

European Countries Facing the Challenge of Foreign Influence on Democracy—Comparative Research

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Attempts by countries to influence other countries constitute a security challenge and a threat to democracy. European countries have identified this challenge as a threat to national security and are dealing with it through government actions, civilian activity, and cooperation between countries, reflecting different approaches and proposed solutions to the problem. This article seeks to examine the various methods that the major European countries are using to cope with this challenge and to assess the differences between them by means of their political culture. In addition, this article shows the differences resulting from the strength and type of threat. Thus, it will be possible to speculate about the possibilities and the limits of implementing different coping approaches according to their political-cultural character and whether these approaches can be applied in other countries, including Israel.

Keywords: Europe, Russia, influence, coping strategy, political culture, the battle for minds, democracy

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Introduction

The international community increasingly has begun to address efforts to exert influence in the digital and network age, particularly following the exposure of Russian attempts to sway the US elections in 2016 as well as their efforts to have influence in many European countries. Attempts to influence are defined as activating the dialogue on values, cultures, and ideas using various tools—including social media and traditional media—in order to change public opinion, disrupt, interfere with processes, and undermine stability.¹ Campaigns of disinformation and manipulation of political and public debate are intended to deepen social rifts, intensify internal and external tensions, undermine public trust in government institutions, and affect strategic decisions or election results in favor of the interests of those behind the campaigns.²

This research focuses on different European states in order to understand how they address at the national level efforts to exert influence, which has developed with technological advancements, the rise of social media, and the undermining of the notion of truth. This article does not deal with attempts to influence by individual agents, formal foreign policy, the use of economic tools or demonstrations of military power. Rather, it focuses on efforts to affect cognition by the streaming of information that is false, designed to influence, while using social media as an arena in which new conflicts are conducted. It should be noted that the European states all face different types of threats and challenges. Countries that are geographically closer to Russia have experienced a more significant strategic threat, while Russian-speaking communities have been more exposed to direct influence, and others have experienced a combination of internal and external threats.

Specifically, this research focuses on those countries that are fertile ground for Russian influence, the threats that they face, how they cope with them, and how to explain the differences in methods of coping between the countries. We considered a wide range of objectives and parameters, such as the country's geopolitical conditions, its geopolitical proximity to Russia and

1 Naja Bentzen, "Foreign Influence Operations in the EU," *EPRS – European Parliamentary Research Service*, July 2018, p. 1, <https://bit.ly/2ORBBuI>.

2 Andrew Weisburd, Clint Watts, and J.M. Berger, "Trolling for Trump: How Russia is Trying to Destroy our Democracy," *War on the Rocks*, November 6, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2iyw0fU>.

to its strategic routes, the existence of a Russian minority within the country and its connection to Russia, ideological competition, economic interests, and the unique political culture of each. The countries can be divided into three groups: the Baltic states of Estonia, and Latvia; the Nordic states of Sweden and Denmark; and the Western European states of Germany, France, and Britain. This regional division also facilitates the political-cultural research, which indicates shared values of the countries within each group.

Methodological Background

In order to answer the research questions, we have relied on concepts that serve the course of the debate as well as on several research approaches, since the ways in which the threats are perceived in Europe differ from that of the United States or Israel. An important concept used in this research is that of “political culture.” Political culture refers to the collection of values, emotions, and perceptions that reflect the nature of a country’s political conduct. In comparative research, political culture is an aid to understanding a country’s past and present behavior and to forecasting future behavior.³ This concept facilitates a comparison of how different countries react to the threats, their attitudes to values such as democracy and freedom of expression, and the steps civil society can take to address the threats.

Comparative political research attempts to combine knowledge about different countries and apply it to reality through analysis of political processes and their causes. One possible approach is to look at the political culture.⁴ Political culture includes civic orientation at three levels. The first level, the political system, refers to how citizens perceive, accept, and trust the values and organizations constituting the political system. The second level, the process of formulating policy, refers to the expectations of how politics should be conducted and the link between the individual and the political process. The third level, the policies and their inputs and outputs, is also connected to public expectations of government and includes its policy

3 Gabriel Almond, “Political Socialization and Political Culture” in *Comparative Politics Today: A World View*, ed. Gabriel Abraham Almond and G. Bingham Powell (New York: Harper and Collins, 1992), pp. 33–39.

4 M. I. Lichbach and A. S. Zuckerman, “Research Traditions and Theory,” in *Comparative Politics: An Introduction*, ed. M. I. Lichbach and A. S. Zuckerman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 3–9.

goals and how the government works to achieve them.⁵ Together, the three levels form the citizens' perceptual framework of democracy and their place within it, in a way that provides insight into democratic national strategic decisions, as well as the degree of successful assimilation of any strategy in accordance with cultural boundaries.

