

# Countering the most critical disinformation narratives in the European Union

Policy Memos by RADAR Youth Ambassadors

# Abbreviations

<b>AI</b>	Artificial Intelligence
<b>Coe</b>	Centre of Excellence
<b>CoPoD</b>	Code of Practice on Disinformation
<b>DSA</b>	Digital Services Act
<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FIMI</b>	Information Manipulation and Interference
<b>ILGA</b>	International Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
<b>MAAP</b>	Media and Audiovisual Action Plan
<b>MIL</b>	Media and Information Literacy
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>SOGIESC</b>	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics

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## Introduction

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‘Our urgent call to action for the European Union (EU) is a comprehensive plan to tackle disinformation across Europe. Recognising its wide impact, we propose consolidating nationally collected data into a European database for everyone to access; this could be accomplished thanks to pan-European research teams. To connect with a diverse population of all ages, we believe the focus should be on community-driven initiatives, reaching beyond major cities to rural areas, for example, through town hall events or summer camps. Additionally, we believe the EU should apply greater pressure on tech companies, especially to ensure a transparent management of their algorithms and safeguard the rights of citizens within the EU. Especially in an election year, public trust and accountability of elected representatives are paramount, particularly in the face of potential foreign interventions. There is a pressing need for increased transparency and standardised financial regulations for campaign teams and elected representatives across all EU Member States’.

### **RADAR Workshop participants**

#### **‘Youth in Action: Tackle Disinformation within the EU’ Fondation Universitaire, 1 February 2024**

More than 71 % of Europeans regularly encounter ‘fake news’ (Eurobarometer, 2020). In an increasingly expansive, intricate, and contested digital landscape, re-evaluating internet safeguards and their connection with the European public is crucial for safeguarding European democracies. However, this necessitates active engagement from

all sectors of society in formulating a comprehensive counter-disinformation plan and solutions.

In the context of the 2024 European elections and within the framework of the Strategic Agenda, there is an interest in addressing the informational vulnerabilities stemming from disinformation,

affecting both voters and the democratic process across a wide range of critical thematic and policy areas. While disinformation is a growing challenge, happening at a time when technological innovation is outpacing regulation, the vision of the generation most online and fluent in the virtual space must contribute to the digital public policy of tomorrow.

In light of this, ten 'Youth Ambassadors' were selected from five 'Youth Labs' organised by TEPSA Member institutes across five Member States (Austria, Finland, Italy, Germany and Poland) of the European Union (EU) to further develop practical recommendations

for EU action against disinformation in their communities. Their proposals initially relied on collective thinking with a larger group of young people.

What follows is the result of the work carried out by these Youth Ambassadors, ten insightful recommendations about critical policy areas in the EU: climate change, democratic processes, foreign interference, LGBTIQ+ and migration. The following aims to provide food for thought for those interested in reading about how young Europeans conceptualise the disinformation space and wish to counter-balance it through practical recommendations.



# Climate Disinformation

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## Moving discourse from digital to physical spaces: town halls

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### Executive summary

The following policy recommendation memo is to be considered as a tool to improve the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation (CoPoD) for the EU. This policy aims to improve the policy of 'Empowering users' (European Commission, 2022), as it provides a way for policymakers to address issues in an offline space and target larger online demographics. This memo aims to mainly address this issue regarding the spread of misinformation on climate change. In the act, users are provided with tools to identify misinformation in online spaces and improve media literacy. Additionally, the issue with online spaces is the lack of dialogue between opposing sides. Therefore, it would be beneficial to remove users from an echo chamber and bring them to dialogue in a space that is offline. This memo proposes the use of 'Town Halls', namely spaces in which EU citizens can discuss issues in a moderated space that is offline. This would enforce etiquette and enhance civic discourse. Additionally,

it would allow for an increased inclusivity physically in the space while building trust across different demographics. This addition to the dialogue would also allow for an opportunity to lessen polarisation and strengthen community bonds.

### Introduction

The 2022 code emphasises empowering users and researchers (European Commission, 2022). However, it fails to tackle the issues provided by users themselves. While the act attempts to provide tools for media literacy, there is an inherent disconnect to the reality of the online space. Hallvard Moe and Ole Jacob Madsen argue in 'Understanding Digital Disconnection Beyond Media Studies' that five different areas are affected, such as health, concentration, existentialism, freedom, and sustainability (Moe and Madsen, 2021). Furthermore, the authors go on to explain that, for sustainability, technology has provided a mediated space for previously unmediated domains. It is therefore incredibly important to

find a solution that can mediate offline spaces and provide a place for discussion. While facts spread by users may be correct, there is a need to take charged language into account, as polarisation leads to an increase in disinformation (Tucker, 2018). Moderation is therefore close to impossible in the online space, as algorithms have gotten more sophisticated. Adaptation to the online space requires a counter motion where users are confronted with correct information about climate change and allowed to debate this information in a safe and inclusive space. 'Town Halls' can bridge that gap while allowing individuals who would not normally interact with the space to do so. Spaces that are already provided in each district can be utilised to increase discourse and allow for each opinion to be represented respectfully. This would mean that expert facilitators will be present within these spaces to ensure a safe spread of information and provide fact-checking services on-site. This means that misinformation regarding climate change will be expertly disputed in a regulated environment.

Due to the current polarisation of the political sphere, facts about climate change have been distorted and the conversation surrounding climate change has been misconstrued, despite efforts by CoPoD to combat this issue. The problems surrounding it also extend beyond misinformation but also include interference from non-academic sources and the propagating of false narratives.

Furthermore, charged language is being used to isolate users in their spaces and make discourse around false narratives both unproductive and impractical.

Additionally, algorithms have been improved to display a variety of information that merely reinforces the same narrative (Awan, 2023), particularly information on climate change. Despite the efforts to combat this issue, particularly when it comes to empowering researchers and fact-checkers, the current political discourse suggests a need to improve efforts in this regard. This means academic research has been disregarded in favour of politicising an issue such as climate change. In addition to this, social interactions have also become more isolated, specifically due to online isolation. Criticism in other mediums outside the online space has become much harsher, contributing to a generational and social discrepancy and therefore allowing for a bigger divide in access to information on climate change. Economic structures also need to be considered, as certain demographics are likely to be more isolated in an online space due to their access to certain information. A study conducted by Toby Hopp and reported on by Lisa Marshall found that the amount of false information distributed by users far outweighed misinformation fabricated by the users themselves (Marshall, 2020). Factors such as education and personal income contribute to the spread of misinformation, as these

demographics are more likely to be targeted.

In addition to CoPoD 2022, alternative measures outside of cyberspace need to be taken. The code focuses primarily on improving online spaces, but there needs to be an alternative in the online space. This means that academic research around climate change should reach as many demographics as possible in a way that allows for discourse within the public sphere. This means that researchers and fact-checkers need to be reached directly with as little interruption as possible. To cater to different kinds of accessibility, research needs to be presented by experts in a space that is accessible. That is why town halls provide the best solution to this case.

## Policy options

Public spaces such as city halls, schools and universities can be utilised to allow all kinds of citizens to engage in discourse in a controlled and monitored environment. Because spaces are already provided, the logistics become much more manageable. The costs are also significantly less severe, as subsidies can be provided by the state as well as taken out of university budgets. This way, events such as panel discussions, workshops, and debates are brought to a much larger capacity with less financial restraint.

Citizens can be incentivised to attend regular meetings to be confronted with facts that have been distorted, while also improving media literacy

at a much closer scope. Facilitators and moderators would be there to ensure decorum and respectful dialogue between citizens. These 'Town Hall' meetings would be a chance for citizens to voice their opinions in a non-polarised way. This would mean that the presence of experts would provide a space for facts to be represented accurately. The issue of the objectivity of facilitators can be solved by a set of rules that are decided on beforehand. In addition to that, freedom of expression can also be ensured through a comprehensive set of rules.

Additionally, there will be positive externalities that might not be immediately recognisable but will prove to be important in the long term. These positive externalities include an increase in engagement and consciousness around fighting climate change. These externalities imply an increase in innovation and creativity due to the higher level of interaction, while also improving education levels. In summation, resources can be used more effectively, costs decrease, and education improves when the CoPoD extends to offline spaces. In comparison to other recommendations, 'Town Halls' can provide a proactive solution that incentivises users to take action while also providing them with the proper information. Unlike policies where there is a focus on only distributing information, this policy can provide tools to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information.

Furthermore, initiatives that were more locally driven, particularly by the EU, have proven to be successful in both effect and longevity. The European Commission has provided tools such as 'community-led local development' between 2014 and 2020 for the specific purpose of involving citizens at the local level in social issues with relatively low funds (European Commission, 2014).

### Recommendation

The introduction to the policy of 'Town Halls' ensures the inclusion of as many age and class demographics while minimising costs at the same time. Local spaces within EU Member States are therefore utilised more efficiently, and the divide between differing opinions can be bridged

more easily in these secluded spaces. This will allow for less isolation, particularly within digital spaces, and a much closer scope. Facilitators and moderators would be there to ensure decorum and respectful dialogue between citizens. These 'Town Hall' meetings would be a chance for citizens to voice their opinions in a non-polarised way. This would mean that the presence of experts would provide a space for facts to be represented accurately. The issue of the objectivity of facilitators can be solved by a set of rules that are decided on beforehand. In addition to that, freedom of expression can also be ensured through a comprehensive set of rules.

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## ‘NewsPass Europe’ for accessible information of quality

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### Executive summary

Disinformation presents a tremendous challenge to effective climate action, eroding public trust, impeding policy implementation, slowing down the transition to sustainable practices, and politicising the issue. The EU CoPoD prioritises publishers and fact-checking but lacks a mechanism for providing quality, verified content to users. With subscription barriers hindering access to news, especially for the younger demographic, a ‘NewsPass’ initiative has emerged from the RADAR Youth Lab. This Pass, which could be funded by the EU, aims to grant young individuals access to credible news outlets, thus enhancing media literacy. By addressing the growing impact of disinformation on climate action and aligning with the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan (MAAP), this initiative contributes to a more aware European citizens that is well-informed and empowered for positive change.

### Introduction

The current EU CoPoD focuses largely on media providers, fact-checkers, and community engagement to flag emerging or existing disinformation content. However, there is a critical lack of a clear mechanism for providing quality, fact-checked content to users.

Modern-day access to verified information, and news articles, in particular, is hindered by subscription barriers, affecting various segments of the population. Notably, studies indicate that a substantial number of young individuals are reluctant to invest in news subscriptions (Groot Kormelink, 2022). In addition, as seen from a comprehensive 20-country analysis of Reuter’s Digital News Report 2023 (largely consisting of Western and Northern European states), the group that does pay for online news, which by itself is not at all large, ‘tends to be male, richer, and better

educated', and 'most of those paying full-price ongoing subscriptions are older, while young people tend to pay less or not at all' (Newman and Robertson, 2023).

