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Disinformation and Foreign Interference: A Challenge for the EU and Its Member States

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen and expand the EU's initiatives against disinformation and foreign interference, such as the East StratCom Task Force, EUvsDisinfo, and the Special Committee for Foreign Interference (INGE); in addition, increase funding and personnel.
2. The EU, through its representatives, institutions, and specialised committees, should urge member states and social media companies to adopt measures that raise awareness and build resilience against disinformation and foreign influence.
3. EU member states should implement strategies to combat disinformation and foreign interference, including media literacy education, awareness campaigns, and security policies targeting foreign information manipulation.

Abstract

This Policy Brief analyses the threats posed by disinformation and foreign interference within the European Union (EU) and outlines strategies to address these challenges. It shows two main levels of action: the EU level, where institutions

can implement regulatory and strategic measures, and the national level, where member state governments and civil societies can engage in education, awareness campaigns, and resilience-building efforts.



Disinformation and Foreign Interference: A Challenge for the EU and Its Member States

Introduction

While disinformation is spread deliberately with the intent to harm an adversary – which can be states, individuals, or groups – misinformation is false information disseminated without malicious intent. Disinformation and misinformation are often incorrectly used synonymously. Disinformation has a long history, especially in warfare, and reached new levels in the 20th century with the spread of mass media. Famous historical cases include the Gleiwitz incident, a false-flag attack on a radio station in Gleiwitz on 31 August 1939, staged by the German secret police, and “Operation Infektion”, a KGB-invented disinformation story claiming that the United States invented HIV, which is still believed by many people more than 40 years after it was disseminated.

Foreign interference, in the context of information warfare, refers to the deliberate international influence on states, organisations, and individuals to manipulate public opinion or the political direction in another state or to achieve a destabilising effect. This can occur through disinformation, propaganda, subversion, or by financing politically sympathetic forces.

Foreign interference is an important aspect of hybrid threats, which aim to destabilise enemy societies through propaganda, cyberattacks, and subversion instead of or alongside conventional military means.

The 2024 Election Year

Elections are always accompanied by an increased amount of disinformation from both domestic and foreign actors. International actors outside the European Union (EU) see this as a prime opportunity to sway public opinion and potentially affect election outcomes. This applies to both the elections to the European Parliament and the elections of individual member states, such as the parliamentary elections in Austria in autumn 2024. Elections at the national level are also crucial for adversaries of the European Union to influence future EU policy because the European Council and the Council of the European Union consist of members of the EU member states’ governments. The current policy that member states must vote unanimously, especially regarding the EU’s foreign and security policy, makes the EU more vulnerable to foreign interference, as a change of government in just one country can block future decisions.

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Foreign interference campaigns before elections also aim to change the policy of centrist parties by manipulating public opinion. Not only do adversaries of the EU seek to manipulate actual public opinion, but it is also common to create a kind of “fake public opinion”, for instance, with troll farms that target the accounts of politicians to express “resistance” to certain policy matters.

Complicated topics where the population lacks information or education, such as foreign or European relations, are especially affected by foreign and domestic dis-



information. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU's response are particularly significant in this context. Populists on the political fringes spread pro-Russian narratives, often supported by Russian troll farms on social media. Additionally, long-standing EU myths persist, such as claims that the EU is undemocratic, strips nations of their individuality, or acts in an authoritarian manner. Whether addressing the EU's response to the Russian invasion or debunking traditional EU myths, combating these major anti-EU narratives requires extensive public awareness and education efforts.

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In the immediate run-up to the EU elections, if robust resilience measures against disinformation, like media literacy education and education about the EU, are not already in place, they cannot be quickly established. However, raising awareness and conducting targeted information campaigns can enhance vigilance against manipulation, disinformation, and anti-EU myths. The US elections also play an important role in the European information space because English is widely spoken within the European Union, and social media content produced for the US population will also reach European audiences. One example from the past is the interview with Vladimir Putin by US far-right journalist Tucker Carlson, which reached millions of people around the globe via social media. US foreign relations, especially everything connected to the transatlantic partnership, are particularly relevant for European audiences and will affect European discourse as well.

Disinformation and foreign interference in the US elections were already widely discussed issues during the 2016 elections and can be expected to be relevant factors in the 2024 elections as well, especially when the polls show a close race between the candidates.

Related to both the elections to the European Parliament and the US presidential elections, we can see an increased activity of fake social media accounts that amplify imposter content. Imposter content consists of websites or screenshots that impersonate legitimate news websites like BBC, CNN, or "Der Spiegel" to disseminate propaganda narratives.

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Disinformation and Foreign Interference in the EU

Following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the commencement of covert military operations in the Eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, the Russian Federation escalated its activities within the information domain. The "Internet Research Agency", founded in 2013 and headquartered in St. Petersburg, assumed a pivotal role in the Kremlin's endeavours to influence individuals within the European Union.

In 2015, the European Union's External Action Service (EEAS) created the East StratCom Task Force, with its flagship project "EUvsDisinformation" aiming to debunk disinformation and propaganda directed especially against the EU and countries formerly controlled by Moscow as parts of the Soviet Union. EUvsDisinfo features numer-



ous fact-checks and high-quality content available in multiple languages¹. While theoretically the whole of Europe or even the whole world would fit as a target audience for EUvsDisinfo, the number of followers on Facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram does not reflect that relevance.

In 2018, 83% of EU citizens stated that they believe “fake news represents a danger to democracy” (source: Eurobarometer, European Commission 2018). In a 2023 survey by the Bertelsmann Foundation, the vast majority of respondents from the 7 surveyed EU countries (82%) agreed with the statement that both politicians and platform operators should take more action to combat the spread of disinformation².

