



Summary Report

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Panel Theme: Building Democratic Resilience Amid Value Conflict

Key Issues:

Foreign interference (FI) has become recognized as a threat not only to national security but to democracy. It is often discussed as “hybrid warfare”. The debate has been very much informed by the interference of the Governments of Russia and China in the presidential elections in the US and France and several parliamentary elections in Canada and European countries, most recently in Moldova¹ and Georgia.² In addition to disinformation campaigns, foreign interference involves electoral corruption in the form of pre-election vote-buying schemes and the intimidation of vulnerable groups and public servants.

The focus on integrity of democratic elections³ might explain why FI discussions tend to be rather state-centered with regard to both, the foreign agents found to interfere and the domestic agencies supposed to detect, deter, and counter FI. Hostile states are a prominent and most potent threat. However, FI often also involves non-state actors, e.g., terrorist networks, religious communities, think tanks, intellectual clubs, and media oligarchs. Their interferences do not only undermine the integrity of democratic institutions and processes but citizens’ trust in government and democracy as well as in each other. The latter requires a more society-centered approach that focuses on the recipient side of FI strengthening the democratic resilience of society.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-votes-election-eu-referendum-shadow-alleged-russian-meddling-2024-10-20/>, accessed October 21, 2024.

² <https://www.scripts-berlin.eu/transfer-activities/read/blog/Blog-76-Mgaloblishvili-Georgian-Election/index.html>, accessed November 1, 2024.

³ Another form of FI that is the “weaponization of mass migration”. Russia and Belarus have used migrants to destabilize neighbouring countries by letting them in and bussing them to their borders with the European Union (Greenhill, Kelly M, 2022: When migrants become weapons: the long history and worrying future of a coercive tactic, in: Foreign Aff. 101, 155).

Assessment:

Democratic resilience refers to the ability of institutions and societies to adapt to challenges and crisis without compromising their core values. In the context of FI, democracies should be able to counter the threats posed by hostile foreign agents to the integrity of their institutions and processes without compromising core democratic values, the very values that are contested and rejected by foreign agents. They do not only challenge democratic institutions and processes directly but support domestic actors that contest liberal democracy from within.

The modes or strategies by which foreign agents interfere with democratic institutions and processes involve cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns from the outside as well as financial support, bribery, blackmail, threats, and the use of proxies inside Canada. But there are also other ways of FI that tend to receive less attention and are not fully addressed by government regulation: Foreign agents fuel mutual dislike and hostility between social and political groups or what we refer to as “polarization”. Citizens increasingly take extreme views towards controversial issues and towards groups who do not share their own views. Why is this a problem?

Polarization has profound effects on our everyday life and social life (from choosing friends and partners to deciding where to live in which province or which part of the city). It undermines citizen’s willingness to compromise. It makes us more inclined to accept violations of democratic freedoms of those who do not share our views. Most importantly, it threatens the social cohesion of our democratic societies.

How do foreign agents fuel polarization? First, they denounce certain positions on critical policy issues as morally wrong, e.g., on social media. Second, they align political and social identities – sexual or ethnic minorities are supposed to vote progressive / social democrats while Catholics should vote conservative.

To address the threat of FI fueling polarization, a “whole of government approach” towards detecting, deterring and countering FI needs to be complemented by a “whole of society approach” focusing on trust as the backbone of democratic resilience. The protection of democratic institutions and processes from FI is not only about government regulation strengthening the capacity of security and intelligence agencies to detect, deter, and counter FI. It should also involve the strengthening of the resilience of democratic societies which rests on political and social trust.

The good news is that Canada still is a high-trust society, even though Trust in Research Undertaken in Science and Technology (TRuST) network at the University of Waterloo finds signs of a beginning decline.⁴ The OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2024 Results reports that half of Canadians have high or moderately high trust in the federal governments, which is well above the OECD average of 39% (in

⁴ <https://uwaterloo.ca/trust-research-undertaken-science-technology-scholarly-network/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/trust-in-canada-recent-trends-in-measures-of-trust-april-2024.pdf>, accessed October 21, 2024.

Germany, e.g., it is at 36%).⁵ Overall, political and social trust in Canada is high and provides a sound basis for democratic resilience.

Recommendations:

Attempt to counter FI can draw on this democratic resilience. This involves measures already listed in the Commissioner's Initial Report:

- Raising public awareness of dangers FI poses to democratic processes.
- Educating the public regarding how to recognize foreign interference tactics and on available protective measures, consulting the public on the legal measures to detect, deter and counter FI, particularly if they interfere with democratic rights and freedoms (e.g. foreign agent registry).
- Building community capacity to support those targeted by FI, as well as building civic capacity to detect and counter mis- and disinformation (critical media literacy resources).
- Encouraging a robust Canada-based media to support a robust information environment, while inviting or requiring media platforms to take measures to control the flow of disinformation.

