

The European Union's handling of Russian disinformation

A content analysis of the European Union's initiatives to handle Russian disinformation



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Abstract

The European Union's democratic features, such as open and fact-based public deliberation processes and free and fair election processes and principles, are threatened by anti-EU and pro-Kremlin disinformation. This thesis explores the European Union's motivations to handle Russian disinformation. By employing the case study method and conducting a qualitative content analysis on official European Union documents and three elite interviews. This thesis employs the theory of realism and social constructivism to examine the empirical material. This thesis focuses on the EU's initiatives after 2015 – the year of the establishment of the East StratCom Task Force, which was the first major initiative taken by the European Union to handle Russian disinformation.

This thesis found that the European Union's main motivations to handle disinformation are to protect public deliberation and the democratic processes within the European Union from being meddled by foreign actors. Most of the initiative launched by the European Union provides solutions to the issue by undertaking internal actions and does not seek to implement offensive sanctions towards Russia.

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1 Introduction

“Words also shoot”

- *Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, 2015*

(Hansen F. S., *The weaponization of information*, 2017)

Since the establishment of the European Union, the member states have integrated in-depth and in width. This has caused many threats to be shared by the member states. One of these is disinformation, which has become an increasingly more significant threat to the European Union in recent years. The increased prominence is predominantly caused by the development of modern information technology, specifically social media platforms. These platforms constitute beneficial and advantageous conditions for disseminating disinformation, as it can spread more rapidly than it can through traditional mainstream media outlets. For instance, disinformation has been shown to spread up to six times faster than accurate news on the social media platform Twitter (Dizikes, 2018).

The European Commission and 83% of EU citizens consider disinformation a threat to the European Union (European Commission, 2021), as disinformation can threaten democracy and democratic principles, which are cornerstones of the European Union. Disinformation is a threat to the European Union because it can erode public trust in the institutions and values the Union is constituted by. Thus, if Russian disinformation disseminators are successful in their aim, it can ultimately lead to the European Union's decay.

Therefore, this master's thesis investigates the European Union's initiatives and motivations to counter disinformation. The rationales and motivations behind the concrete initiatives are examined using the classic theory of international relations, realism, and social constructivism.

Russia has shown to be a major place of origin for disinformation targeting the European Union (Parliament, 2016). Albeit some of the European Union's initiatives towards disinformation does not focus on particular actors and senders of disinformation, at the issue in general, this master's thesis focuses on the European Union's initiatives towards Russian disinformation.

This thesis is an embedded case study constituted by a qualitative content analysis of official policy documents and elite interviews. The thesis accounts for the threat Russian disinformation poses towards the European Union and examines the European Union's initiatives towards it.

As “Disinformation has not received much theoretical attention in International

Relationship scholarship” (Lanoszka, 2019, p. 4), this thesis seeks to contribute to generating knowledge on this issue.

Specifically, this master’s thesis seeks to answer the following research question:

Why and how does the European Union seek to handle the increased dissemination of Russian disinformation?

2 Structure of thesis

This thesis starts by defining and explaining the issue of disinformation as it is essential to understand the term make sense of the rest of this thesis. Later the empirical material is presented, and its relevance is justified. The chosen qualitative methods and theoretical framework are also explained, and their relevance to this thesis research question is justified. In the analysis, various extracts are incorporated (the remaining can be found in the attached appendix), as they provide a more concrete understanding of the various empirical materials points and functions as a proper supplement to the coding results. Finally, in the conclusion, the research question is answered.

3 Case description

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis focuses on the EU's initiatives and reasons to handle Russian disinformation. The East Strategic Communication Task Force (often abbreviated 'East Stratcom') was the first major EU initiative to handle Russian disinformation. It was agreed to be established during a European Council meeting in March 2015 (General Secretariat of the Council, 2015). Cohen (1978) argues that "if a threat is not perceived [...] there can be no mobilization of defensive resources (p. 93). Hence, I argue that the EU's launch of initiatives to handle Russian disinformation obviously shows that the EU perceives disinformation as a threat. Also, I examine the role of the EU's values as explained with social constructivism because "liberal democracies [are] especially vulnerable as a result of their free media culture" (Hansen, F.S, 2017, p. 37).

Russia is interested in creating division among the European Union's member states as it is easier for Russia to handle the individual member-states than it is to handle the European Union as a coherent actor. Some EU-member states have their own institutions to counter disinformation, e.g., the Anti-Disinformation Agency, a part of the Czech Republic's Ministry of Interior (Czech Radio, 2016). However, it is reasonable for the member states to collaborate on such issues as Russian disinformation campaigns targeting the individual member states domestic affairs and the European Union level affairs, such as the legitimacy of its institutions and democratic features.

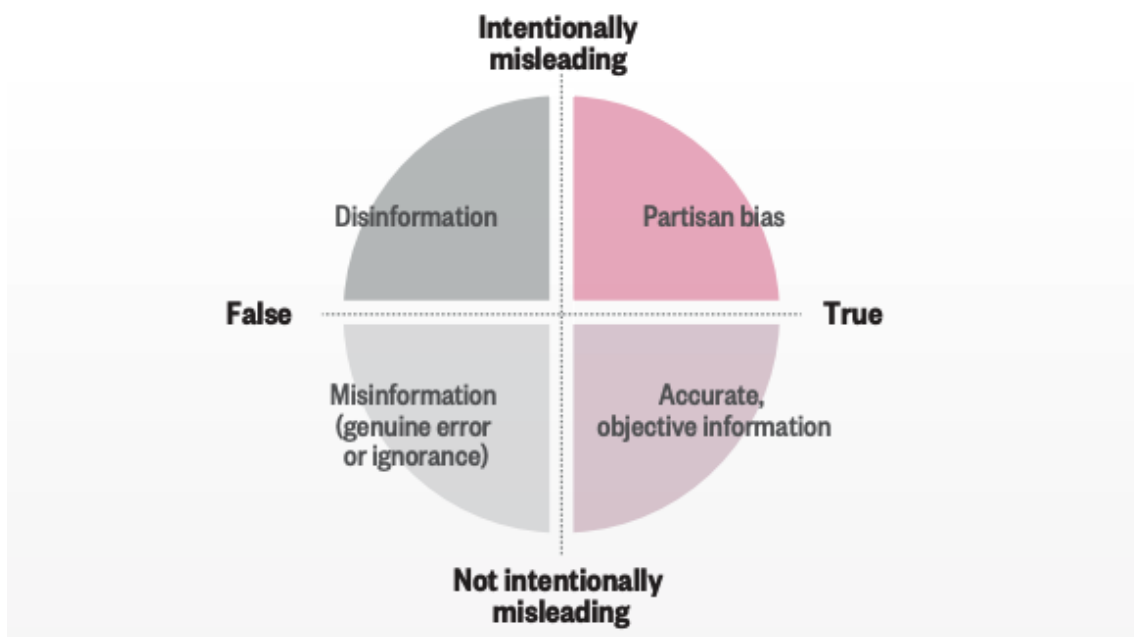
3.1 Definition of disinformation

The European Commission 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 public harm.” Public harm comprises threats to democratic political and policy-making

processes and public goods such as protecting EU citizens' health, the environment or security. Disinformation does not include reporting errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary” (European Commission, 2018, pp. 3-4). Another definition is provided by EUvsDisinfo, which “is the flagship project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force” (EUvsDisinfo, 2022). I include two definitions to enhance understanding of the phenomenon. The definition provided by EUvsDisinfo’s sounds: “The fabrication or deliberate distortion of news content aimed at deceiving an audience, polluting the information space to obscure fact-based reality, and manufacturing misleading narratives about key events or issues to manipulate public opinion” (EUvsDisinfo, 2019).

3.2 Explanation of disinformation

Disinformation differs from misinformation, as disinformation is deliberately misleading, whereas misinformation false component is rooted in “genuine errors or ignorance” (Butcher, 2019, p. 5). If disinformation “is subsequently spread by someone who is unaware of its false nature, it is reduced to misinformation” (Hansen, F.S., 2017, p. 21).



(Butcher, 2019, p. 5)

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, and there are examples of its use in the Roman Republic (BBC, 2021) and in the 13th century’s Mongolian Empire (Gergő Vér, 2011). However, the speed at

which it can spread is unprecedented due to online platforms and the absence of 'gatekeepers' on these platforms, a role journalists and editors undertake in traditional media outlets (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p. 2).

F. S. Hansen (2017) argues that the "digital domain is the scene for the transfer of information from sender to target. In other words, new information technology is the force multiplier, which allows a sender to reach a global audience instantly and with a massive amount of information in the hope of influencing modes of thought" (p. 2). Moreover, online disinformation can transcend national borders instantly and thereby influence multiple states simultaneously. A major initiative for states disseminating disinformation is that this type of hybrid warfare can be effective, but in contrast to kinetic warfare, there is no soldiers life at risk, and it is much easier to remain unidentified. As argued by Filipec (2019), "Confrontative frontal wars are costly, hybrid wars are cheaper as a single hashtag may have a much more destructive impact than bombs dropped from a plane". Moreover, hashtags and fake news do not destroy property" (p. 58).

Russian disinformation often seeks to incite division and social cleavages in the EU's population by playing different groups off against each other. This can be achieved with disinformation by drawing on discourses such as the upper socioeconomic and lower socioeconomic groups, old vs young, urban vs rural, etc.

An aim of disinformation is "changing or reformulating the content of ideas or values and influencing the target's identity to become closer to that of the attacker. In other words, the attacker seeks to create a target more alike or at least more distant from the others in order to disrupt cooperation and further integration between allies" (Filipec, 2019, pp. 64-65).

4 Methods and methodology

4.1 Theoretical and philosophical research considerations

This section will discuss how high levels of reliability, validity, and replicability is ensured in this thesis. In connection to that, I discuss the role of triangulation. Finally, I explain the ontological and epistemological considerations regarding the chosen theoretical framework.

