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COUNTERING DISINFORMATION: SPAIN'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN PROTECTING NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract

Purpose. This article examines Spain's public diplomacy measures aimed at countering disinformation and safeguarding national security. It critically assesses whether Spain's current reliance on state-led institutions, multilateral cooperation, and civil society initiatives is adequate for addressing contemporary foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

Design/methodology/approach. The study employs a qualitative research design based on document and policy analysis of open-access empirical reports, national strategic documents, and peer-reviewed literature published between 2017 and 2025. The methodology includes triangulation of public opinion survey data and a comparative evaluation of institutional responses. In addition, two descriptive quantitative techniques – trend comparison and cross-national benchmarking – are applied using publicly available survey indicators.

Findings. The findings indicate that disinformation represents a major concern for Spanish society, with approximately 70–83% of respondents identifying it as a significant threat, depending on the year and data source. While Spain demonstrates a degree of domestic resilience through established public diplomacy mechanisms, persistent vulnerabilities remain. These vulnerabilities are intensified by social media dynamics, AI-enhanced disinformation, and crisis-driven amplification effects. Existing tools show strengths in detection and awareness-raising but face limitations related to the speed of strategic communication, regulatory clarity, and long-term investment in digital literacy.

Originality. The article contributes to the literature on public diplomacy and national security by providing a comprehensive, up-to-date assessment of Spain's counter-disinformation framework. By integrating institutional analysis with public opinion data and cross-national benchmarks, the study offers a nuanced evaluation of public diplomacy effectiveness in the context of evolving information threats.

Keywords: public diplomacy, misinformation, national security, information disorder.

Introduction

The fast-growing, global risk posed by disinformation threatens individual belief systems by reducing the perceived value of those who are responsible for enforcing rules and regulations. Because disinformation can mislead individuals about what constitutes a proper action, it has a negative impact on national security. In Spain, many of the country's elections, public health systems, and governmental emergency response plans have been the subjects of numerous large-scale disinformation campaigns. Recently, both Spain and the EU have taken action to combat disinformation. This topic is urgent

because modern information operations use hybrid tactics such as bots, manipulated video, and algorithmic amplification that can reach citizens faster than official responses. Recent empirical work suggests that Spaniards perceive disinformation as a major problem, with surveys indicating 70–83% expressing concern or considering it a threat to democracy (Disinfo.eu, 2023; UC3M SmartVote, 2025). These perceptions create both a policy imperative and a test bed for public diplomacy instruments aimed at external audiences and at protecting the national information environment.

The object of the study is Spain's public diplomacy apparatus operating to protect national security

in the information domain. The purpose is to evaluate whether Spain's current measures are sufficient and propose prioritized improvements. The study uses documentary analysis of policy and open reports, triangulates public opinion figures from Eurobarometer, Reuters, UC3M, Iberifier, and Disinfo.eu, and applies qualitative comparative analysis to institutional tools. The working hypothesis is that Spain has developed important detection and awareness capabilities, but its public diplomacy still risks being reactive and under-resourced compared with the speed and scale of modern disinformation. This article tests that hypothesis by comparing measurable public concerns and institutional outputs and by reviewing best-practice proposals from international agencies (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; OECD, 2024).

Literature review

The study builds on both theoretical foundations of information disorder and applied studies on disinformation policy. The conceptual framework draws on Wardle and Derakhshan's taxonomy of information disorder, which distinguishes misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, providing a foundation for designing responses (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) show that false political news spreads faster and farther than true news, a mechanism directly relevant to Spain's viral political hoaxes. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) and Marwick and Lewis (2017) analyze how network structures, platform incentives, and manipulation tactics produce fertile ground for disinformation, highlighting lessons applicable to Spain's social media landscape.

