



Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (ING2)

29.6.2022

MISSION REPORT

following the mission to NATO StratCom in Riga (Latvia) of 24-25 May 2022

Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (ING2)

Members of the mission:

Raphaël Glucksmann

Morten Løkkegaard

Sandra Kalniete

David Lega

Heidi Hautala

(S&D) (Leader of the mission, France)

(Renew) (ING2 Vice-Chair, Denmark)

(EPP) (ING2 Rapporteur, Latvia)

(EPP) (EPP Deputy Coordinator,
Sweden)

(The Greens/EFA) (EP Vice-President,
Finland)

Introduction

Since Russia launched its war against Ukraine, the country has engaged in disinformation of unparalleled malice and magnitude across different types of media, with the aim of deceiving both its own citizens and the international community. Strategic communication is one of the key tools to counter foreign interference in the information sphere, as was identified by the report of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes, including Disinformation (INGE).

The Riga StratCom Dialogue, organised by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom CoE), brought together the strategic communications community in order to discuss ways to counter malign information manipulation. Therefore, the current Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes, including Disinformation (ING2) sent a delegation to Riga to enable Members to attend the conference. In addition, ING2 members met with NATO StratCom CoE to further strengthen the excellent contacts that had already been established during the INGE mandate. Members also got the opportunity to discuss information manipulation and the importance of a free media environment with representatives from Russian independent media organisations established in Latvia, as well as the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence.

The mission gave ING2 members and their counterparts the opportunity to discuss the INGE recommendations, which strongly advise strengthening cooperation on analysis and intelligence capabilities within the EU and with institutional and international partners. Furthermore, ING2 members learned in detail about the current state of the threats and challenges faced by EU and NATO members in the infosphere, specifically in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine.

Summary account of meetings

Tuesday 24 May 2022

Welcome and introduction at NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence

Mr Janis Sārts, Director of the NATO StratCom CoE, welcomed the ING2 delegation and briefed the Members on the centre's structure and working areas. As the CoE is separate from the NATO command structure, it has a great deal of flexibility in terms of research and cooperation with other organisations and bodies. NATO StratCom CoE is staffed and financed by 15 countries, while France and Australia have both recently begun the process of joining. Its mission is to deepen knowledge and to help build resilience against disinformation, information manipulation and interference.

The CoE had two important takeaways in relation to the Russian war against Ukraine. Firstly, the infospace is becoming an increasingly important aspect of the conflict, considering the war is broadcast live on social media. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) is therefore also playing a bigger role. Secondly, while Ukraine is leading the infowar in the western world, Russia has more influence in the developing world, which is a disturbing matter. The west is losing the narrative battle on food supply in the developing world to Russia and China.

Furthermore, the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine proved the effectiveness of pre-

bunking as an instrument to counter information manipulation. The decision of the United States to declassify certain intelligence succeeded in taking away the initiative from Russia in the war.

Briefing 'Russia - Ukraine war: Narratives and disinformation trends'

Lieutenant Colonel Yves Desbiens, Staff Officer of the Operational Support Branch, briefed the delegation about the narratives and disinformation trends around the Russian war against Ukraine. By analysing patterns of disinformation campaigns, the centre attempts to forecast new trends.

Russia's communication strategy regarding the war has gone through four phases. Before the invasion, Russia focused on justifying the 'special military operation' by spreading Nazi/fascist narratives about the Ukrainian Government. At the start of the war, Russia's strategic communication relied heavily on war imagery, such as military victories, and less on disinformation narratives. However, after realising Kyiv could not be taken, Russia focused its strategic communication on an exit strategy, explaining that its troop movements had changed to fight an alleged higher concentration of 'Nazis' in eastern Ukraine. The current message is that Russia's war against the Nazi regime is going well, but cannot yet be won now that the EU and NATO are 'joining the fight'.

On a more general note, the centre has observed that China is using similar narratives to that of Russia, by focusing on attacking the west instead of protecting its identity and justifying its actions, which seemed to be the main strategy before.

