

DEMOCRATIC DEFENCE: HOW ITALY CAN LEAD THE FIGHT AGAINST RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

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SUMMARY

- New research for ECFR suggests pro-Russia and pro-China narratives are present in online and traditional forms of discourse in Italy. It finds that forms of anomalous activity spiked just ahead of the country's 2022 general election.
- Despite the shock to Italian foreign policy caused by Russia's war on Ukraine, economic ties between the countries remain. Moreover, the political environment in Italy remains conducive to Russian influence, with the leaders of four of the five largest parties in parliament prone to echoing talking points favourable to Moscow or advocating for "peace" while suggesting the withdrawal of military support to Ukraine.
- Italy has been slow to put in place the structures needed to combat foreign influence. The new governing coalition appeared to place little value on tackling the problem, but it has now started to build on the more considerable progress made under former prime minister Mario Draghi.
- Italy should seize opportunities to strengthen the battle against disinformation, such as: encouraging the next European Commission to incorporate this task into its mandate; and placing the topic in Rome's forthcoming G7 presidency programme.

Information as a weapon

Following Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European Union's External Action Service warned that Moscow was weaponising hunger and energy through "information manipulation and disinformation targeting international audiences." The Kremlin sought – and continues to seek – to lay the blame for soaring food and energy prices at the door of Western sanctions. The report concluded that Russia aims to sow confusion through proxies and assorted forms of manipulation on social media to exploit sensitive issues.

Over the decades, Italy earned itself a reputation as one of Europe's 'Russia understanders.' Even now, ties remain relatively strong between some Italian politicians and businesses and their Russian counterparts. For many years, former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi was a supporter of close relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia, and was among the strongest advocates of that country's membership of the G8 and bringing it into the Western and NATO order. Other Italian politicians have also signalled where their sympathies lie: for example, Matteo Salvini, leader of the League, undertook the same stunt twice, wearing Putin T-shirts in the European Parliament in 2015 and in Red Square in 2017. Meanwhile, Italian companies represent the 6.3 per cent of international businesses actors still present in Russia.

The last decade and a half has seen a rise in 'hybrid' tactics deployed by Russia, and other players such as China. Such tactics include the use and abuse of information as part of the pursuit of broader strategic aims. Research shared in this policy brief by Constella Intelligence suggests Russian activity was elevated in the run-up to, and during, last year's Italian general election campaign. Italy came late to the fight against disinformation, having for many years failed to put in place the core measures needed to start to handle this challenge. Both the previous government under Mario Draghi and the current Meloni administration have taken some steps in this direction, but much remains to be done. And with elections to the European Parliament just a year away – and greater scrutiny than ever on what they will mean for who runs the EU's core institutions such as the European Commission and the European Council – influencing opinion in countries such as Italy could prove an attractive prospect for external powers.

In the long war scenario Europe is undoubtedly required to face, European citizens' perceptions of the conflict after more than two years of fighting will influence the decisions made by member state governments and the EU itself. Italy's experience could prove instructive for understanding the political impact of the disinformation threat to democracy, economic stability, and social awareness of the problem, not least as national elections approach in other EU member states such as Spain and Poland. In Italy's most recent general

election, three of the main political parties made a point of campaigning on the impacts of the war; two are now in government. The ways in which they campaigned on these topics were echoed in social media, likely driven by bots and false accounts amplifying Russian ‘talking points.’ Italy’s exposure to this form of activity should persuade its government to redouble efforts to combat disinformation, and go further to promote this issue in international forums and organisations such as the G7 and the United Nations.

Definitions of disinformation

Fake news: “false reports of events, written and read on websites,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. The purpose of fake news is not necessarily to deceive readers or create harm.

Misinformation: False or misleading content which is created or shared without necessarily intent to cause harm, although harm may be the result.

Disinformation: False or misleading information, whose propagators use deliberately to cause harm.

Foreign information manipulation and interference: A term used by the EU’s External Action Service, which emphasises the external malign intervention underlying this kind of hybrid war tool. The EU’s External Action Service defines this as “mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.”

