

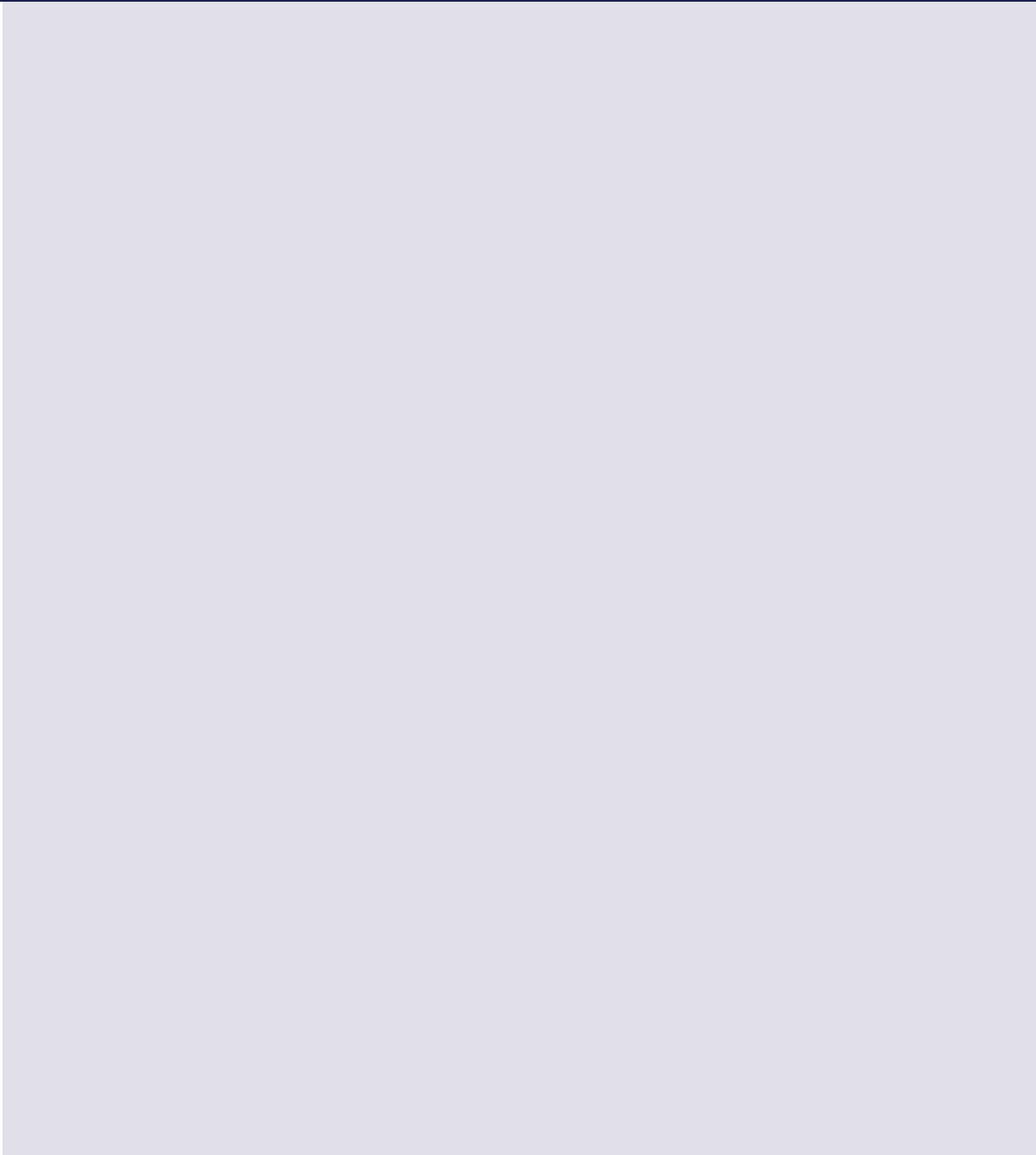
CORONAVIRUS CRISIS: DISINFORMATION BY THE CATALAN NATIONALISM AS A STRATEGIC CHALLENGE FOR SPAIN

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1

INTRODUCTION

Disinformation is a strategic challenge for Spain. It is **a common problem affecting all democracies built upon open media ecosystems**, even though each context has its own features. Information and communication may not save lives directly, but it can certainly be stated that disinformation causes victims and will increase the costs and difficulties to overcome the current crisis. The coronavirus will not only claim thousands of lives. It will ruthlessly test our economic, political, and societal resilience as well.

