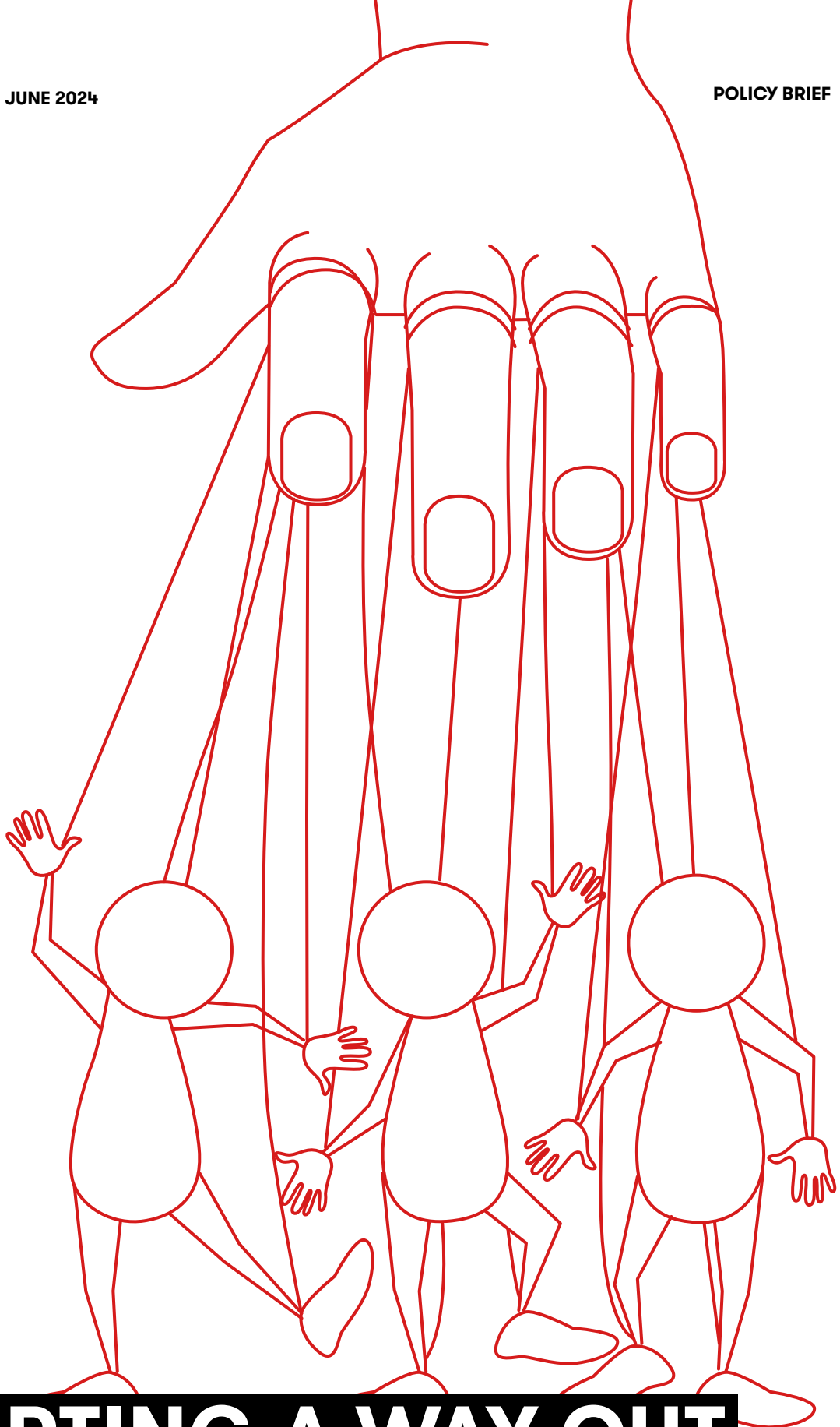




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POLICY BRIEF 06

AMO.CZ



CHARTING A WAY OUT OF THE DISINFORMATION STALEMATE



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Charting a Way Out of the Disinformation Stalemate: Targeted Recommendations for Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland

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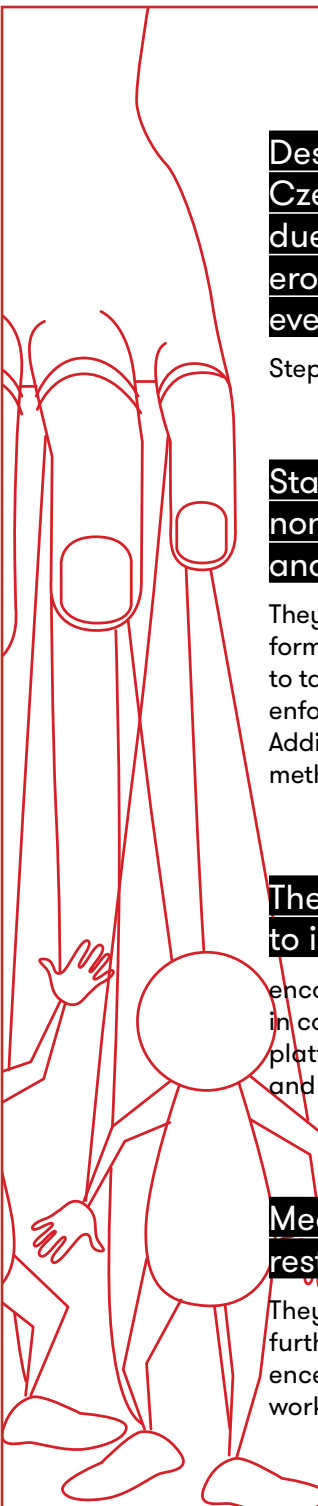
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Despite recent advances in countering disinformation within Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland, many initiatives have slowed due to the recent crises exacerbating societal frustrations and eroding trust in state and European institutions, media, and even interpersonal relationships.

