

FAKE

FACT



Enhancing the Efficiency of Combating Disinformation: A CEE Perspective

Policy Brief

Author

Patrik Szicherle, Research Fellow, GLOBSEC

GLOBSEC
Vajnorská 100/B
831 04 Bratislava
Slovakia

www.globsec.org

We are grateful to the National Endowment for Democracy for supporting this project.



The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy or GLOBSEC. Neither the NED nor GLOBSEC can be held responsible for the views expressed in this policy brief.

January 2024



GLOBSEC and its partners across Central and Eastern Europe have long contributed to global efforts to counter disinformation and foreign malign influence aimed at undermining democracies and Transatlantic unity. This policy brief is the result of projects conducted throughout 2023 as part of a partnership project funded by the National Endowment for Democracy.

During the implementation of the project, multiple expert exchanges and roundtables were organized in Slovakia,¹ Bulgaria,² Czechia,³ Hungary,⁴ Lithuania,⁵ and Poland⁶ in the second half of 2023. These initiatives aimed to improve the resilience of these countries against foreign malign influencing attempts and to discuss the most viable and tested

approaches. The conclusions drawn from these events have substantially contributed to this paper.

Additionally, several international roundtables were held to collect further input, including an event showcasing successful and potentially scalable approaches and projects. Contributors to these discussions included Peter Jančárik (Seznam/Konspirátori.sk), Yevhen Fedchenko (StopFake), Kristína Šefčíková (PSSI), Jaroslav Valuch (Transitions Online), Siim Kumpas (East Stratcom Task Force), Ruslana Margova (GATE), and Connor O’Kelley (CSD). Dr. Rumena Filipova (Institute for Global Analytics) provided additional comments on the policy brief.



1 By GLOBSEC
 2 By Global Analytics, <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/>
 3 By the Prague Security Studies Institute, <https://www.pssi.cz/>
 4 In cooperation with Political Capital, <https://politicalcapital.hu/>
 5 By the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (EESC), <https://www.eesc.lt/en/>
 6 By Demagog.pl, <https://demagog.org.pl/>

Malign influence remains a threat

GLOBSEC's 2023 spring poll⁷ revealed that the majority of Central and Eastern Europe⁸ stands firmly behind European Union and NATO membership, Ukraine, and democracy as a concept. However, strong regional divisions are evident, highlighted by the fact that while 85% of Polish respondents held Russia primarily responsible for the war in Ukraine, only 40% of Slovak respondents did so.⁹

Other reasons for concern include buy-in to disinformation narratives about the West or Ukraine, or at least a high level of confusion about them. For instance, 74% of CEE respondents believed that providing military equipment to Ukraine helps defend against Russia, but 46% thought that it provokes Russia and brings their respective countries closer to war. The results indicate that some respondents agreed with both sentiments. Another example is that while Romanians are the most likely to say their country has no power to influence EU decisions, they are also the strongest supporters of EU membership in the CEE region.

Views on democracy show similar ambiguity. In general, CEE societies support democracy, defined as a system based on equality, human rights, freedoms, and the rule of law. However, the region is also highly prone to anti-liberal rhetoric: if the same definition is used for 'liberal democracy', the backing for the exact same concept falls by 19 percentage points, from 80% to 61%. Moreover, while the majority supports an equality and human-rights-based system of government, they do not necessarily support these concepts in the case of minorities. The proportion of CEE respondents agreeing that LGBTI+ people's rights should be guaranteed stands at only 41% on average in the CEE region.

Vulnerability to anti-liberal and anti-LGBTI+ rhetoric indicates a lack of firm commitment to democratic values. A part of the problem in the region is that democracy was – in the communist era – mostly associated with Western prosperity alone, and expectations on this have not been met since the democratic transitions. As the political elite failed to explain the importance of institutions to the local population, unmet economic expectations could have contributed to an ambiguous stance on democracy. The GLOBSEC Trends 2018 poll showed that there was some level of nostalgia for the communist era, especially economically, at least in the V4.¹⁰ The vulnerability to anti-liberal narratives, the lack of commitment to democratic values, or the skewed views on what democracy entails could all be exploited by autocratic or pro-Kremlin political actors.