4.1.1 Triangulation, reliability, validity, and replicability

Bryman (2012) defines triangulation as: "The use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked" (p. 392). Denzin (1970) described triangulation as a phenomenon that can occur on various levels in research. Essentially

Denzin (1970) is concerned with multiple triangulations, i.e., triangulations occurring on various levels, e.g., “multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, sources of data, and methodologies” (p. 310). The advantage of triangulations is that light is shed on an object from different perspectives. Thus, as triangulations give “a more detailed and balanced picture” (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2005, p. 115), the risk of omitting essential elements is reduced.

In this thesis, multiple triangulations occur in, e.g., the presentations and description of the theories, the case study method, and the method of qualitative content analysis, where several sources are drawn on. Furthermore, the employment of more than one theory and theoretical concept in the examination of the empirical material is a triangulation, which combined provides a comprehensive overview of the material. As the empirical material comprises different data types, it can also be classified as a triangulation. Essentially, triangulation enhances validity and reliability (Moon, 2018, p. 103), as explained below.

Reliability, validity, and replicability are essential to consider when constructing a research design.

Regarding reliability, the coding process is conducted twice, which reduces the risk of errors. This is known as intracoder reliability (Hellevik, 2002, pp. 184-185). If anyone is to replicate this study, intercoder reliability, i.e., multiple coders coding the same material (Andersen, 2012, p. 103), would be advantageous as it naturally reduces the risk of errors even more, granted that all coders follow the same coding manual (Hansen K. M., 2012, p. 297).

The approach to the qualitative content analysis and how the coding categories are employed are thoroughly explained to increase the replicability factor. Moreover, the interview transcripts and examined policy documents are attached as appendix. This increases replicability as regarding the interviews, it is virtually impossible to obtain identical answers if the same interviewees were interviewed again.

Validity is ensured as the chosen theories' characteristics, and the way they will be employed in the analysis are accounted for, i.e., the operationalisation of the theories is explained.

4.1.2 Ontology and epistemology

The theories of realism and social constructivism are both employed as they have two fundamentally different ontologies and epistemologies (Mearsheimer, 1994, pp. 40-41). They are characterised by respectively positivism and interpretivism (della Porta & Keating, 2008, pp. 23-24). Whereas positivists seek understanding through structural and context-independent explanations, interpretivists aim to perceive and understand events through the features actors assign to them and the features that characterise the actors themselves (della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 26). Multiple

actors can share identical perceptions of phenomena. This is known as intersubjectivity (Klemmensen, Andersen, & Hansen, 2012, p. 23).

Realism's positivist ontology is, e.g., manifested in its perception of the international system, which according to realists, is characterised by anarchy and that this view on the international system is a single objective reality. Contrary, the interpretive approach expressed in social constructivism allows for multiple social realities (Slevtich, 2011, p. 79).

The chosen theories have different ontologies and epistemologies and thus bring different strengths and limitations to the research process. Moreover, within the social sciences, no single hegemonic paradigm exists. Instead, multiple approaches exist and can be equally valid for different purposes (della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 20). As realism and social constructivism cover many of each other's shortcomings, they provide the basis for a solid analysis. This is essential because "in the social world there are always at least two stories to tell" (Hollis & Smith, 1991). The concrete strengths and limitations of the chosen theories are explained in the theory section.

4.2 Delimitation of research focus

I focus on the EU's initiatives launched in 2015 and thereafter. The reason for this is that the first major initiative taken by the EU to handle disinformation was launched in 2015, namely the establishment of the East StratCom Task Force.

I chose to focus on pro-Kremlin and disinformation with Russian origin because Russia is a prominent disseminator of disinformation seeking to delegitimise the EU and the West in general.

Regarding delimitation of the empirical material, it consists solely of EU perspectives in policy documents and interviews. I consider this appropriate because the research question seeks to answer the EU's actions, i.e., it is focussed on the EU's motivations to launch the concrete initiatives. Besides, I found it unrealistic to arrange interviews with Russian officials on this topic but acknowledge that such perspective could contribute to the overall understanding of disinformation's role in the EU and Russia's relationship. However, it is highly questionable whether I could gather trustworthy information on the Kremlin's involvement in disseminating disinformation in EU member states.

Methodological delimitation counts the employed case study method, which does not allow for generalisations to be declared. Another methodological delimitation is the focus on qualitative methods, thereby lacking quantitative examination. This is elaborated on and explained further below.

4.3 Case study

In this master's thesis, I employ the case study method. In this section, I explain the strengths and limitations of the case study method in regard to this thesis.

An advantage and strength of the case study method is that it allows a more in-depth examination of the chosen case than analyses that cover several cases.

Unlike other types of research, context-dependent knowledge is produced when employing the case study method (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 222). Meaning that the researcher cannot generate general and context-independent theories based on the findings, as the findings possibly only apply to the concrete case and thus may not be generalizable. At least, it is not possible to prove whether they are generalizable through a case study analysis. However, I argue that the case study approach is particularly appropriate in this thesis, as an embedded case study is the most suitable method to employ when answering the research question of this thesis. Eysenck (1976) stated that "sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases—not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!" (p. 9). I include this to emphasize the point that this thesis does not seek to create theories or (dis)prove any hypotheses.

Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that the social sciences have not successfully produced general context-independent knowledge, but context-dependent knowledge only, which the case study is intrinsically particularly well-suited for (p. 223). I argue that he might exaggerate in that point and diminish theories within the social science, but that it is accurate that the case study is a well-suited method for context-dependent social scientific research.

It is reasonable to conduct a case study and approach the issue of disinformation in Europe from an EU-perspective due to the vast integration among the member states. Much policy decision-making and areas of responsibility have been pooled and delegated from the member states to the EU.

The most suitable and proper research method depends on the concrete issue being examined (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 226). I consider the case study a suitable method due to both the content and the examined actors due to the EU's 'sui generis' nature.

This thesis does not seek to discover overall findings of disinformation as a general concept but is focused solely on Russian disinformation that seeks to discredit the EU and its member states and the EU's responses to it.

As I conduct an embedded case study, I examine several sub-units of a case, concretely

central policy documents launched by the European Union to handle Russian disinformation and elite interviews. A central strength of the case study approach is that it allows for an in-depth examination of the chosen case (Saldaña, 2011, p. 8).

4.4 Empirical material

This section will present the empirical material and the chosen methods to examine it.

The empirical material consists of three official EU policy documents and three elite interviews with relevant EU officials. Therefore, I will explain the method of document analysis, semi-structured interviews and how the transcription process has been conducted.

4.4.1 Policy documents

The three policy documents that will be examined are:

- The communication from the European Commission to other EU institutions “Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach”.
- The Code of Practice against disinformation
- The Action Plan against disinformation

Schreier (2014) argued that there is often a large amount of available material in qualitative research. Consequently, only a part of the material is chosen for examination when working with coding. Therefore, it is essential to carefully consider and select “material so that it reflects the full diversity of data sources” (p. 8). The three policy documents are chosen because they are significant components of the EU's actions to handle disinformation (cf. graphic overview below).

The ‘Communication’ outlines “key overarching principles and objectives to guide action to raise public awareness about disinformation, as well as the specific measures the Commission intended to take.” (European Court of Auditors, 2021, p. 7).

The ‘Code of Practice’ is especially interesting to examine as it calls upon non-governmental actors, mainly online platforms, to take part and act responsible in the battle against disinformation. It has been signed by major online corporations, including Facebook, Google, Twitter, Mozilla, Microsoft, and TikTok (Code of Practice on Disinformation, 2021).

The ‘Action Plan’ presents a “structured approach to address issues requiring both

reactive (debunking and reducing the visibility of disinformation content) and proactive longer-term efforts (media literacy and measures to improve societal resilience).” (European Court of Auditors, 2021, p. 13).



(European Commission, 2019)

4.4.1.1 Document analysis

As parts of the data are policy documents, this section will outline the strengths and limitations of document analyses and documents as data sources.

Scott (1990) emphasises that a researcher must ensure that the examined documents are authentic (p. 6). It is a clear strength to documents' credibility if they are primary sources that are thus not manipulated in any way by others. The documents examined in this thesis are published and authored by the European Union's institutions, which are also the object of study, fulfil this criterion.

Documents can be considered “windows onto social and organizational realities” (Bryman, 2012, p. 554). However, as Atkinson and Coffey (2011) emphasised, documents' peculiar ontological status must be considered. Atkinson and Coffey (2011) disregard that documents are direct ‘windows’ into organisational realities, but stress that they are written to serve specific purposes (p. 79). Such as advancing certain viewpoints or intended perceptions by readers “that will be favourable to the authors” (Bryman, 2012, p. 555). Therefore, such documents must be approached critically to avoid overlooking authors' (underlying) reasons and motivations for publishing the documents.

Moreover, the documents' origins must be kept in mind when examining them (Elklit & Jensen, 2012, pp. 124-125). This is especially relevant when examining policy documents from the EU, as the authors unquestionably know that the documents will be read and investigated by various actors, such as academics, journalists, other - including foreign - political institutions and actors, etc. Therefore, it is crucial to examine documents in “the context in which they were produced and, [...] their implied readership” (Bryman, 2012, p. 554). Consequently, throughout the analysis, I approach

the material critically and am aware that the authors (EU) might outline several initiatives to handle disinformation, but that it most likely is easier said than done to realise the intended effects of these initiatives. Moreover, as argued by Bryman (2012), “if we want to treat documents as telling us something about an underlying reality, we are likely to need to employ other sources of data regarding that reality and the contexts within which the documents are produced” (p. 555). This leads me to the next section on interviews, which supplement the data constituted by the documents.

4.4.2 Elite interviews

I have conducted three elite interviews with relevant people who are or have been employed by the European External Action Service. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) describe elites as leaders or experts in their field (section 8: Interviewpersoner).

