Caricature of Vladimir Putin. Photo: PIXABAY

How Civil Society Organizations Can Help Block Covert Foreign Intervention in Democratic Processes

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Recent years have witnessed attempts by foreign entities to intervene in democratic systems and covertly influence election processes. These attempts are carried out using social media or internal actors that are part of the political discourse and promote intentional radicalization of the discourse. Many countries understand the severity of the phenomenon, and accordingly, address it through specific bodies and tools, including legislation, technology, security, intelligence agencies, and designated integrated teams. However, the state is limited in its ability to provide a complete response, and thus in many countries the challenge is taken up by civil society organizations. This article focuses on the role of civil society organizations and their interactions with government in coping with the threat of foreign influence on democratic processes. It presents the strategic problem and the governmental bodies that address it, and reviews the advantages of civil society organizations in face of the challenge. Following a look at selected case studies, it draws conclusions on the role of civil society organizations in tackling this threat.

Keywords: fake news, elections, democracy, civil society, foreign influence

Introduction

With the burgeoning strength of social media, recent years have seen an increase in the scope and intensity of covert foreign attempts to influence democratic processes in the West. In contrast to overt influence attempts between various countries in the form of open diplomatic processes, which are not discussed in this article, in covert measures, the identity of those undertaking them is unknown and the true aims of the activity are not declared. Consequently, they constitute a challenge to the democratic discourse, which relies on transparency and freedom of ideas.

The aims of covert foreign influence on a country include harming social cohesion, creating pressure on decision makers, undermining the decision making process, and increasing distrust of the institutions of government and democratic processes. In many countries in the West an understanding has developed that this challenge, which for example is reflected in coping with the dissemination of disinformation in social media, demands a response that protects Western democracies from foreign influence attempts, while maintaining freedom of expression and democratic values.

This article discusses covert external influence on the governmental system and on democratic process in general, although this is not entirely distinct from the influence of internal actors: sometimes, internal actors knowingly or unknowingly echo messages whose origin is external. This article does not relate to messages that originate inside the political system (including disinformation) as a strategic challenge; rather, it focuses on external influence attempts driven by a state, usually a great power.

Various kinds of responses to the challenge of foreign influence have emerged, generally based on state mechanisms and intended to protect democracy and the virtues of the democratic process, as well as social media corporations, which in recent years—following the criticism

they have received—have started to resist foreign intervention in election campaigns. This article examines the role of non-state organizations in coping with the phenomenon, since in many cases they are free of the tensions and pressures that influence state bodies in coping with the threat.

The article begins by reviewing the existing literature. It then depicts civil society's attempts to tackle the phenomenon, and through several case studies presents a slightly different perspective on civil society's efforts in this regard. It concludes with an analysis of the case studies and a presentation of the main insights and implications found in these studies.

Covert Foreign Intervention in Democratic Processes as a Strategic Challenge

Foreign influence on democratic processes—some of it overt and some covert—is not a new issue. It was evident, for example, during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, when influence attempts were an essential part of the struggle between the sides. However, the current period, dominated by social media and the resulting possibilities in the digital realm, allows for intensifying influence measures that aim to undermine democratic states (Brun & Siman-Tov, 2019). Foreign intervention in the public discourse, influenced by relations and interests in the international arena, aims to influence foreign states; to weaken the social resilience of each state; and to instill messages in the public arena and thereby influence the political system. Reference to this phenomenon in the field of international relations is called "sharp power," which deals with state influence on the political system of other states via manipulation for the purpose of creating confusion and mistrust in the targeted state (Walker, 2018).

Foreign intervention in the public discourse is employed in several spheres, using a variety of means such as the spread of disinformation, manipulative framing, appeals to emotion, and

more. It is expressed in the political-diplomatic environment, in the overt media realm, and in political discourse, as well as covertly. This article looks at covert intervention that takes place mainly in social media. Prevention of covert foreign intervention is necessary in order to protect the democratic process. For example, in an election campaign a false representation can be created of inauthentic players and/or messages that strive to turn groups against one another, or deepen mistrust in the democratic system, or artificially promote candidates and parties.

> **Election campaigns are a time of vulnerability and can be exploited because the political discourse then is especially polarizing and social sensitivity is at an especially high level.**

Intervention in the democratic discourse and the creation of doubt are always possible, but there are times that are considered more sensitive, during which it is possible to exert influence more effectively and intensively. For example, election campaigns are a time of vulnerability and can be exploited because the political discourse then is especially polarizing and social sensitivity is at an especially high level.

A prominent example of covert foreign intervention in election campaigns is the Russian intervention in the US presidential elections in 2016. The Russian intervention was an influence operation that undermined American democracy, and aimed not only to divert votes from one candidate to another, but also to deepen the polarization in American society and influence the identity of the president by means of a disinformation campaign on social media. To this end, actual demonstrations of various minorities were organized, one against another (Abrams, 2019; Mckew, 2018).

