

# RESISTING FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE

A Stress Test for Democracies



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# Abbreviations

<b>AI</b>	Artificial intelligence
<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress (South Africa)
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organization
<b>DP</b>	Democratic Party, South Korea
<b>EFF</b>	Economic Freedom Fighters (South Africa)
<b>FIMI</b>	Foreign information manipulation and interference
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>GD</b>	Georgian Dream
<b>GOC</b>	Georgian Orthodox Church
<b>ICJ</b>	International Court of Justice
<b>IEC</b>	Electoral Commission of South Africa
<b>ISD</b>	Institute for Strategic Dialogue
<b>LGBTQ+</b>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer
<b>MK</b>	uMkhonto weSizwe (South Africa)
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NEC</b>	National Election Commission of South Korea
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PPP</b>	People's Power Party (South Korea)
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses global stories in countering and addressing foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) through the analysis of four case studies from Georgia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States. These case studies, which represent a sample of the current state of FIMI globally, uncover some key factors in common which underpin FIMI-facilitated democratic decline:

**1. A perpetually online, interconnected world is a landscape FIMI actors navigate well.**

This does not mean that to protect democracy and prevent FIMI, the solution is simply to go 'offline'. However, the role played by globalized content generation and consumption needs to be recognized. This virtual landscape enables adoption of tools and techniques from the authoritarian rule book—including disinformation, shrinking of civic space, attacks on institutions and social polarization—in new contexts and at an unprecedented speed and scale. FIMI actors have quickly grasped the opportunities this new and rapidly evolving setting offers; it is of crucial importance that democratic actors catch up through strategic adaptation and learn how to use this borderless landscape to their advantage.

**2. FIMI actors could not succeed without domestic enablers and incentives.**

Although each recent electoral encounter with FIMI offers a unique picture, the role played by domestic vulnerabilities is a common thread across the four case studies.

In Georgia, Russia's hijacking of the country's pro-European trajectory could have happened without a without pro-Russian ruling elite which has systematically repressed pro-democratic

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figures. This has involved attacks and campaigns of fear orchestrated against opposition voices, including women and marginalized communities. Further, legislative measures to shrink civic space have been modelled on Russia's example.<sup>1</sup>

South Africa also demonstrates the role played by domestic political actors attempting to undermine electoral institutions and trust in them—for example through baseless claims about election fraud. But while Russia might have played a role in the country's 2024 elections and cooperated with local actors, any FIMI impacts would appear to be rather limited.

In South Korea, domestic actors weaponized far-right discourse, gender-based disinformation and narratives of foreign interference. In doing so, they targeted a deeply polarized society suffering from high mistrust towards mainstream media. Culminating in an attempted coup, the campaign triggered a governance crisis that is still ongoing.

The US case study is no exception, as domestic actors, political and otherwise, engaged in disseminating disinformation on a large scale during the 2024 presidential election. Meanwhile, external actors including China, Iran and Russia all contributed to this trend. Efforts to weaken democratic institutions have characterized the early stages of President Trump's second administration<sup>2</sup> and the chilling effect will be felt globally.

### **3. Internal vulnerabilities notwithstanding, FIMI could potentially play a decisive role in democratic decline.**

Since FIMI is channelled to varying degrees by domestic vectors, the question arises whether 'internal' vulnerabilities as traditionally understood—corruption, weak institutions, lack of economic development, social polarization or rapid social change, among others—are still the 'real culprits' behind democratic decline. Especially where democratic erosion is far advanced, or where FIMI campaigns prevent development of strong democratic institutions in the first place, they could play a co-constructive rather than a merely supporting role in autocratization.

1 Civil Georgia, 'CSOs on FARA: This is "Russian Law" repackaged', 24 March 2025, <<https://civil.ge/archives/671219>>, accessed 13 June 2025

2 Urby, E. and Katz, J., 'Dangerous cracks in US democracy pillars', Brookings Institution, 13 February 2025, <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/dangerous-cracks-in-us-democracy-pillars>>, accessed 13 June 2025.

**4. In today's world, foreign interference must be treated as a constant, not an exception.**

Any identified vulnerability, whether political, institutional or societal, can be exploited by foreign actors using internal channels. Strengthening a country's social bases of democratic resilience is therefore essential.

The four countries analysed in this report demonstrate such resilience in different ways: Georgia draws strength from its vibrant civil society; South Africa benefits from robust and independent electoral institutions; South Korea combines both elements, while the USA brings centuries of democratic development to the table. Reinforcing these pillars is crucial—but on its own, it is not enough to resist FIMI. A comprehensive and coordinated strategy is needed to translate resilience into effective defence.

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## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **For governments**

1. Take a comprehensive approach to tackling FIMI by recognizing that it is not only about foreign threats but also about vulnerabilities within the country. Combating FIMI requires coordinated action across different sectors of society, not just isolated efforts.
2. Focus on strengthening the long-term foundations of democracy, including investing in independent journalism and civil education from young age, supporting free civic space and protecting the rights of marginalized groups often targeted by disinformation.
3. Develop clear and democratic rules for the digital space that can reduce the spread of manipulation and harmful content online, while still upholding fundamental rights like freedom of expression.
4. Identify and manage risks of anti-disinformation policies being subverted to stifle legitimate dissent and debate, civic society space and democratic opposition.

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**Helping people critically assess what they see online is a powerful way to build democratic resilience.**

### **For electoral management bodies**

1. Communicate proactively and transparently with the public, especially during election periods, to address misinformation early and reinforce trust in the integrity of the process.
2. Invest in tools and training that help detect and respond to digital threats, including coordinated disinformation campaigns, especially those that target election infrastructure and credibility.
3. Build partnerships with both domestic actors (such as civil society and media) and international peers, to share best practices and ensure that electoral integrity is protected across borders.

### **For civil society organizations**

1. Expand public education and media literacy initiatives, especially among young people and communities that are most vulnerable to false or polarizing information. Helping people critically assess what they see online is a powerful way to build democratic resilience.
2. Continue to play a watchdog role by fact-checking, raising awareness and exposing manipulation, while also advocating for stronger protection and support for independent civil society voices.
3. Work together through networks and alliances at national, regional and international levels to share resources, coordinate responses and amplify efforts to push back against manipulation and democratic backsliding.

### **For the international democracy support community**

1. Provide consistent and long-term support to independent media and civil society groups, especially in countries where political conditions are making their work more difficult or dangerous.
2. Step in to fill the gap left by reduced US involvement in global democracy support, by increasing funding, technical assistance and diplomatic backing for pro-democracy actors around the world.
3. Promote responsible digital governance globally, by encouraging technology platforms and governments to adopt rules and standards that protect open, inclusive and democratic online spaces.

# INTRODUCTION

For several years now, democracy around the globe has been experiencing a worrying decline (International IDEA 2024). The years of the Covid-19 pandemic were followed by a worsening security environment characterized by both open conflicts and hybrid warfare. Combined with resulting economic volatility, these are contributing factors in what some commentators fear could be the twilight of democracy (Applebaum 2020).

Another key factor fanning the flames of authoritarianism, social polarization and democratic decline is foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). Insufficiently regulated digital platforms (Zuboff 2019) operating on a business model that directly profits from spread of disinformation (Silverman, et al. 2022) have proven time and again how destructive FIMI can be. In an era when democratic elections are often decided on the narrowest of margins, a distorted information environment can radically change countries' future trajectories. This is dangerous not only because actors engaging in information manipulation and interference typically do not support causes of peace and tolerance, but also because FIMI represents the antithesis of democratic control, oversight and legitimacy.

Democracy is a system of governance which is defined as rule 'for the people, by the people' (Brander et al. 2023). For such a system to work as intended, effective safeguards are needed to ensure that the people are indeed the ones making collective choices about their future. When democracies fail to prevent FIMI from influencing electoral outcomes, they not only suffer from the erosion of fairness and transparency but also risk empowering leaders whose priorities may align more with foreign interests than with those of the citizens. FIMI carves out power to political forces illicitly, and that way it

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**In an era when democratic elections are often decided on the narrowest of margins, a distorted information environment can radically change countries' future trajectories.**

severely damages citizens' rights, as well as countries' sovereignty, stability and future prospects. The very essence of democracy—the will of the people—is denied in the process.

In recent years, much has been said and written about FIMI. The interest the phenomenon has generated in expert circles, politics and media has produced a wealth of knowledge focused on the actors responsible as well as on tactics and techniques deployed to weaken democracy in target states. Without this knowledge, it would be impossible to understand the parameters of the problem. However, it is also not possible to design effective countermeasures without first identifying the weaknesses and imperfections of democratic governance in general—and the specific weaknesses within individual states in particular—that create openings for malign interference. This report is intended to contribute to this latter aim.

Similarly, the research on FIMI often suffers from perspectives which are too Western-centric, state-centric and securitized. This is not to deny that FIMI has caused significant harm across European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states, or that ways to confront it have fruitfully entered the public discourse of these countries. After all, the term FIMI itself is a product of the European External Action Service (EEAS 2023).

This report seeks to examine FIMI from a more cross-regional perspective, drawing from four states spanning Africa, Asia, Europe and North America, namely South Africa, South Korea, Georgia and the United States. The case studies are followed by an analysis of findings, lessons learned and recommendations. The countries for case studies were selected to capture the different contours of FIMI as a global challenge we face in common. Like the climate crisis it so often denies and distorts, FIMI in the information environment is a problem that knows no borders. The case studies are based on a variety of sources, ranging from official and media reports to other expert analysis.

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**FIMI intrudes into electoral outcomes, but also breaks down trust and social cohesion, pitting communities and individuals against one another.**

This report does not address the important implications of FIMI for hard security but focuses more on quality of democracy and human rights impacts in the affected countries. It must be stressed that FIMI is not just a phenomenon with the potential to make or break politicians' careers, or a topic for another panel at a conference about disinformation. FIMI intrudes into electoral outcomes, but also breaks down trust and social cohesion, pitting communities and individuals

against one another. It undermines, punishes and further prevents public participation and representation of disadvantaged social groups of people such as women and ethnic or sexual minorities. The harmful effects of FIMI thus cannot be evaluated only in terms of costs to national security (US Department of State 2023). There are also grave human and social costs.

However, states, communities and individuals are not helpless in the face of FIMI. As much as FIMI exploits local challenges and grievances to fan the flames of conflict, fear and hate, it also mobilizes resilience and creativity as targets learn to how to adapt and regain broken trust, fortifying embattled institutions. This report aims to present both successes and failures in specific countries as their democracies encounter an ultimate stress test.

**This report aims to present both successes and failures in specific countries as their democracies encounter an ultimate stress test.**

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## Chapter 1

# GEORGIA

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION

Georgia serves as a strong example of how both foreign and domestic actors can be instrumental in foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). The country case study illustrates how external forces, particularly Russia, exploit existing domestic vulnerabilities, while local actors simultaneously adopt and amplify foreign-backed narratives for their own political objectives. This overlap makes Georgia a critical case to understand how FIMI operates as a mutually reinforcing mechanism between domestic and foreign actors rather than a unidirectional force. On one hand, the country has been a target of Russia's strategic interests, including the illegal occupation of part of Georgia's territory. On the other hand, internal democratic backsliding and polarization have created fertile ground for the success and impact of foreign interference operations. Of special relevance is Russia's instrumentalization of identity-based discourse and gendered disinformation to further its influence in Georgia. These narratives intersect with domestic political agendas, exacerbating divisions and undermining Georgia's democracy.

The influence of external forces, particularly Russian-backed disinformation networks, is deeply entangled with the actions of domestic political players who leverage these narratives for their own objectives. The distinction between foreign and domestic influence is often blurred, as Russian-aligned discourse is not only promoted by Russian actors but also echoed and amplified by local political parties, media and institutions. Understanding this dynamic is essential to grasping the full scope of information manipulation in Georgia and to developing effective countermeasures.

**Georgia serves as a strong example of how both foreign and domestic actors can be instrumental in foreign information manipulation and interference.**

This case study is structured into four areas: (a) an overview of the democratic backsliding that enables FIMI in Georgia; (b) the interlinkages between foreign and domestic actors; (c) the weaponizing of identity and gender as a tool for social and political manipulation; and (d) the responses and challenges in countering FIMI in Georgia.

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## 1.2. DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND FIMI VULNERABILITIES

Georgia's susceptibility to FIMI is shaped by a combination of external threats and internal political developments. The Russian occupation of 20 per cent of Georgia's territory remains a key factor in Russia's interference strategies (Caucasus Watch 2024). Russia seeks, among other things, to undermine Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, amplify Russia's dominance and influence in the region, and solidify its irredentist foreign policy. These efforts have intensified and have leveraged increasing vulnerabilities as Georgia has experienced democratic backsliding. The latter is characterized by the erosion of judicial independence, suppression of civil society and government-aligned media dominance (International IDEA n.d.).

Over the past few years, Georgia has witnessed a steady decline in fundamental rights and democratic governance (International IDEA n.d.), mirroring trends observed in other post-Soviet states subjected to Russian influence. This decline has been exacerbated by government actions, including the passage of restrictive legislation such as the Foreign Agent Law 2024 and the Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors 2024, both modelled after Russian policies aimed at curtailing civil liberties (Light 2024).

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**A critical enabler of FIMI in Georgia is the convergence of pro-Russia narratives within domestic political discourse.**

A critical enabler of FIMI in Georgia is the convergence of pro-Russia narratives within domestic political discourse. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has increasingly adopted rhetoric that copies or even aligns with Russian influence strategies, fostering confusion among the public about the origins of these narratives. The government's decision to delay the EU accession process until 2028, despite strong public support for European integration, has further allowed the GD time and space to cast the West as a destabilizing force while positioning Russia as a defender of traditional values and sovereignty (Civil.ge 2024).

### 1.3. THE ENTANGLED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN ACTORS

Foreign and domestic actors in Georgia not only intersect but are deeply interwoven and in complex ways. External influence operations do not function in isolation but are reinforced and magnified by domestic political actors who find strategic advantages in aligning with Russian-backed narratives. Similarly, foreign forces weaponize existing grievances to fuel and amplify polarization as well as advance their own agenda. At the same time, domestic actors abuse the concept of disinformation and the tools to counter it, as a repressive weapon against civil society and political rivals (Neal 2024). This confirms that FIMI in Georgia cannot be viewed purely as a foreign imposition but as a mutually reinforcing ecosystem where external disinformation tactics and internal political interests converge and feed each other.

#### Far right domestic actors as channels of pro-Russian narratives

Actors aligned with Russia's ideology and amplifying pro-Russian narratives in Georgia operate through a network of far-right movements, political parties and media outlets. Among these groups, some far-right and extreme conservative organizations stand out, including Alt-Info/Conservative Movement, a media organization turned political party that maintains close ties to Alexander Dugin, a key ideologue of Russian Neo-Eurasianism; groups such as the Alliance of Patriots; and the social movement 'Unity, Essence, Hope' (ERI) (Kintsurashvili 2024). These groups have played a central role in spreading disinformation targeting marginalized groups, particularly the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) community, as well as journalists and civil society organizations (CSOs). According to watchdog organizations, many of these far-right groups seemingly operate with impunity from security forces, exemplifying the interwoven nature of domestic and foreign powers in Georgia (Cole 2022).

#### Tailored messaging and channels maximizing FIMI's impact

Russian-sponsored media outlets tend to have limited appeal among Georgian-language audiences, likely due to the occupation of Georgian territories and widespread scepticism towards Russian-aligned sources (Information Integrity Coalition 2023: 55). The situation differs in regions with large ethnic minority communities (which represent around 15 per cent of Georgia's population). Here, Russian media enjoys greater influence, facilitated by linguistic

**Foreign forces weaponize existing grievances to fuel and amplify polarization as well as advance their own agenda.**

barriers and Russian as a lingua franca that bridges them, particularly among older generations (Gotua n.d.). As a result, Russia tailors its messaging to different demographics: direct Russian propaganda is more prevalent in minority communities, while Georgian-speaking audiences receive similar content through domestic Russian-aligned proxies, often without recognizing this alignment.

**The ruling Georgian Dream party has played a pivotal role in reinforcing Russia-aligned disinformation, using identity-based and anti-democratic narratives to strengthen its hold on power.**

### **Adoption of Kremlin's narratives and governance model**

The ruling GD party has played a pivotal role in reinforcing Russia-aligned disinformation, using identity-based and anti-democratic narratives to strengthen its hold on power. Through its affiliated media outlets and political messaging, GD has increasingly adopted rhetoric that fosters scepticism towards Western institutions and portrays the European Union as a destabilizing force. The government's legislative agenda, including restrictive measures targeting independent media and non-governmental organizations, mirrors and sometimes directly copies Russia's own tactics for suppressing dissent and consolidating control (Kelly and Kramer 2024).

However, GD positioned itself as a pro-European force during the 2024 parliamentary election campaign to renew its control of government, which it has enjoyed since 2011. The party utilized EU symbolism and adopted the slogan 'Towards Europe only with peace, dignity, and prosperity' (Agenda.GE 2024). The strong support for EU membership among Georgian citizens helps explain this pre-election shift (EU Neighbours East 2024). Since those elections, however, GD has radically changed course and postponed the EU accession process to 2028. Even before the election, the party enacted anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-civil society laws, which sparked a powerful wave of pro-European and pro-democratic protests in the country. These were followed by a crackdown on dissent, violence against peaceful demonstrators, arrests of protesters and journalists, and other repressive measures, while simultaneously garnering the Kremlin's approval (Lomsadze 2024).

Another influential domestic actor in Georgia's information landscape is the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). Similar to the Russian Orthodox Church, the GOC frequently amplifies narratives that align with Russian geopolitical goals, portraying Western values as a threat to Georgia's traditional moral and religious identity. The GOC's refusal to support Ukraine's independent Orthodox Church—its own ties to the Russian Patriarchy endure despite the invasion of Ukraine—underscores concern about its vulnerability to Kremlin influence. By

leveraging its considerable societal influence, the GOC contributes to the entrenchment of narratives that further isolate Georgia from democratic principles.

The concept of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) has played a crucial role in fostering identity-based vulnerabilities. This ideology, advanced by Russian political and religious institutions, portrays Russia as the protector of Orthodox Christianity against an image of Western liberalism that corrupts it. The GOC has been instrumental in propagating these narratives, for example by amplifying messages framing LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality as existential threats to Georgia's national identity (Petro 2015).

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#### 1.4. WEAPONIZING IDENTITY AND GENDER AS A STRATEGY

Identity-based narratives, particularly those concerning gender and LGBTQ+ issues, have been at the forefront of domestic and foreign disinformation strategies in Georgia. Russian influence operations have systematically framed the Western liberal democratic model as a direct threat to Georgia's cultural and religious traditions, a message adopted and magnified by domestic actors seeking to consolidate power. The convergence of these forces has resulted in a potent strategy where identity politics are systematically manipulated to polarize society, delegitimize democratic movements, suppress human rights and undermine Georgia's pro-democratic orientation (Gegeshidze and de Waal 2021).

The ruling GD party and affiliated media have embraced anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric as a tool to distract from governance demands and to mobilize conservative segments of society. Ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections, anti-LGBTQ+ disinformation campaigns surged, with pro-government media outlets and Russian-aligned actors disseminating fabricated content to equate opposition protests with LGBTQ+ advocacy (Myth Detector 2024a). These campaigns have been employed in order to alienate more conservative sections of Georgian society from opposition movements, as well as to disseminate fear-based hatred towards marginalized communities (Myth Detector 2024b).

Women politicians, journalists and activists advocating for democratic reforms have been systematically targeted with misogynist and other gendered narratives designed to erode their

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**Women politicians, journalists and activists advocating for democratic reforms have been systematically targeted with misogynist and other gendered narratives designed to erode their credibility.**

credibility. A notable example was the widespread circulation of a doctored image portraying President Salome Zourabichvili as a sex worker—a smear campaign intended to undermine her leadership and EU affiliations (Kintsurashvili 2024). Similarly, artificial intelligence-generated deepfakes have been used to fabricate images of opposition figures engaged in same-sex relationships, a tactic designed to both stoke and exploit homophobic sentiment to weaken democratic competition (Myth Detector 2024a).

These narratives and tactics are not unique to Georgia but part of broader regional disinformation strategy. Russian state-sponsored media have extended such gender-based attacks to Western politicians critical of Moscow's influence. For example, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and former Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin were both targeted with sexualized disinformation designed to delegitimize their political authority (Giunashvili 2023). By linking gender and sexuality to broader geopolitical tensions, these campaigns reinforce the notion that embracing liberal democratic values leads to societal and moral collapse.

The collaboration of domestic and foreign actors in weaponizing the politics of gender and sexual orientation has deepened societal divisions and hindered Georgia's democratic progress by redirecting public discourse away from governance issues into manufactured cultural conflicts. Understanding these interwoven tactics is essential for developing strategies to counteract both external manipulation and domestic authoritarian consolidation.

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**Efforts to counter FIMI in Georgia include a mix between state-led, internationally backed efforts and civil society responses.**

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## **1.5. RESPONSES AND CHALLENGES IN COUNTERING FIMI**

Efforts to counter FIMI in Georgia include a mix between state-led, internationally backed efforts and civil society responses. State-led efforts have been evidently affected by the political turmoil in the country, even though they received significant support from NATO (Neal 2024). The rapid deterioration of Georgia's relations with NATO partners has significantly impacted state-led efforts to counter FIMI. The termination of a NATO-backed strategic communications initiative in 2024, originally designed to bolster Georgia's resilience against Russian hybrid warfare, is illustrative. The initiative, which had received extensive support from the United Kingdom and United States, was quietly ended after it was revealed that the Georgian

Government had repurposed resources meant for countering Russian disinformation to target domestic critics and spread anti-Western propaganda (Neal 2024).

The erosion of internationally backed counter-disinformation efforts leaves Georgia increasingly vulnerable. CSOs' operational space is shrinking as the government intensifies crackdowns on independent voices. Yet Georgia's vibrant civil society has nevertheless been at the forefront of fighting foreign interference through a variety of activities.

Fact-checking and debunking are core functions, with platforms like Myth Detector and Fact-check Georgia identifying and exposing false narratives and often exposing the overlapping nature of foreign and domestic actors in FIMI. Complementary efforts focus on media literacy and education, with groups like the Media Development Foundation, Strategic Communications Center—Georgia and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) offering training and resources to journalists, the public and other CSOs. These programmes are aimed at equipping individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information and navigate the media landscape, among others.

Georgian CSOs engage in awareness-raising and public engagement on the issue of disinformation also by conducting disinformation research and publishing findings to contribute to public discourse. These organizations operate within a complex environment, facing resource limitations, potential political pressure and existing societal polarization. Platforms of collaboration, networking and collective action are therefore an important part of ongoing efforts to address democratic decay in Georgia.

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## 1.6. CONCLUSION

The case of Georgia illustrates the deeply interconnected nature of foreign and domestic information manipulation and interference—and the role that civil society can play to act as a bulwark against it. Russian influence operations have effectively capitalized on internal vulnerabilities, enablers and incentives, aligning with domestic political actors to increase polarization, muzzle dissent and manipulate identity-based narratives. The blurred lines between foreign interference and homegrown actors make efforts to counter these threats more difficult, weakening Georgia's democratic

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**A vibrant civil society has been key in mobilizing citizens, raising international awareness about the situation and increasing society's resilience against foreign interference.**

institutions and distancing the country from its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. A vibrant civil society has been key in mobilizing citizens, raising international awareness about the situation and increasing society's resilience against foreign interference. Yet, legislative and political restrictions have led to shrinking civic space. At the same time, termination of NATO's strategic communications initiative and the repurposing of state resources for anti-EU propaganda demonstrate the ongoing precarity of Georgia's information environment.

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## Chapter 2

# SOUTH AFRICA

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### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

On 29 May 2024, South Africans voted in the country's seventh general elections since the end of apartheid. Ahead of the election, concerns were raised that South Africa could face a deluge of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) operations. The concerns were shared in many of the other countries that went to the polls in 2024's global 'super-cycle election year'. These fears were amplified by the rise of user-friendly generative artificial intelligence platforms capable of producing highly realistic disinformation content and harnessed to undermine the credibility of electoral candidates and processes. In the European Union, for example, researchers reported a growing Russian disinformation network targeting EU member states and political leaders critical of Russia's current policies; this largely focused on spreading false claims about the war in Ukraine (Delzer 2024).

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**South Africa's 2024 elections took place against a backdrop of uncertainty about the country's role in global geopolitics, influenced by its positions on the wars in Ukraine and Palestine/Lebanon.**

South Africa's 2024 elections took place against a backdrop of uncertainty about the country's role in global geopolitics, influenced by its positions on the wars in Ukraine and Palestine/Lebanon. Diverging from most Western nations—but in line with the African Union position and many other nations in the global south—the government avoided direct condemnation of Russia, instead emphasizing neutrality. On Gaza, South Africa was an outspoken critic of Israeli actions, drawing parallels with apartheid and advocating for Palestinian self-determination. In December 2023, South Africa filed a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) accusing Israel of violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention. The Court ordered Israel to take all measures within its

power to prevent acts of genocide and to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza (ICJ n.d.).

Researchers warned that a long-identified purveyor of disinformation not only in South Africa but in the continent at large—Russia—would strengthen its position in the country by influencing the outcome of elections via social media in particular (ADDO 2024). In this case study, we review the evidence of FIMI in the campaign, specifically focusing on the ‘big lie’—a concerted effort by the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party to undermine the credibility of the elections—and its links to Russia.

While there are clear links between the leadership of the MK party and Russia, we argue that the ‘big lie’ does not constitute FIMI, at least not in the traditional sense of direct foreign involvement. This subcampaign was planned and executed by South Africans, from within the borders of South Africa. Thus, as suggested by others (Van Damme, Findlay and Cornelissen 2024) we argue that it is best characterized as (F)IMI. With the parenthesis around the ‘F’, we mean to emphasize and recognize that much interference originates within the country, with foreign actors exploiting existing domestic systems and narratives rather than creating new mechanisms of manipulation, thus challenging the traditional dichotomy between foreign and domestic influences, instead presenting them as interconnected forces. A domestic-first approach highlights the critical role of local actors and infrastructure in enabling manipulation, which foreign entities opportunistically leverage. By reframing the discourse, (F)IMI provides a more nuanced understanding of interference in South Africa, addressing its unique characteristics and offering a stronger foundation for strategies to mitigate its effects. The case study thus contributes to the debate about FIMI by demonstrating its indirect nature in some settings. In addition, it points to the remarkable (and often overlooked) resilience of those South African institutions providing a bulwark against foreign election interference.

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**The case study points to the remarkable resilience of the South African institutions providing a bulwark against foreign election interference.**

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## **2.2. BACKGROUND: DISINFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon in Africa. It has been common for years and a preoccupation for African academics, journalists and activists long before it became a concern in the Global North (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022).

However, with a fast-growing population of mobile users, and the popularization of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X and WhatsApp, the negative effects of disinformation in Africa are now more pervasive. Researchers have shown that perceived exposure to false information is high in some African countries and yet citizens often share made-up news intentionally. The motivations and contributing factors for sharing misinformation in Africa have been studied (Madrid-Morales et al. 2021) drawing on focus group interviews with students in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The researchers identify two common motivations—civic duty and fun. Digital media acts as a social utility, where the desire to warn others often leads to the unintentional spread of misinformation.

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**In South Africa, journalists and media organizations actively hold the government to account, fulfilling a vital role as the ‘fourth estate’.**

However, in South Africa more than its neighbours—and bucking global trends—the media serves as a bulwark against disinformation. The country’s media landscape is diverse and vibrant, encompassing a mix of print, broadcast and digital platforms, with a range of independent and commercial as well as community and public outlets. Journalists and media organizations actively hold the government to account, fulfilling a vital role as the ‘fourth estate’. This has established the media as a relatively trusted source of information and a key contributor to public discourse, particularly on social media platforms (Ipsos 2019). This stands in contrast to the global trend of declining trust in mainstream media.

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### 2.3. CASE STUDY: THE ‘BIG LIE’ CAMPAIGN

The 2024 elections marked a historic first for South Africa with no party securing an outright majority, necessitating coalition negotiations. This unprecedented scenario offers a unique opportunity to explore the role of FIMI in shaping not just electoral outcomes but also the formation of coalition governments. While the impact of disinformation on South African democracy has been widely studied, this marks a new arena of broader democratic processes beyond elections themselves.

The year 2024 was a key moment for the African National Congress (ANC). For more than two decades, it enjoyed comfortable parliamentary majorities, secured on the back of its anti-apartheid credentials. However, in 2019, its vote share dropped below 60 per cent and opinion polls ahead of the 2024 elections suggested it

could drop even further. Meanwhile, in December 2023, the former president of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, publicly declared that he would not vote for the ANC (De Simone 2023). He also announced the creation of a new political party, the MK party. Named after the ANC's former armed wing during the anti-apartheid struggle, this aimed to tap into the party's historical mythology.

The 'big lie' campaign was a concerted effort by the MK party to undermine the credibility of the 2024 elections, whether to increase its bargaining power in the post-electoral negotiations or to advance its ethno-nationalist, autocratic agenda. In the following paragraphs we describe the campaign, drawing on newspaper articles and published research.

The foundation for this campaign was laid several months before the elections, with the MK party launching an attack on the credibility of the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) as a key mobilizing point to rally supporters ahead of the election. In March 2024, a senior member of the MK party said, after questioning the integrity of the IEC at a rally, 'Comrades, we have two options: either we submit, or we fight ... If it means that we must attack [the IEC], I'll come to you' (Davis 2024).

The attacks on the IEC intensified in the weeks leading up to the elections, reaching a climax three days before the polls when MK party members stormed an IEC warehouse in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa's second most populous province (and former president Zuma's home province). In videos that were widely circulated on social media, MK members claimed the elections were rigged, citing 'a very suspicious truck' offloading 'ballot boxes and scanners' (SABC 2024).

The incident coincided with a surge in social media activity and a series of articles, published by Independent Media. The history of this company can be traced back to the *Cape Argus*, one of South Africa's oldest newspapers. The founder of the *Cape Argus*, Saul Solomon, was a liberal parliamentarian in the Cape Colony and a supporter of multiracialism, women's rights and responsible self-government (Trapido 2004). For most of its existence, the *Cape Argus* has remained true to the values of its founder. Under apartheid, it was a prominent voice of (white liberal) opposition to the ruling National Party and in the 1990s, now part of Independent News and Media South Africa (INMSA), it contributed to holding the new ANC government accountable.

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**The 'big lie' campaign was a concerted effort by the MK party to undermine the credibility of the 2024 elections.**

In 2013, INMSA was acquired by a consortium led by the Sekunjalo Investment Group and renamed Independent Media. Sekunjalo is a private equity firm founded by Iqbal Survé, a South African entrepreneur with links to former president Zuma. Its acquisition of INMSA was funded by a loan from the state-owned Public Investment Corporation (PIC) and two Chinese Government-controlled investment funds. In 2018, as Zuma was leaving office, the PIC wrote off ZAR 1 billion (USD 56.25 million) or 118 per cent of its original ZAR 850 million loan to Sekunjalo, leaving Survé in full control of Independent Media and indebted to Zuma. The articles must be read in this context.

The 'big lie' campaign reached a second climax in the days after the elections when former president Zuma hinted at political violence should the IEC declare the results without responding to the MK party's claims that the elections were rigged. At a late-night press conference following a visit to the IEC's results centre, he warned that the results announcement should not go ahead, saying 'people would be provoked' (The Nation 2024). This was a thinly veiled reference to the deadly riots of July 2021, sparked by the incarceration of Zuma for contempt of court. The riots resulted in more than 350 deaths, loss of over 2 million jobs and disruption of supply chains with an economic cost of over ZAR 50 billion (Moffat and Mbanyele 2022).

Regardless of the warnings, the IEC declared the results the following day. The ANC's seat share in the National Assembly dropped to 40 per cent, paving the way for South Africa's first coalition government. The Democratic Alliance (DA), South Africa's largest opposition party, secured 22 per cent, while the MK party became the third largest party with 15 per cent of the seats.

South African data science start-up Murmur have analysed activity on X (formerly Twitter) in the days and weeks leading up to and after the 2024 elections (Findlay 2024). They find a clear pattern. Users promoting the 'big lie' narrative tended to belong to one of two groups: MK party-aligned users or users associated with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The EFF is a left-wing party with 10 per cent of the seats in the National Assembly but a strong social media presence, including through paid, anonymous influencers (Findlay 2024). While the MK party pushed the narrative consistently before and after the elections, the EFF leadership initially accepted the results. However, as the EFF became increasingly marginalized in post-electoral coalition negotiations, EFF-linked users picked up and amplified the conspiracy theory.

It should be noted that the 2024 elections were tainted also by incidents of online gender-based violence (GBV). Online GBV remains a significant issue in South Africa, despite the country having extensive laws addressing elections, online harms and GBV. A study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (Martiny et al. 2024) revealed that ahead of the elections, women politicians, candidates and public figures were frequently targeted. This abuse took the form of comments and replies to their posts that attacked their physical appearance, intelligence and leadership abilities—often spreading gendered disinformation and narratives that objectified or sexualized the targets.

This issue was exacerbated by the fact that although social media platforms have policies addressing GBV, their algorithms are not tailored to South African contexts. They are often ineffective at policing content in vernacular languages other than English, leaving women vulnerable to abuse. For example, TikTok did not limit or block content in South African vernacular languages that degraded or targeted women, even though equivalent terms in English were banned. Similarly, ISD data found that X hosted significant abusive content, disproportionately targeting women affiliated with the ruling party.

The ‘big lie’ campaign cannot be directly linked to Russia or any other foreign actor. All evidence suggests it was planned and executed by the MK party, later assisted by the EFF. However, there is no doubt the campaign and the election were of interest to Russia, and that the MK party leadership has shown alignment with Russia’s narratives and foreign policy.

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**Online GBV remains a significant issue in South Africa, despite the country having extensive laws addressing elections, online harms and GBV.**

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## 2.4. SOUTH AFRICA–RUSSIA RELATIONS

South Africa–Russia relations are deeply rooted in shared ideology and historical alliances between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the ANC. The USSR was, among many others, a backer of the ANC and provided it with substantial financial, military and intelligence support during the anti-apartheid struggle. As the largest successor state to the USSR, Russia’s relationship with post-1994 South Africa is often regarded as one of its most successful foreign policy achievements (Weiss and Rumer 2019).

Beyond historical loyalties, contemporary South Africa–Russia relations are built around economic cooperation spanning energy,

mining and agriculture. Military cooperation is evidenced through joint exercises and trade in arms. Finally, President Vladimir Putin played a key role in facilitating South Africa's inclusion in BRICS (Weiss and Rumer 2019).

**South Africa's relations with Russia reached a high point during the Zuma era when the two countries signed a USD 76 billion agreement to build a Russian nuclear energy plant in South Africa.**

South Africa's relations with Russia reached a high point during the Zuma era when the two countries signed a USD 76 billion agreement to build a Russian nuclear energy plant in South Africa. Initially secret, the agreement was revealed in 2014 and caused uproar from civil society organizations, the media and opposition members of parliament. Later ruled unconstitutional by the High Court, the agreement effectively died with Zuma's removal from office in early 2018. President Ramaphosa has tried to maintain respectful and strategic relations towards Russia. Though initially critical of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, he has also refrained from condemning Russia at the United Nations and, later, has led an African attempt to mediate in the conflict (Jones 2023).

It has been suggested that Russia backed the creation of the MK party (ADDO 2024). While this is not proven, there is evidence of Russia-linked social media accounts promoting the MK party in the months leading up to the 2024 elections (Bloomberg 2024) and, seemingly, party support of Russian foreign policy. A senior member of the MK party (and daughter of former president Zuma), Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, was the first to use the hashtag #IStandWithRussia, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She was allegedly at the centre of a Russian-backed Twitter/X campaign to increase support for the invasion (Centre for Information Resilience 2023). The MK party has continued its support to Russia, also after the 2024 elections. In a September 2024 press statement, it condemned the 'dangerous provocations by NATO and the West' and recognized 'Russia's legitimate concerns' (uMkhonto weSizwe 2024).

The African Center for Strategic Studies, a research entity within the US Department of Defense, claims Russia is the 'primary disinformation actor in South Africa' (African Center for Strategic Studies 2024). To back up the argument, they cite research published by the Jamestown Foundation, a conservative defence policy think tank, suggesting 'Kremlin-backed/sponsored media outlets purposefully inflame reciprocal hatreds among various ethnic groups in the RSA [Republic of South Africa]' (Sukhankin 2020).



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## 2.5. CONCLUSION: RESILIENCE FACTORS

There is no doubt that Russia took an interest in the 2024 South African elections and worked with local actors, notably the MK party, to advance its foreign policy objectives. However, we believe it would be conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970) to classify this as FIMI. In any case, there is little suggestion Russia's efforts had any impact on the electoral process or outcome. This speaks to an often-overlooked characteristic of South Africa: the remarkable resilience of its democratic culture and institutions—particularly the independence of the electoral management body, the IEC.

South Africa's recent political history is evidence of a notably robust set of institutions, including key government departments (e.g. the Treasury and the South African Revenue Service), the Public Protector, the Auditor General and the judiciary (e.g. the superior courts). Despite a focused and prolonged effort to weaken governance by former president Zuma, these and many other institutions did not collapse, largely thanks to the heroic efforts of their employees. Rather, the attacks fuelled a civic conscience and resistance, the #ZumaMustFall campaign, which is unparalleled in South Africa's post-apartheid history.

Reflecting this, the IEC has continued to demonstrate its competence and impartiality, ensuring free and fair elections while maintaining public trust in the democratic process. South Africa's independent media have also played a pivotal role by providing accurate information, fostering public debate and exposing attempts at disinformation. As noted in this case study, Chinese Government-controlled investment funds have invested in the media, but their investments have been limited and thus also their ability to potentially influence public opinion (Freedom House 2022). Finally, South Africa's active civil society and robust legal framework have acted as further safeguards, ensuring that external and internal actors cannot easily destabilize its democratic institutions.

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**South Africa's recent political history is evidence of a notably robust set of institutions, including key government departments, the Public Protector, the Auditor General and the judiciary.**

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## Chapter 3

# SOUTH KOREA

### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

South Korea is a pioneer of digital technologies. As one of the world's leading countries in innovation and digitalization, it ranks at the top of the Digital Government Index of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (WIPO 2024; OECD 2024). This gives South Korea a unique vantage point in addressing foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). On the one hand, its advanced technological landscape fosters familiarity with digital actors and threats. On the other hand, the widespread use of social media as a news source, combined with low trust in mainstream media, represents a vulnerability (Kemp 2024; Newman et al. 2023; Lee and Park 2024).

South Korea is among the most targeted countries in the world for nation-state cyber operations, primarily conducted by state-affiliated actors from China and North Korea (Microsoft 2024). The reach and influence of FIMI campaigns in the country has steadily escalated this century (Tworek and Lee 2021). Historically, they have sought to exploit existing polarization along partisan and ideological lines, often preying on rivalries between political candidates (Lim 2024). This has cumulatively undermined public confidence in the fairness of elections, causing damage to the credibility of South Korea's democratic institutions.

According to a 2024 study, 37 per cent of South Korean voters believe they encountered foreign electoral interference in the 2024 legislative election, while 61 per cent think they have experienced it in previous election cycles. South Koreans also perceive foreign interference as disproportionately harming the political party they support—which

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**South Korea is among the most targeted countries in the world for nation-state cyber operations, primarily conducted by state-affiliated actors from China and North Korea.**

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**Tech-enabled gender-based violence has been used to deter women from political participation and to publicly shame and discredit female candidates.**

hinders voters' ability to make fair and informed decisions and entrenches polarized beliefs (Lim 2024).

Disinformation campaigns aimed at aggravating ideological polarization have had particularly harmful effects on women and other gender-marginalized groups. Gender politics have become a growing source of division among South Korean voters, with men strongly favouring the conservative People's Power Party (PPP) and women the liberal Democratic Party (DP) (You 2024; Kuhn 2022). This ideological divide has been further deepened by the accelerated spread of politically motivated online harassment campaigns and sexual abuse deepfakes. Tech-enabled gender-based violence (GBV) has been used to deter women from political participation and to publicly shame and discredit female candidates. As such, it poses a significant threat to civil and political rights and democratic processes in South Korea (H. Park 2024).

This case study examines the use of narratives involving FIMI to shape South Korea's information environment, particularly the use of disinformation to deepen political and social polarization. It examines the emergence of this phenomenon over time, its drivers and key actors based on an analysis of a series of elections: from the South Korean 2017 presidential election to the 2024 legislative election and its aftermath. This is followed by a discussion of how disinformation and fear-based narratives have been used to curtail women's public participation. The chapter concludes with a summary of the FIMI challenges and their effects on democracy in the country.

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### 3.2. THE 2017 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

In 1998 South Korea elected its first president since 1962 to represent the liberal DP (Pardo 2022). Since then, the country has experienced a steady oscillation between liberal and conservative incumbencies. While the ideological split between conservatism and liberalism has remained mostly consistent, party composition has fluctuated over time (Y. Kim 2021). Up until 2017, the DP and its rival the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) held the vast majority of seats in the parliament. This status quo received a significant shock, however, as incumbent president Park Geun-hye of the GNP was impeached following a serious corruption scandal. This caused significant turmoil within that party, resulting in the defection of several members who would go on to create alternative conservative parties (Straits Times 2020). The effects of the impeachment scandal

and instability within the GNP ultimately swayed the electorate toward the DP, whose candidate Moon Jae-in won the presidency in 2017.

Geun-hye's impeachment created fertile ground for a surge of disinformation exacerbating political divisions ahead of the 2017 election (Min and Micek 2018). Partisan tensions ran high, as evidence of online astroturfing during Geun-hye's 2012 campaign further marred the legitimacy of her mandate. Coordinated online support campaigns were already a commonplace tactic used by political groups across the partisan spectrum, often slandering rivals by linking them to false or misleading scandals (H. Lee et al. 2022; Tworek and Lee 2021).

The National Election Commission of South Korea (NEC) reported a fivefold increase in documented cases of disinformation in 2017 compared to 2012 (J. M. Lee 2017; see also Go and Lee 2020). Political actors engaged in coordinated manipulation of online discussions and search engines to amplify their visibility (Tworek and Lee 2021). In addition, North Korean agents were revealed to amplify the reach of domestically created disinformation, effectively co-opting domestic material for their own efforts (Kang 2018). The mutual reinforcement of domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns underscores a clear point of systematic vulnerability in South Korea's information landscape—and the need to combat FIMI on two fronts.

Heedless of sources' credibility or journalistic merit, many voters in 2017 actively sought out information sources that aligned with their existing viewpoints and were based on a clear generational divide. While young voters primarily encountered disinformation through open social networking services, such as Facebook or YouTube, older generations were targeted via domestic closed messaging platforms like KakaoTalk or BAND (Go and Lee 2020).

A 2019 panel study revealed that respondents across all age groups agreed that disinformation negatively impacted the 2017 election results and contributed to conflicts and animosity between societal groups. The effect of this exposure on voter behaviour was evident in certain demographics: turnout rates in 2017 among individuals in their 20s and those aged 60 and above rose dramatically (Go and Lee 2020). While higher electoral turnout is generally a hallmark of a healthy democracy, political engagement driven by inflammatory and misleading information raises serious concerns about the integrity of democratic deliberation, the resilience of institutions and the

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**The mutual reinforcement of domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns underscores a clear point of systematic vulnerability in South Korea's information landscape.**

potential erosion of public trust in the electoral process. All of these vulnerabilities were further exploited in subsequent elections.

**While in 2017 the target of information manipulation was voter preferences (polarization), misleading information in 2020 centred on results (process legitimacy).**

### 3.3. 2020 LEGISLATIVE ELECTION

While in 2017 the target of information manipulation was voter preferences (polarization), misleading information in 2020 centred on results (process legitimacy). In the wake of the election, a US-based researcher published a study that mistakenly claimed nearly 10 per cent of votes for the DP were fraudulent. This was due to a misunderstanding of the South Korean voting system, unduly classifying early votes as fraudulent (Kuk, Lee and Rhee 2024a). The inaccurate claim was co-opted by actors seeking to intentionally undermine the electoral process—chiefly, by the newly formed conservative PPP. (The PPP merged several of the parties that were formed following Park Geun-hye's 2016 impeachment.)

The mistaken analysis was picked up without scrutiny by South Korean mainstream media, appearing in over 300 news stories and TV interviews. Airing the false claims on major news outlets lent both credibility and reach to the story, entrenching distrust of democratic institutions; it brought to the surface South Korea's information vulnerabilities and its latent political instability. The 'fraud' claim gained particular favour with supporters of the PPP who, having lost the election, called its legitimacy into question (Friedhoff 2022). A 2024 perception study showed that exposure to this false claim in 2020 led to a 52 per cent increase in belief in election fraud among South Koreans. This effect was particularly pronounced among supporters of the losing parties, indicating that disinformation deepened partisan divides (Kuk, Lee and Rhee 2024b). In response to the controversy, the NEC resorted to manual vote counting in subsequent elections to restore public trust, underscoring the incident's severe impact on voters' faith in the democratic process (Seok-min 2023).

The 2020 legislative election was also affected by concerns about FIMI originating in China. Bot operations targeting online forums were exposed which adopted South Korean personas to spread inflammatory messages and engage in opinion-rigging (Kang 2020), undermining authentic electoral discussions. Prompted by the suspected foreign interference, a conservative lawmaker initiated a process to amend relevant legislation (the Act on Promotion of Information and Communications Network Utilization and



Information Protection 2016) by requiring service providers to display the location of their sites' users and to regularly store and submit related data to the South Korean authorities (M. Kim 2020; J. Kim 2023). Such indefinite storage holds potential negative implications for South Korean users' anonymity and data privacy rights. The controversy allowed the PPP to leverage the growing distrust towards China (Chan and Choi 2021), with PPP supporters disseminating unfounded conspiracy theories exaggerating the extent of Chinese interference. This set the scene for the representatives of the PPP to claim election fraud following the DP's victory (Jun-il 2023).

In the aftermath of the 2020 contest, a prominent figure in the PPP spread unfounded accusations of China-originated poll-rigging. The baseless claim was that actors affiliated with the Chinese Government had manipulated QR-codes featured on early and postal ballots to ensure victory for the liberal DP (Kang 2020; Hyun-kyung 2020). This narrative found large backing among PPP supporters, who accordingly coordinated protests (Da-Min 2020). The NEC refuted the poll-rigging theory and the member of the PPP who fabricated it was criticized by several party colleagues for his conduct (D. Kim 2020). However, the incident heralded an increasingly common political tactic utilized by right-wing political entities in South Korea as a reaction to unfavourable electoral outcomes. Discrediting political opponents through false claims of FIMI subverts public trust in electoral processes. It also desensitizes the public towards FIMI as a credible threat (a 'cry wolf' scenario), thereby weakening system resilience.

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**Discrediting political opponents through false claims of FIMI subverts public trust in electoral processes.**

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### 3.4. 2022 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

During the 2022 South Korean presidential election, social media arose as a central platform for political discourse. A clear winner of this paradigm shift was the PPP, and more specifically their presidential candidate Yoon Suk Yeol. Yoon found large support in online communities, particularly among social media creators who broadcast political messaging to large online audiences (Lee 2021; Koskie 2024).

The popularity of the PPP in online spaces is closely intertwined with the party's vocal endorsement of online anti-feminist communities, which have gained traction among young men in the country over the past decade (Wool Jung 2023). Internet forums have become a channel for growing hostility towards women. Exhibiting patterns

of hate speech, persecution and sexual violence, these forums regularly frame women as perpetrators of any societal ills that befall men (Jung 2024). Pivotal in these misogynist narratives are far-right political content creators (Koskie and Hall 2024) whose material consistently ridicules, harasses and censures women in attempts to deter them from political and public engagement, while simultaneously presenting men as politically persecuted (Bicker 2022).

In the lead up to the 2022 election, far-right political influencers were openly endorsed by the president-elect Yoon. His relationship to online alt-right communities has been credited as a contributing factor in the PPP's rising popularity in that year (R. Moon 2023). The PPP weaponized declining birthrates and compulsory military service to court disgruntled younger male voters, presenting feminist gains of the 2010s as a crisis of masculinity. Manifesting in Yoon's campaign platform, he pledged to raise penalties for defamation related to crimes of sexual violence and to restrict affirmative action and gender-based state expenditures (Jung 2024). Online alt-right communities accordingly heralded Yoon as an anti-feminist champion who would reverse the progressive policies of then-incumbent Moon Jae-in of the DP (E. Lee 2025). The importance of influencers became particularly evident as Yoon invited several prominent YouTubers to his inauguration and granted them official advisory positions (Ji-hyun 2022; Woo-sam 2024).

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**Claims of foreign interference disseminated by alt-right social media creators also played a pivotal role in the 2022 election.**

Claims of foreign interference disseminated by alt-right social media creators also played a pivotal role in the 2022 election. One such claim alleged that Chinese agents had infiltrated high-ranking levels of the South Korean civil service training agency. Charges were frequently targeted at political opponents of the PPP, accusing them of belonging to 'anti-state forces' affiliated with North Korea (Park and Bateman 2024). These claims have been firmly refuted by the DP (Hyun-woo 2023) and there is no evidence to suggest North Korean influence in the party.

However, covert North Korean interference operations to influence public opinion through civil society and online communities has been substantiated. Specifically, these activities have been connected to attempts to incite conflict between women voters and PPP supporters by presenting the latter as anti-women (Newsis 2021). The South Korean National Intelligence Agency regularly monitored and mitigated the spread of Chinese online influence operations (Kang 2023), upholding institutional safeguards to keep the online information space relatively free from disinformation. However,

considering the proliferation of both pro- and anti-PPP narratives, the implemented measures may be insufficient to prevent heightened polarization and distortion of online discourse. While the impact of these campaigns is difficult to gauge and there is currently no evidence to implicate a direct linkage to the electoral outcome, such operations by North Korea are thought to be increasing over time (Choi 2022).

### 3.5. 2024 LEGISLATIVE ELECTION

While the 2024 legislative election followed the trend of institutional distrust and divergence of partisan opinion (Spinelli 2024; Min-Kyung 2024), a key development was concern that artificial intelligence (AI) would be deployed on an unprecedented scale. Ahead of the election, analysts raised alarms about the risk of AI-facilitated electoral interference by Chinese and North Korean actors. Public perception of the risks of FIMI was also high, as 78 per cent of respondents in a pre-election survey expected that disinformation and other covert electoral interference could influence the contest (Lim 2024). Meanwhile the Korean National Police Agency apprehended 895 individuals on grounds of attempting such actions—of whom 436 were charged with dissemination of false content (Shin 2024).

In the event, however, no concrete evidence of major FIMI was recorded (S. H. Lee 2024; Lim 2024). While the NEC discovered attempted interference by North Korean-sponsored hacking groups, these cases did not involve attempts to influence public opinion—instead they sought to retrieve data on the electoral systems (Oh 2024b). And while reported cases that violated the South Korean ‘fake news law’ (Public Official Election Act amended in 2023) indeed surged—to 74,025, an increase of 388 per cent compared to 2020—only 388 of these offences could be categorized as AI-generated videos, otherwise known as ‘deepfakes’ (Oh 2024a).

One possible reason for the limited spread of AI-generated content is the harsh measures implemented to combat its potential reach. These have included crackdowns on KakaoTalk, targeting journalists’ private messaging groups, and a surge of government-issued defamation lawsuits carrying the threat of up to seven years in prison for the accused. The government’s punitive measures have been flagged as damaging free and fair access to electoral information (Alviani 2024; S. H. Lee 2024).

**Ahead of the election, analysts raised alarms about the risk of AI-facilitated electoral interference by Chinese and North Korean actors.**

Ahead of the election, the PPP administration passed amendments to the Public Officials Election Act, imposing a complete ban on the dissemination of any AI-generated material, effective 90 days before the election. Violations of this ban risked penalties of imprisonment or heavy fines (NEC 2024). The ‘blanket ban’ faced heavy criticism for being disproportionate and for issues related to its implementation (Schuldt 2024). By prioritizing broad suppression of a specific technological trend over designing adequate countermeasures, the policy risked leaving South Korea more vulnerable to FIMI, as external actors could exploit enforcement gaps while domestic discourse remained constrained.

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**Low trust in the democratic process and perceived apathy, particularly among young voters, has become a general concern in the country.**

Electoral information integrity was damaged by other disinformation incidents (if not by AI on a significant scale). As in the 2020 legislative election, supporters of the PPP took to social media to assert that the 2024 polls were rigged in favour of the winning DP by means of ‘fake overseas votes’ (Kyu-Seok 2024). These allegations mirrored the previous attempt by the PPP claiming election fraud upon losing the election and further risked eroding the trust in electoral processes. Low trust in the democratic process and perceived apathy, particularly among young voters, has become a general concern in the country. The apparent cause for this disillusionment and disengagement is a polarized and ‘scandal-ridden’ political environment (Min-Kyung 2024).

Weakening faith in democracy is often associated with lower faith in institutions, often leading citizens to vote for populist parties or candidates that aim to tear apart the democratic system itself (University of Southampton 2025). In the case of South Korea, the PPP built its brand on offering an anti-establishment alternative to distrustful voters—at the same time fostering that distrust through a series of disinformation campaigns. This normalization of anti-democratic rhetoric raises long-term concern of public desensitization to disinformation campaigns and dismantling of public institutions and democratic principles—disarming the country against authoritarian power grabs.

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### 3.6. THE WEAPONIZATION OF FIMI RISKS

As already described, the incumbent PPP amended campaigning restrictions in the run-up to the 2024 election and drew criticism for doing so. Part of this was about the negative implications for South Korea’s press freedom. Under President Yoon’s administration,

press freedom had already been impacted by defunding of public broadcasting and labelling of government-critical political news coverage as ‘fake news’ (S. Kim 2022; International IDEA n.d.). In 2022, the domestic outlet Newstapa published an investigation into Yoon’s alleged interference in a 2011 criminal case. In response, the head of the PPP declared that the publisher had committed high treason deserving of capital punishment (TK 2023). The South Korean Culture Ministry further accused the outlet of conspiring to destabilize the country’s democracy (ANI 2023). This raised concerns about the potential misuse of state institutions to suppress independent journalism under the guise of safeguarding democracy, a pattern that often signals broader erosion of democratic freedoms.

While concerns about press freedom predated Yoon’s presidency, the persecution of media under his leadership became more severe. Yoon’s office claimed that critical journalism seeks to ‘undermine freedom, democracy, and the constitutional values of South Korea’, effectively categorizing independent reporting as a national threat (Hyunsu 2023). These measures have had a chilling effect on press freedom, as South Korea dropped from 43rd to 62nd place on Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index between 2022 and 2024 (Alviani 2024; Lee and Park 2024). For the purposes of this discussion, it is notable that repressive measures against political opponents, civil society and critical media have involved systematic reference to FIMI as justification. For example, Yoon has branded his critics and political opponents in the opposition as ‘communist totalitarian and anti-state’ (Yim 2023).

The authoritarian potential of these FIMI narratives came to fruition in December 2024 when President Yoon attempted to declare martial law upon an unsuspecting public following the PPP’s significant electoral losses (Pope 2024). Citing alleged risks to the country’s democratic foundation, Yoon claimed North Korean agents had infiltrated the opposition and orchestrated election fraud to ensure the PPP’s defeat (Tong-Hyung 2025). The suspension of civil rights would, according to Yoon, be the only option to preserve South Korean democracy. The NEC refuted Yoon’s statement, affirming that there was no evidence of foreign breaches of the electoral systems (Oh 2024b). On the night of the declaration, Yoon deployed soldiers to raid the headquarters of the NEC, confiscating cell phones and restricting the movements of overnight staff.

Online, Yoon’s staunch alt-right supporters echoed his reasoning, encouraging the enactment of martial law to limit the purported foreign interference. As Yoon’s declaration faced him with

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**While concerns about press freedom predated Yoon’s presidency, the persecution of media under his leadership became more severe.**

impeachment, his online supporters spread false claims that the impeachment was coordinated by Chinese agents (RFI 2024).

In the aftermath of Yoon's actions, concerns about foreign interference have grown. Analysts point to the risk that China and North Korea may exploit the vulnerabilities exposed by the country's ongoing political turmoil (C. Lee 2025; Vaswani 2024). Given that previous foreign disinformation campaigns have targeted South Korea's polarization and political discord, the current crisis fosters precisely such conditions. Most importantly, Yoon's attempted coup illustrates how FIMI presents a danger to democracy via domestic politics. By fabricating and calling attention to false cases of interference, the PPP not only tried to authorize the dismantling of South Korean democracy but also trivialized the potential impact of actual FIMI operations.

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**Anti-feminist rhetoric and male victimhood narratives have had a significant impact on mainstream South Korean political discourse in the past few elections.**

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### **3.7. GENDER WARS AS DRIVERS OF POLARIZATION AND AUTHORITARIANISM**

Anti-feminist rhetoric and male victimhood narratives have had a significant impact on mainstream South Korean political discourse in the past few elections. Fringe, male-centric communities and influencers have played a pivotal role in cultivating echo chambers that approve of gendered political violence, thereby increasing public vulnerabilities (Ye Bin Won 2024) and acceptance of GBV (K. H. S. Moon 2022). Understanding how the PPP leveraged anti-feminist sentiments to accumulate support is essential to assessing the polarized conditions that led to Yoon's coup attempt and its reception by different parts of South Korean society.

Close to 60 per cent of young men in South Korea strongly agree that feminism is an ideology of female supremacy, while more than half believe that South Korean society is unequal for men (Jung 2023; S. C. Lee 2024). Meanwhile, South Korea ranks second to last in the OECD's Women in Work Index, with the highest gender wage gap among all OECD countries (A. J. Park 2024). The online-facilitated reach and amplification of GBV presents a serious setback for women's lives in South Korea, enabling its transition to offline spaces. At the same time, many young men express grievances and resentment rooted in a perceived societal powerlessness and loss of status (J. Kim 2025). Political actors seeking influence exploit the latter by directing it towards women and a so-called 'misandrist society', fuelling what has been dubbed gender populism (Jung 2024).

The PPP has directly benefited from the rise of gender populism by courting younger anti-feminist demographics. A key pledge in Yoon's 2022 campaign was the abolition of South Korea's Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, citing its redundancy in a 'post-misogyny society' (Kuhn 2022). Yoon's ability to appeal to young men—traditionally, less politically active than older age groups—has been credited as a determining factor in the PPP's victory in the 2022 presidential election (Gunia 2022). Technologically facilitated GBV has been declared a national emergency by prominent members of the DP, as South Korea is the country most targeted by deepfake pornography in the world (Mackenzie and Marsh 2024; *Korea Times* 2024). In response to public outcry, the Act on the Punishment of Sexual Crimes was revised in October 2024 to criminalize the creation of pornographic deepfakes. Despite the pervasive issue of deepfakes being used as social coercion to shame women out of public spaces, President Yoon has denied the existence of structural discrimination against women (H. Park 2024; Yoon-ah 2022).

While the full impact of weaponized anti-feminism on South Korean women's political participation has yet to be ascertained, anti-feminist sentiment has simultaneously mobilized feminist groups and further marginalized women politically. Feminism has seen a resurgence among young women, who largely focus on issues of misogyny as digitally fuelled (J. Kim 2021). Efforts by women to coordinate political resistance against anti-feminism have been met with a fierce backlash by young men, who hold higher levels of negative sentiment towards feminists than any other politically marginalized group (Jung 2023).

Anti-feminist groups in South Korea have orchestrated witch hunts targeting women who they perceive as feminists and thereby 'enemies of men'. The basis of these accusations can be any signifiers perceived as 'feminist', such as short hair or being too outspoken (Ahn 2022). In publicized cases, some employers have given into the pressures or sympathized with these witch hunts, resulting in women being fired from their workplaces and having to publicly apologize for being associated with feminism (Min-sik 2023). Consequently, many women have resorted to anonymous online political engagement to minimize their exposure to gender-based harassment (Ahn 2022). While anti-feminist groups pose a serious threat to women's public participation and security, the corresponding resurgence of feminism marks a point of civic and democratic resilience.