Disinformation is the deliberate dissemination of false, manipulated, or biased information with hostile purposes. Intention is what distinguishes disinformation from misinformation, i.e. the unwittingly spread of erroneous, wrong, or even false information. The popular concept *fake news* may refer to both, but its abusive use -buzzword for many politicians against any criticism- made it unsuited. **Disinformation weaponizes information and communication.** And this is happening worldwide both at domestic levels as well as in broad geostrategic rivalries. Both dynamics may, and usually do, converge and coincide, **making responses much more challenging.** Those who disinform normally take advantage of the preexisting vulnerabilities and **exploit crises as opportunities to maximize their impact.** Therefore, the massive dissemination of fake news, propaganda, **disinformation campaigns or influence operations over the coronavirus crisis come as no surprise.**

Much of the last weeks' online disinformation and influence operations have been linked to China and Russia. However, up to now, there seems to be remarkable differences in their approaches. Thus, whereas Russian disinformation is mainly disruptive



Carles Puigdemont ✓
@KRLS

Són els del "virus para todos", la seva concepció del federalisme. "¡Antes infectada que rota!". El president @QuimTorraíPla i la presidenta Francina Armengol prioritzen la salut, i fan bé de ser exigents i de dir el que s'ha de fer. D'altres, no se sap... o sí.

Posted on Carles Puigdemont's Twitter account on 14th, March 2020.

and attempts to deceive, undermine, polarize, or strategically neutralize those perceived as adversaries; **China seems to be adopting a more ambitious and far-reaching approach, but not necessarily less assertive.** The slow reaction of many European Governments and the EU itself in front of the coronavirus outbreak offered Beijing a golden opportunity. **China shaped a narrative of an alleged Chinese success in containing the epidemic and used sanitary supplies as a public diplomacy tool** -the *facemask diplomacy*- which, in the particular case of Spain, included an attempt of linking some shipments with **the Belt and Road project.** Furthermore, as a novelty, at least in the European Union, some Chinese diplomats adopted a

“What Spain is facing is not only a difficult juncture or an issue related to Mr. Torra or any other staunch nationalist leader, but a structural and strategic challenge deeply enrooted that threatens not only the territorial integrity of Spain but also the harmony of the plural Catalan society”

confrontational tone on Twitter against any criticism on China and alongside Chinese state media contributed to spread conspiracy theories claiming that the coronavirus originated in the US and not in Wuhan.

Following the same approach and using similar methods -but with no suggestion of operative or geopolitical alignment intended- the most assertive and maximalist segment of the Catalan nationalist movement is trying to **take advantage of the coronavirus crisis to advance its separatist project**. On March 19, the President of the *Generalitat*¹, Quim Torra, gave an interview to the BBC World Service blaming the Spanish Government for blocking his attempts to contain the virus spread across Catalonia implying that Madrid was somehow either not interested or indifferent to the fate of

the citizens of Catalonia. **The coronavirus crisis has been already incorporated into the nationalist metanarrative about an alleged permanent aggression from the central Government against Catalonia.** Over the years, the Catalan nationalists have been undermining abroad the image of the Spanish democracy with the declared aim of forcing some sort of international mediation. What Spain is facing is not only a difficult juncture or an issue related to Mr. Torra or any other staunch nationalist leader, but **a structural and strategic challenge deeply enrooted** that threatens not only the territorial integrity of Spain but also the harmony of the plural Catalan society. **Hence, once the critical phase of the coronavirus pandemic is over, this matter must be addressed.** Otherwise, social tensions in Catalonia and the collapse of the territorial and constitutional order of Spain in the mid-to-long term is not an unconceivable scenario.

