EEAS Stratcom's responses to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) in 2023

May 2024

European Union
EXTERNAL ACTION

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The EUvsDisinfo
https://euvsdisinfo.eu/

The 1st Report on FIMI threats
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/1st-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en

The report on FIMI targeting LGBTIQ+ people
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/fimi-targeting-lgbtiq-people_en

The 2nd Report on FIMI threats
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2nd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **manipulation of the information environment and interference by foreign actors has become more prevalent than ever**. New **technologies are being abused to manipulate the information environment**, often targeting directly the EU or its individual Member States. It is used as a broader **strategy to malignly interfere in and destabilize the democratic systems across the world**, combining different instruments (e.g. cyber-attacks, information manipulation, censorship etc.). The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence[1] has identified foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) as one of the pressing foreign policy and security issues of the EU, **closely connected to the challenges to the field of cyber security and hybrid threats**.

In 2023, the EEAS **put in place tangible measures and structures** to allow to systematically **detect and expose** FIMI, including disinformation. The **EU FIMI Toolbox was further developed** through the establishment of the FIMI **Information Sharing and Analysis Centre (FIMI-ISAC)**, which is a significant step towards building a community-based approach and a genuine network of FIMI defenders with the civil society and other stakeholders.

Through the work of its geographical taskforces, the EEAS **continued to denounce Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and reinforced the EU's messages of support to Ukraine** and provided evidence for additional sanctioning of Russian instruments of FIMI and war propaganda. The team continued to **raise public awareness about the Kremlin's information manipulation and interference** activities around the globe. **The EUvsDisinfo project reached more than 20 million people in 2023**. Efforts have been extended to reach out to the African continent as well. For that, a dedicated Sub-Saharan Africa StratCom Task Force was created within the EEAS StratCom Directorate.

In addition to better understanding the problem and raising awareness around it, a big part of the efforts of the EEAS have been **to contribute to building resilience in partner countries**, cooperating both with governments and the civil society, who play a central role in tackling the FIMI threat. The team has been working with **partners like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and many more**. A wide range of strategic communication actions and engagements with the **key local stakeholders, including journalists, fact-checkers, broader civil society actors but also government structures across the Eastern Partnership, Western Balkans and the MENA region** have been implemented. More so, capabilities to **tackle China's FIMI activities** were further developed.

Importantly, the EEAS has **intensified cooperation with other EU Institutions and bodies** via such existing formats as the internal Network against Disinformation (NaD) or the European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE). **Close cooperation with the European Parliament, in particular via the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE)**[2] continued before it came to the end of its mandate. **Exchanges with EU Member States, like-minded international partners, civil society and private industry** accelerated in particular in the context of 2024, the year of elections.

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EEAS STRATCOM'S RESPONSES TO FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE (FIMI)

The EU has been at the **global forefront of building capacities and instruments to address threats posed by FIMI**. It is of utmost importance to note that all our actions are **conducted in full respect of fundamental rights and freedoms** and that we work together in the multilateral system to tackle this threat. Following up on the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence that called to set in motion the development of the EU toolbox to address and counter FIMI and also in line with the European Democracy Action Plan (2020), EEAS Stratcom has been continuously strengthening and implementing the FIMI toolbox.

*The FIMI toolbox focuses **on four cross-cutting priority dimensions**: situational awareness, resilience, regulation and EU's external action. Each area comprises different types of instruments, with the potential to either **prevent or lower the impact of FIMI, to deter actors from pursuing these activities and to respond** to them. EU Member States, like-minded international partners, but also civil society organisations as well as private industry each play their role in strengthening the toolbox. **The FIMI Toolbox was endorsed by the European Council in December 2023***

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1. STRENGTHENING SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

EU Member States and EU Institutions have **invested a lot in developing tools to identify, analyse and expose FIMI**. Situational awareness has continuously expanded over the years **both geographically and technically**.

