[WHEN DATA DECIDES THE VOTE]

From Algorithms to Ballots

How Social Media and AI Shape Europe's Political Future

elf

“Democracy is scrolling.”

“What we see online is not neutral — and neither are our political choices.”

From Algorithms to Ballots

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Table of Contents

13 **The impact of social media, AI, and misinformation in shaping UK electoral outcomes**
ELESA ZEHNDORFER

45 **Navigating the digital crossroads**
Information integrity and democratic resilience in North Macedonia
EMIL KIRJAS

69 **The role of social media and AI**
How do they shape European public opinion and electoral outcomes?
AIDA MAHMUTOVIĆ · ENES HODŽIĆ

97 **Why don't liberals dance on TikTok?**
ALEKSANDRA WIĘCKA

123 **Authors and publishers**

Policy brief

GIAN MARCO BOVENZI

Please raise a hand whoever remembers the Cambridge Analytica scandal. For those who do not, back in the early 2010s, the British consulting firm Cambridge Analytica collected personal data and information of millions of Facebook users (up to almost 90 million profiles) for political advertising without their informed consent. How, and why, would a Facebook user's profile ever be leveraged for political purposes? This is the question that, years ago, we posed to ourselves. Today, we're well aware of the reason: personal information shared on social media represents the easiest way to understand an individual's preferences, choices, psychological profile, and, eventually, political orientation. The use of personal information for political purposes presents several objectives, amongst which *strengthening an existing orientation* (by *bombing* the profile with further similar content) and *suggesting the right choice* to swing voters are both achieved by leveraging personal information to shape individual choices and by suggesting to the user *on which side to lean*.

Basically, just like Netflix's suggested movies or shows, Facebook suggested content influencing users on their voting preferences. The difference? Surely, movies and shows don't threaten democracy.

For the record, Cambridge Analytica ended up influencing the 2016 US presidential elections, the elections in Trinidad and Tobago in 2010, and the Brexit referendum in 2020. What is the lowest common

denominator of these three political events? Their outcomes were in favour of populist and/or far-right oriented political ideologies and parties; against the liberal family.

The reasons for this trend are found in the major aggressiveness embedded in the populist and far-right narratives: the tendency of surfing the wave of citizens dissatisfied with the political and social status quo, by leveraging and deploying *negative emotions* such as fear, hate, and willingness to point the finger towards (not guilty) scapegoats. However, the liberal discourse appears grounded on reasoning, long-term strategies for the common good: Patience lies beneath, and patience is a rare virtue – at least in times that go at 10x speed than the current ones.

Meanwhile, technological progress speeds up. While ten years ago we could possibly identify Facebook as the leading – if not one of the few – social networks representing an actual *forum*, today the number of social media platforms available has grown exponentially: think of Instagram or TikTok. Each has a specific target (mostly generational); hence, coordinated political strategies aimed at influencing the social media audience might have devastating effects in terms of outcomes. And the future, with the increasing advent of artificial intelligence as well as, prospectively, extended reality, offers even more opportunities.

This publication, **FROM ALGORITHMS TO BALLOTS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AND AI SHAPE EUROPE'S POLITICAL FUTURE**, sheds light on how social media, AI, mis/disinformation, and manipulation of the news are capable of shaping electoral outcomes and, eventually, the whole democratic resilience. The analysed countries are the UK, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Poland. Let us take a quick look at the main arguments from each chapter.

Chapter 1 from the UK, titled **THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA, AI, AND MISINFORMATION IN SHAPING UK ELECTORAL OUTCOMES**, argues that social media-based political content creation (a crucial tool for populist narratives) reshaped the landscape of public opinion and, accordingly, electoral outcomes across Europe, ultimately threatening democracy. The contribution identifies how disinformation agents reach and amplify their targets and discusses the reasons why right-wing populists appear to be more successful at driving online political

discourse (also with the aid of Russian reflexive control-style strategies). The chapter concludes with the following pragmatic strategies that can be utilised to achieve meaningful change: (1) alerting liberal voters to voter suppression techniques; (2) engaging far more effectively with emotional messaging (to deliver targeted pro-democracy messaging to traditionally conservative and centrist voters, and maximising voter mobilisation of liberal voters in elections); and (3) giving educational approaches and smart engagement with technology (e.g. flagging and AI detection systems) a pivotal role.

Chapter II, titled **NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL CROSSROADS: INFORMATION INTEGRITY AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA**, underlines how, in this crucial moment for the country (in-between a European future and democratic backsliding), the digital sphere and technologies play a pivotal role: while on the one hand, they ensure the country's progress towards EU membership, on the other hand, their abuse and manipulation – exploited by external actors – threatens its democratic institutions. The author stresses the central role of the liberal forces in securing the country's democratic future, adopting a liberal roadmap including actions such as the acceleration of AI governance and investments in digital literacy, regulatory measures for digital political campaigning and strengthened independent media, and the adoption of specific national strategies for engagement and disinformation resilience.

Chapter III, **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND AI: HOW DO THEY SHAPE EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES?**, offers an overview of the interplay between Bosnia and Herzegovina's sociopolitical landscape and the consumption of political content. It identifies how the peculiar country's political system enhances the risk that ethno-nationalist rhetoric thrives, often carried out through the pervasive use of social media. Moreover, despite efforts, youth political participation remains low due to institutional mistrust, and the only option available for liberals is to implement a coordinated strategy and digital literacy to enhance liberal-democratic values; this can be done through measures such as youth-focused platforms and peer messaging for civic outreach, watchdog monitoring and public pressure (including

on Big Tech platforms) for a better information environment, and deploying prebunking and verification content ahead of elections.

The last chapter, **WHY DON'T LIBERALS DANCE ON TIKTOK?**, from Poland, underlines how a social media-driven political campaign, which leverages the emotional components of the recipients, is capable of influencing the electoral results as no political programme is capable of doing. This has a dramatic impact especially within the liberal world, as the liberal narrative – in being rational, authentic, and committed to discovering the truth – does not play with emotional feedback and, therefore, ceases to be attractive for the young. This is especially true when it has to confront populist and far-right manipulation techniques, engaging in a post-world truth narrative. The solution? Understanding that winning on this front requires strategic decisions, technical knowledge, and building bold narratives through the use of modern technologies.

This exploration of the role of social media and AI in influencing political elections brings us both awareness and concern. How is it possible – if it is even possible – to stop this trend? What measures, if any, can be taken to avoid aggressive narratives impacting voting leanings? Most of all, what can the liberal family do to leverage this trend, making it possible to *reverse* it in its favour? Governance is the key, along with the rule of law. Regulatory measures that synthesise ethics, responsible investments, and democratic use of social media and AI would benefit the overall just use of digital technologies. This should include measures fostering digital literacy: more aware internet users implies a lower trend to trust fake news. Additionally, measures affecting the integrity of political campaigning should include transparency of posted social media content (e.g. state agencies overseeing content shared on social media, fact-checking, or obligations for content creators to pose watermarks or disclaimers on shared content regarding political content, no matter whether generated using AI or not).

Time will tell. In the meantime, we all have some homework to do: Before watching a video, a picture, or reading a post on a social network, let us not stop at appearances; let us dig and verify what's behind the curtain.

The impact of social media, AI, and misinformation in shaping UK electoral outcomes

ELESA ZEHNDORFER

Abstract

In an era defined by rapid technological evolution, the democratisation of AI-driven, social media-based political content creation has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of public opinion and has irrevocably reshaped electoral outcomes across Europe. Specifically, it has emboldened the populist cause across the Continent, posing a major ongoing threat to democracy. This chapter shines a research-driven light on how digital platforms serve not only as conduits for genuine political communication in the UK, but as critical amplifiers of disinformation and polarisation, systematically exploiting (and often engineering) societal division and geopolitical tensions to achieve political (and/or financial) profit. Using a desk research strategy, this chapter subsequently identifies the ways in which disinformation agents reach their targets, clarifying how online networks are exploited to amplify their reach. It discusses why right-wing populists (as opposed to pro-democracy voices) appear to be so successful at driving online political discourse, and how psychological warfare and Russian reflexive control-style strategies continue to manipulate and shape public discourse. The chapter concludes with a playbook of pragmatic strategies that can be utilised to achieve meaningful change.

Keywords: disinformation, misinformation, deepfakes, cognitive warfare, neuropolitics, UK, populism

Introduction

The United Kingdom represents a critical test case for understanding liberal democratic vulnerabilities that arise in post-truth environments. As a recent EU Horizon-funded RECLAIM (Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age) project reflects, disinformation interacts with populism in a way that dangerously fragments the public sphere, weakening the meaningful and deliberative public discourse on which liberal democracy depends.[1] The UK's experience post-Brexit represents an especially instructive test case for European liberal institutions, specifically because it illustrates how populist communication and anti-elite rhetoric can effectively destabilise epistemic trust in the EU and democratic collaborative systems.[2]

Via a critical examination of the drivers of online political discourse in the UK, this chapter subsequently interrogates the mechanisms through which digital ecosystems and AI-driven strategies are leveraged to manipulate perceptions, erode institutional trust, drive elections,

[1] K. Burakowski (2025), 'Professor's research part of major EU project', *Goldsmiths, University of London*, 17 September, https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/2025/reclaim-project/.

[2] S. Kippin (2025), 'New research warns of democratic backsliding in the UK', *University of Stirling News*, 20 September, https://www.stir.ac.uk/news/2025/september-2025-news/new-research-warns-of-democratic-backsliding-in-the-uk/.

and ultimately recalibrate the democratic process. It is a dynamic that demands urgent, empirically grounded scrutiny.[3]

1 Literature review

1.1 Shaping public opinion in the UK

Research identifies a pattern of targeted misinformation influence operations across the UK, which has led to particularly acute effects on shaping public opinion (both in the UK and across Europe).[4] According to a recent study (May 2024) published by the Alan Turing Institute,[5] more than 9 in 10 people (94%) in the UK believe they have been exposed to misinformation on social media.

A 2023–2024 Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) study[6] mirrors these findings, reporting a high rate of exposure to disinformation across the UK populace: As an example, a syndicated (micro-targeted) campaign targeting climate change science, with over 30,000 social media posts, revealed systemic efforts to undermine climate action. A major spike in anti-climate change rhetoric was observed close to then-Prime Minister Sunak's announcement of revised net zero targets (20 September 2023), underscoring how climate change has become a highly politicised topic.

[3] S. Stockwell, M. Hughes, P. Swatton, and K. Bishop (2024), 'AI-enabled influence operations: The threat to the UK general election', Briefing Paper, Center for Emerging Technology & Security, *The Alan Turing Institute*, 28 May, https://cetas.turing.ac.uk/publications/ai-enabled-influence-operations-threat-uk-general-election.

[4] O. S. Kiratli (2023), 'Social Media Effects on Public Trust in the European Union', *Public Opinion Q*, 87(3), 749–763. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfad029.

[5] S. Stockwell (2024), 'AI-enabled influence operations: Threat analysis of the 2024 UK and European elections', Briefing Paper, Centre for Emerging Technology and Security, *The Alan Turing Institute*, 19 September, https://cetas.turing.ac.uk/publications/ai-enabled-influence-operations-threat-analysis-2024-uk-and-european-elections.

[6] CAAD (2024), 'The digital landscape of climate misinformation in the UK: 2023 & 2024', CAAD, 19 September, https://caad.info/analysis/reports/the-digital-landscape-of-climate-misinformation-in-the-uk-2023-2024/.

UK-based disinformation often derives from global sources that extend far beyond the shores of the UK (i.e. as opposed to being UK-centric), with American commentators and global conspiracies often targeting UK users. We see concepts such as immigration tied to LGBTQ+ and widespread conspiracy theory content, such as 'The Great Reset', which amplifies reach and virality.

In terms of a network effect, key fake news stories usually originate from the same small number of accounts, with large numbers of followers. The stories spread quickly. Examples include the post published on 18 May 2025 by Wide Awake Media (▸ Figure 1), which ties climate change, LGBTQ+, and Covid-19 conspiracies together for maximum impact and virality. Wide Awake Media is an 819,300-follower, X account that has been identified as the originator of 59 of the 100 most shared misinformation posts in a recent CAAD 2024 misinformation study.[7]

[7] CAAD (2024), 'The Digital Landscape'.

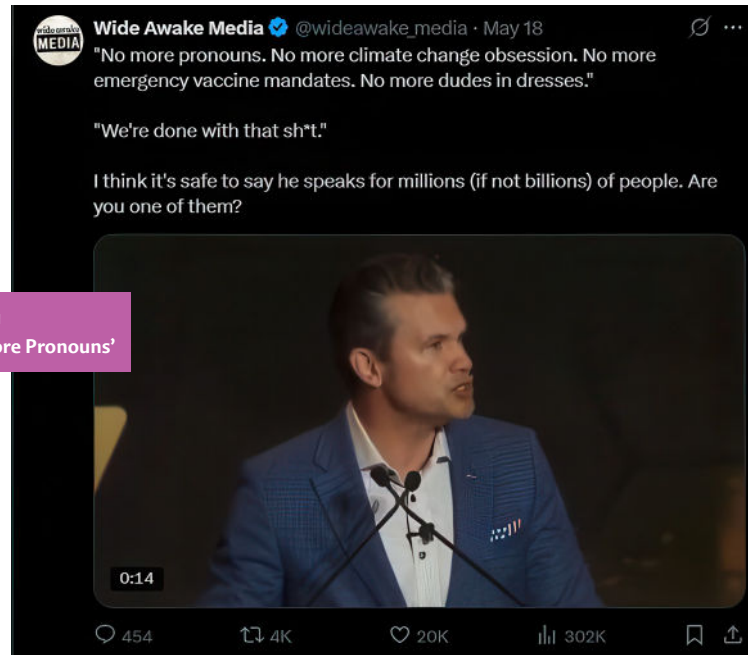

Figure 1
'No More Pronouns'

Figure 2.
Wide Awake Media 'Pure Blood'

Wide Awake Media also sells merchandise – a form of monetised radicalisation – with logos based on fake news stories. These kinds of profit-based approaches usually trade on right-wing (not populist or liberal) sentiments, such as the race-baiting 'Pure Blood' t-shirt sold for 21.81 euro cents (▸ Figure 2).

1.2 Overseas influences

In terms of digital networks, the global amplification effect of specific UK far-right accounts on social media channels (especially X) by

high-profile right-wing ideologues like Elon Musk (221 million followers) is extremely evident. Tommy Robinson (1.2 million) and Radio Genoa (1.3 million) both reach extremely large audiences, and both have been amplified by Elon Musk, owner of X, who has shared their posts. (Musk has also shared banned Tommy Robinson videos.)[8]

This amplification effect has been greatly strengthened by recent algorithmic changes at X, also enabled by Musk, which now strongly favours far-right-wing populist content, with no associated guardrails for identifying or removing fake content.[9]

Since acquiring X, Musk has also powerfully relaxed moderation policies, reinstated previously banned accounts, and allowed the spread of misinformation and inflammatory content, including from UK-based right-wing activists.[10]

Reports indicate Musk has considered making substantial donations to Reform UK, while right-wing figures such as Nigel Farage have benefited financially from X's creator revenue programme, earning money from posts that often contain divisive rhetoric.[11] Musk's interventions have increased the reach and engagement of right-wing populist content, helping these voices gain traction and visibility in UK political discourse.[12] Musk's actions have ultimately drawn praise from some UK Conservative figures, who see his approach as a blow against what they perceive as a left-leaning media and political establishment.[13]

8 A. Boulton (2025), 'Elon Musk must be a busy man - so why is he so interested in UK politics?', *Sky News*, 5 January, https://news.sky.com/story/elon-musk-must-be-a-busy-man-so-why-is-he-so-interested-in-uk-politics-13283908.

9 D. Harwell and J. B. Merrill (2024), 'On Elon Musk's X, Republicans go viral as Democrats disappear'. *The Washington Post*, 29 October, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/10/29/elon-musk-x-republican-democrat-twitter-election/.

10 M. Wendling (2024), 'Elon Musk's curious fixation with Britain', *BBC News*. BBC, 21 December. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy7kpvndyyxo.

11 K. Chaddah (2025), 'Elon Musk's foray into UK politics holds a warning for the US', *Truthout*, 18 January, https://truthout.org/articles/elon-musks-foray-into-uk-politics-holds-a-warning-for-the-us/.

12 K. Chaddah (2025), 'Elon Musk's foray into UK politics'.

13 B. Maass (2025), 'Is Elon Musk aiding a British right-wing extremist?', *DW.com*, 31 January, https://www.dw.com/en/is-elon-musk-aiding-a-british-right-wing-extremist/a-71440001.

UK government officials have publicly called on Musk to act responsibly, criticising his posts for inflaming tensions and spreading misinformation during periods of unrest:[14] These appeals have fallen on deaf ears.

Ultimately, Musk's interventions have significantly amplified right-wing populist voices in the UK, both through his personal influence and changes to X's platform policies, contributing to a more prominent and sometimes more extreme right-wing presence in British online discourse.[15,16] He has also attempted to influence UK politics by repeatedly posting statements attacking the Labour government and Prime Minister Keir Starmer, by amplifying far-right talking points and conspiracy theories[17] or calling for new UK elections to propel right-wing political party Reform to power.

Accounts spreading false rumours about violent incidents, including anti-immigrant and Islamophobic narratives, have also been unblocked or amplified under Musk's leadership, further contributing to unrest and riots in the UK.[18]

In conclusion, the UK political digital landscape is often shaped powerfully by overseas influences (including Elon Musk). American donors have, in the past, supported both Trump and UK right-wing leaning think tanks and advocacy groups in the UK, such as Conservative think tank network Tufton Street.[19]

14 Le Monde with AP. (2024), 'UK government calls on Elon Musk to act responsibly amid far-right riots', *Le Monde*, 7 August, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2024/08/07/uk-government-calls-on-elon-musk-to-act-responsibly-amid-far-right-riots_6710717_13.html.

15 K. Chaddah (2025), 'Elon Musk's Foray Into UK Politics'.

16 P. Iyer (2024), 'New research points to possible algorithmic bias on X', *Tech Policy Press*, 15 November, https://www.techpolicy.press/new-research-points-to-possible-algorithmic-bias-on-x/.

17 K. Knight (2025), 'Elon Musk's latest terrifying foray into British politics', *The New Yorker*, 9 January, https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/elon-musks-latest-terrifying-foray-into-british-politics.

18 Le Monde with AP. (2024), 'UK government calls on Elon Musk to act responsibly'.

19 P. Geoghegan (2024), 'The "dark money" linking Donald Trump and the British right', *Prospect Magazine*, 8 November, https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/68486/dark-money-donald-trump-british-right-farage.

1.3 Misinformation platforms and algorithms

Alongside X and Telegram, TikTok is a virulent breeding ground for the network effect of bots spreading disinformation. For example, over 40 TikTok accounts were identified in one study as using AI text-to-speech apps to mass produce and spread political disinformation, using an approach that coordinated many different accounts (a powerful network effect).[20] In terms of the use of social networks, far-right content (especially decentralised far-right networks such as the old EDL – the English Defence League) also favour Telegram and X to bypass content moderation, to exploit far-right sympathetic algorithmic preferences, and to organise offline protests.[21]

Widescale activation of dormant or fake Instagram and Facebook pages has also emerged in UK-based political campaigns, enabling disinformation creators to evade detection by rotating assets and using a pattern-based (as opposed to personality-based) approach.[22] In all these contexts, content is amplified effectively by algorithmic recommendation systems.[23,24]

Meta (formerly Facebook) is also culpable: Its algorithms have been found to prioritise viral and emotionally charged posts, thereby increasing the visibility and reach of misinformation, amplifying misleading political content (globally and in the UK), and influencing attitudes and public opinion.[25]

20 S. Stockwell (2024), 'AI-Enabled Influence Operations: Threat analysis of the 2024 UK and European elections'.

21 C. Horwood (2024), 'Fake news driven anti-migrant riots and protests in the UK', *Mixed Migration Centre*, 3 October, https://mixedmigration.org/fake-news-driven-anti-migrant-riots-and-protests-in-the-uk/.

22 EU Disinfo Lab. (2025), 'Disinfo Update 12/11/2025', Disinfo Lab, https://www.disinfo.eu/disinfo-update-12-11-2025-2-2-2-2/.

23 Stockwell, S. (2024), 'AI-Enabled Influence Operations: Threat analysis of the 2024 UK and European elections'.

24 Newman, N. (2023), 'Overview and key findings of the 2023 Digital News Report', *Reuters Institute*, 14 June, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary.

