

EUROPEAN MOVEMENT IRELAND

DISINFORMATION RESEARCH

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Executive Summary

European Movement Ireland's mission is to build a connection between Ireland and Europe. At nearly 70 years of age, we see ourselves as a custodian of Ireland's relationship with the European Union (EU). With this comes the responsibility to ensure that the conversation about Europe is factual and straightforward.

This year, EM Ireland has embarked on an ongoing research project to explain the impact of disinformation on how people in Ireland discuss issues related to Europe online. Disinformation can be defined as false information that is shared deliberately online, and it's often used to sow confusion around different issues and cause division between different communities. One only needs to look at the impact of disinformation related to COVID-19 pandemic to understand its impacts. Disinformation led to fewer people getting vaccinated, and divided communities.

Our approach is ambitious. This ongoing research project will examine how different disinformation narratives are discussed, how they evolve over time, and their impact on online discourse concerning Ireland's relationship with the EU. It is our ambition that this project serves as a useful tool for stakeholders and those working in the area of EU affairs.

Our approach

The goal of this research is to understand the impact of disinformation, through its effect on Irish social media discourse. We do this by examining datasets of social media content, through a lens of pre-identified disinformation narratives. In the initial phase of this research, our research datasets have been developed using content from Reddit. Reddit has over 1.7 billion monthly visitors globally, and is Ireland's 9th most visited website¹. The core purpose of Reddit is to provide a platform for open discussion, and it has a thriving community of Irish users. A 2020 Ipsos MRBI poll found that 10% of the Irish population aged 15+ who are online have a Reddit account; 40% of those use it daily².

¹ <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/ireland/>

² Ipsos MRBI (2020) https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-01/soc_net_dec_19.pdf

Given the scope of disinformation present in the anglosphere internet at any given time, EM Ireland sampled a range of different disinformation narratives related to Europe and Ireland for analysis. A broad approach was taken to identifying these narratives, from range of sources³.

These narratives were cross referenced against datasets of naturally occurring language (created from Reddit⁴ between 18 July 2023 and 18 August 2023) using digital processes to analyse discourse. This methodology can be used to identify linguistic patterns, and thus identify methods under which language is used to construct meaning in different contexts. A more complete outline of our approach can be found on pg 9 of this report.

Within this report, four core narratives have been examined and unpacked:

- Ireland's relationship with NATO
- The Digital Euro
- Ukraine and the accommodation crisis
- The funding of NGOs

Ethical note

Using and releasing data in this way does not violate Reddit's terms of service. All data has been anonymised. Please note, where quotes have been used, they are unedited and therefore may contain language that may be offensive.

³ The [EDMO Ireland briefing report](#) from January 2023, which provides an overview of different disinformation focus areas; the [EUvsDisinfo Database](#) provided by the European External Action Service, and Irish-focused Telegram channels identified through a "snowball" method.

⁴ [r/ireland](#) and [r/irishpolitics](#)

Key Findings

Our goal is not to identify specific disinformation narratives and actors as part of this research. Rather, our intention is to explore the impact of these narratives on Irish social media discourse. As a general rule, disinformation is designed to sow discord and distrust on a local, regional, and societal level. Using this methodology, we identified four areas of specific interest for this report. Throughout, the language we've identified demonstrates the presence of this divisive language across each of the areas identified:

- The relationship between Ireland and NATO
- The Digital Euro and privacy issues
- Ukraine, the asylum process and the accommodation crisis
- The funding of NGOs on a European level

NATO

Internationally NATO is a particular focus of disinformation⁵, and the Irish Government's recent Consultative Forum on International Security Policy⁶ provided a clear opportunity to exploit it towards an Irish audience. Key trends were identified: traditional tropes (like antisemitism), a focus on how the government is lying to us, and conspiratorial language.

As with examples identified in Sweden during that country's debate on NATO membership⁷, antisemitic tropes were used ("*NATO is the military arm of globalism and the liberal order*"). Further language that tied into this trope also appeared, drawing false equivalency between Bosnia and Palestine. ("*you are ignoring that NATO didnt bomb Isreal despite the far larger figures killed and maimed in Palestine. Actually the same amount of people were murdered by the Serbs in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995 as has been killed since 1948 to the present day in Palestine*" [sic]).

Specifically related to Ireland, language related to NATO was focused on creating an 'Us Vs Them' dynamic between people living in Ireland and the Irish government. The content was consistently focused on how the Irish government has been gaslighting the Irish people, including the fact that Ireland is already a de facto member (and language suggesting that Ukraine was the reason Ireland had already joined), and through fake polls that demonstrated Irish support for joining

⁵ Robbins, J., 2020. Countering Russian Disinformation. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 23.

⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/e2a6b-consultative-forum-on-international-security-policy/>

⁷ [IntelBrief: Disinformation Narratives Related to Sweden and Finland's NATO Applications](#)

NATO (although it should be noted that 49% of people in Ireland and 52% of people in Northern Ireland think Ireland should be part of increased defence cooperation⁸). Further conspiracy theories, suggesting that all Irish men under 65 would soon be forced to sign up for the NATO army, reflect conscription-focused conspiracies aired in advance of the Lisbon Treaty.

