Community of Democracies

Counter-FIMI Toolbox for Diplomats

A Conceptual Framework

1. Introduction

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) has emerged as one of the most severe global risks as "the disruptive capabilities of manipulated information are rapidly accelerating,"[1] and are used "as a broader strategy to malignly interfere in and destabilise the democratic systems across the world."[2]

The concept of FIMI, initially introduced by the European External Action Service (EEAS) has met a lot of success and is consequently increasingly used. While FIMI overlaps to a certain extent with disinformation, not all disinformation is FIMI, and FIMI is not only disinformation. The definition offered by the EEAS is:

> **FIMI is a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.[3]**

Since the EEAS developed the concept of FIMI, the EU has been at the global forefront of developing relevant frameworks and building capacities and instruments to counter these threats. Following up on the EU Strategic Compass 2022 that called for the development of the EU toolbox to address and counter FIMI,[4] EEAS has fostered a counter-FIMI toolbox based on four cross-cutting priority dimensions: situational awareness, resilience, regulation and EU's external action. Each dimension in this counter-FIMI toolbox comprises different types of instruments, activities, and interventions, with the potential to either prevent or lower the impact of FIMI, deter actors from pursuing these activities, and respond to them. [5]

While the EEAS's counter-FIMI toolbox was developed as a comprehensive framework that incorporates activities and interventions on EU and EU-Members levels,[6] it needs to be adapted to the needs of diplomats, as (1) they face a very particular type of FIMI during their overseas deployments, especially outside of like-minded democracies; and (2) their tools, capabilities and mandates are limited, in comparison to the EEAS.
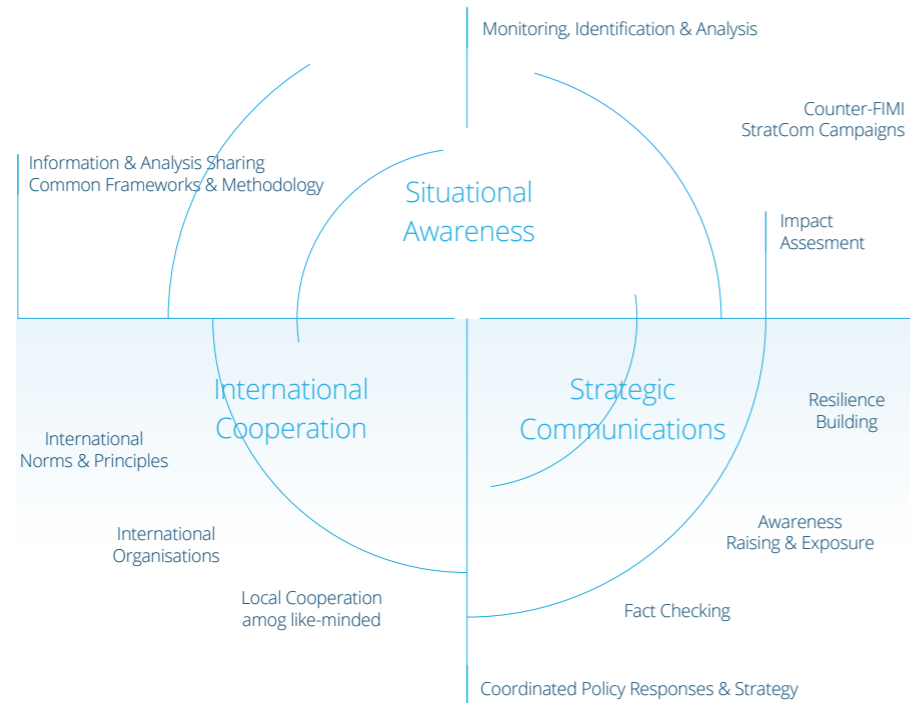
Therefore, this report aims to offer a 'Counter-FIMI Toolbox for Diplomats,' by adapting the EEAS's counter-FIMI toolbox to the nature and character of the activities performed by diplomats during their service abroad.