25 S. Boulianne and C. P. Hoffmann (2024), 'Perceptions and Concerns About Misinformation

1.4 The network effect: Monetisation

Studies of Facebook have also shown that a small network of habitual sharers is responsible for a disproportionate amount of fake news dissemination. As they are incentivised by the platform's reward-based engagement systems, they are rewarded financially by this engagement, underscoring the financial rewards of sharing emotionally charged, outrageous political content.[26] This not only blurs the line between factual and misleading political information but also drives division, distrust of politicians, and confusion.[27]

1.5 UK voter suppression

As part of a wider anti-democracy strategy, online AI-driven networks in the UK are using technology to intimidate UK-based pro-democracy politicians. For example, during the 2024 British general election, research reported that over 55% of democratic political candidates experienced online harassment, while over 65% endured repeated online abuse (deepfake content was a common weapon for this abuse). One candidate was even punched in the face, following a fake news campaign against him.[28]

Recently, UK voters have received a far greater volume of anti-Ukraine fake news campaigns, such as a widespread claim that the UK was 'funding Neo-Nazis'. Specifically, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, over

on Facebook in Canada, France, the US, and the UK', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 36(4). https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edae048.

26 P. Madrid (2023), 'USC study reveals the key reason why fake news spreads on social media', *USC Today*, 17 January, https://today.usc.edu/usc-study-reveals-the-key-reason-why-fake-news-spreads-on-social-media/.

27 S. Boulianne and C. P. Hoffmann (2024), 'Perceptions and Concerns About Misinformation on Facebook'.

28 Electoral Commission (2025), 'Response to the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee call for evidence on social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms', 28 January, https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-views/our-responses-consultations/response-science-innovation-and-technology-committee-call-evidence-social-media-misinformation-and.

95% of referrals made by the UK Government's Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU) related to Russian state-backed disinformation about Ukraine.[29]

A combined use of triggering, unrelated concepts (a strategy outlined earlier in this chapter) emerges in a recent widely shared conspiracy campaign linking Prime Minister Keir Starmer to a Ukrainian rent boy conspiracy story[30] (▸ Figures 3 and 4). The aim of combining triggering topics is to enhance virality.

Another recent example includes a doctored video purporting to show Wes Streeting refer to Diane Abbott as 'a silly woman', posted by a user named Men for Wes and corroborated (falsely) in the X post comments section by a user falsely claiming to be a BBC sound engineer.[31]

[29] Cabinet Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2023), 'Fact sheet on the work of the Government's counter-disinformation unit and rapid response unit', *Gov.uk*, 9 June, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/fact-sheet-on-the-cdu-and-rru.

[30] S. Stockwell (2024), 'AI-Enabled Influence Operations: Threat analysis of the 2024 UK and European elections'.

[31] M. Spring (2024), 'Labour's Wes Streeting among victims of deepfake smear network on X', BBC, 7 June, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg33x9jm02ko.

Figure 3.
Ukrainian Rent Boy Conspiracy

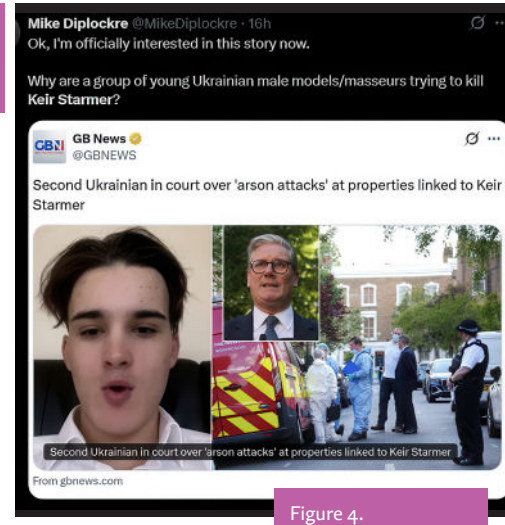

Figure 4.
GB News Ukrainian Rent Boy Conspiracy

1.6 'Shitposting'

Observers will note that conspiracies such as the aforementioned Kier Starmer/rent boy story are difficult for most people to genuinely believe (although some will believe them). However, such outrageous stories form part of a wider '*shitposting*' strategy that Steve Bannon, a key architect of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign, explains well: 'The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit'.[32]

Shitposting, or 'flooding the zone', is often used as part of a wider psychological operations strategy that trades on the concept of an illusory truth: the more we hear something, the more we believe it to be true.[33]

Shitposting as a psychological operations strategy is characterised by a deliberate spread of provocative, nonsensical, or misleading content to elicit strong emotional reactions. The purpose of shitposting is to distract, to derail productive discussions, and to provoke confusion or outrage. This strategy undermines rational debate and amplifies polarisation.

It is a successful distraction tool, which is why state-sponsored troll factories (e.g. sponsored by the Kremlin: a strategy uncovered by the UK Government report)[34] use this tactic as a cheap and rapid tool with which to disseminate misinformation and disrupt the democratic process. This essentially renders shitposting a form of informational guerrilla warfare within the wider context of modern psyop (psychological warfare) campaigns.[35]

[32] M. Lewis (2018), 'Has anyone seen the president?', *Bloomberg*, 21 February, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-09/has-anyone-seen-the-president?embedded-checkout=true.

[33] A. Hassan and S. J. Barber (2021). 'The Effects of Repetition Frequency on the Illusory Truth Effect', *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 6(1), 38.

[34] UK Government (2022), 'UK exposes sick Russian troll factory plaguing social media with Kremlin propaganda', 1 May, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-exposes-sick-russian-troll-factory-plaguing-social-media-with-kremlin-propaganda.

[35] P. J. Woods (2023), 'Shitposting as Public Pedagogy', *Curriculum Inquiry*, 53(4), 359–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2023.2272988.

2 Does misinformation drive UK electoral outcomes?

According to The Turing Institute,[36] 'there is no evidence that AI-enabled disinformation or deepfakes meaningfully impacted UK or European election results'; however, the report goes on to comment that

> most exposure was concentrated among a minority of users with political beliefs already aligned to the ideological narratives embedded within such content. In this sense, it was more likely to consolidate those with similar pre-existing perspectives rather than sway undecided voters.

In the context of the second quote, The Turing Institute refers to microtargeting. Notably, it has already been established that microtargeting significantly increases the power and reach of fake news.[37]

Microtargeting voters involves adapting fake news to target a user more effectively and ultimately aims for the political equivalent of a black swan event (a term usually applied to financial scenarios in which an extremely unusual financial outlier event can cause a major shock, such as a financial crisis). In a UK voting context, while a wider electorate might not necessarily be moved by fake news, one small (microtargeted) subgroup could be significantly persuadable by it – and they are targeted with it specifically because their voting decisions could decide the outcomes of an entire national election.[38]

Consider, for example, the deepfake image of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (created by the author; ▸ Figure 5 on the next page).

Many Indian users are likely to respond with deep outrage and emotion, yet Western users are unlikely to notice anything untoward in the image at all; in fact, it is against Modi's religious beliefs to eat eggs,

[36] S. Stockwell (2024), 'AI-Enabled Influence Operations: Threat analysis of the 2024 UK and European elections'.

[37] T. Dobber, N. Metoui, D. Trilling, N. Helberger, and C. H. de Vreese (2021), 'Do (Microtargeted) Deepfakes Have Real Effects on Political Attitudes?', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(1), 69–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220944364.

[38] Election Forecast UK (2024), 'The role of swing voters in deciding election outcomes', https://electionforecast.co.uk/the-role-of-swing-voters-in-deciding-election-outcomes/.

Figure 5.
Narendra Modi Deepfake

which appear as part of Modis' breakfast. This is exactly how microtargeting works.

This is also exactly the reason why multiple studies report that microtargeted disinformation (e.g. deepfakes) can significantly alter attitudes towards politicians and political parties among targeted subgroups, making these individuals more likely to be influenced than those exposed to generic messaging[39,40]. Thus, we must be hyperaware

39 T. Dobber et al. (2021), 'Do (Microtargeted) Deepfakes Have Real Effects?'

40 B. Gelman and A. Kyadige (2024), 'Political manipulation with massive AI model-driven misinformation and microtargeting', *Sophos*, 2 October, https://news.sophos.com/en-us/2024/10/02/political-manipulation-with-massive-ai-model-driven-misinformation-and-microtargeting/.

of microtargeting, and not just broad-brush fake news trends, because they are used in a targeted way to shape UK public political discourse.

2.1 UK elections and voter regret

The role of fake news in driving political and social media engagement is fascinating, partly because of how triggering fake news-led campaigns can be tied to voters regretting their decisions.

In the UK context, a recent Kings College study of the Brexit Referendum reported a regret rate of around 43% amongst people who did not vote, who wished they had cast a vote for Remain (incidentally, this activity would have altered the outcome of the Referendum). While overall voting engagement in the Referendum was high, regret amongst this specific Remain-sympathetic group might have been representative of a failure of politicians to provide enough key information online during the campaign period, or because of fake news exposure.[41] Research suggests that it may also have occurred as a direct result of (microtargeted) misinformation, particularly at a local level.[42],[43]

The Leave (Brexit Referendum) campaign specifically leveraged the interest of disengaged voters to great effect, using a heavily fake news-based, emotion-inducing campaign, reflecting the fact that disinformation-driven campaigns tend to lead to higher levels of political engagement but lower levels of political knowledge.[44]

41 C. Jennings (2022), 'Leavers 'more likely to regret leave vote' than Remainers, study finds', *Kings College London News Centre*, 28 September, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/leavers-more-likely-to-regret-brexit-vote-than-remainers-study-finds.

42 I. Steinberg (2024), 'Political misinformation can decrease voter turnout in local elections, local experts warn', *The Daily Northwestern*, 30 October, https://dailynorthwestern.com/2024/10/30/city/political-misinformation-can-decrease-voter-turnout-in-local-elections-local-experts-warn/.

43 H. Marshall and A. Drieschova (2020), 'Post-Truth Politics in the UK's Brexit Referendum', *New Perspectives*, 26(3), 89–105. https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X1802600305.

44 H. Milner (2020), 'Populism and Political Knowledge: The United States in Comparative Perspective', *Politics and Governance*, 8(1), 226–238. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i1.2560.

3 Agents of disinformation

It is crucial to understand who plays the greatest role in shaping public opinion in the UK when it comes to online politics and disinformation.

3.1 Disinformation entrepreneurs

The disinformation entrepreneur industry is booming (globally), largely because advances in AI have led to a democratisation of disinformation: Disinformation is now cheap and easy to create, requiring only a Wi-Fi connection and a smartphone. The deepfake of Boris Johnson on the campaign trail (▸ Figure 6), for example, was created by the author of this chapter, at the price of only 5 euro cents, using the AI platform MidJourney.

Disinformation creators may be individuals (e.g. teenagers of any nationality, working from their bedroom, piggybacking on that day's trending topics to earn a few dollars) or sophisticated PR firms creating astroturfing (fake grassroots campaigns) or other fake news-based campaigns. Regardless, these creators can all play a powerful role in shaping public discourse.[45]

The process can also be large-scale and automated, providing notable financial profit for organisations. According to the director of NATO Stratcom, some employees tasked to create disinformation are paid only around $1 per hour to perform simple manipulation tasks.[46] Well-known freelance websites advertising these jobs include bids for the creation of hyper-partisan political articles at highly competitive rates. Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDOS) attacks (which take websites

[45] E. Van Duyn and J. Collier (2023), 'Disinformation as a Context-Bound Phenomenon: Toward a Conceptual Integration of Actors, Intentions and Techniques', *Communication Theory*, 33(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtac021.

[46] NATO Stratcom/Singularex (2018), 'Countering the Malicious Use of Social Media: Countering the Black Market for Social Media Manipulation', https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/web_nato_report_-__the_black_market_of_malicious_use_of_social_media-1.pdf

Figure 6.
Boris Johnson Deepfake

offline as part of a targeted attack) are also cheap, reportedly starting as low as $5.

NATO Stratcom concludes:

> There is a large, vibrant online market for buyers and sellers of tools and services for social media manipulation. Some customers want more likes on their photos, some want to profit financially at the expense of the ad industry, and others want to influence the outcome of elections. Regardless of the end goal, the tools used are much the same.[47]

[47] NATO Stratcom/Singularex (2018), 'Countering the Malicious Use of Social Media'.

3.2 Foreign agents

Disinformation in the UK is also weaponised extensively by foreign and domestic destabilising influences. For example, the Kremlin-backed 'Doppelganger' operation created fake UK news outlets, such as *The London Crier* online newspaper, alongside an extensive network of bot accounts, to spread anti-Ukraine, pro-Russia, divisive content. This practice was particularly prominent around the UK's 2024 general elections. These campaigns involve large numbers of bots posing as regular UK voters to spread disinformation, distract, and amplify divisive beliefs, driving discourse and perhaps even shaping political opinion.

A high level of bot activity (often pro-Russia) was also identified pushing a pro-Reform and anti-migrant narrative, achieving around 150 million views in the 2024 pre-election period, with coordinated messaging and recycled, reshared content, making it difficult to source attribution to specific creators.[48]

In the case of Russian propaganda, the aim is to make a target believe what you want them to believe[49] in a way that makes them believe they changed their mindset organically. Doing so revolves around the utilisation of *maskirovka* (camouflage, concealment, and deception), *dezinformatsiya* (disinformation), *vozhd* (idealising the leader), *edinonachalniye* (one-man control), *poslushanie* (obedience), *dvoemyslie* (doublethink), and *vranyo* (untruths with some grounding in reality). The result is to sway public opinion powerfully. It is an ideological psychological operations strategy used volubly by Russia to effectively wage a digital proxy war against Western nation-states.

As stated in the opening lines of the CIA Handbook of Psychological Operations for Guerrilla Warfare (p. 1),

[48] S. Stockwell (2024), 'AI-Enabled Influence Operations: The threat to the UK general election'.

[49] D. Chotikul (1986), 'The Soviet theory of reflexive control in historical and psychocultural perspective: Preliminary study', Monterey, CA, Naval Postgraduate School. https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/f770a2ad-2f1b-48c8-9d8b-a34a5be2df1d/content

> Guerrilla warfare is essentially a political war. Therefore, its area of operations exceeds the territorial limits of conventional warfare, to penetrate the political entity itself: the 'political animal' that Aristotle defined.

In effect, the human being should be considered the priority objective in a political war. And conceived as the military target of guerrilla war, the human being has his most critical point in his mind. Once his mind has been reached, the 'political animal' has been defeated, without necessarily receiving bullets.[50]

Via observation of domestic posters in the UK, we see many examples of these psyop-style strategies appear as a central part of online far-right discourse: central themes of religion, homeland/nationalism, security, family, nostalgia, and a manufactured fear of out-groups appear with great regularity (e.g. [51,52]).

One example is the Britain First X post (▸ Figure 7). We can clearly see how it weaponises migration (playing on themes of security, nationalism, out-groups, demonisation of minorities, and manufactured fear).

4 Recommendations

So, how can liberal voices engage more effectively and push back against damaging disinformation? This section identifies four clear recommendations. First, the need for impactful education, including prebunking (using AI-generated deepfakes and gamification), is vital. Second, the use of AI-assisted mass flagging has been shown to lead to immediate algorithmic downranking of propagandist content, and is a recommended

[50] Tayacán (1984), *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare* (Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress).

[51] CTPN (2023), 'Mis- and disinformation in the digital age. Counter terrorism preparedness network', *National Preparedness Commission*, https://nationalpreparednesscommission.uk/news/mis-and-disinformation-extremism-in-the-digital-age-report-2023/.

[52] Cabinet Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2023), 'Fact sheet on the CDU and RRU'.

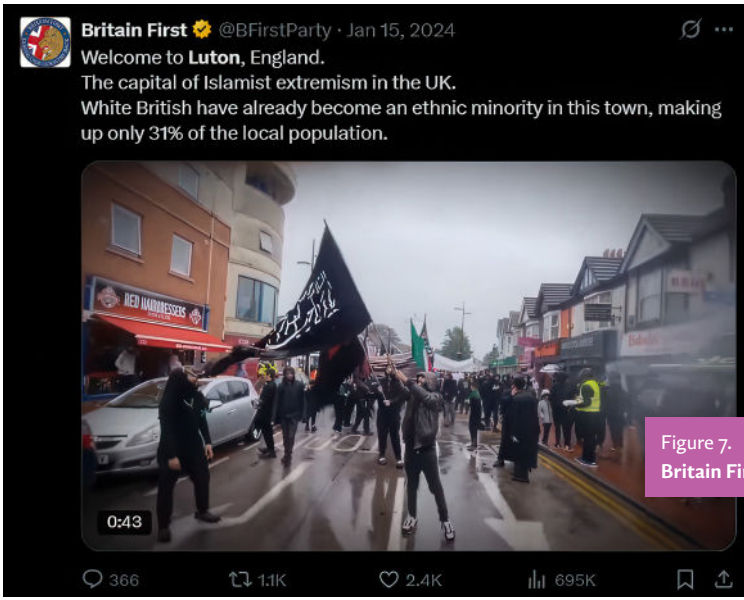

Figure 7.
Britain First X Post

strategy. Third, AI software detection offers serious inroads into improving our detection of AI-created disinformation, and fourth, a coordinated campaign for more robust legislation of social media platforms offers clear benefits.

Additionally, adopting a systems thinking approach enables liberal democratic actors to dissect and fight back against the ever-present and escalating dangers of AI-fuelled, microtargeted disinformation in a more effective way.[53]

These recommendations remain deeply rooted in key tenets of classic liberal theory, relating to commitments to rational discourse, individual autonomy, and institutional checks and balances. First, liberal theorists such as John Stuart Mill emphasised the role of education in

[53] A. Romanishyn, O. Malytska, and V. Goncharuk (2025), 'AI-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience', *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, 30 July(8), https://doi.org/10.3389/frai.2025.1569115.

nurturing autonomous, critically engaged citizens capable of maintaining a resiliency against manipulations and falsehoods.[54,55] Prebunking, media literacy initiatives, and gamification could easily be considered modern extensions of this concept.[56]

Mass flagging and the algorithmic downranking of disinformation reflect liberalism's emphasis on a marketplace of ideas,[57] while also acknowledging the necessity for institutional interventions to prevent systemic abuse (consistent with Rawls' concept of fair value of political liberties).[58] Coordinated legislative reforms in the context of regulating social media platforms draw on liberal calls for the rule of law, a protection of deliberative spaces, and a need to prevent concentrations of power that can undermine democratic equality.[59,60] Finally, systemic, multi-level strategies (reflected in this chapter by the adoption of a systems thinking approach) reflect a core concern of liberal democracy: that of safeguarding pluralism, reason, and civic agency against the threats of disinformation.[61,62]

4.1 A liberal playbook for enhanced digital engagement

The need for impactful educational interventions is clear. According to the World Economic Forum,[63] online misinformation poses a pervasive global threat, with UNESCO calling for citizens to receive high-quality

54 J. S. Mill (1859), *On Liberty* (London: John W. Parker & Son).
55 J. Dewey (1916), *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan).
56 A. Romanishyn, O. Malytska, and V. Goncharuk (2025), 'AI-driven disinformation'.
57 J. Milton (1644), Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing (London: J. Johnson).
58 J. Rawls (1971), *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
59 J. Locke (1689), *Two Treatises of Government* (London: Awnsham Churchill).
60 A. Tocqueville (1835), *Democracy in America* (London: Saunders and Otley).
61 A. Romanishyn, O. Malytska, and V. Goncharuk (2025), 'AI-driven disinformation'.
62 S. Kippin (2025), 'New research warns of democratic backsliding in the UK'.
63 M. Elsner, G. Atkinson, and S. Zahidi (2025), 'Global risks report 2025', *World Economic Forum*, 15 January, https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/.

training and education in how to navigate it in a more skilled way.[64],[65] What could these educational approaches look like?

Ultimately, education needs to be proactive, capturing us emotionally, while pre-arming us with knowledge that will lessen the impact of misinformation when we are exposed to it. Currently, the most effective approach we have is fact checking, and while that is valuable, it is completely reactive and subsequently only occurs after a voter has been affected emotionally (which might have included a targeted action – e.g. casting a vote, sharing a disinformation post). Prebunking offers an effective resolution to this problem.

As stated succinctly by the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA):[66]

> Foreign adversaries often use the same or similar narratives across their campaigns. To get ahead of these nefarious efforts, develop ways to educate the public about the elections process and proactively debunk or 'prebunk' (that is, proactively warn about future influence operations) potential foreign malign influence narratives related to your elections process. (p. 5)

Prebunks essentially combine deepfakes (e.g. an image) with the facts that explain how it is made and how it is used to manipulate us. Engaging with deepfake prebunks can be emotionally engaging, entertaining, and educational, providing a great way of teaching children, teens, and adults about how misinformation works.

Education inoculates users by helping them learn how easy and cheap it is to create them (hands-on workshops are an option), combining

64 U. Carlsson (2019), MIL in the cause of social justice and democratic rule, in U. Carlsson (ed.), *Understanding media and information literacy (MIL) in the digital age: A question of democracy* (Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg), pp. 11–24.

65 J. Roozenbeek, S. Van Der Linden, and T. Nygren (2020), 'Prebunking interventions based on "inoculation" theory can reduce susceptibility to misinformation across cultures', *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review,* 3 February, https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/global-vaccination-badnews/.

