

European issues
n°665
18th April 2023

European anti-propaganda policies

Marie ROBIN

"Without communication, there can be no terrorism[1]" This observation, made more than ten years ago by Alex P. Schmid and Jenny de Graaf, even before the emergence of the Islamic State, is still very much relevant today. Al Qaeda, Daesh and other armed groups resorting to terrorism have been successful in using information and communication technologies to communicate their cause, recruit and mobilise members, and intimidate target populations, including within the European Union. State actors have also been able to use communicative and narrative weapons to advance their interests in conflict and on the international stage. On 24 February 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was supported by influence, disinformation, and propaganda operations, most of which were anti-European.

As a target population, an object of propaganda and a receptacle of discourse, the European Union (EU) is directly concerned by the propaganda narratives developed by certain state and non-state actors. Defined here, following Edgar Henderson, as "a process which deliberately attempts, through persuasive techniques, to obtain from an audience (propagandee), before it can deliberate freely, the responses desired by the propagandists[2]", propaganda may or may not include falsified elements and fake news (disinformation). It aims to influence and manipulate an opinion to achieve strategic effects in the interest of the propagandist. The European Union, together with the Member States, strives to develop strategies to combat propagandist content and its effects.

I) THE DIAGNOSIS

How does propaganda work in Europe?

The Council of Europe [explicitly states that](#) :

two-thirds of citizens in Europe would say they read or hear fake news at least once a week and 80% of Europeans would consider fake news or propaganda to be a problem for their country and for democracy in general.

Within the European Union, the European Parliament [made a similar observation](#) in March 2022, noting that citizens "are under increasing and systematic pressure to process information, disinformation and misleading information campaigns and propaganda coming from countries and non-state actors, such as transnational terrorist or criminal organisations in its vicinity, which seek to undermine the very notion of objective information or ethical journalism, by disseminating only biased information or information used as a tool for political power, and which also undermine democratic values and interests".

Who is spreading propaganda in the European Union?

On 23 November 2016 in a "[Strategic Communication issued by the Union aiming to counter propaganda directed against it by third parties](#)", the European Parliament drew up an initial diagnosis of propaganda activities directed against the European Union - whose main actors do not seem to have fundamentally changed.

- *Le Kremlin* : the main threat identified when it comes to propaganda in Europe is the Kremlin's anti-European propaganda, seen as a potential risk of "an informational iron curtain". According to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, "In these times of war, words matter. We are witnessing propaganda and disinformation on a massive scale about this outrageous attack on a free and independent

[1] Schmid Alex P. and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication*, Sage, 1982, p. 140, 170

[2] Henderson, Edgar, "Toward a definition of propaganda", *Journal of Social Psychology*, 18, 1943, pp. 71-87, p. 83.

country. We will not let the Kremlin's defenders spread their toxic lies to justify Putin's war, we will not let them sow the seeds of division in our Union". Likewise, [High Representative Josep Borrell](#) believes that "the systematic manipulation of information and disinformation by the Kremlin is used as an operational tool in its aggression against Ukraine. They also pose a significant and direct threat to public order and security in the EU". The Kremlin uses propaganda narratives and weapons to justify its war on Ukraine while spreading potentially destabilising anti-European narratives.

- *China*: Beijing is also seen as a propaganda channel targeting the EU. Deemed particularly active during the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), Chinese propaganda is mainly denounced as a relay and supporter of the Kremlin within the Union.

- *Jihadist terrorism*: That the main propaganda threat identified comes from a state is a relatively new development for the Union in the 21st century. Since the turn of the century, the main propaganda concerns have tended to be directed towards non-state armed groups, so-called terrorists, of which Al Qaeda and Daesh were the main exponents. Since 2011, [according to the Council](#), between 4000 and 5000 EU citizens have travelled or attempted to travel to conflict zones (Iraq and Syria). In the early 2000s, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, had made the [fight](#) against radicalisation the spearhead of his mandate, urging Member States and EU institutions to combat propaganda that might encourage their citizens to join armed terrorist groups[3]. In addition to the analysis of the narratives disseminated by these groups, there was also an [approach](#) focused on the distribution networks of this content (online or offline) within the European Union. In this context the social networks, the *dark web*, as well as various encrypted messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram) were scrutinised for the logistical and propaganda opportunities they could offer to terrorist groups seeking to recruit and operate in Europe, which the EU has sought to counter.