The interviews were conducted in English through the video communication service ‘Zoom’.

I chose to interview elite persons as I seek to understand the EU’s motivations and perception of Russian disinformation and how that is reflected in the initiatives to handle disinformation. I considered these elite people to be more qualified to elucidate and provide this thesis with relevant information than random ordinary EU citizens are. Hence, the choice of interviewees.

It was a requirement from the interviewees' sides to remain anonymous in the material because they are not official spokespersons for their organisation. Consequently, I will refer to them as interviewee 1, 2, and 3. The interviews will be labelled respectively as interview A, B and C. However, I can present some information about them without revealing their identity.

- Interviewee 1 is currently employed by the European External Action Service, specifically the East StratCom Task Force.
- Interviewee 2 is a former employee who held a high-ranking position within the East StratCom Task Force and worked there for more than five years.
- Interviewee 3’s current position cannot be specified here as it would reveal the person’s identity. However, it can be mentioned that interviewee 3 has held high ranking positions (and still do) within the European External Action Service in Brussels and Moscow.

4.4.2.1 *Semi-structured interview method*

The interviews can be characterised as semi-structured. As the name indicates, this interview technique lies between the structured and unstructured interview techniques, which respectively follows a rigid interview guide containing a prepared set of questions and non-existence of such guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, section 2: Fænomenologi og forståelsesformen i et kvalitativt forskningsinterview).

The opportunity for follow-up questions is one of the reasons for the employment of semi-structured interviews in the thesis. Semi-structured interviews are generally characterised by the interviewer having prepared questions (an interview guide), while it also allows the interviewer to deviate from the prepared order of questions and ask follow-up questions or other questions that were not initially incorporated in the interviewer's interview guide. An example of this from my research is found at the end of the interview with the current EEAS diplomat (interview A), when the question regarding disinformation in various EU languages is raised (cf. appendix). It was an issue I had already considered during my research process, but it was not originally a part of the interview guide.

The questions asked in the three elite interviews were not phrased in the exact same way, but the topics and meaning of them were very similar. Bryman (2012) argued that this is acceptable in semi-structured interviews (p. 471). Another characteristic of the semi-structured method is that the questions are typically broader than a structured interview (Bryman, 2012, p. 212).

Interview data is a valuable supplement to other empirical material because it can have a cumulative effect as it provides opportunities to clarify elements that are not sufficiently elucidated in the other empirical material (Elklit & Jensen, 2012, p. 134). In contrast to the policy documents examined in this thesis, interview data provide more nuanced and personal perceptions of the issue. Interviews can resolve and clarify doubts from the other material.

A typical point of critique of the interview method is that the data it produces is subjective (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, section: Standardkritik af kvaliteten af interviewforskning). However, I employ this method partly to gather subjective perspectives on the issue as a supplement to the already publicly available policy documents.

4.4.3 *Transcription*

Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) argues that transcription is the first step towards analysis of interview data and that the extent and form of the transcription depends on the purpose of the specific research

(Section 10: Transskription af interview).

During the transcription process, irrelevant sounds such as 'uhm' uttered by the interviewees when they paused to think between words and sentences have been omitted to ease the reading process of the transcripts. Additionally, repeated words that disturb the reading process and does not contribute to the point made by three interviewees have been omitted as well. I argue that it is justifiable to do so in this thesis because such sounds are irrelevant in regard to the topic and focus of this thesis.

I have omitted repeated words that disturb the ease of reading does not indicate that the interviewee is emphasising that specific part or that in any other way contribute to the meaning. An example of this is from interview A where the interviewee says, "If you look at the disinformation or propaganda dissemination history *of of of of* Russia". In that sentence, I have deleted the excess prevalences of the word "of". A few of such editorial actions have been taken in the transcripts. Additionally, interviewee 2 often constructed 'confusing' sentences, e.g., said half a sentence and then decided to say something else. A few times, unnecessary words have been deleted from the transcript to ensure that the meaning is correctly represented.

Finally, I have not transcribed the first part of the interviews comprised of greetings and technical issues.

4.5 Qualitative research method

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods have strengths and limitations (Flick, 2011, p. 13). This thesis' methods and empirical material are qualitative because it allows for a more thorough insight into policy-makers motivation and incentives to implement specific policies and initiatives (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973).

4.5.1 Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a research method that enables the researcher to describe qualitative data systematically. This is achieved by assigning, i.e., coding, relevant parts of the data to specific categories of a coding frame. The coding frame is a central component of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014, p. 2). Bryman (2016) defines coding as a process where "data are broken down into component parts, which are given names" (p. 568). As the research question guides the analysis, I

focus solely on the data elements that are relevant to it.

The method was developed in the first half of the 20th century on issues similar to the research topic of this thesis. Namely a “broadening media landscape and [...] the analysis of propaganda distributed in Nazi Germany” (Schreier, 2014, p. 3). Regarding the similarities with the topic of this thesis, the broadening media landscape can be compared to the breeding ground and arena for disseminating disinformation that social media platforms constitute today. Although propaganda and disinformation are different, they have several shared characteristics.

The qualitative coding research method has been criticized for having low reliability and being too “impressionistic and lacking in rigor” (della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 19). However, clearly defined coding categories can counter this critique as it enables a systematic approach, which contributes to achieving high validity and reliability, meaning that the coding process is conducted in a well-structured manner (Jakobsen, 2012, pp. 182, 185). Another component making it systematic is the requirement of double coding, meaning that the material must be examined twice. As I am the only researcher of this analysis, there is no possibility for inter-rater reliability (two coders coding the same material). Although it cannot eliminate the risk, double coding can reduce erroneous coding and improve the quality of the analysis and intra-rater reliability. Moreover, this tests the quality of the coding frame as the categories “should be so clear and unambiguous that the second coding yields results that are very similar to those of the first coding” (Schreier, 2014, pp. 2-3).

This method reduces data volume and distinguishes itself from other qualitative research methods, e.g., discourse analysis, which often opens or expands the data. The proponents of qualitative content analysis believe “that meaning is often complex, holistic, context dependent” (Schreier, 2014, p. 3). A unique feature of the qualitative content analysis, which explains the presence of data-driven coding categories (as explained below), is that it is employed to unveil “latent and more context-dependent meaning” (Schreier, 2014, p. 5).

Albeit this method is systematic, it also has flexible features that distinguish it from its quantitative counterparts. This is especially evident concerning the coding categories, as both concept-driven and data-driven categories exist within the same coding frame (Schreier, 2014, p. 3). The coding frame must be designed accordingly to the material it seeks to examine. Hence, some of the categories must be data-driven (Schreier, 2014, p. 3) and not solely stem from the theoretical approaches applied in the study. This thesis's main categories are theory-driven by realist and social constructivist theory. And the sub-categories are data-driven. The coding categories are presented below.

The coding frame must consist of at least “one main category and at least two subcategories” (Schreier, 2014, p. 7). As seen below, this thesis employs two main theories and five subcategories. The main categories are based on the researcher’s focus. Subcategories specify the actual content of the data with regard to the main categories (Schreier, 2014, p. 7). The researcher can develop subcategories for subcategories within the coding frame. However, Schreier (2014) argues that it can be challenging to manage coding frames with more than three hierarchical levels (p. 7).

There are specific requirements for coding frames in qualitative content analysis. One of these is the unidimensional nature of the categories, the requirement of mutual exclusiveness of subcategories, the requirement of exhaustiveness, and segmentation.

The requirement of mutual exclusiveness applies to the subcategories. If subcategories were not mutually exclusive, the process of employing the coding frame would be less meaningful. The coding frame in its entirety is multidimensional, whereas the individual categories must be unidimensional, meaning that the categories must “cover one aspect of the material only” (Schreier, 2014, p. 7). It is important to note that parts of data can be coded twice, but only once within one main category. Thus, it is possible to code and assign a piece of data to two main categories (Schreier, 2014, p. 7).

The requirement of exhaustiveness is concerned with the categories’ covering range. Concretely it ensures that all relevant parts of the data are covered by a category (Schreier, 2014, p. 8).

The same piece of text can be labelled with more than one code (Jakobsen, 2012, p. 179). The main categories of the coding frame can each cover multiple passages of the material. A strength of the overarching categories is that it generates indicators for how various data interrelates. A limitation of the overarching categories is that they do not allow for each part of the data to be examined in isolation and as in-depth as would have been possible if another approach was employed (Schreier, 2014, p. 2).

Approach

The first step taken by the researcher is to examine all parts of the material relevant to the research question. This procedure is always the same, regardless of the “exact research question and material” (Schreier, 2014, p. 2). A strength of this approach is that it reduces the influence and tendency of researchers to focus solely on the parts of the data that suits their partisan bias, “assumptions and expectations” (Schreier, 2014, p. 2).

The coding categories must be named and defined. The names must entail and indicate a succinct description of what the category implies (Schreier, 2014, p. 10). The definition explains the features that characterise the category. In essence, the definitions function as a tool for the researcher because they signify when a particular category applies to a piece of data (Schreier, 2014, p. 10).

Besides the definitions, indicators can be incorporated as a helpful tool. As the concept's name hints, indicators indicate when elements of the data can be linked to a specific category of the coding frame. The indicators "can be specific words, or they can be descriptions of the ways in which the presence of a phenomenon manifests itself in the data" (Schreier, 2014, p. 10).

Decision rulers are not mandatory to include but can be helpful if overlapping subcategories are employed. Concretely, they specify which of two overlapping subcategories a piece of data shall be assigned to (Schreier, 2014, p. 11). Thus, the function of decision rulers is to uphold the mutually exclusive nature of subcategories within a main category.

