

DISINFORMATION

When you are plunged into chaos

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Electoral disinformation

The use of social media dynamics and distorted narratives is gaining prominence, especially on the part of some political parties

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Why does disinformation stand out during election time?

During political campaigns, politicians seek to strengthen their influence on citizens in order to attract their votes, and the use of social media dynamics and distorted narratives is gaining prominence, especially on the part of some parties. The appeal to vote for a particular faction may not be exercised directly, but through key themes that are then used as banners in their political speeches. One such example is anti-immigration narratives. In recent years, serious cases of foreign interference in elections and undue investments on social media have been detected.



How can we understand the commitment to political disinformation on social media?

Disinformation distributed via social networks has several advantages. It has a low cost and a high impact. It can reach a global audience of thousands of people, using legitimate advertising techniques, targeting specific audiences, micro-segments, reveals a study about European elections: [Disinformation and Elections to the European](#).

Is politics one of the targets of the most disinformation?

According to citizens' perceptions, politics is the area with the most disinformation. The 2024 Digital News Report reveals that 36 per cent of respondents in 47 countries surveyed say they have come across political disinformation in the last week.

Politics is more permeable to disinformation due to its intrinsic characteristics: it is fuelled by the exercise of influence over voters and constantly appeals to emotional aspects.

How disinformation can work policy?

1. Satire or parody: "It's just a joke":

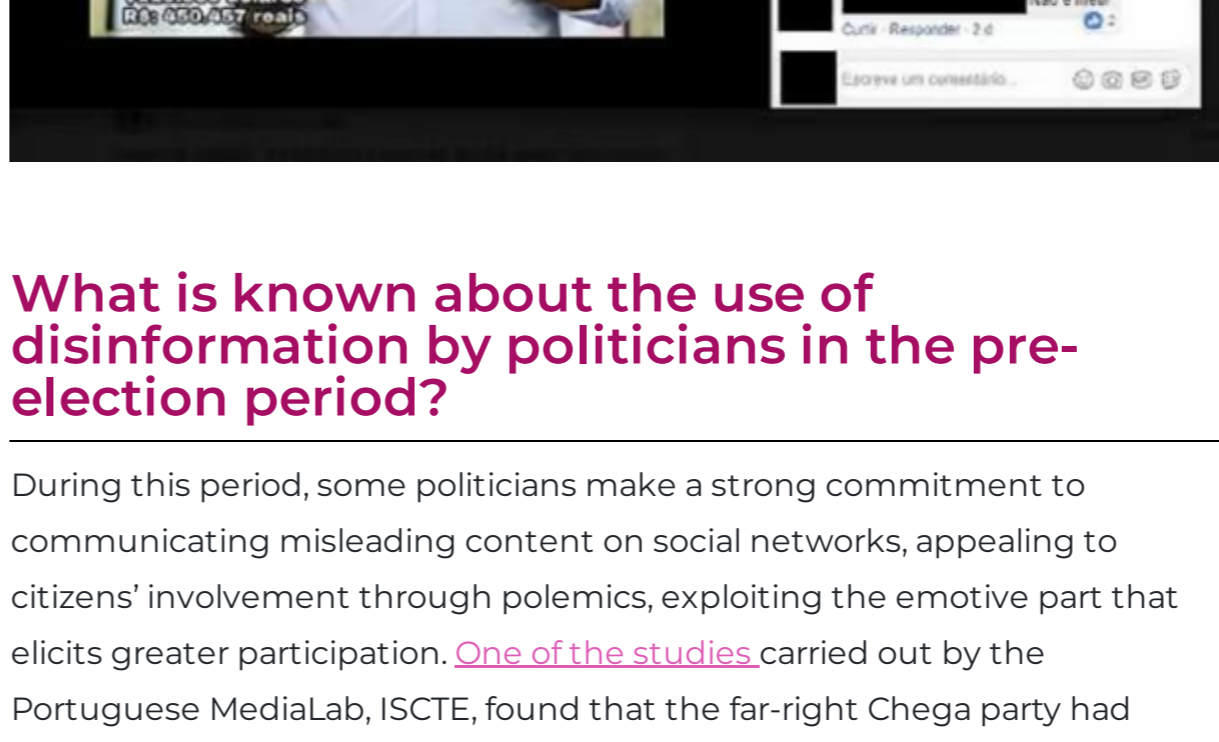
The tampering with a caption attributed to Labour's Stamer, the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, prompted jokes and laughter. What happened? The British Conservative Party manipulated a video and replaced Stamer's answer with a five-second image in which he hears a question but can't answer immediately, implying that he can't come up with a ready-made statement. The result: the Labour Party politician appears to say "Labour has no plan for Brexit". When confronted with the tampering, the justification was that it was just a joke. The full [story](#) First Draft News. Researcher Gustavo Cardoso, a full professor at ISCTE-IUL, underlined the weight of [humour in devaluing disinformation](#) in one of his television commentaries.