66 CISA (2024), 'Securing Election Infrastructure Against the Tactics of Foreign Malign Influence Operations', US Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, April, https://www.dni.gov/files/FMIC/documents/products/Securing-Election-Infrastructure-Against-The-Tactics-Of-Foreign-Malign-Influence-Operations-Apr2024.pdf.

sensational photos and videos, enabling the learner to discover, first-hand, how creators can profit financially by, say, easily Googling trending topics and then generating an AI post with trigger words in them to entice and outrage us.

Popular manipulation strategies such as face-swapping can also be easily taught in these scenarios. Their fascinating, novel nature can enhance motivation to engage, which amplifies memory recall of the facts learnt.[67,68,69]

Gamification offers another innovative prebunk approach, with educational fake news games placing players in the shoes of a disinformation creator. Research indicates that this approach can increase a participant's ability to debunk fake news. It is also fun, which aids engagement.[70]

Research ultimately shows that this kind of prebunk activity can enhance analytic scrutiny and reduce susceptibility to deepfake deception.[71,72]

School-age intervention is a particularly sensitive and pertinent issue in this age of misinformation: the prefrontal cortical immaturity of children and teenagers (up to the age of 25) renders them particularly vulnerable to emotional, radicalising appeals.[73] Further, the average

67 M. Appel and F. Prietzel (2022), 'The Detection of Political Deepfakes', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 27(4). https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmac008.

68 J. Roe, M. Perkins and L. Furze (2024), 'Deepfakes and higher education: A research agenda and scoping review of synthetic media', *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(10), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.53761/2y2np178.

69 L. Garcia and T. Shane (2021), 'A guide to prebunking: A promising way to inoculate against misinformation', *First Draft News*, 29 June, https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/a-guide-to-prebunking-a-promising-way-to-inoculate-against-misinformation/.

70 Roozenbeek and Van Der Linden (2019), 'The Fake News Game: Actively Inoculating Against the Risk of Misinformation', *Journal of Risk Research, 22*(5), 570–580. https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2018.1443491

71 M. Appel and F. Prietzel (2022), 'The Detection of Political Deepfakes'.

72 Twomey, J. Ching, M. P. Aylett, M. Quayle, C. Linehan, and G. Murphy (2023), 'Do Deepfake Videos Undermine Our Epistemic Trust? A Thematic Analysis of Tweets that Discuss Deepfakes in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *PLOS One*. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0291668.

73 F. Cooper (2025), 'Understanding pathways to radicalisation: Examining the risk factors among UK secondary school students', *Plymouth Institute of Education Open Journal*, 2(2), 5.

attention span of Gen Z individuals has been reported to be just eight seconds,[74] suggesting that younger voters or future voters will not spend time adequately evaluating the content they see.

Alongside education, mass flagging (a de-amplification approach) offers another powerful response to misinformation. Mass flagging involves large numbers of users all marking a post as false or inappropriate in a highly coordinated, time-sensitive way, successfully triggering platform moderation systems. Liberal, pro-democratic teams could leverage technology in this way to lessen the impact of right-wing conspiracy posts originating from key disinformation-sharing accounts.

Research has found that this approach (mass flagging posts as 'state-run media' or 'propaganda') led to immediate algorithmic downranking, and a long-term reduction in news sharing, particularly for political content.[75] Another recent study reported that de-amplification of this kind could significantly lower the sharing of misinformation posts, slashing engagement by over 50% in some cases. Interestingly, the same study showed that informational interventions (fact checking) did not have a statistically significant effect on engagement.[76]

AI software detection can escalate the efficiency of this approach: Private companies and government agencies are currently developing AI solutions that engage in disinformation and propaganda detection (e.g. the US Special Operations Command has contracted tech company Accrete AI to deploy software capable of detecting real-time disinformation threats on social media).[77]

74 Microsoft Canada (2015), 'Attention spans: Consumer insights', Report, https://sherpapg.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/mas.pdf.

75 F. Liang, Q. Zhu, and G. M. Li (2022), 'The Effects of Flagging Propaganda Sources on News Sharing: Quasi-Experimental Evidence from Twitter', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(4), 909–928. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221086905.

76 B. Kaiser and J. Mayer (2023), 'It's the algorithm: A large-scale comparative field study of misinformation interventions Emilie Flamme', *Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University,* 23 October, https://knightcolumbia.org/content/its-the-algorithm-a-large-scale-comparative-field-study-of-misinformation-interventions.

77 R. Watkins, (2023), 'USSOCOM to use AI to detect disinformation threats on social media', *The Defense Post*, 31 August, https://thedefensepost.com/2023/08/31/ussocom-ai-disinformation-social-media/.

These AI tools show promise in analysing social media data, identifying emerging narratives, flagging patterns typical of coordinated campaigns, recognising hallmarks of state-sponsored propaganda (e.g. temporal patterns in posting, coordinated posting times, and specific repetitive phrases), classifying posts based on whether they are linguistic, behavioural, or network-based, then mass flagging them. Fingerprinting and hash-matching techniques are already in use for the rapid identification and removal of prohibited material.[78]

Pushing for legislation of social media platforms appears necessary, given the outsized power that social media platforms wage in directing public political discourse in the UK. While the Online Safety Act[79] has afforded Ofcom significant powers to impose fines of up to £18 million or 10% of a tech company's global revenue (for companies that fail to comply with enforcement notices), it appears that the Act has yet to be enforced in any meaningful way. It is heartening, however, that the Act can lead to the potential criminal liability of companies who do not conform.[80] Nevertheless, ongoing support for the Act, alongside raising public knowledge of it, appears crucial in supporting its execution where necessary.

Adopting a systems thinking approach is also advised: combining a knowledge of psychological operations and neuropolitics, for example, affords us far greater insight into how voters engage with political content. As an example, researchers recently reported[81] that while online political misinformation can lead to higher rates of political participation, it also appears (seemingly oxymoronically) to create lower levels

78 M. Anderljung, J. Hazell, and M. von Knebel (2024), 'Protecting Society from AI Misuse: When are Restrictions on Capabilities Warranted?', *AI & Society*, 40(50), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-024-02130-8.

79 Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (2025), 'Online Safety Act: Explainer', *Gov.uk*, 24 April, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer.

80 Cabinet Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2023), 'Fact sheet on the CDU and RRU'.

81 Cabinet Office and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2023), 'Fact sheet on the CDU and RRU'.

of political learning. But psychological operations shed new light on the concept: If UK voters are targeted with fake news as part of a psyop strategy, it makes sense that they would engage with more politically themed content (designed to be emotionally triggering and micro-targeted) while simultaneously reducing their political knowledge (as the political material they are engaging with isn't factual). We can also factor in neuropolitical observations, as Hibbing and Smith[82] noted:

> Who we are and what we do is the product of environmental *and* biological factors. In the life sciences, this simple statement would be regarded as painfully obvious. In many parts of the social sciences, especially in political science, it is seen as peculiar, wrong, and even dangerous. As a result, virtually the entire research agenda in political science is isolated from the vast biological knowledge base that has built up over the course of the past fifty years. (p. 6)

The words of Hibbing and Smith cited above reflect the importance of observing the clear neurological differences that exist between liberals and conservatives, with the goal of understanding more effectively how to engage liberal ideologues, centrists, or those who oppose them. For example, differences in the amygdala and the anterior cingulate cortex[83] have been found to mediate reactions to emotional political stimuli. Individuals who possess a larger amygdala are more likely to adopt conservative belief systems, and are more vulnerable to lust, disgust, and fear-based political appeals (a tendency that has been exploited for decades in negative-themed political messaging). Right-wing conservatives like the Trump administration have long known how to leverage this power: 'Republicans' [...] it has been said, by political scientist Drew Westen, '...have a near monopoly in the marketplace of emotions' as a result.[84]

82 J. R. Hibbing and K. B. Smith (2007), 'The Biology of Political Behavior: An Introduction', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 614(1), 6–14.

83 R. Kanai, T. Feilden, C. Firth, and G. Rees (2011), 'Political orientations are correlated with brain structure in young adults', *Current Biology*, 2(8), 677–680. https://10.1016/j.cub.2011.03.017.

84 D. Westen (2007), *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs).

Conversely, liberals have historically been attracted by high-quality new empirical data.[85] They are also most likely to engage with online political material that is linguistically complex and nuanced, and which (according to a study of over 380,000 speeches) appeals to values such as inclusivity, openness, and diversity.[86] While these values-led political beliefs represent positive political engagement, they have been shown to lead to far less politically motivated action than the negative emotion appeals used to engage conservatives. Further, liberals are also frequent targets of voter suppression strategies.[87]

Summary

Ultimately, we know that liberal politicians (however noble) do not have a monopoly on emotions when it comes to political discourse in the UK – far from it. But this could change. By alerting liberal voters to voter suppression techniques, and by engaging far more effectively with emotional messaging, it may be possible to deliver microtargeted pro-democracy messaging to traditionally conservative and centrist voters, while also maximising voter mobilisation of existing liberal voters in elections.

In summary, the educational approaches outlined in this chapter offer powerful, proactive modes of resistance to nefarious actors seeking to manipulate public political discourse, while smart engagement with technology (such as mass flagging and AI detection systems) can help to shift public political discourse in the UK towards a healthier and more balanced state.

[85] A. M. Tullett, W. P. Hart, M. Feinberg, Z. J. Fetterman, and S. Gottlieb (2016), 'Is Ideology the Enemy of Inquiry? Examining the Link Between Political Orientation and Lack of Interest in Novel Data', *Journal of Research in Personality*, 63, 123–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2016.06.018.

[86] M. Schoonvelde, A. Brosius, G. Schumacher, and B. N. Bakker (2019), 'Liberals Lecture, Conservatives Communicate: Analyzing Complexity and Ideology in 381,609 Political Speeches', *PLOS One*, 14(2). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0208450.

[87] Z. Hajnal, N. Lajevardi, and L. Nielson (2017), 'Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes', *The Journal of Politics*, 79(2), 363–379.

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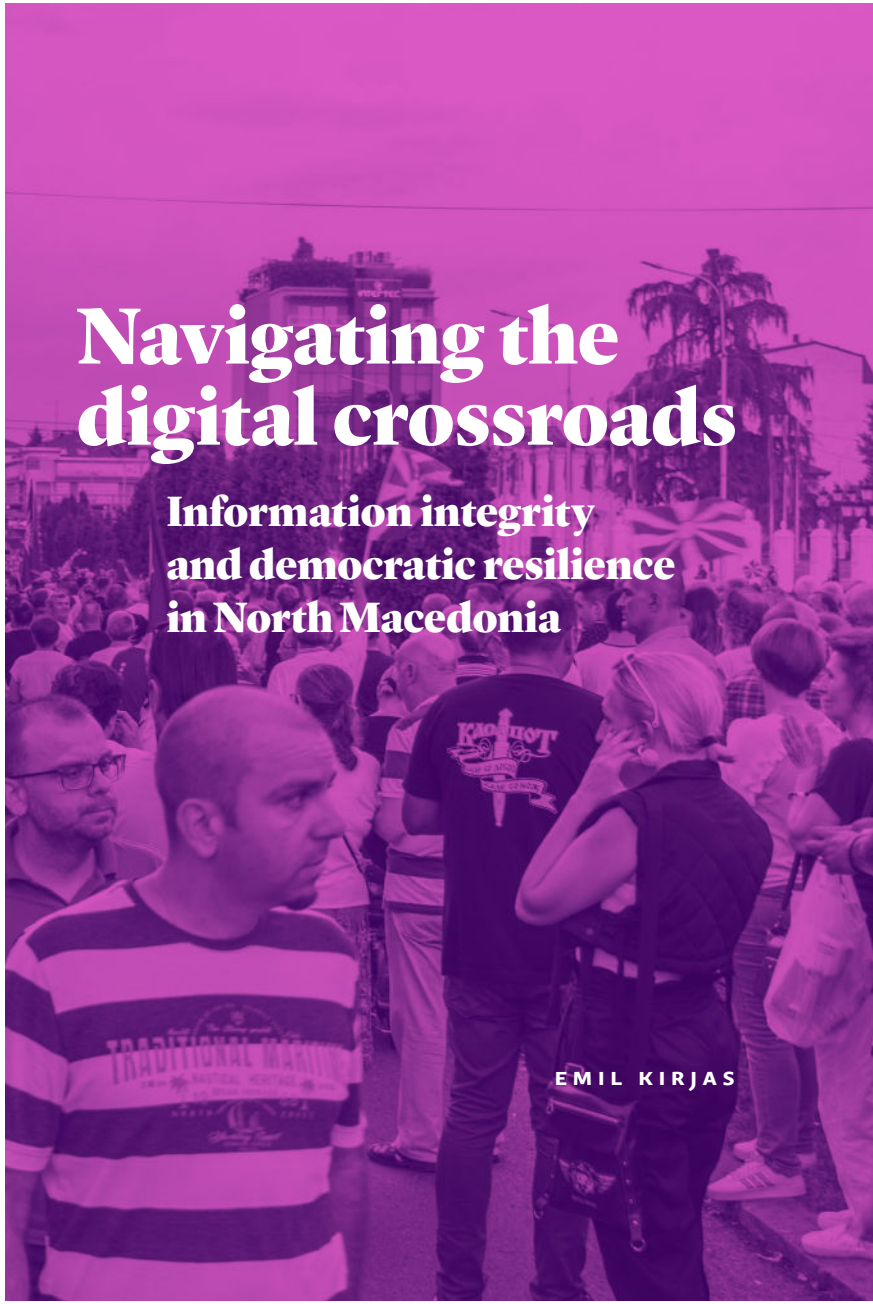

Navigating the digital crossroads

Information integrity and democratic resilience in North Macedonia

EMIL KIRJAS

Abstract

North Macedonia is precariously positioned at a digital and geopolitical crossroads, where its Euro-Atlantic destiny is imperilled by political 'pillarisation' and frustrated EU integration. The digital sphere is the decisive frontline; social media is now a battleground for computational disinformation – driven by conservative domestic actors and amplified by malign foreign influence. This vulnerability stems from North Macedonia's historical notoriety as a 'fake news' hub (dating back to the 2016 US election) and its contemporary role in regional manipulation, evidenced by recent, unsubstantiated allegations linking Macedonian 'fake news farms' to the 2024 Venezuelan elections. The digital nature of political conflict, proving that technology knows no borders, poses a core challenge to democratic integrity, but also to national and European security. Crucially, a severe regulatory void concerning AI, digital campaigning, and media ownership leaves digitally fluent youth highly susceptible due to low media literacy. Therefore, this study advances a clear liberal imperative: The immediate adoption of a Digital Democracy Act and national commitment to AI ethics and civic literacy are essential strategies to secure democratic resilience within the wider European democratic space.

Introduction: **The digital imperative in a shifting geopolitical landscape**

Yet again, North Macedonia finds itself at a defining moment in its history, caught at the crossroads of the European future and opportunities offered by advanced democracies on the one hand and democratic backsliding on the other, in which the digital sphere marred with manipulation and abuse of digital technologies will play a significant part of daily life. As it was in the past decades, the rapid rise of information and communication technologies offers a hope: connectivity to unite our diverse communities, access to information to tear down barriers nationally and regionally, innovation to drive economic progress, and platforms to amplify every citizen's voice. Yet, these same tools cast long shadows, threatening our democratic foundations with disinformation, polarisation, and the unchecked power of algorithms. For a nation like North Macedonia, deeply committed to Euro-Atlantic integration, mastering the digital sphere is not merely a domestic priority; it is a geopolitical necessity that shapes our sovereignty, our path to the European Union, and our resilience against external pressures.

Witnesses of the Macedonian journey from Yugoslav dissolution to EU candidacy have seen technology transform lives and challenge liberties in equal measure. From the early days of *Macedonia Connects* to the wiretapping scandal that shook the country, the digital realm has been both a lifeline and a battleground. Therefore, a comprehensive review of the country's digital landscape is necessary, as we seek to illuminate

the vulnerabilities we have been facing as a nation and the bold strategies we must embrace.

To thrive, North Macedonia has to chart a course for a resilient, informed citizenry – one that upholds liberal values, counters malign influences, and ensures our institutions reflect the will of a free people. The stakes are high, but so is our potential to lead as a small nation aiming to prove that democracy can thrive in the digital era.

The geopolitical context amplifies this urgency. As a NATO Member State and candidate for EU membership, North Macedonia faces external actors – Russia, China, and others – who exploit our digital vulnerabilities to sow discord and undermine Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Internally, the polarised political landscape and fragile media ecosystem create fertile ground for disinformation to flourish.

The current lack of a robust digital legislative framework is, in part, a direct consequence of our thwarted European path. If North Macedonia had been admitted to the EU a decade ago – as logic and merit suggested, potentially alongside Croatia, had there been no bilateral blockades – the digital security landscape would be fundamentally different. The country would have been immediately governed by EU law, meaning critical legislation like the GDPR, the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the new AI Act would already be in force, protecting citizens and providing judicial safeguards under the European Court of Justice. The challenges for North Macedonia and the EU in this field are common, and regulations and legislation cannot be the only solution to them. However, the absence of this EU-based oversight in North Macedonia creates the current vacuum, exploited daily by malign external forces, and turns North Macedonia's digital space into a vulnerability not just for the nation, but for the wider European democratic space.

These challenges magnify the lens of our political history, digital communication trends, and disinformation landscape, which require a set of actionable recommendations to safeguard our democracy as part of the wider European democratic space. North Macedonia cannot afford to navigate this crossroads blindly; it has to act with prudence and purpose, guided by the liberal principles of openness, accountability, inclusion, and full adherence to EU standards. To protect itself,

the EU has to act too by not delaying further the integration of North Macedonia and the other candidate countries.

1 North Macedonia's turbulent political and digital reality

1.1 Overview of the political and digital landscape

Since declaring independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, North Macedonia has walked a turbulent path towards stability and prosperity. As one of Europe's poorest nations, with among the lowest GDP and GNI, the Macedonian State inherited economic challenges that persist decades later.[1] Yet, even in the early 2000s, our leaders – often trained in technical fields like engineering rather than political science – recognised the transformative potential of digital technologies for a landlocked country. This foresight drove a vision of progress, where connectivity could bridge geographic and economic divides, fostering inclusion and opportunity within the scope of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the nation.

The country's journey has been marked by cycles of hope and despair. The difficult 1990s and the armed conflict of 2001 had given space to hope in the aftermath of the Ohrid Peace Agreement, which reorganised the constitutional set up of the country and opened the prospects for EU membership. The 2005 EU candidate status sparked enthusiasm that the nation was on the brink of pioneering transformation. Part of it was the Macedonia Connects project, funded by USAID, which made North Macedonia the first nation with nationwide Wi-Fi coverage – a milestone celebrated as a symbol of ambition[2]. However, setbacks followed: the policies of the newly elected conservative

[1] World Bank Data (n.d.), 'GNI per capita, Atlas method (current US$)', https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD.

[2] Project Management Institute (2006), 'A country connects', 1 June, https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/information-technology-management-macedonia-connects-2748.

government in 2006 had disturbed the regional balances, crowned by Greece's 2008 veto on Macedonia's NATO bid, rooted in the name dispute, which plunged the country into a period of authoritarianism that stifled freedoms and eroded trust.[3] The scars from the 2001 inter-ethnic conflict were left uncured and were mitigated only by power-sharing agreements.[4] A democratic uprising in 2016–2017, fuelled by public outrage over corruption, restored hope and ousted the authoritarian regime.[5] These oscillations have shaped a polarised political landscape, split between the left-leaning Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the conservative VMRO-DPMNE, with liberal forces struggling to find footing in a system that rewards extremes.

Today, the Macedonian State operates as a parliamentary representative democratic republic, rated a 'flawed democracy' by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2022.[6] Our 1991 Constitution enshrines civil liberties, but ethnic tensions persist, requiring delicate power-sharing arrangements.[7] The 2024 double elections – parliamentary and presidential – marked a seismic shift. VMRO-DPMNE, a party with a troubling history of media control during its 2006–2016 rule, surged back to power, securing 58 of 120 parliamentary seats with 45% of the vote and capturing the presidency.[8] The progressive and pro-Western voice offered to the electorate suffered a devastating defeat;[9] the new coalition – VMRO-DPMNE, the Albanian-focused VLEN, and the centre-left ZNAM – now holds nearly a two-thirds majority, commanding 78 seats and raising alarms about potential democratic backsliding.[10]

[3] North Macedonia–NATO relations (n.d.), in *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Macedonia%E2%80%93NATO_relations.

[4] Politics of North Macedonia (n.d.), in *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_North_Macedonia.

[5] A. Domachowska (2017), 'Macedonia with a new government – The end of the crisis', *Casimir Pulaski Foundation*, 20 July, https://pulaski.pl/en/macedonia-with-a-new-government-the-end-of-the-crisis/.

[6] Politics of North Macedonia (n.d.), in *Wikipedia*.

[7] Politics of North Macedonia (n.d.), in *Wikipedia*.

[8] Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2024), 'North Macedonia: The Conservative resurgence in North Macedonia', 10 May, https://www.freiheit.org/node/44549.

[9] Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2024), 'North Macedonia: The Conservative resurgence'.