In West European countries, the target of Russian influence operations is the entire population and not a specific group within the population, with the goal of undermining

confidence in democratic institutions. Russian influence operations in Western Europe aim to intensify the variety of social divisions while exploiting liberal values and the diversity of opinions, which greatly expand the boundaries of public discourse and enable the removal of limitations that impede intervention and active participation. Russia's attempts to intervene in referendums—on the question of the UK's departure from the European Union (Brexit) and on the question of the Catalonian separation from Spain—illustrate this phenomenon (Legucka, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2018).

Unlike the intervention in the United States and Western Europe, in East European countries some of the Russian influence operations have been aimed at Russian-speaking groups. Here the goal is to deepen divisions between these groups and the government, with the aim of strengthening the interests of these groups as well as influencing the government or paralyzing it, as Russia attempted to do in Lithuania and Latvia (Helmus et al., 2018).

Some argue that it is not possible to separate between foreign influence and internal influence, due to the conscious or inadvertent involvement of internal elements in the process of foreign influence, and since the digital realm itself enables blurring the boundaries between states, and between "internal" and "external" domains (Kuperwasser & Siman-Tov, 2019). Foreign influences are also enabled thanks to internal actors that allow them to penetrate the "internal" domain. Consequently, internal influences are influenced by external influences, with internal political actors making use of messages that originate from external sources for the purpose of public influence. For example, internal actors made use of external messages that originated in the Russian intervention in the US presidential elections in 2016, for the purpose of internal influence. In this context, according to the Mueller report, which investigated the Russian intervention, the President of the United States welcomed the Russian intervention and used it for his political campaign. The report

claimed that the investigation identified several connections between the Russian government and the Trump campaign, and that Trump's campaign echoed messages that originated from the Russian activity (Mueller, 2019).

State Strategy for Coping with Foreign Influence

In coping with influence operations, four elements should be identified: the attacker itself; the messages that it seeks to spread; the platforms it chooses for spreading its messages; and the society that is attacked. In addition, there are actors in the targeted country—such as media outlets or political players or social media entities—that collaborate (sometimes unknowingly) with the interfering actor, and echo external messages and ideas in the internal discourse. Therefore, coping with foreign influences can take place on the content level of the messages (attacking the content), on the level of the actor (damaging the actor), on the level of the platform (blocking the message), or on the level of the resilience of the population under attack. In addition, it is possible to cope on all levels at the same time and in an integrated manner (AEP, 2019). All of these will be expressed (in whole or in part) in any coping strategy that figures in the existing literature.

Hellman and Wagnsson (2017) identify four different approaches on how a country can cope (at the level of the government and its resources) with Russian disinformation:

a. Confronting—centered on spreading counter-narratives to the narratives instilled in the discourse.

b. Neutralizing—strengthening the national narrative, creating positive narratives mainly by the state, and creating a positive image in order to receive the public's support.

c. Blocking—defending by blocking the narrative of the interfering country. The activity of the defending country is defined as "selection" of the information spread by the enemy; that is, preventing the public's access to information spread by the enemy, like blocking channels or websites.

d. Ignoring—a lack of response; ignoring what appears to be a fake and manipulative story. This model is based on the belief that a strong democracy has enough means of coping with external manipulation of information.

In coping with foreign intervention, Western countries use several complementary and integrated methods for implementing the selected approach. First, the threat can be defined as a security threat, with action taken accordingly. For example, countries that place an emphasis on perceiving the foreign influence as threatening national security, such as the US, choose to employ their security and intelligence agencies against it (Scott, 2019). As part of the preparedness of government ministries, various entities in the country prepare for an election campaign in a coordinated and synergetic effort. For instance, prior to the 2019 elections in Israel a special elections team was created with the participation of state figures such as the National Cyber Directorate, the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), the IDF, the Police, and the State Attorney. In some countries, public representatives and even private companies participate in such teams.

Another possibility is in the legal sphere: the state can advance legislation, prosecute and punish those who have carried out influence operations, and create regulations and pressure for change on the part of social media corporations, such that they take action against influence operations. For example, a law was passed in France in 2018 that aims to prevent the distortion of information and foreign influence, with an emphasis on social media (French Government, n.d.). In Singapore, two laws were passed in 2019—one to protect against internet scams and the other against distortion of information—that prohibit communication that includes false information and misleading the public regarding facts (Singapore Legal Advice, 2020).

Another way of coping is in the field of education and outreach to the public, in order to increase awareness of the foreign influence threat and to improve digital literacy and critical consumption of the media—the central platform for the transmission of most disinformation. This approach refutes the content of the disinformation and presents it to the public as false. In addition, there are various initiatives that convey information backed by facts to the public, while refuting the false information disseminated in the public discourse, and raise public awareness of the threats of disinformation and influence (Recommendations of Inter-Organizational Think Tank, 2018). Public education and outreach can be based on the state's initiative or on the initiative of a civil society organization.

