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INFODEMIC
& SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Infodemic
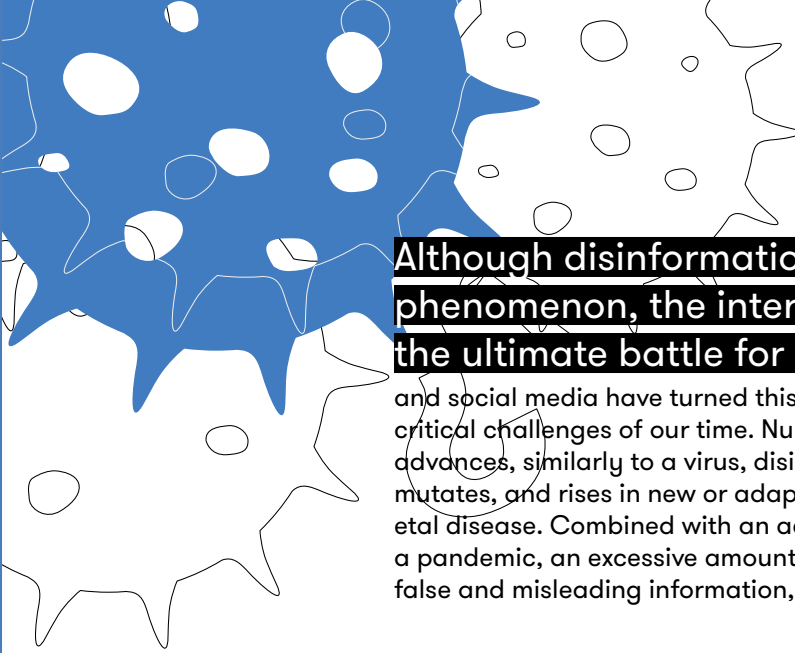# & Societal Resilience

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Although disinformation is hardly a new phenomenon, the internet has enabled the ultimate battle for hearts and minds, and social media have turned this issue into one of the most critical challenges of our time. Nurtured by these technological advances, similarly to a virus, disinformation quickly spreads, mutates, and rises in new or adapted forms resulting in societal disease. Combined with an actual disease outbreak, like a pandemic, an excessive amount of information, including false and misleading information, turns into an infodemic.

Uncertain and fearful situations in general are breeding grounds for disinformation, and recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale war in Ukraine have posed communication challenges for some states and direct threats to national security interests for all democratic states.

Disinformation was present even before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic brought about information chaos and a disintegration of the information environment. The legitimate fears of the population were exploited to pursue political and economic interests.

This information chaos continues after the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine that has brought about new topics which disinformation actors can use in promoting Russia's political goals and sowing distrust in media and state institutions.

As we have seen over the past years, crisis situations, like the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, allowed the information chaos sought by disinformation actors to thrive, sometimes confusing even mainstream factual media that were themselves in several cases guilty of spreading mis- or disinformation.

THE 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGE

Disinformation should be considered one of the most critical challenges of our time. This issue does not just affect a few selected countries; on the contrary, it is a wide-ranging issue that is present all over the world and threatens individuals, communities, societies, as well as the global scale of politics and health.

However, we are by no means talking about a new problem. It is true that it has increasingly resonated more and more in recent years, but information, whether true or not, has always held power. Disinformation has been present throughout the 20th century. Although not labelled as such, it has formed an important part of the information operations of the established powers. Whether we are talking about the First or the Second World War, or the Cold War, false information was gradually weaponised.

However, its reach or potential was still controlled by the dominance of political elites in the public space or the primacy of the standard media. The 21st century, however, heralded a major shift. The internet has offered opportunities for humankind, but at the same time, it poses challenges and also new threats. Social media are now enabling the ultimate battle for hearts and minds, which in 2020 turned into a full-blown infodemic.

The aim of the paper is to introduce the reader to the issue of disinformation and infodemics. In the first part, the paper explains disinformation, revealing the factors that influence its spread, especially in a democratic environment and hybrid threat-based setting. It then highlights the role of the media sector and uses concrete examples to show possible threats or vulnerabilities. In the second part, the paper focuses specifically on the issue of infodemics, using examples of disinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine to highlight the methods used, the actors and the victims of the information challenge. It concludes by offering a set of recommendations aimed at increasing societal and media resilience to disinformation.

EXPLOITING PEOPLE'S UNCERTAINTY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. WHEN THE VICTIM BECOMES AN INSTRUMENT

Infodemic as a term, then, can be widely understood as a phenomenon that has deepened and amplified these differences to a high degree and on a global scale. In essence, the current infodemic is the excessive amount of information, including false and misleading information, that has appeared in the information space during the crisis situation of the COVID-19 disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response.[1] At the same time, the infodemic is the direct result of several factors present even before the COVID-19 pandemic, including the lack of strategic communication by the state, the presence of a wide network of disinformation actors, and societal vulnerabilities to foreign malign influence.
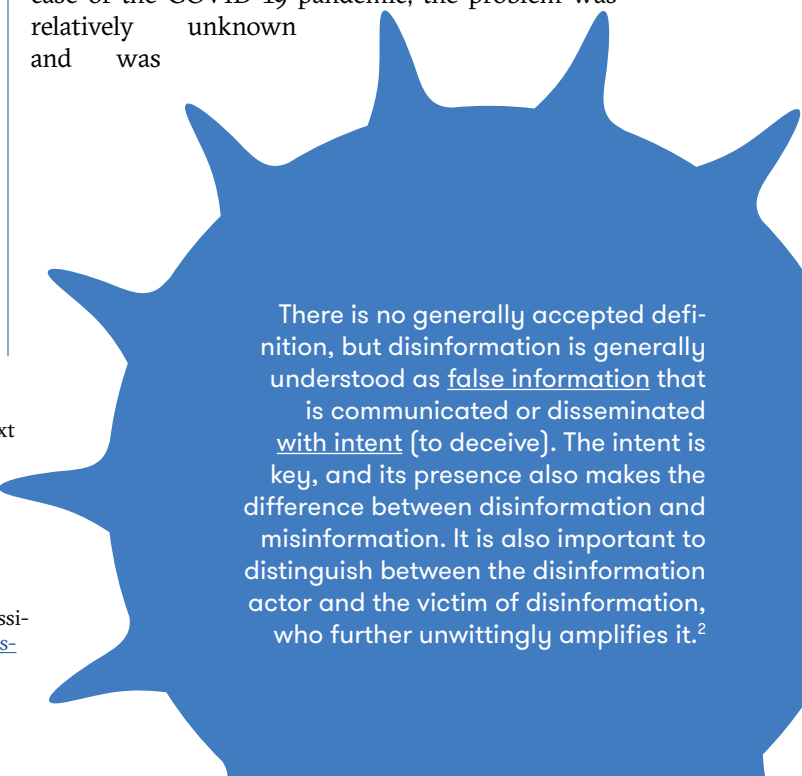
With the infodemic spreading from 2020 onwards, we can speak of a global problem of massive volumes of information of poor factual quality, misleading information or provably false information. The infodemic can be divided into two primary stages, the existence of which also confirms the high adaptability and ability of disinformation actors to exploit and move between diverse topics to which they apply similar, if not the same, mechanisms. The primary stages are: the one relating to the medical and, later, political disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, and then the one we are experiencing today, which relates to the subject of the war in Ukraine. Both have been focused on the targeting of emotions, insecurity and fear. At the same time, they successfully fill the information vacuum that arises in such cases.

