

# Disinformation landscape in DENMARK

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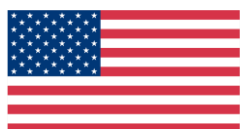
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# INTRODUCTION

- The threat from destabilizing activities including disinformation is a part of the public debate and awareness in Denmark. However, the number of publicly attributed disinformation cases specifically targeting a Danish audience or Danish interests remains low.
- In the public Joint National Threat Assessments of foreign influence before the European Parliament election in June 2024, the focus was held on Russia on China, concluding it to be 'less likely' that these actors would prioritize interference in the Danish election. Post the election, the security services [confirmed](#) that no systematic and coordinated influence was identified, quoting the head of counterintelligence from the Danish Security and Intelligence Service: *"We continuously see Russian attempts to influence the Danish population, but in connection with the election to the European Parliament we have not seen, what we describe as a systematic and coordinated influence."*
- It was the third public threat assessment of election interference and the first time China was mentioned. China constitutes a threat in different ways including espionage and cyber but looking at the public intelligence threat assessments in general, Russia remains the largest disinformation threat. Consequently, this will be the focus of this paper.
- As the information environment crosses borders, so does disinformation through various digital platforms, online gaming communities and social media. Russian disinformation and influence campaigns targeting other audiences can still have an effect on a Danish audience. Furthermore, target audiences for disinformation campaigns do not only have to be segmented by nationality. It can also be influenced by other variables, such as political views, media consumption and attitudes to global events.
- Like other European countries, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked conspiratorial thinking in Denmark. The pattern well known in other countries was also seen in the Danish information sphere: Former anti-vaccine voices took a strong anti-Ukraine stand after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Denmark has been a strong supporter of Ukraine since the beginning of the war, and the support for Ukraine remains strong among the Danish population in all public surveys. Nevertheless, anti-Ukraine sentiments and appeasement rhetoric are frequent on Danish social media. How much is pushed by Russian or pro-Russian actors, and how much is generated organically, remains unanswered. To sum up, Denmark does not seem to be a prioritized target of Russian influence, but it is not an unknown land on the Russian disinformation map of the world. In that case, the emblematic cases presented would simply not exist.

# EMBLEMATIC CASES

## OPERATION OVERLOAD: PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN THE MAILBOX

- In the summer of 2024, the Danish fact-checking media TjekDet (CheckIt) [revealed](#) how the media for about a year has received e-mails from different, but similar e-mail addresses. The concept is an address composed of a foreign name, a number and “@gmail.com”. All of the e-mails are in English language and urge the media to fact-check a certain case. TjekDet discovers that it is not the only media receiving these kinds of messages: So are at least 800 media organizations and individuals in other primarily European countries. This is part of a Russian disinformation operation named Operation Overload. Many of the ‘subjects of fact-checking’ are related to anti-Ukrainian messaging.
- In a report about Operation Overload made by Finish CheckFirst, it [concludes](#), *“Operation Overload stands out as an incredibly intricate campaign due to its omnipresence, extensive outreach, and significant impact. Coordinated across multiple layers using a variety of TTPs, the campaign aims to amplify false narratives, sow discord, create confusion, and polarise public opinion on Ukraine, all in service of the Kremlin’s political agenda.”*
- Operation Overload did not only focus on anti-Ukrainian messaging. TjekDet and its counterparts also received messaging as part of a broader disinformation campaign to discredit the French authorities before the Olympic Games in Paris in the summer of 2024. According to CheckFirst, the overall objectives seem to be for these entities to cover the content, spreading it further – even if it was debunked. This is an interesting dilemma for all media, but fact-checking media even more: By exposing falsehood, you risk amplifying this false information.

