

NATIONAL SECURITY
НАЦИОНАЛНА СИГУРНОСТ

**PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION:
EU AND NATO STRATEGIES FOR PROTECTING PARTICIPATORY
DEMOCRACY AS PART OF NATIONAL SECURITY**

Marina Wieners

University of Library Studies and Information Technologies
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Abstract: *A democracy requires freedom of expression. Corresponding passages can already be found in the American Bill of Rights (1791) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789). However, this basic requirement was formulated during the first wave of globalization. Today, society is in its fifth wave – and each wave has led to an expansion of freedom. Whereas in the 18th century limited channels of information existed, today's information landscape has been exponentially expanded by the internet, increasing digitalization and AI. This expansion makes it difficult to validate information and encourages the spread of disinformation, which is not always immediately recognizable as such and thus enables the manipulation of actions in everyday life and political decisions. Disinformation therefore influences not only individual opinion-forming, but also participatory democratic processes, and can have security-related effects. Mitigating these effects requires measures and coordinated implementation at both national and international level. Against this background, this article analyses current strategies of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to contain disinformation to protect participatory democracy as a component of national security, reviews their effectiveness through SWOT analysis and examples of real disinformation campaigns, and reflects on whether the current strategies are geared towards potential threats.*

Keywords: *participatory democracy; national security; disinformation; disinformation defense; international strategies*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, the state faces new challenges as an actor and guarantor of security for the population. On the one hand, it is required to develop technologically and organizationally in order to keep pace with the dynamics of digital change. On the other hand, it must ensure that the fundamental rights and freedoms of the population are not restricted or endangered. In this context, government action and the achievement of objectives are complicated by hurdles such as disinformation, the digital divide, cybercrime, foreign interference in elections, and ethical challenges (Internet health report 2019; UN Press Release 2023; Weisch 2025, p. 8).

Disinformation is defined as false information that is deliberately generated to harm a person, social group, organization or country. Disinformation is therefore distinct from misinformation and malinformation (see Figure 1). Misinformation is false information that is not produced with the intention of causing harm. Malinformation, by contrast, is information that is based on the truth but used to harm a person, organization or country (Turcilo and Obrenovic 2020, p. 9).

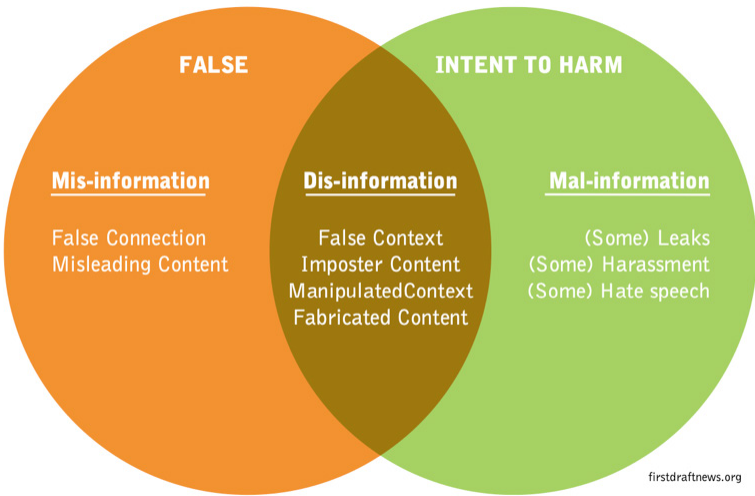


Fig. 1. Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (Turcilo and Obrenovic 2020, p. 10, cited by Asanov 2019)

The danger of disinformation lies in its many forms and the high speed at which it spreads. A study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) showed as early as 2018 that false reports on Twitter spread much faster and further than true messages (vgl. MIT News Office Presse Release 2018). The Konrad Adenauer Foundation distinguishes between four main forms of disinformation manipulation: fake news, deep fakes, social bots and trolls. These can be used not only as weapons in information wars, but also to undermine trust in the media and manipulate public opinion in a targeted manner (KAS n.d.). The results of the Vodafone Foundation Germany (2020) and the survey by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2025) show that such manipulations are already taking place and have been effective since the coronavirus pandemic. In 2020, the proportion of 14- to 24-year-olds who come into contact with disinformation several times a day almost doubled within a year (21% compared to 12% in 2019), and in 2025, young TikTok users were particularly susceptible to Russian and Chinese disinformation.

