Disinformation - An existential threat to European democracy?

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Abstract

In recent years the unprecedented spread of disinformation on online platforms, along with declining trust in government, journalism and institutions, has consequently led the EU to regard disinformation as an urgent threat to democracy. To address the threat the EU decided in 2022 on the groundbreaking Digital Services Act (DSA) legislation, targeting digital platforms. However, the complexity of enforcing measures against disinformation without impacting freedom of expression, raises questions of how the EU reached this policy decision. By applying the theory of securitisation and the discourse analytical WPR-approach this paper explores how the EU has attempted to securitize disinformation as a threat to democracy in the policy discourse, and what has been left unproblematized in the framing of the threat. The findings show the EU has collectively attempted to securitize disinformation as an existential, predominantly external threat to democracy. However, as the DSA and other related measures do not meet the theory's requirements of being extraordinary, it led to the conclusion that this does not constitute a successful case of securitisation. The findings further shows how the problematization of foreign disinformation, particularly concerning Russia as the primary threat, has overshadowed and left the role of domestic disinformation rather unproblematized in the policy discourse.

Keywords: Disinformation, Securitisation, Policy discourse, European Union, Digital Services Act
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1. Introduction

In recent years the spread of disinformation on social media has become a highly politicized topic, whereby exceedingly more have started to question the power social media companies increasingly seem to have over societies. This may not least be due to the spread of disinformation following the Covid-19 pandemic, or the lies about the US election 2020 leading up to the storming of the US Capitol, or the increasing threat posed by foreign actors' influence operations targeting liberal democracies (EEAS, 2020-12-27)(News, EP, 2021-02-10). These developments, along with declining trust in government, journalism and institutions, often driven by excessive social media usage (Ahrendt, et al. 2022), have consequently led the EU and political powers around the world to regard disinformation as an urgent threat to democracy.

Since 2015, the EU has worked on different actions addressing the issue of disinformation. New and updated policy measures have been initiated when previous ones have not been effective enough. Notably, the self-regulatory non-compulsive "Code of Practice on Disinformation", stating guidelines for digital platforms' work against disinformation (EC, press release, 2022-06-16). Most recently, in 2022 the EU decided on two groundbreaking legislative measures including the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA). The laws are further intended to target problems related to the expansion of social media, by protecting users and making companies more accountable for the content and activities that take place on their platform including disinformation (EEAS, 2020-12-27)(The Guardian, 2022-12-17).

The EU's multidimensional policy measure has gained much attention around the globe. As several previous attempts at regulating disinformation have failed or impacted freedom of expression, countries now put hope in the EU to become the global standard in the fight against disinformation (Colomina, Sánchez Margalef, Youngs, 2021)(The Associated Press, 2022-04-23). Some also suggest DSA and DMA will result in the so-called "Brussel-effect", referring to how EU legislations are "exported" internationally through market directives (Project Syndicate, 2020-12-17). The developments have on the contrary not proceeded without criticism, mostly concerning how it may impact freedom of expression. While most agree that the issue of disinformation requires some type of intervention, it's far from clear how to enforce measures without risking instances of arbitrary censorship, possibly infringing on the right to express (CEPA, 2022-05-18). Hence, given that previous legislative attempts

have failed, including the complexity of imposing appropriate measures, thus raises questions of how the EU reached these policy decisions.

The relevancy of bringing this to attention is not only due to how such regulations may compromise freedom of expression but also because of how it inevitably will change or affect users' experience when limiting the spread of "dangerous" information. Especially when it comes to those people who may be more prone to believe disinformation. Considering that users who spread, engage, or adhere to false information on social media tend to have lower trust in mainstream journalism, government, and institutions (Ahrendt, et al. 2022), it's possible that far-reaching regulations on social media limiting "harmful" content may have counterproductive effects, amplifying distrust among these groups.

Furthermore, when the EU has spoken of disinformation as a threat to democracy, more often than not it regards how foreign actors attempt to sow doubt in European democratic processes, by amplifying distrust and impacting civilians' ability to "make informed decisions" (EEAS, 2020-12-27). In other words, what ultimately seems to constitute the threat of disinformation is civilians' susceptibility to misleading or false information, which consequently leads to lower trust, threatening European democracy. In light of this, it's interesting that the EU (at least on the surface), seems to refrain from this notion and rather shed light on external factors when motivating policy measures against disinformation. More exactly, appears to be silent regarding the growing group of "low-trust" citizens, which considering the above-stated reasons, indirectly constitute, or are part of what the EU currently considers to be a threat to democracy. This ambiguity, including the risks associated with enforcing measures on disinformation points to the relevancy of investigating the EU's disinformation policy.

1.1 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the EU's policy discourse on disinformation by investigating the problematization of disinformation as a security threat to European democracy, by assessing the related questions:

How has the EU attempted to securitize disinformation in the policy discourse? And what's left unproblematized in the framing of the threat?

The questions will be assessed by applying the theory of securitization developed by the Copenhagen school. In addition, by using the "What's the problem represented to be?"(WPR) approach, a type of discourse analysis intended to critically interrogate policy documents.

It should however be noted, from a normative standpoint, that the threat posed by disinformation is not intended to be understated. Influence operations and manipulation dividing societies could probably constitute one of the future's many threats to liberal democracies. Furthermore, the phenomenon of disinformation is undoubtedly complex, affecting many different areas of society, from the single individual to the upper parts of the state apparatus, by putting freedom of speech, the very core of democracies into question. In other words, how to confront this multifaceted problem is understandably very difficult. However, in our future fight against disinformation, it's important to consider the risks associated with imposing regulations on false information. It seems questionable to assume that restricting or limiting certain "dangerous" information, would make people holding false, violent, extremist or conspiratorial opinions, to simply give them up. Normatively it would be troubling if such groups in societies felt ostracized or censored due to such regulations. Especially if this gives polarizing illiberal political actors the opportunity to exploit such sentiments, by opposing the regulations in the name of free expression. Or else, by pushing people into so-called "echo chambers", polarizing people and society further. As Lane, McCaffree and Shults (2021, p. 13) put it in their concluding remarks on possible counterproductive effects of over-policing social media platforms for dissenting viewpoints:

"While it may serve to create "safer" spaces for online communities, the overall health of the real-world community could be viewed as compromised when extremist views are not dealt with, but digitally 'swept under the carpet'."

