



# **Fortifying Digital Democracy: Central and Eastern Europe's Blueprint for Social Media Regulation**

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# 1. Challenges

Since 2018, the European Union has reaffirmed its status as a normative power, spearheading regulatory and non-regulatory initiatives aimed at curtailing disinformation and enhancing the transparency of social media platforms as part of efforts to bolster societal resilience. Indeed, the EU has been at the forefront of regulating social media through frameworks like the self-regulative Code of Practice on Disinformation (CoP) and the Digital Services Act (DSA). These regulations are crucial for holding social media companies accountable and ensuring that the platforms take proactive measures to combat misuse directed at polarising societies, undermining democratic processes and/or conducting domestic or foreign malign influence. Notably, however, the self-regulation approach, introduced by the Code, has proven to be insufficient by itself.<sup>1</sup> The monetisation of disinformation in the form of paid advertisements and the resulting multi-billion euro annual revenues has ultimately trumped democratic principles and the adherence of the platforms to their own terms and services.<sup>2</sup> At present, the transparency reports published under both the Code of Practice and the Digital Services Act suffer from poor quality and informational value.<sup>3</sup> For instance, though they span hundreds of pages, the reports often lack contextualisation. They further contain partial or extraneous information and fail to provide specific or coherent details regarding the impact and efficacy of policies. While the DSA has now entered into force, there is a transitional period before its various provisions come into effect in the coming months, impacting its enforcement.

These deficits are problematic due to continued foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) by a rising number of countries, including Russia and China, as well as the dissemination of disinformation by domestic political officials.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the growing popularity of social media platforms<sup>5</sup> originating from or influenced by companies in authoritarian countries, such as TikTok and VKontakte or services like Telegram, poses several security challenges in democratic countries. By January 2021, Telegram had already become the most downloaded non-gaming application worldwide.<sup>6</sup> While these platforms have become important channels of (pro-Kremlin) propaganda and disinformation,<sup>7</sup> the misuse of users' personal data by authoritarian regimes presents another security challenge.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Telegram and VKontakte do not meet the requirements to be designated as very large online platforms and thus do not fall under the EU's regulatory umbrella.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, information operations have become multi-faceted, running simultaneously on a number of social media platforms. And though the operations employ bots and trolls, they are also frequently promoted by real people as well as paid influencers. For example, the operation Doppelgänger, first detected in 2022, showcases how VLOPs have proven unable to stop inauthentic behaviour on their platforms or implement reasonable political ads standards even as the platforms continue to earn millions from spreading disinformation.<sup>10</sup> A recent report by AI Forensics on Doppelgänger found that 60% of ads on Meta did not adhere to the company's own guidelines

1 Elghawaby, A. (2018) Social media's self-regulation isn't enough, Centre for International Governance Innovation.

Available at: <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/social-medias-self-regulation-isnt-enough/>

2 Paul, K. (2023) Reversal of content policies at Alphabet, Meta and X threaten democracy, warn experts, The Guardian.

Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/dec/07/2024-elections-social-media-content-safety-policies-moderation>

3 Goujard, C. (2023) Critics hit out at social media platforms' disinformation reports, Politico.

Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/critics-social-media-platforms-disinformation-report-european-union-meta-youtube-twitter-tiktok/>

4 Amnesty International (2022) Myanmar: Facebook's systems promoted violence against Rohingya; Meta owes reparations – New report.

Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/myanmar-facebooks-systems-promoted-violence-against-rohingya-meta-owes-reparations-new-report/>

5 Dixon, S., J. (2024) Most popular social networks worldwide as of April 2024, ranked by number of monthly active users, Statista.

Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

6 Chan, J. (2021) Top apps worldwide for January 2021 by download, SensorTower. Available at: <https://sensortower.com/blog/top-apps-worldwide-january-2021-by-downloads>

7 Troschuk, S. (2024) 'The Kremlin has entered the chat': How to protect your personal data on Telegram and avoid the bait of propaganda, EU Neighbours East.

