



CENTER FOR  
THE STUDY OF  
DEMOCRACY



# Unraveling Influence

Social and Collective Drivers of Foreign Information  
Manipulation and Interference



# **Unraveling Influence**

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Manipulation and Interference**



This state-of-the-art report is part of the Center for the Study of Democracy's (CSD) extensive body of work addressing Russian malign influence. It builds on the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) framework of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and examines FIMI social and collective drivers identified in scholarly literature. The goal is to conceptualise these drivers as variables, contributing to 1) a deeper understanding of the causal relationships within FIMI ecosystems, and 2) the whole-of-society approach to detecting, preventing, and countering FIMI campaigns and operations that CSD is pursuing.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>EFA</b>	Executive Forest Agency
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>CSD</b>	Center for the Study of Democracy
<b>CSDP</b>	Common Security and Defence Policy
<b>DE-CONSPIRATOR</b>	Detecting and Countering Information Suppression from a Transnational Perspective
<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>ENISA</b>	European Union Agency for Cybersecurity
<b>ETL</b>	ENISA Threat Landscape
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FIMI</b>	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technologies
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>PLS</b>	Partial Least Squares
<b>SEM</b>	Structural Equality Modelling
<b>USA</b>	United States of America

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)** is a growing threat to democratic societies and a systemic challenge effected by foreign actors to destabilise societies, undermine democratic institutions, deepen social and political cleavages, and erode public trust. The concept of FIMI was introduced by the European External Action Service (EEAS) to address this threat.

This state-of-the-art report defines and examines the **social and collective drivers of FIMI**. The report aims to facilitate their quantification, enable deeper analysis, foster a better understanding of their relationships and impacts, and enhance understanding of FIMI's systemic nature. It provides an in-depth review of macro-, meso-, and micro-level drivers, highlighting their interconnected impacts on FIMI's spread and effectiveness. By addressing these drivers systematically, policymakers can better **predict, prevent, and counteract FIMI campaigns** through a holistic approach that accounts for the various societal-, group-, and individual-level effects.

## Macro-level drivers

At the macro level, certain societal structures and systemic vulnerabilities create fertile ground for FIMI. Political systems characterised by **declining public trust in institutions and democratic backsliding** are particularly susceptible. For instance, **governance gaps**, in particular **state capture**, enable threat actors to manipulate systems effectively from within. Such vulnerabilities are further amplified by **geopolitical pressures** and **economic dependencies** as malign actors exploit systemic weaknesses to advance their agendas.

**Social fragmentation** and **polarisation** also serve as major enablers of FIMI. **Societal divisions** based on **ethnicity, religion, ideology, or socioeconomic status** provide opportunities for foreign actors to exacerbate discord. Polarised societies are particularly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns, as these divisions absorb and amplify extremist narratives and undermine social cohesion.

Another critical driver is the profound **transformation of the media ecosystem**. The rise of digital and social media platforms has disrupted traditional information environments. **Declining trust in mainstream, editorial media**, combined with the growing prevalence of alternative and algorithm-driven content, facilitates the rapid spread of disinformation. **Media capture** further strengthens the ability of malign actors to influence public opinion and disseminate disinformation.

Flaws in education systems and broader knowledge structures play a vital role in shaping societal resilience. Limited **media literacy** and **critical thinking skills** increase susceptibility to manipulation. Furthermore, the failure of education systems to properly address historical issues and misinformation leaves societies vulnerable to FIMI campaigns. Addressing these deficiencies is essential for fostering resilience.



In many cases, the geopolitical context adds another layer of vulnerability. **Territorial disputes, economic dependencies, and external pressures** serve as enablers of FIMI. Economic and military resources are often deployed to fund mechanisms of state capture and media capture, enabling sustained FIMI operations.

## Meso-level drivers

At the meso level, community structures and group dynamics significantly influence the spread of FIMI. Social media platforms play a central role by creating **echo chambers** that reinforce existing beliefs. Algorithms that prioritise sensationalist or polarising content amplify misinformation, while community narratives shape social norms that drive the dissemination of FIMI content.

**Group identities**, such as **nationality, religion, or ethnicity**, are often leveraged to foster in-group loyalty and out-group hostility. **Vulnerable groups**, including **marginalised minorities**, are targeted with tailored disinformation campaigns which exacerbate feelings of discrimination and alienation. These efforts create a climate of mistrust and deepen societal divisions.

**Partisanship** and **political affiliations** also contribute to the spread of FIMI. Strong partisan biases make individuals more resistant to debunking efforts and more likely to accept narratives aligned with their views. Moreover, political entities with close ties to foreign actors may serve as conduits for spreading malign influence.

**Strategic corruption** and **illicit financial flows** are additional meso-level drivers. Foreign actors often use these mechanisms to establish networks of influence within existing groups with privileged access to local elites, which support disinformation campaigns and amplify FIMI's impact. These networks blur the lines between political, economic, and social domains, creating environments where manipulation thrives.

## Micro-level drivers

Micro-level drivers focus on **interpersonal interactions** and **individual behaviours**. Direct exposure to conspiratorial content through online platforms is a critical precursor to engagement with FIMI. These interactions often occur within close-knit communities, where personal (friends and kin) connections influence attitudes and behaviours.

**Psychological factors**, such as predisposition toward conspiracy theories, interact with social dynamics to shape individual susceptibility. This micro-level interplay provides the foundation for broader FIMI operations, linking individual behaviours to collective vulnerabilities.

## Quantitative analyses

Key findings and themes from the reviewed quantitative studies of FIMI, primarily examined through related concepts such as disinformation and cognitive warfare, include:

- **Social media and influence operations:** Foreign actors exploit social divisions on platforms to polarise opinions, manipulate elections, and undermine democratic trust using themes such as race and partisanship.
- **Erosion of trust and polarisation:** Declining trust in governments and media accelerates societal polarisation, deepening divisions between perceived in-groups and out-groups targeted by FIMI.
- **Conspiracy ideation and social dynamics:** Factors such as unemployment, elections, and marginalisation are linked to conspiracy adoption, with social predictors like exclusion and relationships influencing community joining.
- **Disinformation and political influence:** Russian and Chinese campaigns show that disinformation affects polarisation, voting, and policy attitudes. Accordingly, partisanship, demographics, and social media use have been quantified as drivers.
- **Ideological vulnerability:** Ideological alignment and perceived minority status heighten susceptibility to misinformation, with conservative groups showing greater exposure.

Although quantitative research on FIMI is limited due to the concept's novelty, available studies highlight its importance for identifying and operationalising FIMI drivers as measurable variables. Advanced methodologies, including regression and econometric modelling, offer actionable insights.

## FIMI drivers as variables

This state-of-the-art report conceptualises FIMI phenomena as **independent, intervening, and dependent variables**:

- **Independent variables (causes)** are drivers, in a broader sense, that initiate or increase susceptibility to FIMI.
- **Intervening variables (intermediaries/modifiers)** are drivers in a narrower sense - enabling conditions or factors that mediate or amplify FIMI's influence.
- **Dependent variables (effects)** are outcomes of FIMI campaigns.

We use **social and political polarisation** as one of FIMI's most common elements to exemplify these three types of variables. **As an independent variable**, polarisation acts as a driver of FIMI by heightening societal divisions or making communities more vulnerable to manipulation. For instance, it can directly affect dependent variables such as electoral behaviour and vote choice. A polarised society is more susceptible to disinformation because its members are less likely to question narratives that align with their biases.

**As an intervening variable**, polarisation can amplify the impact of FIMI campaigns (independent variable). For example, existing polarisation (intervening variable) may make it easier for FIMI (independent variable) to deepen mistrust among groups, change electoral behaviour or influence vote choice (dependent variables). Polarisation in this role can intensify how disinformation spreads and affects societal behaviour.

**As a dependent variable**, increasing polarisation itself can be the target of FIMI campaigns (independent variable), with disinformation aimed at enhancing divisions to undermine societal cohesion. Thus, polarisation can be understood as a driver of FIMI only when it acts as an independent or intervening variable; however, it cannot be considered a driver of FIMI when it functions as a dependent variable. Generally speaking, **FIMI drivers in policy analysis can be interpreted only as independent or intervening variables in social science research.**

By categorising FIMI-specific variables, the report provides a framework to enable a comprehensive analysis and understanding of their role, different causal relationships within FIMI ecosystems, as well as their impact on society and politics. Based on the example of polarisation, we conceptualise FIMI drivers as independent and intervening variables. Expanding research by operationalising and measuring these variables quantitatively will enhance the predictive power of FIMI analyses and provide valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders to implement effective countermeasures and mitigation strategies.

### Real life cases: FIMI during elections

The 2nd EEAS report analyses real case studies of FIMI during elections that showcase various causal relationships.<sup>1</sup> The **tactics of FIMI**, analysed in the EEAS report, involve disinformation campaigns which exploit polarisation to manipulate public opinion. For instance, FIMI actors may disseminate narratives designed to deepen distrust between political factions, aggravating existing divides and reducing trust in democratic processes. The **impact** of these tactics is significant, as a polarised electorate becomes more susceptible to FIMI efforts. Targeted disinformation during elections can heighten political tensions, reduce voter turnout, and erode public confidence in the integrity of elections.

### Conclusion and avenues for future research

The state-of-the-art report underlies the importance of developing a deeper understanding of the social and collective drivers of FIMI, emphasising their systemic and multifaceted nature. It highlights the pressing need for future research to operationalise these drivers as measurable variables, enabling more robust quantitative analysis and theoretical modelling. Such efforts would facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between FIMI drivers and their impacts, offering critical insights into how societal vulnerabilities are exploited by foreign actors.

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<sup>1</sup> European External Action Service, *2nd EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: A framework for networked defense*, 2024.

Future research needs to **expand the application of quantitative methods** to identify and measure the influence of drivers such as polarisation, institutional trust, and media ecosystems. Investigating how these drivers interact across macro, meso, and micro levels could provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of FIMI. Furthermore, exploring the role of context-specific drivers, such as cultural and geopolitical differences, would enrich the theoretical and practical applications of FIMI research.

Advancing this field of study will strengthen predictive models, inform policy interventions, and contribute to the development of a more resilient societal infrastructure capable of countering FIMI's disruptive effects.

## Policy action

Expanding quantitative research to measure FIMI drivers and their impacts is crucial for developing targeted interventions. This report underscores the interconnectedness of macro-, meso- and micro-level drivers in enabling FIMI. By addressing these drivers systematically across the three levels, policymakers can develop robust strategies to mitigate FIMI's impact and safeguard democratic institutions. To counteract FIMI, a holistic approach is essential. Education reforms should prioritise critical thinking and media literacy to reduce societal susceptibility to disinformation. Strengthening institutional trust and transparency will help address vulnerabilities in democratic systems. Fostering international collaboration will enable coordinated efforts to combat FIMI campaigns effectively.

# INTRODUCTION

## Context

In pursuing its revisionist agenda and geopolitical goals, the Kremlin has resorted to the full array of its power capabilities, including many of the instruments identified as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). The Kremlin has steadily reintroduced traditional aspects of its hard power in its wars in Europe, including aggressive military and political tactics, while simultaneously engaging in covert operations or ‘active measures’ throughout Europe.<sup>2</sup> It also successfully leverages its long-standing soft power influence which has enabled it to gain the support of national governments through offers of cultural, religious, and youth-focused initiatives.<sup>3</sup> Russia also wields what some have defined as sharp power,<sup>4</sup> leveraging vulnerabilities in the target countries, for example through state capture, political and economic influence, media capture, disinformation, cyber warfare and other malign activities.<sup>5</sup> Foreign information manipulation and interference has thus added a new layer in Russia’s power projection toolbox which needs to be systematically addressed through concerted efforts and a whole-of-society approach.

Russian malign influence operations have increased over the years targeting vulnerable societies with false and misleading information. Disinformation and propaganda have become important tools in the hybrid warfare of Russia against the EU. Particularly vulnerable are the counties in Southeast Europe as they are ridden with multiple social, ethnic, economic and political problems that make Russian malign influence easy to spread and amplify. The main goal of such operations is to ‘undermine core democratic institutions and processes, deepen and exploit economic dependencies, and sow social divisions through deceit and manipulation’.<sup>6</sup> To tackle this problem, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has developed the concept of FIMI as 1) an analytical framework for FIMI threat analysis, and 2) a response framework to FIMI threats.

The conceptualisation of FIMI has come as a response to the changes in the concept of warfare and in the nature and character of information space, to developments in the international system, but also as a result of civil society organizations’ efforts to draw attention to the problem and their calls for action. Specifically, the EU has been called upon to ‘expand the administrative and personnel capacity of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force – specially dedicated to debunking Russian disinformation across

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<sup>2</sup> Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 13, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> See Walker, C., ‘What Is “Sharp Power“?’ *Journal of Democracy* 29(3), 9-23, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Stefanov, R., Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020. Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., Galev, T. (eds.), *Tackling Kremlin’s Media Capture in Southeast Europe: Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Novossiolova, T., Georgiev, G., *Countering Hybrid Warfare in Bulgaria: A Strategic Assessment of National Capabilities and Infrastructure*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 5, 2023.

European countries. The Task Force should also become a permanent unit with an expanded scope within the EEAS'.<sup>7</sup>

## Purpose

FIMI is a relatively new concept devised by the EEAS to capture various information warfare practices that state or non-state threat actors employ to undermine social cohesion, destabilise societies, deepen political cleavages and polarisation, sow doubt in the viability of democracies, cause distrust of public institutions, threaten public order and internal security, or change individual or group behaviour, including voting patterns.

As a new notion, FIMI is still not well conceptualised in terms of the **social and collective drivers**<sup>8</sup> that influence susceptibility to FIMI content, the spread and effectiveness of related operations, and the success of prevention and counteraction. The relationships among the multifarious factors and the directions of FIMI's impact on the target societies are also yet to be illuminated. Given that information manipulation is of systemic nature and produces system-wide consequences,<sup>9</sup> understanding the social and collective drivers of FIMI is paramount to successfully preventing and countering this phenomenon, particularly through building collective resilience of publics, governments, civil society and the media. As foreign actors seek to exploit pre-existing vulnerabilities in society,<sup>10</sup> such as governance vulnerabilities and state capture for example,<sup>11</sup> addressing the underlying social conditions and processes that augment susceptibility to FIMI is critical to tackling this issue.

The review of the literature points to a **lack of a unified theoretical framework for the examination of societal and collective drivers of FIMI**. This group of drivers have mainly been explored in the framework of studies looking into individual factors. Furthermore, current understanding of societal and collective determinants of FIMI primarily stems from theoretical analyses.<sup>12</sup> There are few examples of research investigating the role of social factors empirically, and these primarily rely on qualitative methods.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy, *Capture Proofing Media in Southeast Europe*, Policy Brief No. 98, p. 6, March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> For a definition of 'social and collective drivers' see the section on definitions below!

<sup>9</sup> Aghajari, Z., Baumer, E. P., DiFranzo, D., 'Reviewing interventions to address misinformation: The need to expand our vision beyond an individualistic focus', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CSCW 1), 1-34, 2023..

<sup>10</sup> Kavanagh, J., Rich, M., *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, RAND Corporation, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., 'What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1-30, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

The twofold purpose of this state-of-the-art report<sup>14</sup> is 1) *to summarise the state of the art on the social and collective drivers or enablers of FIMI* and 2) *to conceptualise these drivers as independent or intervening variables*. To that end, we conducted an extensive literature review on FIMI-related social and collective drivers and their impact on collective action and society. The literature review aims to collect, synthesise and critically examine the state of the existing scholarly literature on social and collective factors, processes and dynamics of relevance to FIMI.