[10] Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2024), 'North Macedonia: The Conservative resurgence'.

A particularly concerning development preceded the elections: the SDSM-led government repealed Article 102 of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, lifting a 2016 democratic milestone ban on state advertising in audiovisual media.[11] This measure, originally enacted to curb the misuse of state funds for media corruption, had been a cornerstone of media independence, both among the traditional media and in the digital domain. Its removal, combined with the conservatives' return and the persistent lack of transparency in digital media funding, risks reviving 'media capture' – where state resources are used to control editorial narratives.[12] This threat is compounded by the absence of robust regulations governing digital media, creating a precarious environment for media pluralism and democratic accountability. The EU integration prospects remain blocked by bilateral disputes with Bulgaria, creating obstacles for checks and balances on democratic governance and freedom in the digital sphere, which would have been more robust if the Macedonian EU accession talks had been taking place. As we navigate this new political reality, the integrity of our information ecosystem hangs in the balance, with profound implications for public discourse and trust in our institutions.

1.2 Liberal presence in the digital battleground

The SDSM, with its centre-left, progressive, and pro-Western discourse, stands in stark contrast to VMRO-DPMNE's conservative nationalism. Yet, the 2024 elections exposed their vulnerabilities. Promises of EU integration, a cornerstone of their coalition platform, which included the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), faltered amid repeated vetoes by EU Member States and bilateral disputes, particularly with Bulgaria.[13] This *bi-lateralisation* of the accession process has eroded public faith in the

[11] Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2025), *The Republic of North Macedonia*, https://cmpf.eui.eu/country/republic-of-north-macedonia/.

[12] Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2025), *The Republic of North Macedonia*.

[13] Central European University (2024), 'North Macedonia's EU integration: Two decades of frustration', 30 October, https://blog.idee.ceu.es/2024/10/30/north-macedonias-eu-integration-two-decades-of-frustration/.

EU as an arbiter of liberal democratic values, undermining the credibility of liberal forces who champion this vision. The SDSM's defeat – losing significant parliamentary seats and shifting to opposition – reflects not only policy failures, but also a struggle to communicate effectively in a digital sphere rife with disinformation.

The digital landscape in North Macedonia is a battleground. Studies of the 2020 election revealed computational disinformation tactics, including bots and fake accounts amplifying VMRO-DPMNE and far-left Levica Party narratives, often attacking Euro-Atlantic integration.[14] These tactics exploit our polarised environment, where hate speech and ethnocentrism thrive, particularly during election cycles.[15] Liberal forces, including the LDP's previous coalition partner, SDSM, appear outmanoeuvred, lacking the sophistication to counter these digital assaults or amplify their message in a media ecosystem vulnerable to political influence. The repeal of the state advertising ban further tilts the playing field, as aligned media outlets gain financial incentives to favour the current ruling coalition, limiting the reach of independent or liberal voices.[16]

This digital disadvantage is not just tactical – it's existential. The EU's failure to deliver on integration promises has eroded the appeal of liberal voices, who are seen as the standard-bearers of a free and open society.[17] When the EU dream falters, so does public trust in the liberal vision, both offline and online. To regain ground, liberal actors must rethink their digital strategies, embracing innovative communication tools and counter-narratives to reclaim the information space and rebuild public confidence.

14 Cogitatio Press (2023, April 28), 'Vulnerability to disinformation in relation to political affiliation in North Macedonia', 28 April, https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/6381.

15 INACH (n.d.), *Metamorphosis: Foundation for Internet and Society*, https://www.inach.net/wp-content/uploads/Cyber-Hate-in-North-Macedonia.pdf.

16 Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2025), *The Republic of North Macedonia*.

17 Central European University (2024), 'North Macedonia's EU integration'.

1.3 Youth (dis)engagement and digital susceptibility

The young people are the heartbeat of North Macedonia's digital future, yet their political engagement presents a troubling paradox. Nearly all 15–24-year-olds (98.8%) use the internet daily, with 90% active on social networks and instant messaging platforms.[18] Instagram (73.8%), Facebook (61.7%), YouTube (45.2%), and TikTok (29.3%) dominate their news consumption, with Reddit gaining traction as a hub for discussion.[19] This digital fluency is unmatched, yet their interest in traditional political developments, economic issues, or social justice is low, overshadowed by preferences for education, technology, and culture.

Voting behaviour underscores this disconnect. While 64% of young people report always voting, 49.5% believe that their vote cannot influence the country's direction, and 54% feel powerless to affect authorities.[20] Notably, 71% view online activism as more impactful than offline efforts, yet 80% describe themselves as socially inactive citizens. This paradox – high digital engagement paired with political apathy – makes youth a prime target for manipulative narratives. Their reliance on social media for news, coupled with a lack of trust in institutions, creates fertile ground for disinformation, particularly emotional or polarising content that bypasses critical engagement.

Efforts to bridge this gap are underway but insufficient. The State Election Commission (SEC) has engaged Meta (Facebook/Instagram) to address disinformation and refine campaign practices, as seen in March 2024 discussions.[21] Civil society organisations like ODASS Skopje have

[18] Institute of Communication Studies (2024b), *Survey Report on Youth News Consumption and Disinformation Recognition in North Macedonia*. https://respublica.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/survey-report-on-youth-news-consumption-desinformation-recognition-in-north-macedonia-en.pdf.

[19] Institute of Communication Studies (2024b), *Survey Report on Youth News Consumption*.

[20] Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2024), 'Fourth study of socio-political participation of youth in North Macedonia', 9 August, https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/fourth-study-socio-political-participation-youth-north-macedonia.

[21] UNICEF North Macedonia (n.d.), 'Youth engagement', https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/topics/youth-engagement?items_per_page=10&page=0.

launched social media campaigns and websites to educate high school students on their rights and encourage democratic participation; the National Youth Strategy 2023–2027 emphasises youth-friendly messaging and accessible public information. However, these initiatives lack the scale and coordination needed to transform digital fluency into meaningful political engagement. A systematic, government-led approach is urgently needed to empower our youth as active, informed citizens.

2 Digital communication trends

2.1 Patterns of political content consumption and fragmentation

Social networks and web portals have become the lifeblood of public discourse in North Macedonia, enabling rapid dissemination of information – and, too often, disinformation. Yet this proliferation creates an 'illusion of pluralism'.[22] The sheer number of online outlets suggests diversity, but many are politically or commercially aligned, engaging in 'copy-paste journalism' that recycles content with little originality.[23] This practice, combined with weak editorial standards, allows manipulation to permeate the information ecosystem, often orchestrated by powerful political or economic interests.

External actors, notably Russia, exploit this vulnerability, amplifying divisive narratives through regional media and online portals.[24] Domestic political parties exacerbate the problem, fuelling hate speech, aggressive nationalism, and ethnocentrism, particularly during election periods.[25] Unmoderated comment sections on news websites and social media pages serve as breeding grounds for toxic rhetoric, with

[22] IFEX (2025), 'North Macedonia: Disinformation continues to undermine democratic processes', 25 June, https://ifex.org/north-macedonia-disinformation-continues-to-undermine-democratic-processes/.

[23] IFEX (2025), 'North Macedonia: Disinformation continues'.

[24] IFEX (2025), 'North Macedonia: Disinformation continues'.

[25] INACH (n.d.), *Metamorphosis: Foundation for Internet and Society*.

little oversight to curb its spread.[26] The absence of comprehensive legislation governing digital media fairness and funding transparency further compounds the issue: Internet service providers face no liability for hosted content, and existing restrictions on hate speech are weakly enforced, creating a regulatory vacuum that allows political and commercial interests to steer narratives with impunity.[27]

This fragmented information environment undermines genuine media pluralism and democratic discourse. The volume of content does not equate to a diversity of perspectives; instead, it masks a deeper lack of independence, leaving our public square vulnerable to manipulation and eroding the trust essential for a functioning democracy.

2.2. Examples of digital mobilisation and strategic failure

The period from 2008 to 2016, under VMRO-DPMNE's Nikola Gruevski, was a dark chapter for the country's democracy. Freedom of speech and assembly were curtailed, independent media faced relentless attacks, and opposition voices were silenced; international indexes flagged North Macedonia as a 'captured state', with state institutions, including media, under political control.[28] However, in this stifling environment, social media emerged as a lifeline for dissent. In fact, it demonstrated social media's potent capacity for democratic liberation. In Skopje's Central Municipality, an opposition mayor and leader of the LDP, facing government pressure and media blackouts, turned to Facebook, Twitter, and instant messaging apps to share updates and expose electoral fraud. This strategy proved effective during local elections, as the government could not fully block the dissemination of evidence, bolstering transparency and eroding the ruling party's dominance.

The 2015–2016 wiretapping scandal was a turning point. Illegally recorded conversations, implicating high-ranking officials in corruption,

[26] IREX (2023), *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023: North Macedonia*, https://www.irex.org/files/vibrant-information-barometer-2023-north-macedonia.pdf.

[27] Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2025), *The Republic of North Macedonia*.

[28] Politics of North Macedonia. (n.d.), in *Wikipedia*.

electoral fraud, and media manipulation, spread rapidly on YouTube and Facebook.[29] These revelations led to widespread protests, ultimately contributing to the fall of the autocratic regime; this moment underscored social media's power to inform citizens, mobilise public opinion, and hold power accountable, reshaping our political landscape and awakening society to the potential of digital platforms.

Conversely, the 2024 elections exposed the limits of liberal and progressive messaging. The centre-left coalition's failure to deliver on EU integration, coupled with controversial compromises on national identity, generated public frustration.[30] Economic stagnation and poor public services further contributed to the erosion of their support.[31] Their digital strategy struggled to counter VMRO-DPMNE's sophisticated disinformation campaigns and nationalist rhetoric, highlighting a critical need for liberal forces to adapt their online tactics. To regain ground, liberals must embrace innovative digital tools, craft compelling counter-narratives, and rebuild trust in a polarised information space.

3 Disinformation landscape

3.1 Sources, types, and channels of weaponised narratives

North Macedonia's disinformation landscape is a complex web, driven primarily by domestic actors but amplified by foreign influences, notably Russia and, to a lesser extent, China and Turkey.[32] Social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter), online forums, and web portals are the primary channels, with traditional media and word-of-mouth also

29 IREX (2023), *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023*.

30 Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2024), 'North Macedonia: The Conservative resurgence'.

31 IREX (2023), *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023*.

32 Disha, E. P., Sorrells, J., Kreci, V., and Ismaili, V. (2025), 'The Prevalence and Impact of Political Disinformation During Elections in North Macedonia'. *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 8(1), 208–227. https://www.mlar.sk/the-prevalence-and-impact-of-political-disinformation-during-elections-in-north-macedonia/.

playing significant roles.[33] Computational propaganda, including bots and fake accounts, is used to spread polarising messages and attack political opponents, as seen in the 2020 election.[34] Key disinformation themes include:

- *Political decisions and elections:* The 2018 name-change referendum faced aggressive Russian-backed campaigns urging a boycott; elections and crises like COVID-19 remain prime targets for manipulation.[35]
- *Gendered disinformation*: A growing trend exploits societal biases, targeting women politicians and LGBTI+ communities with fear-based narratives, such as claims that EU membership would 'turn children transgender' or contrast the 'traditional mother' with the 'Western woman'.[36] These campaigns aim to silence voices and undermine credibility.[37]
- *Corruption and institutions*: Unsubstantiated allegations of corruption erode trust in state institutions are often used to attack political opponents.[38]
- *Anti-EU/NATO sentiment*: Narratives actively oppose our Euro-Atlantic integration, sowing doubt about its benefits.[39]

This multifaceted approach exploits ethnic, political, and gender divides, aiming not just to sway elections but also to erode social cohesion and democratic stability. The lack of robust moderation on media websites and social platforms allows these narratives to proliferate unchecked, amplifying their impact.[40]

[33] UNDP (2024), *Miss the Misinformation*, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/analysis_on_disinformation_eng.pdf.

[34] Cogitatio Press (2023), 'Vulnerability to Disinformation'.

[35] UNDP (2024), *Miss the Misinformation*.

[36] IFEX (2025), 'North Macedonia: Disinformation'.

[37] UNDP (2024), *Miss the Misinformation*.

[38] Institute of Communication Studies (2024a), 'ICS published the March 2024 report on harmful narratives in public political communication in North Macedonia', 23 April, https://iks.edu.mk/en/news/ics-published-the-march-2024-report-on-the-presence-of-harmful-narratives-in-public-political-communication-in-north-macedonia/.

[39] Cogitatio Press (2023), 'Vulnerability to Disinformation'.

[40] IREX (2023), *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023*.

3.2 Liberal democracy threatened by disinformation

Disinformation represents a threat to modern democracies, including Macedonia's. It erodes public trust and fractures discourse. In the context of North Macedonia, data indicate that media trust is evenly split – 49% trust, 49% distrust – with social networks (47% distrust) and online media (41% distrust) seen as propaganda hubs; at the same time, seven in ten citizens believe that media spreads disinformation and political propaganda.[41] North Macedonia's notably low media literacy rate – one of Europe's lowest – leaves 70% of the population susceptible to unverified claims, creating fertile ground for manipulative narratives.[42]

Political polarisation, often along ethnic lines, intensifies this vulnerability.[43] Disinformation creates 'filter bubbles', where individuals are exposed solely to ideologically aligned content, reinforcing confirmation bias and reducing exposure to diverse viewpoints.[44] This 'disinformation order' actively disrupts the traditional information system, undermining rational, fact-based debate. As trust in media and institutions wanes, people become more susceptible to false narratives, deepening societal fragmentation and hindering deliberative democracy. The core of our democratic function – informed public discourse – depends on trust and diversity of perspectives. When disinformation thrives, it chokes the life out of this process, leaving Macedonian society polarised and less capable of collective problem-solving.

41 SEENPM (2022), *Media Trust in North Macedonia – Professional Journalism and Media Literacy Crucial for Increasing Trust in Media*, https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/infographic-N-Macedonia-2nd-corr.pdf.

42 UNDP (2023), 'Miss the misinformation', 15 September, https://www.undp.org/north-macedonia/news/miss-misinformation.

43 IFEX (2025), 'North Macedonia: Disinformation'.

44 IREX (2022), *Vibrant Information Barometer 2022: North Macedonia*. https://www.irex.org/files/VIBE_2022_North_Macedonia.pdf.

4 Digital manipulation: Not too small of a country to be ignored

4.1 From domestic manipulation to global fake news hub

The advent of social media has transformed North Macedonia, aligning the country with global digital trends. By 2022, internet penetration reached 84.23%, with 944,600 social media users (45.4% of the population) by January 2024.[45] Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have seen explosive growth, reshaping how the citizens of North Macedonia consume information. But this digital expansion has a dark side. In 2015–2016, independent media research investigations exposed a network of VMRO-DPMNE-linked online portals with shadowy ownership structures, some traced to tax havens like Belize. These portals, tied to the party leadership and even the national intelligence chief – a relative of then-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski – were used to manipulate public opinion during and between elections, raising alarms domestically and internationally.

Veles, a small Macedonian city, gained global infamy for its role in the 2016 US presidential election. Local individuals created fake news websites targeting American voters, particularly for Donald Trump, amplifying content via social media for financial gain.[46] This model of manipulation – cheap, effective, and scalable – resurfaced in 2024, with unsubstantiated allegations linking Macedonian 'fake news farms' to Venezuela's elections.[47] These cases thrust North Macedonia into the spotlight as a hub for disinformation, highlighting the urgent need to address national digital vulnerabilities.

[45] DataReportal (2024), 'Digital 2024: North Macedonia', 23 February, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-north-macedonia.

[46] H. Hughes and I. Waismel-Manor (2020), 'The Macedonian fake news industry and the 2016 US election', *Cambridge Core*. 25 August, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ps-political-science-and-politics/article/macedonian-fake-news-industry-and-the-2016-us-election/79F67A4F23148D230F120A3BD7E3384F.

[47] H. Hughes and I. Waismel-Manor (2020), 'The Macedonian fake news industry'.

The '*Javna Soba*' ('Public Room' in English) Telegram scandal further exposed the dark underbelly of the Macedonian digital sphere. This group was used to share non-consensual explicit photos and videos of women and girls, often with personal details obtained through hacked social media accounts. Public outrage and protests led to the convictions of the group's founder and moderator, but the case underscored glaring gaps in our legislative and institutional frameworks for combating online harms. It highlighted the critical need for enhanced digital content control and protections for vulnerable individuals.

The 2023 school shooting in the capital of neighbouring Serbia, where a minor allegedly planned the crime using online platforms, mainly TikTok, sent shockwaves through Macedonian society. It sparked a heated debate about minors' access to harmful content, prompting the LDP to propose a TikTok ban for those under 18. While controversial, this call recognised the delicate balance between censorship and safeguarding youth in an era of weak regulatory frameworks. These cases – Veles, *Javna Soba*, and the Belgrade tragedy – illustrate the urgent need for North Macedonia to strengthen its digital governance and protect its citizens from the perils of an unregulated online world.

4.2 Key data on digital challenges

According to Res Publica[48] and Westminster Foundation for Democracy,[49] youth engagement data (▸ Table 1) reveal a critical demographic at the heart of our digital challenge.

Public trust in media is deeply fractured. An even split – 49% trust, 49% distrust – reflects scepticism about media reliability, with social networks (47% distrust) and online media (41% distrust) viewed as particularly untrustworthy due to political influence and propaganda.[50] Seven in ten citizens believe media spreads disinformation, a perception

48 Institute of Communication Studies (2024b), *Survey Report on Youth News Consumption*.

49 Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2024), 'Fourth study of socio-political participation of youth in North Macedonia'.

50 SEENPM (2022). *Media trust in North Macedonia*.

Table 1. **Youth Engagement Data**

Characteristic	*Data Point*
Daily internet usage (15–24 years)	98.8%
Top social media for news	Instagram (73.8%), Facebook (61.7%), YouTube (45.2%), TikTok (29.3%)
Interest in politics	Low; prefer education, technology, culture
Voting frequency	59% always vote (down 5% since 2019), 31% occasionally, 12.6% never
Belief in voting impact	49.5% doubt voting matters; 54% feel powerless
Online vs. offline activism	71% believe online activism is more important
Self-description as socially inactive	80% describe themselves as inactive

reinforced by our low media literacy rate, with 70% of the population susceptible to unverified claims.[51] This vulnerability, combined with high digital connectivity and political polarisation, creates a perfect storm for manipulative narratives to thrive, undermining the informed discourse essential for democracy.

5 Recommendations for a digitally savvy European nation

5.1 Liberals shaping the digital destiny

To navigate this complex digital landscape and secure the country's democratic future, liberal forces must lead with vision, pragmatism, and resolve. As champions of openness, accountability, and inclusion, liberals have a unique opportunity to shape North Macedonia's digital destiny. The main recommendations, rooted in liberal principles and informed by our geopolitical realities, are the following:

[51] UNDP (2023), 'Miss the Misinformation'.

a) *Accelerate and formalise AI governance*: North Macedonia must swiftly develop a national AI strategy, aligned with the EU AI Act and OECD principles, to ensure AI respects human rights, transparency, and accountability.[52] This framework is not just about regulation; it is about positioning our nation as a hub for ethical AI innovation, attracting responsible investment while protecting citizens from misuse.[53] We must move beyond discussions to concrete action, embedding liberal values in every line of code.
b) *Invest massively in media and digital literacy:* The low media literacy rate – 70% susceptibility to disinformation – is a societal Achilles' heel.[54] A national, multigenerational programme is urgent, going beyond basic digital skills to cultivate critical thinking, source evaluation, and awareness of algorithmic biases and AI-generated content. Youth must be the nation's priority, transforming their digital fluency into a shield against manipulation. Schools, CSOs, and the government must collaborate to make media literacy a cornerstone of our education system.
c) *Regulate digital political campaigning and media ownership*: The unregulated 'digital wild west' threatens electoral integrity.[55] Legislation must mandate transparency in online political advertising, accountability for harmful narratives, and clear oversight of digital media ownership.[56] This will curb illicit funding and disinformation, levelling the playing field for liberal voices. North Macedonia cannot allow state advertising to corrupt media independence again.
d) *Strengthen independent media and professional journalism*: The Macedonian media sector is economically vulnerable, making it ripe for political

[52] Grimaldi Alliance (2024), 'The Artificial Intelligence Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689),' 24 July, https://www.grimaldialliance.com/en/ai-act-an-overview-through-the-main-eu-player/.
[53] Fund for Innovation and Technological Development (n.d.), 'National AI strategy', https://fitr.mk/en/national-ai-strategy/.
[54] UNDP (2023). 'Miss the Misinformation'.
[55] Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2025), *The Republic of North Macedonia*.
[56] Karanovic and Partners (2025), 'North Macedonia: Government approves key draft laws for digital future', May, https://www.karanovicpartners.com/news/north-macedonia-government-approves-key-draft-laws-for-digital-future/.

capture.[57] Policies fostering financial sustainability, reducing market concentration, and disincentivising state ad misuse are essential.[58] North Macedonia must promote in-depth, fact-checked reporting and attract young talent to journalism, restoring trust in our information ecosystem. Independent media is the lifeblood of democracy everywhere in Europe – North Macedonia is not an exception.

e) *Proactive counter-narrative strategies against foreign interference*: Russia's disinformation campaigns exploit our divisions, undermining our Euro-Atlantic path. North Macedonia needs sophisticated strategic communication to promote national unity and the benefits of EU and NATO integration.[59] Doing so requires not just debunking falsehoods but crafting compelling, positive narratives backed by international cooperation and intelligence sharing. The voices from within North Macedonia and from the EU must be louder than those from Moscow.

