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# Disinformation on refugees from Ukraine: Boosting Europe's resilience after Russia's invasion

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# List of abbreviations

<b>CSO</b>	civil society organisation
<b>DSA</b>	Digital Services Act
<b>EDMO</b>	European Digital Media Observatory
<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>FEPS</b>	Foundation for European Progressive Studies
<b>FIMI</b>	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (Toolbox)
<b>FES</b>	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
<b>MIL</b>	media and information literacy
<b>OPAM</b>	Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration
<b>RAS</b>	Rapid Alert System
<b>RT</b>	Russia Today
<b>VLOPs</b>	Very Large Online Platforms

# Executive summary

On 24 February 2022, Russia carried out a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's war provoked the fastest and largest displacement of people in Europe since World War II. As such, the ongoing conflict constitutes a litmus test for the EU's capacity to protect those fleeing war-torn Ukraine. At the same time, the war and the forced displacement it triggered are at the epicentre of an information war, with a large share of false and misleading online claims concerning refugees specifically.

The war in Ukraine is the latest instance where attention-grabbing events fuel the rapid spread of disinformation about refugees and migrants. Salient events act as catalysts, enabling both foreign actors and EU-based activist groups or individual extremists to grab people's attention and attempt to set the tone of political discourse with lies and divisive rhetoric.

This Issue Paper examines the challenges posed by disinformation about refugees from Ukraine, as well as the responses taken so far to address it. It inspects which disinformation actors spread false claims about Ukrainian refugees, and how. It sheds light on why migration-related disinformation is so pervasive and how disinformation narratives change over time and space. It also examines which audiences are more susceptible to online disinformation.

The paper also identifies positive developments and shortcomings in the EU's responses. The Union has taken unprecedented measures to protect its social cohesion and democratic values, including banning Kremlin-controlled news outlets. Independent fact-checking bodies also stepped up their activities to debunk disinformation on social media and other outlets.

Despite some welcome actions, much remains to be done to boost Europe's societal resilience against disinformation. Institutional scrutiny at the EU level is focused on to **foreign actors**. Counter-disinformation methods mostly follow a '**debunking approach**', which may not be enough to prevent disinformation from shaping the political debate and policy agenda.

Building on the EPC's earlier research on disinformation on migration, this Issue Paper calls for the adoption of a holistic and pre-emptive strategy centred on '**prebunking**' and aimed at better preparedness and stronger societal resilience. It urges for a change of culture other than a shift from prevalent policy frames: moving beyond security-oriented frames and actor-specific approaches; forming **multistakeholder partnerships** that monitor disinformation more systematically, **intervene rapidly** and **anticipate future disinformation narratives**; and increasing **critical skills** across the EU, targeting population segments that are more susceptible to disinformation.

Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine reflects the challenges Europe currently faces, as well as the high stakes they raise. In a context of rising security and economic concerns, disinformation could lead to **greater resentment** towards national governments and Ukrainians alike and undermine the **reception policies** put in place at the EU level.

Disinformation about refugees and migrants cannot be stopped altogether. However, by adopting and streamlining a prebunking approach across EU actions, it will be possible to promote more **evidence-based discussions**, avoid the risks of **backlashes in public opinion**, and sustain migration and asylum policies that benefit both migrants and the EU as a whole.

# Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia carried out a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, escalating the military aggression it had started back in 2014. While other humanitarian crises continue worldwide, Russia's war on Ukraine provoked the **fastest and largest displacement of people in Europe** since World War II.<sup>1</sup> According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1 million persons fled Ukraine in the first week alone.<sup>2</sup> Over 7.5 million refugees from Ukraine currently reside in the EU.<sup>3</sup> As such, the ongoing conflict constitutes a litmus test for the EU's capacity to protect those who fled Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the war and the forced displacement it triggered are at the epicentre of an **information war**. Disinformation and propaganda are being used to sow uncertainty and divisions in the EU and shape the public discourses around the conflict and its consequences.<sup>5</sup>

A large share of disinformation relating to the war in Ukraine concerns refugees specifically.<sup>6</sup> Just days after thousands of persons started reaching neighbouring countries to seek protection, false and misleading stories began to spread online.<sup>7</sup> In Poland, refugees were falsely accused of committing violent crimes against locals, replacing local students in schools, and ousting local children from oncological hospitals.<sup>8</sup> In Romania as well as in Czechia, social media were flooded with messages claiming that wealthy Ukrainians received significant social and financial support. By contrast, the posts deceptively stated, needy locals were left without help. Countries in Western and Southern Europe also saw the rapid spread of disinformation targeting refugees from Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

Why did refugees from Ukraine become the target of large-scale disinformation? Who is spreading it, and on what channels? And can false and misleading stories undermine the welcoming reception and public support shown to Ukrainian refugees?

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**The war in Ukraine is just the latest instance where attention-grabbing events have fuelled the rapid spread of false or misleading news about refugees and migrants.**

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The war in Ukraine is just the latest instance where attention-grabbing events have fuelled the rapid spread of false or misleading news about refugees and migrants. Previous EPC studies conducted in cooperation with the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) have examined this phenomenon in-depth, putting forward comprehensive recommendations for communication-based responses.<sup>10</sup>

These research findings help make sense of the disinformation trends relating to refugees from Ukraine. They also provide valuable insights into potential challenges and how to address them.

Russia's war on Ukraine has unleashed and exposed a variety of disinformation tactics that have already been used. Salient events like the ongoing war act as catalysts, enabling both foreign actors and EU-based activist groups or individual extremists to grab people's attention and attempt to set the tone of the political discourse by spreading false and misleading stories.

Disinformation depicts migrants and refugees as a threat to Europeans' **health, wealth and/or identity**, appealing to people's **beliefs and anxieties**.<sup>11</sup> Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine attempts to persuade Europeans concerned about their security that generalised violence is spreading because of the refugees' arrivals. It also targets those worried about their economic well-being, trying to convince them that they are being treated unfairly while refugees are receiving assistance.

If it aligns with concerns and pre-existing convictions, disinformation may generate greater online engagement, such as likes and shares, thus potentially reaching more people. In this way, disinformation tries to manipulate people's perceptions about Europe's management of migration.

Despite the widespread false and misleading stories circulating online, false narratives about Ukrainian refugees appear to have so far remained circumscribed to niche blogs and extremist outlets. For the most part, **public attitudes** towards Ukrainian refugees also **remain positive**.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, risks are high in the present geopolitical and socio-economic context.

There is no end in sight for the war in Ukraine, and the prospect of further military escalation continues. Meanwhile, the socio-economic repercussions of the war are leading to a negative spiral in Europe. Poorer households are struggling to pay their bills, while higher food prices are lowering living standards. 'Solidarity fatigue' is also kicking in, with declining support from individuals and civil society organisations (CSOs) who have been helping Ukrainian refugees for months.<sup>13</sup> With the rising security and economic concerns, the risk that disinformation feeds into people's concerns increases by the day. This could lead to resentment towards national governments and Ukrainians alike. It could also undermine the reception policies put in place at the EU level.

Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine, therefore, illustrates the challenges Europe currently faces, as well as the high stakes they raise. At the same time, ahead of what has been labelled a new "winter of discontent",<sup>14</sup> disinformation offers insights on how to strengthen **societal resilience** and sustain public policies that can benefit both the EU and those escaping the war.



**Table 1. Differences between debunking and prebunking approaches against disinformation**

	Debunking	Prebunking
Origin of disinformation	Actor-specific	Actor-agnostic
Scope of monitoring	Story-focused	Narrative-focused
Time of the intervention	Reactive	Anticipatory
Duration of the intervention	Discrete	Continuous
Nature of the intervention	Corrective	Preventive
Type of communication strategy	Audience-agnostic	Audience-specific

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The EU has taken unprecedented measures to protect its social cohesion and democratic values in the face of large-scale disinformation.<sup>15</sup> Among others, it banned Russian media outlets RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik, known for spreading Kremlin-friendly disinformation, from broadcasting in the EU. Independent fact-checking activities also stepped up their activities to debunk disinformation circulating on social media and online outlets.<sup>16</sup> Despite these actions, this Issue Paper argues that much remains to be done to boost Europe’s societal resilience against disinformation.

First, the EU-level institutional attention is limited to **foreign actors** and **Kremlin-led disinformation campaigns**. Some of the online disinformation targeting refugees do originate in Russian sources. But a large share was also promoted by social media users whose identities are unclear. Additionally, a significant amount was produced and amplified by Europe-based outlets and right-wing extremists.

Second, counter-disinformation methods mostly follow a **‘debunking approach’** centred on fact-checking individual false stories circulating online. Complex institutional settings, such as those of the EU, where responsibilities are distributed across many levels and actors, tend to adopt reactive approaches when responding to communication challenges like disinformation.<sup>17</sup> But these debunking methods only allow for interventions after false claims have already been published. From this viewpoint, they may not

actually prevent disinformation from reaching its intended audiences and shaping public discourse.

Third, current counter-disinformation efforts tend not to consider the **population segments** that may be **more susceptible to disinformation**. For example, critical skills training is either directed towards the general population or young persons. Yet, in the face of disinformation’s capacity to adapt and resonate with people’s concerns and pre-existing values, counter-disinformation efforts must also be adjusted to the specific audiences more at risk of being targeted. While young persons are frequent users of social media and are destined to come across disinformation, other groups may actually be more exposed to its divisive narratives because of their lack of digital skills as well as concerns.

A holistic and pre-emptive strategy is therefore needed. Examining the disinformation about refugees from Ukraine in light of the previous EPC studies, this Issue Paper argues that the EU should switch from a reactive to a proactive approach based on a **‘prebunking strategy’** (see Table 1).

According to psychologist Stephan Lewandowsky, prebunking consists of two components: (i) an **explicit warning of an impending threat**; and (ii) an **awareness of manipulation techniques**.<sup>18</sup> The prebunking strategy developed in this and previous EPC studies thus relies on two corresponding pillars, each linked to a specific timescale.

To identify possible disinformation threats, three short-to medium-term actions are foreseen for the first pillar: efforts should be devoted to (1) **monitoring** online trends systematically, (2) setting up **early warning systems** to enable prompt interventions, and (3) **anticipating future disinformation narratives**. In order to raise awareness of manipulation techniques, as part of the second pillar, longer-term initiatives are also needed: (4) citizens should have the **critical skills** to distinguish facts from falsehoods. In addition, (5) journalists, educators and other professionals functioning as intermediaries between the public and the policymaking and political spheres should have **specialised competencies**. This will enable them to report accurately and avoid spreading false stories unintentionally.

As argued in previous EPC studies, the actions under these two prebunking pillars can pave the way for promoting new, evidence-based and balanced narratives about migrants and refugees. Instead of rebuking existing false stories, these new narratives can help reframe the debate and shift the attention away from the threats and fears propagated by disinformation actors.