Disinformation in Italy

Italy has a disinformation problem. An annual report published before the country’s 2022 general election by the Italian Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic (COPASIR) found that: “The Russian hybrid threat continues to manifest itself through the informational, politico-diplomatic, cybernetic and economic domains, through energy leverage.” It notes that aspects of this phenomenon have become more serious since Russia

invaded Ukraine. It goes on to describe the ways in which fake news and other vehicles promote attempts to influence the media and aim to spread a negative image of Ukraine, the EU, and NATO.

Russia is a major active player, but it is not alone on this field. In 2022 the External Action Service looked into the activities of China in this area. It found an “alignment in the information environment” between Russia and China. It also noted that Chinese state-controlled media and social media “amplified selected pro-Kremlin conspiracy narratives,” including alleged links between US intelligence services and the Ukrainian government with neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine. The External Action Service identified a number of incidents of disinformation content moving between the Chinese and Russian online disinformation ecosystems, with content created by one receiving amplification by the other.

The 2022 COPASIR report also highlighted that both countries were engaging in activities aimed at gaining access and influence in Western countries, including Italy. Chinese operations were found to be fuelling this activity mainly in the economic, technological, commercial, and cultural fields; Russian operations focused on “activity of a ‘more cognitive and communicative type’ ... in the deliberately distorted and manipulated reading and interpretation of events, especially those related to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.”

These activities took place on fertile ground. The traditional weakness of Italy’s political system has earned the country the reputation of a laboratory for disinformation. In 2017, Joe Biden warned of the threat of Russian disinformation activities in Italy in aid of “the nationalist Northern League and the populist Five Star Movement” ahead of the 2018 general election. A few weeks before the election that year, *La Stampa* revealed that Russian trolls identified in the US Justice Department investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election had retweeted messages from Italian accounts.

Italy, Russia, and Ukraine

When Italians went to the polls in the general election of September 2022, they voted out a centrist, pro-European, and Atlanticist technocratic administration and voted in a populist-Eurosceptic and conservative-right government. This represented a major shift in the political balance of power in Italy. The country moved from the Draghi government, whose leadership enjoyed high-level dialogue and engaged in close cooperation with Berlin, Brussels, Paris, and Washington, to a government under Giorgia Meloni as prime minister, characterised by mutually sceptical relations between Rome and other European capitals. Despite this, the Italian positioning on Russia and Ukraine remained largely unchanged.

Meloni's Brothers of Italy party heads an uneasy coalition with the League and Forza Italia, formerly Berlusconi's party. Rome maintains a tough stance on Moscow's aggression, despite a relentless disinformation campaign in the Italian media and the presence of a Russophile faction in the government in the form of the junior coalition partners, which periodically make noises sympathetic to Russia. This political divide was clear during the election campaign itself, in which Salvini and Berlusconi (along with former Five Star Movement prime minister Giuseppe Conte) queried the level of military support Italy should be giving to Ukraine; Conte was especially vocal on this point. They also campaigned on the effects of sanctions; Berlusconi in particular majored on this. And they pointed out the impacts of the war on energy prices – a task taken up with some alacrity by Salvini.

Meloni has always taken a different view on Russia to her coalition partners, both in opposition and now in government. Support for Ukraine is a central pillar of Italian foreign policy, and the prime minister has held several meetings and exchanges with President Volodymyr Zelensky, and in February 2023 she travelled to Kyiv. However, the very presence of two Ukraine-sceptic parties in the government creates an inherent tension and potential source of instability that could undermine Italy's position.

Alongside this, around one-third of the seats in parliament are held by parties sympathetic to Russia: the junior coalition partners and the Five Star Movement. And, under the new Democratic Party leadership of Elly Schlein, whose emphasis is on “peace and negotiations”, the party is now split on support for Ukraine. Still, the pro-Russian leaning of the Italian parliament has actually halved in comparison to the results of the 2018 election. Nevertheless, the dynamics inside the government and potential pressures in parliament make Italy the weak flank of Europe on this issue. With Russia and Ukraine a principal question of the moment, splits could politically weaken the government.