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**While anti-feminist groups pose a serious threat to women's public participation and security, the corresponding resurgence of feminism marks a point of civic and democratic resilience.**

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### 3.8. CONCLUSION

South Korea's 2024 legislative election and its aftermath have proven to be the climax of ongoing developments; recent events underscore the country's precarious position at the intersection of gendered social polarization, technological vulnerabilities and the weaponization of external threats by domestic actors. While the risk of foreign interference from China and North Korea is genuine, the primary vulnerability—widespread distrust in democratic institutions (whether public or civil) and mainstream media—stems from years of domestic campaigns rather than from FIMI. The country's polarization provides fertile ground for the spread of narratives that exploit existing ideological divisions, creating a negative spiral that benefits misleading and sensationalist claims. This is particularly evident in the emerging gendered animosities among men and in attitudes towards women's rights to participate in political and public life.

The tactics of Yoon's administration first weaponized narratives of FIMI against political opposition and media and then resulted in an attempted coup. As such, they might serve to benefit any FIMI actors able to leverage the resulting distrust, instability and social polarization. The prevalence of weaponized FIMI narratives in South Korean politics risks desensitizing voters to FIMI as a real threat—as in the story of 'the boy who cried wolf'—opening up additional vulnerabilities in the country's information landscape. Addressing these challenges requires not only robust defences against external threats but also safeguards to prevent domestic manipulation of the issue—by any parties. Failure to do so risks entrenching division and perpetuating a cycle of mistrust. With elections in June 2025, South Korea's democracy finds itself at a precarious juncture. The new leadership could structurally reinforce democracy at the constitutional level, but there are also looming risks that the anti-democratic precedent set by Yoon may be opportunistically exploited and exacerbate backsliding (Min Lee 2025).

Thus far, South Korea's electorate has demonstrated a high level of awareness about FIMI and the destructive power of electoral disinformation, and their contribution to societal polarization. The country's resilience was evidenced by the swift response to Yoon's call for martial law and his subsequent removal from office (N. Lee 2025). However, the attempted coup at the same time underscores the fragility of the country's public institutions, whose democratic decline allowed Yoon's coup attempt to occur in the first place. Democracy's survival in South Korea was greatly aided by the



public's engagement, who held the line against autocracy despite the fractured and antagonistic political climate and bolstered the function of democratic institutions in Yoon's impeachment (N. Lee 2025). While strong, South Korea's civic resilience is not impervious to the domestic and foreign forces that sow discord and deepen divides. If trends are allowed to continue at their current pace, longstanding democratic values may further erode in the long term, weakening the civic shield against authoritarian takeovers. To safeguard a long-lasting and sustainable democracy, it is imperative to strengthen public institutions and fortify public trust in the political system against the combinatory force of foreign and domestic information manipulation and interference.

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**To safeguard a long-lasting and sustainable democracy, it is imperative to strengthen public institutions and fortify public trust in the political system.**

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## Chapter 4

# UNITED STATES

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### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2016 US presidential election, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) has emerged as a significant concern. Evidence of Russian meddling in that election was initially anecdotal before being confirmed and dissected in the Mueller Report (US Department of Justice 2019) which concluded that ‘the Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion’.

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**It is clear that even the USA’s mature democracy has not been able to fortify its processes against FIMI.**

Eight years and several election cycles later, it is clear that even the USA’s mature democracy has not been able to fortify its processes against FIMI. On the contrary, ‘new kids on the block’ such as China and Iran (Miller 2024) whose interference campaigns were previously thought of as limited (Kreps 2020), have since improved their tactics and tested what works. This has been facilitated by years of geopolitical, health and security turmoil associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East, among other contentious issues. Instead of one known FIMI actor, there are now several—and potentially others as yet unidentified.

Given the advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI), insufficient regulation of digital platforms and the dismantling of federal efforts to monitor election interference (Swenson and Cassidy 2025), the US elections seem more vulnerable to FIMI than ever before (Klepper 2024). While the focus on actors is important, it is clear that their activities will keep on increasing, responding to vulnerabilities in the US information space, social fabric and institutions—and driven by the global importance of US electoral outcomes. For this reason,

the key to addressing FIMI lies in not only identifying activities and culprits but studying vulnerabilities and designing strategies to address them.

One such vulnerability exploited by malign actors in democracies worldwide is gender biases and inequalities, and the USA is no exception (Korhonen 2024). If these conditions were not present, gendered disinformation would not find fertile ground and its impacts would be very limited. Unfortunately, gendered disinformation is a FIMI tactic deployed across the world with real consequences for the targeted individuals, societies and states. It can serve several aims from discrediting certain public figures and hence impacting electoral outcomes to suppressing women's public participation more generally. In 2023, the US Department of State warned that the goal of gendered disinformation is to undermine democracy itself (US Department of State 2023).

According to the United Nations Gender Social Norms Index 2023, 50 per cent of the population in the USA holds some kind of gender bias against women—whether in the dimensions of politics, economics, education or physical integrity (UNDP 2023). This is higher compared to certain democratic counterparts, for example, the United Kingdom (30 per cent) and Canada (41 per cent). This vulnerability is not lost on domestic and foreign malign actors seeking to interfere in US democratic processes in general, and elections in particular.

This case study looks at how this particular type of disinformation was used in the 2016, 2020 and 2024 presidential elections, as well as the 2022 midterm elections, and with what effects. The case study also analyses underlying causes of this phenomenon in the USA as well as the effectiveness of strategies to counter it.

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## **4.2. GENDERED DISINFORMATION AS A GLOBAL POLITICAL FORCE**

According to Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, gendered disinformation represents 'a strategy to silence women and gender-diverse voices ... Gendered disinformation seeks to spread false or misleading information with the intent to cause harm to individuals and society at large' (UN General Assembly 2023: 4). As with many other grievances affecting women and other vulnerable

groups or minorities, gendered disinformation has been largely flying under the radar of lawmakers, social media platforms (Jankowicz et al. 2021) and the public at large. This is precisely the reason it has been deployed by malign actors with such success.

Nina Jankowicz, a leading expert on gendered disinformation, points out that it has long been seen as ‘women’s issue’—simply part and parcel of a woman’s participation in public life (Jankowicz 2023). Ironically, dismissing this phenomenon highlights how deeply embedded gender stereotypes remain, including in media, having far-reaching consequences (Frandsen and Bajak 2024; Rohrbach, van der Pas and Aaldering 2023). Specifically, the assumption is that a woman’s right to public participation and self-actualization is somehow less important or legitimate. Such beliefs have dire consequences for democracies, as they perpetuate passivity in the face of election interference, democratic decline, worsening security environment and erosion of individual rights and freedoms. Is it gendered FIMI, or the unaddressed gender inequality that FIMI exploits, which really harms our democracies?

Nine out of ten people worldwide hold essential biases against women, according to the UN 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (UNDP 2023). It should come as no surprise, then, that gendered disinformation finds fertile ground with electorates. The ‘malign creativity’ of gendered disinformation exploits and perpetuates deep-rooted beliefs about gender and identity via more and less coded language, context-based visual and textual memes and the often-coordinated social media campaigns that disseminate them (Jankowicz et al. 2021).

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**The damage to victims of gendered disinformation includes impacts on their rights to privacy, security, dignity and freedom of expression.**

The consequences are profound on both individual and social levels. Gendered and sexualized disinformation ruins individual women’s lives and careers. For example, in **Myanmar**, women publicly opposing the 2021 military coup face gendered disinformation campaigns and abuse including doxxing and rape and death threats by online abusers, often coordinated with Myanmar security forces. Survivors of these attacks suffer from severe emotional and psychological impacts from living in fear and depression as they retreat from public life, while these campaigns also impact their relationships with friends and family (Myanmar Witness 2023). The damage to victims of gendered disinformation includes impacts on their rights to privacy, security, dignity and freedom of expression (United Nations 1948). Those with intersecting identities are the most vulnerable and are often subjected to exceptional levels of abuse (Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah 2020).

For example, following her speech at the UN about the impact of Russia's aggression on women's lives in **Ukraine**, member of parliament Svitlana Zalishchuk endured a year of sexualized abuse which included circulation of photoshopped images of her naked. The campaign's goal was to discredit her as a legitimate political voice (Mocerri 2021). In **Slovakia**, former president Zuzana Čaputová decided not to run for re-election in 2023 despite being the most trusted political figure at the time (Kysel 2023), citing lack of energy following repeated attacks and death threats during her tenure (Lörincová 2023). Čaputová faced years of systematic gendered disinformation campaigns that portrayed her as a 'princess', an 'American agent' and a 'traitor' (Kysel 2022) and her daughters were also targeted.

Besides the profound impacts on social and information environments, gendered disinformation as a subset of FIMI has direct national security implications. These campaigns can influence policy outcomes, cause social unrest and an exodus of experts from institutions, leading to erosion of institutional memory and capacity. In such an environment, we are all less safe.

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### 4.3. GENDERED DISINFORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES

#### **US presidential elections in 2016**

During the 2016 US presidential election campaign, most of the disinformation in circulation sought to demonize the female presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, particularly via the so-called 'Pizzagate' and 'Hillary Health Scare' stories (Stabile et al. 2019). Trading in extreme fabrications, both of these narratives fed into entrenched stereotypes about women as unfit for leadership positions. Further, the tendency even to villainize women seeking such positions was seen in baseless accusations of the worst forms of criminality.

Despite the infamous audio recording of Donald Trump in which he claims that sexual advances on women can be made without their consent (Nelson 2016), 'Clinton's name was associated with deception and sexual assault more than twice as often as Trump's—in 12,000 versus 5,000 tweets—during the fall of 2016' (Stabile et al. 2019: 492). The 'Pizzagate' conspiracy theory, which painted Clinton as a child sexual predator, was narratively built around the false claim that the hacked Clinton campaign emails contained references to

child pornography. According to the investigation documented in the Mueller Report, the Clinton campaign emails released by WikiLeaks were hacked by the Russian intelligence service GRU (US Department of Justice 2019).

Indirectly, then, this FIMI operation harmed the US presidential election by building a prelude to false campaign stories—even though connections between the leaked materials and the lies disseminated were entirely lacking. Rather, these narratives were impactful because they leveraged and radicalized pre-existing stereotypes and unwritten rules about women who compete for high office. Another contributing factor was (and remains) a media landscape polarized along partisan lines. As a result, media consumers tend to overlook facts which do not fit into their firmly held ideological positions, while disinformation supporting their views readily spreads (Au, Ho and Chiu 2021).

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**When disinformation is weaponized against existing societal tensions, even the most established democracies can see their foundational promise of free and fair elections weakened.**

The 2016 US presidential elections made clear that the greatest threat to democracy is not the outright hijacking of its institutions, but the subtle exploitation of its fractures. When disinformation is weaponized against existing societal tensions, even the most established democracies can see their foundational promise of free and fair elections weakened—and in an era of razor-thin margins, it takes only a calculated push to alter history.

### **US presidential elections in 2020**

Although in 2020 the Democratic and Republican party presidential candidates were both male, gendered disinformation still targeted female politicians running for US vice president as well as congressional positions.

As the Democratic Party's candidate Joe Biden's running mate, Kamala Harris was the target of a coordinated gendered disinformation campaign aiming to portray her as unqualified. This was attempted through the familiar misogynist narrative that women leaders use sex and sexual attraction to advance their careers (Verveer and Di Meco 2021; Ziani 2021), feeding also into a deeply embedded stereotype which portrays women as frivolous (Wong 2019). The attacks on Harris had racial element as well, questioning whether she 'is Black' or whether as a child of immigrants to the USA she can run for office at all (Tumulty, Woodsome, Peçanha 2020). Highlighting the intersectional nature of these attacks (Galpin and Vernon 2023), the same falsehoods were again deployed in the 2024 presidential campaign.

An Institute for Strategic Dialogue study of online abuse found out that ‘women and candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds are especially likely to be targeted systemically with abusive content’ (Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah 2020: 3). Transgressing the unwritten rule that political leadership is a (majority ethnic) man’s job then elicits online abuse as a ‘form of gender role enforcement’ (Di Meco and Brechenmacher 2020). Unwittingly, these social norms then enable the successful proliferation of gendered disinformation, by both domestic and foreign actors.