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Against this background, Chapter 1 of this Issue Paper sheds light on why debunking is insufficient, and a shift to a proactive approach is necessary. It responds to four key questions connected to disinformation about refugees from Ukraine: Who spreads disinformation about migrants and refugees, and on what online channels? Why is migration-related disinformation so pervasive? How do disinformation narratives change across time and space? And which audiences are more susceptible to online disinformation?

Chapter 2 focuses on the actions taken so far to respond to the disinformation connected to the war in Ukraine. Employing a prebunking lens, it identifies both positive developments and existing shortcomings. The analysis considers two EU policy frameworks introduced in 2022: the **Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation**<sup>19</sup> and the **Digital Services Act (DSA)**.<sup>20</sup> It also considers the relevant policy tools to follow the launch of the **Strategic Compass** on EU security and defence.<sup>21</sup>

These initiatives closely reflect goals set in the 2020 European Democracy Action Plan.<sup>22</sup> As such, they embody a long-awaited attempt to strengthen the EU's digital governance, among others, by improving disinformation monitoring and boosting critical skills. At the same time, these initiatives were finalised after 24 February 2022. Their possible impact on the EU's resilience to disinformation can and should be assessed in light of the current challenges.

Considering the shortcomings and potential improvements, Chapter 3 provides targeted **recommendations** that build on the proposals advanced in the previous EPC studies. These recommendations are of interest to EU policymakers, national public actors, media organisations, and CSOs leading counter-disinformation activities. Their

relevance and application go beyond disinformation targeting refugees from Ukraine. They should be implemented to strengthen the EU's resilience against all future migration-related disinformation.

1. Expand monitoring activities through coordinated multistakeholder initiatives. Although fact-checking operations multiplied after the war broke out in Ukraine, efforts remain largely uncoordinated, leading to blind spots in the analysis of disinformation trends and insufficient holistic responses.
2. Establish early warning systems based on monitoring work and 'actor-agnosticism'. Although the war in Ukraine renewed attention on the importance of reacting promptly to disinformation campaigns sponsored by foreign actors, false narratives also circulate on non-attributable sources and EU-based outlets.
3. Consolidate foresight methods to gain a first-mover advantage. This will be particularly essential to identifying potential disinformation narratives and their intended audiences in the current context of growing socio-economic and geopolitical uncertainty in Europe.
4. Close gaps and bring about equal critical skills across the EU via literacy campaigns, helping all citizens recognise disinformation. Although there is greater public awareness about the importance of media, information, digital and other basic literacies, the EU landscape remains fragmented, leading to weaker safeguards against the spread of disinformation.
5. Increase 'migration literacy'. Key intermediaries like journalists should acquire subject-specific competencies to promote an evidence-based discussion on migration and prevent the unintentional spread of misinformation.
6. Consider not only demographics but also the values and concerns of different population segments when organising and implementing communication-based responses. These segments may become especially receptive to disinformation about migration and harder to reach via debunking efforts.

Disinformation about refugees and migrants cannot be stopped altogether. As long as migration, whether forcible or voluntary, remains a salient issue, disinformation will continue circulating online and offline. However, by adopting and streamlining a prebunking approach across EU actions, it will be possible to promote evidence-based discussions, avoid the risks of polarisation and backlashes in public opinion, and sustain migration and asylum policies that benefit refugees and migrants and the EU as a whole.



# Chapter 1. Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine: Different, but not new

Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine follows patterns identified in the previous EPC studies.<sup>23</sup> It spreads fast after highly visible events. It originates from **a variety of sources**, including but not exclusively state actors. It exploits people's lack of understanding of the complexity of migration. It seeks to tap into **people's anxieties** and exploit their **pre-existing values** to stir division and confusion.

Individual instances advanced by migration opponents are also generally consistent with some more 'established' narratives. For example, that migrants are invading Europe or that their religious backgrounds pose a threat to European security or cultural traditions. Each story does not so much seek to convince the reader about a particular incident, like a crime allegedly committed by a refugee or migrant, as to reinforce the plausibility of the underlying narrative, such as that all migrants pose a security problem.

Recent highly mediatised events, like the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan or the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrate that virtually all disinformation narratives present migrants and refugees as a threat to Europeans' **health, wealth or identity**.<sup>24</sup> However, disinformation narratives also adapt to the broader social and economic context and the groups concerned.

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Despite some analogies with the disinformation that followed the mentioned salient events, lies and hoaxes concerning Ukrainian refugees accordingly present some unique traits. For example, identity-related narratives aimed at making Europeans feel under a 'cultural' threat due to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees are not absent altogether. However, they are less prominent than disinformation targeting migrants and refugees from other regions, such as the Middle East or Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>25</sup>

Connected to this, although present, false stories reproducing an 'invasion' narrative do not currently dominate the disinformation landscape in the same way as for other groups, such as Afghans.<sup>26</sup> This notably

occurs despite actual large-scale displacement from Ukraine. Instead, disinformation that presents Ukrainian refugees as a threat to Europeans' health/security and wealth appears to be especially dominant in several European countries.

Disinformation about Ukrainian refugees is unique in another sense. As widely noted, the **media representation** of Ukrainian refugees has been overwhelmingly positive.<sup>27</sup> This may have also played a role in preventing disinformation from undermining public support for welcoming policies.

False and misleading stories targeting Ukrainian refugees, therefore, reflect the perceived differences with other groups of persons in need of protection, particularly those who have a distinct religion and ethnic background, such as migrants and refugees from Muslim-majority countries. Considering this, disinformation must be contextualised in the broader media ecology to understand its possible impact on public discourse.

Looking ahead, this chapter also draws attention to the current context of security anxieties and the cost-of-living crisis. False health- and wealth-related claims targeting Ukrainian refugees may affect public attitudes and discourses around their reception. From this perspective, threat-based disinformation may erode or change the positive attitudes shown by Europeans toward Ukrainian refugees.

## 1.1. WHO IS SPREADING DISINFORMATION, AND ON WHAT CHANNELS?

The war in Ukraine has brought renewed attention to the role played by disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Kremlin-controlled outlets and state-sponsored propaganda.<sup>28</sup> Soon after the outbreak of the conflict, European countries banned the media platforms Sputnik and RT, aiming to cripple the Russian propaganda and disinformation machine in Europe.<sup>29</sup> This ban was later extended to further Russian media outlets.<sup>30</sup> EU and national sanctions were then followed by the removal or demotion of disinformation content associated with Moscow on many – but not all – social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.<sup>31</sup>

Some voices in Europe, like the European Federation of Journalists, criticised the ban as an attack on freedom of expression.<sup>32</sup> From the vantage point of this analysis, however, the ban reflects the importance of intervening swiftly to counteract manipulation campaigns. Letting disinformation actors reach their intended audiences often implies allowing them to set the terms of the public debate. It also shows the added value of monitoring disinformation across different types of media, to intervene when appropriate.

At the same time, the ban demonstrates that EU policymakers remain disproportionately focused on **external sources of disinformation**, which is only one part of the disinformation ecosystem. It also shows how disinformation may circumvent these measures. Despite the ban on channels under the control of the Kremlin, other websites and social media accounts kept spreading disinformation about refugees and other war-related matters.<sup>35</sup>

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### The ban against Sputnik and RT demonstrates that EU policymakers remain disproportionately focused on external sources of disinformation, which is only one part of the disinformation ecosystem.

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In some cases, these can be traced back to Russia.<sup>34</sup> For example, websites using a variation of the original RT domain name have kept producing and distributing disinformation in Europe.<sup>35</sup> In addition, some Russian domains posing as local European news featured false content about refugees from Ukraine (e.g. rising crime rates as a result of their arrival), while they were mostly 'neutral' before the war.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that a variety of Russian-controlled sources swiftly replaced banned channels.

But in other cases, reliably identifying the actors producing and disseminating disinformation that portrays Ukrainian refugees as a danger to host countries is difficult. These include **anonymous websites**, outlets with uncertain funding, and 'fringe groups' active on encrypted applications like Telegram.<sup>37</sup>

To take the example of Poland, the EU country currently hosting the highest number of displaced Ukrainians (i.e. around 1.5 million), disinformation exploded on Telegram from the onset of the war. Posts depicted Ukrainian refugees as aggressive and a threat to Polish peace and stability.<sup>38</sup> They made unsubstantiated claims about Ukrainian refugees being treated better than Polish citizens.<sup>39</sup> Some Telegram messages discouraged Polish families from hosting 'dangerous' refugees.<sup>40</sup> Others circulated old videos purporting to show the violent behaviour of Ukrainians in other European countries, although these had been previously debunked.<sup>41</sup>

Similar disinformation tropes were present elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Disinformation about refugees was also widely circulated on Telegram and other messaging applications in Western and Southern Europe. False stories included alleged episodes of violence by hosted Ukrainians in Germany, Italy and Spain.<sup>42</sup> Other posts falsely claimed that Ukrainian refugees would benefit from pension schemes without having ever worked in Europe.<sup>43</sup> Similarly to manipulative

information spread in other contexts, posts also recycled already debunked false stories about refugees.<sup>44</sup>

Assumptions can be made about the motivations of groups and individuals active on these applications – to spread distrust and promote division – and their capacity to mimic prevalent manipulation techniques or disinformation narratives. However, their precise identity is hard to prove.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to foreign and non-attributable sources, in the weeks and months following the February 2022 invasion, a large share of disinformation about refugees from Ukraine also continued to circulate on **Europe-based outlets** and social media pages not directly or indirectly linked to the Kremlin.

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### In addition to foreign and non-attributable sources, a large share of disinformation about refugees from Ukraine continued to circulate on Europe-based outlets and social media pages not directly or indirectly linked to the Kremlin.

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Taking Poland as an example again, far-right Twitter profiles, blogs and websites posted false stories about refugees being violent as soon as they reached border towns.<sup>46</sup> Polish extremist groups falsely claimed that Ukrainians seeking protection earned twice as much as working Poles despite working less,<sup>47</sup> or even that Polish nationals would be evicted in order to house the refugees.<sup>48</sup> Claims that Poles are being systematically discriminated against were present from the early stages of the war.<sup>49</sup> Some right-wing extremists and groups also falsely claimed that the Polish government was *inciting* displacement from Ukraine to replace its nationals.<sup>50</sup>

In some cases, misleading stories and falsehoods originating from within the EU were amplified by **European anti-immigrant politicians**.<sup>51</sup> In other instances, it was the politicians who generated disinformation in the first place, which was then picked up by Russian media. For example, several Russian outlets actively disseminated the false claims made by French far-right politician Éric Zemmour that a third of the refugees arriving in France via Ukraine were not Ukrainian nationals but Africans.<sup>52</sup> Some of these false claims also ended up in **mainstream news media**.<sup>53</sup>

These findings are consistent with the EPC's original research covering migration-related disinformation circulating in 2019 and 2020.<sup>54</sup> Russian sources like RT and Sputnik accounted then for only a part of a significantly broader online disinformation ecosystem (see Infobox 1). At the same time, a large share of migration-related disinformation was actually

'home-bred' in Europe and thrived on social media platforms, amateur websites or blogs.