Public opinion is an essential concern. Italians' views of Russia's war on Ukraine resemble those of other European citizens, as shown by the European Council on Foreign Relations' June 2022 policy brief “Peace versus Justice: The coming European split over the war in Ukraine”. This found that 37 per cent of Italians were concerned by the economic downturn caused by the war. This was not dissimilar to Spain (40 per cent) or Portugal (38 per cent), but was higher than the EU average of 28 per cent. But ECFR's 2023 follow-up survey found that Italians' views differ from those of many other Europeans on what price Ukraine should pay to end the war: 30 per cent of EU citizens polled said they want the war to end as soon as possible, even if this implied a territorial loss for Ukraine. In Italy this view won the support of 41 per cent of respondents.

Unlike in many other European countries, and since last year's general election, Italy stands out for having several major political parties whose leaders have vocally queried and pushed back against measures that aim to curtail Russia's ability to continue to attack Ukraine. Conte opposes "escalation"; Salvini has claimed sanctions were hurting Europe more than Russia; Berlusconi requested dialogue with Putin.

In terms of the role of political leaders, they disseminate pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives in four main ways:

- openly supporting pro-Kremlin narratives;
- allowing to go unchallenged false information about the war, on sanctions, and energy;
- ignoring information on the war, sanctions, and energy;
- and propagating false information relating to the war.

For example, figures openly supporting pro-Kremlin narratives include former League MEP Francesca Donato, who in March 2022 was among 13 elected representatives in the European Parliament (indeed, four of whom were Italian, the other three from the Democratic Party) to vote against condemning Russia as an aggressor. Former Five Star Movement senator Bianca Laura Granato directly shared Russian ministry of foreign affairs arguments about Bucha being a "false massacre".

Still on Bucha, and in a concerted effort at ignoring a major story about the horrors of the war, Salvini tweeted eight times and posted 11 times on Facebook and Instagram without making mention of the massacre between 2-5 April 2022, when the news first emerged. Berlusconi too took his time to comment on the massacre, and even then he only expressed his disappointment in Putin.

On sharing false information and Russian narratives, Salvini claimed that "who is sanctioned is benefiting, who is sanctioning is on its knees ... While Italy and Germany are suffering from sanctions, other countries, like the US and Norway are benefitting". In September 2022, during one popular television show, Berlusconi even attempted to justify the Russian invasion, and less than a month later *LaPresse* released recordings of Berlusconi talking to Forza Italia supporters and a member of the parliament, in which he claimed that Putin had been forced into war – and that Putin only wanted to replace the Zelensky government with "well-mannered people".

On the fourth aspect of sharing false information, after Russia bombed the Mariupol

children's hospital, Donato used Twitter to spread fake news about the hospital being a Ukrainian military headquarters. As a result, her Facebook account was shut down, with Donato accusing the social network of revenge for her views on Ukraine and Russia.

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Public and elite political opinion in Italy presents an opportunity for external actors wishing to influence the information space in the country. Some key political representatives, including leaders of two governing coalition parties, continue in the tradition of Italian 'Russia understanders'. They likely look at opinion polls and are influenced by the social media-driven political world to believe capital can be made by playing to a Eurosceptic and anti-war constituency. For her part, Meloni's stance on the war in Ukraine remains. Nevertheless, vulnerabilities remain – and Italy has still done too little to shore up its protections against the online spread of disinformation.

Italy's halting progress on disinformation

Italy today has in place a structured framework of action on disinformation, one that is in line with EU and NATO measures. Interviews conducted by the authors with Italian government officials suggest that it takes account of a broad geopolitical spectrum of foreign actors. [1]

The European Council first recognised the general threat of online disinformation campaigns in 2015, when it asked the then high representative to address Russian disinformation operations. The East Strategic Communication Task Force was appointed to work on this. Initially, the EU focused on the spread of fake news, especially as the term grew in prominence in 2017 following the political rise of Donald Trump. The EU adopted its first institutional and legislative instrument in 2018, after a report issued by a Commission High Level Expert Group on the topic. Its code of practice on disinformation is likely the first worldwide example of a self-regulatory standard signed by industry representatives on voluntary basis – Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Mozilla, followed by Microsoft in 2019 and TikTok in 2020.

