

Mis- and disinformation on migration in Europe

Independent Expert Report



Mis-and disinformation on migration in Europe

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Alberto-Horst Neidhardt

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1. Introduction

In July 2024, a knife attack in the seaside town of Southport, England, left three girls dead and several others injured. Almost immediately after the incident, false information began circulating on social media, claiming that the attacker was a Muslim male immigrant named Ali Al-Shakati.¹ However, at the time, neither the police nor mainstream media had disclosed the suspect's identity.² Further online stories and posts falsely claimed that the attacker had entered the UK illegally on a small boat in 2023. Later, the suspect was identified as Axel Rudakubana, a 17-year-old born to Rwandan parents in Cardiff – not a Muslim immigrant.

Despite the lack of official information first and the later confirmation that the suspect was in fact a British national, baseless rumours spread quickly, fuelling a wave of Islamophobic and anti-immigrant posts on social media. One prominent account sharing the misinformation on X (formerly Twitter) was 'Europe Invasion'.³ Influencer Andrew Tate also falsely claimed the attacker was an "undocumented migrant" who had "arrived on a boat." Other accounts, including far-right politicians and self-proclaimed local news outlets, blamed Muslims for the attack.⁴ By the day following the incident, posts speculating or falsely stating that the attacker was a Muslim immigrant had garnered over 27 million impressions on social media.⁵

These false claims and posts leveraged **existing concerns about irregular immigration to the UK**, constructing a false yet seemingly credible narrative connecting the incident to the so-called 'small-boat phenomenon'.⁶ They also capitalised on **growing fears surrounding knife attacks** in the country, **amplifying the sense of threat connected to the presence of foreigners** and fuelling anti-immigrant sentiments in turn.⁷

Social tensions escalated rapidly. Groups of protesters took to the streets for several days, demonstrating against immigration and Islam.⁸ In some instances, violence erupted, with protesters assaulting police officers and attempting to set fire to a hotel housing asylum-seekers.⁹

This incident is not an isolated example of migration-related disinformation and misinformation leading to unrest and social tensions. Just one year earlier, in November 2023, a similar dynamic unfolded in Dublin, Ireland. After a knife attack outside a school that injured three children,

¹ EuropeInvasionn (X: @EuropeInvasionn), "The attacker is confirmed to be Muslim. Name is Ali Al-Shakati. 17 years old. Came to UK last year. Has mental problems", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://x.com/EuropeInvasionn/status/1817905351880020365>, archive.ph/ctNqX

² Mersey Police (X: @MerseyPolice), "Police responding to incident in Southport...", accessed 27.10.2024, <https://x.com/MerseyPolice/status/1817896586539626500/photo/1>

³ See above

⁴ Al Jazeera, "Southport Stabbing: What Led to the Spread of Disinformation?", 2 August 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/2/southport-stabbing-what-led-to-the-spread-of-disinformation>.

⁵ Al Jazeera, "Southport Stabbing: What Led to the Spread of Disinformation?", 2 August 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/2/southport-stabbing-what-led-to-the-spread-of-disinformation>.

⁶ Mayblin, Lucy, Thom Davies, Arshad Isakjee, Joe Turner, and Tesfalem Yemane. "Small Boats, Big Contracts: Extracting Value from the UK's Post-Brexit Asylum 'Crisis'." *The Political Quarterly*, 95.2 (2024): 253-262, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12688>.

⁷ Al Jazeera, "Southport Attack: Why Are Knife Crimes on the Rise in the UK?", 1 August 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/1/southport-attack-why-are-knife-crimes-on-the-rise-in-the-uk>.

⁸ Al Jazeera, "UK Charges 17-Year-Old Over Southport Killings as Far-Right Protests Rage", 1 August 2024, accessed 27.10.2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/1/uk-charges-17-year-old-over-southport-killings-as-far-right-protests-rage>; Al Jazeera, "UK braces for day of unrest amid fears of far-right riots in 30 locations", 7 August 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/7/uk-braces-for-day-of-unrest-amid-fears-of-far-right-riots-in-30-locations>; The Guardian, "Extreme right activists 'terrorising' UK Muslims, Tell MAMA reports", 4 August 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/aug/04/extreme-right-activists-terrorising-uk-muslims-tell-mama>

⁹ Reuters, "Man jailed 9 years for setting fire to asylum seekers' hotel amid UK anti-Muslim riots", 6 September 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/man-jailed-9-years-setting-fire-asylum-seekers-hotel-uk-anti-muslim-riots-2024-09-06/>

unconfirmed reports on social media falsely claimed that the attacker was an “illegal immigrant”. These claims sparked violent riots, where anti-immigrant slogans were displayed, including the word “out” smeared on the back of a bus that was set on fire.¹⁰

Far-right groups were accused of promoting lies on social media, amplifying concerns about the arrival of foreigners, particularly asylum-seekers. In the aftermath of the riots, commentators also highlighted that **disinformation had been circulating widely** prior to the riots, particularly **regarding the social benefits migrants receive**.¹¹ But some analysts also pointed to the **housing crisis** shaking the country’s social fabric as playing a role in the events.¹²

In Ireland, disillusionment and resentment were mounting, and the large influx of asylum-seekers added to these tensions. Far-right groups capitalised on this, using the knife attack as a trigger and rallies and social media to push the narrative that “Ireland is full.”

These two examples illustrate how **disinformation can connect deep-seated anxieties – about security and housing, or the state of the economy** – to different groups of migrants or perceived foreigners, be they asylum-seekers or so-called ‘second-generation’ migrants, to try to undermine social cohesion, fuel xenophobia and influence public perceptions. **Disinformation can adapt and exploit high-visibility events to spread quicker and gain further visibility**.

Vast amount of disinformation, alongside misinformation, is promoted on social media and on the internet, on a daily basis. False stories are said to play a significant role in **shaping public discourse** on this topic.¹³ Migration-related disinformation, in particular, preys on the voicelessness of its subjects, who are underrepresented in the media and in political discourse, and often marginalised in society.¹⁴ The infamous ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory – which suggests that immigration is being promoted by elites in an effort to replace native populations – is just one notable illustration of this challenge. Migration-related disinformation also comes in less conspicuous iterations that end up reproducing similar fears and divisive emotions.

The rapid spread of false and misleading information has emerged as **one of the most pressing challenges in liberal democracies**, particularly concerning sensitive and complex issues like migration that have come to dominate the political discourse. **Awareness of the harmful effects of disinformation and misinformation is growing**, and many Europeans are increasingly concerned about receiving false or misleading information, particularly regarding migration.¹⁵

¹⁰ Time, “Dublin Clashes Erupt as Riot Police Respond to Knife Attack Incident”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://time.com/6339333/dublin-clashes-riot-police-knife-attack/>.

¹¹ France24, “Dublin Riot Highlights Far-Right Agitation Over Ireland Immigration”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231125-dublin-riot-highlights-far-right-agitation-over-ireland-immigration>

¹² Time, “Dublin Riots and the Irish Youth Housing Crisis”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://time.com/6343248/dublin-riots-irish-youth-housing-crisis/>.

¹³ See among others, Björk, Anna, “Facts, Narratives, and Migration: Tackling Disinformation at the European and UN Level of Governance”, *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2022, pp. 177–197; Ambrosetti, Elena, Fortunato, Cecilia, and Miccoli, Sara, “EU Border Crisis on Twitter: Sentiments and Misinformation Analysis”, *Book of the Short Papers*, Pearson, 2023, pp. 839–842; Samdani, Abdullah, and Dimri, Shikha, “Syrian Refugees and the Digital Misinformation Crisis: Legal Challenges and Policy Solutions”, *Journal of Informatics Education and Research*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, 2024; Bailer, Werner, Thallinger, Georg, Backfried, Gerhard, and Thomas-Aniola, Dorothea, “Challenges for Automatic Detection of Fake News Related to Migration”, *2021 IEEE Conference on Cognitive and Computational Aspects of Situation Management (CogSIMA)*, IEEE, 2021; Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), *The Networks and Narratives of Anti-Refugee Disinformation in Europe*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021; Sánchez Esparza, M., Vázquez Diéguez, I., and Merino Arribas, A., “Mapping Stigmatizing Hoaxes Towards Immigrants on Twitter and Digital Media: Case Study in Spain, Greece, and Italy”, *News Media and Hate Speech Promotion in Mediterranean Countries*, IGI Global, 2023, pp. 136–161; Culloty, E., and Suiter, J., “Disinformation about Migration: An Age-Old Issue with New Tech Dimensions”, in *World Migration Report 2022*, International Organization for Migration, 2022, <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022>.

¹⁴ “The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects: A Literature Review”, Jakob-Moritz Eberl et al. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2018, pp. 207–223.

¹⁵ European Commission, *Eurobarometer Survey Results, Eurobarometer Surveys 100 (Autumn 2023) and 101 (Spring 2024)*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, accessed 27.10.2024, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2276>

Despite growing attention to the dangers it poses, migration-related disinformation **continues to circulate widely**, in the EU and beyond.¹⁶ Whether European countries, including those forming part of the European Union (EU), will be able to address this challenge or not carries serious implications for the strength of democratic institutions, for public trust and social cohesion.

Against this background, this paper investigates the landscape of migration-related disinformation and misinformation in Europe, focusing on dominant narratives, key actors, and the real-world consequences of disinformation and misinformation targeting migrants and refugees. Where relevant, it also considers false stories and disinformation campaigns targeting ethnic and religious minorities, who are often subjected to similar threat-based narratives.

This study highlights that dominant disinformation narratives frame migrants and migration as a threat to Europeans' **health, wealth, and identity**. False stories are accordingly designed to incite fear and hostility, portraying migrants as violent criminals or burdens on society. They tap into anxieties and pre-existing biases to foster division and confusion.¹⁷ They **spread quickly following attention-grabbing events**, taking advantage of information gaps or information overload, seeking to set the terms of the public debate and distort the political discourse.

This paper also underlines that **much of disinformation about migrants and migration is home grown**, while many of those promoting it in European countries are part of a wider ecosystem where strategies, techniques and narratives are part of a toolbox shared with foreign actors and entities whose identity is hard to trace. For example, EU-based far-right groups typically use the same platforms and repeat the same false messages as a wide array of other motivated actors to achieve their goals, as the Southport and Dublin incidents show. In other words, although disinformation may feed into broader geopolitical strategies to destabilise European societies, **it is not reproduced by foreign state or non-state actors only**, but rather, by cross-border networks who use common strategies and promote the same narratives, often with different aims in mind.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section discusses issues linked to definitions. The second outlines core threat-based narratives in disinformation campaigns, focusing on health, wealth, and identity, and drawing on data collected by the author during the periods of 2019-2020 and 2022, along with more recent targeted examples. The third section explores the role of key actors, both foreign and domestic, in spreading disinformation. The role of social media in the explosion of online disinformation content is examined in the fourth section, together with relevant transformations in the wider media and information ecosystem. These are likewise important to understand the spread of migration-related disinformation and misinformation. The fifth section explores strategies used in disinformation campaigns, while the sixth examines how these exploit personal beliefs and anxieties. Researchers have identified two different explanations for why people pick up and share false content. While 'motivated reasoning' posits that individuals accept false information because it aligns with their pre-existing views, the theory of 'classical reasoning' blames their lack of critical thinking. This paper lays emphasis on both explanations, also highlighting areas for further research. The seventh section discusses the negative impacts of disinformation, especially on democratic institutions and processes as well as on society more broadly. The eighth section reviews responses from public authorities, civil society, and media organisations to counter disinformation, focussing on EU or EU-wide actions and initiatives. Finally, the conclusion offers research and policy recommendations to address disinformation and preserve social cohesion in an increasingly polarised environment.

Among others, this study concludes that a **lack of reliable information on migration** can create an information void that disinformation actors can exploit to shape public debate. **Limited access to quality reporting and declining trust** in democratic institutions further enable the spread of

¹⁶ For a recent account of disinformation on migration ahead of the Presidential Elections in the US, see Slocum, John. "Immigration in the 2024 US Presidential Election Campaign: Policy Stalemate and Disinformation." *CIDOB*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/immigration-2024-us-presidential-election-campaign-policy-stalemate-disinformation>.

¹⁷ Davey, Jacob, and Julia Ebner, "'The Great Replacement': The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2019.

migration-related disinformation. **Efforts to ban disinformation websites or accounts spreading disinformation may prove insufficient** in this context, as actors coordinate and adapt to circumvent restrictions to sustain their campaigns. Without accessible, trustworthy information as well as policies addressing legitimate concerns about migration's societal and economic impacts, certain individuals and groups will more likely be swayed by false narratives.

While this study acknowledges broader shifts in the information ecosystem, it does not delve into the relationship between disinformation and propaganda (content meant to advance specific ideological agendas) or satire (news that mimics real news with cues that it is not meant to be taken seriously). Instead, it draws from an extensive review of academic literature, data, reports, and case studies, as well as grey literature, to demonstrate the challenges posed by migration-related disinformation and misinformation, and identifies actions that can be taken to address it.¹⁸

¹⁸ The analytical framework used and several key insights in this study are borrowed from the following sources: Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives", *European Policy Centre*, 2020; Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "From Debunking to Prebunking: How to Get Ahead of Disinformation on Migration in the EU", *European Policy Centre*, 2021; Neidhardt, A. H., "Boosting Europe's Resilience After Russia's Invasion: Disinformation on Refugees from Ukraine", *European Policy Centre*, 2022.

2. Definitions: Can they capture the Changing Disinformation Environment?

The concepts of disinformation and misinformation have been extensively discussed across various disciplines and from different policy perspectives, with definitions that vary slightly but generally converge around specific aspects, such as motives and intentionality.¹⁹ **Disinformation is therefore generally understood as involving false or misleading information spread intentionally to cause harm or for economic gain.**²⁰ The EU accordingly defines disinformation as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information [...] promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.”²¹ This should not be confused with **misinformation**, which **refers to “misleading or inaccurate information shared by people who do not recognise it as such.”**²²

While some have criticised the existing definitions for being too broad or subjective, specialists have also highlighted the difficulty of fully capturing the complexity of disinformation in today’s fast-evolving media environment.²³ For example, it is not uncommon for an article to **contain both accurate information and false claims or half-truths.**²⁴ Even **truthful information can be used to mislead**, through **selective emphasis or out-of-context reporting** – tactics often seen in migration-related stories. Scholars have also pointed out that misleading information can take the form of outdated, poorly presented, or incomplete data.²⁵ Additionally, opinion pieces are sometimes presented as news, or content that cannot be verified is shared as fact.

The distinction between disinformation and other forms of inaccurate information has also grown increasingly important. However, it can be challenging to classify all promotion of false content as strictly disinformation. Intentionality may be hard to prove, or **the goal may not be to cause harm or gain profit but rather to sow confusion.** ‘**Information gaslighting**’, for example, is a strategy designed to flood the information space with a mix of accurate and misleading content, creating uncertainty.²⁶ The ultimate goal is to undermine the public’s ability to distinguish truth from lies, leading to ‘cognitive overload’ or ‘cognitive exhaustion’. In such conditions, people become more susceptible to disinformation, as they stop critically evaluating the messages they receive.

Another approach or reason, ‘**adaptive disinformation**’ is common in viral migration-related stories. This refers to misleading or inaccurate information spread by those who may not intend to cause harm or make a profit but are instead seeking to gain followers or influence. Certain news outlets, for example, may promote sensationalised or misleading content about migration not to deceive, but to attract larger audiences, thereby increasing their visibility and engagement.²⁷

Disinformation actors also take advantage of **technological advancements** to circumvent debunking or regulatory initiatives (see Section 6).

¹⁹ For an overview, see Annex I.

²⁰ Nimmo, B., “Identifying Disinformation: An ABC Approach”, *IES Policy Brief*, February 2016.

²¹ High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation: Report of the Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, European Commission, 2018, p. 5.

²² High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation: Report of the Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, European Commission, 2018, p. 5.

²³ Fallis, Don, “What Is Disinformation?”, *Library Trends*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2015, pp. 401–426.

²⁴ Pathak, Archita, Rohini K. Srihari, and Nihit Natu, “Disinformation: Analysis and Identification”, *Computational and Mathematical Organization Theory*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2021, pp. 357–375.

²⁵ Chittedam, Alron, “Role of Misinformation in Migration”, *International Journal of Policy Sciences and Law*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2021, pp. 1693–1711.

²⁶ Nisbet, Erik C., and Kamenchuk, Olga, “The Psychology of State-Sponsored Disinformation Campaigns and Implications for Public Diplomacy”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 14, Nos. 1-2, 2019, pp. 65–82.

²⁷ Fallis, Don, “What Is Disinformation?”, *Library Trends*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2015, pp. 401–426.

The disinformation environment is constantly evolving, blending more seamlessly with half-truths and genuine content.²⁸ This makes identifying and countering disinformation more challenging, as it becomes harder to distinguish it from other types of misleading content, and between malicious actors and those who unintentionally spread false information.

Both state and non-state, foreign and domestic actors will continue to exploit these grey areas, using a range of tactics to try to deepen societal divisions and erode trust in democratic institutions (see Sections 4 and 8). Meanwhile, individuals exposed to disinformation – especially those with legitimate concerns about implications of migration for European societies – may find it harder to distinguish truth from falsehood, facts from opinion, misleading content spread by like-minded persons unintentionally from lies promoted to cause public harm or gain profit, or sow confusion.

²⁸ Bayer, Judit, Holznagel, Bernd, Lubianiec, Katarzyna, Pinteá, Adela, Schmitt, Josephine, Szakács, Judit, and Uszkiewicz, Erik. "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update." European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633).

3. Dominant Disinformation Narratives: Migrants as a Threat to Europeans' Health, Wealth and Identity

Migration is a prime topic for those promoting lies and half-truths. It is a **complex phenomenon**, with the differences between groups of people on the move being easily misunderstood. People migrate for various reasons, due to lack of educational or employment opportunities in their home countries, or to escape conflict or persecution. The responsibility for governing migration is also distributed across local, national and supranational authorities, and **the facts surrounding migration are often difficult to ascertain or explain.** The lack of inter-group contact between locals and migrants combined with the spatial and socio-economic segregation in many European cities also makes it easier for disinformation actors to scapegoat the latter for a whole range of social and economic issues (see Section 9.2).²⁹

Various taxonomies have been proposed to categorise the types of migration-related disinformation and misinformation in this context, such as clickbait, misleading connections, fabricated content, conspiracy theories, or rumours.³⁰ **This study** takes a different approach. It **focuses on identifying the overarching frames and narratives that drive migration-related disinformation and misinformation**, noting that these are frequently linked to issues of deep symbolic meaning – such as religion and identity – or sensitive topics like jobs and security.

Narratives serve as distinct and competing interpretations of reality. They function on both cognitive and emotional levels. On the one hand, they convey information in an accessible and compelling way. On the other, they allow individuals to process that information and navigate its complexity, providing structure to their thinking and shared meaning. **Migration narratives often attribute specific causes or reasons to migration while suggesting** corresponding ideas or **policy solutions**, often simplifying complexity on both ends to enhance persuasiveness.

Evidence suggests that disinformation actors, while tailoring their stories to local developments and regional contexts, follow a 'playbook' of higher-level frames, exploiting public fears and anxieties about such issues.³¹ In Europe, three frames are especially dominant, consistently presenting immigration and migrants as threats to Europeans' **health, wealth, and identity**.³²

3.1. Health-based Frame

The first frame portrays migrants as a threat to Europeans' health, their bodily and mental integrity and by extension, their security. In disinformation and misinformation stories, migrants are often falsely depicted as carriers of disease or accused of having preferential access to healthcare systems. These stories typically rely on completely fabricated claims or distortions of real events, creating the perception that the local population is being unfairly disadvantaged while undeserving immigrants are being supported by national governments or local authorities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health-related narratives were especially dominant. False stories circulated about migrants deliberately spreading the virus, ignoring social distancing measures and

²⁹ Chouliaraki, L., and Georgiou, M., "The Digital Border: Mobility Beyond Territorial and Symbolic Divides", *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 34, no. 6, 2022

³⁰ Sánchez Esparza, M., Vázquez Diéguez, I., and Merino Arribas, A., "Mapping Stigmatizing Hoaxes Towards Immigrants on Twitter and Digital Media: Case Study in Spain, Greece, and Italy", *News Media and Hate Speech Promotion in Mediterranean Countries*, IGI Global, 2023.

³¹ Neidhardt, A. H., *Disinformation on Migration: How Lies, Half-Truths, and Mischaracterizations Spread*, Migration Policy Institute, Brussels, 2021, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/disinformation-migration-how-lies-half-truths-spread>

³² Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives", *European Policy Centre*, 2020, p. 7.

continuing to gather in large numbers while local populations were under quarantine.³³ Often, these narratives were linked to cultural stereotypes. Ethnic minorities, like the Roma community, were accused of irresponsibly spreading the virus.³⁴ Other minority groups were similarly scapegoated, such as frequent claims that Muslim migrants were gathering to pray in violation of restrictions – a common trope during the 2019-2020 period.³⁵

Reports by independent organisations and researchers confirm that health - alongside security – continues to be a core theme of migration-related disinformation, even after the end of the pandemic.³⁶

Then and now, health-based disinformation stories often fuel a sense of **‘reverse discrimination’** among nationals of the host country, for example, spreading the false claim that migrants receive preferential healthcare treatment or prevent locals from accessing medical care.³⁷

Narratives exploiting Europeans’ fears about their wellbeing also portray migrants as **prone to violence or sexual crimes**, reinforcing clichés about their disrespectful behaviour. The alleged existence of ‘no-go zones’ controlled by migrants, where law enforcement cannot enter, is frequently promoted by disinformation stories.³⁸ Disinformation also amplifies feelings that European women are no longer safe due to the presence of ‘migrant sexual predators’. These **stories frequently contain both accurate information and false claims, exploiting cognitive biases** to raise their perceived truthfulness (see Section 7). But claims are also accompanied by

³³ Secolo d'Italia, "Immigrati alla fermata dei bus a Roma. Le regole per loro non valgono?", 16 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.secoloditalia.it/2020/03/immigrati-alla-fermata-dei-bus-a-roma-le-regole-per-loro-non-valgono-la-denuncia-di-lollobrigida/>; Il Primato Nazionale, "Coronavirus, gli immigrati se ne fregano anche a Bergamo. Tutti ammassati in stazione", 18 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/cronaca/coronavirus-immigrati-fregano-anche-a-bergamo-ammassati-stazione-150048/>; OK Diario, "Motín en el CIE de Aluche: los inmigrantes se rebelan por el confinamiento del coronavirus", 17 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://okdiario.com/espana/motin-cie-aluche-inmigrantes-rebelan-confinamiento-coronavirus-5330973>; H50 Digital Police Magazine, "MENAS jugando al futbol en Bilbao durante el estado de alarma", 19 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://h50.es/menas-jugando-al-futbol-bilbao-estado-alarma/>.

