

# Poland's Experience in Combating Disinformation:

Inspirations for the Western Balkans



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Artur Adamczyk  
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# Table of Contents

From the Editors .....	7
Artur Adamczyk, Olga Barburska <i>The Evolution of Poland's Foreign Policy Towards the Balkan Region. Challenges Posed by Russian Anti-Polish Propaganda Spread in the Balkan States</i> .....	11
Dorota Jurkiewicz-Eckert <i>Polish Institutes and Their Role in Polish Public Diplomacy's Engagement Against Russia's War in Ukraine</i> .....	29
Agnieszka Ostrowska <i>Russian vs Chinese Disinformation Narratives in Poland. A Comparative Analysis</i> .....	45
Bruno Surdel <i>War in Ukraine and Russian Disinformation: The Kremlin's Efforts to Discredit Polish Nuclear and Renewable Energy Projects</i> .....	55
Marta Grabowska <i>The Role of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) in Countering Disinformation in the European Union</i> .....	71
Mladen Karadjoski, Sasho Dodovski <i>The Institutional and Organisational Role in the Fight Against Disinformation: European Experiences</i> .....	87
Goran Ilik, Vesna Shapkoski <i>The Informational Influence of Russia and China in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans</i> .....	101

## Table of Contents

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Marcin Sokołowski <i>The Recognition of the Autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Problem of Russian Interference and Disinformation in the Macedonian Public Space After the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022</i> . . . . .	113
Blagoj Nenovski, Ice Ilijevski, Angelina Stanojoska <i>Strengthening Resilience Against Deepfakes as Disinformation Threats</i> . . .	127
Gordana Djurović <i>EU Integration SWOT in a New Enlargement Framework</i> . . . . .	143
Mehmedin Tahirović <i>The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans and Montenegro</i> . . . . .	163
Alma Adrović <i>Disinformation and Its Influence on Democratic Processes in Montenegro</i>	187
Jacek Wojnicki <i>The 2023 Elections in Montenegro – A Real Political Breakthrough?</i> . . .	199
Nikola M. Vukčević <i>Fake News and Disinformation Through a Montenegrin Prism</i> . . . . .	211
Bogdan J. Góralczyk <i>Serbia: An Exemplary Partner of China in the Balkan Region</i> . . . . .	225
Marko Babić <i>The Balkans as a Geopolitical Playground for the 21st Century – Threats and Challenges</i> . . . . .	241
Justyna Smagowicz, Cezary Szwed <i>Conceptual Model for Building Disinformation Resilience</i> . . . . .	251
About the Authors . . . . .	281

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# **The Institutional and Organisational Role in the Fight Against Disinformation: European Experiences**

## **Abstract**

Living in a world which is full of information brings forth many advantages and possibilities, but also many disadvantages and threats. Nowadays, online informational resources are available through the Internet for everyone, so billions of people around the world are faced with a great deal of information on a daily basis.

One of the inherent challenges actually is for one to select the so-called “right” information, i.e., to make a crucial distinction between information and disinformation, which can bring you the exact content of the information in a timely manner. In this paper, we will analyse Europe’s institutional and organisational experiences in the fight against disinformation, with a special emphasis on the activities, modalities, and methodology used for achieving this goal.

In this paper, using the descriptive method, the comparative method, and the method of content analysis along with other relevant methods, the authors will try to determine the institutional and organisational role in the fight against disinformation with Europe’s experiences in mind.

**Keywords:** Institutions, Fight, Disinformation, Measures, Experiences

## Introduction

The information component is one of the most important parts of our daily lives nowadays. For this reason, it is of crucial importance to obtain accurate, appropriate, and up-to-date information which is needed for the fulfillment of professional and private activities. There are many sources which deliver different types of information to us, some of them are formal, some of them informal, and some of them are legitimate, whereas some of them are illegitimate.