Human progress in the field of technology has led to a connected digital world, which is expressed, among other things, by social media, in ways that link different cultures and facilitate direct and indirect influences. Today, as perceived by the European Union, influence includes the use of information and its disruption by both covert and overt possibilities that often overlap and can be used simultaneously, as illustrated in figure 1 below:

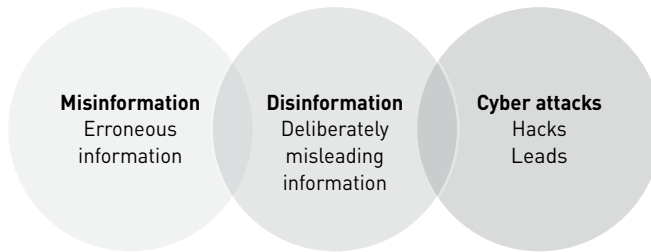


Figure 1: Overlapping Interference

Source: adapted from the European Parliament Research Service, *Council of Europe*, 2017. Misinformation is defined as information that is incorrect or misleading, but not intentional, while disinformation includes spreading deliberately false information, particularly when supplied by a government.⁶

The Russian information warfare strategy in Europe consists of backing anti-EU parties, acquiring foreign media companies, and supporting extreme political movements. Russia's strategy also involves disseminating disinformation, by spreading half-truths, lies, and conflicting versions of events, in order to confuse and undermine the basis of rational debate. Russia's aim is to strengthen its own image, justify its own actions and policies, and weaken rival narratives, such as Western democracy, the European Union, or NATO, in areas under its influence. Russia operates in this manner throughout

⁵ Ibid, p. 44.

⁶ Bentzen, "Foreign Influence Operations in the EU," p. 2.

the year, and not only during elections, although elections are particularly sensitive periods that offer many opportunities to exert influence.⁷

These threats of influence have lead many researchers to attempt to map the ways of coping with them based on various patterns. The model presented by Maria Hellman and Charlotte Wagnsson in their study of threats at the political culture level is useful for the purposes of this article. They examine four coping approaches: confrontation, blocking, naturalizing or reinforcing the national narrative, and ignoring. Their research proposes a series of options that liberal democracies can adopt as a response to information warfare, especially within the context of the Russian operations.⁸

The first approach they consider is confrontation in response to the spreading of opposing narratives. The strategy behind this model includes actively creating counter narratives.⁹ For example, an intelligence operation could disseminate information that directly attacks the hostile narrative, as the British General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) did when they set up a team to create a campaign of counter influence against ISIS. The British cyber department sought to exert internal influence by disseminating the information among local population groups who were at risk of being radicalized by ISIS and by means of external influence by denying services, blocking websites, and interfering with broadcasts to deter individuals or groups.¹⁰

The naturalizing approach is when a country that is threatened disseminates a positive national narrative of its own. It resembles public diplomacy that is focused solely on the internal context; that is, the country presents itself and its world view in a positive light to foreign audiences and thus gains sympathy without competing with or condemning other narratives.¹¹

The blocking approach is a strategy of protecting the national narrative by blocking the narrative of another country. The activity of the country that blocks is defined as being “selective” of the information that is spread by

7 Maria Hellman and Charlotte Wagnsson, “How can European States Respond to Russian Information Warfare? An Analytical Framework,” *European Security* 26, no. 2 (2017): 156.

8 Ibid., 154.

9 Ibid., 158.

10 David Bond, “Britain Preparing to Launch New Cyber Warfare Unit,” *Financial Times*, September 21, 2018, <https://on.ft.com/2HRkcA0>.

11 Hellman and Wagnsson, “How can European States Respond,” pp. 159–160.

the rival country; in other words, it prevents public access to information disseminated by the other country by blocking its broadcasting stations or websites.¹²

Ignoring is a strategy of a lack of response to what appears to be a false and manipulative narrative. This model is based on the belief that a strong democracy has sufficient means to cope with external manipulation of information. It should be noted that ignoring does not necessarily mean no response. Rather, the response focuses on strengthening civil society and training professionals in sensitive areas how to critically understand visual and textual media.¹³

While dealing with this challenge, NATO Stratcom realized that interference in elections is a major threat to the democracy of the Western world. It recently published a study that specifically focuses on the advantages of applying a strategic communications mind-set in dealing with the challenges of interference. They see the common stratagems as laundering, point and shriek, flooding, and polarization. Laundering refers to legitimizing false information or altering the origin, mostly known as “fake news.” Point and shriek refers to injustices within targeted social groups and heightening emotions among them. Flooding causes confusion by providing contradictory information, and polarization uses deceptive identities to support opposing sides or to lead opinions to greater extremes.¹⁴

The way they suggest dealing with interference while protecting the elections is by deterring the players through reducing or removing vulnerabilities. Moreover, the establishment of detection and early warning mechanisms is required, with coordination and cooperation for efficient actions, as well as combining education and raising public awareness for further effects.¹⁵

Four case studies were examined in this research: Sweden, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. First, the countries were assessed for possible risks to the elections and whether they have established functional mechanisms while expanding responsibilities of state bodies relating to the information sphere. The governments in Latvia and Finland, for example, have educated media organizations as part of the building resilience. Afterwards they built

¹² Ibid. p. 161.

¹³ Ibid, p. 162.

¹⁴ NATO Stratcom, “Protecting Elections: A Strategic Communications Approach”, June 2019, pp. 9-12, <https://bit.ly/2KGYiCE>.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

networks of partners and monitored the information. Raising this subject higher in the political agenda has been the result of applying the Stratcom mindset.¹⁶

Threats of Influence on the European Countries

The European countries define and perceive the range of threats of influence as mainly various geopolitical points of view and opportunities. Threats of influence, including disinformation, misinformation, and fake news are observed mainly on social media. They find expression through “trolls,” referring to users who operate fake accounts and post paid content; and “bots,” which are algorithms that disseminate content on social media automatically or semi-automatically and can target specific population segments or groups.¹⁷ The threats of influence are perceived as being mainly foreign, although they may also be internal. Distinguishing between threats is sometimes problematic, artificial, or impossible, because threats often feed on one another, even subconsciously. In Europe, there is broad reference to the Russian threat and its alleged use of information warfare on social media and traditional media, but sometimes the source of the threats actually lies with internal forces and is consciously or unconsciously manipulated by Russia.

