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International Panel on the Information Environment

Resilience and Vulnerability to Misinformation and Disinformation in Political Information Environments

A Comparative Review of Ten Indexes

Technical Paper 2026.1

DOI Number: 10.61452/MBPE3349

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How to cite:
International Panel on the Information Environment [F. Esser, J.A. Solis, M. Chan, P. van Aelst, D. Madrid-Morales, T. Bosch, M. Botan, E. Humprecht, J. Labarre, R. M. Santini, A. Schulz, B. Seim, M. Wack, P.N. Howard, S. Valenzuela (eds.)], "Resilience and Vulnerability to Misinformation and Disinformation in Political Information Environments: A Comparative Review of Ten Indexes," Zurich, Switzerland: IPIE, 2026. Technical Paper, TR2026.1, doi: 10.61452/MBPE3349.

SYNOPSIS

Political information environments around the world are facing the twin challenges of misinformation and disinformation, which degrade the quality of public discourse, undermine political stability, and weaken social cohesion. It is therefore important to understand the conditions under which countries are at risk from misinformation and disinformation. In recent years, several indexes have been developed by scholars, think tanks, advocacy groups, and technology companies aimed at diagnosing and comparing these risk and protective conditions. Yet, systematic cross-index comparison remains limited.

This Synthesis Report (TP2026.1) addresses this gap by developing a typology of existing measures, providing a systematic comparative analysis of ten published indexes, and offering a fitness-for-purpose guide for researchers, policymakers, and index producers. Our analysis reveals three key insights:

1. The concepts of vulnerability and resilience provide a foundational framework for understanding how political misinformation and disinformation are amplified or mitigated and for comparing countries over time. However, because most indexes rely on structural, perceptual, or behavioral proxies rather than direct measures, their scores should therefore be read as comparative diagnostics rather than estimates of disinformation prevalence.
2. Several indexes offer valuable and complementary insights, but they diverge in their theoretical assumptions, methodologies, and the aspects of the political information environment they emphasize. Caution is therefore required to avoid overgeneralizing cross-national rankings, and triangulation across complementary measures is often advisable.
3. Although the ten indexes considered in this report were designed to address political misinformation and disinformation, their underlying logic can be applied to the broader task of measuring political information environments and information integrity.

By evaluating the strengths, good practices, and shortcomings of these ten indexes, this report highlights the critical dimensions and measures that can guide a theoretically informed, methodologically robust, and globally sensitive next-generation index. It concludes with guidance for using index results responsibly.

CONTENTS

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

Countries around the world depend on the integrity of their information environments. In recent years, these systems have faced growing challenges, from conspiracy theories about the pandemic to foreign election interference. Taken together, such forms of misinformation and disinformation (hereafter "mis- and disinformation") threaten the quality of public debate, social cohesion, and democratic resilience. Governments, civil society groups, and international organizations have worked to understand the drivers of poor-quality information and develop strategies to protect civic spaces. The stakes are high: unchecked mis- and disinformation erode public trust, polarize discourse, and undermine democratic legitimacy [1-5].

In response, scholars, think tanks, advocacy groups, and technology companies have developed indexes and ranking tools to diagnose the resilience or vulnerability of political information environments. Throughout this report, we use "indexes" as shorthand for the index frameworks, accompanying methodological documentation, and published outputs included in this review. Such efforts reflect an emerging consensus that mis- and disinformation are not isolated problems but a symptom of deeper structural conditions that vary across societies [6-11]. A comparative analysis of indexing initiatives offers both scientific and practical value [12] by quantifying these conditions and tracking how media systems and political contexts enable or mitigate the spread of harmful content. Yet despite the proliferation of mis- and disinformation, there has been little systematic comparison of how these efforts assess national vulnerabilities and resilience. This report fills that gap.

Objectives

This report aims to strengthen how mis- and disinformation are measured in three ways.

- First, it will map the research field and develop a typology of existing indexes based on their objectives, definitions, methodological implementation, and data sources.
- Second, it will conduct a systematic comparative case study of the ten indexes that remain after applying our inclusion and exclusion criteria. It will assess how index-based measurement captures both the potential and limitations of analyzing political information environments through the lens of mis- and disinformation.
- Third, it aims to serve as a fitness-for-purpose guide for researchers, policymakers, and index producers, helping them develop more robust, inclusive, theoretically grounded, globally sensitive, and regionally adaptable indexes.

We explore the strengths and weaknesses of these indexes to draw lessons for a much broader challenge: the comprehensive conceptualization and measurement of a political information environment. We argue that mis- and disinformation is a critical symptom of systemic vulnerabilities and a direct threat to information integrity. This review therefore lays essential conceptual and methodological groundwork for a forthcoming IPIE report on frameworks for indexing the political information environment more broadly.

Together, these three objectives lead to overarching conclusions about index design and their long-term utility for stakeholders. This multidimensional assessment of how each index defines and measures vulnerability and resilience provide policymakers and civil society organizations with quantifiable

benchmarks for assessing a country's readiness to resist or mitigate the effects of mis- and disinformation. For researchers, the assessment clarifies which indexes and measures are more suitable and relevant for specific research goals and contexts.

Linkages with Information Integrity and the Information Environment

Before turning to the analysis, we clarify several core concepts, starting with the definition of the information environment. The continuing absence of a shared definition of the "information environment" is a major challenge [13]. Some describe it as the space where human cognition, digital technologies, and content flows interact [10, 14], while others adopt a broader systems perspective that includes informational processes, institutions, actors, and infrastructures [15, 16]. We adopt this broader view, treating mis- and disinformation not as isolated pathologies but as features of systemic dynamics [10, 14].

Evaluating this system requires a more precise framework than "health" [17]. The concept of "information integrity" offers such a framework, providing measurable criteria for assessing information environments. Yadav and Lai identify six components in this framework: accuracy, consistency, reliability, fidelity, safety, and transparency [18]. The UN's Information Integrity framework advances this perspective through five principles: societal trust and resilience, healthy incentives for advertisers and tech companies, public empowerment, independent, free, and pluralistic media, and transparency and research [19]. Together, these standards offer a common basis for evaluating the performance of information environments.

Existing mis- and disinformation indexes offer an instructive starting point for exploring these broader concepts. Mis- and disinformation intersect with all core dimensions of information environments [14] and directly link with multiple

pillars of information integrity, including accuracy (by definition), reliability (by eroding trust), fidelity (by distorting understanding), and safety (by causing real-world harm) [18]. The UN principles map onto contexts where trust is low, incentives are shaped by opaque business models, public empowerment is limited, media pluralism is restricted, or transparency is insufficient. Using mis- and disinformation indexing therefore allows us to extract lessons that support the broader goal of measuring political information environments. We focus on political information environments: the segment of a society's wider information environment where public affairs information circulates and where mis- and disinformation can most directly affect public decision-making.

This conceptual groundwork also brings into focus how research on mis- and disinformation is interpreted within current political debates. Such research has become increasingly politically charged, with some officials and commentators arguing that labeling content as "disinformation" may enable censorship. We recognize these concerns yet hold that the open exchange of ideas is indispensable for democratic societies. In this context, the comparative analysis serves two related purposes that directly advance the study's broader objectives. First, it systematically identifies the structural and behavioral factors that elevate content that undermines the core principles of information integrity, including accuracy, reliability, fidelity, and safety. Second, it equips stakeholders with robust evidence to clarify the scope and variation of these challenges and to inform policy debate on how information environments can remain open and pluralistic while mitigating harmful manipulation.

The comparative exercise presented here is both diagnostic and capacity-building. It diagnoses how current mis- and disinformation indexes define and measure vulnerabilities within political information environments. It also builds conceptual and methodological capacities that contribute to a more

comprehensive measurement framework capable of capturing multiple dimensions of information integrity beyond mis- and disinformation.

Terminology: Mis- and Disinformation

The ten indexes reviewed here do not rely on a single shared definition of the information problem they address. Some foreground intentional, foreign-driven disinformation and interference, while others focus on broader domestic conditions such as literacy, trust, and polarization.

In principle, misinformation is false information shared without intent to cause harm, while disinformation is false information knowingly shared to cause harm [2, 20]. In practice, intent is difficult to observe, and many indexes rely on proxy indicators that cannot consistently distinguish intentional from unintentional forms. Moreover, in many languages and media contexts a single term is used for both forms, such as the Indonesian term “hoaks” [21]. For readability, we therefore use “mis- and disinformation” as an umbrella label for the family of information harms covered by the indexes. When discussing a specific index, we retain the terminology used by that index.

Structure of the Report

Consistent with the three objectives outlined above, the remainder of the report is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the rationale and methodology used to select the indexes featured in this report, including the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Section 3 provides an initial typology and overview of each index, focusing on their origins and intended purposes. Section 4 offers a comparative analysis, identifying areas of overlap and clarifying key theoretical and conceptual differences in the latent traits these indexes aim to measure. We also reviewed the data sources, geographic scope, and methodological features employed, including data collection procedures, weighting strategies, and validation checks. Section 5 presents three in-depth empirical comparisons,

highlighting areas of convergence and divergence among them. Finally, Section 6 synthesizes the findings, assessing each index's strengths and weaknesses as well as evaluating their practical utility and potential for further development by researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

SECTION 2. INDEX SELECTION

Meta-comparisons of existing indexing studies are quite common in the fields of healthcare and energy supply [12, 22-26]. These domains share important similarities with the study of mis- and disinformation. Across the three domains, the vulnerability of systems to sudden threats or longer-term structural stress plays a significant role. They all study the resilience of systems using multidimensional indexes that take technical, economic, geopolitical, and social dimensions into account.

Building on this precedent, this report employs a similar meta-analytical approach to the mis- and disinformation field. It maps and categorizes ten indexes that address national vulnerability or resilience to mis- or disinformation, identifies their underlying conceptual assumptions, and evaluates the methodology of their measurement instruments. This approach aligns with established best practices used to create composite indices [27, 28] and with comparative meta-analyses in healthcare and energy supply [12, 22].

To guide our review, we use the Best-Evidence Synthesis (BES) approach, which synthesizes evidence by prioritizing the identification and analysis of indexes that are both methodologically robust and substantively relevant [29-31]. The approach emphasizes quality by selecting indexes with high internal and external validity using clearly defined a priori criteria. Unlike traditional statistical meta-analysis, BES relies on narrative synthesis, which allows for closer attention to the contexts in which the indexes were analyzed and a deeper understanding of how contextual factors shape outcomes.

Consistent with established BES practices and index comparisons, we applied seven inclusion criteria to select the sample [12]:

- Availability: indexes had to be accessible through Google or Google Scholar
- Time period: indexes had to be published between 2016 and 2025
- Object: indexes had to focus on mis- or disinformation or on indicators of contextual conditions predictive of their emergence, including factors related to resilience or vulnerability
- Purpose: indexes had to evaluate, monitor, measure, or assess these objects
- Method: indexes had to use indicators, scores, or indexes applied empirically
- Transparency: indexes had to include details about the indicators or scoring systems used
- Scope: indexes had to be designed for cross-national comparison

Furthermore, we restricted our sample to think-tank reports, research papers, and peer-reviewed articles authored by academic or public policy researchers.

We also applied several exclusion criteria [12]. We excluded studies that lacked measurable indicators such as overviews or commentaries; did not adopt a cross-national comparative scope; lacked a clear connection to mis- or disinformation or relevant contextual conditions; only critiqued or referenced indexes without conducting original analysis; or were inaccessible because of language barriers or lack of full-text access. For example, while indexes like Misinformation Maelstrom: A Mapping of Vulnerability Across America and the Jin-Hafiz Disinformation Index (JHDI) provide valuable insights within their specific national contexts, their lack of transnational applicability places them outside the scope of our inclusion criteria.

The ten indexes in the final sample are funded by a diverse range of actors, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, and academic

institutions, and are aimed at varied target audiences including advertisers and policymakers.

SECTION 3. OVERVIEW OF THE INDEXES

Key Insights

- Indexes are often one-off or first-generation products with no clear path to sustainability.
- Index design reflects a blend of academic and think-tank producers, each shaped by distinct funding incentives and target audiences.
- Index construction tends to rely on structured scoring frameworks for cross-national comparison of vulnerability and resilience.
- Funding and institutional stability heavily shape an index's sustainability and relevance.

