

Johanna Koch* - 28 November 2024

On Disinformation: Why the EU Has Failed to Prevent the Rise of Euroscepticism in the 2024 European Parliament Elections and What Needs to Be Done Now

Introduction

In October 2024, Viktor Orbán, who currently holds the EU Council Presidency, declared in the European Parliament that the EU wanted war.¹ This statement can be classified as disinformation, as it contradicts the position of the European Union, which asserts that the EU is supporting Ukraine in its fight for territorial integrity. Thereby, the EU does not seek war but is responding to it, as the aggression originates from Russia. Orbán's false claim aligns with Putin's anti-EU and anti-democratic narratives, further advancing the Kremlin's agenda. It is no surprise that Orbán's Fidesz party is part of the "Patriots of Europe" group in the European Parliament, which includes various right-wing populist and Eurosceptic parties—often referred to as the TAN parties (traditional, authoritarian, nationalist).² After the 2024 European Parliament elections, this group emerged as the third-largest force in Parliament. An increase in Eurosceptic parties has been particularly evident since the post-Maastricht era. For instance, while there were only 66 MEPs in Eurosceptic groups in 1994, this number has risen to 173 in 2024, marking the highest count to date. Additionally, Eurosceptic parties are not only represented within the right-wing "Europe of Sovereign Nations" alliance, but can also be found among parties that are either unaffiliated or strongly positioned across the TAN-GAL spectrum.³

This surge in Euroscepticism can stem from a rejection of the core liberal ideology of the European Union project. It also highlights the persistence of the constraining dissensus in public opinion towards the EU and the traditional mainstream parties that were instrumental in building and shaping the EU as a peace project, as outlined in Hooghe and Marks' Postfunctionalist theory. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is exacerbated by disinformation and attempts

to influence operations, originating from the Kremlin⁴, which aim to destabilise Western democracies, divide the transatlantic alliance and NATO, and strengthen pro-Russian groups and sentiments abroad. This prompts the critical question: What measures has the EU implemented thus far to combat disinformation, and what further actions are required to bolster its resilience in the face of rising Euroscepticism?

This paper outlines the EU's measures against disinformation – focusing on EU soft and hard law as well as communication efforts –, highlighting the limitations of these efforts, and provides seven key recommendations to strengthen the fight against disinformation and address the growing Euroscepticism within the EU.

EU Member States and Voter Susceptibility: The Limits of EU Soft Law

The EU began its fight against disinformation in 2015⁵ and has since implemented significant measures in the realm of soft law – meaning non-binding legal instruments and guidelines adopted by European Union institutions – particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Notable examples include the "Action Plan on Disinformation" and the "Code of Practice on Disinformation". Additional initiatives, such as the "European Democracy Action Plan" and the "Communication on the Defense of Democracy", further address the issue in a comprehensive manner. However, despite a clear understanding of disinformation and the identification of relevant areas of actions, the effectiveness of these measures is limited by their advisory nature, as certain areas, like political education and national elections, fall under the exclusive competence of member states. Not all member states might be willing to adhere to these measures, particularly when the government is eurosceptic, as in

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the case of Hungary. Additionally, a significant challenge lies in the varying susceptibility of voters to disinformation across member states, influenced by historical, social, and regional factors. For instance, Eurosceptic parties such as Germany's AfD gain traction not only through disinformation, but by mobilising voters with authoritarian tendencies and frustrations with mainstream parties, shaped by factors like the East-West divide in Germany. Thus, it is primarily up to the member states to take a comprehensive approach to disinformation, addressing the root causes of voter susceptibility. Only by doing so can effective political initiatives, such as broad-based political education programmes, be successfully developed and implemented.

Recommendation 1: *EU member states should comprehensively address the fight against disinformation by understanding the underlying reasons for voters' susceptibility and developing effective political and educational initiatives.*

Ensuring the Effectiveness of the Digital Services Act

The EU's hard law approach to combating disinformation, specifically through the Digital Services Act (DSA), enacted in 2022, represents a significant shift from its previous reliance on soft law. The DSA regulates digital intermediary services, including internet access providers, social networks, online marketplaces, and search engines within the EU. It focuses on four key areas: Advertising, Design & Systems, Transparency & Access, and Code of Conduct, to address issues such as disinformation. Non-compliance by intermediary services can result in fines of up to 6% of global annual turnover, with initial lawsuits, particularly against the platform X, already underway.⁶ As a uniform regulation across all EU member states, the DSA employs a top-down approach, requiring infrastructure regulation at the national level, with associated costs in the millions. A critical concern remains the effective implementation of the DSA by member states. To ensure its success, minimising the transposition deficit—the gap between EU directives and national implementation—is crucial. Consistent and rigorous enforcement across all member states is essential in the fight against disinformation.

