THE LAST LINE OF DEFENCE

Measuring resilience to foreign information manipulation and interference in West Africa

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by

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, countries across the globe have witnessed a rise in false and misleading information about political events and actors [1]. It has remained largely unclear, however, why certain disinformation campaigns have spread more widely – and been more effective – in some countries than in others. For instance, why was it that some foreign actors were successful in spreading disinformation during the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, but hardly affected the 2018 parliamentary elections in Sweden? [2] This Brief seeks to address this puzzle by showing how countries' resilience to disinformation can be measured and possibly leveraged for policymaking.

Summary

> Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) is a growing threat, driven by the concerted efforts of foreign actors exploiting new digital technologies and social media.

> Countries are not equally resilient to FIMI. Measuring resilience in the context of West Africa, for example, reveals important differences between more resilient countries (e.g. The Gambia) and more vulnerable ones (e.g. Nigeria).

> Identifying vulnerabilities can help in the design of targeted interventions to bolster resilience in a more effective and contextually appropriate manner.

> The development of a comprehensive method to measure resilience to FIMI is vital to support the proper functioning of state institutions, to reinforce countries' stability and to safeguard the EU's effectiveness in its external action.

The proliferation of disinformation, defined as intentionally false or misleading information disseminated with the purpose of deceiving or influencing public opinion, has become a global political concern. As a result, a growing number of individuals are not *uninformed*, but rather *misinformed*: they hold factually inaccurate beliefs and rely on incorrect information to shape their opinions and preferences [3].

In numerous cases, disinformation is propagated by malign foreign actors seeking to influence public opinion and destabilise societies to their advantage, a practice that the European Union has labelled 'foreign information manipulation and interference' (FIMI) [4]. This is illustrated, for instance, by a flood of pro-Russian content in African media, legitimising Russia's invasion of Ukraine and promoting Russian interests [5].

Faced with this challenge, much effort has been invested in 'reactive' solutions such as fact-checking, as well as policy and platform regulations (e.g. the EU Digital Services Act). However, attention has recently turned to 'proactive' measures, such as strengthening societal resilience, understood as the ability of communities to sustain their well-being while withstanding challenges to it [6].

This Brief shows how resilience to FIMI can be measured, highlighting policy-relevant factors that contribute to countries' resilience. It then examines how this applies in the context of West Africa, a fast-growing region that is experiencing political turmoil and a geopolitical realignment (e.g. military coups in Mali and most recently in Niger, and increasing support for Russia). Ultimately, a comprehensive and systematic measure of resilience to FIMI can facilitate informed decision-making, policy development and targeted interventions to address the challenges posed by this threat in the region and beyond.

Events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have vividly demonstrated the potential impact and rapid spread of disinformation.

▼ A newspaper stand in Dakar, Senegal.

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MEASURING RESILIENCE TO FIMI

Events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have vividly demonstrated the potential impact and rapid spread of disinformation, particularly through social media platforms. Malign foreign actors often rely on sophisticated influence operations to shape narratives and disseminate propaganda to further their own agendas. These actors can, for instance, strategically target and support various channels (e.g. by signing partnership agreements), including traditional or online media outlets, to construct and amplify a favourable narrative and manipulate public opinion in support of specific interests [7].

No matter the tactics employed, false or distorted information related to FIMI operations may spread more easily in less resilient countries [8]. But what exactly makes a country more (or less) resilient to FIMI?

To measure resilience to FIMI, three dimensions are important to consider, capturing three 'layers' of resilience that may determine the extent to which disinformation can spread in different contexts: first, societal cohesion, stability and state legitimacy (macro level); second, the political information environment (meso level); and third, individual resilience to disinformation (micro level).

⌂ University students in Accra speaking about the power and implications of reading and communication in a changing global context.

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Societal cohesion, stability and state legitimacy

Disinformation is not created in a vacuum, and it resonates more if it builds on existing grievances within society [9]. Inequality, intolerance, distrust (towards both fellow citizens and institutions) and discrimination can pave the way for societal grievances that create a fertile ground for FIMI operations. In polarised political environments, individuals have more difficulty distinguishing between false and accurate information [10]. Exploiting societal divisions and an inclination to embrace information that supports biases against certain groups is thus key for disinformation to gain traction and find a receptive audience. In countries where opposed groups are in conflict, malign actors can thus more easily spread false or distorted narratives that exploit societal tensions.