'The EU has become the first ever policymaking body to officially acknowledge the urgency of defining and tackling climate disinformation' (Cook, 2022). By recognising the critical need to address misinformation specifically related to climate change, the EU demonstrates leadership in mitigating one of the most pressing global challenges. This recognition not only prioritises the battle against misinformation but also underscores the significance of informed, evidence-based decision-making in combating climate change. To develop and strengthen media literacy across the EU, especially among the younger demographic, it becomes crucial to ensure access to multiple reliable sources for secure media consumption.

As a result of the discussions and group work at the RADAR Youth Lab 'Dismantle Disinformation on Climate Change' held on June 15-16, 2023, in Berlin, a concept of a 'NewsPass' was introduced – a tool to provide access to credible news outlets to increase the accessibility of high-quality media, especially for younger people.

Disinformation is a tremendous challenge to effective climate action, eroding public trust, impeding policy implementation, slowing down the transition to sustainable practices,

and politicising the issue. During the public debate organised within RADAR in Berlin, experts said: 'The 'culture war' narrative, where climate action seemingly becomes part of an ascribed ideological package, has become mainstream. Parties, politicians, and media sources that profit from denouncing climate action can manipulate public opinion by framing information in ways that favour their interests (European Commission Representation in Berlin, 'Climate Change and Disinformation: How Disinformation Threatens Effective Climate Change Policy and What to Do About It', 15 June 2023).

The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation focuses largely on media providers, fact-checkers, and community engagement to flag emerging or existing disinformation content. Existing European fact-checking activities such as the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), include, inter alia, 'publication of monthly fact-checking briefs, cooperative investigations, content monitoring and analysis'. However, there is a lack of a mechanism for the provision of quality, fact-checked content to users – that is, supplying the audience with quality content in the first place instead of debunking.

## Policy options

Our concept of 'NewsPass' lies in creating a so-called 'multi-subscription' service encompassing multiple reliable and reputable news platforms. Designed specifically for

the younger demographic, such a pass would be funded and distributed by the EU, offering a diverse array of credible news outlets to boost media literacy. A younger audience, the target of the programme, could be reached through students, for example, those who are enrolled in schools in the European Universities Initiative. Access to such passes can also be provided for students in Erasmus+ Academic Mobility projects as part of their grant for the period of study.

The funding for this initiative could be allocated through the MAAP, introduced back in December 2020 by the European Commission as a strategic plan to 'promote a free, diverse and pluralistic media environment, address structural challenges of the media sectors and/or improve citizens' access to quality information' (European Commission, 2020). Within the MAAP, there is a specific focus on News Initiatives, which not only consolidates various support measures for the news media sectors, streamlining them under a unified approach but also acknowledges the importance of access to information and funds various efforts listed in Table 1 (see after).

As for content provider selection, an expert committee containing civil society organisations or other experts should evaluate and decide which media outlets will be asked to be included in the NewsPass. To particularly comply with the idea of providing quality content, that is not

only based on the reputation of the source, For example, EUFACTCHECK, the fact-checking project of the European Journalism Training Association, could be involved in this committee to contribute their expertise.

## Recommendation

Research shows that interventions to counter disinformation that are linked to the European Union end up being seen as more relevant and trustworthy (Bruns et al., 2023). This suggests that such involvement by the EU can remain strong and be used as tools by the EU to combat false information effectively.

Circling back to the concern action against climate change, shared not only between EU policymakers or participants of the RADAR Youth Lab, from whom the idea of a NewsPass was transmitted but also in broader European society. 'Misinformation has likely confused the climate change discourse, increased existing political polarisation, led to political inaction, and stalled support for or led to the rejection of mitigation policies' (Treen, Williams and O'Neill, 2020). Thus, combating misinformation and disinformation could and should be part of Europe's way towards a greener future.

The NewsPass has the potential to disseminate current policy updates on EU climate actions, ensuring citizens are well-informed about government actions. According to the [Special Eurobarometer 538](#), May

2023, 56 % of EU citizens believe that the EU is responsible for climate change. When Europeans are well aware of policies and policy windows, this distribution of responsibility, which can also be viewed as high trust in the institution, can play a vital role in fostering engagement and accountability in achieving climate targets.

Since 2020, the European Commission has continued its backing to create daily, insightful, and reliable content on European current affairs, curated by and for the European youth through the European Parliament Preparatory Action ‘A European public sphere: a new online media offer for young

Europeans’, with the highest budget in 2023 of EUR 9 million, as stated in the Call of Proposals.

The NewsPass is a substantial, on-hand way for people to access the information they are encouraged to read. For young students, the news headlines will transform into articles. Publishers, on the other hand, will gain an audience that was previously stopped by the paywalls. For the EU, this will mean more informed, aware citizens, ready for change – activated on all levels of climate action, from actively voting on important environmental policies to implementing those policies in their personal lives.



#### ACCESS TO INFORMATION INCLUDING ON EU AFFAIRS

Funding support	Programme	Budget	Current beneficiary
Pan-EU TV Programming in multiple languages	Multimedia Actions	€ 14.5 million	<a href="#">Euronews</a>
Coverage of EU affairs through a radio network	Multimedia Actions	€ 4.4 million	<a href="#">Euranet Plus</a>
Data-driven news on EU affairs	Multimedia Actions	€ 1.4 million	<a href="#">European Data Journalism Network &amp; European Data News Hub</a>
Multilingual content across European platforms	Multimedia Actions	€ 1.76 million	The <a href="#">European newsroom of press agencies</a>
Media literacy	Creative Europe	€ 2 million (2022) € 2 million (2023)	<a href="#">Six projects</a> (2022). 2023 call under evaluation
A new online media offer for young Europeans (2022)	Preparatory Action	€ 9 million	<a href="#">Four consortia</a> explain current affairs for youth
Representation and inclusion for refugees and migrants	Pilot project	€ 0,5 million	Under evaluation

Table 1 - Access to Information including on EU Affairs. EU Funding Opportunities, Updated in July 2023. #DigitalEU

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# **Disinformation against LGBTQ+**

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## Addressing discrimination against LGBTQ+ people: combatting tendencies that undermine democracy in rural areas

### Executive summary

Current EU policies on disinformation fail to adapt to the urban-rural gap in political behaviour. Place-sensitive bottom-up concepts are needed to build resilience to disinformation and compensate for the social consequences that the spread of disinformation has for LGBTQ+ people. In all EU Member States, the decline of democratic trust, accompanied by increasing support for democracy undermining political movements, has been significantly prevalent among the population of rural areas. The EU has not taken any successful measures to respond to this trend. The LGBTQ+ community, along with other marginalised groups, has experienced discrimination and violence due to disinformation targeting them. Their insecure status reveals a critical state of democracy in European societies. Therefore, it is recommended to implement a project on a local level in all EU Member States targeting rural communities. The project aims

to further integrate LGBTQ+ people into their communities, educate them on disinformation, build societal resilience to it, and regain trust in democracy.

### Introduction

Disinformation is a driving factor in anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns as well as in the ongoing decline in democracy across Europe. More political actors use disinformation as an instrument to target their opponents or, more drastically, marginalised groups. This has been especially prevalent among right-wing populist actors. Right-wing populist hate speech targets LGBTQ+ people and pushes their discrimination and stigmatisation (Strand, Svensson, Blomeyer and Sanz, 2021). While the current EU policy focuses on disinformation in cyberspace, it fails to sufficiently compensate for the social consequences of disinformation and address specific demographics. In this matter, rural areas have been neglected in policy-making despite

being more susceptible to disinformation and having little trust in democracy (Kenny and Luca, 2021). Accordingly, this memo recommends the creation of an EU-wide education and engagement project on disinformation for rural communities.

Hate and violence against LGBTQ+ people reached a peak in both occurrence and severity in 2022, as illustrated in the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) Europe annual review of the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe and Central Asia. The report also identifies a lack of political will to address certain aspects of LGBTQ+ discrimination (ILGA-Europe, 2021a). While the European Commission and the Council of Europe have called for action in multiple resolutions, the responsibility for these actions is left to the EU Member States. Trans-European projects have not been implemented. Advocating for LGBTQ+ people's rights is largely left to non-governmental organizations. Additionally, non-governmental organisations are few in rural areas, and the LGBTQ+ people from these communities are thereby neglected by any form of activism.

Disinformation campaigns are a major cause of this discrimination (Kremidas-Courtney, 2023). Violence against LGBTQ+ people tends to occur less often in liberal democracies and it was found to be a possible precursor to democratic backsliding (Flores, Carreño and

Shaw, 2023). Disinformation, alongside fake news and manipulation, positively correlates with the general decline in democracy (Conrad, Hálfðanarson, Michailidou, Galpin and Pyrhönen, 2023). Disinformation has been found to actively weaken political institutions and democratic trust while leading to an increase in digital violence (Youngs, Margalef Héctor and Colomina, 2021). Reestablishing a higher acceptance of LGBTQ+ people could provoke stagnation or backlash in the process of democratic backsliding (Flores, Carreño and Shaw, 2023). Therefore, countering disinformation is a significant part of anti-discrimination work as well as current democracy-building projects (European Commission, 2023).

While EU policy largely focuses on institutional aspects of democratic backsliding, the civic factors of this process have not been addressed sufficiently. The lack of civic approaches has been linked to the inefficiency of many EU policies (Pearce, Mrówczyńska, Demény, Gajdos, Haškovec, Kallinikou and Provenzano, 2021). A decrease in democratic trust and values is also a major challenge in the EU. This especially applies to the population of rural areas (Kenny and Luca, 2021). The differences in political and electoral behaviour between rural and urban areas are also called the 'urban-rural ap'. In 2021, research found that negative attitudes towards the EU and the effects of globalisation, as well as mistrust in

the political system and democracy, tend to increase with a decrease in the population density of the area examined (Kenny and Luca, 2021).

This emphasises the trans-European nature of this occurrence. Despite that, it has largely been dealt with on national levels. Whether the susceptibility to disinformation also differs depending on the area has not been directly researched. However, due to the positive correlation between democratic decline and disinformation (Conrad, Hálfðanarson, Michailidou, Galpin and Pyrhönen, 2023), the urban-rural gap reveals a higher demand for resilience among the population of rural places. Policies countering disinformation online are limited in their effect as cyberspace expands and a lot of disinformation is spread in forums that evade legal control. Therefore, societal resilience is crucial to democracy-building and anti-discrimination work.

