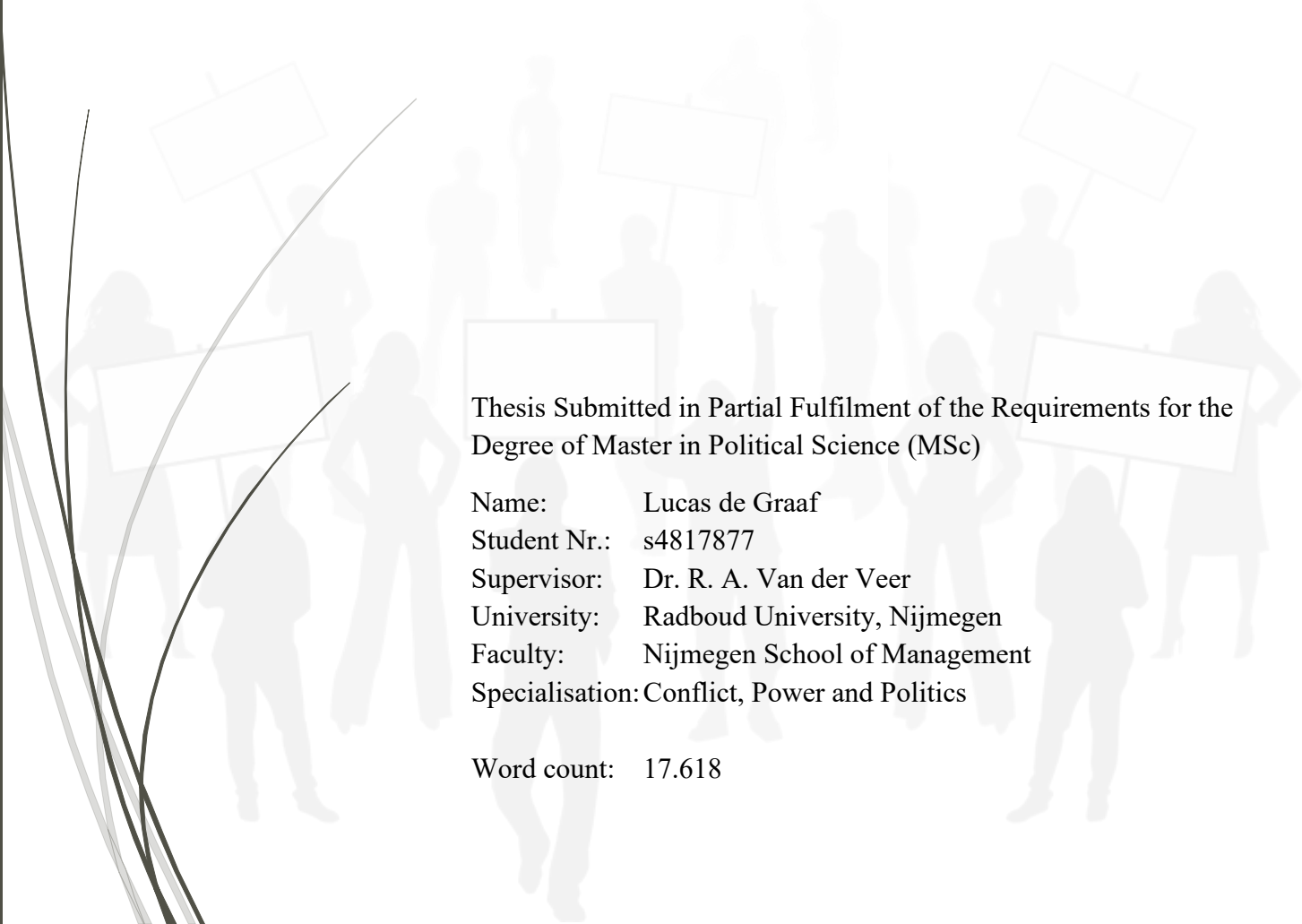




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# Disinformation in the European Union

A process-tracing analysis of the European Union's reaction to disinformation in relation to the Ukraine Crisis 2014 - 2022



Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Political Science (MSc)

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## Abstract

In this thesis the research question *‘To what extent is the European Union securitizing disinformation related to the Ukraine crisis?’* is answered. In order to do so the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School is employed. The securitization framework was redesigned as a causal mechanism in order to conduct a proper process-tracing analysis of the period from 2014, starting with the annexation of Crimea by Russia, until 2022 when the EU banned Russian media outlets such as *‘Russia Today’* and *‘Sputnik’*. The analysis found that in 2014 elite actors such as the European Commission, European Parliament and the European Council had not yet identified disinformation as a potential threat to the EU. This changed in the next couple of years leading up to eventual invasion in 2022. This change is especially evident in the discourse surrounding disinformation. The discourse changes from an event that needs to be ‘countered’ to something that needs to be ‘fought’ and was even seen as part of an ‘undeclared war’ against Europe. It seems the EU was somewhat successful in its securitization of disinformation as the data gathered shows that a large proportion of EU citizens found that Disinformation was a threat to democracies and most of the EU’s proposed policies to counter disinformation were adopted without resistance. However, this thesis found that institutions guarding the freedom of press voiced some concern with the decision of the EU to ban Russian media outlets and advocated other measures instead.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 the Russian invasion that threatened lasting peace on the European continent has become a dire reality in Ukraine. According to a report from Meta, the parent company behind Facebook and Instagram, the invasion came paired with an intensification of disinformation targeting Ukrainian military personnel and public figures on social media (Meta, 2022). In its attempt to counter the spill of disinformation Meta took down a Russian network, consisting of 40 accounts, claiming that Ukraine was betrayed by the West and that it was a failed state (Meta, 2022). Although this spill is identified by Meta at the time of the invasion, disinformation has been playing a role throughout the entire Ukraine crisis starting all the way back in 2014. Several fabricated stories accusing Ukraine of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘genocide’ in Donbas are repeated on many occasions between 2014 and 2022 according to ‘EUvsDisinfo’, a project of the East StratCom Task Force (EUvsDisinfo, 2022). When looking into the Ukraine crisis, the build-up to the eventual invasion and the ongoing war, it can not be denied that disinformation and fake news have had a major impact on this conflict. Not only does disinformation inspire volunteers to travel to the Ukraine and join the fighting, it also hindered a unified EU policy as a response to Russian aggression (Fedor, 2015, p. 4). In an effort to properly deal with disinformation the EU has implemented several measures over the last years. One of the latest of these measures is the ban on media outlets closely related to Russia, such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*.

Although this thesis will focus primarily on the European Union’s response to disinformation in relation to the Ukrainian conflict it is important to sketch a short summary of the events that have led to this moment. While the Cold War ended over thirty years ago the relation between Russia and the West has never been easy going. Under its current president, Vladimir Putin, Russia has looked at the expansion of NATO and the European Union towards its old satellite states with Argus’ eyes. In 2013, when former pro-Russian president of Ukraine Yanukovych was forced to step down as a result of pro-European protests, Russia annexed the Crimea in response. This was followed by pro-Russia separatists seizing control of territory in eastern Ukraine (Smith & Harari, 2014). This resulted in what is now called the Ukrainian Crisis. While small skirmishes between rebels and the Ukrainian military have been present ever since 2014 the possibility of an all-out Russian invasion was closer than ever when Russia moved its troops and military equipment closer to the Ukrainian border in October 2021 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). This military build-up was heavily condemned by the EU, with members of the European Parliament warning Russia that any aggression would come at a high price. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, despite these warnings, President Putin announced that Russian forces had entered Ukrainian territory making the feared invasion a devastating reality.

When studying the conflicts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, like the Russia-Ukraine conflict, most scholars use the term hybrid warfare. Although hybrid warfare is a term heard more and more in studies of conflict and international relations it lacks a clear definition. However, it is understood that hybrid warfare comes in many forms, and many scholars believe that it is a blend of both contemporary warfare and irregular ways of waging war (Wither, 2016). Although it would be truly interesting to study how different international actors define hybrid warfare and what implications that would have for states responding to acts of hybrid warfare, it is not what this

thesis is concerned with. However, the topic of this thesis is closely related to this new form of warfare, and in its analysis this new form of warfare will be mentioned briefly. For now, in order to link the spreading of disinformation to the Ukrainian conflict, it is important to mention that General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, published a piece in 2013 on the future of warfare in which he, according to Flemming Hansen, mentions that “Battles will take place in the information space as well as in physical arenas.” (Hansen, 2017). General Gerasimov seems to strongly suggest that disinformation and the spreading of fake news is a very real part of hybrid warfare for Russia. It seems General Gerasimov was right in his prediction on the future of Russian warfare, as new studies have found that Russia is no stranger to the use of disinformation. Some studies have even shown it to be part of Russia’s information warfare (Giles, 2016; Jaitner, 2015).

### Research Question

Faced with a new type of conflict right at its border it is important to look closely at the EU and analyse how it is handling the spreading of disinformation and fake news. The main question of this thesis therefore is: *‘To what extent is the European Union securitizing disinformation related to the Ukraine crisis?’* To answer this research question this thesis will employ the securitization theory to evaluate how the European Union has responded to the rise of disinformation and fake news in more recent years in relation to the Ukraine crisis. For this thesis a single case study is designed which analyses the official response of the EU to the spreading of disinformation in relation to the Ukraine crisis. Within this case study reports, speeches and statements by the European Union will be analysed and a conclusion will be drawn based on this analysis.

### Scientific Relevance

A fundamental question this thesis needs to answer is whether the EU sees disinformation as a threat to its security. Historically security is seen as a concept that is rather fixed. However, after the Cold War security studies has been divided between scholars that believed security as a concept is still fixed and those that believed the definition of security as a concept should be much broader. Scholars that see security as something that is fixed are called the ‘narrowers’ while scholars that believe security is not a fixed concept are called ‘wideners’ (Eroukhmanhoff, 2018). ‘Narrowers’ are more or less only concerned with conventional views of security, analysing military power and power relations between states. Wideners see a more diverse definition of security. One of the most prominent so called ‘wideners’ is Barry Buzan. He deepened and widened the idea about security, expanding it on a horizontal level onto “political, economic, societal and environmental sectors” (Sulovic, 2010, p. 2). On a vertical level Buzan also questioned the idea of the state being the only actor worth studying in security studies.

A wider idea of security also calls for more distinct criteria of what issues are security threats and when issues become a security threat. This is where the securitization frameworks comes in. In this framework, as defined by Buzan et al., something becomes a security issue once an issue poses “an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects.” (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 25). To keep it short securitization theory is essentially looking towards a discursive process through which a particular issue gets transformed by an

actor into a security threat (Vukovic, 2020, p. 147). The theoretical chapter of this thesis will dive deeper into the theoretical mechanisms of securitization theory.

