

European democracy shield

This European Parliamentary Research Service paper aims to inform Members on issues related to a forthcoming Commission initiative. It highlights the main choices which may shape the initiative and which Members may wish to explore ahead of formal Commission adoption. Based on documentary and other sources, it reflects the information available at the time of writing.

For further information on this topic, Members and staff of the European Parliament may contact the author.

ISSUES AT STAKE

- Increasing **strategic and systemic attacks on European democracy** and fundamental values reflect growing pressures on democracy as a system across the world. In addition to threats from traditional authoritarian adversaries, **risks in the digital realm** are growing.
- The proposed European democracy shield aims to **counter foreign information manipulation and interference**, preserve **fairness and integrity of elections**, support **independent media and journalists** as well as protect civil society.
- Moreover, EU digital regulation put in place in recent years to protect citizens is facing increasingly **organised challenges from big corporate players**, which are also picking up growing support from political actors outside as well as inside the EU.
- This challenges the **strategically important enforcement of the EU's digital regulation** – initially a key dimension of the initiative – while at the same time reducing the number of democratic allies on which the EU can rely for support.
- The outgoing Polish EU Presidency placed the defence of democracy and the fight against disinformation under a broad security umbrella, emphasising the role of civil society in building resilience. The incoming Danish Presidency further builds on the EU's **whole-of-society approach** with an explicit focus on the role of media and culture for democratic resilience.
- The European Parliament's **special committee on the European Democracy Shield** (EUDS), which was set up in December 2024, is playing an active and visible role in providing input to the Commission, further building on previous work. As the only directly elected institution – representing all political groups – the outcome of the work of Parliament's EUDS carries special **democratic legitimacy** of strategic importance for the future of European democracy and, by extension, for the European project.

Developments and insights – European Commission

In May 2024, in the run-up to the European elections, Ursula von der Leyen introduced the idea of a 'European Democracy Shield' to protect EU democracy and values against foreign interference and manipulation. In her political guidelines presented to the European Parliament on 18 July 2024, von der Leyen further elaborated on the announced European democracy shield, which should include countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) online; boosting societal resilience and preparedness; a European network of fact-checkers; stepping up digital enforcement; addressing deepfakes; and preserving and promoting free speech.



Von der Leyen's [speech](#) to Parliament promised to 'take into account recommendations from the ... special committees on foreign interference' (INGE and ING2), arguing for a 'dedicated [EU] structure for countering foreign information manipulation and interference' (FIMI). This echoes INGE and ING2 calls for a [European centre for information integrity](#) to facilitate cooperation in the fight against FIMI.

Responsibility for the democracy shield lies with Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, [Michael McGrath](#). As reflected in his [mission letter](#), he aims to:

- put in place a new European democracy shield, including to **combat disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference** (FIMI),
- **preserve the fairness and integrity of elections**, and protect political candidates,
- implement and put forward proposals to further **support and protect independent media and journalists**,
- build a **civil society platform** to strengthen regular civil dialogue and protect civil society, activists and human rights defenders.

On 27 May 2025, the Commission launched a €5 million [call for proposals](#) to support the growth of a European network of fact-checkers, in line with the Commission's political guidelines.

McGrath reports to the Commissioner for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy, Vice-President Henna Virkkunen, who is [tasked](#) with the rapid enforcement of the EU's digital regulations, and for addressing 'increasingly complex security threats', including in the digital realm, such as hybrid and cyber threats, attacks on critical infrastructure, foreign information manipulation and interference, as well as the weaponisation of people and all types of policies.

Reflecting the focus on horizontal coordination of certain of the 2024–2029 Commission's priorities, a Commissioners' [project group](#) on democracy was set up on 7 January 2025. It includes seven Commissioners, chaired by McGrath, to coordinate across portfolios. The Commission's 2025 [work programme](#), published on 11 February 2025 highlights the 'evolving nature of threats to our democracy and electoral processes, and pledges to step up its engagement to support, protect and empower civil society.

The Commission will take recommendations from the European Parliament (see below) into account in its related communication, [initially planned for Q3 2025](#), but widely expected to be postponed.

The **European External Action Service (EEAS)** has spearheaded EU efforts to counter disinformation from Russia since 2015, in line with a [mandate](#) from the European Council. The EEAS is working with the Commission and the Member States to expand and fine-tune the EU Toolbox to tackle FIMI. The first East StratCom Task Force was later complemented by new task forces covering the EU's southern neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, China, sub-Saharan Africa, and military and civilian missions under the common security and defence policy. The EEAS also leads the work to build an information-sharing and analysis centre (FIMI ISAC), a platform to facilitate the sharing of experience, knowledge, analysis and information between stakeholders, including civil society.

