

The danger of fake news for Common Security and Defence Policy.

Essay

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Abstract and Keywords

In the 21st-century information society, amidst the numerous positives brought about by the internet, countries and international organizations also face various challenges. The intentional dissemination of fake news, extending beyond the digital realm to impact real-life consequences, poses a significant threat. For the modern and democratic states of the European Union, fake news, often propagated through social media, stands out as a pronounced menace. But it also has real effects in the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy. Through my research, I aim to examine the relations between fake news and CSDP missions. I employed various methodologies in my research, including the review of international literature as the foundation. I also used comparative analysis, the evaluation of practical experiences, theoretical-logical methods, and keyword analysis.

In the first chapter of my study, I present the definition problem of fake news. In the second chapter, central to my research focus, I discuss the phenomenon of fake news and why it is easy to spread on social media. I delve into the psychological effects closely tied to social media, explaining why fake news is perceived as credible and spreads rapidly, thereby unraveling its real dangers. In the third chapter I write about the relations between fake news and CSDP missions. I discuss the possible strategies for combating fake news from the perspective of the EU CSDP. I aim to provide recommendations for the future.

My research has shown that it is possible to increase the credibility of fake news intentionally. I highlight the essential need to enhance societal awareness regarding this phenomenon and stress the importance of open communication between the CSDP missions and the local authorities and citizens.

Keywords: fake news, social media, missions, European Union, CSDP

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2. Preface

As a young person born in the 21st century, I don't feel it an exaggeration to say that the digital space, and therefore fake news, is a dominant and inescapable part of my life. During elections, referendums and even major sporting events, the internet has been flooded with fake news, even capable of influencing serious political decisions.

Fake news is so much a part of our everyday lives that we often forget its real danger. Missions are one of the most important elements of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). There are currently 21 CSDP missions and operations¹, which are by their very nature very close to the local societies. And these societies use the Internet, where it is almost inevitable not to encounter fake news. The real trouble starts, however, when these fake news stories are about the CSDP missions.

¹Missions and Operations: Working for a stable world and a safer Europe. URL: https://www.ecas.europa.eu/ecas/missions-and-operations_en. [14-11-2023]

3. Introduction

The priority of the common security and defence policy of the European Union is to prepare and respond consistently to security challenges that threaten the EU as a whole. After World War II, there were no armed conflicts in the European Union. But it would not be correct to say that we are living in a Europe free from security threats.²

The European Union faces a number of hybrid threats, such as terrorism, cyber attacks and the spread of fake news. All these threats mean a danger to Europe's security, which requires joint action at EU level.³

Fake news spread is almost the same age as humanity. Regardless of historical periods and technological possibilities, it has always been possible to deliberately disseminate false information. During World War II, the United States sent leaflets to Europe with a politically conscious goal of shaking people's confidence in the leadership of their country.⁴ The aforementioned U.S. move can be regarded as both a relatively early but effective method of propaganda and dissemination of fake news.

The advent of the Internet has opened up new dimensions in both communication and military operations. An unprecedented amount of information can reach almost an infinite number of users without physical boundaries. A new area of operation (operation domain) was created, the cyberspace, which has been recognized by NATO since 2016.⁵ Social media appeared on the Internet in the early 2000s, opening an entirely new door for the spread of fake news. After the emergence of social media, it quickly achieved huge success. Millions of people have created profiles and become active users of a community across the world. Legislative and supervisory authorities were unable to react to the flash of the various platforms, thereby providing grounds for illegal use of social media. A number of other aspects have led to social media becoming one of the latest fields of warfare in the field of information warfare. Modern conflicts have come closer to civil

² EEAS: A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (2022) URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en [17-11-2023]

³ JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL: Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats, a European Union response (2016) URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016JJC0018> [14-11-2023]

⁴ Rhodes et. al. (1987). Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion: World War II. Wellfleet Press

⁵ NATO Warsaw Summit Communique, 2016, 70.-71. paragraph. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm [11-11-2023]

society through social media sites than ever before. This has been effectively used by several state and non-state actors to spread fake news in their own interests, which can influence the outcome of elections, referendums and even military operations.