³⁴ Szakacs, J., and Bogner, E., "The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU", Policy Department for External Relations, Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, 2021, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/INGE/DV/2021/07-12/IDADisinformation_migrant_minorities_EN.pdf.

³⁵ See Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives", *European Policy Centre*, 2020, p. 17, for an overview: The citizens of Trento are forced to stay at home while immigrants are free: another instance of the one-way racism against Italians" (Italy) "Muslims break confinement for Ramadan" (Spain) "Migrants deliberately spit and sneeze at Germans and shout 'now you have coronavirus!'" (Czech Republic) "No quarantine for sick refugees in Greece, but for healthy German holidaymakers" (Germany).

³⁶ European Digital Media Observatory, "EDMO-36 Horizontal: Insights from the EDMO's Monitoring Activities", June 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/EDMO-36-Horizontal.pdf>; Ostro, "Na posnetku s Kongresnega trga se niso pretepali migranti", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ostro.si/si/razkrinkavanje/objave/na-posnetku-s-kongresnega-trga-se-niso-pretepali-migranti>; DPA Fact Checking, "Did a Polish citizen attack the German prime minister?", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://dpa-factchecking.com/germany/240626-99-541423/>; Correctiv, "No, the video shows a fight in Australia, not Vienna. It has been used for xenophobic propaganda", Correctiv, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2024/06/25/nicht-wien-sondern-australien-video-von-toedlichem-streit-fuer-auslaenderfeindliche-hetze-genutzt/>.

³⁷ See further examples in Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives", *European Policy Centre*, 2020.

³⁸ Secolo d'Italia, "Da Torino a Roma immigrati creano il caos: furti, rapine, spaccio e aggressioni agli agenti", 21 February 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.secoloditalia.it/2020/02/da-torino-a-roma-immigrati-creano-il-caos-furti-rapine-spaccio-e-aggressioni-agli-agenti/>; VoxNews, "Agenti cacciati da immigrati, quartiere in mano Africana", 8 May 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.voxnews.info/2020/05/08/agenti-cacciati-da-immigrati-quartiere-in-mano-africana/>; Pravý Prostor, "V Německu už mají vedle no-go zón i absolutně-no-go zóny", 9 June 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://pravyprostor.cz/v-nemecku-uz-maji-vedle-no-go-zon-i-absolutne-no-go-zony/>.

manipulated statistics to exaggerate actual social and economic problems and present immigration as synonymous, for example, with increased crime.³⁹

In this context, seemingly trivial incidents are either given **disproportionate attention, or are reported with factual inaccuracies**, to portray migrants as ungrateful, disrespectful, or harassing, even when no criminal activity has occurred.⁴⁰ On the other hand, false reports also concern serious attacks against anti-immigration politicians,⁴¹ as well as **particularly heinous and shocking crimes** such as child abduction,⁴² or violence against pregnant women.⁴³ Claims that many migrants come to Europe with terrorist intentions, which are presented as fact, are also not uncommon.

Health-related frames are frequently mixed with other threat-based messages. It is particularly during times of large-scale arrivals that disinformation paint migrants and ethnic minorities as more likely to commit crimes than native citizens (on 'invasion narratives' see Section 3.3).⁴⁴ Concerns about the economy are also exploited to amplify the perception that migrants are a hostile and homogenous group that refuses to abide by societal rules, further cementing an 'us versus them' mentality. Migrants are for instance frequently depicted as 'cheating' the system, with stories of individuals lying about their age being used to inflate and exaggerate their overall numbers and their impact on welfare systems and available integration resources (see next Section 3.2).⁴⁵

False claims are often adapted to local concerns to increase their visibility and resonance. For instance, during the summer of 2024, conspiracy theories in Greece falsely accused migrants of starting wildfires.⁴⁶ Previous incidents involving migrants, asylum-seekers or refugees are exploited to harness resonance, spread confusion and normalise the assumption that violent acts are systematically perpetrated by the same group of persons. In the summer of 2024, for example,

³⁹ Polígrafo, "André Ventura mimetiza Passos Coelho e diz que vaga migratória está a aumentar a criminalidade na Europa. É verdade?", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/fact-check/andre-ventura-mimetiza-passos-coelho-e-diz-que-vaga-migratoria-esta-a-aumentar-a-criminalidade-na-europa-e-verdade>; AFP Factual, "Non, le nombre d'homicides n'a pas été 'multiplié par quatre' en 15 ans en France", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://factual.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34R38FD>; Meddmo, "Parapliroforhsh sxetika me ta posonta egklhmatikothtas twn Roma gia klopes kai diarrhksis", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://meddmo.eu/el/parapliroforhsh-sxetika-me-ta-pososta-egklhmatikothtas-twn-roma-gia-klopes-kai-diarrhksis/>.

⁴⁰ E.g. Area-C, "Rivolta immigrati a Boville-Vogliamo soldi non cibo", 07 June 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.area-c.it/rivolta-immigrati-a-boville-vogliamo-soldi-non-cibo/>; Anonymousnews.ru, "Während deutsche Rentner hungern: Flüchtlinge entsorgen Tüten voller Tafel-Lebensmittel im Müll", 05 July 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.anonymousnews.org/deutschland/fluechtlinge-entsorgen-tafelspende/>.

⁴¹ Logically Facts, "False: Denmark's Prime Minister Was Allegedly Attacked by a Polish Citizen, Not a Muslim Asylum Seeker", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.logicallyfacts.com/en/fact-check/false-denmark-s-prime-minister-was-allegedly-attacked-by-a-polish-citizen-not-a-muslim-asylum-seeker>.

⁴² The Journal, "Debunked: Alleged Kidnapping Attempt in Dundalk, No Evidence", August 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/debunked-alleged-kidnapping-attempt-dundalk-no-evidence-gardai-siochana-councillors-louth-6463720-Aug2024/>; The Journal, "FactCheck: Debunked Abductions of Child in Cork City and Bandon", September 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/factcheck-debunked-abductions-child-cork-city-bandon-6493619-Sep2024/>.

⁴³ Fact Check Cyprus, "African Migrants Did Not Throw Pregnant Woman Off Bus in Paris", Fact Check Cyprus, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://factcheckcyprus.org/fact-checks/parapliroforisi/african-migrants-did-not-throw-pregnant-woman-off-bus-in-paris/>.

⁴⁴ Chouliraki, Lilie, and Rafal Zaborowski. "Voice and Community in the 2015 Refugee Crisis: A Content Analysis of News Coverage in Eight European Countries", *International Communication Gazette*, vol. 79, no. 6-7, 2017, pp. 613-635, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048517715480>.

⁴⁵ Il Giornale, "La truffa dei migranti minori: 'Accolti, ma hanno 40 anni'", 9 September 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/la-truffa-dei-migranti-minori-accolti-ma-hanno-40-anni-1792034.html>; Il Primato Nazionale, "Nove immigrati su dieci sono uomini. La bomba sociale pronta a esplodere anche in Italia", 21 May 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/approfondimenti/nove-immigrati-dieci-uomini-bomba-sociale-italia-118868/>; Caso Aislado, "La verdad de los menas al descubierto: el 50% de los que llegan a España mienten sobre su edad", 08 September 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://forotrolls.com/threads/la-verdad-de-los-menas-al-descubierto-el-50-de-los-que-llegan-a-espa%C3%B1a-mienten-sobre-su-edad.116498/>.

⁴⁶ European Digital Media Observatory, "EDMO 27: Horizontal Fact-Checking Report", May 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EDMO-27-Horizontal-FCB.pdf>.

disinformation also spread widely about the background of an attacker at the Israeli Consulate General in Munich, Germany, after a previous attack perpetrated by an asylum-seeker in the country.⁴⁷ Contrary to these claims, the Munich attacker was not a migrant.⁴⁸

While false claims often build on pre-existing stereotypes, and may present certain groups as particularly violent, prone to crime or socially irresponsible, the health-threat frame affects all groups of people on the move, regardless of their status, ethnicity or religious background.

Illustrating this, similar threat-based narratives have targeted Ukrainians who were displaced by Russia's invasion in February 2022. False reports alleged, for example, that local children had been thrown out of oncological hospitals and replaced by Ukrainians.⁴⁹ Yet, especially common have been disinformation stories claiming that Ukrainians are violent toward locals in cities in Western, Central and Eastern Europe, reinforcing the sense that those who have found protection there pose a threat to local and national security.⁵⁰ Unsubstantiated stories have also claimed that Wagner soldiers are hiding among displaced Ukrainians, amplifying security concerns.⁵¹

3.2. Wealth-based Frame

Just as disinformation exploits fears about health and physical security. It also targets people's economic insecurities, and particular their concerns about prosperity and job opportunities. Another dominant frame in false stories about migrants centres on **Europeans' wealth**. Corresponding threat-based narratives depict migrants as unfair competitors for jobs, a drain on social welfare systems, and a burden on public resources.

The claim that **migrants 'steal' jobs from locals** is an old, well-known trope, yet it remains prevalent, especially in countries facing high unemployment. In some instances, this narrative is

⁴⁷ Bayerischer Rundfunk, "Versuchter Terroranschlag in München: Was bisher bekannt ist", 25 September 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/versuchter-terroranschlag-in-muenchen-was-bisher-bekannt-ist.UNUaQoH>.

⁴⁸ GADMO, "Gebrühtiger Salzburger schoss in München um sich", GADMO, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://gadmo.eu/gebruehtiger-salzbuerger-schoss-in-mnchen-um-sich/>.

⁴⁹ DFRLab, "False reports incite attacks on non-Ukrainian refugees in Poland", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/false-reports-incite-attacks-on-non-ukrainian-refugees-in-poland-a2b549bec10a>.

⁵⁰ DFRLab, "False reports incite attacks on non-Ukrainian refugees in Poland", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/false-reports-incite-attacks-on-non-ukrainian-refugees-in-poland-a2b549bec10a>.

⁵⁰ DEMAGOG, "Polskie dzieci są wyrzucane ze szpitali onkologicznych? Nie ma dowodów!", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://demagog.org.pl/fakt-check/polskie-dzieci-sa-wyrzucane-ze-szpitali-onkologicznych-nie-ma-dowodow/>; DEMAGOG, "Przemysł – situation of refugees at the border explained", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://demagog.org.pl/fakt-check/przemysl-situation-of-refugees-at-the-border-explained/>; Tilles, Daniel. "Russia using disinformation to stir hostility between Ukrainians and Poles, warn security services", *Notes from Poland*, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/05/31/russia-using-disinformation-to-stir-hostility-between-ukrainians-and-poles-warn-security-services/>; Todtmann, Feliks. "Annalena Baerbock hat nicht gesagt, Deutschland werde bis zu zehn Millionen Geflüchtete aus der Ukraine aufnehmen", *AFP Deutschland*, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://fakty.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33UD78P>; Tilles, Daniel. "Russia using disinformation to stir hostility between Ukrainians and Poles, warn security services", *Notes from Poland*, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/05/31/russia-using-disinformation-to-stir-hostility-between-ukrainians-and-poles-warn-security-services/>; Telegram (2022): "DONT PANIC77", "Please don't panic!" accessed 27 October 2024, <https://t.me/DONT PANIC77/1572>; Telegram (2022): "qpolska", "Current events and news updates", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://t.me/qpolska/80245>; Il Fatto Quotidiano, "La fake news del direttore dell'Agenzia spaziale russa: 'Ecco cosa fanno i rifugiati ucraini in Italia'. Ma il video dell'aggressione è del 2018", 17 March 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilmattoquotidiano.it/2022/03/17/la-fake-news-del-direttore-dellagenzia-spaziale-russa-ecco-cosa-fanno-i-rifugiati-ucraini-in-italia-ma-il-video-dellaggressione-e-del-2018/6735438/>; Gigitashvili, Givi and Esteban Ponce de León, "Polish-language Telegram channels spread anti-refugee narratives", *Digital Forensic Research Lab - Atlantic Council*, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/polish-language-telegram-channels-spread-anti-refugee-narratives/>.

⁵¹ DW, "Fact Check: Are Wagner fighters disguised as migrants?", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-are-wagner-fighters-disguised-as-migrants/a-66407086>.

tied to conspiracy theories suggesting that **elites are ‘importing’ migrant workers** because they are ‘cheaper’, work harder, or are simply preferred for unclear reasons.⁵²

Other stories leverage concerns about the costs associated with managing arrivals and accommodating migrants, often suggesting that **migrants receive preferential access to social services** or imply that they are undeserving recipients of benefits and support. These include false claims about daily allowances for asylum-seekers, which allegedly exceed social support for nationals.⁵³ In many cases, these stories are framed with **local grievances** in mind, accusing foreign workers and asylum-seekers of receiving support while locals are left behind. Illustrating this, a frequently used narrative involves migrants receiving **privileged access to social housing**. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, stories circulated about migrants being housed in hotels or luxurious cruise liners, enjoying a comfortable lifestyle at the public's expense.⁵⁴

Similar narratives have become prominent following the displacement of Ukrainians in Europe, depicting them as systematically **abusing welfare systems**. False stories concern housing support, access to education, healthcare, and financial assistance for Ukrainians.⁵⁵ Since 2022, for example, numerous posts have falsely claimed that Ukrainians would benefit from pension schemes despite having never worked in Europe.⁵⁶ In reality, their status is temporary, and many began working soon after their arrival. Other baseless rumours suggest that Ukrainians are exempt from paying taxes or insurance.⁵⁷ In the same vein, false stories claim that Ukrainians earn twice as much as natives despite working less.⁵⁸

Contradictory claims are also common, suggesting that those who are exposed to disinformation may pick up those elements that align to their existing beliefs and anxieties while ignoring or rejecting contradictory information (see Section 7). On one hand, for example, false stories argue that persons displaced from Ukraine are exploiting social benefits while driving luxury

⁵² Aeronet News, “Česká republika masivně dováží tisíce migrantů, jenže je nedeklaruje jako azylanty, nýbrž jako vyzvané cizince s povoleními k pobytu!”, 23 May 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/100048632653769/posts/2230553073649141/>.

⁵³ See examples in Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., “Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives”, *European Policy Centre*, 2020, p. 19: “Conte: 6 euros for Italians to buy food, and 42 euros a day for immigrants” (Italy) “In Morocco, they are going wild for the universal basic income. The Spanish government is announcing it so that they can fill Spain with Moroccans who will live without working at the expense of the Spanish” (Spain) “Asylum seekers are worth three times as much as HartzIV welfare recipients” (Germany).

⁵⁴ Il Giornale, “Salvini: ‘Il traghettone con cinema e solarium. Ecco la quarantena dei migranti’”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/salvini-traghettone-cinema-e-solarium-ecco-quarantena-dei-1855357.html>; Il Giornale, “Cabine singole e cibo ‘etnico’ per i migranti in quarantena”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/cabine-singole-e-cibo-etnico-i-migranti-quarantena-1856789.html>; VoxNews, “Italiani in cerca di cibo tra scarti e rifiuti: governo cerca navi di lusso per immigrati”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://voxnews.info/2024/06/20/italiani-in-cerca-di-cibo-tra-scarti-e-rifiuti-governo-cerca-navi-di-lusso-per-immigrati/>; VoxNews, “Tre Italiane vivono sotto un ponte a Milano mentre manteniamo 85mila immigrati in hotel”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://voxnews.info/2024/06/12/tre-italiane-vivono-sotto-un-ponte-a-milano-mentre-manteniamo-85mila-immigrati-in-hotel/>; 20 Minutos, “Vox acusa al Gobierno de alojar a ‘inmigrantes ilegales en lujosos hoteles’ y regalarles guantes, mascarillas y geles”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/4743081/0/vox-gobierno-inmigrantes-lujosos-hoteles-guantes-mascarillas-geles/>.

⁵⁵ NDP, “Już na 20 tysięcy imigrantów przyleciało do Polski w ciągu miesiąca”, accessed 27 October 2024, https://t.me/ndp_pl/5991; see also European Digital Media Observatory, “Ukrainian Refugees and Disinformation: Situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/publications/ukrainian-refugees-and-disinformation-situation-in-poland-hungary-slovakia-and-romania/>.

⁵⁶ Russecki, J., “Ukrainische Geflüchtete bekommen bei Renten in Deutschland keine Sonderbehandlung”, *AFP Deutschland*, 17 May 2022, <https://fakty.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33UD7BP>.

⁵⁷ The Journal, “Do Ukrainians need insurance to drive in Ireland? Tax debunked”, 20 January 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/do-ukrainians-need-insurance-to-drive-in-ireland-tax-debunk-6284574-Jan2024/>.

⁵⁸ Kancelaria Lega Artis, “Uchodźca zarobi dwa razy więcej niż Polak, pracując mniej”, 16 March 2022, <https://legaartis.pl/uchodzca-zgodnie-z-prawem-zarobi-dwa-razy-wiecej-niz-polak-3099/>.

cars.⁵⁹ On the other hand, they claim that the influx of Ukrainians is driving up unemployment in Europe.⁶⁰

Wealth-related narratives appear to tap into widespread **fears about unemployment and financial insecurity**, which have become salient across many countries, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These claims also stoke fears of reverse discrimination, with migrants seen as benefiting at the expense of struggling local populations.

Reverse discrimination claims are present in claims concerning all migrant groups. They target asylum-seekers as well as displaced Ukrainians, with claims about locals being evicted to make room for newcomers,⁶¹ and suggesting that locals are treated as "second-class citizens"⁶² due to the assistance afforded to foreigners.⁶³

Wealth-related disinformation stories, as in the case of threat-based narratives on health and identity, may have specific goals relating to the specific group they target. For example, they may aim to promote anti-Ukrainian sentiments against persons displaced by Russia's aggression, claiming that displaced Ukrainians are damaging host country economies while profiting from the war.⁶⁴ Yet, wealth-related narratives are said to be particularly consequential in shaping public opinion and policy preferences, with studies showing that citizens who believe that migrants have a negative fiscal impact are more likely to support immigration restrictions (see Section 8).⁶⁵

3.3. Identity-based Frame

The third threat-based frame at the centre of disinformation and misinformation about migration focuses on values and culture, portraying **migrants as a danger to Europeans' identity and Europe's civilisation**.⁶⁶ These narratives equate the arrival of foreigners with an erosion of national culture and frame migration as a threat to the pre-existing religions of European nations.

False articles using this frame for example depict migrants as either unwilling or incapable of integrating into European society, **highlighting perceived cultural incompatibilities**.⁶⁷ Many stories exploiting identity-based frames simultaneously leverage security concerns, portraying migrants as predisposed to violence and suggesting they cannot coexist peacefully with Europeans, due to their uncivilised background or backward beliefs.

Religious undertones are common, particularly in relation to Muslim migrants as well as citizens of foreign origin who are Muslim. The claim that Europe is being 'Islamised,' with Christian or secular traditions being replaced by Islam – a religion often portrayed as inherently violent – is frequent. False or misleading stories reproducing the 'Islamisation narrative' tend to portray all **Muslim migrants as enforcing patriarchal or sexist norms**. For example, they exaggerate or

⁵⁹ E.g. The Beacon Project, "Hostile Narratives Brief: War in Ukraine", Brief No. 11, 28 June 2022, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Ruch Oporu Polska, "Walka z dezinformacją: szokujące fałszywe statystyki na temat uchodźców", 24 July 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://t.me/ruchopropolska/81>.

⁶¹ DEMAGOG, "Uchodźcy dostają darmowe mieszkania? Fake news!", accessed 27 October 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/uchodzcy-dostaja-darmowe-mieszkania-fake-news/.

⁶² "Uchodźcy z Ukrainy dostają mieszkania i socjał na lewo? To nieprawda!", 27 October 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://archive.ph/D8rzn>.

⁶³ Facebook, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://archive.ph/SOEAw>.

⁶⁴ Pravda, "Kredyt Ukraińcy", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://pravda.org.pl/kredyt-ukraincy/>; Naprawoumiru, "Uchodźcy dostają darmowe mieszkania? Fake news!", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://naprawoumiru.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33T82EH>; European Digital Media Observatory, "EDMO-27 Horizontal FCB", May 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EDMO-27-Horizontal-FCB.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Markaki, Y. (2020), "Deliverable 10.6: A Summary of Findings on Perceptions of EU and Non-EU Immigrants", Oxford: REMINDER, <https://reminder-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Deliverable-10.6-Summary-of-findings-on-perceptions-of-EU-and-Non-EU-immigrants.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Protiproud, "Imigrace a multikulturalismus znamená zkázu. KO civilizaci?", 07 September 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://protiproud.info/politika/4404-imigrace-a-multikulturalismus-znamenazkazu-ko-civilizaci.htm>.

⁶⁷ Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives", *European Policy Centre*, 2020, p. 17.

misrepresent incidents to imply that Muslim migrants will demand the introduction of Sharia law, force women to wear burqas, or otherwise impose conservative traditions on societies.⁶⁸

False and misleading stories also concern religious symbols, with baseless or misleading accusations that migrants, especially Muslims, set fire to churches or other Christian sites being rather common.⁶⁹ These stories seek to amplify fears about cultural and religious loss.