However, each of the situations is somewhat different. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem was relatively unknown and was

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1 The World Health Organization (WHO) started using this term in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information, see: "Infodemic," WHO, https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1.

2 According to the EU, disinformation is false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm. Misinformation is false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can still be harmful. For further information, see: "Tackling online disinformation," European Commission, June 29, 2022, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation.

awaiting scientific explanation and subsequent action. The scientific process simply did not have time to offer answers as quickly as the lies could spread in the online space. The situation after February 24, 2022 was different. The enemy is clear, and its motives are known. Russia has fully exposed and openly begun to advance its imperialist interests. Their origins can, of course, be seen as far back as 2008 (Georgia) and 2014 (Crimea). These were accompanied by covert hybrid activities and the spread of malign influence. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is now more blatant than ever. It demonstrates that Russian interests are returning to a revival of history and old thinking about spheres of influence that does not recognise Ukraine as a sovereign state and independent nation, and a massive propaganda and disinformation campaign is helping to convince people of the ‚rightness' of Russia's actions. Although this has been ignored for several years, during which time it has undermined the pillars of the Western societies, today Russia's interests and the tools it uses to pursue them have been recognised.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first wave of disinformation focused mainly on the medical side of the matter. It is easy to recall the early narratives that questioned the seriousness of the coronavirus or compared it to the common flu. The death statistics were further questioned, and pseudo-scientific recommendations and charlatan cure-alls gradually emerged. For example, claims about the healing effects of vitamin D, Ivermectin[3] or iodine[4] in cases of COVID-19 went viral. The paradox is that many of the current disinformation (and in some cases political) actors gained popularity and prominence precisely because of the early waves of the infodemic. Mostly, however, these actors did not focus only on the health side of things, but also added a political aspect to the mix, mainly related to national anti-pandemic measures. Whether it was closed borders, compulsory wearing of masks[5], testing or, later, vaccination[6], we often encountered efforts to undermine confidence in state institutions and characterise decisions as alike to totalitarian or fascist practices. The efforts of these actors were primarily directed against leading political figures. E.g. in the case of Slovakia,

the narratives included attacks on President Čaputová's involvement in the vaccination campaign[7] or accusations of alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity against the government (the anti-pandemic measures were supposed to be a medical experiment on the citizens of the Slovak Republic against their will).[8]

The guiding thread of these efforts is relatively clear - to feed vested interests by deepening the fear and insecurity of the population. In other words, the legitimate fears of the population were exploited to pursue political and economic interests, which often may not even have been local. However, it was not just the massive instrumentalization of disinformation that took place. The victims of disinformation themselves were also instrumentalized, and faced a gradual radicalization and denial of factual reality. This is a fundamental feature of the infodemic - the deniers and sceptics of the pandemic, influenced by the plethora of false information, became instruments in the hands of those who spread it.

In fact, we still see reverberations today, and it should be added that many of the narratives used during the pandemic not only made no sense but also contradicted each other. However, even this did not prevent them from succeeding. This is an important feature of similar efforts. They often follow no logic, rely on out of context half-truths, and attack sensitive spots with the potential to polarise. Most important, however, is the fact that audience persuasion might not necessarily be the primary goal. The main aim is to create information chaos, which destabilises the functioning of not just a democratic society, but any society.

In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has also proved to be fertile ground for the pursuit of geopolitical interests. One need only recall China's mask or vaccination diplomacy and the quite questionable nature of the (sometimes useless) aid it provided. Or Hungary, and the attitude of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who had himself vaccinated with the Chinese vaccine Sinopharm, which was presented as a positive example of the relationship with China. He provided

3 The treatment of COVID-19 with the veterinary drug Ivermectin has also been attributed to a number of false authorities, i.e. figures from the medical community with little or no expertise in the field relevant to the assessment of pandemic measures. Infosecurity.sk, "MESÍK PRI PRETLÁČANÍ IVERMEKTÍNU ŠÍRI KONŠPIRÁCIE A OBVIŇUJE LEKÁROV Z BRANIA ÚPLATKOV," Facebook, August 19, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/2085101965139559/posts/2938658563117224.

4 The treatment with iodine was recommended, among others, by Marian Kotleba, a far-right politician and leader of the People's Party Our Slovakia, who also promoted the allegedly healing effects of the combination of the cough medicine Bromhexin and vodka. Infosecurity.sk, "PO VODKE S BROMHEXINOM PRICHÁDZA ĎALŠÍ LIEK Z ORDINÁCIE MARIANA KOTLEBU. KORONAVÍRUS ODPORÚČA LIEČIŤ JÓDOM," Facebook, August 18, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/2085101965139559/posts/2938086259841121.

5 One of the most active sources spreading lies and manipulations about COVID-19 throughout the pandemic was the website badatel.net. For a long time, it encouraged readers to boycott anti-pandemic measures, based on hoaxes about the negative effects of wearing masks, testing or vaccination. These harmful narratives were further reproduced by other sources and may have put public health at risk. Katarína Drevená, "Bádateľ pokračuje v ohrozovaní verejného zdravia," Infosecurity.sk, March 21, 2021, https://infosecurity.sk/domace/badatel-pokracuje-v-ohrozovani-verejneho-zdravia/?fbclid=IwAR2k4j-K7aN8uHsTe7RhytXB35VfEB59EzZaWUo53qIO1wW_nhA2YglNKovo.

