

EVENT REPORT

Countering Foreign Interference (CFI) project

CFI DIALOGUES 2025

25 - 27 June 2025, Florence, Italy

Background and Concept

The CFI Dialogues is the flagship annual event of the Countering Foreign Interference (CFI) project and directly contributes to building a CFI network as part of the implementation of the project. Through interactions with representatives from European Union institutions, EU Member States, international organisations, think tanks, the private sector, and researchers, the CFI Dialogues aim to support the establishment and strengthening of a community of practice, helping stakeholders to better understand foreign interference threats and identify ways to address them.

The third edition of the CFI Dialogues co-organised by the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the European University Institute-Florence School of Transnational Governance (STG), aimed to address recent developments in the field of foreign interference, and strengthen the community of practice.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- Hostile activities across multiple domains are mutually reinforcing. **FIMI is not solely a communications issue, but part of a growing ecosystem of multidomain warfare.** Moreover, **malign operations increasingly target academia and the wider counter-FIMI community itself.**
- **Russia and China increasingly invest in influence operations in Europe and beyond.** Operations conducted outside the EU aim to undermine the EU's diplomatic efforts, and especially in Africa, fill the gap created by the United States' diminished influence in these areas. These influence operations are highly sophisticated and are designed with a good understanding of the societies that they target.
- EU Member States need to pursue active defence measures against FIMI and consider **integrating counter-FIMI strategies into an expanded and dedicated defence budget.**
- **Awareness of interference threats, both across government departments and the population at large, remains insufficient** and requires a proactive approach to enhance resilience. Governments play a key role in identifying threats, investing in countermeasures and protecting their citizens, but also in effectively communicating to them that these threats are acute and real.
- **Effective early warning systems**, as developed by Ukraine and Taiwan, are **crucial to counter FIMI operations.** However, **means and mechanisms to accurately attribute attacks remain areas for further improvement.**
- **Coordination and cooperation within the EU are crucial.** The EU has developed a common framework and understanding of FIMI threats which is increasingly implemented in collaboration with various international partners. The FIMI Toolbox, the Strategic Compass, and forthcoming initiatives under the European Democracy Shield guide the response against foreign interference. These mechanisms have been successfully deployed in the past in response to attacks, but it is important to further raise the cost for hostile actors seeking to launch and escalate such operations.

- Consistent **enforcement of the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA)** remains necessary to hold online platforms accountable for their role as vectors of FIMI and disinformation, and therefore for countering these threats more effectively.
- **Fostering strong and sustainable media** will enable the EU and its partners to monitor and address harmful narratives and contribute to a whole-of-society approach to build long-term resilience against foreign interference.
- **A cross-sectoral approach to counter FIMI**, bringing the academic, political and military levels together, along with other sectors of society, also plays an important role in tackling hybrid threats. Private companies, for example, are also vulnerable and targeted by FIMI activities, but they are often not aware of this threat or detect and disclose incidents only partially or a long time after their occurrence. Civil society organisations need empowerment and funding to counter FIMI. Here, the Swedish whole-of-society approach can be seen as a model, but Taiwan and Ukraine have developed many good practices as well.
- **Local initiatives** in targeted countries are often perceived as more authentic, as they engage local audiences and trainers (e.g. Young African Leaders' training programmes), while adapting directly to the specific context of FIMI operations and narratives.
- **Changes in the relationship between the United States and Europe have negatively affected a joint approach to countering foreign interference.** Moreover, the withdrawal of US development aid and other activities in certain regions across the globe has created vacuums that can be filled by hostile actors' influence operations. The EU should continue exploring options for transatlantic cooperation, while also addressing the influence of hostile actors in critical areas.
- Cooperation is key to countering foreign interference and fostering resilience in our societies. NATO remains an important partner. The G7 (with its Rapid Response Mechanism) is another format for potential enhanced cooperation and information sharing on an inter-governmental level. **Developing strategic partnerships between the EU, Member States, and other actors is equally essential to build a network of reliable allies. The FIMI-ISAC can help facilitate or deepen such relationships.**
- **CSDP missions** vary in scope and mandate, but they all share the need to continuously adapt to changing and increasingly aggressive information environment. They will need, however, to **build up their analytical capabilities and efforts to increase awareness of FIMI threats.**
- **Training of CSDP missions, EU delegations and other actors in the Member States** will further empower them to effectively counter FIMI and integrate FIMI analysis skills.
- **Tabletop exercises and gaming** can be particularly effective tools to raise awareness of and **build capacities** to address FIMI, and to **develop new approaches** to counter evolving security threats.
- The Dilemma Game illustrated the trade-offs between actively countering disinformation with public narratives and adopting a more restrained, silent approach. The scenario-based format encouraged participants to confront ethical boundaries, especially around the use of deception or selective truth in strategic communications. The protest escalation scenario provided a powerful demonstration of how **seemingly localised FIMI threats can evolve into broader security risks.** The natural disaster storyline maintained a focus on informational challenges, avoiding the distractions of legal, kinetic or intelligence responses, which kept discussions grounded and accessible.
- Participants highlighted a broad convergence of values, particularly a shared reluctance to cross 'red lines' (e.g., using lies in communication, acting against disinformation actors when these were not verified). They also appreciated the exercise's gradual layering of complexity, which mirrored real-world decision-making dynamics and helped **unpack how narratives can be weaponised progressively.**
- The **small-group, interactive engagements** enriched the collective understanding of how disinformation resonates differently across audiences. Participants reflected on likely responses from their own government officials, and shared scenarios that reminded them of their own personal or professional experiences.

More information on the project outputs and activities can be found here:

<https://www.iss.europa.eu/projects/countering-foreign-interference>