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TACKLING DEMOCRATIC VULNERABILITIES IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

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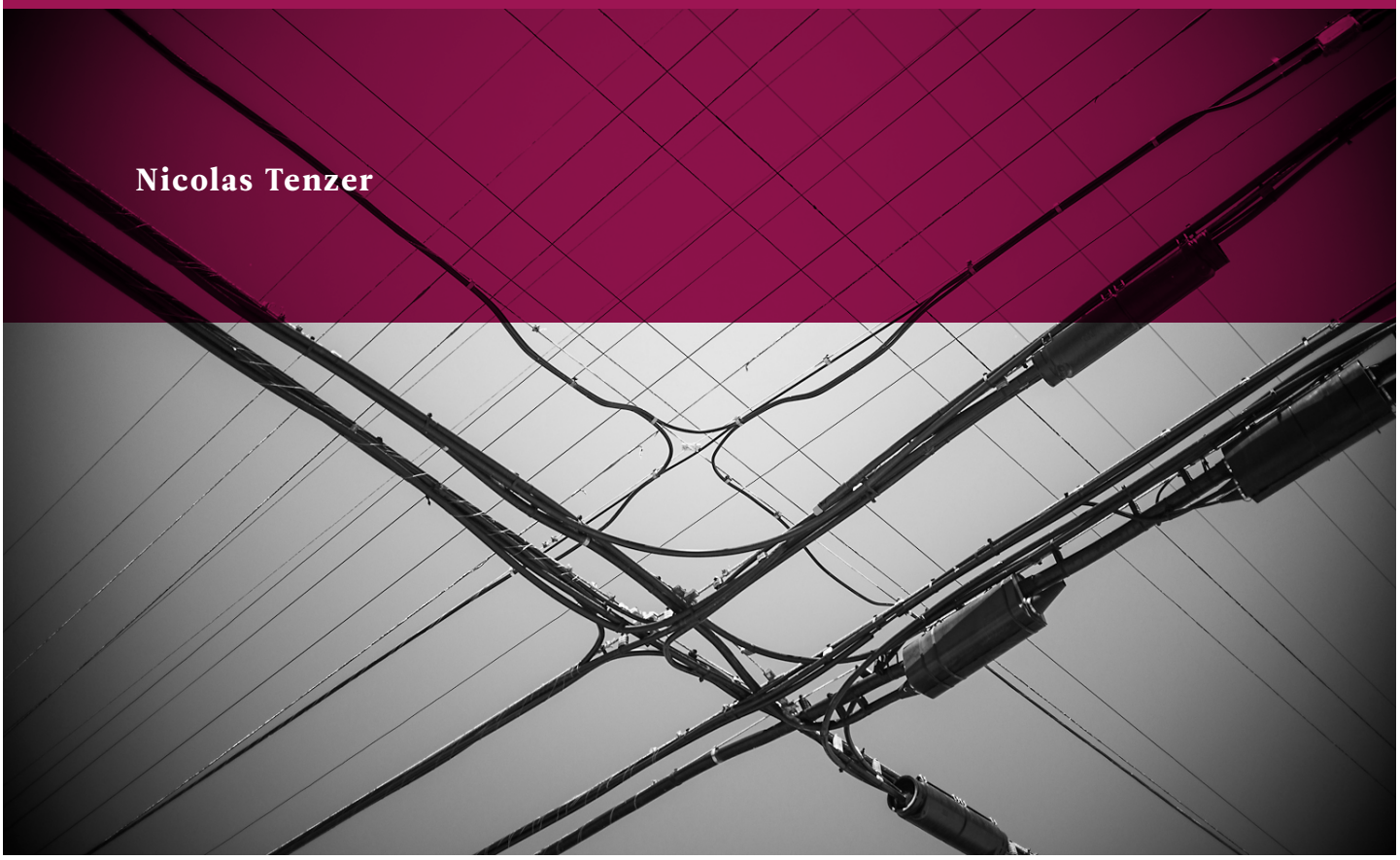

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- Western democracies are characterized at present by a weakened historical consciousness and a more partial situational awareness of threats.
- Public authorities and intellectuals are more to blame than the general public as they have failed to take the threats seriously, including those deriving from de-education and social disruption.
- On the European side, the focus on the economic dimension of the European Union's integration project has created a form of oblivion of the deeper value basis that is intertwined with the geopolitical dimension.
- The key task at hand is to identify the main challenges – namely purposeful external meddling and domestic polarization and populism – that threaten the solidity of our highly diverse democracies, and to formulate a comprehensive action plan.
- This task at the domestic level should be complemented by actions at EU and international levels. However, the EU's internal divisions will complicate the task unless a common awareness of the main threats is established.

