

Manipulating Truth: Disinformation Campaigns Against Child Protection Services in Europe

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Summary: Disinformation targeting child protection services (CPS) in Europe poses a significant challenge to institutional legitimacy and social cohesion. This paper analyses recurring narratives and themes found within 45 fact-checking reports about CPS, using qualitative methods and Habermas's public sphere theory as interpretive framework. Results show that authoritarian and fundamentalist actors strategically create and disseminate disinformation that aim to polarise discussions about topics such as family values, state authority, and child welfare. By mapping actors, targets, and themes, this paper demonstrates how disinformation narratives are constructed and circulated across different ideological contexts. This study contributes to research on disinformation and child welfare by clarifying how CPS in Europe is framed and politicised in disinformation campaigns. Additionally, the study aims to provide a useful basis for policymakers and practitioners in the broader efforts to recognise and respond to disinformation around child welfare and protection, and other public institutions.

Keywords: disinformation, public sphere, child protection services, right-wing extremism, public trust

Die Wahrheit manipulieren: Desinformationskampagnen gegen Kinderschutzdienste in Europa

Zusammenfassung: Desinformation, die sich gegen Kinderschutzdienste in Europa richtet, stellt eine erhebliche Herausforderung für die Legitimität öffentlicher Institutionen und den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt dar. In dieser Studie werden anhand von 45 Faktenüberprüfungsberichten wiederkehrende Narrative und Themen analysiert, wobei qualitative Methoden und die Theorie des öffentlichen Raums von Jürgen Habermas als interpretatives Rahmenwerk dienen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass autoritäre und fundamentalistische Akteur:innen gezielt Desinformationen erstellen und verbreiten, um Diskussionen über Themen wie Familienwerte, staatliche Autorität und Kindeswohl zu polarisieren. Durch die Identifizierung und Zuordnung von Akteur:innen, Zielen und thematischen Strukturen wird deutlich, wie Desinformationsnarrative in unterschiedlichen ideologischen Kontexten entstehen und sich verbreiten. Die Studie trägt zur Forschung über Desinformation und Kindeswohl durch eine klare Darstellung bei, wie Kinderschutzdienste in Europa in Desinformationskampagnen konstruiert und politisiert werden. Zudem soll sie Entscheidungsträger:innen und Praktiker:innen eine Grundlage bieten, um Desinformationen im Bereich Kinderschutz und -wohl sowie anderen öffentlichen Institutionen frühzeitig zu erkennen und darauf zu reagieren.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Desinformation, öffentlicher Raum, Kinderschutzdienste, Rechtsextremismus, öffentliches Vertrauen

1 Introduction¹

The legitimacy of child protection services (CPS) in Europe has been increasingly contested in public debate through disinformation campaigns (Datta 2025; Svatoňová 2021; Ranstorp & Ahlerup 2023). Such campaigns propagate misleading narratives about public institutions, polarising debates around child welfare, family rights, and state authority (Skivenes & Benbenishty 2022). Reports document that these campaigns undermine professional integrity of CPS, foster social division and incite threats against workers in the field (Burns et al. 2024; Nordis 2023), while also influencing legislative debates on child protection policies and regulations (Nenova et al. 2023; Babutsidze 2019; Eurochild 2019a; 2019b). For example, the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs has labelled disinformation campaigns on social/child protection services (also known as “LVU campaigns”) as the “largest influence campaign” the country has ever encountered (Ranstorp & Ahlerup 2023).

Despite growing research on disinformation, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how disinformation narratives about CPS are constructed and circulated across European contexts. This study addresses this gap by analysing disinformation narratives represented and documented in 45 fact-checking reports about CPS in Europe. More specifically, by analysing the content and narrative structure of these disinformation campaigns, the paper will identify dominant narratives and themes within CPS-related disinformation, and map their sources, targets, and ideological patterns.

The following sections review the empirical and conceptual context, as well as the stakeholders involved in these campaigns, the dataset and methods, and the findings and discussion.