Briefing 'Next generation of communication and information sharing'

Mr Gundars Bergmanis-Korāts, Senior Expert on Artificial Intelligence, briefed the members of the delegation on the latest technologies used in information manipulation campaigns. New technology quickly develops and improves, and today's technology can easily create completely fake personas using face generation and seemingly authentic personal details (e.g. hobbies, favourite colours). Bot networks have therefore improved considerably in recent years and become very realistic. The centre performs experiments on social media, for example, by acquiring large amounts of fake engagement to measure how well platforms respond to inauthentic likes, shares and comments. The results show that many platforms still allow the lion's share of inauthentic content on their sites, despite receiving alerts and even though it is against their own community rules.

Looking to the future, Mr Bergmanis-Korāts shared examples of artificial intelligence text generator tools available online, including some that are free to access, such as OpenAI GPT-3. These tools draw from available news articles online to generate relatively authentic looking texts. In addition, deep fake technology is not only able to portray real people, but can also generate satellite maps.

Working dinner

The delegation was invited by Ms Zanda Kalnina-Lukasevica, Parliamentary Secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for a working dinner. Latvia is a major target of Russian propaganda and information manipulation, given the fact that it has the largest proportion of Russians and Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states. For this reason, the Latvian Government focuses significant efforts on developing initiatives to counter Russian

interference. Members of the delegation discussed with their Latvian counterparts approaches to fighting foreign information manipulation and interference and the government's initiatives to build a resilient society.

Wednesday 25 May 2022

Meeting with Russian independent media: Meduza and Novaya Gazeta

The delegation had the opportunity to meet with representatives of *Meduza* and *Novaya Gazeta*, two independent Russian media outlets, operating out of Riga since 2014 and 2022 respectively. *Meduza*, represented by CEO Galina Timchenko, is a Russian- and English-language independent news website, founded in 2014 by Ms Timchenko after she was fired from the Russian news website Lenta.ru. Its main target audience is Russian speakers, both within Russia and elsewhere. *Meduza* has recently set up an initiative called 'Meduza's Friends', where bloggers and journalists can post their articles, in order to share and promote reliable sources. In April 2021, Russian authorities labelled *Meduza* as a 'foreign agent', while the EU rejected this decision. Since the war started, *Meduza* has lost most of its crowdfunding income and it is also having trouble attracting readers within Russia.

Novaya Gazeta Europe, represented by editor-in-chief Kirill Martynov, is the European edition of the famous independent Russian newspaper. It was launched on 7 April 2022 after the Russian authorities cracked down on the Russian newspaper, which had to suspend its activities until the end of Russia's 'special operation' in Ukraine. The European outlet is backed by editor-in-chief and Nobel Peace Prize 2021 laureate Dmitry Muratov. It publishes articles in multiple languages and targets the Russian-speaking population both in Latvia and the rest of Europe. *Novaya Gazeta* is currently working to create a foundation to help rebuild Russian media. Mr Martynov visited the European Parliament in March.

Both journalists depicted the fear among the Russian population of opposing the Russian war against Ukraine. While the Russian Government's repressive system is not as effective as that of the Chinese Government, most Russian citizens would still prefer to survive in the system than to speak out. However, a recent publication featuring mothers of soldiers talking about their sons not returning from the war may signal a turning point.

Meeting with Baltic Centre for Media Excellence

The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence is a hub for quality journalism in the Baltics, Eastern Partnership countries and beyond. Members discussed the centre's work with Gunta Sloga, its Executive Director, and Martins Murnieks, the Head of its Eastern Partnership Programme, to see how the EU could play a role. Their work focuses on the safety of journalists, both physically and in the information space, representing several media outlets of varying sizes and audiences. It provides media training to these media outlets and supports exiled journalists with administrative matters such as obtaining visas. In the short period since the war started, the focus has been on practical aid, including administrative support and helping to find housing for Russian journalists who have relocated to the EU. The centre has given support to around 150 people, however, it estimates the number of relocated Russian media personnel to be at least 200-300. Many are in Latvia, while others have moved to other countries, including the Czech Republic, France and the UK.