The real danger of fake news lies in its credibility. They make it possible to deliver messages to enormous masses, taking advantage of the almost impossibility of filtering them out of a huge amount of information. In social media, a user receives a quantity of content that would take time and effort beyond human capabilities to verify. There are many psychological effects associated with the spread of fake news on social media, which illustrate why it is difficult to fight against it. These psychological effects can be reinforced by practical methods invented to spread fake news.

Effective action against fake news is crucial for the European Union's CSDP. I believe that a comprehensive and multidisciplinary study of the phenomenon is essential for strategies to be developed and successfully implemented. Fake news is targeted by everyday people who use the internet for general activities such as communicating and consuming news. I believe that in order to truly understand the phenomenon and to act effectively against it, it is necessary to understand why fake news are effective. This is precisely the goal of my research with a multi-disciplinary approach. With my paper my main goal is to examine the phenomenon of fake news from several points of view and to answer the questions that why is it dangerous for the CSDP missions.

Currently the EU operates 21 CSDP missions and operations. It is essential for all of the missions to maintain good relations with local leadership and society. A sovereign state will only tolerate the presence of "foreigners" in their country if they believe it is in their interest to do so. This is why the importance of the trust of the local population in the mission is unquestionable. Fake news can influence the opinion of a large group of people in a way that can easily sway them towards European soldiers or civilians. I believe that effective action against fake news requires a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and the threats, to which I aim to contribute with my research.

4. Current State of research

To identify the current state of research of the fake news and its impact on the EU, I conducted a keyword analysis in Scopus that is the largest database of reviewed literature, allowing to search between tens of thousands of documents based on different keywords. I looked at what list of results I got for “fake news” an “EU/European Union” search terms. Such as the mechanisms utilized by Google searches, Scopus interprets the correlation between words predicated on multiple keywords solely when they are enclosed in quotation marks; otherwise, it presents any outcomes that encompass either the terms. I concluded my search with this expedited approach. The outcomes encompassed both dynamic texts, conference papers, books, and other variants of publications. Once I had the hit list, I examined the keywords used in the documents, identifying additional aspects related to the topic that have been examined.

Keywords	Search term no.1.	Search term no.2.
	“EU” AND “fake news”	“European Union” AND “fake news”
all documents	79	72
Disinformation/ Misinformation	29/7	25/7
Social media	10	8
Freedom of expression	9	8
Journalism	6	4
Artificial Intelligence	6	4
Social networks	5	3
Brexit	3	6
Propaganda	3	5
Russia	3	4
Regulation	3	4

