Jagiellonian University in Kraków

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Institute of European Studies

Securitizing Russian Disinformation? An Argumentative Discourse Analysis of MEPs Speeches in European Parliament Debates (2014–2024)

CEERES Master's Thesis

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[1209411]

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[August, 2025]

[Krakow, Poland]

Field of Study: European Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Magister (mgr) of European Studies (specialty: Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies), Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland

International Master's (IntM) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Glasgow, UK

Master of Arts in Social Sciences (MA) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Tartu, Estonia

Word count of the thesis: **21,757**

Authorship Declaration: I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the European Parliament (EP) has discursively framed Russian disinformation between 2014 and 2024 and whether such framings amount to a process of collective securitization. While the European Union (EU) has already enacted extraordinary measures—such as the 2022 ban on Russia Today and Sputnik—that reflect the securitization of disinformation at the policy level, less attention has been paid to the argumentative dynamics that shaped these outcomes. To address this gap, the study analyses seven key plenary debates in which Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) addressed Russian Disinformation, propaganda, foreign interference, and the role of information manipulation in hybrid warfare against EU (or Europe).

Drawing on securitization theory and operationalizing Argumentative Discourse Analysis through Toulmin's model of argumentation, the research systematically identifies claims, warrants, backings, and rebuttals that structured the debates. The findings reveal that Russian disinformation was predominantly framed as a threat to democratic integrity, societal cohesion, and European security, with war metaphors and appeals to EU values serving as recurrent justificatory warrants. At the same time, divergences emerged: some MEPs stressed the primacy of media freedom and cautioned against securitization's potential overreach, while others supported exceptional measures as necessary to protect democracy.

The analysis demonstrates that the EP has functioned as a discursive arena in which competing arguments nonetheless coalesced into a broad security logic, amounting to a collective securitization of Russian disinformation. By foregrounding the argumentative mechanisms underpinning this process, the thesis contributes to both securitization theory and the literature on hybrid threats, while offering insight into the EU's evolving struggle to reconcile security imperatives with democratic freedoms in the information domain.

Keywords: *Russian Disinformation, Securitization, Argumentative Discourse Analysis, European Parliament Debates, MEP Speeches*

Keywords: *rosyjska dezinformacja, sekurytyzacja, analiza dyskursu argumentacyjnego, debaty w Parlamencie Europejskim, wystąpienia europosłów*

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context of the Study

Disinformation is hardly a new phenomenon – deception has long been a tool of statecraft During the Cold War, the Soviet KGB ran *aktivnye meropriyatiya* (“active measures”) to inject false narratives into Western media, often by amplifying existing social fissures rather than fabricating entirely new ones. Classic cases like the forged 1980s narrative that HIV/AIDS was a CIA bioweapon illustrate how Moscow’s propaganda strategy sought to magnify real grievances to erode trust in Western institutions (Walton, 2022). Under Stalin, disinformation became fully operationalized as a formal discipline, and today’s Russian influence operations are explicitly inspired by this Soviet doctrine (Council of the European Union, 2020). In short, the genealogy of what we now term “information warfare” reaches back through decades of ideological conflict and state propaganda, from WWII spy-craft to KGB “fake news” before the term fake news[1] existed.

What has changed in the post-2014 era is the scale, speed, and strategic context of disinformation. The digital revolution provides a veritable “firehose of falsehood[2]” – a daily deluge of claims in which citizens struggle to distinguish fact from state-sponsored fiction (Walton, 2022b). Social media and cyber interconnectivity have supercharged the spread of false content, allowing hostile actors to interfere directly inside democratic discourse. The notion of “information disorder” emerged as a framework to grasp this complex reality: Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) famously classified mis-information, dis-information, and mal-information to differentiate erroneous or harmful content by intent (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Crucially, in their typology, disinformation denotes deliberate falsehoods pushed for malign impact or profit – the category under which modern Russian influence operations squarely fall. This vocabulary

[1] Though the concept of fake news, in general, is very old; however the the term “fake news” was loosely coined in 2014 by Craig Silverman, a Canadian journalist.

[2] According to Wikipedia, The firehose of falsehood, also known as firehosing, is a propaganda technique in which a large number of messages are broadcast rapidly, repetitively, and continuously over multiple channels (like news and social media) without regard for truth or consistency. An outgrowth of Soviet propaganda techniques,the firehose of falsehood is a contemporary model for Russian propaganda under Russian President Vladimir Putin.

helped shift debates beyond the simplistic cry of fake news toward a more nuanced understanding of orchestrated information influence operations (Colomina et al., 2021).

It was the Kremlin's 2014 annexation of Crimea that jolted European policymakers into recognizing disinformation as a core security concern. What had once been viewed as fringe propaganda or a nuisance for fact-checkers came to be seen as a component of hybrid warfare, integrated with military and economic offensives. EU institutions soon observed that Russia's online influence campaigns were no longer aimed merely at swaying opinion, but at sabotaging democratic processes outright. In EU security parlance, disinformation had graduated from a soft-power instrument to a hostile threat vector. Policy analysts now routinely bracket Kremlin propaganda under the rubric of hybrid war, whereby control of the narrative is wielded alongside tanks, hackers, and sanctions on the geopolitical battlefield. For example, Petrovic (2024) describes Russian and Chinese influence campaigns as integral to a broader hybrid war strategy, aimed at winning "the war…in people's heads and minds" even when bullets aren't flying (Petrović, 2024).

Empirical events since 2014 tragically reinforced this reframing. Russia's interference in the 2016 US elections and the alleged Brexit referendum exposed the potency of social-media manipulation (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d; Ruy, 2020). Across Europe, every major electoral cycle has been shadowed by waves of fabricated stories and orchestrated online trolling. Watchdog investigations confirm a rising tempo that coordinated networks of inauthentic accounts have flooded platforms like Twitter (now X) ahead of ballots in France, Germany, Italy and beyond. A 2024 analysis by Dutch researchers found that tens of thousands of new accounts – many created after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – went into overdrive in the weeks before the European Parliament elections, pumping Kremlin-friendly disinformation to millions of users The impact of these networks was found to be "increasing at an alarming rate," with clear evidence that a large, coordinated effort sought to influence the EU vote (O'Carroll, 2024). Such findings underscore why EU leaders have come to describe foreign disinformation as an existential threat to Europe's democratic order rather than just a public relations problem.

European institutions have responded in force. Since 2015, the EU's toolkit against disinformation has rapidly expanded – from the East StratCom Task Force and the EUvsDisinfo database, to the voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation (2018), and culminating in hard

law via the Digital Services Act (2022) to oblige platform action. Notably, in the wake of Russia's 2022 assault on Ukraine, the Union took the unprecedented step of banning two state-backed media outlets, RT and Sputnik, across the EU's airwaves and digital space (Leiden University, 2025). Such a ban – essentially treating information sources as weapons to be disarmed – was unthinkable a few years prior, given the EU's staunch commitment to media freedom. Its adoption speaks to how securitized the disinformation issue became virtually overnight. As one analyst observed, "in times of crisis, exceptional measures can be introduced" against propaganda outlets, breaking normal norms of free expression (Leiden University, 2025b). By 2024, the European Parliament was formally declaring that Russia's meddling constituted hybrid warfare "embedded within a broader strategy to undermine the proper functioning of European democratic processes" (European Parliament, 2024). In sum, foreign information manipulation has been internalized at the highest levels of the EU as a security emergency – one that justifies extraordinary counter-measures normally reserved for armed aggression.

Amid the surge of initiatives addressing disinformation, scholars have meticulously traced Europe's policy responses, ranging from the establishment of task forces and action plans to sanctions targeting propagandists. The record is clear: the Digital Services Act imposes binding obligations, and in exceptional cases the EU has even recognized disinformation as grounds to invoke the Mutual Assistance Clause (Article 42.7 TEU). Major interventions have likewise been catalogued, such as the 2022 ban on RT and Sputnik and the 2023 proposal of the Defence of Democracy package. What is less understood, however, is the discursive work that enabled these measures to gain legitimacy within the democratic sphere. The European Parliament's plenary debates—speeches in which Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) defined disinformation as a threat and deliberated on the necessary countermeasures—have received little systematic analysis. Much of the security studies literature privileges official strategies and institutional outcomes, neglecting the speech acts through which elected representatives transform an issue into a security problem. Overlooking this arena risks missing the very forum where claims are advanced, disputed, and stitched together into a compelling rationale for action. The Parliament is in fact a venue where policymakers must openly defend measures—such as censoring media or monitoring online communication—that could otherwise be seen as illiberal. This thesis argues that without grasping the discursive layer of parliamentary debate, it is

impossible to explain how disinformation came to be reimagined not merely as a nuisance but as a full-fledged security threat requiring extraordinary measures.

1.2. **Research Puzzle**

The study departs from the fact that the European Union has already adopted extraordinary, security-framed measures against Kremlin-linked information operations—most visibly the Union-wide suspension of Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, enacted through Council Regulation (EU) 2022/350 and Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/351. Earlier, Parliament had endorsed a dedicated strategic-communication capacity (the East StratCom Task Force) and called for counter-propaganda instruments in its 23 November 2016 resolution on "EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda by third parties" (European Parliament, 2018). Under classic securitization theory, such exceptional steps imply that Russian disinformation might have been successfully framed as a security threat at the EU level.

What remains under-explored is *how* that securitizing consensus was discursively produced inside the European Parliament: Which argumentative moves, warrants, and audience interactions allowed MEPs to elevate disinformation from a regulatory problem to an existential menace, and where did that logic meet resistance or qualification? Addressing this gap requires an argumentative discourse analysis (ADA) of plenary debates that foreground claims, data, warrants and rebuttals, tracing the micro-mechanisms through which security meaning is co-constructed.

Because parliamentary debate is inherently plural, a further empirical uncertainty arises: to what extent did MEPs converge on a shared threat narrative, and where did they diverge on *that security framing despite exposure to the same strategic environment?* Framed in the terminology of puzzle typologies, this constitutes a convergence/divergence puzzle—a subtype of empirical puzzle in which researchers ask why actors facing similar stimuli arrive at either similar or contrasting positions (Day & Koivu 2019, p. 380).

Resolving this puzzle is not about re-proving securitization, but about illuminating the process by mapping the argumentative pathways through which collective securitization is either reinforced

or contested inside a pluralist legislature. This focus allows securitization theory to serve not as a mere explanatory framework but as a *diagnostic lens* that supplies ADA with criteria (threat construction, referent object, calls for exceptional measures) against which parliamentary speech acts can be systematically coded. Hence the following Research Question can be derived from the research puzzle:

1.3. Research Question

How is Russian disinformation discursively framed in European Parliament debates, and what patterns of convergence and divergence emerge among MEPs' positions on that framing?

1.4. Analytical and Methodological Positioning

The study applies securitisation theory, with particular attention to the concept of collective securitisation. This framework highlights how multiple actors within a political community co-produce a shared security framing, creating a collective discourse that enables exceptional measures (Sperling & Webber, 2019). Parliament provides a crucial arena for tracing this process because it combines legislative authority with public deliberation.

To operationalise this framework, the study employs argumentative discourse analysis (ADA). ADA focuses on the internal structure of arguments—claims, data, warrants, backings, qualifiers, and rebuttals (Toulmin, 1958). By coding plenary speeches according to these elements, it becomes possible to identify the argumentative mechanisms through which securitisation is enacted, reinforced, or resisted.

The empirical basis of the study consists of seven plenary debates between 2014 and 2024, covering key moments such as the annexation of Crimea, the 2016 strategic communication resolution, the 2018 topical debate on propaganda, the post-Ukraine invasion debates, and the historical falsification debate of 2024. Together, these debates allow for a diachronic analysis of securitisation trajectories.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This thesis makes several contributions to both academic scholarship and the policy debate on disinformation. First, it addresses a clear empirical gap: while EU strategies, resolutions, and institutional policies on disinformation have been widely documented, the European Parliament's own debates—where MEPs justify, contest, or resist the framing of disinformation as a security threat—have received scant attention. By focusing on plenary discourse, the study situates the Parliament not as an active site of security construction, where competing narratives must be articulated and legitimized before a plural audience.

Second, the study advances securitization theory methodologically. By operationalizing Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA) through Toulmin's model of claims, warrants, backings, and rebuttals, it responds to the critique (which we will discuss in the next chapter) that securitization research lacks methodological rigor and often relies on selective quotations. This approach demonstrates how to systematically reconstruct the argumentative processes through which securitization is attempted, accepted, or resisted in parliamentary contexts.

Third, the research provides a longitudinal perspective on the EU's treatment of disinformation, tracing shifts across a decade (2014–2024). This long view captures how early warnings about "propaganda wars" evolved into mainstream claims of "hybrid warfare" and, after 2022, into an almost axiomatic understanding of disinformation as a weapon of war. By documenting this trajectory, the study contributes to understanding how European democracies adapt their security discourse in response to crises.

Finally, the study's findings bear normative significance. They show how MEPs negotiated the tension between safeguarding democracy from foreign interference and protecting liberal-democratic values such as freedom of expression. The identification of rebuttals and qualifiers in debates demonstrates that securitization was not automatic, but subject to democratic contestation. This enhances our understanding of whether collective securitization in the EU is grounded in broad-based, reasoned deliberation, or whether it risks slipping into uncritical emergency framing.

1.6. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this research is subject to several limitations.

First, data scope. The study is limited to plenary debates in the European Parliament. While these speeches provide valuable insight into the argumentative dimension of securitization, they do not capture behind-the-scenes negotiations, committee work, or informal interactions that also shape EU responses. Nor does the study analyze how publics or media audiences received these parliamentary framings; it focuses on the discursive construction within Parliament itself.

Second, case specificity. By focusing on Russian disinformation in the EU, the findings are context-specific and may not generalize to other forms of disinformation (e.g., domestic populist narratives) or to other regional settings. The choice of the European Parliament also reflects the institutional pluralism of the EU; securitization dynamics may look different in national parliaments or executive-dominated systems.

Third, methodological constraints. Argumentative Discourse Analysis, while systematic, is still interpretive and requires analytical judgment in reconstructing warrants and rebuttals. Although the use of Toulmin's model and a structured coding scheme increases transparency, subjectivity cannot be entirely eliminated in qualitative research of this nature. Additionally, due to practical limits, only a selection of debates (seven across two periods) was analyzed in detail; other relevant debates may contain nuances not captured here.

Finally, scope of outcomes. The thesis interprets discursive patterns as evidence of (collective) securitization but does not test the causal impact of parliamentary debates on actual policy outcomes. While the findings indicate strong alignment between securitizing discourse and subsequent EU measures (e.g., the RT/Sputnik ban, Digital Services Act), establishing direct causality between speech acts and policy change lies beyond the design of this study.