The European nations classify the threats by the degree of severity. The Western European countries deal with threats of influence on the democratic process and public belief in the democratic system, its institutions, and its leaders. The Baltic states face threats of influence that could lead to war with Russia, as was the case in the Crimean Peninsula. In contrast, the fledgling democracies that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union are worried about Russia’s ambitions to take control of strategic areas of their territory.¹⁸

The regional division used in this article—Baltic states, Nordic states, and the Western European states—can help us to understand the similarities in the nature of the threats. Estonia and Latvia, which share borders with Russia, are at the forefront of the struggle against Russian influence today as well as historically and demonstrate a focused and intense approach for coping with it. A significant part of the Kremlin’s influence campaigns are directed at the

16 Ibid., 16-18.

17 Andrew Higgins, “Effort to Expose Russia’s ‘Troll Army’ Draws Vicious Retaliation,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2HBWitH>.

18 Josh Rubin, “NATO Fears that this Town will be the Epicenter of Conflict with Russia,” *The Atlantic*, January 24, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2HyUK3x>.

Russian-speaking minorities residing in those countries, accounting for 27 percent of the Latvian population and 25 percent of the Estonian population, although the Russian activity is not only targeted at them.¹⁹

The Baltic states are coping with the threat that the population will divide along ethnic lines so that Russia can establish and maintain its control of the local Russian diaspora—which can serve as a tool for the Kremlin. In addition, Russia is trying to instill among the population in those countries a general mistrust of the governments of the Baltic states, by presenting them as precarious ethnocratic regimes that are facing a rise in fascism. At the same time, Russia's interests are to damage democratic methods in general and particularly the way in which citizens perceive democracy; thus Putin's Russia and its successes is presented as a more stable regime model.

Russia has tried to strategically influence the alliances of the Baltic states with the European Union and NATO, by spreading false information about the citizens of these states or about the soldiers of the forces participating in NATO and the Baltic armies, as the Estonian intelligence service revealed in a report published in 2018.²⁰ Here Russia presents the Baltic governments as puppets of supra-national organizations that are allegedly trying to push Russia into a military conflict.²¹ Moreover, through its media and social networks, Russia actively denies the culture, history, traditions, and achievements of the Baltic states and seeks to strengthen its own status in those countries and prepare the ground for preventing any internal opposition should a military conflict between the Baltic states and Russia occur.²²

Sweden and Denmark are both test cases for Russian influence in the Nordic states. Since 2014, Russia has been trying in various ways to influence Swedish policy on its cooperation with NATO and the possibility that it will join the alliance, as well as on Sweden's support—as well as

19 Tomas Cizik, "Russia Tailors its Information Warfare to Specific Countries," *European Security Journal*, November 6, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2wbruJF>.

20 Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (Välisluureamet), "International Security and Estonia 2018," <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport-2018-ENG-web.pdf>.

21 Mike Winnerstig, ed., *Tools of Destabilization: Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence in the Baltic States* (FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency: December 2014), p. 4.

22 Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, "Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security," S. PRT 115–21 (2018), pp. 101f.

of the European Union—to Ukraine following Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and the ensuing international criticism.²³ Russia’s strategic objective is to reduce NATO’s presence in countries that are geographically close to it. In the Swedish case, Russia has disseminated misleading information that sows doubts in the ability of the Swedish political system and tries to incite Swedish society through social media posts that criticize Sweden’s acceptance of refugees, as they tried to do in August 2018 just before the Swedish general elections.²⁴ Denmark, a NATO member, shares with Sweden the geographical link between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, which is also the shortest sea route between Russia, Europe, and North America.²⁵ As a result of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and Denmark’s support for international sanctions against Russia, Denmark is now in a position of needing to cope with increased Russian attempts to influence Danish public opinion and to shift its perceptions of Russia. Denmark’s veto on laying a gas pipeline in its territorial waters as part of its Nord Stream 2 project also triggered Russian attempts to influence. According to researchers, Russia would consider any Danish decision to prohibit the pipeline as the result of anti-Russian feeling among the Danish population, which Russia perceives as being nurtured by the United States.²⁶

The large Western European countries—Germany, France, and England—are mainly attacked externally by Russia and are targeted because of their central position in the European Union and their status as flag-bearers for liberal values. The broad policy of admitting refugees, particularly of Germany, has led Russia to intensify its efforts to influence its domestic arena. Russia is also helped by the internal ideological crises in these countries, which has strengthened the far right parties and their messages on social media. For example, a spokesman of the right-wing German party “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) claimed that information appearing on social media—even

23 Michael Birnbaum, “Sweden is Taking on Russian Meddling ahead of Fall Elections,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 2018, <https://wapo.st/2QkVGLB>.

24 Anna Knutsson, “Nya narrativ utmanar omvärldens bild av Sverige,” *Svenska Institutet*, June 18, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2VWmq1c>.