7 The poll results form the basis of the GLOBSEC Trends 2023 report and country-specific reports.

8 For the purpose of this paper, Central and Eastern Europe, CEE countries and the CEE region will all refer to a group of the following EU/NATO member states: Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

9 Unless indicated otherwise, polling results described in this chapter are from The GLOBSEC Trends 2023 report, available here: <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2023-united-we-still-stand>

10 The GLOBSEC Trends 2018 poll is available here:

<https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2018-central-europe-one-region-different-perspectives>

What is being done about disinformation?

While GLOBSEC's polling was restricted to the CEE region, the effects of the manipulative use of information and the rise of authoritarian parties are part of the realities in other countries within the Western alliance.¹¹ Numerous ongoing initiatives across the West¹² aim to mitigate the effects of disinformation narratives. Multiple stakeholders across the region agree that one approach with strong potential for effectiveness is the 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (CoP), a crucial component of the European Commission's strategy to combat the dissemination of disinformation within the EU.¹³

The CoP, a co-regulatory instrument originally endorsed by 34 signatories, including major platforms like Meta, Google, Twitter,¹⁴ TikTok, and Microsoft, encompasses a diverse range of players such as smaller platforms, the online advertising industry, ad-tech companies, fact-checkers, and civil society. The CoP comprises 44 commitments and 128 specific

measures focused on addressing disinformation, including pledges to demonetize or cut off financial incentives for spreading false information, enhance transparency in political advertising, and reduce manipulative behaviours. To become part of the DSA regulatory framework, the CoP will be converted into a Code of Conduct for Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), as one of the mitigating measures under Article 35 of the DSA. While becoming a Code of Conduct under the DSA gives more weight to the CoP, the Code itself remains voluntary. Platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), which are currently not taking part in the CoP, will have to show they are mitigating the effect of disinformation by other means.¹⁵

One open issue at the moment is the quality of the reports produced by VLOPs concerning their adherence to commitments under the CoP.¹⁶ The reports often lack context, historical data (comparison with the previous year), or information about the impact (in the case of media literacy campaigns). Reports are also not machine-readable, which complicates the work of researchers. These concerns are manageable and can be addressed via the Task Force put together by the CoP specifically for



11 One example for this is the victory of populist Geert Wilders' party (PVV) in the 2023 Dutch general election.

12 Under 'West', we include all countries that belong to the EU or NATO.

13 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>

14 Twitter left the CoP after the company's takeover by Elon Musk:

<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/06/05/twitter-has-chosen-confrontation-with-brussels-over-disinformation-code-of-conduct>

15 <https://digitalservicesact.cc/dsa/art27.html>

16 So far, there have been two rounds of reporting concerning adherence to commitments made under the CoP by signatories: one in January 2023 (a baseline report) and in July 2023. The reports are available here: <https://disinfoec.eu/reports-archive/?years=2023>

the purposes of harmonizing and agreeing upon reporting mechanisms. The key question is how the European Commission intends to evaluate the progress and measures implemented by the large digital platforms to limit disinformation, what amount of progress would be considered insufficient, and what level would be deemed acceptable.¹⁷

EU institutions have also been supporting the creation of Information Sharing Analysis Centres (ISAC). The Union's Cybersecurity Agency (ENISA) highlights that EU legislation itself nurtures the creation of these groups.¹⁸ The European Central Bank, ENISA, Europol, and major European financial institutions have jointly created the Cyber Information and Intelligence Sharing Initiative (CIISI-EU) to share information and best practices against cyber threats and raise awareness of the threat. Another ISAC concerning energy has already produced several position papers on policy proposals made by the European Commission¹⁹ and set up cooperation with others to enhance the exchange of cybersecurity information related to power grids.²⁰ This model could eventually be adopted to fight malign influence as well. Moreover, the European Union has other knowledge-exchange platforms that serve to collect information from across civil society,²¹ as well as a platform for supporting institutional capacity building and peer-to-peer exchanges between public administrations to achieve specific results.²²