The influence of disinformation extends beyond voting behavior and continues to sap institutional trust and civic engagement. In this respect, Ferrara (2020) informs us that social media's algorithmic amplification can very well lead to certain demographic groups being exposed to politically biased content that is very much a part of Spain's regionalized political context with the existence of diverse local media ecosystems in the different autonomous communities. Moreover, Bovet and Makse (2019) point out that the use of bots and inauthentic accounts in coordinated campaigns serves to enlarge false narratives, thus generating a perception of social consensus that might deceive common people. The acceptance of these assertions is highly pertinent for Spain, where the political polarization masking regional differences would only serve to multiply the impact of misinformation that goes viral.

European policy frameworks and platform regulations are critical for understanding Spain's transnational response, including the EEAS rapid alert system and the EU Special Report on disinformation (EEAS, 2023; EUvsDisinfo, 2023). Fact-checking, media literacy, and public diplomacy in Spain are thoroughly examined in national case studies like Disinfo.eu's "Disinformation landscape in Spain" and OficinaC's "Disinformation in the digital age" (OficinaC, 2023; IBERIFIER, 2024). The significance of considering some misinformation as a national-security threat is highlighted by multilateral and security viewpoints from NATO StratCom and Hybrid CoE publications (Hybrid CoE, 2025). OECD and ENISA policy proposals prioritize information integrity frameworks, platform regulation, and whole-of-society strategies (OECD, 2024; ENISA, 2023).

Longitudinal studies have also been conducted on many of the ways in which media literacy campaigns and fact-checking networks are working in Spain. One example of this is the recent evaluation in 2023 of Disinfo.eu's programming, which found that when citizens were exposed to messages about pre-bunking multiple times, their chances of falling for false claims dropped by as much as 20% compared to those who did not engage in pre-bunking efforts. This study demonstrated the benefits of conducting sustained interventions to address disinformation rather than relying on reactive strategies. Moreover, the framework for Public Diplomacy is expanding, with many researchers (Cuenca, 2022; López, 2023) indicating how Spain's response to disinformation encompasses both domestic protective strategies and proactive outreach strategies used to combat FIMI campaigns originating abroad (and often from geopolitical actors).

Although prior studies are extensive, fewer works synthesize Spain's public diplomacy instruments specifically as national-security tools. This article fills that gap by integrating public opinion data, Spanish institutional initiatives (Forum against Disinformation, DSN publications), and EU/NATO coordination results, providing a novel perspective on policy design and evaluation.

Moreover, bringing together the theoretical models of information disorder with empirical policy studies reveals the intricacy of Spain's institutional ecosystem. The scholars agree that the public diplomacy measures' efficiency is determined not just by the technical aspect of detecting and responding quickly but also by the socio-cultural acceptance of the narratives as correct. In addition, the multilingual situation in Spain (Spanish, Catalan, Basque,

Galician) further complicates matters because it requires specific campaigns to be developed for different regions. Cross-national research in other EU states (like Germany, France, and Italy) supports the view that such changes lead to more active participation and higher trust of the local populace, which in turn strengthens the thesis that Spain's multi-layered strategy—of combining EU coordination, national frameworks, and civil-society networks—is conceptually sound but operationally very tricky.

There are marked gaps in the scientific literature about how much corrective measures over the course of many years have an impact on actual people's behavior. A substantial amount of research shows that corrective measures can have a measurable effect on people's belief in misinformation in the short run through fact-checking and media literacy. However, there is little data to support the idea that reduction in misleading misinformation was sustained over longer time frames for more than one year. This is especially important for Spain, where there have been consistent cycles of electoral misinformation and a growing aesthetic to inform people through influencer campaigns. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods of institutional analysis and public opinion tracking will lead to understanding how long-term effective Spain is at countering misinformation, and how those programs fit within a broader national security strategy.

Methodology

Documents from various Spanish departments, as well as from the European Union, NGOs and analysis groups (such as Hybrid CoE and Data & Society), were used for documentary analysis. Documents were classified based on their content: institutional type, legal instruments, operational tools and public diplomacy.

In addition to the documentary analysis, triangulation across multiple sources was utilized for the purpose of establishing reliable results from the analysis. Triangulation allowed researchers to validate their findings by comparing information from different types of documents and organizations, including European Union publications and independent analyses by non-governmental organizations. For example, annual reports prepared by DSN were compared to rapid-response alerts posted by EEAS and media monitoring reports published by Disinfo.eu. Through this triangulation process, formalized institutional frameworks as well as informal networks of collaboration could be identified. Formalized frameworks

and networks provide critical support for rapid-response initiatives, yet few formalized frameworks and networks are available through public sources.

