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DISINFORMATION, DEMOCRACY, AND ISSUES OF STABILITY AND SECURITY

WHAT CHALLENGES DO THE SAHEL AND EUROPE SHARE ?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the globe, disinformation has today become a major test for democracies: it weakens their institutions, strains social cohesion and distorts the conditions of public debate. This report by the Timbuktu Institute and the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences sheds light on the mechanisms of a threat that feeds on social divides, political distrust and geopolitical rivalries. What is at stake, in this sense, goes beyond the mere circulation of false information. It touches on citizens' trust and on their ability to distinguish facts from narratives designed to shape their perceptions and representations.

In the Sahel, deteriorating security, political transitions, sovereigntist discourse and power strategies all provide fertile ground for manipulation operations. In Europe, such operations exploit social anxieties, tensions over immigration and distrust of national and European institutions. While their manifestations differ, these dynamics follow a common logic: information operations draw their strength from pre-existing grievances and discourses, which they amplify and redirect to serve political or geopolitical interests.

This convergence calls for moving beyond a strictly technical reading of disinformation. The circulation of misleading content alone cannot explain its influence. That influence also depends on the local relays that spread such content, on the vulnerabilities they exploit and on the credibility they gain among populations. Consequently, exclusively repressive responses risk missing their target, and may even weaken the very freedoms they claim to defend. Countering information manipulation therefore requires strengthening prevention capacities without unduly restricting the pluralism of public debate.

With this in mind, this report advocates closer cooperation between Europe and Africa, based on information sharing, stronger monitoring and early-warning mechanisms, coordination with digital platforms and support for independent media. Media literacy, fact-checking and the protection of fundamental freedoms are also essential levers. It is indispensable to consolidate the institutions and civil society without which no fight against disinformation can prosper in the long run. This necessity must be matched by a more fundamental requirement: making information resilience one of the pillars of democratic resilience.

INTRODUCTION

That democracies in every corner of the world are beset by a crisis of trust of unprecedented scale is hardly open to dispute. At a time when conflicts extend into digital spaces and the control of perceptions has become an attribute of power, this observation resonates with particular force. It is in this sense, and with renewed urgency, that disinformation has emerged as an issue that can no longer be regarded as a passing anomaly or a mere problem of "fake news". This is a structural challenge that affects the very conditions under which democracy functions, such as the formation of an informed public opinion and trust in representative institutions. In other words, it contributes to building narratives that steer perceptions, exacerbate antagonisms and weigh on the legitimacy of institutions.

In the Sahel and West Africa, aspirations to sovereignty, the deteriorating security situation and distrust of political authorities and foreign partners fuel narratives that external and local actors help shape and amplify. Disinformation thus unfolds in a context of military transitions, terrorist violence and a shrinking media and political space, where it accompanies the reshaping of alliances and fuels intercommunal antagonisms. Information has thus become, with particular acuity, a field of confrontation where geopolitical rivalries, influence strategies and where domestic political divides intersect. In Europe, it grafts itself onto the polarisation of societies, the crisis of legitimacy of mainstream governing parties and the rise of populism and the radical right. Moreover, foreign information interference campaigns exploit economic anxieties, migration tensions and partisan divisions to weaken trust in institutions and democratic processes.

In both contexts, the potency of the phenomenon lies less in the invention of falsehoods than in their capacity to take root in pre-existing representations and to mobilise prevailing discourses. In this sense, however, disinformation cannot be understood as an exclusively exogenous threat. Foreign interference finds relays within the societies it targets, while restrictions on media pluralism and the political instrumentalisation of the fight against false information can heighten the very vulnerabilities they claim to combat.

Furthermore, digital platforms, their recommendation mechanisms, and the possibilities offered by generative artificial intelligence reinforce this dynamic further still. The question is therefore twofold: how, on the one hand, can coordinated manipulation of information be prevented without restricting civil liberties, and, on the other, how can the resilience of societies be strengthened without reducing the response to a series of technical or institutional measures?

Complementing techno-centric approaches, this report adopts a perspective that cross-references dynamics observed in two geographical areas. It thus rejects two overly narrow readings: one that reduces disinformation to a technological pathology that platform regulation alone could cure, and one that treats it as an exclusively exogenous threat imported by hostile powers. It therefore sets out to examine how disinformation, far from being the mere product of information disorder, constitutes a structural threat to political stability and democratic institutions, and to what extent the responses tested on both sides can inform an interregional approach. This report analyses the mechanisms of disinformation in the Sahel and West Africa and their effects on political stability, security, social cohesion and democratic processes, from the perspective of challenges shared between the Sahel/West Africa and Europe. In addition, it identifies the main lessons that could inform a regional approach and makes recommendations to States, regional organisations, digital platform operators and civil society actors.

I. DISINFORMATION AS A DRIVER OF INSTABILITY AND DEMOCRATIC EROSION IN THE SAHEL AND WEST AFRICA

"Almost all the misfortunes of life come from the false ideas we have about what happens to us," wrote Stendhal in his *Œuvres intimes*. More than two centuries later, this reflection retains particular resonance at a time when control over narratives and perceptions remains a stake of power. In the Sahel and West Africa, disinformation is today a major factor undermining political stability, social cohesion and the security of States. In a context marked by a growing number of political transitions and intensifying terrorist violence, the region's information ecosystems have become prime arenas of confrontation, where manipulated narratives and influence campaigns are deployed, intersect, and clash.

West Africa is a space of growing information competition in which several dynamics overlap: rivalries between external powers; the restriction of domestic media and political space in the name of "patriotic journalism"; an information war in which terrorist groups such as JNIM and the Islamic State in the Sahel take part; and the instrumentalisation of electoral processes, including in coastal States. While a regional response is taking shape around fact-checking and counter-disinformation networks, it remains fragile in the face of the growing sophistication of influence operations, now reinforced by advances in generative artificial intelligence and the spread of *deepfakes*.

The Timbuktu Institute's work on the issue[1] has brought to light a recurring sequence in disinformation processes in the region. Divisive content circulates on WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok or Telegram, polarises communities already strained by insecurity, helps delegitimise States, regional organisations (ECOWAS, AU, etc.) or international partners. This content then contributes to an environment conducive to identity-based withdrawal, the shrinking of civic space and the legitimisation of regimes born of coups d'état.

Structural information vulnerability

The conditions for information fragility are all present on the African continent. According to the African Union, Africa has some 400 million young people aged 15 to 35. West Africa has one of the youngest populations in the world and has rapidly adopted social networks and encrypted messaging apps. Critical media literacy, however, remains insufficient. In countries with low digital literacy, UNESCO has shown that unverified content circulates faster than duly verified and documented facts. Where traditional media are perceived as partisan or controlled, trust paradoxically shifts to social networks[2] where disinformation takes root more easily.

Disinformation discourse relies in part on exploiting the negativity bias of communities among whom claims of sovereignty, denunciations of neocolonialism or rejection of the French presence echo pre-existing representations in the Sahelian and West African political space. This predisposition to pay more attention to negatively charged narratives allows the Russian disinformation system to operate by playing on emotions such as frustration and despair[3] linked to economic and social issues. In practice, Russian media such as Russia Today and Sputnik prioritise particularly sensitive social issues and harness anger to designate the West, especially France and the United States, as the main cause of instability and poverty. The Cameroonian television channel *Afrique Média*, reputed to be close to

1 Timbuktu Institute (2026), *Algorithmes en guerre. Comment l'IA générative rebat les cartes du conflit malien*, https://timbuktu-institute.org/media/attachments/2026/09/15/des-algorithmes-en-guerre-comment-lia-gnrative-rebat-les-cartes-du-conflit-malien1.pdf

2 Reuters Institute, Digital News Report 2023, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023

3 Vasyliuk, Stanislav. "Russia's Information Warfare in Africa: Influence Operations in the Sahel." Journal of Strategic Security 19, no. 1 (2026), pp. 78-92. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.19.1.2610.