The European Union has also financially supported the creation of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and its local hubs that now span the entirety of the EU.²³ EDMO and its hubs serve to share information, but they also play a key role in fostering native-language fact-checking

initiatives across the Union. Isabelle Wirth, AFP's European Media Project Manager, who is involved in multiple EDMO hubs, highlighted the success of the Hungarian hub, which was partly the result of building the hub's fact-checking activities with the involvement of an established media outlet, 444.hu.²⁴ The hubs also helped establish new fact-checking teams: the Bulgarian National Television managed to establish such capabilities thanks to the local EDMO Hub.²⁵

Finally, numerous media literacy initiatives are ongoing in the European Union. For instance, *Konspirátori.sk*²⁶ and *Seznam*²⁷ assist teachers in Slovakia and Czechia, respectively, by providing them with media literacy training tools, quizzes and handbooks on conspiracies and disinformation. The ready-made quizzes are appreciated by teachers, and regular updates are facilitated with their input. Another highlighted initiative focuses on educating the elderly about media literacy, led by Transitions Online.²⁸ Emphasizing trust-building over traditional training materials, they adapt language to help the elderly better understand complicated explanations and aim to avoid conflicts during sessions. Moreover, the organization also collaborated with Czech Radio to involve seniors themselves in fact-checking activities, turning them from listeners to active practitioners.²⁹ To enhance outreach, Transitions collaborates with the extensive Czech library network and has partnered with Google for further reach.³⁰ The cooperation with Google will be used, for instance, to reach local regions, develop new courses, and engage new trainers. While media literacy initiatives are often fragmented, fostering strong partnerships, as Transitions has done, could help overcome this challenge.

17 See, for instance, research conducted by the Bulgarian-Romanian EDMO Hub (BROD):

<https://brodhub.eu/en/research/evaluating-vlop-and-vlose-implementation-of-the-strengthened-eu-code-of-practice-on-disinformation-in-bulgaria/>

18 <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/topics/national-cyber-security-strategies/information-sharing>

19 <https://www.ee-isac.eu/impact/>

20 <https://www.ee-isac.eu/ee-isac-and-cynergy-sign-memorandum-of-understanding/>

21 Examples include, but are not limited to the Commission's Knowledge Exchange Platform (KEP)_

<https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/pages/knowledge-exchange-platform.aspx>

22 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kyrgyz-republic/strengthening-institutions-through-peer-peer-administrative-cooperation_en?s=301&page_lang=en

23 <https://o.seznam.cz/en/media-literacy/>

24 The fact-checking sub-site of 444.hu is Lakmusz, which is the main provider of Hungarian-language fact-checking concerning public affairs.

<https://www.lakmusz.hu/report-on-the-work-of-lakmusz-third-quarter-2023/>

25 The capabilities were established in the frames of the Bulgarian-Romanian hub (BROD): <https://bntnews.bg/proverka-na-fakti-102533tag.html>

26 <https://konspiratori.sk/>

27 <https://o.seznam.cz/en/media-literacy/>

28 <https://transitionsmedia.org/>

29 <https://www.demas.cz/whats-new-at-transitions-seniors-as-digital-sherlocks-and-a-free-solutions-journalism-workshop/>

30 <https://transitionsmedia.org/projects/google/>

Steps were taken in the right direction, but more can be done

Combating the dissemination of disinformation is a multidisciplinary effort that requires actors to cooperate both horizontally and vertically. To make such efforts more effective, international organisations, national public administrations, and independent institutions, as well as large and small civil society organisations and media, all need to work together in the long term. The measures and best practices to combat the above-mentioned phenomena cannot be restricted to the information space; they need to address broader societal issues as well, such as poverty or housing problems.

