Correspondence from Brussels TEPSA's #RADARisinfo Conference

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On February 2nd, 2024, the Policy Conference "From Elections to Everyday: Strategies Against Disinformation in the EU", organised by the Trans-European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) and RADAR, funded by the European Commission took place in Brussels. The conference gathered an

impressive number of guests, ranging from students to young professionals to listen to a thought-provoking dialogue on misinformation and ways to tackle it. The conference started with a small introduction by Didier Reynders, European Commissioner for Justice, followed by an interactive panel discussion moderated by Isabelle Kumar. The line-up comprised Samuel van der Staak, Director for Europe, representing International IDEA, Kelsey Beltz, Head of Global Partnerships of The Good Lobby, Toma Šutić, member of the Cabinet of the Vice President for Democracy and Demography, and Katariina Mäkilä, RADAR Youth Ambassador.

With the EU, as well as much of the rest of the world, facing some of the most important elections in the last decades, the overarching issue at stake was disinformation and its consequences. In the following sections, I will introduce some of the key concepts that the speakers put forward.

One significant concept of the discussion was "pre-bunking", which is rather a proactive and powerful approach concerning misinformation. The speaker emphasised the importance of fostering an environment where individuals could also encounter the refutation of the disinformation or simply put, to find out the truth before disinformation thrives. Closely linked to it, the concept of the "truth sandwich", as funny as it sounds, can be used as a strategy. This approach involves "sandwiching" the accurate information between false claims or misinformation so that the public can spot faster discrepancies. Hopefully, this would reinforce the truth and diminish the impact of fake news.

Emphasis was put on the role of education as a central pillar in addressing misinformation as improvements start from the bottom and then all the way up, or as Isabelle Kumar put it "changes start with you and me". Panellists argued that there is a need for programs and workshops that teach digital literacy and critical thinking, as well as the need for civil engagement. These skills are necessary to create informed citizens who can spot lies. However, this point raised the following question: How could citizens stay informed if trustworthy journalistic publications have a paywall? Thus, the speakers reached a consensus on the importance of taking them down, without jeopardising the work and reputation of journalists. Bringing back the example of the COVID-19 pandemic, the speakers drew parallels between those times and the electoral period, with the most significant similarity being the speed and scale of misinformation. If media outlets could remove their paywalls during the pandemic, they should be able to repeat this move during critical periods such as elections. This temporary move would counteract the spread of misinformation by giving the public more reliable resources to make informed choices.

Despite the aforementioned proposals, change should also be happening at the top of the chain, namely with political parties. The speakers argued that they should also be held accountable for the information they share and should follow rigorous guidelines or codes of conduct when posting on social media platforms. There was a consensus that political entities should

be obliged to have transparent practices and to give the public information that is true and backed up by evidence. Lastly, perhaps one of the best ways to combat misinformation is to start regulating. Fortunately, the European Union is already leading in this area as the European Commission is doing remarkable legal work on this topic and in general, preparing for the upcoming elections. However, the most important bulk is left to the Member States, the most important stakeholders of the whole legislative procedure, to correctly implement EU law.

To conclude, the conference provided comprehensive strategies to address disinformation and highlighted the multifaceted nature of this challenge that requires a multi-stakeholder approach. The main message of the conference was that European resilience in the face of misinformation campaigns starts with these strategies, from pre-bunking to education and from taking down paywalls to EU regulatory law. Changes do not happen overnight, but by involving all types of actors, from young people, like in the audience, to journalists and political actors, elections can be not only free but also fair.

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