Listed so far are the components of the strategy and the possible approaches of the state in addressing the challenge. However, the state is limited to a certain extent in coping with this challenge, because its intervention in the contents of the political discourse or preventing access to the internet could constitute a violation of freedom of expression. Furthermore, when the state makes use of the security forces to expose and thwart influence operations, this may be perceived by parts of the public as violating freedom of expression and privacy. This may be due at times to monitoring the internal discourse and examining political actors, which deviates from the authority of these bodies (Siboni & Shuker, 2019).

Furthermore, a state's use of security and intelligence organizations and exposing influence operations could be considered measures that are exploited for political purposes (K.N.C., 2020). This point strengthens the public's concern that the state, through its intelligence organizations, will attempt to determine "what the truth is" and not enable democratic and pluralistic discourse (Baron & Crootof, 2017). A report by the British Intelligence & Security Committee published in July 2020 illustrates this, noting the British intelligence's lack of desire to deal with the issue of foreign influence: they claim maintaining the integrity of democratic processes in the state is not their first priority, and that other bodies are responsible for handling this challenge. The report also states that even when they were confronted with the issue, the intelligence agencies refrained from dealing with it and saw it as a "hot potato" (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, 2020).

Civil Society Organizations Coping with Covert Foreign Intervention in the West

Civil society organizations are defined as organizations or initiatives of civilian society that are engaged in protecting democratic processes, or according to the writings of Bret Schafer (2018), are civil society organizations that provide the necessary democratic response to disinformation. An article by the RAND Corporation maps out various internet tools used in the struggle against disinformation that originate from civil society organizations that develop non-profit tools with social value. The funding of these organizations is diverse and comes from non-profit associations, initiatives, non-governmental organizations, private educational institutions, and private donors (Kavanaugh et al., 2020).

This article's treatment of civil society organizations is somewhat different, because the definition of civil society or non-profit organizations does not apply to all of the organizations engaged in the issue of foreign, covert influence. Some are not non-profit organizations, and they also contribute—or could contribute—to coping with foreign influences. The broad definition that we use in this article includes private and business organizations and initiatives and civil society organizations that are relevant for coping with influence operations and disinformation. Accordingly, the organizations that are included in this definition focus on several functions of the response—identification, research,

education, and outreach—and must meet two conditions: they must address foreign influence and disinformation; and their products must be accessible to the entire population. Education and outreach in this context focus on the dissemination of fake news and disinformation. The reason for including education and outreach stems from the need for tools to strengthen the population in order to cope with foreign and covert influences and with the dissemination of disinformation from external sources.

Civil society organizations employ technological tools for identifying malign activity on social media (inter alia, with trolls and bots), or for identifying disinformation and covert influence in traditional media, and also expose those spreading it. Examples are investigative journalism for finding foreign influences; fact-checking; technology companies such as Graphika or Bellingcat; and research institutes that develop interactive tools for finding narratives by foreign entities. Civil society organizations also engage in research in order to develop the existing knowledge on the issue, with reference to the theoretical or strategic aspect of foreign influence and disinformation and regarding the actors or entities carrying out such operations. These organizations include mainly research institutes and academic bodies.

Finally, there are the civil organizations or initiatives engaged in outreach and education that work with the public in order to strengthen its ability to cope with the threat. They encourage the development of critical thinking and digital literacy in relation to information sources and behavior on the internet and on social media, in order to educate the population to understand intentional acts of disseminating disinformation and to develop immunity for the purpose of effectively coping with the phenomenon. These organizations and initiatives offer educational activities for school students and computer games that allow the user familiarity with how disinformation is spread and with covert influence operations. In addition, there are media organizations and journalists who give lectures and workshops for understanding the threat.

Social media corporations and technology giants are not included among the civil society organizations examined in this article. On the one hand, they are part of the problem and make it easier for foreign and covert influence attempts in light of their problematic business model. On the other hand, the effective power in their hands, due to their complete ownership of various platforms and the extensive information that they possess, grants them the ability to cope with foreign influences. Consequently, these corporations are not included in the definition and the discussion here.

Civil society organizations have proven effective and creative in coming up with new ideas and developing tools and methods such as tools against disinformation in a social network or developing games related to this specific issue.

Civil society organizations have several advantages for coping with the phenomenon of covert foreign influence: first, they are free of claims of intervention in freedom of expression and violation of civil rights, which can be directed at the government. Second, civil society organizations can confront the dissemination of certain information without raising claims of censorship. Third, the distribution of their services is broad and succeeds in reaching audiences that other actors have not succeeded in reaching. In addition, civil society organizations can have flexibility and quick responsiveness compared to large corporations. Furthermore, civil society organizations have proven effective and creative in coming up with new ideas and developing tools and methods such as tools against disinformation in a social network or developing games related to this specific issue (Davis et al., 2020; Kavanaugh et al., 2020).

How Western Civil Society Organizations Cope with Covert Foreign Intervention

The case studies below help illustrate the contribution of civil society organizations in Finland, Denmark, France, and the United States in understanding and coping with foreign influence. Finland and Denmark are considered to have a high level of immunity to disinformation, despite their differing approaches, in contrast with France and the United States, which are considered to have a low level of immunity (Humprecht et al., 2020).

