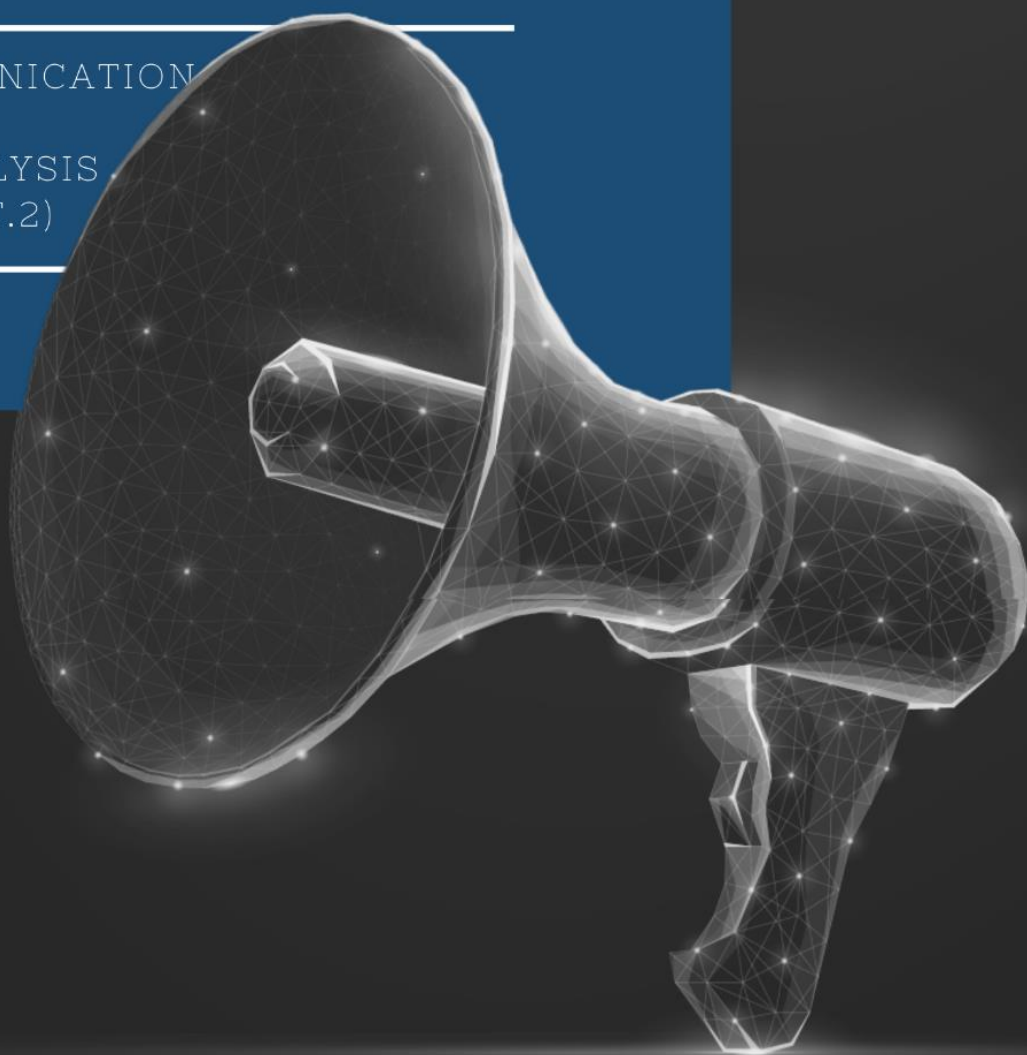# 2021

STRATCOM ACTIVITY REPORT

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
TASK FORCES AND
INFORMATION ANALYSIS
DIVISION (SG.STRAT.2)

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1. FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE (FIMI)

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference – also often labelled as "disinformation" – is a growing political and security challenge for the European Union and has been recognised as such in many high level policy documents, such as the Action Plan against Disinformation (2018)[1], the European Democracy Action Plan (2020)[2], the European Strategic Compass (2022)[3], and several Council Conclusions. Given the foreign and security policy component, the High Representative, supported by the European External Action Service (EEAS), has a leading role in addressing the issue.

FIMI is a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.

Foreign actors trying to manipulate and interfere with our information environment use a variety of constantly evolving Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs), often in combination with cyber security and hybrid threats. For example, cyber-attacks can be among other things used to obtain sensitive documents, which can then be leaked selectively at politically opportune moments to influence the political agenda, sow distrust, or drown out unwanted political debates.

A Challenge to Democratic Processes and Institutions

Developing sound responses to FIMI is a policy priority for the EU, and in particular for the High Representative, since it has the potential to undermine democratic processes and institutions in third countries and can even be used as tool in an insurgency or armed conflict. Currently, this is being demonstrated most vividly in the war the Russian Federation is waging in Ukraine. At the same time, it impacts the EU's ability to implement its policies at home and abroad. Aimed at escalating divisions and polarization, FIMI threatens the integrity of free and open democratic deliberation, which is a central pillar of our political systems.

FIMI is regularly being used to undermine public trust in the legitimacy and efficacy of democratic institutions. While FIMI can contribute to increasing polarization within the EU, it can thus also escalate political violence in already conflict-prone regions.