In reality, the media is the main source of information which we as consumers get, but the plurality of the media in the contemporary world can also mean, *inter alia*, a generation of disinformation, misinformation, and speculation. One of the roles of state institutions and international organisations, as well as other formal entities, is to enable citizens to receive information which is checked, verified, and accurate. However, the freedom to publish and distribute information, especially in the Internet era, can be often misused for myriad different financial, ideological, or axiological purposes. Institutions should not only follow these phenomena, but also should take appropriate measures and react to them accordingly. These measures can be legislative, executive or judicial.

However, synergy between the institution and the citizen in the fight against disinformation is fundamental, because only through that synergy can real effects and results be achieved, i.e., only through the performing of synchronised activities by both state and non-state actors do we stand the best chance of being effective in the fight against disinformation.

## Disinformation as a Phenomena

According to the European Commission's *Action Plan against Disinformation*, disinformation is defined as "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented, and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm". Harm, in this context, can entail threats to democratic political-and-policy-making processes by undermining the trust of citizens in democracy and democratic institutions. The inclusion of intentionality in the *Action Plan's* description also differentiates the term from misinformation. Disinformation can be overt, displaying factually false content, but can also take more subtle forms, such as the cherry-picking of statistics to mislead audiences and prime them in certain ways, or displaying re-contextualised or even visual material which has been tampered with. Narratives can be adjusted to take advantage of the existing information space by tapping into divisive issues. Disinformation's shape-shifting nature and agility

makes it a useful vehicle for hybrid threats or what the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats defines as a “coordinated and synchronised action that deliberately targets democratic states and institutions” systemic vulnerabilities, through a wide range of means [political, economic, military, civil, and information]”. Coordinated and amplified disinformation can crowd-out rational debate and sow confusion and discord, thereby numbing decision-making capacities. Indeed, hybrid threats aim to exploit a target’s vulnerabilities and generate ambiguity to “hinder decision-making processes” (Ignatidou, 2019, pp. 4–5).

The openness of today’s subjects of international law in the forms of states, international organisations, entities *sui generis* etc., also mean an increased vulnerability, because the lack of systemic protection and information selection and filtration can result in an infiltration of disinformation which can be damaging to citizens, societies, and other relevant so-called “stakeholders” involved in the governing processes of a given subject of international law.

There is no universally agreed definition of “disinformation”, and it is often used inter-changeably with “misinformation”. The differences in definition partly come down to whether one is looking at content (i.e., whether the information is false) or behaviour (i.e., whether the disseminator of the information is seeking to deceive or cause harm). On this basis, UNESCO and others have pointed to three distinct phenomena:

- Misinformation: information that is “false but not created with the intention of causing harm”, e.g., a false rumour about the UN that someone shares with their social network for benign reasons;
- Disinformation: information that is “false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country”, e.g., a false rumour that someone generates or spreads to harm the UN; and
- Mal-information: information that is “based on reality and used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation or country”, e.g., propaganda that instrumentalises true information to harm the UN (Trithart, 2022, p. 2).

Despite this distinction which is well explained (see: the UNESCO classification), we can note that there is an interaction among the different parts of the definitions, so we can therefore speak about many combinations made of the abovementioned definitions. For instance, an item of misinformation can unintentionally cause harm, whereas disinformation can be benign, because the concrete disinformation is not relevant anymore.



## **Institutional and Organisational Activities Against Disinformation**

There are many actors that have a role to play in the spread and opposition of disinformation. In liberal democracies the state is, by definition, only one of the respondents; journalists, NGOs, think tanks, academics, digital platforms among others also play an important, if not the greatest role in detecting and countering disinformation. A successful or effective response is always multifactorial, being the result of combined efforts that are so intertwined that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to know for certain to what extent the state's response contributed to it (Vilmer, 2021, p. 7).

However, the state possesses the biggest responsibility regarding the fight against disinformation (along with all the other variants of misinformation and mal-information). With all the institutions under its control, the state has to be the leader in this processes, while simultaneously encouraging all the other variables in the forms of business entities, NGO's, different social groups, etc.