The case studies will be examined in several stages: identification of the foreign intervention; research of the phenomenon; and public education and outreach to reduce its influence on the public's conceptions. Emphasis is on tackling foreign intervention, even though there is an overlap between the phenomena of foreign influence and influences that originate in the political system. Some of the organizations cope with both of these components.

> Confidence is reflected in cooperation with the government, so much so that the government chooses to consult with civil society organizations on legislative issues.

Finland

For several years Finland has coped with influence attempts by Russia, which strives to drive a wedge between Finland and the European Union and harm its relations with NATO. These include spreading messages related to issues important for the Finnish public, including immigration, religion, and minorities. These campaigns created the sense in Finland that an effective and efficient response to the influence attempts is necessary.

Some in Finland have challenged the hierarchical distinction that separates between the citizens and the government, and have proposed integrating civil society organizations in activities on behalf of the state. While

Finland uses defense forces and cooperates with international organizations (NATO, for example) to identify external threats, the government has refrained from using legal tools to cope with foreign influence threats (Hague Center for Strategic Studies, 2017). Instead, the government places emphasis on shaping discourse with civil society organizations, with the purpose of jointly coping with the challenge (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020).

The Finnish approach reflects transparency with the public, enabling criticism while encouraging collaboration and strengthening the government's relations with civil society organizations (Hague Center for Strategic Studies, 2017). The government in Finland enjoys a high level of public confidence, which is also high in comparison with other countries in Europe (Finland Ministry of Finance, 2019). This confidence is reflected in cooperation with the government, so much so that the government chooses to consult with civil society organizations on legislative issues (Finland Corruption Report, 2020).

The activity of civil society organizations in Finland in coping with external influences is manifested in several ways. The media play a central role in identifying intervention: the hope is that the media are free of external influences. The implementation takes place with the help of investigative journalism that identifies external influences on the discourse in order to identify Russian disinformation, with an emphasis on checking statements by public figures. Furthermore, the country's media outlets work to make the media accessible to speakers of minority languages in the country, as they are a target for influence. For example, the media organization Yle, which is well-rooted in Finnish society, is a central player in this effort. In addition, there is a fact-checking project named Faktabaari, which is a journalistic project that checks facts with an emphasis on political topics, and makes information accessible to the public. Evidence of the Finnish media's effectiveness on this issue can be found in the cessation of activity

by the Russian media organization Sputnik, after it failed to attract customers (Hague Center for Strategic Studies, 2017).

Once the foreign influence is identified, research institutes and academia play an important role in tackling the phenomenon. Research institutes analyze the Russian cognitive activities, and academic institutions help analyze the characteristics of the disinformation and foreign influences, with an emphasis on the psychological characteristics. Together they enable drawing insights and responses to the struggle. For example, the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki has published several reports on influence tactics and ways of coping with them. In addition, the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) has researched Russian influences directed at the country (Finland, n.d.).

The next dominant characteristic of Finland's effort is education, which is reflected in the country's decision to include digital literacy in the Finnish education system, based on the assumption that providing tools for critical thinking in children is a central long-term component in coping with foreign influences. Along with activity at the national level, civil society organizations constitute an important part of developing these capabilities, and they are even included in the national strategy engaged in a variety of activities and projects on behalf of various organizations (Finland, n.d.; National Audiovisual Institute, n.d.). For example, initiatives by civil society organizations in the field of digital literacy constitute a complementary framework to the school curriculum to improve this area. In this framework, journalists come to schools and teach about proper consumption of media (Finnish Society on Media Education, n.d.).

In conclusion, Finland promotes education and the integration of civil society organizations, with an emphasis on the media, and as a result has achieved recognition as a country and society that is considered immune, and

is valued in the world in the field of curbing disinformation and foreign influences.

Denmark
Denmark sees Russian intervention as a significant threat to national security. Indeed, in recent years Russia has carried out influence attempts in Denmark as part of its attempt to undermine relations among the Western countries and within NATO. For example, Russian campaigns have sought to challenge the morality of Denmark's values in order to delegitimize the country, both internally and in the international arena (Denmark, n.d.).

The government in Denmark leads the struggle against foreign influence while relying on intelligence and security forces, and it sees civil society organizations as a supportive element. In this framework, the government uses legal measures that limit political advertisements, anchor the legal framework on the issue of freedom of expression, prohibit foreign influence activity, and prosecute those who engage in this activity (US Law Library of Congress, 2020).

In tandem, the government has designated an inter-ministerial task force that mediates between the intelligence forces and governmental organizations. The task force announced a systemic plan for coping with the threats of Russian disinformation, particularly at election time, with some of the measures taken in cooperation with various media organizations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2017). These steps aim to create dialogue and cooperation with social media corporations and with the press, in order to raise awareness of the threat of foreign influence and assist in applying countermeasures. As in Finland, trust in government in Denmark is high in comparison to other countries (Finland Ministry of Finance, 2019). Therefore, it is possible that the government's cooperation with these and other civil society groups is based on the high level of trust that exists in the country, which

is reflected in a policy that conveys credibility and transparency (Laursen et al., 2018).