Steps from multiple stakeholders are needed to reinvigorate these efforts.

State institutions need to foster continuous engagement with non-state actors, moving beyond sporadic interactions to regular and systematic coordination in counter-disinformation efforts.

They should focus on areas that have not yet suffered from public distrust, and form strategic communication units, particularly within the environmental ministries to tackle the exploitation of green issues. Furthermore, leveraging existing laws to enforce accountability would be more efficient than introducing new regulations. Additionally, educational frameworks need to be updated to align with the changing methods through which young people access and assimilate information.

The EU must tailor campaigns more effectively to local contexts to improve impact and engagement,

encourage closer cooperation with national political leaders, focus on local proxies in counter-foreign interference efforts, apply regulations consistently across all platform sizes, and enhance collaboration with the US on regulating social media and AI tools.

Media organizations need to align more closely with the interests of younger generations and people in regional areas.

They should strive for a balance between negative and positive coverage to avoid further media disengagement, leverage social media trends to attract new audiences, implement AI guidelines to maintain ethical standards and credibility, and work more closely with fact-checking organizations to extend their reach.

Social media and AI companies should enhance transparency and improve data access for research,

allocate ample resources to trust and safety teams, focus on monitoring content from political actors (including non-paid content), and implement clear markings on AI-generated content to ensure user awareness.

Businesses can contribute by supporting media and AI literacy programs for working-age adults,

helping to demonetize disinformation sources, and establishing policies to prevent their services from being used to spread disinformation.

INTRODUCTION

The crises of recent years – be it the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, or the climate crisis and the related need for a green transition – have accelerated efforts to bolster societal resilience in Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland. However, these same crises have also exacerbated societal frustrations and eroded trust in state and European institutions, media outlets, and even among individuals, creating fertile ground for both domestic and foreign disinformation actors now equipped with not only the power of social media algorithms but also advanced AI tools. To combat these challenges, the Association for International Affairs (AMO), together with the Adapt Institute and the EAST Center, launched a European Union-funded project to boost the resilience of these societies.¹ Throughout the project,

a series of expert exchanges, workshops with students, and public debates were held across the three countries, and have greatly contributed to this paper.

The paper thus draws on both desktop research and recent analytical reports, as well as the firsthand experiences of citizens and experts from Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland. It offers a mapping of the current vulnerabilities in these Central European nations and provides tailored recommendations for key stakeholders. These stakeholders, including state and European institutions, media outlets, social media platforms, AI companies, and businesses, are each addressed in individual sections with a specific set of recommendations designed to enhance the effectiveness of combating disinformation.

STATE INSTITUTIONS

STATE INSTITUTIONS SHOULD STRENGTHEN THE ENGAGEMENT OF NON-STATE ACTORS IN COUNTER-DISINFORMATION EFFORTS

While state institutions are crucial in the fight against disinformation due to their legitimacy, resources, and regulatory power, recent experiences from Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland suggest they are more effective in a supportive role rather than leading these efforts alone. This is conditioned by several factors.

Firstly, public trust in national governments is relatively low in these countries – 27% in Czechia, 37% in Slovakia, and 34% in Poland.² Low trust in the government undermines its authority as a reliable source, reducing public willingness to support government actions and sometimes even resulting in a backlash against government-led counter-disinformation efforts and accusations of censorship.³

The rigidity and slow responsiveness of state institutions also pose significant challenges. Disinformation evolves rapidly, demanding quick and flexible responses, often un-

achievable through state mechanisms alone. As one expert highlighted during our workshop, the use of AI in creating and spreading disinformation is a recent challenge that exacerbated these institutional limitations. This situation underscores the necessity for state institutions to rely on and cooperate with civil society, which can often mobilize and adapt more quickly. At the same time, dividing counter-disinformation efforts between state and non-state actors is also crucial to maintaining a balance of power and preventing future misuse by potentially elected populist or anti-system parties.

In Czechia, for instance, a successful collaboration between the Ministry of Regional Development and the non-governmental initiative 'NELEŽ' led to the creation of a guideline for state institutions on how to place advertisements to avoid funding disinformation sites. NELEŽ provided a curated list of websites known for unreliable content, enabling the ministry to leverage civil society expertise.⁴ This approach not only filled a gap in the ministry's capabilities but also sidestepped potential accusations of censorship by sourcing the list from an independent organization outside of state control.

¹ "Strengthening the Resilience of Czech, Slovak, and Polish Societies Prior to the 2024 European Parliament Elections," Association for International Affairs (AMO), <https://www.amo.cz/en/strengthening-the-resilience-of-czech-slovak-and-polish-societies-prior-to-the-2024-european-parliament-elections/s/51037-about-the-project/>.

² European Union, "Standard Eurobarometer 100 - Autumn 2023: National Reports," <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3053>.

³ Radek Bartoniček, "Zákon proti dezinformacím zřejmě nevznikne. Stačí bojovat pravdou, míní Benda z ODS," Aktuálně, March 20, 2023, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/zakon-proti-dezinformacim/r~739a7c12c71611ed8b4e0cc47ab5f122/>.

