NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE ON THE CIVIL DIMENSION OF SECURITY (CDS)

BOLSTERING THE DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE OF THE ALLIANCE AGAINST DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

Preliminary Draft Special Report

by Linda SANCHEZ (United States)
Special Rapporteur

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The information crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and the events at the US Capitol building on 6 January 2021 have laid bare the destabilizing effects of disinformation and propaganda on democratic societies. A growing number of ill-intentioned external and internal actors, from authoritarian states to non-state groups and citizens, engage in such hostile information activities to both advance their strategic interests and undermine Allied security and democratic resilience. Disinformation and propaganda threaten the liberal foundations of Allied societies. They limit the ability of citizens to access verified information, amplify polarization, and dent public trust in elections. To tackle this threat, a wide range of measures has therefore been taken in the Alliance and beyond. However, the response remains insufficient and fragmented.

This preliminary draft report offers a set of concrete recommendations on how the Alliance can address more effectively and coherently the threat of disinformation and propaganda. It calls for the adoption of a comprehensive, cooperative, and values-based approach to this menace, at both the national and NATO levels. It also urges the Alliance to place democratic resilience at the centre of ongoing discussions on NATO's future. Rededicating the Alliance to democratic values and leading by example in deeds, as well as in words, constitute the best defence against disinformation and propaganda.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The events culminating in the attack of the US Capitol building on 6 January 2021 made apparent the damaging impact of unchecked disinformation on the democratic resilience of Allied societies. Influenced and incited to violence by baseless allegations – disseminated from within and without – that widespread voter fraud had marred the 2020 presidential election, thousands of protesters stormed the building that symbolizes American democracy. Although democracy prevailed that day, these events provided proof that the dissemination of false and misleading information can have destructive effects and must be countered. They also served as a solemn reminder that responding to the threat posed by disinformation necessitates that Allied countries reaffirm, uphold, renew, and defend the fundamental democratic values which bind our societies together.

2. Disinformation and propaganda do not spread in a vacuum. Rather, they thrive when democratic erosion intensifies, societal divisions rise, and public trust in traditional media and other recognised sources of expertise and verified information declines. Allied societies have increasingly been grappling with these challenges in recent years. The interaction between such democratic vulnerabilities, on the one hand, and disinformation and propaganda, on the other, creates a mutually reinforcing feedback loop. External and domestic malign actors exploit existing weaknesses to widen divisions in Allied societies, generating additional vulnerabilities in the process. They are not only pursuing their own strategic goals through their hostile information activities, but also attempting to undermine the democratic values, principles, and processes that form the foundations of liberal societies and of the Alliance.

3. A growing number of actors is involved in the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda. Most are exogenous, some – perhaps even more worryingly – are, however, endogenous. They include authoritarian states like Russia, China, and Iran which engage in hostile information activities to generate and inflame tensions in Allied democracies, and to promote their repressive governance models abroad. Some non-state actors, including terrorist organisations, far-right and conspiracy theory movements, and informal groups motivated by monetary gain are developing sophisticated disinformation and propaganda capabilities. These actors harness evolving technologies – on which Allied societies rely – to further enhance their capacity to spread harmful narratives. The latter are disseminated primarily by individual citizens within our borders, either purposefully or unwittingly.

4. While each actor has its own strategy, means, and objectives, their individual efforts reinforce and amplify each other. This creates a densely interconnected and at times overwhelming information environment in which the distinction between fact and fiction is blurred. As such, disinformation and propaganda reduce the ability of citizens to access and agree on verified facts that should inform their participation in governance; contribute to increasing societal polarization and frustration with democracy; and negatively affect public confidence in electoral processes.

5. In response to these threats, in 2019, NATO Heads of State and Government underlined that the Alliance is “strengthening [its] ability to prepare for, deter, and defend against hybrid tactics that seek to undermine our security and societies”. Partner nations, international bodies (such as the European Union (EU), the United Nations, and the G7), private companies, and civil society organisations have also taken various measures to counter threats in the information space. The flood of disinformation and propaganda that plagued the COVID-19 pandemic has only reinforced the need to increase efforts in this area. Ranging from national legislation and dedicated counter-disinformation instruments to media and digital literacy initiatives and fact-checking websites, the scope for action against disinformation and propaganda is vast. The response, however, has so far remained fragmented and has lacked coherence.

6. This draft report aims to offer recommendations on how to tackle more effectively and coherently the threat posed by disinformation and propaganda to Allied democratic resilience. As

hostile information activities rely on vulnerabilities in the domestic sphere to influence citizens and shape public opinion, the response must start at home. It should include increased cooperation with private technology companies, initiatives to enhance digital and media literacy and rebuild public trust in the media, as well as more effective and audience-driven communication strategies. Alongside this, a stronger emphasis on liberal values is needed, including dedication to ensuring that freedom of speech is protected. Allied countries and their partners should take steps to overcome the democratic disillusionment that provides fertile ground for disinformation and propaganda to take root and grow. Given the interconnection between external and domestic threats in the information environment, a multi-level collaborative approach is required. At the national level, member states must adopt a whole-of-society approach to countering hostile information activities. At the NATO level, the Allies must reaffirm the crucial importance of transatlanticism and multilateralism, and their shared commitment to democratic values. They must also increase their practical cooperation with their various partners in the fight against the scourge of disinformation and propaganda.

II. A GROWING THREAT WITH A PERVASIVE IMPACT ON THE DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE OF ALLIED SOCIETIES

A. DEFINING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

7. Several terms are used, often interchangeably, in the public discourse to refer to the disruptive actions undertaken deliberately or unintentionally by various actors in the information environment. Such terms include *inter alia* disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and propaganda. In this draft report, "disinformation" refers to "the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information with the intent to deceive and/or mislead" (NATO, 2020). Disinformation may take numerous forms, from fabricated content containing false facts to misleading information misrepresenting a reality. The term "propaganda" is defined by NATO as "information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view" (NATO, 2013). Although it is equally deceptive, distorted, and manipulative, propaganda differs from disinformation and other forms of misleading content in its aim. Its ultimate objective is the promotion of a concrete political or ideological agenda.