Available at: <https://eunighbourseast.eu/news/stories/the-kremlin-has-entered-the-chat-how-to-protect-your-personal-data-on-telegram-and-avoid-the-bait-of-propaganda/>

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/epxken/russian-tiktok-influencers-paid-propaganda>

8 McDonald, J., & Soo, Z. (2023) Why does US see Chinese-owned TikTok as a security threat? Associated Press.

Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/tiktok-bytedance-shou-zi-chew-8d8a6a9694357040d484670b7f4833be>

9 European Commission (2024) DSA: Very large online platforms and search engines. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/dsa-vlos>

10 Goujard, C. (2024) Big, bold and unchecked: Russian influence operation thrives on Facebook, Politico.

Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-influence-hackers-social-media-facebok-operation-thriving/>

concerning political advertising, with pro-Russian messages reaching over 38 million users in France and Germany months before the EU Parliament elections.<sup>11</sup> The monetisation of disinformation has also been observed with respect to Russia's war in Ukraine<sup>12</sup> and the Slovak presidential elections in spring 2024.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, 2023 elections across various EU countries offered lessons on the continuous efficacy of measures adopted to safeguard electoral integrity. Researchers observed shortcomings in content moderation, the identity verification process and advertiser disclaimers in political advertisements running during the silent period. AI-generated content was disseminated on platforms and different policies were applied toward its removal, with some posts still available online.<sup>14</sup> Overall, CEE experts concluded that no tangible and impactful changes were observed to be taken by platforms. Instead, the need for strengthened and more structured cooperation between social media platforms and civil society organisations persists.

The inability of social media platforms to enforce their own terms and services, while they earn sizeable revenue, poses a serious problem to democracy and the EU. Such actions will remain rampant until VLOPs implement their terms and services properly and the EU enforces its legislation.

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11 Bouchaud, P. et al. (2024) No embargo in sight: Meta lets pro-Russian propaganda ads flood the EU, AI Forensics. Available at: <https://aiforensics.org/work/meta-political-ads>

12 Visser, F. et al. (2023) Cashing in on conflict: TikTok profits from pro-Kremlin disinformation ads. Available at: [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/cashing-in-on-conflict-tiktok-profits-from-pro-kremlin-disinformation-ads/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/cashing-in-on-conflict-tiktok-profits-from-pro-kremlin-disinformation-ads/)

13 Suchý, M. & Daňko, L. (2024) Antikampaň proti Korčokovi tesne pred moratóriom zasiahla milión používateľov. Platia ju ľudia blízki Pellegrinimu, Sastavme Korupciu. Available at: <https://zastavmekorupciu.sk/kauzy/antikampan-proti-korcokovi-tesne-pred-moratorium-zasiahla-milion-pouzivatelov-platia-ju-ludia-blizki-pellegrinimu/>

14 Sólymos, K. (2023) Slovak election targeted by pro-Kremlin deepfake hoax, VSquare. Available at: <https://vsquare.org/slovak-election-targeted-by-pro-kremlin-deepfake-hoax/>

## 2. Policy focus and priorities

The voluntary adoption of the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation<sup>15</sup> marked a pioneering moment in the regulation of social media platforms. However, subsequent experience revealed its inadequacy, prompting the introduction of a revised version in 2022.<sup>16</sup> The voluntary self-regulation model embraced by major social media entities, was deemed insufficient, particularly following challenges posed by the COVID-19 “infodemic”.<sup>17</sup> With the European DSA<sup>18</sup> and Digital Markets Act (DMA) entering into force in August 2023,<sup>19</sup> alongside the adoption of the EU AI Act, the EU has laid the groundwork for global standards pertaining to transparency and oversight of platforms, firmly anchored in the principles of human rights adherence.

