Institute of European Democrats

IED I RESEARCH PAPER

TACKLING DISINFORMATION:

Finding alternative roadmaps for Europe

European Parliament

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament. The European Parliament assumes no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use.

DEMOCRACY VERSUS AUTOCRACY. WHY THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS SUPERIOR AND HOW IT CAN DEFEAT AUTOCRACY

TACKLING DISINFORMATION: FINDING ALTERNATIVE ROADMAPS FOR EUROPE

Author: Çakır Somlyai Özge

Brussels, October 2022

Rue Montoyer 25 1000 Brussels Belgium
www.iedonline.eu

European Parliament

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

Our current (dis)information ecosystem is neither a product of coincidence nor it occurred by a fluke. But we were not ready to face such polarised and uncertain information when it hit hard. We are still in the adaptation process, looking for ways to tackle disinformation while trying to gain our trust back for the democratic institutions. The European Union is a strong and reliable umbrella organization. It has the capacity to offer further international cooperation and strengthen global attempts to cope with disinformation. Discourse matters. "Waging war' against disinformation instead of 'tackling' it does not serve the Union's normative values. However significant it is to be aware of coordinated attempts of spreading disinformation from Russia and China, the EU needs to keep an open eye for the rise of 'illiberal democracy' discourse inside the Union. It should also take action against the rising authoritarianism and disinformation threat at its elbow before late.

Social Media Summary

Rapid spread of disinformation caught Europe off guard. But the EU is a strong and has the capacity to cope with its damaging effects on democracy.

Keywords

#tacklingdisinformation, #informationecosystem, #democracy, #authoritarianism, #Europe, #UnitedStates

About the Author

Özge Çakır Somlyai is a second-year PhD student at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. She is awarded Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship to study for doctorate in Hungary. Her research focuses on the rise of alternative/new news media in Hungary and Turkey in the last decade. For the 2022-23 academic year autumn semester, she is assisting her supervisor, Dr. Gábor Polyák, in teaching Media Economics course offered for graduate students at ELTE.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF ACRONYMS

AKP Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi
EEAS European External Action Service
ENP European Neighbourhood Policy
EU European Union
GMF German Marshall Fund
IRA Internet Research Agency
MLSA Media and Law Studies Association
MTVA Magyar Televízió
NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
RAND Research & Development
UK United Kingdom
UN United Nations
US United States
WHO World Health Organisation

TABLE OF FIGURES

1 Heart of the matter: Being conscious of the (dis)information ecosystem we live in

We live in the age of Web 2.0. which 'encompasses web-based platforms that emerged as popular in the first decade of the twentieth century, and that incorporate user-generated content and social interaction, often alongside or in response to structures of (multimedia) content provided by the sites themselves' (Herring, 2013:4). In this day and time, discourses, narratives, and storytelling shape the way we think about individuals, events, and facts as well as what we believe in.

Researchers at RAND Corporation in the US utilize *truth decay* as a term to capture four related trends of our age: growing disagreement about facts; blurred lines between opinion and fact; increasing influence of opinion over fact; and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.

To understand the current information ecosystem and to receive information wisely, experienced researcher and academician Claire Wardle (Derakshan and Wardle, 2017) suggests that we need to break down three elements:

1. Different types of content that are being created and shared,
2. Motivations of those who create this content,
3. Ways this content is being disseminated.

Wardle makes an important point by drawing attention to the difference between the *'one-to-many'* broadcasting technologies that we previously relied on to today's prevalent *'peer-to-peer'* networks. Before the widespread use of social media, mass communication tools such as newspapers, radio, and television were the main mediums where attempts to influence public opinion occurred. Thus, content created and published on such mediums were coming from a singular source with the aim of reaching out to crowds. However, currently available social networks allow -as Wardle puts it- 'atoms' of propaganda to be directly targeted at online users who are prone to accepting and sharing a particular message they receive on these platforms.

"Once they [Internet users/content viewers] inadvertently share a misleading or fabricated article, image, video or meme, the next person who sees it in their social feed probably trusts the original poster and goes on to share it themselves. These 'atoms' then rocket through the information ecosystem at high speed powered by trusted peer-to-peer networks," she explains.

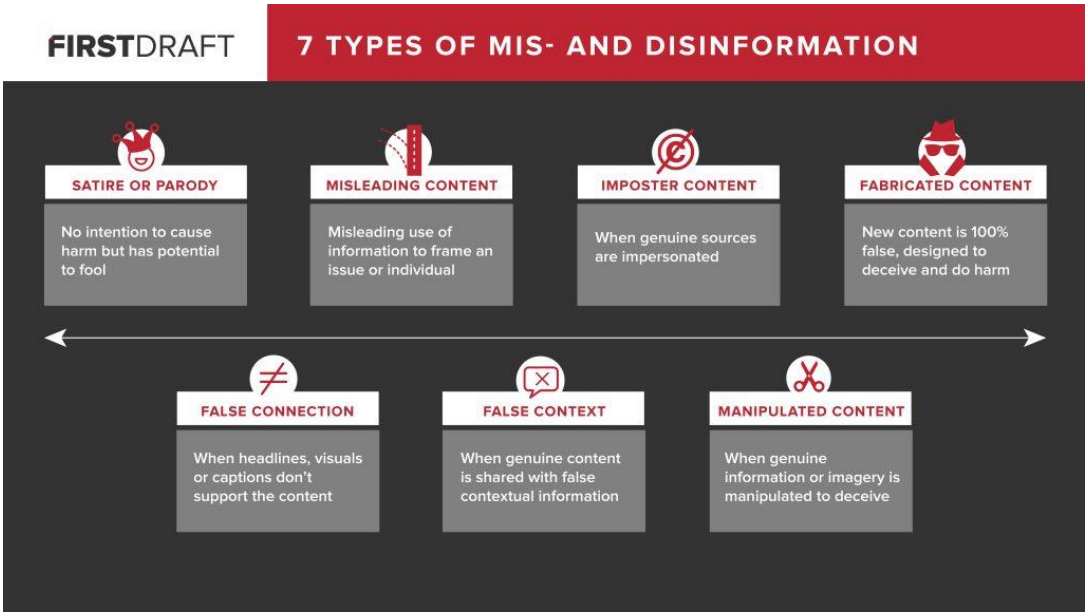

Figure 1: 7 Types of Mis- and Disinformation

Source: First Draft News, 2017

Wardle argues that it is possible to observe seven distinct types of problematic content within our current information ecosystem. At First Draft News, they have come up with the infographic seen above which can help viewers to draw the line between facts and opinions, to detect harmful, false content available on the Internet.

1.1. Disinformation poses threat to democracy: An old phenomenon with new spheres of influence

Our current (dis)information ecosystem is neither a product of coincidence nor it occurred by a fluke. Disinformation -as the above infographic shows- can be detected in different forms. One distinctive feature of it, however, is that it has the 'intention' to lead to misinterpretation or misrepresentation of facts in a community or a society to cause social tension, societal division, and most importantly undermine trust in institutions and governments.

In her book, *Fascism: A Warning*, Madeleine Albright, the first female US secretary of state, wrote:

"Russia's pioneering use of social media as a weapon reflects Putin's experience in the KGB, where spreading disinformation was both a way of life and an art. The impact, though, is larger now than during the Cold War, because the target audience is more accessible and bigger." As to what motives Russia might have, Albright continued and wrote: "A good guess would be to discredit democracy, divide Europe, weaken the transatlantic partnership and punish the governments that dare stand up to Moscow." (Albright, 2018).

Today, the Russians carry out systematic online activities to spread disinformation through social media. Since 2013, Internet Research Agency (IRA) in Saint Petersburg has carried on the business of spreading disinformation. IRA's monthly budget is estimated around one million Euros. The institution has 80 to 100 employees -also known as trolls- actively setting up bot accounts or fake profiles on

numerous social media platforms to upload and spread fabricated content online. By spreading disinformation and publishing content similar to above-mentioned examples, Russia aims at fuelling emotionalised and politicised discussions between people in Europe and at harming their trust toward the European institutions as well as democratic European governments (Volchek, 2021).