Russia, thus uses emotional language that draws directly on frustration, for example by denouncing the inaction of foreign missions in the face of the spreading terrorist threat. Simplifying the dynamics of a complex conflict makes it possible to produce a narrative in which Russia appears as a partner capable of curbing insecurity.

In the months following the 2020 coup d'état in Mali, Russian media set about delegitimising the French military presence, portraying it as a neocolonial fact. In early 2023, an animated video depicting French soldiers as zombies, and another showing a French rat looting a house, were circulated on social networks[4]. Denouncing neocolonialism allows Moscow to shift the focus and screen its own ambitions of influence, at the very moment when Russian aggression against Ukraine resembles a revisionist and neo-imperial war[5].

These vulnerabilities are compounded by the systematic shrinking of the media space. After the coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023), the AES countries successively suspended RFI, France 24, TV5Monde, the BBC, AFP and several other outlets. It should also be noted that Western media are accused of engaging in disinformation by the transitional regimes, which see them as an extension of "Western and neocolonial propaganda". In May 2026, Niger banned nine international media outlets[6], replaced the Higher Council for Communication with a National Observatory and suspended the Maison de la Presse. In Mali, the High Authority for Communication tightened its measures at the end of 2025, relying on laws on cybercrime and "national security ". In Burkina Faso, critical journalists have been forcibly conscripted and sent to the front to fight armed groups. The phenomenon seems to extend beyond the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States. In Senegal, an April 2025 order had required 381 outlets to cease operations for regulatory non-compliance[7] and, more recently, in Guinea, France 24 was banned from broadcasting in mid-September[8], after a presenter described Mamadi Doumbouya as a "putschist president".

The hybrid co-construction of influence narratives

The Russian disinformation ecosystem in sub-Saharan Africa rests on an organisation that is both vertical and horizontal, allowing it to adapt to local contexts. Rather than acting as a centralised broadcaster, Russia inserts itself into pre-existing information networks and combines three categories of actors[9] : state and para-state structures (RT, Sputnik, etc.), unofficial and improvised actors to which certain functions are delegated, and local relays that pick up and adapt the narratives. The system developed by the Wagner galaxy, with the *Lakhta* project, particularly its troll farms, was gradually integrated into the Russian state apparatus following the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023. The *African Initiative* news agency extends this logic by bringing together media outlets, bloggers, activists and local influencers. A network of news sites used to amplify *African Intelligence* content among African audiences was also exposed by Meta in August 2024[10]. This set-up sought to distil propaganda content within a broader and seemingly ordinary flow of information, illustrating the diversification of influence techniques.

4 La Dépêche (2023), *Afrique : zombies, rats... dans des vidéos délirantes, le groupe russe Wagner est présenté comme le pourfendeur de la présence française*, https://www.ladepeche.fr/2023/01/19/afrique-zombies-rats-dans-des-videos-delirantes-le-groupe-russe-wagner-est-presente-comme-le-pourfendeur-de-la-presence-francaise-10934172.php

5 de Tinguy, Anne. "L'invasion de l'Ukraine, une guerre néo-impériale trente ans après l'effondrement de l'URSS". Anne de Tinguy (ed.). Regards sur l'Eurasie. L'année politique 2022, Les Etudes du CERI no. 266-267 (2023), pp. 4-11. HAL Id: https://hal.science/hal-04088010v1

6 ARTICLE 19, "Niger: Lift the Ban on International Media and Protect Freedom of Expression ", https://www.article19.org/fr/resources/niger-lift-the-ban-on-international-media-and-protect-freedom-expression/

7 Deutsche Welle, "Liberté de presse au Sénégal : médias, Bassirou, code de la presse ", https://www.dw.com/fr/libert%C3%A9-de-presse-senegal-medias-bassirou-code-de-la-presse/a-72410867

8 Le Monde (2026), "En Guinée, la chaîne France 24 interdite de diffusion après qu'un présentateur a qualifié le chef de l'Etat, Mamadi Doumbouya, de « président putschiste »", https://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2026/09/17/en-guinee-la-chaine-france-24-interdite-de-diffusion-apres-qu-un-presentateur-a-qualifie-le-chef-de-l-etat-mamadi-doumbouya-de-president-putschiste_6776426_3236.html

9 Audinet, Maxime. (2025). "La stratégie d'influence de la Russie en Afrique subsaharienne : réseau d'acteurs et posture anticoloniale". Revue Défense Nationale, 882(7), 91-99. https://doi.org/10.3917/rdna.882.0091

10 SGDSN, Viginum. (2025). "African Initiative : de la diplomatie publique aux opérations d'influence numériques ".https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250612_TLPCLEAR_VIGINUM_FCDO_EEAS_Rapport_Technique_African_Initiative_FR.pdf

This structuring has been accompanied by a gradual hardening of narratives that are an integral part of Russia's influence strategy. Initially focused on presenting Russia as an alternative to Western partners, the messaging has shifted towards a more frontal denunciation of France and the Western powers. In the Sahel, narratives around sovereignty and decolonisation have thus gradually incorporated accusations of supporting terrorism, of destabilisation or of preparing a military intervention. In Niger, the head of State, General Tiani, notably took up some of these talking points by accusing France of preparing a military invasion. In Mali, officials have accused Paris of supporting terrorist groups. The gradual hardening of Russian discourse thus appears inseparable from its appropriation by local authorities, who themselves help to legitimise and amplify these narratives.

However, the disinformation ecosystem cannot be reduced to the action of foreign powers or a handful of relays. It brings together a plurality of actors (governments, oppositions, activists, influencers, journalists, digital media, transnational networks, armed groups, etc.) whose motivations differ but whose narratives sometimes converge. The agency of local actors plays a central role in this set-up. Figures such as Kémi Séba and Nathalie Yamb have thus largely embraced the themes of African sovereignty and the fight against neocolonialism while being associated with networks and entities linked to Russia[11]. Likewise, the difficulty in studying disinformation also lies in the rather complex interplay between the communication of foreign ministries, including Western ones, and influence strategies.

Russian influence operations in Africa are a textbook illustration of this logic. From this perspective, external influence appears to be more effective when it relies on local actors (and/or relays) able to translate these narratives into a familiar language, anchoring them in national concerns.

Russian influence thus appears less as a one-way transmission than as a co-production of narratives. Foreign influence works more through amplification than substitution, sometimes making it difficult to distinguish between a coordinated operation and local appropriation. Armed groups exploit a comparable logic, but with their own objectives. Here, information becomes a component of armed confrontation, insofar as the battle and the interpretation of the battle constitute, in a sense, distinct fronts.