1. False context and manipulation:

The use of context alteration has been widely used by political disinformation at different times. One example is the use of a photo of Catarina Martins, a Left Bloc politician, in 2018, showing a watch, which is presented as expensive. The photo is real, but it has been added to alter the meaning of the message, indicating that this adornment costs more than 20 thousand euros. [More information here](#). This kind of disinformation model with political personalities was used in Brazil.



Fernando Haddad, the PT's candidate for the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections, has been the subject of a similar target controversy. [See the image](#).



What is known about the use of disinformation by politicians in the pre-election period?

During this period, some politicians make a strong commitment to communicating misleading content on social networks, appealing to citizens' involvement through polemics, exploiting the emotive part that elicits greater participation. [One of the studies](#) carried out by the Portuguese MediaLab, ISCTE, found that the far-right Chega party had almost twice as many interactions as the rest of the political parties on the networks analysed and that, among the misleading narratives, anti-immigration speeches had the greatest reach.

Here are two examples

1. Image of the Virgin Mary

In one case, by their official online social media accounts, the far-right CHEGA party and André Ventura shared a video (image below) in which two Muslim men are depicted destroying a statue of the Virgin Mary, in which they say: "In Portugal, their culture and religion must be accepted, namely the building of mosques. But they don't respect the religion of others! After all, what kind of equality is this, where we respect them but they don't respect us?".

Tabela 3. Exemplo de publicações denunciadas sobre o vídeo da destruição de uma estátua da Virgem Maria e respetivo alcance

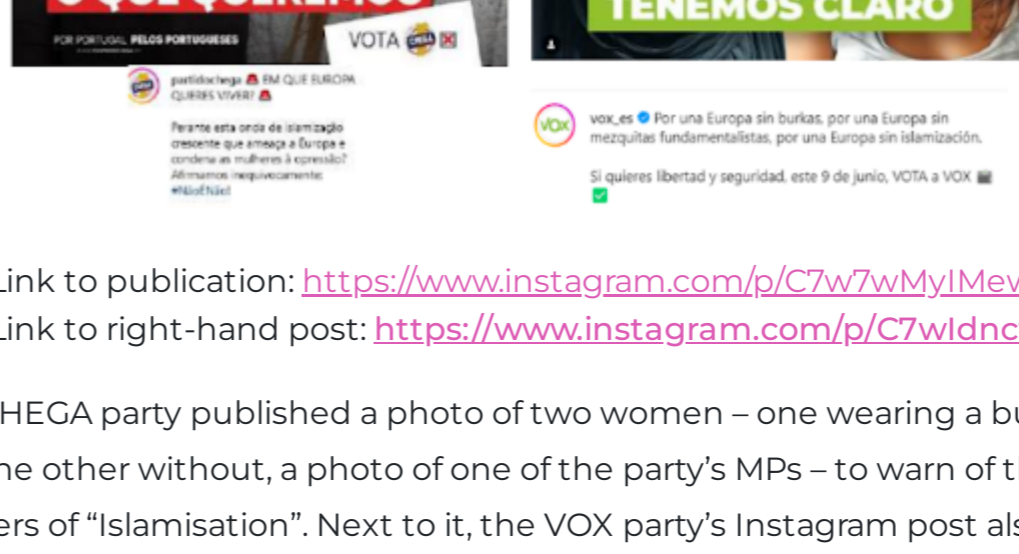
Esta publicação registou:	Esta publicação registou:
20.828 likes	2.054 likes
2812 comentários	12.852 comentários
23.787 interações totais	15.888 interações totais
Link para publicação	Link para publicação

The video received more than 40,000 interactions (likes, comments and shares). However, this is disinformation. The video dates from 2013 and is not related to the Portuguese or European context. It shows an Islamic cleric announcing the end of symbol worship after the Islamic conquest of Christian territories in Syria in 2013. This same video has had several lives. It was used on different dates by far-right movements and shared by Donald Trump in 2017.

2. Islamisation of Europe

The MediaLab academics also present an example of disinformation discourse that has crossed borders. Discover the differences in the image.