Disinformation poses a serious threat to the political and social stability in Europe. Sometimes, it might be quite difficult to detect the problem, the actual threat disinformation poses. Other times, it can be visible to the naked eye. Just like Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated: "Spreading disinformation is playing with people's lives. Disinformation can kill."

2 Words matter: Post-truth, fake news, and words of an unprecedented year that have been shaping our information ecosystem

2.1. Post-truth paving the way toward post-trust

In 2016, *post-truth* was chosen as the word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries. The definition provided for the adjective was "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

Referring to their choosing the term post-truth as word of the year, Oxford Dictionaries President Casper Grathwohl said, "It is not surprising that our choice reflects a year dominated by highly charged political and social discourse. Fuelled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, post-truth as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time."

Indeed, the year 2016 was a turning point for both Europe and the United States (US) in terms of facing the problem of widespread disinformation at the global level. In the same year, the Brexit referendum about whether the United Kingdom (UK) should leave the European Union (EU) and the previous presidential elections in the US took place. Certainly, both political events will leave their marks in history for several reasons. Above all, it was after these events that both sides of the Atlantic came to realize the actual extent of the threat that disinformation poses to democracies all around the world.

Although it was chosen as the word of the year in 2016, the term post-truth was introduced by Steve Tesich in 1992. In his article titled "Government of Lies" for The Nation, referring to the US society, Tesich wrote that "We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth … [however, now] we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world."

In other words, the expression 'post-truth', which entered the literature at the end of the twentieth century, has a dominant effect that shakes our trust in democratic institutions today, and unfortunately its sphere of influence is growing.

Researchers at Pew Research Center found out that a bigger part of the US population identifies spread of made-up news and disinformation as a serious

problem that causes harm to the nation and needs to be dealt with. More and more Americans think that disinformation poses a problem in a way that is similar to illegal immigration, racism, and sexism do. Pew researchers also concluded that nearly seven in ten adults in the US (68 percent to be precise) think that disinformation notably impacts Americans' confidence in government institutions.

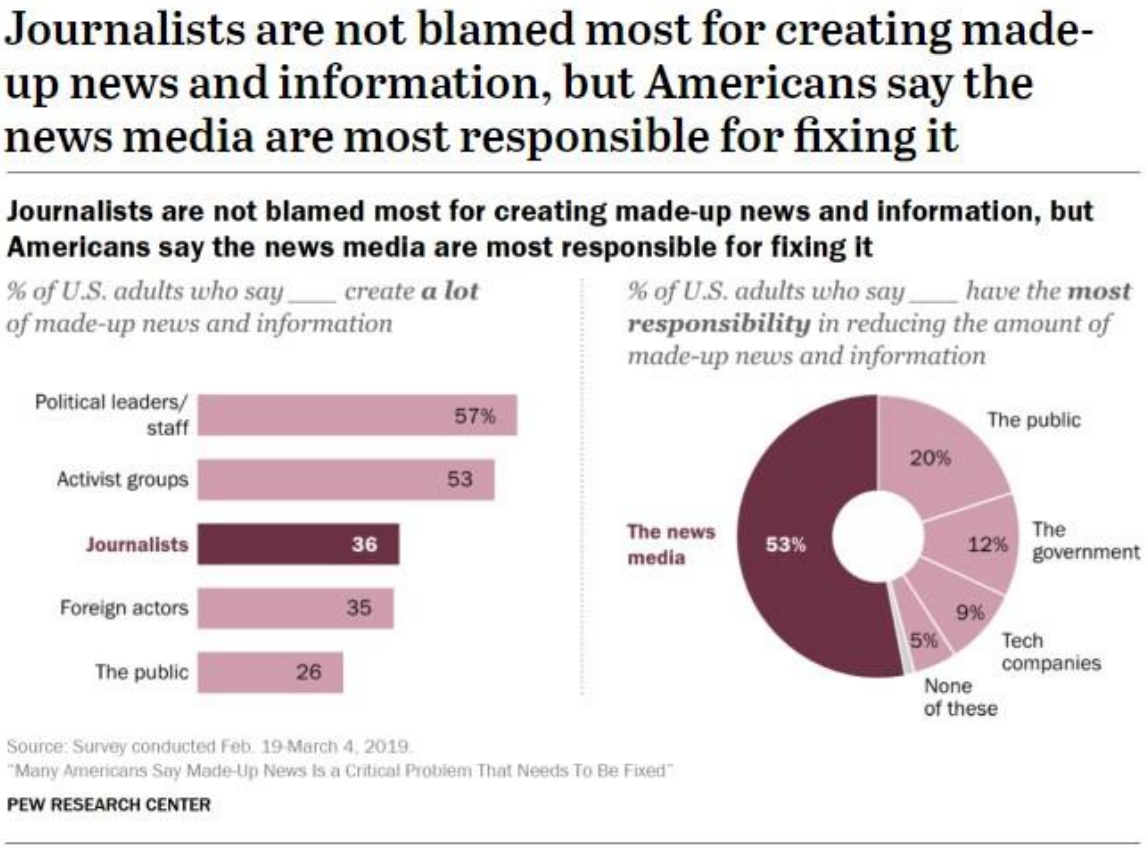

Figure 2: Journalists are not blamed most for creating made-up news and information, but Americans say the news media are most responsible for fixing it

Source : Pew Research Center, 2019

Same research concludes that a large part of the US population think that the government is responsible for the spread of false information, but journalists and news media should be the ones who come up with a solution to tackle the spread of disinformation.

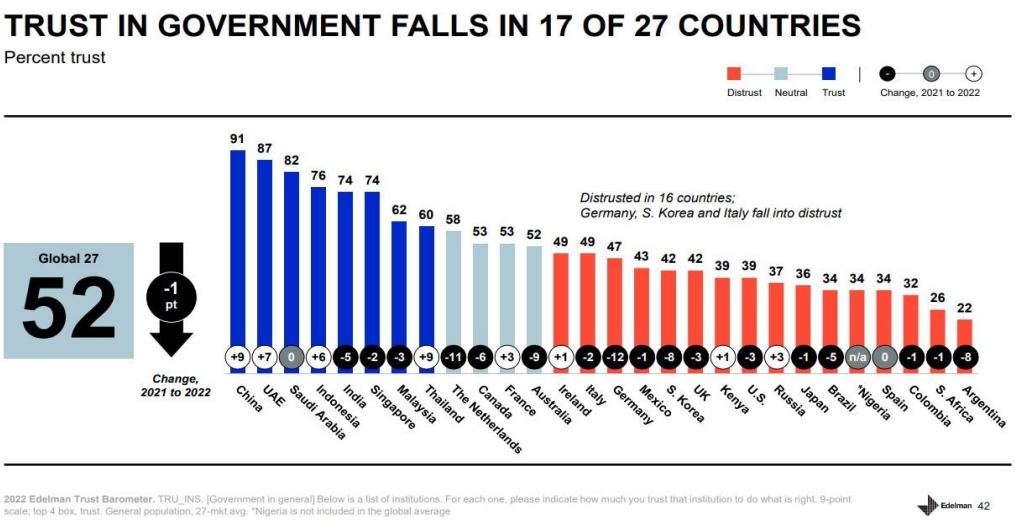

Figure 3: Trust in government falls in 17 of 27 countries
Source: *2022 Edelman Trust Barometer*

The situation on the other side of the Atlantic is not so pleasant either. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2022, in 17 of 27 countries, trust for the government is decreasing. Among these, there are European countries such as The Netherlands, France, Italy, Germany, and Spain.

2.2. Fake news: A concept that influenced not only political discourse but also governments' practices worldwide

Another term that most of us have been frequently encountering in the years since is *fake news*. According to an e-paper published by Heinrich Böll Foundation in August 2020, the term "fake news" encompasses *misinformation* (when false information is shared with no intended harm), *disinformation* (when false information is shared with the intention to cause harm), and *malinformation* (when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere) (definitions by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, 2017).

