



AN EU DISINFO  INVESTIGATION

# #BadSources (BS)

How Indian news agency ANI quoted sources that do not exist

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### #BadSources

The EU DisinfoLab unveils its latest investigation into anti-Pakistan/China influence operations and follows up on two previous investigations published in 2019 and 2020.

The investigation looks into a number of non-existent organisations, bloggers and journalists who are regularly quoted by Asian News International (ANI). ANI is an Indian news agency that plays a relevant role in the country's information ecosystem, providing content for many well-established media across India, such as The Print and Business Standard. ANI's articles are also reproduced on well-known digital portals such as Yahoo News. With this network, ANI acts as a purveyor of news to millions of Indians.

It is worth adding that ANI had previously been accused of reporting the Indian government's 'version of truth' by independent magazine [The Caravan](#). Moreover, two previous EU DisinfoLab investigations have revealed that ANI regularly quoted the defunct 'EP Today' and 'EU Chronicles', two fake media outlets supposedly specialising in EU affairs that were, in fact, created to push anti-Pakistan/China narratives in India.

## NEWS INCEPTION

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How Bad Sources  
end up in reputable  
media

### 1 Bad Source

No background nor online traces needed. Typos and dubious bio accepted.

### 2 Covered by ANI

ANI covers the story and quotes the unverified source.

### 3 ANI becomes the source

The 'news' can be picked up by other media.

Unknown date  
**Beijing's Growing  
Engagement with Iraq**

SOURCE:



Valentin  
Popescu

POLICY RESEARCH GROUP  
Research Institute

16 March 2022

"Valentin Popescu,  
writing for a think tank,  
Policy Research Group  
(POREG)..."

SOURCE:



ANI  
NEWS

16 March 2022

**China emerges as a key  
financial player in Iraq**

SOURCE:



ThePrint  
Business Standard

## Our latest investigation led us to conclude that:

- ANI has been repeatedly quoting a think tank that was dissolved in 2014 and therefore no longer exists.
- ANI has been using quotes from a journalist, as well as from several bloggers and supposed geopolitical experts, who do not exist.

Fake personae, self-described as James Bond fans, basketball players and management consultants, became geopolitical experts quoted by ANI numerous times on topics such as Pakistan's army doctrines and China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy'.

A think tank that we had previously linked to the Srivastava group and that was legally dissolved in 2014, is now quoted about twice a week by ANI. The think tank's website falsely mentions real Canadian university professors as participants in a conference that they never attended, even concocting false quotes by these academics. We had already observed this identity-hijacking pattern in our previous [Indian Chronicles](#) investigation.

The narratives pushed by these fake personae and/or organisations are almost entirely about criticising Pakistan and China, countries that are not India's greatest allies on the international stage. These fake experts or think tanks are quoted almost solely by ANI and then republished across several Indian media outlets. Besides ANI and those outlets republishing its content, barely any other established media covered the reports produced by these 'Bad Sources' (BS) - the name we gave to this investigation.

We assess that ANI has, at least, failed its readership by not respecting the fundamentals of the [Charter of Munich](#). The fact that some of the 'organisations' mentioned use fake personae and are trying to hide their tracks while counting on being regularly quoted by ANI shows that ANI is, *de facto*, playing a key role in this influence operation.

### CHARTER OF MUNICH (excerpts)

- Respect the truth, whatever the consequences, because of the public's right to know the truth.
- To report only on facts of which he knows the origin; not to suppress essential information nor alter texts and documents.
- To rectify any published information which is found to be inaccurate.

## FOREWORD

It was a sunny early April morning at Athens airport.

The previous evening, one of the authors of this report had been challenged by a friend, who told him that doing open-source investigations requires IT skills that he and his co-author certainly don't possess. With this in mind, he took another look at the International Forum for Rights and Security (IFFRAS) website – a Canadian 'think tank' that the EU DisinfoLab had previously exposed for its links to the Srivastava Group.

At first sight, everything seemed rather straightforward: reports, news, conferences – a regular portal for such an organisation. Yet, after years of working on this network (see our [EP Today](#) and [Indian Chronicles](#) reports), he had an intuition: what if the many university professors speaking at IFFRAS conferences did not exist?