## Policy options

Due to their interconnectedness, tackling the increase in LGBTQ+ discrimination and the spread and impact of disinformation in one democracy-building project is advisable.

As elaborated above, few EU policies are responding to increasing discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and no place-sensitive policies at all. Fighting LGBTQ+ discrimination on a local level is essential, as current policies punish the consequences of

LGBTQ+ hate but do not tackle its cause.

Regarding disinformation, EU policies focus on preventing its emergence and fighting existing disinformation online before it can be spread. Building societal resilience against disinformation was mentioned in the Action Plan against Disinformation in 2018 but was not further discussed or followed up with a campaign. In 2020, the EU published the European Democracy Action Plan to react to the decline in democratic values, which includes countering disinformation and building resilience as a main goal. However, the act does not specify the actions, nor does it address specific demographics according to their needs. With a growing cyberspace, disinformation will likely remain present despite ambitions to introduce regulations. Thus, bottom-up solutions have to be considered to complement top-down measurements in the form of fact-checking resources and regulations. While bottom-up concepts have been proposed before, they have not been implemented on a European level.

The urban-rural gap demands place-sensitive policies for both issues. An EU-wide project carried out in rural communities could be an effective policy tool, as involving civil society is effective and important for sufficient democracy-building (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2013). This way, the security and social integration of

LGBTQ+ individuals can be improved while making communities more resilient to disinformation. Working at the local level does entail various challenges that have to be considered. First, the growing mistrust in the EU and politics in general can endanger the acceptance of the project. At the same time, community-based bottom-up approaches tend to find more acceptance among the population (Međugorac and Schuitema 2023) and a representation of the EU is important to work against the widespread feeling of communities being left behind. Therefore, the cooperation of EU representatives and local political actors is necessary. Second, the project needs to be accessible and attractive to all generations and genders. This applies to the facilities, the advertisement, and the curriculum itself. The initiative can be financed with the European Social Fund Plus. If planned well, workshops, public discussions and presentations can be powerful tools for building democracy. It has great potential that has not been realised.

## Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended to create EU-wide local projects to build resilience to disinformation in rural communities across all Member States. The selection of communities for the pilot project should follow the existing data on democratic backsliding and LGBTQ+ discrimination. Communities with the highest level of democratic backsliding and discrimination in each country should take part first. The realisation of the project includes the draft of a general set of information for educational parts, a general concept for carrying the project out, the selection of EU representatives who speak the respective local language, the selection of local organisations and actors to collaborate with, and finally the funding. Local organisations can contribute locally specialised educational parts and useful knowledge about the communities to ensure the success of the project and help with finding the needed facilities.

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# Combatting LGBTQ+ hate through regional watchdogs and artificial intelligence

### Executive summary

There is currently no specific policy for LGBTQ+ disinformation in the EU or European neighbourhood. An LGBTQ+-specific policy is warranted because of the high risk to life. This policy memo calls for the establishment of regional watchdogs for data collection, analysis, and dissemination regarding disinformation targeting LGBTQ+ citizens. Regions should be determined according to an assessment and geographical mapping based on a **disinformation vulnerability index**. Disinformation campaigns led by external actors, particularly, but not exclusively, the Russian state, are evolving and becoming more aggressive. AI will turbocharge the complexity of disinformation and make it harder to detect, trace, and overcome. LGBTQ+ is one of, if not the main, targets at this time: LGBTQ+ rights are manipulated into a flashpoint pitting the EU's values against those of nationalists to expose political

fractures in the European project while rendering queer minorities as collateral. A policy is needed now because LGBTQ+ disinformation in particular causes physical violence up to and including homicide as a result of both spontaneous and premeditated bias-motivated crime. To mitigate this: (i) An index to categorise spatial and temporal vulnerability geographically and demographically to LGBTQ+ disinformation is needed, considering the risk of attacks and susceptibility. (ii) Based on this information, watchdogs should be established based on region, drawing on area expertise, disinformation expertise, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), to monitor LGBTQ+-targeted disinformation, online hate speech, and crime, and build greater cooperation with local LGBTQ+ and/or disinformation non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which is currently lacking and thus a hindrance to efforts tackling disinformation campaigns in Europe.

## Introduction

If legal protections for LGBTQ+ citizens across the EU are a mosaic, then the many powerful anti-LGBTQ+ narratives that are undermining those rights resemble a hydra. One or more of those heads spun from disinformation, will cause problems for collective European values of pan-European LGBTQ+ freedom if a mechanism is not established to deal with this now. As a report for the European Parliament in 2021 shows, a particularly virulent narrative built on disinformation is that of 'hetero-activism' and the protection of the 'natural family's' human rights, which, through its appropriation of human rights discourse, is politically difficult to challenge despite its reliance on false negative claims that demonise sexual and gender minorities (Strand and Svensson, 2021). The EU's inclusion of sexuality in its definition of hate speech and crime is welcome (ILGA-Europe, 2021b). However, there is a shortfall in the quantity and quality of research required when it comes to hate speech and disinformation that targets people because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Studies by Alexander Kondakov (2019) and Sergei Katsuba (2023) of University College Dublin show that such narratives are a direct cause of violent bias-motivated crime that is often premeditated and extreme in the degree of violence. This memo makes the case that some grounds are more fertile for targeted LGBTQ+ information than others in the

European area – most notably, parts of Eastern Europe – and this can shift as political weather changes.

Propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation are deadly for minorities. The link between hate speech and crime and disinformation targeting SOGIESC (from individuals, non-state actors, or governments) is demonstrated in research; the number and scope of academic studies of this link have increased in recent years, reflecting the increasing salience of the problem (Kondakov, 2019; Katsuba, 2023; Mole 2016). If unchecked, disinformation narratives about LGBTQ+ people can not only spread like wildfire but spiral and evolve in ways that become more dangerous to LGBTQ+ lives as queer people are demonised and made to appear threatening. The most dangerous are discourses that falsely paint queer people as 'unnatural', without precedent (i.e., as a fashionable 'trend'), or threaten the 'natural' family order and rights. It is particularly difficult to counter this threat, as groups such as the ['World Congress of Families'](#) use the language of human rights issues to cloak a radical, far-right ideology that fuels homophobic sentiment and leads to an increased number of both premeditated and unplanned violence, which can result in deaths (Stoeckl, 2020).

A review of 11 countries' secret service reports shows that it is the Russian government that has been the main

foreign actor attempting to influence and destabilise European decision-making, some way ahead of China (Karlsen, 2019, 1; Roguski, 2019). Russia has been particularly successful in spreading disinformation and energising narratives that pit Europe against nation-states and conflate LGBTQ+ rights with EU values as a political device in regions where populations have higher levels of distrust or prejudice regarding LGBTQ+ people and/or rights.

Disinformation is incredibly cheap to generate. It is potent when it is based on sound intelligence. An intelligent actor can identify weak points in the fabric of the European project – for instance, in the run-up to elections or in a region where the fertile ground appears for the growth and instrumentalisation of a particular narrative – and inject or increase the circulation of false or misleading information that serves to undermine the coherence and stability of the European project.

## Policy options

### ***Equipping individuals with knowledge and skills to increase resilience***

News literacy education has proven successful in regions of Central and Eastern Europe particularly susceptible to disinformation, as Shane Markowitz's study of innovative crowdfunding of education strategies in the region has shown. The theoretical basis of this approach would be increasing resilience in population areas where

LGBTQ+ disinformation is high risk and LGBTQ+ people are particularly at risk of violence. Funding regular educational workshops in partnership with employers, NGOs, and governments and providing financial incentives to get employees and residents to attend would help equip citizens with their arsenal to spot disinformation, hate speech, and hate crimes and report them. This takes the onus off of victims to report hate crimes and would ameliorate low report rates.

### ***Increase research and establish a 'Disinfo vulnerability' index***

The EU is coming to terms with disinformation as a serious threat to European integrity and democracy: the step to set up the CoPoD adhering to guidelines set out by the Commission, featuring bi-annual reports from online platforms that sign up to the programme, is a step in the right direction for monitoring of the problem (European Commission, 2023). However, platforms are not mandated to sign up, and the CoPoD relies on a limited selection of commercial organisations' self-reporting. There is no systematic way of collecting and mapping the data, and thus there is a wide gap in knowledge acquisition regarding the 'lay of the land' when it comes to disinformation, hate speech, and hate crime. A research and monitoring project should be set up with area studies specialists, disinformation experts, and artificial intelligence to gather data on disinformation across the EU. AI in

particular should be seriously considered as a force for monitoring online disinformation about LGBTQ+. Language is important; the Russian and Ukrainian language spheres should be a particular focus of monitoring. This data should be compiled to create an annual 'vulnerability' index that identifies regions where LGBTQ+ disinformation is particularly prevalent (hotspots), areas where anti-LGBTQ+ narratives are likely to take hold and spread quickly, and areas where the risk to LGBTQ+ lives is high.

### ***Regional watchdogs with targeted monitoring of disinformation, LGBT+ hate speech***

Using data from increased monitoring and AI, watchdog(s) should be set up on a regional basis. It is anticipated that Central and Eastern Europe will warrant most resources / represent an anti-LGBTQ+ disinformation 'hot spot' (Markowitz, 2023) but the data that is gathered and mapped as part of the vulnerability index discussed above will make it clear how the best regional watchdogs should be set up and where resources should be allocated. Monitoring of disinformation, anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes, and hate speech is currently carried out in a patchwork manner through the initiatives of NGOs (such as ILGA's Rainbow Europe initiative), governments, and the United Nations. It is hoped that an EU-wide system of regional watchdogs that monitor and analyse disinformation

would provide reliable and sufficient quantities of data to form actionable policies that mitigate the problem by increasing resilience in populations. Regional watchdogs would be staffed by (i) area experts who are proficient in the languages and knowledgeable of the contemporary societies and politics of their respective country or region; (ii) disinformation experts; and (iii) AI technical specialists. The potential of AI as a monitoring instrument for identifying disinformation and carrying out quick and precise discourse analyses when primed with well-known anti-LGBTQ+ narratives such as the five outlined in Strand and Svensson's briefing is very promising.

### **Recommendations**

1. Firstly, this memo recommends the establishment of a **vulnerability index** based on the concept of disinformation resilience to determine which regions of the EU are most susceptible to anti-LGBTQ narratives (i.e., where the most fertile climates lie for these narratives to be adopted and spread the fastest). This could be set up as a new separate sister organisation or sub-department within the newly established [Transparency Centre](#). Alternatively, an EU-funded think tank with interdisciplinary talent would be effective. The data collected should be mapped to give a regional picture of the LGBTQI+ disinformation and hate speech vulnerability in Europe. A

The suggested format would be that used **by ILGA in its annual reports on LGBTQ+ rights environments using a traffic light system** and providing the possibility to view variables individually or collectively to give ‘the big picture’.