Among the social and collective drivers of FIMI that are investigated are: social and political polarisation, identity politics, ethnic and cultural divisions within society, economic disparity, political cleavages, public opinion, demographics and demographic vulnerabilities, social stratification, disinformation ecosystems, etc. In the analysis, these various elements are approached as drivers that play out at three societal levels: macro, meso and micro. The state-of-the-art report seeks to provide an understanding of how these drivers influence the spread of FIMI, and thus to pave the way towards devising effective policy interventions. The report also looks into the use of quantitative methods in the literature, and attempts to explore the potential operationalisation of some of these drivers as variables, and summarise the existing evidence on the types of relationships between FIMI and the said drivers.

Out of the reviewed pieces of literature – reports, articles and policy documents – a relatively small number specifically treat the concept of FIMI. Qualitative articles predominate in the literature compared to articles using quantitative methods and data. Therefore, we looked to other topical literature on FIMI-related concepts such as disinformation, misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, malign information influence, information warfare, hybrid warfare, cognitive warfare and cognitive supremacy. Since social and collective drivers did not feature prominently and were not explicitly referred to as such, they had to be analytically extracted from the collected literature. Moreover, we defined causal relationships between variables from contexts and goals, e.g. if the goal of a FIMI attack were to polarise society or capitalise on polarisation to shape political attitudes and public opinion, then we hypothesised causality and interpreted these drivers as variables.

Overall, the review of the literature shows that, in the existing research and analyses related to the topic of FIMI, there is an insufficiency of findings and insights on the role of social and collective factors of FIMI. It constitutes a major research gap that individual factors are primarily examined as separate from the social environment in which they play out.<sup>15</sup> As this report exclusively focuses on social and collective drivers of FIMI, other relevant aspects and drivers will not be dealt with in depth and are mostly omitted from this review. Despite this limitation, however, the interplay of collective and individual drivers is considered in a broader context, where appropriate. Building on this basis, the report provides further insights into determining, conceptualising and understanding the relationships of the various social and collective drivers of FIMI. Importantly, this report is not about the essence

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<sup>14</sup> The report does not aim to provide a comprehensive review of all existing literature on FIMI and other FIMI-related fields. It seeks to identify and adapt key social and collective drivers relevant to FIMI, but some important publications may have been omitted.

<sup>15</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., 'What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement', Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 4(CSCW3), 1–30, 2021.

and distinctive features of FIMI operations, the way they are conducted or the channels through which they reach their audience.

This report is structured to provide a comprehensive examination of the social and collective drivers of FIMI. Following this introduction, the Definitions section clarifies key concepts and terminologies central to the understanding of FIMI. The report then reviews insights from EU institutional reports on FIMI drivers, before analysing these drivers across macro, meso, and micro levels to capture their systemic impacts. A dedicated section on quantitative methods explores approaches to studying FIMI, highlighting opportunities and gaps in current research. The report subsequently conceptualises FIMI drivers as variables and investigates their causal relationships in the Defining Drivers as Variables section. Finally, the Conclusion summarises findings and proposes avenues for future research and policy interventions, complemented by an Annex listing some key FIMI drivers.



# DEFINITIONS

The defining work on **FIMI** and its formulation as a specific concept are two reports by the EEAS.<sup>16</sup> They conceptualise FIMI and distinguish it from other related terms such as disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, etc.

The present report follows the EEAS definitions of FIMI and other FIMI-related terms. FIMI is defined as ‘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’.<sup>17</sup>

Closely related is the Swedish definition of malign information influence: ‘[a]ctivities carried out by a foreign power, or antagonistic actors, with the aim of influencing the perceptions, behaviors and decision-making of different target groups’. The official definition employed by Sweden contends that information influence activities target a society’s vulnerabilities and can threaten the ‘...population’s lives and health, the functioning of society, our fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights and freedoms or other national interests’.<sup>18</sup>

The other important terms associated with FIMI and discussed in the literature are disinformation and misinformation. **Disinformation** is defined as ‘verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm comprises threats to democratic political and policy-making processes as well as public goods such as the protection of EU citizens’ health, the environment or security’.<sup>19</sup> Somewhat differently, **misinformation**, is ‘false or misleading information shared without harmful intent, though the effects can still be harmful’.<sup>20</sup>

Although disinformation and FIMI partly overlap, they differ conceptually as ‘not all disinformation is FIMI, and FIMI is not only disinformation’.<sup>21</sup> The FIMI definition implies foreign state-induced manipulations of information (although non-state actors too, according to the definition, may engage in

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<sup>16</sup> European External Action Service, *1st EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: Towards a framework for networked defense*, 2023. European External Action Service, *2nd EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: A framework for networked defense*, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> European External Action Service, *2nd EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: A framework for networked defense*, p. 4, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2019, in Wagnsson C., ‘What is at stake in the information sphere? Anxieties about malign information influence among ordinary Swedes’, *European Security*, 29(4), 397–415, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> European External Action Service, *1st EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: Towards a framework for networked defense*, p. 4, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Hénin, N., *FIMI: Towards a European redefinition of foreign interference*, EU DisinfoLab, April 2023.

FIMI) and a focus on behaviour that specifically threatens values, procedures and political processes and causes public harm related to the priority domains of politics, security, health, or the environment. Thus, threat actors in their FIMI operations use deception, intend to harm, can be identified as groups and entities and follow patterns.<sup>22</sup> FIMI is mainly image-based and is mostly intended to distract and distort.<sup>23</sup> It menaces the citizens' perception of political integrity, causes public harm, especially on topics such as health, the environment, or security, undermines trust in institutions or the democratic process, endangers perceptions, and poses a security threat or disrupts the public order.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, by **social and collective drivers** in the context of FIMI we refer to the social structures, collective dynamics, cultural patterns, group behaviours, and shared beliefs that enable, facilitate, amplify or encourage the spread and effects of manipulated or misleading information. These drivers influence and shape how social groups of various sizes and structures respond to, interact with, and potentially disseminate foreign attempts to manipulate information and influence public opinion or decision-making. Understanding these social and collective drivers is crucial for recognising why social groups sharing certain collective traits are more susceptible or resilient to foreign information campaigns and malign interference, and to develop targeted responses. By addressing these underlying drivers, policymakers, and analysts can better anticipate FIMI tactics, counter disinformation, and build societal resilience against foreign manipulation efforts. For the purposes of this report, we use drivers, enablers and enabling factors interchangeably.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

## EU CONTEXT

The first report on FIMI threats applies a novel framework developed by the EEAS, based on a best case practice methodology. It does not intend to give a comprehensive overview of FIMI in general or of a specific actor involved in FIMI operations, but highlights how existing analyses can be enhanced through this approach so as to allow for informed judgements of ongoing FIMI activities, actors and threat levels. It is therefore a useful tool to support informed and analysis-based policy choices. The report also aims to create a common understanding and formulate a collective, systematic response to FIMI.<sup>25</sup>

The 2nd EEAS Report on FIMI threats builds on the 1st EEAS Report and further completes the work towards a common framework for networked defence against FIMI. This edition is based on further investigation of 750 FIMI incidents having occurred between 1 December 2022 and 30 November 2023. Based on these insights and previous findings, as well as the continuous work of the EEAS, the report proposes a 'FIMI Response Framework' with the aim of linking analysis and lessons even more effectively to timely responses, highlighting the importance of cooperation between all the stakeholders that hold key instruments to respond to the intentional manipulation of the information environment. The report presents a case study that applies the response framework to FIMI incidents investigated in past elections, and suggests a number of measures and actions to prepare and protect against potential information manipulation and interference in an electoral context.<sup>26</sup>

Prior to these two EEAS reports, the EEAS *Stratcom Activity Report* has been pivotal in recognising FIMI as a growing political and security challenge for the EU that is regularly being used as a tool to disrupt democratic politics, sow discord, or deepen divisions within the EU and its member states.<sup>27</sup> Although not explicitly referring to drivers, the text provides sufficient insights to distinguish some important relationships between FIMI and the potential outcomes of FIMI campaigns. Namely, FIMI may result in: 1) escalating divisions and polarisation, threatening the integrity of free and open democratic deliberation, undermining public trust in the legitimacy and efficacy of democratic institutions, increasing polarisation within the EU, escalating political violence in conflict-prone regions;<sup>28</sup> 2) undermining national elections or referenda, magnifying critiques of Western governments and institutions, preparing the ground for potential military deployment, spreading fear among citizens, galvanising domestic support for hostile operations abroad, supporting Russia's military build-up along the borders with Ukraine;<sup>29</sup> 3) silencing, harassing and organising violence against civil society and EU's partners, especially targeting women, stirring and

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<sup>25</sup> European External Action Service, *1st EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: Towards a framework for networked defense*, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> European External Action Service, *2nd EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: A framework for networked defense*, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> European External Action Service, 2021 *Stratcom activity report*, 1-16, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> European External Action Service, 2021 *Stratcom activity report*, 1-16, p. 4, 2021.

perpetuating conflicts and escalating regional confrontations, undermining trust in the integrity of public debate, undermining the efforts of the EEAS to foster peace, stability, and the rule-of-law through its civilian and military Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, violent political and armed conflicts, ethnic violence, genocidal threats, hate speech, conspiracy narratives;<sup>30</sup> 4) threatening states, the international community and the international rules-based order;<sup>31</sup> 5) threatening democratic political and policy making processes, as well as the protection of EU citizens' health, security, or the environment.<sup>32</sup>

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the EEAS understands FIMI as an instrument of war, which is used and coordinated strategically to prepare and execute the Kremlin's war against Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> The Kremlin's FIMI activities can be divided into domestic and international dimensions. Domestically, these activities suppress, censor and destroy independent media within Russia; internationally, they **undermine international support for Ukraine**, sow doubt, exploit and exacerbate sensitive issues such as migration, refugees, cost of living and energy prices.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Russia weaponises hunger and energy as a result of Western sanctions and portrays the USA and NATO as responsible for the Russian invasion.<sup>35</sup>

Likewise, a joint report by the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and the EEAS that studies and analyses the threat landscape concerning FIMI and disinformation provides an analytical framework consistent with the ENISA Threat Landscape (ETL) methodology with the aim of analysing both FIMI and cybersecurity aspects of disinformation. The report proposes and tests an analytical approach describing FIMI and manipulation of information, as well as the underlying cybersecurity elements, by combining practices from both domains.<sup>36</sup> In this framework, FIMI aims to distort facts and reality, foster fear and hatred, and sow division in societies<sup>37</sup> FIMI corrodes the very basis of democracy and security, and is an integral part of modern warfare.<sup>38</sup> The main motivations behind it are political, geopolitical, disruptive, and ideological.<sup>39</sup>

What these groundbreaking reports that conceptualise FIMI seem to be lacking is a precise definition of drivers and social-scientific variables attributable to FIMI, as well as their operationalisation. The FIMI drivers in these reports are not clearly pinpointed, but mostly have to be inferred from the context. The main contribution of these documents consists of analysing the actors, processes and channels through which FIMI operates, and its goals and potential consequences. However, there is no clear delineation of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> European External Action Service, *2022 report on EEAS activities to counter FIMI*, 1-19, p. 3, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Magonara, E., Malatras, A., *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and Cybersecurity - Threat Landscape*, European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Magonara, E., Malatras, A., *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and Cybersecurity - Threat Landscape*, European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), pp. 7, 26, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp. 12, 17.

the variables that define the relationships within the socio-political structure of a FIMI ecosystem or the target society in general. 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.

# MACRO, MESO, AND MICRO LEVELS

In overviewing the various social and collective drivers related to FIMI, which have been identified in the literature, it would be useful to classify those into **macro-level, meso-level and micro-level drivers**. Firstly, it is an established approach in sociology to look into these three levels of society in investigating different social phenomena and the effects of social structures and collective processes thereupon.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, this approach has been successfully employed in the context of analyses on disinformation. For example, Terren et al. have set out to measure societal resilience to FIMI by considering these three levels, pointing out that factors pertaining to each of those 'layers' of resilience may influence the extent to which different environments are affected by disinformation.<sup>41</sup>

The three levels are often interconnected and influence each other. They are distinguished by the size of the examined structures. Some social and political phenomena related to FIMI can be analysed at different levels depending on the scale of the social structure that is an object of inquiry as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Levels of analysis.

Macro level	Examines large scale social structures, processes and institutions, e.g. whole societies, economies, cultures, or global systems
Meso level	Focuses on intermediate social structures or units, e.g. communities organisations, or networks, political parties, social identity groups
Micro level	Smallest scale of inquiry, focusing on individual or small group interactions and experiences

In the context of FIMI, social and collective drivers refer to the societal and group-level factors that make certain communities or demographics more susceptible or resilient to external influence or manipulation. They operate at the societal or national level and involve broad systemic factors that create fertile ground for foreign influence across larger or smaller social groups. These drivers exploit existing social structures, grievances, or collective beliefs. The following subsections look into some common social and collective drivers of FIMI.

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<sup>40</sup> Course Hero, *Sociological Perspective: Macro-Level, Meso-Level, and Micro-Level Analysis*, 2024. Crossman, A., *The Concept of Social Structure in Sociology*, ThoughtCo, 28 June 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Terren, L., Van Aelst, P., Van Damme, P., *Last line of defence: measuring resilience to foreign information*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2024.

## Macro level

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, are major determinants of social conditions. Several pieces of literature have emphasised that academic and expert accounts of belief in disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories need to move beyond the important discussion of individual factors and seek to also shed light on underlying macro-level social conditions.<sup>42</sup>

### Political system, institutional environment and state legitimacy

Some authors have suggested that a state's **democratic system** impacts the respective society's vulnerability to FIMI. For example, a report by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs highlights that information manipulation poses significant challenges to democracies, as open information environments are more vulnerable to exploitation by foreign entities seeking to influence public opinion and disrupt democratic processes. The report emphasises that the very openness of democratic systems, which allows for free expression and the unimpeded flow of information, can be targeted by malicious actors aiming to manipulate information and undermine democratic institutions.<sup>43</sup> While this state-of-the-art report is not designed to include political systems other than democracies, the underlying FIMI vulnerability assumption raises questions that warrant comparisons with other regime types (see Box 1 below).

Conversely, rather than the political system itself, some authors point to present-day challenges (e.g. legitimacy problems) experienced by many democracies as the actual driver. In particular, highly disputed issues such as migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising inflation and energy prices, have been associated with a decline in the authority of and public trust in democratic systems and institutions, as well as in the institutions of the EU. Jeangène Vilmer et al. contend that one of the two primary drivers of the current rise in information manipulation is the **crisis of confidence** which democracies are undergoing and which in effect 'devalues public speech and goes so far as to relativize the very notion of truth.'<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, Terren et al. argue that **state legitimacy** is a major macro-level factor impacting social resilience to disinformation.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, **democratic backsliding** has been identified as a driver contributing to the increased levels of false information circulating in

<sup>42</sup> Aghajari, Z., Baumer, E. P., DiFranzo D., 'Reviewing interventions to address misinformation: The need to expand our vision beyond an individualistic focus', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CSCW 1), 1-34, 2023. DiGrazia J., 'The social determinants of conspiratorial ideation', *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 3, 2017. Gundersen, A. B., van der Linden, S., Piksa, M., Morzy, M., 'The role of perceived minority-group status in the conspiracy beliefs of factual majority groups', *Royal Society Open Science*, 10(10), 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Jeangène Vilmer, J.-B., Escorcía, A., Guillaume, M., Herrera, J., *Information manipulation: A challenge for our democracies*, Policy Planning Staff (CAPS), Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, & Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM), Ministry for the Armed Forces, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Terren, L., Van Aelst, P., Van Damme, P., *Last line of defence: measuring resilience to foreign information*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, p. 2, 2024.

online outlets and social media groups in many countries.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, actors involved in disinformation operations have strategically targeted vulnerabilities within democratic institutions.<sup>47</sup> Democratic backsliding is linked with the existence of autocratic environment<sup>48</sup> and relates to other socio-political factors such as **low public trust in democratic institutions**,<sup>49</sup> deficiencies in transparency and the rule of law,<sup>50</sup> **dysfunctional governance and state capture**,<sup>51</sup> insufficient commitment to democratic governance,<sup>52</sup> and a weak civil society and low levels of state-society collaboration.<sup>53</sup>

**State capture** in particular, described as ‘meta-organization and institutionalization of corruption relations which lead to virtual privatization of governance’<sup>54</sup> and as a ‘process of privatization of government functions, which turns institutions rogue without destroying the semblance of democracy and market economy,’<sup>55</sup> is another FIMI-enabling factor. State capture governance gaps, such as ‘lack of integrity and impartiality in politics and government, ineffective (anticorruption, money-laundering, political party financing, etc.) laws, constrained media freedom, judicial incapacity’<sup>56</sup> enable threat actors to interfere in the affairs of targeted states. State capture mechanisms are actively used by threat actors such as Russia, which has allowed it to influence strategic foreign policy decisions in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the Kremlin utilises propaganda and disinformation in its state capture power mix to wage its influence in Europe.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the concept is firmly embedded in the development of policy responses to foreign malign influence.<sup>59</sup> In that respect, certain traits of the **political system** and the **institutional environment**, such as state capture, can be considered major FIMI drivers.