Civil society organizations in Denmark are very active in identifying Russian disinformation. For example, a Danish research institute has developed an interactive tool for exposing Russian influence operations in social media. This tool is employed alongside the state's reliance on intelligence agencies. In addition, the media work to expose influence operations to the public. For example, a Danish media organization exposed a pro-Russian campaign that spread false reports as well as inserting pro-Russian narratives regarding battles that took place in the war in Syria and the use of chemical weapons (Denmark's Defence, 2018).

> In Denmark, the state leads the struggle against threats of foreign intervention, but it also makes use of civil society organizations. Thus, organizations operate in their own right and sometimes assist the state's activities, with civil society organizations considered very active.

Following the identification of threats, research institutes study influence and disinformation methods in the world in order to understand possible courses of action, and publish various books, articles, and analyses on the issue by experts on Russia and the former Soviet Union. At the same time, the press often covers Russian influence operations in Denmark in particular and in Western countries in general. In addition, there are fact-checking initiatives that refute disinformation (Tjekdet, for example), as well as integration of fact checking such as the television program Detektor, which verifies facts and presents the complexity of the political discourse in Denmark. Moreover, a Danish newspaper created a website called Snopes.com that contains "true" facts and not "alternative" facts. Academia has also enlisted in the fight against disinformation, with a research institute at the University of Copenhagen carrying out studies on the issue of disinformation and

influence as well as advising the Danish Ministry of Defence on the issue (Denmark, n.d.).

In the educational sphere, the government promotes digital literacy in the context of disinformation and influence. To this end, initiatives have been established that are directed toward the entire population, in order to increase awareness of the phenomenon, alongside the development of critical thinking. But in order to maximize the effectiveness of these initiatives, the government makes use of civil society groups (Denmark, n.d.). This collaboration in the field of digital literacy aims to strengthen the public's capability in the digital world, with an emphasis on search and navigation. These projects encourage critical thinking and understanding of how the media industry works (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016).

In conclusion, Denmark presents a slightly different approach from that of Finland, in which the state leads the struggle against threats of foreign intervention, but it also makes use of civil society organizations. Thus, organizations operate in their own right and sometimes assist the state's activities, with civil society organizations considered very active. Consequently, even though the state makes use of intelligence agencies and legal measures, civil society organizations play an important role in addressing cognitive threats.

France

France also tackles foreign influence efforts from Russia. A prominent case that illustrates the importance of the challenge was the Russian intervention in the French presidential elections when an unsuccessful attempt was made to twist the 2017 presidential elections in favor of Marine Le Pen. The failure may stem from various factors, but there is a claim that among them is the large number of bodies that responded to the intervention, including civil society groups (Tackling Disinformation, 2019).

In order to identify foreign influence threats, the state relies on intelligence organizations,

international collaboration, and legislation. In this framework, the government adopted legislation against "manipulation of information." The law called for establishing a central organization for media ethics that would regulate a work framework for cooperation among media outlets and journalists (French Government, n.d.).

However, in the interface between the national effort and civil society organizations it appears that there is little fruitful cooperation, due to the public's low level of confidence in government institutions (Statista, 2019). This apparently affects the level of cooperation between the government and civil society organizations. Regarding the 2017 election episode, a comprehensive approach was evident that included four levels: awareness, cooperation, transparency, and economic-political courage. These were expressed in the awareness of the threat, thanks to the cooperation with American intelligence; transparency toward the public and reporting that the computers of the Macron campaign were hacked; economic-political courage that included placing pressure for intervention by the social networks to remove content and users spreading disinformation; and cooperation between various governmental bodies and the media. Cooperation with the media occurred as part of the French media authority's demand that media outlets refrain from publishing leaks and disinformation, on the grounds that publishing them would constitute a criminal offense (Shwartz Altshuler, 2018). On the other hand, civil society groups are not an integral part of the response, and thus the French approach emphasizes the use of all governmental bodies, including security elements.

Civil society organizations in France provide a response to the threat of foreign influence after the challenge is identified. First, research institutes study Russia's activity in the cyber realm and expose Russian propaganda and influence operations. Second are academics with expertise on the topic of Russia and its

influence on France, such as Cecile Vaissie from the University of Rennes, who published a book on the Russian network in France (Vaissie, 2016). Furthermore, media organizations like the newspaper *Le Monde* extensively cover relations between France and Russia and expose Russian influence operations to the public. The newspaper also established its own fact-checking system, called Decodex. Finally, activities by individuals expose foreign influence, as by a French journalist who exposed Russian disinformation regarding demonstrations against immigrants and against the European Union, and a book published about Putin's attempts to influence French politics, written by an academic expert on Russia (France, n.d.).

In educational institutions and academia in France there are initiatives that encourage critical thinking and digital literacy (France, n.d.). One example is an initiative called Between the Lines, which was established by journalists from Agence France Presse and enlists other media organizations in running workshops that strengthen critical thinking among university students and school teachers (Neset II, 2018).