2. Based on this data, **‘watchdog(s)’ should be set up**. This includes regional experts (language experts; recruitment from Area Studies is encouraged), disinformation experts and AI professionals. The role of the watchdogs will be to monitor, gather, and corroborate data about disinformation and LGBTQ+ hate speech and crimes in a given region and analyse this data to identify sections of populations who are particularly susceptible to disinformation and areas where LGBTQ+ lives are particularly at risk of hate-fuelled violence. To do this, the watchdogs must build links, cooperate with local LGBTQ+ groups, and monitor NGOs local to the regions over which the watchdog is responsible.

3. Watchdogs should **explore ways of combining human expertise with AI** to provide monitoring that is sophisticated enough to reflect the shifting and complex landscape of anti-LGBTQ narratives in Europe. This was strongly recommended in Strand and Svensson’s seminal advisory

report to the European Parliament (Strand and Svensson, 2021).

As a future direction, this policy memo strongly encourages further investigation into (i) the potential for using AI as a means of detecting disinformation and investigating the potential of AI in helping to generate effective counter-disinformation narratives on a scale more massive than current human intelligence allows and (ii) the inevitable application of AI by harmful actors as a means for producing disinformation and information on a massive scale and in a targeted way. EU countries need to be ready for this proactively, which can be achieved through long-term investment in AI knowledge and its interaction with disinformation, as both defence and risk are warranted. Steps in this direction have already been taken in the EU, such as through the [FANDANGO](#) project, which is ingeniously building a big data platform aimed at countering harmful disinformation on a Europe-wide scale.

There are also grounds for an investigation into the application of AI to promote specifically anti-LGBTQ+ disinformation on social media platforms and how this interacts with societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people and rights.

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# **Disinformation on Democratic Processes**

**Sophie Lorenz  
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# Sophie Lorenz

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Democratic Processes

## Using pop-ups to find a reliable database

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### Executive summary

'Disinformation erodes trust in institutions and media and harms democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to make informed decisions' (European Commission, 2021). Seventy-one per cent of Europeans encounter false information on the internet several times a month, while 30 % stated that they encounter misinformation on a daily or almost daily basis (European Commission, 2021). Yet, only around a quarter of people say they check the veracity of information or content (Eurostat, 2021). In a world where there is an excess of information, it is sometimes difficult to determine which information is correct and which is not, and also to find evidence in favour of one position or another. However, it is not enough to let people find out for themselves and just point out the dangers of misinformation. To effectively counteract the problem, it is necessary to set up an independent database as well as pop-ups that appear when political content is posted, leading to this database and

ultimately making fact-checking accessible and easy for everyone.

### Introduction

In times of misinformation, fake news, and propaganda, as well as the sheer abundance of opinions and conflicting opinions and information in the media and social media, fact-checking has become a lot more difficult these days. Furthermore, simply labelling content and therefore misinformation or teaching about misinformation and calling people to fact-check is, due to, for example, so-called 'imposter content', which is the impersonation of genuine sources (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022), not enough to tackle the problem. Often, even when there is a desire to fact-check, it is difficult to find a reliable database that contains facts and accurate information. The need for an independent and reliable database has increased significantly in recent years and can be combined with popups that lead to this very database, which appear when political content is published and

would make this database accessible to the whole population and thus make fact-checking easier for everyone. The first results with a similar approach have already been achieved during the WHO's collaboration with Meta to combat misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, where pop-ups were created that led to the WHO website (Bickert, 2019).

In the upcoming European elections, one is increasingly exposed to the problem of false information and manipulation of voters by interest groups, individuals, and other actors through social media. The European Parliament, for example, warned in an article written in August 2023 against paid misinformation from abroad to influence the elections in 2024 and, at that time, was already working on a way to exclude it as far as possible (European Parliament, 2023).

This creates the problem that people, for example, start to distrust the EU and democracy, stop voting or change their mind on a certain issue due to false information, and vote against their convictions, which they would have if they had the right information on the issue.

So, there is a need for a solution to mark different content as true or false and an easier way for people to reach a reliable data source.

The main problem with identifying and combating misinformation is that there can be no simple right or

wrong when labelling online content and general content. This type of wrong-right labelling would mark opinions from the perspective of the EU or other institutions with similar beliefs, which risks suppressing dissenting or controversial views and, in doing so, restricting the freedom of speech. In addition, various groups, especially in the democracy- and state-critical spectrum, could feel confirmed in their opinion by such a label and follow this conviction even more strongly, as this would only provide even more arguments and evidence in favour of their opinion from their perspective.

### Policy options

The first idea that comes to mind, which can be compared to Meta and the WHO combating misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic (Bickert, 2019), would be to censor or delete misinformation and accounts that spread such information and influence the algorithm to change the reach of accounts with possible misinformation. However, regulating and deleting accounts with different or opposing opinions, even if they are known to be false, could provide proponents with more material and arguments against the EU, democracy and the targeted social media, which could lead to even greater conspiracies and induce a reaction opposite to what was initially desired. A solution must therefore be found that allows people to form their own opinions on whether a particular post is portraying the truth or misleading content. One solution for this could

be a type of pop-up, such as those used by Meta during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bickert, 2019).

The pop-ups would be attached to topical, politically charged, and generally political posts and articles and would lead to a relevant article concerning the topic. Once certain keywords are used, for example, 'Ukraine, Corona, Palestine, Elections', a pop-up stating that the post might contain fake information and a link will be provided. By following this link, the person will be led to a reliable database for easier access to fact-checking from a reliable source. To strive towards fairness, the pop-up would appear regardless of who or what organisation wrote the article and regardless of the content of the post. This way, there will be no censorship of personal opinions while giving people the opportunity to inform themselves and form their fact-based opinions.

Through this, the issue of imposter content (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022) could be solved to a certain degree. Furthermore, leading social media companies, such as Meta and X, should be contacted and called upon to cooperate again and to point out the dangers of misinformation and the possible consequences of it. During the cooperation with Meta regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Meta declared: 'Facebook will direct millions of its users to World Health Organization's accurate and reliable vaccine information in several languages to ensure people can access authoritative information on vaccines and reduce the spread of

inaccuracies' (World Health Organisation, 2019), so one can hope that there will be another possible cooperation.

Now to the reliable database. If the centre containing the information is to be monitored by the EU, the opinions of EU opponents will harden, calling on the EU to impose opinions on the people. The database must therefore be set up by the EU government but be independent of it in terms of content. An example of a similar database created with independent journalists is [Radio Free Europe](#), initially founded by the government of the United States and can serve as a legal and general blueprint for the creation of a sister organisation doing the same or similar work but founded and funded by the EU. This database should not only be created in several languages but also in easy-to-understand languages to widen the circle of people who can inform themselves and reach all levels of the population, as well as to give young people the opportunity to inform themselves properly, for whom the 'advanced language' might otherwise be too complicated.

Within this solution, misinformation can be tackled more effectively, give people the opportunity to fact-check more easily, and raise awareness of the topic.

## Recommendation

In today's world, the media and social media play the biggest role they have ever played, with 28 % of people claiming to receive their news solely through social media. A

few years back, according to the explicit title of the World Economic Forum, 'Most people get their news online, but many are switching off altogether' (World Economic Forum, 2022). Young people in particular, but also slightly older people, form their opinions based on what they read on social media, which makes them much more vulnerable to misinformation and consequently form their opinions based on misinformation, which can lead to mistrust, prejudice, and different voting behaviours and ultimately to an unstable democratic system. And even if the wish to fact-check is there, it is often difficult to find a reliable data source and find good information in a pool of information provided by the internet.

To overcome these threads, the creation of a sister organisation similar to Radio Free Europe, funded and established by the EU but uninfluenced by it in terms of content, to ensure an independent source of data, reachable through research as well as pop-ups on social media and in the general media

whenever political material is posted, is needed. The project would be carried out in cooperation with the [Directorate General on Communication Networks, Content and Technology](#), or 'connect' for short, and would be supported in practice by monitoring pop-ups in the database as well as by working with industry professionals to create such a database and pop-up complex. In this way, the problem of loss of public confidence in the EU and the influence on voting behaviour at the national and supranational level can be addressed, while at the same time helping to combat prejudice against certain groups and allowing everyone to check facts and form an independent opinion.

This proposal could help us take a step further into keeping all European citizens, including young people, safe from the spread of false information. As European democracies could be in danger, one should do their best to protect them from harmful influences.

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## Enhancing media literacy and critical thinking skills in the EU ahead of the 2024 elections

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### Executive summary

The EU is faced with the challenge of effectively addressing the proliferation of disinformation interventions, which are widespread and pose a threat to democratic processes, public discourse, and social cohesion (Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, 2018). Recognising the pivotal role of education and awareness in combating the menace of these interventions, this policy recommendation focuses on a comprehensive strategy to enhance media literacy and critical thinking skills across the EU. By empowering citizens with the tools and knowledge to navigate the digital information landscape effectively, the EU can foster a more resilient and informed society.

### Introduction

The European Commission has recognised the need to defend the European project from hybrid strategies and disinformation,

particularly from Russia, since 2015. Due to concerns about disinformation impacts on the European Parliament in 2019, the COVID-19 health crisis and Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the EU implemented sanctions and several measures, including economic measures and the suspension of Russian government-controlled broadcasters within the EU (such as RT and Sputnik) due to their role in spreading disinformation (Holroyd, 2022). This move reflects the [EU's evolving response to disinformation](#) as a multifaceted transnational phenomenon and a matter requiring regulatory intervention by the public sector. At the same time, the EU has sought to encourage the promotion of fact-checking and media literacy (Casero-Ripollés, Tuñón, and Bouza-García, 2019). Building on that, the following memo will propose a fast-paced way to fight disinformation, which mainly consists of two important elements:

### ***Disinformation awareness campaign***

A broad-based information campaign that makes citizens aware of the risks of disinformation through digital and analogue channels and refers to the already implemented and upcoming measures concerning this issue.

### ***Accessory training for media literacy***

Introduction of a wide range of educational offerings, focusing primarily on younger, older, and more vulnerable citizens, including the implementation of school curricula based on the Digital Education Plan of 2018.

Disinformation has become a systemic challenge for democracies because of the combination of disruptive technological, political, and sociological transformations of the public spheres in a very short period. The causes of the emergence of this new order of disinformation are diverse (Bennet, Livingston and Horowitz, 2018). One of them is the emergence and consolidation of social media, which have become a preferred platform for the circulation of false information due to their open nature and lack of controls and filters on the content in circulation. The development of artificial intelligence and bots is also contributing to the consolidation of this new order of disinformation (García-Orosa, 2021). In

addition to that, trust in traditional news media is at an all-time low. This phenomenon is called the 'post-truth era' by the American writer Ralph Keyes back in 2004.