Before the actual analysis is conducted, a 'pilot phase' is conducted on parts of the material. Its purpose is to uncover shortcomings and revise the coding frame before the main analysis is performed (Schreier, 2014, p. 12). Therefore, I undertake a combination of 'open' and 'closed' coding, which is a typical approach to qualitative analyses in social sciences (Jakobsen, 2012, p. 179). Open coding requires the researcher to strive for objectivity, albeit practically impossible in social sciences, and thus leave one's pre-understandings and stance towards the issue in the background and simply let the 'data talk' (Jakobsen, 2012, p. 178).

As argued by Schreier (2014), "the coding frame itself can be the main result" (p. 14) of the analysis. It can be presented and expounded through quotes (Schreier, 2014, p. 14). A frequency table can supplement the qualitative presentation of the data. Such coding presentations typically focus on the various categories' appearance frequencies (Schreier, 2014, p. 15). In the analysis, I have inserted a number in parenthesis next to the sub-categories name in a table, indicating the code frequency in each data source. And I provide extracts exemplifying units assigned to the respective coding categories in the analysis. The codes are used to indicate when the data mentions areas that can be threatened by disinformation and/or how the EU can respond to that.

Here is a representation of the coding categories employed in this thesis. The same codes are applied to all parts of the coded material.

Main category: Realism	Description of coding category	Example from data
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Subcategory: Survival of the state	(Risks to) the continuing existence of the EU and its institutions	“(…) it's potentially one of the more existential threats to the European Union because of the very devious nature of disinformation” (Interview A)
Subcategory: Internal security	Defensive realist features. Including ensuring internal social cohesion, public trust, avoiding domestic crises, and features that can counter disinformation domestically, e.g., ‘calling it out.’	“(…) bolstering resilience against hybrid threats that highlighted strategic communication as a priority field …” (Action Plan)
Subcategory: Offensive realism	Military action and (economic) sanctions	“(…) the use of sanctions where appropriate” (Action Plan)

Main category: Social constructivism	Description of coding category	Example from data
Subcategory: Ensuring free public deliberation	Freedom of media, expression, and ensuring transparent and objective information	“This contributes to eroding. (...) trusts (...) in a free and trustworthy media landscape” (Interview C)
Subcategory: Protecting democracy and democratic principles	Securing free and fair elections and avoiding foreign meddling.	“(…) democracy is built on certain principles (...), and if someone is meddling in that process it undermines the whole democracy itself” (Interview B)

5 Theory

Several theories seek to describe actors' behaviour in international relations. Nonetheless, no single theory can sufficiently explain the various nuances that determine actors' behaviour on the international scene. The inability to describe phenomena entirely is a general limitation within the humanities and social sciences (Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2016, pp. 6, 10). Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that there does not and probably cannot exist predictive theory in social science" (p. 223). Unlike natural sciences that focus on causality, phenomena in social sciences are not 'black and white' and cannot be isolated from the influence of human actions, as the subjects of study within the social sciences fundamentally are socially constructed by humans. However, I seek to discover much relevant information on the examined issue by applying these two different theories.

In this thesis, I apply realism and social constructivism to explain the European Union's initiatives towards disinformation. As described in the section on ontology and epistemology, realism and social constructivism differ and cover many of each other's shortcomings, which combined makes them a powerful set of theories.

As employed in the coding process, the theories and their theoretical concepts are applied to enhance understanding of and explain the EU's initiatives to handle disinformation. I.e., the theories and theoretical concepts are employed to make sense of the empirical material. The theories have a central influence on the analysis as they constitute the theory-driven coding categories.

In the following, I will explain and critically evaluate the theories capability to work as a tool to answer the research question. After the sections on realism and social constructivism, I have devoted a section to consider the major differences and similarities of the theories to show how the employment of both theories are beneficial in this thesis.

5.1 Realism

Realists perceive the international system as an arena characterised by anarchy in which nation-states are the most important actors, and no central executive entity exists. According to realism, states are rational actors motivated by maximising self-interest. As the international system is anarchic and characterised as a zero-sum game (Friis & Juncos, 2019, p. 288), any state can, if its resources allow it, act independently to pursue its self-interests, regardless of the opinions of other – weaker – states. Thus, states find themselves in constant power battles, not necessarily wars, but endless power competitions (Donnelly, 2000, p. 8), where a latent risk of war is always present (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 9). As accounted for below, in contemporary times, 'war' is increasingly seldomly conducted using conventional kinetic arms since hybrid warfare, including disinformation, has become increasingly

prevalent.

The concept of 'power' is central to realist theory. Power inequality is present in all human affairs and determines actors' behaviour (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 36). Waltz (1979) states, "The web of social and political life is spun out of inclinations and incentives, deterrent threats and punishments. Eliminate the latter two, and the ordering of society depends entirely on the former - a utopian thought impractical this side of Eden" (p. 186). This encapsulates realism's cynical worldview.

Another central element of realist theory is that actors are egoistic and always driven by self-interests. Realists argue that egoism is a fundamental trait rooted in human nature that characterises nation-states. Albeit actors can undertake altruistic behaviour, they prioritise self-interest if they must choose between that and the interests of a collective. A classic realist adage states, "Inhumanity is just humanity under pressure" (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 36).

Realism is the earliest developed theory of international politics. Its origins trace back to Thucydides' Peloponnesian War (~430 BC) (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 37) where "relations between Greek city states" was examined (Rynning, 2005, p. 20). Realism constitutes the foundation for developing other international relations theories, and most others are developed as responses to realism (Wohlforth, 2016, pp. 36, 52).

Realism is not one single theory but a "body of theories and related arguments that flow from a very small set of basic assumptions about how the world works" (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 36). Several theorists created and contributed to these, including the early thinkers and developers of the theory, such as Thucydides and later Machiavelli, to more contemporary theorists such as Morgenthau, Mearsheimer, Waltz, and others. These thinkers' views differ and occasionally contradict and challenge each other on certain points, e.g., as expressed in defensive and offensive structural realism (Rynning, 2005, p. 16). Examples of this are Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, some of the most prominent realists. Morgenthau, a proponent of offensive realism, argues that states have ambition for power maximization, whereas Waltz undertakes a defensive realist stance and argues that states simply want to survive and enhance their security capabilities to ensure their survival (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 9).

Offensive realism focuses on the anarchic structure of the international system, which it considers conflict generating. According to offensive realists, "Attack is not a question of whether but when, and even defensive states must ponder an uncomfortable choice: be offensive, or be attacked" (Rynning, 2005, p. 17). Contrary to defensive realism, offensive realism does not believe

that conditions that stabilise the international arena and ensure peaceful conditions can be relied on due to the non-existence of an authority to enforce such arrangements. Such conditions can, e.g., be alliances or a bi-polar world order where the two poles keep each other in check and mutually prevents the use of, e.g., nuclear weapons. Thus, the only way a weaker state can be protected against a more potent adversary is through strategic alliances or indirectly if a third-party nation-state finds it appropriate due to its self-interests (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 11).

Consequently, states should not base their security on such conditions according to offensive realism. Moreover, offensive realists perceive other states enhanced power and capacities with suspicion and are often motivated to strengthen their own capabilities – or weaken others – to ensure their own survival (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 39). Additionally, Morgenthau, paraphrased in Antunes & Camisão (2017), believed that policies based on morality or idealism could lead to weakness – and possibly the destruction or domination of a state by a competitor” (p. 16).

The realist ideas developed from Thucydides up to the middle of the Cold War are labelled classical realism (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 38) and emphasise human nature's reflection in nation-states' behaviour. Neorealism, initially developed by Kenneth Waltz (1979), focuses on the role of structure in the international system, which according to realism is anarchic. Specifically, Waltz, as cited in Wohlforth (2016), stresses that the "mere existence of groups in anarchy" (p. 38) can cause clashes and power battles. Waltz particularly criticised the existing approaches to realism lack of clearly distinguishing between "human nature, the internal attributes of states, and the overall system of states" (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 38).

Neoclassical realism consists of elements from both classical and neorealism.

I acknowledge that realism is not a single theory. In this thesis, I will, however, often refer to it as such for the sake of simplicity and because I rely on concepts from different sub-schools. Overall, the different types of realism agree on central arguments, thereby forming the main ideas of realism, and collectively they constitute a "coherent intellectual school" (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 37).

Mearsheimer, a neorealist, presents five realist assumptions, which are inspected and elaborated on below in regard to the focus of this thesis, namely how they relate to the interrelationship between the European Union and Russia and the issue of disinformation.

The assumptions are respectively:

1. “The international system is anarchic
2. States have some type of offensive military capability
3. States can never fully trust other states

4. Survival is the most basic motive that drives states
 5. States act strategically to ensure their survival” (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 10).
- i. Regarding the first assumption, namely the international system’s anarchic nature, realists do not mean that the world is necessarily doomed to be permeated by war and chaos. Instead, they emphasise that no superior authority to nation-states exist (Mearsheimer, 1994, pp. 10, 11). Regarding disinformation, this assumption proclaims that if the EU is frustrated with Russia’s dissemination of disinformation, the lack of a superior executive entity makes it difficult for the EU to force Russia to end the dissemination as there is no one ‘to call’ in the anarchic system. However, from a realist perspective, the EU can force Russia to cease the dissemination of disinformation if the EU has more powerful military (including hybrid ones) capabilities than Russia as these capabilities can be utilised strategically to realise the EU’s preferences vis-à-vis Russia – and vice versa. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to identify the sender of disinformation, for which reason military capabilities can be irrelevant if it is uncertain where such capabilities should be applied. In fact, this is a prominent motivational factor for the senders of disinformation, which is explained and elaborated on further in sections below.

As explained, realists consider nation-states the most important actors. In this thesis, I apply realism to elucidate the EU’s actions. I am thus expanding the concept of the ‘state’ to include the EU. I elaborate on this in the section on realism’s justification in this thesis. The anarchic feature and distrust on a military level are attenuated within the EU (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 40). “For realists, peace results when the key causes of war are absent. Thus the amity you might observe among some groups of states may be a result of the attenuation of anarchy among them caused by a local order-providing great power. Or amity among one group of states may arise from their shared need to oppose another state or group. In either case, realist theories predict that the absence of conflict is contingent on a particular configuration of power and that conflict might return when that configuration changes” (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 42).