2 Background Review: Disinformation Landscape

2.1 Empirical Background

The contemporary political landscape in Europe is increasingly influenced by disinformation that shape political communication and distort public debate about social and institutional issues (Conrad & Hálfðanarson 2022). Disinformation can be defined as deliberate production and dissemination of false or misleading information (Marsden, et al. 2020). Such campaigns have become a common tactic used by undemocratic regimes and fundamentalist groups to attack and weaken democratic public institutions and their authority (Conrad & Hálfðanarson 2022). The main aim of disinformation campaigns is to distort public opinions and increase cleavages in society, and simultaneously undermine trust in political representatives, public institutions, and governments (Zinkanell 2020). Studies show a correlation between widespread belief in disinformation and a decline in trust and confidence in public institutions (OECD 2024; Rucinska 2023) which helps explain why public institutions become frequent targets of such campaigns.

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As Hellman (2024a: 2) states, “everyday disinformation describes a practice in which the stability of a society is shaken, its constitutional pillars are torn down and its legitimacy weakened.” Across Europe, Russian state-supported media and networks have been identified as major drivers of disinformation, followed by radical and fundamentalist political and religious groups (Giles 2016; Sentiido 2021; Hellman 2024b; Conrad & Hálfðanarson 2022). Russian disinformation dominates online media, supported by a comprehensive infrastructure including state-controlled media, civil society organisations, and social media networks, also known as “troll factories” (Aro 2022).

Child protection services are a common target of such campaigns, attacked by both state-sponsored entities and extremist groups (Ranstorp & Ahlerup 2023; Svatonova 2021, Datta 2025). Public perception of child protection is characterised by the tension between too much and too little government involvement, and decision-making in this field requires balancing parental rights, children’s rights, and state responsibility, which often makes its interventions controversial (Berrick et al. 2023). As a result, the actions of these institutions are often misrepresented in the media (Datta 2025).

Research on disinformation has gained increasing attention due to the impact of online media on society and the documented challenges disinformation campaigns pose to institutions, elections, and public perceptions (Zimmermann & Kohring 2020; Colley et al. 2020; Nieminen 2024; Rucinska 2023). Despite growing literature on disinformation, CPS-related studies remain scarce. Only a limited number of studies specifically address disinformation in the context of child protection services.

For example, Datta (2025) explores the influence of far right stakeholders on CPS, showing that far right organisations and “anti-gender” movements frame child welfare institutions as threatening “family values”. Pavlíková and Mareš (2020) investigate Russian disinformation on child welfare in Norway and the Czech Republic, focusing on the strategic use of false narratives promoting anti-Western sentiment and portraying CPS as hostile toward parental rights. Svatoňová (2021) examines the “moral panic” about child protection in the Czech Republic as well, analysing public discourse and media framing to further understand fear-based narratives. Nenova et al. (2024) assesses disinformation campaigns related to Bulgaria’s Child Welfare Code, and the mobilisation of foreign influence narratives to discredit policy change. Burns et al. (2024), highlight the online harassment of CPS workers in Ireland and its broader societal impacts on trust and legitimacy. These studies suggest that child protections services have become a symbolically and politically charged target of disinformation campaigns. This article then further builds on that literature by examining how such disinformation is narratively constructed within a broad dataset of fact-checking reports in Europe.

2.2 Conceptual framing

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere refers to a social space, where citizens engage in rational-critical debate to form public opinion (Habermas 1962). In this study, public sphere is used as a conceptual lens for examining the discursive space surrounding CPS, where narratives about authority, legitimacy, and social conflict are produced and disseminated. Habermas’s public sphere requires communication where citizens can exchange and debate ideas, beliefs, and claims about issues of collective concern. Disinformation is therefore relevant for

this debate, as it challenges the very nature and conditions of the public sphere as an arena of discussion.

Digital and social media have expanded the public sphere by enabling broader participation (Bruns & Highfield 2016; Kumar & Maurya 2024) but have also facilitated the circulation of disinformation narratives (Conrad et al. 2022).

Discourse within disinformation is often marked by the rejection of the “expert” opinion, and the emphasis on the “will of people” untethered from “ideological” and “hegemonic” influences (Collins et al. 2020; Oyserman & Dawson 2020). Additionally, disinformation campaigns frequently exploit debates on racial, national, and religious identities and cleavages, which obscures efforts to foster intersectional social discussions (Oyserman & Dawson 2020). They frequently contribute to the “othering” of minority groups and uses hateful narratives to invoke stronger emotions for the cause (Evolvi 2022).