Prompted by this idea, he googled several of them and could not find any trace of them... (The reader will undoubtedly appreciate the author's sophisticated IT prowess, i.e. typing names into a search engine.) He soon noticed that parts of the written summaries of these webinars were copy-pasted from various sources. He immediately informed his partner-in-crime, whose first reaction was along the lines of 'Here we go again...'

"Here we go again..."



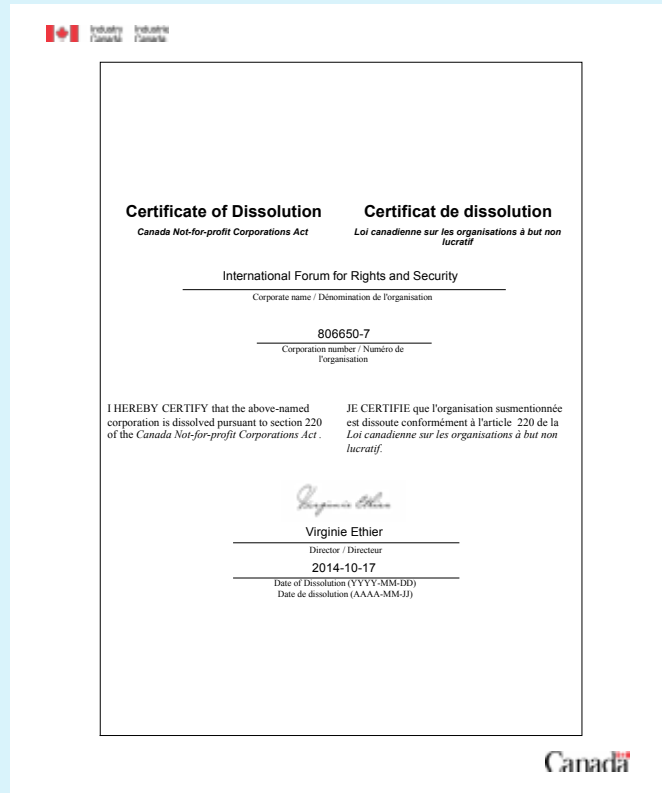
# REPORT

## THE THINK TANK THAT DOES NOT EXIST AND DOES NOT WANT TO BE FOUND

In our previous investigations, EP Today and Indian Chronicles, we mentioned that [the same IP hosted the IFFRAS website](#) and other websites from the Srivastava group. Moreover, it had been registered using a well-known email address from the same group. The think tank, previously chaired by Mario Silva, a former Canadian Member of Parliament (MP), was registered in Canada in 2012, and [officially dissolved in 2014](#).

However, the website remained online and was being updated. At first sight, it looks like a regular think tank website, containing for example reports, news, and [conferences](#). We focused on the latter, in order to better grasp who could take part in conferences organised by a dissolved think tank.

On 29 January 2020, at the University of Montreal, [IFFRAS claims](#) to have brought together no more than four Montreal University professors to discuss the 'Increasing presence of Muslim Brotherhood'. We contacted the individuals listed as speakers, two of them responded and confirmed they had never attended such a conference and that the Muslim Brotherhood had nothing to do with their field of expertise.



IFFRAS Certificate of Dissolution, dated 17/10/2014

Looking at the summary of the conference available on the IFFRAS website, we also noticed that some of the alleged speaking points were clearly copy-pasted from [other sources](#).

## Content copy-pasted and words put in the mouths of academics who confirmed they never attended such conference

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Content copy-pasted and words put in the mouths of academics who confirmed they never attended such conference

**BACK TO THE FUTURE**  
When a fake conference announces genuine future events

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Reporting an event that never took place  
**University of Montreal – 29 January 2020**

Thomas ██████ explained that denied the reins of an actual government since the removal of Mohammed Morsi from the presidency in Egypt in 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood now operates from the shadows across a vast geography ranging from Europe to Qatar, hiding in plain sight. It has now begun to spread in Africa & North America as well. An underground cell of the outlawed Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was uncovered in Sudan in mid-February 2020, planning to carry out terrorist operations in the country's capital, Khartoum, and in the capital of Egypt, Cairo. Members of the cell included individuals of assorted backgrounds, such as Egyptians, and entered Sudan using fake Syrian passports, which was allegedly supplied to them by the Turkish government.