Power battles still occur, but they are civilised and take the form of political ‘battles’ rather than latent threats of military force. The defensive realist point on states seeking to balance threats (Wohlforth, 2016, pp. 40-41) rather than power can explain this as states with concordant preferences and strong interdependence, as seen in alliances, do not constitute threats to each other, regardless of increased power. As stressed by realism and liberal intergovernmentalism, nation-states are rational actors that only enter alliances and integrate if they believe it improves

their chances of realising preferences (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 21). Hence, alliances are built upon shared interests. Moreover, democratic peace theory, as evolved out of Kant's (1795) idea of democratic states' reluctance to wage war against each other, can also explain this.

Distrust is, however, still prevalent outside the EU when it faces external actors, such as Russia.

- ii. The second assumption, namely that states have a type of offensive military capability, is rooted in the distrust among nation-states and nation-states' intrinsic ambition for survival (as outlined in assumptions three and four). However, the fact that Mearsheimer (1994) stresses that states have a type of *offensive* type of military (p. 10) capability reveals his offensive realist perspective, which stresses that an actor's security is best obtained by becoming a hegemon (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 12).

As a state can never be perfectly assured of the intentions of other states, it can, from a defensive realist perspective, apply its military capabilities to protect itself. And from an offensive perspective, anticipate an attack by attacking the adversary or simply utilise its offensive military capabilities to refrain from potential attacks from adversaries. The latter will typically occur for a hegemon.

Concerning disinformation, it is vital to note the words 'some type' in the second assumption where Mearsheimer declares that states have "some type of offensive military capability" (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 10). As, e.g., the interviewees also mention (cf. transcripts), the concept of military capabilities must be understood as more than traditional kinetic military capabilities such as armed soldier, combat vehicles, fighter aircraft etc., to also include hybrid warfare, which embraces disinformation (Richter, 2009, p. 104).

- iii. The third assumption regarding distrust among states does not necessarily imply that states have constant malicious intentions towards each other. Rather it stresses that states simply cannot be sure of other states intentions and how they might apply their offensive military capabilities, including hybrid ones (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 10). Currently, the European Union is observing Russia with vast distrust (Wesel, 2021) (at the time of hand-in of this thesis, the situation at the Ukrainian border is tense disinformation is being used (EUvsDisinfo, 2022), however, I will maintain a general view on the issue of disinformation in this thesis). Distrust towards other states can motivate a state to improve its own capabilities to protect itself, which is precisely what the EU has done with its various initiatives against Russian disinformation, as examined in the analysis. The focus on protection leads us to Mearsheimer's fourth assumption.

iv. The fourth assumption simply emphasises that the fundamental objective of a state is to maintain its sovereignty and ensure its survival (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 10). As mentioned, defensive and offensive realism propose different solutions to this. Offensive realists argue that the ideal means is through power maximization, which leads to hegemony. Defensive realists are not as focused on power maximization and argue that states should simply be sufficiently robust and strong to protect themselves. In fact, defensive realism stresses that an increase of power can provoke an attack from other states as they might seek to hinder another actor from achieving hegemony. Waltz (1986) argued that states' actual behaviour lies somewhere in between the two claims, as he argued that states "are unitary actors who, at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination" (p. 117).

To put it into the context of this thesis, as elaborated on below, Russia can perceive the integration of Eastern European and former Soviet Republics, i.e., Russia's near sphere of interest, into the European Union as a threat, which motivates Russia to interfere in such integration processes. This can also be explained by assumption three (distrust) and offensive realism's point of power maximization. In this case, Russia seeks to obstruct EU integration, especially in Eastern Europe (Euractiv.com, 2020). Besides, the reasons for the integration of Eastern European nation-states are, at least, twofold. Following the logic of offensive realism, the EU is motivated by expansion. However, another realist point is that of 'bandwagoning', causing the Eastern European nation-states to "join the winning organization, the EU (and NATO)" (Rynning, 2005, p. 22).

The fifth and final assumption, as outlined by Mearsheimer (1994), is that states are rational actors that act strategically to pursue their best interests and realise their preferences. Generally, states' strategies possess both offensive and defensive realist traits, as they are motivated by conquest and interest's maximization while constantly balancing and trying to deter and minimise the actions of malicious states (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 12). Despite states' intentions of acting rational, disinformation disseminated from adversaries can cause actors to act unconsciously irrational, as disinformation can affect the basis of decision making. Additionally, Mearsheimer (1994) argues that "they operate in a world of imperfect information, where potential adversaries have incentives to misrepresent their own strength or weakness and to conceal their true aims." (p. 10).

5.1.1 Explanation and justification for applying realism

Realism is employed because it is a major theoretical approach to international relations. As realism primarily focuses on high politics and hard power, it is especially relevant to this thesis when examining the European Union's initiatives to handle Russian disinformation.

Concretely, realism is applied to examine to what extent the EU's initiatives are characterised and motivated by realist features. Therefore, some of the coding categories used in the analysis are based on realist points. Moreover, I present extracts from the empirical material in the analysis and examine them using the theories and concepts.

Realism's belief of nation-states as the most important actors in the international system does not disregard the application of realism to explain the actions and features of the European Union. As argued by Rynning (2005), "Many observers of European Union affairs discard the theory of Realism [*sic*] in the belief that this "crude" theory of sovereignty and conflict cannot grasp the "sophisticated" politics of dialogue and compromise in the EU. However, this rejection is based more on a false stereotypical view of Realism than on the insights generated by real Realism" (p. 10).

Due to increased integration among the member states, the EU has gained several state-like features, including enhanced cooperation within the area of security policies. This makes it relevant to examine the EU as an entity. Therefore, despite my focus on the EU and not on individual nation-states, I argue that applying realism in this thesis is relevant, possible, and justifiable. This is especially so because this is a case study focussing solely on the EU as a coherent actor and not a comparative analysis of, e.g., the EU and individual nation-states. Moreover, in recent international relations literature, non-state actors and regional entities, such as the EU, are recognised as important and pertinent actors playing essential roles in the international system (Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2016, p. 3).

Despite the attenuated anarchic structure, liberal institutions, and vast integration within the EU, the global system is mainly characterised by realists features such as anarchy. The European Union is often labelled 'sui generis', as it is more than an institution facilitating international cooperation but less than a traditional nation-state. "Instead, it is a unique polity that combines elements of intergovernmentalism [...] and supranationalism [...]. The EU is a transnational entity with state-like attributes" (Dinan, 2016, p. 30). Because of the EU's unique nature, it can be arduous to examine it using theories developed to describe and predict the actions of nation-states. However, as significantly furthered with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), established with the Maastricht Treaty that entered into force in 1993, the European Union has become an entity through

which the member states can act as a coherent global actor and engage in high politics (Rynning, 2005). This supports the employment of realism in this thesis. Furthermore, despite the EU's focus on democratic values and other liberal ideals, many parts of Russia's foreign policy can be described using the principles of realism, making the theory relevant in this thesis. Examples of Russia's realist approach to foreign policy includes, e.g., the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, where it invaded a territory of another nation-state, Ukraine.

Realism's belief of the principles defining international politics being 'unaffected by the circumstances of time and place' (Morgenthau, 1985, pp. 10-11) has been criticised for being "an abstraction, more useful to understand realism as a theory than world politics." (Orsi, Avgustin, & Nurnus, 2018, p. 1). Realism is criticised for having a pessimistic and cynical worldview. Realists, however, have responded that it simply presents a realistic description of human and international affairs (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 37). As previously stated, things are rarely one dimensional within the social sciences. Thus, the arguments of both proponents and critics can carry elements of truth.

5.2 Social constructivism

A social constructivist approach to international relations asserts that the structures defining the international system are socially constructed and that these structures affect the identity of the actors that operate in the system (Wendt, 1995, 72). In other words, actors shape and are shaped by the environment in which they operate. This claim contradicts rationalism, which realist theory is strongly built on. Constructivism is occasionally classified as a theory located between liberalism and realism (Adler, 1997).

Social constructivism lies within the group of critical theory together with postmodernists, feminists, neo-Marxists, and others. However, out of those, I focus solely on social constructivism for the sake of delimitation and because I consider it to be the most relevant to answer the research question.

Social constructivism focusses on various social ontologies such as "intersubjective meanings, norms, rules, institutions, routinized practices, discourse, constitutive and/or deliberative processes, symbolic politics, imagined and/or epistemic communities, communicative action, collective identity formation, and cultures of national security" (Christensen, Jorgensen, & Wiener, 1999, p. 535). Therefore, according to social constructivism, the EU's values, etc., are not pre-given and intrinsic but socially constructed by its member states, citizens, institutions, and norms.

Friis and Juncos (2019) argue that social constructivism, in contrast to other theories of

international relations, is especially suitable for explaining the EU's foreign and security strategies because it considers its "foreign, security, and defence norms, practices and identity at the European level as a result of increased cooperation and integration" (p. 288). This also supports the previously presented point of disinformation being a shared issue among the member states due to the increased integration, especially regarding the EU's democratic processes and institutions. This explains the member states' motivation to seek collective solutions to alleviate the issue through EU initiatives, as shown in the empirical material.

As argued by Friis and Juncos (2019), a constructivist approach can elucidate a "potentially shared, common strategic culture across the member states through, for example, the production of common strategic documents" (p. 288). This is especially relevant regarding this thesis' focus and empirical material. Moreover, social constructivism provides the researcher with an improved ability to examine non-kinetic threats, such as disinformation, because disinformation constitutes a threat to socially constructed targets, such as norms and ideas, and cannot directly cause physical harm. As stated by Christensen et al. (1999) "beyond mere utterances, language constitutes meaning within specific contexts. If successfully performed, speech acts cause a particular meaning that, in turn, leads to rule-following" (p. 535).