25 Alexandr Golts, “The Arctic: A Clash of Interests or Clash of Ambitions,” in *Russia in the Arctic*, ed. Stephen J. Blank (Carlisle, PA: The Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2011), p. 48, <https://bit.ly/2HOo5po>.

26 Danish Defense Intelligence Service, “Intelligence Risk Assessment 2018,” December 21, 2018, p. 21, <https://bit.ly/2QjX4y2>.

if it was false or incorrect—provided a generally true message, irrespective of its origin.²⁷ In France, leaks from the social media account of Emanuel Macron during his election to the French presidency, which were published on WikiLeaks, even though some items were false; the incitement against Macron and his activity after his election; and information about the French Police spread during the “Yellow Vests” protests in 2018, which can perhaps also be attributed to external sources, are all examples of the challenges that face these countries.²⁸

Germany, France, and England are also coping at various levels with the spread of extreme Muslim ideology and terrorist acts motivated by ISIS propaganda when the organization represented a significant threat to these countries. ISIS’s tactic was to exploit ideological, social, economic, and political weaknesses among the target audience in those countries.²⁹ Moreover, Britain had also been dealing with efforts to influence the referendum on EU membership, which led to Brexit and served the interests of those seeking to weaken the European Union both internally and externally.

Ways of Coping

In the countries mentioned above, we examined the political and governmental methods of handling the threats of influence. These methods include setting up bodies or links between various ministries, educating citizens and senior political figures, and working with the media to combat the dissemination of disinformation and fake news. In addition, we studied the place of civil society in each country within this context. We present the main methods of dealing with the threat and separately discuss the most prominent or unique activities. The methods tend to reflect the approaches that each country adopted, so that the holistic approach represents a balanced combination of approaches; the data security and cyber method represents the confrontational approach, and so on, as discussed in the section connecting approaches to political culture. Several complementary directions of action also took place, some with greater impact, such as educating the public on critical

27 Karolin Schwarz, “Ist Doch Nur Satire?,” *CORRECTIV*, September 9, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2VMVYvI>.

28 “French Yellow Vests, the Far Right, and the Russian Connection,” *Tango Noir*, December 12, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2wgYxMs>.

29 HM Government, “National Security Capability Review,” (March 2018), pp. 5–6, <https://bit.ly/2HnHafL>.

consumption of news, and some with less. It should be noted that the impact of the various efforts is not discussed here.

The Holistic Approach

The holistic approach looks at the system beyond its components and creates a broad, inclusive overview. One country that uses the holistic approach to tackle the challenge of influence and combines a number of courses of action into an organized national policy is Denmark, which is highly aware of external efforts, mainly by Russia, to influence it. According to Defense Minister Claus Hjort Frederiksen, within Denmark, it is possible to identify the Russian “propaganda designed to improve the image of Russia and its activities, and undermine our belief in ourselves.”³⁰

In September 2017, Denmark set up an inter-ministerial body to strengthen cooperation between the various ministries of defense and justice as well as intelligence and national security agencies and to coordinate activities inside and outside the government in order to address the threat of influence. A year later, the government published its “Eleven-Step Plan,” designed to provide steps to reinforce Danish opposition to attempts to influence.³¹ The next stage has been to strengthen the monitoring of disinformation in the country by training people in the media, while supporting the efforts of the Danish Security Service and Defense Intelligence to respond to campaigns of influence. This approach led to energetic organizing in order to cope with the efforts of external influence in the period leading up to the Danish elections in 2019. As part of the efforts to deal with the threat, assessments of threats and risks were published, as a result of cooperation between Danish intelligence bodies, the Ministry of Economy, and Ministry of Internal Security, while national preparedness to deal with external campaigns prior to the elections reached emergency levels. The government also announced that it intended to advise the various political parties and their leaders on the threats and how to handle them. It stressed the importance of dialogue and cooperation with the media, including full respect for the core principles of press freedom and independence. At the same time, Danish legislation

30 “Denmark to Educate Soldiers in Combatting Disinformation,” *EU vs Disinformation*, August 23, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2M2YuhX>.

31 “Strengthened Safeguards against Foreign Influence on Danish Elections and Democracy,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark*, <https://bit.ly/2U0aHmR>.

on foreign influence was amended, while the government also took steps to raise awareness of these threats among the population.³²

Data Security and Cyber Protection

This approach centers around the identification, exposure, and blocking of information warfare through data security and cyber protection. It involves political-security activities by civil society organizations, as well as private companies. This approach is characteristic of the confrontational approach, which sets up a counternarrative to influence efforts and actively fights them. The importance of data security is based in the understanding that leaks of genuine information are central to the threat of influence, in which the targets of attack are not necessarily security-related but rather political parties and politicians.

Britain is a leader in using the confrontational policy, due to its experience in dealing with extreme ideological influences and external interference in its EU membership referendum. It combines a political and civilian approach and includes a broad cybersecurity strategy formulated by the National Cyber Security Center (NCSC). As a result of this strategy, political parties were warned of the risk of Russian hackers and attempts to influence social media. The NCSC cooperates with individuals, companies, and organizations by “sharing information about cybersecurity.”³³ In addition, the Government Communications Service (GCS) published a toolkit called RESIST intended to aid media people in handling the threat of disinformation. It includes training on how to identify a wide range of fake news items, prevent their dissemination, and—unlike other guides—how to develop a response. Disinformation affects the work of organizations as well as the general public, and the response is based on both short-term and long-term strategic communication. For example, if the disinformation requires an immediate response, the toolkit suggests to distribute a counter narrative, or a fact-based correction in the traditional media and on social media. On the other hand, misleading information also requires a more coherent, ongoing response of disseminating a strategic narrative in the information space.³⁴

32 Ibid.

33 William James, “UK Political Parties Warned of Russian Hacking Threat: Report,” *Reuters*, March 12, 2017, <https://reut.rs/2JZJhf1>.