While in some ways welcome, measures against disinformation also come with the risk of restricting legitimate and free speech. In a democracy, the possibilities to tackle the problem are therefore very limited.

### **Policy options**

The EU has considered **four policy solutions** in response to disinformation: **strategic communication, censorship, media literacy, and media pluralism**. While censorship and strategic communication are not dominant policies, the EU has emphasised security-centred solutions to address online risks within the context of hybrid threats. In 2018, the European Commission introduced the first voluntary CoPoD. In 2022, this became a strengthened co-regulation scheme, with responsibility shared between the regulators and companies' signatories to the code. It complements an earlier Digital Services Act (DSA) agreed upon by the 27 EU Member States, which already includes a section on combining information. The DSA represented a mandatory shift, demanding transparency and imposing sanctions for inaction.

Regarding other initiatives, the EU also funded a certain number of projects, such as 'PROVENANCE', 'SocialTruth', 'EUNOMIA' and WeVerify.

The 'Action Plan against Disinformation' by the European Foundation, especially the 4th pillar, already ensures a great foundation for any further policy recommendations that address the issue but focus on the removal of fake news, especially on social media. All in all, innovators have primarily relied on self-regulation and a shared responsibility approach, with attempts to engage digital platforms.

According to the Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, commissioned by the European Commission to prepare a report on disinformation, 'All relevant stakeholders, including online platforms, news media organisations (press and broadcasters), journalists, fact-checkers, independent content creators, and the advertising industry, are called upon to commit to a Code of Practice' (Independent High-Level Group, 2018). However, politicians, driven by their capitalist nature, have been reluctant to assume greater responsibility, opting to outsource the fight against disinformation to third parties. In conclusion, media literacy is undoubtedly a crucial tool in the fight against disinformation.

A public that is both critically and digitally literate is much more likely to be able to assess the information

they encounter online, identify sources they can trust, and make well-informed decisions as citizens. Often called 'digital natives' due to their active digital usage, disinformation is very much a part of children's lives. A UNICEF survey in 10 countries points to shortcomings in how young people evaluate online information: up to three-quarters of children reported feeling unable to judge the veracity of the information they encounter online. Therefore, an investment in media and information literacy programmes, revision of national curricula if required, and the creation of training and educational opportunities for parents, carers, and educators are required.

Using a whole-of-a-society approach, a multi-channel awareness campaign to ensure public recognition is essential and has proven to be effective on many recent issues addressed by the EU.

## Recommendation

2024 holds several significant decisions that will be brought about through elections, including in Brazil, India, South Korea, Austria and Portugal, as well as the United States of America and the EU. There is no doubt that the fair democratic procedure of these elections will be threatened by the rising number of disinformation interventions. The European Commission considers these a direct threat to the Union's public order and security (European Commission, 2022).

The EU's response to that is not only urgent but also a challenging matter of European security can be summarised in two major approaches. On the one hand, it has adopted a hard power approach in the European External Action Service (EEAS) strategy that includes the use of acronyms highly reminiscent of geopolitical thought, such as the East StratCom. On the other hand, the EU has not adopted any type of mandatory policy towards online platforms and social media companies such as Meta or X, despite the agreement on the DSA referred to above. As a result, the EU is being accused at the same time of promoting a strong discourse linking disinformation to security, equality, and geopolitical strategies while

being lax on the obligations and responsibilities of social media companies. As a result, a change of course and a well-structured toolbox are crucial to tackling the problem, including the increased involvement of fact-checking organisations (e.g. EDMO), enhanced transparency and accountability of news media, citizen engagement, and technological solutions. And most of all, widespread media literacy in combination with elevated issue awareness in our society, is realised through an almost ubiquitous campaign and sustainable training available to as many citizens as possible. Nevertheless, this campaign would be mostly targeting the most exposed and potentially more vulnerable, i.e. young people.

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# **Disinformation through Foreign Interference**

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## Katariina Mäkilä

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Foreign Interference

# CounterStratCom platform initiative

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### Executive summary

The various tactics of malign information influence can be seen both as a problem of democracy and a security threat (Pamment, 2020, 1). In this policy recommendation, the focus is on countering foreign (dis)information interventions as security threats with proactive, collective and coordinated measures. Since the EU as a whole and its Member States are targets of foreign disinformation and interference, the counter-disinformation community should deepen both its collaboration in information sharing and coordinated responses and strengthen its concrete toolbox of proactive countermeasures in demonstrating preparedness, resilience and capabilities. This broad CounterStratCom collaboration – coordinated by the EEAS Strategic Communication Division or the suggested new European Centre for Interference Threats and Information Integrity (European Parliament, 2022) – should involve the EU-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) close partnership, national security actors, think tanks, NGOs, civil society actors and media actors, as well as

other relevant international counter-disinformation actors.

### Introduction

The EEAS defines foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) as a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes; is manipulative, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner; and whose actors can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their territory. When malign information operations are perceived as a security threat, an effective counter-disinformation policy requires actor-specific knowledge and countermeasures that dissuade the adversaries from attempting to influence (Pamment, 2020, 1).

It has been long argued that Western democracies are not in decline but in crisis (Schmitter, 2015) – or rather under disinformation attack (Tenove, 2020). Among the main normative threats posed by disinformation are democracies' self-

determination, accountable representation and public deliberation (Tenove, 2020). Since the beginning of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 and the increasing Chinese influence operations in Europe, the urgent need to enhance the EU's resilience and coordinated strategic counteractions towards FIMI has been evident.

Russia's disinformation campaigns and its holistic, synchronised, and continuous concept of information warfare (Adamsky, 2015; Merriam, 2023) against the EU have been countered with the East StratCom Task Force, which has been analysing and debunking Russian disinformation campaigns under EEAS since 2015 (Hedling, 2021). Its counteract capacity was reinforced in 2016. Before the 2019 European Elections, the Rapid Alert System and rapid alert procedure for crisis management in information manipulation cases were created.

Malign state and non-state actors, as well as their proxies, operate in a coordinated manner, even when it is semi-structured or seemingly organic and covert. Thus, the EU's defensive response should also be collectively coordinated and involve a variety of actors (such as the EU, NATO, government, academics, media, civil society and grassroots actors), as has already been suggested in the early governmental policies of various democratic countries concerning

foreign disinformation (Tenove, 2020, 523).

According to the resolution of the European Parliament (2022) on foreign interference, there is a need for enhanced cooperation in threat analysis and a shared understanding of threats to national security between the EU, Member States and other like-minded countries, civil society and the private sector. This could be promoted by a new and independent European Centre for Interference Threats and Information Integrity that would cooperate with the EEAS StratCom.

The resolution highlights the necessity of a 'multi-layer, coordinated and cross-sector strategy' involving, e.g., common terminologies and definitions, shared intelligence system, resilience-building policies, appropriate disruption and defence capacities, diplomatic and deterrence responses (such as an EU toolbox for countering FIMI), and global partnerships. This strategy would offer tools to tackle the lack of 'appropriate and sufficient means to be able to better prevent, detect, attribute, counter and sanctions' foreign interference threats (European Parliament, 2022). As a goal, the successful implementation of the grand strategy would serve the ultimate objective of a 'cumulative posture aimed at dissuading adversary actors from spreading disinformation and

conducting influence operations and foreign interference' (Pamment, 2020, 1–2).

Analysing Russian and Chinese information operations and their convergence, NATO StratCom research points out that both countries are increasing their information influence in NATO countries, which poses a security concern for the EU as well. Russia and China share some common geopolitical goals but differ in tactics and objectives, which calls for separate countermeasures and monitoring. (Bahenský, Daniel and Turcsányi, 2023.) For countering Chinese information operations and hybrid threats, there is a need for more Chinese language experts in the EEAS's StratCom teams (Wigell, Mikkola and Juntunen, 2021, vii).

## Policy options

According to previous research on democratic resilience, countering foreign disinformation interventions as security threats requires policies that emphasise proactive, collective and coordinated measures. The suggested policy options involve six measures: (i) creating common behavioural, contextual and legal-ethical assessments as the basis of multi-stakeholder cooperation; (ii) creating a coordinative centre for multi-stakeholder cooperation; (iii) supporting transparent real-time disinformation monitoring through fact-checkers; (iv) improving risk mitigation; (iv) enhancing the ability to adapt and recover from successful

disinformation attacks; and (vi) communicating preparedness.

As noted in a joint report from the NATO StratComCoe and the HybridCoE (Pamment and Smith, 2022, 30), behavioural, contextual and legal-ethical assessments are highly needed and potential areas for enhanced cooperation between counter-disinformation actors on all levels of society. This approach takes into account that the most effective countering of disinformation involves cultivating local expertise and assisting independent local media and civil society actors (Kovalčíková, Salvo, and Soula. 2019, 41). Broader information sharing on these assessments would enhance the detection, attributing and countering of foreign interference.

The suggested European Centre for Interference Threats and Information Integrity (European Parliament, 2022) could act as a coordinator for a common CounterStratCom platform, providing structure and concrete means for information sharing and serving as a European epicentre for new proactive, collective and coordinated counter-disinformation and information defence initiatives. The centre could also deepen cooperation with NATO actors, especially with the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence.

Although fact-checking is not a proactive but mainly a responsive measure, transparent real-time monitoring is important for both

active strategic communication and future information defence planning. Cultivating already existing (private) fact-checkers and their teams and networks with information sharing and financial support is an efficient way of enhancing coordinated and effective cooperation.

Countering the constantly growing number of disinformation and its disseminators is arguably most effective when the effects of the disinformation are maintained as low as possible. This can be achieved by focusing on democracies' resilience towards FIMI. Risk mitigation and the ability to adapt and recover from successful attacks are both vital for building and maintaining resilience (Pamment, 2020, 2) and should be enhanced in the future by deepened multi-stakeholder cooperation.

Finally, the EU should invest in strategic communication with its European audience as well as with foreign malign actors and their networks. By communicating its 'assertiveness, agility, and resolve' (Pamment, 2020, 2), the EU can protect trust and resilience among its citizens and influence its adversaries' calculus.

The above-listed measures could be included in a single, all-in-one policy advocating the already-suggested coordinated European centre (European Parliament 2022) that could facilitate various FIMI countermeasures and multi-stakeholder cooperation. A cumulative posture focusing on

resilience and defensive countermeasures could result in efficient and impactful disinformation deterrence by 'communicating preparedness, building capacity, assessing threats, analysing adversaries' influence networks and communicating with adversaries' (Pamment, 2020, 1-2).

