

# TACKLING DISINFORMATION AND INACCURACY: EURO-MED DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN ONLINE INVASION

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## Introduction

The two shores of the Mediterranean, like the broader world, have been brought closer with the advent of thousands of channels of international information exchange. Despite this digital proximity, the current media landscape has grown rather saturated, allowing for the proliferation of disinformation and general inaccuracy in the context of politicised issues. In this regard, disinformation exacerbated existing tensions and rifts between the Southern Neighbourhood (SN) of the European Union (EU) and the EU itself. This is particularly exemplified by the SN's reaction to the EU's response and policy in regard to Russian aggression towards Ukraine (Sleibi, 2022). Although SN media outlets and online users demonstrate solidarity and sympathy towards the Ukrainian population, specifically Ukrainian migrants, heavy criticism has also been levied against the EU, its institutions, and its member states. Instances of this criticism primarily focus on the alleged double standards and/or hypocrisy demonstrated by EU institutions and member states in their treatment of Ukrainian refugees as compared to refugees from the SN. Additionally, many have also taken note of the draconian policy taken by the EU in this conflict, and pointed to its softer stance on other aggressors in the past. Going beyond whether this criticism is justified, the veracity of the information on the conflict currently circulating online should be considered. Moreover, a question can be asked about why the media landscape has been heavily populated by disinformation despite EU attempts to mitigate the phenomenon through policy and action (European Commission, 2020b). Notably, in referring to disinformation, this brief adheres to definitions used by the EU, and refers to disinformation as a combination of false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is propagated with the intention of causing public harm or

realising some form of economic or political profit (European Commission, 2022).

Crucially, this brief points out how the challenges of disinformation in this conflict context have yet to be balanced along the market logic of supply and demand. The last two decades have demonstrated a strong focus by the EU, and specifically the European Commission (EC), on countering the supply side of disinformation, being the sources and content of misleading and false narratives (European Commission, 2022). Alternatively, Russian efforts in the region over an analogous time period indicate a drive to develop outlets that directly amplify points of division and distrust within SN audiences to serve its national interests (Janadze, 2022; OECD, 2022). This amplification creates a demand for disinformation, namely being a mode of engagement fraud that validates negative perceptions, confirms existing narratives/doubts, and weaponises distrust in an effort to fuel resentment against targeted actors like the EU. With account to this imbalance, how have the EU's disinformation countermeasures restricted its ability to counter the phenomenon in the SN? How can the EU curb the spread of further disinformation in the SN? By investigating the scope and procedures behind current EU disinformation policies, and using social media metrics to recognise Russian influence on the media landscape, this policy brief highlights the necessity of incorporating EU policies that cater to the demand side of digital disinformation.

In subsequent sections, the current state of the incorporation of disinformation countermeasures in EU policy will be examined with reference to the guiding rationale behind their implementation. Particular attention will be given to the limited geographical and linguistic scope of EU supply-side disinformation measures which often come in the form of guidelines and voluntary moderation efforts, and the increasing demand for digital disinformation by online users. Evidence collected from the online media platforms (Twitter and Telegram), and primary Russia-state-owned disinformation distributors (Russia Today (RT) Arabic, Sputnik Arabic) will be presented with the intent of cataloguing ongoing false narratives and their popularity among Arabic-speaking audiences. Finally, this brief will provide policy recommendations on how the EU can stem the current pattern of disinformation and impede the further expansion of Russian influence.

## **The Southern Neighbourhood: the restricted scope of disinformation countermeasures**

In looking at disinformation campaigns populating the EU-SN online space, and appraising EU countermeasures, the language and context biases underlying this phenomenon should be recognised. Overall, English-language platforms have a more robust history and mandate for content and user moderation (OECD, 2022; Oweidat, 2022), while disinformation countermeasures by the EU are mostly limited to the immediate region (European Commission, 2022), even when they may target platforms and technologies that cater to Arabic-speaking audiences. A notable instance of this can be seen in the decision of EU officials to internally block the broadcasting of content from, and access to, Russian-state-owned media outlets RT and Sputnik, and their social media outlets (Council of the EU, 2022). The same ban has not been extended to the international, and specifically SN, online space. With this in mind, it can also be noted that Arab diasporas in the EU continue to have access to Arabic-language media outlets with dubious credibility.