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Focusing only on foreign actors and ignoring the complexity of the disinformation landscape inevitably leads to blind spots. Considering the criticism over the sanctions against Russian media and the laws protecting freedom of expression across member states, banning all sources of disinformation may be neither the most desirable nor the most realistic option in this context.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, regardless of their source, the disinformation narratives circulating on both Kremlin-controlled media and European outlets since Russia's invasion of Ukraine tend to follow similar scripts.<sup>55</sup> Common narratives include the preferential treatment received by Ukrainian refugees or the security risks they pose. The repetition of these narratives makes them more believable, independently of the channel used or its questionable credibility.<sup>56</sup>

## **1.2. WHY IS DISINFORMATION ABOUT MIGRATION SO PERVASIVE?**

Several topics and events have been at the centre of online disinformation campaigns following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. These include false reporting on specific war-related developments taking place on the ground, such as the Bucha massacre in March and Russian authorities' coverup attempts, or disinformation narratives shifting the responsibility for starting the war away from Russia.<sup>57</sup> Beyond these topics, disinformation about refugees has been especially prominent as public actors and CSOs monitoring online disinformation reported.<sup>58</sup>

Migration is an ideal topic for those pushing lies and half-truths to spread confusion, fear, anger and prejudice. This is mainly for three reasons.

First, people's movement across borders is a **complex phenomenon** where the facts can be difficult to ascertain or explain. A variety of institutions are also involved in the governance of migration, with varying responsibilities and powers, from the EU and national actors to international organisations and CSOs. The differences

### **INFOBOX 1: PREVIOUS EPC FINDINGS ON MIGRATION-RELATED DISINFORMATION**

This Issue Paper draws on the findings of the 2020 EPC study on online disinformation narratives relating to migration. The authors identified 1,425 articles containing disinformation on migrants and refugees published in blogs, other commentary websites, and online news outlets from Czechia, Germany, Italy and Spain between May 2019 and July 2020. The research was carried out using the online analysis tool BuzzSumo, which allowed the authors to identify the articles that received the greatest engagement on social media (i.e. likes, comments and shares on Facebook and Twitter) without excluding *a priori* any sources based on their characteristics. The sample of articles was selected using a set of broad, migration-related keywords, such as *migrants* and *refugees*. Only articles generating high engagement and containing significantly questionable material – either recognised disinformation (as determined by fact-checkers or secondary sources) or misrepresentations of reality based upon manipulative use of information – were included in the dataset. Although not all 1,425 articles necessarily fall within the most commonly accepted definition of disinformation in the EU context, they do all support hostile narratives found in disinformation sources.

between the groups on the move, as well as between the legal and policy framework governing cross-border movements, add further layers to this complexity.

Policymakers, experts and journalists have a duty to talk about migration and asylum policies – for example, about the challenges connected to the arrival of persons fleeing wars and the responses put in place to address them – using the most accurate terminology. However, it may be hard for non-specialised audiences to understand the jargon typically used by institutional actors.

Particularly in the context of a war in a neighbouring country, but not exclusively in such a 'crisis situation', it may be difficult for the public to closely follow developments on the ground and at the political level.<sup>59</sup> This complexity makes ordinary citizens and those using the internet to keep themselves informed, more exposed to false information and misleading messages.

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**The complexity of migration management makes ordinary citizens and those using the internet to keep themselves informed, more exposed to false information and misleading messages.**

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Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine embodies this challenge. One example is the difference between the temporary protection status awarded to displaced Ukrainians and the other forms of protection provided to other migrant groups. As these notions have no self-evident meaning, or their differences are not broadly known, it has become easier to promote clichés, such as that Ukrainians are ‘real refugees’ while other national groups are simply ‘economic migrants’.<sup>60</sup>

At the same time, the terms of the conversation can also be turned upside down to attack Ukrainian refugees. For instance, some baseless social media stories accused “[so-called ]refugees” from Ukraine (purposefully put in quotation marks) of disrespecting locals.<sup>61</sup> Others claimed that Ukrainians are “displaced persons” and not refugees, yet get “everything for free” while locals must work hard to earn a living.<sup>62</sup> These reports thus feed the antithetical narrative that Ukrainians do not need protection but are exploiting the social benefits and aid offered by European countries.

The complexity of migration makes it difficult to talk about it in fact-based terms, while disinformation actors can consistently use everyday terms or differentiate between different categories of migrants, associating them with negative frames and stereotypical images. They can also spread confusion and suspicion by using terms arbitrarily and deliberately.

Second, whether voluntary or not, migration can be linked to issues with great **symbolic meaning**, such as religion and identity, or **sensitive matters** like jobs and security. Regardless of one’s position or empathy for refugees and their plight – which also varies depending on the reader’s background and ideological preferences – European citizens may have legitimate interests or concerns around these issues. Disinformation creates artificial links between these matters and migration where there are none, or exploit them where they exist, thus more easily manipulating discourses about topical social issues.

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**The war in Ukraine can be connected to issues Europeans care about, such as their security and economic well-being. These anxieties can also be exploited to spread confusion or xenophobic sentiment.**

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The war in Ukraine can also be connected to issues Europeans care about, such as their security and economic well-being. For example, false claims about wealthy refugees receiving financial support are meant to increase a sense of **economic uncertainty and**

**unfairness** (see sections 1.3. and 1.4.). Displacement caused by the war can also be connected to people’s sense of belonging, for example, through perceived similarities with the Ukrainian refugees. These anxieties provide an entry point for disinformation – and propaganda – to build an audience, so to speak, with certain population segments. It can also be exploited to spread confusion or **xenophobic sentiment**.

Third, migration-related disinformation exploits the **voicelessness** of the subjects it targets, who are generally under-represented in the media and political debates and are frequently socio-economically marginalised. The physical and mediatic remoteness of online users or ordinary EU citizens from the direct experience of migrants or refugees makes it easier for disinformation actors to paint an oversimplistic picture of migration.<sup>63</sup> It also makes it harder to counter hostile narratives promoted by disinformation actors or individuals with first-hand accounts about the lived experience of migrants and refugees or through intergroup contacts.

Regarding media underrepresentation and the generally meagre opportunities for social interaction, the situation of Ukrainian refugees presents some singular traits compared with other large-scale cross-border movements of the recent past.

To begin with, the temporary protection status granted to refugees from Ukraine provided them with more opportunities for immediate interaction, such as children entering schools and families being hosted by locals. Far from being a vehicle of integration only, direct intergroup contact also weakens prejudice and the perception of threat, potentially reducing the harm caused by disinformation narratives hostile to refugees.<sup>64</sup>

In addition, unlike previous migration or refugee ‘crises’, Ukrainian refugees benefitted from more supportive and balanced media coverage and were frequently present in political debates. Mainstream media, for example, launched awareness-raising campaigns to sensitise the European public to the trauma of the war.<sup>65</sup> This positive media coverage, which focuses on the ‘human face’ of displacement from Ukraine, is at odds with the portrayals of chaos and disorder that often accompany reports about refugees from other parts of the world.

While the solidarity with Ukrainians has been inspiring, the language used by some mainstream journalists against non-white refugees fleeing Ukraine mirrors the hostile narratives spread by disinformation actors. Media coverage portrayed Ukrainians as part of a European ‘us’, emphasising the colour of their eyes, hair and skin as well as their belonging to the same ‘civilised’ West. Meanwhile, racialised depictions of other refugees systematically framed them as threatening aliens.<sup>66</sup> Notably, disinformation actors have used the same binary depictions to recontextualise and promote the ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory.<sup>67</sup> Thus, although the greater presence and more positive depiction of Ukrainians in the media have contributed to more



balanced debates, the voicelessness and negative media framing of the other groups paved the way for disinformation actors' attempted normalisation of their divisive falsehoods.<sup>68</sup>

**Although the greater presence and more positive depiction of Ukrainians in the media have contributed to more balanced debates, the voicelessness and negative media framing of the other groups paved the way for disinformation actors' attempted normalisation of their divisive falsehoods.**

### 1.3. HOW DO DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES CHANGE ACROSS TIME AND SPACE?

Disinformation presents migrants as an invasion force by using manipulated statistics, a vector for diseases through baseless claims, a source of violent crime by presenting information out of context, or undeserving recipients of social benefits via false dichotomies and

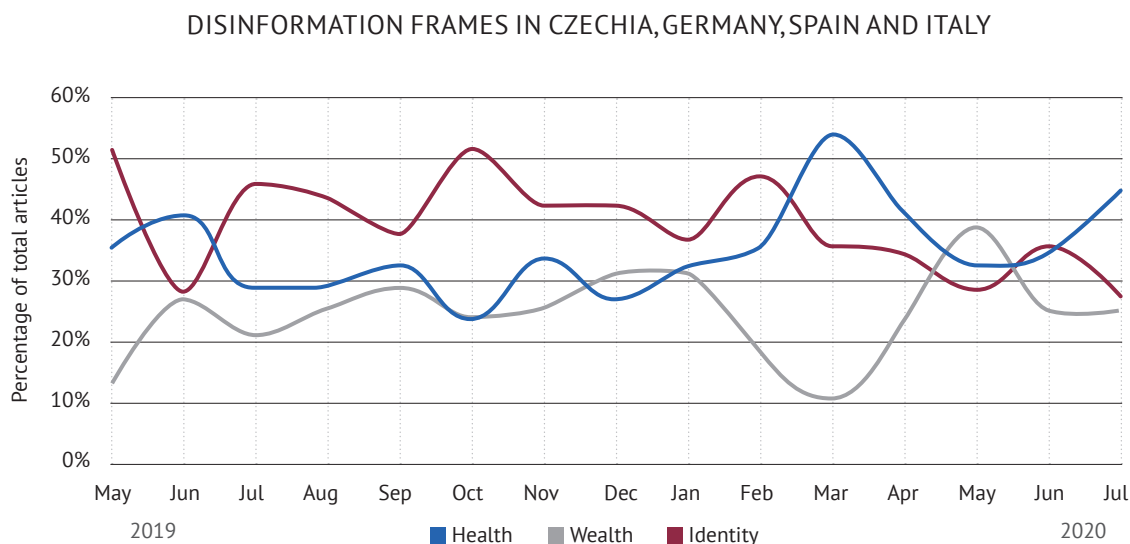
'reverse discrimination' claims, among other recurring themes and manipulation techniques. Previous EPC studies have put forward an analytical framework for making sense of false and misleading stories about refugees and migrants.<sup>69</sup> They show that, regardless of the manipulation techniques used, virtually all disinformation frames them as a fundamental threat to Europeans' **health, wealth and identity**.

While false claims and misleading information can always be connected to one or more of these frames, disinformation narratives vary across time and space, depending on the political salience of certain themes as well as the local context and groups involved.

