The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU

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European Parliament

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU

ABSTRACT

This analysis, commissioned by the European Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE), aims to explore the impact of disinformation activity originated or amplified from abroad targeting minorities in the EU over the years 2018-2021. While disinformation has become all-pervasive, it can be considered as yet another tool being used to target vulnerable groups in society. Looking at recent disinformation campaigns that ethnic, religious and cultural minorities have been subjected to, this study finds both direct and indirect links between disinformation and fundamental rights, such as human dignity or physical and mental integrity, along with core European values, including equality, the rule of law and solidarity. The Roma are found to be victims of domestic disinformation, while migrants and the Jewish community are targeted by the Kremlin. The research found that disinformation by foreign and domestic actors as well as disinformation and organic content are increasingly merging, rendering measures to stop foreign disinformation more difficult.

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List of acronyms

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
DITIB	Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs in Germany [*Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği*]
DSA	Digital Services Act
EC	European Commission
ECRE	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
EEAS	European External Action Service
ENAR	European Network Against Racism
ERRC	European Roma Rights Centre
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
IDA	Information and documentation centre for anti-racism work e.V
ISD	Institute for Strategic Dialogue
NGO	non-governmental organisation
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
TEV	Tett es Védelem Alapítvány

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Executive Summary

Based on desk research and 10 stakeholder interviews, this study reviews (1) the most important disinformation campaigns targeting ethnic, cultural and religious minorities in the European Union (EU), with a focus on disinformation activities originating from, funded by, or amplified by foreign actors over the period from January 2018 to March 2021; and (2) the impact of such disinformation activities not only on the core values identified in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), notably dignity, freedom, equality and the rights of persons belonging to minorities, but also on democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights.

The main minority groups covered in this study are the Roma, migrants, Muslim and Jewish people, people of Asian background and Russian minorities in Estonia, Germany and Latvia. The starting point of our analysis is the EUvsDisinfo database, a flagship project of the European External Action Service (EEAS) East StratCom Task Force, which focuses on disinformation from the Kremlin. Additional disinformation activities are collected from academic and grey literature, the news media and stakeholder interviews.

With regard to **disinformation campaigns**, key findings based on the EUvsDisinfo database are:

- Most of the relevant articles in this database concern **migrants or Muslims**.

- These stories perpetuate longstanding narratives, such as: migrants/Muslims as a threat to European cultural identity; migrants as a criminal threat; and migrants as an economic threat.

- The articles about Jews contain **old anti-Semitic canards** or conspiracy theories.

- The database contains **no relevant articles about the Roma and people with Asian backgrounds.**

- Overall, the articles recorded **build on existing tensions**, leveraging stereotypes and fears in Member States' societies.

- Few of the stories are completely fabricated, with most framing issues in an 'alternative' way and expressing opinions rather than factual statements.

Disinformation articles collected outside of this database show:

1. The Roma
- During the period studied, disinformation about the Roma in France and Romania included **time-worn stories** about 'child-snatching'.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in the levels of *anti-gypsyism*, resulting in the **'ethnicisation' of the pandemic** in several Member States.

- In these Member States, **the Roma have been scapegoated** and attacked for allegedly being the virus' main spreaders. Rumours circulated about Roma communities being 'hotbeds' of infection, prompting the authorities to restrict entry to and exit from these neighbourhoods.

- It is unlikely that anti-Roma disinformation campaigns originate from foreign actors.

2. Migrants/Muslims
- Although receiving less attention of late, stories about them **as a threat to public health** have been reported in several Member States.

- During the pandemic's first wave, disinformation about migrants being 'secretly allowed' into the country were published in Germany, Croatia and Czech Republic.

- There have been stories in Italy and Spain about allegedly infected migrants entering the country, allegedly escaping quarantine or purportedly infecting police officers.

- Migrant-related disinformation operations reveal **a mixture of disinformation linked to the Kremlin and domestic far-right actors.**

3. Jewish people

- **Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories** have very deep roots, often focusing on a single individual such as American billionaire George Soros.

- The pandemic has brought about an explosion of conspiracy theories in Europe, many with anti-Semitic undertones.

- A study in the United States (USA) found that Russian trolls spread the same anti-Semitic conspiracy theories as the far-right; often it is not possible to discover who came up with the disinformation first.

- It is also likely that some anti-Semitic disinformation is spread by Russian actors in Europe.

4. People of Asian descent

- The pandemic has brought about **an exponential rise in anti-Asian racism** in Europe.

- This prompted some to start the social media campaign #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus ('I am not a virus').

5. Russian minorities in Estonia, Latvia and Germany as addressee of disinformation

- The Russian-speaking diaspora in Estonia, Latvia and Germany has been targeted by Kremlin-backed disinformation and propaganda for decades.

- Kremlin-originated disinformation aimed at the diaspora **depicts these Member States and the EU as anti-Russian, weak and polarised**, in contrast to the image of a strong, prosperous Russia, which protects Russians no matter where they live.

6. The Muslim minority as addressee of disinformation

- Extremist groups such as **al-Qaeda and ISIS** have used disinformation and propaganda for recruitment purposes.

- Some groups have used **the COVID-19 pandemic** to spread disinformation, framing the virus as God's punishment of his enemies.

Microtargeting minorities with emotive messages weaponising existing social problems is a potential danger for the European Union. While no report of cases similar to those identified in the USA has been found in the EU, the Russian diaspora in Germany has been targeted by the Kremlin before elections.

With regard to **the impact of disinformation**, this study finds that it is **multifaceted**:

- Democracy relies on a well-informed public and is adversely affected by disinformation. The current media ecosystem is particularly susceptible to disinformation, thus making it inherently problematic for democracy.

- The impact of disinformation within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has had some very direct consequences for minorities. **Health-related disinformation** in the infodemic, in regard for example to anti-vaccine disinformation or disinformation about potential 'cures' for COVID-19, can be dangerous for the health of all people, but **some minorities appear to be particularly vulnerable**. The infodemic thus impacts the fundamental rights of minorities, including their right to life, the right to physical and mental integrity as well as the right to free and informed consent in the field of medicine. Moreover, with disinformation campaigns blaming them for spreading the virus, **the Roma have become subject to** overly restrictive, **discriminatory measures** in a number of Member States. This is a direct impact on their fundamental rights as well as equality and the rule of law.

- Information manipulation campaigns can contribute to **increasing hatred against minorities** and hence they have a direct negative impact on the fundamental right to human dignity. The extent to which this impact is actual or potential varies according to group and geography. The Roma and migrants are heavily affected, while a Hungarian-Jewish organisation has not found a direct link between disinformation and anti-Semitic hate crime.

- Beyond affecting those who are the victims, these campaigns also have an adverse impact on tolerance and solidarity. By attacking a social group and spreading distorted negative information about it, such actions reinforce the existence of an 'out-group', which **undermines social cohesion**.

- Campaigns targeting Russian minorities abroad aim to sow **distrust towards the government**, potentially impacting respect for the rule of law. These campaigns also foster Russian identity as being in opposition to that of the host country, thereby trying to undermine social cohesion. The Kremlin has also microtargeted racial minorities in the USA to discourage them from voting. No similar cases have been reported in Europe, but the potential is nevertheless present.

- Activists reported on disinformation's '**chilling effect**' for non-governmental organisations (NGOs). For instance, if a group is vilified in the media, NGOs may want to avoid being associated with it. In addition, **disinformation has been weaponised** by politicians to clamp down on dissent.

- Disinformation can possibly be linked with changes in levels of **acceptance and solidarity** towards migrant communities.

With these findings in mind, this study makes a **number of recommendations** on how to improve the media ecosystem in general and how to counter minority-related disinformation in particular. The minority-specific recommendations include (but are not limited to):

- The planned strengthened **Code of Practice on Disinformation and Digital Services Act** should both include **specific protection for vulnerable groups**. For example, platforms should be required to cooperate with fact-checkers and moderators representing minorities. Hate speech often uses coded language, making detection difficult for algorithms and moderators who are not familiar with the local context. Under these plans, platforms may be required to improve the visibility of authoritative information based on transparent standards. Minorities should have an input into any authoritative information about them.

- To counter negative disinformation, minorities should foster their own, positive **counter-narrative** which should come to the attention of the media. Such projects should be supported by Member States or the EU.

- Successful EU programmes which **train young people** from minorities on how to create and disseminate their counter-narrative should continue.

- In addition to **training programmes for journalists** on how to cover minority-related news, they should also be taught how to recognise disinformation about minorities, so as to avoid its inadvertent spread.

- **Media literacy programmes** for general audiences should cover the issue of how minorities are used as tools in disinformation campaigns.

- Member States should create **minority-specific media literacy programmes** on how to resist disinformation.

- In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States should provide **essential information (for example, about vaccines) in minority languages**. A lack of easy-to-understand authoritative information contributes to the spread of disinformation.

- The EU and Member States should continue to support **fact-checking** programmes and the development of fact-checking tools. At the same time, given the limitations therein, research should be undertaken into potentially more effective methods such as **pre-bunking**.

- The erosion of trust in institutions and fellow citizens caused partially by disinformation has had a significantly negative impact on feelings of solidarity towards minorities. Hence, it is important to find ways of rebuilding this trust by having a **more proactive**, rather than reactive, communication policy.

- To better deal with hate speech, platforms should be required to **report illegal hate speech** to the relevant authorities instead of just removing it.

- To counter foreign disinformation, **platforms should** be required to **label accounts belonging to government officials as well as accounts belonging to state-affiliated media**. Some are already doing this, but the labelling should be underpinned by clear and transparent rules.

- Platforms should be required to verify the identity of groups/individuals who want to run political advertisements. Such **advertisements should be clearly labelled** including the organisation/individual who funded them.

1 Introduction

The issue of disinformation has in recent years received much public, political and scholarly attention. Social scientists have been busy developing typologies, analysing potential causes and consequences of disinformation. Policymakers have responded by proposing and introducing legislation designed to tackle this problem, both at European Union (EU) level and in Member States (MS). Civil society has launched initiatives such as media literacy and fact-checking projects to increase societal resilience to information manipulation[1].

While **disinformation** has become all-pervasive, it can arguably be considered as **yet another tool to target vulnerable groups** in society. The European Parliament recognised the 'weaponisation' of disinformation against minorities in two Resolutions (10 October 2019[2] and 15 January 2020) where it 'condemn[ed] media propaganda and misinformation against minorities; call[ed] for the establishment of the best possible safeguards against hate speech and radicalisation, disinformation campaigns and hostile propaganda, particularly those originating from authoritarian states and non-state actors such as terrorist groups'[3].

Disinformation leads to a number of significant consequences. Some are more abstract, for instance contributing to the **erosion of public trust** in institutions and influencing voting behaviour, while others represent **actual health risks** (such as during the infodemic) or may lead to hate crimes. This has been acknowledged by the European Parliament in two other Resolutions adopted on 20 October 2020 and 25 November 2020. In the resolution of October, the Parliament states that 'hate speech and disinformation harm public interest by undermining respectful and honest discourse and pose threats to public security since they can incite real-world violence'[4]. The COVID-19 infodemic and fatal storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, following a massive disinformation campaign about the US Presidential elections, are stark reminders that disinformation has real-life consequences.

While the initiators and forces behind disinformation activities are often difficult to identify, global actors such as Russia, China and Iran benefit from the resulting increased societal divisions and tensions, as well as from interference with democratic processes in the EU. Aimed at polarising Europe and undermining solidarity among Member States, disinformation campaigns require a multifaceted response from the EU, both to protect vulnerable groups and to defend Union values, such as the rule of law, fundamental rights, tolerance and equality.

This study seeks to inform the work of Members of the European Parliament with information on recent disinformation activities targeting minority groups with foreign support or interference. It will also look at the originators and impact of such campaigns. Our goal is not only to provide a better understanding of minority-specific foreign disinformation strategies, but also to propose recommendations for countering this problem.

1.1 Outline of the study

For conceptual clarity in this rather chaotic field, Chapter 2 will set out a brief definition of key terms before contextualising disinformation activity in the current information ecosystem. Chapter 3 will then provide a description of the most important recent disinformation campaigns, which will be followed in Chapter 4

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[1] See, for example, the _Factabaari_ project in Finland or _Manipulátoři_ in Czech Republic.
[2] European Parliament, Resolution of 10 October 2019 on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes, P9_TA(2019)0031, 2019.
[3] European Parliament, Resolution on Human Rights and Democracy in the World and the European Union's Policy on the Matter – Annual Report 2018, P9_TA(2020)0007, 2020a.
[4] European Parliament, Resolution on the Digital Services Act and fundamental rights issues posed, P9_TA(2020)0274, 2020b; European Parliament, Resolution on Strengthening Media Freedom: the Protection of Journalists in Europe, Hate Speech, Disinformation and the Role of Platforms, P9_TA(2020)0320, 2020c.

with an analysis of both the real and potential consequences of such activity. In Chapter 5, relevant EU-level policies will be summarised and reviewed, prior to an evaluation of certain civic initiatives in Member States. Chapters 6 and 7 will conclude the study by proposing a number of concrete steps aimed at creating greater resilience to disinformation within society.

1.2   Methodology

This study relies on a qualitative mixed methodology featuring **desk research and stakeholder interviews**. The former includes a comprehensive review of relevant academic and grey literature, as well as newspaper reports. For Kremlin-originated disinformation, reference was made to the **EUvsDisinfo database**, a flagship project of the European External Action Service (EEAS) East StratCom Task Force. The database is the only one of its kind in the EU and as such has been a regular point of reference for EU politicians, although in our view it is rather problematic, both in its status as an 'official' fact-checker and in its operations[5]. As for its status as part of the EU's Strategic Communications Task Force, 'it is vulnerable to charges of being (counter-) propaganda'[6]. Although it has taken steps to increase transparency, the criteria used to identify disinformation remain somewhat unclear. It also tries to debunk claims that are not verifiable, such as opinions. Yet, for the purposes of this analysis the authors consider as disinformation what the EEAS labels as such.

As for stakeholders, **10 representatives of various EU-level and national civic organisations** were interviewed, bearing in mind diversity with regard to the groups represented as well as geographical variation within the EU[7]. While this approach provides the most well-rounded study possible given time constraints and availability of resources, there are of course limitations. Identifying the actors behind inherently secretive steps, such as information manipulation, using open-source information is largely impossible. Relying on newspapers as research sources that not only have their own political agendas but have also not been peer-reviewed can potentially open up our study to the charge of political bias. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, we believe that the conclusions reached are valid and accordingly this study can contribute to a better understanding of how disinformation impacts vulnerable groups in society.

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[5] See also J. Bayer, N. Bitiukova, P. Bárd, J. Szakács, A. Alemanno, and E. Uszkiewicz, Disinformation and Propaganda – Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law in the EU and Its Member States, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union (DG IPOL), European Parliament, February 2019, pp 97-98.

[6] J. Bayer, B. Holznagel, K. Lubianiec, A. Pintea, J. B. Schmitt, J. Szakács, and E. Uszkiewicz, Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States - 2021 Update, Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, 2021.
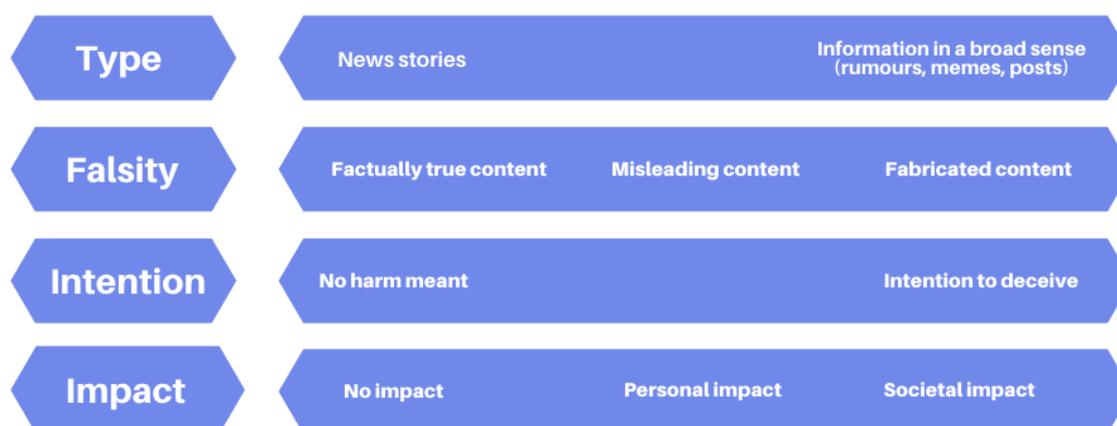
[7] A list of interviewees is provided in the Annex.