2. Previous research

In recent years, increasingly more research has been conducted on the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and its impact on individuals, society, and democracy. The concept of "disinformation" typically refers to the intentional spread of false and misleading information to decisive and cause public harm. Whereas "misinformation" refers to the spread of false information, but where there is no intention to deceive or cause public harm (Bayer, et al. 2021). Disinformation and misinformation are no new nor uncommon phenomena and have most likely existed in most eras and societies. However, after the digital revolution and expansion of social media in recent decades which dramatically changed how information is circulated, also opened up new possibilities to spread disinformation on an unprecedented scale and reach (Flore, et al. 2019). This has led to exceeding more research on the subject. For example, extensive research has been conducted on the outspread misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Including studies on attempts to regulate false information in different countries following Covid-19, and their impact on freedom of expression (Colomina, Sánchez Margalef, Youngs, 2021). Several studies have also been issued by the EU to facilitate policy-making on disinformation. However, rather few studies have investigated the EU's most recent policy proposal against disinformation concerning the DSA legislation. And, none as far as I could find, have used securitization theory and the WPR-approach to assess the EU's disinformation policy. The aim is thus to contribute scientifically by accounting for how the EU may have attempted to securitze disinformation in the policy discourse.

3. Theoretical framework

In this section, the theoretical framework will be presented and operationalized. As mentioned previously this paper consider the theory of Securitisation, a critical approach by the Copenhagen School, including the discourse analytical approach developed by Carol Bacchi "What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR). Whilst securitization is commonly said to stem from the constructivist approach, the WPR-approach draws from poststructuralism. Two branches springing from the post-positivist tradition. I will therefore begin by shortly introducing the constructivist and poststructural ways of reasoning and how they relate to one another. Thereafter the theory of securitization will be presented and operationalized, followed by a discussion on the concept of "discourse" and the use of discourse analysis. Thereafter the outlining and operationalisation of the WPR approach, and lastly a presentation of the data that will be used.

3.1 Post-positivism - Constructivism and Poststructuralism

In social science and IR, the post-positivist disciplines started developing through questioning or rejecting the ontological premise of the dominant positivist tradition, concerning the notion of objective truths. Rather than treating facts as simply material, they argued the role of the subjective mind and the social biases in constructing or producing knowledge, thus moving towards a relativistic ontology. This reasoning laid the ground for the early conventional constructivism (Yong-Soo Eun, 2017)(Dunne, Kurki, Smith, 2016). Moreover, after the so-called "linguistic turn" the approach of poststructuralism took shape. Compared to constructivism, it took further steps towards relativism by emphasizing the role of language and discursive practices as constituting for how we understand our reality, including the use of hermeneutics in research (Rékasi, 2010). After the linguistic turn it also became more common among constrivist scholars to empahize the role of language, the representational meanings, as means to understand how aspects in IR are socially constructed. However, compared to poststructuralism, constructivism generally gives less importance to the role of discourses. Yet, by sharing the common goal of seeking to understand the contextual conditions of the subjective, social and linguistics, and that both have commonly been used in interpretive research, makes them compatible (ibid). In fact discourses analysis is usually the preferred method to assess securitisation among scholars (Balzacq, 2010). Hence given these fundamental similarities between the theory of securitisation and the WPR-approach, and use of discourse analysis as metod make them appropriate to combine.

3.2 Securitisation

Conducting studies in security politics has long been of great interest among scholars in international relations. The popularity resurged a few decades ago after the introduction of the theory of securitization. A critical approach to security studies of the Copenhagen school developed by Buzan and Wæver (Romaniuk, 2018). The theory suggests that when events or issues on domestic level are expressed as an "insecurity" by state actors, it has a signaling value, emotionally communicative, which may aid to legitimize extraordinary actions to take place (Hansen, 2018). In other words, it's a process in which actors transform aspects from regular political issues into matters of "security", becoming an issue of national security. When securitised matter is perceived as a legitimate threat by an audience such as civilians, it authorizes exceptional means to be used, often violent in nature, or in some way impact fundamental rights (Taureck, 2006). However, securitized issues do not necessarily represent "real" or actual threats to the essential survival of the state. Instead it rather represents an actor or actors successful construction of some problem into an existential threat. The theory has traditionally been used to understand political actions in matters of international conflicts or war, and claims of external threats to a nation's security (Romaniuk, 2018).

In more recent times, the theory has gotten a more nuanced use, for example in the wider field of policy-making and decision-making, such as in studies on climate policies. Whereby securitization is sometimes viewed as tactical means or a political strategy to carry out certain policy measures. For example Kaunert and Léonard (2021) explored the link between the concepts of "collective securitization" and "crisification" (referring to early identification of the next crisis in EU policy-making), investigating how EU addressed the "war on terror", in its counterterrorism-policy. Suggesting terrorism was securitized as a collective European threat rather than a national one, allowing for supranational policy responses, which Kaunert (2021, p. 688) evaluates as "a process between a construction of security threats and the development of supranational governance through crisification".

To conclude the discussion above; the guiding premise of the theory is that it views security as a socially constructed phenomenon. Hence, rather than stating if something is objectively true or not, the aim is to make sense of the subjectively constructed threat, by assessing the representational and attributional meanings given in speech and text by the securitasing actors. Including the possible successful securitisation through the legitimate use of

extraordinary means. According to the Copenhagen school the process of securitisation contains three phases (Romaniuk, 2018, p. 2):

1. *The creation of an existential threat*
2. *The commencement of special/emergency/extraordinary actions in an attempt to secure and protect the referent object against the existential threat.*
3. *The receiving of "the speech act" by one or more audiences.*

The first phase refers to what's previously been described, when an issue or an event moves from "normal" politics into emergency politics, through the securitizing state actor(s), attributing an existential threat to a referent object. This phase is called the "speech act" (ibid). In the context of this paper, it regards representations of disinformation as an existential security threat, by claiming to threaten a referent object, such as democracy. To assess this phase, the attributional meanings assigned disinformation as a threat in policy documents and in statements by EU MEPs will be analyzed.

