

All for one and one for all against disinformation to protect democracy

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Democratic politics has a key responsibility to prevent extreme societal polarization and divisive culture wars, which create fertile ground for **malicious interference and deception**. While Russia and China actively spread disinformation to undermine open societies, what should a European response to the deadly threat of disinformation look like?

In government communication, media and public discourse, references to disinformation are increasingly frequent. While fact-checkers and public warnings against the misuse and manipulation of information are becoming part of our daily life, the first step to cure a disease is to understand what exactly it is. Disinformation refers to intentionally false or misleading information crafted and spread to deceive, manipulate or sway an audience. It typically involves a mix of deliberate intent, emotional appeal and strategic targeting while often using sensationalism, manipulative tactics and the targeting of specific groups.

Disinformation is often designed to erode trust in individuals, institutions or processes and is disseminated by sources that conceal or distort their identity and intentions. It spreads quickly and, once in circulation, can continue to have harmful effects even after being disproved. While disinformation adapts to its specific contexts and targets, its goals, dynamics and consequences remain relatively constant

across societies and countries. No nation is immune to its effects, making disinformation a global challenge on par with climate, pandemics and organized crime.

A virus against democracy

Disinformation strategies are intentionally crafted to serve two primary purposes: fostering societal discord and division, and eroding our ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, often by presenting a misleading equivalence between them. The rapid growth and proliferation of artificial intelligence, combined with the dynamic and increasingly fragmented information environment shaped by social media, do not change the fundamental aims or nature of disinformation. Instead, they broaden its scope and magnify its effects. As Umberto Eco put it: “Social media gives legions of idiots the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after a glass of wine, without harming the community ... but now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner. It’s the invasion of the idiots.”

This phenomenon poses particular risks in complex, diverse, liberal-democratic societies. Such societies, characterized by pluralism, are especially vulnerable to foreign interference and domestic populists who exploit openness for their own ends. At the same time, efforts to combat disinformation must remain grounded in the rule of law and uphold the freedom of information – core values of these open societies.

Ironically, undesired information is far less threatening to autocratic regimes, which are often the leading perpetrators of foreign interference. In these systems, the absence of pluralism and a state monopoly on media allow such regimes to swiftly suppress any unfavourable narratives.

France and Estonia: so different yet so similar

At first glance, Estonia and France might appear to share little in common. Estonia, a small nation of 1.3 million people on the EU and NATO’s Eastern Flank, carries the historical weight of foreign invasions and an independence recovered after Soviet occupation only in 1991. France, by contrast, is one of Europe’s largest countries, with a legacy as a great power and a history of global influence. However, both nations are profoundly impacted by disinformation, which is often driven by similar perpetrators employing comparable techniques.

Estonia emerged as a leader in countering disinformation in the mid-2000s. This was the result of a major Russian cyberattack in 2007, following the relocation of the Soviet-era Bronze Soldier statue from central Tallinn. France, on the

other hand, has contended with a series of disinformation campaigns during recent presidential elections and, more recently, around the Paris Olympics. These threats, frequently linked to far-right groups with Kremlin ties, highlight the shared challenges faced by both nations in addressing this evolving threat.

In response to this shared challenge, the “France and Estonia – Together Against Disinformation” (FREETAD) project was launched in 2024 with funding from NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division and coordinated by the University of Tartu in Estonia together with French higher education institutions and think tanks. The timing could not be more apt: 2024 marked the 20th anniversary of Estonia joining NATO and was the year of the European Parliament elections, a period when the threat of disinformation and foreign interference by hostile actors was widely anticipated to undermine European democracy.

Inspired by the French Ambassador to Estonia, Emmanuel G.F. Mignot, the project aims to raise public awareness and foster cross-border collaboration among Estonian and French academia, public institutions and civil society. By countering malicious interference and disinformation, the initiative equips the Estonian and French societies to respond more effectively to these growing threats, while also strengthening democratic resilience by uniting their efforts.