<sup>46</sup> Bennett, W. L., Livingston, S., ‘The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions’, *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122-139, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Deppe, C., ‘Disinformation in cognitive warfare foreign information manipulation and interference and hybrid threats’, *The Defence Horizon Journal*, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Knuutila, A., Neudert, L. M., Howard P. N., ‘Who is afraid of fake news? Modeling risk perceptions of misinformation in 142 countries’, *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 3(3), 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Humprecht, E., *The role of trust and attitudes toward democracy in the dissemination of disinformation — a comparative analysis of six democracies*, Digital Journalism, 2023. Van Raemdonck, N., Meyer, T., ‘Why disinformation is here to stay. A socio-technical analysis of disinformation as a hybrid threat’, in Lonardo, L. (ed.), *Addressing Hybrid Threats: European Law and Policies*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 57-83, 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Wigell, M., ‘Democratic deterrence: How to dissuade hybrid interference’, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44(1), 49-67, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Stoyanov, A., Gerganov, A., Yalamov, T., *State Capture Assessment Diagnostics*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Greene, S., Asmolov, G., Fagan, A., Fridman, O., Gjuzelov, B., *Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them*, European Parliament, European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs, NA: European Union, 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Wigell, M., ‘Democratic deterrence: How to dissuade hybrid interference’, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44(1), 49-67, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Stoyanov, A., Gerganov, A., Yalamov, T., *State Capture Assessment Diagnostics*, Sofia: CSD, p. 15, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 11, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., Galev, T. (eds.), *Tackling Kremlin’s Media Capture in Southeast Europe: Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, p. 20, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 4, 2020.



### Box 1: Regime type and vulnerability to FIMI

There are notable contradictions in the linkage between FIMI vulnerability and regime type, which require both empirical and conceptual clarification. This issue should be approached with caution, and while it is not the primary focus of this state-of-the-art report, a brief discussion is warranted. Comparing democracies and autocracies in terms of vulnerability to FIMI raises numerous questions, providing fertile ground for empirical research to **differentiate FIMI vulnerability levels across the spectrum of regime types - democracies, backsliding democracies, competitive autocracies, and full autocracies.**

The argument that democratic societies are more susceptible to FIMI invites a comparison with autocracies. Democracies are often perceived as more vulnerable due to their openness, pluralism, and media freedom. In contrast, autocracies, which are built upon pervasive state-controlled disinformation and limited media freedom, seem inherently more resistant to unsanctioned foreign disinformation. Given autocracies' reliance on internal government-controlled narratives enforced by authoritarian mechanisms, they might appear less permeable to external disinformation and FIMI than democracies.

However, this assumption is complicated by the potential for autocratic regimes to leverage manipulated information disseminated by other autocratic states for domestic purposes. This dynamic might inadvertently increase societal receptivity to external disinformation. Moreover, the phenomenon of **democratic backsliding**, often cited as contributing to FIMI susceptibility, introduces further complexity: Does democratic backsliding render societies more vulnerable or less vulnerable to FIMI compared to stable democracies or autocracies?

For instance, if democracies are considered to be inherently more vulnerable to FIMI, does democratic backsliding - marked by restrictions on free media, increased media control, and media capture - actually make such states less vulnerable to FIMI? This perspective would, essentially, contradict or challenge the assumption that democratic backsliding enhances FIMI vulnerability. It has also been argued that **media capture** facilitates FIMI, which raises the question of whether democratic backsliding creates greater vulnerability to FIMI. Alternatively, could FIMI vulnerability in such contexts arise because of the alleged instability of backsliding societies, or because domestic political elites intentionally amplify external disinformation through captured media to advance their own interests and further their own domestic political ends?

Autocracies, with their **stringent control over the flow of information**, are generally assumed to be more immune to FIMI than democracies. This raises several questions. Can autocracies better manage or control external disinformation and interference, or even exploit it selectively for internal purposes? Moreover, can the concept of FIMI be applied to autocracies as FIMI targets at all? If so, does this imply that democracies engage in FIMI activities against autocracies, or that autocracies engage in FIMI against each other? Not least, would it be possible that FIMI

affects differently and has varying impacts, in a context-dependent way, on countries across different regime types?

Another layer of complexity involves **state capture**. Does state capture apply exclusively only to democracies, or can autocracies be seen as a form of ‘perfect’ state capture? If the latter is true, does state capture make autocracies more vulnerable to FIMI, given that state capture is considered an enabling factor for FIMI? This appears contradictory, as autocratic states are assumed to be more impervious to FIMI. Could it be, then, that state capture manifests differently in democratic and autocratic systems concerning FIMI exposure? Furthermore, does state capture, as an enabler of FIMI, primarily affect democratic systems, with limited relevance to autocracies?

These contradictions underscore the need for evidence-based, empirical studies to investigate, test, corroborate, or challenge the above assumptions. Developing robust hypotheses around these questions could significantly deepen our **understanding of how FIMI operates across different political regimes**. This, in turn, would yield valuable insights and meaningful conclusions to inform both social science research and policy analysis. Consequently, the **relationship between FIMI vulnerability and regime type**, along with the role of FIMI social and collective drivers in spreading disinformation across political systems, warrants greater attention from scholars and policymakers alike.

## Political grievances, radicalisation and violent extremism

A related variable that ought to be taken into account are **political grievances**. However, to our knowledge, in the existing literature on FIMI, the relevance of political grievances has been considered in very few studies, and only marginally so. For example, Marwick and Lewis observe that far-right groups have spread disinformation that exploits the political dissatisfaction of cohorts of young men (e.g. their dislike of ‘political correctness’) in order to propagate white supremacist, Islamophobic and misogynistic ideas. This general omission in the literature is disconcerting and ought to be remedied in future research undertakings.<sup>60</sup>

Studies on other topics, for example, **radicalisation and violent extremism**, emphasise the significance of political grievances as drivers of various social processes, including adoption of radicalised beliefs.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, recent empirical data demonstrate that radicalisation processes, disinformation and foreign influence are closely interconnected in some countries.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, it may be reasonably hypothesised that political grievances may also be a factor relevant to FIMI.

<sup>60</sup> Marwick, A., Lewis, R., *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, Data and Society, 1-106, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> CONNEKT, *Policy Brief on Macro-Level Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkans*, IEMed, September 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Ralchev, S., Stoyanova, N., *Bulgaria – Meso-level Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*, IEMed, 2022.

## Social fragmentation and polarisation

When a society is divided along political, ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic lines, it becomes easier for foreign threat actors to exploit these cleavages to create discord and manipulate public opinion. Targeting messages that exacerbate mistrust between groups can fuel discontent, making people more likely to adopt extreme viewpoints and behaviours.

**Societal divisions** and political, social, sociodemographic, ideological and economic **polarisation** emerge in the literature as all-important drivers as well as goals of FIMI.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, social cohesion, stability and social capital have been discussed as critical macro-level drivers of social resilience to disinformation.<sup>64</sup> As FIMI-enabling drivers can also be seen social divisions such as minorities or diasporas sharing a common language, ethnicity or religion with the FIMI-state actor,<sup>65</sup> existing vulnerable societal groups,<sup>66</sup> deep ethnic divisions in society,<sup>67</sup> strong national divisions, conflicts, or fighting within political coalitions,<sup>68</sup> or exploitable pre-existing social anxieties related to health, wealth and identity.<sup>69</sup> Factors related to membership of identity groups or vulnerable groups are discussed in more detail as meso-level social and collective drivers in the next subsection.

Malign actors using FIMI techniques tend to exploit existing polarisation with a view to aggravating this issue and further undermining social cohesion and cooperation.<sup>70</sup> Terren et al. discerningly observe that disinformation does not emerge 'in a vacuum' and its effects are more significant when it capitalises on present-day social grievances.<sup>71</sup> Wagnsson cautions that information influence activities can make use of and deepen polarisation on intensely

<sup>63</sup> Burke, P., Henschke, A., 'I know my truth... Now tell me yours: From active measures to cognitive warfare in the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *Strategic Panorama*, 2, 12-27, 2023. European External Action Service, *2nd EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: A framework for networked defense*, 2024. Kavanagh, J., Rich, M., *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, RAND Corporation, 2018. Krekó, P., *The drivers of disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe and their utilization during the pandemic*, Globsec Policy Brief, 9, 2020. Morača, T., Sicurella, F., Sekulić, T., Armanini, J., Stella, F., *Feeling the pulse: Countering foreign information manipulation interference in Africa and the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 1-8, 2023. Wagnsson, C., 'What is at stake in the information sphere? Anxieties about malign information influence among ordinary Swedes', *European Security*, 29(4), 397-415, 2020..

<sup>64</sup> Terren, L., Van Aelst, P., Van Damme, P., *Last line of defence: measuring resilience to foreign information*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, p. 2, 2024.

<sup>65</sup> Hung, T. C., Hung, T. W., 'How China's cognitive warfare works: A frontline perspective of Taiwan's anti-disinformation wars', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7(4), 2022. Morača, T., Sicurella, F., Sekulić, T., Armanini, J., Stella, F., *Feeling the pulse: Countering foreign information manipulation interference in Africa and the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 1-8, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Teperik, D., Denisa-Liepniece, S., Bankauskaitė, D., Kullamaa, K., *Resilience against disinformation: A new Baltic way to follow?*, International Centre for Defence and Security, 20, 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Interviews with independent forest experts, prosecutors and economic police officers.

<sup>68</sup> Wigell, M., 'Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: A theory of external interference in liberal democracy', *International Affairs*, 95(2), 255-275, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Neidhardt, A. H., *Disinformation on refugees from Ukraine: Boosting Europe's resilience after Russia's invasion*, European Policy Centre, 2022. Van Raemdonck, N., Meyer, T., 'Why disinformation is here to stay. A socio-technical analysis of disinformation as a hybrid threat', in Lonardo, L. (ed.), *Addressing Hybrid Threats: European Law and Policies*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 57-83, 2024.

<sup>70</sup> European External Action Service, *2021 Stratcom activity report*, 1-16, 2021. Miller, S., 'Cognitive warfare: An ethical analysis', *Ethics and Information Technology*, 25(3), p. 46, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Terren, L., Van Aelst, P., Van Damme, P., *Last line of defence: measuring resilience to foreign information*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, pp. 2-3, 2024.

contested issues such as migration, as well as existing conflicts between social groups, as in the case of Sweden.<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, Morača et al. find that the politicisation of the concept of disinformation itself can be a polarising topic within society.<sup>73</sup>

What is more, the propagation of polarising views by actors involved in information manipulation appears to be one of the explanations as to why in many of the reviewed pieces of literature **disinformation** and **radicalisation/extremism** are discussed in conjunction. Miller highlights that players engaged in cognitive warfare endeavour to utilise polarisation by promoting both extreme left-wing and extreme right-wing views.<sup>74</sup> In addition, it may be inferred from some of the reviewed studies that, in polarised societies, people might be more inclined to resort to disinformation techniques: political positions associated with the far ends of the political spectrum have been linked to a readiness to use all means necessary to gain a collective advantage over the opposing group.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to polarisation, there is evidence that **social self-selection** and **social ‘sorting’** may also be enablers of FIMI.<sup>76</sup> Social sorting is increasingly observed in some societies, for example, in the USA, and consists in people limiting their social interactions to individuals who share their beliefs and views and refraining from communicating with persons whose opinions diverge from their own.<sup>77</sup> Sorting also takes place online - as in the case of ‘echo chambers’<sup>78</sup> created by social media. Lewandowski et al. have found that echo chambers are associated with increased consumption and sharing of untrustworthy information by people on the populist right side of the political spectrum.<sup>79</sup> What is more, **marginalisation from other communities**, which unlike social self-selection and sorting may be both voluntary and involuntary, has been found to be a significant element in joining conspiracy communities.<sup>80 81</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Wagnsson, C., ‘What is at stake in the information sphere? Anxieties about malign information influence among ordinary Swedes’, *European Security*, 29(4), 406-407, 397-415, 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Morača, T., Sicurella, F., Sekulić, T., Armanini, J., Stella, F., *Feeling the pulse: Countering foreign information manipulation interference in Africa and the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 1-8, 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Miller, S., ‘Cognitive warfare: An ethical analysis’, *Ethics and Information Technology*, 25(3), p. 1, 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Terren, L., Van Aelst P., Van Damme, P., *Last line of defence: measuring resilience to foreign information*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, p. 3, 2024.

<sup>76</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., ‘What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement’, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1-30, p. 24, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Brown, B., *Brené Brown: America’s Crisis of Disconnection Runs Deeper than Politics*, 9 December 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Online communities often serve as echo chambers where individuals with similar beliefs reinforce one another. Malign actors use these to spread misinformation rapidly within groups. Groups on social media dedicated to niche topics or political views can become vectors for conspiracy theories or misleading information when infiltrated by foreign actors.

<sup>79</sup> Lewandowski, S., Smille, L., Garcia, D., Hertwig, R., Weatherall, J., Egidy, S., Robertson, R. E., O’Conner, C., Kozyreva, A., Lorenz-Spreen, P., Blaschke, Y., Leiser, M., *Technology and Democracy: Understanding the Influence of Online Technologies on Political Behaviour and Decision-making*, Joint Research Centre, European Commission, p. 5, August 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., ‘What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement’, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1-30, p. 24, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Notably, not all conspiracy cultures are affected by self-selection, sorting and marginalisation. For instance, De Wildt and Aupers (2023) look into ‘participatory conspiracy culture of r/ conspiracy’ which is profoundly different from ‘echo chambers’ in that it is characterised by openness, heterogeneity and dispute.

**Marginalisation, discrimination and social stereotyping** of certain vulnerable groups, such as women, migrants and refugees, and LGBTQI+ individuals, can also facilitate the spread and effectiveness of FIMI incidents targeting these groups by creating a climate of intolerance and legitimising hostile messages against members of these groups. FIMI attacks directed at specific groups with protected characteristics, including incidents seeking to incite hate speech, hate crime – and in extreme cases genocide – have been examined in a number of reports.<sup>82</sup> However, there are few examples of research looking into the particular social and collective drivers of FIMI attacks that specifically target socially vulnerable groups. An exception in this regard is a paper by Neidhardt investigating the reasons behind the pervasiveness of migration-related disinformation.<sup>83</sup> The author maintains that, among other things, disinformation directed at migrants is aided by the ‘voicelessness’ of the targets which is to be attributed to their socio-economic marginalisation and under-representation in the media and political debates. At the same time, it is important to highlight that **social injustices and discrimination** lay a fertile ground for FIMI operations also by provoking societal grievances that may be exploited by foreign actors.<sup>84</sup>

## Media and information ecosystem transformation

Societies with low trust in mainstream **media** may turn to alternative sources for news and information, which can be manipulated by foreign actors. Using social media or foreign-funded news outlets to provide ‘alternative perspectives’ allows malign actors to bypass traditional information gatekeepers.

