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Policy Paper on **Values, Rights, Rule of Law & Security**

Combating Disinformation to Protect European Democracy

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The ParticipACTION Project

The ParticipACTION " Building Inclusive Civic Engagement and Solidarity Among Diverse Young People in Europe " project is co-funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Program (CERV-2023- CITIZENS-CIV).

The project's core aims to enhance youth engagement in European decision-making processes and create opportunities for young people to connect with policymakers at local, national, and European levels through research initiatives, roundtables, workshops, and training sessions on policy and advocacy. The project targets young people aged 16 to 23. It seeks to involve not only European citizens but also young individuals with migratory backgrounds or coming from non-EU countries, with a special focus on women and girls. By bringing together these diverse groups of young people, the project aims to foster mutual understanding of shared experiences and barriers to democratic participation, ultimately promoting solidarity. The goal of the project is to equip young people with the tools to influence EU democratic processes, while promoting a bottom-up approach that ensures their lived realities are at the heart of policy decisions.

The ParticipACTION project is implemented in Italy, France, Cyprus and Lithuania by a consortium of five experienced partners. The project runs from October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2026.

Project Partners

IRC Italia – Fondazione International Rescue Committee Italia ETS – Coordinator (Italy)

G.F.C. - Generation For Change CY - (Cyprus)

PLACE - PLACE Network - (France)

GLOCAL FACTORY - GLOCAL FACTORY Società Cooperativa Sociale - (Italy)

MANO EUROPA – Asociacija Mano Europa - (Lithuania)



From Youth Participation to Policy Papers

As part of the project, young participants were given the opportunity to explore issues that matter to them, exchange perspectives and develop policy-oriented proposals. Through a series of participatory activities and workshops, they worked collectively to identify challenges, formulate recommendations and translate their experiences and ideas into concrete policy proposals.

The policy papers presented in this publication are the result of this process. They reflect the perspectives and recommendations developed by the participating young people and aim to contribute to ongoing discussions on inclusive democratic participation and youth engagement in Europe.



Combating Digital Disinformation for a More Democratic Europe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper analyses how disinformation, especially when it is spread via digital media and AI generated content, can negatively affect the politics of the European Union and what measures should be implemented by the European Commission in order to combat this problem. The main solutions suggested by this paper are digital media literacy training for both young people and older generations as well as stricter regulations for bot accounts and AI generated content. This issue is extremely relevant since misinformed political decisions and false public views have a huge negative impact on the European Union.

INTRODUCTION

The reinforcement of The Code of Conduct on Disinformation in 2022, following the spread of false information regarding topics such as the Covid-19 pandemic or war in Ukraine, was a fitting step towards a more transparent and democratic Europe. Nevertheless, the problem of disinformation and the grip it has on European politics is far from having been solved and requires immediate attention. There are numerous examples of how disinformation negatively impacted elections and other democratic processes, not to mention the damage it does to social cohesion and solidarity. This paper analyses different aspects of the pressing issue of intentionally distorted information and the measures that should be implemented by the European Commission in order to reduce its influence on our political and everyday lives.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The main problem is that the majority of people tend to not verify the facts and data that they find online, hear on the radio or see on television. Studies show that the groups most vulnerable to propaganda are older adults (55+ years old) and young people (16-24 years old), although when disinformation finds its way into politics, everyone feels the negative consequences. Especially with the rise of Artificial Intelligence, when images and videos can no longer be considered undeniable evidence, it becomes really difficult to differentiate between real and fake information.

According to a survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals published by Eurostat in 2025, only 31% of individuals verified the information or content they found on the internet. That number is extremely alarming, since the hold disinformation has on politics remains huge. We have two quite recent situations - Romania's 2024-2025 Presidential Election Crisis and the "Slovak case" - that showcase just how much damage distorted information can do to EU politics. Romania's Presidential Election was a perfect example of how using AI-generated content, bot networks, troll farms, and other data-manipulation techniques an anti-EU, pro-Moscow candidate can take the lead in the presidential elections. And although Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first-round results and everything was back under control, the risk of such events repeating in the future is too big not to take any concrete actions. The other incident illustrates what role AI plays in disinformation and what threats it could pose to democratic processes - just before the elections to Slovakia's parliament a fake, AI generated audio clip of a candidate discussing electoral fraud surfaced, which really influenced public opinions and the results of the election.

Despite the fact that there have been various successful steps towards a more trustful digital environment, the novelty of Artificial Intelligence and the people's inability to identify fake news, really complicate the process of eliminating the impact of misinformation. That is why a different solution would be more effective.