It should not be taken as an axiom that only young people are affected by disinformation: a study by the Max Planck Society (2024), which examined the perception and classification of information in different population groups, showed that only older adults were significantly better able to distinguish between true and false headlines. By contrast, younger adults (the age groups examined were: 18-31 years, 32-47 years and 48-88 years) were less able to do so. At the same time, the study found that education level had no measurable impact on susceptibility to misinformation (Press Release of Max-Planck-Gesellschaft 2025). Therefore, the ability to recognize false information is not determined by one's own self-assessment but is significantly influenced by the type of content and the source (OECD Truth Quest Survey 2024).

While the individual motives for spreading disinformation are complex and varied, four overarching objectives can be identified at the societal level: the targeted radicalization and division of society, the erosion of trust in the media, political influence through the manipulation of opinions or elections, and economic interests. These objectives, the high level of awareness of the term "disinformation" (76% of respondents in Germany and the US), as well as proven influences of disinformation on participatory events such as the Brexit referendum or the "Doppelgänger" campaign, underline the influence of disinformation on participatory democracy (Bernhard et al. 2024; Bastos 2016; USCYBERCOM Public Affairs 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, disinformation can be classified as a security policy threat, as it can have a multidimensional impact on participatory democracy and national security, making it difficult to combat. This can be justified by Daase and Kessler's concept, according to which disinformation can be classified into all forms of democratic deficits (known knowns, known unknowns, unknown unknowns and unknown knowns):

- Disinformation can function as known knowns when its existence, objectives and basic

mechanisms of action are recognised and empirically proven (e.g. orchestrated disinformation campaigns, coordinated bot networks or recurring narratives);

➤ Disinformation can occur as known unknowns when its existence is recognized, but some characteristics such as actor attribution, reach or intended side effects remain unclear;

➤ Disinformation can be classified as an unknown known if its existence and potential risks are known but are deliberately ignored or not addressed for political, institutional or normative reasons;

➤ Disinformation can act as an unknown unknown if novel forms, actor constellations or causal relationships are neither anticipated nor recognized at an early stage and can lead to significant consequences. (Daase et al. 2007, pp. 411–434).

At the international level, disinformation is considered by both the EU and NATO to be part of hybrid threats, prompting the development of concrete protective measures and the inclusion of corresponding regulations in national security strategies to protect participatory democracy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to present and critically analyze current EU and NATO strategies for combating disinformation and their impact in the context of protecting participatory democracy as a component of national security, a qualitative evaluation of current specialist literature, political strategy and security papers, scientific studies and selected case studies will be carried out. The analysis will follow the following pattern: definition of theoretical principles and terminology – examination of the strategies of selected actors (the EU and NATO) and their evaluation using SWOT analysis – reflection on the strategies based on selected case studies of real disinformation campaigns, followed by the derivation of recommendations for future strategies to combat disinformation.

RESULTS

The European Union's (EU's) strategy for combating disinformation

Analysis and development of strategies to counter information warfare in the European Union are based on a variety of sources: pan-European surveys, external studies by institutions and organizations, and reports by internal expert groups (Mündges 2019). The acceleration in strategy development took place after the disinformation campaigns in the context of the Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 in 2015, the East StratCom Task Force was set up to deal primarily with the detection and classification of Russian disinformation activities (Hoxtell 2024, p. 12). The task force is part of the Strategic Communication and Information Analysis Division (AFFGEN.7) of the European External Action Service. The Western Balkans Task Force, the South Task Force and a cross-cutting team dealing with emerging threats, data analysis, policy development and international cooperation also belong to the same division. The tasks of this unit include, among other things, coordinating the EU rapid alert system against disinformation (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union 2021). In 2018, the publication of the Communication “Tackling online disinformation: a European approach” and the EU Action Plan against Disinformation (see Figure 2) were followed, along with the entry into force of the “Code of Practice on Disinformation” (Hoxtell 2024, p. 12). The 2018 EU Action Plan proclaims disinformation as “a major challenge for European democracies and societies” and sets out four pillars for a coordinated response to disinformation between the Union institutions, Member States, civil society and the private sector, in particular online platforms: improving the Union institutions’ abilities to recognize, analyze and expose disinformation; strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation; mobilizing the private sector to combat disinformation; raising awareness and improving societal resilience. The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation was formally adopted by the initial signatories (Internet companies Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla, and the European Association of Digital Media EDiMA) on 16 October 2018 and includes a preamble, a statement of purpose and a total of 15 voluntary commitments by the signatories to exercise control over advertising placements, political and issue-related advertising, the integrity of the services offered, empowering consumers and promoting research (Sachstand des Deutschen Bundestags PE 6-3000-041/19,