**Media manipulation** is a key component of the strategies of malign actors, such as Russia, allowing this sort of actors not only to dominate the media environment but to capture the cognitive realm of target states.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, the information domain is a critical area for FIMI. **Transformations in the information and media ecosystem** may create windows of opportunity for foreign actors executing information manipulation operations ultimately aimed at causing ‘truth decay’.<sup>86</sup> Examples of such profound changes in the information system include the rise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, the use of alternative media and the tremendously

<sup>82</sup> European External Action Service, *1st EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: Towards a framework for networked defense*, 2023. European External Action Service, *2nd EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: A framework for networked defense*, 2024.

<sup>83</sup> Neidhardt, A. H., *Disinformation on refugees from Ukraine: Boosting Europe’s resilience after Russia’s invasion*, European Policy Centre, p. 12, 2022.

<sup>84</sup> Terren, L., Van Aelst, P., Van Damme, P., *Last line of defence: measuring resilience to foreign information*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, p. 3, 2024.

<sup>85</sup> Sabev, M., Georgiev, G., McLaren, R., *Safeguarding the Foundations: Strengthening Civil Security in Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 8, 2024.

<sup>86</sup> Kavanagh, J., Rich, M., *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, RAND Corporation, 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Casero-Ripollés, A., Tuñón, J., Bouza-García, L., ‘The European approach to online disinformation: Geopolitical and regulatory dissonance’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), 657, 2023. Kavanagh, J. and Rich, M., *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, RAND Corporation, 2018. Newman, H., *Foreign information manipulation and interference defence standards: Test for rapid adoption of the common language and framework ‘DISARM’*, Hybrid CoE Research Report 7, November 2022.

high level of activity in social media<sup>88</sup> links to the decreasing consumption of traditional TV news.<sup>89</sup> This development is paramount to understanding the phenomenon of FIMI as social media and social platforms constitute an information environment with high levels of local disinformation,<sup>90</sup> which facilitates the entrance of foreign disinformation.<sup>91</sup>

According to Kavanagh and Rich,<sup>92</sup> transformations in the information and media ecosystem are linked to trends, such as the declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information. Similarly, Wagnsson highlights that by diminishing people's **trust in the media**, information influence operations undermine beliefs in the existence of a 'truth' and the possibility for decent public debate, and in effect harm democratic processes, also by influencing political views and voting behaviour.<sup>93</sup> Bennett and Livingston contend that the decline in the perceived credibility of official information in the news 'opens publics to alternative information sources', linking this factor to the general erosion of citizen confidence in state institutions.<sup>94</sup> The authors argue that those 'alternative sources' are in many cases connected to nationalist (especially, radical right) and foreign (commonly, Russian) strategies seeking to weaken institutional legitimacy and enfeeble centre parties, governments and electoral processes.<sup>95</sup> While this phenomenon has been observed in many countries, vivid examples thereof are the Brexit campaign in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the USA.<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore, Casero-Ripollés et al. speak about a 'new order of disinformation' which has been brought about partly by the loss of authority in journalism and the breakdown of the former news order and subsequent chaos in public communication.<sup>97</sup> From a broader perspective, Harsin discusses the shift taking place in many societies away from 'regimes of truth' and towards 'regimes of posttruth'.<sup>98</sup> This transformation, among other things, consists in a diminishment of the social role of 'dominant truth arbiters'<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Humprecht, E., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., Staender, A., Morosoli, S., 'The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: Analyzing patterns of resilience', *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(7), 1342-1362, 2023.

<sup>89</sup> Hameleers, M., Brosius, A., De Vreese, C. H., 'Whom to trust? Media exposure patterns of citizens with perceptions of misinformation and disinformation related to the news media', *European Journal of Communication*, 37(3), 237-268, 2022.

<sup>90</sup> Morača, T., Sicurella, F., Sekulić, T., Armanini, J., Stella, F., *Feeling the pulse: Countering foreign information manipulation interference in Africa and the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 1-8, 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Bergh, A., *Being there: Content, cognition and strategic competition. Mitigating and responding to cognitive warfare*, NATO, 2024.

<sup>92</sup> Kavanagh, J., Rich, M., *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, RAND Corporation, 2018.

<sup>93</sup> Wagnsson, C., 'What is at stake in the information sphere? Anxieties about malign information influence among ordinary Swedes', *European Security*, 29(4), 397-415, pp. 401-403, 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Bennett, W. L., Livingston, S., 'The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions', *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122-139, 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Casero-Ripollés, A., Tuñón, J., Bouza-García, L., 'The European approach to online disinformation: Geopolitical and regulatory dissonance', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), 657, 2023.

<sup>98</sup> Harsin, J., 'Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies', *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8(2), 327-333, 2015.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

and the destabilisation of ‘epistemic institutions’<sup>100</sup> such as the media. The lack of professionalisation of journalists can also be a contributing factor to this development as it is linked to the erosion of journalistic standards.<sup>101</sup> Disinformation also enters the public domain through stereotypical media representation and a low-level subject-specific knowledge.<sup>102</sup>

Relatedly, **informational pressure** is viewed as an important dimension to be considered in analysing susceptibility to conspiracies.<sup>103</sup> Empirical representation of social features pertaining to this dimension have also been provided.<sup>104</sup> These observations are supported by the findings of another study which show that small-size media markets are linked to more significant collective resilience to disinformation.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, the **attention economy**<sup>106</sup> which has come to characterise the information environment, both online and offline, is critical to consider in accounting for public vulnerabilities to information manipulation.<sup>107</sup> For example, Casero-Ripollés et al. discuss disinformation as competition for the attention of publics in the context of a distorted digital attention market.<sup>108</sup> Exploring attention economies in the context of ‘regimes of posttruth’, Harsin maintains that various actors increasingly aim to influence perceptions by inducing and managing the public’s attention to and participation in power games of discursive truth-production.<sup>109</sup>

Important FIMI-enabling factors are **media capture** and the **oligarchisation of the media markets** in the target countries - for example, oligarchic networks with close ties to Russia.<sup>110</sup> Media capture occurs when political or economic entities exert excessive control over important media outlets to further their own agendas. This often involves shaping or manipulating public opinion,

<sup>100</sup> Miller, S., ‘Cognitive warfare: An ethical analysis’, *Ethics and Information Technology*, 25(3), 46, 2023.

<sup>101</sup> Van Raemdonck, N., Meyer, T., ‘Why disinformation is here to stay. A socio-technical analysis of disinformation as a hybrid threat’, in Lonardo, L. (ed.), *Addressing Hybrid Threats: European Law and Policies*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 57-83, 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Humprecht, E., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., Staender, A., Morosoli, S., ‘The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: Analyzing patterns of resilience’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(7), 1342-1362, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., ‘What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement’, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1–30, p. 23, 2021.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Humprecht, E., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., ‘Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research’, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 493-516, 2020.

<sup>106</sup> The ‘economics of attention’ has been understood as an approach to the management of information that views human attention as a scarce commodity, thus applying economic theory so as to tackle different information management problems. See Davenport, T. H., Beck, J. C., ‘The Attention Economy’, *Ubiquity*, 2(May), 1, 2001.

<sup>107</sup> Zhang et al., 2021, in Arcos, R., Gertrudix, M., Arribas, C., Cardarilli, M., *Responses to digital disinformation as part of hybrid threats: a systematic review on the effects of disinformation and the effectiveness of fact-checking/debunking*, Open Research Europe, 2, 8, p. 11, 2022.

<sup>108</sup> Casero-Ripollés, A., Tuñón, J., Bouza-García, L., ‘The European approach to online disinformation: Geopolitical and regulatory dissonance’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), 657, p. 3, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Harsin, J., ‘Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies’, *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8(2), 327-333, p. 5, 2015.

<sup>110</sup> Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 18, 2020.

silencing opposition, or ensuring positive coverage. It can take the form of direct ownership or control by political or corporate elites, as well as subtler methods of influence, such as through advertising revenue, financial subsidies, or the selective release of government information.<sup>111</sup>

Media capture involves two aspects of the media sector. On the one hand, it is the **material aspects** which include business deals, ownership models, and financial flows of media companies. On the other, it is the **ideational aspects**, including the content, editorial decisions and policies, and the viewpoints of managers, editors, and journalists.<sup>112</sup> By extension, media outlets owned by FIMI threat actors also provide channels for spreading disinformation, propaganda and malign influence.

The ideational aspect closely relates to cognitive capture, e.g. the way journalists ‘influence content by reflecting their own perceptions and worldviews or those of their customers onto their media products’,<sup>113</sup> and may be conducive to enabling the dissemination of FIMI content and threat actors’ narratives as well. Generally, cognitive capture refers to the subtler, and more dangerous, sociological effects of repeated exposure to foreign anti-democratic propaganda and influence campaigns. This effect is especially concerning for individuals within institutions tasked with defending against such threats, such as government regulators, security agencies, and the media.<sup>114</sup>

Linked to this issue is the argument put forward by Casero-Ripollés et al. that among the causes of the current rise in disinformation is the **use of disinformation narratives as a political strategy** to achieve power by political and media actors, as well as the **dominance of post-truth** in present-day political landscapes.<sup>115</sup> These developments are also analysed by Harsin who examines the employment of ‘postpolitical/postdemocratic strategies’ by resource rich political actors, such as the attempted use of data-analytic knowledge to manage the field of appearance and participation through attention and affect.<sup>116</sup> Likewise, Steinfeld points out that the widespread media presence of public figures who regularly share disinformation contributes to its normalisation.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, polarised and highly partisan local media have also been found to enable disinformation.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Georgiev, G., Petrova, V., Tsabala, K., *Breaking the Code: Tackling the Interlocking Nexus of Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 32, 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>114</sup> Sabev, M., Georgiev, G., McLaren, R., *Safeguarding the Foundations: Strengthening Civil Security in Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 28, 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Casero-Ripollés, A., Tuñón, J., Bouza-García, L., ‘The European approach to online disinformation: Geopolitical and regulatory dissonance’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), 657, 2023.

<sup>116</sup> Harsin, J., ‘Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies’, *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8(2), 327-333, 2015.

<sup>117</sup> Steinfeld, N., ‘The disinformation warfare: How users use every means possible in the political battlefield on social media’, *Online Information Review*, 46(7), 1313-1334, 2022.

<sup>118</sup> Humprecht, E., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., ‘Resilience to online disinformation: A framework for cross-national comparative research’, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 493-516, 2020. Van Raemdonck, N., Meyer, T., ‘Why disinformation is here to stay. A socio-technical analysis of disinformation as a hybrid threat’, in Lonardo, L. (ed.), *Addressing Hybrid Threats: European Law and Policies*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 57-83, 2024.



A related challenge is the **considerable media coverage** received by political figures and groups that hold **populist, anti-establishment and extreme ideologies**.<sup>119</sup> The example of Donald Trump has been discussed in the context of the USA.<sup>120</sup> According to a study conducted by Humprecht et al.,<sup>121</sup> low levels of populist communication provide better conditions for societal resilience to disinformation. In addition, far-right groups have exploited certain traits of the contemporary media environment which make it vulnerable to information manipulation, particularly the media's significant reliance on social media, analytics and metrics, novelty and sensationalism over newsworthiness, and clickbait.<sup>122</sup> Such groups have sought to boost the visibility of their ideas and agendas by employing techniques of 'attention hacking' that use social media, memes and bots, and by targeting bloggers, influencers and even journalists to aid the spread of far-right content.<sup>123</sup>

## Education and knowledge structure

The **media environment** and the **educational system** are closely related social structures; some of their characteristics can be related to FIMI. Harsin argues that the currently observed decline in 'regimes of truth' and onset of 'regimes of posttruth' are, among other things, linked to the breakdown of the previously tight functioning between educational, media and political apparatuses.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, Kavanagh and Rich underscore the deleterious consequences of the educational system's **inability to keep pace with information system transformations** due to competing demands.<sup>125</sup> What is more, the educational system also plays out as a macro-level driver of FIMI by profoundly shaping individual critical thinking skills and media literacy.

It is important to note that receptivity to FIMI depends in large measure on the knowledge structure in society vis-à-vis its susceptibility to disinformation. This knowledge structure links to the social contexts of low media, digital and information literacy<sup>126</sup> with two possible consequences: 1) low public awareness of its existence can be dangerous,<sup>127</sup> and 2) disproportionate alarmism on its threat and scale can create a general rejection of news, even

<sup>119</sup> Bennett, W. L., Livingston, S., 'The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions', *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122-139, 2018. Humprecht, E., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., Staender, A., Morosoli, S., 'The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: Analyzing patterns of resilience', *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(7), 1342-1362, 2023. Van Raemdonck, N., Meyer, T., 'Why disinformation is here to stay. A socio-technical analysis of disinformation as a hybrid threat', in Lonardo, L. (ed.), *Addressing Hybrid Threats: European Law and Policies*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 57-83, 2024.

<sup>120</sup> Bennett, W. L., Livingston, S., 'The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions', *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122-139, 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Humprecht et al., 2020, in Arcos, R., Gertrudix, M., Arribas, C., Cardarilli, M., *Responses to digital disinformation as part of hybrid threats: a systematic review on the effects of disinformation and the effectiveness of fact-checking/debunking*, Open Research Europe, 2, 8, p. 12, 2022.

<sup>122</sup> Marwick, A., Lewis, R., *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, Data and Society, 1-106, 2017.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Harsin, J., 'Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies', *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8(2), 327-333, 2015.

<sup>125</sup> Kavanagh, J. Rich, M., *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, RAND Corporation, 2018.

<sup>126</sup> Neidhardt, A. H., *Disinformation on refugees from Ukraine: Boosting Europe's resilience after Russia's invasion*, *European Policy Centre*, 2022.

<sup>127</sup> Knuutila, A., Neudert, L. M., Howard P. N., 'Who is afraid of fake news? Modeling risk perceptions of misinformation in 142 countries', *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 3(3), 2022.

the legitimate ones.<sup>128</sup> Thus, knowledgeability of FIMI in a society can be viewed as a function of the interplay of two factors that communicate the understanding of disinformation in its salient social context: **the media and education**.

In addition, educational institutions are the primary social actors responsible for **teaching a sound knowledge of history**.<sup>129</sup> This factor, in combination with increased awareness about disinformation, is seen as critical to social resilience to information manipulation by both foreign and domestic players.<sup>130</sup> The authors have emphasised that the lack of awareness about the prominence and risks of disinformation content, taken together with insufficient knowledge and understanding of historical events and processes, have allowed for disinformation and historical revisionism to be used as tools by foreign actors (e.g. Russia) seeking to influence and interfere.<sup>131</sup>

Furthermore, Levitin points out that the **disruption of educational institutions** with respect to their ability to teach students how to think and consume media content critically (also in the online sphere) has facilitated the weaponisation of 'lies'.<sup>132</sup> In the author's view, such 'lies' are euphemistically - and highly problematically - referred to as fake news, conspiracy theories, counter-knowledge, half-truths and alternative truths. On the basis of the argument developed in this article, it may be concluded that the way social actors, especially representatives of epistemological institutions such as educationalists, journalists, politicians, speak about FIMI and related terms may cumulatively affect the social acceptance, credibility and legitimacy of such phenomena and thus may in itself be a factor influencing the effectiveness of FIMI operations.