The public opinion and survey data provided the number of people directed to disinformation (and the geographic location of each individual). Source material was collected from four locations: Reuters Institute's country profiles, Disinfo.eu country profiles, Eurobarometer reports, and SmartVote/UC3M.

The evaluated the data on a four-state scale. Two descriptive tables and two graphic figures were developed based solely on the source materials without any added data.

To compare the Spanish institutional action against disinformation with current recommendations, the assessment used criteria from the recommendations by the OECD and Hybrid CoE related to the following state-of-the-art capabilities: speed of detection, response, engagement with platforms, outreach to the public, and legal clarity. In a thorough examination of disinformation Spain's measures to counteract them, the analysis also included the discussion of the public diplomacy of the country in terms of their pros and cons and their link with the national-security aspects of the measures taken.

The scope and nature of disinformation-related public concern in Spain, Spain's public diplomacy reaction to misinformation as a danger to national security, and gaps and useful policy recommendations are among the research issues. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) and the OECD (2024), Spain has good detection and civil-society resilience, but it is still vulnerable since strategic communication and legal mechanisms are not yet entirely aligned with the speed of current FIMI.

Results and Discussion

The data demonstrates both a high level of concern from the public about disinformation and a more nuanced understanding of how Spain's institutions are able to respond. The survey data shows that between 70%-83% of Spaniards believe disinformation to be a threat to democracy or are worried about distinguishing between what is real and what is fake (Disinfo.eu, 2023; UC3M SmartVote, 2025). This continuous level of worry from the public also indicates ongoing vulnerability in their information environment and presents an opportunity for Spanish organizations to actively pursue diplomatic relationships with other countries. The evolution (figure 1) of perceptions of the threat over time shows that while the public's level of concern has remained rela-

tively stable during periods of crisis (e.g., national elections, public health emergencies), there are peaks associated with those crises. Survey data shows that

during the regional elections in 2023 there was a peak in public worry in relation to the impact of targeted misinformation campaigns.

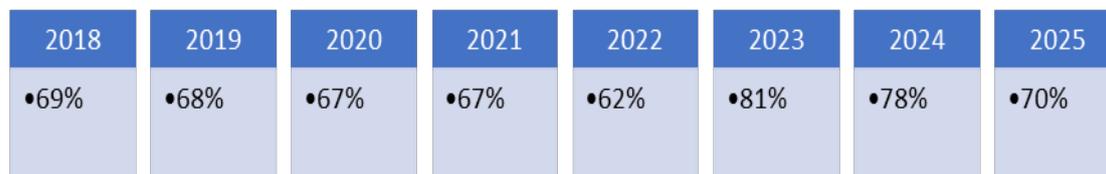


Figure 1 – Trend: Public perception of disinformation as a threat in Spain, 2018–2025 (percent concerned)
 Note – compiled by the author based on the source (Disinfo.eu, 2023)

Concern about disinformation decreased slightly during 2018–2022 but surged in 2023 due to electoral campaigns and public debates on health measures (Disinfo.eu, 2023). This suggests that Spain's public is highly sensitive to contextual triggers, which implies that institutional messaging needs to anticipate rather than simply react to disinformation waves. The decline in 2025 may indicate stabilization or adaptation by citizens, but continued vigilance remains critical.

Spain's institutional landscape, mapped in Table 1, shows a combination of national security bodies, EU-level cooperation, and civil-society networks. The Forum against Disinformation (DSN-led) provides coordination between ministries and fact-checking organizations, while EU tools such as the EEAS rapid alert system and EUvsDisinfo database enable situational awareness and detection. Smart-

Vote and other academic initiatives offer analytical support and detection of manipulated media. Media literacy and fact-checking networks amplify public diplomacy outreach.

