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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Foreign interference and influence operations: The need for joint EU responses Non-paper by DK, RO, CZ, EE, FI, LV and NL

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Delegations will find in Annex a Non-paper on Foreign interference and influence operations: The need for joint EU responses by DK, RO, CZ, EE, FI, LV, NL.

## **Foreign interference and influence operations: The need for joint EU responses**

Foreign interference and influence operations<sup>1</sup> have become a permanent part of the security policy landscape and the broader picture of hybrid threats.

Countering hybrid threats requires a comprehensive, whole-of government and whole-of-society approach – both resilience and countermeasures – at the national and EU level. This paper relates to the development of the Strategic Compass and particularly focuses on the implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan, which calls for new EU tools for countering foreign interference and influence operations.

By illegitimately influencing a target audience using coercive or deceptive means, such as coordinated and inauthentic dissemination of disinformation on social media platforms, hack-and-leak attacks, or the establishment of false media outlets, foreign interference and influence operations take advantage of our democratic and open societies. Such actions undermine our security, prosperity and values. Particularly as digital tools enable rapid online proliferation of disinformation and other aspects of foreign interference and influence operations. COVID-19 has highlighted that malicious state and non-state actors will take advantage of any opportunity, even a global pandemic. The EU and Member States must be able to respond firmly to foreign interference and influence operations to deter future foreign attacks on our societies.

The need to respond to foreign interference and influence operations is widely accepted and the time is right for tangible proposals for joint diplomatic responses. We believe that diplomatic tools for responding to foreign interference and influence operations should include, but not be limited to, the following four tools. Moreover, we offer guiding principles for the use of these tools in the succeeding section.

We emphasize that the ideas put forward in this non-paper are meant to encourage further EU discussion on the specifics of tools for responding to foreign interference and influence operations. Furthermore, we underscore that beyond the responses presented in this paper, there remains a need for increased transparency on online platforms and access to data for researchers and civil society, which would both have a preventative value in itself by increasing societal awareness and resilience, and improve the basis for diplomatic responses.

### **Tools for joint responses**

**Strengthen dialogue with media, academia, and tech companies:** Establishing a running format for Member States' joint dialogues with civil society to share knowledge, raise awareness of the threat and discuss concrete cases. This dialogue should build on the efforts by the European Commission, EEAS StratCom and INTCEN to map interference and influence operations and the actors behind them.

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<sup>1</sup>Foreign interference and influence operations can be broadly defined in line with the European Democracy Action Plan (COM/2020/790 final), this paper will focus on information influence operations and foreign interference in the information space.

**Diplomatic dialogue:** Joint demarches and EU dialogue, if appropriate, with states behind foreign interference and influence operations are among the options to leverage the EU's diplomatic power and clearly signal that foreign interference and influence operations are unacceptable.

**Public attribution:** The EU and member states publicly exposing an actor behind a foreign interference and influence operation will increase reputational costs for the perpetrator, and raise public awareness. Publically attributing an operation, while remaining a national decision within the competence of the member states, would target the covert nature of these operations and highlight member states' determination to hold the perpetrator responsible.

**Restrictive measures:** By utilising the existing sanctions regimes such as the cyber sanctions regime to the full and, if deemed necessary, exploring creating a new targeted sanctions regime entirely, the EU could impose concrete costs on the perpetrators behind foreign interference and influence operations to change their strategic calculus and raise public awareness.

### **Principles for responding**

**Respect for the fundamental rights:** All responses must be in line with the fundamental rights, including the freedom of expression and information, as well as data protection, which underpin the founding values of the EU.

**Proportionality:** The response should be proportional with the foreign interference and influence operation it addresses. Significant operations should entail a significant joint response. Strong technical evidence should be the underpinning for any such joint response.

**International cooperation:** Close cooperation on joint responses, such as declarations, statements, demarches, attributions and restrictive measures, with our partners, particularly NATO and its member states, including the US, the UK, Canada, and Norway should be further explored. Such coordination must not become a hindrance for prompt reactions. Developing a conceptually similar terminology would contribute to stronger cooperation.

**Stronger deterrence:** Joint responses will significantly strengthen our deterrence. However, for these responses to contribute to deterrence we must be able and willing to employ them quickly and effectively to concrete cases.