



DE-CONSPIRATOR

DETECTING AND COUNTERING INFORMATION SUPPRESSION FROM A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY

Conceptualizing FIMI Social and Collective Drivers

Alexander Politov, Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD)

Sofia Information Integrity Forum, 08.11.2024



Funded by
the European Union

The DE-CONSPIRATOR project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No 101132671.



About the project

- DE-CONSPIRATOR aims to understand the success factors, manifestations, and impacts of Russian and Chinese FIMI and to provide data-driven policy solutions.
- **Objectives:** ▶ Analyse the strategies and tactics of those who initiate FIMI. ▶ Understand how FIMI spreads within the EU and Partner Countries (PC) through local networks. ▶ Investigate the factors that contribute to the success of FIMI campaigns. ▶ Develop a comprehensive, multilingual database of FIMI incidents. ▶ Assess the effectiveness of existing regulatory frameworks in the EU and nationally against FIMI. ▶ Engage policymakers and stakeholders in protecting the values of European democracies against FIMI
- **Beneficiaries:** ▶ Policymakers seeking data-driven policy solutions against FIMI. ▶ The academic and scientific community gaining fresh insight on factors and impacts of FIMI. ▶ Social media platforms that need better protection against FIMI while preserving freedom of expression. ▶ Civil society organisations that work on media and journalism integrity
- **Expected results:** ▶ Trans-European FIMI Actors Dataset; ▶ FIMI Event Database; ▶ ‘Disinfor-meter’: A Psychometric tool; ▶ Multi-dimensional Policy & Regulatory Toolbox; ▶ FIMI Policy Briefs



DE-CONSPIRATOR

DETECTING AND COUNTERING INFORMATION SUPPRESSION FROM A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE



The task

- To identify, collect, synthesize and review scholarly literature on FIMI social and collective drivers;
- Understand collective dynamics of FIMI exposure and group behavior within larger or smaller social structures;
- Provide an understanding of how these drivers influence the spread of FIMI;
- A major research gap in the literature on the role of social and collective drivers of FIMI;
- FIMI drivers are not specifically conceptualised as such in the reviewed literature.

FIMI social and collective drivers in EU institutional reports

- Two ground-breaking EEAS reports (2023; 2024) - defining FIMI and analysing the actors, processes and channels through which FIMI operates, as well as goals and potential consequences.
- No precise definition of FIMI drivers attributable to FIMI, as well as their operationalization;
- No clear delineation of social-scientific variables that define the relationships within the socio-political structure of a FIMI ecosystem or the target society;
- Defining the variables provides ground for theorisation of FIMI and bridging of theory and practice.
- Prevention and counteraction would also benefit from a more theoretical approach.

- **FIMI** - ‘a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory’ (EEAS, 2024, p. 4).
- Although disinformation and FIMI partly overlap, they differ conceptually as ‘not all disinformation is FIMI, and FIMI is not only disinformation’.
- The FIMI concept: 1) an **analytical framework** for FIMI threat analysis; 2) a **response framework** to FIMI threats.

Levels of analysis

- **Gap** in the literature on the conceptualization of FIMI drivers /inferred from context and goals/; Qualitative studies predominate over quantitative ones.
- **Macro level** – examines large scale social structures, processes and institutions /whole societies, economies, cultures, or global systems/;
- **Meso level** - focusing on intermediate social structures or units /communities, organizations, or networks, political parties, social identity groups/;
- **Micro level** - smallest scale of inquiry, focusing on individual or small group interactions and experiences.

Macro-level drivers of FIMI

- Major determinants of social conditions - macro-level social systems and social structures in a country including the legal and regulatory framework, political system, economy, education system, the media and religion;
- **The political system, mode of governance, institutional environment** – democratic societies are more vulnerable to FIMI as they have higher level of diversity which can be exploited by FIMI threat actors, capitalizing on in-group and out-group dynamics;
- **Democratic backsliding, low public trust in democratic institutions, dysfunctional governance and state capture** – FIMI-enabling factors as they make societies less resilient and more susceptible to FIMI threats;
- **Political grievances, radicalization and violent extremism** are interconnected and create enabling environment for FIMI.
- **Societal divisions and political, social, sociodemographic, ideological and economic polarisation** emerge in the literature as all-important drivers of FIMI.