2   State of play

2.1   The definition of key terms

Given the scholarly, political and public attention to 'fake news', it is not surprising that a plethora of overlapping and sometimes contradictory terminology has been developed to describe and analyse this phenomenon. These definitions are generally constructed along four dimensions, albeit not usually equally weighted: the type of information; the falsity of information; the intention of the author; and the consequences or impact of the information[8].

Figure 1: Dimensions of information disorder

Type	News stories		Information in a broad sense (rumours, memes, posts)
Falsity	Factually true content	Misleading content	Fabricated content
Intention	No harm meant		Intention to deceive
Impact	No impact	Personal impact	Societal impact

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Based mostly on falsity, intention and impact, the European Commission (EC) defines disinformation as 'verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm […][such as] threats to democratic political and policy-making processes as well as public goods'[9].

This definition entails that disinformation is deceptive and intentionally so. On the dimension of intent, this differentiates disinformation from *misinformation*, in that the latter is **false or misleading information spread without the intention to deceive**. Along the dimension of falsity, disinformation is distinguished from *mal-information,* which involves **the weaponisation of genuine information** such as data gathered via hacks or leaks. Mal-information is '[i]nformation that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country'[10]. In addition to misinformation and mal-information, the European Commission's definition of disinformation also excludes satire and parody, as well as errors and 'clearly identified partisan news and commentary'[11], which arguably lack the intention to deceive news consumers about their goals[12].

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[8] Bayer et al., 2019.
[9] European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach, COM/2018/236 final, 2018a.
[10] C. Wardle, and H. Derakhshan, Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making, Council of Europe Report No 27, 2017.
[11] European Commission 2018a.
[12] In the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, the Commission added 'misleading advertising' to the list of problematic content excluded from the definition of disinformation. See European Commission, EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, 2018b.

Using 'intention' to define different types of false information is not without problems. Creators of disinformation hardly ever state their goal publicly. Indeed, even identifying the originators of false information is generally difficult, **rendering intent often impossible to ascribe**. Additionally, the originator's intention may be different from the intention of those who disseminate disinformation. For example, a piece of disinformation created to sow doubts about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, such as 'in Sweden, 64 people died as a side effect of the Pfizer vaccine'[13], reported in the state-run Russian newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, may be spread by people who mean no harm, but believe this 'news' to be genuine.

While the 'falsity' dimension appears less problematic than the dimension of intention, it may be less relevant for the topic of this study. Epistemic issues about the existence and knowability of 'truth' aside, it has been argued that in the current **post-truth era**, the veracity of claims, from the perspective of influencing public opinion, does not matter; facts are becoming less influential than opinions and beliefs[14]. Firstly, not all disinformation contains elements that are objectively untrue. Very often, '[t]he problem […] is not so much inaccuracy, but rather extreme bias'[15]. For example, a recent analysis of Russian COVID-19 vaccine narratives found that Russian media, both mainstream and 'alternative', have selectively focused on and amplified news stories about adverse reactions to 'Western' vaccines while not reporting on any risk related to the Russian Sputnik V vaccine[16]. This has created the misperception that 'Western' vaccines are unsafe, without the stories themselves being factually incorrect. Secondly, it has been argued that in many real-life cases 'the actors behind [the information manipulation] do not necessarily position themselves relative to the truth but may simply be trying to produce the dividing effect'[17]. For example, an emotional Instagram meme about the US police (captioned 'We don't know them all, but we owe them all') makes no truth claim. Yet it was posted by a Russia-linked account which, under a different username, was also posting about police violence against African Americans[18]. That is, the same actor(s) posted opposing messages that targeted different user demographics. Creating and disseminating emotive memes for both sides of divisive issues, the goal of this operation was to stoke tension, yet it was not spreading any 'fake news'.

On this basis, our study includes '**aggressive informational practices**'[19] that fall outside the true/false binary, such as **profiling** and **microtargeting** (collecting vast amounts of data about users and serving content specifically targeted at them), exploiting one's fears and vulnerabilities or verbal abuse. The authors would also argue for the inclusion of parody, which is often misunderstood and taken seriously, as real-life examples show. When that happens, the impact of parody/satire is no different from that of other types of disinformation. This raises the issue of free speech, which explicitly protects satire and parody. At the same time, so defined, most disinformation cases 'escape the boundaries of legal categories'[20]. Even beyond value judgements and non-factual statements, it has been argued that **with few very specific**

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[13] EUvsDisinfo, <u>64 People Have Died in Sweden from Side Effects of Vaccination</u>, Published on 12 February 2021.

[14] L. McIntyre, Post-Truth, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series, MIT Press, 2018.

[15] J. Rone, <u>Why Talking about 'Disinformation' Misses the Point When Considering Radical Right 'Alternative' Media</u>, LSE Media Policy Project, Published on 3 January 2019.

[16] R. Osadchuk, <u>How Pro-Kremlin Outlets and Blogs Undermine Trust in Foreign-Made COVID Vaccines</u>, DFRLab Medium, Published on 27 January 2021. This has proven to be a particularly successful strategy as these scaremongering stories about the vaccines appeal to anti-vax groups who readily disseminate them.

[17] J. Bayer, N. Bitiukova, P. Bárd, J. Szakács, A. Alemanno, and E. Uszkiewicz, <u>Disinformation and Propaganda – Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law in the EU and Its Member States</u>, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union (DG IPOL), European Parliament, February 2019.

[18] B. Nimmo, C. François, C. Shawn Eib, and L. Tamora<u>, From Russia With Blogs: GRU Operators Leveraged Blogs, Social Media Accounts and Private Messaging to Reach Audiences Across Europe</u>, Graphika Report, February 2020.

[19] J. Bayer et al., 2019, p. 28.

[20] J. Bayer et al., 2019, p. 90.

limitations, freedom of speech protects even false information[21]. This has important consequences when considering different countering strategies.

The European Commission's definition also includes criteria relating to 'impact' by stating that disinformation 'may cause public harm'. This issue will be fully discussed in Chapter 4.

2.1.1   Types of disinformation

From the many typologies developed by scholars, this study will rely on the most often cited taxonomy by Wardle, which differentiates between seven categories[22] of mis- and disinformation[23]:

- *Satire* and *parody*, which can become misinformation or disinformation, despite its author's intention[24].

- '*False connection*' refers to 'clickbait', when a generally sensationalist headline is not supported by the article which follows.

- '*Misleading content*' refers to cases when an issue is framed in a misleading manner by the selective inclusion of data.

- *False context* refers to the 'repurposing' of genuine material for an unrelated issue.

- *Imposter content* refers to disinformation masquerading as genuine news from reliable sources by using trusted journalists' by-lines or the names and logos of well-known news organisations[25], for instance by hacking a legitimate news site's content management system and posting disinformation articles[26]. In a broader sense and with regard to social media, imposter content may also refer to *trolls* or *bots*, in other words accounts that pretend to be someone else. Social media platforms usually refer to this as 'inauthentic' behaviour or account.

- *Manipulated content* refers primarily to images and videos that have been altered.

- Finally, *fabricated content* is completely invented.

Of all these, only the final category (and possibly 'imposter content') refers to content conjured out of thin air; the rest contain kernels of truth distorted so as to serve an alternative agenda.

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[21] A. Renda, The Legal Framework to Address 'Fake News': Possible Policy Actions at the EU Level, Directorate General for Internal Policies (DG IPOL), European Parliament, June 2018.

[22] C. Wardle, Fake News. It's Complicated, *First Draft*, Published on 16 February 2017.

[23] This categorisation covers the full spectrum of mis- and disinformation, ranging from the unintentional and mildly misleading to the intentionally and completely fabricated types.

[24] For example, a hyper-partisan Hungarian news site ran a piece on Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's alleged report card from secondary school. While the article was clearly meant to be satire, the comments on the piece show that many readers believed it to be authentic. See P.S. Föld, Megtaláltuk Orbán Viktor középiskolás ellenőrzőjét, *Hírklikk.hu*, Published on 5 April 2019.

[25] A historical example is that of Benjamin Franklin, who, as ambassador ('commissioner') for the United States in France, printed a whole made-up *Supplement to the Boston Independent Chronicle* in 1782. See C. Mulford, Benjamin Franklin's Savage Eloquence: Hoaxes from the Press at Passy, 1782, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 152, No. 4, 2008, pp. 490–530.

[26] On 18 January 2018, a bogus article defaming the then Lithuanian Defence Minister Raimundas Karoblis was posted by suspected Russian actors on the TV3.lt news site. See L. Foster, S. Riddell, D. Mainor and G. Roncone, 'Ghostwriter' Influence Campaign: Unknown Actors Leverage Website Compromises and Fabricated Content to Push Narratives Aligned with Russian Security Interests, Mandiant Threat Intelligence, 2020.

Table 1: Types of dis/misinformation

Type of disinformation	Definition	Example
Satire/parody	No intention to cause harm but has the potential to fool	Article on Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's high school report card
False connection	Headlines, visuals, or captions do not support the content	Clickbait headlines such as 'The Secret They Don't Want You to Know'
Misleading content	Misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual	Reporting on deaths after COVID-19 vaccination without stating that no link was found
False context	Genuine content shared with false contextual information	Using old pictures of parades for articles on anti-lockdown demonstrations
Imposter content	Impersonating genuine sources	Fake article defaming Lithuanian Defence Minister on a legitimate news site
Manipulated content	Genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive	Manipulated picture of US President Joe Biden falling asleep in the Oval Office
Fabricated content	100% false, designed to deceive	Story about Pope Francis being arrested for child trafficking

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Wardle (2017)

A concept related to and sometimes used interchangeably with disinformation is **propaganda**. Subject to much scholarly attention, propaganda has also been defined in different ways, some broad enough to cover all attempts to persuade, while others including only persuasion with an intention to mislead[27]. This analysis uses the term propaganda to imply **strategic information campaigns for political goals**. Disinformation may be deployed for propaganda purposes, but not all propaganda is disinformation.

2.1.2   Hate speech

As this study focuses on disinformation targeting minorities, the issue of hate speech and its relation to disinformation also needs to be discussed. Hate speech has been subject to heated academic debate in past decades, centred mostly on the potential harm it may cause and whether or not it needs to be restricted[28]. The EU's authoritative definition is provided in **Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA** of 28 November 2008 on Combating Certain Forms and Expressions of Racism as well as Xenophobia by Means of Criminal Law. The Framework Decision defines **hate speech** as 'publicly inciting to violence or hatred directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by reference to race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin;' and 'publicly condoning, denying or grossly trivialising crimes

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[27] Bayer et al., 2019.
[28] J. Bayer, and P. Bárd, Hate Speech and Hate Crime in the EU and the Evaluation of Online Content Regulation Approaches, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies (DG IPOL), European Parliament, 2020.

of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes[29]'. The Framework Decision calls on Member States to ensure that such conduct 'is punishable by effective, proportionate and dissuasive criminal penalties' and that racist, xenophobic motivation 'is considered an aggravating circumstance'[30].

With the exception of racism, **hate speech** and hate crime are **regulated at Member State level**, under the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice. This may change, as in its 2021 Work Programme the Commission said it would 'propose to extend the list of euro-crimes to include all forms of hate crime and hate speech'[31] in the fourth quarter of the year[32].

While there is extensive literature discussing potential as well as real impacts of hate speech and wide-ranging research covering possible links between social media and hate speech, surprisingly few empirical studies have addressed how disinformation and hate speech are interrelated. One analysis of hate speech in statements flagged by fact-checkers found that hate speech 'is most likely to occur when information is found to be completely false'[33]. Conversely, the researchers argue that **those who consume disinformation are also more likely to be exposed to hate speech**. Furthermore, a study of Spanish Twitter messages about migrants between November 2018 and April 2019 found that messages with hate speech tended to feature false information[34]. On a more theoretical level, some talk about '**the ecosystem of hate**'[35], pointing out that disinformation is often used to incite hatred. However, 'hate campaigns' often involve entirely factual statements, selected in a manipulative manner and often relying on the wider context for effect[36].

Mindful of the overlap between groups associated with hate speech and those linked with disinformation, some researchers argue that '**hate speech strongly resonate[s] with the politics of (partisan) disinformation**'[37]. It is clear that disinformation can be used to incite hatred, but not all disinformation is 'hate speech' and disseminators are clearly able to use other means to spark hatred. As discussed in Chapter 2.1, information manipulation campaigns often involve 'aggressive information practices', such as highly emotional and emotive polarising statements that cannot be interpreted through a true/false dichotomy. Some of these statements probably fall under the category of hate speech. This analysis includes hate speech only if it is also disinformation.

2.2 The disinformation ecosystem

The advent of the internet and more particularly social media has brought about an explosion of disinformation, since '[p]owerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content

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[29] European Union, Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA of 28 November 2008 on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law, Official Journal of the European Union L 328/55 of 6 December 2008.
[30] European Union, 2008.
[31] European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Commission Work Programme 2021: A Union of Vitality in a World of Fragility. COM(2020) 690 Final, 2020c
[32] European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Commission Work Programme 2021: A Union of Vitality in a World of Fragility, (Annexes), COM(2020) 690 Final, 2020c.
[33] M. Hameleers, T. van der Meer, and R. Vliegenthart, Civilized Truths, Hateful Lies? Incivility and Hate Speech in False Information – Evidence from Fact-Checked Statements in the US, Information, Communication & Society, 2021, pp. 1–18.
[34] C. Arcila Calderón, G. de la Vega, and D. Blanco Herrero, Topic Modeling and Characterization of Hate Speech against Immigrants on Twitter around the Emergence of a Far-Right Party in Spain, Social Sciences, Vol. 9, 2020, p. 188.
[35] G. Cherian, The Scourge of Disinformation-Assisted Hate Propaganda, in Melissa Zimdars and Kembrew McLeod (eds.), Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age, MIT Press, 2020, pp. 145–152.
[36] Cherian G., 2020.
[37] M. Hameleers, T. van der Meer, and R. Vliegenthart, Civilized Truths, Hateful Lies? Incivility and Hate Speech in False Information – Evidence from Fact-Checked Statements in the US, Information, Communication & Society, 2021, pp. 1–18.

simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods'[38]. Whilst recognising that technology itself is not solely responsible for the 'information disorder'[39], analysing the underlying social causes is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say here that social media platforms are susceptible to disinformation[40]. The reasons often quoted for their susceptibility include **disintermediation**, the spread of user-generated content without 'gatekeepers'. Additionally, there is the '**attention economy**', which refers to the fact that social media platforms' business models rely on keeping users engaged. This is coupled with the **algorithmic curation** of content: what users see in their social media feed is not selected by humans, but by opaque algorithms which capture attention well, albeit without any ability to differentiate between facts and what looks like facts[41]. Social media **echo chambers** or filter bubbles, the personalised universe in which users are encapsulated without much chance of encountering opposing views[42], are yet another reason why disinformation spreads so easily. It has also been argued that social media companies contribute to disinformation by **profiling** and **microtargeting** users, thereby fostering filter bubbles. The European Parliament summarised some of these issues in its Resolution of 20 October 2020[43].

Some of these problems have been publicly recognised by Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg. With Facebook having suffered much public backlash for its supposed role in the election of Donald Trump, Zuckerberg wrote a long message in 2017, which included points about the difficulty of distinguishing misinformation from opinion. Furthermore, he stated that '[s]ocial media is a short-form medium where resonant messages get amplified many times. This rewards simplicity and discourages nuance. At its best, this focuses messages and exposes people to different ideas. At its worst, it oversimplifies important topics and pushes us towards extremes'[44]. Disinformation actors make use of these characteristics of social media[45], which have been shown to have played a role in the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments and movements[46].