Most identity-related disinformation, however, reproduce 'invasion narratives'. These suggest that Europe is being **overwhelmed by 'hordes' of migrants**. Invasion stories manipulate statistics or take them out of context to create the perception that migrants are taking Europe by assault (on the use of statistics, see Section 6). Many such false stories typically emphasise the male gender and young age of migrants, tapping into fears about declining birth rates and ageing populations.⁷⁰

Invasion narratives tend to gain dominance in connection to **increases in irregular arrivals** to Europe. Stories reproducing invasion narratives also exploit events taking place in other countries to gain further visibility. For example, in the summer of 2024, the above-mentioned *Europe Invasion* profile (see Introduction), gained massive popularity by repeatedly sharing invasion stories about different European countries on X, also reaching millions of European users through its activities.⁷¹ In addition, as the Southport incidents show, invasion narratives can exploit societal concerns and amplify public sentiments about the number of migrants entering or residing in European countries, using manipulated stories about unrelated groups such as citizens born from foreign parents, to achieve their purposes.

Invasion narratives are prevalent across Europe and beyond, in countries with a long history of immigration, such as Germany⁷², as well as in those in Central Europe which used to be countries of emigration.⁷³ Yet, they **are also mediated by local experiences and histories**. For example, in countries that recently joined the EU, and those with low-income rates which have little history of immigration from African and Asian countries, invasion narratives often take anti-EU and anti-establishment tones, e.g. accusing the European Union or wealthier states of 'dumping' migrants there.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Reflex, "Ondřej Neff: Migrace je nezastavitelná a šaría bude nutnost, uvidíte do 15 let. Gřety se nebojím, je mi jí líto", 20 June 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.reflex.cz/clanek/prostor-x/95977/ondrej-neff-migrace-je-nezastavitelna-a-saria-bude-nutnost-uvidite-do-15-let-gřety-se-nebojim-je-mi-ji-lito.html>; Il Giornale, "Se governerà ancora la sinistra, l'Ue diventerà un califfato islamico", 02 May 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/se-governera-ancora-sinistra-lue-diventer-califfato-islamico-1871006.html>; The Journal, "Hoax stickers claiming Sharia law coming to Ireland linked to Britain First", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/irish-muslim-council-hoax-stickers-sharia-law-britain-first-social-media-6311302-Feb2024/>.

⁶⁹ Knack, "Factcheck: Brand in Noord-Franse kerk is niet door een migrant, maar door een Fransman aangestoken", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.knack.be/factcheck/factcheck-brand-in-noord-franse-kerk-is-niet-door-een-migrant-maar-door-een-fransman-aangestoken/>.

⁷⁰ La Dépêche, "Drapeaux maghrébins sur une église d'Albi : l'Archevêque et le curé appellent à l'apaisement", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2023/10/03/drapeaux-maghebains-sur-une-eglise-dalbi-larcheveque-et-le-cure-appellent-a-lapaisement-11042443.php>; Chiesaepostconcilio, "Immigrati occupano una chiesa issando bandiere islamiche", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://chiesaepostconcilio.blogspot.com/2020/02/immigrati-occupano-una-chiesa-issando.html>; De Facto Observatoire, "Non, l'Allemagne ne finance pas des programmes pour enseigner aux migrants comment sortir avec des femmes locales", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://defacto-observatoire.fr/Medias/20-Minutes/Fact-checks/Non-l-Allemagne-ne-finance-pas-des-programmes-pour-enseigner-aux-migrants-comment-sortir-avec-des-femmes-locales/>.

⁷¹ TjekDet, "En enkelt X-profil skaber uro i hele Europa med anti-muslimsk desinformation", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.tjekdet.dk/indsigt/en-enkelt-x-profil-skaber-uro-i-hele-europa-med-anti-muslimsk-desinformation->.

⁷² DPA Fact Checking, "Fact Check: False Claims Regarding Migrants in Germany", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://dpa-factchecking.com/germany/240904-99-302361/>.

⁷³ CEDMO Hub, "Gra na emocjach i brak kontekstu: Chaos informacyjny wokół migracji", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://cedmohub.eu/pl/gr-na-emocjach-i-brak-kontekstu-chaos-informacyjny-wokol-migracji>.

⁷⁴ Horizon Digital Media Observatory, "Anti-migrant disinformation floods Bulgaria at the gateway to Schengen accession", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.hdmo.eu/anti-migrant-disinformation-floods-bulgaria-at-the-gateway-to-schengen-accession/?lang=en>; Agence France-Presse, "Fake news: migrants are not the cause of a rise in

Language and rhetorical devices play a crucial role in reinforcing identity-related narratives. In some cases, migrants are depicted as an ‘**organised army**’, “assaulting” or taking Europe by “storm”, often with the alleged support of ruling elites.⁷⁵ This type of vocabulary is particularly common in countries, such as Spain, where historical references to ‘Muslim invaders’ continue to have cultural resonance. In other cases, **natural metaphors** are common – such as “**waves**” or “**floods**” – to reinforce the notion of an impending disaster or stoke fears that arrivals are out of control and unstoppable.

Stories framing migration as an ‘invasion’ are also often linked to the conspiracy theory of the ‘**Great Replacement**’.⁷⁶ Popularised by French writer Renaud Camus, this theory argues that European and Western elites are orchestrating the replacement of white, Christian Europeans with non-whites, Muslims, Africans, or Arabs through mass immigration and low birth rates. The motivations attributed to these elites range from securing a more sympathetic voter base to undermining Christian and European traditions for ideological purposes.⁷⁷

Evidence suggests that, compared to health and wealth frames, **identity-related disinformation varies to a higher degree in accordance with the group of persons targeted.** Although invasion narratives are prevalent also in the case of persons displaced from Ukraine, for example, they are less common. Ukrainians are not typically portrayed as a threat to European identity or traditions, likely because of their perceived similarity in race and religion to many Europeans. However, identity-related disinformation has still surfaced. For example, in Poland, a conspiracy theory suggests that cooperation between the Polish and Ukrainian governments will lead to the unification of the countries, undermining Polish national identity and sovereignty.⁷⁸ Right-wing extremists also falsely claimed the Polish government is intentionally displacing its own population to accommodate Ukrainians,⁷⁹ with their reception accelerating population replacement.⁸⁰ Yet, these stories mainly circulate among extremists.

crime in France”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://proveri.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34D72FX>; Maldita, “Alemania y las deportaciones ilegales: la información que falta en los medios”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20240206/medios-alemania-deportaciones-ilegales-espana/>.

⁷⁵ Maldita, “Medios alemanes difunden información errónea sobre deportaciones ilegales a España”, Maldita, February 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20240206/medios-alemania-deportaciones-ilegales-espana/>.

⁷⁶ See Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., “Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives”, *European Policy Centre*, 2020, p. 21: “Invasion in Trieste: 1000 Pakistani and Afghani illegals assault the border” (Italy) “Are they really refugees or an invading Islamic army?” (Czech Republic) “Illegals storm the borders. Police: we’re powerless” (Germany) “The Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party gives the green light for the migrant invasion: they order the fences to be pulled down to satisfy Podemos” (Spain)

⁷⁷ The Journal, “Number of illegally present immigrants in Ireland last year was not 10 times the EU average”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/number-of-illegally-present-immigrants-in-ireland-last-year-was-not-10-times-the-eu-average-6378592-May2024/>.

⁷⁸ Polígrafo, “Este vídeo mostra Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa em Timor a promover a substituição da população portuguesa?”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/fact-check/este-video-mostra-marcelo-rebelo-de-sousa-em-timor-a-promover-a-substituicao-da-populacao-portuguesa/>; Polígrafo, “Imagens de concentração de imigrantes em Odívetas comprova substituição da classe trabalhadora branca?”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/fact-check/imagens-de-concentracao-de-imigrantes-em-odivelas-comprova-substituicao-da-classe-trabalhadora-branca/>.

⁷⁹ Frontstory, “‘Ukrainization’ in pro-Russian propaganda in Romania, Poland, Serbia and Hungary”, 08 August 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.frontstory.ro/ukrainization-in-pro-russian-propaganda-in-romania-poland-serbia-and-hungary>.

⁸⁰ Facebook, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://archive.ph/V5iw9>

⁸⁰ Braun, Grzegorz, “Polska powinna wyjść z Unii Europejskiej”, X, 24 February 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://x.com/GrzegorzBraun/status/1498243764120391682>. See also European Digital Media Observatory. “Ukrainian Refugees and Disinformation: Situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania.” *European Digital Media Observatory*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/publications/ukrainian-refugees-and-disinformation-situation-in-poland-hungary-slovakia-and-romania/>.

4. Who spreads Disinformation? From Foreign-Actors to Domestic Cross-Border Networks

Disinformation campaigns are typically orchestrated by a variety of actors, and migration-related disinformation is no exception. Two of the author's previous studies provide insights into the diversity of sources and amplifiers of migration-related disinformation, particularly during 2019-2020 (marked by COVID-19 and the ensuing "infodemic") and following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁸¹ These studies and other independent reports show that **false stories targeting migrants and minorities come from diverse sources, both foreign and domestic.**⁸²

Yet, in the EU, much of the attention focuses on foreign disinformation sources, often neglecting that the (dis-)information ecosystem involves a multiplicity of actors who share tactics and are capable of adapting their strategies to continue operating. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 by Russia reinforced these trends, bringing renewed attention to Kremlin-orchestrated disinformation, but also confirmed the limits of responses that only focus on foreign actors.

Days after the invasion, the EU banned Russian media platforms like Sputnik and RT.⁸³ This ban was later extended to additional Russian outlets.⁸⁴ Yet, such measures proved to a large part ineffective. Other websites and social media accounts continued spreading disinformation about Ukrainians and other war-related issues, with **some but not all traceable back to Russia.**⁸⁵

For instance, websites mimicking the RT domain name continued producing disinformation in Europe, and some Russian domains, disguised as local European news sites, published false content about displaced Ukrainians.⁸⁶ This shows that Russian-controlled sources quickly adapted to circumvent bans, continuing their disinformation campaigns. But alongside foreign sources, **much of the disinformation in Europe about Ukrainians in fact originated from domestic platforms who were promoting the same narratives.**

For example, in Poland – which received a significant number of displaced Ukrainians – far-right profiles on social media and messaging applications, together with local blogs and websites spread false stories presenting Ukrainians as a threat to Poles' health, wealth and identity.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Michałowska-Kubś, A., "Coining lies. Kremlin spends 1.5 Billion per year to spread disinformation and propaganda", *Debunk EU*, 08 August 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.debunk.org/coining-lies-state-budget-financing-of-russian-propaganda>

⁸² Schwarz, K., and Holnburger, J. "Disinformation: what role does disinformation play for hate speech and extremism on the internet and what measures have social media companies taken to combat it", in *Hate Speech and Radicalisation Online: The OCCI Research Report*, 2019, pp. 35-43.

⁸³ Council of the European Union, Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/351 of 1 March 2022 amending Decision 2014/512/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine, OJ L 65, 2 March 2022.

⁸⁴ Council of the European Union, Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/884 of 3 June 2022 amending Decision 2014/512/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine", OJ L 153, 3 June 2022.

⁸⁵ Balint, Kata; Arcostanzo, Francesca; Wildon, Jordan; and Reyes, Kevin, "RT Articles are Finding their Way to European Audiences – but how?", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue Blog*, 20 July 2022; see also Scott, Mark, "As war in Ukraine evolves, so do disinformation tactics", *Politico*, 10 March 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-disinformation-tactics-war-evolves/>.

⁸⁶ DEMAGOG, "Ruskie trolle w Twoim mieście – jak działa skoordynowana dezinformacja?" accessed 27 October 2024, <https://demagog.org.pl/ruskie-trolle-w-twoim-miescie-jak-dziala-skoordynowana-dezinformacja/>.

⁸⁷ European Digital Media Observatory, "Ukrainian Refugees and Disinformation: Situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania," accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/publications/ukrainian-refugees-and-disinformation-situation-in-poland-hungary-slovakia-and-romania/>.

Other European countries were exposed to similar dynamics. In some cases, misleading stories from within the EU were amplified by European anti-immigrant politicians⁸⁸, while in others, politicians themselves promoted the disinformation, which was then picked up by Russian media. For example, several Russian outlets disseminated false claims by French far-right politician Éric Zemmour, who argued that a third of refugees arriving in France from Ukraine were actually Africans.⁸⁹ These examples follow **a broader trend of foreign actors, like Russia, amplifying narratives created by domestic far-right groups to deepen societal divisions**.⁹⁰ Some of these disinformation stories even made their way into European mainstream media.⁹¹

While there is ample evidence that both foreign and domestic actors use disinformation to advance specific agenda and influence public opinion,⁹² **identifying the exact actors behind disinformation can sometimes be difficult**. Anonymous websites, outlets with obscure funding, and fringe groups active on encrypted platforms typically contribute to the spread of migration-related disinformation.⁹³ In the wake of Russia's invasion, disinformation exploded on Telegram, for example, particularly in countries hosting large numbers of displaced Ukrainians. While some assumptions can be made about the motivations of these groups, their precise identities remain difficult to verify.⁹⁴

Earlier research conducted by the author of this study – which concerned disinformation about migrants, without distinction of nationality or origin – confirm the same findings. For example, around the time of the 2019 European Parliament elections and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, only some disinformation stories originated from foreign sources. **A significant portion was produced and amplified by Europe-based outlets and right-wing extremists as well as social media users whose identities remain unclear**.⁹⁵

Then and today, Russian sources like RT and Sputnik accounted for only a fraction of a much larger and more dynamic online disinformation ecosystem. A large share of the migration-related disinformation is home-bred, thriving on European websites and blogs, many of which are affiliated with far-right groups or groups that have rejected mainstream politics.

Other independent reports also highlight that migration-related disinformation is often home grown. Anti-refugee disinformation campaigns, they show, are promoted by transnational networks of far-

⁸⁸ Tilles, Daniel, "Russia using disinformation to stir hostility between Ukrainians and Poles, warn security services", *Notes from Poland*, 31 May 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/05/31/russia-using-disinformation-to-stir-hostility-between-ukrainians-and-poles-warn-security-services/>; Todtmann, Feliks, "Annalena Baerbock hat nicht gesagt, Deutschland werde bis zu zehn Millionen Geflüchtete aus der Ukraine aufnehmen", *AFP Deutschland*, 04 April 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://fakty.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33UD7BP>.

⁸⁹ StopFake, "Fake: One Third of Ukrainian Refugees Arriving in France Are African Migrants", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-one-third-of-ukrainian-refugees-arriving-in-france-are-african-migrants/>.

⁹⁰ Schwarz, K, and Holnburger, J., "Disinformation: what role does disinformation play for hate speech and extremism on the internet and what measures have social media companies taken to combat it", in *Hate Speech and Radicalisation Online: The OCCI Research Report*, 2019, pp. 35-43.

⁹¹ See e.g. Cattaneo, Daniel. "Guerre en Ukraine: Un Non-Ukrainien sur Trois Parmi les Réfugiés en France." *Le Figaro*, 8 March 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/guerre-en-ukraine-un-non-ukrainien-sur-trois-parmi-les-refugies-en-france-20220308>; Factcheck Vlaanderen, "Vluchtelingen Oekraïne: Franse Nationaliteit Geen 1 op 3", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://factcheck.vlaanderen/factcheck/vluchtelingen-oekraïne-frankrijk-oekraïense-nationaliteit-geen-1-op-3>.

⁹² Rodríguez-Pérez, Carlos, and Gustavo R. García-Vargas. "Understanding Which Factors Promote Exposure to Online Disinformation", in *Politics of Disinformation: The Influence of Fake News on the Public Sphere*, 2021, pp. 173-186.

⁹³ Loucaides, Darren, "Telegram: The Digital Battlefield Between Russia and Ukraine", *Politico*, 10 March 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/telegram-digital-battlefront-russia-ukraine/>.

⁹⁴ Gigitashvili, Givi and Esteban Ponce de León, "Polish-language Telegram channels spread anti-refugee narratives", Digital Forensic Research Lab - Atlantic Council, 31 May 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/polish-language-telegram-channels-spread-anti-refugee-narratives/>.

⁹⁵ Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives", *European Policy Centre*, 2020, pp. 25-26.

right groups and political extremists officials across different countries.⁹⁶ These actors frequently interact and share content, demonstrating a pattern 'mutual learning'.⁹⁷ This suggests that **migration-related disinformation is becoming increasingly coordinated across borders**.⁹⁸ Regardless of their origin, disinformation campaigns tend to follow a similar 'playbook', reinforcing the idea of cross-fertilisation among disinformation actors.

⁹⁶ Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), The Networks and Narratives of Anti-Refugee Disinformation in Europe, 2021

⁹⁷ Schwarz, K, and Holnburger, J., "Disinformation: what role does disinformation play for hate speech and extremism on the internet and what measures have social media companies taken to combat it." Hate Speech and Radicalisation Online. The OCCI Research Report (2019): 35-43.

⁹⁸ Szakacs, J., and Bognar, E., "The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU", Policy Department for External Relations, Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, European Parliament, 2021, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/INGE/DV/2021/07-12/IDADisinformation_migrant_minorities_EN.pdf.

5. Social Media as Disinformation Multiplier

The rapid and widespread distribution of false contents cannot be understood without considering the role of social media. **Digital advancements, particularly the algorithms used by social media platforms, function as multipliers of disinformation and misinformation.**⁹⁹ Algorithms filter and recommend content, creating personalised information ecosystems. They prioritise content that generates engagement, often promoting sensationalist or divisive material over accurate information. Social bots – automated accounts programmed to perform specific tasks – also play a role, inflating content popularity and contributing to the formation of **echo chambers** or **filter bubbles** where one-sided, often extreme views are reinforced, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints.¹⁰⁰

These **echo chambers** end up deepening divisions, especially on sensitive issues like migration. Users repeatedly encounter the same narratives, which strengthen alignment with their pre-existing opinions, with misleading information acting as the vehicle for these narratives. Filter bubbles can then entrench existing beliefs, making it harder to foster dialogue or mutual understanding between individuals outside one's group (see Section 7).

Studies have explored how disinformation spreads in this digital ecosystem and moves across social networks, also providing insights into the effectiveness and limits of responses such as fact-checking (see Section 9.1). A key concept is the hierarchical structure of information propagation, which distinguishes between **macro-level reposts** and **micro-level replies**.¹⁰¹

Macro-level reposts refer to the widespread sharing of content such as news articles or social media posts across platforms. When disinformation is reposted or shared, it potentially reaches broader audiences beyond the creator's immediate circle, amplifying its potential to go viral. A single piece of disinformation, if reshared enough, can quickly spread to thousands or even millions of users. However, the content could also remain limited.

At the **micro level, replies represent a more nuanced form of interaction.** They indicate active engagement with the content, where users express opinions, agree with, or challenge the information.¹⁰² Micro-level interactions offer deeper insight into the spread of disinformation and misinformation – whether users are buying into false narratives or expressing scepticism. While replies may take longer to accumulate than reposts, they provide valuable information about the reception of the false or misleading content. **If replies are overwhelmingly sceptical, fact-checking or an official rectification might not be unnecessary.** However, if both reposts and replies show strong support, disinformation is likely to spread further and have a more profound impact.

Network-level analysis also helps researchers map how disinformation propagates in this environment. It traces the spread of false stories from the source (or 'source node') to clusters of users.¹⁰³ This analysis can identify **super-spreaders** – key individuals (or bots) that amplify

⁹⁹ Jinkang, Alagie, "Toxic Narratives: Understanding the Dynamics of Online Disinformation in the Context of Migration", *Perceptions*, July 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.perceptions.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Social-Media-Toxic-Narratives.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Jinkang, Alagie, "Toxic Narratives: Understanding the Dynamics of Online Disinformation in the Context of Migration", *Perceptions*, July 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.perceptions.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Social-Media-Toxic-Narratives.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ Shu, Kai, Suhang Wang, Dongwon Lee, and Huan Liu, "Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements", *ACM Computing Surveys*, 54, no. 4 (2021): 1-35, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3531140>.

¹⁰² Shu, Kai, Suhang Wang, Dongwon Lee, and Huan Liu, "Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements", *ACM Computing Surveys*, 54, no. 4 (2021): 1-35, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3531140>.

¹⁰³ Shu, Kai, Suhang Wang, Dongwon Lee, and Huan Liu, "Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements", *ACM Computing Surveys*, 54, no. 4 (2021): 1-35, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3531140>.

disinformation significantly. It also reveals patterns, such as which types of disinformation are more likely to go viral and which user groups are more prone to spreading it.

Anticipating virality involves an examination of the interplay between various factors. These include the state of users and their predisposition to disinformation (see Section 7),¹⁰⁴ their degree of segregation,¹⁰⁵ and content-selective exposure,¹⁰⁶ alongside the presence of super-spreaders who, thanks to their extensive networks can flood platforms with disinformation (at the macro-level) or enhance its dissemination by fostering interactions, at the micro-level.¹⁰⁷

Early prediction of virality is seen as critical for strengthening resilience to disinformation and focusing both prebunking and debunking strategies on false stories with potentially massive diffusion (see Section 9.1).¹⁰⁸ If not countered, disinformation is able to set the terms of the discourse, as it spreads faster than fact-based news. However, the virality prediction is still subject to debate and research, and remains of limited practical application.¹⁰⁹

This complex ecosystem not only makes it harder to intervene to limit the spread disinformation online (see Sections 7 and 10). It has radically transformed how information is created and disseminated more broadly, in turn creating more fertile ground for the promotion of hostile narratives about migrants. The internet and social media democratised access to information. However, they also diminished the role of professional journalism. The low barriers to entry allow virtually anyone to produce and share content, bypassing traditional gatekeepers.¹¹⁰ As a result, evidence-based, balanced reporting – especially on contentious issues like migration – has become more difficult to sustain, putting pressure on mainstream media and smaller outlets.

This information ecosystem encourages sensationalism, with many news outlets competing for attention by using **clickbait headlines** designed to attract viewers with exaggerated or provocative language.¹¹¹ Notably, mainstream media have themselves come to often use sensationalist language in recent years, especially in connection to so-called ‘migration crises’.¹¹² If news outlets struggle to maintain visibility and relevance, and end up prioritising profit and visibility over quality

¹⁰⁴ Vosoughi, Soroush, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral. “The Spread of True and False News Online.” *Science*, 359.6380 (2018): 1146-1151, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

¹⁰⁵ Törnberg, Petter. “Echo Chambers and Viral Misinformation: Modeling Fake News as Complex Contagion.” *PLoS ONE*, 13.9 (2018): e0203958, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0203958>.