Moreover, the spirit and implementation of EU countermeasures hinge on liberal-democratic principles and values (Ask EP, 2022), many of which do not apply to the character of online spaces in the SN and broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Oweidat, 2022). The fight against disinformation is commonly conceptualised as the fight to protect the “democratic information space” (European Commission, 2021). This sentiment is a fundamental facet of existing policies, as the EU has largely focused on building public trust in democratic institutions as a keystone of fighting disinformation in the region (European

Commission, 2018b; European Commission, 2020a). Although this is a feasible strategy on the EU-level, SN audiences demonstrate lower trust towards their institutions and state media outlets (al-Tahat, 2021), and appear to more often trust and engage with news stories shared via social media (Janadze, 2022).

Authoritarian, semi-authoritarian and neighbouring SN regimes consistently embrace principles of the “digital surveillance, repression and control” of online spaces (POMEPS, 2021). These measures have been extended to the (apparent) sponsorship of disinformation campaigns (al-Tahat, 2021; Hassan & Schaer, 2022), and a perception by SN audiences that facts are actively being concealed by their governments. Subsequently, this practice of media repression has pushed the SN public to employ less credible sources like social media, and pursue media narratives that feed particular (often misleading) worldviews and biases (Oweidat, 2022; POMEPS, 2021). Such characteristics distinguish the SN digital space from that of the EU, and when combined with the liberal-democratic principles underlying EU disinformation countermeasures, strongly indicate that EU models to counter the supply of disinformation cannot be easily exported to the SN. The following sections will further elaborate on this inference, and later point to how the reliance of SN audiences on social media can be viewed as a demand problem, rather than purely a supply problem.

## **Supply-side measures and limitations of European co-regulation**

The EU's approach to countering digital disinformation strongly relies on the implementation of supply-side measures. Disinformation countermeasures that follow this rationale reinforce member state capacities to counter disinformation efforts by relevant actors, and limit their presence on online platforms by advocating for stronger private-sector digital guidelines and codes of practice (European Commission, 2021). Supply-side policies have also demonstrated a tendency of focusing on actual online content and its truth value, subsequently leading to tailored countermeasures (i.e., information directories, fact-checking, stakeholder mapping, data-exchange, debunking, counternarratives) (European Commission, 2022).

In observing the construction and application of disinformation countermeasures by the EU, it is clear that there is a strong preference for cooperation and dialogue. Countermeasures rarely come in the form of direct regulation, but are rather based on the creation of cooperation frameworks between experts, academics, researchers, member states, influential internet platform corporations, and media organisations (Durach, Bargaoanu, & Nastasiu, 2020). This operative philosophy can be defined as a co-regulation procedure. In practice, by relying on the co-regulation procedure, the EU aims to reach a regulatory compromise in which a series of measures are implemented voluntarily by internet corporations/platforms under the monitoring of an authority (i.e., the EC) (Alaphilippe et al., 2019). Further manifestations of this procedure are visible in expert contributions (e.g. Report of the independent High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation) (European Commission, 2018a), calls for online platforms to self-regulate and moderate their content, task forces (e.g., East StratCom) (European Union External Action Service, 2021c), and Codes of Practice (e.g., the 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation) (European Commission, 2021).

Altogether, despite the capacity of the aforementioned countermeasures and policies to impede the spread of disinformation, their restricted and often voluntary implementation within the European online space limits their applicability to the SN. The EU co-regulation procedure is fundamentally a private-public mechanism that aims to set rules and standards. Exporting this approach to the SN could allow for symbolic commitments, but the voluntary nature of implementations, and the required goodwill on behalf of all involved parties, would yield inconsistent results. Moreover, the supranational approach to coordinating the implementation of standards does not translate well to the fragmented SN and broader authoritarian-

dominated MENA region. In essence, current EU supply-side countermeasures persist as an internal EU regulatory mechanism; a European solution.

