

Opening remarks by Drs. Frits Lintmeijer on the occasion of workshop 2 on 'Fighting propaganda and information warfare' of the Inter-Parliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CFSP/CSDP) on 28th April 2017 in Malta

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Using information to promote a certain cause or point of view is a century-old trade. For politicians, for vicars, for lawyers... for all sorts of professionals.

We call it propaganda. And not all propaganda is inherently bad.

It becomes a problem, when it is systematically used by authoritarian or dictatorial regimes that tolerate no sound but their own, portraying their own personal realities as the only truth.

This problem grows when individuals or groups are routinely stigmatized, threatened, excluded or stirred up and incited to commit atrocities. This is, for instance, how ISIS applies propaganda.

Things get worse when not only the information is misleading and people are stigmatized, but when the sender stays anonymous or pretends to be someone or something else. So faking a reality that does not exist and expressing opinions on behalf of people and groups that are not aware of it. An example is a fake-video by so-called Ukrainian soldiers that had a message for the Ukraine-referendum-voters in the Netherlands. In reality the clip appeared to be produced by a professional group of fake-messengers from outside Ukraine.

Above all, there is the danger of infiltration by third parties of our IT-systems. Via our systems they can transmit falsified data, or illegally read or misuse the content of our computers.

But, let's focus on the information warfare.

In this age of global technology, the scale to which both propaganda and fake news can be produced, published and multiplied, is new.

And social media have further accelerated this spread of 'fake news'.

Six out of ten news items shared, are passed on without being read first.

Dear colleagues,

Traditional theory of war told us long ago that capability and intent combined, can be an impressive force.

Today, I would like to add connectivity.

Because a combination of these three – capability, intent and connectivity – is exactly what is worrying us.

Much damage can be done when a regime or non-state actor misuses the resources, the will and the means to mobilise people - or to accelerate the spread of fake news - via the internet.

It is what we see every day. Some regimes and non-state actors are systematically using alternative facts to put people and whole communities on the wrong foot, and more importantly, to influence and undermine democratic processes.

National elections have become prone to infection by third parties. We saw it in the United States.

And because of the risk of influence from the outside, our Minister of the Interior decided at the recent elections in the Netherlands, for a manual, time-consuming count of the votes, instead of digital.

Whether the decision was necessary or not, we will not know for sure but we concluded 'beter safe than sorry'.

However, denying the use of modern technology in a highly developed information society cannot be the answer. Because it denies us freedom of action in our own societies. And if we favor these types of short-term solutions over long-term solutions, which other freedoms will we have to give up? The answer in my view is not limiting the freedoms of our societies or the freedom of internet.

The EU stands for democracy, the rule of law and freedom. These common values belong to our core values. Therefore, it is vital that we continue to show that we stand by these values strongly and that we will not give in.

Here are some examples of what is being done about it.

- We must guard the freedom of the press. Traditionally, a free and independent press has the task to identify and analyze news and events from different points of views, amongst the dozens of unsorted messages that reach us every minute through our social media accounts and mailboxes.

In recent years, free press has become an important factchecker in cases of dubious news, increasingly important for the checks and balances within our political system.

- At the EU level, the East StratCom task force has been created and an EU strategic communication has been published to counteract propaganda against it by third parties.

- At the NGO and scientific level, many fact-checking initiatives have been undertaken, such as the initiation of CrossCheck, the International Fact Checking Network and the strategic communication programme by the Center for European Policy Analysis.

- And recently, big companies like Facebook are getting more and more aware of their responsibilities when it comes to the spread of fake news through their services.

As politicians, we have a task to protect our free democratic societies against propaganda, fake news and other types of hybrid threats. That means:

- Protecting our free press
- Supporting serious research websites that investigate and unmask fake news
- Delivering means to secure our national communication and IT-systems against illegal infiltration
- Counteracting propaganda by third parties

Dear colleagues,

Having made these opening remarks, I realise that sometimes there is a thin line between facts and alternative facts. And the British saying 'where you stand, depends on where you sit' makes a definitive judgement about facts, let alone the truth, difficult.

But even then, doing nothing, is not an option.

And in addition to the measures I just mentioned which are necessary for a sound political debate, it is in my opinion crucial that citizens are able to distinguish facts from humbug.

Therefore, we should also have the ambition to educate, especially our young citizens, that there is more to the picture than meets the eye.

Citizens have an important role themselves, but the role of government is to strengthen their ability to do so.

Therefore, I would like to suggest to add this ambition to the final conclusions of this meeting.

Since the deadline was yesterday-evening, the Dutch delegation has already proposed to add this ambition to the final conclusions.

I am looking forward to a fruitful debate.

Thank you.