

Disinformation campaigns about LGBTI+ people in the EU and foreign influence



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BRIEFING

Disinformation campaigns about LGBTI+ people in the EU and foreign influence

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this briefing is to give a concise overview of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda campaigns about LGBTI+ persons and rights, originating from or being supported and/or multiplied by actors outside the EU. Based on a review of existing literature, the briefing examines the main narratives used, supported and circulated, as well as which actors or group of actors are involved. Where available, information on methods, funding and impacts on European values is provided. The main narratives identified include negative othering, opposing a 'gender ideology', 'heteroactivism', restoring a 'natural' order, 'colonialism' and child safety. The briefing concludes that there is a need for more research, further harmonisation of legal frameworks, the scrutiny of financial flows and strengthened capacity to detect disinformation, misinformation, propaganda and hate speech.

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Table of contents

1	Introduction	4
1.1	Definition of terms: disinformation, propaganda and hate speech	5
1.2	Methodology	6
2	Research overview of main narratives	6
2.1	LGBTI+ inclusion as ‘colonialism’ by the liberal West	7
2.2	LGBTI+ inclusion as a ‘threat to child safety’: paedophilia and sex education promoting unnatural sexuality and gender expressions	8
2.3	Negative othering	8
2.4	Opposing a ‘Gender Ideology’	9
2.5	Heteroactivism and protection of the ‘natural’ family’s rights	9
2.6	Restoring the ‘natural’ order as ordained by God	10
3	Cases of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech	10
3.1	‘Colonialism’ by the West	11
3.2	Children, sex education and paedophilia	12
3.3	Negative othering: LGBTI+ people spreading COVID-19	12
3.4	Opposing a ‘Gender Ideology’: the role of the Vatican	13
3.5	Heteroactivism: The reinstatement of the ‘natural family’ and the World Congress of Families	13
3.6	The role of religion: Restoring the ‘natural order’ - the case of Tradition Family and Property	14
4	Overview of actual and possible impacts of disinformation	15
5	Assessment of actions taken at EU and Member State level	16
5.1	Actions at EU and Member State level	16
5.1.1	Strategy, legislation and specific tools	16
5.1.2	Capacity development	18
5.2	Assessment	19

6	Conclusions and recommendations	20
6.1	Harmonise the legal framework across Europe and strengthen capacity amongst law enforcement professionals to handle disinformation campaigns, misinformation and hate speech and counter them by promoting EU values	21
6.2	Restrict the financial flows to disinformation and hate speech groups	21
6.3	Upgrade European capacity to detect and monitor disinformation and hate speech.	22
6.4	More research is needed	22
	Annex 1 - Consultations	23
	Annex 2 - Bibliography	24
	Annex 3 – EU Documents	28

List of tables

Table 1: Review of EU documents referring to LGBTIQ+, disinformation, hate speech and/or hate crime	28
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List of acronyms and abbreviations

Acronym	Definition
AI	Artificial Intelligence
EC	European Commission
EDMO	European Digital Media Observatory
EEAS	European Union External Action Service
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
IC	Istanbul Convention
INGE	Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex
SOGI Unit	Council of Europe Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Unit
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFP	Tradition, Family and Property
UN	United Nations
WCF	World Congress of Families

1 Introduction

Digital communication facilitates non-democratic actors' access to and control of public life in their own country, as well as the opportunity to operate undetected outside the country of origin. There is concrete evidence that the European Union's (EU) democratic processes are being targeted and interfered with by disinformation campaigns aiming at challenging democratic ideals and agreements on rights and responsibilities inside the EU (Makhashvili 2017). Based on a systematic review of 11 countries' secret service reports, the Russian government is repeatedly identified as the main foreign actor when it comes to attempts 'to influence European politics and decision-making most, and more so than China and other states' (Karlsen 2019: 1, Roguski 2019). But the EU is also targeted by other foreign non-state actors (Archer & Provost 2020, Stoeckl & Medvedeva 2018, Stoeckl 2018, 2020). The Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union (INGE) was created to analyse attempts by both state and non-state actors to interfere in the functioning of democracy in the EU and its Member States and to make recommendations for strengthening the Union's capacity to respond.

The Russian government's interference is motivated by a desire to ensure long-term regime security and the resurrection of its world-power status, which are contingent on a weakened EU and NATO (Karlsen 2019). The West and Europe is consequently targeted using a divide-and-rule approach, where identifying and exploiting divisive social issues is a core strategy. Equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people (LGBTI+) appear to have been singled out as a particularly opportune topic to sow friction and disunity between EU Member States. Although the Russian government is a key actor, it is important to understand that it is not the sole actor with an interest in challenging the last decade's expansion of rights. Russia's interests in destabilisation overlap with those of other actors driven by ideological agendas.

Even with noticeable differences in the level of social acceptance towards LGBTI+ people between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe (Takas and Szalma 2019), decades of human rights advocacy, targeting both individual Member States and the EU institutions, have effectively made many Western democracies, including most parts of Europe, a better place for LGBTI+ people than before. Important legislative and policy changes have removed criminalization, progressively granted freedoms and rights and brought more equality (equal age of consent, anti-discrimination laws, same-sex civil partnership and marriage, adoption, protection from hate speech and crime). Tolerance levels have thus steadily increased across most of Europe between 2002-2016, but with parts of Central and Eastern Europe being an exception (Takas and Szalma 2019).

However, to provide context for the analysis of foreign influence and disinformation, it has to be noted that there are clear signs of a backlash against equal rights for the community: 40 % of 140,000 respondents to a recent survey reported a deterioration in the human rights situation in the past five years. This trend is particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) 2020). There is also a sharp increase in online hate speech across the EU (ILGA-Europe Annual Review 2020). Public figures and officials across Europe in countries including Bulgaria, Poland, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Portugal and Spain are actively contributing to hate speech (ILGA-Europe Annual Review 2020). Some public officials in Central and Eastern Europe are openly challenging the equality-for-all framework, and boldly broadcast their non-compliance with EU norms and regulations. Polish officials' public support for so-called 'LGBTI free zones' is one example of state-sponsored homophobia, and indicative of a new level of confidence in which conservative policy makers publicly reject and challenge EU ambitions of making of the EU a 'Union of Equality' for LGBTI+ persons and to ensure that their fundamental rights are guaranteed, respected and promoted. ILGA-Europe (2020) concludes that there is a discernible mismatch between lived experiences in some parts of Europe and the EU governing bodies' public messaging on LGBTI+ equality as a shared European norm, and thus calls for more determined action.

It is against this background that the European Parliament (EP) has commissioned a briefing on disinformation activities on LGBTI+ issues initiated or supported by actors outside the EU. The purpose of the briefing is to give a concise overview of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda campaigns about LGBTI+ persons and rights, originating from or being supported and/or multiplied by actors outside the EU. Departing from a review of academic (and other published) literature, the briefing examines the main narratives used, supported and circulated, as well as which actors or group of actors are involved. Where available, information on methods, funding and impacts on European values is provided.

1.1 Definition of terms: disinformation, propaganda and hate speech

The European Commission (EC) defines disinformation as ‘verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause harm’.¹ The Center for Democracy and Technology (2021) argues that the following three conditions should guide the understanding of disinformation: a) false information, b) intentionally designed to be false and misleading, c) with a political, social or economic goal, such as undermining trust in democratic institutions. Both definitions highlight that disinformation is purposefully created and disseminated with the intention to mislead the public or a section of the public. Disinformation is closely related to propaganda, which is information that contains deliberately selected facts and arguments presented to have the most effect on an intended audience. Propaganda, similar to disinformation, may omit and/or distort key facts. Classic overt propaganda is primarily found in political spaces where citizens have reason to suspect they are going to be exposed to a variety of often fiercely argued political opinions. Intense propaganda sustained over time may result in political indoctrination, where citizens gradually come to internalise the propagandist’s proposed grand narrative. None of these definitions, however, successfully addresses source visibility. We would argue that an expanded definition of disinformation should also reflect sources’ strategic use of invisibility and source ambiguity, that is, the fact that authors and in particular the original sources of disinformation are often strategically hidden,² which denies the recipients an opportunity to assess the source’s agenda, credibility and legitimacy on the topic. Actors of disinformation make use of the contemporary social media landscape’s sharing logics, where content is re-packaged and personalised and eventually shared, allowing the original source’s identity to become camouflaged behind, or merged with the immediate message senders. Source ambiguity is one of the reasons that disinformation is particularly hard to combat.