Back to the future – When a fake conference announces genuine future events

Interestingly, during that same conference - which supposedly took place in January 2020 - a speaker even referred that 'An underground cell of the outlawed Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was uncovered in Sudan in mid-February 2020' – events that took place weeks after the conference itself. *Fake and Future* might be the new *Fast and Furious*.

No real conferences then, but we did notice that most of the 70+ speakers mentioned in these fake IFFRAS conferences did not exist at all. For instance, we could find no trace of 'Ms Oliver Carter' as a professor at the University of Toronto. The same applies with 'Ms Staphany Campebell - Assistant Professor, University of Manitoba'. Instead, we observed the same tendency as in our previous investigations: mistyping the names of individuals.

An additional interesting element is that one would normally assume that think tanks would rather enjoy having their positions and ideas widely publicised online. Instead, IFFRAS' frenetic activity contrasts sharply with its silence on its social media accounts, which have been [inactive since 2021](#). Our guess is that the sole purpose of the IFFRAS is to produce content that can be covered by ANI and then republished widely throughout the Indian press.

Such obvious elements could have triggered ANI's suspicion. It did not, however, prevent the news agency from quoting

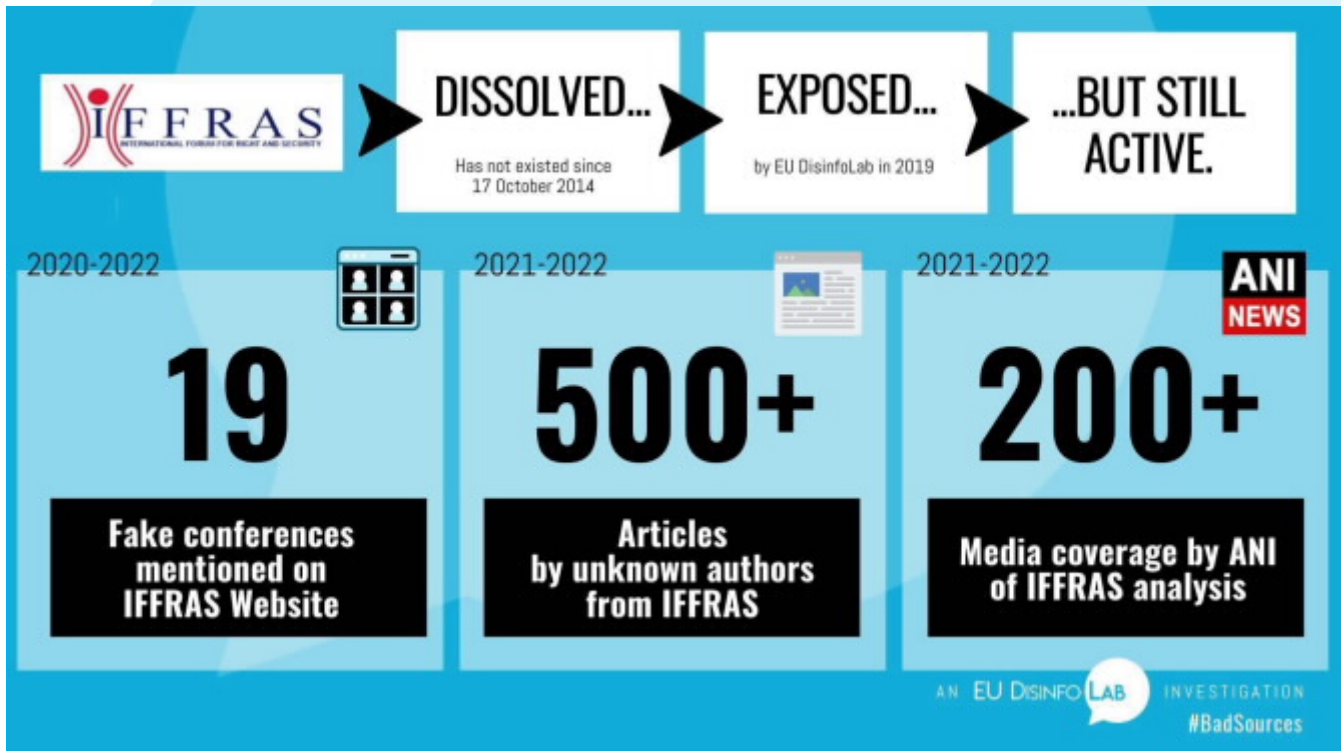
IFFRAS more than 200 times between May 2021 and January 2023. In most instances, it was not only quoting but using [the IFFRAS 'reports'](#) as [the backbone of the articles](#).

