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# **Disinformation in France: A Strategy of Information Warfare in the Digital Age**

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And to my grandfather, you will be missed.

## List of the Acronyms

- AFP: French Press Agency – Agence France-Presse
- CNRS: National Centre for Scientific Research – Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
- COMCYBER: Cyber Defence Command – Commandement de la Cyberdéfense
- CPCO: Operation Planning and Conduct Centre – Centre de planification et de conduite des opérations
- CREOGN: Research Centre of the National Gendarmerie Officers School – Centre de Recherche de l'Ecole des officiers de la Gendarmerie nationale
- DGRIS: Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy – Direction Générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie
- DGSI: Directorate General for Internal Security – Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure
- ISD: Institute of Strategic Dialogue
- LID: Defensive Information Warfare – Lutte Informatique Défensive
- LIO: Offensive Information Warfare – Lutte Informatique Offensive
- L2I: Digital Warfare for Influence – Doctrine militaire de lutte information d'influence
- MEFA: Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs – Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Etrangères
- NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
- NUPES: New ecological and social People's Union – Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale
- SMI: Military Strategy of Influence – Stratégie Militaire d'Influence
- TF2I: Interministerial Informational task force – Task force informationnelle interministérielle

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Disinformation or the manipulation of information have always been present throughout history, in both military and civilian domains. Indeed, the significance of disinformation and the art of deception was underlined since the sixth century, by Sun Tzu in his famous book, the Art of War. However, its significance in today's context can be attributed to the combination of two key factors. First, the growing crisis of trust that democratic systems are currently facing, which undermines public discourse and raises doubts about the very nature of truth (Bennett and Livingston, 2018, p. 122). Second, the volume of information and the unprecedented speed at which information can be disseminated through the Internet and social media, leading to its viral nature. Hence, one key factor contributing to the transformation of information manipulation is the rapid advancement of technology.

Furthermore, there has been a diversification of actors involved in the spread of disinformation. Indeed, the interconnectedness of digital networks has made it easier for both state and non-state actors to engage in information warfare. State-sponsored disinformation campaigns, hacktivist groups, and other malicious entities can now leverage sophisticated techniques to exploit vulnerabilities and target specific audiences with tailored disinformation campaigns (Nocetti, 2017, p. 141). Additionally, the erosion of traditional gatekeepers provided in journalism like the French Press Agency (AFP in French), and the blurring of lines between facts and opinions have complicated the information landscape. This has created a fertile ground for the spread of sensationalism, conspiracy theories, and fabricated narratives, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to distinguish between accurate information and manipulated content. The consequences of information manipulation have expanded beyond the military realm and now pose significant threats to democratic processes, public discourse and social cohesion.

Disinformation and its related concepts such as misinformation or fake news, are frequently intermingled in public discussions. Thus, it is crucial to begin by establishing a clear definition to ensure conceptual clarity. Disinformation refers to «false or misleading information deliberately spread with the intent to deceive» according to the definition given by the Atlantic Council. It should be distinguished from misinformation, which is the «unintentional dissemination of false or inaccurate information» (Atlantic Council). In other words, even if there is no harmful intent in the spread of misinformation, it can still be damaging. Regarding fake news, it is the most commonly used expression, including in

French, and is usually translated as «false information». However, it should refer to falsified, counterfeit or forged information. The term was popularised by the 2016 American presidential elections and specifically denotes the inaccuracy of information and the deceptive intentions of the author (Nocetti, 2017, p. 141). The Commission for the Enrichment of the French Language recommends the use of the neologism «infox, » derived from the combination of «information» and «intoxication. » (Brillé-Champaux, 2019).

In this research, disinformation will be understood as the manipulation of information. This manipulation of information can take various forms such as the withholding of information or the presentation of information in an emotive manner, as often seen in sensationalist press. It is worth noting that not all manipulative processes can be reduced to a simple dichotomy of true or false (Jeangène Vilmer and al., 2018, p. 20). In many cases, the focus of the manipulator is not necessarily to spread false information but to create a specific impact or effect. Information may not be entirely false but rather exaggerated or biased. Therefore, narrowing down disinformation to false information is misleading as it fails to encompass the broader range of manipulative tactics employed.

I chose the case of France because of the unique national social and political context. In the last few years, the country has been fractured by various crises such as the 2015 terrorist attacks, the yellow vests in 2018, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020... which made it particularly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns. In parallel, there has been a rise of far-right political parties and groups. The combination of these two factors led to a revival in the activity of far-right groups (violent far-right and ultra movements). They are active in the dissemination of disinformation, aiming at destabilising the democratic fabric of the nation by exploiting the social divisions and fuelling anti-system feelings. Even though their disinformation campaigns did not spread to the rest of society and stayed confined within the far-right ecosystem, France remains a particularly interesting case. Indeed, the country has developed a legal and institutional arsenal to counter disinformation and to achieve sovereignty over its informational space. The case of the 2022 presidential elections shows that France takes disinformation as a serious national security threat and that informational warfare is increasingly becoming part of military operations and national security strategies.

In this dissertation, I will argue that the social and political context in France allowed far-right political parties and notably the political candidate, Eric Zemmour to rise. I will demonstrate that he used discursive practices to justify his rhetoric and legitimise his

political agenda. Among these practices, he employed tactics to manipulate information and reality by crafting narratives that fitted his far-right imaginary. This led to the banalisation of far-right narratives in society. Further, I will show that in the last few years, far-right movements have become more active and bolder which the French government sees as a national security threat due to the potential resurgence of domestic terrorism. Moreover, the use of disinformation by these groups is also considered as a national security threat. Indeed, disinformation is becoming a common tool in information warfare and hybrid strategies, both in the military and civilian realms. This can be linked to the development of digital tools and social media as well as the growth of the cyberspace, now considered as a field of conflict. Indeed, France has been reinforcing its tools to achieve sovereignty over its informational space and adapt to the geostrategic environment. Therefore, disinformation is a threat to democratic and electoral processes as well as military operations.

Disinformation campaigns during political elections have been launched worldwide in recent years. Democracies are now considering disinformation as a threat since it can instil distrust in political institutions and undermine democratic processes. Democracies are a target of choice for disinformation campaigns. Indeed, democracies are inherently vulnerable to disinformation due to their political openness and the freedom of information. In other words,

«Freedoms of information, communication and expression that characterise liberal democracies allow disinformation and misinformation proliferate largely unchecked. » (Dowling, 2021, p. 385). This creates an environment where anyone can freely express their views and participate in public discourse. However, this openness also provides an opportunity for malicious actors to exploit and manipulate information to influence public opinion. This is problematic because democracies face constraints when countering information manipulation. Unlike authoritarian regimes, democratic governments cannot employ the same repressive measures such as censorship for instance to control the information channels to combat disinformation. In this context, democracies face a unique challenge in defending themselves against disinformation. In France, disinformation has been treated as a serious threat since the 2017 presidential elections. Since then, France has been reinforcing its arsenal in the fight against disinformation.

This dissertation will answer the following questions:

1. What narratives were spread by the far-right political sphere and movements during the 2022 French elections?
2. How do the 2022 French elections reflect the banalisation of the far-right rhetoric in society?
3. How do the 2022 French presidential elections demonstrate the relevance of disinformation campaigns in information warfare?

In this section, I will explain the relevance of this dissertation and how it fits into security studies. In the twenty-first century, the traditional boundaries between times of war and times of peace have become increasingly hard to distinguish. This shift is primarily due to the growing significance of non-military tactics in achieving strategic and political goals. Contemporary conflicts no longer solely rely on military force as the primary instrument for achieving objectives. Instead, a wide range of non-military methods have gained prominence and are actively employed to shape the outcomes of conflicts. These methods encompass various dimensions, such as political maneuvering, economic leverage and information manipulation. Further, the information space has emerged as a crucial arena for exerting political influence, particularly for actors seeking to interfere in the affairs of other countries.

This dissertation studies the discursive practices of far-right political candidate, Eric Zemmour, and how it facilitates the normalisation of a far-right rhetoric into society. The discourses spread by far-right groups, rooted in disinformation, aim to undermine democratic processes and public institutions as they usually exploit anti-system feelings. Further, their rhetoric's goal is the manipulation of public opinion to enhance social polarisation by exacerbating existing divisions. Overall, the use of specific discursive strategies and disinformation, especially during elections, is a threat for the stability of democracies.

This research also aims to identify the themes they use as well as the type of claims they make to support their ideological framework. Further, the research will examine how they manipulate information to create their own reality and to promote their own version of the truth. Finally, studying how these discourses become sustainable in the long-term i.e., how they continue to exist and impact society over time as well as how they adapt to new contexts.

Although storytelling has played an important role in politics throughout history, today's combination



of digital media, populism and partisanship is making it an evermore important part of the persuasive process – so much so that even when the current cast of characters get written out of the script, the storylines they've instigated will continue to resonate throughout the culture (Seargeant, 2020, p. 6).

Thus, this dissertation aims to explore the lasting effect narratives have in society. In fact, the narratives continue to impact society as they are perpetually maintained by political actors, «influencers» or proxies as well as members of far-right groups. In other words, a narrative can continue to have influence in society even after the actors that initiated it are no longer relevant as they will be reappropriated by other actors. This can add valuable knowledge to the field.

The first chapter of this dissertation will introduce the concept of disinformation. It will also show how the advent of the Internet and social media have changed the way disinformation campaigns are conducted. In addition, this section will explain the rationale behind the choice of France for this research as well as the relevance of this dissertation for the field of security studies. There has been a growing interest regarding the dangers of disinformation campaigns for the integrity of elections. Disinformation campaigns have challenged the preservation of democracies, especially considering their role in hybrid strategies and information warfare.

The second chapter will provide the reader with an overview of the existing literature on the evolution of disinformation over time. Indeed, information can now reach a large audience in a short amount of time. As a result, it has become very easy to disseminate manipulated content.

The third chapter of this dissertation will detail the methodology of the research, detailing the rationale behind the choice of the research methods and the database.

The fourth part will define the theoretical or conceptual framework used in the dissertation. It will clarify the concept of political discourse and demonstrate the importance of the context to fully understand political speeches. In addition, this section will refer to the dichotomy between good and evil used by politicians to legitimise their political agenda. Lastly, this part of the dissertation will show how politicians instrumentalise history by using analogies to justify their policies.

Chapter five will provide an empirical analysis of the themes identified in the theoretical framework. It will illustrate these themes i.e., the importance of the context, the dichotomy between good and evil and the instrumentalisation of history with examples for

the case of the 2022 French elections.

Chapter six will investigate the role of disinformation campaigns within more global hybrid strategies employed by states and how disinformation campaigns are used in information warfare. This will show that disinformation is a threat for democracies as they can disturb political processes, undermine public institutions, and create social divisions by fuelling anti-system feelings or by exploiting already existing social tensions. Further, disinformation is a tool used by far-right (violent and ultra) movements which has been rising in recent years. The modus operandi shows that they can constitute a threat for France and that the rhetoric they use, and spread is dangerous and can lead to the radicalisation of individuals.

The seventh and last chapter will conclude the dissertation and summarise the paper.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

The concept of disinformation originated in the Cold-War era propaganda studies and has gained significant academic interest since the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. It can be traced back to the Russian word «dezinformatsiya, » which was used by the security agencies of the Soviet Union to describe activities such as forgeries and subversive information operations (Martin, 1982; Kux, 1985). The term gained traction as an analytical concept in Western academia thanks to the work of Ladislav Bittman, a former Czechoslovak intelligence officer who defected to the United States in 1968 (Sandomir, 2018). After a period of waning interest following the decline of the active Soviet disinformation threat, the study of disinformation experienced a resurgence in the past decade due to notable cases such as Brexit and the 2016 American presidential elections. Additionally, there has been a growing recognition among military-strategic thinkers of the potential implications of disinformation for military operations and long-term strategic planning, leading to further exploration of this subject area.

The extensive circulation of disinformation during the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2016 American presidential elections sparked a significant academic discussion centered around the potential danger posed by targeted disinformation campaigns to the security of elections and democracy as a whole. Scholars have been particularly concerned about the impact of manipulated content on shaping public opinion, influencing voter behaviour, and undermining the integrity of democratic processes. Contemporary research on disinformation has largely focused on its strategic implications, including its content and how it is received by specific populations, particularly voters. The emergence of social media platforms and new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence has provided unprecedented opportunities for disinformation campaigns on a large scale and with high intensity (Kertysova, 2018).

