

**Master in Advanced European
and International Studies**

Applied European Policy and Governance Studies



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Disinformation and Euroscepticism are two of the many challenges of our time that require sustainable solutions. I am committed to finding these solutions, as it is a matter close to my heart.

Abstract

In the post-Maastricht era, the EU lacks a permissive consensus among the public. This assumption by Hooghe & Marks (2009) might explain the rise of Euroscepticism among the EU populace, a trend that is reinforced by Eurosceptic parties represented in the European Parliament, especially since 1994. These political actors, most often from the TAN side (traditional, authoritarian, or nationalist), frequently employ populist, polarising language and utilise Eurosceptic disinformation.

This research analyses current Eurosceptic disinformation narratives based on EDMO fact-checking briefings and election information from the six largest Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament (Rassemblement National, Lega per Salvini Premier, AfD, PiS, Fidesz, MoVimento 5 Stelle). It is found that the disinformation primarily consists of false information or conspiracy narratives about the EU's decision-making processes and actions or behaviour, targeting the EU's soft power. Key topics in this disinformation include Ukraine, climate change, COVID-19, migration, Israel-Hamas, and LGBTQI+ issues. However, Eurosceptic disinformation could not be proven for all parties.

Furthermore, in light of a further increase of Euroscepticism that has emerged in the course of the 2024 EP elections, this research analyses the EU initiatives to counter Eurosceptic disinformation, addressing particularly EU soft law and hard law, namely the Digital Services Act (DSA), as well as communication efforts. It has been found that, despite of the fact that the EU pursues a holistic approach to combating disinformation, it shows considerable deficits, particularly regarding voters' susceptibility to disinformation, the handling of non-voters, the implementation and effectiveness of the DSA, and the commitment of independent players such as the media industry and companies.

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List of Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
CDU	Christlich-Demokratische Union
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DSA	Digital Services Act
ECA	European Court of Auditors
ECI	European Citizens' Initiative
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
ECB	European Central Bank
EDMO	European Digital Media Observatory
EEAS	European External Action Service
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
ERGA	European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services
EU	European Union
FDP	Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei)
Fidesz	Magyar Polgári Szövetség
GAL	Green/Alternative/Libertarian
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GUE/NGL	European United Left/Nordic Green Left
ID	Identity and Democracy Group
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and others
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MLG	Multilevel Governance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość
RN	Rassemblement National
RT	Russia Today
TAN	Traditionalism/Authority/Nationalism
UK	United Kingdom
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
X	Social media platform, previously known as Twitter

Introduction¹

“Europa stirbt und damit stirbt auch die innere Freiheit der Völker. Das Bekenntnis zur Oligarchie exklusiver korrupter Minderheiten ist längst moralisches Pflichttor in Brüssel und Straßburg. Traurige Statisten in dieser düsteren Nachtvorstellung sind die deutschen Abgeordneten der Alt Parteien. Deshalb sind sie uns (der AfD) Widersacher.” (Phoenix, 2023)

These are the words of Andreas Otte in his introductory speech as the lead candidate of the AfD (Alternative for Germany) for the 2024 European Parliament elections. In his speech, he alleges that the political elite of the European Union endorses oligarchy, implying that the political elite and all politicians from established parties in the EU are corrupt. However, Otte is not the only one using anti-EU disinformation at this party congress. The President of the German ‘Verfassungsschutz’, Thomas Haldenwang, confirms that the far-right German party is promoting right-wing extremist conspiracy theories at the event (James & Dpa, 2023). A few months later, Maximilian Krah, Otte's opponent who was eventually elected as the AfD's ‘Spitzenkandidat’, was suspected of Russian influence peddling (Beck, 2024a). Furthermore, his former employer was arrested for allegedly acting as an agent for China (Beck, 2024b).

This is relevant in light of the fact that China has been recognised by the EU as a systemic rival in 2019, just as Russia has been recognised as the ‘most significant and direct threat’ since its war of aggression against Ukraine by NATO (2023). Hereby, the concept of systemic rivalry comes into play. The fact that a growing party from the largest EU member state spreads disinformation against the supranational organisation and maintains connections with states that pose a threat to the security and fundamental principles of the EU, destabilises the supranational organisation from within.

The challenge for the EU is that the German party is just one of many parties in Europe that belong to the right-wing political spectrum and can be characterised as Eurosceptic,

¹ This paper has been linguistically and grammatically edited with the assistance of the AI tool ChatGPT 4.0 (premium version).

i.e., opposed to the European integration project. Namely, parties like the Rassemblement National in France, the Fidesz Party in Hungary, or the Vox Party in Spain fall under this cluster. The existence of these parties with their ideological opposition is possible in a pluralistic democracy and does not necessarily represent a threat. However, a problem arises when these parties grow larger and secure a significant number of seats in the European Parliament, which is involved in EU legislation and therefore holds substantial power. In other words, if more and more voters support these parties, the effectiveness and ability to act of the EU—namely of the European Commission and the European Council—is scrutinised. Therefore, Euroscepticism poses significant challenges to the European integration project, with the spread of disinformation further exacerbating these issues.

In their Postfunctionalist theory, Hooghe and Marks (2009) contend that the EU's governance, once characterised by permissive consensus, now grapples with constraining dissensus among the public. The rise of Euroscepticism is exemplified by events like 'Brexit,' described by some as a “20-year-long disinformation campaign,” (MacShane, cited by Henkel, 2021) and the dissemination of disinformation in general has intensified with the rise of social media, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to a more complex landscape. Particularly during elections, an escalation in disinformation is anticipated.

In this context, the question arises: Are the measures taken by the EU against disinformation in connection with the 2024 European Parliament elections enough to curb growing Euroscepticism? While focusing on the elections, a second question arises: What are the predominant disinformation narratives surrounding the EU that contribute to reinforcing Euroscepticism in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections? These are the two research questions addressed in this master thesis.

In part one of this evaluative research, Eurosceptic disinformation and its recent key events—namely the Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic—are described. Additionally, the presence of Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament is examined using a dataset from the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys. Subsequently, based on monthly EDMO fact-checking briefings and electoral content from the six largest Eurosceptic parties,

Eurosceptic disinformation narratives in the run-up of the 2024 European Parliament elections are evaluated to answer the second research question.

In Part Two of this research, the EU's initiatives to counter Eurosceptic disinformation are analysed and evaluated². This includes an examination of recent EU soft and hard law, as well as communication efforts of the European Commission. The second section is rounded off with a discussion of any limitations of this evaluative research, a final assessment of the evaluations, and an identification of shortcomings of the EU's fight against Eurosceptic disinformation. Finally, where appropriate, protentional ways to enhance the fight against disinformation with regard to answering the first research question will be provided.

² The critical evaluation is based on literature review, as well as informal interviews with experts conducted during these studies, who provided valuable insights on the topic.

PART I: EUROSCEPTIC DISINFORMATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

1. Definitional Framework of Eurosceptic Disinformation

1.1. Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism has emerged as a subject of study across various academic disciplines and is thus characterised by Leruth et al. (2017) as having a "multi-faceted nature" (p. 3). Accordingly, Euroscepticism describes diverse attitudes opposed to European integration or the EU in general but does not "specify the reasons for this opposition, the form it should take, its specific targets, or its ultimate objectives" (Leruth et al., 2017, p. 4). It can therefore be found across a spectrum of ideological perspectives. In general, one of the most prominent definitions of Euroscepticism is provided by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2001), who distinguish between 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism, understood as forms of opposition to European integration. While hard Euroscepticism denotes a general opposition to European integration based on the shift of sovereignty towards a supranational institution, soft Euroscepticism refers to opposition to current EU plans or projects to further European integration.

Historically, the term Euroscepticism first emerged and was used by journalists in the 1980s in the United Kingdom to describe the opposition voices within the Conservative Party against the European Community. Since then, the study of Euroscepticism has increasingly become a significant aspect of research in European integration and the politics of European member states (Vasilopoulou, 2017, p. 23). According to Hooghe and Marks (2009), the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 was a key event in the rise of Euroscepticism. The authors explain the treaty's rejection in a referendum in Denmark and the reservations in France as due to an "elite-public gap" that "sustained the populist notion that important EU decisions could no longer be legitimised by the executive and legislature operating in the normal way" (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 21). Referendums as direct democracy initiatives ushered in a new era where public backing became essential, blending the governance of European integration with elements of political party rivalry and electoral processes. This is where Eurosceptic parties emerged, forcing

the elite to deal with a more critical public. Before that, the European integration project was primarily a project of the political elite of parties on the right and the left-center, also referred to by the authors as "mainstream parties" (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 19). Thus, European integration was more of an economic project that was not as 'visible' to the general public. This period is described by the authors as a "permissive consensus" among the public, whereas since 1991, the politics of European integration has been characterised by a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 5).

This change is partly because European policymaking now operates within a multilevel governance framework (MLG). This framework is based on the premise that, in the context of a complex interplay where supranational and non-state actors are gaining increased significance, national governments are progressively losing authority.

1.1.1. Party-Based Euroscepticism

Researchers particularly focus on two main forms of Euroscepticism: public-based and party-based. Public-based Euroscepticism refers to the attitudes and opinions held by the general population, while party-based Euroscepticism pertains to the stances and policies of political parties towards European integration and the European Union. Hooghe (2003) concentrates on the differences between citizens' views and public opinion regarding European integration. However, in this research, the focus is on party/ideological aspects rather than public-based Euroscepticism. Therefore, the ideological aspects behind party-based Euroscepticism must be identified.

Hooghe and Marks (2009) distinguish between two categories of Euroscepticism in different ideological political thinkings. According to the authors, political parties' views on Europe are typically derived from their wider ideological and programmatic beliefs, which are based on their alignment with historical or modern social cleavages. Thus, the left-wing type focuses on the exploitation of social benefits and social infrastructure, manifested as a disdain for capitalism, whereas the right-wing type sees national sovereignty and national identity in danger. Accordingly, they developed the 'Hooghe-Marks model' (2009), which correlates the left/right political spectrum with specific European issues. Regarding Euroscepticism, Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson (2002) assert that it particularly arises within extreme left and right parties, while centrist parties, such as Social Democratic, Christian Democratic, Liberal, and Conservative parties, tend to be

much more supportive of European integration. However, they also argue that parties on the radical right have become the most Eurosceptic. Hence, Önerfors and Krouwel (2021) state that "Euroscepticism is central to the ideologies of radical political movements across Europe" (p. 22).

a) The GAL-TAN dimension

Nevertheless, Hooghe and Marks (2009) delve deeper and identify a "non-economic left/right dimension", based on national identity, "ranging from green/alternative/libertarian (GAL) to traditionalism/authority/nationalism (TAN)" (p. 17). According to this model, Euroscepticism is most intense on the TAN side, where nationalist values prevail. TAN parties, such as the German AfD, oppose European integration, seeing it as a threat to national sovereignty and cultural identity. Conservative parties, which exhibit a milder TAN inclination, similarly emphasise safeguarding national culture and sovereignty, resisting immigration, international agreements, and the idea of complex territorial identities. Within these parties, there's a notable clash between nationalist ambitions to preserve sovereignty and neoliberal tendencies favouring economic integration and shared sovereignty for economic progress (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In contrast, Euroscepticism is less pronounced on the GAL side, with Green parties backing the European integration project for fostering a diverse society, despite critiquing its democratic deficit and technocratic disposition. For left-leaning parties on the GAL side, the contention revolves around market liberalism.

b) From party strategy to political communication

Recent advancements in European integration have broadened the scope for politicization, allowing parties to seize and politicise issues that align with their agendas. This development provides an avenue for 'non-mainstream parties', especially those struggling to find their footing within the established political landscape, to challenge the status quo and disrupt the conventional party system. The surge in Euroscepticism, or the creation of a platform for such viewpoints, can stem from a rejection of the core ideology of the European Union project (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Given the context that that politics can no longer be guided by universally accepted truths (Newman, 2023, p. 21), which supports the notion of constraining dissensus put forth by Hooghe & Marks (2009), and that citizens increasingly distrust and question political

authority as global politics becomes more uncertain (Massa & Anzera, 2022), this scepticism can be strategically exploited. Specifically, political actors, especially populists, lay claim to their own versions of truth in the media-society we live in. Consequently, there is no longer a single dominant understanding, but rather a plurality of narratives or perspectives, also known as metanarratives, competing with each other. This development has given rise to the term 'post-truth,' which was named the 'word of the year' by the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016.

Newman (2023) argues, that post-truth populists

“seek to impose a new and more authoritarian order of power and truth, based on conservative values and traditional hierarchies and patriarchal norms. In other words, post-truth is part of a fundamentally reactionary political and ideological project that seeks to preserve and even intensify the current regime of neoliberal inequality. (...)

The war between the populists and the ‘liberal establishment’ is nothing but a parlour game of elites.” (p. 18)

According to Conrad and Hálfðanarson (2023), post-truth politics is depicted as having a unique "mode of communication" (p. 4). The authors argue that "populist actors exploit the capabilities of social and other digital media platforms to flood the public sphere with misinformation and disinformation" (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2023, p. 4).

1.2. Disinformation

Disinformation is intentionally created and disseminated false information aimed at misleading recipients, as opposed to misinformation, which is the “spread of false information without intent to deceive”, as outlined by Bakir and McStay (2022, p. 71). Furthermore, the authors delve deeper, characterising disinformation as an “active measure” employed to “strategically disrupt the policies and relations of opposition governments while bolstering allies” (Bakir & McStay, 2022, p. 73). Its purpose is to “resonate with the targeted community’s emotions, covertly exacerbate rifts and tensions, erode trust in specific institutions, and destabilise the relationships between states, their

publics, and each other” (ibid., p. 73). Thus, the ultimate objective is to sow distrust in political elites and cast doubt on their narratives (Massa & Anzera, 2022).

The challenge with disinformation is amplified by new technologies such as social media, which enable its rapid spread. The consequences of this phenomenon are tangible, leading to increased distrust and scepticism among citizens. It is evident that a singular exposure to disinformation, such as fake news or conspiracy theories, induces doubts among the population politics (Lamberty & Leiser, 2023), resulting in diminished trust in the European Union's. This is reflected in declining voter turnout and a surge in Eurosceptic populist parties in the European Parliament (Treib, 2020). As Massa & Anzera (2022) argue, disinformation campaigns, especially from Russia, are a threaten to destabilise Europe’s soft power. Furthermore, as already highlighted in the introduction, particularly during elections, an escalation in disinformation is anticipated.

1.2.1. Eurosceptic Conspiracy Theory

The language of Eurosceptic populism, its rhetoric and its narratives are often fuelled by conspiratorial ideas in political debates (Harmsen & Spiering, 2004), and these conspiratorial ideas reflect the ideological orientation described above. Accordingly, Krouwel and van Prooijen (2021) argue that there is a clear correlation between Euroscepticism and belief in conspiracies. According to Önnarfors & Krouwel (2022), for Eurosceptic parties on the far-left, conspiracy narratives typically focus on the “nefarious deeds of (global) financial elites” (p. 22) controlling the EU and influenced by the United States (Hainsworth et al., 2004). On the other hand, for far-right Eurosceptic parties – where the use of Eurosceptical conspiracy narratives is prominent – the prevalent conspiracy narrative involves an elite seeking to undermine the nation-state, a concept “often invoked by influential figures such as former US President Donald Trump” (Önnarfors & Krouwel, 2021, p. 22). The European institutions are thereby dominated by ‘globalists’ and ‘internationalists’ (ibid., p. 22). However, there are also other conspiracy narratives or theories tied to current European Union topics. It's crucial to highlight the significance of these conspiracies, as conspiratorial rhetoric has even become mainstream among political actors, with disinformation serving as a tool to reinforce such narratives. For instance, there have been efforts by foreign governments to undermine the EU system through disinformation and conspiracy theories related to immigration (Juhász &

Szicherle, 2017). This is connected to the ‘Eurabia’ conspiracy theory, which claims the EU is deliberately allowing mass Muslim immigration to destroy nation-states (Önnerfors & Krouwel, 2021, p. 10). In contrast, the ‘Eurasian’ conspiracy theory pertains to the continuation of 'Cold War dualism' (Önnerfors & Krouwel, 2021, p. 8). Additionally, Önnerfors & Krouwel (2021, p. 5) identified two conspiracy theories: one suggesting global domination by Jews, and another about a grand Muslim takeover, both aimed at destroying the West. All this information becomes vital in the context of current disinformation campaigns.

