



Name of the student:	Bianca Mihailov
Title of the thesis:	The polarizing effect of Russian disinformation in the European Parliament
Reviewer:	Toni Rodon

### 1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review):

This MA dissertation is empirically timely. Given the influence of Russia in European politics (and elsewhere) on the last few years, it is relevant to study whether and how the Russian influence is felt in Western European countries. There have been many studies in political science on the Russian influence on different political outcomes, such as vote choice or satisfaction with democracy. Yet, our empirical understanding of whether and how the elites change their behaviour as a result of Russian actions is still limited. This MA dissertation represents an effort in this direction.

The goal of the MA dissertation is largely clear, although the reader often has the feeling that there are two aspects under examination: First, the influence of Russian disinformation on MEP’s behaviour and, second, the influence of MEP’s ideology in filtering the effect of Russian disinformation. Although both of them are closely linked, they do not equally operate from a theoretical point of view.

The theoretical discussion is correct, although it could be streamlined. It is divided into three parts (commitment to democratic values, members of the European Parliament’s voting behaviour and combating disinformation) that are not always logically connected. Most crucially, much of the effort and discussion is put on the third subsection (combating disinformation), and we are missing some theoretical ideas for why some MEPs are more inclined to disregard the role of Russia than others. That is, the literature on political elites offer some theoretical ideas (strategic choice/complementarities, alternative coalitions, etc) that could have been a good addition in the discussion.

### 2. ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources):

The MA dissertation uses a directive in digital policy to combat disinformation approved in 2022 as a case study. The methodology is based on the analysis of speeches of the debates that take place during the plenary session leading to the approval of the directive. Critical discourse analysis is employed. The methodology is well implemented, although a few more details on its advantages and disadvantages would have been appreciated. Similarly, speeches were categorised as in favour or against regulation and subsequently analysed. This represents a good approach, but perhaps a more nuanced operationalisation—and more sophisticated techniques—would have provided a different or more elaborate picture.

The analysis is descriptive, but it is generally thorough and properly developed. The analysis of narratives is empirically interesting in light of the research question, although we are missing some links between the analysis and theoretical discussion.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives):

The conclusion is sound, and the MA dissertation provides an interesting empirical contribution. As suggestions to improve it—and hence limitations of the current text, the MA dissertation could have provided a better discussion on the shortcomings of the analysis. For instance, the dissertation analysis one case (the DSA directive) and a set of debates, an approach that hinders the external validity of the findings. It also takes a case in 2022, when Russian disinformation had already been there for a while and (some) countries already reacted against it. Similarly, the focus on speeches misses the interaction between the different members across alliances and topics, which misses the power dynamics within the EP.

**4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE**

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout):

Formal aspects are correct. There are, however, some minor issues:

- The subsection ‘relevance of the research’ seems to be misplaced at the end of the theory.
- More information on the speeches could have been provided in the appendix (number\*length, who intervened, etc).
- Given that the author created a dataset, information on topics, or themes could have been visually linked to voting patterns.

**5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT**

(strong and weak point of the dissertation, other issues)

<b>Grade (0-10):</b>	5
Date:	Signature: