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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN BELGIUM



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INTRODUCTION

- Belgium can be seen as a particular example of how to report on disinformation.
- First, the federal country is divided between both territorial and linguistic borders. Belgium has three official languages (Dutch, French, and German) and three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels-Capital), which partially overlap.
- On the one hand, this double fragmentation, combined with weak federal institutions, is the source of many political and community tensions within the country. On top of that, local communities' information ecosystems are very connected to neighbour countries such as France for the French-speaking part, and the Netherlands for Flanders.
- On the other hand, Brussels is the home of the European Commission and hosts one seat of the European Parliament, the European Council, and the NATO headquarters. This puts Belgium as an influence target for foreign interference as the capital is the beating heart of European regulation.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

BYE BYE BELGIUM

- On the evening of 13 December 2006, French-speaking national broadcaster RTBF interrupted its announced programmes to broadcast a breaking news special edition announcing to the country that [Flanders had declared independence from Belgium](#). This specific 90-minute programme, which was intended to be perceived as a parody, mimicked a real news report, with official declarations from political parties and officials, fake demonstrations organised in front of on-site reporters, and other news segments.
- The unannounced action, which did not mention its parodic nature, at least for the first 32 minutes, provoked tensions within the country, mainly because it came from a public broadcaster. A few weeks later, RTBF was issued a warning from the Belgian audio-visual regulator and forced to apologise to the public for failing to inform about the fictional character of the programme correctly.

FAKE CLUSTER BOOSTS HUAWEI

- In January 2021, Graphika uncovered a [network of inauthentic accounts on Twitter targeting the Belgian government](#). This operation occurred precisely when the Belgian federal government was planning to limit access to Chinese companies, such as Huawei, to the Belgian telecom infrastructure. Despite the overall limited traction, this unattributed operation was mainly aimed at boosting English content to policy-makers. Real accounts of Huawei executives in Western Europe systematically amplified the deceptive content. One of the peculiarities was the constant use of so-called “European media” to legitimise its claims, then pushed on Twitter by fake accounts using computer-generated profile pictures (GAN).

EP TODAY – INDIAN CHRONICLES

- In 2019 and 2020, EU DisinfoLab released a double investigation focusing partly on [pro-India networks operating in Belgium](#). These two investigations have shown how a European media called EP Today, mimicking the legitimate magazine of the European Parliament, was used to push anti-Pakistan narratives online. The investigation also demonstrated how related think tanks have been able to cover travel expenses for Members of the European Parliament to visit Kashmir and meet Narendra Modi. EP Today/Indian Chronicles show how Belgian-based organisations can be used in international information operations, exploiting their position at the heart of Europe.

NARRATIVES

MIGRATIONS/IDENTITY

The question of migration has been instrumentalised, especially by right-wing political parties. This narrative has been exacerbated by different events, from the terrorist attacks claimed by ISIS in 2015, the Syrian migration wave, or the creation of an anecdotal radical political party advocating for implementing [Islamic law](#) in Belgium. Identity should also include disinformation that targets gender and sexual identities, [as recently seen in Flanders](#).

HEALTH/ANTIVAX

Though already present before 2020, a growing presence of online communities pushing anti-vax narratives has been seen in Belgium during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Starting with opposition to mandatory vaccination, the movement rapidly grew. The main events were the organisation of [demonstrations](#) in Brussels against the health pass and restrictions, followed by violence, and coordinated online through social media. As seen in other countries, this narrative is now very close to technology scepticism, for instance, over the allegedly damaging effects of [5G](#) on health.

COMMUNITY TENSIONS

Public space fragmentation around linguistic communities is a substantial reality in Belgium, which generates tension between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking communities. This social fracture is often exploited for political purposes, especially with the rise of independence movements in Flanders. The linguistic cleavage – from which identity divisions derive – is also translated into disinformation by exploiting prejudice.

COMMUNITY COUNTERING DISINFO

As mentioned earlier, the country's fragmentation in multiple communities prevents strong national initiatives from emerging. We chose relevant community activities and their focus, often reflecting a regional-based organisation.

EDMO BELUX

[EDMO BELUX](#) is a regional hub of the European Digital Media Observatory initiative. Led by the Free University of Brussels (VUB), EDMO BELUX conducts fact-checking, research, and media literacy on the entire Belgian territory (and in Luxembourg). Among its various products, the hub partners have detailed how anti-vax communities from the United States have been setting up the foot in Belgium to lead their [lobbying activities](#).

BENEDMO

[Benedmo](#) is another regional hub from the European Digital Media Observatory initiative. It focuses specifically on the Dutch-speaking side of Belgium and the Netherlands. Benedmo has, for instance, looked at specific [cross-border disinformation campaigns](#) on health and the impact of fact-checking.

DECHECKERS

[deCheckers](#) is a non-profit organisation working in partnership with Dutch-speaking fact-checkers. deCheckers gathers fact-check articles from various media (e.g., VRT, Fact-check.Vlaanderen, etc.) in a single place. Therefore, this initiative allows the public to access this information in one portal instead of searching for debunks on multiple websites.

FAKY

[Faky](#) is an initiative from French-speaking public broadcaster RTBF aiming at helping the audience to evaluate the reliability of a piece of news or information. Using multiple criteria, such as subjectivity analysis, or whitelists, it equips its user with a risk score of disinformation on online resources (URLs and pictures).

CROSSOVER

[CrossOver](#) was a pilot project funded by the European Commission focusing on analysing algorithmic recommendations of disinformation in Belgium. Led by EU DisinfoLab, it gathered media, technical and MIL organisations to build concrete examples of algorithmic manipulation on Facebook, Twitter, Discord, YouTube, and other online platforms. This project is currently over, but its research contribution is still available.

POLICY AGAINST DISINFO

Belgium does not have specific laws against disinformation. The current legal framework is mainly structured around the Constitution:

- Article 150 of the Belgian Constitution deals with slander, which must be prosecuted in front of a popular jury unless the crime is motivated by racism or xenophobia. These cases are rarely carried through because popular juries are expensive to summon, while instances of slander are widespread.
- Various laws define multiple limits to freedom of speech, all focusing on prohibiting hate speech based on gender, race, political convictions, etc.

In 2022, the Belgian Senate issued 53 recommendations to national and international stakeholders on improving the current legal framework. The most precise recommendations call for:

- an improvement of the law defining journalistic status to increase quality journalism;
- the development of a framework for online content creators;
- the creation of processes for intelligence services to alert the government and media in case of disinformation campaigns;
- the increase financial support for the community tackling disinformation;
- the prohibition of using fake online accounts and robots by political parties and providing more transparency on political ads.

[Since 15 February 2023](#), the European directive to protect whistle-blowers has been transposed into Belgian law. The new regulation adds social and fiscal fraud to the domains where whistle-blowers can operate.

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