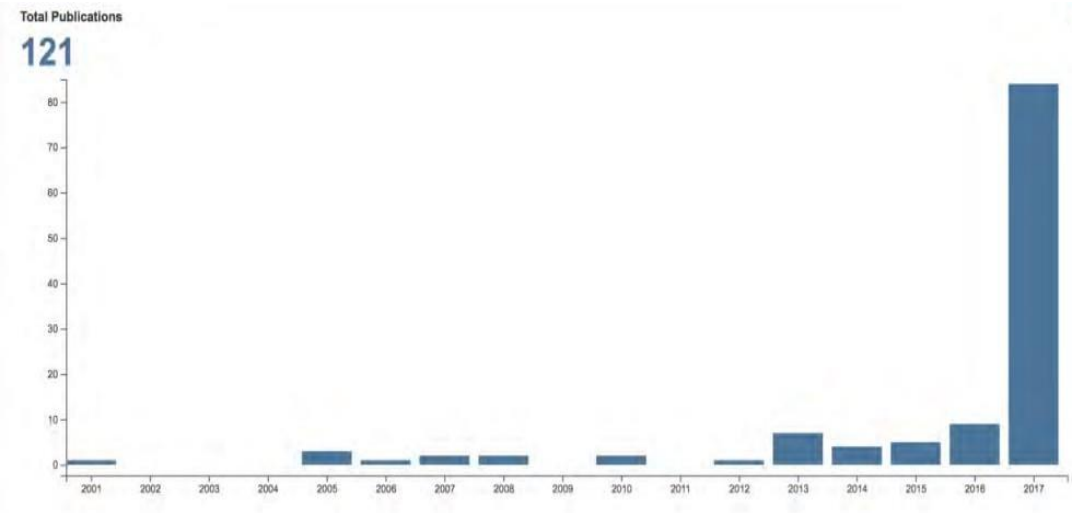

Figure 4: Number of peer-reviewed publications from the Web of Science that included 'fake news' in the title, abstract, or keywords
Source: Derakhshan and Wardle, 2017).

It is not a coincidence that starting from 2016, the number of peer-reviewed publications from the Web of Science that included 'fake news' in their title, abstract, or keywords increased by leaps and bounds. This was the year that Donald J. Trump became the US president. Trump did not coin the term 'fake news'. But he used these words so often that Trump's name has become reminiscent of 'fake news' and vice versa.

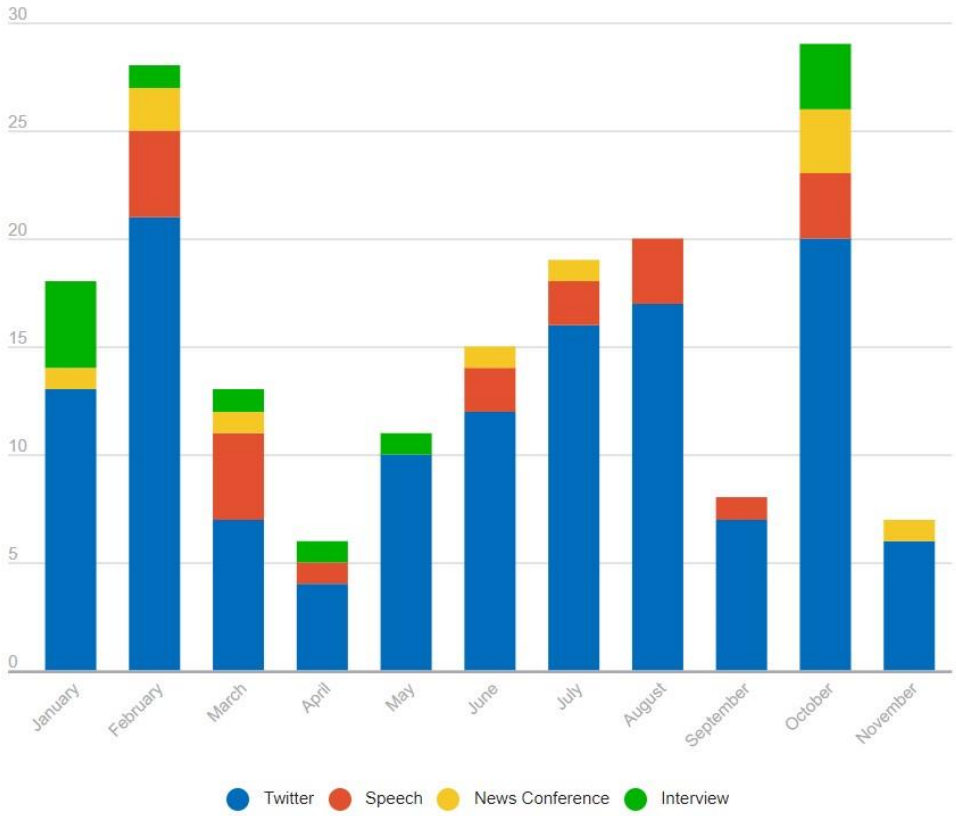

Figure 5: Research by PolitiFact shows that Trump used the term 'fake news' more than 154 times in 2017

Source: PolitiFact, 2017

Figure 6: Photo by Elijah Nouvelage / Reuters

According to a Politico investigation, following Trump's frequent use of the term fake news, a growing number of authoritarian rulers or state media across the world adopted the term to 'denounce their critics and limit free speech'.

"I am seeing it more and more. Trump is providing a context and framework for all sorts of authoritarian leaders -or democratic leaders and others who are dissatisfied or upset by critical media coverage- to undermine and discredit reporting," said Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists to Politico.

Among the most notable examples included in Politico's analysis is how Rodrigo Duterte, the then president of Philippines, called reporters "spies" while sitting next to Trump -who was laughing at the moment- at a press conference. Again in 2017, Duterte also complained of being "demonized" by "fake news." Another example was given from within the EU: Spain's then foreign minister said that police violence against Catalonians during their independence referendum was "fake news," despite the photos and videos that are indicative of the contrary.

2.3. Brexit: When Europe truly grasped how big of a threat disinformation poses to democracy

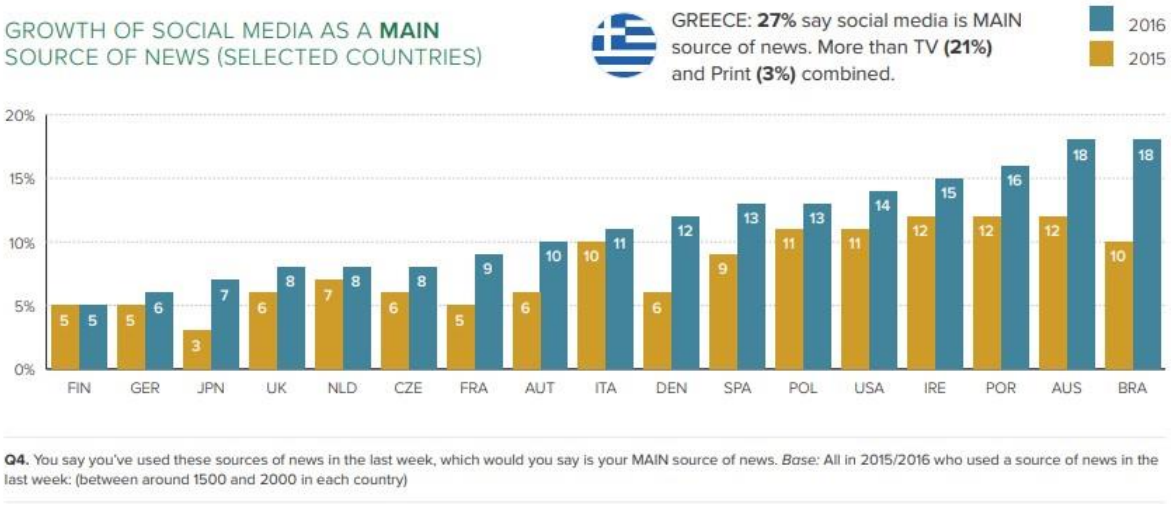

Figure 7: Growth of social media as a main source of news in selected countries

Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2016

According to the Reuters Institute's 2016 Digital News Report, in the same year social media's rise as a news source pulled even with the printed news media's decline, both serving as a source of information for around 35 percent of the UK's public. After dedicated news sites, social media is the second most important news source for those who prefer following news on the Internet (Newman et al 2016).

