

# Fighting disinformation: the truth is still the truth

## Countering disinformation through inclusive dialogue

/ By Burak Ünveren, Journalist, BMW Foundation Responsible Leader, Member of the Global Diplomacy Lab (GDL)

As the magnitude of disinformation grows, so does the fight against it. As Europeans, we need a constructive and inclusive conversation to face this challenge.

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. Quite the contrary: It has been with us for quite a long time. In the fifth century B.C., one of the greatest military strategists of history, Sun Tzu, wrote that all warfare is based on deception. However, in the recent years, we have been observing that it has become easier to create and disseminate disinformation owing to the popularization and the consolidation of social media. In the Information Age, disinformation has even surpassed the boundaries of being a theoretical threat and verifiably determined the fate of many European societies by influencing election and referendum outcomes.

As European societies, one of our distinguishing characteristics is that we are organically grown, bottom-up democracies: Our state structures receive their legitimacy from the *dēmos*. Another thing which distinguishes us from many other societies in the world is that one of our values is the freedom of speech: Everybody can express their opinion freely.

However, just like all the freedoms, these pillars of the Euro-Atlantic institutions and structures can easily be manipulated, often by manipulation itself. The more we are in position to express our opinion, the greater the room malevolent sociopolitical actors have to disseminate disinformation for various purposes. Especially social media platforms provide them with an endless ocean of possibilities. An intoxicated public sphere serves the goals of the challengers to the Transatlantic alliance. They are trying to im-

prove and expand their influence in European societies through their efforts to shape the public opinion. These efforts include increased investment in state broadcasters to propagate personified state policies or direct involvement in elections or referenda to influence or determine their outcomes.

As an example, fake news have played a decisive role in the Brexit referendum, which led to United Kingdom leaving the EU. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean,

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disinformation led to or helped the election of a President of the United States. Disinformation campaigns and fake news are emerging as a long-term threat to the values and the security of the Transatlantic alliance and the EU, as the line between information and disinformation is fading.

As a journalist, political scientist and citizen, I have observed that the recent years have been marked by the normalization of disinformation. The extent to which this phenomenon has become mundane is concerning. It has become so ordinary that the newsworthiness of disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and various developments regarding fake news have decreased. We are becoming insensitive to it. Over the course of the past five years, the issue has been discussed on every level and certain political steps have been taken, yet I argue that these are not sufficient to overcome the problem. Neither qualitatively nor quantitatively.

The issue has indeed become a main topic of discussion at NATO meetings. While the world leaders are trying to find a solution to the existing problem of foreign perpetrated disinformation within our societies, we should be asking ourselves the following pressing questions: How come the Transatlantic alliance has not been able to efficiently prevent disinformation campaigns before they arrived and infiltrated the European and American public spheres?

Are we not capable of disarming these threats beyond our borders? Is disinformation, by its very nature, unstoppable? Or is it that we are just not doing enough?

When we talk about the EU, we talk about one of the most successful supranational organizations in human history, the majority of EU members (21 out of 27) constitute the main body of the NATO. The EU is also a major world trading power. Furthermore, we, as Europeans, have the aspiration to have a more influential say in global politics. Under these circumstances, how come we almost exclusively blame the hackers employed by foreign governments for determining our election results but not search for the deficiencies in ourselves and improve them?

Disinformation and fake news affect all of us in our daily and professional lives, regardless of our occupations, identities and political beliefs. The burning topic which we will talk about in Bled is about the future, it's about strategy and it's about conversation.