In 2023, transparency reports submitted under the revised Code of Practice on Disinformation, as well as those mandated by the DSA, provided some insight into the policies and structures of social media platforms. However, these reports fell short of expectations, failing to fully realise their potential. Analyses conducted by the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) and civil society organisations, many of whom are non-platform signatories to the Code, concluded that platforms’ policies and practices had been only minimally modified since the Code’s inception, casting doubts on its efficacy. A systematic review conducted by EFCSN concerning the implementation of the Code underscored the persistent shortcomings of platforms in fulfilling their commitments, indicating that “platforms and search engines are still far from fulfilling their promises and do not have effective risk mitigation measures against disinformation in place, as DSA requires.”<sup>20</sup>

Consulted CEE experts have likened these reports to “PR exercises” for platforms, rather than robust instruments capable of demonstrating the outcomes of policy measures and actions. Moreover, the data provided by VLOPs lacks standardisation and precludes meaningful comparisons across platforms due to discrepancies in data collection methodologies and computations, thereby impeding comprehensive analysis and evaluation.

*“At the moment, however, VLOPs can report anything without anybody having the ability to catch them or provide scrutiny,”*

*said an expert from Czechia.*

Therefore, the EU’s continuous policy priorities should focus on increasing the transparency of VLOPs, empowering users and enhancing the transparency of algorithms. By improving the transparency reports and ensuring a better understanding of measures taken by the platforms, the EU can hold the companies accountable and ensure compliance with regulations. Empowering users with better tools to understand and control their data and content exposure is crucial for fostering a safer online environment. Additionally, transparency of algorithms will help demystify the decision-making processes that influence content visibility and dissemination, reducing the potential for biased or harmful outcomes. Finally, researcher access to reliable data is an important component towards ensuring effective platform oversight.

15 European Commission (2022) 2018 Code of practice on disinformation. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2018-code-practice-disinformation#:~:text=The%202018%20Code%20of%20Practice%20aimed%20at%20achieving%20the%20objectives,demonetization%20of%20purveyors%20of%20disinformation>.

16 European Commission (2022) The 2022 code of practice on disinformation. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>

17 GLOBSEC (2022) Fighting disinformation while safeguarding human rights: Key recommendations. Available at: <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/fighting-disinformation-while-safeguarding-human-rights-key-recommendations>

18 DSA is applicable for the services that have been already designated as Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs).

19 Delegation of the European Union to Türkiye (2023) EU Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act enters into force. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/t%C3%BCrkiye/eu%E2%80%99s-digital-services-act-and-digital-markets-act-enter-force\\_en?s=230#:~:text=As%20of%2025%20August%202023,from%2024%20February%202024%20onwards](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/t%C3%BCrkiye/eu%E2%80%99s-digital-services-act-and-digital-markets-act-enter-force_en?s=230#:~:text=As%20of%2025%20August%202023,from%2024%20February%202024%20onwards).

20 European Fact-Checking Standards Network (2024) Fact-checking and related risk-mitigation measures for disinformation in the very large online platforms and search engines. Available at: [https://efcsn.com/app/uploads/2024/01/FINAL\\_Fact\\_checking\\_and\\_related\\_Risk\\_Mitigation\\_Measures\\_for\\_Disinformation.pdf](https://efcsn.com/app/uploads/2024/01/FINAL_Fact_checking_and_related_Risk_Mitigation_Measures_for_Disinformation.pdf)

### 3. Practical recommendations

As the implementation of the Digital Services Act enters a crucial phase and the Code of Practice transitions from being a self-regulatory framework to a Code of Conduct, a thorough assessment of the efficacy and implementation of measures undertaken by major social media platforms is assuming heightened significance, particularly for the new EU Commission.

#### ► Expedite finalisation of processes and structures outlined in the DSA, both at national and EU levels

Despite the DSA coming into effect in August, delays in legislative processes and the establishment of critical bodies, such as national Digital Service Coordinators (DSCs),<sup>21</sup> have hindered progress. The initial target date of establishing a functional DSA Board by February 17, 2024, was unmet within the targeted timeline. In April, the EU Commission launched infringement procedures against Estonia, Poland and Slovakia, and in July the Commission initiated procedures for Belgium, Spain, Croatia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Sweden because they had not yet designated their Digital Services Coordinators, failed to grant these authorities the essential powers to perform their duties, or both.<sup>22</sup> Such delays hinder the effective enforcement of the DSA.