The second phase refers to what extraordinary actions the EU as the securitizing actor may assume to take to protect the referent object from the threat. In other words, refers to swift and urgent actions, which are typically violent or in some other way compromise fundamental human rights, such as freedom of expression (ibid, p. 2). The phase will be assessed by analyzing proposed actions in policy documents, including DSA, and co-regulatory measures on disinformation based on how they may impact the right to free expression.

The third phase refers to how the speech act containing insecurity claims is received and interpreted as a legitimate threat by an audience. If perceived as a valid threat it would legitimize extraordinary means to take place (ibid, p. 2). In the context of this paper, the receiving audience could regard other EU parliament representatives or political actors within member states, or European civilians. However, I will primarily assess how civilians as the receiving audience interpret threat claims of disinformation as a legitimate threat or not. For example by assessing news articles, surveys, or other types of data on how audiences respond or interpret security claims concerning disinformation.

Moreover, for an issue to be regarded as successfully securitized all of the phases need to take place. However, a problem associated with this process is the lack of control securitizing actors ultimately have over the way in which the audience interprets the speech act, concerning the third phase (Romaniuk, 2018). This phase is also often hard to properly assess since it's somewhat unclear who the relevant audience is, and how to determine whether a security claim has been interpreted as a threat by the audience (Balzacq, Léonard, Ruzicka, 2016). In addition, it can also be hard to establish the actual timely process of securitization taking place. These aspects have raised criticism of the theory's usage, pointing to the lack of description of the phases, which subsequently led to scholars applying the theory in vastly different ways (ibid).

The points raised are relevant to take into consideration, and could possibly be a limitation in this thesis. It's likely that I may not be able to verify all three phases, i.e. a successful securitization took place as the theory suggests. Likewise stated above, this is probably mostly true when it comes to the third phase, but also to some degree phase two, as extraordinary actions are suggested to be taken swiftly, not in accordance with the typical policy-making process. It may for example be hard to state if a legislation such as the DSA, which has gone through several stages, is in fact the type of "emergency" policy containing extraordinary actions. However, some scholars have confronted this issue by putting less emphasis on determining if a successful securitization actually took place, and instead, rather assesses how something was attempted to be securitized (Ruzicka, 2019). As I'm open to the possibility that I may not be able to verify that a successful securitization took place, I will primarily focus on assessing how the EU may have attempted to securitize disinformation.

3.3 The concept of "discourse" and discourse analysis

As earlier mentioned, there are different ways scholars have applied and assessed securitization in IR studies. One common approach to examining securitization and the development of security threat problems is through discourse analytical methods (Balzacq, 2010). While there is no clear definition of the concept of "discourse", according to Rose (2016, p. 18) it can be understood as "a group of assertions that form how a specific thing is thought of and has implications for how we act". This includes all forms of texts, signs, and written and spoken utterances that contribute to forming a discourse (ibid). As Balzacq (2010,

p. 39) points out "What unites these manifestations of text is their capacity to convey meaning, in a context." The aim of discourse analysis is thus to examine the meanings in texts that together form a discourse, by paying close attention to the representational, attributional, and intertextual meanings. In relation to securitization, Balzacq (2010, p. 39) argues discourse analysis helps scholars to "map the emergence and evolution of patterns of representations which are constitutive of a threat image." In this sense, he suggest discourse becomes a "vehicle of meaning, a meaning which is rarely self-evident but has to be charted by the analyst." By using a discourse analysis, assessing the policy documents on disinformation from the perspective of securitization will therefore give thorough insights to how the discourse has been shaped around matters of security. Including aspects left silent in the creation and framing of the threat. How the discourse analysis will be conducted will be further expanded on in the following section about the WPR approach.

3.4 What's the problem represented to be?

The method and theoretical approach this paper will apply as a guiding tool for the analysis is "What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) developed by Carol Bacchi. A form of discourse analysis, intended to critically interrogate public policies, based on the premise that "what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic needs to change" (Bacchi, 2009, p. xi). The post-structural theoretical assumptions underpinning the WPR approach depart from opposing the commonly held view of governments as "problem solvers". Rather than *reacting* to problems, Bacchi argues governments are *active* in identifying and creating policy problems. Likewise securitization, it thus regards a "problem" (or "security threat") as socially constructed. The aim of the WPR approach is to critically analyze the representational meanings of the supposed "problem", the implicit meanings given, in order to reveal how an issue is thought, what's in need of change. The central reason for studying problem representations, rather than "real" problems, Bacchi argues, is because policy-documents are effectively what's governing us all. In other words, studying how "problems" are problematized in policy-documents thus allows one to critically analyze the policy discourses that constitute and shape how we are governed (ibid, p. x, xi, 1).

The WPR approach consists of six interrelated questions that are meant to serve as guiding tools for the analysis. However, due to limited time and space, I chose to exclude questions 3 and 5 as I consider the other questions to be more relevant for this thesis. The questions include (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2):

1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?

Question 1 is built on the premise that "since all policies are problematic activities, they contain implicit problem representations" (ibid, p. 2). One is thus meant to identify the dominant problem representations in policy-document and the implicit meanings given. In the case of this paper how disinformation is represented in the EUs policy-documents. This can both include representations regarding the causes or effects of disinformation, as well as proposed solutions (ibid, p. 3-4). This question also relates to phase one of securitisation, given that one regards "problems" or security threats as socially constructed. Hence why identified problem representation containing security-related claims will aid the assessment of phase one. In addition, will policy proposals concerning actions that may infringe on freedom of expression, aid the assessment of phase two of securitization.

