



## **Narrative report**

on the workshop entitled “From Populist, Illiberal Political Narratives to Conspiracy Theories and Fake News in the Visegrád Region and Beyond” organised by the Hungarian Europe Society on 7 June 2018 in Budapest and related activities in the “Open Space, Regional Networking, Mediatisation of Politics” project

### The workshop

The main objective of the event organised by the Hungarian Europe Society was to bring together experts, journalists as well as civil society representatives from the Visegrád region and beyond in order to discuss new ideas, concepts and proposals how to unmask populist and illiberal narratives and to strengthen democratic and liberal communication practices under the conditions of a changing political and media environment. During the one day meeting - thanks to the support of the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit – invited guests from Central European countries, Brussels, Paris, and even from New York City, involving a heterogeneous audience, contributed to the on-ongoing debate about the reasons and consequences of the challenges facing the dominant liberal order. As elaborated in the final program of the workshop, speakers and participants focused on the interplay of significant new phenomena in the realm of politics and media in Central Europe, the European Union and globally: populist political communication, fake news, post-truth, alternative facts, partisan and polarised media landscapes, disinformation and (Russian) propaganda, transformation of social media, bubbles and echo chambers, media literacy.

Whilst populist parties have become strong competitors to the mainstream democratic political forces globally, the situation is even worse in countries like Hungary, where a semi-authoritarian, populist party grasped political power and was able to keep its ruling role in two following elections whilst building an anti-liberal system. The success of Fidesz can be also explained how Viktor Orbán and his “spin doctors” creatively use techniques of populist communication. In his introductory speech, István Hegedűs, chairman of the host organisation, the Hungarian Europe Society, cited a letter written by a Fidesz leader reacting to the critical voice coming from a sister party inside their common political family, the European People’s Party as an example for the radicalisation in style and strategy of the governing party. The most striking phenomenon is the brutality of the language in the correspondence that includes provocative claims, bad intention, hatred, and defiance. There is no intellectually sophisticated argumentation in defence of the party positions of Fidesz any more – the letter sounds like a simple counter-at



tack following the rhetorical methods of Donald Trump and the Hungarian foreign minister, Péter Szijjártó in public. The repetitive, sole message to the centre-right Christian Democratic Appeal from the Netherlands, but actually to anyone, who might disagree with the party's political platform presents a simple charge: "you are lying".

In a more general approach, Hegedűs raised questions in order to give a political frame to the forthcoming discussions of the workshop. Should we describe populism as a political style, a new discourse, a smart communication and political strategy, or does it have a "thin-centred" ideology? Is emerging populism dangerous for liberal democracy worldwide? Does populism – left and right – have an agenda to build a semi-authoritarian political regime? Or, do politicians like Viktor Orbán have a special regional character that creates a deep East-West divide? Can we find the roots of populism in cultural conflicts inside societies that include both social deprivation and ethnic-national differences? Do we face, perhaps worldwide, a counter-revolution, a sentiment of nostalgia towards a perceived golden age in a new era that might be described as the politics of passion?

After leaving these questions open to further debates, speakers of the first session elaborated the consequences of the political communication of illiberal regimes in Hungary and Poland as the two examples of new "illiberal democracies" inside the European Union. There was a special focus on the playbook and the communication tools which were created and probably exported within member states and beyond. Anna Kende, social psychologist at ELTE University in Budapest, summarised the causes and consequences of the so-called national consultations in Hungary. Since the first victory of Viktor Orbán at the elections in 2010, seven consultations were held about different political issues which were always connected to the actual government's propaganda. As Kende pointed out this instrument fits clearly into the populist political communication as a proof of direct support from the people and with which government can avoid using the usual democratic channels such as referenda. National consultations provide some kind of direct feedback mostly from the governing party's voters and undoubtedly serve the propaganda objectives of the regime. In the first years, until 2015, national consultations helped in defining the national (in-)group and in creating the division line between 'us' and 'them' – those who do not belong to the inner circle. However, after 2015 the consultations rather tried to define threatening out-groups (namely migrants, George Soros and Brussels). The construction of the image of migrants – not refugees - in the state-run campaigns has been used as continuous social, economic and security threats towards the Hungarian people. The centrali

sed, aggressive propaganda caused higher discrimination rate and higher acceptance of violence in the society against strangers.

