Information Security Policy

Conditions, Threats and Implementation in the International Environment

EDITED BY
PIOTR BAJOR

INFORMATION SECURITY POLICY

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The European Union versus Russian Disinformation

Abstract: The war in Ukraine has made public opinion and policy makers aware of the Russian Federation as a major threat to international security, but also to the internal security of the European Union. The military threat is only one of the instruments used by this state. For years, a different type of Russian activity in the EU has been observed, consisting in creating an alternative picture of the situation in Ukraine, and interfering in political processes in selected countries. All these activities are aimed at undermining the cohesion and solidarity of the EU, which, from Moscow's perspective, is a threat to its political interests as a result of the Union's promotion of democratic values and principles and human rights in the international environment. The article presents selected disinformation campaigns carried out by Russia in the EU and then analyses the actions the Union has taken in response. Conclusions and recommendations were formulated in the end.

Keywords: European Union, Russia, disinformation, propaganda

Introduction

The Russian Federation has long seen the EU as a threat to its political interest, particularly in politics and security in post-Soviet countries. Democratic governance and guaranteed civil rights and liberties are incompatible with Russia's policies. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), including its East European dimension – the Eastern Partnership, are seen by Russian decision-makers as an encroachment into Russia's sphere of influence. For this reason, the Russian Federation – for several years now – has been running a large-scale disinformation campaign in the EU aimed not only at disseminating false information about the current situation in Ukraine, but also at breaking apart the political unity among EU states in terms of their attitude towards Russia's actions. The EU is aware of the danger posed by the campaign and, since 2015, has been operating and developing the East StratCom Task Force (SCTF),[1] whose tasks include running the EUvsDisinfo project.

The objective of this paper is to present the results of the Task Force's actions as well as assess the extent to which member states make use of its experiences and collaborate with it. The following research hypotheses were formulated: H1: the goal of Russian disinformation is to weaken unity among EU member states; H2: the EU has developed effective instruments for combating Russian disinformation; H3: the EU is resistant to Russia's disinformation activities. In order to examine these hypotheses, the following research questions were formulated: Q1: In which areas is Russian disinformation most active?; Q2: What entities/groups is Russian disinformation directed at?; Q3: What are the institutional actions taken by the EU to combat Russian disinformation?; Q4: Does the EU collaborate with member states in combating Russian disinformation? If so, how?; Q5: What are the results of the EU's actions aimed at combating Russian disinformation? The activities of the ESCTF, part of the European External Action Service, will be examined through the lens of classical Easton's systems theory,[2] with the securitisation theory[3] used as an auxiliary

[1] There are currently three Task Forces – Eastern (2015), Western Balkans (2017) and Middle East and Africa (2017) (East, Western Balkans, South) with a similar mandate. For the purposes of this study, they will be treated as one project. For more see: "Dezinformacja w UE – pomimo podejmowanych wysiłków problem pozostaje nierozwiązany", *Sprawozdanie specjalne Europejskiego Trybunału Obrachunkowego* 2021, [on-line:] https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR21_09/SR_Disinformation_PL.pdf (13.09.2022).

[2] D. Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1953, *passim*.

[3] Ł. Fijałkowski, "Teoria sekurytyzacji i konstruowanie bezpieczeństwa", *Przegląd Strategiczny*, no. 1 (2012), pp. 149–161.

tool. The research will be based on qualitative methods, including – in particular – content analysis and institutional, legal and systemic methods.

Russian disinformation activities in respect of the European Union

Aside from the US, the EU poses the biggest threat to Russia's ambitions to be a superpower. Due to this, one of the objectives of Russian propaganda for internal and external purposes is to sow disinformation on the EU's political, economic and social situation. Russia undertakes institutional activities to attack the European Union as an organisation and its member states. The purpose is to cause the disintegration of the EU and weaken its potential and impact on international relations to supplant liberal democratic values with its own vision of the international order based on Russian supremacy.