Origins and Purposes of the Indexes

This section provides an overview of the ten indexes included in our analysis, their origins, and their operational characteristics (Table 1). The indexes fall into two general categories. One set was developed by academic researchers and published in peer-reviewed journals [32-34], or disseminated as publicly accessible briefs and reports. The other set was produced by researchers in nongovernmental organizations, independent think tanks, and university research labs [35].

The main purposes of each index are summarized in Table 1. While the specific purposes of the indexes differ, they all serve as comparative tools designed to address the global challenge of mis- and disinformation through structured, score-based methodologies. Each index approaches the issue of mis- or disinformation by evaluating factors such as vulnerability, resilience, or other risks associated with the spread of misleading content.

Table 1. Indexes included in the analysis

Index	Lead author / sponsor	Overview of what it measures	Purpose / intended audience	Editions reviewed	# of editions / outputs
Global Disinformation Index (GDI)	Global Disinformation Index	Produces "disinformation risk" ratings of news domains and media markets intended to support brand-safety and investment decisions, such as by advertisers, platforms, and funders. Publishes domain- and market-level analyses and, in some workflows, exclusion-list style outputs for higher-risk domains.	Advertising & funding-oriented	USA (2022); Senegal (2024); EU election (2023)	28 country reports
Media Resilience to Malign Influence (MRMI) Index	AidData	Assesses the resilience of a country's media against foreign malign influence, emphasizing authoritarian strategies that undermine democratic norms. Evaluates structural safeguards, such as rule of law, press freedom, and indirect risk factors such as ownership transparency, funding independence, and journalistic standards.	Policy-driven (government & security)	2023	1
Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI)	EAST Center	Tracks and compares changes in disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly after geopolitical shocks, such as the war in Ukraine. Assesses institutions, civil society, and media frameworks, with a focus on foreign-led disinformation.	Policy-driven (government & security)	2021; 2024	3
GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index (GVI)	GLOBSEC	Assesses the susceptibility of Central and Southeastern European countries to foreign malign influence, focusing on corruption, institutional quality, and public attitudes. Uses data on corruption, media freedom, and public trust; covers Russia's and China's influence efforts.	Policy-driven (government & security)	2021	1
GlobalFocus Permeability Index (GPI)	GlobalFocus Center	Measures how "permeable" a country is to external propaganda, disinformation, and hybrid warfare tactics by examining structural vulnerabilities (corruption, governance quality, the media ecosystem, economic dependencies) and risk areas for manipulative narratives.	Policy-driven (government & security)	2019	1
Resilience to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Index	Van Aelst et al.	Assesses how well societies absorb, adapt to, or mitigate misinformation and other forms of manipulation/interference by considering macro-level (institutional trust, social cohesion), meso-level (media, politics), and micro-level (education, digital literacy) opportunity structures for resilience.	Academically oriented	2025	1
Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index	Humprecht et al.	Compares how well Western democracies resist disinformation by examining structural factors, such as political polarization, populist support, trust in news, strength of public service media, and social media reliance, and how these relate to self-reported mis- and disinformation exposure.	Academically oriented	2020	1
Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index	Labarre	Measures a society's "epistemic health": how people lose confidence in the authority and value of political information due to distrust, confusion, and deceptive content. Includes perceived disinformation exposure, confusion ("disorientation"), and distrust in professional media.	Academically oriented	2024	1
Media Literacy Index (MLI)	OSI–Sofia	Assesses societal resilience to disinformation by combining measures of media literacy (education and digital participation) with structural factors (media freedom and public trust), assuming that a higher level of literacy supports stronger defenses against disinformation.	Public outreach	2022; 2023	6
Misinformation Vulnerability Index (MVI)	Mu & Shanks	Quantifies how vulnerable a population is to misinformation. Originally focused on COVID-19; uses trust in science, government countermeasures, and social media penetration as proxies for susceptibility.	Public outreach	2022	1

All of them provide cross-national or cross-outlet comparisons through mechanisms like scoring, ranking, or mapping, highlighting how different contexts fall along a spectrum of risk or resilience. Most use nested measurement architectures: individual indicators are grouped into pillars, dimensions, or components, which are then combined into composite scores, categorical ratings, or rankings.

These indexes do not all measure the same underlying phenomena at the same levels of analysis. Some focus primarily on the structural conditions of the information environment, such as media systems, regulatory frameworks, institutional quality, and incentive structures. Others emphasize observable outputs or information problems, including the prevalence of mis- and disinformation, exposure to harmful content, or related manifestations such as confusion or distrust. Several indexes combine structural- and output-oriented indicators within a single composite score without clearly distinguishing between causes and manifestations.

The purpose of each index often reflects the expectations of its initiators and funders, who developed it for specific purposes and target audiences. However, the true value of these indexes lies in their ability to generate insights that extend beyond their original purpose. Examining their stated goals and intended audiences offers a foundation for understanding their design and orientation. Building on this foundation, we identify four groups into which the indexes can be classified:

- Advertising- and Funding-Oriented Index. Global Disinformation Index (GDI). The GDI is designed for ad-tech firms, marketers, and brand-safety teams. It aims to reduce the monetization of outlets it rates as higher disinformation risks by providing risk scores and licensing products such as its “Dynamic Exclusion List,” which can be integrated into ad-buying

and brand-safety systems to limit ad placement on higher-risk domains. Although the GDI is a nonprofit, it operates a licensing model for some outputs and has been supported by a mix of philanthropic and government-related funding.

- Policy-Driven, Government, and Security-Oriented Indexes. Media Resilience to Malign Influence (MRMI) Index, Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI), GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index (GVI), GlobalFocus Permeability Index (GPI). These indexes inform government policy and strategic planning to counter foreign disinformation, often linked to Russia or China. Target audiences include policymakers, security agencies, and international organizations. Each data-generating organization is a think tank or research lab focused on security, development, or policy analysis. All of the indexes were published by nonprofits with funding from governments and foundations. GVI (Slovakia) and the MRMI index (USA) have a broader scope, while GPI (Romania) and DRI (Poland) focus on more specialized regional issues.
- Academically Oriented Indexes. Resilience to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Index, Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index, Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index. Their primary audience is the academic community, particularly scholars of political communication, sociology, and journalism studies, though they are also useful to policymakers. The FIMI index explicitly targets both scholars and European policy actors. The ROD index examines structural resilience, while the EV index examines epistemic vulnerability from a theoretical perspective. These data generators are affiliated with public universities in Europe or the USA and publish their indexes in peer-reviewed academic journals.

- Public Outreach Indexes. Media Literacy Index (MLI), Misinformation Vulnerability Index (MVI). Both of these indexes inform and engage the public while offering insights for academic and policy communities. The MLI highlights media literacy produced by the Open Society Institute – Sofia Foundation (OSIS), raising awareness among NGOs, media literacy advocates, and scholars. The MVI addresses public health misinformation, particularly around COVID-19, and emphasizes trust in science. Its main audience includes public health officials and civil society organizations, and its insights are also relevant for researchers and policymakers. It is part of a university-led effort to counter misinformation and to prepare for future pandemics.

Update Frequency of the Indexes

The ten indexes vary in terms of their longevity, their responsiveness to emerging challenges, and their update frequency, generally falling into three categories: regularly updated, irregularly updated, and one-off iterations. The MLI is the only index with updates almost every year since its launch in 2017. The second category includes indexes that evolve over time rather than having a fixed schedule for updates. The GDI's country assessments and lists, the FIMI index's progression from a conceptual framework to a West Africa pilot, and the DRI's 2018, 2021, and 2024 editions all exemplify this pattern. These models adjust their methodologies or incorporate new geopolitical developments, such as the DRI's focus on the Russia-Ukraine war. These updates improve relevance but complicate longitudinal comparisons.

The third category consists of one-off or first-generation academic indexes, such as the ROD index. Although applied in follow-up studies beyond European countries and the USA [7, 9], it lacks the institutional structures and funding needed for ongoing updates. Such indexes can quickly become outdated as mis-

and disinformation techniques evolve, and irregularly updated indexes face similar challenges when data sources stagnate or when new technologies like deepfakes are not reflected in the indexes.

This analysis demonstrates that long-term sustainability depends on stable technical, managerial, and financial support. The MLI illustrates this: its annual update is enabled by OSIS, which is backed by donors, foundations, national governments, and multilateral organizations. Beyond the organizational differences, the indexes reviewed here vary widely in purpose, scope, and design, yet their shared reliance on composite measurement raises common conceptual and methodological questions. The following section moves beyond description to compare how these tools define core concepts, select indicators, and construct measures of vulnerability and resilience.

SECTION 4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Key Insights

- Vulnerability and resilience are treated as closely related constructs, often positioned as opposite ends of a continuum (more vulnerability typically implies less resilience, and vice versa).
- Indexes address mis- and disinformation mainly indirectly, operationalizing risk through structural, perceptual, or psychological proxies rather than through direct, standardized measurement of false content.
- Methodological transparency is uneven, with inconsistent detail on indicator selection, how missing data are handled, weighting/aggregation, and validation procedures.
- Divergent designs and data-generation strategies are hard to align, limiting meaningful side-by-side comparisons and requiring careful attention to the scope, assumptions, and measurement.
- Geographic coverage is uneven, with strong representation of Europe and other data-rich democracies and persistent gaps across much of the Global South, reflecting data availability and institutional priorities.

In this section, we examine the conceptual foundations of the indexes and evaluate their methodological approaches. We first compare how the indexes define their core concepts, then analyze their dimensions and indicators, and finally assess their methodological construction.

Conceptual Foundations

According to the OECD's Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators (2008), the first step in constructing an index is to build a theoretical framework and define the terms used. Like other comparative analyses of indexes, such as a study

investigating energy security in 2015 [22], our analysis also shows considerable variance. The ten indexes all define the core concepts such as disinformation, vulnerability, and resilience, but then situate them within distinct theoretical frameworks based on their problem focus and the context, type, and source of mis- and disinformation.

Most academically oriented indexes distinguish between "disinformation" (intentional falsehoods) and "misinformation" (unintentional inaccuracies) while acknowledging that intent is difficult to measure empirically. The FIMI index and the MVI place greater emphasis on misinformation but acknowledge conceptual overlap. The approaches vary among the nonacademic indexes. The GDI emphasizes disinformation as "intentionally misleading narratives," while the MLI uses "disinformation," "misinformation," and "fake news" interchangeably. Generally, indexes maintain strict conceptual separation, but most integrate elements of both concepts into their frameworks.

One conceptual distinction lies in which layer of the political information environment each index foregrounds. Although all the indexes address multiple components of political information environments, they emphasize different levels of analysis. Some focus primarily on the structural layer, examining media systems, regulatory institutions, or political communication infrastructures. Others focus on the content and narrative layer, analyzing the presence, circulation, or characteristics of harmful narratives and media-market dynamics. A third group gives prominence to the audience layer, concentrating on attitudes, beliefs, cognitive dispositions, or perceived exposure. A few integrate two or more layers simultaneously. These differences in emphasis do not contradict that mis- and disinformation intersect with the entire political information environment; rather, they demonstrate how each index selects entry points within a broader conceptual framework.

These conceptual foundations also shape what each index treats as the primary source of risk. Indexes prioritizing foreign-driven disinformation treat it as a strategic tool used by external state actors to exploit domestic vulnerabilities to shape domestic discourses, polarize societies, and destabilize democracies. This group includes the DRI, the GVI, the GPI, and the MRMI index. These frameworks conceptualize disinformation as intentional and externally driven. They often focus on Russia, China, or other regionally salient external actors because of their specific country samples, policy contexts, and threat models. However, this should not be read as a general claim that foreign disinformation is confined to these actors, or that geography alone explains disinformation risk. These indexes' geopolitical perspectives, drawing on theories such as hybrid warfare, sharp power, and foreign malign influence [36, 37], distinguish them from indexes that pay less attention to external actors or conflate foreign and domestic sources.