However, these resilience-building mechanisms can be a double-edged sword as they could themselves negatively impact democracy. Militant democracies, like Germany, run the risk of violating the very democratic freedoms they seek to protect. Moreover, not any foreign interference is malign. Many countries benefited from Western countries and international institutions at promoting and protecting human rights, the rule of law, and democracy. Finally, it is often difficult to disentangle foreign and domestic malign actions. Amidst the limits and the grey zones, the Government should exercise caution and restraint in regulating FI. And it should develop alternative strategies to strengthen democratic resilience. Strengthening the resilience of a democratic society is an even more complex task than regulating FI that targets the society. Research on trust suggests several strategies:

- Priming common identities that cut across group identities.⁶ Canada's multicultural society is made up of three founding peoples – Indigenous, French, and British – and of many other racial and ethnic groups.
- Encouraging cross-partisan dialogues on critical issues, including abortion, migration, or foreign interference.
- Providing government services in an inclusive, impartial and transparent way. People infer from their experience with public service provision to the behaviour

⁵ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results-country-notes_a8004759-en/canada_1d3c42d0-en.html, accessed October 21, 2024.

⁶ Stolle, Dietlind, 2002: Trusting Strangers. The Concept of Generalized Trust in Perspective, in: Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft 31, 4, 397-412.

of others. Conversely, the perception of government favouring some groups or regions over others, fuels mistrust and hostility.⁷

- Supporting voluntary associations and networks of civic engagement where citizens can develop and strengthen their trust in each other.⁸

Democracy requires not only strong institutions but a democratic culture, with citizens being willing to respectfully disagree and reach compromise through deliberation and majority voting. For this, citizens have to have trust in democratic institutions as well in each other. It is this trust, hostile foreign agents seek to destroy and that, therefore, should therefore merit special attention by the Government.

Additional Remarks:

The European Union has adopted several measures to safeguard elections from external influence and foster trust in democratic processes across the Union:

Strengthening Cybersecurity Measures

- The **EU Cybersecurity Act**, which defines robust cybersecurity guidelines.
- The **Network and Information Security Directive** sets standards for critical infrastructure protection, including election systems.
- The **Cybersecurity Rapid Alert System** helps member states exchange information on threats quickly to counter potential interference efforts.
- The **Cybersecurity Cooperation Group** shall enhance cooperation among EU countries on cybersecurity, specifically during election periods.

Combating Disinformation

- The **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)**, which works with fact-checkers, researchers, and media literacy experts across the EU to analyze disinformation trends and provide accurate information to the public.
- The **EU Code of Practice on Disinformation** is a voluntary code, agreed upon by major social media companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google. It aims to reduce disinformation by limiting fake accounts, labeling state-controlled media, and reducing the spread of false information.
- The **Digital Services Act** and **Digital Markets Act** require large digital platforms to provide more transparency in how they manage content and ads, holding them accountable for spreading disinformation or election interference. Platforms must publish reports on their actions against disinformation.

⁷ Rothstein, Bo, and Dietlind Stolle, 2008: The State and Social Capital: An Institutional Theory of Generalized Trust, in: Comparative Politics 40, 4, 441-459.

⁸ Stolle, Dietlind, 1998: Bowling Together, Bowling Alone: The Development of Generalized Trust in Voluntary Associations, in: Political Psychology 19, 1, 497-525.

Election Security Cooperation

- The **European Cooperation Network on Elections** is a network that allows member states to share best practices and intelligence on election threats. It also works closely with the European External Action Service (EEAS) to address specific risks from foreign entities.
- **Joint Task Forces** like the EU East StratCom and EU Hybrid Fusion Cell allow the EU to monitor disinformation originating from non-EU countries, particularly from Russia and China, and to coordinate responses.

Legislative Frameworks and Sanctions

- **Sanctions for Interference** for individuals and entities outside the EU found responsible for election interference, including asset freezes and travel bans.
- **EU Democracy Action Plan**, launched in 2020, strengthens protections against foreign influence in EU elections, ensuring more transparency in political ads and funding, particularly for cross-border online campaigns.

Education and Public Awareness

- **Awareness Campaigns** shall counter foreign manipulation efforts by regularly informing the public about interference risks in collaboration with civil society organizations.
- **Media Literacy Initiatives** shall promote media literacy to help citizens recognize disinformation and improve public understanding of misinformation techniques.