Operationally, the concept of public sphere in this study helps identify how disinformation narratives frame CPS, and how they, in return, contribute to a broader polarisation, political cleavages, social distrust, and conflict. Specifically, the concept is operationalised through the analysis of recurring narratives and patterns within CPS-related disinformation. Therefore, it functions as an interpretative framework for analysing how disinformation on CPS becomes relevant and impactful on discussions about democratic legitimacy, trust, and authority.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study has analysed 45 fact-checking reports published by organisations recognised by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which lists 148 fact-checking organizations from the EU, EEA, the Western Balkans, Turkey, and the Eastern Neighbourhood (EDMO n.d.).

To be included in the list of fact-checking organisations by EDMO, their primary focus must be to collect and analyse disinformation circulating within one of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe, as well as Kosovo and Belarus. Additionally, there are also 14 national or multinational EDMO hubs (EDMO n.d) which are regional media observatory organisations that cooperate with local organisations. The reports published on the 14 EDMO hubs will also be included in the dataset analysed in this article.

Table 1. Databases Searched

Source	Number of organisations
EDMO-recognised organisations	148
EDMO regional hubs	14
Total	162

All listed fact-checking organizations are required to publish their articles and reports online, ensuring that they are freely accessible to the public. Their core methodology consists of collecting articles/information that potentially contain mis- or disinformation, analysing the

claims outlined in the initial text. Organisations listed on the EDMO website that conduct fact-checking adhere to strict methodologies and rigorous, non-partisan analyses. For the purposes of this study, fact-checking reports produced by EDMO-recognised organisations and hubs were used as an empirical bridge through which disinformation were identified, collected, and contextualised. That means, the unit of analysis were the disinformation claims from the reports, rather than the fact-checking report as a whole.

3.2 Sampling and Selection

Fact-checking reports published between January 1, 2014, and August 15, 2024, were searched, as this period saw a surge in disinformation activity linked to major geopolitical events (for example, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine) (Evolvi 2022; Conrad & Hálfdanarson 2022; Hellman 2024b).

The reports were selected so that the main topic was child protection systems/services, and the keywords for data collection were: “child protection service” OR “child protective service” OR “child welfare” OR “social service*”, in English, and local languages. Reports were first thoroughly screened for topical relevance, then assessed for analytic depth with manual review. To be included, reports had to analyse disinformation claims in which child protection institutions, interventions, or related child welfare debates were the central focus.

The final dataset consists of 45 reports, (187 pages total) from 15 platforms, which was considered sufficient for thematic saturation.

Table 2. Platforms Analysed

Online platform	Number of reports	Target country
EUvsDisinfo	10	Europe-wide
Faktograf.hr	1	Croatia
MythDetector	11	Georgia
Nordishub	1	Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland
Stopfake	4	Ukraine
Factcheck.bg	1	Bulgaria
Faktisk.no	6	Norway
Istinomer.rs	1	Serbia
Raskrinkavanje.me	1	Montenegro
Raskrinkavanje.ba	4	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Correctiv	1	Germany
DPA-factchecking	1	Germany
Källkritikbyrån	1	Sweden

Online platform	Number of reports	Target country
Faktabaari	1	Finland
Demagog.org.pl	1	Poland

3.3 Analytical approach

The selected reports were imported into NVivo 14 and coded manually, using an inductive qualitative approach, with themes, actors, and narratives identified directly from the data. From the coded material, six main themes emerged. A detailed codebook is provided in Appendix 1.

The analysis combined narrative analysis, examining how language and stories construct meaning and assign roles (Riessman 2008), with thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns (Braun & Clarke 2006) across the disinformation material documented in the reports. Narrative analysis is particularly important in studying disinformation, as disinformation narratives rely on emotionally charged personal experiences and stories rather than evidence (Hellman 2024c). This combined approach helped identify the narrative structures and thematic patterns through which CPS were framed, politicised, and contested.