In the late 1990s, Aleksandr Dugin, the chief ideologue of Russian imperial ambitions, wrote [in his book *Foundations of Geopolitics*] that Russia would have to use disinformation, destabilisation and annexation to regain its position as a global empire.[4] With time, Dugin's political thought became the foundation of Russia's state ideology under Putin, and the guidelines formulated in this publication formed the basis for an institutionalised industry of propaganda. In its ideological strife against Western values, Russia operates on many levels and along multiple vectors, making identifying threats and their effective nullification difficult. The development of new technologies and communication platforms gave Russian propaganda specialists new possibilities for impacting societies in EU member states. However, Russia continues to use traditional means such as public statements made by politicians or activities of non-state actors located in third parties and operating as think tanks, NGOs or, more broadly, agents of influence.[5]

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[4] M. Bukowski, M. Duszczyk (eds), *Gościnna Polska 2022+*, Warszawa 2022, [on-line:] https://wise-europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Raport-Goscinna-Polska-2022.pdf (13.09.2022).

[5] Agents of influence are a very broad category that includes both third-country nationals operating in the host country and their own citizens. These are people whose actions, public statements or other activities are aimed at supporting the political or economic goals of a third country, without clearly indicating the principal, which significantly hinders the identification of such a person and counteracting their activities. A similar category are 'useful idiots'. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the two categories. It is the link, or lack thereof, with the intelligence of a third country. The agent of influence acts on the orders of the services of a third country, while the "useful idiot" most often acts for ideological reasons, believing in the rightness of a given case. See: "Terms

Given the specific nature of Russia's actions, this paper will present selected examples of disinformation activities that affect the entire European Union and, as such, are meant to cause political, social and economic destabilisation.[6] Brexit, the first-ever case of a country leaving the union, was one of the most important events for the entire EU in its over 70-year history. The UK's potential in the European Union was based not only on its economy or population, but also on its international position. Together with France, the UK is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power. In this context, the debate over the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union became a matter of international importance and raised the interest of many entities, including the Russian Federation, which realised that it could use this situation to weaken two organisations at once – the European Union and the UK itself. Although it has been six years since the Brexit referendum, from the very start it was clear that, for many observers, external players partially controlled Brexit. To this day, nobody has been held responsible. A report by the British Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament is a major document that sums up the extent of Russian influence during Brexit.[7]

The document was published in July 2020, although the Committee completed work on it in March 2019. The delay resulted from the conclusions of the document, which included a finding that Russian influences penetrated political life in the UK, and UK intelligence was unable to prevent it effectively. The report further stated that Russia had used various means and instruments to influence the Brexit referendum

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& Definitions of Interest for DOD Counterintelligence Professional", *Office of Counterintelligence (DXC) Defense CI & Humint Center Defense Intelligence Agency*, 2.05.2011 [on-line:] http://www.ncix.gov/publications/ci_references/CI_Glossary.pdf, pp. 4–5 (13.09.2022).

[6] Three EU-wide issues have been selected, although disinformation activities often target selected Member States and, as such, may have an indirect impact on the situation across the Union. Russian actions often take the form of indirect influence, such as political and financial support for selected political parties in EU countries, which then become agents of Russia's influence, introducing issues that Moscow cares about into public debates and becoming their natural promoters. In recent years, the most famous examples of such activities are the close ties of the French National Union (fr. Rassamblement national, until 2018 under the name of the National Front, Fr. Front national) Marine Le Pen, Italian Northern League (It. Lega Nord) by Matteo Salvini or the Freedom Party of Austria (Ger. Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), headed by Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache until 2019. See: F. Wesslau, "Putin's Friends in Europe", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 19.10.2016, [on-line:] https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_putins_friends_in_europe7153/ (24.09.2022); B. Bernatskyi, "How to Stop Russia from Bribing European Politicians", *Visegrad Insight*, 21.09.2022, [on-line:] https://visegradinsight.eu/russia-bribe-eu-corruption-ukraine/ (27.09.2022).