In their work, Freelon and Wells (2020) provide a comprehensive overview of the current studies on disinformation. They categorise the body of research into two main areas: content studies and reception studies. Content studies focus on the supply side of disinformation and aim to understand the creation of narratives and the motives behind their dissemination (Bradshaw et al., 2019; Krafft and Donovan, 2020). On the other hand, reception studies adopt a quantitative approach to explore the impact of exposure to disinformation on individuals' behaviours and opinions (Garrett, Sude, and Riva, 2019;

Zimmerman and Kohring, 2020).

## 1- The Internet revolution

Disinformation has taken a certain breadth in the last few years, notably with Brexit and Donald Trump's election. It has become an important phenomenon in the twenty-first century due to the expansion of the Internet and the rise of social media. The proliferation of digital platforms and social media has enabled the rapid dissemination of news and content to a wider and global audience. With the advent of these technologies and in this age of instant-access news coverage, there are limited barriers to prevent the overwhelming flow of information intended for consumption (Jeangène Vilmer, 2023, p. 225). The speed at which global events unfold has reshaped the way news is reported. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram can now feature breaking news before official newspapers.

This shift has increased the likelihood that individuals will encounter, read, interpret, and potentially believe news without verifying its accuracy or checking for underlying biases. In other words, this immediacy can lead to the consumption of news without the critical examination that traditional journalistic practices might afford. This means that information shared on social media does not go through a thorough process of fact-checking to ensure the veracity of the information. Hence, the emergence of the Internet and online social media has fundamentally transformed the way people obtain, consume, and share information.

«Cyberspace empowers and enables individuals in ways that were previously not possible. » (Choucri, 2012, p. 14). The cyberspace has increased the number of actors that can spread information. This poses challenges for individuals and society at large to identify manipulated content. By creating an environment where facts are distorted or obscured, disinformation can manipulate public opinion and amplify divisions.

Moreover, on the Internet, the competition for attention and visibility often leads to a chaotic and overwhelming information landscape. Search engines prioritise content based on popularity and visibility rather than solely on the credibility or accuracy of the source. This means that even unreliable or misleading information can gain prominence if it manages to generate a significant amount of noise or attract attention through various means. This phenomenon can make it challenging for users to discern reliable and trustworthy information from the vast amount of content available online. In addition, social media produces two phenomena: echo chambers and filter bubbles, which can enhance the

dissemination of disinformation (Pariser, 2011).

An echo chamber refers to an environment in which users have limited access to information other than that provided by algorithms based on their prior behavior. The accumulation of preferred information contributes to selective exposure and polarisation of individuals or groups, whereby users predominantly engage with and share content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, while disregarding contradictory information (Quattrociocchi, Scala and Sunstein, 2016, p. 14). This is particularly useful for the spread of conspiracy theories as people's beliefs become even more entrenched when refutation attempts are made. On the other hand, filter bubbles refer to the fact that it is the partisan affiliation of Internet users that creates selective exposure. In other words, political affiliations are stronger than recommendation algorithms. Similarly to echo chambers, filter bubbles help reinforce people's beliefs as they are only exposed to content in line with their affinity group. These selective displays appear to be most effective among a small subset of highly committed and engaged Internet users. Therefore, recommendation algorithms, designed to prioritise user engagement and connectivity rather than the content itself, produce significant vulnerabilities and gaps in the information ecosystem, ultimately benefiting the spread of disinformation.

## **2- The importance of emotions and cognitive biases**

«The inherent malleability of human reasoning guarantees that homo sapiens will never be absolutely immune to absurdity, contradictions, clichés» (Chang & Mehan, 2011, p. 475). Disinformation campaigns can appeal to people's emotions, beliefs, and biases rather than objective facts. Consequently, disinformation can create confusion and make it difficult for people to discern accurate information from manipulated content, leading to a lack of consensus on what is true and what is not. Hence, disinformation campaigns can blur the lines between truth and falsehood by leveraging emotional appeals, sensationalism, and cognitive biases (Chadwick and Stanyer, 2022, p. 5). A cognitive bias refers to the unique set of beliefs and experiences that a person has, which shapes how they perceive events, facts, and other people and thus does not rely solely on reason or logic. People may become more inclined to reject established facts and evidence. This creates a culture of scepticism where people become distrustful of all sources of information, including legitimate ones.

Political candidates understand that there is an opportunity to reach a large part of the population through social media. The nature of social media allows political candidates to

target audiences that will be receptive to their message. Indeed, as social media platforms collect (behavioural) data on users, they are able to create tailored content based on users' activities, followers and beliefs. The infrastructure of social media platforms then allows the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. «The web has become a veritable laboratory, where one can study human behaviour with a precision and on a scale never possible before» (Huberman, 2001, p. 16).

Several biases are frequently observed in relation to the dissemination of disinformation, including confirmation bias, authority bias, memory availability bias, and attribution bias. These biases have a significant influence on how individuals perceive and interpret information (Frau-Meigs, 2021, p. 332). The confirmation bias refers to the tendency to favour information that aligns with preexisting beliefs or opinions while dismissing or disregarding contradictory evidence. Authority bias, on the other hand, involves giving more weight or credibility to information provided by perceived authoritative figures or sources. The memory availability bias refers to the inclination to rely on information that is more readily available in memory, often leading to distorted perceptions of the prevalence or importance of certain events or ideas. Finally, the attribution bias relates to the tendency to attribute the cause or motivation behind certain information or events based on personal biases or assumptions rather than objective evidence. Overall, these biases collectively contribute to the spread and acceptance of disinformation, as individuals are more likely to embrace information that aligns with their existing beliefs, that is provided by reliable sources, that is easily recalled from memory, or that confirms their preferred attributions.

Moreover, two emotions, anger, and anxiety, play a role in shaping how individuals perceive information. The use of spectacular and sometimes alarmist rhetoric can exploit feelings of anxiety and anger, leveraging our cognitive biases. This is particularly evident on social media platforms, which strive to engage users (Frau-Meigs, 2021, p. 334). Indeed, disinformation is intentionally designed to go viral. It is written in a sensational and emotionally charged style, aimed at evoking strong reactions and playing on people's fears and biases. Unlike genuine news, which prioritises accurate reporting, disinformation focuses on maximising its spread through compelling narratives and captivating headlines. In addition, the feelings of novelty and surprise play a role in influencing individuals' preferences. The fascination with sensational news contributes to the rapid spread of disinformation as it triggers the urge to share. This pull towards novelty amplifies the dissemination of attention-grabbing narratives, which peaks the interests of people even if

they do not end up believing or supporting such narratives. Once a narrative has gained the attention of people, it is more likely to get shared because people want to appear knowledgeable or to gain social status for instance.

Further, disinformation campaigns use emotions to engage users. «Emotional content is clicked on, diffuses widely and rapidly through social networks, and is often believed, particularly when it fits with one's political worldview. » (Pasquetto and al., 2020, p. 5). Connecting with people on an emotional level has emerged as a crucial factor in engaging with audiences. This approach, as exemplified by the success of Donald Trump, acknowledges that relying solely on facts may not be effective when facing a lack of trust in the media and a disregard for established facts. In such a climate, individuals tend to believe in their own version of the 'truth'.

### **3- The dangers of a post-truth world**

The concept of post-truth emerged as one of the main concepts to explain two major events in 2016: Brexit and the 2016 American presidential elections. It was even elected as the Word of the Year 2016 by the Oxford English Dictionary (Nocetti, 2017, p. 139). In the dictionary, post-truth refers to «circumstances in which objective facts have less influence in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs. » This shows that there has been a shift in the way information is perceived and valued, suggesting that public opinion is shaped more by subjective biases and emotional appeals than by objective facts and evidence. In an era characterised by the prevalence of individualised facts, the question arises: does the concept of truth still hold any significance? Efforts to combat disinformation by presenting factual information have faced significant challenges as the value of facts has been greatly diminished (Viner, 2016). When a fact becomes subjective and is shaped by personal beliefs or feelings, distinguishing between true facts and 'subjective facts' becomes exceedingly difficult. In other words, the erosion of trust in objective facts and the rise of personalised truths pose significant challenges in promoting a shared understanding of reality. In a society overwhelmed with information and struggling to discern truths from falsehoods or manipulated content, it becomes challenging for individuals to determine the authenticity of information.

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to

distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).

Nowadays, there is a widespread scepticism towards information presented as factual, especially if it challenges people's established beliefs or makes them uncomfortable. The distinction between falsehoods and facts has become blurred as both can be propagated in similar ways, often through what experts refer to as an «information cascade. » This means that information, regardless of its accuracy, can rapidly spread and gain credibility simply through repeated sharing and exposure (Viner, 2016). This environment of information ambiguity and the equal dissemination of both truth and falsehoods or manipulated content can have profound implications for the healthiness of public discourse.

According to the conceptualisation of post-truth politics by Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen, post truth is «a two-sided process brought about by mutually dependent structural factors contributing to the irrelevance of factual truths and a particular political style labelled careless speech. » (2018, p. 30). The intention behind careless speech is to generate confusion and disrupt democratic discourse, ultimately hindering meaningful debate. The concept of post- truth does not impose any specific version of the truth. This is why it operates in a way that fosters confusion and ambiguity, allowing the proliferation of alternative facts indefinitely, even if these alternative versions contradict one another. In the absence of consensus on what truth is, the absence of a shared understanding of truth can lead to chaos (Creech and Roessner, 2019, p. 264).

Once a certain fact is accepted as true, the focus of the debate shifts away from questioning its validity. As a result, it is problematic to either deliberately manipulate factual information or to transform facts into matters of opinion. Such acts, aimed at altering the debate, should be viewed as forms of political action (Arendt, 2006, p. 218). This can be observed, for instance, in the attempt to counter inconvenient facts with 'alternative facts'. Further, facts inform opinions while opinions themselves are influenced by various interests and emotions. While there can be a wide range of opinions, the latter can still be legitimate if they are aligned with factual truth. If opinions become rooted in 'alternative facts' then freedom of opinion becomes meaningless as there will be no consensus on the veracity, reliability and validity of facts. Therefore, the manipulation of information plays a dual role as both a cause and a symptom of the crisis of democracy. The latter is closely intertwined with the growing phenomenon of voter abstention in elections (as can be seen



in France), the erosion of public trust in elected representatives or the questioning of the fundamental principles of democracy (Jeangène Vilmer and al., 2018, p. 59). Overall, one significant manifestation of this crisis is the devaluation of truth, which erodes the shared understanding of reality necessary for a functioning democratic society.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This dissertation offers insights into the process of banalisation of far-right discourses into French society and how it can be linked to a similar trend in Europe. This constitutes a threat for democracies because far-right groups use disinformation to promote their narratives. These narratives continue to have an influence in society as they are employed by political candidates, notably Eric Zemmour. Further, exploring how disinformation is used as a political tool can provide an understanding of the normalisation of a specific rhetoric, characterised by polarising narratives. The strategy chosen to demonstrate this combines a case-study approach and a thematic discourse analysis.

The case study was selected based on the accounts of disinformation being used by political candidates and far-right groups, provided by previous research. It is worth noting the rise of far-right political parties as well as far-right violent movements which can put in perspective the unique French history with far-right groups. In parallel, the French social and political context is an interesting case. Indeed, the country has been hit with several successive crises. Further, case studies emphasise the importance of understanding the context in which a phenomenon occurs. They allow researchers to examine the interplay between different variables and factors within a specific environment, facilitating a deep understanding of the complex relationships at play. They are useful in that they let the researcher exploit a relevant event and draw specific insights from it.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that case studies can be restricting in the sense that it is an analysis focused on one specific example which can be hard to transpose to other events. Due to their focus on a specific subject, case studies have limited generalisability to broader circumstances. The findings may not be representative of the larger context. Consequently, caution should be exercised when making broad claims or drawing universal conclusions based solely on case study research. Especially considering that case studies rely heavily on the researcher's interpretation of data, the findings can be subject to cognitive biases.

Thematic discourse analysis is a methodology used to examine and analyse patterns of communication within a specific context or domain. It involves identifying and interpreting recurring themes in the discourse (Muhammad and Hashmi, 2020; Clarke and Braun, 2017; Brewer and al., 2022). These themes are identified by closely examining the language used, as well as the context in which it is employed. This involves examining the

content, structure, and rhetorical strategies employed in the discourse. In thematic discourse analysis, the researcher aims to understand the underlying meanings, perspectives, and social constructions that are expressed through language.

Moreover, thematic discourse analysis helps to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the meanings and discursive practices within a specific context. It allows the researcher to explore how language is used to construct and convey particular ideas, values, and ideologies. By employing this methodology, the researcher can gain insights into the ways in which individuals or groups communicate, negotiate power dynamics, and shape social realities through discourse.