6 For example, in July 2021, the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic reported on the lies spread by MP Ľuboš Blaha about vaccines against COVID-19. These included, for example, statements that the vaccines do not protect against new COVID variants or that the vaccine does not protect against the spread of the virus in general. Blaha later had to delete these disinformation posts on Facebook. Ministerstvo zdravotníctva Slovenskej republiky, "POSLANEC BLAHA ŠÍRI KLAMSTVÁ O VAKCÍNACH," Facebook, July 9, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/MinisterstvoZdravotnictvaSR/posts/pfbid0ayNvFzESVDJ78LRdkDYFvQzZyyBhE7pH65qQq6swR4rWib73wRA95qFHvZwkC5pJl.

7 Former constitutional judge and unsuccessful presidential candidate Štefan Harabin warned that President Zuzana Čaputová, Health Minister Vladimír Lengvarský and other politicians who supported the vaccination against COVID-19 would face prosecution for crimes against humanity as they allegedly „promoted murder". Marián Maraffko, "Harabin odkazuje prezidentke: „Vaša propagácia vraždenia neostane bez trestu!". Vraždením Harabin myslí očkovanie," Infosecurity.sk, July 25, 2021, https://infosecurity.sk/domace/harabin-odkazuje-prezidentke-vasa-propagacia-vrazdenia-neostane-bez-trestu-vrazdenim-harabin-mysli-ockovanie/.

8 For example, the disinformation media Hlavné správy reported about the submission to the International Criminal Court to prosecute the Slovak government for war crimes and crimes against humanity because of the nation-wide testing. Matúš Bučko, "Slovenská vláda môže byť stíhaná za vojnové zločiny, píše Hlavný denník. Ako zvyčajne, nie tak celkom," Infosecurity.sk, July 20, 2021, https://infosecurity.sk/domace/slovenska-vlada-moze-byt-stihana-za-vojnove-zlociny-pise-hlavny-dennik.

Hungarian citizens with 550,000 units of a vaccine that was not registered with the European Medicines Agency at the time and was supposed to be a replacement for the allegedly slow and unstable supply of EU certified vaccines.[9] And somewhat worse is the case of Russia, which has classically relied not on diplomacy but on quite blatant influence ped- dling. In the case of Slovakia, the purchase of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V proved to be significant, serving not only as a tool to strengthen Russia's position, but also as a trigger for a government crisis that led to the collapse of the govern- ing coalition.[10]

INFORMATION SPACE SWAMPED BY THE WAR IN UKRAINE

More than a year has passed since the beginning of the full- scale Russian aggression in Ukraine. These months have been full of Kremlin disinformation narratives, diversions and blame-shifting in an attempt to legitimise the aggres- sion. The disseminators of these narratives have also picked up on stories emerging long before 24 February 2022. In- deed, the Russian propaganda and disinformation machin- ery has been working at full speed for several years to help create information chaos and undermine the legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood.

The Kremlin's disinformation and manipulations have long been disseminated on the basis of the 'four D's' model (dismiss, distort, distract, dismay).[11] The strategy is based on an attempt to erode the trust of information consumers in the traditional and mainstream media, as well as state institutions.

Dismiss

The goal is to discredit factual information by attacking its source. Therefore, pro-Kremlin actors mostly resort to abusive language to sow distrust in the public about relevant sources

Distort

If reality does not match the image that pro-Kremlin actors want to portray, they supplement it with fabricated stories and their own 'facts'.

Distract

This is an attempt to divert the attention of the public or consumers of infor- mation by changing the subject. To do this, actors may use the technique of "whataboutism", referring to similar events or actions committed by someone else.

Dismay

This consists of trying to dissuade the public from a certain action (e.g. soli- darity and support for Ukraine) by pointing out the dire consequences it may lead to. However, these are often presented in a deceptive way, exaggerated through the use of hyperbole or arguments of slippery slope.[12]

9 Many actors reported positively on Orbán's vaccination and interpreted the event as a consequence of the EU's weak pandemic response, as the EU allegedly did not assist Member States sufficiently during the pandemic. For examples of positive communication about the Hungarian purcha- se of Chinese vaccines, see: Nocomment.sk, "Maďarsko si ide svoje, letia pre čínsku vakcínu," Facebook, February 16, 2021, https://www.facebook. com/1008829205981608/posts/1597702393760950.

10 Disinformation actors reacted very positively to the purchase of Russian vaccines, pointing to its high effectiveness. On the other hand, they emphasised the attitude of those politicians who underlined the propaganda element of the purchase – according to disinformers, this was to prove their anti-Russian and chauvinist attitude. For an example of such narrative, see: Eduard Chmelár, "ĎAKUJEM, PÁN PREMIÉR!," Facebook, March 1, 2021, https://www. facebook.com/277333422298557/posts/4047647635267098.

11 For more information, see: John B. Emerson, "Exposing Russian Disinformation," Atlantic Council, June 29, 2015, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/ blogs/ukrainealert/exposing-russian-disinformation/.

12 For more information, see: Sean Corp, "COMBATTING DISINFORMATION WITH THE FOUR D'S," University of Michigan, March 8, 2022, https:// ai.umich.edu/blog-posts/spotting-fake-news-ben-nimmo-disinformation-misinformation-fake-news-teach-out/.

The EUvsDisinfo portal, which regularly monitors disinformation narratives and tactics used to justify Russian aggression in Ukraine, also points to the frequent use of the so-called SWAMPED model.[13] This is because the most frequently disseminated pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda narratives operate with the following manipulative techniques:

S (strawman)

consists of attacks on a fabricated threat or claim that was
never actually made by the attacked actor;

W (whataboutism)

establishes a false parallel to a similar but unrelated
phenomenon or situation;

A (attack)

based on the use of aggressive rhetoric
against critics;

M (mockery)

based on sarcasm or open mockery of other actors in order
to portray them as weak and untrustworthy;

P (provocation)

pro-Kremlin actors often reach for provocative questions,
typically to point out the alleged benefits of others
(„Who benefits from this?");

E (exhaust)

the tactic aims to overwhelm the opponent with a large
amount of not always verifiable information, which makes
it difficult for him or her to respond afterwards;

D (denial)

rejection of the evidence presented.

