

REPORT: RECLAIM KICK-OFF CONFERENCE

FRIDAY 14 OCTOBER 2022

IN VERÖLD - HOUSE OF VIGDÍS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

*The RECLAIM Kick-off conference took place in Reykjavik on October 14 and marked the start of the RECLAIM project. Under the title “**Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age**” and funded by a Horizon Europe grant, the project addresses the impact of disinformation on liberal democracies in Europe. The following report summarizes the main themes and discussions of the conference, which focused on the challenges caused by external factors and disruptive technologies while also examining the role that citizenship education and media literacy can play in mitigating the challenges to liberal democracy.*



Funded by
the European Union

RECLAIM





1



2

OPENING SESSION

Jón Atli Benediktsson, the Rector of the University of Iceland, opened the event and expressed how proud the University was to be leading such a diverse, topical project addressing one of the most pressing challenges liberal democracies face today, specifically, the spread of fake news and disinformation. He emphasized the importance of international research cooperation to be able to come up with solutions on how to tackle these challenges. One important tool in the toolkit is citizenship education and increased media literacy, with the end goal of better preparing citizens for their active participation and role in democracy in a changing and increasingly manipulative information environment.

Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland, gave the opening address at the conference, in which she discussed the advantages and disadvantages of technological changes in the information environment on the political sphere. She emphasised the dangers of hybrid threats in destabilising democracy and the realisation of human rights and the vital importance of mobilisation of trust in our societies to combat the spread of mis- and disinformation.

Maximilian Conrad, Professor of Political Science at the University of Iceland and Principal Investigator of the RECLAIM project, gave the keynote address at the conference. He began with a stimulating comment on

the title of the project. He explained that in titling the project 'Reclaim', there is a hope to *reclaim* democracy in the wake of a post-truth attack on the freedoms of liberal democracy. The term is however also suggestive of a fictional time where democracy was at an ideal peak to which we would like to return, which seems to nostalgically and retrospectively neglect the democratic challenges of the past. Conrad went on to articulate how the RECLAIM project focuses on mis- and disinformation and intends to analyse and, most importantly, propose effective solutions to dealing with the reality of how politics is becoming increasingly post-factual to a degree which is alarmingly detrimental to democracy.

Conrad framed the concept of the post-factual age by acknowledging the changing status of truth and facts in political discourse, addressing truth has lost its symbolic value, facts are becoming more and more contentious. This consequently provides a reduced basis for political deliberation, which is an essential core of democratic society. The RECLAIM project thus aims to address how democratic societies can equip citizens with the ability to recognise, navigate and combat manipulative information environments and reduce the spread of fake news.

He went on to explain that acknowledging the impossibility of eradicating disinformation, the RECLAIM project instead focuses on how to moderate its impact on liberal democracies. To handle the

1. Jón Atli Benediktsson, the Rector of the University of Iceland

2. Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland



challenges of disinformation we need to promote citizenship education, media literacy and critical thinking. The project will address this in three phases: **the methodological-conceptual phase** which will involve studying the different components of postfactual politics and gathering details for the work packages, **the empirical-analytical phase** where the state of play analysis will take place, and lastly **the critical-advisory phase** where insights from the second phase will be utilised to formalize recommendations to make liberal democracy resilient in the postfactual age.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The first panel discussion of the conference focused on external challenges to liberal democracy. **Nikola Schmidt**, from the Institute of International Relations in Prague, led the discussion and talked about the political effects of new disruptive technologies for various political agendas. He then asked the panel to elaborate on how they thought new technologies are affecting our way of living.

Panelists were: **Guðmundur Arnar Sigmundsson**, Director of CERT-IS, **Jón Ólafsson**, Professor in Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Iceland, and **Jóna Sólveig Elínardóttir**, Department Director at the Defence Directorate at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Iceland.

3



4



5

5. The RECLAIM consortium

Guðmundur Arnar Sigmundsson argued that the Industrial Revolution had allowed humans to use fuels to break their physical strength barriers, but we are now living in a new era whereby technology is breaking our cognitive barrier, and as we are all currently experiencing it and it is the cognitive rather than physical functions that are being impacted, this concept is something we cannot yet comprehend, which limits our ability to tackle it. The panel however also discussed and agreed that technology and social media are simultaneously beneficial and detrimental to knowledge-sharing and the upholding of democratic values. **Jón Ólafsson** emphasized that the main concern is the erosion of liberal values and stressed that we need to be careful not to exaggerate the causal effect of new technologies to explain current political developments. He explained that when we talk about post-truth it suggests something that came after, as if at a certain point everything was ok and now it is not. He stressed the importance of acknowledging that the liberal values that we now see eroding were maybe just a veneer for something that was not as solid as we believed. **Jóna Sólveig Elínardóttir** emphasized the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in enabling disinformation campaigns, arguing that deep fakes are a real security concern. In her view, mis- and disinformation are part of autocratic states' tool box alongside traditional actions to achieve strategic and military goals. Disinformation undermines trust and societal cohesion which provides the environment for the diffusion of

doubt and fear which threatens democracy's ability to thrive.

