



Sustainable Development in the World of Lies

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Abstract: *Is the process of sustainable development threatened by disinformation or is disinformation eligible to change the civilizational trajectory of the European Union's paradigmatic endeavor towards a sustainable future? As the author believes, answering the question is vital in order to adapt to the situation of new threats that change the perception, cognition, and behavior of a wide range of participants in political, public, and civil life. In order to do that, the author scrutinizes the European Union's major sustainable development policies on the one hand and various trends influenced by strong disinformation campaigns and hybrid threats towards them on the level of member states on the other hand. As the author shows, there are already observable tendencies, based on which it is possible to state a significant influence of disinformation on the sustainable development of the European Union. As the following article will point out, the social and political reality in the European Union indicate a possible paradigm shift where traditional knowledge-based sustainable development is challenged by disinformation narratives that make both European and global endeavor toward a sustainable future strongly aggravated.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The international community, finding out that long-term civilizational survivorship may be an issue, established in 2015 the plan known as The Sustainable Development Goals (European Commission, 2015) as a part of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). Inclusiveness and sustainability in development, eradication of poverty, and ensuring human rights have become new axioms in the trajectory of global endeavor aiming very ambitious deadlines in terms of results delivery. According to the European Commission, “through its international partnerships, the EU pursues progress towards the relevant SDGs together with EU priorities...” Nevertheless, as very valuable data from the COVID-19 crisis shows, for instance, actions towards global warming and climate change mitigation, even though the process was catalyzed by lockdowns all over the globe, have shown that results were at least deplorable. As the population was restrained at homes, working, and interacting through online calls, there were radical changes in energy use with unconvincing impacts on the levels of CO₂ emissions (Le Quéré et al., 2020, p. 647) that were reduced by 4-8% (Evans, 2020). We are speaking about results that were achieved only thanks to extreme measures, practically by putting to death all of the social and economic life on the planet, results that were paid by an outrageous price that for instance consisted of reversing the wide trend of reduction of global extreme poverty, adding to the group of extremely poor new 150 million people (The World Bank, 2020), doubling the number of people facing acute food insecurity to 265 million in 2020 (Morgan, 2020) or causing a serious disruption of education systems that affected about 1.6 billion learners all over the world (United Nations, 2020). Cosmetic and short-term results in reducing CO₂ emissions were achieved only because of one of the worst humanitarian disasters in history. Sustainable goals speaking, achieving one sustainable development goal necessarily influence others (education, equality, inclusivity...). This inevitable

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connection is however nothing special and it is a very part of the nature of complex systems (the phenomenon is described in detail mostly by political economists, philosophers, and epistemologists who study negative externalities as byproducts of interventions in various ecosystems like economy, nature, etc.). And even though achieving goals are based on thorough expertise, intervening in global interconnected systems with trillions of variables, can lead, as we can see in the real-life COVID-19 example, to unexpected results. As we can see, the nature of complex systems itself can be a serious foe for achieving goals in global policies. However, there are significantly more enemies today. Moreover, they are much more insidious than the mere unpredictable nature of a complex system. That brings us to the matter of our paper, which is focused on the problem of disinformation and its influence on the achievability of sustainable development goals. As we believe, the problem is very vivid, global and, as we will show later in the text, potentially threatening not only for moving humanity forward but also for its civilizational prevalence.