¹⁰⁶ Del Vicario, Michela, Alessandro Bessi, Fabiana Zollo, Fabio Petroni, Antonio Scala, Guido Caldarelli, H. Eugene Stanley, and Walter Quattrociocchi. “The Spreading of Misinformation Online.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113.3 (2016): 554-559, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517441113>.

¹⁰⁷ Baribi-Bartov, Sahar, Briony Swire-Thompson, and Nir Grinberg. “Supersharers of Fake News on Twitter.” *Science*, 30 May 2024, 384.6699: 979-982, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adl4435>; Kiyak, S., De Coninck, D., Mertens, S., and d’Haenens, L. “Navigating Political Waters: Network Analysis of the Syrian and Ukrainian Refugee Influxes in the Italian Discourse on Social Media.” KU Leuven: OPPORTUNITIES Project 101004945 – H2020, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Esteban-Bravo, Mercedes, Lisbeth d. I. M. Jiménez-Rubido, and Jose M. Vidal-Sanz. “Predicting the Virality of Fake News at the Early Stage of Dissemination.” *Expert Systems with Applications*, 248 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2024.123390>.

¹⁰⁹ Rony, Nazmul K., and Rahnuma Ahmed. “Fake News Conversation Network in Twitter: User Type, Emotional Appeals and Motives in Network Formation.” *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 10.1 (2021): 121-139, <https://thejsms.org/index.php/JSMS/article/view/363>.

¹¹⁰ Rodríguez-Pérez, Carlos, and Gustavo R. García-Vargas, “Understanding Which Factors Promote Exposure to Online Disinformation”, in *Politics of Disinformation: The Influence of Fake News on the Public Sphere* (2021): 173-186.

¹¹¹ Pathak, Archita, Rohini K. Srihari, and Nihit Natu, “Disinformation: analysis and identification”, in *Computational and Mathematical Organization Theory* 27, no. 3 (2021): 357-375, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10115-021-00402-7>.

¹¹² Adinolfi, Caracciolo, et al., “Opportunities for Refugees: Report on Inclusive Integration Policies”, *Opportunities Project*, September 14, 2023, *Opportunities*, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/media/attachments/2023/09/14/d.5.5_part1_adonilfi_carrac.pdf. Metaphors like “invasion” and “flood” were frequently used to describe the flow of migrants, objectifying them and reducing the complexity of their plight to mere numbers or threats.

and balanced reporting, this can and often does lead to a race toward the most attention-grabbing and divisive content.¹¹³

Disinformation thrives in this environment. Illustrating this challenge, recent studies show a troubling convergence between **disinformation frames** and **mainstream media coverage**.¹¹⁴

Themes like security or the economy have inevitably come to dominate public discourse in recent years, considering legitimate concerns about them. However, studies have also noticed growing polarisation (see Section 7), highlighting for example, that migrants are typically presented as an economic and social burden in the mainstream media, and almost never as contributors, in line with the above-examined threat-based frames. This risks to normalise extreme views, making it easier for hostile narratives at the centre of both disinformation and accurate information to take root and flourish.

¹¹³ Adinolfi, Simona, and Marco Caracciolo, "Narrative, Scale, and Two Refugee Crises in Comparison in the Italian Media", *Diegesis* 12, no. 2 (2023): 18-33.

¹¹⁴ Eberl, Jakob-Moritz, et al. "The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its Effects: A Literature Review." *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42, no. 3 (2018): 207-223.

6. Strategies to propagate Migration-Related Disinformation

This section provides a non-exhaustive overview of some of the most frequently used tactics to propagate migration-related disinformation, before zooming out to broader developments which suggest that such strategies will continue to evolve, particularly due to technological progress.

Significant attention in the literature has been devoted to tactics used by foreign actors, especially Russia, in disinformation campaigns, and, relatedly, troll farms.¹¹⁵ Yet, a much wider variety of tactics and strategies is used to spread disinformation online. These vary in nature and level of sophistication: some exploit the characteristics of the targeted individuals and audiences, others the features of the information environment, and others still exploit technological advancements. In many cases, complementary strategies are used.

- *Strategy 1: Salient issues are used as catalysts to fill information voids and set the tone of the public debate.* Various examples from the recent past show that **migration-related disinformation is rapidly promoted in connection with headline-grabbing events**. For example, studies have shown that key events such as the Greece-Turkey border crisis at Evros in 2020, the tensions at the Poland-Belarus border and the Taliban takeover in 2021, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 all acted as flashpoints, triggering spikes in disinformation.¹¹⁶

Especially when there is confusion or a lack of reliable information on the same topic, a **quick reaction** to headline-grabbing events allows disinformation actors to exploit the information void, which **can be used to set the basis and tone of the public debate**, often amplifying concerns around salient issues. For example, after the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in 2021, it did not take long before news outlets misleadingly claimed that hundreds of thousands of Afghans were on their way to Europe,¹¹⁷ while others put the number at over a million.¹¹⁸

Disinformation actors quickly adapt their core messages to the news cycle, using prominent events to stimulate readers' interest and susceptibility. Notably, salient events and developments do not have to be, strictly speaking, connected to peoples' movement, as the COVID-19 pandemic shows. After the COVID-19 outbreak, dominant narratives quickly shifted. With health becoming an overriding public concern, migrants and minorities were falsely accused of carrying the virus, ignoring social distancing rules, or obtaining better treatment than local populations (see Section 3.1).¹¹⁹ While narratives depicting migrants as

¹¹⁵ See e.g. McCombie, S., and A. J. Uhlmann. "The US 2016 Presidential Election & Russia's Troll Farms." *Political Quarterly*, 2022; Zannettou, Savvas *et al.* "Disinformation Warfare: Understanding State-Sponsored Trolls on Twitter and Their Influence on the Web." In *Companion Proceedings of the 2019 World Wide Web Conference*, May 13–17, 2019, San Francisco, USA, 218-226. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3308560.3316495>.

¹¹⁶ Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), *The Networks and Narratives of Anti-Refugee Disinformation in Europe*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021

¹¹⁷ Il Libero Quotidiano, "Afghanistan, Biden scatena il caos e 250mila migranti arriveranno in Europa", 19 August 2021, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/afghanistan/29018552/afghanistan-biden-scatena-caos-250mila-migranti-arriveranno-europa.html>.

¹¹⁸ Il Giornale, "Più di un milione di profughi dall'Afghanistan, l'Europa adesso trema", 17 August 2021, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/piu-milione-di-profughi-dallafghanistan-leuropa-adesso-trema-1987322.html>.

¹¹⁹ Kumar, Sudhanshu, and Francisco Anselmo, "Policy Brief: Understanding Migration in Europe", Ithaca Horizon, Ithaca, May 2024, accessed 27 https://ithacahorizon.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/PolicyBrief1_web.pdf.

vectors for diseases had existed before, they took on a more urgent tone as COVID-19 became an unavoidable topic.¹²⁰

- *Strategy 2: Information Gaslighting* (see Section 2). Individual instances advanced by migration opponents and opportunists are generally consistent with an ‘established’ narrative, where **each story is less about a particular incident and more about reinforcing the plausibility of stereotypes**. Whether or not a single instance is backed up by evidence, the repetition of these narratives increases their perceived credibility. An actual occurrence or incident can also be exploited to make false stories more believable, with following stories spread to sow confusion or reproduce and normalise the threat-based claim.

Take the widely discussed and publicised sexual assaults that took place during the 2015–2016 celebrations of New Year’s Eve in Germany, particularly in Cologne. Videos typically resurface around New Year celebrations to show German-speaking men of dark-skin colour and apparent foreign descent ‘behaving lawlessly’, for example firing automatic weapons in the air.¹²¹

The same narrative can circulate widely across European countries. Illustrating this, Italian websites claimed that Afghan and Pakistani migrants threw firecrackers at families and passers-by during New Year’s Eve’s celebrations, further dramatizing the story by asserting that an Italian father had to protect his daughter from a group of sexual predators. Though no sources were cited, the articles – one of which was titled “Like in Cologne” – also referenced an unrelated sexual assault on an Italian woman by an unidentified individual,¹²² misleadingly implying that the same group of foreign nationals was responsible.

- *Strategy 3: Simplistic and sensationalist language*. Disinformation articles typically use sensationalist language, for example, reinforcing invasion narratives by describing large-scale arrivals as an ‘exodus’ and the situation as ‘out of control’.¹²³ Disinformation also often include **natural disasters and other metaphors** to increase their persuasiveness(see Section 3.3).
- *Strategy 4: Manipulated statistics, or data presented out of context*. Studies show that misleading information that includes references to statistics, known as **evidence-based misinformation, is perceived as more accurate than fact-free misinformation**, which increases the risk that more people believe it.¹²⁴ The manipulation of statistics is frequent in migration-related disinformation. **Data and numbers can be fabricated or presented out of context** to project imminent invasions of migrants, ‘provide evidence’ that ‘natives’ are being

¹²⁰ European Digital Media Observatory (2021b), “COVID-19 disinformation’s arsenal is well spread across the EU, and disinformation about Afghanistan is on the rise: Monthly brief no. 3”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/EDMO-19-Horizontal.pdf>, p. 4.

¹²¹ Daily Star, “WATCH: Out-of-Control Migrants Fire Gunshots into the Air in Europe to Mark New Year”, 11 January 2016, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.debunk.org/coining-lies-state-budget-financing-of-russian-propaganda>; Sputnik, “Integrace migrantů nefunguje”, Video z ‘války’ na ulicích Německa o silvestrovské noci”, 03 January 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20200103/integrace-migrantu-nefunguje-video-z-valky-na-ulicich-nemecka-o-silvestrovske-noci-11042618.html>.

¹²² Vox News, “Udine come Colonia, profughi assaltano ragazze: una violentata da ‘sconosciuto’ a capodanno”, 02 January 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://voxnews.info/2020/01/02/udine-come-colonia-profughi-assaltano-ragazze-una-violentata-da-sconosciuto-a-capodanno/>.

¹²³ Il Giornale, “Con la crisi in Afghanistan si rischia l'ondata di migranti”, 12 August 2021, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/con-la-crisi-afghanistan-si-rischia-londata-migranti-1979527.html>.

¹²⁴ Hameleers, Michael, “Separating Truth from Lies: Comparing the Effects of News Media Literacy Interventions and Fact-Checkers in Response to Political Misinformation in the US and Netherlands” *Information, Communication & Society* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2049932>.

replaced by immigrants,¹²⁵ or claim that immigrants receive social benefits while not wanting to work.¹²⁶

- **Strategy 5: Cross-country references. Limited knowledge of the foreign context makes it easier to fabricate stories.** False stories about migrants often refer to developments in other countries.¹²⁷ Illustrating this, the *Europe Invasion* account implicated in the riots in England has been promoting false and misleading claims about migrants' knife attacks in Spain and Sweden.¹²⁸

Further examples include unsubstantiated accusations that foreigners are responsible for more crimes than nationals or, as seen before, false stories of no-go areas entirely controlled by migrants in foreign cities.¹²⁹ 'Demographic reports' about other European countries are also used to claim that foreign governments are replacing citizens with immigrants.¹³⁰ In some cases, the same hoaxes travel across Europe. For example, a story first published by a French monthly magazine claiming that 70% of Belgian Muslims believe that sharia is superior to Belgian law has then been used by Italian websites to spread fears of an ongoing replacement of national cultural traditions.¹³¹

- **Strategy 6: Information-laundering.** Information laundering is another common tactic in migration-related disinformation. In this case, false stories are spread through **different outlets**. By passing through various intermediaries and landing in more channels, **false or misleading information gains credibility**.¹³² In some cases, only the original story, itself baseless, is used as source. For instance, German online media misleadingly used national

¹²⁵ Malta Environment and Development Network (MEDD) "Fact Check: Is Malta's Population Now at 717,000 People?", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://meddmo.eu/fact-check-is-maltas-population-now-at-717000-people/>; Malta Environment and Development Network (MEDD) "Fact Check: Has Malta's Population Almost Doubled Since 2013?", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://meddmo.eu/fact-check-has-maltas-population-almost-doubled-since-2013/>.

¹²⁶ Vox News, "Paghiamo la pensione a 100mila migranti che non hanno mai lavorato (video)", 14 June 2019, accessed 28 October 2024, <https://voxnews.info/2019/06/14/paghiamo-la-pensione-a-100mila-migranti-che-non-hanno-mai-lavorato-video/>; Defacto Observatoire, "Attention aux chiffres exagérés sur 80% de fraudeurs parmi les bénéficiaires de retraites françaises résidant en Algérie", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://defacto-observatoire.fr/Medias/Factuel/Fact-checks/Attention-aux-chiffres-exageres-sur-80-de-fraudeurs-parmi-les-beneficiaires-de-retraites-francaises-residant-en-Algerie/>.

¹²⁷ GADMO, "Gefälschtes Bild von knienden Polizisten in Großbritannien", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://gadmo.eu/gefaelschtes-bild-von-knienden-polizisten-in-grobritannien/>.

¹²⁸ The Guardian, "Spain: Fatal stabbing of boy fuels misinformation", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/20/spain-fatal-stabbing-of-boy-misinformation>.

¹²⁹ Rukojmí, "Finské vládě došla trpělivost. Odmítnutí migranti budou mít na nohou sledovací náramky", 16 September 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.rukojmi.cz/finske-vlade-dosla-trpeливost-odmitnuti-migranti-budou-mit-na-nohou-sledovaci-naramky/>; La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana, "Più immigrati, più criminalità. Il problema scoppia in Spagna", 24 May 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://lanuovabq.it/it/pdf/piu-immigrati-piu-criminalita-il-problema-scoppia-in-spagna>.

¹³⁰ Verificat, "L'informe francès que cita Buxadé no parla de substitució demogràfica sinó de la importància dels immigrants en el creixement demogràfic", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.verificat.cat/linforme-frances-que-cita-buxade-no-parla-de-substitucio-demografica-sino-de-la-importancia-dels-immigrants-en-el-creixement-demografic/>; see also European Digital Media Observatory, "EDMO-28 Horizontal: Insights from the EDMO's Monitoring Activities", July 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/EDMO-28-Horizontal-FCB.pdf>.

¹³¹ Česká věc, "Říjnová série znásilnění po celém Německu. Školačka (14) přepadena 2 uprchlíky, další středoškolačku znásilnil Afgánec v parku. Bonn, Postupim, Mnichov... Kolik toho ještě Němci snesou?", accessed 25 October 2019; Libertad Digital website, "Musulmanes rompen otra vez el confinamiento y llaman a la oración desde la catedral de Lérida", 25 April 2020, accessed 28 October 2024, <https://www.libertaddigital.com/espana/2020-04-25/musulmanes-rompen-otra-vez-el-confinamiento-y-llaman-a-la-oracion-desde-la-catedral-de-lerida-1276656543/>;

Europa statt EU, "Deutsche gingen wieder leer aus: 100 nagelneue Laptops für illegal Migranten in Hanover", 05 June 2020; Junge Freiheit, "Erneute Vergewaltigung: Ausländer unter Tatverdacht", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://jungefreiheit.de/kultur/gesellschaft/2019/erneute-vergewaltigung-auslaender-unter-tatverdacht/>.

¹³² Bayer, Judit et al. "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update", European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633).

statistics in May 2019 to falsely claim that European governments secretly flew thousands of refugees into Europe.¹³³ This story was then picked up and reused by Czech and Slovakian websites, giving it credibility in the process.¹³⁴ Other examples illustrate how disinformation often starts from obscure or untrustworthy sources and is gradually amplified through more mainstream or credible outlets.¹³⁵

Information laundering can also be exploited by foreign actors: content created in a foreign website can be funnelled through seemingly independent media outlets. These entities, in turn, **disseminate the false information to a wider audience**, including legitimate news outlets, which may then unknowingly contribute to the spread of disinformation by laundering the sources and inadvertently helping to legitimise false content and narratives.

- *Strategy 7: Use of cloned websites.* Another trend is the creation and promotion of disinformation through what look like ‘domestic outlets’. **This tactic helps create the appearance that disinformation originates organically within the affected societies and makes it harder to attribute it to foreign actors.**

A recent example is the Russian influence operation known as ‘*Doppelgänger*’. Since at least May 2022, two Russian IT companies have promoted pro-Russian narratives across European media through a network of cloned websites, fabricated articles, and manipulated social media activity. Disinformation actors also leveraged generative AI to produce content and acquire domain names closely resembling credible news outlets and government websites, misleading readers into consuming false content.¹³⁶

- *Strategy 8: Recycling and repackaging of old stories.* Old stories are frequently recycled to spread false claims in migration-related disinformation. For example, articles falsely claiming that migrants violently attacked police officers and set a detention centre on fire can reappear years after their first publication.¹³⁷ **Even when content has been debunked, it can still attract attention and engagement.** The repackaging of old content thus makes it possible to bypass fact-checking activities. The same pattern has been observed with social media posts about persons displaced from Ukraine, with social media frequently recycling debunked false stories.¹³⁸

Film footage can also be recycled across multiple countries to reinforce claims that migrants constitute a threat to European societies. One recent example exploiting security-related

¹³³ Junge Freiheit, “Einreise per Flugzeug: Regierung schweigt weiter zu Flüchtlingszahlen”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://jungefreiheit.de/politik/deutschland/2019/einreise-per-flugzeug-regierung-schweigt-weiter-zu-fluechtlingszahlen/>.

¹³⁴ Infovojna, “30 žadatelů o azyl přiletělo do Německa: Noční operace na letištích se ukazují jako pravdivé”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.infovojna.bz/article/30-zadatel-o-azyl-prileta-do-nemecka-letadlem-tajne-nocni-operace-na-letistich-se-ukazuji-jako-pravdive>.

¹³⁵ Bayer, Judit et al. “Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update”, European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633).

¹³⁶ OpenAI, “Threat Intelligence Report”, accessed 27 October 2024, https://downloads.ctfassets.net/kftzwdyauwt9/5IMxzTmUclSOAcWUXbkVrk/3cfab518e6b10789ab8843bcc18b633/Threat_Intel_Report.pdf.

¹³⁷ E.g. Mastinu, Luca, “Migranti in Rivolta. Incendiato un CPR a Potenza. Una notte d'Inferno per gli agenti e i residenti”, *Bufale*, 30 January 2020.

¹³⁸ Correctiv, “Es gibt keine Hinweise, dass ukrainische Flüchtlinge einen Mann erstochen haben”, 24 May 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2022/05/24/polen-es-gibt-keine-hinweise-dass-ukrainische-fluechtlinge-einen-mann-erstochen-haben/>; Facta, “Questi non sono dei rifugiati ucraini che pestano a morte un ragazzo di Varsavia”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.facta.news/antibufale/questi-non-sono-dei-rifugiati-ucraini-che-pestano-a-morte-un-ragazzo-di-varsovia>; EFE, “Falso: refugiados ucranianos, autores de agresión mortal en Varsovia”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://verifica.efe.com/falso-refugiados-ucranianos-autores-agresion-mortal-varsovia/>.

concerns involves audio-visual content about attacks against authorities in Lampedusa,¹³⁹ with migrants falsely accused of setting fire to buildings.¹⁴⁰ This story was then shared and promoted across European countries, in Germany,¹⁴¹ Spain,¹⁴² Austria,¹⁴³ Lithuania,¹⁴⁴ and Slovakia.¹⁴⁵

- *Strategy 9: Combining audio-visual material with text.* Most of the above strategic tools could be put into practice using textual disinformation alone. Textual disinformation is cheaper to produce¹⁴⁶ and, for a long time, attracted the attention of most researchers, fact-checkers, and policymakers.¹⁴⁷ Yet, with the proliferation of multimedia content such as images, video, and audio, disinformation, and its detection, is fast-evolving into a 'multimodal' problem.

Misleading images and videos are frequently utilised to support migration-related disinformation narratives and evoke stronger emotional reactions. For instance, out-of-context photos or videos of Muslims praying in public squares have been used to claim that European countries are being overrun by a wave of uncontrolled 'Islamisation' and Muslim immigration¹⁴⁸ or to reinforce textual disinformation portraying refugees as violent.¹⁴⁹

Audio-visual disinformation, which includes doctored images, deepfakes, and misleading data visualisations, differs from textual disinformation in its dissemination and psychological effects.¹⁵⁰ Visuals, compared to text, **are perceived as more credible and emotionally engaging.** Due to their perceived realism, they are often accepted as truthful

¹³⁹ Correctiv, "Brennendes Gebäude auf Lampedusa: Foto aus 2009 wird erneut verbreitet", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2023/09/26/brennendes-gebaeude-auf-lampedusa-foto-aus-2009-wird-erneut-verbreitet/>.

¹⁴⁰ European Digital Media Observatory, "EDMO-28 Horizontal: Insights from the EDMO's Monitoring Activities", July 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/EDMO-28-Horizontal-FCB.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ Correctiv, "Brennendes Gebäude auf Lampedusa: Foto aus 2009 wird erneut verbreitet", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2023/09/26/brennendes-gebaeude-auf-lampedusa-foto-aus-2009-wird-erneut-verbreitet/>.

¹⁴² Newtral, "Pelea entre inmigrantes y policía en Lampedusa: qué ocurrió", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.newtral.es/pelea-inmigrantes-policia-lampedusa/20230922>; Newtral, "Inmigrantes golpeando coche de la policía en Italia: qué ocurrió", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.newtral.es/inmigrantes-golpeando-coche-policia-italia/20230920/>.

¹⁴³ AFP Fact Check, "Dans cette vidéo, un homme n'attaque pas un migrant, mais une femme", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://faktencheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33VQ2NW>.

¹⁴⁴ Delfi, "Ar tikrai į Lampeduzą atvykę migrantai iš karto sukėlė riaušes su policija?", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/melo-detektorius/melas/ar-tikrai-i-lampeduza-atvyke-migrantai-is-karto-sukele-riaušes-su-policija-94654729>.

¹⁴⁵ AFP, "Lampedusa: Video de inmigrantes arrojando objetos a la policía fue mal interpretado", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://fakty.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33WG77U>.

¹⁴⁶ Teresa Weikmann and Sophie Lecheler (2023), "Visual Disinformation in a Digital Age: A Literature Synthesis and Research Agenda", *New media & Society* 2023, Vol. 25(12): 3696– 3713. DOI: 10.1177/14614448221141648.