Figure 1 diagram labels:

- Monitoring, Identification & Analysis
- Counter-FIMI StratCom Campaigns
- Information & Analysis Sharing Common Frameworks & Methodology
- **Situational Awareness**
- Impact Assesment
- **International Cooperation**
- **Strategic Communications**
- Resilience Building
- International Norms & Principles
- Awareness Raising & Exposure
- International Organisations
- Local Cooperation amog like-minded
- Fact Checking
- Coordinated Policy Responses & Strategy

2. The Framework

The EEAS's counter-FIMI toolbox has been the most advanced conceptual framework to address the threats of foreign information manipulations and interference[7] However, developed for the use of the EU and EU-member states, it is too comprehensive for the use of diplomats as a part of overseas missions on behalf of their governments. Yet, as demonstrated in the analysis of Russia's official communications, these diplomats need to address information manipulations in the countries' information ecosystems. Therefore, the EEAS's counter-FIMI toolbox must be adapted to the needs of diplomats, as (1) they face a very particular type of FIMI during their overseas deployments, especially outside of like-minded democracies; and (2) their tools, capabilities and mandates are limited, as they operate outside of their countries.

This adaptation leads to a counter-FIMI toolbox focusing on three overlapping priority dimensions: situational awareness, international cooperation and strategic communications (see Figure 1). Each dimension comprises different types of activities required to respond to FIMI events and prevent or lower their impact.

3. Situational Awareness

Comprehensive situational awareness is a key prerequisite for any responses to FIMI activity. The core of the situation awareness consists of a set of activities designed to monitor the information environment, identify malign actors and receptive audiences (sometimes called vulnerable audiences), and analyse the collected data to recreate and understand the full scope of the FIMI activity conducted by malign actors. This set of activities and the relations between them are best understood through an adapted version of 'Disinformation Pyramid' developed as a part of DISARM framework – "a universal approach to identify and record disinformation attacks throughout the security community."[8] It is important to remember that the modus operandi of malign actors and the counter-FIMI efforts to 'monitor, identify & analyse' work in the opposite directions (see Figure 2). Malign actors focus on a limited number of overreaching campaigns to promote their interests by creating or exploiting incidents to communicate narratives toward their target (receptive) audiences through a network of actors that produce, disseminate and amplify malign messages. Since these actors and messages are the only visible part of FIMI, counter-FIMI actors must work backward from messages and actors to identify narratives and receptive audiences, understand incidents, and analyse the campaign. This activity requires both data and social scientists to work together to recreate the full scope of FIMI threat.
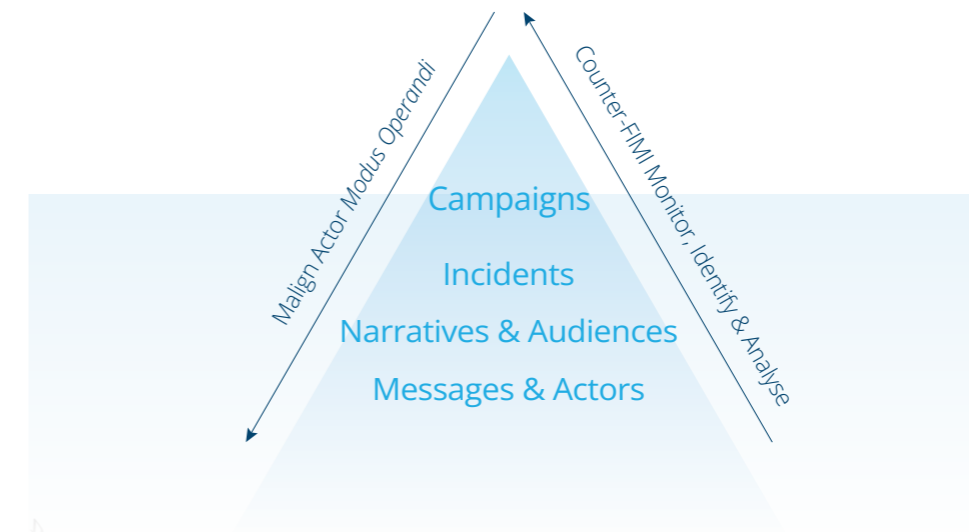
Figure 2 diagram labels:

