

The reality of foreign interference and disinformation in election times

by Paolo Cesarini, Director of the European Digital Media Observatory

Concerns about foreign interference have grown steadily in Europe since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. A European Parliament resolution of March 2022 unveiled different forms of foreign meddling, notably by Russia and China, targeting EU member states. Information manipulation was identified as a high-level threat to security and sovereignty, especially in the context of elections, along with covert donations to national political parties and other hybrid forms. According to a recent **Eurobarometer survey, 81% of European citizens believe that foreign interference constitutes a serious problem.**¹

The European Commission's Democracy Action Plan (December 2020) established a framework to combat foreign and domestic disinformation. This includes new EU legislation, international collaborations, and support for independent fact-checking, research, and media literacy organizations.

In the lead-up to the 2024 European elections, coordinated efforts at the EU and national levels played a crucial role in mitigating disinformation threats. According to the **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), systematic debunking of false or misleading information has made it increasingly difficult for threat actors to operate.** Despite Kremlin propaganda aiming to undermine the integrity of the elections and discourage voter turnout, the 2024 elections saw the highest voter participation in two decades, with the integrity of all 27 national electoral processes intact.

However, the battle against disinformation is far from over. **EDMO's analysis reveals that disinformation proliferated during the final phase of the campaign, building on pre-existent disinformation narratives and targeting key themes such as climate change, immigration, support for Ukraine, EU economic policies, and fundamental rights.**² In the Netherlands and Ireland, these efforts were coupled with cyber-attacks on political party and government websites. Considering such a mixed picture, three main reasons advise against letting the guard down now.

INFORMATION WARS

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→ Answers to the Statement (% EU27) in the **Flash Eurobarometer 528**

"Citizenship and democracy" (Fieldwork: April-May 2023, Publication December 2023) "Foreign interference in our democratic system is a serious problem that should be addressed":

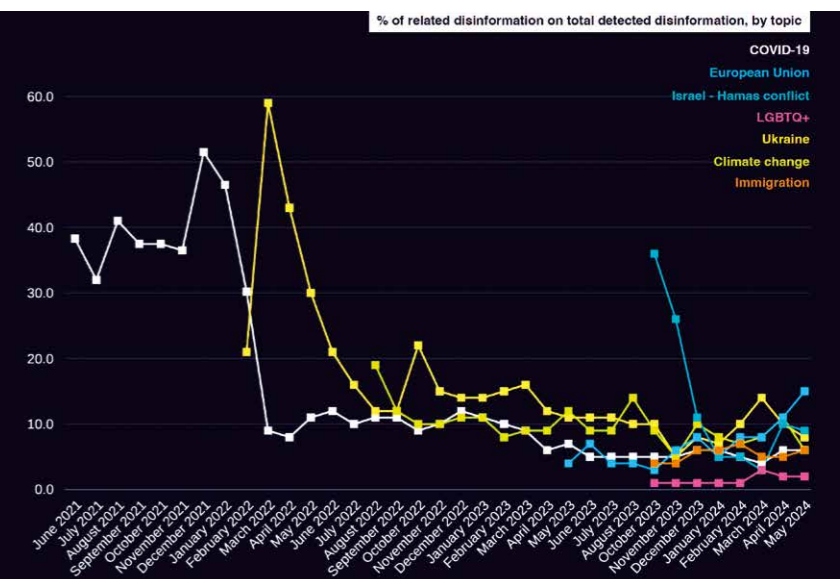
- 52% strongly agree
- 29% tend to agree
- 10% tend to disagree
- 6% strongly disagree
- 2% don't know (not read out)

2



→ The **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)** by Paolo Cesarini is the

EU's largest interdisciplinary network dedicated to countering disinformation, particularly by monitoring and analyzing it to safeguard the integrity of EU elections. The graphic from the EDMO's June 2024 Report illustrates the percentage of disinformation related to various topics detected over time.





GEOPOLITICAL INSTABILITY AND DISINFORMATION

Firstly, growing geopolitical instability continues to provide strong incentives for **foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) attacks**. Sophisticated actors exploit the online information space with advanced tactics. As the conflict in Ukraine continues, the Kremlin's attempts to undermine Western governments' support for Kyiv go on undeterred. The Russian **Operation Doppelgänger**,³ which cloned European news outlets to spread pro-Russian narratives, remains active, particularly in Germany.

To counter persistent attacks, Europe needs to develop and maintain long-term response capabilities. Enforcing the **Digital Services Act**⁴ and the **Code of Practice on Disinformation**⁵ is essential for ensuring digital platforms implement proper security measures. Additionally, long-term funding and support for independent fact-checking, research, and civil-society organizations are crucial to provide continuous oversight and enhance citizens' threat awareness and media literacy.