Applying the securitization framework to analyse an actors' response to the output of disinformation is not new. For example, studies have been designed looking into the securitization of fake news in Singapore (Neo, The Securitization of fake news in Singapore, 2019), or studies regarding the securitization of disinformation in a Taiwanese context (Tsui, 2020). Securitization theory has even been applied to the output of the Russian state in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Rechtik & Mares, 2021). By looking into the securitization of disinformation in relation to the Ukraine crisis from 2014-2022 this thesis adds to the vast body of securitization literature in two ways. Firstly, it applies securitization theory to a new case: the creation of a security framework surrounding disinformation in relation to the recently enlarged Ukraine crisis. By employing the theory of securitization to this case this thesis helps scholars of securitization to further understand how external events such as the enlargement of a conflict can influence and enhance a securitization process. Furthermore, it provides the scholars of securitization with a starting point to further understand how securitization processes look in the EU. The same goes for scholars interested in the broader internal politics of the EU, as the securitization process in the analysis of this thesis provides them with a closer look into how different actors within the EU engaged with each other while securitizing the spreading of disinformation. Secondly, this thesis looks into securitization over an extended period of time using a process-tracing method, which has not been done a lot before. In order to do so the securitization framework needs to be redesigned into a causal mechanism, which is done in the theoretical framework chapter of this thesis. The causal mechanism designed for the purpose of this thesis can help securitization scholars to further understand how the process of securitization can be understood as a causal mechanism.

### Societal Relevance

Fake news as a concept has seen a rise in popularity during the 2016 Trump presidential campaign in de US. It even became 'word of the year' in 2017 (The Guardian, 2017). Although the term fake news has seen a rise in popularity, it is not a new phenomenon. The use of manipulated information or disinformation to disrupt or unite societies has been around for ages. Some examples even go as far back as the Roman Empire (Posetti & matthews, 2018, p. 2). New however, are the extensive possibilities through which an actor might disseminate disinformation. New technological developments and the rise of social media have made it possible for fake news to spread like wildfire. Furthermore, most social media outputs lack the proper tools to detect and identify fake news, therefore it becomes harder and harder for people to distinguish disinformation from facts.

A more recent example of the impact of social media and other new communication technologies can be found in de spreading of disinformation and fake news surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Although fake news surrounding medical information is nothing new, several studies have shown impact of social media on the dissemination of disinformation and fake news in relation to COVID-19 (Fernández-Torres, Almansa-Martínez, & Chamizo-Sánchez, 2021; Guadagno & Guttieri, 2021). Furthermore Prof. Cavazos of the University of Baltimore estimates that fake news generally is costing the global economy around \$78 billion

a year in 2019 (Cavazos, 2019). Although this thesis will not focus on disinformation in relation to the coronavirus it serves as an example to illustrate the impact which disinformation can have on society and the role social media and new communication technologies play in the dissemination of disinformation. If left unchecked fake news and disinformation can have harmful and even destabilizing effects on societies at large (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 122).

Studying the securitization of disinformation is therefore not just relevant to further the scientific understanding of securitization processes. Its societal relevance comes in multiple forms as well. Firstly, it is important for civil society to be aware of these processes and understand how security issues are created by securitizing actors. Especially because, as will be explained in the theoretical framework of this thesis, securitizing processes allow actors to overstep every day politics and implement measures that would not be accepted in normal circumstances. Even though, it is untrue that all actors engaging in a securitizing move do so consciously, nor is it always true that actors engaging in a speech-act are looking to abuse the process for their own gains, it is important for civil society and democratic institutions to be aware of these processes especially because it could come at a price. For example as part of the war on terror western societies have implemented extensive and intrusive measures at the expense of civil liberties (Fierke, 2005). It is not for this thesis to argue whether the implementation of these measures was justified or not, nor is this thesis trying make an argument about the justification or legitimatization of the measures taken in order to counter disinformation, it is merely providing a closer look into the securitizing process in the case of disinformation in relation to the Ukraine crisis. However, by providing its readers with a closer look into the process and its observable mechanisms this thesis could lead to a better understanding of the process. Which in turn will lead to a more vigilant civil society which watches these processes more critically and rightfully so.

Secondly, the analysis provided by the thesis shows a securitizing process over an extended period of time. This could also be used to evaluate what worked and what did not work for future reference by securitizing actors such as security experts and politicians who believe that they face new security challenges. The same is true for the securitizing actors found in the analysis of this thesis, such as the Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission. Even though, the analysis of this thesis will not lead to generalizable outcomes in any way or form. It does provide these actors with a closer look into a process along a certain pathway which lies at the core of securitization theory.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

To answer the research question: *‘To what extent is the European Union securitizing disinformation related to the Ukraine crisis?’* the theory of securitization will be employed. This theory has been around for a couple of decades now and therefore many studies have been done to explore how it works and how its ideas apply to the real world. This also resulted in many different iterations of the theory and its most important concepts. Before we dive deeper in the history of securitization theory it is important to establish a definition of the securitization which will be elaborated upon with some examples.



Securitization in essence can be seen as a process of ‘call and response’ (Vukovic, 2020). When a certain actor frames a development as being an existential threat to the status quo of a society and the audience responds to this call with confirmation that the threat is perceived as a threat the actor is able to implement extraordinary measures to take care of the development (2020). An example of securitization can be found in the recent Israeli response to the COVID-19 crisis. In this example Israeli Minister of Defence Naftali Bennett referred to the pandemic as Israel’s “First Corona War” (Bennett N. , 2020). The Israeli people accepted this frame of the situations and as a result of this war like language Israel deployed extraordinary measures including the unprecedented use of Israel’s intelligence agencies against its own citizens (Hoffman, 2020). Another example of successful securitization is the securitization of refugees in Greece in the 1990s. When studying the discourse surrounding refugees in Greece during this period Georgios Karyotis found that parliamentary debates show an increased use of metaphors such as ‘invasion’, or ‘hungry hordes’ when discussing the impact of refugees on the country (Karyotis, 2012, p. 396). This discourse was later adopted by a wider audience and resulted in the introduction of a new refugee law in 1991 which did not distinguish between the type of refugee and excluded undocumented refugees from healthcare and education (Karyotis, 2012, p. 397). As illustrated by these examples the successful framing of an issue as a security issue through a discursive process allows actors to employ extraordinary measures.

In its approach to the conceptualisation of what ‘security’ is, securitization breaks with the more fixed definition of more traditional theories. Below ‘security’ according to two of the most prominent traditional theories will be explored. In doing so this thesis is able to show how the views on security have changed over the course of theoretical history. After which the theory of securitization will be further described, in a more general sense and in particular the ideas of the Copenhagen School will be explored in more detail. These findings will then be used as the foundations for describing the process of securitization of a certain issue.

### Realism and Liberalism

As mentioned before ‘security’ is historically seen as a narrow concept. As such, in more conventional IR theories such as realism and liberalism ‘security’ was defined within well-established confines. Within the realist theory for example the realm of security is defined mostly by looking at the security of the state while putting an emphasis on the preservation of a state’s territory and the physical safety of its citizens. In short, this more traditionalist view of security comes down to “the study of the threat, use and control of military force” (Walt, 1991). In realism for example, states are both the main actors and the referent object when studying security. Furthermore, realist scholars, in general, determine a state’s security by its ability to defend itself from interference by other hostile states, either in a direct militarized form or through a forced change of core political values through the threat of violence (Walt, 2017). Although liberalism tends to look at security at a more individualistic and economic level, liberalist scholars still tend to adopt conventional realist language when engaging in security studies. They primarily talk about states in relation to security despite focussing on groups and individuals inside or outside states (Owen, 2017). Due to this different approach to security studies liberalist scholars rely more heavily on political solutions that preserve and prolong peace and economic stability rather than military conflict. As a result, liberalist scholars see a bigger role for the international rule of law and for cooperation between states

through international organisations and treaties (Pirnuta & Secarea, 2012, p. 105). Although liberalism as a theory widens the realm of security vertically by looking at individuals, states and NGOs, the definition of security stays fixed, and the language adopted remains that of militarized nature.

### Critical Theories

When the Cold War ended scholars in IR started to look more critically at traditionalist theories and how they theorized about the world. Central in their critical approach to research was the idea that all research is done within a certain historical and societal context and therefore highly dependent on that specific context (Jones, 1999). Securitization theory also belongs to the family of critical theories. Critical theorists argued that the conventional, more traditional, fixed definitions of security were no longer sufficient for the complex ever-changing world of international relations. This resulted in new theoretical approaches to study security. They pushed to horizontally widen the definition of security in their work. At the core of their argument, they see security as something that is socially constructed and highly political (Browning & McDonald, 2011, p. 236). This means that security is not something that is fixed but rather something that comes into existence through discourse. While this approach to security studies allows for a more inclusive definition, it also faces some critiques. Some scholars argue that these critical security studies, in their attempt to widen the definition, fail to deliver a sophisticated and applicable framework for understanding the politics of security (Browning & McDonald, 2011, p. 236). Securitization theory tries to overcome this by defining a usable framework for security studies. Below, in Figure 1, the key differences between realism, Liberalism and Critical Theory in relation to the concept of security are shortly summarized.

Security		
Realism	Liberalism	Critical Theory
Narrow and fixed definition	Narrow and fixed definition.	Wide and flexible definition.
Focused primarily on safety from physical harm.	Starts of from an economic perspective	Sees security as a social construct.
Security based on the ability to defend from interference by other states.	Focussed on political solutions to preserve peace and economic prosperity.	Focussed on discursive processes and a wide range of security areas.

*Figure 1: 3 Different approaches to security*

### Different schools of securitization

There are a couple of different takes on securitization theory. The first iteration of securitization theory was designed by the so-called Copenhagen School. Its main authors are Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan and Jaap de Wilde. Other prominent securitization schools such as the Welsh and Paris School have either added, revised, or criticised the work of the Copenhagen School.

#### Copenhagen School

The Copenhagen School of securitization sees security as something that is flexible, changeable and context based. It defines security as something that is essentially socially constructed

(Emmers, 2002). ‘Security’ is not out there, rather it is created by certain actors through a linguistic process. The Copenhagen School of securitization theory contributes in two distinct ways to the critical security theories. First, provides scholars with a usable framework by splitting the traditionalist security sphere into five new areas of security (Nyman, 2013). These five new areas are: military, environmental, economic, societal, and political security. Each of these sectors has its own referent object. For example, in the military sector the state is still the referent object while for the environmental sector this might be animal species threatened with extinction, or in the case of the societal sector, ‘identity’ might be the referent object. Second, the Copenhagen school provides scholars with a comprehensive operational framework for understanding and analysing how and when an issue becomes a securitized threat (Nyman, 2013).

According to securitization theory an issue is made into a security issue when it is perceived as “something that can undercut the political order within a state and thereby alter the premises for all other questions” (Wæver, 1993, p. 53). What this means in essence is that security issues are not objective and created externally but rather become security issues once they are perceived as such and are securitized by certain actors. This allows for a very flexible definition of what security truly is, one that is not dictated by fixed concepts but by changing discourses. Buzan et al. see security as “the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames issues either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998, p. 23). In essence this makes it possible for an actor to move beyond normal political processes when dealing with an issue.

Central to the securitization theory of the Copenhagen school is the so-called speech act. Ole Wæver argues that by calling something a security issue “a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area” (Wæver, 1993, p. 55). While there is a clear emphasis on the linguistic process behind the speech act, successful securitization is not limited to just constructing a security discourse surrounding a certain development. This is merely a securitizing move (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 25). It is the combined identification of an existential threat which requires immediate action and the acceptance by a significant audience that makes a successful securitization process. (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998, p. 27).