Context

Ireland's policy of military neutrality has traditionally held strong support among the Irish public. Neutrality is seen as allowing Ireland to avoid involvement in wars and retain independence in foreign policy. There are concerns that NATO membership may compromise neutrality.

Some parties and activist oppose NATO membership, seeing the alliance as a "nuclear armed military alliance" contrary to neutrality.

Ireland's security needs are currently met through its safe geostrategic neighbourhood, close UK-Ireland defence links, the EU's mutual defence clause, and UN peacekeeping.

The Digital Euro

As with NATO, discourse surrounding the Digital Euro was divisive. While participants held opposing perspectives, all demonstrated a mistrust of government and institutions. Throughout, language related to the Digital Euro used the trope of privacy to create a fragmented discussion environment. Some participants focused on the idea that a purely digital currency meant that the government could turn off access to money at any point, citing Canada⁹ as precedent (*"Protestors/dissenters will be denied access to their money, Canada did it first and are leading the way with CBDC, the EU has already employed personal sanctions for individuals, they're not going to protect against it."* [sic]). Other conspiracy focused on privacy issues and the Digital Euro's potential as a tracking device.

While conspiratorial language was common across Digital Euro-related content, in most cases it was met with derision and mockery by other participants (which can be typical of online conversation related to conspiracy theory¹⁰). Specific rebuttals were used in relation to privacy issues, as well as language mocking online conspiracy more generally (*"Leo and Mehole were sitting in their control centre tracking us both, using GPS on our phones, CCTV from the Circle K where yer man bought a bag of taytos and a dairy milk with cash, he asked for a receipt, smart TV"*).

⁸ [EM Ireland EU Poll 2023](#)

⁹ [Trudeau vows to freeze anti-mandate protesters' bank accounts](#)

¹⁰ Dynel, M. and Zappavigna, M., 2023. Enacting polyvocal scorn in #CovidConspiracy tweets: The orchestration of voices in humorous responses to COVID-19 conspiracy theories. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 52, p.100670.

data from my sitting room, triangulation of our positions, drone footage, filmed the transaction and NOW THEY KNOW EVERYTHING =3> They are used by "Irish" banks so are subject to Irish/ EU laws."[sic]).

Context

The European Central Bank (ECB) is studying the possibility of introducing the Digital Euro, which would respond to the need for secure, efficient digital payments leveraging the backing of the central bank.

The intention is that the Digital Euro would exist alongside cash and bank deposits, as a separate digital payment option. The Digital Euro is intended to complement, not replace, existing forms of money like cash and commercial bank deposits. The ECB has clearly stated the "Digital Euro would exist alongside cash in response to people's growing preference to pay digitally, in a fast and secure way" and interact with current payment options to provide additional choices.

Ukraine, the asylum process, and the accommodation crisis

Given the Irish-focused nature of the subreddits where the dataset corpora was taken from, the main discourse surrounding the war in Ukraine was its impact on Ireland. In the earlier parts of the data-window (i.e., 17 July 2023 to 01 August 2023), participants focused on the impact of asylum seekers on the accommodation crisis in Ireland. A significant thread used the crisis as an opportunity to attack different political parties on their support or lack of support for the Ukrainian asylum seekers more broadly. Participants in those conversations recognised the impact on housing, but regularly came back to the government being at fault (*"How has it escaped you that the housing crisis has been a thing since before the Ukraine war?"*).

In the later parts of the data (i.e. 01 August 2023 to 18 August 2023), the discourse about accommodation remained but became more explicit (*"The issue is the Ukrainian war threw a spanner in the works and added the population of Galway to the country in a matter of months, absolutely making the housing crisis that was bad, turn into something on another level."*). This period also saw explicitly right-wing anti-immigrant tropes appear (*"I can tell you how to get free housing in Ireland, Move to Ukraine get Ukrainian citizenship ,come back you'll be treated far better."*[sic]).

These patterns demonstrate attempts to exploit the crisis to attack political parties, thereby tying refugee backlash to domestic political grievances. The discourse presented within the data is intended to cultivate anti-immigrant views, exacerbate domestic tensions, and turn public opinion against Ukrainian refugees by exploiting Ireland's housing shortage.

Context

Commentators have noted that the Irish housing sector has faced significant challenges for over 20 years¹¹, and it is a key political issue.

Surveys show the public holds broadly positive views towards immigration, although concerns exist about pressures on housing and services. The salience of immigration as a public issue is very low compared to other European countries, although it has recently moved towards the centre of public debate with the increase in visibility of the far-right movement in Ireland.