Already at the begging of the year, **the EEAS brought closer together the international community countering FIMI, civil society, private industry, journalists and other relevant stakeholders for a high level conference "Beyond Disinformation: EU Responses to the Threat of Foreign Information Manipulation"** that took place in February. During the conference, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell presented the **1st Report on FIMI Threats**[3] and launched **the Information Sharing and Analysis Center in the field of FIMI (FIMI-ISAC) project**. The 1st threat report introduced a proposal for a common analytical framework and methodology for governmental and international partners in the FIMI defender space, followed by a series of workshops and trainings on the common framework and methodology for governmental and international partners in the FIMI defender space.

The FIMI – ISAC project brings together all parts of the defender community (governments, civil society, private industry). **The purpose of the FIMI-ISAC is to enhance collaboration between its members, building on the "common framework and methodology to collect**

systematic evidence of information manipulation incidents" as called for in the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP). It works on a standardised, interoperable way of collecting and sharing data on FIMI activities. **The FIMI-ISAC marks a significant step towards a more effective and efficient response to FIMI threats**.
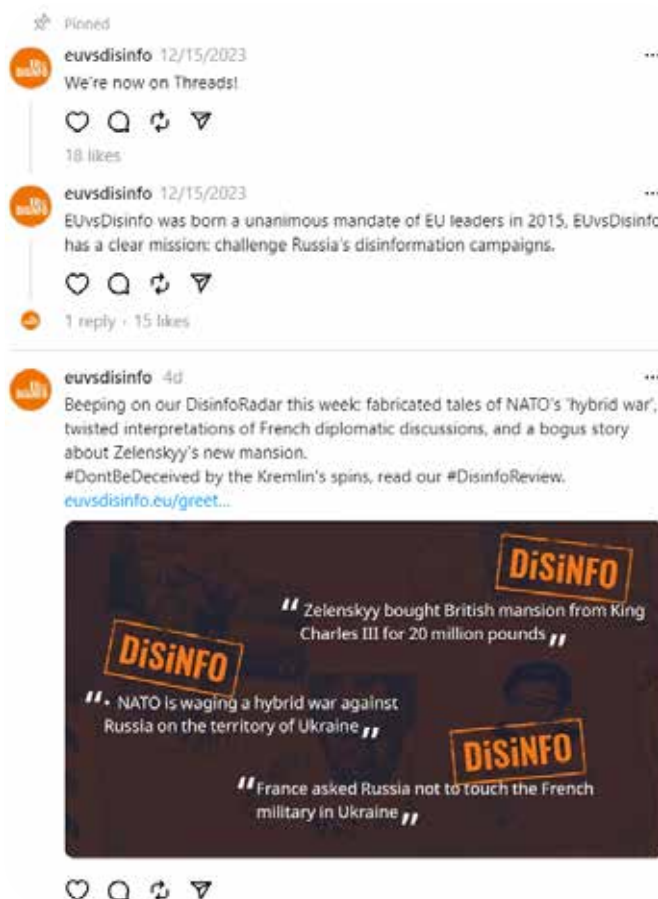

Responding to calls from EU Member States and the European Parliament, work on **developing capabilities to tackle China's FIMI activities**, including improving understandings of the actor via monitoring of relevant information environments and analysis of FIMI tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) continued. The effort was geared towards fostering tailored responses to Chinese FIMI, with capacity- and resilience-building initiatives being launched and maintained over the course of the year. Additional efforts were dedicated to **monitoring information environments in Sub-Saharan Africa** in order to keep track of manipulation incidents targeting the EU and analyse trends over time, across several contexts: Mali, Niger, Central African Republic, Democratic republic of Congo, Senegal. Additional ad hoc monitoring of crisis contexts was undertaken on Sudan and Niger.

To highlight the personal harms that FIMI can cause the **first report on FIMI targeting LGBTIQ+ community4** was published. The report includes a wide set of recommendations on advancing work against FIMI in the context of LGBTIQ+

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people, which were developed jointly with civil society organisations, researchers and the EEAS in a dedicated workshop aimed at experts in FIMI targeting the LGBTIQ+ community to discuss the most problematic issues in this field and actionable solutions to them.

We **continued to systematically provide situational awareness on FIMI actors to CSDP deployments in Eastern Partnership, Sub-Saharan Africa and maritime dimension**. In total, ten missions received analytical and operational support for effective detection, analysis and response to FIMI in their areas of operation. Particular attention was given to the newly established missions in the Eastern Partnership (Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia) with regard to the initial set up of their strategic communication capabilities.