⁴ "Konspirační weby už nedosáhnou na veřejné peníze. MMR společně s experty připravilo metodiku pro mediální zakázky," Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj ČR, <https://mmr.gov.cz/cs/ostatni/web/novinky/konspiracni-weby-uz-nedosahnou-na-verejne-penize-m>.

Drawing on this successful cooperation, similar partnerships could be established with national ministries of education to develop materials and training for teachers, reflecting the latest trends in the information space. In Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland, formalized curricula on disinformation and media literacy are still lacking, with engagement in these areas largely dependent on the initiative of individual teachers and headmasters. State support for non-state initiatives like People in Need's project "Jeden svět na školách (JSNS)" in Czechia, which provides educational materials on disinformation and media literacy, is crucial but currently limited in scope and content.⁵ By enhancing collaboration with these initiatives, state institutions can broaden the reach and update the content of educational resources, benefiting not just schoolchildren but also adults in ongoing lifelong education programs.^{6,7}

STATE INSTITUTIONS MUST ESTABLISH REGULAR COORDINATION WITH NON-STATE ACTORS, NOT ONLY AD HOC MEETINGS

For cooperation between state and non-state actors to be truly effective, improved coordination mechanisms are essential. In Czechia and Poland, such cooperation has mostly been ad hoc, lacking an established coordination framework with regular meetings to discuss current issues, activities, and potential synergies in the fight against disinformation.⁸ One expert attending a project workshop pointed out that Slovakia serves as an example of good practice. In Slovakia, a coordination platform facilitated structured, ongoing dialogue between state institutions, academia, and civil society on disinformation, strategic communications, and democratic resilience. This platform operated informally for several years, holding regular meetings to introduce policy recommendations and coordinate counter-disinformation efforts. This network-building and information-sharing

process continually enhanced stakeholders' strategic communication skills, leading to the institutionalization of the mechanism through a Framework for Strategic Communication by the Slovak Government Office, adopted by the cabinet in 2023.⁹ Although these efforts were somewhat halted by the new Slovak government in Fall 2023,¹⁰ this model still provides a valuable example for Czechia and Poland to follow.

THOSE EFFORTS TO COUNTER DISINFORMATION WHICH HAVE NOT YET GAINED A NEGATIVE LABEL SHOULD BE PRIORITIZED

Given the negative connotations associated with the term 'disinformation' and the reluctance of political representatives to address this unpopular issue, state institutions in Czechia,¹¹ Slovakia,¹² and Poland¹³ should focus on aspects of the disinformation battle that haven't yet attracted negative attention or controversy, such as strategic communication and enhancing media and AI literacy. Moreover, disinformation is a cross-sectional issue that also relates to the social and economic conditions of a society. Without addressing pressing issues in these areas, people's frustrations will persist, providing fertile ground for narratives that seek to exploit these sentiments. This is particularly vital in the aftermath of COVID-19 and during the ongoing crisis stemming from the war in Ukraine.

MINISTRIES OF ENVIRONMENT IN EACH COUNTRY NEED TO ESTABLISH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TEAMS TO PREVENT FURTHER MISUSE OF GREEN TOPICS

With the increasing impact of climate change and the burgeoning of green disinformation,¹⁴ it's crucial for the ministries of environment to establish their own strategic communication teams.

5 "O Jednom světě na školách," JSNS, <https://www.jsns.cz/>.

6 There are numerous non-state initiatives in Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland dedicated to enhancing media literacy and educating the public about disinformation. In Czechia, organizations like Zvol si info, Fakescape, and Transitions are active, similarly The Center for Citizenship Education in Poland, while Slovakia has initiatives such as Zmudri and HistoryLab. Influential figures also play a significant role; in Czechia, influencer Karel Kovář, known as "Kovy," and in Slovakia, Sandra Sviteková from "Dejepis jinak" and journalist Vladimír Šnidl are prominent. These individuals and organizations can leverage their expertise to raise awareness about disinformation and teach methods to counter it.

7 However, such cooperation in Slovakia is currently uncertain due to the current government and Ministry of Education's hostile stance towards NGOs.

8 "Disinformation Landscape in Poland," EU Disinfo Lab, https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20231203_PL_DisinfoFS.pdf.

9 Patrik Szicherle. Enhancing the Efficiency of Combating Disinformation: A CEE Perspective. Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2024, 7, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/enhancing-efficiency-combating-disinformation-cee-perspective>.

10 Barbora Plávalová, "Vláda sa mstí úradníkom, ktorí bojovali proti ruskej propagande. V hre sú milióny eur," SME, December 6, 2023, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23252927/propaganda-hybridne-hrozby-hoaxy-stat-zmeny.html>.

11 Radek Bartoníček, "Zákon proti dezinformacím zrejme nevznikne. Stačí bojovať pravdou, miní Benda z ODS," Aktuálně, March 20, 2023, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/zakon-proti-dezinformacim/r-739a7c12c71611ed8b4e0cc47ab5f122/>.

12 Barbora Plávalová, "Vláda sa mstí úradníkom, ktorí bojovali proti ruskej propagande. V hre sú milióny eur," SME, December 6, 2023, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23252927/propaganda-hybridne-hrozby-hoaxy-stat-zmeny.html>.

13 "Disinformation Landscape in Poland," EU Disinfo Lab, https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20231203_PL_DisinfoFS.pdf.

14 Darren Loucaides, Sam Edwards, Alessio Perrone, "Conspiracy theorists have turned from COVID to climate. How will it impact the EU elections?," Eu-

Drawing lessons from the hijacking of Green Deal communications by anti-system actors in Czechia,¹⁵ the information vacuum on the topic in Slovakia,¹⁶ and its politicization in Poland,¹⁷ the ministries of environment in Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland should allocate specific financial and personnel resources to specialized strategic communications teams to prevent a further vacuum on green topics and their subsequent manipulation.