Before the war in Ukraine, the most popular news and political topic was the COVID-19 pandemic. This was also reflected in a corresponding shift in migration-related disinformation narratives (see Figure 1). For example, Spain and Italy – the countries most affected by the first wave of COVID-19 in Europe – saw the dominance of anti-migration stories with health-related themes in the spring of 2020. After lockdowns were declared to slow the spreading of the virus, migrants were accused of ignoring social distancing rules, deliberately infecting locals or receiving preferential access to healthcare.<sup>70</sup>

The dominance of narratives varied again when the national political debates and media attention turned to the economic consequences of the lockdowns. Accordingly, Italy and Spain also experienced

Fig. 1



Source: Butcher and Neidhardt (2020).<sup>71</sup>

*The health category refers to the depiction of migrants as a COVID-19 infection risk, potential terrorists, or violent criminals. Wealth refers to the coverage of migrants as social benefits cheats, unfair competitors for jobs, or a drain on community resources. Identity refers to depictions of migrants as an invasion force, a threat to European or Christian traditions, or the subject of a conspiracy to replace white Europeans. Some articles employ multiple frames, so percentages refer to the share of total frames rather than total articles.*



disproportionately high levels of wealth-related disinformation narratives, such as asylum seekers receiving high daily allowances or migrants having better access to housing than natives.<sup>72</sup>

According to the local context, specific frames and narratives were more visible or triggered more engagement online. In countries not immediately affected by the pandemic or where the debate had not yet shifted to the economic impact of the lockdowns, disinformation narratives on migration did not reorient to health or wealth frames. In Czechia, for example, foreigners – particularly migrants and refugees from the Middle East – continued to be portrayed as a threat to identity and culture rather than as an infection risk or a drain on resources.

The underlying claims in disinformation stories generated more engagement if they aligned with the values and anxieties of certain population segments, whether these were centred on health/security, economic well-being or a sense of belonging.<sup>73</sup> This is in line with research indicating that users who like and share disinformation either consider the content to be true or have pre-existing attitudes consistent with their underlying message.<sup>74</sup>

Particularly important in this context are the beliefs and concerns of persons who fall within what has been called the ‘**conflicted**’ or ‘**movable middle**’.<sup>75</sup> Researchers and communication experts argue that between those who are supportive of migrants and those who are hostile, there is a large middle formed by groups of persons who do not hold fixed ideological positions.<sup>76</sup> Middle groups may hold a sympathetic view of migrants or refugees. However, they may also be concerned about job security, the pace of cultural change or their well-being.

Middle groups may be especially susceptible to certain disinformation narratives. If it resonates with their concerns or beliefs, disinformation can more easily captivate their attention and attract likes and shares. This way, it can break out of niche groups and reach more people.

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**Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine presents unique characteristics compared to other instances of migration-related disinformation, particularly because of the perceived likeness, racial background and religious beliefs of most persons fleeing the war.**

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Disinformation about refugees from Ukraine functions similarly, with certain narratives emerging depending on the national context, the groups affected and broader changes in public concerns. This also means that it presents unique characteristics compared to other instances of migration-related disinformation, particularly because of the perceived likeness, racial background and religious beliefs of most persons fleeing the war.

Across member states, Ukrainian refugees tend not to be portrayed as a threat to Europe’s **identity** or traditions in disinformation stories. This does not mean that identity-related disinformation is absent altogether. In Poland, for example, a conspiracy theory claimed that cooperation between the Polish and Ukrainian governments would lead to the unification of the country at the expense of Polish national identity and sovereignty. The arrival of Ukrainian refugees would allegedly fuel the population replacement.<sup>77</sup> This rhetoric is meant to perpetuate the feeling that Poland is under attack from Ukrainian refugees.<sup>78</sup>

But these narratives appear to be shared by radicalised conspiracy theorists only and, as such, may only appeal to those holding extremist views. Yet, a large share of disinformation about Ukrainian refugees relates to the well-being and wealth frames instead.

Accordingly, in Central and Eastern Europe, but also in Southern and Western member states, Ukrainian refugees have been portrayed as a threat to European **security**, with disinformation stories often falsely accusing refugees of being violent against locals.<sup>79</sup>

Some journalists and fact-checking organisations have also reported a shift to **wealth-related narratives**.<sup>80</sup> Across the EU, false and misleading stories concern housing support, facilitated access to education and medical care, and financial assistance provided to refugees from Ukraine.<sup>81</sup> Refugees seeking support are described as driving luxury cars.<sup>82</sup> Or, contradictory claims state that the influx of refugees from Ukraine caused unemployment rates to rise.<sup>83</sup> In addition, disinformation stories often claim that locals are “**discriminated against**”<sup>84</sup> or treated as “**second-class**” citizens in their land due to protections offered to refugees.<sup>85</sup>

#### 1.4. EUROPE AT THE CROSSROADS?

Lies about Ukrainian refugees and efforts to capitalize on Europeans’ fears have not successfully polarised or shaped the public discourse so far. Partly because an overwhelming outpouring of solidarity has overshadowed them, they have been circumscribed to niche or extremist circles. However, recent studies warn that the proportion of information that is hostile toward Ukrainian refugees is increasing and generating greater engagement on social media.<sup>86</sup>

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Bearing in mind that disinformation is appealing because of the concerns and pre-existing convictions it exploits, the prevalence of health/security and wealth-related false stories present significant challenges in this context. As the war shows no sign of de-escalation and EU citizens feel its full socio-economic effects, these disinformation narratives may captivate more peoples' attention.

But disinformation narratives may not only become more appealing. If they strongly resonate with the beliefs and anxieties of those exposed to them, they may even lead to changes in perceptions and policy preferences. Research shows that threat-based messages concerning culture and tradition, economic well-being and security are associated with negative attitudes towards refugees and support for restrictive migration policies.<sup>87</sup> Together with negative frames in the wider media environment, disinformation narratives could thus contribute to declining support for Ukrainian refugees.

Studies on public attitudes suggest the same. A Flash Eurobarometer conducted shortly after the beginning of the war shows that, in April 2022, 9 out of 10 Europeans felt a high degree of **empathy towards Ukrainians** and expressed support for their reception.<sup>88</sup> Later surveys paint what remains a largely positive picture. For example, one conducted in 8 member states by the Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM) indicates that, on average, only 1 in 10 respondents would not allow any Ukrainian refugee to live in their country.<sup>89</sup> Noteworthy is that this survey shows considerably lower support for refugees from the Middle East and Africa.<sup>90</sup>

The welcoming attitudes shown so far to Ukrainian refugees may be slowly waning, however, particularly but not exclusively in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>91</sup> Analyses of the media space across Europe have emphasised that disinformation narratives which claim that Ukrainians are treated better than the local population are gaining particular traction alongside declining pro-Ukrainian sentiment.<sup>92</sup> The OPAM survey also confirms that a growing number of Europeans think that their governments treat Ukrainian refugees better than them.<sup>93</sup>

Against this background, disinformation tapping into security- and especially wealth-related concerns may contribute to shifts in public support. Attitudes to refugees – as to all migrants – are especially driven by **perceptions of fairness**. The feelings of unfairness elicited by exposure to disinformation stories, for example those using the '**reverse discrimination**' rhetoric, could therefore negatively affect the support shown to refugees from Ukraine. This is particularly the case as economic concerns about energy, housing and food prices rise.

Ukrainian refugees need support to access work, education and housing. At the same time, the war and consequent rise in inflation are hitting ordinary European citizens and residents hard. Increasing numbers of Europeans may feel that their governments are not doing enough to secure their well-being. Under the influence of wealth-related disinformation narratives, welcoming attitudes to refugees could be replaced with growing resentment and hostility in the near future.

Recent large-scale forced movements offer a cautionary tale in this respect. Europeans responded with solidarity and immediate support for the hundreds of thousands of Syrians and other refugees who reached the EU in 2015 and 2016. But public support declined rapidly. In conjunction with negative media representations,<sup>94</sup> the downward economic spiral caused by broader economic developments, especially in countries hosting large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, led to the emergence of more negative public attitudes.<sup>95</sup>

History might repeat itself in the case of refugees from Ukraine. Far from being a self-fulfilling prophesy, awareness of this risk should lead to the adoption of measures that can prevent disinformation from feeding discontent and undermining support for the welcoming reception policies to Ukrainian arrivals put in place at the EU and national levels.

# Chapter 2. Boosting resilience against disinformation after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine

Although it remains an ongoing challenge, the EU, member states and CSOs have already taken several actions to address disinformation connected to the war in Ukraine, including initiatives against false and misleading stories about refugees specifically. This chapter adopts a **prebunking lens** to analyse these actions and assess their contribution to building Europe’s resilience to disinformation about refugees.

The concept of prebunking revolves around **better preparedness** on the one hand, and **greater awareness** on the other. The first pillar of the prebunking approach is therefore composed of **monitoring systems** to detect disinformation trends, **early warning systems** to issue alerts about false stories, and **strategic foresight** to anticipate possible future disinformation narratives. The second pillar involves strengthening **critical skills** and enabling those exposed to disinformation to spot manipulation techniques independently. It also involves providing key professional actors and intermediaries like journalists with subject-specific competencies, such as **‘migration literacy’**. This can help promote fact-based, balanced reporting on migration and asylum matters. It can also reorient the discussion away from the hostile narratives promoted by disinformation actors (see Figure 2).

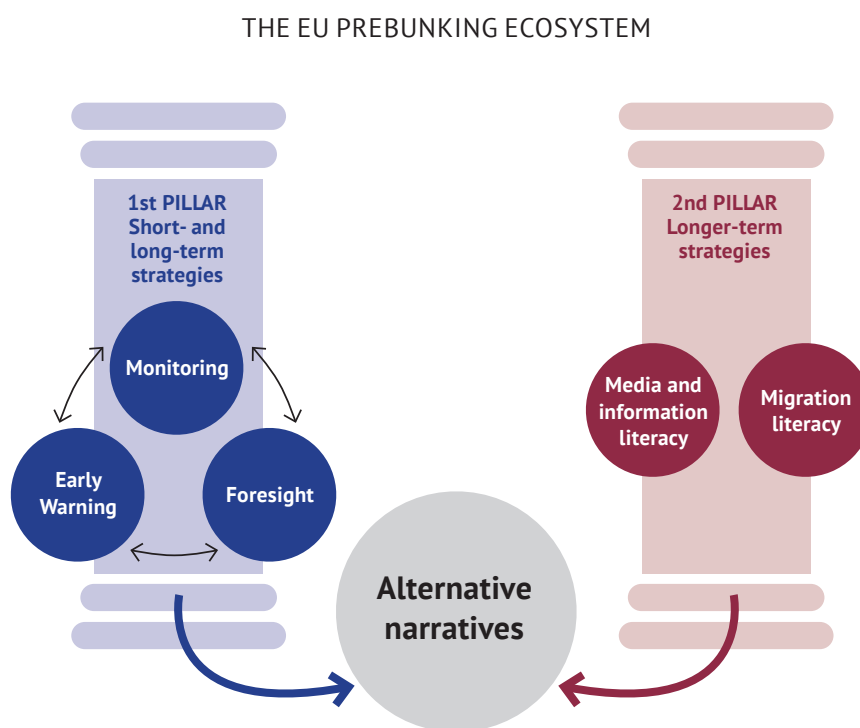
The successful implementation of these prebunking strategies depends on identifying the segments of the population most susceptible to disinformation narratives. It is also contingent on the successful involvement of CSOs, media organisations, fact-checkers, tech companies and public authorities in initiatives that fall under each pillar.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine provides an opportune moment to examine the extent to which European counter-disinformation initiatives embody this prebunking approach. This analysis is especially timely in light of the EU legal and policy initiatives launched to raise the EU’s capacity to act against disinformation: the **Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation**, the **DSA**, and the policy and operational tools under the **Strategic Compass**. This chapter points to ways these new regulatory and policy frameworks could be utilised to sustain prebunking actions against disinformation.

