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CONNECTING THE DISINFORMATION DOTS

Insights, lessons, and guidance from 20 EU Member States

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INTRODUCTION

- “The disinformation landscape across Europe” is a project conducted between March and December 2023 thanks to the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. The project collected factsheets, leading to the production of 20 factsheets mapping the state of disinformation in [Austria](#), [Belgium](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Finland](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [Greece](#), [Hungary](#), [Ireland](#), [Italy](#), [Latvia](#), [Lithuania](#), [Luxembourg](#), [Netherlands](#), [Poland](#), [Portugal](#), [Romania](#), [Slovakia](#), [Spain](#), and [Sweden](#).
- A community of experts (23 authors and 20 reviewers) responded to EU DisinfoLab’s call to help describe and review the most emblematic disinformation cases, recurrent narratives, community actors, and policy initiatives to grasp the essentials of what disinformation looks like in each country.
- This document compiles a comparative analysis of the findings in the listed Member States, showing that the European Union faces the same challenges regarding disinformation campaigns. The common denominator of the most recurring narratives is fear that life as one knows it will take a turn for the worse between erosion of values, sovereignty, and purchasing power.
- Across Europe, the counter-disinformation community is characterised by interdisciplinarity and cooperation among private and public stakeholders. At the national level, policies are also put in place, although, usually, there are no standalone laws that explicitly target disinformation. As the reception of EU legislation is often delayed and patchy, it will be crucial to monitor the enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA).
- Ten recommendations addressed to policymakers and the general community stem from the analysis. They focus on the need to ensure continued, collaborative, and financially sustainable research – with data access – based on a common language, with a diversity-, solution-, and threat-oriented approach.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS ON DISINFORMATION BASED ON EMBLEMATIC CASES ACROSS EUROPE

In every factsheet, the experts helped assess what they considered to be emblematic cases of disinformation in their countries. These were a selection of hoaxes, unsubstantiated urban legends, and foreign interference that made the top of the public debate, contributing to the information disorder.

Despite the uniqueness of the various landscapes, striking similarities often emerge. To illustrate this, three examples are described.

FALSE CHILD ABDUCTIONS

A multitude of conspiracy theories starring alleged child abuse pollute online discussion. For instance, QAnon's successful weaponisation of anti-trafficking narratives shows how triggering the topic is. Therefore, the narrative has been exploited to stir indignation over national governments and denounce alleged [Russophobia](#). Moreover, anti-vaxxers and those opposing sexual education alleged child abuse to support their views.

Various factsheets reported a conspiracy theory that involves fearmongering on child abduction by deliberately misinterpreting facts. In the 2010s, Russian officials and media falsely accused Finnish (and Scandinavian) officials of taking [Russian children](#) into custody without a valid reason, simply to have them adopted by national citizens. In 2023, a disinformation campaign presented the Romanian Ministry of Family, Youth, and Equality's plan to change the law to separate [children from at-risk families](#) as a scheme to take away children under the framework of the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP).

On a similar note, Polish [medical facilities](#) had to debunk false claims that Polish childhood cancer patients were being discharged to give room to sick and wounded Ukrainian children, causing outrage and anti-refugee sentiments.

FOREIGN INTERFERENCES

Foreign interference heavily relies on disinformation and related strategies to spread chaos and distrust. Overall, attribution remains often controversial and complex to achieve and, on a positive note, these campaigns' impact tends to remain, at this stage, limited. However, these instances undoubtedly align with foreign interests – mainly but not limited to Russia – polarising the debate with adversarial narratives.

In 2023, [dozens of Twitter accounts impersonating Finnish MP candidates and/or experts](#) were created to discourage the country's accession to NATO. Due to its poor Finnish, the campaign of unknown origins caused more hilarity than trouble. In France, suspicions of interference were raised against a [journalist in charge of BFM TV's nightly programmes](#) for broadcasting reports on contentious international relations issues (e.g., [pro-Morocco](#) and [anti-Qatar](#)).