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD USE EXISTING LAWS TO PENALIZE DISINFORMATION AND PROMOTE ACCOUNTABILITY INSTEAD OF CREATING NEW ONES

Considering the challenges in developing legislation to tackle disinformation – stemming from difficulties in defining the term, proving intent, a lack of political will, and public backlash – the governments of Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland should focus on penalizing disinformation within their existing legal frameworks rather than creating new laws. These countries already have legal provisions to prosecute false information on grounds such as defamation or spreading hatred towards ethnic, religious, or racial groups. Experts at our events emphasized that these provisions should be utilized more frequently to demonstrate that spreading disinformation and hatred online can have real-world consequences. By making examples of those who spread misinformation, governments can remind everyone of their responsibility to avoid polluting the information space with falsehoods.

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM NEEDS TO BE ADAPTED TO THE NEW WAY IN WHICH CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS GET AND PROCESS INFORMATION

Accustomed to quick scrolling, brief videos, and fragmented content from social media, today's children and young adults process information in markedly different ways than older generations.¹⁸ This change in cognitive engagement requires an adjustment in educational practices. Current pedagogical methods in Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, which often rely on students memorizing and repeating long texts word by word, are increasingly outdated. They fail to equip students with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate and synthesize the complex array of information they encounter daily. Instead, education systems must pivot towards fostering analytical skills and encouraging students to make connections independently. Additionally, the influence of social media algorithms that create echo chambers highlights the importance of teaching students to listen respectfully to diverse opinions.¹⁹ This means moving away from rote learning towards more discussion-based and interactive teaching styles. However, this shift can be challenging for teachers, many of whom may feel uncomfortable with these new methods. To support educators through this transition, it is essential to provide them with comprehensive training and workshops and to adjust the university education of future teachers. Collaborations with skilled non-state actors could further enhance these training efforts.

EUROPEAN UNION

THE EU NEEDS TO TAILOR ITS CAMPAIGNS TO LOCAL CONTEXTS FOR GREATER IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT

The EU needs to better tailor its communication strategies to local contexts. Experts have pointed out that recent EU campaigns in countries like Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland

– characterized by brief slogans and vague, abstract language – often miss the mark. These campaigns typically lack emotional resonance and fail to address the interests and concerns of the local populations. Another issue is when the same campaign is deployed across most member states, despite varying perceptions in Central Europe

ronews, April 30, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/green/2024/04/30/conspiracy-theorists-have-turned-from-covid-to-climate-how-will-it-impact-the-eu-elections>.

15 Kristína Šefčíková. The European Green Deal as a Scapegoat: The Green Deal in the Czech Online Information Space. Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), December 2022, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/85-the-european-green-deal-as-a-scapegoat-the-green-deal-in-the-czech-online-information-space/>.

16 Michaela Dubóczy. Green Deal and climate change: communication trends in the Slovak information space. Bratislava: Infosecurity.sk, February 14, 2023, <https://infosecurity.sk/domace/green-deal-and-climate-change-communication-trends-in-the-slovak-information-space/>.

17 Marta Kowalska. Green Deal Facebook Narratives in Poland. Warsaw: Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis, June 2022, <https://capd.pl/en/reports/319-european-green-deal-mapping-perceptions-in-central-and-eastern-europe>.

18 Joseph Firth et al., "The "online brain": how the Internet may be changing our cognition," *World Psychiatry* 18, no. 2 (2019: 119-129), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6502424/>.

19 Miroslava Pisklová. Metodika vzdelávania slovenskej mládeže: Ako chrániť študentov proti dezinformáciám o zahraničnej politike, EÚ a NATO?. Bratislava: Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), December 2023, <https://www.sfpa.sk/sk/publication/metodika-vzdelavania-slovenskej-mladeze-ako-sucast-komplexneho-boja-sr-proti-dezinformaciam/>.

from countries like Germany or Spain, due to differences in values, historical experience, and economic conditions.

To make campaigns more relevant, appealing, and resonant, the EU should collaborate closely with local actors such as PR and marketing agencies, think tanks, influencers, and other relevant stakeholders. A notable example shared by one of the experts is the campaign by the European Commission Representation in Prague, which celebrated the 20th anniversary of Czech membership in the EU. This campaign involved local influencers as well as actors from soap operas and reality shows that appeal to older demographics.²⁰

Such localized communication is especially critical when conveying green policies, which are increasingly subject to exploitation and misinterpretation by disinformation campaigns. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and with ongoing tensions following Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, public anxiety and uncertainty about the future are heightened. With green policies potentially introducing further uncertainties, these are sensitive topics ripe for misuse by disinformation actors. To counter this, it's essential for the EU to localize its communication efforts around such policies. For instance, campaigns focusing on the Green Deal should specifically target coal regions and economically disadvantaged areas, addressing local concerns directly and preempting disinformation by addressing community fears head-on.

EU COUNTER-DISINFORMATION LEGISLATION SHOULD FOCUS MORE ON LOCAL PROXIES

Recent discussions at the EU level have largely concentrated on foreign malign actors, such as Russia and China. Although

these pose a significant threat, experiences from Czechia and Slovakia demonstrate that it's often local proxies and national disinformation actors who are pivotal in adapting and amplifying foreign campaigns. However, the current definition of foreign malign influence primarily assumes that manipulation originates solely from abroad. This makes it easier for local national proxies to circumvent counter-foreign malign influence efforts. Thus, the definition of foreign malign influence needs to be revised to make bypassing existing rules more difficult and costly. The revised definition should consider any action that aims to influence public opinion or decision-making in favor of a hostile foreign power as a foreign malign influence.