## 2.1. MONITORING AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS AFTER RUSSIA’S INVASION: MORE AND YET FRAGMENTED

Strengthening societal resilience is largely a long-term task. However, preparing those on the communication frontlines to better spot and counteract disinformation

Fig. 2



Source: Butcher and Neidhardt (2021), *op.cit.*

narratives can be achieved through various short- and medium-term means. Since migration-related disinformation spreads rapidly in response to highly visible developments, the first step of a prebunking approach is to monitor emerging disinformation systematically. Based on this **monitoring** work, as a second step, **early warning systems** can help assess disinformation's potential to spread and, where appropriate, enable timelier responses.

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**Since migration-related disinformation spreads rapidly in response to highly visible developments, the first step of a prebunking approach is to monitor emerging disinformation systematically. Based on this monitoring work, as a second step, early warning systems can help assess disinformation's potential to spread and, where appropriate, enable timelier responses.**

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While online disinformation is mostly detected by independent fact-checkers operating at the national level, the EU has acquired some capacity to monitor and evaluate disinformation threats in recent years. The European External Action Service (EEAS) pioneered the EU's activities. Notably, when the EEAS was asked to take action back in 2015, the trigger was the reckoning that disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Russia posed a threat to EU democratic institutions and interests. This resulted in the creation of the EEAS' East StratCom Task Force and EUvsDisinfo, its flagship project monitoring and examining disinformation campaigns conducted by Russia across the EU.

The East StratCom Task Force also manages the EU's Rapid Alert System (RAS), which was designed to accelerate the exchange of information between member states (and international partners like NATO) in the wake of information manipulation campaigns orchestrated by foreign actors. This reflects an understanding that the first hours after disinformation is released are critical for responding to it.<sup>96</sup>

At first glance, the RAS appears to be the perfect vehicle for a Europe-wide monitoring and early warning system. However, its primary function is not so much to issue rapid alerts as to facilitate information exchange between member states and enabling them to address common threats.<sup>97</sup>

Adopting a prebunking lens allows for an examination of the extent to which these tools have been further developed since the creation of the EEAS' East StratCom

Task Force. It also makes it possible to identify areas for improvement in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Monitoring efforts at the EU level have increased following Russia's invasion. This is mainly due to the Kremlin's direct and indirect role in coordinating disinformation campaigns. Since February 2022, EUvsDisinfo tracked and systematically analysed kremlin-led disinformation in multiple languages, raising the alarm about its potential harmful impact.<sup>98</sup> It specifically examined Russia's attempt to invoke fears of migration and peddle xenophobia by targeting Ukrainian refugees.<sup>99</sup>

The ability of the East StratCom Task Force to monitor and quickly expose disinformation played a crucial role for identifying the risks of manufactured discontent and facilitating exchanges on how to address them.<sup>100</sup> It is also thanks to these activities that EU leaders decided to implement as soon as 2 March a ban against channels controlled by the Russian government.<sup>101</sup>

Yet, the monitoring capacity of the East StratCom Task Force continues to be strictly limited by its 2015 mandate. As such, it can only monitor (external) threats from foreign states and non-state actors. The activities of the RAS are similarly restricted to threats *outside* the Union.

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Against this background, on 24 March 2022, the European Council also endorsed the Strategic Compass.<sup>102</sup> While it opens opportunities for further developing the EU's monitoring and counter-disinformation capacities, the Strategic Compass maintains the narrower focus on security and threats posed by actors outside the EU. This also limits its prebunking potential.

More specifically, the Strategic Compass includes a set of actions and policy tools for strengthening the EU's security and defence in the upcoming years.<sup>103</sup> Among others, the Strategic Compass stresses the need for quicker and more effective interventions against changing geopolitical threats. To this end, it introduced two relevant policy initiatives for counter-disinformation efforts, the EU Hybrid Toolbox and the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Toolbox.<sup>104</sup>

Although details are yet to be ironed out, the EU Hybrid Toolbox should strengthen cooperation among member states to detect hybrid threats and launch coordinated responses against them.<sup>105</sup> Hybrid threats or campaigns



refer to the activities of hostile external actors targeting systemic vulnerabilities in democratic societies, including via disinformation.<sup>106</sup> Since they can polarise European societies and undermine democratic values, manipulative discourses on migration are considered a form of **hybrid threat**.<sup>107</sup>

The FIMI Toolbox is expected to be launched by the end of 2022 with further concrete measures for more effective monitoring and counter-measures.<sup>108</sup> Among others, it should strengthen the EU's response options and cooperation against FIMI by improving situational awareness via the RAS.

On the one hand, these initiatives recognise the importance of greater monitoring capacity and early interventions against disinformation campaigns, including those relating to migration. On the other, they are mainly linked to **security-oriented objectives**.<sup>109</sup> As such, instead of addressing the deeper reasons why migration is such easy fodder for disinformation campaigns (see section 1.2.) or providing citizens with the capacity to resist manipulation campaigns (see section 2.3.), they may lead to the further securitisation of migration and asylum policies.<sup>110</sup>

As far as the RAS is concerned, the tools foreseen by the Strategic Compass do not fundamentally alter its functions. Instead, they attempt to further integrate it in the EU's security architecture. Additional proposals to involve Ukrainian authorities in its activities, while welcome, would not change its functions either.<sup>111</sup> Hence, the RAS will continue to bring national authorities together to facilitate the launch of coordinated responses.

But the greatest limitation that these EU's activities face is their exclusive focus on foreign actors, predominantly hostile states. This can be explained by practical reasons as well as the risk that EU monitoring activities could violate the fundamental right to free speech, other than by their limited mandate. However, false and misleading claims do not only originate from foreign sources (see section 1.1.). A large share of disinformation about refugees and migrants appears to be promoted by Europe-based outlets or extremists. This means that EU monitoring activities which only focus on foreign manipulation campaigns will provide an incomplete picture of the disinformation landscape.

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Some initiatives which followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine have tried to close potential gaps in the examination of disinformation about refugees, and more generally, on migration. For example, the European Commission developed further tools to monitor disinformation in this space, both at the level of headquarters and Representations in national capitals, in order to feed communication-based responses.<sup>112</sup> Yet, this work has scope for further development and use.

**Independent fact-checkers**, those working for media companies and CSOs have also stepped up their capacity to identify and expose the widespread disinformation narratives relating to the war. In fact, attempts to identify and counter disinformation have proliferated since the invasion.<sup>113</sup> Fact-checkers helped uncover hundreds if not thousands of disinformation stories on refugees in connection to the displacement from Ukraine. Not facing political or legal constraints, they successfully exposed false and misleading claims and broader disinformation trends, regardless of their origins.

Independent fact-checkers thus already play a vital role in counter-disinformation efforts. But NGOs also face challenges. Three problems can be identified: the limited or sometimes even **counter-productive effects** of fact-checking; the **lack of coordination** among fact-checkers, especially at the EU level; and their incapacity to carry out **rapid counter-disinformation actions** on their own.

Firstly, fact-checkers cannot possibly catch all stories containing outright false or misleading information. It is not only the sheer number of stories that poses a problem. Many European citizens and residents may be exposed to messages containing disinformation and misinformation via messaging applications like Signal or Telegram, which remain, for the most part, outside the reach of fact-checkers, especially when the communication is private or encrypted.

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**Simply debunking and labelling an individual story as false is not enough to convince all those exposed to the information to stop sharing it, particularly when the broader narrative or claim resonates with individuals' pre-existing convictions and concerns.**

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Furthermore, simply debunking and labelling an individual story as false is not enough to convince all those exposed to the information to stop sharing it, particularly when the broader narrative or claim resonates with individuals' pre-existing convictions and concerns.<sup>114</sup> In some cases, telling people they are wrong may even backfire, strengthening misconceptions and reinforcing prior beliefs or even inadvertently



spreading the message more widely.<sup>115</sup> On their own, fact-checking initiatives will, therefore, not be able to prevent disinformation from setting the tone of the debate or generate sufficient insights into how to promote more evidence-based discussions.

Concerning the second problem, the other side of the coin to the spontaneous and welcome growth of fact-checking activities after Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a lack of coordination. While having several monitoring and fact-checking activities is certainly better than having none, the lack of coordination across these activities results in an inevitable duplication of efforts. This is made worse by the fact that, although they share the common goal of exposing disinformation, fact-checkers often vary widely in their methods. In addition, they also tend not to share the results of their work in a commonly accessible database or in accordance with a common analytical framework.<sup>116</sup>

Due to this fragmented approach, fact-checking organisations focus their efforts on individual instances of disinformation without mapping broader trends or developing holistic and joint responses. Some initiatives have been launched at the national level, bringing together multiple stakeholders to overcome this problem.<sup>117</sup> However, these are often short-lived and unable to capture broader developments at the EU level or beyond the EU. Only well-established EU-wide networks of fact-checkers, such as the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), have the resources to coordinate their activities over a longer period, map content circulating across the EU, and issue recommendations for strengthening responses.

The EDMO, a Europe-wide network of fact-checking organisations, academics, researchers and media institutions, was specifically developed to strengthen cooperation, raise awareness and empower citizens to respond to online disinformation. In line with these goals, on 3 March, the EDMO established a Taskforce on Disinformation and the War in Ukraine. It monitors and exposes stories about several topics connected to the conflict, including refugees. In doing so, it identifies broader trends and challenges. Instructively, members of the Taskforce benefitted from the monitoring work and put forward recommendations for policymakers, the private sector and civil society to strengthen European societal resilience against disinformation.<sup>119</sup>

This remains, however, an isolated example and one where few organisations take part. Without further coordinated actions, it will remain difficult for independent fact-checkers across the board – and those with relevant expertise – to track trends more effectively and identify which disinformation narratives are breaking through or gaining ground.

As for **rapid interventions**, the wealth of monitoring and fact-checking activities conducted in Europe by independent actors and CSOs since the Russian invasion made it possible for both public authorities and tech companies to address disinformation campaigns against refugees with more timely responses. Nonetheless, challenges remain.

