Combatting disinformation in the modern media landscape

Resolution submitted by: Political Commission 2 – Internal European Affairs

Disinformation goes beyond the popularised terminology of "fake news" and is one element of the information disorder[1]. It can be defined as "*false or misleading information that is spread deliberately to deceive*". Although disinformation is by no means a new phenomenon, it has become more widespread with the development of social media and contemporary communication technologies. It becomes especially dangerous when it leads to life-threatening decisions, which the global community witnessed during the spread of the unprecedented 'infodemic' - a flood of information about COVID-19 that created confusion and distrust among the public and undermined the effectiveness of the public health response.

Fighting disinformation in the era of social media and easily shareable online content, especially during a worldwide pandemic, is essential and has to be a coordinated effort of all actors - from EU institutions, media outlets and tech-giants to civil society activists, educational institutions and citizens.

JEF Europe,

- *Recognising* that disinformation is a global phenomenon influencing societies across the world;
- *Noting with concern* the results of the Eurobarometer survey[2], where 85% of respondents perceive "fake news" as a problem in their country and 83% perceive it as a problem for democracy in general;
- *Recognising with concern* the role of disinformation in influencing the public discussion about certain topics, including but not limited to migration, by not only distorting the reality of facts but also fostering stereotypes, discrimination and prejudices;

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[1] https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/information-disorder
Information disorder framework includes **three different types: mis-, dis- and mal-information**

- **Mis-information** is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant.
- **Dis-information** is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.
- **Mal-information** is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/flash/surveyky/2183

- *Believing* that one of the best ways to foster a public discussion based on real facts is to be more transparent about how political decisions are made, especially within the EU institutions;
- *Acknowledging* the limits of national regulation aimed at social media platforms and other online public spaces, now mostly self-regulated by the platform owners, that are guided by prevailing economic, social and political interests;
- *Taking note* of the work of the EU institutions in tackling disinformation, namely the EU's joint and coordinated action against disinformation, including but not limited to initiatives such as the Code of Practice, the Action Plan Against Disinformation and the Rapid Alert System;
- *Expressing its appreciation* for EU institutions making it their key priority to strengthen the resilience of the Union's democratic system by implementing the Action Plan Against Disinformation;
- *Welcoming* social media platform's actions[3] to implement transparent and consistent content moderation policy, and further actions undertaken to help fight disinformation around COVID-19; while noting the need for these measures to be adequate and accurate to avoid arbitrary censoring of adverse opinions;
- Yet*, noting with concern* the lack of enforcement power and the limited reach of the self-regulatory Code of Practice on Disinformation, established by the European Commission and signed by social media networks and online platforms, to address the spread of online disinformation;
- *Welcoming* the work done so far by the EEAS East Stratcom Task Force, and it's "EUvsDisinfo" portal aimed at identifying pro-Kremlin disinformation;
- *Recognising* the importance of the work done by independent fact-checkers in debunking disinformation in real time, notably such initiatives as the International Fact-Checking Network and the European Digital Media Observatory, as well as other independent citizens', civil society, and media initiatives;
- *Having regard* to its resolution of 25th March 2018 on "Strengthening European Citizenship Education";
- *Noting* the urgent need for media literacy education across the EU, to educate citizens about disinformation and other types of information disorders, and give them the tools to analyse media content, specifically news, limiting the need for debunking false information post-factum;
- *Noting with satisfaction* the establishment of JEF Europe's pool of trainers, trained, in the first place, on media literacy;
- *Further emphasising* the need for more European citizenship education, and recognising the success JEF Europe has achieved in the past 30 years with its Europe at School programme;
- *Emphasising* the responsibility of every individual to carefully analyse the information with which they are provided, before sharing it further, while reaffirming our commitment to the freedom of expression;
- *Reaffirming* the responsibility of media outlets to provide verified content to its audience, and be at the forefront of the fight against disinformation;

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[3]Twitter approach to misleading information
https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/updating-our-approach-to-misleading-information.html
Facebook approach to combating COVID19 misinformation https://about.fb.com/news/2020/03/combating-covid-19-misinformation/