Researchers Max Hänska and Stefan Bauchowitz (2017) collected more than 7.5 million Brexit-related tweets shared in the month preceding the referendum. They aimed at getting a clear insight into the Twitter activities of those users who voted "leave" [the EU] -also known as Eurosceptics- as well as those who voted "remain" [in the EU]. Their analysis demonstrates that Eurosceptic users were more active in general. They tweeted more often compared to the users who voted to remain in the EU.

Hänska and Bauchowitz also examined the actual voting behaviours (percentages of "leave" and "remain" votes) and the turnouts at the referendum in the local districts where they examined the voters' Twitter behaviours. They found out that Twitter activity correlated with voting in the Brexit referendum. This result demonstrates the significance of social media as a news source. It also indicates that social media platforms such as Twitter have become the new public discussion spheres for many voters. While examining the influence of social media on Brexit, other researchers investigated the correlations between voter behaviour and activities on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and sites like Google. Like Hänska and Bauchowitz, they also found similar patterns (Polonski, 2016).

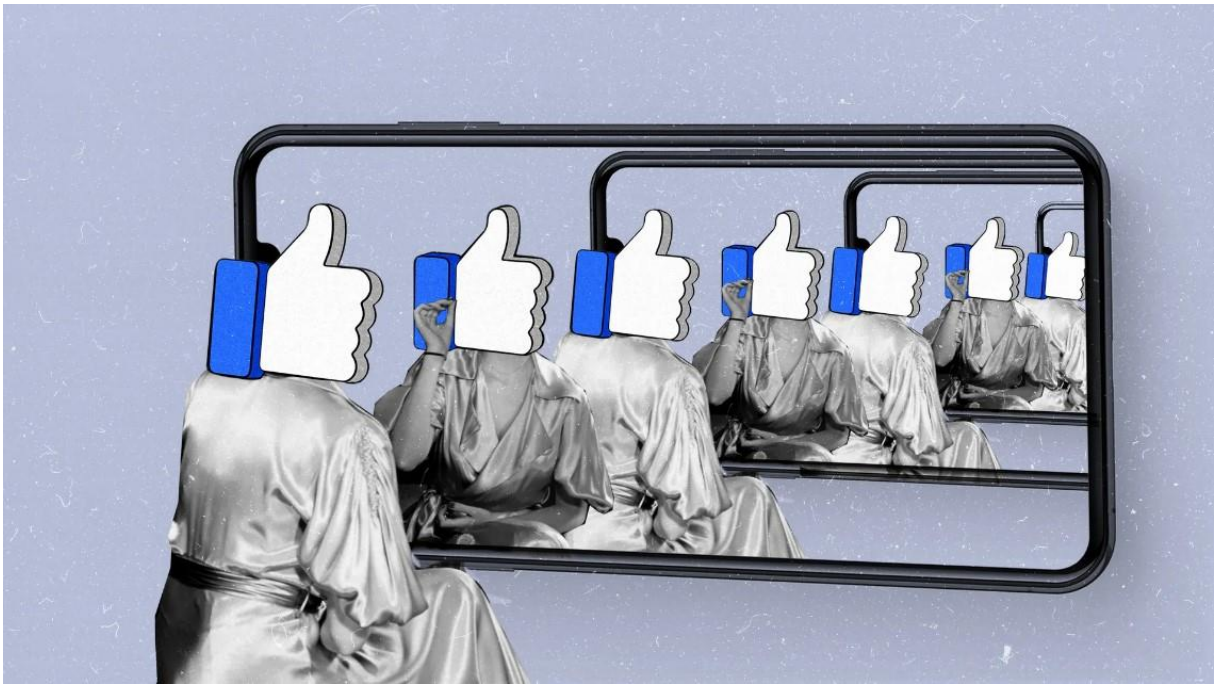

Figure 8: Illustration by Elena Lacey / Getty Images

While social media platforms are becoming new public spheres of political and social discussions, as seen at the Brexit example above, it does not always rest on openness and exchange of ideas between users who have differing opinions on matters. In other words, the tendency to fall into the trap of echo chambers is as easy as abc.

Hänska and Bauchowitz looked into whether a user who supported leaving the EU replied, quoted or retweeted a user who supported remaining in the EU. They found out that those who support leaving the union tended to mostly engage with other like-minded users. This result indicates important hallmarks of an echo-chamber. "remain" supporters were much more open. Specifically, 83 percent of interactions initiated by "leave" supporters were with other "leave" supporters. For supporters of remaining in the EU, this figure was 46 percent.

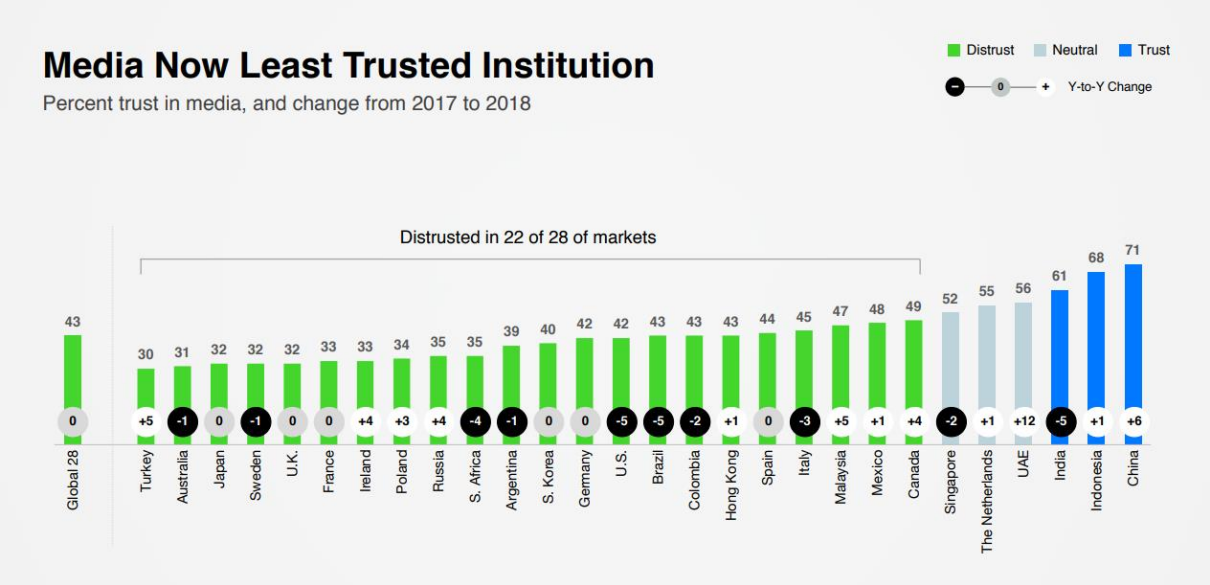

Figure 9: Percentage of trust in media in 28 countries across the globe and the change from 2017 to 2018

Source: 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer

In the past few years, these findings and similar trends have become widespread not only in the UK, but all-around Europe and even in numerous countries around the globe. As seen above, following the turbulent year of 2016, trust for the media started to ramp down.

2.4. Covid-19 pandemic and our enriching vocabulary: Infodemic

World Health Organization (WHO) defines an infodemic as "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response."