The funding of NGOs

Limited but significant discourse focused on the role of NGOs in both Ireland and Europe, and the lack of transparency around their funding. EM Ireland notes that this narrative reflects ongoing Russian efforts to discredit and dismantle their native NGO sector¹². Most of the discourse in this area was explicitly conspiratorial (*"It's simply a case of the tail wagging the dog in Ireland where the Irish people are paying - billions of euros each year to obscure and opaque organisations without any oversight whatsoever and whose primary raison d'être is against the views or support of the Irish majority."*[sic]). Further conversation reenforced questions about the links between the NGO sector and the Irish government (*"The Government should have a readily available website where citizens can check how their hard earned 1,000's tax euros freely donated to NGO's are really spent every year."*)

The language used here - *"hard earned 1,000's tax euros"* and *"against the views or support of the Irish majority"* - are specific populist tropes that have appeared in Irish Telegram channels. The different narratives demonstrate conspiracy theories being used to question and undermine trust in NGO funding and links to government. Specific language casts doubt on transparency around NGO funding sources and implies NGO goals are "against the views or support of the Irish majority".

Context

Within the last few years, the rise of authoritarian populism in several EU member states has led to democratic backsliding and crackdowns on different civil society actors. For example, Hungary

¹¹ Kitchin, R., Hearne, R. and O'Callaghan, C., 2015. Housing in Ireland: From crisis to crisis. Available at SSRN 2566297.

¹² Moser, E. and Skripchenko, A., 2018. Russian NGOs and their struggle for legitimacy in the face of the 'foreign agents' law: Surviving in small ecologies. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(4), pp.591-614.

Poland, and the non-member state of Georgia have implemented policies aimed at restricting NGOs, the media, and other watchdogs that have become essential to fostering an open and healthy democracy. These measures included the tightening of oversight in relation to NGO funding as well as limiting access to resources and information.

The EU has struggled to counter this democratic backsliding within its own borders effectively. As a result, the space for civil society is shrinking in parts of Europe thus risking and undermining the bloc's moral authority when challenging similar actions by non-member states. More broadly, it threatens the EU's founding democratic values and norms that civil society should be able to be part of the decision-making process at all levels.

Methodology

This research follows a corpus-based discourse analysis approach. Corpus-based discourse analysis is the process in which research is used to understand and unpack meaning through the statistical analysis of large datasets of naturally occurring language.

Corpus-based techniques can be used to identify linguistic patterns, and thus identify methods under which language is used to construct meaning in different contexts. They involve computer-aided analysis of large amounts of electronic data through machine learning techniques, and can be used to examine large bodies of language data. This research was carried out using a corpus of language specifically compiled for this study, and analysed using the Sketch Engine¹³ platform.

Different approaches were used to analyse the data, including examining it for keywords that appear statistically more often in this dataset than in a more general dataset, an analysis of what words appear together statistically more often than they might otherwise, and searches for specific words and phrases in the context that they have been used. Through this approach, we were able to identify the discourse around specific topics systematically.

Data

The data for this study was extracted from Reddit using the R programming language. Reddit contains user-created forums called subreddits that are focused on specific topics. The data was collected from the subreddits *r/ireland* and *r/irishpolitics* which contain images and discussions surrounding Irish life.

The R package *RedditExtractor*¹⁴ was used to extract data from the selected subreddit. First, the package was installed in RStudio along with its dependencies. The R script was run to execute these steps and extract the Reddit data. This process resulted in two files in CSV format containing the post and comment information from the selected subreddit. These datasets can then be loaded into other programs for further analysis. For longitudinal research purposes, separate datasets were created covering two-week blocks.

¹³ Sketch Engine (2023) <https://www.sketchengine.eu/>

¹⁴ Rivera, I (2023) *RedditExtractor*: Reddit Data Extraction. <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/RedditExtractor/RedditExtractor.pdf>

Data-handling

Our approach is based on anonymisation and archiving:

1. Data anonymisation: When creating and archiving corpora for linguistic research, it is important to anonymise any personal data to protect the privacy of individuals who contributed to the dataset. EM Ireland has followed this approach throughout.
2. Dataset archiving: Archiving older linguistic datasets that contain personal data poses ethical challenges as consent procedures and privacy norms have evolved. Approaches like data minimisation, access restrictions, and re-consenting participants allow datasets to be preserved while respecting changing standards.

Conclusions

- The topics explored within the data set time frame include NATO membership, the Digital Euro, the Ukrainian refugee crisis, and NGO funding.
- There is evidence that disinformation narratives impact Irish social media conversations, particularly around controversial or divisive political topics.
- These narratives seem aimed at sowing discord, spreading mistrust of government institutions, and promoting conspiracy theories.
- Some common tactics include exploiting anti-immigrant sentiment, antisemitic tropes, stoking privacy fears, and anti-establishment populism.
- On social media, this shows up through divisive and inflammatory language that tries to pit "the people" against the government, as well as against each other.
- There are attempts to spread conspiracies about government overreach or ulterior motives around the Digital Euro and NGO funding.
- Blaming societal problems like the accommodation crisis on Ukrainian refugees is another way to tap into anti-immigrant views.