2.3 Minority-related disinformation campaigns: origin and target

This study aims to investigate the impact of disinformation and propaganda campaigns particularly in the context of migrants and ethnic, religious, or cultural minorities, originating from or being supported by actors outside the EU, targeting the EU or its Member States. Aside from a handful of proven cases, the originators of such campaigns are very difficult to identify using open-source intelligence alone.

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[38] C. Ireton and J. Posetti, Introduction in *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2018, pp. 14–25.

[39] C. Wardle, and H. Derakhshan, Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making, Council of Europe Report No 27, 2017.

[40] See for example, L.W. Bennett, and S. Livingston, The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2018, pp. 122–139; S. Vosoughi, D. Roy, and S. Aral, The Spread of True and False News Online, Science, Vol. 359, No. 6380, 2018, pp. 1146–1151.

[41] See for example J. Claussen, C. Peukert, and A. Sen, The Editor vs. the Algorithm: Targeting, Data and Externalities in Online News, Data and Externalities in Online News, SSRN Scholarly Papers, *Social Science Research Network,* June 2019.

[42] E. Pariser, The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think, Penguin, 2011.

[43] See European Parliament, Resolution on the Digital Services Act and fundamental rights issues posed, P9_TA(2020)0274, 2020b. 'Online hate speech and disinformation have become increasingly widespread in recent years as […] disruptive actors make use of online platforms to increase polarisation, which, in turn, is used for political purposes. […] [T]his trend has been aided by online platforms whose business model is based on the collection and analysis of user data with a view to generating more traffic and 'clicks' […]; [T]his leads to the amplification of sensationalist content. […] [S]ocial media and other content distribution platforms utilise profiling techniques […]. [It was revealed] that certain voters had been micro-targeted with political advertising and, at times, even with targeted disinformation.'

[44] M. Zuckerberg, 'Building a Global Community', Facebook webpages, Published on 17 February 2017.

[45] A. Alaphilippe, A. Gizikis, C. Hanot, and K. Bontcheva, Automated Tackling of Disinformation: Major Challenges Ahead, European Parliament Research Services, European Parliament, March 2019.

[46] M. Ekman, Anti-Immigrant Sentiments and Mobilization on the Internet, SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration. London: SAGE, 2019, pp. 551–562. See also E. Nortio, M. Niska, T.A. Renvik, and I. Jasinskaja-Lahti, The Nightmare of Multiculturalism': Interpreting and Deploying Anti-Immigration Rhetoric in Social Media, *New Media & Society*, Vol. 23, No. 3, March 1, 2021, pp. 438–456.

The EC European Migration Network defines minorities as 'non-dominant group[s] which [are] usually numerically less than the majority population of a State or region regarding their ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics and who (if only implicitly) maintain solidarity with their own culture, traditions, religion or language'[47]. However, it is clear that not all minority groups are equally likely to become targeted by hate speech and disinformation. For the Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) selected **groups** that it considers 'to be **vulnerable to victimisation and discrimination**'[48] as well as vulnerable **to social exclusion**[49] in Member States. These groups include immigrants and descendants of immigrants from Turkey, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, as well as the Roma, Russian minorities and recent immigrants[50]. Additionally, separate surveys have covered Muslim immigrants and their descendants[51] as well as Jewish minorities[52] who are also considered vulnerable. This study will follow FRA's lead and focus on these vulnerable ethnic, racial and religious minorities, complemented by people with an Asian background, who have become vulnerable to heightened discrimination and exclusion due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Included in the analysis are also ethnic groups that may be vulnerable to social exclusion in specific Member States, such as ethnic Hungarians in Romania.

Disinformation poses a particular threat to minority groups that are vulnerable to victimisation and discrimination. These groups are already suffering from prejudices borne by the majority group; disinformation about them tends to aggravate the situation. As Chapter 3 will discuss, disinformation against minorities relies on **longstanding stereotypes and well-entrenched biases**. Moreover, as they are already marginalised, it is highly likely that they are not in a situation to defend themselves.

Some of these marginalised minorities are also particularly **vulnerable to disinformation as its 'consumers'**. For historical reasons, **they often have strained relations with the state**, characterised by an erosion of trust, which can make them more susceptible to conspiracy theories. They are also often deprived of necessary information, which opens up space for disinformation.

2.4   State of the art

It appears that the specific issue of externally initiated or supported disinformation campaigns about minorities and migrants has not as yet been subject to much scholarly work[53].

One of the few exceptions is a report that analysed anti-immigration discourses in a number of Member States during 2017[54]. Researchers found that disinformation was to a large extent spread by pro-Kremlin media, representing Russia's interests. They concluded that **'[t]he topic of migration is suitable to disrupt European unity** and shake EU citizens' confidence in European institutions. Russia's national interest is the dissolution of the EU, […] the Putin-regime thus uses its propaganda media to support the narratives of pro-Russian, anti-EU populist political forces'[55].

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[47] European Migration Network, Migration, Glossary entry, European Commission webpages. Accessed 2020.
[48] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), EU-MIDIS Technical Report Methodology, Sampling and Fieldwork, 2009, p. 9.
[49] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey Technical Report, 2017. p. 30.
[50] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2017.
[51] European Union Agency of Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2017, p. 10. Note: there is, obviously, an overlap between categories, that is, some migrants and descendants of migrants are also covered in the survey about Muslims.
[52] European Union Agency of Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2017, p. 57.
[53] A possible explanation may be that scholars have come up against the same problem as that encountered by this study's authors, namely a lack of information about the originator of campaigns.
[54] A. Juhász, and P. Szicherle, The Political Effects of Migration-Related Fake News, Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in Europe, Friedrich Ebert Stifüng; Political Capital, 2017.
[55] A. Juhász and P. Szicherle, 2017 p. 4.

A recent study on anti-migrant Facebook posts in several Member States discovered only three foreign sources (the Chinese *Epoch Times* newspaper, a far-right American think tank and a further website, more than likely Russian)[56]. However, the bulk of disinformation was found to be '**home-grown**'.

A series of papers discussing a case of Islamophobic 'fake news' in Denmark does not address the actors involved, but the *modus operandi* is reminiscent of the Russian Internet Research Agency's proven tactics. In 2015, several Islamist Facebook accounts were posting messages about 'taking over Denmark' as well as killing and raping non-Muslim Danish people. The ensuing outrage provided visibility to the posts, with even a member of the Danish Parliament sharing one to post a reaction. Many users responded with anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant comments. However, the Facebook pages did not belong to Muslim extremists and were set up purely with the aim of stoking hatred against migrants and Muslims[57]. While the true identities behind these bogus profiles have yet to be found, similar tactics have been used by Russian trolls in the United States (USA)[58].

Leaving aside the question of origin, disinformation campaigns about minorities have been studied from various aspects. Similar to media studies in general, a major research topic is the representation of minorities in 'fake news' stories. A study about 'racial hoaxes' on irregular migrants in Italy in 2014-2016 found that most stories presented **migrants as an economic threat, a criminal threat or a health threat**[59]. The findings of a non-academic project run by a Turkish journalist and French fact-checkers partly echo these results[60,61]. Another important study traces the evolution of a forensic photograph, featuring a young, blonde Swedish rape victim, into a global symbol of a 'Muslim/immigrant rape wave', used in constructing a trans-European network of white masculinity[62]. An investigation into anti-Roma hate speech, including disinformation, on Slovak Facebook and a survey conducted by activists in six Member States[63] found that the Roma were depicted as criminals and welfare-abusers[64].

Using a different approach and focusing on far-right and alt-right groups, one recent study analyses the actors, platforms and audiences of anti-immigrant disinformation[65]. Another recently published paper looked at posts about the Roma in Romanian-language Reddit posts to analyse what factors influence hostility against the Roma, concluding that the most important factor is a lack of trust in the authorities[66]

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[56] P. Butcher, and A.H. Neidhardt, Fear and Lying in the EU: Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives, Issues Paper, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, the FriedrichEbert-Stiftung, the Fundación Pablo Iglesias and the European Policy Centre, 2020.

[57] J. Farkas, J. Schou, and C. Neumayer, Cloaked Facebook Pages: Exploring Fake Islamist Propaganda in Social Mediav, *New Media & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 5, 2018, pp. 1850–1867.

[58] A. Spangher, G. Ranade, B. Nushi, A. Fourney, and E. Horvitz, Analysis of Strategy and Spread of Russia-Sponsored Content in the US in 2017, ArXiv, October 2018.

[59] A. Cerase, and C. Santoro, From Racial Hoaxes to Media Hypes: Fake News' Real Consequences, in Peter Vasterman (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, pp. 333–354.

[60] That analysis looked at visual disinformation of migrants in a number of Member States and Turkey in 2015-2017 and identified three major fictitious narratives: migrants as criminals, migrants as social welfare recipients and migrants as invaders. While the narratives were the same, comparing and contrasting stories in different countries the study showed how local contexts influenced content. See L. Mas, How Fake Images Spread Racist Stereotypes about Migrants across the Globe, The Observers - *France 24*, Published on 5 January 2018.

[61] For example, a video of a man assaulting nurses in Novgorod, Russia, was disseminated by French far-right Facebook pages as if it was a migrant assaulting hospital staff in France; in Spain, as if it was a Muslim doing it in a Spanish health centre; and in Turkey as if it was a Syrian in Turkey. This reveals who the main scapegoats were in the different local contexts.

[62] K. Horsti, Digital Islamophobia: The Swedish Woman as a Figure of Pure and Dangerous Whiteness, *New Media & Society*, Vol. 19, No. 9, 2017, pp. 1440–1457.

[63] M. Hamelmann, Antigypsyism on the Internet, sCAN - Platforms, Experts, Tools: Specialised Cyber-Activists Network, 2018.

[64] J. Miškolci, L. Kováčová, and E. Rigová, Countering Hate Speech on Facebook: The Case of the Roma Minority in Slovakia, *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2020, pp. 128–146.

[65] J. Suiter and E. Culloty, 'Anti-Immigration Disinformation', in Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2021.

[66] L. Molnar, The Law of the Jungle. The Online Hate-Speech against the Roma in Romania, Victims & Offenders, 2021, pp. 1–22.

A rich grey literature and several newspaper reports also cover **disinformation** on minorities in a number of Member States, often **weaponised in electoral campaigns**, but they generally do not link the disinformation to foreign sources[67].

Other research in this field concentrates on **extremist propaganda and disinformation**, which has been created and disseminated by terror groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. This is of paramount value. As an analysis of the Islamic State's media strategy document found: 'propaganda production and dissemination [are] at times considered to be even more important [for ISIS] than military jihad'[68]. On the one hand, such propaganda may lead to severe public harm in Member States; on the other hand, it targets Muslim minorities and other vulnerable groups, not in the sense of victimising them, but as an audience for recruitment purposes. An extensive body of literature looks at the content of such propaganda[69] and its possible role in **radicalisation**[70]. Particularly pertinent is a series of papers based on in-depth interviews with radicalised or formerly radicalised Islamists in Austria and Germany, who describe how they followed YouTube's algorithmic recommendations and were consequently exposed to increasingly radical content[71].

ISIS has employed a highly sophisticated social media strategy, which has entailed 'hijacking' hashtags on Twitter. Propaganda Tweets were posted under completely unrelated but popular English Premier League teams' hashtags so that football fans would inadvertently stumble upon the propaganda material[72]. However, more recently, major social media sites have become more adept at removing ISIS-related accounts; hence ISIS, as well as al-Qaeda, have been forced to find a new home on the messaging platform **Telegram**. There is grey literature research that analyses the content posted on this app[73]. In 2018, a group of Iraqi activists infiltrated the ISIS communication channels on Telegram and spread disinformation among ISIS supporters. They utilised the imposter method, not only by posing as ISIS supporters, but also by producing a fake copy of the ISIS newspaper *Al-Naba*, complete with a manipulated photo of the then ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi posing with scantily dressed dancers and distributing it from an official-looking ISIS channel. Reportedly, the United Kingdom's (UK) Government Communications Headquarters were also involved in distributing disinformation on ISIS Telegram channels[74].

A very recent report looks at the impact of a Europol Action Day in November 2019 that resulted in the takedown of several ISIS accounts and channels on Telegram, with a resultant long-term detrimental effect on the dissemination of ISIS propaganda[75].

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[67] For example, Spain: M. Beatley, Inside the Far-Right Fake-News Nexus, *The Atlantic*, Published on 28 September 2019; Sweden: M. Meaker, Inside the Online Disinformation War Trying to Tear Sweden Apart, *Wired UK*, Published on 9 September 2018.
[68] C. Winter, Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare, Institute for Strategic Dialogue and International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2017.
[69] Some recent examples include M.S. Stempień, Russia in the Eyes of Islamic State: An Analysis of the Content of Dabiq and Rumiyah Magazines and Russia's Involvement in the Fight against the Islamic State, Terrorism and Political Violence, 2019; and S.J. Baele, K.A. Boyd, and T.G. Coan, Lethal Images: Analyzing Extremist Visual Propaganda from ISIS and Beyond, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4, October 2020, pp. 634–657.
[70] See for example J.R. Vacca, Online Terrorist Propaganda, Recruitment, and Radicalization, CRC Press, 2019.
[71] P. Baugut, and K. Neumann, Online Propaganda Use during Islamist Radicalization, *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 23, No. 11, 2020, pp. 1570–1592.
[72] C. Milmo, Iraq Crisis Exclusive: Isis Jihadists Using World Cup and Premier League Hashtags to Promote Extremist Propaganda on Twitter, *The Independent*, Published on 23 June 2014.
[73] S. Stalinsky, and R. Sosnow, Germany-Based Encrypted Messaging App Telegram Emerges As Jihadis' Preferred Communications Platform – Part V Of MEMRI Series: Encryption Technology Embraced By ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Other Jihadis – September 2015-September 2016, MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1291, December 2016.
[74] L. Dearden, Isis Hit by Onslaught of Fake Propaganda and Cyberattacks, *The Independent*, Published on 11 July 2018.
[75] A. Amarasingam, M. Shiraz, and C. Winter, How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST), 2021.

3 Main disinformation actions against minorities

This Chapter provides an overview and assessment of recent key disinformation campaigns against minorities and migrants, starting with the only known collection of foreign campaigns in the EU, namely the EUvsDisinfo database. Although the focus here is on disinformation and hate speech originated abroad, in many cases it is not possible to name the actors responsible. Sometimes, unrelated pieces of information help identify them. For example, a Facebook Ad Library report[76] in Lithuania recently revealed that disinformation website *Minfo.lt* was one of the biggest ad spenders in the country. Yet the site had no visible source of income, containing no advertisements or calls for crowdfunding. This raises the suspicion that it could have been receiving covert funding, possibly from Russia[77].

3.1 Actions recorded in the EUvsDisinfo database

For the time period covered in this study (1 January 2018-31 March 2021), the EUvsDisinfo database, listing 7 807 disinformation news pieces from Russian sources, contains 55 items relating to Jews, 123 items about migrants and 36 items about Muslims. Furthermore, the researchers collected 44 pieces about 'Russophobia' targeting Germany, 23 targeting Estonia, 34 Latvia and 47 Lithuania. A manual review of hits for the keyword 'Roma' found no related pieces, as was also the case for Asian minorities[78].