In 2020 the EU experienced not only the pandemic and but also the associated 'infodemic' of fake news and misinformation about covid-19. The European Commission did not stay idle, however: it launched communication campaigns and the EUvsDisinfo project, coordinated by the East Strategic Communication Task Force. The project devised counter-disinformation tools and debunked fake news. In 2020 the European Commission also published the European Democracy Action Plan, which aimed to empower European citizens and strengthen the resilience of their democracies. In 2022 the EU updated its code of practice on

disinformation.

Despite its strong exposure to Russian and Chinese disinformation activities, especially during the pandemic, Italy has moved slowly to address the problem in the political and institutional senses. Its 2013 “National strategic framework for the protection of cyber space” and 2017 implementation of a “Prime ministerial decree on cybernetic and computing security protection” were adopted – but these received no institutional follow-up or support.

Under the last government, Italy took some more emphatic steps forward by creating ad hoc bodies and structures to fight disinformation. Draghi officially launched the 2022-2026 Italian national cyber-security strategy, whose contents were explicitly in line with the EU 2020 cyber-security strategy. He remarked: “The new forms of strategic competition that characterize the geopolitical scenario, require Italy to continue and, where possible, increase cybersecurity initiatives.” The new strategy is based on EU principles and adopted practices, including a “whole-of-society” approach which envisages the involvement of government actors, private stakeholders, academics, researchers, citizens, and civil society. Citizens are conceived of as an indirect beneficiary but also as an active actor supporting the goal in the fight against online disinformation in the broader context of hybrid threats

A major advance in Italy took place with the June 2021 creation of the Agency for National Cybersecurity (ACN), which rationalised and simplified what had been a fragmented sector made up of different competencies, roles, and functions. The government allocated a budget of 1.2 per cent of gross annual national investments, to be integrated with the Horizon Europe and Digital Europe funds and, more recently, with the recovery funds allocated to Italy, with an overall investment of €623m in cybersecurity.

Alongside the ACN, a crucial role is played by the Italian foreign ministry, whose mandate includes acting as a focal contact point and a coordination body for national and European measures and strategies to fight hostile disinformation narratives. In 2022, the Italian foreign ministry, under the political impetus of the government, set up the Directorate General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy and tasked it with analysis, planning, and support for Italy’s role in international forums and promoting soft power. The new directorate coordinates on this with NATO and EU bodies and strategies such as StratCom, the Strategic Compass, and the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union (committees INGE1 and ING2). These bodies aim to tackle foreign information manipulation and interference.

The foreign ministry has four priorities, for which it gives support to other organisations working on disinformation. The first is to strengthen societal and public opinion resilience

through pursuing the “whole-of-society” approach: Italy fully supports the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) launched in 2020 to provide an independent core service digital platform to fight disinformation in Europe, both through monitoring activities and through information literacy. EDMO is funded by the EU, but led by the European University Institute in Florence, and draws on the expertise of its School of Transnational Governance and Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.

The Italian foreign ministry’s second priority is to support the co-regulation of the digital space, which it pursues by coordinating with the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services. Its third is to support a process of connecting different Italian actors and institutions to a shared framework of action. And the fourth priority is to evaluate the political costs of manipulation – namely, sanctions against media bodies that disseminate disinformation, as with Russia Today and Sputnik. Conversations with Italian government officials indicate that this last point still sees a division in Europe between countries, such as Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, which prefer a more cautious approach on using sanctions in response to disinformation, and the eastern and Baltic flank. [2]

The fight against disinformation in Italy today

The results of the 2022 general election were not auspicious for the continued fight against disinformation in Italy. The Brothers of Italy electoral programme described disinformation as one aspect of a “new Cold War” and as a “fight against the arbitrary censorship of social networks and guarantee respect for the free expression of thought by the large communication platforms.” In 2022, Meloni had branded an Italian government initiative to set up a covid-19 disinformation task force as representing “threats against freedom”.