EU DIGITAL AND COUNTER-DISINFORMATION STEPS MUST APPLY EQUALLY TO BOTH LARGE AND SMALL PLATFORMS

Otherwise, there is a risk that users may migrate to smaller, less regulated platforms like Telegram. This could lead to a fragmentation of anti-system, disinformation-prone users, making them even more difficult to monitor and counter.

TIGHTER COOPERATION WITH THE US IS NEEDED FOR EFFECTIVE REGULATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND AI TOOLS

The EU alone cannot tackle the problem of social media and AI serving as spreaders and amplifiers of disinformation. Digital platforms operate on a global scale, which complicates the enforcement of EU regulations beyond its borders – especially for disinformation campaigns originating outside the EU. Moreover, since many social media and AI companies are based in the US and are subject to US laws, closer cooperation is essential.

MEDIA

MEDIA MUST BETTER REFLECT TOPICS OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

An increasing number of people are turning to social media as their primary news source, with roughly 50% of the population in Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland doing

so.²¹ This trend is even more significant among young people, with 74% in Poland,²² and 61% in Slovakia²³ and Czechia²⁴ relying primarily on social media for news. University students in our workshops confirmed this, noting that they typically consult established media outlets only when they encounter dubious news on social media and

²⁰ Evropská komise v ČR (@EvropskaKomise.cz), "Proč EU? U příležitosti 20. výročí ČR v EU nám odpověděla desítka českých osobností," Facebook, May 1, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3VnLx2E>

²¹ European Union, "Media & News Survey 2023," <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3153>.

²² European Union, "Flash Eurobarometer Poland: Media & News Survey 2023," <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3153>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

need to verify its authenticity. They frequently mentioned that traditional media outlets often overlook topics they care about, such as mental health and well-being, environmental and climate issues, and social justice. Moreover, when these topics are covered, the language used often feels outdated and inaccessible to younger readers.

To prevent the further alienation of young readers and to avoid social media becoming their only news source, traditional media outlets should increase their coverage of topics relevant to this generation. Additionally, the language used in these articles should be more relatable and understandable to young people, employing terms that resonate with and are used by them.

TRADITIONAL MEDIA SHOULD LEVERAGE SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS TO ATTRACT NEW AUDIENCES

Traditional media should adapt to the changing information diets of the population and capitalize on the increased use of social media as a primary news source. Young people often prefer quick, easily digestible news formats, such as short videos on TikTok or Instagram, over traditional news articles. They resonate with content that feels personal and relatable, often delivered by their favorite influencers who discuss global or local events in a casual, conversational style, similar to chatting over coffee with a friend. Both student feedback in our workshops and research indicate that the youngest generations, raised on social media, tend to pay more attention to influencers or celebrities for news than to traditional journalists.²⁵ However, this trend comes with risks, including the consumption of unverified, unreliable, or biased news due to the lack of content regulation on social media platforms.

To address this, traditional media should embrace and replicate the content formats that resonate most with younger audiences. Although several news outlets in Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland have established a social media presence, their content often consists of classic textual posts linked to full articles or carousel image posts on Instagram. Given the popularity and algorithmic promotion of short videos on social media, traditional media should

invest more in this dynamic and engaging format. Short videos are not only more digestible and attention-grabbing but also create a personal connection with the audience, leaving a more lasting impression, particularly when a journalist from the media outlet is directly involved.

Journalists could even become influencers themselves. For example, The Washington Post's journalist Dave Jorgensen has successfully combined trending TikTok memes with news insights on TikTok and YouTube Shorts, attracting over 50,000 followers in just one month and garnering 5.3 million account views.²⁶ Czech journalist Jan Žabka from the outlet 'Hlídací Pes' also produces short TikTok videos that debunk viral hoaxes. While TikTok has its challenges, including security concerns and the potential for misuse in spreading disinformation, being present on the platform can help fill the information vacuum and prevent malign actors from exploiting it.²⁷ This platform also serves as a critical gateway to engage with young people, offering traditional media a potential new audience pool.

IF JOURNALISTS DO NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE ACTING AS INFLUENCERS, THEY SHOULD CONSIDER COLLABORATING WITH THEM

Even if some journalists or media outlets lack the capacity to create short videos themselves, they can partner with influencers who already produce similar content. For example, in Czechia, the influencer Johana Bázlerová, known as 'Jsem v obraze,' creates short videos and posts about news from Czechia and around the world. The Czech media outlet 'Respekt' utilized her reach to younger audiences and partnered up with her on news coverage related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.²⁸

MEDIA MUST LOCALIZE CONTENT TO BETTER REFLECT REGIONAL CONCERNS AND A DIVERSE READERSHIP

Besides tailoring content for younger audiences, traditional media should also revise their content for the rest of their readership to make it more localized and representative of people's concerns. It is not just young people who feel under-

25 Nic Newman, "Overview and key findings of the 2023 Digital News Report," Reuters Institute, June 14, 2023, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary>.

26 Alex Mahadevan, "How The Washington Post's TikTok guy Dave Jorgenson gets millions of views by being uncool," Poynter, October 2, 2019, <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2019/how-the-washington-posts-tiktok-guy-dave-jorgenson-gets-millions-of-views-by-being-uncool/>.