1.3. Eurosceptic Disinformation Definition

Given this context, the following definition for Eurosceptic disinformation is proposed:

Eurosceptic disinformation is false information disseminated by political actors to undermine the project of European integration, specifically designed to sow mistrust among the European political elite or mainstream parties. It is particularly utilised by political actors on the extreme right wing concerning economic factors, and within the traditionalism, authority, and nationalism (TAN) milieu regarding non-economic factors. Furthermore, Eurosceptic disinformation is often fuelled by conspiracy narratives.

Having discussed the historical context of Euroscepticism, its ideological or party-background and strategies such political communication, populists’ disinformation and related conspiracy belief, the next chapter will give an overview of key events where Eurosceptic disinformation played a crucial role.

2. Key Events of Eurosceptic Disinformation

2.1. The Brexit

The event with the most crucial consequences of Eurosceptic disinformation might arguably be Brexit, interpreted by Conrad & Hálfðanarson (2023) as a “possible beginning of the disintegration of the European project” (p. 1). The EU referendum, held on 23 June 2016, saw British citizens narrowly vote in favor of the UK leaving the EU, making the UK the first country to transition from a member state to a non-member state.

The Brexit is considered a consequence of a “20-year propaganda campaign against Europe” (MacShane, cited by Henkel, 2021), fuelled by lies and disinformation. Gaber and Fisher (2021) attribute the communication around the Brexit to a ‘strategic lying’ method’, employed alongside agenda-setting and priming techniques. This ‘strategic lying’ represents “an evolution of political public relations tactics over decades” (Gaber & Fisher, 2021, p. 462), significantly impacting the liberal democratic model and democratic engagement.

According to Hooghe & Marks (2009), a conflict between nationalism and neoliberalism has characterised the internal dynamics of the British Conservative Party since the Maastricht Treaty was signed. Consequently, Brexit might also be seen as a rejection of the European Community and its core principles and values. Accordingly, after initially sympathising with the European Union project from 1945 until the 1980s, the British press shifted to a stance of opposition around the time of the Maastricht Treaty's ratification. Especially since the early 1990s, the British press has amplified Eurosceptic positions and 'Us-vs-Them' (Britain against the EU) narratives.

Since 1992, the European Commission has then been combating 'Euromyth' propagated by the British press, whereas Henkel (2021) describes Euromyth as disinformation, as it consists of false claims that “were intended to harm the reputation of the EU” (p. 153). The European Commission then tried to debunk or decode fake narratives and falsehoods, leading to the creation of a Euromyth blog, which operated for over 26 years. The main target groups were thereby politicians, journalists and key stakeholders to help them to be able to categorise the news correctly. The blog was shut down one day after the UK left the EU on the 30 January 2019.

From this background emerged the Leave Campaign of the British Eurosceptic Independence Party (UKIP) and the British Nationalist Party (BNP). These parties focused primarily on the issues of immigration and mobilised “right-wing populist ideas concerning race and nationhood”, utilising an “elite versus the people approach” (Faulkner et al, 2021, p. 198) which was characterised by emotional populist language and a main narrative of regaining control, employing slogans such as “Getting My/Our Country Back,” “Undemocratic Europe,” and “Take Control” (Henkel, 2021, p. 25).

Accordingly, the authors Farrand and Carrapico (2021) argue that in context of the Brexit negotiations:

“The UK Government has adopted a populist style characterized by narratives of taking back control, legitimized by the will of the people, communicating often in a ‘low’ political style and using a narrative of crisis and threat. In comparison, the EU has adopted a technocratic style characterized by narratives of technical policy making and the need for rationality, legitimized through the laws, rules and processes by which it is governed, communicating in a ‘high’ political style while using a narrative of stability and continuity.” (p. 148)

Furthermore, visual disinformation was employed, especially with the UKIP billboard poster. A Getty Images photo captured by photojournalist Jeff Mitchell, which illustrates a significant number of mostly adult male Syrian and Afghan refugees being guided by Slovenian police from the Croatia-Slovenia border to the Brezice refugee camp, was used in a poster with the slogans “BREAKING POINT,” “The EU has failed us all,” and “We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.” The party aimed to make it clear what the UK would have to face at its borders because of the EU.³ According to Faulkner et al. (2021, “the poster represented the EU border breaking under the weight of non-white immigration, but at the same time, it encouraged a sense of slippage between this framing of the EU border as a border out of control and the UK border” (p. 203). this is what makes them interpret it as disinformation.

³ The photo was furthermore used by the right-win populist Hungarian Fidesz party in the means of anti-immigration communication (Faulkner et al, 2021).

Moreover, besides campaigns by the British press and the two parties, Bastos and Mercea (2017, as cited in Bruno et al., 2022) uncovered more than 10,000 bots spreading fake and hyperpartisan news during the 2016 Brexit referendum. These bots predominantly supported Brexit rather than opposed it. Bruno et al. (2022) further discovered, through the study of hashtags and URLs utilised by bots, a linkage between the Brexit campaign and Trump's 2016 US election campaign. The authors noted that these hashtags were "quite aggressive and targeted some US misinformation arguments (#Qanon, #soros4gitmo, #soros) or referred to extreme right-wing propaganda (#tinatoon, a popular comic strip among the US alt-right; #blexit, representing black and Latin-American Trump supporters who renamed themselves after the Brexit campaign)" (Bruno et al., 2022, p. 14). They observed that some bot accounts were reactivated later to target other, more liberal politicians, such as during Macron's campaign. This disinformation has amongst others been linked to Russian interference (Bennett & Livingston, 2021). Furthermore, the Russian TV channel RT has been noted for featuring Eurosceptic politicians in its coverage, thereby supporting anti-EU ideology (Flaherty & Roselle, 2018).

2.2. The COVID-19 Pandemic

Another key event in the emergence of disinformation is the COVID-19 pandemic, described by experts as a historical event marked by the "highest rate of disinformation" (Güner, 2023, p. 204). Although the COVID-19 pandemic is not as closely linked to ideology, it is crucial to note that recent EU legislation, both soft and hard law, has been influenced by and implemented in response to the health risks posed by the pandemic and the spread of related disinformation. Therefore, when examining disinformation related to COVID-19, the approach shifts from that of the previous chapter on Brexit. Instead of focusing primarily on the distinction between the actors spreading disinformation, this chapter emphasises the nature of the disinformation itself and the consequences that have been derived from it.

In the context of COVID-19 disinformation, social media played a significant role, as numerous disinformation narratives emerged and were widely spread through online channels – leading to an 'infodemic', where disinformation was significantly exacerbated by the algorithms of social media platforms. These algorithms ensured that once

individuals were exposed to disinformation, they continued to encounter similar content. This created so-called echo chambers, which are formed based on similar news sources and opinions. This environment makes it exceedingly challenging to break free from the echo chamber of disinformation once ensnared within it.

Specifically, this disinformation was reflected in narratives claiming that the pandemic was not real, that the virus was manipulated in a laboratory, and that vaccinations would alter human genetics. These narratives were often accompanied by the conspiracy theory that secret elites were using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to enrich themselves in some way. The problem with this was that the greater the belief in these COVID-19 conspiracy theories, the lower the adherence to government guidelines and the diminished willingness to undergo antibody testing or vaccination among these individuals – not to mention the ensuing mistrust towards the political elite (Vériter et al., 2020).

This becomes particularly concerning when considering the findings of Eberl et al. (2021). Accordingly, the authors assert that “individuals with higher levels of populist attitudes are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories” (ibid., p. 277). As a result, they argue that populism indirectly influences COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs through a mistrust in political and scientific institutions. From this observation, the authors deduce that an increase in populist attitudes correlates with a rise in COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, leading them to conclude that populism is a significant predictor of citizens' conspiracy thinking regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (Eberl et al., 2021, p. 279).

The authors further elucidate that the approach of governments to the pandemic, specifically the bottom-down strategy regarding policy measurements, effectively invited populists to oppose it and propagate 'elite conspiracies.' This is characterised as the “populists' anti-elitist stance” (Eberl et al., 2021, p. 274). Through this, the authors highlight a core attribute of populists: their opposition to political and social elites, an attribute that is inherently non-ideological. The authors go on to explain that right-wing populists have exacerbated the infodemic by openly challenging scientific experts.

Regarding Eurosceptic parties, Fontana (2020) highlights that individuals affiliated with the right-wing and anti-immigrant Italian Lega per Salvini Premier party, as well as other right and center-right parties, perceived the European Union's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic as inadequate. In contrast, there was substantial support for the EU's

measures among left-wing voters, with 76% approval, predominantly led by the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD), which is currently in power.

However, Hloušek and Havlík (2022) found that the COVID-19 pandemic did not intensify Eurosceptic narratives in Central and Eastern Europe, even though the circumstances had the potential to facilitate such an increase. As a result, there was no significant politicization by political actors; rather, it has been demonstrated that connecting pre-existing Eurosceptic narratives with new challenges and issues presented a considerable challenge.

In this context, it is worthwhile to conduct a closer analysis of Eurosceptic parties within the institution that plays a significant role in European legislation – the European Parliament.

3. Euroscepticism Within the European Parliament

3.1. Historical Background

Within the EU institutions, the European Parliament is described by Brack and Costa (2020) as the “most obvious platform for Eurosceptics at the supranational level” (p. 374). A term that refers to Euroscepticism within the context of the EU level is described as ‘Pan-Euroscepticism’. Leruth (2020) notes that soft Euroscepticism had a presence in the European Parliament from its inaugural elections in 1979, but it only became overtly noticeable with the emergence of the first Eurosceptic groups in the 1994 elections. Although the first homogenous and explicitly Eurosceptic factions emerged in the European Parliament after the 1994 elections, manifestations of soft Euroscepticism have been present in this body for many years. Before, the resistance to the European Project was rooted in specific political movements, notably Gaullism and British Conservatism (Leruth, 2020).

According to the Leruth (2020), it is particularly the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group from 2009 that has rebranded “right-wing soft Euroscepticism” as “Eurorealism” (p. 394), influenced primarily by the British Conservative Party. Euroscepticism has hence become “more institutionalised” from 2009 on (ibid, p. 394). The author also attributes a surge in Euroscepticism to the Great Recession of 2007/2008. Either way, the rise of Eurosceptic parties in the EP is related to successes of right-wing parties in the national elections of the member states (Brack & Costa, 2020). Then, the 2014 elections have even “reinforced the pro/anti-integration cleavage, at both the national and the European level” (ibid., p. 380), even though, before, Euroscepticism was more related to the national levels of the member states. Despite the challenges Eurosceptic parties faced in organising themselves into formal groups, by the 2014 European elections, the Eurosceptic ECR emerged as the third-largest group in the European Parliament. Whereas the seats of Eurosceptic voices remained stable at 20% since the 2000, they now represent almost 30% of the seats in the EP (Brack & Costa, 2020).

3.2. Eurosceptic Political Groups

Ultan (2023) categorises the Identity and Democracy Group (IDG) (radical right), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) (conservative), Group of the European People's Party (EPP) (centre-right), and European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) (radical left) groups as Eurosceptic composition, whereas the Identity and Democracy Group can be categorised as hard Eurosceptic. However, as mainstream parties like the German CDU (Christlich-Demokratische Union) are part of the European People's Party, this group is not categorised as Eurosceptic in this research.

As this research concentrates on the theory of Hooghe and Marks (2009) who claim that Euroscepticism especially emerged in the post-Maastricht treaty period, party groups in the EP after the 1994 EP elections are evaluated. In table 1, groups were identified as Eurosceptic when they were extreme right or extreme left or openly Eurosceptic (Brack, 2015; Leruth, 202; Ultan, 2023). The table shows that Eurosceptic groups have grown continuously since the 1994 European Parliament elections.

In the 2024 European Parliament elections, Eurosceptic, right-wing parties, especially the AfD in Germany and the Rassemblement National in France, have gained strength once again. The number of Eurosceptic MEPs within the EP factions has increased (preliminary results from June 14th, recorded in Table 1), and it can be assumed that Euroscepticism is also reflected in some of the 44 members who are still unaffiliated (including the AfD, which was excluded from the ID group by the Rassemblement National during the campaign) and in some of the 45 new members who do not belong to any faction of the outgoing Parliament. Additionally, there has been a loss of votes for pro-European parties, such as the Greens/EFA, and the established 'mainstream' parties, such as the Renew Europe group. Nevertheless, the established 'mainstream' parties from the conservative EPP group gained seats. Although Eurosceptic parties have gained ground primarily in the larger member states, they have lost support in Nordic countries like Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, where more left-leaning parties have made gains (TLDR News EU, 2024). Thus, the electoral landscape is highly heterogeneous. Nevertheless, the increased mandates for the Eurosceptic groups ECR and ID suggest that Eurosceptic parties have become stronger. A constitutive session of the Parliament is

scheduled to take place on July 16, 2024, at which time the new groups will also be established.

Table 1

Eurosceptic party groups per election year

Party Groups	Election Year						
	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	<i>2024</i>
European United Left/Nordic Green Left ⁴	28	42	41	35	52	37	<i>39</i>
Europe of Nations Group (Coordinating Group)	19	-	-	-	-	-	-
Group of the European Radical Alliance	19	-	-	-	-	-	-
Union for Europe of the Nations	-	31	27	-	-	-	-
Independence/Democracy Group ⁵	-	16	37	-	-	-	-
Identity and Democracy Group ⁶	-	-	-	32	48	49	<i>58</i>
European Conservatives and Reformists	-	-	-	54	70	69	<i>76</i>
Total	66	89	105	121	170	157 ⁷	<i>173</i>

Note: Source: Europäisches Parlament (n.d., 2024)

3.3. Parties Opposing the European Integration Project

As mentioned above, not all MEPs or parties with Eurosceptic tendencies can be identified within the groups. As Hooghe and Marks (2009, p. 17) note, parties on the 'non-economic left/right dimension' can be categorised into a GAL and TAN dimension with different Eurosceptic tendencies. A dataset from the Chapel Hill expert surveys, founded

⁴ From 1995 – 2021 named as ‘The Left in the European Parliament’

⁵ Firstly named as ‘Group for a Europe of Democracies and Diversities’

⁶ Europe for freedom and democracy Group, later European Freedom and Direct Democracy, Europe of Nations and Freedom, from 2019 renamed in Identity and Democracy Group.

⁷ The number of seats has decreased as mandates have been lost due to BREXIT.

by Gary Marks and with Lisbeth Hooghe also working in the team, was used to more precisely identify parties that are opposed to the European integration project. Table 2 lists the parties whose leadership is either strongly opposed (score = 1), opposed (score = 2), somewhat opposed (score = 3) and almost neutral (3.5) to European integration.⁸ The values on the GAL/TAN scale are also presented, where a higher value closer to 10 indicates a stronger TAN orientation, and a higher value closer to 1 indicates a stronger GAL orientation.