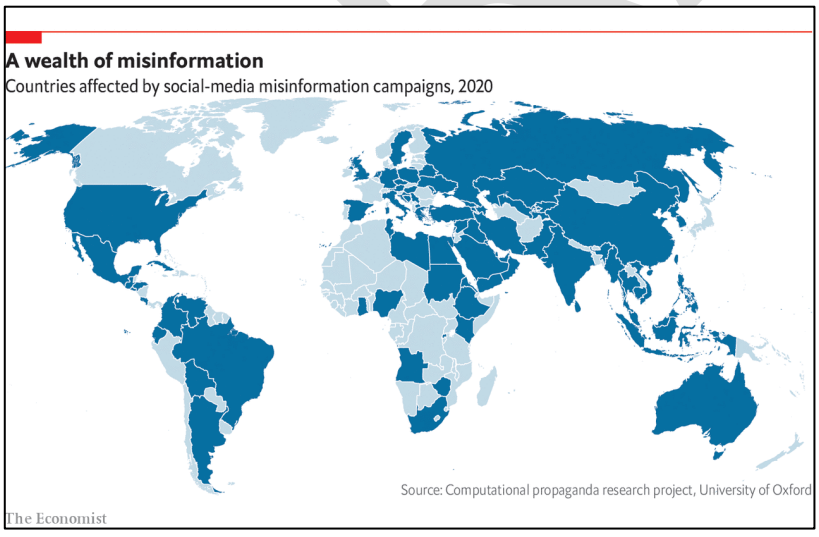
8. Although this preliminary draft report principally discusses disinformation and propaganda, it is necessary to define some of the other terms that describe further types of deceitful content. "Misinformation" refers to "false or misleading information spread without the intention to deceive". As such, the same content may be classified as disinformation or misinformation depending on the intent behind it (Colley et al., 2020). Finally, "fake news" refers to verifiably false information that is spread intentionally (West, 2017). Although originally similar in meaning to the term "disinformation", it has recently been increasingly used to qualify genuine information that one disagrees with (Colley et al., 2020).

B. THE MISUSE OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS AND THE GROWING DISSEMINATION OF DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

9. The growing use of propaganda and disinformation to influence public opinion has long been correlated to technological advancement and its misuse. The invention of the printing press around 1436 first allowed information, as well as disinformation, to spread faster and further than ever before, and thus to influence public opinion. The development of mass media – newspapers, radio, and television – subsequently made it possible to use disinformation and propaganda on a societal level, particularly during the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War. Today, these means of mass communication remain part of the toolbox employed by malicious actors to disseminate their false narratives.

10. In the past decades, the development of modern means of communication has made the information landscape increasingly complex. It is no longer the preserve of a select few actors such as states and traditional media. Rather, it favours many-to-many interactions between individuals who generate a large proportion of the content themselves. The increased availability of innovative technologies and tools, such as social media, wireless internet, and smartphones, has removed barriers to widespread participation in the online sphere. By creating a marketplace of ideas, the online space can act as a potential catalyst for democratisation (Bremmer, 2010). Any individual can share content globally in real time, become an information actor, and effect change as a result. The Arab uprisings, for instance, produced hopes in 2011-2012 that the unlocking of the information space would lead to democratic reform, transparency, and accountability.

11. The opening-up of the online information space has, however, been exploited by opportunistic actors to spread disinformation and propaganda faster and further than ever before. They take advantage of several vulnerabilities intrinsic to the nature of the online domain. First, by facilitating the creation and dissemination of information, online tools allow for a multiplication of sources. Although theoretically positive, this proliferation can overwhelm the public and make it difficult to assess the credibility of those sources and, therefore, to gauge the reliability of the information received (NATO Strategic Communications, 2016; Lazer et al., 2017). Second, although crucial to free speech, the anonymity of the online space allows ill-intentioned actors to spread harmful falsehoods covertly and effortlessly without taking responsibility for their effects (Cordy, 2017; Bremmer, 2010). Third, the algorithms that power social media platforms inadvertently contribute to the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda by confining users into homogeneous "echo chambers". As the aim of these algorithms is to generate and sustain user attention, they are designed to deliver content that the user wants to consume. They function by grouping users based on their common interests and then sharing relevant content to all members of each group. If the algorithm places a user in a group that has shown an interest in content comprising disinformation or propaganda, it will repeatedly highlight such content for the user. Over time, by making disinformation and propaganda ubiquitous and limiting the user's access to diverging and verified information, this exposure could persuade them of the reliability and veracity of deceitful content (Yaraghi, 2019).



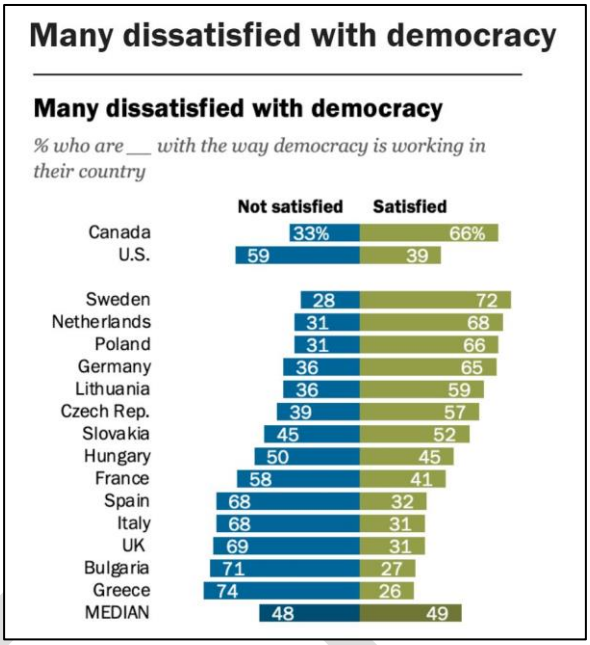
12. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified the impact of the misuse of technological tools on the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda in the information space. The health crisis sparked by the rapid propagation of the novel coronavirus around the world has been matched by a parallel information crisis, particularly in the online space. Generated by the worldwide circulation of false and misleading claims about the origins of the virus, possible treatments, protective measures, and now vaccine distribution, this information crisis has hampered national and international responses to the crisis and contributed to its worsening. A 2020 report by the Oxford Internet Institute showed that disinformation campaigns were waged in 81 countries in 2020, compared with 70 in 2019 (Bradshaw et al., 2020). The pandemic has thus made clear that no country is immune from the wide-reaching and insidious effects of disinformation and propaganda.

13. In the future, emerging technologies have the potential to further intensify the creation, spread, and impact of disinformation and propaganda. The development of artificial intelligence (AI) will transform interaction in the digital environment and facilitate the dissemination of false or misleading information. AI-powered "bots" (i.e. false accounts designed to flood social media platforms with posts reinforcing and amplifying disinformation and propaganda) will become increasingly able to predict individuals' personal and political preferences which will, in turn, render manipulating public opinion easier. Even when failing to change people's opinions, AI tools could further submerge users with disinformation and propaganda, which would contribute to further blurring the line between fact and fiction. Tools that can produce misleading content at scale are already being developed today. For example, the GPT-3 model, created by an independent research group and whose beta version was released commercially in 2020, can automatically complete a text in a style that matches that of the original input. The outcome is often difficult to distinguish from the work of human beings (DiResta, 2020). Similarly, deepfakes (i.e. highly realistic and difficult-to-detect digital manipulations of audio or video which manufacture the appearance of reality) have the potential to fuel the spread of disinformation and propaganda. Although the advancement of these sophisticated technologies will benefit our societies in various areas, they may also allow ill-intentioned state and non-state actors to manipulate audio and video content easily and convincingly. By obscuring the distinction between reality and fiction, if misused, they may thus pose a threat to democratic systems, institutions, and values.