## UNDER THE RADAR: AN ECOSYSTEM OF CHEAP DISINFORMATION

- Early after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU sanctioned Russian disinformation outlets such as RT and Sputnik. It was an important effort to reduce the impact of these ‘flag stores’ of Russian disinformation, but it did not stop the stream. It just changed and transformed into other kinds of networks, fake or forged media as well as accounts working under the radar: A system of cheap disinformation sites and accounts seems to have grown during Russia’s war in Ukraine. A Danish version of ‘[Euromore](#)’ as well as the ‘[Pravda](#)’ network exist. Both of these sites are cheap-looking sites and typically in a very poor Danish language.
- These two sites are part of a larger ecosystem of (pro-)Russian disinformation sites and accounts, which often exist quietly under the radar. A part of the concept might be looking as amateurish as possible, but still, it is there, and it is publishing what seems to be AI-generated stories. Together with accounts on platforms such as (but not excluded) Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), they interact and share content.
- François Deruty, a chief operations officer from the French cybersecurity company Sekoia, formulates it perfectly in a [quote](#) from France24: *“When Prigozhin was the tutelary figure of the Kremlin’s cyber propaganda, “disinformation was organised in a pyramid structure, whereas we seem to be moving more towards a spider’s web structure with several*

*players linked together in a network.*” The same pattern is recognisable in the Danish information sphere but also emphasizes that looking at disinformation distribution, narratives and actors within a specific country, implies the risk of missing what is going on in a larger picture – including the country of interest.

- As an example, during the Covid pandemic, Denmark like many other countries, witnessed a spike in conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking, and aligned with the pattern in other countries, voices of the anti-vaccine movement in Denmark quickly turned to dissemination of anti-Ukrainian messaging after the Russian invasion of the country in February 2022. This is not something that started or stopped at the border. Nevertheless, it has the potential to infect and affect the domestic information sphere.

## A ‘PRANK’ ENDING UP AS A TASS TELEGRAM

- On a Friday in the fall of 2023, the Danish minister of foreign affairs, Lars Løkke Rasmussen had an online meeting with whom he thought to be the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki. In the meeting, they discussed different issues, including the prospects for Ukraine. *“It is not easy for me to predict, but at some point, I guess the Ukrainian president will adjust the situation and declare that the time has now come to start negotiations,”* the Danish minister of foreign affairs answered. This remark made it into a TASS telegram under the headline *[‘Zelensky to agree to peace talks, top Danish diplomat says in call with Russian pranksters.’](#)*
- It was not Mr. Moussa Faki, who had called the meeting with the Danish minister of foreign affairs. It was the Russian duo known as ‘Vovan & Lexus’, who was behind the call, and once again succeeded in fooling a Western politician in opposition to the Kremlin. The same fall, the duo made a similar prank call with the Italian [Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni](#) and the Norwegian Prime Minister, Jonas Gahr Store with the war in Ukraine as a [topic](#).
- In some Danish media, the call was almost considered a joke, as the then largest Danish Late Night Show ‘Tæt på Sandheden’ (‘Close to the Truth’) chose to invite the ‘pranksters’ to greet the Danish population on public service TV. This naivety is crucial when considering disinformation in a Danish context: The typical understanding in Danish society is that the population is too educated to fall for foreign disinformation and propaganda. But when inviting the perpetrator into your national TV for a New Year celebration, a guess is that the loudest laugh was that of the Kremlin.

# NARRATIVES

All the narratives mentioned in this section overlap. Of course, other narratives could have been taken into consideration, but these are assessed to be the most dominating ones of current Russian disinformation. These narratives are thriving online, but it is once again important to emphasize that they do not represent the common public view. The support to Ukraine remains high among both decision-makers and the population.

## “OPERATION UNDERMINING UKRAINE”

- This narrative comprises different anti-Ukrainian sentiments from *“Ukraine is corrupt”* and *“Zelensky is a Western puppet”* to question Ukrainian statehood. It is a recurrent topic in more fringe online media and forums, and it is common to see in Ukraine related comments on social media. None of this is specifically addressing Danish issues, but expressions like these are in a more general way trying to sow discord in support of Ukraine. When translated into a Danish context, it is often about how much money the Danes should put into Ukraine instead of Danish welfare.
- As an example, the Danish Ministry of Defence [posted](#) on X September 15 2024 about the Danish minister of defence visiting Ukrainian defence industry companies. Among comments are wording like: *“2xWEFs puppets”* (due to the photo of the Danish minister of Defence and the Ukrainian president Zelensky), *“[M]ore war crimes from the attack ministry”*, and *“More tax money for corruption”*.
- While it might not change the discourse, attempts to do so and attempts to intimidate pro-Ukrainian voices, posts and reporting are frequent online.