## THE JOURNALIST, BLOGGERS AND EXPERTS WHO DO NOT EXIST

Could IFFRAS just be a single rotten apple? Reversing the process, we looked into other organisations frequently covered by ANI and stumbled across the Policy Research Group, aka [POREG](#). It does seem that, in the last two years, three new contributors joined the platforms, and we could not find any other sign of their existence.

One is [James Duglous Crickton](#), a misspelling of James Douglas Crickton. He made the news in 2016 and [caught the attention of journalists](#) for writing an article claiming that former Pakistan president Pervez Musharraf held a secret bank account in Switzerland, something [ANI covered](#). He had also posted an article on opednews.com on behalf of '[Maria Rutowicz](#)', a real or fake personae working at 'EP Today' – the fake magazine impersonating the European Parliament, run by the Srivastava Group, which we exposed in 2019 (yes, we do realise this is hard to follow).

Another POREG contributor quoted by ANI goes by the name of [Magda Lipan](#), sometimes misspelled as [Magad Lipan](#) or [Magda](#)



IFFRAS – Dissolved, exposed, but still active

[Lipin](#). (After all, it's not like Magda - who does not exist - would care about the typos in her name.)

Last, there is 'Ms [Valentin Popescu](#)'. One could consider that if Valentin was really a Romanian woman, as described in her bio, she would probably be called Valentina rather than Valentin. In any case, Ms Popescu seems to be in close contact with James Duglous Crickton, as James posted an [article](#) written by Valentin on Opednews.com.

We tried to contact these persons through the POREG to schedule a web meeting with them, but got no response.

Yet somehow, despite the laughable misspellings and bios, these James Bond fans, basketball players and management consultants have become geopolitical experts, quoted by ANI numerous times on topics such as [Pakistan's army doctrines](#) and [China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy'](#).

