

Truth or Tale? Fact-checking, disinformation and fake news in European and national election campaigns

Workshop
Mercator European Dialogue
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HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

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about the mercator european dialogue

THE NETWORK

The Mercator European Dialogue is a network of 150+ members of parliaments (MPs) from 25+ Member States. The network convenes in different European cities and its members participate in regular, multi-lateral and thematic activities. Across parties, across political ideologies, across borders. Our network of national parliamentarians aims to be as diverse as Europe itself.

This European network is a project by the German Marshall Fund of the United States in cooperation with the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy in Athens and is funded by Stiftung Mercator and since 2017 also by the King Baudouin Foundation.



executive summary

On May 2-3, 2019, 18 members of parliament from 12 different EU member states came together in Barcelona to discuss fact-checking, disinformation and fake news in the context of the upcoming European Parliament elections and beyond.

Today, the proliferation of fake news is a top concern among Europeans. According to the “Flash Eurobarometer on Fake News and Online Disinformation”, published by the European Commission in March 2018, 83% of respondents think that fake news represents a danger to democracy. This workshop provided the participants with the opportunity to discuss the policy challenges related to disinformation in electoral campaigns at different levels, with a specific focus on the Spanish general election and the upcoming European Parliament elections.

Guided by Carme Colomina (Researcher at CIDOB), Marc Cases (founder of Think O’Clock), Katarína Klingová (senior research fellow at GlobSec) and Lorenzo Marini (journalist at VerifiCat), MPs discussed how to counter negative depictions of European politics while simultaneously addressing citizens’ concerns in election campaigns at different levels, including in the run-up to the European elections.

Participants learned to identify online disinformation techniques and engaged in innovative discussions on how to tackle misinformation and achieve a more effective communication during electoral campaigns and beyond. The conversation revolved around the role politicians can have in improving the standards of political communication, especially when it comes to the role national Members of Parliaments in the European debate, and in encouraging more truthful and reality-based discussions, thus increasing interaction with voters and contributing to a healthier democratic system.

The recent Spanish general election offered the perfect framework to explore whether fake news have any real effects on national debates, analyze and compare the quality of political discussions across Europe, as well as to touch upon the regulations and policies that exist at the national and European levels in this field.



“In the European elections, small countries feel like they don’t get to influence the agenda compared to big countries with many MPs, such as France or Germany, therefore campaigns are less focused on European affairs.”

“When dealing with fake news, we shouldn’t fall into the trap of countering with the same mechanisms, but instead reframe and bring in new angles.”

“The best tool against fake news is prevention. Educating society to be critical with news, young people especially as they spend more time on social media.”

“The European Union needs to be protected by attractive narratives. This does not mean telling lies about the EU institutions or politicians because that will backfire.”

“Sometimes, it is too late to correct the fake news. That correction usually reaches few people and does not have the desired impact.”

Note: Any quotes mentioned in this report can be attributed to participants of the event while respecting their anonymity under Chatham House Rule.

observations and main takeaways

LOW PERCEIVED URGENCY

When participants were asked to discuss their experiences and challenges with the campaigns for the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections in their own countries, fake news and disinformation did not come up as the main challenge or threat.

Instead, as the most worrying trend of the past years, they mentioned the rise of anti-EU voices. It was discussed that, particularly in the run up to the EP elections, a lot of parties across Europe are opportunistically debating European issues to push for their national agendas and this weakens and erodes the European project from within. Meanwhile, in other countries political parties do not talk about the EU at all and prefer to focus exclusively on internal matters (e.g. the Catalan issue in Spain).

LIMITS OF DEBUNKING

While developing fact-checking strategies remains essential, the evident downside is that these strategies only work retroactively.

For instance, a single social media automated account (bot) can spread thousands of posts and articles before getting caught, which, in the best-case scenario, is within 24 hours from when it started operating. Additionally, correcting misinformation will often just bring more attention to facts or myths that we originally wanted to correct, defeating the original purpose of fact-checking. One takeaway that politicians found particularly useful to safeguard their credibility and avoid toxic and polarizing debates is that of coming up with alternative narratives, not counter-narratives, while continuing to communicate their values in a transparent and clear manner to their electorate. The limit of fact-checking was also discussed in the frame of understanding that fake-news relies on deeply held values that will not be affected by exposing a factual counter-narrative. Different tools need to be employed to successfully change voter perceptions of a given problem.

NO USER MANUAL FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Among experts there is no consensus on how (and if) best to invest in the use social media as a politician.

What emerged during the workshop is that while Facebook reaches a higher number of users compared to Twitter or Instagram, today the main (and most trusted) source of information for most European citizens remains television. Something that also particularly surprised the participants is that in the past few years WhatsApp has become an increasingly powerful and influential tool for political campaigns, especially in southern and eastern Europe.

DISINFORMATION VS MISINFORMATION

Participants discussed how disinformation and misinformation contribute to fake news, and both pose a risk to the relationship between politicians and their electorate. Misinformation, and widespread media illiteracy, rather than purposeful disinformation is the more substantial challenge.