Despite the steps taken by the state and civil society organizations in France to cope with disinformation attempts, a study by the London School of Economics claims that the level of French social resilience in coping with external influences is low, and it appears that the actions that France has carried out, whether at the state level or by civil society groups, are not sufficient (Humprecht et al., 2020).

Thus several vulnerabilities in the French approach are evident. Most of the French solutions are mainly top-down. The government relies on security elements and on legislative measures against disinformation, in which it attempts to enlist civil society organizations to take action. Meanwhile, cooperation between civil society organizations and the government is limited, and therefore in addressing the threat of influence, presumably the solutions implemented by civil society organizations

are not done in full cooperation with the government (France Corruption Report, 2020).

The United States

The threat of foreign influence received significant international awareness following the Russian intervention in the US presidential elections in 2016, which was seen as a seminal event and even called a "strategic surprise," like events such as Pearl Harbor (Brun & Siman-Tov, 2019). In general, the United States is an attractive target for foreign influences, not just on the part of Russia but also from additional players such as China and Iran.

The United States is an attractive target for foreign influences, not just on the part of Russia but also from additional players such as China and Iran.

The American approach relies to a large extent on many intelligence and defense entities that lead the administration's efforts to identify and expose foreign attempts to influence the public discourse, along with cooperation with international bodies. The Global Engagement Center (GEC) created in the United States is responsible for directing the effort and coordinating the various bodies in coping with foreign influences, as well as funding the activity of civil society organizations on this issue (Polyakova, 2019). Furthermore, despite the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which offers a broad concept of freedom of expression, there is a legal framework for preventing foreign influences. An example of this is the FARA law, which requires foreign entities engaged in various issues (including politics) to be transparent regarding their source of funding and to register with the government as a foreign entity (US Department of Justice, n.d.). Another example is an initiative to regulate political advertisements on social media, which was brought up in the US Congress (Robinson et al., 2019).

However, there is considerable criticism of American actions vis-à-vis the threat. One central claim relates to the slow bureaucracy involved in the coping process, in light of the large number of different bodies that deal with the threat, including the DNI, the NSA, the FBI, and the DHS. Another claim is that the central body established (the GEC) does not have an effective mandate, as it is subordinate to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy in the State Department. This is in contrast with the DHS, which deals with threats to the United States, but emphasizes the defense of the election infrastructure. Finally, the harshest criticism is that the United States does not have a defined long-term strategy for coping with the threat (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2020).

Another problem facing the American government is the decline in public confidence. A Pew Research Center report (2019) states that only 20 percent of the public have confidence in the government (all of the time or most of the time), with the figure dropping at one point to 17 percent. This is an unprecedented low point in comparison to data collected for the years 1958-2019. Accordingly, it appears that the cooperation between the government and civil society organizations is not fruitful, despite the calls to learn from European countries and increase the cooperation with civil society groups (Claesson, 2019).

Civil society organizations are also active in the struggle against influence threats (USA, n.d.). There are many research institutes in the United States, whether in academic frameworks or independent, that deal with influence threats from Russia and other actors and the ways to address them, such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and many others. Second, many periodicals provide a platform for articles on the issue by writers who are former defense personnel or academics. Third, there are research institutes such as the Atlantic Council that raise awareness about the issue of foreign influence. The Atlantic Council

runs a lab for forensic research on the internet (DFRLab) for identifying disinformation and influence operations (Digital Forensic Research lab, n.d.). Another civil society organization that deals with influence threats is the German Marshall Fund of the United States, which operates a database that tracks narratives and issues that are promoted by Iran, China, and Russia (Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard, n.d.).

When it comes to fact-checkers in the media, there are many organizations and different initiatives that aim to strengthen media ethics and credibility, along with fact-checking. Examples can be found in Poynter, which is engaged in media studies and media research, and Bellingcat, which conducts internet research and open-source intelligence—both of which operate fact-checking services. In addition, papers and articles are also published on various influence threats in the traditional media (Poynter, n.d.; Bellingcat, n.d.).

On the education and outreach side, there are many civil society organizations and initiatives for encouraging critical thinking and digital literacy. These direct the public to be aware of manipulation that takes place on the internet and provide tools for coping with the threats that exist on the internet, including disinformation and influence attempts. An example of this is the University of Arizona initiative News Co/Lab, which strengthens critical thinking, digital literacy, and transparency. The initiative

seeks collaboration with news organizations to increase transparency and involve the community in the process of creating the news (Legg et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the American approach, similar to the French approach, relies on the leadership of the state and defense organizations in coping with foreign influences. Therefore, the approach should be seen as top-down, with a low level of collaboration with civil society organizations. This is the case despite the many organizations and initiatives that have emerged from the public for the effort. In addition, according to a study by the London School of Economics (LSE), the United States' resilience to disinformation is ranked lowest among all the countries in the listing (Humprecht et al., 2020). Consequently, the US approach appears insufficiently effective in protecting its democracy from foreign intervention, especially when it involves a host of actors, while it itself is based on a politically polarized society.

Table 1 brings together the different approaches and methods in the four countries surveyed.

