

Non-paper by Sweden

Protecting democracy from Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference: A contribution ahead of a European Democracy Shield

Introduction

Democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights are common values of the European Union. To foster and preserve these values it is necessary to ensure that citizens can participate in democratic life, which requires public space and processes that are transparent, fair and free from interference. Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we find ourselves in a new security reality, where the inherent openness of our democratic societies is increasingly being exploited by actors with malign intent seeking to destabilise and undermine trust. By deploying a wide range of hybrid tactics, malign actors such as Russia and its proxies, strive to both strategically and opportunistically exploit all vulnerabilities in our societies to achieve their objectives, inter alia by aiming to create antagonism between different parts and groups in our societies.

As set out in the council conclusions on democratic resilience¹, the EU should step up its efforts to safeguard our democracies, built on free and well-informed political choices, protected from all forms of foreign interference. Recalling the Swedish non-paper on constraining Russia² – the strategic aim of our policy towards Russia must be to prevent Russia's expansion of power by constraining its influence, scope for action, and ability to cause harm. This also applies to the purpose of a future European Democracy Shield. The EU should collectively strive towards further raising the baseline of democratic resilience against Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) to limit the attack surface and make the EU, its Member States, and partners into difficult operating environments for malign influence actors. This non-paper hopes to serve as a contribution ahead of the European Democracy Shield, as well as providing a perspective from Swedish experiences of working with psychological defence.

Maximising the use of EU tools

Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia enhanced its FIMI activities targeting the EU, Member States and partners. Since then, the EU has made great progress in establishing legal acts, platforms, and initiatives to counter FIMI. Altogether, already conducted work constitutes a well-developed approach to countering FIMI in combining policy, detection efforts, international diplomacy and public resilience. For several of the legislative initiatives, the implementation and/or adaptation of national legislation and monitoring structures in Member States has just started or is still ongoing. Hence, **the priority when designing a European Democracy Shield should be to build on and make full use of existing tools and recently enhanced structures.** This is primarily a coordination exercise to prevent EU-level efforts from taking a fragmented approach, as also underlined by the European Parliaments' special rapporteur on the European Democracy Shield³. **A key purpose of the European Democracy Shield should be to conduct a mapping of our efforts to ensure an efficient use of**

¹ Council conclusions on democratic resilience: safeguarding electoral processes from foreign interference. 2024-05-21.

² Swedish non-paper – Constraining Russia - securing Europe. 2024-11-15.

³ WORKING DOCUMENT on Protecting European democracy and our values. Findings and recommendations of the Special Committee on the European Democracy Shield. 2025-04-29.

resources and enhanced coordination. This mapping should constitute a basis for any further long-term initiatives and aim at structuring overarching strategic goals.

Raising the baseline with collective expertise and sharpening our collective response

Bearing in mind that there is no single solution to counter FIMI and attempts of destabilisation, collective efforts should aim at continuously interlinking and developing situational awareness and resilience-building measures, as well as strengthening the ability to respond in a united manner.

Psychological defence

Psychological defence is in essence a society's common capabilities for detecting and resisting foreign malign information influence activities. Countries have different experiences, expertise and ways of building their capabilities in this field. Sweden has a long tradition of the political concept of psychological defence - governmental entities have coordinated the Swedish preparedness in the psychological domain since the 1950s. In 2022, the Psychological Defence Agency was established with one of its tasks to identify and analyse malign information influence from antagonistic foreign powers directed at Sweden or Swedish interests⁴. The agency's expertise has become an important asset in Sweden's whole-of-society approach and they work closely with, for example, the Swedish Agency for the Media who is commissioned to coordinate the work on media literacy in Sweden, and other academic cooperation and trainings on countering FIMI. Furthermore, the agency also has the task to strengthen the willingness of the Swedish population to defend itself, democratic values and freedom – a task that is deeply interlinked with resilience against malign interference.

In line with the EU Preparedness Union Strategy⁵, Sweden deems that a whole-of-society approach is essential when raising the baseline of democratic resilience against FIMI. The EU, its Member States and partners need to create a robust foundation of media and information literacy in the population, which not only focuses on critical thinking but also on trustworthy sources and trust in democratic institutions and processes. Our open, tolerant and democratic societies are not only important to defend but are in fact important assets when building trust and resilience.

Meanwhile – it is important to note that democratic systems and structures are built differently among Member States, and at times face different threats and challenges. Capacity-building efforts, such as providing conditions for an independent and diverse media sector, should be carefully tailored to the legislative, demographic, educational, and cultural contexts of individual Member States, and in full respect of freedom of information and freedom of expression, to strengthen resilience.