Wojciech Przybylski, editor-in-chief of Visegrad Insight and chairman of the Res Publica Foundation in Warsaw, summarised the illiberal trends in the Visegrad countries and the consequences of the populist turn in the political communication sphere. Although Poland could be seen as a success story regarding its regime change and even after the big transformation Poland could be an exemplary country converging to the core of the European Union, the Polish society tended to believe in the slogan of 'good change', an invention of Jarosław Kaczyński's party in 2015. This romantic rebellion, a continuous cultural war against a clearly defined enemy determines the everyday life in Poland. Although there are some significantly similar signs in comparison to the nationalisation patterns in Hungary, nothing really happens in the same way in the two countries. In the changing media sphere, including the role and relevance of the local media as well as regarding the chances of the opposition parties in the upcoming local and regional elections, and the relations with the United States and Russia, Poland has not reached the same level of political populism like Hungary.

At the second session titled „The European Union in a Hostile Environment” two frontline „practitioners” made presentations and answered questions about the threat of Russian disinformation campaigns and about counter-measures that have been carried out. First, Ida Ekund Lindwall from the East Stratcom Task Force of the European External Action Service talked about disinformation as a weapon to destabilise Western democracies by amplifying already existing cleavages in society. Lies spread six times faster than truth: this is an explanation for the success of the infamous troll factory based in Saint Petersburg operating on twelve thousand square meters. When directed to home audience, trolls spread fake news and elaborate comments to highlight Russian superiority, whilst abroad they want to undermine trust in democratic structures, institutions and authorities. In both cases the European Union is represented as an interventionist, aggressive and/or a decadent, collapsing entity.

The second speaker, Martin Mycielski, correspondent of the Polish journal Gazeta Wyborcza and director of Partnerships and Communications at EU DisinfoLab in Brussels, explained the nature of actual cyber-operations in spreading disinformation. The findings of the Social Network Analysis of DisinfoLab highlighted how media outlets like Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik used their dubious cyber-connections to spread fake news during the French presidential elections. Just 1



like the Russian embassy in London which started one of the many circulating false narratives on the Salisbury attack. Debunking false narratives is not enough, since people often spread such views even if they do not believe in them on the assumption that news could theoretically be true even if they aren't. It is an important task to make Stratcom and DisinfoLab better equipped, staffed and financed, and perhaps even a more adequate methodology would be beneficial for these agencies in order to classify and falsify fake news and disinformation successfully.

In the first panel of the afternoon session titled "Quality Journalism under Changing Political, Technological and Business Circumstances" John Lloyd, Founding Member and Senior Research Fellow at the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford and Contributing Editor to the Financial Times, pointed out that the transformations in journalism are part of an ongoing process and we do not see the end, yet. The appearance of the Internet changed the business models of traditional media by moving advertising to other channels. The media outlets that continue to survive financially without major difficulties are the niche papers. The ideal of the unbiased and fair Anglo-Saxon journalism that seeks to verifiably report the truth still survives, but faces difficulties with those outlets entering the stage that have no problems blurring truth and lies just like RT. In this environment, quality paper-based journalism competes with the net dominated by non-media organizations working for income. The new trends in the media world, however, benefited public relations by providing instant space for companies that no longer need journalists to run a story. On the other hand, the pressure to be present publicly and to look transparent has also become a new driving force for firms operating on the market.

