

Governing the Grey Zone: Democracy, Disinformation, and the Ethics of Protection

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Across Europe and beyond, democracies are confronting a defining challenge of the digital age: how to defend themselves against foreign information manipulation without undermining the freedoms that constitute the very foundation of democratic governance. The expansion of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and coordinated influence operations has exposed structural vulnerabilities within open societies. These activities, often conducted below the threshold of armed conflict and frequently operating in legally ambiguous terrain, do not necessarily aim to persuade but, instead, to destabilize political processes, erode trust, polarise public discourse, and weaken institutional legitimacy.

The European Union's information environment has increasingly become a contested space. In this era, recent electoral interference cases, the growing use of artificial intelligence in narrative manipulation, and the strategic amplification of disinformation by both foreign actors and domestic political movements illustrate how democratic openness can be exploited. Influence operations today are rarely isolated incidents; they are all essential pillars of broader strategies that leverage digital technologies and platforms, algorithmic amplification, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour to shape perceptions and decision-making processes.

The central dilemma democracies face is therefore not abstract. It is immediate and practical: when, if ever, should governments restrict certain freedoms of expression or political participation in order to protect democratic integrity? Democracies already accept limited and proportionate constraints in specific contexts through phenomena such as campaign silence periods, foreign funding restrictions, and protections for classified information. Yet extending such logic into the digital sphere raises profound questions of proportionality, transparency, and accountability. Under-regulation risks democratic erosion; over-regulation risks democratic backsliding. The line between necessary defence and excessive control is neither fixed nor easily drawn.

The difficulty is compounded by conceptual ambiguity. Despite advances in terminology at the European level, distinguishing influence from interference remains contested. Attribution is frequently complicated by the use of proxies and hybrid networks that blur the boundary between foreign direction and domestic agency. At the same time, technological acceleration has transformed the scale and speed of manipulation. Artificial intelligence tools enable the rapid production of synthetic content, micro-targeted narratives, and large-scale automated engagement. The cost of conducting influence operations has decreased, while their sophistication has

increased. Many influence operations operate in what has been described as a regulatory “grey zone”, exploiting gaps between legal frameworks, institutional mandates, and technological capabilities. Policymakers are thus required to act under conditions of uncertainty, where responses must be both swift and restrained.

Democracies must therefore adapt to an environment in which the architecture of communication itself can be weaponised. Yet adaptation must not come at the expense of pluralism, judicial safeguards, or constitutional balance.

It is in this context that this conference takes place. The timing is critical. Electoral cycles across Europe continue to present moments of heightened vulnerability. Institutional responses to FIMI are evolving, with the European Union refining regulatory frameworks and coordination mechanisms. Public debate increasingly oscillates between calls for stronger intervention and concerns about censorship and executive overreach. The need for structured, interdisciplinary reflection has rarely been more pressing.

This conference convenes voices from academia, civil society, and research institutes, who will also address the positions of the private sector and public institutions accordingly, precisely because no single domain can address the challenge alone.

Beyond its policy relevance, the conference also reflects the role of academic institutions as spaces of democratic deliberation. Universities are uniquely positioned to host conversations that transcend partisan boundaries and short-term political pressures. By bringing together diverse expertise, this event aims to bridge theory and practice, transforming scholarly insights into policy-relevant guidance while subjecting practical measures to normative scrutiny.

The stakes extend beyond regulatory design. At issue is the broader question of democratic resilience: how open societies can sustain trust, maintain pluralism, and preserve institutional legitimacy under sustained informational pressure. The objective is not to securitise the information space indiscriminately, nor to treat all dissent as suspect. Rather, it is to explore how democracies can strengthen transparency, accountability, and civic capacity without normalising exceptional measures.

The discussions held during this conference will inform a policy brief and a subsequent report synthesising insights across sectors. In doing so, the event seeks to contribute to an evidence-based and proportionate framework for responding to foreign information manipulation, one that recognises both the necessity of defence and the primacy of democratic values.