POLICY BACKGROUND

The European Union has already introduced several major initiatives to combat disinformation online. These include the strengthening of the Code of Practice on Disinformation in 2022, which created voluntary commitments for online platforms to improve transparency, limit the monetisation of false content, and cooperate with fact-checkers and researchers. The EU also adopted the Digital Services Act (DSA), which requires very large online platforms to assess and reduce systemic risks such as disinformation and foreign information manipulation. In addition, the European Democracy Action Plan and the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) support media literacy, election protection and the independent communities working to combat disinformation. Education efforts include guidelines for media literacy programmes, school-based digital education policies, and EU-wide awareness campaigns aimed at students, voters, and vulnerable groups.

Despite the fact that the EU has implemented all these previously mentioned policies, media literacy initiatives remain uneven across Member States, often dependent on national education systems, and without a fully harmonised EU curriculum. Many programmes are project-based rather than long-term, and older adults are less consistently reached. At the same time, rapid developments in AI-generated content and cross-border disinformation campaigns outpace current educational and regulatory responses, creating a need for more coordinated, scalable, and continuously updated strategies, focused on the education of civilians.

RECOMMENDATIONS / CALL TO ACTION

Recommendation 1: Mandatory Digital Media Literacy Curriculum for Youth (16+)

We call on the European Commission to introduce a directive by 2030 requiring all Member States to implement a mandatory digital media literacy and critical assessment of information curriculum for students aged 16 and above. The programme should be funded through Erasmus+ and implemented across schools using standardized EU learning outcomes. It should equip students with skills to identify AI-generated misinformation, understand algorithms, verify sources, and critically assess media bias. By 2033, at least 80% of students aged 16-18 in the EU should complete this training, monitored by national education systems.

This proposal would be effective because it addresses disinformation at its root by strengthening citizens' ability to critically evaluate information. EU-wide data (UNESCO ICT skills indicators) shows that a large proportion of young people (approximately 66.5% across European countries in 2023) already use digital platforms daily for information and communication. The numbers are increasing every year, which also increases exposure to misinformation. Some may argue that education is a national competence; however, the EU already supports cross-border education through Erasmus+ and programs developed by The Council of Europe, including "The Education Strategy 2030". Although similar initiatives already exist, our approach is to tackle this problem through schools to ensure a long-term response to this problem.

Recommendation 2: Media Literacy Programme for Older Adults

We recommend creating an EU-funded media literacy programme by 2030 under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV). Member States should implement local training initiatives in libraries, community centres, and NGOs targeting citizens aged 50 and above. The programme should focus on identifying AI-generated misinformation, online scams, fake news and manipulated political content. By 2033, at least 5 million citizens across the EU should complete a certified programme, monitored through standardised indicators.

Our proposal addresses a clear vulnerability among older generations, who are more likely to have lower digital literacy and therefore greater exposure to misinformation. According to UNESCO ICT skills indicator, the percentage of adults and youth reading information in digital format across European countries keeps

rising every year, showing that online platforms are now the dominant source of information. The proposal is achievable because it builds on existing EU structures such as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV). While some may argue that such programmes are costly, targeted prevention is more efficient than addressing the long-term consequences caused by widespread disinformation in digital environments.

Recommendation 3: Stronger Regulation of Bot Accounts and AI Content

We call on the European Commission to strengthen enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA) by 2030, requiring major digital platforms to detect and remove bot accounts and AI-generated fake content. Big Tech companies should label AI-generated media and publish annual transparency reports. This labelling should include visible indicators for users when content has been generated or significantly altered by AI. Platforms should also be required to ensure that AI-generated political or news-related content cannot be spread without such labelling.

This proposal would reduce online disinformation by limiting fake accounts and manipulated content. The EU already has a legal basis through the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Artificial Intelligence Act (EU AI Act). But research on the Brexit referendum (2016) showed that less than 1% of Twitter accounts generated nearly one third of political messages, demonstrating how bots can control democratic discussions. Some may argue that stricter moderation threatens freedom of expression, however, the proposal focuses on fake account detection rather than limiting opinions.

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that disinformation and its negative impact on politics are both urgent and solvable. In order for the European Union to continue being strong, democratic and trusted, it needs to make sure its citizens can identify and critically assess false or AI generated information, which can be done through digital media literacy training and stricter regulations for AI generated content and Bot accounts. That way individuals can develop an opinion about the EU and national politics without any unwanted influence and ensure that all the democratic processes such as elections are clear, transparent and truly coincide with the views of the majority. We urge the European Commission to act ambitiously so that the European Union could build its future on trust and truth.

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