Armed jihadist groups using terrorism were, and to some extents, still are successful in disseminating anti-democratic rhetoric glorifying terrorism.

- *The far right*: An additional danger in relation to attempts at radicalisation and propaganda comes from certain extreme right-wing groupings, belonging to the supremacist, neo-Nazi and/or conspiracy movements, often inspired by the QAnon movements in the US. In France, Germany and many Member States, governments are gradually becoming aware of the dangers posed by groups promoting these ideologies, and are attempting to [prohibit gatherings or their existence even](#).

Within the European Union, some work and projects are beginning to address the dangers posed by hate speech and violent right-wing extremism (anti-immigration, anti-feminism, conspiracy, anti-Semitism, anti-elite)[4], mainly driven, for the time being, by the experts of the *Radicalization Awareness Network* (RAN).

Far-right groups are increasingly the spread of anti-democratic content, aiming to destabilise European cohesion and promote strict visions of borders, which differ greatly from the supranational project.

II) COUNTERMEASURE POLICIES

Given this diagnosis, how can propaganda which intended to destabilise the European Union or its Member States be countered, whether terrorist or not? The challenge is to combat this potentially dangerous content for the security of Europe, the Member States and its citizens, while guaranteeing certain founding principles: media freedom, access to information, freedom of expression and media pluralism. The European Union's action against propaganda can be split into three parts: identifying, removing and countering (but not counter-propaganda).

A) Identifying and knowing

To combat propaganda, it is necessary to be able to grasp, understand and analyse it. To this end, the

[3] Bonelli Laurent, Francesco Ragazzi, "La lutte contre la 'radicalisation'. Genèse et expansion d'un nouveau lieu commun administratif en France et dans l'Union européenne", Archives de politique criminelle, 2019.

[4] Farinelli Francesco, Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism - Insights and recommendations for P/ CV, Radicalization Awareness Network -European Commission, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/ran_conspiracy_theories_and_right-wing_2021_en.pdf

European Union has sought to act as a "coordination forum" between Member States, promoting the sharing of information and the exchange of best practices, while developing, at the supranational level, research and intelligence initiatives aimed at capturing such content. In 2015, Europol created a special unit ([EU IRU](#)) designed to specifically combat terrorist propaganda on the Internet. The unit's objective is to "detect content promoting terrorism and violent extremism online". In addition to its intelligence objectives, it issues annual reports, such as the "[Online Jihadist Propaganda – Year in Review](#)", which takes stock of the narratives disseminated (in this case by jihadist actors) and the actors and networks involved in disseminating them.

In a similar vein, the European Parliament also encourages Member States and European institutions to promote and fund research by think-tanks and academics on these issues. In its 2016 Resolution, it calls on each Member State "to investigate and effectively combat the underlying socio-demographic causes of vulnerability to radicalisation".

B) Removing

Beyond the mere knowledge and detection of propaganda content, the EU Council [hopes that the](#) "EU will strive to prevent terrorists from using the internet for radicalisation, recruitment and incitement to violence". How to prevent such use and dissemination? Firstly, by removing the content concerned as quickly as possible. Then by establishing temporary bans on dissemination.

With the adoption of [regulation dated 29 April 2021](#) the EU aimed to compel Internet platforms and providers operating in the Union by giving them one hour, after an injunction by the competent authorities in the Member States, to remove terrorist content from their platform "or to block access to it in all Member States". The strength of this rule is that it applies to any provider operating in one or more EU Member States. It is not necessary for the headquarters of the platform to be located in the

EU. The regulation covers all content that "*incites or contributes to the commission of terrorist acts; gives instructions on how to commit such acts; solicits participation in terrorist groups*". The EU's intention is explicitly formulated: through these rapid deletion injunctions, it hopes to avoid the virality of certain offensive content on the networks, as was seen in March 2019 in New Zealand, when the perpetrator of the [Christchurch attacks](#) broadcast his crime live on Facebook, or in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine in October 2020, when photos of Samuel Paty's body were widely circulated on Twitter.

What about propaganda content that does not call for terrorism? What about non-terrorist propaganda content?