[7] Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament: Russia: Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 3 of the Justice and Security Act 2013 Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on July 21 2020, [on-line:] https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_HC632_CCS001_CCS1019402408-001_ISC_Russia_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf (23.09.2022).

campaign on the side of those advocating for leaving the EU (the ‚Leave' campaign).[8] The authors of the report claimed that Russian influences in the UK had become the "new normal" – in particular, in "Londongrad", where many Russians enjoy special influence thanks to their money and the UK intelligence services do nothing to prevent it, thus limiting themselves to mitigating potential damage.[9]

Russia's involvement in the ‚Leave' campaign involved the dissemination of disinformation on social media and in traditional media (such as RT or Sputnik). False information on the financial and economic impact of UK's membership in the EU was spread, including the claim that the UK was paying huge sums of money into the EU budget, which could otherwise be used to fund the NHS. Another talking point raised during the campaign was EU's migration policy, which – in the opinion of Brexit supporters – limited their country's sovereignty in terms of accepting the influx of foreign citizens. All these issues were presented to create fear and anxiety in British society and induce citizens to vote for "Leave". Although the report did not authoritatively state that Russian disinformation was a factor that decided the vote, the slim difference between those in favour of (51.89%) and those against (48.11%) leaving the EU[10] means that any influence should be treated as unlawful interference.[11] As a result of the decision made by UK citizens, Article 50 of the Treaty on the European Union was activated, and negotiations on UK's exist from the UK began. The process was formally concluded on February 1, 2020, politically and economically weakening both the EU and the UK.

After this difficult process – sometimes called a ‚crisis' – concluded, the EU and the rest of the world had to face another test of unity, solidarity and responsibility related to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, Russian intelligence services decided to take advantage of this extraordinary situation to sow disinformation. Interestingly, but also concerningly, Russian disinformation activities related to the coronavirus pandemic were correlated with the disinformation disseminated by China in this regard. There is

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[8] The report has a broader context and analyses Russian influence also in the context of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. In this case, the conclusions are similar and indicate the involvement of Russia on the side of supporters of Scottish independence, which would weaken and destabilise Great Britain. The main accusation arising from the report is that the British services have failed to act in the following years, despite the awareness that a third country is trying to interfere in the political processes in Great Britain.

[9] Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament…, p. 15.

[10] "Results and Turnout at the EU Referendum", *The Electoral Commission*, 25.09.2019, [on-line:] https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/results-and-turnout-eu-referendum (23.09.2022).

[11] D. Ruy, "Did Russia Influence Brexit?", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 21.07.2020, [on-line:] https://www.csis.org/blogs/brexit-bits-bobs-and-blogs/did-russia-influence-brexit (23.09.2022).

no evidence that these activities were planned and coordinated; however, both Russia and China had similar goals. Russia repeated Chinese talking points on the origins of the pandemic, where an American bioweapon attack on China was identified as the potential cause of the outbreak or, depending on the medium disseminating the information, US soldiers were said to be responsible for escalating the epidemic. During the pandemic, Russia attempted to sway other countries to lift the sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea by providing material assistance to countries, including Italy, by showing that the EU was unable to protect the health and life of its own citizens effectively. The campaign was given the name "From Russia with Love" in the media. Manipulated images depicting EU flags being taken down from public buildings in Russia and performances of the Russian anthem were shown. Restrictions on travelling were presented as evidence of powerlessness and lack of European solidarity.[12]

Similarly to Brexit, Russia used various media to push its agenda – from statements made by politicians and diplomats (which were then quoted in European media), to RT, Sputnik and social media (where troll farms and bots were used to create and spread false information). Media of dubious credibility, particularly websites, also played a significant role by publishing numerous unverified, often mutually contradictory information about the pandemic, which were then reproduced by traditional and social media.[13] In the context of the hazard posed by the pandemic, claims that the pandemic was "fake" were particularly dangerous as they contested the restrictions imposed on everyday life or promoted treatment methods contrary to medical knowledge. Russian disinformation entered a new phase when COVID-19 vaccines were introduced.[14] Russian narration spread in European media focused on the side effects of vaccines and questioned the safety of mRNA-based vaccines. Russian disinformation also attempted to spread social polarisation by raising the issue of mandatory vaccination.[15]

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[12] P. Śledź, "Ostry cień mgły: antyzachodnia dezinformacja ze strony Chin i Rosji w związku z pandemią COVID-19", *Rocznik Strategiczny*, vol. 26 (2020/21), pp. 389–401, [on-line:] https://wnpism.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Sledz_Ostry_cien_mgly.pdf (23.09.2022).

[13] R. Reczkowski, "Geopolityczna rozgrywka pandemią COVID-19: rosyjski ekosystem dezinformacji i propagandy", *Świat Idei i Polityki*, vol. 19 (2020), pp. 251–252, [on-line:] https://www.ukw.edu.pl/download/58289/12._Robert_Reczkowski.pdf (12.09.2022).

