Disinformation: Opening speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EEAS Conference on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference

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Check against delivery!

Good morning to everybody.

Dear guests, dear colleagues,

Let me start by talking about something which has nothing to do with our meeting today, but I think I have to mention it: the terrible catastrophe that struck the Gaziantep region in Turkey and Syria. It has been a 7.8 magnitude earthquake, it has made thousands of buildings collapse. It is a natural disaster like we have not seen in more than a decade. It has taken the lives of thousands of people in Turkey and Syria.

I think that we have to remember the victims and the brave rescue workers who have been working, are still working around the clock to find survivors. Many of them come from European Union countries who volunteered to go. In the last days, our Centre of Coordination [Emergency Response Coordination Centre] has been working hard in order to ask [for] support and the Member States have responded very proactively.

I think that we should start our Conference this morning, with a minute of silence for those who have passed away and for the people working there. Thank you.

Thank you very much for this minute of silence. And I am thinking especially of the many people who are still trapped under the rubble in Turkey and Syria. Yesterday, I was in contact with the Foreign Minister of Turkey [Mevlut Cavusoglu] and I am thinking a lot of the people trapped in the rubble and the people who are trying to save them.

And now let’s go to the meeting today.

The purpose of the meeting today is about information and disinformation. Years ago, the Council asked the [European] External Action Service, and the High Representative, to work on [countering] disinformation. It is not something that happened yesterday. When was it? I do not remember, but it was much before I came to Brussels.

The Council started detecting that there was a lot of toxic information spreading around and asked the [European] External Action Service to react to it. And then, we started working and, today, we are going to present the result of our work.

And we do it a few days before the 24th of February, the day that marked the start of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine [one year ago].

This date has fundamentally changed the security in Europe and sent shockwaves to the world.

It has impacted all of us, here in Brussels, in Johannesburg, in South America, in South-East Asia, in the Horn of Africa – everywhere.

First, Ukrainians: tens of thousands of victims and millions of refugees in Europe. An increase in the price of energy and food affecting living standards, as I said, everywhere.

I cannot travel without facing the same questions: When are you going to stop this war? Because the consequences of this war are unbearable for us, in Africa, in the Middle East, everywhere.

Last week, we were in Kyiv – the [European] Commission, the President of the European Council [Charles Michel] - and, once again, we were able to know, to witness the consequences of Russia attacking Ukraine.

Thousands and thousands of mines will have to be looked for and taken out of the land and the water. One third of Ukranian territory is being contaminated by some kind of explosive. And I know from my past experience that, to recover from that, it takes decades: from Croatia, Colombia, everywhere where there has been a war, the reminders of the war stay there for decades.

Once again, I want to praise the courage of the people who are looking for it and trying to clean the land and the waters. In this moment, Russia is trying to destroy Ukraine, to make people suffer, to scare them, to undermine their morale – making them feel weak and scared and [making them] surrender.

But I see also that the Ukrainians continue fighting, and not just for themselves. I think that everybody has to understand that the fight in Ukraine is not only for the freedom, the independence and the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but also for the values on which we are basing our understanding of the world.

From this point of view, we can say that they are also fighting for us. It is a little bit rhetorical, no? "They are fighting for us"? It looks like something that you say in order to "avoir une bonne conscience", but it is true. It is true. This war undermines universal values and the rules-based order.

Not everybody understands that in the same way. Do not believe that, around the world, everybody agrees with that diagnostic. Yesterday, we had a meeting with some African friends, and it is not so clear that everybody supports this approach. Let's see what happens in the next United Nations Security Council meeting, by the end of the month.

People believe this is a European war. And well, yes, the war takes place in Europe, but it is not a European war. It is not a war among Europeans or not a war of the West against Russia – as Russia likes to depict.

In any case, its consequences are affecting the whole world. As I said, it is sending shockwaves everywhere in the world through energy and food as a lever. Russia is creating hardships around the world and trying to convince people that it is our fault: "it is the fault of the Europeans putting sanctions on us".