Verbal abuse, harassment and death threats against US election officials—surrounding baseless claims of a ‘stolen 2020 election’—also had gendered content and disproportionately targeted women (Leingang 2024). The conspiracy theory was systematically promoted by a range of influential individuals and organizations, including Donald Trump (Viala-Gaudefroy 2024). As 80 per cent of electoral officials in the USA are women, the attacks they experience are often sexist and misogynist in nature. Not only does this interplay of conspiracy theories, institutional mistrust and gender biases harm the targeted individuals, but it also weakens US democracy as significant numbers of election officials leave their positions in the wake of the abuse (Ferrer, Thompson and Orey 2024).

The US 2020 presidential election was the first election seriously targeted by Iran (Collier 2024). The aim of Iranian operations was to sow distrust in the US political system and further social polarization, for example by posing as the pro-Trump Proud Boys militia group and threatening Democratic Party voters. Other Iranian disinformation operations further promoted the ‘stolen election’ narrative (US Department of Justice 2021).

### **US midterm elections in 2022**

While the 2022 US midterm elections were not targeted by foreign actors to the extent that the presidential elections were, the US Department of Justice still ‘did detect some cyber activity ... including from pro-Russian hacktivists and suspected People’s Republic of China (PRC) actors’ that did not compromise election infrastructure networks (US Department of Homeland Security and DOJ 2023: 3). In addition, there were incidents where Russian and Chinese government-affiliated actors succeeded in connecting to election campaign infrastructure, although this did not impact voting (Bracken 2023).

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**Verbal abuse, harassment and death threats against US election officials also had gendered content and disproportionately targeted women.**

**Domestic tendencies to gendered and racialized disinformation are compounded by digital platforms' algorithmic architecture and do not require the presence of foreign actors to become a severe problem.**

According to an Institute for Strategic Dialogue report (Simmons and Fourle 2022), an increasing number of minority candidates on the ballot triggered a counter-reaction in the form of misogynistic attacks, sexual content and other harassment; narratives accusing the candidates of treason; and racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic abuse. One of the key findings of the report is that this abusive content was recommended to users by their digital platforms when they searched for candidates' names, a pattern that continued despite the content violating those platforms' own terms of service. In the absence of significant FIMI, this confirms that domestic tendencies to gendered and racialized disinformation are compounded by digital platforms' algorithmic architecture and do not require the presence of foreign actors to become a severe problem. For this reason, it is domestic and self-regulatory enforcement factors that need to be addressed if gendered disinformation is to be relegated from the centre to the fringes of social and political discourse.

### **US presidential elections in 2024**

Gendered disinformation in the 2024 US presidential elections largely built on narratives that were already firmly established in 2020. This is because the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris was, as mentioned, subject of intense disinformation attacks while campaigning for Vice President in 2020 (for details of sexualized attacks and criticism of Harris' not being a mother, see: Eisele 2024; Spencer 2024; Flowers 2024). In contrast, Donald Trump's competency to hold the highest office was not similarly scrutinized on the basis of his sexual or relationship history. Given what was on public record (Sisak et al. 2024), this marked a double standard in US politics.

Nevertheless, gendered attacks on Kamala Harris did intensify and included some new elements such as AI-generated imagery to convincingly animate the false narratives (Euronews 2024). Use of language also increased in vulgarity. For instance, one video ad run by America PAC (a campaign funding vehicle) used the 'c-word' to describe Harris, as well as other democratic politicians, utilizing blatant misogyny in the campaign (Gibson 2024).

Influential female figures who publicly supported Kamala Harris also faced gendered recriminations—such as the singer Taylor Swift becoming the target of AI-generated sexualized content (Weatherbed 2024) and a far-right conspiracy theory claiming she is a Pentagon 'psyop' (an asset used for psychological operations) (Bond 2024). Feeding into other firmly established 'deep state' conspiracy theories,



the latter demonstrates the collective need to provide an alternative explanation for economic and social success some women have earned. It also shows that in culture as in politics, even the most prominent women are not immune to gendered attacks.

In the weeks preceding the elections, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue reported an increase in misogynist content (Frances-Wright and Ayad 2024). With news of the pro-choice Democratic candidate's defeat, a far-right misogynist slogan 'Your body, my choice' was used to harass women online; use of the phrase jumped by 4,600 per cent on X within 24 hours of the election results (ISD 2024). This campaign against women's rights is reverberating offline with some schools reporting the slogan (and others) is being shouted at girls (Duffy 2024).

Although the above-described instances of gendered disinformation and abuse were to a great extent home-grown, foreign malign actors also took an interest in the US 2024 presidential elections (Kovalčíková and Spatafora 2024). In an open information environment, foreign actors have many channels at their disposal to amplify domestic discourses (Menczer 2024), complicating the distinction between the domestic and the foreign. Three US intelligence agencies jointly affirmed that China, Iran and Russia all tried to interfere in the US information environment to sway the public debate in line with their objectives (Thrush 2024). As these state actors pursued differing goals, their interference efforts did not align. What they had in common was seeking to increase social polarization and distrust towards US institutions in general, and towards elections in particular. In response, the US Treasury announced sanctions on Russian and Iranian entities for attempting to 'divide the American people through targeted disinformation campaigns' (US Department of the Treasury 2024).

The Kremlin largely focused its influence operations on Kamala Harris, using digital platforms (Chatterjee 2024), for example disseminating false content on alleged ballot destruction using paid ads, AI-generated bots and fake profiles, as well as websites mimicking legitimate news outlets (Shedd and Stradner 2024). Amounting to a vast ecosystem of FIMI, these efforts were aimed at both discrediting Harris in the run up to the election and sowing distrust in the electoral system itself. However, experts have pointed out that such operations were also enabled by domestic actors who resort to similar tactics (Shuster 2024), highlighting the important vector between FIMI and its domestic enablers.

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**Three US intelligence agencies jointly affirmed that China, Iran and Russia all tried to interfere in the US information environment to sway the public debate in line with their objectives.**

Conversely, Iran's efforts (while also trying to discredit the democratic process) were aimed at harming Donald Trump's campaign given his hard-line foreign policy approach towards the country (Myers, Hsu and Fassihi 2024). Iranian operations included hacking into Trump's campaign as well as promoting boycott of the election as a form of protesting the war in Gaza. The latter demonstrates how the divisiveness of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is being weaponized by foreign malign actors to damage American society (US Department of State 2024). Iran's election interference also involved websites posing as legitimate US news outlets which disseminated false stories about transgender and other gender issues (CBS News 2024).

The extent of Chinese FIMI included espionage (Nakashima and Dawsey 2024) and operations seeking to portray congressional candidates perceived as 'anti-China' in a negative light (Jignan 2024). While the impact of the above-mentioned campaigns is difficult to evaluate, Microsoft's Threat Analysis Centre concludes that activities of foreign actors can 'significantly impact public perception and electoral outcomes' (Watts 2024).

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#### 4.4. AWARENESS IS NOT ENOUGH

The four US electoral campaign cases analysed in this study demonstrate that gendered disinformation is now firmly established and prevalent in US election campaigns. It has been utilized with success by both domestic and foreign actors and shows no signs of abating. The information environment and particularly the digital platforms are designed in a way that enable wide and rapid dissemination of disinformation for profit (Ruiz 2023). And because the public is vulnerable to gender biases, such disinformation can find a receptive audience. Crucially, there are vanishingly few consequences for those who utilize gendered disinformation for political gains, hence the returns on investing in such tactics appear to be guaranteed.

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**Since 2016 much has been said about disinformation and within this, its gender component, but social and policy responses have clearly been inadequate.**

Since 2016 much has been said about disinformation and within this, its gender component, but social and policy responses have clearly been inadequate. Some progress has been made by US intelligence agencies in warning the public about FIMI threats to elections (Thrush 2024). Gender-based disinformation nevertheless remains actively utilized by US domestic actors and is seen in campaigning circles as an acceptable, if perhaps distasteful, tactic to be used on

one's opponents. This means that gender-based disinformation and abuse has unfortunately become a socially accepted norm—forming part of the complaint that tech's influence in campaigning and governance amounts to an unregulated 'broligarchy' (Antelava 2024).

In contrast with the radicalization wrought by online campaign strategies, changing gender norms constructively is notoriously difficult as some groups and individuals have a vested interest 'in ensuring that norms upholding gender inequalities persist' (UNDP 2023: 14), whether by offering purportedly 'traditional' values pitted against the notion of gender equality, or by other means. Gender-based disinformation can also be seen as a form of anti-feminism and it is no coincidence that countries such as Russia that have legislated against gender equalities promote it via diplomatic and less-diplomatic channels (Cockerell 2023). The result is concrete harms to citizens' rights and safety worldwide, legislative and otherwise (Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls 2024).

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#### 4.5. WHAT'S NEXT?

A combination of surging populism, lack of digital regulation and the ascent of generative AI means that the situation will very likely get worse before it gets better. If the domestic impacts of gender-based disinformation are to be addressed, it first needs to be taken seriously as a national security issue. In isolation, the traditional antidotes to FIMI—fact-checking, awareness-raising and critical thinking—are likely to have a very limited impact because they focus on the consequence, instead of the cause. The links between existing gender relations and receptiveness to gender-based disinformation need to be better understood.

While the US agencies have successfully monitored and exposed some of the threats of FIMI and gendered disinformation (ODNI, FBI and CISA 2024), the US society is generally opposed to the idea of regulating digital space (Stein 2024). Hence voter preferences may play a role in co-creating a key vulnerability—the virtually lawless online environment. Such under-regulation leaves countless victims of cyber-bullying, doxxing and hate in its wake, without any meaningful recourse to justice. Furthermore, several efforts to monitor, study and prevent FIMI have been abandoned under the present administration. This includes disbanding of key task forces

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**Without functioning institutional protections online and offline, US society and politics will continue to be vulnerable to FIMI and democratic decline.**

such as the Foreign Influence Task Force (Johnson 2025), reducing staffing at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (McLaughlin 2025), pausing enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (Goudswaard and Lynch 2025), and terminating the Global Engagement Center (Johnson 2024) and its activities, among others. Without functioning institutional protections online and offline, US society and politics will continue to be vulnerable to FIMI and democratic decline.

On this showing, it is unlikely that the USA will implement sufficient protections on a national level in the upcoming years. Yet, relevant actors in civil society, private sector, academia, media and legislature can cooperate in search for innovative solutions and they can also examine their own contribution to gender relations and norms.

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**Gender stereotypes are the root cause of which gender-based disinformation is only a consequence.**

However, addressing gender-based disinformation itself requires implementation of a much more comprehensive long-term policy of addressing the origin of gender biases and deeply ingrained harmful stereotypes. It is these that lie at the root of the success of gender-based disinformation campaigns. In other words, gender stereotypes are the root cause of which gender-based disinformation is only a consequence. Perhaps the recognition of the fact that gender biases have largely a detrimental impact on national security and quality of democracies worldwide is not new and may seem rather self-evident. However, simply recognizing this fact and taking it seriously is the first long-overdue step towards actually doing something about it.

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## Chapter 5

# FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The four case studies examined each present a unique story in relation to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), electoral integrity and resilience of democratic institutions, owing to their distinct historical, social, economic and cultural circumstances. However, these case studies also show that many trends contributing to democratic decline are universal rather than local. The nature of our globalized, perpetually online world enables the adoption, at startling speed, of technologies, strategies and movements. This is the reason why readers may recognize elements of these case studies in the situations and decisions facing many other countries.

Georgia exemplifies the convergence danger between systematic foreign interference—which goes beyond FIMI, to territorial occupation by Russia (Chkhaidze 2024)—and the actions of domestic actors. In an effort to retain power, domestic political actors actively benefit from Russia's interference in their favour. Public campaigns of fear and hatred are orchestrated against anyone who might challenge the emerging authoritarian regime. Closely mirroring the Kremlin's authoritarian playbook (Minicozzi-Wheeland 2024), this involves verbal and physical attacks on pro-democratic public figures, women and marginalized communities (Amnesty International 2024; Gegidze 2023). Yet, while Georgia's case study highlights the fragility of democracy, it also demonstrates how difficult it is to dismantle—especially as the country's European Union aspirations persist and its active civil society refuses to submit in advance (Snyder 2017).