## **Demand and dominant narratives on Ukraine: Russia and Europe**

### **(European) approaches to tackling the demand for disinformation**

Looking at the issue from the demand perspective, the EU's expansion beyond voluntary measures should be commended, but not overstated in its ability to impede the spread of disinformation internally, and within the SN. The conventional view of disinformation as the identification and subsequent elimination of false and fake content is functionally insufficient in the face of a growing public demand for disinformation. When aspiring to tackle this phenomenon, the spread of digital disinformation should be understood as both content-related fraud in the case of supply, and engagement-related fraud in the case of demand (NED, 2018). The latter definition encompasses the effect of disinformation on audiences, implying that the consequences of technologically-driven engagement include the further legitimisation and spread of disinformation campaigns.

Increasing instances of online disinformation seek to create a compelling emotional effect. Social media platforms, which operate on an ad-based business model and rely on the monetisation of content, can be seen as the main driver for this view of disinformation. Messages on such platforms often exploit emotional appeals and visual discourses which engage users and create a sense of ownership over misleading or incorrect content [users have the ability to endorse, contribute to, modify, and share disinformation messages that match their worldview] (Asmolov, 2019; Durach, Bargaoanu, & Nastasiu, 2020). In essence, such disinformation campaigns work to confirm existing doubts and weaponise distrust. Vivid and vocal narratives garner more attention, even when they are misleading or incorrect.

In the last five years, the EU has largely succeeded in introducing policies that seek to tackle the locus of engagement-related fraud in disinformation campaigns, namely by seeking to regulate the manner by which new digital ecosystems function (Durach, Bargaoanu, & Nastasiu, 2020). Specifically, this refers to the reliance of such ecosystems on algorithms, big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence. Prominent policy reforms in this direction include the Digital Services Act (Regulation 2022/2065) and the Digital Markets Act (Regulation 2022/1925), which set out new rules for digital services like social media, online marketplaces, messaging applications and other online platforms. The value of the aforementioned policies lies in their aim to: expose practices such as targeted advertising and extreme personalisation of content, define obligations for media platforms to prevent abuse of their systems, set new rules on transparency and content recommendation, and initiate a cooperation process among public authorities to ensure correct enforcement within the European single market (European Commission, 2022). At this point in time, the actual effect of such policies on disinformation is hard to estimate, yet their introduction indicates an evolving view of disinformation and its channels of output.

Overall, the aforementioned policies are a significant step in the right direction, and do well to curb engagement-related disinformation within the EU but, as with the previously examined supply-side measures, have limited effect on the SN. The aforementioned policies may present the EU media environment as an impartial alternative for SN audiences, but this meagre offering will do little to curb the current wave of disinformation in the SN. The EU is making great steps in inoculating itself against disinformation internally, yet when looking towards tackling the spread of disinformation that influences the relationship between the EU and SN, further considerations are necessary. Primarily, the role of external actors (i.e., Russia) in directly amplifying points of division and distrust within SN audiences.

## Russian media: driving demand for digital disinformation

Exploring the tone of current SN online discourses towards the Ukraine-Russia conflict, and particularly towards the EU as an actor in this conflict, anti-Western and anti-democratic perceptions and narratives are paramount (Janadze, 2022; Oweidat, 2022). These perceptions can often be monitored when simply searching ‘اوكرانيا’ (‘Ukraine’) on Twitter. **Figure 1** provides an impression of this sentiment with its presentation of top posts on the topic of the Ukraine-Russia war and EU involvement/participation. In this, it is essential to recognise the use of social media by the Russian government to skew perceptions.