Disinformation relies on narratives to make people believe a certain reality and create an environment of confusion aimed at destabilising the target. For this reason, thematic discourse analysis will be helpful to examine the content of the rhetoric as well as the discursive tricks used by the relevant actors. This will show how a discourse can be constructed in order to impact a target audience and how some narratives are being adapted by far-right movements and parties in different contexts and scenarios. This results in a sort of sustainability of these narratives as well as their banalisation over the long-term. Hence, the thematic discourse analysis will provide insights on their ideological framework and the narrative they disseminate.

These research methods are the most appropriate to conduct this dissertation because they allow the analysis to identify which discourses were spread during the 2022 elections and by which actors. It then allows the researcher to put these findings into perspective with the context of both previous presidential elections, the Covid pandemic as well as the French current social and political climate.

The choice of qualitative methods over quantitative ones was motivated by the fact that discourses are subject to interpretation and must be analysed within their context. Quantitative methods do not allow the researcher to explore the subjectivity of narratives and the discursive aspects of disinformation. The choice of qualitative methods does not have to be opposed to the use of quantitative methods but can rather be seen as an addition to an understanding of a situation or event provided by a quantitative investigation.

However, measuring the effectiveness of information manipulation is an incredibly challenging task. It is difficult to establish a direct causal link between specific narratives and the subsequent behaviour due to the involvement of numerous complex factors. People's beliefs, attitudes, previous experiences, social context, and other individual characteristics all play a role in shaping their response to disinformation. Additionally, the

impact of disinformation can vary widely among different individuals and situations, making it virtually impossible to measure its effectiveness in a comprehensive and standardised manner.

The study will firstly compile data consisting of state doctrines, government hearings and reports as well as strategic documents pertaining to disinformation and related concepts. In my analysis, I focused specifically on texts that included some mention or reference to disinformation or information warfare. I assessed that texts completely devoid of any mention of these concepts would not be useful for conducting a thematic discourse analysis.

Furthermore, these state documents will be supported by relevant examples from official discourses and political speeches made by Eric Zemmour . These speeches were obtained on Eric Zemmour 's official website. About 20 speeches in total were analysed, along with other materials such as his previous writings (books and articles). In this research, only text-based content such as written messages or oral speeches will be analysed. Thus, although information manipulation is not limited to text alone, but also involves the use of images, videos, or GIFs, the latter will be excluded from the scope of this research. Visual based content, which constitutes a large part of the content disseminated in information warfare strategies as they can be more impactful than words and stay longer with the targeted audience, will not be treated which can constitute one of the limits of this dissertation.

Moreover, many secondary sources were used for this research. They include academic papers and press articles drawn from a number of sources such as: Le Monde, Médiapart, Le Figaro... It is worth noting that some of these (online) newspapers are politically oriented (opinion journalism). They allowed the researcher to have a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-political context during the electoral period and the domestic climate before, during and after the elections. These sources were also used to link this domestic climate to the international climate and thus identify the possible bridges between far-right communities and networks, notably across Europe.

Lastly, databases for newspaper articles and online libraries were used to obtain the materials. In addition, open-source intelligence (OSINT) techniques were employed to get better results and more precise suggestions on search engines. Further, being a French speaker, it was possible to conduct the discourse analysis in its original language and thus avoid any terminological challenges related to translations. As a result, the collection of materials for this research was not limited by the language barrier.

In sum, the case study will show that disinformation was used as a political tool by several actors such as Eric Zemmour and far-right groups. It demonstrates how they employed discursive strategies to build an argumentation system that fit their far-right imaginaries as well as their political agenda. By spreading specific narratives, these actors have managed to banalise and normalise their rhetoric rooted in themes such as identity, nationalism, violence...

A focus on the rhetoric of these movements exhibits how they adapted narratives to different contexts and crises. Both research methods demonstrate the importance of context. Firstly, how the context impacts the discursive strategies used as well as how the narratives are received by individuals, exposing the discursive power of disinformation. Disinformation thus plays a role in the radicalisation and polarisation of society. Overall, both disinformation and the rise of far-right movements, if they conduct destabilising actions against political institutions and democratic processes, can be a national security threat for democracies.

## **Chapter 4: Theoretical discussion**

My conceptual framework relies on a case study of the 2022 French elections and the socio-political context in which they took place, demonstrating the rise of far-right political parties and violent movements. Case studies are about allowing the researcher to apply a theoretical framework to an actual event and test its limits. In addition, the thematic discourse analysis then identifies the recurrent themes used in the rhetoric of far-right groups. As a result, the thematic discourse analysis aims to show that the use of discursive strategies and disinformation allows a banalisation of this rhetoric in society.

This segment of the dissertation will detail the discourse strategies and the types of reasoning (analogical, oracular...) that can be used to help actors legitimise their arguments and actions. It will emphasise the relation between discourses and society, showing how discourse can affect the social and political order. Furthermore, as this research focuses on thematic discourse analysis and disinformation, it seems logical to look into the theoretical debate surrounding argumentation systems and rhetorical practices. The notion of disinformation can be hard to define, especially when it is used interchangeably with terms such as misinformation and fake news. Hence, the following chapter will give the reader more clarity into what is understood as political discourse, rhetoric and context for this research. Lastly, the following sections structure the dissertation around three categories. The latter are all grounded in theories which have already been used in the literature. Hence, there is disciplinary experience with these categories such as the dichotomy between good and evil.

### **1- The importance of the context**

The study of political discourse has its roots in the tradition of rhetoric in the Western world. Rhetoric, the art of persuasive communication, has long been recognised as a central element of political practice. Defining political discourse cannot be separated from defining the broader concept of «politics» itself. However, this task is highly complex and beyond the scope of this dissertation. The definition of «politics» is not straightforward as evidenced by the diverse interpretations within the field of political science. Depending on different political science studies, politics may encompass a wide range of elements, including «official and unofficial political actors, events, encounters, settings, actions, and discourses. » (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 15). Additionally, it can also involve more abstract

aspects such as political processes, political systems, political ideologies... As underlined by Van Dijk, political language extends beyond the discourse used solely by politicians. It then becomes evident that to understand political discourses, we must go beyond the analysis of discursive features alone. Hence, it is worth noting that one of the challenges in developing a theory of language and politics is determining the scope of what constitutes political language.

Moreover, the distinctiveness of political activity is based on its predominantly discursive nature. Discourse actively participates in the construction of social reality. Individuals use language to «create representations of reality that are never mere reflections of a pre-existing reality but contribute to constructing reality» (Kulikova and Detinko, 2019, p. 210). As stated by Paul Chilton, «politics is very largely the use of language. » (2004, p.14). This assertion highlights the fact that political actors rely heavily on language to convey their ideas, persuade audiences, and shape public opinion. Further, according to Wodak, political groups develop their own language to portray themselves, using specific slogans and stereotypes to expose their ideology. Hence, each political group has its own ideological structure and argumentation system (1989, p. 137).

The term 'discourse' can be quite vague and open to interpretation. Scholars like Willig (2014) and Parker (1999) propose a broad range of potential data for discourse analysis, encompassing «all tissues of meaning». In general, discourse involves language and the communication of meaning. Rather than being limited to analysing specific types of data, discourse analysis allows an approach to language that focuses on the understanding of meaning and on how the language is used. In discourse analysis, language employed in texts is seen as a result of deliberate choices made within particular contexts to produce specific purposes. In other words, discourse analysis focuses on the context, choices and the intended goals of the narratives to interpret the meaning of the texts (Balzacq, 2010; Willig, 2014).

Furthermore, as explained by Van Dijk (2009), in the study of language and discourse, the term «context» can be understood in two distinct ways, leading to some ambiguity. Firstly, «context» can refer to what is commonly known as «verbal context» or «co-text. » This refers to the surrounding words, sentences, speech acts, or turns within a discourse or conversation. In approaches to language analysis that do not prioritise discourse or conversation as the primary unit of study, the verbal context is seen as an integral part of the global structures of the text or talk itself. Secondly, «context» is used to describe the

«social situation» of language use or the specific circumstances in which a particular text or speech fragment occurs.

The concept of «context» plays a crucial role in the study of language, discourse, and cognition. It is widely recognised that in order to gain a complete understanding of discourse, we must consider it within its specific context. According to Foucault (1977), the connection between claims and facts does not possess inherent or universal validity across time and contexts. Instead, it is always context-dependent and influenced by specific discourses shaped within particular power structures. This can be illustrated by the speech made by George W. Bush following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

[George W. Bush] also speaks at a time of radical social, economic, and political upheaval. Following the sudden collapse of Sovietism, 'globalization', now a fast-fading shibboleth, dominated economic and political discourses throughout the 1990s. (Graham, Keenan and Dowd, 2004, p. 201).

Considering this context, it can be better understood how Bush is exploiting the context, and particularly the terrorist attacks to emphasise that the country is under attack and therefore to justify the need for the war on terror. As a result, his discourse, aimed at rallying support for military actions, relies on nationalistic sentiments.

In addition, Van Dijk argues that the contexts in which language is used have often been overlooked, assumed, or treated as a separate factor or variable of the social situation without proper examination. Consequently, according to Van Dijk (2014), a comprehensive theory of context should incorporate cognitive categories, as they play a significant role in shaping discourse. He argues that individuals possess shared «knowledge models» that represent their understanding of each other's knowledge and beliefs. These knowledge models have a crucial influence on the discursive strategies employed by individuals. In other words, people's mental representations of others' knowledge and beliefs guide their choice of language and discourse strategies.

Furthermore, human practices and cultural environments serve as significant foundations for constructing legitimate knowledge. As a result of prior interaction and communication, as well as their socialisation, language users possess a range of shared knowledge and beliefs. Through generalisation and abstraction, these shared beliefs shape the development of new models, which in turn facilitate interaction and mutual understanding among individuals. In addition, it is worth noting that the process of reasoning is subject to various influences, including biases, cultural perspectives, and



power relations, which can introduce vulnerabilities and limitations into the construction of knowledge.

Within the realm of knowledge, there exists a certain degree of legitimate flexibility. It is important to note that a strong argument does not necessarily equate to a correct or universally valid argument (Hitchcock, 2005; Toulmin, 2001). The validity of an argument may vary across different contexts and historical periods. Understanding how peculiar or unconventional reasoning practices operate is crucial in comprehending how coherent knowledge systems were constructed within their specific historical contexts. By examining these practices, we can gain insights into the construction of knowledge and the factors that influenced the coherence of arguments within different timeframes and different cultural frameworks.

Discourse implies the use of language, and a linguistic analysis of the language used reveals what the texts say explicitly and implicitly. However, discourse involves also a transmission of beliefs. When texts are placed into their context, their ideology is revealed. (Le, 2022, p. 375).

This dissertation follows Toulmin's theory of practical arguments, which provides a knowledge framework wherein arguments are constructed based on a relational system involving claims, data, and warrants. The claim refers to the proposition made by the author or speaker, the data provides evidence for the claim while warrants refer to the assumption that creates the link between the claim and the data. Hence, the strength of an argument lies in the sufficient support between the claim and the data, establishing a legitimate and justified connection. Hence, the three components are necessary to have a complete and coherent argument.

Political discourse is determined not only by political discourse structures, such as language and content, but also by political contexts: understanding political discourse presupposes knowledge of the background, expectations of the author and audience, hidden motives, plot patterns and favourite logical links peculiar for a concrete epoch. (Demjankov, 2002, cited in Kulikova and Detinko, 2019, p. 205).

## **2- The dichotomy between good and evil**

« "Others" is one of the main concepts in political communication, therefore, discursive construction of "otherness" takes a special place in political and discursive linguistics. »

(Kulikova and Detinko, 2019, p. 200). An argumentation system allows the categorisation of an aspect of reality into discursive terms and can be applied in various contexts. The concept of «otherness» is a sociocultural phenomenon that plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's discursive identity. Identity formation often involves the differentiation of the self from others, creating a distinct division between the two. Individuals usually strongly delineate the boundaries of the group to which they belong. This is done by minimising the differences of the members within the groups while exaggerating the differences between said groups and other groups. This allows members of a group to recognise one another as well as to identify outsiders.

Setting boundaries between groups makes it easier to strengthen the sense of belonging and shared identity between the members of the group (Kolosov, 2004). Hence, individuals use a discourse of similarity to set the characteristics associated to members of the group and a discourse of difference to set the characteristics associated to others. These discursive practices are meant to establish one's identity within society, thus defining one's identity in relation to the perceived differences or similarities with others (Riggins, 1997). In other words, «identity is understood as the result of the process of naming, attributing some characteristics to someone or something.» (Kulikova and Detinko, 2019, p. 201).