27 Jan Žabka, "O TikToku na TikToku. Český rozhlas by měl na čínské síti zůstat," Hlídací pes, March 24, 2023, <https://hlidacipes.org/jan-zabka-o-tiktoku-na-tiktoku-cesky-rozhlas-by-mel-na-cinske-siti-zustat/>.

28 Aneta Smržová, "Využívání sociálních sítí jako nových informačních platformem během války na Ukrajině," UK, 2023, <https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/182566/120445469.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.

represented; other age groups feel this way too, as confirmed by participants in our expert workshops. Many believe journalists are often detached from the daily issues of people living outside the capital cities where these media are typically based, making it hard to address regional interests accurately.

Two main reasons were identified for this deficiency: a lack of regional news outlets and the tendency of media companies to employ like-minded individuals who share similar values. This can result in biased reporting if journalists' personal opinions permeate their articles too much. For example, one expert cited the Slovak daily 'Denník N,' which initially trivialized the growing problem of bears approaching towns and cities. Residents in affected areas felt their real concerns were being mocked, which only fueled anti-system sentiment and political exploitation of the issue.

To prevent further alienation, traditional media should provide more localized coverage that reflects the issues important to people in different regions. Journalists must also be cautious not to let personal biases seep into non-editorial articles and should avoid condescending attitudes towards those with different views or frustrations. Media should aim to serve all citizens, not just the liberal demographic in urban centers like Prague and Bratislava, as noted by our workshop experts.

An example of positive change comes from the Czech media company 'Seznam,' which collaborates with local news agencies to offer localized coverage that addresses regional concerns. They also allow users to customize their news feed based on their location and interests, integrating more local reporting into their general feed. If more media outlets adopt such practices, it could reduce the number of frustrated individuals turning to alternative media and populist/anti-system politicians for representation.

BETTER BALANCE IS NEEDED BETWEEN NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE COVERAGE TO PREVENT NEWS AVOIDANCE AND FRUSTRATION

Besides focusing on more localized and representative content, traditional media should also balance negative and positive coverage. Although hate and fear often drive engagement, they also lead to news avoidance, apathy, and increased

frustration. This trend has intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, with more people avoiding the news because they find it too focused on politics or too depressing. This issue affects the entire society, not just those who believe in disinformation. In recent years, the number of people avoiding news has grown significantly, reaching 34% in Czechia, 37% in Slovakia, and 44% in Poland. The Ukraine war is among the most avoided topics, with avoidance rates of 35% in Poland, 49% in Slovakia, and 60% in Czechia.²⁹ Another frequently avoided topic is COVID-19, as both subjects often bring negative and unsettling news.

These seismic events have also led to social and economic uncertainties, invoking feelings of fear, uncertainty, anger, and hopelessness. Several students at our workshops mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the extensive coverage of these two topics. This trend presents vulnerabilities, as disinformation actors exploit the information vacuum and the emotional responses of news avoiders.

One answer is to incorporate more solutions journalism, which not only highlights problems but also presents evidence-based solutions.³⁰ This type of reporting offers constructive and positive content, potentially engaging readers more effectively, as they can spend 300 to 400% more time on such articles.³¹ Solutions journalism provides an escape from the bleakness of crises like COVID-19 and global conflicts and demonstrates that solutions exist. As an expert on media literacy and countering disinformation noted, based on their research,³² people in Czechia and Slovakia are tired of negative content, and solutions journalism could be the answer. There are even free courses with the basics of this approach.³³

MEDIA MUST IMPLEMENT AI GUIDELINES TO ENSURE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND CREDIBILITY AND PREVENT UNINTENTIONAL SPREADING OF DISINFORMATION

In order to counteract any biases that may be embedded in AI tools, maintain ethical standards, avoid inadvertently disseminating disinformation, and maintain high standards and credibility, media organizations should develop and enforce guidelines that tackle these challenges. The expert workshop we held showed that not all media outlets in Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland have

29 Filip Struhárik, "Nový trend je potvrdený: Ľudia vypínajú správy, nerobia im dobre," Denník N, June 14, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3424598/novy-trend-je-potvrdeny-ludia-vypinaju-spravy-nerobia-im-dobre/>.

30 "What is Solutions Journalism," Transitions, <https://transitionsmedia.org/solutions-journalism/what-is-solutions-journalism/>.

31 "Novinári měnící svět. 'Solutions journalism není aktivismus, ale hledání cest k řešení problémů,' říká děkan," iRozhlas, June 4, 2018, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zivotni-styl/spolecnost/solution-journalism-dobra-vule-novinari_1806041315_dp.

32 ""Nás nikdo nenachytá". Kvalitativní výzkum o důvěře, zvycích, médiích a dezinformacích," Science+, <https://mailchi.mp/fpee/trust-in-media-research-czechia?e=cdd5a00097>.

33 "Courses," Transitions, <https://courses.toleducation.org/>.

these. The codes developed by 'Seznam zprávy'³⁴ and the 'Český Rozhlas'³⁵ can serve as examples of such AI codes for journalists.

