Priming Politicians for Post-Truth

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Key Takeaways

- The most prominent narratives put forward on migration and border policy in a number of European parliaments (Italy, Poland, Germany, Austria, European Parliament) have not only become more hostile towards migrants but are increasingly disconnected from facts and evidence-based knowledge.

- By their own account, mainstream politicians have a general awareness of the impact and workings of information manipulation but lack the ability to consistently spot and appropriately respond to arguments build on post-truth tropes.

- Parliaments in cooperation with civil society organisations should offer dedicated training on the mechanisms of post-truth discourse for members of parliaments both in the form of regular in-person seminars and via online modules for self-study.

RECLAIM summary

RECLAIM is a three-year research project (2022-2025) funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe program. Consisting of a consortium of researchers from thirteen partner universities around Europe, the RECLAIM project addresses the implications of the challenge of post-truth politics for the future of liberal democracy in Europe, in order to (a) produce theoretically and empirically robust visions for the future of liberal democratic institutions, (b) to reflect on the meaning of liberal democracy in the 21st century in Europe and, (c) to develop recommendations, toolkits, narratives and methodologies to reinstate the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democracies.

Analysis and findings

The rise of post-truth tropes in European politics is characterized by a deliberate challenge to facts as well as to epistemic authorities such as experts that are tasked to produce the evidential basis that political debates rely on. Post-truth tropes are characterized by (1) the use of intense emotional appeals and personalised attacks, (2) the undermining of science, research-based evidence, and

democratic institutions, (3) reliance on 'common sense', self-evident truths, or the public as ultimate arbiters of fact, and (4) rhetorical strategies that either disregard or colonise truth. As disinformation and misinformation, conspiracy theories and rhetorical assaults on experts have entered and gradually taken hold in the mainstream of Europe's political spaces, the policy area arguably most susceptible to post-truth distortions has been migration and border policy. In fact, while post-truth tropes can also be found in debates over climate policy, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic or to international conflicts such as the invasion of Ukraine, there is a sense that migration governance has been post-truth's ground zero.

To empirically test this contention, RECLAIM have conducted in-depth research on parliamentary discourses on migration and border policies from 2011 to 2024, covering the period since the start of forced migrations induced by the Syrian civil war. With some exceptions, the focus has been on debates explicitly dedicated to migration and border policy. In addition to the European parliament, the analysis also covered the national parliaments of Spain, Italy, Poland, Germany, and Austria. As such, we include countries that for reasons of geography and political traditions have had very different track records of debates over migration. To triangulate our findings, we conducted interviews with selected members of parliament.

Our analysis has shown that post-truth tropes have become substantially more embedded into parliamentary discourses on migration during the period under investigation and have been employed by a wider range of political actors. In line with other studies, we observe a shift in the framing of migration. While migration used to be framed predominantly as a humanitarian issue, it is now increasingly framed as a security concern. Hence, migrants are portrayed as criminals or terrorists or tools of international warfare that constitute a threat to the native population and to national security and need to be dealt with accordingly. While security-orientated migration policies are not problematic per se, our research showed that post-truth tropes were most strongly clustered in arguments supporting a highly securitized understanding of migrants. What this means is that arguments based on malicious information manipulation that are meant to silence alternative points of view in the name

of security have played a crucial role in shaping national and European debates over migration. In the process, these securitized migration discourses have shifted the centre-ground of debate into a direction that it might not have done without postfactual support.

Thus, beyond this thematic osmosis, we found that post-truth messaging – the deliberate use of tactics to bend, colonise and create confusion about facts and shared knowledge – has begun to migrate from the political fringes to the centre-ground of politics. Populist far-right parties remain the most prolific promoters of post-truth tropes, but several mainstream parties have adopted similar communication strategies. Consequently, we note a growing number of centre-right and centre-left MPs that use a range of rhetorical tools to undermine trust in facts and shared knowledge in the field of migration. One result is that although the far-right is not represented in the new governments of Poland, Austria and Germany, the migration policies espoused by these respective governments can be traced to *ideas and storylines* introduced by far-right parties using post-truth messaging.

A specific and quite striking finding was that, with a few notable exceptions, post-truth tropes have not effectively been countered and responded to in the course of debates. Politicians from mainstream parties that did not typically resort to the use of post-truth messaging generally had a sense that post-truth politics presents a severe danger to political culture, including the working of parliamentary democracy. However, they often felt unprepared to adequately detect and respond to post-truth messaging. Indeed, as we found during the discourse analysis, most of the time responses tended to focus exclusively on the *content* of what was being said and on personal attacks against the speaker instead of calling out the assault on expertise, knowledge, facts and evidence-based political contestation. Hence, while awareness-raising about the presence, working mechanisms and danger of post-truth politics has to take place across all layers of society, politicians and members of parliament are not exempt.