C. THE IMPACT OF DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA ON THE DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE OF ALLIED SOCIETIES

14. The proliferation of propaganda and disinformation poses multiple threats to the democratic resilience of Allied societies. First, by blurring the line between fact and fiction, disinformation and propaganda undermine the public's confidence in reliable sources of information. As such, they threaten one of the pillars of democracy: the ability of citizens to access verified information on which they can base their active participation in governance. Indeed, the growing propagation of disinformation and propaganda in recent years has led to a decrease in public trust in traditional journalism and the mainstream media. A 2019 Ipsos global study found that one-third (34%) of adults across 27 countries around the world trust newspapers, magazines, television, and radio less than they did five years ago (Grimm, 2019). Similarly, only 40% of Americans trusted mass media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly in 2020, compared with 53% in 1997 (Brenan, 2020). As a result, citizens are more likely to rely on sources of fluctuating trustworthiness to obtain information, thus leaving the way open for increased exposure to disinformation and propaganda. For example, a 2020 survey showed that only 17% of those who depend on social media for political news had high political knowledge (based on an index of nine knowledge questions), compared with respectively 42% and 41% of those who rely on the radio and print media. Additionally, 81% of social media users had heard the conspiracy theory that powerful people intentionally planned the COVID-19 pandemic (compared to 72% for radio listeners, and 63% for print media readers) (Mitchell et al., 2020). At its core, democracy requires that citizens can understand the critical issues of the day and engage in rational debates about them. Disinformation and propaganda, on the contrary, make it difficult for citizens to take informed decisions based on corroborated facts.

15. Second, disinformation and propaganda contribute to heightening the polarization of Allied societies and increasing dissatisfaction with democracy. Both domestic and external ill-intentioned actors spread partisan disinformation that specifically aims to widen the already existing political divides between citizens within democratic societies (Niu et al., 2020). Even when it is not partisan in nature, as it floods the information space, disinformation generates a sense of confusion and information exhaustion amongst citizens. The latter therefore often tune out perspectives that do not comport with their own and rely exclusively on a limited number of sources that correspond to their views (Tavernise and Gardiner, 2019). As a result, citizens can no longer agree on basic facts, thus threatening the democratic fabric of our societies. In 2019, for instance, 73% of Americans said that they could not agree with supporters of another party on basic facts concerning issues facing the United States (Dimock, 2020). This, in turn, contributes to a decrease in levels of satisfaction with democracy. In 2020, a survey by the Pew Research Center showed that the median percentage of people dissatisfied with the way democracy was working in their country in 14 European countries was as high as 48% (compared with 49% who were satisfied). In the United States, dissatisfaction was running even higher, at 59% (compared with 39% who were satisfied) (Wike and Schumacher, 2020).



16. Malevolent actors also create or fuel internal tensions within Allied societies by spreading disinformation targeted at minority communities and migrants. For example, in 2017 the Russian-funded internet portals *sputniknews.lt* and *baltnews.lt* published multiple articles about the alleged discrimination of the Polish community in Lithuania with the aim of increasing inter-ethnic tensions in the country and degrading its relations with Poland (State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, 2018). Additionally, disinformation actors manipulate narratives about migration to generate frictions and discontent. In 2016, for instance, Russian media spread false information about crimes supposedly committed by migrants in European countries with the aim of undermining public confidence in the ability of their government to manage the then-ongoing migration crisis (Janda and Sharibzhanov, 2017). Similarly, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple actors – including foreign state-backed groups – spread narratives framing migrants as responsible for the propagation of COVID-19 (EUvsDisinfo, 2020).

17. Third, disinformation and propaganda affect public trust and participation in elections. This most critical phase of democratic cycles provides a high-impact opportunity for both foreign authoritarian actors and domestic groups to influence public opinion and sway voters. Through the widespread dissemination of deceitful content, disinformation actors weaken citizens' confidence and participation in electoral processes and ultimately seek to undermine the legitimacy of Allied democratic systems. For instance, the broad propagation of false claims about fraud in the 2020 US presidential election led to a sharp decrease in trust in the accuracy of the results. A survey taken immediately after the results were announced showed that only 57% of Americans trusted the US electoral system (Laughlin et al., 2020).

18. Some disinformation actors disseminate false and misleading narratives around elections specifically aimed at racial minority communities. During the campaign for the 2016 US presidential election, Russian operatives used social media to exacerbate racial tensions in the country and suppress African American voter turnout (Bond, 2020). In the run-up to the 2020 US presidential

elections, both external and internal actors circulated disinformation targeted at African American and Latino communities (Timberg and Isaac, 2020). By manipulating narratives around racial tensions, these actors aim to generate mistrust of the electoral process among these communities and ultimately lower their participation.

19. For these reasons, disinformation and propaganda have become tools of choice for a growing number of actors who share the same overarching objective: undermining and delegitimizing our democratic systems and institutions as well as the values that underpin them. Understanding their nature and the means that these actors employ is thus essential to tackle the grave threats that their hostile information activities pose to our democratic resilience.

Gendered disinformation: denying women a voice and undermining social cohesion

Women are frequently and specifically targeted by disinformation campaigns. Various external and domestic actors spread dishonest or false information and images to discredit and silence women, particularly those in high-profile positions such as politicians, journalists, and other public figures. Such disinformation campaigns often draw on pre-existing prejudices about gender roles. They aim to increase polarization, challenge social cohesion, and undermine women's political participation (Di Meco, 2019). For example, in 2017, after Svitlana Zalishchuk, a Ukrainian member of parliament, gave a speech at the United Nations about the hardship endured by women in Eastern Ukraine as a result of Russia's aggression, a fake tweet about her was widely circulated online. It claimed that she had promised to run naked in Kyiv if the Ukrainian army lost an important battle against the Russia-backed separatists. The disinformation campaign aimed to harm her political reputation and discourage her from voicing her opinions (Di Meco and Brechenmacher, 2020).

The prevalence of gendered disinformation has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. False or misleading information has been used to present female decision makers as unable to respond effectively to the crisis, and undermine their actions. For instance, after she participated in an authorised demonstration on International Women's Day in Spain in March 2020 – before the declaration of the state of emergency in the country – a manipulated video showing Irene Montero, the country's Minister for Equality, coughing at the event was widely circulated. A subsequent disinformation campaign wrongfully accused her of having failed to isolate despite having COVID-19 symptoms (Sessa, 2020).

