantage of propaganda is that it is hard to "see", but incredibly effective in influencing people's minds. As the American writer Mark Twain said, it is much easier to deceive a person than to convince him that he has been deceived.

Europe has long lived with the knowledge that propaganda refers to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. However, during "Brexit", and particularly during the Covid-19 crisis and full-scale war in Ukraine, the enormous usage of different information manipulation technique made Europeans wake up. In this critical situation, fighting disinformation is one of the crucial responses to the crisis.

Communication must not be the responsibility of European institutions alone. It must be shared with the Member States. The European politicians across all other levels (national, local and regional) should be co-owners of the EU delivery and partners in conveying consistent explanatory messages. In reality, quite often instead of "singing in unison" with the EU, the Member states tend to present any success story as their own success and blame the EU for any failures.

As public bodies, the EU institutions' communication tend to be mostly rational, based on facts and figures. Indeed the 'rational' advantages of the Union can be well explained in non-emotional way. In *business-as-usual times* the rational explanation of the major EU success stories works well.

Disappearance of customs procedures for trade between Member States, the absence of internal border control, the ability of young people to engage in student exchanges and the free-of-charge mobile telephony roaming in the EU can be well communicated in a traditional evidence-based way. But these achievements alone will not succeed in changing people's attitudes in the *times of crises*. The role of the EU institutions is much broader than simply providing information. It must also be based on a degree of emotional engagement with the Union by Europeans. The people's emotions like fear, frustration and anger tend to overshadow any evidence-based communication and facts, especially when political leaders are helpless in finding a proper combination of facts and emotions to provide reasons for hope and confidence.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shocked Europeans. With unprecedented unity among its Member States and in partnership with G7 allies, the EU has weaponized its trade and financial instruments to punish the invaders. After so many crises over the past decade, the EU finally responded rapidly and decisive to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Since Russia's invasion in Ukraine, in parallel with individual country efforts, the EC like the other international organizations have undertaken fact-checking and debunking activities to counter Russian massive propaganda and disinformation. Summarizing the EU experience and response to the threat posed by disinformation, misinformation and foreign influence, one can conclude that in response to the war in Ukraine this gap has been considerably narrowed.

The emotional reaction of the European citizens to the war in Europe forged the EU unprecedented unity. In the end, Europe's response has demonstrated the strength and resilience of democracy.

As the European elections are a flagship of European democracy it is not a surprise that in June 2024, disinformation actors from inside and outside the EU tried to undermine trust in democratic processes and broaden division and polarization in our societies. The information space in the European MS was full with false and misleading information, all with the aim to hijack the public debate. Several European policies are often target of disinformation: support to Ukraine, the European Green Deal and migration.

According to the The Flash Eurobarometer on Fake News and Online Disinformation published in March 2018, 83% of the EU citizens agree that news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false is a problem for democracy.

Communication is getting increasingly complex also because the traditional and social media landscape in the EU is changing rapidly. The main weakness of EU communication is speed. EU response is often slower than disinformation campaigns.

The key challenge is Member States communication narratives fragmentation and inconsistency (for instance, Hungary and Slovakia playing against EU mainstream).

To conclude:

1.

From COVID-19 to war in Ukraine, **disinformation today is shaping major global events**. Disinformation also undermines people's trust in governments and other public institutions. This "atomic bomb" spans from misinformation to propaganda, from hostile narrative to hybrid warfare.

2.

Disinformation destroys people's faith in traditional news sources – which have ethical standards and legal responsibilities to report the facts, often more complex and less viral than a simplistic hostile narrative and manipulate public opinion.

3.

During hard times the Union must confront the cynics and the sceptics, showing that it is delivering. Providing citizens with comprehensive facts and figures is clearly not enough. The EU leaders need to **find a proper combination of facts and emotional engagement** to provide reasons for hope and confidence.

4.

The EU communication tools depend on the European media landscape. **Understanding the media landscape is crucial** for the EU effective communication, reputation management, and crisis response.



5.

The EU response to disinformation and information manipulation is partially effective because of regulatory and institutional frameworks but faces persistent **challenges in speed and adaptation to rapidly evolving tactics.**

6.

The **increase of the popular support of extreme-right parties overall in Europe is a dangerous trend**, which require smart adjustment of all communication actors to the changing and challenging media landscape.



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