Policy Recommendations

We therefore propose to develop and roll out a toolkit tailored to members of parliament on how to detect and respond to post-truth tropes. This toolkit should be designed with the end-user – the parliamentarian – in mind, including them in all stages of design and implementation. The final product would enable members of parliament to better grasp when political arguments, including their own, draw on post-truth tropes. In addition, it should include a manual with possible responses to instances of post-truth arguments being uttered in parliamentary debates. As such, this response to the onslaught of postfactual messaging seeks to avoid the slippery slope of banning or outlawing forms of speech, which is generally incompatible with the freedom of speech integral to liberal democracy. Instead, it is informed by the contention that to strengthen liberal democracy it is vital for decision-makers to reflect on the narratives that they help to produce and at the same time to empower them to fight back against postfactual arguments. In fact, a case can be made that politicians ought to lead the way in this matter given the high degree of visibility afforded to parliamentary exchanges and their expertise in the art of rhetoric. And if political contestation is to take place in a state of relative civility, then the distinction between lies and reliable evidence, facts and fiction needs to be maintained and protected. MPs therefore must be equipped with the proper tools to spot and identify post-truth tropes.

This toolkit is to be developed in a cooperative effort between academics working on post-truth, educators, and think-tanks with experience in reaching out to members of parliament. Emphasis should be placed on designing the module to be short and concise so that it can be consumed and digested in the precious little time MPs have at hand. Crucially, the toolkit should be designed as a dual-use training module that can be taken in either in online self-study (including short video presentations) or as an in-person course. In addition, parallel training modules should be addressed to MPs' parliamentary staff, which in many cases are primarily responsible for researching background material and preparing representatives' speeches and policy proposals. Moreover, these training modules should be offered at least once a year so as to enable more MPs to engage with the subject matter and to allow for returning MPs to share their own insights after taking the module in the first place. Given the rapidly changing nature of the types, formats, channels, and actors responsible for spreading disinformation and misinformation, the toolkits should undergo a continuous monitoring and evaluation process to assess their utility to MPs and to update the content when and where necessary.

A critical observation is that there appears to be demand for such interventions by parliamentary administrations, several of which have begun to offer at least one-off trainings to new MPs on how to engage with information at the start of a legislative term. For example, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association offers outreach and training programmes about the use of AI in disinformation and information manipulation[1] while ParlAmericas, which unites 35 parliaments in the American hemisphere, provides a guide on how to navigate information and disinformation online[2]. The aim therefore

1 https://www.cpahq.org/media/sphl0rft/handbook-on-disinformation-ai-and-synthetic-media.pdf

2 https://parlamericas.org/uploads/documents/Publication-ParliamentaryResearchTool-en.pdf

ought to be to directly address and engage with parliaments and parliamentary research services (where they exist) and present the toolkit to their representatives.

A good starting point would be to initially prepare the material in English and address the European parliament as the primary stakeholder. There would then be a dry run with a select focus group to work out the toolkit's effectiveness and allow its content and approach to be refined depending on the feedback. Subsequently, the toolkit should be rolled out in a presentation organized in cooperation with a Brussels-based think-tank such as TEPSA. The publicity generated by this event could be used to formally reach out to the European Parliament with an offer to showcase the toolkit to MEPs. As a second step, the toolkit could be translated in an effort to reach additional parliaments where post-truth tropes flourish. As it stands, the toolkit may pave the way for additional steps to improve the quality of parliamentary debates down the line, such as a non-binding commitment to eschew post-truth messaging that MPs or party factions could voluntarily sign up to.

Crucially, the toolkit should not try to reinvent the wheel of truth but build on and make use of existing formats of professional training modules. A specific model that could be taken as a point of departure is the format developed by the NGO Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). ISD has been working with German MPs in both in-person dialogue and in developing a self-learning tutorial (*'Vorsicht manipuliert!'*) on how to spot and respond to disinformation[3]. Another best-practice example is the guideline for British MPs on how to discern conspiracy theories which was spearheaded by the Antisemitism Trust in the United Kingdom[4]. What both have in common is that the final product was developed in a dialogue process that included input from the target group themselves.

Pushback against such a toolkit may arise from a range of political actors from across the left-right spectrum. A likely point of critique may well be that the toolkit represents politicized overreach and is fundamentally biased against points of views that diverge from the mainstream. Thus, to avoid feeding into this narrative it is important that the toolkit's authors avoid collaboration with political foundations linked to a particular political party or ideology. At the same time, the toolkit and training should explicitly be open to representatives from all parties and actively approach populist parties and politicians with the offer to participate. At the end of the day, it is nonetheless clear that the planned toolkit on detecting and responding to post-truth structures in parliament is not meant to convert avid purveyors of postfactual narratives –

although this would constitute a bonus. What the toolkit wants to achieve is, in essence, to help and assist those politicians that consider the liberal democratic order worth protecting.

3 https://isdgermany.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/AHEAD-Leitfaden.pdf
4 https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Conspiracy-Theory-Guide.pdf