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INTRODUCTION

Although not unprecedented, the interaction between domestic dynamics and external tactics is putting Western democracies increasingly at risk. The risks stemming from combined internal and external illiberal actions were highly evident in the 2016 US presidential election, the 2017 French presidential election, and the 2017 German and 2018 Italian parliamentary elections. The endangerment of the liberal and rules-based order relates to the threats posed to democratic values. This is hardly fortuitous: powers that are aiming to unravel human rights values, international law – especially humanitarian, and the international organizations that are at their core are also pushing an illiberal agenda at home and in other democracies. Advocating alleged traditional values, such as the family, religion and national pride, while embracing an anti-migrant stance and xenophobic hatred, they are intent upon weakening the constitutional democratic order and international bodies. These institutions include the European Court of Human Rights, whose mission is to limit the legal ability of states to disrespect the principles they are supposed to abide by.

Internal as well as external illiberal forces have led to the emergence of an as yet under-defined and informal autocratic Internationale. One example of this is the network established in Europe by the political mastermind behind the Trump campaign, Steve Bannon. Similarly, the political and financial networks between the Western illiberals and Russian actors highlight the surfacing of shadowy networks. However, it must be recognized that although there is an unmistakable offensive that is part of the power game, this willingness by external powers to undermine Western principles would not be very successful if there were no sources of homegrown distrust and delegitimization. However, those powers exploit this congruence and reinforce the assault against basic liberal values. From this point of view and due to this conjunction of the attacks, our democracies are increasingly at risk.

This Briefing Paper first assesses the reasons why democratic societies in the West are so vulnerable to both domestic and external influences targeted at undermining their core values. Subsequently, it analyzes the methods used, and explores possible ways to counteract them. Lastly, the paper proposes some steps that can be taken at the European and international levels.

WHY DEMOCRACIES ARE SO VULNERABLE: THE LOSS OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Multiple factors underlie the vulnerabilities of Western democracies. First, it is obvious that they cannot retaliate in the same manner that they are attacked. Autocratic external actors are less restrained by concerns about the rule of law, the protection of privacy, and freedom of speech. Democracies, on the other hand, are restrained by their own democratic accountability and the rule of law, including the presumption of innocence. Any kind of reversal of this would be unacceptable irrespective of the democracy.

Second, in many Western liberal democracies, most of the public, including many politicians and intellectuals, have lost the ability to determine what constitutes an enemy. Of course, Islamic terrorism is an exception to this tendency, and some European countries, such as France and the UK, are still fighting abroad. Even if Western citizens have read history books and listen to their parents and grandparents, they are unacquainted with war. Surprisingly enough, maybe because of the lack of sufficiently strong coverage, not everyone in the EU seems to be aware that there is a hot war in Ukraine, in a location just a three-hour flight from Paris and less than two from Berlin, where more than 10,400 people have been killed and over 1.6 million displaced. French people, for example, do not perceive Ukraine as a European issue, but consider it to be in the Russian sphere of influence, although they blame Russia for the war.[1] The concept of war seems distant and ambiguous to many. This may even be true when it comes to the war in Syria, in which more than 500,000 have lost their lives and

1 'Enquete-dopinion-aupres-des-francais-sur-lukraine', https://www.bva-group.com/sondages/enquete-dopinion-aupres-des-francais-sur-lukraine/, last accessed 30 November 2018.

12 million have been displaced (5.6 of them having fled abroad), not to mention Myanmar, Yemen and Sudan. When direct awareness of the threat dissipates, the fragility of democracies can increase.

The third factor, often depicted by the Frankfurt School and many others from Adorno to Christopher Lash and Cornelius Castoriadis, is what we may label as the frivolity of the information age. It favours the volatility of concerns, a non-hierarchy among news items, and relativism among issues. Priorities are harder to set in this environment. The focus is often fragmentary, and indifference may prevail. These tendencies are further accentuated by the disinformation and unconfirmed news that are rife on social media sites. Whereas the dark pages of history are falling into what Hannah Arendt called the "holes of oblivion", the possible collapse of our societies and their very principles is no longer perceived by many as a credible prophecy.[2] Not least due to the omnipresent social media, ordinary citizens can therefore become unwitting victims of mis- or disinformation that fuel fear and resentment.