- Malign Actor Modus Operandi
- Counter-FIMI Monitor, Identify & Analyse
- Campaigns
- Incidents
- Narratives & Audiences
- Messages & Actors

Layer	Title	Definition	Activity	Required Tools & Skills
Bottom	Messages & Actors	Messages, images, accounts, relationships, and group that malign actors use to create narratives and incidents. This is the visible part of each incident, often in large volumes. It serves as the basis for the preliminary analysis by data scientists.	Monitor & Identify	Data collection + primary quantitative analysis
Second from the bottom	Narratives & Audiences	Stories told to shape beliefs, emotions, and the actions of audiences targeted by malign actors. This is the invisible part of each incident. It is identifiable through in-depth analysis by data scientists and experts with the knowledge of the relevant context (target audiences, relevant incidents, etc.)	Monitor & Identify & Analyse	In-depth quantitative analysis with large language models and network analysis tools, including topic clustering, sentiment analysis, etc. In-depth qualitative analysis based on contextual expertise on the local audiences.
Second from the top	Incidents	Shorter-term sets of information manipulation and interference activity, usually around a real-life event. Past bursts of activity can be easily identified by data scientists, and future incidents can be anticipated by experts with the knowledge of the relevant context (target audiences, malign actors, political/military/economic developments, etc.)	Identify & Analyse	All above.
Top	Campaigns	Advanced persistent threats predominantly created by nation-state actors using information manipulation and interference with long-term objectives. They consist of multiple incidents, targeting multiple audiences with multiple incident-relevant narratives.	Analyse	All above + in-depth expertise on the malign actors.

In the last several years, significant efforts have been invested by EU Institutions, EU Member States, and other democracies to increase situational awareness about FIMI activities conducted by malign actors (notably Russia and China) within their borders. Fewer resources were invested in systematic monitoring, identification and analysis of information manipulation and interference in third countries. The pilot study of Russia's official communications on Telegram and X indicated complex and highly adaptable worldwide FIMI operations orchestrated by the Kremlin that are tailored to the specific contexts of each country.[9]

To address and counter this campaign, diplomats need to be aware of the specific narratives communicated by the Kremlin in their countries of deployment and understand the local audiences receptive to these narratives. For example, a European diplomat serving in Argentina needs to be aware of (1) the Russian narratives disseminated in Argentina, (2) the incidents used by the Kremlin in Argentina in the past and might be used in the future, (3) the local audiences receptive to the Kremlin messages; and (4) how these narratives and incidents fit into the Kremlin's global campaign.

4. International Cooperation

As no systematic analysis of FIMI on a global level currently exists, international cooperation for information and analysis sharing is vital for successfully countering FIMI. During the last several years, there have been several multilateral initiatives to establish international norms, principles, and codes of practice for addressing FIMI threats. For example, the EU-led 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation is a first-of-its-kind tool through which 44 relevant players in the industry agreed on self-regulatory standards to fight disinformation.[10] Other examples include the 2023 Global Declaration on Information Integrity Online launched by Canada and the Netherlands,[11] and the 2018 Charlevoix Commitment on Defending Democracy signed by G7 Members at the 44th G7 Summit in Charlevoix seeking "to establish a common understanding of unacceptable actions by foreign actors with the malicious intent of undermining our countries' democratic systems as the basis for our collective and individual response."[12]

In addition to promoting international norms and principles, like-minded democracies have promoted international cooperation to share information and analyse FIMI activities. For example, following the 2018 G7 Summit in Charlevoix, the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism was established to strengthen "coordination between G7 countries to identify and respond to diverse and evolving foreign threats to democracy."[13] Other examples include different bilateral cooperations, cooperation between international institutions (e.g., NATO and EU)[14] and efforts made by various international institutions (e.g., the UN Secretary-General's Countering Disinformation Report,[15] or this report commissioned by the Community of Democracies).