Contrary to the concept of rational choice and the logic of consequentialism that characterise realism, social constructivists believe that actors act according to a logic of appropriateness (Filipec, 2019, p. 64). Meaning that what actors consider appropriate, i.e. the norms is a result of their culture, experiences, and other socially constructed factors. Conflicting values can cause adverse relations between actors (Filipec, 2019, p. 64). Katzenstein (1996) defines norms as "a standard set of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity" (p. 5).

According to social constructivism, ideas and discourses influence people's opinions and perceptions of reality (Filipec, 2019, p. 64). This makes disinformation a powerful instrument to employ as it can affect public opinion, mislead people, and cause their perceptions of reality to be based on falsehoods that are beneficial for the transmitter.

Wendt (1992) counters main arguments posed by neorealism, namely that actors are driven by self-interests and that power politics are crucial and constitutive components of the anarchic international system. Wendt argues that those features are socially constructed by the actors operating on the international arena and that "anarchy is what states make of it" (p. 395). Wendt (1995) argues that realists, in this case, Mearsheimer, do not acknowledge that constructivists are structuralists too. In fact, Wendt argues that neorealism does not allocate sufficient value to the role structures have on

international politics as the neorealist focus on individualism obscures the role structures, i.e., the environment in which actors operate, constitute on the actors (e.g., states) and their identity (Wendt, 1995, p. 72).

A central principle of social constructivism is that the way actors respond to objects, and other actors is a result “of the meaning those objects have for them” (Wendt, 1992, pp. 396-397). There are, e.g., vast differences between the USA’s and Russia’s perceptions of the EU. From a constructivist perspective, reasons for this are found in the assigned meanings those actors have for the EU and the principles it is built on, such as liberal ideology.

Wendt (1992) argues that “Identities are the basis of interests” (p. 398). In that regard, it is essential to note the role of context-dependent roles, which means that actors undertake different roles, i.e., identities in different contexts. When actors face a new object for the first time, they must construct its meaning and thereby the actors’ interests “by analogy or invent them de novo” (Wendt, 1992, p. 398). To put this into the context of disinformation, while disinformation is not a new phenomenon, the level of threat it constitutes is on an unprecedented high level in contemporary times. This forces the EU to reconstruct its perception of disinformation and how it responds to it.

Risse (2009) argues that constructivism is based on a social ontology asserting that actors exist co-dependently with their “social environment and its collectively shared systems of meaning (‘culture’ in a broad sense)” (pp. 145-146), which is in “contrast to the methodological individualism of rational choice” (Pollack, 2015, p. 21), which emphasises that the individual human action is the elementary unit of social life (Pollack, 2015, p. 21). Another difference lies in preference-making. Constructivists believe that preferences are endogenous to institutions and other actors “and are shaped and reshaped by their social environment” (Pollack, 2015, p. 21).

5.2.1 Justification for applying social constructivism

Social constructivism is employed because it, as explained above, focuses on the role of values, norms, etc. This is especially relevant in regard to disinformation because it particularly is concepts like those that are being threatened by disinformation campaigns. As explained by Filipec (2019), disinformation seeks “... to construct a reality. This is happening by de-constructing and re-constructing key ideas, principles and at the end, also the identity of the target country and reinforcing its own identity by home targeted propaganda” (p. 67). The EU’s many liberal democratic features make it vulnerable to disinformation. Therefore, I argue that it is also appropriate to examine how social constructivism and its features can explain the EU’s initiatives to handle disinformation. Some

of the coding categories are based on social constructivism. Moreover, I present extracts from the empirical material in the analysis and examine it using the theories and their concepts

5.3 Comparing realism and social constructivism

Despite the differences between social constructivism and realism, the theories share some beliefs. Wendt explains this in his article 'Constructing International Politics'. Specifically, Wendt states that he "share all five of Mearsheimer's 'realist' assumptions" (Wendt, 1995, p. 72) (See Mearsheimer's five assumptions presented in the section on realism). Whereas realists describe the assumptions as pre-given conditions that constitute the world, social constructivists argue that the structures are socially constructed by the actors operating within said structures. Social constructivists generally define social structures by "shared understandings, expectations, or knowledge" (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). Constructivists argue that the shared understandings explain this among the states. Social constructivists argue that these elements can describe the features of realism. E.g., the realist assumption of distrust among states, declaring that states can never be certain of the intentions of other states.

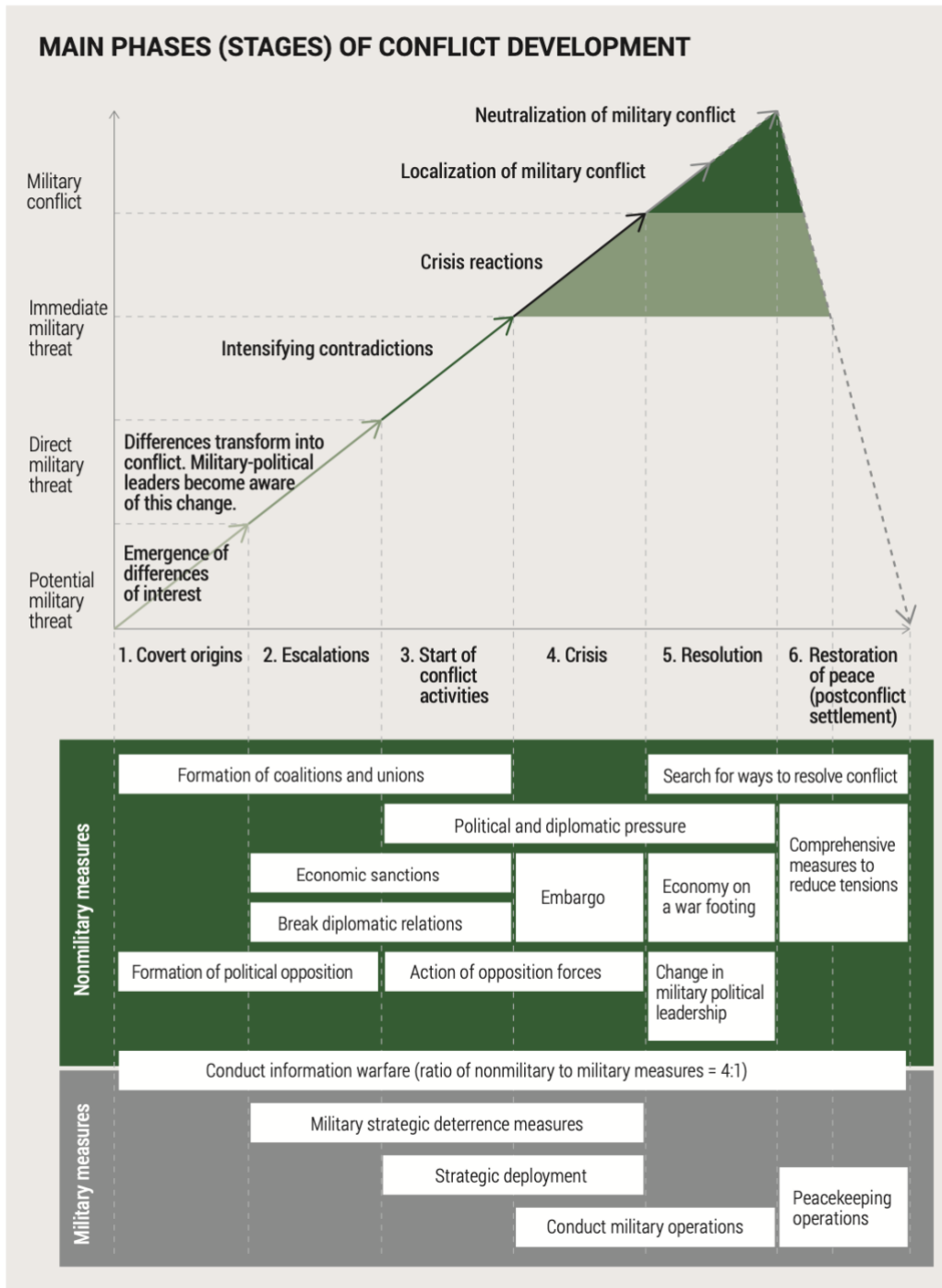
According to constructivism, the opposite understanding is equally likely to exist as states build a community characterized by mutual trust (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). Examples of this are the European Union and NATO. These 'communities' are built on mutual trusts, shared meanings, and expectations of one another and increased interdependency, which is accepted by the member states due to the socially constructed values. Nevertheless, realism can also explain alliances but approaches them from a more cynical angle of hard power politics and the theoretical concept of balance of power (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 40). Overall, both theories comprise relevant, accurate and valuable elements. This again emphasises the nuances and complexity of the social sciences.

5.4 Examples of Russian disinformation targeting

Russia disseminates disinformation on a variety of topics. Recent examples are that the West is currently causing tension near the Ukrainian-Russian border (EUvsDisinfo, 2022). Other classic examples are that "Europe is, at best, morally bankrupt, at worst, on the verge of collapse." (StopFake, 2016). Various disinformation stories have been spread on the topic of COVID19 (European Commission, 2020).

Albeit outside the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that Pro-Kremlin disinformation is also distributed domestically in Russia. Motivations for this can, e.g., be, to improve

support for “Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, the Russian military” (Hansen, 2019) or to criticise and discredit ‘normative power Europe’ (Manners, 2006) and its progressive liberal values as they contradict the political agenda of the Kremlin. However, this thesis focuses on the role of disinformation targeted at the EU.



(Hansen F. S., Russian Hybrid Warfare: a Study of Disinformation, 2017, p. 9)

The above graphic illustrates that information warfare is an integrated part of Russian military strategy. Thus, it must always be perceived as a potential threat and should not be distinguished from other military domains, e.g., land and sea. This point is also furthered by the interviewees (cf. appendix).