FIMI therefore presents a dual challenge. On the one hand, it is an *internal issue* in the sense of protecting the EU's and its Member States' democratic processes. On the other hand, it is an *external issue* about working with like-minded partner countries to either support them in their work against FIMI or in working together to address an issue that goes beyond national borders. This duality is also reflected in the work objectives of the EEAS Stratcom (SG.STRAT.2) Division[4].

The capacity of the EEAS to address the FIMI challenge has grown significantly since 2015, when the problem first appeared on the EU's political agenda. In addition to a more precise understanding and diagnosis of the problem – from 'fake news', to 'disinformation', to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference – the Division has been developing and improving the means to detect, analyse, and

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[1] https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/ap20_04/ap_disinformation_en.pdf
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en
[3] https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/106337/A%20Strategic%20Compass%20for%20the%20EU
[4] https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/countering-disinformation/105460/tackling-disinformation-information-work-eeas-strategic-communication-division-and-its-task_en

counter FIMI. It has done so in close contact and collaboration with networks of international partners, civil society organizations, academia and private industry.

Purpose of Reporting on the Division's Work

This report aims to strengthen accountability and increase transparency about the Division's work, following up in particular on the report by the **European Court of Auditors[5] and the corresponding Council Conclusions of June 2021[6]**.

The following, second section provides a retrospective assessment of the 2021 threat environment and the major Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) used to conduct FIMI. The third section dissects the different dimensions and objectives of the Division's work and showcases them via select initiatives and accomplishments from the different teams and task forces. This report has the objective to illustrate the kind of activities the Division is engaged with, and how these address the EEAS mandate to tackle the FIMI challenge.

1. KEY FIMI ACTORS AND PRIORITY REGIONS

Foreign information manipulation and interference is conducted by both state and non-state actors, as well as their proxies. While states use FIMI to destabilise foreign countries for their own advantage, private companies increasingly provide 'disinformation for hire'[7] services or simply exploit the financial gains from amplifying sensationalist content in combination with advertisement revenue.

The Division's focus is on FIMI that is suspected to be directly or indirectly linked to foreign governments. While the picture is more complex in terms of actors and regions[8], the EEAS has focused its work in 2021 particularly on FIMI activities related to the Russian Government, on actors in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, Western Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and on the African continent, as well as on emerging actors, such as actors related to the Chinese authorities.

Russia

While the FIMI activity conducted by the Russian government and its proxies (or often also better described as "pro-Kremlin ecosystem") adapts its messages to the tactical priorities of specific situations, its strategic objective remains to undermine 'the West' and to strengthen the Kremlin's influence in the world. To this end, it is steadily expanding its tool kit to disseminate and strategically amplify their narratives, including combinations of cyber-attacks and leaking of selective and often forged or distorted information. Beyond known state-financed media outlets like RT and Sputnik, its international FIMI efforts also employ ecosystems of local proxies and amplifiers that, at first glance, are not always recognizable to the audience as supported or financed by the Kremlin[9].

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[5] https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=58682

[6] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10968-2021-INIT/en/pdf

[7] https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-disinformation-evolved-in-2020/

[8] https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/news/social-media-manipulation-by-political-actors-now-an-industrial-scale-problem-prevalent-in-over-80-countries-annual-oxford-report/

[9] See also https://www.state.gov/report-rt-and-sputniks-role-in-russias-disinformation-and-propaganda-ecosystem/

These TTPs are used to undermine national elections or referenda, magnify critiques of Western governments and institutions, and prepare the ground for potential military deployment, as could be seen during the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 or ahead of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In 2021, the Kremlin has used FIMI to spread COVID-19-related disinformation in favour of the Russian Sputnik-V vaccine, and to destabilise and undermine the Western response to the pandemic.

Eastern Partnership

FIMI narratives targeting the Eastern Partnership countries spread fear among their citizens that they are powerless, and their destinies are controlled and manipulated by the EU and the West. The role of Russian state-controlled media to galvanize domestic support for hostile operations abroad remains key. In Belarus, extensive FIMI activity continues to enable and justify the brutality of Lukashenka's regime against its own citizens, independent media, and civil society. Furthermore, while Russia's role in the Belarusian migrant crisis is difficult to document, its FIMI behaviour aligns with the Lukashenko regime's in attempting to shift the blame to the EU for the dire humanitarian situation of the refugees at the Belarussian border. The Kremlin used FIMI activity in 2021 to support its military build-up along the borders of Ukraine, not only endangering the security and stability in Ukraine, but also within the EU and wider region. Also the Presidential elections and the gas crisis in the Republic of Moldova were targeted, ridiculing President Maia Sandu's reform-oriented policies.

China

Not least due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EEAS has observed increasing FIMI efforts by Chinese actors, often directly or indirectly linked to Chinese authorities. Chinese officials and state-controlled media have generated FIMI narratives sowing doubt about the origin of the virus and the safety of Western vaccines. China's FIMI activity often distinguishes itself by its harsh messaging through official channels, attempts to silence critical voices, and financing of social media influencers to spread positive narratives about China.

In 2021, there have been occasional alignments with and amplification of pro-Kremlin conspiracy narratives: the alleged U.S. secret bio-labs in Eastern Europe; exploiting the humanitarian and security crisis in Afghanistan; or denying human rights violations in Xinjiang. China has also systematically promoted the underlying message that its own system of government is a better alternative to Western democracies. This alignment has become more obvious during the unfolding of the events during Russia's military aggression against Ukraine.