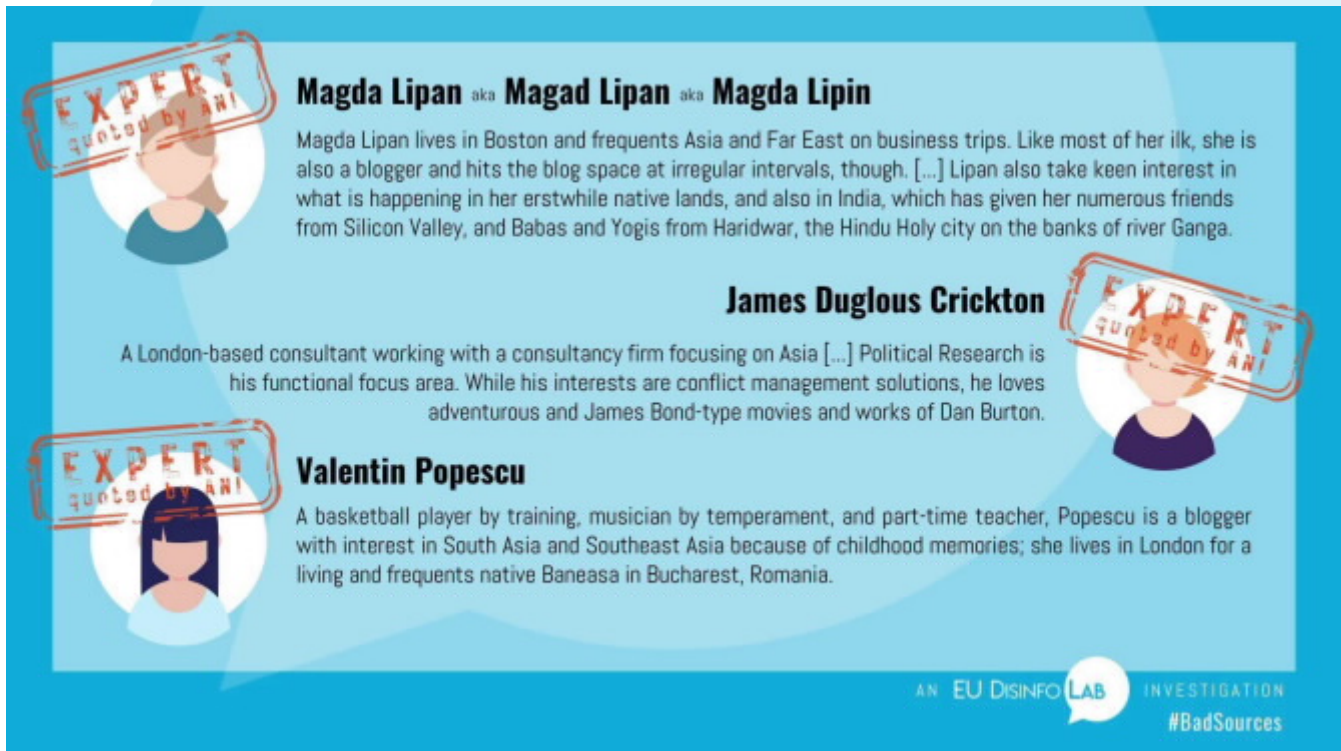
Overall, the personae publishing on the POREG website do not hardly try to appear credible. Moreover, as with IFFRAS, POREG does not communicate via social media and seems to rely on ANI, which provides the think tank with [regular and consistent coverage](#). Here again, all these elements should have triggered ANI's suspicion. Similarly, ANI was not only quoting but also using the POREG reports as the backbone of some of its articles.

In 2021, ANI also started quoting [reports](#) by the [Center of Political and Foreign Affairs](#) (CPFA), a think tank based in France and registered in Hong Kong which - unlike the IFFRAS - genuinely exists. Alongside the legitimate reports by the CPFA team, we encountered content that we could not attribute to real individuals.

One such report is '[Deception Games: Pakistan's Eyewash Action Against Terror Groups](#)', authored by 'Ronald Duchemin' from the 'Anti-Terrorism Task Force'. This was published on 12 February 2021, and covered by ANI the following day. We searched the web for further evidence of Duchemin's existence and expertise on Pakistan, without success. Another CPFA persona, named [Mario de Gasperi](#), produced several reports on pro-Indian narratives; once again, he was quoted by ANI, but we did fail to find any evidence of his existence, despite our best efforts. We reached out to CPFA in order to talk to Mr Duchemin and Mr de Gasperi, but we did not receive any response to our requests.

In July 2021, ANI published a piece of [news](#) entitled 'European Parliament to withdraw Pakistan's GSP+ status over abuse of blasphemy laws' – a withdrawal that did not happen. ANI quoted Philippe Jeune, sometimes presented as 'Phillipe Jeune', 'Philippe Jeaune' or on occasions 'Philippe Lejeune', who claims to be a 'Paris-based investigative journo with more than 10 years' experience' or 'a Brussels-based





**Magda Lipan** aka **Magad Lipan** aka **Magda Lipin**

Magda Lipan lives in Boston and frequents Asia and Far East on business trips. Like most of her ilk, she is also a blogger and hits the blog space at irregular intervals, though. [...] Lipan also take keen interest in what is happening in her erstwhile native lands, and also in India, which has given her numerous friends from Silicon Valley, and Babas and Yogis from Haridwar, the Hindu Holy city on the banks of river Ganga.