1.7. Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into six chapters:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction** situates the problem, outlines the puzzle and question, and previews the theoretical and methodological approach.
- **Chapter 2: Literature Review** surveys scholarship on disinformation, Soviet hybrid warfare, securitization, role of Argumentative Discourse Analysis & identify the gaps that motivate the study.
- **Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework** explains the conceptual lens of (collective) securitization and the operationalization of theory.
- **Chapter 5: Research Methodology** details the data sources, sampling & coding strategy, and analytical procedures.
- **Chapter 6: Empirical Analysis of Findings** presents the thematic analysis of debates from 2014 to 2024, tracing discursive mechanisms and patterns of convergence/divergence.
- **Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion** interprets the findings in light of (collective) securitization theory and reflects on implications for EU governance and democratic resilience.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decade, research on information manipulation has expanded substantially but remains conceptually fragmented and historically selective. This chapter pursues three objectives: first, it maps contemporary scholarship on disinformation, highlighting how the field has moved from static "fake-news" labelling toward dynamic hybrid-threat frameworks that integrate technological affordances, cognitive biases, and geopolitical strategy. Second, it reconstructs the historical lineage of these practices, tracing continuities from early Soviet active measures to today's digitally mediated influence operations. Third, it assesses how such insights feed into security-oriented debates, foreground securitization theory and argumentative discourse analysis as lenses for understanding why some threat narratives gain institutional traction while others do not. By interweaving these strands, the review clarifies the intellectual foundations on which the present study—an analysis of European Parliament debates on Russian disinformation—builds and identifies the conceptual and empirical gaps it seeks to address.

Since previous decade, scholars have converged on a deceptively simple definition of disinformation: false or misleading content deliberately crafted and circulated to secure political, ideological, or financial advantage (European Commission, 2018; OECD, 2022). Yet beneath that consensus lies a dense conceptual landscape. Kruijver et al. (2025) propose a lifecycle model—from creation through amplification to behavioral impact—that foregrounds intent, strategy, and context. Meel and Vishwakarma (2020) extend this logic, arguing that producers now treat disinformation as an engineered product: it is designed for virality, packaged in attention-grabbing formats, and optimized for platform algorithms. Recent media-forensics work shows how multimodal presentations i.e. text reinforced by images, memes, or AI-generated deepfakes dramatically increase perceived credibility and emotional resonance (Weikmann & Lecheler, 2022). In effect, contemporary disinformation should be read less as isolated falsehoods and more as strategic influence operations calibrated to exploit both technological affordances and human cognition.

A second body of scholarship turns attention to the wider communicative ecology within which disinformation circulates. Humprecht (2019) shows that national contexts differ considerably: while partisan political lies dominate the U.S. and U.K. media environments, Germany and Austria tend to be saturated with sensationalist clickbait. Broda and Strömbäck (2024) trace these differences to meso-level conditions such as public trust in media systems, the mobilizing role of

populism, and the strength of public-service broadcasting. At the individual level, cognitive mechanisms play a decisive role. Lazer et al. (2018) demonstrate how shortcuts like confirmation bias or the illusory-truth effect make people susceptible to emotionally loaded claims. Disinformation actors exploit these vulnerabilities, embedding messages in identity-affirming narratives that strengthen in-group solidarity while delegitimizing out-groups. Platform design then accelerates the reach of such narratives: frictionless sharing, algorithmic recommender systems, and encrypted forwarding channels function as “network escorts,” moving fringe messages into mainstream feeds at rapid speed (Arcos, Gertrudix, Arribas, & Cardarilli, 2022). In this way, the interplay between technological infrastructures and psychological predispositions sustains what many now describe as a post-truth information order—an environment in which knowledge claims are constantly contested.

Increasingly, analysts situate these dynamics inside a larger security frame. Ivan, Chiru, and Arcos (2023) position disinformation alongside cyber-attacks, economic coercion, and clandestine military probes as integral components of hybrid threats. Giannopoulos, Smith, and Theocharidou (2021) go further, proposing a thirteen-domain resilience model in which the information sphere interacts with diplomacy, infrastructure, and legal levers. The European External Action Service codifies this under the label *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference* (FIMI), underscoring that hostile actors now treat perception-management as a battlespace, not a side show. In that battlespace, emotional triggers are weaponized and cognitive biases become entry points for strategic penetration. Consequently, contemporary scholarship no longer treats disinformation as a media or ethics problem alone; it is analyzed as a deliberate cognitive-warfare instrument aimed at degrading democratic cohesion and decision-making (Kelley, 2024).

Placing this modern threat in historical perspective reveals telling continuities. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union developed an elaborate repertoire of active measures—forgeries, front organizations, agents of influence—that blurred the line between diplomacy and covert action (Kux, 1985; Shultz & Godson, 1984). Hosaka (2024) documents how KGB Service “A” integrated these tools with overt propaganda, enabling Moscow to inject fabricated narratives (for example, the AIDS-as-U.S.-bioweapon rumor) into Western media ecosystems while concealing its hand. Mitrokhin (2002) reveals that such operations consumed most Soviet

intelligence resources, illustrating the regime's conviction that managing perception was as consequential as collecting secrets. Sherr's (1995) characterization of the USSR as a "counter-intelligence state" underscores the strategic intent: degrade opponents' informational environment so thoroughly that rational policy evaluation becomes impossible.

Post-1991 Russia has not abandoned that playbook; it has digitized it. Pherson, Labriny, and DiOrio (2023) outline a "Five Ds" doctrine—dismiss, distract, distort, deflect, and sow distrust—that links legacy tradecraft to social-media affordances. Thomas (2020) shows how Russian military thinkers fold these tactics into *new-generation warfare*, a doctrine that fuses kinetic, cyber, economic, and information tools to shape conflict environments below the formal threshold of war. Empirically, operations surrounding the annexation of Crimea, interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum, and pandemic-era conspiracies each illustrate a hybrid orchestration: cyber intrusions supply hacked material, troll farms weaponise social platforms, and state broadcasters like RT provide pseudo-legitimate echo chambers (Nemeth, 2002; Hoffman, 2007). These cases demonstrate how Soviet-era methods—agents of influence, forged documents, black propaganda—have been retooled into always-on, algorithmically enhanced campaigns capable of flooding global information channels faster than fact-checkers can respond.

Taken together, these strands of research converge on a sobering conclusion. Disinformation can no longer be treated as occasional irritation; it has become a systemic, layered threat exploiting both the architecture of digital communication and the quirks of human reasoning. Historically, its lineage stretches from Tsarist-era forgeries through Soviet "active measures" to contemporary hybrid warfare. In the present, its operational logic is reshaped by platform design, data-driven analytics, and psychographic targeting. Its political effects, meanwhile, are manifest in declining trust in institutions, heightened polarization, and disruptions of policy-making processes. To trace these threads is not simply descriptive, it is analytically indispensable. Doing so reveals why many democratic states, and the EU collectively, have reframed disinformation as a matter of national and collective security rather than simply a question of media regulation.

This securitized reading of disinformation now sets the stage for the next part of the review, which examines how political actors discursively construct threat-ness in parliamentary contexts and how argumentative strategies shape audience acceptance of extraordinary countermeasures.

2.1. The Copenhagen School: Security as a Speech Act

The theoretical foundation for understanding disinformation as a security issue lies in securitization theory, pioneered by the Copenhagen School. Ole Wæver's seminal essay (1995) and the influential book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998) conceptualized security not as an objective condition but as an intersubjective process constituted through language. Security is performed when a political actor declares an issue to be an existential threat to a valued referent object, thereby legitimating extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). The power of this framework lay in its radical shift: from treating security as given to analyzing how issues become constructed as security.

Central to this approach is the notion of the *speech act*. Drawing on Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), Wæver argued that utterances such as "X is a security threat" are not descriptive but performative. They enact a shift from normal politics to emergency politics. For the Copenhagen School, successful securitization requires three elements: a securitizing actor with authority, a referent object under threat, and an audience that accepts the claim (Buzan et al., 1998). If accepted, the claim legitimates exceptional policies, such as restrictions on rights, censorship, or coercive measures.

However, while compelling, the speech-act model faced immediate critiques. Scholars noted its over-formalized notion of language and its tendency to privilege elite actors, ignoring contestation and resistance (McDonald, 2008). Moreover, it treated the audience as passive, assuming uptake if certain felicity conditions were met. For disinformation, a phenomenon rife with ambiguity, irony, and contestation, this rigidity obscures the processes by which actors argue, rebut, and persuade. Herein lies the first methodological gap: securitization theory foregrounded the importance of discourse but left its empirical operationalization vague.

Second-generation securitization scholars sought to address these limitations. Thierry Balzacq (2005) advanced the view that securitization is best understood as a pragmatic, strategic practice shaped by context, audience disposition, and power relations. Rather than abstract felicity conditions, what matters is how securitizing actors mobilize rhetorical and argumentative resources to persuade audiences. Paul Roe (2008) likewise emphasized the role of audiences, proposing a two-stage model of identification and mobilization. Michael C. Williams, Mark

Salter, and others argued that securitization should be seen as dramaturgical, involving staging, performance, and multiple overlapping audiences (Salter, 2008).

These revisions highlight two implications for the present study. First, audiences matter profoundly: MEPs are not simply issuing declarations but engaging in argumentative exchanges with peers, media, and publics. Second, securitization is not a single event but a process, unfolding over years of parliamentary debates. The case of Russian disinformation thus requires methodological tools that can capture argumentative strategies, counterarguments, and coalition-building over time.

Despite these theoretical refinements, scholars consistently note the lack of methodological clarity in securitization studies. As Karoline Färber (2018) observes, securitization research often stops at conceptual analysis or selective discourse readings, neglecting to specify methods for systematically identifying securitizing moves. In her words, securitization theory has an "absence of methodology," with most studies failing to explain how texts are analysed or how conclusions are reached (Farber, 2018). Similarly, Baele and Jalea's (2022) corpus-based meta-analysis shows that, while securitization theory has flourished conceptually, it remains empirically fragmented and methodologically inconsistent.

For the study of parliamentary debates, this shortfall is especially acute. Without methodological rigour, researchers risk cherry-picking speeches or highlighting dramatic quotes without analysing the argumentative logics underpinning them. To claim that "the EP securitized disinformation" is insufficient without reconstructing the warrants, backings, and rebuttals that made securitization persuasive—or not. This is where Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA) provides the necessary framework.

Having introduced the phenomenon of Russian disinformation and outlined the foundations and critiques of securitization theory, the next section turns to the philosophy of language and argumentation. It explores how speech-act theory (Austin, Searle), argumentation models (Toulmin, Perelman, Walton), and the argumentative turn in policy analysis (Majone, Fischer, Fairclough & Fairclough) provide the conceptual and methodological tools to analyse parliamentary speeches not as mere rhetoric but as structured arguments. This sets the stage for explaining why ADA is particularly suited for analysing European Parliament debates.

2.2. Speech-Acts and the Philosophy of Language

To understand why parliamentary speeches must be treated as *argumentative acts*, it is essential to revisit the philosophy of language foundations on which securitization theory itself rests. John Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) was revolutionary in showing that certain utterances are performative rather than descriptive: to say something is to *do* something. Austin distinguished between locutionary acts (the act of saying something), illocutionary acts (what one does in saying something), and perlocutionary acts (the effects achieved by saying it). For securitization, it is the *illocutionary force*—the declaration that an issue constitutes a threat—that transforms political reality by legitimating extraordinary measures.

John Searle (1969) further refined this into a systematic theory of speech acts, emphasizing the conditions of success or failure (felicity conditions) of performatives. For securitization, this underpins the idea that a securitizing move is successful only if the appropriate authority speaks in the right context and is accepted by a relevant audience. Yet as Färber (2018) notes, the Copenhagen School applied speech-act theory somewhat rigidly, privileging elite speakers and abstract rules of felicity while neglecting the pragmatic dynamics of persuasion. In parliamentary debates, however, success is rarely automatic: speeches persuade only if arguments resonate with audiences.

This is precisely where the philosophy of language intersects with argumentation theory. While Austin and Searle highlighted the *performative capacity* of language, argumentation theorists like Stephen Toulmin, Chaïm Perelman, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca focused on the *reason-giving practices* that underpin persuasion. To bridge securitization and parliamentary debate analysis, we must shift from speech acts as isolated declarations to speeches as complex argumentative performances.

2.3. Toulmin's Model: The Architecture of Argument

Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* (1958/2003) remains foundational for reconstructing the internal logic of practical reasoning. Toulmin proposed a model consisting of six elements:

claims (conclusions advanced), data (evidence supporting the claim), warrants (the general principles linking data to claim), backings (further support for the warrant), qualifiers (indicating the strength of the claim), and rebuttals (acknowledging counter-arguments) (Toulmin, 1958). This model is particularly well-suited to political debates, where arguments are rarely deductive but rely on warrants that must be made plausible to an audience.

In the context of securitization, Toulmin's model allows researchers to pinpoint the argumentative step where an issue is transformed into a security threat. For example, an MEP might present data about Russian media outlets spreading false narratives (data), argue that foreign manipulation undermines democratic sovereignty (warrant), and thus claim that the EU must treat disinformation as a security threat (claim). The rebuttals (e.g., "this infringes on free speech") and qualifiers ("a temporary ban may be justified under exceptional circumstances") reveal the contested and conditional nature of securitization. By making these steps explicit, ADA operationalizes securitization theory in a way that neither simple content analysis nor speech-act theory alone can achieve.

While Toulmin provided an analytic schema, Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* (1969) emphasized the audience's role in argumentation. For them, persuasion is effective not because arguments are formally valid but because they resonate with the values and commitments of a specific audience. In securitization terms, this underscores the relational character of threat construction.What counts as an existential danger depends on whether an audience is willing to accept the warrant.

This audience-centric view directly addresses one of the central critiques of securitization theory. While the Copenhagen School acknowledged that audience acceptance was crucial, it left the concept vague. Perelman's theory fills this gap by providing a way to examine *why* some securitizing moves succeed and others fail; because they align (or clash) with the audience's normative universe. Applied to the EP, this means examining how MEPs tailor their arguments to resonate with peers, political groups, and the European public.

Douglas Walton, Chris Reed, and Fabrizio Macagno (2008) advanced this field further by cataloguing common *argumentation schemes*, such as argument from authority, argument from consequences, or argument from analogy. These schemes are especially relevant in

parliamentary contexts where speakers rely on recognisable patterns of reasoning. For instance, an MEP arguing for restrictions on Russian media may invoke authority, consequences, or analogy.

Identifying these schemes not only enriches the empirical analysis but also strengthens the methodological rigor of securitization research. Instead of merely noting that disinformation was called a threat, researchers can show *how* the claim was justified, what warrants were invoked, and what counterarguments were silenced. This makes securitization analysis more systematic, transparent, and replicable addressing precisely the concerns raised by Färber (2018) and Baele and Jalea (2022).

The idea that politics is inherently argumentative was further developed by Giandomenico Majone's *Evidence, Argument, and Persuasion in the Policy Process* (1989). Majone argued that democratic policymaking is not primarily about technical problem-solving but about persuading audiences through evidence and reasoning. Policy analysts, he suggested, should focus less on technocratic expertise and more on rhetorical and dialectical skills to construct persuasive arguments. This resonates directly with the European Parliament's role. MEPs are not bureaucrats producing regulations but politicians constructing arguments to persuade colleagues, publics, and member states.

Frank Fischer and John Forester's, *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (1993) consolidated this perspective, calling for a shift from positivist approaches to interpretive and argumentative ones. For Fischer (2003), public policy is best understood as a process of meaning-making in which actors frame issues, build storylines, and mobilize discourse coalitions. This framework has been widely applied in environmental and social policy studies but has rarely been connected to securitization or to the analysis of security debates in parliaments. Hence, this study fills this gap by applying the argumentative turn explicitly to security discourse in the EP.