III. THE PROLIFERATION OF ACTORS DISSEMINATING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

A. RUSSIA: AN ESTABLISHED MANIPULATOR

20. The Kremlin has long seen the manipulation of information as a cost-effective means to achieve its geopolitical objectives. Contemporary Russian disinformation campaigns find their roots in the "active measures" carried out by the Soviet Union to influence foreign governments and their populations. Indeed, disinformation and propaganda remain a cornerstone of Russia's current efforts to wield influence on a global scale and to undermine those that it perceives as its enemies, including NATO and individual Allies. To that end, the Kremlin strives to sow discord and divisions within and between democracies by exploiting societal and institutional vulnerabilities. To achieve these aims, Russia disseminates false or biased narratives through a complex media ecosystem composed of both traditional media outlets (including, for example, the *Sputnik* news agency and the *Russia Today* (RT) television network) and online news websites and social media platforms (MacFarquhar, 2016). Government intelligence agencies and affiliated companies, such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), harness these channels to infiltrate and corrupt the information space in democracies. Deceitful narratives are created, then echoed throughout this web of platforms, and eventually spread by users in the targeted countries either deliberately or unwittingly (Robbins, 2020).

21. Russia's disinformation efforts were brought to the fore following the 2016 presidential election in the United States. Russian interference in this election involved a sweeping and sustained operation targeting US citizens. Primarily led by the IRA, this multi-platform disinformation campaign emphasized a wide range of social issues along with partisan political messages (DiResta et al., 2018). Russia-based operatives published about 80,000 posts on Facebook over a two-year period between June 2015 and August 2017. Up to 126 million users may have seen them during that time (Ingram, 2017). The aim of this campaign was to reinforce social and political polarization, erode trust in the information environment, and reduce confidence in the democratic process and its legitimacy. Since then, elections and referendums in various European countries have been the target of Russian disinformation campaigns (Taylor, 2019). Similarly, Russia launched an aggressive disinformation campaign in 2018 to reject responsibility in the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian intelligence officer, in Salisbury, United Kingdom. In the aftermath of the attack, hostile information activity by Russian-operated accounts is estimated to have increased by 4,000%, primarily through the use of automated bots (Stewart, 2018). Today, Russian intelligence agencies are spreading disinformation to weaken public confidence in Western vaccines against COVID-19 (Gordon and Volz, 2021).

B. CHINA: AN EMERGING THREAT IN THE INFORMATION SPACE

22. China represents an emerging threat in the global disinformation and propaganda sphere. Until recently, Beijing had largely limited its use of false and misleading information to key issues driving its national strategic and geopolitical interests at home and in its own neighbourhood. This included manipulating the narrative around the democratic protests in Hong Kong; the status of Taiwan, Tibet, and the South China Sea; and refuting accusations of human rights violations in Xinjiang (Roberts, 2020).

23. The scope, visibility, and ambitions of China's disinformation and propaganda efforts have, however, expanded significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the initial discovery of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan, the Chinese government pursued a major disinformation campaign designed to divert blame for the pandemic and deflect attention away from the country's early handling of the crisis (Gitter et al., 2020). At the start of the crisis, Chinese diplomats and official accounts openly engaged in spreading false and misleading information. In March 2020, for example, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs tweeted an article which falsely suggested that the virus had originated in the United States and been brought to Wuhan by the US army (Wong et al., 2020). China's disinformation efforts around COVID-19 later evolved, moving away from overt tactics and embracing covert methods more closely aligned with the Russian model. The authorities began to deploy more subtle and unofficial information manipulation strategies, including through the use of internet sites and fake social media accounts to push out misleading information (Brandt and Taussig, 2020). For example, Chinese operatives are largely considered responsible for the online dissemination of a false news story in March 2020 claiming that the US administration was set to announce a national lockdown (Wong et al., 2020). This shift towards a reliance on covert methods is likely to shape future Chinese disinformation efforts beyond the pandemic.

24. The objectives of Chinese disinformation and propaganda efforts have also evolved in the context of the pandemic. They aim to undermine confidence in democratic governments, instill chaos and confusion, and exploit public dissent to widen societal divisions in Allied countries. In addition, they promote China's image as a stable and resilient country, and bolster and export its illiberal principles and authoritarian model of governance.

C. AUTHORITARIAN STATES AND THE STRATEGY OF MUTUAL REINFORCEMENT

25. Alongside Russia and China, several authoritarian states are stepping up their disinformation and propaganda operations on an international scale (Alba and Satariano, 2019). Iran, in particular,

has significantly expanded the reach and sophistication of its activities in the information space over the last two years (Dubowitz and Ghasseminejad, 2020). In 2018, for instance, Facebook removed 652 accounts, pages, and groups associated with Iranian disinformation campaigns targeting users in the United Kingdom, the United States, Latin America, and the Middle East (Solon, 2018). Iranian disinformation and propaganda efforts have only increased since the outbreak of COVID-19. Through them, Tehran aims to deflect attention from its poor management of the pandemic. In March 2020, for instance, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, suggested that the novel coronavirus had been created by US scientists (Luxner, 2020).

26. The pandemic has also highlighted concerns about synergies between the disinformation and propaganda campaigns carried out by different authoritarian states, and in particular those pushed by Iran, China, and Russia. China's disinformation campaigns during the pandemic, for example, have been promoted to a great extent by Russia's extensive propaganda apparatus. *RT* and *Sputnik* are indeed among the top five non-Chinese news outlets most-retweeted by China's state-funded media (Brandt and Taussig, 2020). Similarly, the Iranian media has supported Chinese and Russian efforts in the information space (Watts, 2020). This trilateral convergence of disinformation and propaganda campaigns has had a mutually reinforcing effect that gives the false and harmful messages spread by these authoritarian countries a veneer of legitimacy.

D. NON-STATE GROUPS AND DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

27. Some terrorist groups have developed sophisticated capabilities in the area of disinformation and propaganda, particularly in the online sphere. Daesh has been a prolific and effective actor in this field. Between 2014 and 2016, the terrorist group mounted a large-scale propaganda campaign through social media with the objectives of projecting and promoting its claim to statehood, affirming its religious and political legitimacy, expanding its influence beyond Syria and Iraq, and recruiting foreign fighters. To do so, it created its own online magazines (*Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*) and managed to attract a large number of followers for its web of social media accounts. Since 2016, the year that marked the beginning of its unravelling, Daesh's online presence and related capacities have gradually decreased. Its propaganda remains a threat, however. Today, it is less focused on the group's statehood claims in Syria and Iraq, and instead prioritizes its covert asymmetrical actions in these two countries and attempts to encourage terrorist attacks in the rest of the world (Winter, 2019).

28. Far-right and conspiracy theory groups are also among those actors engaged in the creation and spread of false and misleading information. For instance, in Europe, ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections, far-right groups weaponized social media at scale to spread false and hateful content (Avaaz, 2019). In the United States, adherents to QAnon – an umbrella term for a set of disproven far-right conspiracy theories which originated in 2017 on the internet forum 4chan – have been using social media and other online platforms to disseminate false information about COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the 2020 US presidential election, among other topics (Roose, 2021). The widespread propagation of such extremist disinformation and conspiracy theories can fuel political violence. Indeed, the extensive online presence of far-right and conspiracy theory groups and the disinformation that they disseminate played an instrumental role in the attack on the US Capitol building on 6 January 2021 (Butt, 2021).