In 2019 and 2020, a double EU DisinfoLab investigation focusing on [pro-India networks](#) operating in Belgium showed how EP Today, falsely acting as the European Parliament's legitimate magazine, was used to push anti-Pakistan narratives online.

In 2021, a Graphika investigation uncovered a [network of inauthentic Twitter accounts](#) targeting the Belgian government. This unattributed operation was precisely when the Belgian federal government planned to limit access to the Belgian telecom infrastructure to Chinese companies. In the Netherlands, secret spies from Russia and China posed as colleagues or recruiters to approach thousands of Dutch tech companies' employees [via fake accounts on LinkedIn](#).

SATIRE

A curious pattern is that [satire can sometimes misinform](#) when the ironic bent of the message gets lost from the transmitter to the receiver. Users are met with an overabundance of online content, and sometimes, despite having the technological tools, they lack the [digital literacy](#) know-how to discern true from false. Moreover, everyone is more prone to believing misleading messages if trusted sources deliver them.

In 2006, French-speaking national broadcaster RTBF launched a parodic breaking news programme stating that [Flanders had declared independence](#) from Belgium, causing tensions. In 2009, film director Jan Henrik Stahlberg tricked German media outlets into covering an [inexistent terrorist attack](#) in the made-up town of Bluewater, California.

	Austria	Belgium	Bulgaria	Finland	France	Germany	Greece	Hungary	Ireland	Italy	Latvia	Lithuania	Luxembourg	Netherlands	Poland	Portugal	Romania	Slovakia	Spain	Sweden
Anti-Europeanism and anti-Atlanticism																				
Anti-migration and xenophobia																				
Climate change and the energy crisis																				
Gender-based disinformation																				
Health, Covid-19, and vaccines																				
Historical revisionism																				
Institutional distrust																				
Media distrust																				
Regional tensions																				
Ukraine war																				

AN OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN DISINFORMATIVE NARRATIVES ACROSS EUROPE

Deceptive narratives that sow division, distrust, and fear continue to find fertile ground, shaping perceptions and beliefs in an age where information, misinformation, and disinformation coexist in the public discourse. This intricate tapestry of disinformation paints a vivid picture of the contemporary European landscape, highlighting the pressing need for discernment, critical thinking, and media literacy in an era where narratives can be more potent than facts.

This section summarises the main narratives encountered across the European disinformation landscape as reported by the factsheets. To provide an overview, these are concisely reported in the table above. Of course, this is not to say that other narratives are absent in a specific country. It merely reflects the aspects the various experts deemed prominent to focus on. For instance, one can be sure that climate- or gender-related deceptions are registered everywhere.

Ultimately, the common denominator of these narratives is a sense of frustration towards the possibility that life as one knows it might change. For example, the fear that stricter health-, climate-, or migration-related policies will limit one's freedom or economic power. This malaise is quickly projected onto the more immediate targets to blame, namely national and international authorities and the media. Although a lot of disinformation is fabricated domestically, it is undoubted that the resulting weakening of European democratic institutions supports the plans of malign actors such as Russia.

ANTI-EUROPEANISM AND ANTI-ATLANTICISM:

EU membership is negatively framed as a source of impoverishment for its Member States, stigmatising the [Eurozone](#) and framing the community as [taking](#) from countries more than it is giving them back. Moreover, the EU is described as trying to impose same-sex marriage and sexual education on reluctant countries.

Similarly, NATO membership is negatively presented as a loss of independence and national sovereignty, especially in [Finland](#), which recently joined the alliance, moving away from its traditional neutrality. Overall, the narrative conveys the idea that ex-USSR nations and its satellites such as Lithuania and Hungary are puppets of the West, bending to European and American interests.

ANTI-MIGRATION AND XENOPHOBIA:

Xenophobia is fostered by claims that refugees are [criminals](#) (often accused of [sexual violence](#)) and [treated better](#) than nationals. In 2016, the Hungarian government organised a referendum – invalidated by the low turnout – asking, “Do you want to allow the European Union to mandate the relocation of non-Hungarian citizens to Hungary without the approval of the National Assembly?”. The narrative is often declined in terms of Islamophobia and goes both ways: from claims that European countries are forced to give up their [traditions](#) to accommodate the Muslim minorities to false reports that Muslims were made to eat non-halal meals and forced to [convert](#) to Christianity.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ENERGY CRISIS:

Climate-related falsities either deny or [underplay](#) the climate emergency and man's responsibility. For example, Luxembourgian fact-checkers reported the alarming practice of sneaking [false research results](#) into peer-reviewed journalism, trying to exploit the system to undermine climate protection.

