

Report no. 739 (2023-2024) from the Committee of Inquiry into Official Policy on Foreign Influence Operations.

COMBATING MALIGN FOREIGN INFLUENCES: MOBILISING THE WHOLE NATION AGAINST THE NEW COLD WAR

Created on the initiative of the Socialist, Ecologist and Republican (SER) group, the Committee of Inquiry into Official Policy on Foreign Influence Operations, chaired by **Dominique de Legge (Les Républicains – Ille-et-Vilaine)**, adopted the report presented by **Rachid Temal (SER – Val-d'Oise)** on 23 July 2024.

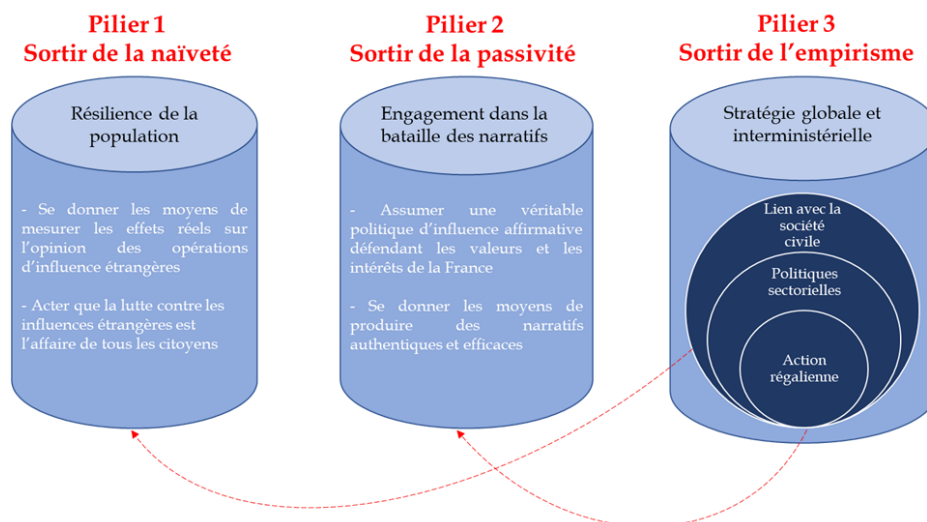
The Committee in figures

- 23 Senators representing all the political groups in the Senate
- 6 months of work, 46 hearings and 6 trips in France and abroad (Brussels, Taiwan, Helsinki, Tallinn)
- 120 people interviewed: 5 ministers, government agencies, social media companies (Meta, Google, X, TikTok), journalists, researchers, media and AI experts

In favour of an official policy to combat malign foreign influences, underpinned by three pillars

- **A three-pillar official policy:** building resilience among the population; winning the battle of narratives; building a comprehensive cross-departmental strategy for the entire nation.
- **A roadmap of 47 recommendations** to be implemented in various sectors to counter foreign digital influences more effectively in France and develop France's positive influence abroad.

The three pillars underpinning a new collective approach to combating malign foreign influences