Disinformation as a destabilising force

When disinformation becomes a way of narrating reality, it consists less in distorting or inventing facts than in embedding them in an arrangement of narratives designed to give meaning to an event, such as a political, geopolitical or social sequence. It is in this vein that "information disorders[12]" proliferate through their capacity to insert themselves into already established discourses and representations. Moreover, it is well known that during the coups d'états that took place a few years ago in the AES countries, social networks accompanied the reshaping of political and geopolitical power relations. Indeed, during this sequence, disinformation contributed to building relatively coherent political narratives, in this case a binary opposition between these countries and France. Disinformation therefore does not so much create the prevailing representations as give them narrative form, simplify them and link them together. And it is this narrative mechanism that explains its performative dimension[13]. Disinformation seeks not only to convince but also to provoke indignation, anger, patriotism or a sense of collective humiliation.

Yet the manufacturing of perceptions takes place within a media ecosystem profoundly transformed by digital technology, which opens new spaces for civic participation but, by the same token, makes it harder to distinguish between information, opinion, partisan interpretation and disinformation. In Burkina Faso,

11 US Department of State (2022), *La campagne de désinformation d'Evguéni Prigojine dans toute l'Afrique*, https://2021-2025.state.gov/la-campagne-de-desinformation-devgueni-prigojine-dans-toute-lafrique/?safe=1

12 Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking* (Vol. 27, pp. 1-107). Strasbourg: Council of Europe. https://www.firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PREMS-162317-GBR-2018-Report-de%CC%81sinformation-1.pdf

13 Dô, D. D. D. (2026). *La désinformation au Sahel : Narrativité, performativité et fabrique de l'opinion*. Revue Africaine de Communication de l'UCAD. https://rac.ucad.sn/la-desinformation-au-sahel-narrativite-performativite-et-fabrique-de-lopinion

the demonstrations hostile to the French presence and the attack by demonstrators on the Institut Français in Ouagadougou after the 2022 coup show how a narrative circulating in the information space can translate concretely into physical space. Similarly, since the outbreak of the Malian conflict in 2012, and then with the coups of 2020 and 2021, the deterioration of relations with France, ECOWAS sanctions and cooperation with Russia, the Malian "Twittersphere" (now X), and by extension social networks, has virtually become an "actor" in the conflict. The platform has turned into a space where professional journalists, citizen journalists, bloggers and authorities construct and confront their interpretations of the conflict. In this respect, circulation dynamics, algorithmic mechanisms and interactions between users contribute to producing a "networked conflict". The platform thus becomes a site of participation in the conflict itself through the "weaponization[14]" of information, i.e. the use of information as a weapon in the service of political or conflict-related objectives, thereby reinforcing existing socio-political divisions.

This plurality of actors should therefore prompt us to examine the infrastructures through which content circulates, namely platforms whose visibility and recommendation rules structure a significant share of the public space. Owing to their importance, the logic of the public space is thus increasingly becoming the logic of platforms. This was notably the case in Nigeria's 2023 elections where, despite the contribution of the BVAS (*Bimodal Voter Accreditation System*) and IReV (*INEC Results Viewing Portal*) systems for identifying voters and transmitting or viewing results, digital technology nonetheless served as a tool for manipulating electoral information. Research by the CDD (Centre for Democracy and Development) documented hashtag manipulation, the use of automated or controlled networks, the creation of fake identities, the use of deliberately misleading translations and the manipulation of audio and video content. Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp each contributed, according to their own circulation mechanisms, to spreading content likely to influence perceptions of the vote[15].

Outside election periods, in February 2026 an international investigative consortium (Forbidden Stories, All Eyes On Wagner, The Continent, openDemocracy, iStories) made public a leak of 1,431 pages of internal documents from Africa Politology, a disinformation structure reportedly run directly by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). These documents detail a large-scale organisation of disinformation: a budget of 7.3 million dollars over ten months, 34 "specialists" coordinated across 15 countries, and funding channelled through shell companies. In August 2024 alone, 340,000 dollars reportedly paid for the placement of 516 articles and videos in African media, at a unit cost of 250 to 700 dollars per article, with more than 5,000 dollars specifically earmarked for Senegal. Finally, the democratisation of artificial intelligence (AI) now adds a new capability to the machinery of disinformation. Deepfakes, synthetic content and automated systems lower production costs, accelerate dissemination and make it possible to target different audiences. That said, artificial intelligence is not so much an entirely separate threat as a multiplier of pre-existing vulnerabilities, as the Malian conflict shows[16]. What is at work here is the logic of the "liar's dividend[17] ", which makes it possible to exploit the blurring of true and false to discredit authentic evidence.

Disinformation: a structural threat to democracy

Once a degree of perceived equivalence forms between the public space and the digital space, the growing difficulty of distinguishing information from manipulation gradually affects trust in institutions, hardens social and political antagonisms.

14 de Bruijn, M., Mutsvairo, B., Bruls, L., Cissé, M. G., Langguth, J., Orgeret, K. S., Badji, S. D., Moges, M. A., & Schroeder, D. T. (2025). "Aren't we all journalists?" Citizen journalism, disinformation and the weaponization of social media in conflict torn Mali.https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241312743

15 Schroeder, Z., Batista, M., & Timcke, S. (2025). *Digital governance for democratic integrity in West African electoral contexts*. https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S2077-72132025000200005&script=sci_arttext

16 Timbuktu Institute (2026), *Algorithmes en guerre, op. cit.,*

17 Chesney, B., & Citron, D. (2019). *Deep fakes: A looming challenge for privacy, democracy, and national security*. Calif. L. Rev., 107, 1753. https://www.californialawreview.org/print/deep-fakes-a-looming-challenge-for-privacy-democracy-and-national-security

"Information disorders" thus become both a democratic and a security issue. The massive scale of disinformation tends to alter the frameworks within which countries and societies in crisis interpret and settle their conflicts.

One of the most pervasive effects of this dynamic lies in the erosion of trust. From this standpoint, when citizens are confronted with a succession of contradictory content, manipulated narratives and denials, the widespread uncertainty certainly concerns the veracity of information, but also, and above all, the question of whom can still be trusted. Disinformation thus produces a paradoxical effect: even when it fails to impose a falsehood, it can weaken legitimate sources enough to make their word less convincing. This phenomenon is particularly worrying in the Sahel and West Africa, where trust in institutions is already fragile. Governments, media, electoral authorities, ECOWAS, the African Union or international partners can gradually become associated with the same suspicion of manipulation.

This is where an essential part of the democratic stake lies. Indeed, if a democratic system presupposes the existence of a minimum base of shared facts from which citizens can diverge on political choices, the erosion of this base undermines the very conditions of democratic possibility[18]. Institutions then face a twofold challenge: responding to crises while demonstrating that they describe their reality accurately. For it is the gradual loss of a common frame of factual knowledge that paves the way for distrust to turn into polarisation. In Sahelian contexts, a local event may be interpreted as the expression of a conflict between communities, a rumour reporting an attack may be perceived as proof of a generalised threat, or an accusation against an official may turn into an accusation against the group with which he or she is associated.

Social networks accelerate this process by allowing content produced in a restricted space to rapidly cross territorial and community boundaries. In the Burkinabe, Malian and Nigerien configurations, for example, where armed violence has already deeply affected relations between populations, security forces and local authorities, the consequences can be particularly severe. The circulation of unverified information about abuses, attacks or alleged complicity can feed fear and heighten suspicion towards certain communities. This is not to say that disinformation necessarily creates these tensions, but it can give them a more radical form by narrowing the room left for doubt and verification, all the more so in a context where armed groups are able to turn socio-economic conflicts into identity-based antagonisms. However, these dynamics do not concern only countries in the grip of political and security crises. Generally speaking, West African countries remain exposed as soon as digital networks become a privileged arena of political confrontation. As debates become polarised, content likely to confirm pre-existing convictions is more likely to be shared, and it becomes difficult for institutions and the media to reintroduce nuance into public debate.