1. Catalan regional government.

2

WHY DISINFORMATION IS A STRATEGIC THREAT TO DEMOCRACIES



The phenomenon of disinformation is not new. Deception and political manipulation are as old as human beings. Nor it is the attempt by those who hold power **to control public discourse**. The use of art, symbolic representation and ritualization of power or promotion of **metanarratives that justify and legitimize a given power** and the social order it upholds are as valid today as it was in ancient Mesopotamia. **Sources of legitimacy and technical progress are what evolve over time.** Digital revolution is what characterizes today's world and makes it different from any previous time in history. It has dramatically transformed our information and communication environments. **Smartphones place information and communication at the center of people's daily activity**, thus enabling people to become both a target and a transmission vector.

Internet offers access to an unprecedented level of information and knowledge and represents a turning point in human history. The rise of social networks, instant messaging applications and technology giants such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft or Google brought major changes to information environment worldwide. An obvious one **is the collapse of the business model of traditional mass media** which have mostly lost its prominent role as the gatekeeper to public conversation. This may be seen as a change leading to a more democratic public conversation. However, **digital media ecosystem makes much easier and cost-effective the massive dissemination of information without any editorial accountability and the manipulation of**



Carod-Rovira II*II
@CarodRoviraJLI

Posant de manera subliminal el virus de color *groc* i el missatge polític de la *unitat* com a resposta, queda ben clar q la premsa espanyola no parla del coronavirus sinó de Catalunya!

[Traducir Tweet](#)



11:56 · 15 mar. 20 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

Posted on the former Vice President of the *Generalitat* and former President of ERC Josep-Lluís Carod Rovira's Twitter account.

“Digital media ecosystem makes much easier and cost-effective the massive dissemination of information without any editorial accountability and the manipulation of communication flows”

communication flows. In other words, Internet offers extraordinary beneficial possibilities, but also **many opportunities for malicious use by State and non-state actors.**

In appearance, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp or Telegram **facilitate greater citizens' participation in public debates** and are a central element of the current media ecosystem. However, in practice, algorithms of these platforms **seem to decisively contribute to the polarization, the echo chamber effect and the primacy of emotional over factually rigorous information.** Thus, this ecosystem creates an environment propitious to turn democratic strengths such as the free flow of information or the

open and plural nature of European societies **into a potential strategic vulnerability.**

And the worst is probably yet to come. The proliferation of so-called deep fakes **-realistic videos and audios produced with artificial intelligence, increasingly difficult to detect and cheaper to produce-** would take us to a much more dangerous scenario. Deep fake videos may have legitimate purposes -in the audiovisual industry, for example- but **it is easy to foresee explosive and potentially devastating consequences in the political and international relations domains** if their production and dissemination are not somehow regulated. Considering these effects, deep fakes may be considered weapons or at least weapons able to induce and achieve strategic effects that could be use with no restrictions or clear rules of engagement.

There are no borders on the Internet. At least not in the virtual environments of democratic countries. **Nor are there too many rules or application of conventions and norms from the physical world.** Again, the Internet can be used with virtuous purposes -collaborative researching to develop a vaccine for the coronavirus, for example- as well as with malicious intentions -the dissemination of hoaxes and conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus, following the same example.

Social media offers an easy access to the heart of liberal democracies. Massive audiences may be immediately reached at low cost and with little risk, since attribution is usually uncertain. This makes easier for adversarial State and non-State actors to operate, in many cases, **below the response threshold of Western democracies.** An element that, in the context of great power competition will only increase in the coming years. In recent times we have seen Russia pursuing both tactical and strategic objectives. Regarding the former the noise and confusion generated on social media - to hinder both the investigation and the debate on the shooting down of flight MH17 in Ukraine in July 2014- is a good example. Regarding the later the dissemination of



Retweet from the former President of Catalanian Parliament Núria de Gispert's Twitter account.



