

Disinformation landscape in CYPRUS

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INTRODUCTION

- The disinformation landscape in Cyprus is complex and multifaceted, influenced by the island's unique political and cultural context. The division of the island between the Republic of Cyprus and the so-called “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (recognized only by Turkey) creates significant challenges in addressing disinformation.
- Cyprus [ranks](#) 55th in the world in the [2023 “World Press Freedom Index”](#) as published by Reporters Without Borders, raising 10 places in the index compared to 2022, when it recorded a dive of 39 places, falling from 26th to 65th. Direct interference in editorial work, media concentration and lack of transparency in ownership, as well as the influence of business interests and the Church, have undermined media work in Cyprus, forcing journalists to self-censor.
- In the Republic of Cyprus, the media landscape is characterised by a mix of public and private media outlets, with many mainstream media organisations following official narratives closely. This adherence to official perspectives often limits critical journalism, resulting in a lack of investigative reporting and making it easier for false information to go unchallenged.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

In the Republic of Cyprus, several emblematic cases of disinformation have highlighted the challenges the country faces in maintaining accurate and truthful public discourse. Here are a few notable examples of disinformation cases that were fact-checked:

THE UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY PURCHASED A CASINO-HOTEL IN KYRENIA, NORTHERN CYPRUS.

- Several newspapers, websites and social media accounts reported rumours that the Ukrainian president Zelenskyy purchased the Vuni Palace Hotel and Casino in Kyrenia, Northern Cyprus. To support the claim of the transfer of ownership of the hotel, the site Booking.com was shown not allowing any reservations to the Vuni Palace Hotel and Casino.
- The allegation appears to have started in early June 2024 from a report by the Turkish news outlet OdaTv, which claimed that Zelenskyy's company, Film Heritage Inc. The news “erupted” in Greek and Cypriot media the week ahead of the European elections.
- Fact-Check Cyprus and Greece Fact Check collaborated to investigate the [claim](#) and found no evidence to support it. The Vuni Palace Hotel remains under the ownership of the Oscar Group of Companies, and representatives from the hotel have confirmed that Zelenskyy is not a shareholder. Booking.com does not allow reservations from Europe to Northern Cyprus, but reservations were possible from countries outside Europe.

50% OF STUDENTS IN NICOSIA ARE MIGRANTS.

- This claim appeared in November 2023, through big media outlets. The claim was supposed to be made by members of the parliament who presented data on the composition of the student population in the capital of Cyprus.
- According to the official data requested directly from Fact Check Cyprus and provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth, this percentage reaches approximately 20% both in the different districts of Cyprus and in Cyprus as a whole. The [presented data](#) pertains to specific schools in Nicosia, especially in the historic centre, which have a high attendance of immigrant students in their population.

86% OF PAEDOPHILES ARE HOMOSEXUALS.

- A long persistent claim that 86% of paedophiles (towards boys) are homosexual or bisexual was [found](#) to be misleading and based on poor scientific evidence.
- The claim originates from a 1988 study by Erikson et al. with several methodological problems. The study found that 30% of paedophiles preferred same-gender or both same- and opposite-gender children. The remaining 70% of paedophiles abused only girls. From the initial 30% who preferred either both sexes or only boys, 86% molested boys.
- The study's methodology has additional problems and is severely flawed. Modern research treats paedophilia as paraphilia, noting no correlation between paedophilia or pederasty and homosexuality. This suggests that only a small percentage of paedophiles are directed towards same-sex victims, and not 86% of paedophiles prefer boys.

NARRATIVES

This section illustrates the most recurrent narratives in the disinformation landscape of Cyprus.

COVID-19 MISINFORMATION

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, Cyprus experienced a [significant amount of misinformation](#) related to the [virus and vaccines](#). False claims ranged from the severity of the virus to [conspiracy theories](#) about vaccine ingredients and [effects](#).
- These narratives often spread rapidly on social media, leading to confusion and hesitancy among the public regarding vaccination and public health measures.

MIGRATION AND REFUGEES

- Disinformation about migrants and refugees is always prevalent on the island and has intensified through the increased waves of immigrants arriving on the island in the past couple of years.
- [False stories](#) and [exaggerated reports](#) about the behaviours and [numbers of migrants](#) often circulate, aiming to stoke fear and xenophobia [among the local population](#). Such narratives focus on the dangers of a demographic change on the island which will have a direct effect on the inhabitants' ethnic, cultural and religious identity.
- These narratives often lead to [increased social tension](#) and [discriminatory attitudes](#) towards migrant communities, something that was especially noticed in the summer of 2023 with direct physical attacks towards immigrants and the destruction of their properties.