The goal of question 2 is to identify and analyze the conceptual logic that underpins specific problem representations. Conceptual logic refers to the meanings that need to be in place for a problem representation to cohere or make sense, including ontological and epistemological assumptions. In other words, the presuppositions or assumptions that underlie an identified problem representation, the background knowledge which is taken for granted. This includes binary assumptions or dichotomies such as "rich/poor", "national/international" and identifying key concepts in the problem representations and the meanings assigned. In addition, identifying "categories", referring to how people are categorized in policy

documents, such as "citizens" "tax payer", "unemployed". And, how such presuppositions function to give a specific meaning to the problem representation (ibid, p. 5-9). The analysis will further aid the assessment of phase one of securitization, by highlighting the assigned meanings that are taken for granted in the claiming of the threat.

The aim of question 4 is to reflect on and consider the limits of, or which issues and perspectives are silenced in identified problem representations. In other words, what fails to be problematized, bringing in the silenced areas into discussion. This is therefore meant to draw attention to tensions and contradictions in problem representations. (ibid, p. 12-13). The question will facilitate and expand the discussion on securitization, by assessing how the framing of the threat may leave certain areas unproblematized, that may challenge the problem representation.

Question 6 brings attention to practices and processes that allow certain representations to assume dominance. The goal is to pay attention to the contextual conditions and the means through which problem representations reach their targeted audience and achieve legitimacy. In other words how some problem representations assume dominance. In addition, the possibility to challenge the problem representations that are judged to be harmful (ibid, p. 19). This question will aid the assessment of phase three of securitization, by giving answers to how threat claims in speech acts are received and interpreted by an audience, as a legitimate threat.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, due to the limited time and space I chose to exclude question 3 and 5. This should not be a problem considering that the WPR-approach is more of a guiding tool for the analysis, rather than a fixed set of rules to follow. In addition, given that the questions are interrelated, and overlap to a certain degree, the questions used will be able to cover some aspects left out in the other two. For example, question 6 covers similar aspects as question 3, regarding non-discursive conditions and contextual aspects allowing certain representations to assume dominance. Whereas question 4 will be able to cover aspects related to question 5, concerning how "the problem" can be thought of differently, and challenged.

3.5 Data

As alluded to previously I intend to mainly use the EU's policy documents on disinformation as data. This primarily includes documents by the European Commission concerning communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and social committee, and the Committee of the Regions. Including the "European Democracy Action Plan" (hereafter "EDAP") from 2020, which sets out a comprehensive plan against threats to European democracy including disinformation. In addition, the related policy documents "Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach", (hereafter "the Communication") and the "Action plan against disinformation" (hereafter, "APAD") from 2018. The former outlines key principles and objectives guiding the EU actions against disinformation, whereas the latter sets out key actions to tackle disinformation as part of a coordinated approach by the European Union and the Member States.

Furthermore, I will collect some data from the regulation ((EU) 2022/2065) of the Digital Services Act ("DSA") by the EP from 2022. Including from the complementary non-compulsive measure "Code of Practice on Disinformation" (2018), but will primarily consider data from the updated version "The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation 2022" (hereafter "the Code") by the Commission in 2022. The data collected will mainly concern regulations targeting online content containing disinformation. Apart from the above, I will collect supplementary data from parliamentary resolutions, surveys, press releases, and news articles by the EU. As well as from the Commission's website "ec.europa.eu" and studies initiated by the EU about disinformation.

In terms of the selection of data, I have prioritized that of most relevance in the perspective of securitization, by focusing on such aspects that constitute the threat, or what's causing it. Meaning data of less relevant policy area, proposals, regulation, and measures have been excluded. For exemple conserning how disinformation negatively impacts traditional media and journalists. Whilst it's an important matter in the problem of disinformation, it's not taking part in what the EU considers to be a threat or a cause to it, hence why I argue data about this to be less relevant for this paper.

4. Analysis

1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?

To make sense of how the EU thinks of and represents disinformation as a problem, it's relevant to begin the analysis by presenting the EU definition of "disinformation", which is referred to as: *"false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain and which may cause public harm"* (EDAP, 2020, p. 18). The definition is meant to encapsulate several types of false and misleading information spreading, including misinformation, disinformation, information influence operations, and foreign interference. The concept mainly refers to different types of actors, both domestic and foreign, seeking to intentionally deceive through the use of disinformation. The definition gives context to the following dominant problem representation:

"Disinformation is a major challenge for European democracies and societies, and the Union needs to address it while being true to European values and freedoms. Disinformation undermines the trust of citizens in democracy and democratic institutions. Disinformation also contributes to the polarisation of public views and interferes in the democratic decisionmaking processes. It can also be used to undermine the European project. This can have considerable adverse effects on society across the Union…Strong commitment and swift actions are necessary to preserve the democratic process and the trust of citizens in public institutions at both national and Union level" (APAD, 2018, p. 11-12).

The representation implies disinformation is assumed to threaten European democracy. Mainly by polarizing public views and diminishing civilians' trust in democratic processes and institutions. This further implies "the problem" is on one hand constituted by civilians' susceptibility to misleading or false information containing inflammatory or polarizing messages. On the other hand, the actors who spread or "use" disinformation, to intentionally deceive the public for the purpose of destabilizing European societies. Thus assuming actors may exploit people's susceptibility to false and misleading content for their own economic or political interests. This could in turn have serious consequences for society, even affecting the functioning of democracy, hence the call for strong collective actions. The suggestion that "swift actions are necessary to preserve the democratic process" further emphasizes how serious the threat of disinformation is assumed to be, implying there's an essential or even existential need for the EU to take action. Whilst the presented example is not a "speech act" as phase 1 in securitization typically refers to, it nevertheless contains the attributional

properties of an existential threat claim and the call for swift actions to protect the referent object democracy.

One of the more severe threats is suggested to stem from more highly coordinated, either foreign or domestic disinformation campaigns attempting to influence decision-making or elections by manipulating citizens voting behavior. For example, when actor deploy deceptive tools and targets political content or advertisements based on users' data improperly obtained, which can be *"misused to direct divisive and polarising narratives"*. The EU proposes a legislative proposal increasing the transparency of sponsored political advertisement and communication, suggesting*:*

> *"There is a clear need for more transparency in political advertising and communication… Citizens, civil society and responsible authorities must be able to see clearly the source and purpose of such advertising"* (EDAP, p. 4).