The aforementioned criteria for disinformation do not come without challenges. Firstly, intentions are hard to verify, in particular as benefitting actors may not be known. Where there are no obvious intentions to mislead, and false or misleading information is rather shared in good faith, this is described as misinformation.³ Secondly, a partly related challenge is to determine the objectives of disinformation efforts when benefitting actors may not be fully known. Thirdly, determining what is verifiably false and / or misleading in relation to a subject will vary depending on the authors’ level of understanding of the topic and/or ideological convictions. Texts or multimodal expressions that contain unjust and generic ‘negative-othering’, and may include support of existing discriminatory or unfavourable treatment or advocate new unfavourable treatment and discrimination, but that are not strictly verifiably false or

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/action-plan-disinformation-commission-contribution-european-council-13-14-december-2018_en, accessed 19 March 2021

² In the case of LGBTI-related disinformation, this also sometimes manifests not as remaining ‘hidden’ but as misrepresenting the number of people who hold the views – asserting that something is widely held when in fact a small number of voices are supporting the position. It may be that this small group further hides another group, as is the case with a lot of anti-trans and anti-LGBTI rhetoric.

³ See for example the [Commission Communication on Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - getting the facts rights](#): ‘Second, it is important to determine whether there is an intention to deceive or cause public harm, or to make economic gain. Where there is no such intention, for example, when citizens share false information unknowingly with friends and family in good faith, the content concerned can be viewed as misinformation; by contrast, and as defined in the Commission Communication of April 2018, the presence of such intention would qualify the content as disinformation.’

misleading and that do not aim at deceiving the public, cannot in general be considered disinformation. Such expressions could, however, be exploited by foreign actors wanting to increase division and polarisation in our democratic society, and provide fertile ground for targeted disinformation campaigns.

This briefing focuses on disinformation pertaining to LGBTI+ issues, i.e., false or misleading information *intentionally spread* to European citizens, mainly with the intention to take advantage of the social polarisation pertaining to the Union's human rights framework. But it also covers misinformation, where the intention to deceive is difficult to ascertain due to source ambiguity. The briefing covers disinformation and misinformation originating from both known and suspected foreign actors, as well as disinformation with an ambiguous source status, but where the text is supported and spread by European actors.

Both disinformation and misinformation may lead to hate speech, which is defined as 'all forms of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance' (Council of Europe 1997). Although content can be both identified as disinformation and hate speech, and there is a clear common core of propagating and spreading prejudices, hate speech is understood as different in at least one key aspect - the intentions behind the act, as hate speech has a clear intention to vilify, humiliate, threaten, scare and intimidate a target (i.e., the LGBTI+ individual and / or community). On the other hand, the intentions behind disinformation lie in misleading the public or a section of the public, by feeding it untrue, deceptive or biased information about LGBTI+ people or policies concerning them, which may in turn fuel and incite hatred against LGBTI+ individuals or the people/organisations defending their rights. Hate speech thus has an explicit element of threat, which disinformation does not necessarily have. Because of the element of aggression, hate speech is illegal in most of the EU. Hate crime, which can include hate speech against LGBTI+ people, also includes other acts, such as vandalism of property and arson, acts of assault, and murder. Bayer & Bard (2020) argue that hate speech has grave implications at a societal level as it can 'poison societies by threatening individual rights, human dignity and equality, reinforcing tensions between social groups, disturbing public peace and public order, and jeopardising peaceful coexistence'.

1.2 Methodology

The briefing is based on two complementary methods: a standard review of academic and 'grey' literature and engagement with European scholars and selected stakeholders (see list of consultations in Annex I).

Besides literature collected through contacting academics, material was sourced first through Google Scholar, using the search words 'hate speech' and 'disinformation' in combination with the acronym 'LGBT*' (the * signifying that all different endings of LGBT were included); and secondly, through the academic databases *Sociological Abstracts*, *Scopus* and *Academic Search Elite*. Materials were manually processed to ensure relevance for the EU context. Relevant grey literature and information from trusted and reliable organisations such as FRA, ILGA-Europe, and Algorithm Watch and the portal EUvsDisinfo has also been reviewed. Some of the contacted scholars and stakeholders provided comments on the draft version of this report. It is worth noting the main constraint affecting the preparation of this briefing was the lack of systematic collection of data on disinformation targeting LGBTI+ people and originating and / or supported by actors outside the EU.

2 Research overview of main narratives

In an increasingly globalised world, with domestic and international actors intermingling, influencing and drawing inspiration from each other, combined with the fact that disinformation campaigns are often carried out by consortia of actors, where local actors enter partnerships with foreign actors, it is a precarious task to pin down foreign influence. Patternotte and Kuhar (2017: 4) argue that it is not always productive to create borders and insist on 'the trans-national nature of these discourses and strategies'. Research shows that narratives are often co-produced with local partners, as opposed to merely being injected in

the EU from the outside. While the reviewed literature rarely reveals any direct links between disinformation narratives and attacks against democratic institutions and processes, most of the reviewed literature is based on the understanding that disinformation is a problem for democracies (as also apparent in the above section on definitions).

The literature review resulted in the identification of six dominant narratives that for the purpose of analytical clarity are presented separately. In reality, they often appear in pairs and combinations and create mutually-reinforcing connections. These narratives should thus be viewed in light of the academic point of departure identifying them. There might be other narratives and actors involved than those revealed in the reviewed academic and published literature. The narratives help to contextualise the concrete disinformation actions with foreign interference to be discussed in chapter 3.

- 1) LGBTI+ as 'colonialism' by the West;
- 2) LGBTI+ as a 'threat to child safety': paedophilia and sex education promoting unnatural sexuality and gender expressions;
- 3) Negative othering;
- 4) Opposing a 'Gender Ideology';
- 5) Heteroactivism and protecting the 'natural' family's rights;
- 6) Restoring the 'natural' order as ordained by God.

2.1 LGBTI+ inclusion as 'colonialism' by the liberal West

There is an established narrative that the promotion of the rights of LGBTI+ people is a poorly veiled 'colonisation' attempt by a morally corrupt and degraded West. This is notably the case for Central and Eastern Europe which is said to be particularly exposed through its geographical proximity to the West (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). The use of the negative connotations of 'colonisation' by the Global Right to galvanize opposition to LGBTI+ people's rights inside Europe is explored in the study 'Gender as Ebola from Brussels', where the authors find that 'colonisation' fears are more present in Central and Eastern Europe. Narratives frame gender egalitarianism as 20th century totalitarianism which is deadly and creates social upheaval. In the 'colonisation' narrative the Russian government is identified as the guarantor of traditional values and decency (Moss, in Kuhar & Paternotte 2017). Russia's Ministry of Culture announced in 2014 that Russia is not 'gayropa' but a protector of religious, cultural and historical traditions and values, unlike the morally corrupt establishment in Europe (Stoeckl & Medvedeva 2018). This 'colonisation' narrative not only draws on a dichotomy of Europe (the West) versus Russia (the East) but also exploits a general mistrust of the 'establishment', and perceived arrogance by Western liberal elites (Korolczuk & Graff 2018). The narrative rests on and exploits a growing scepticism of centralism and the EU (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017) and often with intentionally misleading information (see Korolczuk and Graff 2018).

The narrative also plays on broader fears of globalisation, and a sense of alienation, where Western global institutions and established elites are seen as imposing their 'liberal elite views', which are contrary to populist discourses that allegedly reflect the 'real' or 'normal' people on the ground. Opposing the rights of LGBTI+ people is interpreted by those who do not share the egalitarian and freedom-based principles of the European liberal project as an act of resistance against 'ideological colonisation'. This narrative refers to the West as capitalist, immoral, anti-family, as well as anti-religion and ungodly, while the East, and Russia in particular, offer a path to salvation (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017).

2.2 LGBTI+ inclusion as a 'threat to child safety': paedophilia and sex education promoting unnatural sexuality and gender expressions

The reviewed literature also revealed a narrative where LGBTI+ people are identified as a threat to children through their supposed 'predatory behaviour', and attempts at 'converting children into sexual perversions'; and finally, societies at large. In this narrative, so-called 'LGBTI+ behaviours' constitute a public health risk. The study 'The European Union as a child molester: sex education on pro-Russian websites', shows how sex education is vilified, and Russia is portrayed as a saviour of traditional values (Jarkovská 2020). Pro-Russian websites present extreme and manipulated representations of sex education in the EU, and callously exploit fears linked to concerns with sex education in educational systems (Jarkovská 2020). There are several examples of how the educational system is portrayed as a place of unwanted influence. For example, an overview of hate speech in Romania points at fears of children being taught 'deviance' (that is, homosexuality) in schools, and how this fear was exploited also in hate speech (Iordache 2015). Stoeckl (2018) reports how the EU is presented by certain media as imposing school curricula that teach masturbation. Sex education is also portrayed as an indicator of something worse to come (such as a general acceptance of so-called deviant sexualities, see Kuhar & Paternotte 2017). In this narrative, the child is seen as being threatened by indoctrination, sexualisation or being exposed to over-sexual adults. The image of the innocent and endangered child seems particularly effective in triggering 'moral panic'. This narrative is also connected to the prerogative of families to raise and educate their children according to their moral and religious beliefs (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017). Henning (2018) finds that the notion of Europeanisation of anti-discrimination policies in the arena of education makes the education system a key battleground.