Figure 2: Number of articles per group
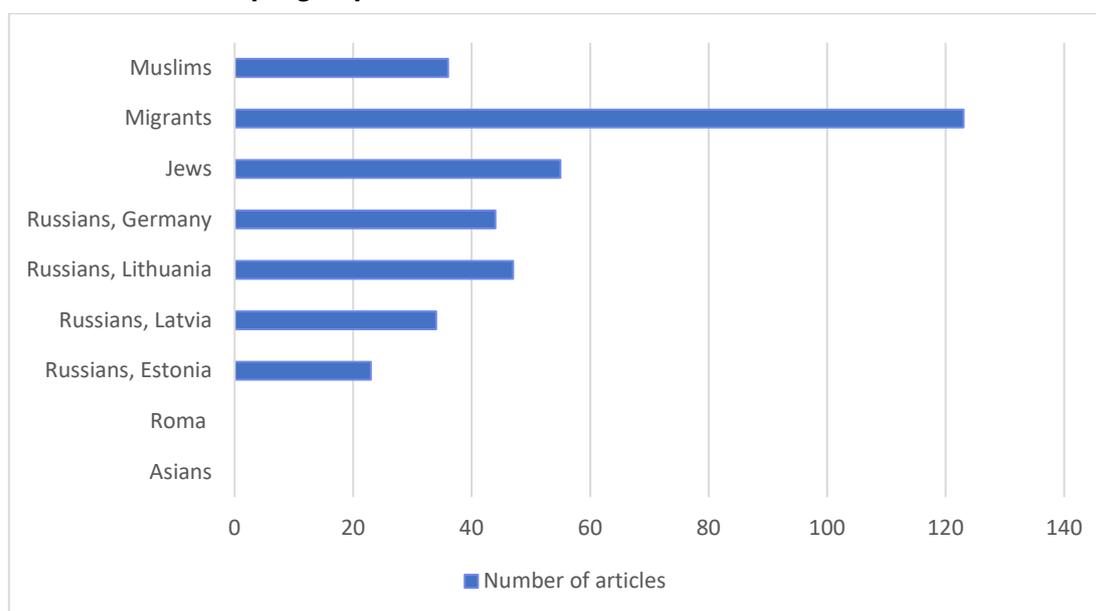
Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on EUvsDisinfo

Overgeneralisations should be avoided in light of the unclear selection mechanism used by this database, but the trends are clear. **Migrants receive the most attention, while the Roma and Asians are ignored**. Although included in the chart above, articles regarding the Russian minority are in a different category: the Russian minority is the target audience, rather than the group featured in stories (see Chapter 3.7).

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[76] See Facebook Ads Library Report.

[77] Source of the information: the interview with the representative of Manoteises. In a recent article, Lithuanian investigative journalists found that the site is officially financed by the owner's 'alternative medicine' business, and the owner said he used the site as a way to promote the values of his company. See Savickas, Edgaras, Vaidas Saldžiūnas, and Ernestas Naprys, Sekant Pinigus: Iš Ko Gyvena Lietuvos Viešosios Erdvės Paraščių Veikėjai, DELFI, March 2, 2021. (In Lithuanian)

[78] There are overlaps between the categories. Non-relevant items were removed from the hits (e.g. articles listed as relating to migration but being about emigration from Poland).

Looking more closely at the content, the same types of narratives appear as those identified in earlier research (see Chapter 2). A large number of articles report on **migrants and/or Muslims[79] as a threat to European culture and identity**, as shown in stories about various European towns allegedly abandoning Christmas traditions to appease local Muslims/migrants or other reports about children being forced to pray to Allah in school[80]. This 'Islamisation' narrative appears in another major group of stories reporting that Muslims will soon outnumber 'Europeans' in a variety of locations[81]. The second major narrative presents **migrants/Muslims as a criminal threat**, particularly as rapists[82]. This is sometimes connected to a narrative about 'the decline of Europe' and often has sexist undertones[83]. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants are also **depicted as a health threat**[84]. Several articles targeting for example Poland or Italy used migration as an issue to exacerbate existing tension between Member States or certain Member States and the EU[85]. The narrative of **migrants as an economic threat** is less prevalent than in earlier research, but it does appear[86].

Articles featuring Jews contain **old anti-Semitic canards**[87] or **conspiracy theories**[88].

Reports to do with the Russian minority fall under a different category from those discussed so far. These target the ethnic Russian community, primarily in the Baltic states and Germany, as an audience, offering them an image of the EU or these **Member States as 'Russophobic'**[89]. These stories are often general claims along the lines that the countries' leaders hate Russia; sometimes they cite general discrimination and rely on distorted personal stories to push this 'Russophobia' agenda. For example, authorities in Berlin are reported to have taken the children of a local Russian couple into state care. Not only did the police allegedly brutalise the father but according to the story police officers also said that they were taking the children as 'revenge' for Alexei Navalny[90]. While such a claim about the police's open political statement stretches the limits of credulity, this story does rely on a highly emotional topic with an exaggerated presentation in serving the larger agenda of alleging German hostility towards Russia.

Rather surprisingly, we were unable to locate stories in the database pertaining to tensions between a Member State's ethnic group living in another Member State, even though such conflicts would seem to

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[79] While migrants and Muslims are clearly two different groups, there is a considerable overlap in disinformation regarding them. The 'migrant' label is often a code for 'Muslim', and the two terms are frequently used as synonyms. Conflating the two groups in disinformation campaigns can lead to an increase in bias against both of them.

[80] For example, EUvsDisinfo, Italian Town Forbids Christmas Carols Not to Insult Migrants, Published on 3 December 2020; EUvsDisinfo, Germany Removes Baby Jesus from Christmas Markets, Published on 30 October 30 2020; EUvsDisinfo, Swedish Children Forced to Pray to Allah in School, Published on 14 June 2018.

[81] For example, EUvsDisinfo, Every Muslim Family Living in France Has More than 8 Children, Published on 17 July 2019; EUvsDisinfo, The Majority of Newborns in Brussels Are from the New Islamic Community, Published on 28 April 2019.

[82] For example, EUvsDisinfo, Migrants Responsible for Increase in Robberies, Murders and Rapes in Germany, Published on 17 December 2018.

[83] For example, a piece claiming men in Europe have become so 'feminised' that they cannot protect their wives and daughters from being raped by migrants. See EUvsDisinfo, Today's Western Males Are Feminised Semi-Men Unable to Protect Their Women Being Raped by Immigrants, Published on 16 October 2019.

[84] EUvsDisinfo, The Situation with COVID-19 in Germany Is Worsening Because of Migrants, Published on 1 December 2020.

[85] EUvsDisinfo, EU Institutions Take Away Freedom from the European Nations, Published on 15 April 2019.

[86] EUvsDisinfo, Money to Teach Children in Kindergartens Now Goes to Migrants in Germany, Published on 9 November 2019. Similar stories were promoted by the Hungarian government in 2019 when claiming the EU was planning to cut subsidies for farmers and use the money to support migrants instead. See Robinson, Olga, Alistair Coleman, and Sayan Sardarizadeh, A Report on Anti-Disinformation Initiatives, Oxford Technology and Elections Commission; Oxford Internet Institute, 2019.

[87] EUvsDisinfo, 90% of Romanian Media Is Ruled by Israeli People, Published on 28 May 2018.

[88] EUvsDisinfo, Sputnik V Vaccine Destroyed the Plans of Globalists and Judeo Masonic Forces, Published on 3 February 2021. Interestingly enough, articles about Jews seem to focus on Poland, but this may be due to external factors such as the time period studied, which included the 75th anniversary of the Auschwitz concentration camps' liberation, or to (unknown) methodology used by EUvsDisinfo.

[89] EUvsDisinfo, Who Is Afraid Of Russophobia?, Published on 25 February 2021.

[90] EUvsDisinfo, Vilifying Germany; Wooing Germany, Published on 9 March 2021.

be ripe for abuse. We found just one story about the Hungarian (and the Romanian) ethnic minority, but it was about Ukraine and not an EU Member State[91].

As for the tools employed, these stories utilise several types of disinformation discussed in Chapter 2.1, such as: clickbait headlines (e.g. an article describing crime statistics is headlined, 'Migrant violence strikes Stockholm', although the data presented do not support the title[92]); misleading framing; false context (e.g. a video showing a rush hour train in England is used to report that migrants are arriving *en masse* in Prague[93]); and completely fabricated stories (e.g. 'The pope may suggest a mosque to be built at the site of the Notre-Dame'[94]).

These Kremlin-originated articles of disinformation **build on existing tension and utilise existing stereotypes and fears in Member States' societies**. Migrants/Muslims are depicted as a threat to European identity and as criminals; Jews are attacked using age-old anti-Semitic tropes; and a private tragedy of parents losing their children to state care is presented to a Russian minority audience in Germany as evidence that Germany is 'Russophobic'. Few of the stories are completely invented; the majority seem to be framing issues in an 'alternative' way[95].

The next section turns to disinformation actions that have been collected using stakeholder interviews and desk research, reviewing a large number of NGO, state and institutional publications, recent research and news media articles.

3.2 Ethnicising the pandemic: disinformation concerning the Roma

The Roma have been subject to untrue stories, often with violent consequences throughout their history in Europe. Historical allegations have crystallised into **anti-Gypsy tropes** that are part of European folklore. However, the internet and social media, in particular, can turn outrage over these tropes very quickly into mob violence. The most notable recent case involves **an image of the Roma as 'child-snatchers'** in March 2019, after which two Roma groups in a couple of Paris suburbs were attacked by a bloodthirsty mob of 50-70 people. These people were angered by online rumours, circulating mostly on Snapchat and Facebook, that the Roma were going around in a white van 'stealing' children[96]. This claim was of course completely unfounded but, despite a police denial, the Roma had to fear for their physical safety. It is unclear who was behind these rumours although the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) representative said it appears to have been a coordinated campaign. The NGO E-Romnja confirmed that the story had also appeared in Romania, where the van was supposedly black, but the 'child-snatching' theme was the same[97].

The COVID-19 **pandemic** has also led to an increase in the levels of 'anti-gypsyism', prompting some scholars to discuss the pandemic's '**ethnicisation**', at least in certain Member States. There are reports that

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[91] EUvsDisinfo, Ukrainian Language Law Prohibits Use of Russian, Hungarian, Romanian Languages, Published on 13 June 2019.

[92] EUvsDisinfo, Migrant Violence Strikes the City of Stockholm; Authorities Ask Not to Worry, Published on 24 January 2020.

[93] EUvsDisinfo, A Video Shows a Major Influx of Migrants to Prague, Published on 01 July 2018.

[94] EUvsDisinfo, The Pope Might Suggest a Mosque to Be Built at the Site of Notre Dame, Published on 16 April 2019.

[95] However, it must be noted that the methodology employed to compile and 'debunk' these is unknown, limiting the validity of conclusions that can be drawn from them.

[96] Agence France-Presse, Roma Attacked in Paris after Fake News Reports, *The Guardian*, Published on 27 March 2019.

[97] The image of the child-snatcher plays on some very deep, universal human fear, appearing in different contexts. For instance, some very similar (and some different) stories led to over 100 instances of lynching in India between 2015 and 2019. See S. Banaji, R. Bhat, WhatsApp Vigilantes: An Exploration of Citizen Reception and Circulation of WhatsApp Misinformation Linked to Mob Violence in India, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), 2019.

this was the case in Bulgaria[98], Slovakia[99], Romania[100], Spain[101] and Italy[102]. In some Member States, politicians and other leaders were reportedly targeting the Roma. In a resolution on 25 November 2020, the European Parliament 'underlines in the context of the COVID-19 emergency, that disinformation and **sensationalised media reports** relating to the pandemic have also been used by extreme right-wing, populist groups and politicians to target minority groups, thereby contributing to anti-immigration rhetoric, which has in turn led to increased instances of racist and xenophobic hate speech, as well as discrimination'[103].

The representative from E-Romnja reported that **the Roma were scapegoated** for bringing the virus to Romania, as it is they 'who come and go'. Similar narratives were reported in Bulgaria[104] and Spain[105] where the Civil Guard was deployed to ensure that the quarantined Roma did not leave their homes[106]. In Italy, far-right parties used social media to spread disinformation about the Roma breaching COVID-19 restrictions[107]. This depiction of the Roma as bringing in infection, while invoking age-old stereotypes of dirt and illness, reportedly led to a shocking amount of online hate speech in Romania[108]. While a Romanian newspaper alleged that the Roma were immune to the virus[109], rumours also circulated about Roma communities being the epicentres of infection, prompting authorities to restrict entry to and exit from Roma settlements and neighbourhoods in Bulgaria, as well as Slovakia[110], where 6 000 Roma were sealed off in five settlements after a Roma man returning from Britain broke the mandatory 14-day self-isolation[111]. Beyond unjustly confining the Roma community, such excessive measures also had the effect of 'seemingly confirm[ing] the fake news'[112].

In summary, disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic based on longstanding stereotypes led to **the stigmatisation of Roma communities** in several Member States. In some Member States, this stigmatisation was followed by **discriminative action** against the Roma.

As signalled above by the lack of Roma-related entries in the EUvsDisinfo database and with reports identifying local far-right parties or extreme-right media as the disinformation propagators, it is highly **unlikely that anti-Roma disinformation campaigns originate from foreign actors**. This is probably due to the Roma's status as permanent underdogs in most Member States. As explained by the European Roma Rights Centre representative, 'whether Russia or anyone else are interfering is kind of academic when it comes to the Roma. You really do not need dark money funnelling ideas about disinformation campaigns about the Roma. Politicians for long decades have been quite willing to do this for their own personal gain'.

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[98] B. Rorke, More toxic than COVID? The politics of anti-Roma racism in Bulgaria, European Roma Rights Centre, Published on 8 June 2020.

[99] E. Holt, COVID-19 Lockdown of Roma Settlements in Slovakia, *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 20, No. 6, 2020, p. 659.

[100] I. Costache, 'Until We Are Able to Gas Them like the Nazis, the Roma Will Infect the Nation:' Roma and the Ethnicization of COVID-19 in Romania, Decât o Revistă (DoR), Published on 22 April 2020.

[101] P. Gay y Blasco, and M.F. Rodriguez Camacho, COVID-19 and Its Impact on the Roma Community: The Case of Spainv, Somatosphere, Published on 31 March 2020.

[102] N. Korunovska, and Z. Jovanovic, ROMA IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS, Open Society Foundations, 2020.

[103] European Parliament, Resolution on the Digital Services Act and fundamental rights issues posed, P9_TA(2020)0274, 2020b.

[104] A. Krasimirov and T. Tsolova, 2020.

[105] N. Korunovska and Z. Jovanovic, 2020.

[106] P. Gay y Blasco and M.F. Rodriguez Camacho, 2020.

[107] N. Korunovska and Z. Jovanovic, 2020.

[108] I. Costache. 2020.

[109] M. Matacha, and J. Bhabha, Anti-Roma Racism Is Spiraling During COVID-19 Pandemic, *Health and Human Rights Journal*, 2020.

[110] B. Rorke, 2020.

[111] E. Holt, COVID-19 Lockdown of Roma Settlements in Slovakia, *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 20, No. 6, 2020, p. 659.

[112] N. Korunovska and Z. Jovanovic, 2020.

3.3   Disinformation actions against migrants

As with the Roma, **migrants** also have a long history of being subjected to disinformation. Conversely, unlike the Roma, they seem to be **targeted by foreign disinformation campaigns**. One of the strangest Russian disinformation actions relates to migrants. In 2017, after the then US President Donald Trump referred to some non-existent race riots in Sweden, a Russian television crew showed up in the Stockholm suburb of Rinkeby and offered money to local migrant youths to stage a riot for the camera[113]. This, arguably, takes disinformation action to the next level, with authentic characters being hired to act out a pre-written story.

Disinformation about migrants has been found to have been weaponised in Spain during the 2019 electoral campaign. A report by activist group Avaaz about disinformation's spread on the messaging app WhatsApp found that 14 % of the stories surveyed were anti-migrant and a further 25 % contained racist, hateful content[114]. The report mentions it was not possible to tell the sources of disinformation[115], although during the same timeframe, WhatsApp's parent company Facebook removed three Spanish far-right networks spreading anti-migrant, anti-Muslim and homophobic content[116].

Some interviewees, such as the representative from Italian pro-migrant NGO Lunaria, pointed out that especially compared with the 'migrant crisis' in 2015, migrants currently receive much less of the limelight. However, some stories about them as **a threat to public health** have been reported in several Member States. During the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, a number of stories emerged in Germany about migrants being taken into the country under cover of the lockdown[117]; while Czech disinformation websites ran similar stories about migrants covertly brought into Greece from Turkey[118] and about the goal of the pandemic being to divert attention from the alleged 'real threat', migration[119]. A similar story about secretly opening the borders for migrants spread in Croatia[120].