According to the discourse theory proposed by E. Laclau and Ch. Mouffe (2006), identities are constructed and negotiated through discursive processes. Identity is considered a social category that is interwoven with discourse and, therefore, with political practices. This highlights the role of language and communication in shaping identities within society. From E. Laclau and Ch. Mouffe's theory, several principles for the construction of the «other» can be identified. Firstly, an individual's self-identification is intertwined with their recognition of others as «alien.» Secondly, the construction of the «other» is shaped by comparing oneself with others and is influenced by the speaker's or writer's perspective. Thirdly, the «other» is established through discursive representations. Further, the dichotomy between «self» and «others» often involves the classification of «others» as dangerous. Four discursive strategies can be used to clarify the opposition between the self and others, such as: using a good versus evil comparison based on the speaker's or writer's perspective to identify the members of the group, attributing positive characteristics to members of the groups while attaching negative characteristics to the other, employing stereotypes to categorise the other and using associative links i.e. basing the classification of the other on their association with a particular group or geographical region (Kulikova and Detinko, 2019, p. 202).

The characterisation of Saddam Hussein as evil by the Bush administration is a good illustration of the discursive construction of the «other» or an enemy. The Bush administration characterised the Iraqi regime as evil and Saddam Hussein as «an insane person or a madman, notably in the 2003 State of the Union address» as demonstrated by Chang and Mehan (2008, p. 460). Further, the categorisation of Saddam Hussein as evil allowed the Bush administration to legitimise its claims such as the need for military actions as well as convince the audience that the root of the issue originates from the character of Saddam Hussein who is evil and not from political or economic factors. Finally, according to the Bush administration, it is because Saddam Hussein is insane and irrational, that the United States must take military actions. Indeed, a madman cannot be trusted with weapons of mass destruction. As a result, through the construction of the «other» and the characterisation of an evil enemy, the Bush administration managed to legitimise its political agenda and justify its claims.

The «Other» is constructed discursively based on various factors that are related to the context and content of communication. In political discourse, which revolves around the struggle for power, the issues of inclusion and exclusion within the group, characterised by the dichotomy between the self and the other, are particularly significant and prevalent (Kulikova and Detinko, 2019, p. 209). The association of the other with a negative image and the idea of the enemy is based on individuals' fear of what is unfamiliar or different. This is backed by humans' cognitive hardware. Indeed, individuals have a natural inclination to expect members of their group to behave and think similarly to them, aligning with their own perspectives. They are also less afraid of interacting with members of their group while interacting with «other» induces more anxiety. In addition, when assessing other individuals, people are more inclined to make better predictions on the behaviour of members of their group than for the «other» (Gudykunst 1998, p. 71). As a result, this makes individuals more comfortable around people similar to them.

Furthermore, to allow the identification and formation of a group, several stages for the construction of the «other» through discourse have to be completed. These steps are the assignment of labels to social actors to establish a boundary between the self and the other, the attribution of negative characteristics to the other is generalised and the creation of an argumentation system that legitimises the inclusion or exclusion of individuals from the group. These stages provide a framework for understanding how discursive strategies can shape the perception of the «self» and «others» within a social context. In addition, the creation of the «other» needs to be adapted depending on the «historical conventions,

the public levels of tolerance, political correctness, the specific context and public sphere» (Wodak, 2008, p. 295). As a result, four strategies can be identified in the construction of the «other». The first strategy is the strategy of identification of the «otherness» which means the «other» is formed using verbal expressions and acts of reference. By employing a specific language such as the use of the pronoun «they», the identification strategy creates boundaries between «us» and «them», establishing a clear distinction and reinforcing the differences between the two groups. The second strategy is the strategy of justification and retention of the status of the «other» which means that this status of the «other» is implemented through the act of legitimising the existing social order. This is done by accumulating evidence that the «other» is unlike the «self» to justify the preservation of the status quo. It contributes to the preservation and reinforcement of the established order, where the «others» are positioned as separate and different from the norm or dominant group. The third strategy is the transformation strategy which means that the writer or speaker is trying to alter the existing perception or image of the «other». This aims at influencing the audience's perception of the «other» to fit the writer or speaker's perspective. The fourth strategy is the destructive strategy which means that the writer or speaker wants to undermine and discredit the image of the «other» without providing an alternative representation of them. This is done by eroding the credibility or legitimacy of the «other» by highlighting their flaws and controversial actions.

In sum, as H. Bausinger (1988) suggests, the concept of the «other» is subjective, and someone is considered «other» only from the perspective of a «self». In other words, the interpretation of «other» is always influenced by the perspective of the «self». This means that the perception of others as different or alien is relative to one's own identity and perspective (cited in Kulikova and Detinko, 2019, p. 206).

### **3- The reliance on history to legitimise actions**

The discourse-historical approach, as described by Fairclough and Wodak (1997), involves «systematically integrating all the relevant background information when analysing and interpreting the various layers of a spoken or written text». In this approach, the goal is to consider and incorporate all the available contextual information that may have influenced the production and meaning of the text being analysed. By doing so, a deeper understanding of the text and its underlying social, political, and historical dimensions can be achieved.

Phil Graham and al. examine four «call to arms» speeches and identify four

defining features.

[They have] an appeal to a legitimate power source that is external to the orator, and which is presented as inherently good; an appeal to the historical importance of the culture in which the discourse is situated; the construction of a thoroughly evil Other; an appeal for unification behind the legitimating external power source. (Graham and al., 2004, p. 199).

The «call to arms» is a longstanding strategy used by leaders in times of crisis to mobilise the masses and manipulate the power dynamics of their social contexts. By urging people to fight and sacrifice their lives, leaders aim to consolidate their own power (Bourdieu, 1998 and Saul, 1992). Texts of this nature are often found in historical contexts marked by significant crises in political legitimacy. These crises signify a loss of faith in established political institutions and leaders, creating an environment of scepticism and distrust. For instance, when George W. Bush was elected, political parties lost their traditional constituencies and extremist political parties were rising. Many people widely believed that Bush had stolen the 2000 elections and was viewed as an illegitimate president.

Furthermore, oracular reasoning practices can be used to legitimise the author or speaker's arguments. The concept of oracular reasoning as explained by Evans-Pritchard (1937), entails using a diverse array of events as indisputable evidence to uphold «incorrigible propositions» within a cultural framework of meaning, while disregarding evidence that contradicts the belief. As a result, supplementary explanations of these incorrigible propositions are generated to clarify contradictory evidence, preventing any questioning of the original beliefs. In addition, the coherence and legitimacy of arguments are inherently connected to human ingenuity as well as the social and power dynamics that prevail within a specific historical context. According to Van Dijk, «two propositions are considered coherent when they are conditionally related i.e., they have an elaborative relationship or a goal-outcome relation» (1980, cited in Chang and Mehan, 2008, p. 468). When two events or sentences are expressed together, they can create a meaning that goes beyond the mere combination of the individual sentences. The audience detects a cause effect relationship between the two events, which leads to a sense of coherence.

Moreover, analogical reasoning has consistently been appealing to policymakers, who have frequently employed historical metaphors to inform their decision-making processes. The literature on analogical reasoning in policy making emphasises how analogies have been employed to shed light on the «lessons» of history. These lessons are

supposed to then influence contemporary decisions and security policies (May, 1973; Jervis, 1976; Khong, 1992, cited in Mumford, 2015, p. 2). By leveraging historical analogies, policymakers aim to better navigate complex modern policy challenges in order to make informed decisions. Further, the use of analogies by policymakers, regardless of their accuracy or reliability, is a recurring phenomenon. Policymakers consistently draw upon historical analogies to interpret and justify their decisions. This practice highlights the significance of analogical reasoning as a crucial component of policy making.

Nonetheless, in recent times, there has been an emergence of a more powerful type of analogy, one that is deliberately chosen to serve an ideological function. The use of analogical reasoning as a means of rational decision making has gradually given way to its use as a tool for forcefully justifying policy choices driven by a specific ideological agenda. In other words, policymakers are now more inclined to select analogies that align with their ideological stance and serve as a persuasive tool to support their policy positions (Mumford, 2015, p. 2). This means that ideological analogical reasoning is inherently instrumental in nature. Its primary function becomes to manipulate history to fit a predetermined political agenda, making it a deliberately persuasive tool.

The Bush administration's manichean approach to world politics, dividing nations into those who were either «with us or with the terrorists, » exemplified the use of analogical reasoning to fulfil a particular ideological function. This approach was employed to justify the implementation of the Bush Doctrine, which aimed to assert American power in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks by advocating regime change in countries considered to be a threat. Through this ideological lens, Saddam Hussein was portrayed as an equivalent to Adolf Hitler, drawing a parallel between the necessary war against the spread of Nazism in the past and the perceived need to fight Islamism in the present. This use of analogical reasoning allowed the Bush administration to create a sense of urgency and moral duty to justify their policy actions (Mumford, 2015, p. 2). Further, this approach often disregards the complexity and nuances of historical events, reducing them to simplistic comparisons that serve the ideological narrative being promoted. As a result, historical accuracy and a comprehensive understanding of the past are sacrificed for the sake of gaining support for a specific political agenda.

In addition, according to Dan Reiter (1994), analogical reasoning is «a theory of learning that combines the ideas of knowledge structures and judgmental heuristics». This means that it serves a cognitive framework that helps individuals organise and connect information in order to have a better understanding of complex modern circumstances. In

other words, analogies allow individuals to simplify the complexities of the present by linking them to familiar or reassuring elements from the past (Mumford, 2015, p. 3). They provide a sense of order and coherence by creating a narrative that connects the known with the unknown.

## Chapter 5: Empirical analysis

This chapter will aim at explaining in which context the 2022 elections took place. The French social and political context has been through several crises in recent years which fragmented society. Consequently, French society has been fragmented over these years which can fuel social unrest. Given this context of fragility and questioning of democratic processes, society is more receptive to disinformation. Disinformation involves the manipulation of information and narratives. For this reason, this chapter focuses on the discursive techniques used by Eric Zemmour and the far-right ecosystem at large as he is part of this movement on the political spectrum. The Covid-19 pandemic in particular has underscored how disinformation can be a threat to democracies. The unprecedented health crisis has provided fertile ground for the propagation of conspiracy theories and alternative narratives, including on social media platforms.

### 1- The importance of context

Eric Zemmour is a famous polemicist and former columnist for the newspaper *Le Figaro*. He regularly appears on TV shows, notably on the TV channel CNews since 2019. He used the social and political context to make himself a prominent actor in the national political landscape and to legitimise his arguments. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) notes that:

The potential candidacy of Zemmour was omnipresent in the French media ahead of the election cycle especially from September 2021. As highlighted by Action Critique Médias (or Acrimed), in September 2021, Zemmour was mentioned 4,167 times in French media (139 mentions per day). (Fourel and Gatewood, 2022, p. 4).

He has been in the spotlight for most of his career, since the early 2000s, which allowed him to use his media presence to promote his candidacy. Further, France has undergone several crises from the terrorist attacks to the Covid-19 pandemic in the span of a few years which allowed Eric Zemmour to use the climate of social tensions and divisions for his political campaign. He declared his official candidacy for the presidency in a video posted on YouTube on November 30th, 2021. According to him, «It's no longer time to reform France, but to save it. That's why I've decided to run for president. » (2021).



The 2022 elections unfolded in a context of heightened apprehension surrounding the potential consequences of disinformation and divisive rhetoric, notably due to the 2017 presidential elections. The latter was the first major example of disinformation during political elections in France, which opposed Marine Le Pen (from the far-right, Rassemblement National party) to Emmanuel Macron (from the République en Marche/Renaissance party). In France, the Electoral Code (Articles L-49 and L59-1) forbids television and radio stations from airing polls or election-related statements the day before and the day of the first round of voting in order to prevent swaying voters' votes. Similarly, political candidates commit to not do any public declarations. However, during this period of «electoral silence», a leak was reported on a 4Chan forum. The latter disclosed more than 20.000 emails, some of which had been created by the hackers, from the political team of Emmanuel Macron. Pro-Trump and pro-russian groups then amplified this leak through their social media networks. As a result, France was on alert for the 2022 elections to avoid a repetition of this situation. This episode, named the Macron Leaks, underlined the fact that election interference and information manipulation are becoming recurrent threats that democracies need to be prepared for.