UKRAINE RELATED DISINFORMATION

- Cyprus has been a notable hub for Ukraine-related disinformation, largely driven by pro-Russian narratives. Even before February 2022 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Cyprus was a significant target of pro-Russian propaganda due to its strategic location, historical ties, and economic interactions with Russia.
- Cyprus has been a key financial hub for Russian oligarchs and businesses. According to an [investigation](#) by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), Cypriot professional services firms facilitated the movement and hiding of Russian wealth through various means such as real estate, financial instruments, and shell companies. This financial interdependence created an environment where pro-Russian narratives could easily find support.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been a primary target of disinformation campaigns. False claims about his alleged lavish lifestyle, such as purchasing luxury yachts [and estates](#), often in Cyprus itself, and his wife [buying expensive jewellery](#) have been debunked. Perhaps the most prevalent example of disinformation was the (abovementioned) claim that [Zelenskyy bought a casino-hotel](#) in Turkish-occupied Kyrenia.

LGBTQ+ RELATED DISINFORMATION

- In the Republic of Cyprus, LGBTQ+ related disinformation has been a persistent issue, often driven by ultra-conservative and far-right groups [and individuals](#). A significant amount of disinformation revolves around the notion that LGBTQ+ rights threaten traditional family values and that members of the community are corrupt and insult the Church.
- Another prevalent disinformation tactic is the false claim that LGBTQ+ inclusive education will "brainwash" children. One very prominent example of disinformation [was the claim](#) that the vast majority of paedophiles are homosexuals.

COMMUNITY

The main actors countering disinformation in Cyprus are listed hereafter.

FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES

- To combat disinformation, Cyprus has taken significant steps, including the establishment of fact-checking organisations. For example, the [Social Computing Research Centre of the Cyprus University of Technology](#) (TEΠAK) launched the first Anti-Disinformation Centre, known as [Fact-Check Cyprus](#), which is a member of the EDMO community of fact-checking organisations and [signatory of the IFCN Code of Principles](#). This centre focuses on deconstructing false news and enhancing public awareness regarding misinformation. It aims to provide reliable resources and promote media literacy among the public, by frequently organising seminars and workshops.
- The [Mediterranean Digital Media Observatory](#) (MedMO), is an initiative focused on addressing the challenges of disinformation in the Mediterranean region, specifically in Cyprus, Greece and Malta. It is part of the broader European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) network, which aims to combat disinformation through collaborations among fact-checkers, academic researchers and media organisations.
- [Greece Fact Check](#) is a non-profit organisation that is dedicated to identifying and countering disinformation and misinformation both in Greece and Cyprus. As part of its commitment to combating disinformation, Greece Fact Check is associated with the [European Digital Media Observatory](#) (EDMO), the [International Fact-Checking Network](#) and the [European Fact-Checking Standards Network](#) (EFCSN). Greece Fact Check often contributes to seminars and workshops organised by Fact-Check Cyprus for students, educators, and the general public.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION INITIATIVES

The European Commission has been actively involved in raising awareness about the risks of disinformation and promoting media literacy across member states, including Cyprus. They have launched various campaigns and published toolkits aimed at educating teachers, students, and the general public on how to identify and combat mis and disinformation.

POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Cyprus Radio-Television Authority (CRTA) is the main regulatory body overseeing broadcast media. It ensures compliance with laws and regulations, issues licences, and monitors content to maintain standards of accuracy, impartiality, and respect for human dignity. Cyprus upholds the principle of freedom of expression, as enshrined in its Constitution and aligned with European Union standards. This includes the right to disseminate and receive information without undue interference.

Cypriot law mandates transparency in media ownership to prevent monopolies and ensure diversity of viewpoints. Media companies are required to disclose their ownership structures to avoid conflicts of interest and concentration of media power. Cyprus has specific laws addressing defamation and the protection of personal data to safeguard against misuse of media platforms.

A February 2024 decision by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cyprus assigned the role of Digital Services Coordinator to the Cyprus Radio Television Authority (CRTA), in alignment with the Digital Services Act 2022/2065. National Digital Services Coordinators (DSCs) ensure compliance with the Digital Services Act (DSA) by supervising and enforcing regulations for very large online platforms and very large online search engines within their jurisdiction. They act as liaisons between national authorities and the European Commission, handling complaints, mediating disputes, and promoting public awareness. DSCs also collaborate with other regulatory bodies to maintain consistent enforcement across the EU. Their role includes reporting, transparency, and data analysis to support effective regulation.

According to the [2023 "World Press Freedom Index,"](#) the constitution guarantees press freedom. Defamation is not a crime, but the attorney general can authorise criminal proceedings against a media outlet. There are regulatory safeguards for the protection of sources and editorial autonomy is guaranteed, but mechanisms or procedures to protect journalists and prevent political interference are limited. The law protects private communications, but there are no clear rules on the use of interception devices for national security reasons. Civil libel lawsuits contribute to self-censorship and discourage investigative journalism. Direct interference in editorial decisions, growing media concentration and lack of transparency in print and digital media ownership have undermined media pluralism and have pushed journalists towards self-censorship.

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