Furthermore, the potential politicisation of DSCs necessitates careful consideration amidst growing concerns about democratic erosion in various EU member states. While the responsibility for establishing DSCs rests with member states, the new EU Commission should mandate that these institutions possess adequate competencies, resources and political independence. Additionally, inclusive decision-making processes involving diverse stakeholders

can foster a more representative approach, mitigating the risk of undue political influence on DSCs. Meanwhile, transparent communication of these processes to the public is imperative.

In addition, the implementation of the DSA may face challenges due to inadequate financial resources and personnel within DSCs, thereby impeding their ability to fulfil newly mandated obligations. Therefore, both the EU and member states need to allocate sufficient financial resources both for own institutions dealing with implementation for DSA and CoP but also for researchers and civil society organisations.

#### ► Comprehensive mapping of capacities and requirements for successful implementation and enforcement of social media platform regulation, followed by the development of financial structures

The effective regulation (and its enforcement) of social media platforms and the protection of democratic principles necessitates a collective initiative encompassing various stakeholders.<sup>23</sup> However, the efficacy of such efforts may be compromised by a lack of sufficient capacities for delivery and oversight. The EU's introduction of social media platform regulation without a thorough understanding of its own capabilities, such as the composition of trust and safety teams within platforms or the distribution of moderators across countries, underscores the need for a comprehensive analysis of resources and capacities at the EU, member state and VLOP levels. Following this assessment, a clear allocation of financial resources will be essential.

21 Cunningham, F. & Sasdelli, P. (2024) What countries have appointed their Digital Services Coordinators under the DSA? Available at: <https://www.twobirds.com/en/insights/2024/global/which-countries-have-appointed-their-digital-services-coordinators-under-the-dsa>

22 Tar, J. (2024, July 26). EU Commission urges six member states to appoint authorities for DSA enforcement. [www.euractiv.com](http://www.euractiv.com). <https://www.euractiv.com/section/data-privacy/news/eu-commission-urges-six-member-states-to-appoint-authorities-for-dsa-enforcement/>

Kroet, C. (2024, April 24). Six EU countries pressed to appoint platform watchdogs. [Euronews](http://Euronews). <https://www.euronews.com/next/2024/04/24/six-eu-countries-pressed-to-appoint-platform-watchdogs>

23 Gori, P. (2024) Countering disinformation: A whole-of-society approach beyond traditional frameworks. Available at: <https://edmo.eu/blog/countering-disinformation-a-whole-of-society-approach-beyond-traditional-frameworks/>

## **D Establish a competence centre for enforcement and implementation**

Social media regulation, counter-FIMI measures, enforcement of the rule of law and the protection of democratic principles both online and offline have faced an EU competence problem where these matters appear to sit everywhere - but nowhere properly - within the various EU institutions. This deficit remains a complex security challenge that goes beyond mere regulation, with the new EU Commission needing to address it by creating a centre of competence for the enforcement and implementation of social media regulation. The centre would oversee the enforcement of legislation and be commissioned to establish a clear framework of cooperation, connectivity and exchange of information.

In addition, the effectiveness of the EU's regulation of social media platforms will hinge on proactive enforcement measures. The EU Commission must demonstrate a commitment to enforcing regulations and holding non-compliant VLOPs accountable. While certain cases may necessitate litigation, initiating enforcement processes will be crucial towards establishing clear precedents. Meanwhile, the reluctance to enforce rules against non-compliant VLOPs sets a negative precedent and undermines the normative power of the EU. In this regard, the development of a competence centre demonstrating the efficacy of regulation is essential for setting global standards and countering the influence of malign actors such as Russia and China in the digital sphere. The competence centre should conduct the mapping of capacities mentioned above.