Much of the disinformation that the Russian propaganda machinery was working with during 2022 was profiled and disseminated based on these strategies. Ukraine Crisis Media Center has published a summary of five groups of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives disseminated over the past year. Each of the groups identified contained a larger number of sub-narratives pursuing different goals:

- Narratives seeking to sow uncertainty – primarily concerned with the West (Western sanctions imposed on Russia, support for Ukraine, or acceptance of Ukrainian refugees). For example, the effect of the sanctions was questioned, which, according to the disinformers, were more damaging to the West or the EU than to Russia.[14] In addition, pro-Kremlin actors attacked Ukrainian ref-

13 For more information on the SWAMPED model and access to the disinformation narrative debunking database, see: "A GUIDE TO DECIPHERING PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION AROUND PUTIN'S WAR," EUvsDisinfo, March 2, 2022, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/a-guide-to-deciphering-pro-kremlin--disinformation-around-putins-war/?highlight=playbook.

14 For example, former Slovak prime minister and SMER-SD party leader Robert Fico argued that sanctions against Russia are self-defeating for the West. The war in Ukraine and the related sanctions on the Russian Federation are said to suit only the USA, which was supposed to have forced the EU to impose them in order to weaken it (Robert Fico, "JEDNO EURO ZA JEDEN DOLÁR, DOKONCA DNES UŽ MENEJ AKO JEDEN DOLÁR!," Facebook, July 14, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/videos/442521467733079). MEP and leader of the far-right party Republika Milan Uhrík spread the narrative that sanctions against Russia are „suicidal" and that by imposing them, Western countries are not punishing Russia, but only their own citizens. Milan Uhrík "Energetická kríza? Nie, len dôsledok hlúpych rozhodnutí hlúpych politikov!," Facebook, November 2, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1055179805159299.

ugees, who were portrayed as a burden on the economy of the host states;

- Narratives undermining Ukraine's relations with other strategically important states. This includes narratives of fictitious attacks on Ukraine by neighbouring states, in particular Poland[15] and Hungary;

- Narratives blaming the events in Ukraine on the West, the US or Ukrainians themselves. In this context, not only narratives about faked attacks by Western security services (e.g. in the case of the Bucha massacre), but also those accusing Ukraine of provocations and threats to use chemical, biological or nuclear weapons[16] were dominant;

- Narratives distorting real events in an attempt to present a clear Russian superiority. At the same time, there was a campaign to discredit the Ukrainian army and its achievements. In particular, mocking rhetoric portraying the army as weak and incompetent was frequent. According to Kremlin propaganda, the inept Ukrainians were responsible, for example, for the attack on Dnipro on 14 January 2023.[17] There were also lies about NATO which often included claims that the Alliance was sending troops to Ukraine or that this was a war between Russia and the US;

- Narratives demonising Ukraine and Ukrainians. This was based primarily on the alleged militarisation and fascism that was supposed to be so widespread in Ukraine that it permeated both the military and the decision-making processes in the state.[18] The idea of the alleged glorification of far-right ideologies by Ukraine was one of the main arguments used to justify Russian aggression against Ukraine. This narrative served to deliberately and manipulatively create hatred and an image of the enemy.[19]

EVEN THE TRADITIONAL MEDIA GET IT WRONG

For better or worse, over years, the internet (and social media specifically) have been gradually moving from the role of a peripheral force to that of an instrument of change. In the early days of the internet itself, the online space was connected by only a few communication nodes. In the 21st century, every person with a mobile connection has become a communication point. At the same time, each person becomes a transformer of information; to some extent, each person can be seen as a medium. This is only further extrapolated by social networks. Not only in this sense, the online space can be seen as a true revolution of communication which has essentially removed all communication and information barriers.

The dynamics of these technological developments have disrupted the quite clearly established boundaries of the media space. This is also why media today can be divided into standard (mainstream or traditional) and the so-called alternative (fringe or disinformation) ones. The differences between the two are particularly evident in their compliance with the rules of journalism or journalistic ethics. Further to the alternative media's obscure background, anonymous authors, use of questionable sources or manipulative techniques, the key difference between the mainstream and the alternative lies in the fact that alternative media do not create topics. They only shape them secondarily and further amplify them. In other words, the significant part and orientation of public discourse is still shaped by the mainstream media. Which, of course, also increases the significance of the responsibility they shoulder.

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15 For this purpose, for example, a disinformation narrative was spread about Poland's plans to attack Ukraine (Katarína Drevená, "Podľa Infovojny a Aeronetu plánuje Poľsko napadnúť Ukrajinu. Slová poľského prezidenta boli vytrhnuté z kontextu," Infosecurity.sk, May 25, 2022, https://infosecurity.sk/dezinfo/podla-infovojny-a-aeronetu-planuje-polsko-napadnut-ukrajinu-slova-polskeho-prezidenta-boli-vytrhnute-z-kontextu/), or about the alleged inclination of Polish political elites towards fascism and the worship of Stepan Bandera. Jakub Neščivera, "Ruská propaganda sa snaží rozdeliť Poliakov a Ukrajincov šírením dezinformácií," Infosecurity.sk, January 22, 2023, https://infosecurity.sk/zahranicne/ruska-propaganda-sa-snazi-rozdelit-poliakov-a-ukrajincov-si-renim-dezinformacii/.

16 One of the disinformation narratives is that Ukraine is secretly developing nuclear weapons, or experimenting with and producing biological weapons in collaboration with the USA. For an example of such a narrative, see: Armáda Ruskej Federácie "POTVRDENÉ, NA UKRAJINE SA NACHÁDZAJÚ BIOLOGICKÉ LABORATÓRIA, KTORÉ NESMÚ PADNÚŤ RUSOM DO RÚK," Facebook, March 9, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/386600464835386/posts/2084817255013690.

17 On January 14, the Russians attacked a residential building in the city of Dnipro with a Ch-22 missile. Speculations were sparked by the words of Ukrainian presidential adviser Oleksiy Arestovych, who claimed in his live stream that the building was hit by a Russian missile shot down by Ukrainian air defences. His claims were immediately denied by the Ukrainian army, which did not have the ability to shoot down Ch-22 missiles. However, Arestovych's words about the attack already resonated in the Russian information space and helped the Kremlin's propaganda, which could again falsely accuse Ukraine (Infosecurity.sk, "NEPRESNÉ SLOVÁ UKRAJINSKÉHO PREZIDENTSKÉHO PORADCU ARESTOVYČA O ÚTOKU V DNIPRE POSLÚŽILI PUTINOVSKEJ PROPAGANDE," Facebook, January 19, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/infosec.sk/posts/pfbid0TYmFJ6xBmKBiZYVz47DArYtg54JYLBHDrUZGJ-zsTAAJHGTiX7mjx3gKVj9pnBZfal). The Facebook profile of the Embassy of Russia in Slovakia also contributed to the spread of disinformation that the Russian missile „fell" on a civilian object as a result of thedefence of the Ukrainian anti-aircraft system. Hoaxy a podvody - Polícia SR "Takto Rusi zavraždili civilistov na Ukrajine," Facebook, January 17, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/hoaxPZ/videos/620373323186201.

