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## Introduction

The days of winning battles and wars solely on the battlefield are long gone. Warring parties are gaining a significant advantage in the realm of information warfare. The information domain can bring significant advantages or cause a significant harm to one side, with no regard to the actual happening on the battlefield. As the conflicts become more complex, there is a bigger need to win the war not only on the field but also in the people's 'heads and minds'. The main aim of this article is to analyse Russian and Chinese influence operations and provide a comprehensive overview of the EU's institutional response to disinformation and narrative campaigns. The first part of this paper introduces the conceptual framework for understanding narratives and disinformation in the light of hybrid warfare. Secondly, it discusses the various ways in which state actors, notably Russia and China, are influencing the EU with their own narratives and disinformation campaigns. Finally, the paper analyses the EU's policies and responses to these information attacks, while critically examining the structures and mechanisms EU is implementing to tackle this issue.

## Narratives and disinformation - A conceptual framework

Undeniably, a major challenge for modern democracies is misinformation, which is described by the European Commission (2019) as false or misleading information created and spread for financial gain or intentional deception of the public. "The main problem with misinformation, however, comes from deliberate falsehoods. This is the content that, in the Anglo-Saxon world, is properly called 'disinformation'. That is voluntary lies" (Sadaba & Salaverria, 2023). Disinformation can also be defined as a purposeful lie with the objective to deliberately deceive and influence people. As seen by the COVID-19 outbreak, the conflict in Ukraine, and the recent elections in the Western world, such as EU elections this summer, it appears that false narratives and disinformation campaigns are becoming the most prevalent tool for information warfare against the EU. These operations, whose sole purpose is to exert influence, have the potential to be just as damaging as active military operations since they seek to subvert, distort, and undermine the fundamental principles of the "Western system" and its guiding values, such as freedom of speech and media, as well as democratic principles (Bachman et al., 2023). The war narrative is descriptive by nature, anchored in discussions about the manifestation of so-called hybrid warfare. Within those discussions, the primary goal is to share each actor's own version of events and, with that, influence the targeted audience (Bachman et al., 2023).

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In this sense, a ‘war narrative’ is an existential and ideological vision of why ‘we’ should enter war, designed to convey the why, what, and how of the conflict and legitimise the action (De Graaf et al., 2015). Within the sphere of hybrid warfare, these narratives are often used to provide the passion and motivation needed to engage in acts of mutual destruction (Hammack, 2011). Narrative research has grown significantly in the last 35 years or more, and the concept has grown to signify many different things. Ideologies, broad research paradigms, whole-life narratives, folktales, falsehoods, passages from interviews, and historical assessments can all be mentioned (Kvernbekk & Hansen, 2017).

This paper will use the aforementioned broad assessment of ‘narratives’ in order to avoid being caught in a conceptual debate. The western world is in the unaccustomed position of being way behind its adversaries in the field of weaponised narratives, and it has a lot of catching up to do (Defense One, 2017). While the West has traditionally been successful in using soft power for its own interests, in this new playing field, the advantage is on the other side (Ahmed et al., 2022). It is becoming obvious that the basic notion of ‘Western values’ does not have the appeal it once had, and the collective West needs to develop its own narratives, if they were to compete with leading powers in this domain, Russia and China.

## **EU as a target of other states – Russia and China on the offence**

The problems associated with the dissemination of disinformation and false narratives online have been recognised and verified globally in recent years through several high-profile events, including multiple election campaigns in the West, Brexit, the COVID-19 epidemic, and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. A number of those events are correlated with the EU, and the effects of those events are visible and severe: undermining institutional legitimacy, distrust in media and deeper polarisation of citizens (Durach et al., 2020).

### *A. Russian influence*

In the past ten years, European countries have been facing massive disinformation campaigns coming from Russia, e.g. Brexit, Nordic countries facing huge ‘Russophobia’ campaigns, major elections being targeted (France, EP), or social media campaigns. Russian information warfare is one of the most important security issues concerning the EU, as it is carefully made and tailored for each country (Cizik, 2018). Sweden’s Security Police amplified psychological measures of Russian information operations which consists of “targeted efforts to influence public opinion, to undermine trust in national leaders and to influence the decision-making and security policy decision” (Sapo, 2016).

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One of the biggest narratives Russia is using, especially while dealing with Nordic countries, is based on Russophobia. Allegations on the anti-Russian phobia is employed to deter and discredit its critics (Schmidt-Felzman, 2018).

When observing the tools Russia uses in disinformation campaigns, the most evident is mainly alternative media. Alternative media refers to radio channels, online magazines and social media dissemination of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hoaxes among the public, carefully implemented in the native tongue of the country being aimed at (Cizik, 2018). One of the major aims of pro-Russian propaganda is to erode the public's trust in independent media outlets. The goal of their narratives is not to convince everyone that their interpretation of events is the right one, but rather to destroy and distort the trust in Western media (Gvineria, 2018).