34 Government Communication Service, “RESIST: Counter-Disinformation Toolkit,” (2019), <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/resist-counter-disinformation-toolkit/>.

Many countries strengthen their defenses against cyber threats using this approach. For example, Latvia set up the National Computer Security Incident Response Team (CERT.LV), which works with the government cyber authority and includes over 600 IT experts from government institutions and local authorities. This cooperation yields cyber protection and warnings and includes workshops to raise awareness on the subjects of influence and disinformation.³⁵

Educating the Public

Teaching the public to take a critical approach, raise doubts about information on social media and other media outlets, check sources, dates, and so on, are all means of dealing with the threats as part of the method of ignoring them. As part of strengthening democracy, the state and civil society can educate the public in this method, which enables ordinary citizens to distinguish attempts to influence them and handle them without having to confront the hostile narrative.

This method of handling the threat by educating the public is most common in Sweden and is apparent both in government policy and in civil society activity. The Swedish government works through a unit in the Ministry of Defense, called the MSB (the Civil Contingencies Agency). The MSB focuses on public awareness, and prior to the elections, it educated senior figures and government bodies, including the Central Elections Authority and the police, on the need to be prepared for possible interference and influence on the elections process and for developing the ability to identify weaknesses in the system. In reference to Swedish policy, which champions the idea of not using fire to respond to fire, the head of global monitoring and analysis in the MSB, Mikael Tofvesson said that “it’s like fighting with a pig in mud. You both get dirty, but the pig will think it’s quite nice.”³⁶ As a result, Sweden chooses to focus on democracy and freedom of expression by providing the public with correct information as the best means of defense. The Swedish Institute, a public institute that promotes interest and trust in Sweden, has developed a detailed educational program called Fake ≠ Fact,

35 Gederts Gelzis, “Latvia Launches Cyber Defence Unit to Beef up Online Security,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 4, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2wbOoR2>.

36 Emma Löfgren, “How Sweden’s Getting Ready for the Election-year Information War,” *The Local*, November 7, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2KULjyr>.

which can be freely downloaded and is intended to provide teachers with the tools for teaching critical thinking to the younger generation and thus protect Swedish society from false information and propaganda.³⁷

Another country that invests in educating the public is France. *Entre Les Lignes* (“Between the Lines”) is an organization of a hundred journalists, photographers, and volunteers from the French media who give workshops designed to encourage pupils to be wary of the sources of information reaching them, particularly on the internet.³⁸

A study by IREX, an organization that specializes in development and in global education, examined the effectiveness of educating the younger generation as a means of dealing with influencing specifically in Ukraine. Although Ukraine is not included in the research for this paper, IREX’s study showed the ability of pupils in eighth and ninth grade to identify false information after taking lessons on techniques of media literacy led by the organization. Following the training, pupils were able to identify twice as many hate messages and could identify 18 percent more fake news than pupils who did not receive the training.³⁹

Coping Through Research

Research institutes, universities, and colleges all are engaging in research on attempts to influence and different means of coping. The research can be divided into theoretical research and research on public discourse. Theoretical research focuses on illustrating and explaining terms and analyzing test cases, while the research on the public discourse analyzes public opinion, as expressed mainly on social media, in order to identify efforts to disrupt and interfere. This research could help to reinforce the national narrative by creating explanations for hostile narratives, facilitating the presentation of a social-academic narrative of progress, and strengthening the public’s knowledge and its faith in the truth.

Stratcom is a NATO research institute in Riga, Latvia. It combines theoretical and operative research in order to achieve a better comprehend the challenges, the limits of influence through social media, and to understand

37 “Fake ≠ Fact,” *Sharing Sweden*, December 2017, <https://bit.ly/2weRmEe>.

38 *Entre les Lignes*: Association D’Éducation aux Medias et a L’information, *Entre les Lignes*, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2EsfWpL>.

39 Sasha Ingber, “Students in Ukraine Learn How to Spot Fake Stories, Propaganda and Hate Speech,” *NPR*, March 22, 2019, <https://n.pr/2HOIKLj>.

Russian activity in Europe. The Baltic Center for Media Excellence is prominent for its work in identifying fake news and propaganda. The center also operates as an advisory body and develops workshops on dealing with disinformation and fake news and education for critical thinking.⁴⁰ Other research institutes, such as the Danish Institute for International Studies, mainly focus on theoretical studies of foreign intervention and disinformation. At the same time, the Danish Institute also engages in research on how to deal with such intervention and disinformation and presents its findings and means of identifying these activities on social media, particularly to high school students. Copenhagen University also deals with these issues, focusing on inter-disciplinary research on digital information warfare and the function of public debate.⁴¹

Civil society in the United Kingdom demonstrates a similar line of action, by looking at the discourse, while the universities tend to focus on internet research. Edinburgh University, for example studies the activities of Russian bots. These studies have exposed attempts to exert influence on the referendum on EU membership (“Brexit”).⁴² The independent Institute for Statecraft also researches Russian attempts to influence as well as the war on disinformation.