Western Balkans

The Western Balkans are particularly vulnerable to FIMI because of low media literacy, low trust in institutions, limited space for professional journalism and a low level of media freedom. Russian and Chinese proxies engage in FIMI, including the spread of disinformation and anti-EU/West narratives in tandem with some regional actors. In addition to the existing playbook, the FIMI actors in the Western Balkans increasingly have used marginal outlets and anonymous social media accounts to push a particular political agenda to steer the public debate by revealing alleged "leaked documents" on important regional and international political issues.

In 2021, COVID-19-related narratives over-appreciated China's and Russia's initial support to the Western Balkans. Some local media heavily praised China and Russia and undermined the EU's position in the region by spreading the narrative of vaccination delays, even though ultimately, the EU's vaccination support made a large, positive impact on the region. The introduction of COVID-19 digital green passes, and other measures taken separately by the EU, Member States, or the Commission, were frequently used in a manipulative manner by some FIMI actors to portray the Union

as being discriminatory to the region. The Division, in partnership with international, regional, state, and non-state actors works on tackling FIMI through a range of activities that are primarily focused on resilience building of Western Balkans societies, following the approach defined in the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP).

Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

The MENA region is affected both by FIMI activity of global actors, and by local state and non-state actors, who have gained sophisticated capacities for controlling the political debate. Information manipulation is used in combination with cyber-surveillance and cyberattacks – sometimes abroad, sometimes domestically – creating further instability in an already volatile region.

For example, information manipulation in the MENA region aims to silence, harass and organise violence against civil society and our partners, especially targeting women. It also threatens to stir and perpetuate conflicts and escalate regional confrontations. Information manipulation destabilises the region by undermining trust in the integrity of public debate, which makes conflict resolution ever more complicated. As such, it is an impediment to the efforts of the EEAS to promote peace and democracy in the region.

CSDP Missions and Operations

Operationally, FIMI has the capacity to undermine the EEAS' efforts to foster peace, stability, and the rule-of-law through its civilian and military CSDP missions and operations. We see FIMI being increasingly employed by Russia and China to strengthen their strategic foothold in conflict-prone regions, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. As information manipulation is a natural element of violent political and armed conflicts – with ethnic violence and genocidal threats building on hate speech and conspiracy narratives – understanding FIMI and its potential escalating impact has become a priority issue for the EEAS.

These developments pose a political challenge to the EU, as our response needs to be rooted in the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. EEAS STRAT.2 contributes to the EU's ability to tackle FIMI through the whole-of-society approach enshrined in the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and the European Strategic Compass.

2. PRIORITY DIMENSIONS AND WORK OBJECTIVES OF THE DIVISION'S RESPONSE TO FIMI

The Council's mandate that led to the creation of STRAT.2 in its current iteration stipulates that the work should focus, inter alia, on pro-active communication and awareness raising, support to independent media, and the detection, analysis and challenge of information manipulation and interference activities by foreign states (see Annex for an historical overview of our mandate).

Through the development of the conceptual work, the division identified four dimensions of the toolbox that the EU has at its disposal to respond to FIMI: (a) Situational awareness; (b) resilience building; (c) disruption and regulatory approaches; and (d) diplomatic responses / responses of the CFSP realm. All of these four dimensions comprise concrete individual instruments, such as strategic communication or demarches. These include also the important work done by the Commission services and Member States, in particular on disruption and regulatory approaches (social media platform regulation) and resilience building (media literacy, awareness raising campaigns, etc.). The team has translated this four dimensions in concrete work objectives.

Objective 1: Strengthen Situational Awareness

The **Rapid Alert System (RAS)** is a key element of the 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation. Since its launch in March 2019, it has been managed by the Division to promote the exchange of information, analysis and best practices amongst EU institutions, EU Member States and international partners.

In view of the impact FIMI has on democracy, highlighted by the European Democracy Action Plan, the RAS has also enabled exchanges on policy development and amplified proactive communication materials, leading to an increased awareness about EU decisions and policies amongst our partners.

A central asset of the Division's work is its contribution to increasing the EU's situational awareness of the evolving threat landscape, including analyses of the strategic foci of different FIMI actors and the respective Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) they preferably use. Reacting to input from the regional task forces, Member States and international partners as well as insights from third party research, the Division investigates and catalogues FIMI incidents and campaigns in a central standardised data standard and database.

Through close exchanges with the Commission, Member States and international partners as well as stakeholders from the private sector and civil society organizations, 2021 has been devoted to the ongoing conceptualization and promotion of a standardised approach to information sharing and analysis about FIMI. At this stage, the community of researchers regularly uncovers campaigns that lead to take-downs of networks on social media engaging in such activity and awareness raising around TTPs used in such campaigns.

The community faces a significant challenge in that the wealth of insights into FIMI is fragmented and information sharing is hindered by a lack of definitional, methodological, and agreed-upon data-sharing standards. Because of this, it remains difficult for the community to connect the dots between different campaigns and detect patterns in TTPs that might have facilitated an attribution of campaigns to certain threat actors.