Uniting and strengthening the efforts at EU level

While acknowledging our differences, many of the challenges relating to FIMI are mutual and shared among Member States. Learning from each other is key. It should be easy to access expertise, lessons

⁴ The Psychological Defence Agency does not monitor Sweden's domestic information environment. The purpose of psychological defence is to foster freedom of speech and the open democratic society.

⁵ JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the European Preparedness Union Strategy. 2025-03-26.

learned and advise. Hence, EU-level efforts could provide added value by even further leveraging the ability to coordinate expertise from Member States, EU institutions, partners and non-institutional stakeholders. To streamline fragmented efforts within EU institutions, Member States and non-institutional actors, **the EU Democracy Shield could include the development of a more permanent coordinating structure to sharpen our collective expertise and capabilities in a broad sense.** This could be realised in line with the vision of a Situational Awareness and Operational Centre (SAOC) – as suggested in the Digital Europe Programme⁶. Any potential financing of such a structure should be covered through reallocations within budgetary margin. If realised, such a coordinating structure should strive towards more efficient and strategic use of existing tools at EU level, guided by the FIMI, Cyber Diplomacy and Hybrid toolboxes.

To raise the baseline of resilience against FIMI in the EU, it is important that the coordinated efforts at EU level aim to support Member States, as well as partners, in strengthening their capabilities. To facilitate this aim, **encouraging the establishment of expert entities at the national level, to serve as lead coordinators and experts on FIMI within each Member State,** would enhance the joint efficiency, resilience and our ability to align and unite our efforts. In due time, national points of contact from these entities could also be included in the coordinating structure at EU level.

The EU also provides added value by enabling collective response measures. By using FIMI and other hybrid tactics, Russia seeks to drive wedges between Member States and our partners. **Unified or joint responses by Member States, in full respect of freedom of information and freedom of expression, should therefore also be a strategic aim of a European Democracy Shield.** Through collective expertise, the EU and its Member States should continue to make full use of all means available to prevent, deter and respond to malicious hybrid activities. This also includes making full use of existing frameworks for restrictive measures, such as the sanctions regime in response to Russia's destabilising activities⁷. However, it is important to note that response measures to counter FIMI are developed with Member States in the Council and in full respect of the principles and values of our open democratic societies with its wide-reaching freedom of information and freedom of expression.

The need for an external dimension of a Democracy Shield

The information landscape knows no borders and the security of the EU and its Member States is also intertwined with the security of the EU's neighbours. This is why we underline that collective efforts within the realm of a European Democracy Shield should have a strong external dimension. Capacity-building and the exchange of lessons learned can also be included in our strategic approach and cooperation with our partners, including NATO. **It is in our mutual interest to work closely with partners in preventing, deterring, mitigating and countering FIMI.** Furthermore, we see a clear value in supporting and strengthening the capabilities of EU delegations in third countries in their strategic communication. EU delegations play a key role in coordinating communication on EU matters and EU collective action of relevance to building resilience against FIMI. Member States' missions abroad could

⁶ ANNEX to the Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Digital Europe Programme and the adoption of the multiannual work programme for 2025 – 2027, 2025-03-28.

⁷ COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2024/2643 of 8 October 2024 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's destabilising activities.

in turn reinforce these messages to ensure that we have a strengthened, united front in our messaging which would help in building our joint resilience and spread more information and knowledge on the EU.

Conclusion

The current threat landscape, with Russia being the most significant and direct threat to the EU, necessitates continuous and collective efforts to safeguard and strengthen our democracies. A European Democracy Shield should consider that the level of experience and excellence regarding resilience and tools to counter FIMI appears to vary among Member States, and it should also weigh in all the efforts that have been, and are being, made. Long-term initiatives at EU-level are necessary – pooling our expertise, experiences and efforts will make us more powerful. This non-paper lays out five key aspects that should be included to counter FIMI within the realm of a European Democracy Shield:

- Conduct a **mapping of existing EU initiatives** to ensure an efficient use of resources and enhanced coordination.
- Develop a more permanent, **coordinating structure** to sharpen our collective expertise and capabilities by bringing together existing initiatives within EU institutions, Member States and non-institutional actors. Potential financing of such a structure should be covered through reallocations within budgetary margin.
- Encourage and support the establishment of **expert entities at the national level**, to serve as lead coordinators and experts on FIMI within each Member State.
- Strengthen the ability to **respond collectively**.
- Ensuring an external dimension, making sure joint efforts to counter FIMI also include **working closely with partners, such as NATO**.

Lastly, upholding the respect for Union values, including fundamental rights and the rule of law must be at the core of a European Democracy Shield. It is of paramount importance to clearly integrate fundamental rights concerns throughout the design, and implementation, of the initiative.

In light of this, Sweden remains committed to contributing and sharing our experiences from building psychological defence, both in terms of the union's overall preparedness, as well as within the realm of a European Democracy Shield.