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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN SWEDEN

EU DISINFO LAB



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INTRODUCTION

- The Swedish information landscape has seen practically the same set of disinformation issues as the rest of Europe in the last couple of years: related to COVID-19, vaccines, 5G radiation, renewable energy, migration, and so forth. This underlines the already widely drawn conclusion that these issues are driven by multi-national disinformation agents targeting at least Europe as a continent, if not an even broader audience.
- Many of the disinformation themes mentioned above can be traced to a broader narrative linked to pro-Russian interests and actors, aiming at disturbing the democratic dialogue in society and promoting discord and distrust. These narratives exploited by Russian state actors have turned towards promoting the idea of peace and negotiations regarding the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Again, this follows the lines we see in the rest of Europe.
- This report highlights a specific case for the Swedish context: the claim that Swedish social services kidnap children from Muslim immigrant families to force them to become Christians. Based on misunderstandings of Swedish law, the desperation and confusion of the families have been distorted and amplified by both domestic and foreign actors, mainly in Arabic. The narrative has helped a predominantly immigrant-based political party grow, has increased tensions between Swedish institutions and the country's Muslim inhabitants, and has even migrated into the Russian information landscape. It may even affect the general view of Sweden in Muslim societies and indirectly feed into the Turkish decision to delay or withhold the Swedish membership of NATO. Thus this one case, based on misunderstandings, has developed into disinformation and information operations affecting trust in domestic institutions and Sweden as a country, and even potentially international relations.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

THE CARE OF YOUNG PERSONS (LVU-LAGEN)

- In December 2021, a campaign criticising Swedish social services rapidly gained momentum on Arab-speaking Twitter and other platforms such as YouTube. In essence, videos of crying families who claimed to have had their children kidnapped by social services, and crying children who claimed to have been wrongfully removed from their families by social services, were spread by an increasing number of persons with a large number of followers. Among the persons sharing these videos, we can find IS and al-Qaeda sympathisers, often based outside Sweden, such as in Egypt or Morocco. Al Jazeera made a 45-minute report on their Arab-speaking services about the alleged wrongdoing by the Swedish social services, increasing the spread and legitimising the narrative.
- It all started when a man got angry and desperate after his children were taken away. He campaigned with other immigrants in the same situation on social media with strong language, claiming that social services kidnapped his children. However, he and his fellow protesters had little impact or visibility. In December 2021, an Egyptian influencer with 800.000 followers on YouTube contacted him. Then, another Arabic-speaking influencer, with 4 million followers and an Islamist edge, published allegations about how Swedish social services kidnap Muslim children. After that, it all took a [turn](#) the man who started the campaign did not foresee. In fact, he claims that Salafists in Sweden and abroad [took over](#) his personal struggle.
- As the campaign gained momentum, the narrative grew to include claims that the children were forcibly taken from their families in order to leave their Muslim faith, to make them eat pork meat, force girls to take off their hijab, and so on. Some of the forums on social media based in Sweden have organised demonstrations and manifestations outside the offices of local social services, and there have also been threats of violence towards the offices and social workers. Some social workers have had their names and address being published online. One of the [hashtags](#) associated with the campaign is “Sweden is a Fascist state” (in Arabic), a hashtag launched by a Moroccan influencer.
- Several analysts come to the same conclusion: foreign actors now drive the campaign, predominantly in Arab-speaking countries, rather than persons who actually have lost custody of their children. Instead, the parents have started a more constructed dialogue with the authorities to learn more about the law. International actors carry on the campaign, while most commentators fail to understand the Swedish law or society.
- The [Swedish government](#) is not seeing any end of this campaign soon and has given the Psychological Defence Agency the task of monitoring the developments and to strengthen the capability to stand against such disinformation campaigns, and the National Board of Health and Welfare the task to counter them.

