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**Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference against
the Euro-Atlantic Security – A Case Study of campaigns
against NATO**

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Abstract

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) campaigns employ weaponized disinformation in a targeted and concerted manner in order to destabilize democratic societies, international alliances and have a deep impact on Euro-Atlantic security. The aim of the actors behind these campaigns is to weaken international partnerships and public trust and thus increase their sphere of influence. The present research examines the evolution of narratives employed in the FIMI campaign against NATO over a one-year period and analyzes the ways in which language itself has been misappropriated so as to further confuse audiences and subvert their trust in Euro-Atlantic security mechanisms.²

Keywords: FIMI, NATO, democracy, distrust

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² Note: The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and are not necessarily those of the EACS, nor of the institution in which the author works.



Introduction

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) has increasingly become an issue for democratic states and international alliances as it affects and even subverts the processes that democracies rely on for their well-functioning. FIMI is weaponized disinformation employed by a foreign actor against another. It can be as strong as any conventional weapon and even more effective because it can lead to lasting change in people's perceptions regarding the world around them and in their understanding of current events. FIMI campaigns are generally orchestrated in times of crisis or war (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine) or during events that have the potential to shape democratic societies for years to come (e.g. elections). The goal of a FIMI campaign is not to get people to believe something different, but to be too confused to believe anything and to become disengaged from their own democratic societies and related processes. FIMI aims to subvert democracies from within, and to this end it misemploys the very rights and freedoms that are foundational for democratic societies such as freedom of expression and freedom of thought. The current research exemplifies how FIMI can subvert audiences' understanding and view of NATO, NATO's role and support for Ukraine in the current war against Russia, by analyzing the disinformation narratives produced, and identifying the techniques that are employed to create confusion and ultimately disengagement on the part of European audiences.

FIMI Definition and Examples

FIMI is defined by the European External Action Service (EASS) as “*a mostly non-illegal pattern of behavior that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.*”³ An analysis of this definition reveals the following:

1. *Non-illegal pattern of behavior* refers to the fact that such campaigns fall in a grey legislative area, they are neither legal, nor illegal and, therefore, difficult to prosecute judicially.
2. *Negative impact on values, procedures and political processes through manipulation* means that these behaviors are designed to alter the values that democratic societies are based on, and to affect their democratic political processes such as elections, without those targeted being aware that they are subject to influence operations. The key to understanding this definition is the fact that FIMI influence does not operate in the open and transparently with the actors clearly declaring their intentions.

³ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference_en



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3. *Intentional and coordinated* means that this is not misinformation or honest mistakes, but a concerted effort on the part of the foreign actors to identify the weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the target audiences and exploit them to reach their own ends, to weaken those they perceive as their adversaries, i.e., the EU or EU Member States.

4. In order to fall into the category of FIMI, these behaviours need to be traced back to a foreign actor outside of the European Union, even if that actor dissimulates its activities behind proxies operating in EU Member States.

NATO has also begun paying special attention to FIMI, which it places under the larger umbrella of information threats. They are “*intentional, harmful, manipulative and coordinated activities, conducted by state and non-state actors to weaken and divide NATO, its members and its partners. These hostile information activities can include many different TTPs designed to manipulate public opinion.*”⁴ The definition is in many ways similar to the definition of EEAS with a focus on malicious intent, manipulation of content and audiences and overall objective of weakening NATO.

There have been several cases of documented and proven FIMI campaigns in European States. For example, *Operation Doppelganger Report*⁵ monitored and exposed an extensive network of media clones which disseminated Russian propaganda with respect to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war. The campaign uses clones of authentic media websites to disseminate disinformation and then the so-called news articles are further pushed through Facebook accounts. A Graphika Report⁶ continued the analysis of the *Doppelganger* campaign focusing on the NATO Vilnius summit and on the ways it further spread on social media platforms such as X and Telegram, their finding being corroborated by Viginum, France’s service for vigilance and protection against foreign digital interference. All reports prove that the campaign can be attributed to Russian companies. Viginum also published a report analyzing in detail *Matryoshka*⁷, a campaign which targeted the media directly and overloaded the fact-checking community by making endless requests to verify information. The campaign involves posting fake content, distributed on X and sending it to media outlets and fact-checking organizations, via emails or comments on their web pages. The fake content impersonated public figures and media outlets in Europe and North America and the content promoted focused on anti-Ukrainian narratives, and attacks against countries and politicians that support Ukraine.