Building on these insights, Isabela and Norman Fairclough's *Political Discourse Analysis* (2012) proposed a systematic method for analysing political argumentation as practical reasoning. Their framework integrates critical discourse analysis (CDA) with argumentation theory, focusing on how actors justify actions by linking circumstances (what is happening), goals (what ought to

happen), and means (what should be done). Applied to securitization, this reveals not just that an actor labels disinformation a threat but *how* they justify exceptional measures as necessary to achieve security goals.

The framework developed by Norman and Isabela Fairclough proves especially pertinent for analyzing parliamentary debates. Here, argumentation is embedded in procedural rules, partisan contestation, and public visibility. Their emphasis on practical reasoning aligns with Toulmin's model and with Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA), offering a strong methodological toolkit for reconstructing how MEPs frame and justify their positions. Unlike Critical Discourse Analysis, which often foregrounds ideology and power, the Faircloughs' approach prioritizes the internal logic of argumentation. This makes it particularly suitable for analyzing securitization as a process carried out through structured reasoning.

Bringing these insights together, the case for ADA as the most fitting framework becomes evident. Developed by Hajer (1995), ADA focuses on story-lines—narratives that draw actors into coalitions—and on the argumentative struggles through which these narratives acquire traction. By combining Toulmin's micro-level focus on the structure of claims, warrants, and rebuttals with Hajer's macro-level attention to discourse coalitions, ADA is able to capture both the fine-grained reasoning of individual speeches and the broader patterns of discursive formation that give meaning to them.

Compared to alternative methods, ADA has clear advantages. Quantitative content analysis can identify word frequencies, but misses warrants and rebuttals. Corpus linguistics can reveal collocations but strips statements from context. Critical Discourse Analysis illuminates' ideology but often neglects the fine-grained argumentative structure. ADA, by contrast, restores context, identifies reasoning patterns, and reveals how competing claims are justified and contested. In doing so, it answers the call for methodological rigor in securitization studies.

The argument so far has established why speeches must be treated as argumentative acts, drawing on philosophy of language, argumentation theory, and the argumentative turn in policy analysis. The next section situates this within the broader *discursive turn in International Relations* and examines the methodological critiques of securitization research. It shows how

discourse analysis has been applied, where it has fallen short, and why ADA offers the best way forward for studying parliamentary securitization debates.

2.4. The Discursive Turn in International Relations

The importance of language and discourse in International Relations (IR) gained prominence during the so-called "discursive turn"[3] of the 1990s. Jennifer Milliken's (1999) landmark article on the study "The Study of Discourse in International Relations" of discourse in IR crystallized two key insights: first, that discourse is constitutive of social and political reality, and second, that discourse analysis itself must be a methodological framework, not just a rhetorical add-on. Milliken highlighted three roles of discourse in IR: it is productive (creating social realities by defining subjects and objects), it is historical (situating practices within traditions of meaning), and it is political (organizing social relations and power) (Milliken, 1999) . This perspective opened the way for scholars to treat speech and texts as sites where international politics is made, not merely reflected.

Yet Milliken also identified a persistent problem: much of IR discourse analysis remained vague and unsystematic. Scholars invoked discourse to explain how ideas shape politics but often failed to show *how* to analyse texts systematically. This problem remains acute in securitization research, which is heavily reliant on discourse but often methodologically underspecified. The challenge is not whether language matters but how to analyse it rigorously.

The discursive turn also produced works like Lene Hansen's *Security as Practice* (2006), which integrated poststructuralist discourse analysis into security studies, showing how representations of identity and danger shaped foreign policy decisions. Similarly, Iver Neumann (2008) provided a concise guide to discourse analysis in IR, emphasizing its methodological value. These studies demonstrated the importance of discourse but also reinforced Milliken's critique that while discourse analysis illuminated broad patterns of meaning, it rarely provided tools for reconstructing the internal logic of specific arguments.

[3] The "Discursive Turn" in International Relations refers to a significant shift in the field to focus on how language, communication, and discourse construct and shape global politics and social reality. https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/16/the-discursive-turn-in-international-relations-research-bad-science/

Alongside the discursive turn, there were critiques of its excesses. Croucher (2013) argued that the discursive turn sometimes devolved into what he called "bad science," where the invocation of discourse became a substitute for systematic analysis. Without methodological clarity, discourse research risked degenerating into impressionistic commentary (Croucher, 2013). In securitization studies, this problem is acute. Analysts frequently claim that an issue has been securitized by highlighting a few dramatic quotations or policy decisions without systematically demonstrating how the argumentative process unfolded

This critique reinforces the urgency of methodological innovation. To avoid "bad science," discourse studies require systematic frameworks for reconstructing the reasoning embedded in texts. ADA provides exactly that by combining discourse analysis with Toulminian argument reconstruction. By demonstrating how claims, warrants, and rebuttals are mobilized in EP debates, ADA prevents securitization analysis from slipping into anecdotalism.

Moreover, Holger Stritzel's *Security in Translation* (2014) advanced securitization theory by emphasizing how threat constructions travel across contexts. Stritzel argued that securitization is not a singular act but a process of translation, where discourses adapt to different settings, institutions, and audiences (Stritzel, 2014). For instance, a narrative about Russian hybrid warfare may originate in military discourse but be translated into parliamentary debates as a justification for media regulation. For this study, Stritzel's insight highlights why longitudinal analysis of EP debates is critical. From 2014 to 2024, narratives about Russian disinformation did not remain static; they were repeatedly translated, adapted, and contested within parliamentary speech.

Furthermore, ADA's strength lies in bridging pragmatics (how language is used strategically in context) and analysis (how arguments can be systematically reconstructed). Hajer (1995) developed ADA to study environmental policy debates, emphasizing the role of "story-lines" that simplify complexity and allow coalition-building. This is directly applicable to securitization: storylines such as "Russian disinformation is hybrid warfare" or "disinformation undermines democracy" function as rallying devices for MEPs across parties.

ADA also resonates with Balzacq's (2005) "three faces of securitization": agency, audience, and context. By analysing how MEPs mobilize warrants to persuade peers (audience), draw on

institutional authority (agency), and invoke geopolitical backdrops (context), ADA operationalizes Balzacq's pragmatic vision. Unlike the Copenhagen School's formalism, ADA recognises securitization as a strategic, contested, and iterative process.

Finally, the choice of method is not only technical but normative. As McDonald (2008) argues, securitization theory has political implications: labelling issues as security threats justifies extraordinary measures that suspend normal politics. If scholars analyse securitization without methodological rigour, they risk legitimising these moves uncritically. By providing systematic reconstructions of parliamentary arguments, ADA enables critical scrutiny of how securitization claims are justified, resisted, or modified. This is particularly important for disinformation, where securitizing moves may clash with democratic values such as freedom of expression. Thus, the methodological debate is linked to democratic accountability. If EP debates are arenas where security claims are legitimated, then analysing them through ADA allows us to assess whether securitization was built on robust arguments or rhetorical sleight-of-hand.

Having established the discursive turn, the methodological gaps in securitization research, and the importance of ADA, the final section turns to the European Parliament as a discursive arena. It explores how parliamentary debates function as sites of securitization, how ADA can be applied to MEP speeches, and what specific gaps—argument-level, temporal, and institutional—this study could fill.

2.5. The European Parliament as a Discursive Arena

The European Parliament (EP) occupies a distinctive position within the EU's institutional architecture as it is both a legislative body and a forum where divergent political positions are voiced, contested, and legitimated. Unlike the European Council or the Commission, which often project unity in external communication, the EP is characterised by plurality and contestation. Scholars of parliamentary politics emphasise that plenary debates serve not only as deliberative spaces but also as performative venues where MEPs demonstrate accountability to constituents, position themselves ideologically, and signal to domestic audiences (Proksch & Slapin, 2015).

For securitization studies, this institutional role is crucial. MEPs' speeches are not mere commentary; they are part of a structured process in which security narratives are constructed, debated, and sometimes stabilised into collective positions. Yet, as Proksch and Slapin (2010)

demonstrate, plenary speeches often reveal ideological divides that are not visible in voting outcomes. This suggests that debates offer a more sensitive site for tracing contestation and coalition-building than resolutions alone. Analysing EP debates thus provides unique access to the argumentative processes through which security issues are framed.

The European Parliament's debates on Russian disinformation provide a clear example. The Parliament has adopted resolutions condemning disinformation campaigns, calling for bans on state-backed broadcasters, and urging stronger regulatory tools. Yet these formal texts are only the visible outcome. Beneath them lie deliberations in which MEPs justified interventions, invoked values, and responded to objections. If these argumentative processes are not reconstructed, securitization research risks presenting a simplified, outcome-driven account of Europe's response, overlooking the dynamics of contestation and persuasion that shaped it.

2.6. Collective Securitization and the EU

Recent literature on "collective securitization" underscores the importance of multi-actor processes in the EU. Sperling and Webber (2019) argue that, unlike states, the EU cannot securitize unilaterally; securitization requires aggregation across multiple institutions and actors. Lucarelli, Sperling, and Webber (2020) extend this framework, showing how different EU institutions contribute to a collective securitizing process. In this context, the EP is not a marginal actor but a crucial component of the collective voice.

Chen and Gao (2021), in their study of the EU's collective securitization moves toward China, demonstrate how securitization falters when internal audiences are divided. This insight directly applies to Russian disinformation as securitization succeeds only if a broad coalition of MEPs accepts the threat narrative. The EP debates thus provide the most visible evidence of whether a collective securitizing move has taken place. More recently, Vériter (2025) has argued that the EU collectively securitized disinformation in its 2022–24 ban on RT and Sputnik. Yet even this cutting-edge work acknowledges the lack of micro-level analysis of parliamentary debates, where the process of persuasion unfolds.

Despite the theoretical recognition of audiences and contestation, securitization studies rarely treat speeches as *arguments*. Most analyses either highlight dramatic quotes or focus on the presence of securitizing vocabulary (e.g., "threat," "existential," "attack"). This risks reducing

speech to description rather than persuasion. Yet, as Toulmin (2003) demonstrated, arguments are structured by warrants, backings, and rebuttals, which determine whether claims are persuasive.

Majone's insight that policymaking is fundamentally argumentative (Majone, 1989) applies fully to the EP. MEPs must justify why disinformation is not only falsehood but a *security* issue that justifies exceptional measures. Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) model of practical reasoning makes clear that securitization hinges not on vocabulary but on the argumentative link between circumstances, goals, and actions. By treating speeches as argumentative acts, ADA enables researchers to identify precisely when and how securitization occurs.

Another neglected dimension in literature is time. Many studies analyse securitization as a snapshot: a crisis moment, a specific resolution, or a single speech. Yet, as Stritzel (2014) emphasises, securitization is a process of translation across contexts and over time. The meaning of "Russian disinformation" in 2014, in the aftermath of Crimea, differs from its meaning in 2022, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Only a longitudinal analysis of EP debates can capture how arguments evolved, how coalitions shifted, and how rebuttals gained or lost traction. By covering the period 2014–2024, this study traces this temporal evolution, showing whether securitization was a gradual process of coalition-building or a series of ruptures triggered by crises. This contributes to debates about whether the EU, as a supra-national organization, securitizes incrementally or through shock events (Roe, 2008)

Moreover, as Proksch and Slapin (2015) show, the EP is not merely symbolic. Its debates shape agenda-setting, frame issues for public audiences, and influence subsequent policy. For disinformation, where legitimacy is contested and measures risk infringing free speech, parliamentary justification is essential.

2.7. Conclusion

This literature review has discussed five aspects: the concept and evolution of disinformation as a security issue, the Soviet disinformation measures and its the development and critiques of securitization theory, and the rise of argumentative approaches to policy discourse. It has shown

that while securitization theory provides a powerful framework, it suffers from methodological opacity, audience under-specification, and a neglect of parliamentary debates. It has also shown that argumentation theory and ADA provide the conceptual and methodological tools needed to address these gaps.

This study, by applying ADA to EP debates on Russian disinformation from 2014 to 2024, fills three critical gaps in the literature. First, it addresses the argument-level gap by reconstructing securitizing moves as structured arguments rather than isolated statements. Second, it fills the temporal gap by tracing the evolution of discourse over a decade of crises and transformations. Third, it tackles the institutional gap by foregrounding the EP as a central site of collective securitization.

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Securitization Theory as an Evaluative Lens

With an argumentation method justified and explained above, this study applies securitization theory to guide what to look for in those arguments. Here, security is understood in the constructivist sense of the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998): not an objective condition, but something that is achieved by discourse. In their classic formulation, securitization is defined as “the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames issues either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). In other words, to treat an issue as a security threat is to claim the need for extraordinary measures. Crucially, this process is initiated by a speech act: by labeling something a security issue – by saying, for example, this is an existential threat – a political actor tries to elevate it to an urgent priority (Wæver, 1995). However, securitization is more than just uttering the word “security.” It involves convincing an audience to accept exceptional measures (Buzan et al., 1998). A securitizing speech act typically asserts an existential threat to a valued referent object (e.g. national survival, societal stability, fundamental values) and thereby attempts to justify emergency action outside normal politics. Whether this move succeeds depends on audience acceptance. If the relevant audience is persuaded, the issue moves into the realm of security and extraordinary responses become legitimate; if not, the issue remains in normal politics.

In this study, securitization is used as an evaluative lens, not a presupposed outcome. It does not begin by assuming that Russian disinformation is securitized in the European Parliament discourse; rather, it asks ‘if and how the discourse in EP debates align with securitization dynamics. Following Balzacq (2005), we also emphasize audience and context. Thierry Balzacq argues that securitization is not a one-off pronouncement but an evolving process that must resonate with audiences and be attuned to the context (Balzacq, 2005). Especially in a democratic, pluralistic setting like the EP, what counts as a “security threat” is negotiated and may require broader buy-in than in an authoritarian context. We heed this by paying attention to how other MEPs respond (or don’t respond) to securitizing language, and by noting when the context shifts (for example, as we will see below, the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 dramatically changed how arguments landed).

One particular concept we take our theoretical insight from is ‘collective securitization’, which has been developed to describe security framing in multi-actor environments like the European Union (Sperling & Webber, 2019). Traditional securitization theory often imagines a single state

actor declaring an issue to be a security threat and emergency to a domestic audience. In the EU, however, we have multiple institutions and states potentially collectively securitizing an issue. Sperling and Webber (2019) define collective securitization as a process that "requires that the actor in question acts on behalf of other empowered actors who themselves may have individual securitizing imperatives. It entails aggregating these multiple securitizations and giving them authoritative articulation and so is most obviously undertaken by formal international organizations" (2019, p. 236). They argue that it is indeed possible for securitization to occur in a collective setting: an international organization (like the EU) can become a securitizing agent in its own right, especially if its members converge on a threat narrative. They distinguish between "thin" collective securitization (the International Organization/Institution just echoing some states' concerns) and "thick" collective securitization (the Institution itself asserting a threat and driving the response) (Haacke and Williams 2008; Sperling & Webber, 2019). The European Parliament is an interesting case here because, while it does not command military forces or enact executive measures, it is a visible political arena where threat definitions can be articulated and given legitimacy. If a broad spectrum of MEPs from different countries and parties all start describing Russian disinformation in terms of an existential threat to the Union, that would suggest an emergent collective securitizing move – even before any formal policy is implemented. We will use this notion in our interpretation.