What kind of endogenous information resilience for the Sahel?

Since disinformation is a structural phenomenon, the response cannot be limited to simply detecting and debunking problematic content. It must address the information vulnerabilities that allow it to spread, while taking local contexts into account to avoid an exogenous, one-size-fits-all approach that would have no effect. It is in this spirit that regional initiatives are beginning to emerge. In September 2025, thirteen West African States adopted, under the aegis of UNESCO, a strategic framework and an action plan for information integrity up to 2036[19]. The BLOC Anti-Fake consortium, launched the same year in Abidjan, also illustrates the possibility of regional cooperation among fact-checkers. These advances nevertheless remain limited due to a lack of funding for media literacy, the fragility of independent

18 Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., Cook, J., Van Der Linden, S., Roozenbeek, J., & Oreskes, N. (2023). Misinformation and the epistemic integrity of democracy. *Current opinion in psychology*, 54, 101711. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352250X23001562

19 UN News, "Un cadre stratégique et un plan d'action pour l'intégrité de l'information adoptés à Praia", 2025, https://news.un.org/fr/story/2025/12/1157995

media, and the inadequate adaptation of platforms to West African languages and contexts.

A resilience policy must therefore prioritise endogenous capacities: independent and community media, local fact-checkers, media literacy in national and local languages, and independent institutes dedicated to information ecosystem. It must also link information resilience with the fight against interference, rather than treating disinformation as a mere communication issue. For the EU, the AU and ECOWAS, the challenge is thus to regard the information space as a fully-fledged determinant of political stability, by supporting local actors rather than substituting institutional mechanisms for existing mechanisms of trust. Without action on structural factors such as institutional distrust, media weakness, the digital divide, and inadequate media literacy, responses will remain essentially reactive and ineffective.

II. DISINFORMATION: A STRUCTURAL CHALLENGE FOR EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES

During the night of 9 to 10 September 2025, in the course of a massive air strike on Ukraine, nineteen drones launched by Russia violated Polish airspace; some crashed, others were shot down by NATO fighter jets. There were no casualties, only a few buildings damaged in sparsely populated rural areas in the east of the country. For the first time since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a NATO member had opened fire on hostile targets over its own territory[20]. But the crux lay elsewhere. In the shadow of the headlines, a subtler and, in many respects, more dangerous attack was unfolding in the Polish information space: a wave of coordinated foreign disinformation accompanied the kinetic attack.

This coordinated campaign put into circulation, on the very same day, more than thirty distinct manipulated narratives, identified by NASK, the Polish disinformation monitoring centre[21]. According to some, the Polish government was lying to its citizens and the army was unprepared and defenceless; according to others, it was a Ukrainian provocation, a false-flag operation aimed at dragging Poland into the war. The coordination between the drone attack and the information attack was obvious: narratives announcing a Ukrainian provocation were circulating in the Polish information space even before the airspace violation.

The campaign took place mainly on X and Facebook, but also on YouTube and Instagram. It relied on the massive and artificial dissemination of inauthentic comments under content published by Polish State institutions, politicians and media. This coordinated inauthentic behaviour relied in particular on the hashtag #tonienaszawojna, meaning "this is not our war". The campaign mobilised dormant automated accounts previously associated with anti-vaccine content linked to Covid-19, as well as supposedly "neutral" accounts that usually posted about the economy or sport but had suddenly become passionate about drones[22].

Analysis of the campaign showed that it sought to weaken Poles' trust in their institutions and government, to stoke Polish-Ukrainian tensions and to shift negative emotions away from Russia towards the Polish government, Ukraine and Ukrainians in Poland. It revealed that disinformation targets not only our beliefs, or what we know, but above all our affects: what we feel, towards whom, and how these emotions guide our social and political choices and behaviour. Finally, it illustrates how Russian actors combine foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) with other forms of hybrid attack.

FIMI and European elections

The concept of FIMI (*foreign information manipulation and interference*) has obvious advantages over those of "fake news" or "disinformation", which are most often used in public debate without much analytical rigour and are frequently instrumentalised to discredit opposition voices. Developed by the European External Action Service (EEAS)[23], the concept of FIMI marks a genuine paradigm shift. It makes it possible both to understand how foreign disinformation works and to respond to a threat that is not limited to the manipulation of information but also implies a deliberate intent to cause harm.

Not all disinformation is FIMI, and FIMI is not only disinformation. It is narrower than disinformation,

20 Alan Charlish, Lidia Kelly and Barbara Erling (2025) Poland downs drones in its airspace, becoming first NATO member to fire during war in Ukraine, Reuters, September 10, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/poland-downs-drones-its-airspace-becoming-first-nato-member-fire-during-war-2025-09-10/

21 MinisterstwoCyfryzacji (2025) Uwaga na dezinformację związaną z naruszeniem polskiej przestrzeni powietrznej przez drony, 10.09, https://www.gov.pl/web/cyfryzacja/uwaga-na-dezinformacje-zwiazana-z-naruszeniem-polskiej-przestrzeni-powietrznej-przez-drony

22 Filip Bryjka, Aleksandra Wójtowicz (2025) Russia Launches Drone and Disinformation Attack on Poland, Bulletin, Polish Institute of International Affairs, NO. 99 (2600), 19 September, https://www.pism.pl/publications/russia-launches-drone-and-disinformation-attack-on-polandv

23 European External Action Service (2023) 1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/1st-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en

because it excludes purely domestic activities not inspired from abroad. It is also broader, because it encompasses not only manipulated content but above all manipulative behaviours, most often not illegal: the massive, automated dissemination and amplification of manipulated information by inauthentic accounts or bots. The consequences for information integrity are far more serious than those of misinformation, or even of disinformation relayed by legitimate social media users.

Consider the FIMI campaigns launched by Russia-linked actors to interfere in the 2024 European election campaign. These elections to the European Parliament are an ideal laboratory, as they show how foreign disinformation operates simultaneously in the national contexts of the twenty-seven Member States.

What behaviours, including what covert techniques for distorting national media ecosystems, were identified? Monitoring carried out by various national and European institutions[24] made it possible to characterise several Information Manipulation Sets (IMS), including Doppelgänger, the Pravda network and Storm-1516. Here, an IMS refers to the underlying digital infrastructure that makes online manipulation possible[25] : interconnected domains, shared hosting accounts, bot networks. It can be activated, expanded or deactivated at any time, according to the needs of a campaign. IMS fabricate fake media outlets in several languages that recycle content from Russian State media, pro-Russian influencers or anti-establishment local media.

Very active ahead of the 2024 European elections, the Doppelgänger IMS became notorious for impersonating legitimate media through domain cloning and typosquatting. Clones of major European titles (Le Parisien, La Stampa) disseminated typical far-right content that these outlets would never have published, in order to launder and normalise pro-Russian, anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives. Typosquatting refers to a practice that uses a URL almost identical to that of the original outlet, differing by a single letter. This content was then injected into social networks through deceptive redirects: links to the clones were posted en masse as comments under the posts of the impersonated outlets.

