

# THE ILLIBERALISM OF FEAR AS A DISINFOMATION STRATEGY

**A study of the construction of  
the refugee as an internal  
enemy in the post-truth  
framework**

# EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: THE REQUIRED INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

## THE ILLIBERALISM OF FEAR AS A DISINFORMATION STRATEGY

**Author: Jediael A. de DOMPABLO**

**Brussels, October 2023**

© Institute of European Democrats, 2023  
Rue Montoyer 25 1000 Brussels Belgium  
[www.iedonline.eu](http://www.iedonline.eu)



This Research Paper was elaborated on the basis of independent research. The opinions expressed here are those of the Contractor and do not represent the point of view of the Institute of European Democrats. With the financial support of the European Parliament

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current communicative framework has favored the emergence of the phenomenon of post-truth linked to the crisis of liberal democracy, which has become a challenge for the European Union. Thus, conceived to address all the issues connected to this situation, the European Democracy Action Plan sets a course of action.

In this context, disinformation has become a strategy employed by far-right radical populist parties to create a favorable public opinion environment for their interests. To achieve this, the far right uses the construction of scapegoats, such as the figure of the refugee, to build Otherness, which is key to understanding the illiberal project since the need to create an internal enemy aligns with the ideological foundations of this movement.

In this research, we study the new communicative framework of the post-truth era and analyze the construction of populist discourse through the figure of the refugee and how it has affected public opinion, assuming certain ideological presuppositions of liberal political aspirations.

However, the debate over the concept of refugee could be a window of opportunity after the current Ukraine refugee crisis to change the stigma and improve the lives of people suffering from political persecution while simultaneously reinforcing European democracy and liberal institutions.

## Social Media summary

The disinformation strategy has become a danger to the EU. It is not something neutral; it has a political purpose. The construction of the refugee as a scapegoat is crucial for the illiberal movement. However, disputing the concept is key to reinforcing democracy.

## Keywords

Illiberalism, refugee, far-right, disinformation, post-truth, populism

## Short bio

Jediael A. de Dompablo is an associate Professor at Carlos III University of Madrid, holds a PhD in Political Science from Autonomous University of Madrid and is a visiting researcher at Science Po-Paris.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ACTION PLAN FOR EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>COMMUNICATIVE FRAMEWORKS: POST-TRUTH AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>DISINFORMATION STRATEGIES AND THE ILLIBERAL POSITION: CONSTRUCTING THE REFUGEE AS AN ENEMY</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>16</b>

## Introduction

The European Democracy Action Plan identifies disinformation strategies as one of the greatest challenges to democracy in the EU (Commission, 2023). The objective of these strategies is to have an impact on public opinion, affecting all aspects of political life, from the concerns of citizens to the issues on the public agenda and, therefore, electoral processes.

According to Robert Manin's categories, democracies have evolved as communicative frameworks have evolved from audience democracies to digital democracies, facilitated by the information age that reigns in the 21st century, and it is developed in different post-truth frameworks (Vallespín and Martínez-Bascuñán, 2017:143-187). Post-truth should be understood as a communicative framework where facts are replaced by a narrative that prioritizes feelings over reason and questions intermediaries such as traditional media, political parties, unions favoring new sources of authority that refute cognitive biases (McIntyre, 2018).

This new communicative paradigm breaks with the traditional spaces of deliberation where reason was a central element in decision-making and where the search for the best argument was the justification for a process of dialogue and listening, as advocated by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Borradori, 2003), whose thinking has served as inspiration for the EU as a model of deliberative democracy; however, it is worth asking to what extent the EU model and its democratic conception are at risk in this new post-truth framework.

In fact, we are witnessing how the debate has been corrupted by the entry of the so-called extreme right or the radical populist right that has used the new communicative framework and the strategy of disinformation to gain a political space that they did not have just a decade ago. As Cass Mudde (2020) argues, their agendas were based on cultural agendas and identity when the framework changed and issues focused on rationality such as the economy were not central to the debate, these parties began to have a greater importance and to be able to influence the other parties that either by acceptance or opposition to them talked about those same issues, even when it was false debates motivated by fake news.