While disinformation is a widely discussed topic and numerous initiatives are already in progress, the uniqueness of the FREETAD project lies in its comparative approach and ability to engage multiple target groups under a single framework. As part of the project, Estonian and French university students received training to identify disinformation and develop collaborative initiatives. Additionally, French and Estonian experts participated in the 2024 Normandy for Peace World Forum in Caen, where they engaged with young people and policymakers. French experts also travelled to Estonia to meet key stakeholders in government and academia, fostering an exchange of best practice in tackling disinformation and strengthening cross-border cooperation.

The context for Franco-Estonian collaboration could not be more significant given the evolving strategic landscape following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has significantly intensified disinformation campaigns targeting European societies. Moreover, the differences between the two countries enhance their complementarity and make their collaboration particularly fruitful. Estonia’s status as a pioneer in e-governance and cyber-awareness, exemplified by the Tallinn-based NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, complements France’s increasing commitment to European security and NATO’s Eastern Flank, particularly in the wake of Brexit and the recent US elections. Together, these strengths form a robust foundation for addressing shared challenges and strengthening democratic resilience in Europe.

Manipulating the narrative

In summer 2024, following her selection as the future EU foreign policy chief, Estonia's then prime minister, Kaja Kallas, became the target of a Kremlin-led disinformation campaign. Russian propaganda distorted a family photo of a young Kallas, fabricating false claims of privilege and hypocrisy alongside family collaboration with both the Soviet and Nazi regimes. The campaign began in late June, just one day after Kallas's nomination as EU High Representative was announced. Russian outlets like Sputnik and Kremlin-linked VKontakte accounts spearheaded the smear. This coordinated effort sought to discredit Kallas and undermine her candidacy on the international stage.

Investigative journalists from Estonia's *Delfi*, along with local fact-checkers, quickly debunked the incident, revealing how the photo – taken in the mid-1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union – was deliberately manipulated and distributed through Kremlin-aligned media, social media accounts, bots and trolls. The swift reaction and effective response are directly linked to Estonia's approach to combating disinformation, which is recognized as a hybrid threat to the country's security. A guiding principle in Estonia's national security strategy is the concept of “total defence”, which ensures that all major state authorities contribute to national defence by integrating military forces with non-military capabilities. Countering disinformation is a vital component of this strategy, which is aimed at safeguarding Estonia's internal security.

A key pillar in Estonia's strategy for addressing disinformation lies in providing comprehensive training and education to the general public, starting as early as primary school. This proactive approach has propelled Estonia into the top five countries on the Media Literacy Index, alongside Finland, Norway and Denmark. This achievement is particularly notable given the higher levels of vulnerability and exposure to fake news faced by other Baltic and Central and Eastern European countries. Beyond educating the public, Estonia balances its disinformation countermeasures through a two-pronged approach. On one hand, it restricts and counters disinformation through governmental and grassroots initiatives, such as “Propastop”. On the other hand, it supports media outlets that produce high-quality journalism and engage in fact-checking.

A notable example of this supportive strategy was the establishment of ETV+, a state-funded TV channel launched in late 2014. While this move might seem counterintuitive following Russia's annexation of Crimea, it was part of Estonia's broader strategy of integration and social cohesion. Recognizing the heightened vulnerability of Russian-speaking minorities to Russian state-controlled propaganda, ETV+ provides high-quality news and content about Estonia in the Russian

language. This ensures that Estonia's Russian-speaking population has access to reliable information, fostering social cohesion and resilience against disinformation.

Portal Kombat

In February 2024, a viral video began circulating on French social media, falsely attributed to France24, claiming that Ukraine was planning to assassinate the French president, prompting him to cancel a planned visit to the country. Shortly after, it was uncovered that approximately 200 fabricated and ad hoc French “information portals” had been set up and were being used to spread pro-Russian propaganda aimed at undermining French support for Ukraine. This network, known as “Portal Kombat”, disseminated false narratives, including claims about French mercenaries fighting in Ukraine.

The plot was exposed by VIGINUM, the French agency responsible for monitoring and countering foreign digital interference. Established in 2021, VIGINUM is a national technical and operational service dedicated to safeguarding digital public debate from information manipulation campaigns orchestrated by foreign actors with the intent to harm France and its fundamental interests. This agency represents a particularly compelling and actionable example of how Paris is addressing the challenge of disinformation in a strategic and proactive manner.