3.4 Limitations

The data rely on fact-checking reports that adhere to strict methodologies of collection, fact checking, and analysis of disinformation. This process entails certifications and methodologies that are beyond the scope of this study, and this paper therefore uses the analyses of EDMO-recognised fact-checking organisations. For that reason, the selection of disinformation, as well as the analysis of the initial discourses, is inherently based on the quality of work of the authors of the fact-checking reports. Additionally, the collection of disinformation was carried out by fact-checking organisations and their authors, and it was therefore not within the capacity of this study to determine whether all instances of disinformation on CPS have been detected and verified.

This paper uses databases and fact-checking reports written in multiple languages. While the data selection process included translation of the search strings to the respective languages, the quality of the translation of reports depends on online translation engines (Google Translate and ChatGPT), potentially introducing minor interpretive bias.

No inter-coder reliability testing was conducted due to the study's scope as solo-authored qualitative research. Findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than exhaustive of all CPS disinformation in Europe.

4 Findings and analysis

This section presents the results of the qualitative analysis of 45 fact-checking reports on disinformation campaigns targeting child protection services (CPS) in Europe. The analysis is organised into two main parts: *5.1 Source Typologies* and *5.2 Narrative Patterns*.

4.1 Source typologies

The analysed data reveal three primary source contexts from which disinformation on CPS emerges:

1. Russian State-Sponsored disinformation
2. Islamist/Islamic Fundamentalist disinformation
3. European Far Right and Christian Fundamentalist disinformation

Table 3. Source of disinformation on CPS in Europe

Source	Number of reports	% of Total
Russian State-Sponsored disinformation	27	60 %
Islamist/Islamic Fundamentalist disinformation	10	22 %
European Far Right and Christian Fundamentalist disinformation	5	11 %
Other*	3	7 %
Total	45	100 %

*The “Other” category includes cases where no clear ideological or political background was identifiable

4.1.1 Russian State-Sponsored Disinformation

Most disinformation on child protection services in the dataset can be linked to a Russia-aligned narrative, mainly disseminated through state-sponsored media channels and organisations. These narratives portray CPS as symbols of “Western moral decay, liberal excess, and geopolitical hypocrisy”. They are particularly evident when discussing these institutions in the Eastern and Central Europe, and Nordic countries.

Key disinformation narratives identified in Russian disinformation include:

1. **Family values and moral decay:** Narratives frequently portray CPS as emblematic of the “decay” of family-friendly values in European liberal democracies, framing these services as undermining traditional family structures. For instance, a report from EUvsDisinfo (2021), identifies a news article by the website *Tsargrad* as a part of the Russian narrative about family values in Europe. The article states: “...the main (problem) is the juvenile policy in the European Union in general. The same one that they want to export to Russia. What we are facing is a fight against the traditional family, an attempt to solve all the problems in the family by destroying it.”

2. **Geopolitical framing:** Misinformation about CPS are often intertwined with larger geopolitical narratives, such as NATO's perceived influence, the war in Ukraine, and accusations of Western exploitation of Ukrainian children and refugee families. A report from EUvsDisinfo (2021) summarizes these narratives: "How can one be talking about global issues like NATO, when children are being trafficked in Kyiv Region? (...) The adopting countries are mostly the United States and European nations."
3. **Discrimination against Russian minorities:** Disinformation campaigns frequently allege systemic discrimination against Russian-speaking minorities by CPS in European countries. For instance, a report by EUvsDisinfo (2018) cites an article from the website *Segodnia*, where Finnish CPS is being linked to authoritarian institutions, stating: "The Finnish guardianship is absolutely omnipotent and uncontrollable, it pounces on every Russian family and steals our Russian children, transferring Russian children to the ownership of the Finnish nation (...) The expropriation of Russian children in Finland is being carried out openly and widely under the slogan: "A Russian parent is a bad parent, the Finnish state is an ideal mother." This cannot go on any longer."

4.1.2 *Islamist and Islamic fundamentalist disinformation*

Disinformation on CPS coming from Islamist and Islamic fundamentalist sources was especially visible in Nordic countries and Germany, with ten reports being attributed to this group. In these cases, CPS are primarily framed as hostile to family life, religious authority, and religious beliefs, often through narratives of humiliation, removal, religious conversion, and abuse.