By contrast, other indexes take an approach that includes capturing domestic mis- and disinformation and the social and cognitive conditions that shape them. These frameworks are less concerned with the foreign or domestic origins of falsehoods and focus more on how factors like trust, media literacy, and polarization influence public susceptibility to mis- and disinformation. Some prioritize media-system characteristics (such as the GDI and the ROD and FIMI indexes), while others focus on literacy and epistemic vulnerabilities (such as the MLI, the MVI, and the EV index).

The GDI stands out for redefining conceptual boundaries. It has broadened its focus beyond the traditional understanding of mis- and disinformation and includes the analysis of statements that target at-risk groups, promote division, challenge mainstream or scientific consensus, and hinder consensus building. This broader category of "adversarial narratives," based on conflict theory [38], aims to capture the networked and emotional nature of contemporary

information harms. The GDI is also distinctive in foregrounding economic incentives: it provides advertisers with risk ratings intended to redirect revenue away from higher-risk outlets, thereby making monetization a direct object of measurement. However, this expansive definition has drawn criticism for blurring the line between harmful manipulation and legitimate dissent. This has raised concerns about subjectivity in content labeling and its implications for free expression when linked to the systematic withdrawal of advertising revenue [39-41].

Disinformation as the Problem Focus, Conditions as the Measurement Focus

A key insight of our review is straightforward but easy to miss: although all ten indexes are motivated by the threats posed by mis- and disinformation, they rarely operationalize them as directly observed outcomes. Instead, they primarily measure the risk and protective conditions that are assumed to make societies more susceptible to—or better protected from—mis- and disinformation. Table 2 summarizes this shift from problem focus to measurement focus.

Directly measuring mis- and disinformation from a cross-national perspective is difficult for both conceptual and practical reasons. Conceptually, the defining feature of disinformation—intent to deceive—is rarely observable at scale. Practically, systematic verification of claims or representative content monitoring across languages, platforms, and media systems is costly and hard to standardize. As a result, the ten indexes reviewed here largely do not aim to count falsehoods. Instead, they rely primarily on proxy indicators that can be collected across countries and compared. A proxy variable is an indirect measure of a concept when it is not possible to capture the variable of interest directly [42].

Using proxies is not a methodological flaw per se: in composite-index work it is a common and often necessary strategy when direct data are unavailable [27]. The key requirement is interpretive clarity [28]. Proxies should be theoretically

justified, and the resulting scores should be interpreted as measuring risk and protective conditions, not the volume of mis- and disinformation itself. For example, the GVI uses indicators such as corruption, media freedom, institutional trust, and public attitudes as proxies for vulnerability to foreign information manipulation; these indicators do not count false claims or estimate their prevalence, but capture conditions under which manipulative information is expected to gain more or less traction. Table 2 therefore distinguishes between what the indexes treat as the problem context, including broad information disorder, foreign malign influence, and public health misinformation, and what they largely measure in practice, typically enabling conditions and opportunity structures at societal and individual levels. In other words, the indexes' problem focus is mis- and disinformation, but their measurement focus is typically the set of conditions thought to foster, amplify, or dampen the spread of mis- and disinformation. This choice is justifiable given data constraints, and it aligns with the diagnostic orientation of these tools [43]. These indexes are often designed to identify where societies are more exposed or better protected rather than to measure the prevalence of false claims [34].

Table 2 identifies the most "disinformation-related proxy indicators"—that is, the limited set of indicators that most closely capture disinformation-related outputs or impacts without systematically verifying claims. For example, the GVI also uses expert assessments of the volume and influence of disinformation by domestic and foreign actors. These assessments should not be read as direct measurements of disinformation prevalence: they do not systematically verify individual false claims or measure representative content flows, but they provide context-sensitive comparative judgments about disinformation-related outcomes that would otherwise be difficult to measure across countries.

Table 2. Disinformation Contexts and What the Indexes Measure in Practice.

Index	Problem context emphasized	Main measurement focus	Disinformation-related proxy indicator(s)	Disinformation related proxies: N (~share)
Global Disinformation Index (GDI)	Broadly defined political disinformation	Media-outlet-level risk conditions in content cues and organizational structure	Content/narrative classification, or "adversarial narratives"	1 (~4%)
Media Resilience to Malign Influence (MRMI) Index	Foreign malign influence	Media-sector resilience conditions across producers, consumers, governance system	Expert ratings for how often domestic or foreign governments "spread misleading or false info to influence" the country	2 (~4%)
Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI)	Foreign malign influence	Resilience capacities such as institutional, legal, media, societal	Expert ratings for volume, popularity, and danger of malign influence content	5 (50%)
GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index (GVI)	Foreign malign influence	Governance, societal, and information-landscape vulnerabilities	Expert assessments of volume and influence of disinformation by domestic and foreign actors	8 (~24%)
GlobalFocus Permeability Index (GPI)	Foreign propaganda and disinformation	Structural permeability drivers in politics, economy, and media	Expert-informed indicators referencing foreign policy narratives/ misleading media	2 (~9%)
Resilience to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Index	Information manipulation and interference	Macro-, meso-, micro-level opportunity structures for resilience	Self-reporting surveys of worry about "receiving news or information that is not true"	1 (~2%)
Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index	Online political disinformation	Structural predictors of resilience in politics, media, and market conditions	Self-reported exposure to stories "completely made-up for political reasons" used as a validation measure	1 (~7%)
Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index	Epistemic risk under information disorder	Audience-level vulnerability outcomes: disorientation, distrust	Self-reporting surveys of perceived exposure to "news or information that is misleading or false"	1 (~33%)
Media Literacy Index (MLI)	Societal capacity to withstand disinformation	Enabling conditions such as education, freedom, trust, participation	None identified as disinformation-proximate	0 (0%)
Misinformation Vulnerability Index (MVI)	Public health misinformation	Enabling conditions such as trust in science, policy response, platform penetration	None identified as disinformation-proximate	0 (0%)

Note: In the last column, N refers to the number of indicators in each index coded as disinformation-proximate "proxies." The approximate share is calculated relative to the total number of indicators listed for that index in Table 5. Shares are approximate because index architectures differ in how they define variables, indicators, pillars, and composite scores.

These indicators differ in type and evidentiary strength. Content-analytic approximations, such as the GDI's classification of online content as adversarial narratives, are relatively close to observable outputs, but they depend heavily on how the categories are defined and how reliably the classification rules are applied. Expert assessments can capture contextual knowledge about malicious influence and narratives that are difficult to capture otherwise, including the DRI, GVI, and GPI, but the results depend on the expertise of the assessors, how their judgments are standardized, and how consistent their interpretations are. Self-reporting surveys, including the ROD, FIMI, and EV indexes, are valuable for learning about people's perceptions and experiences. However, they do not verify falsity and often cannot distinguish mis- from disinformation. Some index builders, therefore, do not treat perceived exposure and concern as verification but as an individual-level indicator of how information disorder is experienced. Such perceptions can be substantively consequential even when they do not exactly correlate with the number of verified falsehoods [32, 33].

Importantly, these proxy indicators typically represent only a small portion of the overall variables included across the ten indexes. The final column in Table 2 shows how many of the indicators in each index qualify as the closest available disinformation proxy measures. For example, in the GVI, eight (24%) of the indicators are dedicated to proxy-based assessments that are relatively close to disinformation-related outcomes in a country, while the remaining 76% of the indicators are dedicated to assessing vulnerability factors in the areas of governance, society, and the information landscape.

This pattern underscores a key interpretive rule for users: index scores should be read as structured assessments of risk and protective conditions within political information environments, not as direct estimates of how much disinformation exists. Given how prominently many indexes use the labels "vulnerability" and

"resilience" to organize these conditions, the next section examines how the indexes define and conceptualize these terms.

Defining Vulnerability and Resilience

The ten indexes are roughly equally divided between those that primarily frame their outcome as vulnerability and those that primarily frame it as resilience, although several incorporate elements of both. To assess the "fitness for purpose" of these indexes [28], we will examine how they define and measure vulnerability and resilience, highlighting similarities and differences among them. While Tables 3 and 4 document the specific conceptualizations adopted by each index, the accompanying text synthesizes the shared elements across definitions—a key task of comparative reviews that lays the foundation for follow-up work [12].

Vulnerability

Indexes of vulnerability focus on the conditions that leave societies and media systems open to harmful or manipulated information. Table 3 summarizes how each index defines vulnerability and the indicators they use. A comparison of all five understandings in their respective contexts allows us to define vulnerability as the susceptibility of a political information environment to harmful or manipulated information, including disinformation, media capture, and foreign interference. This definition is closest to the one adopted in the GVI. Vulnerability emerges from the interaction between internal weaknesses, including poor governance and cognitive disorientation, and external pressures such as disinformation campaigns and media manipulation by foreign governments. These indexes conceptualize vulnerability according to three dimensions.

The first consists of political and societal weaknesses. They include political polarization, instability, weak public administration, a high level of corruption, limited media independence, and the absence of anti-misinformation legislation, which are often compounded by structural factors such as inequality, conflict, and

social distrust. Together, these dynamics leave states vulnerable to foreign influence (e.g., the GVI, the MVI, and the FIMI index). Media capture theories and governance theories [44, 45], for example, were used by the GVI and the MRMI index to explain how weaknesses within media systems and governmental institutions facilitate the spread of disinformation.

The second dimension of vulnerability is media-system fragility, which arises either from monopolistic or state-controlled outlets that are easily manipulated because of their small numbers or from fragmented, polarized, and social media-dependent environments (e.g., the MRMI and EV indexes). Several indexes

Table 3. Conceptualization of Vulnerability Across Indexes.

Index	Definition of vulnerability	Key indicators / components
Global Disinformation Index (GDI)	Risk of spreading disinformation based on both content features and systemic organizational weaknesses at the outlet and market levels	Content-level: bias, sensationalism, adversarial narratives Organizational-level: ownership transparency, editorial policies Output: composite scores and outlet/market rankings
GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index (GVI)	Susceptibility to foreign-led disinformation campaigns due to structural and societal weaknesses	Trust in institutions, media literacy, awareness of foreign influence (especially from Russia and China), concentrated media ownership
GlobalFocus Permeability Index (GPI)	"Permeability" of a country's political information environment to external propaganda and interference	Foreign-sponsored narratives, governance gaps, societal fragmentation, corruption, weak media independence
Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index	Predisposition to adopt or retain false beliefs, shaped by systemic and psychological conditions	Exposure to disinformation, distrust in professional media, confusion between fact and falsehood, political polarization
Misinformation Vulnerability Index (MVI)	Likelihood that individuals or groups will believe or share false information, shaped by the interaction of psychological and structural drivers	Trust in science, emotional triggers, social media use, and weak policy responses; convergence of these factors at country/regional level

emphasize concepts like foreign malign influence, hybrid warfare tactics, and sharp power theory [36, 37] to explain how authoritarian regimes exploit societal weaknesses to manipulate information (e.g., the GPI and GVI).

Resilience

Indexes of resilience focus on the conditions that enable societies and media systems to withstand and recover from harmful or manipulated information. Table 4 presents their definitions and indicators. Taken together, these five indexes allow us to conclude that resilience can be defined as the capacity of a political information environment to absorb, adapt to, and recover from disruptive or manipulative forces while maintaining its core integrity and function. This definition aligns with the one adopted in the FIMI index and reflects insights from different disciplinary perspectives, such as disaster studies, social-ecological systems, and media and communication scholarship. Against this backdrop, the resilience-oriented indexes take into account factors across three dimensions and draw on related literature.

The first dimension is societal resilience, which includes social trust and cohesion, public literacy and education, and cultural and emotional wellbeing. The FIMI index's use of opportunity structures suggests that societies with a lower level of polarization and stronger civic bonds are more resilient to manipulative content [47]. Classical theories of media literacy support this logic [48]: the MLI argues that stronger formal education, digital skills, and critical thinking create robust defenses against disinformation. At the same time, stressful or conflict-filled environments can erode psychological readiness to discount falsehoods [49, 50].

The second dimension is institutional and legal resilience, which captures the strength of governance structures, the rule of law, anticorruption frameworks, and regulatory safeguards. This aligns with research showing that states with

Table 4. Conceptualization of Resilience Across Indexes.