To summarize, securitization theory provides the criteria we look for in the arguments: references to existential threat, emergency logic, and departure from normal politics (Buzan et al., 1998). If such elements (what we will call securitizing warrants) become common across many speeches and find little resistance, that indicates the issue is being collectively securitized in the discourse. Conversely, if most MEPs discuss disinformation in routine terms of regulation and do not invoke security imperatives, then securitization has not taken hold, or at least not fully.

3.2. Operationalizing the Analysis: Themes and Indicators in Speeches

The theoretical framework above translates into concrete analytic categories that guide how we read and code the debate transcripts. I will track five interrelated aspects in the MEPs' arguments, each informed by the theoretical framework:

- **Referent Objects**: What do speakers present as being threatened by disinformation? In securitization terms, the referent object is that which is claimed to need protection (Buzan et al., 1998). It could be EU citizens, democratic elections, the stability of member states, European values, or even the European Union as a whole. Mapping referent objects tells us what MEPs are trying to secure.

- **Securitizing Warrants**: These are the justificatory moves that signal a step into the security realm. Essentially, we look for instances where an MEP's warrant (in Toulmin's sense) claims that ordinary measures are insufficient and that disinformation constitutes a qualitatively exceptional kind of threat. Typical indicators include war metaphors (e.g., describing disinformation as a weapon or warfare), references to hybrid warfare or information warfare. Such language suggests the speaker is framing the issue as beyond normal politics. The analysis will note whenever speakers use terms drawn from the security lexicon (attack, threat, warfare, defend, etc.) as part of their warrants. These securitizing warrants are the core of what could make the discourse a securitization. By contrast, if a speaker's warrant is along the lines of normal politics or ordinary measures, that indicates a non-securitized framing.

- **Backings**: When MEPs justify their claims, do they invoke higher authorities, laws, or norms? Backings provide insight into the resources of legitimacy used in the arguments.

- **Qualifiers and Rebuttals**: Given the nature of the topic, it is expected to encounter the classic tension between security and liberty. Thus, the study pays special attention to any qualifiers or rebuttals that emphasize media freedom, pluralism, proportionality, or the risk of censorship.

- **Rhetorical Audience Invoked**: In each speech, we note whom the speaker is addressing or invoking as the audience, which can be a telling aspect of the discourse. This is not "audience" in the securitization-theory sense of who must be persuaded (here, effectively

the Parliament and public), but rather the rhetorical audience each MEP chooses to mention or appeal to.

CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

This research is a qualitative, interpretive case study of how the European Parliament has debated and framed the issue of Russian disinformation, and how this framing evolved from 2014 to post-2022 discourse. Qualitative research is grounded in an interpretive paradigm that seeks to understand the “why” and “how” of social phenomena, emphasizing rich description and the subjective meanings that individuals or groups attach to events (Lim, 2023). Instead of testing hypotheses through quantification, qualitative inquiry probes underlying motives, processes, and perspectives. It relies on methods such as open-ended interviews, focus groups, and document or textual analysis to capture a context-rich and nuanced picture of reality. This approach is highly flexible and reflexive, allowing design to adapt as understanding deepens. The co-construction of reality between the researcher and the data is acknowledged, and rigor is maintained through systematic procedures and transparency of method.

This approach is suitable with this study. Rather than testing a predetermined hypothesis, we let patterns in the data (the debates) inform and refine our understanding of the problem. In practical terms, this meant that the exact research questions and theoretical focus were polished after a deep engagement with the speeches, not before. The choice of an interpretive methodology reflects the nature of the inquiry. We are dealing with socially constructed meanings that cannot be measured quantitatively in any straightforward way. Instead of treating the debates as a dataset from which to extract frequencies of words, we treat them as discursive events to be interpreted in context. It is worth noting explicitly that the puzzle and research questions were finalized after the initial analysis, which is somewhat unusual in a positivist design but workable in an interpretive one. This approach kept the research grounded and open to analysis.

4.2. Corpus Selection and Sampling of Debates

Source of Data: The primary data for this study are official transcripts of plenary debates from the European Parliament. All transcripts were retrieved from the European Parliament’s public “Debates and Verbatim Reports” portal, which provides searchable records of proceedings in all official languages. Each debate’s transcript is accessible by date and agenda item, ensuring transparency and reproducibility of the corpus. By using the Parliament’s own records, the study ensures authenticity and avoid media filtering or summarizing of the speeches.

Inclusion Criteria: I employed purposive sampling to identify debates that are substantively about disinformation, propaganda, information warfare, or foreign influence in the information space especially involving Russia. In qualitative case studies, researchers often employ purposive sampling, deliberately choosing data sources (contexts, documents, participants) that are most likely to produce insight about the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The strength of purposive sampling lies in its intentional focus on cases or materials that exhibit the phenomenon intensely or transparently, thereby maximizing what the researcher can learn (Patton, 2015; Morse, 2020).

The inclusion criteria were: (1) plenary sessions where keywords terms like “disinformation,” “propaganda,” “fake news,” “foreign interference,” or “information manipulation” appear in the agenda item title or are a central focus of discussion; and (2) debates occurring after two precipitating events: The 2014 Crimea annexation period and 2022 Full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. By focusing on plenary debates, the data corpus only includes discourse among MEPs. It excludes committee hearings, press conferences, and one-off remarks, as well as any plenary debates where disinformation was tangential. The study also did not include the texts of EP resolutions or legislative acts in this corpus – while closely related, those are written, negotiated texts rather than spontaneous speech acts, and our analysis centers on spoken argumentation. (Resolutions and official documents will be brought in later, but only in the discussion to contextualize the debate findings, per our framework.)

4.3. Sampled Debates

In post-2014 period, four plenary debates were selected: (1) “Situation in Ukraine” – 15 July 2014, a debate shortly after Russia’s annexation of Crimea that touched on Russian propaganda in Ukraine; (2) “Situation in Ukraine” – 14 October 2015, another debate where disinformation issues were mentioned in light of the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine; (3) “EU strategic communication to counteract anti-EU propaganda by third parties” – 22 November 2016, a debate dedicated to Russian propaganda and the EU’s response (coinciding with an EP resolution on the topic); and (4) “Russia – the influence of propaganda on EU countries” (Topical debate) – 17 January 2018, which explicitly centered on Russian disinformation campaigns within the EU. Additionally, “Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European

democratic processes" – 17 September 2019 was considered to capture end-of-term reflections, though much of its content overlapped with the 2018 debate's themes.

For the post-2022 period, three debates were selected: (1) "Russian aggression against Ukraine" – 1 March 2022, an extraordinary plenary debate immediately following the invasion of Ukraine (while primarily about the war, many MEPs addressed the disinformation aspect as part of hybrid warfare); (2) "Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU including disinformation - Election integrity and resilience build-up towards European elections 2024 (debate)" – 1 June 2023, a debate that came on the heels of the invasion and, significantly, just after the EU had moved to ban Russian state media outlets – this debate provided insight into MEPs' views on those unprecedented measures; and (3) Plenary debate on "Russia's disinformation and historical falsification to justify its war of aggression against Ukraine" on 17 December 2024. These debates allow us to capture how the tone and proposals shifted after the war began.

The sample thus includes seven plenary debates (four in the first period, three in the second). This is a manageable number for in-depth analysis, given each debate transcript ranges from roughly 5 to 15 pages of text. The rationale for balancing 4 vs. 3 debates across the two periods is that the density of relevant content in the post-2022 debates is much higher (the issue had become central, and virtually every speaker addressed disinformation), whereas in 2014–2015 the references were sparser and needed multiple debates to accumulate enough material. In other words, fewer debates in 2022–24 were needed to gather a large number of securitization-relevant arguments, because one 2022 debate contains as many pertinent statements as several earlier debates combined. The study acknowledges this imbalance, but it reflects the empirical reality of how salient the issue became in post-2022. It ensures that wherever one period gets more attention in analysis, this is explicitly noted because of the data (more content to analyze) rather than analytic bias.

4.4. Application of Toulmin's Model of Arguments

To systematically reconstruct the speeches as a argumentative units, the study draws on Stephen Toulmin's model of argumentation, a core component of Argumentative Discourse Analysis, which breaks an argument into functional parts. The elements I will use are 'Claim, Data, Warrant, Backing, Qualifier, and Rebuttal' (Toulmin, 2003). In this scheme, the Claim is the

position or conclusion being asserted – for example, an MEP might claim that "Kremlin disinformation poses a threat to Europe's democracy." The Data (or grounds) consist of the evidence and facts presented to support the claim – for instance, the speaker might cite specific examples of fake news influencing elections or refer to an increase in pro-Russian propaganda channels. The Warrant is the logical bridge that connects the data to the claim, often an implicit assumption or principle. In our context, a warrant might be that if disinformation is orchestrated by hostile power and undermines democratic processes, then it must be treated as a security threat requiring an extraordinary response. In other words, the warrant justifies why the data means the claim is true.

Additionally, Toulmin's model includes Backing meaning the broader support or authority underpinning the warrant. In parliamentary speeches, backing might come in the form of references to EU treaties, previous EP resolutions, or widely shared values. The Qualifier indicates the strength of the claim or the conditions under which it holds, often shown by phrases like "probably," "in most cases," or conversely, an absolute tone indicating certainty. Finally, Rebuttal captures counterarguments or exceptions – any acknowledgment of conditions that could invalidate the claim. This could be an explicit refutation raised by the speaker themselves or an anticipated objection. In debates, one MEP's entire speech can function as a rebuttal to another's claim. For example, if some frame Russian disinformation as an existential threat, others might push back that overreacting could lead to censorship – a direct rebuttal that normal democratic debate should not be suspended.

It is important to note that I use Toulmin's model as a reconstruction tool, not a rigid template. Real political speeches do not label their claim and warrant explicitly; the analyst teases these out. For instance, consider a hypothetical argument: Disinformation from the Kremlin is infecting our societies daily (data); these aren't just lies – they are a form of aggression (warrant). We cannot treat this as normal political discourse (warrant), so we need a firm response at the EU level (claim). I urge the Commission and Council to act, as we did with anti-terrorism measures (backing). Of course, in doing so we must not undermine our own free speech principles (qualifier/rebuttal). In reconstructing such an intervention, we identify the claim (need for a firm EU response), supported by data (Kremlin disinformation infecting societies), justified by a warrant (it is a form of aggression, not normal politics) with backing

(analogy to anti-terrorism measures), and tempered by a qualifier/rebuttal (don't undermine free speech). Toulmin's model thus helps standardize the comparison of arguments across dozens of speeches. By coding each intervention for these elements, we can more transparently compare how different MEPs justify their positions. This method also ensures clarity while analyzing large amount of discourses: instead of free-form interpretation, we have a consistent framework to capture each argument's structure (Toulmin, 2003). Each speech becomes a data point comprising identifiable pieces (claim, warrant, etc.), which enhances analytical rigor.

4.5. Coding Instrument and Reliability

After reconstructing arguments qualitatively, I moved to a coding phase to enable thematic analysis across the corpus. A codebook was developed corresponding to the operational themes described in the theoretical framework (Chapter 3). The codebook was essentially a table with the following fields for each speech: Speaker, Date/Debate, Referent Object, Securitizing Warrant (present/not present, and if present what type), Backing (type of authority invoked, if any), Qualifier (yes/no, nature of qualifier), Rebuttal (yes/no, if yes, summary of counterpoint), and Rhetorical Audience Invoked. There was also a Notes column for any additional context (e.g., "Speaker is from Baltic state, likely reflecting national perspective" or "this speech drew heckles from others, indicating contestation"). This structured coding enabled the study to aggregate findings (e.g., how many speeches in 2018 explicitly used war metaphors? How many, in 2022, mentioned free speech concerns? Which referent object was most common overall?).

Because this is a single-researcher project, achieving inter-coder reliability in the usual sense was not possible. However, to ensure consistency and mitigate subjective drift, a two-pass coding strategy was implemented. First, after initially coding all debates, I revisited a sample debate (the 22 Nov 2016 debate) one week later and recoded it from scratch without looking at the first-round codes. I then compared the two sets of codes for that debate. Discrepancies were mostly in emphasis (e.g., initially I might not have tagged a subtle qualifier that on second read I noticed). These were reconciled by refining the code definitions (for example, clarifying what counts as a "securitizing warrant" vs a normal policy statement). I repeated this re-check for a 2022 debate as well (8 March 2022) due to its importance. The codebook was updated with clearer decision rules (such as: "if any reference to war/attack is made in connection with disinformation, mark as securitizing warrant even if the speaker doesn't explicitly call for exceptional measures; the

presumption of exceptionalism is implied by war framing"). This iterative refinement improves the reliability of coding by ensuring the same criteria are applied uniformly across the dataset.

4.6. Referencing and Citation of Primary Materials

Clarity in referencing the debates is crucial, given the large number of quotes and examples that will be presented. In the empirical analysis chapters, all quotations or specific references to MEP statements are cited in the footnotes that include the last name of the MEP and year of the debate. For example, a reference citing any quote or speech statement by 'Rebecca Harms'[4] might appear as: Harms, 2018. This indicates a statement from the 2018 debate by MEP Rebecca Harms, with the full reference of the plenary debate provided in the Appendix (which would include the debate date, month, title and URL). In other cases, if the speaker is named in the sentence, the parenthetical might just contain the source and date: e.g., As Rebecca Harms argued (2018). Every debate used has a corresponding entry in the reference list, formatted with the debate title, date, and retrieval information. Moreover, as some speeches analyzed and quoted were in original languages (e.g. French, German, Estonian etc.), I have also provided the actual speeches in the original language in the footnotes with MEP names and year of the debate.

4.7. English Translation of the Speeches

All plenary interventions (MEP speeches/statements) that were in other languages were retrieved from the European Parliament's verbatim transcript database and rendered into English through a two-step machine-assisted workflow. First, the Google Translate browser extension produced an initial draft translation for each speech segment. Second, the draft was cross-checked in DeepL Translator, whose output was compared line-by-line to the Google version; any discrepancies involving key terms or modal verbs indicating policy stance were resolved through manual adjudication against the source language, aided by official EP multilingual glossaries. This combined procedure maximised lexical fidelity while reducing the risk of machine-translation artefacts that might distort argumentative nuance.

[4] Rebecca Harms is a German politician who served as Member of the European Parliament from 2004 until 2019. She is a member of the Alliance '90/The Greens, part of the European Green Party.

