

VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

FIMI | Visegrad Group | UvdL Commission 2.0

Problem

The current EU approach to countering malign influence focuses on foreign agents, overlooking domestic actors perpetuating disinformation. CSOs that receive funding from Western bodies require stronger protections against pressure, often from their own non-democratic governments.

Key facts

- 86% say it is important that media and CSOs in all other EU Member States than their own country can operate freely and without pressure, even when they are critical.
- Slovakia: 40% trust in government, 51% trust in EU
- Hungary: 40% trust in government, 53% trust in EU
- Czechia: 28% trust in government, 43% trust in EU
- Poland: 40% trust in government, 52% trust in EU
- In countries like Slovakia and Hungary, EU-funded CSOs are increasingly being framed as instruments of foreign interference.

Foresight

Without a shift in strategic communications and the provision of core and shield funding for CSOs, the reach of foreign and domestic malign influences will grow, further undermining trust in democratic processes.

A Shield for CSOs: Countering Malign Foreign and Domestic Actors

RECOMMENDATIONS

In her May 2024 speech, President von der Leyen outlined the need for a 'European Democracy Shield' to counter FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference).

As the Commission develops the policy framework, it should also prepare to protect Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from domestic discrimination, misinformation and legal or bureaucratic malpractice.

Therefore, EU institutions and member states must:

1. Broaden the strategic focus so that FIMI includes domestic actors promoting non-democratic policies or countering EU values in EU strategic communications efforts. This could be known as the more inclusive DIMI (Democracy Information Manipulation and Interference).
2. Fund local campaigns to counter disinformation, highlight CSOs' role in EU affairs and debunk the 'foreign agents' label with resonant, targeted messaging.
3. Increase EU budgets for CSOs in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), prioritising media pluralism and EU values.
4. Enshrine legal protection – an anti-foreign-agents law – for pro-democracy CSOs who receive funding from Western institutions or governments from abroad.
5. Establish a legal defence fund for lawyers aiding CSOs targeted by strategic lawsuits (SLAPPs), ensuring they have the resources to defend against legal harassment and continue anti-disinformation work.
6. Adapt Erasmus+ to support law and media trainees in contributing their expertise to pro-democracy CSOs across the EU.
7. Coordinate EU media literacy and digital security efforts with local CSOs, fostering regional cooperation in areas with low public trust in national institutions.

About

Project

Foresight on European Values and Democratic Security (FEVDS). This project engages CEE civil society leaders in a foresight-driven debate on the future EU policy developments to protect European values and freedoms.

visegradinsight.eu/foresight-European-values

Visegrad Insight, a pro-democracy think tank established in 2012 by the Res Publica Foundation, is Central Europe's top platform for a debate on Europe's future.

Author

Galan Dall

Project lead

Wojciech Przybylski

Editors

Staś Kaleta, Jessica Moss

Project Manager

Magdalena Przedmojska

BACKGROUND

Why FIMI should be broadened to DIMI

- FIMI, as defined in the [EU External Action Service](#), overlooks domestic actors who, while not necessarily foreign government proxies, nonetheless promote anti-democratic rhetoric. This often aligns with national policies that pressure CSOs.
- The EC's focus on foreign disinformation may stem from concerns that tackling domestic actors could lead to accusations of EU overreach. Recent elections in Moldova and Georgia highlighted electoral interference, with pro-Russian factions warning the West against involvement
- The slightly adapted European Democracy Shield offers an opportunity to adopt a more inclusive framework – DIMI – which would allow the EU to protect CSOs from domestic threats via legal protections and strategic communications.
- By supporting local pro-democracy CSOs, the EU can also develop more powerful campaigns. 'The EU must urgently develop more effective strategic communication that takes into account local contexts, allocates more resources to civil society and independent media and evokes emotional responses in stakeholders', as [explained by a Visegrad Insight Fellow from Slovakia](#).

Leveraging higher trust in the EU to fight DIMI

- Slovakia faced criticism in the [EU's rule of law report](#) over [recent policy shifts](#), which Prime Minister Robert Fico attributed to EU pressure on Slovakia's foreign policy. This framing reinforces claims of EU foreign interference. However, the efficacy of anti-EU rhetoric should not be overestimated, as public trust in the CEE is often split between national and supranational institutions.
- In line with the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, the EU must counter domestic disinformation or derogatory speech against CSOs in public. For this purpose, it should recognise its leverage regarding the trust differential.

V4 National attitudes and anti-DIMI strategies

- **Slovakia:** a transparent, proactive approach is essential to counter scepticism and debunk narratives on foreign imposition. The 2024 EU elections saw Slovak populist

Team

Karolina Choina, Magda Jakubowska, Katarzyna Górska, Tomasz Kasprowicz, Anna Kuczyńska, Natalia Kurpiewska, Albín Sybera and Luca Soltész and Visegrad Insight Fellows:
visegradinsight.eu/fellows/

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parties advance false claims like the EU forcing citizens to eat 'contaminated Ukrainian wheat.'

- **Poland:** anti-DIMI communication should focus on security as a mutual interest between the EU and Poland and address perceived sensitivities around overreach. Persistent low-level trust is conducive to disinformation, as seen in election periods. 88% of [Poles back NATO membership](#) and 52% trust the EU, but only 40% trust the national government. A further 39% of Poles report [dissatisfaction with democratic governance](#).
- **Hungary:** disinformers exploit Euroscepticism and stir national sentiments. The EU must promote a balanced view of EU policies without appearing overly critical of Hungary's domestic concerns. While 53% trust the EU and 63% view NATO favourably, [satisfaction with democratic governance](#) stands at just 49%.
- **Czechia:** a DIMI-focused approach should emphasise democratic values and policy transparency to reduce scepticism. While 43% of Czechs trust the EU and [73% would vote to stay in NATO](#), EU approval has declined due to perceptions of a 'dictate from Brussels.' Recent domestic campaigns saw false claims about EU regulation threatening local industry. A third of Czechs are open to more authoritarian governance.

The role of CSOs in upholding EU values

- CSOs are vital in countering disinformation through de-bunking, pre-bunking and media literacy campaigns. See: Romanian CSOs addressing health misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic; Lithuanian CSOs running innovative media literacy programmes with tech companies; Polish CSOs supporting Ukrainian refugees.
- CSOs also face increasing smear campaigns, intimidation and online threats from domestic and foreign sources.
- Disinformers target regional vulnerabilities to divide and undermine trust: in the Black Sea, they frame the West as an enemy; in the Baltics, Russian media stirs polarisation; in the Western Balkans, disinformation reinforces authoritarian political power.

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Galczynskiego 5, 00-032 Warszawa, Poland
contact@visegradinsight.eu
www.visegradinsight.eu