In addition, the 2022 French elections were marked by the rise of extremist parties. Indeed, in 2022, France witnessed two significant elections: the presidential election, and the parliamentary election. The parliament is now made up of a notable presence of far-right parties (88 seats out of 577). This shift in the composition of the parliament reflects the evolving dynamics of French politics and highlights the influence and support garnered by far-right ideologies. Consequently, this shows that far-right discourses are finding echoes in society. In contrast, the speeches made by Jean-Marie Le Pen, a far-right politician who was also known to make controversial statements in the 1980s and in the early 2000s, earned him the exclusion from other political parties and rejection from most of the population. However, in the current era of constant sensationalism, Eric Zemmour has emerged as a figure who effectively captures the audience's attention.

Hence, to legitimise his political agenda, he used the gradual introduction of certain terms or ideas such as the Great Replacement theory, into the public discourse. As he said in the Mont-Saint-Michel on February 19th, 2022, «We defied political correctness». By doing so, he aims to desensitise the audience to these concepts, making them appear more familiar and acceptable in political language. This process of normalisation involves repeatedly exposing individuals to the same slogans and ideas, leading the critical consciousness to believe that it has already evaluated these concepts in the past. The

repetition of the message creates a perception of its justification, simply based on its recurrence. To comfort people's acceptance of these ideas, he assures them that they are not alone and thus should not be afraid of their convictions.

You're not the only ones who think what you do, the majority of French people do. Our ideas are not divisive: it's the journalists who say they are: they are the consensus throughout France! (Zemmour, 2022).

Furthermore, during January 2022, in the middle of the electoral campaigns, the main topics online and offline in France revolved around the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, there was a significant emphasis on the potential dangers associated with the Omicron variant, as well as the controversies surrounding the vaccination pass and sanitary measures. In addition, there was a notable surge in anti-establishment sentiments and discourses, alongside the widespread dissemination of false or misleading information concerning the virus. A report from the ISD revealed that Eric Zemmour benefited from the existence of a group of accounts on social media that actively supported him (2022, p. 37). This cluster of accounts, composed of Eric Zemmour's campaign team and himself, did not only promote his political agenda but also amplified messages that strongly criticised the Emmanuel Macron's administration's health restriction policies, albeit to a lesser extent. Moreover, beyond this core group, several public figures and individuals associated with broader ecosystems of the far-right and the conservative right in France, also promoted his content although their explicit support for him was not clearly stated. Overall, this report highlighted how certain actors from the far-right and sovereignist right-wing have incorporated disinformation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and conspiracy theories into their narratives.

Eric Zemmour accused Emmanuel Macron of instrumentalising the Covid-19 pandemic for two specific reasons. Firstly, Eric Zemmour argued that Emmanuel Macron wanted to shift the focus of the presidential election onto the topic of Covid-19, to avoid discussions about France's identity. Eric Zemmour suggested that he successfully made France's identity a prominent theme at the beginning of the presidential campaign. According to him, Emmanuel Macron «wants to make Covid the subject of this presidential election. [...] We won't let the election be stolen from us, » (2022). He used a «Stop the Steal» rhetoric (referring to the social movement for the 2020 American presidential elections), aiming at making Emmanuel Macron seem like he was engaging in a political

manipulation of the health crisis for political gain. In other words, Eric Zemmour used the Covid-19 pandemic to construct political evidence against Macron's administration. Therefore, by discrediting the discourses of others, he effectively undermines the integrity of public discourse, monopolising the debate and positioning himself as the sole legitimate voice. He described himself as the spokesman for French people who have been «despised by the powerful, the elites, the self-righteous, journalists, politicians, academics, sociologists, trade unionists and religious authorities» (2021).

Further, Eric Zemmour's «Stop the Steal» script was grounded on electoral fraud. He spread narratives aimed at undermining the integrity and fairness of the elections. This can be illustrated with statements such as: «They tell you that the polls tell the truth, when they've always been wrong. » (2022) or

I chose the Trocadéro to come and wash away the affronts of the Right, the affronts of the people who legitimately feel that their vote has been stolen from them for too long. (Zemmour, 2022).

Overall, he used the crisis to establish himself on the political scene and erect himself as a charismatic leader. He also used his lack of affiliation with a traditional political party to show that he was not a corrupted politician but rather a genuine individual. This is illustrated by his statement:

I'm not a professional politician: journalists think that's my weakness. The people think it's my strength. Because I haven't spent my life betraying my promises, going with the flow to move up one per cent in the polls. I haven't spent my life scheming to get a government job. I haven't spent my life living off public money. I've spent my life defending you. I've spent my life telling the truth and paying the price. (Zemmour, 2022)

Thus, he leveraged this aspect to present himself as an independent individual, similar to the rest of society. Moreover, once the war in Ukraine was launched, the same individuals that disseminated narratives against the Covid-19 vaccine, also actively propagated pro-Russian disinformation. During times of war, the proliferation of disinformation tends to escalate. As early as 1921, Marc Bloch highlighted the prevalence of information manipulation during the First World War. In his analysis, he noted that heightened emotions and fatigue among the population weakened their critical thinking abilities, making them more susceptible to manipulation and disinformation campaigns. Thus, the combination of heightened emotions, ambiguity, and censorship creates a fertile ground for

disinformation to thrive. Malicious actors take advantage of the public's vulnerability and of their desire for clarity, to disseminate false narratives, exploit biases, and promote their own agendas. Eric Zemmour used the war in Ukraine to legitimise his political agenda.

This war also reminds us that we have a duty to be strong, and that this duty is the most important of all, because it defends our sovereignty, our independence, our security, our freedom, our prosperity and our identity (Zemmour, 2022).

This quote highlights the recurrent themes he used in his campaign such as identity, security and sovereignty. These themes are meant to justify his vision for France. Indeed, because Europe and France's security are in danger due to the war in Ukraine, this is an opportunity for the country to assume its power, which echoes to the General de Gaulle's aspirations, and to design stricter migration policies to protect France's security and identity.

Moreover, the emergence of authoritarian as well as identity-based political forces and regimes is a defining characteristic of our contemporary era. It has gained strength in a fertile political environment, nourished by both the tragic events that have deeply affected France and the shortcomings of both left-wing and right-wing parties. The world has grown more complex, burdened by asymmetric threats. The state of crisis has become almost permanent. Indeed, for almost the past six years now, France has experienced a regime that deviates from the norms of ordinary law. According to Jean-Louis Fiamenghi (2022), a former member of the law enforcement and author, immediacy is a determining factor in crisis management. This compression of time creates an environment where there is no tolerance for even the slightest uncertainty, leading politicians to seize upon issues instantly. As a result, Eric Zemmour has thrived and gained influence in this politically conducive environment. Amidst the prevailing political turmoil, Eric Zemmour emerged as a figure who brings a semblance of order to a chaotic climate.

## **2- The dichotomy between good and evil**

The people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country. (Hermann Goering, 1938, cited in Gilbert, 1947, p. 278–9)

Since the terrorist attacks of 2015, the focus on security has expanded beyond the issue of terrorism, notably due to the social unrest of the yellow vests, the impact of Covid-19, and the war in Ukraine. Eric Zemmour 's speeches can be analysed through Phil Graham and al.'s historical approach. In fact, there are similarities notably «the construction of a thoroughly evil «Other. » (2004, p. 199). Eric Zemmour targeted immigrants and foreigners and constructed them as an enemy. He fabricated a visible enemy, a perceived threat that must be eliminated or eradicated, to legitimise his political agenda, characterised by five priorities. Among the latter were «face with scum, fear will change sides» and «in the face of Islam's conquest, I will protect France and its identity. ». This construction of an evil Other serves to rally support and justify the need for action which «reflects the 'societal order of discourse' of the day» (Fairclough, 1992, cited in Graham and al., 2004, p. 203).

Further, Eric Zemmour 's argumentation system aimed to prove the need for a clash of civilisation. The clash of civilisation script constructed a scene of conflict between the French people and immigrants to justify the view that human existence is inherently rooted in conflict and the pursuit of dominance. Therefore, by creating a narrative that justified the need for confrontation and conflict, he justified the vital importance to a crusade for civilisation. In turn, this fight for civilisation justified oppressive measures against immigrants of his political agenda. Indeed, according to him, the overload of foreigners is making French people feel like foreigners in their country as he explained in his video announcing his candidacy for president.

The fear of the end of France is the indefinable misfortune of feeling like a foreigner in your own country, the anguish of living in a violent country, the horror of the increasing number of victims, the despair of such a cowardly political class (Zemmour, 2022).

In his words, «Immigration is not the source of all our problems, even if it aggravates them all» (Zemmour, 2021). This shows that Eric Zemmour aimed to personalise the source of the issue i.e., immigrants by using discourse strategies to construct an enemy. In other words, he characterised foreigners and immigrants as 'forces of evil' against which he has to stand against, making himself the 'saviour' of the country. Eric Zemmour is also relying on religious symbols as reflected in his speech at the Mont Saint Michel on February 19th, 2021.

Saint Michael is not just any saint. Present in both the Old and New Testaments, he is the leader of the heavenly army. In other words, the angel who leads the army of angels against the army of

demons, in the battle between good and evil that has spanned the millennia. (Zemmour, 2021)

This imagery evokes a symbolic battle between good and evil, with Eric Zemmour positioning himself as a leader of the righteous forces combating the perceived forces of darkness as illustrated by his claim «We don't want a token candidacy, we want power. The others want to reform France, we want to save France» (2022). By doing so, he highlighted his identification to a specific religious framework and presented himself as a champion of those values. Consequently, Eric Zemmour ascribes a vital importance to his crusade for civilisation. In this respect, for Erwan Lecœur, a French sociologist and far-right specialist,

[France] is facing people who believe that they have to prepare for a form of ethnic civil war, and that accelerationism (a theory which aims to promote chaos in order to precipitate a racial war,) consists in striking first. (Lecœur, 2023)

Through his portrayal of immigrants as 'evil', which aligns with his clash of civilisations script, Eric Zemmour simplified complex issues and disregarded nuanced aspects of the immigration debate by making generalisations. Also, he often used terms like muslim and terrorist interchangeably or blended them together. This imprecise usage of vocabulary aimed to create more confusion and ambiguity. By relying on stereotypes about immigrants and deliberately misusing words and creating amalgams, he generated biased knowledge. Overall, his deliberate misinterpretation of words contributed to the implosion of social cohesion, the destabilisation of the republican fabric and the erosion of core democratic values.

Furthermore, this mode of argumentation enabled him to present intricate situations, which are typically fully understood only by experts, as straightforward facts that can be easily understood by the general public. By framing immigration policy concerns within the clash of civilisations script, Eric Zemmour removed these concerns from the realm of expert discourse and made them accessible to a wider audience. In sum, he built an argumentation system that helped legitimise his exclusionary ideology to gain support for his regressive policies.

Moreover, within Eric Zemmour's universe, there is an overwhelming presence of violence and an unhealthy obsession with themes of war, death, conquest, and dominance as illustrated with his statement «The hounds are now at my heels. My opponents want me dead politically, the journalists want me dead socially and the jihadists want me dead

altogether» (2021). This atmosphere of widespread violence creates an underlying assumption that subtly implants in people's minds the notion that they must align themselves with one side or the other. The implicit pressure to choose sides is instilled in people's minds, creating a binary or manichean perspective that oversimplifies complex issues and disregards the possibility of nuanced understanding or alternative viewpoints. In other words, choosing sides is subtly ingrained within society, perpetuating a sense of social division and polarisation.

In addition, the polarisation of identity is a response to the permeable nature of borders and to cultural blending as demonstrated by his claim «Insecurity and immigration! Yes, I have a duty to think about the consequences of the lax attitude of our politicians, who have abandoned our borders» (Zemmour, 2022). Individuals and communities often seek to reinforce their sense of identity by delineating clear divisions between «us» and «them». The erection of walls e.g., in the United States is a manifestation of this desire to physically set boundaries between different communities. Such physical barriers aim to create a sense of security and protect the perceived cultural, social, or economic interests of a particular group. By physically separating populations, these walls serve as tangible symbols of division and reinforce a sense of «us» versus «them».

Moreover, Eric Zemmour's clash of civilisation or Great Replacement script was rooted in oracular reasoning which allowed him to create an argumentation system that relied on an arbitrary evidential system. The fact that «we're financing their arrival, we're financing the upkeep of the suburbs they've ransacked, and we're financing their lifestyle» (Zemmour, 2022) is a self-evident indicator that immigrants and foreigners are the reason for the Great Replacement in France. In other words, the claim «immigrants are evil because they are responsible for national insecurity and our Great Replacement» becomes an incorrigible proposition. Hence, according to Eric Zemmour «we are financing our own replacement, at the cost of our own downgrading! » (2022). As a result, this leads to the disappearance of France:

We don't have many French bookshops anymore, but we do come across Islamic bookshops. You don't see many skirts anymore, but you do see a lot of niqabs. You're looking for France, and you can't find it. France is disappearing before the frightened eyes of the French. (Zemmour, 2022).