18 For more on how the narrative of Ukrainian fascism has been shaped by Russian propaganda since 2014, see: "Ukrainian fascism and high energy prices: what narratives did pro-Russian propagandists spread in Slovakia in January? (Kremlin Watchers Movement Policy Brief – January 2023)," Infosecurity.sk, January 31, 2023, https://infosecurity.sk/dezinfo/ukrainian-fascism-and-high-energy-prices-what-narratives-did-pro-russian-propagandists-spread-in--slovakia-in-january-kremlin-watchers-movement-policy-brief-january-2023/.

19 For more information, see: "Key Russian Disinformation Narratives of 2022," Ukraine Crisis Media Center, February 8, 2023, https://uacrisis.org/en/key-russian-disinformation-narratives-of-2022.

Although traditional media such as television, radio or print are still one of the main sources of information, the situation is gradually changing and the number of people getting their information from social networks and alternative media is increasing.[20] The need for quality journalism is thus increasing in direct proportion to the increase in problematic content (disinformation, conspiracy theories, propaganda, manipulation) in the information space. The ability to recognise this problematic content is a prerequisite for the correct grasping and presentation of information.

However, given the sophistication of some narratives and their originators, there is now a distortion of discourse even in the case of some mainstream media. For example, the mainstream media may slip into narrowing the debate by omitting information that is relevant to the context, taking on unverified information that subsequently turns out to be false, or presenting the views of false authorities (i.e. experts who are not competent in the field they are commenting on). Appeals to false authority were a feature of the alternative media during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in its early stages, and may also have appeared in the mainstream media.

EXAMPLES OF MEDIA MISCONDUCT

A typical example of media misconduct during the pandemic was the invitation of molecular biologist and virologist Soňa Peková, who spread lies about the origin and nature of the virus throughout the pandemic, to the Czech weekly Reflex.[21] In the interview, Peková said that fears about the virus were unfounded and that the virus would soon disappear, which later turned out to be untrue. Peková's actions reinforced the narrative of a laboratory-engineered virus, contributing to conspiratorial thinking, and may have strengthened opposition to the pandemic measures in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.[22] Her claims about COVID-19 have been refuted by several leading virologists.[23]

Similar cases have also been recorded in the Slovak public broadcaster RTVS. For example, in January 2023, the pro-Russian commentator and conspirator Eduard Chmelár, who has long downplayed Russian aggression against Ukraine, was invited to the RTVS discussion programme Do kríža.[24] Although the topic of the discussion was oriented towards early elections and related political topics, even in this field his impartiality could not be counted on. This case in particular revealed significant misconduct on the part of the public service media, which marks a decline in quality and impartiality resulting from irresponsible selection of guests. Chmelár was also recently invited to be interviewed by PLUS 7 Dní, where, paradoxically, he commented on topics such as critical thinking and polarisation in society or the war in Ukraine and its possible solutions.[25]

20 "Výsledky prieskumu verejnej mienky pre MEMO 98", MEMO98, January 2020, https://memo98.sk/uploads/content_galleries/source/memo/slovak--parliamentary-elections-2020/tv-monitoring/memo-98_prieskum-focus-prva-cast_januar2020.pdf.

21 The interview can be found at: Čestmír Strakatý, "Soňa Peková: Covid do Vánoc opravdu zmizí, výrazně zeslábl, je tu šílenství. Potvrzuje se, že není z přírody," Reflex, October 6, 2020, https://www.reflex.cz/clanek/rozhovory/103250/sona-pekova-covid-do-vanoc-opravdu-zmizi-vyrazne-zeslabl-je-tu-silenstvi-potvrzuje-se-ze-neni-z-prirody.html.

22 It should be added that currently there are new as yet unconfirmed findings that point to an artificial/laboratory origin of COVID-19. This is based on a US Department of Energy assessment. However, in her rhetoric, Peková worked without these findings and thus encouraged conspiratorial thinking, including, for example, about COVID-19 as a plan for world domination by political elites. Read more about the new findings: Natasha Bertrand, Jeremy Herb. "US Energy Department assesses Covid-19 likely resulted from lab leak, furthering US intel divide over virus origin," CNN, February 27, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/26/politics/covid-lab-leak-wuhan-china-intelligence/index.html.

23 Debunks of Peková's statements can be found at: Jan Žabka, "Virus ze zkumavky? Expertům chybí důkazy pro výroky bioložky a mediální hvězdy Pekové," Hlídací Pes, June 17, 2020, https://hlidacipes.org/virus-ze-zkumavky-expertum-chybi-dukazy-pro-vyroky-biolozky-a-medialni-hvezdy-pekove/.
It is also worth noting the misconduct of the Slovak magazine Trend, which published an article by the Chinese ambassador back in 2019. In his article, he addressed the issue of the Hong Kong protests. He referred to the demonstrators as terrorists and described the protests as supported by foreign forces. Although the article was not published as editorial content but as paid advertisement, the mainstream media nevertheless served to spread Chinese propaganda. CEIAS also covered this incident in its article. For more information, see: Matej Šimalčík "Ako slovenské médiá uverejnili čínsku propagandu," CEIAS, August 27, 2019, https://ceias.eu/sk/ako-slovenske-media-uverejnili-cinsku-propagandu/.

24 The discussion can be found at: "Do kríža (Od referenda k predčasným voľbám)," RTVS, January 25, 2023, https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/15289/382064.

25 The interview can be found at: Norbert Dolinský, "Uštipačný Chmelár: Ja nie som proruský, ale pročínsky. Predovšetkým však vnímajme naše záujmy," Plus 7 Dní, March 2, 2023, https://plus7dni.pluska.sk/domov/ustipacny-chmelar-ja-nie-som-prorusky-ale-procinsky-predovsetkym-vsak-vnimajme-nase-zaujmy.