p. 5). In addition, the “Digital Services Act” (2022), the “Digital Markets Act” (2022) and the “AI Act” (2024) created further legal frameworks that also serve – in some cases indirectly – to contain disinformation (Hoxtell 2024, p. 12).

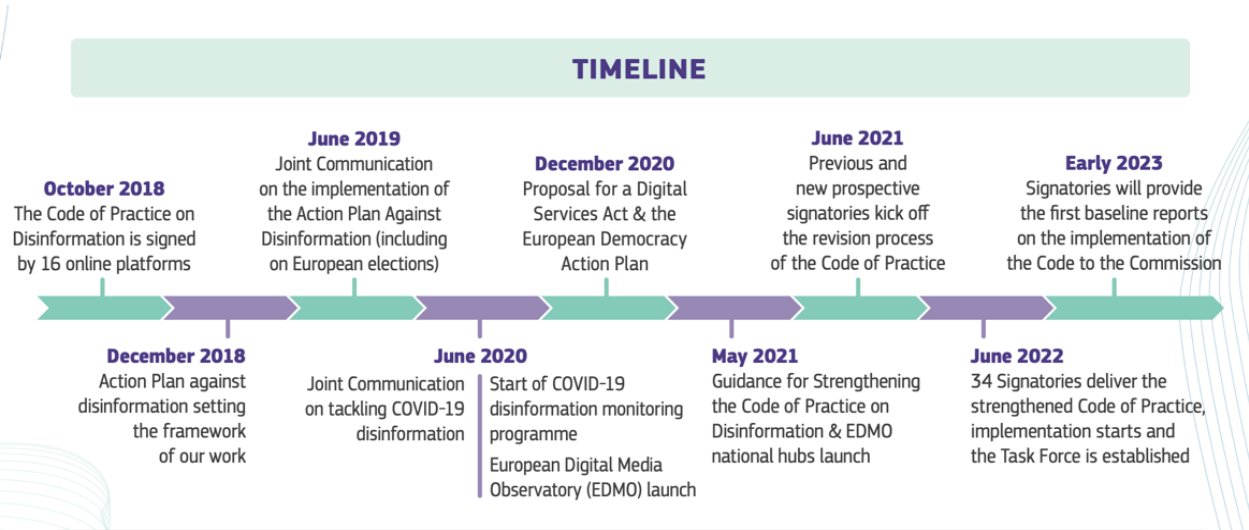


Fig. 2. Timeline of measures Implementing the Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission 2022)

The strategy of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for combating disinformation

NATO views disinformation as part of the collective term “information threats”, since the term disinformation has become, according to NATO, “an umbrella term for different kinds of phenomena in the information space, including as a label for opinions and narratives that contradict an actor’s own opinion”. The danger of information threats is seen in the fact that they erode people’s trust in governments and other public institutions and “appeal to people’s worst impulses, fears and prejudices”. NATO’s strategy for combating information threats is based on close cooperation with allies and partner states and consists of four central approaches: Understanding the information environment, Preventing the effectiveness of information threats, Containing and mitigating information threats, Recovering quickly by learning lessons from information threats (NATO 2025). The aim is to fundamentally “vaccinate” or “prevent” the media sphere, rather than refuting every false claim. The objectives and measures are regularly reviewed and adjusted, as was the case after the COVID-19 disinformation incident. Member and partner states are supported in increasing their resilience to disinformation through advisory services and financial support for social and scientific projects, which was further anchored by the adoption of Resolution 483 “Protecting Allied Democracies and Partners from Disinformation” in 2023. NATO is also intensifying its cooperation with the European Union to benefit from the EU rapid alert system to combat disinformation (Chlon 2022, p. 6).