Eric Zemmour employed a divisive rhetoric characterised by the us versus them dichotomy. He created a portrayal of immigrants aimed at facilitating the dissemination of a xenophobic

narrative to fabricate or manufacture an enemy out of immigrants.

In a fragile context, it becomes easy to fuel the feelings of resentment, to proclaim the «submersion» by Islam, to condemn the supposed «betrayal of the elites, » and to target scapegoats who are immediately perceived as threats. Pierre Conesa, in his book *The making of the enemy, or how to kill with your conscience at heart*, highlights the intellectual and mental constructs that play a crucial role in shaping the «other» and in the process of fabricating an enemy. According to him, these constructs serve to shape public perception as well as create a narrative that justifies the need for confrontation or conflict. Hence, the presence of minority groups is often exploited as a factor of vulnerability, particularly when they can be associated with migrants in narratives surrounding the perceived risk of displacement and appeals to patriotic nostalgia.

### **3- The reliance on history to legitimise actions**

I'm happy to be here at Mont-Saint-Michel. Not just because this fairy castle, set in the sea, springs from my childhood dreams. But also, and above all, because of the power of the symbol represented by this high place in our national memory. An inspiring symbol of French magnificence and grace, Mont-Saint-Michel is a high-altitude sign of power, the power of old, enduring nations. Those nations that rise above the trials and tribulations of the past to stand stronger and stronger, century after century, thanks to the «genius of renewal», as De Gaulle used to say (Zemmour, 2022).

In this statement, Eric Zemmour laments the death of France as we know it to capitalise on feelings of nostalgia and show that «it was better before». In addition, Eric Zemmour has been referring to historical figures, and in particular Charles de Gaulle, in many of his speeches. By incorporating cultural references and historical figures, his intention was to evoke a sense of nostalgia by reminding the audience of France's glorious past. To do so, he often referred to the fact that «We have a duty of power. Yes, I'm talking about a duty. We owe it to our history, we owe it to the French, we owe it to our children and grandchildren. » (2022). Similarly,

We have a duty to be strong, a duty bequeathed to us by our glorious history, reinforced by General de Gaulle, and on which our future depends. We have a duty of strength for the security of our children. We have a duty of power, and it is non-negotiable (Zemmour, 2022).

This shows that Eric Zemmour employed historical figures, notably Charles de Gaulle, as



part of a storytelling strategy aimed at establishing a connection between the present and the past. In other words, this deliberate use of historical references served to create a narrative that emphasised a sense of continuity and heritage, tapping into people's collective memory and identity. Consequently, it constructed a specific portrayal of France, highlighting particular values, traditions, and ideals associated with these historical figures. His goal was to foster a shared understanding of the country's identity and values.

Furthermore, in his presidential candidacy announcement video, Eric Zemmour drew parallels with the General de Gaulle's famous June 18th, 1940, appeal during the Second World War. Indeed, he recreated a similar setting, with a typical office, an old microphone, and an overall atmosphere of gravity, to evoke a sense of historical significance. This communication strategy relied on storytelling techniques to foster a strong sense of national identity. Eric Zemmour tried to convey a specific vision of France, underlining its historical importance, as demonstrated in his speech in Paris,

I chose the Trocadéro, this square that symbolises France recovering from the defeat of Sedan with the construction of the Eiffel Tower. I chose the Trocadéro with Marshal Foch in mind, the sublime victor of the terrible war of 14-18, who is looking down on us from his statue this afternoon. I chose the Trocadéro because I thought of General de Gaulle, who made a great speech here on this square in 1944, just a few days after walking down the Champs Elysées in a liberated Paris (Zemmour, 2022).

According to Laurent Joly, a researcher at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS in French) and a specialist of antisemitism under the Vichy regime, in France, «you need an intellectual cachet to seduce», Eric Zemmour plays «the card of the man who knows, who has read. He knows French history, and that gives him the legitimacy to talk about the present» (2022). This can be illustrated by his claim:

Some of you will be familiar with the letter Bernanos wrote to his friends in 1942: «So don't worry, France invented Joan of Arc, it invented Saint-Just, it invented Clemenceau, and it hasn't finished inventing more!  
» (Zemmour, 2022).

Moreover, Eric Zemmour distorts historical facts to construct an alternate reality and alter the collective memory of society. This can be seen in the way he advocates for the Great Replacement theory:

I say no to the great downgrading and I also say no to the Great Replacement! No, it's not a conspiracy theory, it's not a theory at all: it's the day-to-day reality that you experience. (Zemmour, 2022).

The theory of the Great Replacement has a long history that initially targeted Jews, beginning with the nationalism of Maurice Barrès in the 19th century. However, since the 9/11 in 2001, it has shifted its focus towards Islam. The conspiracy version of this theory suggests that global elites are intentionally facilitating the supposed Arab-Muslim «colonisation» of Europe. This narrative asserts that increasing immigration and higher birth rates among immigrants pose a risk to the original population, which is becoming a minority in their own country and thus having a foreign culture imposed upon them. Eric Zemmour openly built a political agenda around this theory

Furthermore, to legitimise his political agenda characterised by racist policies, he gave an account of events that selectively presented information while disregarding the broader context.

A priest [who] was attacked by a man «known by the police intelligence services», as they say, which means, every time, that we know and do nothing. This man spat in the face of the priest of the Basilica of Saint Michel, in the middle of blessing the square. This unacceptable act should have been firmly condemned. Do you agree? The courts have made an example of him, and this delinquent who was armed with a knife and who attacked a man of the cloth has been given a... citizenship course. It's a disgrace, my friends! (Zemmour, 2022).

He chose to focus solely on the nationality of the perpetrators, disregarding the rest of the story. He selected and accentuated the «facts» that underpinned his arguments to create a narrative that captures the attention of the audience by being a sensationalist account of the events. In other words, he deliberately omitted certain facts of the overall context to make the story fit his exclusionary views. This helped him achieve an anxious climate characterised by a sense of peril and urgency to act. In addition, according to Eric Zemmour, under Emmanuel Macron's presidency, France will have welcomed 2 million immigrants, averaging 400,000 per year. This large figure is intended to support his plans for stricter migration policies. However, according to the think tank Terra Nova, this calculation is flawed. Eric Zemmour combines different types of data, such as residence permits issued, asylum applications filed in the country, and unaccompanied minors, thereby conflating the stock of immigrants with the flow of people entering the country. Terra Nova argues that

this methodology is inaccurate and misleading as it fails to differentiate between different categories of immigrants and their respective immigration statuses. He manipulated information to make his claims support his narrative. He also romanticised the idea of triumph and power over these threats, similarly to Donald Trump's storytelling practices.

[His story] was torn straight from the template of all great drama. It mixes together all the same ingredients: well-defined antagonists and protagonists; a challenging quest with an unlikely outcome; and page after page of memorable dialogue (Sergeant, 2020, p. 5).

Moreover, he discursively linked the fight for civilisation that he wants to lead with a variety of events like the attack of a priest to justify the implementation of oppressive policies. Immigrants can be characterised as «evil» because there are precedents i.e., tragic events, which are then instrumentalised by Eric Zemmour to back up his claims. This allows him to convince his audience that immigrants are responsible for the attacks committed on the population. In addition, the theory of the Great Replacement helped Eric Zemmour to introduce conspiratorial rhetoric in the public sphere and public discourse. He is paranoid about the decline of the country and the failure of elites to protect French identity. His vision of France's identity relies on the country's greatness which he reflects through historical figures and great authors of classic French literature.

It's the greatest gift France can give you, to be part of its immense History. It's the greatest gift France has ever given me! Imagine becoming a compatriot of Montaigne and Pascal, of Chateaubriand and Balzac! (Zemmour, 2022).

Overall, he constructed a narrative that disregards historical accuracy and distorts the collective memory we share as a society. Indeed, by using strategies such as truncated quotations and selectively cherry-picking information that served his desired narrative, he sought to reshape public opinion and reinterpret the events of the past to align with his political agenda. Eric Zemmour aimed to downplay or dismiss the reprehensible actions of the Vichy regime to legitimise his exclusionary ideologies and gain support for their regressive policies. On CNews, he stated that the Vichy «protected French Jews and gave away foreign Jews» (2021).

As a result, Eric Zemmour's manipulation of history to absolve Marshal Pétain from his involvement in the deportation of Jews has been strongly criticised by experts on the Vichy regime and the Holocaust. A collective of historians argued that his approach relied

on inaccuracies as a deliberate method. This led to him being tried on appeal in January 2022 for

«disputing a crime against humanity». Hence, Eric Zemmour 's attempt to rewrite the national narrative involved the use of falsehoods and political manipulation of the past. He did so in his speeches but also his previous writings. By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, Eric Zemmour 's writings undermine people's ability to accurately understand and interpret the past. He also used questionable sources that only confirmed his narrative to propagate an extreme- right imaginary. As said by Chang and Mehan, «manipulating established practices of reasoning can be dangerous as they help to regulate and direct social power» (2008, p. 473).

## **Chapter 6: Disinformation as a part of a more global hybridstrategy**

While political and electoral gains are often the focus of disinformation campaigns, their impact extends beyond elections. Indeed, the rise of the cyberspace has marked the onset of a new era characterised by power struggles between states trying to establish their supremacy and expand their influence in the informational space. While certain elements of confrontation in this intangible world resemble those observed in the physical realm, there are distinct dynamics unique to this domain, thereby introducing a new logic of conflict (NATO, 2020, p. 2). In this intangible world, conflicts are not solely determined by tangible resources or military might but are heavily influenced by the control and manipulation of information. States are compelled to navigate and compete within this information-rich environment, as it holds significant sway over their positions in the global arena. To achieve success in information warfare strategies, acquiring substantial data access and processing capabilities is essential. Conquering the digital market revolves around attaining informational supremacy to become the primary influencer of public opinion and behaviour. Hence, the realm of cyberspace serves as a battleground for information warfare. New technologies allow malicious actors to use strategies such as spreading disinformation campaigns and disseminating targeted narratives to disturb democratic processes thus «disrupting the peace from the inside. » Overall, influencing public opinion through fabricated narratives and social media manipulation can be used by foreign states to exert influence over the public sentiment and behaviour of the targeted country.

### **1- Disinformation as a hybrid threat**

Disinformation was recognised as a hybrid threat within Western strategic discussions. The concept of hybrid threats emerged from debates on military doctrine, particularly in the context of conflicts witnessed in the early twenty-first century. Hybrid threats encompassed the notion of adversaries employing a combination of conventional and unconventional means in creative and unpredictable ways to achieve their objectives (Hoffman, 2007; 2010). In other words, this concept acknowledges the interconnectedness of different forms of warfare and recognises the integration of information warfare within the broader spectrum of conventional military tactics. In addition, information warfare is used not only in the

physical world but also in the virtual world. The French Armed forces see cyberspace as an area of combat. Information warfare is the discursive layer of cyberspace. According to Florence Parly, the former minister of the Armed Forces, «tomorrow's war is also a war of influence and disinformation of populations» (2019). With the development of the information sphere, influence operations have become an integral part of military operations. This link between the two is part of the framework of competition, contestation and confrontation, developed by Thierry Burkhard, the French Chief of the Defence Staff. This paradigm shift provides a better understanding of hybrid strategies and reflects a significant turning point in French doctrine.

Since 2017, France has implemented measures to safeguard the country from disinformation campaigns and influence operations, expanding both technological and human resources. Firstly, France developed its legal framework on information manipulation. The framework is defined by two key laws: the 1881 law on freedom of the press and the 2018 law on combating the manipulation of information. The law n°2018-1202 specifically focuses on preventing and responding to information manipulation, with a particular emphasis on the pre-election period. It was enacted in response to the Macron Leaks in 2017 and created a 'fake news' emergency procedure, outlined in Article L. 163-2 of the French Electoral Code. The latter states that a panel of judges is allowed to take urgent measures (within 48 hours after receiving a complaint) to halt the dissemination of false information, «when inaccurate or misleading allegations or imputations of a fact likely to alter the sincerity of the upcoming ballot are disseminated in a deliberate, artificial or automated and massive manner through an online public communication service».