Key disinformation narratives include the following allegations:

1. **Religious discrimination:** Narratives often claim CPS aim to "convert" Muslim families or undermine their religious values, framing CPS as hostile to Islamic traditions. For instance, a report by Nordis (2023) which analysed disinformation within social media posts states: "The (social media) posts, claimed, inaccurately, that Muslim children were forced (by CPS) to convert to Christianity, eat pork, drink alcohol, and that Muslim girls were raped and forced to remove their veils."
2. **Moral deviance:** Claims of corruption within CPS and moral failings of Western societies are common, portraying these institutions as threats to traditional, religion-based family values. A report produced by the websites Källkritikbyrå (Sweden), Faktisk (Norway), and Faktabaari (Finland) (2023) analysed social media posts stating that CPS "take the child and then they trade the child. Not to take care of the child and move him to a better family, but for money."
3. **Broader ideological indoctrination:** Disinformation frame CPS as an ideological tool for indoctrination. A report by Myth Detector (2023) analysed social media posts on this topic, including one claiming: "A young boy is forcefully removed from his family by child protection services & police. The school were informed that he was being taught that homosexuality & trans was not acceptable in Islam. Ideology difference is not danger or abuse."

4.1.3 European Far Right and Christian Fundamentalist Disinformation

Five reports have a background in Christian Fundamentalist and far-right sources. In this category, CPS are depicted as an arm of an intrusive liberal state, threatening parental rights, Christian values and beliefs, as well as national traditions.

Key disinformation narratives include some of the following claims:

1. **Liberal values within CPS:** Narratives claim CPS enforces liberal or “progressive” values that are antithetical to “European” and Christian traditions. For instance, a report by EUvsDisinfo (2021) cites narratives alleging that: “Europe and the West has embarked on the path of the brutal concept of Children’s Rights, and the state has received the right to intrude in family matters. This is very strange from the background of the liberal concept of freedom.”
2. **Endangered parental rights:** Disinformation emphasizes the alleged infringement of parental rights, presenting CPS as an overreaching state apparatus. A report by Myth Detector (2019) addresses this topic and debunks claims that children will be taken away if their parents do not adhere to a specific set of “European” values; for example, the idea that “if a parent does not follow European social norms, a social worker will take the child away.”
3. **Globalism through CPS:** Disinformation often frame CPS as part of a broader “globalist” agenda aimed at eroding national sovereignty and traditional family structures. A report by Myth Detector (2020) highlights disinformation targeting child rights legislation and research produced by international organisations, falsely claiming it is promoting harmful behaviour: “(UNICEF’s research on child rights) emphasized that parents should adequately meet children’s behaviours or pleasures in their teenage years, including unusual changes in their appearance, love relations, use of tobacco, alcohol, so called soft drugs, etc.”

Table 4. Summary of actors, dominant narratives, main targets and framing in disinformation narratives about CPS

Source typology	Dominant narratives	Main targets	Typical framing
Russian state-sponsored disinformation	Moral decay of the West; CPS as anti-family; CPS linked to NATO, Ukraine, and anti-Russian discrimination	Nordic countries, Eastern and Central Europe, Ukraine, Russian-speaking minorities	CPS as proof of Western hypocrisy, liberal collapse, and hostility toward Russia-aligned identities
Islamist/Islamic fundamentalist disinformation	Religious discrimination; forced assimilation; corruption, trafficking, and ideological indoctrination	Muslim families, especially in Nordic countries and Germany	CPS as anti-Islamic, anti-family, and morally corrupt
European far-right/Christian fundamentalist disinformation	Threats to parental rights; liberal indoctrination; globalist intrusion into family life	Christian/traditional families; Governments considering EU-aligned reforms	CPS as an instrument of progressive, anti-national, and anti-traditional agendas

4.2 Narrative patterns

Recurring narrative patterns were detected across the dataset, in which CPS are framed as illegitimate, discriminatory, and dangerous institutions. There are six main themes identified in the coding process, which informed the analysis about the most common narrative patterns: Targeted Populations and Regions, Framing and Perception of CPS, Disinformation Methods, Political and Institutional Connections, CPS Criticism and Reform, and Ideological Connections. A detailed overview of the themes is provided in Appendix.