MEDIA SHOULD COOPERATE MORE CLOSELY WITH FACT-CHECKING ORGANIZATIONS TO HELP INCREASE THEIR REACH

Although experts agree that pre-bunking and other preventive measures are more effective than fact-checking, it

still plays a crucial role in countering disinformation, especially during key moments of information overload like elections. One expert noted that their research showed people appreciated content from fact-checking organizations like Demagog and AFP, but they simply were not aware of them. Media outlets could help increase the reach and visibility of these organizations. This was evident during the 2023 Czech presidential elections, when various mainstream media shared fact-checks, enhancing their impact.³⁶

SOCIAL MEDIA AND AI COMPANIES

SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES NEED TO INCREASE THEIR TRANSPARENCY AND PROVIDE BETTER DATA ACCESS FOR RESEARCH

Several experts have raised concerns that, despite EU pressure on social media companies and new regulations, access to data has, in fact, decreased. This trend must be reversed to enable researchers to effectively monitor and counter disinformation. For example, Meta's decision to abandon the CrowdTangle tool³⁷ necessitates an adequate replacement. The upcoming Meta Content Library and Content Library API must offer equal or greater data access and detail. Similarly, improvements are needed with TikTok's Research API, as experts report discrepancies with real-time data and delays that hinder timely responses to viral content.

Furthermore, social media companies need to expand data access rights. Even with the Digital Services Act (DSA) opening up more data points, such as ad libraries across more platforms, the accessibility, reliability, and usefulness of this data remain contentious. In cases like LinkedIn, no research access requests have been granted, and researchers outside the EU face barriers when collaborating with European partners.³⁸ Access to TikTok's Research API should also extend beyond academic institutions to include think tanks and other relevant experts.

Additionally, experts emphasized that transparency involves not just the availability of information but also how it is presented. Transparency reports under the DSA, often released as lengthy PDFs, overwhelm civil society. Given that many involved in this process operate without significant financial support, they face challenges in handling vast amounts of intricate data. Therefore, platforms should strive to provide clearer, more organized, and easily digestible data to researchers.

MORE, NOT LESS RESOURCES SHOULD BE ALLOCATED TO TRUST AND SAFETY TEAMS

Given the frequent surges of disinformation during election periods,³⁹ social media companies need to strengthen their trust and safety, integrity, and election teams. These enhancements will enable them to better manage the increasing threats associated with election-related disinformation, particularly important in this super-election year and beyond as AI rapidly advances and its misuse in creating and spreading disinformation grows. Currently, the trend is worrying – a decline in counter-disinformation and election security efforts, with reductions in resources and personnel. For instance, a fake AI-generated voice recording of Slovak opposition leader Michal

34 "Seznam Zprávy pracují s AI a mají jasná pravidla," Seznam zprávy, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/redakce-seznam-zpravy-pracuji-s-ai-a-maji-jasna-pravidla-229210>.

35 „Pravidla pro užívání umělé inteligence v Českém rozhlasu,” Český rozhlas, <https://informace.rozhlas.cz/pravidla-pro-uzivani-umele-inteligence-v-ceskem-rozhlasu-9169447>.

36 Natálie Tkáčová, Kristína Šefčíková. Czech Presidential Elections in the Online Space. Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), January 2023, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/10208_czech-presidential-elections-in-the-online-space-1st-round.pdf.

37 "Important Update to CrowdTangle," CrowdTangle, <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/9014544-important-update-to-crowdtangle-march-2024>.

38 Cathleen Berger, Charlotte Freihse, "Research engagement #5 to Brussels, Belgium," Upgrade Democracy, April 2024, <https://upgradedemocracy.de/perspective/research-engagement-5-to-brussels-belgium/>.

39 Tiffany Hsu, Stuart A. Thompson, and Steven Lee Myers, "Elections and Disinformation Are Colliding Like Never Before in 2024," New York Times, January 9, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/09/business/media/election-disinformation-2024.html>.

Šimečka spread misleading information during the 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections⁴⁰ and was only removed by Meta after several days, despite urgent requests from the Slovak Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission. Furthermore, a recently uncovered Russian influence network managed to purchase and run ads on Facebook targeting 38 million accounts in Germany and France ahead of the EP elections, undetected by Meta.⁴¹ These incidents highlight the critical need for social media companies to reverse the current cutbacks and instead allocate more resources to combating these challenges effectively.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS SHOULD FOCUS MORE ON THE CONTENT PRODUCED BY POLITICAL ACTORS, AND NOT JUST THE PAID CONTENT

Experts from Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland have highlighted how politicians have become significant amplifiers of disinformation in recent years. They often have a much wider reach than disinformation websites and obscure social media groups and pages, and they play a key role in shifting fringe disinformation into mainstream public discourse.⁴² Politicians have realized that they can gain traction by posting emotionally charged and often misleading content on social media. They no longer need to rely on paid promotions; simply posting something controversial and polarizing can be enough for it to

spread virally, earning them political points while simultaneously deepening societal polarization and facilitating the spread of hate, deceit, and conspiracy theories. Recent elections in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland have provided ample evidence of this issue. Given this context, social media companies need to pay more attention to the activities of political actors on their platforms, focusing not only on halting the spread of disinformation through paid ads during election campaigns but also on monitoring the general content posted by these politicians, especially during elections.

AI COMPANIES MUST IMPLEMENT HARD-TO-REMOVE MARKINGS TO ENSURE USERS RECOGNIZE AI-GENERATED CONTENT

AI companies should consistently implement mechanisms that allow users to recognize if audio or visual content is AI-generated, and make it challenging to remove any indicators that signify AI generation. It is crucial that all generative AI companies introduce difficult-to-remove watermarks on their AI-generated content or, at the very least, integrate a marking into the code of the content. This practice has already been adopted by Google's DeepMind with their 'SynthID' product.⁴³ Such measures should be enforced across both large and small companies to prevent any evasion of the system.