## **D Secure funding for researchers, fact-checkers and civil society organisations**

The importance of government funding for researchers and civil society organisations involved in social media regulation is

underestimated. Several counter-disinformation civil society organisations, led by the EU DisinfoLab, already in May 2023 called on the EU Commission to create a dedicated EU budget allocation for CSOs working in this field to ensure their sustainability and viability.<sup>24</sup> While EU institutions rely on data analysis, consultation inputs and feedback on transparency reports from civil society organisations, such activities come without remuneration. Both the Code of Practice and the DSA expect participation from civil society organisations, which is welcomed and necessary. However, researchers can easily be overwhelmed by bureaucratic hurdles, preventing them from gaining seamless access to the necessary data. They may also lack the necessary resources to analyse the considerable volume of data from transparency reports, audits and repositories.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the new financial framework within the European Digital Media Observatory is set at 50% co-financing from partners for upcoming projects. Furthermore, according to the EFCSN, European fact-checking organisations are sceptical that various VLOPs offer a “fair financial contribution for fact-checkers to combat disinformation on its service” as they committed to do in the Code of Practice.

All told, the expectations for the participation of CSOs and fact-checkers in the DSA, the Code, research and other activities are not sustainable in the long run, without appropriate financial support. Therefore, the allocation of such money in the EU budget is a must for the new EU Commission.<sup>26</sup>

## **D Enhance strategic communication on the DSA, DSCs and their functions**

Addressing criticisms of social media regulation and dispelling misinformation regarding its objectives requires robust strategic communication efforts. Given the limited awareness of EU legislation among citizens,

<sup>24</sup> EU Disinfo Lab (2023) Stand by us - counter-disinformation community urges the European Commission to walk the talk and back their efforts to protect European democracies against disinformation. Available at: <https://www.disinfo.eu/advocacy/stand-by-us-counter-disinformation-community-urges-the-european-commission-to-walk-the-talk-and-back-their-efforts-to-protect-european-democracies-against-disinformation/>

<sup>25</sup> Jaurisch, J. (2024) The Digital Services Act is in effect - now what? Stiftung Neue Verantwortung. Available at: <https://www.stiftung-nv.de/en/publication/digital-services-act-now-what>

<sup>26</sup> European Fast-Checking Standards Network (2024) Fact-checking and related risk-mitigation measures for disinformation in the very large online platforms and search engines. Available at: [https://efcsn.com/app/uploads/2024/01/FINAL\\_Fact\\_checking\\_and\\_related\\_Risk\\_Mitigation\\_Measures\\_for\\_Disinformation.pdf](https://efcsn.com/app/uploads/2024/01/FINAL_Fact_checking_and_related_Risk_Mitigation_Measures_for_Disinformation.pdf)

particularly in CEE countries, comprehensive explanations of the DSA and its implications are necessary. Strategic communication efforts must be tailored to different audiences and the different political and cultural contexts of EU member states, emphasising the objectives of social media regulation and refuting misconceptions regarding censorship.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, building media literacy and fostering public understanding of EU processes will be critical to garner support for regulatory measures. These efforts should include capacity building and communication with civil servants within EU member states, many of whom may have very limited understanding of the pertinent legislation. Civil servants and citizens alike, however, should understand that the regulation of social media is not about censorship, but rather about building trust, enhancing online safety and protecting democratic principles and processes.

Overall, as it seeks to foster stronger and more resilient societies, the EU and its representatives need to conduct better strategic communication and engagement with EU citizens as well as coordination and effective targeting against malign narratives. One-size-fits-all campaigns, such as the EU NextGen or You Are EU, have very limited impact in CEE countries. Moreover, the media literacy initiatives of VLOPs could complement the EU's strategic communication in this area.

### **Develop tailored media literacy campaigns in collaboration with local stakeholders**

Effective media literacy initiatives must be tailored to specific countries and target a range of demographic groups, utilising appropriate communication channels and narratives. Collaborating with local partners, including civil society organisations and influencers, will ensure that the campaigns are culturally relevant and resonate with intended audiences. The continuous monitoring of campaign effectiveness and the

sharing of data on impact with stakeholders is also essential for refining strategies and maximising outreach. Ideally, media campaigns should be accompanied by pre-and-post surveys among the target audiences to measure the effectiveness of the campaigns in terms of attitudinal shifts.