Italy and Spain have seen their fair share of stories about infected migrants allegedly entering the country, supposedly escaping from the quarantine or purportedly infecting police officers. These stories usually featured images from earlier times and other places[121]. Similar stories about migrants not observing lockdown rules were recorded in Germany and Belgium[122]. Such findings were confirmed by the Lunaria representative, who claimed that the issue was being used as **an argument to stop immigration**. In Hungary, the government cited this alleged link between migration and the pandemic to suspend admission of asylum-seekers into transit zones on the country's southern border in March 2020[123]. These stories are similar to others about the Roma, which are based on a **fear of contamination**, metaphorical

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[113] For the full, truly bizarre story, see L.W. Bennett, and S. Livingston, The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2018, pp. 122–139.
[114] Avaaz, Whatsapp - Social Media's Dark Web: How the Messaging App Is Being Flooded with Lies and Hatred Ahead of the Spanish Elections, April 26, 2019, p.4. The report employs a somewhat questionable methodology, but it does indicate that the problem exists.
[115] Stolton, S, As Election Looms, Spaniards Are Hit by WhatsApp Disinformation Campaign, *Euractiv*, Published on 26 April, 2019.
[116] Stolton, S., 2019.
[117] AFP, CORRECTIV, Pagella Politica/Facta, Full Fact and Maldita.Es, Infodemic Covid-19 in Europe: A Visual Analysis of Disinformation. A Fact-Checking Report, 2020.
[118] Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky, Coronavirus: An overview of the Main Disinformation Narratives in the Czech Republic - Terorismus a měkké cíle, 2021.
[119] Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky, 2021.
[120] P. Vidov, Tvrdnja da Plenković u sjeni korona krize otvara granice migrantima je lažna, *Faktograf.hr*, Published on 9 April 2020 [in Croatian.]
[121] See the CoronavirusFacts Alliance Database for more details.
[122] Klein, O., How Is the Far-Right Capitalizing COVID-19?, Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, 2020.
[123] Hungary Today, Coronavirus: Hungary Suspends Migrant Entry to Transit Zone for Foreseeable Future, Published on 2 March 2020.

as well as physical. Such fears are no longer new even in the context of migrants as they were heavily leveraged during the 'migration crisis' of 2015, for instance when Hungarian police officers wore medical masks around asylum-seekers. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) representative also mentioned an example of an earlier hoax in Italy reporting that migrants had arrived with allegedly AIDS-infested clothes. It is **not possible to tell** from the information sources **where these false stories originated**, or whether they have been amplified by foreign actors.

Beyond the pandemic, a notable disinformation action weaponizing minorities and linked to Russia was uncovered in 2019 by Recorded Future's Insikt Group, a cyber threat analyst company, which named the action 'Operation Pinball'[124]. In Estonia, the operation consisted of a German-language blog post on the migration crisis, including a forged letter purportedly written by Taavi Aas, Minister of Economic Affairs and Infrastructure to Dimitris Avramopoulos, then-European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship. Although Insikt Group stopped short of saying the action was conducted by the Kremlin, a linguistic analysis confirmed that the author was probably a native Russian speaker and the action's *modus operandi* was very similar to Kremlin's methods identified by previous research. The operation was largely unsuccessful as the posts were removed from various social media sites before they could be widely shared. Nevertheless, it signals a clear effort to undermine Estonia-EU relations, create tension among Estonian officials and influence public opinion about migrants, Insikt Group concludes[125].

In February 2020 Facebook removed a network of accounts it said belonged to Russia's military intelligence services; two accounts were targeting Germany and both *inter alia* shared anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim content. They also posted content in support of the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)[126]. Similar dynamics were reported by the representative of refugee group ECRE between far-right politicians in Italy and external actors, with **pro-Kremlin disinformation media amplifying the messages of far-right politicians**. Some amplification of messages promoting Swedish far-right parties was also observed before the 2018 elections in Sweden[127]. This, of course, does not imply any kind of cooperation or coordination; malicious foreign actors may simply use far-right politicians' messages for their own goals[128] or even as 'vehicles' in disinformation campaigns by proxy. Likewise, the now-defunct far-right transnational anti-immigrant news site Voice of Europe offers an interesting case of domestic actors receiving a foreign boost. Although the site's owners were Dutch, its stories were eagerly amplified by Kremlin accounts on social media[129]. Again, this does not indicate any cooperation or conscious synergy between the two; it can simply be a case of aligning interests. Another recent example is the false information carried by German media in March 2021 that the majority of COVID-19 intensive care patients have an immigrant background[130]. While the source was a domestic tabloid, a similar story from December 2020 has been identified by the EUvsdisinfo database[131]. **These cases reveal that the Kremlin may not be the originator, but it is a disseminator and amplifier of messages that align with its interests.** Moreover, it is not always clear whether there is a link at the level of news stories between pro-Kremlin and

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[124] Recorded Future, Insikt Group, Intent to Infekt: Operation Pinball' Tactics Reminiscent of "Operation Secondary Infektion", 2020.
[125] Recorded Future, 2020, p. 2. The operation also included action in Georgia.
[126] B. Nimmo, C. François, C. Shawn Eib, and L. Tamora, From Russia With Blogs: GRU Operators Leveraged Blogs, Social Media Accounts and Private Messaging to Reach Audiences Across Europe, Graphika Report, February 2020.
[127] C. Colliver, P. Pomerantsev, A. Applebaum, and J. Birdwell, Smearing Sweden: International Influence Campaigns in the 2018 Swedish Election, London School of Economics Institute of Global Affairs, 2018.
[128] In the ECRE interviewee's example, a tweet by European politicians criticising the EU may be appealing content for malicious foreign actors to amplify.
[129] L. van der Pol, and C. van de Ven, Nederland Is Een Knooppunt in de Verspreiding van Nepnieuws [in Dutch], *De Groene Amsterdammer*, Published on 21 February 2018.
[130] Get The Trolls Out , How an Informal Conversation Was Used to Scapegoat Immigrants During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Published on 15 April 2021.
[131] EUvsDisinfo, The Situation with COVID-19 in Germany Is Worsening Because of Migrants, Published on 1 December 2020.

domestic disinformation media; it is possible that they simply perpetuate identical disinformation narratives.

Italian migrant organisation Lunaria's interviewee listed the same main narratives regarding migrants in Italy that earlier research identified: the migrants as a criminal threat, as an economic threat and as a threat for cultural identity.

3.4   Islamophobia: disinformation actions against Muslims

Although there is much overlap between disinformation activities targeting migrants and those targeting Muslims, the disinformation campaign **#stopislam** is worth discussing in its own right. Researchers have recently investigated this hashtag on Instagram[132] and Twitter[133]. It is still very much in use on both platforms; furthermore, users have published content in a variety of languages, for instance, German, Slovak, Italian, Dutch and English. The hashtag is applied to anti-Muslim memes, decontextualised images and videos purportedly showing Muslim men committing violent crimes. The picture identified by EUvsDisinfo as a Russian hoax about children in Sweden praying to Allah was also posted allegedly by a Serbian user in January 2021, although the user claims that the photograph was taken in Germany. This does not mean that the person is a Russian or Russian-paid troll, but it is possible that he amplifies a successful viral Russian message. It is also conceivable that the story identified by EUvsDisinfo as a Russian hoax was based on an already existing meme. This is an example of **the merging of** – likely – **organic and foreign-supported content**. The researchers who conducted the content analysis of posts under the #stopislam hashtag on Instagram identified the **same key narratives** that were discussed in Chapter 3.1. Moreover, the study on the Twitter hashtag shows that, although many well-intentioned people engaged with the content to refute it by creating a counter-narrative, most responses to their Tweets followed the Islamophobic message of the original posts.

The COVID-19 **pandemic** also led to **increased Islamophobia** in some Member States. An analysis of German-language extremist social media found that the largest anti-Muslim Telegram channel grew in size from 14 000 to 40 000 in just three months, between January and March 2020[134]. Anti-Muslim conspiracy theories were also registered in Germany[135].

3.5   'The newest vehicle for the oldest hatred'[136]: disinformation actions against Jews

Disinformation has been a feature of anti-Semitism since at least the Middle Ages, when blood libel stories often spread, at times leading to pogroms throughout Europe[137].

Accordingly, **anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have very deep roots**. A large-scale analysis of anti-Jewish memes in the United States between 2016-2019 and during the COVID-19 lockdown in May-June 2020 found a prevalence of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in extremist and mainstream online communities,

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[132] S. Civila, L.M. Romero-Rodríguez, and A. Civila, The Demonization of Islam through Social Media: A Case Study of #Stopislam in Instagram, *Publications*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2020, p. 52.
[133] E. Poole, E. Haifa Giraud, and E. de Quincey, Tactical Interventions in Online Hate Speech: The Case of #stopIslam, *New Media & Society*, March 2020.
[134] Guhl J., and Gerster L., Crisis and Loss of Control: German-Language Digital Extremism in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, ISD, 2020.
[135] Guhl and Gerster. 2020.
[136] P. Paresky, and J. Farmer, The Newest Vehicle for the Oldest Hatred: OPINION, *ABC News*, Published on 29 January 2021.
[137] W. Laqueur, The Changing Face of Antisemitism: From Ancient Times to the Present Day, Oxford University Press, 2006. In the 14th century, when the Black Death was ravaging the continent and nobody knew why or how it spread, Jews were found to be convenient scapegoats. Accusations of well-poisoning were followed by extremely violent retributions; violence and the plague together probably killed the majority of Jews in Central Europe at the time.

often disguised as being about a single person, such as billionaire George Soros. The researchers also found that 'Russian trolls disseminate the same anti-Jewish conspiracy memes and themes online […] as members of extremist communities, thus amplifying the antisemitic messaging'[138]. A study found very similar disinformation narratives in the USA and in the UK[139].

The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought about **an explosion of conspiracy theories** in Europe, many **with anti-Semitic undertones**. As early as March 2020, old anti-Semitic conspiracy theories were revamped to include the virus[140]. For example, Czech disinformation websites published articles about an alleged 'Zionist plot' being behind the pandemic.[141] **The same narratives have been perpetuated by pro-Kremlin media**[142]. Additionally, far-right leaders have 'hijacked' demonstrations against pandemic restrictions to display anti-Semitic messages[143]. There has also been a reported increase in anti-Semitism[144] and anti-Semitic hate crimes in Germany[145] as well as an underlying high level of anti-Semitism in the UK, fuelled by conspiracy theories about the pandemic[146].

Interestingly, the Hungarian Jewish organisation Tett es Védelem Alapítvány (TEV*)* did not see COVID-19 conspiracy theories as a problem in Hungary. TEV's representative said the topic does come up in their media monitoring, but it remains a fringe theory, very limited in reach and appeal.

3.6 #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus: disinformation actions against people with Asian background

The COVID-19 **pandemic** has brought about **an exponential rise in anti-Asian racism** across Europe. NGOs and the media have reported racist incidents targeting people who are perceived to be of Chinese background in most Member States[147]. The UK has registered a 21 % increase in anti-Asian hate crime[148]. As early as March 2020, one report found a 900 % increase in hate speech directed at Chinese people on Twitter and a 200 % increase in traffic to well-known 'hate sites'[149]. Around the same time, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) reported that extremist online communities were teeming with anti-Chinese hate speech and even calls for violence, relying on unverified footages such as one purportedly showing Chinese people spreading the virus deliberately by wiping saliva on public benches[150]. Researchers have also found that those who adopted the term 'China virus' or 'Chinese virus' were much more likely to pair it with an explicitly racist hashtag than those who used 'COVID-19' or coronavirus[151]. The interviewee

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[138] J. Finkelstein, P. Paresky, A. Goldenberg, S. Zannettou, L. Jussim, J. Baumgartner, et al., Antisemitic Disinformation: A Study of the Online Dissemination of Anti-Jewish Conspiracy Theories, Rutgers and Network Contagion Research Institute, December 2020.

[139] R. Ehsan, Weaponising COVID-19: Far-Right Antisemitism in the United Kingdom and United States, The Henry Jackson Society, 2020.

[140] Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1, ISD Briefing Papers, March 2020, p.8.

[141] Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky, Coronavirus: An overview of the Main Disinformation Narratives in the Czech Republic - Terorismus a měkké cíle, 2021.

[142] EUvsDisinfo, Disinformation Review: It's the Global Elite, Stupid!, Published on 3 December 2020.

[143] Bayer J., and Bárd P., Hate Speech and Hate Crime in the EU and the Evaluation of Online Content Regulation Approaches, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies (DG IPOL), European Parliament, July 2020.

[144] Deutsche Welle, 'Anti-Semitism in Germany Increased Due to Coronavirus Protests', Published on 1 September 2020.

[145] Deutsche Welle, 'Germany Sees Spike in Anti-Semitic Crimes — Reports', Published on 11 February 2020.

[146] Holden M., COVID Conspiracies Fuel Anti-Semitic Incidents in UK - Report, Reuters, February 2021.

[147] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Coronavirus Pandemic in the EU - Fundamental Rights Implications, 2020.

[148] J. Grierson, Anti-Asian Hate Crimes up 21% in UK during Coronavirus Crisis, The Guardian, Published on 13 May 2020.

[149] L1ght, Rising Levels of Hate Speech & Online Toxicity During This Time of Crisis, 2020; W. Laqueur, The Changing Face of Antisemitism: From Ancient Times to the Present Day, Oxford University Press, 2006.

[150] Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1, ISD Briefing Papers, 2020.

[151] Y. Hswen, X. Xu, A. Hing, J.B. Hawkins, J.S. Brownstein, and G. C. Gee, Association of '#covid19' Versus '#chinesevirus' With Anti-Asian Sentiments on Twitter: March 9–23, 2020, American Journal of Public Health, 2021, pp. e1–e9.

representing the European Network Against Racism pointed out that **anti-Asian narratives also extended beyond social platforms into traditional media**. Hate speech and even physical attacks against people with Asian backgrounds in Italy were described by the Lunaria representative. Researchers have in fact recorded a significant increase in hate crimes against Asians in Italy at the onset of the pandemic[152]. Chinese people living in France reported 'more blunt and violent manifestations of racism' than before[153]. It prompted some to start a social media campaign with the hashtag #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus ('I am not a virus'). As for its connection to disinformation, it was argued by some of our interviewees that labelling COVID-19 the 'China virus' could legitimately be classified as disinformation, given that the virus' origins are still not proven.

Foreign involvement in disinformation actions against Asians is **unclear**. Although the EUvsDisinfo database contains no relevant entry and we were unable to identify the sources, it is nevertheless possible that some of these campaigns could have received foreign backing.

3.7 Minorities as the target audience for disinformation

Albeit the core focus of this analysis concerns disinformation about minorities, stakeholder interviews and previous research have made it abundantly clear that **disinformation aiming to influence minorities** must also be addressed. **Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states and Germany have been targeted by Russian disinformation and propaganda** for decades[154]. Echoing findings in the EUvsDisinfo database (see Chapter 3.1 above), various analyses have found that Russian disinformation depicts these Member States and the EU as anti-Russian, weak and polarised, in contrast with the image of a strong, prosperous Russia[155] which protects Russians no matter where they live[156]. Such narratives have emerged in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst **the Kremlin's well-documented efforts to discredit the EU's management of this crisis while portraying its own pandemic response as successful**[157]. Russian minorities in the Baltic states have been subject to **much vaccine propaganda** with claims that the 'Western' vaccines, unlike the Russian Sputnik V, are ineffective. According to Lithuanian human rights NGO Manoteises, this may have contributed to the **slow vaccine uptake by the Russian community** in Lithuania. Indeed, an analysis of anti-vaccination Facebook pages and YouTube channels in Lithuania found that two-thirds were in Russian[158]. In Latvia, a survey found that those 'who mainly consume Russian media content are the most likely group to say they won't get vaccinated'[159]. In particular, 60 % of people in Latvia whose primary news source is Russian sites said they would definitely or probably not be vaccinated[160].

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[152] G. Dipopp, G. Grossman, and S. Zonszein, Locked Down, Lashing Out: Situational Triggers and Hateful Behavior Towards Minority Ethnic Immigrants, SSRN Scholarly Papers, *Social Science Research Network*, 2021.

[153] S. Wang, X. Chen, Y. Li, C. Luu, R. Yan, and F. Madrisotti, 'I'm More Afraid of Racism than of the Virus!': Racism Awareness and Resistance among Chinese Migrants and Their Descendants in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic, *European Societies*, Vol. 23, No. 1, February 19, 2021, pp. 721–742.