BUSINESS

MEDIA AND AI LITERACY INITIATIVES MUST BROADEN THEIR FOCUS TO INCLUDE WORKING-AGE ADULTS

Media and AI literacy efforts, as well as other initiatives to counter disinformation, should extend beyond the typical focus groups of students and older adults. It is essential to also engage working-age adults, a significant segment of the population who, like older individuals, did not grow up with social media and often lack the skills to navigate it effective-

ly. For this demographic, it is particularly important to rebuild trust in institutions, reduce bureaucratic obstacles, and improve the quality of state services, especially during crises. Raising awareness about AI can help them better navigate the increasingly complex information landscape and alleviate concerns about job security in the face of automation. Private companies, as employers, can play a crucial role in directing initiatives toward this age group, focusing on practical and relevant topics such as the financial motivations

⁴⁰ Morgan Meaker, "Slovakia's Election Deepfakes Show AI Is a Danger to Democracy," Wired, October 3, 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/slovakias-election-deepfakes-show-ai-is-a-danger-to-democracy/>.

⁴¹ Clothilde Goujard, "Big, bold and unchecked: Russian influence operation thrives on Facebook," Politico, April 17, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-influence-hackers-social-media-facebok-operation-thriving/>.

⁴² Katarína Lorincová, "Dezinformácie sa len snažia vyvolať chaos, najviac ich šíria politici," SITA, June 20, 2023, <https://sita.sk/duboczi-dezinformacie-sa-len-snazia-vyvolat-chaos-najviac-ich-siria-politici-rozhovor/>; Lenka Kabrhelová, "Dezinformace je jen lidská blbost. Než přijde politik a zvedne ji," Seznam zprávy, April 18, 2023, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/audio-podcast-5-59-cil-ruske-propagandy-u-nas-rozbit-duveru-na-padrt-rika-analytik-slerka-229542>; Matej Pribelský, "Neviditeľný nástroj vojny: Dezinformácie Slovákom šijú na mieru. Nie je to náhoda," Aktuality, October 19, 2023, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/wLVKPuc/neviditelny-nastroj-vojny-dezinformacie-slovakom-siju-na-mieru-nie-je-to-nahoda/>.

⁴³ "Identifying AI-generated content with SynthID," Google, <https://deepmind.google/technologies/synthid/>.

behind disinformation and courses on how to harness AI to enhance their skills.

PRIVATE COMPANIES MUST ALSO HELP IN DEMONETIZING DISINFORMATION

The advertising methodology developed by the Czech Ministry of Regional Development and the civil society organization 'NELEŽ', which diverts funding from disinformation websites, should be expanded to include private companies. One expert at our events highlighted that several websites regularly posting disinformation generate substantial revenue from advertisements. The business sector needs to recognize that advertising on such websites could damage their reputation and that disinformation narratives often target private companies as well.⁴⁴ During the energy crisis following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, energy companies were primary targets, but conspiracies also involve other large corporations, international banks, eco-companies, and electric car manufacturers, particularly in relation to disinformation about the Green Deal. To prevent inadvertently supporting actors that could harm their reputation and alienate consumers, private companies can also consult resources like 'Konspiratori.sk'⁴⁵ in Slovakia or the Czech 'NELEŽ',⁴⁶ which publicly list problematic websites and provide guidance on blocking these sites from Google Ads.

WEB HOSTING PROVIDERS AND DOMAIN REGISTRARS SHOULD SET POLICIES TO PREVENT THE USE OF THEIR SERVICES FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION

Private companies, such as web-hosting providers and domain registrars, can play a pivotal role in combat-

ing disinformation by enforcing specific content management policies on their platforms. These companies could implement rules that prevent them from serving clients who repeatedly disseminate disinformation, at least in the most grave cases, potentially harmful to health or security. An effective strategy might involve creating a monitoring system that identifies disinformation on hosted domains. If disinformation is detected, the company could issue a warning to the website administrator responsible for the content. Should the administrator fail to rectify the issue promptly, the company could escalate measures, including suspending or shutting down the website. This approach not only curtails the spread of harmful content but also encourages website owners to uphold higher information accuracy standards, contributing to a more reliable digital environment.

Implementing such policies would require clear guidelines defining disinformation, robust detection mechanisms, and a transparent process for addressing violations to maintain fairness and mitigate censorship concerns. Importantly, this approach avoids direct government intervention in blocking websites, which should mitigate any public backlash and censorship accusations. As demonstrated by Czechia's response to disinformation following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the government did not directly block websites but requested the domain provider CZ.NIC to take action, thereby avoiding direct involvement.⁴⁷ Such cooperative strategies could be advantageous in the future, especially as they limit state control over website blocking, thus preventing potential misuse should anti-system parties come to power.

⁴⁴ Natália Tkáčová, Kristína Šefčíková. Disinformation as a Business. Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), September 2023, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/10680_business-models-of-the-czech-disinformation-landscape.pdf; Lindsay Wojtula, "Not Just Governments Anymore: How Disinformation Impacts Private Companies," Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8209_764-blog-private-companies-and-disinformation.pdf; Peter Dubóczy, Matej Friedl, Michaela Ružičková. Disinformation and Propaganda as a Business. Bratislava: Infosecurity.sk, June 2023, <https://infosecurity.sk/studie/disinformation-and-propaganda-as-a-business-mapping-the-financial-and-organisational-background-of-disinformation-websites-in-slovakia/>.

⁴⁵ "Zoznam stránok so sporným obsahom," Konspiratori.sk, <https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok>.

⁴⁶ "Metodika určování dezinformačních Webů," NELEŽ, <https://www.nelez.cz/#uvod>.

⁴⁷ "Czech domain operator blocks eight websites spreading disinformation and Kremlin propaganda," Czech Radio International, February 26, 2022.

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