In 2021, therefore, the Division's Data and Analysis Team maintained close contact with international and private industry partners and encouraged initiatives such as the DISARM (DISinformation Analysis & Risk Management) framework (formerly "AMITT" - Adversarial Misinformation and Influence Tactics and Techniques) for describing disinformation incidents, which the Division uses internally.
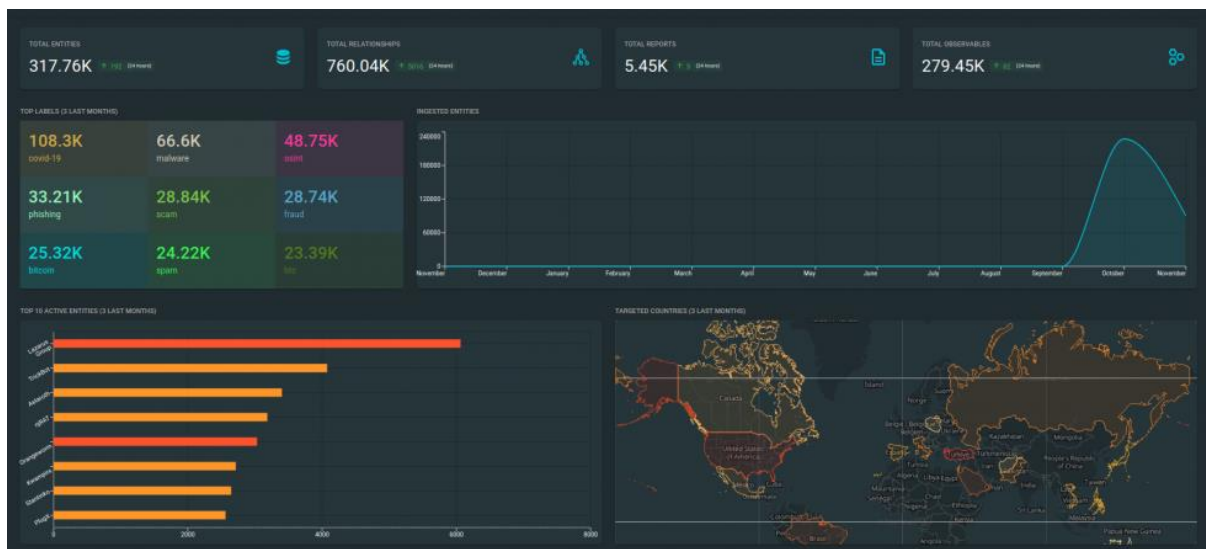
Building on the experiences of the cyber-security community, the EEAS has been working to establish **data-sharing standards and analysis practices for FIMI incidents**. These would enable the research community to systematically and efficiently share comparable data on the Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) used in foreign information manipulation and interference. This is aimed at bringing together the dispersed knowledge of governments, private companies, civil society organizations, and international institutions, which would facilitate a better overview of the scope and nature of the challenge, enable more in-depth research, better evidence and foresight capabilities. 2021 has been an important year to demonstrate the feasibility of such an approach through an increasing standardization of internal reporting on FIMI incidents. The Division has been in continuous exchange with stakeholders to explore their views on this approach, which could lead to the creation of an Information Analysis and Sharing Center (ISAC) on FIMI.

Objective 2: Develop appropriate Policies, Strategies, and Instruments to Respond to the Threat

The EU institutions and Member States engage in a wide range of resilience building activities to reduce the impact of FIMI. In order to respond to threats, robust structures and policies are needed to protect our citizens and democratic institutions against FIMI. A common understanding of these policies and strategies not only increases resilience of the EU and Member States through a stronger common basis, but also enables synergies to implement instruments to disrupt FIMI threats.

The Division develops policies, strategies and instruments to respond to the threat foreign information manipulation and interference poses to the functioning of the EU's democracies, security, and policy implementation. In order to put in place a comprehensive, sustainable and effective framework to tackle FIMI, the Division works closely with the EU Institutions, Member States, as well as international governments, civil society and private industry to promote a whole-of-society approach.

One of the main work strands is the further refinement of the terminology employed to describe illegitimate behaviour of different actors in the information environment. The Division intensified efforts in 2021 to promote FIMI terminology with the objective of creating a shared political conceptual definition across the European Union and relevant stakeholders (international partners, civil society, and industry) to facilitate a better collective understanding of the threat landscape, enable comparability of analysis across stakeholders, and ultimately support a transparent framework for effective response against FIMI. Work to this end is also being led by the EEAS in a dedicated working group within the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (G7 RRM).

The Division has concentrated efforts to further develop the EU's toolbox for countering FIMI, including new instruments that allow imposing costs on perpetrators. The EEAS, in close cooperation with the European Commission, Member States and stakeholders, mapped existing instruments and identified gaps where additional instruments could be developed both at Institutional and Member State level. This work is ongoing, involving Commission services, other EU institutions, Member States, civil society and international partners.