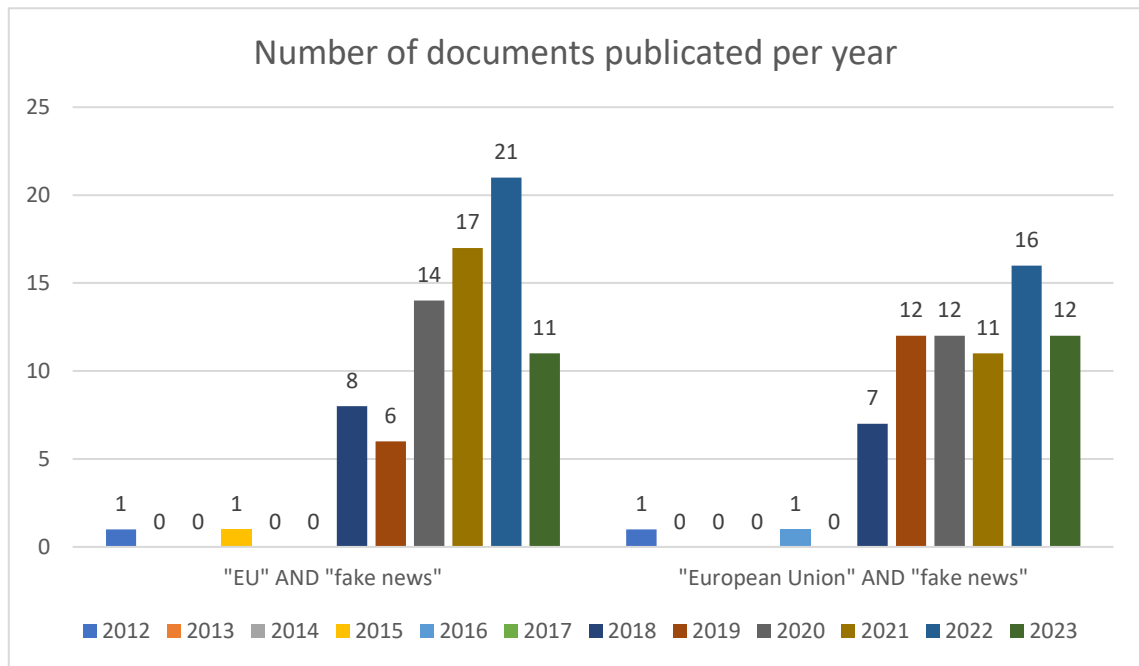
1. Table: Distribution of international scientific publications.⁶

⁶ Table created by the author. It reflects the scientific publications in the Scopus database the 11th of November, 2023.

The two columns in Table 1 show the number of hits for the search terms "EU" AND "fake news" and "European Union" AND "fake news", and the keywords associated with these publications separately. There is likely to be a relatively large overlap between the results of the two searches, but this overlap has no role in identifying research trends.

I have highlighted the most common keywords, which provide a relatively comprehensive picture of the research topics. It can be observed that most of the keywords refer to relatively general research aspects such as artificial intelligence or social media. However, the terms "Brexit" and "Russia" were also found several times among the keywords of the publications, which suggests that case studies focusing on the specific events and countries were also produced.

The impact of fake news on the European Union and the EU's response to it is a topical and much researched subject, best illustrated by the year-by-year distribution of publications in the Scopus database.



1. Figure: Documents published per year.⁷

Figure 1 illustrates that for both terms, the year 2022 is the year in which most papers were published. Since 2023 is not yet completed, the previous year is the most recent complete data, indicating that the topic is current and increasingly researched.

⁷ Figure created by the author. It reflects the scientific publications in the Scopus database the 11th of November, 2023.

5. Research gap

By revising international academical papers, I have come to the observation that no research has been done regarding to fake news, the European Union and the CSDP missions. To prove my observation I have conducted a keyword analysis in the Scopus database.

My research covered the search terms in Table 1 and reflects the scientific publications in the Scopus database the 14th of November, 2023.

Search term	Number of documents
„EU” AND „fake news” AND „mission”	0
„EU” AND „fake news” AND „CSDP”	0
„European Union” AND „fake news” AND „mission”	0
„European Union” AND „fake news” AND „CSDP”	0

2. Table: Scientific publications regarding tot he EU, fake news and CSDP missions.⁸

The table above illustrates that while numerous scientific publications have been produced regarding to the European Union and fake news, the CSDP mission’s role of the same phenomenon has not been researched.

⁸ Table created by the author. It reflects the scientific publications in the Scopus database the 14th of November, 2023.

6. Research Question

My research is based on two main research questions:

1. Why are fake news believable?
2. How does fake news affect the EU's CSDP missions?

With this two questions I aim to maintain a multidisciplinary approach to the subject, which I believe is essential. In my research, I strive for a general and widespread application of scientific findings, which can also help to fight fake news effectively at the national and EU level in the future.