As for the content disseminated through these tactics, it should be stressed that FIMI actors do not spread scattered falsehoods: they construct coherent narratives. FIMI narratives can be understood as a category of strategic narratives[26] whose projection is manipulative, i.e. covert, coordinated and inauthentically amplified; whose object is above all the targeted society; and whose aim is to shape the target's political behaviour rather than to make it adopt the sender's worldview[27].

While the Russian FIMI ecosystem relies on a centralised set of meta-narratives[28], the narratives disseminated in the Member States during the 2024 campaign appeared to have very diverse accents. Recent research[29] shows, however, that this apparent diversity masks a single pattern: a constant villain template, adapted into victim figures calibrated to the economic anxieties, historical memories and cultural identities of the target audience. The adversary therefore does not write one script per country; it hands out the same script to different national characters. National variations are thus explained by the tactical adaptation

24 European External Action Service (2024) Doppelganger strikes back: FIMI activities in the context of the EE24, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/uploads/2024/06/EEAS-TechnicalReport-DoppelgangerEE24_June2024.pdf ; VIGINUM (2023). RRN: a complex and persistent information manipulation campaign, 19 July, https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20230719_NP_VIGINUM_RAPPORT-CAMPAGNE-RRN_EN.pdf

25 VIGINUM (2026) Definitions and objectives of the concept of "Information Manipulation Set" (IMS), January 2026, https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20260122_NP_TLP-CLEAR_SGDSN_VIGINUM_IMS_0.pdf

26 Miskimmon, A., B. O'Loughlin, and L. Roselle (2013). Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order. Routledge, https://www.routledge.com/Strategic-Narratives-Communication-Power-and-the-New-World-Order/Miskimmon-OLoughlin-Roselle/p/book/9780415721882

27 Agnieszka K. Cianciara (2026) Nationally Yours. The Tactical Adaptation of the Russian FIMI Narratives in the 2024 European elections' campaign, Contemporary Security Policy (manuscript under review).

28 Legucka, A., R. Kupiecki (2022). Introduction In: Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus, eds. A. Legucka, R. Kupiecki. Routledge, https://www.routledge.com/Disinformation-Narratives-and-Memory-Politics-in-Russia-and-Belarus/Legucka-Kupiecki/p/book/9781032251110

29 Agnieszka K. Cianciara (2026) Nationally Yours… op. cit.

of a common template to local conditions of strategic resonance[30]. Structural narrative analysis shows that the designated "villain" varies little: it is "Brussels" or the national government. The victim is tailor-made; the hero is often a local far-right party. In Poland, the plot revolves around Ukrainian refugees whom the government (the villain) supposedly treats better than Poles (the victim). Elsewhere, it focuses on high energy prices (Germany) or on a European agricultural policy deemed harmful (France). The victims are always ordinary citizens or particular groups, farmers or pensioners, wronged by their government and by the EU. The moral is the same everywhere: elect anti-EU far-right leaders who, as if by chance, boast of good relations with Russia.

Narrative laundering: when the foreign becomes domestic

Foreign disinformation campaigns do not invent problems: they distort and amplify pre-existing internal tensions and divisions. They sow narratives tailored to the local context and leave their laundering to local actors[31]. By analogy with money laundering, three stages can be distinguished: placement (initial publication on an account or site that conceals the origin), layering (circulation through seemingly unconnected intermediaries and through "cascading citations" towards increasingly credible sources) and integration (uptake by trusted media or real users, until the narrative becomes an ordinary part of public debate). Domestic amplification refers precisely to the moment when national actors give an exogenous narrative its legitimacy and reach. This does not require active coordination with the foreign actor, only ideological or strategic alignment.

Narrative laundering makes attributing a campaign to a given actor very difficult, unless one traces the techniques and channels through which the manipulated content is disseminated – tracing that is itself problematic. In 2025, the EEAS documented 540 FIMI incidents in the EU, involving 10,500 channels and sites: 29% were attributed to Russia and 6% to China, with Ukraine, France, Moldova and Germany as the main targets. The remaining 65%, unattributed, showed signs of coordination with assets linked to Russian or Chinese infrastructure[32]. The Russian FIMI ecosystem includes State media (RT and Sputnik, banned in the EU), networks of cloned or "mirror" sites (Doppelgänger, the Pravda network), operations designed to overwhelm fact-checkers (Operation Overload), "disinformation-for-hire" outfits and, above all, domestic relays: parties, influencers, partisan media and ideologically aligned organisations. Electoral FIMI now combines algorithmic manipulation, paid influencers, mirror sites and domestic relays.

Finally, the attention-based business model of platforms rewards emotion, outrage and polarisation, and their recommendation systems can be hijacked. A 2025 report by VIGINUM, the French agency for vigilance and protection against foreign digital interference, highlighted how easily the visibility of a topic can be forced and how ineffective the measures taken by platforms are. The rise of generative AI adds two effects. The first concerns scale and cost: FIMI campaigns routinely use AI-manipulated audio and video content – one in four incidents recorded by the EEAS in 2025[33] – and large-scale automated manipulation has become very cheap. The second is model poisoning, or "LLM grooming": by flooding search engines and web crawlers with pro-Russian falsehoods, FIMI campaigns distort the way the large language models used every day, such as ChatGPT, process and present information. Ten major chatbots thus repeated the false claims of the Pravda network in 33% of cases[34]. FIMI no longer targets humans alone, but also the machines that inform them.

The effects of information manipulation: erosion rather than persuasion

Available research provides solid evidence on the design of FIMI campaigns and how they spread, but

30 McDonnell, T. E., Bail, C. A., & Tavory, I. (2017). A Theory of Resonance. Sociological Theory, 35(1), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275117692837; Homolar, A. (2021) A call to arms: Hero–villain narratives in US security discourse. Security Dialogue, 53(4), 324–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106211005897

31 Meleshevich, K. and Schafer, B. (2018). Online Information Laundering: The Role of Social Media. Alliance for Securing Democracy, no. 002, https://www.gmfus.org/news/online-information-laundering-role-social-media

32 European External Action Service (2026) 4th EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats Dismantling the FIMI House of Cards, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2026/documents/EEAS%204th%20Threat%20Report_web%20version_1.pdf

33 European External Action Service (2026) 4th EEAS Report…, op. cit.

34 Sadeghi, M. and Blachez, I. (2025). A Well-funded Moscow-based Global 'News' Network has Infected Western Artificial Intelligence Tools Worldwide with Russian Propaganda. NewsGuard. https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-

still weak evidence on their direct effects on political behaviour, particularly on voting. However, while the direct causal effect of exposure to disinformation on electoral choices is difficult to demonstrate, this does not mean that it has no diffuse, longer-term effects. The state of the literature suggests that disinformation and FIMI work less by converting voters than by reinforcing existing supporters, wearing down trust and making legitimate decisions appear illegitimate[35].

Vulnerability to disinformation is rooted in a pre-existing crisis of legitimacy[36]. Declining citizen trust in democratic institutions makes people more receptive to alternative narratives, which in turn deepen distrust. In Europe, these narratives are often associated both with the domestic radical right and with foreign strategies, most often Russian, aimed at undermining the legitimacy of institutions and destabilising governing parties, executives and elections. It is a vicious circle of distrust, and this is precisely what FIMI seeks to exploit.