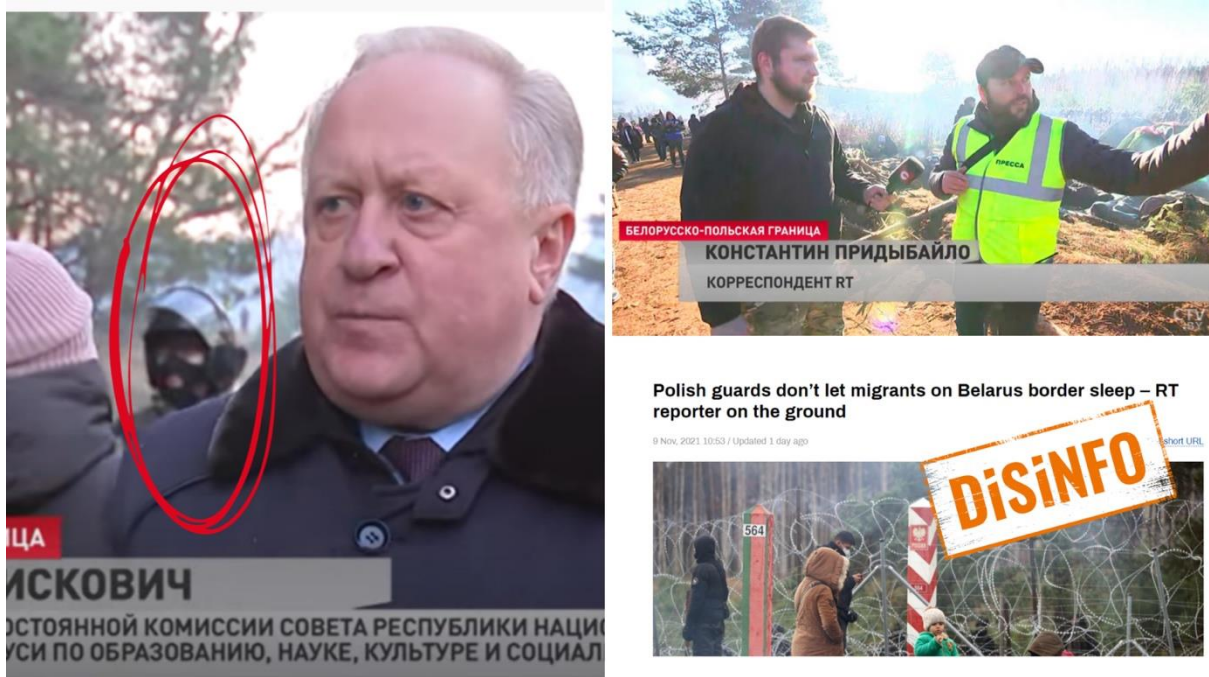## Objective 3: Provide Strategic Communications Support to EU Delegations and CSDP Missions and Operations

The Division's launch of the *MENA Regional Media Officer* **position** marked a hallmark decision by the EU to dedicate a position and social media accounts to a specific region in a non-European language. Luis Miguel Bueno Padilla, the Regional Media Officer, based in the EU Delegation to Lebanon, has a mandate to engage on all regional topics and support Delegations to communicate more extensively in Arabic. Supported by the Division and the network of delegations in the region, the Regional Media Officer became a well-known media figure on pan-regional news channels and engages with Arabic-speaking audiences through his successful Twitter account @EUinArabic with over 28k followers.

Furthermore, the Regional Media Officer succeeded in addressing FIMI narratives directly, well positioning the EU to engage with independent media and civil society to support freedom of expression. Not only does the project fill the void of presenting the EU perspective amidst a tense, and typically anti-West, and anti-EU media and social media landscape, but it promotes EU democratic principles and policies by supporting media plurality and active engagement on adversarial narratives through a credible, and reliable EU voice.

Building resilience against FIMI requires addressing and ultimately responding to FIMI activities targeting our strategic footprint in the field: our EU Delegations and CSDP Missions. In 2021, the existing efforts to support Delegations and Missions were complemented by additional initiatives and resources: given the constantly evolving threat parameters on the ground. The Division's efforts likewise increased to build capacity and investment to expand our work in different geographical areas, particularly in terms of analysis and response from an EU perspective. In this regard, the Division laid a strong foundation for a more coordinated and coherent approach in countering FIMI targeting our strategic presence in other regions. The deteriorating situation in wider Sub-Saharan Africa, and other geographic regions in Asia and Africa, led to efforts to mainstream this new and challenging work into our existing scope. The Division strategically liaises with EU Delegations and Missions within its focus regions and further afield, to strengthen the local analytical capacity regarding FIMI, as well supporting the development of communication campaigns and other actions to counter FIMI locally.

It uses regional expertise to employ unique strategic communications efforts to ensure reliable support to our Delegations and CSDP missions. Strategic communication officers employed in EU Delegations in East, Western Balkans, and the South are central to this work. The team combines unique institutional, regional, and language expertise with policy development, communication actions and data analysis to make the EU's Missions and Delegations more resilient against threats stemming from polluted information environments, clearing the way for factual information about the EU's policy, actions, and values in the public sphere.

Objective 4: Strengthening Public Resilience and Awareness of FIMI in the EU and beyond

To help tamp down the **migratory tensions in Belarus** in autumn 2021, the Division drafted a short-term communication strategy, produced and distributed social media videos, secured partnerships for campaign distribution, and produced tailored monitoring and analysis reports to inform EU policy and communication responses. The Division's analytical reports on the Lukashenko regime's FIMI activities levied against the EU and Member States helped identify and track new trends as well as monitor the engagement of Russia and other actors. By exposing the true nature, the tactics, techniques and procedures of the Belarus regime's operations and filling the space with easily-available, fact-based material on the migrant situation and condition, the work of the Division supported a factual narrative on this important issue.