## Recommendations

Since the EU and its Member States are targets of foreign disinformation and interference, the counter-disinformation community should deepen both its collaboration in information sharing and coordinated responses and strengthen its concrete toolbox of proactive countermeasures in demonstrating preparedness, resilience and capabilities. Proactive, collective and coordinated measures include EU-wide identification of vulnerable FIMI target groups and building their resilience ('defending known targets') and information sharing on hostile actors, their strategies and potential future targets, as well as building societal resilience with ongoing threat assessment and effective counteractions ('defending all'). Especially in ongoing monitoring, risk assessment and fact-checking, enhanced cooperation with grass-roots and civil society actors is crucial.

Using a whole-of-a-society approach, CounterStratCom Platform collaboration should involve closely coordinated EU-NATO actor partnership, national security actors, think tanks, NGOs, civil society actors

and media actors, as well as other relevant international counter-disinformation actors. Collaboration is based on collaboratively developed, consistent terminology and a shared understanding of hostile FIMI actor's tools, techniques and procedures. Two main lines of investigation and

counteractions include Russian FIMI and Chinese FIMI. The CounterStratCom Platform could be coordinated by the EEAS Strategic Communication Division or the suggested new European Centre for Interference Threats and Information Integrity.

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# Astrid Söderström

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## ‘Digital volunteers’: empowering the public through grassroots disinformation and media policy experts

### Executive summary

Growing concerns about disinformation and its detrimental impact on democracy, amplified by the changes in the information ecosystem and a growing ease in conducting information operations with little to no repercussions, call for more effort in resilience building. The holistic approach to counter-disinformation strategy is threefold: sufficient (social) media regulation, efficient top-down strategic communication, and resilient bottom-up grassroots activity. Currently, the EU is in the process of implementing and welcoming multiple legal tools to enhance regulation in the field. At the same time, experts highlight that relying solely on legal tools is inefficient in addressing the decreasing trust in public and legacy media, as well as the absence of credible authorities leading the public debate. This recommendation suggests, building upon the vision laid out by the Nordic Think Tank for Tech and Democracy,

that the EU targets increased efforts into educating and empowering the public. This includes, for example, educating volunteers to further instruct local actors in media, education, and other sectors of civil society by providing knowledge, expertise, and tools to build robust and self-regenerative resilience.

### Introduction

Concerns over disinformation – deceitful information with malicious intent (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) – are understandably on the rise. In the context of disinformation by foreign actors, it can be seen as part of the information operations toolkit in modern hybrid warfare. Information operations, in turn, are defined as ‘coordinated efforts to influence a target audience using a range of illegitimate and deceptive means’ (Bayer et al., 2019). The impact of such an operation on modern-day democratic societies can be severe: undermining democracy, harming credibility,

endangering access to credible information, and disrupting 'civil order, fact-based policy debates, and democracy itself' (Coper, 2022).

The allure of disinformation lies in the fact that it is a 'low-risk, high-reward endeavour' (Pamment, 2020). Producing large quantities of disinformation at a fast pace in the current information environment – by, for example, using software to create countless fake accounts, known as 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour', to push out and amplify a message to control the narrative in public debate – is relatively easy and cheap. This type of activity occurs on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, or Telegram and is often supported by alternative media or reported on by legacy media (Coper, 2022b). In the future, the array of available and efficient tools for producing disinformation is likely to only increase, driven by advances in AI such as deep fakes.

The key problem in counter-disinformation action is the complex, fractured information sphere. Since information on online platforms transcends borders and its source is often hard to detect, there are difficulties in distinguishing between foreign and domestic actors. Additionally, it is often not illegal. Overall, the field is complicated to regulate due to concerns about freedom of speech. All of these details make monitoring, classifying, and punishing disinformation a real challenge.

Simultaneously, and partly due to modern changes in the information ecosystem, trust in media is decreasing, leaving behind a vacuum in the public sphere that is easy to fill with information operations (Coper, 2022c). Furthermore, marginalised groups, as well as conspiracy theorists ('Truth Seekers'), are becoming more forceful in rejecting the common narrative (Moilanen, Hautala and Saari, 2023). In such a fractured and rapidly changing information sphere, and considering the 'low-cost, high-reward' nature of disinformation, proactive measures and empowering the public are the most important actions to take.

## Policy options

The holistic, and therefore adequate, counter-disinformation action is threefold: sufficient (social) media regulation, efficient top-down strategic communication, and resilient bottom-up grassroots activity. At the moment, the EU is in the process of implementing and welcoming multiple legal tools to improve regulation in the field, such as the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act, and the European Media Freedom Act. For most of the new legal tools, the impact is yet to be seen.

Simultaneously, experts highlight that focusing on legal tools is inefficient in addressing the issue of decreasing trust in public and legacy media, as well as the lack of credible authorities leading the debate in the public sphere. That is why it is also important to increasingly target

efforts to strengthen civil society and build grassroots resilience against disinformation through education, media literacy, and empowerment. For a functioning democracy, the public must be able to distinguish between fact and fiction (Benkler et al., 2018).

Currently, the Nordic countries host some of the arguably most resilient societies to disinformation (Media Literacy Index, 2022; Mackintosh, 2018). Trust in media, as well as in all authorities, is high in these countries (Newman et al., 2023). Partly, this is due to cultural factors, but constant effort is also taken to protect civil society and safeguard public debate and democratic processes. For example, all of the countries have robust, independent public media outlets (Dragomir and Söderström, 2023). For example, in Finland, media literacy is taught to the young public in schools (Cord, 2022) and to other demographics, such as the elderly, through [civil society initiatives](#).

At present, Nordic societies are looking to further strengthen their disinformation resilience by focusing on Nordic cooperation. The Nordic Think Tank for Tech and Democracy, operating under the Nordic Council of Ministers, aims to make the Nordics a 'united tech-democratic region' (Nordic Think Tank for Tech and Democracy, 2023). This includes 'thriving citizens and open and informed public debate taking place across different spaces and with vigilant public oversight over democratic infrastructure.

This type of cooperation between EU Member States is urgently needed as well. Furthermore, much can be learned from the think tank's vision. On April 17, 2023, the think tank published its suggestions for 'possible initiatives to address the most pressing challenges to the Nordic democracies'. One of these initiatives, point 3A, is grassroots empowerment and education: to '[s]upport the volunteers who facilitate online communities where democratic debate unfolds.'

This part of the recommendation suggests, for example, that the nations create and trial approaches to empower digital volunteers. This might also include small-scale funding initiatives, supported by major technology companies, aimed at assisting administrators of sizable public groups in managing operational costs, training, and fostering innovation in public discussions within their communities. Additionally, efforts could encompass the design of free training modules to encourage inclusive and dynamic digital dialogues within online groups.

## Recommendations

Building upon the vision outlined by the Nordic Think Tank for Tech and Democracy, this policy memo recommends that the EU strengthen its efforts to educate and empower the public. To foster inclusion and mitigate the radicalization of marginalised groups, it is essential to

concentrate on educating and empowering the public through local, grassroots, and trusted actors – so-called 'digital volunteers,' as conceptualised above. Considering the complexity of the disinformation issue, the constant enhancement of disinformation tools, and the challenges in making sense of the media policy landscape, it is advantageous to equip these volunteers with the knowledge, expertise, and tools to further educate local actors in media, education, and various sectors of civil society.

This initiative could be led by the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) within the [Digital Europe Programme](#). Moreover, the initiative could draw inspiration from the mentoring schemes implemented in the [Digital Volunteers](#) Pilot Programme for the digitisation of small and medium-sized enterprises, start-ups and NGOs. This approach aims to cultivate authentic and self-generative resilience in EU Member States and their diverse communities.

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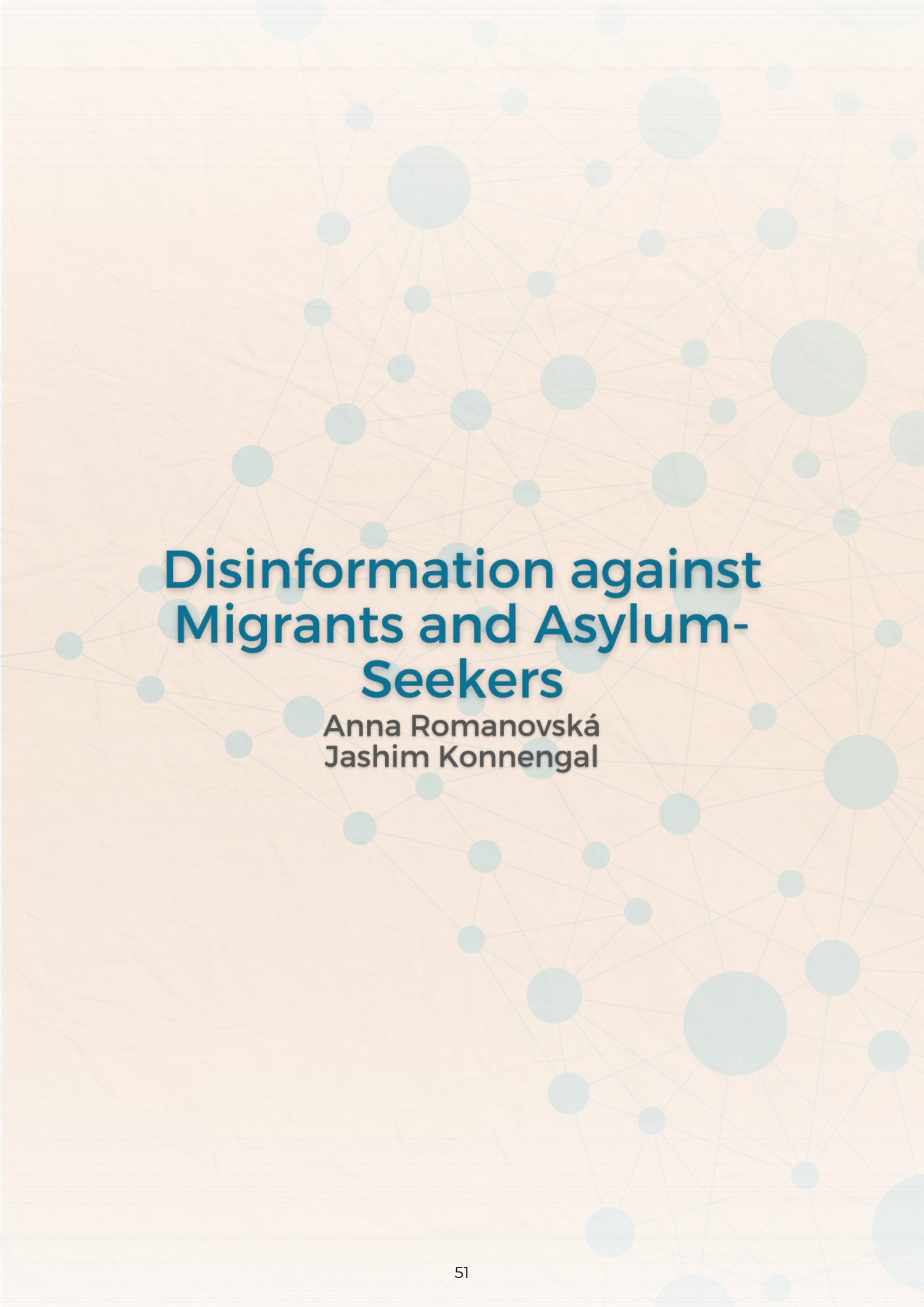
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# **Disinformation against Migrants and Asylum- Seekers**

**Anna Romanovská  
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# Anna Romanovská

RADAR Youth Ambassador  
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## Local, intergenerational community workshops

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### Executive summary

In response to a growing need for positive and data-driven communication about migration and increased societal resilience to disinformation, this policy memo considers a variety of options on how to develop and implement such conversations amongst the European public. By recognising that disinformation and negative stereotyping can have a harmful, real-life impact on migrants and refugees, this policy memo recommends adopting a proactive approach to building resilience to disinformation targeting migration. This collaboration between EU institutions, the EDMO, local councils, and civil society organisations strives to bring a local approach to improving media and information literacy, as well as an improved public understanding of migration.

