The Position of Humanities and Social Sciences in European Education and their Role in the Fight against Disinformation and Propaganda[1]

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Abstract

In the European area, we have recently noticed an increase in the spread of conspiracy theories and propaganda. Several crises (especially the crisis associated with the Covid-19 pandemic) have reduced the credibility of European/Western institutions in the eyes of many young people. In addition, some states are weakened by the rise of Pan-Slavism and nationalist ideas. In this context, is it necessary to reconsider the education of future European citizens? How to approach this if countries are facing multiple challenges at the same time?

Keywords: European education, European citizenship, disinformation, propaganda, Pan-Slavism, critical thinking, media education.

Disinformation has always been present in our society; however, its impact has recently become more significant due to its spread and accessibility. False information and manipulation affect the lives of all European citizens, influencing their opinions and decisions, polarizing debate, creating tension in society, and, in many cases, even undermining electoral systems and causing distrust in public institutions. Young people are generally considered to be at risk the most, as they are easily targeted by social networks, their creators, and promoters. In fact, up to 63% of young Europeans are exposed to fake news more than once a week, according to EU surveys (European Commission, 2019).

Crises and Disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe

The spread of fake news and misinformation in the European context has significantly increased after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has undoubtedly had a negative impact on the vaccination rate of Europeans themselves, which reached an average of 66% in December 2021, however with clearly visible regional differences. While Western European countries reported a high vaccination rate of around 80% (e.g., Portugal and Spain), some Central and Eastern European countries, such as Slovakia, reported rates below 50%, or even lower, as is the case of Romania and Bulgaria (24%). Furthermore, the situation with the spread of disinformation had come under scrutiny in many countries after the outbreak of the Russian military invasion against Ukraine, which began in February this year, when, after the initial shock of all Europeans, the attention of many citizens turned precisely to the dangers of the spread of conspiracy theories, as well as Russian propaganda.

We consider it necessary to point out the interconnectedness of both phenomena, which is clearly visible, for example, in the countries of Central Europe, where disinformation before the outbreak of the pandemic focused mainly on Russia's policy and questioning the importance of international organizations such as the EU and NATO. Members of GLOBSEC, which has been dealing with the issue of disinformation since 2015, pointed out that after the annexation of Crimea, some internet portals in Slovakia started spreading conspiracy theories and Russian propaganda. Their number subsequently began to grow rapidly. When the *konspiratori.sk* portal was created, the list had approximately 60 websites, while in 2021 there were already around 200. According to the *blbec.online* portal, there are over 1,700 disinformation sites and open Facebook groups in Slovakia. According to GLOBSEC, we also have to add those that are closed. (Klingová, In: Kačmár, 2021)

Slovak disinformation portals often take content from Czech sources. Their Slovakian counterparts cooperate with Czech disinformation servers, but cooperation between disinformation agents also takes place at the level within the state. (ibid.)

As stated by the Slovak disinformation and conspiracy expert K. Klingová from GLOBSEC, in the early days of the pandemic, some of these disseminators quickly adapted to the situation and started to use "health hoaxes" in order to undermine confidence against the West. Consequently, questioning NATO and the EU remained their main theme, but their "narrative shifted to the health sector." (Klingová, In: Kačmár, 2021) Despite the efforts of several Slovak government officials who tried to explain that the EU is helping its citizens during the pandemic, some activists manipulated the public by saying that Russia and China are doing much more for the people and that the EU is incapable in this sense. In doing so, the disseminators took advantage of the lack of communication both at the level of the EU, as well as its member states. In Slovakia, where the governing coalition was formed after the parliamentary elections that took place just at the time of the outbreak of the first wave of the pandemic, the issue became a "test of strategic and crisis communication by public officials and institutions," which had long been given insufficient attention in the country. (ibid.)

This expert's comments show that while initially the disseminators of this information were considered to be more of a "narrow group of people or websites on the fringes of society" with a small spectrum of readers distrustful of the system, in recent years, conspiracy theories, hoaxes and disinformation have become part of the mainstream and a common part of political debates. (ibid.) Moreover, in the last parliamentary elections in Slovakia, elected politicians have been close to similar narratives. This problem nowadays is no longer exclusive to foreign actors but also to some political parties that profile themselves through the aforementioned themes, addressing groups of addressees prone to believe disinformation.