Manifestation of EU and NATO strategies at national level for the protection of participatory democracy

An analysis of the national strategies of countries that are members of both the EU and NATO revealed the following explicit manifestations of EU and NATO strategic approaches to protecting participatory democracy in the context of disinformation:

- Germany’s National Security Strategy aims to expand public relations work, strengthen media literacy, and speed up the identification and deletion of illegal content in the digital space in order to “strengthen defenses against disinformation and the resilience of democracy” (NSS 2023, pp. 46–48);
- In France’s Revue nationale stratégique (National Strategic Review), protection against disinformation is seen as requiring targeted investment in the strategic education and research sector (National Strategic Review 2025, p. 39);

➤ The Netherlands' National Security Strategy recognizes the spread of disinformation as a security threat to public discourse and social cohesion. Disinformation can be combated by maintaining a pluralistic media landscape, strengthening citizens' resilience to disinformation and reducing the influence of disinformation through international common standards (The Security Strategy for the Kingdom of the Netherlands 2023, pp. 14–31);

➤ Estonia's National Security Concept classifies disinformation as a threat to constitutional order and social cohesion. To counter it, Estonia relies on strategic communication that strengthens constitutional values in society (National Security Concept of Estonia 2023, p. 10);

➤ Latvia's State Defense Concept defines the goal against disinformation as 'building public understanding of state threats and understanding the intentions of potential aggressors' in order to "increase the resilience of the government and the psychological resilience of society to various forms of manipulation, including disinformation and information-based influence operations" (The State Defence Concept 2023, pp. 10 – 16);

➤ In the Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland), disinformation is described as part of hybrid threats to state structures and societies in Western countries and as a challenge to the information sphere. To counteract this, the information sphere should be protected at the virtual, physical and cognitive levels in cooperation with the media, social networks, citizens and non-governmental organisations (Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2020, pp. 6–21);

➤ According to the Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic, disinformation is used to "disrupt or manipulate national decision-making mechanisms, influence public opinion and destabilize the political situation". To counteract this, the strategy envisages the development of critical thinking among young people, the establishment of coordinated national mechanisms for the early identification, assessment and combating of disinformation, and the development of strategic communication involving civil society, the media and academia (Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic 2021, pp. 10–19);

➤ The Belgian Stratégie de sécurité nationale describes disinformation as part of hostile information operations. To counter this, a safer and more responsible online environment is to be created that enables the strengthening of the position of citizens and civil society (Stratégie de sécurité nationale 2022, pp. 18–39).

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the EU and NATO strategies presented for combating disinformation with regard to safeguarding participatory democracy and national security interests, a SWOT analysis (see Table 1) is carried out below. This method allows for a systematic comparison of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of existing measures at the EU and NATO level and provides a basis for reflecting on and evaluating the success of the strategies using a few case studies of real disinformation campaigns.

Table 1. SWOT Analysis of Current EU and NATO Strategies Against Disinformation (Own elaboration)

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Liability through codes (Code of Conduct against Disinformation) and legal frameworks (DSA, DMA, AI Act); • Clear target definitions & strategic frameworks (e.g. EU action plan, resolution 483); • Broad institutional anchoring in the EU & NATO through task forces and specialised programmes; • Coordination between member states (EU rapid alert system) and multilateral exchange between the EU and NATO.	• Heterogeneous implementation in EU member states; • Lack of mandatory standards in the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation; • Dependence on voluntary self-regulation (e.g. by online platforms); • Limited sanctions for violations; • High pressure to adapt due to constantly changing disinformation practices; • Lack of transparency regarding the effectiveness of existing measures.
Opportunities	Threats
• Expansion of digital resilience in the population through targeted programmes; • Increased cooperation with civil society actors and fact-checkers; • Use of AI for early detection and analysis of campaigns; • Synergies through close integration with cybersecurity strategies; • Development of international alliances and strategic partnerships against coordinated disinformation attacks.	• Increase in state-orchestrated disinformation campaigns from autocratic states and constant change in their forms; • Lack of speed of response to new threats; • Potential conflict of interest between freedom of expression and security interests; • Loss of trust in democratic institutions and the media.