In addition, by strengthening current legislation concerning foreign funding of domestic political parties, arguing that there's a *"need to strengthen some of the rules in order to prevent external interference, in particular by improving transparency as regards sources of financing for European political parties"* (EDAP, p. 5).

In other words, the EU assumes European political actors can manipulate people's voting behavior by targeting political content anonymously to specific audiences. Furthermore, assumes that foreign actors sponsor certain European parties acting in the foreign actor's political interests. Hence implying both domestic and foreign actors are assumed to politically gain from spreading divisive and polarizing content, influencing and interfering in elections. By increasing transparency on online platforms revealing the intent, actors' and sponsors' identity behind political content and advertising is thus assumed to reduce actors' ability and incentives to influence and manipulate citizens voting behavior.

Apart from the actors role, the EU suggests online platforms *"play a key role in the spread and amplification of online disinformation"* and these have *"failed to act proportionately, falling short of the challenge posed by disinformation"* (the Communication, p. 2). Several regulations in the DSA specifically target aspects in the design of platforms assumed to exacerbated the spread of disinformation, such as the use of algorithms and lack of transparency. Whereas others in the DSA and the self-regulatory measure "the Code" regulate how platforms should take action against content containing disinformation, but this cannot

violate freedom of expression. That is to say, spreading false or misleading information isn't in itself criminalizing, hence platforms cannot simply remove false and misleading content. However, article 48 of the DSA states that the Commission may in situations where security is threatened, initiate voluntary crisis protocols in order to *"coordinate a rapid, collective and crossborder response in the online environment"*. For example when: *"online platforms are misused for the rapid spread of illegal content or disinformation, or where the need arises for rapid dissemination of reliable information."* It's further suggested the protocols are only to be activated for a limited time and that *"the measures adopted should also be limited to what is strictly necessary to address the extraordinary circumstance"* (EP, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065).

The representation suggests that under extraordinary circumstances, where security is threatened due to a severe spread of disinformation it can be justified to counter with "crisis measures", implied to rapidly limit the spread of false or misleading information. However, the Code already contains seemingly similar actions against disinformation, such as "diluting the visibility" of disinformation by increasing the visibility of trustworthy information or by "prohibiting, downranking, or not recommending" disinformation (2022, p. 18, 20). Whilst it's somewhat ambiguous under what conditions "crisis protocols" may be needed, or how they would be implemented, the representation gives the impression that crisis measures may justify further restrictive actions, perhaps censoring or removing legal content under certain conditions, possibly risking infringement on freedom of expression. The regulation may therefore constitute an extraordinary measure phase two of securitization refers to. However, rather than being a direct, swift action, the proposed action is only motivated and swift under certain "crisis circumstances".

Moreover, one of the main issues concerning disinformation according to the EU, is how it affects citizens. To counter the problem the EU puts strong emphasis on measures aiming to strengthen Europe's resilience against disinformation. Namely by "empowering citizens to make informed decisions" through media literacy and digital literacy training, and other fact-checking measures:

"Media literacy skills help citizens check information before sharing it, understand who is behind it, why it was distributed to them and whether it is credible. Digital literacy enables people to participate in the online environment wisely, safely and ethically" (EDAP, p. 24).

The representation implies that cititzens are assumed to lack media literacy. Therefore are more susceptible to disinformation and may partake in the dissimilation of false and misleading information. Hence contributing to amplifying the spread, allowing disinformation to reach larger crowds. Furthermore, civilians are presumed to lack digital literacy, thus implied to make users engage unwisely, unsafely and unethically on online platforms. By increasing media and digital literacy, citizens are assumed to be better equipped to engage on online platforms, as it increases their ability to distinguish false from more credible information.

To conclude, policy documents highlight three main areas of action, which indirectly is assumed to comprise the threat of disinformation. Including the actors spreading disinformation, the online platforms where most of the spread of disinformation takes place, and civilians' susceptibility toward disinformation.

2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?

According to question 2, one is supposed to assess the conceptual logic underpinning the problem representations, by identifying and analyzing key concepts, binary assumptions, and categories.

To begin with, "disinformation" constitutes the main key concept in the identified problem representations. When the EU promotes actions in policy documents one of the most (if not the most) frequent attributed reasons is by being a "threat". That disinformation threatens our security, democracy and its values, by eroding civilians' trust, skewing public opinion, and polarizing European societies. This has also been expressed by several MEPs, for example by Věra Jourová (the vice-president of values and transparency in the EU Commission) at the conference "Disinfo Horizon: Responding to Future Threats" (2020-01-30) stated:

> *"Not a week goes by without a new evidence from the media or academia showing how serious threats to democracy disinformation and related forms of external interference pose...This is not even a wake up call – this is a call to arms…Democracy is not a given, and we have to fight for it if we want to preserve it".*

The attributional meaning assigned in the statement, along with the threat assuptions in the policy documents thus highlights a presupposed consensus concerning disinformation and its

consequential effects. Namely that it's understood as having the property of an existential threat, endangering the very existence of Europe as a democratic entity. The statement is also an illustrative example of a "speech act" as phase 1 in securitization stipulates, as the meaning more or less suggests "if we do not act against disinformation, we will lose democracy". As such it gives further reason to suggest a collective attempt by the EU to securitize disinformation.

Another related presumption concerning "the threat" regards its assumed cause or origin, i.e. the actors spreading disinformation for economic or political gain. Whilst it's clear that the EU considers any actors, both domestic and foreign engaging in disinformation spreading is a threat. However, far more attention is given foreign disinformation and the suggested threat it poses in the policy discourse. For example disinformation spread by domestic actors is mention as a "growing threat", their role is rarely further expanded on in the policy document. Whereas when speaking of foreign attempts to influence or interfere in democratic processes and elections it's often in terms of "information warfare" or "hybrid threats". This is particularly the case when it comes to disinformation by Russia, who's represented as posing "*the greatest threat to the EU*" in ADAP. A resolution by EP stated further that evidence shows Russia has interfered in the US election 2016, the Brexit referendum, and several European elections 2019 through covert funding of domestic parties, often benefiting anti-EU, extremist and populist candidates (EP, Resolution, 2022-03-09).