Analysis of Table 1 demonstrates strengths in detection and civil-society engagement. However, operational gaps remain: response speed is sometimes slow, platform accountability is partially unclear, and resources for proactive public diplomacy are limited (OECD, 2024).

To further understand Spain's vulnerabilities, Figure 2 presents a comparative analysis of public concern by type of disinformation (political, health, emergency) in 2023–2025. The graph highlights that political disinformation consistently generates the highest worry (85%–88%), followed by health (75%–80%) and emergency-related misinformation (65%–70%).

Table 1 – Spain: major public-diplomacy & institutional initiatives (selected, 2020–2025)

Initiative / body	Start / active	Core function	Note / source
Forum against Disinformation Campaigns (DSN-led)	Consolidated 2024	National coordination to identify FIMI affecting national security	DSN/Spanish government document summary
EU External Action Service (FIMI rapid alerts & EEAS)	Ongoing 2018–2023	EU-level detection & debunking	EEAS & EUvsDisinfo reports
Spanish Ministry/OFCINA reports (OficinaC)	2023	Research, translation & public guidance on disinformation	OficinaC, 2023
SmartVote / academic consortia	2024–2025	Detection of image/video manipulation; public alerts	UC3M SmartVote press release
Media literacy & fact-checking network	Active 2020–2025	Public outreach, debunking, training	Disinfo.eu, 2023; IBERIFIER, 2024

Note – This table reflects a synthesis of publicly available reports and press releases. Core functions were assessed for relevance to detection, rapid response, public diplomacy, and legal frameworks.

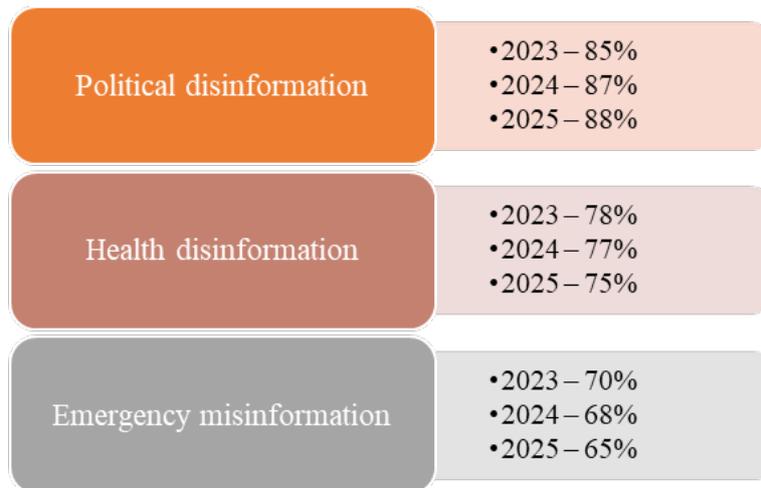


Figure 2 – Public concern by type of disinformation in Spain, 2023–2025 (percent concerned)
Note – compiled by the author based on the source (OECD, 2024)

The narrative about politics is very powerful and takes the first place in public concerns, thus making it clear that electoral times are very sensitive. Misinformation related to healthcare issues is still a prominent problem but it has a slight decrease which can be linked to the awareness-raising campaigns for the public. Concerns about emergency misinformation are not that high but they are always there and very important during the crisis because quick spreading of wrong information can put people’s safety at risk. This separation of the issue demonstrates the importance of different communication strategies which will accompany the high-impact areas and will not forget about the occasional crises.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data acquired from surveys, Table 1, and Figures 1-2 points out that Spain’s disinformation environment has a dual nature: on one hand, high public concern and, on the other hand, varying institutional effectiveness. A higher percentage of people who engaged with corrective information is presented in Table 1, but Figure 2 shows that the disinformation type is a factor that affects perception and possible vulnerability. These trends suggest that public diplomacy cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach but it has to very discernibly target both the content type and the segment of the citizens.