29. In addition to ideological motives, disinformation campaigns can also be driven by monetary gain. For example, ahead of the 2016 US presidential elections, as many as 150 websites publishing and disseminating false stories about the ongoing campaign were run out of the town of Veles, North Macedonia. These websites were predominantly run by young people in their late teens and early twenties with knowledge of social media who could earn an additional income of around €1,000 per month through advertisement revenue. They published false news stories with inflammatory headlines designed to draw viral traffic from US audiences (Hughes and Waismel-Manor, 2020).

Although solely motivated by the prospect of financial gain, such operations further exacerbate polarization and tensions in democratic societies.

E. CITIZENS AS THE PRIMARY CATALYST OF DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA DISSEMINATION

30. Disinformation and propaganda, even when created by malicious exogenous actors, ultimately spread largely through the actions of individual citizens within our borders. In that sense, citizens are both the primary targets and the main promoters of false information. The distinction between disinformation and misinformation is important in this context. On the one hand, some individuals purposefully disseminate disinformation to their own networks. In a 2016 survey of US adults, 7% said that they had shared a fake political news story online despite knowing that it was made up (Barthel et al., 2016). These citizens often share news and information that they know or believe to be false because they are sympathetic to its underlying message, or to signal their social identity or allegiance to a political group or movement. On the other hand, some individuals spread misleading information unwittingly. In the abovementioned survey, 16% of US adults said they had shared fake political news, only to discover later that it was made up. This stems partly from a lack of media and digital literacy and from the information overload that users face online which makes it difficult to distinguish between low- and high-quality information (Lazer et al., 2017). Malicious foreign and domestic actors exploit these vulnerabilities to convey their false and harmful messages.

IV. AN OVERVIEW OF EFFORTS UNDERTAKEN IN THE ALLIANCE AND BEYOND TO TACKLE PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION

A. THE CRITICAL ROLE OF ALLIED NATIONS AND PARTNER COUNTRIES

31. Countering disinformation and propaganda is first and foremost a national responsibility. Member states and partner countries have therefore adopted different approaches and taken a wide range of measures to counter the threat posed by hostile information activities. While this diversity makes coordination difficult, it allows for best practices and lessons learned from the various responses to be shared and replicated where possible.

32. First, some nations have adopted laws and taken regulatory measures to curb the spread of disinformation. Germany, for example, adopted in 2017 the NetzDG law (or Network Enforcement Act) which makes social media companies with more than two million users liable for fines of up to €50 million for failure to delete “obviously illegal” content within 24 hours of its publication (Morar and dos Santos, 2020). Similarly, in 2018, France adopted a law against information manipulation which obliges large social media companies to disclose the source and funding of sponsored campaign advertisements, gives the national media regulator the power to block foreign-controlled broadcasters that disseminate disinformation, and allows judges in the three months preceding a national or European election to rule on taking down false or misleading content from media platforms and outlets (Robinson et al., 2019). In February 2020, the United States designated five Chinese news agencies as operatives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), thus imposing limits on the number of employees which they could have in the country (Jakes and Myers, 2020). Similarly, in February 2021, the UK broadcasting regulator withdrew the license of the China Global Television Network (CGTN), in part because the channel is affiliated with the CCP (Hern, 2021). In the same month, Ukraine shut down three TV channels accused of posing a risk to national security by spreading Russian disinformation (Olearchyk, 2021). Such wide-reaching legislative and regulatory measures are, however, not uniformly supported in Allied countries. Some have raised concerns about the risk of censorship, limitations to freedom of expression, and stifling of legitimate dissent that they pose (West, 2017).

33. Second, member states and partner countries have implemented various programs to increase awareness of, and societal resilience to, all forms of hostile information, such as media and digital literacy initiatives and fact-checking websites. For example, the Latvian Ministry of Culture has financially supported projects around investigative journalism, debunking, and media literacy since 2017, holds national debate competitions focused on media literacy amongst schoolchildren, and launched a social campaign for media literacy and internet safety for 5–8-year-olds (Ločmele, 2019). In the United States, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency – a standalone federal agency established in 2018 under the oversight of the Department of Homeland Security – created the fact-checking website *rumorcontrol* to debunk misleading or false claims related to the 2020 elections (Miller, 2020). In Estonia, the Estonian Defense League (a paramilitary organisation under the Ministry of Defense) has created the anti-propaganda website *propastop.org* which highlights misleading or false information disseminated in the media and online. Some partners have equally been at the forefront of efforts to increase media literacy and societal resilience to disinformation and propaganda. Finland, in particular, has focused on raising awareness among youth about the threat posed by deceitful content. The authorities have made information literacy and strong critical thinking core components of the national primary school curriculum and launched a yearly national media literacy week (Henley, 2020). Partly as a result of these efforts, Finland ranked first in a 2019 study on media literacy levels in Europe (Open Society Institute, 2019).

34. Finally, most member states and partner countries have deployed and supported communication efforts to counter the impact of disinformation and propaganda. For instance, the Dutch government implemented an online awareness campaign aiming to inform people about the spread of disinformation online ahead of the 2019 local and European elections (Robinson et al., 2019). The Latvian authorities launched a communication campaign against the dissemination of disinformation called “Media are not comedy” targeting primarily youth and senior audiences (Media and learning, 2019). Some other member states have also supported the efforts of their international public service media (such as *Deutsche Welle*, BBC World Service, *France Médias Monde*, CBC Radio-Canada, USAGM, etc.) to expose disinformation and counter it with verified facts (Garriaud-Maylam, 2020).

B. NATO’S EFFORTS

35. In the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration, Allied Heads of State and Government stressed that NATO member states “face hybrid challenges, including disinformation campaigns and malicious cyber activities”. These hostile information activities seek to undermine the liberal principles that define the Alliance. Indeed, shared democratic values are what differentiates NATO from those that threaten it and what binds member countries together in the most successful security Alliance ever created. For this reason, the rampant spread of disinformation and propaganda is a growing concern for NATO.

36. Since 2018, NATO has therefore further increased its efforts to tackle disinformation and propaganda. NATO’s response to hostile information activities follows a twin-track model. First, it aims to *understand* the information environment in which it operates. To that end, it tracks, monitors, and analyses information threats, including disinformation and propaganda campaigns. Second, it embeds these insights into its communication efforts, thus enabling NATO to tailor its strategic communications to counter disinformation most effectively. A third principle underpins NATO’s strategy against disinformation: *coordination*. NATO strives to synchronize its efforts internally and closely cooperates with external actors that face the same threats, such as partner countries, the EU, and the private sector (NATO, 2020).