Source: Committee of Inquiry

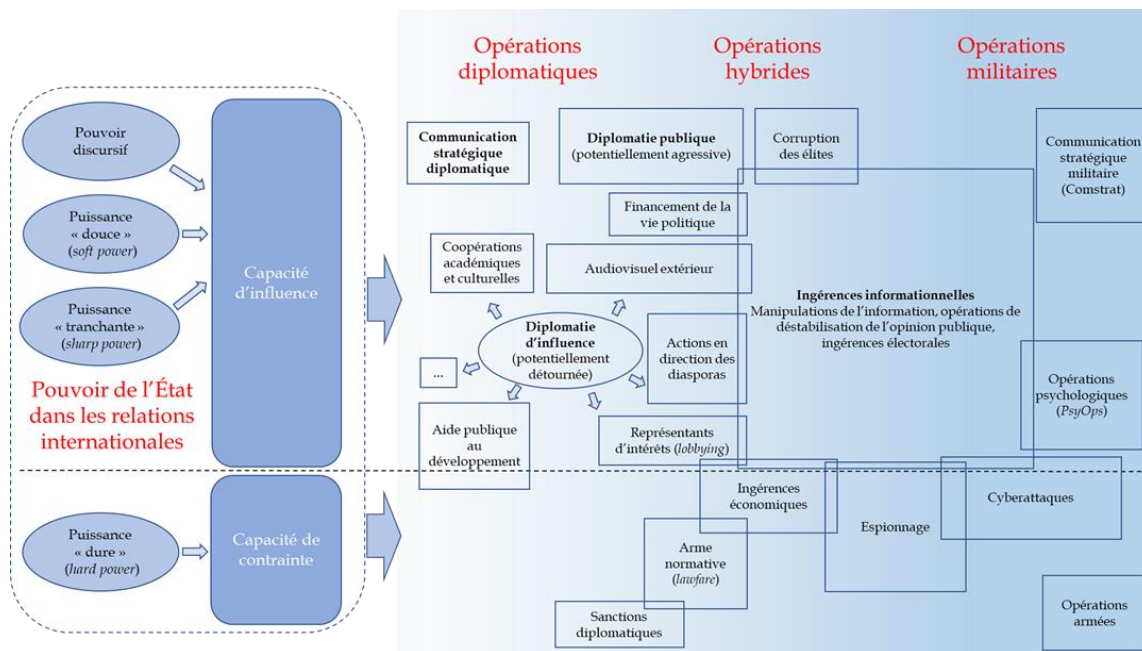
1. MAIN FINDINGS

A. MALIGN FOREIGN INFLUENCES AT THE ROOT OF NEW HYBRID THREATS

The threat to France's democratic model and interests is no longer limited to conventional warfare or "traditional" interference, such as espionage or treason.

It was around the concept of malign foreign influence that the Committee of Inquiry focused its work. This concept differs from the more commonly used term "interference", which describes a means rather than an end, and is also narrower than the term "influence", which, when transparent, is part of the normal interplay of international relations. Malign foreign influence is comparable to hybrid attacks (information manipulation, foreign digital interference, etc.), which are far more serious as they do not respect physical borders.

Typology of foreign influences and distinction from coercive operations



Source: Committee of Inquiry

B. FRANCE FACED WITH A HARDENING OF INFLUENCE STRATEGIES

The increasingly uninhibited use of strategies of malign influence against France is part of a wider international context marked by:

- **a new geopolitical order**, with a return to power strategies and an increase in hybrid operations being conducted below the threshold of conventional warfare.
- **a new technological environment**, characterised by the centrality of digital platforms and the growing power of artificial intelligence, which are creating new channels through which people perceive information.

A number of competitors are engaged in a war of influence against Western countries and France in particular. Alongside Russia – by far the most aggressive state, even before it invaded Ukraine – and China, who are trying to promote their authoritarian model by undermining democracy, threats are coming from a whole range of emerging state competitors, such as Turkey and Azerbaijan.

In their war of influence against France, our adversaries are exploiting some of our vulnerabilities. These result from the all too real fractures in French society, the disarmament of the State in certain sectors and the fragility of the individual and the cognitive biases to which that person may fall victim. **More importantly, these operations can paradoxically benefit from our liberal democratic model**, with its open information space, which sets us apart from authoritarian regimes that muzzle public opinion.

These operations mainly involve the **manipulation of information**. The **blue Stars of David spray-painted on several buildings in Paris** in the days following the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 is a good example. This destabilisation operation exploited a source of high political tension, bore the signature of the Russian secret services, and was artificially amplified on social media. However, the range of operations identified is much broader and includes capturing elites, controlling diasporas and exerting economic influence.

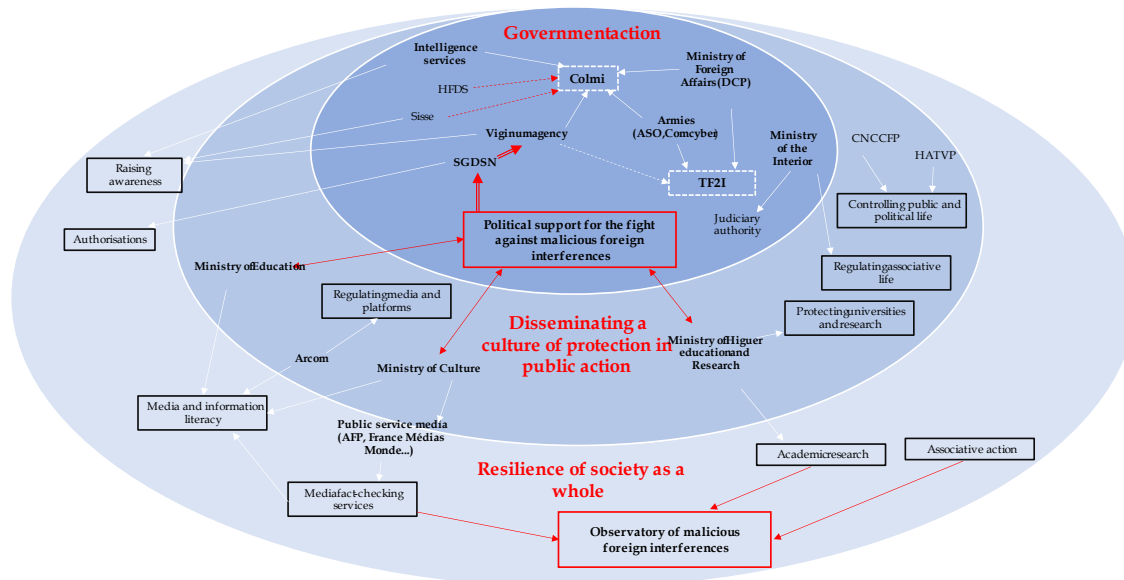
These attacks present us with an existential challenge, that of not falling into the trap set for us and therefore refusing, in our defence and in our response, to give in when it comes to our democratic principles and values.