Restricting Attempts to Influence

The approach of blocking attempts to influence is manifested by restrictions on broadcasting channels, websites, users, or content. These steps are widely accepted in the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia, although other countries also engage in similar restrictions, albeit at a lower level and more focused. Some countries adopt this approach as a result of the position of the social media companies in their countries. In discussions on disinformation and influence, various governments in Europe and the European Union have stressed the responsibility of companies, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google for allowing the misleading, inciteful, or fake information.⁴³

40 “Our Mission,” *Baltic Center for Media Excellence*, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2WZteBf>.

41 “Exploring Digital Disinformation and its Effects in the 21st Century,” *Digital Disinformation – Department of Political Science*, <https://disinfo.ku.dk/>.

42 Matthew Weaver et al., “Russia Used Hundreds of Fake Accounts to Tweet about Brexit, Data Shows,” *Guardian*, November 14, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2K17b9F>.

43 “Facebook, Twitter doing too Little against Disinformation: EU,” *Phys*, February 28, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YDg8Ku>.

The main way of dealing with the problem is by adapting the algorithms of these platforms to identify and stop the spread of misleading posts and by activating automatic tools to identify automated activity or activity that breaches community rules. For example, the community rules on Facebook prohibit users from having more than one profile, and therefore each “bot” or paid fake user is in breach of the terms.

Estonia and Latvia made a strategic decision to limit content published outside of social media. Thus, these countries supervise Russian media channels, impose fines for incitement, and sometimes even block the channels on accusations of having breached local media laws.⁴⁴ Estonia has even created a media alternative, which broadens the struggle against the hostile narrative. In 2015, a public Russian-language TV channel was established in Estonia, which broadcasts claims that counter pro-Russian broadcasts and thus reduces the gap and the alienation felt by the country’s Russian-speaking population.⁴⁵

Political Responses to Efforts to Influence

The response of the political system and politicians—whether by raising public awareness or by training senior figures (as seen in one of the Danish initiatives)—is an important dimension of the struggle against efforts to influence. Public statements made by political leaders represent the confrontational approach, as they publicly present the hostile narrative and its purpose, sometimes with a warning against these attempts to intervene. For example, Foreign Minister Edgar Rinkēvičs of Latvia often warns against outside influence, as does the president of Estonia, who even stresses Russia’s role in the activity.⁴⁶ France’s President Emanuel Macron is known for his statements against fake news and disinformation, as is Britain’s Prime Minister Theresa May, who turned directly to Russia during the parliamentary elections and stated bluntly, “We know what you’re doing, and it won’t succeed,” in reference to Russia’s use of digital warfare.⁴⁷

44 “Fighting Disinformation in the Baltic States,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, July 6, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2JCENoP>.

45 Ibid.

46 Lally Weymouth, “‘Russia Is a Threat’: Estonia Frets about Its Neighbor,” *Washington Post*, March 24, 2017, <https://wapo.st/2EseSCq>.

47 Jon Craig, “PM warns Putin: We Know What You’re Doing and It Won’t Succeed,” *Sky News*, November 14, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2zWIsAB>.

In addition to making public statements, public figures also take their own steps to fight the challenges of influencing. For example, Estonian public figures have announced that they refuse to be interviewed for Russian state media because “there is no reason to give interviews, when the story has already been written.”⁴⁸ In this manner, they sought to undermine the legitimacy of Russian media and the trust in it. Similarly, in Germany, party leaders (excluding the right-wing AfD) signed a “gentlemen’s agreement” before the elections, in which they promised not to use bots on social media, an agreement that was indeed honored.⁴⁹

Legislation

Legislation and regulations are tools that reflect responsibility of the state as being at the center of the struggle to curb influence. Researchers consider this as similar to blocking, since it limits certain activities and may encounter criticism. Germany leads in this kind of legislation. In 2017, it passed the Network Enforcement Act, designed to combat the spread of fake news and hate speech via the internet. In an unusual step for Western democracies, the law stated that networks such as Facebook and Twitter must remove fake news items that encourage hatred or that have “criminal” content within 24 hours after posting, otherwise they could face fines of fifty million euros. So far no actual fines have been reported. The UN condemned the German law saying it bordered on censorship and damaged freedom of the press.⁵⁰

In July 2018, France, which has faced attempts to influence its presidential elections, passed a law against the dissemination of fake news, particularly during elections. The law states that if fake news is published during an election campaign, the legal authorities will be able to block content or the site where the content appears. The law also demands greater transparency regarding sources of funding for websites.⁵¹

48 “Estonia’s Lessons for Fighting Russian Disinformation,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 24, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qJKg8s>.

49 *Make Germany Great Again – Kremlin, Alt-Right and International Influences in the 2017 German Elections* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2017), pp. 12–13.

50 Erik Brattberg and Tim Maurer, *Russia’s Elections Interference: Europe’s Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2018), p. 20.

51 Michael Ross Fiorentino, “France Passes Controversial ‘Fake News’ Law,” *Euronews*, November 22, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FBn0U7>.