Typically, the Russian-Ukrainian war was discussed and emphasized that it was an event which has highlighted, specifically for the rest of Europe, the value and need for free press and unrestricted access to information and truth.

TRUST IN AND DEMAND FOR QUALITY JOURNALISM

The second panel discussion centered around trust in quality journalism and its link with democracy. **Asimina Michailidou**, Senior Researcher at ARENA Centre for European Studies, initiated the discussion by stating that the RECLAIM project would not only investigate the negative effects of post-factual politics on journalism and the role of journalists in democratic society, but also look at the democratic resilience of journalists themselves, what citizens think of this and their relationship of trust or distrust towards journalists, what policy makers think and what they intend to do about the challenges facing our post-factual democracies.

Michailidou then went on to ask the panelists whether and why citizens have been moving away from professional journalism as the main source of news.



6



7

Panelists were: **Elfa Ýr Gylfadóttir**, Director of the Icelandic Media Commission, **Valgerður Anna Jóhannsdóttir**, Assistant Professor and Head of Journalism Programme at the University of Iceland, and **Þórður Snær Júlíusson**, Editor in Chief at Kjarninn.

Elfa Ýr Gylfadóttir started the discussion by pointing out that recent surveys in Iceland show that trust in traditional news media has remained fairly high, especially public service media. Mistrust is more related to news reporting on social media, which people find difficult to trust. **Þórður Snær Júlíusson** went on to explain that we are experiencing a multilayered, systematic weakening of traditional media - multilayered in that big international social media companies take away advertisement revenue from traditional media and in Iceland a lot of journalists are leaving the profession. Fewer journalists mean more workload and less specialization, which leads to more mistakes and at times sub-value content and ultimately increased distrust. **Valgerður Anna Jóhannsdóttir** discussed potential solutions to disinformation. She agreed on the importance to teach media literacy, but urged caution not to place all responsibility on the users, but also to look at the wider structural aspects and push for governmental action to create conditions that support quality journalism so that trust can be rebuilt.

The panelists agreed that disinformation cultivates distrust and diminishes credibility in the media and that governments have a big role to play in implementing

and championing media literacy in education as well as more effective targeting and containing of disinformation. The panelists emphasised that conditions in the Nordic countries, including Iceland, are better than in many other European countries, as social trust is still high and corruption minimal. In the case of Iceland there is also a question of the inbuilt barrier of the Icelandic language, that not a lot of people speak. This makes it more difficult for outsiders to influence civilians with fake news and disinformation.

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

The concluding panel of the conference focused on addressing issues of citizenship education. **Nona Mikhelidze**, Senior Researcher at the Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome led the discussion. She began by asking the panelists to elaborate on how best to navigate disinformation and misinformation and tackle these challenges both at the national level but also on the bigger level of the EU.

Panelists were **Ólafur Páll Jónsson**, Professor of Philosophy at the Faculty of Education and Diversity at the University of Iceland, **Hulda Skogland**, Senior Advisor at the Department of Analysis at Iceland's Directorate of Education, and **Ellert Björgvin Schram**, Instructor at Siðmennt and Graduate Student in Philosophy at the University of Iceland.



8



9

Hulda Skogland started the dialogue by emphasizing the importance of quality science teaching to equip children with the necessary skills to become responsible citizens. She pointed out that evidence from the PISA study shows that 23% of 15 year olds do not even reach basic skills in science, which is a serious problem that needs to be rectified. **Ólafur Páll Ólafsson** discussed that science is important but that maybe we need a completely different approach to learning, with more emphasis on learning to listen, question and care for other people. The answer according to Ólafur is not to make things faster and more effective but rather to slow down teaching and tolerate ambiguity. **Ellert Björgvin Schram** agreed that the answer is not only to teach skills, it is more of an ethical question. We need to emphasise moral education, where children learn empathy and learn how to listen and argue without shouting and fighting. The key is helping children develop critical thinking from an early age.

The conversation went on to centre on whether quality science or the cultivation of values was the most effective route to citizenship education, crucial in combatting dis- and misinformation in the post-truth era. There was an understanding that the combination of concrete guidelines and tools for teachers as well as fostering values like caring, listening, and critical thinking at the national and EU level provides the ideal environment for the enhancement of critical thinking and thus increased ability to recognise and respond to dis- and misinformation. The requirement

of equity and special measures within education was also discussed in relation to the creation of a holistically educated society where critical thinking is natural.

RECLAIM's opening event was not only stimulating for the guest speakers involved, but the discussions prompted many thought-provoking questions and comments from the audience and allowed all involved not only to reflect on the current state of the post-truth age but the essential routes forward, allowing this crucial topic to live on in the minds and conversations of the attendees after the event, perfectly setting the scene for RECLAIM's next three years ahead.

RECLAIM is a Research and Innovation Action funded by the EU's Horizon Europe programme under Grant Agreement no. 101061330. The content of this report are the sole responsibility of the RECLAIM project. It does not reflect the opinion of the European Union. The Research Executive Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.



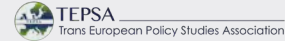
Funded by
the European Union



INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

IRMO

Institut za razvoj i medunarodne odnose
Institute for Development and International Relations



I->INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS PRAGUE