In the summer of 2023, Meta launched the “Focus on Facts”<sup>28</sup> campaign featuring cartoons in English in three countries - Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovakia. However, in environments saturated with disinformation spread by various domestic actors, including AI-generated content, English-language cartoons or posters may have limited impact, especially among vulnerable societal groups such as middle-aged and elderly people who do not speak English.<sup>29</sup> According to CEE experts, Meta's campaign suffered from limited outreach and appropriate age-demographic targeting.

Furthermore, media literacy efforts by social media platforms need to be consistent and sustained over the long-term. Initiatives launched mere weeks or months before elections are unlikely to counteract years of information operations propagated by political representatives and other domestic or foreign actors across the EU.

### **Need for real audit of VLOPs**

In September 2023, TrustLab released a report<sup>30</sup> measuring the implementation of structural indicators in terms of prevalence and sources of disinformation across major social platforms in three pilot countries. While the report was insightful, it recognised its limitations due to “the lack of access to internal platform data.” Therefore, a comprehensive audit of VLOPs is necessary. While audits are envisioned within the DSA, it is questionable what data will be provided by the VLOPs to the selected auditor. Furthermore, the findings of the audits will not be immediately public.

27 Holan, A. (2024) Let's say it plainly: Fact-checking is not censorship, Poynter. Available at: <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2024/fact-checking-is-not-censorship/>

28 Meta (2023) Facts in focus: Combatting fake news through the artists' lens. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/facts-in-focus-combating-fake-news-through-the-artists-lens/>

29 GLOBSEC (2021) GLOBSEC vulnerability index 2021. Available at: [https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Vulnerability-Index\\_Comparative-report.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Vulnerability-Index_Comparative-report.pdf)

30 TrustLab (2023) Code of practice on disinformation: A comparative analysis of the prevalence and sources of disinformation across major social media platforms in Poland, Slovakia and Spain. Available at: <https://www.trustlab.com/codeofpractice-disinformation>



## Require improved access to data

Access to comprehensive data is vital for researchers, fact-checkers and civil society organisations engaged in social media regulation. However, access to data on most platforms under article 40 of the DSA is currently non-existent. This is due to the decision of VLOPs to launch new API platforms, combined with new administrative procedures for granting access to data. Furthermore, there are substantial discrepancies between platforms on what data is provided and accessible to analysts.<sup>31</sup>

While in the context of article 40 of the DSA, researchers can request a broad range of previously undisclosed data, the research community needs to operationalise the so-called “scraping provision” under article 40<sup>32</sup>, as it is exactly this type of data that fosters exploratory research. If researchers, fact-checkers and civil society organisations are to be actively involved in the Code and DSA, access to data and appropriate tools are key prerequisites. Therefore, Meta’s announcement that it would shut down CrowdTangle, a monitoring tool used by tens of thousands of journalists, researchers and election observers, in August without a proper replacement was widely criticised by the research community.<sup>33</sup> Such a decision is very unfortunate in a major election year, as 2024 undoubtedly is.

## Promote DISARM framework, increasing effectiveness of cooperation and counter-measures

The widespread utilisation of a common DISARM framework by all stakeholders will streamline data sharing, analysis and the coordination of effective measures. Such efforts, however, need to go hand in hand with actions directed at strengthening information-sharing facilities and structures.

## Increasing requirements for the Journalism Trust Initiative certification

The goal of the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI) certification, which is managed by Reporters Without Borders, is to standardise the media practices of legitimate media newsrooms, rewarding ethical journalistic practices.<sup>34</sup> However, at present, the JTI certification is rather a checklist exercise that investigates the existence of certain documents without assessing the quality of the content published by media outlets. Such a purely administrative approach to certification can be very easily misused by outlets spreading problematic content and disinformation. For example, disinformation outlets could pay lip service to ethical standards, while not properly enforcing them. Due to the shortcomings of this check-list approach to certification, even outlets like RT (Russia Today) could technically become JTI certified.

Especially concerning is that Reporters Without Borders is negotiating with search engines and the European Commission to feature JTI-certified outlets higher in search engine results. According to consulted experts, it has also been suggested that JTI certification should be one of the criteria for media to receive funding from the EU and other donors. The deficiencies of JTI certifications could therefore pose a serious threat to EU democracy by distorting the current media environment and to media collaboration with VLOPs.