Other mainstream media also occasionally provide space for statements by individuals who are not experts on the topic under discussion and have a significantly distorted and biased perception of the issue. An example is Ján Baránek, a geography graduate who presents himself as a political scientist and a relevant political analyst, but in reality spreads disinformation and pro-Russian narratives. He was invited to RTVS in 2021 to comment on the coalition crisis after the purchase of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V against COVID-19. Meanwhile, in the past, Baránek has continuously questioned both measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and the production of vaccines.[26]
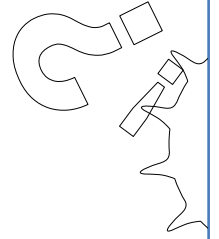
The uncritical presentation of the opinions of incompetent persons or experts who deliberately distort reality has also occurred in other media. At the end of 2021, the Slovak daily Pravda published an interview with Milan Žitný, in which the causes of the death of former police president Milan Lučanský were clearly questioned, despite the fact that the investigation had preliminary ruled out external culpability. The journalist who interviewed Žitný did not add any additional comment to his false statements.[27]

Similarly, TA3 picked up on the statements of Stanislav Pánis (an analyst at the Slovak branch of the J&T bank) in which he claimed that the rapid inflation and the energy crisis do not stem from the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine, but are the result of the artificial promotion of the green agenda, which weakens democracy and strengthens autocracy in the West. In the interview, Pánis presented the EU's climate action as „green ideology", „green sectarianism" and a senseless attempt to save the climate with fossil-free fuels, which he said the EU and the West are destroying themselves. The interview subsequently provided ammunition for various alternative media outlets, which spread Pánis's words on their platforms as true.[28]

Some of the Czech mainstream media, including idnes.cz, have also been repeating narratives about green policies used by anti-systemic actors, alternative media, and authors of chain emails. As found by the recent report by Europeum Institute for European Policy, the majority of these articles labelled the European Green Deal as an EU tool for controlling citizens. The second most common narrative described green policies as harmful for the economy of individual member-states. The same report revealed that another soft spot of mainstream media which renders them susceptible to spreading mis- and disinformation is their blog sections. People can often freely express their thoughts in these sections without any or only limited oversight from the in-house editors.[29]

The pandemic has also highlighted another long standing means of exploiting mainstream media for the spread of disinformation - the misinterpretation and misuse of news coverage to support conspiracy narratives. A prominent example from the Czech Republic involves a news report by Prima CNN News on the reliability of COVID-19 testing, testing methods, and individual testing facilities. The report showed that one testing facility in Prague was not delivering completely reliable results and explained that not all testing methods have the same accuracy. However, several anti-system actors exploited the coverage to support their claims about the futility of COVID-19 testing and other counter-pandemic measures introduced by the government. This further undermined the public's trust in state institutions and political leadership in the country.[30]
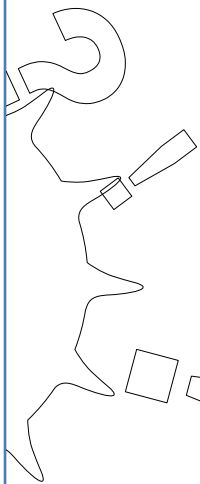
26 The interview can be found at: "Z prvej ruky," RTVS, March 3, 2021, https://www.rtvs.sk/radio/archiv/1175/1521130.

27 The interview can be found at: "Žitný o Lučanskom: Trvám na tom, že ho zabili," Pravda, December 31, 2021, https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/612002-zitny-o-lucanskom-trvam-na-tom-ze-ho-zabili/

28 A recording of the broadcast can be found at: "Analytik: Západ sa zničí sám energeticky aj ekonomicky. Nepotrebuje k tomu ani hrozbu z Ruska," TA3, July 6, 2022, https://www.ta3.com/relacia/24905/analytik-zapad-sa-znici-sam-energeticky-aj-ekonomicky-nepotrebuje-k-tomu-ani-hrozbu-z-ruska.

29 For more information, see: Tatiana Mindeková, "MONITORING OF THE EU'S GREEN POLICIES: PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES IN THE CZECH AND SLOVAK INFORMATION SPACE," EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, January, 2023, https://europeum.org/data/articles/monitoring-of-the-eu-s-green-policies-perceptions-and-narratives-in-the-czech-and-slovak-information-space.pdf.

30 The report can be found at: "Hoax: reportáž CNN Prima News o rozdílných výsledcích testů na koronavirus," Česká televize, February 7, 2021, https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/11030967025-newsroom-ct24/221411058170005/cast/818380/.

Certain Polish media also presented quite controversial information on the COVID-19 pandemic, including the mainstream public media like TVP.[31] In March 2020, just at the beginning of the pandemic they published a video interview where an invited expert was comparing COVID-19 to HIV which at that point could have caused an additional panic among the population. Doctor Bogdan Stelmach, who was a sexologist, for some reason was part of the conversation of COVID-19 making very odd statements and sharing figures which were not at that point proved scientifically.[32] For instance, Stelmach said that 20% of COVID-19 was transmitted "from hand to hand".

The most notorious examples of COVID-19 disinformation appeared on the websites of the Kremlin-sponsored media, such as sputnik.pl. It was activated again when Western vaccines emerged on the market and started to compete with the Russian Sputnik V. In April 2021, when Polish prime-minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced that he would use the AstraZeneca vaccine, sputnik.pl immediately labeled that statement as "worse than Hitler's propaganda".[33]

Furthermore, a new dimension of such narratives have been reinvented since Russia's war in Ukraine started. In March 2022 sputnik.pl published an opinion piece which argued that "the collective West" was using the war in Ukraine to prolong the state of emergency for the COVID-19 pandemic "which was beneficial for their elites".[34] The article itself is full of anti-Western narratives, typical for the pro-Kremlin propaganda, such as criticism of Kosovo's independence and the suggestion that "the collective West" wants to control all countries on the planet.
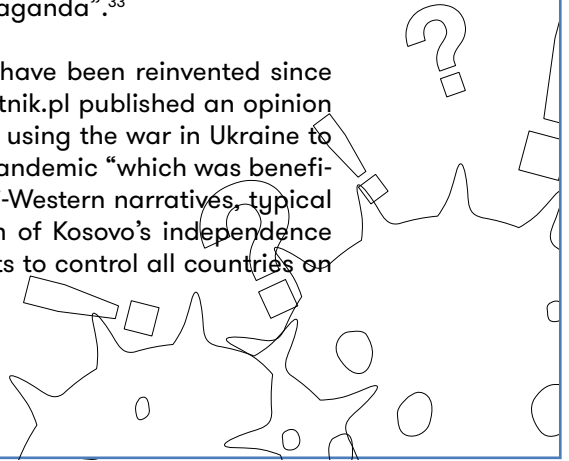
HOW CAN INDIVIDUALS COUNTER DISINFORMATION

Currently, the spread of disinformation is being combated primarily in a reactionary way. The fight against the infodemic is admittedly a difficult one, but not a lost cause completely. Ultimately, it is a long-distance race and requires long-term efforts and a systematic approach in several areas to be successful. At the same time, the approach must reflect the very societal nature of the infodemic. In other words, if we want to limit the ills of infodemics, we cannot just involve the state, a few activists or journalists.