The spread of deliberate, large-scale, and systematic disinformation is an acutely strategic challenge for many countries worldwide. The EU's legitimacy and purpose rest on a democratic foundation, predicated on an informed electorate expressing its democratic will through free and fair elections. Any attempt to maliciously and intentionally undermine and/or manipulate public opinion therefore represents a grave threat to the EU itself. Combating disinformation represents a major challenge because it needs to strike the right balance between maintaining fundamental rights to freedom and security, and encouraging innovation and an open market. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. However, the rise of the internet and social media along with the development of new digital technologies have revolutionised the way citizens are informed of current affairs, and has been accompanied by increasing challenges related to large-scale data collection and mono-or-oligopolistic markets which are dominated by a very small number of companies.

Article 11 of the European Charter on Fundamental Rights covers the freedom of expression and information. This includes the freedom of the media and pluralism. The EU's efforts to tackle disinformation hinge primarily on policy initiatives. In March 2015, the European Council invited the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to develop an action plan on strategic communication, in cooperation with both EU Member States and EU Institutions, to address Russia's on-going disinformation campaigns. This led to the creation

of the East Stratcom Task Force within the EEAS, whose mandate is to tackle disinformation originating from outside the EU. More specifically, it counters Russian disinformation as well as designing and disseminating positive strategic communications in the Eastern neighbourhood. This was followed in 2017 by two more task forces, namely, TF South, and TF Western Balkans. In late 2017, the Commission – following widespread consultation – set up the High-Level Expert Group to offer concrete advice on tackling disinformation. The Group delivered its report in March 2018 and this formed the basis for the Commission’s “Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach”, based on four core principles and objectives: improving the transparency of the origin of information and how it is produced, sponsored, disseminated and targeted; promoting diversity of information in order to enable informed decision-making and supported by high quality journalism and media literacy; fostering the credibility and trustworthiness of information by working with key stakeholders; and fashioning inclusive solutions through awareness-raising, improved media literacy, and broad stakeholder involvement (European Court of Auditors, 2020, pp. 4–6).

At the moment, the aforementioned challenges are even greater because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict’s current intensity and seriousness. Compared to the Russian-Ukrainian war, there is a bigger division in public opinion, but there is also more sensitive information which is spreading in the European media, especially because of the heterogenic population in the European Union countries, and especially in the Western countries.

In April 2018, the European Commission published an official communication entitled “Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach” (COM(2018) 236) (“the Communication”), noting that large-scale disinformation and misinformation, including misleading or outright false information, is a major challenge. Namely, disinformation actively threatens free and fair political processes, and poses significant risks to public health systems, crisis management, the economy, and social cohesion, as well as to mental health and wellbeing. According to the Commission’s research, the major themes of disinformation are currently those regarding elections, immigration, health, environment, and security policies, with deceptive content regarding COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine being exceedingly pervasive in particular. In its Communication, the Commission specifically pointed to new technologies and social media as the tools through which disinformation spreads with unprecedented speed and precision of targeting, thereby creating “personalised information spheres and becoming powerful

echo chambers for disinformation campaigns”. The Commission went on to argue that technology and digital media companies “have so far failed to act proportionately, falling short of the challenge posed by disinformation and the manipulative use of platforms’ infrastructures”. In October 2018, and in response to this criticism, representatives of leading tech companies, social media platforms, and advertising agencies agreed to the self-regulatory 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation (“2018 Code”). The 2018 Code marked the first time in the world that industry players voluntarily agreed on a set of standards to fight disinformation, and participation significantly broadened in the years which followed. By way of follow-up to the 2018 Code, in 2021 the Commission published the “Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation” (“2021 Guidance”). The 2021 Guidance set out the Commission’s views regarding how platforms and other relevant stakeholders should improve upon the 2018 Code in order to create a more transparent, safe, and trustworthy online environment. 2022’s Strengthened Code is, therefore, the industry’s latest response to the 2021 Guidance, and contains renewed, more ambitious commitments aimed at countering online disinformation. In the 2022 Strengthened Code, the signatories acknowledge their important role in combatting disinformation, which, for the purposes of the initiative, is defined to include “misinformation, disinformation, information influence operations, and foreign interference in the information space”. Accordingly, the 2022 Strengthened Code contains 44 commitments, and 128 specific measures relating to such commitments, in the following thematic areas:

- The scrutiny of ad placements. Measures include the demonetisation of disinformation.
- Political advertising. Measures include the labelling and verification of political or issue advertising.
- The integrity of services. Measures include improving transparency obligations for AI systems, notably, deep-fakes and their use in manipulative practices.
- Empowering users. Measures include enhancing media literacy, improving functionalities to flag harmful, false information, and implementing more transparent content review-appeal mechanisms.

In June 2022, a broad range of technology companies, social media platforms, advertising agencies, and journalism organisations joined together to deliver the 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (“2022 Strengthened Code”). The signatories – which include the likes of Google, Twitter, Meta, Microsoft, and TikTok – have

recently launched the Transparency Centre, an online hub where visitors can access data regarding actions taken and policies implemented under the 2022 Strengthened Code. The first set of reports have now been published, and give an indication as to what is being done in practice to combat disinformation and misinformation online. As of 20<sup>th</sup> March 2022, most of the 34 signatories have published their baseline reports, which are now available in the Transparency Centre Reports Archive (Farish, 2023, pp. 1–2).

The synergy manifested by the different actors, i.e., states, international organisations, technological companies, the business sector, non-governmental organisations, etc., is the best solution for fighting disinformation, although it is not a guarantee that disinformation will be eliminated. Still, in this way, the reduction of disinformation will help those actors to raise confidence in the information disseminated by the media.

Europeans see the flow of false information as a perpetual challenge to their online lives. Could they do more to root out false information? Should governments step in? Although education and transparency are seen as crucial elements to any potential solution, all the potential approaches come with inherent difficulties. Any attempt to punish the media, for example, could quickly lead to state control and propaganda (Boyle, 2022, p. 20).

In reality, this so-called “drawing of an appropriate line” is the biggest challenge which can divide the control and filtering of the wrong information from one side, and state censorship from the other. So, incredibly careful access should be implemented, using all the instruments (those legal and technological) which any given state has at its disposal.

According to one study, the majority of people in advanced economies would see more false than true information by 2022, a worrying prediction that still gives us pause for thought about the information society we are living in. Laptops, smartphones, and tablets give us the opportunity to be aware at any time of what is happening around the globe, with social media allowing us to communicate freely with people all over the world. We are thus constantly surrounded by a flow of information.

The technological progress that we are witnessing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century highlights a paradox; our societies are becoming more interconnected, but are at the same time confronted with a number of challenges, with disinformation being one of them. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon; it is at least as old as the printing press. However, technological development and social media have tremendously accelerated the speed at which news, and in this case, false news, is diffused and have simultaneously

expanded their reach. Disinformation is a virulent trend that concerns all citizens and all sectors of democratic societies. Moreover, the EU is not ready to cope with the latest developments made in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) that will significantly impact the way disinformation is created and diffused. Overall, the EU is not entirely prepared to counter external disinformation campaigns in cyberspace. Disinformation is a complex phenomenon which has numerous, harmful consequences which affect both individuals and societies. First of all, disinformation degrades citizens' trust in traditional media. It "undermines the very fundamentals of information and credibility that informed debates are supposed to rest upon" (Scheidt, 2019, pp. 4–5). People face different false narratives which destabilise their sense of certainty about what is happening in world affairs. Moreover, disinformation undermines trust in public authorities and institutions, and confuses citizens as to what and whom to believe. It therefore undermines democracy, the rule of law, and good governance (Scheidt, 2019, pp. 4–6).

However, responsibility for treating the flow of information should be divided; institutions should treat information in accordance with their applicable authorisations and competences, but citizens should also be more careful regarding the receptive and cognitive component of information handling and consumption, or, in other words, they should check and analyse the information they receive from the media.