Based on the information shared and lessons learned, GLOBSEC and its partners can present the following recommendations:

General

- **Institutionalise a whole-of-society approach.** In Slovakia, a coordination platform that laid the foundation for structured, continuous dialogue between state institutions, academia, and civil society on issues related to disinformation, strategic communications, and democratic resilience ran informally for several years. The regular meetings of the network served, among other things, to introduce policy recommendations and to coordinate counter-disinformation efforts. The network-building and information-sharing kept increasing the know-how and capacity of stakeholders in strategic communication, leading to the institutionalisation of the mechanism through a Framework for Strategic Communication by the Slovak Government Office adopted by the cabinet in 2023.



- **Independent operational funding is key.**

As Siim Kumpas, a policy officer at the East Stratcom Task Force (EEAS), noted during the DisinfoHub event, the speed of reaction is crucial in countering the spread of disinformation. The project-based funding commonly accessible for entities engaged in countering this phenomenon does not facilitate prompt responses to evolving situations. Therefore, additional operational funding is required that can be used for non-specific research. This funding should come from independent sources or the supranational level (such as the EU or the UN) to ensure that the actors in question do not become limited by national, business, or social media interests. One example that highlights the need for additional general, independent funding is the work of signatories within the EU CoP, which requires considerable time dedication. The current scenario presents a challenge, particularly for smaller Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) lacking funding for dedicating time resources to such initiatives. Moreover, the available project-based funding often originates from VLOPs, creating a potential conflict of interest and underscoring the resource disparity between CSOs and VLOPs.

One grant offered for operational costs is entitled 'Europe for Citizens,' which supports initiatives that strengthen remembrance of recent European history and enhance civic participation at the EU level. This allows think tanks and CSOs to cover their operational funding, among others. However, more initiatives like this are needed, especially ones focusing on disinformation.³¹

- **Focus on the undecided.** There is a layer of society who are already firmly committed to their belief in conspiracy theories, and who are

unlikely to change their minds.³² Focus should be directed at those who are undecided about narratives or geopolitical orientation, as they are more likely to be convinced by either side. There is a broad layer of undecided citizens in the CEE region: the GLOBSEC Trends 2023 poll revealed that in 6 out of 8 countries, more than 15% of respondents could not select their respective nations' most important strategic partners, and in 4 out of 8, at least 10% did not know if economic sanctions against Russia should stay in place.

While there are not many best practices to highlight on this issue, the London School of Economics organized focus group discussions with a group of undecided voters in 2019, which could serve as a pointer to start: the voters engaged in the discussions highlighted that what they would appreciate is more information on key issues, such as the Withdrawal Agreement or the UK's future relationship with the EU. These issues, they felt, would have a strong influence on their future but were rarely discussed during recent election campaigns.³³ A study on negative campaigning highlights that fear ads are designed to "trigger anxieties" among undecided or weakly committed voters.³⁴ The lack of knowledge about key topics, such as the EU or NATO, could thus create fertile ground for anti-West political actors to spread their agenda. This indicates that more resources must be poured into running public information campaigns about the basics of (1) the functioning of democracy, (2) key policy questions, even controversial ones such as migration, and (3) the functioning of the western institutional system. These campaigns need to be balanced, understandable, focus on tangible benefits to citizens where applicable, and they have to be run for longer periods of time.

31 https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/justice-and-consumers/justice-and-consumers-funding-tenders/funding-programmes/previous-programmes-2014-2020/europe-citizens-efc_en

32 See, for instance a statement by MIT professor of cognitive neuroscience Tali Sharot here: <https://americanpressinstitute.org/should-we-give-up-on-facts/>

33 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/02/19/britain-in-one-room-reflection-on-a-focus-group-of-undecided-voters-during-ge2019/>

34 https://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu/lau/articles/lau-rovner_negativecampaigning.pdf

- **Convey messages as personal experiences.**

Messages about some topics (such as Ukraine or democracy) might be overly complicated, intangible, or securitised. It is beneficial to convey messages via personal examples and life stories instead, which have a better chance of connecting with the general population. The messages need to be presented to the target audience in a way that shows them the impact the EU, the war, or any other topic in question has on their lives. Kristína Šefčíková notes an initiative by Aktuálně.cz as an example, which shares the personal stories of families that fell apart as a result of some family members falling for disinformation and conspiracy theories.³⁵