2. FROM DATA TO KNOWLEDGE

The vital component of decision-making in complex systems is the quality of data and flawless interpretation of information providing certain knowledge that can be used for the creation of public policies. Speaking of information and data as a concept, it is traditionally represented as a hierarchic system that provides a structure for the complexity of the phenomenon. If we are mentioning structure, we mean the DIKW pyramid that shows the relation between data, information, knowledge and wisdom. Despite the frequent use of the hierarchical relationship between the mentioned terms, it is almost impossible to identify its author (Wallace, 2007). It has been used in various permutations and variations for quite a long time. As the name of the pyramid suggests, the first component is data, which forms the basis of the entire hierarchical structure. Data are not to be reduced only to the digital environment but understood as data in the broadest context, as impulses perceived by the sensory organs, such as sounds, smells, colors, etc. To create the simplest possible definition of data, we are inspired by the theory of data as an objective reality. In its context, data are then the simplest facts that are a prerequisite for further processing, selection, which leads to the constitution of information (Ahsan & Shah, 2006, pp. 2-3). According to Becerra-Fernandez and Sabherwala (2010, p. 17), data “comprises facts, observations or perceptions (which may be correct or incorrect). By itself, data represent raw numbers or statements and can therefore be stripped of context, meaning or intent.” Thus, data represent the basic building block of the knowledge structure. There is although a noticeable tendency to confuse individual elements of the DIKW hierarchical structure. This is also why we consider it particularly important to emphasize that knowledge is neither data nor information, although it is in a certain relation to both (Davenport & Prusak, 1998, p. 1). As mentioned in the previous section, information is the next step in the hierarchy of human knowledge. But how to define it and what connects it to the data? In order to find a satisfactory answer, we are going to use the following argument according to which data usually occurs in a huge amount and, assuming that we want to obtain any practical value from it, it is necessary to transform it in the context of a specific relationship, or situation or solved problem. It is this transformation of data in a specific context that will provide us with information (Schumaker, 2011, p. 4). While computers need data, people need information. Data is a building block, information gives us meaning and is understandable for humans (Brooke, 2022). Information is therefore relevant, usable, significant, meaningful, or processed data (Frické, 2009, pp. 132-133). Even though the DIKW pyramid consists of 4 elements, it is often used only 3 three-element structures known as Knowledge hierarchy or Knowledge pyramid with knowledge as precisely that piece of information that has a specific direction and is capable of being the basis for decisions (Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwala, 2010, p. 18). Hey (2004, p. 2) argues that knowledge is generally personal, subjective and personalized – it is the intellectual equipment

of people rather than an objectively existing category outside the human mind. Compared to data, an individual with knowledge can actively dispose of and realistically use it to solve problems because it allows a better understanding of the situation in a specific context (Schumaker, 2011, p. 5). Even though the theoretical concept of Knowledge hierarchy seems to be way too theoretical, it can be very helpful in illustrating how crucial can individual parts of the pyramid be in achieving results in reality in knowledge-based sustainable development or, on the other hand, how an improper approach towards data and information can constitute false knowledge that will be in the further text referred as antiknowledge.

3. FROM KNOWLEDGE TO DISTRUST

It is extremely difficult to successfully intervene in complex systems according to plans mostly because of inevitable ignorance that is tightly connected with human intellectual processes on one hand (psychological factor) (Taleb, 2007, p. 138) and also because of the objective inability to grasp even a glimpse of variables that are to be influenced by intervention or that influence the intervention itself (epistemic factor) (Bastiat, 1998). If there are to be any intervention with at least a partial hope of success, it has to be executed thoroughly and purely based on bulletproof knowledge. Regardless of the fact that even the best data, the best plan and the best intentions are far away from reality, if there is a will to change a paradigm of global life, it is the knowledge distilled from the proper data and information, interpreted in the rigorous way possible, that is an only shot. But what if the DIK (data, information, knowledge) jar is not filled with proper content? And now, let's not focus on scientific knowledge or expert institutions. In the end, these have only very limited executive power in policy enforcement. What however are capable of change, are governments and, if we take into consideration the European context, institutions of the European Union. Democracy as a ruling form of government in the European Union gives power to citizens of the European Union as a source of power or those who are entitled to rule indirectly through their representatives. In other words, the responsibility for acquiring data, information and forms of knowledge is largely on the shoulders of voters, who choose not only parties and representatives but also public policies. And this is exactly the point where the problems arise. Building a knowledge pyramid or knowledge-based (any type) development may be corrupted from the beginning of the process. People's trust in official institutions is declining, the trust that is considered a fundamental element of social capital – a key contributor to sustaining well-being outcomes, including economic development (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2016). According to data from the *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2022)*, there is a continual and not negligible decline of trust in institutions such as national governments, the EU, the police, news, etc. The majority of global democracies declined in trust index significantly and it is not perceptible only in long term period but also in one year change. For example, the Netherlands declined by 6 points from the trust range (63 points) in 2021 to the neutral range (57 points) in 2022. Germany experienced an even worse scenario when it declined by 7 points from neutral range (53 points) to distrust range (46 points). An increase in trust was experienced only in France according to the trust index. Even though France switched the range from distrust to the range of trust, it was only minimal gain. Numbers speaking, France improved its position only by 2 points (from 48 points to 50 points) (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022, p. 21). The general tendency of distrust is followed by similar tendencies in particular parts of the societal relations. Among other things, we would like to emphasize the development of trust in government and media. First of all, it has to be stated that there are not only losses, there are also gains, however, those increases are unexpectedly connected to dictatorships or states that are not democracies per se. In Europe, the biggest losers in trust are the Netherlands and Germany. Germany loses interannually 12 points in trust in government