7. Methodology

I used the following research methods to prepare my work:

1. The **processing of literature** was the basis of my research. Although the phenomenon of spreading fake news is common, it has affected different countries in different ways and has provoked very varied reactions. In addition to analyzing international writings, my goal was to draw conclusions as generally as possible regarding the phenomenon, which can be interpreted for any case regarding to CSDP missions and fake news.
2. Through a **comparative analysis**, I identified the different definitions of fake news.
3. By **evaluating the practical experience** of taking steps to stop the spreading of fake news, I recommend ideas to be implemented in the future.
4. I have applied **theoretical-logical methods** to identify the possible consequences associated with fake news and missions.
5. I have applied **keyword analysis** to Scopus and Google databases.

8. Research and Results of Research

8.1 What is fake news?

The term "fake news" is widely discussed, but its definition is still unclear. Fake news refers to deliberately fabricated information presented as true, with the intention to deceive or manipulate public opinion. It can come in various forms such as articles, images, videos, and social media posts. Misinformation is a broader category that includes unintentional errors and unsubstantiated claims, but lacks the intentional deception of fake news. Understanding this spectrum is important for combating misinformation while preserving freedom of expression.

Defining fake news needs collaboration from researchers, policymakers, and technology experts. A complete definition should cover intentional deceit and unintentional misinformation. It should also recognize the changing nature of information dissemination in the digital age, adapting to evolving technologies and communication platforms.

Search term	No of documents
„fake news definition”	18 400
„fake news definitions”	3 300
„definition of fake news”	319 000
„definitions of fake news”	76 300

3. Table: Google searches of fake news definitions⁹

The 3. Table aims to illustrate the number of hits associated with different Google searches. Particularly interesting are the search terms "fake news definitions" and "definitions of fake news", as in these cases the term definitions is in plural form. The number of hits here refers to content in which, using the plural, the author refers to a multiple definition of terrorism, thus acknowledging that there is more than one definition.

⁹ Table created by the author. It reflects the document in Google the 11th of November, 2023.

8.2 The real danger of fake news

8.2.1 How is it easy to spread?

The easiest way to spread fake news is by using social media sites. Each social media site has its own algorithm, whose primary task is to deliver interesting and actual content to the largest possible group of users. The algorithms are trade secrets, but the principle is relatively similar across platforms. A Trend List is a ranking of the posts generated by the algorithm, according to which the content that is 'ranked' higher up the list is delivered to more and more users.

The algorithms also analyses the level of interaction achieved by the content, among many other aspects. This includes reactions, comments and shares, which can be artificially generated to push a publication as high as possible on the Trend List and thus reach as many people as possible. A study published in 2011 showed that the most important factor in determining trends is the number of shares (retweets) by other users.¹⁰

Twitter is actively trying to combat the use of the platform by terrorists by improving its algorithm. In developing the Trend List, Twitter is careful not to distribute publications from blocked accounts and to avoid too many consecutive Tweets from a single author. It tries to ensure a balance of content between content from Twitter and external sources, and aim to select posts that are as verifiable and up-to-date as possible.

The most efficient way to spread propaganda is by commanding the trend for which there are 3 methods:

- trend distribution,
- trend hijacking and
- trend creation.¹¹

8.2.2 Why do people believe it?

The phenomenon, known in English as the “Firehose of Falsehood,” was first investigated in 2016 and was then presented as a method of spreading disinformation of Russian

¹⁰ Asur et. al. (2011). Trends in Social Media: Persistence and Decay. SSRN Electronic Journal.

¹¹ Prier, J.. (2017). Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare. Volume 11. No.4.

propaganda.¹² The phenomenon is based on the natural human reaction that the facts often seen or heard create the illusion of reality.