However, Meloni has since taken some political ownership of this issue. In May 2023, the Italian cabinet appointed to the ACN the diplomatic adviser to the Italian defence minister, Ambassador Massimo Marotti. This move suggests a willingness, first of all, to strengthen links between the foreign ministry and the ACN. Appointing Italian diplomats strategically to key Italian companies and bodies is not an unusual step for an Italian government: it has done this with firms such as Eni, ENEL, and Cassa Depositi and Prestiti. Adding the ACN to this group places the agency among this set of national strategic assets. Marotti’s background of advising the minister in a time of war strengthens the link between the fight against cyber threats and national security and defence.

However, missing from the government’s activity on this front is a political vision to match, for example, its efforts to reduce Italian dependence on Russian energy. In contrast to countries from the EU’s eastern and Baltic flanks, in the case of disinformation, Meloni lacks

a strategy to finally tackle disinformation as a threat to the democratic order.

Channels of influence

The scale of the challenge is illustrated by research carried out by Constella Intelligence for ECFR on the emergence and presence of social media-based political ‘communities’. Their growth in the run-up to the 2022 Italian general election suggests that Italian social media was easily penetrated by foreign actors and may have galvanised some parties now in government to hold firm in their Russophile tendencies.

Constella analysed six key narratives, on: energy, Russia’s war on Ukraine, sanctions against Russia, vaccines, the euro, and migration. The concept of ‘narrative’ describes “an overall message, communicated through texts, images, metaphors, and other means”, according to EUvsDisinfo. Narratives convey stories adapted to target particular audiences. Immigration and the euro were key issues in the campaign for the 2018 Italian general election, which saw the election of a populist and sovereigntist government composed of the Five Star Movement and the League. These issues also dominated during the 2019 European Parliament election, won by the League. But during the 2022 general election, public attention had shifted to the war in Ukraine, including energy and sanctions against Russia.

Constella found that between 27 August and 25 September 2022 (the date of the general election), the energy sector and Russia’s war on Ukraine represented more than 67 per cent of the total comments associated with all narratives. How sanctions on Russia, arms shipments to Ukraine, and EU policies would affect the Italian economy in terms of energy were the main issues discussed by accounts. These ranked above debates about vaccines and immigration.

The research also found that an unusual number of accounts were created during July and August 2022, following the collapse of the Draghi government. Analysts studied the output of 235,428 unique accounts, and found 1,763 that registered unusually high activity. These represented 1.2 per cent of the total number of accounts and in total published 1,538,919 posts – 33.3 per cent of all activity identified as political discussion on Twitter in Italy.

Of these 1,763 authors, 28 per cent belonged to the Five Star Movement community: they made up 4.5 per cent of the total number of users belonging to this community but generated 55.2 per cent of its total activity. Such anomalous Five Star Movement users mainly promoted the party's campaign and sought to position it as the left-wing alternative to the Democratic Party. These users expressed strong support for Conte's leadership and opposition to the conflict in Ukraine.

A total of 24.1 per cent of these 1,763 authors belonged to the 'conservative populism' community. This represented 1.7 per cent of the users in this community, but again these generated 25.4 per cent of the community's activity. These users were characterised by nationalist sentiment, a propensity to disseminate pseudoscientific theories, and vociferous opposition to the EU, NATO, and the United States. The hashtags and domains most shared by these users focused on the price of gas, supporting the anti-vaccination movement, and blaming Draghi and the Democratic Party for fuelling anti-Western sentiment and against sanctions on Russia.

Energy-related issues, such as gas prices, overlapped with anti-vaccination positions, anti-EU positions, and anti-sanctions positions. This picture reflected the assessment by the Italian intelligence community in its 2022 annual report, which found that: "On a national scale, a connection was detected within the main social platforms between the No-Vax and No-Pass profiles and pro-Russia messaging on the ongoing crisis between Moscow and Kyiv, implemented by relaunching and re-sharing content originating from media and institutional bodies close to the Kremlin, in order to orientate Italian public opinion."

The debate in networks analysed by Constella revealed patterns of behaviour that researchers found to be abnormal for online political debates. The patterns exhibited a level of interaction between opposing ideological blocs that is very different from the regular political debates, where it is expected that purveyors of different ideologies do not interact. In Italy, the interactions generated a confrontational and polarised debate. This suggests that the hyperactive members of the identified communities sought to fuel political tensions before the election, in particular over questions relating to the EU and NATO.