Posted on Joan Coma i Roura's Twitter account, city councillor of Vic from CUP.

insidious narratives agitating, for example, migratory issues, cultural wars or secessionist movements reflect the clear aim to undermine the legitimacy of the European democratic systems from within. Will China **apply or is applying a similar approach to the image crisis and international legitimacy** caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? Preliminary research suggest that China has learnt from the Russian playbook and is using similar disinformation techniques and unfolding an assertive diplomatic activity on Western social media.

In principle, Russia, and China, with authoritarian regimes that exercise tight domestic control over information and communications, seem less vulnerable to this phenomenon **and more when it comes to actions conceived and executed from abroad**. Furthermore, even though both Moscow and Beijing are genuinely convinced to the contrary, the West, and the EU in particular, do not apply an approach of “information warfare” or operations of influence slightly equating those of Russia or China. **Nor do their closed political and informational systems offer similar options to that of the Western open media ecosystems**. For instance, do the leaders of the EU or the US have any channel like Twitter to reach out Chinese audiences bypassing Beijing’s control?

The EU and its member states **have gradually become aware of the challenge posed by disinformation**. The issue has been conceived mostly in relation to the integrity of the different electoral processes in the face of Russian interference and **focusing on the veracity and accuracy of circulating information**. In practice this has resulted in the promotion of fact-checking or data verification and the development of a code of **good practice on disinformation for digital platforms and advertisers**. This approach is reductionist and problematic. Fact-checking must be part of the answer, but it cannot be the only answer vis-à-vis disinformation and wider malign influence.

Fact-checking contributes to **creating an abundant**



||★|| Mark Serra - #Antillirista #Uni...
@mksjosocdr

Si em contagio aniré a escopir a la cara a colons catalans i traïdors als q tinc ganes des de fa temps i són tan culpables d'aquesta situació com Espanya. No em quedarà saliva...I si els passa alguna cosa a la meva família no descansaré fins q ho paguin per còmplices d'assassinat

Posted on independentist Mark Serra's Twitter account, who has a big number of followers.



Michel Fanès
@fanes_michel

En resposta a @QuimTorraIPla

A infectar-ho tot. United in infection.
[#MarcaEspana](#)



1:35 p. m. · 24 mar. 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

15 Retweets 35 Me gusta

Post on a French Catalan independentist's Twitter account in response to Quim Torra, President of the *Generalitat*, in which the spread of Covid-19 is related to the Guardia Civil and a massive infection from Madrid.

and unquestionable body of evidence to call into question the credibility of those who generate disinformation and **helps legitimize the response of democratic states**. However, verification focuses exclusively on the disinformation tactical objectives and **does not address the strategic impact and has no effect on preventing the problem** or building a deterrence capability. In this regard, the EU and its member **states fight a succession of information battles but without any strategic direction** or certainty about what objectives should be pursued.

Thus, the European approach usually evaluates the individual impact of **disinformation campaigns by measuring what can be counted** (likes, retweets, traffic generated, or even votes in a given election); **but completely ignores the cumulative and sedimentary harmful effect** of disinformation. Disinformation increasingly undermines public trust and legitimacy, both essential elements for having a robust and healthy democratic system. **The greatest hardship lies in how to measure this impact** and how to intervene in the field of information without eroding freedom of expression, free flow of information or encouraging the creation of “ministries of the truth”. The epistemic relationship between **facts, interpretation of facts and the concept of truth is eminently complex from a philosophical viewpoint**.

Likewise, as is already well documented, fact-checking, disinformation and **fake news operate at**



Sembla un acudit, però no ho és: l'Estat espanyol ha decidit que la principal eina per combatre el coronavirus ha de ser l'exèrcit 🇪🇸

Però per gestionar una crisi sanitària fan falta més sanitaris i menys soldats! #JoNoSocUnSoldat #CatalunyaConfinamentTotal



9:24 p. m. · 23 mar. 2020 · Twitter Media Studio

947 Retweets 1,3 mil Me gusta



Post on Òmniium Cultural's official Twitter account despiising the Emergency Army Unit deployment to help against the pandemic.