4.2.1 Targeted countries, institutions, and populations

The results show that disinformation on CPS target countries and communities throughout the continent. However, countries in Western and Northern European regions, and their institutions, are more likely to be subjected to such disinformation campaigns and narratives than in other regions of Europe. The Norwegian system, *Barnevernet*, has been directly mentioned in seven reports, which is more than any other national child protection system. Countries neighbouring the EU or those in democratic transition are also frequent targets. The results show that in Armenia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Bulgaria, pro-EU political representatives are often attacked, as are policies seemingly unrelated to child protection, such as the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (Myth Detector 2020).

Minority communities are also recurrent targets. Russian-speaking minorities, Muslims, migrants, Roma communities, and LGBT-related themes are repeatedly mobilised to portray CPS as anti-family oriented, or civilisationally threatening. In this sense, disinformation about CPS often operated by linking child protection to pre-existing social cleavages in the society.

4.2.2 Political and institutional linkages

Findings show that disinformation narratives also draw parallels between CPS and various national and international institutions and legal frameworks. Narratives in CPS disinformation are often highly critical of international legal frameworks concerning the protection of children (as well as women, in the context of domestic abuse), such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Istanbul Convention, or the Lanzarote Convention. A report by EUvsDisinfo (2020) highlights one such narrative falsely claiming that “officials from the UN and other international organisations involved and exposed in child molestation, are behind the Lanzarote Convention.” In this way, CPS becomes a bridge through which broader anti-institutional arguments can be made.

4.2.3 Ideological condensation

Across the dataset, CPS is repeatedly portrayed as a symbolic site onto which wider anxieties and struggles over family, religion, gender, and sovereignty are projected. This way, CPS are used as a tool to organise broader political and moral conflict into an emotionally charged narrative.

For example, Myth Detector (2017) highlights a narrative stating that “the children who have been abducted from their families are placed in Juvenile Justice institutions, similar to concentration camps, where they are often victims of physical and psychological abuse.” The

report further notes the false claims that “(...) in 2011, 38,500 children were stolen from German families and were given away to same-sex ‘families.’”

5 Discussion

The findings and its analysis demonstrate that disinformation on CPS in Europe is propagated by an interconnected web of stakeholders who often complement and reinforce each other despite ideological differences. These campaigns align with general populist rhetoric, overlapping with broader extremist and anti-progressive movements, illustrating how CPS becomes a symbolic battleground in wider political and cultural conflicts.

Islamist and Christian fundamentalist narratives on CPS are primarily grounded in religiously informed values and “family principles”, framing CPS through moral and ideological lenses. Conversely, Russian disinformation more frequently incorporates broader geopolitical discourses, linking CPS and its work to political discussions about EU institutional frameworks, NATO, and the invasion of Ukraine. These patterns show that disinformation on CPS is constructed through two partly overlapping pathways: one centred on moral and cultural threat, and another centred on geopolitical antagonism. This interpretation also aligns with previous research showing that disinformation narratives are often embedded in wider ideological and identity-based conflicts (Hellman 2024a). Geographically, the findings show clear regional patterns. Russia-affiliated disinformation primarily targeted Eastern Europe (including Eastern EU Member States and countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood), as well as Central and Northern Europe. Islamist and Islamic fundamentalist discourse were particularly prominent in Northern Europe and Germany, while Christian fundamentalist and far-right narratives were more visible in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria, although their influence extends across Europe,. These regional variations suggest that disinformation narratives are adapted to exploit local grievances, political cleavages, and institutional controversies, even when they rely on broader transnational ideological frames.