[14] While the development of vaccines against Covid-19 was underway, Russian disinformation was aimed at undermining the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines. It was only after the Russians developed and approved the Sputnik V vaccine that the campaign to discredit vaccines was limited, because some of the negative message to the West returned to Russia and discouraged Russians from vaccinating, see: P. Śledź, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

[15] M. Fraser, "Eksperci: rosyjska dezinformacja antyszczepionkowa rośnie w siłę wraz z wariantem Delta", *CyberDefence24*, 9.08.2021, [on-line:] https://cyberdefence24.pl/eksperci-rosyjska-dezinformacja-antyszczepionkowa-rosnie-w-sile-wraz-z-wariantem-delta (23.09.2022).

Although different, the two examples of Russian disinformation discussed above had the same objective: undermining unity and solidarity on the level of states and communities. Activities related to Brexit laid bare the dangerous mechanism of creating and using agents of influence among political, economic and social elites. This helps lend credence to the message that the Russian Federation wants to spread. This mechanism is still being developed and used – as exemplified by disinformation activities surrounding the conflict in Ukraine.

Narration on the situation in Ukraine can be divided into two phases, each with a different dynamic. The first phase began in 2013 and was related to another attempt at bringing Ukraine closer to the EU. The Euromaidan confirmed that Ukraine was on a pro-European course which the Russian Federation wouldn't accept. 2014 saw the first stage of Russia's political and military operation against Ukraine begin, resulting in the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in the Donbas. The international democratic community condemned Russia's action and refused to recognise the resulting territorial changes. The EU was one of the entities who reacted to Russia's illegal actions by imposing a number of economic and political sanctions.[16] From the beginning of the conflict, Russia used multiple channels – political (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), diplomatic (diplomatic missions in third countries and international organisations), traditional and social media – to wage a massive campaign disparaging Ukraine and Ukrainians. Ukraine's right to sovereignty was undermined, with the country being described as a „failed state" or "artificial creation". Another trend in narration pointed to the historical background by saying that Ukraine was an integral part of the Russian Federation. Legal pro-European and democratic authorities of Ukraine were called a „Nazi junta" that was a threat to the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. The importance and political influence of nationalist parties were exaggerated to show that the danger posed by Nazis was real. Yet another narrative was

[16] As of March 3, 2014, EU institutions: The European Council, the Council of the EU and the European Commission worked on sanctions against the Russian Federation in connection with the aggression against Ukraine. Entry bans were introduced for Russian officials and trade restrictions were imposed. The cancellation of the EU-Russia summit in Sochi scheduled for June 2014 and the suspension of visa talks and a new strategic agreement were also politically significant. For a complete calendar of sanctions imposed by the EU on the Russian Federation, see: "Kalendarium – sankcje UE wobec Rosji w sprawie Ukrainy", *Strona Rady Europejskiej i Rady Unii Europejskiej*, [on-line:] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/history-restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/ (12.09.2022).

used to show Ukraine as an agent of the West and the US, who would be in a good position to endanger the safety of Russia by taking over its neighbour.[17]

Attempts were made to use the media to legalise the occupation of Ukraine by introducing the name ""Federal Republic of Novorossiya" into the public sphere. Ultimately, "Novorossiya" was meant to encompass the entire south of Ukraine.[18] This was not only an attempt to familiarise the public opinion with the new name, but, most of all, preparation for an escalation of the aggression and new status quo. An important goal of disinformation, in this case, was to reach the political decision-makers in the EU as their position would determine the scale of sanctions to be imposed on Russia for violating international law and the territorial integrity of a sovereign country. Due to this, an increase in relations between certain political parties active in EU member states and the Russian Federation could be observed at the time.

