

Joint Committee On Foreign Affairs and Defence

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Subject: Disinformation and Hybrid Threat

Let me begin by thanking the Committee for the invitation to participate in the deliberations of the Joint Committee. I say from the outset that I am not a security or defence specialist. The focus of my work for over forty years has been on the dynamic of European Integration and the evolution of EU governance across different domains. That is the perspective I bring to bear here. It is simply not possible to analyse the EU today and explore where the EU is going without due recognition of the shifts and shocks in global politics and order.

The first significant development is the return of geo-politics, on the one hand, and a hardening of geopolitics, on the other. We live in an era of Great Power Competition as the US, no longer a singular hegemon, competes with the rising power of China. The US-China relationship is not just competitive but also has cooperative elements. That said the unipolar world of the early post-communist era is well and truly over. The international system is multi-polar and the multilateral rules-based order is under considerable strain. The second momentous development is the return of war to the European continent following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. This war is the first war since the end of the Second World War that a European state invades a neighbour with the expressed intention to alter territorial borders and undermine the sovereignty and independence of a member of the UN. In the lead up to the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the 2020 invasion, the Russian state engaged on extensive subversive activity in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine shattered a pervasive complacency that Europe's security and way of life was secure.

The hardening of geopolitics and the war pose challenging dilemmas for the EU as the main institution for the management of interdependence and economic exchange in Europe. The

challenges are no less challenging for its member states. Chancellor Schultz's claim that this is a transformational movement, a *Zeitenwende*, is no exaggeration. Thus discussion of hybrid threats and disinformation must be situated in the context of Europe's changing security landscape.

Concerns about hybrid threats and disinformation are not new but what is new is the impact of digitalisation and new communications tools on the deployment and effectiveness of hybrid threats. In addition, in Europe Russia has become an aggressor state that wants to over-turn the norms and structure's of Europe's security architecture. Hybrid threats are used against open societies with the objective of undermining public trust, revealing vulnerabilities, undermining critical infrastructure, and inducing polarization within societies. Hybrid threats are by definition multidimensional- a combination of coercive and subversive action, conventional and non-conventional means. The intention is to undermine the institutions of a state or a group of states and to undermine decision making capacity. The target of hybrid threats is potentially very wide-such as, critical infrastructure, public administration, parts of the economy or even the political system. Two of the most impactful tools of hybrid warfare/threat are cyber and disinformation conducted by states, private actors or a combination of the two. Disinformation is the most visible element of hybrid threats involving fake news, information warfare, social media manipulation but this is but the tip of the iceberg. Hybrid threats are designed to go under the radar of detection and attribution-plausible deniability part of the toolkit. Addressing hybrid threats and disinformation are high on the EU and NATO agendas and on the agendas of the member states.

The EU is slowly building a capacity to respond to hybrid threats but does not as yet have a fully comprehensive holistic system. In 2016 the European Commission presented a Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats – a European Union response <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0018&from=EN> . The EU began to institutionalise the response to hybrid threats in the following manner. First, with the establishment of an EU Hybrid Fusion Cell to offer a single focus for the analysis of hybrid threats; established within the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN) of the European External Action Service (EEAS). Member States were invited to create national contact points for engagement with the Fusion Cell. Second, the development of a strategic

communication capability to counteract disinformation. Third establishing a Centre of Excellence on Hybrid Threats (CoE) in Helsinki. The purpose of the CoE is to provide a forum for states to come together to share best practice, share experiences, develop training and test new ideas and practices. The CoE also provides a forum for EU-NATO cooperation. It is a network of practitioners and researchers from the participating states. Ireland submitted its letter of notification to join CoE in January 2023, one of 33 states (initiated by 16 states in 2017). Ireland was a follower not a leader in the development of CoE.

The EU published a Strategic Compass in March 2022 that is its main strategic document on European security. In relation to hybrid threats the key aim is the establishment of an EU Hybrid Toolkit which indexes all available countermeasures and develops new ones. Within the Council system, a Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats is the arena for the engagement of member state practitioners. The Council is developing a framework for counteracting hybrid campaigns. Some countries are pushing the development of a holistic EU response, notably North European states and those bordering Russia. The Netherlands, Finland and Denmark are particularly active in this realm. Counteracting hybrid threats is a national responsibility but cannot be successfully undertaken without cross national and transnational cooperation.

Key questions for Ireland:

1. How active and embedded is Ireland in key EU institutions and policy development in this field?
2. Relationship with NATO activities in this field-critical infrastructure including undersea cables