

Schuman Paper

n°851

20th October 2026

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The European Union and foreign interference: understanding, identifying and resisting it

There are wars we did not see coming. The information war being waged against us is one example^[1]. The countries of the European Union are now operating in a profoundly transformed political and strategic environment: a war of aggression unfolding on our continent; the explicit challenge to international law based on common rules established in the aftermath of the Second World War; a powerful ally, the United States of America, which appears to be challenging the very foundations of our Euro-Atlantic alliance, and the rise of authoritarian regimes that use conflict as a means of action are permanently altering the conditions of European security. This is no longer played out solely at the European Union's external borders, nor is it confined to the military sphere. It is now being fought at the very heart of our societies: testing the strength of democratic institutions, the quality and sincerity of public debate, and the trust that European citizens place in the media and in collective decision-making processes.

In this context, various forms of foreign interference, whatever their nature, can no longer be viewed as 'traditional' peripheral or temporary phenomena.

They constitute an instrument of power in their own right, a part of coherent, planned and openly pursued state strategies. Their aim is not necessarily to bring about an immediate political shift or an abrupt rupture. It is more insidious: to instil lasting fragility, a continuous erosion of democratic trust and a growing

difficulty in reaching legitimate collective decisions. In short, its aim is to weaken in order to subjugate.

INTERFERENCE IS A STRATEGY... AND AN ACT OF AGGRESSION

Public debate sometimes tends to view the issue of foreign interference through the prism of sensational cases, highly publicised incidents or crucial moments such as elections. This fragmented view is misleading. Interference is not an event: it is a strategy. It unfolds over the long term, combines a wide variety of methods and constantly adapts to the specific vulnerabilities of each society. It seeks not so much to impose an alternative narrative as to render any narrative open to challenge, to blur shared points of reference and to undermine the very foundations of democracy: a society's ability to inform itself, to analyse the facts, to debate calmly, and then to make free and informed decisions. Interference is an act of aggression.

These acts of interference are deliberately carried out just below the threshold of armed conflict. They operate in this grey area where attribution is complex, a response is politically sensitive, and doubt and confusion are easily instilled. They target the sphere of information, electoral processes, critical infrastructure, and political actors such as civil society, by exploiting the psychological and emotional dynamics inherent in open societies. They thrive, for example, on existing divisions by

^[1] This text originally appeared in the 'Schuman Report on Europe: The State of the Union 2026', published by Hémisphères Editions, Paris, May 2026

seeking to amplify them methodically, and by fully and cynically exploiting our fundamental freedom of opinion and expression.

POLITICAL GOALS

The issue of foreign interference is no longer merely technical: it is eminently political. As Jean-Noël Barrot, the French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, stated, “*disinformation has become a weapon of war*”, designed to strike at democracies from within, without fanfare or public declaration. Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, made the same point with equal gravity: “*The European Union cannot accept that the manipulation of information is eroding its democracies without a clear political response.*”

This assessment is crucial: what is under attack is not merely public policy, but the ability of European Union countries to enjoy effective political sovereignty and democratic freedom.

The term ‘foreign interference’ is now widely used, sometimes too broadly, at the risk of weakening its analytical significance. To properly understand the serious threat facing the European Union, I believe it is essential to clarify what this concept encompasses – and what it does not. Interference is not to be confused with influence – which is inherent in international relations – nor with the diversity of opinions, nor with the freedom to debate. Influence is open, transparent and governed by diplomacy and the law. It becomes interference when its nature changes: when it is covert, malicious, toxic, divorced from the facts and aimed at causing disruption – even destruction – of the normal functioning of a democratic system in the interests of, or to further, foreign interests or objectives.

DESTRUCTIVE PURPOSES

What distinguishes interference, therefore, is not merely the means employed, but the end sought. It aims to destabilise rather than to convince, to sow doubt rather than to engage in a fair exchange of arguments, and to deny historical facts and

realities rather than to foster rational debate. It creates confusion between truth and falsehood. As demonstrated by recent French parliamentary work on the strategic function of ‘influence’, the effectiveness of these manoeuvres rests less on the content of the messages than on methods of amplification, repetition and saturation of the information space, designed to disrupt democratic debate in the long term. This has also been demonstrated by the French information vigilance authorities, foremost among which is [VIGINUM](#), responsible for detecting and characterising foreign digital interference in France.