These parties could primarily be described as nationalist and populist. Their common trait was their potential. By using the concept of political relevance of a party, as proposed by Giovanni Sartori, these parties were (and still are) those with the potential to use political blackmail and rarely become part of a coalition. Pro-Russian circles in France (Marine Le Pen's National Rally), Italy (Lega Nord) or Hungary (Fidesz) were strengthened in this way. This is a form of political capital which firstly helps with disinformation as politicians of these parties push Russian narration, and secondly weakens the unity of the EU and, as a result, its potential. Although public opinion and mainstream media lost interest in the situation in Ukraine after 2015, disinformation campaigns did not stop and continued to be pushed – primarily in Russian media that reached international audiences (Sputnik, RT) and social media. The aim was to prepare the international public for the next stage of the conflict, which began in February 2022. The same narration as before was used and further strengthened, describing Ukraine as a fascist/Nazi state.[19]

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[17] F. Bryjka, "Rosyjska dezinformacja na temat ataku na Ukrainę", *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych*, 25.02.2022, [on-line:] https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/rosyjska-dezinformacja-na-temat-ataku-na-ukraine (15.09.2022).

[18] A. Włodkowska-Bagan, "Rosyjska ofensywa propagandowa. Casus Ukrainy", *Studia Politologiczne*, vol. 49 (2018), pp. 109–124, [on-line:] http://www.studiapolitologiczne.pl/pdf-115451-44713?filename=RUSSIAN%20PROPAGANDA.pdf (12.09.2022).

[19] As early as January 20, 2022, the US State Department published a document identifying the seven main lies of Russian propaganda about Ukraine: 1. Ukraine is the aggressor; 2. The West is pushing Ukraine towards conflict; 3. Russian troop movements are mere manoeuvres on their own territory; 4. The US is planning a chemical attack in the Donbas; 5. Russia defends its own citizens on the territory of Ukraine; 6. NATO has broken the non-enlargement agreement and intends to accept Ukraine; 7. The West does not want to talk, it just starts imposing sanctions. American services prepared a report based on an analysis of materials published mainly in American media, but

A new element of the programme was a campaign aimed personally at Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, who has Jewish roots. The president's Jewish roots were somehow not incompatible with his alleged Nazi beliefs. The objective of the disinformation campaign was to convince the public that Russia was conducting a „special operation" aimed at protecting the Ukrainian people from their government. New themes were introduced in later weeks and months: Ukrainian refugees, armed hostilities and their consequences, and nuclear safety. Ukrainian refugees were depicted as a problem and danger to European societies. Narratives were very diverse and focused on such themes as the economy (a burden to social systems and health care) and morality (women refugees from Ukraine as a threat to marriages).[20]

Of particular importance to Russian propaganda is the depiction of military action and its own explanations for gradually uncovering war crimes. The dominant theme coincides with the Kremlin's official line that the crimes were a sham aimed at discrediting the Russian army or that the Ukrainians themselves committed the crimes. Since the beginning of the war, potential contamination due to radiation has been an important theme. This context involves two narratives, the first – related to the potential use of tactical nukes by Russia, which the Kremlin propaganda depicts as a manifestation of Russia's right to defend its own interest, and the second – related to the potential intentional causing of a failure at one of the nuclear power plants in Ukraine or attacking it. Russians have taken over the largest Ukrainian nuclear plant in Zaporizhzhia, and the situation around that facility has been the subject of a disinformation campaign ever since. After the experiences related to the Chernobyl disaster, the topic is of particular interest to the public – which Russia has been taking full advantage of. The danger posed to the European security system by threats related to the war in Ukraine is unprecedented. The scale of disinformation is far beyond the previously described examples of Russia's interference with the internal affairs of the EU during Brexit and the pandemic.

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the narrative was global and the same topics and lies were repeated around the world. See: "Fact vs. Fiction: Russian Disinformation on Ukraine", *US Department of State*, 20.01.2022, [on-line:] https://www.state.gov/fact-vs-fiction-russian-disinformation-on-ukraine/ (23.09.2022).

[20] These theses were often adopted and copied by the media and opinion-forming centres in the EU Member States, e.g. in one of the analyses of the Jagiellonian Club, see.: M. Gulczyński, "'To przez te Ukrainki'. Szkoła, praca, lekarz, mieszkanie. Polki pod presją zwrócą się ku prawicy?", *Klub Jagielloński*, 20.04.2022, [on-line:] https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2022/04/20/to-przez-te-ukrainki-szkola-praca-lekarz-mieszkanie-polki-pod-presja-zwroca-sie-ku-prawicy/ (23.09.2022).