The role of the audience is especially important in when dealing with democracies. While it is said, by Buzan et al., that the utterance of security lifts a certain issue beyond normal politics and thus reduced the influence the public on the handling of the issue, it remains important to legitimise the securitization of certain issues. (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998, p. 28). However, it is specifically the role of the audience which makes for one of the most heard critiques by other scholars. As on the one hand Buzan et al. show that the audience is of importance in the successful securitization of an event while also arguing that the securitizing actor is the one deciding if an event is to be handled as a threat (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Although this critique is well grounded and, as will be shown below, other securitization schools have tried to reconceptualize the role of the audience, it goes without saying that the Copenhagen school of securitization sees an important role for the audience of a securitizing move.

Besides the speech act the actor engaging in the speech act is also important for securitization theory. Buzan et al. describe the securitizing actor as “someone, or a group, who performs the security speech act” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 40). These can be individual political leaders or bureaucrats, lobbyists, but also governments at large and pressure groups. Buzan and his colleagues blur the line between the referent object, for example the state, and the securitizing actor, for example its representatives. The difference between the referent object and the securitizing actor is therefore contextual rather than fixed (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 42). As argued by Buzan et al., it is therefore possible for securitizing actors to act as individuals separated from referent objects while in other cases actors with authority will act on behalf of the state (Buzan et al., 1998 p. 42). It is therefore important to realize who is speaking and in what role they are finding themselves.

### Welsh and Paris School

While the Copenhagen School has laid the foundations of a securitization theory it is not without its critique. In the years following the work of Buzan and his colleagues other scholars from different schools have had their own ideas on how the securitization process works. Although this thesis will primarily borrow its theoretical approach from the Copenhagen school it is important to be aware of the shortcomings and critique it gets from other approaches to securitization theory. The most prominent of these different schools are the Welsh and Paris school of securitization theory.

### Paris School

Scholars of the Paris school criticize the emphasis on language in the Copenhagen school’s securitization theory. They argue that by focussing exclusively on language the Copenhagen school underestimates the importance of shared imagery and other visual symbols and representations in the securitization process (McDonald, *Securitization and the Construction of Security*, 2008). Furthermore, scholars of the Paris school emphasize the role of institutionalization of security issues by security professionals (Baysal, 2020). This emphasis on imagery and security professionals can also be found in the definition of securitization by Thierry Balzacq, one of the most prominent scholars in the Paris school for securitization theory. He defines the securitization process as a combined act of metaphors, policy tools, images, stereotypes and emotions that are contextually mobilised by a securitizing actor, who wants his audience to be aware of an existential threat to the referent object, for example the state (Balzacq, 2011). Besides expanding upon the linguistic approach of the Copenhagen School, Balzacq and his colleagues break away from the top-down approach of the Copenhagen School. They present a more bottom-up approach to the securitization process by putting an extra emphasis on the audience of securitization rather than the securitizing actor. The language and imagery used by the securitizing actor should resonate with the context and experience of the targeted audience (Balzacq, 2011).

### Welsh School

The Welsh school of securitization takes yet another approach to the securitization theory. It takes a more normative approach. In fact, one of its biggest critiques on the Copenhagen School’s approach is its rejection to include the intentions of the securitizing actor in the securitization framework (Floyd, 2011). Furthermore, the Welsh school sees security not as

something that comes from power or order but rather from emancipation (Floyd, Towards a consequentialist evaluation of security: bringing together the Copenhagen and the Welsh Schools of security studies, 2007). In fact, Ken Booth goes as far as to argue that security and emancipation are theoretically the same thing. In his argument he states that “emancipation is freeing people from the physical and human constraints, together with poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on (Booth, 1991). In doing so it places the individual at the centre of the theory. This can also be identified in what Booth argues is the main concern for individual security, which is the state (Booth, 1991).

All three schools offer a different approach to security and securitization theory. The key differences between the three schools are summarized below in Figure 2. While the Copenhagen school focusses mainly on the so-called elite actors deploying a speech-act the Paris and Welsh school take a more bottom-up or normative approach. Even though both Paris and Welsh schools offer an interesting approach to the theory this thesis chooses to employ the Copenhagen schools’ securitization theory as it analyses the securitization process as a top-down process and it does not concern itself with the normative aspect of securitization. This does not mean, however, that this thesis will not take in the consideration of the Paris school’s ideas about the limitations when only looking at language. It would be quite reasonable to also include symbolism and imagery in the analysis.

Securitization		
Copenhagen School	Paris School	Welsh School
Focusses on the actions of Elite actors rather than the audience.	Takes a more bottom-up approach to securitization.	Advocates a more normative approach to securitization.
Focus on the ‘Speech Act’ primarily based on language.	Look beyond the use of language, also include symbolism and shared emotions.	Includes the intention of the actor and sees security as emancipation of the individual.

Figure 2: Key differences in securitization schools

### Securitization as a causal mechanism

As mentioned before this thesis will employ securitization theory to analyse the EU’s response to the spreading of disinformation in the context of the Ukraine crisis. This thesis will draw primarily on the Copenhagen school’s ideas on securitization theory. This is mainly due to that fact that this thesis sets out to analyse the speech-act engaged in by elite actors within the European Union, rather than taking a bottom-up or normative approach advocated by respectively the Paris and Welsh school of securitization. Before the mechanism behind securitization can be designed it is important to realize that securitization is as an ongoing process rather than a single event. Furthermore, the generalizability of securitization as a causal mechanism is inherently flawed due to its highly contextualized nature of the theory. As Guzzini argues:

*“The empirical theory is about a process; a process in which (de)securitization can only be understood against a background of existing*

*foreign policy discourses, their embedded collective memory of past lessons, defining metaphors and the (...) collective identities of a country “ (Guzzini, 2011, p. 335).*

However, the core question of securitization can be defined as: “Who can ‘do’ or ‘speak’ security successfully, on what issues, under which conditions and with what effects.” (Lindgren, 2018, p. 345). Lindgren shows that there are certain conditions and effects in a securitization process by defining the core question of securitization this way, hinting towards the possibility of a causal mechanism being at the core of the theory. Following this approach this thesis is able to design the process of securitization as a causal mechanism as presented in figure 3.

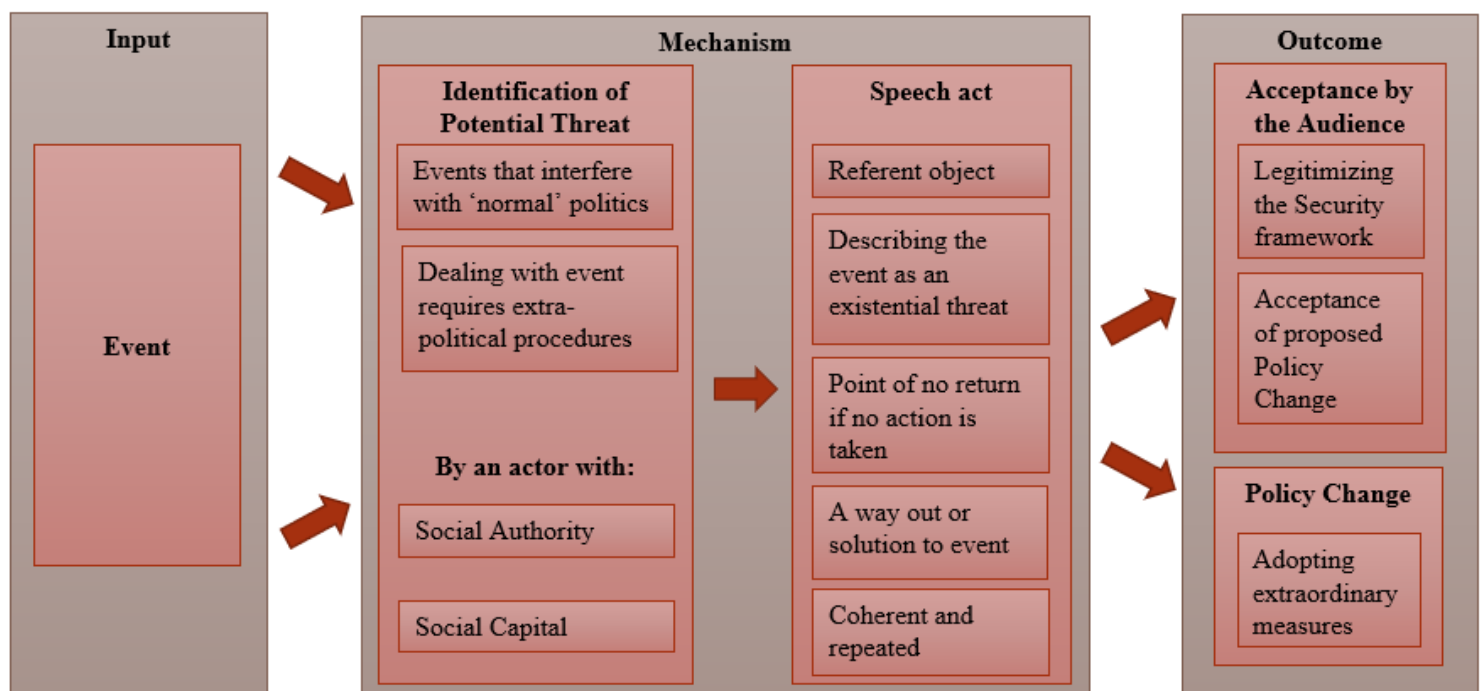


Figure 3: Process of securitization as a causal mechanism

The process of securitization, as indicated by the Copenhagen schools' ideas starts with the identification of disinformation as an existential security threat to the European Union by an elite actor. This identification of disinformation as an existential threat is necessary in securitization theory due the fact that at the core of this theory security is flexible. As long as the event is not perceived as a security threat it will not enter the security realm. Therefore, it is vital for securitization theory that a certain event is interpreted as an existential threat which in turn stimulates a security interpretation of the event (Robinson, 2017). In Canada for example, disinformation was identified as a security threat in 2018 when the National Cyber Threat Assessment saw that disinformation was used to influence political-processes and democratic elections (Jackson, 2022). It is therefore expected that there will be evidence of securitizing actors within the EU identifying the interference of disinformation within EU processes. Furthermore, it is vital that the actor engaging in the securitizing move is capable to speak to the targeted audience with certain (social) authority (Lindgren, 2018).

When an actor within the EU has identified fake news as a security threat the actor is expected to engage in a discursive process creating a security frame in which disinformation is presented



as a threat to EU. This is vital to the process of securitization as it moves an event, in this case the spreading of disinformation, into a securitized sphere (Wæver, 1993). Within securitization theory this process of creating a framework and calling out security is what is essentially done through the speech act. Once more it is important to realize that the idea of a speech act refers to a recurring discourse rather than a single point in time or to a single event (Guzzini, 2011). In order to create a security frame the actor is expected to resort to militarized or warlike language when discussing disinformation. Important to the speech act is that it contains a referent object which is threatened by the event and that the securitizing actor offers a possible solution or ‘way out’ regarding the threat (Lindgren, 2018). Furthermore, it is important that the securitizing actor provides an argument along the lines of “if something is not done, the danger/threat will be realized” (Stritzel, 2012, p. 554). This is defined as providing the audience with a ‘a point of no return’ in the causal mechanism. The creation of the security frame is only effective when the frame is “logically coherent, empirically credible, linked to broader cultural narratives and the values of the audience, and articulated by a credible agent” (Rychnovská, 2014, pp. 16-17). The importance of this is stressed in the example of the failed securitization of fake news in Malaysia. In this example a study found that lacking consistent narratives and a securitizing actor lacking legitimacy ultimately caused the securitization attempt by the government to fail (Neo, 2021). As can be seen in the causal mechanism (figure 3) it is expected that the framing of disinformation needs to be consistent in order for the securitizing move to be successful. Furthermore, it is expected that the framing of disinformation is referencing European shared norms and values such as democracy, equality, rule of law and human rights (European Union, 2022).