In this research we propose the study of one of those debates that has focused and mobilized public opinion in the EU. The construction of the idea of the refugee is key to understand the new communicative framework of post-truth. To do so, we will analyze the construction of the political concept by the radical populist right and how, in Orban's words, refugees are the Trojan horse of terrorism (FT, 2017). This

framework and these statements have allowed to build reality during the refugee crisis of 2016 and has served to mobilize the fears and yearnings of public opinion favoring the construction of new scapegoats and creating new frames in the political debate.

However, the new refugee crisis with the Ukrainian war has allowed to dispute the political concept by making a differentiation both in policies and disputing the meaning of the same political concept. To do this we propose to make an analysis of the new framework of disinformation within the European Democracy Action Plan through the study of the concept of refugee.

We will observe how the different actors of the radical populist right have constructed this social reality creating a new scapegoat and creating a new theoretical debate regarding the influence of illiberal positions as a danger for democracy in the EU.

At the same time, we will be able to observe how the same concept changes its political meaning when different actors have interest demonstrating their capacity to build reality as demonstrated by the comparative study between the refugee crisis of 2016 and the crisis of the current Ukrainian war being able to observe the ideological positions of illiberal thinking and its capacity of internal influence in the EU democracy.

To this end, we will carry out a comparative study of the different actors through the study of political and media discourse with special reference to methodology in political theory based on the empirical analysis of political concepts and their influence on democracy.

## **Action Plan for European Democracy**

The Action Plan for European Democracy aims to strengthen democracy and empower citizens through the promotion of free, fair, and secure elections, the reinforcement of media freedom and pluralism, and the fight against disinformation. The main objective is to implement and strengthen these principles in preparation for the upcoming European elections in 2024 (European Commission, 2023).

One of the main challenges is to combat disinformation in a novel communication context, not only technologically but also where communication strategies are adapting to a new era, a new reality that directly affects public opinion and our democratic quality.

## New Communicative Frameworks: Post-truth and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

Traditionally we speak of the birth of liberal democracies with the appearing of those political models that combine certain elements of separation of powers, the establishment of private spheres of citizen rights and other practical factors, like accountability. For this last one, citizens have been able to track Government action through the role of the Media, as the middle actor that brought into light, in a comprehensible manner, the institutional behaviour that is often too complicated for the average person to follow daily, due to lack of time or knowledge.

Most liberal democracies appear then in the Western world: Western democracies that had followed the model of “audience democracies” magnified the role of mass media as providers of information, giving them that central role (and in a way, power) when selecting topics, presentation, framing, etc.

This system that had developed through the transformation of mass media, from newspapers to the radio and then television, depended very much on the fair job of the journalists. Hence, the importance of press freedom when measuring quality of democracy in different countries (as put forward by *Reporters Sans Frontières*).

However, in the late 90s early 00s a new technology of communication develops, that challenges the balanced system Western democracies had built. Challenging at the same time one of the pillars of liberal democracies: accountability through transparency. This has generated an information crisis which harms our societies due to the impossibility to control not only who creates information and what information is created, but also how real factual events are presented to the public. Our societies of mass-communication have radically changed.

The emergence of new communication structures has shifted the role of the media and forced traditional forms of communication to adopt new strategies to compete for public attention. This has led to a surge in emotionality and expression, what we academically refer to as “post-truth,” a new form of communication that allows targeting audiences and manipulating messages in a way that almost individually appeals to each receiver. The prime examples of these new strategies are fake news, falsehoods in the media that date back to traditional mass communication (or classic lies in politics as in Vallespín, 2012). However, in these new communicative frameworks, they have found an ideal environment to spread and propagate much



faster than the media's verification capacity, citizens, and institutions themselves (Vallespín y Martínez-Bascuñán, 2017:143-187).