5.2 From systematic vulnerabilities to disinformation resilience

Combating disinformation demands a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach that addresses systemic vulnerabilities and empowers citizens. Key strategies include the following:

a) *Enhanced media and digital literacy*: Tailored, widespread programmes must involve the government, local authorities, CSOs, and schools.[60] Education should incorporate AI literacy and critical thinking from an early age, equipping citizens to discern truth from manipulation.[61] Youth-centric initiatives are critical for bridging the gap between digital fluency and democratic engagement.

[57] Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2025), *The Republic of North Macedonia*.

[58] A. Zekiri and D. Vasquez (2024), 'North Macedonia sets a benchmark for digital readiness in the region', *UNDP*, 14 August, https://www.undp.org/north-macedonia/blog/north-macedonia-sets-benchmark-digital-readiness-region.

[59] European Parliament (2025). 'Motion for a European parliament resolution', 26 June, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0118_EN.html.

[60] IFEX (2025), 'North Macedonia: Disinformation'.

[61] Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2025), *The Republic of North Macedonia*.

b) *Robust fact-checking and AI-assisted detection*: Human fact-checkers are indispensable, but AI tools can enhance their work by flagging suspicious content, analysing patterns, and identifying fake news.[62] Collaboration between journalists and AI developers is crucial, with human verification ensuring accuracy before publication.[63] This hybrid approach can keep pace with the speed of digital disinformation.
c) *Transparent digital advertising regulations:* Urgent criteria are needed to ensure state funding for election campaigns reaches credible outlets. AI-driven monitoring can enhance transparency in paid political advertising, reducing the influence of illicit funds.[64] Oversight must be rigorous to prevent media capture.
d) *Holistic strategy*: As there is no silver bullet for disinformation, a 'portfolio approach' prioritising long-term structural reforms – from media economics to education – is essential.[65] Addressing cognitive biases through literacy and systemic pressures through transparency will build true *information resilience*, enabling the Macedonian liberal democracy to thrive and to resist manipulation at every level.

5.3 An integrated digital roadmap forward

Liberal political forces in North Macedonia must lead, not follow. The country has the opportunity to prove that small states are not just targets of disinformation but sources of innovation, rule of law, and democratic renewal. The following roadmap would be a good starting point:

a) *A national strategy on AI ethics and human rights*: This strategy must guide technology development with liberal values at its core, ensuring AI serves citizens, not manipulators.[66]

62 Evrosimoska, M. B. (2024), 'Artificial intelligence: An enigma for Macedonian media', *ResPublica*, 18 March, https://respublica.edu.mk/blog-en/politics/artificial-intelligence-an-enigma-for-macedonian-media/?lang=en.
63 IFEX (2025), 'Engaging with North Macedonian youth on AI and disinformation', 29 April, https://ifex.org/engaging-with-north-macedonian-youth-on-ai-and-disinformation/.
64 Karanovic and Partners (2025), 'North Macedonia: Government approves key draft laws'.
65 IREX (2022), *Vibrant Information Barometer 2022*.
66 Grimaldi Alliance (n.d.), 'The Artificial Intelligence Act'.

b) *A digital democracy act*: This legislation should protect election integrity, transparency, and digital rights, setting a global standard for democratic governance in the digital age.[67]

c) *An independent digital oversight board*: Modelled on European and global best practices, this board would monitor digital platforms, enforce regulations, and safeguard information integrity.[68]

d) *Accelerate digital integration for EU security*: The legislative void in North Macedonia is a vulnerability for the entire EU. Leaving this space open to exploitation by external malign forces endangers EU democracy and security. Therefore, the EU and its liberal actors must treat digital security as a priority in accession talks focusing on immediate alignment and implementation of the EU's digital legislative acquis (DSA, AI Act, GDPR), in line with the ELF policy proposal for accelerated, staged EU integration.[69] This early adoption would secure the EU's cyber and digital vulnerability now, rather than tomorrow, proving that the EU cannot protect itself solely through military investment, but must also secure the digital space.

North Macedonia can be a beacon of hope. The digital age is not and cannot be treated as a threat to liberalism – it is a call to prove its resilience. By embracing these strategies, North Macedonia, as part of the wider European efforts, can build a future where technology empowers our democracy, unites our people, and secures the nation's place in the Euro-Atlantic community.

[67] Karanovic and Partners (2025), 'North Macedonia: Government approves key draft laws'.

[68] Karanovic and Partners (2025), 'North Macedonia: Government approves key draft laws'.

[69] ELF (2022), 'Staged integration for future EU enlargement', November, https://liberal-forum.eu/publication/policy-paper-20-staged-integration-for-future-eu-enlargement/.

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The role of social media and AI

How do they shape European public opinion and electoral outcomes?

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Abstract

This study analyses the complex interplay between Bosnia and Herzegovina's unique sociopolitical landscape and the consumption of political content, particularly on social media. It identifies how the country's decentralised political system, marked by institutionalised ethnic divisions and political blockades, creates an environment in which ethno-nationalist rhetoric thrives. The findings show that while liberal-civic parties struggle with limited resources and algorithmic biases, they increasingly rely on digital platforms to engage with a young, digitally literate population. The study highlights that despite high internet penetration and social media usage, youth political participation remains low due to deep-seated distrust in institutions. It also explores the pervasive issue of disinformation, detailing its sources, channels, and negative impact on democratic discourse, ultimately concluding that without a coordinated strategy and digital literacy, liberal-democratic values remain vulnerable to digital manipulations.

KEYWORDS: artificial intelligence, Bosnia and Herzegovina, media, disinformation, social media platforms, media literacy, ethno-national rhetoric

Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is defined by an institutionally complex political system established by the Dayton Agreement, which fosters a climate of ethnic division and political stagnation. The state is composed of two entities and a district, with power-sharing arrangements among Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs that frequently result in blockades and hinder substantive reforms. In this environment, the international community, particularly the Office of the High Representative, plays a key role in maintaining stability, yet its intermittent influence contributes to a sense of political uncertainty.

This study examines the challenges and strategies of liberal and civic parties operating within this highly polarised context. Due to limited access to traditional media and financial constraints, these parties increasingly depend on social media to communicate their platforms, which prioritise rule of law, anti-corruption, and EU integration. This shift to digital spaces, however, exposes them to new challenges, including a lack of clear technical regulations, disinformation campaigns, and algorithmic biases that favour polarising content. Concurrently, the research explores how the country's young, digitally savvy population consumes political information. While social media is their primary source, distrust in political institutions leads to low voter turnout and political disengagement. The study also analyses the landscape of disinformation, identifying key domestic and foreign sources, as well as

the narratives and channels used to undermine democratic discourse and social cohesion in BiH.

1 The political and institutional landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina

1.1 An overview of the political landscape

BiH is a state with a complex and decentralised political system. It consists of two entities – the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska – and the Brčko District; this political system was created according to the Dayton Agreement, which ended the war in BiH. The Federation of BiH has cantons with significant autonomy, while the Republika Srpska has a more centralised government structure. At the state level, power is shared by the three constituent national groups – Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs – which further complicates the decision-making process. Although aimed at protecting collective rights, this framework often results in political blockades, ethno-national tensions, and institutional dysfunction.

According to reports from Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)[1] and the European Commission,[2] political polarisation in BiH prevents progress in reforms (specifically, reforms of election processes) and contributes to reduced citizen trust in democratic processes.

The role of the international community, especially the Office of the High Representative,[3] the ad hoc international institution responsible for overseeing implementation of the Dayton Agreement, remains crucial for preserving institutional stability.

[1] OSCE/ODIHR (2022), *Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina–Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, https://www.osce.org.

[2] European Commission (2023), *BiH Report 2023*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/Izvje%C5%A1taj%200%20Bosni%20i%20Hercegovini%20za%202023.%20%20-%20BHS%20prijevod%20%28002%29.pdf.

[3] OHR (2015), 'General information', https://www.ohr.int/about-ohr/general-information/.

When it comes to the election process, the Central Election Commission (CIK) of BiH does not have clear technical mechanisms for controlling digital advertising or sufficiently trained staff to monitor the behaviour of parties on social networks. The OSCE report from 2022 noted that political parties in several cases did not declare the costs of any promotion, including digital promotion, thereby circumventing legal obligations on transparency.[4]

The political system of BiH is often characterised as institutionally complex for any substantial change. In addition to the complicated relations between the entities, complexity is introduced by the (institutionalised) division based on ethnicity, implying that citizens often vote along ethnic lines rather than programmatic commitments. This situation favours preserving the status quo after the war and hinders developing liberal-democratic values in society.

Legislative and executive authorities often operate under pressure from international actors, and reform processes have stagnated for years. Citizens express dissatisfaction with the lack of transparency, political corruption, and slow pace of European integration. In its annual reports, the European Commission notes that despite a declarative commitment to reforms, actual implementation is extremely slow.[5]

The BiH election law further complicates the political dynamics by allowing indirect discrimination through restrictions on candidacy and ethnic representation. The European Court of Human Rights has issued several rulings (Sejdić-Finci, Pilav, Zornić) that BiH has not implemented. This further undermines citizens' trust in institutions and democratic processes.

Concerning the use of AI for any purpose, including political purposes, BiH does not yet have any framework directly regulating its use. The exception lies in the latest amendments to the Criminal Code of FBiH, which bring novelties regarding the punishment of certain criminal acts, the initiation of which includes the use of AI. However, the fact that BiH

[4] OSCE (2023), *ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Final Report*, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/2/536993_0.pdf.

[5] European Commission (2023), *BiH Report 2023*.

lacks regulations that explicitly regulate the field of AI does not mean that its use is legally unregulated because various laws and by-laws can be applied to this field, such as those from the copyright domain.

1.2 Liberal and civic parties: Communication challenges and strategies

One of the most significant challenges for the political stability of BiH is the continuous activity of political actors who openly question the territorial integrity of the state. The rhetoric of certain leaders, especially from Republika Srpska, often includes threats of secession, denial of the genocide in Srebrenica, and calls to reorganise the state, which creates tensions among the public and further polarises the electorate.[6]

Such statements are regularly condemned by the international community, including the EU Delegation to BiH, OHR, and the US and British embassies. However, despite these reactions, domestic institutions rarely initiate any concrete legal or political measures, which further reduces citizens' confidence in the rule of law.

Notably the role of the international community in BiH is not just that of an observer: The OHR has executive powers through the so-called Bonn powers, while the EUFOR (or the European Union Forces)[7] maintains a military presence. However, occasional hesitations by international actors and an uneven approach cause a sense of insecurity and demotivation among citizens.

In addition, the complexity of the political system, in which there is no unified position on key issues such as NATO membership or EU integration, leads to blockages in the work of institutions. All of this opens up space for extra-institutional influences, among which

[6] Dnevni list (2021), 'Milorad Dodik, the current president of Republika Srpska, denies the genocide in Srebrenica and calls for secession', 24 September, https://dnevni.ba/clanak/dodik-objavio-video-u-kojem-negira-genocid-i-poziva-na-secesiju.

[7] The European External Action Service (EEAS) (2020), 'EUFOR Bosnia-Herzegovina Military Operation ALTHEA, 30 November, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eufor-althea/eufor-bosnia-herzegovina-military-operation-althea_und_en.

digital campaigns and the spread of disinformation play a significant role.

Liberal and civic parties in BiH – such as *Naša stranka*, SDP BiH, or *Za Nove Generacije* (ZNG) – operate in a political environment dominated by ethno-national rhetoric. These parties are trying to build communication strategies based on topics such as the rule of law, the fight against corruption, the environment, and the EU integration process. However, due to poor infrastructure, limited access to traditional media, and a lack of financial resources, social media is becoming their main channel of communication with the public.

In the digital space, liberal parties face challenges of disinformation, algorithmic invisibility, and organised political discrediting. Various practices have shown that these parties are frequent targets of negative campaigns, especially on Facebook and YouTube.

Attempts to create inclusive and rational political debate are often lost in the digital noise generated by political bots and coordinated networks of anonymous accounts. However, campaigns and localised initiatives from political parties and civil society show that digital space can also be an effective tool for democratisation and political education, provided that they are accompanied by strategy, resources, and institutional support.

Grassroots digital campaigns organised by volunteers and activists attempt to compensate for the lack of institutional support, but social media algorithms often favour polarising content.

1.3 Youth engagement: Social media usage and political participation

Liberal parties face a double challenge: On the one hand, they must communicate complex policies in an environment that rewards simplification and emotional messages; on the other hand, they are exposed to disproportionately greater scrutiny and criticism – from both political and media circles.

A 2022 analysis by Transparency International BiH showed that certain portals and broadcasters in the entities differ significantly in their

treatment of political actors, with liberal candidates more often negatively presented or ignored compared to nationalist leaders.[8]

This situation makes digital communication not just an option but a necessity for liberal actors. However, the lack of systematic training, analytics, and campaign results tracking implies that they often rely on individual enthusiasm and unstructured initiatives, making it difficult to measurably increase support.

These challenges point to the need to build a sustainable digital infrastructure – including social media teams, political communication training, the use of real-time data, and the development of partnerships with youth and civil society. Without this, liberal options will struggle to compete with the digital efficiency of political power centres that have significantly greater resources.

However, after some liberal parties that make up the coalition at the state level in BiH took power after winning the elections in 2022, there was a visible turn in the allocation of space on public broadcasting services. There has been a notable increase in the number of public appearances by the leaders of liberal parties and a decrease in the number of public appearances by the leaders of other parties, at least when it comes to public broadcasting services in BiH. Currently, there are no reports on this subject, but it will certainly be measured during the pre-election campaign for general elections in 2026.

One of the key challenges for liberal parties in the digital space is that the algorithms of platforms like Facebook and YouTube often favour content that evokes strong emotional reactions, such as anger, fear, or hatred. This benefits parties that use populist rhetoric, while rational, moderate, or programmatic content gets lost in algorithmic chaos.

Several analyses, including those by *Detektor.ba*, indicate the dominance of ethno-nationalist narratives in social media posts during the 2022 election cycle,[9] with polarising messages generating high levels

[8] Transparency International BiH (2022), *Election Campaign Monitoring, General Elections 2022*, https://ti-bih.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Monitoring-izborne-kampanje-Izbori-2022.pdf.

[9] BIRN BiH (2023), 'Milorad Dodik is the largest single source of hate narratives in Bosnia

of engagement and commentary. Nevertheless, moderate political actors, including liberals, remain somewhat marginalised in the digital content dynamic.

Additionally, the liberal parties' political advertising on social media often faces targeting problems because of the lack of tools or knowledge for microtargeting or campaign performance monitoring; this makes their messages less effective compared to parties that have access to state resources and professional digital teams. Different examples can be seen at the individual level in the way that certain political representatives of liberal parties skilfully use social networks, but this still remains in the domain of individual effort. The change is also visible compared to some previous governments at all levels in BiH because some liberal parties are now part of the government, which gives them access to state resources and a larger number of professionals for managing digital advertising, and this in turn helps them promote ideas and narratives.

While some liberal parties rely on spontaneous initiatives and support from influencers, as well as cooperation with youth organisations often created by those parties, this is often not enough to overcome structural barriers to access to information and platform bias. A systemic strategy is needed that should include a combination of organically produced content, paid advertising, and strategic alliances with independent media.

Young people in BiH are informing themselves through various platforms, with online media and social networks (especially Instagram and Facebook) occupying a significant place as sources of political information.[10]

When talking about turnout in elections, according to data from the CIK of BiH in the general elections that took place on 2 October 2022,

and Herzegovina', *Detektor.ba*, 10 February, https://detektor.ba/2023/02/10/miloraddodik-najveci-pojedinacni-izvor-mrzilackih-narativa-u-bih/.

10 Mediacentar Sarajevo and University of Vienna (2021), *Youth for Better Media: Attitudes, Habits and Needs of Young People for Media Content in BiH*, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/21524.pdf.

only 16% of young people voted, which significantly deviates from the expectations of civic participation of the younger population.[11]

In the absence of precise data on the participation of young people in local elections in 2024, the general trend of declining turnout has continued and young people participate less in local processes, according to ODIHR's preliminary analysis for local elections in 2024.[12]

One of the key challenges is the lack of content that is adapted to the language, visual habits, and interests of young people. While nationalist parties often use emotion, fear, and identity mobilisation, liberal initiatives have a harder time breaking through the complex information landscape.

On the other hand, the practices of civil society organisations in BiH show that it is possible to achieve some success in the engagement of this population. According to a report by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2024), young people in BiH highly value topics such as employment, education, and leaving the country, but political parties rarely address these topics in a way that is understandable and close to them.[13]

Civil sector initiatives and some independent media – especially through digital platforms – use personalised approaches, including video testimonials and peer experiences, to create a sense of recognition and inclusion among young people.[14]

UNICEF's 2024 'Voices of Youth' report confirms that young people want to participate in social change, but they prefer informal and digital interaction over institutional politics.[15]

11 N1 Info (2023), 'Youth and (non)turnout in elections: According to CIK data only about 16% of young people in BiH voted in 2022. Elections', 29 August, https://n1info.ba/obrazovanje/mladi-i-neizlaznost-na-izbore-ova-djevojka-iz-dijaspore-ipak-rusi-sve-predrasude.

12 OSCE/ODIHR (2025), *Bosnia & Herzegovina, Local elections, 6 October 2024: Final Report*, 25 February, https://odihr.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/7/3/586134.pdf.

13 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Ipsos (2024), *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024: Bosnia and Herzegovina*, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/21524.pdf.

14 BCSDN (2023), 'CPCD publishes 2023 report on the civil society environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina', 16 October, https://balkancsd.net/cpcd-publishes-2023-report-on-the-civil-society-environment-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/.

15 UNICEF (2024), *Voices of Youth 2024: Insights from Bosnia and Herzegovina*, https://www.unicef.org/bih/en/media/12651/file/Voices%20of%20Youth%202024.pdf.

According to the investigation 'Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024', conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in cooperation with the Ipsos agency, more than 60% of young people in BiH said that political institutions do not respond to their needs or offer concrete solutions for their everyday problems, such as access to education, problems with employment, and securing a home.[16]

Young people express deep distrust of the political system and see no room for their own involvement in it. At the same time, according to a survey by the Institute for Youth Development KULT, as many as 76.7% of young people use online media and social networks as the primary source of information – most often Instagram and Facebook – while television and print media have much less influence.[17]

However, despite a high digital presence, political participation remains low: young people often feel excluded from political processes and marginalised in party structures. In this context, civil society and independent media have a key role in creating political content that is relevant, visually accessible, and thematically connected to the real challenges of young people. This includes media literacy campaigns, street forums, workshops, and online initiatives that enable young people to learn, discuss, and actively participate in society.

2 Social media consumption and the role of AI

2.1 How people consume political content in Bosnia and Herzegovina

In BiH, while the internet space stays mostly ungoverned, the impact of social media and its consumption is quite high.

16 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Ipsos (2024), *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024*.

17 Institute for Youth Development KULT (2024), 'BiH youth political literacy survey: Young people do not trust politicians and political parties', 3 September, https://mladi.org/en/bih-youth-political-literacy-survey-young-people-do-not-trust-politicians-and-political-parties.

The Global Digital Report 2024[18] notes that at the beginning of 2024, there were 2.67 million internet users in BiH, with 83.4% internet penetration, and 2.16 million social media users (67.5% of the total population), with 3.93 million cellular mobile connections active in the country.

There were also 1.45 million users on Facebook (45.3% of the total population), 2.16 million on YouTube, 1.10 million on Instagram, 165,900 on X (formerly Twitter) and 998,500 on TikTok. Data also indicate that TikTok ads reached 37.9% of all adults aged 19 and above.

How people consume political content is heavily influenced by their country's unique media and cultural background, which now includes the growing impact of social media and AI.

While social media offers diversified information, sources, and voices, it also amplifies misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, especially in the election year, hindering access to information, undermining democratic dialogue, and contributing to further societal fragmentation.

Already in 2021, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIRN BiH) developed and published a '*Mapiranje mržnje*' (Mapping hate) database[19] of hate speech, discriminatory speech, denial of genocide, and other war crimes uttered by officials or public figures in the media or on social networks, as well as incidents in which hatred is incited or war crimes are denied.

