

## “INDIA’S DISINFORMATION NETWORK: A CHALLENGE TO GLOBAL INFORMATION INTEGRITY”

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May 10, 2025

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The EU DisinfoLab has discovered a huge Indian disinformation network named the Indian Chronicles, which ran for over 15 years in 115 countries. Conducted by the Srivastava Group, the campaign had more than 750 phony media houses, reconstituted NGOs, and imitated UN-accredited personalities to project anti-Pakistan agendas in international forums such as the UN and EU.

Pakistan reacted in diplomatic ways, bringing up the issue in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, calling for global accountability. Despite the magnitude of the operation, the international response has proved inadequate, which illuminates the missing regulatory mechanisms for combating state-sponsored disinformation.

The campaign carries real threats to international credibility, media integrity, and diplomatic fairness, and is a highlight of the immediate need for increased international protection from information warfare.

Integrity of information has become a key process around which modern diplomacy and relations between countries are built. In this regard, the emergence of a massive state-affiliated disinformation network attributed to India has generated serious issues in the eyes of the stakeholders concerned with transparency, multilateralism, and ethical international relations. The revelations of EU DisinfoLab, a Brussels NGO, revealed a complex, united campaign to besmirch Pakistan’s international reputation, seek to influence global debate, and use the framework of international organizations. This Issue Brief describes the setting and consequences of this

campaign, what Pakistan has done in response, and the larger issues that it poses to the global governance of information.

In December 2019 and December 2020, EU DisinfoLab released investigative reports – especially the “Indian Chronicles,” which exposed the existence of a global network of more than 750 fake media outlets in over 115 countries. This network was run by the Indian holding company Srivastava Group, working in conjunction with some NGOs and what seemed to be state-aligned individuals. These entities were involved in a systematic crafting and distribution of anti-Pakistan content, including, but not limited to, terrorism, religious minorities, and the situation in Kashmir.<sup>1</sup>

The disinformation campaign was operationally complex. It also included the hijacking of dormant NGOs in addition to the creation of fake news portals and thinktanks. It even resurrected the identities of long-dead individuals accredited to the United Nations.<sup>2</sup> One especially disconcerting discovery was the placing of the name “Professor Louis B. Sohn” – the name of an esteemed UN-associated professional – behind these manipulated platforms in order to give them a certain plausibility.<sup>3</sup> The major goal of these initiatives was to shape decision-making circles in the European Parliament, UN Human Rights Council, and international media in support of the Indian strategic narratives and against Pakistan.

Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) reacted promptly and strongly to the revelations from the EU DisinfoLab. Repeatedly in press briefings and official communiqués, Pakistan condemned this Indian enterprise as a state-sponsored campaign of disinformation and psychological warfare.<sup>4</sup> MoFA stressed that the operation was not only unethical but also risky because it sought not only to undermine the credibility of Pakistan on the global platforms but also to interfere with its sovereign right to defend its national interests.

The Human Rights Council and other relevant forums took up the issue when the Permanent Mission of Pakistan at the United Nations in Geneva raised this issue with detailed dossiers based on the findings made by the EU DisinfoLab.<sup>5</sup> The Pakistani Mission urged a global examination of the use of

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<sup>1</sup> *Indian Chronicles: Deep Dive into a 15-Year Operation Targeting the EU and UN to Serve Indian Interests*, EU DisinfoLab, December 2020, [https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Indian-chronicles\\_FULLREPORT.pdf](https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Indian-chronicles_FULLREPORT.pdf). EU DisinfoLab.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–25.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, *Transcript of the Press Briefing by Spokesperson on Thursday, 10 December 2020*, December 10, 2020, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/transcript-of-the-press-briefing-by-spokesperson-on-thursday-10-december-2020?mission=media-briefings>.

<sup>5</sup> Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations, “Pakistan's Statement on Disinformation and Sabotage of Peace in South Asia,” United Nations Human Rights Council, March 2021, <https://pakun.org/news/new-4.Pakun+1YouTube+1>.

fake NGOs and media platforms by India in conducting manipulations of discussions at the UN and other multilateral bodies. Pakistan affirmed that such malign influence operations posed a threat to the credibility and neutrality of international institutions, particularly those required to guard the rights and justice of humankind.