The price of wheat has increased. You do not have fertilisers, you cannot pay for the energy bill? "It is the Europeans' fault". "It is European sanctions". "It is the European Union who is creating trouble around the world, preventing food [from] being exported and making the price of energy increase."

And, when you are feeling the consequences – when you feel [them] on yourself, on your pockets, on your mouth – food insecurity is not an abstract term. For us, food insecurity is an abstract term. For many people, food insecurity means that you do not have anything to eat. Then, it is important to know who is telling what and what are people believing, who are people believing.

Our partners in Africa are the hardest hit; but you go to Latin America and South-East Asia and you will see the same thing.

In this scenario, Russia is using information manipulation and interference as a crucial instrument of this war. This war is not only [about] using explosives, bombs, bullets, killing people. It is about the mind of the people. It is about how to conquer the spirit, the intelligence, the understanding of the people.

I have, from my personal experience, concrete, in very concrete terms to perceive that this battle is going on.

Minister [of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Sergey] Lavrov is touring Africa again. These days, Mali and Eritrea; well, easy countries for them but others not so easy. Trying to spread lies about who is guilty for what is happening there.

It is not new. It started with the [COVID-19] pandemic. When the pandemic came, we started speaking about "the battle of narratives". This is a sentence as important as "the Geopolitical Europe". The battle of narratives started with the pandemic at the latest.

And, today, that is clear: this war is not only conducted on the battlefield by the soldiers. It is also waged in the information space, trying to win the hearts and minds of people.

And you will tell me: “nothing new on that, Goebbels already invented [that] during the Second World War – to lie and to spread disinformation is nothing new”. Well, what is new today is the intensity, the will and the instruments. Goebbels had no internet, and no social media instruments.

But, today, people that behave like Goebbels – telling a lie 1,000 times – have a powerful capacity of multiplication at the speed of light and reaching everyone everywhere.

Inside Russia, the crackdown on freedom of expression and freedom of the media has reached unprecedented levels. As in any authoritarian regime, particularly when one is at war, it has to hide to their population the number of casualties they are suffering.

Just 10 days ago, one of the last independent media outlets in Russia, Meduza, was designated as an “undesirable organisation”. And anyone who is trying to say the truth is immediately considered a “foreign agent”.

We try to support them. We stand by the Russian independent media, by the civil society, the human rights defenders who, despite the continuous crackdown they are suffering, continue to defend the human rights and oppose authoritarianism and war. When I say that, it is not just rhetoric. I cannot go into details, but believe me, we support them in practical terms. But I am not going to tell you why because it would be detrimental for them. Because there are still some independent voices that continue working under serious threat.

For years now, Russia has invested in disinformation and information manipulation as an industry. They have been investing massively, much more than we invest in fighting against disinformation.

Believe, I know it very well: I have been one of the favourite targets of [Russian] disinformation – me, personally –, much before coming here, and especially these days. They are masters of that, they invest a lot, they use thousands of people, and they do that on a systematic, permanent and industrialised manner – as a weapon.

Disinformation and propaganda outlets are today a weapon of the Kremlin. And this weapon is a weapon – it hurts, it kills. It kills the capacity of the people of understanding what is going on, and, as a consequence, the position of governments and the decisions of international organisations. We will see that in the next UN General Assembly.

They try not only to control what is happening at home – as any authoritarian dictatorship regime – but they [also] try to destabilise others.

Russia has built networks and an infrastructure to mislead, to lie and destabilise. I want to use these strong verbs: to mislead, to lie and to destabilise in an industrial manner. To erode

trust in institutions.

This is a major threat for the liberal democracies, which are based on information. Democracy is a system that is based on the information that people have, because they made their choices – their political choices – according to their own perceptions and information that they receive about what is happening in the rest of the world.

If the information is toxic, democracy cannot work. If information is manipulated, people don't have a clear idea of what is going on. So, their choices are biased, and the information is the oil of the engine of democracy. We have to take care of the quality of information because is the sap, the blood, the oil, the thing that makes democracy work.