The aim was to collect as much data as possible on the spread of hatred in BiH, with the methodology[20] developed and the efforts of their investigative journalists, in order to better monitor this phenomenon and report on its consequences.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube nowadays play a crucial role in terms of how people in BiH –

18 S. Kemp (2024), 'Global digital report, digital 2024: Bosnia and Herzegovina', 23 February, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-bosnia-and-herzegovina#:~:text=TikTok%20users%20in%20Bosnia%20and,while%2054.5%20percent%20was%20male.

19 BIRN BiH (2021), 'Mapping hate database', 30 December, https://mapiranjemrznje.detektor.ba/about.

20 BIRN BiH (2021). 'Mapping hate database'.

as well as diaspora – access political news, engage with political narratives, and receive information about political agendas, politicians, and elections.

With the growing influence of AI in political communication and content filtering, AI technologies, whether used by platforms themselves or used by political actors, are increasingly shaping political content and the way it is created, targeted, disseminated, and consumed.

In BiH, we can see platforms such as Facebook using algorithms to prioritise sensationalistic and polarising political content to maximise engagements. Targeted political ads enable the microtargeting of political messages, especially during elections, and are quite successful considering that regulation and transparency in BiH is limited. Deepfakes and AI-generated misinformation in BiH is growing, and it can be expected to be widespread in the following elections. However, the main factors influencing the consumption of political content in BiH remain ethnic identity lenses.

In March 2024, High Representative Christian Schmidt imposed amendments to the Election Law of BiH,[21] mandating a prohibition on *premature campaigning* from the moment elections are announced and explicitly including social media platforms. The CIK of BiH soon after began imposing fines – many of which related to Facebook posts – by issuing penalties to dozens of political parties for early campaigning.

Fact-checking organisation '*Zašto ne?*'[22] found that campaigning and social media posts were related to false statements about socioeconomic indicators as a tool for discrediting opponents, as well as hate symbols and prohibited gifts.

Big tech platforms are rather less agile or slower when it comes to monitoring cases, even when reported by fact-checking organisations. Therefore, problematic content remains online.

[21] OHR (2024), 'Decision enacting the law on amendments to the election law of Bosnia and Herzegovina', 26 March, https://www.ohr.int/decision-enacting-the-law-on-amendments-to-the-election-law-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina-11/

[22] Zašto ne (2025), 'Election campaign monitoring: Candidates and social media platforms', 28 January, https://zastone.ba/en/election-campaign-monitoring-candidates-and-social-media-platforms/.

While monitoring, the organisation *Zašto ne* (Why not) also looked into[23] how large social media platforms react to such cases. The following are *Zašto ne* reports along with feedback from the platforms:

a) 71 problematic pieces of content were reported to Facebook (48 related to the spread of false political information, 16 to hate speech, one to harassment, and six to child exploitation); no feedback was received on any of these reports, neither confirmation of receipt nor notifications about any actions taken by the platform;
b) four problematic pieces of content were reported to Instagram (all involved hate speech); for three cases, Instagram responded that there was no violation of community standards, while one post was initially removed and then reinstated;
c) 27 cases were reported to TikTok (25 related to electoral disinformation, two to hate speech); TikTok did not provide any feedback, neither confirmation of receiving the report nor notification of any steps the platform may have taken;
d) 14 cases were reported to X: confirmation of receipt for half of these reports was received, but there was no further notification from the platform regarding any steps taken;
e) three cases were reported to YouTube as false information; notification of the report was immediate, but there was no further information on any further step taken regarding the reports.

2.2 Liberal messaging in digital and political campaigns

In his article 'Long road to new government – Liberals in it for the first time'[24] Dr Adnan Huskić, project manager for BiH of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, notes that ever since the signing of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in 1995 ('The Dayton

[23] Zašto ne (2025), 'Election campaign monitoring: Very large online platforms', 28 January, https://zastone.ba/en/election-campaign-monitoring-very-large-online-platforms/.

[24] A. Huskić (2023), 'Long road to new government - Liberals in it for the first time', *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, 20 January, https://www.freiheit.org/east-and-southeast-europe/long-road-new-government-liberals-it-first-time.

Agreement'), the results of elections almost exclusively favoured ethnic and nationalist parties. There are various reasons for this. First, there is a prevalence of inter-ethnic issues, peddled and perpetuated by these same parties. Second, these parties maintained exclusive control over vast public resources and institutions for more than two decades, abusing them and making them instrumental for staying in power.

Dr Adnan Huskić questions whether the liberal '*Naša stranka*' party will be able to transform historically negative political dynamics at the state and Federation levels, noting that the same doubts were voiced when the governing coalition with *Naša stranka* emerged in Canton Sarajevo after the elections in 2018:

> Yet their good governing record won them a lot of sympathies and the status of an unwavering socially progressive party. No doubt, working with proto-nationalists who have a penchant for producing rather than solving conflicts will be challenging, but 'Naša stranka' has proven capable of transforming political culture and relations before.

Naša stranka continues throughout the years to maintain a liberal, civic-oriented political party that promotes social liberalism, anti-corruption, and multiethnic cooperation – both offline and online – which is notable from their social media posts and campaigns during and after elections.

Apart from political parties, liberal messaging is tightly connected to liberal NGOs (such as Sarajevo Open Centre, Civil Rights Defenders, and *Povorka ponosa*), which promote human rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, gender equality, and overall raising visibility around marginalised, supporting progressive reforms and policies, and engaging media effectively, both online and offline.

Throughout the years, it seems that the rhetoric around the EU accession process lost its way to local resonance and with local people, especially with the way that political actors as well as CSOs use the EU-centric vocabulary such as the rule of law, democratic values, EU standards, and digitalisation – which, as such, do not translate and connect with citizens at large and their day-to-day struggles.

3 Disinformation ecosystem in Bosnia and Herzegovina

3.1 Main sources and types of disinformation

In BiH, disinformation comes from both domestic and foreign sources: political actors, marketing-motivated online media outlets, regional centres of power, and anonymous digital entities.[25] Research shows that the most commonly misused topics are election campaigns and the legitimacy of political candidates, highly sensitive topics such as the Srebrenica genocide and the war past, intriguing claims about the role of foreign embassies, and conspiracy theories about global actors.[26,27]

In BiH, research on media disinformation confirms that the most common forms of disinformation are deliberately fabricated news (fake news), clickbait headlines (manipulating headlines), and false claims in the context of real statements by political actors. In 2019, the study 'Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH', conducted by *Zašto ne* in cooperation with *MediaCentar* Sarajevo, found that anonymous online media outlets are the main source of dissemination of such content, with almost a third (33%) of the analysed articles classified as 'fake news' and about 20% as clickbait. Such unverifiable media outlets often do not have transparent ownership structures, and they spread posts quickly via social networks and messaging apps.

Foreign influence, especially from Russia, is often reflected through disinformation narratives targeting BiH's institutional sovereignty and ethnic divisions – narratives about the alleged threat to Serbs, discrediting

[25] Zašto ne and MediaCentar Sarajevo (2019), *Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf.

[26] European Parliament, Policy Department for External Policies (2021), 'Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them', 23 February, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2020)653621.

[27] China-CEE Institute (2019), 'Bosnia–Herzegovina social briefing: Political disinformation in BiH media', 5 June, https://china-cee.eu/2019/06/05/bosnia-herzegovina-social-briefing-political-disinformation-in-bih-media/.

Western interests, and fragmentation of the state.[28] These narratives are actively propagated by local media with a pro-Kremlin profile, regional influential power centres, and digital entities linked to Russia and Serbia.[29] Such information is often linked to the broader concept of 'hybrid warfare' and poses a serious challenge to a country's democratic and security capacities.[30]

3.2 Channels and narratives

Disinformation in BiH spreads through a variety of digital and traditional channels, including pseudo-media, political parties, social networks, forums, and messaging applications. Facebook and YouTube continue to dominate as primary spaces for publishing videos, memes, and unstructured 'analyses' that are often not supported by verified sources.[31]

A special challenge is represented by the so-called *grey-zone* media – digital platforms that are not registered as media do not have proper responsibility, but they produce a huge amount of content with political connotations. These platforms often act as informal vehicles for political campaigns, favouring certain actors while simultaneously discrediting their opponents.[32]

[28] Clingendael Institute (2023), 'Russian sources of influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina', August, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/russian-sources-of-influence-in-serbia-montenegro-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina/.

[29] J. Jevtić (2021), 'The Russian disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans', *Security Distillery*, 28 April, https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/the-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-western-balkans.

[30] NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (2020), *Russia's Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment*, https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_footprint_in_wb_executive_summary_30-04_v2-2.pdf.

[31] Zašto ne and MediaCentar Sarajevo (2019), *Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf.

[32] BIRN (2025), 'Digital rights review: AI-driven violations go unchecked in South-East Europe', 7 July, https://balkaninsight.com/2025/07/07/digital-rights-review-ai-driven-violations-go-unchecked-in-south-east-europe/.

According to BIRN's analysis about digital rights in Western Balkans is shown that numerous Facebook pages without a clearly stated imprint or editorial team regularly promote political actors through sponsored posts without proper labelling, contributing to an unethical digital campaign. Some of these channels recycle content from foreign sources without checking its accuracy and context, using clickbait headlines that distort information to drive views and engagement. This misinformation and disinformation has been shown to mislead elderly people.[33]

The technical aspects of disinformation campaigns have also been documented. According to analyses by NGOs and journalists, the campaigns often involve so-called farm servers that create hundreds of fake profiles and then distribute identical content through closed groups and comment sections.[34] These efforts contribute to the construction of a false narrative through apparent massiveness.

The issue of digital literacy further complicates the fight against misinformation. This context is suitable for expanding the non-manipulative and emotionally charged content that further polarises public discourse.

Study conducted by the European Parliament confirm that certain misinformation is being circulated simultaneously in several countries of the region, indicating the existence of coordinated distribution networks, especially those expressed during pre-election periods and states of emergency.[35]

Digital space then becomes a battleground for the interpretation of reality. Political elites and external actors attempt to shape citizens' perceptions through this channel, with users being overwhelmed by contradictory information. This leads to information fatigue, apathy, and further distancing from political engagement.

[33] Media centre Sarajevo (2022), 'Between freedom of expression and damage to democracy: analysis of harmful digital content in Bosnia and Herzegovina', https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-mreze-i-web/kad-klik-postane-opasnost-kako-starije-osobe-u-bih-i-sjevernoj-makedoniji.

[34] N. Kilibarda (2024), *Bot and Troll Farms*, BIRN BiH, https://detektor.ba/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/03-Farme-botova-i-trolova-3003.pdf.

[35] European Parliament, Policy Department for External Policies (2021). 'Mapping Fake News'.

Different analyses point to the increasingly frequent occurrence of coordinated campaigns in the digital space, which include the spread of hate speech, ethnic polarisation, and discrediting of political opponents, especially in the pre-election campaigns. These campaigns often take place through anonymised Facebook pages and comments, where the lack of transparency allows the manipulation of public discourse. The digital space in BiH in that manner becomes an extension of real political conflicts, whereby social networks serve as a tool for the strategic distribution of narratives.

Finally, the narratives that dominate these campaigns include claims such as 'BiH is a dysfunctional state', 'the West is destabilising the region', 'the elections were stolen', and 'foreigners are imposing their will on the people'. Transparency International BiH also documented an increase in sponsored posts without adequate labels, which further contributes to the non-transparency of digital political advertising.[36]

3.3 Impact on liberal-democratic values and institutions

BiH citizens' trust in the democratic process has been significantly undermined. According to a survey by the OSCE, as many as 42% of respondents believed that the 2022 elections were not fair or free, while media content in the pre-election period was judged to be extremely biased.[37] The OSCE/ODIHR observation mission further confirmed serious shortcomings, including the misuse of public resources, pressure on voters, and manipulation of electoral legislation.[38] This perception favours narratives of political cynicism and resignation. When citizens believe that their voices have no weight, the tendency to support actors who offer authoritarian solutions under the pretext of *efficiency*

[36] Transparency International BiH (2024), 'Report on non-transparent digital advertising during the elections', 4 October, https://ti-bih.org/66345/.

[37] OSCE (2022), 'Citizens' perceptions, experiences and opinions about elections in BiH", 23 September, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/b/526735.pdf.

[38] OSCE/ODIHR (2022), *Bosnia and Herzegovina – General Elections 2022: Final Report*, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/e/526976.pdf.

increases, which creates fertile ground for populist and anti-democratic tendencies.

Institutions that should be the pillars of liberal democracy – public services, judiciary, and education system – are often subject to political influences and lack integrity. Their inability to resist pressure further erodes their confidence in the system.[39]

It is therefore important that liberal-democratic values are not presented as abstract concepts, but rather translated into policies with concrete effects on citizens' lives: citizen involvement in decision-making, budget transparency, protection of minority rights, and functional public services.

BiH does not currently have a single strategy for combating disinformation. Although some non-governmental organisations and journalists provide quality analysis and education, the institutional reaction remains weak. The Communications Regulatory Agency (RAK) has limited oversight of content on social networks, where political advertising often goes unmarked and unaccountable.

In its guidelines, UNESCO highlights the importance of integrating digital and media literacy into educational programmes, but such content has not yet been systematically implemented in BiH. Without a strong educational policy, protection of media freedom, and strengthening of regulatory bodies, the liberal-democratic discourse remains vulnerable to digital manipulations that undermine the very foundation of the democratic order.

[39] Council of Europe (2023), 'Challenges to the rule of law in the Western Balkans', https://www.coe.int/en/web/rule-of-law/western-balkans.

4 Case studies and local media practices

4.1 Highlight local campaigns, messages, or media efforts – positive or problematic

In 2022, *Balkan Insight* shared its investigation focused on political parties in BiH, particularly those in the Republika Srpska entity of BiH, which spent 'tens of thousands of US dollars' before elections. According to Facebook transparency data, six political parties competing for seats for presidency spent a combined total of between $95,000 and $117,000 on 499 paid Facebook and Instagram ads during the month-long campaign for elections. According to the investigation, the biggest spender was the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, SNSD, led by Bosnian Serb hardliner Milorad Dodik.

The '*Sve počinje izborom*' (Everything Starts With a Choice) campaign[40] by the EU in BiH was launched in 2024 to empower citizens to achieve their democratic rights and promote fair and credible elections, with special emphasis on increasing the number of voters, impeding election frauds, and increasing female participation in politics. The campaign successfully featured accessible visuals and clearly drafted messages understandable to both younger and older audiences, as well as voters.

Female politicians such Sabina Čudić, Irma Baralija, and Nasiha Pozder – all from *Naša stranka* – heavily relied on social media platforms[41] X and Facebook to share their personal stances and stories, raise their visibility and that of their political platforms, and direct communications to their voters and potential voters. They won seats and increased

[40] Delegation of EU in BiH and Office of the special representative of EU in BiH (2024), 'EU in BiH starts campaign on social media "Sve počinje izborom" to encourage citizens to exercise their democratic rights', 10 September, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/bosnia-and-herzegovina/eu-u-bih-pokre%C4%87e-kampanju-na-dru%C5%A1tvenim-mre%C5%BEama-sve-po%C4%8Dinje-izborom-kako-bi-ohrabrila-gra%C4%91ane-da_bs.

[41] E. Mušija, R. Mikac, and I. Cesarec (2022), 'Comparative analysis of woman's representation in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republic of Croatia', *Jurnal Harian Regional*, https://jurnal.harianregional.com/widya/full-95896?.

their public profiles, even if oftentimes they were less featured in traditional media.

During the elections in BiH, there was a notable increase in the so-called bots, and bot farms, and coordinated disinformation tactics.

BIRN BiH published a 'Bot and trolls farms' paper which notes that in an August 2023 report, Meta stated that by blocking two of the largest political influence operations ever discovered on Facebook and Instagram, one linked to China and the other to Russia, it had 'made the world a slightly safer place'. Both operations used disinformation and fake news in attempts to discredit Western governments or undermine their support for Ukraine.

The campaign in China included 7,704 Facebook accounts, 954 Facebook pages, 15 Facebook groups, and 15 Instagram accounts. The accounts and actors spread across more than 50 platforms, with activity observed on X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, Pinterest, Medium, Blogspot, LiveJournal, Vimeo, Russia's VKontakte, and dozens of smaller online forums.

The pro-China campaign, with negative content about US and Western foreign policy, targeted Taiwan, the US, Australia, the UK, Japan, and Chinese-speaking audiences globally. Meta linked this campaign to a group known as 'Spamouflage', or 'Dragonbridge', linked to Chinese state agencies. 'Spamouflage' was involved in placing and disseminating disinformation during the 2022 US elections.

Recognising the dangers facing the Western Balkans, the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee published a study[42] on disinformation that was adopted by the European Parliament on 1 December 2020, and a revised version was completed on 23 February 2021. The study highlights that 'disinformation is an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics in the Western Balkans, without exception'.[43]

For BiH, the study states that the disinformation landscape is dominated by media from Republika Srpska, often with the support of Russian disinformation networks, and that the focus is on xenophobia and

42 European Parliament, Policy Department for External Policies (2021), 'Mapping Fake News'.
43 European Parliament, Policy Department for External Policies (2021), 'Mapping Fake News'.

discrediting the EU. All this evidence suggests that BiH is constantly under the influence of various types of bots and trolls, disinformation, and fake news.

In late 2023, it was allegedly discovered that one of the most followed pro-Russian Twitter accounts writing about the war in Ukraine belonged to a person from BiH. The account, run by a man living and working in Mostar, was identified as one of the three most significant pro-Russian propaganda accounts spreading disinformation about the war in Ukraine and Syria.

5 Recommendations for strengthening democratic resilience

The following recommendations suggest how liberal actors in BiH should adapt and adopt specific strategies for engagement and disinformation resilience.

a) Youth-focused platforms and peer messaging for authentic civic (out) reach:
   - Use social media platforms, especially short multimedia content (such as TikTok and Instagram reels), to appeal to younger voters with civic messaging.
   - Train and support local youth creators, meme-inspired pages, and student and/or young journalists to be so-called digital ambassadors for civic tolerance and democratic engagement.
   - As peer messengers are more effective than formal party spokespeople in emotionally charged digital spaces, look into cooperations between professional spokespersons and positive influencers.
   - As using TikTok or Instagram alone isn't enough, populate these platforms with trusted peer messengers to create a more credible, viral, and culturally resonant message. Together, this strategy shifts political discourse from top-down lecturing to grassroots, horizontal civic storytelling.

b) Watchdog monitoring and public pressure (including on Big Tech platforms) for a better information environment:
   - Support and empower investigative media, fact checkers, and official social media flaggers who monitor, document, and report on (AI-enabled) political smear campaigns, hate speech, and ad manipulation during elections. Doing so would proactively reveal that these manipulations build public trust and shield liberal messaging from being drowned out.
   - Advocate for TikTok, Meta, and YouTube to expand ad transparency tools, assign local language moderators trained in BiH's political and ethnic context, and leverage findings from watchdog reports to demand better AI algorithm audits, especially around election periods. Without local oversight, platform algorithms will continue to prioritise polarising or harmful content over civic messaging.

c) Deploy prebunking and verification content ahead of elections:
   - Launch short *real vs fake* videos to inoculate voters against deepfakes, AI-generated propaganda, and misleading claims before they go viral.

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Why don't liberals dance on TikTok?

ALEKSANDRA WIĘCKA

Abstract

This paper examines the communicative and structural dynamics behind the Polish liberal camp's loss in the 2025 presidential election – occurring two years after its parliamentary victory in 2023. It argues that political discourse has become deeply embedded in the logic of digital platforms, where virality, affect, and repetition eclipse deliberation, evidence, and institutional authority. The right has proven more adept at navigating this environment and constructing an immersive narrative ecosystem built on memetic circulation, emotional resonance, and algorithmic amplification. Within this ecosystem, politics is reframed as a moral conflict between 'ordinary people' and 'the elites', blending nationalist sentiment, authenticity, and security concerns into a cohesive emotional narrative. By contrast, liberal actors remain anchored in the discursive norms of rationality, moderation, and procedural legitimacy. To reclaim narrative agency, liberal actors must learn to 'speak platform' – to design emotionally charged, participatory formats, cultivate networked publics, and articulate a new liberal myth.

Introduction

Public debate today resembles a loop created by viral *hook–reaction–hook*: first a provocation, then an outburst of emotion, and finally endless variations. In this rhythm, political arguments matter only insofar as they can take on a format – preferably short, repetitive, and fleeting, like a memory from a feed. This text reconstructs the Polish political landscape after the last presidential campaign and proposes a set of practices through which liberal actors can learn to speak the language of platforms without losing the language of institutions.

On 1 October 2023, people were gathered at the Dmowskiego roundabout in Warsaw. It was difficult to push through the crowd climbing the stairs, and parking was out of the question. And there were still two hours to go before the start of the March of a Million Hearts – a demonstration intended to seal the victory of liberal democracy, represented by the Civic Coalition, over the right-wing populists of the Law and Justice party, who had been ruling Poland for eight years. Volunteers were handing out water and white and red hearts – a symbol of hope for change. The leader of the Civic Platform party, Donald Tusk, promised an end to the Polish-Polish war, 'chasing away the aggressor' reckoning, and victory. Hundreds of thousands of march participants cheered. Victory in the elections was not certain, but democracy had a chance – everything depended on voters' mobilisation. There was hope for change in the air – the restoration of the rule of law, rapprochement with Europe,

and a return to the direction from which eight years of right-wing rule seemed a grim departure.