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## The wealth of monitoring and fact-checking activities conducted in Europe since the Russian invasion made it possible for both public authorities and tech companies to address disinformation campaigns against refugees with more timely responses.

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Starting from the former case of public actors and taking the example of Poland, the Research and Academic Computer Network (“NASK”), a research institute under the Ministry of Digital Affairs, quickly uncovered disinformation stories concerning Ukrainian refugees' alleged privileges.<sup>120</sup> Greater situational awareness and early warnings prompted officials from the Polish government, police and border guard to issue statements and clarifications.<sup>121</sup>

While these rapid interventions and awareness-raising efforts are welcome, it is worth noting that some Polish politicians had also contributed to spreading false and unverified narratives about migrants and refugees in the past.<sup>122</sup> This raises questions about the capacity of public actors and politicians – in Poland and elsewhere – to maintain a coherent role in countering disinformation on migration and providing evidence-based information. It also leads to the question of whether similar rapid and resolute interventions will be taken to address future disinformation about other groups of refugees.

Based on the monitoring and fact-checking activities, online platforms also intervened to remove flagged content which violated their internal policies.<sup>123</sup> However, different moderation policies also resulted in different actions by social media and messaging platforms.<sup>124</sup> In many cases, tech companies also did not follow transparent policies.<sup>125</sup> In addition, limited content moderation sometimes resulted in delayed interventions. This was partly due to the uneven quality and implementation of moderation across the EU, which is still lacking in many European languages other than English.<sup>126</sup>

The **DSA**, whose rules will start being applied after 2024,<sup>127</sup> was introduced to address these shortcomings and lay out stronger responsibilities for online platforms.<sup>128</sup> Among others, it sets higher standards for content moderation: platforms would have to publish reports explaining their practices and policies and indicate how many content moderators they allocate for each official EU language.

The DSA also harmonises rules for dealing with illegal content, broadly defined as any information that does not comply with EU or member state laws. While platforms will have to remove illegal content, they will remain free to decide how to deal with ‘lawful but awful’ content, such as most disinformation. This reflects the understandable desire to achieve a careful balance: ensuring, on the one

hand, that the regulation of content does not undermine free speech and, on the other, that platforms are held accountable for how disinformation is handled.<sup>129</sup>

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**While platforms will have to remove illegal content under the Digital Services Act, they will remain free to decide how to deal with ‘lawful but awful’ content, such as most disinformation. This may contribute to incoherent approaches and a fragmented digital environment.**

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Yet, this may contribute to a fragmented digital environment. Some platforms may decide to simply remove all disinformation. Others may add warnings or fact-checked information. Others may reduce the risk of algorithms pushing misleading content to users’ feeds.<sup>130</sup>

Questions will inevitably arise about the consequences of uneven content moderation policies on user behaviour.<sup>131</sup> For example, some users may move to smaller platforms or use alternative channels to spread false and misleading claims, if actions are taken. At the same time, incoherent approaches under the DSA may make it harder to swiftly intervene against manipulation content that could harm individuals and groups, regardless of fact-checkers’ efforts to promptly flag it as such.<sup>132</sup>

## **2.2. FORESIGHT AND FUTURE DISINFORMATION AMID GEOPOLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TENSIONS**

However useful or indispensable, monitoring activities and early warning systems cannot eliminate but only narrow the gap between events that trigger disinformation and the responses of public institutions, civil society and other stakeholders. Disinformation’s inherent capacity to spread faster and wider than fact-based reporting structurally limits the effectiveness of fact-checking and early warning systems.

**Strategic foresight** is helpful in this context, as it involves exploring plausible future scenarios structurally and systematically.<sup>133</sup> Possible challenges can be identified well in advance, and preparedness improved. More specifically, the insights gleaned from monitoring activities could help identify which disinformation frames and narratives may be exploited in specific future scenarios. Pre-emptive communication strategies could then be developed. From this perspective, anticipatory actions enabled by strategic foresight could future-proof counter-disinformation measures.

Strategic foresight could play an important role against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. With growing

concerns about living costs and energy prices, the risk that disinformation finds more fertile ground in the European public increases by the day. Strategic foresight would make it possible to identify which disinformation narratives may become more dominant and/or generate greater engagement in this context. It would help identify the segments of the population most susceptible to such narratives. It could also help develop effective actions against their spread. For example, targeted awareness-raising campaigns could be promoted, enabling the public to detect manipulative material more easily.

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The challenges brought about by the war in Ukraine, the large-scale disinformation that followed it, and the longer-term prospects of a protracted conflict warrant an analysis of the tools currently available to conduct strategic foresight at the EU level.

The European Commission has tried to embed strategic foresight and correlated methods into its policymaking activities, reflecting the growing importance of strategic planning, among others, for ensuring better responses to future emergencies. A culture of greater preparedness therefore trickled down across the Commission’s legislative, policy and operational initiatives in recent years.

Nevertheless, foresight initiatives to counter disinformation remain limited at the EU level. More specifically, they remain circumscribed to the EEAS’ work and, in the **security** sphere, to initiatives falling under the Strategic Compass.

As implied in its name, the EEAS’ Directorate for Strategic Communication and Foresight monitors information manipulation campaigns, including identifying “**emerging threats**.”<sup>134</sup> However, also when it comes to foresight activities, the EEAS is bound to its mandate. Emerging threats are therefore considered only insofar as they originate outside the EU.

Meanwhile, the Strategic Compass was introduced to not only strengthen the EU’s capacity to detect but also anticipate hybrid threats.<sup>135</sup> To this end, it seeks to build on early warnings to further develop the EU’s strategic foresight. However, its connected policy and operational tools will also be limited to foreign actors and remain anchored in a security logic.

This is problematic, as a more comprehensive and holistic assessment of future disinformation claims could help prevent them from becoming a reality.

As EU institutional initiatives are limited, there may be opportunities elsewhere to fill some existing gaps. For example, while they would not pave the way for strategic foresight as such, additional DSA obligations for platforms could facilitate the identification of future disinformation risks.

As part of their responsibilities under the DSA, **Very Large Online Platforms** (VLOPs) will be required to conduct a **systemic risk assessment** at least once a year.<sup>136</sup> Systemic risks include “any actual or foreseeable” negative effects on civic discourse that may result from disinformation disseminated or amplified on the platforms.<sup>137</sup> VLOPs will then have to mitigate these risks using proportionate measures, such as raising awareness or adapting content moderation processes. Large platforms will also be obligated to give “vetted researchers”, which include CSOs, access to relevant data for understanding and detecting systemic risks and identifying **mitigation measures**.<sup>138</sup>

The DSA will therefore open some opportunities for multistakeholder collaboration. And the assessments under the DSA’s collaborative framework could, in principle, lead to a better understanding of the risks associated with future disinformation beyond those connected to foreign actors. However, there are reasons to be sceptical about the impact of systematic risk assessments.

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To start, multistakeholder partnerships with a wide range of specialised experts would be needed. In addition, to succeed, the cooperation between platforms and different stakeholders would have to run smoothly, taking place according to transparent processes and in a trusting environment.<sup>139</sup> Not all VLOPs, however, may make genuine efforts to enable such processes and conducive climate.<sup>140</sup>

Secondly, risk assessments are different from, although not incompatible with, foresight activities. If the DSA assessments are merely yearly exercises, they may not be enough to anticipate the possible challenges in a fast-changing disinformation – as well as geopolitical and social – environment. Foresight should instead assess

and respond to unpredictable and rapidly changing situations. In this context, relying on systematic risk assessments alone may not result in sufficiently informed and continued situational awareness needed to put in place adequate mitigation measures, including campaigns and targeted communication-based actions in anticipation of future disinformation. Even the European Commission has acknowledged that platforms may not be able to foresee all possible future systemic risks and take coherent actions against future challenges.<sup>141</sup>

### **2.3. MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN THE EU POST-INVASION: WORK IN PROGRESS**

The short- and medium-term measures examined in previous sections could enable institutions, CSOs and other organisations to understand the disinformation landscape better, respond quickly to emerging false stories and examine potential disinformation narratives. But as long as disinformation encounters a receptive audience, these efforts will likely have limited success. Adopting a prebunking approach requires longer-term actions that equip online users and citizens with the required critical skills to distinguish facts from falsehoods and filter out disinformation on their own.

Media and information literacy (MIL) and subject-specific competencies constitute the second pillar of an effective prebunking strategy. This Issue Paper defines MIL as the critical skills and technical competencies required to autonomously access, understand, analyse and evaluate print and digital media. These skills include assessing the trustworthiness of sources as well as recognising one’s own **biases and ideology**; identifying **selective reporting** and **appeals to emotion**; and understanding how to analyse and evaluate claims for their legitimacy, among others.<sup>142</sup>

Studies have demonstrated that promoting critical skills positively affects people’s ability to identify disinformation and can reduce its impact on personal beliefs.<sup>143</sup> When people understand that information is false or misleading, they can make an informed decision on whether to promote it further or not share it. With an awareness of its existence – and of the techniques and goals of emotionally loaded, manipulative messages – it also becomes harder to inflame feelings and polarise public discourse.

Despite this, several EU member states continue to have underdeveloped media literacy policies. As national authorities are responsible for educational policy, literacy campaigns and critical skills vary from country to country.

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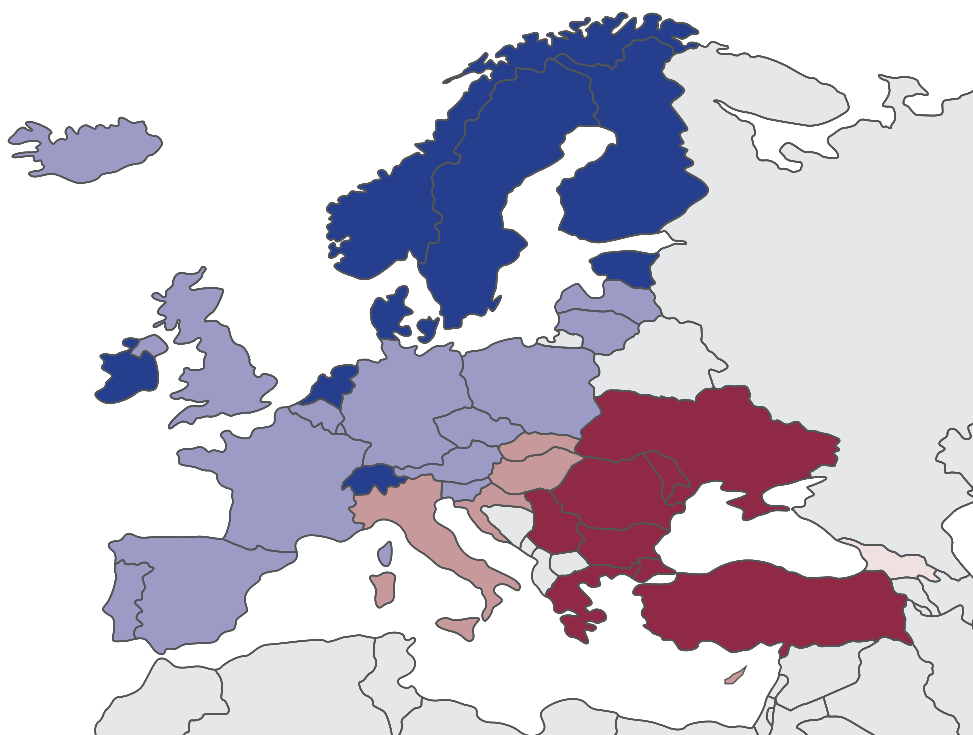
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Some European countries officially incorporate MIL into nationwide initiatives against disinformation. For example, Finland has established comprehensive MIL training from a young age. Accordingly, Finland is considered the European country which is best equipped to withstand the impact of disinformation thanks, among others, to the quality of education and free and plural media.<sup>144</sup> But other states did not establish similar policies. Eurostat data thus states that 8 out of 10 persons aged 16 to 74 possessed basic overall digital skills in Finland and the Netherlands (both 79%), but only one-third in Romania (28%) and Bulgaria (31%).<sup>145</sup>

Although there is no harmonised system for evaluating and ranking European citizens' critical skills, independent surveys and studies looking at MIL point to a similarly uneven situation. For example, the Media Literacy Index, a private initiative led by the Open Society Foundations, measures national differences in resilience to disinformation by considering and comparing "predictors" of media literacy (e.g. media freedom, reading competencies). The 2022 Index confirms the wide differences across the EU and beyond, with Southern and Eastern European countries towards the bottom of the ranking (see Figure 3).