Table 2

Opposition to European Integration per party

Member State	Meas. Date	Full Party Name	EP Seats	EP Group	Family	EU Position	GAL/TAN Dimension
Netherlands	2019	Forum voor Democratie	3	ECR	Radical Right	1,01	8,33
Greece	2019	Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas	2	No Group	Radical Left	1,11	6,62
Hungary	2014	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	1	No Group	Radical Right	1,21	9,5
Greece	2019	Laikós Síndesmos—Chrysí Avgí	2	No Group	Radical Right	1,22	10
Slovakia	2019	Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (Marian Kotleba)	2	No Group	Radical Right	1,31	9,82
France	2019	Rassemblement National	22	ID	Radical Right	1,38	8,12
Czech Republic	2019	Svoboda a přímá demokracie Tomio Okamura	2	ID	Radical Right	1,48	9,37
Finland	2019	Perussuomalaiset	2	ID	Radical Right	1,65	8,58

⁸ Values up to 4 would mean a neutral position

Italy	2019	Lega per Salvini Premier	28	ID	Radical Right	1,68	9,21
Croatia	2019	Živi zid	1	No Group	No Family	1,82	4,96
Germany	2019	Alternative für Deutschland	11	ID	Radical Right	1,9	9,52
Italy	2019	Fratelli d'Italia	5	ECR	Conservative	1,95	9,42
Denmark	2019	Dansk Folkeparti	1	ID	Radical Right	2	8
Greece	2019	Elliniki Lisi	1	ECR	Radical Right	2,13	9,37
Sweden	2019	Sverigedemokraterna	3	ECR	Radical Right	2,23	8,76
Belgium	2019	Vlaams Belang	4	ID	Radical Right	2,25	8
Austria	2019	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs	3	ID	Radical Right	2,3	8,9
Czech Republic	2019	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	1	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	2,37	8,07
Portugal	2019	Coligação Democrática Unitária (Partido Comunista Português + Partido Ecologista “Os Verdes”)	2	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	2,4	5,12
Denmark	2019	Enhedslisten —De Rød-Grønne	1	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	2,43	1,07
Croatia	2019	Hrvatska konzervativna stranka	1	ECR	Conservative	2,62	9,48
Netherlands	2019	Partij voor de Dieren	1	GUE/NGL	Green	2,64	2,92

Belgium	2019	Parti du Travail de Belgique	1	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	2,73	4,58
Ireland	2014	Sinn Féin	1	GUE/NGL	Regionalist	2,78	5,12
Slovakia	2014	Sloboda a Solidarita	2	ECR	Liberal	2,86	2,78
Czech Republic	2014	Občanská Demokratická Strana	4	ECR	Conservative	2,87	6
France	2019	La France Insourmice	6	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	2,87	3,12
Netherlands	2019	Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij	1	ECR	Agrarian/Centre	2,92	9,23
Denmark	2002	Socialistisk Folkeparti	2	Greens	Radical Left	2,92	2,15
Poland	2019	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	26	ECR	Radical Right	2,95	9,14
Slovakia	2014	Obyčajní Ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti	1	EPP	Conservative	3	8,08
Germany	2014	Die Linke	6	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	3	4,92
Hungary	2019	Fidesz—Magyar Polgári Szövetség Fidesz—Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	13	EPP	Radical Right	3,1	9,2
Ireland	2006	Comhaontas Glas	2	Greens	Green	3,1	1,89
Bulgaria	2014	Dviženie Gergiovden VMRO	2	ECR	Conservative	3,12	8,62
Portugal	2014	Bloco de Esquerda	2	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	3,12	0,7

Sweden	2019	Vänsterpartiet	1	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	3,18	1,94
Spain	2019	Vox	3	ECR	Radical Right	3,27	9,67
Sweden	2010	Miljöpartiet de Gröna	2	Greens	Green	3,4	2,85
Italy	2014	Forza Italia	6	EPP	Conservative	3,43	7,28
Netherlands	2014	ChristenUnie	1	EPP	Agrarian/Centre	3,44	7,67
Greece	2014	Synaspismó's Rizospastikís Aristerás	2	GUE/NGL	Radical Left	3,44	2,11
Italy	2019	MoVimento 5 Stelle	15	No Group	No Family	3,47	3,74
Sum						Average	
198						2,47	

Note: EP seats in the 2019 - 2024 legislative period (European Parliament, n.d.)

Measurements from 2002, 2006 and 2010 show that the parties Socialistisk Folkeparti (value 2.92), Comhaontas Glas (value 3.1), and Miljöpartiet de Gröna (value 3.4) all belong to the group 'the Greens' and are, according to their values in the section of 'EU position', somewhat opposed to European integration. It should be noted that the measurements were taken several years ago and that this attitude may have changed. Other parties with strong Eurosceptic tendencies, such as the Greek party Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas (value 1.11), do not belong to any group at all. In addition, some parties belonging to the ECR Group were not rated as Eurosceptic according to the interpretation of the data set. For example, the Coal. AP! From Latvia 2019 measured a value of 6.64, which means that their leadership is in favor of European integration. In total, the data set shows 198 seats held by Eurosceptic parties in parliament from 2019-2024.

3.4. Euroscepticism Beyond Political Groups

The comparison of table 1 and 2 manifests that a growing Euroscepticism can not only be concluded by the different groups of the European Parliament. However, this inevitably means that Euroscepticism is more pronounced than it appears at first glance. This does not occur without consequences for the European institutions. According to

Brack and Costa (2020), Eurosceptic parties can influence negotiations within EU institutions and affect “the ability to find a consensus” (p. 379) internally. In order to counter that, the authors claim that “pro-European parliamentary groups form alliances in order to save the deliberating capacity of the EP and to reduce the influence of Eurosceptics” (p. 377). But not all Eurosceptic MEPs act the same. Accordingly, Brack (2015) identified a typology of four roles on how Eurosceptic Members of the Parliament behave in their positions:

“Some remain in an outsider position, through an empty chair strategy (absentee) or noisy opposition (public orator). But some are relatively well integrated in the parliamentary game and choose to get involved in the EP’s deliberation either in a limited and instrumental way (pragmatist) or by compromising their Eurosceptic convictions without being able to influence the legislative process on sensitive issues (participant).” (p. 348)

From this, one could conclude that the noisy opposition would be, in particular, actors spreading Eurosceptic disinformation. However, no monitoring of disinformation from within the EU Parliament was found. Analysing disinformation from within the European Parliament is very challenging, as monitoring would need to be established. Furthermore, the appointment of Eurosceptic party members to EU institutions other than the European Parliament could have repercussions for the European institutions, which, as Brack and Costa (2020) highlight, have always favoured European integration. Therefore, the selection of personnel in the EU institutions should not be overlooked, as policy processes could be blocked from within for ideological reasons.

Having analysed how Euroscepticism emerged in the European Parliament, the next chapter examines Eurosceptic disinformation narratives in the run-up to the 2024 elections, including those spread by the six largest Eurosceptic parties in the EP.

4. Eurosceptic Disinformation in the Context of the 2024 EU Parliament Elections

4.1. EDMO Fact Checking Briefings

Current EU-related disinformation narratives close in time of the 2024 European Parliament elections are identified through the fact-checking briefs of EDMO. The European Digital Media Observatory is funded by the European Union and describes itself as having created “a network of fact-checking organisations based in the EU to foster collaboration in countering disinformation” (Edmo, n.d.). One of their fact-checking activities are monthly briefs that illustrate the main disinformation trends in the EU. These fact-checking briefs were analysed as part of this research. The time frame covers nearly one year before the elections, that is, from April 2023 to May 2024. The content of the fact-checking briefs was gathered through questionnaires from the fact-checking organisations that are part of the EDMO fact-checking network. On average, 1,478 articles were evaluated per month (with an average of 31.5 partner organisations monitoring these articles, as seen in Table 3 under ‘respondents’), with approximately 7% related to EU-related disinformation. In May 2023, the monitoring of disinformation related to the EU began and about the EU peaked at 15% one year after, in May 2024, shortly before the elections. Disinformation on specific topics (such as the EU, Ukraine, etc.) is detailed in the EDMO briefings themselves. The disinformation articles mentioned in the briefings were evaluated qualitatively (see Appendix I-III).

Table 3

Average value of general data on the disinformation identified by EDMO fact-checking briefings

Res-pondents	Articles	AI gener.	Disinformation related to						
			EU	Ukraine	Climate Change	Covid-19	Israel Hamas	Mi-gration	LGBTQI+
31,5	1.478	3 %	7 %	10 %	9 %	5 %	7 %	3 %	1 %

Note: Survey period April 2023 - May 2024, average values. Rounded up to one decimal place. All fact-checking briefings are available on the site of EDMO (n.d.)

4.1.1. Disinformation About the EU

The EU-related disinformation is classified as Eurosceptic disinformation because it directly targets the European Union as a supranational organisation. Based on the data, the disinformation was categorised into various types according to similarity. It was found that the narratives focused either on EU decision-making (pertaining to alleged political decisions or laws), EU actions or behaviour (for example regarding statements from the President of the Commission), or EU conspiracy narratives (such as the supposed large-scale replacement of EU citizens with Africans). In general, these narratives were mostly disseminated through accounts on social media, but also via TV/news media, or even, in a very few cases, directly by political representatives.

Table 4

EU-related disinformation and some narratives (examples)

Country	Platform	Stakeholder	Disinformation narrative	Related to
Spain	Twitter / X	Unkown user	The European Commission is preparing water restrictions for the entire population so that citizens will no longer be able to shower whenever they want because the EU institutions will control the use of showers.	Decision making
Spain	Twitter / X, Facebook	Unkown user	There is a large-scale replacement of EU citizens with Africans.	Conspiracy narrative
Romania	News Media	News Media	The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, openly promotes discrimination and marginalization of the Romanian community in Ukraine in her speech.	Action / behaviour
Ireland	X	Unkown user	The European Union has told Ireland to delay a general election.	Action / behaviour
Estland	Telegram	Unkown user	The European Commission is considering a ban on repairing vehicles over 15 years old.	Decision making

4.2.2. Disinformation Related to Soft Power of the EU

Disinformation concerning Ukraine, climate change, COVID-19, Israel-Hamas, migrants, and LGBTQI+ is interpreted as damaging to the soft power of the European Union. Thereby, this disinformation directly opposes European values and/or legislation and/or enlargement projects (see table 5 for more details).

Table 5*Disinformation related to EU Soft Power (Examples)*

Member State	Soft Power	Medium	Stakeholder	Disinformation narrative
Spain	LGBTQI+	Tik Tok	Unknown User	German police is separating a child from their family for opposing LGBTQI+ propaganda.
Finland	Climate Protection	Facebook	Unknown User	Climate change is not real.
France	Ukraine	Twitter / X	Unknown User	Zelensky is establishing a dictatorship in Ukraine.
Greece	Migration	News TV, Internet	News Media	Two migrants are responsible for a huge fire in Greece.
Denmark	Israel Hamas	Facebook	Unknown User	Hamas' actions alleging war crimes by Israel are justified.
Spain	Migration	Social Media	Political Party	Migrants took power in local elections, part of the Great Replacement.

The disinformation was consistently debunked, i.e., corrected, by the EDMO partner network.

4.2. Disinformation Narratives of Eurosceptic Parties 2024

The electoral content of the six largest Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament (up to 10 elected MEPs) is also assessed. These consist of Rassemblement National, Lega per Salvini Premier, AfD, PiS, Fidesz, and MoVimento 5 Stelle. The list in Table 6 is based on the degree of opposition of the European integration project (EU position). The lower the value, the stronger the Euroscepticism. It shows that RN is strongly opposed to European integration (value close to 1), Lega per Salvini Premier and AfD are opposed (value close to 2), PiS and Fidesz are somewhat opposed (value close to 3), and MoVimento 5 Stelle is between somewhat opposed and neutral towards European integration. It is also evident that Rassemblement National, Lega per Salvini Premier, AfD, PiS, Fidesz would be categorised as TAN-parties, whereas Movimento Cinque Stelle would be categorised in the GAL-party (GAL/TAN dimension). It is not possible to definitively distinguish between hard and soft Euroscepticism. However, it can be

assumed that the stronger the opposition to the European integration project, the more likely it is that the Euroscepticism can be categorised as hard (see chapter 1.1.2).

Table 6

The largest Eurosceptic parties according to CHES

Member State	Meas. Date	Party	EP Seats	EP Group	Family	EU Position	GAL/TAN Dimension
France	2019	RN	22	ID	Radical Right	1,38	8,12
Italy	2019	Lega per Salvini Premier	28	ID	Radical Right	1,68	9,21
Germany	2019	AfD	11	ID	Radical Right	1,9	9,52
Poland	2019	PiS	26	ECR	Radical Right	2,95	9,14
Hungary	2019	Fidesz	13	EPP	Radical Right	3,1	9,2
Italy	2019	MoVimento 5 Stelle	15	No Group	No Family	3,47	3,74

Note of the author of this research: The MoVimento 5 could be categorised as left-green family.

Election programs for AfD, Rassemblement National, Lega per Salvini Premier, and MoVimento 5 Stelle were presented on the parties' websites. However, no election program was identified for the PiS and Fidesz parties through internet research. In May 2024, spokespersons for the press of the different political groups were also asked for the election programs, but none were identified. Therefore, for Fidesz, a speech by party leader Viktor Orbán at the Hungarian Civic Alliance election manifesto was analysed. For PiS, a speech by the party's leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, at the electoral congress in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, published on YouTube on May 19, 2024, was transcribed using the AI tool 'Trint' and translated with the help of ChatGPT. Prior to this, PiS had only published a PDF with the main election positions summarised in seven points. The election programs vary significantly in their length and style of language, and the speeches also differ in length (see table 7).

Table 7*Details about the evaluation data*

	RN	Lega per Salvini Premier	AfD	PiS	Fidesz	MoVimento 5 Stelle
Data	Election Program	Election Program	Election Program	Speech	Speech	Election Program
Format	PDF	PDF	PDF	Youtube Video	Translated Speech	PDF
Length	17 pages	16 pages	51 pages	3810 words	1657 words	102 pages
Disinf. narratives	4	-	18	3	3	-

Sources: About Hungary (2024), Alternative für Deutschland (2024), Janusz Jaskółka (2024), Lega per Salvini Premier (2024), MoVimento 5 Stelle (2024), Rassemblement National (2024). See Appendix IV for the disinformation narratives.

According to the definition given in this research, Eurosceptic disinformation narratives were identified when they contented false information, or they were fuelled by conspiracy narratives – with the aim to sow mistrust among the European political elite or mainstream parties.

4.2.1. The Rassemblement National (RN) Party

In the electoral program of the Rassemblement National, four disinformation narratives were identified. These narratives question the legitimacy of the EU through false insinuations, demonising the EU by suggesting that its intentions are to harm France and other member states (see table 8).

Table 8*Disinformation of Rassemblement Nationale*

Cluster	Narrative	Citation
Migration	Mass immigration and unfair competition are intentionally imposed by the EU's leading parties.	En imposant l'immigration de masse et la concurrence déloyale, résultant toutes deux d'une conception naïve et dépassée de la mondialisation, les partis jusqu'à présent majoritaires à Bruxelles fragilisent notre sécurité, déconstruisent notre civilisation et déstabilisent notre modèle économique et social.

Legitimacy	The European Commission is deliberately pursuing policies that harm industrial, agricultural, and energy sectors based on ideological reasons.	Par idéologie, la Commission européenne a fait le choix de la décroissance industrielle, agricole et énergétique.
Legitimacy	The EU, with the backing of Emmanuel Macron, has been deliberately acting against the interests and will of the people since the 2005 French referendum	Depuis la trahison du référendum français de 2005, l'Union européenne soutenue par Emmanuel Macron se construit contre les peuples.
Legitimacy	The European Commission is exploiting crises to expand its control over areas like health and defence, and punishing states that try to assert their sovereignty	Cette dérive est telle que non seulement la Commission profite des crises pour accaparer de nouveaux pouvoirs à l'instar de la santé ou la Défense, mais en plus elle n'hésite pas à sanctionner des États qui souhaitent exercer leur souveraineté.

4.2.2. The Lega per Salvini Premier Party & MoVimento 5 Stelle

In contrast to the other parties, no disinformation was identified for the Italian parties. In the short electoral program of Lega per Salvini Premier, the political elite of the EU is rarely mentioned. On the other hand, the program of MoVimento 5 Stelle focuses on constructive policy proposals and would be classified by the author as more aligned with the left-green spectrum. This raises the question of whether this party has significantly changed since 2019, or if the value of 3.47 is too weak to be classified as Eurosceptic. However, as demonstrated in the first part of the thesis, this could also indicate that Euroscepticism manifests differently in GAL parties. On the other hand, the fact that no Eurosceptic disinformation was found could also show that the length of the election program is not a decisive factor for the presence of disinformation.

4.2.3. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Party

The party with the highest amount of identified disinformation is the AfD, with a total of 18 disinformation narratives found (see Appendix IV). Although this is not a linguistic analysis, it is noteworthy that the AfD heavily focuses on criticising the EU's leadership style and consistently spreads half-truth about the EU. Their disinformation narratives can be clustered based on the interpretation of the meaning or consequences of the disinformation. Therefore, the AfD primarily aims to undermine the legitimacy of the EU, describing its bureaucracy as "unaccountable and non-transparent" or claiming that the EU exploits crises to advance its own agenda and goal of becoming a sovereign state.

Additionally, it is alleged that the EU engages in illegal activities, such as unauthorised economic practices. Similar to the disinformation identified in the EDMO briefings, the AfD's disinformation narratives aim to undermine the EU's soft power. For instance, the party suggest that the EU uses false data on climate change. The party also promotes conspiracy theories, such as claims that the EU wants to ban individual mobility or undermine economic livelihoods through vaccinations (see table 9).