These tensions are heightened in crisis situations and conflict settings, which often go hand in hand with greater volumes of disinformation [11]. Intense group divisions, a lack of access to trustworthy information, the trauma inflicted by conflict, and opposing parties' readiness to use all means necessary to gain an advantage

In polarised political environments, individuals have more difficulty distinguishing between false and accurate information.

collectively foster an environment conducive to the spread of disinformation.

Political information environment

Considering different levels of receptiveness to disinformation, a country's political information environment will determine the extent to which the population is exposed to false or distorted narratives, as well as how these narratives are framed (e.g. presenting groups as antagonistic). It is therefore crucial to consider different information channels (e.g. news media and social media) and 'curating actors' (e.g. journalists, political elites, experts) who communicate via these information channels and shape public perceptions around different issues. Curation involves the production, filtering, selection and framing of content, all of which can be part of the 'FIMI arsenal'. This does not necessarily involve demonstrably false information but may include biased framing or the selective reproduction or filtering of strategic messages. Within this second dimension, it is important to consider four factors, namely the political arena,

the media landscape, social media (news) use, and trust in curating actors.

Partisan disinformation is closely linked to populist, anti-pluralist or hostile political rhetoric. These types of rhetoric tend to exploit emotions and gut feelings rather than rely on empirical evidence. They often share a mistrust of experts, anti-elitist sentiments and a conspiracy mindset, all of which can contribute to inaccurate and distorted perceptions of reality[12]. The '**political arena**' is thus a crucial factor in how receptive a country is to FIMI. Although this Brief focuses on 'foreign' information manipulation and interference, domestic actors can bolster and further disseminate this information. These can include populist politicians, but also activists who for instance deny climate change or are part of an anti-vaccination movement.

The **media landscape** is also important. From a political and economic standpoint, creating news outlets and producing content that accommodates alternative points of view can be more appealing in countries that have a larger media market and social media user base. This will increase the likelihood that disinformation is further spread online[13]. In countries such as the United States, Brazil and India, the media environment has grown increasingly fragmented due to the growing popularity of niche or partisan media. This fragmentation creates more entry points for disinformation and undermines the shared nature of people's understanding of reality[14]. Studies have shown that those who primarily get news from **social media** are less informed about politics and public affairs[15]. These platforms are also conducive to the formation of partisan and antagonistic networks which contribute to the spread of disinformation[16].

Finally, another critical factor linked to resilience is the **level of trust** that citizens have in different curating actors, including the government, journalists, experts or civil society. With high trust in government, there is an increased likelihood that people will have faith in the government's official narrative, making it harder for disinformation to gain traction[17]. Distrust in journalists, experts or civil society can affect the way people interpret information and contribute to a reliance on alternative – and sometimes untrustworthy – sources of knowledge that potentially publish false or distorted information[18].

Individual resilience to disinformation

After societal risk factors and the information environment, individual resilience to disinformation can be seen as the 'last line of defence'. If FIMI taps into strong grievances in a society and is not 'filtered' in

the information environment, a country may still count, at least partially, on citizens' individual resilience. This is determined by their level of education, media literacy and different levels of individual well-being, among other factors.

Known as media (or digital) literacy, the capacity to critically analyse and navigate the (online) media landscape makes people better able to discern disinformation[19]. This ability is enhanced via experience with digital devices and an increased awareness of the problem of disinformation[20].

In terms of individual well-being, dissatisfaction with life, anger, sorrow, anxiety and low social support are all psychological risk factors linked to a heightened susceptibility to false or distorted narratives[21].

While these factors will – to varying degrees – influence resilience to FIMI, the way they apply in different regional and national contexts has so far been largely unexplored. The next section of this Brief will specifically address this, focusing on resilience to FIMI across West Africa.

HOW RESILIENCE TO FIMI VARIES ACROSS WEST AFRICA

The African continent is often labelled a 'hybrid battleground' where competing powers attempt to advance their strategic interests through various means[22].

