HOW THE FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION IMPACT NATIONAL SECURITY. CASE STUDY FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: As defense planning evolves and main defense planning documents are developed on the basis of emerging and new threats, the role of Media on both the internal and external environment rises. Innovative technology has meant the creation of social media, which in itself has become a distributer of shared information. This unprecedented flow of information has created an environment where real news and fake news are very difficult to tell apart. For security decision makers these is problematic as social pressure has to be mitigated if certain decisions necessary for achieving security goals and objectives are contested because of the spread of fake news. It is the aim of this paper to analyze by using the descriptive method how fake news have contributed to the impeding/ the implementation of decisions and assuring security measure in times of crisis. The case study that will be presented in the paper is that of the Covid-19 Pandemic and how measures to fight the pandemic have been affected by the spread of fake news. In the second part of the paper we will address means and ways by which the negative impact that media has on security and defense measures can be reduced and mitigated.

Keywords: fake-news, social media, decision making, national security, misinformation, disinformation

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since 2017 when the Collins Dictionary added the word fake news to the vocabulary the spread of this phenomenon has increased affecting countries and international organization. Fake news have been described by specialists (Zimbars, 2020) as

> purposefully crafted, sensational, emotionally charged, misleading or totally fabricated information that mimics the form of mainstream news.

On the other hand to important terms that help the spread of fake news are those of misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation represents "false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead" while disinformation can be defined as "deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda." (*Dictionary.com*, 2022).

Inside the European Union, starting with 2018, the European Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society Mariya Gabriel considers that

> fake news is suppressing the media and society as a whole, calling for an EU-level analysis in order to assess the amount to which fake news menaces the EU and pinpoint whether it is likely to find a common solution regarding this issue. (Gergana & Belova, 2018).

The Covid-19 Pandemic that has developed since the beginning of the December 2019 in China from where it spread to the European continent as early as February 2020. The effects of the pandemic have not only impacted the medical area, but the economic, geo-political and security areas as well.

2. THE SPREAD OF FACKE NEWS INSIDE EU BORDERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Pandemic brought about an increase in spreading fake news at an unprecedented level, especially after the vaccination process started worldwide. A study conducted in Europe (Klug, 2022) shows that inside the EU and Germany one out of three Germans cannot differentiate between real news and fake news

Fake news have therefore penetrated all social categories, regardless of their degree of education, income and so forth. The development of social media and online interconnections has enhanced this phenomenon. The lack of fact checking has led to many people being misinformed and acting irrationally because of the negative information that is usually presented in fake news.

One of the aims of this paper has been to collect by using the descriptive method a series of fake news that have impacted the European society and have created negative reactions in more than just one EU member state.

One such piece of news has been that vaccines cause infertility. The fake study distributed using social media and that some anti-vax politicians have used in their public speeches as well declared that antibodies formed after vaccination will not attach only to the spike protein of the Coronavirus but also to a similar protein called syncytin-1, which plays a role in the development of babies inside the uterus. Several responses from medical specialists were required to shut down the rumor, but the effects were already there, as the anti-vax protesters complained in many of the nationwide protests of 2021 that have covered Europe that the risk of infertility for those who get vaccinated still remains.

Another largely spread theory has been that the ARN vaccines from Moderna and BioNTech Pfizer modify the human DNA. This fake news that scientists had again to disprove has been one of the earliest that penetrated social media ever since the vaccines first appeared at the end of 2020. Even though experts have shown that ARN does not enter the nucleus of cells where it could potentially modify DNA, the fast spreading of this news, the fact that ARN and DNA sound similar has confused and triggered a great number of people living inside the European Union Borders.

More recently, other fake news rolled in the public opinion has been that the Delta version of Covid-19 or even the Omicron version have actually been triggered by vaccines themselves and therefore only vaccinated people would get these new versions of Coronavirus. This then became an argument for the anti-vax community to once again reject vaccination. Scientists have come with studies that claim that all these allegations are false and on the contrary those who are not vaccinated contribute to the incubation of the virus and the creation of new versions of Covid-19.

Fake news have been also used to attack individuals like political figures or medical staff. One such example is the allegation that Ugur Sahin, founder of BioNTech has not vaccinated himself and is afraid of the potential effects that the vaccine might bring. The video streaming platform YouTube was used for the spread of an online video in 2021 that shown an interview with Ugur Sahin that mentioned he was not vaccinated. However, that video was actually older than a year, and by that time, in 2020, the BioNTech founder could not have vaccinated himself as vaccines were not available at that

particular moment. After the vaccine became available and Ugur Sahin vaccinated himself, the rumors were eventually shot down even though the effects they produced in terms in mistrust in the vaccinated process had already been produced. Other fake videos suggested that political figures did not actually vaccinate themselves but instead used fake needles to mimic an actual vaccination. All of this rumors had to be shut down individually and with little or late effect on the public opinion that had already formed an impression on the matter.