Whilst it has been relatively successful relying on individuals to be, by and large, smart enough to distinguish the efforts of disinformers from the more reliable media, it has never been sufficient, and is only a patch for the weakening firewall of information and cognitive security. The situation calls for the application of a whole-of-society approach, but the truth is that even the application of a whole-of-government approach is currently lacking in many states. In other words, demo-

cratic states are largely unprepared, lacking capacity, funding, but also sufficient know-how. However, it remains critical to focus on the essential component of a well-functioning and defensible democracy in the 21st century - educated and well-prepared citizens. This, of course, is already a question of finding solutions in the long term and, in particular, the need to adapt educational processes to reflect the needs of lifelong learning focused on digital citizenship.

Several times in the course of the paper, we also focused on the role of the standard media, which today should to some extent play the role of watchdog against the influence of disinformation. In other words, to limit the rampant growth of alternative realities by means of facts. We therefore also offer a short set of recommendations intended for the wider public, but especially students of journalism and fields related to the media space. The recommendations will serve to promote the publishing of accurate information, and also help in nav-

31 "Seks w czasie epidemii. Ekspert odpowiada na pytania," TVP Info, March 24, 2020, https://www.tvp.info/47250349/seks-w-czasie-epidemii-koronawirusa-bezpieczny-ekspert-informuje-wieszwiecej.

32 Marta K. Nowak, "Groźna dezinformacja. TVP szczytuje na temat seksu w czasach koronawirusa," OKO Press, March 25, 2020, https://oko.press/tvp-szczytuje-na-temat-seksu-w-czasach-koronawirusa.

33 "Morawiecki zaszczepi się AstraZeneką: „Propaganda gorsza niż za Hitlera"," SputnikNews, April 20, 2021, https://pl.sputniknews.com/polska/2021042014157560-morawiecki-zaszczepi-sie-astrazeneka/

34 "Ukraińska lekcja dla Polski," SputnikNews, March 9, 2022, https://pl.sputniknews.com/20220309/ukrainska-lekcja-dla-polski-17534653.html

igating and working with sources in the information space. Furthermore, as we have already written, the media today is, to some extent, anyone, so the following recommendations are also applicable at the level of individuals or communities, which form the backbone of a democratic society:

Distinguish between reliable media and sources of information:

to verify a lesser-known or difficult to distinguish source, it is possible to use existing databases verifying the quality of media and pages (konspiratori.sk, blbec.online, Gerulata Technologies, Atlas konspirací and for foreign sources, e.g. Media Bias Fact Check). These databases now cover not only major media, but also various websites, social media pages or specific profiles (influencers or politicians).

Verify specific claims, especially if you have doubts about their accuracy:

in addition to databases of sources, it is also possible to consult databases of disinformation, conspiracy or propaganda narratives, which often provide arguments to refute the narrative in question. We can look for information on fact-checking portals (in both Slovakia and Czech Republic, for example, there is the demagog.sk and demagog.cz project focused on verifying the factuality of statements made by politicians and public figures; the Czech project Čeští elfové monitors not only social media and websites but also chain emails; also organisations carrying out investigations into disinformation actors and their networks like Investigatívne centrum Jána Kuciaka, Investigace.cz, and Hlídací pes; the Facebook page of the Police focused on verifying information Hoaxes and Frauds - Police of the Slovak Republic; or the fact-checking sites AFP Fakty Manipulátoři, and Ověřovna. In the case of foreign countries, we recommend, for example, the EUvsDisinfo database, EDMO, AFP Fact Check, and POLITIFACT (focuses on the American context).

To strengthen critical thinking, to train the identification of argumentation errors, fallacies and manipulation techniques:

the various lists that exist can help us to do this. For example, the NSA Hybrid Threat Dictionary contains a number of manipulation techniques, the same goes for bezfaulu.net, and we can also reach for new manuals on critical thinking.

We should be mindful of context:

a claim we are in contact with does not always have to be outright disinformation/untruth. It may be a statement taken out of context or deliberately placed in a different context.

Be wary of image material or video content selection:

such content can now be manipulated. This concerns not only deepfake videos or modified images (Example: Biden's visit to Kyiv), but also our opinion can be distorted by presenting an old image from a different situation in a new false context (Example: A German Leopard tank was supposed to be destroyed in Ukraine, but it was an image from Syria in 2018).

CONCLUSION

While disinformation is hardly a new phenomenon, the internet and social media have turned it into a rampant societal illness. Like a virus, it thrives when conditions are favourable and can even mutate into new or adapted forms. Recent crises, such as the pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, have provided fertile ground for disinformation to spread like wildfire. By exploiting people's legitimate fears, those who spread disinformation have pursued their own political and economic interests. But it is not just the spread of false information that is troubling; it is also the gradual radicalization and denial of reality among those who fall victim to it. This is a fundamental reversal of the infodemic phenomenon: deniers and sceptics of the pandemic, or people who side with Russia in the conflict, have become tools in the hands of disinformation peddlers. As we have seen in recent years, even trustworthy traditional media outlets can fall prey to disinformation efforts, especially when faced with unprecedented situations like a novel virus or fog of war.