Minority groups receive disproportionate attention within CPS disinformation portraying them as threats to traditional family and social structures, as also noted by Evolvi (2022) in previous research. Narratives concerning women, the LGBTI community, migrants, and ethnic minorities, such as Roma in Bulgaria and Muslims in Nordic countries, serve as focal points for fearmongering and polarization (Evolvi 2022; Eurochild 2019a; Ranstorp & Ahlerup 2023). This is consistent with empirical evidence. In Bulgaria, Roma communities were disproportionately affected by disinformation about the proposed Family Code, which promoted the idea that Roma children would be taken away under the proposed legal changes (Eurochild 2019b). Similarly, in Nordic countries, disinformation campaigns have focused on targeting immigrant communities, exploiting their marginalization, lower levels of integration in welfare systems, and limited digital literacy (Ranstorp & Ahlerup 2023).

Further evidence suggests that Russia-sponsored, far right, and Christian fundamentalist groups, along with affiliated NGOs and media, capitalized on disinformation narratives to oppose the National Strategy for the Child in Bulgaria and the Child Protection Code in Georgia. The strategy in Bulgaria was ultimately withdrawn (Nenova et al. 2023), while the legislation in Georgia was enacted, albeit amid significant social controversy (Babutsidze

2019). These cases illustrate that debates on child protection, and the disinformation within, can become catalysts for wider political cleavages over sovereignty, geopolitical alignment, and cultural belonging, especially in contexts where reforms are already politically contested.

The findings suggest that CPS-related disinformation operates by attaching itself to already existing moral anxieties, identity conflicts, and distrust toward institutions. From the perspective of the public sphere, this is significant because it shows how debate around CPS is “restructured” through emotionally charged, polarising, and antagonistic claims. In this respect, the discussion of Habermas is most useful as an interpretive framework for understanding how disinformation enters public debate and has the power to reframe institutional legitimacy as a site of ideological struggle.

Overall, the findings indicate that disinformation narratives about child protection services extend beyond democratic discussion on the management of this institution. Rather, they frame CPS as a symbol for broader debates about liberalism, minority rights, religious freedoms, family, and state authority. This can be read in relations to Habermas’ concept of public sphere, which highlights how public discourse is distorted when emotionally driven claims and misinformation overpower rational debate. In this sense, the analysis suggests that disinformation about CPS functions as a tool for challenging institutional authority and politicising debates on welfare institutions.

6 Concluding Remarks

This study has demonstrated that disinformation targeting CPS in Europe is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a broader spectrum of strategic communication aimed at eroding democratic institutions, fragmenting the public sphere, and manipulating core social values. Through narrative and thematic analysis of fact-checking reports, the research presented a complex combination of state, religious, and political actors whose narratives, while diverse in origin, often intersect and reinforce each other regardless of ideological lines.

By grounding the analysis in Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, the study highlights how emotionally charged, polarised, and misleading claims about CPS can be understood as part of a broader distortion of public sphere. Disinformation campaigns use the symbolic value of child welfare to promote fear and distrust, while at the same time, disrupting the quality of public discourse and undermining institutional legitimacy, which are distortions Habermas warned of in the context of public discussion.

The findings show the vulnerability and threats that democracies face from disinformation campaigns, particularly where social cleavages and geopolitical interests align. Policymakers and practitioners must address the content of disinformation, as well as the systemic weaknesses in public communication that allow such narratives to develop. Finally, confronting disinformation about CPS requires defending not only the integrity and legitimacy of public institutions, but also the deliberative foundations of European democracies.

Further studies relying on quantitative data, employing methods such as word frequency and term co-occurrence network analysis, social network analysis, and topic modelling, could be developed to help understand the scale, reach, and impact of disinformation narratives, as well as the structural patterns of their dissemination across networks. Additionally, surveys

can be conducted to better understand the social impact of disinformation, as well as the public perception of disinformation related to child welfare and family issues.

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Appendix I

Developed themes and CodebookTheme	Code	Description	Reports
Targeted Populations and Regions	Armenia	Disinformation on child protection in Armenia.	1
Targeted Populations and Regions	Bulgaria	Disinformation on child protection in Bulgaria.	1
Targeted Populations and Regions	Georgia	Disinformation related to child protection in Georgia.	10
Targeted Populations and Regions	Ukraine	Disinformation involving Ukraine's CPS.	7
Targeted Populations and Regions	Barnevernet (Norwegian CPS)	Disinformation about Norway's child protection system.	7
Targeted Populations and Regions	Belgium	Disinformation on child protection in Belgium.	1
Targeted Populations and Regions	Denmark	Disinformation on child protection in Denmark.	3
Targeted Populations and Regions	Finland	Disinformation on child protection in Finland.	3
Targeted Populations and Regions	France	Disinformation on child protection in France.	2