C. AN EXTENSIVE BUT VARIABLE-GEOMETRY PROTECTION SYSTEM, WITH NO OVERALL STRATEGY

Awareness of malign foreign influence strategies has led to the development, one piece at a time, of a **three-dimensional response plan**:

- **Detection and characterisation activities**, including surveillance and identification of influence operations. The **Viginum** service, which reports to the French Secretary General for Defence and National Security (SGDSN), is responsible for detecting **foreign digital interference**.
- **Response actions**, covering the full range of measures available to the French government, from diplomatic steps to legal action against influence operations. The Foreign Interference Act, finally adopted on 5 June 2024, recently strengthened this arsenal.
- **Resilience policies**, aimed at protecting civil society against influence operations, before they are detected and responded to.

In theory, this response plan covers all public policies, providing a framework for combating, on the domestic front, **influence operations targeting French territory or the French information space** and, on the international front, influence operations targeting the deployment and image of the French armed forces and French interests abroad.



Source: Committee of Inquiry

However, despite a largely satisfactory record, **policies to combat malign influence operations are strikingly empirical**. The construction of bespoke systems for detecting and characterising malign influence operations has led to a fragmentation of our capabilities. The result is a **risk of watering down our response capabilities**, coupled with a lack of clear operational approach in responding to hostile manoeuvres. These operational difficulties are compounded by a **lack of academic understanding** of the problem of foreign influence, which has not been studied to any great extent in our universities.

From a strategic point of view, **France has no unified view on the issue of malign foreign influences**. Furthermore, the French Prime Minister does not have political responsibility for the issue, despite the fact that it cuts across all government departments. As a result, there is **a significant mismatch between the involvement of key ministries, which are actively engaged, and that of other departments**, which are not well versed in this policy. Moreover, civil society, the main target of influence operations, is ironically largely on the sidelines in the fight against this threat.

2. COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. IN FAVOUR OF AN OFFICIAL POLICY TO COMBAT MALIGN FOREIGN INFLUENCES UNDERPINNED BY THREE PILLARS

The Committee of Inquiry recommends a comprehensive overhaul of our collective approach to the problem of malign foreign influences.

- **First pillar: Building resilience among the population.** Unlike countries that have been exposed to information manipulation for many years, French society still seems overly naive about the extent of the threat. Combating foreign influence is something that concerns everyone, government officials and citizens alike, and everyone must acknowledge this. The government cannot take sole responsibility for this fight. While the protection, detection and response systems it puts in place are obviously necessary, they are no substitute for efforts to build a truly resilient society.
- **Second pillar: Winning the battle of narratives.** The defensive stance we have adopted until now in response to malign foreign influences has shown its limitations. We now need to adopt an effective policy of positive influence, defending French values and interests in the eyes of international public opinion, and become fully engaged in the battle of narratives.
- **Third pillar: Building a comprehensive cross-departmental strategy for the entire nation.** The government must take its responsibilities seriously by adopting a comprehensive, cross-departmental strategy to combat malign foreign influences, with a view to organising its response and putting an end to the empiricism that has prevailed in recent years.

This strategy should be structured around three **concentric circles**, with the inner circle focused on the government, the second on sector-specific policies contributing to efforts to combat malign foreign influences, and the outer circle, which should be cross-cutting and inclusive, focused on civil society and the integration of its initiatives, with the aim of strengthening our collective resilience.