**Figure 1.** Snapshot of Top Arabic Twitter Posts on the Topic of 'Ukraine-Russia-EU' (2022)

Translated Tweet Text - Summarized	Like Count	Retweet (Share) Count
Video - Irish Minister reveals the hypocrisy of the West. 5 days of war lead to sanctions on Putin, while no sanctions on Israel after 70 years.	33782	13983
After Putin kills 500 Syrians, France has no issue with Russia hosting the World Cup. After Putin kills 500 Ukrainians, France calls for Russia to be banned. Corruption!	10085	1895
Ukrainians blowing up the Crimean bridge is considered a victory by the West and not terrorism, but a Palestinian doing the same to defend his homeland is a terrorist by the West. The world is truly ruled by double standards.	6405	658
The corruption in the West and its double standards are beyond imagination! The West sees Ukrainians as humans, but not Arabs!	4086	1962

Source: Retrieved by author using R and Twitter API v2

The systematic manipulation of information and spread of disinformation are applied by the Kremlin as an operational tool in the assault against Ukraine, and the staged presentation of this assault to online audiences (Council of the EU, 2022). Through the use of a combination of official state media outlets, unofficial branded media organisations (i.e., Russia Today (RT) Arabic, Sputnik Arabic), and Facebook/Twitter/Telegram-only media outlets<sup>1</sup>, the Russian government ceaselessly propagates its narratives into the SN digital ecosystem (Hassan & Schaer, 2022). Furthermore, the built-in distribution features of social media outlets allow for the near-endless spread of selected news content and opinions to audiences based on profile and preference. Altogether, the Kremlin's drive to garner support through such (dis)information campaigns can be framed as an attempt to entrench anti-democratic perspectives in the SN, and shake the influence of Western governments, particularly the United States (US) on the region (OECD, 2022; Oweidat, 2022). In a sense, the Kremlin is seeking to push out its Western competitors and monopolise the resources and opportunities within the SN market.

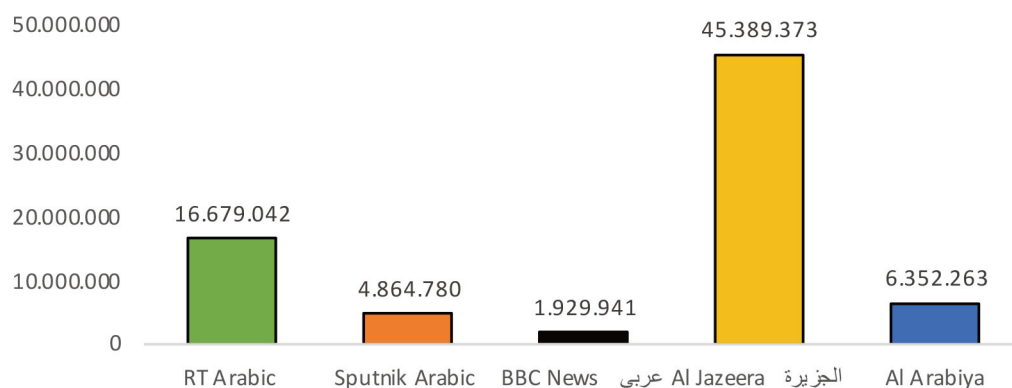
Applying disinformation as a mode of engagement-related fraud, the Russian government has taken advantage of media platforms and algorithm designs to amplify the spread of its narratives. Digital ecosystems like Twitter and Telegram have facilitated the creation of echo chambers that serve to reinforce confirmation bias mechanisms that segregate factual news and the unconfirmed information with which people engage online (OECD, 2022). In this segregated space, information overload, cognitive biases, and existing resentments flourish,

<sup>1</sup> Facebook/Twitter/Telegram-only outlets are those that were created specifically to be used on the aforementioned social media platforms. These outlets do not have alternative formats (website, television channel, paper publication, etc.).

allowing for the further spread of disinformation (Matasick, Alfonsi, & Bellantoni, 2020). A challenge that supplements this effect is that online users tend to spread false or misleading information faster and more broadly than truth, particularly in the case of false political news (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). The confusion that results from this saturation of the online space can then lead to feedback loops between online platforms and traditional media outlets. Feedback loops can then work to amplify false content, and allow malicious actors to influence public conversations and general perceptions deliberately.