Checking the Facts

Fact-checking websites are another expression of how civil society deals with false information and attempts to influence. While the impact of this method is not great, as it is a narrowly focused response to information that has already been published, it does present an active debate on the truth and options for internal cooperation. For example, in France, sixteen different journals, including *Le Monde*, *Google NewsLab*, and *First Draft*, cooperate to check facts. The project is called CrossCheck and it focuses mainly on election campaigns, with the purpose of informing the public about the information needed. It does this by sharing with the public its opinions and news items in real time. This cooperation encourages exchange of ideas while fact-checking, at the expense of the competition between the journals.⁵² Another example is the independent German blog called BildBlog, which focuses on verifying information and video clips on social media. The activity of those who report on this blog about false news items increases the public's awareness about disinformation and encourages cautious attitude to the flow of information.

Between Political Culture and Approaches to Coping

It is possible to map how countries address the problem of foreign influence by analyzing their different approaches in regards to their political culture. Gary Schaub, a researcher from the Center for Military Studies at Copenhagen University, argues that Russia's disinformation does not have much effect in Denmark as it does elsewhere because of the Danish political culture. According to Schaub, "The difficulty derives from the Scandinavian culture, that builds consensus and social robustness, which are an obstacle to attempts at influence."⁵³

Both Estonia and Latvia have a similar political culture, having emerged as fledgling democracies after the fall of the Soviet Union. Their perception of democracy is intertwined with notions of unity and preserving their democratic principles and its basic fundamentals, and not of promoting advanced values as in the West, together with the shaky progress of civil society and its efforts

52 "CrossCheck – a Collaborative Journalism Project," *First Draft*, <https://firstdraftnews.org/project/crosscheck/>.

53 Robbin Laird, "Shaping a Way Ahead in Nordic Defense," *Second Line of Defense*, October 15, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2X1O4jH>.

against the values of the institutional political system.⁵⁴ Both countries have demonstrated a pattern of strategic choices that champion the blocking approach. As already mentioned above, for example, Estonia established a Russian-language television channel whose purpose is to publish counter narratives to the Russian ones, thus constructing a unique Estonian narrative. Similarly, Lithuania, the neighbor of Estonia and Latvia, also has sought to block the Russian TV channel, RT. The blocking approach is not suitable for countries that have a political culture based on a progressive and developed liberal concept of democracy and its values, as it could be perceived by the public in those countries as “cultural imperialism” or censorship. However, fledgling democracies, such as the Baltic states, recognize its importance as they seek to defend themselves with various methods, including blocking.⁵⁵

Since 1990, Germany has shaped a political culture whose main purpose has been to unite East and West Germany. Combining the different political cultures of West and East Germany, this process required a high degree of commitment to basic democratic values and tolerance based on Germany’s previous historical experience. Nevertheless, research indicates that the political culture of the two parts of Germany are still different, with eastern Germany having less faith in democracy than the western part.⁵⁶ Thus, it becomes clear that in its current way of coping with the challenge of external influence, Germany prefers to reinforce the German narrative and chooses options that increase transparency on the internet. The choice to emphasize its national narrative is strengthened by Germany’s political and cultural leadership in the European Union and by its having a history of acknowledging its internal narratives and understanding their power and significance. This understanding has led Germany to block the spread of narratives that it deems threatening as well as to pass legislation imposing fines on social media for the spread of fake news.

The Nordic countries are characterized by a culture of self-criticism in the fields of society, politics, and economics. This criticism reflects an open political culture that believes in democracy and the power of the people,

54 Martin Stefek, “Post-Communist Central East European Political Culture in the Era of Neoliberalism,” *Delhi Business Review* 14, no. 1 (2013): 25.

55 Hellman and Wagnsson, “How can European States Respond to Russian Information Warfare?,” p. 161.

56 Russell J. Dalton and Steven Weldon, “Germans Divided? Political Culture in a United Germany,” *German Politics* 19, no. 1 (2010): 9–23.

based on the perception that participatory democracy is a progressive and rational project. This perception means that education occupies an elevated position in Nordic cultural values.⁵⁷ Thus, it is possible to understand, for example, why Sweden generally chooses the strategy to ignore the efforts to influence. This choice emanates mainly from a belief in democratic institutions and their power and in the belief that non-intervention and the maintenance of open dialogue strengthen the credibility of these institutions in society.⁵⁸ At the same time, depending upon the ability of citizens to deal with foreign narratives could ultimately become a weakness, particularly when Sweden relies on the traditional media as an objective player in the defense of democracy. For example, when external efforts to exert influence cross the boundaries of the internet in Sweden, the state takes steps to strengthen the local narrative, as it did in the media coverage of a joint Sweden-NATO military exercise.⁵⁹ The special relationship between Sweden and NATO is a target for Russian efforts, and when they attack the positive narrative that Sweden tries to portray, this only reinforces Sweden's interest in projecting internally positive narratives.

Britain, whose political culture was the subject of a study by Gabriel Almond and which is still relevant today, has a dynamic political culture based on its status as an island, rich in history and wars, and as a democracy that has progressed by evolution rather than revolution.⁶⁰ Britain leads the confrontational approach, choosing an operative strategy that invests in spreading counter narratives to hostile ones. This approach suits Britain's political culture, which believes in its ability to lead the international system and in its importance vis-à-vis both the United States and Europe. While British democracy faces threats from several directions, it tries to define its narrative in an era of internal political change. In particular, this is the case given the choice to leave the European Union on one hand, and internal opposition to the results of the referendum that followed, on the other hand.