Table 9

Disinformation narratives of the AfD (Examples)

Cluster	Narrative	Citation
Legitimacy	The EU has deliberately exploited various crises to push forward its agenda of becoming a sovereign state, with the backing of the European Court of Justice and a self-serving bureaucracy.	Alle Krisen seit 2008 – Weltfinanzkrise, Eurokrise, Migrationskrise, Corona-Krise, Energiekrise, Inflationskrise sowie die angebliche Klimakrise – wurden genutzt, um die Staatswerdung der EU voranzutreiben, unterstützt vom Europäischen Gerichtshof und einer selbstherrlichen Bürokratie.
Legitimacy	The EU is being ruled by an unaccountable and non-transparent bureaucracy.	Die EU hat sich zu einem undemokratischen Konstrukt entwickelt, das immer mehr Gewalt an sich zieht und von einer intransparenten, nicht kontrollierten Bürokratie regiert wird.
Legality	The EU and ECB are engaging in illegal and unauthorised economic practices that unfairly burden Germany	Wir erleben vertragswidrige Gemeinschaftshaftung, Transferzahlungen, Verschuldung auf Ebene der EU, verbotene Staatsfinanzierung und mandatswidrige (Plan-)Wirtschaftspolitik durch EZB und EU – alles weitgehend zu Lasten Deutschlands.
Soft Power	Claims about increasing extreme weather and rising sea levels due to climate change are exaggerated or false.	Trotz des durch Medien und Politik verbreiteten Alarmismus zeigen sich in der Realität weder vermehrte Extremwetterereignisse noch ein beschleunigt ansteigender Meeresspiegel.
Conspiracy Theory	The government is violating constitutional rights by coercing citizens into getting vaccinated through extreme pressure and threats to their economic well-being.	Damit schränkt der Staat das im Grundgesetz verankerte Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Bürger über ihren eigenen Körper grundrechtswidrig ein und verlagert eine Impfentscheidung von der persönlichen auf die staatliche Ebene, wo durch massiven Druck bis hin zur Entziehung der wirtschaftlichen Lebensgrundlage der Bürger eine Entscheidung zugunsten einer Impfung erzwungen werden soll.

Furthermore, the AfD positions itself also against the Digital Services Act, framing it within the narrative that the EU seeks to exert control over the media, censor third-party media content, and restrict freedom of speech (Alternative für Deutschland, 2024, p. 51).

4.2.3 The Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) Party

In his speech, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński takes a long time before addressing the EU election. Before that, he criticises the new government in his country and speaks extensively about domestic issues. However, there is a notable point where, in a single sentence, three clusters of disinformation can be identified. Kaczyński accuses the EU of pursuing its own agenda with climate protection measures, namely changing the global financial system, and suggests that some parties would benefit from this, clearly revealing the conspiratorial nature of his narrative (see table 10).

Table 10

Disinformation narratives of PiS

Cluster	Narrative	Citation
Soft Power, Conspiracy Theory & Legitimacy	Climate protection efforts are a facade for a global financial operation benefiting influential elites at the expense of the general population	I don't know, I'm not an expert, but there is really a lot of evidence that we are dealing with a gigantic operation aimed not at protecting the climate, but at changing the financial system in the world, so that various types of operations are conducted in a way that will be beneficial for certain spheres, the most influential ones, but detrimental for a huge part, in this case not only Poles, but also Europeans.
Soft Power	The European Commission can declare a state of crisis, forcing Poland to accept tens of thousands of migrants annually, potentially increasing to 200 or 300 thousand when including families, leading to a situation where Poland will have to prevent these people from escaping and pay fines if they do.	It is enough to declare a state of crisis, which is a prerogative of the European Commission, or accept tens of thousands annually. There is a question of whether families will be included. Then these tens of thousands, given the size of these families, will turn into 200 or even 300 thousand and in addition. We will have a situation where we will have to watch these people so that they do not escape, because if they do, we will have to pay fines.

4.2.2. The Fidesz Party

In his speech, party leader Viktor Orbán positions himself in absolute opposition to the European leadership. He reinforces this stance with disinformation, claiming that the EU financially supports and manipulates the opposition in his country. Furthermore, he

asserts that he and his party are the only ones who can prevent war in Europe, falsely stating that the majority in the EU wants to go to war (see table 11).

Table 11

Disinformation narratives of Fidesz

Cluster	Narrative	Citation
Imputation	The EU majority wants to go to war	In Brussels today there is a pro-war majority. (...) I see preparations for war from everyone and from all sides.
Imputation	The political elite of the EU is allegedly funding the left in Budapest to instigate a government change that aligns with their interests.	The pro-war governments, the bureaucrats in Brussels, George Soros's network, are sending millions of dollars to the pro-war left in Budapest, who make no secret of the fact that they want a change of government which meets the demands of their paymasters.

4.2.6. Disinformation Similarities Between the Parties

It is not surprising that right-wing Eurosceptic parties share similar content (e.g., opposition to the European Green Deal), especially when they belong to the same EP groups. In the sample used in this research, an overlap in themes was found for disinformation targeting the EU's soft power, particularly regarding LGBTQI+ issues, with AfD, Fidesz, and PiS (see table 12).

Table 12

Disinformation similarity of Fidesz, PiS and AfD on the topic of LGBTQI+

Party	Narrative	Citation
Fidesz	The EU wants to re-educate children and hand them over to gender activists	They want to re-educate children and hand them over to gender activists
PiS	Propaganda is artificially inflating the number of people identifying with non-traditional gender identities, so that the true prevalence is being exaggerated by up to 200 times.	Concerning gender, it is about one per thousand people. Naturally, of course, with the help of propaganda, it can be increased a hundredfold or even 200 times, because propaganda today has an incredible impact on people.
AfD	The understanding of gender as a spectrum rather than a binary is pseudoscientific and incorrectly supported by the EU	Es ist eine biologische Tatsache und kein soziales Konstrukt, dass es genau zwei Geschlechter gibt: Frau und Mann. Die Pseudowissenschaft der Gender-Ideologie bestreitet diese biologische Grundtatsache. Die EU muss jede Förderung dieser skandalösen Ideologie sofort beenden.

4.2.7. Disinformation Similarities Between EDMO and the Parties

There are notable similarities between the disinformation narratives found in election programs and those identified by EDMO. Substantively, this is evident in topics such as defence/war, migration, and climate protection – the area of EU soft power, as explained above. These narratives primarily focus on ideological opposition to EU leadership and their decisions (see table 13).

Table 13

Disinformation similarity of election program and disinformation found by EDMO

	Source	Member State	Medium	Stakeholder	Disinformation Narrative
Defence/ War	EDMO (Nr. 35)	France, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Czechia	Facebook, News Media, Youtube	Unkown User	European member states are sending troops to the Ukraine
	Fidesz	Hungary	Speech	Party leader	The EU majority wants to go to war
Migration	EDMO (Nr.)	Hungary	Facebook	Government representatives (national level)	Brussels once again wants to enforce quotas for the distribution of migrants in the EU.
	PiS	Poland	Speech	Party leader	The European Commission can declare a state of crisis, forcing Poland to accept tens of thousands of migrants annually, potentially increasing to 200 or 300 thousand when including families, leading to a situation where Poland will have to prevent these people from escaping and pay fines if they do.
Climate Change	EDMO (Nr. 28)	Spain	Facebook	Unkown User	Natural disasters are intentionally caused by humans.
	AfD	Germany	Election program	National Party	Claims about increasing extreme weather and rising sea levels due to climate change are exaggerated or false.

4.3. Current Eurosceptic Disinformation Narratives

To conclude this chapter, it was found that current Eurosceptic disinformation narratives focus on spreading false information about the European Union's decision-making processes and actions. Additionally, the EU is sometimes portrayed as planning secretive actions against the will of its citizens, a narrative often communicated through conspiracy theories. However, the predominant disinformation targets the European Union's soft power, directly opposing European values, legislation, enlargement projects, or the communication the European Commission implements to legitimise these aspects. Key topics in this disinformation include Ukraine, climate change, Israel-Hamas, COVID-19, migration, and LGBTQI+ issues. The disinformation identified by EDMO was primarily on social media, where it is often spread by bots and anonymous users (see chapter 1.2). Given that many bots are believed to originate from Russia, it is particularly interesting to note that the investigated parties propagate the same narratives identified by EDMO.

Eurosceptic far-right parties often adopt similar narratives, claiming to oppose the ideology of the European Union and questioning the EU's legitimacy through their disinformation. These parties describe the EU as an organisation pursuing its own secretive (Fidesz, PiS) and overt (AfD) interests, acting against the population's interests, engaging in illegal behaviour (AfD), and knowingly harming member states due to ideology (RN, AfD, Fidesz). Furthermore, these parties are all TAN parties from the right party spectrum. This underscores the assumption of Hooghe and Marks (2009) that Euroscepticism is more pronounced on the TAN side.⁹

In general, there is a lack of consistency in electoral programs and campaign strategies among these parties. The content differs linguistically (from populist to more technocratic language), and the presentation of campaign content varies significantly. Nevertheless, the question arises if the Italian party MoVimento 5 Stelle, with its value of 3.47, is too weak to be classified as Eurosceptic, since no Eurosceptic stance or corresponding disinformation could be found in its extensive campaign program. On the other hand, no

⁹ Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are also left-wing parties that tend to be TAN (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). An analysis of the new German party 'Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht' (BSW) would be particularly interesting in this context.

Eurosceptic disinformation could be found for Lega per Salvini Premier either. This highlights the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of categorising Euroscepticism.

Last but not least, it should be noted that the national parties typically have national agendas and pursue goals specific to their countries, as seen by evaluating their speeches. It is likely that more disinformation would be identified if social media posts were examined, given their predisposition to rapidly disseminate false information (see chapter 1.2). Naturally, the data presented in this chapter is not exhaustive, and the analysis is merely a sample.

Having defined Eurosceptic disinformation, outlined key events, illustrated Euroscepticism within the context of groups and parties in the European Parliament, and analysed current Eurosceptic narratives in the first part of this thesis, the second part will evaluate the EU's measures against Eurosceptic disinformation. This includes an analysis of EU soft and hard law, as well as the communication of the European Commission, accompanied by a critical evaluation of these measures.

PART II: THE EU'S INITIATIVES TO ENCOUNTER EUROSCEPTIC DISINFORMATION

5. European Soft Law

5.1. EU Initiatives Against Disinformation

The European Union's actions against disinformation began in 2015 in response to the disinformation challenges originating from Russia. During this time, the European Commission announced the preparation of an Action Plan on Strategic Communication, which included the establishment of a dedicated communication team. In this initiative, the High Representative, in collaboration with member states and EU institutions, works together to address the issue (European Commission, 2018a). The fight against disinformation was then institutionalised with the StratCom Task Force within the EU External Action Service. In addition to that, the Strategic Communication department of the EEAS and its 'Task Forces' claim from themselves to “contribute to effective and fact-based communication, countering disinformation, narrative-positioning and the strengthening of the overall media environment and civil society in their corresponding regions” (European External Action Service (EEAS), n. d.).

Then, in 2018, the European Commission initiated three approaches: ‘The Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation, a European Approach’; The 2018 EU ‘Code of Practice on Disinformation’; and the ‘Action Plan against Disinformation’. The extent to which the European Union acknowledges the threat of disinformation and the actions it intends to take (complementing the General Data Protection Regulation) can be inferred from the comprehensive communication line.

From that point, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic (‘Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation - Getting the Facts Right’) and considering the results from evaluating the Infodemic's impact through the Code of Practice (‘Assessment of the Code of Practice on Disinformation - Achievements and Areas for Further Improvement’), stronger measures were developed (‘Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation – Getting the Facts Right’), leading to the update of the updated Code of Practice in 2022.

According to the different documents, the strategy of the European Union against disinformation is initially evaluated based on EU Soft Law.

Table 14

EU soft law against disinformation

Date	Name	Type	Institution
From 2010 (After Lisbon Treaty)	Strategic Communication Department EEAS	Institution-based / EU Department	EEAS
19.03.2015	StratCom Task Force (The East Strategic Communication Task Force). Two additional tasks forces: the Western Balkans Task Force & Task Force South (2015 & 2018)	Institution-based / EU Department	EEAS
03.03.2017	Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and ‘Fake News’, Disinformation and Propaganda	EU Soft Law	European Council
13.11.2017	Set-up of a Commission of High-Level Expert Group for considering the extensive consultations with citizens and stakeholders	Advisory body	European Commission
26.04.2018	Tackling Online Disinformation, a European Approach (Communication)	EU Soft Law	European Commission
16.06.2018	The 2018 EU Code of Practice on Disinformation	EU Soft Law	European Commission
05.12.2018	The Action Plan against Disinformation	EU Soft Law	European Commission & High Representative
15.03.2019	Establishment of Rapid Alert System (set out in the Action Plan against Disinformation)	EU tool	EEAS
10.06.2020	Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation - Getting the Facts Right	EU Soft Law	European Commission
24.07.2020	EU Security Union Strategy (Communication)	EU Soft Law	European Commission
01.08.2020 - 01.04.2022	Covid-19 Disinformation Monitoring Program (set out in the ‘Tackling Covid-19 disinformation – Getting the facts right’)	EU Soft Law	European Commission

10.09.2020	Assessment of the Code of Practice on Disinformation - Achievements and Areas for Further Improvement	EU Soft Law	European Commission (Staff Working Document)
30.09.2020	Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 (Communication)		European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
03.12.2020	European Democracy Action Plan (Communication)	EU Soft Law	European Commission
26.05.2021	Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation – Getting the facts rights	EU Soft Law	European Commission
16.06.2022	The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation	EU Soft Law	European Commission
12.12.2023	On Defense of Democracy (Communication)	EU Soft Law	European Commission
11.03.2024	Legislation on the Transparency of Political Advertising	EU Soft Law	European Commission
27.05.2025	EU Toolbox to Counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)	EU Soft Law	European Commission

Note: European Commission, 2017, 3. November; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b; European Commission, 2018c; European Commission, 2019, 15. März; European Commission, 2020a; European Commission, 2020b; European Commission, 2020c; European Commission, 2020d; European Commission, 2021a; European Commission, 2021b; European Commission, 2022; United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression et al., 2017; European External Action Service (EEAS), 2019

5.2. Evaluation of EU Soft Law Against Disinformation

In general, it can be stated that the European Union has acknowledged disinformation as a substantial threat. The broad areas in which disinformation must be combated are clearly identified. A holistic approach by the European Commission (see e.g., 2018a; 2018c; 2020d) is evident, considering the various sectors affected by disinformation and from where it needs to be addressed. This approach is not limited to elections and security issues, as highlighted by the EU Security Union Strategy, which focuses on security

concerns, including hybrid threats like disinformation campaigns. It also encompasses the educational perspective, as outlined in the EU's Digital Education Action Plan, and the media sector, as addressed by the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA), while also supporting the journalism sector.

Disinformation is recognised as a threat to democracy at large, and this concern is prominently highlighted with significant chapters dedicated solely to the topic of disinformation in the 'European Democracy Action Plan' and the Communication on the Defense of Democracy, both published in 2023. Also, the EU's analytical perspective is evident, as noted in the Communication of the latter:

“Disinformation stems from societal and economic changes, and the impact of disinformation varies across societies, influenced by factors such as levels of education, the strength of democratic culture, trust in institutions, the inclusiveness of electoral systems, the role of money in politics, and social and economic inequalities.” (European Commission, 2018a, p. 4)

The European Commission, in its fight against disinformation, strengthens its institutions, such as the EEAS, particularly enhancing the strategic communication department (see, e.g., European Commission, 2018a; 2018c; 2020d; 2023). Moreover, the European Union is implementing new measures, notably the Rapid Alert System at the EEAS, to address disinformation campaigns swiftly and proactively (European Commission, 2018c). Additionally, the European Commission is making use of its EU budget, announcing EU funds for e.g. new technologies to combat disinformation (see e.g., European Commission, 2018a; 2018c; 2020d).

Another significant area of action of the EU is its diplomacy. The European Commission is tackling this area, for instance, by promoting best-practice sharing in fighting disinformation within the EU neighbourhood (see e.g., European Commission, 2020b). Furthermore, the European Commission is mindful of its communication, indicating, for example, that both the European Commission and Parliament aim to invest more effort in communicating about values and policies. This is coupled with advice suggesting that member states should do the same (see e.g., European Commission, 2018c). The aspect

of communication, especially regarding the Regulation on Transparency of Political Advertisement, will be explicitly addressed later on. Finally, the European Commission is also supporting independent initiatives, especially the fact-checking initiative EDMO. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

It becomes immediately clear that the European Commission is taking digital platforms to task, seeing significant regulatory potential here, with its EU Soft Law (2018 and 2022 Code of Practice) leading to EU Hard Law, the Digital Services Act. When the Code of Practice on Disinformation was established in 2018, its key areas included 'Scrutiny of Ad Placements', 'Political Advertising and Issue-based Advertising', 'Integrity of Services', 'Empowering Consumers', and 'Empowering the Research Community' (European Commission, 2018b). However, according to the detailed Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation – Getting the facts right, issues identified included “inconsistent and incomplete application of the Code across platforms and Member States, limitations intrinsic to the self-regulatory nature of the Code, as well as gaps in the coverage of the Code’s commitments” (European Commission, 2021a, p. 1). These shortcomings were then addressed, for instance, through the implementation of clear Key Performance Indicators and a strengthened monitoring system. The final 2022 Code of Practice is more comprehensive and explicit. The commitments are numbered, in total 13, each comprising many specific measures. Moreover, the area of 'Empowering the Fact-Checking Community' has been added (European Commission, 2022). Still, the commitments from its signatories, which aim to support the European Commission's efforts to combat disinformation, represent a pledge of “good faith” among them, based on a “transparent and honest declaration of their intentions” (European Commission, 2018b, p. 3). Evaluation data from 2022 could not be found, therefore, the effectiveness of the Code remains uncertain.

