

Statement by the Ministers for European Affairs of France, Germany, Poland, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain

With the envisaged adoption of the Council conclusions on “Democratic resilience: safeguarding electoral processes from foreign interference”, we are taking an important step to defend our European democratic values, fundamentals and political culture and should continue this integrated approach to address current challenges we face from outside the EU. We welcome the ongoing debate on how to protect our European Democracy and want to contribute with concrete ideas, which should also be considered by the future Commission and High Representative.

There is no “single solution” to counter foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and attempts of destabilization with the aim to undermine and discredit our democracies. This is why we need to strengthen our detection and unveiling capabilities, enforce a swift response to identified threats and support and mobilize all parts of our European societies, to strengthen the resilience of our foundations with a view to the EP elections and beyond.

Detecting and combating information manipulation, enforcing robust legal reaction and sanctions, enhancing effective, coherent and proactive political communication, strengthening independent media nationally and at EU level, fostering civic education and digital and media literacy, creating opportunities for and access to political and social engagement and participation are all necessary mechanisms, which in combination strengthen our democratic resilience.

The freedom of our Union and our neighbourhood is built upon our strong democratic foundations. Consequently, our approach should include the enlargement countries, where long-term dedication to democratic resilience is essential to strengthening and protecting our future European Union.

Building on today’s Council conclusions and contributing to the ongoing debate, we, the Ministers for European Affairs of France, Germany, Poland, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, present the following concrete proposals to step up efforts covering different aspects:

Strengthening collective resilience by sharing information and working with civil society

As stated in the Council conclusions, digital and media literacy of citizens and as well as independent and free media play an essential role in strengthening the EU’s resilience. Many initiatives and projects in this area exist across the EU, but a more structured exchange of best practices between MS would improve our effectiveness. Proposals:

- 1. MS should regularly discuss which approaches and projects have been implemented and were most effective to combat foreign information manipulation interference (FIMI). The Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats (HWP ERCHT) could serve as a hub for a structured exchange to draw lessons learnt and make recommendations as appropriate.*
- 2. The Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) and the Rapid Alert System (RAS) are useful tools to share information about FIMI, but are only limited to MS governments and EU institutions. A more open information-sharing with the public (including researchers, media and NGOs, similar to the IPCR use during the COVID pandemic) would complement ongoing efforts and enhance awareness with the wider European public, and allow for a quick and coordinated response to FIMI campaigns. Therefore, we encourage the EEAS to present a proposal which bundles existing tools and efforts of dissemination to achieve this aim.*

3. *It should be combined with additional funding and a platform for knowledge exchange between civil society, researchers and Member States on strategies for strengthening media literacy and civic education in the EU to share experiences, evaluations, new research and present funding opportunities, while building on the expertise of existing structures, such as the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO).*
4. *Publics are less likely to believe disinformation about the EU if they are aware of EU's benefits and added value. Enhanced strategic communication about the EU in Member States is therefore needed.*
5. *We are convinced that a European media platform would contribute to countering disinformation by providing high quality information and independent journalism to all EU citizens.*

Enhancing detection, unveiling capabilities

Building on the Council conclusions, it is essential to strengthen our ability to detect foreign information manipulation and interference in order to swiftly unveil them, in order to break their virality as early as possible and limit their impact.

6. *Member States should enhance the cooperation and sharing of information between their competent national agencies on identified or supposed threats, intensify their use of the Rapid Alert System for this purpose. They should also increase the unveiling of detected manipulation campaigns in a coordinated way, to enhance at the European scale the dissemination of our strategic communication including factual positive narratives.*
7. *We encourage the Commission and EEAS to continue their efforts towards more efficiency and cooperation with national agencies and look forward to proposals and initiatives in the following months.*

Enforcing regulation and establishing restrictive measures

The Digital Services Act is a landmark regulation that is giving the Commission extraordinary tools to hold Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) accountable and live up to their responsibility in managing systemic risks, in particular regarding FIMI. We welcome the Commissions' decision to open formal proceedings against VLOPs which have failed to do so.

Restrictive measures are an important tool to target the authors of FIMI campaigns and show a clear sign that the EU will act against individuals and entities which are attempting to interfere in our democracies. Proposals:

8. *The full regulatory infrastructure of the DSA should be set up without delay, so that it can fully function and effectively enforce the regulatory framework.*
9. *The Commission should continue to engage swiftly with Member States and civil society through briefings and publicly denounce any failure by VLOPs to implement their legal obligations under the DSA and commitments under the Code of Practice on Disinformation, and open formal proceedings if necessary.*
10. *New tools of the EU and Member States support for civil society involvement in implementing the DSA should be explored, including the creation of advisory and consultative bodies to the national Digital Services Coordinators. The opinions and proposals presented by these bodies could range from trusted whistleblower status and verified researcher status to complaints and court proceedings.*

11. *The Code of Practice on Disinformation should be converted to a binding Code of Conduct as foreseen by the DSA.*
12. *The Council should swiftly conclude ongoing discussions to establish a new regime of restrictive measures targeting Russia's destabilisation efforts, which include FIMI campaigns.*

Strengthening our neighborhood

Furthermore, our efforts to strengthen democratic resilience must include our neighborhood. The candidate and potential candidate countries are equally subject to FIMI and other targeted interference campaigns. An investment into their democratic resilience is also a long-term investment towards the resilience of the current and future European Union. Furthermore, public support to enlargement in current Member States is volatile and vulnerable to FIMI. Proposals:

13. *We need to enhance our strategic communication in countries in the accession process. The EEAS Western Balkans and East StratCom Task Forces have done important work, but need to expand their activities to cover all countries in the accession process.*
14. *We call on the EEAS to focus on countries in the accession process and develop a comprehensive strategy, in cooperation with relevant Commission DGs and Member States for engagement, fields of programming and cooperation with current EU Member States on the ground.*
15. *We also invite the EEAS to enhance its cooperation with StratCom institutions in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans in countering FIMI.*
16. *The incoming Commission and High Representative should identify and allocate specific funding for programmes countering FIMI in countries aspiring to join the EU, in particular media literacy and civic education programmes.*
17. *The incoming Commission should in coordination with Member States develop a communication strategy within the EU to enhance public support for EU enlargement.*
18. *The Council should continue regular discussions on StratCom issues in COWEB, COELA, COEST, HWP ERCHT and other Council working groups including focus on evaluation of efforts and analysis of gaps with experts in the region.*
19. *In addition to the actions listed above, we would welcome a discussion in the broader European framework to enhance cooperation in countering FIMI.*

Future work in EU institutions

We welcome the announced reorganisation of the EEAS StratCom divisions, with the aim to further streamline and reinforce efforts in strategic communication and countering FIMI, including clear communication on the EU's benefits and added value.

In the Council, several Council formations will continue to discuss democratic resilience as a crosscutting issue with an internal and external dimension. The GAC should remain seized of this matter, with a particular focus on societal resilience in MS and the role of FIMI and level of democratic resilience in potential and candidate countries. Proposal:

20. *The GAC should keep the topic of democratic resilience on its agenda for a regular discussion. Informal consultations could also be organised with candidate and potential candidate countries. After the European elections, an exchange with the European Digital Media*

Observatory (EDMO) could be organised as soon as possible to discuss the impact of FIMI, lessons learnt and possible future steps.