The major difference between the two lies in intent: disinformation carries with it the deliberate intent to spread information known to be incorrect. In contrast, the sender of misinformation may not know the information is inaccurate. One of the techniques participants learnt on how to spot disinformation is the “CRAP test”, developed by Molly Beestrum. The CRAP Test looks at four major areas: currency, reliability, authority and purpose. How recent is the information? Does the creator provide references or sources for data or quotations? What are the author’s credentials? Is it biased? Does the author seem to be trying to push an agenda or particular side? As far as politicians are concerned, they should always have access to independent fact-checking support. This can help them build stronger arguments and avoid the risk of making mistakes that can affect their reputation.

EDUCATION IS KEY

The long-term goal should be that of educating our societies and improving their critical thinking skills and media literacy. Empowering people to use information and critically assess it will require a major effort from governments and society as a whole.

countering fake news and misinformation

These resources are meant to complement the discussions that took place on May 2-3, 2019 during the MED "Truth or Tale?" workshop in Barcelona. The sources compiled in the first part provide an extensive definition of the problem and an overview of the various existing initiatives and strategies at the national and European level. They are followed by a list of potentially useful fact-checking tools and finally by essays and articles touching upon the more fundamental questions of human perceptions and liberal democracy.



UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

- » **Bright, J. (2018). Explaining the Emergence of Political Fragmentation on Social Media: The Role of Ideology and Extremism. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication.** <https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/23/1/17/4832996>
- » **High level Group on fake news and online disinformation (2018). A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. European Commission.** <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6ef4df8b-4cea-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

EXAMPLES OF MANIPULATION AND ELECTION INTERFERENCE

- » **Avaaz (2019). Whatsapp: social media's dark web.** https://avaazimages.avaaz.org/Avaaz_Spanish-WhatsApp_FINAL.pdf
- » **Wright, G. (2018). Italy: Personal Data and Political Influence. Our Data Ourselves.** <https://our-dataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/overview-italy/>
- » **Cadwalladr, C. (2019). Facebook's role in Brexit – and the threat to democracy. TED2019.** https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy

In this talk, Pulitzer Price finalist Carol Cadwalladr narrates her investigation of the advertising strategy used by the leave campaign during the Brexit referendum that led her to expose the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal.



EXISTING INITIATIVES AND FRAMEWORKS

- » Alemanno, A. (2018). **Editorial: How to Counter Fake News? A Taxonomy of Anti-Fake News Approaches.** *European Journal of Risk Regulation*. https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/EA53D30745F601834218DDD7DB90950A/S1867299X18000120a.pdf/how_to_counter_fake_news_a_taxonomy_of_antifake_news_approaches.pdf
- » Bayer J. et al. (2019). **Disinformation and propaganda – impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States.** *European Parliament. Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs*. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU\(2019\)608864_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU(2019)608864_EN.pdf)

This report assesses the impact of disinformation through social media on the rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights in the EU and its member states. The authors cover the multiple aspects of the issue, the existing regulations and legal frameworks at the national and European levels and offer concrete recommendations on how to tackle disinformation and strengthen democratic resilience.

- » Fried, D. and Polyakova, A. (2018). **Democratic defense against disinformation.** *Atlantic Council Eurasia Center*. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Democratic_Defense_Against_Disinformation_FINAL.pdf
- » Renada, A. (2018). **The legal framework to address “fake news”: possible policy actions at the EU level.** *CEPS at the petition of IMCO. European Parliament*. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/619013/IPOL_IDA\(2018\)619013_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/619013/IPOL_IDA(2018)619013_EN.pdf)

LIMITS AND CHALLENGES OF FACT-CHECKING

- » Lorenzo, M. (2018). **Fighting fake news: Caught between a rock and a hard place.** *European Council on Foreign Relations*. https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_fighting_fake_news_caught_between_a_rock_and_a_hard_place
- » Pavleska, T., A. Školkay, B. Zankova, N. Ribeiro and A. Bechmann (2018), **Performance analysis of fact-checking organizations and initiatives in Europe: a critical overview of online platforms fighting fake news.** http://compact-media.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Performance-assessment-of-fact-checking-organizations_A-critical-overview-Full-Research-1-1.pdf

fact-checking websites

» **EU vs Disinfo** - <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

EU vs Disinfo is a part of a EEAS East Stratcom Task Force led campaign to better forecast and respond to pro-Kremlin disinformation strategies.

» **Euomyths** - <https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/euomyths-a-z-index/>

Euomyths is a blog by the Representation of the European Commission in the UK that focuses on debunking false information circulated about the European Union and its policies' effects on Member States.

» **FactcheckEU** - <https://factcheckeu.info/en/>

FactcheckEU is a website that compiles articles by fact-checkers of 19 different European media outlets such as AFP, Les Décodeurs and Korrektiv Faktencheck, and translates them into English.