To this irrationalization of news, another element is added, one that breaks with the political communication triangle proposed by Brigitte Nacos (Nacos, 2016). The media lose their centrality in the Government-governed relationship because today citizens have direct access to institutions. Communication, which has traditionally been one-way, has now become an interactive phenomenon (Castells, 2009: 87; Nacos, 2016: 36).

Manuel Castells talks about mass self-communication thanks to the convergence of our societies into a global networked society, facilitated by digital communication and information technologies. Technological advances have allowed us to transcend territorial and institutional boundaries, and this global network has evolved in parallel with the globalization of other social structures (and is even co-dependent, as we cannot understand globalization without the digital technological revolution) (Castells, 2009: 50-54).

In sum, the shift from the communication model to Castells' interactive formula in societies, with practically instant information flows and access, challenges the traditional role of the press.

Users not only receive information but interact instantaneously with that information. With a single person, you can reach thousands of others through social networks, providing them with unprecedented content creation power without the need to overcome the traditional barriers imposed by mainstream media gatekeepers (Vallespín y Martínez-Bascuñán, 2017:143-187). "The technological evolution generated by social networks, the democratization of smart mobile devices, and high-quality image and video recording and editing devices have altered the usual frameworks for constructing public opinion" (Lesaca, 2017: 30).

According to Vallespín y Martínez-Bascuñán (2017), the significant changes that democratic systems have undergone can be summarized as follows:

1. The diffusion of sources of authority shifts the role of traditional media but also of the political elite.
2. Anyone can access information directly without mediation from the media, as well as create their information and spread it rapidly.



3. There is competition for public attention spaces, and the new barriers are the cognitive biases of users, ideological biases that senders constantly seek to overcome.

In this way, audience democracies have evolved into digital democracies, facilitated by the information age that prevails in the 21st century, and develop within various frameworks of post-truth (Vallespín y Martínez-Bascuñán, 2017:143-187). How is this new communicative framework affecting different political actors and especially actors like illiberal movements and parties in Europe who have found disinformation strategies as a way to connect with public opinion?

### **Disinformation Strategies and the Illiberal Position: Constructing the Refugee as an Enemy**

The consequences of the 2008 Great Recession and its political and social effects on significant parts of Western societies are evident. While authors like David Harvey observe the continuity of neoliberalism, Wendy Brown points out a new “authoritarian, protectionist, and nationalist” version of the same regime (Brown, 2019: 51). Political and cultural changes are occurring that affect all spheres of social phenomena.

The repercussions of the economic crisis scenario that has unfolded since 2008 have been the underlying factor, as we have seen, in a “reaction phenomenon in which factors (1) socio-economic; but also (2) cultural and psychosocial; (3) political; (4) new forms of communication resulting from a profound restructuring of our public space. All these factors have led to an evolution in the political behavior of citizens, which can be characterized as a new populist emergence (Vallespín and Martínez-Bascuñán, 2017: 91).

This populist scenario should be understood because of the malaise or crisis of liberal democracies today. “When Francis Fukuyama's theses pointed to a world where the democratic-liberal political form, like modern scientific methods, together with technological advancement and the market economy as a system for processing the necessary information in resource allocation, had shaped a model without any visible alternative in sight” (Vallespín and Martínez-Bascuñán, 2017: 29).

The phenomenon of populism emerges, which, more than an ideology, should be understood as a logic of political action that allows for simplifying responses to complex processes, where the construction of 'us' versus 'them' predominates as a response in times of social crisis capable of capturing the negativity and indignation

of the people. To contest power, populism allows for the generation of communicative frames capable of absorbing political debate, with cultural frames predominating that appeal to emotionality and deeper feelings by channeling them through the figure of a charismatic leader (Vallespín and Martínez-Bascuñán, 2017: 52).

