

# Research and innovation to counter disinformation, foreign manipulation and interference

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## What is foreign interference?

Disinformation campaigns and other targeted actions aiming to undermine democratic debate and aggravate social divisions are increasing. They are often financed or instigated by foreign countries that do not share the [EU values in terms of human rights, democracy, equality and rule of law](#). They thus pose a **threat to European democracies**. The [disinformation campaigns](#) carried out before and during the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine are only the latest evidence of this phenomenon.

Protecting European democracies from the threats and harmful effects of disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference is therefore a top priority for the EU since the adoption of the [European Democracy Action Plan](#) in 2020, and will continue to be so in the years to come.

## EU-funded research and innovation projects

The EU allocates resources to support **projects** to counter foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation and hybrid threats, under its programmes aimed at **fostering research and innovation**, and **promoting and protecting European democracies and the EU values**, as well as **supporting civil society and public administration** in the EU neighbourhood and in third countries.

Around 40 projects on disinformation have been funded under [Horizon 2020](#) for a total of €76.5 million:

- Some projects have been focusing on detecting fake news and disinformation **thought the use of new technologies**, such as **artificial intelligence, block chain or use of big data**. Research teams have specifically investigated how to curb disinformation that spreads on social media (see [BOTFIND](#), [FANDANGO](#) or [PROVENANCE](#)), while others identified the human behaviours that prompt the misuse of this new technology ([FARE](#)).
- Other projects have studied **political propaganda and disinformation**, such as the [COMPROP](#) project, which investigated networks of automated social media accounts and their role in manipulating public opinion.

The [EEAS](#) defines **Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference (FIMI)** as “mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.”

- Other projects have instead focused on **building capacities of practitioners and civil society organizations (CSOs)**. The [EU-HYBNET](#) project is investigating hybrid threats and building a European network of practitioners and relevant stakeholders. In this regard, the Joint Research Centre in partnership with the [European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats](#) developed a [new method to help policymakers defend democracy against hybrid threats](#).

The ongoing [Horizon Europe](#) programme dedicates funding to issues relating to foreign interference, aiming at strengthening democratic accountability and the resilience of citizens against disinformation:

- Two projects ([VIGILANT](#) and [FERMI](#)) are developing **innovative solutions for European police authorities and other practitioners** from the civil security research angle.
- Others ([AI4TRUST](#), [vera.ai](#) and [TITAN](#)) are continuing to investigate the **use and misuse of new technologies**, specifically focusing on the emerging field of **Artificial Intelligence**, and how it can be used to debunk disinformation spread via algorithms on platforms.
- In addition, additional projects on FIMI funded [under the 2023 calls for proposals](#) will improve our knowledge of the **Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs)** used by foreign state and non-state actors to interfere in our democracies.



Tackling disinformation and other forms of interference in democratic debate and promoting media literacy are also priorities tackled by the [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values \(CERV\) programme](#), under the strand “**Citizen engagement and participation**”, which is managed by the European Executive Agency for Education and Culture (EACEA).

This funding is directed primarily to civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs to develop solutions that enable citizens to make informed decisions by helping them to identify disinformation and promoting media literacy ([2022](#) and [2023](#) calls for proposals).



Other programmes in the EU Neighbourhood and Enlargement countries have among their objectives the fight against disinformation and foreign interference.

The [TAIEX](#) and [Twinning](#) programmes finance capacity building activities, in the form of multi-country workshops and peer-to-peer advisory services. The [Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe \(NDICI-GE\) instrument](#) for the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood is funding for instance actions to support independent journalism and media literacy, and enhance the resilience of the media sector. The [Instrument for Pre-Accession \(IPA\)](#) finances actions aimed specifically at increasing the skills of civil society organisations, fact checkers and decision makers, but also at aligning enlargement countries’ legal frameworks to the current EU acquis in the media, audiovisual and digital sector.



The need to fight disinformation and false narratives has become even more crucial since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The European Commission launched therefore the “[European Narrative Observatory to fight disinformation post-COVID-19](#)”, a pilot project that aims to identify and analyse the emergence and impact of often harmful narratives in relation to the Russian war on Ukraine, gender identity, and misleading information around elections, in particular on the 2024 European Parliament elections.

This pilot project is expected to build on the findings of the [Narratives Observatory Combatting Disinformation in Europe Systemically \(NODES\)](#) pilot project regarding narratives related to climate change, migration and the COVID-19 pandemic.