Current debates about fake news encompass a spectrum of information types. This includes relatively low-risk forms such as honest mistakes made by reporters, partisan political discourse, and the use of click bait headlines, to high-risk forms such as, for instance, foreign states or domestic groups that try to undermine the political process in European Member States and the European Union through the use of various forms of malicious fabrications, the infiltration of grassroots groups, and automated amplification techniques. We define it as false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or create profit. The risk of harm includes threats to democratic political processes and values, which can specifically target a variety of sectors, such as those of health, science, education, finance, and more. It is driven by the production and promotion of disinformation for economic gains or for political or ideological goals, but can be exacerbated by how different audiences and communities receive, engage, and amplify disinformation. Problems of disinformation are thus connected with wider political, social, civic, and media issues in Europe (European Commission, 2018, pp. 10–11).

Social media has changed the way humans interact with each other by allowing people to express themselves, share information, and communicate online by using computers, smartphones, tablets and, nowadays, even watches. Today, 81% of Europeans go online regularly (at least once per week). These people have access to an incredible amount of information which includes political communications, and we can surely agree on the fact that social media has changed the democratic public sphere. Social media has played a fundamental role in enhancing democracy and activism, facilitating the organisation of manifestation and giving voices to marginalised groups. Nonetheless, what we are now witnessing is how social media is polarising and polluting democracy, through fake news, hate speech, and defamation (Hinds, 2019, p. 7).

There are always two sides of the metaphorical coin; social media can help people in the distribution of useful information and offers of help, such as humanitarian aid and assistance, and by getting alternative information in many spheres which can't be managed by conventional media, etc., but social media can also be a platform for rumour dissemination, speculation, wrong information, fraud, etc. So, the possible level of influence exerted by social media depends not only on the level of usage by a state's citizens, but also by the level of confidence they have in social media.

Fighting against information manipulation effectively requires, first and foremost, identifying the roots of the problem. These roots are myriad, and identifying them is a challenge on its own; there are individual causes, linked to human nature and thus tied to psychology and epistemology. There are cognitive weaknesses and a crisis of knowledge that makes us particularly vulnerable to information manipulation. There are also collective causes, related to the dynamics of social life, crises of trust in institutions, crises of the press, and disillusionment with the digital world. Indeed, although the internet was supposed to liberate humanity, we instead find ourselves somewhat confined by it. After analysing each of these causes, we can then identify the beneficiaries, i.e., the actors conducting information manipulation, focusing in particular on state actors. Information manipulation is particularly prolific in times of war – and thus benefits all the more from the “de-specification” of war, that is, from the increasing ambiguity between times of war and times of peace. Censorship also plays a role, because it is more intense in moments of crisis and feeds into paranoia and delusions (Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 29).

Moreover, there appears to have been a reason why the European Union recently updated its anti-disinformation code, a tool at the core of the EU strategy against disinformation which has proven to be an effective tool to limit the spread of online disinformation, including during electoral

periods and to quickly respond to crises, such as the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In addition, although many of the existing fact-checking tools had already become prevalent in recent years, it is true that the pandemic – along with the invasion of Ukraine – has highlighted the perils of false information. In short, it can be said that there are two recurrent types of tools: on the one hand, there are those made available by existing services such as online platforms (for instance, Google’s Fact Check Explorer), broadcasting companies (such as the BBC, with Reality Check in the UK), or newspapers (i.e.: De’codex by Le Monde in France). In addition, fact-checking companies have been launched with the sole purpose of providing said services. Some are backed or endorsed by platforms or media services, such as Newtral in Spain, which works closely with Facebook. On the other hand, there is Factual in Romania or Mimikama in Austria, which are financed via crowd-funding, and which represents a form of civil-society involvement in fighting disinformation (Cabrera Blázquez et al., 2022, p. 8).

Of course, there is always the dilemma about who fact checks the fact-checkers. Indeed, the public are not always be trustful of fact-checker platforms but can always ask questions about whether the fact-checker is a selective tool because it is easy to check the information about an event or fact which is near you, but it is almost impossible to do the same for an issue occurring a large distance away. The only relevant thing, therefore, is the confidence users have in their sources of information, in addition to their confidence in fact-checkers.