Index	Definition of resilience	Key indicators / components
Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI)	Capacity to resist and counter disinformation, especially in conflict or hybrid-threat contexts	Legal, institutional, and societal dimensions: legal frameworks, public awareness, media independence, popularity of pro-Kremlin narratives; assesses adaptation to evolving foreign information threats, such as those from Russia and China
Media Resilience to Malign Influence (MRMI) Index	Strength of media systems and audiences to withstand foreign, malign state influence	Along three dimensions: media (including professional journalistic standards, regulatory independence, business environment); audience (including critical thinking, media literacy); and institutional/societal conditions (including political polarization, democracy, corruption)
Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index	Societal-level resilience shaped by systemic factors that reduce the impact of disinformation	Public broadcasting strength, media trust, polarization, reliance on social media, advertising-driven markets
Resilience to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Index	Multilevel resilience across society, media systems, and individuals	Structural and behavioral indicators: polarization, media trust, digital literacy, misinformation awareness
Media Literacy Index (MLI)	Higher media literacy reduces susceptibility to misinformation	Education quality, press freedom, civic engagement

strong, transparent, and accountable institutions are better positioned to counter external manipulation [51]. In the DRI, this is reflected in indicators on government quality, the rule of law, and anticorruption performance. The MRMI index, by contrast, underscores that effective government communication can swiftly correct false narratives.

The third dimension is media and information ecosystem resilience, which includes independent media and fact-checking, digital platform practices and

activist networks, and technological and cyber defenses. Media systems research in the tradition of Blumler and Gurevitch [52] suggests that robust editorial standards, independent fact checkers, and editorial autonomy reduce the spread of disinformation. The DRI focuses on structural features of the media environment, such as media freedom, media sustainability, and regulatory safeguards. Other indexes, such as the MRMI index and the GPI, extend this to include aspects such as narrative monitoring, civil society engagement, or early-warning mechanisms [53, 54].

Taken together, these three dimensions show that resilience is not static but depends on sustained investment in media literacy, institutional adaptation, and broad-based civic engagement. Our synthesis underscores the importance of a whole-of-society strategy to safeguard countries against the destabilizing consequences of disinformation.

Vulnerability and Resilience in Perspective

Indexes focused on vulnerability and resilience converge on several foundational elements. Both types of indexes emphasize structural conditions such as institutional integrity, regulatory frameworks, and media independence, and societal factors such as trust, literacy, and political polarization that enable or guard against disinformation. They diverge, however, in their emphasis: vulnerability-oriented indexes examine systemic shortcomings and external interference, whereas those oriented to resilience highlight the strengths, capabilities, and adaptive processes that help societies counter misinformation.

Despite these differences, both types of indexes underscore the interplay of domestic conditions and external actors, showing that these dimensions are intertwined and shape a country's overall exposure to and response to mis- and disinformation.

Most indexes treat vulnerability and resilience as inverse concepts: the more vulnerabilities exist, the lower the resilience, and vice versa. For instance, the GDI views structural weaknesses as increasing disinformation risk and institutional safeguards as lowering it. Some indexes, such as the ROD and FIMI indexes and the DRI, state that resilience implies fewer vulnerabilities, treating them as complementary opposites.

While all indexes identify system-level drivers like media ownership and institutional trust, some, like the EV and FIMI indexes and the MVI include individual-level or psychological factors. Others, such as the MLI, take a holistic approach by equating a higher level of literacy with resilience. Some view resilience as a capacity that develops over time, such as the MRMI index and the DRI 2024, but most present static snapshots, creating different interpretations of resilience as dynamic or fixed. Despite these variations, all ten frameworks agree that vulnerability and resilience need to be studied together to understand how societies confront mis- and disinformation.

Dimensions and Indicators

This section analyzes the indexes' methodological design, starting with how they construct their core dimensions and indicators, and the implications for their complexity. We then examine the data collection approaches used to generate these measures and how indexes score and categorize resilience and vulnerability. Finally, we assess their transparency, rigor, geographical scope, and long-term sustainability. Together, these elements show how methodological decisions shape each index's reliability, feasibility, and validity.

Index Construction

Constructing a composite index is a complex task that lacks a standardized approach: the particular purpose of an index and its intended use determine the construction process [27, 55]. Ideally, indicators would be selected solely

according to their relevance, but since that relevance is not always given, the construction process can also be quite subjective [28]. A review of our indexes shows that there is substantial variation in purpose, thematic emphasis, and complexity. Some focus on vulnerability and resilience to a specific type of mis- and disinformation that can be measured with only a few dimensions and indicators, while others broaden the scope considerably, requiring a combination of more dimensions and indicators [27]. Comparative studies of energy supply indexes typically find a large variance in the complexity of index construction, as noted by Ang et al. [22], and there is a tendency toward constructing increasingly complex indexes [26].

Similarly, these ten indexing initiatives also employ diverse dimensions and indicators to measure resilience and vulnerability to mis- and disinformation (Table 5). In practice, the usefulness of an index does not rest on how much it measures but on whether its level of complexity yields insights that can be meaningfully interpreted and acted upon by policymakers and analysts. Complexity categories were therefore assigned using explicit thresholds across three observable attributes: indicator volume (the number of measures), dimensional scope (the number of dimensions and whether they span single or multiple analytical levels), and data-generation workload (reliance on secondary data collection rather than primary data collection). Low-complexity indexes generally include fewer than 10 indicators, 3 or fewer single-level dimensions, and rely primarily on secondary or survey data; medium-complexity indexes typically include roughly 10 to 25 indicators and multiple dimensions defined at a single analytical level; medium-high complexity indexes exceed these thresholds on at least 2 attributes; and high-complexity indexes typically include more than 50 indicators, multilevel dimensional structures, extensive data collection or expert coding, and substantial multisource aggregation.

Table 5. Indicators, Dimensions, and Complexity of the Indexes.

Index	Number of dimensions	Dimensions	Number of indicators
LOW COMPLEXITY			
Misinformation Vulnerability Index (MVI)	3	Trust in science, government anti-misinformation actions, social media penetration	3
Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index	3	Perceived exposure to disinformation, Distrust in professional news, disorientation	3
Media Literacy Index (MLI)	4	Education, media freedom, trust in people, e-participation	8
MEDIUM COMPLEXITY			
Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI)	3	Social resilience, legal and institutional resilience, media and digital resilience	10
Global Disinformation Index (GDI)	2	Website content, website operations	24
Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index	7	Polarization, populism, trust in media, strength of public service media, shared media use, market size, social media news reliance	14
MEDIUM-HIGH COMPLEXITY			
GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index (GVI)	5	Public attitudes, political landscape, public administration, information landscape, civic and academic space	33
GlobalFocus Permeability Index (GPI)	4	Society, economy, politics, foreign policy and security	22
HIGH COMPLEXITY			
Media Resilience to Malign Influence (MRMI) Index	3	Content consumers, content producers, institutional environment	54
Resilience to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Index	3	Societal (macro level), media-political (meso level), individual (micro level)	60

The complexity level of the indexes comes with clear advantages and drawbacks. First, a more complex approach is more comprehensive and better suited to capturing a multidimensional phenomenon such as resilience to mis- and disinformation. Low-complexity indexes can still offer valuable insights, however.

The EV index, which focuses on self-reported exposure, distrust, and confusion, sheds light on psychological mechanisms underlying the acceptance of disinformation, capturing people's sense of having a conspiracy mindset or disorientation. This is a significant contribution precisely because it focuses on aspects that broader indexes seldom address. The MVI also demonstrates how a simpler approach—centered on trust in science, government action, and social media penetration—can quickly yield actionable comparisons. Although the MLI also has a low level of complexity, it includes more indicators and dimensions than other indexes in this category, highlighting education and literacy as key factors shaping resilience while maintaining a modest level of methodological intricacy that keeps data collection manageable over time.

By contrast, some indexes have a moderate level of complexity intentionally built into their designs, balancing breadth with practical feasibility. The GDI addresses content risk (bias, sensationalism) and operational risk (ownership, editorial policies) at the organizational/domain level. This makes it relevant for advertisers and brand-safety managers who need a targeted yet robust measure. Similarly, the DRI captures societal, legal/institutional, and media/digital pillars over time without placing excessive demands on the data required for the regional contexts it covers. The GVI and the ROD index add additional indicators while remaining sufficiently contained to support cross-national comparisons and potential future iterations.

Highly complex indexes go further by incorporating multiple dimensions, diverse indicators, and mixed data sources. The most complex examples in our sample are the MRMI index and the FIMI index. Both combine structural system-level variables, institutional characteristics, media-system indicators, and audience- and society-level measures such as trust, populism, and societal polarization. The FIMI index includes far-reaching macrosocial conditions such as economic

inequality and political divisiveness, and the MRMI index incorporates longitudinal data from 2010-2020—the longest time span of any index in our study.

This breadth and depth of highly complex indexes afford rich, multifaceted analyses that provide an advantage to scholars and policy analysts who aim to capture the full ecosystem of mis- and disinformation, including foreign infiltration, institutional factors, audience perceptions, and content patterns over time. Although such expansive frameworks are labor intensive and pose challenges for interpretation and extension over time, they enable a deeper system-wide analysis that can pinpoint nuanced policy interventions. In short, the choice of index depends on a trade-off: policymakers may prefer simpler measures if they want to take action quickly, while researchers and specialists often require the exhaustive detail that only high-complexity models can provide.

Evaluation of Methodological Approaches

This section examines how the ten indexes construct their methodological foundations by analyzing four components: their geographical scope, their data collection approaches, the procedures used to score and aggregate indicators, and the extent to which their methods are transparently documented and validated. Because the indexes differ widely across these components, this assessment is essential for understanding how and why their results diverge. Taken together, these elements clarify what each index can and cannot measure—and highlight methodological gaps that future efforts must confront to build stronger evidence on resilience and vulnerability.

Geographical Scope of the Indexes

Country inclusion differs across the ten indexes, reflecting their purpose, data availability, and conceptual scope (Table 6). While none offer comprehensive global coverage, some provide cross-regional coverage. For example, the GDI

covers 28 country reports across the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia-Pacific. Others are region-specific, such as the DRI, GVI, and GPI. The FIMI index focuses on West Africa, and the MRMI index covers the Western Balkans and the post-Soviet space, including Central Asia. A final group composed of the ROD index and the MLI focuses on established democracies in Europe and North America, which draw on high-quality data but remain less applicable outside those contexts. These region-specific initiatives gain depth by addressing issues distinctive to these areas, though this depth naturally limits their applicability elsewhere.

Democracies make up a substantial share of the country samples overall, although several also include hybrid or less democratic countries such as Turkmenistan and Tajikistan in the MRMI index. Despite these expansions, geographic coverage remains uneven, with clear gaps in Central and South America, East and Southeast Asia, and much of the Global South. The two main reasons for these geographic gaps are structural and institutional. Structurally, reliable and comparable data are scarcer outside Western Europe and North America, limiting the ability of any organization to produce comprehensive coverage beyond those contexts. Institutionally, most existing indexes are developed by organizations whose stakeholders, funding priorities, and methodological models shape country selection and embed resilience benchmarks that are grounded in the experiences of wealthy democracies. Together, these dynamics create a strong regional bias and produce country samples that reflect existing funding patterns rather than a theoretically representative sampling strategy, generating convenience samples that limit the interpretability of regional or cross-regional comparisons.

Although within-country variation is not prioritized by any index, its absence represents another significant gap in current measurement efforts. By aggregating findings only at the national level, mis- and disinformation indexes leave

subnational evaluations absent, despite their potential to inform domestic policy interventions. For large, geographically dispersed states with diverse internal ecosystems that may include high levels of digital inequalities or significant urban/rural divides, national-level aggregation limits reporting on regional disparities in political polarization, media consumption trends, linguistic diversity, and digital infrastructure. Subnational modules with more granular data, which are increasingly common in corruption and governance indexes, remain absent

Table 6. Geographic Scope of the Indexes.