Awarding of such certification should thus go beyond a checklist of having necessary documentation, but the real enforcement of editorial independence and journalistic standards. Local researchers and independent Digital Service Coordinators should play a role and provide insights on the independence of media.

31 Digital Democracy Monitor (n.d.) Data access. Available at: <https://digitalmonitor.democracy-reporting.org/data-access/>

32 VLOPs and other providers use technical restrictions, such as blocking of IP addresses to limit the access to data for researchers and block unlimited scraping of data from their platforms. Article 40(12) of the DSA lifts these technical restrictions or enables the researchers to obtain special “scraping exceptions” from them. While API access based on Article 40(12) should be further developed, the possibility to scrap data provides alternative access to public data regardless of what APIs or other tools are offered by providers. “Scraping puts pressure on VLOPs to create properly functioning APIs, and facilitates that researchers explore the relevant risks before they formulate their requests pursuant to Article 40(4).” Husovec, M. (2023, May 19). How to Facilitate Data Access under the Digital Services Act. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4452940](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4452940)

33 Mozilla Foundation (2024) Open letter to Meta. Available at: <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/campaigns/open-letter-to-meta-support-crowdtangle-through-2024-and-maintain-crowdtangle-approach/>

34 Journalism Trust Initiative (2024) The Journalism Trust Initiative. Available at: <https://www.journalismtrustinitiative.org/>

## **Investment in research on AI-driven technologies**

With the proliferation of AI-generated disinformation, investing in research and development of AI-driven technologies is imperative for bolstering resilience against digital threats. Allocating funding for research initiatives focused on AI-for-good technologies will ensure that the EU remains at the forefront of technological innovation and digital resilience. In addition, AI companies like OpenAI could be included in the DSA and Code of Practice on Disinformation framework in the future, since

they have become platforms utilised by millions of users.

## **Addressing challenges posed by platforms like Telegram**

Despite not falling under the purview of the DSA, platforms such as Telegram<sup>35</sup> have emerged as significant sources of foreign influence and disinformation within the EU. Advocating for the participation of such platforms in codes of conduct and fostering cooperation with relevant stakeholders can mitigate their negative impact on digital discourse.

## **Methodology**

*This chapter draws upon two workshops with key experts from Central and Eastern Europe on social media regulation and election integrity. The first workshop was held on January 31 and the second on February 1. While some experts participated in person, others contributed written responses to a structured questionnaire, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of pertinent issues.*

## **Consulted experts:**

*The stakeholders consulted for this chapter expressed diverse opinions. They helped in providing useful input to the authors. The chapter as such, however, is the responsibility of the authors and does not express the official opinions of the consulted stakeholders or the institutions they represent.*

### **Researchers from the Council for Media Services**

Slovakia

### **Richard Kuchta**

Reset/Reporting Democracy International, Germany

### **Assistant of Markéta Gregorová**

Czech Member of the European Parliament

### **Dávid Púchovský**

Assistant to the MP and former social media coordinator at the Ministry of Interior, Slovakia

### **Justin E. Lane**

CulturePulse, Slovakia

### **Jakub Goda**

expert on disinformation and former Social Media Administrator at the Office of the President of the Slovak Republic

### **Martin Luhan**

Rekonstrukce Statu, Czechia

### **Meta's Factcheckers covering the CEE region**

### **Giedrius Sakalauskas**

Director of Res Publica – Civic Resilience Center, Lithuania

### **Maia Mazurkiewicz**

Alliance for Europe, Poland

### **Pawel Terpilowski**

Demagog Poland, Poland

### **Ieva Ivanauskaitė**

Innovation and Partnerships Team Lead, Delfi Lithuania

### **Peter Jančárik**

Seznam, Czechia

<sup>35</sup> Telegram was not designated as a VLOP that has to comply with DSA because the number of monthly active users they reported is lower than 45 million, which is the required threshold to be designated as such. Telegram along with all other platforms must publish updated user numbers at least once every 6 months.



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