¹⁴⁷ Alam, Firoj et al. (2022), "A survey on multimodal disinformation detection", *International Committee on Computational Linguistics*, Proceedings of the 29th International Conference on Computational Linguistics: 6625– 6643.

¹⁴⁸ For example, a photograph or video may show Muslims praying in another city or country (e.g. Bosse, Rossen, and Liesa Pauwels. "Тези кадри показват молещи се мюсюлмани в Москва през 2021 г., а не в Париж през 2024 г." AFP Bulgaria, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://proveri.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34YN8TA>) or may have been taken more than a dozen years ago, before a mosque opened (e.g. Theodosiou, Pantelis. "Out-of-context photo used to spread anti-migrant rhetoric in Greece." MEDDMO, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://meddmo.eu/out-of-context-photo-used-to-spread-anti-migrant-rhetoric-in-greece/>).

¹⁴⁹ Samdani, Abdullah, and Shikha Dimri. "Syrian Refugees and the Digital Misinformation Crisis: Legal Challenges and Policy Solutions." *Journal of Informatics Education and Research*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2024, pp. 1-18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52783/jier.v4i2.1231>.

¹⁵⁰ Teresa Weikmann and Sophie Lecheler (2023), "Visual Disinformation in a Digital Age: A Literature Synthesis and Research Agenda", *New media & Society* 2023, Vol. 25(12): 3696– 3713. DOI: 10.1177/14614448221141648.

without scrutiny. **They can elicit stronger emotional responses**, fear, anger, or sympathy.¹⁵¹ A manipulated image or video may align with viewers' mental models, reinforcing their acceptance of its underlying narrative.¹⁵² People are also more likely to remember information that is paired with visuals.

For these reasons, the psychological effects of audio-visual disinformation are generally considered more potent than those of textual disinformation. Audio-visual disinformation also shortens the timeframe for effective responses, necessitating immediate action, but also makes it harder for fact-checkers to verify the false claims (see Section 9.1).¹⁵³

While there is now greater awareness of the risks posed by the combination of text with audio-visual material, content detection – particularly of audio and video – is still underexplored compared to textual analysis.¹⁵⁴

- *Strategy 10: Exploitation of technological innovations.* As the example of videos and deepfakes shows, technological development will continue creating novel challenges. While not per se a tactic, **artificial intelligence (AI) will significantly amplify the disinformation problem**, mainly in two ways.¹⁵⁵ The first concerns content creation. AI can manipulate text, images, and media in ways that were previously impossible or labour-intensive. As **AI can generate highly realistic fake content**, it makes it easier to deceive audiences. Deepfakes have now become inexpensive and relatively easy to produce, making them accessible to malicious actors.¹⁵⁶

The second concerns content dissemination. By analysing psychographic and behavioural data, AI can make it possible to improve the **micro-targeting of specific users** based on their behaviour and preferences. For example, **social media platforms rely on AI algorithms to recommend content**. AI-powered systems on social media platforms are designed to maximise user engagement, often promoting content that elicits strong reactions. This potentially raises the efficiency of disinformation campaigns because they can exploit users' psychological profiles and deliver misleading content tailored to their specific fears, biases, or interests.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵¹ Alam, Firoj et al. (2022), "A survey on multimodal disinformation detection", *International Committee on Computational Linguistics*, Proceedings of the 29th International Conference on Computational Linguistics, 6625–6643.

¹⁵² Teresa Weikmann and Sophie Lecheler (2023), "Visual Disinformation in a Digital Age: A Literature Synthesis and Research Agenda", *New media & Society* 2023, Vol. 25(12): 3696– 3713. DOI: 10.1177/14614448221141648.

¹⁵³ Nimmo, B., "Identifying Disinformation: An ABC Approach", *IES Policy Brief*, February 2016.

¹⁵⁴ Alam, Firoj et al. (2022), "A survey on multimodal disinformation detection", *International Committee on Computational Linguistics*, Proceedings of the 29th International Conference on Computational Linguistics, 6625–6643; Bailer, Werner et al (2021), "Challenges for Automatic Detection of Fake News Related to Migration." In *Proceedings of the 2021 IEEE Conference on Cognitive and Computational Aspects of Situation Management (CogSIMA)*, pp. 1-10.

¹⁵⁵ Bontridder, Noémi, and Yves Pouillet (2021), "The role of artificial intelligence in disinformation." *Data & Policy* 3.

¹⁵⁶ Bontridder, Noémi, and Yves Pouillet (2021), "The role of artificial intelligence in disinformation." *Data & Policy* 3.

¹⁵⁷ Bontridder, Noémi, and Yves Pouillet (2021), "The role of artificial intelligence in disinformation." *Data & Policy* 3.

7. Exploiting Pre-existing Beliefs and Personal Concerns

Technology plays a significant role in spreading disinformation. However, exposure and attention paid to false or misleading information, including on migration, is also driven by cognitive and emotional factors. Specialists have examined the psychological and social mechanisms that make disinformation appealing to certain societal groups, arguing that understanding these mechanisms can help develop effective counterstrategies (see below, Section 9).¹⁵⁸

To understand how migration-related disinformation functions and its impact on European society and democracies, **it is therefore necessary to examine its relationship with emotions, psychological traits, pre-existing beliefs.** Migration-related **disinformation is emotionally charged, with campaigns exploiting real or perceived social grievances.** They leverage fears and ideological predispositions to deepen societal divisions (see Section 3).¹⁵⁹

In this context, specialists have found that lies spread faster than the truth due to the stronger emotional reactions of recipients.¹⁶⁰ They also suggested that disinformation – like misinformation – is more persuasive when it aligns with individuals' pre-existing beliefs or concerns.

Shifts in the dominance of certain disinformation narratives, and a corresponding rise in user engagement, illustrate this challenge. For example, previous studies by the author show that, as COVID-19 massively increased Europeans' worries and insecurities about health, there was a corresponding rise in the number of disinformation stories that exploit this concern, but also micro-level user engagement on social media.¹⁶¹ Later, when joblessness and the economic impacts of the pandemic became a greater concern, wealth-related narratives received higher engagement.

Studies confirm that social media users are more likely to share content that aligns with their beliefs, regardless of its accuracy.¹⁶² This appears to indicate that, if it resonates, disinformation – like misinformation – captures more people's attention and generates greater levels of engagement and, possibly, impact. It also suggests that migration-related **disinformation may be appealing not only or not mainly for the claims it makes but also, or especially, for the concerns it exploits** and the pre-existing convictions it triggers.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ Ecker, Ullrich, John Cook, and Stephan Lewandowsky, "Misinformation and How to Correct It." In *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Robert Scott and Marlis Buchmann, Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons (2015), pp. 1-17; Buchanan, Tom. "Why do people spread false information online? The effects of message and viewer characteristics on self-reported likelihood of sharing social media disinformation." *PLOS ONE* 15.10 (2020): e0239666. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239666>; Nisbet, Erik C., and Olga Kamenchuk. "The Psychology of State-Sponsored Disinformation Campaigns and Implications for Public Diplomacy." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14.1-2 (2019): 65-82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-11411019>.

¹⁵⁹ Hameleers, Michael. "Separating truth from lies: comparing the effects of news media literacy interventions and fact-checkers in response to political misinformation in the US and Netherlands." *Information, Communication & Society* 25.1 (2022): 110-126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1764603>.

¹⁶⁰ Vosoughi, Soroush, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral. "The Spread of True and False News Online." *Science*, 359.6380 (2018): 1146-1151, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

¹⁶¹ See Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives", *European Policy Centre*, 2020.

¹⁶² Shu, Kai, Wang, Suhang, Lee, Dongwon, and Liu, Huan. "Mining Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements." In *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media*, edited by K. Shu, S. Wang, D. Lee, and H. Liu, 2020, pp. 1-19.

¹⁶³ Jinkang, Alagie. "Social Media Toxic Public Opinion Formation in Migration Ecosystem." *PERCEPTIONS*, 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.perceptions.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Social-Media-Toxic-Narratives.pdf>.

In this context, specialists have emphasized that the success of disinformation campaigns, including those targeting migrants, can be traced to **motivated reasoning, cognitive biases, confirmation bias, affective polarisation or cognitive exhaustion**.

Motivated reasoning refers to people's tendency to favour information that supports their existing beliefs and identities while ignoring or rejecting contradictory or false information. *Cognitive biases* involve repeated exposure to disinformation, which increases its perceived truthfulness and makes it more likely to be accepted, even from less credible sources.¹⁶⁴ This phenomenon, known as the *illusory truth effect*, occurs because **familiar statements are processed more fluently, leading to greater perceived accuracy**.

Many disinformation articles exploit *confirmation bias* by referencing widely publicised past events to reproduce fear, anger, and prejudice. For instance, terrorist or violent attacks provide opportunities for disinformation actors to push narratives focused on security concerns while also exploiting confirmation bias. Recently reported false stories about knife attacks (see Introduction and Section 3.1) illustrate this dynamic, as do examples from the past, such as the sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015-16 (see Section 6).

Both **motivated reasoning and confirmation bias favour evidence supporting one's beliefs while dismissing contradictory evidence**. Disinformation can thus more easily exploit concerns around personal security, economic uncertainty, perceived unfairness, or issues of identity – legitimate areas of interest for many citizens. Such **selective exposure** reinforces ideological biases, and makes it more likely for disinformation to spread within like-minded communities. This can be connected to **filter bubbles**, where individuals primarily come into contact and engage with content that aligns with their beliefs (see Section 5).¹⁶⁵

Additionally, recent studies suggest that, contrary to common assumptions, many people do not share disinformation content because they believe it is true. Instead, the decision to share content on social media is often influenced by other factors, such as **the desire for social approval, political identity signalling**, or simply an interest in sensational content (for those who unwittingly share false content, without asking themselves if it is true, see Section 7.1).¹⁶⁶ In other words, sharing particular news content also allows individuals to signal their concerns, beliefs, and identity. This makes disinformation challenging to counter, as people become emotionally and ideologically invested in the narratives they propagate.

Affective polarisation, which involves strong emotional reactions, is another factor contributing to the spread of migration-related disinformation. With greater affective polarisation, individuals develop **stronger positive feelings toward those with similar views and increasingly negative feelings toward those outside their group**.¹⁶⁷ Various studies indicate that immigration is among the topics eliciting the highest levels of affective polarisation in Europe.¹⁶⁸ **This makes more**

¹⁶⁴ Nisbet, Erik C., and Olga Kamenchuk. "The Psychology of State-Sponsored Disinformation Campaigns and Implications for Public Diplomacy." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14.1-2 (2019): 65-82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-11411019>.

¹⁶⁵ Diaz Ruiz, Carlos, and Tomas Nilsson. "Disinformation and Echo Chambers: How Disinformation Circulates on Social Media Through Identity-Driven Controversies." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 42.1 (2023): 18-35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/07439156221103852>.

¹⁶⁶ Pennycook, Gordon, and David G. Rand. "The psychology of fake news." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 25.5 (2021): 388-402. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2021.01.004>.

¹⁶⁷ Banulescu-Bogdan, Natalia. "When Facts Don't Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration's Costs and Benefits." Migration Policy Institute, 2018, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/when-facts-dont-matter-communicate-immigration-costs-benefits>.

¹⁶⁸ Herold, Maik, Joachim, Janine, Otteni, Cyrill, and Vorländer, Hans. "Polarization in Europe: An Analysis of Ten European Countries." MIDEM Study 2023-1, Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy, Technischen Universität Dresden, 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, https://forum-midem.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/TUD_MIDEM_Study_2023-1_Polarization_in_Europe_.pdf.

people more inclined to believe disinformation that demonises opposing views, allowing migration-related disinformation to exploit and exacerbate negative inter-group sentiments.

Combined with other psychological mechanisms and social processes, these factors help explain why migration-related disinformation gains attention and traction on social media, side lining those holding moderate views. Because people are more likely to engage with content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, disinformation narratives that reproduce clichés or promote extreme policy responses – e.g. that all migrants are criminals and should be deported – forces individuals to pick sides, especially if combined with identity-signalling. This amplifies divisions between opposing groups, reinforcing the notion of irreconcilable differences.¹⁶⁹

While echo chambers and filter bubbles may be perceived as purely technological constructs, they in fact reflect deep psychological and societal tendencies. People gravitate toward information aligning with their pre-existing beliefs, concerns, or deep-seated anxieties, often influenced by peer pressure and social dynamics similar to those outside the digital sphere.

In this context of high polarisation and divisiveness, **it is however also easy to simplify the complexity of peoples' beliefs and concerns**, and lose sight of the fact that these may not fully conform to the built-in assumptions within disinformation narratives. Yet, without a reliable information that can also address their legitimate concerns, these groups may more easily be persuaded by false narratives (see Box 1).

Box 1: The Movable Middle

While the research and the media tend to focus on extremist groups sharing false stories and on outlandish conspiracy theories propagated by radicalised individuals, there are many groups in society whose views and concerns do not neatly align with hostiles narratives underpinning disinformation, and yet have preoccupations or beliefs that can be 'triggered' by such narratives. Particularly relevant in this context are the beliefs and concerns of those within the so-called '**conflicted**' or '**movable middle**'.¹⁷⁰ For example, research conducted under the EU-funded project 'OPPORTUNITIES' reveals that, prior to COVID-19, **roughly 50% of Europeans held neutral views on migration, around 30% had positive views, and only about 25% perceived migration as a threat to their culture, economy, or way of life.**¹⁷¹

Research shows that **most Europeans are neither strongly pro- nor anti-immigration but fall somewhere in between.** In European countries, most people belong to groups referred to as the 'disengaged' or 'detached', the 'disillusioned', or the 'traditionalists'.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ French, Aaron, Veda C. Storey, and Linda Wallace. "A Typology of Disinformation Intentionality and Impact." *Information Systems Journal* 34.4 (2024): 1324-1354. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12495>.

¹⁷⁰ See e.g. British Future. "How to Talk About Immigration." British Future, 2014, accessed 27 October 2024, <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/How-To-Talk-About-Immigration-FINAL.pdf>; Napolitano, Antonella, "Understanding the Conflicted Middle in Italy." *Open Migration*, 13 April 2018, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://openmigration.org/en/analyses/understanding-the-conflicted-middle-in-italy/>; Social Change Initiative. "Stories of Change: Working with the Moveable Middle." Social Change Initiative, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.socialchangeinitiative.com/stories-of-change-working-with-the-moveable-middle-3603eb37-f61e-4873-a3e4-6919df64132d>.

¹⁷¹ Opportunities, "Trends in Attitudes Towards Migration in Europe: A Comparative Analysis", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/media/attachments/2022/04/20/changing-attitudes-towards-migration.pdf>.

¹⁷² Dixon, Tim, "Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration and Refugees in Italy", *More in Common*, August 2018, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.moreincommon.com/media/3hnhssh5/italy-en-final_digital_2b.pdf; More in Common, "Fault Lines: Executive Summary", 2019, accessed 27 October 2024,

While not considering migration as a direct threat and not driven by ideological preferences, these middle groups share common beliefs and legitimate concerns about cultural identity, employment or security.

This finding challenges the assumption that the often-hostile narratives surrounding migration that dominate media and political discourse are necessarily accompanied by growing hostility towards migration across all groups in European societies. Nevertheless, these middle groups may be susceptible to certain disinformation narratives.

For example, individuals in disengaged groups tend to be young, working-class, and individualistic. They are less likely than other groups to identify with a political party or be politically active (e.g., through protest, donations, or candidacy). They also often view politicians as incompetent. Some disinformation narratives about migration may appeal to this group due to their comparatively high levels of distrust (see also Section 8).

The disillusioned tend to be older, either middle-aged or retired, with relatively low levels of education and residing in rural areas. Often characterised as those 'left behind' by economic progress, they hold economic concerns and may be swayed by disinformation narratives suggesting migrants take scarce community resources, such as social benefits, or receive preferential treatment.

Traditionalists generally display higher levels of religious adherence. Most are comfortable with their position in society and feel they have had ample opportunities in life. While open to humanitarian values, they also seek to protect what they perceive as the strengths of their society from external influences and may be wary of 'foreign' cultural and religious ideas. Identity-based narratives that stress the losses associated with societal change or portray migrants as an invasive force may resonate with their values of nostalgia and fear of change.

If disinformation aligns with the concerns or beliefs of these groups, it can more easily capture their attention and attract further likes and shares. In this way, disinformation can extend beyond niche audiences, reaching a broader spectrum of society.

Comparatively less attention has been given to **differences across cultures and political systems**, possibly because the focus tends to be on online disinformation, which transcends geographical boundaries in terms of tactics, narratives and groups. However, the characteristics of users who spread disinformation can vary based on cultural, historical, or political factors, intersecting with the psychological processes and social dynamics examined above.

In some cultures, communities, or regions, historical factors may foster greater trust in unofficial sources or word-of-mouth information, making individuals more susceptible to misleading information.¹⁷³ In such contexts, **the perceived proximity of the source significantly affects its trustworthiness.** People are more likely to trust and share information from familiar individuals, for example, regardless of their knowledge of a certain topic, or accuracy.

<https://www.moreincommon.com/media/0wih2zdp/more-in-common-fault-lines-executive-summary.pdf>; Demoures, François-Xavier et al. "Finding France: Executive Summary." *More in Common*, 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/krjchzr5/finding-france-executive-summary.pdf>; More in Common. "Greece Report." *More in Common*, 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, <http://www.moreincommon.com/media/ltinlcnc/0535-more-in-common-greece-report-final-4-web-lr.pdf>.

¹⁷³ Shu, Kai, Wang, Suhang, Lee, Dongwon, and Liu, Huan, "Mining Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements", in *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media*, 2020, pp. 1-19.

Disinformation campaigns are also designed to exploit vulnerabilities in different political systems. In democracies, that disinformation can be used to discredit opposing political actors or the political system itself is widely demonstrated (see Section 8).¹⁷⁴ In more authoritarian systems, or where state-controlled narratives dominate media and political discourse, disinformation is often used to undermine the opposition or external adversaries to support the government. Yet, it is easy to overlook that in countries where mainstream media or political narratives are heavily controlled by the government, **individuals may turn to alternative sources like social media, blogs, or peer-shared content in search of a different or more reliable perspective**. But these alternative sources are also where disinformation tends to proliferate.¹⁷⁵

In other words, as migration-related disinformation and divisive rhetoric about different groups of migrants is often present in countries with authoritarian tendencies, turning to social media can be indicative of a desire for alternative reporting. However, it can also be a double-edge sword.

Closely linked to this is **the limited access to quality reporting on topics like migration and the breakdown of public trust in democratic institutions**. Recent surveys, such as the latest Eurobarometer thematic survey on migration, published in 2022, reveals that only 38% of Europeans consider themselves well-informed on the topic, with legacy media serving as the primary information source for most respondents (56%) and social media as the second-largest source (15%).¹⁷⁶ Many European countries have also seen a democratic backsliding in recent years. **A lack of trust – not only in the political system but also in other democratic pillars, particularly an independent and plural media – may explain why more people in Europe have turned away from mainstream outlets**, opting for social media instead to seek information.

Given that public trust levels have decreased in several EU member states, towards authorities and mainstream media, more people will be likely to come across disinformation.¹⁷⁷

While these insights apply to all types of false information, they are particularly relevant for migration-related disinformation. They highlight the importance of focusing on how this spreads, notions of trustworthiness, inter-group dynamics, and polarisation, rather than solely on the intentions or goals of disinformation creators – a possible unintended consequence of current definitions (see Section 2). Understanding the relationship between disinformation and personal beliefs, and the broader political environment, is necessary to understand the impact of disinformation, on discourse, attitudes and policies, but also the strategies that should be developed to counter disinformation (see Sections 9 and 10).

7.1. Lack of Critical Skills undermines Societal Resilience against Disinformation

While many specialists have drawn attention to psychological and societal factors that explain disinformation propagation, other studies have challenged the notion that disinformation spreads

¹⁷⁴ Shu, Kai, Wang, Suhang, Lee, Dongwon, and Liu, Huan, “Mining Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements”, in *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media*, 2020, pp. 1-19.

¹⁷⁵ Shu, Kai, Wang, Suhang, Lee, Dongwon, and Liu, Huan, “Mining Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements”, in *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media*, 2020, pp. 1-19.

¹⁷⁶ European Commission, *Eurobarometer Survey Results, Eurobarometer Surveys 100 (Autumn 2023) and 101 (Spring 2024)*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, accessed 27.10.2024, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2276>.

¹⁷⁷ Zimmermann, Fabian, and Matthias Kohring. “Mistrust, disinforming news, and vote choice: A panel survey on the origins and consequences of believing disinformation in the 2017 German parliamentary election.” *Political Communication* 37.2 (2020): 215-237. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1663797>.

due to cognitive bias or motivated reasoning.¹⁷⁸ According to this strand of the literature, **truth bias, a tendency to accept information as true, remains one of the primary reasons for disinformation to spread.**¹⁷⁹ For instance, older users are seen as more susceptible to disinformation due to lower digital literacy and unfamiliarity with online ecosystems.¹⁸⁰

For scholars who favour the theory of ‘classical reasoning’ to explain the virality of false stories, **people believe disinformation because they fail to think analytically**, not because of their values. For these scholars, a lack of analytical reasoning is a stronger predictor of susceptibility to disinformation.¹⁸¹ Their studies accordingly indicate that individuals who score higher on tests of analytical thinking are better at distinguishing truth from falsehood, even when the information aligns with their existing beliefs. They also reveal that inattention plays a role in the spread of disinformation: many users do not pause to consider the accuracy of information before sharing it, distracted by a digital and media environment that prioritises engagement over reflection. Additionally, they suggest that **when online users are prompted to consider the truthfulness of a story, they become more discerning and are less likely to share false content.**

Further research is required **to explore the interface between motivated reasoning and classical reasoning explanations.** It would be particularly valuable, for example, to investigate why critical thinking is sometimes bypassed and whether this is partly due to disinformation’s emotionally charged content, which may capture attention and trigger a faster, more intuitive processing style. While lack of analytical reasoning is seen as a predictor for user behaviour, there may be **other user characteristics** (e.g. social media fatigue caused by information overload) **which could shed light on why persons with critical skills nevertheless share disinformation.**¹⁸²

Related social dynamics could also be considered, including the notion of ‘source credibility’: people are influenced by the opinions and behaviours of those around them. They rely on social media cues, such as likes and shares, as indicators of credibility, rather than the actual reliability of the news source. In other words, people are more likely to believe information from sources they perceive as trustworthy. In this context, they may only apply critical reasoning in some instances, when the source or filter bubble is not perceived as trustworthy.