In Hungary, a photo posted on 23 October 2022 by ethnic Hungarian soldiers in the Ukrainian Army prompted a group of Hungarians to start collecting money to help ethnic Hungarian units in Ukraine.³⁶ Balázs Trautmann, one of the organizers behind the initiative, highlighted that this photo “showed a more human side of the war than what I had been used to. It was a very moving, very symbolic, and communication-wise extraordinary gesture.”³⁷ The KARD blog³⁸ and the Diétás Magyar Múzsza blog³⁹ joined the promotion of the initiative to collect money later, improving its outreach. Then, national independent media started sharing the initiative as well, and, as of 6 December 2023, around HUF 160 million (EUR 420,000) worth of equipment had been donated by Hungarians to some units of the Ukrainian Army.⁴⁰

- **Forge a positive national identity.** Often, questions of identity and history are exploited by malign actors to influence public opinion. The Institute for Global Analytics explained

in its report entitled ‘History Undone’ that the distortion and falsification of history are crucial factors in the Kremlin’s successful media campaigns aiming to depict Bulgarian-Russian ties as mutually beneficial both culturally and historically.⁴¹

Thus, it is important to develop positive messages regarding a particular nation’s or organization’s identity and history. Kristína Šefčíková from PSSI highlighted that in Czechia, key historical figures fighting for democratic values and principles, such as the first President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk or the event of the Soviet invasion of 1968, are being used actively to forge a cohesive national identity and narrative. Czechs have succeeded in utilizing the existing historical symbols to emphasize the importance of democracy and human rights for the country.

- **Sometimes, humour works.** Siim Kumpas from the EEAS highlighted that – for some audiences – opting for a humorous or even cheeky style and tone of communication can work. EUvsDisinfo’s experience shows that this type of content has high potential to go viral organically. For instance, the EUvsDisinfo team responded rapidly to several tweets by the Russian Foreign Ministry, highlighting all factual errors there in a clear and brazen manner. This allowed the team to reach – at times – audiences several times larger than EUvsDisinfo’s own follower count on X (formerly Twitter).⁴²

The Facebook page of Slovak Police “Hoaxy a podvody – Polícia SR,” the most popular Facebook page run by a state institution, specifically dedicated to countering

35 <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/dezinformace/r~c8dd8d90f88f1eda873ac1f6b220ee8/>

36 On the picture, the soldiers were posing with a Ukrainian and a Hungarian flag with a hole in the middle, which is symbolic of Hungary’s struggle against Soviet occupation in 1956. <https://444.hu/2023/01/08/lyukas-zaszlos-video-szupertolto-meleg-zokni-es-eros-pista-igy-kezdtek-tamogatni-civil-internetezok-az-ukran-hadsereg-magyar-szarmazasu-karpataljai-sarkanyait>

37 <https://napunk.dennikn.sk/hu/3228654/az-ukrajnaert-harcolo-katonaknak-gyujt-adomanyokat-egy-magyarorszagi-civil-csoport-bevonnak-a-hataron-tuli-magyarokat-is/>

38 https://www.facebook.com/kardblog?locale=hu_HU

39 https://www.facebook.com/dmagyarmuzsa/?locale=hu_HU

40 <https://www.facebook.com/karpataljai.sarkanyellato/posts/pfbid02jkE5siiBw38hWdFBe3MNia2hqcxrxySWDEXNuS3pdFyNmYcYcS3A7u7X26UzjU89I>

41 <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/2023/08/14/new-report-history-undone-russias-historical-disinformation-bulgarias-memory-politics-and-lessons-for-dealing-with-the-past-from-central-and-eastern-europe/>

42 <https://twitter.com/EUvsDisinfo/status/1578388632188108802>

disinformation in Europe, regularly uses humour and satire to communicate with its followers, often using bold statements against the Kremlin or other disinformation spreaders.⁴³ Another Slovak page, ZOMRI, successfully uses satire to comment on current political developments.⁴⁴