Taking advantage of deep structural challenges, non-democratic regimes such as Russia and China are using information warfare to influence public discourse and undermine the credibility and interests of both the EU and its partners. Russia and China have been building on pre-existing anticolonial narratives, sowing mistrust and seeking to influence political developments, with both direct and indirect repercussions for the EU's presence on the ground. For instance, anti-French protesters were shouting support for Russia in front of French embassies, most recently in support of the military coup in Niger, and previously in Mali and Burkina Faso[23]. Such developments, apart from damaging the EU's image and strategic interests, can destabilise the security situation and put the physical safety of EU staff at risk[24].

These types of influence operations call for a systematic assessment of resilience to FIMI on the

> **P**artisan disinformation is closely linked to populist or hostile political rhetoric.

FIMI resilience scores
West Africa, 2021

FIMI resilience scores respresent the average value of three dimensions measuring resilience on a normalised scale from a hypothetical 0 (low) to a hypothetical 100 (high).
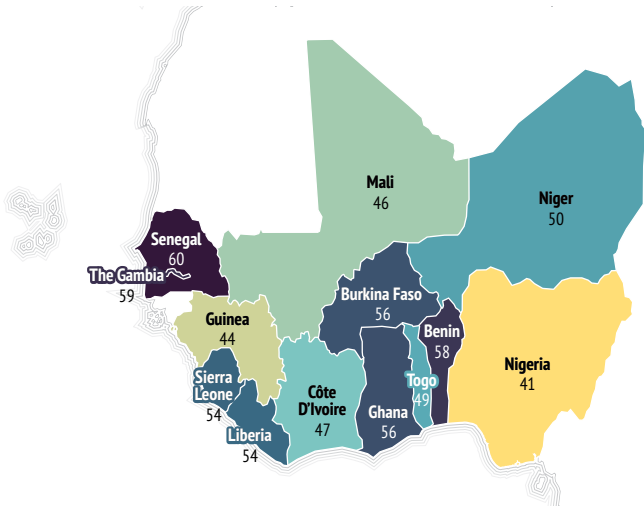
Data: FIMI resilience index, CFI Project, EUISS, 2023

continent, and notably in West Africa. This is a diverse and growing region that is of significant interest to China and Russia, who are actively developing their soft power engagements, whether via foreign direct investment (FDI) or the expansion of their media influence via partnerships with local media [25].

Resilience to FIMI can be measured using aggregated scores based on a series of datasets [26]. Across West Africa, resilience scores are contrasted (see map above), with higher scores (meaning more resilience) in more politically stable countries such as Senegal and The Gambia, and lower scores in more fragile and conflict-affected countries such as Nigeria and Mali [27].

These contrasting scores reflect differences in the frequency with which these countries are targeted by FIMI campaigns, with fewer instances in Senegal, for example, than in Nigeria or Mali [28], where the spread of Russian disinformation has arguably paved the way for the deployment of Wagner mercenaries [29]. Niger has also been the target of several disinformation campaigns, which have intensified since the recent military coup [30]. The latter might open doors for jihadist groups and state actors such as Russia or China to project their influence in a country that had long been considered a critical Western ally [31].

Niger has been the target of several disinformation campaigns, which have intensified since the recent military coup.

Zooming in on FIMI resilience in Nigeria and The Gambia

To better understand how resilience scores align with the characteristics of specific countries, it is useful to take a deeper comparative look at two West African countries: The Gambia, one of the countries with the highest scores in the region (59) and the largest increase (+4) in overall FIMI resilience between 2016 and 2021 [32]; and Nigeria, the country with the lowest score in West Africa (41) and one of the largest drops (-3) in overall FIMI resilience during the same period.

The two selected countries are highly contrasting in terms of societal cohesion, stability and state legitimacy (dimension 1). Nigeria is a country with significant ethnic diversity and persistent ethno-religious conflicts, as well as rising levels of banditry and organised political violence [33], offering opportunities for FIMI actors to tap into existing grievances. The Gambia, on the other hand, has been going through a peaceful democratic transition since late 2016 and has a more homogeneous ethnic and religious composition that facilitates societal cohesion and mitigates cross-cultural tensions, thereby reducing receptiveness to FIMI [34].