The Division contributes to building resilience against foreign information manipulation and interference through awareness raising by engaging the public directly and supporting an environment where civil society, independent media and media literacy skills thrive. EUvsDisinfo directly debunks pro-Kremlin FIMI via digital platforms, regular analytical newsletters, and by maintaining a publically-available database of 13,300 cases[10]. All analytical EUvsDisinfo content is available in English and Russian languages, with selected articles translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Polish,

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[10] As of December 31, 2021.

Belarussian and Ukrainian, as well as Armenian, Azerbaijani, Romanian, Georgian languages. In 2021, EUvsDisinfo website gained over 890,000 unique page-views. On social media, over 48,600 users follow EUvsDisinfo account on Facebook, and additional 55,600 on Twitter. The most popular EUvsDisinfo articles in 2021 revealed a systematic pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign against Germany and investigated how disinformation accompanied the Russian

The **COVID-19 pandemic** and the accompanying infodemic in 2020 and 2021 called for enhanced public outreach and communication about foreign information manipulation and interference on the topic. The EEAS released overall 5 Special Reports on the issue until the end of 2021, covering persistent actors like Russia and emerging actors like China. *EUvsDisinfo* featured more than 900 case examples on COVID-19 related FIMI and penned dedicated articles, focusing on vaccine-related disinformation in the Eastern Partnership region. Additionally, the analysis of the case examples led to the production of a brief guide on how to talk to someone who is embracing vaccine-related disinformation to help counter vaccine scepticism fuelled by disinformation.

Objective 5: Resilience and Capacity Building in Neighbouring Countries

Building resilience against FIMI relies on sustained partnership and regional collaboration on current political issues of the day. The Division builds partnerships with EU institutions, Member States, other governments, partner institutions, private industry as well as media and civil society of neighbouring countries to address FIMI in a regional approach and build their capacities. To respond, the team is

Capitalising on years of on-the-ground expertise and strategy, the Division ensured the EU's partnership with the European Endowment for Democracy for a multi-year, multimillion Euro project focussing on long-term capacity building projects such as on-the-job mentorship and training linked to content production and management. In close cooperation with DG NEAR, the Division helped design the EU4IndependentMedia projects. Worth 8 million EUR, it is one of the biggest EU-funded media support projects to date. Under this partnership, in 2021, the Division worked with Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA), the Foreign Policy Instrument and the EU Delegation in Kyiv to design FIMI resilience programmes (e.g. **EU4ResilientRegions, Media4Democracy, and support to the government Centre for Strategic Communication)**. Their goal is to strengthen independent media outlets, journalists, bloggers, opinion makers, organised civil society and government agencies in Ukraine, as well as across the Eastern Partnership region.

working with local governments and organizations to step up EU support to fact-checkers and researchers; it strengthens the strategic communications capacities on the ground and liaises with credible local voices to amplify the EU's message in the local context.

The Division is also supporting independent media and civil society in countries with tightly controlled media environments – especially where these groups face growing governmental pressure infringing on media freedom. The Division's cooperation helped ensure the EU's commitment to freedom of expression and plurality extended to support like-minded media and civil society partners throughout the region and beyond. Regional partnerships and capacity building initiatives take time and require consistent reinforcement. The Division's work to support events such as the Eastern Partnership Summit, the EU-Western Balkans Summit, or the Conference on the Future of Europe demonstrate the commitment to building local and regional partnerships with civil society activists, fact checkers, opinion leaders, governments and journalists to counter FIMI, promote civic engagement and activism, and support a vibrant media environment which can serve as inspirations both locally and globally.

The Division worked alongside the EU Delegation to North Macedonia and the Macedonian Institute for Media for the **2021 EU-Western Balkans Media Literacy Conference** under the title of "Building resilience to disinformation." The conference gathered fact-checkers, youth, journalists, high-level officials and authorities from the Western Balkans and the EU to discuss disinformation, the challenges of professional journalism, the importance of media literacy in the new media environment and resilience strategies. The Division foresees a yearly rotation of the host country amongst the Western Balkans partners, in order to reinforce the truly regional approach necessary to build stronger democracies and regional resilience to FIMI threats. The conference published policy-oriented conclusions that stressed the need for a whole of society approach to build resilience, particularly in terms of including media literacy in formal education and recognizing professional journalism and media freedom as being essential components for democracies which hold governments and authorities accountable.
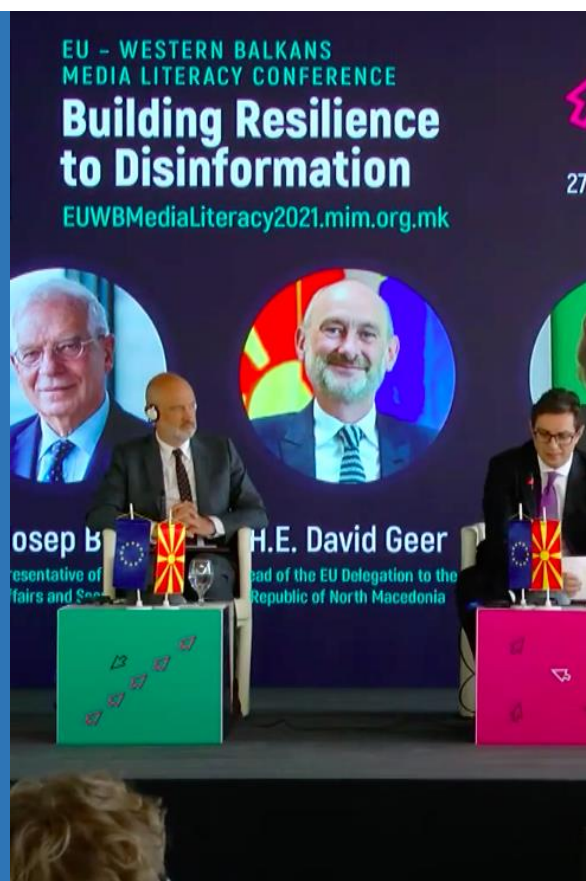
Objective 6: Cooperation with International Partners