B. 47 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING AN OFFICIAL POLICY TO COMBAT MALIGN FOREIGN INFLUENCES

The need to overhaul our collective approach to the problem

- Recommendation 1: Undertake urgent transdisciplinary academic research into how people and society perceive and receive information manipulation operations, and ensure that we update our knowledge regularly in this area.
- Recommendation 2: Develop a comprehensive, national, cross-departmental strategy to combat malign foreign influence, including the issue of financing from the outset and involving the French Parliament. A debate on its implementation should be held annually in the two Assemblies.
- Recommendation 3: Define a clear approach to responding to malign influence operations.

- Recommendation 4: Strengthen Viginum's role as a leader in protecting the public debate on digital issues, by making it a government agency with management autonomy under the supervision of the French Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security (SGDSN).
- Recommendation 5: Reaffirm the French Prime Minister's political support for the policy to combat malign foreign influence by appointing a member of the government to report to him with responsibility for this policy.
- Recommendation 6: Set up a malign foreign influence observatory, bringing together stakeholders from civil society and from relevant areas of the public sector.

First circle: Key ministries, the “hard core” of the response to foreign influence operations

Combating malign foreign influences in France

- Recommendation 7: Provide Viginum with the human and material resources it needs to fulfil its role as leader in protecting the public debate on digital issues and clearly identify, in budget documents and in the interests of transparency, the financial resources and staff allocated.
- Recommendation 8: Strengthen Viginum's legal means by removing the reference to the threshold of five million unique visitors per month for online platforms, authorising automated data collection as part of Viginum's monitoring activities, extending the period for retaining processed data and the period for renewing data collection, and reviewing the concept of foreign digital interference.
- Recommendation 9: Develop a tool to monitor foreign investment in France, not only in terms of its strategic nature, as the French Strategic Information and Economic Security Service (SISSE) does, but also in terms of its potential medium- to long-term influence.
- Recommendation 10: Fully implement the criminal aspects of the Foreign Interference Law, by providing judges with all relevant information on new tools for combating foreign interference and by fully integrating the definition of the new aggravating circumstance of foreign interference into standard cooperation between Pharos and Viginum. Include these aspects in the training of judges at the French National School for the Judiciary.

In the armed forces, reassess budgetary resources in light of new threats

- Recommendation 11: When the Military Planning Act is next updated, before the end of 2027, reassess the resources available for information warfare in light of changes in the threat.

Develop our positive influence abroad by linking it to the policy for combating malign influences.

- Recommendation 12: Strengthen monitoring and warning systems within the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, in particular by expanding the monitoring and investigation capabilities of open sources within the Monitoring and Strategy Sub-Directorate of the Press and Communication Directorate, and continuing efforts to train the diplomatic network in strategic communication issues.
- Recommendation 13: Strengthen, as part of the next Aims and Means Contract, France Médias Monde's abilities to combat disinformation.
- Recommendation 14: Make France Médias Monde's foreign-language radio services more widely available in France through terrestrial Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB+).

- Recommendation 15: Expand France 24's broadcasting reach, especially in China.
- Recommendation 16: Continue efforts to make Arte a "European benchmark platform" for culture.
- Recommendation 17: Create an "influence group" of writers, scriptwriters and representatives of the various artistic disciplines to support the influence policy and public diplomacy.

Strengthen the joint detection and response capabilities of France and its allies.

- Recommendation 18: Step up France's commitment to bringing the fight against FIMI¹ to the attention of the European Union, NATO, the OECD and the G7, and strengthen joint response capabilities.
- Recommendation 19: Support European partners looking to develop capabilities comparable to those of France's Viginum service.
- Recommendation 20: Support NATO partners looking to develop capabilities comparable to those of France's Cyber Defence Command (COMCYBER).

Second circle: Disseminating a culture of protection in all public policies

Limit the extent to which influence operations are amplified in the media and on platforms