The real responsibility, however, lies with the political leaders in most countries: they do not dare to name, shame, and cause alarm, and try to avoid having to publicize "bad news". The policy of burying one's head in the sand is a common non-strategy that complicates tackling the roots of intentional disruptions. Many are not aware of the dangers because they refuse to see and assess them. In domestic realms, in spite of the growing number of opinion polls, many countries lack subtle and accurate assessments of public opinion, and then fail to respond to the anxieties that exacerbate the fragility of both society and the ethical, political and social contract it is based upon.

From this point of view, the EU may face a double issue. Many EU leaders have promoted an economic vision of the EU's development, but also of its enlargement. Of course, at the same time, they defend its core values, but these are not at the epicentre of their public advocacy. Perhaps they perceived them as self-evident and as having sufficient staying power in and of themselves, as if they could not be threatened. A geopolitical understanding of the Union's very nature is absent, arguably because they are convinced, embracing Fukuyama's perspective on the end of history, that the EU no longer has internal and external enemies. They are, in a way, prisoners of the longstanding debate between the partisans of an EU based on law and an EU regarded as a world power, without trying to merge the two sides of the coin. Hence, the economic vision has prevailed, sweeping under the carpet both the vision and the forthcoming dangers. As a result, the historical consciousness and legacy disappear from the minds of most EU citizens, turning the EU into easy prey for those who, domestically as well as abroad, try to undermine its solidity and its call for values.

THE WEST UNDER THREAT: METHODS OF UNDERMINING DEMOCRACIES

Put bluntly, disinformation and foreign interference in Western democracies would not pose such a threat if our societies were less permeable to them, and if they were not so fragile and quick to embrace untrue but distracting narratives. The reality is that, on the contrary, information warfare is functioning rather well and has concrete effects on the way people think, behave, and vote. In actual fact, much more must be done upstream in terms of building the resilience and resistance of our societies. This is an urgent task for the education system, the media, public intellectuals, and civil society organizations alike.

At the same time, it is crucial to address the immediate threat, which requires more precise insights. The methods applied by some foreign countries and organizations display a certain continuum. Nonetheless, they are quite different, with some borrowing from hard propaganda techniques while others are more inclined towards soft propaganda, which is less discernible and more invasive. One must also be aware – although it is not the focus of this analysis – that private actors are also using some of those tools in order to damage the reputation of competing companies. Many of these methods are well-documented. They include spreading fake news through social media and websites, trolling and insulting adversaries, financing think tanks, using agents of influence such as senior journalists, intellectuals and politicians, and exploiting the ignorance of so-called useful idiots, who may still have an audience at home. Such methods also include instigating rumours in order to spread hatred, fear and disproportionate reactions among the general public, undermining the credibility of national institutions, and so on.[3]

2 Arendt, Hannah (1951), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken Books.

3 E.g. Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste (2018), *Successfully countering Russian electoral interference*, CIS Briefs, https://www.csis.org/analysis/successfully-countering-russian-electoral-interference, last accessed 30 November 2018.

Methods of undermining democratic societies can be divided into four categories. The first can be labelled as cyber threats, and should be seen as warfare as such. The techniques applied are already subject to the full force of the law in most countries, and hence are well-known. They include hacking websites and computerized systems, and could entail an assault on the functioning of a country, targeting for example airplane navigation systems, electrical grids, or nuclear power plants. These can obviously amount to an act of war. Other techniques include spying, collecting and using private data, and blackmailing. Obviously, awareness is rising concerning these threats and most countries are robustly upgrading the quality of their systems, but much more remains to be done. A further method, on which more studies have been published, is direct or indirect meddling in the electoral process. This technique combines elements that belong to the realm of cyber warfare with others that are more related to information warfare and that result in controversial rulings, as shown by the recently drafted legal countermeasures in France.

The second category of methods can be labelled as hard propaganda. Here, the main tool is to intentionally spread lies, including denials, not only to make people embrace false narratives, but to question all of them, notably the true ones, equating lies with the truth. As a result, people either believe nothing or trust selected stories according to their personal preferences, and not the intrinsic validity of the narrative. As a consequence, people do not feel the need for permanent criteria for validity, and the facts themselves enter the realm of relativism. On a side note, this dimension of hard propaganda is more important than the belief in outright lies. Uncertainty about what is true and what is false is lethal for democracies. In this context we must be aware of the fact that official propaganda outlets are perhaps less dangerous than covert ones. These less than candid outlets include false media Twitter accounts posing as independent news channels, websites claiming to provide the public with "hidden truths", media that systematically seek to present a grim view of any Western society in order to fuel resentment, dissatisfaction and dark pessimism, and so on.