2.3 Negative othering

The reviewed literature is rife with reports about various anti-narratives, where LGBTI+ people are given generic and unjust negative labels, where narratives either portray LGBTI+ people as morally corrupted and/or in some way a threat to society. Derogatory labels such as 'faggot' or 'pédé' (French), 'maricón' (Spanish) and 'Tunte' (German) are often used, as are statements of mockery through well-known slogans such as 'homosexuality is an abomination' and 'Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve' (Russell 2019). Epithets such as being 'perverts' and being 'sick' or 'deviant', and associating LGBTI+ people with decadence, disease and misery, communicate that LGBTI+ people are not only a threat to themselves but potentially to society in general (Iordache 2015). Furthermore, generic and unjust negative othering and labelling of LGBTI+ people are the building blocks of hate speech (Iordache 2015). Rusieshvili-Cartledge & Dolidze (2020) find that hate speech online often focuses on personal characteristics and stereotypes such as being effeminate, which resonate particularly in the Balkans where masculinity is celebrated but also connected to nation and nation building (Mrsevic 2013).

Russell (2019) underlines in his book that speech targeting LGBTI+ people involves more than the use of taboo words, or calls for the exclusion of LGBTI+ people. He examines the broad and complex linguistic patterns that produce and propagate a homophobic world view, which has real consequences. Baider (2018) finds that negative othering in Cyprus is used to advocate that LGBTI+ people do not 'deserve to live'. Lately, LGBTI+ people have also been blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic (ILGA Europe 2020).

Whether negative othering falls under the category of hate speech, misinformation or disinformation is difficult to say as intentions of those engaging in negative othering have not been addressed in the reviewed literature. Nonetheless, negative othering contains false information (as when LGBTI+ people are said to be 'sick') and often results in explicit proposals supporting discriminatory or unfavourable treatment of LGBTI+ people.

2.4 Opposing a 'Gender Ideology'

Kuhar and Paternotte (in different combinations and multiple publications) trace a narrative of *anti-gender* across Europe, using Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Russia, Slovenia and Spain as case studies. The authors find that actors unite under an umbrella of resistance against what is labelled 'Gender Ideology'. This so-called 'Gender Ideology' is said to permeate and dominate Western liberal democracies in general, and the EU in particular. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) explain that the term *anti-gender* captures a general opposition to women's quest for equality and LGBTI+ rights, which threaten to erode hegemonic masculinity. Opponents to so-called 'Gender Ideology' rationalise their opposition by claiming that they combat the destruction of the human race and civilisation, which in their minds are threatened by the expansion of equal rights to women and LGBTI+ people.

In their study of the far-right and conservative movements in France, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, Kovats & Pöim (2015) find that the term 'gender' successfully functions as a 'symbolic glue' for those involved. The term 'Gender Ideology' is an empty signifier which allows a diverse range of religious and far-right actors to team up to fight women's equality, sex education and the rights of LGBTI+ people such as same-sex marriage. Hodzic and Bijelic (2014) conclude that fighting sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU has united a range of different parties. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) emphasise that opponents are transnationally interconnected, notwithstanding the fact that they proclaim their local embeddedness and support for national sovereignty; their declared aims are fighting against morally corrupt elites - notably represented by the EU and United Nations (UN) - that attempt to 'colonise' them by propagating liberal ideals. More recently, also the term 'LGBT ideology' has been repeatedly used derogatorily, notably by Polish politicians, to attack and dehumanise LGBTI+ people. (In response, the Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen and others, including the EP, have replied that it is not an ideology, it is an identity).⁴

Since 'Gender Ideology' is a construction by outsiders opposing gender and LGBTI+ equality, in cases where the term is spread intentionally to deceive the public this falls into the category of disinformation. However, it seems from the reviewed literature that many opponents of a 'Gender Ideology' actually believe in this as an intentional 'ideology', probably mistaking it with 'Gender Theory' in feminist studies. The narrative can thus amount to misinformation, but could also provide a fertile ground for foreign sponsored disinformation.

2.5 Heteroactivism and protection of the 'natural' family's rights

A central narrative in anti-gender campaigns is how a liberal understanding of gender is believed to pose a threat to human procreation, as it is claimed to negate sexual differences and gender complementarity, and thus threatens traditional / nuclear / 'natural' families consisting of a married man and woman who have children. Historically, actors have gathered around an anti-narrative. While this anti-narrative remains strong in hate speech, there are signs that actors are expanding their repertoire by complementing *anti* (gender and LGBTI+ rights) with being *pro*, in particular the 'natural' family. Mourao Permoser & Stoeckl's (2020) study of *pro*-homeschooling campaigns notes that traditional human rights defenders' language and rhetoric are being hijacked, and human rights are reframed as the rights of the *pro*-traditional family which rest on patriarchal structures as sources of authority and primary carriers of rights. The European Parliamentary Forum's report 'Restoring the Natural Order' finds that the focus has shifted from being 'anti' others' rights, to 'pro'-focused, where the right of fathers and parents (as well as the rights of children) are to be shielded from what is considered a harmful gender propaganda (Datta 2018). This shift is captured

⁴ 16 September 2021, State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655 and also EP resolution of 11 March 2021 on the declaration of the EU as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone, [Texts adopted - Declaration of the EU as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone - Thursday, 11 March 2021 \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/media/default.do?act=download&file=123456789)

in the concept of *heteroactivism* (Browne and Nash 2019, 2020). Heteroactivism attempts to reassert the superiority and centrality of heteronormativity and the traditional family for both individuals and society. This narrative explicitly avoids overt homophobia or anti-gay expressions. Many of these actors are not against the notion of different genders (Browne and Nash 2020). On the contrary, they are in favour of a binary normative gender order. As with the 'Gender Ideology' narrative, depending on where there is clear indication of an intention to deceive, the discourse about the 'natural family' can amount to disinformation or misinformation. It seems that 'heteroactivists' believe in the information they spread, which leads them to advocate for unfavourable treatment and discrimination of LGBTI+ people (even though this is less explicit than in the 'Gender Ideology' narrative).

2.6 Restoring the 'natural' order as ordained by God

Religion plays a key role in narratives of disinformation and hate speech directed against LGBTI+ people. Paternotte & Kuhar (2018) trace organised anti-gender campaigns in Europe back to conservative wings of the Catholic Church in the 1990s. Most large organised religions comprise factions that foster - and appear to attract individuals with - an unfavourable view of LGBTI+ issues. This is particularly true of some conservative branches of religious congregations which are used for mobilisation against what is perceived as an 'abomination' (Ayoub & Page 2020). Narratives include descriptions of homosexuality as inherently 'perverse, excessive and wicked' (Mrsevic 2013, Van Klinken & Zebracki 2016). 'LGBTI+ practices' are described as threatening the social and moral order, as prescribed to man by God (Van Klinken & Zebracki 2016). Inspired by the role of repentance in religious teachings, narratives include false and unscientific claims of sexuality being an individual choice. The narratives also describe opportunities to correct ungodly behaviours by submitting to so-called 'conversion therapy', which is the pseudoscientific practice of trying to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender expression (to heterosexual/cisgender) using psychological, physical, or spiritual intervention.

Religiously tainted narratives argue that fighting against LGBTI+ inclusion is fighting *for* God and His plan for us. The divine plan is centred around 'the natural order', where marriage, family and the right to life (European Parliamentary Forum reports 2018, 2020) take centre stage in religious narratives and activism. As such, these narratives can also contribute to existing discriminatory and unfavourable treatment of LGBTI+ people. In many cases these narratives are not disseminated with overt intention to mislead the public; some proponents of this narrative actually believe that homosexuality can be cured. This type of rhetoric can be consequently described as either disinformation, or misinformation, depending on the intention behind it, and can provide an anchor for foreign actors aiming to promote polarisation.