While further research would be useful to combine the insights of studies in motivated reasoning and classical reasoning, the latter’s findings nevertheless underscore the importance of analytical thinking to distinguish true from false information and confirm that, to counter disinformation, **fostering cognitive reflection is essential.**

¹⁷⁸ E.g. Pennycook, Gordon, and David G. Rand, “Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning”, *Cognition* 188 (2019): 39-50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011>; Pennycook, Gordon, and David G. Rand, “The psychology of fake news”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 25.5 (2021): 388-402. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2021.02.007>.

¹⁷⁹ Agarwal, Naresh Kumar, and Farraj Alsaedi, “Creation, dissemination and mitigation: toward a disinformation behavior framework and model”, *Aslib Journal of Information Management* 73.5 (2021): 639-658. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/AJIM-11-2020-0423>.

¹⁸⁰ Giglietto, Fabio, et al. “‘Fake news’ is the invention of a liar: How false information circulates within the hybrid news system”, *Current Sociology* 67.4 (2019): 625-642. DOI: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0011392119837536>

¹⁸¹ Pennycook, Gordon, and David G. Rand, “Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning”, *Cognition* 188 (2019): 39-50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011>; Pennycook, Gordon, and David G. Rand, “The psychology of fake news.” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 25.5 (2021): 388-402. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2021.02.007>.

¹⁸² Talwar, Shalini, Amandeep Dhir, Puneet Kaur, Nida Zafar, and Melfi Alrasheedy. “Why Do People Share Fake News? Associations Between the Dark Side of Social Media Use and Fake News Sharing Behavior.” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 51 (2019): 72-82, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.05.026>.

8. The Impact of Migration-Related Disinformation on the Media, Policy-making, Democracies and Societies

The impact of widely and persistently circulating false stories has been a topic of considerable discussion among experts. The goals of disinformation campaigns are varied, encompassing political or economic motivations and, at times, exceeding these. While there is broad agreement on the potential objectives of disinformation actors, however, precisely measuring impact and establishing causal links remains challenging.

This section explores the (intended or unintended) consequences of false narratives. Among many relevant implications, the literature has emphasised four areas of impact: i) **social actors**, including the media; ii) **state actors** and policymakers; iii) state dynamics and **democratic processes**; and iv) **societal dynamics**, particularly inter-group exchanges.

First, the literature has examined disinformation's impact on the media environment, including its interactions with mainstream news outlets. This issue is critical as the media arguably shapes public perception of which issues are important, based on how they are framed and reported.¹⁸³ Studies show that politicians often adjust their narratives in response to media coverage, particularly during elections or in response to real and perceived 'migration crises', to resonate with public concerns.¹⁸⁴ A key question in this context is whether disinformation can influence mainstream media, potentially shaping the broader political agenda.

While studies suggest that disinformation outlets do not generally dictate mainstream media's overall agenda, **false stories appear to influence coverage on specific issues, with immigration frequently cited as an example.**¹⁸⁵ Persistent disinformation may contribute to a cycle of continuous media focus on migration, heightening its political salience.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, studies indicate that the threat-based framing is used by both disinformation sources and mainstream channels, suggesting a degree of overlap in framing and language (see Section 6).

Second, disinformation can potentially impact public policy. One obvious example is reflected in policy initiatives taken to counter disinformation, for examples through communication campaigns and legislation, redirecting resources that could be used elsewhere. Decision-makers are also sometimes exposed to disinformation, potentially influencing law-making in ways that are not evidence-based or reflective of wider public interest.

Migration-related disinformation demonstrates how hostile narratives can shape policy, beyond these more self-evident examples.¹⁸⁷ For instance, the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) faced disinformation campaigns, notably in Austria, Germany, and Sweden, with far-right

¹⁸³ McCombs, Maxwell E., and Lei Guo. "Agenda-setting influence of the media in the public sphere." *The handbook of media and mass communication theory* (2014): 249-268. According to the 'agenda-setting theory', media determines which issues the public perceives as important based on how frequently they are covered.

¹⁸⁴ Bridges for Integration, "Comparative Analysis of Migration Narratives in Political Debate and Policymaking", 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/comparative-analysis-of-migration-narratives-in-political-debate-and-policymaking/>.

¹⁸⁵ Vargo, Chris J., Lei Guo, and Michelle A. Amazeen, "The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016", *New Media & Society* 20.5 (2018): 2028-2049. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817690986>.

¹⁸⁶ Dennison, J. and Geddes, A., 'A rising tide? The salience of immigration and the rise of anti-immigration political parties in Western Europe', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 90, No. 1, 2019, pp. 107-116.

¹⁸⁷ For an analysis of the impact on policy making of media discourses more in general, see Bridges for Integration, "The Impact of Narratives on EU Policymaking", 2023 accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/the-impact-of-narratives-on-eu-policy-making/> and Bridges for Integration, "The Influence of Narratives on Subsequent Narratives About Immigration: Individuals as Narratively Shaped Shapers of Reality", 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/the-influence-of-narratives-on-subsequent-narratives-about-immigration-individuals-as-narratively-shaped-shapers-of-reality/>.

actors falsely claiming it was a binding international agreement enabling mass migration and undermining national sovereignty.¹⁸⁸ This narrative, initially prominent in alternative media, gained traction in mainstream discourse, pressuring national governments. Consequently, several countries, including Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Italy, chose not to sign the GCM.

The disinformation surrounding the GCM highlights how right-wing populist actors can influence political outcomes **by shaping the narrative, forcing centrist and mainstream parties into defensive positions**. By framing the GCM as a threat to sovereignty, populists succeeded in redirecting public debate, leading to a significant policy shift.

Migration-related disinformation can similarly influence political discussions and decisions, complicating evidence-based policy-making, particularly in areas central to EU interests, such as border management, asylum, and integration.¹⁸⁹ For example, *invasion narratives*, which exaggerate numbers of irregular arrivals into Europe, **are often used to justify calls for securitising migration, normalising surveillance practices or bestowing legitimacy on controversial border practices**.

A third area of research focuses on disinformation's impact on democratic processes, especially elections. Whether domestic or foreign, political actors may use disinformation to manipulate public opinion or weaken opponents, potentially undermining electoral integrity (see Section 7).

Immigration is a particularly contentious issue in many European countries, with disinformation on this topic often used to influence opinion during election periods.¹⁹⁰ Numerous examples demonstrate that, in the run-up to local, national, or European elections, disinformation about migrants and asylum-seekers is often disseminated to exploit public fears around immigration policies,¹⁹¹ amplifying social divides and **bolstering nationalist or anti-immigration agendas**.¹⁹²

Disinformation appears to shape political discourse on during election campaigns. **However, assessing its precise impact on voting behaviour remains difficult**.¹⁹³ While some scholars argue that belief in news that contain disinformation significantly influences voting behaviour, particularly among those who are inclined toward anti-establishment votes, others question

¹⁸⁸ Conrad, Maximilian, "Post-Truth Politics, Digital Media, and the Politicization of the Global Compact for Migration", *Politics and Governance* 9.3 (2021): 301-311. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i3.3985>; Rasche, Lukas, and Paul-Jasper Dittrich. "Interpretation and Truth: How Right-Wing Populist Disinformation Informs the Debate on Migration." *Jacques Delors Centre*, 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/detail/publication/how-populist-disinformation-informs-the-debate-on-migration>.

¹⁸⁹ Bayer, Judit et. al. "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update", European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633); Sánchez Esparza, Marta, Ignacio Vázquez Diéguez, and Adoración Merino Arribas, "Mapping Stigmatizing Hoaxes Towards Immigrants on Twitter and Digital Media: Case Study in Spain, Greece, and Italy", In *News Media and Hate Speech Promotion in Mediterranean Countries*, edited by E. Said Hung & J. Diaz, IGI Global, 2023, pp. 136-161. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-8427-2.ch008>.

¹⁹⁰ The Journal, "People Before Profit, Sinn Féin Poster Debunked: Fact Check on Refugees", September 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/people-before-profit-sinn-fein-poster-debunked-factcheck-refugees-6497166-Sep2024/>.

¹⁹¹ EFE Verifica. "La desinformación sobre inmigración aflora antes de las elecciones en Cataluña." EFE Verifica, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://verifica.efe.com/desinformacion-inmigracion-elecciones-cataluna/>; European Digital Media Observatory, "EDMO-35: Monitoring Disinformation in Europe", May 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EDMO-35-Horizontal.pdf>.

¹⁹² Bayer, Judit et. al. "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update", European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633).

¹⁹³ IRI Beacon Project, "Towards a Model Measuring the Impact of Disinformation on Electoral Behaviour", December 2022, *International Republican Institute*, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.iribeaconproject.org/our-work-analysis-and-insights/2022-12-06/towards-model-measuring-impact-disinformation-electoral>.

whether false stories can truly determine electoral outcomes.¹⁹⁴ Disinformation narratives may only reinforce rather than alter voting intentions.

Illustratively, the 2024 European Parliament elections witnessed a rise in far-right nationalist parties benefiting from hostile narratives promoted by disinformation actors. Monitoring by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) identified an increase in disinformation, particularly regarding migration, as well as 'cloned' outlets sharing false information. However, preliminary evidence suggests that **regulatory measures and awareness campaigns at the EU level helped safeguard electoral integrity and avoid 'major incidents'**.¹⁹⁵

During the 2019 European Parliament elections, far-right groups across member states leveraged disinformation strategies to influence public perceptions, promoting false narratives, including on migration. In some cases, these groups maintained financial or ideological ties with foreign actors like Russia.¹⁹⁶ By framing migrants as invaders, these groups aimed to sway public opinion against pro-EU and pro-immigration candidates.¹⁹⁷ Yet, analysts later questioned the impact of influence operations during the 2019 elections.¹⁹⁸ National political elections, they argued, are a more attractive target of manipulation than European elections.¹⁹⁹

Nonetheless, research on disinformation's impact on voter behaviour remains inconclusive, calling for further analysis, including but not only during European Parliament elections.

Yet, disinformation can impact democratic processes beyond elections,²⁰⁰ fostering a political environment where opposing views are disrespected, or reducing political participation.²⁰¹ This can also lead to backlash against EU integration and support for populist, Eurosceptic movements. **Disinformation can be weaponised to undermine public trust in institutions and their ability to manage migration,** fuelling perceptions that national or EU bodies are either incompetent or complicit in enabling unchecked immigration.²⁰²

¹⁹⁴ Zimmermann, Fabian, and Matthias Kohring, "Mistrust, disinforming news, and vote choice: A panel survey on the origins and consequences of believing disinformation in the 2017 German parliamentary election", *Political Communication* 37.2 (2020): 215-237. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1663797>.

¹⁹⁵ See e.g. European Board for Digital Services, *Report on the European Elections: Digital Services Act and Code of Practice on Disinformation*, 2024, accessed 28 October 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/107587>.

¹⁹⁶ Bayer, Judit et. al. "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update", European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633).

¹⁹⁷ Sullivan, Eileen, and Andrew Higgins, "Russian Propaganda Is Spreading in Europe, and Far-Right Parties Are Thriving", *The New York Times*, 12 May 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/world/europe/russian-propaganda-influence-campaign-european-elections-far-right.html>; Illing, Hannah, "The Likelihood of Disinformation Campaigns During the European Elections Is High", *The New Federalist*, 3 April 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/the-likelihood-of-disinformation-campaigns-during-the-european-elections>.

¹⁹⁸ Szicherle, Patrik, Adam Lelonek, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Jonas Syrovatka, and Nikos Štěpánek, "Investigating Russia's Role and the Kremlin's Interference in the 2019 EP Elections", *Political Capital*, May 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_russian_meddling_ep2019_eng_web_20190520.pdf.

¹⁹⁹ Associated Press News, "Europe's Elections: Social Media in the Shadow of Trump." 11 April 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-elections-social-media-european-parliament-donald-trump-5e81a57aa17d4ca7a0c02f89c8efe421>.

²⁰⁰ Hunter, Lance Y. "Social media, disinformation, and democracy: how different types of social media usage affect democracy cross-nationally." *Democratization* 30.6 (2023): 1040-1072. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2171435>.

²⁰¹ Bayer, Judit et. al. "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update", European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633).

²⁰² Bayer, Judit et. al. "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update", European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633).

A notable example is the set of asylum and migration reforms recently adopted by the EU, the **New Pact on Migration and Asylum**, which has attracted considerable attention, and backlash, in some member states.²⁰³ Disinformation campaigns exaggerated the reforms' impact, **spreading false figures about migrant quotas and financial obligations** that European countries will have to fulfil once the reforms become fully applicable in 2026, issues that EU institutions had to fact-check.²⁰⁴ Although false information about the Pact circulated ahead of the European Parliament 2024 elections, possibly to foment anti-European movements, this examples illustrates that **the potential harm** to political discourse and the credibility of EU policies **extends beyond electoral outcomes**.

Thus, disinformation should be seen as part of a broader strategy to destabilise political systems and sow distrust in democratic institutions. It is not confined to elections or major events but forms part of a continuous effort to control public discourse on key issues like migration.²⁰⁵

As a fourth area of potential impact, disinformation affects societal dynamics, shaping attitudes towards migrants, refugees, religious and ethnic minorities, and wider social relations. Migration-related disinformation has arguably contributed to normalising hostility towards these groups, justifying xenophobic policies or attitudes, exacerbating social divisions, and fuelling movements opposed to inclusivity and human rights.²⁰⁶

In some cases, disinformation has been linked to violent incidents, as illustrated by examples from the UK and Ireland in this study's introduction. Independent reports also indicate that regions with higher disinformation exposure are more likely to experience violence against migrants, such as

²⁰³ See European Policy Centre, 'What next for EU migration and asylum policies? Launch of EPC Odysseus', European Policy Centre website, accessed 28 October 2024, <https://epc.eu/en/publications/What-next-for-EU-migration-and-asylum-policies-Launch-of-EPC-Odysseus~5b165c>; European Digital Media Observatory, "EDMO-36: EU-Related Disinformation Keeps Growing Before the EU Parliament Elections", June 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/EDMO-36-Horizontal.pdf>.

²⁰⁴ See e.g. Factual, "Fals: George Simion despre Parlamentul European, care ne-ar obliga să primim migranți." *Factual*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.factual.ro/declaratii/fals-george-simion-despre-parlamentul-european-care-ne-ar-obligha-sa-primim-migranti/>; ReBaltica, "Ko paredz jaunais ES migrācijas pakts?", 17 May 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://rebaltica.lv/2024/05/ko-paredz-jaunais-es-migracijas-pakts/>; CEDMO Hub, "Polska zapłaci za każdego migranta, którego nie przyjmie", 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://cedmohub.eu/pl/polska-zaplaci-za-kazdego-migranta-ktorego-nie-przyjmie/>; CEDMO Hub, "Kandidāti o kvótach a azylu v migračním paktu.", 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://cedmohub.eu/cs/kandidati-o-kvotach-a-azylu-v-migracnim-paktu/>; The Journal, "EU Commission Delays Election in Ireland Over Treaty, Pandemic Accord, and Migrant Pact", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/eu-commission-ireland-delay-election-who-treaty-pandemic-accord-migrant-pact-hate-crime-bill-6348792-Apr2024/>; TjekDet, "Nej, Danmark risikerer ikke migrantbøder i ny EU-pagt." *TjekDet*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.tjekdet.dk/faktatjek/nej-danmark-risikerer-ikke-migrantboeder-i-ny-eu-pagt>; GADMO, "Aktion im EU-Parlament: Was steht auf dieser Liste mit verstorbenen Geflüchteten?", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://gadmo.eu/aktion-im-eu-parlament-was-steht-auf-dieser-liste-mit-verstorbenen-gefluechteten/>; Euractiv, "Predvolebné dezinformácie: Anna Belousova strasí miliónmi migrantov." *Euractiv*, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://euractiv.sk/section/digitalizacia/news/predvolebne-dezinformacie-anna-belousova-strasi-milionmi-migrantov/>.

²⁰⁵ Rasche, Lukas, and Paul-Jasper Dittrich, "Interpretation and Truth: How Right-Wing Populist Disinformation Informs the Debate on Migration", *Jacques Delors Centre*, 2019, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/detail/publication/how-populist-disinformation-informs-the-debate-on-migration>.

²⁰⁶ Opportunities, "Policy Brief: Cross-Country Comparison of Media Selection and Attitudes Towards Narratives on Migration", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/media/attachments/2022/08/19/policybrief-kul.pdf>; this study highlights that individuals who perceive greater threats from refugees – whether related to crime, jobs, social benefits, or cultural life – tend to hold more negative attitudes towards immigrants. This perceived threat was most strongly related to the fear that refugees would impact the country's cultural life.

arson attacks.²⁰⁷ During the COVID-19 pandemic, false stories blaming migrants and minorities for the virus's spread led to violence, particularly against communities of Chinese descent.²⁰⁸

Even if disinformation about migrants does not result in violence, and the majority is not perfectly aligned with all its hostile contents, it can still have significant impact on social perceptions. For example, **Europeans frequently overestimate the number of foreign-born residents**, likely influenced by claims of an 'invasion' of immigrants.²⁰⁹ This perception can then lead to the normalisation of demands for stricter measures against irregular arrivals.

Particularly when resources like jobs or welfare benefits are perceived as scarce, narratives depicting migrants as an economic threat can also heighten negative sentiments.²¹⁰ People with lower-income or less secure workers who may feel vulnerable to competition.²¹¹ The 'profiteer frame', or 'reverse discrimination' narrative, appears to have the most damaging effect on perceptions and behaviour (see also Section 3.2).²¹²

False and misleading stories thus feeds other societal processes, reinforcing biases, divisions and social tensions.²¹³ Repeated exposure to disinformation and misinformation about refugees creates mental associations, with crime or economic burden, which become harder to refute, increasing stigma and discrimination.²¹⁴ Experts argue that disinformation can thus deepen fear and distrust in this context, complicating efforts to promote integration and social inclusion.²¹⁵

One of the most concerning effects of disinformation, especially if not addressed through public policy, is **its potential to undermine social bonds**.²¹⁶ Beyond weakened trust in institutions, disinformation disrupts social ties, especially in contexts in which political tensions and emotional discussions can influence the behaviour and decisions of individuals. It fosters an atmosphere where opposing groups become increasingly hostile, undermining tolerance and dialogue. This erosion of social cohesion fundamentally weakens the bonds that hold democratic societies and communities together and could, in itself, be an objective of malicious actors.

²⁰⁷ Hinz, Thomas et al. "Media coverage, fake news, and the diffusion of xenophobic violence: A fine-grained county-level analysis of the geographic and temporal patterns of arson attacks during the German refugee crisis 2015–2017", *PLOS ONE* 18.7 (2023): e0288645. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0288645>.

²⁰⁸ Euronews, 'COVID-19 and xenophobia: why outbreaks are often accompanied by racism', 5 March 2020, accessed 28 October 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/05/covid-19-and-xenophobia-why-outbreaks-are-often-accompanied-by-racism>; Chittedam, Alron. "Role of Misinformation in Migration." *International Journal of Policy Sciences and Law* 1.3 (2021): 1693-1711

²⁰⁹ Swanson, Ana, "Why you're probably wrong about levels of immigration in your country", World Economic Forum, 05 September 2016.

²¹⁰ Bayer, Judit et. al. "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States – 2021 Update", European Parliament, 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653633).

²¹¹ Opportunities. "Changing Attitudes Towards Migration in Europe: Dynamic Analyses (2002-2018)", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/media/attachments/2022/11/14/d4.2-final.pdf>.

²¹² Bridges for Integration. "Report on the Influence of Narratives on Attitudes Towards Immigrants", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/report-on-the-influence-of-narratives-on-attitudes-towards-immigrants/>.

²¹³ Banulescu-Bogdan, Natalia. "When Facts Don't Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration's Costs and Benefits." Migration Policy Institute, 2018.

²¹⁴ Samdani, Abdullah, and Shikha Dimri, "Syrian Refugees and the Digital Misinformation Crisis: Legal Challenges and Policy Solutions", *Journal of Informatics Education and Research*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2024, pp. 1-30. DOI: [10.52783/jier.v4i2.1231](https://doi.org/10.52783/jier.v4i2.1231).

²¹⁵ Sánchez Esparza et al. "Mapping Stigmatizing Hoaxes Towards Immigrants on Twitter and Digital Media: Case Study in Spain, Greece, and Italy", in *News Media and Hate Speech Promotion in Mediterranean Countries*, edited by Elias Said Hung and Julio Montero Diaz, IGI Global, 2023, pp. 136-161. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-8427-2.ch008>.

²¹⁶ Asmolov, Gregory. "The disconnective power of disinformation campaigns", *Journal of International Affairs* 71.1.5 (2018): 69-76.

9. Initiatives by Authorities and Civil Society Actors against Disinformation

In the EU, several approaches are being pursued to address disinformation and misinformation, ranging from **communication-based strategies** (see Sections 9.1 and 9.2) to **self-regulatory** and, more recently, regulatory measures, as well as criminal sanctions where appropriate, with varying degrees of success. These **measures must take into account fundamental rights**, especially freedom of expression, which is robustly protected. This section examines these approaches, highlighting relevant insights that may inform effective responses to disinformation.

As a starting point, it is important to note that **freedom of expression**, encompassing the “freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference from public authority”, is a guiding principle that delimits clear regulatory boundaries.²¹⁷ Yet, **EU law has long required member states to criminalise racist or xenophobic speech** that publicly incites “violence or hatred 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”.²¹⁸ **Online hate speech** has similarly been a criminal offence for some time.

Some scholars have in this context criticised recent national developments criminalising disinformation in certain EU member states, arguing that this raises concerns regarding fundamental rights.²¹⁹ However, due to the high-threshold set by the fundamental right to freedom of expression, hostile narratives in themselves cannot be made illegal.

