

The battle against Information Disorder is fought on the ground

The second day of the Information Disorder During a War Infodemic forum dealt with misinformation as it appears in journalism and the media sphere and more importantly, with the possible answers to the problem.

Back in 2008, when the war between Russia and Georgia was raging over the secession of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the latter, Greek investigative journalist Tasos Telloglou was on the ground. In order to reach the city of Tskhinvali, he and his crew had to cross a 200-km long tunnel by bus which began from the city of Vladikavkaz in the region of North Ossetia in Russia and led through the dark to its Southern counterpart. It was this exact tunnel that Georgia had neglected to barricade, allowing the Russian forces to use it as a passage into South Ossetia and raze Tskhinvali to the ground. “When we reached the city, it was already rubble. It had become a parking lot”, Mr. Telloglou remembers.

Reaching this no-man’s land that now lacked basic infrastructure like electricity and water, they found it difficult to transmit their stories to the rest of the world. And while in the modern world this would be cause for alarm, Mr. Telloglou and his crew saw it as an advantage. “We had this magic slowing down of time in the former Soviet Union” he says. “We needed time”.

This story was what launched the second day of the Information Disorder During a War Infodemic forum. For Tasos Telloglou, one of Greece’s most experienced and well-known investigative journalists, it wasn’t simply a recollection of another war, but rather a condensed metaphor for all the difficulties a journalist and their audience are faced with when trying to uncover the truth at the heart of a conflict.

The biggest difficulty lies in that one cannot change sides during a war. “You pick a side and you stay there until the end” as Mr. Telloglou puts it. “It’s impossible to get to the other side and even if you could, they will not accept you”.

The previous day that had launched the forum had been mostly dedicated to propaganda networks acting in the shadows. The activities that Mr. Telloglou referred to, belonged to another world of distributing information, which appears much less malicious but is confined within its own limitations. His description of war time reporting was similar to a game of chess: sides are clearly defined and opposed, moves are predetermined and often actors will act as pawns in the broader strategy of the player that controls the side they belong to. State officials on either side of a conflict that a journalist reaches out to for facts and figures will twist this information to serve their own goals and a journalist reporting from the field might have the option to upset and drop a source, but not all of them. After all, as he put it at the end of his speech, “remember you are always a foreigner”.

From the very start, the second day of the forum made it clear it would not refrain from touching upon difficult subjects, where there might not be a clearly marked enemy, but rather objective and immovable limits or long-term tendencies that are now showing their consequences. Tasos Teloglou spoke extensively about the objective limits of wartime reporting. And then, political scientist Ioannis Papageorgiou, Associate Professor at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki went into what Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revealed about Europe.

Dr. Papageorgiou noted how the war in Ukraine was an unexpected shock for Europeans. Having built an alliance on the idea that trade would lead to collaboration and therefore peace, it was absurd for European leaders that Russia would go against its own interests and breach the standard of international cooperation. For the European Union and its officials, it therefore acted as a wake-up call that would lead them to realize and even question some aspects of the views that guided European integration.

The invasion of Ukraine showed that the West's global influence and ability to dictate policy had withered and that dependency, as a core idea of countries banding together leaves them vulnerable and exposed to outside pressures. This is the case with the looming energy crisis across Europe that has led to immense problems in the national economies of member-states, as raw materials and energy sources are imported from countries that do not share the ideals that made these countries come together under the European Union. It is also true of Europe's defense capacity which is entirely reliant on the United States.

As urgent and pressing as these problems are, they remain problems of policy; but Dr. Papageorgiou's view of the effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Europe also extends to the European Union's deeper identity crisis. Europe has not shared a common enemy ever again. For each member-state, the opponent is different – if such an opponent exists at all. This implies a lack of an integrated European foreign policy, which stems from a lack of common European "national" interests and is the main prerequisite for putting together a joint European defense strategy.

Now that the fallout from the invasion of Ukraine is leading to a deterioration of living standards in the EU, it is the quality of life that European integration offered which might lead to problems. "Europeans since the 1960s have been living in an incremental prosperity", according to Dr. Papageorgiou, "and now realize that this is not a given".

The former generations lived through an upward social mobility that in recent years has been backtracking and for Dr. Papageorgiou this has led to a corrosion of faith in democratic institutions. "Young people do not see the benefits of democracy. They go to vote and their quality of life continues to deteriorate. As a result, the defense of democratic values and liberal democracy is weakening".

Therefore, for Dr. Papageorgiou the road ahead is challenging and could lead to the backtracking of European integration or even inspire authoritarian solutions. In any case, it has brought Europe's latent problems to the fore.