3 Cases of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech

This section presents some (while not all) cases described in the reviewed literature to illustrate the main narratives where they can be linked to foreign actors. Case description explores targets of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech, as well as actors or groups of actors responsible for creating and/or disseminating it. These cases diverge substantially in the nature of actors involved, from well-organised institutional arrangements to instances of foreign leaders initiating unrest, and minor citizen-led outbursts of 'moral panic'. Finally, the cases explore disinformation or misinformation and hate speech strategies and methods, where that information is available (which was not always the case in the reviewed literature). With little data on funding sources and patterns, this aspect of foreign influence is poorly understood and will subsequently be part of the recommendations for further research.

Although the examples showcase different ways of achieving the target of eroding public support for the rights of LGBTI+ people, as well as women's rights, there are common denominators in terms of the strategies that are used. These actors are extremely active on the web, taking advantage of its online opportunities to spread information, build community, create a sense of belonging and call for offline

demonstrations (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017: 264). Social media spaces are pivotal for dissemination and circulation of disinformation and hate speech. The basic structure of social media - that is, based on social ties - allows disinformation to penetrate networks of like-minded people. Disinformation is far more likely to be effective if it can attach itself to an already held belief or suspicion.

Conservative disinformation and misinformation are spread also through traditional activism (which contains elements of disinformation, Kuhar & Paternotte 2017), ranging from street-based activism and lobbying policy makers and media, to pursuing social policy change through litigation on behalf of individuals and groups. Social media greatly facilitates mobilisation on the ground, such as events and rallies. Conservative actors are also increasingly adopting strategies that traditionally have been used by human rights defenders, such as organising colourful and festive rallies, often reminiscent of Pride festivals. Self-victimisation is also employed, as are populist strategies, with actors presenting themselves as true defenders of an oppressed people, a majority silenced by powerful lobbies and elites. To justify disinformation or misinformation activities, actors often refer to their human rights and their freedom of expression. These actors make use of extensive lobbying on the local as well as international level, in particular to pursue legal cases in order to push for precedents.⁵

3.1 'Colonialism' by the West

The Kremlin is the obvious example of a foreign actor engaged in using and spreading a 'colonialism' narrative. Targeting LGBTI+ people lies at the heart of the Russian government's self-identification as opposed to a decadent West – positioning itself as the saviour of European civilisation. At the same time, the Russian government's geopolitical strategy involves uniting like-minded forces and intentionally destabilising the EU by supporting right-wing dissenting factions within the EU (see Moss' chapter, in Kuhar & Paternotte 2017). The idea of 'Eurasianism' plays an important role (Jarkovská 2020), promoting an ideology of Russian-Asian greatness. Political homophobia in Russia is connected to the country's supposed moral sovereignty (Wilkinson 2014). Western multiculturalism and tolerance are sometimes referred to as 'tolerasty' to rhyme with 'pederasty', a derogatory term used against homosexuals (Moss 2017). Verpoest (2017) argues that Russian government LGBTI+-related policies (such as the infamous 2013 law banning so-called 'gay propaganda', see also Polsdofer 2014; Wilkinson 2014) illustrate how precarious the position of Central European EU Member States has become, as they are caught between efforts to defend European values including the rights of LGBTI+ people on the one hand, and recent efforts to push pro-family agendas on the other. Jarkovská (2020) shows that even though direct official ties to the Kremlin are difficult to prove, pro-Russian websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia aim to make the public dislike the West and its institutions, and to convince people that civilisation can only be saved by Russia. According to her, Russian government actors take a specific approach to the manipulation of media and information in European countries, creating a special strategy for each state by engaging with local conditions, disputes and sensitive topics (sex education being a major one). According to a RAND report (Helmut et al. 2018), Russian actors are actively engaged in disseminating disinformation to Russian speakers in the Baltics, through a variety of means including traditional and social media. According to the report, in some cases Russia has used this outreach to sow dissent against host and neighbouring governments, as well as against the EU. Similarly, Verpoest (2017) concludes that there are clear signs of the Russian government's active stance in countering the rights of LGBTI+ people in Central and Eastern European countries. Another major actor is the World Congress of Families (WCF, see further below), which has close ties to Moscow State University and chief ideologists within the Kremlin (Moss 2017). Indeed, according to Moss (2017), one of WCF's main sponsors in Russia is the chief executive officer of Russian Railway.

⁵ Also, a tactic is to represent themselves as being more people than they are, or more connected to a local community than they are. The internet facilitates this, because it allows for such easy creation of fake profiles, etc.

3.2 Children, sex education and paedophilia

Dragoeva (2020) reports on 'hysteria', mainly among the Roma population in Bulgaria, in reaction to the ratification of the Council of Europe 2011 Istanbul Convention (IC) on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence (and how this was reported in the media), as well as the adoption of the *Strategy for the Child*, drafted by civil society and focusing on supporting parenthood. The narrative was that children would become perverted and taken away from parents into foster care, or sold to Scandinavia in general and Norway in particular (in which there were rumours, some broadcast on national media, that paedophilia is a state policy). This led to parents removing children from school, mainly fearing that their kids would end up with gay couples in Scandinavia who would sexually abuse them (Dragoeva 2020). Behind both the opposition to and creation of the Strategy for the Child were conservative groups with ties outside the EU. As Dragoeva (2020) states, Scandinavia is a convenient enemy for the Kremlin, where much of the disinformation originated. As Jarkovská (2020) also underlines, the portrayal of European (Union) countries as child molesters is common on Russian websites. In 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the IC unconstitutional because of its use of the word 'gender' (see Bankov, 2020), and the Strategy for the Child was retracted (Dragoeva 2020).

An example from the EUvsDisinfo database (2020b) is pro-Kremlin propaganda in the form of a [video clip](#) circulating on social media, and also spread in the EU, showing Russia in 2035, with a man arriving to an orphanage to adopt a boy together with another man, wearing make-up. The first gift the boy receives from his adoptive parents is a women's dress. The voice-over asks the viewer, *'Is this the Russia you choose? Decide the future of the country. Vote for the Constitutional Amendments'*. Another example in the same EUvsDisinfo database is a story run first on Russian channels which claimed that wealthy homosexuals could buy children at a fair in Brussels (EUvsDisinfo 2020b).

The focus on children and education resonates across cases and narratives in our overview. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) conclude that 'gender ideology' is presented as particularly threatening to children, and sex education is connected to a perceived hyper-sexualisation of LGBTI+ people, as well as paedophilia. Another example is Croatia, where the association 'The Voice of Parents and Children' - with strong links to conservative wings of the Church and echoing the political agenda of the Vatican - attempted in 2006 to oppose the introduction of a curriculum in schools for sex education by spreading incorrect and discriminatory information (European Parliamentary Forum 2020).

3.3 Negative othering: LGBTI+ people spreading COVID-19

In its report on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTI+ people, ILGA-Europe (2020) reports on political and religious leaders blaming LGBTI+ communities for the pandemic in a range of EU Member States, including Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and Poland. In the case of Bulgaria this seems to have originated in Turkey. During a Friday sermon marking the first day of Ramadan, the president of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) declared that Islam condemns homosexuality because it 'brings illness', insinuating that same-sex relations are responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite a public uproar from civil society organisations, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan quickly backed him, underlining the widely-known anti-LGBTI+ stance of the Turkish government.⁶ According to the ILGA-Europe report, these statements were shared in Bulgarian mainstream media, which in turn led to widespread LGBTI+-phobic comments in traditional and social media. This is thus a case of disinformation through negative othering of LGBTI+ people - as disease-spreaders. In the past LGBTI+ people were widely accused of spreading HIV/Aids (see HRC report from 2015). Today such disinformation is being rephrased within the current COVID-19 pandemic.

⁶ See <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/252534/turkish-government-scapegoats-lgbti-community-for-covid-19-pandemic/>, accessed 12 March 2021.

3.4 Opposing a 'Gender Ideology': the role of the Vatican

This sub-section relates to the role of the Vatican. The Holy See, a subject of international law *sui generis*, with the independent Vatican City State as its physical base, has been categorised as a hybrid actor in international relations. The Pope functions as the head of the Vatican State, and the leader of the Catholic Church as a transnational non-state actor, which is based on and includes institutions and Members around the World, and is closely intertwined with the societies in many EU countries. Given that the EU has diplomatic relations with the Holy See, and the latter has a physical base which is legally outside the EU, the Holy See and its Vatican-based institutions are here considered as an external actor, while acknowledging, as mentioned above, the difficulty of drawing borders and the trans-national nature of many discourses and strategies.