This highlights a binary assumption regarding "foreign/domestic" or "external/internal". A consensus regarding foreign actors as posing a greater threat to Europe than domestic ones. This is further supported by how frequently "foreign actors" are mentioned as a reason for taking action compared to "domestic actors" in the policy documents. In other words, the conceptual logic underpinning the problem representation of disinformation or the origin of the threat is assumed to mainly stem from foreign actors. Thus, rather typical for securitisation, external threats seem to be the major reason calling for action.

Moreover, the main category identified in the problem representation to categorize people concerns "citizens". Whilst "citizens" is used to categorize people in general when calling for the need to strengthen people's resilience against disinformation through media literacy and digital literacy training. Thus implying it's assumed to be a general risk among citizens being deceived by disinformation. Yet this is done so by mainly using the category to categorize people who are targeted and deceived by disinformation, whose trust in the political power

and democractic institutions have eroded, and informed decision making is harmed. Those implied to be most need of "empowering" through media literacy and digital literacy training. In other words, whilst "citizens" is used to call for a general need of "empowering" citizens, it's motivated by making an example of "citizens" who are already assumed to have low trust and harmed imformed decision-making due to disinformation.

Furthermore the EU also occasionally attributes citizens as having "vulnerabilities" or as "vulnerable groups", referring to how actors may exploit targeted people's emotions or worries when disseminating inflammatory and polarizing disinformation: *"There is usually an emphasis on exploiting the vulnerabilities of the target and on generating ambiguity to hinder decision-making processes"* (ADAP, 2018, p. 2). In other words, these citizens' "vulnerabilities" are assumed to lie in their susceptibility of being deceived by disinformation.

To conclude, whilst "citizens" is used to refer to people in general when calling for the need to strengthen people's resilience against disinformation, it's mainly used to catagorize people who are already assumed to be deceived and impacted by disinformation. However, little is further said about the properties of citizens assumed to be more "vulnerable" to disinformation, or factors making some citizens more susceptible to disinformation.

4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?

Question 4 addresses the silences or what's left unproblematized in the identified problem representations. As mentioned earlier, there's an evident consensus that the greatest threat concerning disinformation stem from foreign state actors, attempting to influence and interfere in elections. This has in turn obscured the role of domestic actor spreading disinformation, and has been left comparatively unproblematized in the policy discourse. Yet interestingly, a comprehensive study overviewing the current literature on disinformation initiated by the INGE-committee of the EU parliament, stated there was large evidence supporting the claim that mass disinformation campaigns took place approaching the 2019 EU-elections. However, that "the vast majority of influence operations uncovered…was linked to far-right European activists, rather than foreign state or non-state actors." (Bayer, et at. 2021, p. 31). Whilst in some cases, clear financial and political ties to Russia were

established, in the majority of the cases they could not verify a link, and no evidence was found supporting the claim that Russia engaged in large-scale interference during the election period.

Whether or not there are established bonds between European actors and Russia, this notion contradicts EU's threat representation and blurs the line between the binary assumption of "domestic/foreign". Hence, another way to think about "the problem", is to consider how domestic actors may be just as involved in creating the assumed threat. Without the role of internal political actors giving voice to "harmful" disinformation, both online and offline, it's questionable how successful Russia or other foreign actors would be in their presumed pursuit to interfere or influence European elections. The point made is further illustrated in this example concerning Donald Trump: *"In January 2021, manipulation and conspiracy theories led to an unprecedented attack on the Capitol building in Washington…This event is a notable example of the impact that disinformation and incitement to violence can have when disseminated by prominent political figures"* (Bayer et at. 2021, p.14).

Another related silence concerns citizens' susceptibility towards disinformation, which is often merely represented as a lack of education based on the suggested need for media and digital literacy training, and fact-checking measures. Although research initiated by the EU's overall show promising results of the proposed measures, the effect seems to decrease when it comes to people who are generally more willing to believe disinformation (Bayer et al. 2021). For example, studies on fact-checked claims by political candidates such as Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump found that, even when fact-checking showed claims to be untruthful or when it reduced factual misperceptions, it had no measurable effects on supporters' attitudes towards the candidates. This is, as Bayer et al. (2021, p. 111) point out, because *"the trust in such authoritative persons is a value choice which cannot be changed by rational arguments…Supporters believe with great confidence in these fallacies, and even engage in action to follow their beliefs, from resistance against health-protecting measures, to a violent attack against the Capitol."* And further added that when disinformation is disseminated by prominent political individuals *"it makes defence strategies against disinformation futile".* In other words, this illustrates the unproblematized role of disinformation spread by domestic political actors, which seemingly could hamper efforts to "build resilience" against disinformation among it's supporters. Including a silence concerning the role of citizens'

predispositions to believe disinformation, where beliefs, values or emotions seemingly have the ability to override any factual or trustworthy information.

6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?

The EU's disinformation-policy has been developing since 2015, when the EU "first recognised the threat of online disinformation" (ADAP) by Russia. In other words, the representation of foreign actors as main problem or threat has shaped the policy from the beginning. This assumption continued to dominate the problem representation, and was founded on several instances of large scale influence operations and cases of election interference, such as during the US election 2016 and the Brexit referendum 2016. This led the EU to initiate and implement several policy measures in 2018, to strengthening and protecting the integrity of elections approaching 2019. Including the GDPR legislation and the first version of the voluntary self-regulative measure "the Code" for platforms (ADAP, the Communication).

In more recent times, massive influence operations led by Russia and China during the Covid-19 pandemy targeting the EU, and increasing instances of domestic disinformation, sparked new worry (EDAP, 2020). Particularly concerning anti-EU, populist and existmist parties financial and political relationships with Russia, such as Rassemblement National, AFD and the Brexit party, potentially aiding Russian interference (EP, Resolution, 2022-03-09). The new more complex reality of the problem partly disrupted previous notions of "the perpetrators" of the threat. Yet this only further reinforced the assumption of disinformation as an existential threat to European democracy in the policy-discourse, leading to continuous calls for stronger actions tackling disinformation. For example, in relation to a debate regarding the legislative proposals for the DSA, Marina Kaljurand (S&D, Estonia) stated the then self-regulative measures (the Code) were *"insufficient to counter the assault on our democracy"* and added *"After the riots in Capitol Hill, the ultimate price of allowing disinformation and hatred to spread online unchecked is clear to all of us."* (EP, News, 2021-02-10).