This logic of political action is altering the hubris of democracies and favoring a context of identity retreat. It is having significant effects, especially on the so-called radical right-wing populism, which has been able to absorb thoughts and issues from the broader traditional right-wing, leading to a process of alignment where old extreme right-wing groups have moderated (de-marginalized), and other conventional right-wing parties have radicalized by taking similar positions, resulting in a convergence phenomenon, which we can conceptualize as radical right-wing populism (Mudde, 2021: 215-221).

We must not forget that all manifestations of this crisis of liberal democracy are occurring by waving a populist discourse, both on the left and right of the political spectrum (Vallespín and Martínez-Bascuñán, 2017).

What happens is that in Europe and the West, it is predominantly the extreme right that leads the movement, as they have focused on sociocultural themes and identity politics in their ideological axis (Mudde, 2021: 217). This means that topics related to immigration, sovereignty, integration, culture, and terrorism dominate the public and media agenda, with these movements positioning themselves “more or less explicitly in defense of white supremacy” (Ibid.) against others, generally ethnic and religious minorities that challenge the homogeneity fantasies of these groups.

Therefore, this normalization and institutional presence of radical right-wing populist movements in the European Union, including governments like Fidesz in Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, has given rise to the concept of illiberal democracy as a counterpoint to liberal democracy.

The peculiarity of illiberal democracy is the gradual limitation and reduction of civil society pluralism while seeking to control the political system by appealing to nationalism and populism, where the culture shared by the specific nation becomes the identity of resistance against the pluralistic and liberal model of globalization.

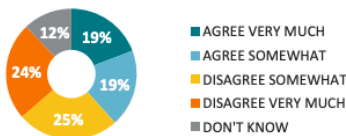
One of the most relevant elements is the construction of the 'other,' an internal enemy, to generate a reactive political movement that fears the immigrant, the cultural or religious other, or highlights the case of refugees, especially after the crisis

and the Syrian war in 2016, where these illiberal movements linked them to terrorism, generating a series of negative reactions that have influenced public opinion. Below, we provide evidence that allows us to glimpse the trend that different illiberal discourses have had on a global level:

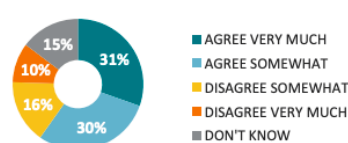
#### IPSOS IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEES POLL

### Attitudes to refugees: less than half want to close borders, but concern about terrorism, motives and integration

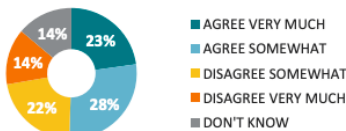
*"We must close our borders to refugees entirely—we can't accept any at this time"*



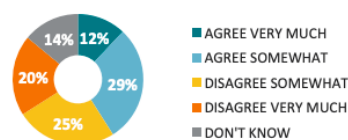
*"There are terrorists pretending to be refugees who will enter my country to cause violence and destruction"*



*"Most foreigners who want to get into my country as a refugee really aren't refugees. They just want to come here for economic reasons, or to take advantage of our welfare services"*



*"I'm confident that most refugees who come to my country will successfully integrate into their new society"*



17 © Ipsos.

Base: 16,040 adults aged 16-64 across Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United States. July 2016

GAME CHANGERS



Source: Ipsos (2016) Global View on immigration and the Refugee Crisis

According to the Ipsos survey on attitudes towards refugees, which includes more than 16,000 interviews from over twenty countries around the world, close to 40% of the population would agree with closing their borders. 60% believe that there are refugees entering their countries to commit acts of violence and terrorism.

More than 50% consider that the fundamental reason for displacement is not persecution, as outlined in international law (1951 Geneva Convention), but rather to benefit from social services. Around 40% believe that refugees will integrate into society.

Therefore, this survey highlights the influence of illiberal discourse from far-right movements spread through disinformation strategies:

1. Border closures and fortification against globalization.
2. Linking refugees to terrorism: constructing a scapegoat.
3. Depicting them as social parasites eroding the social rights of nationals.
4. Belief that integration is impossible.