[154] A large body of non-academic literature is devoted to this issue. See, for example, T.C. Helmus, E. Bodine-Baron, A. Radin, M. Magnuson, J. Mendelsohn, W. Marcellino, A. Bega, and Z. Winkelman, Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe, Rand Corporation, 2018; E. Lucas, and P. Pomeranzev, Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter-Strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe. A Report by CEPA's Information Warfare Project in Partnership with the Legatum Institute, Center for European Policy Analysis, 2016.

[155] United States Senate, Putin's Asymetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security. A Minority Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, January 2018.

[156] This is the so-called compatriot policy; See for example Helmus et al, 2018.

[157] For example R. Jozwiak, EU Monitors See Coordinated COVID-19 Disinformation Effort By Iran, Russia, China, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, Published on 22 April 2020.

[158] E. Puriņa, (ed), D. Repečkaite, E. von Schaper, H. Raudsik, and S. Bērziņa, Who Spreads Vaccine Lies in the Baltics?, Re:Baltica, 2021.

[159] Purina (ed), et al., 2021

[160] Purina (ed) et al., 2021

As for other minorities, the UK media have reported rumours in Muslim WhatsApp groups and social media pages alleging that vaccines contain alcohol[161], ingredients derived from pork or even aborted human foetus cells[162]. The BBC reported **fears among minorities of being used as 'guinea pigs' for vaccine testing**, a claim the representative of anti-racist group European Network Against Racism (ENAR) has also come across. Such fears have deep historical roots, as black and marginalised communities have previously been subject to medical experiments without their consent. As the representative of ENAR explained, this is fertile ground for anti-vaccine campaigns.

Additionally, more than one interviewee reported that **many Roma follow the wildest conspiracy theories** linking Microsoft founder Bill Gates to COVID-19 and worrying about microchips being implanted into people. In Germany, the representative of anti-racist group IDA told the authors that **disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine** 'causing infertility' **was spreading among refugees**, along with the aforementioned conspiracy theories about Bill Gates and microchips. While such conspiracy theories are not Roma and migrant-specific, their widespread adoption in these communities signals distrust, or at least scepticism towards the authorities. According to the IDA interviewee, these conspiracy theories are present in society at large, but due to rather understandable scepticism, **refugees are more susceptible** to them. This **distrust of authorities** is even more pronounced in another version of the conspiracy theory mentioned by the E-Romnja representative. Some Roma believe that this alleged chip would allow the police to control them, rather than Bill Gates as claimed in the 'mainstream' version of this theory.

A further kind of Kremlin-linked disinformation campaigns targeting minorities has been extensively reported in the United States, where since at least 2016 Russia has exploited the grievances of racial minorities **to increase societal tension** and **undermine the appeal of democracy**[163]. Campaigns microtargeting racial minorities disseminate emotive, often incendiary messages[164] about racial injustice, weaponising existing societal problems. Taking this a step further, the messages often suggest that the institutions cannot be fixed, and people should simply disengage[165]. The 2020 US Presidential elections saw social media campaigns microtargeting African Americans discouraging them from voting[166]. While the authors have not identified reports of similar cases in any EU Member State, **the Russian diaspora in Germany was shown to have been targeted by the Kremlin** ahead of the 2017 elections. The Russian-language media depicted far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in a positive manner, while providing an unbalanced, negative image of German Chancellor Angela Merkel[167]. Russian and pro-Kremlin bots amplified AfD messages, while Russian social media platforms such as *Odnoklassniki* – similar to Facebook – featured pro-AfD content and also displayed signs of bot use[168]. On a more general level, the Kremlin has been found to try to influence votes in a number of Member States (e.g. the Brexit vote, the 2017 French elections and to some extent the 2019 European elections)[169].

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[161] A. Forrest, Fake News Causing Ethnic Minorities to Reject Covid Vaccine, NHS Official Warns, *The Independent*, Published on 15 January 2021.

[162] J. Etutu and J. Goodman, Covid Vaccines: Misleading Claims Targeting Ethnic Minorities, *BBC News*, Published on 28 January 2021.

[163] S. Spaulding, D. Nair, and A. Nelson, Why Putin Targets Minorities, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018.

[164] W. J. Aceves, Virtual Hatred: How Russia Tried to Start a Race War in the United States, *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2019, p 75.

[165] S. Spaulding et al, 2018.

[166] S. Bond, Black And Latino Voters Flooded With Disinformation In Election's Final Days, National Public Radio, Published on 30 October 2020.

[167] A. Applebaum, P. Pomerantsev, M. Smith, and C. Colliver, "Make Germany Great Again": Kremlin, Alt-Right and International Influences in the 2017 German Elections, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), December 2017. This is important because according to the report, these media outlets have significant reach in the Russian minority audience.

[168] Applebaum et al., 2017.

[169] J. Bayer et al., 2019; J. Bayer, et al., 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been used by Islam extremist groups to spread disinformation. The pandemic has been framed by some of these groups as **God's punishment of his enemies**[170]. Al-Qaeda issued a statement calling the pandemic God's punishment 'for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims by Western governments'[171]. ISIS propaganda on the virus has shifted along with the outbreak's severity in different parts of the world, from describing the epidemic as God's punishment on China for its treatment of Uyghur Muslims, to God's wrath of Western 'crusaders' against Muslims[172]. While not reported in Europe, in some parts of the world such as Nigeria, the temporary closure of mosques to contain the virus has been 'framed as evidence of anti-Islam sentiments'[173]. There are concerns about the **pandemic's potential impact on radicalisation**[174].

4   The impact of disinformation campaigns

One of the goals of this study is to analyse the impact of disinformation campaigns. Yet, as mentioned in Chapter 2, measuring impact in social sciences is extremely difficult. This is certainly true for the impact of hate speech and disinformation. Firstly, research is restricted by the lack of data. Secondly, as a more general issue, causality is always complex and multifaceted. The social context, the historical background and the economic situation are just a few of the numerous variables that affect the impact of every social phenomenon. In empirical non-experimental studies, **identifying a direct impact of disinformation on behaviour has proven** so **elusive** that it has been likened to 'searching for a unicorn'[175].

This being said, some observations about the impact of disinformation can be made. As discussed in Chapter 2.2, the structure of the public sphere has undergone a significant transformation over recent years. Built on participatory culture, the new media ecosystem has largely done away with traditional gatekeepers. Yet, early optimism regarding the internet as heralding a golden age of participatory democracy has been replaced by worries of societies splintering into factions. Due to the reasons outlined in Chapter 2.2 concerning filter bubbles, microtargeting and audience fragmentation, societies are facing dissolution of the shared ground that is needed for democratic debate. Coupled with the fact that algorithmic content curation prioritises simplistic, emotionally laden messages, this has given rise to the post-truth society where 'facts' as such matter less than emotions and former arbiters of truth are hit with a crisis of trust. In the post-truth era, disinformation goes beyond spreading particular lies for particular goals. Rather, **post-truth disinformation aims to undermine 'the theoretical infrastructure that makes it possible to have a conversation about the truth'**[176]. Disinformation can muddy reality until there is no longer a common understanding of truth's existence. **Democracy**, which **relies on a well-informed public**[177], is adversely affected. Moreover, in the new public sphere, **private companies have become gatekeepers**, often with opaque policies and practices, but with enormous potential impact on freedom

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[170] Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, How Extremist Groups Are Responding to Covid-19, 2020.

[171] A. Hanna, What Islamists Are Doing and Saying on COVID-19 Crisis, Wilson Center, Published on 14 May 2020.

[172] A. Basit, The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Opportunity for Terrorist Groups?, Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2020, pp. 7–12.

[173] W. Avis, The COVID-19 Pandemic and Response on Violent Extremist Recruitment and Radicalisation, K4D Helpdesk Report 808, Institute of Development Studies, 2020, p.3.

[174] Avis.

[175] L. Curini, and E. Pizzimenti, Searching for a Unicorn: Fake News and Electoral Behaviour, in S. Giusti and E. Piras (eds.), *Democracy and Fake News: Information Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics, Politics, Media and Political Communication*, Routledge: London and New York, 2021, pp. 77–91.

[176] V. Bufacchi, Truth, Lies and Tweets: A Consensus Theory of Post-Truth, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2021, pp. 347–361.

[177] S. Lewandowsky, U.K. H. Ecker, and J. Cook, Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the 'Post-Truth' Era, *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, Vol. 6, No. 4, December 2017, pp. 353–369.

of speech[178]. If a private company in a near-monopoly position can decide who participates in public debate, this can directly impact **equality and the rule of law**.

Looking more specifically at the impact of disinformation and hate speech about minorities, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to some direct consequences. With disinformation campaigns blaming them for the virus' spread, the Roma have had to endure overly restrictive, **discriminative measures** in a number of Member States. This directly impacts their fundamental rights as well as equality and the rule of law. As a result of disinformation, the Roma have also experienced an **increase in hate speech and discrimination**. The same is true for Jews, Muslims and for people of Asian backgrounds. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) names human dignity and non-discrimination as core principles of the European Union, which have both been violated in these cases. This is true of disinformation and hate speech campaigns about minorities beyond circumstances surrounding the pandemic. Information manipulation campaigns contributing to increased hatred against minorities produce a **direct negative impact on the fundamental right to human dignity**, respect for which is provided for in Article 2 TEU.

The extent to which this impact is actual or potential varies considerably, depending on the minority group in question and, more generally, geographical influences. A recent study by the Spanish Ministry of Equality linked the spread of disinformation and racist content to a rise in discrimination in housing and education, hitting migrants and the Roma in Spain particularly hard[179]. The Roma are heavily affected in other Member States, too. Online hate speech against them often makes its way offline in violent confrontations, according to the European Roma Rights Centre's representative. In a Rome suburb during 2019, following an online campaign against the local Roma, neofascist groups surrounded a shelter housing an extended Roma family, burnt dustbins and trampled on their food. While it is not clear exactly how the violence was instigated, whether it was disinformation or simply hate speech, **hate crime is a serious real-world impact** to which minority groups are vulnerable. Similarly, the Lunaria representative stated that disinformation about migrants spreading the virus is dangerous because it can lead to protests at local level.

However, the Hungarian Jewish organisation TEV's representative stated that his organisation, which monitors the media, has not found a direct link between disinformation and anti-Semitic hate crime. Even in cases where they did identify distorted information, for example to do with Israel, they have not seen any direct effect. According to TEV, anti-Semitism is more prevalent in Hungary than in many western European countries, yet the number of anti-Semitic hate crimes are lower. More research is needed to shed light on the reasons behind this apparent paradox. Researchers also encountered this issue while studying hate speech on French social media. They found almost no anti-Semitic hate speech, but anti-Semitic offences in France were nevertheless on the rise[180]. **Disinformation can certainly contribute to a climate of hostility**, or 'a sphere of hate,' to quote German anti-racist group IDA's interviewee. This can reinforce prejudices and negative attitudes. At the same time, establishing causation is difficult. While an association has been found between online hate speech and offline hate-fuelled crime, researchers argue that online hate is not a sole cause but 'only part of the formula, and that local level factors […] and other ecological level factors play key roles' in hate crime[181]. Additionally, hate crimes are often preceded by hateful

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[178] In the aftermath of the storming of the US Capitol, Twitter and Facebook/Instagram banned then US President Donald Tump. While many consider the step belated, others warn of the unintended consequences, both in principle and in practice. This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

[179] C-L. Laudette, Discrimination Worsens in Spain, Far-Right and Fake News Largely to Blame, *Reuters*, Published on 25 January 2021.

[180] C. Gatewood, C. Guerin, J. Birdwell, I. Boyer, and Fourel, Cartographie de La Haine En Ligne: Online Civil Courage Initiative France, ISD, 2019.

[181] M.L. Williams, P. Burnap, A. Javed, H. Liu, and S. Ozalp, Hate in the Machine: Anti-Black and Anti-Muslim Social Media Posts as Predictors of Offline Racially and Religiously Aggravated Crime, The British Journal of Criminology, Vol. 60, No. 1, 2020, pp. 93–117.

expressions online. For example, before the deadly attack on the synagogue in Halle (Germany) in 2019, the suspect posted an (English-language) 'manifesto' online, and then live-streamed the attack on gaming platform Twitch[182].

Experts have also shown that online disinformation 'can lead to detrimental infringements of dignity offline'[183]. This was confirmed by our interviews, which showed that on a personal level, disinformation's impact on human dignity can be devastating. Beyond the issue of physical violence, the interviews revealed a **loss of self-esteem** for many[184].

In addition to affecting those who are the victims, **disinformation campaigns against minorities and migrants also have a general adverse impact on tolerance and solidarity**. By attacking a particular social group and spreading distorted negative information about it, such actions, whether domestic or foreign-backed, reinforce the existence of an 'out-group', an 'other', towards whom the 'in-group' shows no solidarity.

The impact of disinformation targeting minorities as an audience is also of significance. As discussed in Chapter 3.7, Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns aim to discredit 'Western' COVID-19 vaccines among Russian minorities in the Baltic states and Germany. Disinformation about vaccines and the pandemic in general is also prevalent among the Muslim/migrant communities and the Roma. This causes direct bodily harm; for example, only 9 % of the Roma in Hungary plan to be vaccinated, despite the pandemic ravaging their communities[185]. Thus, **the 'infodemic' impacts minorities' fundamental rights**, including the right to life, right to physical and mental integrity and right to free and informed consent in the field of medicine[186].

Beyond directly affecting the health of people belonging to minorities, Kremlin-linked disinformation campaigns aiming at Russian communities in Member States also try **to undermine social cohesion**. Fostering a Russian group identity against the shared national identity and depicting Member States as 'Russophobic,', these operations aim to sow distrust towards Member State governments and authorities. This directly threatens **the rule of law and democracy**. Furthermore, with the prominent Kremlin narrative of portraying the EU as failing, weak and being on the brink of collapse[187], Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns try **to undermine the appeal of democracy itself**[188] for the Russian diaspora.

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[182] M. von Hein, and E. Felden, German Synagogue Attack Suspect's Online Extremist Circles Revealed, *Deutsche Welle*, Published on 10 November 2019.

[183] D. Frau-Meigs, Addressing the Risks of Harms Caused by Disinformation: European vs US Approaches to Testing the Limits of Dignity and Freedom of Expression Online, in Loreto Corredoira, Ignacio Bel Mallen, and Rodrigo Cetina Presuel (eds.), *The Handbook of Communication Rights, Law, and Ethics*, John Wiley & Sons, 2021, pp. 135–147.

[184] The representative of E-Romnja, who works with teenagers, said that Roma children in schools are called names and told that 'the Roma steal children'. Roma teenagers also encounter racism on social media. 'There is a lot of hatred going on these pages', she said, emphasising that the effect on self-esteem is significant. Additionally, when people in powerful positions say racist things, it encourages the general public to display racist attitudes more openly. The CCIB interviewee mentioned loss of self-confidence and anxiety as the impact disinformation stories have on Muslim individuals. The ECRE representative talked about how deeply disinformation affects refugees emotionally: 'You come here with extreme traumas, and then you are confronted with the constant alienation, the constant 'other' role[…] it also prevents you from participating in your own narrative'.

[185] M. Dunai, 'Falling like Flies': Hungary's Roma Community Pleads for COVID Help', Reuters, Published on 31 March 2021.

[186] European Union, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Official Journal of the European Union 2012/C 326/391 of 26 October 2012.

[187] EUvsDisinfo, 5 Common Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Narratives, Published on 2 April 2019. China has propagated a similar narrative in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic about the EU being inefficient.

[188] United States Senate, Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security. A Minority Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 2018, p. 99.

Whether this impact is actual or potential can of course be debated. On the one hand, surveys show that Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia have weaker pro-Western attitudes than the majorities[189] and that '[t]he main language of Euroscepticism in Latvia and Estonia is Russian'[190]. On the other hand, scholars do not find Russia to have a strong impact on Russian minorities in the region[191].

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 3.7, the USA has seen Kremlin-run campaigns **microtargeting** racial minorities to discourage them from voting. No similar case has been reported in Europe[192], but the possibility clearly exists. Representing a direct interference with the electoral process, this certainly produces a potentially negative impact on democracy. It has also been argued that microtargeting, not specifically regarding minorities but in the wider context of political campaigning, violates freedom of information under Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU[193]. Microtargeting entails the collection of personal information, which may have relevance for the protection of personal data, established in Article 8 of the Charter[194].