Strategic communications are central to the work, as well as support for independent media and awareness-raising, notably under the EUvsDisinfo brand. This includes a [database](#) of more than 19 000 documented disinformation cases (at the time of writing). In addition, a rapid alert system (RAS) facilitates cooperation with other EU institutions and Member States on FIMI. While the focus on countering FIMI featured prominently in von der Leyen's political guidelines, the work programme is more subtle. The work to counter FIMI is mentioned implicitly in the [mission letter](#) to High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas, under efforts to counter hybrid threats and attacks.

Why is a European democracy shield important?

EU democracy and [values](#), as outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union ([TEU](#)), are facing significant pressure, not least in the information space. This is echoed in concern among EU citizens about foreign interference in democratic systems; 81 % of respondents to a [2023 Eurobarometer survey](#) saw foreign interference in democracies as a serious problem, and many expressed concern about the impact of disinformation, hybrid attacks and covert foreign influence on elections. This echoes a [global trend](#) of [democratic decline](#) in the face of growing political repression, disinformation, electoral disputes, and rising authoritarianism.

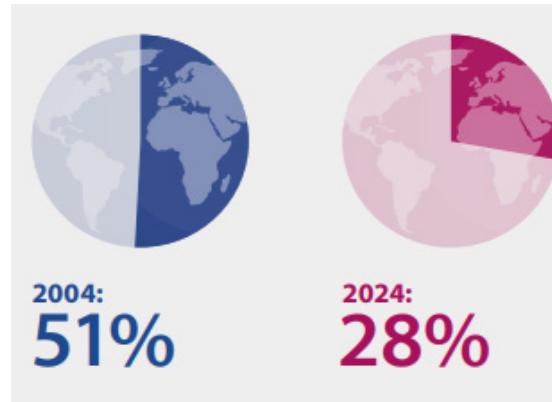
The 2024 report by former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, [Safer Together](#), highlighted the necessity of a rapid and agile response to 'brazen hybrid campaigns', including increasingly sophisticated FIMI that is further accelerated by new technological opportunities. He underlined that 'ensuring rapid, agile, and decisive decision-making at the political level will be an essential catalyst for a genuine whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach to comprehensive preparedness'.

Systemic and strategic challenges to EU democracy and values – and the information space that underpins it – come from various actors, including foreign authoritarian state actors such as Russia and China that engage in foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). At the time of the 2024 European elections alone, 42 Russian FIMI cases were [documented by the EEAS](#). The situation in Romania, the first EU Member State to cancel an election due to information manipulation on social media, further highlights the difficult balance between protecting electoral processes against interference without restricting freedom of expression. The recent US [trajectory](#) away from advancing democracy and human rights (the anchor of [transatlantic ties](#) since World War II), while attacking the EU's rights-driven digital regulatory model (see A. Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*, Oxford University Press, 2019) adds another layer of complexity to the EU's efforts to defend its democracy and its values.

In response to the pressures on its democracy and values in the information space, the EU has developed a growing set of non-legislative and legislative instruments:

- 2023 [defence of democracy package](#), building on the 2020 [European democracy action plan](#);
- EU Hybrid Toolbox;
- FIMI toolbox;
- Rapid Alert System (RAS) as a secure platform for information-sharing on FIMI;
- Digital Services Act ([DSA](#)) regulation of online platforms and search engines, including strengthened code of practice (set to become a [Code of Conduct](#) in July 2025);
- work by the European Digital Media Observatory ([EDMO](#)) with its 14 regional hubs;
- [Artificial Intelligence Act](#) with its risk-based approach to regulating AI, including generative AI-facilitated information manipulation such as deepfakes;
- [European Media Freedom Act](#),
- [Regulation on Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising](#);
- [Anti-SLAPP](#) (strategic lawsuits against public participation) Directive.

Figure 1 – Share of world population living in democracies



Source: Nord, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., and Lindberg, S., Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped? University of Gothenberg, [V-Dem Institute](#).

Enforcement of the EU's digital regulation is key to protecting EU democracy and citizens against FIMI in the digital realm. The EU's information ecosystem is underpinned by very large online platforms and search engines (VLOPSEs), many of which are either US or China-based, with over 45 million EU users. The EU's strategic vulnerability in the digital realm has been further highlighted by increasingly confrontational US administration rhetoric, where tech industry [talking points](#) about EU 'censorship' (repeated by Vice-President Vance in [Munich](#) in February 2025) were translated into US executive diplomacy action in the US Secretary of State's 28 May 2025 [statement](#), in which he announced a new visa restriction policy applying to 'foreign nationals who are responsible for censorship of protected expression in the United States'.