The securitization of an issue is only successful when the targeted audience accepts the frame and the securitizing actor is able to implement measures to counter the event. As mentioned by McDonald in his study of the securitization of climate change in Australia it is rather difficult to analyse the audience acceptance of a securitizing move (McDonald, 2012). However, if something is difficult it does not mean that it is impossible. Nonetheless it is important to state that using the acceptance of the audience as an indicator of a successful securitization process should spearheaded carefully and with nuance. Luckily, the theory of securitization also allows for a more straightforward approach as Ole Weaver mentions in his work that extraordinary measures are only tolerated when the audience accepts the securitizing move (Weaver, 2011). Therefore, analysing both the acceptance of the security frame by the audience and the successful implementation of policy change and extraordinary measures will suffice in order to estimate whether the securitizing move was successful.

Taking all this together, it is expected that there will be evidence pointing towards the identification of disinformation as an existential threat by one or more elite actors within the EU. These actors could be Members of the European Parliament or European Commission members. When such elite actors within the EU are perceiving disinformation as a security threat the actors are expected to engage in a speech-act aimed at creating a security framework surrounding disinformation and convincing the audience of the imminent threat posed by disinformation. This speech-act is expected to include a message indicating that disinformation is especially dangerous for the EU. The speech-act is also expected to include security grammar in order to describe disinformation as a threat and to give a description of the consequences of

inaction. Furthermore, the securitizing actor is expected to provide a possible solution when dealing with disinformation in the speech-act. Last but not least, the speech-act found in the analysis is expected to be coherent and repeated throughout the securitization process. When the securitization of disinformation is successful there should be evidence found where the audience is legitimizing the security framework and accepts the proposed solution by the securitizing actor, or the securitizing actor should be able to adopt measures which would normally never be accepted.

### Defining Disinformation and Propaganda

It is also important for this thesis to properly operationalise how it defines disinformation. The EU defines disinformation as “verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public” (European Commission, 2022a). Although disinformation and misinformation are almost identical terms there is one very important distinction between them. Where disinformation requires an actor to intentionally spread false information for self-gain, misinformation is information which is spread without the intention to mislead. It is important to state the difference as both terms are often used interchangeably. Another term often used when discussing disinformation is ‘propaganda’. Propaganda is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “the systematic dissemination of information, especially in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view” (OED, 2022). As the definition of disinformation and the definition of propaganda look so much alike and are used interchangeably in the evidence found this thesis will also use both terms to refer to the same thing. In short, this thesis defines disinformation as misleading or manipulative information which is spread by an external or internal actor with the intent to interfere, disrupt or influence the public for direct or indirect self-gain.

## Chapter 3: Methods

In order to answer the research question a single case study is designed to study the European Union’s response to the spreading of fake news in the context of the Ukraine crisis starting in 2014 and ending in 2022. A process tracing method will be employed using the securitization theory as a causal mechanism. Before the actual analysis can be conducted it is important to establish a couple of things. Firstly, it is important for this thesis to explain the methodology behind process tracing, making a distinction between different types of process tracing and explaining which type will be used to find the answer to the research question of this thesis. Secondly, the decision to use the mechanism within securitization theory as a causal mechanism needs to be justified. Lastly, it is important to elaborate upon the sources which will be used to gather evidence for the actual analysis.

### Case study

As explained above this thesis opts for a single case study design. A single case study research design allows the scholar to look at processes within a specific context (Yin, 2000). This suits this thesis perfectly as securitization theory, as the theoretical motor of this thesis and being part of the family of critical theories, is putting a lot of emphasis on dependency of the context in research findings. Furthermore, securitization theory is about a dynamic process which



occurs and repeats itself over an extended period of time. Therefore, it would be nonsensical to design a study comparing cases within a single point of time. Furthermore, a single case study allows for the gathering of evidence in order to explore complex situations (Lauckner, Paterson, & Krupa, 2012). Although the single case study research design fits this thesis it is not without its problems. One of the most heard critiques on a single case study design is the lack of generalizability of the outcome (Mariotto, Zanni, & De Moraes, 2014). However, as this thesis does not look for generalizable outcomes from its analysis as it is very aware that securitization processes might look different in different cases. Therefore, it is believed that a single case study design will fit the purpose of this thesis.

As for the case itself. This thesis opts to study the securitization of disinformation by the EU in relation to the Ukraine crisis for three reasons. Firstly, by starting in 2014 the case allows for a starting point in which disinformation as not yet securitized by the EU. Which allows this thesis to show how the securitization started and how it intensified overtime. Secondly, this case is chosen as it presents itself as a typical case of securitization. This means that this thesis is able to better understand how securitization works within a process-tracing analysis. In contrast, when studying of a deviant case, this thesis would first be committed to show whether securitization happened at all, before the extraordinary measures were taken. Which is not necessary in this case. Thirdly, the case shows a securitization process that is still ongoing and the necessity to understand how the securitization process looks is therefore very relevant. Especially because the citizens of the EU will be directly confronted with the measures adopted in order to fight disinformation right now and in the near future.

### Process-tracing

In order to analyse the reaction to the spreading of disinformation in the context of the Ukraine crisis this thesis will use the method of process-tracing as described by Beach and Pedersen. They define process-tracing as a tool which allows scholars to look further than only correlations between X and Y (Beach et al., 2013). It allows scholars to look further into the causal mechanisms that make the correlation between X and Y. Beach and his colleague make a distinction between theory-testing, theory-building and an explaining outcome process-tracing method. Both theory-testing and theory-building process-tracing methods are more theory-centric approaches while the explaining outcome method is more case-centric (see Figure 4).

This thesis will particularly employ a theory-testing process-tracing method. This type of process-tracing allows a scholar to evaluate whether a causal mechanism is present and functions as is hypothesized in the theory. In order to conduct a proper theory-testing process-tracing method this thesis will need to operationalise both the core concepts of the causal mechanism (securitization) and the context (European Union) in which the causal mechanism is expected to operate.

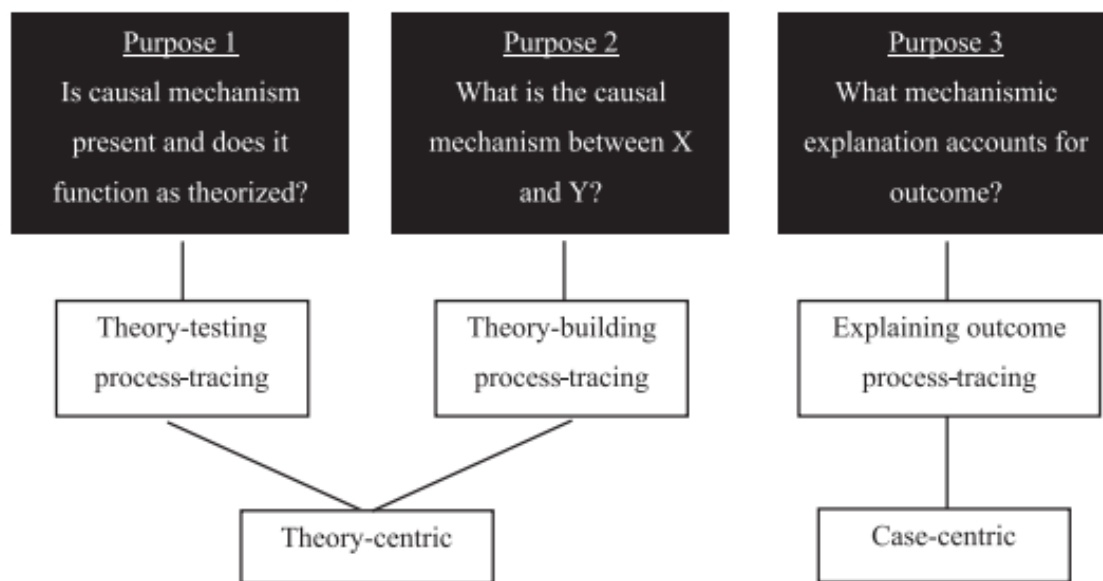


Figure 4: Process-tracing methods

Note: from Beach, D., & Pedersen, R. B. (2013). *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. (p. 12)

Theory-testing process-tracing is not without its complications and limitations. David Waldner argues that a process-tracing analysis “privileges internal validity over external validity” (Waldner, 2012). Essentially meaning that it sacrifices generalizability of its outcome in order to be able to provide more in depth explanations and theoretical inferences. This limitation is the similar to the critique heard when conducting a single case study. As mentioned before as this thesis is employing a critical theory it is not looking to make generalized inferences based on the analysis, it is simply looking to better understand the securitization process in this particular case. Another issue that needs to be addressed when conducting a process-tracing analysis is the reliability of its outcomes. In order to ensure the reliability of this thesis’s outcomes it has provided an extensive look into how it understands the theory of securitization. Furthermore, it also explains what type of evidence was used and how it fitted within the theoretical expectations. The latter is done by designing an evidence ledger which can be found below in figure 5.

### Evidence to analyse

As described in the previous chapter securitization theory sees security as something that comes into being through a discursive process. In order to properly analyse this process this thesis looks into policy documents, policy briefs, press releases and statements given by prominent leaders within the European Union from 2014 onwards. This includes approximately ten resolutions from the European Parliament, ten reports by several EU institutions, nine press releases, five newspaper articles, five survey’s from the Eurobarometer and several statements made by elite actors within the EU ranging from the President of the European Commission to individual members of the European Parliament all dating from 2014 until 2022.

By starting the analysis in 2014 this thesis is able to fully incorporate the Ukraine crisis, starting with the annexation of Crimea. This also provides a certain starting point at which

disinformation is not yet perceived as a threat. This is mainly because there is no evidence found of actors within the EU being aware of disinformation being a threat before 2014. Because the timeframe covered by this thesis is quite big the analysis is divided into two parts. Part one will start in 2014 and last until 2020. Part two will start in 2021 with the rising pressure and the gathering of Russian forces at the border of Ukraine and end in March 2022. This division allows for a more structured analysis in which a clear distinction can be made between the securitization process gaining momentum through several political events from 2014 until 2020 such as Brexit and COVID-19 and the military build-up leading towards the eventual invasion in 2021 and 2022.

### Operationalization

In order to properly conduct a theory-testing process-tracing analysis the causal mechanism designed for the process of securitization needs to be operationalized. In the case of this thesis it meant that the theory of securitization and the process of securitization as described in the theoretical framework chapter needs to be redefined in an evidence ledger in which it is made clear what evidence is expected at each step of the causal mechanism. This ledger can be found, below in Figure 5.

