



## **POLICY POSITION**

# Fighting the Invisible Enemy: Countering Disinformation & Misinformation

## KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The main online platforms need to be regulated to stem the flow of fake news, with the strengthening of the Code of Conduct against disinformation as well as the need for greater transparency around algorithms and the removing of harmful content.
- The media has a key role to play in the fight against disinformation, the EU must protect media pluralism and independence by providing funding and support to independent media outlets, promoting investigative journalism, and holding media accountable for spreading disinformation.
- The EU should also encourage self-regulation measures, support fact-checking initiatives, and address media ownership concentration for transparency and accountability.
- The EU and its Member States need to maintain unity and provide support to Ukraine in its ongoing conflict with Russia, while addressing the challenges of opinion manipulation online. This includes monitoring and countering pro-Russia disinformation, supporting independent journalism, protecting journalists, and developing positive narratives that promote democratic values and counter pro-Russia propaganda.
- Civil society organisations are vital in the fight against disinformation. The EU should support them through funding, training, and technical assistance, while ensuring a favourable legal framework to protect freedom of expression.
- To protect democratic electoral processes, robust measures are necessary to counter disinformation, which can undermine trust, intensify divisions, and impede political participation. Collaboration between Member States, including information sharing and early warning systems, is crucial.
- Disinformation disproportionately affects vulnerable and marginalised groups, the EU should support research, community-led initiatives, media literacy programs, and representation of marginalised groups to counter disinformation and promote their participation in public life.
- Young people are highly vulnerable to disinformation on social media, and the EU should promote media literacy and critical thinking through educational programs in schools and universities. This includes capacity-building for educators, resources for external experts, and supporting youth-led initiatives that empower young people to combat disinformation and foster dialogue with journalists and experts.
- Amidst the energy crisis and questioning of the European Green Deal, the EU must combat disinformation to effectively address climate change by engaging with scientists, providing accurate information, and promoting targeted investments in a fair green transition.
- Gendered disinformation is a growing phenomenon which the EU should monitor and research. Also, resources need to be allocated to understand its misogynistic origins, engage civil society and women's organizations, and involve online platforms in diversity training and collaboration with local experts to combat gendered disinformation effectively.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A steep rise in the use of disinformation and fake news by malicious actors and even governments has been witnessed in recent years. Used as a tool to disrupt the trust that citizens have in truth and fact-based information, disinformation has also been a weapon wielded by the Kremlin in its unjust war against Ukraine.

The proliferation of disinformation undermines the very foundations of democracy, eroding the confidence in governments and institutions essential for the functioning of a healthy society. The European Union (EU) must urgently tackle this pressing issue through comprehensive measures to combat its dissemination. Ultimately, a comprehensive approach involving cooperation between stakeholders and proactive measures is essential to address the broader challenge of disinformation in society.

## **REGULATING ONLINE PLATFORMS**

As disinformation has become rampant on popular online platforms, it is urgent to regulate how they operate to stem the

flow of fake news reaching millions of citizens, especially the younger population. Building on the EU's agreement on the Digital Services Act (DSA), we support the European Commission's proposal to strengthen the Code of Conduct to combat disinformation. We call for a stronger Code and the introduction of new binding laws, considering that voluntary self-regulation by platforms has shown its limits. If platforms do not comply with the Code's provisions, malicious non-compliance must be penalised with strongly dissuasive fines proportionate to platform's profits.

Ultimately, should repeated infractions be encountered, the platform's operation must be suspended or closed. Platforms that have agreed to the Code of Conduct should implement mechanisms that recognise AI content and clearly label it to users within the context of deepfakes and generative images or texts such as ChatGPT. Platforms should disclose more information about the sources of the content they host, including any political or commercial ties that may

influence the dissemination of disinformation.

Greater transparency regarding algorithms and harmful content removal is needed. Additionally, as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues, platforms with owners residing in Russia or linked to their involvement in the Ukraine war must not be allowed to operate in the EU's territory. Platforms should collaborate with and provide funding to fact-checking organisations as well as organised civil society to monitor disinformation. In order to equip the young generations with critical thinking, their curricula should include information on how social media platforms operate and how disinformation can be more easily spread online.

## **PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY IN MEDIA**

Actors in the media have a crucial role to play to handle and debunk fake news and misinformation. The European Media Freedom Act has introduced a novel set of rules to protect media pluralism and independence in the EU. The EU should provide funding and

The EU should provide funding and support for independent media outlets to ensure they have the resources necessary to produce high-quality and fact-based journalism, including through the easing of market entry barriers. This should include investigative journalism, which can help to expose and counter disinformation. Financial assistance for media outlets should be consistent, result-oriented and coherent. Support to quality media outlets at regional and local levels must be given as they require both financial and professional assistance to operate effectively; they are key, as they speak about the daily life of their communities.