According to the information shared on WHO's official website, "An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them. With growing digitization – an expansion of social media and internet use – information can spread more rapidly. This can help to more quickly fill information voids but can also amplify harmful messages."

While both sides of the Atlantic were trying to grasp fully and truly what happened in 2016, the year 2020 brought a startling sequence of events with itself. As a result, Oxford Dictionaries has gathered its words of the year for 2020 under the title of "Words of an Unprecedented Year."

Beyond doubt, *Covid-19* was among the most frequently used words of 2020. In the same year, use of the word *pandemic* has increased by more than 57 thousand percent. Grathwohl reflected on their choice by saying that he "has never witnessed a year in language like the one we have just had." "It is both unprecedented and a little ironic -in a year that left us speechless- 2020 has been filled with new words unlike any other," he added.

Spread of the Covid-19 across Europe was accompanied by a great amount of false information. The novel coronavirus was unknown, unpredictable, and at the beginning it was uncertain when and how it would be taken under control. Uncertainty causes panic. In times of crisis like this, people look for remedies or hope. Our information ecosystem and the rise of 'peer-to-peer' communication accelerated the spread of disinformation about the virus. A conservative pastor's claim to heal viewers of Coronavirus through their television screen reached many. The claim that drinking water, or even more dangerously drinking bleach can help protect yourself from the virus spread like wildfire on the Internet.

There was news spread deliberately to negatively affect people's trust in their governments and in the EU institutions. One of the first disinformation cases was detected in January 2020. A news report claimed that it was NATO who spread the coronavirus in the EU. In September 2020, there was a recurring pro-Kremlin disinformation narrative about secret labs dedicated to develop biological weapons by the US. The news claimed that the novel coronavirus was created by Americans in a laboratory in Kazakhstan. Later on, the target of disinformation campaigns became the coronavirus vaccines. Content about Covid-19 vaccines aimed to cause distrust among people against health institutions, healthcare professionals and vaccinations.

3 The events in 2016 and its aftermath ignited the wick for shaping EU policies to tackle disinformation

In a fashion similar to Derakshan and Wardle, the European Union (EU) also pays attention to separating *disinformation* from *misinformation*. Within the framework of #FactsMatter campaign led by the European Commission, disinformation is defined as "false or misleading content that is spread *with an intention to* deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm." Misinformation on the other hand, is defined as "false or misleading content shared *without harmful intent* though the effects can be still harmful."

The EU had to commit itself to the challenging task of tackling disinformation. As explained in the earlier parts of this article, 2016 was a cornerstone for the EU to realize how devastating the effects of disinformation and its spread can be. Disinformation campaigns aim at spreading distrust, confusion, and deception among people toward news media, political institutions, and governments.

The EU already offers structured, binding policies, regulations and regulatory oversight as well as means to enforce these regulations. Prior to the accelerating spread of disinformation with the Covid-19 pandemic, several EU institutions have been working on countermeasures and long-term strategies to tackle disinformation. They have developed numerous mechanisms to detect, prevent and mitigate disinformation.

Forming the EU East StratCom Task Force was the first milestone among the Union's measures to tackle disinformation. Managed by the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Task Force focuses proactively on communicating EU policies and activities to the Eastern Partnership countries.

EUvsDisinfo is the Task Force's flagship project. Its core objective is "to increase public awareness and understanding of the Kremlin's disinformation operations,

and to help citizens in Europe and beyond develop resistance to digital information and media manipulation."

Following the report of the High-Level Expert Group on fake news and online disinformation, Digital Commissioner Mariya Gabriel led the establishment of a "multi-stakeholder forum on disinformation" to facilitate cooperation between actors, eventually resulting in *the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation*.

After the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation by the EU proved to be effective, the 2020 Code brought international actors to commit to tackle disinformation together. While preparing the code, the EU contacted major online platforms, emerging and specialized platforms, players in the advertising industry, fact-checkers, research, and civil society organizations. Among these are Meta, Twitter, and Google, as well as relatively new actors such as ClubHouse. In today's dynamic digital environment, lengthening the list of signatories and contributors to this code plays a key role in tackling disinformation globally. It provides room for cooperation as well as for protecting democratic values within the current information ecosystem.

By becoming signatories, the above-mentioned big tech companies as well as software designers, advertisers and trade associations who signed the code agree to follow in their efforts to protect users from disinformation. The Code aims at improving the transparency, trustworthiness and accountability of the current information ecosystem, more specifically online information ecosystem. According to the Code, advertising should be clearly distinguished from editorial content on news sites, and users should be able to see why they have been targeted with the content they see. Platforms should also ensure that their algorithms prioritise 'good' content which is problematic as it does not define clearly what 'good' means.

Other than not having a clear definition for 'good content' the code has one major weakness which is inevitable due to its democratic approach at tackling disinformation; it is based on voluntary participation of signatories. At the moment, the list is long, all the relevant internet media companies have signed the code, but there is nothing which is legally binding and keeping them from withdrawing their signatures.

However, here comes the EU's normative characteristic as well as promoting democratic values. Although there would be no legal consequences of withdrawing their signatures from the code, the tech companies and online news media outlets would face a backlash and criticism that they would choose to avoid. It is also important to keep in mind that these signatories played active roles in the process of preparing the agreement.

Věra Jourová, vice president for values and transparency at the European Commission, talked about the Union's latest initiative; the Digital Services Act at the 2022 EU-US Defence Forum. "The first rule we follow is what is illegal offline must be illegal online. We have a new legislation for that; the Digital Services Act," she said, and added: "Free speech is not absolute neither in Europe nor here in the US. You also have exceptions related to fraud, child pornography, incitement to violence or commercial speech such as advertising, not to mention defamation." Following that, Jourová underlined the necessity for cooperation between the two sides of the Atlantic; the US and Europe to face disinformation as a global issue and to tackle it effectively.

CONCLUSION

The EU has the capacity to offer further international cooperation, particularly with the US and therefore strengthen multinational attempts to cope with the global issue of disinformation. Above explored approaches followed by the EU to counter disinformation/fake news demonstrate the plurality of the Union's approaches. All these aim at ensuring that European societies keep having trust in democracy and democratic political institutions.

Research (Romanova et al. 2020) reveals that there are two main approaches followed by the EU to tackle disinformation. First one is utilized by the European Commission which includes 'the recognition of citizens' right to information as well as of the need to promote critical thinking and information literacy.' Second approach is the one taken by the External Action Service within the EU. It aims at exposing the disinformation and the mediums where it spreads.