### Introduction

The European Commission defines disinformation as false or misleading content that is spread to deceive or secure economic or political gain and which may cause public harm

(European Commission, 2022). Disinformation has the potential to sow division and exacerbate feelings of fear by playing on several social issues. Disinformation on migration is particularly effective at this, generating false narratives about migrants and refugees, often 'othering' them, and taking away their voice to be able to defend themselves. Most disinformation narratives seek to inflame existing tensions, exacerbating existing stereotypes and fears prevalent among citizens in Member States (Szakács and Bognár, 2021; EDMO, 2023). This can lead to harmful real-world implications, where strong anti-immigration sentiments can grow and, at times, lead to violent attacks against migrants, thus undermining social cohesion (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021).

Existing initiatives for tackling disinformation on migration focus on training on how to use mindful language when talking about migration for politicians and

communications professionals (e.g. [European University Institute](#)), as well as the provision of training programmes for young journalism students on how to address anti-immigration rhetoric (e.g. [Global Migration Media Academy](#)). However, such initiatives are targeted at specific groups, and although some work as multipliers and can have a wider effect on facilitating public discourse, they are not often followed by those with negative perceptions of migration.

Therefore, there runs a risk of an echo chamber being created where those who already hold a positive attitude towards migration will be targeted by such initiatives, whereas those who are unclear about their attitudes are not targeted and thus continue to be more susceptible to harmful narratives targeting migrants.

Migration itself is an incredibly complex and delicate topic in the public discourse arena, both offline and online. As identified in the report from the ING2 Special Committee, migrants are often the target of coordinated disinformation campaigns orchestrated by foreign actors 'to amplify negative preconceptions about migration to build up tensions within European societies' (European Parliament, 2023). Such tensions hold the potential to undermine the social cohesion of European society and can sow distrust towards national and European public institutions. By improving the public's understanding of migration, it will be more difficult

for disinformation actors to exploit the topic and amplify tensions within EU society while also improving the civic cohesion and democratic resilience of the EU and its member states.

Furthermore, disinformation spreads quickly, making it difficult to develop a quick reactive response that can effectively counteract the negative impact of harmful narratives spread by disinformation actors. Although debunking still serves a crucial role in ensuring that EU citizens are well-informed, more needs to be done to ensure that awareness of potential manipulation is increased.

### Policy options

While the CoPoD, followed by the DSA, has played and will play important roles in curbing the impacts of harmful, particularly illegal, online content across online platforms, more needs to be done to inoculate EU citizens against disinformation and damaging narratives targeting migrants and migration. By promoting increased Media and Information Literacy (MIL), and a greater understanding of migration, particularly the processes and people involved, greater resilience to the discord caused by disinformation can be achieved.

Previous research on limiting the harmful impact of disinformation on migrants has highlighted the need for increased MIL as well as improving the public's migration literacy as a sustainable long-term strategy (Butcher and Neidhardt,

2021). By focusing on pre-bunking rather than reactive debunking strategies, citizens' ability to identify and critically analyse manipulative techniques in a rapidly evolving information environment will be improved (Roozenbeek, Suiter and Culloty, 2021). Moreover, MIL, as well as improving understanding of migration, are crucial to adopting a whole-of-society approach to countering disinformation on migration.

EDMO's foundation served as a crucial step in building long-term societal resilience to disinformation. By bringing together fact-checkers, researchers, and media literacy experts, this EU-funded project has been working to tackle disinformation with a focus on multidisciplinary. Moreover, its network of regional hubs provides the grassroots-level expertise needed to develop workshops catered to local communities.

Seeing as the EU does not have a direct mandate on influencing the education policies of its Member States, an intergenerational and local focus on delivering MIL training could be adopted to facilitate education for two age groups that are said to be highly vulnerable to disinformation on migration, particularly in terms of vulnerabilities to disinformation or negative narratives aimed at migrants and refugees (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

Local, intergenerational workshops will focus on building resilience to

disinformation and fostering data-driven and fact-based conversations about migration. This adopts a local and community-focused approach to countering disinformation and harmful narratives about migration rather than a wider public communication campaign. Although public communication campaigns can be effective at ensuring that the public is better equipped to spot disinformation tactics, when it comes to disinformation targeting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, a more complex approach is required.

By focusing on a local level and the creation of multipliers, the interactions held in local workshops will build upon existing levels of trust that are often present in local communities, making it more effective than campaigns present in public places.

### ***Local, intergenerational workshops focused on the creation of multipliers***

This policy option considers the delivery of local, intergenerational workshops, intending to create multipliers dedicated to improving mindful and fact-based conversations about migration, as well as raising awareness of the tactics used by disinformation actors in their local communities. The workshops would then be followed by the creation of an EU-wide network, where the past participants of the workshops would gain further access to learning resources on how

to guide fact-based conversations on migration in their communities safely. Locations that would be prioritised for the delivery of such workshops would mainly include rural areas.

## Recommendation

By bolstering intergenerational MIL training, inclusive communities that promote understanding, cooperation, and a sense of belonging for migrants will be promoted. This proposal aims to develop a programme of local, intergenerational workshops across EU Member States that would bring together people from different districts. The workshops would allow participants to meet with those whom they may not normally interact with, thus expanding their social circles. During the workshops, the participants would learn more about the impact of disinformation, how it materialises, as well as what they could do to counter it. The workshop would focus specifically on how disinformation impacts migrants, as well as pre-bunking negative narratives about migration by training participants on how to drive mindful and data-driven conversations on the topic of migration. To facilitate the workshops, partnerships with local organisations, councils, NGOs, youth centres, schools, and universities would be built via the strengthened media literacy wings of the EDMO regional hubs. The engagement of local organisations known to the participants will allow workshop facilitators to adapt the delivery of

their workshops to the local community.

Following the workshops, participants would join an EU-wide network, facilitated by the EDMO media literacy wing, where they would gain access to resources on how to effectively communicate about migration and how to build resilience to disinformation in their local communities. Such resources would build upon those already presented in the workshops as well as ensure the sustainability of the project, ensuring that past participants can effectively act as multipliers if they so wish.

Participants will be chosen in two ways: either by applying to attend the workshop or by acting as a representative of their local organisation, who will be invited to select a delegate from their organisation to attend the workshop. The promotion of the workshop will focus primarily on local organisations and on family members, who can be encouraged to attend together. The subsequent town hall discussions, however, will be free to attend and advertised via local bulletin boards and newspapers. Special care will be given to ensure that conversations are conducted safely, and thus only skilled media literacy trainers will be leading the workshops.

This initiative would be best funded through the financial strengthening of the Media Literacy wings of the EDMO Hubs. Given that the regional hubs regularly partner with local

organisations and their members include local fact-checking and media literacy organisations, they already have a good understanding of how disinformation targeting migration materialises, as well as the state of play when it comes to media literacy within their countries.

Moreover, as many of the organisations already have experience delivering media literacy training, they will be well-equipped to aid in the development of the workshop programmes and learning resources.

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## Strategic enhancement: amplifying visibility of existing platforms addressing misinformation and disinformation

### Executive summary

Fake news and false information are big problems nowadays. Because of the prevalence of the use of a lot of online platforms like social media, blogs, and news websites in daily life, wrong information spreads easily. This happens mainly because these online platforms are the main way information reaches people, and sometimes checking and making sure the information is true is not very good. In the EU, both misinformation (unintentional) and disinformation (intentional) about migration play a significant role. Their dissemination harms society, leading to the [spread of hate speech and false beliefs](#) against migrants and asylum-seekers. In light of this, the EU has adopted a variety of strategies, including several initiatives centred on online media. As a result, while there are already numerous platforms available, they are not being fully utilised, so the goal of this policy is to maximise their visibility and effectiveness. The prevalence of disinformation on

migration is a pressing concern that requires immediate action. Existing commendable online platforms such as [EUvsDisinfo](#) managed by the EEAS East StratCom Task Force provide analyses of disinformation campaigns, particularly those originating from state-sponsored sources. The goal is to counter disinformation and raise awareness about misleading narratives that might affect the EU and its Member States. Rather than introducing a new hub, the proposal focuses on amplifying the visibility of proven resources. The proposed initiative will be aimed at two age groups: those between 16 and 30 years old and those above 55 years old. When targeting these groups, tailored campaigns on social media and in public spaces become essential. This cost-effective strategy maximises impact without the burden of new infrastructure, effectively tackling the challenge of low awareness in addressing migration-related disinformation.

## Introduction

In response to the prevalent issue of misinformation on migration, this proposal adopts a pragmatic approach by maximising the visibility of existing online platforms. The goal is to bridge the awareness gap rather than reinvent the information wheel. The strategy involves targeted marketing campaigns, ensuring that valuable resources are more accessible to the general public, particularly youth and seniors. This approach capitalises on the strengths of established platforms without the need for elaborate introductions or transitions. The ensuing sections of the memo will further delve into the intricacies of this approach, providing a comprehensive roadmap for effectively countering migration-related disinformation.