- **Master Artificial Intelligence (AI) to combat disinformation.** Studies have highlighted that AI is being used to generate misleading texts, audio, or imagery, and it has been deployed by some governments to “refine their online censorship.”⁴⁵ These adverse effects can also be combated with the aid of AI. Seznam.cz, for example, is working on multiple ways to utilise AI against disinformation. For instance, they are working on deploying AI to suggest relevant fact-checks for discussion board users writing questionable and conspiratorial comments. Moreover, Seznam is using AI to determine what part of a text was written by AI, claiming that this system is highly accurate for longer texts.⁴⁶

The CEDMO⁴⁷ hub of EDMO covering Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland includes the Artificial Intelligence Centre of the Czech Technical University (CTU) and the Slovak Kempelen Institute of Intelligence Technologies (KInIT), both of which have experience with AI. The Rector of the CTU, Vojtěch Petráček, highlighted that they had set out to build a pan-European AI Centre of Excellence, and the CEDMO hub is the first step on that journey.⁴⁸ CEDMO could be very effective in establishing such a centre by allowing AI experts, disinformation specialists, and fact-checkers to work together.

Institutions (EU, NATO, national governments, independent state institutions)

- **Be clear on the rules and enforce them.** The EU should establish clear procedural rules for enforcing the DSA. It is crucial to define precisely what actions would be considered non-compliant and subject to fines, and under which conditions. For instance, a letter from Commissioner Breton demanding large digital platforms to act against Hamas disinformation met with criticism by a digital rights advocacy group for not having a basis in the DSA.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, refining the reporting rules set by the CoP will address concerns about the insufficient provision of meaningful data and context by the digital platforms.
- **Focus on algorithms.** Global efforts to regulate social media (e.g., by the UN and the EU) should concentrate on regulating algorithms to ensure that users encounter a broad range of reliable information online, as increasing research proves that algorithm-led recommendation systems help fuel disinformation and harmful content.⁵⁰ The DSA's provisions on algorithms must be enforced, and information regarding the issue concerning algorithms should be shared with the public regularly. Algorithms should ensure that social media users see accurate content from various sources, while misleading ones should be hidden by them. Moreover, children should be protected from algorithms, especially on platforms dedicated to them (e.g., YouTube Kids).
- **Improve media literacy by creating synergies between existing projects.** As noted above, multiple civil society actors dedicate efforts to teach media literacy to CEE societies.

43 <https://www.facebook.com/hoaxPZ/>

44 <https://www.facebook.com/zomriofficial>

45 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence>

46 <https://www.ecommercebridge.cz/seznam-cz-pritvrzuje-v-boji-proti-dezinformacim-a-clickbaitum-ve-spolupraci-s-ai/>

47 <https://cedmohub.eu/>

48 <https://www.aic.fel.cvut.cz/news/fighting-disinformation-with-ai-algorithms>

49 <https://therecord.media/european-commission-digital-services-act-enforcement-breton>

<https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/precise-interpretation-of-dsa-matters-in-gaza-and-israel/>

50 For more information on how algorithms influence the spread of disinformation, see, for instance, research by Irene Pasquetto, an Assistant Professor of Information at the University of Michigan's School of Information. <https://publicengagement.umich.edu/social-media-algorithms-and-the-infrastructure-of-disinformation/>

Konšpirátori.sk⁵¹ and Seznam⁵² are working on “teaching the teachers” via quizzes and e-learning materials that can be used by them to amplify the effects, and Transitions Online⁵³ is educating older citizens, focusing on building trust among them. These initiatives require a platform to connect and exchange information and to start discussions with state institutions, which can then implement already developed media literacy programmes into school curricula and lifelong education materials for adults and the elderly.

- **Meet citizens.** Politicians, decision-makers, opinion-shapers, and any other individual or organisation that partakes in public affairs stand to gain a lot from meeting citizens in person

frequently, as it can be a strong contributor to building trust within society from the bottom up. While social media does provide an opportunity to broaden outreach, it does not replace face-to-face exchanges, even if the latter exposes participants to a higher potential for confrontation.