The EU's activities in response to Russian disinformation

The European Union is in a difficult situation when attempting to fight Russian disinformation and propaganda. Firstly, as an entity aspiring to be a normative power, it cannot use the same instruments as Russia as they are incompatible with its rules and values. Secondly, its ability to use other available instruments is significantly limited. Member states did not grant the EU competencies in respect of internal security. According to Article 72 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union (TFEU), responsibilities concerning the maintenance of law and order and the safeguarding of internal security lie with the member states.[21]

Member states may cooperate in this regard, with the EU coordinating the cooperation. The Standing Committee on Operational Cooperation on Internal Security plays a particularly important role in this aspect (Article 71 of TFEU).[22] In addition, matters related to the disinformation activities of the Russian Federation in the EU combine elements of internal and external security as they involve a third country whose actions affect internal political, economic and social processes in the EU and its member states. Despite the legal and political limitations in becoming involved in actions related to security policy, the EU has developed and continues to develop mechanisms aimed at counteracting Russian disinformation. Most importantly, the EU defined disinformation as "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Disinformation does not include reporting errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary".[23]

This definition allows for some possibility of the continued impact of propaganda and dissemination of controlled information but should be treated as an attempt to reconcile the protection of public interest and a guarantee of the fundamental value of free speech.

The EU had already taken specific action in response to Russian disinformation in 2015. At a session of the European Council, leaders of member states tasked the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) with preparing a plan for fighting Russian disinformation. They noted that a special

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[21] *Traktat o funkcjonowaniu Unii Europejskiej*, Dz.U. UE C 326 z 26.10.2012, p. 74.

[22] *Ibidem*.

[23] COM(2018)236 final, 26.04.2018, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach*, p. 4.

unit should be created to implement tasks related to counteracting disinformation. This became the basis for creating the StratCom Task Force on September 1, 2015.[24]

Due to the previously discussed treaty limitations, as well as the fact that the HR/VP was designated as the entity responsible for this matter, the Task Force was organised within the European External Action Service (EEAS). This is where it became part of Strategic Communication, Task Forces and Information Analysis Division (AFFGEN.7), which also includes a horizontal team tasked with analysing potential threats to EU's security system, creating the backbone of the EU's early disinformation warning system. SCTF initially operated in a very limited scope as it had only nine members and was funded from voluntary payments made by member states. However, when it became clear that Russian disinformation activity was posing a constantly growing threat, a decision was made in 2018 that funding would be granted by the European Parliament. The Task Force's responsibilities were made more specific, and it was made more powerful with the adoption of two documents by the EU: "Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach"[25] and "On the European democracy action plan".[26]

Three areas of combating disinformation were identified: firstly, making the EU's own communication more effective to ensure a better flow of verified and credible information, in particular on EU-Ukraine relations, thus eliminating the potential for reproducing false information; secondly, strengthening free and independent media to guarantee that an accurate image of the world will be shown; thirdly, raising awareness of the disinformation problem – its forms and effects among citizens, political decision-makers and EU institutions, as well as in member states and countries affiliated with the EU.[27]

Major responsibilities of the Task Force include media monitoring – both traditional and social media – to track and counteract Russian disinformation. The group monitors media in all member states. Due to this, coordination of its activities with relevant national intelligence services is required. The group analyses reported content

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[24] "Conclusions of the European Council, 19–20 March 2015", Brussels, *EUCO* 11/15, 20.03.2015, [on-line:] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11-2015-INIT/pl/pdf (12.09.2022).

[25] COM(2018) 236 final, 26.04.2018, pp. 1–20.

[26] COM(2020) 790 final, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions On the European democracy action plan*, Brussels, 3.12.2020, pp. 1–31.

[27] "'Przeciwstawianie się trwającym kampaniom dezinformacyjnym prowadzonym przez Rosję': Historia EUvsDisinfo", *EUvsDisinfo*, 20.04.2020, [on-line:] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pl/przeciwstawianie-sie-trwajacym-kampaniom-dezinformacyjnym-prowadzonym-przez-rosje-historia-euvsdisinfo/ (12.09.2022).

to prepare guidelines for interested entities on which content presents a potential threat. Education is an important part of the Task Force's responsibilities to ensure that various groups – citizens, media or political decision-makers can independently make a credible judgment as to the veracity of the information they obtain. These tasks are implemented as part of the EUvsDisinfo project.[28]

The project involves an ongoing analysis of media in 15 languages. The objective is to expose content republished in European media from Russian pro-Kremlin outlets. The geographical scope of the analysis also includes the Eastern Partnership, West Balkans and EU's Southern neighbourhood because they are a particular target for disinformation activity and attempts at interfering with political life, which may – in turn – lead to a destabilisation of the EU's closest neighbours. EUvsDisinfo's activities – focused on monitoring the situation in these countries – are, therefore, of key importance for European security.

