

May 2023

# **DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN FINLAND**

EU DISINFO LAB



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
EMBLEMATIC CASES	4
NARRATIVES	5
COMMUNITY	7
POLICY	8

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## INTRODUCTION

- In general, Finland has a decent level of resilience against disinformation and information warfare. The main reasons behind this are the relatively high quality of the Finnish education system (and accordingly, high levels of education among the population), a long tradition of media literacy and institutional trust among the population.
- The continuing polarization of Finnish society and a possible decline in education and economic levels cause concerns over Finland's ability to resist disinformation in the future.
- Despite far-right groups still being marginal, [the Finnish Security Intelligence Service \(Supo\)](#) warns of increasing radicalisation fueled by far-right communities and networks online. According to Supo, individuals and small groups constitute the biggest threat. In December 2021, the Finnish police [identified and arrested](#) seven men on the suspicion of planning a terrorist attack. [Europol](#) maintained that the group was influenced by accelerationist, neo-Nazis and satanist ideals.
- Overall, Finnish authorities missed the opportunity to build a more comprehensive situational awareness on what is really happening, especially online. Instead, major focus was put on Russian trolls and disinformation narratives that have a smaller impact on the Finnish public debate. Contrarily to the past, where preparation against information warfare and disinformation has been rather minimal, authorities, civil society organisations, and independent media have recently stepped up their efforts in combatting disinformation and information warfare.

# EMBLEMATIC CASES

## RUSSIAN ALLEGATIONS OF FINNISH ABDUCTIONS OF RUSSIAN CHILDREN

- At the end of the 2010s, Russian officials and media accused Finnish (and Scandinavian) officials of systematic misconduct and discrimination against Russian children and their parents. Pavel Astahov, who then was the Russian ombudsman for children, even declared Finland a [life-threatening country](#) for Russian children and demanded consultations with Finnish officials.
- The narrative, repeated multiple times in the Russian media, was that Finnish officials took Russian children into custody without a relevant reason to do so, and then handed them over to national citizens, including LGBTQ+ couples. The procedure was said to be a severe threat to [all children of Russian origin](#) – also those coming to Finland as tourists with their parents.
- The typical pattern was that [somebody talked about the alleged](#) misconduct of Finnish officials in the media. Astahov then commented on the case, framing it as an example of a general procedure in Finland.
- For Finnish officials, this was a complex situation; according to the Finnish legislation, they are not allowed to comment on any individual case or give out any personal information, with which they could have proven the falsity of the news. Instead, their statements might have been perceived as nonchalant and insensitive.

## ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AND “THE TRUTH SEEKERS”

- In Finland, there is a network of alternative media and individual actors actively producing and spreading disinformation. Some of them call themselves “The Truth Seekers”. According to their deep state conspiracy, there is a powerful elite that pursues its own interests at the expenses of the people, and it has the mainstream media on its side. “The Truth Seekers” believes they are being silenced and that the interest of the public is ignored.
- These “Truth Seekers” reject official polls, according to which most Finns support the country’s NATO membership. These polls were denied by the alternative media, as they claimed that a majority of the population did not support joining the alliance. The network called for a referendum on the issue.
- This [visualisation](#) shows that disinformation and its spreaders, both alternative media and individual actors, are bubbled up. There is a network of followers around these disinformation spreaders, who were also active in distributing COVID-19 disinformation. Additionally, there are also other actors close to the bubble. Among them, there are members of registered parties and members of a party that fell out of Parliament in the 2023 parliamentary elections.

## DISINFORMATION DURING THE 2023 FINNISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

- The use of disinformation was observed during the 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections. In February, [dozens of Twitter-accounts were created](#), which pretended to belong to MP-candidates and/or experts. These imposter candidates or experts posted mostly about the Finnish accession into NATO and how little sense it made for Finland to join the alliance. According to these accounts, NATO could not save Finland and, on the contrary, the country would become a puppet to the organisation. The appearance of these accounts was mostly received with hilarity by the general public, as the tweets were written in very poor Finnish. Yet, the origin of these Twitter accounts remains unknown at the time of our writing.
- Twitter is widely estimated the most influential platform for disinformation in Finland and deepfakes about politicians and false information in general have been frequent, especially in fringe groups connected to the far-right. These parties have [already casted doubts](#) about the elections being rigged, recommending voters to take pictures of their votes so they would be “counted properly”. Increasing concern was on the impact of TikTok especially among the young and future voters, while few real data availabilities justify more attention to it during next elections.

# NARRATIVES

## NATO MEMBERSHIP THREATENS FINNISH INDEPENDENCE

- As Finland has been applying for a NATO membership, a new disinformation narrative has emerged in social media. [According to the narrative](#), Finland must stick to its traditional neutrality, adopted after the II World War. According to this narrative, Russia does not currently present a threat to Finland and, therefore, Finland should avoid provoking Russia.
- This narrative often includes calls to remove sanctions aimed at Russia and to [resume friendly economic and political ties](#). The main driving factor in this narrative is the claim that [Finland would lose its independence](#) and become a puppet of the United States and its allies, should it be accepted as a NATO member.
- Russian disinformation narratives also argue that Finland has been pressured by the US to apply to the alliance and that a [majority of Finns oppose the NATO membership](#). This sentiment appears sometimes in tandem with the popular sentiment of European Union scepticism that resonates well with Russian disinformation campaigning.
- Similar narratives are spread mostly by small far-right parties and activists, some who see Ukraine and the [collective West as the main culprit](#) for the war in Ukraine. The same parties accuse the Finnish government and mainstream media of war-mongering and inciting hysteria in the general public.
- This “hysteria” was supported by a Russian information campaign, where multiple Russian-linked media outlets [falsely reported that Finland is moving its tanks to the Eastern border](#) in a massive mobilisation effort against Russia. The claim was based on social media videos, showing Finnish tanks being transferred westward to partake in a military exercise.

