

**Speaking points of H.E.Mr Vincent Degert,
Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic
of Mauritius**

Round table : Beyond disinformation

9 March 2023, EU Delegation

Ladies and gentlemen

Introduction

Good afternoon.

Welcome to the Delegation of the EU for this round table on an increasingly topical and yet complex subject.

I have to say that for 2 years now I have become more and more interested in this subject and was even considering organising a conference.

When the Indian Ocean Region Coordinator of the Cyber4Dev programme, Mr Hannes Krause informed me a few weeks ago about the planned training on disinformation in Mauritius – the training took place on

Monday and Tuesday this week, I decided we could not miss this opportunity to discuss this topic with the media, civil society, academic circles and public institutions.

A team of two experts from the European External Action Service and the Cybersecurity for Development programme (a European Union project designed to promote cyber-resilience and cybersecurity in partner countries), are here with us this afternoon. We have Mr Hannes Krause and Mr Siim KUMPAS, Policy Officer at the East StratCom Task Force within the European External Action Service. Thank you gentlemen for having accepted to facilitate this round table.

I also wish to thank all of you for your presence this afternoon. I am certain that you will find this round table interesting.

Allow me to say a few words before we move forward.

First, we have to understand disinformation and its impact.

Disinformation is a form of Information Disorder – it is false information that is knowingly shared to cause harm.

Information manipulation, including disinformation, is not a new thing in the human society, but with the rapid digitalization of societies it is becoming a real challenge to all democratic societies in the world.

During the 2017 French Presidential elections, a duplicate version of the Belgian newspaper 'Le Soir' was created, with a false article claiming that Emmanuel Macron was being funded by Saudi Arabia!

There are different motivations of those responsible for disinformation campaigns. It can be either economic or political, and there is a myriad of state and non-state actors involved who use diverse tools and manipulation techniques to achieve their harmful goals.

During the coronavirus pandemic for instance, there has been an increase in information consumption. This has led to data overexposure, a spike in 'fake news' and conspiracy theories, breeding distrust in public institutions. The World Health Organisation (WHO) noted

that global citizens were victims of both the pandemic itself and an 'infodemic' that arose around it.

The direct and indirect impact of disinformation are difficult to quantify - we are only at the earliest of stages of understanding their full implications. However, what we know, is that the long-term implications of dis-information campaigns designed specifically to sow mistrust and confusion and to sharpen existing sociocultural divisions using nationalistic, ethnic, racial and religious tensions, are most worrying.

In 2018, an MIT Media Lab research found that lies disseminate 'farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth' and falsehoods were '70 % more likely to be retweeted than the truth'.

Hence, it is more important and urgent than ever, to build the resilience of our democratic societies to disinformation, and to build this resilience, it is important to understand what disinformation is about – how does it work, who are they, where are they, how do they work, what are their motives.

How to address disinformation?

Our two experts will provide us with more details on ways and means to tackle disinformation in a few minutes. But let me just say that if appropriate technological solutions, such as structural changes to the information ecosystem can be devised and implemented, technical solutions alone are not enough.

The problem is a “whole-of-society” problem, so a “whole-of-society” approach with the media, civil society, and people who are empowered through education and media literacy, to raise awareness about how disinformation works, need to be adopted. In other words, empowering society to tackle disinformation.

Lying is a problem, but the bigger problem is that we believe in those lies.

I also want to underline here that, preventing the spread of toxic information on information platforms, is not about

attacking freedom of speech, on the contrary, it is about protecting it.

The EU action to tackle disinformation

The spread of both disinformation and misinformation can have a range of harmful consequences, such as threatening our democracies, polarising debates, and putting the health, security and environment of EU citizens at risk.

Large-scale disinformation campaigns are a major challenge for Europe and require a coordinated response from EU countries, EU institutions, online platforms, news media and EU citizens.

Since 2015, the EU has significantly improved its capacity to tackle Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), protecting the EU's democratic processes, security and citizens.

The EU is implementing a decisive and coordinated action against Russia's disinformation campaign in the context of its military aggression against Ukraine.

The EU is determined to firmly respond to foreign information manipulation and interference by establishing a common understanding of the threat as well as further developing a range of instruments to effectively detect, analyse and address it and impose costs on the perpetrators of such activities. Moreover to enhance societal resilience, the EU will also strengthen access to credible information and free and independent media across the Union.

The problem of information disorder is global, so the response has to be global. This is why the European Union, through its Cyber Resilience for Development project is providing support to like-minded partner countries, like Mauritius, to enhance their capacity to counter the spread of disinformation.

The event

The programme of this round table is as follows :

In a few minutes, we will be screening a very short video of the keynote speech of the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security policy/Vice President of the European Commission, Mr Josep Borrell about the first EEAS – European External Action Service report on Foreign information manipulation and interference (*FIMI*).

The EEAS has created a specific unit - the Strategic Communication, Task Forces and Information Analysis Division to address foreign **information manipulation and interference, including disinformation.**

The East Stratcomm Task Force where Mr Kumpas works is one of the three Task Forces created within the EEAS.

In addition to a more precise understanding and diagnosis of the problem – from ‘fake news’, to ‘disinformation’, to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference - the EEAS has been developing and improving the means to prevent, deter and respond to FIMI.

The work carried out by the EEAS Strategic Communication, Task Forces and Information Analysis Division in 2022 has informed the first edition of the EEAS report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) threats.

The EEAS Strategic Communication, Task Forces and Information Analysis Division has also published a report on its 2022 activities to counter FIMI. Their work has considerably been shaped by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. It targets 6 objectives and have concrete results including the suspension of media outlets.

My colleagues will give you a USB key with both reports.

The video will then be followed by the presentation by Mr Siim KUMPAS, and Mr Hannes Krause, of 3 aspects, namely:

- Conceptual introduction to the current information environment and information disorder
- The role of social media platforms and digital service providers in information disorder and countering disinformation
- Building resilience against disinformation using a whole-of-society approach - The case of Estonia.

You will then have the opportunity to react and ask questions.

Thank you for your attention.