The objective is to cultivate harmonious and inclusive communities that enhance understanding, cooperation, and a sense of belonging for both migrants and host communities. Leveraging existing platforms funded by the EU, this memo plans to develop strategies to boost their visibility and usage. Through targeted demographic and geographic research, it will formulate effective strategies to reach the audience. Additionally, a comprehensive plan will be established to foster the utilisation of existing tools, ensuring their effectiveness in countering migration-related disinformation. Relevant organisations could be:

(i) the German-based, [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Foundation](#), which focuses on 'shaping the future of the European Union and fostering the acceptance of the European idea'; (ii) [Full fact](#), an independent fact-checking organisation which focuses on various topics, including politics and migration.

While commendable online platforms exist to counter disinformation and provide reliable migration information, their impact is hindered by the low awareness provided by checking the website analytics. Traffic to these platforms is low. This proposal directly tackles this challenge through targeted marketing. The crux of the issue lies in visibility rather than the absence of quality platforms. By enhancing awareness, individuals across age groups can access accurate information and actively contribute to countering misinformation. As the impact of strategic social media marketing becomes more apparent, there are success stories supporting this model. At the moment, the website analysis of these platforms is relatively low, so this information can be used to launch a marketing initiative that will target the target demographic both geographically and demographically by creating targeted profiles. From there, it can create content that highlights the issues at hand and the kinds of services to be offered through the platform. This will generate traffic to the platforms.

## Policy options

The proposal navigates two key policy options to address migration disinformation:

**Option 1:** To create a new online hub, emphasising exclusivity but at the cost of high development expenses and delays. This proposal recommends the creation of a new online hub with a strong emphasis on exclusivity. While this approach might result in a specialised platform, it comes with significant drawbacks, including high development costs and delays. The emphasis on exclusivity could limit accessibility, and the substantial investment and time required for development may hinder a timely response to the pressing issue.

**Option 2:** The preferred approach of this memo is to focus on the strategic presence of existing platforms. This cost-effective method maximises impact without the need for new infrastructure. Strategically market existing platforms as a cost-effective method to maximise impact without requiring new infrastructure. This involves employing specific marketing strategies to effectively reach the target audience and integrate these platforms into their daily lives. By utilising existing resources, the plan aims to enhance awareness and engagement, addressing the challenge of low visibility in countering migration-related disinformation.

## Recommendation

This policy memo recommends amplifying the strategic presence of existing platforms (option 2) by optimising their resources and supporting them in reaching a broader audience with effective strategies. Tailored campaigns targeting youth through social media and seniors via public spaces facilitate inclusivity. Recognising the proven effectiveness of strategic social media marketing, it would plan to launch a targeted campaign. By analysing under-utilised platforms, the aim is to reach the audience both geographically and demographically. By creating focused profiles, it will share content addressing relevant issues and showcasing the services to boost platform traffic.

And it can seek partnerships and collaborations to broaden the impact. Aligning with like-minded entities and influencers will amplify the message, build credibility, and expand the reach within the target audience, enhancing the overall success of the marketing efforts. The goal is clear: to empower individuals with accessible information and contribute effectively to countering disinformation about migration.

# Authors



## Mada Al-Zaobi

RADAR Youth Ambassador

Climate change

Mada Al-Zoabi is a bachelor's student in politics, economics, and social thought at Bard College Berlin. Mada works as a research assistant at the Leibniz Institut für Moderne Orient in Berlin. She is incredibly passionate about providing people with the right information, and she hopes to do so in the future by becoming an international correspondent.



## Lilith Holweg

RADAR Youth Ambassador

LGBTQ+

Lilith Holweg is in her first year of the Una Europa joint Bachelor of European Studies at Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Originally from Hamburg, Germany, Lilith lived in Estonia and Rwanda before moving to Poland. Over the past years, she has been volunteering in different youth projects with a focus on extracurricular activities, education, and youth exchange programs. During her one-year stay in the Rwandan organisation Root Foundation, she was able to get an insight into NGO work supporting, building, and implementing different projects with the team.



## Jashim Konnengal

RADAR Youth Ambassador

Migration and Asylum

Jashim Konnengal is currently interning at Beyond the Horizon as a Project Assistant, working on the EU-funded 'Imune2Infodemics' project, which focuses on combating misinformation and disinformation about migration, elections, and health in the EU. Jashim moved to Brussels on exchange while pursuing a master's degree in International Economic Relations at Riga Technical University in Latvia.



## Sophie Lorenz

RADAR Youth Ambassador  
Democratic Processes

Sophie Lorenz, from Germany, has worked in several NGOs, the latest being an NGO battling ethnic segregation in Bosnia, where she spent a year working with the local community. Afterwards, Sophie went to Vienna to study political science to learn how to be a changemaker in the areas most important to her. It is her biggest dream to leave an imprint and help people change their lives for the better.



## Katariina Mäkilä

RADAR Youth Ambassador  
Foreign Interference

Katariina Mäkilä is a M.Soc.Sc. student in politics and communication at the University of Helsinki. In 2022, Katariina earned an MA degree in Russian translation and specialised in her studies in Russian strategic narratives, news translation, and the Russian concept of information-psychological warfare. During her studies, she has completed internships at the Aleksanteri Institute (Finnish Centre for Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European Studies) and the Finnish Defence Forces. Currently, she is working as a Communications Coordinator in the Finnish national office of the global Christian charity NGO Open Doors.



## Car-Moritz Genée

RADAR Youth Ambassador  
Democratic Processes

Carl Mortiz Genée is a Vienna-based political science bachelor's student. Born in Dresden and raised in Munich, Carl has a deep interest in politics and joined the European party Volt Europa two years ago. Separate from his interest in politics, Carl takes a great interest in fashion, art, music, and subcultures. Before moving to Vienna, Carl spent a gap year travelling in Southeast Asia and North Africa.



## Joshua Robinson

RADAR Youth Ambassador  
LGBTQ+

Joshua Robinson is a freelance journalist and master's student based in Krakow, Poland. Originally from the United Kingdom, Joshua worked in St. Petersburg, Russia, for several years before winning a scholarship to undertake postgraduate studies at UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies and Jagiellonian University, focusing on Russia and Eastern Europe. He is particularly interested in Russian media, the effects of Russian disinformation in the EU, and LGBTQ+ rights. He is currently researching the impacts of the 2013 and 2022 anti- 'gay propaganda' laws on Russia's LGBTQ+ citizens for his master's thesis. In his spare time, he enjoys playing the cello, baking scones, and listening to Shostakovich.



## Anna Romanovská

RADAR Youth Ambassador  
Migration and Asylum

Anna Romanovská is a communications professional focused on identifying inauthentic behaviour across social media platforms and increasing resilience to disinformation in local communities, especially among youth. As a Young European Ambassador for the EU Neighbours East programme, she focuses on fighting disinformation about the EU and the Eastern Partnership, with a particular focus on bolstering media literacy and situational awareness of prominent disinformation narratives in this regard. She covers Moldova for The European Correspondent and is a contributor to the magazine Young Europe, where she delves into foreign information manipulation and interference across the Central-Eastern European region.



## Astrid Söderström

RADAR Youth Ambassador  
Foreign Interference

Astrid Söderström is a Helsinki-based freelance journalist and media researcher. She has a deep interest in media independence, having co-authored two comparative studies that map out the autonomy of state media globally. Astrid is currently studying global politics and communications at the University of Helsinki, specialising in the interplay of media and democracy. Additionally, she is an expert at the Media and Journalism Research Center, an independent media research and policy think tank. In her university work, she focuses on communication ethics, challenges to journalism, disinformation, and propaganda.



## Polina Vyzhak

RADAR Youth Ambassador  
Climate change

Polina Vyzhak is a Ukrainian feminist and youth activist at the Global Fund for Women. Her work is dedicated to the development of fair modern philanthropy through participatory grant-making. Her goal is to shift power in philanthropy from an up-down to a horizontal approach, including diverse voices in decision-making and shifting power to young, feminist, queer people, and others who were ever underpowered before. In Ukraine, Polina worked on HIV awareness, promoting sexual education, conducting training sessions for students in different establishments, and contributing to several projects that bring awareness to gender-based violence and discrimination against adolescents in health institutions, especially in sexual and reproductive health. At Tara's Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Polina studied transboundary environmental cooperation for her BA. Due to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, she had to move to Berlin, Germany, where she is now based. At the Free University of Berlin, she pursued her bachelor's in an exchange programme, studying political science at the Otto-Suhr Institute.

# Editors



## Sonia Chabane

Project Manager

Trans European Policy Studies Association

Sonia Chabane is a Project Manager at TEPSA, coordinating the RADAR project and Nets4Dem on democratic innovations. Additionally, she co-manages the supply of external academic expertise to the European Parliament's Committees and Subcommittees, especially on Foreign Affairs (AFET), matters of human rights (DROI), development (DEVE) and the Southern and Eastern 'Neighbourhoods', including the Greater Middle East (AFET).

Before TEPSA, Sonia strengthened her background through international experience in research institutes (CNRS, Istanbul Policy Center), academia (Yeditepe, Saint-Joseph of Beirut, University College London), think tanks (European Horizons and the Turkish Heritage Organization) and non-governmental organisations. Learning from these spaces, Sonia grew interested in actionable research and strengthening ties between academia and policy-making.

Over the last six years, she developed expertise on Turkey, the Mashreq, the Maghreb and the Gulf on authoritarianism, humanitarian assistance and development cooperation, surveillance and new technologies and forced migration. Sonia holds three Summa Cum Laude master's degrees with a research specialisation: one from the Global Campus of Human Rights with a regional focus on human rights within the Arab world (2021) and a Dual MA in the Governance of International Relations from Sciences Po Toulouse and University-Toulouse-1 Capitole (2022). In November 2023, she became a Global Fellow at Brown University's Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies.



## Samuel Dempsey

fmr. Project Assistant

Trans European Policy Studies Association

Samuel Dempsey was a Project Assistant at TEPSA between October 2023-January 2024. He supported the many projects of the TEPSA team, with a primary focus on coordinating expertise for the European Parliament and assisting the RADAR project. He is the Director of Policy at European Horizons and a US Presidential Management Fellow Finalist, the US government's premier citizen scholar leadership programme. Previously, Samuel has been an International Affairs Fellow for US Congressman Seth Moulton (MA-06), supporting a broad portfolio encompassing security, defence and foreign policy.

He was previously a Strategic Foresight Intern in the US Department of State and a Foreign Service Fellow in the US International Trade Administration. Alongside his governmental experience, Samuel has worked in research and journalism, predominantly focused on human rights and democracy promotion, Central and Eastern Europe, the Eastern Neighbourhood, and European integration. Samuel holds an MA in Geopolitics and Strategic Studies from the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain, and a BA in Journalism and Communications from the Anglo-American University Prague, Czech Republic.

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*All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the contributors, and do not represent the position of their Institutes nor of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).*

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