## DENIAL AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES CONCERNING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, denial towards research-based decision-making emerged. This caused a significant challenge in the Finnish disinformation landscape. The seriousness of the virus and even its existence were disputed, and the decision-makers’ motivations for imposing containment measures were questioned. Denialist opinions were strongly linked to conspiracy theories.
- In practice, denialism occurred, together with actions and encouragement to behave against recommendations. In addition, much incorrect and misleading information regarding vaccines and masks, for instance, was shared especially in social media.
- [Even though decision-makers and experts did not always agree on pandemic-related decisions](#) (e.g., on containment measures and vaccination campaigns), conspiracy theories about a unified elite with a secret agenda were shared.

## QUESTIONING THE NEUTRALITY AND INTEGRITY OF FINNISH JOURNALISTIC MEDIA

- [So far, Finns' trust in the news has been relatively high](#). However, some people tend to question the neutrality and integrity of journalistic media in Finland. Its credibility is being undermined by the belief that journalistic media is involved in a conspiracy plot or secret agenda, to mislead people. Also, the media's political neutrality has been questioned.
- According to the narrative, the mainstream media consists of like-minded actors who determine the topics of conversation and the right opinion to have. Also, there is said to be an elite that pursues its own interests, with the support of the mainstream media. There are many examples of this, especially related to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding restrictions and vaccines.
- Moreover, it is claimed that the Finnish journalistic media is not objective and that it pursues a certain ideological or political agenda. However, Finnish media actors, such as Helsingin Sanomat and YLE, [are politically uncommitted and guided by the principle of independence](#). However, [journalists' criticism is relatively evenly distributed across parties](#).

## ANTI-MIGRATION NARRATIVES AND THE "GREAT REPLACEMENT"

- After the 2015 immigration crisis, the Finnish social media space has been filled with anti-migration and xenophobic disinformation. This mostly consists of false news by alternate media websites. For example, in 2019, within minutes after a school stabbing in Kuopio, [news began circulating on social media that falsely claimed the attacker was a refugee](#).
- Similarly, this narrative aims to prove that migrants are a threat to Finnish society, culture, and race. [The Finnish far-right has promoted the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory](#), according to which a globalist elite is planning to replace Christian and white Europeans with Muslim migrants from the Middle East and Africa. This theory has spilled into [mainstream political discourse](#), through the claim that Muslim immigrants are treated better than nationals. [Accordingly](#), multiculturalism, feminism, and the LGBTQ+-movement are responsible for the low birth-rate of the "white race". It is important to note that Ukrainians are spared from this anti-immigration tide as Finns have empathised with them strongly, especially after the Russian invasion.

## COMMUNITY

When it comes to countering disinformation, Finland's strengths are high level of institutional and media trust, as well as teaching media literacy which is essential in the development of critical thinking. In countering disinformation, there are many actors, including The Finnish Defence Forces, government ministries, universities, associations (such as Faktabaari) and journalistic media, especially Yle. In addition, Finland counts on strong international cooperation concerning information defence.

However, an authority that would be responsible for the development of Finland's cognitive security is needed, together with further cooperation between relevant actors. In addition to disinformation from third countries, domestic disinformation actors and digital media development (i.e., from AI to social media) require increasing attention and international collaboration.

### FACT-CHECKERS

Faktabaari is a Finnish NGO focused on independent journalism, fact-checking, and digital information literacy education, founded in 2014. It adheres to the Finnish ethical code for journalists. It is part of several independent national, Nordic, European, and global expert networks. It still works on a project basis and tries to catalyse journalism on verification skills and to cooperate on tackling information disorders. Its mission is to support fact-based public debate, digital information literacy and participatory democracy and, as a result, to strengthen critical thinking and responsible participation. Faktabaari Editor includes, for instance, professional journalists, teachers, researchers and information and media literacy specialists.

### OTHER ACTORS

- **The knowledge center on information resilience of The National Emergency Supply Agency**

In 2022, the National Emergency Supply Agency of Finland founded a centre on information resilience. The pilot project is until 2024, during which networks and operating models will be built and relevant information for future activities gathered.

- **The Finnish Broadcasting Company**

YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company, is owned by the Finnish state and financed by taxpayers. YLE's main mission is to strengthen democracy and offer independent and neutral information. YLE counters disinformation not only by regularly producing news, but also by fact-checking, and designing other journalistic actions and content. Thanks to the public resources it receives, YLE has special media coordination duties regarding response to hybrid and information warfare.

## POLICY

- At this moment, Finland has no existing laws or policies against disinformation. In some cases, hate speech or disinformation can be punished via a law against ethnic agitation.
- Finnish law also dictates that illegal information must be removed from a newspaper or a website.
- The rights of whistle-blowers are protected by the [Finnish law concerning the use of freedom of speech](#) and journalism.
- The director of the Finnish Security Intelligence Service recommended [a law that penalises the spreading of foreign disinformation on purpose](#).
- Nordic Council of Ministers expert group recommendation on digital democracy next to forthcoming Government positions on media (especially YLE funding) and revision of preparedness law are to be followed. Finnish authorities' activity towards EU level disinformation policy has been mostly limited on third country actors.

This project is funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.



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