**James Duglous Crickton**

A London-based consultant working with a consultancy firm focusing on Asia [...] Political Research is his functional focus area. While his interests are conflict management solutions, he loves adventurous and James Bond-type movies and works of Dan Burton.

**Valentin Popescu**

A basketball player by training, musician by temperament, and part-time teacher, Popescu is a blogger with interest in South Asia and Southeast Asia because of childhood memories; she lives in London for a living and frequents native Baneasa in Bucharest, Romania.

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Experts quoted by ANI

freelance journalist' [who, nevertheless, does not exist](#). Fake 'Phillipe' (note: the real French first name is spelled 'Philippe') has published on both [EU Political Report](#) and [EU Today](#), two Brussels-based media depicted in a [series of articles](#) by Politico's Mark Scott. ANI's piece quotes both EU Political Report and EU Today, giving it the appearance of a well-sourced EU-based news, when in fact it is disputable.

We tried to meet Mr Jeune or Lejeune or Jeaune and reached out to the Brussels media to which he contributed. Asked

about Mr Jeune's contribution to EU Political Report, its editor-in-chief advised us to contact the director of EU Today. Despite our repeated requests, none of them were able to put us in contact with Mr Jeune.

All this would be laughable if it weren't the case that hundreds of press articles eventually republished the content produced by all these fake personae. Sadly, the overwhelming majority of these reports are being reproduced across Indian media, [reaching hundreds of thousands, if not millions](#), of readers.



**ANI NEWS**

ANI coverage in online media

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yahoo! Business Standard ThePrint INDIA TV Hindustan Times BIG NEWS NETWORK

ANI coverage in online media



It is crucial to keep in mind that - as the narratives get reproduced across different media over and over - readers can easily lose track of the original sources and actors involved in the amplification loop. The narratives then become so sedimented in the public debate as legitimate positions that it becomes literally impossible to challenge them.

An additional long-term effect of such operations is the overall loss of trust in established think tanks, NGOs and media. In other words, if a well-known news agency can repeatedly quote fake sources, won't readers start questioning the honesty of the good-faith organisations as well? The risk here is that readers – and citizens – end up believing that *'Nothing is true and everything is possible'*, and gradually and inexorably, leave the public debate.

### WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OUR THREE INVESTIGATIONS ON PRO-INDIA INFLUENCE OPERATIONS?

Our journey investigating pro-Indian influence operations started three-and-a-half years ago. In [our previous reports](#), we have exposed a long list of fake and impersonated organisations. It went from fake media and press agencies in Brussels and Geneva to networks of zombie media across the world. We showed how fake NGOs and fake independent think tanks had access to the EU and the UN. It even took the appearance

of a network of dead NGOs revived to speak at the UN Human Rights Council, fake journalists and fake bloggers as well as the hijacking of a dead person's identity. Too often, we had to pinch ourselves when realising the number of layers of fakes we had uncovered. For the authors, telling these stories – which are entirely based on factual, open-source elements – has been challenging. How can we clearly relate a story when fake journalists work for fake media, quoting a fake NGO and another fake media? How can readers of the Indian press get to the primary source of the fake?

Often, we think about what could be done to contribute to a better information ecosystem; sometimes we find ourselves left with minimal solutions. In the case of these influence operations, their owners have often shut down certain media and NGOs following their exposure. Yet, organisations such as IFFRAS and 'bloggers' such as James Duglous Crickton continue to operate, despite having been publicly exposed in the past. Worse still, ANI does not seem to be concerned by being the only major agency quoting them as a primary source. In other words, journalists working at ANI must know these sources are fabricated – and if they don't, they are failing as journalists. In fact, who really cares? We do, for one, but our guess is that the actors running this influence operation understand that the average reader will not have days available to investigate the multiple layers of fake behind a news story.