Furthermore, institutionally, various organisations have established watch cells to monitor and address these security concerns. The Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS in French) is currently planning an internal reorganisation to better respond to the evolving geostrategic context. In addition, Viginum which succeeded to the Honfleur task force, is responsible for combating foreign digital interference, particularly in electoral processes. It was created to avoid a similar situation to the Macron Leaks for the 2022 elections. Further, Viginum's mission is to detect and characterise interference or «inauthentic situations». Nonetheless, there has been a trend to expand the scope of the organisation's missions. This can be evidenced with its last investigation, published on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The latter focuses on disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining Western support for Ukraine's war efforts. It details the operating procedures and fabricated narratives of these disinformation campaigns.

While Viginum is increasing its involvement in France's fight against disinformation, the Cyber Defence Command (COMCYBER in French) remains the leader in France's strategy against disinformation. Its main objective is to protect information systems and undertake military operations in cyberspace, encompassing their planning, design, and execution. In addition, the organisation is looking to expand its personnel, going from around 3600 cyber fighters to around 5000 between 2025 and 2030. This reflects the growing role of information warfare and the desire to better integrate cyber influence operations to military strategies.

Moreover, the French Armed forces have recognised the importance of cyberspace, where a significant part of disinformation campaigns and influence operations take place. This is evidenced by the French military doctrine for information warfare. The latter is composed of the defensive information warfare (LID in French) doctrine published in 2018 and the offensive information warfare (LIO in French) doctrine published the following year. Faced with an increasingly complex geostrategic landscape, France decided to continue strengthening its informational space by adopting a more comprehensive doctrinal framework. This is why, in 2021, the Ministry of the Armed Forces promulgated its military doctrine to combat electronic influence (L2I in French). The aim of this doctrine is to provide a framework for military influence operations outside national territory and unconventional countermeasures techniques. The effective use of information warfare is crucial to the success of military strategies in order to allow France to «win the war before the war».

The L2I enables the Armed forces to detect, characterise and impede attacks and to carry out operations to reinforce their actions in theatres of operation. Among the operations covered by the L2I are the following missions: mitigating the effects of informational attacks against French military operations, collecting intelligence on the informational environment of military operations, denouncing the deceptions of France's adversaries... The extension of information warfare into cyberspace has introduced a destabilising element within the military operations environment. Indeed, disinformation can be detrimental to the operational conduct of military actions in the field. Armed forces can also face rejection from local populations, who may be influenced by messages on social media that fuel anti-French sentiment. Finally, the distortion of information makes it more difficult for armies to obtain an accurate analysis of the situation.

Furthermore, the fight against disinformation also encompasses influence operations. According to François Bernard Huyghe, influence is a «process aimed at

altering others' perception of reality » (cited in Revel, 2023, p. 4). Hence, the Armed forces have recognised the relevance of influence operations. This is evident in the 2017 Strategic Review and the report accompanying the 2019-2025 Military Programming Law. One key measure of the latter is the implementation of a Military Strategy of Influence (SMI in French), which is overseen by the J9-OI office within the Operation Planning and Conduct Centre (CPCO in French). The SMI is designed to guide the Armed forces in countering disinformation and in conducting information operations in support of military personnel at the tactical level.

Additionally, the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEFA) introduced its Roadmap on Influence in December 2021. The latter gives an inventory of France's existing levers of influence and outlines ten key areas as well as six strategic priorities that France must focus on to adapt to the evolving geostrategic context. Further, the MEFA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, presented in March 2023 a strategy for influence through law for the next five years. Lastly, the MEFA has approved the implementation of a six-month trial for an interministerial informational task force (TF2I). The main objective of the TF2I is to coordinate the French response against foreign influence operations targeting Paris, especially during times of crisis. The decision to establish the TF2I was made during a meeting of the National Defence and Security Council in March 2023, which focused on information-related issues. This indicates that disinformation and influence operations continue to be topics of interest in France.

Over the past two centuries, cognitive domination techniques, which originated during religious wars, have undergone further development, characterised by a professionalisation of the conduct of disinformation campaigns. For instance, the «Story Killers» project exposes an industry that employs various tactics to manipulate the media and public opinion, disregarding the principles of accurate information and democratic values. A market has emerged where companies have honed their expertise in manipulating reality and disseminating fabricated narratives. These entities operate at the intersection of social media, digital strategies, and cyberespionage, skillfully exerting influence over public opinion and clandestinely and covertly impacting politics and businesses. Troll factories and click farms have become key components of this emerging disinformation economy. By artificially boosting engagement and amplifying the reach of disinformation, click farms contribute to the illusion of popularity and credibility. The common thread among all these operations is the deliberate cultivation or perpetuation of confusion. This development signifies the growing recognition and utilisation of disinformation as a strategic tool,



particularly in economic and political spheres.

Overall, France has taken several steps institutionally and legally to better fight disinformation. This ongoing reinforcement reflects a desire to reorganise the system in line with operational realities, rooted in the information offensives in the Sahel region and in Ukraine. It also underscores France's commitment to safeguard its sovereignty in the informational space with the creation of several doctrines. Information warfare and influence operations have also been recurrent themes within national strategic documents and national security discussions. This shows that they are significant security concerns for France.

## **2- The threat of far-right movements**

The far-right landscape consists of various entities, including ultras, identitaires, groupuscules, and movements. It is important to note the difference between ultra-right movements or the violent far-right and the political far-right. The ultra-right stands out because violent actions are an integral part of its *modus operandi*, including assassinations. Historically, the ultra-right is the most extreme as it has had the capacity to carry out attacks in order to terrorise the population. In France, the phenomenon of domestic terrorism is usually linked to the ultra-right, as no other political force has used it to the same extent.

Furthermore, ultra movements are supported by groups specifically dedicated to organising and coordinating violent actions. This is why recruiting veterans is so important for these movements as it allows them to acquire knowledge of weapons and security procedures. These movements may also attempt to infiltrate their members into the ranks of the law enforcement. Hence, these movements regularly target and recruit former members of the security forces and the military. The resurgence of the ultra-right movements is partly due to their recruitment campaigns. In addition, online recruitment is often used by ultra-right groups. They communicate on social media, particularly Telegram, and also recruit via video games to target a younger audience (National Assembly, 2023). This digital recruitment has been developed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The health crisis had a big effect on the way online spheres operate to spread disinformation. It was a great opportunity for these communities to disseminate manipulated content, especially as the pandemic was unprecedented. It gives these communities the chance to occupy more space in the public sphere and thus expand their influence outside their spheres. In other

words, new technologies have given violent far-right and ultra-right movements a new lease of life.

As a result, Jérémie Iordanoff (NUPES party) and Eric Poulliat (Renaissance party) have been appointed as rapporteurs for the information mission on violent activism. This mission was established on February 7th, 2023, by the Law Commission of the National Assembly and is expected to present its conclusions by September 2023. The objective of this mission is to gain insights into the phenomenon of the normalisation and even endorsement of violence in political and activist actions (Agnan, 2023). In parallel, there has also been a normalisation of the far-right rhetoric. Certain terms and ideas coined by far-right minority groups that were once considered marginal have now become normalised. This normalisation process can fuel the motivation of lone wolves to take action, which was not as prevalent two decades ago. Hence, it can be suggested that this normalisation of the rhetoric has served as a catalyst for violent actions including terrorist activities. In this respect, the French National Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Coordinator has raised concerns about the resurgence of domestic terrorism originating from clandestine ultra-left or ultra-right groups. These concerns were also echoed by Nicolas Lerner, the director of the Directorate General for Internal Security (DGSI in French) (El Ghoul, Marjany, and Rejichi, 2023).

Over time, far-right ideas are gradually permeating public opinion. According to Erwan Lecœur, the split within the National Front party (Front National in French) which kept in check all the different branches of the far-right, allowed far-right and right-wing extremist ideas to seep into public discourse. Indeed, Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front party served as a unifying force for these diverse far-right entities, bringing together several clusters and encompassing around a dozen different tendencies (National Assembly, 2023). These entities thus operated in a controlled environment as the National Front maintained order within this conglomerate. But in 1999, a parliamentary commission of inquiry investigated the activities of the National Front. It led to the split of the party and the departure of identitaires and traditionalist Catholics, who gained more autonomy over time, especially since Marine Le Pen assumed leadership of the party.

In addition, because of the rise of far-right politicians, far-right groups feel a sense of proximity to power which has emboldened them to engage in (violent) activities. As said by Eric Zemmour, when talking about the presidency, «It will be difficult and demanding, but victory is within reach,» (2022). This can encourage far-right groups to take actions. In other words, these groups see their actions as a way of preparing their political victory. It is

also worth noting that the rapid expansion of disinformation networks facilitated by the Internet and social media platforms is exerting a significant influence on potential isolated actions. As a result, the issue of violent activism has gained prominence in public discussions, evident in recent cases such as the Barjols trial, the protests for the pension plan reform or the demonstration in Sainte Soline which was particularly violent. Traditional and visible ultra-right movements engage in provocative actions, often inciting hatred and clashing with opponents or law enforcement during demonstrations. These movements are easily recognisable and subject to legal measures, such as administrative dissolution. Recently, Génération Identitaire faced dissolution in 2021, as did Jeunesses nationalistes révolutionnaires in 2014 and again in 2023, as well as the Bastion social in 2019 (National Assembly, 2019).

However, these groups have resurfaced under different names or entities. They are reorganising themselves, finding new forms and structures. Jean-Yves Camus, a French journalist and political scientist, specialised in far-right movements, expressed concerns over the efficacy of dissolution measures, emphasising that they are not a definitive solution. He argued that the belief in their ability to completely eradicate such groups was misguided. Moreover, he noted there has been a shift in the composition of far-right and ultra-right groups. Indeed, it used to be the typical radical young activists like in the movement Génération Identitaire. However, many members now come from diverse backgrounds (National Assembly, 2023). Therefore, the threat has become more elusive as individuals with various profiles become involved. They can be well-integrated into society, not necessarily belonging to the marginalised class. This means that radical spheres are expanding. In other words, this broader appeal reaches beyond the traditional militants of established far-right groups.

Additionally, the ultra-right is now witnessing the emergence of groups that operate differently. These groups do not seek visibility through isolated actions but instead operate covertly, resorting to violence. As a result, groups such as Volontaires pour la France or Action des forces opérationnelles have been dismantled by intelligence agencies like the DGSI. Hence, the threat of attacks by the ultra-right has been increasing in recent years and is being taken very seriously by the French government (Albertini and Ayad, 2023). According to assessments by the Research Centre of the National Gendarmerie Officers School (CREOGN in French), these radicalised groups have entered a new phase characterised by an escalation in violence and an increase in their organisational capabilities (2022). Further, «many Western democracies consider the ultra-right, supremacist,

accelerationist threat to be the main threat they face today. And we all have in mind the tragedies that these ideologies have generated in Christchurch, Buffalo, Ottawa, Hanau, Bratislava and so many other cities. France, like all democracies, is exposed to this same threat, the prevention of which is actively mobilising intelligenceservices», as explained by Nicolas Lerner (2023).

The example of the tragic attack that occurred in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 shows the connection between the theory of the Great Replacement and acts of violence, underscoring the dangerous potential of such conspiracy theories. Indeed, the manifesto of Brenton Tarrant, the perpetrator of the attack, explicitly refers to the theory. Conspiracy theories can be quite prevalent in far-right and ultra-right spheres. Their belief in conspiracy theories has been amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic and social media. Further, the 2022 election campaign was marked by the fact that influential figures and political candidates, notably Eric Zemmour, contributed to the incremental inclusion of a conspiracy rhetoric within their speeches. Eric Zemmour played a significant role in the dissemination of the Great Replacement theory beyond its usual realms within the traditional identitarian far-right (ISD, 2022). The Great Replacement theory is rooted in deep-seated anti-semitism and conspiracy theories. The concept of the Great Replacement was launched by Renaud Camus in 2011 and describes the population shift that France but also Europe is undergoing. He refers to a process of replacement of the original French population with predominantly non-European individuals, particularly from North Africa.

Overall, three trends can be identified regarding the far-right movements. Firstly, there has been a notable rise in the activities of ultra-right groups, including engaging in acts of violence. Secondly, there is a growing infiltration of conspiracy and sectarian movements by violent far-right groups, leading to stronger connections between the two. Thirdly, in recent years, one of the primary responses to ultra-right groups has been their dissolution through administrative means (National Assembly, 2023). These far-right groups represent a threat for the stability of democracies, due to their recourse to violent actions as well as their use of disinformation and conspiracy theories to expand their influence in society. Hence, the development of their activities is relevant to the potential increase of polarising and alternative narratives.