The information ground war and air war

This online information ground war was accompanied by information 'air support' from key players, with energy- and sanctions-related issues at the centre of the online narratives by some Italian leaders and Russian officials. Constella found that the leaders of the League and Italexit, a Eurosceptic party led by former journalist and member of parliament Gianluigi

Paragone, achieved high engagement with some of their comments.

Meanwhile, Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman for the Russian foreign ministry, commented on the Italian energy savings plan in a conspiracy-filled post that sought to undermine support for the sanctions imposed on Russia, along with Western unity more generally: “It is clear that this plan is imposed on Rome by Brussels (which, in turn, acts on the orders of Washington), but in the end it is the Italian people who will suffer.” Gazprom published a video showing a cold winter for Europe without Russian gas (whose supply the Kremlin had cut in response to sanctions). The timing, context, and content of missives such as from former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev suggested he wished to ‘punish’ Italian politicians through the ballot boxes.

Before the 2022 election, cyber-criminal gangs linked to Russia targeted the critical energy sector in Italy. In early September 2022, a few weeks before the general election, Italy’s National Cyber Security Agency reported that attacks on Italian energy operators and infrastructure had increased following two cyberattacks on major companies. A hack on energy giant Eni followed a cyberattack affecting Gestore dei Servizi Energetici, the agency that runs the country’s electricity market. The two companies were crucial to the Italian plan to diversify away from Russian energy sources. According to the Italian security agencies’ annual report released after the general election, “Moscow will not stop interfering in the political dynamics and decision-making processes within NATO countries, resorting even more than in the past to coercive and manipulative methods, such as cyber-attacks, disinformation, blackmail, and the use of levers such as migration and energy, the latter of which is destined to lose relevance with the Western commitment to find alternatives to energy dependence on Russia.”

From laggard to champion: How Italy can lead on combating disinformation

Misinformation and disinformation are challenging issues for open societies, and tackling them is vital to protecting them. With the 2024 European Parliament election approaching and EU member states such as Spain and Poland shortly to hold general elections, the question of how to prevent foreign interference from manipulating public opinion through disinformation – and, so, from destabilising member states politically and economically – remains a vital question for the EU. The case of Russian disinformation campaigns relating to the war on Ukraine and on the effects of sanctions is a prime example of the risks that lie ahead.

In the context of the conflict and the possibility of a long war, the EU should draw on the experience it has acquired in combating disinformation during the covid-19 pandemic and strengthen its action on this front. The next European Commission should make the fight against disinformation part of its mandate, whatever its political leanings. The European Parliament should also make this a priority.

In Italy itself, the political environment harbours the potential to become more conducive to positions that would be to Moscow's liking. Whether it goes this way depends on numerous factors. For some time Italy has lacked a structured and 360-degree strategy to fight disinformation and fake news. While the wider political context, at the EU level as well as among member states, has focused policymakers' attention on the issue of disinformation, Italy needs to continue to strengthen its institutional framework on combating this problem, beyond the current bodies and legislation in place. The government should invest more in monitoring disinformation trends, including by making the most of available EU funds. It should focus on strengthening citizens' digital literacy, offering them training and equipping them with tools to recognise disinformation, and to train political representatives and civil servants.

Italy could take the opportunity of its own forthcoming G7 presidency in 2024 to incorporate the fight against disinformation into its official programme. So far, the government's disclosed priorities are fairly generic and broad, including food security, partnership with Africa, economic security, and the climate challenge. There is still time for the government to recognise disinformation as a global threat to include in the G7 work programme.

Italy can also promote these issues beyond Europe by proposing a coordinating body such as the creation of a UN special envoy for the freedom and protection of journalists, as suggested by Reporters Without Borders. This could help create a more defined multilateral framework of action to promote independent journalism and promote World Press Freedom Day, the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, and the legislative framework of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. Alongside the existing G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, this would also allow the construction of an additional multilateral pillar to tackle and fight disinformation.

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[1] Conversations between the authors and Rome-based experts and officials, conducted between January and February 2023.

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