## APPEASEMENT RHETORIC: “STOP THE KILLING OF PEOPLE”

- *“Why can't we just have peace?”* Arguments such as those are common in the comment section on social media under posts about Russia's war in Ukraine. But they are never about the root cause: The Russian invasion. The fundamental argument in these kinds of comments is appeasement – understood as if “we all agree” to stop the war at the current frontline, there will be peace. The fact that about 20 % of Ukraine will remain occupied, the question of abducted Ukrainian children, prisoners of war and other displaced persons are never subject to this.
- There are without a doubt people in Denmark believing in this from a pacifistic standpoint, but the peace argument is not neutral when it is submitted to Moscow rules. In that case, the pacifistic stand just becomes a rhetorical front for pro-Kremlin narratives. The share of organic content versus the share of orchestrated content pushed by Russian or pro-Russian actors remains unanswered.

## “QUESTION MORE – AND DON'T BELIEVE A THING”

- The effort to undermine trust in general is also visible in Danish society. Trust in Danish society remains high, but it is not something to take for granted. As in many other countries, Denmark witnessed an increase in conspiratorial thinking

during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic gathered different kinds of groups with different viewpoints and interests but often gathered in a mis- or distrust of the authorities and established media.

- As these groups turned away from 'mainstream media', they often leaned to more fringe and/or propagandistic sources such as RT, platforms such as Telegram and other niche media to "*question more*", as RT's payoff urges you to. As often said about Russian disinformation, the purpose is not necessarily to make you believe in *something*, but believe in *nothing*.
- In 2022, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service addressed this movement for the first time under the label of "anti-establishment extremists"; new inhomogeneous groups gathered in conspiratorial thinking and distrust in authorities and media. A 2024 assessment from the same service states that anti-establishment extremism could constitute a [latent threat to democracy](#) in the long term.

# COMMUNITY

## INTER-DEPARTMENTAL TASK FORCE TO COUNTER FOREIGN INFLUENCE

There is no national agency dedicated to countering mis- and disinformation in Denmark. There is an inter-departmental task force to counter foreign influence, established in 2017 as an effort of the then Danish government to counter foreign interference. The task force consists of representatives from the Ministry of Justice (chairman), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, Denmark's national security and intelligence service and the Danish Defence Intelligence Service. [The Task Force's task is](#) *“to coordinate the Danish efforts against state influence campaigns and ensure that the authorities collectively act effectively and well-coordinated against influence campaigns based on a transversal and holistic approach, the nature and scope of the threat and the vulnerability in society.”* The task force's mandate is limited to [governmental influence campaigns](#).

## DANISH DEFENCE INTELLIGENCE SERVICE (FE) & NATIONAL SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE SERVICE (PET)

The two Danish intelligence and security services play an important role in informing decision-makers and the public about the threat of disinformation. The services have since 2019 published assessments of the threat of foreign interference before elections. Also, disinformation and other destabilizing activities are addressed in each of their public threat assessments. Webpage: <https://www.fe-ddis.dk/> & <https://pet.dk/>

## TJEKDET (CHECKIT)

TjekDet is a Danish independent fact-checking media established in 2016. In its own [words](#), the goal is to *“qualify the public debate and strengthen the democratic conversation by ensuring that both parts take place on as informed a basis as possible – free of misinformation, disinformation and fake news.”* TjekDet collaborates with other European fact-checking media. Webpage: <https://www.tjekdet.dk/>.

## COMMUNITY OF INTEREST

An advantage of being a small country is that an informal community of interest exists in terms of researchers, analysts, reporters and practitioners within this field, who often know one another.



# POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

- While laws against defamation and hate speech exist, Denmark does not have laws against disinformation as such. Freedom of speech as well as freedom of the press is a strong and profound tradition in society.
- It is, however, illegal to work on behalf of a foreign country, including by conducting influence activities in this regard. The provisions on espionage and influencing appear in the Danish Criminal Code, part 12. Treason and other offences against state autonomy and security, section 107-109. [Section 108 is specifically about influence:](#)

*“(1) Any person who otherwise commits an act not falling within section 107 which enables or provides assistance to a foreign intelligence service to perform operations within the territory of the Danish state, whether directly or indirectly, including cooperation on influence activity to influence decision-makers or the formation of public opinion, is sentenced to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six years.*

*(2) If military intelligence is involved, or the activity is performed during war or hostile occupation, the sentence can increase to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 years. The same applies if influence activity under subsection 1 is performed in connection with elections and votes falling within section 116.”*

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