An analysis of Russian narratives and disinformation campaigns within the EU and the goals of those campaigns shows the following: Campaigns are aiming at creating, or deepening, internal divisions within member states, at propagating distrust towards EU and hindering institutional capabilities, at meddling with the election processes and at popularising pro-Russian narratives within the far right or populist electors (Zadorozna and Butuc, 2024).

#### A. *China's influence*

The way the EU perceives China and addresses China-related issues has undergone a profound change in recent years, with the COVID pandemic marking a starting point (Pavlicevic 2022). At the outset of the COVID crisis, the EU recognised and labelled China as a source of disinformation whose goal is to undermine Western democracies and trust in their institutional operability (Politico, 2020).

One could argue that China's disinformation and narrative influence within the EU is part of a broader strategy to expand its geopolitical power, manage its image, and counter criticism. A novel aspect of China's propaganda efforts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been the usage of disinformation tactics in a copy of Russia's hybrid operations playbook. Globally, China seems to intentionally target the same audience, disillusioned with the West, displaying strong similarities with Russian anti-West narratives (Karaskova et al., 2020). In the previous year, Meta announced the dismantling of a huge network disseminating disinformation and propaganda on behalf of China. It was stated that the main focus was to mend the unidimensional perceptions around the region of Xinjiang, where the Ughur minority is persecuted, and combat the 'false' Western narrative of the lack of human rights and freedom within the region (Le Monde, 2023).

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An interesting characteristic of Chinese policymakers is that they are not afraid of change. After the initial launch and aggressive months of wolf warrior diplomacy, where even the Ambassador to France had to be summoned and reprimanded (Reuters, 2021), China has quickly backed off and stopped using this aggressive narrative and turned back to its usual 'benevolent' tactics (Liu, 2024). While China is not as active as Russia in this domain, their strategy of presenting themselves as a 'benevolent hegemon' in these times of deep polarisation might have appeal within Europe. Chinese policy of presenting themselves as a 'benevolent hegemon' can further fragmentise Europe, as there are several countries within the EU that are enjoying economic partnership with China and enabling this soft power approach to establish roots within the Union.

### **EU's institutional response – Structures and policies**

According to academics, the EU is a normative force whose ability to influence ideas about what constitutes "normal" in international relations is one of its greatest assets. Scholars have contended that a normative power must adhere to specific discursive criteria, such as presenting others in a modest and non-aggressive manner (Wagnsson & Hellman, 2018). Europe has understood the danger of disinformation campaigns since the beginning, with the European Council at its meeting conclusion in 2015 highlighting the need for creating and implementing the Action Plan on strategic communication. In the preface of the European elections in 2019, the EU adopted the "EU Action Plan Against Disinformation" (Kouroutakis, 2020). The Action Plan provides a comprehensive strategy to combat disinformation, with an emphasis on four main areas: better disinformation detection, coordinated responses to disinformation, collaboration with online platforms and industry, and lastly, public awareness-building (Kouroutakis, 2020).

Situated within the EEAS Directorate for Strategic Communication and Foresight are the Task Forces (STRAT.2) and the EEAS Strategic Communication Division. In order to facilitate the implementation of EU foreign policy and safeguard its values and interests, the Division is in charge of tackling foreign disinformation, information manipulation, and interferences. Its mandate also includes information environment analysis (EEAS, 2021). In the General Affairs Council Conclusion (2019), the work of EEAS StratCom to tackle disinformation campaigns and foreign narratives influence has been divided into several working strands, such as Pro-active communication and awareness raising, support to independent media, as well as the early detection of disinformation campaigns.

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Another division, the East Stratcom Task Force (ESTF) exposes Russian narratives and attacks on the European Union, its Member States, and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood by spreading awareness of pro-Kremlin disinformation, information manipulation, and meddling with institutional capacity (EUvsDisinfo, 2023).

While the EU still has not implemented a specific Task Force to combat China's influence, a complex network of mechanisms and structures are implemented to combat the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interferences (FIMI). Rapid Alert System (RAS) on disinformation is the structure built to enable joint activities with EU institutions and Member States. There is also a comprehensive framework and methodology for the systematic collection of FIMI. Finally, EEAS, together with the Commission and Member States, is continuously working on strengthening EU's Toolbox to tackle FIMI (EEAS, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the information domain plays an important role in modern day conflicts. Disinformation and narrative campaigns are painting a picture far away from the battlefield, a picture whose objective is to exert influence on the targeted audience. Therefore, the understanding of battlefield outcome becomes deeply intertwined to the predominant narrative. In this light, this article provides a conceptual framework for understanding disinformation and narrative campaigns. One of the principal aspects of this paper was the analysis of Russian and Chinese campaigns against the EU. It touches upon various strategies used by Russia and China, with clear objectives to diminish trust in EU's institutions, fragmentise European society and reduce EU's institutional capability. Another key aspect of this paper is the EU's comprehensive response to these threats. In the final section, I attempted to provide an overview of EU's policies, structures and mechanisms to counteract threats coming from the East. While the institutional response has been visible and effective, there is still a lot of work to be done. For now, the EU appears as only a reactive actor in the information domain, with a lot of potential to further develop into a proactive actor, which will be able to fully combat the major powers in this domain, Russia and China.

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