

# Social media arenas are key to understanding the post-truth delegitimation of European Integration

Maximilian Conrad, Faculty of Political Science, University of Iceland

## Executive Summary

This policy brief spells out the main findings stemming from the second work package of the Jean Monnet Network on Post-Truth Politics, Nationalism and the (De-)Legitimation of European Integration (JMN-PTP), focusing in particular on their relevance for policy makers. The aim of this work package was to analyze the impact of post-truth politics on the legitimation and delegitimation of European Integration. In line with the findings of the whole network, we found a strong link between populism and post-truth politics: a post-truth style of communication is particularly evident among (right-wing) populist actors. This includes Euroskeptic actors. Furthermore, the work package showed that social and digital media play a key role as arenas for the dissemination of misleading information about the EU, confirming the project's assumption that the arena dimension is key in understanding and tackling post-truth politics: where this disinformation is disseminated is as important as who spreads it. Another finding was that post-truth politics does not frequently play out in the form of blatant disinformation devoid of any factual basis. Instead, negative framing and other stylistic tools (e.g., exaggerations, ridicule, hyperbole) play a key role in the creation of negative images of the EU. For policy makers, it is important to understand the often subtle ways in which post-truth politics plays out in relation to European integration. While this is not a new phenomenon, it is important to understand the opportunities that social and other digital media present for populist actors as vehicles for the dissemination of misleading messages about the EU. This provides a welcome opportunity to undermine public perceptions of the EU and public support for the EU and, by extension, the legitimacy of the EU and the integration process as a whole.

## Introduction

With the rise of the internet and, ultimately, also social and other digital media, questions of mis- and disinformation have become central in discussions on the impact of new technologies on democracy. Social media provide forums where virtually anyone can spread mis- and disinformation with ease and at virtually no cost. The Brexit referendum campaign and the US Presidential elections in 2016 opened the eyes of many to the beginning of the postfactual age, characterized by a style of politics in which the truth (as based on factual correctness) appeared to have lost its relevance and, indeed, symbolic authority. These two events also provided evidence that social media are forums through which external actors can spread disinformation with malicious intent and have a decisive impact on domestic political processes, including elections and public opinion and will formation.

The ambition driving our research was to analyze whether these developments also have implications for the legitimation and delegitimation of European integration. Our aim was to study the significance of post-truth politics in relation to efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the European Union and European integration more broadly. Because of the presumed importance of social and other digital media, our research was based on

an analytical framework that moves beyond an actor-centered perspective that focuses solely on *who* spreads what kind of mis- and disinformation about the EU. Instead, we wanted to draw attention also to the *arena dimension* of post-truth politics: we wanted to know how important social and other digital media were in Euroskeptic actors' efforts to disseminate false and/or misleading information about the EU.

## Approach and results

In close cooperation with the other researchers in this network, our work package produced a number of publications that highlighted the relevance of post-truth politics for the legitimation and delegitimation of European integration. In these contributions, particular emphasis was placed on the role of social and other digital media as arenas for the dissemination of false or misleading information about the EU. In assessing the scope of the broader problem of post-truth politics, it is crucial that the significance of the *arena dimension* of post-truth politics is properly understood. The network's flagship publication is the edited volume *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics* that was published at Springer/Palgrave in late 2022 and which contains a few chapters on this topic. The work package's main contribution in relation to the delegitimation of European integration was a journal article by the

network's principal investigator and leader of this work package, Professor Maximilian Conrad, that was published in *German Politics and Society* in early 2022 and analyzed the role of post-truth politics in the *Alternative for Germany's* (AfD) campaign for the 2019 European Parliament elections. The article developed an analytical framework for the study of post-truth politics and applied it in an analysis of the way in which the AfD used negative frames and specific evaluative styles (e.g., ridicule and scandalization) to create negative images of the EU. The article also drew attention to the importance of social media in this process, as most of the analyzed material was only available via the party's and/or individual candidates' social media accounts, in particular the party's YouTube channel AfD TV. Strikingly, the analysis showed that the AfD's post-truth politics in relation to the European Union did not take the form of blatant disinformation, but rather appeared in the form of misleading messages based on limited factual content – the metaphorical kernel of truth from which misinformation can grow.

These findings are also supported by similar research published in the network's edited volume. A chapter by Giulia Evolvi (Erasmus University Rotterdam) in this volume analyzed the role of post-truth politics in Matteo Salvini's tweets and concluded that post-truth politics plays out predominantly in the form of exaggerations, hyperbole and misleading messages. Similar findings are also reported in a chapter by Vittorio Orlando (University of Iceland) on the role of post-truth politics in the Brexit campaign. Overall, the contributions from this work package underline that post-truth politics clearly has deeper roots than the existence and relevance of social media; but social media provide the infrastructure that allows post-truth politics to thrive – and populist actors are fully aware and ready to take advantage of this.

## Conclusion

One key finding of our research is that in relation to European integration, post-truth politics does not play in as straight-forward a way as one could have assumed. Our findings regarding *who* spreads false or misleading information about the EU (i.e., the *actor* dimension) reflect the usual suspects already known from the literature on Euroskepticism. Our findings also show that framing and negative evaluative styles play a potentially more important role in undermining the legitimacy of the EU than outright disinformation. As such, post-truth politics seems to continue along the trajectory of discursive Euroskepticism that has arguably always been based on a loose interpretation of limited factual information. Going forward, more research will however need to be done in order to ascertain to which extent these findings can also be shown across a broader set of cases.

## Implications and recommendations

Regulatory approaches to disinformation have tended to focus on fact checking as a remedy to post-truth politics. But as EU policy makers are well aware, it is the multifaceted character of post-truth politics that makes the problem so difficult to tackle. As a first step, it is important to understand the importance of fully grasping and disentangling the root causes of this political-cultural development, i.e., the declining status of the truth in political discourse. Efforts to this effect are currently underway, for instance in the context of the RECLAIM project (reclaim.hi.is). It is fundamental to understand post-truth politics as the expression of a deeper discontent that is intimately connected to a widespread lack of trust in science and other forms of expertise, but also in mainstream media and the institutions of the political system. If these problems go unaddressed, this could have fundamental implications for the future of democratic deliberation and, by extension, for democracy as such. Given the centrality of the process of public deliberation, policy makers need to do everything in their power to avert a continued descent into post-truth politics. Three crucial recommendations include the following:

- It is crucial to **rebuild trust relationships** between citizens and purveyors of knowledge, such as scientific experts, but also mainstream media and the institutions of the political system;
- It is crucial to **emphasize the role of citizenship education** as a way to counter citizens' susceptibility to false and misleading information: people need to have the skills and competences to critically examine the (mis-)information they are exposed to and, essentially, to play the role of fact checkers themselves;
- Finally, in relation to the legitimacy of European integration, it is important to continue to spread information about **what the EU is and what it does**.