As with fighting a virus, countering disinformation is lengthy and arduous work. As it mutates into new forms and keeps popping up in new locations via new transmitters, it is a constant fight that needs cooperation among whole societies. To be effective, both state institutions and citizens must take part. Governments must engage in consistent strategic communication, while individuals need to be vigilant in the information space, check their sources, and consume diverse and factual news.
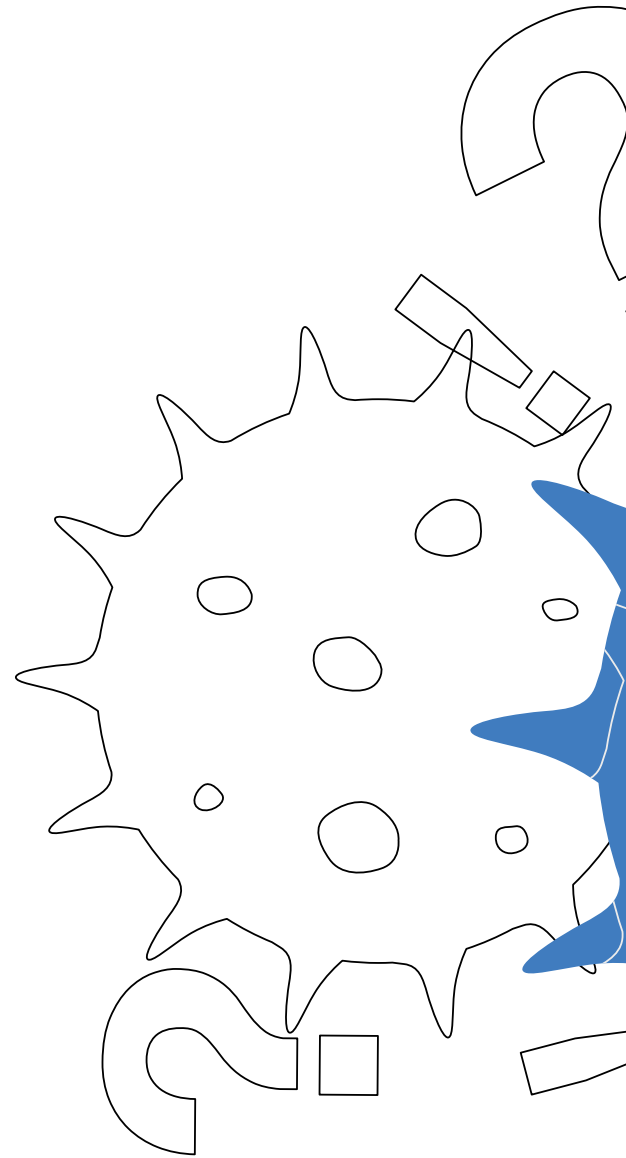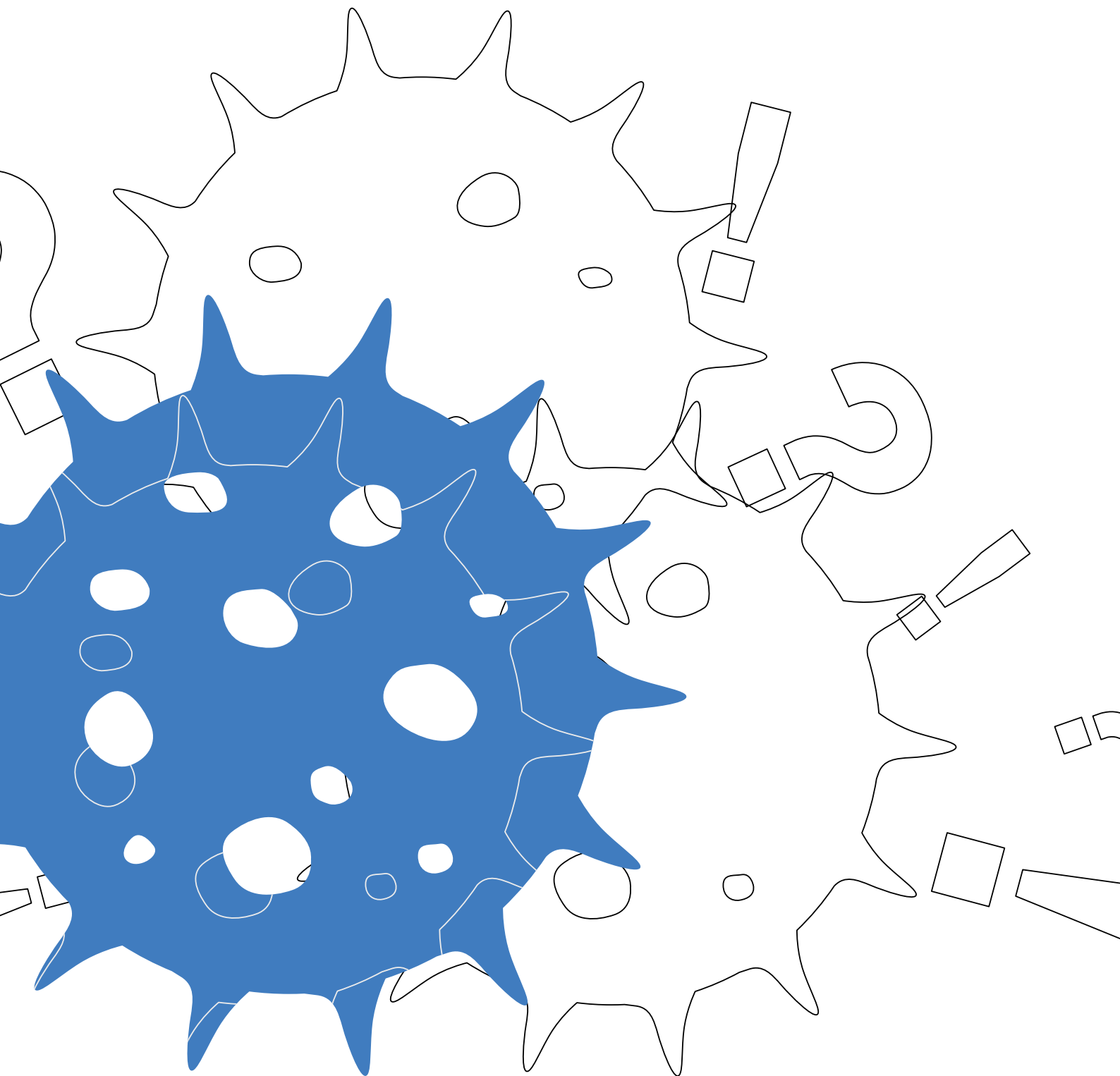
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AMO is a non-governmental not–for–profit Prague-based organization founded in 1997. Its main aim is to promote research and education in the field of international relations. AMO facilitates the expression and realization of ideas, thoughts, and projects in order to increase education, mutual understanding, and tolerance among people.

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