THE RISE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DISINFORMATION

Secondly, the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI), especially generative AI like ChatGPT and DALL-E, introduces new challenges. These tools can create highly persuasive synthetic content, often misused for disinformation. Recent cases include deepfake videos and synthetic audio in Moldova and Slovakia, misleading the public with false narratives. For example Facebook ads with deepfakes of Moldova's pro-Western president, Maia Sandu, falsely showing her in a hijab and claiming she would step down, and viral synthetic audio on social media mimicking Michal Šimečka, leader of Slovakia's progressive party, falsely announcing a beer price hike just before the legislative elections.

The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 warns of the long-term consequences of synthetic content. Addressing this requires not only strict AI regulations through **the European AI Act**⁶ but also the development of pro-social AI systems to aid fact-checkers and researchers.

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→ The **Digital Services Act (DSA)** is an EU regulation aimed at creating a safer and more transparent on-

line environment. It establishes clear rules for digital platforms, particularly large ones, to combat illegal content, protect users' rights, and ensure transparency in content moderation. The DSA also requires platforms to manage risks related to disinformation and to provide greater transparency in how they handle user data and advertisements. Supporters hope it will enhance accountability and reduce the spread of harmful content, while opponents fear it could lead to overregulation and stifle free speech.

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→ The **2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation** is a voluntary EU framework to combat online disinformation. It builds on the 2018 Code and involves commitments from digital platforms and stakeholders to improve transparency, reduce harmful content, and protect elections. The Code focuses on better fact-checking, cutting financial incentives for disinformation, and fostering cooperation between platforms and authorities.

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3



→ **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)** attacks are deliberate actions by foreign actors aimed at disrupting or influencing democratic processes within the EU. The Russian influence operation Doppelgänger, unmasked in September 2022, is a symptomatic example. Many European news outlets and press agencies, including Bild, Der Spiegel, the Guardian, ANSA and 20 Minutes, were cloned to promote pro-Russian narratives.

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→ The **European AI Act** is a key regulation that establishes rules for AI development and use in the EU,

categorizing systems by risk levels—unacceptable, high, limited, and minimal. It imposes strict requirements on high-risk AI to ensure safety, transparency, and alignment with EU values. While aimed at protecting citizens and promoting innovation, critics argue the Act may stifle innovation and burden businesses, potentially affecting the EU's AI competitiveness. For more on the significance of the EU AI Act, see the contribution by Paul Nemitz on page 68 in this issue.

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→ The **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)** is a proposed EU regulation aimed at protecting media

freedom and pluralism across member states. It seeks to ensure the independence of media outlets from government and corporate interference, enhance transparency in media ownership, and protect journalists from surveillance and intimidation. The Act also promotes cross-border cooperation and sets standards to safeguard the editorial independence of public service media. Critics fear that the EMFA could lead to increased regulatory control over the media and potentially limit press freedom instead of protecting it.

BLURRING LINES BETWEEN FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC DISINFORMATION

Lastly, the distinction between foreign and domestic disinformation is increasingly blurred. Not all disinformation originates abroad; domestic actors, including politicians, are often involved. The European Parliament's resolution condemning MEPs' participation in the pro-Russian site Voice of Europe, whose declared aim is to "undermine European support for Ukraine and influence the 2024 European Parliament elections is a stark reminder. To combat this, fostering professional and ethical journalism is crucial. The **European Media Freedom Act is essential**⁷, but supporting independent media to deliver high-quality journalism is equally important. The EU must create an enabling environment for the media sector to thrive and innovate. Its long-term sustainability depends on industry's capacity to innovate, empower ethical journalistic practices, nurture and retain technology-savvy journalistic talents. The EU should provide an enabling framework for the media sector to benefit from the single market and the digital transformation.

A CALL TO ACTION

The integrity of our public sphere is vital for a resilient democracy. The European Council's Strategic Agenda 2024–2029 rightly prioritizes democracy. As the new mandate begins, the Commission must seize the opportunity to address these challenges and uphold democratic values. By continuing to fight disinformation, supporting ethical journalism, and leveraging technological advancements, Europe can safeguard its democratic processes and ensure a robust, informed public sphere.

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»During the next EU mandate, most independent media will die or shrink, one way or another. But, if EU leaders do their jobs right, plenty can be reborn in a more resilient form.«

→ Find out more about Paolo Cesarini's ideas on how the EU could tackle the risks confronting Europe's media sector in his recent article "Europe Needs a Democracy Commissioner", written together with Christophe Leclercq, and Maria João Rodrigues.