The service champions open public communication and works horizontally with all the relevant state administrations. It also involves a very diverse team ranging from legal experts and IT analysts to specialists covering ethics and cultural studies.

To encourage an informed public debate, teaching **critical thinking** is key, especially among young people.

One key aspect of the agency's tasks is that it is not responsible or concerned with re-establishing the truth or correcting “inaccurate” information, but rather detecting the source of any massive circulation of false information and whether it is the result of foreign interference. The idea is that in a democratic society this function of “correction” should be carried out by democratic institutions and informed public debate, not by a government agency.

In an era where fact-checkers and top-down debunking efforts face growing criticism for perceived politicization, and as major online platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook increasingly shift away from these practices in favour of community-driven approaches such as community notes, this presents a promising alternative. By placing informed citizens at the centre of the process, it avoids the pitfalls of being accused by demagogues and critics of censorship of curtailing

free speech. This ultimately helps foster a more inclusive and participatory method for combating misinformation.

To encourage an informed public debate, a cornerstone of the French approach is promoting *esprit critique* or critical thinking, especially among young people and less politically engaged citizens. French educators integrate critical thinking into school curricula, teaching students how to analyse media content, recognize biases, identify *infox* (the French term for fake news), and differentiate credible information from manipulation. This approach views critical thinking both as a method and as a practical toolkit for assessing the likelihood and veracity of news, as well as the credibility of sources. It equips citizens with the means to understand how information is produced and disseminated, all while emphasizing the importance of verifying sources to navigate today's complex information landscape.

How can Europe increase its resilience and better protect its democracy?

Democratic politics has a key responsibility to prevent extreme societal polarization and divisive culture wars, which create fertile ground for malicious interference and deception. To drain the swamp in which disinformation thrives, mutual toleration between political adversaries and societal awareness are the best antibodies against hostile actions. While Russia and China actively spread disinformation to undermine open societies, and Elon Musk pursues an extraordinary *Blitzkrieg* against liberal democracy by weaponizing social media, what should a European response to the deadly threat of disinformation look like?

In the short term, the idea is to set up an effective firewall. Rapid-response measures are essential for countering disinformation quickly. Scaling fact-checking services and providing them with an EU or NATO-wide framework of coordination, as well as enforcing the EU's Digital Services Act while collaborating (when possible) with media platforms to flag and correct false claims can limit the immediate spread of disinformation. Accountability initiatives like "naming and shaming" promote transparency and responsible reporting, though care must be taken to avoid sensationalism that could undermine public trust.

This should go hand in hand with fostering public engagement and pluralism as a way to build societal resilience. Experiences like FREETAD prove that media cafés and community spaces can encourage critical dialogue and interaction with verified information, while preventing the emergence of confined echo chambers and insular digital spaces. Strengthening connections between citizens and democratic institutions can empower individuals to critically assess information rather

than passively consume it, all without losing trust in the media. Transparency about journalistic processes further bolsters trust and media literacy.

In the long term, as the French and Estonian examples show, robust media literacy education, beginning in early childhood, is fundamental to long-term resilience. Teaching critical thinking skills helps future generations distinguish credible sources from manipulation. As highlighted by the 2020 European Democracy Action plan adopted by the European Commission, at the systemic level, promoting a strong journalistic culture grounded in transparency, ethics and accountability helps build a trusted media ecosystem that supports democratic resilience.

In a time in which Europe is increasingly insulated, by working with each other we prove that disinformation, like other global threats, is better addressed by means of cross-border cooperation and the international exchange of experience among like-minded democratic nations. This is especially true given the scope and scale of the shared danger and its transnational nature, which is only amplified by online communication and digital tools.

Many years ago, the late Belgian Prime Minister Paul Henri Spaak famously remarked: “There are only two kinds of states in Europe: small states, and small states that have not yet realized they are small.” In light of recent developments, including Russia’s war against Ukraine and the West, China’s growing global ambitions, and an increasingly isolationist and unpredictable America under Trump, this statement rings truer than ever. ~~It~~

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