Tabela 4. Publicações no Instagram do partido Chega de Portugal e partido Vox de Espanha sobre a islamização da Europa



1. Link to publication: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C7wMylMew/>
2. Link to right-hand post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C7vldnctRkR/>

The CHEGA party published a photo of two women – one wearing a burka and the other without, a photo of the other party's MPs – to warn of the dangers of "Islamisation". Next to it, the VOX party's Instagram post also uses a graphic of a bare-faced woman next to a figure dressed in a burka. The slogan, however, is the same: "What kind of Europe do you want?".

What do we know about how foreign interference in elections works?

The European External Action's second report on Foreign Intelligence Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) highlights doctored information about Ukraine – which was also identified as the main target of the activities – attacks on institutions such as the European Union, the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation NATO and on the main media, as well as politicians.

The report reveals the growing threats to democratic integrity, notably through coordinated disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks. In the sample used, 149 concerned organisations, mostly the EU and its member states, as well as NATO, and media companies such as Euronews, Reuters, Deutsche Welle and the New York Times. Other targets were the LGBTIQ+ community. The sample also revealed that 59 individuals were the target of manipulated information, from Volodymyr Zelensky to his wife, and French President Emmanuel Macron.

What do we know about specific cases?

The 2nd [EEAS on Foreign Intelligence Manipulation and Interference \(FIMI\)](#) identifies different stages.

Elections in Spain in 2023

Phase 1: Months before the elections in Poland, an official account was created by the Russian government on Telegram that suggested the public follow a long list of information channels.

Phase 2: a network of pro-Russian hackers released important documents in a misleading way, with the clear purpose of damaging the image of Spain and Europe and fuelling doubts about the integrity of political systems.

Phase 3: Some of the accounts mentioned in phase 1 spread to other platforms. Two days before the elections, a website, similar to the official website of the polling stations by the ex-terrorist organisation ETA. After the elections, a YouTube account of the Spanish RT programme published a video of the results, in which it was said that, regardless of the results, Spain would follow the wishes of EU and NATO leaders.

Elections in Poland in 2023

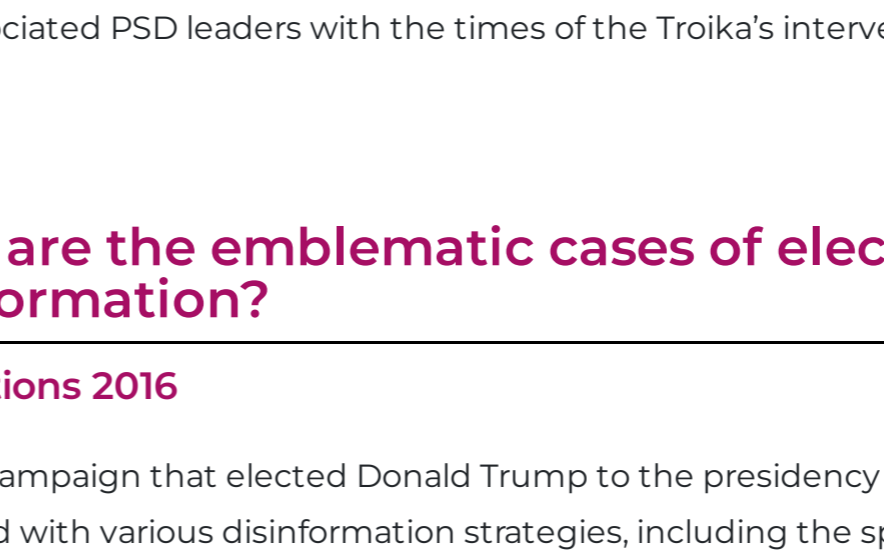
Phase 1: Months before the elections in Poland, some state-linked media outlets from neighbouring Belarus set up channels that were used to broadcast Belarusian and Russian news on a daily basis. This period was also used to attack candidates through the use of manipulated videos.

Phase 2: Days before the elections, a Polish website shared messages directly targeting a candidate in the parliamentary elections. The site mimicked a domain that had previously been blocked. The content was also disseminated via X. The aim was above all to discredit the candidates.

Phase 3: Two days before the elections, Polish media published a video of a police intervention at three polling stations, prompted by an anonymous bomb threat. The video had been altered and the explosions had already taken place. This manipulated content was amplified by unattributed pro-Russian accounts. [More information](#)

Elections in Portugal 2024

Portuguese investigators of MediaLab, ISCTE – IUL, also detected the circulation of irregular paid adverts on YouTube and Facebook, wrongly associating politicians with corruption during the run-up to the 2024 legislative elections in Portugal. [Play on RTP](#).



One of them showed newspaper front pages in a decontextualized way, associating Socialist Party leaders with corruption. In another example, a page associated PSD legislators with the times of the Troika's intervention in Portugal.