Fig. 3

GEOGRAPHICAL DIVIDES IN MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY WITHIN AND BEYOND THE EU



Rank (1-35)	Country	Score (100-0)
1	Finland	76
2	Norway	74
3	Denmark	73
4	Estonia	72
5	Ireland	71
6	Sweden	71
7	Switzerland	68
8	Netherlands	66
9	Germany	62
10	Iceland	62
11	UK	62
12	Austria	61
13	Belgium	61
14	Portugal	61
15	Spain	59
16	France	58
17	Lithuania	58
18	Czechia	57
19	Poland	56
20	Slovenia	56
21	Latvia	64
22	Luxembourg	54
23	Italy	50
24	Slovakia	49
25	Croatia	47
26	Malta	44
27	Hungary	42
28	Cyprus	41
29	Ukraine	39
30	Greece	38
31	Romania	36
32	Serbia	35
33	Bulgaria	33
34	Moldova	32
35	Turkey	31

Source: Lessenski (2022).<sup>146</sup>



Recognising that media literacy is a vital tool for addressing disinformation and that there is much room for improvement, the European Commission established the Media Literacy Expert Group.<sup>147</sup> It also launched a Digital Education Action Plan to foster a more inclusive digital education ecosystem and enhance digital skills. Coherently with the Action Plan, in 2022, the Expert Group's work resulted in guidelines for teachers and educators on how to use digital competences to tackle disinformation.<sup>148</sup> They also include some specific (albeit limited) tips on how to stimulate informed classroom debates on subjects that attract disinformation and hostile narratives, including migration. Nevertheless, the Commission can only promote coordinated actions in this area since education is a national competence.

Considering existing shortcomings on the one hand and the importance of MIL on the other, it is unsurprising that, on top of public efforts, several initiatives to increase critical skills have been launched by non-state actors across Europe after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These include renewed efforts from universities, news media, educators and librarians, as well as some specialist media literacy organisations.<sup>149</sup>

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Overall, these initiatives reflect a growing recognition of the need to increase resistance to false and misleading information by enabling citizens to engage with information critically. This is especially urgent in the current context. While MIL is also necessary in 'normal' times, critical skills play a strategic role at a time when Russia's war in Ukraine is propelling large shares of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda.<sup>150</sup>

However, the delivery of MIL across Europe by non-state actors and CSOs after Russia's invasion of Ukraine was also uneven. Although there is no comprehensive mapping, preliminary studies suggest that the lion's share of these initiatives came from countries with an established MIL tradition.<sup>151</sup> On the one hand, this reflects the deeply fragmented European MIL landscape. On the other one, it suggests that on their own, CSO efforts will not even out this fragmented landscape.

Tech companies also became more involved after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They can help boost critical skills by reaching a larger number of people with their training and campaigns.<sup>152</sup>

Some recent initiatives also explicitly adopted a prebunking approach and specifically addressed disinformation about refugees. One example is the campaign launched by Google in partnership with academic researchers.<sup>153</sup> The campaign consisted of 90-second video clips showing how manipulation techniques function, after tests revealed that these increase people's ability to discern trustworthy from untrustworthy content.<sup>154</sup> It was directed toward users of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok in Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, three countries which have been especially exposed to disinformation narratives about refugees from Ukraine.

These initiatives demonstrate the potential of prebunking approaches and multistakeholder partnerships to reduce people's susceptibility to disinformation, including targeting specific minority groups.<sup>155</sup> Similar joint initiatives between private companies, researchers and CSOs could potentially be promoted in the future following the launch of the **2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation**.

The Code of Practice is a unique self-regulatory tool which complements legal obligations – such as those set by the DSA – allowing relevant stakeholders to make voluntary pledges and further coordinate their counter-disinformation activities.<sup>156</sup> Signatories include online platforms, fact-checkers, CSOs and researchers. Among others, signatories to the Code committed to strengthening media literacy and critical thinking. Notably, the Code emphasises the importance of partnerships between a broad range of expert actors for implementing MIL programmes and awareness-raising campaigns.

The Code could therefore be used to promote greater critical skills through multistakeholder partnerships. Yet, challenges remain.

First, most MIL programmes, including those promoted by tech companies, tend to address the general population instead of targeting groups especially exposed to disinformation risk.<sup>157</sup> This is a known problem, as social platforms that partnered up with educational organisations in recent years typically established media literacy campaigns in urban centres, targeting a fraction of the population.<sup>158</sup>

The Google campaign launched in 2022 is different in that it tries to reach youths on TikTok and YouTube using prebunking methods, also transcending national divides. This is natural and, to a certain extent, justifiable since people start to develop critical attitudes from a young age. In this sense, its 'immunising effect' may turn out to be particularly effective.<sup>159</sup> However, other demographics,



especially older citizens, are harder to reach through such methods. This is problematic, as the elderly are most likely to share and be influenced by disinformation, if they come across it.<sup>160</sup>

Second, beyond demographic differences, these initiatives tend to neglect the importance of personal attitudes. Yet, those who are most exposed to threat-based disinformation because of their personal beliefs and concerns may also be those whom conventional or even online MIL campaigns cannot reach.<sup>161</sup> As a result, MIL initiatives may not reach those very audiences who are more likely to be disproportionately and adversely affected by the spread of disinformation.

## 2.4. MIGRATION LITERACY AND ACCESS TO RELIABLE INFORMATION

Most MIL programmes tend to take a neutral ideological stance, avoiding what are perceived as divisive subjects, such as migration, in their training. This is partly justified, as drawing on politicised topics could distract from the training's overall purpose. In addition, organisations providing MIL understandably try to protect themselves against accusations – including by disinformation actors – of spouting propaganda.

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However, the skills and competencies needed to resist disinformation partly vary with each subject area. Migration is an excellent illustration of this, as it is an inherently complex subject that can be easily twisted or misrepresented by disinformation actors (see section 1.2.). Disinformation actors exploit this complexity and its 'political currency' to spread hostile narratives, polarise public opinion and influence citizens' views. But it is not only those who read the news who may be exposed to false and misleading messages. Journalists too are and can be guilty of spreading them.

Journalists have been at the forefront of the information battles linked to the war in Ukraine. Many among them provided a bulwark against disinformation, misinformation and propaganda.<sup>162</sup> But not all journalists are well-informed about migration issues. For many, it is

harder to carry out specialised reporting in this context, which puts them at greater risk of unintentionally spreading falsehoods and misleading stories.

As reported in the previous EPC studies, some international organisations have launched campaigns to promote fact-based reporting and public awareness on migration. The ongoing initiatives do not try to reach citizens directly. Instead, international organisations seek to improve public understanding of migration matters through programmes and campaigns targeting 'intermediaries' like journalists and teachers, a task that could be described as boosting their migration literacy.

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Accordingly, the International Organization for Migration and the University of Galway launched the Global Migration Media Academy to provide journalism students with standardised tools to report migration accurately and avoid spreading falsehoods and misleading news.<sup>163</sup> Handbooks were also produced to help the next generation of journalists report on **migration accurately**.<sup>164</sup>

Although promising, these initiatives were launched before the war in Ukraine and remain isolated examples to date. So far, in other words, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the large-scale disinformation that followed it have not resulted in further efforts to equip journalists – or other relevant intermediaries – with subject-specific competencies.

Where there has been a notable step forward in connection with the war is the provision of reliable information. Reliable data on migration is often scarce, making it difficult for journalists to report on it accurately. This is also problematic for the general public, as ordinary citizens may not know where to look for reliable data or what sources to trust. Ensuring that the public has access to and ultimately benefits from quality information is key.

Unprecedented efforts have been made to expand access to **reliable information** on forced displacement from Ukraine. At the EU level, the European Commission has been providing weekly updates, including on the entries and exits of refugees from Ukraine or the number of children benefitting from temporary protection who have been admitted to schools in Europe. This is meant to channel information to journalists and interested citizens.

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Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, national authorities also publish regular updates on the number of refugees welcomed, the reception policies put in place and the public expenditure needed for their implementation. Spain, for example, developed an online dashboard presenting the profiles of registered Ukrainian refugees in real time.<sup>165</sup> The Italian *Protezione Civile*, the national agency dealing with emergencies, presents data on refugee entries, requests for temporary protection, and livelihood contributions.<sup>166</sup>

Other countries went further and created online platforms that offer a comprehensive overview of their strategies to respond to the high number of arrivals. The Portugal for Ukraine website, for example, gives an accessible and comprehensible overview of public actions, including humanitarian aid and the integration and hosting of Ukrainian refugees.<sup>167</sup> It also explains the relevant legislation. Similarly, the Irish government launched a dedicated platform with information for the general public, businesses and the Community Response Forum, a network of local groups established to coordinate community-led support for Ukrainian refugees in the country.<sup>168</sup>

While also accessible to the public at large, these initiatives are essential for promoting evidence-based discourses through professional actors like journalists.

If supported by concrete policies, these initiatives could play an important role in the sustained acceptance of refugees in host societies, as they provide data

demonstrating that the EU and governments are not ignoring the challenges or, worse, neglecting locals' concerns and prioritising Ukrainian refugees' needs instead.<sup>169</sup>

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Yet, these are early steps. Data is not always regularly updated. It also remains to be seen if member states will be as keen to invest resources to continue access to reliable information in the future. In addition, these initiatives tend to rely on potential users seeking reliable content themselves. Besides experts, only some journalists and communication professionals may know about their existence.