*Operation Overload*⁸ identified the same modus operandi of targeting European fact-checkers, newsrooms, and researchers by inundating them with pro-Russian disinformation, employing both

⁴ https://www.nato.int/cps/cs/natohq/topics_219728.htm#what

⁵ Operation Doppelganger Report published by EU DisinfoLab in 2022 available at <https://www.disinfo.eu/doppelganger-operation/>

⁶ Graphika Report available at <https://graphika.com/reports/summit-old-summit-new>

⁷ Viginum Operation Matrioska, available at

https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/20240611_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_Matriochka_EN_VF.pdf

⁸ CheckFirst Network Operation Overload available at <https://checkfirst.network/operation-overload-how-pro-russian-actors-flood-newsrooms-with-fake-content-and-seek-to-divert-their-efforts/>



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online channels, such as email campaigns, social media campaigns on X and Telegram, a network of Russia-aligned websites, such as Pravda2, as well as offline manifestations such as graffiti in major European cities.

FIMI has also interfered in election processes as proven by the Meta's Role in *Romania's 2024 Presidential Election Report*,⁹ by activating dormant accounts on Facebook and Instagram and conducting high-budget advertising campaigns promoting far-right candidates active on Facebook and Instagram for years leading up to the Romanian Presidential election in November 2024.

The Ghostwriter campaign¹⁰ targeted NATO in particular, over a period of several years, starting in 2016 and continuing to 2022 when the report was published. Ghostwriter hacked social media accounts, published fake blogposts, impersonated government and NATO officials as well as journalists in several European countries.

All these analyses reveal that FIMI should be of great concern to European states but also to NATO, which has been often the target and close attention should be paid to how NATO is portrayed in order to effectively counter this weaponized disinformation.

Content Analysis of Anti-NATO Narratives in 2024

In order to perform a content analysis to better understand how NATO may be targeted and portrayed in these FIMI campaigns, the EUvsDisinfo database was used, employing the following search parameters: NATO, war, Ukraine. The period covered in this analysis is limited to January – December 2024. The search returned 263 pieces of disinformation that targeted European audiences on these topics in this period. These were then grouped according to the main narratives they promoted, and seven main narratives were uncovered¹¹.

1. *NATO is the threat and the aggressor in this war.* This narrative was the most present with 83 instances identified. NATO is presented as the “coalition of war” that wants to drive the world into a new global conflict as it seeks to expand its geopolitical and military influence beyond Europe, across the South Caucasus, to Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific region. NATO also intentionally escalates the conflict in Ukraine, to weaken Russia and Ukraine, to start an open war with Russia, and, to this end, it has militarized the territories of Poland and the Baltic states that have surrendered their sovereignty. NATO exercises (such as Steadfast Defender and Freezing Winds-24) are presented as preparations

⁹ CheckFirst, Research Note: Meta's Role in Romania's 2024 Presidential Election, available at <https://checkfirst.network/research-note-metas-role-in-romanias-2024-presidential-election/>

¹⁰ University of Cardiff- Ghostwriter Report, available at https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2699483/Ghostwriter-Report-Final.pdf

¹¹ Some of the disinformation items were included in more than one narrative.



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for large-scale NATO invasion into Russia. Moreover, the war in Ukraine is meant to deplete Europe's armament reserves, thus weakening them so that the US could more easily control them.