Such a shock to the fabric of a society makes it fertile ground for propaganda to manipulate public opinion. This is the story that Aleksandr Shmelev, the editor-in-chief of Sapere Aude, has located in the background of the war between Russia and Ukraine.

What makes this war different from other similar conflicts like those between Armenia and Azerbaijan or Serbia and Croatia according to Mr. Shmelev is that even after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the vast majority of people in the two countries held a positive view of the other. Polls were showing that more than 75% of Russians held a favorable attitude towards Ukrainians and vice versa. By 2022 when Russia would officially invade and attack Ukraine, these numbers were now far gone.

This shift in Russian public opinion is the result of an 8-year-long strategy of persistent and diffuse state-sponsored anti-Ukrainian propaganda. It began with acquiring a direct or indirect monopoly control over all traditional media in Russia, which was completed following the invasion in Ukraine as all small newspapers and radio stations that were not subject to the Kremlin's line were closed and voicing an opposition to the war either through op-eds or broadcast commentary became a felony.

Following the seizing of media, public funds were directed *en masse* towards them. 1,4 billion dollars annually are being funneled towards Russian state propaganda through the media, when the budget of major outlets that do not answer to the Kremlin only amounted to a tiny fraction of that. These funds allowed Russian state propaganda to have an advantage on image quality and size of content, which according to Mr. Shmelev is quite important: Soviet television of his childhood years was "boring and poor", something which makes the glossy cover and unstoppable flow of content of these propaganda outlets all the more alluring to viewers that have not been accustomed to it. Budgets of this size even allowed paying for blockbusters at the time of their release to be broadcast on TV in order to attract audiences – who would then sit through the 'breaking news' segments that interrupted the film.

Having set up this monophonic vessel and pumped it with money to increase its allure, the message was then ready to be distorted. Mr. Shmelev's research showed that anti-Ukrainian propaganda that opted to shift the sentiments of Russians, followed in its entirety the motifs of the early 20th Century, as highlighted in a handbook published by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in the US in the late 1930s. Everything regarding Ukraine would be put in name-calling terms and generalities, the conversation regarding the present situation were constantly transferred to the events of the Second World War, polls were falsified and overused to emphasize public support of anti-Ukrainian views and entice people to join in, complete fabrications were spread and other techniques were employed.

Despite it being hardly elaborate in its approach, this mechanism was effective in shifting public opinion. So, the question would be how to counter it. "It is difficult to win propaganda by other propaganda", Mr. Shmelev concluded. "To take these channels, keep the same presenters and turn them to the other side would work for a few years, but it has nothing in

common with freedom, liberty and democracy. It would be much better if we found a way to enlighten people and make them think for themselves”. A difficult task if ever there was one.

Then again, problems are not explicit to one side of the conflict. Stelios Kouloglou, journalist and Member of the European Parliament with SYRIZA, has noticed that the coverage of the Ukraine war in Greek media which sided with Ukraine, also failed to provide a clear perspective to the public. Very few Greek reporters were on the ground in Ukraine, while back in Greece, a hostile environment for pluralism had been shaped. “There was no possibility for a more objective stance” according to Mr. Kouloglou. “You were either with Putin or Zelensky. Every effort to adopt a more neutral position was considered suspicious.”

Mr. Kouloglou was targeted by the Greek government which has put forward a very aggressive stance against Russia that Greek media have adopted. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, he was writing a column criticizing NATO’s expansion towards the East. That column was used a day after the invasion by the government spokesperson to claim that he was using that column to prepare the Greek public for Russia’s actions – effectively accusing him of acting in the service of Russia. “This happened to many of us who wanted to adopt a more neutral language in the conflict”, Mr. Kouloglou added.

This ‘ideologization of war’ as he put it, led to some actions that proved controversial, if not downright negative, like the decision taken by European authorities after the invasion to ban Russian media RT and Sputnik from broadcasting or reporting from inside the European Union. This decision led to Russia reciprocating by deeming western media and reporters in Moscow to be foreign agents, thus making their job of reporting on Russia much more difficult, if not impossible.

“This is a very bad continuation of a trend in the last 30 years, especially after the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia in 1999, when Serbian radio and television were considered legitimate targets, since they were ‘part of the propaganda machine of the government’.” The same was true for him in the killings of western journalists who were attempting to cover the U.S. invasion in Iraq.