Deceptive content maintains that climate policies are based on a false emergency and will impoverish EU countries. Conspiracy theories claim that European authorities wish to impose climate lockdowns and fifteen-minute cities, forcing people to drive [electric cars](#) and eat insects and lab-made meat against their traditional lifestyle. In the Netherlands, a government proposal to reduce the country's nitrogen emissions by 30% by 2030 to limit agricultural pollution inspired a wave of [protests among farmers](#).

Disinformation related to the energy crisis has been spread to promote the idea that Russian sanctions [harm](#) the countries implementing them, contributing to a European economic crisis. Therefore, siding with Russia is portrayed as the only way to secure energy independence.

GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION:

One of the most emblematic gender-based disinformation cases concerns German Foreign Affairs Minister [Annalena Baerbock](#), a similar experience to Italian congresswoman and former President of the Chamber [Laura Boldrini](#). Moreover, gendered disinformation attacks women and the LGBTQ+ community; for instance, the [Irish Minister for Children](#) was targeted by a homophobic campaign and the [Luxembourg Prime Minister](#) was falsely said to be dating a transgender woman.

Following the tightening of the Polish abortion law in 2020, far-right politicians accused women and feminists of being traitors to the nation and foreign influence agents.

HEALTH, COVID-19, AND VACCINES:

Pandemic-related unscientific claims, hoaxes, and fully-fledged conspiracies have permeated European societies. Disinformation suggests that [containment measures](#) are a cover-up to restrict individual freedom and that vaccines are [unsafe](#), contrary to [alternative cures](#). A detrimental plan from an ill-meant elite is often implied, linking it to the Great Reset. A peculiarity to the Greek case is that the Orthodox Church resisted compliance with safety requirements to carry on [Holy Communion](#). In Italy, far-right politicians contributed to reviving a [2015 TV excerpt](#) discussing a “super virus” as evidence that COVID-19 was a lab-made Chinese bioweapon.

HISTORICAL REVISIONISM:

Historical revisionism is an all-encompassing narrative that combines elements of anti-Semitism, alleged Russophobia, and failed state threats, among others.

The glorification of the “[big Russian bear](#)” presenting Russia as a friendly protector is crucial. This is also fed by claims that Soviet countries either joined the USSR voluntarily or are still legally [Russian provinces](#), and their independence is illegitimate. To empower this view, disinformation suggests that [Nazism](#) has been thriving in Baltic countries since the end of the Soviet era and that the CIA orchestrated Lithuania's [liberation](#) in 1991. A recent revival of Latvia's [de-Russification](#) through the removal of Soviet statues is framed as a form of Russophobia.

INSTITUTIONAL DISTRUST:

Lack of trust in authorities and institutions is at the basis of numerous conspiracy theories that identify elites as the source of all evil. This narrative is often expressed in terms of electoral disinformation. In most countries, unfounded voting fraud claims were made to undermine credibility in elections as the epitome of the democratic

process. In Bulgaria, hoaxes opposing [electronic voting](#) technology thrived, while Finnish audiences were incentivised to take [pictures](#) of their voting ballots to avoid miscounts. The [2017 MacronLeaks](#) is probably the most well-known election-related scandal analysed.

In politically fragmented countries, disinformation is regularly used as a political communication tool, often transmitted and amplified by [politicians](#) – a consideration that emerges especially among Southern Europeans. On the other hand, politicians are often fact-checked for their statements. [Corruption](#) is one of the most salient issues in the Portuguese public debate, while malign actors exploit the perception of inequality to spread lies across the EU.