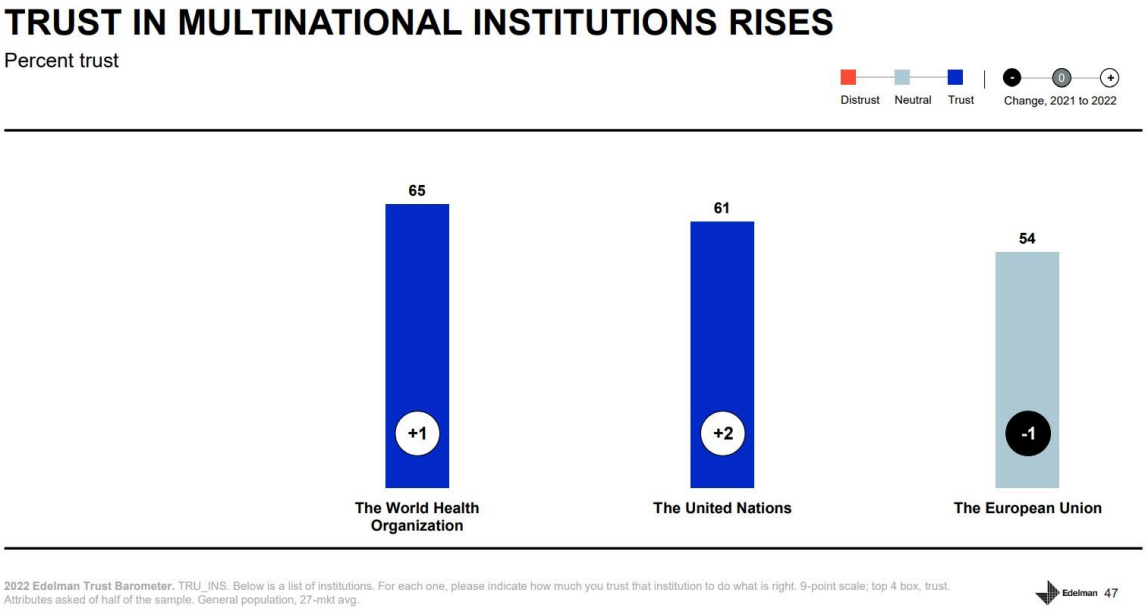

Figure 10: Trust in multinational institutions rises

Source: 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer

After the coronavirus pandemic, there is an expected and understandable level of trust rising toward the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN). However, there is some decrease in people's trust for the European Union which is worrisome. (2022 Edelman Trust Barometer). As explained earlier, the rise of certain negative narratives about governments and democratic institutions went hand in hand with the frequent use of words such as 'fake news' by prominent political leaders like Donald Trump as well as researchers and journalists. Declining trust in governments and media affects the trust toward the multilateral solutions to global problems as well.

Policy Analyst Paul Butcher puts it bluntly: "Dissatisfaction with mainstream politics, polarisation, populist political actors and disinformation are all linked to

one another and mutually reinforcing, creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to break." (Butcher, 2019).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCERNS

Since 2016, due to the series of crises faced by European societies, the EU's instruments to tackle disinformation have been put to test. While still trying to recover from the harmful effects of disinformation spread during 2016 followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's all-out war against Ukraine hit Europe when least expected.

Unsurprisingly, much of the ongoing disinformation-themed debate across the EU focuses on the role of actors such as Russia and China -more specifically Russia- in the spread of disinformation on the Internet. As emphasized in the earlier parts of this article, Russian and Chinese efforts in spreading disinformation are undeniable. However, it would be wise not to ignore the sources of disinformation within and/or near the EU by focusing solely on Russian efforts. Such an approach is inconvenient as it would reinforce the discourse of *"war against disinformation"* used by some researchers (see for example Boyd, 2017 and Butcher, 2019).

'Waging war' against disinformation instead of 'tackling' or 'confronting' it is not helpful when it comes to strengthening the EU's normative approach to tackling disinformation problem while supporting people's trust and participation in democratic processes in their countries and in Europe. Such discourse might unintendedly encourage those governments within or nearby the EU with a more authoritarian nature by letting them implement so-called measures against disinformation with the intent of suppressing independent media outlets. Péter Krekó from the Political Capital Institute in Budapest warns that the Hungarian media landscape today is not in a shape that allows pluralism. This is the case mainly because the mainstream news media in the country is under the control of the government and dissident journalists or media outlets are being shut down.

Figure 11: Deutsche Welle (DW) / 2021

Magyar Nemzet (Hungarian Nation) is a newspaper known for its proximity to the Hungarian government. Its website frequently hosts op-ed articles about Hungary's possible exit from the EU. After the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Hungarian government blamed the opposition for saying that they would send Hungarian soldiers to fight in Ukraine therefore dragging Hungary into the war. Hungarian public media organisation Magyar Televízió (MTVA or Hungarian Television in English) said: "The left is attacking the independent Hungarian public media again," in a recent statement. "Now they want to prescribe what is in the news in connection with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict."

The Hungarian government also acted quickly to take advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to introduce a state of emergency not long after the first coronavirus case was seen in the country in March 2020. The government's excuse was to make quick decisions to fight the pandemic, but ambiguity about the time limit set the alarm bells ringing for many non-governmental organizations as well as journalists.

Hungary's coronavirus act stated that "spreading falsehood or claim [...] or spreading a distorted truth in relation to the emergency in a way that is suitable for alarming or agitating a large group of people" are considered as criminal offenses. Spreading claims or distorted facts that "interfere with the successful protection of the public" which could also be punished by up to five years in prison.

"Five years is too long to be imprisoned for stating facts," says Justin Spike in his interview with me on Medyascope. One week before our interview, he already wrote about two people that were taken under police custody for expressing their opinions about the government's policies during the pandemic. These people were not found guilty, and they were released, but "The actual story here is that now in Hungary you can get arrested, if not charged, for sharing your opinion on social media," he added.

Increasingly centralized state media empires are undermining the media pluralism that Europe needs by pressurizing independent media and by narrowing the scope of it. Unfortunately, Hungary presents a clear example of this trend. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán describes his way of practicing democracy as "illiberal democracy." (Polyák, 2019). However, a strong democracy needs a free flow of information and multiple, fact-based narratives that can compete with each other. This is why the European Union's normative approach to tackle disinformation should be at the core of the strategies followed by the Union.

It is encouraging to see that the EU tries to act as an inclusive, normative actor while working on its policies to tackle disinformation paying attention to the Eastern Partnership Countries which include Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. On the other hand, Turkey is a candidate country with a young and growing population where alternative news media is at rise and it deserves attention from the EU.

Similar to Hungary, in Turkey as well most of the mainstream news media organisations are under strict control of the government. Unlike Hungary, journalists and media workers who try to do their jobs face limitations, barriers, even jail time. According to the recent data shared by the Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA), as of June 16th, 2022, there are at least 56 imprisoned journalists and media employees in Turkey, at Europe's elbow.

Despite being ruled by AKP's (Justice and Development Party) authoritarianism (Esen and Gümüscü, 2020) since 2002, journalists and media professionals in

Turkey are eager to carry on their journalistic practices and tackle disinformation. In fact, being suppressed under the authoritarian government of AKP catalysed the transition to and spread of alternative news media in Turkey. Turkey has a great potential to be an asset for Europe and for developing, improving multilateral attempts to cope with disinformation. Many experienced journalists noticed the importance of alternative platforms to carry on their journalistic activities as early as 2015 and established independent news platforms.

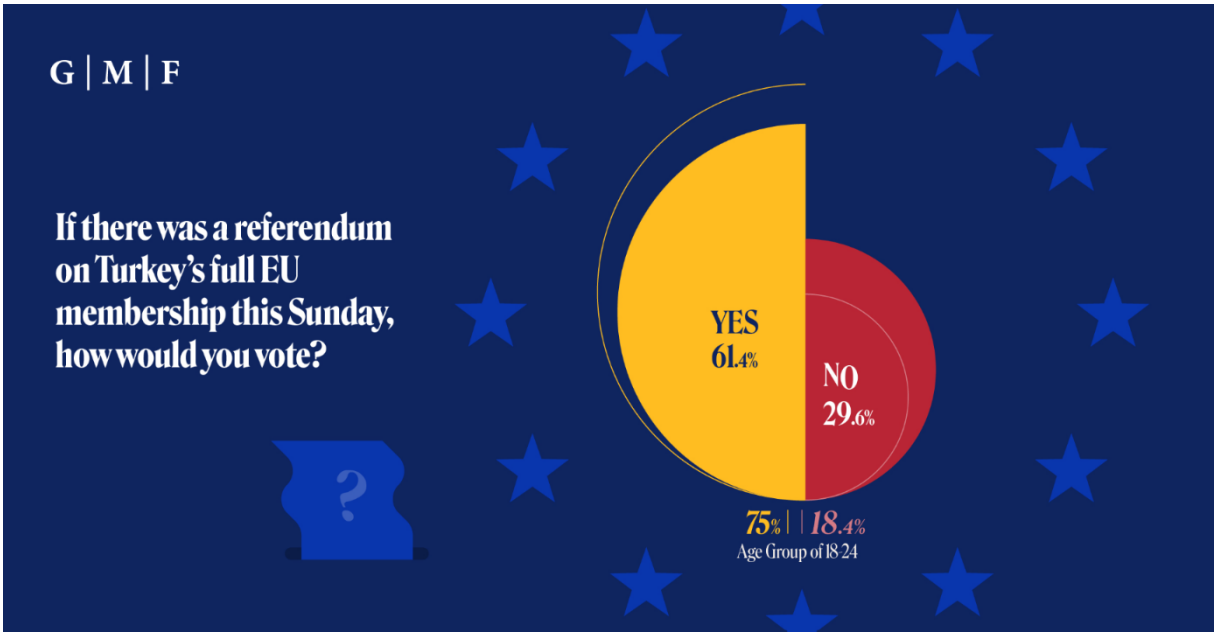

Figure 12: Percentages of participants who would vote "yes" and would vote "no" if asked whether Turkey should become a member of the European Union