Some of these disinformation strategies have been carried out through fake news campaigns that contrast with reality but aim to portray refugees as enemies to simplify social problems in terms of identity. For example, in 2018, Hungary's Fidesz party blamed immigrants and refugees for pension cuts.

There have also been disinformation campaigns that falsely linked mass sexual assaults in Germany on New Year's Eve in 2016 to refugees when only a small percentage of the perpetrators were refugees (Diezle, 2020).

Another example is the connection made between refugee status and terrorism, even though the historical data shows that, from 1975 to 2015, the United States recognized 3.5 million refugees, and only 20 individuals among them committed acts of terrorism in the country, resulting in the deaths of 3 Americans. These acts were primarily carried out in the 1970s by Cuban exiles (Strunzi, 2017).

These are just a few examples of how the figure of the refugee is politically exploited to construct an internal enemy through disinformation strategies that distort the reality of the facts. There exist certain dynamics that utilize these strategies to consolidate specific ideological positions, which translate to electoral goals through the social mobilization.

The challenge for 2024 would be creating mechanisms of verification that block these strategies which have already been employed in elections both national and regional. Other than the cited examples, the Spanish alt-right party Vox (in the European Conservative and Reformist group under the leadership of Poland's Law and Justice Party) has used the same dynamic of using a scapegoat in the context of social alarm, linking fake elements to real problems. For instance, they pointed to unaccompanied minors as recipients of a series of public aid whose amount does not align with reality, contrasting it with the pensions of the elderly in an electoral campaign poster. Therefore, we have disinformation, data that doesn't correspond to reality, the targeting of a vulnerable social group, in a context of social inequality that allows them to appeal to the emotions of the citizenry. "Either grandparents or immigrants", they construct a false dilemma that aims to emotionally mobilize the electorate. This is one of the challenges for democracy and elections in 2024.

## CONCLUSION

The EU is facing one of the greatest political challenges to democracy, disinformation, as outlined in the European Democracy Action Plan.

Illiberal movements, such as the realization by the far-right of an alternative model to liberal democracy, are employing disinformation strategies to influence public opinion. The new communicative framework is favoring the phenomenon known as post-truth, closely linked to populism.

Further, using these disinformation tactics, the far right can mobilize their voters for good electoral results, which would give them more space in EU institutions and influence their power over its politics. This could translate into more restrictive measures against refugees in particular, and migrants in general.

The 2016 refugee crisis was an event used by illiberal movements to stigmatize and portray refugees as internal enemies and scapegoats, promoting an ideological agenda in this regard:

1. Border closures and fortification against globalization.
2. Linking refugees to terrorism: the construction of the scapegoat.
3. Depicting refugees as social parasites eroding the social rights of nationals.
4. Integration is impossible.

However, the current refugee crisis is an opportunity to challenge the concept of refugees and reinforce the democratic liberal principles of the EU, through the development of a strategy of fair and transparent communication.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Every political concept is a contested concept, and just as illiberal strategies aim to strengthen the idea of the nation in opposition to globalization by appealing to fear and constructing scapegoats, in this case, the refugee becomes the focal point of this contestation.

Liberal discourses must respond with responsible communication policies that contrast with the facts. However, the medium of communication is relevant, but so is its content. In the case of the refugee figure, the refugee crisis in Ukraine presents an opportunity to question the concept of the refugee as a negative political subject, as illiberal movements do.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a new wave of refugees in Europe. This time, these illiberal movements in Europe have not rejected Ukrainian refugees, as they saw them as “cultural brethren,” thus fostering solidarity in the EU.