Analysis of Case Studies

In light of the analysis of the case studies, we propose structuring the way civil society organizations deal with foreign influence in three stages, and at each stage there is reference to the relevant civil society groups.
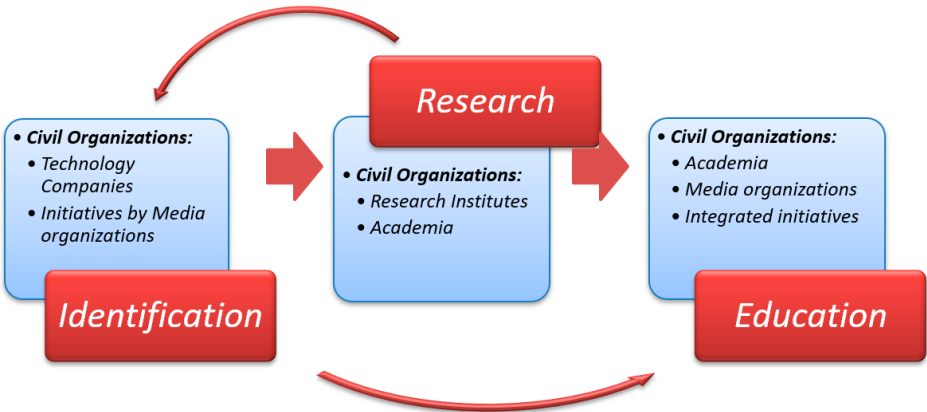

Figure 1. Civil society organizations coping with foreign influence

The first stage for identifying foreign influence includes initiatives of media organizations and technology companies. The goal is to identify activity that is not authentic in the digital realm that spreads disinformation originating from foreign entities or internal ones (which are beyond the scope of this article). This stage is based on technological capabilities, media organizations, and private initiatives on the various platforms where the public discourse occurs. Therefore, integrating all of the players in civil society, including independent or institutional initiatives as well as companies engaged in the issue is essential for finding foreign entities that are trying to influence the internal discourse covertly.

The second stage describes the research process required in order to study the phenomenon and formulate an effective coping strategy. To this end, the research institutes

Table 1. Comparative Perspective

	Finland	Denmark	France	United States
How the threat of foreign influence is perceived	Social and security threat	Security threat	Security threat	Security threat
Ways that the state copes with the threat	Use of intelligence and security elements; cooperation with international defense organizations (NATO)	Use of intelligence and security elements; creation of ad hoc bodies for coping with the threat; international collaboration; legal tools	Use of intelligence and security elements; international collaboration; legal tools	Use of intelligence and security elements; creation of ad hoc bodies for coping with the threat; international collaboration; minimal use of legal tools
Leading characteristics of how the state copes with the threat	Transparency, confidence, unity, criticism, education	Security, transparency, confidence, hierarchy, cooperation, education	Security, hierarchy, concentration of power and authority, ad hoc cooperation	Security, hierarchy, cumbersome bureaucracy
The entity leading the struggle against foreign influence	The state along with civil society groups	The state, with civil society organizations a complementary party	The state; marginal collaboration with civil society organizations	The state; marginal collaboration with civil society organizations
Civil society groups coping with the foreign influence	Media organizations, research institutes, fact checkers, organizations engaged in education	Media organizations, research institutes, fact checkers, organizations engaged in education	Media organizations, research institutes, fact checkers, organizations engaged in education	Media organizations, research institutes, fact checkers, organizations engaged in education
Level of confidence in government institutions	High	High	Low	Very low
Level of cooperation between the government and civil society groups	High: takes place with an emphasis on extensive cooperation in the fields of research, media, and education	Medium: independence alongside cooperation, with an emphasis on research, media, and education	Low: work separately, and sometimes there is ad hoc cooperation in research, media, and education	Low: work separately, and sometimes there is ad hoc cooperation in research, media, and education

and academic institutions with operational capabilities work to gather existing knowledge and to formulate a strategic understanding and conception for coping with the influence challenge. The research is presented in articles by relevant researchers and published in periodicals, which enriches the knowledge in the field. In this framework, it is necessary to examine new research directions in the field for the purpose of understanding the vulnerabilities of the targeted society and how to defend it, as well as the methods of operation of the foreign entities attempting to influence, from the strategic aspect to the tactical aspect. In addition, exposing the actors carrying out influence operations among the public contributes to the education stage and enriches existing knowledge.

In the third stage, emphasis is placed on public education and outreach, which means developing tools to identify and analyze manipulative external messages and cope with them. These translate into encouraging digital literacy and critical thinking, which are essential for coping with external cognitive threats. This stage places an emphasis on strengthening the population and developing immunity as much as possible, and employing countermeasures against those using fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. Education is necessary for school-age children and for adults in the appropriate form for each population group. A desired result of strengthening the population against such a threat is the population's ability on a large scale to identify fake news and disinformation.