More recently, in March of 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine the EU decided to ban the Russian state owned media outlets Sputnik and RT, due to its spread of pro-russian

propaganda and disinformation, at which President Ursula von der Leyen motivated: "*In this time of war, words matter….We will not let Kremlin apologists pour their toxic lies justifying Putin's war or sow the seeds of division in our Union.*" (EC, Press release, 02-03-2022). Whilst the decision was controversial and criticized by some for impacting freedom of expression, and the free press (Voorhoof, 2022-03-09), the invasion indirectly defended and legitimized the representation of Russian disinformation as the main threat to Europe's democracy**.**

Moreover, as the policy has developed over the years, the EU has issued several surveys and public consultations concerning the opinions of European citizens and relevant actors on disinformation as a threat and proposed actions. The results have often been referenced in relation to various proposals targeting disinformation in policy documents, indirectly legitimizing the proposed measures. For example concerning the proposal on media literacy and digital literacy which a majority of respondents supported (the Communication, 2018). In addition: "*83% of people think disinformation threatens democracy*" (EC, ec.europa.eu, accessed: 2023-04-05)*, "84% of respondents…supported more transparency on the financing of European political parties* (EDAP, 2020).

To conclude, the representation of disinformation as a threat, particularly caused by foreign actors, has repeatedly been defended and reinforced by the EU in relation to proposed measures. Mainly by exemplifying established instances of foreign interference and influence operations in the EU and other countries over the years. Including by referencing public consultations, as a way of legitimizing proposed actions. Furthermore, likewise the third phase of securitization, the audience, concerning citizens, as recipients of the threat claim, seem according to the surveys to interpret disinformation as a legitimate threat. Thus authorizing the propsed measures. However, rather than a single straight process of securitisation, the threat representation of disinformation has been reinforced repeatedly over the years in policy documents as well as by MEPs, in other words, no obvious link between a specific speech act and the audience legitimization of the threat. In the following section the results of the analysis will be discussed.

5. Discussion

In the following section the results of the analysis will be discussed in relation to the thesis questions: *How has the EU attempted to securitize disinformation in the policy discourse? And what has been left unproblemtized in the framing of the threat?* The questions with be discussed separately, beginning with the first, followed by the second.

The results of the analysis show the policy discourse on disinformation has been shaped around matters of security by the continuous framing and reinforcement of being a threat to democracy in policy documents as well as by MEPs over the years. Rather typical for securitisation, the threat has primarly been framed as external, priticularly concerning Russian disinformation, who continues to dominate the threat representation. Apart from actors disseminating disinformation, the threat is futher assumed to constitute of citizens ' susceptibility to disinformation and by online platforms lack of action, exacerbating the spread. The developments has led to the assumption that disinformation existanially threatens European democracy, which Věra Jourová's statement or "speech act", mentioned under question 2, is a telling example of as the meaning given more or less suggests "if we do not act against disinformation, we will essentially lose democracy". Taken together, the results show a collective attempt by the EU to securitize disinformation by representing it as an existential, predominantly external threat to European democracy, in line with phase 1.

Furthermore, whilst the terminology concerning the need for "strong", "urgent" or "swift" actions, often used when promoting actions, do allude to the notion of extraordinary means as phase 2 suggests. However, as the process between initial proposal of the DSA to implementation almost reached across two years (2020-2022), it seems rather questionable to suggest the measures are extraordinary by being "rapid" or "swift". What further speaks against phase 2, is how strongly it's pointed out for platforms to safeguard freedom of expression. As mentioned under question 1, rather than banning or removing false and misleading information, the Code and the DSA, urges platforms to "dilute" disinformation by increasing the visibility of reliable information. Hence as they do not intended to restrict or remove any legal content on the basis of being false or misleading, it thus make it less plausible to assume freedom of expression will get impacted. On the contrary, regulations in the Code and the DSA are often rather vague and sometimes ambiguous as to what they are intended for, such as the crisis-protocol described under question 1. And, considering that platforms have the ultimate power to decide what content should be acted upon, there may

still be a possibility platforms could take unjustified actions which subsequently risk impacting the right to express. Yet, even if so, in the eyes of securitization it does not constitute a convincing or sufficient reason to suggest the DSA or the Code meet the requirements of phase 2 as extraordinary, by impacting fundamental rights in any evident way.

Moreover, concerning the third phase of securitization, it seems plausible to assume that civilians as the receiving audience have interpreted disinformation as a legitimate threat. At least if one regard the several public consultations the EU has initiated, such as the one stating *"83% of people think disinformation threatens democracy"*. However, as mentioned under question 6, unlike the theory stipulates, the process of the securitizing actors' speech act reaching the audiences who legitimize proposed extraordinary actions has not been single nor straight. The EU have rather collectively attempted to securitize disinformation by reinforcing the threat over the years. In other words, it's hard or impossible to establish a direct link between a specific speech act such as Věra Jourovás' and its effect on civilians as the audience. Yet one could nevertheless assume that this repeated assertion of disinformation as threat to European democracy, along with revelations of large-scale disinformation spreading, such as Russia's interference during the US election and the Brexit referendum 2016, has shaped how citizens ultimately view disinformation. Hence may also be the reason why the majority of the participants in surveys seems to show support for the various measures the EU proposed. Thus irrespective of how specific speech acts may have impacted audiences' interpretation of disinformation as a legitimate threat or not, the majority of citizens do nonetheless seem to view it as such, indirectly authorizing the proposed measures, as phase 3 suggests.