The above problems are often mentioned in connection with the spread of the ideas of Pan-Slavism – the idea of the unity of Slavic peoples, which resonates in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Stránský, 2020). While in the Czech and Slovak environment, these ideas are mainly associated with the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th century, Slavic mutuality and orientation towards Russia have their supporters in these two countries even today. The propagators of these ideas are particularly active in the alternative media and on social networks through which they spread nationalist ideas to the countries of Central Europe. As stated by the Czech political scientist and lawyer M. Čejka, pro-Western and pro-Russian attitudes appear in top politics in this region as well. (Čejka, In: Červinka, 2020)

"*Russia and some of its allies, which is mainly the ageing generation of some politicians from post-socialist countries, have started to intensify their criticism of the EU and other forms of Western integration.*" According to him, the divided countries, as well as the traditional Western powers, have themselves to blame for this negative state: "Russian President Vladimir Putin, who skilfully uses his cult of personality and nationalist and Pan-Slavic elements, would be foolish if in the era of populist authoritarians, among whom he plays one of the main roles, he did not use his position," naming politicians such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Recep Erdogan and Miloš Zeman. (ibid.)

Čejka (ibid.) argues that although this "cold war" line does not yet divide Europe into East and West, as it used to be in the past, it is polarizing mainly Central and Eastern European societies from the inside, which is particularly dangerous in the context of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. In Slovakia, for example, around a quarter of Slovak citizens believe the recurrent reports that Russia's military intervention in Ukraine is aimed at disarming and denationalizing Ukraine (28%) or that the war was deliberately provoked by the Western powers and that Russia was merely reacting to their provocation (34%). The above survey revealed that the age of respondents does not play a major role in trusting these narratives (Data obtained from a survey conducted by a scientific team from the Institute of Experimental Psychology of the Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences of the Slovak Academy of Sciences on a sample of 900 respondents on 22-24 March). In other words, the young generation that has already been educated in the era of 'modern European' education is also at risk.

Priority given to teaching

So, how can we cope with this situation? How should we educate new generations of European citizens so that they are able to detect the danger of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and propaganda better? Experts point to the need to rethink current approaches to the formation of critical thinking, which is more than necessary in the age of social networks and Internet media. Although this issue is certainly not new in many European education systems, including French education, several EU Member States are still lagging behind as far as the development of critical thinking is concerned. Similar outcomes are mapped by the PISA survey, which in 2018 focused on reading literacy with an emphasis on reading comprehension, understanding of context, and the ability to recognize and classify sources: "*In this digital world, people use all kinds of information sources. Reading is no longer*

primarily about extracting information from texts, but about building knowledge, thinking critically and making informed judgements." (PISA, 2018)

The survey revealed that in OECD countries, less than a tenth of students are able to distinguish between facts and opinions based on implicit cues related to the content or source of information. Among the European countries, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Slovenia, Belgium, France, Portugal and the Czech Republic, ranked above the OECD average. The situation is traditionally the same in the Scandinavian countries compared to 2000 and 2009. The representative of Germany, K. Reiss *et al.* (2018), also considers this development to be promising and positive, because in the year 2000, the performance of young people in Germany was below the OECD average; in 2009 the results of young people in Germany were average and finally at present Germany has reached and remained above the OECD average. However, K. Reiss et al. (ibid.) point to the difference in outcomes between pupils from favorable socio-economic backgrounds and those from unfavorable backgrounds, which has increased by 9% in Germany since 2009. The increased number of pupils with a migrant background also has a negative impact on these results. Therefore, it is important to make resources available to provide more individualized support and ensure no child is left behind. (ibid.) Slovakia, for example, remains below the OECD average in the long-term perspective.

For this reason, increasing the digital literacy of individuals through new media and information technologies gets to the attention of the European Commission and, consequently, of the general professional and lay European public. In addition to improving digital and media literacy which is closely linked to the formation of critical thinking, it is also essential to improve the social status of media education in schools.