CONCLUSION

The comparison carried out in the form of a SWOT analysis confirms that the EU and NATO are pursuing an active policy of countering disinformation. In particular, the legally binding nature of the strategies, clarity of objectives and the development of coordinated mechanisms in partnership with partners can be cited as strengths. The identified weaknesses indicate that the strategies examined cannot be considered complete.

The case studies of the Brexit referendum and the “Doppelgänger” campaign provide a concrete illustration of various elements of the SWOT analysis. In the case of Brexit, existing strategic weaknesses such as the lack of a coordinated communication framework and the low capacity for coordinated disinformation became apparent. At the same time, it became clear that political influence can be exerted by digital platforms with a high degree of effectiveness. The “Doppelgänger” campaign is an example of how targeted misinformation can be used at the international level against participatory processes and trust in state institutions.

The nature of digital threats requires a regular review and adaptation of existing instruments, which can be confirmed by the identified risks. It is recommended that the intervals between strategic revisions be shortened, that operational feedback be evaluated more systematically and that cooperation between international actors be further strengthened. The challenge here is to find a level of regulation that protects democracy against disinformation but which does not endanger democracy itself at its core, because as early as 2019, the investigation initiated by the European Parliament’s Civil Liberties and Constitutional Affairs department found that legal restrictions on the content of democracy would do more harm than disinformation itself (LIBE Committee summary 2019).

The risks identified supplement those already collected and published in the other sources, such as keeping up with the volume and speed of disinformation, disinformation being more interest than information, limited resources and expertise, balancing commercial interests with the public goods, and thus expand the field of possible adjustments at the structural and strategic level (Hoxtell 2024).

In terms of participatory democracy, which relies on active participation from the population, particular attention should be paid to the risks of “an increase in state-orchestrated disinformation campaigns from autocratic states and constant changes to their forms” and “a loss of trust in democratic institutions and the media”. If the loss of trust is caused by targeted disinformation,

the population not only loses interest in participating, but also the basis for informed participation, which in turn can lead to the long-term creeping loss of function of participatory elements within democratic systems.

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ДЕМОКРАЦИЯ НА УЧАСТИЕТО В ЕРАТА НА ДЕЗИНФОРМАЦИЯТА: СТРАТЕГИИ НА ЕС И НАТО ЗА ЗАЩИТА НА „ДЕМОКРАЦИЯТА НА УЧАСТИЕТО“ КАТО ЧАСТ ОТ НАЦИОНАЛНАТА СИГУРНОСТ

Резюме: Демокрацията изисква свобода на изразяване. Съответни пасажки вече могат да бъдат намерени в Американската декларация за правата (1791) и Френската декларация за правата на човека и гражданина (1789). Това основно изискване обаче е формулирано по време на първата вълна на глобализацията. Днес обществото е в петата си вълна – и всяка вълна е довела до разширяване на свободата. Докато през XVIII век са съществували ограничени канали за информация, днес информационният пейзаж е разширен експоненциално благодарение на интернет, нарастващата дигитализация и изкуствения интелект. Това разширяване затруднява валидирането на информацията и насърчава разпространението на дезинформация, която невинаги е лесно разпознаваема като такава и по този начин позволява манипулиране на действията в ежедневието и политическите решения. Дезинформацията следователно влияе не само върху формирането на индивидуалното мнение, но и върху демократичните процеси на участие и може да има последици, свързани със сигурността. За да се смекчат тези последици, са необходими мерки и координирано изпълнение както на национално, така и на международно равнище. На този фон в настоящата статия се анализират настоящите стратегии на Европейския съюз (ЕС) и Организацията на Северноатлантическия договор (НАТО) за ограничаване на дезинформацията с цел защита на „демокрацията на участието“ като компонент на националната сигурност, прави се преглед на тяхната ефективност чрез SWOT анализ и примери за реални дезинформационни кампании и се разсъждава дали настоящите стратегии са насочени към потенциалните заплахи.

Ключови думи: демокрация на участието; национална сигурност; дезинформация; защита от дезинформация; международни стратегии

Марина Винерс, докторант
Университет по библиотекознание и информационни технологии
София, България
E-mail: marina@wieners.eu