Source: German Marshall Fund (GMF), 2022

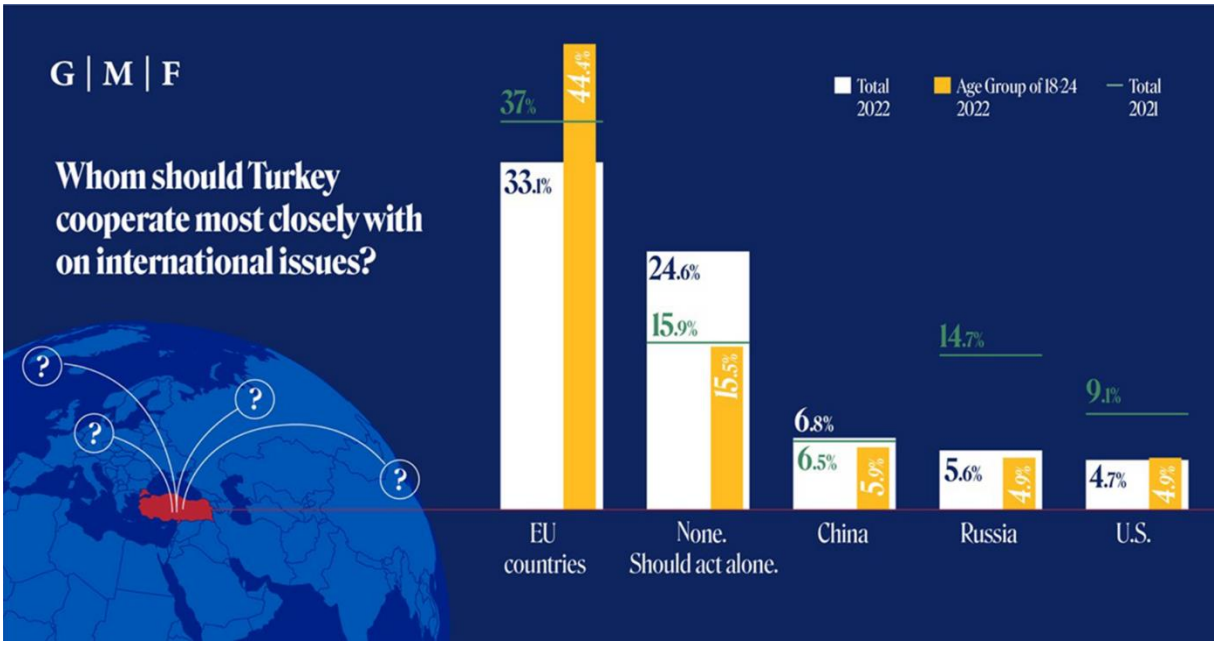

Figure 13: Percentages of participants who support Turkey's cooperation with the European Union countries, Russia, China, the United States and none of the options

Source: German Marshall Fund (GMF), 2022

Especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, factors such as the AKP government's mismanagement of the economy, currency depreciation faced by the Turkish Lira and the sudden and ongoing decrease in the purchasing power of consumers in Turkey as well as suppression of the freedom of speech have affected Turkish people's opinion and expectations from the EU in a positive way.

Recent research by the German Marshall Fund (GMF) in Turkey demonstrates that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a negative impact on how the Turkish perceive Russia. After the invasion, Turkish citizens have been less likely to perceive Russia as a partner and more likely to see it as a security threat.

47.2 percent of the respondents see Azerbaijan among Turkey's most important partners followed by Germany with 15.4 percent. Russia follows as the third with 13.8 percent.

According to the same research results, it was observed that acting together with the EU countries on international problems was explicitly preferred more by the respondents in the 18–24 age group. The tendency to vote "yes" in a possible referendum on Turkey's EU membership is also significantly stronger in the same age group.

In a healthy democracy, the media should be focusing on informing people and empowering them to engage in democratic processes. In order to do so, European governments as well as the US government and media institutions on both side of the Atlantic should demonstrate tangible, result-oriented actions. While doing so, being inclusive and building its strategies to tackle disinformation with its normative values in mind should be the key aspect of the Union's policies.

REFERENCES

Albright, M. (2018). *Fascism: A Warning*. London. William Collins. Available from: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/oa_textbooks/2 [Accessed: 13th August 2022]

Bátorfy, A. (2019). Hungary: A country on the path toward an authoritarian media system. In Giannakopoulos, A. (ed.) *Media, Freedom of Speech, and Democracy in the EU and Beyond*. The S. Daniel Abraham Center for International and Regional Studies, Tel Aviv University. ISBN: 978-965-7440-08-7

Bentzen, N. (2018). From post-truth to post-trust? Available from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/628298/EPRS_ATA(2018)628298_EN.pdf [Accessed: 12th August 2022]

Borrell, J. (2020). Video conference of foreign affairs ministers: Remarks by the High Representative Josep Borrell at the press conference. European External Action Service. Available from: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76381/video-conference-foreign-affairs-ministers-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-press_en [Accessed: 12th August 2022]

Briggs, M. (2007). *Journalism 2.0: How to Survive and Thrive*. USF Tampa Bay Open Access Textbooks Collection. 2.

Butcher, Paul (2019), *Disinformation and democracy: The home front in the information war*, European Policy Centre. Available from: https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2019/190130_Disinformationdemocracy_PB.pdf

Cakir-Somlyai, Ö. (2020). *Freedom of expression in Hungary in the aftermath of the coronavirus act: Interview with Budapest-based journalist Justin Spike*. Medyascope. Available from: https://medyascope.tv/2020/05/19/freedom-of-expression-in-hungary-in-the-aftermath-of-thecoronavirus-act-interview-with-budapest-based-journalist-justin-spike/ [Accessed: 30th August 2022]

Cakir-Somlyai, Ö. (2020). *Political scientist Zoltán Vörös: "In Hungary, not the parliament but the media and civil society are at stake."* Medyascope. Available from: https://medyascope.tv/2020/03/28/political-scientist-zoltan-voros-in-hungary-not-theparliament-but-media-and-civil-society-are-at-stake/ [Accessed: 30th August 2022]

Cakir-Somlyai, Ö. (2020). *Taking advantage of a pandemic: Hungary passes law allowing Prime Minister Orbán to rule by decree – Interview with Tamás Lattmann and Dalma Dojcsák*. Medyascope. Available from: https://medyascope.tv/2020/04/02/taking-advantage-of-apandemic-hungary-passes-law-allowing-prime-minister-orban-to-rule-by-decree-interviewwith-tamas-lattmann-and-dalma-dojcsak/ [Accessed: 30th August 2022]

Çoban, B. (ed.), Ataman, B. (ed.) & Erkmen (ed.). (2020). *Yeni Gazetecilik: Mecralar, Deneyimler, Olanaklar*. Istanbul. Kafka Kitap.