Riga StratCom Dialogue

The first day of the conference focused mainly on Russia's war against Ukraine and its effect on the global information space. Speakers representing several NATO countries stressed the growing importance of strategic communication in safeguarding democracy. One of the most important takeaways was the need to stay united, stand behind Ukraine and act firmly to counter the disinformation factories of malign foreign actors such as Russia and China.

The Chair of the delegation, Mr Raphaël Glucksmann, participated in the final panel of the day on foreign election interference, together with Ms Laura Thornton, the Director for the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund, Dr Marija Golubeva, former minister of the interior of the Republic of Latvia, and Dr Martyna Bildziukiewicz, Head of the East StratCom Task Force at the European External Action Service. The panel agreed that our democratic processes today, especially election infrastructure, are more secure than in previous years. However, malign foreign actors quickly adapt their tactics and techniques to interfere in elections, in order to polarise societies. Pre-existing conditions such as the level of trust in institutions make a big difference to the effectiveness of information manipulation with the aim of election interference. In most societies, many voters are no longer interested in facts. Advocating for more direct democracy could be part of the solution to restore trust in institutions. Furthermore, the solution needs to be a jointly coordinated approach together with international partners focused on different areas, such as building resilience, strengthening legislation and strongly attributing malign actions to the actors responsible.

Conclusions

The mission to Riga was a success as it enabled ING2 members to deepen their knowledge of foreign interference and strategic communication as well as to exchange experiences and practices with their counterparts from NATO countries. Members were able to establish and strengthen important contacts within the strategic communications community of NATO countries. They were also able to present the INGE recommendations, which stress the general lack of awareness of the severity of foreign interference and information manipulation, and contributed to the contextualisation of these issues.

The exchanges with various interlocutors reemphasised the importance of strategic communication in countering malign information manipulation and interference. Members were impressed by the work done by the NATO StratCom CoE in gaining an in-depth understanding of the processes surrounding information manipulation and to learn more about the different tactics and techniques used by malign actors. In addition, Members learned more about the work done by Latvian authorities and civil society to support Russian independent journalism.

Finally, the information gathered during the mission will feed into the ING2 report.



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ING2 Committee mission

24 – 25 May 2022

Riga, Latvia

PROGRAMME

Tuesday 24 May 2022

- 15.00 – 15.40 Welcome and introduction at NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence**
by Mr Jānis Sārts, Director of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence
- 15.40 – 16.20 Briefing ‘Russia – Ukraine war: Narratives and disinformation trends’**
by Lieutenant Colonel Yves Desbiens, Staff Officer of the Operational Support Branch/Senior National Representative of Canada to NATO StratCom COE
- 16.20 – 17.00 Briefing ‘Next generation of communication and information sharing’**
by Mr Gundars Bergmanis-Korāts, Senior Expert on Artificial Intelligence, Technical and Scientific Development Branch of NATO StratCom COE
- 18.30 – 20.30 Working dinner**
with Ms Zanda Kalnina-Lukasevica, Parliamentary Secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Wednesday 25 May 2022

09.15 DEPARTURE TO THE EPLO RIGA

(Aspazijas bulvaris 28)

09.30 - 10.30 Meeting with Russian independent media: *Meduza* and *Novaya Gazeta*
with Galina Timchenko (Meduza) and Kirill Martynov (Novaya Gazeta)

10.30 - 11.30 Meeting with the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence
with Gunta Sloga, Executive Director, and Martins Murnieks, Head of Eastern Partnership Programme



EVENT Programme

From 25-26 May 2022, the Riga StratCom Dialogue will bring together the strategic communications community for two days of intensive and inspiring discussion between experts

12.00 - 13.30 Battlefields in the mind: societal resilience and cognitive defence

13.30 - 15.00 Lunch

15.00 - 16.30 What strategic communications has to say about NATO's new Strategic Concept

16.30 - 17.00 Coffee break

17.00 - 18.30 Foreign election interference: where we are today

18.30 - 18.45 Closing remarks

18.45 - 21.00 Dinner

NB: All times refer to Riga time