Besides, Pakistan raised the issue at different bilateral and multilateral forums, calling upon the international community to take notice of the long-term perils of the normalization of such information warfare techniques. In its public diplomacy strategy, Pakistan has also made the effort to apprise the civil society and journalists around the world of the mechanics of India's campaign so that the issue does not get off the radar of the international community.

Despite attracting media attention in Europe and by digital rights watchdogs, the official reaction from international institutions and major powers in the West has been incredibly muted in response to the EU DisinfoLab reports. In spite of the size of the operation, no concrete punitive actions have been undertaken by the European or the UN bodies towards the actors involved.<sup>6</sup> This subdued response might mirror the absence of binding international rules that regulate government-sponsored disinformation, especially when done aurally with ostensibly "civil society" channels.

However, civil society groups and some UN Special Rapporteurs did recognize the gravity of the revelations in question.<sup>7</sup> There have been increased voices in UN ranks for a more hard-nosed screening of NGOs and examination of the accreditation procedures in order to avoid the misuse of civil society machinery for geopolitical interference. The case has also revived the controversies about the correctness of state conduct in cyberspace and the necessity to establish international norms to control information warfare.

The EU DisinfoLab revelations on India's large disinformation network indicate a growing global trend of a hybrid form of information warfare which is used to mold perceptions and undermine rivals. It points to the urgent need for cementing international norms governing the information flows relating to digital realm. In turn, the United Nations has taken a few steps. Pakistan has taken the lead in the adoption of Resolution 76/227 in 2021 to demand collective action against disinformation and the support of human rights.<sup>8</sup> The UN Secretary General also came out with a

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<sup>6</sup> Julian Pecquet, "India's Disinformation Campaign Barely Registers in Europe," Foreign Lobby, January 5, 2021, <https://foreignlobby.com/2021/01/05/indias-disinformation-campaign-barely-registers-in-europe/>.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association*, UNHRC, A/HRC/50/23, June 2022, [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3976158/files/A\\_HRC\\_50\\_23-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3976158/files/A_HRC_50_23-EN.pdf). Digital Library.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, A/RES/76/227 (December 24, 2021), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3955093>.

Policy Brief in 2023 that outlines a *Global Code of Conduct for Information Integrity* to protect the digital information space.<sup>9</sup> These sentiments are increasingly reflecting the broader international consensus on the need for collective response under frameworks that can be cooperative and normative to the state-led disinformation.

For its part, India has habitually denied the allegations, dismissed the EU DisinfoLab findings as politically motivated and non-credible, but has not conducted an open investigation on the entities named or distanced itself from the Srivastava Group nor the network of fake media outlets.<sup>10</sup>

What has been uncovered by EU DisinfoLab as the Indian disinformation network is not a single incident, but instead indicative of a broader pattern of hybrid war strategies that more states including India are using. These are cyber espionage, narrative control, and use of digital means to influence the international perceptions. The episode shows how the lack of any clear framework for regulation enables state and quasi-state actors to take advantage of open societies, digital platforms, and the liberal international order for pursuing their narrow geopolitical interests.

For Pakistan, the Indian campaign is not only a diplomatic affront but also a stiff challenge to its national security and international image. This has implications for how Pakistan's position is viewed in conflict places, in negotiations on development, and in international financial institutions. Even more broadly, it establishes a dangerous dichotomy as false information becomes a legitimate instrument in the conduct of statecraft, undermining the truth as a principle in international dialogue.

India's disinformation campaign, described by EU DisinfoLab in detail, is one of the most organized and far-ranging state-sponsored propaganda campaigns of the modern age. It exploited the veneer of international legitimacy by faking NGOs; media houses which were even UN accredited, to distort a synchronized and deceitful message. Pakistan was the favoured target, but the global consequences are obvious. The international community should regard this as a turning point and quickly review the weaknesses of the information ecosystem that supports diplomacy and multilateral governance. Without being challenged, such malign campaigns may gain normality and systemic status and undermine the credibility of international institutions and impede pursuit of equitable world order.

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Secretary-General, *Policy Brief: Information Integrity on Digital Platforms*, June 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/civil-society/information-integrity-digital-platforms>.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *India Clarifies on Fake News Report, Says Our Neighbours Run Such Campaigns*, December 12, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-clarifies-on-fake-news-report-blames-pakistan-1748892-2020-12-12>.