Lastly, it is worth noting that, while **deficiencies in educational institutions** may create a fertile ground for FIMI, one of the main social implications of FIMI operations, at the same time, is **erosion of trust in the system of education**.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Van der Meer, T. G., Hameleers, M., Ohme, J., 'Can fighting misinformation have a negative spillover effect? How warnings for the threat of misinformation can decrease general news credibility', *Journalism Studies*, 24(6), 803-823, 2023.

<sup>129</sup> Arribas, C., Arcos, R., Gertrudix, M., Mikulski, K., Hernández-Escayola, P., Teodor, M., Novăcescu, E., Surdu, I., Stoian, V., García-Jiménez, A., 'Information manipulation and historical revisionism: Russian disinformation and foreign interference through manipulated history-based narratives', *Open Research Europe*, 3(121), 1-29, 2023.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Levitin, 2016, in Kolobara, R., 'Information Operations as a Means of Cognitive Superiority—Theory and Term Research in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *National Security and the Future*, 24(2), 41–67, p. 50, 2023.

<sup>133</sup> Wagnsson, C., 'What is at stake in the information sphere? Anxieties about malign information influence among ordinary Swedes', *European Security*, 29(4), 397–415, p. 409, 2020. Danyk, Y., Briggs, C., 'Modern Cognitive Operations and Hybrid Warfare', *Journal of Strategic Security*, 16(1), 35–50, p. 41, 2023.

## Religion and cultural drivers

**Religion** as a driver of FIMI may play out both at the macro and the meso levels, depending on its degree of institutionalisation and societal presence, and the particular state-religion relationship and mode of religious governance in a country. For example, on the basis of studies in the area of governance of religion and religious diversity<sup>134</sup> it may be inferred that in countries where religion is socially prominent, institutionalised and enjoys close and formalised relations with the state, religion is generally more likely to exert various types of macro-level influence on society. In addition, religion and religious belonging may also manifest as a meso-level driver of FIMI affecting group identity and group dynamics. Importantly, in countries where religion is relegated to the private sphere and there are limitations on group religious observance (e.g. France), the meso-level impact of religion as a driver may be less significant.

The reviewed literature provides little insight into the role of religion as a driver of FIMI.<sup>135</sup> Hung and Hung discuss the case of China's cognitive warfare in Taiwan as an example of religion being used as a channel for cognitive operations, including such that are carried out by means of information manipulation.<sup>136</sup> China has systematically strived to alter the perception that China and Taiwan have the same religion and culture and to propagate the one-China policy on the premise of peaceful unification.<sup>137</sup>

Although in the reviewed literature there is a gap when it comes to religion as a driver, existing research on other topics, such as radicalisation and violent extremism, helps to illuminate the possible relationships between religion and FIMI. For example, empirical research into potential radicalisation in certain communities in Bulgaria has found that religious narratives are present in domestic conspiracy theories, misinformation and fake news regarding the highly contested issues of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the adoption of the National Strategy for the Child, and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>138</sup> Primary research among ultra-conservative online communities overtly defending traditional family and religious values has found that religious arguments have often been put forward as a way of opposing the codification and societal uptake of gender ideologies allegedly transmitted from the West.<sup>139</sup> In conspiratorial content, any attempts to challenge the male-female dichotomy has been presented as an infringement on the divinely-established social order on Earth.<sup>140</sup> There have also been some,

<sup>134</sup> Modood, T., Sealy, T., *Secularism and the Governance of Religious Diversity*. GREASE Concept Paper, 2019. Triandafyllidou, A., Gülalp, H., Iliysov, M., Mahajan, G., Raciuc, E., *Nation and Religion - Reflections on Europe, the MENA Region and South Asia*, GREASE Concept Paper, 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Hung, T. C., Hung, T. W., 'How China's cognitive warfare works: A frontline perspective of Taiwan's anti-disinformation wars', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7(4), 2022. De Wildt, L., Aupers, S., 'Participatory conspiracy culture: Believing, doubting and playing with conspiracy theories on Reddit', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media and Technologies*, 1-18, pp. 333-334, 2023.

<sup>136</sup> Hung, T. C., Hung, T. W., 'How China's cognitive warfare works: A frontline perspective of Taiwan's anti-disinformation wars', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7(4), pp. 6-7, 2022.

<sup>137</sup> Chang and Tsai, 2009, in Hung, T. C., Hung, T. W., 'How China's cognitive warfare works: A frontline perspective of Taiwan's anti-disinformation wars', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7(4), p. 7, 2022.

<sup>138</sup> Ralchev, S., Stoyanova, N., *Bulgaria – Meso-level Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*, IEMed, p. 14, 2022.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

## Geopolitical context and external drivers

albeit more limited, references to religion in online interactions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>141</sup> These country-specific findings are of relevance to the dissemination of FIMI in Bulgaria as data show that the examined domestic conspiracies and fake news have been influenced by foreign propaganda and misinformation.<sup>142</sup>

FIMI, by its very nature, is a foreign policy tool used in pursuit of foreign policy goals. Therefore, there are macro-level drivers that can be directly related to the **external environment**. FIMI actors can take advantage of a number of factors that are linked to the **geopolitical context** as FIMI enablers. Some examples from an international relations perspective include the **geopolitical insecurity of states**, especially when the state's existence and sovereignty are concerned,<sup>143</sup> **nationalistic and territorial disputes**,<sup>144</sup> and **regional confrontations** and **inter-state conflict**.<sup>145</sup> Other FIMI-enabling drivers in the foreign policy domain can be geopolitical feelings of insecurity and inferiority, the mystification of the power of authoritarian regimes,<sup>146</sup> and anti-colonial, non-aligned exploitable narratives.<sup>147</sup> Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that diplomatic relations and diplomatic channels are often utilised as enablers of FIMI operations.<sup>148</sup> In addition, alignment of the economic or political interests of local elites and foreign actors resorting to FIMI, as well as of local and foreign actors' messages, can also be enablers of FIMI.<sup>149</sup>

The high levels of external exposure of economic environments are also conducive to FIMI, for instance, if strong economic relations and interests with the FIMI actor exists,<sup>150</sup> or in case of economic and technological dependence.<sup>151</sup> Likewise, the concept of the Kremlin Playbook revolves around the premise that FIMI is fundamentally underpinned by economic and military drivers. These drivers fund mechanisms like state and media

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Greene, S., Asmolov, G., Fagan, A., Fridman, O., Gjuzelov, B., *Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them*, European Parliament, European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs. NA: European Union, 2021.

<sup>144</sup> Krekó, P., *The drivers of disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe and their utilization during the pandemic*, Globsec Policy Brief, 9, 2020.

<sup>145</sup> European External Action Service, *2021 Stratcom activity report*, 1-16, 2021.

<sup>146</sup> Krekó, P., *The drivers of disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe and their utilization during the pandemic*, Globsec Policy Brief, 9, 2020.

<sup>147</sup> Morača, T., Sicurella, F., Sekulić, T., Armanini, J., Stella, F., *Feeling the pulse: Countering foreign information manipulation interference in Africa and the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 1-8, 2023.

<sup>148</sup> European External Action Service, *1st EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: Towards a framework for networked defense*, p. 5, 2023.

<sup>149</sup> Morača, T., Sicurella, F., Sekulić, T., Armanini, J., Stella, F., *Feeling the pulse: Countering foreign information manipulation interference in Africa and the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 1-8, 2023.

<sup>150</sup> Wigell, M., 'Democratic deterrence: How to dissuade hybrid interference', *The Washington Quarterly*, 44(1), 49-67, 2021.

<sup>151</sup> Teperik, D., Denisa-Liepniece, S., Bankauskaitė, D., Kullamaa, K., *Resilience against disinformation: A new Baltic way to follow?*, International Centre for Defence and Security, 20, 2022.

## Structural transformations and feelings of threat and insecurity

capture, which in turn facilitate and amplify FIMI operations.<sup>152</sup> The external and geopolitical drivers illustrate how foreign powers exploit divisions and divergent interpretations to advance their FIMI agendas.

By way of conclusion, it is important to note that **changes in macro-level social structures** may also be determinants of the spread and effectiveness of FIMI. For instance, several studies have found that structural transformations that evoke feelings of threat and insecurity - such as economic depression, unemployment, political changes, demographic alterations as well as disaster and crisis situations (e.g. pandemics) - are associated with increased belief in disinformation and conspiracy theories<sup>153</sup> and greater success of cognitive warfare operations.<sup>154</sup> This observation is also supported by other research endeavours which have discovered that inducing circumstantial uncertainty increases conspiracy belief.<sup>155</sup>

Similarly, ontological insecurity which may provoke fear of loss of jobs, social status or privilege has been understood as one of the main reasons why people may be attracted to conspiracy communities.<sup>156</sup> Gundersen et al. have found that perceptions of shifts in (or 'attack' on) fundamental societal values and norms may contribute to increased susceptibility to misinformation in the form of conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality.<sup>157</sup> These findings specifically relate to male perceived membership of a gender (low-power) minority group and related feelings of system identity threat.<sup>158</sup> Conspiratorial information and communities may give people some sense of security, although studies have established that they do not satisfy many of the other psychological needs that render them attractive in the first place.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy, *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe: Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*, 2021. Center for the Study of Democracy, *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, 2020.

<sup>153</sup> DiGrazia J., 'The social determinants of conspiratorial ideation', *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 3, 2017. Girish, P., 'Fake news and social processes: A short review', *Data science for fake news: Surveys and perspectives*, 42, 245-255, p. 254, 2021. Terren, L., Van Aelst, P., Van Damme, P., *Last line of defence: measuring resilience to foreign information*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2024.

<sup>154</sup> Miller, S., 'Cognitive warfare: An ethical analysis', *Ethics and Information Technology*, 25(3), 46, 2023.

<sup>155</sup> Franks, B., Bangerter, A., Bauer, M. W., Hall, M., Noort, M. C., 'Beyond "monologicality"? Exploring conspiracist worldviews', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 861, 2017.

<sup>156</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., 'What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1-30, 2021.

<sup>157</sup> Gundersen, A. B., van der Linden, S., Piksa, M., Morzy, M., 'The role of perceived minority-group status in the conspiracy beliefs of factual majority groups', *Royal Society Open Science*, 10(10), p. 22, 2023.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> DiGrazia J., 'The social determinants of conspiratorial ideation', *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 3, 2017. Kinnvall, C., 'Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security', *Political Psychology*, 25(5), 741-767, 2004.

## Meso and micro level

Having discussed macro-level drivers, we now examine meso- and micro-level enabling factors influencing FIMI. The examined literature offers relatively fewer insights as regards social and collective drivers of FIMI that play out at the meso and micro levels than at the macro level. To a certain degree, this is to be expected owing to the systemic character and implications of FIMI which render macro-level social drivers crucial to understanding this phenomenon. Nonetheless, elements pertaining to medium and small social systems are also significant and ought to be given due consideration in scientific accounts of FIMI. The importance of **meso-level drivers** related to FIMI has been stressed in a number of the reviewed studies.<sup>160</sup> Societal and collective drivers of FIMI which manifest at the meso level are linked to the operation of medium social systems, such as communities (also in the online space), political parties, organisations, and social identity groups (race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class/socioeconomic status, ability, citizenship, age, etc.). They are more localised or community-based, typically targeting specific groups or institutions within a society.

### Online social networks and community influence

Social media groups represent meso-level manifestations of social structures within which FIMI takes place. There is evidence that **certain characteristics of online social networks**, in particular features which are the product of continuously developing digital and ICT technologies, may constitute enabling factors of FIMI.<sup>161</sup> In fact, Jeangène Vilmer et al. argue that one of the two main reasons behind the rise of information manipulation and the increased attention received by this phenomenon is the ‘unprecedented capacity of...social networks to rapidly, even ‘virally,’ spread information’<sup>162</sup>

**Choice architectures** and **algorithmic content curation** on social media platforms may contribute to information manipulation by limiting truth-finding and opportunities to discover new perspectives and potentially highlighting content which is untruthful, misleading, polarising or extremist.<sup>163</sup> The interplay between algorithms that promote engaging content, on the one hand, and people’s pronounced psychological predisposition to focus on negative news, on the other, create settings that are strongly conducive to the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation.<sup>164</sup> This owes to the fact

<sup>160</sup> Aghajari, Z., Baumer, E. P., DiFranzo D., ‘Reviewing interventions to address misinformation: The need to expand our vision beyond an individualistic focus’, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CSCW 1), 1-34, 2023. Gundersen, A. B., van der Linden, S., Piksa, M., Morzy, M., ‘The role of perceived minority-group status in the conspiracy beliefs of factual majority groups’, *Royal Society Open Science*, 10(10), p. 2, 2023.

<sup>161</sup> Burke, P., Henschke, A., ‘I know my truth... Now tell me yours: From active measures to cognitive warfare in the Russian invasion of Ukraine’, *Strategic Panorama*, 2, 12-27, 2023. Kolobara, R., ‘Information Operations as a Means of Cognitive Superiority—Theory and Term Research in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *National Security and the Future*, 24(2), 41–67, 2023.

<sup>162</sup> Jeangène Vilmer, J.-B., Escorcia, A., Guillaume, M., Herrera, J., *Information manipulation: A challenge for our democracies*, Policy Planning Staff (CAPS), Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM), Ministry for the Armed Forces, 2018.

<sup>163</sup> Lewandowski, S., Smille, L., Garcia, D., Hertwig, R., Weatherall, J., Egidy, S., Robertson, R. E., O’Conner, C., Kozyreva, A., Lorenz-Spreen, P., Blaschke, Y., Leiser, M., *Technology and Democracy: Understanding the Influence of Online Technologies on Political Behaviour and Decision-making*, Joint Research Centre, European Commission, pp. 4-5, August 2020.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

that in most cases misinformation provokes negative emotions, such as fear and anger.<sup>165</sup> Addictive technology, coupled with AI suggestion engines (which are enabled by machine learning), generates powerful effects of persuasion.<sup>166</sup> Thus, an originally 'neutral' social network can be used to ill intent easily and free of cost.<sup>167</sup> When it comes to social networking in the gaming domain, the insufficiency of policies and mechanisms to tackle motivated information influence campaigns has increased users' vulnerability.<sup>168</sup>

In addition, social networks and communities have been found to influence social issues related to misinformation also through their effects on **social norms**.<sup>169</sup> The authors discuss social norms as a community-oriented factor that moulds the social contexts in which misinformation is encountered by individuals.<sup>170</sup> Online communities add to the spread of misinformation by creating community narratives which impact social norms, in particular perceptions thereof, including perceptions around what other people do (descriptive norms), approve of or condemn (injunctive norms), as well as how one thinks he or she is expected to behave (subjective norms).<sup>171</sup> In combination with the desire for external approval, these perceptions can generate behavioural effects, inter alia, as regard the types of content that people share within their community, and how they identify and respond to misinformation.<sup>172</sup>

Similarly, Lewandowski et al. observe that network structures of social media platforms may bring about considerable distortions in perceived social signals which can result in entrenchment of attitudes.<sup>173</sup> Moreover, Zhen et. al explore how social and group mechanisms drive the dissemination of information in online communities.<sup>174</sup> They focus on networked social influence and strategic information manipulation as driving forces to understand how **embedded authority** and **community loyalty** as key variables impact the spread of misinformation within online communities, and address their roles in sharing misinformation with a social-behavioural focus. These drivers of misinformation can potentially be applied to FIMI as well, but more observation and testing needs to be done to that end.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Polson and Scott, 2018, in Kolobara, R., 'Information Operations as a Means of Cognitive Superiority—Theory and Term Research in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *National Security and the Future*, 24(2), 41–67, pp. 47–48, 2023.