The text of the Geneva Convention (and its 1967 Protocol) has served as the basis from the perspective of international law for defining the refugee subject. Given the broad acceptance of the text (142 countries have ratified it), it can be said that there is consensus in this regard. Therefore, even though the geopolitical realities of the 2016 Syrian refugee crisis and the current Ukrainian refugee crisis are different, both are conceptualized politically and legally as refugees. Thus, the treatment by institutions should be the same.

Hence, the current crisis offers an opportunity to dissociate the negative construction of the refugee concept created by illiberal movements. It also allows for a range of public policies to benefit this group since it is part of the liberal ideology, such as the protection of vulnerable minorities, particularly in cases of political persecution. This transformation can turn the refugee figure from a scapegoat into a dignified subject, reinforcing the democratic commitment of the EU and improving the conditions of the European political project by strengthening a political spirit based on pluralism and the defense of people who suffer political persecution.

For this end, implementing and reinforcing the Action Plan for European Democracy becomes an indispensable tool to not only create a more transparent and safer Europe in terms of the truthfulness of the information citizens access and share, but also to limit the harm populist discourse does to society. Regardless of political

choices both in life and in voting, it is only fair that they do so with an informed opinion of the option they are endorsing.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abellán, J. (2007) “En torno al objeto de la “historia de los conceptos” de Reinhard Koselleck”, en E. B. Crespo (ed.) *El Giro Contextual: Cinco ensayos de Quentin Skinner, y seis comentarios*, Madrid: Tecnos, pp. 215-248.

Arendt, H. (2016) *La condición humana*. Barcelona: Paidós.

Balibar, E. (2018) “Racisme et nationalisme”, en E. Wallerstein y I. Balibar (ed.). *Race, nation, classe. Les identités ambiguës*. Paris: Découverte, pp. 82-123.

Borradori, G. (2003) *La filosofía en época de terror. Diálogos con Jurgen Habermas y Jacques Derrida*, Barcelona, Tauros.

Brown, W. (2015) *Estados amurallados y soberanía en declive*. Barcelona: Herder.

EU Commission (2023) European Democracy Action Plan. [online] Available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en) [Accessed 30/06/2023].

El País (2015) Trump califica de “caballo de Troya” a los refugiados sirios. [online] Available at: [https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/11/19/videos/1447941316\\_777631.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/11/19/videos/1447941316_777631.html) [Accessed 13/09/2021]

Financial Times (2017) *Europe refugee policy is ‘Trojan horse of terrorism’, says Orban*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/538b2a0a-154e-11e7-80f4-13e067d5072c> [Accessed 02/10/2021]

Fukuyama, F. (2015) *¿El fin de la historia? y otros ensayos*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

Habermas, J. (2002) *Historia y crítica de la opinión pública. La transformación estructural de la vida pública*. Barcelona: G. Gili.

Koselleck, R. (2012) *Historias de conceptos. Estudios sobre semántica y pragmática del lenguaje político y social*, Madrid, Trotta.

McIntyre, L. (2018) *Post-Truth*. MIT Press.

McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media*. London: Routledge.

Mudde, C. (2021) *La ultraderecha hoy*. Barcelona: Paidós.

Nacos, B. (2007) *Mass-mediated terrorism*. Plymouth: Rowman y Littlefield.

OAR (2019) *Asilo en cifras 2019*. Ministerio del interior.

Said, E. (2012) *Orientalismo*. Barcelona: De bolsillo.

Shklar, J. (1989) *The Liberalism of Fear*, in *Liberalism and the moral life*, Nancy L. Rosenblum (Ed.), Harvard University Press, pp. 21-38

Strunzi, R. (2017) Les réfugiées comme “cheveux de Troie” du terrorisme Islamique?, Organisation Suisse d’aide aux refugies. Ipsos (2016) *Global View on immigration and the Refugee Crisis*.

Vallespín, F. (1992) El pensamiento en la historia: aspectos metodológicos. *Revista del Centro de Estudios Constitucionales*, 13, pp. 153-178.

Vallespín, F. & Martínez-Bascuñán, M. (2017) *Populismos*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.