While deployed diplomats maximise the opportunities created by these frameworks of international cooperation, increased cooperation on the local level among representatives of like-minded democracies can significantly strengthen their capacity to counter FIMI actors in their respective countries of deployment. As stated above, malign actors tailor their FIMI interventions to the contextual circumstances of each country. Local cooperation to share information and analyses of these FIMI activities and coordination of policy responses and strategic approaches can significantly enhance counter-FIMI efforts.

In other words, international cooperation, as a counter-FIMI tool for diplomats, is based on a multilayered approach (see Figure 3). Rooted in the international norms and principles, common frameworks and methodology championed by international organisations and like-minded democracies, the diplomats of these democracies increase their information and analysis sharing on a local level, leading to more coordinated and effective counter-FIMI policy responses and strategies
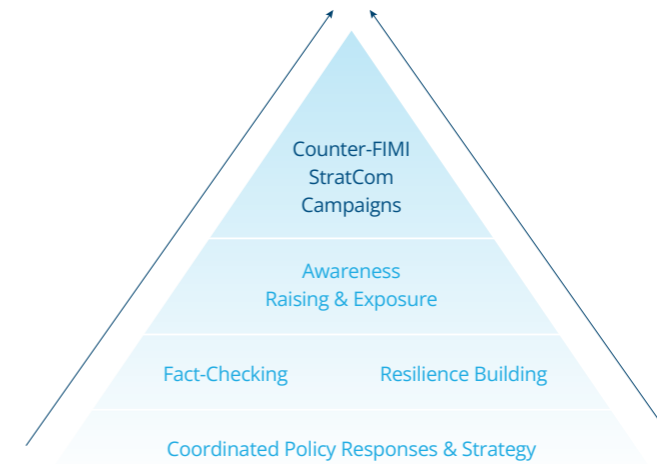
Coordinated Policy
Responses & Strategy

Information
& Analysis Sharing

Local
Cooperation

International Norms
& Principles

International
Organisations

Common Frameworks
& Methodology
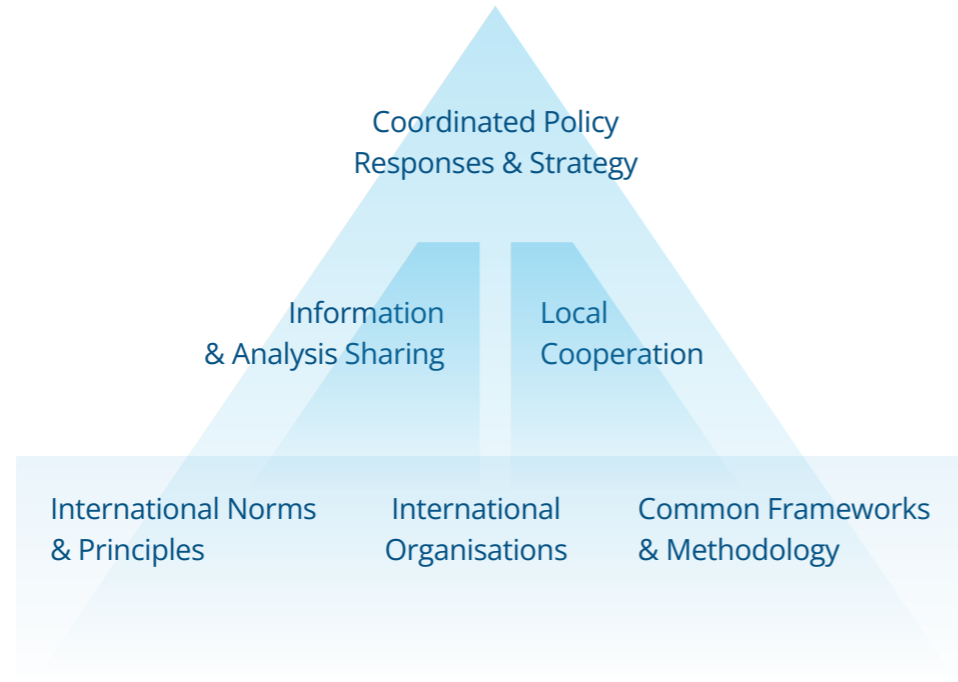
5. Strategic Communications