<sup>167</sup> Kolobara, R., 'Information Operations as a Means of Cognitive Superiority—Theory and Term Research in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *National Security and the Future*, 24(2), 41–67, p. 48, 2023.

<sup>168</sup> Pamment, J., Falkheimer, J., Isaksson, E., *Malign foreign interference and information influence on video game platforms: Understanding the adversarial playbook*, MPF report series 3, 2023.

<sup>169</sup> Aghajari, Z., Baumer, E. P., DiFranzo D., 'Reviewing interventions to address misinformation: The need to expand our vision beyond an individualistic focus', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CSCW 1), 1–34, 2023.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Lewandowski, S., Smille, L., Garcia, D., Hertwig, R., Weatherall, J., Egidy, S., Robertson, R. E., O'Conner, C., Kozyreva, A., Lorenz-Spreen, P., Blaschke, Y., Leiser, M., *Technology and Democracy: Understanding the Influence of Online Technologies on Political Behaviour and Decision-making*, Joint Research Centre, European Commission, p. 6, August 2020.

<sup>174</sup> Zhen, L., Yan, B., Tang, J. L., Nan, Y., Yang, A., 'Social network dynamics, bots, and community-based online misinformation spread: Lessons from anti-refugee and COVID-19 misinformation cases', *The Information Society*, 39(1), 17–34, 2023.

## Social stratification and socioeconomic status

Furthermore, **social stratification**<sup>175</sup> is a structural factor that influences the precision targeting of different audiences at the meso level. For example, an inquiry into Chinese propaganda suggests segmenting audiences in accordance with certain group characteristics. The content disseminated by party-state media and other elements of the external propaganda system are expected to become more varied, first according to country differences and then based on social strata and other specific community-level traits.<sup>176</sup> Through precise, differentiated or stratified communication, marketing segmentation strategies, audience segmentation, content tailoring, the article sheds light on the evolving landscape of Chinese Communist Party's external propaganda work. To achieve greater impact, communication is differentiated according to classes, such as political elites, academic elites, or the masses, using formal and academic language for elites, and slang and agile content for netizens and new media users. Differentiation parameters such as gender, religion, age, interests and hobbies also factor in the CCP's propaganda strategy,<sup>177</sup> combining collective and individual propaganda enablers that may be applicable to FIMI as well.

**Socioeconomic status** is also discussed in several studies as a factor influencing susceptibility to FIMI. Salvador Casara et al. have found that objective and perceived economic inequality, and/or membership of a group with a lower socioeconomic status have been associated with more pronounced conspiracy beliefs.<sup>178</sup> A likely explanation for this correlation is that economic inequality frustrates needs which conspiratorial beliefs in turn promise to cater to.<sup>179</sup> In addition, considerable economic inequality evokes feelings of lack of control and anomie which increase vulnerability to conspiracies.<sup>180</sup> These findings are supported by the outcomes of several other studies which have established that conspiracy beliefs are more prominent among individuals with low socioeconomic status.<sup>181</sup> In particular, Gundersen et al. have underscored the importance of differentiating, in scientific investigations, between perceived and factual situations of deprived life circumstances, having demonstrated that perceptions of relative deprivation are associated with higher susceptibility to misinformation, for example in Poland and the Netherlands.<sup>182</sup>

In sum, FIMI can exploit local economic hardship, discontent within specific regions, or dissatisfaction with local governance. For instance, we can assume that foreign malign influence can be more potent in communities facing unemployment or poor infrastructure.

<sup>175</sup> Social stratification can also be a macro-level driver when it pertains to the larger society or at the country level.

<sup>176</sup> Insikt Group, 1 Key for 1 Lock: *The Chinese Communist Party's strategy for targeted propaganda*, p. 2, 2022.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Salvador Casara, B. G., Suitner, C., Jetten, J., 'The impact of economic inequality on conspiracy beliefs', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 98, 104245, 2022.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., 'The psychology of conspiracy theories', *Association for Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538-542, 2017. Gundersen, A. B., van der Linden, S., Piksa, M., Morzy, M., 'The role of perceived minority-group status in the conspiracy beliefs of factual majority groups', *Royal Society Open Science*, 10(10), p. 2, 2023. Franks, B., Bangerter, A., Bauer, M. W., Hall, M., Noort, M. C., 'Beyond "monologicality"? Exploring conspiracist worldviews', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 861, 2017.

<sup>182</sup> Gundersen, A. B., van der Linden, S., Piksa, M., Morzy, M., 'The role of perceived minority-group status in the conspiracy beliefs of factual majority groups', *Royal Society Open Science*, 10(10), p. 22, 2023.



## Group identity and minority vulnerabilities

Strong **group identities**, such as nationalism, religion, or ethnicity, can be leveraged to create an ‘us vs. them’ mentality. Foreign actors may use this to intensify in-group loyalty and out-group hostility. Manipulative campaigns can amplify patriotic or religious fervour to create suspicion or hostility towards outsiders or minorities.

Another key meso-level driver relevant to the effectiveness of FIMI is **membership of social identity groups**. For instance, Phadke et al. stress that group identity is a key dimension when it comes to adoption of conspiracy belief and present empirical representation of social features relevant to group identity.<sup>183</sup> Before looking into the practical implications of this particular driver of FIMI, it should be noted that demographic variables, such as age, gender, ethnicity etc., can also be legitimately investigated as individual factors, as well as social and collective factors. On the one hand, demographic variables manifest at the individual level and can rightfully be viewed as individual factors. On the other hand, individual demographic characteristics cannot be adequately understood without reference to social systems and processes. Some demographic variables are in part determined by social conditions: for example, individual socioeconomic status is profoundly influenced by economic, political and legal systems. What is more, individual demographic characteristics play out as drivers of FIMI partly because of the social meaning they carry; the social meaning and significance of demographic variables is created at the level of social structures and interactions.

**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.<sup>184</sup> In addition, two studies carried out by Gundersen et al. suggest that individuals who perceive themselves as members of minority groups are in some cases more susceptible to misinformation.<sup>185</sup> For example, the first of the couple of studies, which covered the USA, the UK, Germany and Poland, showed that the **perception of belonging to a minority group** (rather than factually belonging to it) was most consistently linked to an increased susceptibility to COVID-19-related misinformation.<sup>186</sup> Perceived membership of a gender minority group was particularly related to susceptibility to misinformation when the participants in the study factually were not members of such a group.<sup>187</sup>

In addition, the conducted research discovered that **conspiracy beliefs** are more pronounced among ethnic and religious minorities, and that vulnerability to health misinformation is associated with religiosity and belonging to a racial minority group.<sup>188</sup> Notably, it was established that perceptions of societal prejudice and discrimination mediated the relationship

<sup>183</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., ‘What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement’, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1–30, p. 23, 2021

<sup>184</sup> Jeangène Vilmer, J.-B., Escorcía, A., Guillaume, M., Herrera, J., *Information manipulation: A challenge for our democracies*, Policy Planning Staff (CAPS), Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM), Ministry for the Armed Forces, 2018.

<sup>185</sup> Gundersen, A. B., van der Linden, S., Piksa, M., Morzy, M., ‘The role of perceived minority-group status in the conspiracy beliefs of factual majority groups’, *Royal Society Open Science*, 10(10), 2023.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

between being a member of a marginalised minority group and holding conspiracy beliefs, and perceptions of being a minority that finds itself on the losing side of power relations (rather than minority in terms of group size) showed stronger relationships with the mediators and one of the dependent variables.<sup>189</sup> In a similar vein, Douglas et al. found that social identity groups which perceive themselves to be on the losing side of political processes are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories.<sup>190</sup>

## Partisanship and political affiliations

**Party affiliations** and **partisanship** also emerge in the literature as a meso-level factor that may influence people's vulnerability to FIMI-related phenomena, for example, conspiracies.<sup>191</sup> While political ideology is an individual-level driver of FIMI, partisanship - or strong adherence to a particular party - is also a collective factor that plays out at the meso level. In the USA, it has been found to create a predisposition to negatively portray the opposing party and its supporters, and impact people's perception of political conspiracies - increasing partisan bias in the processing of political information.<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, it is among the elements that correlate with asymmetry in liberals' and conservatives' conspiracy endorsement.<sup>193</sup> It has also been found that 'holders of partisan positions are not only more vulnerable to disinformation attacks consistent with their views, but also will likely be more resistant to debunking, unless the debunking message is consistent with their initial positions'.<sup>194</sup>

**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. For example, the Kremlin has been building both formal and informal relationships with European political parties in an effort to undermine the current European order from within. This includes interactions with extremist opposition parties in Germany and France, as well as with anti-establishment and anti-European ruling parties in Austria, Italy, Bulgaria, and Serbia.<sup>195</sup>

## Strategic corruption and illicit financial flows

**Strategic corruption** can also be considered as a driver of FIMI, insofar as it can be weaponised by threat actors such as Russia 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.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., 'The psychology of conspiracy theories', *Association for Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538-542, 2017.

<sup>191</sup> Jiang, Y., 'The impact of political ideology, knowledge and participation on electoral conspiracy endorsement', *Front. Polit. Sci.*, 5, 1-14, February 2023.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, p. 4

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p. 3

<sup>194</sup> Arcos, R., Gertrudix, M., Arribas, C., Cardarilli, M., *Responses to digital disinformation as part of hybrid threats: a systematic review on the effects of disinformation and the effectiveness of fact-checking/debunking*, Open Research Europe, 2, 8, p. 14, 2022.

<sup>195</sup> Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 13, 2020.

<sup>196</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy, *The State of Capture: The Elusive Quest for Anti-Corruption Results*, Policy Brief No. 144, April 2024.

### Interplay between individual and group psychology drivers at the meso level

Strategic corruption links to **illicit financial flows**, which can be another driver of FIMI. The Kremlin has been known for its use of illicit financial flows to establish and maintain relations with political parties, social groups, and high-ranking individuals, aiming to influence policy decisions. For years, Russia and China have leveraged opaque corporate ownership and illicit financial flows to acquire technology, expertise, and economic and political influence in target countries. Russia has repeatedly exerted malign economic influence in Europe by developing opaque patronage networks throughout the region, which it then utilises to impact decision-making in major markets and institutions.<sup>197</sup> Illicit financial flows ensure the availability of multiple channels for disinformation, information suppression and other malign influences.

As illustrated by the examples discussed above, the review of the literature suggests that meso-level societal and collective drivers of FIMI are intimately connected with individual drivers, in particular psychological attributes, and ought to be considered in conjunction with the latter. A possible explanation is that meso-level societal drivers relate to community and group membership which in turn gives rise to strong group (psychological) dynamics. Douglas et al. have discovered that social and collective motives, such as the desire to maintain a positive image of one's in-group, are among the determinants of the popularity of conspiracy theories.<sup>198</sup>

In a similar vein, Gundersen et al. have demonstrated that, across different countries, conspiracy beliefs and willingness to disseminate conspiracy theories have been connected to intra- and inter-group psychological processes such as collective narcissism - the belief that one's in-group is 'exceptional yet underappreciated' and at a disadvantage relative to the out-group(s).<sup>199</sup> Furthermore, Aghajari et al. point out the 'familiarity bias' and the 'majority illusion effect' as other examples of the interplay between individual and group psychology that may be relevant to the spread of FIMI and its impacts.<sup>200</sup> The 'majority illusion effect' is used to describe a situation in which a small number of highly connected users with inaccurate or misleading views are able to alter the perceptions of many other people and even bring about swift changes in the community's views and narratives.<sup>201</sup>

<sup>197</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy, *Illicit Financial Flows and Disinformation in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, p. 3, 2023.

<sup>198</sup> Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., 'The psychology of conspiracy theories', *Association for Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538-542, p. 538, 2017.

<sup>199</sup> Gundersen, A. B., van der Linden, S., Piksa, M., Morzy, M., 'The role of perceived minority-group status in the conspiracy beliefs of factual majority groups', *Royal Society Open Science*, 10(10), p. 22, 2023.

<sup>200</sup> Aghajari, Z., Baumer, E. P., DiFranzo D., 'Reviewing interventions to address misinformation: The need to expand our vision beyond an individualistic focus', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CSCW 1), 1-34, p. 2, 2023.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

## Micro-level social and collective drivers

Finally, 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). They operate at the individual or interpersonal level, focusing on personal attitudes, behaviours, and social relationships. Overall, 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.

Nonetheless, an important finding by Phadke et al. is that **direct exposure** to conspiracists and their conspiratorial beliefs through direct interactions taking place on online platforms is the most critical social precursor of conspiracy joining.<sup>202</sup> On a more general note, while the individual factors outlined in this study are so construed as to reflect people's predisposition towards conspiracies, the social factors aim to capture users' engagement with the members of the online conspiracy communities prior to joining those communities.<sup>203</sup> The reviewed literature does not provide in-depth accounts of micro-level drivers, which opens avenues for future research.

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<sup>202</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., 'What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1–30, p. 2, 2021.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

# QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

**Quantitative analyses of FIMI social and collective drivers are limited in current literature**, primarily because FIMI is a relatively recent concept, and the relevant variables and their interconnections remain undefined — an important gap for future studies to address. In the relative absence of quantification of FIMI drivers, we extended the search to other related concepts, such as disinformation and cognitive warfare, to identify potentially quantifiable variables that might also be applicable to FIMI. Nonetheless, the few quantitative studies available provide strong evidence of the importance of social factors, for example, when it comes to conspiratorial joining.<sup>204</sup> Moreover, it has been determined that some social factors have higher predictive power than any of the individual factors considered in the respective study.<sup>205</sup>

## Influence operations and the role of social media

DiResta et al. review an expansive data set of social media posts and metadata provided by Facebook, Twitter, and Alphabet, plus a set of related data from additional platforms.<sup>206</sup> The report quantifies and contextualises Internet Research Agency (IRA)<sup>207</sup> influence operations targeting American citizens from 2014 through 2017, and articulates the significance of this long-running and broad influence operation. These operations exploit **divisions within American** society on social media, especially on social issues such as Black culture, community, Black Lives Matter; Blue Lives Matter, pro-police; Anti-refugee, pro-immigration reform; Gun rights, pro-2nd Amendment; Political Pro-Trump, anti-Clinton content; and trust in media. They provide a Facebook data graph of IRA's attempts at FIMI during the US presidential election. The Facebook data provided included posts from 81 unique Pages, of which 33 had over 1000 followers. Of these 33, 14 major pages focused on Black audiences, five were aimed at Left-leaning audiences, one was a travel-focused older page, and 13 targeted Right-leaning audiences.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., 'What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement', 2021.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>206</sup> DiResta, R., Shaffer, K., Ruppel, B., Sullivan, D., Matney, R., Fox, R., Albright, J., Johnson, B., *The tactics & tropes of the Internet Research Agency*, New Knowledge, 2018.

<sup>207</sup> A Saint Petersburg-based Russian troll factory that was engaged in influence operations and propaganda.

<sup>208</sup> DiResta, R., Shaffer, K., Ruppel, B., Sullivan, D., Matney, R., Fox, R., Albright, J., Johnson, B., *The tactics & tropes of the Internet Research Agency*, New Knowledge, 2018.

## Erosion of trust and societal polarisation

**Social trust, trust in authority or experts, and trust in democracy** – the so-called ‘trinity of trust’ – are a major target of foreign malign influence. When anti-democratic influence operations are introduced into a society, the trinity of trust is broken leading to **increased polarisation** amongst people. In-groups and out-groups are formed where the out-group is demonised and painted as an existential threat. A 2017 study by the Pew Research Center finds that those with ‘a lot’ of trust in their governments in democratic nations around the world are in the minority.<sup>209</sup> The percentage of respondents who answered ‘a lot’ when asked ‘How much do you trust the national government to do what is right for our country?’ shows the following figures for some major democracies: Canada: 20%; USA: 15%; UK: 14%; Spain: 5%; Italy: 1%; Australia: 7%, Japan: 6%, SK: 2%.<sup>210</sup>

Likewise, the OECD report uses survey data on drivers of trust in public institutions.<sup>211</sup> It finds that in the modern complex information landscape, marked by the prevalence of disinformation and polarising content, the ways in which information is produced, shared, and consumed are closely tied to the levels of trust. While public trust in media is generally low, reflecting similar trust levels in national governments (39%), people’s trust in government strongly correlates with their media engagement. Only 22% of individuals who avoid following political news report high or moderate trust in government, compared to 40% of those who engage with news in some manner. Additionally, when governments act as information providers, 67% of people express satisfaction with information on administrative services. However, only 39% believe that communication regarding policy reforms – an essential factor in building trust – is sufficient.<sup>212</sup>

## Social and structural drivers in conspiracy ideation

DiGrazia outlines several social factors associated with **threat and insecurity** that are linked to an increase in consumption of illuminati conspiracy.<sup>213</sup> The author finds that it is important to move beyond individual explanations of conspiratorial ideation and further develop an understanding of the social conditions that underlie conspiratorial belief with a focus on macro-level social conditions and structural change. DiGrazia conducts a state-level longitudinal analysis using data on Internet search volumes related to conspiracy theories.<sup>214</sup>

The major independent variables used to measure the consumption of conspiracy and variation in conspiratorial ideation across US states between the years 2007 and 2014 are: 1) **increased unemployment**; 2) **political partisanship** whereby party supporters indulge in conspiracy when their candidate loses a presidential election (while this result is more prevalent

<sup>209</sup> Wike et al., 2017, in Ingram, H. J., ‘The strategic logic of state and non-state malign ‘influence activities’: Polarising populations, exploiting the democratic recession’, *The RUSI Journal*, 165(1), 12-24, pp. 20-21, 2020.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>211</sup> OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>213</sup> DiGrazia J., ‘The social determinants of conspiratorial ideation’, *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 3, 2017.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*.

among conservatives it holds true across ideology); 3) **immigration**, which according to the study had an ambiguous linkage to increased conspiracy consumption, but one could infer that new studies would find a more direct linkage; and 4) **demographic changes**. The dependent variable used in this analysis consists of state-level measurements based on aggregate Google search patterns associated with the search terms Illuminati and Obama birth.<sup>215</sup> It is likely that the same elements making one susceptible to conspiracy would make one susceptible to FIMI as well. Following this logic, high unemployment and contentious elections may both create a society more susceptible to FIMI.

## Joining conspiracy communities: the role of social factors

In existing research, there is little insight about the role of social factors in joining online conspiracy communities. Current understanding of social factors in conspiracy adoption is assembled from mainly theoretical studies. Most conspiracy research looks at factors that motivate individuals into conspiracy communities, but looking at society-level factors gives a different perspective to the reasons why people join conspiracy communities. In line with that, the study by Phadke et al. finds that 1) one-on-one relationships between a conspiracy outsider and a conspiracy insider, and 2) real or perceived marginalisation outside the conspiracy community are the main social-level indicators that a person will join a conspiracy community.<sup>216</sup> While individual factors are designed to reflect the users' predisposition towards conspiracies, social factors capture their engagement with the members of the conspiracy communities prior to joining those communities.<sup>217</sup> A regression analysis is performed, that is, a quasi-experimental study detailing the individual and social factors correlated with users joining the conspiracy communities. The study identifies as independent variables several major social factors, e.g. **reputation, emotions, group polarisation** and **social self-selection**<sup>218</sup> and conspiratorial engagement as the dependent variable.<sup>219</sup> Indicators for identifying and measuring the presence of these factors have been developed.<sup>220</sup>

## Political influence campaigns and disinformation

**Changing political attitudes and voting behaviour** is considered a major goal of foreign actors using social media to interfere in elections. Examining the links between exposure to foreign influence campaigns and political behaviour is important as it gives understanding of the structure and content of these campaigns. The foreign influence campaign of the Russian Internet Research Agency on Twitter in the 2016 US presidential elections, for instance, has been suspected to have affected political attitudes, the levels of political polarisation, voting behaviour and vote choice, and positions on salient policy issues. It also has allegedly exacerbated polarisation among the

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>216</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., 'What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1–30, 2021.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

electorate and influenced or changed candidate preferences. The major social/political drivers, identified and analysed quantitatively in a study by Eady et al. include **partisanship/party identification, standard socio-demographic characteristics, the level of social media use, political attitudes, policy positions**, (perceptions of) **polarisation**, and **ideology**.<sup>221</sup> These drivers are quantified to measure the amount/level of and susceptibility to exposures to posts from the Russian foreign influence campaign in 2016.<sup>222</sup> The authors show that exposure to Russian disinformation accounts has been highly concentrated, with just 1% of users accounting for 70% of all exposures. This exposure has been predominantly among users who strongly identified as Republicans. Additionally, content from domestic news media and politicians far outweighs exposure to the Russian influence campaign. Lastly, the authors find no significant link between exposure to the Russian campaign and changes in attitudes, polarisation, or voting behaviour. These findings highlight the limited impact of social media-based election interference campaigns.<sup>223</sup>

Likewise, in a study on Chinese disinformation campaigns against Taiwan, Harold et al. find that the impact of China's disinformation is mainly political in nature, affecting public perceptions and potentially influencing electoral outcomes.<sup>224</sup> Thus, reports of disinformation could be timed strategically before local elections to sway voter sentiment.<sup>225</sup> In a similar vein, disinformation is conceived of as a form of political communication, which has an impact on democratic institutions through a variety of socio-political factors, enabling disinformation and allowing it to flourish in recent years.<sup>226</sup> Such conceptions underscore the political nature of disinformation.

## Ideological influence on conspiracy and disinformation

Jiang's article stands out within the body of collected literature with its clearly stated and defined variables.<sup>227</sup> Unlike previous conspiracy studies, with their primary focus on psychological factors that shape conspiracy mentality, Jiang's study selects popular conspiracies and conducts multiple survey rounds (n = 500) to compare and contrast the effects of **partisan affiliations** on the susceptibility to conspiracy theories. Using quantitative methods, it analyses the impact of **political ideology, political knowledge** and **political participation**, as the primary independent variables<sup>228</sup> on **conspiracy theory endorsement** – the main dependent variable - and on the social aspect of conspiracy adoption, by applying econometric modelling to

<sup>221</sup> Eady, G., Paskhalis, T., Zilinsky, J., Bonneau, R., Nagler, J., Tucker, J. A., 'Exposure to the Russian Internet Research Agency foreign influence campaign on Twitter in the 2016 US election and its relationship to attitudes and voting behavior', *Nature Communications*, 14, 62, 2023.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Eady, G., Paskhalis, T., Zilinsky, J., Bonneau, R., Nagler, J., Tucker, J. A., 'Exposure to the Russian Internet Research Agency foreign influence campaign on Twitter in the 2016 US election and its relationship to attitudes and voting behavior', *Nature Communications*, 14, 62, 2023.

<sup>224</sup> Harold, S. W., Beauchamp-Mustafaga, N., Hornung, J. W., *Chinese disinformation efforts on social media*, RAND, 2021.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Freelon, D., Wells, C., 'Disinformation as political communication', *Political Communication*, 37(2), 145-156, 2020.

<sup>227</sup> Jiang, Y., 'The impact of political ideology, knowledge and participation on electoral conspiracy endorsement', *Front. Polit. Sci.*, 5, 1-14, February 2023.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, p. 7.



identify the interaction effects of these variables.<sup>229</sup> For the sake of robustness of the quantitative analysis, the study also defines control variables (trust, confidence, internal efficacy, external efficacy, need for cognition, need for evaluation), demographic variables (ethnicity, age, family income, educational level, partisanship and religiosity), and dummy variables (gender, ethnicity, and educational level).<sup>230</sup> Political ideology, knowledge and perception may also be applied in estimating the effects of susceptibility to FIMI campaigns and attacks, or of endorsement of manipulated information.

Similarly, **ideology** is operationalised as an independent variable which impacts the potential exposure of the American public to Russian disinformation (the dependent variable) in a study of the effects of Russian digital disinformation on audiences in the USA. The article finds that the most conservative individuals are more prone to potential exposure to disinformation. They analyse a sample associated with a change in the conditional probability of potential exposure to disinformation from 6.5% for the most liberal to 45.2% for the most conservative individuals. The findings are corroborated using a second, validated data set on individual party registration. According to the results, the reach of online, pro-Russian disinformation into audiences in the USA displays ideological asymmetry.<sup>231</sup> Ideology as a variable may as well be applied and contribute to estimating the potential exposure to FIMI of various political groups or partisans in society.

## Minority identity and misinformation vulnerability

The **self-perception of minority-group membership** is a contributing factor to misinformation susceptibility. Using regression analysis, Gundersen et al. examine in two complementary studies the relationship between perceived minority status (independent variable) on susceptibility to misinformation and conspiracy beliefs (dependent variable).<sup>232</sup> In the first study (n = 2140), the authors measure the perception of belonging to a minority group, rather than factually belonging to it. They find that it was most consistently related with an increased susceptibility to COVID-19 misinformation across national samples from the USA, the UK, Germany and Poland. Importantly, perceiving that one belongs to a gender minority group predicts susceptibility to misinformation when participants factually did not belong to it. In the second pre-registered study (n = 1823), their experiment, aiming to manipulate the minority perceptions of men, did not succeed to influence conspiracy beliefs in the predicted direction.<sup>233</sup> This research article relates to the observation that group identity with its social features is a key dimension as far as the adoption of conspiracy beliefs is concerned.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid, pp. 7-8.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Hjorth, F., Adler-Nissen, R., 'Ideological asymmetry in the reach of pro-Russian digital disinformation to United States audiences', *Journal of Communication*, 69(2), 168-192, 2019.

<sup>232</sup> Gundersen, A. B., van der Linden, S., Piksa, M., Morzy, M., 'The role of perceived minority-group status in the conspiracy beliefs of factual majority groups', *Royal Society Open Science*, 10(10), 2023.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Phadke, S., Samory, M., Mitra, T., 'What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?: Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1-30, 2021.

## **Potential for quantitative FIMI research**

Despite the current scarcity of FIMI-focused quantitative studies, the limited but growing body of literature illustrates the potential of applying quantitative methods to the study and analysis of FIMI drivers. Expanding this research can help understand the relationships between FIMI drivers and measure their effects, enabling more precise and actionable insights into combating FIMI. Moreover, future research should aim to establish clear connections between these drivers and their societal effects, expanding the understanding of FIMI.

# SOCIAL AND COLLECTIVE DRIVERS AS VARIABLES

A significant challenge in investigating the phenomenon of FIMI through quantitative methods is how to effectively **operationalise** the social and collective drivers of FIMI as variables. Operationalisation, in this context, relies on the framing of the relationships between these variables and on defining the research questions appropriately. In other words, the **research question, unit of analysis, and level of analysis** must be chosen carefully to establish the correct causal relationships between the variables we want to measure and analyse within a FIMI ecosystem. Developing clear and testable hypotheses about the relationships between FIMI and its drivers is crucial for assessing FIMI’s impact on society and politics, particularly its effects on social structures and political systems, and for understanding the mechanisms and channels of FIMI’s influence.

To this end, we propose categorising FIMI-related phenomena as either **independent, intervening, or dependent variables**. What is considered a ‘driver’ in policy analysis often aligns with either independent or intervening variables in social scientific research. Conversely, phenomena constructed as dependent variables or outcomes cannot be considered drivers within the same framework. For illustration and conceptual clarity, we use the example of social and political polarisation, a common societal FIMI phenomenon, and outline a methodological approach to defining it as different types of variables. Table 2 explores causal relationships within a FIMI ecosystem, illustrating how variables interact using **social and political polarisation** as an example.

Table 2: Examples of variables within FIMI ecosystems

Independent variable (cause, driver)	Intervening variable (mediator, enabler or modifier)	Dependent variable (effect, outcome)
Social and political polarisation	Cognitive capture/ psychological predispositions	Increasing susceptibility, vulnerability or exposure to FIMI
FIMI operation/campaign	Social and political polarisation	Changing public opinion/ party or candidate preferences/electoral behaviour/vote choice
FIMI operation/campaign	Demographic characteristics/ social status/political cleavages/media capture	Changing levels of/amplifying <b>social and political polarisation</b>

Below, we explore these relationships and disentangle the links between variables in different causal relationships to FIMI.

## FIMI drivers as independent variables

In policy analysis, drivers refer to primary forces, factors, or conditions that initiate or accelerate change within a specific policy area. Conceptually, drivers are often viewed as **independent variables with a direct, immediate impact on the dependent variable, without necessarily involving intermediary effects**. Thus, the most common conceptualisation of drivers is as independent variables that have a clear, direct impact on the dependent variable. The first example in Table 2 shows that social and political polarisation can directly influence the level of exposure to FIMI, thereby increasing susceptibility and vulnerability. In this causal relationship, polarisation (the independent variable) functions as a driver that directly affects the outcome, i.e. the change in susceptibility to FIMI (dependent variable).

## FIMI drivers as intervening variables

In certain research contexts, **drivers can also function as intervening variables**.<sup>235</sup> Under specific conditions, FIMI drivers may be conceptualised as intervening variables that act as mediators or modifiers, amplifying or altering the impact of FIMI on the dependent variable. In this narrower sense and more nuanced view, we construe a FIMI attack,<sup>236</sup> operation<sup>237</sup> or campaign<sup>238</sup> as the independent variable seeking to exert influence on and cause change in the behaviour or attitudes of the public in the target society.

A theoretical example to consider would be the relationship between FIMI and its influence on the attitudes or public opinion during election campaigns (see the second causal relationship in Table 2). The goal of a FIMI operation or campaign might be to change these public attitudes and opinions by inducing voting for certain political parties that are deemed to act favourably and in the interest of the threat actor, ultimately **shaping the voting preferences and vote choice** in the target society. In this scenario, existing social and political polarisation may enable or amplify the spread and impact of FIMI. Polarisation, in this case, acts as an intervening variable, i.e. a driver or enabler of FIMI.

A similar operationalisation of drivers as intervening variables has been employed by Arayankalam and Krishnan.<sup>239</sup> The authors explore the relationships and impacts of foreign disinformation through social media on social media-induced offline violence in a country. Their article analyses how foreign disinformation impacts domestic online media fractionalisation and, in turn, how this fractionalisation influences social media-induced offline

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<sup>235</sup> An intervening variable (also known as a **mediating variable**) is one that helps explain the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable. Intervening variables are **factors that mediate the relationship between an independent variable (cause) and a dependent variable (effect)**. They clarify intermediate mechanisms within a specific causal chain. Intervening variables may or may not be considered in a causal relationship; in the latter case, the relationship between the independent and dependent variables will be direct.

<sup>236</sup> A quick, targeted act to spread false information, often around a specific event, aimed at immediate disruption.

<sup>237</sup> A coordinated series of actions to manipulate public opinion over time, using multiple tactics across platforms.

<sup>238</sup> A prolonged, large-scale effort combining multiple operations to weaken social trust or democratic processes in the long run.