After general trends and ongoing changes in current journalism were discussed, Anna Szilágyi, Professor of Communications at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Hong Kong, has turned to the ever-present role of language in journalism. She argued that the way language works and is used for propaganda is becoming a topic today again. Regardless, language is still not a constituent part of trainings on media and media literacy. Still, language and vocabulary can activate certain frames of understanding in people's minds, which can then influence perceptions. It is also important to pay attention to what words are missing from a public discourse: their omission limits people's capability to think about other aspects that would be otherwise evoked. Staying with the example of the Hungarian governmental anti-migrant campaigns, the lack of vocabulary evoking humanitarianism is apparent. It is the responsibility of the media is that often takes over words that are loaded in its coverage without thinking about them. Even technic





al terms can thus become slurs - see the examples of migrant in Hungary or the expression tax relief invented in the United States. In the end, whose frames dominate the political language can be more influential in public life.

The presentation of Elodie Vialle, Head of Journalism & Technology Desk at the Reporters Without Borders, rounded up the panel. She talked about RWB's freedom of the press index and highlighted that serious transformations have been taking place in the Visegrad countries in the past year. To illustrate the negative trend she noted that the ranking of the Czech Republic has fallen by 11 points and that of Slovakia by 10 just in one year. Technology brought new threats to media freedom, such as techno-censorship, trolls and the ease of spreading fake news on social accounts. All these phenomena are especially dangerous because by now its magnitude is global and can influence political processes all across the world, creating an unbalanced and unfair environment for politics. Troll factories are spreading and the aim of their "cyber soldiers" is to target, pressure, discredit, intimidate and even threaten journalists, while spreading information in the interests of someone (who pays them) and amplify the voice of certain groups. The biggest challenge today is to find ways to fight against such groups without using censorship. A large part of responsibility lies within social media companies, like Facebook or Twitter, to go after such actors - whilst watchdogs try to put pressure on them to do so.

In the fourth session of the workshop invited speakers took a closer look at regional peculiarities in the relationship between politics and media characteristic in a populist era. The two presenters came from the Czech Republic and from Slovakia, both of them practising journalists and editors of daily papers. Martin Ehl, Chief International Editor of the traditional newspaper *Hospodárske Noviny* published in Prague outlined the media landscape in his country, where media owners are increasingly reluctant to fund quality journalism which does not produce much profit any more. He also described a number of concrete cases to display their efforts to debunk fake news spreading to Europe from Russia. One of the most interesting cases involved a story in which the fake news circulating on the internet was that kebabs sold in the Czech Republic had been deliberately "infected" with food poisoning viruses by the Ukraine. His colleague from Bratislava, Filip S tuhárik journalist and editor at a relatively new Slovakian media outlet, *Denník N*, explained how a number of brave young journalists embarked on launching a new political daily in an unfavourable economic and media environment, to introduce a very modern integrated entity, where both the print and online versions are able not only to survive but even to produce some profits after the difficult in

initial years - due to a fresh and professional journalistic style and the innovative financing methods like crowd-funding.

During the discussion it became obvious that the success of Denník N can also be explained by the relatively favourable political situation in Slovakia, where, compared to the Czech Republic and particularly Hungary, government interference in the operation of the media market is weaker. Participants acknowledged that even during these difficult times it is very important and not impossible to sustain quality journalism where consumers realise that credible and reliable news service cannot be provided for free. On the other hand, it would be extremely necessary at European level to prevent governments to distort the media market either by directly or indirectly supporting politically friendly media, e.g. by supplying them advertisements of state-owned companies. At the same time, eliminating politically motivated market distortions could be one tool to empower professional journalists to fight fake news themselves.

Nevertheless, there is a problem with market competition that makes the idea of self-regulation non-convincing - which is the number one concept on the agenda of the European Commission at the moment according to Alberto Alemanno, Jean Monnet Professor of European Union Law and Regulation, Scientific Director of the EU Public Interest Law Clinic, HEC Paris and New York University School of Law. Namely, social media platforms do not have incentives to block fake news because their revenues are highly dependent on clicks and shares. On the other hand, we can still observe positive signs of continuity as Michael Schudson, Professor of Journalism from the Columbia Journalism School in New York City explained in his intervention. Forty years ago, it was the New York Times and the Washington Post which unmasked the negative activities of government officials and contributed to their political failures. Today, these two outstanding newspapers – with a renewed business model – have done exactly the same and in consequence important members of the Trump administration had to resign. This can make us more optimistic about the future – at least, in the United States of America...