The EEAS aims to cooperate with its international partners on all dimensions of FIMI. In all its efforts, the Division aims to build local capacity as well as international alliances and contributes to a shared understanding of, and coordinated policy response to the threat.

Cooperation with the EU Member States and international partners has always been a pillar of the Division's work and has further been stepped up in 2021. This includes both the cooperation on a

bilateral basis as well as engagement in international fora and networks, like the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism and NATO.

2021 was an important year for the bilateral cooperation between the EU and the US, which is further strengthened through the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC). Such bilateral cooperation on aspects of foreign information manipulation and interference has a considerable potential, not just for bilateral efforts and cooperation, but to at the same time act as a booster for international cooperation more broadly on specific aspects of tackling FIMI.

Considering the recent developments on the international stage and the reinforced engagement of the United Nations on the topic, close cooperation with like-minded partners remains a key benefit to explore the option to develop international norms to respond to FIMI, in full respect of fundamental rights and freedoms.

The Division consulted **international like-minded partners** and held various meetings with administrations from Canada, the US, NATO and others to exchange best practices and to identify instruments that have been tested and proved efficient abroad to tackle FIMI. Other stakeholders, such as platforms, academia, civil society and fact-checkers also provided valuable information through ongoing dialogues. Through a comprehensive consultation process with stakeholders from public administration, civil society and private industry, the Division performed critical analysis and gathered concrete suggestions for the drafting of a FIMI Toolbox, as key deliverable of the Strategic Compass and in line with EDAP initiatives. The Division's work on the FIMI toolbox not only enshrines important terminology to describe the threat, but it provides concrete guidance on how to implement the four cross-cutting priority dimensions (situational awareness, resilience building, disruption, CFSP/diplomatic responses) of the existing EU toolbox, by strengthening existing, as well as by putting in place new instruments that would effectively prevent, deter and respond to FIMI.

3. CONCLUSION

Foreign information manipulation and interference knows no borders and is not just a threat for one country, but for the international community and the international, rules-based order. As shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign actors have tried to exploit citizens' fears around the world to confuse the public and discredit efforts in democratic countries to curb the spread of the virus and attempted to portray authoritarian regimes as better equipped to deal with such a crisis, thus trying to undermine democracy as such.

The political and security challenge of FIMI needs to be addressed both at the regional, national, and international level. A whole-of-society approach is important to leverage the different capabilities and competences that lay with governments, civil society and private industry. International partners may have valuable experience in regional areas where the EU wants to increase its work on tackling FIMI; an awareness of ongoing initiatives by international partners in regions where the EU engages in is also of utmost importance to avoid duplication and – where possible – streamline efforts and cooperate. Therefore, only if the EU brings together all these stakeholders in a meaningful way can it tackle the threat in a comprehensive and effective manner.

In 2022, the Division will deepen its cooperation with EU institutions, Member States, international partners and private industry to have a commonly agreed-upon understanding and definition of the threat and develop an appropriate methodology. Working on the current policy issues of the day, such as the Russian Federation's war in Ukraine, work on developing the EU's toolbox to prevent, deter and respond and impose costs on FIMI perpetrators must continue. Aligned under the European Strategic Compass our work to share best-practices guidance with Member States and international partners to counter FIMI threats that destabilize the democratic order remains steadfast and ever important.