The vectors of such interference are now manifold. Some are well identified: disinformation and information manipulation campaigns – particularly during elections – cyber-attacks, economic or scientific espionage, attempts to access and hack sensitive data, legal or regulatory pressure, and corruption. Others are more diffuse and insidious. They involve seeking out opinion leaders, exploiting legitimate causes, or capitalising on individual trajectories (the ‘co-opting of elites’) characterised by ideological convergence or a desire for recognition. Interference can thus take place without any apparent coercion or secrecy, drawing on pre-existing dynamics which it captures, directs and gradually amplifies; in this sense, it does not constitute an illegal act in the strict sense of the term.

COMMITTED PLAYERS

Numerous foreign powers are engaged in strategies of interference: the Russian Federation, of course, the People’s Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey and Azerbaijan, to name but a few. Recent, reliable sources also document certain attempts at interference – admittedly less ‘toxic’ and less directly aggressive – originating from private Israeli organisations and the ‘MAGA’ sphere. However, amongst the powers engaged in strategies of interference, Russia occupies a unique position. The operations attributed to it form part of a structured state strategy, designed as a fully-fledged instrument of foreign policy towards the European Union on the one hand, and towards the

former satellite states of the USSR – some of which are candidates for EU membership – on the other.

This strategy is based on centralised political steering and the coordinated mobilisation of several components of the Russian security apparatus. Research carried out by European analysis and intelligence monitoring services highlights a functional division of roles: the FSB is primarily involved in activating local intermediaries and targeted influence operations; the GRU is regularly associated with information campaigns and cyber-offensives, which form part of broader, synchronised operations. In addition to this we find an ecosystem of parastatal actors, communications agencies, and organisations presenting themselves as alternative media or humanitarian organisations.

Since Russia's large-scale military invasion of Ukraine, this long-standing strategy has become more intense and reinforced. It now forms part of a broader confrontation with European democracies, which are perceived as political and ideological adversaries. The aim is not only to support Russia's war effort, but also to weaken the ability of European societies to stand united, to provide sustained support for Ukraine and to achieve European strategic autonomy.

MODUS OPERANDI

Information-based methods, made highly effective by digital virality, are now well documented: fake websites imitating recognised media outlets, the coordinated dissemination of misleading content, and the activation of account network, otherwise known as 'troll farms', designed to simulate widespread spontaneous mobilisation. Their primary aim is not persuasion, but the saturation of the public sphere, the undermining of the hierarchy of sources, and the creation of a climate of lasting confusion. The disinformation campaigns known as '*Doppelgänger*', '*Matriochka*' and '*Storm-1516*', thoroughly documented by VIGINUM, which have targeted the media in several European countries, have been highly instructive in this regard. They are unquestionably attributed to Vladimir Putin's regime and its various agencies.

A particularly worrying aspect of these operations lies in the deliberate exploitation of sensitive societal tensions, notably and sadly illustrated by the appalling resurgence of anti-Semitism across Europe. Graffiti depicting Stars of David, green paint thrown at synagogues, and red hands painted on the Wall of the Righteous among Nations at the Shoah Memorial in Paris have been analysed by the French authorities as acts forming part of structured information warfare operations. Their effectiveness lies less in their physical impact than in their digital amplification via social media and numerous accounts (so-called 'bots'), and their immediate exploitation in accusatory narratives.

DEMOCRACIES UNDER ATTACK

Our European liberal democracies are being specifically targeted; that much is clear. Electoral interference has been observed in recent years in several Member States and candidate countries, notably in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In the case of Georgia, this coincided with a sudden shift in power towards a stance aligned with Russian interests.