Identification of Potential threat	Predicted Evidence	Typical Evidence
Event interferes with 'normal' politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to see evidence of actors talking about the interference of disinformation and how everyday politics is hindered by the event.</li> </ul>	Disinformation is leading to the erosion of our shared values...
The Event requires extra-political procedures as response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to see evidence of the actor claiming that 'normal' political procedures is no longer fitting suffice for a fitting response to the event.</li> </ul>	Diplomatic calls are no longer sufficient...
Speech Act	Predicted Evidence	Type of Evidence Used
Hint towards the referent object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to see evidence of the securitizing actor to relate his/her warning of the event to the EU or its member states.</li> </ul>	<p>The EU is facing...</p> <p>This is damaging the EU...</p>
Event described as existential threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to see evidence of security grammar and/or military language when describing the event as a threat.</li> </ul>	<p>We have to learn to fight this war...</p> <p>Waging of hybrid warfare including information war...</p>

Point of no return if no action is taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to see evidence of the actor describing a situation in which the event has let to lasting unwanted change to the referent object.</li> </ul>	The erosion of democratic values, human rights and freedom of speech...
Proposed solution or 'A way out'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to see evidence of the actor giving his audience his perspective of dealing with the event.</li> </ul>	Calls for the creation of an anti-disinformation taskforce...
<b>Acceptance by Audience</b>	<b>Predicted Evidence</b>	<b>Type of Evidence Used</b>
Legitimizing the Security framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to see evidence of the audience accepting the framework and prioritizing the event as a threat</li> </ul>	Citizens feel that the EU should work on...
Acceptance of proposed Policy Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to find evidence of the audience accepting the proposed Policy Change</li> </ul>	MEPs agree on the proposed ban on....
<b>Policy Change</b>	<b>Predicted Evidence</b>	<b>Type of Evidence Used</b>
Adopting extraordinary measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to see evidence of measures targeting the event being implemented by political leaders.</li> </ul>	The EU will ban Russian News outlets...

Figure 5: Evidence Ledger

## Chapter 4: Analysis

The analysis of this thesis has been split into two parts. The first part of this analysis will illustrate the process of the securitization of disinformation. It will start in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and part one will end with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The first part of the analysis will provide a starting point to the securitization process. In the second part of the analysis the process of the securitization of disinformation will be closer looked at from 2021 until 2022. This part will focus specifically on the securitization of disinformation in the context of the build-up of tension at the Ukrainian border and the eventual invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

### Part 1: Securitization of disinformation since the annexation of the Crimea (2014 – 2020)

A year before this analysis starts, in November 2013, former president of Ukraine Yanukovich announced to suspend talks about closer trade and political relation between Ukraine and the

EU. This decision resulted in major protests filling Maidan square in Kiev. Ultimately in 2014 the protests forced the former president to flee Ukraine and new elections were held. On February 27 2014 as a result of Yanukovych fleeing the country Pro-Russian militants occupied parts of Crimea and on March 18 the Russian and Crimean leaders signed a treaty which made Crimea part of Russian territory, effectively annexing Crimea.

#### 2014: Russia and the Annexation of Crimea

In response to the annexation of Crimea the US and EU have announced several sanctions against Russian businesses and individuals. These existed mostly were mostly of an economic nature, among others targeting Russia's export of oil-related technologies and military equipment (DLA Piper, 2014). On September 5<sup>th</sup>, representatives from Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany attempt to negotiate a ceasefire. These negotiations result in the first Minsk agreement. The agreed ceasefire soon fails and the fighting persists.

*Mechanism:* After the annexation of Crimea on March 18<sup>th</sup> 2014 the EU's initial response does not mention disinformation. There are no signs of actors within the EU identifying disinformation as a potential threat to the EU itself. In fact, the EU was solely focussed on sanctions against Russia for its role in the destabilisation of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. That is until a resolution of the European Parliament (EP) on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September. In this resolution, on *'the situation in Ukraine and the state of play of EU-Russia relations'*, the EP mentions the issue of propaganda at play in Ukraine at that time. Specifically, it mentions that:

*"In this context, [the EP] emphasises the importance of establishing an inclusive national dialogue, avoiding propaganda, hate speech and rhetoric, which may further aggravate the conflict; [the EP] emphasises that an inclusive dialogue such as this should involve civil society and citizens from all the regions and minorities;"* (European Parliament, 2014).

Although the EP stresses the dangers of propaganda in this resolution the referent object in its message limits itself to Ukraine rather than the Europe or the EU as a whole. It seems that the EP does not yet identify the threatening presence of propaganda or disinformation in the Ukraine crisis in relation to itself nor does this resolution offer any indication of measures from the EU to counter Russian propaganda targeting the EU. It does show however that the EP is aware of the presence of disinformation within the Ukrainian context at this moment and of its potentially destructive effects on society. No further evidence is found, within the scope of this thesis, of the EU perceiving disinformation as a potential threat to itself until the start of 2015.

#### 2015-2016: Disinformation as part of Russian aggression

In February 2015, the countries involved in the first Minsk agreement make a second attempt to negotiate a ceasefire. This will be known as the Minsk II agreement. As with the first Minsk agreement the ceasefire fails and the fighting continues. Throughout 2016 Russia repeatedly targeted Ukraine with cyberattacks. One of these attacks, in December, caused a power blackout in Kyiv. Reports on the blackout note that the attack was aimed at physically damaging the power grid (Journal, I. J. E. R. T., 2021).

*Mechanism:* In 2015, the first mention of disinformation being part of Russian aggression potentially threatening the EU is found in a resolution of the EP on January 15<sup>th</sup>. This resolution clearly states that Russia is waging a hybrid war against Ukraine, including an information war, which poses a potential threat to the EU itself (European Parliament, 2015a). This seems to be the first sign of the EU securitizing disinformation directed at itself. It specifically mentions ‘information war’ as a very real part of the hybrid war Russia is waging against Ukraine. This frame is then also adopted by the European council on March 19<sup>th</sup> and 20 on which:

*“The European Council stresses the need to challenge Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns and invited the High Representative, in cooperation with Member States and EU institutions, to prepare (...) an action plan on strategic communication”* (European Council, 2015).

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June the EP supports the EU Council regarding its concerns with Russian disinformation and also argues that the development of analytical and monitoring capabilities in order to identify deliberately biased information spreading in the EU is necessary (European Parliament, 2015b). In their resolution on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June the EP specifically states that it:

*“calls on the Commission and the Member States to also devise a coordinated mechanism for transparency of and for the collection, monitoring and reporting of financial, political or technical assistance provided by Russia to political parties and other organisations within the EU, with a view to assessing its involvement in, and influence over, political life and public opinion in the EU and its Eastern neighbours, and to take appropriate measures.”* (European Parliament, 2015b).

In the same resolution the EP argues that it:

*“is deeply concerned with the recent tendency of the Russian state-controlled media to rewrite and reinterpret historical events (...) as well as the selective use of historical narrative for current political propaganda.”* (European Parliament, 2015b).

In the strategic action plan, designed by the EEAS, it reads that one of the three main objectives is to specifically “Increase public awareness of disinformation activities of external actors, and improve EU capacity to anticipate and respond to such activities” (EEAS, 2015). As part of this strategic action plan a strategic communications division was established, “leading the work on addressing foreign disinformation, information manipulation and interference” (EEAS, 2021). This strategic communications division is called the East StratCom taskforce and its establishment was initially finalized in September 2015.

In November 2016 the EP released a resolution on ‘EU strategic communication and counteract propaganda against it by third parties’. In this resolution the EP recognizes a growing systematic pressure on the EU and its member states to deal with propaganda which are intended to undermine objective information and democratic values and interests (European Parliament, 2016). Furthermore, this resolution reinstated the importance of EEAS’s East StratCom and also called for more adequate staffing and funding to reinforce the taskforce



(European Parliament, 2017). In the resolution the EP once more argues that disinformation and propaganda are seen as part of ‘hybrid warfare’. In December of 2016 DW reports that EP president Martin Schultz argued that “to combat the subversion of democracy that occurs when foreign interests create fake viral stories (...) a European solution was necessary” (DW, 2016).

It seems the message from both the EU Council and the EP to its audience is clear. The European Council and the EP identify that the spreading of disinformation is a potential issue to the integrity of the EU. In both cases the securitizing actor clearly positions the EU as the referent object to the audience. The idea that disinformation is identified as a security threat to the EU is further strengthened by the fact that the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) is asked to set up a strategic action plan, whereas the EEAS is responsible for both the EU’s diplomatic and security policies. As the resolution of November points out the EU identifies disinformation as being part of ‘hybrid warfare’. By arguing that disinformation and propaganda are part of a ‘hybrid warfare’ strategy the EP places disinformation well within the confines of a security issue. Also, in this resolution ‘a point of no return’ type message is embedded as the EP claims that disinformation seeking to maintain and/or increase Russia’s influence can weaken and even split the EU (European Parliament, 2016). In short, this resolution provides the audience with the referent object, the framing of the event, a point of no return and the measures needed to counter the event. Moreover, these claims clearly point towards a speech act being present within the EP which it is communicating to its audience. Schultz also engages in a securitizing speech act by giving the audience a clear warning of the consequences of disinformation left unchecked while also providing a way out by stating that the disinformation requires not just a national but a European solution.

### 2017: Aftermath of Brexit

In 2017, a new surge in the securitization of disinformation by actors within the EU can be identified. Against the backdrop of the Brexit referendum in 2016 in the UK, the EU began to see the first real consequences of spreading disinformation with the goal to undermine the unity of the EU.

*Mechanism:* on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, an open letter was published backed by several members of the EP, lawmakers and European security experts in which they criticized the ‘irresponsible weak’ stance from the high representative of the EU against the Russian ‘brutally aggressive disinformation campaign’ (Politico, 2017). Even though the EEAS had increased the size of the EAST StratCom taskforce from two to ten employees since its initial founding in 2015 voices within the EU called for an even further expansion of the East StratCom taskforce. MEP Siegfried Mureşan states that “we cannot just keep on stating intentions and work with a understaffed unit in the EEAS when our democracies are under threat” (Mureşan, 2017). Another EU official is quoted in an article of TIME stating that the task remained a “David and Goliath struggle” with the current state of the East StratCom taskforce (TIME, 2017). In the same article EP member Petras Auštrevičius goes a step further and is quoted stating that he “does not exclude a cut-off of the [Russian] broadcasters if they are really hostile against us, against our values, we should not shy away from taking even more principled measures.” (Auštrevičius, 2017).

In April a document directed to the EP states that “recent political and security-related developments have increased the focus on, and concern over, the use of biased and deceptive information as tool to exert strategic influence” (EPRS, 2017a). Just as the open letter a month earlier this document refers to the Brexit referendum as a major indication of what disinformation campaigns from Russia are capable of. The EPRS also warns the EP that disinformation campaigns could possibly be targeting the elections in France and Germany coming up in 2017 and the 2019 EP elections (EPRS, 2017b).

Back in March the European Commission (EC), in a reaction to the Brexit referendum, voiced “the desirability of defining an overall communication strategy (...) in order to encourage informed public debate and prevent attempts at disinformation” (European Commission, 2017). This message was once again repeated in the mission letter from President of the EC Jean-Claude Juncker addressed to Mariya Gabriel tasking her with the Digital Economy and Society portfolio. In the mission letter Juncker asks Gabriel to specifically look into the challenges online platforms pose for democracies with regard to fake news and disinformation (Juncker, 2017). In November the EC set up a High-level Expert Group which main task is to help develop an EU strategy in dealing with disinformation. Vice-President Frans Timmermans argued that the High-level Expert Group is needed because

*“we live in an era where the flow of information and misinformation has become almost overwhelming. That is why we need to give our citizens the tools to identify fake news, improve trust online and manage the information they receive.” (Timmermans, 2017).*

His colleague Andrus Ansip, Vice-president for the Digital Single Market, added that “we need to find a balanced approach between the freedom of expression, media pluralism and the citizen’s right to access diverse and reliable information” (Ansip, 2017).