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2. BUILDING RESILIENCE WITHIN THE EU, THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BEYOND

Close cooperation with the EU Member States continued via both **the Rapid Alert System** connecting the all the EU capitals with the EU Institutions and also **in relevant formats of the Council of the EU**. Ambassadors from the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and regional working parties (e.g. COEST, COWEB, COAFR, etc.) were briefed on a regular basis on the latest developments concerning FIMI activities. In September, responding to a call from the Member States, the Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats (HWP ERCHT) agreed **on common messages on FIMI in order to help EU Institutions and EU Member States to speak with one voice** on EU's work on tackling FIMI.

The EEAS has developed excellent relations with the European Parliament's INGE committee and a consistent exchange of information has been established between the two institutions, as exemplified by the numerous participations of EEAS in INGE meetings. **INGE members, in particular its Chair MEP Raphaël Glucksmann, was very supportive of the work of the EEAS** in this field of ever growing strategic importance.

The EUvsDisinfo, our flagship project in raising awareness about pro-Kremlin information manipulation and disinformation reached **in 2023 an estimated audience of over 20 million people via its social media channels** (Facebook[5], X[6], LinkedIn[7], and YouTube[8]). Its videos have been viewed over 2 million times on YouTube. In November 2023, the EUvsDisinfo launched its Instagram[9] account to further diversify and expand its audiences, followed by also launching an affiliated account on Threads[10]. The most accessed resource on the website continues to be a database[11] of pro-Kremlin disinformation cases. Throughout 2023, **1569 new cases** were added to the database, and now, **the total number** of exposed and debunked disinformation cases is **nearly 17 000**, which makes it **the world's biggest public archive of disinformation incidents.** A **new Africa**

section12 was added to the website, featuring guest content from prominent civil society and fact-checking organizations, and we have started to offer selected content in new languages, including Bulgarian[13] and Kazakh[14].

Capacity building projects in **Central Asia (CA)**, under the auspices of the Resilience and Engagement with Varied Information for a Vibrant Environment (REVIVE) project[15], funded and run by FPI, provided a training on tackling FIMI to a group of journalist from all five countries in Central Asia. The **EU-Belarus Informal Dialogue Group on Strategic Communication was setup** based on a request by the 1st EU-Belarus Consultative Group.

Moldovan government and civil society representatives were trained to better address the threat of FIMI, participating in press trips, visitors programmes and TAIEX. **Georgian civil society, fact-checking organizations, academia and students via visitors programme engaged in** capacity-building events.

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In Kinshasa, a roundable for representatives from the **Congolese government and institutions, civil society, media sector, private industry, EU Member States, US and UK embassies, and the UN** was organised to discuss **FIMI trends and challenges in the Democratic Republic of Congo**.

Trainings for media professionals, journalists, fact-checkers, data analysts, media and information literacy experts and educators with more than 200 participants **from Eastern Partnership, Western Balkans, CA, MENA** and selected countries from **Africa and Latin America** took place in three separate events in (i) Bosnia and Herzegovina, (ii) Ukraine and Poland, and (iii) Moldova. Additionally, **studies on FIMI in Albania and Kosovo** were published, which significantly contributed to local resilience building and awareness raising.

A project focused on mentoring junior and senior journalists and fact-checkers in the MENA region by mobilising media experts, fact-checkers and journalists from MENA living in Europe was delivered. This project aimed to highlight the valuable role of journalists and experts from MENA who are exiled in Europe, largely due to their line of work, and to preserve their knowledge and best practices in a new generation of journalists in the region.

Several communication campaigns took place to reinforce the EU's messages of support to Ukraine and in Sub-Saharan Africa **an online pilot campaign exposing Russia's failed support to Africa was** developed and delivered across the continent ahead of the Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023.

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3. EXTERNAL ACTION AND DIPLOMACY

The EEAS **worked closely with the European Institutions, the European Member States and international partners** and other **relevant stakeholders** in **implementing the whole-of-society approach to prevent, deter and respond to FIMI**.