These needs are via the media communicated from the European level to the national level, as presented in the following analysis of media discourse: for instance, in the German media space, for example, our quantitative analyses confirm the increasing prevalence of some related concepts such as "media literacy" (in German: *Medienkompetenz*), "media education" (*Medienbildung*), "media upbringing" (*Medienerziehung*) and "critical thinking" (*Kritisches Denken*). While the term "media literacy" shows only a slight increase since 2003 (from 0.98/ipm in 2003 to 1.16/ipm in 2020), the terms "media education" and "media upbringing" have appeared in the studied corpus only since 2008 with a constant number of occurrences in the range of 0.18-0.20/ipm. However, the term 'critical thinking' shows a significant increase in occurrences (from 108.1/ipm in 2003 to 145.2/ipm

in 2020), which confirms the above-mentioned trend responding to the results of the PISA 2000, 2009, and 2018 surveys[2]. The quantitative analysis of the Slovak media discourse revealed that the term 'media literacy' has appeared in the corpus only since 2006 with a low incidence of 0.01/ipm (increasing to 0.24/ipm by 2019), as well as the terms 'media education' and 'media upbringing' - since 2005 the number of occurrences ranging from 0.01 - 0.04/ipm, similarly as critical thinking (0.01 - 0.08/ipm). Last but not least, alongside media education, concepts of moral and character education are becoming predominant approaches to critical thinking development at all levels of education. (Hurajová & Hladíková, 2022)

In this context, another question arises: how to approach the new reform needs in the field of education in such countries where it is necessary to respond to several societal challenges simultaneously? In the Slovak Republic, for example, in the last decade, the focus has been mainly on the lack of connectivity between education and practice, on the employability of graduates in the labor market, and the related need to improve the quality of dual education, which had to be supported by legislation. Our previous analyses clearly indicated that the topic of dual VET is important in the social discourse in Slovakia, and in the period after 2015 (when a number of legislative measures were adopted), it had sufficient space in the Slovak press. Several important factors have contributed to this, such as the urgent need for reform of the education system at the national and European level, the related European recommendations reflected in the Slovak legislative framework, and a direct link between the quality of VET and the national economy. The above facts have an impact on the pace of economic growth in every country, but probably also the increased interest of the Slovak public in education policies. (Molnárová & Rošteková, 2020)

However, we perceive problematic the way in which this need for reform has been communicated to the public by politicians through the media, often referring to the EU recommendations, when the image of the social sciences and humanities has been continuously defaced by inappropriate and insensitive statements, thus reducing their societal relevance. Furthermore, government officials have repeatedly expressed their intention to interfere directly with the composition of secondary school curricula. The former Prime Minister, Robert Fico, repeatedly called for the

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[2] For the quantitative research, we used the most extensive German annotated corpus DeReKo accessible via COSMAS II. Version 2.4. Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache (IDS) <https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web/> [06. 09. 2021] and the Slovak National Corpus. Version prim-9.0-public-inf. [online]. Bratislava: Ľudovít Štúr Institute of Linguistics, Slovak Academy of Sciences. Available at: http://korpus.juls.savba.sk [cited 2022-04-11]. In order to make the results comparable, we present the number of occurrences of the studied terms per million words, abbreviated as ipm (instances per million).

'political courage' that the social situation demanded. He constantly pointed to the possibility of removing the competencies from regional councils in the sphere of secondary schools' management. (Rošteková, Molnárová & Gura, 2020). Add to that, he stressed the need to reduce the number of those Slovak universities which focus their study programs mainly on humanities. Consequently, several political leaders regarded universities oriented on humanities as culprits of the unfavorable state in Slovak society. However, at the same time, the same politicians publicly concealed the long-standing undersized financing of Slovak higher education institutions.

It is undeniable, however, that at a time when Europe is having to recover from previous crises and at the same time face new economic and social challenges, it is the teaching of social sciences and humanities that should be at the center of attention in all the member states. Therefore, a coordinated approach is essential in the field of education, where common problems need to be tackled together. In this context, it is necessary to positively perceive the decision of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which contributed to the establishment of the Observatory for the Teaching of History in November 2020. The main objective of the Observatory is to collect and share factual information on the state of the teaching of history in 17 participating countries in order to promote the exchange of good practice and mutual learning and to act as a platform for professional development, which in turn could become "a valuable tool in the fight against dangerous revisionism and efforts to falsify historical truth." (Jambon, 2021) To conclude, this initiative can be seen as one of the steps towards the creation of the European Education Area, which is expected to be established by the year 2025.

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