FIMI narratives of "rigged" elections or "traitorous" governments seek less to convince people of a fact than to cast suspicion on all official information, and thus to undermine trust in democratic institutions – government, the judiciary, the media, the police and the armed forces – in favour of alternative, often radicalised, sources. FIMI can also target electoral participation. Its moral generally calls for a radical protest vote, but it can also encourage abstention by channelling disgust with elites ("they're all the same") and a sense of powerlessness ("your vote doesn't count ").

FIMI feeds polarisation, above all affective polarisation: hostility and resentment towards the opposing camp rather than ideological disagreement. The aim is less to change beliefs than to make people hate those who hold different ones. Finally, when trust is low, even a well-founded decision (sanctioning a corrupt elected official) can appear partisan. This is the "liar's dividend": in an environment saturated with falsehoods, it becomes easy to deny the truth. In a polarised context, it matters little what the person did or how legally sound the decision is; it is enough that "they" struck at "one of ours" to delegitimise any political decision.

How to respond to information manipulation? Lessons learned in Europe

The European Union has equipped itself with the most comprehensive institutional, methodological and regulatory framework for countering FIMI of any international organisation. This does not mean that its action is fully adequate, sufficient or easily transferable outside Europe, but it certainly offers lessons for other democracies facing "information disorder"[37]. This framework has been built up since 2015 in successive layers, which can be organised according to four logics[38].

The first is situational awareness, which makes it possible to detect and analyse, in a structured way, coordinated FIMI campaigns targeting the EU and its Member States, including hostile narratives and the channels and techniques used to disseminate content.

reports/moscow-based-global-news-network-infected-western-artificial-intelligence-russian-propaganda/

35 Eady, G., Paskhalis, T., Zilinsky, J. et al. Exposure to the Russian Internet Research Agency foreign influence campaign on Twitter in the 2016 US election and its relationship to attitudes and voting behavior. Nature Communications 14, 62 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-35576-9; Budak C, Nyhan B, Rothschild DM, Thorson E, Watts DJ. Misunderstanding the harms of online misinformation. Nature. 2024 Jun;630(8015):45-53. doi: 10.1038/s41586-024-07417-w. Epub 2024 Jun 5. PMID: 38840013. Lin, H., Czarnek, G.,
Lewis, B. et al. Persuading voters using human–artificial intelligence dialogues. Nature 648, 394–401 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-025-09771-9

36 Bennett, W. L. and Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. European Journal of Communication, 33(2), 122–139. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0267323118760317

37 Wardle, C. and Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html

38 Filip Bryjka and Agnieszka Legucka (2026 forthcoming) The EU's Approach to Countering FIMI, in: Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Europe Strategies, Capabilities, and Resilience, eds. A.K. Cianciara and A. Legucka, London & New York: Routledge, https://www.routledge.com/Countering-Foreign-Information-Manipulation-and-Interference-in-Europe-Strategies-Capabilities-and-Resilience/Cianciara-Legucka/p/book/9781041374534

This task is carried out by the EEAS strategic communication (StratCom) units and within the new European Centre for Democratic Resilience, in coordination with the Rapid Alert System, which relies on national contact points in Member State capitals.

Second, the EU intends to regulate very large online platforms (VLOPs). These are not regarded as neutral infrastructures, but as active architects of public discourse and gatekeepers of digital access, which must be regulated and held accountable because of their asymmetric structural power and an algorithmic curation designed to maximise engagement, and therefore monetisation. Since engagement is driven above all by manipulated, divisive or extreme content, platforms generate, according to the EU, an inherent public risk. They are in effect the modern agora, but governed by private rules that allow the mass dissemination of manipulated content for profit, without any accountability[39].

European regulation aims to bring these spaces under democratic control. Its pillars, the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), impose on very large platforms obligations to assess and mitigate systemic risks and to ensure the transparency of synthetic content. Rather than censoring, the EU seeks to compel platforms to dismantle the dissemination channels, bot networks and algorithmic reward loops on which interference depends, in particular by requiring transparency about their architecture and algorithms. The target is the operational logic of the infrastructure, not any particular content, unless it is illegal under national law.

Third, the EU imposes costs and sanctions, including asset freezes and travel bans, on foreign entities and individuals involved in destabilising FIMI campaigns. The activities of Russian State media are thus suspended in the Union. A major development has been the shift from diagnosis to deterrence. Knowing how IMS operate, the EU now seeks to target their critical nodes (intermediaries, service providers, supply chains) to make FIMI operations "more costly and less sustainable"[40]. The ultimate goal is to make these campaigns technically difficult and financially expensive for foreign adversaries.

Fourth, the EU strives to strengthen the democratic resilience of European societies through programmes and networks supporting fact-checking, quality media and media literacy. The aim here is to prepare citizens, at the individual level, to better cope with the information disorder in which they live.

Europe acts not only at the regional, EU level, but also at the national level. Yet, from one Member State to another, diversity of institutional responses prevails. Research conducted under the SAUFEX project (Horizon Europe) identified three levels of institutionalisation of responses to FIMI, based on four criteria[41] : a centralised or decentralised system; government-wide or ministerial coordination; the existence of a specialised agency; and the use of analytical and digital tools dedicated to detecting and analysing FIMI.

A high level of institutionalisation was observed in only two Member States, France and Sweden, which have set up a centralised coordination system and a specialised service: the Vigilance and Protection Service against Foreign Digital Interference (VIGINUM) in France and the Psychological Defence Agency in Sweden. An intermediate level, with ministerial coordination and emerging specialised structures (such as NASK), characterises in particular Poland, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Estonia and Lithuania. Many Member States, on the other hand, rely mainly on European mechanisms and display a low level of institutionalisation of their counter-FIMI capabilities.

France is the most instructive case, as it combines a strong capacity for action with democratic safeguards. VIGINUM was designed cautiously in order to establish its credibility and defuse the accusation of

39 Hannah Bloch-Wehba (2019), Global Platform Governance: Private Power in the Shadow of the State, 72 SMU L. Rev. 27, https://doi.org/10.25172/smulr.72.1.9 ; De Gregorio G, Pollicino O. The European Constitutional Way to Address Disinformation in the Age of Artificial Intelligence. German Law Journal. 2025;26(3):449-470, doi:10.1017/glj.2025.24.

40 European External Action Service (2026) 4th EEAS Report…, op. cit.

41 Agnieszka K. Cianciara and Kamila Szymańska (2026 forthcoming) Institutional Capacity-Building to Counter FIMi, in: Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Europe Strategies, Capabilities, and Resilience, eds. A.K. Cianciara and A. Legucka, London & New York: Routledge, https://www.routledge.com/Countering-Foreign-Information-Manipulation-and-Interference-in-Europe-Strategies-Capabilities-and-Resilience/Cianciara-Legucka/p/book/9781041374534

being a "ministry of truth": a narrow mandate limited to foreign interference that harms the fundamental interests of the Nation; analysis of open sources only; a focus on "massive, artificial or automated" dissemination; and oversight by an independent ethics and scientific committee. This model is now enshrined in the National Strategy to Counter Information Manipulation 2026–2030, which commits France to promoting a "democratic doctrine for responding to manipulation" among its international partners.

Poland illustrates another model. Without a single national coordination centre, it has consolidated a multi-pole ministerial system in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a leading role, an office presiding over countering international disinformation, a strategic communication department and a Council for Resilience to International Disinformation bringing together the administration, civil society, academics and the private sector. But the Polish experience also carries a warning: the official office responsible for countering international disinformation set up in 2022 under the authorities of the Prime Minister, during the previous government, was dissolved at the end of 2023 for politicisation, after taking part in campaigns aimed at discrediting the then opposition. This is what must be avoided: an institution perceived as partisan, which destroys the very trust it claims to protect.