On 1 June 2025, shortly after 9 p.m., Prime Minister Donald Tusk left Rafał Trzaskowski's campaign headquarters without waiting for the results of the presidential election. At the same time, Rafał Trzaskowski announced his victory based on exit poll results. A few hours later, the results coming in from the electoral commissions showed that, despite the record turnout – which usually favours democrats (67.31% in the first round, 71.63% in the second round) – the coalition candidate Rafał Trzaskowski lost to the officially independent candidate, Karol Nawrocki, who was openly supported by PiS.[1] Zenek Martyniuk, a popular disco polo musician in Poland, released a hit song with the chorus '*Jak do tego doszło, nie wiem*' (How did this happen, I don't know), which has become part of everyday language. Although it seems an appropriate comment on the situation, we cannot afford such carelessness and must stop wondering what made the liberal-democratic discourse cease to be attractive to voters, especially young ones.

So how did it happen that two years after winning the election, the liberal-democratic side lost to a right-wing candidate, backed up by a party whose eight years in power were called by leftist politicians 'the new Middle Ages'?[2] Is the Democrats' victory in 2023 just a storytelling twist, an accident at work? Is it that, as George Lakoff and others argue, the right wing is simply better at constructing effective narratives that mobilise voters? Or is it the result of a paradigm shift in which the division between the left and right seems to be becoming increasingly blurred? What forces are shaping the Polish political landscape?

1 PAP (n.d.), 'Nawrocki proposes pension law, calls for parliamentary backing', https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/prezes-pis-nawrocki-jako-prezydent-jest-gwarantem-suwerennosci-i-rozwoju.

2 Dziennik (2021), 'Scheuring-Wielgus: PiS is serving us the Middle Ages. Young people will show us what Poland will become', 24 February, https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/8104488,joanna-scheuring-wielgus-pis-sredniowiecze-mlodziez.html.

1 The political landscape in Poland in 2025

As early as 2024, sociologist Prof. Przemysław Sadura and journalist Sławomir Sierakowski, in their report 'The Hidden Crisis of Power' published by Krytyka Polityczna,[3] state that Poles did not breathe a sigh of relief when they handed over power to the Coalition on 15 October. On the contrary, they actively kept a close eye on the government, expecting measurable results – and quickly.

It can be said that Poles were expecting a story about a team of Marvel superheroes who, in an almost supernatural way that is straight out of an action movie, remove all traces of PiS from political life, clean up morality, return embezzled cash, and, on such a cleansed playing field, begin to govern Poland in a transparent manner and in accordance with a democratic set of values, rather than reports on governance.

The destruction and devastation visible mainly on a symbolic level – such as institutions staffed by people subordinate to a single party (the prosecutor's office, courts, state-owned companies, etc.) deliberate changes in the law (the Constitutional Tribunal, the Supreme Court, the National Media Council, the National Broadcasting Council), which are invisible to most citizens – should not, in the common perception, justify the slow pace of change and reckoning with the past. This was especially true because these changes, unlike the practices of the previous government, had to be introduced in accordance with the letter of the law.

An example of this is the communication surrounding TVP, a public television station that became a propaganda mouthpiece for the government during the PiS administration. On the one hand, the *hero* of the mass imagination was the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz, whose photo, showing him wearing dark glasses and smoking a cigarette, as if from an action movie, became the subject of numerous memes. On the other hand, numerous voices,

[3] P. Sadura and S. Sierakowski (2024), 'The hidden crisis of power', *Krytyka Polityczna*, 15 October, https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/ukryty-kryzys-wladzy-nowy-raport-sierakowskiego-i-sadury/.

including those from the liberal side, questioned the legality of his actions. It should be noted that the construction of an (auto)narrative about the successes and achievements of the liberal-democratic camp is almost non-existent. A government spokesperson was not appointed until June 2025, and the current government narrative set by Prime Minister Donald Tusk is 'we do, we don't talk'.[4] However, the consistent avoidance of building a new liberal-democratic myth did not bring any benefits in the form of appreciation for the government's actions; on the contrary, it gave the opposition fuel to point out its lack of effectiveness.

Thus, just a year after the elections, there were reshuffles among political players on the political market, and subsequent seasons of the political series brought announcements of new deals and (un)expected twists and turns. While the two main parties enjoyed the support of around 30% of voters (PiS: 30%; KO: 28%), Sławomir Mentzen and Krzysztof Bosak's Confederation (15%) quickly emerged as the third force. Support for the Third Way, a coalition of Szymon Hołownia's (Polska 2050) and Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz's (PSL) parties, stood at 7%, and for the New Left at 8%.[5] The surveys also showed that the level of mobilisation to participate in the next elections is higher among those who assess the situation in Poland negatively, i.e. mainly PiS and Confederation voters. The belief that Konfederacja, as a new force, could *turn the tables*, has attracted a deeply committed and engaged electorate. This type of Konfederacja voter is particularly prevalent among men. As many as 37% of male voters under the age of 20 would vote for Konfederacja.[6]

[4] Service of the Republic of Poland (2025), '"We do, we don't talk" – The government on the economy, investments and agriculture', 27 August, https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/robimy-nie-gadamy--rzad-o-gospodarce-inwestycjach-i-rolnictwie.

[5] Infor (2023), '2023 Election polls – Average poll results from before election silence', 15 October, https://www.infor.pl/prawo/nowosci-prawne/6336878,sondaze-wyborcze-2023-srednia-sondazowa-sprzed-ciszy-wyborczej.html.

[6] P. Sadura and S. Sierakowski (2024), 'Co drugi mężczyzna przed czterdziestką popiera Konfederację. Raport wyborczy po roku rządów Tuska', *Wyborcza Magazine*, 16 October, https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,31384101,co-drugi-mezczyzna-przed-czterdziestka-popiera-konfederacje.html.

Fatigue with the duopoly, the unresolvable dispute between KO and PiS, and the growing need to seek new representatives of power made itself felt before the 2025 presidential election. The report 'Disappointed with the state, satisfied with life'[7] published by the Batory Foundation, summarising the results of several studies, paints a picture of young people who are primarily concerned about their future and the possibility of starting an independent life (e.g. due to the unavailability of housing), excluded from political life, and lured by political promises.

No wonder, then, that another report by the duo Sadura-Sierakowski '*Nowy Duopopol obali ten system*' (The new duopoly will overthrow this system), commissioned by the Institute of Political Criticism, argues that we are on the verge of a generational change in politics, in which the conflict will not be between conservatism and liberalism, or provincialism and modernity, but between the elite and the anti-elite, or between large cities and towns and villages. As can be read in the report,

> Polarization is real – not so much political, because that is only a derivative – but social. And this is nothing new, but a post-terrestrial division that has never been healed. . . . We are living on an unhealed wound. Every liberal government in Poland will sooner or later fall if it does not find a way, under the pressure of current problems, to finally implement a program of social reforms that would build the people's trust in the elites.[8]

According to them, the new leaders are Sławomir Mentzen – leader of the conservative-liberal Confederation – and Adrian Zandberg – leader of the left-wing Razem party. What do they have in common? A young electorate, growing support, and the ability to navigate the internet with ease. This is because the political discourse has changed not only in character, but also in location. Current affairs programmes

[7] K. Izdebski, F. Pazderski, and P. Marczewski (2025), 'Disappointed with the state, satisfied with life', *Batory Foundation*, 5 May, https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacja/rozczarowani-panstwem-zadowoleni-z-zycia-prezydenckie-wybory-mlodych-polek-i-polakow/

[8] P. Sadura and S. Sierakowski (2025), 'Nowy Duopopol obali ten system' ('The new duopoly will overthrow this system'), *The Institute of Political Criticism*, 11 July, https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/nowy-duopol-obali-ten-system-nowy-raport-sierakowski-sadura-krytyka-polityczna/.

and interviews with politicians often have fewer views than videos featuring their parodies. When James H. Kuklinski and Norman L. Hurley published 'On Hearing and Interpreting Political Messages: A Cautionary Tale of Citizen Cue-Taking',[9] they assumed that the source of knowledge about politics was mainly messages from elites, which could be more or less audible and interpreted correctly or incorrectly. Today, it can be said that the *cues* referred to by the researchers are scattered across a wide variety of messages, and their interpretation is multilayered and diverse. Perhaps the reason for the reduced effectiveness of liberal-democratic circles in engaging voters in political discourse is the belief that elites can still set the tone for political discourse.

2 Politics for consumption

In her book *(Not)Kidding. Politics in Online Tabloids*,[10] media researcher and political commentator Dr Helena Chmielewska-Schlajfer examines how knowledge about politics can be obtained. She takes a close look at the 2015 and 2020 presidential campaigns in Poland and the US, citing research showing that although traditional media remain a key source of information, two-thirds of political communication on the internet comes not from news media, but from memes, TikTok, tabloids, forums, and personal influencer channels. Even on gossip websites such as Pudelek, political and politics-related news accounts for 30% of the content, from the affairs of Marianna Schreiber (the ex-wife of a PiS politician) or the betrayal of Marcin Bosacki (PO), through the alleged row on board a plane involving French President Macron, to reporting on turnout during the first round of the presidential election and celebrities casting their votes. 'It's not that the news media has ceased to

[9] J. H. Kuklinski and N. L. Hurley (1994), 'On Hearing and Interpreting Political Messages: A Cautionary Tale of Citizen Cue-Taking', *The Journal of Politics*, 56, 729–751. https://doi.org/10.2307/2132190.

[10] H. Chmielewska-Szlajfer (2024), *(Not)Kidding. Politic in online Tabloids, Studies in Critical Social Sciences*, volume 238 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill).

be relevant. But what appears on television, for example, is processed, repeated, and recalibrated so that it works on other channels, including social media',[11] explains the researcher. These channels may become an important – and for some people, the only – source of knowledge about politics. She further adds that the lack of people's interest in politics does not depend on the fact that they do not read political analyses in traditional media or watch the news.

Politics on the internet, from right to left, is intertwined with make-up tips – which Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez made great use of in 2020 when she presented her political demands while applying lipstick on Vogue's channel – and is processed by AI as shown on the profile '*Sztuczna Polska*' (Artificial Poland), where politicians from various factions take part in a rap music video on Fat Thursday, or in competitions for epigrams, sonnets, and limericks. Located between alternative Polish buildings filled with Żabka convenience stores, it is a commentary on classic works of art, mixed with training and parenting advice. It is turned into memes, videos, and trends, and candidates are compared to clothing brands, Polish cities, dance styles, or date suggestions. Voters with varying degrees of political engagement piece together these micro-stories believing they are making informed and balanced choices.

In the last presidential election, candidates competed to find ways to reach potential voters. Thirteen candidates ran in the first round, of which a minority – five representing the democratic, liberal, or left-wing side – were Magdalena Biejat, Szymon Hołownia, Joanna Senyszyn, Rafał Trzaskowski, and Adrian Zandberg.

2.1 Memes reinforce information bubbles.

'For most candidates, the internet and social media represented a sphere of communication that was as important as it was troublesome. However, deciphering TikTok algorithms and achieving success in terms

[11] J. Ezzeldien (2024), '(Not)kidding. Politics in online tabloids – Review', 16 September, https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/opinie/internet-i-wybory-memy-emocje-i-ich-wplyw-na-preferencje-wyborcow/jthrh7l

of viewership and popularity did not translate directly into electoral success. An example is the case of Joanna Senyszyn: despite creating a coherent narrative about 'Empress Senyszyn', choosing a distinctive accessory in the form of red beads, effectively neutralising a potential weakness – her characteristic voice tone – and achieving millions of views on TikTok, she gained the sympathy of young people but not their votes. In the first round, she received 1.09% of the votes.[12]

Adrian Zandberg reached the peak of his popularity on his TikTok channel (3.6 million views) by dissing 'Trump from Temu', 'The recycled European', and their love of wafers (Prince Polo Trzaskowski versus Mentzen's Teatralne wafers), and by winking at those who understand the not only challenges of real progress but also the importance of silicon wafers for developing new technologies. Supporters and staff of all candidates use verses or entire songs to humiliate a competitor: in an edition of electoral freestyle, a clip generated by the artificial intelligence rapper Now Rocky on 'Bonżur' (200,000 views) addressed all the narratives aimed at discrediting the KO candidate – from his knowledge of languages, through *rainbowism*, to his changing views and liberal views on abortion, described here as 'killing foetuses'. In response, the internet was flooded with AI-generated musical interpretations of the part of the debate in which Karol Nawrocki puts a pouch of *snus* under his gum.

Fakes, memes, AI-generated videos, pastes, and YouTube jokes shape our political choices to a much greater extent than we are willing to admit. First, it is often thanks to them that we are able to connect a candidate with a name.

> Memes can increase a politician's popularity and recognition. With the flood of information that reaches us every day, it is not easy to remember who is who. For many people, it is quite a complicated task to figure out how parliamentarianism works, to connect a name with a program, a party, and even a candidate's face.

[12] J. Senyszyn (2025), 'The election of the president of the republic of Poland', *National Electoral Commission*, 18 May, https://wybory.gov.pl/prezydent2025/pl/kandydat/4281491.

These are the words of Prof. Magdalena Kamińska from Adam Mickiewicz University, who has been researching the Polish *memosphere* for years.[13] Third, and perhaps most importantly, Prof. Kamińska stated the following:

> In my opinion, memes are not so much about changing someone's attitude or discrediting an opponent, but rather about strengthening and sealing the boundaries of worldview bubbles. . . . Memes about politicians are not only created in their campaign headquarters. They are spontaneously created by politicians' fandoms, who work very hard on the internet for their candidates, without receiving any money for it. . . . They are distributed within bubbles, simply to count ourselves and feel that our views are validated, at least in our immediate environment.[14]

Those who understand and appreciate the same jokes as ours.

3 An ineffective attack

However, the performative function of politics is not only manifested in the memosphere. An election campaign is a battle of stories. The choice of a candidate is rarely made on the basis of rational analysis but more often based on tribal identification: *ours* versus *not ours*.

Comparing political programmes stands no chance against a well-constructed story, and this is something that the candidates' campaign staff, the media, and content creators know very well. Rationality does not get clicks or lead to the polls: what works best is what arouses our anger, fear, or laughter. That is why everyone involved in political disputes stirs up emotions. In *(Not) Kidding: Politics in Online Tabloids*,[15] Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer shows three strategies used, for example, by online tabloids to intensify the drama of their messages.

The first strategy is the 'game frame', namely, to describe the relationship between competitors in terms of a zero-sum game. There can only be one winner, and even a minimal loss means a crushing defeat

[13] J. Ezzeldien (2024), '(Not)Kidding. Politics in online Tabloids – Review'.
[14] J. Ezzeldien (2024), '(Not)Kidding. Politics in online Tabloids – Review'.
[15] H. Chmielewska-Szlajfer (2024), (Not)Kidding. Politics in Online Tabloids.

and infamy not only for the loser but also for their electorate. More than accuracy, it is their diversity that is key, and undermining their credibility builds tension and uncertainty. Candidates compete not only in the political arena; their attractiveness, masculinity or femininity, strength, charisma, and wife (or husband) are also evaluated. Each of these elements can cause a drop in ratings and a change in voter preferences. Candidates are more like athletes or celebrities than politicians.

The second strategy is the scandal framework. Scandals, controversies, and blunders are intended to arouse interest and discredit the candidate. Revealing the darkest secrets ensures twists and turns, shattering the candidate's official image. In the presidential campaign, this strategy was used by both Rafał Trzaskowski's and Karol Nawrocki's campaign teams. Rafał Trzaskowski's long career in politics and stable family life made it difficult to find any *fresh* scandals. As a result, Karol Nawrocki's campaign team had limited room for manoeuvre in this regard. Therefore, problematic situations related to the role of the mayor of Warsaw were recalled, especially the failure of the Czajka sewage treatment plant. The aspects of the candidate's story that contradicted the classic model of the 'strict father' proposed by George Lakoff[16] were attacked. The attacks therefore concerned the changeability of his views. Excerpts from the candidate's earlier statements were quoted to counter them with elements of the programme. Changing one's mind was equated with a lack of views, a lack of moral backbone, dependence on the Civic Platform, and, in particular, subordination to party leader Donald Tusk. The candidate's demeanour and background were attacked. His knowledge of many foreign languages, including French, became evidence in the right-wing narrative of the candidate's *un-Polishness* and elitist background. He was given the nickname *bążur*, a Polish-style version of the French *bonjour*. He was also confronted with the model of traditional masculinity, pointing to his 'delicacy' and, above all, by linking Rafał Trzaskowski with LGBTQ+ circles. Photos and videos

16 G. Lakoff (2016), *Moral Politics. How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).

from Equality Parades in which he participated were recalled, and he was given the nickname 'Rainbow Rafał'.

For the liberal side, on the other hand, the scandal was to become the most important recipe for weakening the right-wing candidate. Karol Nawrocki, as a relatively new face in politics, was better suited to a strategy based on uncovering the candidate's dark secrets. Journalists from the liberal media became the storytellers. The first story intended to reduce his chances of winning was about him taking over an elderly man's apartment for a fraction of its value and failing to fulfil his obligation to care for him despite notarial arrangements. The story was referred to in the media as 'Mr. Jerzy's studio apartment'. Initially, it seemed that this strategy would be effective, but in a survey conducted by United Surveys for the Wirtualna Polska website in May 2025, although 49.7% of respondents did not believe the candidate's explanations about the 'takeover of the studio apartment', this only translated into a 1.5% drop in support. Karol Nawrocki's campaign team neutralised this story with a decision to transfer the apartment for social purposes. The next stage of this strategy was the revelation that Karol Nawrocki, while working as a security guard at the Grand Hotel in Sopot, 'arranged' meetings with sex workers for clients and had contacts with the criminal world of Gdańsk.[17] Despite the huge response in the KO voter bubble, this strategy did not deter voters from Karol Nawrocki.

The result of choosing this strategy was to arouse a sense of solidarity among PiS voters with the candidate, who was the victim of a smear campaign by the elites and secret services. This narrative line, reversing the effects of the scandals, was chosen by Nawrocki's campaign team. In addition, they diagnosed that there was an 'embarrassment effect' among Karol Nawrocki's voters – they did not change their preferences, but hid them from pollsters.

17 Onet (RASP) and Gazeta Wyborcza (2025), Series of articles, 26 May, https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/wybory/wybory-prezydenckie/karol-nawrocki-i-tajemnice-grand-hotelu-zrodla-onetu-uczestniczyl-w-procederze/kqwwbef?utm_source=wiadomosci.onet.pl_viasg_wiadomosci&utm_medium=referal&utm_campaign=leo_automatic&srcc=undefined&utm_v=2.

Chmielewska-Szlajfer[18] comments as follows:

> Since Donald Trump's first campaign, the scandal framework has been losing its effectiveness, it turned out then that although we theoretically live in a moral system where bad deeds should be punished, with the right position, money, and power, they can be irrelevant or even rewarded. In sociology, this is described as a deviation that is not followed by social sanctions. This lack of punishment introduces confusion, a sense of a lack of social rules, and can cause cynicism and, consequently, political passivity.

The third strategy is the aforementioned 'elite versus ordinary people' framework, i.e. the stable status quo versus revolution. Belonging to the elite in this framework does not refer to competence but is the result of connections and undeserved privileges. The use of this framework was particularly effective in these elections. As the analytical collective Res Futura claims in its analysis 'Algorithm of Victory',[19] it became the driving force behind the conservative candidate's winning narrative.

4 Immersion versus argumentation

> What makes this campaign groundbreaking is not only its new, unprecedented technical architecture. The foundation of its effectiveness was a philosophical system of anti-systemism – built on the contestation of institutions, elites, mainstream culture, and the logic of liberal democracy. The message was not based on demands or programmatic offers, but on a structure of rejection.[20]

Analysts from Res Futura collective outline the differences between liberal and conservative campaigns by analysing dimensions such as scale (the number and reach of messages), axes of conflict, campaign formatting, and user engagement management. However, they argue that Karol Nawrocki's campaign can be called a new generation political operation in the digital space. In building the narrative ecosystem,

18 J. Ezzeldien (2024), '(Not)Kidding. Politics in online Tabloids – Review'.
19 Res Futura (2025), 'Algorithm of Victory', *Res Futura*, 2 June, https://resfutura.pl/144222-2/.
20 Res Futura (2025), 'Algorithm of Victory'.

the power of repetition, emotion, opposition, and tribal identification was used. The substance of the content was not key: 'It is a form of political philosophy in the context of social media platforms – taking the form of memetic, viral, and non-linear content, spreading not through argumentation, but through the power of repetition, emotion, and algorithmic recommendations', the report 'Algorithm of Victory' states. Argumentation takes a back seat to immersion in this strategy. The key is to lock potential voters into a media space where messages are repeated and bounce off each other, activating emotions ranging from outrage to hope.