<sup>239</sup> Arayankalam, J., Krishnan, S., 'Relating foreign disinformation through social media, domestic online media fractionalization, government's control over cyberspace, and social media-induced offline violence: Insights from the agenda-building theoretical perspective', *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 166, 120661, 2021.

violence. To examine the complex relationships between these variables, the authors employ various methods and approaches such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), Partial Least Squares (PLS) Approach, Secondary Data Analysis, Multicollinearity Tests, and Bootstrapping Analysis. Within this complex analytical framework, the authors operationalise **domestic online media fractionalisation as an intervening variable** in the relationship between foreign disinformation and social media-induced offline violence.<sup>240</sup> This operationalisation aligns with our approach of conceiving FIMI drivers also as intervening variables. In our understanding, domestic online media fractionalisation is understood as a driver of foreign disinformation. We deem such an operationalisation as applicable to quantitative studies on FIMI as well.

### FIMI-related phenomena as dependent variables

When FIMI-related phenomena are considered **outcomes or effects**, they are framed as **dependent variables** (as seen in Table 2, third causal relationship). In this case, FIMI's goal is to directly influence these phenomena or cause change in social conditions, structures, and processes. As outcomes, these phenomena cannot be thought of as drivers of FIMI. This implies that FIMI drivers should be conceptualised solely as independent or, in certain cases, as intervening variables. Meanwhile, when elements related to FIMI are influenced or altered as a result of FIMI activity, they are viewed as dependent variables.

Thus, if the goal of a FIMI operation (independent variable) is to increase social and political polarisation, then polarisation would be a dependent variable in this causal relationship. Factors such as demographic characteristics, social status, political cleavages, or media capture may be at play here as intervening variables enabling the FIMI operation. In this particular example, polarisation as a dependent variable can no longer be treated as a driver.

So, by way of distinction, some phenomena such as social and political polarisation, ethnic divisions, and political attitudes, for example, can be defined either as **independent or intervening variables** and thus considered as **FIMI drivers**. Alternatively, depending on the identified goals of a FIMI attack or the framing of the research question, they can be viewed as **dependent variables**, and therefore **not** as drivers.

Testing these methodological assumptions can help establish various causalities within FIMI ecosystems and capture more possible pathways of influence in future research on FIMI. To define the variables properly, it is crucial to ask the appropriate research questions and formulate viable hypotheses regarding the relationships between social and collective variables that are the object of study.

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

## An illustration of causal relationships

Section 4 of the 2nd EEAS report *Addressing FIMI during Electoral Processes* with its cross-case analysis of real FIMI incidents during electoral processes can be brought up to illustrate the proposed methodological distinction among variables and to corroborate the applicability of the above methodological conceptualisation of FIMI variables.<sup>241</sup> The report does not identify the main causal relationships in terms of variables, but they can be ferreted out from the analysis.

Thus, one can deduce the main independent variables as the **strategic objectives of FIMI actors** who seek to disrupt democratic electoral processes. These actors - both foreign and domestic - target electoral integrity by manipulating information to 1) control the public's information sources, 2) discourage or obstruct voting, 3) attack political candidates and parties, 4) undermine trust in democracy, and 5) disrupt election-related infrastructure. These objectives drive a range of tactics that include creating channels specifically aimed at disseminating disinformation, promoting narratives that discredit mainstream media, and spreading coordinated false information to sow distrust.

The dependent variables are the **effects** of these FIMI campaigns **on the electorate**, which include a reduction in public trust in democratic processes, potential decreases in voter turnout, and heightened polarisation around political issues and candidates. These outcomes are influenced by the systematic spread of false information designed to confuse or deter specific demographics from participating in elections. In particular, the report notes that manipulating information flow and targeting election integrity aims to erode voter confidence by creating narratives of instability or unreliability around election procedures.

Intervening variables **affect the strength and impact of FIMI on the electoral outcomes**. Key intervening variables include the methods and channels through which disinformation is spread, such as social media platforms and proxy websites; the timing of FIMI activities in relation to the election phases; and the ways FIMI actors intensify their campaigns as elections draw closer. The report outlines a timeline of FIMI activity that includes pre-election phases (building channels and testing narratives), intensifying during election periods (saturating platforms with targeted disinformation), and post-election phases (exploiting any confusion around results to further discredit electoral integrity). This strategic timing enables FIMI actors to maximise their impact by aligning their efforts with key moments when public attention is highest.

In practical terms, the cumulative effect of these variables fosters a pervasive atmosphere of distrust and creates an environment where public perception of election integrity may be significantly eroded, potentially influencing electoral outcomes. This pattern underscores the **complex causal relationship**: FIMI actors (independent variable) leverage timing and media channels (intervening variables) to create targeted shifts in public trust and voter behaviour (dependent variables), shaping electoral outcomes through a multi-layered strategy.<sup>242</sup>

<sup>241</sup> European External Action Service, *2nd EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: A framework for networked defense*, pp. 23-33, 2024.

<sup>242</sup> Real-life cases chosen for this report consists of a total of 33 analysed FIMI incidents concerning elections in the following countries: United States (Midterm Elections 2022), Italy (General Elections 2022), Kosovo (Local Elections 2023), Montenegro (Parliamentary Election 2023), Spain (General Election 2023), Liberia (General Elections 2023), Poland (Parliamentary Election 2023), the Netherlands (Parliamentary Election 2023) and Democratic Republic of the Congo (Presidential Election 2023). See European External Action Service, *2nd EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats: A framework for networked defense*, p. 23, 2024.

# CONCLUSION

This state-of-the-art report explores the existing literature on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), focusing on its **social and collective drivers** and conceptualising them as **variables**. By examining these drivers across macro, meso, and micro levels, the report identifies systemic vulnerabilities that enable the spread of FIMI. It also highlights the scarcity of **quantitative approaches** in this field, emphasising the need to **operationalise** these drivers for more rigorous analysis. Moreover, the report bridges theoretical insights with practical strategies aimed at predicting, preventing, and mitigating FIMI's impact on **democratic societies**.

The analysis reveals that the **social and collective drivers** of FIMI, as well as the **causal relationships** within FIMI ecosystems, are insufficiently conceptualised. Much of the current research prioritises **individual drivers** - such as **cognitive and psychological factors** - or focuses on tracing FIMI campaigns, collecting data on specific FIMI attacks, and analysing the channels through which FIMI exerts influence. Furthermore, many social and collective drivers are analytically inferred from related concepts, as FIMI is still a relatively new and distinct phenomenon. Unlike better established concepts such as **disinformation, propaganda, and malign foreign influence**, FIMI lacks a fully developed theoretical foundation in terms of its social and collective drivers.

Most studies on FIMI employ **qualitative, actor-centric approaches**, paying limited attention to broader social and political structural drivers. When quantitative data are collected and analysed, they primarily measure the scale of FIMI attacks or campaigns rather than quantifying underlying variables. The present report addresses this gap by defining the identified drivers as variables to facilitate their **quantification** and the study of their interrelationships. Such an approach could lead to the development of a broader **social-structural theory** of FIMI, complementing actor-centric perspectives and offering a more holistic understanding of its socio-political impact.

The report proposes to treat FIMI drivers either as **independent variables** that directly influence outcomes (dependent variables), or as **intervening variables** that mediate the relationship between FIMI and its outcomes and amplify its effects. Further theoretical development and the quantification of these drivers can enhance the knowledge-based predictive power, accuracy and effectiveness of FIMI analyses. This would support the creation of more robust policy responses and preventive measures to mitigate FIMI's impact. Addressing these drivers requires a comprehensive analysis across **macro, meso, and micro levels**, with insights integrated into **actionable strategies**.

## Contribution and future research

The purpose of this state-of-the-art report extends beyond reviewing existing literature: it seeks to formulate assumptions about FIMI's social and collective drivers, propose causal relationships between variables, and suggest new avenues for research and reflection. Operationalising and quantifying these drivers as variables and measuring their effects can deepen our understanding of FIMI's **systemic dynamics**. This foundational work paves the way for **scholarly debate, policy development, and strategic responses** to FIMI. Understanding how these drivers interact and influence outcomes is key to deciphering FIMI mechanisms and designing effective preventive and defensive measures.

This provides a large field for further research, conceptualisation, observation and analysis of a large number of drivers that enable FIMI. The **quantification of FIMI variables** is a major challenge for scholarly work in the future. The integration of context-specific factors can enhance the theoretical and practical relevance of FIMI research

Given that FIMI's social and collective drivers are not specifically defined in most of the reviewed literature, the report draws insights from and adapts related concepts, such as disinformation and propaganda, to extend the analytical framework. It also identifies additional drivers inferred from FIMI's **goals and enabling conditions**. This expansive approach provides a fertile ground for future research, conceptualisation, and analysis of the numerous drivers that facilitate FIMI.

Future research should also explore FIMI as a phenomenon situated at the intersection of **social, digital, and physical realms**, influenced by elements and processes from each of these realities. A comprehensive understanding requires investigating the interplay between **individual (cognitive and psychological) drivers** and **social and collective drivers**, alongside their interactions with **technological and digital aspects**. Such scientific inquiries are essential for generating robust, data-driven evidence to inform effective **policy interventions** for prevention and counteraction.

Specifically, this report identifies limited research on the potential implications of social and collective drivers of FIMI, such as **political grievances, social marginalisation, discrimination, and cultural elements**, particularly **religion**. Examining how these factors shape individual perceptions and behaviours could yield valuable insights into FIMI's connections with other contemporary challenges, including **radicalisation, extremism, populism, and polarisation**.

A critical issue that warrants further scholarly attention is the relationship between FIMI and the **decline of democracy**. Is FIMI - along with related elements such as disinformation, propaganda, fake news, conspiracy theories, and cognitive warfare - a direct cause of democratic decline (**independent variable**)? Or does FIMI merely amplify or reinforce already existing factors, causal relationships and tendencies, rooted in broader socio-political, cultural, or economic processes (**intervening variable**)?



Assessing and measuring the **scale, effects, and impact** of FIMI on democracy is a complex and demanding task. Such research could not only address pressing questions about the future of democracy but also shed light on the diverse factors and interactions driving its decline.

Another valuable research avenue lies in examining the implications of FIMI for **internal security, foreign policy, international relations, and global security**. Conceptualising the social and collective drivers of FIMI as variables, and advancing their theoretical study and quantitative operationalisation, would significantly enhance methodological approaches in both academic and policy-oriented contexts.

Finally, it is worth acknowledging that future efforts at further conceptualising FIMI should take into consideration that defining FIMI and related terms is an act of **social construction** that produces effects of power. Importantly, the way FIMI is understood by influential social actors, such as **epistemic communities, policymakers, educators, and journalists**, can significantly affect its social and political consequences. This, in turn, may influence the success or failure of FIMI operations.

Understanding the social construction and perception of FIMI underscores the importance of shaping effective, **multi-level strategies** to counter its impact. Collaboration among **academic, governmental, and civil society sectors** is essential for developing comprehensive frameworks to address FIMI's multifaceted challenges. The systemic nature of FIMI demands a **whole-of-society approach**, leveraging education, transparent governance, and robust media ecosystems to build **collective resilience**.

## Policy action

To combat the systemic threat posed by FIMI, policymakers must adopt a multi-level approach addressing the macro, meso, and micro drivers identified in this report. Policy recommendations may include:

- Strengthening **institutional trust** and promoting **transparency** within democratic systems to reduce vulnerabilities like **state capture** and declining public confidence;
- Improving **media literacy**, and **community resilience** against polarisation to counter FIMI's impact;
- Implementing education reforms that prioritise **critical thinking** and media literacy to enhance societal resilience to disinformation.
- **Fostering inclusivity** and combating social polarisation through targeted community-building initiatives to mitigate the exploitation of group dynamics by malign actors;
- **Regulating algorithmic content curation** on social media platforms to prevent the amplification of sensationalist or polarising content.
- Launching **public awareness campaigns** to highlight the **psychological and interpersonal mechanisms** driving susceptibility to FIMI;

- Promoting coordinated **international efforts**, including intelligence sharing and joint responses to disinformation campaigns, to strengthen societal defences.

Advancing the study of FIMI not only informs policy measures but also safeguards democratic institutions and societal cohesion from a range of evolving threats. By integrating **macro-, meso-, and micro-level analyses and conceptualising social and collective drivers of FIMI as variables**, this report provides a foundational framework for understanding causal relationships within FIMI ecosystems and devising practicable policy responses. Effective strategies must leverage education, transparent governance, and community resilience to build a robust societal defence against this complex challenge.

# ANNEX 1

## SAMPLE LIST OF FIMI-RELATED SOCIAL AND COLLECTIVE DRIVERS

1. Absence of refined government interventions
2. Algorithmic content curation
3. Anti-colonial/postcolonial narratives
4. Armed conflict
5. Autocratic system
6. Biased media
7. Changes in partisan control of government
8. Cleavages (social, political)
9. Clickbait business model and culture of local media
10. Cognitive bias
11. Cognitive capture
12. Cognitive-dissonance phenomenon
13. Confirmation bias
14. Connectivity influence
15. Crisis and disaster
16. Culturally and historically determined vulnerability to Russian disinformation and propaganda
17. Data void in which searches scarcely return official information
18. Decreasing consumption of traditional media
19. Digital technologies
20. Discrimination against minorities
21. Disproportionate alarmism on the threat and scale of misinformation
22. Dysfunctional governance and state capture
23. Economic and technological dependence
24. Economic concerns
25. Economic inequality
26. Economic interests
27. Economic motivation

28. Ecosystem of polarised pluralist media
29. Emotions
30. Erosion of journalist standards
31. Existence of vulnerable groups
32. Extreme ideology
33. Feelings of threat, fear or insecurity
34. Foreign economic influence on local media
35. Gender
36. Geopolitics
37. Health concerns
38. High use and activity of social media
39. Illicit financial flows
40. Immature culture of information sharing
41. Information with a lack of context
42. Informational environment lacking relevant info from authorities
43. Lack of awareness of disinformation
44. Lack of coordinated fact-checkers
45. Lack of media/digital literacy
46. Lack of press freedom
47. Lack of subject-specific competency in journalism
48. Legal loopholes in the EU's legislative and policy acquis
49. Local actors/public figures/elite sharing disinformation
50. Local actors that benefit economically/ideologically
51. Local media replicating foreign misinformation
52. Long, frequent exposure to disinformation
53. Low education level
54. Low level of commitment to democratic governance
55. Low levels of state-society collaboration
56. Low levels of transparency and rule of law
57. Low media literacy
58. Low public awareness of misinformation existence
59. Low societal preparedness to handle multilayered information crises
60. Low trust in government, media and civil society institutions

61. Media capture
62. Migration/refugees
63. Multiculturalism
64. Mystification of authoritarian regimes' power
65. Nationalistic and territorial disputes
66. Opaqueness of foreign money flows
67. Pluralism
68. Polarisation (social, political, economic)
69. Political activism
70. Political cynicism
71. Political destabilisation
72. Political ideology
73. Political parties
74. Political violence
75. Poor knowledge of history
76. Populism
77. Populist/far-right groups
78. Presence of deep ethnic and/or sectarian divides
79. Public distrust (in democratic institutions, authority, elites, politicians, media)
80. Race
81. Religion
82. Reputation
83. Shared common language and ethnicity with FIMI state-actor
84. Shared economic and political interests between local elites and foreign actors
85. Sharp power
86. Social division within or between groups
87. Social identity grievances
88. Social media choice architectures
89. Social media/press
90. Social norms
91. Social self-selection
92. Social status

93. Sociocultural characteristics
94. Support for conspiracy theories
95. Systemic corruption
96. Technological infrastructure
97. The opaqueness of foreign economic influence
98. Tribalism
99. Underfunded local media dependent on free content
100. Unemployment
101. Unquestioned trust in news/social media
102. Use of alternative media
103. Violent political participation
104. Weak civil society
105. Weak journalistic standards
106. Working for a political party