We have plenty of evidence. What I am saying it is not just an accusation without proof. We have plenty of evidence proving that Russia is behind coordinated attempts to manipulate public debates in open societies. I am repeating that because I am sure that the Russian services will be hearing me, and will immediately criticise what I am saying: yes, Russia is coordinating attempts to manipulate public debates in open societies.

We have collected over 15,000 cases over the last years since 2015 – when the Council asked us to work on that – through our EUvsDisinfo. I want to thank [you] for the work you are doing, a work that is not always well-known, and if it is not well-known it is our fault, because we do not explain enough what we are doing.

And this unit in our [European External Action] Service has collected 15,000 thousand cases, hard evidence, that we have always published to expose and to raise awareness. Today, we want to do it in a more coordinated and organised manner, so that everyone can be informed and see through these disinformation activities what I am talking about.

There are campaigns that swap causes and effect. They somehow portray the Russian aggression as a necessary reaction to an alleged threat by Ukraine or the West at large. "It is not Russia who is attacking Ukraine, Russia is just defending [itself] from an attack from the West." I had to discuss that with many people around the world. "Well, in the end, Putin is only defending himself. You were attacking him. You, the West, you were attacking Russia."

We have seen artificial networks being created to spread this disinformation.

They have been flooding the information space, in order to avoid that any other voice can be heard any more.

We have seen attempts to confuse and mislead people, with ever-changing narratives and versions of the event. The aim is that nobody believes anything, any report anymore. To make people believe that "well, in the end, everything is a lie. How can I distinguish between a lie and the truth?"

They want to erode trust in all media and our institutions. I want to say that today that we have to take this very seriously. It is not just a matter for the specialists. It is not just a matter for the people who are working on the information system. It is something that the citizens have to be aware [of].

We have to address the issue politically at the highest possible level. And that is what we try to do. That is what we have done.

This is what has brought all of you together here today. Not only to complain, but to look for answers, to look for solutions, to look for reactions, to [take] action against it.

But, when you have a challenge, in order to face it, the first thing to do is to understand it. Everything starts by understanding the challenges that you are facing. Who is doing what, what are we seeing, how does it work, where are they, who are they, how do they work?

Only when we will have clarity on the nature of the problem, we can try to define and implement proper responses.

I want to stress the importance of this fact, and thank you for your attention: today, we are publishing the first ever report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats.

It is the first report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats. I hope the media will pay a lot of attention to that, the governments, my colleagues from the Commission, Foreign Affairs Ministers, everyone. Please, this is a very important document.

It presents clear trends in the threats against our information space.

What are the main findings of the report?

First, clear evidence that Russia has mobilised all its instruments to conduct disinformation campaigns.

Through its state-controlled outlets, in its diplomatic networks, and its proxies, prove the systematic distortion of reality to distract attention from its military invasion.

One example: Russian diplomatic accounts have spread claims that the Armed Forces of Ukraine are just, and I cite, “neo-Nazi paramilitary units committing atrocities against civilians, including children”, and using explicit images and videos of killed and injured individuals, trying to demonstrate that it is the Ukrainian army acting like Nazis who are behaving like this. They try to organise demonstrations in European Union countries under the banner #StopKillinginDonbass.

Certainly, that is false, and we know it – but not everybody knows it. It is Russia who is bombing cities, playgrounds, schools, and hospitals across Ukraine. But they say it is the “Nazi Army” who is killing people and “we have to defend them”.

Second, our report confirms that there is a new wave of disinformation techniques – the procedures, the methods.

Russia uses cheap technologies to fabricate false images and videos. They do not shy away from creating false websites to impersonate trusted media. The content is amplified at the speed of light and posted across social networks, messaging services and propaganda outlets.

When we launched our [Military] Assistance Mission to Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), our training mission to Ukraine, in November, Russian diplomatic accounts reacted developing images to dismiss this initiative, accusing us of being a servant of NATO and conducting hybrid warfare. This was posted on the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs website. Yes, on the website of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. 10 minutes later, on their Telegram channel and then quickly amplified by over 100 channels, including Sputnik Africa.

Third, the report documents the worrisome cooperation between threat actors like Russia and China.

