

# **REPORT: Shaping Our Digital Future: tackling Disinformation in the EU, case of Central and Eastern Europe**

As the war in Ukraine has shown, the malign foreign influence continues to shape and impact political processes and public opinions in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). On Monday, March 27, 2023, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, the Think Visegrad Platform, and International Republican Institute’s Beacon Project, in cooperation with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, organized an event titled **“Shaping Our Digital Future: tackling Disinformation in the EU, case of Central and Eastern Europe.”**

The program started with a keynote speech by **Věra Jourová**, the Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Values and Transparency. After the keynote speech, **Žiga Faktor**, Head of Brussels’ office of EUROPEUM, and **Iva Merheim-Eyre**, Junior Program Officer at IRI’s Beacon Project, added a few words about the activities of their respective organizations in the field of disinformation. Following the introductions, the event continued with a panel discussion moderated by **Danielle Piatkiewicz**, Research Fellow at EUROPEUM.

**Věra Jourová** opened the debate with a reflection about the title of the discussion, mentioning that digital future is, in fact, digital present. Because we already live in the digital age. She also reminded the audience that digital transformation brings risks to democracy and human rights. She briefly outlined that the current geopolitical context stems from the misuse of digital technologies by some authoritarian regimes – most recently by the Russian Federation. “The Kremlin is fighting the war not only with bombs but also with words. Since the war started, the Kremlin has unleashed a tsunami of propaganda. But it has been engaged in misinformation and foreign interference long before this war,” Jourová said. A concrete example of the Kremlin’s interference in the domestic issues of the countries in the CEE region was provided by **Dorka Takacsy**, Research Fellow at the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID). She claimed that the main reason for the success of Russian interference being deeply rooted in Hungary is because it is predominantly the Hungarian government that uses narratives coming from Russia, creating a monolithic bloc of information. “Hungarian society has seen a one-sided campaign since 2015. You can constantly see a strong anti-EU narrative on which the pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian are built,” Takacsy explained.

Since the countries of the CEE regions have experienced the impact of propaganda and the disinformation campaign firsthand, they have developed various strategies to combat their spread. Yet, as **Katarína Klingová**, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Democracy & Resilience and GLOBSEC, suggests, “it is a one step forward, two steps back process in Central Europe, and we still have a long way to go.” She drew attention to the rigid nature of the information flow and demonstrated it in the [study](#) conveyed in 9 countries after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where a substantive number of respondents did not immediately perceive Russia as an aggressor. **Nad'a Kovalčíková**, Senior Researcher at the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), further expanded on this idea and reminded the audience that countries need to approach Russian and Chinese interference differently as their tactics differ. For instance, Russia uses troll farms on a long-term basis. On the other hand, China is putting responsibility on others. “At the same time, we see that they are learning from each other regarding the different measures used.”

To combat the Russian propaganda, Radio Free Europe, who had to leave Russia and Belarus due to foreign agents’ laws, also uses various approaches. They have started streaming news to the Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic region and set up a digital innovation hub. Through the latter, they try to circumvent the Russian war on information by creating mirror sites or by helping Russians to set up VPN services to allow them to access foreign news and media. “Furthermore, we will have a new streaming service, similar to Netflix, dealing with non-news content. This is a way of reaching out to the Russian audience who does not consume the news constantly. It will focus on cultural things, such as documentaries,” **Rikard Jozwiak**, Europe Editor, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, revealed during the discussion. According to Commissioner **Věra Jourová**, the overall EU approach consists of a mixture of legislative and non-legislative measures – such as the Digital Media Act or the new Code of Practice on Disinformation. However, as **Miriam Lexmann**, Member of the European Parliament from Slovakia, noted, there’s still a long way to go as not even the illegal content is not being taken away in a timely manner. Yet she recognized a few good steps in the combat so far. “We were able to diminish the revenue for advertisements for disinformation websites. This has seized the period where

we see disinformation as a business because it attracts people sometimes more than the truth.”

**Katarína Klingová** also stressed the need for a whole-society approach to fighting disinformation. “It starts with critical thinking, but it’s not only the young generation who is vulnerable but also older generations – we need to develop life-long programs.” Yet, as she added, the political will to fight, invest money and build capacities is needed for these long-time measures. “Kremlin investments into hybrid warfare have been incomparable even before the war. We can build resilience and strategies but need dedicated leadership that is willing to push for the reforms. Unfortunately, we see that disinformation is not only driven by the foreign actors but by the political figures themselves as they see it as a way to approach voters,” acknowledged Klingová. **Nad’a Kovalčíková** also recognized the disproportionate investments, yet she highlighted that there had been a shift in the approach. She demonstrated it in the role of the Strategic Unit of Communications of EEAS, which lately launched larger scope projects in regions of the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, or even in China. “Investments into investigative journalism and media are critical. They must be able to compete with other outlets that are not necessarily the non-evidence-based information.”

The investment in better quality media to protect media pluralism is, according to **Miriam Lexmann**, also applicable to other regions, not only the CEE. “What I find essential is an intensified engagement with the countries in Eastern Europe and learning from each other. Furthermore, understanding the context, which is being exploited by Russia and China, and increased funding for targeted initiatives are essential as well, “ **Nad’a Kovalčíková** concluded on the role of EU countries in Eastern Europe region on the issue of disinformation.

## About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making. We are the recipient of institutional funding from the European Commission under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.



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