6 Analysis

This section will examine the empirical material and present the qualitative coding content analysis results. I have incorporated extracts from the policy documents and interviews to show examples of the coding units that have been identified. Additionally, I will supplement this with some general points and considerations from the empirical material using the chosen theories in order to improve the analysis and the answering of the research question, as presented in the conclusion.

6.1 Policy documents

6.1.1 Communication: Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach

Main category: Realism	Main category: Social constructivism
Survival of the state (3)	Ensuring free public deliberation (31)
Internal security (9)	Protecting democracy and democratic principles (15)
Offensive realism (0)	

In the Communication from the European Commission, a motivation to handle disinformation is to protect and ensure a free and neutral public deliberation sphere in the EU and democratic election processes. For example, this is, e.g., seen in the following extract: “Our open democratic societies depend on public debates that allow well-informed citizens to express their will through free and fair political processes”.

Disinformation is perceived as a threat that can erode trust in the EU's institution. This was categorised as “Survival of the state” in the coding process. Because an absence of citizen trust in the EU's institution ultimately will result in a decay of the EU in general. The concerned extract

is: “Disinformation erodes trust in institutions”.

I found that the EU sees free media (public deliberation category) and a functioning democratic system as interdependent: “Democracy in the European Union rests on the existence of free and independent media”. With modern social media platforms, the information sphere is no longer unidimensional. Instead, citizens can live in (online media) social realities that do not overlap, as a result of the social media platforms algorithms that tend to create echo chambers: “new technologies can be used, notably through social media, to disseminate disinformation on a scale and with speed and precision of targeting that is unprecedented, creating personalised information spheres and becoming powerful echo chambers for disinformation campaigns.” Disinformation can be very effective in such echo chambers, resulting in disinformation constituting a potential threat to the European public deliberation and potentially Union in general if anti-EU disinformation successfully convinces citizens to change their voting behaviour accordingly to the disinformation’s claims. Thus, disinformation can constitute a severe threat to the EU in that regard.

6.1.2 The Code of Practice against disinformation

The Code of Practice differs vastly from other policy documents as it has one specific purpose, whereas the other documents outline several initiatives and motivations. The Code of Practice is solely focused on committing private internet actors to commit to certain procedures. As social media has become the public sphere for most public deliberation, the EU must ensure that disinformation is not (significantly) disturbing this deliberation. It can affect voting behaviour and citizens general perception of their government and the societies in which they live.

It is predominantly focused on online advertising as disinformation disseminators can exploit this. Regarding the theoretical framework, this is especially interesting from a realist perspective, where, as explained, nation-states (including the EU, in this thesis) are considered the most important actors. Here the ‘state’ calls upon non-state actors as their platforms potentially can be exploited for purposes (disinformation) that can have severe consequences for the EU. Such as eroding trust in its institutions. Interviewees 1 and 3 touches upon the role of social media platforms, which the Code of Practice is concerned with. Both (cf. appendix) are dissatisfied with the commitment from these platforms and criticise them for being more concerned with maximizing their financial profits than contributing to protecting and improving public deliberation and democratic principles.

An example from interview A emphasising the role social media platforms have in

regard to the issue of disinformation is: “they [Russia] use whatever channels that we use. And that is a big challenge, that it is not just, you know, that we need to be effective against, you know, single source of Russian disinformation we need to be, you know, we need to build resilient platforms. And that, of course, means the involvement of private sector of the platform owners who aren't necessarily driven by the same values that are sometimes more driven by the shareholder value than they are by values with the capital” (Interview A).

Interview C was also focused on the role of social media platforms in regard to disinformation. Especially how monitoring of disinformation is close to non in non-English languages, which provides beneficial conditions for disseminating disinformation. ”But if we say the French, the German, the Arabic, the Russian, Spanish, those other segments of the internet, practically no moderation at all, no moderation. (...) It is basically a free Klondike. You can do whatever you want.” (interview c). This contributes to an understanding of why the EU is eager to engage social media platforms to counter disinformation on their platforms because currently, the conditions are critical.

6.1.3 The Action Plan against disinformation

Main category: Realism	Main category: Social constructivism
Survival of the state (6)	Ensuring free public deliberation (11)
Internal security (9)	Protecting democracy and democratic principles (20)
Offensive realism (1)	

In the Action Plan from the European Commission, the central area of concern that has motivated the EU to handle disinformation is found in the code ‘public deliberation’. This can mainly be explained using points from social constructivist theory, as socially constructed values that are central to the EU project, such as open and free debates about the EU and practically everything is challenged by disinformation as it obscures the public sphere and, if successful in its aim can disturb the public deliberation occurring in Europe. This can cause citizens to alter their voting behaviour due to disinformation if such contamination of the information sphere is not controlled.

Our open democratic societies depend on the ability of citizens to access a variety of

verifiable information so that they can form a view on different political issues. In this way, citizens can participate in an informed way in public debates and express their will through free and fair political processes". This is e.g., evident in the following extract from the Action Plan: "Freedom of expression is a core value of the European Union enshrined in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights and the constitutions of Member States.

The following extract is another example of the Action Plan focusing on ensuring a public deliberation process that is free from disinformation and conducted by citizens who approaches media critically so that the risk of them being subjected to disinformation campaigns are lowered: "(..) an independent network of fact-checkers is being developed to increase the ability to detect and expose disinformation, and sustained efforts are being made at Union and national level to support media literacy".

An example of the 'Survival of the state' code in the Communication is: "disinformation often targets European institutions and their representatives and aims at undermining the European project itself in general". This refers to the risk posed by disinformation on eroding trust in the European project and the EU institutions.

One of the few units I have coded as 'offensive realism' is found in this part of the empirical material. It refers to the potential use of sanctions to actors who meddle in EU elections, e.g., by disseminating disinformation in the run-up to election days. The extract is: "the use of sanctions where appropriate". Nevertheless, it is difficult to impose such sanctions as the senders of disinformation often are obscured, and if Russian, typically are not linked directly to the Kremlin.

6.2 Interviews

Generally, fewer units were qualified to the coding categories because the interview data is another type and created with a different purpose than the policy documents from the European Commission. Besides elements that link well to the coding categories, the interviews were utilised to learn more about how the interviewees perceive disinformation as a threat and how the EU's initiatives match this threat.

6.2.1 Interview A

Main category: Realism	Main category: Social constructivism
Survival of the state (3)	Ensuring free public deliberation (4)
Internal security (3)	Protecting democracy and democratic principles (3)
Offensive realism (0)	

Questions to interviewee A:

- In what ways do you see disinformation constituting a threat to the EU?
- What actions taken by the EU to handle disinformation do you consider to be the most effective and why?
- Do you still consider Russia successful in spreading disinformation within the EU despite the EU's initiatives to handle disinformation? If yes, why do you think that is, and what can be done from the EU level to handle that?
- Within the last 10 years, has Russia posed a bigger threat to the EU through traditional kinetic military measures or through information warfare, including disinformation?
 - Follow up question (cf. semistructured interview): "something I've been thinking about in my process, and now you just said it with the different languages. They have people who speak Italian, German and so on. But do you think that makes it more complicated to handle from the EU level because it is so many different languages? Or is that a benefit for the EU in some way because it makes it more difficult for Russia to translate it into all these different languages?"

Social cohesion is member states, and within the European Union is a typical element for disseminators of disinformation to target and seek harm. As the current EEAS employee says in the interview, when asked about how disinformation constitutes a threat to the EU: I think it absolutely does constitute a threat and a very serious threat to the European Union. Why do I say that? Because in my mind, this is a union more than any other union and probably in the history of unions that is built not on political necessity. So much as it is built on common values and on common understanding why those values are important to us and why they bind us together. And what we've seen in the recent, you know, years. It is a direct attack on those values because the adversaries of the West or the European Union or those whose interests are not aligned with ours, they've seen the strength of those values that bind us together, and they know that to dismantle this union, they have to go after what unites us”.

This shows how realist and social constructivist elements are linked together. The realist desire to maintain a union to play a significant role in the international arena is dependent on the public support in the union, which is partly caused by a common set of liberal values that the EU is built on.

Generally, the interviewee is focused on the fact that the EU has acknowledged that disinformation is a real threat. All interviewees emphasise that communication and awareness within the union are important elements. On establishing the East StratCom Task Force, he states that it is: “a great way and a great step towards raising awareness within the institutions” (Interviewee A).

In addition to that, the interviewee emphasises the task force’s hard work but admits that it does not stop pro-Kremlin sources from continuing the dissemination of disinformation in Europe: “the task force has catalogued some 13000 different disinformation cases, which is probably the largest publicly accessible database of Kremlin propelled disinformation against, you know, against Ukraine, against the European Union, against a whole wide variety of issues. So, do I think that it is effective to how stop disinformation? Unfortunately, not.” (Interviewee A). However, he states that in the long run, this can be useful to understand Russia’s disinformation techniques: “the larger our dataset is that, the more it allows us to understand and to predict, possibly next steps. ”. Also, despite Russian disinformation being disseminated it is not necessarily being effective, as he states: “there is a lot of disinformation out there, so they're successful at spreading it. I would say to some degree, they're successful in changing some opinions somewhere, but they're not successful in changing all the opinions everywhere.”

In this interview, the coding category ‘survival of the state’ is: “: In all seriousness, I

think it's potentially one of the more existential threats to the European Union because of the very devious nature of disinformation. ". Especially the word "existential" indicates that this is unit can be assigned to that code. He emphasises that the EU is being attacked on the shared values that characterise the European Union: "disinformation or hostile information or manipulation of information is a particularly effective tool. To attack exactly on that front [common values] ". This contributes to an explanation for 'why', as asked in the research question, the EU seeks to handle Russian disinformation targeting the EU. Because if the common values are destroyed, trust and support for the EU will likely decrease rapidly, causing an existential threat.