In response to the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on 24 February 2022, which from the beginning was marked by propaganda and disinformation activities, the European institutions decided, quite decisively, to [suspend the broadcast of some Russian media](#) in the Member States. The aim in this case was to prevent the broadcasting of propaganda content by channels such as RT or Sputnik, even before it occurred. The decision was challenged by the Russian channel RT France, which referred the matter to the [General Court of the European Union](#), where its request for reinstatement was rejected on 27 July 2022. For the court, "*since propaganda and disinformation campaigns are likely to undermine the foundations of democratic societies and are an integral part of the arsenal of modern warfare, the restrictive measures at issue also fall within the framework of the Union's pursuit of the objectives assigned to it*". Such a ban, the court says, does not therefore contravene the fundamental principle of media freedom since: "*the applicant was temporarily banned from broadcasting content as a media outlet under the permanent direct or indirect control of the Russian Federation's leadership, for having carried out propaganda aimed, in particular, at justifying and supporting the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine.*"

In this context, and wishing to go further, the [European Parliament](#) recommended, in March 2022,

three types of measures to truly "prevent" the dissemination of propaganda in the European Union: Delete content in a rapid timeframe to avoid virality; Ban media outlets that disseminate propaganda; Prevent the recruitment by foreign propagandist actors of influential relays within the EU that can disseminate such narratives in the Member States and find an echo there.

For example, European universities were asked to reconsider their cooperation with Confucius Institutes, identified as sometimes acting as Chinese lobbying platforms.

The European Parliament Research Service also published a study about [preventing radicalisation in the EU](#) in November 2022.

C) Countering?

But deleting content alone is not enough in the fight against propaganda in the European Union. Firstly, because not all content can always be removed. Secondly, even when deleted within an hour, some content can still be seen by thousands/millions of people. Furthermore, the continuous adaptation of technology and social media allows the creators of propaganda to constantly innovate on new platforms with less stringent bans and filters ([from Facebook to Twitter and Telegram](#)). Once propaganda is seen, how can its influence be countered?

Does the European Union have a role to play here? The European approach to countering propaganda is dual. On the one hand, it refuses to engage in counter-propaganda[5], refusing to give in to the logics of strategic narratives as employed by those it fights, preferring instead to debunk them. On the other hand, it wishes to promote moderate voices and alternative narratives that can present the European Union in a positive light.

- "Debunking disinformation."

Already in 2015, aware of the manipulation of information emanating from Russia, the European Union created the [Strategic Communication Task](#)

[Force in the eastern neighbourhood](#) (*East StratCom Task Force*) within the European External Action Service (EEAS). It disseminates its work on its website [EUvsDisinfo](#) to "explain and expose disinformation stories and raise awareness of the negative impact of disinformation from pro-Kremlin sources." The website slogan "Don't be deceived. Question even more" is a clear reference to RT's slogan and provides analysis and reports on the strategies used by the Kremlin to impose its rhetoric in the European Union. On Twitter, its account [@EUvsDisinfo](#) is followed by over 72,500 people. The Task Force aims to expose the lies, information manipulation and other biased interpretations disseminated by pro-Kremlin actors about the European Union and beyond, which also seek to destabilise the European project. The propaganda must be identified and deconstructed.

- Refusal to engage in counter-propaganda

The European Union therefore wants to show what is fake and expose the lies put forward in the propaganda narratives. However, it explicitly refuses to engage in counter-propaganda. For the European Parliament, "it is counterproductive to fight propaganda with propaganda". The only way to fight would be to act "by refuting disinformation campaigns and by disseminating positive information and messages" about democratic values and public policies proposed by the European Union. Thus, [one of the objectives of the task force](#) is to "develop communication products and campaigns aimed at better explaining EU values, interests and policies in the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine)". Similarly, the Parliament "calls on Member States to develop coordinated strategic communication mechanisms to support the attribution of sources and to combat disinformation and propaganda in order to expose hybrid threats" against Russian anti-European propaganda. A few Member States are spearheading this alternative discourse approach: the Baltic States, especially in relation to Russian propaganda, the Scandinavian countries, the Central European countries and, before leaving the EU, the United Kingdom.