This attempt by the EU to regulate the platforms is unsurprising as they have become arenas for significant public discourse and, consequently, for the spread of disinformation campaigns. The collaborative effort with these platforms is vital, given that the institutions themselves do not have the same level of access to data or control over the digital environment as private platforms do. Given that the European Union holds exclusive competence in matters of trade and competition, it can enact laws for major

platforms that directly affect each member state. However, apart from the EU Hard Law, which will be more precisely be discussed in the following chapter, the question of the EU's effective capacity to act against disinformation arises. Because, aside from EU soft law, which relies heavily on advocacy and voluntary commitment by both online platforms and Member States, the EU has limited top-down authority to effectively address the problem of disinformation within Member States. In areas where the EU does not have exclusive rights, namely in the matter of elections or how to handle resilience building of the citizens through education, these fall under the sovereignty of the member states. Therefore, it is evident that the European Commission (see e.g. 2018a; 2018c; 2020d; 2023) places a strong emphasis on advising or emphasising them. Especially mentioned in the European Action Plan on Democracy (2020) to improve the member states “capacity to counter disinformation” and emphasises the importance to pool information on disinformation and to work together collaborative. However, it is certainly questionable whether member states with governments with Eurosceptic tendencies, such as Hungary, would actually heed this advice, especially if they benefit from disinformation themselves, rather than abstaining from it altogether.

In this context, it is crucial to highlight that all documents from 2018 address the risks of disinformation to European elections as well as to elections in member states, with specific reference to 2019. However, it was observed and shown in chapter 3 that Eurosceptic parties have grown in size. Even with the existing framework, the European Union is setting the course with the Digital Services Act and the legislation on the transparency of political advertising to prepare for the elections to the European Parliament in 2024, as written in the ‘Communication on the Defense of Democracy’. In the latter, regarding disinformation, the challenge of foreign interference / authoritarian regimes is highlighted. A too strong focus on the fact that authoritarian regimes deliberately use disinformation campaigns to destabilise EU elections overlooks the question of why people fall for disinformation in the first place. After all, voter turnout has not decreased in the European Parliament elections¹⁰, which shows that people are interested in European politics and want to get involved.

¹⁰ In general, but voter turnout varies from member state to member state.

As demonstrated in part 1 of this research, Euroscepticism is, according to Hooghe and Marks (2009), most intense on the TAN side, where nationalist values prevail. Furthermore, it was shown that populists claim their own versions of truth (Massa & Anzera, 2022), leading their communication to often be fueled with disinformation or conspiracy narratives. However, one would be naïve if they argued that Eurosceptic parties grow stronger and larger solely because all voters fall for their disinformation. It may be that nowadays TAN parties mobilise a significant voter potential that the mainstream parties have missed, namely voters with a more authoritarian attitude, as is apparently the case for 20-30% of people in Germany (Backovsky, 2022). Germany serves as a prime example here, as the AfD displays significant Eurosceptic tendencies (as demonstrated in the previous chapter). Commission Vice President Věra Jourová has labelled the AfD as the “biggest concern” in relation to the upcoming European election because the party is “adopting Russian narratives” (Vela, 2024). She stated, “But in case the AfD is very successful in the European elections, just the arithmetic implies that it could lead to considerable change, so of course, this is a source of concern” (ibid., 2024). The fact that the AfD mobilises voters could be due to the assumption that those voters are susceptible to the disinformation spread by Eurosceptics because they are frustrated with the established parties that have been in power in recent years. This frustration may stem from perceived unaddressed grievances, policy failures, or a general disenchantment with the political status quo, making them more open to alternative narratives, even if those narratives are based on disinformation (see Hofmann, 2022). This assumption is also supported by the authors of TLDR in their broadcast from June 8, 2024. Thereby, they address the question of why young voters from Generation Z are voting for the far right, especially in Germany and France. Their assumption is that these young voters choose the far right to be “anti-establishment,” as eurosceptic parties position themselves against the political elite.

However, these circumstances vary for each member state, starting on the regional level. In Germany, numerous issues lead back to its East-West division after the second World War. Trust in democracy is still lower in East Germany compared to West Germany, which plays into the hands of the AfD as potential voter support (Vorreyer, 2023). Prof. Dr. Oliver Decker summarises a study result from the EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2 as follows, referring to people living in Eastern Germany:

„Ein Viertel fühlt sich als Verlierer der Wende, nicht mal die Hälfte möchte sich als Gewinner bezeichnen. Rückblickend ist die Zufriedenheit unter den Befragten mit ihrem Leben in der DDR hoch.“ (EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken und die Unzufriedenheit mit der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut, 2023)

In addition, people who grew up in the GDR or had contact with it also had a completely different understanding of Europe and a different political education. Therefore, the question of whether people become susceptible to disinformation is not just a matter of education. The question must be asked how mainstream parties can engage voter potential that yearns for authoritarian, Eurosceptic tendencies or people who are not enthusiastic about the EU project due to a different socialization.

Furthermore, the EU emphasises the need to strengthen pluralistic journalism and the media landscape regarding the challenge of disinformation, as the European Commission claims in the European Democracy Action Plan: “By providing the public with reliable information, independent media play an important role in the fight against disinformation and the manipulation of democratic debate” (European Commission, 2020d). However, the question remains whether classical journalism and its media landscape with its scandalization tendencies and polarization is even contributing to a tense societal situation so that the citizens crave for change and simple solutions. One example of the spread of Eurosceptic disinformation by the free press became clear with Brexit. Following this argument, according to Blumler & Kavanagh (1999), the public is shaped by a “media-constructed public sphere” (p. 210) with an increasing supply of information, which leads to competition for attention in a differentiated media system. Here, journalists strive for high news value, aiming to report on or uncover scandals (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Eisenegger, 2005). This makes the political communication arena more turbulent, less predictable, and increasingly difficult to control (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, as cited by Koch, 2020). Therefore, the question also arises to what extent the free press landscape contributes to a loss of control among social groups, making people susceptible to disinformation, as numerous renowned psychologists and researchers have already shown.

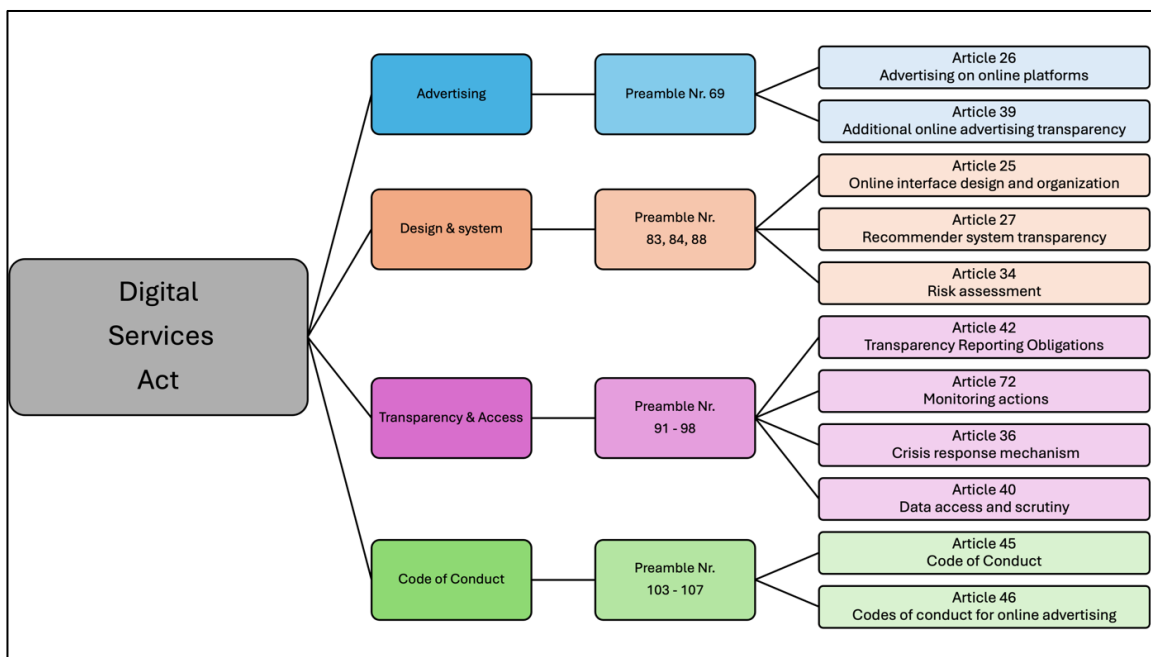
6. European Hard Law

6.1. The Digital Services Act (DSA)

The Digital Services Act (DSA) is an EU regulation applicable to digital intermediary services such as internet access providers, social networks, online marketplaces, and search engines, as well as other so-called access, caching, and hosting providers operating within the EU. The DSA differentiates in its regulations between small and large companies and providers. It came into effect on November 16, 2022, and obligations were required to be implemented by February 17, 2024. Non-compliance can result in fines of up to 6% of the global annual turnover. The DSA aims to create a “safe, predictable, and trusted online environment” by addressing the spread of illegal content and the societal risks associated with the dissemination of disinformation, as stated in its objectives (European Commission, 2022). Although the term ‘disinformation’ may not be explicitly mentioned within the articles, the preamble clarifies that various articles are designed to tackle the challenge of disinformation. It is important to note that disinformation and fake news are not explicitly regulated as illegal, therefore, explicit rules are provided for platforms on how to handle disinformation. These rules and the related articles to them are visualised in illustration 1.

Illustration 1

The Digital Services Act



Four areas of action have been identified—Advertising, Design & System, Transparency & Access, and Code of Conduct—in which intermediary systems must become operational, or through which articles address the problem of disinformation. For example, according to preamble point 69, advertising-related targeting techniques can have negative impacts and lead to societal harms through disinformation campaigns. This issue is addressed, among others, in Article 26, (1) Advertising on Online Platforms: “Providers of online platforms that present advertisements on their online interfaces shall ensure that, for each specific advertisement presented to each individual recipient, the recipients of the service are able to identify, in a clear, concise, and unambiguous manner and in real time, the following: (a) that the information is an advertisement, including through prominent markings, which might follow standards pursuant to Article 44; (b) the natural or legal person on whose behalf the advertisement is presented; (c) the natural or legal person who paid for the advertisement if that person is different from the natural or legal person referred to in point (b); (d) meaningful information directly and easily accessible from the advertisement about the main parameters used to determine the recipient to whom the advertisement is presented and, where applicable, about how to change those parameters.”

6.2. Evaluation of EU Hard Law Against Disinformation

The Digital Services Act serves as uniform regulations across all EU member states, as mentioned in the preamble, highlighting that divergent rules among member states could potentially harm the internal market. Therefore, the Commission calls within the DSA upon member states to refrain from implementing further regulatory measures in this specific area. Instead, a top-down approach is evident with the introduction of the Digital Services Act, mandating member states to designate Digital Services Coordinators. According to Article 49 (Competent Authorities and Digital Services Coordinators), each member state must select one or more official bodies to oversee online service providers, ensuring compliance with the regulations. One of these bodies will be appointed as the country's Digital Services Coordinator, responsible for overseeing adherence to regulations and enforcement within the nation, aside from any areas assigned to other bodies. These Digital Services Coordinators from each member state form the European Board for Digital Services (the "Board", see Article 61), chaired by the European Commission. According to Article 51 (Powers of Digital Services Coordinators), these

Coordinators have the authority to investigate and enforce regulations for online service providers, among other powers.

It is important to note that with the enactment of the law at the European level, the infrastructure must first be regulated at the national level. For example, the implementation of the DSA at the national level in Germany was decided on March 21, 2024 (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024). In Germany, the DSA and the infrastructural changes are particularly located at the Federal Network Agency (Bundesnetzagentur, n.d.). This entails personnel changes amounting to several million euros impacting Germany. Additionally, the ‘Bundeskriminalamt’ is required to intensify its efforts. Germany is chosen as an example here because the DSA was already included in the coalition agreement, and the governing party, FDP, had it in their election program. In Germany, thanks to this agenda-setting, effective implementation of the DSA is anticipated. However, this will not be the case in every member state as they face varying bureaucratic challenges and differ in their effectiveness in implementing these changes. Accordingly, the December 2023 transposition report from the European Commission presents the outcomes of monitoring the implementation of Single Market rules across Member States (European Commission, 2023a). It reveals persistent issues, including a transposition deficit (the gap between the number of Single Market directives adopted by the EU and the extent to which each member state has implemented these directives) and a conformity deficit (the percentage of directives that have been incorrectly implemented). For instance, member states such as Bulgaria and Poland still exhibit high transposition deficits with regard to Single Market directives.

As of now, there is no information available on the effectiveness of the Digital Services Act. However, a press release from the European Union dated December 18, 2023, announced that proceedings based on the DSA had been initiated against Platform X (Digital Services Act: Kommission Eröffnet Förmliches Verfahren Gegen X, 2023). The case concerns potential violations related to “risk management, content moderation, dark patterns, advertising transparency, and data access for researchers under the Digital Services Act”. This demonstrates that the EU is already actively enforcing the DSA.

In the previous chapter on European Soft Law, the importance of collaboration with digital platforms was highlighted, considering that the European Commission does not

possess the same level of access to data or control over the digital environment as private entities. However, this dynamic shifts with the introduction of the Digital Services Act, which mandates intermediary systems to comply with regulations. Failure to adhere to these rules may result in substantial fines. However, the question of intervention in private platforms poses a fundamental challenge, especially within the context of the European Union, traditionally seen as a liberal project that minimally interferes in economic affairs. For more than twenty years, the European Union had largely avoided imposing regulations in this domain. Nevertheless, following the introduction of the E-commerce Directive in 2000, the landscape of the internet has experienced substantial changes. The profound effects of digital transformation have given rise to a new digital reality marked by a certain level of anarchy. These developments require a critical reassessment of existing regulatory frameworks to ensure they effectively address the intricacies of contemporary digital life, protect the public interest, and foster competitive fairness. Therefore, the Digital Services Act marks a significant shift in this approach by imposing more substantial regulations on the private sector. This change is understandable, as the online world has evolved into a kind of second public sphere, one that has previously operated with a degree of anarchy.

Moreover, the private sector and various platforms hold significant importance in today's digitalised world. Some of them have been classified as gatekeepers under the Digital Markets Act. A company is designated as a gatekeeper if it provides a core platform service to more than 45 million monthly active end users established or located in the EU and to more than 10,000 yearly active business users established in the EU. This category includes companies like Meta and Microsoft. Gatekeepers have evolved into transnational actors, engaging in cross-border relations and becoming almost equal partners to states. They exert substantial control over the digital ecosystem, influencing everything from the development of software and hardware to the algorithms that dictate the visibility of content across vast networks. Voluntary initiatives such as the Code of Practice aim to ensure these entities fulfil their responsibilities and combat disinformation. Nevertheless, the principle of taking on socio-political responsibility as a platform should be in the companies' own interest. The Digital Services Act highlights the political responsibility of these transnational firms, emphasising the voluntary implementation of a Code of Practice against disinformation. Promoting democratic values and limiting the influence

of authoritarian regimes aligns with the fundamental interests of these actors. Democracy and an open society are prerequisites for successful business operations and are threatened by disinformation and authoritarian interference. For instance, Russia is pursuing plans for its own controlled internet, and China restricts platforms and internet access within its borders. This is where Bohnen's (2020) concept of Corporate Political Responsibility comes into play. Hereby, ethical and strategic obligations of companies to engage in and address political and social issues that impact their operations and stakeholders are meant. This involves proactive efforts to promote democratic values and thereby ensuring a stable and conducive environment for business activities.

One initiative to fulfil Corporate Political Responsibility could involve protecting stakeholders and users while proactively embracing political responsibility. Thereby, gatekeepers could implement psychological inoculation instruments against disinformation on their platforms, as suggested by researchers van der Linden and Roozenbeek (2020). The authors found that "serious games can be leveraged as a novel psychological intervention to combat fake news across the political spectrum." Additionally, gatekeepers could employ methods or gamification techniques to promote analytical and critical thinking skills. O'Mahony et al. (2023) discovered that such approaches are effective in changing conspiracy beliefs.