Index	Scope	Countries
Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index	Primarily Europe/Transatlantic coverage	Covers 18 Western democracies in Europe and Northern America (USA and Canada)
Misinformation Vulnerability Index (MVI)	Near-global coverage	Pilot covers 34 countries from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas
Resilience to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Index	Near-global coverage	Pilot covers 13 West African countries (published), 180 additional countries (unpublished)
Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index	Primarily Europe/Transatlantic coverage	Covers 19 Western democracies in Europe and the USA
GlobalFocus Permeability Index (GPI)	Region-specific coverage in Eastern Europe, Balkans, and post-Soviet space	Covers 6 countries in the region
GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index (GVI)	Region-specific coverage in Eastern Europe, Balkans, and post-Soviet space	Covers 8 countries in the region
Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI)	Region-specific coverage in Eastern Europe, Balkans, and post-Soviet space	Covers 8 countries in the region
Global Disinformation Index (GDI)	Near-global coverage	28 single-country reports, mostly from the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia-Pacific
Media Literacy Index (MLI)	Primarily Europe/Transatlantic coverage	Covers 41 European countries plus 6 non-European democracies
Media Resilience to Malign Influence (MRMI) Index	Region-specific coverage in Western Balkans and post-Soviet space	Covers 17 states in the region, plus Eurasia (Caucasus, Central Asia)

from mis- and disinformation measurement. Reliable, comparable subnational data are also scarce, limiting the potential for systematic subnational analysis.

Despite these limitations, the ten indexes do demonstrate progress in researching political mis- and disinformation by using systematically defined country samples. Region-focused indexes maximize local knowledge and tailor indicators to different political and media environments, while recognizing that different contexts require different measures. Indexes confined to Western democracies benefit from extensive data availability and established methodologies but face challenges when applying their insights to non-Western settings.

Data Collection Approaches

Different indexes adopt distinct data collection approaches that directly shape how comparable their results are across countries. Below, we discuss their dominant data collection methods and the nature of their sources. This dual perspective clarifies each index's strengths and limitations regarding accuracy and reliability. Previous research suggests that indexes relying on primary data from content analyses or expert assessments offer unique insights, but they also place greater demands on the procedures that must be considered credible and reliable [28]. Indexes that rely on secondary data like official statistics or databases) enable multi-perspective aggregations as long as the often highly quantitative data is consistently structured and coded and comes from reliable sources.

The ten indexes reveal four types of approaches, which are described in Table 7: (i) content-analysis-driven indexing, (ii) expert-survey-driven indexing, (iii) composite multisource, high-complexity indexing, and (iv) targeted data fusion, narrow-complexity indexing. We examine each in turn and present the main trade-offs and challenges each approach faces.

Table 7. Data Collection Focus and Data Sources.

Data collection focus	Index sources	Representative indexes
CONTENT-ANALYSIS-DRIVEN INDEXING		
Custom content and operational data. Combines subjective (manual coding) and objective (ownership records) inputs	Primary data collected through manual and computerized content analysis, combined with desk-researched data on news organizations' operations	Global Disinformation Index (GDI)
EXPERT-SURVEY-DRIVEN INDEXING		
Expert surveys, supplemented by select international indexes	Primary data collected through country expert surveys and reports by local partners, combined with qual. media narrative analyses and select official statistics	Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI), GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index (GVI), GlobalFocus Permeability Index (GPI)
COMPOSITE MULTISOURCE, HIGH-COMPLEXITY INDEXING		
Broad coverage of global data, balancing subjective (expert coded) and objective metrics	Only secondary data sources that include subjective (expert coded), perceptual (survey based) and objective (official records and statistics) measures	Media Resilience to Malign Influence (MRMI) Index, Resilience to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Index
TARGETED DATA FUSION, NARROW-COMPLEXITY INDEXING		
Relies on a limited set of carefully selected indicators	Only a small number of secondary sources that include subjective (expert coded), perceptual (survey based) and objective (official statistics) measures	Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index, Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index, Media Literacy Index (MLI), Misinformation Vulnerability Index (MVI)

The content-analysis-driven approach involves directly scrutinizing media outputs and publisher operations to detect disinformation signals such as bias, sensationalism, and adversarial narratives. The GDI exemplifies this model by collecting data through systematic reviews of articles' content and editorial procedures, supplemented by fact-checking sources. While the GDI incorporates organizational and background indicators into its content analysis and discloses most of its instruments, the specifics of how it identifies adversarial narratives and

bias and how it reports intercoder reliability remain unclear. The supposed subjectivity of this data collection method has become a subject of political debate [39, 40]. Content-level measures like in the GDI stand apart because they can capture actual disinformation outputs circulating within a political information environment, providing empirical granularity and behavioral insights. However, the sampling burden is high, and classification thresholds depend on trained coders and machine-learning pipelines that require strong quality control that can be very costly.

The expert-survey-driven approach collects data by gathering the judgments of local specialists, including media professionals, journalists, academics, policy analysts, and civil society experts. They assess institutional resilience, regulatory frameworks, and political pressures. Examples of this model include the DRI 2024, the GVI, and the GPI, which sometimes supplement expert responses with secondary sources such as Transparency International, Freedom House, and Varieties of Democracy. While this approach captures nuances that quantitative approaches omit, it also risks bias if panels lack diversity of perspective or transparency. Comparability across countries and over time depends on clear recruitment guidelines, consistent panel compositions, and calibrated scoring methods.

The supposed subjectivity of this data collection method has become a topic of methodological political debate [56].

The composite multisource, high-complexity approach collects data by drawing on dozens of indicators from recognized global databases, such as governance measures, media freedom scores, and GDP. The MRMI and FIMI indexes exemplify this model. By merging objective and subjective indicators, such as national statistics on internet access and expert-coded assessments of press freedom, these indexes aim to capture structural, cultural, and institutional drivers of

disinformation across diverse contexts. Transparent documentation enables this approach to provide a layered portrait of resilience that reveals how social, political, and economic factors intersect to shape disinformation risks. The complex and sophisticated nature of this approach is not only a major strength but also its main weakness. By relying on proxies, such as GDP to estimate media resources in a country, and on complex weighting methods, it often remains unclear how final scores are derived, even though transparent documentation helps users interpret the assumptions behind the index and understand how these complexities shape its assessments.

The targeted data fusion, narrow-complexity approach collects information from a small number of well-known or readily available sources. This approach relies on fewer indicators than expansive multi-pillar frameworks. The EV and ROD indexes, as well as the MVI and MLI, exemplify this model. For example, the EV index focuses on subjective self-reports such as perceived exposure, distrust, and disorientation, while the MLI combines objective measures like PISA scores (a global education assessment) with subjective metrics like press freedom rankings from Reporters Without Borders. These simplified designs promote clarity and ease of cross-national comparison; however, they omit granular factors that broader composite indexes capture. While they enhance reliability by relying on fewer indicators and straightforward weights, they risk underrepresenting local nuances, especially when cultural differences or rapid media shifts affect the chosen measures. This approach provides robust cross-national comparability but can overlook important contextual variation in information disorder, political manipulation, or platform-specific behaviors.

Taken together, these four approaches highlight the diverse ways in which indexes capture the risks of or resilience to mis- and disinformation. They also underscore trade-offs between precision and generalizability and between

complexity and replicability. These methodological categories generate nonproportional and noncomparable datasets; it is difficult to align expert judgments, structural indicators, surveys, and content analyses. This limits meaningful side-by-side comparison across indexes. Ultimately, the trade-offs influence how well each index captures real-world patterns of mis- and disinformation, how reliably those patterns hold across countries and over time, and how effectively the findings can inform policymakers who seek to strengthen societal resilience.

Scoring Approaches

All indexes begin with raw data collected or produced by analysts who transform those inputs into a composite score. Reaching that point typically involves three recurring steps: standardization, aggregation, and scaling. Below, we discuss how these steps are implemented across the indexes, using illustrative examples where appropriate to highlight differences in approach and design choices.

Standardization requires fitting different kinds of data onto the same scale so they can be compared. For example, some variables are based on categories or rating scales, others vary along a bounded continuous range, and still others reflect large economic quantities such as gross domestic product. Because these measures are expressed in very different ways, they need to be converted to a common scale to allow meaningful comparison. When an index relies on a single data source, this process is relatively straightforward. For example, the DRI and the GPI draw exclusively on expert surveys, while the EV index relies on public opinion data, enabling it to average responses across questions within each indicator. When indexes draw on multiple types of data sources, standardization becomes more complex, requiring variables to be standardized and inverted so that all indicators point in the same direction, like in the ROD and MRMI indexes and the GDI, MLI, and MVI.

To illustrate a more complex case, the FIMI index began by organizing all raw data sources into country-year pairs, ensuring that each variable had a single corresponding value reflecting a country's performance each year. Next, it applied a "distance-to-frontier" method to ensure uniform scaling and directional coherence, enabling intuitive comparisons across variables, countries, and time. In practice, this involves identifying the lowest and highest observed values for each variable across all countries in the dataset and using those benchmarks to convert each country's value into a standardized score from 0 to 100, where higher values indicate stronger mis- and disinformation resilience.

Next, aggregation combines these standardized indicators into a final index score. As part of this process, most indexes first assess the internal consistency of their composite measures by reporting Cronbach's alpha for key constructs, as in the ROD and EV indexes. Many report these tests only briefly, though the GVI and the MRMI index present more extensive results. To produce the composite score, most indexes then take a mean across indicators drawn from different conceptual levels and aggregate upward. For example, an index might collect several indicators of polarization, such as polarization across the population or polarization within the party landscape and average them to form a single composite "polarization" measure within a broader multidimensional framework. Some indexes, such as the MLI and the EV index, calculate one index score based on a few indicators with only two levels of abstraction (indicators → index score). More complex indexes include up to five levels of abstraction, such as the MRMI index (variables → elements → domains → components → index score) and the FIMI index (variables → indicators → components → dimensions → index score).

Another consideration in aggregation is the decision to weight the different components of the framework. Only a few indexes explicitly weight their indicators. These indexes usually rely on expert judgment, asking the experts to

assign greater or lesser weight to different subcomponents of the index when determining the final score, as in the MLI and GDI. However, most indexes do not assign different weights to the components in their model. The reason for this is straightforward, as the MRMI index notes: "There is no obvious theoretical or statistical reason to weight one component over another" [35].

Even when components are weighted equally, aggregation often results in implicit weighting because variable influence is determined by the index's internal structure. When many variables are grouped together within a given subcomponent of an index, each variable exerts a relatively small influence on the subcomponent score. By contrast, when fewer variables are included, each variable carries greater influence within that subcomponent. As a result, the way indexes group variables into subcomponents and higher-level components effectively determines how much influence individual variables ultimately exert on the final index score. For example, if one subcomponent is based on two variables, each variable contributes half of that subcomponent's value, whereas a subcomponent based on five variables assigns one-fifth of the total to each variable. This reflects a trade-off between complexity and robustness on the one hand, and simplicity and interpretability on the other.

After aggregation, each index applies a scaling step to produce a final country score. Two broad approaches emerge: some group country-years into categories like high, medium, or low resilience, while others retain a continuous scale such as 0–100 scores. Both approaches rely on relative comparisons between countries but differ in how explicitly they communicate the results and involve trade-offs. Categorical approaches ease country classification, but category cutoffs can shift with the distribution of scores in the dataset, as in the GDI and MLI. Indexes that retain continuous scales, such as the MRMI index or GVI, provide richer detail without fixed thresholds, but rely on index-defined benchmarks tied to countries'

relative positions within the dataset rather than external or global performance cutoffs.

From an implementation standpoint, methodological decisions are also shaped by costs and feasibility. Content analysis and mixed-method frameworks offer greater depth but require substantial resources to implement, whereas secondary data approaches are more scalable but may miss context-relevant dynamics. These trade-offs also raise questions about methodological transparency and validation.

Methodological Transparency and Validation

Methodological transparency varies across the ten indexes, each providing different levels of detail about index scope, data collection, imputation rules for missing data, and validating final scores. The ten indexes also differ in how rigorous and transparent their data validation approaches are. Since transparency affects the credibility, replicability, and comparability of these indexes, we examine how transparent their documentation and validation practices are.