CHAPTER 5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS: EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DEBATES ON RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION (2014–2024)

5.1. Russian Disinformation as Hybrid Warfare and Democratic Threat

A dominant theme across the debates is the characterization of Russian disinformation as a weapon of hybrid warfare and an existential threat to European democracy. From the earliest discussions amid the Ukraine crisis of 2014, many Members of European Parliament (MEPs) framed Kremlin-sponsored information operations as an integral part of Russia's offensive arsenal, akin to conventional military tactics. In July 2014, Ioan Mircea Pașcu (S&D) warned that "the Russian TV 1 channel is in the middle of a total propaganda war against Ukraine"[5]. This claim explicitly cast Russian media narratives as warfare, supported by evidence of coordinated falsehoods on Russian state TV, with the implicit warrant that such propaganda campaigns directly undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and stability. By labeling it a "propaganda war," Pașcu and others invoked a security logic: if Russia treats information as a weapon, then the EU must view disinformation as a security threat, not merely a matter of public discourse. The underlying warrant here is that extraordinary measures may be justified because the normal information environment is being weaponized by a hostile actor. This securitizing move – portraying disinformation as "more dangerous than… the time of the Cold War" as one Stefen Fule (Member of the Commission) put it in 2014[6] – set the stage for much of the Parliament's subsequent consensus.

By 2016, in the wake of Crimea's annexation and evidence of meddling in Western elections, the idea of disinformation as a full-scale… war to undermine the EU was broadly embraced among mainstream MEPs (across the center-right EPP, center-left S&D, liberals, and Greens). Tunne Kelam (EPP), for example, declared in November 2016 that "the Russian leadership is engaged in a full-scale disinformation and propaganda war to undermine the EU democratic narrative"[7] .

[5] Pascu, 2014

[6] Fule, 2014

[7] Kelam, 2016

Here the claim is clear. Russia is waging an information war against Europe. The data he cites include parallel examples – "parallel to Daesh" (ISIS) – and observable effects such as far-left and far-right politicians echoing Kremlin talking points (which Kelam pointed to as evidence by noting the "irritation shown in this Hemicycle by the far left and far right")[8]. The implied warrant is that because Russia's effort is concerted and hostile (and even likened to a terrorist threat), Europe must respond with unity and urgency. Many speakers backed this warrant by invoking fundamental democratic values: if disinformation undermines the EU democratic narrative, then defending against it is tantamount to defending democracy itself. Indeed, MEPs repeatedly stressed that lies are poisoning our people's minds (as one might paraphrase their rhetoric) and that failing to counter this would mean allowing an attack on Europe's way of life.

This securitized framing was reinforced through vivid rhetorical devices. MEPs frequently employed martial metaphors[9] to convey urgency. In 2018, Jaromír Štětina (PPE) stated, "we are at war… a hybrid war" led by the Kremlin, which "is winning", admonishing that losing the information war might mean EU losing the hybrid war[10]. Such language explicitly casts the EU as a referent object under existential threat. Similarly, in 2022, Fabio Castaldo (NI) described Putin's strategy as "divisions on the ground, but also… divisions no less dangerous through propaganda and fear within our countries" [11], indicating that Russia's assault is two-pronged: physical and psychological. The 'propaganda… within our countries' is presented as a no less dangerous front, implying that subverting European public opinion could be as damaging as tanks and missiles. Here the claim is that internal cohesion and trust are under attack, the evidence is the spread of fear and division attributed to Russian influence (for instance, Castaldo

[8] Ibid.

[9] Martial metaphors are expressions that use language and imagery from warfare and combat to describe non-military concepts, often to frame them as struggles or battles. Common examples include the "war on" cancer, the use of "fight" in the context of fighting illness, and the concept of argument as a battle, as famously analyzed by Lakoff and Johnson in 'Metaphors We Live By'. These metaphors can shape perception, and while they can provide a clear framework for understanding a situation, they also carry historical and connotative baggage that can lead to unintended consequences.

[10] Štětina, 2018, "Jsme ve válce… Je to hybridní válka… Je to válka, ve které Kreml vítězí."

[11] Castaldo, 2022.

alludes to Putin's attempt to "overthrow Ukrainian democracy" and simultaneously sow fear in Europe[12]), and the warrant is that Europe's bond and duty is to ensure Putin will fail on both fronts. Notably, Castaldo's remarks also hint at the remedy: "resolute support to the resistance in Ukraine" and granting Ukraine EU candidate status[13]. This introduces a linkage between fighting disinformation and upholding European unity and expansion, which we will see as a recurring argumentative pattern (the idea that strengthening the European project – including welcoming Eastern neighbors – is itself a strategic response to disinformation-fueled division).

By 2024, after a full-scale war in Ukraine, the hybrid warfare framing had become almost axiomatic in the Parliament. In a December 2024 debate, Vice-President of the Commission Kaja Kallas (formerly Prime Minister of Estonia) stated bluntly that "disinformation is a fundamental part of Russian military activities"[14]. This claim is presented as a matter of fact, backed by historical data. Kallas noted that "when Russia illegally annexed Crimea in 2014, it began with the disinformation campaign"[15], reminding the chamber that military aggression was preceded by narrative aggression. The warrant she presses is that "we have seen this all before", invoking the Soviet Union's propaganda practices[16]. By drawing a parallel to Soviet-era brainwashing and repression of truth-tellers (she cited the case of historian Yuri Dmitriev, imprisoned in Russia for exposing Stalinist crimes)[17], Kallas provided backing to her argument that the West's collective historical memory of Soviet propaganda and censorship is mobilized to legitimate a strong response now. In her words, "we cannot accept the spill-over into Europe of Russian disinformation… It is a weapon to support kinetic warfare on the ground. We must fight it. This is hybrid warfare"[18]. Virtually identical reasoning is evident across pro-EU political groups.

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[12] Ibid

[13] Ibid

[14] Kallas, 2024.

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] For his case details and updates, visit https://pen.org/individual-case/yury-dmitriev/

[18] Kallas, 2024.

Russian disinformation is portrayed as a weapon aimed at Europe's heart, so Europe must treat it with the gravity and unity reserved for warfare.

It is important to note that while there was broad convergence in this securitized depiction of Russian disinformation, it was not without contestation (as we will examine below). However, among the Parliament's majority the pattern was clear. They consistently linked instances of Russian interference (e.g. meddling in Moldovan elections or the Brexit referendum) to a larger strategy of undermining democracy. MEP Sandra Kalniete (EPP) summarized in 2018 that the Kremlin seeks "to weaken and undermine our democracies and alliances" [19]; her claim that Russia's propaganda aims to make our societies more vulnerable was supported by examples like the manipulation of historical grievances and minority issues, and by pointing to Russian funding for "anti-European and anti-democratic forces in our societies"[20] [21]. The warrant was that Europe's very security and stability are at risk. Indeed, Kalniete and others explicitly used the language of collective security, noting that "basic principles of international law" and the post-WWII European order were being attacked along with facts[22]. In sum, through claim after claim, supported by both concrete examples (electoral interference, fake news campaigns, documented lies in conflict zones) and appeals to historical memory, a hegemonic discourse emerged that Russian disinformation is not just misleading speech; it is an instrument of war requiring a systemic and urgent defense.

5.2. European Institutional Countermeasures: Strategic Communication and Sanctions

Parallel to recognizing the threat, MEPs devoted extensive attention to what the European Union should do – and has done – to counter Russian disinformation. A major thematic category that arises from the debates is the advocacy for institutional and policy responses, from strategic communications task forces to legal sanctions. Over the decade, one can trace an evolution. Initial calls for action (often lamenting under-preparedness) gradually give way to descriptions of

[19] Kalniete,2018

[20] Ibid

[21] Ibid

[22] Ibid

measures implemented and demands for their expansion or reinforcement. This reflects both a convergence on the need for action and a critical assessment of the adequacy of EU efforts.

Early debates reveal frustration with the EU's slow start in counterpropaganda. In 2014–2015, several MEPs already urged the Union to step up its communications game vis-à-vis Russia. For instance, a 2016 intervention by Sandra Kalniete (EPP) commended the nascent steps such as the creation of the East StratCom Task Force but regretted that the "EU strategic communications efforts remain seriously underfunded and understaffed"[23]. Here, Kalniete's claim is that the EU's response machinery is insufficient given the scale of the threat. She provided data by naming specific bodies – the EEAS East StratCom Task Force, the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, Centres of Excellence – and noting these exist but lack resources. The warrant is that because Russia is investing massively in disinformation (implied by her noting alarm bells… ringing since the war against Ukraine), the EU must invest proportionately in its defenses. This was a recurring line of argument: our response must match their offense. Kalniete backed this warrant by recalling that EU leaders themselves had called for a plan (the European Council in March 2015 tasked the High Representative to prepare an action plan to counter disinformation). Thus, appealing to a mandate from heads of state served as backing – a legitimizing reference – for strengthening StratCom.

By 2016, this conversation crystallized around the Fotyga report on EU strategic communication. Anna Elżbieta Fotyga (ECR), the rapporteur, opened that debate by asserting Parliament's stance on countering propaganda by third parties as "pertinent and timely"[24]. Her speech epitomized the push for institutional action. Fotyga's central claim was that the EU needs a strong strategic communications capability to counter hostile propaganda. She underscored that many Western democracies are fully aware of Russian disinformation after Crimea, implying there is no excuse for inaction. As evidence, she detailed the content of her report, which identified two directions of hostile propaganda – state (Russia) and non-state (terrorist) – and commended existing bodies (like the East StratCom team). One powerful piece of data she and others cited was Russia's own doctrinal openness: "Russian generals… describe the use of false data and destabilising

[23] Kalniete, 2016. "EU strategic communication to counteract anti-EU propaganda by third parties".

[24] Fotyga, 2016

propaganda as legitimate tools" (as Commissioner Julian King later highlighted in 2018[25]). This serves as a factual backing to the claim that the EU must develop counter-tools. The warrant is straightforward: if Moscow openly integrates disinformation into its military doctrine, then the EU's response cannot be merely ad hoc or left to individual Member States – it must be strategic, coordinated, and well-resourced at the Union level. In Toulmin's terms, the implied warrant is that because the adversary treats information as a weapon of war, we must likewise respond through security and defense means, not just normal public diplomacy. We see multiple MEPs explicitly articulating this logic. Jaromír Štětina (EPP) in 2016 scolded the EU's High Representative for having a defense in the "information war" that is "weak and… shamefully underfunded", asking "how do you expect to resist… with your tiny team against the millions of dollars the Russian secret services pour into RT or Sputnik?"[26]. His stark claim – Europe is losing the information war due to under-resourcing – was illustrated with data: only a 14-person StratCom team versus a Kremlin propaganda budget "of 1,000 million euros a year" and "a network of TV stations in 100 countries and 33 languages", as Esteban González Pons (EPP) quantified in 2018[27]. The warrant practically leaps off the page: the EU is defenseless with its current paltry effort; therefore, it must dramatically boost funding and staffing or risk losing this war. In response, many called for turning the StratCom Task Force into a permanent EU structure with a serious budget (David McAllister of the EPP listed this as a top recommendation in 2018, urging to "turn the East StratCom task force into a permanent EU structure with adequate funding and increased personnel"[28]). By 2023, this had become mainstream wisdom, reflected in the INGE Committee's proposals for a dedicated sanctions regime on foreign disinformation and a more coordinated EU approach.

In terms of concrete measures, a major step frequently heralded in later debates was the ban on Kremlin media outlets. MEPs in 2022–2023 cited the EU's unprecedented move to suspend the

[25] King, 2018. In "Rusia - influența propagandei asupra statelor din UE".

[26] Štětina, 2016

[27] Pons, 2018. "El Kremlin dispone de 1 000 millones de euros al año en medios públicos, una red de televisiones en cien países y treinta y tres idiomas… La Unión Europea, para defenderse, cuenta, sin embargo, solo con un millón de euros de presupuesto y la Task Force, que son diecisiete personas… Estamos realmente bastante indefensos."

[28] McAallister, 2018

broadcasting licenses of Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, addressing Parliament in March 2022, explicitly announced, "we are suspending the licenses of the Kremlin's propaganda machine. RT and Sputnik… will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin's war"[29]. This statement – a claim of decisive action – was itself evidence of how far EU policy had shifted. Von der Leyen backed it with data on implementation (disconnection of banks, sanctions on oligarchs, etc., contextualizing the media ban as part of a larger sanction package). The warrant was left implicit but resonated with prior debates: extraordinary aggression warrants extraordinary countermeasures. Indeed, when the President of Parliament welcomed the ban on Kremlin propaganda tools in that same session, it signaled broad political agreement that freedom of expression could not be exploited as a shield for foreign war propaganda. This marks a striking evolution from earlier hesitancy – a point we will revisit when examining dissenting views on free speech.

Beyond strategic comms and media bans, MEPs highlighted legal and regulatory tools. The development of a European Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act (DSA), along with a strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, were frequently cited as key elements of the EU's institutional counterstrategy by 2023. Věra Jourová, Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency, thanked Parliament's INGE Committee in June 2023 for inspiring many of these initiatives. She enumerated measures: working with online platforms (under the DSA's new rules), improving fact-checking and content moderation, and crucially a proposed law on "transparency and targeting of political advertising" to curb microtargeted propaganda[30]. Each measure corresponds to specific claims about how to counter disinformation: e.g., "introduce high transparency standards for online political ads" to expose malign influence[31], supported by evidence of past abuses of microtargeting, with the warrant that shining light on who pays for ads will dry up covert foreign campaigns. Jourová explicitly tied these to protecting elections, noting the Commission's work on a Joint Mechanism for Electoral Resilience and a Rapid Alert System for disinformation ahead of 2024 elections. The tone of her remarks – we have done X, Y, Z, but this is not enough – reflects the Parliament's persistent pressure.

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[29] Ursula von der Leyen, 2022. "Russian aggression against Ukraine (debate)"

[30] Jourová, 2023.

[31] Ibid

Throughout the debates, MEPs often treated Commission action as necessary but still insufficient, thereby warranting ever stronger remedies. For example, Julian King in 2018 (as Security Union Commissioner) reassured MEPs that the East StratCom team had collected "over 3,500 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation", implying the EU was actively documenting the problem[32]. Yet MEPs like Liisa Jaakonsaari (S&D) responded by urging more: calling for a psychological defence unit at EU level, inspired by a Swedish initiative. This reveals a pattern of claim and rebuttal between Parliament and the executive: MEPs pressed for robust action (claims of needed measures, with warrants about security), the Commission detailed steps taken (data showing progress), but MEPs frequently qualified their support with "it's a good start, but we must go further." The INGE report of 2023[33], presented by Kalniete, encapsulated this by noting progress (DSA, code of practice) but explicitly warning that "the EU is still suffering from a fragmented approach" and "cannot afford splintering our resources"[34]. The report's recommendations – e.g., "establish a dedicated EU programme to invest in our democracy… a worthwhile long-term investment"[35] and creating an EU sanctions regime for disinformation perpetrators – were essentially Parliament's blueprint for a more centralized and punitive strategy. The underlying warrant was that only a "whole-of-Union" approach, backed by hard measures (like sanctions and legal enforcement), can meet the challenge. By linking foreign information manipulation to traditional security domains (critical infrastructure, election integrity, etc.), the Parliament signaled that counter-disinformation should be mainstreamed into EU security and foreign policy.

Another facet of institutional response is the emphasis on international cooperation and unity, which overlaps with policy measures. Many MEPs argued that Europe must act in concert with allies and speak with one voice. Federica Mogherini (the High Representative) in 2016 already stressed that "security has to be taken into account, but also everyone's freedom of expression",

[32] King, 2018.

[33] REPORT on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation. Read here. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0187_EN.html

[34] Kalniete, 2023

[35] Ibid

attempting to balance values, but she "welcomed the proposal… to strengthen both our East and South StratCom Task Forces"[36]. She noted the importance of working closely with governments in the Eastern Partnership region – essentially, a cooperative approach. By 2024, Kaja Kallas went further, describing how the EU had built a Team Europe approach to tackle Russian interference, deploying experts not just in Brussels but in the Western Balkans, the Southern Neighbourhood, and Africa[37]. This illustrates that EU counter-disinformation efforts became globally networked, driven by the idea (warrant) that Russian campaigns are a worldwide menace requiring collective defense. Indeed, several MEPs invoked NATO and the G7: for example, in 2018 Kalniete argued that trans-Atlantic cooperation via NATO is key for cyber-deterrence, and in 2024 Kallas emphasized pooling know-how with G7 partners to respond collectively. The consensus in these arguments is that European action must be complemented by alliances – a recognition that disinformation respects no borders.

In summary, across the debates there emerged a structured argument for robust EU countermeasures. Claim: We must actively counter Russian disinformation through unified strategies. Data: (a) Evidence of under-resourcing and Russian massive spending; (b) Successful initial steps like StratCom, sanctions on media; (c) New regulations (DSA, etc.) in place. Warrant: Because disinformation is a security threat, the EU needs extraordinary and coordinated instruments (treat it not as ordinary political speech, but as malign interference). Backing: Mandates from EU leaders, principles of protecting democracy, and even analogies to past crises (some MEPs compared this to counter-terrorism efforts post-9/11 or to Cold War information policy). By 2024, many of these once-controversial measures (like banning RT) had become accepted policy, indicating that the narrative of taking a hard line had largely prevailed in practice. Yet, as we turn to the next theme, not everyone in the Parliament agreed with this securitized, interventionist approach – and those divergences are crucial for a full understanding of the discourse.

[36] Mogherini, 2016

[37] Kallas, 2024

5.3. Enhancing Societal Resilience: Media, Literacy, and Transparency

In tandem with calls for strategic communication and sanctions, a significant thread in the debates focused on strengthening societal resilience against disinformation. MEPs across the pro-EU spectrum frequently argued that long-term success against propaganda depends on an informed, critical, and united citizenry – in other words, bolstering Europe's internal defenses: free and pluralistic media, educated audiences, transparency in politics, and trust in institutions. This thematic category reflects a more bottom-up counter-disinformation strategy, often presented as complementary to the top-down security measures.

One recurring claim was that supporting independent journalism and media plurality is essential to inoculate society against fake news. Julie Ward (S&D) exemplified this in 2016 by stating that "support for independent media and promotion of freedom of the press… must be the pillars of EU actions aiming at countering propaganda"[38]. She provided specifics – calling for backing persecuted journalists, improving media literacy, and putting in place a strategic cultural diplomacy platform – thereby giving concrete content to the claim. The warrant was that an open, educated media ecosystem will make citizens less susceptible to malign propaganda, a logic widely shared in the chamber. Indeed, Ward explicitly tied media literacy and critical thinking education to keys to many of the challenges we are facing. Many MEPs echoed this educational turn. In 2018, Liisa Jaakonsaari (S&D) highlighted that "media, social media, investigative journalism, think tanks and NGOs all have a role in helping people separate fact from lies", urging that "media literacy is now extremely important"[39]. This argument's data point was the growth of aggressive online behavior and widespread confusion, with the warrant that a citizenry equipped with critical tools can resist manipulation. By urging a psychological defense unit and noting Sweden's establishment of one, Jaakonsaari provided an example (data) and implicitly warranted that if Member States like Sweden see value in societal resilience measures, the EU should too (an appeal to successful practice as backing).

[38] Ward, 2016. In "EU strategic communication to counteract anti-EU propaganda by third parties"

[39] Jaakonsaari, 2018. "Mainio uutinen olikin, että Ruotsin pääministeri Stefan Löfven ilmoitti viime viikolla Sälenin turvallisuuskonferenssissa, että Ruotsiin perustetaan psykologisen puolustuksen yksikkö… meidänkin pitää perustaa psykologisen puolustuksen yksikkö – psychological defense – olkoon se avainsana."

Another facet of resilience is transparency in political and financial spheres. Several debates touched on the need to expose and root out covert Russian influence – whether in party financing, lobbying, or online campaigning. Raphaël Glucksmann (S&D), who chaired the INGE Committee, delivered a forceful speech in 2023 cataloguing how "for 20 years European leaders were naïve… letting tyrants wipe their feet on our sovereignty"[40]. His claim was that Europe must end this naivety by shedding light on foreign influence and stopping elite capture and corruption. As evidence, he vividly listed instances of what he termed "trahison des élites": former officials like Gerhard Schröder working for Gazprom weeks after leaving office, French and Austrian ex-ministers doing similarly for Russian or Chinese firms, etc. Glucksmann's tone was accusatory; he asked, "How could we accept for so long that so many prime ministers, ministers, high officials go to work for Russian or Chinese interests?"[41]. The warrant is moral and security-driven: Western political elites selling their services to authoritarian regimes constitutes a grave vulnerability – it "precipitates the fall of cities" (a historical metaphor he employed)[42] – thus Europe must impose stricter rules (a rebuttal to any complacency about free movement of labor or free trade, here overridden by security concerns). This logic materialized as policy proposals: Jourová in response described the upcoming Defence of Democracy Package to address covert foreign interference through interest representation and to require transparency for those lobbying on behalf of foreign governments. The claim for a foreign agent transparency law (though she avoided the term "agent") was justified with data about foreign funding flows and the warrant that Europeans have a right to know who is behind political advocacy. Importantly, Jourová pre-empted potential civil liberties rebuttals by assuring it "will not ban or criminalise activities… the EU remains open and democratic. But we cannot be naive"[43]. This qualifier and rebuttal acknowledge concerns that such measures could emulate illiberal foreign agent laws (like Russia's own or a proposed Georgian law), which she explicitly differentiated as very different in aim and scope. Thus, the debate on transparency shows a careful balancing act demanding openness and integrity (to fortify democracy from within) while

[40] Glucksmann, 2023.

[41] Ibid

[42] Ibid, "la corruption des élites précipite toujours la chute des cités"

[43] Jourová, 2023.

trying not to undermine democratic values in the process. Nonetheless, the Parliament's stance was clear: bolstering integrity and shining light on dark influence is seen as a prophylactic against disinformation. As Glucksmann put it, Europe's "ruling classes must no longer be supermarkets where autocracies come to do their shopping"[44] – a pithy warrant that Europe's values and interests must not be for sale.

A complementary angle on societal resilience is citizen engagement and addressing root causes of discontent. Some MEPs argued that closing the gap between European institutions and citizens would deprive Russian propaganda of fertile ground. Kateřina Konečná (GUE/NGL) voiced this viewpoint starkly in 2016. "The problem is that EU citizens have less and less trust in European institutions, because they don't think the European project benefits them… they face difficult socio-economic problems and thus are prone to anti-European sentiment"[45]. Her claim was that EU neglect of citizens' concerns – not Russian propaganda per se – is the fundamental issue. The data she offered were the observable struggles of citizens (unemployment, inequality) and scandals of EU elites (she alluded to former Commission President Barroso taking a Goldman Sachs job[46] as an example of elite impropriety that angers citizens). The warrant was that if people are disillusioned and desperate, they will be vulnerable to hostile narratives or even simply adopt anti-EU positions on their own. Konečná even stated, "people are not stupid… stupid are those [politicians] who focus on topics that won't help them in life", directly rebutting the prevailing securitization by suggesting the EU was obsessing over propaganda instead of solving people's real problems[47]. While her perspective was in the minority in terms of political grouping, it struck a chord with a broader idea: closing the trust gap is vital. Even some pro-EU MEPs acknowledged that Western democracies had at times underestimated or mishandled their own media space. Roberts Zīle (ECR) noted Western indifference when Sputnik began

[44] Glucksmann,2023. "Nos classes dirigeantes ne doivent plus être les supermarchés dans lesquels les régimes autocratiques viennent tranquillement faire leurs courses"

[45] Konečná, 2016. "Problém je přeci v tom, že občané EU mají čím dál menší důvěru v evropské instituce, protože se nedomnívají, že jim evropský projekt přináší užitek. Často řeší velmi složité osobní a rodinné socio-ekonomické problémy a ano, jsou proto náchylní k anti evropským náladám."

[46] Read here. https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/meps-outraged-at-former-european-commission-president-jos-manuel-barrosos-goldman-sachs-job

[47] Ibid

broadcasting: “my colleague said: we are always for freedom of speech, we’re not worried”[48], implying a naïveté that allowed Kremlin narratives to spread unopposed. Others pointed out that propaganda “falls on fertile ground when citizens increasingly distrust those who lead them”, as Croatian MEP Ruža Tomašić (ECR) observed in 2016. Tomašić’s warrant was that rebuilding public trust through transparency and accountability is “the most effective way to fight propaganda”[49] – essentially the mirror image of Konečná’s warning, but from a pro-EU stance: do better by the people, and foreign lies won’t take root. This converges with the idea that resilience starts at home. We see it too in 2022 debates, where MEPs like Nathalie Loiseau (Renew) argued that Putin’s war ironically “taught Europe to speak the language of power” and awakened NATO and EU defense – suggesting that European unity and resolve (once lacking) were now being built in response[50]. While Loiseau’s focus was more on hard power, the subtext is that Europe’s internal cohesion and will are crucial defenses. In the context of disinformation, internal cohesion means an electorate that is informed and resilient, and institutions that are transparent and responsive.

In the debates, therefore, one finds a rich array of argumentation stressing long-term, democratic antidotes to fake news. These include: educating citizens (the metaphor of “vaccinating our societies against disinformation” was explicitly used in the 2023 INGE report; promoting quality journalism[51] (Kalniete in 2018 insisted “quality journalism should be supported by governments and the EU, otherwise it would disappear and leave us at the mercy of Kremlin trolls”[52] – a claim backed by pointing to the distortion of social media algorithms and the collapse of traditional media business models); and strengthening civic participation (Jourová’s mention of supporting

[48] Zile, 2018. “Mēs vienmēr esam par vārda brīvību, mēs par to neuztraucamies.”

[49] Tomašić, 2016. “Propaganda protiv Europe i Zapada pada na plodno tlo jer građani sve manje vjeruju onima koji ih vode i za njih donose važne odluke. Ponovna izgradnja tog povjerenja najučinkovitiji je način borbe protiv propagande.”

[50] Loiseau, 2022. “il a fallu une guerre sur le sol européen pour que l’Europe apprenne à parler le langage de la puissance. Il a fallu Vladimir Poutine et sa guerre de trop pour que le lien transatlantique se resserre, pour que l’OTAN se réveille et pour que la défense européenne naisse enfin.”

[51] Kalniete, 2023. 2023 INGE report debate.

[52] Kalniete, 2018. *Russia — the influence of propaganda on EU countries*

civil society engagement in policymaking as part of the Democracy Defense Package[53] suggests an attempt to shore up democratic legitimacy as a shield against extremist narratives). The underlying warrants in all these are variations of a liberal-democratic ethos: an open society armed with truth and trust is the best defense against lies. Or as several MEPs put it, "the best way to counter propaganda is to tell the truth, quickly, calmly, and backed with facts" (a sentiment voiced by Angel Dzhambazki (ECR) in 2018)[54]. This reflects a continued faith that European values and factual discourse can ultimately prevail – a notable point of convergence even among many who otherwise disagreed on methods.

Crucially, the emphasis on resilience sometimes served as a moderating qualifier to the securitization narrative. It conveyed that while emergency measures (sanctions, bans, task forces) are needed, they must be accompanied by efforts that uphold the very democratic values the EU seeks to protect. This duality – fight the immediate fire but also fireproof the house – permeates the parliamentary discourse. As we move on, however, we must examine those voices who were wary of too much firefighting, lest it burn down the house itself, so to speak. The next section delves into the divergences and counterarguments that emerged, often in the guise of defending free expression or accusing the EU of hypocrisy.

5.4. Contesting the Narrative: Free Expression, Hypocrisy, and Dissenting Voices

While a broad majority in the European Parliament converged on treating Russian disinformation as a serious menace and endorsing robust countermeasures, a persistent minority of MEPs – often from the far-left GUE/NGL group or right-wing populist groups (EFDD, ENF, later ID/PfE) – challenged key elements of this narrative. These dissenting interventions add an important dimension of divergence to the debates. They questioned whether the threat was being overstated or manipulated, warned of the risks to civil liberties, and sometimes mirrored Kremlin talking points by shifting blame to the West or Ukraine. An analytically significant pattern is that these MEPs often acted as rebuttals to the securitizing claims of their colleagues. They injected

[53] Jourová. 2023.

[54] Dzhambazki. 2018. "Отговорът на фалшивите новини е това да се казва истината, колкото се може по-бързо, по-организирано, по-спокойно и подкрепено с факти. Това трябва да прави всеки един от нас."

alternative warrants: prioritizing free speech absolutism, skepticism of EU institutions, or geopolitical viewpoints that downplayed Russian wrongdoing.

One common claim among skeptics was that the campaign against fake news itself could become a pretext for censorship or propaganda by the EU establishment. Barbara Spinelli (GUE/NGL) exemplified this in 2018 by cautioning that terms like fake news are ambiguous and risk being used for propaganda and censorship[55]. She expressed skepticism toward allegations of Russian election interference: "I am skeptical about the tendency to attribute to [Russia] interference in US and European elections. There is no proof of such interference, only denials from Wisconsin, California, the French cybersecurity agency, and the Digital Society Institute in Berlin."[56]. Here Spinelli's data are the reported statements of authorities finding no conclusive evidence of Russian hacking or influence (e.g., U.S. state officials, French agency) – essentially using Western sources to undermine the prevailing claim of massive interference. Her warrant is that absent hard proof, the narrative of Russian meddling may be exaggerated or even a dangerous new Cold War in the making. She backed this by pointing to Western media failures: "Fake news did not only arise on the Internet. In the Iraq war it was the mainstream press that spread devastating lies about weapons of mass destruction"[57]. This historical example serves as backing for her argument that the loudest voices denouncing fake news today were themselves purveyors of fake news in the past. The implication (warrant) is that the current moral panic over disinformation might be hypocritical and politically motivated. Spinelli's conclusion was striking, that those most vehement about censoring false news are themselves divulgers of fake news driving a dangerous new Cold War with Russia. Essentially, she flipped the script to accuse most of the propagandistic behavior – a direct rebuttal to securitization. Her stance highlights a fundamental clash of warrants: security vs. liberty, and trust in EU narratives vs. distrust in them.

Another salient dissent came from the right-wing Euroskeptic camp. Jörg Meuthen (EFDD, of Germany's AfD) delivered a polemic in 2018 mocking the debate itself: "Fake news is a fighting term used by the Establishment to discredit unwelcome facts and opinions. And Russia has been

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[55] Spinelli, 2018.