MEDIA DISTRUST:

The countries analysed enjoy different levels of trust in the media ecosystem. For instance, this is high in the Scandinavian region, yet some people [question](#) the neutrality and integrity of journalistic media in Finland. A network of alternative media, self-defining as “the truth seekers”, feeds into deep-state conspiracies that the mainstream media helps evil elites maintain control over the population. In Ireland, disinformation actors consistently seek to undermine professional journalism while promoting their media practices as authentic journalism.

According to a 2023 Reuters Institute study, only [27%](#) of Slovaks trust the media. The Portuguese coined the term ‘jornalixo’, combining journalism and garbage, used to attack content that goes against the reader’s convictions. On the other hand, a breach of journalistic freedom occurred in Greece, where several journalists, government officials, and businesspeople were targeted by the illegal [Predator spyware](#) on their devices. The government denied any involvement but acknowledged surveillance of an opposition leader.

REGIONAL TENSIONS:

In countries that experience linguistic or ethnic fragmentations, regional tensions are also fuelled by disinformation and connected to independence movements. In Belgium, the social fracture between the French- and the Dutch-speaking communities are a substantial reality. In Bulgaria, [North Macedonia](#)’s accession to the European Union is a triggering topic. In Spain, some hoaxes tackled the regular contacts of the independence movement with Russian officials during the Catalan sovereignty process.

In Poland, the 2021 Polish-Belarusian border crisis intensified tensions around the hosting of migrants. In Spain, the regular contacts of the independence movement with Russian officials during the Catalan sovereignty process were the subject of hoaxes by pro-Kremlin media.

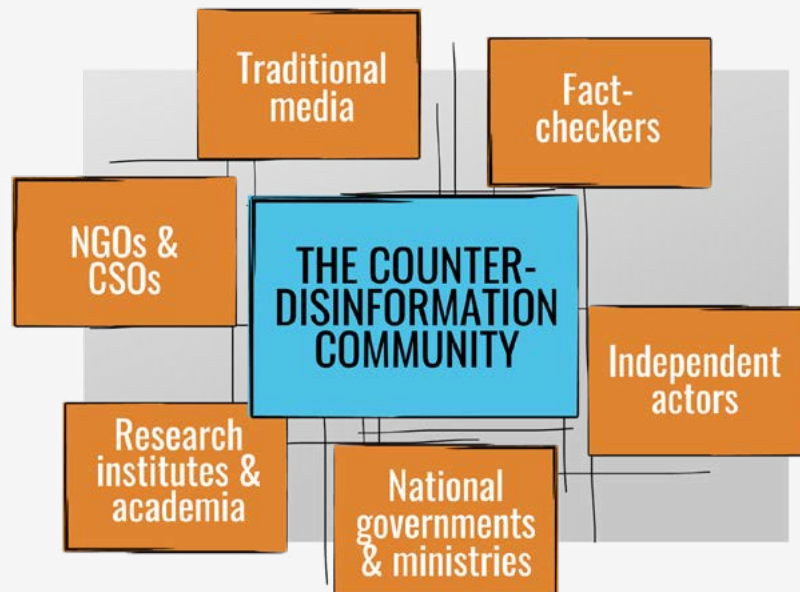
UKRAINE WAR:

False and misleading information related to the Ukraine conflict flooded the information sphere globally, especially in neighbouring countries. The impact on public opinion is tangible: for instance, in April 2022, [46%](#) of the Hungarian population believed that Ukrainian nationalists threatened the lives of Hungarians in Transcarpathia. In Poland, due to the geographical proximity, the conflict evoked strong emotions. For example, Ukraine-related narratives succeeded among [anti-vaxxers](#) and fed anti-refugees positions.

[Russian embassies](#) are active actors in spreading Russian propaganda. These hoaxes blame the West for rejecting peace negotiations and prolonging the conflict while projecting an image of [Russia](#) as an anti-fascist

fighter against the so-called Ukrainian genocide of the Russian-speaking population in [Donbas](#). Ukraine-related disinformation cultivates fears that Slovaks will be [drafted](#) to fight in the war or that the Bulgarian government plans to [send troops](#) to Ukraine.