The political information environments (dimension 2) of these countries are also highly contrasting, particularly in terms of the political arena (e.g. populism), the news and social media landscape, and trust in curating actors. Compared to The Gambia, which, since the beginning of its democratic transition, has experienced burgeoning democratic debate and freedom of speech [35], Nigeria has been facing rising populism and a fractured political discourse [36].

With a much larger population, the size of the news and social media market is significantly greater in Nigeria, increasing the attractiveness of establishing fringe or alternative media. Additionally, in Nigeria there is widespread public mistrust in the curating actors (e.g. journalists, the government) who use these media to convey their message, whether relating to Covid-19 or elections [37].

Across these two countries, individual resilience to disinformation presents less of a contrast. One notable difference, however, lies in a lower quality of education (including learning-adjusted years of schooling) and lower information literacy for Nigeria [38], a situation that is particularly acute in rural areas and the conflict-affected northern parts of the country.
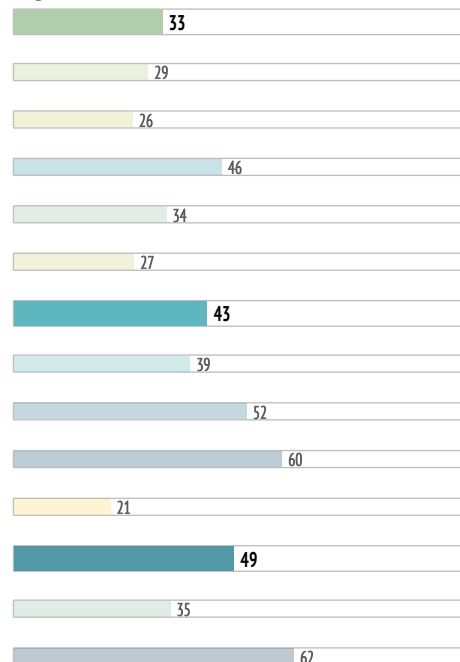
This approach to measuring resilience helps to identify more or less resilient countries or regions, as well

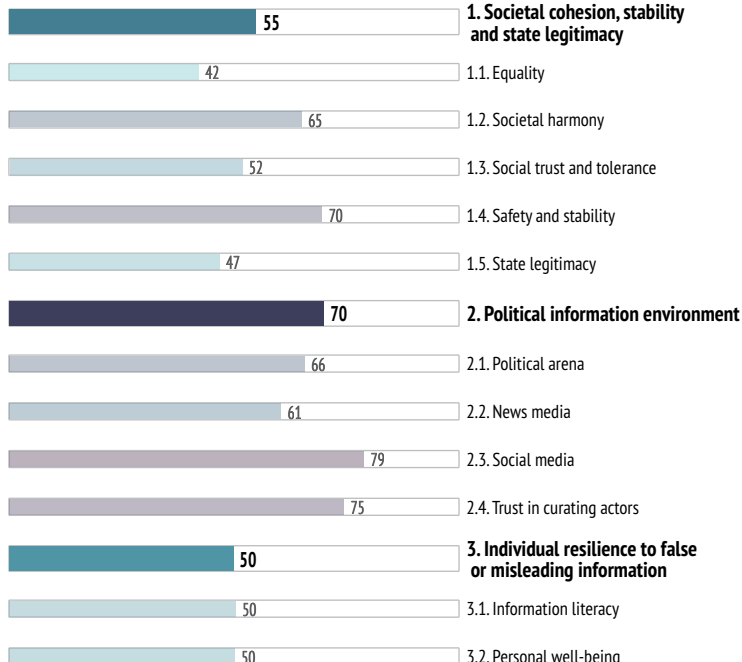## FIMI resilience scores for Nigeria and The Gambia

Dimensions and aggregate scores, 2021

For the sake of visual clarity, this graph only includes scores for the dimensions and components. It does not include the indicators within each component, nor the variables within each indicator.