In Chapters 5 and 6, EU soft and hard law against disinformation were analysed. Various initiatives under EU soft law were highlighted. It was also shown that the Digital Services Act as EU hard law can be derived from EU soft law. However, the EU possesses another lever to legitimise its policies and counter disinformation: its own communication strategies. The role of the European Commission's communication will be briefly outlined in the following chapter and evaluated based on its scope of action within the media environment, considering new regulations and expert recommendations.

7. The EU's communication

7.1. The Communication of the European Commission

Political communication from the European Union is extremely fragmented. Not only do all institutions have their own communication departments, but so do the groups from the Parliament and, of course, politicians themselves. Speaking with one voice is challenging since various topics are often the responsibility of the Commission's President, the High Representative, or the President of the Council of the EU, and there are recurring difficulties in assigning responsibility. However, this chapter focuses on the communication of the European Commission, which is responsible for "explaining EU policies to outside audiences" (European Commission, n.d.). Consequently, the Commission has a dedicated department, the Directorate-General for Communication. Its tasks range from "defining and monitoring the Commission's corporate image" to "communicating to the media and public about political priorities and topics of political importance and/or public interest" (European Commission, n.d.). In its Strategic Plan for 2020 – 2024, the communication department addresses the issue of disinformation (European Commission, 2020d). Thereby, the strategy against disinformation is described as follows:

"In this context, DG Communication's role in the fight against disinformation is substantial. Ranging from the production of communication products (including videos and social media posts) to the coordination of the Commission's network against disinformation, DG Communication will continue fighting disinformation, debunking myths, and informing citizens about how they can protect themselves."

(European Commission, 2020d, p. 8).

In general, the European Commission's communication has shifted from a one-way to a two-way model, meaning it not only sends out messages but also receives them (Van Brussel, 2014). However, this is merely an adaptation to new media dynamics where the roles of sender and recipient are interchangeable. The Commission's move towards more interaction and exchange with citizens is evident in initiatives such as 'The Europe for

Citizens and the new Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programs’, ‘The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI)’, or the ‘What Europe Does for Me’ website (Iskra, 2023). Bearing this in mind, this chapter focuses more intently on the social media presence of the Commission, particularly in response to the rise of disinformation online.

7.2. Evaluation of the EU’s Communication Against Disinformation

The Commission has a significant reach across various social media platforms. During an expert briefing in March 2024, the Head of Social Media at the European Commission highlighted that LinkedIn, in particular, is effective in terms of increasing reach. A critical question concerns the audience on LinkedIn: does it primarily consist of the European "bubble," including many employees from EU institutions? This discussion leads to the concept of echo chambers, defined as “the creation of (polarised) groups of users based on access to similar news sources” (Bruno et al., 2022, p. 2). Social media algorithms tend to keep users within information bubbles, consistently suggesting similar content, which can lead to information self-affirmation. The challenge for the Commission is to break out of these echo chambers to reach those who are sceptical or believe in disinformation.

In this context, questions also arise about whether the EU, with regulations like the Transparency Regulation on Political Advertisements, might be inadvertently limiting its outreach. Under this regulation, political actors and parties can only place political advertisements if users have previously given their consent. This limitation means that it can be difficult for democratic parties and EU communication to reach people who are critical of the political establishment and from whom they want to win back their potential voters. Additionally, there is concern that some platforms may choose to limit the reach of political content through algorithmic restrictions, posing a risk of reinforcing echo chambers. The question remains whether these approaches might further alienate the political establishment from broader segments of the population.

Furthermore, various expert briefings and interviews have revealed that the European Commission consistently treats the issue of disinformation as a 'new' development and employs debunking methods, particularly on social media platforms. A critical question is whether the Commission's efforts to expose the disinformation will also reach the voter groups that support the Eurosceptic, extreme political groups in the European Parliament.

As shown in Part I of this thesis, these groups are generally opposed to the political elite and inherently sceptical of any communication emanating from the Commission. However, debunking is not a new tactic, considering the Euromyth Blog as an example. Nevertheless, the question arises of how strategically the Commission is employing prebunking, which involves proactive rather than reactive measures. When questioned in expert interviews, the communication team could only refer to the Strategic Communication efforts of the European External Action Service (EEAS).

It can generally be assumed that the more EU policies affect the member states, the more profound their impact on individuals and the sovereignty of the member states—often restricted by top-down politics—the more national media will cover these issues. In such cases, the added value of the policy should always be communicated, which also reflects the quality of communication from the Commission. However, if the European Parliament adopts stronger Eurosceptic tendencies and debates become increasingly polarised, this becomes a question of majority relations or who shouts louder. Additionally, it matters how the news media report these issues and which narratives they choose to amplify. As demonstrated in Part I of this thesis during the Brexit case, journalists and news media can themselves spread Eurosceptic disinformation and provide a platform for such actors. In this context, Lewis (2016) can be quoted stating that “in some areas of coverage, the default position of reporting claim and counterclaim with equal weight has reached its limits.” This suggests that journalism may also be experiencing a certain crisis, which extends beyond just a matter of the Commission's press department (e.g. through the publication of effective press releases or the presence of press contacts themselves). The European Commission aims to strengthen journalism through its soft law approaches. It remains to be seen how the media landscape will evolve and whether this will have an impact. Clearly, the responsibility to counter disinformation lies not only with social media platforms but also with journalists and news media themselves.

Last but not least, conspiracy theories represent a form of disinformation. Nwokora (2023) identifies three strategies through which the political elite can respond to conspiracy narratives: ignore, rebut, or embrace. Ignoring involves simply not addressing the theories, rebutting entails refuting them, and embracing means adopting them for one's

own use. However, Schlipphak et al. (2022) have observed that in countries where state actors use conspiracy theories as a political communication strategy, political distrust tends to be less pronounced. Despite this, employing conspiracy theories contradicts democratic values and is therefore not advisable for democratic states. Instead, to counter authoritarian disinformation and conspiracy narratives, Brand (2021) suggests that democracies should leverage their comparative advantages over autocratic regimes by emphasising democratic values and strengths. While this recommendation might sound like a campaign for liberal values, it could also serve as the foundation to establish a European identity and confidently communicate it externally, as recommended by Waechter (2019). Hereby, the author explains, “why moderate politicians find it difficult to defend the assets of integration in a public arena increasingly dominated by populist discourse: The European Union epitomises political complexity, the importance of institutional checks and balances, the limits to direct expression of popular sovereignty and the dissolution of national identities in a collective framework” (Waechter 2019, p. 30). This is the reason that

“among today's citizens (...) the EU doesn't appeal sufficiently to the emotions of the citizens and thus becomes an easy victim of false allegations, as demonstrated by the Brexit debate.” (Waechter, 2019, p. 31)

The emotional narrative of a European identity could bring about a change in this context. However, it is important to consider that the political will to create a European identity could also trigger more Euroscepticism, with TAN parties polarising the issue. Consequently, a European identity could be perceived as a threat to national identity and sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the "emotional deficit" identified by Waechter (2019) in his article forms a transition to the topic of the European Commission's linguistics. This deficit is therefore also reflected in the language of the European Commission's press releases. Rauh (2020), in an analysis of press releases from the European Commission covering the period from 1985 to 2020, finds that the Commission has consistently used, and continues to use, very complex language, specialised jargon, and a nominal style that obfuscates political action.

This technocratic style of communication might undermine the effectiveness of democratic communication by making information less accessible and understandable to the general public, even though these communications will be processed by the press. Such an approach could potentially alienate citizens and exacerbate political disengagement rather than fostering an informed and engaged electorate. Therefore, while it is important to promote European values, there is also a pressing need for the European Commission to simplify its communication to ensure clarity and broader comprehension.

In Part II, the EU's measures against disinformation were comprehensively presented and evaluated with a focus on Euroscepticism. The following chapter 8 therefore discusses the extent to which the research questions can be answered and what future prospects result from this.

8. Final Evaluation: Limitations, Findings and Shortcomings

Before drawing a conclusion, this chapter critically discusses the results relating to the research questions, starting with addressing the limitations of this research. Based on the results and identified shortcomings, possible ways to enhance the fight against Eurosceptic disinformation are provided.

8.1. Limitations of this Research

Firstly, in Part I of this research, Eurosceptic disinformation has been analysed and presented as a subject of academic research. The post-functionalist theory of Hooghe and Marks was used to explain Eurosceptic tendencies within the EU. It is based on the authors' premise that the political elite has shifted from a permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus amongst the public. This raises three questions: First, whether there is indeed a constraining dissensus due to the tangible impact of EU policies on people (see the research on multilevel governance) or whether the increasing politicization of EU issues awakens authoritarian tendencies in society that make a certain degree of Euroscepticism natural. Secondly, whether voters are 'falling for' the disinformation of Eurosceptic parties or if they are genuinely attracted to the ideology these parties represent. And thirdly, whether the prevailing constraining dissensus is due to the fact that European voters are simply dissatisfied with the policies of the political elite at EU level or whether there is a lack of acceptance for political authority.

Furthermore, it has been shown that Eurosceptic disinformation is used as a tool of political communication especially by populists who are primarily located in the TAN segment of Hooghe and Marks' GAL/TAN dimension. This finding was supported by analysing the key event of Brexit, which was driven by right-wing populist parties as part of their campaign strategy. Other examples could have been cited, such as the referendum on the European Constitution in France. However, these were omitted as a further analysis of a key event would have gone beyond the scope of the research. Furthermore, the key event of COVID-19 was crucial to shed light on the digital sphere of Eurosceptic disinformation and illustrate how this disinformation, primarily spread via social media, undermines the soft power of the EU (e.g. disinformation against vaccination campaigns and health initiatives).

Overall, it has been shown that Euroscepticism has increased in the European Parliament, particularly since 1994, which aligns with Hooghe and Marks theory. This research is published shortly after the 2024 EU Parliament elections, which marked a new peak in Euroscepticism. The evaluation revealed that Euroscepticism is not only evident within political groups but also among individual political parties, particularly those on the TAN side. However, the data used for evaluating the various parties dates back significantly, in some cases to 2006. It is possible that the political orientation of these parties has changed since. According to a recent inquiry (in May 2024) with the Chapel Hill Survey, the institute plans to conduct a new survey this fall after the EP elections, with the aim of releasing new data by early 2025. Furthermore, Euroscepticism can certainly be identified using stronger parameters than simply "opposition to the European integration project."

However, still concerning the Chapel Hill Survey and the classification of parties opposing the European integration project as undertaken in this research, the question arises whether parties with a value close to 3.5 can even be classified as Eurosceptic. Therefore, when evaluating the electoral content of the six largest Eurosceptic parties in the EP from 2023, it was found that the Italian party MoVimento 5 Stelle, with its score of 3.47, did not exhibit a Eurosceptic stance or disseminate corresponding disinformation in its extensive campaign program. Furthermore, based on the evaluation of election programs and speeches, it was revealed that different parties in the member states campaign in varied ways. This thesis already critically noted that the examined campaign materials might not be representative for identifying Eurosceptic disinformation. In addition, automated linguistic tools could be used in the assessment of disinformation reports to ensure that they are indeed disinformation or conspiracy narratives.

Moreover, the EDMO monthly fact-checking briefings, which were also evaluated to identify Eurosceptic disinformation narratives, can only capture a certain amount of disinformation spread in the EU, even though they have partner organisations across the EU that report disinformation to EDMO. This raises the question of how comprehensive monitoring of Eurosceptic disinformation in the EU can be achieved.

In the second part of this thesis, the EU's soft and hard law as well as the communication strategies of the European Commission were critically evaluated. While it was relatively easier to examine and analyse a single regulation in detail for hard law, doing so for EU

soft law, which encompasses over 19 initiatives, proved to be more challenging. It could have been beneficial to analyse one or two initiatives of the EU Commission in detail. The same applies to analysing the Commission's communication. For instance, press releases or debunked disinformation narratives in the Euromyth Blog or on social media could have been critically analysed in detail. A linguistic analysis could have been conducted here, as linguistics is a crucial field that addresses disinformation and conspiracy narratives. Furthermore, it could have been highlighted and critically evaluated which initiatives are currently funded by the EU budget that research disinformation or develop innovations in the fight against Eurosceptic disinformation.

8.2. Findings of the Research Questions

Based on the findings in Part I of this research, it can be established that the predominant disinformation narratives surrounding the EU that contribute to reinforcing Euroscepticism in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections focus on spreading false information or conspiracy narratives about the European Union's decision-making processes and actions or behaviour. This disinformation also targets the European Union's soft power, directly opposing European values, legislation, enlargement projects, or the communication efforts of the European Commission to legitimise these aspects. The predominant disinformation key topics in this disinformation include Ukraine, climate change, COVID-19, migration, Israel-Hamas, and LGBTQI+ issues. Therefore, the second research question has been answered.

However, the research question of whether the EU's efforts against disinformation are sufficient to curb growing Euroscepticism cannot be easily answered. Firstly, examining the results of the 2024 European Parliament elections, it is evident that Euroscepticism has continued to strengthen. It has been demonstrated that Eurosceptic disinformation can impact voter behaviour. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether voters are swayed by the disinformation spread by Eurosceptic parties because they believe it, because they agree with the underlying ideology, or because they wish to express their protest with the political establishment. Nonetheless, when it comes to disinformation, the EU combats it comprehensively with a holistic approach. These instruments (soft and hard EU law and the European Commission's communication) were outlined and critically assessed in this paper, with shortcomings identified. Based on these critical evaluations and the

identification of shortcomings, possible ways to enhance the fight against disinformation from Eurosceptic actors are provided in the next subchapter.

8.3. Remaining Shortcomings in the EU's Fight Against Disinformation

The EU institutionalised its fight against disinformation in 2015 and has taken decisive measures, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, utilising both EU soft and hard law, as well as its own communication efforts by the Commission. Notably, the most significant examples of EU soft law are the Action Plan on Disinformation and the Code of Practice on Disinformation, with a particularly prominent focus on platform regulation (additionally, it is noteworthy that these efforts extend into EU hard law, namely the Digital Services Act). The EU's efforts to regulate platforms are crucial due to their role in public discourse and disinformation, but the effectiveness of these efforts is limited by reliance on soft law and the sovereignty of member states in areas like elections and education, necessitating a focus on collaboration and advisory measures. This is particularly relevant in overarching soft law initiatives such as the European Democracy Action Plan and the Communication on Defense of Democracy, which also address disinformation. However, not every member state is interested in adhering to these measures, especially if the government itself is Eurosceptic, as is the case in Hungary.

Additionally, it was highlighted that the major issue lies in voters' susceptibility to disinformation, which varies across member states for different reasons. Eurosceptic parties like Germany's AfD gain strength not solely from disinformation but also by mobilising voters with authoritarian tendencies or those frustrated with 'mainstream' parties. This is influenced by historical and regional factors, such as the East-West divide in Germany. Therefore, it is up to the member states themselves to comprehensively address the fight against disinformation and understand the underlying reasons for voters' susceptibility. Only then can political initiatives, such as comprehensive political education programs, be developed. It is also crucial that the member states themselves uphold democratic and liberal values.

Furthermore, the EU emphasises the importance of strengthening pluralistic journalism and the media landscape to combat disinformation, but it remains uncertain whether traditional journalism in the digital age, with its tendencies toward scandalization and polarization, contributes to societal tension and a public craving for change, potentially

making citizens more susceptible to disinformation. Therefore, addressing the challenge of disinformation must also involve the media sector, which carries political responsibility. This is in the media sector's own interest, as a free press and the freedom of expression are only possible in democratic countries like the EU member states. An authoritarian shift, such as the measures implemented by the PiS party in Poland, can only harm these freedoms. Here, the government has used its regulatory powers to intimidate and penalise independent media organisations, as, for example, the state broadcasting authority delayed the renewal of TVN24's broadcasting licence, creating uncertainty and pressure on independent journalists (euronews, 2021). However, the question remains whether quality journalism can manage, in a polarised political sphere, to present reporting with equal weight given to claims and counterclaims. It remains to be seen whether the journalism sector can achieve this.

Moreover, this research demonstrated that the EU's hard law against disinformation, specifically the Digital Services Act, is a development from the preceding EU soft law. The approach of regulating platforms continues, now through a single market regulation, which is binding for all member states and thus has a real impact. This raises the immediate question of the implementation of the recent Digital Services Act by the member states. For it to be successful, the transposition deficit (the gap between the number of single market directives adopted by the EU and the extent to which each member state has implemented these directives) must be significantly limited. The fight against disinformation must be carried out with equal rigor and effective implementation across all member states. In addition, a method should be defined to evaluate the effectiveness of the Digital Services Act.