To conclude, in line with phase 1, the findings show a rather obvious collective attempt by the EU to securitze disinformation as an existential threat to European democracy in the policy discourse. The analysis also arguably seems to suggest it has been interpreted as a legitimate threat by citizens as the audience, authorizing the proposed measures as phase 3 stipulates. However, since the DSA and the Code does not seem to impact freedom of expression in any evident way, nor can be considered "swift", there's no convincing support for phase two's claim of means being extraordinary. Therefore constitute the main reason this can't be considered a proper or successful case of securitization.

Moveover, when it comes to aspects left unproblematized in the framing of the threat, the analysis show this predominantly concerns domestic actors spreading disinformation, whose role has been overshadowed and indirectly downplayed by the framing of foreign disinformation as the primary threat. Although the results do show the EU has increasingly recognized the role of domestic disinformation over the year, for example the proposal in EDAP from 2020 for increased transparency of political content, mentioned under question 1. It's still evident that forgein disinformation continues to dominate the threat representation in the policy discourse, leaving the role of domestic actors comparatively unproblematized.

This is especially evident when it comes to the role of prominent political figures spreading disinformation and their audience or supporters' willingness to accept or believe expressed fallacies. On one hand, a silence concerning the role of people's predispositions to believe disinformation. On the other the impact of disinformation disseminated by a trusted political figures, which according Bayer *et al* (2021) risk hampering any efforts to to "build resilience" through educative measures among such groups of people. In other word, a lack of problematization of the groups of people who are potentially more likely to be unreceptive to media and digital literacy training or fact checking measures, due to the factors stated above.

To conclude, what's left unproblematized in the framing of the threat of disinformation, predominantly regards disinformation spread by domestic actors, especially when it comes to individuals in positions of power and its potential impact on its' audience or supporters. In the following paragraphs will potential implications of the thesis' results be discussed, including possible limitations, and how the results relate to other studies, but also suggestions for future research.

To begin with, although the findings indicate the DSA and the Code won't impact freedom of expression, a limitation is that the actual effects of the DSA were not assessed, as it's not yet in full force. Given the risks associated with regulating disinformation, suggests further research into the effects of the legislation is likely needed to properly establish if or how it may impacts the right. On the contrary, as the regulations do not restrict any information or online content on the basis of being false or misleading, it thus raises questions of how effective the measures actually will be at addressing the spread of disinformation. Future research should therefore also assess how effective the DSA and the Code are at reducing the spread of disinformation.

Regarding the problematization of foreign disinformation, especially the view of Russia as the main threat to European democracy seems likely to continue to dominate the policy discourse. Especially after the invasion of Ukraine, which legitimized the EU's threat representation of Russia. Although it has not been the primary focus of this paper, it's possible to assume that the consensus regarding Russian disinformation as a threat also aided to legitimize the controversial decision to ban Sputnik and RT within the EU. In other words, if there were no previous consensus regarding Russian disinformation as a threat, it's possible that the decision, which seemingly could impact free expression or the free presss, may not as swiftly or "easily" have achieved legitimacy.

Furthermore, the distinction found between how foreign and domestic actors have been problematized in the policy discourse partly confirms previous research raising concerns over EU's earlier disinformation policy for being one sided and overly centered around the threat posed by foregin actors. And lacking meaningful action against domestic disinformation (Feldstein, 2020)(Butcher, 2019). Bayer et al. (2021, p. 111) also argue that the highest risk to democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights rather stem from domestic disinformation. Hence this highlights how the view and fear for foreign disinformation risks obscuring and potentially underscore the impact of domestic disinformation, such as when it comes to political actors spreading disinformation.

Furthermore, as measures meant to strengthen people's resilience potentially may fall short on those groups of people who by values or choice believe disinformation when disseminated by a trusted political figure, could also potentially exacerbate polarization, as indicated by Bayer et al. (2021, 111): *"While a growing number of the population is thought to be resilient against disinformation, the gap between these two groups is widening."* In other words, overlooking the role of people's predispositions to believe disinformation and the impact when spread by prominent political actors may not only mean that building resilience through educational measures become ineffective among such groups, but also allows for further polarization of society. Whilst more research is likely needed to establish how such factor may impact the effects the proposed measures for increased media and digital literacy training, and fact checking measures. In sum, these potential risks nevertheless highlights a relevant point, that we in our future fights against disinformation don't get blind sighted by threats externally, but also direct our attention internally. As Butcher (2019) point out: "Winning this information war means winning on the home front too."

Lastly, concerning potential limitations in this thesis. Due to limited time and space, the complexity of disinformation as subject, including the vast scope of EU's disinformation policy, meant that I had to prioritize those aspects which seemed of most importance in the perspective of securitization. Hence it important to point out that, whilst this paper has attempted to make an account for how the EU disinformation policy can be understood from the perspective of securitization, it by no means have covered all the different areas and policy proposals. Although I have put substantial effort with regards to both reflexivity and objectivity, one cannot rule out the possibility that my judgment or choices of priority potentially is flawed or biased in some way, and may therefore constitute a possible limitation in this thesis.

6. Conclusions

The findings show, in line with the theory, that the EU has collectively attempted to securitize disinformation by representing it as an existential, predominantly external threat to European democracy in the policy discourse. Whilst it was impossible to establish a particular link between a speech act and the receiving audience legitimization of the threat, finding nevertheless show that European citizens seem to regard disinformation as a valid threat to democracy. However, the main reason this can't be considered a proper case of securitization stems from how the DSA and the Code do not seem to risk impacting freedom of expression. Although this does not rule out the possibility that they potentially could, it's no convincing support for the theory's claim of means being extraordinary. Future research should however further investigate the effects of the regulations to properly establish if or how it may impact the right. What's left unproblematized in the framing of the threat of disinformation, predominantly regards the role of domestic disinformation, which has been obscured by the problematization of foreign disinformation as the primary threat in the policy discourse. Especially evident is the lack of problematization of influential public figures disseminating disinformation, and the role of poeple's predispositions to believe disinformation. As these factors could potentially make measures meant to strengthen people's resilience against disinformation become less effective, it suggest that more attention should perhaps be directed to internal notions of the problem of disinformation.

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