The analysis of institutional capacity has pointed out a number of different themes. To start with, the detection instruments are very powerful and they are the ones that take in both EU data and academic projects. Civil society, for instance, the actors involved in this matter, contribute to raising awareness, yet the money available is still very little when compared

with the huge scale of disinformation operations. Coordination mechanisms have been improving since 2024, however, they are still working at different speeds, especially in the areas of social media monitoring and emergency alerting. The legal status of platform accountability is in flux, however, there are still some difficulties with the national implementation and therefore a gray area exists regarding who is responsible for the spread of false narratives. Lastly, public diplomacy mainly focuses on strengthening the domestic front and not on projecting the strategic narratives internationally which limits Spain’s capability to confront the disinformation coming from the outside sources preemptively (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; OECD, 2024).

One of the main points is the relationship between public anxiety and participation behavior. Though the public is very much worried about a certain issue it does not necessarily mean that those people will go for corrective content consumption; according to the survey data, as much as 25% of the public that is concerned and in the know shun news at the time when there is a peak in disinformation spread. This phenomenon which is termed as “paradoxical vulnerability” highlighting the need for pre-emptive and narrative-based interventions that anticipate misinformation before it gets too late to prevent it from going widely. Proactive campaigns that are supporting this idea should give priority to regionally customized messages, multilingual formats, and repetition over different channels to reach the max audience (ENISA, 2023).

The insights from the analysis of Table 2 further show that the public-diplomacy programs of

Spain fall into complementary layers such as detection (SmartVote, EUvsDisinfo), coordination (DSN Forum), research and translation (OficinaC), and outreach (fact-checking networks), among others. Nevertheless, the connection among these layers is at times sporadic, and the lack of a centralized rapid-response protocol could result in the official communications being slower than the viral disinformation campaigns. This delay could, during election times and public health emergencies, be a

factor that leads to the entrenchment of false narratives which in turn could weaken both Spain's international credibility and domestic resilience (Hybrid CoE, 2025).

By indicating the amount of detection and response activities in 2023–2025 per institution, Figure 3 shows an extra dimension of comprehension. The graph illustrates the annual count of corrective actions, media literacy workshops, fact-checking outputs, and EU coordination alerts.

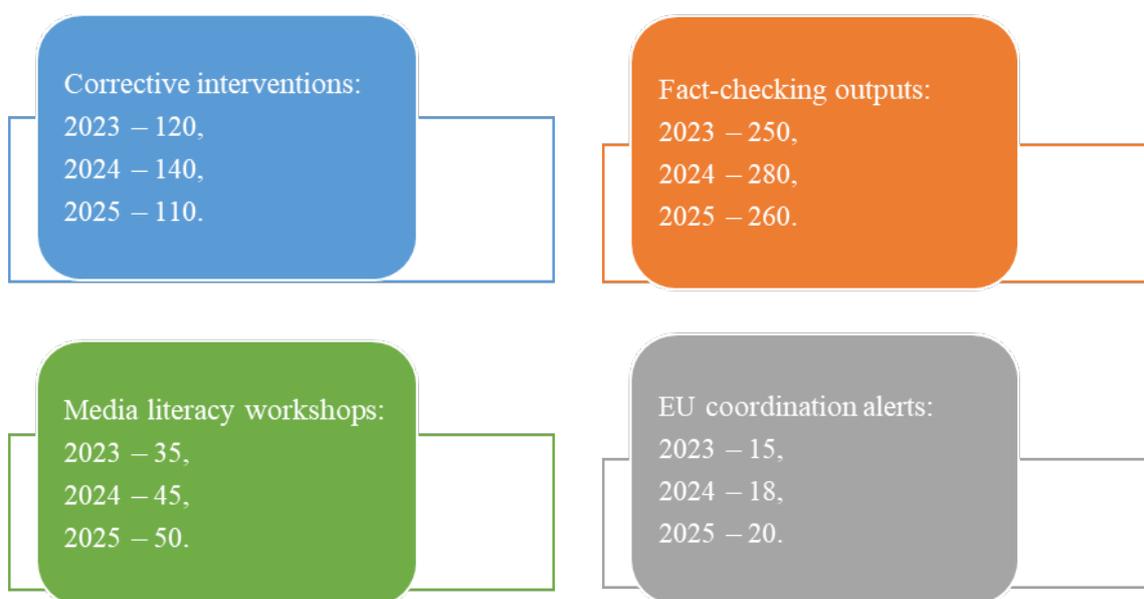


Figure 3 – Distribution of institutional anti-disinformation activities, 2023–2025
 Note – compiled by the author based on the source (ENISA, 2023)