Activists also reported on disinformation's '**chilling effect**' for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which may want to avoid being associated with any group being vilified in the media. NGO work is dependent on public attitude and hence working with stigmatised groups can threaten the NGO's image. Disinformation can also have a real impact on their ability to help particular groups. The Czech Helsinki Committee (CHC) mentioned refugees as an example: 'There was a lot of disinformation about them, how dangerous they are, that they raped someone or destroyed something, they were ungrateful for their help, or that their religion is a threat to our culture, norms and traditions. This affects voters who will then tell politicians that they do not want public funds to be spent on migrants'. The Czech Helsinki Committee's respondent also mentioned extremist efforts to stop people from helping vilified groups, referring to a now-defunct Czech neo-Nazi website, which had listed organisations and activists that stood up for these groups in need and labelled them 'public enemy'. The interviewee also interpreted this website as disinformation because it twisted the mission of NGOs and activists into work, which carried a very bad image.

An additional 'chilling effect' is produced by **instrumentalisation of the term 'disinformation'** or, more often, 'fake news' along with its use as a label **to delegitimise journalists**[195] **and dissent**[196]. As the Czech Helsinki Committee representative stated, 'in some countries, if you disagree with the government, you

[189] M. Kaprāns, and I. Mierina, Ideological Polarization in Baltic Societies. A Cross-National Survey Report, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia, 2019.

[190] S. Denisa-Liepniece, A Case of Euroscepticism: Russian Speakers in Latvian and Estonian Politics, in Aldis Austers and Kārlis Bukovskis (eds.), *Euroscepticism in the Baltic States: Uncovering Issues, People and Stereotypes*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LLIA), 2017, pp. 69–87.

[191] U. Bergmane, Fading Russian Influence in the Baltic States, *Orbis*, Vol. 64, No. 3, 2020, pp. 479–488.

[192] As discussed in Section 3.7, AfD appeared to be supported by Russian propaganda in the Russian-German community during the 2017 elections campaign, and it performed better in the elections in areas with a denser Russian population. Yet, other factors probably also played a role; no causal line can be drawn from the propaganda to the elections results.

[193] M. Brkan., EU Fundamental Rights and Democracy Implications of Data-Driven Political Campaigns, *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, Vol. 27, No. 6, 2020, pp. 774–790. As this article explains, the legal situation is more complex and the Court of Justice of the EU has yet to engage with the issue.

[194] A substantial body of literature analyses the issue. See for example: T. Dobber, R. Ó Fathaigh, and F.J. Zuiderveen Borgesius, The Regulation of Online Political Micro-Targeting in Europe, *Internet Policy Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4,2019.

[195] J. L. Egelhofer, and S. Lecheler, Fake News as a Two-Dimensional Phenomenon: A Framework and Research Agenda, Annals of the International Communication Association, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2019, pp. 97–116.

[196] M. Hameleers, and S. Minihold, Constructing Discourses on (Un)Truthfulness: Attributions of Reality, Misinformation, and Disinformation by Politicians in a Comparative Social Media Setting, Communication Research, 2020.

get labelled as a *disinformator*.' This actual impact on freedom of expression is an issue, which has received much scholarly attention of late, given particularly the rise of populism[197] and harassment of journalists[198].

Finally, while it is extremely difficult to measure how attitudes are influenced by disinformation and propaganda explicitly, a number of studies do offer some indirect indications. For instance, a recent investigation found the key variable to be trust. This work aimed at linking macro- and micro-level factors with attitudes towards migrants by conducting a complex analysis of data from the European Social Survey and statistical data about Member States. In fact, '[t]rust, both in terms of how much trust people have in their fellow citizens and how much trust they have in the major institutions of the state seems to be at the core of the feeling of safety that allows acceptance of and solidarity with migrants'[199]. This corresponds with macro-level findings that social cohesion and a perception of corruption in any given country form key predictors of attitudes towards migrants. Since **disinformation** is capable of undermining trust in public institutions, **it can possibly be linked with changes in levels of acceptance and solidarity towards migrant communities.**

5 EU and Member State action against disinformation

5.1 Brief overview of the relevant EU policies

Since EU level legislation along with policies to counter disinformation[200] and hate speech[201] have been discussed at length elsewhere, this study provides only a brief overview. Respect for human rights, including the rights of persons to belong to minorities, is enshrined in **Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union**[202]. The **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)** contains a number of provisions to combat discrimination[203]. The **Charter of Fundamental Rights** of the European Union protects human dignity and bans '[a]ny discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation'[204]. The **Racial Equality Directive** of 2000 prohibits discrimination, and the European Commission has promised to report on its implementation in 2021[205]. In September 2020, the EC **Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025** was also presented[206].

In addition to these core principles and more closely linked to the topic of this analysis, the main hate speech legislation in the EU is **Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA** of 28 November 2008 on Combating Certain Forms and Expressions of Racism and Xenophobia by Means of Criminal Law. Based on this, the

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[197] Hameleers and Minihold, 2019; K. Farhall, A. Carson, S. Wright, A. Gibbons, and W. Lukamto, Political Elites' Use of Fake News Discourse Across Communications Platforms, International Journal of Communication, Vol. 13, 2019.

[198] J.E. Relly, Online Harassment of Journalists as a Consequence of Populism, Mis/Disinformation, and Impunity, in Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, Routledge, 2021, pp. 178–187.

[199] V. Messing, and B. Ságvári, Looking behind the Culture of Fear: Cross-National Analysis of Attitudes towards Migration, Friedrich Ebert Stifüng, 2018.

[200] J. Bayer, N. Bitiukova, P. Bárd, J. Szakács, A. Alemanno, and E. Uszkiewicz, Disinformation and Propaganda – Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law in the EU and Its Member States, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union (DG IPOL), European Parliament, 2019.

[201] J. Bayer, and P. Bárd, Hate Speech and Hate Crime in the EU and the Evaluation of Online Content Regulation Approaches, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies (DG IPOL), European Parliament, 2020.

[202] Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union.

[203] Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

[204] European Union, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Official Journal of the European Union 2012/C 326/391 of 26 October 2012.

[205] European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Union of equality : EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025, COM(2020) 565 final, 2020a.

[206] European Commission, 2020a.

European Commission agreed with major IT companies in 2016 to sign the **Code of Conduct** on countering illegal hate speech online. In 2017, the Commission issued guidelines for platforms on implementing this Code of Conduct[207], followed by the EC Recommendations on measures to tackle illegal content online in 2018[208]. As for disinformation, the European Commission issued a **Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach** in 2018, complete with an Action Plan and leading to the **Code of Practice on Disinformation**, signed by major platforms and IT companies in 2018. This voluntary document establishes self-regulatory standards to fight disinformation. In the **European Democracy Action Plan** in December 2020, the Commission announced it was reviewing the Code of Practice and would issue guidance in the spring of 2021 on how to strengthen the Code of Practice and improve the monitoring of its implementation[209]. Furthermore, to counter disinformation and interference originated abroad, the **EEAS East StratCom Task Force** was established in 2015, with a focus on Kremlin-linked disinformation and propaganda. The Task Force's flagship project is the EUvsDisinfo database which monitors the media, compiles, analyses and debunks disinformation that can be linked to Russia. A Task Force for the Western Balkans and a Task Force for the South have also been established[210], but as of yet there is little public information on their activities, although this role is expected to grow[211].

Both Codes are self-regulatory, with the usual benefits and disadvantages of this approach. On the upside, the non-mandatory Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online represents only a minor interference with the right to freedom of speech, while on the downside it lacks constitutional guarantees[212]. Implementation of this Code is being tested through **regular monitoring exercises**, which keep showing improving results. Yet, monitoring reports do not include any qualitative data, implying that the public can learn how quickly the platform has removed content, but cannot find out what that content comprised and whether it was illegal or not. Without such important information, any public evaluation of the platforms' progress is impossible.

The Code of Practice on Disinformation is more problematic, probably because the limits of hate speech are less blurred than those of disinformation. Most **platforms outsource fact-checking**, which is probably better than internal vetting, but the platforms are still criticised for their choice of fact-checkers. In addition, platform interference with fact-checkers' work is periodically reported, primarily with regard to Facebook[213]. Some Member States are also blind spots for Facebook's fact-checking. For example, the company has no cooperation with fact-checkers in Bulgaria[214] and Hungary has also only recently been included in the fact-checking programme, with a single person dedicated to the task[215].

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[207] European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach, COM/2018/236 final, 2018a.
[208] European Commission, Commission Recommendation (EU) 2018/334 of 1 March 3 2018 on measures to effectively tackle illegal content online (C(2018) 1177), 2018.
[209] European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions On the European Democracy Action Plan. COM/2020/790 Final. 2020d.
[210] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan against Disinformation. JOIN(2018) 36 Final, 2018.
[211] K. Berzina, N. Kovalcikova, D. Salvo, and E. Soula, Annex A.: European Efforts to Counter Disinformation, European Policy Blueprint for Countering Authoritarian Interference in Democracies, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019.
[212] J. Bayer, and P. Bárd, Hate Speech and Hate Crime in the EU and the Evaluation of Online Content Regulation Approaches, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies (DG IPOL), European Parliament, 2020, p. 53.
[213] A. Pasternack, Facebook Quietly Pressured Its Fact-Checkers over Climate and Abortion Posts, Fast Company, Published on 20 August 2020.
[214] K. Bontcheva, Bulgaria: The Wild, Wild East of Vaccine Disinformation, EU DisinfoLab, Published on 8 April 2021.
[215] P. Licskay, Facebook's Fact-Checking Program Reached Hungary -- Is This the End of the Fake News Era?, Daily News Hungary, Published on 3 March 2021.

That said, **removing or reducing access to content that does not break any law is problematic from the perspective of freedom of speech**. Moreover, such measures may disproportionately affect minorities due to 'biases potentially embedded in the notification system by users and third parties, as well as … in the automated moderation tools used by platforms'.[216] The mechanism has also been criticised for not being transparent and offering no remedy to contest the decision to remove content. The Commission is planning to address these issues in the planned guidance to the Code of Practice and in the forthcoming **Digital Services Act (DSA)**, put forward by the Commission in December 2020. Once adopted, the DSA will introduce new regulations to curb disinformation on social media platforms[217]. The DSA **aims to improve not only the mechanism for removing illegal content but also general transparency, while at the same time ensuring the protection of fundamental rights**. In terms of disinformation, it introduces co-regulation for risk mitigation.

The Commission argues for **EU level regulation by citing the internet's cross-border nature** and the ineffectiveness of national legislation in enforcing the uniform protection of rights[218]. A study of regulatory efforts in Finland found that platforms displayed a lack of attention to national initiatives due to the power imbalance between a small country and a large corporation[219]. An unpublished analysis by EU disinformation monitors also found that tech companies are not motivated to act quickly in smaller media markets[220]. A recent journalistic investigation confirmed this finding[221].

5.2 Possible responses: civic initiatives in Member States

As documented elsewhere, the issue of disinformation has been in the public eye throughout Europe at least since 2014, the year of Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea. Hence, numerous initiatives have been launched by civil society as well as some for-profit media organisations in an effort to counter it. The majority of these initiatives are not minority-specific, but rather general; comprising fact-checking and media literacy initiatives, public awareness campaigns, science communication and investigative journalism projects. Among these initiatives, **fact-checking** is the most prevalent. A previous study has identified 70 fact-checking projects currently running in Member States and several that have received EU funding[222]. Yet, fact-checking is inherently problematic, particularly when it comes to hate speech and emotionally loaded issues that frequently characterise minority-related disinformation campaigns. **Fact-checking works only with verifiable/falsifiable statements** and, as shown in Chapter 3, much disinformation about minorities falls outside the realm of 'fact-related' claims. Additionally, there are certain doubts in scholarly literature about fact-checking's efficacy[223]. Some interviewees have noted this

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[216] European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document Impact Assessment accompanying the Document Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market For Digital Services (Digital Services Act) and Amending Directive 2000/31/EC. Part 1/2. SWD (2020) 348 Final, 2020d, p.63.

[217] European Commission. The Digital Services Act: ensuring a safe and accountable online environment, 2020b.

[218] European Commission, 2020d.

[219] N, N, Schia, and L. Gjesvik, Hacking Democracy: Managing Influence Campaigns and Disinformation in the Digital Age, *Journal of Cyber Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2020, pp. 413–428.

[220] R. Jozwiak., EU Monitors See Coordinated COVID-19 Disinformation Effort By Iran, Russia, China, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Published on 22 April 2020.

[221] J.C. Wong., Revealed: The Facebook Loophole That Lets World Leaders Deceive and Harass Their Citizens, *The Guardian*, Published on 12 April 2021. In the interviews conducted for this analysis, an interviewee expressed doubts about the EU even having enough clout *vis-à-vis* the largest online corporations to implement changes.

[222] For example, the European Digital Media Observatory is a hub for fact-checkers; the WeVerify project is developing tools to help verify and fact-check online content, such as a plug-in for browsers to analyse visual material.

[223] Experiments have repeatedly shown that fact-checks or corrections can change people's mind about the veracity of statements, or lack thereof, but have minimal effect on their behaviour. For instance, even when people understand that their favourite political candidate has lied, they would still vote for him or her (see the discussion on the post-truth era in the Introduction). See also S. Lewandowsky, and S. van der Linden, Countering Misinformation and Fake News Through Inoculation and Prebunking, *European Review of Social Psychology*, 2021, pp. 1–38.

problem, saying it is not effective to respond to disinformation with facts because people engage with the issues on an emotional level[224].

Moreover, several experts argue that not only is fact-checking ineffective, but it may also contribute to the salience and spread of any debunked claim[225]. Extensive literature on fact-checking discusses a potential '**backfire effect**', although results are so far inconclusive.

Some scholars argue that the problem goes beyond repeating a particular debunked claim when fact-checking. Fact-checkers 'may reinforce the specific frame of reference, which unavoidably leads to feeding the news wave, also reinforcing the newsworthiness of the news theme and consolidating racial hoaxes as plausible truths'[226]. Moreover, as discussed above, **engagement may be abused by malicious actors to enhance the visibility of controversial content**, thereby increasing social polarisation. This was shown in the context of the #stopislam campaign[227], as was echoed by some of the activists interviewed for our study, a few of which have unintentionally amplified hate speech by engaging with it[228]. Likewise, it has been observed that certain COVID-19 related disinformation stories in France appeared only in fact-checking stories and warnings about the stories. This had the unintended effect of amplifying disinformation that was otherwise not spreading[229].

Recognising the limits of fact-checking and engaging with hateful content, some researchers argue for '**pre-bunking'**, that is, the pre-emptive refutation of disinformation. With roots in the psychological theory of 'inoculation', the proactive approach of pre-bunking aims to neutralise false information pre-emptively by 'exposing people to a refuted form of the message beforehand[230]. Pre-bunking includes an explicit warning about the anticipated disinformation and its refutation. Today, the focus is often not on individual examples of disinformation, but rather on the techniques of manipulation[231]. Newly released research shows that such 'pre-bunking treatment' was effective against both Islamophobic and radical Islamist propaganda[232]. However, another study concluded that inoculation worked only in the short run[233]. More research is needed to see what strategy is effective. Yet, some advocates in the field do see some potential in pre-bunking as well as the idea of **filling an information void**. The lack of information has come up in

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[224] 'If someone is ready to believe that migrants come with their clothes infested with HIV, we will not convince him or her that this is not true by citing the facts', mentioned the ECRE representative. The IDA respondent suggested that the way to counter disinformation is to reach the person's emotions and the fears that underpin them. The ENAR representative shared the view that many fake narratives are successful because they build on long-standing concepts and deeply embedded ideas. Without challenging the underlying foundations, disinformation continues to be effective.

[225] See for example: N. Walter, J.R. Cohen, L. Holbert, and Y. Morag, Fact-Checking: A Meta-Analysis of What Works and for Whom, Political Communication, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2020, pp. 350–375.

[226] A. Cerase, and C. Santoro, From Racial Hoaxes to Media Hypes: Fake News' Real Consequences, in Peter Vasterman (ed.), From Media Hype to Twitter Storm, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, pp. 333–354.

[227] E. Poole, E.H. Giraud, and E. de Quincey, Tactical Interventions in Online Hate Speech: The Case of #stopIslam, New Media & Society, 2020.