Indeed, a case of anti-LGBTI+ campaign is the 'Gender ideology' opposition campaign that started in conservative wings of the Vatican in the 1990s, in reaction to UN conferences in Cairo (1994, on population and development) and Beijing (1995, on women) believed to spread a so-called 'Gender Ideology'. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017: 9) therefore claim that the 'Gender Ideology' was a Catholic invention, with the Catholic Church its chief 'discourse producer' (p. 262). The Vatican feared that sexual and reproductive rights would become a vehicle for recognising abortion, undermining traditional motherhood and legitimising homosexuality.

Opposition to 'Gender Ideology' is thus a clear case of supporting and advocating for unfavourable treatment and discrimination against LGBTI+ people. Theologies of the woman and of the body (insisting on the difference and complementarity of the sexes) and the Vatican's idea of a 'new feminism', together with different publications from the former *Pontifical Council for the Family*, seem to have played a particular role. These ideas have persisted in the Vatican, evident in statements that gender is eliminating 'the anthropological basis of the family' (cited in Kuhar & Paternotte 2017: 5). The reason anti-gender campaigns gained momentum in the 2010s was because of crucial encounters with right-wing populism (Paternotte & Kuhar 2018). The term 'LGBT ideology' is also more and more used by right-wing conservative political figures connected to various religions and religious figures.⁷

Hodzic and Bijelic (2014) list various Catholic actors (inside the EU) with strong ties to the Vatican among the agents that are a threat to sexual and reproductive health rights in the EU. The European Parliamentary Forum report (2018, authored by Datta) on the Christian right-wing network *Agenda Europe* outlines how Vatican actors and institutions are central in the organisation of the network of 'Vatican Surrogates'. Similarly, in the chapters on anti-gender mobilisation in Kuhar and Paternotte's (2017) edited volume, there are examples of direct links between the Vatican and, for instance, the 2010s French anti-gender campaigns (see chapter by Stambolis-Ruhstorfer & Tricou). One French priest is described as a 'movement entrepreneur for the Vatican' (p. 85). There are other notorious intermediaries within the EU spreading Vatican anti-gender narratives, including intentional disinformation, all of whom had documented ties to the Vatican in general and the former *Pontifical Council for the Family* in particular (see Kuhar & Paternotte 2017: 10-11).

3.5 Heteroactivism: The reinstatement of the 'natural family' and the World Congress of Families

The World Congress of Families (WCF) is another example of a well-organised institutional and international actor that is mostly foreign but acts within the EU with a plethora of local partners. Stoeckl (2018) writes that WCF does not self-identify explicitly as Christian (even though it includes many Christians, with Orthodox Christians from Central and Eastern Europe being the newcomers). A report from

⁷ See for instance the use of this term in Poland both by the Catholic hierarchy and by Polish politicians.

2015 from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (HRC 2015) describes WCF as an 'American organisation exporting hate' such as homophobia and transphobia, particularly focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. However, to describe it as an American organisation is somewhat misleading, as Russian partners were part of its foundation in 1997 and continued to play a vital role (Stoeckl, 2018). As Stoeckl (2020) argues in her study of WCF, right-wing and conservative groups are increasingly connected across borders and are often overlooked in individual country case studies that focus on nationalism or on single religious groups.

WCF and its network of international partners actively seek to use the target country's existing human rights system and its mechanisms to halt and roll back human rights improvements, in the interests of 'protecting heterosexuals' and the 'natural' family. These actors thus recognise the successes of transnational human rights organisations as a global agenda-setter and fora for setting policy standards, and now use the very same mechanism that once produced greater awareness of and support for equality for LGBTI+ people but for the opposite aim. While not being explicitly anti, WCF clearly advocates for unfavourable treatment and discrimination against LGBTI+ people. The EU is also particularly targeted by disinformation and misinformation originating from this environment, with false statements that the EU would for example impose a school curriculum that teaches masturbation (Stoeckl, 2018).

3.6 The role of religion: Restoring the 'natural order' - the case of Tradition Family and Property

A direct link to religion, and a mission to restore a supposed Godly order between man and woman, is advocated by the socially conservative network *Tradition Family and Property* (TFP). The network was initiated in Catholic circles in Latin America and is now active also in Europe, targeting sexual and reproductive rights. According to the 2020 European Parliamentary Forum report titled 'Modern Day Crusaders in Europe' (authored by Datta), TFP originated in Brazil in 1960, founded by the Catholic activist Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira. The network focuses on social conservatism and economic hyper-liberalism, and it has a legacy of complicity with far-right movements. According to the report, TFP has found new horizons in Central and Eastern Europe and has ambitions to influence the EU and the UN. The report focuses on three recent events in Europe, spearheaded by organisations which appear to be supported by TFP: 1) a ban on abortion in Poland; 2) blocking support for *She Decides* (whether, when, and with whom, to have sex, to fall in love, to marry, to have children) in Croatia;⁸ and 3) halting a civil union law in Estonia.

TFP tactics take three main routes: social mobilisation; changing social norms (seeing their demands written into the law of most Western democracies, Stoeckl 2018); and entering existing decision-making spaces. Another tactic is to use the language and discursive tactics of their opponents to voice their claims. For example, the term 'Christianophobia' has been used to recast Christians rather than LGBTI+ people as victims (European Parliamentary Forum 2018). Victim-perpetrator relations are consequently reversed, with those opposing the rights of LGBTI+ people portraying themselves as victims, scapegoating and constructing conspiracy theories. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) outline what they perceive as an 'NGOisation' of religious actors and secularisation of their discourse. Similarly, the report from European Parliamentary Forum (2018) describes this as a discursive shift, as those who oppose LGBTI+ rights argue for 'their equality', and against 'a dictatorship of the majority' (meaning the 'Western liberal elite') that is at odds with democratic principles. This is further linked to freedom of expression and on how anti-discrimination legislation is curtailing the freedom of opinion and expression of those who 'have moral reservations against sodomy' (European Parliamentary Forum 2018). Their strategy is clearly to debunk the opponents' claim of victim status (and claim it themselves) and to argue that LGBTI+ proponents intend to

⁸ See <https://www.shedecides.com/the-movement/>, accessed 12 March 2021.

silence them (Browne & Nash 2020). They portray themselves as the real victims, as defenders of faith, versus intolerant cultural revolutionaries.⁹

While Christian conservative actors dominate the reviewed literature, there are also examples of foreign sponsored Salafi preachers expressing homophobia and outright hatred towards LGBTI+ people from mosques in Sweden (see report from CATS 2018, authored by Ranstorp et al.), equating homosexuality with a virus and demanding that homosexuals should be executed.

4 Overview of actual and possible impacts of disinformation

The EC LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 only discusses 'impact' of disinformation in somewhat indirect terms (EC 2020). Indeed, impact on the rights of LGBTI+ people can only be 'deduced' from the strategy's focus on different legislative and action plans (see Section 5).

The existing literature confirms the absence of systematic and specific data on the impact of disinformation with a 'foreign involvement' on LGBTI+ people. There are, however, insights into the impact of disinformation on human rights.

Indeed, in general terms, 'disinformation has a direct impact on human rights' (Bayer 2019: 73). Disinformation violates human dignity and damages civil and political rights. It can exacerbate discrimination against LGBTI+ people since it results in a breach of their rights (to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, right to private and family life, etc.). In some cases, disinformation can lead to violence (e.g., deceptive news that incites violence). Besides, disinformation aims to polarise society and strengthens 'a state's capacity to construct an image of an external enemy' (Asmolov 2018: 1).

It is worth noting that false information in itself (if it does not violate others' reputation, for example) enjoys the protection of freedom of expression, but when the whole environment of public discourse becomes occupied and dominated by falsehood, it frustrates the primary purpose of freedom of expression' (Bayer 2019: 79).

Turning to perceptions of impact, data exists in terms of the perception that LGBTI+ people might have of impact. The FRA has recently conducted a survey on LGBTI people.¹⁰ Whilst not focusing specifically on disinformation, the FRA survey includes responses from 'LGBTI respondents' to the question of whether they have suffered from 'offensive or threatening comments posted on the internet, for example on Facebook or Twitter'.¹¹ At EU-28 level, the survey shows 29 % of the respondents to have been a target of this type of offensive or threatening comments at least once. The countries with the highest percentages for this category are Malta (50 %), Hungary (44 %) and Austria (41 %); and those with the lowest percentages are Denmark (21 %), the Netherlands (22 %), and the United Kingdom (24 %). It is also interesting to note that 10 % of the respondents at EU-28 level stated that they have had experience of cyber attacks due to being LGBTI in the past 12 months. Whilst the survey data does not specifically focus on disinformation, it clearly shows the potential negative impact of social media and the internet on LGBTI+ people.