The third category, soft propaganda, continues the work of hard propaganda in forging and reinforcing relativism. It can be depicted as a kind of narrative that does not directly embrace or promote lies and the advocacy of criminal deeds by a foreign country, but which aims precisely at relativizing for the purpose of sowing discord and division. Its techniques are well-documented by experts, but senior government officials seldom devote enough time and attention to analyzing these methods in detail.[4] Soft propaganda includes what is called "whataboutism" – talking about another issue when asked about a disturbing one; fostering indifference (never mentioning news that can evoke emotion, anger, or public outrage); always showing "understanding" towards illegitimate and unlawful acts; never saying that a reality can be unidimensional, but, on the contrary, insisting on the complexity of the historical situation; never blaming just one party, but rather all of them, and so on. Given the fact that many people do not pay attention to these kinds of benign narratives, this disinformation technique may ultimately be the most effective when it comes to deterring the willingness to fight back.

The fourth and last category of methods consists of directly de-legitimizing liberal values. An objective alliance exists between far-right and nationalist groups and some foreign powers in trying to destabilize the unity and cohesiveness of democratic countries. Any fake news relating, for example, to crimes committed by migrants, dwelling on political scandals, even if they are exceptional or infrequent, but never on what works well and better, the fuelling of anxieties about the homogeneity of Western societies, or the linking of Islam and terrorism, are not only part of an ancient ideology, but also tools manipulated by foreign intelligence agencies and their channels.

TACKLING THE THREATS AND FORMULATING RESPONSES AT THE DOMESTIC LEVEL

Having identified the tools that are applied to undermine democracies, the next step consists of launching an action plan at the domestic level in order to fight back. It goes without saying that a major investment needs to be implemented in the fight against the heavy infrastructures of cyberwar. However, this needs to be complemented by a plan to fight against the disarmament of people's cognitive awareness, and the complicity and underestimation of relatively invisible

4 See, for example, Pynnönniemi, K. and Racz, A. (eds) 2016, *Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*, FIIA Report 35, https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/fog-of-falsehood, last accessed 30 November 2018.

attacks on our democracy.[5] The help of civil society and media organizations is vital, but no government should evade its own responsibilities. In addition, this Briefing Paper proposes five further measures. First, a permanent observatory of social media should be created, in order to directly raise public officials' awareness of disinformation manoeuvres. This could be the pre-condition in order to prepare retaliations, from closing down websites and accounts to debunking lies, from identifying the real foreign backers of some of those sites or accounts to sanctioning a direct offence against the rule of law. Some civil society organizations are already considering this a part of their duties, but they do not possess the means to cover everything. Experience has also shown that self-regulation by companies such as Google, Facebook or Twitter has not been very effective.

A second measure relates to increased transparency in terms of the funding of think tanks and research centres, including universities. Any observer of think tanks will certainly assess that political diversity is a required asset. Some are socialist, others liberal or conservative, while still others manage to be non-partisan; some are business friendly whereas others advocate human rights; some focus on economy and others on security and international studies; some release reports and essays while others prefer to organize public events – or do both; some reach the general public and the press and others remain confidential. Many research centres are de facto competing with world-class universities, and some departments within the latter genuinely function as think tanks. If an absolute neutrality cannot exist, then seriousness and outlawing playing with facts are key.

Having entered the post-truth era, think tanks and universities are confronting a real challenge, namely how to be trusted. What are the verification mechanisms that can assess the quality of their work? This central issue becomes even more crucial since some think tanks obviously do not meet the criteria for objectivity and impartiality. Some scorn facts, and push a purely political strategy that could be inspired by other countries or interest groups. Whatever the instruments for assessing the quality of their work, a minimum requirement would be to publicly disclose the origins of both their core funding and the funding of their programmes, and of course the measures taken to guarantee that interest groups cannot have a say in their policy recommendations.

The third measure should by definition be more discreet. It relies on scrutiny through intelligence gathered on the people massively involved in propaganda activities for a foreign country. In itself, it is not necessarily outlawed. Many lobbyist firms are giving assistance to foreign governments or private interest groups without violating the law. But when those activities appear to be potentially subversive and targeted, or even intimidating, public officials should at least be exposed. In some countries, the law may need to be amended in order to respond to this kind of threat.