Developed themes and CodebookTheme	Code	Description	Reports
Targeted Populations and Regions	Germany	Disinformation on child protection in Germany.	7
Targeted Populations and Regions	Latvia	Disinformation on child protection in Latvia.	1
Targeted Populations and Regions	Netherlands	Disinformation on child protection in Netherlands.	2
Targeted Populations and Regions	Sweden	Disinformation on child protection in Sweden.	4
Targeted Populations and Regions	UK	Disinformation on child protection in UK.	1
Targeted Populations and Regions	USA	Disinformation on child protection in USA.	1
Framing and Perception of CPS	Attack on Families	CPS framed as attacking families and taking away rights.	9
Framing and Perception of CPS	Children Stolen by the West	Non-Western children taken by Western CPS and adopted.	13
Framing and Perception of CPS	Russian Minority Targeted by CPS	CPS accused of targeting Russian minorities abroad.	3
Framing and Perception of CPS	Arab Minority Targeted by CPS	CPS accused of targeting Arab minority	5
Framing and Perception of CPS	CPS as Child Abusers	Claims that CPS abuses children or facilitates abuse.	5
Framing and Perception of CPS	Islamophobia in CPS	CPS framed as discriminatory against Muslims.	7
Framing and Perception of CPS	CPS as Corrupt	CPS portrayed as corrupt, with adoptions driven by profit.	7
Framing and Perception of CPS	CPS as Fascist	CPS framed as a fascist institution.	4
Framing and Perception of CPS	CPS as Discriminatory	CPS framed as institutionally racist and discriminatory.	5
Framing and Perception of CPS	CPS as a Repressive System	CPS portrayed as authoritarian and overly strict.	10
Framing and Perception of CPS	CPS as Paternalistic	CPS framed as part of an over-reaching state.	1
Framing and Perception of CPS	CPS and Pedophilia	CPS linked to pedophilia-related conspiracies.	4

Developed themes and CodebookTheme	Code	Description	Reports
Framing and Perception of CPS	CPS as Russophobic	CPS framed as discriminating against Russians.	4
Disinformation Methods	Anti-CPS Social Movements	Social movements opposing CPS decisions.	5
Disinformation Methods	Social Media as a Disinformation Tool	Social media used to spread CPS disinformation.	9
Disinformation Methods	Family Testimonies Against CPS	Families sharing their experiences with CPS.	1
Political and Institutional Connections	Diplomatic Scandals Involving CPS	CPS-related controversies in diplomatic circles.	1
Political and Institutional Connections	EU integrations	CPS disinformation linked to EU integration issues.	1
Political and Institutional Connections	European Court of Human Rights	Child protection cases in the European Court of Human Rights.	1
Political and Institutional Connections	Kremlin Statements on CPS	Official Kremlin statements related to CPS.	1
Political and Institutional Connections	CPS and NATO	CPS disinformation linked to NATO.	2
Political and Institutional Connections	Erosion of Public Trust in Institutions	CPS disinformation damaging trust in public institutions.	4
Political and Institutional Connections	Violence Linked to CPS Disinformation	Threats/acts of violence tied to CPS disinformation.	2
Political and Institutional Connections	Political Figures Spreading Disinformation	Politicians promoting CPS disinformation.	11
CPS Criticism and Reform	CPS Criticism with no ideological background	Concerns about CPS without authoritarian/fundamentalist narratives.	2
Ideological Connections and Social Values	Liberalism and CPS	CPS framed as a connected to liberal ideology.	3
Ideological Connections and Social Values	Moral Decay of the West	CPS used as proof of Western moral decline.	28

Developed themes and CodebookTheme	Code	Description	Reports
Ideological Connections and Social Values	Homophobia in CPS Disinformation	CPS disinformation using homophobia.	13
Ideological Connections and Social Values	Kremlin Promotion	Promotion of Kremlin policies and values as positive	17