(from 59 points which is the limit value of neutral to trust sphere to 47 points which is on the scale of distrust). The Netherlands with its 11 points loss did not fare much better (from 69 points which belongs to the trust sphere to 58 points which is on the edge of the neutral scale). Even though the decline in trust in media is not as significant, there are apparent decreases. Germany lost interannually 5 points and the Netherlands 3 points. If we compare the situation with the broader world, it is clear that trust in media is shaken mainly in Australia and South Korea where the mentioned countries experienced an interannual decrease of 8 points in Australia (from 51 points in the neutral zone to 43 points that is in distrust) or 7 points in South Korea (From 40 points to 33 points that are both scaled as distrust rates) (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022, p. 41). Worse values were measured only in Russia with 29 points with no interannual change (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022, p. 41). Answering the question of what is the cause of the global pandemic of distrust would be difficult. However, what we can state with certainty is that the phenomenon of social networks, especially with the current algorithm setup, does not help this trend.

4. FROM DISTRUST TO ANTIKNOWLEDGE

As we indicated in the title of our paper, we are interested in so called “lies” and their ability to influence sustainable development policies. There are evident significant risks that certain categories of lies present to governance, social order, and governance stability (Lazer et al., 2018, pp. 1094–1096). As Pulido et al. (2020) imply, under the influence of rumors and misleading information, the public tends to be trapped by groups, accentuating panic, and misusing crisis, which can even lead to social tragedies. According to Luo et al. (2021) social media not only misleads the public guiding them towards wrong decisions, in addition, it also represents substantial threats to the public’s physical and mental health and economic properties. What lies? In the context of the article, lies stand especially for disinformation, hoaxes, fake news and conspiracy theories that altogether constitute without exaggeration new type of global pandemic. There has to be a clear distinction between those types of lies that are spread intentionally and those that are not spread with bad intentions but rather with negligence, even though both types can affect public policies and political reality. In this context, there is a difference between misinformation that is unintentional and disinformation that, as pointed out in the previous sentences, is spread intentionally (Sadiq & Saji, 2022, p. 271). Apart from stated, there is according to Sadiq and Saji (2022, p. 271) another significant difference between the two phenomena. Disinformation is usually connected to politics and political campaigns where they are used as instruments intended for political gain, misinformation, on the other hand, seems to be more of a spontaneous nature. Nonetheless, both types present serious social danger which is demonstrated for instance by the World Economic Forum which identifies even misinformation as a global risk (World Economic Forum, 2022). In the end, this fear turned out to be justified, as demonstrated by the case of influencing the American elections in 2016 (Sadiq & Saji, 2022, p. 271) or the successful Brexit campaign, both of which were built to a significant extent on false information of both types. Despite the fact that all aforementioned phenomena took place in the past (Mason et al., 2018), with the emergence of social networks they were significantly reinforced. It is not only because of greater availability and possibility of connecting millions of people at the same time, and lesser critical approach towards information (Oh et al., 2013) but notably because of anxiety (which is believed to a one of the main reasons behind the misinformation) that is failed to overcome by information from mainstream media (Oh et al., 2013) and last but not least, because of specific setup of algorithms of social networks. According to whistleblower and former high-ranking executive at Meta, Frances Haugen, the management of the social network Facebook was aware of the harmfulness of the algorithms, which she said encouraged hate speech and the spread of disinformation. The company’s failure to act in the given matter was probably