The approach to regulating platforms in a more or less anarchic digital world is understandable, particularly as the Digital Markets Act, which complements the Digital Services Act, moves towards anti-trust policy. Additionally, the Digital Services Act specifically addresses the issue of hate speech, which constitutes criminal offenses. However, the European Union is traditionally viewed as a liberal project that minimally interferes in economic affairs, and this form of economic intervention is unusual. It would be more effective if transnational companies and the European economy became aware of their social responsibilities and engaged in Corporate Political Responsibility (Bohnen, 2020). After all, they can only operate freely in a free market economy with democratic

institutions - a situation that is particularly jeopardised by the influence of authoritarian actors who spread Eurosceptic disinformation.

Besides that, it has been shown that the European Commission, as the main communicator of the EU, primarily communicates with citizens on social media, with LinkedIn gaining increasing popularity. However, the risk of echo chambers has been highlighted, which poses a challenge for the Commission to reach users who are Eurosceptic or believe in disinformation. Furthermore, the new Transparency Regulation for Political Advertising makes the challenge of breaking through the echo chambers and reaching Eurosceptic voters even more difficult. Additionally, some platforms are limiting the reach of political content through algorithmic restrictions, further risking the reinforcement of echo chambers. Moreover, it has been shown that the EU Commission employs debunking methods to address disinformation, particularly on social media platforms. However, to effectively prevent disinformation, prebunking measures should also be utilised, as they can help build resilience against disinformation by pre-emptively exposing and debunking false narratives before they take hold.

Last but not least, as an instrument against the effects of false or misleading information disseminated by authoritarian states, Brand (2021) suggests that democracies should leverage their comparative advantages over autocratic regimes by emphasising democratic values and strengths. Instead of addressing conspiracy narratives, disinformation, or populist agitation, experts (see Waechter, 2019; Brand, 2021) suggest highlighting the advantages of the EU in a more emotional manner. One possible approach could be the creation of a European identity that reflects these values (Waechter, 2019). This would also counteract the technocratic language of the European Commission. However, creating a European identity could increase Euroscepticism, with TAN parties polarising the issue and viewing it as a threat to national identity and sovereignty. Therefore, a European identity should be implemented strategically and cautiously.

Conclusion

In this research, the EU's fight against disinformation to encounter Euroscepticism in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections was examined. Eurosceptic disinformation was defined as the false information disseminated by political actors to undermine the project of European integration, specifically designed to sow mistrust among the European political elite or mainstream parties. It is particularly utilised as a communication instrument by political actors on the extreme right wing party spectrum concerning economic factors, and within the traditionalism, authority, and nationalism (TAN) spectrum regarding non-economic factors. Furthermore, Eurosceptic disinformation is often fuelled by conspiracy narratives.

The evaluative research addressed the subordinate research question by identifying the predominant disinformation narratives surrounding the EU that contribute to reinforcing Euroscepticism during the 2024 European Parliament elections. These narratives primarily focus on spreading false information about the EU's decision-making processes, actions and behaviour, targeting the EU's soft power, and directly opposing European values, legislation, enlargement projects, and the communication efforts of the European Commission to legitimise these aspects. The key topics in this disinformation include Ukraine, climate change, Israel-Hamas, COVID-19, migration, and LGBTQI+ issues.

Furthermore, it was demonstrated that the main research question—whether the EU's efforts against disinformation are enough to curb growing Euroscepticism—is challenging to answer. It was found that Euroscepticism has steadily increased in the European Parliament since the post-Maastricht era, with Eurosceptic parties gaining strength in the 2024 European Parliament elections as well. Additionally, it was shown that Eurosceptic parties disseminate disinformation about the EU to promote their agendas, as seen in the Leave Campaign concerning Brexit. Despite the numerous initiatives by the EU to combat disinformation, including various efforts under soft and hard law, it can be concluded that the EU has already made extensive efforts to address disinformation, especially since the disinformation key event of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the EU's fight against Eurosceptic disinformation also shows

considerable shortcomings, particularly regarding voters' susceptibility to disinformation, the handling of non-voters, the implementation and effectiveness of the DSA and the commitment of independent players such as the media industry and companies. Based on the assumption that voters are susceptible to the Eurosceptic disinformation of the TAN parties, the author of this research proposes seven potential ways to enhance the fight against disinformation:

1. Member states' bottom-up approach: Member states should address the underlying reasons for voters' susceptibility to disinformation and develop comprehensive, region-specific initiatives to counter this susceptibility.
2. Media and journalism responsibility: The media sector should recognise its political responsibility and take measures to counteract polarisation and disinformation.
3. Digital Services Act implementation and effectiveness: All member states should ensure to rigorously implement the Digital Services Act and evaluate its effectiveness regularly.
4. Corporate Political Responsibility: Transnational companies and the European economy should engage in combating Eurosceptic disinformation proactively.
5. Strategic communication: The European Commission should develop a strategy aimed at breaking out of the echo chambers and focusing on political communication with non-voters and other groups.
6. Prebunking measures: The European Commission should incorporate prebunking measures into the strategic campaign against disinformation.
7. European Identity: The EU should create a European identity to emotionally highlight the advantages of the EU and counteract disinformation and populist rhetoric.

Given this context, the assumption of the author of this research is that the EU's fight against disinformation will succeed if these seven suggestions are adopted.

Generally, Eurosceptic disinformation challenges the legitimacy of the EU, especially during times of systemic rivalries. When focusing on Eurosceptic disinformation and examining the actors spreading it—parties with totalitarian, authoritarian, or nationalist ideologies—and recognising the interference of authoritarian regimes like Russia, it

becomes clear: The EU's fight against Euroscepticism is a battle of ideologies. On the one hand, there are 'mainstream parties' that support European values and favour European integration, and on the other hand, there are especially TAN parties that oppose the European integration project due to reasons of national identity. This raises the question of whether the EU, with its liberal ideology, will continue to sufficiently reach and engage people committed to it in the future.

Nevertheless, currently, the balance of power is clear, which can be illustrated by an example from the largest member state: Although the AfD is gaining strength in Germany, the mainstream parties collectively remain the largest. These parties, as stated in the 2021 coalition agreement, even advocate for a federal state of the EU (Föderaler Bundesstaat). However, European citizens need to see and feel the successes and advantages of the EU. This requires a bottom-up approach, starting at the local level. European citizens need to see and experience the tangible benefits that the EU brings to their communities and that are made possible by EU cohesion policy, one of the most important levers of European policy. To this end, the successes of cohesion policy and its contribution to the daily lives of citizens must be visibly and clearly communicated as a success story of the EU.

This much has been demonstrated in this research: Euroscepticism is here to stay. This issue extends beyond the European Parliament - where Eurosceptic parties can influence EU negotiations and hinder consensus - to the member states themselves and, consequently, to the European Council. Eurosceptic disinformation cannot be viewed in isolation; it requires a holistic approach. In times when the competition between the parties and ideologies is so intense, pro-European parties should not only work closer together, but also strategically address and better persuade citizens who are susceptible to Eurosceptic disinformation. This offers a perspective for future research on how pro-European parties within EU member states strategise in party competition, with the aim of better convincing voters, thereby curbing Euroscepticism and combating disinformation as a means of communication.

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Appendix

Appendix I: EDMO – General Information on Data

Date	Published	Briefing Nr.	Respondents	Articles	Title	EU	Ukraine	Climate Change	Covid-19	AI generated	Israel Hamas	Migrants	LGBTQI+
Apr 23	17.04.23	23	30	1.402	IS THE COVID-19 INFODEMIC FADING AWAY?		12%	9%	6%	4%	0%	0%	0%
May 23	15.06.23	24	28	1.361	DISINFORMATION RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE IS GROWING IN MAY AND SO IS THE RISK OF IT POLLUTING THE POLITICAL DEBATE	4%	11%	12%	7%	4%	0%	0%	0%
Jun 23	17.07.23	25	25	1.503	DURING THE PRIDE MONTH, DISINFORMATION ABOUT LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES GOES VIRAL IN THE EU	7%	11%	9%	5%	4%	0%	0%	0%

Jul 23	24. 08. 23	26	22	1.1 22	RIOTS IN FRANCE SPARK DISINFORM ATION AND XENOPHOB IA IN THE EU	4%	11%	9%	5%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Au g 23	18. 09. 23	27	31	1.5 09	CONSPIRAC Y THEORIES ABOUT WILDFIRES BOOST CLIMATE CHANGE DISINFORM ATION IN AUGUST	4%	10%	14%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Se p 23	19. 10. 23	28	29	1.3 82	DISINFORM ATION ABOUT MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES RISES IN SEPTEMBE R	3%	10%	9%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Ok t 23	17. 11. 23	29	35	1.5 76	DISINFORM ATION ABOUT ISRAEL/HA MAS CONFLICT FLOODED THE EU IN OCTOBER	4%	8%	5%	6%	0%	36%	4%	1%

No v 23	14. 12. 23	30	32	1.3 54	IN NOVEMBER , A CLEAR ATTEMPT TO DRIVE A WEDGE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND UKRAINE SUPPORTER S USING DISINFORM ATION	6%	5%	5%	5%	4%	26%	4%	1%
De z 23	15. 01. 24	31	34	1.4 16	DISINFORM ATION ABOUT ATTACKS TO CHRISTMA S BY THE EU, OR OTHER ACTORS, GOES VIRAL IN DECEMBER	8%	8%	10%	6%	3%	11%	6%	1%
Ja n 24	16. 02. 24	32	34	1.4 90	AS THE FARMERS' PROTESTS GAIN TRACTION IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE IN JANUARY, SO DOES THE DISINFORM ATION	5%	7%	8%	6%	4%	5%	6%	1%

					ABOUT THEM								
Feb 24	15.03.24	33	35	1.488	DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE GROWS, AS DOES FALSE CONTENT ABOUT THE EU AND IMMIGRATION	8%	10%	7%	5%	5%	5%	5%	1%
Mär 24	17.04.24	34	36	1.729	MACRON'S WORDS AND CROCUS' TERRORIST ATTACK BOOST DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE	8%	14%	8%	4%	5%	3%	5%	3%
Apr 24	21.05.24	35	36	1.716	EU-RELATED DISINFORMATION PEAKS IN APRIL	11%	10%	11%	6%	5%	10%	5%	2%
Mai 24	06.06.24	36	34	1643	EU-RELATED DISINFORMATION KEEPS GROWING BEFORE EU PARLIAMENT	15%	8%	6%	6%	4%	9%	6%	2%

					NT ELECTIONS								
Sum / Average value		31, 5	1.4 78		6,69 %	9,64 %	8,71%	5,50 %	3,14 %	7,50%	2,93 %	0,86 %	

Appendix II: EDMO – Examples for Eurosceptic disinformation related to EU soft law

Country	Date	Platform	Stakeholder	Disinformation narrative	Related to
Spain	Apr 23	News TV	News Media	The population lives locked up in neighborhoods and the goal is that they do not commute in order to reduce emissions (about 15-minute city concep).	Climate change
Poland	Apr 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Ukrainians are Nazis	Ukraine
Spain	Mai 23	Social Media	Unknown User	German police is separating a child from their family for opposing LGBTQI+ propaganda	LGBTQI+
Spain	Jun 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Ukraine is involved in child-trafficking	Ukraine
Lithuana	Jun 23	Social Media	Unknown User	German police would has taken their children from a Muslim family for saying at school that homosexuality and LGBTQ+ culture is not accepted in Islam.	LGBTQI+

Finland	Jul 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Climate change is not real	Climate change
France	Jul 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Zelensky is destabilising a dictatorship in Ukraine.	Ukraine
Spain	Aug 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Climate change is not real	Climate change
Poland	Aug 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Ukrainian citizens are damaging the economies of the hosting countries.	Ukraine
Greece	Aug 23	Social Media, News Media	News Media	Two migrants are responsible for a huge fire in Greece.	Migration
Spain	Sep 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Natural disasters / climate change is caused by humans.	Climate change
Poland	Sep 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Ukrainian leaders and refugees are profiteers who are enriching themselves with aid received for the war.	Ukraine
Ost-Europa	Sep 23	Social Media	Unknown User	German initiatives are campaigning in favour of looking after German children instead of supplying weapons to Ukraine.	Ukraine
Denmark	Okt 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Hamas' actions alleging war crimes by Israel are justifeid.	Israel Hamas
Germany	Okt 23	Social Media	Unknown User	UN representatives hold a minute's silence for killed Hamas terrorists.	Israel Hamas

Germany	Okt 23	Social Media, News Media	News Media, Politische Repräsentanten	Migrants are a huge cost factor for the hosting countries.	Migration
Finland	Okt 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Wind turbines spread microplastics.	Climate change
Romania	Nov 23	Social Media	Unknown User	Ukraine is supporting / sending weapons to Hamas	Ukraine
Spain	Feb 24	Social Media	Unknown User	Ukrainians tried to kill the French President Macron	Ukraine
Cyprus	March 24	Social Media	Unknown User	A study has shown that 86% of pedophiles are gay or bisexual	LGBTQI+
Bulgaria	Apr 24	News Media	News Media	The national statistics service manipulates the data so Bulgaria can fulfill the eurozone criteria	Divers
Kataloninen / Spain	Apr 24	Social Media	Political Party	Migrants took power in local elections, part of the Great Replacement (conspiracy theory according to which the European élites are substituting the European populations with migrants)	Migration
Portugal	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	Russia moves nuclear weapons after [Emmanuel] Macron's statements	Ukraine
Greece	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	Ukrainian secret services are behind the attempted assassination of the Slovak Prime Minister	Ukraine

Denmark	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	The attack of Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico is linked to his previous criticism of the WHO pandemic agreement	Divers
Slovakia	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	The attack of Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico is linked to the LGBTQ+ community	LGBTQI+
Slovakia	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	The main opposition party endorsed the attack on the Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico	Divers
Slovakia	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	The wife of the Slovak Prime Minister is a Ukrainian refugee	Ukraine
Bulgaria	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	Germany has not decriminalised the possession and sharing of child pornography	Divers
Spain	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	Pro-European protesters in Georgia have not adopted the 'Nazi salute'	Enlargement

Appendix III: EDMO – Examples for Eurosceptic disinformation related to the EU in general

MS	Date	Platform	Stakeholder	Disinformation narrative	Related to
Germany	Apr 23	Social Media	Unkown user	With a new legislative proposal, the EU plans to make all poorly renovated buildings uninhabitable by 2030, leading to mass evictions and loss of housing.	EU decision making

Finland	Apr 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The authorisation of new insect-based ingredients by the EU leads to the spread of harmful foods by established food manufacturers, especially the Finnish company Fazer.	EU decision making
Spain	Apr 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The European Commission is preparing water restrictions for the entire population so that citizens will no longer be able to shower whenever they want because the EU institutions will control the use of showers.	EU decision making
Romania	Mai 23	News Media	News Media	The European Union will ban residential power plants from 2029, including in Romania.	EU decision making
Hungary	Mai 23	Statement	Politician	Teachers cannot get paid more because of the European Union (and its proceedings against Hungary).	EU decision making
Greece	Mai 23	Social Media	Unkown user	Photo of Volodymyr Zelenski, Ursula von der Leyen and Charles Michel posing in front of a nude statue with two genders.	EU action / behaviour
Hungary	Jun 23	Social Media, Statement	Politician	Brussels once again wants to enforce quotas for the distribution of migrants in the EU.	EU decision making, migration
Poland	Aug 23	Social Media	Unkown user	EU countries are alone in restricting the sale of combustion cars from 2035.	EU decision making

Spain	Aug 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU is seeking to limit clothing consumption to just three items of clothing per person per year, in line with the supposed goals of the 2030 Agenda.	EU decision making
Spain	Aug 23	Social Media	Unkown user	Europe must be African.	EU conspiracy narrative
Finland	Aug 23	Social Media	Unkown user	European Space Agency (ESA) is manipulating temperature records to artificially create heat records.	EU decision making
Spain	Aug 23	News Media	News Media	This man has come here with no ideas, just to dismantle his country's government. These are the words attributed to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, about the PP candidate for the parliamentary elections on 23 July, Alberto Núñez Feijóo.	EU action / behaviour
Spain	Aug 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, is campaigning for the PSOE	EU action / behaviour
Romania	Aug 23	News Media	News Media	The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, openly promotes discrimination and marginalisation of the Romanian community in Ukraine in her speech.	EU action / behaviour