Instead of focusing on the quality and credibility of content, fake news distributors focus on quantity. In order to deliver the message to large crowds, it is distributed on as many different platforms as possible so that it appears to people as credible as possible. The success of this strategy lies in the fact that people identify different platforms with different points of view¹³, and by following this logic, information that is “true” from many points of view will also appear to be trustable to them. If different formulations of thinking on different sites come to the same conclusion, it further increases the chances of successfully manipulating people.¹⁴ People are more likely to believe a fake news that discloses a lot of details, although they are completely uninteresting¹⁵, or if there is some external sign of reliability on the content, such as a "Dr." prefix on the author's name, it also greatly increases the chances that the message will be judged as true.¹⁶

The message seen many times becomes more and more true to the user, and the reality of the further news and additions associated with it becomes less and less questionable. 500 million posts are uploaded daily on Twitter alone¹⁷, which a user of course can't read through. It would also take a lot of time and documentation to check the accuracy of the content that comes from it, which users simply don't have time to do.

In the phenomenon of the “Firehose of falsehood”, journalists also play a major role. In search of valuable news, they often write about content currently uploaded on various platforms, which thus get out of social media and gain serious legitimacy by news providers deemed to be trusted by people.

¹² Paul, Christopher & Matthews, Miriam. (2016). The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It. RAND Corporation.

¹³ Harkins, Stephen G. & Petty, Richard E. (1987). Information Utility and the Multiple Source Effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Volume 52. No. 2.

¹⁴ Harkins, Stephen G. & Petty, Richard E. (1981). The Multiple Source Effect in Persuasion: The Effects of Distraction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Volume 7. No. 4.

¹⁵ Bell, Brad E. & Loftus, Elizabeth F. (1989) Trivial Persuasion in the Courtroom: The Power of (a Few) Minor Details. Volume 56. No. 5.

¹⁶ Beauvais, Catherine. (2022) Fake News: Why Do We Believe It?. *Joint Bone Spine*, Volume 89. No. 4.

¹⁷ Sayce, David (2022). The Number of Tweets per Day in 2022 URL: <https://www.dsayce.com/social-media/tweets-day/> [17-11-2023]

8.3. The fake news and missions: a dangerous combination

Currently, there are 21 ongoing CSDP missions, with different tasks but mainly aimed at:

- peacekeeping,
- conflict prevention,
- strengthening of international security and
- providing stability and building resilience in fragile environments.

Military and civilian missions are long-term stays by European contingents in third countries. Although it would be naïve to think that the EU has no strategic interest in being present in the mission locations, it is of course also their task to support the local population and to promote the objectives listed above.

In order for a state that has historically experienced the challenges of foreign influence, especially in the case of African missions, to accept the EU's mission presence, it is essential to build a relationship of trust between the population and the staff. This trust is, of course, based on mutual interests, which requires informing the population about the mission's goals. The success of a mission is a multi-factorial process in which the attitude of the local population towards the mission plays a major role, alongside the implementation of peacekeeping or policing tasks, the current situation in the country, the functioning of democratic institutions and many other aspects.

Fake news has the potential to influence a large group of people and drastically change their opinion. The greatest threat to the CSDP can be posed through its missions, which I identify in the following ways:

1. Manipulate Public Perception and Support

As I mentioned above, the local population's support and consideration of the mission as useful is essential for its success. Fake news can shape public perception about the goals, achievements, or activities of CSDP missions. This can lead to a lack of public support, which is crucial for sustaining the political will needed for successful missions.

2. Manipulating Local Politicians

The implementation of the CSDP missions requires the support of the leaders of the country. The fake news is able to change their attitude seriously, which could be the end of further support for the mission. It is also important to note that if fake news spreads

unfavourable information about the relationship between the leadership and the mission, such as references to corruption, it could also seriously jeopardise the development of the relation between the EU and the state.

3. Operational Challenges

Even during the course of the execution of mission operations at a less than strategic level, the spread of fake news can pose difficulties, which can also lead to the emergence of various points of tension, posing a serious security threat, especially in places that are already tense by default.

4. Security threats

The spread of misinformation also threatens the security of mission staff. Since in many cases the purpose of the mission requires the base to be close to civil society, it is not inconceivable that a news item that is outrageous to the local population could lead to the base being the target of a stampede or, in worse cases, armed attacks. Even in the absence of coordination, the safety of the staff is at risk if they are attacked on the streets by local residents.