caused by the concern of the company's management about profits, which are directly proportional to the amount of user interactions on the social network. It is not surprising that most interactions have radicalizing and hateful information, among which disinformation of various kinds can undoubtedly be included. As much as it might seem that Haugen is just a bitter manager out to get revenge on her former employer, she is simply not. Her claims are supported by more or less related studies, according to which, for example, in 2020, disinformation media had an average of 6 times more likes, shares and interactions than information from reliable sources such as CNN or the WHO (Dwoskin, 2021). According to another study carried out by the non-profit organization Avaaz, disinformation had approximately 3.8 billion views on the Facebook social network in 2019 alone. Surprisingly, only 16% of the total number of disinformation posts were evaluated as disinformation, the other 84% went unnoticed (Avaaz, 2020). According to available information, the marketing logic of social networks is built in such a way that it promotes an emotional lie, which we can see in the form of disinformation because it has a greater potential for interactions and shares.

5. ANTIKNOWLEDGE AND ITS POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

It is apparent that the problem of lies in the broader public space is substantial. There is a tendency to choose biased data, information is filtered through algorithms of social networks where the most of social interaction happens and the knowledge that stems from the latter is often misinformation, hoax, fake news, or pure disinformation. An accompanying phenomenon is the popularity of antiestablishment, radical and populist movements that themselves feed the life of lies by creating or using them in political struggle in the form of various hoaxes, disinformation, or fake news. From the local – central European environment, the rise of radical and populist parties and movements is substantial. For example, in Slovakia, pre-election polls from August indicate that solely populist and radical parties that are explicitly oriented against the EU and its development goals (e.g. environmental goals, inclusiveness, equality, solidarity, peace, or even EU membership) have the support of 39,6%, including following parties SMER-SD, Republika, SNS Aliancia, LSNS of the whole population in total (SME, 2023). Even though in the Czech Republic, a coalition of democratic parties forms a government, according to a recent poll of an agency Median (iROZHLAS, 2023) it is apparent that tendencies favor rather Euroskeptic, populist, or openly radical movements with the support of almost 60% of the population (including following parties: ANO, SPD, SOCDEM, KSČM, Trikolóra, Prísaha). In Hungary, there is a long-term democratic deficit, since there is Orbán's semi-dictatorship that is openly against the rule of law, democratic principles, and pro-Russian orientation in terms of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. EU institutions repeatedly warn of the worsening situation in the country. On many occasions, there have been expressed concerns over the state of EU values in Hungary by MEPs (European Parliament, 2023). Poland as the last (but not least) country belonging to the group V4 deserves a special place. On one hand, it is reprimanded by EU institutions for the reasons of deficiencies in the rule of law, and judicial independence, etc., on the other hand, Poland has played a significant civilizational role in its stance towards Russian aggression in Ukraine and Russian hybrid threats towards Europe. In connection with the aforementioned, we consider as necessary to emphasize that it is the Russian Federation that through hybrid threats and disinformation endangers European countries (Pillai, 2023) and values the most. This was the reason behind the emergence of specialized agencies such as Anti-Disinformation Agency in the Czech Republic (operational since January 2017) and the Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Finland (operational by late 2017). On the global level, it is worth mentioning the European Union's East Stratcom Task Force and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (Splidsboel, 2017).

6. CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of achieving sustainable development goals as global, demanding intentions is dependent on perfect planning, organization and knowledge-building processes. Not only that these processes seem to be endangered by the phenomenon of disinformation, another key factor, that is crucial – the support of the citizens that constitute the source of the political power in the European Union and its member states, at least V4 states, show its shift from the pro-democratic and pro European settings towards radical and antidemocratic tendencies. Whether the common ground of mutual sustainable development goals is achieved or not will be shown in the next few years. What can be however stated today is that lies as are depicted in our article present a serious civilizational threat.

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