Recommendation 2: *To ensure the success of the Digital Services Act, the EU must significantly reduce the transposition deficit, ensuring that all EU member states implement the legislation with equal rigour and effectiveness in the fight against disinformation.*

From Economic to Political Accountability: The Role of CPR

This approach to regulating platforms in a more or less anarchic digital world is understandable, as the Digital Services Act specifically addresses the issue of hate speech, which constitutes criminal offenses. However, the EU is traditionally seen as a liberal project with minimal interference in economic matters, making this type of intervention unusual. A more effective approach might be for transnational corporations and the European economy to recognise their social responsibilities and actively engage in Corporate Political Responsibility⁷. These companies thrive in a free market economy supported by democratic institutions—institutions that are increasingly under threat from authoritarian actors spreading Eurosceptic disinformation. By acknowledging their role in maintaining democratic stability, corporations could contribute to safeguarding the very conditions that enable their success.

Recommendation 3: *Transnational companies and the European economy should acknowledge their political responsibilities and actively engage in Corporate Political Responsibility (CPR) by voluntarily and proactively combating eurosceptic disinformation. Policy makers should therefore take a proactive approach by providing incentivising businesses and supplying them with clear and supportive guidelines.*

Engaging Eurosceptic Voters through a Comprehensive Communication Strategy

The European Commission, as the primary communicator of the EU, increasingly engages with citizens via social media, with LinkedIn gaining popularity as a platform.⁸ However, the challenge of so called echo chambers persists, making it difficult for the Commission to reach individuals who are skeptical of the EU or believe the disinformation. Echo chambers are a phenomenon resulting from the algorithms of social

media platforms which repeatedly expose individuals only to information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, thereby reinforcing existing biases. Addressing the challenge of this phenomenon is crucial, especially in light of the recent regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising which, once again, restricts political communication. Additionally, certain platforms are limiting the visibility of political content through algorithmic restrictions, further exacerbating the risk of reinforcing echo chambers and hindering efforts to engage Euro-sceptic voters.

Recommendation 4: *A comprehensive communication strategy is needed to tackle the issue of echo chambers. The European Commission should strategically approach this problem, especially considering the new regulations that tighten political communication with non-voters.*

Furthermore, the European Commission has addressed the issue of disinformation in the public communication space, primarily through debunking measures. This became particularly evident during Brexit, where fake narratives were countered through the “Euromyth” blog, which operated for over 26 years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission created dedicated landing pages and even released videos from the Commission President to debunk disinformation. Today, the EU Commission continues to use debunking methods, particularly on social media platforms. Additionally, the EU-funded European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) publishes monthly reports on current disinformation narratives and brings together fact-checking organisations across the EU. However, to effectively neutralise the power of disinformation, preventive measures are essential. Disinformation must be addressed before it goes viral. This requires so-called “pre-bunking” measures, which should be integrated into the European Commission’s communication strategy. One of these measures could be the instrument of psychological inoculation, where individuals are “inoculated” against disinformation by being made aware of its tactics and psychological mechanisms.⁹

Recommendation 5: *“Prebunking” measures against disinformation should be integrated into the strategic campaign against disinformation.*

The Impact of Media on Polarisation and Disinformation

In its soft law, particularly in the “Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach”, the EU highlights the importance of strengthening pluralistic journalism and the media landscape as key measures in combating disinformation. However, it remains uncertain whether traditional journalism in the digital age, with its tendencies toward scandal-mongering and polarisation, contributes to societal tension, potentially making citizens more susceptible to disinformation. Therefore, addressing the challenge of disinformation must also involve the media sector, which carries political responsibility. This is in the media sector’s own interests, as a free press and freedom of expression are only possible in free, democratic countries.

Recommendation 6: *The media and journalism sector in the EU must recognise its political responsibility and implement measures to counteract increasing polarisation and the spread of disinformation. The EU should raise awareness in the sector through targeted initiatives.*

The Role of European Identity in Strengthening Democratic Values

As a tool to combat the spread of false or misleading information by authoritarian states, it is recommended that democracies leverage their comparative advantages over autocratic regimes by highlighting their democratic values and strengths.¹⁰ Besides addressing conspiracy narratives, disinformation, or populist agitation, experts suggest highlighting the advantages of the EU in a more emotional manner.¹¹ One possible approach could be the creation of a European identity that reflects these values.¹² This would also counteract the technocratic language of the European Commission, which is often subject to criticism.¹³

Recommendation 7: *Promoting a European identity that authentically and emotionally conveys the EU’s advantages should be pursued to repel disinformation campaigns and populist attacks.*

Conclusion

The 2024 European Parliament elections highlighted the EU's persistent challenge in effectively combating the rise of Euroscepticism, which is significantly fueled by disinformation and external influence operations. This is particularly urgent, given the ongoing war in Europe, where the liberal democratic order is under serious threat. The EU must therefore show resilience and bolster its defenses in the information warfare against disinformation and foreign interference. Viktor Orbán's false narrative, as mentioned in the introduction, exemplifies the challenges the EU

encounters in sustaining a unified, pro-democratic narrative amidst rising polarisation. Furthermore, with the re-election of populist US President Trump, known for his polarising tactics and EU-critical stance¹⁴, the EU must now present a united front to urgently counteract illiberal and Eurosceptic tendencies. The seven recommendations outlined in this policy paper aim to address not only the gaps in the EU's current strategy against disinformation, but also the growing rise of Euroscepticism within the Union, considering both phenomena as interconnected issues.

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