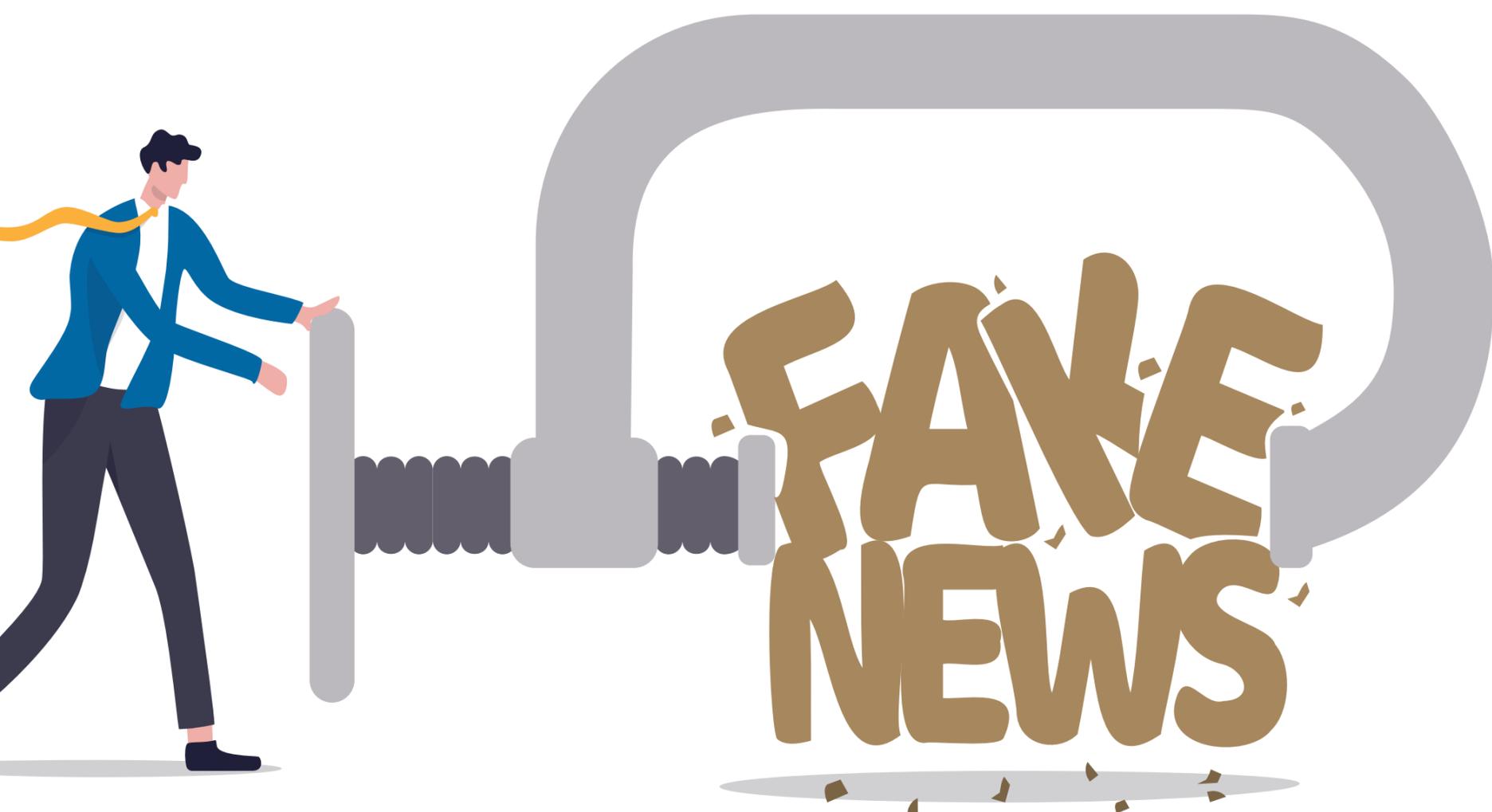
This is a conversation we have to have as Europeans. And the best way to have this conversation is to have it in a constructive, interactive and inclusive manner. Our goal is to constructively contribute to the existing strategy against disinformation in an inclu-

sive forum in collaboration of experts, professionals and citizens from diverse backgrounds for the future of Europe.

What we want to achieve at this year's Bled Strategic Forum is an interactive debate, in which we will develop solutions that will improve the European defense against disinformation and fake news.