37. NATO does not respond to propaganda with propaganda. Proactive, fact-based, credible communications are the best means at its disposal to counter hostile information activities. NATO uses a range of tools to refute false claims and expose disinformation aimed at the Alliance, including media statements, press briefings, debunking, and fact checking. For example, NATO’s Public

Diplomacy Division maintains the webpage "Setting the record straight" where it sets out the facts on misleading or false information about the Alliance disseminated by Russian media and officials (NATO, 2019). In addition to refuting hostile claims, NATO strives to increase the level of knowledge about the Alliance and understanding of its missions among the public in Allied countries and beyond. For this purpose, it has set up the #WeAreNATO campaign, which particularly targets young audiences and aims to build resilience and promote a values-based counter-brand to propaganda and disinformation.

38. NATO also provides support to member states in thwarting threats in the information space. For instance, it is currently developing a counter-hostile information and disinformation toolkit for Allies outlining key definitions, approaches, and response options at the national level. Once finalized, the toolkit will facilitate the sharing among Allies of lessons learned and, where possible, the replication of national best practices. In addition, in 2018, Allied countries established NATO Counter-Hybrid Support Teams, i.e. groups of experts that can provide tailored assistance to member states, upon their request, on an ad hoc basis in preparing for, and responding to, hybrid activities, including disinformation and propaganda (NATO, 2019). A Counter-Hybrid Support Team was deployed for the first time to Montenegro in November 2019 to strengthen the country's capacities, including in the information space, amid concerns that Russia would attempt to influence the 2020 elections (Segers, 2020). In 2020, NATO set up another team to support North Macedonia in combatting disinformation online, particularly from Russia (Finabel, 2020).

39. Established in 2014 in Riga and structurally separate from NATO but accredited by it, the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence contributes to improving strategic communications capabilities within the Alliance and amongst member states, and as such to countering disinformation. It carries out in-depth analyses of various related topics and provides advice and support to Allied countries and NATO. It harnesses the knowledge and analytical skills of international military specialists and civilian experts, including from the private and academic sectors.

40. Although NATO has already stepped up its efforts to counter disinformation and propaganda in the past few years, it must continue to intensify its work in this area. These activities are a crucial element of the broader strategic efforts to strengthen the societal and democratic resilience of the Alliance. As part of the NATO 2030 process, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has suggested that the Alliance should recommit to and promote democratic values at home, defend the international rules-based order, and adopt a more integrated and coordinated approach to societal resilience (Stoltenberg, 2021).

C. INITIATIVES UNDERTAKEN BY OTHER MULTILATERAL ACTORS

41. The EU's approach to countering disinformation and propaganda involves several dedicated initiatives and instruments. In 2015, the European External Action Service (EEAS) set up its East Strategic Communications Task Force to tackle Russian disinformation campaigns against the EU and its member states. In 2018, the European Commission launched a voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation to which the largest social media companies agreed. The same year, it adopted an Action Plan against Disinformation, a key feature of which was the launch of a Rapid Alert System (RAS) to monitor and uncover disinformation and propaganda campaigns in real time (European Commission, 2021). In December 2020, the Commission introduced the European Democracy Action Plan which seeks to strengthen media freedom and counter disinformation in the context of elections (European Commission, 2020).

42. The EU is a key partner for NATO in countering threats in the information space and both organisations have strengthened their joint efforts in recent years to tackle disinformation within the wider context of their response to hybrid threats. Interactions have focused on increasing staff-to-staff information exchange, improving capacities related to analysis of disinformation, coordinating messaging, and reinforcing mutual alert capacities to detect hostile information activities, for

example through the RAS mechanism in which NATO participates (EU-NATO, 2020). The cooperation between the EU and NATO in this area has been complemented by the establishment in 2017 of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, which provides a forum for strategic discussions and joint training exercises among the NATO Allies and EU Member States involved.

43. Other initiatives have been undertaken to counter disinformation such as the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism which aims to strengthen coordination across the G7 countries in identifying, preventing, and responding to evolving threats to democracies. Similarly, in 2020, the United Nations launched the "Verified" campaign in the context of an influx of false and misleading information related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative aims to deliver trusted information and counter disinformation about the health emergency (UN, 2020).

D. THE EVOLVING ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES IN COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

44. Initially slow to respond to the disinformation threat and address the manipulation of their platforms for malicious purposes, social media companies have increasingly acknowledged the risk that it poses and recently adopted measures to address it (Polyakova and Fried, 2019). In the past few years, social media firms have made changes in their policies, oversight mechanisms, and operational parameters to reduce the spread of disinformation. For instance, Twitter has banned all political advertising on its platform to prevent its misuse, while Google and Facebook temporarily followed suit around the 2020 US elections (The Economist, 2020). Along with these structural changes, companies have increasingly adopted proactive measures, taking down or labelling content deemed misleading or false. For example, Facebook announced in December 2020 that it would remove posts containing claims that have been discredited by public health experts about COVID-19 vaccines (Isaac, 2020). Ahead of the 2020 US elections, Twitter added labels to messages judged misleading and warnings pointing users towards credible information before they could retweet the original message (BBC News, 2020).

45. However, the actions of social media companies do not represent a panacea to the problem of disinformation. Limited legislative and governmental regulation and intervention on these platforms have left it up to companies to create their own guidelines. This state of play is unsatisfactory and needs careful rethinking for two main reasons. First, self-regulation has not always been effective in eliminating false content or preventing hostile actors from disseminating misleading and divisive content (Berzina et al, 2019). Second, leaving social media companies solely responsible for tackling disinformation raises concerns about corporate censorship, politicization of the platforms, and lack of transparency. The boundary between disinformation on the one hand, and freedom of speech on the other must therefore be set through a democratic process and not be left to the discretion of private entities. In collaboration with the private sector and civil society, democratic governments should work towards achieving a shared understanding of the threat posed by online disinformation and set common standards on how to tackle it, while at the same time protecting freedom of speech.

E. CITIZENS AND CIVIL SOCIETY AS THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE AGAINST DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

46. Citizens are both the primary catalyst in the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda and the first line of defense against these threats. For that reason, both raising awareness about hostile information activities and helping individuals to identify and reject false or misleading content are critical. To that end, some civil society groups have been supporting and complementing the abovementioned institutional digital and media literacy campaigns. For instance, in the implementation of its "Strategy for a strong democracy" which it adopted in 2018, the Swedish government has been relying heavily on civil society organisations. They carry out digital and media

literacy campaigns with the aim of reinforcing societal resilience to disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech online while safeguarding freedom of speech (Swedish Government, 2018).

