

EVENT REPORT

Countering Foreign Interference (CFI) project

CFI DIALOGUES 2024

24–25 June 2024, Florence, Italy

Background and concept

The **Countering Foreign Interference (CFI) Dialogues** is the flagship annual event of the CFI project. Further to the first edition held in June 2023, this year's edition reached additional relevant stakeholders to continue building a **CFI Network**. This year, the Dialogues had an increased focus on the engagement of field and security experts, and the private sector, and continued to engage with **European Union (EU) institutions, EU Council Member State Presidency, international organisations and think-thanks, as well as researchers**. The enhanced **Community of Practice** will deepen the understanding of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)-related challenges and further develop and operationalise the project tools to help address them more effectively.

The second edition of the CFI Dialogues, titled **Interference's Many Faces in Times of Hybridity**, and co-organised by the European University Institute (EUI) and the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), was held at the EUI on 24 and 25 June 2024. Building on the successful first edition of the Dialogues, the event explored FIMI within the wider spectrum of foreign interference, including technological and psychological aspects of interference operations.

The plenary sessions were held in a hybrid format, while the specialised breakout sessions were in person only. The first plenary session dealt with the shift in the understanding of FIMI within the EU. As the phenomenon is evolving, its conceptualisation and policy responses are evolving in parallel. FIMI is now increasingly understood as a security threat. The second panel discussed different forms of foreign interference in partner countries and the value of efforts to counter it as a tool for fostering European partnerships. The final plenary panel exposed the increasing threat posed by AI when used to amplify FIMI. Finally, the event also shed light on the increasing link between FIMI and cyber threats and the role of information threats in conflict situations.

KEY TAKEAWAYS include:

FIMI as a threat:

- **The FIMI concept has been well established** as representing significant threats by state and non-state actors, both within and outside the EU. Discussion of the threat dimension of FIMI was more thorough than in last year's edition of the Dialogues.
- **FIMI, disinformation and harmful narratives can erode trust, destabilise societies and increase cynicism and nihilism among citizens.** Another highlighted aspect was the direct harm that these may pose to the (physical) security of members of the community. Policies and initiatives aimed at countering these threats need to account for threat levels and assess the risks posed by FIMI at all levels – from its societal implications to the security of persons.

- The CFI Dialogues 2024 further explored the impact of FIMI on the EU's external relations. FIMI has **the potential to disrupt peace operations including Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and the EU's external action in broader terms. Situational awareness is a key factor in mitigating the risks.** Building resilience via training is a key component of effectively addressing FIMI.
- Last but not least, the event explored how artificial Intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies greatly increase the capacity to create and distribute disinformation at scale.

Potential responses:

- A **multifaceted approach is required to tackle FIMI**, which should encompass whole-of-society awareness-raising, a strong legal framework, cooperation from IT platforms and robust cybersecurity solutions to rising digital threats.
- As a result, a **wide variety of initiatives aimed at identifying, understanding and countering these threats have emerged.** Recent examples, such as the notable absence of major foreign interference with serious disruptive effects during the EU elections, indicate that these may have been successful, but the need to enhance a systematic and structural approach to vigilance, defence and deterrence remains.
- **AI and emerging technologies can also be utilised** to support and improve the CFI community's capacity **to identify and analyse substantial amounts of misleading content.** To be successful, policies aimed at limiting the harmful effects of AI technology need to reflect its multifaceted nature, including the societal components.
- The **growth of the counter-interference community is a welcome development**, but it is important to avoid overlap, redundancies and potential interferences between the activities of multiple actors, institutions and initiatives.
- **Human interaction remains key. Cooperation** between like-minded and partner countries, EU institutions, civil society, journalists and other relevant actors **is crucial to counter FIMI** and other foreign interferences effectively and efficiently. **Coordination** between the community members can facilitate the sharing of relevant findings, tools, methodologies and other important information.
- Complementary to the last year's edition, the CFI Dialogues 2024 discussed the necessity **to improve communicating the FIMI and disinformation threats to the wider public**, including the tactics and actors involved. Prebunking and debunking have proved useful, but a more comprehensive approach is needed to reach all relevant publics.
- It is important **to identify the responsibilities of each actor involved in the spreading, identification, correction and countering of manipulative content.** This includes relevant platforms that host and enable misleading content, civil society organisations that monitor these issues and, importantly, the media that can report on and address harmful narratives, inter alia.
- Even more than last year, the CFI Dialogues 2024 acknowledged that much of the community's work so far has been reactive. To better address these threats, **it is important for the EU, national authorities and other relevant stakeholders across societal sectors to be proactive**, and to develop, implement and sustain actionable and tailored solutions.
- **Specialised breakout sessions** focused on the following issues:
 - **Session 1:** How Vulnerable Are Countries to FIMI? An Empirical Approach.
 - **Session 2:** Knowing the Information Environment: A Dynamic FIMI Threat Assessment.
 - **Session 3:** A Brave New World: Future Proofing CSDP in the Hybrid and FIMI Domain.
 - **Session 4:** Ensuring Cognitive Security: Crisis Context and Best Practices.

More information on the project outputs and activities can be found here:

<https://www.iss.europa.eu/projects/countering-foreign-interference>