Auštrevičius is quite clear in his message and shows his willingness to adopt measures that under normal circumstances would never be accepted. However, the communication of the EP and its supporting institutions remain focussed on the expansion of the EEAS East StratCom taskforce. Both pieces of evidence, addressed at the EP, point towards a speech act directed at the EP with the goal to make the EP aware of the danger these manipulative campaigns are becoming. Also, both the writers of the open letter and the EPRS engage in a securitizing move by telling the EP that they feel disinformation will have serious consequences for the EU if left undealt with. When looking at the evidence from the European Commission both Timmermans and Ansip seem to engage in a securitizing move as well. They both show their audience why the decision to establish a High-level expert group is necessary. What is more evident for the research of this thesis is that both Timmermans and Ansip show early hints of a possible restrictions on the sources of information accessible for EU citizens.

**Outcome:** As a result of the EC and EP’s plea to adequately back the EEAS taskforce at the start of 2017 it saw its budget consequently rise for the next couple of years. The East StratCom taskforce saw its funding increase from €1.1 million in 2018 to €3 million in 2019 and €4 million in 2020 while the total budget devoted to the EEAS Strategic Communications and



Information Analysis Division, of which the East StratCom Taskforce is a part, saw its budget rise to approximately €11.1 million in 2021 (EEAS, 2021).

It is clear from the evidence shown that the EU, by 2017, is aware that disinformation campaigns targeting the EU and its member states pose a serious threat to the shared democratic values and the democratic integrity of the EU. This translates itself to a significant increase in funding and resources of the EEAS's strategic communications division. Furthermore, 2017 also marks the first time there are traces of evidence pointing towards measures being needed that forgo normal political procedures, measures such as restricting the access to sources that the EU finds manipulative.

### 2018: The European Commission's Action plan and Code of Practice

With the European Elections coming up the next year and the scars left by Brexit still visible in Europe's political landscape a shift in securitizing actor can be identified. Where before the European Parliament seemed to be more active in the securitization of disinformation, in 2018 the European Commission (EC) is more prominently present in the evidence found.

*Mechanism:* In document titled: 'Tackling online disinformation: A European Approach' directed at the European Council and the European Parliament, the European Commission describes disinformation as "a major challenge for Europe" (European Commission, 2018a). Furthermore, it argues that:

*"Disinformation erodes trust in institutions and digital and traditional media, and harms our democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed decisions. Disinformation also often supports radical and extremist ideas and activities."* (European Commission, 2018a).

In a communication entitled 'Securing free and fair European elections' published in September 2018 the EC says that targeted disinformation are attacks which:

*"affect the integrity and fairness of the electoral process and citizens' trust in elected representatives and as such they challenge democracy itself"* (European Commission, 2018b).

In their action plan, published in December 2018 the EC once again states that:

*"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."* (European Commission, 2018c)

Although the Action plan from the EC is not necessarily aimed at the spreading of disinformation by Russia alone, The Guardian defined the presented action plan as the launch of the EU's "war against disinformation spread by the Kremlin" (The Guardian, 2018). In the article Andrus Ansip, now Vice-President of the European Commission, was quoted stating that "There is strong evidence pointing to Russia as the primary source of disinformation in Europe" (The Guardian, 2018). Although several social media platforms signed the code of conduct, security commissioner Julian King warned them stating that "The EU would not stand for an internet that is the wild west, where anything goes" (The Guardian, 2018).

In both documents the EC gives of a clear statement here that is very fitting as part of the speech act in a securitizing process. Especially because it describes what is happening if the EU does not act upon the presence of disinformation. Furthermore, the action plan shows that the EC is willing take it a step further and explore its options for regulating the content on the internet if it thinks that this is necessary to stop the spreading of disinformation. Although this might sound like a minor warning, it shows a great turnaround in the ideas on the freedom of the internet. Almost a decade earlier in 2009 the EU condemned the Chinese government for interfering with the accessibility of information for Chinese citizens (EUobserver, 2009). Now almost a decade later it seems the EU is willing to do the same thing. Some nuance is in order, as the statement of the EC does not necessarily point towards a possible direct censorship online. However, it shows the first hints of going beyond what would normally be accepted in order to deal with the perceived threat.

*Outcome:* It seems the securitizing moves by the European Commission and the European Parliament are bearing fruit among the EU citizens. The Eurobarometer survey ‘*Fake news and Disinformation online*’, which was sent out in 2018, shows that 83% of the respondents perceive fake news as a danger to democracy (Eurobarometer, 2018a). Another survey from 2018 shows that 73% of respondents are concerned about disinformation online (Eurobarometer, 2018b). It seems a vast majority of citizens in the EU are accepting the premise that disinformation poses a threat to the EU and to democracy, which is in line with the what the securitizing actors in this thesis have been arguing.

Apart from the acceptance by the audience the evidence also shows that the EC takes action in order to ensure secure and fair elections. In 2018 the EC designed the ‘*Code of Practice on Disinformation*’. This code obligates its backers to be more transparent about sponsored content, especially on political or issue-based matters (European Commission, 2018b). As part of the presented action plan the EC aims to provide 5 million to raise awareness about disinformation amongst voters and policymakers while also strengthening the security of electoral systems and processes (SWP, 2019). On top of that, in the action plan, the EC advocates for close and continues monitoring of the implementation of the code of practice by online platforms. The EC also gives of a warning that if the code is not followed as desired it may explore further regulatory actions (European Commission, 2018c).

As a result of the security discourse surrounding the disinformation the EC took actions to promote adequate changes in online platforms’ conduct, effectively making these platforms more responsible for the information safety of their users. By emphasising that the EC is willing to take it a step further if the code of practice is not adhered to properly, it puts pressure on its signatories to follow the guidelines. Furthermore, the monitoring of the implementation of the code of practice requires its signatories to share information and data on how the platform operates, which was not necessary before. This in turn shows how seriously the EC is taking disinformation online.

### 2019: The European Parliamentary Elections

In 2019 the process of the securitization of disinformation further unfolds and repeats itself. It seems that the overall securitizing moves made by the actors followed in this analysis are especially aimed at stressing the threat to European Parliamentary elections in May of 2019.

*Mechanism:* In January the EP reiterates that Russia is the main source of disinformation in Europe and recommends the European Council and the European Commission to still “raise awareness about Russia’s disinformation campaigns” (European Parliament, 2019a). Also, in 2019 a study titled: ‘*Disinformation and propaganda – impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and it’s member states*’ gets published which was commissioned by the EP’s Policy Department for Civil Liberties and the Committee on Civil Liberties. In the abstract it says that disinformation is a “threat to human rights, democracy and the rule of law.” (European Parliament, 2019b). This same discourse can be identified in a briefing addressed to the EP in February 2019. In this briefing it reads that “the visibility of disinformation as a tool to undermine democracies has increased in the context of Russia’s hybrid war against Ukraine” (EPRS, 2019).

Later that year on October the 2<sup>nd</sup> the EP moves towards a motion for ‘*a resolution on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic elections*’. In this motion the EP gives off a clear message by stating that the amount of disinformation cases has doubled in the last period since 2018 rising from 434 cases to 998 cases. Furthermore, the EP calls on the European Commission and the High Representative to make the fight against disinformation a central foreign policy objective and to explore legislative and non-legislative actions to counter disinformation online (European Parliament, 2019c).

The securitizing move can be identified in the recommendation by the EP. It gives a strong message to the audience as it specifically highlights the risk of disinformation in relation to free and fair democratic elections. Another interesting piece of evidence is the need for a study that investigates the impact of disinformation in the EU. This points towards a certain acceptance of the framework established within the EU seeing disinformation as a threat. Furthermore, in the first pages of the published work the constructed security discourse that has been applied to disinformation in the years before resonates once again. It seems the EP is stepping up their securitizing move in the second half of the year by specifically advocating that the handling of disinformation should be a priority for the EC and the High Representative’s foreign policy in its motion on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October.

*Outcome:* Back in 2018 only 40% of the respondents were satisfied with the fight against disinformation according to a Eurobarometer survey, in 2019 this increased to 48% (Eurobarometer, 2019). Although this shows an increase of 8% it still means that less than half of the respondents felt that the disinformation is dealt with appropriately. Despite the increase of 8 % the majority of the respondents is not satisfied with how the EU is handling the spreading of disinformation. However, some caution is needed as the data from these surveys does not show whether respondents are of the opinion that the EU is not doing enough or too much. Still, when taking in mind to the earlier found evidence that 83% of respondents saw fake news as a danger and 73% of respondents were concerned about disinformation in 2018, it is not entirely unrealistic to assume that this means that in 2019 less than half the respondent found that the EU is not doing enough. It seems the respondents are echoing the call of the EP to do more in the fight against disinformation, which point towards a certain acceptance of the speech-act.

## 2020: Disinformation and COVID-19

Although this thesis's primary focus is on the securitization of disinformation in relation to the Ukraine crisis it cannot conduct a proper analysis without mentioning the momentum the securitization of disinformation gained as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

*Mechanism:* Although the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing research regarding disinformation and its sources revealed that Russia is not the only perpetrator, Russia's disinformation campaigns are identified by the European Commission as the EU's biggest threat (Legucka, 2020). To provide with a concrete example: as of March 2020 the East StratCom Taskforce has identified over 110 cases of Covid related disinformation stemming from Russia alone (EUvsDisinfo, 2020). When talking about these cases the EP argues that with disinformation stemming from external actors "the aim is political, to undermine the European Union or create political shifts." (European Parliament, 2020a).

In a press release on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, on the EU strengthening its actions against disinformation, the High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell stating the warning that: "*Disinformation in times of the coronavirus can Kill.*" (Borrell, 2020). He continues with:

*"We have a duty to protect our citizens by making them aware of false information, and expose the actors responsible for engaging in such practices."* (Borrell, 2020).

After which he makes a closing remark:

*"(...) targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns are a recognised weapon of state and non-state actors, the European union is increasing its activities and capabilities in this fight."* (Borrell, 2020).

Once more the EP is stepping up its game when trying to convince its audience that disinformation is a serious threat. In its communication around disinformation instead of 'tackling' or 'countering' disinformation the EP shifts its vocabulary to 'fighting' disinformation (European Parliament, 2020b). The EP even describes disinformation as a 'virus of Covid-19', using the shared experience of living in a pandemic to get a securitized message across. This securitizing move by Vice-President Borrell is coherent with the EU's communication surrounding disinformation. He even argues that disinformation can 'kill'. Although most Members of the European Parliament were supportive of the actions undertaken by the EC with some even arguing for tougher legislation others voiced their concern over the potential impact on the freedom of speech (European Parliament, 2020c).