Media outlets must be held accountable for their reporting by imposing stricter sanctions against media spreading disinformation and against Member States which fail in due diligence against misinformation (for instance, by allowing official media to spread misinformation, tolerating media spreading misinformation despite complaints, etc.). The EU should increase its financial support for organisations actively involved in fact-checking and continue its support in the development of fact-checking initiatives

and tools which can help identify and counter disinformation. Alongside these regulations, the EU should encourage the media industry to adopt self-regulatory measures, such as codes of conduct and ethical guidelines to ensure the quality, accuracy and impartiality of news reporting. The EU can also support media self-regulation bodies and provide incentives for media outlets that comply with their standards.

European Digital Media Organisation (EDMO) hubs are also valuable initiatives that ensure a strong link between the EU and Member States in fighting disinformation. Encouraging greater engagement between them and civil society organisations (CSOs) is crucial. The EU should address the issue of media ownership concentration, not least by ensuring transparency of ownerships, including that of social media platforms. The ownership of media holdings must be made public to identify any malign actors that conceal their identities in offshore locations or through hedge funds. Ensuring this transparency will enhance accountability and contribute to demanding greater responsibility for the dissemination of information.

## **COUNTERING THE DISINFORMATION WAR**

Russia's brutal war of aggression continues to rage on European soil. The EU institutions as well as its Member States must keep a united front and provide support to Ukraine and its citizens. Especially in the context of the strategic use of opinion manipulation online by Russia and its allies, the EU needs to focus even more intensively on the challenges posed by the shift of political debates into the digital space. The EU must strike a good balance between promoting diversity of opinion and combating disinformation in the digital debate, countering digital echo chambers, and clearly drawing the line between freedom of expression and hate speech.

Pro-Russia disinformation must be monitored and countered while providing citizens in the EU, Ukraine, and even Russia when possible, with precise data on the conflict. The European External Action Service (EEAS)'s East Stratcom Task Force has been successfully debunking disinformation, especially pro-Kremlin information, but more needs to be done. The financial lifeline of misinformation

spreaders in the EU must be cut, as many individuals closely linked to Russian officials directly involved in the war are still not sanctioned, with some even residing in the EU. In Ukraine and in EU Member States that [or whose citizens] are especially susceptible to Russian propaganda, independent journalism should be supported through funding and technical assistance to ensure they provide high-quality journalism and accurate information. The support and protection of journalists reporting on the conflict are also paramount. In the long term, to promote peace on the continent and beyond, the EU must develop alternative positive narratives that promote democratic values and respect for human rights to help counter pro-Russia propaganda. The EU should prioritise launching timely and effective information campaigns that promote a positive pro-European narrative and build resilience against disinformation. This requires identifying strategic communication priorities and planning mid- and long-term projects and financing opportunities for CSOs.

## **EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY**

CSOs play a crucial role in the fight against disinformation by mobilising

citizens, monitoring disinformation campaigns, and holding authorities accountable. The EU can best support CSOs by providing funding, training, and technical assistance to improve their capabilities to monitor and combat disinformation. This can include, for instance, training on digital tools and techniques for identifying and tracking disinformation. The EU must also ensure the creation of a favourable legal and policy framework to protect freedom of expression while combatting disinformation. While disinformation and foreign interference in the EU's democracy are a security threat that should be rigorously addressed, it should be done without jeopardising the vital work that European organised civil society carries out nor restricting access to the financial resources necessary to do such work, in the EU and beyond. Pro-European, pro-democratic civil society, which already operates under intense financial scrutiny and adheres to all transparency rules, must not become collateral damage. This matter must be taken into consideration in the European Commission's Defence of Democracy Package.

Additionally, the EU can help CSOs in building networks and partnerships

with other organisations to share best-practices and resources on how to counter disinformation. The EU can also encourage collaboration between CSOs and media organisations to promote the circulation of accurate, factual information. The EU must develop frameworks that ensure the safety and security of civil society actors, including journalists, activists and human rights defenders, who are often targeted for their work. CSOs that offer structured volunteering opportunities have a role to play as well, considering that volunteers tend to enjoy an elevated degree of trust in the population and could therefore be an effective and sustainable component in communicating against disinformation. The EU should recognise the value of structured and qualified volunteering more and increase support to the CSOs that offer and promote such volunteering opportunities.

## **ELECTIONS MUST HAVE ROBUST PROTECTIONS**

Democratic electoral processes rely on faith in electoral institutions and informed participation. Disinformation can lead to increased voter confusion,

intensify social divisions, and hinder the political involvement of women and marginalised groups. This ultimately erodes trust in democratic systems and institutions. Especially ahead of the 2024 European Parliament (EP) election, collaboration between Member States through information sharing will be key to monitoring and countering these harmful disinformation campaigns. Pre-emptive measures can include setting up early warning systems to detect potential disinformation campaigns and sharing best practices for resisting such tactics.

