

EVENT REPORT

Countering Foreign Interference (CFI) project

CFI DIALOGUES 2023

20-21 June 2023, 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 **Countering Foreign Interference (CFI) Network** as part of the implementation of the project. By facilitating the engagement with representatives from **European Union (EU) institutions, EU Member States, international organisations, think-thanks, private sector, as well as researchers**, the CFI Dialogues aim to support the establishment of a Community of Practice, bringing the EU, Member States and partners closer together on the understanding of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)-related challenges and ways to address them.

The first edition of the CFI Dialogues – **the CFI Dialogues 2023** – was held at the European University Institute (EUI) on 20-21 June 2023. The event was organised in a hybrid format with the possibility for participants to attend the sessions remotely and in an interactive way.

KEY TAKEAWAYS include:

- Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the threat of foreign interference became prominent on the EU's political agenda. At that point, the EU, and the European External Action Service (EEAS) in particular, ascribed an increased importance to it, fostering efforts to counter it and build resilience by implementing the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and most notably the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.
- **Major changes occurred in the field of disinformation studies over the past ten years.** Presently, there are many more online platforms on which disinformation is amplifying, and there are more actors involved, using a plethora of different techniques to create and spread disinformation.
- There is **more awareness of the threat of foreign interference**, and an increased number of stakeholders, either at the individual, country, or international level are examining the implications of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) – including how to counter it. Through structural cooperation and regular exchange of knowledge and timely information and alerts, it is possible to disrupt foreign interference.
- **Partnerships are critical to address FIMI effectively** and the EU needs to forge both broader and deeper partnerships to enable a more resilient environment as the FIMI phenomenon grows worldwide.
- While foreign interference by malign actors **attempts to exploit local vulnerabilities and narratives**, some common patterns of action have emerged. Often the 'battle of narratives' is based on ethnic or religious cleavages, anti-western grievances and conspiracy theories. Building in-country resilience is critical, including through media literacy, education and support for independent journalism and fact-checking.

- The **EU has launched numerous efforts to counter foreign interference and hybrid threats** affecting the EU. They include, among others, the European Democracy Action Plan, the Digital Services Act, the EU Strategic Compass, and output by the European Parliament, specifically through the Special Committee on foreign interference concerning all democratic processes in the European Union (covering disinformation, strengthening integrity, transparency and accountability, (ING2)).
- The **EU is creating a new security culture**, which extends beyond countering FIMI threats and aims to address risks posed both by digitalisation and the evolving role and impact of technologies.
- **Experience from the field**, including EU missions and operations or EU Delegations, illustrate specific challenges posed by hybrid threats and the need for an increased EU attention to preserving its interests and values outside the EU territory.
- **Lessons from several countries suggest that combining fact-checking and media literacy efforts with entertainment**, by involving popular media figures, for example, or by adapting their language and contents to specific groups, **are more successful** than without it. **Training people** from an early age to understand media literacy and how to identify bias within information sources is useful to address disinformation long-term. **Disinformation is a societal issue and should be treated as such.**
- There is an outstanding question on the **lack of a commonly agreed approach to what constitutes 'interference'**, or how states may use different means to interfere in other countries.
- To counter interference attempts by hostile actors, states need to **communicate better with their citizens, restore trust in institutions, improve social cohesion**, and **build resilience** at large.
- **Specialised breakout sessions** focused on the following issues:
 - **Session 1:** Measuring resilience to FIMI: Toolkits and limitations.
 - **Session 2:** Monitoring the information space: A threat assessment framework.
 - **Session 3:** Countering FIMI in CSDP missions: Operational guidelines.
 - **Session 4:** Identifying security nexuses: Cognitive security to counter foreign interference.

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

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