47. Other civil society groups – and the citizens that form them – have been taking a more offensive approach to disinformation and propaganda by focusing on identifying, countering, and discrediting hostile narratives. For example, the 'Baltic Elves' are an internet activist network of thousands of volunteers based primarily in Lithuania who aim to counter false narratives spread by Russian media and online accounts across the Baltic states (Peel, 2019). In Ukraine, journalism students and professors established the fact-checking group StopFake in 2014 to debunk Russian hostile information activities. Since then, the group has been hired, along with more than 50 other organisations working in 40 different languages, by Facebook to curb the flow of hostile information on the platform (Troianovski, 2020). Other civil society groups include the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab and the Alliance for Securing Democracy's Hamilton 68.

V. THE WAY FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO PROTECT OUR DEMOCRACIES AGAINST DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

48. Disinformation and propaganda pose substantial risks to the integrity of our democratic societies. To counter these challenges in the short and long term, NATO and its member states must not only actively address the threats posed by individual actors, but also invest in long-term resilience against hostile information activities by tackling the societal vulnerabilities that allow misleading or false information to spread. Disinformation and propaganda pose a systemic challenge to our democratic values and institutions. Addressing it therefore requires systemic responses premised on a collaborative approach involving a range of stakeholders. The broad scope of such a response means that action is required at both national and NATO levels. This chapter sets out a suggested framework for how this multifaceted agenda could be advanced in practice.

A. POSSIBLE ACTIONS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

1. Consolidate internal cohesion around democratic values and processes in Allied societies to better fend off threats in the information space

49. The emergence of fissures in the shared liberal foundations that bind Allied societies together creates democratic vulnerabilities. Hostile actors exploit these vulnerabilities to spread disinformation and propaganda among Allied citizens in order to generate social tensions and pursue their strategic objectives. To address this risk, individual member states should reaffirm their commitment to the democratic values and principles that underpin the Alliance. In particular, member countries should reassert their commitment to women's equal rights and dedicate additional resources to understanding and countering the effects of gendered disinformation on our democracies.

50. Member countries should also further communicate to their national publics the importance of the Alliance's common values and the need to uphold and defend them. In today's complex information environment, endogenous and exogenous threats are difficult to disentangle and efforts to protect our democracies must therefore start in the domestic space. Strengthening internal societal cohesion around democratic values and institutions is particularly essential to rebuff the claims of authoritarian actors extolling the supposed superiority of their regimes.

51. Member states should foster public trust in the integrity of electoral processes which constitute the basis of our democratic systems. To that end, they could consider developing a shared framework on the protection of elections against disinformation and propaganda. This framework should include common standards on strategic communications around elections, specific media

regulations, and eventual sanctions against disruptive actors. In addition, Allied countries should develop online tools to debunk election-related disinformation. They could, for instance, replicate the best practice developed by the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency for the 2020 elections with the creation of the *rumorcontrol* website dedicated to independently debunking false claims about the integrity of the elections.

2. Build technological resilience to disinformation and propaganda

52. Allied countries should cooperate to develop a common transatlantic legislative approach on regulating online content with a view to prevent the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda. Large technological companies should not be placed in a position to make unilateral decisions on the acceptability or veracity of content. Rather, such issues should be addressed through a strong legislative framework that would be transparent and democratic in nature and would both guarantee freedom of speech and prevent online hostile information activities. This framework should aim to replace currently competing national efforts with a common approach to managing the use of information technologies, including emerging technologies such as AI and deepfakes. Beyond preventing the misuse of information tools, this framework should also support a positive vision of digital technology as a democratic tool.

53. Beyond these legislative efforts, Allied countries should cooperate with digital companies in a more informal manner to develop a democratic digital domain in which freedom of speech is upheld and disinformation prevented from spreading. This cooperation should focus on four key aspects. First, Allied countries and digital companies should assess the impact of the measures that the latter have recently adopted, particularly around the 2020 US election, and replicate successful practices where appropriate. Second, Allied governments should urge these companies to invest in technologies, such as algorithms, that can automatically identify disinformation and flag it for users. Third, they should press digital companies to strengthen online accountability by bolstering their policies against users posting under false names. Finally, governments should work with these companies to take down authoritarian state-sponsored news outlets and social media accounts disseminating disinformation and propaganda.

3. Develop citizens' media and digital literacy and support the actors and tools operating in this field

54. Allied governments should cooperate with news organisations to call out disinformation. They should particularly support the development of fact-checking tools. Similarly, following the example set by some Allied countries such as Latvia, they should encourage and invest in professional investigative journalism, including at local levels, to offer high-quality alternatives to disinformation. They should also ensure that national political contexts do not inhibit the practice of free and independent journalism. Finally, they should continue to support the work of international public service media in exposing and countering disinformation and propaganda.

55. Member states should also work with civil society organisations specialised in the development of programs and curricula on enhancing media literacy. These actors are often well-placed to bridge the trust gap between citizens and traditional media. Governments should also support the creation by such organisations of counter-disinformation websites similar to the Estonian website *propastop* or the Ukrainian website *StopFake*.

56. Finally, Allied countries should support efforts to raise media literacy levels among youth. In particular, they should follow the example of partner countries such as Finland and ensure that educational institutions raise awareness among children from a young age about the distinction

between information and disinformation. Where possible, they should replicate best practices developed by other NATO states and partner countries.

4. Increase interdemocracy and interparliamentary cooperation on countering disinformation and propaganda

57. Lawmakers and interparliamentary diplomacy have a role to play in countering disinformation and propaganda. By gathering parliamentarians from multiple countries, interparliamentary forums, such as the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, allow for a frank but constructive exchange of views and ideas between lawmakers. Such a dialogue is necessary to build a common transatlantic approach to the threat that disinformation and propaganda pose to our democratic values and systems. The NATO PA, as well as other interparliamentary forums, also gives parliamentarians an opportunity to share best practices and lessons learned that they can replicate, where possible, in their own country. Finally, thanks to their direct link with their constituents, parliamentarians can amplify the counter-disinformation messages put forth by national governments and NATO.

58. Allied countries should further increase their cooperation with other democracies around the globe confronting the same disinformation and propaganda challenge. This cooperation could focus on the elaboration of a common agenda to reinvigorate democracy, foster domestic and international cohesion, remedy societal vulnerabilities, and counter threats to liberal principles and institutions such as that of hostile information activities. This wide-reaching pro-democracy initiative could constitute a feature of the new US administration's ambition to hold a Summit for Democracy. It could also align with the German proposal to launch a transatlantic Marshall Plan to reinvigorate democracy and the United Kingdom's suggestion to establish a D10 group of leading democracies (based on the current G7 members along with South Korea, India and Australia) (Brattberg and Judah, 2020; Deutsche Welle, 2020; Patrick, 2020).

B. POSSIBLE ACTIONS AT THE NATO LEVEL

1. Increase NATO's capacity to understand and respond to threats in the information space

59. Member states should expand NATO's human, financial, and technological resources dedicated to fighting disinformation and propaganda to match both the level of the threat and the Alliance's ambitions to counter it. Such resources would help strengthen NATO's capacity to monitor the information environment in which it operates and respond to any hostile information activity.