**BS LOCATIONS**

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- TORONTO:** Unknown author; IFFRAS
- LONDON:** James Duglous Crickton, Valentin Popescu; POLICY RESEARCH GROUP
- BOSTON:** Magda Lipan; POLICY RESEARCH GROUP
- BRUSSELS:** Philippe Juane; EU Political Report, EU Today
- PARIS:** Ronald Duchemin, Mario De Gasperi; CPFA (Center of Political and Foreign Affairs)

BS locations

## WHY CAN THEY CONTINUE DOING MORE OF THE SAME?

The fundamental answer lies in the structure of the operation. Let's keep in mind that the target audience is internal to India, but that these operations use our institutions (Members of the European Parliament - MEPs - for example), real and fake organisations as well as individuals based, or supposedly based, in Europe and North America. For the actors behind these personae, why are they not setting up legitimate organisations with real experts, rather than taking the risk of being uncovered?

Our guess here is that setting up fake personae in Europe or North America and then quoting them is seen as a way of bringing more credibility and legitimacy to these narratives. Thus, the actors involved seem to prefer using badly constructed fake profiles or fake organisations, even when previously uncovered, rather than relying on real organisations and people. What is clear is that we would not be covering this story if news agencies had been quoting similar narratives published by real persons and/or real organisations.

When asked what they can do about this, the authorities and legislators in Europe either feel powerless, unconcerned or motivated by other priorities. The playbook of using Europe-based friendly bloggers and think tanks or friendly politicians for internal purposes is now well-known and replicated in several countries, including Russia. In essence, Europe and North America have become places of production for influence operations material. Often, we are not the main target; we are the enablers and the co-producers, *de facto* partners of the disinformation and propaganda machines in other parts of the world.

In Europe, authorities often claim they do not have the legal basis to prosecute the actors behind influence operations. However, identity theft, false documents and breach of trust all constitute criminal offenses in multiple EU countries. But as long as it does not directly threaten our institutions and democracies, the malicious actors know they can continue their operation, impersonating real or disguising as fake European entities and people, without facing any consequence. And as they can continue doing it – usually avoiding the EU's legal and financial obligations – why would they stop?

It is our firm belief that we should not let it go further and that we have a moral responsibility to do our utmost to tackle the problem. The absence of a response creates a vacuum

that increasing numbers of countries will know they can use. And, like a slow virus, it continues to spread until it becomes impossible to stop. Therefore, we invite the EU and national authorities to seriously reflect on how we can find solutions to avoid becoming the world centre of production of influence operations material.

Here are some modest contributions of what we think could be done:

- **Follow the money.** As exposed by journalists who covered our Indian Chronicles report, it is clear that some of the participants in these operations are being paid, [sometimes directly in cash](#), and others rely on more sophisticated financial methods. The relevant institutions should 'follow the money' and take appropriate measures. We have shared all the information in our possession with other investigative journalists as well.
- **We know who they are... and they are hiding in plain sight.** EU institutions must stop saying 'they can't do anything' about organisations and politicians involved in influence operations. Some organisations involved in these influence operations remain in the lobby transparency register, can freely enter the European Parliament when they wish to, and some are even being funded by the EU. Some elected officials have been heavily involved in these operations, and [one even declaring that a trip was funded by an organisation that never legally existed](#): this should be investigated further by the EU institutions. Let us remember that the European Parliament's President recently stated that ['there will be no impunity'](#) and that 'there will be no sweeping under the carpet'. We will be watching for actions to back up the good words. Individuals and organisations who participate in such influence operations should not be allowed to lobby the EU nor qualify for EU funding.
- **Look at the role played by domain names.** As we said in our previous investigations, the domain name industry needs to acknowledge the crucial role of their sector in influence operations; we know that this is not easy, but this field needs to be explored.
- **Enforce current laws.** European laws must apply equally. With Data and Privacy protection, consumer and anti-corruption as well as financial transparency regulations, the current legal framework offers avenues for litigation. In practice, however, anyone can disobey or ignore these laws at will. When potential violations of EU laws are exposed, investigations should be opened, and infractions prosecuted. Only this way could the growing

sentiment of impunity that these malicious actors benefit from be broken.