57 Ainur Elmgren and Norbert Götze, "'Power Investigation: The Political Culture of Nordic Self-Understanding': Introduction," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 21, no. 3 (2013): 338–340.

58 Ibid, p. 162.

59 Reuters, "Fears of Russia: Sweden Starts a Military Exercise with NATO Support," *Ynet*, September 14, 2017 [in Hebrew], <https://bit.ly/2VZATTW>.

60 Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).

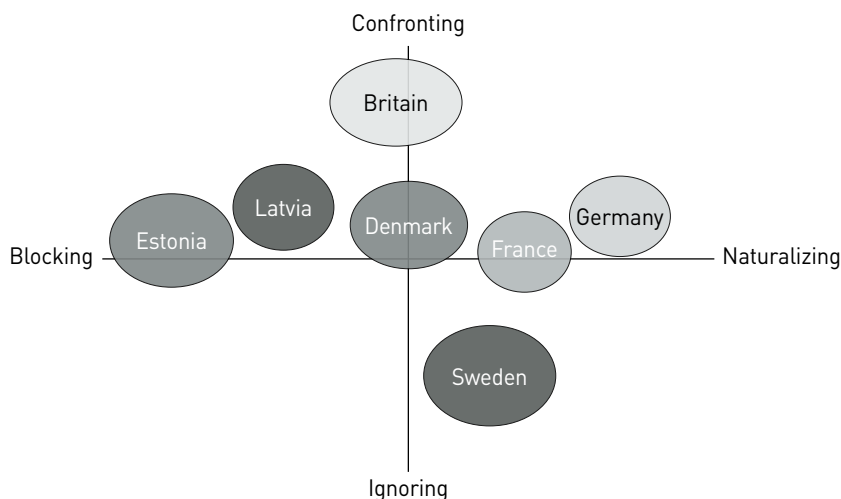


Figure 2: Choice of Approaches

Figure 2 above shows a possible distribution of the seven countries examined in this article and their modes of dealing with foreign influence. The graphic presentation shows the proximity of the countries to the various approaches. Thus, Denmark is at the center in order to illustrate its holistic approach, which integrates the various approaches. The propinquity of the countries can be explained by their political culture and the choice of the strategic narrative of each country, its citizens, and history. By looking at the picture as a whole, we can examine the various means used to deal with the threat and the possibility of adopting them in other countries, including Israel.

Conclusion

The different ways of dealing with the challenge of influence as presented here suggests several conclusions. Cooperation between the government, political parties, politicians, the intelligence and security communities, media companies, and civil society is needed so that each country can address the threat. Denmark is a good example of such cooperation, but other forms of cooperation also can contribute to managing this phenomenon.

In each country studied, the perception of the threat differs, even though the threats are similar (originating in Russia) and this affects each country's chosen strategies. For example, Sweden does not perceive Russia's attempts to undermine the European Union as a threat that requires a counternarrative,

unlike Germany, which puts the European Union and its values at the forefront of its national priorities. This is part of the definition of the strategic importance of narratives and the willingness of civil society to cooperate according to the limits of democracy and its values.

This article presents one possible way of analyzing how European countries are facing the challenge of foreign influence and discusses the main approaches and reasons for each country's choice of approach, shaped by the political culture of each—the British confrontational approach to Russia; Sweden's ignoring of Russia, Estonia's decision to block Russian influence, and the reinforcing or naturalizing of the national narrative in Germany. The different countries create strategies that combine approaches based on their historical experience and how their societies perceive themselves and their democracy.

Further research on this subject is essential, in order to expand its scope beyond these countries and beyond Europe. Other countries in Europe have different ways of handling the threat of influence, which is not necessarily due to an absence of threats. Countries on other continents also have their own way of approaching the challenges, which can be linked to their own political cultures. For example, Nigeria is trying to deal with attempts to influence its election campaign, while New Zealand must face polluting the local dialogue following the massacres in the mosques in March 2018. Further research should emphasize coping methods that are not necessarily related to election campaigns, although these are periods when it is particularly easy to influence viewpoints.

Israeli society, especially during elections, faces both internal and external threats of influence that challenge the stability of its democracy, its institutions, and undermine trust in them. Shared government and citizen efforts, as well as learning from western countries that have already prepared for similar threats, could help Israel formulate a national response to existing or potential attempts of external influence. Further research could focus on Israel's political culture in order to suggest possible responses to the threats of foreign influence, based on Israel's perception of the threats. Political culture in Israel, based on its values, norms, and its unique, complex history, reveals a people who combine critical views of the government with a loyalty

and willingness to participate in politics.⁶¹ An approach that combines the efforts of both government and enterprising civil society in Israel with the importance of confronting the narratives reinforced with education and a blocking approach that utilizes Israel's advantages in cyberspace, if possible, will create a model that increases national robustness in the face of foreign efforts to influence events. Such a model would be especially effective in a society as full of rifts and opportunities as Israel.

61 Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir, "From a Dialogue on Pioneering to a Dialogue on Rights: Identity and Citizenship in Israel," in *Society in the Mirror*, ed. Hanna Herzog (Tel Aviv: Ramot, 2000), p. 520.