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Similar to the Active Measures Working Group of the US State Department during the Cold War, the East StratCom Task Force is underfunded and understaffed, which leads to two problems: Firstly, this limits the amount of fake stories that can be covered, reported, and debunked, and secondly, it limits the opportunities to connect internationally, reach out to new audiences, and establish contacts. It would be highly recommended to increase the funding of the Task Force and establish EUvsDisinfo offices in all EU member states that can be, for instance, housed in the EU field offices. These local offices could share expertise on EU-relevant cases of disinformation and monitor foreign information manipulation specifically relevant to the country in which they are based. These offices are not meant to replace measures taken by the national government but rather to act as an addition. In January 2024, the EEAS published the “Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Threats”, which provides an overview analysis of foreign information interference, the targets of these campaigns, and presents a response framework to FIMI threats. The informative FIMI report by the EEAS and EUvsDisinfo by the East StratCom Task Force face a common challenge: the knowledge and information need to be transferred to the nation level and not remain a “niche project” of the so-called “EU bubble”. Events and task forces at the national level in collaboration with the EU could be one tool to raise awareness and know-how about FIMI threats. Education about disinformation at the national level is very heterogeneous among the member states of the European Union. While countries like Finland have addressed the threat of FIMI, particularly from the Russian Federation since 2014, Austria, for instance, adopts a more superficial and “neutral” approach to tackling this issue.

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In a 12-page information PDF document by the Federal Chancellery of Austria titled “Disinformation – What Can I Do?” the Russian Federation is not even mentioned. It is of crucial importance that the European Union increases its efforts to debunk false narratives and myths and raises awareness of the threat of FIMI at the national level, while, of course, respecting all different opinions that are part of a fact-based critical discourse.

1 “Don’t Be Deceived”. n. d. EU vs DISINFORMATION. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>.

2 “Disinformation – a Challenge for Democracy”. n. d. www.bertelsmann-Stiftung.de. <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/disinformation-a-challenge-for-democracy>.



The European Union must also devise strategies to address agents of influence or individuals commonly referred to as “useful idiots”. This includes individuals who operate, for example, as Members of the European Parliament, as well as various figures in academia and politics across Europe. One important step regarding that issue is the initiative by the European Commission to address abusive lawsuits, known as “SLAPP suits”, targeting journalists and human rights defenders. SLAPP stands for “Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation”. These lawsuits are filed with the intention of intimidating or silencing critics by burdening them with costly and time-consuming legal proceedings. There are numerous cases where those accused of spreading harmful narratives, propaganda, and disinformation against the European Union resort to SLAPP suits in an attempt to silence criticism³.

Regulating Social Media Platforms

The European Union already puts pressure on social media companies to address the amount of fake news, hate speech, and other harmful content on their platforms. It is of high importance that manipulated or fabricated content is visibly marked as false for audiences and that fact checks are prominently displayed. Additionally, coordinated troll attacks by troll farms or networks of users who report legitimate content as “fake” or “abusive” to get other users banned or their postings deleted is an issue that deserves further action. It is noteworthy that platform regulations and efforts by the platforms to limit the amount of malign content on social media cannot be viewed as a solution that alone can solve the problem of disinformation and foreign interference, but it is an important step that can be initiated by the European Union.

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Suggested Measures for EU Member States

While the ability to counter disinformation and foreign interference by governments in democracies is limited, EU member states’ governments must do more to address this threat to democracy and stability at the local level. The necessary measures can be divided into three fields: education, raising awareness, and security policy. The government itself cannot only adapt the education system to a certain extent to react to contemporary threats in the information sphere, but it can also order the intelligence services to take a closer look at agents of influence – individuals who are spreading propaganda (sometimes paid) for autocratic regimes. We see, all over Europe, that there is more awareness of individuals who deliver sensitive information to adversaries than of individuals who disseminate the hostile and dangerous narratives of autocratic regimes to subvert European societies. Civil society and media play a crucial role in containing the impact of foreign interference. The EU member state governments should make efforts to identify and support civil society organisations that play a crucial role in building democratic resilience and providing education to

3 “Press Corner”. n. d. European Commission – European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6159.



combat myths, conspiracy theories, and disinformation about EU issues, ensuring they receive adequate funding.

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In many countries, expertise regarding foreign information manipulation is not widespread in civil society and media, highlighting the need for a pan-European education and knowledge exchange on this topic. One role the nation-state government can play in this context is to provide a platform for the creation of task forces against disinformation and foreign interference, comprising experts from various fields such as political science, journalism, history, security, and information technology. The role of these task forces can vary from exchanging information and networking to establishing a common strategy to protect the information space without undermining the principles of freedom of speech. Exchanging information is especially crucial for monitoring and archiving incidents and channels that disseminate disinformation and propagandistic narratives, given the vast amounts of such content circulating. In many EU member states, traditional media outlets are facing an economic crisis. To ensure a serious yet diverse media landscape, it is crucial to establish conditions that support quality journalism. Government press subsidies can play a significant role in maintaining media outlets, but these subsidies must be tied to strict quality criteria.

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Accurate and fact-based reporting is of utmost importance in debunking false information and creating resilience against disinformation campaigns. However, traditional media in many EU member states faces not only economic challenges but also a growing lack of trust among the population.

Addressing these issues requires the implementation of measures that promote transparency, accountability, and high journalistic standards. By doing so, a media environment that is both reliable and diverse can be fostered, ultimately strengthening public trust and resilience against disinformation.



About the author

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About ÖGfE

The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a non-governmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has a long-standing experience in promoting European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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