Diplomatic accounts and state-controlled channels manipulate perceptions about the European Union, blaming the West for all the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

They amplify lies about [alleged] military-grade Western biolabs in Ukraine targeting its neighbours.

This is something that needs a response. We need to anticipate and deter such activities with concrete actions and measures.

We need to continue supporting Ukraine on all sides: certainly militarily, but also financially and diplomatically, and finally, we have to be more ambitious in building resilience to authoritarian regimes that try to create disinformation and manipulate information.

In recent years, we have created - with the support and with the impulse of the European Parliament - within my service, the European External Action Service, instruments to detect and expose information manipulation.

After the Ukraine war started, we have done much more, we have been trying to track how the Kremlin has been flooding the information environment with this kind of false allegations.

We are able to show that Russia has abandoned facts altogether.

But today I have the feeling that it is not enough and that we need to go further.

We need to understand how these disinformation campaigns are organised, so that we can organise our answer and to identify the actors of this manipulation.

We have to do more research on the social media platforms, we have to study how does it flow, where does it comes from, and what are the results.

We heard the news that Twitter is planning to restrict this access. This would be a serious step back from early commitments. We need more transparency and accountability, not less. I call on Twitter – and on its owner – to ensure that all obligations that they have taken will be honoured.

We need a standardised and interoperable way of sharing analysis within the community that tackles information manipulation.

For that, I want to use this opportunity to announce that we will create a new central resource for gathering information on threats stemming from disinformation and foreign information manipulation.

This will promote the sharing of information between all stakeholders about root causes, incidents and threats, and sharing experience, knowledge and analysis.

This is a long term fight; it is not going to be won overnight. We have to have the tools. This “Information Sharing and Analysis Centre” will strengthen our responses and enable us to protect our democracies better.

This was proposed in the Strategic Compass. When we presented the Strategic Compass, this was there – the need to create an information sharing and analysis centre. And today we are delivering.

We are delivering thanks to the ample evidence that we have collected with EUvsDisinfo, that we were able to impose restrictive measures on the Kremlin’s propaganda machinery and effectively ban them from operating within the European Union.

In doing that, we are not attacking the freedom of expression, we are just protecting the freedom of expression.

This is part of our sanctions against the Kremlin’s mouthpieces sending a strong signal that we know how they manipulate our ecosystem and how they operate. And we are strong in our resolve.

I think this was a crucial step and many of you can attest how we have been empowering citizens to protect themselves against the threat.

We started this “EUvsDisinfo” campaign in 2022, and we saw an unprecedented numbers of visitors on our website, with almost 3 million visitors.

Our social media channels reached another 20 million people.

Once again, I want to thank the European Parliament for supporting these activities politically and financially, and asking us to be more proactive.

It is not just about the European Union: it is also in Africa, in Latin America and in Asia.

So, my call is that we need to invest more in working with our partners around the globe on this issue.

Being more present, expressing better the realities, engaging in different languages and media. We are used to [speaking] English, but I can tell you that there are a lot of people around the world who do not understand English. So, we have to address them in their language. Otherwise, they are completely out of what we are saying or what we are trying to explain.

I am looking into options to ensure better and more strategic regional presence of our Strat-comm experts. All our [European Union] Delegations will be equipped with experts on countering disinformation in many parts of the world in order to make our voice be heard better.

That is what I wanted to tell you.

Let me come back where this started: the 24th of February last year, when the fight started taking place in Ukraine.

I think that we must continue our support to the country and its people. This includes this effort to counter the massive attempts of Russia, sometimes with the opportunistic support of other countries, to try to manipulate our public opinion.

Because Putin believes our democracies are weak, that they will not resist the shock of the war, they will not resist the consequences – especially if they are disseminating false information about the causes and consequences of this war.

I am looking to all of you, at this room full of experts on information and information manipulation around the world. I ask for your support. I ask [for you] to engage on this work, on the battle against information manipulation and foreign interference.

It is one of the battles of our times. And this battle has to be won.

Thank you.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-236532

Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/disinformation-opening-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-eeas-conference_en