In terms of transparent documentation, several indexes provide relatively detailed information on indicator selection and partial reliability checks, usually through a separate methodological appendix, as in the GVI and the EV and MRMI indexes. These appendices discuss the indicators in detail and test their internal consistency. Yet they rarely clarify how and why individual indicators are weighted or why others are not weighted. Another group of indexes provides only moderate transparency. Some offer additional reports upon request, like the GDI and the FIMI index, while others such as the MLI include a brief documentation of the research instrument, the indicator selection, and some frequency data. However, they offer little clarity on key details, such as the extent to which expert data and subjective ratings are systematically validated, like the the GPI and DRI. Among these, the MVI is the least specific, outlining three core dimensions but

giving little explanation of how missing values are handled or whether certain dimensions carry greater weight.

Some indexes try to validate their index score against another measure of disinformation. Since mis- and disinformation can never be fully captured and therefore needs to rely on proxies of the phenomenon, this approach tests convergent validity by assessing whether index scores align with theoretically related external measures. Several indexes use regression-based checks as a form of validation, and when an index correlates with external measures, this provides some evidence that the index is capturing the intended concept. Specifically, these frameworks use regression models that position the index either as a predictor of external phenomena, such as the ROD index and the MVI, or as an outcome of systemic drivers, such as the EV index, with results consistently aligning with theoretical expectations. However, using regressions is not the same as comprehensive validation, especially when the outcome is itself a proxy for mis- and disinformation and may introduce its own biases.

Yet validation cannot serve as the sole test of index quality, because no single authoritative measure of resilience to mis- or disinformation exists. For example, the EV and MRMI indexes include Cronbach's alpha to ensure internal consistency, while the MRMI index also elaborates on the imputation procedure for missing data. An index's ability to accurately capture the phenomenon it is intended to measure ultimately depends on the selection of variables, indicators, and dimensions included in the model, the quality of their underlying data, how these different components are aggregated [27, 28, 43]. In general, index users should treat composite indicators as heuristic tools that provide only an approximate indication of the multifaceted concept being measured. For this reason, most of the indexes are accompanied by in-depth country summaries that provide more

detail regarding specific factors contributing to each country's resilience or vulnerability.

To summarize, the ten indexes follow different methodological paths to measuring vulnerability or resilience to mis- and disinformation. Each has distinct strengths and limitations, ranging from potential coder subjectivity in content analysis to the challenges of ensuring unbiased expert panels. Content analysis, expert surveys, and composite secondary data approaches all introduce potential sources of bias, from coder subjectivity to panel composition and indicator selection. Transparency also varies on key design choices, such as weighting and imputation, with some indexes such as the MRMI index and the MLI documenting these choices more clearly than others. Together, these patterns provide the methodological background for the next section, which examines how far the indexes converge in their explanatory factors and country rankings and where their underlying assumptions or measurement strategies lead them to diverge.

SECTION 5. THREE IN-DEPTH COMPARISONS

Key Insights

- The conceptual frameworks among the indexes often overlap, but outcomes converge or diverge depending on operational choices regarding data, assumptions, and methodological logics.
- Cross-index comparisons show that resilience is not a unidimensional construct: indexes claiming to measure the same idea often capture different dimensions, producing contradictory country rankings.

This section examines how well the indexes work in practice. It reviews convergence and divergence in the findings and evaluates the overall strengths and weaknesses of the current landscape.

Convergence and Divergence Among the Indexes

Moving from conceptual convergence across the indexes to concrete comparisons, we examine how different indexes score the same countries through three illustrative cases. These comparisons demonstrate how prior conceptual assumptions and methodological choices shape index measures, producing convergent or divergent outcomes. Comparative analysis instead makes visible how different conceptualizations operate in practice, what they reveal, and what they omit. For researchers, this underscores the importance of index pluralism. For policymakers and users, it signals both caution, because index choice conditions what is being measured, and opportunity, as different indexes may offer complementary insights.

First, we identify two indexes that draw on overlapping constructs and yield similar outputs of the political information environment, though they use slightly different methodological approaches. Second, we examine two indexes that measure related or adjacent constructs. In principle, conceptual alignment should

yield some degree of empirical overlap, but where it does not, the divergence reveals differences in data choices, indicator selection, and the theoretical assumptions underpinning each index. Third, we compare indexes that explicitly claim to measure the same construct, "resilience." These indexes diverge sharply and show how different methodological logics produce contradictory results when working under an identical conceptual label.

Comparison #1: Overlapping Constructs with Similar Outcomes

Some indexes show clear conceptual alignment and methodological similarity. The ROD and EV indexes measure related constructs and yield strikingly similar country rankings across advanced democracies (Table 8). Their numeric directions run in opposite directions, because one index focuses on resilience (a high score means more resilience) and the other on vulnerability (a low score means less vulnerability). Despite being developed independently, the ranks of the 14 countries shared by these frameworks are highly correlated ($\rho = 0.92$). This reflects conceptual alignment and similar outcomes on vulnerability/resilience to disinformation. For instance, both indexes rank Finland first, while other advanced democracies such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and Ireland are also ranked high. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the USA and Greece rank low in both indexes.

This convergence appears only among advanced democracies, where comparable data and stable institutional conditions allow the indexes to draw on similar structural predictors. The parallels also stem from shared theoretical premises. Both indexes conceptualize resilience not as short-term responses to disinformation campaigns but as the product of long-term structural factors such as political polarization, the strength of public broadcasting, institutional trust, and the cohesion of the media system.

Table 8. Comparison Between the ROD Index and the EV Index.

	Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index	Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index
Finland	7.52	-5.19
Denmark	4.85	-4.72
Netherlands	3.67	-2.91
Ireland	1.47	-2.4
Sweden	1.59	-1.83
Germany	3.64	-1.22
Austria	0.01	-0.8
United Kingdom	3.13	-0.48
Portugal	0.37	0.02
France	-2.09	0.55
Italy	-5.09	0.68
USA	-11.66	2.47
Spain	-2.29	2.89
Greece	-6.71	3.82

Note: Scores are presented in their original scales without modification. Both indexes use z-standardized composite scores with no fixed theoretical range; higher ROD index scores indicate greater resilience, while higher (more positive) EV index scores indicate greater vulnerability. Countries shown represent the 14 cases with overlapping coverage across both indexes. The ROD index draws on data from multiple sources collected between 2014 and 2019; the EV index draws on survey data collected between 2018 and 2021. Countries are ordered by their position in the EV index. Color shading reflects relative rank within each index separately: darker green indicates higher-ranking countries (towards the top of the distribution), and darker red indicates lower-ranking countries (towards the bottom of the distribution).

While their indicators differ in form, they capture similar dynamics. For example, the ROD index uses aggregate structural data, whereas the EV index relies on survey material. The strong correlation suggests that both indexes tap similar underlying structural conditions. The convergent findings reinforce the claim that structural resilience to disinformation can be measured across countries.

Comparison #2: Overlapping Constructs but with Misaligned Outcomes

The MLI and the FIMI index appear to align in purpose. Both are designed to capture a country's ability to resist or mitigate the spread of mis- and disinformation, both focus on structural indicators including education, media systems, and internet access, and both provide generalized, actor-agnostic

assessments. Given these conceptual overlaps, it is reasonable to expect that countries performing well in one index will perform well in the other. Yet the two indexes yield divergent assessments. When comparing the 11 countries that appear in both indexes, we find a moderate correlation between the rankings ($\rho = 0.58$). While Norway and Switzerland rank similarly in both, the remaining rankings diverge substantially. Ukraine scores moderately in the MLI but scores much higher in the FIMI index. Albania exhibits the opposite pattern: it is weak in the MLI but strong in the FIMI index. Similar misalignments occur for Serbia, Moldova, Montenegro, and North Macedonia (Table 9).

These mismatches reflect differences in how resilience is conceptualized. The MLI emphasizes media freedom, education, and trust in institutions, measuring a society's preparedness to interpret information critically. In contrast, the FIMI index adopts a broader behavioral and institutional perspective, incorporating elements such as civic engagement, political stability, and public responsiveness

Table 9. Comparison Between the MLI (2022 Edition) and the FIMI Index.

	Media Literacy Index	FIMI Index
Norway	74	82.1
Switzerland	68	78.9
Ukraine	39	44.3
Serbia	35	51.5
Moldova	32	55.3
Montenegro	32	48.7
Turkey	31	42.9
Albania	25	52.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	24	42.4
North Macedonia	23	45.6
Georgia	20	46.2

Note: Scores are presented in their original 0–100 scales without modification. Both indexes map composite scores onto a 0–100 range, though they use different normalization methods (the MLI uses z-score transformation; the FIMI Index uses distance-to-frontier normalization); the two scales are therefore not directly comparable in absolute terms. Countries shown represent the 11 cases with overlapping coverage and are ordered by their position in the MLI. Both indexes draw on the latest secondary data available to scholars in early 2022. Color shading reflects relative rank within each index separately: darker green indicates higher-ranking countries (towards the top of the distribution), and darker red indicates lower-ranking countries (towards the bottom of the distribution).

to mis- and disinformation. Underlying data sources also restrict scores to specific countries and regions. The MLI relies heavily on Eurocentric data such as Eurostat, limiting its applicability outside the EU. The FIMI index, on the other hand, covers a broader range of countries including the Global South and enables cross-regional comparison. Rather than measuring the same thing, the two frameworks capture different subdimensions of resilience—the MLI foregrounding interpretive preparedness, and the FIMI index foregrounding system-level absorptive/adaptive capacity. The moderate correlation suggests a partial overlap but also highlights the need for clearer documentation of what each index counts as "resilience" and how those choices are converted into variables and an overall score.

Comparison #3: Same Construct Label, Different Measurement Approaches and Divergent Outcomes

The sharpest contrast emerges when indexes use the same conceptual label but differ fundamentally in what they measure. This applies to the DRI and the FIMI index. Both frameworks explicitly assess a country's resilience to mis- and disinformation, with a specific focus on foreign content, and present themselves as tools for evaluating national capacity to withstand hostile influence efforts. This shared emphasis on resilience suggests substantial alignment in country rankings, but a closer inspection shows the overlap is misleading.

The two DRI editions share the same conceptual foundation but differ in what they capture. The 2021 edition assesses the state of national resilience at a given point in time; the 2024 edition assesses the direction and extent of change in resilience since 2021, with scores ranging from -2, indicating dramatic regression, to +2, indicating substantial progress. This shift in measurement target explains why the correlation between the two editions is positive but imperfect ($\rho = 0.74$): countries that were relatively resilient in 2021 tended to continue improving but not uniformly. The FIMI index, by contrast, measures the structural conditions that

shape long-term resilience using secondary data from approximately the same period. When the DRI 2024 change scores are compared with the FIMI index's level scores, the correlation is moderately negative (ρ = –0.36, Table 10). This inverse pattern reflects a systematic asymmetry: the countries that mobilized most aggressively since 2021 are not the same countries that possess the strongest structural foundations. The DRI 2024 captures reactive mobilization; the FIMI index captures structural capacity.

This asymmetry arises from fundamental differences in how each index is constructed. The DRI is built around expert assessments of how countries have responded to foreign disinformation, including new legislation, coordination mechanisms, institutional improvements, and media-sector initiatives. By

Table 10. Three-Way Comparison Between the DRI (2021 and 2024 Editions) and the FIMI Index.