Within the European single market, the aforementioned Digital Services Act (Regulation 2022/2065) and Digital Markets Act (Regulation 2022/1925), in addition to numerous co-regulation measures, impede the ability of the Russian government to exploit social media to spread disinformation, but the SN is not equivalently protected. The Kremlin has developed a strong foothold in the SN online ecosystem, with outreach efforts to Arabic-speaking audiences starting as early as 2007 with the launch of RT Arabic (Hassan & Schaer, 2022), and subsequent launches of Sputnik Arabic and multiple social media arms for each outlet in the following years. This long history of activity within the region, combined with the overreliance of Arabic-speaking audiences on social media and alternative media for news (al-Tahat, 2021), enables the Kremlin to reach millions. Independent statistics on the popularity of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic are often unavailable, but an alternative presentation of the reach of each outlet can be seen in **Figure 2**. The Arabic branches of RT and Sputnik appear to hold a strong position when looking at average monthly views, exceeding outlets like BBC News عربي and Al Arabiya in their reach. Al Jazeera maintains an obvious lead in this metric, but the sway RT and Sputnik may hold on audiences is not negligible. The growing popularity of Telegram has caused many to turn to it as a source of information, and ‘view’ metrics suggest that the Arabic RT and Sputnik channels are popular choices in the SN, especially when compared against well-established regional outlets. With an average of more than 16 million post views every month, RT Arabic demonstrates a strong online presence. This snapshot also reinforces the general impression that RT Arabic ranks as one of the top five broadcasters in the MENA region in terms of general outreach and popularity (Janadze, 2022; Jensen, 2017).

**Figure 2.** Average Monthly **Telegram** Views (2022)

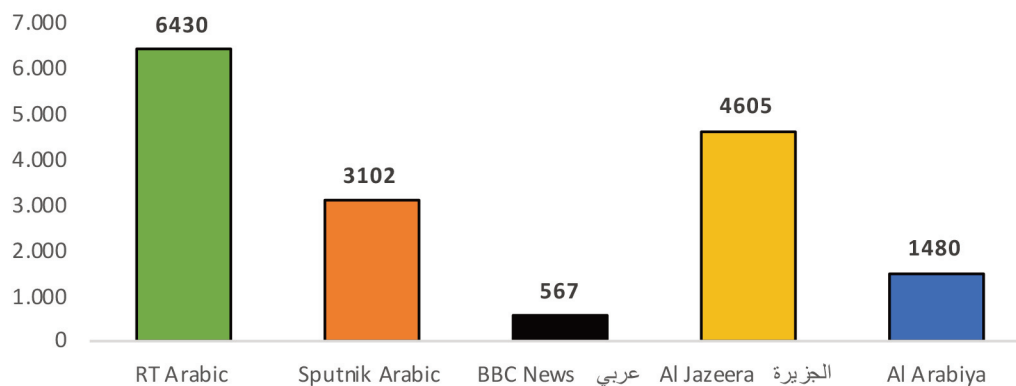


Source: Retrieved by author using R and TGStat

Disinformation that exploits user engagement is fundamentally based on saturating online information spaces with false or misleading content to ensure its spread. Additional metrics on the behaviour of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic on Telegram are displayed in **Figure 3**, which shows the average monthly posts by major outlets in the region. Notably, this adds some perspective to **Figure 2**, as the level of views can be attributed to the regularity and mass of posts published, with RT Arabic taking a significant lead. As a tactic, this approach to publishing content ensures that narratives favoured by RT are spread by users to friends,

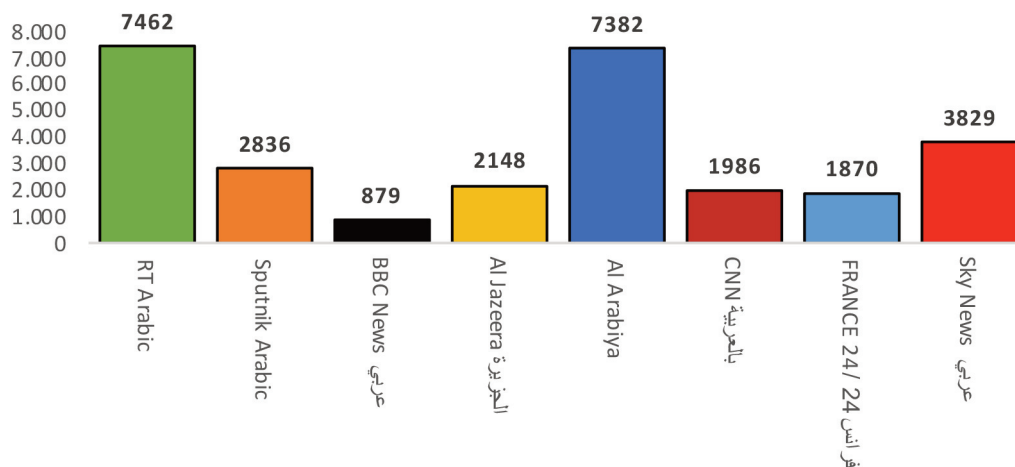
family and acquaintances. The wide net of content is certain to capture various demographics of online users, and subsequently, their network as posts are shared, liked and discussed. **Figure 4** expands the scope of post metrics to include average monthly posts on Twitter, with the comparison also including other major outlets in the SN and broader MENA region. The comparatively large mass of information published monthly by the Arabic branches of RT and Sputnik on both platforms indicates a strong drive to saturate the SN ecosystem with disinformation and false narratives. On both platforms, RT Arabic is a leader when it comes to content publication, while Sputnik Arabic exceeds many well-known outlets like FRANCE 24, Al Jazeera, and CNN بالعربية. Still more pressing is the type of content published by these Kremlin-backed outlets, and the correlated effect on user perceptions.

**Figure 3.** Average Monthly **Telegram** Posts (2022)



Source: Retrieved by author using R and TGStat

**Figure 4.** Average Monthly **Twitter** Posts (2022)



Source: Retrieved by author using R and Twitter API v2

Oversaturating online spaces with specific content certainly leads to its higher availability, but it also prevents counternarratives and alternative perspectives from being seen/heard. Looking towards **Figure 5**, a snapshot of the top (based on Twitter analytics) news stories posted by RT/Sputnik Arabic can be seen. The nature of published stories, and their misleading titles and representations of political events and decisions, certainly pose the risk of disinformation spread, echo chambers and feedback loops, yet the impact of these stories and subsequent audience perceptions are also fed by a lack of a countervailing narrative. Significantly, the EU has done much to impede disinformation on a technical level, and more often internally, but in looking at the short to medium term, Russia has been presented

as a winner in the information war being fought in the SN. The reasoning behind this verdict is participation and engagement. When comparing the level of online participation by the EU, Russia and their media representatives/champions, SN audiences have repeatedly favoured the Russian outlook on the conflict with Ukraine, while also criticising the EU and 'Western powers' (Janadze, 2022; Sleibi, 2022). Strong arguments can be made on the role of automated bots in swaying the tide of public opinion, but a significant portion of these views are authentic and cannot be left to fester (Borshchevskaya & Cleveland, 2022; Shafi, 2022). The implementation of policies that target the supply of disinformation and algorithmic designs that foster its spread is a major facet of tackling this disinformation phenomenon, but the delivery of impartial information and outreach is another no-less-important step. The EU has largely lagged in doing so, allowing other actors, be they friendly or malicious, to determine its position.

**Figure 5.** Snapshot of Top RT/Sputnik Arabic News Stories on Twitter (2022)

Translated Tweet Text	Like Count	Retweet (Share) Count
French independent journalist: I will shock my audience with this admission, but the truth is that Ukrainian forces are launching strikes against their own people.	1104	382
Lavrov: How can Iraq threaten the security of the United States at a distance of thousands of kilometers, and when we said that Ukraine is on our borders, they said, No, it does not threaten your national security, we know that they did not listen to us and were lying to us.	931	281
A investment fund under the name of President Biden's son took part in funding biological labs in Ukraine.	833	347
"We support Russia" - a big image of Putin in Baghdad.	776	107
Ukrainian parliamentarian: Zelensky left for Poland in a hurry and is hiding in the US embassy.	417	93