On 28 September 2025, during the parliamentary elections, Moldova showed commendable resilience, even as it faced one of the most extensive campaigns of interference initiated by the Kremlin regime ever documented in Europe. National authorities and European institutions condemned repeated attempts to manipulate the electoral process, combining massive disinformation campaigns, covert funding of pro-Russian political forces and the exploitation of socio-economic vulnerabilities, with the explicit aim of undoing the country's European integration.

In Romania, on 24 November 2024, the first round of the presidential election was annulled by the Romanian Constitutional Court, leading to a new ballot, due to widespread 'fake news' and digital manipulation, particularly on TikTok. A new election took place in May 2025.

In Poland, several investigations and public warnings have highlighted attempts at information interference targeting public debate and election periods, relying on divisive narratives relating to

security, migration or relations with the European Union. The German authorities' public attribution, in 2025 and 2026, of cyber-attacks targeting aviation security and manoeuvres aimed at destabilising the elections marked a turning point for the country: the shift from suspicion to an explicit political designation, now necessarily claimed as an act of democratic defence.

A EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY SHIELD

It was against this backdrop that the European Commission presented the European Democracy Shield on 12 November 2025, marking an important political milestone: for the European Union the protection of democracy is now recognised as a strategic issue in its own right. This development is part of a gradual shift in awareness, as illustrated within the European Parliament. The special committees on foreign interference and disinformation ('INGE 1' and 'INGE 2') have, through the publication of two reports and the adoption of two resolutions, documented the [increasing sophistication of interference strategies](#) targeting the European Union and their direct effects on [democratic processes](#).

This work was shaped in particular by Raphaël Glucksmann, chair of the two successive committees, Sandra Kalniete, rapporteur, and by the commitment shown by Nathalie Loiseau, rapporteur and chair of the European Parliament's Special Committee on the European Shield for Democracy.

The European Democracy Shield, currently under discussion within the European institutions ([European Parliament vote on 15 September](#)), is a set of concrete measures designed to strengthen our democracies. In particular, it aims to strengthen the detection and public identification of foreign interference, especially when it targets European elections, drawing in particular on the capabilities developed within the European External Action Service, including its StratCom teams. It also strengthens cooperation and early-warning mechanisms between Member States to enable rapid, coordinated and politically accountable responses.

Several Member States have already taken the lead – notably the Baltic States, Sweden and Finland – by combining technical capabilities, administrative action and civic engagement in the face of foreign interference. For the European Union, the challenge now is to capitalise on these experiences, disseminate best practices and adapt them to emerging challenges, particularly those posed by artificial intelligence. These observations are in line with the analyses set out in a French parliamentary report presented in December 2025 on [the emergence of artificial intelligence in foreign interference](#), which highlights the shift in scale of destabilisation strategies and their increasing hybridisation with advanced digital technologies.

In this regard, certain national measures are worth mentioning and commending. France's adoption in July 2024 of the law aimed at [preventing foreign interference](#), illustrated the parliamentarians' growing awareness of the reality and danger posed by foreign interference of all kinds.

The inauguration in 2017 of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats ([Hybrid CoE](#)) in Helsinki signalled a commitment to better anticipate and coordinate responses to hybrid strategies targeting European democracies. By bringing the European Union and NATO close together, this framework helps to foster a shared culture of vigilance and resilience, which is essential for tackling threats that now extend far beyond national borders.

The various national responses reflect a scaling-up of Member States' efforts to tackle the increasing frequency and diversity of foreign interference. This highlights the need for the European Union to provide a coherent, overarching European framework for these national policies and to support those Member States that do not yet have dedicated capabilities. Attacks on our democracies take many forms. In this state that is neither true peace nor conventional military warfare – in this grey area known as 'hybrid warfare' – we must defend our security and sovereignty together, without naivety

or complacency. Beyond the specialist agencies, official bodies, dedicated services, we must call for the widespread mobilisation of the public!

Because it is up to each and every one of us to combat attacks and strategies that aim to

weaken and subjugate us, to demand transparency, professionalism, sincerity, fairness and verification in the information sphere, and to exercise critical thinking and reason. The future of Europe is at stake.

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ISSN 2402-614X

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