[56] Ibid

[57] Ibid

made the scapegoat for everything bad in the world"[58]. His claim was that the entire discussion of "alleged election interference by Russian fake news" was a gift to pro-EU elites – "like Easter and Christmas on the same day" for them – allowing them to demonize critics and push for regulating speech[59]. Meuthen's data were more insinuation than evidence, but he referenced the impending 2019 European elections, accusing Parliament of planning to "run a campaign in its own interest… with EU officials as campaigners producing their own truths". He specifically cited the phrase "quality news should be supported by the government" – something mentioned by pro-EU MEPs like Kalniete or Ward – retorting that "that is propaganda of the finest sort!"[60]. This direct inversion (labeling the EU's counter-disinformation idea as propaganda) is Meuthen's warrant that any government involvement in defining or supporting quality media is inherently propagandistic and illegitimate. He warned that those doing so have no right to complain about alleged Russian election interference. This argument aligns with a libertarian or populist distrust of authorities: the warrant being that the greater threat to free democratic debate might come from EU institutions themselves rather than from Moscow. Meuthen buttressed this with the classic idiom "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones", referencing a German law (NetzDG) on social media content removal as an example of domestic censorship. Thus, his perspective reframed the debate as the EU establishment versus free speech, rather than democracy versus Putin.

These themes – that the EU's response could be worse than the disease and that the disinformation narrative is a cover for elite failures – were echoed by others. Nigel Farage's UKIP colleagues (EFDD) in prior years and speakers like David Coburn (EFDD, UK) in 2018 made similar claims. Coburn ridiculed the idea of fearing Russian propaganda when, in his view, "the EU spent millions on propaganda to pervert the Irish, Dutch, French referendums and to prevent Brexit, aided by the BBC – the Brussels Broadcasting Corporation"[61]. His claim: EU propaganda is the real problem, not the clunky Russian version. As evidence, he pointed to actual EU information campaigns and funding for pro-EU messaging, and alleged bias in mainstream

[58] Meuthen, 2018. *"Russia — the influence of propaganda on EU countries,"*

[59] Ibid

[60] Ibid

[61] Coburn, 2018.

media, arguing that British voters saw through it in the Brexit case. Coburn's warrant was that European institutions themselves manipulate media and therefore have no moral high ground to police truth. He even thanked Russia Today for giving UKIP a platform when we couldn't get on the BBC, framing RT as a defender of free speech against EU suppression. This startling inversion – Kremlin media as champions of freedom – highlights how diametrically opposed the interpretive frames were between the mainstream and the Euroskeptics. In fact, it drew a sharp response: the President of the session rebuked Coburn for abusing the debate format, and mainstream MEPs in earlier debates had accused those like Coburn of effectively serving as mouthpieces for Russian narratives. Tunne Kelam (EPP) in 2016 had pointed out that the irritation of the far-left and far-right in the chamber "proves Mogherini's message hit its targets"[62], insinuating that those protesting the loudest (on free speech grounds, etc.) were precisely the ones influenced by or aligned with Moscow. This reflects a counternarrative from the majority: far from being principled defenders of free expression, the dissenters were portrayed as naïve at best or collaborators at worst. Indeed, several interventions explicitly named colleagues or factions. In 2023, Glucksmann did not shy from saying "the betrayal of our democracies also takes the face of far-right demagogues ready to sell themselves to the enemy", accusing Marine Le Pen's party of indebtedness to Russia and thus parroting Kremlin strategic aims[63]. Cristian Dan Preda (EPP) in 2018 similarly called out Romanian figures and even hinted at certain S&D colleagues "here in Parliament" who "support exactly the same points of view as Russian propaganda"[64] – naming one by name (Maria Grapini)[65]. Such moments underscore that the divide in Parliament was openly acknowledged; skeptics were often isolated via these confrontations.

From the perspective of argumentation, the skeptical MEPs advanced alternative warrants that often centered on upholding liberal freedoms or rectifying Western faults. For example, freedom of expression as an absolute. Greek MEP Georgios Epitideios (NI, far-right) argued in 2016 that "you cannot put Russia's propaganda and ISISs on the same level and expect people to accept

[62] Kelam, 2016.

[63] Glucksmann, 2023.

[64] Dan Preda, 2018.

[65] Ibid

that"[66], and "you cannot target political groups and not expect to be called anti-democratic"[67]. His warrant was that the EU's approach risked violating impartiality and fairness; he stressed that no matter how much effort and money we spend, nothing will work unless we first transmit the EU's founding principles to the youth to make them immune to ISIS propaganda. Notably, he conspicuously omitted Russian propaganda in that remedy, effectively downplaying it. Similarly, Janusz Korwin-Mikke (NI, far-right) declared in 2018 he felt like he was hearing "the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee" in the EP – "the same phrases that we must strengthen our journalists, not allow everyone to say what they want, that the enemy threatens our socialist democracy"[68]. By likening pro-countermeasures MEPs to Soviet censors, he turned their Cold War analogies on their head. Korwin-Mikke's claim was that the EU's stance on propaganda is itself propaganda; he even accused European media of following Goebbels's pattern of lying constantly and all saying the same across Europe. For data, he dredged a Russian-favored conspiracy: citing a leaked call by Estonia's foreign minister in 2014 insinuating that our people (Ukrainian revolutionaries) might have shot protesters – fundamental lies he said the West ignores. This was a direct counter-narrative, effectively accusing the EU of building its Ukraine policy on misinformation. The warrant from Korwin-Mikke: Western hypocrisy and disinformation are as bad as or worse than Russia's. He thus saw no legitimacy in the EU's moral outrage.

These dissenting voices, albeit in the minority, had an impact on the debates by forcing proponents to refine their arguments. Pro-EU MEPs often preempted critics by acknowledging free speech concerns but asserting a hierarchy of values. For instance, Mogherini in 2016 and Jourová in 2023 both emphasized that defending security must go together with defending freedom of expression, and that measures like the Code of Practice are voluntary, not censorshi. In Jourová terms, they added qualifiers: e.g., "while we must protect ourselves from outside interference, we must also build democratic resilience from within"[69] – essentially saying the

[66] Epitideios, 2016. *"EU strategic communication to counteract anti-EU propaganda by third parties"*

[67] Ibid

[68] Korwin-Mikke, 2018.

[69] Jourová, 2023.

anti-disinformation strategy will be balanced and rights-respecting. Likewise, multiple MEPs stressed that exposing disinformation is not the same as banning speech and pointed to the narrow targeting of state-sponsored propaganda outlets rather than general policing of opinion. Nonetheless, the division remained sharp. By 2022–24, the practical convergence on steps like banning RT showed the skeptics had not carried the day in policy terms. Yet their arguments did resonate with a segment of public opinion, and mainstream MEPs took pains to address the slippery slope argument.

In summary, the divergent voices introduced counterclaims such as EU's propaganda about propaganda is the real problem, People can discern truth without paternalistic regulation, and Focusing on Russian meddling ignores our own failures and provokes hysteria. Their rhetorical strategy often involved tu quoque[70] – pointing out Western information sins – and reductio ad absurdum[71] – equating EU information policy proposals with Orwellian or Soviet tactics. While these arguments did not stop the Parliament's march toward tougher measures, they ensured the debates were not one-sided. They also underscore a key analytical insight: the construction of disinformation as a security threat was actively contested and had to overcome liberal-democratic objections to become dominant. This contestation required securitizing actors to articulate why this time is different (e.g., Russian disinformation is so hostile and dangerous that it justifies steps we'd normally hesitate to take). The eventual dominance of the securitized narrative – evidenced by near-unanimous resolutions by 2022–24 – suggests that the majority successfully argued that the exceptional nature of the threat warranted exceptional measures, rebutting the dissenters' accusations of censorship by emphasizing proportionality and necessity. However, those rebuttals had to be made explicit, reflecting how deeply interwoven values of free speech and open society were negotiated in the face of perceived hostile interference.

5.5. Historical Narratives and Memory as a Battleground

[70] Tu quoque (Latin for "you too" or "you likewise") is a logical fallacy that occurs when someone responds to criticism by accusing the accuser of committing the same offense or holding the same flawed beliefs, deflecting the original argument rather than addressing it directly.

[71] a method of proving the falsity of a premise by showing that its logical consequence is absurd or contradictory.

A particularly distinctive theme in these debates is the contest over history and truth, which became more pronounced over time. MEPs not only argued about current events, but also about historical interpretation – highlighting how the Kremlin's disinformation often involves "historical falsification" to justify aggression. By 2024, the Parliament was explicitly framing part of the war of ideas as a "battle for historical memory." This theme connects to disinformation because manipulating history – from World War II narratives to the collapse of the USSR – has been a tool in Russia's propaganda arsenal, and MEPs saw countering those false historical claims as essential to defending European values and partners.

Throughout the debates, references to history served both as backing for arguments and as objects of dispute. Eastern European MEPs, in particular, drew on historical experience. In 2014, as Russia invoked WWII rhetoric to smear Ukraine's new government, we see MEPs like Rebecca Harms (Greens) warning since early on that Moscow aimed to "drive polarization in the EU" and even "supports anti-EU parties", invoking examples from history where propaganda was used to sow division[72]. In 2016, Harms explicitly said we've known for a long time that "Russian propaganda media and parts of Russian politics aim to… undermine democratic debate", and she pointed to specific historical analogies: she noted evidence of bots from "Nizhny Novgorod and the American alt-right collaborating to boost AfD in the German elections"[73] – effectively saying history is repeating itself in new form. Her warrant was that this is not just spontaneous populism; it's deliberately fed by Kremlin revisionist ideology. Her call that the EU must strengthen journalism and that social media companies should be regulated like media also subtly invokes historical precedent: just as Europe once had to regulate broadcasters or print media to protect the public sphere, now it must do so for digital platforms.

By 2022–2024, with Russia openly denying Ukraine's historical nationhood to rationalize its invasion, history moved to center stage. The December 2024 debate was even titled "Russia's disinformation and historical falsification to justify its war of aggression." In that debate, speakers dissected Putin's pseudo-historical claims (e.g. that Ukraine isn't a real country or

[72] Harms, 2018.

[73] Ibid

needs “denazification”[74]). Kaja Kallas opened by flatly stating “there is no rewriting of history that can ever explain away the invasion…but some people just don’t care. Putin’s justification for his war on Ukraine is steeped in lies”[75]. This claim – that Russian war propaganda fundamentally relies on falsifying history – was supported by data: “Russian authorities are revising history textbooks… bringing war propaganda to schools… jailing their own historians like Yuri Dmitriev who uncovered Stalin’s crimes”[76]. The warrant is that a regime that literally rewrites history for its people will also spew historical lies abroad – thus Europeans must vigilantly defend historical truth. Kallas explicitly tied this to European experience: “We have seen this all before… in the Soviet Union”. That collective memory serves as a powerful backing. It implies a moral obligation that never again accepts the distortion of truth that underpinned totalitarianism. MEP Rasa Juknevičienė (EPP, Lithuania) built on this in the same debate, recalling how under Soviet occupation “freedom fighters were called bandits, exiled families were called profiteers” – a “brutal lie” era[77]. She lamented that they had hoped that empire of lies ended in 1991, but “unfortunately, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was the greatest disaster of the last century, and it is being revived in the Kremlin’s aggressive policies, also because Communist crimes were not addressed”[78]. In these sentences, Juknevičienė’s claim is two-fold. Russia’s current aggression revives totalitarian methods and goals from the past, and Europe’s failure to fully reckon with and condemn the USSR’s crimes left space for these narratives to return. The evidence she gives spans decades – from WWII pacts to Soviet atrocities – connecting them to today’s war. Her underlying warrant is that historical truth and accountability are inseparable from contemporary security. As she put it, establishing a special tribunal for Russia’s war crimes in Ukraine would also serve as a condemnation of the crimes committed by the Communists. This suggests that setting the historical record straight (finally

[74] the process of removing the Nazi influence from an area or institution, in particular the investigation and prosecution of the leaders of the Nazi regime in Germany after the Second World War.

[75] Kallas, 2024. “Russia’s disinformation and historical falsification to justify its war of aggression against Ukraine”

[76] Ibid

[77] Juknevičienė, 2024.

[78] Ibid

condemning Soviet-era criminality in an international tribunal context) would undercut Russia's neo-imperial narrative.

This idea – that the war of narratives is partly a war over historical memory – led MEPs to urge proactive measures in the information domain. Many referenced the importance of remembrance and truth-telling. The informal "Reconciliation of European Histories" group in Parliament (alluded to by Juknevičienė as the "informal Remembrance Group") saw getting this debate and a subsequent resolution on the agenda as a victory. Their draft resolution for January (presumably 2025) aims to highlight loud and clear that no distortion of history can justify aggression. That is a direct response to Putin's narrative of a shared Russian Ukrainian destiny and false accusations of Ukrainian "Nazism."

Interestingly, even MEPs who were otherwise moderate became quite firm on historical truths. Tonino Picula (S&D), generally a proponent of dialogue, in 2024 strongly condemned Russia's persistent disinformation and historical falsification, noting that Russia resorts to falsifying history "because their actions have no justification under international law"[79]. He anticipated that some in the debate (likely the usual pro-Kremlin voices) would try to justify Russia and misuse our opinions on social media, which only adds reason for us to defend historical facts even more committedly. The warrant he emphasizes is that facts and truth must be defended as part of defending international law and the present order. Picula then, notably, pivoted to action: the best way to fight disinformation, apart from calling it out, is to respond with concrete action to help Ukraine. In other words, do not just counter lie with words – counter them by ensuring Putin's lies achieve none of their strategic aims (i.e., help Ukraine win). This implies that victory in war and justice for war crimes are themselves ways to vindicate truth.

Even one member of the new far-right "PfE" group, Pierre-Romain Thionnet (France), spoke in 2024 to acknowledge Putin's historical negationism. In an unexpected alignment with the mainstream, Thionnet dissected how Putin's long screeds on history (and even his interview with Tucker Carlson) were an "enterprise of denying the history of a Ukrainian nation", describing it

[79] Picula, 2024.

as a “mental invasion” that accompanied the physical invasion[80]. Thionnet warned that in Western Europe “we are poorly protected against this ideological assault” and many subconsciously believe “Ukraine is Russia’s little sister, Ukrainian a dialect of Russian”[81]. His claim was essentially that Russian historical propaganda finds unwitting echo in Western misconceptions, and thus Europe needs to better educate itself about Eastern European history. The warrant is that failing to correct these myths even in our own minds makes us more susceptible to Kremlin influence or at least less resolute in opposing it. This is a notable admission from a Eurosceptic: it underscores the power of historical framing.

Combining these threads, it’s clear that the Parliament came to view historical truth-telling as a strategic front. We can summarize their stance as: Claim: Russia is using distorted history as a weapon; Data: e.g., Putin’s false articles, re-written textbooks, Soviet nostalgia narratives, denial of Ukrainian statehood; Warrant: therefore, Europe must actively defend historical truth and support historical justice (tribunals, remembrance) to immunize against this weapon. Backing: Europe’s own painful history with totalitarian propaganda (Nazi and Soviet) and its legal/moral commitment (e.g., laws in some countries against Holocaust denial, etc., can be seen as analogous backing for fighting state-sponsored historical lies). Indeed, Juknevičienė’s mention that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact’s legacy was never fully erased implies that fully confronting historical evils is necessary to prevent their recurrence.