Source: Retrieved by author using R and Twitter API v2

## Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the current state of EU disinformation countermeasures indicates a distinct focus on the supply side of disinformation, and a limited reach resulting from the geographical, linguistic and technical limitations inherent to current policies. To be clear, when seeking to understand why disinformation has propagated in the SN despite EU attempts to mitigate the phenomenon through numerous policies and countermeasures, the reasons hinge on: (1) a language bias that favours online moderation in 'English' rather than 'Arabic', and a policy focus that does not easily extend to SN governmental contexts due to it fostering public trust in national-democratic institutions and assuming a free and open online space, (2) the implementation of disinformation policies/countermeasures on a voluntary basis through public-private commitments under the observation of supranational authority, which is a structural approach with limited reproducibility or governmental appeal in the SN, (3) a lack of clear online participation by the EU in the construction of narratives and presentation of positions as compared to active attempts by the Russian government and its outlets to infiltrate SN media spaces. With the above in mind, this brief proposes the following recommendations as a potential way forward in tackling disinformation plaguing the EU-SN online ecosystem:



- 1. Fostering voluntary moderation practices in the SN.** Although the EU co-regulation has been limited to tackling disinformation within the European online space, there is room for the creation of a Code of Practice, akin to the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation, that extends to the SN online space. These initiatives would likely be met with some level of resistance as EU regulative reach is limited in the SN, but creating voluntary measures and a stronger culture of moderation for Arabic content is an important step in ensuring impartial and accurate content in the SN online ecosystem. A potential avenue for implementation could come through policies linked to the Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood (European Union External Action Service, 2021b). As a start, calling for moderation commitments from larger international media platforms operating in both the SN and EU space could stem the flow of disinformation from one major source, and initiate a stronger culture of online impartiality.
- 2. Cooperating with, and funding, third-party media outlets, fact-checkers, and independent journalists.** Leveraging information flows and opportunities for the dissemination of information via traditional media and social media in the SN is a functional way to offset the Kremlin's influence over the SN online ecosystem. Taking inspiration from the United Kingdom (UK) funding the BBC and independent journalists working in Ukraine/Russia to offset Russian propaganda (GOV.UK, 2022), or the US Congress approving an aid package to Ukraine that allocates USD 25 million for the purpose of supporting independent media and combating the spread of disinformation (Pallaro & Parlapiano, 2022), the EU may sponsor its own network of impartial media sources. Creating opportunities for the further delivery of accurate and impartial information is a major step towards impeding Kremlin attempts to saturate the media space with near-endless falsehoods and misleading opinions.
- 3. Seeking more constructive engagement with audiences through social media platforms.** Communicating with audiences and content creators is a practice by which the EU, or specifically the EC, can ensure that its position is not hijacked or determined by an external actor (i.e., Kremlin-backed outlets). Taking inspiration from the US government and its decision to brief online creators on TikTok, YouTube and Twitter in a fashion not unlike how it briefs traditional journalists on Russia's war in Ukraine (Lorenz, 2022), the EU can similarly seek to brief creators on said platforms and others like Telegram/Facebook, thus expanding its range of outreach, and targeting an expanded audience pool. These briefings can include concrete facts on how the EU is helping the Ukrainian public and pressuring the Russian government, or even provide more factual information on the progression of the war between Russia and Ukraine. For instance, Ukrainians and Russians have both been seen to use Telegram as a source of real-time updates and information during the war (OECD, 2022). Key to this engagement strategy is providing a space for content creators with a strong following in the SN to participate and engage with the EU. Notably, the EU has already made progress in this dimension by appointing a regional media officer for the MENA region (External Action Service, 2021a). Enlarging the competencies of this media officer or creating a broader network of contact points and cooperation initiatives under the umbrella of this position can give the EU a necessary measure of visibility in the SN, particularly when seeking to counteract Russian government disinformation efforts.

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