In contemporary academic and professional discourses, the term 'strategic communications' has long been conceptualised as a set of activities political actors conduct to advance their interests. However, regardless of the extensive literature on strategic communications and its widespread application, it has neither a universally accepted definition nor consensus on what it entails.

To develop this counter-FIMI toolbox for diplomats, this report adopts a definition proposed by the StratCom Terminology Project hosted by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. The main reason that justifies this choice is the aim of this Terminology Project. Since its main objective is to clarify terms and make them accessible to the broader community of strategic communicators, it offers the most comprehensive and thought-through rationale behind its proposed definitions. According to the StratCom Terminology Project, strategic communications represent "a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment."

When used in the context of diplomats deployed overseas, this definition implies a multilayered approach that leads to the creation of Counter-FIMI StratCom campaigns (see Figure 4). Any counter-FIMI StratCom campaign must be rooted in policy and strategy, as strategic communications are "driven by objectives that are derived from policy strategy." As

noted above, coordinating policy responses and strategic approaches between democracies (on state level and among diplomats deployed in the same country) would significantly strengthen the response to FIMI. However, a clear strategy with clearly defined objectives regarding counter-FIMI locally is required even without such cooperation. This strategy shall be developed based on situational awareness of the type, scale, and form of FIMI activities at the local level.

Counter-FIMI
StratCom
Campaigns

Awareness
Raising & Exposure

Fact-Checking   Resilience Building

Coordinated Policy Responses & Strategy

Based on the developed strategy, the counter-FIMI StratCom campaigns will evolve around a set of activities, such as Fact-Checking, Awareness Raising and Exposure and Resilience Building (see Figure 5). While these free are the main ones, other activities can be added to the list: media/digital/information literacy education, support of independent media and civil society, etc. It is important to emphasise that to maximise their potential; all these activities must be adjusted to the local information environment and FIMI activities conducted by malign actors.

Layer	Title	Definition
Fact-Checking	Reduce the scale of malign content in local information environment by veryfying the factual accuracy of messages and narratives disseminated by malign actors and refuting false-based content.	Fact-Checking is usually a part of Situational Awareness 'monitor, identify & analyse' effort. It can be implemented in deferent ways (e.g., international, national or local institutions, NGOs or private sector), however, it shall be focusing on the malign content distributed locally in the country of deployment.
Awareness Raising and Exposure	Make local audiences and decision makers awara about local FIMI campaigns and potential exploitation of local incidents by malign actors (e.g., elections, natural disasters, etc.)	This activity can be implemented through cooperation with local think tanks and NGOs by sharing the outputs of 'monitor, identify & nalayse' effort.
Resilience Building	Increasing the resilience of local audiences to FIMI	This activity can be implemented through cooperation with local think tanks and NGOs specialising in FIMI resilience-building activities, such as media literacy, independent media, information policy, etc.

Finally, counter-FIMI campaigns must be designed to engage people on a narrative level, which is more effective than facts alone. By targeting the deeper feelings and ideas that make FIMI messages and narratives appealing, counter-FIMI campaigns need to target harder-to-reach audiences. To do so, these campaigns must be based on carefully developed situational awareness to select the most resonant messengers, mediums, themes, and styles in the local information environment.

6. Conclusion

This report aimed to offer a counter-FIMI toolbox tailored for diplomats deployed overseas. By adopting the EEAS's counter-FIMI toolbox, the suggested framework is based on three overlapping priority dimensions: situational awareness, international cooperation and strategic communications.