EUvsDisinfo is an open platform, meaning that any interested entity may use the information found on it. It includes a database of over 12,000 examples of disinformation content, which is updated on an ongoing basis. It's worth noting that information gathered in the database is developed to identify main threats and their evolution to facilitate defence against such content. Although disinformation content concerning Ukraine has been the project's main focus since 2015, Russian propaganda – as already noted earlier in the paper – uses various topics to destabilise the EU and its member states. Due to this, the themes tackled by the platform focus on several issues: Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, elections, climate change, conspiracy theories and other content.[29]

The threat posed by Chinese disinformation has also been noted, and content originating from this country that is potentially detrimental to public life in the EU is also subject to analysis. The actions of StratCom have met with much praise, both from European and foreign decision-makers and experts. The methodology of analysis of disinformation and real contribution to counteracting this phenomenon has been recognised.[30] However, this does not mean that no criticism has been forthcoming. Some of the criticism has been levelled not against the unit itself, but on the method

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[28] Website *EUvsDiSiNFO*, [on-line:] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ (23.09.2022).

[29] "'Przeciwstawianie się trwającym kampaniom…"

[30] See: T. Glavin, "How Russia's Attack on Freeland Got Traction in Canada", *McLeans*, 14.03.2017, [on-line:] https://www.macleans.ca/politics/how-russias-attack-on-freeland-got-traction-in-canada/ (23.09.2022); M. Scott, M. Eddy, "Europe Combats a New Foe of Political Stability: Fake News", *The New York Times*, 20.02.2017 [on-line:] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/world/europe/europe-combats-a-new-foe-of-political-stability-fake-news.html (23.09.2022).

of its organisation – which lies with the competencies of EU institutions and member states. In the opinion of those critical of the Task Force, while its overall impact has been positive, adequate funding for the initiative that would enable it to reach its full potential has not been secured.[31] This, however, has been gradually changing. In 2018, thanks to funds provided by the European Parliament, StratCom's budget was €1.1m. The budget was gradually increased in the following years to €3m in 2019 and €4m in 2020. In 2021, it reached a record level of €11.1m.[32]

As already noted, the EU itself is not competent to adopt binding acts of law to regulate issues related to the systemic fight against disinformation due to the division of competencies between the EU and its member states as laid down in treaties. Due to this, the EU's actions in this area are of a supporting and coordinating nature. Acting according to treaties and within its competencies, the EU cooperated with member states to identify threats related to escalating disinformation – originating primarily in Russia, but with an increasing contribution from China – and has taken actions aimed primarily at supporting services in member states responsible for ensuring security and maintaining public order. Creating the East StratCom unit was an important step but has been insufficient given the scale of disinformation attacks. Actions must be taken on the level of member states and coordinated. One of the proposals put forward in this regard is the creation of a network of national StratCom units. In December 2018, the European Council approved a plan to create an early disinformation warning system – the Rapid Alert System (RAS), which was implemented in March of the following year. RAS is an interactive platform that connects national points of contact,[33] tasked with enabling member states to inform each other of disinformation campaigns and share analysis and reports concerning this issue. The platform aims to facilitate the development and implementation of a coordinated response of all member states to identified threats. It is stressed that the tool is meant to help

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[31] M. Apuzzo, "Top EU Diplomat Says Disinformation Report Was Not Watered Down for China", *The New York Times*, 30.05.2020 [on-line:] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/world/europe/coronavirus-china-eu-disinformation.html (23.09.2022).

[32] "Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force", *European External Action Service*, [on-line:] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en (23.09.2022). According to the European Court of Auditors, in 2015-2020, the total EU expenditure on combating disinformation amounted to EUR 50 million, dispersed in various EU programmes and activities. "Dezinformacja w UE – pomimo podejmowanych wysiłków problem pozostaje nierozwiązany", p. 4.