- *Condemning* the political developments in Belarus after the Presidential elections of August 9, 2020 and reaffirming the need for the support for independent free media to ensure a plurality of opinions;
- *Highlighting* the importance of independent foreign media coverage in restrictive regimes and applauding the difficult work done by several media outlets under these difficult circumstances;
- *Welcoming* the decision of several media outlets to provide the most essential content related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the health emergency free of charge, to ensure that everyone has access to correct and verified information about the pandemic and public health measures;
- *Convinced* that free and fair elections are the cornerstone of democracy, and should not be influenced by malevolent foreign or domestic actors, both public and private;
- *Acknowledging* the work done by the European Commission ahead of the launch of the European Democracy Action Plan to ensure fair elections and transparent advertising online;
- *Noting with satisfaction* the European Parliament's action in setting up a special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU, including disinformation;
- *Disapproving* of state sponsored disinformation campaigns, which took place and continue to take place in various EU Member States, such as Hungary, Italy and Poland;
- *Noting with concern* the measures implemented during the state of emergency established in response to the pandemic by some Member States, including, but not limited to, the Hungarian "fake news law"[4] leading to criminal proceedings for allegedly spreading "fake news" related to the pandemic;
- *Deeply concerned* with the polarisation of societies due to disinformation and the growth of conspiracy theories and disinformation aimed at destabilising democratic societies, supported by foreign powers like China, Russia and the USA, and their impact on the well-being of citizens across the world;
- *Noting with concern* that the spread of disinformation negatively affects, in particular, the trust in the EU and other supranational organisations (e.g. the World Health Organisation - WHO), as they are often the main targets of generalised disinformation campaigns;
- *Further concerned* about the growing weaponisation of disinformation by state actors, aimed at destabilising democratic supranational organisations like the EU and to disrupt democratic processes in the EU and its Member States;
- *Convinced* that supranational institutions and organisations, in particular, are the target of disinformation campaigns due to resurging nationalism across the world and EU Member States, and because of their foundational purpose of providing a defense against authoritarianism and war;
- *Reaffirming* its belief that only democratic and multilevel governance can provide the institutional and political framework for democratic societies in an interconnected world;
- *Reaffirming*, moreover, that a federal Europe is a necessary first step to establish a democratic, value-based and united World.

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[4] EN translation of the draft law on the "Protection against coronavirus"
https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/03/21/translation-of-draft-law-on-protecting-against-the-coronavirus/

JEF Europe, therefore,

1. *Calls* upon all actors - such as international and EU institutions, national governments and civil society organisations - to establish a common terminology while talking about disinformation, and avoid using weaponised terms such as "fake news";
2. *Calls* for a more coordinated approach to fighting disinformation across the EU and Member States;
3. *Calls* for the plurality of opinions and diverse views to be the basis of everyday communication, as long as they are based on facts; as well as the plurality of free and independent media and press that contribute to the public debate;
4. *Calls,* furthermore, for careful consideration of any actions taken to fight disinformation, to avoid any risk of censorship;
5. *Calls* for enhanced transparency of online news and its origin, and the way it is produced, sponsored and disseminated, in order to allow audiences to assess the content they consume;
6. *Calls* on social media platforms and other tech-giants to take further responsibility for countering the spread of disinformation online;
7. *Stresses* the need for further actions by social media platforms and digital companies to enhance transparency in political advertising, and sponsored political or commercial content, especially when it comes to democratic elections;
8. *Emphasises* the need for comparable media literacy and critical thinking school curricula across the EU, developed on the European level, to help counter disinformation, strengthen digital skills, and help users better understand the current media environment;
9. *Calls* for better public funding for schools, programmes on critical thinking, media and political literacy, and European citizenship education in school curricula;
10. *Calls* for the comparability of all school curricula to be established at European level, including with a Treaty revision of EU competences if necessary;
11. *Stresses* the need to support - including with public funding - independent professional journalism and media outlets, to be able to operate in and keep providing reliable, diverse and accurate information to citizens, including in countries where media pluralism is under attack;
12. *Calls* for measures to protect journalists against Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation to ensure that the work of journalists is not silenced by powerful actors;
13. *Calls* for strategic, coordinated and objective-driven communication of the EU and its Member States internally and towards third-countries; especially about their own powers and decision-making processes;
14. *Calls* on EU institutions to take measures ensuring the protection of the rule of law, to prevent the erosion of freedom of speech via national laws;
15. *Encourages* more Member States to share information through the Rapid Alert System;
16. *Encourages* EU Institutions to closely cooperate with civil society actors and the scientific community to ensure better outreach of factually correct and accurate information to citizens;
17. *Calls* for a united EU response to disinformation campaigns of certain state actors, including China, Russia and the USA, which aim to weaken citizen's trust in democratic institutions and supranational organisations like the EU.