Finally, there is also limited information to draw from relevant case law at the European level. In the period 2018-2021,¹² there have been no cases on disinformation and sexual orientation before the Court of Justice of the EU. In this period, 24 cases related to discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, however none of the cases related specifically to disinformation (most cases in this area relate to employment,

⁹ One early writer about how the religious right and LGBTI+ activism influence each other in their strategies was Fetner (2008).

¹⁰ FRA, EU LGBTI Survey II conducted on 140,000 participants.

¹¹ FRA Survey results- Second Lesbian women, Gay men, Bisexual women / men, Trans people and Intersex people survey, 2020.

¹² Search from 01 January 2018 to 25 February 2021.

pensions and marriage). Turning to the European Court of Human Rights, between 2018 and 2021, one judgment of the European Court of Human Rights related to sexual orientation and disinformation (of a total of 20 cases on sexual orientation in the same period). In this case,¹³ the Court considered that the Lithuanian authorities had failed to investigate effectively whether serious homophobic comments on Facebook constituted incitement to hatred and violence.

5 Assessment of actions taken at EU and Member State level

There is no systematic literature providing an assessment of actions taken at EU and Member State level to address the impact of disinformation originating outside the EU / supported by actors outside the EU on the European LGBTI+ community. However, the research undertaken for this briefing has pointed to relevant actions that, whilst not speaking to all elements of the research focus (disinformation originating outside the EU / supported by actors outside the EU, focus on LGBTI+ people), can be presented here to illustrate different 'categories' of actions, including policy and strategy, legislation and tools, and capacity development (including awareness-raising and education). This section explores some of these actions and provides a brief assessment on the basis of stakeholder feedback.

5.1 Actions at EU and Member State level

5.1.1 Strategy, legislation and specific tools

Several recent EP resolutions are worth noting. The **Resolution on the Digital Services Act and fundamental rights issues posed** refers to combatting disinformation, and specifically disinformation on LGBTI+ people, and asks the EC to issue guidelines to increase transparency and content moderation.¹⁴ The **Resolution on strengthening media freedom** calls on the EC, the Member States and social media companies to counteract the spread of hate speech against LGBTI+ people and requests more collection of reliable data to truly grasp the extent of the issue.¹⁵ While not specifically linked to foreign interference and disinformation, other resolutions are worth mentioning to provide context: the **Resolution on the rule of law and fundamental rights in Bulgaria** of October 2020¹⁶ condemns hate speech against the LGBTI+ community and urges the Bulgarian authorities to amend the present criminal code to include hate crime and hate speech on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics, and to allow for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Finally, other relevant resolutions include the **Resolution of 17 September 2020 on the proposal for a Council decision on the determination of a clear risk of a serious breach by the Republic of Poland of the rule of law**, and the **Resolution of 11 March 2021 on the declaration of the EU as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone**.

The EP committees regularly discuss issues related to disinformation, anti-gender movements and the backlash on LGBTI+ people and women rights. The Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs has repeatedly discussed the issue of disinformation, hate speech and hate crime, and homophobia, and their impact on specific groups, and its Monitoring Group on Democracy, Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights discussed anti-gender disinformation. Recently, on 25 March 2021 the Committee on Foreign

¹³ Case of Beizaras and Levickas v. Lithuania (41288/15) of 14 January 2020.

¹⁴ European Parliament, 2020, European Parliament resolution of 20 October 2020 on the Digital Services Act and fundamental rights issues posed (2020/2022(INI)).

¹⁵ European Parliament, 2020, European Parliament resolution of 25 November 2020 on strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms (2020/2009(INI)).

¹⁶ European Parliament, 2020, European Parliament Resolution of 8 October 2020 on the rule of law and fundamental rights in Bulgaria (2020/2793(RSP)).

Interferences and the Committee on Gender Equality held a joint hearing on the foreign 'Financing of anti-choice organisations'.¹⁷

The EC has very strongly and publicly taken position against 'LGBT ideology' rhetoric and against 'LGBT free zones'. The Commission President has used her State of the Union speech to declare that such zones are 'humanity free zones'. Commissioners Vera Jourova and Helena Dalli have also been very vocal on this. These speeches were followed up by the Commission's **LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025**, which aims to improve the life of LGBTIQ persons, and the strategy includes tackling disinformation specifically on LGBTIQ, including hate speech and hate crime. Indeed, the EC plans to increase funding for initiatives that are dedicated to combatting hate crime and hate speech and violence targeting LGBTIQ+ communities by 2021, including by expanding the list of EU crimes to include hate speech and hate crime (EC 2020).

Looking specifically into disinformation, the strategy refers to the proposal for the **Digital Services Act** that 'will aim to address more effectively all types of illegal content [...] ensuring respect for fundamental rights, including freedom of expression' (EC 2020: 12). The proposal entails revising and **strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation** 'as announced in the European Democracy Action Plan' (EC 2019). Moreover, the **revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive** offers protection against content that incites 'hatred or violence [...] that include or promote any discrimination, including on the grounds of sexual orientation' (EC 2020: 12). Similarly, the **implementation of the Code of Conduct on countering illegal online hate speech by IT companies and platforms** will contribute to reducing discriminatory content.

Following the adoption of the self-regulatory Code of Practice on disinformation, 3.39 million YouTube channels were removed globally and Facebook disabled 2.19 billion fake accounts in the first quarter of 2019 (EC 2019). This is considered a first step, however the EC recognises that 'more needs to be done by the platforms to effectively tackle disinformation' (EC 2019: 5).

Other specific tools to tackle disinformation originating outside the EU are the **Strategic Communication Task Forces** and the **EU Hybrid Fusion Cell** within the European External Action Service (EEAS) (EC 2019). The East StratCom Task Force was set up in 2015 by all Member States, together with the flagship initiative of the website portal 'EUvsDisinfo.eu'. The platform displays over 11,600 different disinformation narratives (as of 26 April 2021), that can be searched by categories and are always paired with information that disproves the respective narrative; 159 disinformation narratives include a reference to LGBTI+ people (EUvsDisinfo 2020a). To reinforce the EU's capabilities to detect disinformation, the EU has also increased the EEAS budget for raising awareness on disinformation from EUR 1.9 in 2018 to EUR 5 million in 2019.¹⁸ Moreover, in 2019 the EU set up a **Rapid Alert System** aiming to exchange information between the EU and the Member States (EC 2019). This provides alerts on disinformation campaigns in real time and has facilitated sharing of cases of disinformation between the EU and the Member States (EUvsDisinfo 2018). The system has proved valuable: 'the number of interactions between authorities has been growing steadily and the tool has become a reference point for the fight against disinformation' (EC 2019: 3).

In relation to the **Member State level**, the following recent examples illustrate the types of action - mainly related to hate speech, but indirectly covering disinformation too - taken:

- In Sweden amendments on the hate speech legislation to include transgender people entered into force on 1 January 2019 (ILGA-Europe 2020).

¹⁷ [Joint FEMM-INGE Public Hearing on "Financing of anti-choice organisations" | Hearings | Events | FEMM | Committees | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁸ European Parliament, 2019, At a Glance - Online disinformation and the EU's response, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/620230/EPRS_ATA\(2018\)620230_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/620230/EPRS_ATA(2018)620230_EN.pdf).

- Whilst the German Parliament adopted new legislation on hate crime in July 2020 (ILGA-Europe 2021), this failed to explicitly address homophobia and transphobia. At the regional level, all regions (except for Bavaria) have now adopted action plans against homophobia and transphobia (ILGA-Europe 2021).
- The French Constitutional Council revoked the 'Aviva law' on hate speech in June 2020 (ILGA-Europe 2021), which forced online platforms to delete hateful content in 24 hours. The argument of the Council was that the law limited freedom of expression in a way that is not necessary and proportionate (ILGA-Europe 2021). Before the approval of the law, the NGO Inter-LGBT expressed concerns that it would violate freedom of expression and prevent victims from reporting hate speech (ILGA-Europe 2020).
- In November 2020 Italy's lower House of Parliament approved an anti-discrimination bill that broadens the definition of hate crimes to include violence against women and LGBTI+ persons.¹⁹ The draft law is currently blocked in the Senate by the Justice Committee chair belonging to a party which often took pro-Russia positions. A campaign is underway to denounce the situation and unblock it.²⁰
- In the Netherlands, the Minister for Legal Protection announced the revision of articles on discrimination in the Penal Code in April 2020, after civil society pressure. The criminalisation of discrimination and hate speech on the basis of gender identity and expression and sex characteristics will now be added (ILGA-Europe 2021).