The EP should also consider turning its subcommittee on disinformation (ING2) into a fully-fledged one. The EP recently decided to extend the remit of the committee and make it work on the strengthening of integrity, transparency and accountability in the European Parliament. This should not dilute the focus the EP must have on disinformation. The EU should also work to strengthen cybersecurity measures to prevent hacking and other attacks on election infrastructure, including providing training and resources to election officials.

## **PROTECTING VULNERABLE AND MARGINALISED GROUPS**

It has been shown that disinformation often targets the most vulnerable and historically marginalised groups of a society.

This particularly holds true for refugees and asylum seekers, as well as ethnic and religious minorities. Disinformation can incite violence, discrimination, or hostility against these groups. To prevent this phenomenon, the EU should support research into the ways in which disinformation campaigns target specific communities and utilise factual information to develop ad hoc counterstrategies. The EU could then promote participation of these communities in public life by creating safe spaces for dialogue and providing support for community-led initiatives that promote their voices and participation.

Working with CSOs will also allow the EU to develop and implement community-led solutions to disinformation, such as local fact-checking initiatives and citizen journalism programmes that empower marginalised groups to share their own stories and perspectives. The EU must

invest in media literacy and education programmes that specifically target these communities, equipping them with the skills to critically evaluate information and identify disinformation. This must be done in collaboration with community leaders, educators, and media organisations to develop tailored programs that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

The EU should also promote the representation of marginalised groups in media and public life to counteract disinformation campaigns by supporting diversity in media ownership, encouraging media outlets to promote diverse voices and promoting the participation of marginalised groups in public debates and decision-making processes.

## **ONLINE DISINFORMATION IS A THREAT FOR THE YOUTH**

Young people are particularly exposed to disinformation, as they are the heaviest consumers of social media where fake news spreads quickly. To better inform the young generations of the specificities of disinformation, the EU should encourage Member States to develop education programmes in

schools and universities that promote media literacy and critical thinking. This could involve creating curricula that teach students how to evaluate information sources, recognise propaganda and disinformation, and fact-check information.

This must go hand in hand with capacity-building for education providers as well as resources to attract external experts.

The EU should also empower youth-led initiatives that promote media literacy and fact-checking to give young people a voice in the fight against disinformation. The dialogue between young people, journalists, and experts on disinformation should be encouraged to create a space for learning and the exchange of ideas.

## **THE ROLLBACK OF GREEN MEASURES MUST BE PREVENTED**

Considering that the measures enshrined in the European Green Deal and the overall objective to reach decarbonisation by 2050 are being questioned by the energy crisis, the EU must urgently seek to reduce dis- and misinformation surrounding climate change. The EU can engage with

scientists and experts in the field of climate change to provide accurate and evidence-based information and build trust in the public.

Additionally, the EU should make targeted investments in promoting the green transition while making it fair so that nobody is left behind (for example, by promoting energy communities, upskilling for vulnerable and marginalised workers, etc). Lessons must be learned from previous instances of disinformation in recent years, such as the disinformation witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic. EU and Member States reacted quickly and made sure that the fight against disinformation was integrated in their communications, which should be reproduced in the case of climate disinformation.

## **GENDERED DISINFORMATION IS A GROWING CONCERN**

Disinformation also targets women in a differentiated way: false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives are used, often with some degree of coordination, to deter women from participating in the public sphere. Both foreign state and non-state actors employ strategic tactics of gendered

disinformation to suppress the voices of women, discourage political conversations online, and manipulate public opinions regarding gender and women's roles in democratic societies.

Additionally, disinformation often targets women with intersecting identities who are already more vulnerable and more likely to face discrimination. The EU must monitor this threat and conduct research that can support reform. Adequate resources should be allocated to comprehending the misogynistic origins of disinformation. CSOs, women's organisations, as well as local experts should be engaged to monitor gendered disinformation and identify suitable solutions and develop resilience. Best practices of fighting against this phenomenon should be mapped and integrated into policies and campaigns. Online platforms once again have the responsibility to implement greater diversity and cultural training of their content moderators and receive input from local experts.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

*Only by working together can we provide common solutions to the challenges Europe faces and ensure that Europeans' ambitions mirror the future work of the European Union. By bringing our member organisations together in our Political Committees, we continuously develop new policy positions and put existing ones to good use. Please visit our website [www.europeanmovement.eu](http://www.europeanmovement.eu) to take a look at our main policy positions that guide our current work and get in touch if you would like to join us or support our work.*



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