

World Forum for Democracy

Is populism  
a problem

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## Lab 9 - Fake News: Does Fact Checking Work?

*Sponsored by the Region Grand Est*

### *Moderators:*

Mr **Erdoğan İŞCAN**, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Turkey to the Council of Europe  
Mr Conor MCARDLE, Youth Department's youth delegation

### *Initiatives:*

Protection of democratic values through fact-checking journalism (sut.am), "Union of Informed Citizens" NGO (Armenia) by Mr Daniel Ioannisyán, Founder of Union of Informed Citizens  
EUCHECK: Journalism schools for fact-checking, an impartial network, European Journalism Training Association – EJTA (Netherlands) by Ms Catherine SHANAHAN, senior lecturer and Head of Journalism and Communications, Dublin Institute of Technology and Ms Carien J. TOUWEN International officer and senior lecturer journalism research, HU University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht  
The Insider (Russian Federation) by Mr Roman DOBROKHOTOV, Russian Federation, editor-in-chief of The Insiders

### *Discussants:*

Mr Simas **ČELUTKA**, Lithuania, Director of European Security Programme at Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis  
Mr Gunnar GRÍMSSON, Iceland, Visionary at Better News and Co-founder of Citizens Foundation

## The lab in brief

This lab looked into examples of fact checking methodologies to identify the most effective approaches in cracking down on fake stories. The aim of the session was to “address the growing disconnect between citizens and political elites and the impact of populism on the capacity of democracies to defend human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

## About the initiatives

Protection of democratic values through fact-checking journalism (sut.am), Armenia

The Union of Informed Citizens is a non-governmental organisation that aims to increase public support for democratic values through fact-checking journalism. It fights against disinformation that undermines the activity of NGOs, democratic values, human rights, freedom of expression, and political reforms. The organisation, through fact-checking journalism, aims to increase public support for democratic values, human rights, freedom of expression, and political reforms. It seeks to promote facts for the wider population, disclose “the real face and narrative of propagandists and populists”, and build the capacity of free media through training of journalists on foreign policy, publishing unpublished official documents, preparing media-useful materials and debates.

Democracy in Armenia faces a triple challenge: disinformation, propaganda and populism. Fake news emanate from a range of sources including both within the country and from abroad. Some of it is official, some of it unofficial, some is propagated deliberately, some by mistakes or misunderstandings. The presenter mentioned the role of “hurray patriotism” in fanning populism though an anti-democratic and nationalistic ideology.

To counter all of this the Union has a range of interlinked activities including direct fact-checking via the SUT.am website, as well as undertaking awareness raising and capacity building with local citizens and civil society organisations as well as the media.

Overall, their solution to the problem of fake news is the promotion of fact-based information and its distribution widely amongst the population primarily through pictures, videos and social media, disclosing the real face and narrative of propagandists and populists.

The Insider (Russia)

The Insider is an investigative newspaper that seeks to provide its readers with information about the current political, economic and social situation in Russia, while also promoting democratic values and shedding light on issues related to human rights and civil society. In addition, the Insider implements the “Antifake” project, with the objective of systematically debunking fake news in Russian media in order to help its audience to distinguish relevant information from fake news and propaganda.

Fake news is not a new phenomenon – indeed it has existed as long as news has. However, there is some evidence that the situation is changing in terms of the methods used to propagate it and its potential to cause serious harm and instability. The example

of Russians volunteering to fight in the recent conflict in Ukraine was given, based on fake news stories, allegedly produced by digital teams paid by the Russian state. This then had a direct consequence on which parts of Ukraine experienced conflict. A further example was a story propagated by senior Russian political figures and recently debunked by The Insider reporting that western agents were gathering Russian biological materials to use in the creation of targeted biological weapons against ethnic Russians. These examples indicate how the fake news has become part of information warfare.

EUCHECK: Journalism schools for fact-checking, an impartial network, European Journalism Training Association (EJTA), the Netherlands

EUCHECK strives to be a reference point for fact-checking EU policies and politics, while promoting European studies and developing fact-checking. It consists of 15 journalism schools throughout Europe (within EJTA, which itself consists of 70 journalism schools in 28 countries). EUCHECK aims to support quality journalism and journalism education while testing new cooperative arrangements, to enhance credibility of media; to contribute to the accuracy of European political statements; to engage European citizens as well as to create incentives to spread fact-checked information on social media; to develop a European open educational resource (OER) methodology; and to establish cooperation with quality national fact-checkers.

Main target group is the Youth. According to Shane Smith, CEO of Vice, young people are angry, disenfranchised and do not trust the mainstream media. This is evidenced for example by the fact that the average viewer of the BBC is 60 years old. The appeal of fake news for younger audiences is clear – most obvious forms are most prevalent on social media. A real challenge for traditional media is for it to recognise that it is operating in a propaganda and disinformation-rich environment. In this context EUCHECK's purpose is to train a new generation to ensure that the public is well informed. Prior knowledge has been shown to be a key defence against fake news.

The project's desired outcomes for 2020 are: (a) co-creation of fact-checking modules in journalism curricula in schools; and (b) establish fact-checking platforms at the national level. For the 2019 European parliamentary elections, EUCHECK intends to bring all their national platforms together in one pan-European portal.

## Key points issues by the debate

Fake news as a fundamental threat to democracy and pluralism everywhere. While fake news has always existed, the internet has allowed it to have unprecedented scale and influence. This is already causing serious harm to people in places like Ukraine. Without trust in institutions and in the information available to citizens, proper debate and decision-making cannot take place.

Increasing the impact of fact-checking. Many excellent fact-checking initiatives exist but their scale and resourcing is insufficient compared to the scale of the fake news industry. Solutions to this include engaging the mainstream media and making fact-checking their job, considering other business models (not only relying on commercially driven sensationalism). The quality of journalism has fallen as business models have driven outlets to prioritise advertising revenue over journalistic output. In the case of social media, greater responsibility needs to be taken by the major corporations such as Facebook and Google for the accuracy of content posted through their channels and also the role of filter bubbles in creating greater polarisation in society.

In terms of approaches, it is important to be more proactive in exposing fake news narratives rather than just reactively debunking stories one by one. Overall there is a need to focus on the core of the problem by looking at the tactics, strategies and objectives of the protagonists - what narrative they are propagating – and then bring that to the attention of citizens.

Some of the most important actions for combatting fake news are: building the capacity of media and journalists; educating the public, especially around media literacy; and reaching out to excluded groups – young people, women, and those who are supporting populists, by simplifying language and producing more visual output (e.g. infographics).

Horizontal collaborations among fact-checking initiatives and vertical collaborations through crowdsourcing. A better coordination among fact-checking initiatives is fundamental to avoid duplication and consequent waste of time and efforts. It is not feasible to debunk stories one at a time. All presented projects share one thing – small groups of people trying to affect change in their surroundings – this is promising because people are more likely to believe in something from someone they know. One possible solution to reach a broader scale could be sourcing more accurate news through crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing can go well or badly – the key difference is whether it is fun to participate and whether you get something out of it personally. Wikipedia is obviously the largest and most successful example of crowdsourcing.

## Recommendations

- ✓ To train mainstream media in fact-checking and encourage greater responsibility in journalism.
- ✓ To spread simple fact-checking techniques among the population, considering alternative business models (e.g. crowdsourcing) that allow greater scale.
- ✓ To collectively promote inherent values of the European project, as Europe has lost its influence with European citizens leaving room for outsiders to cause fragmentation.
- ✓ To address the legal and regulatory framework to tackle misinformation (also by monitoring the respect of international standards).