Established dialogues with like-minded international partners continued **on a bilateral basis** throughout the year. During **the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC)** Ministerial in May, **the EU and the US committed to a shared standard for threat information sharing,** based on the EEAS' proposal for a common analytical framework and methodology to systematically collect evidence of FIMI activity. On top of this, the EU-US Joint Summit Statement of October 2023 highlighted the **commitment of the EU and the US to continue cooperation on this matter around common principles, such as dedicated strategies, internal organizational structures, capacity, civil society and multilateral engagement**. This cooperation should aim to support like-minded partners in countering FIMI, including via US and EU coordinated activities, while safeguarding freedom of expression together with partner countries.

Cooperation with the UK and Canada on issues related to FIMI related remained **very close**. They both remain key international partners in this line of work. **Both the UK and Canada are interested in moving from collective analysis to collective response**, when and where possible and reasonable.

Consistent exchange of in-depth analysis and real-time insights with NATO staff was ongoing. We **worked hand-in-hand to maintain shared situational awareness** of hostile activities in the information environment.

Engagement in expert dialogues and tabling FIMI as an agenda point for **established cooperation formats** with other partners **were used to advance** with an effective action against FIMI. The second Expert meeting **with Switzerland** confirmed a strong interest on the Swiss side to further develop this exchange and cooperation. **In line with the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy**, the EEAS had FIMI-focused exchanges with **likeminded partners from the region**.

On the **multilateral level**, our main **initiatives and actions were channelled via the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (G7 RRM)** format. The EEAS led the work within a dedicated **Working Group on Collective Response** with an aim to develop the G7 RRM's collective response capabilities and related operational principles as a guiding framework for aligning respective members' approaches to countering foreign threats to democracy.

In addition, considering that **2024 is a critical year for democracies around world as more than half of the adult population across the world will be heading to elections, including the European elections taking place in June. The EEAS stepped up its efforts** with the aim to sharing information, working on common policy approaches, and focusing on cooperation on specific campaigns and projects.

In December **the EEAS, together with NATO, European Commission, Council, European Parliament and other partners organised four FIMI-focused events in Brussels over the course of three days**. This series of events illustrated the conceptual and practical leadership the EU has taken in this area – with a set of instruments, policies and practical measures that many of our Member States and like-minded partners use as inspiration and best practice example. During the conference, different networks of experts such as **G7 RRM** focal points, and **members of the Rapid Alert System (RAS)**, the Council's Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats (HWP ERCHT) and the European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE) as well as other important stakeholders, used the opportunity to discuss important common challenges, such as the role of AI in FIMI and FIMI threats to European elections.

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4. ANALYSIS OF THE THREAT LANDSCAPE IN 2023

In 2023, the first and foremost target for **Russia** continued to be Ukraine, with nearly all disinformation narratives to justify and mobilise domestic support for the invasion traceable back to 2013-2014. With the Russian losses on the battlefield, **hate speech and incitement to genocide became a regular occurrence in Russian outlets**, both offline and online. Narratives supporting the war permeated not just political commentary and news, but also entertainment. Internationally, the Kremlin has been using its information manipulation playbook in attempts to undermine international support for Ukraine and impose costs on Russia for its violation of international law. Additionally, through its proxies and manipulative behaviour on social media pro-Kremlin information manipulation actors sought to exacerbate and exploit sensitive issues within the EU societies, such as migration and refugees; cost of living; energy prices.

Inside Russia, the information manipulation and censorship campaign pursued by the Kremlin enabled and continues to fuel the war against Ukraine. Information manipulation campaigns went hand in hand with hard-handed censorship and destruction of independent media. In 2023, Russia further moved to a state of total propaganda, where the war is presented as an existential fight to defend Russia.

China continued to be a multifaceted FIMI actor with a diverse arsenal that includes a broad range of tactics. Its **activities range from benign public diplomacy to clearly illegitimate** – intimidation and harassment of critical voices with the aim of suppressing information even outside of its borders. Different tactics are often used in combination and can be connected to other forms of interference, such as economic coercion. Some of the TTPs and highlights observed during the year included information laundering; takedown of a broad network of inauthentic social media accounts directly attributed by social media platforms to the Chinese government; and direct harassment of overseas individuals.