Position of the Council of the EU

The Polish Presidency finalised [conclusions on strengthening EU democratic resilience](#) at the General Affairs Council (GAC) of 27 May 2025, providing the Council's input to the Commission's European democracy shield initiative. **Supported by 25 delegations**, unanimity could not be reached. The document invited the Commission and the High Representative to boost **safeguarding information integrity and countering FIMI campaigns**; underlined the key role of **preparedness and crisis response capacities** in democratic resilience frameworks; and the right of **freedom of expression and access to information**. The conclusions highlight the whole-of-society approach, and underline the crucial role of civil society organisations and for funding to strengthen democratic resilience. The presidency conclusions also underscored the need to **enhance citizens' participation** in decision-making processes.

Member State positions and interested parties' opinions

Given the early stage of the planned European democracy shield, Member States' positions are still evolving. The broad nature of the initiative leaves flexibility to focus on aspects that align with existing priorities. Geography and historical exposure to FIMI play a key role, as well as traditional alliances and historical, recent or ongoing security challenges and domestic debate. Criticisms of EU digital regulation appear most prominent from governments and high-profile think-tanks in Member States currently [under pressure](#) to comply with EU fundamental rights and values, as reflected in the lack of consensus for the 27 May Council conclusions. The multifaceted nature of the challenges related to FIMI is mirrored in differing national structural approaches, with responsibilities placed under different ministries, posing challenges to practical and operational coordination. This, in addition to a perceived increasing need for interinstitutional cooperation, has sparked calls for better cooperation and coordination, building on the RAS.

France set up an agency to combat foreign information manipulation – [VIGINUM](#) – in 2021 to protect democracy and electoral debate. Von der Leyen's political guidelines singled out VIGINUM as a model for a potential EU structure, alongside the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency (see below). VIGINUM works to identify and expose foreign, covert networks attempting to influence public debate. The agency reports to the French Prime Minister, within the General Secretariat for Defence and National Security (SGDSN) at the heart of the executive chain of command and coordination on security threats. VIGINUM collaborates with and advises the Europe, foreign affairs, interior and armed forces ministries. France plays an active role in multilateral and international cooperation, e.g. by co-chairing the [DIS/MIS Information Resource Hub](#) of the OECD, with the US.

Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency is a state agency. Established in [2022](#), its mission is coordination and development of activities related to Sweden's psychological defence, specifically external information influence directed at Sweden with the aim of harming Swedish interests, while safeguarding freedom of expression and an open and democratic society. The agency supports government bodies, municipalities, regions, companies and organisations to boost resilience. The Director General is responsible to the government for operations and ensuring they are conducted effectively and in accordance with applicable law and EU obligations. The government appoints the agency's Advisory Board, to ensure transparency in the operations and advises the Director General.

Poland, whose [presidency](#) coincided with the beginning of the second Trump administration, placed 'resilience of democracy to curb polarisation and radicalisation' among its priorities under the broader security umbrella. Reflecting the EU's cross-cutting whole-of-society approach, this included long-term efforts on civic education and strengthening civil society. Poland established a [Council for Resilience](#) by foreign minister's order in December 2024. Composed of 22 experts (recommended by NGOs and universities) from various backgrounds, the Council has been operational since April 2025. It works as a platform for cooperation between government, universities, local government, civil society organisations, and business. It aims to build societal resilience against international disinformation and develop recommendations on countermeasures.

Denmark, whose EU presidency coincides with its membership of the 2025-2026 [UN Security Council](#), as well as chairing the [Arctic Council](#) from 2025 to 2027, has maintained a broad, multistakeholder focus on healthy information ecosystems as part of the country's [tech diplomacy](#). The July-December 2025 [Danish EU Presidency](#) will continue to implement the EU's Preparedness Union Strategy, in line with the Niinistö report. Emphasising the broader societal role of culture for democratic values and resilience, the Presidency will encourage further work on the media aspects of a European Democracy Shield. In addition to free, pluralistic, and reliable media, the efforts to protect democracies from disinformation and foreign interference also include promoting digital literacy and regulating tech giants to ensure that they take responsibility. Denmark aims to facilitate a discussion on updating EU regulatory frameworks, such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, and to secure Council conclusions on advancing the EU's International Digital Strategy. A [conference](#) on information integrity is scheduled in Copenhagen for November.