While all three dimensions are equally central, it is essential to emphasise the ascendancy of situational awareness is a key prerequisite for any responses to FIMI activity. Despite the common assumption that the Kremlin's communication strategy is "throwing mud at everyone and hoping some of it sticks,"[16] preliminary research into the Kremlin's FIMI worldwide activities suggests overwise, indicating a "deliberate allocation of resources to achieve overarching strategic goals within local geopolitical and economic contexts."[17]

As discussed above, in an attempt to counter threats posed by Russia's FIMI, diplomats need to have a comprehensive understanding of the specific narratives disseminated by the Kremlin in their country of deployment, the audiences receptive to these narratives, and how these narratives fit into the Kremlin's global campaign. Such an understanding must be based on a systematic data-driven analysis that encompasses all social media platforms used by the Russian embassies and representatives and applies quantitative technological tools such as topic clustering, networks and sentiment analyses, and other machine learning techniques to recreate the Kremlin's particular communication approach in each country.

Such a comprehensive analysis would not only provide data-driven evidence of the Kremlin's global strategy and its adaptions to local contexts, but it would also serve as the first major step for successfully addressing FIMI threats faced by the diplomats and representatives of like-minded democracies deployed in the countries targeted by the Kremlin.

References

1   World Economic Forum (2024). The Global Risk Report 2024. Geneva.
2   European Union External Action (EEAS) (2023). EEAS Stratcom's Responses to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in 2023. Brussels.
3   EU Disinfo Lab (2023). FIMI: Towards a European Redefinition of Foreign Interference. Brussels.
4   European Union (2022). A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. Brussels.
5   European Union External Action (EEAS) (2023). EEAS Stratcom's Responses to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in 2023. Brussels.
6   Ibid.
7   European Union External Action (EEAS) (2023). EEAS Stratcom's Responses to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in 2023. Brussels.
8   The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) (2022). Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Defence Standards: Test for Rapid Adoption of the Common Language and Framework 'DISARM'. Helsinki. p. 15.
9   Boucher, JC. and Fridman, O. (2025). Russia's Worldwide Information Manipulations on Telegram and X: A Pilot Study, Community of Democracies. Warsaw.
10   European Commission (2022). 'The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation'. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation. Accessed: 20 November 2024; European Commission (2022). 'Signatories of the 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation'. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/signatories-2022-strengthened-code-practice-disinformation. Accessed: 20 November, 2024.
11   Government of the Netherlands (2023). 'Global Declaration on Information Integrity Online'. https://www.government.nl/documents/diplomatic-statements/2023/09/20/global-declaration-on-information-integrity-online. Accessed: 20 November, 2024.
12   Charlevoix Commitment on Defending Democracy (2018). https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000373846.pdf. Accessed: 20 November, 2024.
13   Government of Canada (2024). 'Rapid Response Mechanism Canada: Global Affairs Canada'. https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/rapid-response-mechanism-mecanisme-reponse-rapide/index.aspx?lang=eng. Accessed: 20 November, 2024.
14   European Union External Action (EEAS) (2023). EEAS Stratcom's Responses to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in 2023. Brussels.
15   United Nations General Assembly (2022). Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms - Report of the Secretary-General. New York.
16   EUvsDISINFO. (2022). 'Throwing Mud at Everyone and Hoping Some of It Sticks'. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/throwing-mud-at-everyone-and-hoping-some-of-it-sticks/. Accessed 20 November, 2024.
17   Boucher and Fridman. Russia's Worldwide Information Manipulations on Telegram and X.

Contact Us

Community of Democracies Permanent Secretariat
Al. Ujazdowskie 41, 00-540 Warsaw, Poland

E-mail: info@community-democracies.org
Website: community-democracies.org

Social networks

facebook.com/CommunityofDemocracies

twitter.com/CommunityofDem

youtube.com/user/CommunityDemocracies