

# Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) through Digital Diplomacy in Europe

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## Key Takeaways

- The EU has to develop sufficient capabilities to defend its interests and project its values on the international stage even under post-truth conditions. Developing effective digital diplomacy skills and capabilities is an indispensable part of this effort. This should entail coordinated communication efforts to build a community of like-minded actors.
- Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) will be part of the toolbox of numerous states for the foreseeable future. However, the EU should neither try to emulate this tactic (as it would contradict its core values and identity), nor accept the use of FIMI by other states. Therefore, FIMI should be tracked, exposed and sanctioned which will clearly signal that it is not an acceptable foreign policy tool.
- To successfully tackle FIMI, it is crucial to focus not only on messages but engage with audiences. European institutions should focus on explaining FIMI to citizens in member states and clarify the scope and purpose of countermeasures to alleviate the public's concerns about freedom of speech. Engagement with citizens and enhancing their capability in recognizing and countering FIMI can contribute to societal resilience in times of crisis.

## RECLAIM summary

RECLAIM is a three-year research project (2022-2025) funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe program. Consisting of a consortium of researchers from thirteen partner universities around Europe, the RECLAIM project addresses the implications of the challenge of post-truth politics for the future of liberal democracy in Europe, in order to (a) produce theoretically and empirically robust visions for the future of liberal democratic institutions, (b) to reflect on the meaning of liberal democracy in the 21st century in Europe and, (c) to develop recommendations, toolkits, narratives and methodologies to reinstate the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democracies.

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Jan Daniel (Institute of International Relations Prague) for consultation and support during the writing of this policy brief.

## Analysis and findings

The post-truth condition has reshaped international politics and intersects with several other challenges to the international liberal order (ILO). Powers intending to revise the ILO such as Russia and China are challenging it from the outside. On the inside, far-right populist forces – most importantly, US President Donald Trump – aim to reshape domestic political orders. In a situation of competition among various truth regimes advanced by different actors, FIMI becomes an important tool for asserting influence in international politics.

In contrast to predominant trends in existing academic literature focusing on individual pieces of disinformation and their spread, RECLAIM has placed FIMI into a broader context of consistent and strategic efforts to undermine what we call the truth regimes of the EU and the ILO. The term FIMI – used also by EU institutions – represents a useful framework encapsulating various types of covert communication activities by malign actors as part of their digital diplomacy.

The digital information space – social networks in particular – has reshaped the context of international politics by underlining the disconnect of sovereignty, territory and population. This space allows the construction of identities irrespective of one's nationality, ethnicity or cultural background. While this is very much in line with individual freedom which is at the heart of the liberal political order, it has created opportunities for promoters of alternative truth regimes. FIMI takes advantage of these dynamics as it tries to appeal to sympathetic audiences.

## Policy Recommendations

In the coming years, the continuing erosion of the ILO will provide numerous opportunities for malign actors to use FIMI against the EU and its member states. Such activities require swift but well thought out reactions from EU institutions and member states. The EU already recognized this challenge and started to implement various measures to tackle it. Our recommendations advance existing measures while suggesting their reinforcement, improving the level of coordination and experience exchange, and implementing monitoring and evaluation practices.

### 1) *Develop digital diplomacy capabilities*

Digital diplomacy will be an indispensable tool of foreign policy in the 21st century. The increasing relevance of the digital space may be both a challenge and an opportunity, as these spaces can be used to share information about the EU's goals, policies, and its functioning, and to promote its values. Digital diplomacy can be particularly useful for the reinforcement of public diplomacy focused on people-to-people exchange in the context of culture, education and other societal topics.

The key element of the success of digital diplomacy is its proactive promotion of the strategic objectives of the EU. While digital diplomacy can serve as an effective tool for countering FIMI in countries outside the EU, this reactive mode should be only a smaller part of its communication. The EU should be inspired by best practices of member states such as the use of digital diplomacy tools to support Sweden's (now defunct) feminist foreign policy. EU communication – conducted in cooperation with relevant institutions in member states – should be spread across all channels relevant to a given context and reach out to local partners as a transnational community-building measure.

Each of the digital communication channels requires a different approach. The European External Action Service (EEAS) should launch robust training programmes to improve the communication skillset of its employees in cooperation with experts from the private sector and from academia. While the evaluation of communication effectiveness is always challenging, there should be attempts to identify best practices.

As rightly pointed out in the Council Conclusions on EU Digital Diplomacy the EU adopted in June 2023, the understanding of digital diplomacy should not be limited to communication. It also needs to encompass efforts to shape the nature of the information space in which it takes place. While regulations like the Digital Services Act do so directly, EU digital diplomacy can achieve this with a softer approach and lead by example in transparency and high ethical standards. EEAS should dedicate efforts to establish itself as a leading force in this area and develop guidance for ethical digital diplomacy that can serve as a benchmark for the international community.

### 2) *Expose, sanction and deter FIMI*

Due to its covert nature and malign intent, FIMI is detrimental to free and open deliberation that is a cornerstone of EU democracies. The EU should further develop its capabilities in exposing FIMI and propose mechanisms to sanction and deter states and entities from using them. On the other hand, such covert activities should be distinguished from public diplomacy which – even if it is at odds with EU values – is still protected by the freedom of expression.

The EU's main tool for tackling FIMI is the East StratCom Task Force. Since 2015 this unit has gained substantial expertise on the narratives and tactics used by actors spreading FIMI. Its ability to expose ongoing malign actions in real time can be further fostered by creating platforms establishing stronger cooperation between EEAS, civil society and academia.

While the EU has the capability to expose FIMI, it still lacks both the will and the means to sanction those responsible. In some cases, FIMI breaks laws and perpetrators can and should be held accountable. However, since that is not always the case, the EU has to think more creatively about its responses and show that it is willing to apply diplomatic, economic and cyber tools against states and entities using FIMI. Such a resolute stance can not only address ongoing covert operations but also deter potential perpetrators from even initiating malign activities.

### 3) *Increase public awareness and promote societal resilience*

The response to FIMI should not be limited to messages and those who spread them but should also consider audiences that influence operation targets. It should be taken into consideration that the success of FIMI stems from its ability to resonate with audiences. The response thus has to be carefully measured as it can easily come into conflict with the right to freedom of opinion. Attempts to patronise or even censor citizens are most likely counterproductive and could undermine trust in institutions, thereby increasing the potential for successful FIMI in the future. Therefore, our recommendation to engage with audiences vulnerable to FIMI revolves around transparency, clear communication of applied countermeasures, and respectful cooperation with citizens in addressing the issue.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that the public is eager to learn about FIMI as there is a high level of concern about disinformation across member states. Therefore, EEAS and the Directorate-General for Communication in the Commission should clearly and repeatedly explain the definition of FIMI. Why does FIMI represent a problem, which actions are taken against it, and how effective are these measures? Maximum transparency is closely linked to the second suggestion, urging us to think about the backfire effect.

Secondly, attempts to counter FIMI will be met with scepticism and concerns about restricting the freedom of expression. These criticisms should not be discounted but instead, through active engagement, it should be demonstrated that FIMI represents a problem for open debate due to its malign intent and intransparent nature.

Thirdly, citizens should not be perceived as passive recipients of information but as partners in the building of a resilient

society. Increasing their understanding of threats as well as their ability to recognise and counter them will undermine the effectiveness of FIMI.

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RECLAIM is a Research and Innovation Action funded by the EU's Horizon Europe programme under Grant Agreement no. 101061330. The views and opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union or the Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the Research Executive Agency can be held responsible for them.