While narratives regarding Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine became less prominent in Chinese channels in 2023, China's and Russia's alignment in the information environment also remained visible as China continued to selectively amplify pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives.

In Western Balkans, FIMI operations aim to diminish the EU's reputation. Misleading narratives promoting a 'multipolar', 'traditional' and illiberal world order were spreading across the region, generally pushed and disseminated locally, echoing foreign information operations – albeit tweaked and tuned to fit already existing local beliefs and grievances. FIMI thus takes a generic anti-Western (and, by definition anti-EU) sentiment which aims to derail the region from its EU path. Whilst different angles of the messaging were present across the whole region, their framing dominated in (and from) Serbia's information environment and spilled over across the region where language is understood without translation.

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The MENA region continued to be characterised by an information environment that is largely hostile to the West, including the EU. Albeit not a new sentiment, this tendency has suffered a drastic upsurge in the aftermath of the 7 October Hamas attacks on Israel, and the subsequent Israeli operation in Gaza. Regional audiences are highly polarised and emotionally invested in the ongoing situation. In this context, the perception of the EU as a principled and balanced actor has been severely damaged, amid crossed accusations of double standards.

This general perception has played in the hands of opportunistic FIMI actors, who have capitalised on the current crisis to exacerbate the information environments. Findings consistently revealed a high volume of manipulated and inauthentic content, as well as an increase of instances of hate speech, including faith-based hatred targeting members of different religious communities.

Local, regional and interregional actors are making opportunistic use of the high attention to the conflict in order to increase their audience and promote their own agendas. A wide array of information manipulation and disinformation TTPs have been identified, including AI-generated imagery, deliberately inaccurate translations, dissemination of non-authentic content and images which include staged videos and impersonation.

The continued challenging political and security situation **throughout Sub-Saharan Africa** in 2023 gave additional margin for malicious foreign actors, notably pro-Kremlin, to manipulate and interfere in the African information environment. Be it the coups in Burkina Faso and Niger, the lingering transitions managed by military juntas such as in Mali, or the weakened institutions such as in the Central African Republic, malign foreign actors seized opportunities to expand their engagement across those countries, using FIMI as a main weapon, typically by exploiting existing anti-Western sentiment.

EU was also targeted in the context of Presidential elections (e.g. in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Senegal), through narratives and operations – both foreign and domestic – discrediting political opponents and candidates for their affiliation with so called "European values" or blaming the EU for its support to regimes considered as oppressive and illegitimate.

In 2023, **EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) areas** of deployment continued to face hostile and coordinated FIMI campaigns. Over the past year, missions and operations in sub-Saharan Africa witnessed an increase in Russian FIMI targeting the EU and its Member States. This persistent threat has had an impact not only on the image of CSDP and EU deployments in the region, but also on the implementation of CFSP objectives within their mandates. In other areas of operations, particularly in the EaP, misleading narratives revolved around the Russian invasion of Ukraine, continuing to sew anti-Western sentiment.

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ENDNOTES

1   https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en

2   The INGE Committee (later ING2) established in June 2020 with a mandate until August 2023. The Committee has conducted extensive hearings on foreign interference and disinformation with security experts, social media platforms and international partners. Its final reports outlined major threats to the European democracies and called for a radical re-think on how EU should handle and sanction foreign interference. It recommended taking urgent measures to strengthen the EU's capacities to tackle interference, ranging from hybrid and cyberattacks on critical infrastructure to covert political funding and foreign information manipulation and interference.

3   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/1st-eeas-report-on-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats-towards-a-framework-for-networked-defence/

4   https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/fimi-targeting-lgbtiq-people_en

5   https://www.facebook.com/EUvsDisinfo

6   https://twitter.com/EUvsDisinfo

7   https://be.linkedin.com/company/euvsdisinfo

8   https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAiQd5dj168VcYa6Nly_jIw

9   https://www.instagram.com/EUvsDisinfo/

10   https://www.threads.net/@euvsdisinfo

11   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/

12   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/africa/

13   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/bg/

14   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/kz/

15   https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/news/tackling-disinformation-new-report-media-consumption-central-asia-2023-03-28_en

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