The comprehensive approach involved building a three-dimensional system in which the first dimension is tribalism, identity, and the construction of an opposition between *us* and *them*. *Us* characterised conservative voters, tradition, sovereignty, and *ordinary people*; *them* referred to the entire liberal-democratic universe – the European Union, Brussels, liberals, the LGBTQ+ community, and feminists. The moral dimension, in turn, granted the national conservative narrative the exclusive right to define what is morally acceptable, good, and right. At the same time, everything that came from outside this universe had to be defined as immoral, bad, and unacceptable. However, the epistemic dimension was key, i.e. undermining trust in traditional sources of knowledge – from science, through authorities, to the media – and granting the status of legitimising *truth* to the vox populi, which operates on the principle of an autopoietic system. It is reinforced by constant duplication and repetition.

The latter dimension, typical of the communication of right-wing parties, especially PiS, was visible even before the presidential campaign, thanks to the skilful use of social media and the internet. It involves giving special value to the so-called *statements of ordinary people*. The internet is a place where voices that were previously ignored can be heard. In videos, memes, and above all in comments, people really *say what they think*. Securing such a virtual agora is so important to many voters that they are willing to get financially involved when such a place is threatened. An example of this is the increase in the reach of the radical right-wing TV station Republika, despite problems with obtaining

a licence. To keep it alive in 2024, direct donations from viewers made it possible to fill a budget gap of over PLN 30 million, and in August 2025, the station became the most popular station in Poland (6.81% market share). Creating highly popular internet formats is also a practice that right-wing conservative groups use better than liberal ones, which rely on relationships with traditional media. Another example of a media format that has gained high popularity is 'Kanał Zero'. Its creator and main presenter, Krzysztof Stanowski, even ran for president. The format of the popular conservative journalist Robert Mazurek – '*Mazurek komentuje*' (Mazurek comments) – secured 27 million views for the channel in the second quarter of 2025,[21] while Onet's 'Stan wyjątkowy' (State of emergency), hosted by leading news journalists (a news portal owned by RASP), had 3,306,000 views during the same period.[22] The Confederation candidate's project, '*Mentzen Grilluje*' (Mentzen Grills), also did well during the campaign, securing high viewership in the second round of the presidential election by inviting both presidential candidates vying for his voters to the programme. In this way, the party changed its status from one considered radical to a potential coalition partner accepted by voters from both groups. Krzysztof Stanowski took on the role of *anchor*, a *neutral arbiter*, even though a few days earlier he had been a competitor of both candidates. The effect of the Confederation's normalisation continues even after the presidential campaign.

4.1 Security versus threat

The main theme of the presidential campaign was security; namely, the focus on the threat posed by the conflict with Russia. This topic provided a framework within which both sides interpreted key issues, such as:

21 D. Senkowski (2025), '...', *Virtual Media*, 16 July, https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/to-tam-ogladalismy-polityke-w-internecie-zdecydowany-lider-wsrod-programow-wydawcow-2,71909950712034 57a.

22 D. Senkowski (2025), '...', *Virtual Media*.

- Poland's security
- Poland's relations with the European Union
- health care
- tax breaks for entrepreneurs
- the cost of living and housing.

Rafał Trzaskowski's campaign team built their message around a sense of community, security, agency, and hope ('All of Poland forward!'[23], 'there is room for everyone'[24]). In line with the liberal value system, he crafted narratives in which meaning is produced through negotiation among different groups, and the key value lies in pooling perspectives while preserving the distinct identities of the various social actors. The ability to negotiate, compromise, engage in dialogue, and embrace diversity is worth fighting for. It can therefore be said that, within the framework of security, Trzaskowski offered Poles attempts at agreement, at *getting along* on the most important issues – from economy to identity, through education.

When it came to distributing content, he relied mainly on traditional media, as well as his own and his party's official channels. This strategy, however, was successful mainly in the bubble of already convinced voters. Rafał Trzaskowski's campaign headquarters likely also overestimated the candidate's brand awareness outside Warsaw – where he is the mayor – on the strength of his participation in the 2020 presidential election. The candidate's image spots, which built his image as a man and father (a conciliatory, modern father), were only broadcast in the final phase of the campaign when the negative image of *Bonżur* had already been cemented by the other side.

However, the *let's get along* attitude, which worked (and still works) in everyday politics, clashed with a narrative that defined *getting along* as betrayal and described the opponent as an enemy rather than a rival. This disproportion is perfectly illustrated by an AI-generated video using the motif of a *fight*, i.e. a planned fight between fans. Karol Nawrocki

[23] K. Nawrocki (2025, May 24), '...', Facebook Reel, https://www.facebook.com/reel/1595175181164681.

[24] Rafał Trzaskowski Campaign (2025), 'Rafał Trzaskowski 2025', https://trzaskowski.pl/.

was accused of participating in such illegal fights. In response, the *Sztuczna Polska* profile created a viral video in which fans do arrange a fight, but for epigrams and poems.

Liberalism assumes the possibility of compromise – but there is no answer when the opponent does not recognise its cognitive, legal, and axiological framework. From an anti-system perspective:

- facts are manipulated
- institutions are tools of oppression
- liberal language is a mask for the interests of the elites.

Therefore, in the age of platforms, where existential conflict becomes the currency of algorithms, liberalism cannot win narratively without changing its communication framework – because it does not operate in the field it has built itself, but in one that has already been taken over and redefined by anti-system logic, according to the authors of the report 'Algorithm of Victory'.[25]

The narrative of the conservative side has been constructed like a marketing campaign in which a need is generated, a lack (in this case, a lack of security and a threat to State sovereignty), and then a solution is offered to remove the lack. The liberal narrative placed the potential enemy outside Poland, creating tension and uncertainty about the possible development of an armed conflict with Russia. The right wing considered the liberal-democratic faction to be the enemy, but for conservative voters, the enemy was the liberal-democratic faction itself.

The liberal strategy, which did not build a bold vision or a clear goal and was often reactive, could not compete with a narrative that constituted a new order of things, engaged extreme emotions, and offered revealed truths that were impossible to verify, being self-confirming through the emotional involvement and holy indignation of content consumers. The conservative narrative considers the negotiation of reality a threat and sees its task as defending the *truth* it has generated.

In the face of a reduced, affective communication space, liberalism finds itself deprived not only of instruments but also of the fundamental language to describe what is happening. It was unable to answer

[25] Res Futura (2025), 'Algorithm of Victory'.

the following questions: Who is to blame? What threatens us? What is the source of the community's strength? Why does liberalism have value beyond itself?

From the perspective of platform users, 'liberalism did not offer meaning – it offered procedure. It did not say what the world is, only how to organise it', reads a detailed analysis of the Algorithm of Victory campaign.[26]

5 Technology and disinformation

In terms of the quantity and quality of online communications, the two main candidates were evenly matched. Election advertising on the internet was intensely professional and reached record levels. The most diverse messages were released by Karol Nawrocki's campaign team (over 2,000 creations by the end of the campaign, which all together garnered over 100 million views). The Batory Foundation presented nine reports on the online communication of presidential candidates.[27] They show that all candidates, regardless of their views, used social media in two ways: (1) Using their own channels on the Meta platform (Facebook, Instagram), as well as X, YouTube, and TikTok, and (2) using paid promotions on Meta (Facebook, Instagram) and Alphabet (Google, YouTube).

Most of the material concerned Poland's security, Poland's position in the EU, the cost of living, tax breaks for entrepreneurs, accountability of the previous government, migration, healthcare, abortion rights, the rule of law, housing availability, LGBTQ+ rights, financial support for families, and energy security.

In the campaign before the first round, Karol Nawrocki published 2,465 advertisements online and 148 in the second round.[28] This is

[26] Res Futura (2025), 'Algorithm of Victory'.

[27] Batory Foundation (n.d.), 'Publications', https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacje/?strona=2.

[28] Batory Foundation (n.d.), 'From emotions to numbers: A comprehensive report on the 2025 presidential campaign in social media', https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacja/od-emocji-do-liczb-kompleksowy-raport-o-kampanii-prezydenckiej-2025-w-mediach-spolecznosciowych/.

a record number of creations used. Rafał Trzaskowski, who came second, published 621 different advertisements. However, content and data management was key. While the content published by Rafał Trzaskowski's team was scattered and broadly targeted, Karol Nawrocki's team precisely managed the data and strategically targeted various messages to select those with the greatest impact.

Although Rafał Trzaskowski maintained greater reach – his ads exceeded 235 million views – the 'lack of attractive audiovisual forms limited the level of interaction with his message; communication was mainly one-way instead of engaging potential voters in a conversation about his vision for the presidency'.[29] Karol Nawrocki's campaign team spent as much as 31% of its first-round budget on advertising the 'Wybierz Świadomie' (Choose Consciously) website, which linked to a Facebook profile that was a library of ads attacking Rafał Trzaskowski. In turn, the Civic Platform logo appeared on the 'Nowa 5 Mentzena' website, which showed the *old* version of the candidate's demands, based on his statement that 'We don't want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes, or the European Union'.[30]

From the beginning of the campaign, the conservative side also attacked the liberal candidate, uniting other voters against him before the second round under the slogan 'anyone but Trzaskowski'. The attempt to divert attention from him and create this slogan did not generate much engagement. Both sides faced accusations of disinformation and the use of political advertisements sponsored by unauthorised entities. The most significant source of disruption was not a single piece of fake news but the blurring of the sender. The *blade* was delegated to secondary accounts, meme clips, and supporter channels. Instead, the centre maintained an image of moderation, while the controversy was tested by *proxies*. This is the new norm in Polish digital campaigns.

[29] Batory Foundation (n.d.), 'From emotions to numbers'.

[30] A. Mierzynska (2025), 'Black campaign. Who's spending money discouraging their opponent? Check it out!' [Network Report]', *Oko Press*, 25 April, https://oko.press/czarna-kampania-wydaja-kase-na-zniechecanie-do-przeciwnikow.

Both sides faced accusations of spreading disinformation, but it was the liberal candidate who had to fend off attacks when it was revealed that advertisements paid for by foreign entities supporting Rafał Trzaskowski and attacking conservative candidates had appeared online under the slogan 'Say NO to Nawrocki' and 'Say NO to Menetzen'. The Scientific and Academic Computer Network – National Research Institute (NASK) was the first to publicise the issue, warning of potential interference in the campaign on Meta platforms. This was followed by journalistic investigations analysing the activity of mysterious websites such as Stół Dorosłych (Adult Table) and Wiesz Jak Nie Jest (You Know How It Isn't). The budget for this campaign on Meta platforms exceeded PLN 490,000. The liberal candidate's campaign team refuted the allegations by declaring cooperation with the campaign control authorities and constructing a perverse narrative that conservative forces or Russian services, posing as supporters of Rafał Trzaskowski, wanted to act to his disadvantage.

This example shows that the liberal narrative is more vulnerable to attacks targeting its core values. A group that places transparency, the rule of law, and honesty at the centre of its narrative finds it difficult to defend its position when suspicions, uncertainty, and a lack of clear information arise.

6 The new liberal myth

The key problem with the liberal narrative is its attachment to a mode of communication based on rational argumentation, as well as the assumption that this way of perceiving reality is a commonly shared norm. Nuanced narratives and fact-based lines of argumentation cannot withstand confrontation with well-known and effective manipulation techniques when there is an overload of messages, and it is impossible to verify their credibility (whether due to cognitive overload, or a loss of trust in authorities and institutions that once stood guard over the truth). A good illustration of this confrontation was the presidential debate, during which the conservative candidate often

did not answer his opponent's questions but used reframing techniques to explain to the audience and give the desired meaning to his opponent's words, constructing long and complex statements, and summarising them with phrases such as 'It's not the first time you've lied'.[31]

However, if we ask ourselves what is the key obstacle to engaging undecided voters in a *cause* or mission with which they could identify, it must be clearly stated that it is the lack of such a cause or mission.

While the conservative side, as part of its narrative, can defend Poland against betrayal, German influence, liberal contagion, and *rainbow Rafał*, the liberal side has no task that could engage voters.

When the liberal-democratic narrative was forming, the mission of the liberal-democratic camp was to lead Poland out of Russia's sphere of influence and into a mythical Europe – Western, modern, secular. Today, when Poland – and above all, Poles – is in Europe, often in a leading position, this narrative seems to have lost its meaning. No other challenge – characteristic of this formation – has yet emerged. Protecting Poland and securing its borders is an obvious and important mission, but one that does not fit in with the democratic-liberal ethos and fits much better with the conservative description of reality. No wonder, then, that although it is supposed to be exciting, it is not; it does not warm the heart; it does not engage.

The liberal narrative is committed to discovering the truth, while for the other side, the truth is whatever arouses stronger emotions. In the post-truth world, liberalism and democracy are losing ground not only at decisive moments such as elections. They are becoming less attractive, just as a philosophical argument is less attractive than its summary on TikTok. Without stories about challenges, without a new founding myth, or a new liberal-democratic paradigm, young voters will start

[31] https://www.facebook.com/reel/1595175181164681 – Full quote: 'It's not the first time you've lied. What harm is there in making promises, right?'

'As an MP you made women and men in Poland work longer, because you voted against lowering the retirement age'.

— Reframing: he turns the 'no new taxes' promise into an allegation of a tendency to lie, and he recasts the vote on the retirement age as 'ordering people to work longer'.

scrolling through their feed the moment the next candidate for public office opens their mouth. And there, uncompromising, engaging, and *independent* content will be waiting for them.

Analysts from the Res Futura collective write:

> The liberal centre knows how to diagnose and respond within the system, but it cannot
> - dominate the narrative
> - infect the circulation of content emotionally
> - transform the information reality into a tool of power.
>
> This is not an ideological failure – it is a systemic failure: the liberal centre is not keeping up with the change in communication logic, where it is not about who is right, but who produces reality through emotion and reach.

Producers of liberal narratives must understand that winning on this front requires making strategic decisions, understanding how algorithms work, building bold narratives, using modern technologies, and executing effectively, even if this implies that the candidate has to dance on Tik Tok.

Within the liberal framework, politics has traditionally been understood as a functional domain – a space of governance, deliberation, and institutional responsibility. In this model, communication serves clarity and accountability rather than spectacle. Conservatives were quicker to recognise that in the digital environment, political efficacy operates through a different logic – one shaped by belonging, repetition, and affect. Today, proximity is cultivated not by touring the country but by maintaining visibility where voters actually are: online.

Liberal actors have often resisted the performative rhythm that platforms such as TikTok demand. The platform privileges spontaneity, emotion, and irony – qualities long regarded as incompatible with political seriousness. Yet, in the post-broadcast public sphere, meaning is increasingly generated through participation rather than persuasion, through visibility rather than hierarchy.

This dynamic is particularly evident on Civic Platform's TikTok profile. Alongside curated excerpts from speeches by the prime minister and other key figures, the account features interactive formats such as inflation quizzes or looping clips in which party leaders ritualise political

slogans. Viewers can take a Kahoot quiz about inflation or watch the president repeating 'Tusk, Tusk, Tusk' like a mantra. The party has learned to *be present* on the platform, yet not entirely *at home* in its logic – performing participation while still speaking the language of institutions.

Whether liberals will ever truly dance on TikTok remains less a question of choreography than of epistemology: how politics decides what counts as meaningful communication in the digital age.

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Hodžić is the author of the first two cybersecurity threat assessment reports in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as a recent regional security threat assessment focusing on disinformation, harmful narratives, foreign malign influence, and the rule of law in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo. He is also the author and conceptual designer of the *Virtual Memories* app, a digital memorialisation project using augmented reality (AR) to commemorate victims of war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition, he has developed extensive experience in report writing, SEO-adapted content, news production, analysis, and investigative reporting, as well as in data analysis, project management, public relations, and marketing. He holds a bachelor's degree in Communication and has worked across public institutions, media organisations, the non-governmental sector, and sports clubs, both as an employee and as a freelancer.

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THE EUROPEAN LIBERAL FORUM (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 57 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks, and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

LIBERAL INSTITUTE SKOPJE (LIS) is an independent, non-profit organization founded in 2002, dedicated to promoting liberal values, democratic principles, human rights, and youth participation in decision-making processes. Guided by the mission to create values, build capacities, educate, and advance liberalism as a way of thinking that safeguards individual freedom, LIS works to foster free democracy, freedom of expression, inclusion, and gender equality in North Macedonia and the wider region. The Institute implements seminars, academies, workshops, policy-writing programs, and exchanges of experience, while its internal "Law Factory" department contributes to research, legal analysis, and the development of democratic

initiatives and public policies. Through regional cooperation, public roundtables, and advocacy for youth and women's rights, LIS strives to strengthen democratic culture and to be recognized internationally among liberal organizations committed to a free, open, and rights-based society.

THE BORIS DIVKOVIC FOUNDATION was established in 2013 with the aim of advancing political science and political practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region. Since then, the Foundation has promoted a responsible policy, which serves all citizens and operates on the principles of equality, coexistence and solidarity. The Boris Divkovic Foundation is marked by the desire to harmonize political activity with basic moral principles, which is the idea that Boris Divkovic advocated during his engagement. The widespread opinion that a combination of morality and politics is impossible is only a consequence of the decades-long rule of irresponsible politicians. The Boris Divkovic Foundation starts from the assumption that a combination of morality and politics is possible, but that it is necessary to carry out ideological decontamination of the notion of politics in public space, which would create conditions for including honest and responsible people in political processes in the Western Balkans.

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THE PADDY ASHDOWN FORUM is a Think Tank and exists to increase useful skills, capabilities and capacities of civic education as well as advance education and policy development on sustainably viable national and international governance for the public benefit.

The Paddy Ashdown Forum will promote studies on different areas comparing the UK and International experiences to contribute to and inform the public debate in the UK and elsewhere. Research will be published online as well as disseminated via roundtables, seminars and discussions and will be publicly available within the UK and Europe. The Paddy Ashdown Forum will seek to guide rather than instruct. Output framed inclusively, connected interdependently, yet simply communicated will aim to engage everyone as equals. As a result, this will give rise to holistic evidence-based conversation. Ultimately, a new Think-Tank credibility can be born. Minding-the-gap between evidence and policymaking is key to enhancing a think-tanks effectiveness and its sustainable viability. Rather than relying on the passive transfer of information, The Paddy Ashdown Forum will contextualise, frame and communicate evidence with inclusivity, diversity and climate-justice at its heart.

THE FRIEDRICH NAUMANN FOUNDATION FOR FREEDOM (FNF) is a German political foundation committed to the promotion of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and human rights worldwide. Through political education, policy dialogue, and international cooperation, the Foundation supports open societies, individual freedom, and responsible governance. The FNF Office for Bulgaria and North Macedonia works with a broad network of partners from academia, civil society, politics, and the media. Its activities focus on strengthening democratic institutions, fostering European integration, and encouraging informed public debate on liberal values and policies in the region.

COLOPHON

From Algorithms to Ballots.
How Social Media and AI Shape
Europe's Political Future

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(p. 13) London, England, United Kingdom, 2 July 2016 –
Protesters take part in the March for Europe demonstration.
An estimated 35,000 people attend the march.

(p. 45) Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 14 June 2025 –
Participants march during the Pride Parade in Sarajevo.

(p. 69) Skopje, North Macedonia, 2 July 2022 –
Thousands of protesters gather in Skopje to demonstrate
against the government and the French proposal.

(p. 97) Gdańsk, Poland, 5 April 2025 – Polish presidential candidate
Sławomir Mentzen escapes journalists on an electric scooter
during a presidential campaign rally.

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This publication explores how social media and artificial intelligence are reshaping political competition and electoral behaviour across Europe. By examining the dynamics of mis/disinformation, targeted political messaging, and the manipulation of online discourse, it highlights risks to democratic resilience—and practical pathways to address them. The volume advances a pro-democracy agenda grounded in the rule of law, ethical governance of digital technologies, transparency in political campaigning, and stronger digital literacy. Through comparative country chapters, it offers evidence and recommendations for policymakers, civil society, media actors, and citizens committed to protecting open, pluralistic democratic systems.

From Cambridge Analytica to TikTok-era campaigning, digital platforms have become powerful political arenas—where algorithms amplify emotion, misinformation spreads faster than facts, and voters are nudged in subtle but consequential ways. *From Algorithms to Ballots: How Social Media and AI Shape Europe's Political Future* examines how social media, artificial intelligence, and mis/disinformation influence electoral outcomes and democratic resilience across four country contexts: the United Kingdom, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Poland. The volume maps key manipulation dynamics—from voter suppression techniques and coordinated online narratives to the vulnerabilities of fragmented media ecosystems and youth disengagement—and offers pragmatic recommendations for pro-democracy actors. It argues that safeguarding elections in the digital age requires more than awareness: it demands governance grounded in the rule of law, transparency in political advertising, stronger information integrity measures, and sustained investment in digital literacy. As technology accelerates, the democratic homework becomes urgent: verify, question, and look beyond appearances—before the next ballot is shaped by the next algorithm.

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