

## **CSDP missions and operations: sources, vulnerabilities and responses to disinformation attacks**

**On 16 November, the Security and Defence Subcommittee (SEDE) organised a discussion on the impact of disinformation campaigns against CSDP missions and operations**

SEDE Chair Nathalie Loiseau led the exchange of views on the impact of disinformation campaigns where MEPs discussed the ways to improve the response to disinformation campaigns against the EU military and civilian missions and operations, both on policy and operational levels, with the following guest speakers:

- Vice-Admiral Hervé Bléjean, Director-General of the EU Military Staff (EUMS) and Operations Commander, Head of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), EEAS;
- , Birgit Loeser, Deputy Civilian Operations Commander/ Chief of Staff, Civilian Planning and Conduct Capabilities (CPCC), EEAS,;
- Michael Weiss , investigative journalist, Director for Special Investigations at Free Russia Foundation and editor-at-large at The Daily Beast,.

### **Common Security and Defence Policy (CDSP) missions**

With more and more disinformation campaigns targeting the EU and its institutions in recent years, CDSP missions and operations have also been subject to such attacks. The speakers provided an outlook on the increasing disinformation campaigns in particular by Russia, but also by China and Turkey. The EU's economic success as a world actor makes it a target for competitors whose objective is to increase or regain influence and undermining the EU.

Vice-Admiral Bléjean described disinformation as a way for them to increase their influence and by undermining the EU global strategic interests. He warned that we should not be naïve as to the economic interests at play such as in the Mediterranean region, Somalia and the Balkans.

Birgit Loeser reiterated disinformation was nothing new but that its pace accelerated with the new geopolitical developments and under the cover of the COVID pandemic. She underlined that the modus operandi of disinformation, such as the spread of rumours and hearsay was also making its way to Europe.

Both heads of the MPCC and the CPCC referred to ongoing work with the EUMS regarding the improvement of their public relations. They also highlighted the important work made in cooperation with the EEAS division for Strategic Communications solely in charge of countering disinformation, to come to a joint best practices and guidance document

### **Russia's campaign of disinformation**

All three speakers identified Russian disinformation campaigns as one of the EU's greatest threats. Russia's global strategy to reaffirm its geopolitical position has led the country to increase its presence in Africa where it has intensified efforts to shape the continent's politics and seize new economic opportunities to mitigate the effects of the sanctions they entailed following the annexation of Crimea.

Russia's disinformation campaigns have been systematic, well resourced, and perpetrated on a larger scale than similar campaigns by any other country. Through these actions, the Russian authorities' purpose is to influence internal EU processes to their benefit through both traditional media (e.g. local newspapers) and online media.

The COVID19 pandemic has pushed Russia's disinformation strategy further, allowing it to portray the EU's actions and missions as outdated and ineffective.

## **Africa targeted**

Vice-Admiral Hervé Bléjean explained that Central Africa is one of the main areas of interest for Russia, pushing primarily in the countries and geographic areas that were formerly colonies of France and Portugal.

Michael Weiss also talked about this, adding that Russia's missions abroad - mainly in Africa and the Middle East- employ Wagner mercenaries to uphold their agenda at the expense of European values, liberalism, and democratic order. The journalist presented his investigation on the Russian disinformation and disruption campaigns in Libya and Syria. He stated that Russian disinformation objective, as shown in leaked internal documents, was not to promote any particular actor but to sustain chaos through all available means.

Likewise, the Vice-Admiral pointed out that Turkey has been carrying out similar disinformation actions, spreading fake news in the Mediterranean region. The purpose of this has been to undermine European interest and create economic dependency in the targeted countries. In this regard, he presented the example of locally published articles that targeted the EU Training Mission in CAR and the Turkish disinformation campaign against the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation EUNAVFOR IRINI.

## **The way forward**

Overall, the speakers thought that the EU needed to strengthen its communication strategy to counter these intents of creating divisions. According to Vice-Admiral Bléjean, it is essential to increase research and analyse the source and effects of disinformation developing new methods and practices, and collating international research to make innovative contributions to the field.

He also underlined the importance of maintaining good working relations with journalists to make sure they receive accurate information. In the same line, it is also

necessary to coordinate with national parliaments, increase cohesiveness in information, and build stronger communication networks. The latter would include being more proactive in involving local authorities (e.g. laws against defamation) in the fight against disinformation. He added that fighting disinformation was also countering terrorism and that perhaps there could be a better use of threat analysis. Ms Loeser argued in favour of a stronger and clearer CFSP, and Mr. Weiss concluded that shedding some light on undercover businesses was the best way forward. He also believes that the EU could proceed by registering and running background checks of foreign organisations.

More information:

[Subcommittee on Security and Defence](#)

[EP- Fighting disinformation](#)

[EPRS-Online Disinformation](#)