It is telling that in 2019 the Parliament passed a resolution equating Nazi and Communist crimes and calling for remembrance[82] – a resolution that Moscow vehemently condemned as rewriting

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[80] Thionnet, 2024. “C’est à une entreprise de négation de l’histoire d’une nation ukrainienne que nous avons assisté. L’invasion de l’Ukraine a été précédée puis accompagnée par une invasion mentale…,” and he references Putin’s long texts and the Tucker Carlson interview.

“Mais ici, en Europe de l’Ouest notamment, nous sommes mal protégés contre cet assaut idéologique… que l’Ukraine est la petite sœur de la Russie, que l’ukrainien est un dialecte du russe….”

[81] Ibid

[82] European Parliament. (2019, 19 September). *Resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe* (2019/2819(RSP)). *Official Journal of the European Union*. Retrieved 20 August 2025, from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019IP0021

history. That political context loomed in 2024's debate. MEPs essentially argued that Moscow is projecting its own historical revisionism onto the West; in reality, it is Putin who rewrites history, while Europe seeks to restore truth. Thus, by the end of the period, the defense of factual history and memory was firmly entrenched as part of the EU's fight against disinformation. This theme adds depth to the overall findings: the disinformation battle is not only about fact-checking contemporary news, but also about long-standing narratives of identity, legitimacy, and collective memory. As these debates reveal, winning the information war is also about winning the history war – ensuring that Europe's understanding of the past is not subverted by those who wish to revive its darkest chapters.

5.6. Conclusion

Over the course of seven debates from 2014 to 2024, the European Parliament's discourse on Russian disinformation evolved from initial alarm to a broad consensus on action – all while navigating fundamental disagreements about values and strategy. The empirical analysis above, structured around major inductive themes, demonstrates how MEPs constructed arguments in claim–data–warrant patterns that reveal both convergence and divergence in their views.

Convergent Narratives: A clear through-line is the construction of Russian disinformation as a serious security threat – an act of hybrid warfare demanding a decisive response. Across parties (barring the extremes), MEPs agreed that the Kremlin's meddling was real, deliberate, and dangerous. They cited tangible examples (from fake news in Ukraine and Syria to meddling in Brexit and Catalonia) and marshaled these as evidence that Europe's democratic institutions and social cohesion were under attack. The warrants underpinning this narrative often invoked existential stakes: protecting democracy, sovereignty, and the very idea of truth. Hence, a securitizing logic took hold: extraordinary threats justify extraordinary measures. By the late 2010s, calls for EU strategic communication capabilities, cybersecurity, media regulation, and even sanctions on disinformation agents were not outlier ideas but mainstream positions. MEPs largely converged on endorsing instruments like the East StratCom Task Force, the Digital Services Act's anti-disinformation provisions, and the banning of Kremlin media outlets – steps that would have been scarcely conceivable when the debate began in 2014. This represents a

significant interpretive shift: disinformation moved from a peripheral issue to a core matter of European security and policy.

Divergent Voices: Yet, amid this convergence, there was a persistent undercurrent of dissent. A minority of MEPs contested the dominant framing, raising concerns about free expression, the credibility of evidence, and the EU's own role. Their claims – that the fake news crusade might become a witch-hunt or that the EU should look in the mirror before pointing fingers – forced the majority to clarify and sometimes adjust their arguments. These skeptics often employed warrants grounded in classical liberal or populist reasoning: that censorship is more dangerous than disinformation, or that elites use external threats as excuses to silence domestic criticism. While the weight of parliamentary opinion did not side with them (notably, every resolution on the topic passed with large majorities), the presence of these voices ensured that debates addressed potential trade-offs between security and freedom. In reconstructing these arguments, we see that whenever the Parliament moved closer to securitization, a counterargument about safeguarding civil liberties arose in tandem – exemplifying the push-and-pull of a pluralist democracy trying to respond to a threat without losing its soul. Over time, the dominant argument absorbed these concerns by emphasizing proportionate responses and repeatedly affirming commitment to fundamental rights even while taking an aggressive stance against Kremlin propaganda.

Thematic Synthesis: Inducing the themes directly from the speeches allowed it to capture how MEPs themselves framed the issue. The analysis identified themes of hybrid warfare, EU countermeasures, societal resilience, internal dissent, and historical narrative. These are not isolated silos but interconnected facets of one overarching story i.e. the EU waking up to a new kind of conflict and debating how to win it without losing itself. For example, the theme of hybrid warfare (Theme 1) provides the urgency that propels EU institutional countermeasures (Theme 2). The push for societal resilience (Theme 3) reflects an understanding that long-term victory lies in fortifying democratic society – a response to both the external threat and some internal criticisms. The dissenting voices (Theme 4) kept the debate grounded in core European values, forcing proponents to refine their warrants (e.g., explicitly rejecting censorship and insisting measures target only hostile manipulation, not genuine debate). Finally, the focus on historical narratives (Theme 5) emerged as Russia increasingly leaned on revisionist history; it

added moral weight to the EU's position by linking today's struggle to Europe's darkest lessons from the 20th century. The Parliament's argumentation thus evolved a rich claim: We must treat Russian disinformation as an attack on peace and democracy. It gathered data: from contemporary fake news incidents to decades-old treaties. It built a warrant: because if left unchecked, this information war can divide and weaken Europe from within. It invoked backing: international law, European unity, historical truth. And it addressed qualifiers and rebuttals: acknowledging the need to protect free discourse even as we defend against abuse.

CHAPTER 6. Discussion & Conclusion

6.1. Discursive Framing and Securitizing Moves

The evidence suggests that the European Parliament (EP) debates largely coalesced around a securitized framing of Russian disinformation as an urgent threat to European democracy and security. In line with securitization theory, speakers treated disinformation as a speech act that casts Russian disinformation as an existential threat to the EU's democratic order (Flohr, 2025). Across party lines, MEPs often invoked experts, election reports, and incidents (e.g. the 2014 Crimea annexation, 2016 electoral meddling, 2022 war) to back the claim that foreign disinformation campaigns endanger elections, civil society, and European integration. This created a broad convergence: most voices agreed that such information operations fit a hybrid-warfare logic and required serious attention. For instance, the study of EP debates notes that over time the discourse on digital disinformation has evolved and become more complex: initial problem definitions tied disinformation to conflicts, while later discussions added technological dimensions; the identified actors expanded beyond foreign states to include social media platforms and bot networks; and recommended actions shifted from vague societal resilience to stricter regulation (even emergency measures). The study's findings echo this pattern. The referent of Russian disinformation broadened, and the collectively proposed policy solutions hardened over the decade.

At the same time, important divergences and contestations emerged. Although the underlying threat perception was largely shared, MEPs varied in how they framed the problem's causes and appropriate remedies. Some speeches emphasized geostrategic warfare — e.g. calling RT and Sputnik weapons of Kremlin influence — while others cautioned against framing social media or civil-society actors as threats. In some debates, arguments for robust state responses (sanctions, content regulation) clashed with liberal-democratic arguments. Notably, a minority of speakers urged a rights-based perspective, warning that counter-disinformation policies could unduly curb free speech and press freedom. These counter-discourses explicitly rejected heavy securitizing moves. For example, references to media literacy, open societies, and democratic debate were invoked as backings to warrants like truth must be contested, not enforced. The tension between emphasizing security and protecting democracy is thus evident in the data. Policy measures like

platform regulation and disinformation laws were supported by broad majorities but also subjected to critical rebuttals on civil-liberties grounds. This pattern mirrors broader European debates on the security–freedom nexus. An EP majority framed disinformation as an external assault to be met by extraordinary means, while dissenting voices called for strengthening societal resilience and transparency rather than government censorship.

The EP debates also show the collective securitization dynamic at work in the EU. Securitization literature emphasizes the role of empowering audience and recursive interaction between securitizing actors and their publics (Floyd, 2018). Here, the EU institutions (Commission, Parliament and Council acting together) function as both speaker and audience. Sperling and Webber observe that in EU and NATO contexts the organization is ‘simultaneously a securitising actor’ acting on behalf of its members ‘and a framework of audience participation’ by which those same members agree to, modify, accept or reject the securitizing narrative (Sperling & Webber, 2019). This study confirms this: the Parliament, as collective representative body, helped articulate a common threat narrative (e.g. cross-party resolutions on disinformation), but also provided space for amendments and debate. In practice, the EU’s eventual policy outputs (sanctions on Russian propaganda channels, Codes of Practice, the Digital Services Act) indicate that the securitizing move generally secured audience acceptance at the EU level. At the same time, as others have shown, perfect unanimity was not required. Likewise, our analysis notes that despite isolated opposition, EP debates tilted decisively toward securitization. The threshold for collective securitization was therefore achieved: the relevant EU audience accepted both the threat framing and the resulting policy measures (even if certain MEPs remained skeptical).

6.2. Methodological Reflections

Applying a Toulmin-based Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA) proved effective for mapping how arguments about disinformation were constructed. ADA examines what is being said, to whom, and in what context (Hajer, 2006), breaking down each speech into claims (threat declarations), grounds/evidence (reports, examples), warrants (underlying assumptions, e.g. democracy requires free elections), and rebuttals. This micro-structure analysis illuminated the internal logic of securitizing arguments. For example, many majoritarian speeches paired the claim Russian disinformation is a grave threat to EU democracy with grounds drawn from

electoral data or reports of foreign meddling, and with warrants such as the normative principle that preserving democratic integrity justifies extraordinary action. In contrast, dissenting arguments often invoked counter-warrants backed by legal principles. Systematically coding these elements revealed patterns: certain warrants (e.g. sovereignty, rule of law) recurred among supporters of tough measures, while others (e.g. civil liberties, free media) characterized counter-voices. This granularity would be difficult to capture via broad frame analysis alone. By applying the Toulmin model, we not only identified *which* securitizing moves succeeded (strongly warranted, well-backed claims) and which faltered (weak backings, unresolved rebuttals) but also traced shifts over time. It is a methodological contribution to EP security discourse studies that goes beyond content counts: ADA exposes the structure of argumentation, highlighting how convergence and divergence of framing emerge from the interplay of claims and justifications. As Hajer notes, such analysis puts emphasis on argumentation as interplay in the context of practice (Hajer, 2006), enabling us to interpret not just topics but the quality and weight of arguments across pluralist debates.

Situating these findings in broader theory, our analysis underscores the nuances of *collective securitization* in a pluralist context. The EP did not rubber-stamp an external narrative; it debated, negotiated and at times contested the threat frames. This reflects that securitization is a multifaceted, contested, and dynamic process (Stivas, 2024). In practice, the Parliament's approval of EU-wide measures (e.g. the DSA, stronger disinfo strategies) can be read as audience consent that gave the securitizing move legitimacy.

However, normative contestation remained evident. Theory reminds us that securitization is not value-neutral: it highlights how specific issues are constructed as matters of urgent and existential threat" which can justify "extreme and potentially excessive responses (Flohr, 2025). The findings show the EP legislature grappling with that tension. On one hand, formal consensus on the threat enabled collective action (a shared threat perception in the Copenhagen sense), but on the other hand, democratic procedures ensured that the move was continually reframed and justified. Contestations over the proper balance of measures (media literacy vs regulation, EU vs national competency, security vs rights) kept the issue open. This interplay in a pluralist assembly reflects the normative contestation underscored by security scholars. Securitizing moves in democracies face pushback from competing values. In sum, the EP case exemplifies a

democratic securitization process where majority concerns about security were moderated by minority concerns about freedom.

6.3. Implications for EU Governance and the Security–Freedom Nexus

These discursive patterns have real implications for EU policy and democratic resilience. The EP's securitizing discourse both reflects and propels EU responses to information warfare. As the Commission's recent strategy documents show, the EU has indeed followed through: from the 2021-22 Code of Practice on Disinformation (introducing demonetization of false content and transparency rules) to the landmark Digital Services Act (DSA). The DSA, a key legislative step, embeds many ideas raised in Parliament (platform accountability, risk assessments on disinformation, etc.). Observers note the DSA as a positive step toward curbing online disinformation, though with caveats (Pornschlegel, 2024). This underscores the chapter's central theme that measures intended to protect democratic security must themselves be carefully calibrated so as not to erode open discourse.

At the same time, the EP debates themselves suggest ways the EU can bolster resilience without self-undermining. The emphasis on media literacy, fact-checking networks, and "whole society" approaches (as mentioned in debates) signals recognition that societal immunity is crucial. In its disinformation strategy, the German Federal Foreign Office has framed the issue as best addressed through democratic collaboration, advanced technological monitoring, and reinforcement of rule-of-law institutions and media freedom—not through sweeping censorship (Federal Foreign Office, 2024). This view resonates with the normative ideal that healthy democracies mitigate information threats by empowering informed citizenry, consistent with our finding that plural debate and transparency are themselves bulwarks against propaganda.

More broadly, our analysis suggests that institutionalizing lessons from the securitization debate is key. The EU's legislative toolkit – from the Democracy Action Plan to the DSA and AI Act – must remain mindful of the underlying discourse. Measures must be proportionate, evidence-based, and respectful of fundamental rights. The patterns of consensus we observed imply that European institutions have both a mandate and a responsibility to act. Yet the recorded divergences remind policymakers to justify security measures in terms compatible with liberal democracy. This balancing act is at the core of the security–freedom nexus; how to defend the

polity's core values without sacrificing them. As disinformation campaigns grow more sophisticated, the EP, and in broader sense, the EU will have to continue this discursive negotiation.

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that European Parliament debates from 2014–2024 broadly framed Russian disinformation as a serious security threat but also reflected the pluralist contestations inherent in Europe's political system. A cross-party consensus emerged around seeing foreign propaganda as part of an existential challenge to EU democracy – a framing that enabled collective securitization (evident in sanctions and new regulations). At the same time, the EP data reveals clear patterns of divergence: ideological differences over how far to go, and normative debates over civil liberties and democratic openness. By applying a Toulmin-based ADA methodology, we were able to unpack how claims, evidence, and assumptions were marshaled on both sides of this debate. This methodological lens uncovered not only that Russia's disinformation was portrayed as a threat, but how that narrative was constructed, justified, and sometimes challenged.

The analysis also suggests pathways for further inquiry. Comparative studies could investigate whether national parliaments or other EU institutions employ similar securitization narratives or whether divergences prevail. Longitudinal work extending beyond 2024 might reveal how patterns of convergence and contestation evolve in light of technological and geopolitical change. Ethnographic or network approaches could illuminate which MEP groups consistently advance particular warrants. Finally, normative studies might probe how democratic values are balanced against restrictive measures, for instance by examining the domestic implementation of the Digital Services Act or the European Democracy Action Plan.

In conclusion, this discussion highlights a profound paradox. The battle against external information manipulation is simultaneously a battle over the meaning of democratic norms themselves. Protecting Europe from disinformation cannot be achieved solely through technical adjustments or regulatory instruments; it also requires steering the discourse through which the threat is understood. The European Parliament illustrates that collective positions against disinformation can indeed be forged, but only through the process of debate, justification, and

compromise. Ultimately, the war against disinformation may be won or lost not only in social media feeds, but in the stories, we tell each other about democracy itself.

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Appendix: European Parliament Debates (17 Sep, 2019 Debate was selected as supplementary debate – explained in Methodology chapter)

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5. European Parliament. (2019, September 17). *Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes (debate)* [Verbatim report of proceedings]. Retrieved 20 August 2025, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-09-17-ITM-011_EN.html

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