The European Union versus External Disinformation Campaigns in the Midst of Information Warfare – Will the EU Win the Battle?

Mélanie SCHEIDT (FR) – Prof. SCHELHASE

Abstract

As a result of increased globalisation and digitalisation, new security challenges emerge such as the rise of online disinformation, which undermines democracy and people's trust in mainstream media and public authorities. The 2016 US elections, the Brexit referendum, and the 2017 French elections have all been disturbed by external interferences coming from Russia, including massive disinformation campaigns which were disseminated on social media to influence citizens' opinion. This thesis will focus on Russian disinformation and will highlight the tools and technics it uses to create and spread disinformation through the specific case of the 'Macron Leaks'. With the perspective of the European elections in May 2019, the European Union (EU) has been extremely worried about having a similar scenario threatening the ballot. Therefore, the Union decided to act rapidly to fight against disinformation campaigns. This research studies the EU's strategy to counter external disinformation campaigns in cyberspace, i.e. the campaigns that are diffused online by foreign actors, such as Russia, within the EU's territory.

The EU has adopted a defensive strategy to deal with disinformation. It has delivered several strategic documents, including an Action Plan in December 2018 that provides a promising basis for action. The work done by the East StratCom Task Force, which detects and debunks Russian narratives, is a strong asset for the EU. The major online platforms are currently trying to implement a Code of Practice that the European Commission set up with the aim of taming disinformation spreading on social networks. Having a long-term perspective in mind, the EU rightly implements measures to enhance societal resilience and improve media literacy among its citizens. However, the financial resources dedicated to counter disinformation are not commensurate with the threat it represents. Furthermore, the EU's approach is not focusing enough on artificial intelligence tools that can significantly influence how disinformation is done and disseminated but can on the other hand also help fact-checking activities. Moreover, this thesis argues that disinformation should be looked at in the wider framework of hybrid warfare and should therefore be considered as a cybersecurity matter.