	DRI 2021	DRI 2024	FIMI Index
Ukraine	1.9	2.9	44.3
Azerbaijan	1.87	2.53	52.5
Czechia	1.8	1.87	60.5
Slovakia	1.8	1.5	60.7
Hungary	1.63	0.87	53.9
Georgia	1.63	1.73	46.2
Poland	1.63	1.73	58.6
Armenia	1.57	2.2	44.9
Belarus	1.53	0.9	48.9
Moldova	1.37	0.87	55.3

Note: The three indexes use different scales and measure different aspects of resilience. The DRI 2021 scores range from 0 to 4 and represent the mean of expert responses across the index's three component dimensions, predominantly assessing the state of national resilience as of early 2021, with a minority of variables capturing changes since 2018. The DRI 2024 scores range from –2 to +2 and are averaged across the same dimensions but assess something fundamentally different: the direction and extent of change in resilience since 2021, where 0 indicates no change, positive values indicate progress, and negative values indicate decline. Accordingly, higher DRI 2024 scores reflect greater improvement since 2021, not necessarily a higher absolute level of resilience. Higher DRI 2021 scores indicate greater resilience; higher DRI 2024 scores indicate greater improvement in resilience since 2021; higher FIMI index scores indicate greater resilience. Countries shown represent cases with overlapping coverage across the indexes. Countries are ordered by their position in the DRI 2021 edition. Color shading reflects relative rank within each index separately: darker green indicates higher-ranking countries (toward the top of the distribution), and darker red indicates lower-ranking countries (toward the bottom of the distribution).

contrast, the FIMI index's structural approach focuses on deeper characteristics of the political information environment that shape long-term vulnerability, such as institutional trust, political polarization, societal cohesion, information curation systems, or the architecture of media governance. These conditions reflect baseline strengths or weaknesses that change slowly. Several countries in the FIMI index's sample remain shaped by legacies predating recent reforms. This means that a country can implement ambitious measures to counter foreign disinformation yet remain vulnerable due to persistent structural deficits in trust, governance, or information infrastructure.

This distinction explains why Ukraine, Armenia, and Poland show the largest improvements in DRI 2024 but rank relatively low in the FIMI index. Each of these countries has intensified policy or institutional responses to Russian information operations in recent years, which the DRI captures as improvements. Yet they continue to exhibit underlying structural vulnerabilities, such as polarization, low institutional trust, or fragile media systems. These structural characteristics have limited impact on DRI outcomes but are central to how the FIMI index assesses resilience. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that the shared label of resilience can mask fundamentally different measurement targets, with reactive mobilization and structural capacity representing complementary but distinct dimensions of the construct.

Synthesis of Evidence

These comparisons demonstrate the dual value of cross-index comparison: convergence highlights shared structural constants, while divergence reveals how different methodological approaches affect resulting estimates in meaningful ways. When multiple indexes converge on a similar assessment despite different inputs or theoretical frameworks, that alignment points to underlying explanatory

logics such as institutional trust, media independence, or broader socio-political stability.

Where indexes diverge, the discrepancies are equally instructive. Some reflect differences in temporal sensitivity, with trend-based indexes capturing change more quickly than those built on structural indicators. Others expose misalignment in what is being measured, such as short-term exposure versus long-term capacity or threat-specific responsiveness versus generalized vulnerability. Some indexes appear to be conceptually aligned but diverge in practice because of different assumptions, data, and scope. In other cases, efforts to measure the same construct result in capturing different dimensions, producing outright contradictions. These differences are not anomalies to be corrected but design features that require careful interpretation.

SECTION 6. DISCUSSION

Evaluation of Strengths and Weaknesses

The ten indexes reviewed here represent a substantial body of comparative tools for measuring mis- and disinformation. While heterogeneous in purpose and design, they collectively reveal (i) where conceptual and methodological convergences emerge, (ii) where results diverge because indexes operationalize different layers of the political information environment, and (iii) what minimum requirements would make future measurement more coherent, comparable, and policy relevant. The strengths noted below summarize what this body of work already contributes; the limitations that follow identify the most consequential gaps and then present avenues for improvement.

Strengths of the Indexes

1. Diversity of approaches. The ten indexes were constructed in different ways, drawing on different data sources, and focusing on different aspects of the mis- and disinformation spectrum. Each index provides a specific vantage point on the information landscape that is shaped by its target audiences and conceptual priorities. Taken together, these different perspectives underscore that any single index constitutes just one analytical instrument within a broader toolkit and cannot capture the full complexity of political information environments on its own.
2. Convergence of recurring core factors. Despite conceptual and methodological heterogeneity, several factors recur across indexes: media independence and freedom, institutional trust, political and social polarization, education and literacy-related capacities, governance quality, and regulatory or accountability safeguards. The recurrence of these factors across different designs suggests that they are widely

understood as central components of resilience and vulnerability, even when operationalizations differ.

3. Complementary value of individual-level measurement. While many indexes emphasize structural conditions, others, including the EV index and the MVI, incorporate individual-level indicators that capture how publics perceive, interpret, and respond to information. This strand of work complements structural measurement by highlighting demand-side vulnerabilities and capacities that can vary within similar institutional contexts. Together, structural and individual-level approaches point to the value of multilevel measurement rather than a single "best" index.
4. Country-level visibility of patterns of resilience and vulnerability. Across the ten indexes, a consistent contribution is the identification of countries that appear to be structurally resilient, structurally vulnerable, or highly sensitive to specific types of mis- or disinformation threats. While the logics differ, several countries frequently emerge as high risk due to persistent institutional fragility, low levels of trust, or geopolitical exposure, such as the USA and Greece, whereas others, such as Finland and Denmark, consistently perform well, as shown in the previous index comparisons. This comparative visibility supports early-warning assessment, helps identify which underlying conditions drive risk profiles, and can inform the selection and tailoring of countermeasures.

These strengths demonstrate that existing indexes—despite their limitations—provide substantial analytical value. Their complementarity, recurring indicators, and evidence of structural patterns offer a foundation from which more coherent and theoretically integrated approaches can be developed.

Limitations and Gaps

Our comparative analysis reveals various structural limitations that constrain these indexes' comparability, interpretability, and broader applicability, often reflecting design trade-offs. These limitations do not reduce the value of indexing efforts; rather, they provide guidance for how future indexing work can evolve toward greater conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, and broader temporal and geographic scope. The recommendations outlined below build on these limitations and identify potential avenues for future development.

Limitation 1: Conceptual and methodological inconsistencies

Across the ten indexes, mis- and disinformation are conceptualized unevenly and operationalized with substantial variation. Some frameworks deliberately merge both concepts into a broad umbrella category. Others prioritize disinformation while explicitly treating it as including misinformation-like dynamics rather than as a distinct category defined by intent. A few go further and incorporate discriminatory, polarizing, or consensus-undermining narratives under the heading of "disinformation."

A second inconsistency concerns measurement. Many indexes rely on perception-based proxies, such as self-reported exposure or trust measures. Although such perceptions are valuable, they do not map reliably onto actual exposure or prevalence and are sensitive to cultural norms, media habits, and levels of political engagement. As a result, proxy-heavy approaches can yield cross-country differences that partly reflect differences in interpretation or reporting rather than differences in the underlying information problem. Reliance primarily on subjective indicators can also introduce inconsistencies into cross-country comparisons, as interpretation and expert judgment may vary across contexts.

A third issue concerns underlying theoretical assumptions. When indexes treat polarization, media trust, or trust in science as indicators of vulnerability or resilience, they often implicitly assume these factors are causes rather than consequences of mis- and disinformation dynamics. Because many data sources cannot observe intent directly, the distinction between mis- and disinformation is not consistently measurable across countries and methods—further complicating cross-index comparability.

Limitation 2: Methodological transparency gaps

Methodological choices further limit clear interpretation. Composite scores—often collapsed into a single number—can hide internal variation: a country may score highly due to strong education and media freedom while simultaneously exhibiting a high level of polarization or a low level of institutional trust. Such contradictions disappear in final scores despite their diagnostic importance.

In addition, many indexes measure resilience and vulnerability through proxy indicators assembled pragmatically rather than systematically derived from explicit theoretical frameworks. As a result, "resilience" can describe anything from media independence to civic engagement to the absence of foreign influence—concepts that overlap but are not interchangeable. Finally, documentation is often insufficient to justify indicator selection, weighting, and aggregation choices, limiting transparency, replication, and credible validation.

Limitation 3: Limited temporal and geographic coverage

Most indexes fail to capture the dynamic nature of vulnerability and resilience. Evidence from political communication research suggests that susceptibility and resilience can fluctuate in response to elite cues, crisis events, media-system shocks, threat environments, and changes in platform governance, yet few indexes are designed to track change over time. Instead, they rely heavily on

structural variables which change slowly. Their cross-sectional snapshots are ill-suited to capturing dynamic processes.

Geographic coverage is also uneven. Countries in the Global South, conflict zones, and authoritarian contexts are underrepresented. Many frameworks implicitly reflect the informational realities and data infrastructures of wealthier democracies, embedding regional biases into indicator selection and conceptual assumptions. National-level aggregation struggles to represent heterogeneous states and may obscure subnational differences in digital infrastructure or media consumption.

Limitation 4: Minimal integration of platform-specific dynamics

Despite the centrality of algorithms, engagement incentives, and platform governance to mis- and disinformation, most indexes focus on media institutions, legacy outlets, or national information infrastructures. Measuring how behind-the-scenes social media recommendation ecosystems amplify disinformation remains underrepresented. Pursuing this aim is difficult because platforms do not provide disaggregated or historical algorithmic data, APIs are restricted or rate-limited, transparency reports are inconsistent, and platform practices vary across countries (e.g., weaker moderation in the Global South).

Beyond these data-access constraints, online media are treated in many assessments as a single category, ignoring that without platform-level differentiation, comparisons across countries are severely distorted. Additionally, without weighing platform penetration, an index cannot compare amplification dynamics. These omissions risk overlooking how different platforms can create distinct information environments within the same country. Platform-specific recommendation and moderation systems can shift what citizens encounter, allow fringe actors to reach large audiences, and reduce the amount of shared news and facts across the public.

Limitation 5: Narrow integration of the broader political information environment

Most indexes, by design, treat mis- and disinformation as isolated phenomena rather than situating them within the wider political information environment or linking them to related concepts such as information integrity. This narrow focus means that indexes measure symptoms rather than tracing the structural causes, communicative patterns, or vulnerabilities shaped by political or economic incentives. The economic dimension is particularly important, given that disinformation has become a lucrative industry and that producing false content is cheaper than producing reliable information. In some contexts, vulnerability is also shaped by identity- and belief-based communication (including religious discourse), which can structure trust networks and interpretive communities but is rarely captured in existing index designs. The indexes also fail to capture phenomena defined by absence rather than presence, such as censorship, information suppression, or the absence of content that the public is interested in, which are central to understanding information integrity in authoritarian or hybrid regimes.

Directions for future work

The limitations identified above highlight several areas where future indexes could strengthen the measurement of vulnerability and resilience to mis- and disinformation. To this end, the section below outlines four priorities for future work. These are not intended to prescribe a single path forward; rather, they outline considerations that future index builders can apply in ways that reflect differing research purposes and design choices.

First, future work should clarify the conceptual foundations of its approaches. This would include developing agreed-upon frameworks that either distinguish among or deliberately merge different forms of mis- and disinformation while

more explicitly specifying the relationships between observable proxies and the underlying constructs they are intended to capture. Such frameworks should also clarify whether commonly cited factors, such as polarization or trust, are theorized as primary drivers, amplifiers, or consequences of mis- and disinformation. In addition, these frameworks should incorporate the economic and cultural dimensions of disinformation, including the incentive structures that make the production of false or misleading content profitable and the conditions under which such content becomes normalized within political information environments. Finally, these efforts should connect mis- and disinformation more directly to the broader literature on political information environments to provide a stronger theoretical grounding.

Second, methodological transparency deserves more attention. Indicator selection, weighting, and aggregation procedures should be documented with sufficient detail to enable replication and rigorous peer assessment. In addition, more widespread use of sensitivity analyses to test alternative specifications, clearer documentation of how missing data are treated, and the public release of instruments and codebooks to open repositories would improve the comparability of these measures and their credibility among scholarly and policy audiences.

Third, the temporal and geographic dimensions remain underdeveloped. Designing indexes for repeated measurement over longer intervals would allow researchers to track trends over time and assess how political information environments respond to shocks and external interference. This temporal focus could be complemented by event-focused monitoring around elections and periods of crisis, which could capture short-term dynamics that cross-sectional snapshots tend to miss. More balanced geographic coverage would also require index designs that employ indicators that are adaptable to data-sparse contexts,

alongside sustained investment in surveys and monitoring infrastructure in regions that remain overlooked. Improving measurement in larger and more diverse cases would need greater use of subnational approaches to capture within-country variation and reduce analytical blind spots.