4. ANNEX

Division Organigram (as of December 2021)
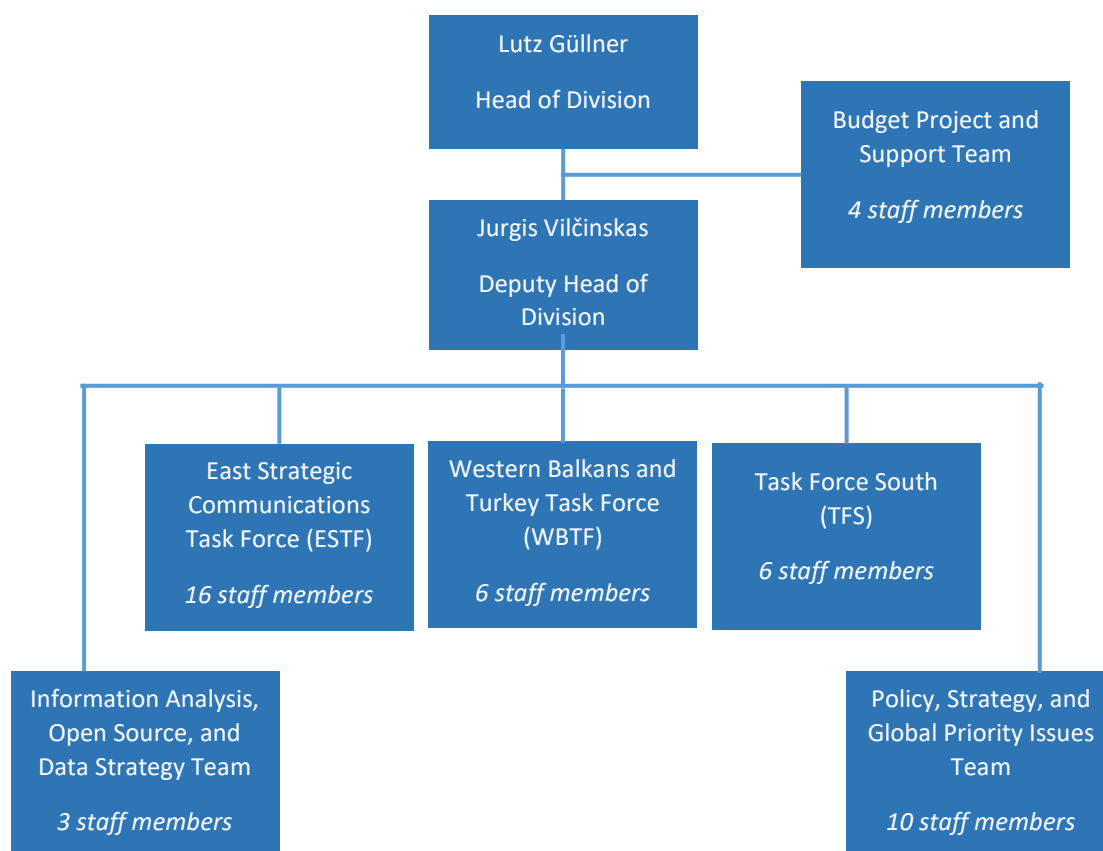
Historical Overview of the Division's Mandate

The European Commission defines "disinformation" – which the EEAS more specifically characterises as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) – as the "creation, presentation and dissemination of verifiably false or misleading information for the purposes of economic gain or intentionally deceiving the public, which may cause public harm" (Communication on tackling online disinformation, COM 2018; 236 final of 26 April 2018). Such public harm includes threats to democratic political and policy making processes, as well as to the protection of EU citizens' health, security, or the environment.

The efforts of the European Union (EU) to tackle disinformation and more recently FIMI began in March 2015 when the European Council Conclusions called for an Action plan on strategic communication to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns, resulting in the establishment of the East Stratcom Task Force (EUCO 11/15 Point 13). The Western Balkans Task Force and the Task Force South were established in 2017 to strengthen strategic communication activities in these regions and to monitor and analyse information environments.

Policy initiatives have further shaped and aligned the Division's work. The *2018 Action Plan against Disinformation* mandated the European Union and in particular the EEAS to cooperate closely with the EU Member States and international partners in the field of foreign information manipulation and interference. In this realm, the Division brought together EU Institutions and EU Member States through the Rapid Alert System (RAS) in 2019, which enables daily exchanges of information and policy

discussions. The RAS has also strengthened international cooperation with the G7 and NATO by setting up a dedicated International Cooperation Space on the RAS; likewise, the RAS has facilitated exchanges with civil society experts.

The objective of countering FIMI was again reinforced in December 2019 with the General Affairs Council Conclusions by outlining Division's three work strands: (1) pro-active communication and awareness raising, (2) support to independent media and (3) detect, analyse and challenge such activities of the threat actors. This explicitly broadened the mandate to new threat actors and geographic regions.

In 2020 the *European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP)* called to build on the EEAS work with EU Member States and international partners, most notably focussing on: 1) establishing a common conceptual understanding of the threat, 2) developing a common methodology and framework to systematically collect evidence of FIMI incidents and 3) enhancing the EU's toolbox to respond to the threat in an effective manner and impose costs on the perpetrators.

In June 2021, the European Court of Auditor presented its report "Disinformation affecting the EU; tackled but not tamed", which examined the EU's implementation of the 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation. Following this report, in July 2021, the General Affairs Council Conclusions on "Disinformation affecting the EU; tackled but not tamed" (CoA SR No 09/2021) recognised the Division's progress made on the implementation of its mandate, its role in supporting wider EU efforts to describe threat behaviours and counter FIMI on current policy priorities. The Council report highlighted the activities of the Division's flagship campaign 'EUvsDisinfo' to raise awareness of FIMI in the public sphere, and international coordination through the Rapid Alert System (RAS).

However, the Council Conclusions underline the need for proper monitoring and evaluation of the progress made in implementing the Division's actions to protect the EU, its Member States, citizens, institutions, bodies and agencies. Similarly, the Division notes that since its inception in 2015, it has received ad hoc requests from within the EU institutions, such as the European Parliament, through the annual Discharge Procedure, on key actions implemented by the EEAS in the field of communication (including strategic communication, countering disinformation and strengthening public diplomacy).