2. Another narrative (with 41 identified instances), closely linked to the first one, is increasingly spread: *NATO is already fighting Russia in Ukraine*, using mercenaries (60 French mercenaries are claimed to have been killed in Kharkyv), terrorists, drug dealers, militants from the Middle East, soldiers disguised as humanitarian workers. Military personnel from France, UK and Germany are also on the front lines. NATO (especially UK and US) planned the Ukrainian incursion in the Kursk region, and, by allowing the Ukrainian army to employ western-sent weapons against targets in Russia, it is already involved directly in the conflict. This direct NATO involvement is responsible for "the special military operation becoming a war."

3. *NATO threatens with and instigates nuclear war*. This narrative is less present, with only 14 instances, however, it highlights the role reversal that this FIMI campaign is based on, in which the aggressor, Russia, becomes the victim. NATO is presented as the actor which wants to start a nuclear war or threatens with a nuclear war. This is done directly, or by employing Ukraine to carry out acts of "nuclear terrorism," or by NATO, the West or the US brandishing nuclear weapons.

4. The second most prevalent narrative is that *Ukraine is a NATO/Western puppet* (54 instances). This narrative rewrites historic events as far back as 2014, when "US organised a coup d'état in Ukraine in 2014 to install a neo-Nazi regime hostile to Russia," and claims that in 2022, Ukraine was preparing to attack Donbass and Crimea with NATO support, which is why Russia started the "special military operation." Ukraine and the Kyiv regime are presented as proxies, tools and vassals for NATO and the US, as "expendable materials" for the West to achieve its goal of weakening Russia. Along the same lines, Ukraine is a "springboard" for the US to attack Russia, the Ukrainian soldiers are "cannon fodder in US' proxy war against Russia." President Zelenskyy, who only came to power because the West supported him, started the war to please his American "masters," as Ukraine is not an autonomous state. Ukrainian soldiers are dying for Western geopolitical interests which revolve around disintegrating Russia and NATO, UN and US force "Ukraine to fight 'to the last Ukrainian' to eliminate Russia." The West has no interest in peace which is why it manipulates the Kyiv regime to refuse all peace offers coming from Russia.

5. In this war, *Russia is the innocent victim of Western aggression* (a narrative with 40 identified instances). NATO and Ukraine are trying to annihilate Russia and have declared "a senseless war against multipolarity." NATO's goal is to extend the war beyond Ukraine and to turn the South Caucasus into another confrontation arena against Russia. Russia only wants to liberate Ukraine, which is presented as "a neo-Nazi Russophobic state." To this end, Russia has been pushed to a war with Ukraine and its "special military operation in Ukraine has a character of liberation."

Russia is actually fighting for its survival as the West wants to make Russia a "dependent and dying space" to break it down into "weak colonial powers." The West and the US want to wage war against



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Russia and every Russian citizen in order to inflict as much damage as possible, which is why they have given their consent to the first full-scale attack on Russian territory since World War II, which, in turn, will cause World War III to start.

6. *Russia as an unsung defender and peace promoter* (a narratives with 10 instances) presents Russia and President Putin as the only one who are trying to end the war and who are fighting a just war the same as Russia did during WWII when it liberated “most of Europe.” In fact, Russia defends “EU’s national interests by fighting the West in Ukraine” and is striving for “new world order and equal security” through this war. By continuing this war and not accepting Russia’s peace initiatives, NATO is condemning itself to destruction as there is no way that Ukraine will win irrespective of the weapons that NATO countries have and send.

7. In this ample, ongoing FIMI campaign, there is a narrative thread (14 instances) that focuses on the *European Union which is portrayed as NATO’s political arm*. The EU is presented as an occupying administration in Europe, “Western liberalism is a religious sect trying to destroy traditional values,” as an “American colony.” EU national governments are forced by EU leadership to act in America’s interests, while the US only wants to weaken Europe, to prevent it from creating the EU Army so that it remains dependent on NATO and the US for its protection.

When analyzing these narratives, two main techniques involved in creating them have been identified: *role reversal* and *concept misappropriation*. *Role reversal* refers to the fact the disinformation narratives in the FIMI campaign against NATO are all based on presenting the aggressor as the victim and the victim, or the ones who try to support the victim, as the aggressor(s).