We might have the best technologies, the best engineers, doctors, journalists, philosophers, poets, machines, bridges... The lingua franca of the world, which the entire world is eager to learn, might be a European one. But if the basis of our society is highly vulnerable to manipulation by the post-truth or alternative facts, none of that will matter. That's why we immediately need an inclusive conversation to co-develop a sustainable, long-term solution to the undeniable problem of disinformation. By doing that, we need to consult with actors from various fields who are dealing with this problem on a daily basis: Politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, fact-checkers, decision-makers on cybersecurity issues, researchers, and most importantly, citizens.

This is not an easy task, especially when MIT researchers find that lies spread faster than the truth, owing to their novelty. We won't be able to decontaminate the European public sphere overnight. It is going to cost us time and energy. But it's worth it. Let's not forget one thing: The post-truth might be attractive, but the truth is still the truth. ♦



# We need to talk about Europe: addressing the communication deficit of the EU

## The CoFoE provides an invaluable opportunity to change how the EU communicates by dialogue on the EU on local and national levels

/ By Elif Çavuşlu, Member of the Global Diplomacy Lab (GDL)



The citizens have a right to information to be able to benefit from the opportunities that the EU offer, to participate fully in European politics, and to engage in the debate on their future and the future of Europe. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between people's level of knowledge and interest and support for the EU.

As the consultations on the Future of Europe showed, there is also demand from the citizens that the EU actively shows that it's at the service of its citizens by being transparent and communicating effectively about its concrete actions.

### Communicating about the EU is a shared responsibility

The real challenge is to engage the people who have little knowledge of or interest in the EU politics and demonstrate the EU's real life impact, value and relevance. In the last 30 years, the EU institutions have been gradually taking steps to improve their direct communication with the people by explaining the policies, trying to engage the disinterested. However, reaching out to and engaging almost half a billion people in 24 languages in today's crowded communication environment is an obstacle too big to be dealt with by the EU institutions alone.

The European Institutions have only a few points of contact with the citizens. They mostly rely on their social media accounts whose impact is limited; and the citizens receive the information on the EU mostly from their national news. Research shows that communication by national representatives - from government or civil society- has a greater impact in shaping the perceptions of citizens, compared to the communication initiatives developed by international organisations.

Disseminating comprehensive and uniform messages to all European citizens, listening to and engaging them is a responsibility that must collaboratively be shared by the EU institutions, Member States and all pro-EU organisations and individuals. Their cooperation can provide more coherent information, maximize the impact of messages and help reach out to the widest audience. It can also make the EU policy-making process more understandable and inclusive for the public by increasing the visibility of each step at local, national and the EU levels.

**The CoFoE provides an invaluable opportunity to change how the EU communicates, with the promise of 'listening' to the citizens and encouraging dialogue on the EU on local and national levels.** The major success of the CoFoE would be generating a momentum that can lead to interest and engagement in EU affairs and "ever closer Union to its citizens". However,

since the inaugural conference, the conversation around CoFoE has been confined to a limited circle of 'elites'. A recent social media mapping by the data analytics company Graphtext shows that Brussels based EU actors drive the conversation while there is almost non-existent engagement from the wider society. So far, around 22,000 individuals and organisations have registered to the CoFoE's digital platform. It is not realistic to expect millions of citizens to start engaging on European issues on social media and the platform but at the same time the current number is worryingly insignificant, as it represents less than 0.005% of the EU population.

So, what can be done to attract the citizens' attention to CoFoE when there is less than a year left until its conclusion?