A good example of this is the Slovak Denník N paper’s efforts to organise debates on how to save democracy across Slovakia during the election campaign, which included discussions on the contemporary political situation. The debates took place in Košice, Trenčín, and Trnava, among others, so they were not restricted to the Slovak capital, which is also important.⁵⁴



51 <https://konspiratori.sk/>

52 <https://o.seznam.cz/en/media-literacy/>

53 <https://transitionsmedia.org/>

54 <https://dennikn.sk/3372510/s-diskusiou-ako-zachranit-demokraciu-budeme-cestovat-po-slovensku/>

Social media

- **Politicians must get the same treatment.**

Social media platforms must hold politicians and influential opinion-shapers to the same standards they hold other users to. They need to pay special attention to stopping the dissemination of disinformation narratives via paid advertisements during election campaigns. For instance, between April 2019 and November 2023, the Hungarian government's FB page spent over HUF 640 million (EUR 1.7 million) on advertisements.⁵⁵ One of these is advertising the cabinet's most recent national consultation,⁵⁶ and the video about it that is being disseminated claims – among others – that the European Commission says Hungary should “create migrant ghettos,” which was identified as a false claim by the Commission itself.⁵⁷

In the lead-up to the 2023 Slovak parliamentary election, deepfakes made their debut in political manipulation with a video falsely depicting a conversation between journalist Monika Tódová and Progressive Slovakia party chairman Michal Šimečka circulating on social media. The fabricated dialogue focused on electoral fraud, but both individuals promptly denied its authenticity, and fact-checkers confirmed it as a deepfake. This fake video was being spread on the platform during the election campaign by accounts belonging to politicians and has not been taken down to date.⁵⁸

- **Stop inauthentic behaviour.** Inauthentic accounts are often used to generate engagement for or help the dissemination of posts on social media. Social media platforms need to do everything in their power to stop this fake activity, not only when it is being carried out in English. Inauthentic behaviour on social media

could even be made illegal, as it would then fall under the DSA, and social media platforms would be required to take it down.

For instance, seemingly inauthentic profiles are highly active on the X platform (formerly Twitter) in creating a perception of a majority behind narratives that match those often advocated by populist political parties.⁵⁹

Media

- **Increasing trust in media is crucial.** A key takeaway from the GLOBSEC Trends 2023 poll is that those who trust standard, mainstream media are much more likely to say that Russia is mainly responsible for the war in Ukraine – highlighting the importance of trust in combating disinformation. Restoring trust in the media also requires the cooperation of numerous stakeholders. Governments must ensure that the editorials of public media can be completely independent, including financially. For instance, in Czechia, the TV License required for TV owners is used to finance the public media of the country,⁶⁰ and the same applies to public radio, granting it a level of financial independence from the government. The independence of media oversight bodies is also crucial, including independent Digital Services Coordinators, who will be responsible for the enforcement of the Digital Services Act in each individual EU member state.⁶¹

Media companies need to experiment with new financing models to reduce the need for sensationalist, clickbait articles. Journalists could focus more on explaining their methods to the public and how they try to remain unbiased. Lakmusz, for example, has a detailed article on their fact-checking methodology.⁶²

55 For more on political advertisements in Hungary, see:

<https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/05/27/ketmilliard-forintot-ontott-a-magyar-politika-facebook-reklamokba>

56 https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=HU&id=2095180394168521&media_type=all

57 <https://telex.hu/english/2023/11/20/european-commission-hungarys-national-consultation-contains-false-allegations>

58 <https://ipi.media/slovakia-deepfake-audio-of-dennik-n-journalist-offers-worrying-example-of-ai-abuse/>

59 <https://4liberty.eu/hungarys-den-of-trolls/>

60 <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/ceska-televizes-licence-fee-up-or-down/>

61 <https://digitalservicesact.cc/dsa/art38.html>

62 <https://www.lakmusz.hu/modszertan/>

Moreover, curating the media environment on private surfaces could contribute to increasing trust in media as well. For instance, in Czechia, Seznam demotes information from misleading and low-quality news sites in their newsfeed, ranking authoritative sources higher.