5.1.2 Capacity development

Despite the fact that most of the capacity development actions do not specifically focus on disinformation against LGBTI+ people, it is worth noting that the EU has put in place a framework for coordinated actions to combat disinformation (EC 2019). In March 2019, the EC launched the first European Media Literacy Week with more than 320 events to increase media literacy, which is crucial in allowing citizens to navigate all information and make informed decisions (EC 2019). Moreover, the EU institutions have launched numerous initiatives such as seminars, conferences and media briefings to raise public awareness on disinformation, and efforts have been undertaken to better communicate EU policies and actions across social media (EC 2019).

It is also worth noting that the EC, the EP and the EEAS cooperated to produce awareness-raising materials that debunk myths (EC 2019). EC Representations in EU Member States for example created pages on their websites disproving myths about the EU, and developing partnerships with fact-checkers.

Similarly, other international institutions such as the Council of Europe (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Unit - SOGI Unit) have developed training for a professional police response to hate crimes against LGBTI+ people in 2017 (Council of Europe 2017), with all Member States participating in this initiative. In June 2019, the SOGI Unit delivered its first trainings for police officers, judges and prosecutors on addressing discrimination and hate crimes against LGBTI people in Greece (ILGA-Europe 2020).

At Member State level, different initiatives have been implemented. For example, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency issued a handbook in March 2019, including a section dedicated to disinformation (but not specifically focussing on LGBTI+ people). The handbook offers an in-depth explanation on how to counter disinformation.²¹

¹⁹ Reuters Staff, 2020, Italy's lower house of parliament approves bill protecting LGBT+ community, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-lgbt-idUSKBN27K1QQ>

²⁰ [Far right puts brakes on a new law that aims to stamp out homophobia in Italy | Italy | The Guardian and La Lega sta bloccando la legge Zan contro l'omotransfobia | Pagella Politica](#)

²¹ Swedish Civil Contingencies Agencies (2019), Countering information influence activities - A handbook for communicators.

5.2 Assessment

This subsection first assesses EU-level action, and then includes feedback from relevant stakeholders.

As stated in subsection 5.1.2, in the past five years the EU has reinforced the legal and policy framework to fight disinformation in general, hereby covering also disinformation against LGBTI+ people. Nevertheless, as the Commission recognises, ‘Discrimination against LGBTIQ people persists throughout the EU’ (EC 2020: 4) and it is required that the EU institutions, Member States, national, regional and local authorities, as well as civil society organisations, strengthen ‘their efforts to achieve the (LGBTIQ Equality) strategy’s objectives’ (EC 2020: 24). Illustrating recent developments at EU level, Table 1 in Annex 3 presents a selection of EU documents that refer to disinformation and LGBTI+ issues. We observe that the number of EP resolutions referring to one or more of these terms has significantly increased in 2020 (four resolutions, compared to only one in 2016, 2017 and 2018 and 2019²², see Annex 3 for the detail on the Resolutions). However, there is a limited number of documents that refer to ‘disinformation’ in relation to ‘LGBT+’. Indeed, the documents refer to either one or two terms, but there is limited intersectionality. It is interesting to note that we have only identified two documents both of which date from 2020 (the EC LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025, and the EP Resolution of 25 November 2020 on strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms) that refer to the four terms ‘disinformation’, ‘LGBT’, ‘hate speech’ and ‘hate crime’.

Stakeholder feedback did not relate specifically to disinformation originating outside the EU / supported by actors outside the EU and targeting LGBTI+ people in the EU (because of the lack of data), but more generally to the adequacy of actions fighting disinformation against LGBTI+ people. This is presented here to provide context.

At EU-level, ILGA-Europe considers that the EU LGBTIQ Equality Strategy (2020-2025) ‘reaffirms the European Commission’s (EC) commitment to ensure EU-wide protection against discrimination by working towards the adoption of the horizontal non-discrimination directive, and initiating an exchange of good practices on protection from discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in Member States’ (ILGA-Europe 2020: 9).

However, regarding Member State level in its annual reports 2018 and 2019,²³ ILGA-Europe condemns discrimination against LGBTI+ persons in several countries, most specifically in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Moreover, the organisation runs an index rating the position of all European countries regarding their respect for or violation of human rights, and the equality or discrimination against LGBTI+ people. In the 2020 index,²⁴ Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg, France and Denmark were the five countries which were most respectful regarding the rights of LGBTI+ persons; Poland, Latvia, Romania, Bulgaria and Italy were at the bottom of the ranking. ILGA-Europe regrets that in about 50 % of European countries in 2020 there has been no positive change compared to 2019, and that ‘for the second year in a row, countries are moving backwards on the Rainbow Index, as existing protections are disappearing’.²⁵

Finally, interviewees commented positively on action at the EU level, while at the same time suggesting uneven commitment at the level of the Member States, pointing to limited evidence of actions in specific Member States such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

²² [Texts adopted - Experiencing backlash in women’s rights and gender equality in the EU - Wednesday, 13 February 2019 \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52019D0001)

²³ ILGA-Europe, Annual Report 2018-2019 and Annual Report 2019-2020

²⁴ ILGA-Europe, Rainbow Europe Index 2020

²⁵ <https://www.ilga-europe.org/resources/news/latest-news/rainbow-map-2020-points-make-or-break-moment-lgbti-rights-europe>

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Through a review of existing literature, this briefing set out to identify disinformation and misinformation narratives circulating in Europe that are initiated, supported, circulated and/or amplified by a foreign actor or group of actors.

The review identified six frequently-occurring narratives that could be tied to a foreign actor or group of actors: negative othering; opposing a 'Gender Ideology'; heteroactivism and protecting the 'natural' family's rights; restoring the 'natural' order as ordained by God; LGBTI+ issues as 'colonialism' by the West; and LGBTI+ people as a 'threat to child safety': paedophilia and sex education promoting unnatural sexuality and gender expressions. Although all narratives contribute to fuelling misconceptions on LGBTI+ issues and may erode European resolve and commitments to build a 'Union of Equality' by providing equal rights to LGBTI+ people, one narrative is particularly insidious and likely to pose a formidable challenge going forward: heteroactivism and protecting the 'natural' family's rights. Heteroactivism - i.e., setting out to promote heteronormativity as being morally superior to other sexual/gender identities and therefore 'best for society' - plays a more important role in the current wave of disinformation in Europe. By castigating LGBTI+ people as a threat to the primary cultural unit, 'the Family', and by framing heteronormativity as a human rights struggle where the natural family is argued to have irrefutable rights, disinformation becomes elusive and difficult to separate from rights advocacy. Unlike traditional anti-narratives, heteroactivism will be particularly challenging to counter through legal reforms. With expansive European protection for freedom of expression, current laws are likely to be ineffectual in countering human rights advocacy arguing a pro-heterosexuality and pro-nuclear family message based on human rights. With heteroactivism already firmly established in Europe, often championed by populist and conservative leaders propagating the 'natural family' or 'family charter' (Guardian 17 July 2020), and strong backing by the well-resourced WCF, the narrative is likely to grow in strength.

Although the Russian government is undeniably a key actor, the Russian state is not alone on the scene. On the contrary, Russian influence is most likely most impactful when hidden behind ideologically-motivated international actors and/ or conservative local partners with similar interests in securing their own political survival through monopoly of public discourses. Parallel to the Russian government's strategic use of social polarisation on LGBTI+ people, other actors engage in similar actions and take advantage of the same social discords, although they are driven by ideological motives rather than the prospects of a weaker Europe.

The WCF is a prime example of an ideologically motivated actor. WCF's longstanding cooperation with the Russian government, where both parties take advantage of their complementary status, motivates their marriage of convenience. The partnership allows the Russian government to act through a strategic partner and local proxy actors, and hide behind an alliance of likeminded motivated by religious and ideological convictions. The WCF's religion-based normative agenda can thus be successfully used to conceal the real end goal – an EU weakened by ideological tensions and strife. It is an effective alliance. The EU Members States' internal debates and different opinions and policies on LGBTI+ issues, laced with traditional bigotry and intolerance, are utilised and taken advantage of to polarise and erode the foundation for a common understanding of equality, fundamental rights and protection of minorities - but also of democracy and rule of law, as demonstrated by the procedures against Poland and Hungary - under Article 2 TEU.²⁶ Paternotte and Kuhar (2017: 4) 'insist on the trans-national nature of these discourses and strategies', and argue forcefully that local-global entanglements need to be acknowledged, if we are to understand the European scene.