These two cases underline the importance of credible institutionalisation and point to a way forward: earning trust through targeted action in areas where broad consensus exists, even in polarised societies, namely the foreign information threat. It then becomes easier to avoid, or reduce, delegitimisation and accusations of censoring domestic dissent.

Finally, priority should initially be given to building institutional credibility rather than to policing disinformation.

Institutional and regulatory solutions will not, however, be enough to build democratic resilience against disinformation. A vibrant civil society has a key role to play, both in debunking and in prebunking information manipulation. Debunking, which generally takes the form of fact-checking, is a reactive response that corrects isolated beliefs without reducing affective polarisation[42]. In other words, we may accept the correction of a given piece of false information without changing our worldview or the emotions we feel towards certain people or groups.

This is why researchers and practitioners have turned to prebunking. Rather than refuting a false claim after the fact, it warns in advance that someone may try to manipulate us, and shows how[43]. Like a vaccine, a small, harmless dose of the trick helps people recognise it later. Because it teaches people to spot techniques rather than isolated claims, a short video or an online game can protect against many future messages, including those that do not yet exist. A study conducted in twelve EU countries ahead of the 2024 European elections shows that prebunking works, even if its effects are modest and vary by level of education[44]. On Instagram, among young Britons, a 19-second video improved recognition of emotional manipulation, albeit on a small sample[45]. What are its effects on affective polarisation? According to experimental research, a prebunking video on hostile and divisive language made British and American participants less inclined to click on or share polarising messages, without

42 Porter E, Scott RB, Wood TJ, Zhandayeva R (2024) Correcting misinformation about the Russia-Ukraine War reduces false beliefs but does not change views about the War. PLoS ONE 19(9): e0307090. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0307090

43 Ullrich Ecker, et al. Misinformation poses a bigger threat to democracy than you might think. Nature 630, 29-32 (2024), doi: https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-01587-3

44 Biddlestone, M., Goldberg, B., Basol, M., van der Linden, S., Roozenbeek, J. and al. (2026). Video inoculation against election misinformation across 12 EU nations. Communications Psychology. https://www.nature.com/articles/s44271-025-00379-3

45 Van der Linden, S., Louison-Lavoy, D., Blazer, N., Noble, N. S., and Roozenbeek, J. (2026). Prebunking misinformation techniques in social media feeds: Results from an Instagram field study. Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review, 22 January 2026. https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/prebunking-misinformation-techniques-in-social-media-feeds-results-from-an-instagram-field-study/

making them more benevolent towards their political opponents[46]. The strength of prebunking, then, is not that it changes minds more than fact-checking does: it reaches the public earlier and more widely, and targets the emotional "us versus them" tactics that fuel polarisation and that debunking leaves untouched.

The lesson is that media literacy is a long-term investment. It can be co-constructed through primary and secondary school curricula, university research, and civil society organisations and quality media, which raise public awareness of the cognitive and affective biases on which disinformation feeds.

FIMI is not simply an exogenous threat weighing on otherwise healthy democracies. It exploits their existing weaknesses and builds on a crisis of legitimacy of democratic institutions and procedures that predates it. Institutional coordination, platform regulation and media literacy are all indispensable elements of a viable strategy against information disorder. But the overriding imperative remains to restore trust in democratic institutions and procedures. It is especially essential that counter-disinformation mechanisms be credible in both their mandate and their action, rather than further undermining the trust they are meant to protect.

46 Smith, F., Simchon, A., Holford, D. et al. (2025). Inoculation reduces social media engagement with affectively polarized content in the UK and US. Communications Psychology, 3, 11. https://www.nature.com/articles/s44271-025-00189-7

THE SAHEL AND EUROPE: TWO SHARED INFORMATION CHALLENGES

From the Sahel and West Africa to Europe, disinformation seeps into the interstices of public debate, bends the perception of crises and reshapes power relations, to the point of testing the very foundations of democratic legitimacy. It inserts itself into already established discourses and representations, whether sovereigntist claims in the Sahel or economic anxiety and distrust of "Brussels" in Europe. In other words, it lodges itself in the political, social and economic fault lines that it exploits, while digital platforms and artificial intelligence multiply its capacity for dissemination and staging. Its reach stems not only from the spread of falsehoods, but also, and above all, from a more insidious undertaking: blurring common reference points, stoking antagonisms and fostering suspicion towards institutions, the media and democratic procedures. Herein lies one of its most worrying consequences, namely its capacity to erode citizens' trust in all public speech, thereby making it ever more difficult to establish a shared factual foundation.

What the Sahelian analysis describes as a co-production of narratives, in which external influence works through amplification rather than substitution, the European analysis calls narrative laundering. Both notions capture the same movement: a narrative of exogenous origin gains reach only when national actors – influencers, journalists, leaders or political parties – appropriate it and give it local legitimacy. In this respect, the Sahelian, West African and European experiences reveal an essential reality: information manipulation does not thrive solely through the action of foreign powers. It becomes more effective when it meets long-standing grievances, weakened institutions, threatened media pluralism or divides that political actors themselves sometimes help to deepen.

It follows that reducing the response to monitoring social networks, regulating platforms or debunking misleading content would amount to treating the symptoms of the phenomenon without reaching its root causes. Monitoring and early warning, cooperation with digital actors, support for independent media and media literacy must be part of a broader strategy that is attentive to local realities and committed to preserving civil liberties. European mechanisms offer useful avenues, not a model to be transposed mechanically. Their relevance depends on the ability to adapt them to the political trajectories, institutional resources and information ecosystems of each society.

For states and regional/international organisations (EU, AU, ECOWAS, etc.), the challenge now is to treat information integrity as a fully-fledged dimension of conflict prevention and democratic consolidation. This requires better detection of coordinated operations, stronger local fact-checking capacities, transparent counter-disinformation mechanisms and the preservation of the conditions for pluralist public debate. The line between protecting the information space and subjecting it to those in power is a fine one. A policy that conflated the fight against manipulation with bringing citizen criticism to heel would risk, conversely, fuelling the very distrust it claims to dispel.

Thus, meaningful information resilience must be judged above all by the solidity of institutions, the independence of the media and the ability of citizens to compare narratives, challenge authorities and form an informed judgement. It is in this requirement that the challenges of the Sahel and Europe converge: making verifiable truth, pluralism and trust not presumed achievements, but conditions of political stability and democratic life that must constantly be won anew. From this perspective, cooperation between the European Union, the African Union and ECOWAS would benefit from being conceived as an exchange of practices between partners facing a common challenge, rather than as an export of norms. If almost all the misfortunes of life come from the false ideas we have about what happens to us, the response to disinformation cannot be reduced to correcting facts. It requires rebuilding, in the Sahel as in Europe, that minimum common ground without which democracy cannot truly take shape.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish an inter-regional cooperation mechanism for information monitoring and early warning

The European Union, the African Union and ECOWAS should set up a permanent framework for exchanging information and good practices dedicated to detecting, documenting and analysing coordinated disinformation and influence campaigns. This mechanism would bring existing alert systems closer together, enable the sharing of analytical methods and facilitate cooperation between public institutions, researchers, the media and civil society organisations. It could be stepped up during election periods and security crises, when information manipulation operations are likely to heighten political and social tensions.