One of the main lessons to be drawn from the current state of interplay in the spheres of politics and media is that independent civil society and democratic, liberal political forces have to continue their efforts to renew their presence in the public discourse at European, national and local levels. Certainly, the task is even bigger and more complicated than a smart adaptation of political communication to a changing social and political environment. This is especially true in countries

where populists took over political power. Still, the better understanding of the political and media conditions of our age is part of the job to be done.

### Open Space

Network-building has been the second main objective of the project of the Hungarian Europe Society. In accordance with our proposal, invited guests and participants of the workshop did not only have fruitful discussions during the day, but they also accepted the invitation for a joint dinner that gave an opportunity for socialising and for further analyses of the themes raised during the sessions. As elaborated in our application, we had the intention to express and feel the mutual support and encouragement of like-minded people from different parts of Europe to each other in order to defend and represent our shared democratic values in our turbulent era. At the same time, the workshop was a direct continuation of similar public events organised by the Hungarian Europe Society the year before when we focused on emerging alternative ideas to the dominant populist narratives in the Visegrad region, especially in Poland and Hungary. As always, we relied on our existing international network, but also wanted to broaden its scope and deepen its cooperative potential.

The core of the concept to strengthen our regional and international network has been the idea to create a joint on-line platform for civil groups, think tanks and individual researchers. Open Space, a virtual infrastructure connected to our website is supposed to become an influential hub for reform-oriented ideas about the future of the European Union and the Visegrad region. Our old and new partners will gain free access to this on-line territory and can contribute to its success with their active involvement when spreading their views in an interactive, vibrant forum. We hope to reach out to bigger audiences in Hungary and in the region by the multiple use of existing online platforms of our partners, including the mobilisation of the circa 4500 members belonging to the Facebook group of the Hungarian Europe Society.

During the project period, we continued the preparation for a professional layout for the Open Space project and numerous publications and other relevant contents provided by the members of our Hungarian Europe Society have been uploaded on our website. At the moment, we are ready to contact again our partners who have been informed about the objective of our Open Space concept before to start the creation of the new on-online platform with their involvement. Recently, we had some unexpected technical difficulties and sometimes it has been difficult

t to co-operate with IT specialists who have their own preferences and divergent approach regarding the outcome of the initiative. Moreover, the new EU-level General Data Protection Regulation has brought a lot of uncertainties both to our everyday life and especially to the Open Space project. We had to stop our preparations for while until our own policy principles have been discussed and finalised after many rounds of consultation among activists and experts. Our guide-lines have been finally constructively elaborated and published on our website. Now our team will be able to concentrate on the tasks how to collect, upgrade and spread contents in a close co-operation with our partners, including the participants of our workshop. We hope that the Open Space concept becomes sustainable in the long run, but first we need to manage its take-off. Team members of the Hungarian Europe Society are more than ready to push further the implementation of our original idea in the following months.

Photos of the event are to be found on our website and all the presentations as well as the debates have been placed on the YouTube channel of the Hungarian Europe Society: <https://europatarsasag.hu/en/blog/populists-and-fake-news> and [www.youtube.com/user/METHungary/videos](http://www.youtube.com/user/METHungary/videos). The critical and independent Klubrádió presented a long report quoting speakers of the workshop in a special coverage on 16 June 2018: [www.europatarsasag.hu/sites/default/files/multimedia/audio/klub20180616-met.mp3](http://www.europatarsasag.hu/sites/default/files/multimedia/audio/klub20180616-met.mp3)

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