“Media outlets like Sputnik and RT are controlled by the government, but they are not the only ones in the world. If we begin to exclude and bomb every media we suspect is part of a government campaign, very few of us will stay in the profession”, Mr. Kouloglou concluded, leading to a vibrant, albeit brief discussion with participants focused mostly on the European ban of Russian media – an unforeseen move on the behalf of European authorities that was welcomed by some and criticized by others, including the [European Federation of Journalists](#).

Perhaps no other story exemplifies the perils of hate speech better than that of Turkish-Armenian journalist and founder and editor-in-chief of the bilingual newspaper Agos, Hran Dink. The years of persecution and harassment in Turkish media about his revelations of the

Armenian origins of Kemal Atatürk's adopted daughter, directly or indirectly led to him being murdered by a Turkish nationalist in 2007 outside of the headquarters of Agos.

His death immediately gave birth to the Hran Dink Foundation, an Institution established to preserve the memory of the murdered journalist, to defend human rights and combat hate speech. "At the time, society was not even familiar with the term hate speech", Nayat Karaköse, the Programme Coordinator of the Foundation told participants in the forum. "And we had to learn ourselves as well".

The Hran Dink Foundation began to monitor hate speech in Turkish media and found various instances mainly on ethnic and religious grounds. Then in 2013, the Foundation extended its research from national to local media, where many influential local outlets who had previously targeted the 'unchanging others' of hate speech in Turkey, now began using hate speech on the newly arrived refugees in the country. This corresponds to the distribution of refugees in smaller towns in Turkey. At the same time, the Foundation found that hate speech had left opinion columns and now appeared directly in news items. Also, they had become less direct and were now based not on direct insults but on a constant 'exaggeration' of news regarding certain national or religious minorities.

Ms. Karaköse and the Hran Dink Foundation invested a lot of time in monitoring and indexing all instances of hate speech in national and local media, while at the same time organizing conferences and putting together educational material on hate speech. "We were then wondering how we could be part of the solution", Ms. Karaköse added. The answer they gave was by promoting an inclusive discourse in media and society, that would be based on human rights and facilitate critical thinking, which they are constantly disseminating.

Nayat Karaköse had stated the incentive for fighting hate speech while concluding the introduction of the forum's participants to the life and death of Hran Dink: "We have seen over the course of time how words of hatred, how this propaganda and misleading news turn into bullets". And as Aleksandr Shmelev had shown before her, many of the words the Russian public had been hearing in the last eight years, turned into the bullets currently flying over Ukraine.

Sofia Oliynik, director of the Programme "Democracy Support and Human Security" at the Kiyv office of the Heinrich Boll Institute lives in Ukraine. Not being on the physical frontline did not mean that she has been absent from the war. As she explained in the final session of a rich and insightful day, the war also impacts the economy and the culture even to the places that armed troops have not reached yet. "What the experience of the last eight years taught us is that the war is not simply the military parts, it's not only the shelling, the attacks, the casualties, the frontline, it's something way beyond."

Therefore, Russia's war in Ukraine was not simply fought at the eastern side of the country but in its entirety. Feeling the need to intervene and cut through the information attacks that were distorting the truth of what was happening on the ground, Ms. Oliynik and her colleagues banded together to create the website Share The Truths. Their outlet would cut

through the noise to curate daily briefs that put together events of the day from fact-checked and trustworthy sources for officials or the general public.

In the first 210 days of the war, Share the Truths produced 158 such briefs and continues with one every two days, as the news cycle of events has slowed down. Meanwhile, it has attracted a number of volunteers who are translating the content in various languages and has expanded to producing factsheets that inform the public on the effects of war in specific fields: from climate to publishing. Also, it has begun to produce 'decolonization articles' by reaching out to experts who are explaining the historical background of Russia's colonial stance towards Ukraine.

For Ms. Oliynik and her colleagues, the process of developing Share The Truths and the capacity it has shown to make local opinions reach a global audience are 'Democracy in Practice'. "For us it's just a sign that when you live in a country, you have an idea and you have resources, you do it. No one forced us and no one forced any other volunteers to do anything. It was our duty. This is how democracy works best, this is the participatory approach: you engage and you do what you can".

In a number of ways, what marked the second day of the Information Disorder During a War Infodemic forum, was that it explored conditions on the ground. From the objective limitations of journalism on war reporting to the inherent or acquired confines of western media, malicious long-term campaigns that aim to shift public opinion or the diverse dissemination of hate speech on both the national and local level, the War in Ukraine is taking place at a world that has changed and then contributes to it changing even further. Despite the unforeseen difficulties of the time, there is always room for initiative, action and one would dare say, even hope.