Macro-level drivers of FIMI

- Media manipulation is a key component of malign actors' strategies; therefore, **the media environment** plays a large part for the spread of FIMI content. Some drivers include:
- **Low trust in the media**, which averts the attention to alternative media sources;
- **Media capture** - political or economic entities exert excessive control over important media outlets to further their own agendas (either through direct ownership or control by political or corporate elites, or through subtler methods of influence - advertising revenue, financial subsidies, or the selective release of government information);
- **Cognitive capture** - the way journalists 'influence content by reflecting their own perceptions and worldviews or those of their customers onto their media products' - conducive to enabling the dissemination of FIMI content and threat actors' narratives.

Meso- and micro-level drivers of FIMI

- Fewer insights as regards social and collective drivers of FIMI that play out at the meso and micro level;
- **Social networks** (incl. online social networks) - meso-level manifestations of social structures, are a major aspect of the environments in which FIMI takes place;
- Social networks and communities have been found to influence social issues related to misinformation also through their effects on **social norms**;
- **Social stratification** - a structural factor that influences the precision targeting of different audiences, which can be analysed at the meso level.
- **Socioeconomic status** - influencing susceptibility to FIMI. Membership of a group with a lower socioeconomic status has been associated with more pronounced conspiracy beliefs.
- **Sociodemographic variables** - age, gender, ethnicity, education, etc.

Meso- and micro-level drivers of FIMI

- **Membership of social identity groups** (community and group membership) - a key dimension when it comes to adoption of conspiracy theories, applicable to FIMI as well;
- The **presence of minority groups** in a society has been discussed by some experts as a factor which may correspond to increased collective vulnerability to information manipulation.
- Party affiliations and **partisanship** also emerge in the literature as a meso-level factor that may influence people's vulnerability to FIMI-related phenomena like conspiracies, especially if conspiracies conform to their partisan views.
- **Political parties** with favourable attitudes towards or close ties with threat actors may as well be used to spread and amplify malign influence and disinformation.

Meso- and micro-level drivers of FIMI

- **Strategic corruption** can also be considered as a driver of FIMI, in so far as it can be weaponized by threat actors and facilitated by established local oligarchic networks, which have developed a covert influence infrastructure to purchase the services of politicians, judges, media executives, and businesses.
- The **micro-level analysis** of social and collective drivers focuses on small social systems, i.e. the social interactions of individuals and very small groups (families, relationships). The reviewed literature presents very few research and analytical results as regards social and collective drivers of FIMI that play out at the micro level.

Drivers of FIMI as variables

- Unclear causal relationships between variables within FIMI ecosystems;
- For the purpose of scholarly research - need to operationalise FIMI drivers as variables – research question / unit of analysis / level of analysis.
- Place drivers at their proper level of scholarly enquiry and analysis – drivers, e.g. enablers or enabling factors, in policy analysis corresponds roughly to independent variables in scholarly research.

Divers of FIMI as intervening variables

Independent variable (cause)	Intervening variable (pathway, mediator or modifier)	Dependent variable (effect, outcome)
FIMI operation/campaign ▶▶▶	Polarization ▶▶▶	Changing public opinion / party or candidate preferences / electoral behavior / vote choice
FIMI operation/campaign ▶▶▶	Media capture /control over media outlets ▶▶▶	Changing or manipulating public opinion / ensuring positive coverage/
FIMI operation/campaign ▶▶▶	Demographic characteristics / social status / media capture ▶▶▶	Changing levels of / amplifying social or political polarization
Polarization	▶▶▶	Increased susceptibility or exposure to FIMI

Bridging policy and practice

- Enhancing the knowledge of FIMI will help build societal resilience against FIMI in different spheres of social life – government institutions, the administration, political parties, the media, civil society, etc.
- Building social cohesion and stability as critical social drivers of social resilience to FIMI;
- Whole-of-society approach - publics, government, civil society and the media;
- Bridging scholarship and practice to: 1) inform theory from practice and vice versa and 2) improve responses to FIMI (detection, prevention and counteraction).



csd.eu



Alexander Politov



alexander.politov@csd.eu



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY



DE-CONSPIRATOR

DETECTING AND COUNTERING INFORMATION SUPPRESSION FROM A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE



www.deconspirator-project.eu



info@deconspirator-project.eu



Funded by
the European Union

The DE-CONSPIRATOR project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No 101132671.



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY



DE-CONSPIRATOR

DETECTING AND COUNTERING INFORMATION SUPPRESSION FROM A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Thank you!



Funded by
the European Union

The DE-CONSPIRATOR project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No 101132671.