Covid-19: Narratives and policies of the populist and radical right and implications for local communities

Roundtable Briefing, 30 October 2020

Political Capital organised an online roundtable for representatives of municipalities and NGOs working at the local level in the Visegrad Group (V4) countries on 30 October 2020. Based on the findings of our research on the narratives about COVID-19 in the V4 countries, we discussed regional developments, national peculiarities and what can be done against harmful narratives at both national and local levels. The aim of the event was to strengthen regional cooperation, exchange experiences and good practices, and to find joint solutions. The roundtable took place within the framework of the project "*Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the far right and the populist radical right in the V4 region*", which was supported by the [Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom](#).

Participants

Together with the representatives of the national project partners, 10 participants attended the event out of the 16 who had registered. The composition of attendees was as follows:

- from the Czech Republic: a project manager of Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, a leading representative of Mladé ANO and Secretary General, a program manager of the Prague Security Studies Institute, and a political/economic analyst of our project partner, the Institute for Politics and Society;
- from Hungary: none of the registered participants were present, hence, the information about the situation in the country was shared by two analysts of Political Capital;
- from Poland: two representatives of the national project partner, the Institute of Social Safety, one of whom works closely together with representatives of the Polish town Dąbrowa Górnicza;
- from Slovakia: one of the leaders of Open Society Foundation, a coordinator of the Centre for Community Organizing/Not in Our Town Platform and a representative of the national project partner, the Institute for Public Affairs.

Key takeaways from the discussion

- COVID-19 has revealed a high level of vulnerability among the weakest layers of societies (e.g., Roma communities in Slovakia have become targets of verbal attacks from the far right).

- Untransparent governance and unclear communications have decreased trust in government and authorities, and has lowered the acceptance – and thus the effectivity

– of anti-pandemic measures. It is the anti-mainstream forces such as the far right that profit from confusion and disinformation.

- Clear communications by mainstream political and social actors such as the mainstream media, authorities and NGOs is of key importance. Extreme and harmful narratives have to be challenged and – simultaneously – alternative narratives have to be offered. An alliance of mainstream actors (e.g., the media, local government, NGOs, businesses) is highly needed.

- Direct engagement with communities at the local level plays a central role in building trust. Moreover, it makes crisis management easier, for instance, by recruiting volunteers.

Detailed summary of the discussion

Narratives at municipal level and in local communities

- In Slovakia, after the summer, the situation during the second wave has been much more robust and worse regarding fatalities and daily cases. This has led to the change of relevance of different narratives and the reaction of different actors. The most present disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories are connected to the topic of medical treatment and the vaccine. Demonstrations organised by the far right against COVID-19 restrictions turned violent, while conspiracy theory promoters are expected to be more active as the government is aiming for testing the country's whole population. Toxic narratives are also present in relation with and against the measuring of the daily cases, as well as regarding other facts and numbers related to the impact of the virus on citizens. The Swedish model appears as a strong argument against the measures introduced by the government since people don't want to have to live under a lockdown again. In contrary to the first wave, where an increased level of trust in the government was observed, mistrust is more present in the second wave as the government's unclear communications led to confusion. In addition, Roma communities were blamed a lot by the far-right actors, as they live in poverty, hence they have poor hygiene. Another argument was that their relatives, who work in the UK but occasionally come home to Slovakia, are spreading the virus.
- In Poland, the situation has dramatically changed during the second wave of the pandemic. In the beginning, the far-right surfaced as the promoter of freedom against restrictions, but as the topic of abortion and the debate around it became more prevalent, the conversation about the pandemic was pushed into the background. Regarding the demonstrations against the abortion law, the far-right and the government took the same side, and a new narrative came up: the protesters are responsible for the spreading of the virus.
- In the Czech Republic, disinformation during the first wave did not have much of an impact, however, the situation has changed a lot in comparison to the second wave.

Although there is a department within the Ministry of Interior that deals with fake news, it is a small department and has small reach to the public. A lot of NGOs are fighting actively online against the spreading of disinformation in the country.

- In Hungary, the government is spreading conspiracy theories and factual information at the same time. A strong anti-opposition narrative is present from the side of the government as the local municipalities have acted strongly against the government's communications with creating alternative narratives related to the pandemic.

How have these narratives spread within the communities?

- As the Slovak public television is usually not dealing with disinformation, far-right and extremist organizations, who are the main actors of spreading harmful narratives, are reaching a lot of people online. With the lack of existing alternative narratives about healthy patriotism, the activities of far-right and extremist organisations are having a greater impact with their narratives. Furthermore, a lot of Slovak anti-system and far-right groups are heavily relying on the opinion of Czech doctors, many of whom are criticising the measures and expressing doubt about the situation around the pandemic.

- In Poland, disinformation is spreading mainly through WhatsApp, posing a huge challenge as it is complicated to tackle.

- In the Czech Republic, the narratives are mostly spread by Russian disinformation sites and political actors don't really provide any proper counter-narratives. Besides, chain emails play a big role in spreading disinformation about COVID-19 in the country.

- The Hungarian participants suspected that chain-emails spreading harmful narratives could exist, although they haven't encountered them yet.

How have communities, local governments coped with the situation?

- Although the situation in Slovakia is dynamic and changing, there is a lack of information and clear communications from the side of the government, and the level of trust towards authorities is decreasing.

- In Poland, the local governments of the cities have built their own strategies to handle the situation. For example, in Dąbrowa Górnicza, the mayor holds regular online meetings with the citizens, and in Wroclaw the municipality makes efforts trying to recognise the actors, who are spreading potentially dangerous misinformation on spreading disease.

- In the Czech Republic, neither the local governments have really made any effort to counter disinformation, nor an overall approach from the government is present.

- The local governments in Hungary have started to recruit volunteers to help their communities as they didn't have other resources to fulfil the emerging needs. Some local governments, especially the ones led by opposition parties, have created direct

ways of communications with the population of their area. These municipalities were able to solve the challenges much easier than other ones.

Solution proposals and ideas

Slovakia
- The most efficient solution is building trust in communities for a longer period of time, with local leadership, systematic work, and community organising. These leadership structures can really help the fight against any kind of toxic narratives.
- Information should be provided to poor Roma communities as well.
- Get together different stakeholders, for example, people from companies, NGOs and municipalities. Try to organize a hackathon for them in order to solve the crisis and tackle the harmful narratives.

Czech Republic
- More communication from the local authorities, less centralization from the Ministry. A robust disinformation debunking in the EU.

Poland
- Systematic trust building in communities would be very important. There are no quick fixes, trust needs to be built over a long period of time.
- A follow-up to the project could be to contact local municipalities who have dealt better with the virus and to write case studies.

Conclusions

The pandemic seems to have worked as an incubator for various social problems and it has revealed the high vulnerability of the weakest layers of societies. Anti-pandemic measures, untransparent governance and unclear communications all create mistrust, chaos, confusion, while clear communications and properly functioning narratives would be key against extreme forms of patriotism. Mainstream media plays a highly important role in countering harmful narratives and providing alternative ones. Engaging with communities at the local level directly and regularly would build trust and help in acting and thinking jointly with several allies.