Throughout the pandemic another means for misinformation has been not just to track the potential negative effects that vaccines might develop but to also spread fake cures and remedies that might cure the virus without the use of typical Coronavirus vaccination. Several such fake cures and remedies have been presented in 2021 in most European countries. In Fig.1 we present a list of these so called alternative solutions and how they were distributed in some of Europe's countries with the largest population including Germany, Italy, France, Spain and the United Kingdom.
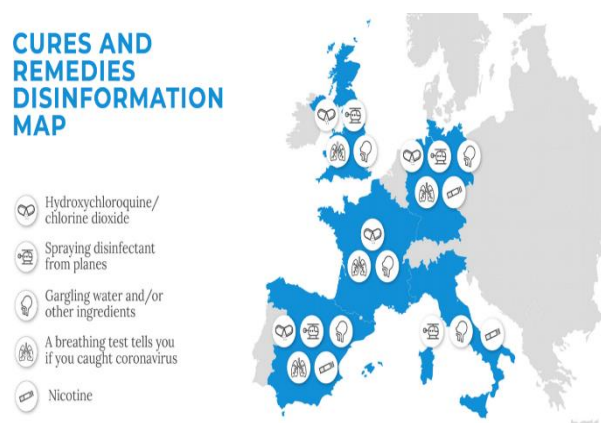

Fig. 1 Disinformation Map in Western Europe
Source: https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/why-do-people-share-misinformation-about-covid-19-partly-because-theyre-distracted/

As we can see from Fig.1 several fake cures have been presented in Europe from the hydroxychloroquine medicine that specialists have established has no effects on treating the Coronavirus infection from gargling water, from the fake fact that nicotine users, smokers, are less likely to get the virus, to the fact that there are planes in the skies spraying disinfectant and simple breading tests can determine whether you have Coronavirus or not.

All of these fake negative effects of fake solution in dealing with the virus have made it difficult for authorities to actually manage the pandemic as increasing percentages of the population became

reluctant to respecting the rules that countries sought to implement during the pandemic or they didn't comply to getting vaccinated and thus ending the pandemic earlier.

In the following chapter we aim to present the means by which the European Union has tried to answer to these increase of fake news, an increase that affected not just the medical management of the Coronavirus situation but would also have negative effects concerning the economic specter and the international security one.

3. MEANS TO MITIGATE DISINFORMATION

Because of misinformation, in 2021 a special commission inside the European Parliament was created with the purpose of trying to identify and combat informational cybernetic attacks that would take the shape of fake news. This idea started to develop in spring of 2021 when Vice-president Vera Jourova of the European Commission had already signaled that Europe had been flooded with campaigns of fake news regarding the pandemic (European Commission, 2020). The European Union came to understanding that these campaigns represent more than just an attack on the healthcare domain but rather they represent a way of increasing mistrust in countries governments, national and international institutions, and thus they could represent a threat on the security of the European Continent.

In explaining why the need for a commission that could counter fake news is needed, the EU gave the example of Germany, a country where because of fake news regarding the vaccine, the willingness for vaccination as a percentage dropped in just one month with almost 20%.

The foreign representative for External Policies Josep Borrel came to the conclusion (Trullols, 2020) that fake news during the pandemic has the potential to take away human lives as for those unvaccinated the risk for death is much higher than for those who get the vaccine shot.

One conspiracy theory was considered a direct threat on the Integrity of the EU as this particular fake news claimed that Microsoft founder, Bill Gates has planned together with EU leading officials to vaccinate the entire population of the European Union in order to monitor people through chips installed through the vaccination. Therefore the EU would make vaccination mandatory, which of course has not been the case.

Fighting the spread of fake news has been a slow process as in 2020 as it can be seen in Fig.2, just two

EU member states blocked by their internal laws the spread of fake news by deciding to close those online sites that were considered guilty of constant misinformation. Those two countries were Romania and Hungary.

Fig. 2 Countries that have passed fake news laws. Source:https://www.economist.com/international/2021/02/11/censorious-governments-are-abusing-fake-news-laws

The EU has long been under the impression that fake news and the spread of alarming conspiracy theories are not random and are actually well directed by other countries especially Russia and China, with the aim of decreasing the stability and strength of the European Union. The commission on fake news is a first step that the EU is establishing in this matter, as though there have been many attempts by now, so far, legally the European Union has no acted in developing an actual legal framework for countering misinformation.