Deutsche Welle (DW) Turkey. Alternative media on the rise in Turkey. Available from: https://learngerman.dw.com/en/alternative-media-on-the-rise-in-turkey/a-19231282 [Accessed: 6th September 2022]

Esen, B. & Gümüscü, S. (2020). Why did Turkish democracy collapse? A political economy account of AKP's authoritarianism. Party Politics. 20 (10). pp. 1-17. DOI: 10.1177/1354068820923722

Euractiv. (2017). 'Fake news' another weapon in Orban's illiberal Hungary. Available from: www.euractiv.com/section/freedom-of-thought/news/fake-newsanother-weapon-in-orbans-illiberal-hungary/ [Accessed: 6th September 2022]

European Commission. (2019). Report on the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation. Available from: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/report-implementation-action-plan-against-disinformation [Accessed: 12th August 2022]

European Commission. (2019). *Report on the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation*. 12. Available from: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic/ [Accessed: 15th August 2022]

European Commission. (2022). 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation. Available from: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2018-code-practice-disinformation [Accessed: 5th September 2022]

European Commission. (2022). The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation. Available from: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation [Accessed: 5th September 2022]

European Commission. (2022). The Digital Services Act package. Available from: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package [Accessed: 6th September 2022]

EUvsDisinfo. (2020). Disinfo: Coronavirus was created by Americans in a biolaboratory in Kazakhstan. Available from: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-was-created-by-americans-in-a-biolaboratory-in-kazakhstan [Accessed: 19th August 2022]

EUvsDisinfo. (2020). Disinfo: Nato spreads the coronavirus in the EU. Available from: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-spreads-the-coronavirus-in-the-eu/ [Accessed: 19th August 2022]

EUvsDisinfo. (2021). Disinfo: The Covid-19 vaccine has provoked more illness and deaths than the virus itself. Available from: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-covid-19-vaccine-has-provoked-more-illness-and-deaths-than-the-virus-itself [Accessed: 19th August 2022]

EUvsDisinfo. Disinfo Database. Available from: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/ [Accessed: 4th September 2022]

EUvsDisinfo. Ukraine. Available from: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ukraine/ [Accessed: 7th September 2022]

FOX 35 Orlando. (2020). Don't drink bleach to prevent coronavirus, poison control center warns. Available from: https://www.fox10phoenix.com/news/dont-drink-bleach-to-prevent-coronavirus-poison-control-center-warns [Accessed: 19th August 2022]

Fuchs, C. (2015). *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*. New York. Routledge.

Goldstein, M. & Mac, R. (2022). Trump's Truth Social is poised to join a crowded field. The New York Times. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/business/trumps-truth-social.html [Accessed: 12th August 2022]

Gorvett, Z. (2020). No, drinking water doesn't kill coronavirus. BBC Future. Available from: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200319-covid-19-will-drinking-water-keep-you-safe-from-coronavirus [Accessed: 19th August 2022]

Hänska, M. & Bauchowitz, S. (2017). Tweeting for Brexit: How social media influenced the referendum. In: Mair, J. (ed.) Clark, T. (ed.) Fowler, N. (ed.) Snoddy, R. (ed.) & Tait, R. (ed..) *Brexit, Trump and the Media*. UK. Abramis Academic Publishing. pp. 31-35. ISBN 9781845497095

Herman, E. S. & Chomsky, N. (1988). Manufacturing Consent: *The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. London. Vintage.

Herring, C. S. (2013). Discourse in Web 2.0.: Familiar, Reconfigured and Emergent. In Tannen, D. (ed.) &Trester, A. M. (ed.) *Discourse 2.0.: Language and New Media*. Washington DC. Georgetown University Press.

Herrman, J. (2016) 'Brexit' talk on social media favored the 'leave' side. New York Times. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/25/business/brexit-talk-on-social-media-heavily-favored-the-leave-side.html [Accessed: 4th August 2022]

International Press Institute IFEX. (2017). Hungarian taxpayers fund a unique 'fake news' industry. Available from: https://ifex.org/hungarian-taxpayers-fund-unique-fake-news-industry/ [Accessed: 6th September 2022]

Kavanagh, J. & Michael D. R. (2018) *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. Santa Monica, CA. RAND Corporation. Available from: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html. [Accessed: 30th August 2022]

Lemon, J. (2020). Conservative pastor claims he 'healed' viewers of coronavirus through their TV screens. Newsweek. Available from: https://www.newsweek.com/conservative-pastor-claims-he-healed-viewers-coronavirus-through-their-tv-screens-1492044 [Accessed: 19th August 2022]

Loukopoulos, S. (2021). State and corporate capture of the media threaten the quality of democracy in Greece. Available from: https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/06/07/state-and-corporate-capture-media-threaten-quality-democracy-greece [Accessed: 30th August 2022]

Magyar Televízió. Újabb ellenzéki politikai támadás a független magyar közmédia ellen. Available from: https://mtva.hu/2022/02/28/ujabb-ellenzeki-politikai-tamadas-a-fuggetlen-magyar-kozmedia-ellen/# [Accessed: 6th September 2022]

Malloy, D. (2021). The urgent task before the US and EU: To craft democracy that 'delivers'. Available from: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-urgent-task-before-the-us-and-eu-to-craft-democracy-that-delivers/ [Accessed: 14th August 2022]

Marwick, A. E. (2018). Why do people share fake news? A sociotechnical model of media effects. Georgetown Law Technology Review 2 (2). pp. 474–512. Available from: https://georgetownlawtechreview.org/why-do-people-share-fake-news-a-sociotechnical-model-of-media-effects/GLTR-07-2018/ [Accessed: 13th August 2022]

Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA). (2022). Imprisoned journalists and media employees in Turkey. Available from:

https://www.mlsaturkey.com/en/imprisoned-journalists-and-media-employees-in-turkey/ [Accessed: 6th September 2022]

Newman, N. Fletcher, R. Levy, D. A. & Nielsen, R. K. (2016). Reuters Institute digital news report 2016. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. Available from: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/Digital%2520News%2520Report%25202016.pdf [Accessed: 16th August 2022]

Pew Research Center. (2019). *Many Americans say made-up news is a critical problem that needs to be fixed*. Available from: https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-be-fixed/ [Accessed: 12th August 2022]

Polonski, V. (2016). Social media voices in the UK's EU referendum. Medium. Available from: https://medium.com/@slavacm/social-media-voices-in-theuks-eu-referendum-brexit-or-bremain-what-does-the-internet-say-about-ebbd7b27cf0f# Accessed: 06.08.2022

Polyák, G. (2019). Media in Hungary: Three pillars of an illiberal democracy. In Połońska, E. (ed.) & Beckett, C. (ed.) *Public Service Broadcasting and Media Systems in Troubled European Democracies*. London. Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-3-030-02709-4

Romanova, T. A. Sokolov, N. I. & Kolotaev, Y. Y. (2020). Disinformation as a threat to democratic resilience: Approaches used in the EU and its member state Lithuania. Baltic Region. pp. 53-67. DOI: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-1-4

Schwartz, J. (2017). *Trump's 'fake news' mantra a hit with despots*. Politico. Available from: https://www.politico.com/story/2017/12/08/trump-fake-news-despots-287129 [Accessed: 13th August 2022]

Steinmetz, K. (2016). Oxford's word of the year for 2016 is "post-truth". Available from: https://time.com/4572592/oxford-word-of-the-year-2016-post-truth/ [Accessed: 30th August 2022]

Tesich, S. (1992). *A government of lies*. The Nation. 254 (1). pp. 12–14. Available from: https://www.thefreelibrary.com/A+government+of+lies.-a011665982 [Accessed: 12th August 2022]

Ünlühisarcıklı Ö. Tastan K. Akman Canbilek, C. (2022). Turkish Perceptions of the European Union 2022. German Marshall Fund. Available from: https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkish-perceptions-european-union-2022 [Accessed: 17th August 2022]

Volchek, D. (2021). Inside the 'propaganda kitchen' - A former Russian 'troll factory' employee speaks out. Available from: https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-troll-factory-hacking/31076160.html [Accessed: 20th August 2022]

Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H. (2017) Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe. Available from: https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c [Accessed: 14th August 2022]

World Health Organization Report. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) situation report, 45 Available from: https://www.who.int/docs/default-

source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200305-sitrep-45-covid-19.pdf
[Accessed: 14th August 2022]