“Those who disinform normally take advantage of the preexisting vulnerabilities and exploit crises as opportunities to maximize their impact. Therefore, the massive dissemination of fake news, propaganda, disinformation campaigns or influence operations over the coronavirus crisis come as no surprise”

completely different speeds and spheres. In other words, it is not just that debunking always arrive late -it is easier, faster and cheaper to saturate an environment with false or manipulated information than to debunk it- or that the *disinformers* set the verifier's agenda. It is even worse, since *disinformers* and fact-checkers frequently reach **different audiences which barely interact.** This is partly the result of the same referred segmentation and generation of echo chambers caused by social media.

Furthermore, and as a peculiarity, although not exclusively Spanish, **the politicization, in the partisan sense, of fact-checking activity turns data verification into part of the problem and not of the solution.** Thus, paraphrasing the well-known joke about post-truth and meteorological forecast, we end up with fact checking for the left and another one for the right, when it is an activity **that should be perceived and carried out with the utmost impartiality and possible ideological neutrality.**



Post on a Twitter account replicating the "Telegram's chat to share news, debates and activities from the people and from Catalonia".

3

DISINFORMATION AND INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CATALAN INDEPENDENCE PROCESS



The independentist process in Catalonia cannot be understood without its informational dimension. Catalonia is going through an unprecedented process of **institutional disobedience from within and from outside the same democratic State** to which belongs and fights. Catalan nationalists' policymakers enjoy and use all democratic freedoms and tools while trying to subvert simultaneously the democratic system in Catalonia. **To a greater or lesser degree several elements mentioned in the previous section unfolded in Catalonia over the last decade**, although with its own specificities. The secessionist movement has been a lot about simulation, imposture, and ambiguity. But if something has been confirmed in the last five years, it is that **fake news may have real effects**.

The issue, however, comes from much earlier times. Since the Spanish democratic transition Catalan **nationalism has promoted an all-encompassing national building process**. As a result, after forty years, Catalan nationalism enjoys an overwhelming **political and cultural hegemony at institutional, media, educational and cultural industry levels**. The social division -at least regarding the independence question- and political fragmentation reflected by the successive electoral results in Catalonia **is invisible in the public and informational space and denied by the Catalan nationalist movement**. The insistent use of slogans like "*un sol poble*" ("one nation only"), assertive monopolization of the public space with yellow ribbons and other nationalist symbols and **the patrimonial understanding of the Catalan identity** are clear reflections of this approach. It shows an intentional non-recognition of the plurality of the Catalan society



The official Catalan Generalitat Twitter account highlighted a statement in which Quim Torra told the BBC that the Spanish Government hadn't declared the national lockdown.

“The secessionist movement has been a lot about simulation, imposture, and ambiguity. But if something has been confirmed in the last five years, it is that fake news may have real effects”

 **Miquel Buch** @MiquelBuch

Al @nytimes deixo clar que “cal prendre mesures dràstiques, dures i eficients” contra el coronavirus, i que “Catalunya les ha pres i Espanya no”. El diari reconeix que el nostre país “ha reaccionat més ràpidament” que l’Estat
#COVID19

nytimes.com/2020/03/20/wor...



Miquel Buch, center, the regional interior minister in Catalonia, at the emergency coordination center in Barcelona. “This is a moment to take drastic, tough and efficient decisions,” he said. “When we in Catalonia were taking drastic measures not to let the disease propagate, in Spain they were not.” Samuel Aranda for The New York Times

10:25 p. m. · 20 mar. 2020 · Twitter for Android

677 Retweets 1,2 mil Me gusta

Posted on Internal Affairs regional minister of Generalitat’s Twitter account insisting that Spain has not adopted strong measures and pointing out Catalonia as a different country.