More precisely, the facts are that on 24th February 2022, the Russian military invaded the sovereign country Ukraine in direct violation of international laws and treaties, including the Budapest Memorandum of 1994¹² which guaranteed Ukraine’s territorial integrity and which was signed by Russia. The war that ensued is a defensive war for Ukraine, which is trying to protect its citizens and territories, with military and humanitarian assistance from countries all over the world, especially Europe and North America. It is also a war of aggression on the part of the Russian Federation as it is illegally annexing territories from another sovereign country.

However, the FIMI campaign rewrites these historical facts to present Russia as the victim and Ukraine, NATO, EU, the collective West, as the aggressor. The analysis of the narratives reveals that the FIMI campaign assigns the blame for the war to NATO which is presented as an existential threat to Russia, while Russia is presented as a savior for its brothers in Ukraine, as a peaceful country trying to defend itself against NATO which is encroaching on its sphere of influence and its borders, all the while Russia is also trying to maintain order in the world. By constantly spreading disinformation narratives based on this role reversal, this FIMI campaign against NATO manages to blur the lines

¹² *Memorandum on security assurances in connection with Ukraine’s accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, available at <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb>



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between facts and fiction and to weaken European citizens' trust in the alliance and in the actions undertaken to support Ukraine. More and more public opinion surveys¹³ reveal that European audiences are less and less supportive of Ukraine as they are confused by the events in Ukraine and fear that their countries will also be dragged into war against Russia.

This effect of confusion is compounded by the *misappropriation of concepts*, the second technique employed. It can be seen in narratives such as “*the EU does not need Russian 'interference' as it has Brussels for that;*” “*the West's hybrid war against Russia is fraught with nuclear risks;*” “*NATO is waging cognitive warfare by banning Russian media.*” The concepts of “*foreign interference,*” “*cognitive warfare,*” and “*hybrid war*” have initially been introduced and are employed to describe and characterize the Russian malign influence operations which are ongoing in European democratic societies. In order to understand a threat and to act against it, one must first define it. To this end, these concepts have been employed in analyzing the information environment, the role Russia plays in tempering with it and in designing strategies to counter the effects of these malign influence operations. However, if the concepts are misappropriated and subverted and the perpetrator of these actions blames its victims for exactly the same things, then the whole information environment becomes polluted and unclear, and every actor appears to be working in the same manner. There is no right or wrong, the facts are absconded, and audiences find themselves unable to rely on any account. As Muirhead & Rosenblum (2019) explain, the goal of such disinformation in concerted FIMI campaigns is to delegitimize democracy and democratic institutions and to cause the audiences in democratic societies to feel disoriented due to cognitive and emotional exhaustion and eventually to disengage from democratic processes and even alliances.

Conclusion

FIMI aims to subvert democratic systems from within, abusing the right to freedom of expression and freedom of information, creating and disseminating content whose sole goal is to erode public trust and sow division in societies, so that they no longer coalesce against the adversary but rather fight amongst themselves. This allows foreign actors to pursue their own interests and meet less resistance.

The analysis of the ongoing FIMI campaign against NATO has revealed that the foreign actor's goals are to weaken the alliance by contesting its mission and in its actions, by presenting a distorted image of the measures it is taking to protect Euro-Atlantic security and by casting it as the aggressor in a war for geopolitical supremacy. To this end, multiple narratives are constructed around the war in Ukraine, all concerted to discredit NATO and to convince people from allied countries that it is not a protector of security but an instrument for destruction. NATO needs to take back command of the

¹³ See a summary of these surveys at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2022/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine/en-public-opinion-on-the-war-against-ukraine-20240223.pdf>



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information environment especially in the most targeted countries in this FIMI campaign, Eastern and Central European countries as well as the Baltic states and explain repeatedly what actions it is taking in the war in Ukraine and what resources it employs. The fear that European citizens will be involved in the war is increasing and only very clear, consistent and pervasive communication can appease these fears and garner support for NATO.

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