Fourth, the dynamics of large online platforms, including social networking sites, video-sharing services, search engines, messaging apps, and advertising-technology systems, warrant greater attention. Future work should incorporate reports on platform transparency, engagement metrics, and data on content moderation and removal practices where available. Rather than treating online media as a single category, research designs should distinguish among platforms and account for differences in their architectures, governance practices, and modes of content circulation. This would also require considering variations in platform reach and usage, patterns of news consumption, and the economic dependence of news media on platform-based distribution. Advancing this agenda would also require collaboration with media organizations and oversight bodies operating under formal regulatory frameworks, such as the European Union's Digital Services Act, which may improve prospects for sustained access to high-quality data.

Index Adaptability and Transferability for Broader Purposes

No single index is universally transferable across regions, data environments, or research objectives. In practice, index choice should align with its intended purpose. Structural indexes are most useful for benchmarking enabling conditions and institutional weaknesses; perception-based tools are best suited to understanding audience susceptibilities and responses; and content- or narrative-based approaches are most relevant for operational monitoring of actors, messages, and amplification dynamics. Clarifying intended use helps avoid misinterpretation and supports better comparison of tools. Transferability to a

variety of cases depends on theoretical foundations, the portability of indicators across different settings, and the feasibility of meeting data requirements.

The FIMI and ROD indexes provide broadly transferable conceptual frameworks. Both rely on multilevel theories that distinguish structural, institutional, and societal drivers of disinformation. Their indicators, such as media independence, political polarization, institutional trust, and the strength of public communication, are measurable across regime types. Both indexes are also suitable for cross-regional extensions. FIMI's emphasis on the manipulation of information and institutional safeguards is especially relevant for contexts with significant geopolitical interference, while the ROD index provides a generalizable structural model grounded in political communication research. Establishing a universally applicable framework or set of indicators will be challenging, because factors like political polarization and trust in media can be both a cause and a consequence of an environment characterized by a low level of information integrity.

The MRMI index demonstrates more operational flexibility than conceptual generality. Designed for environments with limited data availability, it combines institutional, civic, and media indicators drawn from diverse sources, such as policy documents, expert assessments, NGO reports, and administrative data. This modular structure allows researchers to triangulate local data, expert ratings, or survey items when standardized cross-national datasets are unavailable. The MRMI index can be implemented in regions with limited data infrastructure, including fragile or transitional political systems across Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central and South America, where data gaps would make many other indexes unusable.

The GDI represents a different form of adaptability grounded in technical extensibility. Its pipeline of machine-learning detection combined with human

coding can be replicated in new media ecosystems or in thematic domains such as climate or health disinformation. Although the definition of "adversarial narratives" continues to be debated, the measurement technique is replicable where media sampling is feasible. This makes the GDI a useful building block for future indexes, because it aims to incorporate direct content-level evidence in addition to structural and individual-level proxies.

Other indexes have limited transferability and adaptability. The MLI relies on standardized European data such as Eurostat, which limits applicability outside established democracies. The EV index, which is grounded in psychological constructs developed and tested in Western populations, requires survey instruments that do not generalize well cross-culturally. Both are valuable in their original settings but difficult to apply beyond them. This is similar to region-specific indexes like the DRI and GVI, which are tied to Central and Eastern Europe and to threat environments shaped specifically by Russian influence. Their conceptual logic is adaptable, but only with significant contextual modification.

Overall, no single index is replicable across all settings. Instead, future efforts would be enhanced by incorporating the most promising attributes from existing indexes: (1) theoretically robust and multilevel structures such as the FIMI and ROD indexes, (2) operational flexibility across a variety of data-poor and data-rich contexts such as the MRMI index, and (3) scalable content-based measurement such as the GDI. Together, these attributes would provide a solid foundation for developing systematic and generalizable tools to assess cross-national variation in the structural conditions and observable information problems shaping political information environments. This diversity of purposes and designs is a strength—but it also explains why cross-index comparisons require careful attention to scope, assumptions, and measurement choices.

SECTION 7. CONCLUSION

The Limits of Current Measurement Approaches

Political information environments are shaped by the interaction of governance institutions, media systems, publics, and technologies. Understanding how resilient or vulnerable these environments are to mis- and disinformation is a central concern for scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors. The ten indexes reviewed here provide valuable diagnostics, but they also make clear that current measurement approaches remain fragmented: tools capture different layers of the political information environment and rely on different mixes of proxies and structural indicators. As a result, they should not be treated interchangeably, and their scores should not be interpreted as direct estimates of mis- and disinformation prevalence. Because most indexes operationalize mis- and disinformation primarily through risk and protective conditions, their scores are best read as comparative diagnostics—not as measures of how much mis- and disinformation exists.

Our analysis shows areas of both convergence and divergence. Many indexes emphasize enabling structural conditions such as media independence, institutional trust, polarization, and governance quality; others foreground audience-level factors such as literacy, trust orientations, and perceived exposure; and a smaller subset emphasizes threat-specific dynamics such as foreign interference. Much of the apparent disagreement across indexes therefore reflects different assumptions about which parts of the political information environment most strongly shape resilience or vulnerability. The practical implication is that indexes often measure related but distinct constructs and should be interpreted as complementary diagnostics rather than interchangeable measures. Without a shared measurement model that specifies constructs, layers, and causal assumptions, it becomes difficult to compare results or interpret divergence

across indexes. The indexes reflect varying assumptions about whether mis- and disinformation emerge primarily from structural weaknesses, audience susceptibilities, or foreign exploitation of domestic conditions.

Measurement efforts remain valuable but face several limitations. Many indexes rely on subjective indicators, expert assessments, or perception surveys that lack clear justification for indicator selection, weighting, or aggregation, while limited documentation transparency inhibits replication and external validation. Few indexes provide repeated observations over time, making it difficult to assess indicator stability or contextual responsiveness. Data availability also shapes measurement unevenly: countries with rich administrative data, robust media monitoring, or a high capacity to conduct surveys are better represented, while lower-resourced settings remain overlooked. This biases coverage and obscures structural vulnerabilities in many political information environments. Indexes focused on content or narrative dynamics rarely integrate structural conditions, while structurally oriented models often overlook dynamic processes such as coordinated manipulation. These constraints combine to produce tools that are informative but incomplete.

Generalizability remains another challenge. Broader global indexes trade contextual depth for comparability, while region-specific tools capture granular detail that does not transfer easily. This trade-off is inherent but infrequently acknowledged, leading to misinterpretation of some indexes as universal diagnostic tools. Many frameworks implicitly reflect the informational realities and data infrastructures of wealthier regions, embedding biases into conceptual assumptions and indicator selection.

Toward a Unified and Coherent Measurement Architecture

Despite the variation and divergence issues, several domains appear consistently across indexes: media independence, institutional trust, polarization, literacy and

education, governance quality, and forms of platform or media accountability. These domains form a partial foundation across all the indexes we reviewed, but they are not integrated into all of them to form a unified theoretical or conceptual model.

A core limitation is that relatively few indexes explicitly anchor their indicators in information integrity or political information environment frameworks. Only a few link their indicators to the overall coherence, transparency, and resilience of information systems. Without theoretical anchoring, many indexes assemble indicators in ways that appear ad hoc rather than grounded in an explicit conceptual model, which limits interpretability and construct validity.

Advancing measurement requires an integrated architecture that includes structural, behavioral, institutional, and technological indicators while maintaining conceptual clarity. Multiple data streams—expert assessments, surveys, administrative data, platform-level indicators, and content analysis—are necessary, and cultural and geographic specificity should be incorporated without sacrificing comparability. Longitudinal measurement is especially important during elections, crises, and other periods of heightened uncertainty, and validation should link indicators to observable outputs of the political information environment.

Future tools should justify indicator selection, weighting, and aggregation; articulate clear conceptual models that distinguish structural drivers from behavioral responses; acknowledge the contexts for which they are optimized; and avoid over reliance on data-rich environments that exclude much of the world.

A practical way to improve coherence is to combine a shared core of broadly relevant dimensions with layered, context-specific modules. A common core can support cross-national comparability, while modules can address variation in

political systems, media markets, platform penetration, data availability, and threat environments. Such an approach cannot eliminate all conceptual and data constraints, but it would provide a clearer basis for distinguishing widely shared integrity conditions from context-specific vulnerabilities while preserving comparability.

This review suggests that the most important next step is not to produce more composite rankings but to strengthen coherence in what is being measured and how results are interpreted. Future tools should clarify constructs; justify indicator selection, weighting, and aggregation; and state explicitly the contexts and purposes for which they are optimized. They should also incorporate designs that are sensitive to change over time—especially around elections and crises—and that better reflect platform-mediated dynamics shaping exposure and amplification.

Improved measurement will not, by itself, solve problems relating to mis- and disinformation, nor should measurement be used to justify content restrictions or to suppress legitimate disagreement. Instead, this analysis underscores the need for conceptually grounded, empirically validated, and contextually sensitive approaches to assessing the conditions shaping public knowledge and discourse. Better tools of this kind can support researchers, policymakers, and civil society organizations as they work to strengthen information integrity and resilience. As pressures on political information environments around the world grow, the need for coherent, comprehensive measurement will only increase. Indexing is one approach that can effectively address this need.

Guidance for Using Index Results Responsibly

The analyses in this report have shown that index scores are shaped by conceptual, methodological, and data-related choices that users need to understand before acting on results. The points below summarize how stakeholders can understand and use the indexes without overgeneralizing the scores beyond their intended purpose:

- Treat indexes as diagnostic tools rather than ranking tables; interpret scores alongside what each index actually measures (including structural conditions, audience perceptions, and content dynamics).
- For policy decisions, it is often helpful to triangulate across complementary measures (including structural, audience, and content/platform indicators).
- Before using index results for funding, regulation, or public reporting, consider whether indicator choice, weighting, and uncertainty are transparent and defensible.
- Reducing global blind spots typically requires strengthening data infrastructure in overlooked settings (including survey capacity, media monitoring, and platform access).
- To capture rapid shifts, indexes can be complemented by event-sensitive monitoring around elections and crises, which cross-sectional measures often miss.
- Build in safeguards so measurement supports accountability and resilience-building; avoid treating index outputs as justification for censorship or the suppression of legitimate dissent.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Index Sources.

Index	URL Access
Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI)	https://east-center.org
Epistemic Vulnerability (EV) Index	https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2363545
Global Disinformation Index (GDI)	https://www.disinformationindex.org
GlobalFocus Permeability Index (GPI)	https://global-focus.eu
GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index (GVI)	https://www.globsec.org
Media Literacy Index (MLI)	https://osis.bg
Media Resilience to Malign Influence (MRMI) Index	https://www.aiddata.org/publications/standing-firm-measuring-resilience-to-malign-foreign-influence-in-european-eurasian-media
Misinformation Vulnerability Index (MVI)	https://doi.org/10.17608/k6.auckland.21571380.v1
Resilience to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Index	https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2025.2587131
Resilience to Online Disinformation (ROD) Index	https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-182652

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This document should be cited as:

International Panel on the Information Environment [F. Esser, J.A. Solis, M. Chan, P. van Aelst, D. Madrid-Morales, T. Bosch, M. Botan, E. Humprecht, J. Labarre, R. M. Santini, A. Schulz, B. Seim, M. Wack, P.N. Howard, S. Valenzuela (eds.)], “Resilience and Vulnerability to Misinformation and Disinformation in Political Information Environments: A Comparative Review of Ten Indexes,” Zurich, Switzerland: IPIE, 2026. Technical Paper, TR2026.1, doi: 10.61452/MBPE3349.

Funders

The International Panel on the Information Environment (IPIE) gratefully acknowledges the support of its funders. For a full list of funding partners please visit www.ipie.info. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the IPIE and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.

Authors' AI Contribution Statement

Large Language Models (LLMs) were used at an early stage of this project to support exploratory tasks such as summarizing source materials, identifying relevant information in the analyzed indexes, assisting with early table drafts, and helping to cross-check thematic patterns identified by the research team. AI-based tools were also used occasionally for translation support between German and English. All substantive analytical decisions, comparative dimensions, interpretations, and the final wording of the report were developed and approved by the authors. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the lead authors. The first author takes full responsibility for the final version of the report.

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