Letland	Aug 23	News Media	Politician	The adoption of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation would lead to a massive loss of agricultural land in Latvia by taking 30% of the territory out of production.	EU decision making
Finland	Aug 23	Social Media	MEP	The EU Nature Restoration Law would turn the entire city of Rovaniemi into a forest and other natural areas.	EU decision making
Spain	Sep 23	Social Media	MEP	The French population is undergoing a demographic replacement, in reference to immigration, attributed to a pull effect caused by social benefits.	EU conspiracy narrative
Slovakia	Okt 23	Social Media	Politician	The EU sanctions member States that do not accept migrants	EU decision making
Greece	Okt 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU is supporting the Hamas	EU conspiracy narrative
Spain	Nov 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU is voting against a ceasefire in Gaza.	EU decision making
Bulgaria	Nov 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU is backing an alleged imminent closure of coal mines in Bulgaria.	EU decision making
Bulgaria	Nov 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The majority of French people want to leave the EU and NATO.	EU conspiracy narrative

Slovakia	Nov 23	Social Media	MEP	The proposal to abolish the veto power of EU member states would transform the EU into a “military federation”.	EU decision making
Slovakia	Nov 23	Social Media	Unkown user	Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, is related to a Nazi military figure and has inherited property linked to slavery	EU conspiracy narrative
Slovakia	Nov 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU wants to ban toilet paper in the name of climate change.	EU decision making
France	Nov 23	Social Media	Influencer	The European Medicine Agency (EMA) said that nobody under age 60 should have been vaccinated against Covid-19, plus other “shocking” revelations.	EU action / behaviour
Spain	Dez 23	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU Commission prohibited the use of the term “Christmas”	EU decision making
Spain	Dez 23	Social Media	Unkown user	16 European countries have issued a communiqué against the amnesty and that they have asked Spain to cut off the funds.	EU decision making
Poland	Jan 24	Social Media	Unkown user	The European Union bans the exchange of engines, transmissions, and rear wheels in cars.	EU decision making
Spain	Jan 24	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU will "ban" the repair of cars that are still roadworthy and will force people to buy new cars, the Commission says	EU decision making

Germany	Jan 24	Social Media	Unkown user	During recent floods, no one, not even EU countries, offered help to Germany.	EU action / behaviour
Denmark	Feb 24	Social Media	Russia	The EU is forcing or tricking people into eating insects.	EU decision making
Austria	Feb 24	Social Media	Unkown user	Meat created in laboratories from animal cells is authorised in the EU	EU decision making
Spain	Feb 24	Social Media	Unkown user	AGRICULTURAL IMPORTS FROM OUTSIDE THE EU DO NOT PASS PHYTOSANITARY CHECKS	EU action / behaviour
Spain	Feb 24	Social Media	Unkown user	All irregular migrants from the EU will be deported to Spain	EU action / behaviour
Poland	March 24	Social Media	Russia	European Union will decide on military conscription	EU decision making
Estland	March 24	Social Media	Unkown user	The European Commission is considering a ban on repairing vehicles over 15 years old	EU decision making
France, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Czechia	Apr 24	Social Media, News Media	Unkown user	European member states are sending troops to the Ukraine	EU decision making
Slovakia	Apr 24	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU wants to replace cow's milk with cockroach milk	EU decision making

Finland	Apr 24	Social Media	Unkown user	The EU is banning old cars or their repair	EU decision making
Latvia	Apr 24	Social Media	Politician	EU law will prevent the use of wood, pellets and briquettes for heating	EU decision making
Romania	Apr 24	Social Media	MEP	The European Parliament has voted on the regulation obliging Romania to receive migrants	EU decision making
Ireland	Apr 24	Social Media	Unkown user	The European Union has told Ireland to delay a general election	EU action / behaviour
Hungary	Apr 24	Social Media	News Media	European politicians that are not friendly to the Hungarian ruling party are all “left-wing” politicians	EU action / behaviour
Denmark	May 24	Social Media	Unkown user	President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, is linked to Nazism	EU action / behaviour
Latvia	May 24	Social Media	Unkown user	President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, is linked to Nazism	EU action / behaviour
Spain	May 24	Social Media	MEP, Unkown user	President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, is having a conflict of interest in managing the pandemic phase	EU action / behaviour
Spain	May 24	Social Media	Unkown user	President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, is being arrested in the EU Parliament	EU action / behaviour

France	May 24	Social Media	Politician	President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, was “not elected by anyone”	EU action / behaviour
Germany	May 24	Social Media	Unkown user	MEPS are just staticians	EU action / behaviour
Germany	May 24	Social Media	Unkown user	Wahlleiter werden angewiesen, AfD-Stimmen für ungültig zu erklären	EU conspiracy narrative
Germany	May 24	Social Media	Unkown user	AfD wurde von Europawahl ausgeschlossen	EU action / behaviour
Latvia	May 24	Social Media	Politician	Latvia having to take in 10 000 migrants a year or pay EUR 200 million for the Pact on Migration and Asylum.	EU decision making, migration
Slovakia	May 24	Social Media	Political Party	Slovakia's responsibility for hundreds of thousands to millions of migrants because of the Pact on Migration and Asylum	EU decision making, migration
Croatia	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	The introduction of the euro in Croatia led to a doubling of prices	EU decision making
Portugal	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	The European digital identity is imminent and will fully control citizens	EU decision making
Estland	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	The European Central Bank is planning to introduce the Digital Euro and ban cash for surveillance purposes	EU decision making

Poland	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	European Commission has confirmed that the Polish government has established the superiority of EU law over Polish law	EU decision making
Czech Republic	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	NATO and therefore member states are directly involved in Ukraine war	EU decision making
Greece	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	NATO and therefore member states are directly involved in Ukraine war	EU decision making
Germany	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	NATO and therefore member states are directly involved in Ukraine war	EU decision making
Slovakia	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	NATO and therefore member states are directly involved in Ukraine war	EU decision making
Poland	May 24	Social Media	Unknown User	NATO and therefore member states are directly involved in Ukraine war	EU decision making
Slovakia	May 24	News Media	Politician	Russia's natural resources are one of the reasons for the Russia-Ukraine war, saying that the West wants to appropriate them because Russia has the largest oil and natural gas reserves in the world.	EU conspiracy narrative

Appendix IV: Election Content – Disinformation Narratives

Sum	Party	Narrative	Citation	Page
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1	AfD	The EU has deliberately exploited various crises to push forward its agenda of becoming a sovereign state, with the backing of the European Court of Justice and a self-serving bureaucracy.	Alle Krisen seit 2008 – Weltfinanzkrise, Eurokrise, Migrationskrise, Corona-Krise, Energiekrise, Inflationskrise sowie die angebliche Klimakrise – wurden genutzt, um die Staatswerdung der EU voranzutreiben, unterstützt vom Europäischen Gerichtshof und einer selbstherrlichen Bürokratie.	9
2	AfD	The EU is being ruled by an unaccountable and non-transparent bureaucracy.	Die EU hat sich zu einem undemokratischen Konstrukt entwickelt, das immer mehr Gewalt an sich zieht und von einer intransparenten, nicht kontrollierten Bürokratie regiert wird.	10
3	AfD	Lobbyists have a pervasive and unchecked influence on the EU bureaucracy in Brussels	Die Einwirkung (von Lobbyisten) auf die Brüsseler Bürokratie erfolgt intensiv und unkontrollierbar schamlos	12
4	AfD	The EU prioritises informing lobbyists and special interest groups over its own citizens.	Während Lobbyisten und Interessenvertreter umfassend und vorab informiert werden, bleiben den Bürgern die Informationen der EU-Institutionen in der Regel vorenthalten.	12
5	AfD	Antisemitism in Europe is rooted in Islamic belief.	Antisemitismus in Europa, der seine Wurzeln im Islam hat.	13
6	AfD	The euro is illegitimate because it does not have the necessary institutional and constitutional basis.	Der Euro besitzt nicht die institutionelle Grundlage, die verfassungsrechtliche Voraussetzung für seine Legitimität wäre.	19

7	AfD	The EU and ECB are engaging in illegal and unauthorised economic practices that unfairly burden Germany	Wir erleben vertragswidrige Gemeinschaftshaftung, Transferzahlungen, Verschuldung auf Ebene der EU, verbotene Staatsfinanzierung und mandatswidrige (Plan-)Wirtschaftspolitik durch EZB und EU – alles weitgehend zu Lasten Deutschlands.	19
8	AfD	The ECB's actions are ideologically driven, illegal, and amount to unauthorised monetary support for certain states.	Die EZB betreibt dabei auch noch ideologische und verbotene Wirtschaftspolitik – über billionenschwere zweckgebundene Garantien und Bürgschaften sowie über Aufkäufe von „grünen“ oder anderweitig ideologisch begebenen Anleihen. Dies sind faktisch direkte Geldgeschenke an „notleidende“ Staaten über eine gemeinschaftliche EU-Schuldenaufnahme („NextGenerationEU“-Fonds, „Ukraine“-Bonds, etc. oder TARGET2). All diese Maßnahmen sind vertragswidrig, da sie gegen die Verbote der monetären Staatsfinanzierung und der gegenseitigen Haftungsübernahme verstoßen.	20
9	AfD	There is a coordinated effort by significant financial and governmental institutions to gradually eliminate cash.	Unser Bargeld ist in Gefahr. Mit Unterstützung von Bundesregierung, Internationalem Währungsfonds und Europäischer Zentralbank wird seine schleichende Abschaffung betrieben.	21

10	AfD	The EU is violating treaties by incurring debt	Die EU maßt sich heute vertragswidrig an, entgegen dem expliziten Wortlaut der EU-Verträge eigene Schulden aufzunehmen, was zu Lasten künftiger deutscher Generationen geht	20
11	AfD	Claims about increasing extreme weather and rising sea levels due to climate change are exaggerated or false.	Trotz des durch Medien und Politik verbreiteten Alarmismus zeigen sich in der Realität weder vermehrte Extremwetterereignisse noch ein beschleunigt ansteigender Meeresspiegel.	39
12	AfD	The EU's policy to ban combustion engines is intended to eliminate personal vehicle use for most people.	Mit dem durch die EU beschlossenen Verbot von Verbrennungsmotoren bis zum Jahr 2035, welches von allen Altparteien mitgetragen wird, verfolgt sie das Ziel, den Individualverkehr für den Großteil der Bevölkerung abzuschaffen.	41
13	AfD	The government is violating constitutional rights by coercing citizens into getting vaccinated through extreme pressure and threats to their economic well-being.	Damit schränkt der Staat das im Grundgesetz verankerte Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Bürger über ihren eigenen Körper grundrechtswidrig ein und verlagert eine Impfentscheidung von der persönlichen auf die staatliche Ebene, wo durch massiven Druck bis hin zur Entziehung der wirtschaftlichen Lebensgrundlage der Bürger eine Entscheidung zugunsten einer Impfung erzwungen werden soll.	44

14	AfD	The understanding of gender as a spectrum rather than a binary is pseudoscientific and incorrectly supported by the EU	Es ist eine biologische Tatsache und kein soziales Konstrukt, dass es genau zwei Geschlechter gibt: Frau und Mann. Die Pseudowissenschaft der Gender-Ideologie bestreitet diese biologische Grundtatsache. Die EU muss jede Förderung dieser skandalösen Ideologie sofort beenden.	47
15	AfD	The EU Commission is heavily influenced and controlled by lobbyists and special interest groups	Dabei übernimmt die EU-Kommission häufig die ihr von verschiedenen Interessenverbänden und Lobbygruppen diktierte Agenda.	48
16	AfD	The European Union's cultural policies are deliberately designed to dissolve Europe's rich cultural diversity into a homogenised, artificial culture.	Der kulturelle Reichtum Europas liegt in der Vielfalt seiner Traditionen, Sprachen und Regionen. Die Kulturpolitik der EU verfolgt – gemeinsam mit UN-Institutionen und Nichtregierungsorganisationen – das Ziel, diese europäische Vielfalt in einer künstlich geschaffenen Einheitskultur aufzulösen. Durch Maßnahmen zur Inklusion, Chancengleichheit, Diversität und Geschlechtergerechtigkeit sorgt man nicht nur für Quoten in der Kulturförderung, sondern erzeugt auch einen ideologischen Konformitätsdruck. Auch der Kampf gegen „Rassismus“ und „Diskriminierung“, von denen die europäischen Gesellschaften angeblich strukturell durchsetzt seien, wird von der EU vorangetrieben. Das sorgt für ein repressives kulturelles Klima im	50

			Sinne einer immer rigideren „politischen Korrektheit“ und für „Cancel Culture“ gegenüber allen abweichenden Positionen. Darüber hinaus trägt die Unterordnung der europäischen Kulturpolitik unter die Ziele des „Green Deal“ zur Ideologisierung des Kulturlebens bei	
17	AfD	The EU undermines and erodes national cultural identities.	Die millionenschweren kulturellen Rahmenprogramme der EU führen zu einer ideologischen Gängelung, die auf die „Vereinigten Staaten von Europa“ hinarbeitet und die nationalen Leitkulturen aushöhlt.	50
18	AfD	The EU takes efforts to exert control over the media, censor third-party media content, and restrict freedom of speech.	Daher lehnt die AfD alle Bestrebungen der EU ab, Kontrolle über die Medien auszuüben, Medienangebote Dritter zu zensieren oder die Meinungsfreiheit zu beschränken, wie sie in Initiativen wie dem „European Democracy Action Plan“, dem „Digital Service Act“ oder dem sogenannten „Medienfreiheitsgesetz“ zum Ausdruck kommen.	51

1	Fidesz	The EU elite wants to re-educate children and hand them over to gender activists	They want to re-educate children and hand them over to gender activists	
2	Fidesz	The EU majority wants to go to war	In Brussels today there is a pro-war majority. (...) I see preparations for war from everyone and from all sides.	
3	Fidesz	The political elite of the EU is allegedly funding the left in Budapest to instigate a government change that aligns with their interests.	The pro-war governments, the bureaucrats in Brussels, George Soros's network, are sending millions of dollars to the pro-war left in Budapest, who make no secret of the fact that they want a change of government which meets the demands of their paymasters.	
1	Rassemblement Nationale	Mass immigration and unfair competition are intentionally imposed by the EU's leading parties.	En imposant l'immigration de masse et la concurrence déloyale, résultant toutes deux d'une conception naïve et dépassée de la mondialisation, les partis jusqu'à présent majoritaires à Bruxelles fragilisent notre sécurité, déconstruisent notre civilisation et déstabilisent notre modèle économique et social.	8
2	Rassemblement Nationale	The European Commission is deliberately pursuing policies that harm industrial, agricultural, and energy sectors based on ideological reasons.	Par idéologie, la Commission européenne a fait le choix de la décroissance industrielle, agricole et énergétique.	9
3	Rassemblement Nationale	The EU, with the backing of Emmanuel Macron, has been deliberately acting against the interests and will of the	Depuis la trahison du référendum français de 2005, l'Union européenne soutenue par Emmanuel	10

		people since the 2005 French referendum	Macron se construit contre les peuples.	
4	Rassemblement Nationale	The European Commission is exploiting crises to expand its control over areas like health and defence, and punishing states that try to assert their sovereignty	Cette dérive est telle que non seulement la Commission profite des crises pour ac- caparer de nouveaux pouvoirs à l'instar de la santé ou la Défense, mais en plus elle n'hésite pas à sanctionner des États qui souhaitent exercer leur souveraineté.	10
1	PiS	climate protection efforts are a facade for a global financial operation benefiting influential elites at the expense of the general population	I don't know, I'm not an expert, but there is really a lot of evidence that we are dealing with a gigantic operation aimed not at protecting the climate, but at changing the financial system in the world, so that various types of operations are conducted in a way that will be beneficial for certain spheres, the most influential ones, but detrimental for a huge part, in this case not only Poles, but also Europeans.	
2	PiS	Propaganda is artificially inflating the number of people identifying with non-traditional gender identities, so that the true prevalence is being exaggerated by up to 200 times.	Concerning gender, it is about one per thousand people. Naturally, of course, with the help of propaganda, it can be increased a hundredfold or even 200 times, because propaganda today has an incredible impact on people.	

3	PiS	<p>The European Commission can declare a state of crisis, forcing Poland to accept tens of thousands of migrants annually, potentially increasing to 200 or 300 thousand when including families, leading to a situation where Poland will have to prevent these people from escaping and pay fines if they do. Poland will have to create camps to hold migrants, leading to an extremely dangerous situation</p>	<p>It is enough to declare a state of crisis, which is a prerogative of the European Commission, or accept tens of thousands annually. There is a question of whether families will be included. Then these tens of thousands, given the size of these families, will turn into 200 or even 300 thousand and in addition. We will have a situation where we will have to watch these people so that they do not escape, because if they do, we will have to pay fines. (...) So it is not very clear how it is supposed to be. Are we supposed to make some kind of camp out of Poland? Or camps in Poland, which is generally a complete idiocy, extremely dangerous for our security, because just consider this one more thing.</p>	
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