Business sector

- **Do not fund your own enemies.** PSSI's research found that some Czech websites posting disinformation regularly earn substantial money from their activities.⁶³ The business sector needs to understand that disinformation narratives and their proponents – such as Russia and its allies in the West – are generally anti-business. Narratives against large corporations are often spread on such websites. Thus, it is imperative for the business community to start paying attention to where their advertisements appear online and ensure that they do not appear on manipulative pages. Businesses can turn to sites such as *Konspiratori.sk*⁶⁴ or the Czech *Nelez*⁶⁵ that publicly list problematic websites and offer a how-to guide on preventing these sites from Google Ads. Advertising platforms, like Google Ads, need to ensure themselves that their clients understand they can restrict ads on certain websites and that this function is easily accessible.

Academia, NGOs

- **Help defund disinformation.** Numerous national initiatives are already working on defunding disinformation. One such initiative is *Konspiratori.sk*, a public database categorising websites that disseminate disinformation, aiming to assign credible ratings to dissuade businesses from

advertising on such platforms. These kinds of projects have great potential for scalability in other countries. Strengthening the impact requires a collaborative alliance of NGOs from multiple nations, fostering a more effective approach to encourage corporate involvement in the fight against disinformation.

- **Standardise.** There is a lot of research being done on dis- and misinformation, but this is often being done without a common understanding of definitions or even a common terminology. Efforts to standardise the work should be started swiftly. Yevhen Fedchenko⁶⁶ highlighted that there might be a lot of projects addressing disinformation, but these are spread out between various sub-topics, and many do not address the weaponised use of disinformation employed by Russia and China to invade the European information space.
- **Elevate trusted voices of science.** Academia needs to become more public-facing. The scientific work done by academics needs to be introduced to the public regularly in an easily digestible manner. As people tend to trust science – at least in Europe⁶⁷ – this could help dispel belief in disinformation narratives. For instance, in Hungary, a virologist called Gábor Kemenesi started posting frequently about issues that affected people during COVID. He noted to the daily *Magyar Nemzet* that “A researcher almost has a duty to explain what and why they do in an understandable manner, and not only when there is an epidemic.”⁶⁸ Ever since the pandemic, he has been asked about numerous topics, such as the threat of Asian tiger mosquitoes spreading various diseases in Hungary, which shows that there is some level of trust towards him.⁶⁹

63 <https://www.pssi.cz/projects/74-disinformation-and-brand-safety>

64 <https://konspiratori.sk/>

65 <https://www.nelez.cz/en/>

66 <https://msj.ukma.edu.ua/en/about-school/lecturers/yevhen-fedchenko/>

67 https://www.wissenschaft-im-dialog.de/fileadmin/user_upload/WiD_Basisinfos/Trust_in_Science_Discussion_Paper_Jan_2021.pdf

68 <https://magyarnemzet.hu/lugas-rovat/2023/01/sok-e-a-virologus-kemenesi-gabor-a-negy-es-szintu-laboratoriumrol-az-ertheto-tudomanyrol-es-a-szakmai-kontroll-fontossagarol>

69 In Summer 2023, the Asian tiger mosquito caused some concerns in Hungary, as it was rumoured that it might be spreading the West Nile fever. Kemenesi explained to multiple media outlets that these mosquitos did not have the necessary conditions to spread the virus in the country. <https://www.portfolio.hu/uzlet/20230829/megszolalt-kemenesi-gabor-a-tigrisszunyogrol-nincs-ra-bizonyitek-hogy-aktivan-terjeszti-itthon-a-nyugat-nilusi-virust-636383>



▸ Vajnorská 100/B
831 04 Bratislava
Slovak Republic

▸ +421 2 321 378 00
▸ info@globsec.org
▸ www.globsec.org