²⁶ Some authors talk about 'culture wars' in Central Europe, see '[Poland's Culture Wars Are Dangerous, and Europe Risks Handing a Victory to Russia \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2017/07/17/poland_culture_wars_are_dangerous_and_europe_risks_handing_a_victory_to_russia)'

Furthermore, it is important to note that foreign actors, both state and non-state, often form strategic alliances with local partners, such as religious leaders and conservative politicians. It is a strategic operational tactic, which allows foreign entities to gain access to local intelligence on which issues are most likely to resonate with the target audience's current anxieties and/or antipathies.

Disinformation and misinformation on LGBTI+ people of foreign, domestic and/or unknown origins is harmful to the European project of shared human rights standards across Member States. Although there is a general lack of research detailing the impact of disinformation campaigns on European institutions and societies, there is ample research concluding that there is an increase in hate speech targeting LGBTI+ people, both in Europe (Mole 2016) and around the world (UN 2019). Therefore, even if the mechanisms between disinformation campaigns on the one hand, and discrimination and hate crimes on the other, are not fully known, it is highly likely that these types of speech act to normalise discrimination and hate, especially when coming from political actors or religious leaders. Furthermore, it is not far-fetched that disinformation campaigns and hate speech are contributory factors to the last few years' increase in reported hate crimes against LGBTI+ people in Europe.

Furthermore, if disinformation and hate speech is not addressed forcefully at the supranational level, it may send an unfortunate signal that hate and discrimination against LGBTI+ people is not a priority in the EU. Such a signal is likely to influence victims' willingness to report crimes, which results in hate crimes becoming less visible. Under-reporting in turn contributes to failure to recognise the problem as prevalent and in need of urgent attention. A weak and / or inconsistent response from key EU institutions may be interpreted as indifference to the plight of LGBTI+ communities and may be used by domestic authorities to withdraw resources from policing, and from prosecuting and sentencing hate speech and hate crimes.

Based on this briefing's findings, the following recommendations should be considered:

6.1 Harmonise the legal framework across Europe and strengthen capacity amongst law enforcement professionals to handle disinformation campaigns, misinformation and hate speech and counter them by promoting EU values

The European legal framework and policy approaches on LGBTI+ equal rights can best be understood as a mosaic, which makes common standards on disinformation, misinformation and hate speech a challenge. Langarita et al. (2018) outlined the differences in how hate crimes against LGBTI+ people are understood and addressed. Addressing disinformation and hate speech on LGBTI+ issues would benefit from the adoption of comprehensive hate speech legislation, in which investigation of hate speech crimes is not dependent on victims' reporting, but could be brought forward by anyone who encounters it. The EC should prioritise developing common rules on online and offline speech, as well as ensuring that rules are monitored. The new initiative announced on extending the list of EU crimes to all forms of hate crime and hate speech - whether because of race, religion, gender or sexuality - would serve this purpose. If legal reforms are to be effective, they need to be accompanied by efforts to raise awareness on the insidious nature of disinformation on LGBTI+ issues and hate speech in general. Campaigns to promote a culture of European Union values as included in Article 2 TEU and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights should be launched and promoted at all levels in the EU, thereby strengthening the resilience against disinformation and hate speech.

6.2 Restrict the financial flows to disinformation and hate speech groups

Open Democracy (2020) reveals how 'dark money' is pouring into the EU. US Christian right groups have spent at least USD 280 million on so-called dark money to fuel campaigns against women's rights and the rights of LGBTI+ people (Open Democracy 2020). Today Europe is the continent receiving the largest

amount of this money. The EU should consider ways to hinder financial support to individuals and groups that spread disinformation and hate speech, in much the same way as support to terrorism organisations is curtailed.

6.3 Upgrade European capacity to detect and monitor disinformation and hate speech.

Building robust detection and monitoring systems, using both artificial intelligence (AI) and human expertise, should be considered. Detection systems should take advantage of the advancement in artificial intelligence, to handle the massive number of communication acts that take place in every part of the EU. AI will need to be complemented by the support of civil society actors, with a regional or national watchdog mandate that specifically handles disinformation and hate speech on LGBTI+ issues. In the US, the Southern Poverty Law Center continuously monitors 'traditional family values' organisations and their rhetoric, which results in a 'hate group listing' (McMillin 2014). The Southern Poverty Law Center monitoring mechanism, including its annual report, could service as a model. Its 'Year in Hate and Extremism' report noted a 43 percent increase last year in the number of anti-LGBTI+ people hate groups in the US (rising from 49 groups in 2018 to 70 in 2019), as well as the role of social media in spreading messages of hate (Southern Poverty Law Center 2020).

Furthermore, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) could be asked to specifically monitor disinformation and hate speech against LGBTI+ people, and Member States could be requested to periodically report on which actions have been taken in this specific field.

6.4 More research is needed

Although the briefing focuses on actors outside the EU, it is key to understand that actors often cooperate with European partners. Further research is needed to understand the complex web of actors (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017). A blind focus on where actors come from risks missing out on the intricacies of these international networks, as well as missing out on the role of actors within the EU involved in hate speech and disinformation against LGBTI+ people. Furthermore, the range of actors is diverse, from family organisations to anti-abortion groups, religious conservatives, nationalists and far right groups, some well-established groups and some newly established ones and their allies (which include media, intellectuals and politicians, Kuhar & Paternotte 2017).

Furthermore, with disinformation of foreign origin, and international norm entrepreneurs' activities being concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe, more research is needed to understand the processes whereby this part of Europe is targeted and appears to be more receptive.²⁷ The shorter history of LGBTI+ rights activism in ex-Communist Central and Eastern Europe does not fully explain the 'pink divide' across Europe (Kuhar 2011).

²⁷ ILGA-Europe 2020 report <https://www.ilga-europe.org/rainboweurope/2020>, The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights/FRA, 2020.

Annex 1 - Consultations

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List of Interviews

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Lutz Güllner, EEAS

David Patternote, University of Brussels (also provided comments on the draft version of this Briefing)

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List of contacted organisations

Algorithm Watch

Amadeu Antonio Stiftung

Bilitis Resource Center Foundation

Center for Democracy & Technology

Council of Europe

European Parliamentary Forum

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Foundation for European Progressive Studies

Hate Aid

ILGA-Europe

Kompetenznetzwerk zum Abbau von Homosexuellen- und Trans*feindlichkeit

Malmö mot diskriminering

Open Democracy

RFSL (acta publica)

World Pride Malmö Copenhagen 2021

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Annex 3 – EU Documents

Table 1: Review of EU documents referring to LGBTIQ+, disinformation, hate speech and/or hate crime

Year	Institution	Type of document	Document title	References to LGBTIQ+	References to disinformation	References to hate crime	References to hate speech
2015	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2015 on the state of EU-Russia relations	yes	yes		yes
2015	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 9 July 2015 on the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy	yes			
2016	EC	Code of conduct	Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online			yes	yes
2016	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 26 November of 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract anti-EU propaganda by third parties		yes	yes	yes
2017	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 15 June 2017 on online platforms and the digital single market				yes
2018	EC	Communication	Action Plan against Disinformation		yes		
2018	EC	Communication	Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach		yes		
2018	EU	Code of practice	EU Code of Practice on Disinformation		yes		
2018	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 3 May 2018 on media pluralism and media freedom in the European Union		yes		yes

Year	Institution	Type of document	Document title	References to LGBTIQ+	References to disinformation	References to hate crime	References to hate speech
2019	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 13 February 2019 on experiencing a backlash in women's rights and gender equality in the EU	yes	yes		yes
2019	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 10 October 2019 on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes	yes	yes		yes
2019	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 18 December 2019 on public discrimination and hate speech against LGBTI people, including LGBTI free zones	yes		yes	yes
2020	EC	Communication	European Democracy Action Plan	yes	yes		yes
2020	EC	Legislative proposal	Digital Services Act (proposal)	yes *	yes		yes
2020	EC	Communication	LGTBIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025	yes	yes	yes	yes
2020	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter – annual report 2018	yes	yes		yes
2020	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences	yes	yes		yes
2020	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 20 October 2020 on the Digital Services Act and fundamental rights issues posed	yes	yes		yes

Year	Institution	Type of document	Document title	References to LGBTIQ+	References to disinformation	References to hate crime	References to hate speech
2020	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 25 November 2020 on strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms	yes	yes	yes	yes
2021	EP	EP Resolution	European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021 on the declaration of the EU as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone	yes		yes	yes

Source: Author

* Mention to 'protection of groups vulnerable because of their sexual orientation'.

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PDF ISBN 978-92-846-8347-5 | doi:10.2861/980572 | QA-09-21-283-EN-N