South Africa's story echoes that of many countries where electoral and other democratic institutions have been under pressure from those seeking to avoid complying with scrutiny, limitations on executive power and other rules of the 'democratic game'. South Africa faces other widespread challenges including gender-based

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violence (International IDEA n.d.) and proliferation of disinformation (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2024). Yet the country's relatively young institutions have proven quite resilient against false allegations of election fraud (Sadek and Carvin 2024). Although Russia did take an interest in the 2024 election and cooperated with local actors, its impact has been rather limited. Public trust in mainstream media and an active civil society still act as safeguards of South African democracy, highlighting their key role in countering FIMI.

South Korea shares a further similarity with South Africa insofar as the narrative of FIMI has itself been weaponized (Nishioka 2025). In a highly polarized society (Sohn and Kang 2025) characterized by high mistrust towards mainstream media and predominant consumption of information online (Lee and Park 2023; BBC News 2025) this culminated in an attempted coup by domestic political actors (Ng, Tan and Kwon 2025). The case study also demonstrates the alliance between far-right online influencers and incumbent President Yoon Suk Yeol (Chaigne 2025), resulting in mainstreaming of far-right discourse as a state policy (Park and Bateman 2024). Gender-based disinformation has been systematically deployed to suppress women's public participation and degrade the information environment. Despite all this, South Korea's civil society remains vigilant while public institutions continue to grapple with the consequences of the coup attempt.

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**In 2024, US national intelligence institutions proved more efficient in coordinating, uncovering and openly communicating the threat.**

Finally, FIMI has become almost a staple of the United States electoral process in recent cycles. In 2024, US national intelligence institutions proved more efficient in coordinating, uncovering and openly communicating the threat (US Department of State 2024). However, as China and Iran join Russia in involving themselves (Kovalčíková and Spatafora 2024) and protective institutional capacity has been actively weakened (Myers, Barnes and Frenkel 2025), it is open to question whether such gains can be sustained. Furthermore, disinformation and its gender-based facets were utilized by a plethora of influential US domestic actors in the 2024 election campaign, including representatives of the current administration.

These tools erode the integrity of the information space, human rights, democracy and national security. It remains to be seen how US civil society and institutions will withstand the kinds of democracy-eroding measures (Urby and Katz 2025) the country has seen, including weakening efforts to safeguard information integrity both in the US and abroad in the first months of its newly elected administration (Myers, Barnes and Frenkel 2025).

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## 5.1. LESSONS LEARNED: DOMESTIC INCENTIVES AND ENABLERS COMPOUND FIMI'S IMPACT

In each of the analysed case studies foreign actors have impacted democratic institutions and electoral processes in different ways, sometimes weakening them only when domestic enablers and incentives align with their efforts. While FIMI has been confirmed to play a role in domestic affairs of the studied countries to a varying degree (for example limited efforts to interfere by Russia in South Africa as opposed to Russia's extensive entanglement in domestic affairs of Georgia), foreign actors are successful mainly when enabled by domestic political and other actors. Once democratic institutions, accountability, transparency and rule of law become an obstacle for domestic actors, they quickly and willingly adopt methods of sowing chaos, distrust and polarization in an effort to mobilize crowds via incendiary campaigns on social media as the case studies from South Korea and the USA demonstrate. This does not mean that foreign actors are just innocent bystanders, rather foreign influence is often exerted through this domestic vector, further blurring the line between domestic and foreign and complicating the efforts to identify effective countermeasures.

The always connected, global information environment enables easy external influence, cooperation and learning among far-right authoritarian-leaning actors across borders (Cottiero and Emmons 2024). This creates an international alignment of anti-democratic actors who dismantle democratic systems from within using tools and techniques that have been tried and tested for decades by foreign state actors such as Russia (Coalson 2023). The authoritarian playbook (Horizons Project 2022) has gone viral globally, using techniques such as: (a) disinformation to polarize and sow chaos, fear and hatred among the target populations; (b) deliberate shrinking of civic space (CIVICUS Monitor 2024); and (c) scapegoating of vulnerable populations to mobilize and unite populations against the perceived internal enemy who can be comfortably blamed for all kinds of supposed social ills without the ability to defend themselves, and many others. At the same time, key state institutions including professional public administrations and independent judiciaries are being undermined, further eroding the democratic separation of powers (Applebaum and Pomerantsev 2024).

This frontal attack on democracy is driven through the manipulation of one key enabler—an information ecosystem reshaped by unregulated or badly regulated social media platforms and readily available artificial intelligence (AI) tools, enabling information

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manipulation on an unprecedented scale. This is the new layer of the authoritarian turn of the 21st century, paradoxically enabled by tools once hailed as a great democratizing force giving voice and access to knowledge to everyone. While still useful, their use as tools of mass-surveillance (Zuboff 2019), propaganda (Olanipekun 2025) and the suppression of public participation—particularly among marginalized groups and women—cannot be denied (Felle 2023).

Although the nature of the above-described phenomena as well as their severity varies from country to country based on their local circumstances, the manipulation of the information environment demonstrates surprisingly similar characteristics across the board, with almost copy-paste campaigns occurring across different continents as the ‘stop the steal’ US-originated narrative later occurring in South Africa and South Korea demonstrates. Similarly, almost identical attacks on female public participation using AI-generated sexualized imagery and gendered stereotypes have been observed in all four case studies. The efforts to subvert trust in mainstream media, electoral institutions, civil society and civil servants through smear and online hate campaigns is another commonly deployed tactic not only in the four countries studied in this report, but in every region of the world. Democracies are in decline (International IDEA 2024) and they face global existential threats.

The above assessment of the situation at hand may seem to offer very little in terms of positive outlook. Yet, the resilience of democracies should not be underestimated. All of the analysed case studies offer examples of civil society, media and institutional resilience. In both the USA and South Korea, democracy has survived not only FIMI but also attempted coups, while South Africa’s institutions and media have proven resilient in the face of efforts to dismantle them and weaken populations’ trust. Finally, while Georgia’s aspirations for EU membership are thwarted for now, its civil society represents a formidable example of resistance against authoritarianism even in the bleakest of situations.

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## **5.2. BRAVE NEW WORLD: COMBATING FIMI IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE**

The global democratic decline is underpinned by paradigm-shifting geopolitical changes which ultimately set the stage and manoeuvring space for all democratic actors. The global international relations are



shifting away from the US hegemony (Cooley and Nexon 2020) and new power centres with non-democratic governance models compete for power on the world stage. As imperfect and problematic (Parmar 2025) as this set up has been, there is no doubt it guaranteed security, peace and prosperity for many democracies, particularly those in the trans-Atlantic region.

This shift is characterized by uncertainty of what is to come. Yet some contours are already visible: hard power seems to be the currency of the day, at the expense of multilateralism, diplomacy and soft power threatening to trigger more regional and even international conflicts. The new US administration has enthusiastically embraced this shift, even actively undoing the seams of the international order it once shaped, for example through the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Knickmeyer 2025). In addition, the domestic enablers of democratic erosion will be further emboldened by the global shift towards authoritarianism, creating new openings for autocratic cooperation while democracies will continue to grapple with destabilizing forces of foreign and domestic information manipulation.

The weakening of democratic institutions in the USA at the expense of emboldening private technological industries can also negatively impact information integrity in other democracies not only through withdrawal of support, but also through private companies' open defiance of effective regulation, causing a deep dent in the whole-of-society efforts to counter FIMI (Datta 2025).

In this brave new world, democracies currently face an evolutionary test of resilience. Surviving and even flourishing will require new and creative adaptation techniques at a time when information and technological revolution has triggered mass confusion with its addictive algorithms and 24/7 information overload. There is no other way around it—finding effective, quick and democratic solutions to push manipulation back to the fringes of the information space, where it belongs, represents a key adaptation technique. Without this, democracies may not endure.

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**The weakening of democratic institutions in the USA at the expense of emboldening private technological industries can also negatively impact information integrity in other democracies.**

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### 5.3. WAY FORWARD

Every crisis is also an opportunity and in this era, democracies can draw valuable lessons from states that have endured authoritarianism and totalitarianism in the past. The Baltic States,

former Czechoslovakia and others that survived decades of propaganda and information manipulation while keeping the light of freedom alive, show that resilience can be forged under immense pressure.

In the face of FIMI and other global challenges, it is precisely such resilience and resourcefulness that pro-democratic actors must embrace. Success will depend on building powerful alliances against mistrust, fear and cynicism, recognizing that resilient democracies are not always the largest or oldest. Those with difficult histories can transform past struggles into sources of insight, while democracies without lived experience of such threats must remain alert to how quickly their systems can change into something unrecognizable.

FIMI represents a key practice, arena and trend facilitating democratic decline. However, as the four case studies from Georgia, South Africa, South Korea and the USA demonstrate, foreign actors could not succeed on their own. Their influence is enabled and amplified by domestic actors. In practice, domestic and foreign factors cooperate to weaken institutions and erode human rights, attacking civil society in general, and women and other marginalized communities in particular. These developments in the countries analysed cannot be divorced from geopolitical shifts towards a 'hard security' paradigm of competing power centres. It is in this global context that authoritarianism, always intrinsically linked with mass disinformation, is resurgent.

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**Successful models of democratic prosperity will be those that take defence seriously, in terms of both hard security and safeguarding the information environment.**

All of these factors need to be considered when designing effective countermeasures. Successful models of democratic prosperity will be those that take defence seriously, in terms of both hard security and safeguarding the information environment. In this new era, protection against 'malicious online and offline influence at scales ranging from individuals to nation states' is inseparable from information and what some call 'cognitive security' (Pierce n.d.)—but also from vital national interests. Most democracies have still to fully recognize this reality and collective measures to protect information integrity are long overdue.

As both domestic and foreign actors make use of synergies and international support when adopting the authoritarian playbook, there is nothing preventing democratic allies from utilizing the same features of virtual global networks to opposite ends. In resisting FIMI and continuing to make their voices heard, civil society organizations and pro-democratic public figures under attack will benefit from

cross-national support systems. The policy recommendations and way forward in this section are offered in this spirit.

Countering FIMI requires a dual approach that combines tailored responses with decisive governance. On one hand, case studies highlight the importance of designing bespoke solutions that reflect each country's unique vulnerabilities. Because interference exploits internal weaknesses that differ across states, measures such as online legal protections may be effective in some contexts but counterproductive in others, especially where democratic backsliding is a concern. Regulation must also be carefully crafted to prevent misuse by both authoritarian actors and corporate interests, with negotiated agreements sometimes necessary to restore a level playing field during periods of constitutional impasse.

On the other hand, democracies must adopt bold and timely measures to reinforce Internet governance and safeguard the integrity of their information spaces. Such efforts often demand considerable political courage, since both domestic and foreign actors engaged in FIMI frequently frame regulation as 'censorship'. To maintain credibility, legislation must be systematically enforced, its impacts continually assessed and safeguards built in to ensure that regulatory power remains both robust and balanced.

Democracies must strengthen their support for civil society organizations and pro-democratic actors as a central pillar of countering FIMI. The decline of US funding and the dismantling of institutions such as the USAID should not be seen as irreversible losses. Instead, they present opportunities for other democratic states and organizations to replace and expand programmes that promote information integrity and democratic resilience. Such efforts are particularly urgent in countries like Georgia, where pro-democratic actors are fighting for survival and risk full state capture.

Beyond financial, legal or physical protection, democracies must also bolster trust in independent, high-quality media and reinforce the independence and capacity of electoral management bodies. Although these recommendations are well established, their implementation too often lags. The four case studies nonetheless show that sustained support for civil society, free media and strong electoral institutions is indispensable for safeguarding democratic integrity against disinformation and foreign interference. Allocating resources to match the urgency of these continuous threats is critical for maintaining resilience.

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**Democracies must adopt bold and timely measures to reinforce Internet governance and safeguard the integrity of their information spaces.**

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**Sustained support for civil society, free media and strong electoral institutions is indispensable for safeguarding democratic integrity against disinformation and foreign interference.**

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This report examines how foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) exploits domestic vulnerabilities to weaken democracies, drawing lessons from Georgia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States. It shows how disinformation, polarization and attacks on institutions spread rapidly in today's digital landscape but also highlights sources of resilience—from strong civil societies to independent electoral bodies. The central message is clear: defending democracy requires more than resilience alone; it demands coordinated, forward-looking strategies that adapt to the realities of a borderless information age.

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