### **3- Disinformation a threat for democracies**

Disinformation poses a significant threat to democracies. This can be evidenced with the recurrent foreign interference in democratic processes, especially since 2014, with the Ukrainian crisis, the Dutch referendum, Brexit and the 2016 American presidential elections. These instances have demonstrated that Western democracies, including even the largest and most established ones, are not immune to external manipulation and disinformation campaigns. Foreign interference in these democratic processes has raised concerns about the vulnerability of democratic systems to malicious actors seeking to manipulate public opinion, sow discord, and undermine the integrity of elections and decision-making processes.

Disinformation campaigns can originate from anywhere in the world and rapidly spread across borders through digital platforms and social media. This creates a complex web of actors and networks which reflects the transnational nature of disinformation. The transnational nature of disinformation is used by the conspiratorial sphere. Indeed, groups in different countries that believe in the same conspiracy theories can collaborate and coordinate disinformation campaigns. The connections between French far-right entities and foreign far-right entities have been increasingly strengthening in recent years. With the rise of these entities' online presence, there has emerged an international network of highly active nationalists that transcends geographical boundaries. Numerous influential groups from around the world have shown interest in French clusters. For instance, the alt-right movement associated with the former US President Donald Trump has provided financial support to European clusters, including those in France (Jeangène Vilmer, 2019, p. 4). Additionally, there are established connections with Russia. Indeed, during the protests of the yellow vests, Russia was seeking to exacerbate social and political tensions. Therefore, disinformation campaigns are being used by Russia as short-term operations but also as part of its informational influence strategy abroad.

Furthermore, violent far-right and ultra groups can be influenced, instrumentalised or sponsored by foreign powers. The latter can attempt to launch influence operations during electoral campaigns through radical activists. The American alt-right has been involved in the Macron Leaks in 2017 as demonstrated in the study by Jeangène Vilmer (2019, p. 6). Russia has also been involved in the Macron Leaks. In recent years, Russian destabilisation efforts have been exposed in other cases such as the yellow vests. Therefore, the influence of foreign powers in French politics is a real risk.

Moreover, in France but also in the United States, Belgium, Italy, Hungary, and Germany, there is a noticeable trend where the prevailing collective imagination and social climate appear to support and validate ideas that were once considered outside the boundaries of acceptable discourse. This reflects the phenomenon of the «Overton window» which represents the range of ideas that are deemed acceptable and discussable within a given society or media space. Over the last decades, this window has undergone a shift, and terms coined by niche groups have gradually entered mainstream usage, becoming normalised in public discourse. As a result, far-right networks have introduced narratives based on conspiracy theories in society. This amplifies the reach of disinformation and conspiracy theories to receptive audiences across borders but also to society at large, thus undermining the quality of public discourse.

In addition, conspiracy theorists exploit the human inclination to seek patterns and explanations for complex events. In other words, they often emerge as attempts to make sense of complex events or as a response to feelings of confusion and uncertainty. Conspiracy theories are an inherent aspect of human thinking and tend to flourish during times of crisis or in the aftermath of violent incidents. They construct narratives that provide simple and often sensationalistic explanations, disregarding rigorous scientific methods and evidence-based reasoning. By relying on anecdotal accounts, cherry-picked data, and disinformation, they create an illusion of credibility and coherence. However, the lack of scientific basis in conspiracy theories further erodes the shared understanding of reality and fuels scepticism toward established public institutions, scientific communities, and traditional media sources.

In sum, individuals' beliefs often stem from a lack of access to reliable and credible sources of information. While the theories individuals embrace may appear unfounded when considering all the available evidence, they may seem coherent and justifiable based on the limited sources individuals rely upon. In essence, the root of the problem lies in the epistemic poverty of individuals' informational environment. Epistemic poverty refers to the limited access to diverse and trustworthy sources of information. Further, conspiracy theorists present a unique challenge as they tend to be highly resistant to efforts aimed at debunking their beliefs, particularly when those efforts come from authoritative sources such as the state. This resistance can be attributed to the core nature of conspiracism, which attributes immense power to certain individuals or groups to conceal their actions, making any attempt to refute the conspiracy theory perceived as part of the conspiracy itself.

While conspiracy theories may be embraced by a minority of the population, they

can still have destabilising effects, especially if that minority is prepared to resort to violent actions. Indeed, the willingness of a small but motivated minority to engage in violent acts can have significant consequences, including social unrest, political destabilisation, or even acts of terrorism. Radicalisation frequently coexists within a conspiratorial worldview, where individuals perceive reality through the lens of secretive plots and hidden agendas. Hence, the danger lies in the potential for these theories to fuel radicalisation and inspire individuals to take drastic actions based on unfounded beliefs. This can be linked to a broader crisis of knowledge, an epistemological crisis that is not entirely new. Indeed, throughout history, similar challenges to knowledge and truth have emerged, such as Plato's criticism of the sophists. Plato argued that the sophists prioritised persuasion and personal conviction over the pursuit of genuine knowledge (episteme), leading to a reliance on mere opinion (doxa). Nowadays, facts give way to opinions. In this context, conspiracy theories find fertile ground as they offer alternative explanations and narratives that resonate with individuals who question the notion of a singular and objective truth.

Conspiracy theories circulate within far-right (online) spheres and thrive because of echo chambers as they contribute to the validation of individuals' beliefs. Consequently, individuals become more entrenched in their beliefs and less willing to engage with opposing viewpoints. They use tactics such as shifting the burden of proof i.e., challenging others to disprove their claims. This helps them to create an atmosphere of doubt and suspicion, making it harder to counter their viewpoints effectively. In addition, the resurgence of conspiracy theories and polarising narratives can largely be attributed to the influence of social media. Digital networks and platforms give individuals the opportunity to connect with like-minded communities, providing them with a sense of belonging. Consequently, some individuals choose to immerse themselves in conspiracy theories as a means of avoiding social isolation. They refuse to disengage from them, as doing so would potentially lead them back to a sense of social exclusion. Hence, this leads to both the polarisation of society and the radicalisation of individuals.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

This dissertation focuses on the disinformation landscape during the 2022 French political elections and the type of rhetoric that was spread by Eric Zemmour . It explores the argumentation system he created as well as the discursive strategies he used to justify his political agenda, normalise his controversial statements and legitimise his exclusionary policies. It then delves into the risks of disinformation campaigns and how it can be a threat for democracies. In addition, disinformation is a tool used by far-right groups to expand their influence. This is dangerous considering the rhetoric they disseminate. Indeed, it can lead to the polarisation of society and the radicalisation of individuals. This is particularly problematic considering the rise of far-right movements in recent years in France and in Europe.

Furthermore, to fully comprehend political discourses, it is widely acknowledged that they must be analysed within the context in which they occur. The 2022 presidential elections took place against a backdrop of heightened concern regarding the potential impact of disinformation due to the previous elections in 2017. Eric Zemmour strategically capitalised on the social and political context of the recent years, characterised by various crises such as the terrorist attacks, the yellow vests movement, the Covid-19 pandemic... to position himself as a prominent figure in the national political landscape and to legitimise his arguments. In addition, the 2022 French elections witnessed the ascent of far-right parties and groups, whose rhetoric has gradually become normalised in recent years. Exploiting the Covid-19 pandemic, far-right movements leveraged anti-system sentiments among the population to undermine President Emmanuel Macron's administration and exacerbate already existing social divisions and tensions.

Eric Zemmour used several narratives to justify his political agenda. He used the Great Replacement theory combined with the us versus them rhetoric to justify his exclusionary views and stricter migration policies. He used a narrative of electoral fraud rooted in a stop the deal rhetoric as well as narratives rooted in the Covid-19 pandemic to criticise Emmanuel Macron's management of the health crisis and to undermine his candidacy to the 2022 elections. He used narratives that glorify the past which allowed him to draw lessons from history. However, his use of historical analogies was based on selected information that fitted his narratives. This is problematic as it can alter collective memory. In parallel, Eric Zemmour benefited from discourses spread by far-right



movements and influencers. Indeed, the latter disseminated content that promoted his political agenda as well as anti-system discourses. Therefore, both far-right political candidate, Eric Zemmour , and far-right movements as well as influencers propagated narratives that fitted their agenda.

By manipulating information and employing discursive strategies such as the reliance on stereotypes, the construction of an evil “other”, the distortion of historical facts, the use of historical analogies, the oversimplification of issues making generalisations, the misinterpretation of words, the inclusion of conspiracy theories in political speeches... they aimed at creating ambiguity and confusion, exacerbating social tensions, eroding democratic values, undermining electoral processes, shaping public opinion... Thus, actors in the far-right ecosystem that resorted to these techniques, played a role in the production and dissemination of disinformation. They created a reality that fitted their far-right imaginary which captured the attention of the audience, which in turn normalised their discourses in society.

As a result, there is a banalisation of the far-right rhetoric in society. The 2022 French elections demonstrate this shift as there is a growing far-right sphere in the political landscape. In addition, the fact that Eric Zemmour was not ostracised like Jean-Marie Le Pen was back in the 1990s-2000s shows that there has been a shift within society. Eric Zemmour has been in the public sphere since the 2000s and has been known for his controversial statements. Hence, he had a mediatic presence, knew how to seduce the audience and emphasise the fact that he was not affiliated with any traditional political party to gather support. Additionally, far-right violent movements and ultra-right groups have been using social media to recruit members, a trend exacerbated since the Covid-19 pandemic. They have grown bolder over the years, partly because of the normalisation of the far-right rhetoric in the public sphere. Consequently, a number of far-right groups have been dissolved. However, they have managed to reconstruct themselves and thus continue to be active. Therefore, the intelligence service as well as the law enforcement have notified their concern over the resurgence of domestic terrorism, notably from violent far-right movements and ultra-right groups.

Furthermore, in recent years, a transnational conspiratorial sphere has emerged, throughout Europe and globally, playing a significant role in undermining the quality and credibility of political discourse. The dissemination of conspiracy theories can contribute to the polarisation of society and the radicalisation of individuals. Indeed, individuals become so entrenched in their beliefs that any attempt to debunk the conspiracy theories becomes

very complicated, especially when they come from official or state sources. This is mainly due to the broader crisis of knowledge and the epistemological crisis we face. Ultimately, the problem stems from the lack of reliable and accurate information or epistemic poverty of individuals' informational environment. Overall, disinformation poses a substantial threat to our democratic systems, especially due to the transnational and cross-border nature of the phenomenon, which is facilitated by social media platforms.

Moreover, there is a concern that far-right and ultra-right movements may have connections or sponsorship by foreign powers. The latter can then exploit these movements to disrupt democratic processes and undermine national stability by proxy. In other words, far-right groups can be instrumentalised or sponsored by foreign powers as part of their informational warfare strategies in order to destabilise democratic and electoral processes of the targeted country. Foreign interference in French politics is thus very possible. This risk is particularly significant considering the increasing sophistication and professionalisation of disinformation campaigns.

The rise of the far-right is a threat to democracies as they resort to disinformation but also violent actions, both of which undermine democratic and electoral processes. In addition, the use of disinformation as a political tool and its availability to a large range of actors is concerning for democracies. Social media has made the dissemination of disinformation easier, cheaper and faster. Nowadays, anyone can spread inaccurate information or manipulated content. As the cyberspace is now a field of conflict, states have to face foreign interference, influence operations and disinformation campaigns on a regular basis. Hence, in this intangible world, the ability to shape narratives, control the flow of information, and manipulate public opinion can be significant tools. Disinformation campaigns have become part of hybrid strategies and a tool to conduct information warfare.

The 2022 French elections show that France considers disinformation as a national security threat. This can be evidenced through several observations. Firstly, France strengthened its state apparatus to be better prepared against disinformation campaigns and (online) foreign interference. This can be demonstrated by the 2018 law, the trend to extend the field of competence of Viginum, and the implementation of watch cells in several institutions. Secondly, the country has reinforced its military doctrine in information warfare. This doctrine is composed of three texts: the defensive information warfare (LID) from 2018, the offensive information warfare (LIO) from 2019 and the doctrine to combat electronic influence (L2I) from 2021. Thirdly, the planned increase in the COMCYBER personnel indicates the expanding significance of information warfare and operations in the

cyberspace, as well as the aspiration to integrate them into military strategies. Indeed, military operations and influence operations are now interdependent. Lastly, France continues to take measures regarding disinformation and information warfare such as the decision to implement the TF2I or to launch the doctrine on influence which indicates that there is a continued interest in these fields and concern over these security threats.

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