 Carles Puigdemont ha retwitteado
Clara Ponsatí @ClaraPonsati · 1h
En respuesta a @ClaraPonsati
De Madrid al Cielo.

3251 535 1559

[Mostrar este hilo](#)

Posted on Twitter account of the former Education regional minister of Generalitat and actual Member of European Parliament, Clara Ponsatí, the 15th March about the Madrid’s deaths by coronavirus.

and a clear will to exercise the uncontested hegemony achieved after decades of national building process.

This hegemony feeds itself by **promoting and subsidizing like-minded individuals, organizations and narratives and expelling dissident voices and viewpoints**. As a result, a patron-client system is firmly in place making organizations like the so-called Assemblée Nacional Catalana (“Catalan National Assembly”) or Ommium Cultural more a tool in the hands of the Catalan government than a genuine expression of the Catalan civil society. Likewise, the regional media landscape -dominated by public media broadcasters such as TV3 or Catalunya Ràdio or **highly subsidized formally private media outlets-plays a key role in strengthening the nationalist hegemony**. These media outlets shape and spread pervasive metanarratives riddled with grievances and persecution complex in relation to Spain which **is always characterized as authoritarian, backward, threatening and hostile**.

This characterization is not limited to news or political talk shows. **These metanarratives permeate the whole broadcasting activity including child-oriented programmes or popular comedy shows** such as Polònia or APM. It is not a crude top-down imposition of contents, but the natural and normalized result of this nationalist discursive hegemony. The relevance of these media outlets admits little discussion. Nationalists themselves often refer to TV3 as a “state structure”. And there is frequent public lament from nationalist columnists and opinion-makers regarding those who do not consume “the country’s culture and media”.

The consolidation, from an informational and communicational viewpoint, of closed communities favors polarization. And, as it happened in October 2017 and has been happening since then, **this polarization constitutes a vulnerability that can be exploited by foreign actors**. Russian interference in Catalonia is yet to a large extent a story to be told in the public domain. However, it is probably only a matter of time that the details of this and of some subsequent cover-up operation come to light. At the moment it

is still a controversial issue in public and journalistic discussion, but not at the State core level. The massive artificial activity on social media those days, the hostile media coverage and the role played by some well-known political actors is measurable, traceable, verifiable and provides an undeniable body of empirical evidence. **Hence, facts are not in dispute. Though a discussion about the reasons, impact achieved, and specific objectives pursued by the Kremlin** is of course legitimate. There is an ongoing judiciary investigation in Spain at the Audiencia Nacional on the activities in Barcelona of an identified GRU agent² during the most critical days of 2017. As a preliminary conclusion it can be said that **the rank and profile of the main agent identified suggest that the Kremlin considered different possible scenarios and outcomes** for the Catalan crisis at that time.

Regarding the impact evaluation of the Russian meddling it must be noted that **the same reductionist approach outlined above has been often adopted.** Focused on the tactical and conjunctural impact by questioning, for instance, whether the Russian meddling had a significant effect in the voting turnout. However, given the illegal nature of that referendum and, the absence of the minimum democratic guarantees, it is completely inappropriate. What is relevant is **the cumulative and sedimentary effect of this disinformation in terms of delegitimizing the Spanish democracy** (aspiration of the Catalan separatism), but also of the EU as a whole (aim of the Kremlin campaigns). Hence, the analysis of why this interference took place cannot be detached from the European geopolitical context, characterized by the tensions between the EU and NATO with Russia due to its covert military intervention in Ukraine since 2014. **Addressing the issue through only its local dynamics does not provide the full picture and keys to understand it.** Nor it will in the future.



Posted on Twitter comparing the crowds on supermarkets because of the coronavirus crisis, differencing in between "redneck" customers of a Spanish brand and the civilized of a Catalan one.