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additional reading: perceptions, disinformation and democracy

- » Furedi, F. (2007). **The only thing we have to fear is the 'culture of fear' itself. How human thought and action are being stifled by a regime of uncertainty.** Spiked. <http://frankfuredi.com/pdf/feaessay-20070404.pdf>
- » Krastev, I. (2012). **Can democracy exist without trust? Speech at TEDGlobal 2012.** TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/ivan_krastev_can_democracy_exist_without_trust/up-next?language=en
- » Rosenfeld, S. (2018). **Democracy and Truth: A Short History.** University of Pennsylvania Press.

While fake news, doctored photos, and deep fakes create a space in which citizens constantly have to deal with competing claims and counter claims, the challenge of determining truth in a democratic world is not novel. In this book, Rosenfeld explores the tension at the heart of democracy between the supposed wisdom of the crowd and the need for information to be vetted by a learned elite made up of trusted experts.

- » Snyder, T. (2019). **And we dream as electric sheep: on humanity, sexuality and digitality.** Eurozine. <https://www.eurozine.com/dream-electric-sheep/?pdf>

In this article, historian Timothy Snyder examines how Alan Turing thought about the digital threat to a human future and provides an intricate analysis of our contemporary struggles with digitalization, truth and liberal democracy.

- » Wright, N. (2018). **How artificial intelligence will reshape the global order: the coming competition between digital authoritarianism and liberal democracy.** Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-07-10/how-artificial-intelligence-will-reshape-global-order>



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Stiftung Mercator is a private and independent foundation. Through its work it strives for a society characterized by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities. In this context it concentrates on strengthening Europe; increasing the educational success of disadvantaged children and young people, especially those of migrant origin; driving forward climate change mitigation and promoting

The King Baudouin Foundation's mission is to contribute to a better society. The Foundation is an actor for change and innovation, serving the public interest and increasing social cohesion in Belgium and Europe. We seek to maximize our impact by strengthening the capacity of organizations and individuals. We also stimulate effective philanthropy by individuals and corporations. The Foundation's key values are integrity, transparency, pluralism, independence, respect for diversity, and promoting solidarity.

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The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF contributes research and analysis and convenes leaders on transatlantic issues relevant to policymakers. GMF offers rising leaders opportunities to develop their skills and networks through transatlantic exchange, and supports civil society in the Balkans and Black Sea regions by fostering democratic initiatives, rule of law, and regional



The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) was founded on 11 October 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. The Institute's main objective is to promote an understanding of the problems of international politics through studies, research, meetings and publications, with the aim of increasing the opportunities of all countries to move in the direction of supranational organization, democratic freedom and social justice (IAI Bylaws, Article 1). Its main research areas include: EU Institutions

CIDOB BARCELONA CENTRE FOR
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The Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) is an independent and plural think tank based in Barcelona, dedicated to the study, research and analysis of international affairs. Created in 1973 as an International Documentation Centre of Barcelona, it is a private foundation since 1979.

CIDOB promotes global governance and good practices – based on local, national and European democratic government – to ensu-

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ELIAMEP is an independent, non-profit and policy-oriented research and training institute. It neither expresses, nor represents, any specific political party view. It is only devoted to the right of free and well-documented discourse.

science and the humanities. Stiftung Mercator symbolizes the connection between academic expertise and practical project experience. One of Germany's leading foundations, it is active both nationally and internationally. Stiftung Mercator feels a strong sense of loyalty to the Ruhr region, the home of the founding family and the foundation's headquarters.

The Foundation's current areas of activity are poverty and social justice, philanthropy, health, civic engagement, developing talents, democracy, European integration, heritage and development cooperation.

The King Baudouin Foundation is a public benefit foundation. The Foundation was set up in 1976 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of King Baudouin's reign.

cooperation.

Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

and Politics, the EU's Global Role, Turkey and the Neighbourhood, International Political Economy, Mediterranean and Middle East, Transatlantic Relations, Security and Defense, Italian Foreign Policy, Energy. A non-profit organization, the IAI is funded by individual and corporate members, public and private organizations, major international foundations, and by a standing grant from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

re that people possess the basic elements to live their lives free from fear and in liberty, by facilitating a dialogue that includes all diversities and which actively defends human rights and gender equality. CIDOB is a dynamic community of analytics that works to produce and offer to all political actors – from individual citizens to international organizations – information and ideas to formulate and promote policies for a more secure, free and fair world for everyone.

ELIAMEP's mission is to provide a forum for public debate on issues of European integration and international relations to conduct scientific research that contributes to a better informed and documented knowledge of the European and international environment.

NOTES:



If you have an idea for an initiative that you would like to advance through the MED network, we are happy to help. We have available (wo)manpower and funds to support your spin-off activity. You can apply on our website:

www.mercatoreuropeandialoge.org

Use your login details to get full access (email ckolster@gmfus.org for help)



If you are looking to reconnect with your colleagues from the MED network, you can use our Facebook group, visit our website mercatoeuropeandialogue.org, or get in touch with the MED team. We are always happy to help.