The Commission's **public consultation on the European democracy shield**, which concluded on 26 May 2025, produced many contributions. Specific proposals included:

The **European Broadcasting Union (EBU)** [proposed](#) combining top-quality media content with technological innovation to boost media resilience and reduce dependence on outside technology and infrastructure, highlighting the example of [A European Perspective](#).

The **European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)** [called](#) for journalism to be seen as **critical infrastructure**, and for strategies to avoid 'news deserts' with scarce access to (local) news.

The **European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)**, with 66 signatories including the African Digital Democracy Observatory (ADDO) and the African Fact-Checking Alliance (AFCA), called for safe-harbour protections for researchers examining online platforms and AI in the public interest. It also proposed investing in alternative online platform models to reduce disinformation and polarisation, and to **extend protections externally** to include candidate countries.

A joint [position](#) signed by **European and international organisations** including the European Civic Forum, Transparency International EU, Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), Association of Ukrainian Civic Initiatives, and others, called for the next EU long-term budget (post-2027) to boost finance for the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.

The **European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN)** proposed an **Information Integrity Investment Fund (I3F)**, to facilitate a coordinated funding strategy with robust governance mechanisms to support fact-checkers and enhance information integrity.

International IDEA [recommended](#) creating a temporary **European support hub to protect information integrity** during elections, including tracking and monitoring social media campaigning.

Role and position of the European Parliament

Parliament [voted](#) to set up a special Committee on the European Democracy Shield ([EUDS](#)), chaired by Nathalie Loiseau (Renew, France), on 18 December 2024. This allowed Parliament to start its work before the Commission's work programme was published, building on work by previous special committees on foreign interference (see box below). In line with [Rule 213](#) of Parliament's Rules of Procedure, the term of the EUDS is limited to 12 months, unless Parliament extends it.

Role of previous special committees on foreign interference

The 2020 creation of the first Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the EU, including Disinformation (INGE) helped increase EU focus on FIMI. When its mandate expired in 2022, Parliament created a successor, ING2, operating until 2023. In resolutions adopted in [March 2022](#) and [June 2023](#) respectively, Members called for a common EU strategy to tackle foreign interference and disinformation. As well as calling for support for independent media, fact checkers and researchers, Members proposed considering the creation a European centre for **information integrity** as a knowledge hub to facilitate and foster operational exchange between Member States, EU institutions and EU agencies.

In line with its mandate, EUDS will examine Commission and EEAS action to combat FIMI, and propose tangible solutions to strengthen EU resilience to hybrid threats and attacks and improve the EU's legal and institutional framework. The committee's early creation means it is well positioned to play a proactive role in driving the debate, involving [other committees](#) (e.g. Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) and the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE)), and with the Commission and EEAS, in addition to a wide spectrum of experts and stakeholders, including civil society organisations and media watchdogs. EUDS debates reflect the entire political spectrum represented in Parliament, and global fault lines around threats to democracy and fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, come to the fore in meetings.

An EUDS [working document](#), published on 29 April 2025, called to boost independent media and civil society, defence against cyber and hybrid threats, and to add an external dimension to the European democracy shield, including by helping EU neighbours, particularly candidate countries, in their efforts to counter FIMI. It also proposed the creation of a new independent EU-level structure, in line with recommendations by the previous INGE and ING2 committees; a centre of excellence for fighting FIMI that builds on existing work by the Commission, the EEAS and Parliament. The idea was also included in Parliament's 2 April 2025 [resolution](#) on the implementation of the common security and defence policy. The EUDS rapporteur will continue to work on an own-initiative report (INI) with findings, policy proposals and recommendations, set to be presented in committee in September 2025. The Commission is expected to take Parliament's recommendations into account in its related communication [initially planned for Q3 2025](#). The committee is set to vote on the report in November 2025, with the final vote in plenary expected in January 2026.

On 7 May 2025, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on a revamped long-term budget for the Union in a changing world, which underscored the need for continued Union budget support for initiatives related to the European democracy shield. Members stressed the fundamental importance of a free, independent and pluralistic media for Europe's resilience, 'safeguarding not only the free flow of information but also a democratic mindset, critical thinking and informed decision-making'. Parliament also underlined the importance of 'investment in independent and investigative journalism, fact-checking initiatives, digital and media literacy and critical thinking to safeguard against disinformation, foreign information manipulation and electoral interference as part of the European Democracy Shield initiative and therefore to guarantee democratic resilience'.

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