[33] In Poland, it is a special department for strategic communication at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (StratCom), F. Bryjka, "Rozwój unijnych zdolności do zwalczania zagrożeń hybrydowych", *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych*, 1.08.2022, [on-line:] https://pism.pl/publikacje/rozwoj-unijnych-zdolnosci-do-zwalczania-zagrozen-hybrydowych, p. 4 (12.09.2022).

member states save time and money they would otherwise have to spend were they all to individually engage in the constant observation and reacting to disinformation activities. Another benefit is the ability to develop more effective instruments in the fight against disinformation. The mechanism of operation of the platform was made as simple as possible: EU institutions and national points of contact enter data into the system, and EEAS and the European Council analyse and investigate them.[34] The EU also uses other instruments to limit the area of effect of Russian disinformation. As part of its activities related to imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation for its attack on Ukraine, on March 2, 2022, the European Council urgently suspended the broadcasting activities of the Sputnik agency and RT stations (RT English, RT UK, RT Germany, RT France and RT Spanish).[35]

Summary

The three selected examples of Russian disinformation campaigns discussed in the paper – related to Brexit, COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine – clearly show that a politically, socially and economically united and consolidated EU is treated by the Kremlin as an enemy. Due to this, Russia is attempting to destroy this unity which was partially successful in the examples discussed in the paper. In the case of Brexit, as noted in the report of the Committee of the British Parliament, there is no hard data confirming that the disinformation campaign itself affected the results of the referendum, but the existence of close ties, including financial ones, between Russia and leaders of the 'Leave' campaign was confirmed. UK's exit from the European Union was undoubtedly beneficial to Russia as it weakened both the EU and the UK in political and economic terms. The example of the COVID-19 pandemic is different as the main objective of disinformation, in this case, was to create divisions within societies, push conspiracy theories and, as a result, create a threat to the life and health of EU citizens. In addition, Russia attempted to use the crisis caused by the pandemic to achieve political goals. Using so-called "face mask politics", the Kremlin wanted to improve its image and cause sanctions imposed after its annexation of Crimea in

[34] *Rapid Alert System*, Factsheet, March 2019, [on-line:] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ras_factsheet_march_2019_0.pdf (23.09.2022).

[35] "EU Imposes Sanctions on State-owned Outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's Broadcasting in the EU", *European Council and Council of the European Union*, [on-line:] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/ (23.09.2022).

2014 to be lifted. In this case, Russia could not achieve its political goals, even though voices supporting lifting the sanctions could be heard in some countries (e.g., Hungary or Austria). The campaign aimed at besmirching Ukraine's image in the EU is the most difficult to assess as it has been going on the longest. The first phase of the war, which commenced in 2014, resulted in the EU implementing institutionalised action aimed at protecting its citizens, public institutions and media against manipulated information. The development of the StratCom task force and the RAS project, in combination with the Commission's communication specifying priorities in fighting disinformation, have created a foundation on which an effective system can be built to combat Russian disinformation.

The first of the research hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the paper, concerning Russia's disinformation in the EU, has been confirmed. The second and third hypotheses have been partially confirmed: instruments developed so far to fight Russian disinformation have been able to limit its impact but not fully eliminate it, making the EU more resilient to disinformation attacks when compared to other countries with additional actions required to further strengthen institutional and systemic solutions.

A number of conclusions can be made based on the issues discussed: firstly, a strong and united European Union is Russia's rival; secondly, Russia's activities aimed at destabilising the EU will be primarily focused on medium- and small-sized countries where anti-EU sentiment will be encouraged; thirdly, after the elimination of its main communication channels – Sputnik and RT – from the European market, Russia will search for new instruments to influence public opinion in the EU. In summary, only a strong and united EU that avoids internal conflict and is based on democratic values will be able to effectively fight disinformation and protect its member states against Russian influence.

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Information security is one the key aspects of modern security and its importance has been significantly increasing in contemporary international relations. This publication presents the results of studies on several key aspects related to this issue. The publication contains results of research on considerations related to information security and its implementation, as well as research on social media, analysed through the lens of the object and subject of disinformation activities.

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