A DIVERSE COMMUNITY CHARACTERISED BY COLLABORATION AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY



The community engaged in the battle against disinformation is incredibly diverse, and the factsheets comprehensively reflect this multifaceted landscape. As the field is relatively new, its stakeholders come from various backgrounds (e.g., journalism, communication, cyber-security, only to mention a few), ensuring an interdisciplinary approach. Another fundamental aspect is the collaborative outlook as several actors – from the private and public sectors – work together in projects and consortia, pooling their resources and expertise.

These actors include:

- Academic institutions and specific research institutes;
- Fact-checking organisations;
- Individual actors such as journalists, experts, or activists;
- National governments and ministries and audiovisual regulators;
- News media outlets and other traditional media, such as TV and radio networks;
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs).

Activities include research, fact-checking, investigative journalists, advocacy, and media literacy initiatives. Ultimately, this community, characterised by a multidisciplinary and cooperative approach, demonstrated its ability to respond proactively to crises.

A VARIED LANDSCAPE OF POLICY INITIATIVES

In the majority of EU countries, there are no standalone laws that explicitly target disinformation as a separate legal offence. Instead, instances of addressing disinformation are typically found within broader legal frameworks, such as national constitutions or criminal codes. This approach allows countries to combat disinformation (referred to with a range of terms like “fake news” or “false information”) within the existing legal structures despite the lack of a dedicated law. Nevertheless, hate speech, slander, and actions that threaten public order are normally criminalised, providing legal mechanisms to combat disinformation indirectly.

Moreover, every EU member state has its own media laws or regulations that safeguard the freedom of the press. These laws vary in scope and strength, reflecting each country’s diverse cultural and historical backgrounds. They play a vital role in ensuring responsible and ethical journalism, which can help counter the spread of disinformation. Additionally, most EU countries have taken steps to implement the [EU Whistleblowing Directive](#) despite delays and shortcomings in some cases.

Various countries have taken steps to avoid Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), which are often filed against journalists and media outlets to dissuade them from speaking out on public issues.

The table below summarises the existence and, more generally, lack of specific laws against disinformation across the sampled EU member states. A necessary disclaimer is that the information provided reflects what has been reported in the factsheets, and therefore, it might not consider developments or amendments over time.

As a consequence, this study sheds light on the need to update these factsheets regularly, allowing the opportunity to delve into more specific comparisons of the various legislation frameworks. This is especially relevant given the novelties the Digital Services Act brought, such as the appointment of Digital Services Coordinators in each country.

Country	Law against disinformation
Austria	No.
Belgium	No.
Bulgaria	No.
Finland	No.
France	Law 2018-1202 during elections.
Germany	No.
Greece	Article 36, 4855/2021 of the Criminal Code criminalises “fake news that is capable of causing concern or fear to the public or shattering public confidence in the national economy, the country’s defence capacity or public health”.
Hungary	No.
Ireland	No.
Italy	No.
Latvia	Article 231 of the Criminal Code entails criminal liability for gross disturbance of public order, which includes the public dissemination of false information or fiction.

Lithuania	Article 25 of the Constitution states that freedom of expression is incompatible with disinformation.
Luxembourg	No.
Netherlands	No.
Poland	No.
Portugal	Law n. 15/2022 simplifies the “right to protection against disinformation”.
Romania	Article 404 of the Criminal Code punishes the spreading of false news.
Slovakia	No.
Spain	No.
Sweden	No.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE LEARNING OUTCOMES

The mapping of the disinformation landscape across 20 EU Member States added great value to our understanding of the field, its trends, challenges, and opportunities moving forward.

The learning outcomes can be summarised in a decalogue of recommendations.

1. FAVOUR INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND UNITED RESPONSES:

The counter-disinformation community offers a virtuous example of interdisciplinarity and cooperation among stakeholders, as displayed during the pandemic or the war in Ukraine. The factsheet displayed how disinformation actors, behaviours, and contents resemble one another in different countries. Continuing to monitor the landscape allows us to identify specific and generalisable patterns. This teaches us that EU Member States are facing similar challenges, which should lead to a reinforcement of united responses by pooling expertise and resources. Hopefully, the Digital Services Coordinators’ joint investigation powers will ensure efficiency.