60. NATO and its member countries should improve their understanding of the domestic vulnerabilities to disinformation and propaganda faced by the Allies. In particular, the Alliance should better account in its counter-disinformation efforts for the role of citizens within its borders in the spread of disinformation. Additionally, NATO should carry out regular in-depth assessments in all 30 member states to identify and monitor specific national vulnerabilities to disinformation and propaganda, similar to the surveys that it carries out every two years to assess the state of civil preparedness in Allied countries. These assessments could be carried out by peers or a group of experts. Based on the insight gained in such assessments, NATO should shift from a broad and one-size-fits-all communication strategy to a more tailored approach better targeting the groups most vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda in each Allied country. As such, these assessments would help NATO make the most of its limited resources and give member states a better understanding of the shortfall areas in which they could focus their efforts. In addition to this regular monitoring, member states should make more frequent use of the NATO Counter-Hybrid Support Teams to identify vulnerabilities to disinformation ahead of or during sensitive events, such as elections.

61. NATO should step up its response to the disinformation and propaganda campaigns launched by authoritarian states, particularly Russia and China. As many of the false or misleading narratives promoted by these actors are predictable, NATO should increase its efforts to prebunk such messages at early stages before they spread widely, rather than debunk them once they have achieved broad circulation. At the same time, careful consideration must be given to which claims should be actively refuted and which should not. Indeed, disproving claims that have not yet been widely disseminated can be counterproductive as it may inadvertently give them increased visibility.

62. NATO and its member states should further bolster their efforts to increase public knowledge about the Alliance. Better educating Allied publics about the Alliance's values, objectives, and benefits would indeed contribute to countering disinformation about NATO. To achieve this goal, however, NATO and individual member countries should shift the primary focus of their communications strategies from countering negative narratives to actively communicating positive narratives about the successes of the Alliance. They should continue promoting NATO's achievements and solidarity, as they have successfully done in the context of the response to the pandemic.

63. NATO should further increase the coordination of counter-disinformation efforts between Allied countries and with partners. The wide-reaching nature of disinformation campaigns means that responses should be transatlantic in scope and inherently collaborative. NATO can play a more active role in coordinating national efforts and in sharing best practices amongst member states and partner countries for possible replication. To that end, NATO should develop a taxonomy of national measures adopted by NATO member states and partner countries, as well as countries that are not NATO partners but have experience in countering disinformation.

2. Create a framework that places democratic resilience and efforts to counter disinformation and propaganda at the centre of NATO's future

64. The Allies should reaffirm their shared commitment to democratic values and principles by establishing a Center for Democratic Resilience within NATO, as suggested by the NATO PA President Gerald Connolly and subsequently recommended by the NATO 2030 Group of experts (Connolly, 2019; Group of experts, 2020). Structurally similar to the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre, this Center would provide technical and research support to member states in strengthening democratic resilience, ensuring greater societal cohesion, resisting hostile interference, and responding to disinformation from external and internal actors. To do so, the Center would, first, monitor, identify, and highlight vulnerabilities in member states in the areas of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Second, the Center would assist member states in the development of institutions, laws, and policies to tackle corruption, foster trust in elections, and respond to other governance challenges. Through these two strands of work, the Center would play a key role in supporting member states in recognizing and remedying democratic vulnerabilities that could otherwise be used by malevolent actors to spread disinformation and propaganda within the Alliance. Although institutionally part of NATO, the Center would harness the experience and knowledge of civil society experts and think tanks and could include an advisory group of external experts.

65. NATO should make the ongoing development of a counter-hostile information and disinformation toolkit for Allies a priority. In addition to outlining key definitions, approaches, and response options at the national level, it could be used as a basis to establish NATO-level standards for resilience to disinformation and propaganda. Member states could use such standards to set national targets and compare their progress to that of other Allies. This could include common standards in terms of the institutional structure designated to address disinformation threats, the financial and human resources allocated, and the legal framework.

66. NATO and Allied countries should reflect on options for a more offensive counter-disinformation approach. The Alliance should consider developing a strategy that would impose greater costs on malevolent actors aggressively disrupting the information space. NATO has recognized that a serious hybrid attack, such as a cyberattack, could trigger Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, where an attack against one Ally is treated as an attack against all (Stoltenberg, 2019). Attention should be paid to the conditions under which a disinformation or propaganda campaign could be considered a possible trigger. The Alliance cannot remain passive in the face of hostile information activity which threatens to undermine the foundations of our democratic institutions and societies.

67. Finally, NATO and the Allies should ensure that countering disinformation and propaganda, and strengthening democratic resilience more broadly, are part and parcel of the ongoing discussions on NATO's future, including the NATO 2030 process.

3. Better coordinate with other stakeholders facing the same threat

68. NATO should further enhance its cooperation with other multilateral organisations facing the threat of disinformation and propaganda, such as the G7 and the United Nations. NATO's cooperation with the EU, in particular, should be increased through regular convening and information sharing at both political and staff-to-staff levels. In their cooperation, both organisations should focus on identifying common threats, speaking with one voice to debunk misleading or false claims affecting their member states, avoid any duplication of efforts, and pool resources where and when possible.

69. The Alliance should also prioritize dialogue with democratic countries beyond NATO's membership that are affected by disinformation and propaganda. This dialogue should focus, in particular, on establishing or reinvigorating cooperation frameworks with countries in the Asia-Pacific region that share the Alliance's values and grapple with increasing hostile information activities from China. Such cooperation, by allowing for better sharing of lessons learned and best practices in the counter-disinformation area, would be beneficial to both the Alliance and the countries involved.

VI. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

70. There are no simple solutions to countering the threat of disinformation and propaganda to Allied democratic resilience. Decisive action is needed from a broad range of societal actors across areas such as strategic communications and outreach, digital and media literacy, international and multilateral coordination, resilience standards, electoral processes, fact-checking and debunking initiatives, regulatory and legislative measures, and cooperation between the public and private sectors. No one actor or measure can solve the problem entirely, but together they can create a sound basis to reinforce the resilience of our democratic societies to hostile information activities.

71. Going forward, the Alliance must build a comprehensive, cooperative, and values-based response to the threat posed by disinformation and propaganda. At the national level, the Allies must adopt a whole-of-society approach which is predicated on the involvement of governmental, private sector and civil society actors. At the international level, multilateral and transatlantic engagement and the forging of new partnerships with democracies around the world are vital in building an international community united in the fight against this common threat. Above all, countering the threat posed by disinformation and propaganda necessitates that all actors within the Alliance and beyond take decisive steps to rededicate themselves to and bolster public support for liberal values, rebuild the strained social contract of our societies, and restore trust in democracy.

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