Nigeria	The Gambia	
33	55	**1. Societal cohesion, stability and state legitimacy**
29	42	1.1. Equality
26	65	1.2. Societal harmony
46	52	1.3. Social trust and tolerance
34	70	1.4. Safety and stability
27	47	1.5. State legitimacy
43	70	**2. Political information environment**
39	66	2.1. Political arena
52	61	2.2. News media
60	79	2.3. Social media
21	75	2.4. Trust in curating actors
49	50	**3. Individual resilience to false or misleading information**
35	50	3.1. Information literacy
62	50	3.2. Personal well-being

Data: FIMI resilience index, CFI Project, EUISS, 2023

as specific vulnerabilities within each country. In this sense, we have seen that Nigeria is generally less resilient to FIMI than The Gambia, with notable vulnerabilities in terms of societal harmony and cohesion, safety and stability, as well as trust in curating actors. Due to their economic, political and security leverage, West African countries such as Nigeria or Mali are considered central in efforts to counter hybrid threats such as FIMI[39]. It is thus crucial to identify vulnerabilities to FIMI in this region in order to be able to target resources and efforts more accurately and proactively (e.g. strategic prioritisation, tailored capacity-building programmes). These efforts can help preserve the EU's credibility as a responsible actor committed to upholding democratic values and information integrity. They can also help ensure the success of the EU's engagement on the ground, by fostering stability, trust and effective governance.

has shown how the interplay between structural conditions (e.g. societal cohesion, stability, the information environment) and individual characteristics (e.g. information literacy, personal well-being) can provide a comprehensive measure of countries' overall resilience to FIMI. This, in turn, can provide a sound basis to develop efforts to reinforce societal and individual resilience. As FIMI is a rising threat that is here to stay, it is essential to promote resilience as part of a 'proactive' approach that will help in countering this threat.

Zooming in on West African countries has shown that measuring resilience to FIMI is possible, and that doing so can offer a guiding framework to navigate the

CONCLUSION

The reality is that there is no silver bullet to deal with the complex threat of FIMI. Nevertheless, this Brief

Ursula von der Leyen, Macky Sall and Charles Michel (from left to right)

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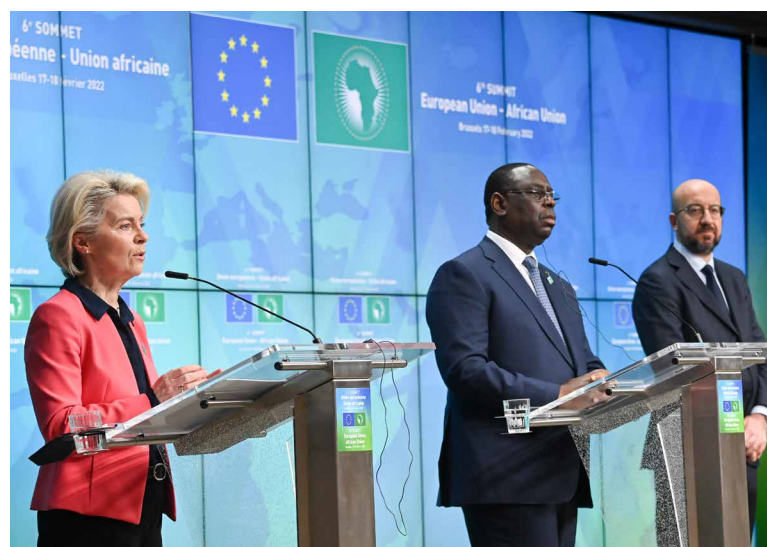
complex landscape of FIMI, by increasing situational and analytical awareness. This framework can facilitate threat prevention, resilience building and the sharing of best practices across partner countries, to strengthen collective efforts against FIMI.

By further developing and replicating such a measure, bridging the gap between theory and practice, policymakers could better grasp the nuanced realities of different regions. This can promote informed decision-making and the design of targeted interventions to bolster resilience to FIMI in a more effective and contextually appropriate manner.

In the specific context of West Africa, this knowledge can support efforts to counter external influences and manipulation, enhancing our collective ability to withstand FIMI and mitigate its impact. Eventually, this may prevent countries from becoming hotspots for proxy conflicts between competing powers and bring resilience, as 'the last line of defence', to the forefront of countries' policy agendas.

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