The interview with the BBC of Mr. Torra reproduced a recurrent appeal to outside intervention. The aim is transforming an internal conflict between Catalans into a dispute between Catalonia and Spain, conceived as two alien and equally sovereign entities which require international mediation due to the alleged democratic deficits of the Spanish State. This is the basic message spread abroad by Catalan nationalists. Obviously, in the midst of a global pandemic, the practical impact to be expected from this interview or from the letters sent by Mr. Torra to members of the European Council is simply nonexistent and it may even be counterproductive for him and the Catalan nationalist movement. **There are many voices in Spain who think that greater international exposure of leaders like Mr. Torra or Mr. Puigdemont is beneficial** as European audiences will come to know them better beyond superficial and romantic viewpoints. That well may be. But again, the cumulative effect of this messaging **should not be missed and its impact over years should be foreseen.**

2. Russian military intelligence.

To date, the Spanish diplomatic service has effectively dealt with this challenge. However, success should not invite lowering the guard or underestimating the relevance of international public opinion where independentist narratives have penetrated significantly.

It seems obvious that the issue will hardly be solved through fact-checking. When Mr. Torra said on March 19 on BBC that the central Government prevents confinement in Catalonia -despite speaking from his home confinement and appearing below himself a text saying that “Spain has been in nearly in total lockdown since Saturday” [March 15]- the problem is not that he is not aware of reality, it is that simply that reality does not matter and facts become irrelevant. The impact of such narratives and messaging among likeminded audiences should not be underestimated either. Hate speech against Spain is clearly on the rise on Twitter among nationalists’ accounts. **Messages implying that COVID-19 “comes and is the fault of Madrid”,** or that “the State does not care if Catalans die” or that the pandemic would not have reach an “independent Catalan republic” are widely circulating both on social media and regional media outlets. The letters sent by a parastatal organization such as the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) to the consular body accredited in Barcelona blaming “the people of Madrid for the spread of the coronavirus” and accusing the Guardia Civil of “blocking and seizing” medical equipment destined to Igualada -one of the focal points of the pandemic in Catalonia- shows the clear will of the *Generalitat* of shaping an insidious narrative in the nationalist imaginary and spreading it internationally.

Seen from confinement, this activity may seem as another mere example of excesses by the nationalists on social media. **However, its mid-to-long term impact on the civic harmony in the plural Catalan society remains to be seen.** If the death toll keeps growing and the economic impact is as severe as some projections forecast, **there is little room for optimism.** In fact, if the framework and dynamics described are not altered, the question to be asked is whether time and demographics play in favor of Spain or the separatist agenda.



Posted on Junts Per Catalonia’s spokesman at the Spanish Parliament’s Twitter account criticizing the participation of Spanish National Police and the Army deployment to help against the pandemic.



Posted on the Twitter account of the Digital Politics regional minister of the Generalitat, Jordi Puigneró, identifying the alarm state with the application of the 155 article of the Spanish Constitution.

TEN KEYS TO UNDERSTAND THE DISINFORMATION STRATEGY OF THE CATALAN SEPARATISM

1. Forty years of an all-encompassing national building process has resulted in an overwhelming political and cultural hegemony at institutional, media, educational and cultural industry levels.

2. Political fragmentation and plurality ignored on regional public media.

3. Monopolization of public space with yellow ribbons and other nationalist symbols.

4. Patron-client system in place subsidizing like-minded and expelling dissident voices.

5. Central role played by public media broadcasters such as TV3 or Catalunya Ràdio conceived as “state structures”.

6. A pervasive metanarratives riddled with grievances and persecution complex in relation to Spain.

7. Permanent characterization of Spain as authoritarian, backward, threatening and hostile even in child-oriented and popular comedy shows such as Polònia or APM.

8. Permanente delegitimization of the Spanish democracy and appeal to an external mediation to present a conflict “between Catalonia and Spain”.

9. Promotion of a hate speech regarding the coronavirus as a pandemic that “comes and is Madrid’s fault” since the State does not care “if Catalans die”.

10. Cumulative and eroding effect of disinformation and nationalist discursive hegemony.



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