[228] The representative of ECRE stated that when people try to correct disinformation, they just enlarge the message: 'The more we respond, the more we give them a platform, and this is exactly what they want'. Likewise, the representative of ENAR pointed out: 'what fake news relies on is attention'. Lunaria and CCIB are also selective in regard to newspapers with which they engage in debates. The ERRC representative mentioned one instance where they took action and that eventually raised the profile to the extent that there was a resultant overall increase in hate speech.

[229] I. Boyer, and T. Lenoir, Information Manipulations Around Covid-19: France Under Attack, Institut Montaigne and ISD, 2020.

[230] J. Cook, S. Lewandowsky, and U. K. H. Ecker, Neutralizing Misinformation through Inoculation: Exposing Misleading Argumentation Techniques Reduces Their Influence, PLOS ONE, Vol. 12, No. 5, 2017.

[231] S. van der Linden, J. Roozenbeek, and J. Compton, Inoculating Against Fake News About COVID-19, Frontiers in Psychology, Vol. 11, 2020. An innovative way to achieve this goal is the online game Bad News and its COVID-19-focused version Go Viral!, developed by Cambridge University, Dutch media agency DROG and the UK government.

[232] S. Lewandowsky, and M. Yesilada, Inoculating Against the Spread of Islamophobic and Radical-Islamist Disinformation, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2021.

[233] T. Zerback, F. Töpfl and M. Knöpfle, The Disconcerting Potential of Online Disinformation: Persuasive Effects of Astroturfing Comments and Three Strategies for Inoculation against Them, New Media & Society, 2020.

more than one interview as contributing to the spread of disinformation. The Czech Helsinki Committee interviewee sees this as a crucial point for intervention, arguing that in these areas of information shortage, it is important to be proactive. In her opinion, 'if you encounter disinformation first, you are less likely to accept the truth'.

Experts have long argued that providing the fact is not enough; **counter-narratives** must also be put forward[234], a point reiterated by some of the stakeholders interviewed. Indeed, one task for the EU's East Stratcom Task Force is to develop 'communication products and campaigns focused on better explaining EU policies in the Eastern Partnership countries'[235]. Civic initiatives also exist in this field.

Media literacy projects make up another tool in the fight against disinformation. Media literacy education, more recently referred to as information literacy[236], has a long history and established traditions in the EU. Recognising its importance, the revised **Audiovisual Media Services Directive** requires Member States to 'promote and take measures for the development of media literacy skills'[237]. A study by the European Audiovisual Observatory identified 547 media literacy projects in Member States during 2016; 46 of the 145 initiatives which were examined in more detail focused on 'intercultural dialogue', that is combating hate speech and radicalisation[238]. This issue also came up in the stakeholder interviews conducted for this project. For instance, the representative of Jewish organisation TEV argued for providing information using education and opening up the community.

Demonetisation, which implies stripping disinformation websites of their revenue by removing advertisements, has been shown to work for example in Slovakia[239]. It is also part of commitments made by signatories to the Code of Practice on Disinformation and one aspect of the Code that the Commission explicitly aims to improve with its planned Guidance[240]. This was also a topic recently discussed at an INGE hearing where Co-Founder and Executive Director of Global Disinformation Index Clare Melford estimated that disinformation news sites targeting Member States earn USD 76 million annually from advertising revenues[241]. Although it is only of limited value against foreign state actors, as they are often neither motivated nor constrained by financial factors, it can still contribute to the reduction of disinformation against minorities initiated by foreign players by cutting off local amplifiers.

5.3 Some successful initiatives

1. Get the Trolls Out!

Get the Trolls Out! is a campaign led by the Media Diversity Institute in conjunction with seven other organisations in various Member States to combat religion-based hate speech, be it Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Christian sentiments, or attacking any other religion. This campaign, launched in 2015,

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[234] See for example: C. Bjola, and J. Pamment J., Digital Containment: Revisiting Containment Strategy in the Digital Age, *Global Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2016, pp. 131–142.

[235] EEAS, Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force, European External Action Service webpages, December 2018.

[236] For an explanation of the different types of literacies, see M.S. Jones-Jang, T. Mortensen, and J. Liu, Does Media Literacy Help Identification of Fake News? Information Literacy Helps, but Other Literacies Don't, *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2021, pp. 371–388.

[237] European Union, Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) in view of changing market realities', Official Journal of the European Union, L 303/69, 2018.

[238] European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO), Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28, 2016.

[239] J.M. Mintal, The Business of Minisnformation: Slovakia - Snake Oil Spills Onto the Web, Center for Media, Data and Society Central European University, 2019.

[240] European Commission, Roadmap to the Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation, 2021.

[241] Melford, Clare, Monetising Disinformation in the EU. Presentation by Clare Melford European Parliament - INGE, presented at the European Parliament INGE Committee Hearing on 'Interference through advertisement', 2021.

provides a wealth of material in an accessible manner, publishing in English, German, French, Greek and Hungarian. In addition to their 'Trollbusters' media monitoring service, guides and longer analyses, the campaign also produces cartoons, short videos featuring 'Inspector Hate Speech' and awards the Troll of the Month 'prize' for public figures who said or did something particularly outrageous in terms of anti-religious hate speech. Member organisations also submit official complaints to authorities when needed[242].

2.   #hardlyrocketscience

Explaining their new proposed EU Migration Pact, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles tries to reach out to the wider society with a campaign that involves short videos of hip-hop music and dancers, shared on social media. Musicians rap about concepts such as the non-refoulment principle thereby increasing the general accessibility of abstract issues to those who are not well-versed in 'legalese'. The slogan is 'human rights compliance, hardly rocket science'[243].

3.   Roma Rights Defenders

Roma Rights Defenders is a programme run by ERRC in Albania, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine to 'challenge digital antigypsyism'. This programme features volunteers in each country reporting to social media platforms any case of anti-Roma hate speech they encounter on them, based on a template of hate speech created by the platforms themselves. They also log each case they report. Their goal is to be able show these platforms what content, offensive according to their own rules, they fail to remove. This will feed into Facebook's work of redesigning its algorithm for removing hate speech in Europe. It is also important because Facebook has been shown to have poor quality moderation in less used languages. According to ERRC, their volunteers have logged hundreds and thousands of instances since the programme was launched last autumn[244].

4.   Stop Funding Fake News

This project is being undertaken by a small, informal group publicly criticising companies whose ads are placed on disinformation websites. The goal is to demonetise disinformation sites. This group takes credit for the closure of anti-immigrant website Voice of Europe, which stopped operating due to a lack of revenue once advertisements had been removed from its site. In order to achieve their goal, the group tweets screenshots of a site's hateful content and the advertisements placed on it tagging the advertiser, who is most likely unaware of any presence on such a website[245].

5.   Expertalia

An initiative of the Belgian Association of Professional Journalists, this project aims to diversify the group of experts appearing in the media. When a journalist needs to consult or interview an expert, through Expertalia he or she can find one who has a minority background or is a woman[246].

6.   #IAmHere International

This Swedish initiative comprises an international network of 150 000 activists in 14 countries, which aims to counter disinformation and hate speech by 'counter-speak.' Its members scan social media and news media's comment boards and intervene in hateful conversations. Instead of engaging directly with trolls, they post their own nuanced messages or counter disinformation with factual information. Other members

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[242] Source: www.getthetrollsout.org
[243] Source: stakeholder interview, https://hardlyrocketscience.org/
[244] Source: stakeholder interview, www.errc.org
[245] Source: www.stopfundingfakenews.com. Example of a tweet of theirs: 'Voice of Europe publishes articles designed to whip up hate against migrants and refugees. … @Budweiser @BudweiserUK do you endorse this?'; Twitter, 28 May 2020.
[246] Source: stakeholder interview, https://expertalia.be/

of the team then 'like' these messages, increasing their visibility and simultaneously pushing hateful comments further down in the comment section[247].

6   Conclusions

This study set out to assess the impact of foreign disinformation targeting ethnic, racial and cultural minorities in the EU. Desk research findings and most of our interviews point to foreign disinformation being much less significant than previously thought, in terms both of 'foreign' and 'disinformation' aspects. Regarding **disinformation**, information manipulation and propaganda today go well beyond spreading 'fake news'. Just as facts are losing some of their importance in politics, so are 'fake facts' in propaganda. Instead of fabricating stories, the focus of malicious actors has shifted to aggravating existing social conflicts with emotive statements and non-verifiable value claims as well as amplifying domestically created messages.

As to the **foreign aspect**, beyond difficulties in identifying the actors behind disinformation campaigns, some minority groups such as the Roma seem not to be targeted by foreign operators. In contrast, migrants and Muslims certainly are subject to foreign disinformation campaigns. Yet even in these cases we observed an amalgamation of foreign and domestic disinformation. Foreign and domestic actors often share the same messages at the same time, making it impossible to tell which came first. This makes it much more difficult to identify malicious foreign actors and distinguish them from those who disseminate disinformation out of their own convictions. It has also been argued that 'many of the disinformation tactics pioneered by Russia have been domesticated [and] replicated'[248], further blurring the lines. Moreover, studies investigating, for example, disinformation before the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, found that homegrown, rather than foreign disinformation dominated[249]. It is possible that the COVID-19 infodemic led by Russia, China and Iran[250] has changed these trends. However, this was not revealed by our study.

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[247] Source: https://iamhereinternational.com
[248] M. Birnbaum, Europe Was Worried Russia Would Mess with Its Elections. Now It Has Other Fears, Washington Post, Published on 21 May 2019.
[249] Avaaz, Far Right Networks of Deception: Avaaz Investigation Uncovers Flood of Disinformation, Triggering Shutdown of Facebook Pages with Over 500 Million Views Ahead of EU Elections, Avaaz Report, May 2019.
[250] R. Jozwiak, EU Monitors See Coordinated COVID-19 Disinformation Effort By Iran, Russia, China, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Published on 22 April 2020.

7   Recommendations

In December 2020, the European Commission announced plans to strengthen the Code of Practice on Disinformation. It also proposed a Digital Services Act. These plans already capture some of the recommendations below.

7.1   Changing the media ecosystem

Although it is clear that social media platforms are not fully responsible for the current predicament, the existing media ecosystem, as shown in Chapter 2.2, is highly conducive to disinformation.

- *Algorithmic transparency*: moving away from the current black box-type algorithms to more transparent mechanisms. Modifications to the platform's content recommendation algorithm and content curation algorithm should also be made transparent. This should be included in the Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online.

- *Content curation/recommendation*: platforms should be required by the Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online to modify algorithms so as to de-prioritise extreme content. This is particularly relevant for hate speech as well as radicalisation.

- *Transparency in microtargeting*: although there are some steps in this direction, they come from civic initiatives, rather than platforms. As examples from the USA show, microtargeting presents a particularly significant potential danger for minority-related disinformation. This issue should be regulated at EU level.

- *Demonetisation*: the European Commission should require more concrete commitments from platforms to demonetise disinformation compared with current requirements in the Code of Practice. Civic initiatives show that demonetisation is effective. This would not primarily concern foreign actors, but it would help cut off local amplifiers.

- *Support for local journalism/citizen journalism projects*: successful EU projects to develop local community media as a tool against disinformation should continue and be expanded to include minorities.

- *Data collection*: research has been hindered by the lack of data. The EU should require platforms to provide researchers with access to relevant platform data, so as to gain a better understanding of the processes which contribute to the dissemination of disinformation.

- Addressing the larger problem of the current post-truth disinformation sphere requires far-reaching changes beyond the scope of this analysis. Teaching critical thinking skills, supporting quality journalism, strengthening science education are important steps forward. Another measure could be to put the issue on the agenda for the general public. Relying on academic expertise but in an accessible language, conferences and awareness campaigns using the public media could be organised to discuss epistemological questions such as what makes a claim 'true'.

7.2   Increasing societal resistance

- The EU and Member States should continue to support fact-checking programmes and the development of fact-checking tools. At the same time, bearing in mind the limitations of fact-checking, research should be conducted into potentially more effective methods such as pre-bunking.

- The erosion of trust in institutions and fellow citizens caused partially by disinformation has a significant negative impact on the feeling of solidarity towards minorities. An important way forward is to work on rebuilding this trust by having a more proactive, rather than reactive communication policy. For example, pre-bunking gives more agency to news consumers than debunking, which may give some

consumers the impression that they are being instructed what to think 'from above'. Media literacy programmes for groups susceptible to disinformation should continue and be given more focus. Research can help identify the groups that are particularly vulnerable in this regard. The European Commission already has some programmes in this field; those that are effective should continue.

• Media literacy programmes for the majority society should cover information on how disinformation about minorities is used for political manipulation.

• Specific training programmes for journalists should be introduced. Although much disinformation about minorities spreads via memes and social media posts, legacy media also play a role. Beyond that, the media help shape public discourse concerning minorities. Several interviewees said that they are attempting to work with journalists to improve coverage of minority-related issues. Specific training programmes could be more effective and on a larger scale. Such programmes should be supported by the EU or Member States. In addition to training programmes for journalists on how to cover minority-related news, training should instruct journalists on how to recognise disinformation about minorities so as not to inadvertently perpetuate it.

7.3   Minorities

• The planned strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation and Digital Services Act should both include specific protection for vulnerable groups, including minorities. Social media platforms should hire as content moderators and fact-checkers representatives of minorities who are familiar with the local context and language. This is essential as hate speech often uses coded language that algorithms and 'outsiders' cannot decode. Since platforms play a primary role in spreading disinformation about minorities, this could cut down the amount of such disinformation in circulation.

• Under plans announced by the Commission, platforms may be required to improve the visibility of authoritative information based on transparent standards. Minorities should be allowed to have an input into authoritative information about them.

• To counter negative disinformation, minorities should foster their own, positive counter-narrative in the media. Initiatives to increase minority visibility in the media should be supported. For example, the Commission (DG Connect) is funding a project to produce collaborative media reports of minority- and majority-language media professionals[251]. Such projects should be supported by Member States or the EU.

• Successful EU programmes should continue to train young people from minority backgrounds on how to create their counter-narrative.

• Civic initiatives to diversify the pool of experts appearing in the media to include members of minorities who are experts in their field (instead of journalists relying on experts from the majority) should be supported by Member States.

• Member States should create minority-specific media literacy programmes to help minorities resist disinformation. As the study shows, minorities are not just subject to but also targets of disinformation, although probably to a lesser extent than in the USA. Yet, the danger is certainly present.

• Mindful of the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States should provide essential information (for example, about vaccines) in minority languages. The shortage of accessible information leads to misunderstandings and is one factor underlying the disinformation landscape.

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[251] See https://newsspectrum.eu/

- In light of the pandemic, Member States should have health mediators for minority communities. They should be trusted members of communities who can help counter COVID-19 disinformation.

- To better deal with hate speech, platforms should be required to report illegal hate speech to the relevant authorities instead of just removing it.

- The process of removing content should be transparent and offer users a mechanism to contest the decision.

7.4   Addressing the foreign origin of disinformation

- Platforms should collect and make available information on the originators and amplifiers of disinformation and hate speech.

- Platforms should clearly label accounts that belong to government officials, spokespersons, diplomats. Twitter has started doing this and other platforms should follow suit.

- Platforms should clearly label accounts that belong to official and state-affiliated media outlets. Some such as Facebook, Google (on YouTube) and Twitter are already doing this, but it should be expanded. The rules for labelling should be transparent.

- Platforms should be required to verify the identity of groups/persons running political or issue-based advertisements. Some platforms are already doing this. The posts should be clearly labelled as advertising and should clearly mark the person/group who funded the ad. While Twitter has banned all political advertising, this measure is not recommended here.

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9   Annex: List of interviewees

The stakeholders interviewed for the study were representatives of the following organisations.

Organisation	Country / EU
Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en Belgique asbl (CCIB)	Belgium
E-Romnja (NGO for Roma women)	Romania
European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)	European Union
European Network Against Racism (ENAR)	European Union
European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC)	European Union
Information and documentation centre for anti-racism work e.V. (IDA)	Germany
Lunaria Associazione di Promozione Sociale	Italy
Manoteises (NGO for human rights)	Lithuania
Tett es Védelem Alapítvány (TEV; Jewish NGO)	Hungary
The Czech Helsinki Committee (CHC)	Czech Republic