This is key to understand why legal tools to address the spread of **‘awful but lawful’ content** took long to develop. Harmful speech may ‘shock, offend or disturb’ or spread disinformation that hinders individuals’ ability to make informed decisions. Yet, it **is protected by freedom of expression** and not deemed illegal.²²⁰

Considering this, EU policy initiatives mainly avoided direct control over such content, encouraging **self-regulation by digital companies** to mitigate potential harm instead. For example, in 2016, the EU introduced the **Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online**, committing platforms to measures to create a safer digital environment, including the removal of harmful content.²²¹ In 2022, the EU then launched a **strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation**, whereby major platforms, including Google, Meta, and TikTok, agreed to demonetise disinformation, increase transparency in political advertising, reduce manipulative practices (e.g., fake accounts) and empower individuals and fact-checkers to flag disinformation.²²²

While these self-regulatory initiatives are generally seen as helpful complementary tools, they have faced criticism. The platforms’ commitments are largely non-binding, and **evaluating their**

²¹⁷ Article 11, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

²¹⁸ Council of the 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.

²¹⁹ Ó Fathaigh, Ronan, Natali Helberger, and Naomi Appelman, “The Perils of Legally Defining Disinformation”, *Internet Policy Review* 10.4 (2021): 2022-2040. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14763/2021.4.1587>.

²²⁰ Hoffmann, Anja, and Gasparotti, Alessandro, “Liability for Illegal Content Online: Weaknesses of the EU Legal Framework and Possible Plans of the EU Commission to Address Them in a ‘Digital Services Act’”, CEP, 2020.

²²¹ European Commission. “The EU Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online”, available at https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/document.cfm?doc_id=42985

²²² European Commission, “2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation”, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/87585>; European Commission. “EU Action Plan Against Disinformation: Six Key Areas of Focus.” European Commission, 2021, accessed 27 October 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2585, European Commission. 2019 SBA Fact Sheet: Spain. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/586157e5-923f-11e9-9369-01aa75ed71a1>.

effectiveness has proved challenging.²²³ More broadly, delegating **content monitoring and truth assessment to private companies remains contentious.**²²⁴

Over time, the EU has gradually moved towards **co-regulatory or regulatory** approaches, whereby measures taken by private entities are grounded in binding legislation. This shift recognises that voluntary measures alone are insufficient to combat the sophisticated tactics of disinformation campaigns. Regulatory approaches aim to increase platform accountability while safeguarding freedom of expression.²²⁵ Reflecting this shift, the recently adopted **Digital Services Act (DSA) seeks to strengthen Europe's response to illegal content and disinformation** by establishing more stringent standards and responsibilities for online platforms. While generally considered a step in the right direction, **intervening swiftly across all forms of manipulated content** and stimulating instead of thwarting democratic debates **may prove challenging** (see Box 2 for a detailed overview of the obligations set by the DSA).

Box 2: The Digital Services Act (DSA), its added value and potential shortcomings

The DSA introduces clear obligations for platforms to mitigate systemic risks, ensure transparency in content moderation, and provide effective user reporting mechanisms. More specifically:

- Transparency requirements obligate platforms to share data with vetted researchers to better understand systemic risks, including disinformation.
- Platforms need to disclose how content moderation operates, including algorithmic decision-making and human review processes.
- The DSA seeks to enhance user control over algorithmically curated feeds, which often prioritise divisive or manipulative content over factual information.²²⁶

The DSA also mandates Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), with over 45 million users, to undergo risk assessments and enhance content moderation practices to limit illegal or harmful content. This includes monitoring disinformation risks affecting public health, safety, and electoral processes. As part of these assessments, platforms are required to address manipulative activities such as inauthentic behaviour and fake accounts, and implementing reasonable measures, including content moderation adjustments, ad restrictions, and stronger security processes.

While generally seen as a positive development, scholars point to certain shortcomings:

²²³ Galantino, Sharon, "How Will the EU Digital Services Act Affect the Regulation of Disinformation?" *SCRIPTed*, 20 (2023): 89, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://script-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Galantino-How-Will-the-EU-Digital-Services-Act-Affect-the-Regulation-of-Disinformation.pdf>.

²²⁴ Article 19, "Facebook Oversight Board and Freedom of Expression", accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.article19.org/resources/facebook-oversight-board-freedom-of-expression/>.

²²⁵ Shattock, Ethan, "Lies, Liability, and Lawful Content: Critiquing the Approaches to Online Disinformation in the EU", *Common Market Law Review*, 60.5 (2023).

²²⁶ European Parliament, "Facebook Files: MEPs to Invite Whistleblower Frances Haugen to a Hearing." *European Parliament News*, 11 October 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/de/press-room/20211011IPR14619/facebook-files-meps-to-invite-whistleblower-frances-haugen-to-a-hearing>.

- Experts question whether requiring platforms to disclose how their recommendation systems work will ensure real accountability, particularly if algorithms continue to prioritise engagement over accuracy.²²⁷
- Some commentators suggest that the DSA falls short in addressing the economic incentives underpinning algorithmic content promotion.²²⁸
- The DSA's focus on large platforms leaves smaller platforms and certain messaging apps less regulated, creating potential gaps where harmful content may continue to proliferate.²²⁹
- The DSA defines "systemic risks" too narrowly, which allows certain harmful practices to slip through. The DSA addresses manipulative uses of platform services, but disinformation tactics frequently extend beyond platforms, complicating regulatory efforts. To address this, experts have suggested that systemic risks should be broadly defined to capture information manipulations originating outside but influencing platform ecosystems.²³⁰
- Content moderation remains a challenge.²³¹ Removing illegal content is relatively straightforward, but disinformation often falls within a grey area, occupying the space between unlawful and lawful content. As disinformation is not necessarily illegal, the boundary between harmful content and legitimate expression is blurred. Experts argue that strict measures like content removal should be reserved for severe cases, as in the case of coordinated disinformation campaigns.. Meanwhile, 'lawful but awful' content could be managed through promotion of reliable information and increased user awareness.²³²

The DSA measures, focused on transparency and heightened risk, **are intended to prevent arbitrary or disproportionate content removal, thus protecting free speech rights, while holding platforms accountable.**²³³ However, this underscores a delicate balance between regulatory interventions, and their potential undesirable effects. For example, asymmetrical responsibilities, combined with further voluntary commitments, may lead to a fragmented digital environment, with some platforms choosing to remove all such content while others opt for warnings or fact-checking labels.²³⁴ At the same time, some users may migrate to smaller platforms or alternative channels to express genuine and legitimate dissent or share false, or misleading messages, **potentially outpacing monitoring and removal.**

Alongside the DSA, the EU has introduced the **Artificial Intelligence Act**, which aims to establish a comprehensive regulatory framework for AI technologies. A core objective of the Act is to foster

²²⁷ Nannini, Luca et al, "Beyond Phase-in: Assessing Impacts on Disinformation of the EU Digital Services Act", *AI and Ethics*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-024-00001-2>.

²²⁸ Leiser, M.R. "Curtailling Disinformation: Analysing the European Union's Digital Services Act Provisions for the Curtailment of Fake News, Disinformation, & Online Manipulation." *Journal of Media Law*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17577632.2024.0001>.

²²⁹ Nannini, Luca et al, "Beyond Phase-in: Assessing Impacts on Disinformation of the EU Digital Services Act", *AI and Ethics*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-024-00001-2>.

²³⁰ Cesarini, Paolo, "Regulating Big Tech to Counter Online Disinformation: Avoiding Pitfalls While Moving Forward", *Journal of Media Law*, 13.1 (2021): 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17577632.2021.1893224>.

²³¹ Cesarini, Paolo, "Regulating Big Tech to Counter Online Disinformation: Avoiding Pitfalls While Moving Forward", *Journal of Media Law*, 13.1 (2021): 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17577632.2021.1893224>.

²³² Cesarini, Paolo, "Regulating Big Tech to Counter Online Disinformation: Avoiding Pitfalls While Moving Forward", *Journal of Media Law*, 13.1 (2021): 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17577632.2021.1893224>.

²³³ Husovec, Martin, "The Digital Services Act's red line: what the Commission can and cannot do about disinformation", *Journal of Media Law*, 16.1 (2024): 47-56.

²³⁴ Galantino, Sharon, "How Will the EU Digital Services Act Affect the Regulation of Disinformation?" *SCRIPTed*, 20 (2023): 89, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://script-ed.org/article/how-will-the-eu-digital-services-act-affect-the-regulation-of-disinformation/>.

an ‘**ecosystem of trust**’ by enforcing safety and transparency requirements. The AI Act categorises AI systems by risk level: high, medium, and low or minimal. Deepfakes are subject to specific **transparency requirements** but are not classified as high-risk. Users using AI systems to generate deepfakes have to disclose that the content is artificially created.²³⁵ This aims to inform recipients that the content is not real, thus helping reduce deception. Some scholars, however, question whether this will suffice, as many deepfakes are created with malicious intent, and those responsible may simply ignore requirements.²³⁶ **Consequently, transparency obligations may apply to only a minority of malicious deepfakes, leaving most unregulated.**

Overall, the DSA and AI Act could therefore only be considered a starting point in the efforts to address disinformation in a fast-changing media and information environment. Without further initiatives, a large share of manipulative content will likely continue to go unchecked.

On the other hand, beyond freedom of expression, scholars have also raised concerns about the potentially counter-productive effect of regulatory or even self-regulatory initiatives, if not balanced against broader principles of democratic governance. While the risks associated with disinformation justify vigilant monitoring, some experts are sceptical of its true impact (see Section 8). They for this reason argue that efforts to counter disinformation could lead to overreach,²³⁷ and further undermine public trust and in those who claim authority over truth.²³⁸

The literature has also highlighted the integral role of social media in political communication and participation in this context. Many EU citizens use social media to engage in political discourse. Social media provide a platform for politicians and citizens to communicate, share information, and mobilise on political issues across member states. Recognising this, experts caution that **policies addressing disinformation should avoid restricting space for dissent and debate.**²³⁹

Considering this, recent EU-level initiatives also aim to **strengthen and pluralise the European media environment**. Structural issues identified in several EU states include a lack of transparency in media ownership, curtailed editorial autonomy, and concentrated ownership often favouring government-friendly outlets.²⁴⁰ These trends have eroded trust in legacy media in many countries, raising the risk of exposure to inaccurate content within Europe and its neighbouring regions (see Section 8).²⁴¹ The recently adopted EU Media Freedom Act (MFA) seeks to protect editorial freedom and independence by guarding against political and ownership interference and **promoting transparency and stable funding for media pluralism.**

9.1. Whole-of-society Efforts: Monitoring and Fact-checking

Efforts to combat disinformation have not been limited to initiatives led by public authorities. Independent fact-checking initiatives by civil society organisations and independent researchers

²³⁵ Łabuz, Mateusz, “Regulating Deep Fakes in the Artificial Intelligence Act”, *Applied Cybersecurity & Internet Governance*, 2.1 (2023): 1-42, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4535462>.

²³⁶ Łabuz, Mateusz, “Regulating Deep Fakes in the Artificial Intelligence Act”, *Applied Cybersecurity & Internet Governance*, 2.1 (2023): 1-42, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4535462>.

²³⁷ García, Luis Bouza, and Alvaro Oleart, “Regulating Disinformation and Big Tech in the EU: A Research Agenda on the Institutional Strategies, Public Spheres and Analytical Challenges”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62.5 (2024): 1395-1407, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13548>.

²³⁸ Peuker, Alexander, “The Regulation of Disinformation: A Critical Appraisal”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62.5 (2024): 1395-1407, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13548>.

²³⁹ Hunter, Lance Y, “Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy: How Different Types of Social Media Usage Affect Democracy Cross-Nationally”, *Democratization*, 30.6 (2023): 1040-1072, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2234096>.

²⁴⁰ Centre of Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, “Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey in the Year 2022”, 2023, <https://cmpf.eu.eu/mpm2022-results/>.

²⁴¹ Factors Promote Exposure to Online Disinformation.” *Politics of Disinformation: The Influence of Fake News on the Public Sphere*, 2021, pp. 173-186, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64174-3_11.

also aim to debunk disinformation circulating on social media and online platforms, and have achieved notable successes while also facing persistent challenges.

Fact-checking efforts have surged since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.²⁴² Building on previous work debunking disinformation on other migrant groups, fact-checkers have helped expose hundreds, if not thousands, of disinformation stories related to displaced Ukrainians. Unconstrained by political or legal limits, they successfully uncovered false and misleading claims and broader disinformation trends, regardless of origin. Independent fact-checkers thus play a key role in countering disinformation, **a role that will grow under the DSA framework.**

Future successes may also emerge from initiatives such as the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), launched in 2020. This Europe-wide network includes fact-checking organisations, academics, researchers, and media institutions. Organised around national and regional hubs, EDMO seeks to strengthen cooperation and raise on the needs and most effective strategies to counter online disinformation. EDMO conducts original research, maps and supports ongoing fact-checking and research efforts, and aims to build a European fact-checking community, also **fostering cross-border collaboration and a culture of cooperation.**

While fact-checking is a crucial tool in the fight against disinformation, it faces various challenges, including evolving technologies. **AI advancements** reduce the cost of creating and distributing disinformation across multiple social media and encrypted platforms, **complicating detection** efforts. Detecting audio-visual disinformation is also more complex than identifying textual disinformation because it is processed more intuitively and emotionally. This makes people more likely to believe and remember visual disinformation (see Section 6).

With only limited resources, many fact-checkers may struggle to adapt to these new technological developments, with fact-checking methods and efforts more likely to fall short.²⁴³

In addition to these specific challenges, fact-checkers face multiple structural obstacles that range from 1) the limits of debunking due to psychological processes, 2) the risk of unintentionally amplifying visibility of disinformation narratives, and 3) the inability to balance out discourses on divisive topics like migration in the wider information ecosystem.

Disinformation appeals not only because of its claims but also because of the ideology and values it reinforces as well as the concerns it exploits. It provides material to strengthen group beliefs, while also seeking to gain new supporters by tapping into their fears (see Section 7).²⁴⁴ Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning mean that those drawn to disinformation often disregard information that contradicts their beliefs. **Disinformation's emotional and ideological appeal likewise weakens the effectiveness of debunking,** as audiences who engage with false narratives are unlikely to be swayed by facts alone.²⁴⁵ Connected to this, simply labelling content as 'false' may also fail to prevent further sharing.

Not all disinformation generates equal engagement, making **blanket fact-checking approaches impractical and, at times, counter-productive.** On complex issues like migration, fact-checkers may also be tempted to verify every aspect of false claims, including technical language often used

²⁴² Iwaniuk, Jakub, "In Poland, 'Cyber-Elves' Fight Russian Trolls", *Le Monde*, 14 April 2022, <https://script-ed.org/article/how-will-the-eu-digital-services-act-affect-the-regulation-of-disinformation/>

²⁴³ Weikmann, Teresa, and Sophie Lecheler, "Visual disinformation in a digital age: A literature synthesis and research agenda", *New Media & Society* 25.12 (2023): 3696-3713.

²⁴⁴ Massimo Flore et al., *Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities to Disinformation and Data-Driven Propaganda: Case Study: The 2018 Italian General Election*, EUR 29741 EN (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019),

https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC116009/understanding_citizens_vulnerabilities_to_disinformation.pdf. Walter, Nathan et al. "Fact-Checking: A Meta-Analysis of What Works and For Whom", *Political Communication*, 37.3 (2020): 350-375, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1638288>.

²⁴⁵ Leiser, M.R., "Curtailling Disinformation: Analysing the European Union's Digital Services Act Provisions for the Curtailment of Fake News, Disinformation, & Online Manipulation", *Journal of Media Law*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17577632.2024.0001>

ambiguously by disinformation actors.²⁴⁶ However, only a few disinformation stories achieve both macro-level and micro-level engagement and may generate negative impacts on society, policies or democracy.²⁴⁷ Where this is not the case, **myth-busting**, including on seemingly small technical details, **may backfire, inadvertently amplifying the message and framing used by disinformation actors**. Correcting disinformation can reinforce familiarity, making false claims seem more credible (see Section 7 on, e.g. the *illusory truth effect*).²⁴⁸

In addition, **disinformation is known to spread faster than verified reporting and corrections**.²⁴⁹ Relatedly, while fact-checkers effectively counter individual disinformation stories, their impact on the broader media ecosystem is therefore limited.²⁵⁰ **Fact-checkers have minimal influence on the agendas of partisan or mainstream media outlets, let alone on disinformation creators**. This highlights a challenge within migration discourse: facts alone rarely suffice to balance debates on migration or migration policy.²⁵¹

This is not to undermine the role of fact-checkers and independent investigators, who play a vital role beyond debunking individual stories. Fact-checkers contribute by identifying harmful content and offering insights into evolving disinformation trends, threats, and narratives.

Recent successes underscore the value of ‘whole-of-society’ approaches to countering disinformation. The uncovering of the *Doppelgänger* operation (see Section 6) exemplifies a collaborative, open-source investigation involving media, civil society, platforms, and authorities to counteract foreign influence campaigns. However, *Doppelgänger* also illustrates the limitations faced by civil society and the limited effectiveness of sanctions or legal measures. While actions like deplatforming and sanctions have hindered the operation, they have not fully dismantled it. Malign actors continue to adapt, employing new tactics and enhancing obfuscation, while community-driven efforts face ongoing resource challenges in disrupting these networks.

9.2. Beyond Disinformation as an Online and Technological Threat

The challenges in addressing the threats posed by disinformation, including migration-related disinformation, do not end here. **Disinformation is not only a technological problem**; actions cannot be confined to regulating the digital world. **Disinformation is also a social and communication issue**. From this perspective, three additional aspects warrant attention: 1) media and information literacy; 2) communication-based responses; and 3) contact-based responses. This section concludes with a reflection on policy change and implementation.

Media and information literacy

While measures to reshape the media ecosystem, such as increasing algorithmic transparency, requiring tech companies to act against proven malicious actors, and supporting independent journalism, are essential to slowing the impact of disinformation, these alone will not create more resilient European societies **unless citizens are supported in understanding the media**

²⁴⁶ See e.g. GADMO. “Gebrühtiger Salzburger schoss in München um sich”, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://gadmo.eu/gebrühtiger-salzbürger-schoss-in-münchen-um-sich/>.

²⁴⁷ Fletcher, Richard, et al. “Measuring the Reach of ‘Fake News’ and Online Disinformation in Europe.” *Australasian Policing*, 10.2 (2018): 25-33.

²⁴⁸ Van der Linden, Sander, and Jon Roozenbeek, “How Can Psychological Science Help Counter the Spread of Fake News?”, *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 24 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1017/SJP.2021.23>.

²⁴⁹ Van der Linden, Sander, and Jon Roozenbeek, “How Can Psychological Science Help Counter the Spread of Fake News?”, *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 24 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1017/SJP.2021.23>.

²⁵⁰ Vargo, Chris J., Lei Guo, and Michelle A. Amazeen, “The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016”, *New Media & Society* 20.5 (2018): 2028-2049. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817690986>.

²⁵¹ Banulescu-Bogdan, Natalia, “When Facts Don’t Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration’s Costs and Benefits”, *Migration Policy Institute*, 2018, accessed 27 October 2024,

environment and the role disinformation plays within it. Achieving this demands significant, consistent investment in bolstering critical skills.

Studies show that critical skills are key structural factors contributing to societal and democratic resilience against online disinformation (see Section 7.1).²⁵² Although media and information literacy alone may not reduce belief in specific false claims, interventions to enhance **these skills can lower the perceived accuracy** of misinformation and disinformation.²⁵³ Critical skills should not be seen as a universal solution either.²⁵⁴ Media and information literacy is challenging to design and deliver. While no one-size-fits-all approach exists, **the need to enhance digital, media, and information skills is increasingly recognised** across European countries.

Media, information, and digital skills – often termed media and information literacy – are not yet codified or standardised. Traditionally, media and information literacy referred to citizens' ability to access, analyse, and produce information. However, new understandings of digital literacy have emerged, such as 'transmedia literacy', which put emphasis digital and participatory culture and skills to navigate, create, and critically evaluate content across multiple platforms.

Essential critical skills include the ability to **identify bias, selective reporting, and emotional appeals**, understanding how media shape perceptions and beliefs, and **assessing the reliability of sources**. Recognising the importance of media literacy, the European Commission has established the Media Literacy Expert Group and launched a Digital Education Action Plan to create a more inclusive digital education system. Aligned with this, in 2022, the Expert Group published guidelines for educators on using digital competences to combat disinformation.²⁵⁵

However, as education is a national competence within the EU, **the Commission can only promote coordinated actions in this area**, resulting in **varied levels of media and information literacy across the EU**. Recent Eurostat data highlights these disparities: in Finland and the Netherlands, eight out of ten people aged 16 to 74 have basic digital skills, compared to only around one-third in Romania and Bulgaria.²⁵⁶

In response, numerous initiatives have been launched by non-state actors to improve critical skills, including universities, media organisations, educators, and specialist media literacy bodies.²⁵⁷ Some recent initiatives also use a '**prebunking**' approach based on '*inoculation theory*'.²⁵⁸ This involves exposing people to weakened forms of misinformation, pre-emptively equipping them to recognise and resist future disinformation, akin to how vaccines work.

Inoculation has been applied in various areas, including climate change denial, conspiracy theories, and COVID-19 misinformation as well as in relation to migrants and refugees, with

²⁵² Humprecht, Edda, Frank Esser, and Peter Van Aelst, "Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25.3 (2020): 493-516, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219900126>.

²⁵³ Hameleers, Michael, "Separating Truth from Lies: Comparing the Effects of News Media Literacy Interventions and Fact-Checkers in Response to Political Misinformation in the US and Netherlands", *Information, Communication & Society*, 25.1 (2020): 110-126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1764603>.

²⁵⁴ Livingstone, Sonia, "Media Literacy: What Are the Challenges and How Can We Move Towards a Solution?", *LSE Media Blog*, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/media/2018/10/25/media-literacy-what-are-the-challenges-and-how-can-we-move-towards-a-solution/>.

²⁵⁵ European Union, "Guidelines for Teachers and Educators on Tackling Disinformation and Promoting Digital Literacy Through Education and Training", *European Commission*, 2022, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/167c4c3b-4ae8-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

²⁵⁶ European Commission, "Overall Digital Skills: Digital Skills Reference to Each Area", *Eurostat News*, 30 March 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220330-1>.