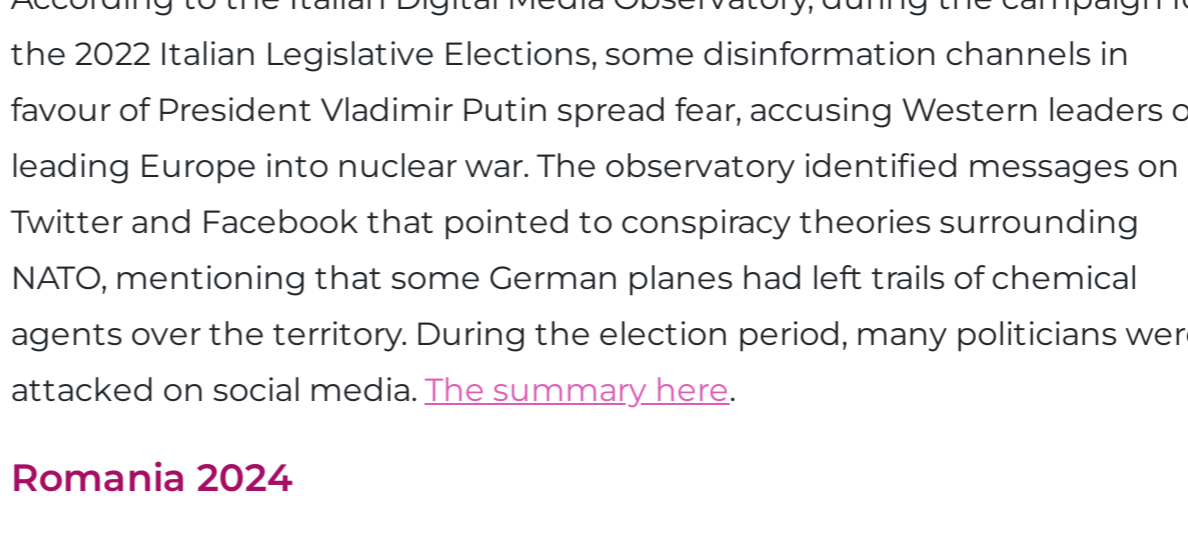
What are the emblematic cases of electoral disinformation?

US elections 2016

The first campaign that elected Donald Trump to the presidency was associated with various disinformation strategies, including the spread of fake news, the use of bots and targeted adverts based on data collected on voter profiles. Facebook admitted that Cambridge Analytica – the political advisory firm linked to Steve Bannon that ran Trump's digital campaign – collected private data from 87 million Facebook users, which it then used to send targeted political advertising according to the group of individuals. The company later pleaded guilty to collecting the data but did not admit to misusing it. [More information](#). [One of the reports on the subject](#).

Brexit 2016

One of the most cited examples of electoral disinformation relates to the run-up to the Brexit vote, which resulted in the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) in 2016. The proliferation of deliberately manipulated anti-immigration narratives, present in the analysis of multiple newspaper headlines, in the run-up to the referendum contributed to the construction of an opinion in favour of the UK leaving the EU, as can be read in this [article](#) by Portuguese fact-checker Polygraph.



Source: image taken from Polygraph fact checker

Elections in Italy 2022

According to the Italian Digital Media Observatory, during the campaign for the 2022 Italian Legislative Elections, some disinformation channels in favour of President Vladimir Putin spread fear, accusing Western leaders of leading Europe into nuclear war. The observatory identified messages on Twitter and Facebook that pointed to conspiracy theories surrounding NATO, mentioning that some German planes had left trails of chemical agents over the territory. During the election period, many politicians were attacked on social media. [The summary here](#).

Romania 2024

The presidential election in Romania in 2024 had different controversies, involving alleged foreign interference and disinformation. An independent candidate unexpectedly won, that was Eurosceptic and pro-Russian. And it was suggested that his victory was the result of a coordinated action to manipulate the algorithm of TikTok. A previously hidden network on TikTok became very active in the two weeks before the first round of elections. Additionally, almost a million euros were spent on the campaign by an individual who supported Calin Georgescu.

The nationalist Georgescu won the first round of presidential elections on November 24, with 23% of the votes, ahead of the European candidate Elena Lasconi, with 19%. The Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the first round of elections on December 6th and ordered the resumption of the electoral process. [More information](#).

What are the strategies to combat disinformation during the electoral period?

Fact-checking by professionals has emerged as an effective strategy for restoring the truth, with a double effect: revealing the description of the facts in the public arena and discouraging politicians from maintaining false discourses. Media literacy actions have also been gaining prominence precisely to prepare citizens to find sources and credible information.

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