Europe and the West are targets of disinformation, influence operations, and foreign interference. And the responses of most Western countries have been piecemeal and slow, hampered by legal restraints and bureaucracy and lacking in any real political understanding of the problem and evidence of its impact. Adversaries of the EU and the West include states, organisations, and individuals which have developed well-established techniques and have laid the groundwork in terms of building networks, disseminating narratives, and tapping into local issues to effectively recruit unwitting grassroots supporters for current and future campaign goals. This puts the EU and its Member States at a disadvantage when it comes to countering these malicious activities. The following factors give adversary actors a significant advantage, with some of them pertaining to the nature of the disinformation activities they pursue; those actors often employ low-cost, low-risk, and high-reward tactics. They are first movers and use marginal technological advantages, meaning that their activities can be fully underway before they are even noticed. Moreover, they are less restricted by legal, ethical, or bureaucratic constraints, and

the broad range of illegitimate influence tools and techniques available to them make it difficult to identify and counteract the full extent of their campaigns (Pamment, 2020, p. 2).

We are all vulnerable to disinformation. We simply couldn't function effectively if we mistrusted and questioned everything. But the mental shortcuts we use to make sense of the world can work against us when we are being fed bad information. "Cognitive miserliness" – the rather mean-spirited term psychologists use for this – means we prefer to use as little mental effort as possible. We typically think of those who are older as being most vulnerable, and although it is a more nuanced picture than at first glance, there are factors that seem to impact on our seniors. Those who have acquired digital skills for utility later in life (contact with friends and family, online banking, etc.) are less likely to have been exposed to formal media literacy. Trust increases with age, and research has also shown older adults are more likely to believe online claims without verifying sources. The older generation has enthusiastically embraced social media, and are seven times more likely to share information without checking its veracity, and so – inadvertently – become part of the disinformation cycle (Skippage, 2020, p. 9).

In the field of traditional media, specifically in radio and television, disinformation has seemingly severely discredited news programs in the eyes of the viewers. According to data from a Reuters Institute's Digital News Report, less than 50% of respondents from around Europe trusted the news, a lower score than that of the previous year. However, television audiences and trust in television increased during the months of pandemic-related confinement, in particular with regard to television news programmes. This occurred despite the changes in the production of content and formats derived from the limited resources resulting from the restrictions. This boost, given by the pandemic to radio and television, has not, however, been enough to rebuild the credibility and stability of the audiences of the past (Rúas-Araújo et al., 2023, p. 2).

Also, here the role of media editors has to be emphasised, which can sometimes be negative in the sense of their selective behaviour towards information, i.e., they can approve only the information they favour and think reliable and convenient for the audience should the editors so desire.

## Conclusions

Disinformation seems to be one of the most serious challenges in the media space nowadays. Regardless of the social, economic or political circumstances, disinformation can cause serious problems and generate



a great deal of damage in each of the democratic states. This damage can be not only physical, but can also be of a spiritual nature. Bearing in mind all the experiences of and research by scientists, journalists, media experts, and other relevant factors, we can emphasise that the older population is more vulnerable to the disinformation which is presented in all types of media. This is due to the bigger confidence that older people have in the media compared with the younger population which is more fond of the additional exploration, researching, and checking of all available information, but also due to the fact that the younger generations are more skeptical towards information.

Institutions and organisations should create some mechanisms to defending themselves from misinformation, combining legal, social, and technical measures. It is likely that these mechanisms will not solve the problem, at least not completely, but it could be a good step forward in the process of creating a safe and confident media space.

We can conclude that in a globalised world full of different types of information and an enormous information flow on a daily basis, it is extremely difficult to control, filter, select, and disseminate only good and correct information. In any case, the “laissez faire” concept regarding information is not a good solution and all democratic states, along with international organisations, as well as business and non-governmental entities have to react and fight against disinformation continuously, thereby helping the citizens to receive real, correct, appropriate, and useful information.

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