- **The media and publishers need to take more responsibility in their reporting.** Disclaimers such as “*This report is auto-generated from YYY news service. XXX holds no responsibility for its content*” are not sufficient. The media and publishers using the content from news agencies should do more not to provide greater visibility to bad sources.
- **No media exemption.** This investigation shows once again that any media exemption from platform moderation is a terrible idea. It would offer a blank cheque to news agencies and media to relay unverified and false sources without having any method of reducing their visibility and spread – a highway to *en masse* disinformation.

## FINAL WORDS FOR THE NEAR FUTURE

When we first started to work on pro-Indian influence operations in 2019, we did not foresee that we would be writing a third investigation in 2023. We thought the second would be the last, but here we are, publishing another one. We cannot entirely exclude having to write a fourth one, but we sincerely hope we will not have to.

Based on our experience, the following is likely to happen in the next days and weeks: we will be congratulated, mainly by those who want to see pro-Indian influence operations

exposed, who will probably use our work with one of or more of the [5D](#)'s (dismiss, distort, distract, dismay, divide). At the same time, actors in India might start their usual covert harassment, usually with hundreds of Twitter accounts that smear us and target our families, colleagues and professional contacts. As they have in the past, the actors who we have exposed might use the EU's freedom of access to information, to request exchanges between ourselves and EU institutions. They might harass us with frivolous inquiries, legal fights, and subpoenas. We also anticipate that Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) might, once again, send parliamentary questions about our organisation and participate as collaborators in this harassment. All this is in the standard playbook for discrediting and smearing organisations such as ours, hoping we would ultimately stop doing our work.

All kinds of organisations may invite us to present this report, and we will turn most of them down, as we would need more resources to meet their requests. EU Institutions may ask us to present the report officially. We will repeat the same policy recommendations and will probably be told that not much can be done.

But we stand ready for pleasant surprises.

**READ THE RIGHT TO REPLY ON THE NEXT PAGE.**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank our colleagues for their precious support in publishing this report, as well as for their patience and understanding when we could not be available for other important missions due to the work on this report. To our wonderful Board Members who are always available to advise and support us in good and darker times: thank you. Thank you Sandrine, Karine, Phineas, Léa and all the fantastic team at Forbidden Stories for making us a part of this #StoryKillers adventure. Thanks to our families who had to bear with us working on this story nights and weekends.

## RIGHT TO REPLY

In addition to what is already featured in our report, we have contacted for reply/comment the following organisations, which did not respond: ANI, Reuters, Yahoo News, Hindustan Times, India TV, The Print, Business Standard and EU Today.

Contacted, the Big News Network (BNN), an international conglomerate of global news distribution systems with online news portals such as the CardiffStar.com ("The home of accuracy and truth") and Northkoreatimes.com ("Oldest online news service in North Korea"), responded. Here are our questions and BNN's response:

### EU DisinfoLab's questions :

Dear Mr McEvoy,

Please note that BNN contact form is not allowing us to contact the BNN team on this request.

In the course of its latest investigation, EU DisinfoLab has assessed that ANI news agency has been repeatedly quoting online news sources or experts that have no existence. These sources include for instance a think tank dissolved in 2014 (IFFRAS).

We found these stories from ANI reproduced on websites managed by the Big News Network, and would like to request official comments on the following questions:

- How would you characterize your business relationship with ANI?
- Do you have any process for assessing the accuracy of the content provided by third parties such as ANI?
- taking into account the facts mentioned above, what are the measures you are planning to take?

We would be grateful if you could respond to these questions before the 22 February at 4 PM CET

Best regards,

EU DisinfoLab

### BNN's response :

Good Morning

Thank you for your email below, received just after 4:00am this morning (Sydney time).

As we have previously communicated, we firmly deny the allegations made against us in your original report and have initiated legal proceedings against your organization with regards to the defamatory statements made in that report. We have provided evidence that disproves the allegations and wish to reiterate that we have no involvement in the subject matter of your previous report, which appears to be the focus of your new report.

Any repetition of the defamatory statements made or reference to our group will only cause further harm, which will be addressed through the ongoing legal proceedings.

If you choose to reference Big News Network in your new report, you are free to quote the above statement, in full and unedited, as our response to the three questions posed in your email below

Thank you for your understanding.

Regards,

Big News Network FZ LLC.