*Mechanism:* On the 18<sup>th</sup> of June the European Parliament set up a special committee on 'Foreign Interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, Including Disinformation' (INGE). INGE was created to:

*"provide a long-term approach to addressing evidence of foreign interference in democratic institutions and processes of the EU and its Member States, not only in the run-up to all major national and European*

*elections but in a sustained manner across the EU, under a myriad of forms, including disinformation campaigns” (European Parliament, 2020d).*

The document further expresses the EP’s idea that foreign interference, including disinformation campaigns, are a systematic threat that needs to be dealt with. In the document it reads that:

*“Foreign interference in democratic processes and institutions represents a systematic pattern that has been recurring over recent years; whereas foreign interference is used in combination with economic and military pressure to harm European Unity” (European Parliament, 2020d).*

The special committee INGE is found responsible for, among others, the identification of possible areas which:

*“would require legislative and non-legislative actions which can result in intervention by social media platforms with the aim of (...) reviewing algorithms in order to make them as transparent as possible, (...) and closing down accounts of persons engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour online or illegal activities aimed at the systematic undermining of democratic processes (...) while not compromising on freedom of expression.” (European Parliament, 2020d).*

The formulation of this responsibility is interesting in two ways. Firstly, it highlights the willingness of EU institutions to explore legislative measure to allow social media platforms to crack down on the spreading of disinformation online, something that has been identified before in this analysis. Secondly, it also shows that the EP is willing to explore ways to make algorithms more transparent and to gain insight in the banning accounts of persons that are found to undermine democratic processes, while still upholding freedom of expression online.

## Part 2: Securitization of disinformation in the Ukraine crisis (2021 – 2022)

Throughout the years since the annexation of the Crimea the conflict in Ukraine has been slumbering with attempts at a ceasefire seeing no success as skirmishes between separatist movements and the Ukrainian military were present from 2014 onwards. However, in the next part of this analysis these tensions will reach a new boiling point and eventually will spill-over resulting in a war on the European continent.

### 2021: Tensions are rising

In March 2021 the EU’s ability to respond to hybrid threats, including the spreading of disinformation, where at the centre of debate. While the EU is slowly getting the COVID-19 pandemic under control it is already faced a new challenge as Russia moved its troops closer to the Ukrainian border.

*Mechanism:* In a meeting between MEPs that are part of INGE Josep Borrell, High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission, the MEPs asked Borrell which concrete steps were taken against the Russian disinformation campaigns (European Parliament, 2021a). When asked whether the EU has enough resources to counter disinformation campaigns Borrell answers with:

*“We have a war now. We have to learn how to fight this war, get necessary tools. Compared to what our adversaries have, we have very little.”* (Borrell, 2021).

In April of 2021 a report was published on ‘*The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*’. The report was requested by the EPs subcommittee on Human Rights. In the report disinformation is seen as threatening to “freedom of thought, the right to privacy and the right to democratic participation” (Colomina, Margalef, & Youngs, 2021).

Despite the big focus on the COVID-19 pandemic the military build-up of Russia around Ukraine did not go unnoticed by the EU. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of April, in a resolution on ‘*Russia, the case of Navalny, the military build-up on Ukraine’s border and Russian attacks in the Czech Republic*’, the EP condemns Russia’s ongoing aggression Ukraine in particular and Europe at large. The resolution specifically reads that the EP condemns Russia’s:

*“Hostile behaviour towards and outright attacks on EU Member States and societies manifested, inter alia, through interference in election processes, the use of disinformation, deep fakes, malicious cyber-attacks and chemical weapons”* (European Parliament, 2021b).

Furthermore, the resolutions also:

*“Condemns propaganda and disinformation in the Russian press and its malicious spread to the EU, as well as the work of Russian troll farms, especially those currently defaming the Czech Republic”* (European Parliament, 2021b).

And in the resolution the EP:

*“Reiterates that unity among EU Member States is the best policy to deter Russia from carrying out destabilising and subversive actions in Europe; (...) considers that the EU should seek further cooperation with like-minded partners, in particular NATO and the US, to use all means available at international level to effectively counter Russia’s continued interferences, ever-more aggressive disinformation campaigns and gross violations of international law that threaten security and stability in Europe”* (European Parliament, 2021b).

In June Raphaël Glucksmann, Chair of INGE, gave a statement on the EU’s current efforts to counter disinformation. In his statement he says that:

*“The democratic debate gets misdirected by actors hostile to the EU. These operations eventually can impact on the outcome of elections. The EU should guard itself against disinformation and ensure that its democratic structures remain inviolable.”* (Glucksmann, 2021).

Furthermore, he adds that the EU action plan against disinformation, adopted back in 2018, is still relevant and showing promise, however it has yet to reach all its goals. On the East



StratCom Taskforce he notes that its resources are not allowing it to effectively react to threats (Glucksmann, 2021). On the code of Practice he notes that:

*“cooperation with the online platforms cannot continue on a voluntary basis or by informal dialogue only. The cooperation between the EU institutions and the online platforms has to be governed by protocol. The ongoing revision of the Code of Practice should equally define the responsibilities of each stakeholder in the fight against disinformation”* (Glucksmann, 2021).

He also reiterates that the EU should ‘guard’ itself and that in order to do so more resources and legislation are needed.

In December 2021, when the tension on the Ukrainian border were at a new high the EP released a new resolution on the situation. In it the EP identifies that:

*“the recent movements of Russian troops near the Ukrainian border have been matched by enhanced interference and disinformation campaigns by Russian proxies and media outlets in the EU, Ukraine and Russia itself”* (European Parliament, 2021d).

And that:

*“Russian military build-ups also form part of a wider strategy, which also includes elements of hybrid warfare, waged by Russia against the European Union and its likeminded partners , by causing chaos and confusion in its neighbourhoods, at its borders and within the European Union; reiterates that Russia is using a confluence of threats, such as military, digital, energy and disinformation, taking advantage of the open system of the EU to weaken it”* (European Parliament, 2021d).

By arguing that the EU faces ‘a war now’ and that it needs to learn how to ‘fight this war’ Borrell is adding another layer to the speech act identified before. Whereas disinformation was first seen as something that needs to be ‘countered’ and later to be ‘fought’ the spreading of disinformation is now described as a ‘war’. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that actors whom are behind the spreading of disinformation are referred to as ‘adversaries’ by Borrell. This is interesting because the message given is two-fold. First off, the EU is facing multiple sources of disinformation in this so called ‘war’ and secondly, they are now all branded as adversaries to the EU. Borrell also provides the MEPs with a warning that the resources directed at countering the spreading of disinformation are not enough to effectively counter disinformation. It seems Borrell, in a bid to gain more resources for countering the spreading of disinformation, is trying to convince the MEPs that it is no longer a fight but rather a war that the EU is facing.

In April, the EP once more identifies disinformation as a threat in the context of Russia’s aggression aimed at Ukraine and the EU. Furthermore, it claims that the spreading of

disinformation must be seen as an attack on European societies. This fits the security framework that the EP has been building around the spreading of disinformation. The resolution also provides a way out by arguing that unity between the EU Member States is the best deterrent and that the EU should try to work together with NATO and the US. Noteworthy in this resolution is the EPs proposed ‘way out’. The EP argues that the EU is calling for its partners to use ‘all means available at the international level to counter Russia’s interference, and ever-more aggressive disinformation campaigns’.

Glucksmann, in his statement, engages in a securitizing move which is coherent with the securitizing move of other actors within the EU. He repeats the danger of disinformation regarding democracies and democratic processes. He also reiterates that the EU should ‘guard’ itself and that in order to do so more resources and legislation is needed.

In its resolution from December the EP once again repeats the idea that disinformation campaigns are to be seen as part of a larger strategy in Russian warfare. Furthermore, it echo’s the EU’s warning that disinformation is affecting the stability of the region and of the EU itself.

*Outcome:* Glucksmann’s argument that the EU needs to look into more regulatory alternatives to the Code of Practice, which is based on voluntary cooperation from online platforms, is also echoed in the 2021 survey of the Eurobarometer. In this survey 32% of respondents see the defence of the value of democracy as a top priority for the EP, closely followed by the freedom of speech (27%) (Eurobarometer, 2021). This is interesting as it shows that among respondents protecting democracy gets slightly higher priority than the freedom of speech, which is in line with the shift identified within the EU itself.

In May 2021, the European Commission adopted its ‘*guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation*’. This guidance was aimed at enforcing the EU’s response to the spreading of disinformation. It underlines the importance of working together with civil society when addressing the challenge of dealing with disinformation (European Commission, 2021). The EC sees that supporting civil society organisations deal with disinformation is:

*“of paramount importance since the misinformation and disinformation on the pandemic created confusion and undermined trust in public health on the one hand and, on the other hand, could fuel tensions and violence in already fragile contexts”* (European Commission, 2021).

In this message disinformation is identified as a cause for rising tensions and looming violence by the EC. In order to support civil society organisation the EU starts to fund projects through the ‘*instrument contributing to Stability and Peace*’. These projects are both aimed at disinformation in relation to COVID-19 but also at countering disinformation in Ukraine.

On June the 6<sup>th</sup> Glucksmann’s call for more resources for the measures against disinformation are heeded by members of the EP. In a debate with the EU’s foreign policy chief a majority of the EP was in favour of providing more funding towards measures against disinformation, while also arguing for countermeasures including sanctions against actors found responsible for disinformation campaigns (European Parliament, 2021c).



It is interesting to see that the EU is no longer only focussed on countering disinformation in its own territory but also in other states outside the EU. Apart from that, the fact that projects on countering disinformation fall under the ‘instrument contributing to Stability and Peace’ shows how disinformation is seen as a serious threat by the EU. Furthermore, the evidence showing that a majority of the EP is in favour of sanctions against actors engaging in disinformation campaigns is noteworthy. It is the first time the EU is considering measures aimed at making disinformation campaigns costly for the actors behind the campaigns, instead of only countering disinformation.

### 2022: War in Europe

Despite multiple warnings from the EU that any aggression will come at a price Russia kept moving troops towards the Ukrainian border throughout the first two months of 2022. Until on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, when Putin announced that he had ordered his troops to enter Ukrainian territory.

*Mechanism:* Against the backdrop of the build-up leading towards the invasion the INGE committee concluded and presented its final report on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January. The report on its findings accumulating 12 months of research and hearings. In this report INGE argues that the EU should build up a sanction regime against disinformation, while legislation should be implemented that tighten the control on social media platforms, which are identified to serve as vehicles for foreign interference (European Parliament, 2022a). At the presentation of the report Andreas Schieder, negotiator in INGE said that:

*“The situation is much worse than we originally expected. Russia, China and other authoritarian states are trying to weaken European Democracies from within. They use social media companies, economic pressure and even European political parties (...) to destabilize our model of liberal open democracy” (Schieder, 2022).*

He later added :

*“Therefore we need more EU action to counter interference campaigns that spread anti-EU sentiment and tries to destabilize the whole region” (Schieder, 2022).*

Raphaël Glucksmann adds to Schieder’s securitizing move by stating that:

*“the report highlights the level of attacks an threats the EU is facing. Foreign hostile actors have declared a hybrid warfare on the Union and its Member States. The report makes series of important recommendations to protect our democracies and ensures European sovereignty. We call on the Commission and the Council to implement them without losing time” (Glucksmann, 2022)*

Another member of the INGE committee, Sandra Kalniete, adds that disinformation should be seen as a creature: *“where the online platforms and infrastructure are the nervous system and the money – it’s a blood circulation system.” (Kalniete, 2022).* According to her the proposed

measures against disinformation: *“will never kill the creature completely, but we can certainly make it weaker and less dominant in our information space.”* (Kalniete, 2022).

After Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup> President of the EC, Ursula von der Leyen, made a statement on further measures against Russia. In this statement she argued that:

*“in another unprecedented step, we will ban in the EU the Kremlin’s media machine. The state-owned Russia Today and Sputnik, as well as their subsidiaries will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin’s war and to sow division in our Union. So we are developing tools to ban their toxic and harmful disinformation in Europe.”* (Von der Leyen, 2022).

The decision to ban Moscow related media outlets also found backlash from the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ). In a response to the EU’s decision Ricardo Gutiérrez, General Secretary of EFJ, stated that:

*“We believe the EU has no right to grant or withdraw broadcasting licences. This is an exclusive competence of the states. In our liberal democracies, it is independent regulators, never the government, that are allowed to manage the allocation of licences. The EU’s decision is a complete break with these democratic guarantees. For the first time in modern history, Western European governments are banning media.”* (Gutiérrez, 2022).

The EFJ is not alone in its objection to the Russian media ban. The International Press Institute (IPI) also finds issue with the banning of Russian media outlets and states that:

*“even during times of information warfare, it remains true that the best way to counter state-sponsored disinformation is not through broadcast bans or censorship (...). Our focus should therefore be on investing in sustainable and long-term defence mechanisms against all forms of propaganda.”* (IPI, 2022).

Both the EFJ and the IPI are of the opinion that by banning Russian media outlets the EU is in violation with one of its core values, the freedom of expression. In a debate on the topic Josep Borrell, in reaction to this critique, argues that:

*“They are not independent media, they are assets, they are weapons, in the Kremlin’s manipulation ecosystem. We are not trying to decide what is true and what is false. (...) but we have to focus on foreign actors who intentionally, in a coordinated manner, try to manipulate our information environment”* (Borrell, 2022).

Out of Borrell’s response it can be concluded that the EU is not willing to back down on its promise to ban Russian news media despite its critique.

Schieder engages in a speech act by first repeating the warning heard before of the EU being threatened by the disinformation campaigns from external authoritarian states. He also provides the audience with a solution. He advocates for more EU action and measures in order to stop

the spreading of disinformation. He then closes with a ‘point of no return’ by arguing that disinformation campaigns try to destabilize the whole region. Gluckmann’s securitizing move is coherent with the security framework created around disinformation. What is interesting is that he claims that hostile actors have ‘declared a hybrid warfare’ which is a step up from what is seen before where the spreading of disinformation in relation to the EU is seen as a mere attack rather than declared warfare on the EU. He also provides the same warning as before stating that the EU needs to protect its democracies.

The statement by Ursula von der Leyen shows that, against the backdrop of the ongoing securitization of disinformation and the recent invasion in Ukraine the EU is willing to take measures to stop the spreading of disinformation a step further by banning certain media outlets closely related to Russia. It also seems that the EU is willing to make compromises on the freedom of expression in its fight against disinformation. The critiques heard in reaction to the statement by Von der Leyen are interesting as it is the first time within the scope of this thesis, that there are institutions openly criticising the measures the EU is taking in their struggle to counter disinformation.

*Outcome:* On the 9<sup>th</sup> of March the EP, in a resolution, welcomes the EU-wide ban on Russian propaganda and calls for further measures in this regard (European Parliament, 2022b). A month later on the 23<sup>th</sup> of April the European Council and the European Parliament reach a provisional agreement on the Digital Service Act (DSA). The DSA is essentially a set of regulations which are aimed to force large tech companies to moderate the content on online platforms (Euronews, 2022). The DSA obliges tech companies to take action against disinformation or election manipulation while also implementing a crisis response mechanism in order to properly respond to waves of disinformation in relation to public health or security crisis such as a pandemic or war (European Commission, 2022b).

The proposed DSA seems to find approval among the audience. In a survey on ‘*Democracy in the EU*’ in 2020, 80% the respondents feel that online platform’s should adhere to the same rules as traditional media during the pre-election period, which is an increase of 4% compared to 2018 (Eurobarometer, 2020). This is in line with what the EU is proposing by pushing for a mandatory alternative for the Code of Practice, created back in 2018, which led to the eventual provisional agreement on the DSA in 2022.

## Discussion

All pieces of evidence, presented in the analysis above, show a larger securitization process being at play here. In this larger process each securitization move and outcome adds up to a much larger process of securitization.

In the evidence found in the 2014 the actors within the EU are slowly starting to identify that disinformation is playing a role in the early stages of the Ukraine crisis. However, it takes until 2015 before the securitizing actors within the EU start to perceive disinformation as a threat to the EU itself. Once the securitizing actors such as the EP and the EC identify disinformation as a threat to the EU they start to engage in a speech-act. The message emitted through the speech-act remains largely the same throughout the analysis. At its core the securitizing actors keep repeating the message that the EU is suffering from the spreading of disinformation and

that its core democratic values such as free and fair elections are targeted by malicious outside forces thought disinformation campaigns and that something needs to be done. All different aspects of the speech-act as are identified in the theoretical framework can be identified in this message.

Albeit that the content of the speech-act remains largely the same, its intensity changes drastically as the securitization process progresses from 2014 onwards. Where at first securitizing actors '*stress the need to challenge*' later they '*have to learn and fight this war*'. This change in intensity seems to come paired with an increase in intrusiveness of the measures proposed by the securitizing actors. Where at first the proposed and later implemented code of conduct, which aimed at social media platforms, was based on voluntary commitment by these platforms the code of conduct was later backed with legislative and regulatory measures to ensure online platforms adhered to it. It could be argued that the increased intensity of the entire securitization process eventually allowed the EU to effectively ban Russian media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to better understand the EU's response to the spreading of disinformation from the start of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 up until the banning of Russian media in 2022. Using the Copenhagen school's securitization theory a causal mechanism of securitization was designed. This causal mechanism was then used to analyse the securitization of disinformation in the EU.

In the first part of the analysis, starting from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ending with the outbreak of a global pandemic in 2020, the analysis has shown that disinformation has gained a lot of attention from several elite actors within the EU. Securitizing actors that are actively engaging in securitizing moves are identified as the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council. Not only did these institutions show signs of actively identifying disinformation as a potential threat they also engaged in a speech act to ensure its audiences of the necessity of the implementation of measures in reaction to the spreading of disinformation. What this analysis has also shown is that over time the referent object remained the same and the lasting effects on the referent object were repeated over and over. However, this analysis did see a change in the vocabulary used by the elite actors when discussing disinformation. At first the measures were needed to 'counter' disinformation while in 2020 the EU institutions stressed the need for measures by claiming a need to 'fight' disinformation. Also, the presented 'solution or 'way out' kept changing. At first a small taskforce was established which saw the number of identified disinformation cases targeting the EU rise and consequently its budget and resources have risen each year since its founding. Later the securitizing actors within the EU voiced their willingness to go further and implement more principled measures. Furthermore, while the EC first aimed for voluntary cooperation from information platforms, with its action plan and its code of practice, it later seemed willing to also explore regulatory measures if needed. Which ultimately led to the establishment of a special committee specifically tasked to explore further legislative and non-legislative measures to counter the spreading of disinformation. The first part of the analysis shows that the securitization of disinformation by the EU has gained more momentum surrounding each

of the bigger political events in the EU the last couple of years. While the annexation of Crimea marked the first time disinformation was on the radar in the EU later events such as the upcoming European Elections, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic provided new momentum to the securitization process.

In the second part of the analysis it is shown that the securitization process sped up once more as the tensions around the situation in Ukraine grew. This came with a shift in vocabulary where disinformation was not just something the EU was just ‘fighting’ against. Instead disinformation was seen as ‘warfare’ which was ‘declared’ by hostile actors. Furthermore, the second part of the analysis also shows the EU pushed forwards on its promise to explore regulatory measures to counter the spreading of disinformation. This resulted in the eventual DSA and the ban on Russian state media in the EU.

Concerning the changing perception of the audience this thesis is only able to make assumptions rather than strong conclusions as the data gathered does not encompass the whole timespan of the analysis. In order to properly analyse whether the audience accepts the framework data should be found which spans the whole timeframe. What can be deduced from the data combined with the acceptance of most of the measures proposed by the elite securitizing actors is that the securitizing actors in the analysis were able to successfully construct a security framework around disinformation. As most measures were met with support, while some people in the EU even though the EU was not doing enough in its struggle with disinformation.

This thesis is not without its shortcomings. As mentioned before the data gathered from the Eurobarometer surveys is not inclusive enough to cover the entire timeframe. Secondly, it would further strengthen the conclusions drawn from the evidence if interviews with the securitizing actors and institutions within the EU responsible for the implementation of the proposed measures were conducted and added. Even though the chosen method of process-tracing does not specifically require these to be added, it is believed that possible interviews would have strengthened the conclusion from this thesis. Another shortcoming of this thesis is the fact that its analysis was conducted so shortly after the start of the invasion which saw a new rise in intensity of the securitizing move. It could be argued that securitization process is far from over which indicates that the analysis in this thesis only partially covers the process rather than the process as a whole. Another limitation of this thesis is its lack of a generalizable conclusions. However, as has been mentioned extensively before, the aim of this thesis is not to make general claims about securitization process but rather to provide insight in the process in this particular case.

Despite its limitations, this thesis has shown that the Copenhagen schools’ theory of securitization can be used understand the EU’s reaction to the spreading of disinformation in relation to the Ukrainian crisis. Moreover, It has shown that the securitization process can be understood as a causal mechanism when accepting that at the core of the theory there lies the question of “Who can ‘do’ or ‘speak’ security successfully, on what issues, under which conditions and with what effects?” (Lindgren, 2018). It has also shown that, despite the changes in the content of the securitizing move and outcome, the larger securitization process follows a distinct pathway in the analysed case. Which is also in line with what Guzzini theorised. He

argued that securitization can be used to explain why certain moves can be expected in securitizing issues (...) and why certain action-complexes can then follow (Guzzini, 2011). In this thesis, this pathway is identified as the identification of the issue as a threat by an elite actor, followed by the elite actor engaging in a speech act, this securitizing move is then successful when it either leads to policy change or when it is accepted by the audience. Some caution is needed however as these findings are limited to the case analysed in this thesis. Further research into securitization as a causal mechanism is needed before this scientific contribution can be accepted in more cases.

Apart from the theoretical implications, this thesis also hopes to contribute to a better understanding of how security is created for societies at large. By providing a deep dive into the innerworkings of the securitization process for societal actors such as human rights organisations or political individuals. Even though the outcome of this thesis does not directly allow for generalizable conclusions regarding the securitization of other political issues, it does allow for a deeper understanding of how this process works and the possible pathway it may follow in the future.

Looking towards the future, the outcome of the analysis still holds some puzzling findings. It is noteworthy that the IPI and the EFJ are disproving of the decision to ban Russian news media in the EU despite the security framework. As the analysis has shown, those disproving of the decision advocated other measures instead. This could hint towards the securitizing framework not being completely successful. Furthermore, it highlights the tension that the EU must have felt between fighting disinformation and the freedom of expression. It would be truly interesting to further study how the friction between freedom of speech and protection from disinformation develops going forward in relation to the conflict in Ukraine, and in EU politics as a whole.



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