2. ENHANCE POLICY MONITORING AND COOPERATION STARTING FROM STANDARD DEFINITIONS:

In the upcoming months, EU Member states will be required to comply with the Digital Services Act and enforce it within their very diverse legal frameworks. The success of this endeavour can be facilitated by adopting a standard terminology, always respecting the principle of proportionality. For example, there is a need to define what is ‘illegal content’, and it would be preferable to use consistent terms to call disinformation (instead of “fake news” or “false information”) to avoid misunderstandings.

3. FOCUS ON DISINFORMATION AROUND THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS AND BEYOND:

In addition to the European elections, 2024 will be the biggest election year in history. Therefore, it is urgent to address electoral disinformation quickly and in coordination. Malign actors instilling doubts in vote integrity

represent an attack on European democratic institutions. However, attention to the problem should not be limited to voting periods but adopt a systematic approach based on an early alert system.

4. LOOK OUT FOR FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE (FIMI):

In light of the current global landscape characterised by reliance on the information war, it is imperative to identify and counter FIMI. This includes enhancing awareness and training for various stakeholders (including national governments), establishing monitoring, analysis, and information exchange mechanisms, and learning from neighbouring disciplines and cyber-security.

5. IMPROVE MEDIA AND DIGITAL LITERACY:

Invest in media and digital literacy to build a resilient society that is immune to deceptions and manipulations, including misunderstanding satire or falling for new strategies such as impersonation used in disseminating disinformation. People today have the technological tools to access content but need to gain the skills to understand and interact with it properly.

6. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT DISINFORMATION THRIVES ON PUBLIC DISTRUST:

Disinformation exploits negative sentiments such as rage and fear to polarise and mobilise the audience. National and international authorities and the media are often identified as enemies to be blamed for all evil. To dismantle the power that disinformation has over these individuals – which malign actors and extreme political alignments exploit – it is crucial to acknowledge and address public distrust to heal democracies.

7. PROTECT MINORITIES AND VULNERABLE CATEGORIES:

Disinformation weighs heavy on those belonging to marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as women and LGBTQI+ individuals, but also ethnic or religious minorities. For this reason, it is important to shed light on those categories and design specific measures that ensure inclusion, avoiding a discriminatory and silencing effect.

8. STRENGTHEN THE PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS, FACT-CHECKERS, AND WHISTLEBLOWERS:

Information sector workers are the lifeblood of our democracies and must, therefore, be safeguarded and supported. Policymakers should address concerns regarding vague transcriptions of EU laws, mainly focusing on whistleblower protections and SLAPPs.

However, we must express our fears about the so-called “media exemption” envisioned by Article 17 of the upcoming European Media Freedom Act, which contradicts fact-checking as a deontological principle of good journalism. Media professionals should commit to an open and honest correction policy, and creating a getaway from content moderation will only incentivise malign actors to exploit self-proclaimed media to disinform.

9. PROVIDE ACCESS TO DATA FOR ALL RESEARCHERS:

The brilliant community of experts behind the preparation of these factsheets shows the incredible work that non-academic and academic researchers do in this field. To continue doing this, researchers should be granted

access to data – as Article 40 of the DSA establishes and the relative delegated act will detail. Ensuring that vetted researchers are not simply those tied to academic institutions and that access to data is granted in a permanent and easily understandable way that contains granular indications is crucial to understanding disinformation and working out solutions.

10. ENSURE CORE AND SUSTAINABLE FUNDING TO MAINTAIN, UPDATE, AND EXPAND RESEARCH:

Finally, it is crucial to ensure sustainable and permanent funding to the civil society organisations that are engaged in the fight against disinformation. To provide a vivid example, they are expected to address disinformation during the 2024 European election, when their very survival until the end of the next legislature cannot be taken for granted. Financial safety means ensuring that research is regularly maintained, updated, and expanded. In this way, cooperation is favoured and solutions advanced.

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