[5] Jeangène Vilmer Jean-Baptiste, "La lutte contre la désinformation russe : contrer la propagande sans faire de contre-propagande ?" Revue Défense Nationale, 6:801, 2017, pp. 93-105.

Terrorist propaganda linked to jihadism or neo-Nazi movements also lends itself to this type of approach promoting moderate, pro-EU voices. As part of its fight against the Islamic State, the European Parliament “calls on the Union and its Member States to develop a counter-discourse to ISIL/Daesh, involving the education system and strengthening the position and visibility of moderate Muslim scholars who have sufficient credibility to de-legitimise ISIL/Daesh propaganda”.

- Training

To improve the fight against biased or erroneous information conveyed by propaganda or disinformation, the European Union intends not only to deconstruct the manipulation of information and promote a positive vision of Europe by promoting more moderate voices, but also to train citizens to resist internally the attempts of biased and erroneous discourse. In this context, it is crucial, according to the Union, to promote good quality journalism: the task force is thus working to “strengthen the overall media environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries and in the Member States, including support for media freedom and the strengthening of independent media” and those which are deemed rigorous, including in-house. The EU intends to empower and involve civil society more. This is, for example, the stated aim of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which was formed in 2015 and brings together more than 6,000 professionals from all over Europe for an exchange of best practices between police officers, social workers, victims of terrorism, prison officers, researchers, etc. Within the RAN the “[Communication and Narratives \(RAN C&N\)](#)” section focuses in particular on producing alternative communications to counter extremist propaganda.

In line with this and in conjunction with the work of the Eastern Neighbourhood Task Force, in 2018 the Commission published a [code of good practice against disinformation](#) that was updated in 2022, and an [action plan against disinformation](#), to train citizens, journalists and policy makers in

fact-checking and other practices to deconstruct disinformation. In December 2020, the Commission proposed an [action plan for European democracy](#) designed to protect the freedom of the media, particularly during elections.

III- THE CHALLENGES AND ISSUES INVOLVED

Given this diagnosis, do the measures implemented by the European Union seem adequate and what are the potential challenges? Two issues appear relevant here.

Dual responsibility

In all of its statements regarding the fight against propaganda, whether terrorist or not, the European Union insists on the complementarity between its actions and those of the Member States in this area. The Council recalls that “*Member States have the primary responsibility for fighting crime and safeguarding security*”. The European institutions also recognise “*a common responsibility*”, making the European Union the “*main forum for cooperation and coordination between Member States*”, including in the field of terrorism. In accordance with the principles of the Treaties, the Member States and the EU institutions therefore are working in a joint and complementary manner to combat propaganda and biased, erroneous and misleading information.

This duality, which is commendable in principle, since it aims to involve as many actors as possible in a matter that concerns them all, can nevertheless prove to be an obstacle on certain occasions and lead to potential contradictory injunctions.

Thus, in the mid-2000s, while the European Union made the fight against terrorist radicalisation and, therefore, against propaganda narratives its priority, in France, the fight against terrorism adopted a more repressive and security-oriented approach, not focused on preventing terrorism, but rather on detecting and neutralizing it. Two potentially contradictory approaches that can potentially dissipate means, but also responsibilities

6

according to the well-known adage: "*if everyone is responsible, then maybe in the end no one is*".

Is the Union's discourse on democracy difficult to convey?

In the face of terrorist propaganda and Kremlin disinformation, the European Union is choosing to promote a positive discourse, a way of underlining the benefits of its policies, its respect for democratic values, and its principles related to the rule of law. This is not without obstacles in a context of rising populism in several Member States where the fundamentally democratic character of the Union is being questioned. While some actors accuse the European Union of technocracy or Brussels-made decision-making, it is up to the institutions,

if they wish to be an effective counterweight to anti-European propaganda, to make the way they operate, and the measures they adopt, accessible and comprehensible to citizens. Tautologically speaking, countering the anti-European discourse put forward by state and non-state actors inside and outside the European Union may be achieved first and foremost by strengthening the European project, cohesion between its Member States and its accessibility to all Europeans.

Marie Robin

Postdoctoral researcher at the Thucydide Centre
(Paris Panthéon Assas University)
Associate researcher, Center for War Studies
(University of Southern Denmark)

You can read all of our publications on our site :
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France , Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.