Furthermore, sharing data effectively is often just as important as having access to reliable data. Poor data presentation can contribute to misperceptions about migration and distort public opinion. A better capacity to analyse and communicate the data is needed to promote a balanced debate on migration issues. While access to data is a vital starting point, subject-specific competencies combined with MIL will therefore remain necessary for journalists and other communication professionals to be able to promote an evidence-based discussion on the topic.

# Chapter 3. Recommendations for a more resilient EU

Actions to be taken by the EU and other relevant stakeholders reflect the two pillars and timescales of prebunking approaches: in the short term, improve the identification of impending disinformation threats and, in the longer term, raise public awareness of manipulation techniques.<sup>170</sup>

## 3.1. SHORT-TERM INITIATIVES: MONITORING, EARLY WARNING AND FORESIGHT

### **RECOMMENDATION 1:** Expand monitoring activities through coordinated multistakeholder initiatives

**Monitoring** disinformation narratives is an important task to ensure that all relevant policymakers and stakeholders understand what they consist of, how they spread and how effective responses can be crafted. A significant number of different actors are currently engaged in this task. In order to avoid duplicating efforts, activities should be coordinated as much as possible. Monitoring systems should use common analytical frameworks to capture the changing flows of disinformation across different languages and the whole of the information environment. Monitoring efforts should also involve media experts and stakeholders specialised in topics which are often the subject of disinformation.

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To ensure that all sources and channels of disinformation are effectively monitored, a more ambitious project would be to set up an inclusive European hub. An **EU online platform against disinformation** could close the gaps that currently limit EU's capacity to detect manipulation campaigns to foreign actors. Civil society partners should run this platform. This would enable monitoring activities to bypass existing legal, political and practical constraints, and take an actor-agnostic approach.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2:** Establish real-time and early warning systems based on civil society monitoring

Monitoring and research efforts can help communicators and other stakeholders react promptly to new developments through early warning systems. At the moment, with some exceptions, new disinformation narratives are not being examined 'in real time'. This makes it difficult to intervene promptly where necessary. Real-time monitoring and early warning systems should enable public authorities, fact-checkers and other communication professionals to assess the likely reach and impact of disinformation before intervening and craft swift responses where necessary.

**Early warning measures** could be built into the EU online platform against disinformation (see Recommendation 1), with a dedicated channel or group for early warning activities. Platform users could signpost specific cases following a predefined set of criteria. For example, they could assign each disinformation case a 'grade' reflecting the individual story's characteristics or narrative. Immediate actions would need to address those with a high potential to attract significant engagement, possibly across borders and linguistic communities. Less harmful disinformation stories would be simply monitored to promote situational awareness.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3:** Use foresight techniques to gain a first-mover advantage and fine-tune communication efforts

**Foresight methods** should be implemented to enable policymakers and other relevant stakeholders to be better prepared for future developments. Foresight efforts should account for various potential scenarios (e.g. war in Ukraine protracted, another epidemic breakout) and assess which disinformation narratives and frames may be used in specific circumstances (e.g. wealth-related narratives). They should also consider how stories and narratives can harness widespread concerns and target particular population segments.

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The EU online platform against disinformation (see recommendation 1) could also include a channel dedicated to foresight activities. For all short-term actions, including these foresight activities, the platform should have an open and adjustable membership system that convenes experts, CSOs, and national and EU institutions interested in strategic foresight. It should also involve large social networks and tech companies which fall within the scope of the DSA or subscribe to the 2022 Code of Practice against Disinformation. The platform should produce regular (e.g. monthly) situational reports. This will help set up a rapid and robust response to future disinformation crises.

### 3.2. LONGER-TERM INITIATIVES: SOCIETAL RESILIENCE THROUGH MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4: Prepare citizens to recognise disinformation via literacy campaigns that cover all basic critical skills**

To be able to distinguish actual news from rumours and manipulation, European citizens must be equipped with a **comprehensive set of critical skills** to cope with the dynamic and fast-developing (dis)information environment. They should be able to spot and resist bias and common manipulation techniques. Despite deep and widespread concerns about disinformation connected to the war in Ukraine, not all member states prioritise MIL efforts equally.

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The EU should strive for a degree of harmony in this area while supporting CSOs and private initiatives, despite the different national educational policies. This should include, at minimum, a harmonised system to measure the impact of MIL initiatives, as well as guidelines based on best practices for national and regional educational authorities. Promising initiatives taken against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine could complement the experience already acquired at the national level in some countries, such as Finland. While this may not bridge national divides, continued collaboration and coordinated state-led efforts could bring about greater MIL uniformity in the EU.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5: Promote migration literacy through subject-specific training for intermediaries**

Migration is an inherently complex subject, offering malicious actors various entry points to propagate divisive narratives. Considering the unique characteristics of disinformation about migration, subject-specific educational programmes on disinformation should be promoted alongside general training. Awareness-raising efforts should be directed towards those with an intermediary role; notably journalists and the media, as well as teachers. **Migration literacy** will help them avoid reproducing false and misleading stories unintentionally. It will also help them promote a more balanced, evidence-based debate without aligning with a specific ideological or political agenda.

Initiatives to improve access to reliable information, which started with Russia's war on Ukraine, should be extended in the future and cover all migration and asylum scenarios (e.g. beyond refugees from Ukraine). Teachers should also encourage students to apply a critical attitude to information while ensuring that they are better informed about the realities of migration. Future European-level media literacy guidelines could include resources for educators to mediate informed classroom discussions on migration. To avoid any risk of the efforts becoming politicised, the content and teaching material for such training should continue to be developed by experts, international organisations or civil society working on migration rather than governments or the EU.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 6: Apply segmentation and targeting to media literacy efforts**

European citizens of all ages and walks of life should be given the opportunity to strengthen and update their critical skills regularly. MIL programmes should reflect the needs of different age groups, from children born in the digital age who are heavy users of social media to older generations who are not as adept at using digital technologies. However, literacy programmes should consider not only demographics but also the values, beliefs and concerns of different segments of society. Those with specific pre-existing values and concerns, including those who may be especially receptive to disinformation about migration, may not be reached by general campaigns. MIL training and initiatives for groups besides youths should therefore consider the specific attitudes, preferences and value systems of those most likely to be susceptible to disinformation campaigns.

# Conclusion: Future-proofing the EU against migration-related disinformation

Migration is and will remain a salient issue in the political agenda and the news cycle. As such, it will continue to attract large volumes of disinformation in the future. Attention-grabbing events like Russia's invasion of Ukraine fuel the rapid spread of false and misleading news about refugees and other groups of migrants. But migration-related disinformation also circulates in situations of apparent normalcy, continuously adapting its script to different contexts and the changing news cycle.

Against this backdrop, a variety of actors will continue to use migration-related disinformation to sow divisions, stoke confusion and feed polarisation. The war in Ukraine and widespread disinformation about the consequent displacement embodies existing challenges in this respect, pointing to the high stakes involved in the fight against hostile narratives promoted by disinformation. At the same time, it sheds light on the necessary actions that must be taken to strengthen societal resilience against current and future disinformation.

As this Issue Paper emphasises, public attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees remain largely positive. However, threat-based narratives may feed discontent and contribute to declining support for the welcoming policies at the EU and national levels. This is especially the case in the current European context of heightening concerns about geopolitical instability and insecurity and the cost-of-living crisis.

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**Public attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees remain largely positive. However, threat-based narratives may feed discontent and contribute to declining support for the welcoming policies at the EU and national levels. This is especially the case in the current European context of heightening concerns about geopolitical instability and insecurity and the cost-of-living crisis.**

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Disinformation portraying refugees from Ukraine as undeserving or locals as second-class citizens in their own country could resonate with a greater number of people against this backdrop, leading to a marked perception of unfairness and growing resentment. False stories reproducing baseless content that all refugees are violent could similarly impact the welcoming attitudes of those who share security concerns.

Due to the present and future risks linked to the rapid spread of these disinformation narratives, this Issue Paper examines and identifies the advantages of tailor-made communication-based responses to disinformation, calling for a **prebunking approach**.

The concept of prebunking revolves around preparedness and increased societal resilience. Preparedness is built around the capacity to monitor the disinformation landscape thoroughly and systematically, issue alerts about false stories as early as possible, or even anticipate future narratives before they spread. Resilience involves strengthening critical skills and enabling those exposed to disinformation to spot manipulation techniques independently. It also entails gaining subject-specific competencies that can promote fact-based, balanced reporting about migration and asylum.

The switch from a debunking to a prebunking approach entails a change of policies, but also of mindset or culture: looking at the broader disinformation environment instead of fact-checking individual stories; understanding the attitudes of the audiences targeted by disinformation; creating more opportunities for whole-of-society initiatives to ensure that anticipatory actions can benefit all those who are susceptible to disinformation. The list goes on.

Admittedly, implementing this change is not easy in a multilevel governance framework such as that of the EU. However, some early initiatives taken against disinformation – as well as misinformation and propaganda – linked to the war in Ukraine, and recent changes to the EU policy and legal frameworks, could facilitate this transition.

Yet, for this process to be complete and for the EU to effectively boost its societal resilience against disinformation, several obstacles must be overcome. These include dropping actor-specific approaches to the origins of disinformation, moving beyond security-oriented policy responses, and bringing about harmonised MIL across the EU, among others.

Although not straightforward or reachable overnight, achieving this change will enable policymakers and communication actors to be one step ahead of disinformation actors and ensure they are suitably prepared for each new development. They will be able to take strategic action before disinformation can manipulate the public discourse and public attitudes. Even though this prebunking approach will not end disinformation as such, it will nevertheless help pre-empt the impact of disinformation.



Challenges will remain though, as will the opportunities for improving the EU's response to disinformation and for promoting better policies in the areas of migration and asylum.

Firstly, while the war further consolidated policymakers' attention on the digital ecosystem, disinformation is hardly limited to the online world. Understanding how false claims move between and across social media, traditional media and offline spaces will be critical in this context.

Secondly, to further undermine the appeal of disinformation and depolarise the discourse, politicians and public figures must not amplify disinformation, even if unintentionally. In addition, they have a particular responsibility to talk about migration in a truthful and measured way.

Thirdly, prebunking strategies can help undermine threat-based discourses about migration. But communication-based strategies must also be backed up by effective policies. In this respect as well, the EU's response to the war in Ukraine and the displacement of millions of refugees shows not only the need to step

up efforts against disinformation but also that existing socio-economic challenges must be urgently addressed.

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**Prebunking strategies can help undermine threat-based discourses about migration. But communication-based strategies must also be backed up by effective policies.**

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Ineffective policymaking that fails to address the roots of people's concerns in the upcoming months will make it harder to reinforce a balanced communication about migration or asylum policy. Conversely, effective policies will go a long way towards resolving the concerns that drive disinformation on migration. A more balanced debate will, in turn, facilitate the adoption of these policies, thus creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of balanced debate and policymaking.

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