The interviewee explains how disinformation is a central part of the Russian military strategy, which explains why the EU seeks to handle disinformation.

"So do I see a difference between the Russian stationing Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad and the way that they propel propaganda, you know, to instigate some covert actions in east Ukraine? Not really. I see it as part of the same tactic, which isn't, you know, necessarily geared towards a specific tactical objective. (...) It is largely an attack against our values and fundamentally against who we are, because at least to my mind, the Russian authorities' view, unfortunately, is. That it is a zero-sum game, and it is either-or." This also touches upon the differences between the values and ideologies that characterise the EU and Russia. Russia's has a very realist approach and perception of the international system, whereas the EU has less drastic and more liberal aims.

The interviewee says: "We are yet to come up with a definition that we can all agree on or with any sustainably effective means to counter it. It is a bit of like Sisyphus pushing that rock up the hill. I don't think we'll ever be able to push it up the hill. And that vein, I think it absolutely does constitute a threat and a very serious threat to the European Union." This point can be set in connection to a point advanced by Hansen (2017) "by the time a piece of disinformation has been debunked, the world of media has moved on, producing a vast number of new items in the process. And as sites are being flagged for disinformation content, new ones will emerge" (p. 36).

6.2.2 Interview B

Main category: Realism	Main category: Social constructivism
Survival of the state (0)	Public deliberation (1)
Internal security (2)	Protecting democracy and democratic principles (4)
Offensive realism (1)	

Interview questions:

- In what ways do you see disinformation constitutes a threat to the EU?
- What actions taken by the EU to handle disinformation do you consider to be the most effective and why?
- Do you consider Russia to be successful in spreading disinformation within the EU, despite the initiatives the EU has taken?
- Would you say that Russia would, in the last five to 10 years, has posed a bigger threat to the EU through traditional kinetic military warfare or through all these types of information warfare, including disinformation?

This interviewee's European democratic morale and values are evident, see, e.g., the following extract, which concerns a clear difference between the EU and Russia. Namely, willingness to engage in other countries' affairs: "I find it wrong, you know, this is a country who actually purposefully meddled in other countries' affairs and tries to subside it" (interview B). This interviewee also focusses on the element of raising awareness within the EU as an important part of the EU's work with anti-disinformation strategies: "I think what was important in the beginning was to raise awareness. And I think that we successfully as a team, the East StratCom Task Force were successful in that". He argues that more people are aware that disinformation exists but that Russia has not been stopped from disseminating it. I argue that the EU's actions cause this focus on raising awareness and other 'defensive' solutions, rather than undertaking an offensive approach to prevent the disinformation from spreading. However, I acknowledge the difficulty in doing so due to, e.g. the

obscured sender of disinformation. Extract: “Have people been more aware? Yes, we have general awareness growing in the EU that there is. That's an issue, actually. And I think it is good for that. So. So yes. Have we prevented Russia from doing it? No, I don't think so” “I don't think that we were ever, I would say, naive enough to think that activities like EUvsDisinfo or like action plans or something would actually prevent Russia or other kind of actors there are more actors. I don't think it was. I think the important was to get our own sort of act together to just think ourselves how to better control better and how to protect ourselves”.

6.2.3 Interview C

Main category: Realism	Main category: Social constructivism
Survival of the state (3)	Public deliberation (6)
Internal security (9)	Protecting democracy and democratic principles (0 – not focussed on).
Offensive realism (0)	

Interview questions:

- How does this information constitute a threat to the EU?
- Would you say that within the last five, 10 years, the EU's view on Russia has changed because of Russian disinformation and in connection to that, if not, whether Russia constitutes a bigger threat to the EU through kinetic warfare and traditional military features, or if Russia is a bigger threat through its information, warfare and disinformation campaigns?
- Would you say that within the last five, 10 years the EU's view on Russia has changed because of Russian disinformation and in connection to that, whether Russia constitutes a bigger threat to the EU through kinetic warfare and traditional military features, or if Russia is a bigger threat through its information, warfare and disinformation campaigns?
- What roles do social media platforms play in regard to disinformation?
- Which of the EU's initiatives to handle Russian disinformation is the most effective?

- Would you say that most of the EU's initiatives focus on the EU itself and explain to the European population that this is just disinformation? Rather than doing something offensive, so to speak, against Russia, to stop it, such as sanctions?
- Would you say that regardless of the initiatives we have now from the European side, is Russia still successful in distributing disinformation within the EU and its member states?

Interviewee C argues that the EU's perception of Russia as a threat has changed due to the increased dissemination of Russian disinformation in recent years: "the perception of Russia has changed primarily because Russia herself has changed and their protracted campaign to undermine the government in Kyiv support the armed separatists in Donbas, eastern Ukraine to galvanise the annexation of Crimea that has, together with Russia involvement on the Bashar al-Assad side in Syria, and Russia's much-expanded operations also to support various dubious governments around the world. Venezuela is like that. The regimes in Africa were very kind of robust military means has led to a change of perception from where Russia would be a partner, with whom you could have a critical dialogue difficult to dance with to now by more and more EU member states being perceived as a competitor and a rival intended on eroding the EU system, intending on bringing in as much trouble and discontent from inside from the populations towards the EU system. And if you see the statement by the Russian government, they are, to say the least. Very, very critical of the EU system." (interview c). The part "a competitor and a rival intended on eroding the EU system" is an example of a unit that was coded to the 'survival of the state' category.

This point is also emphasised in interview A. He mentions how Russia incorporates the information sphere into its military strategy: "Russia needs to control the information sphere, and it is a battlespace unless we control it. Others will do it against us. So in the Russian perception, information space is a battlespace equal to that of land sea air. And basically, so the Russian perception is that information warfare is seen in connection with the others. It's not seen as separate too, but it is integrated into" (interview c).

In interview C is explained by the experienced EU diplomat why it has been so important to focus on creating awareness of the issue within the EU: "(...) even two years ago, we still had to argue with certain groups and segments in member state governments and certain, you know, opinion makers and shapers across the EU who would really doubt that disinformation was a problem. Is it really existing? Isn't it just another way of expressing what you have of personal viewpoint (...) [It was a] very naive discussion". Moreover, he states: "it is effective to have a

common understanding and a basic approach of what we do. And I think also it is important to say that we have not fallen into the trap of becoming mind polices because the of course, one of the risks claims have always been, are we now organising the Ministry of Truth. And this becomes a threat to the to the basic freedom of expression. I think it's safe to say this is certainly not." This point touches on the socially constructed values in the EU, such as freedom of expression. It would be counterproductive if the EU, in an attempt to handle disinformation, diminished its ideals, such as freedom of expression.

When asked if he agrees that there are no actual offensive initiatives to handle Russian disinformation, he answers: "Yes. I mean, this is a fair representation. We are certainly not in the in the business of counter. Kind of you throw this weapon at us, and we throw a similar weapon at you" (interview c). Regardless of the coded 'Survival of state' units, interviewee C states: "I'm not pessimistic in the sense that I foresee a soon collapse of the way our democratic functioning discussions and dialogues. I think it's more robust than that."

7 Conclusion

This thesis answered the research question: *Why does the European Union seek to handle the increased dissemination of Russian disinformation?*

By conducting a case study using qualitative content analysis method on official European Union policy documents and the examination of three elite interviews with current and former European Union diplomats, it has been found that the EU's primary motivation to handle the increased dissemination of Russian disinformation is to protect the public deliberation processes within the European Union and its member states, by ensuring that it is a fact-based. Another motivation was to ensure the democratic institutions and principles remain well-functioning in the European Union.

The EU's initiatives to handle disinformation are best characterised using social constructivists terms regarding the chosen theories. There are essentially zero offensive realist initiatives, e.g., sanctions imposed on Russia. Instead, the focus was on enhancing awareness of disinformation within the European Union, its institutions, member states, and citizens. Awareness of the issue is helpful to alleviate the potential consequences of disinformation, but it does not deter Russia from disseminating it. It can be characterised as a reactive response rather than a proactive one.

The European Union has launched several initiatives to handle disinformation, including cooperating with private social media platforms, which is difficult due to the varying

motivations of governmental and private corporations. Additionally, databases debunking and calling out Russian disinformation has been created, namely EUvsDisinfo.com. Overall, the EU is exceptionally committed to educating its citizens to be critical media users.

Disinformation is a central component of Russia's warfare toolbox, and it must be treated as such. As the empirical material has shown, it is an outdated perception to either not perceive disinformation as a military instrument or as a tool only utilised in isolation. This is because information warfare, including disinformation, is an embedded component of all Russian military matters. Generally, Russia's actions in this connection are characterised well by realism. It undertakes a cynical approach to its affairs with the European Union and employs disinformation as a strategic tool to dismantle cohesion among the European Union's member states and citizens.

As this thesis finds that disinformation is a central part of the Russian foreign policy and military strategy, further research and, e.g., investigate how it is employed in connection with other types of hybrid warfare. Alternatively, simply investigate Russia's use of hybrid actions in general, as it seems to be a significant threat to the West in the coming years.

To provide self-criticism, the structure in the analysis chapter could be more rigid and uniform to each empirical material examined. However, the idea was to present the reader with different parts of the empirical material and relevant arguments presented by the interviewees, as would otherwise only be found in the appendix.

Thus, to sum up, the European Union mainly seeks to handle Russian disinformation to protect democracy and democratic principles, such as free and fair elections and a public debate that is not influenced by foreign interference such as disinformation and to protect and maintain the existence of the European Union and its institutions. The European Union seeks to do so mainly through internal solutions such as educating citizens and debunking Russian disinformation. There were essentially no offensive initiatives taken. This is, among other things, explained by the fact that disseminators of disinformation are often obscured and not directly linked to the Kremlin, making it difficult to justify, e.g., imposed economic sanctions or similar.

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