- Recommendation 21: Amend the remit of the French regulatory authority for audiovisual and digital communication (ARCOM) to include the prevention of foreign interference.
- Recommendation 22: Reintroduce an obligation for non-European audiovisual media to sign an agreement with ARCOM.
- Recommendation 23: When the European Union's Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive is next revised, propose a simplified method for applying the criteria used to determine which Member State has jurisdiction over a non-European audiovisual media service.
- Recommendation 24: Modelled on the mechanism provided for in Article L. 163-2 of the French Electoral Code, introduce a mechanism enabling legal authorities to put a stop to the large-scale, artificial dissemination of false or misleading content linked to foreign digital interference and likely to undermine the fundamental interests of France.
- Recommendation 25: In the short term, make full use of the new regulatory prerogatives conferred by the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) to ensure that platforms have the necessary resources to combat information manipulation linked to informational interference operations.
- Recommendation 26: In the medium term, adopt a position at European level to confer publisher status on platforms for some of the content they publish or, at the very least, confer on them a hybrid status of "key entities in the information space" (neither host nor publisher) with specific obligations to prevent information interference.
- Recommendation 27: Adopt a proactive industrial policy in favour of French and European digital sovereignty, with the long-term aim of ensuring that non-European operators no longer shape our information space.
- Recommendation 28: Identify specifically the threats linked to foreign interference in the Aims and Means Contracts signed between the French government and media

¹ *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference*, a concept developed by the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS).

organisations with general-interest remits, by requiring in particular the introduction of internal protection mechanisms modelled on the alert procedure set up by France Médias Monde.

Strengthen the tools for monitoring public and political life in light of the risk of interference

- Recommendation 29: Close the existing loopholes in the legal framework that applies to financing election campaigns and political parties, by limiting the value of loans to a candidate or political party, prohibiting foreign individuals not resident in France from making this type of loan, and prohibiting the same individuals from donating to political parties.
- Recommendation 30: Prohibit parties and candidates from using content creators (“influencers”) on platforms to run paid electioneering campaigns.
- Recommendation 31: Strengthen the powers of the French National Commission for Campaign Accounts and Political Financing (CNCCFP), by allowing it to ask lenders to ascertain the origin of funds lent to a candidate or political party, giving it access to the French national bank account database (FICOBA), and including it on the list of entities to whom TRACFIN may transmit information.
- Recommendation 32: In the 2025 Finance Bill, examine the impact of the implementation of the Foreign Interference Act on the budget of France’s High Authority for Transparency in Public Life, with regard to the new responsibilities assigned to it.
- Recommendation 33: In the report to Parliament on the state of the threat linked to foreign interference required by the Foreign Interference Act, include an initial assessment of how the system for monitoring interest representatives acting on behalf of foreign principals is working, including any limitations identified by the High Authority for Transparency in Public Life.
- Recommendation 34: At the European level, as part of the discussions on the Defence of Democracy Package, defend strict transparency requirements for interest representation activities carried out outside France, comparable to those set out in the Foreign Interference Act.
- Recommendation 35: Conduct surveys of “prospective” ministers to ensure that they are not exposed to foreign influence.
- Recommendation 36: Strongly encourage, as best practice, identification of the “sources” of parliamentary amendments and questions to the government when they are linked to possible foreign influence.

Continue to strengthen the protection of universities and research against influence operations

- Recommendation 37: Carry out work at ministerial level to restructure systems for detecting threats linked to foreign influences within higher education and research institutions, including private-sector institutions.
- Recommendation 38: Continue to implement the recommendations of the Gattolin Report, particularly with regard to the protection of social sciences and humanities, the monitoring of international agreements, and transparency on researchers’ links of interest and the non-European funding of private-sector institutions.
- Recommendation 39: Introduce a procedure for systematically monitoring government- and quasi-government-funded grants.

Maintain a high level of vigilance with regard to issues relating to the funding of religious associations.

- Recommendation 40: Close the loopholes in the legal framework resulting from the Law of 24 August 2021 reinforcing respect for the principles of the Republic with regard to the control of foreign funding of religious associations.

Third circle: Collectively laying the foundations for a truly resilient society

- Recommendation 41: Create a new information security awareness and training function within Viginum, including for private-sector stakeholders.
- Recommendation 42: Carry out a comprehensive assessment of France's educational programmes for the media and, more broadly, critical thinking, with the aim of promoting media and information literacy as a major national cause, with a specific focus on malign foreign influences.
- Recommendation 43: Create a Media Pass for young people, modelled on the Culture Pass.
- Recommendation 44: Include a component on foreign influences in France's Defence and Citizenship Day.
- Recommendation 45: Create a special function of the Operational Reserve and the Citizens' Defence and Security Reserve that focuses on influence and can be mobilised to detect and respond to foreign influence operations.
- Recommendation 46: Raise awareness among elected officials of the issues related to malign foreign influence (public procurement, cybersecurity, etc.).
- Recommendation 47: Examine the possibility of granting national defence secrecy clearance, on a need-to-know basis, to more public officials, in particular local executives and the presidents of higher education institutions.



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