²⁵⁷ Livingstone, Sonia, "Mapping European Media Literacy Initiatives in Response to the War in Ukraine", *European Digital Media Observatory*, 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/edmo-news/mapping-european-media-literacy-initiatives-in-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

²⁵⁸ Kiili, Kristian, Juho Siuko, and Manuel Ninaus, "Tackling Misinformation with Games: A Systematic Literature Review," *Interactive Learning Environments*, 3 January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2023.2299999>.

individuals exposed to small doses of disinformation through interactive exercises.²⁵⁹ This method focuses on the deceptive tactics (e.g., conspiracy framing, polarisation) behind fake news rather than specific content, enabling people to transfer these skills across contexts. Among others, it has shown promise in helping people resist manipulation.

Recent pre-bunking initiatives specifically aimed to address disinformation about migrants and refugees, with one example being a campaign launched by Google in partnership with academic researchers, featuring 90-second videos showcasing different manipulation techniques frequently utilised in migration-related disinformation.²⁶⁰ After testing, these clips proved effective in improving people's ability to discern trustworthy from untrustworthy content, and were directed toward users of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, where disinformation about displaced Ukrainians was prevalent.²⁶¹

These initiatives reflect an increasing recognition of the need to build resilience against false information by empowering citizens to engage with it critically. They also highlight the potential of prebunking and, more broadly, **of multistakeholder partnerships to raise critical skills and reduce susceptibility to disinformation**, including among specific minority groups.²⁶²

However, **the involvement of non-state actors and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in media literacy programmes cannot single-handedly create a level playing field across Europe**. Preliminary studies, for example, suggest that the bulk of CSO initiatives come from countries with established media literacy traditions.²⁶³ In addition, **a comprehensive mapping and evaluation** of media literacy initiatives in Europe **is yet to be undertaken**, which call for more harmonised approach, and the definition of widely-agreed and scientifically defined indicators.²⁶⁴

Reflecting this fragmented landscape, and the growing need to create a 'level playing field', EDMO has also established a Working Group dedicated to raising media literacy levels across Europe. By developing quality standards, guidelines, and best practices, EDMO seeks to enhance the effectiveness of new and existing media literacy initiatives. Further EU-level efforts will, however, be essential to address disparities among member states, as **the EU's societal resilience to disinformation is only as strong as its weakest link**.

Such interventions may not necessarily alter underlying attitudes toward the issues discussed, but they can help individuals recognise when information may be false. With awareness of disinformation and an understanding of manipulative messaging techniques, European citizens will be better equipped to make informed choices about whether to share content further.

²⁵⁹ Lewandowsky, S., and Van Der Linden, S. "Countering Misinformation and Fake News Through Inoculation and Prebunking", *European Review of Social Psychology*, 32.2 (2021): 348-384, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10463283.2021.1876983>; Roozenbeek, Jon, and Sander van der Linden, "Fake News Game Confers Psychological Resistance Against Online Misinformation", *Palgrave Communications*, 5 (2019): 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0225-9>.

²⁶⁰ Gerken, Tom, "Google to Run Ads Educating Users About Fake News", *BBC News*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-62503200>.

²⁶¹ Roozenbeek, Jon, et al. "Psychological Inoculation Improves Resilience Against Misinformation on Social Media." *Science Advances*, 8.34 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abo6254>.

²⁶² Lewandowsky, Stephan, and Muhsin Yesilada, "Inoculating Against the Spread of Islamophobic and Radical-Islamist Disinformation", *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 6.1 (2021): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-021-00323-z>.

²⁶³ Livingstone, Sonia. "Mapping European Media Literacy Initiatives in Response to the War in Ukraine." *European Digital Media Observatory*, 2022, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/edmo-news/mapping-european-media-literacy-initiatives-in-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

²⁶⁴ See however for an upcoming study, Ecorys, "Call for Literature: Evaluation of Media Literacy Initiatives in Europe", *European Digital Media Observatory*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://edmo.eu/edmo-news/call-for-literature-evaluation-of-media-literacy-initiatives-in-europe-by-ecorys/>.

Communication-based responses:

The second non-regulatory approach to consider is **communication and reporting**.²⁶⁵ Disinformation often exploits an information vacuum, filling discursive space with threat-based narratives. Citizens and commentators frequently cite a lack of reliable information on migration issues.²⁶⁶ In this context, **experts argue that a comprehensive approach to disinformation should include efforts to promote more balanced migration narratives and de-polarise the debate, offering an alternative to the hostile narratives that disinformation spreads.**²⁶⁷

Specialists have for example stressed the need for providing responsible, evidence-based narratives early in the discursive process to keep migration debates calm and informed, helping to ensure that policy decisions are not driven by the divisive rhetoric of disinformation.²⁶⁸ Strengthening access to a diverse, plural, and independent media sector is a critical first step to achieve this (see above, Section 9).

At the same time, the literature has also highlighted that the use of simplistic counter-narratives to 'respond' to hostile narratives can be counterproductive. **Communication strategies to maintain a balanced debate may backfire if they raise the suspicion that institutional actors are using disinformation concerns as an excuse to control public discourse.** This can undermine the credibility of anti-disinformation actions. It should be considered by fact-checkers and content moderators, but also by government actors or EU institutions keen to reduce polarisation and stimulate more balanced reporting about divisive topics like migration.

Regarding migration specifically, **counter-narratives often attempt to garner sympathy for migrants using 'victim' or 'hero' frames.**²⁶⁹ The victim frame portrays migrants as individuals in need of support, appealing to values of altruism and humanitarianism. Yet, not everyone shares these values. The hero frame, meanwhile, presents migrants as exceptionally talented or hard-working individuals who have successfully overcome hardship.²⁷⁰ However, such narratives risk creating unrealistic expectations, potentially leading to disappointment if these are unmet.

These counter-narratives do not offer a real alternative to the divisive rhetoric of disinformation and may only resonate with liberal audiences who value solidarity. Without providing a middle ground for those with conservative or traditional values, such groups may shift towards extremes in search of belonging if they repeatedly encounter threat-based disinformation (see Box 1, 'the Movable Middle', in Section 7).

To depolarise migration debates, **communication specialists advocate for 'new' or 'alternative narratives' that more closely resonate with the concerns and the value systems of individuals with conflicting views.**²⁷¹ Communication-based responses should prioritise

²⁶⁵ OECD, "Facts Not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity" March 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/03/facts-not-fakes-tackling-disinformation-strengthening-information-integrity_ff96d19f.html.

²⁶⁶ Kenny, Ciarán, "Roscrea Protests Against Misinformation on Immigrants and the Far Right", *The Journal*, 22 January 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.thejournal.ie/roscrea-tipperary-racket-hall-protests-misinformation-immigrants-far-right-6274302-Jan2024/?jrnl_lg=1.

²⁶⁷ Chittedam, Alron, "Role of Misinformation in Migration", *International Journal of Policy Sciences and Law*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2021, pp. 1693–1711.

²⁶⁸ Smellie, Saskia, and Christina Boswell, "Policy Brief on the Impact of Narratives on Policymaking at the National Level", *BRIDGES Policy Brief 2*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/policy-brief-on-the-impact-of-narratives-on-policymaking-at-the-national-level/>.

²⁶⁹ Pizarro Carrasco, José J., Juan-José Igartua, and Verónica Benet-Martínez, "Narrative Framing Effects on Intergroup Attitudes and Prosocial Behaviors", *BRIDGES Working Paper Series*, December 2023, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/report-on-the-influence-of-narratives-on-attitudes-towards-immigrants/>.

²⁷⁰ Ghosh, Palash, "Here's to the Immigrant Heroes Behind the BioNTech-Pfizer Vaccine", *Bloomberg Opinion*, 13 November 2020, accessed 27 October 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2020-11-13/here-s-to-the-immigrant-heroes-behind-the-biontech-pfizer-vaccine?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner.

²⁷¹ For an overview of the literature, see Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives", *European Policy Centre*, 2020, p. 31.

messages tailored to conflicted segments of society who feel underrepresented in public discourse, targeting groups more likely to recognise the benefits of balanced migration policies who nevertheless harbour genuine concerns about their countries' future.

This is especially urgent in the current context, as the cost-of-living crisis and uneven prosperity– amplified by the consequences of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and increased instability in the Middle East – provide more entry points for disinformation around migration.

Contact-based responses:

Online campaigns can effectively reach targeted audiences, yet disinformation should not be viewed solely as an online problem. In fact, lasting impressions and meaningful connections are often formed through interpersonal relationships, which disinformation undermines. Some scholars argue that efforts should focus on preserving or re-establishing social ties.²⁷²

Contact theory, a valuable but underexplored area of research, offers insights into how to achieve this end and complement other actions in order to more comprehensive and strategically address migration-related disinformation.²⁷³ Contact theory posits that, under certain conditions, direct interaction between different groups can reduce prejudice. Positive interactions with members of an outgroup foster more favourable attitudes towards the group as a whole, whereas interactions marked by conflict or competition are less effective or even counterproductive.²⁷⁴

For instance, research focused on migrants has shown that feelings of threat mediate the relationship between contact and attitudes towards migrants.²⁷⁵ Direct contact can help reduce perceived threats, whereas negative media portrayals heighten them.²⁷⁶ Overall, the quality of contact (e.g., positive or negative experiences) has a stronger impact on attitudes than the quantity of contact. Closer relationships, such as friendships, are especially effective in reducing prejudice.

While not a panacea, promoting sustained, in-person interaction between locals and migrant groups can be key to combating disinformation and misinformation targeting migrants. Given its relevance to daily life, the local level may be ideal for fostering inclusive migration debates and facilitating connections between host communities and migrants.

However, contact theory also highlights one further aspect of the disinformation challenge: strategies must be underpinned by effective policies. For instance, spatial segregation, lack of investment in socio-economic inclusion, and inadequate housing policies reduce the frequency and quality of inter-group interactions.

More broadly, messages from EU institutions and national or local authorities reassuring the public that migration can be managed to benefit all are only credible if backed by concrete policies. Effective policies can alleviate the insecurities that fuel disinformation narratives, ultimately showing that these narratives are fictitious. Moreover, **if institutions demonstrate genuine responsiveness to citizens' concerns**, the public may become more receptive to further

²⁷² Asmolov, Gregory, "The disconnective power of disinformation campaigns", *Journal of International Affairs*, 71.1.5 (2018): 69-76.

²⁷³ David De Coninck, Isabel Rodríguez-de-Dios, and Leen d'Haenens, "The Contact Hypothesis During the European Refugee Crisis: Relating Quality and Quantity of (In)Direct Intergroup Contact to Attitudes Towards Refugees", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 6 (2021): 881–901, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220929394>; Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp, "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90.5 (2006): 751-783, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.

²⁷⁴ Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp, "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90.5 (2006): 751-783, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.

²⁷⁵ De Coninck, David, Isabel Rodríguez-de-Dios, and Leen d'Haenens, "The Contact Hypothesis During the European Refugee Crisis: Relating Quality and Quantity of (In)direct Intergroup Contact to Attitudes Towards Refugees", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 24.6 (2022): 973-993, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302221116199>.

²⁷⁶ Crisp, Richard, et al. "CARIN About Migrants Through News? Linking Migrant Deservingness to Traditional and Digital Media Consumption", *International Migration*, 62.3 (2023): 469-488, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13212>.

communication from these sources, creating **a mutually reinforcing cycle between balanced public discourse on migration and sound policymaking.**

10. Conclusive Reflections: Research Insights and Policy Considerations

Disinformation and misinformation, including false stories on migrants, are here to stay.²⁷⁷ This study emphasises the complexity and multidimensional nature of the challenges posed by disinformation and misinformation on migration. There are no silver bullets. Consequently, effective actions to address these challenges must consider various research and policy dimensions. Based on the analysis in this study, the following research and policy insights (#) and recommendations (→) are presented.

Research-Oriented insights and recommendations:

- 1) Addressing disinformation and misinformation through diverse methods is likely to remain the preferred approach, yet the literature does not consistently agree on which approach is most effective.
→ **Continue investing in research that underscores the need for comprehensive approaches to disinformation, identifying the strongest defensive or corrective mechanisms through data and evidence.**
- 2) Migration can be artificially linked to various other salient issues, from housing to health. Identifying key structural factors that influence societal vulnerability, or resilience against disinformation can inform policy responses across different contexts.
→ **Conduct research on intersecting disinformation topics, exposing trends, vulnerabilities, and opportunities for counter-strategies that provide ‘global’ insights.**
- 3) Critical reasoning can help mitigate the impact of fake news, regardless of partisanship. However, the media literacy landscape in Europe is fragmented, with different approaches and segments targeted and inconsistent methods. In addition, there are few long-term impact assessments of the benefits of trainings in critical thinking.
→ **Conduct rigorous and standardised research to evaluate the benefits of critical skill-building. Study how media literacy can be adapted for diverse audiences, including different age groups as well as ‘middle groups’ and those with low level public trust.**
→ **Expand longitudinal research to assess whether benefits of fact-checking and media literacy interventions persist over time.**
- 4) Inoculation techniques, like vaccination, involve exposing individuals to small doses of misinformation, equipping them with defences and skills to resist future disinformation.
→ **Support research on prebunking methods, assessing how they can be combined with other strategies to bolster societal resilience.**
- 5) Audio-visual disinformation is processed more intuitively and emotionally than text, making it more believable and memorable. Detecting visual disinformation is also challenging.
→ **Promote empirical studies on visual manipulation effects, exploring the prevalence of visual disinformation, psychological mechanisms enhancing its impact, and effective countermeasures.**
- 6) Social media’s impact on democracy is dual; it can strengthen democratic participation or, conversely, spread disinformation, increase polarisation, and incite divisions.
→ **Focus future research on regulating harmful content while ensuring social media positively contributes to democratic governance.**

²⁷⁷ Van Raemdonck, Nathalie, and Trisha Meyer, “Why Disinformation Is Here to Stay: A Socio-Technical Analysis of Disinformation as a Hybrid Threat”, in *Addressing Hybrid Threats: European Law and Policies*, edited by Luigi Lonardo, 57-83. Edward Elgar Publishing, February 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802207408.00009>.

- 7) Disinformation exploits psychological vulnerabilities, such as cognitive biases and emotional appeals. People are more inclined to engage with news that aligns with their views, avoiding corrections that challenge their beliefs.
 - ➔ **Support research exploring why people believe and share disinformation, focusing on psychological traits, beliefs, and concerns of different audiences as well as on the interface between motivated reasoning and classical reasoning explanations.**
- 8) While disinformation can affect democracies, policymaking and social processes, measuring its precise impact remains challenging.
 - ➔ **Facilitate comprehensive data collection across a wide range of countries to assess the ‘global’ impact of disinformation, including on the integrity of democratic processes as well as on policymaking.**

Policy-Oriented insights and recommendations:

- 1) Tackling disinformation demands a combination of strategies and a whole-of-society approach involving public authorities, civil society organisations, tech companies, and international bodies.
 - ➔ **Institutionalise a whole-of-society approach as a core feature of the EU’s response to disinformation, fostering collaboration among policymakers, researchers, CSOs, journalists, and tech companies to ensure that policies are comprehensive and inclusive.**
- 2) Disinformation is spread by both foreign and domestic actors, often promoting similar strategies and narratives.
 - ➔ **Invest in monitoring and fact-checking activities to track both domestic and foreign sources of disinformation, effectively responding to the complexity of the disinformation ecosystem and closing regulatory blind spots.**
- 3) Various actors monitor and fact-check false stories, yet this diversity can lead to duplication of effort and limited coordination. Connected to this, although they share the common goal, fact-checkers often vary widely in methods.
 - ➔ **Strengthen coordination among fact-checkers, identifying redundancies and optimising collective impact.**
- 4) While fact-checking is essential, it does not always generate engagement. Fact-checking must also be timely to counter disinformation effectively.
 - ➔ **Avoid blanket approaches. Instead, prioritise fact-checking of stories with significant viral potential. Incorporate tools to assess individual stories’ harmful exposure, engagement, and believability.**
 - ➔ **Enhance real-time monitoring capacity and establish ‘early warning systems’ for prompt responses to emerging disinformation trends.**
- 5) Transparency in disinformation detection models is crucial to maintain public trust, particularly among sceptical audiences. There is a risk that lack of transparency or ability to describe how a disinformation detection model makes its decisions affects the credibility of fact-checking activities.²⁷⁸
 - ➔ **Ensure that the public understands why content is flagged as disinformation to improve trust in these systems.**
- 6) Disinformation’s impact on political and societal processes is complex, requiring nuanced responses from national and EU authorities.
 - ➔ **Evaluate the DSA’s impact across legal, technical, psychological, and ethical dimensions, covering all relevant areas, from content moderation to algorithmic transparency.**

²⁷⁸ Alam, Firoj et al. (2022), “A survey on multimodal disinformation detection”, *International Committee on Computational Linguistics*, Proceedings of the 29th International Conference on Computational Linguistics: 6625–6643.

- 7) Algorithm-led recommendation systems contribute to the spread of disinformation. Algorithms designed for engagement often amplify sensational or divisive content.
→ **Enforce greater accountability in algorithmic operations, ensuring that platforms prioritise factual, balanced content over sensationalism and continued, passive engagement.**
- 8) Fact-checkers have limited influence over news agendas, particularly in partisan or mainstream outlets. Countries with trusted public media tend to have better public resilience to disinformation.
→ **Foster a more diverse media landscape, demonetise disinformation, and promote public service media to strengthen trust in professional journalism.**²⁷⁹
- 9) Media literacy empowers citizens to critically assess information and make informed choices.
→ **Strengthen media and information literacy by building synergies across existing initiatives, involving state institutions, and integrating media literacy into curricula for all age groups.**
→ **Tailor literacy programmes to specific demographics, including vulnerable groups and those with lower media literacy levels, also considering value-based segmentation to increase reach and impact.**
- 10) Disinformation thrives in environments with distrust in institutions, polarisation, and economic inequality.
→ **Develop messages addressing underlying grievances, fostering hope, and reducing fear.**
- 11) Polarisation fosters environments where certain narratives resonate more strongly. Simple, memorable, and believable narratives can help challenge disinformation.
→ **Use repeated exposure to balanced information to counter disinformation, while avoiding reinforcement of false claims and threat-based messages underlying disinformation.**
→ **Encourage all stakeholders (public authorities, journalists, CSOs) to communicate on migration in a balanced, evidence-based manner, avoiding unnecessary complexity.**
- 12) Knowledge gaps in the public, combined with information vacuums can create fertile ground for disinformation.
→ **Allocate resources for public awareness campaigns on complex topics like migration to mitigate these vacuums.**²⁸⁰
- 13) Disinformation erodes social connections, which could otherwise support reconciliation and dialogue. Social media could play a constructive role by exposing users to diverse views, reducing polarisation.
→ **Encourage social media platforms to develop tools that promote respectful political engagement across partisan lines. Additionally, create physical spaces for in-person engagement across ideological divides, fostering dialogue and critical thinking.**
- 14) As long as the conditions driving dissatisfaction, disillusionment, and anxiety remain, disinformation will continue to find fertile ground.
→ **Address the root causes of disinformation by developing policies that go beyond disinformation itself, fostering solutions to societal issues artificially linked to migration, from housing to labour market participation.**

²⁷⁹ Bleyer-Simon, Konrad, et al. "Demonetisation of Disinformation: Can the Actions of Large Online Platforms Be Measured?" *Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom*, 2024, accessed 27 October 2024, <https://cmpf.eui.eu/demonetisation-of-disinformation/>.

²⁸⁰ See on 'migration literacy', Butcher, P., and Neidhardt, A. H., "From Debunking to Prebunking: How to Get Ahead of Disinformation on Migration in the EU", *European Policy Centre*, 2021.

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Annex 1

Fact-checking Databases Consulted (Selection)

EU-wide/International

- EDMO:
 - o <https://edmo.eu/resources/repositories/repository-of-fact-checking-articles/> and <https://edmo.eu/areas-of-activities/fact-checking/best-of-fact-checking-map/>
- EU vs. Disinfo
 - o <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>
- AFP:
 - o <https://factcheck.afp.com/list/regions/Europe>
- Database of Known Fakes Home About (DBKF) <https://dbkf.ontotext.com/>

National databases (selection):

- Belgium: <https://factcheck.vlaanderen/>
- Bosnia: <https://istinomjer.ba/>
- Croatia: <https://faktograf.hr/>;
- Czechia: <https://demagog.cz/>; <https://www.fakticke.info/> ; <https://manipulatori.cz/>
- Germany: <https://correctiv.org/>
- Ireland: <https://www.thejournal.ie/factcheck/news/>; <https://www.logicallyfacts.com/en>
- Italy: <https://www.bufale.net/> ; <https://www.butac.it/> ; <https://pagellapolitica.it/>
- Montenegro: <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/>
- Poland: <https://demagog.org.pl/> ; <https://pravda.org.pl/>
- Serbia: <https://fakenews.rs/>; <https://www.istinomer.rs/> ; <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/>
- Spain: <https://maldita.es/migracion/>
- United Kingdom: <https://factcheckni.org/> ; <https://theferret.scot/ferret-fact-service/> ; <https://fullfact.org/>
- Ukraine: <https://www.stopfake.org/ru/glavnaya-2/>; <https://voxukraine.org/en/voxcheck>

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The portal data.europa.eu provides access to open datasets from the EU institutions, bodies and agencies. These can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes. The portal also provides access to a wealth of datasets from European countries.

This study highlights that dominant disinformation narratives frame migrants and migration as a threat to Europeans' health, wealth, and identity. It discusses issues linked to definitions, core threat-based narratives in disinformation campaigns and explores the role of key actors, both foreign and domestic, in spreading disinformation. The role of social media and relevant transformations in the wider media and information ecosystem is investigated. Strategies used in disinformation campaigns and exploitation of personal beliefs and anxieties are also addressed. This leads to exploring the negative impacts of disinformation, and the responses public authorities, civil society, and media organisations can formulate and to know how to counter disinformation. The conclusion in this report offers research and policy recommendations to address disinformation and preserve social cohesion in an increasingly polarised environment.

Studies and reports