As a fourth measure, we need to respond to propaganda. All too often, both the public and intellectuals do not take the time to rectify some basic details, exposing lies and debunking all of the false assertions of propaganda, including the soft variety, in a more thorough way. Of course, it is extremely difficult for officials to maintain their credibility when refuting arguments due to suspicion about what they are saying. Hence, the refutation strategy calls for the involvement of non-official persons, including academia, and the expression of as broadly diverse opinions as possible. This obviously means that a global strategy should be formulated under the supervision of the president or prime minister, involving the ministries of foreign affairs, defence and finance, and the main intelligence, homeland and external security agencies. The refutation of lies cannot be seen as an optional activity that depends solely on the willingness and efforts of private people to speak out.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE AT THE EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL?

Although it is crucial for each country to have its own domestic action plan to counter democratic vulnerabilities, there must also be coordinated decisions at the European and international levels. Concerted efforts already partially exist in the context of the fight against cyber threats among NATO members or, even if not with proportionate means, against disinformation at the EU level. This, however, will not suffice. Many obstacles still remain: divisions in the EU on multiple issues; the rise of illiberal anti-democratic trends; a political context in some countries where part of the government sympathizes with illiberal visions and itself

5 See the joint report by the French CAPS (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs) / IRSEM (Ministry of Defence), *Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies*, 2018, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/irsem/page-d-accueil/nos-evenements/lancement-du-rapport-conjoint-caps-irsem.-les-manipulations-de-l-information, last accessed 30 November 2018.

fuels disinformation narratives; divisions between the East and the West or the North and the South; an antagonistic system of values; or economic short-term interests. All of these elements show that in itself Europe is more at risk than it has ever been. At the same time, this provides another reason, at least for some like-minded states, to launch a basic programme at the minimum in addition to what is already in place in the fight against the main cyber threats.

The first step would consist of exchanging information about those persons and groups involved in the spread of disinformation and the perpetration of assaults against the democratic system. Some of those groups have international connections or allies. What is more, certain think tanks, obviously linked to foreign powers, may try to attract intellectuals or even government officials in conferences and symposiums simply in order to gain legitimacy or to whitewash compromises. This exchange of information on a daily basis would also comprise elements related to the funding of entities or individuals that could violate domestic law in some countries. Those providing funding should be publicly disclosed.

The second step would consist of sharing concerns, exchanging information about the methods used by those groups, and identifying the threats both in terms of processes and content. All of those complicit in the propaganda and narratives used to fuel division among societies and discredit democratic institutions display many similarities. Exchanging information on the main findings is essential not only to create awareness, but also to boost the ability to be immediately alerted when something suspicious happens. This would also include exchanges on bad experiences and frequently occurring mistakes, including the underestimation of threats.

The third step would entail in-depth exchanges on invisible or less-perceived threats. Many examples exist of senior officials not being able to connect the dots while working in a given department and thus lacking a comprehensive view of how adversaries are acting. There are also many instances of economic agreements that have diminished diplomatic credibility because the deal-makers had no idea of the game of influence played by foreign powers. Some cultural exchanges, which seem innocuous on the face of it, could also form a means for hostile powers to exert influence. In a common space such as the EU, cohesion in the face of efforts to dismantle democratic principles and institutions is key, and it is therefore crucial to be aware of the risks generated by successful influencing activities in one of the member states.

CONCLUSION

This Briefing Paper has analyzed the threats relating to democratic vulnerabilities, dissected the methods used in undermining democracies, and proposed a number of countermeasures at both domestic and international levels. Ultimately, a key element is clarity and openness as to the assessment of the threat in question. Intellectuals and global opinion leaders play a role in making that assessment public but, most importantly, the often cautious political powers need to speak out. If there is no public clarity on the assessment, there will hardly be an opportunity to fight against those vulnerabilities that are not a major concern for public opinion. Most politicians hesitate to name and shame, underestimate the threat, and somehow continue to embrace the irrational belief that appeasement could work and that we have to "understand" our adversaries. As a consequence, they become entrapped by their narratives. Hence, many members of the general public who could and should have perceived the threat, do not.

This has direct implications for what could constitute a core rule for the EU: to frame common positions between as many EU states as possible before entering into talks with a country convicted of having deployed efforts to undermine Europe's cohesiveness. The EU is an easy target when divided as each state adopts its own position towards foreign powers. Establishing a common front also entails a commitment by those member states that are aiming at dismantling both domestic and international threats. Cohesiveness and unity on international affairs are vital in order to address the direct threats posed to democracy at home.