THE ISSUE MIGRATING INTO OTHER CONTEXTS

- Before the 2022 Swedish general elections, the newly formed political party Nyans (Shade, or Nuance) picked up the issue of Muslim children being separated from their families by social services. The party is mainly oriented towards voters in immigrant-dense areas. A party member was interviewed in one of the [videos](#) launching the political campaign, which was posted by the Arab-speaking YouTube channel Shoun Islamiya, known to have shared extremist beliefs and values. Nyans presented itself as a party working against the unjust and misconducted interventions by the social services, with videos in different languages besides Swedish, and broadcast by channels based [abroad](#), such as Turkey.
- The same foreign actors that were involved in the campaign against the Swedish social services had also contributed to raising the tension among immigrants in Sweden and Muslims abroad regarding the Easter 2022 events, when a Swedish-Danish extreme-right politician, Rasmus Paludan, burned the Quran in Jönköping, which ignited several days of [violence](#) between rioters and the police.
- Mr. Paludan has carried on his anti-Islam displays, burning a copy of the Quran in front of the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm in January 2023, during a delicate moment in the negotiations between Sweden and Turkey for the possible Swedish membership of NATO. Muslim and Arab-speaking milieux have massively criticised the act, as well as Sweden for allowing the burning of a Holy script, leading to a call to boycott Swedish products and brands. The government's Psychological Defence Agency has identified the same foreign actors behind the escalation of hatred towards Sweden as those behind the campaign against social services.
- Sweden's perception as a liberal country was damaged over the Muslim world. Following the blasphemous act, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Sweden is a "Nazi country" as it legal to burn books, even religious texts, as part of public manifestations.
- More recently, Russian media outlet Vremja has reported about a Russian family that claims it had to flee Sweden to avoid having their children taken away by social services because they were caught [speaking Russian](#). The Russian reportage did not mention that social services acted upon reports of violence and severe alcoholism in the family and it was a court to decide such measures. The migration of this narrative between contexts indicates its success in reaching target audiences inside and outside Sweden.

NARRATIVES

SWEDEN IS RACIST AND ANTI-MUSLIM

- The narrative accompanying the campaign against social services is largely based on the idea that Sweden is a racist and untrustworthy country where the population fears the otherwise peaceful influx of Muslim immigrants. Thus, the state uses social services to forcefully remove Muslim children from their families to secularise them or make them turn into good Christians. Deceptive [reports](#) include claims that girls were forced to take off their hijab and even raped or that children are served pork and alcohol, and their names are changed into Christian ones.
- The campaign aims to divide the Muslim world from the West, and it has engaged many people. The provocative yet legal act of burning the Quran elicited boycotts of Swedish goods and brands, endorsed even by the well-renowned Al Azhar University in Cairo.
- Anger increased substantially when the same influencers spreading false information about the Swedish social services began to highlight Mr. Paludan's blasphemous act, which coincided – intentionally or not – with the delicate negotiations for Turkey to accept the Swedish NATO membership application. Turkey wants Sweden, among other things, to be tough on terrorists, particularly Kurdish groups. Many in Sweden are upset about Turkey pressuring Sweden in order to join a military coalition they would rather not join. Therefore, Mr. Paludan exploited the momentum to express anti-Islam views at a convenient time to halt Sweden's entry into NATO. In fact, there are [allegations](#) of connections between his manifestations and Russian interests.

COMMUNITY

Sweden has a very small community of fact-checkers and active anti-disinformation campaigners. This is because the general Swedish public is quite social media literate and keeps a somewhat sceptical approach to strong statements online. However, the more noteworthy actors are listed below:

KÄLLKRITIKBYRÅN

- Källkritikbyrån is a journalistic initiative focusing on helping people become confident and aware net users, which systematically reviews online claims.
- Källkritikbyrån is a part of Nordis – Nordic Observatory for Digital Media and Information Disorders – a collaboration between fact-checkers and researchers in the Nordic countries. They are also part of Meta's third-party fact-checking programme.

FAKTAJOUREN-FOJO

- Faktajouren is a project run by the Media Institute Fojo, an independent institute for media development at Linnaeus University in Kalmar. The Faktajouren follows and reports on research and development of methods, tools, and models for fact-checking and handling inaccuracies online in Sweden and internationally.
- Faktajouren also conducts dialogue with authorities, organisations, and the media industry, supports independent media initiatives to conduct fact-checking, and arranges training for media actors.

MYNDIGHETEN FÖR PSYKOLOGISKT FÖRSVAR- PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENCE AGENCY

- The Psychological Defence Agency (Myndigheten för Psykologiskt Försvar, MPF), a government agency, was launched on 1 January 2022 to strengthen the population's ability to detect and resist malign influence campaigns and disinformation. It conducts studies and spreads awareness about disinformation, information operations, and how to become a more informed citizen.
- The Agency also identifies, analyses, prevents, and counters foreign malign information influence activities and other disinformation directed at Sweden or Swedish interests.

POLICY

- Sweden does not have laws against disinformation. Freedom of speech is strong and highly protected in the Constitution, which gives citizens far-reaching rights to express their views. However, there are laws against defamation, inciting ethnic hatred, agitation and sedition, which could be applied against certain types of disinformation. For example, Mr. Paludan has always been legally allowed to burn the Quran during his anti-Islam actions. Still, on one occasion, the police did allow him to manifest due to public safety reasons. This prohibition was later deemed wrong by a court, despite the offense it caused to the Muslim community.
- However, there have been government agencies countering disinformation, propaganda, and information operations in different shapes since at least the 1950s. The Psychological Defence Agency was opened in January 2022 with a clear mandate to identify and counter disinformation. Democratic principles forbid them, as a state agency, to monitor domestic actors, and they focus on foreign initiatives and campaigns.

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