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IDEAS FOR RESILIENT DEMOCRACIES
COVID-19 Infodemic: Push and Pull Factors

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Covid-19 Infodemic: Push and Pull Factors discussion has highlighted a number of challenges the European community is facing with regards to the current infodemic and which need to be taken into consideration when contemplating suitable counter measures:

Challenge no.1: **The success of disinformation narratives also depends on what P. Kreko calls the demand side of disinformation – on populations perceptible to influence operations' messaging.**

'Especially in Central Europe, persistent feelings of insecurity and inferiority rooted in historical experience of Central Europeans represent vulnerabilities often nurtured also by mainstream political narratives. These are then easily exploited by malign state and non-state actors who tailor influence operations to each audience by tapping into these underlying complexes' (P. Kreko). Such efforts are enabled by a high degree of uncertainty or void in the information space.

Challenge no.2: **The adversaries aiming to undermine liberal democratic regimes and unity of the EU and NATO are better at selling their harmful narratives to target audiences.**

EU, NATO, and the member states are still not achieving enough in strategic communication and their efforts are not translated into meaningful impact. The COVID-19 pandemic was a demonstration of successful communication campaigns of Russian and Chinese administrations via their (sometimes illusory) assistance provided to the hard-hit countries in the EU while at the same time portraying the EU as failing in the moment of existential crisis. Regardless of the fact that the health-care agenda falls under the remit of nation states and hence EU's competence in this area is limited, and despite the amount of help which EU did provide, such narratives quickly gained prominence across number of member states.

❞ **How is it possible that if China brings help with cargo planes, it is covered in the media across the EU but if Austria and Germany provide the same, there is no coverage?' (P. Kreko)**

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The webinar generated several ideas to address the above-mentioned challenges:

1. **More self-PR to counter influence operations on the EU level**
   'If you do not sell your measures, it is as if they never existed.' (P. Kreko)

   ◗ **Increase the role of the EU Representations:** in each country, the EU representations should play a key role in selling the successes of the European Union proactively and in an engaging way. Quick counter-messaging is needed if the role of the EU or its member states is undermined.

   ◗ **Make the EU emotionally appealing:** Language matters – getting rid of dry technocratic jargon is essential to successfully promoting EU values and successes. Our adversaries often have the upper hand because they supply our journalists with a steady stream of exciting headlines and pictures and narratives with enticing dramatic plotlines. 'We must never lose sight of the entertainment value of the stories we promote. If we are to successfully compete, we must supply journalists with our messaging in the form of dramatic headlines and narratives that will result in deep emotional investment by our audiences. Such emotional investment and identification with our characters can win over audiences in a way that rational argument never can, even audiences that would be otherwise resistant.' (R. Waltzman)

   ◗ **Stick to key democratic values:** Protect transparent information space by identifying failures of authoritarian states, exposing them, and by communicating these failures in a language that is understandable and interesting to target audiences.

   ◗ **Make use of the media, civil society, and social media platforms:** These need to be utilised much more actively to serve as a key means for effective counter-messaging.

2. **European public sphere**

   Naďa Kovalčíková argued for an increased "transnational cross-media engagement", which would allow for better access of EU and national expert and representative voices to the national public spheres and contribute to discussions of issues beyond the national level. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed an interesting trend in which different EU and national high-level officials engaged with national media outlets in different member states. This tendency should be operationalised in a systematic way with the aim of providing more accurate coverage on other countries and breaking down the language barriers. These efforts would fill the void and help mitigate information chaos currently exploited by malign actors aiming to sow discord and spread divisive narratives.

3. **Equal treatment of all EU member states by social media platforms**

   Measures and initiatives of social media platforms, such as third-party factcheckers should be equally implemented in all EU 27 member states. In Hungary, for example, there are still no fact-checkers employed in content moderation.

   The upcoming European initiatives embodied in the Digital Services Act and European Democracy Action Plan promise to deal not only with disinformation and hate speech, but also lack of transparency in digital platforms' operation. These highly anticipated pieces of legislation need to ensure that small markets are equally represented.

4. **Boost our overall information ecosystem**

   Public service media and independent news outlets are under a lot of financial strain, yet they play the most vital part in protecting liberal democracies. In a Covid-19 induced era of economic recession, independent journalism and media will need assistance to encourage healthier information ecosystem.

   After this infodemic, 'other crises will arise, and wedge issues related to history, politics, culture, society, religion will be weaponized. In addition to increased support for media freedom/plurality, quality journalism, we have to make sure that everyone can access reliable, verified information in their mother tongue.' argued Naja Bentzen.

5. **Investment in research, development, and education**

   'We need to not only vaccinate people with media literacy campaigns, we need to make sure that that people don't lack basic ingredients in their information diet. In order to avoid information voids, national governments and the EU can provide funding for the creation or the maintenance/updating of verified, independent national online encyclopaedias. Some exist already – for example, in Norway, Latvia and Denmark - while others were struggling to survive even pre-Covid-19.' (N. Bentzen). And finally, supplementing all of these efforts with critical thinking initiatives and education is a key to fostering more resilient societies.