The various stages of coping do not necessarily proceed in linear fashion, and a direct connection can be created from the identification stage to the education stage. In addition, there is a possibility of creating a network of connections among civil society groups at varying focus levels. This type of networking may be expressed in creating a joint network realm, sharing knowledge, and coordinating activities, rather than in hierarchical

institutionalization that is not suitable to the nature of civil society organizations.

A central point relates to the decentralized approach that characterizes civil society organizations. Usually each organization operates in its field to achieve certain aims and advance the area that it is responsible for—identification, research, or education. Furthermore, collaboration in coping with the foreign influence threat need not be ad hoc and implemented only at sensitive times. Therefore, for the purpose of coping with the challenge, a continuous response is needed that operates not only during election time but on a regular basis, and includes deeper levels of cooperation and jointness.

A consolidated and coordinated response by civil society organizations in defending the democratic discourse is necessary and even more so, ongoing cooperation is required among all of the organizations engaged in identification, research, and education.

Consequently, a consolidated and coordinated response by civil society organizations in defending the democratic discourse is necessary and even more so, ongoing cooperation is required among all of the organizations engaged in identification, research, and education. Such cooperation would enable the creation of extensive, up-to-date knowledge that would be located in a database accessible to all of the organizations and the public. Such a database could streamline the activity of all the civil society organizations in coping with the threat and streamline the development of ways of thinking, conceptual changes, and tools for measuring the influence and addressing it, as it derives from integrating various entities with different expertise.

Furthermore, cooperation among the entities can improve the work of each area. For example, the work of those engaged in identification can be improved by the knowledge

created in the field of research. The knowledge accumulated about the actors, the tactics, and even the preferred target audience for attack in carrying out foreign and covert influence operations increases the level of precision and the effectiveness of the entities engaged in identification in coping with the threat. Similarly, cooperation between identification entities and educational bodies enables improvement of the educational work. The information that the identification entities possess can be transmitted to an entire population through various means of education and outreach, thus improving the population's ability to cope with these operations, learn how to deal with an internet user who seems suspicious, and understand the content whose source may be foreign entities. Finally, the work of research bodies can contribute to the educational work regarding effective ways to strengthen the public and provide it with tools for coping with influence operations.

In various Western countries, civil society organizations fulfill a significant role in countering foreign influences on democratic processes, and it is, therefore, worth examining what role civil society organizations in Israel might play, starting with research bodies and extending to organizations engaged in education.

Conclusion

The state has many advantages, such as control of resources and intelligence capabilities, in coping with influence operations by a foreign state that aims to disrupt the democratic discourse in order to achieve strategic objectives. However, there are various kinds of constraints that make it difficult for the state to fully address this threat.

In contrast, civil society organizations have advantages—links with the population, familiarity with social divisions and the social structure, and familiarity with vulnerabilities that can be exploited by foreign actors. They include groups that could help at various stages of responding to this complex challenge, and from identification and research to education and prevention. But their potential is not exploited—at least in some countries, such as Israel—due to non-recognition of the threat, lack of confidence in the government, and increased preoccupation with internal challenges.

Enlisting civil society organizations in tackling foreign influence is a challenge that also depends on the nature of relations between the state and society. An inclusive and transparent political culture on the part of the state and a sense among civil society organizations that the political bodies in the state can counter external influence will increase the confidence and participation of the organizations in preventing foreign influence, as well as other national challenges.

Although this article does not discuss the transparency of the internal democratic discourse, there is a connection between external influences and the internal discourse that echoes them, sometimes unknowingly. Therefore, even if we focus on foreign influences, this does not provide a complete response, and therefore it is also necessary to turn the spotlight on the internal discourse. In such a case, civil society organizations have a significant advantage over state bodies, because they are free of the claims of governmental limitations on freedom of expression.

As demonstrated, in various Western countries, civil society organizations fulfill a significant role in countering foreign influences on democratic processes, and it is, therefore, worth examining what role civil society organizations in Israel might play, starting with research bodies and extending to organizations engaged in education. There are organizations in Israel that deal with defending the internal discourse against fake news and exploitation of social media, which mainly address the internal discourse. Some of these organizations can also deal with covert foreign influence, because as discussed above, there is a close

and complementary connection between the internal threat and the external one.

The proposal stated above strongly recommends fostering connections among different civil society organizations that are active in the fields of identification, research, and education for a more effective strategy, as well as creating a database that contains various actors, narratives, and material for study, research, and defense. Once connections are created among civil society organizations, they could serve as a kind of civil network to defend democracy and to focus on external threats and internal threats, and the connection between them. This network can arise gradually, based on trust and a shared desire to fight foreign influences. Over time, collaboration will be more common, to the point of creating a network that brings together a wide variety of entities (fact checkers, journalists, research institutes, organizations from the field of cyber defense, associations engaged in education), while creating platforms for sharing relevant information as well as other integrated initiatives.

An effective response to the strategic threat of foreign influence on democratic processes requires integrating civil society organizations in liberal Western countries as a complementary effort to the activity of the state. Finland and Denmark are examples of states that do this successfully. The state has constraints in tackling foreign threats, while civil society organizations—which in many cases are themselves a target of foreign influence—can be an important part of the response.

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