5. OSINT

The success of missions and operations requires information, and one of the easiest and cheapest ways to get it is through Open Source Intelligence. OSINT includes all public information that can be accessed by anyone, for example on social media sites. Fake news make OSINT difficult, as not only is it necessary to filter out relevant information, but also to verify the veracity of this information, which makes the process longer and more complicated.

Regardless of their military or civilian form, CSDP missions have information that is not publicly available to ordinary citizens. These gaps provide opportunities for the spread of fake news, which is also difficult to refute, sometimes impossible due to classified information.

8.4 Scientific Findings

My research has successfully answered both my research questions.

A1: The plausibility of fake news can be deliberately and consciously increased by sharing it on many different platforms, by providing details or even by scientific

formulations. The more someone sees a content and on the more reliable sites it happens, the more it create the illusion of reality.

A2: Fake news can undermine the success of CSDP missions by weakening the confidence of the local population and leadership in the mission, jeopardising the security of personnel and making it difficult to gather information essential to operations.

9. Discussion of Results and personal Conclusions

Fake news is a real threat to CSDP missions, which indirectly threatens the entire EU CSDP. This calls for the development of response strategies that not only react to the spread of a fake news, but also prevent the situation from developing in the first place.

It is important to realise that the targets of fake news are citizens, who are normally not in a decision-making position, but it is easy to reach the highest levels through a large enough number of people. I believe that it is therefore worth starting to tackle the problem at the level of everyday Internet users. By improving communication of the CSDP missions, the gaps that provide space for fake news can be reduced. If the mission openly and frequently informs the local leadership and the local population about its activities, objectives and successes, it may be able to build a relationship of trust. Several studies have proven that people are more likely to believe news that communicates information that is in line with their thoughts. Following this logic, if the public is aware of the mission's successes and sees their positive effects, they are less likely to believe and spread news that tries to turn public opinion against the mission. Raising awareness of the phenomenon of fake news also falls into the category of informing citizens. Raising public awareness cannot prevent fake news from appearing, but it can prevent it from spreading.

The category of fake news is very broad, and there are many different forms, which have different consequences in different situations. In my research, my aim was to characterise the phenomenon comprehensively and to draw conclusions that could be interpreted not only for specific cases, but also for the relationship between fake news and CSDP missions in general. The scope of this thesis did not allow for a specific case study, but it may be useful for establishing a set of analytical criteria that will help mission leaders to identify the threats associated with fake news in their specific cases and to develop possible actions to counter them.

Although the EU is actively fighting disinformation¹⁸, it would be worth paying special attention to the impact of this phenomenon on missions.

¹⁸ EU vs Disinfo. URL: <https://euvdisinfo.eu/>

10. Annexes

10.1 List of Abbreviations

CSDP – Common Security and Defence Policy

EU – European Union

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JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL: Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats, a European Union response (2016) URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0018>. [14-11-2023]

Missions and Operations: Working for a stable world and a safer Europe. URL:https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en. [14-11-2023]

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Sayce, David (2022). The Number of Tweets per Day in 2022 URL: <https://www.dsayce.com/social-media/tweets-day/>. [17-11-2023]

11. Affidavit

I declare that I have written the present essay independently and on my own. I have clearly marked any language or ideas borrowed from other sources as not my own and documented their sources. The essay does not contain any work that I have handed in or have had graded as a previous scientific paper earlier on.

I am aware that any failure to do so constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism is the presentation of another person's thoughts or words as if they were my own – even if I summarise, paraphrase, condense, cut, rearrange, or otherwise alter them.

I am aware of the consequences and sanctions plagiarism entails. Among others, consequences may include nullification of the essay, exclusion from participation in the CSDP Olympiad. These consequences also apply retrospectively, i.e. if plagiarism is discovered after the essay has been accepted and graded. I am fully aware of the scope of these consequences.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kiss Gréta". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal dotted line.

Gréta Kiss

Budapest, Hungary in November 2023