### Shifting the language

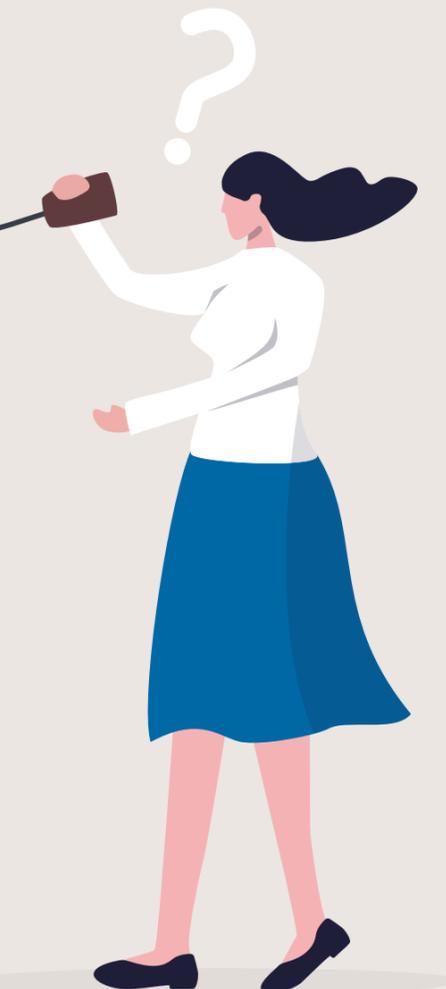
Although the EU is one of the most transparent political organisations and the information on EU policies and laws are available on the Commission, the Parliament and the Council's websites for the perusal of all citizens, it is hard to navigate them if you are not familiar with the EU jargon.

As Pat Cox once said, "Europe is not short of information but short of communication." Jargon and technocratic language are the biggest barriers for achieving the transparency the EU desires. This only reinforces the idea that the EU is run by detached elites.

## The EU is no different from any other actor in political life; its success and survival depends on how the public perceive it and on how the citizens feel empowered through their membership in it.

"EU literacy" is very low among the general public. Until there is an EU-wide, mandatory European citizenship class, there will always be confusion and lack of understanding about what the EU does and how it does it.

To extend the target of the EU communication from a very specialized audience to the wider public, a language shift is necessary. A clear and simpler language with a focus on the Europe of values and a Europe that has a direct impact on people's lives has more potential to speak to the hearts and minds of the Europeans. This type of communication is more risky in terms of triggering challenging discussions. But so far, the 'safer' style of communication with a technocratic mindset, that mostly focuses on 'informing' rather than 'dialogic engagement', has not been successful in communicating the accomplishments and value of the EU effectively. The words of Robert Schuman



on world peace apply to the European project too: "(it) cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it."

### Building social proof for pro-Europeanism

As social beings, people tend to check the appropriateness of their opinions and behaviours in reference to other people, through social comparison. This is called social proof. This psychological and social phenomenon stems from people's inclination to trust others' opinions and desire to conform. Disinformation campaigns work by creating 'faked' social proof, changing people's perceptions by 'fabricating' opinions.

Exposure to information on European politics and engagement in political discussions increase citizens' interest and engagement in European affairs. If this information is negative and the public space is dominated by Eurosceptic discourse, the undecided and uninformed people will be more susceptible to the negative social proof around the EU.

For this reason, reacting to events and setting the right narrative early is important. Unfortunately, Eurosceptic messaging is more visible, especially because negative content attracts more attention.

To counter this, the EU institutions and the member states must encourage national and local policymakers, communities, civil society leaders and young people to play a more active role in creating a positive dialogue space about the EU and multiplying the positive messages.

The CoFoE can help with opening up new fora for debate and information sharing and creating a social stamp of 'approval' for the EU. ♦

**"If there was an award for the worst communication strategy in the history of world politics, the European Union would be a serious contender."** Prof. Alexander Stubb

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) can be a historical opportunity to improve democratic participation and interest among citizens for EU affairs. But its success highly depends on effective communication.

Communication has been a strategic weakness of the EU. With each political shock that the EU has faced - from the ratification process of the Maastricht Treaty to the constitutional crisis, from the eurozone crisis to the Brexit, and finally the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for effective and inspiring communication to raise public engagement became more apparent.

The EU institutions and leaders have been convinced since the early 1990s that will fulfil the vision upon which it has been established, it is necessary to bring the EU closer to its citizens and to engage with them meaningfully. Echoing the words of Jacques Delors, although Europe has begun as an "elitist project in which it was believed that all that was required was to convince the decision-makers, that phase of benign despotism [was] over."

There is a consensus that effective communication is essential for a healthy European democracy and legitimacy of the EU. After all, the EU is no different from any other actor in political life; its success and survival depends on how the public perceive it and on how the citizens feel empowered through their membership in it.