Corrective interventions are at their highest point in 2024, which is a year of great electoral activity. Media literacy workshops and fact-checking outputs indicate an upward trend, which is representative of civil-society involvement. The EU coordination alerts are still relatively few but they are directed to the right places. The year 2025 may see a decline in corrective interventions, which can be interpreted in different ways such as resource reallocation or the use of pre-bunk campaigns, which are likely to result in lesser need for reactive measures.

The dynamic between public anxiety and institutional response indicates several policy implications. To begin with, it is necessary for Spain to strike the right balance between detection, reactive correction, and proactive narrative work. To be specific, government funding should be allocated according to the impact periods (e.g., elections) and the types of dis-

information that cause high concern (politics, health) that have been identified. Moreover, the partnership between civil-society, academic, and EU mechanisms can create a more efficient process in terms of both speed and reach but it would necessitate the establishment of coordinated operational protocols and the provision of funding for sustaining such cooperation. Lastly, it is of utmost importance to have international coordination to neutralize the narratives that originate from foreign sources, especially the pro-Kremlin FIMI as it possesses the potential of transnational propagation.

The path that Spain followed in regard to public concern and institutional response shows a complicated situation that has several layers of issues. The detection capacity, involvement of civil society, and coordination among the EU together form a solid basis. Apart from this, the speed and magnitude of the

current FIMI necessitate further integration, active engagement of public diplomacy, and specific legal and platform interventions. Gaining and keeping public trust is an area where institutional responses have to do even more than correcting lies; they also have to be prepared for the next move of the propagators of false information, be quick in communicating, and be open about their activities.

Ultimately, the results point to a dual challenge: Spain has a successful outreach and detection system but still has to address both ongoing public concern regarding the spread of misinformation, as well as sporadic gaps during periods of significant risk. To address this, Spain must: enhance the development of proactive narratives through campaign development; work toward improving existing mechanisms used for platform accountability; invest in long-term development of media literacy; establish operational coordination among national and EU authorities; and conduct crisis communication exercises that simulate the flow of viral misinformation to enhance resilience.

These actions will ensure that Spain's public diplomacy transforms the experience gained through significant exposure into lasting value, thereby protecting national security and maintaining credibility at both the national and international level.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to evaluate how Spain has used Public Diplomacy to build its National Security Resilience to Disinformation (e.g., the threat represented by disinformation campaigns). It

was determined that Spain already has very effective systems for detecting disinformation, as well as effective Fact Checking Networks and growing National Coordination Forums (Coordination Networks) for working together to build National Security Resilience to Disinformation. In addition, it appears that Public Support remains quite strong in Spain, with approximately 70-83% of people concerned about disinformation, thus creating a serious Political Need for Response to this Threat.

The primary strengths identified in Spain's current approach to Building Resilience to Disinformation included: 1) Detection (e.g., the capability to Identify Disinformation); Resilience of Civil Society (e.g., through the use of Networks of Civil Society Organizations), and 3) Collaboration with the European Union (EU).

Limitations to Spain's Public Resilience Response include: 1) Reactive rather than Proactive, 2) Lack of Accountability on Social Media Platforms (e.g., the use by Disinformation sources) and 3) Delays in Operational Response during Crises due to Inefficient Coordination between various Public/Private actors.

Future policy opportunities identified as essential to building domestic resilience within Spain and establishing its global reputation as a competitor in counter-disinformation initiatives include: 1) proactivity in narrative development 2) whole-of-government rapid response, 3) collaborations with Private Sector Companies (social media platforms), and 4) creation of measurable programs to improve Public Media Literacy (Disinfo.eu, 2023; UC3M Smart-Vote, 2025; OECD, 2024).

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