The aim of the new commission will be to identify what are some of the key areas and domains where fake news are mostly spread in order to then be able to mitigate the effects. One key area that is considered of vital importance and that has been under the impact of misinformation even before the pandemic, during European elections and will be under impact after the pandemic will end, the Russian war on Ukraine being a clear example, is the domain of security, both national for EU member states but also international around the European Borders.

It is therefore the aim of this paper to present in the following chapter the means by which fake news affect security and what are some of the ways ahead in stopping misinformation from impacting the European Union.

4. FAKE NEWS AND SECURITY

Since misinformation represents a form of hybrid warfare and is perpetuated through cyber-attacks on social online platforms it can be considered that

spreading fake news has a clear impact on security. The way through which the EU can counter the impact on security when it comes to cyber threats is by partnering up with online social platform.

Some of the EU's biggest partners in this area are Facebook, Twitter and Google. The EU is looking at way that would make it mandatory for these platforms to better intervene and monitor even closely the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theory and to accept access of EU's own specialists to some of the stocked data that these online companies detain. Vice president of the European Commission, Vera Jurova considers that there is still a long road ahead for the collaboration between the EU and online platforms, as there is a lack of transparency and responsibility when it comes to the information that is publically distributed by the use of these platforms (Chee, 2020).

During the pandemic the collaboration has met some positive results, and the newly organized commission inside the EU Parliament is slowly starting to do its jobs. As such, it has become easier to fact check information, fake news content is much easily being taken out, and Facebook and Instagram have direct links to the WHO, while red flags appear on information that is distributed regarding the virus without being checked beforehand. One example of fake material being taken out of the online social media has been that of coronavirus medicine with exaggerated market prices. Some specialists consider that these measures are not yet enough to control the spread of fake news and increase security inside the EU when answering to this threat. Regulations are still not mandatory for online platforms, while the European Commission can only just rely on the well intent of these social online media providers (Claesson, 2019).

On the other hand it is clear that it is not easy to balance a fact checking device and differentiate between real and fake news. In other news the path to actually signaling which information is true and which it is not, is not a straightforward one. The line between mitigating misinformation and censorship must not be crossed in mitigating these risks, even if they can represent a threat to the EU's security.

One aspect to also take into consideration is which are the actors involved in spreading disinformation. As such the first category of fake news distributers are the so called external actors. They use fake news as medium for organized disinformation campaigns. These external actors can be state and non-state actors that by proxy represent those states agenda. When speaking about the Covid-19 Pandemic, Russian and Chinese agencies can be given as such as examples. The Russian official sites like Russia Today and Sputnik have uses throughout the European Continent to spread lies, fear and disinformation by the means of fake news in order to reduce the trust of citizens in state authority when it came to implement measures for managing the pandemic and increasing the process of vaccination.

Besides external actors, there is a second category of internal actors that can also be state and non-state actors. In the case of the Covid-19 Pandemic we have seen the rise of political parties with an anti-vaccination agenda as well as NGOs that share the same agenda and actions towards building a rhetoric that is centered around conspiracy theories regarding the state's role in diminishing civil rights, taking control and reducing citizen liberties through the actual means of combating the pandemic. All of the false claims that have presented in these fake news have since been proven false, as the reduction in Covid-19 cases at the beginning of 2022 has led to the lift of almost all pandemic restrictions inside the EU and all rights and liberties are protected for EU citizens regardless of their status of being vaccinated or not.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

The fight against fake news seems to take a more advanced step as the European Union Resilience plan is being developed. This resilience plan calls on member states to intensify proactive and objective communications to provide positive counter-narratives to disinformation campaigns. (Claesson, 2019). It is our opinion that besides pre-emptive measures the management of crisis situation should also include reactive measures in countering disinformation and fake news.

An example of a need for legal framework that could enable reactive measures is the ongoing situation with the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. The EU has taken down all Russian propaganda sites like including sputnik and Russia Today. However without a clear legal framework, the action in itself has triggered an aggressive response from Russian representatives who claim that the closures of these propaganda sites on EU territory is no less than censorship.

The disinformation developed during the pandemic can therefore serve as a lessons learned manual on how to better understand the origins, the means of spread and ultimately the best legal way of managing and countering fake news as their effects have an impact on national security, international security inside the EU while taking a toll on both the economic and political fields as well.

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