2. Integrate information risk into crisis prevention mechanisms and the protection of democratic processes

National and regional institutions should integrate information dynamics into their early-warning systems and their analysis of political and security risks. The coordinated spread of rumours targeting communities, institutions or security forces, as well as the circulation of narratives likely to stoke tensions or delegitimise electoral processes, should be subject to contextualised monitoring and rapid assessment. This approach would make it possible to better anticipate the effects of information manipulation on social cohesion and political stability, without equating all protest or critical expression with a threat.

3. Strengthen the coordination of responses to foreign information manipulation operations (FIMI)

The European Union, the African Union and sub-regional organisations should develop common procedures for sharing evidence, analysing the networks involved in foreign information manipulation operations and coordinating responses. Where the facts are sufficiently established, the available legal, diplomatic and financial instruments could be deployed in a concerted manner against the operators and intermediaries concerned, with due respect for each institution's competences and for procedural safeguards. The attribution of campaigns should be based on verifiable evidence and subject to rigorous assessment for distinguishing organised foreign influence operations from ordinary and legitimate exchanges between societies.

4. Establish a framework for cooperation with digital platforms based on transparency and accountability

The European Union, the African Union and ECOWAS should promote a structured dialogue with the main digital platforms to improve the detection of coordinated campaigns, the transparency of recommendation systems and researchers' access to relevant data. This cooperation should also foster more effective moderation in national and local languages, as well as reporting procedures adapted to election periods and crises. It would benefit from being accompanied by exchanges on the transparency of media ownership and funding, political micro-targeting and the protection of personal data. Legal safeguards and redress mechanisms would remain indispensable to prevent the abusive removal of content and unjustified restrictions on freedom of expression.

5. Support independent media, civil society and local information resilience initiatives

States, regional organisations and international partners should step up their support for independent and community media, fact-checking organisations, researchers and media literacy initiatives. Funding should prioritise sustainable mechanisms rooted in the social and linguistic realities of the communities affected, and make use of the communication

channels actually used, in particular community radio stations and digital platforms. Training programmes in digital verification and in the prebunking of information manipulation could be developed for journalists, diplomats and civil society actors. Particular attention should be paid to the financial independence of these actors, in order to reduce their vulnerability to political pressure and opaque funding.

6. Preserve media pluralism and fundamental freedoms in the fight against disinformation

States and regulatory authorities should draw a clear distinction between coordinated information manipulation operations and critical expression, investigative journalism and legitimate political dissent. Any restrictive measure, whether the suspension of a media outlet, the blocking of a service or the removal of content, should rest on a clear legal basis and meet the requirements of necessity, proportionality and transparency. Decisions should be open to effective appeal. Regional organisations and international partners should integrate these safeguards into their information resilience programmes, so that the defence of the democratic space does not serve as a justification for shrinking it.

7. Make joint research and evaluation the foundation of a lasting Euro-African partnership

The European Union, the African Union and ECOWAS should encourage the funding of research programmes involving African and European researchers on an equal footing. These programmes could address the mechanisms through which manipulative narratives spread, the effects of disinformation on institutional trust, the linguistic specificities of digital spaces and the effectiveness of public responses. Data sharing, researcher mobility, joint project leadership and independent evaluation of the measures adopted would contribute to building a common understanding of the threat. This partnership should be based on reciprocity of expertise and adaptation to local contexts, rather than on the transposition of a single institutional model, so as to make Euro-African cooperation a lever for lasting democratic resilience.

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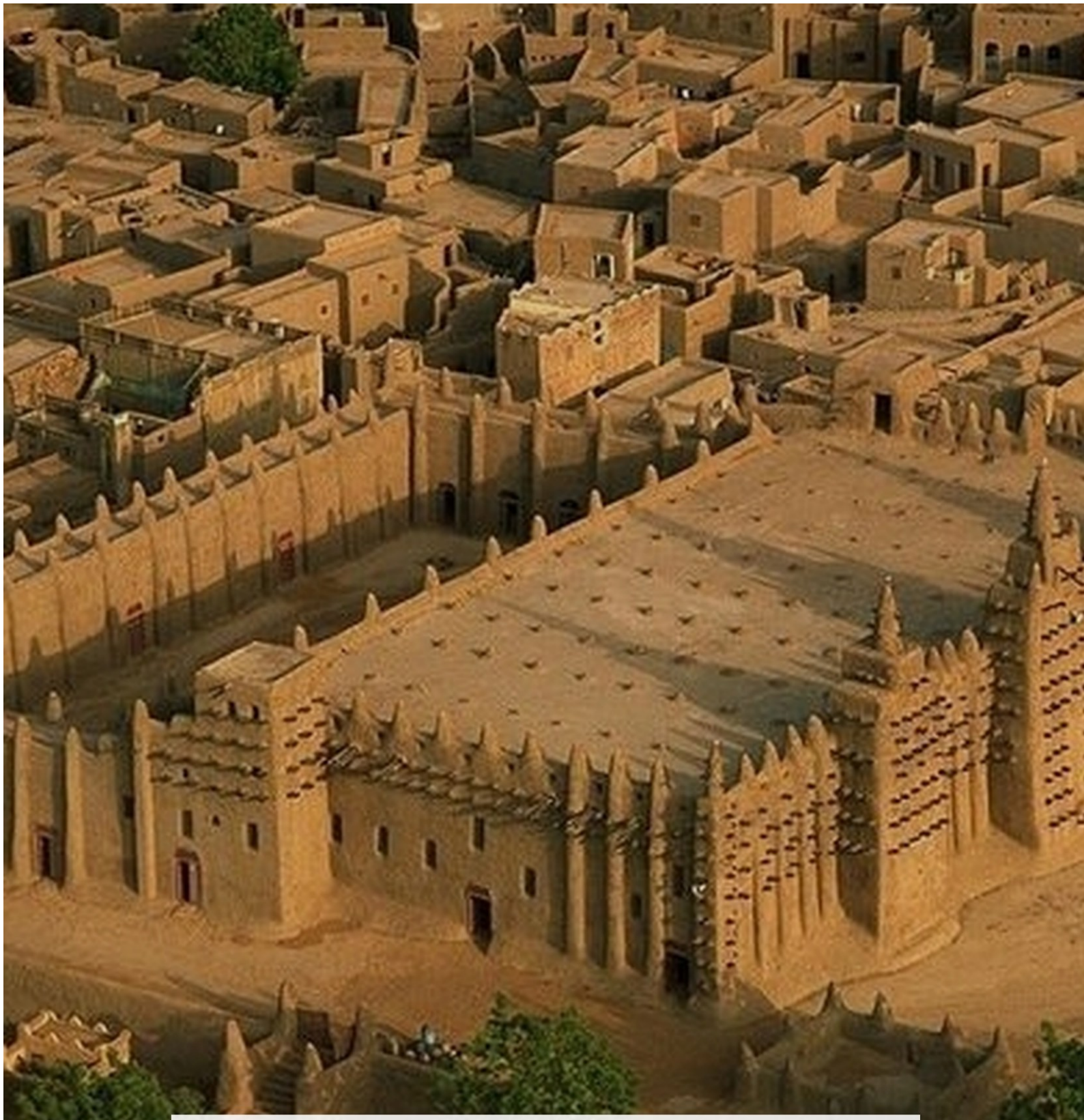

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