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# Disinformation: A Challenge for Democracy

Attitudes and perceptions in Europe

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## Contents

<a href="#">1</a>	— Key findings	4
<a href="#">2</a>	— Introduction	7
<a href="#">3</a>	— Widespread uncertainty and reported encounters with disinformation	8
<a href="#">4</a>	— Responses to false information	13
<a href="#">5</a>	— Social media use and dealing with disinformation	18
<a href="#">6</a>	— Trust in media	24
<a href="#">7</a>	— Measures to combat disinformation	26
<a href="#">8</a>	— Political attitudes and stances toward disinformation	28
<a href="#">9</a>	— Conclusion	34
<a href="#">10</a>	— Recommended actions	37
<a href="#">11</a>	— Legal notice and Notes on methodology	38

## 1 Key findings

**Uncertainty about information seen on the internet and perceived encounters with disinformation are widespread phenomena in the European Union.** Fifty-four percent of EU citizens reported being “often” or “very often” unsure whether a piece of information they saw on the internet in recent months was true. Only 4% reported never being unsure of information they saw. Thirty-nine percent of respondents reported consciously encountering disinformation, while only ten percent said they did not encounter any disinformation at all. Respondents with a university-level degree are more likely to report being unsure and encountering disinformation than respondents with no formal education. Younger respondents tend to feel unsure less often than older respondents, but these young people also report encountering disinformation more often. Respondents in Spain and Italy show a comparatively higher frequency of uncertainty and reported encounters with disinformation, while respondents in the Netherlands show the lowest values in both cases.

**Less than half of Europeans claim to actively investigate information on the internet, and an even smaller percentage report false information or bring attention to it in any way.** Forty-four percent of respondents across the EU said that they actively investigated whether a piece of information they saw on the internet was true at least once in recent months. Twenty-two percent said they reported a post or account on social media at least once in recent months or that they personally alerted someone by means of a comment or message that he or she was spreading false information. Respondents in Poland and Germany are most active when it comes to investigating information. Sixty percent of Polish and 49% of German respondents reported having investigated whether a piece of information on the internet was true in recent months. Polish respondents were shown to have alerted someone with a comment or message that he or she was spreading false information especially often (28%); only Spain shows a slightly higher figure for this at 29%. Belgian (28%) and Polish (27%) respondents are the most active in reporting false information.

**The higher the self-reported frequency of encountering disinformation, the greater the willingness to take action to counteract it. Uncertainty about the veracity of online information alone is not enough to prompt action.** Across the EU, 52% of respondents who reported an account because of false information also said they encountered disinformation often or very often. Of those respondents who never reported an account, only 36% said the same about encountering disinformation. Conversely, the two groups stated to roughly the same extent (58% and 53%, respectively) that they often or very often feel uncertain about the veracity of information seen on the internet. The more often a person feels unsure about information does not automatically lead to a more active response, such as reporting a post or alerting someone with a comment. However, respondents who report being unsure tend to research information more often; with 62% saying they had investigated information at least once in recent months.

**Young people and people with higher formal education attainment levels show a more active response to (false) information on the internet:** A person's willingness to report information, to alert someone else with a comment and to investigate whether a piece of information is true all decrease with age. People with higher levels of formal education tend to actively research information themselves, while people with lower levels of formal education are more likely to like or share false information.

**People who use a larger number of social media channels also report more frequent encounters with disinformation. Twitter and Telegram stand out in this regard.** Generally, respondents who regularly use multiple platforms also reported encountering disinformation more frequently. However, the reported frequency of encountering disinformation varies depending on the specific platforms used. For instance, users of Telegram and Twitter reported encountering disinformation much more often than users of other platforms. Telegram users, in particular, admitted to accidentally liking or sharing false information at least once in recent months. In terms of reporting false information, both Telegram and Twitter users surpass users of other platforms. In contrast, people who use Telegram are particularly likely to alert others to the existence of false information. Similarly, although to a lesser extent, this applies to users of Twitter and TikTok as well.

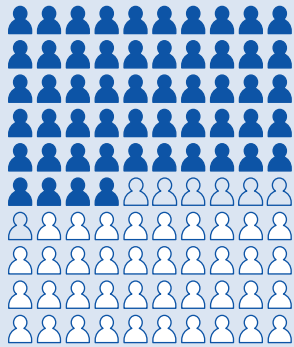
**EU citizens hold mixed views on the impact of social media on democracy.** While 30% perceive social media as having a negative impact, 28% see it as a positive force. The majority (42%) remain ambivalent about its impact. However, opinions differ across countries, with more critical attitudes observed in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. In France, 43% hold a critical view, while only 19% see it positively. Similarly, in Germany, the ratio of critical to positive views is 35% to 24%. Conversely, Poland takes a more positive stance on the impact of social media on democracy, with only 18% perceiving it negatively and 39% seeing it positively. Generally, younger people tend to view the impact of social media slightly more positively than older individuals. Additionally, a higher level of formal education is associated with a somewhat more critical perspective on social media's influence on democracy.

**The vast majority of respondents express a desire for more effort from politicians and platform operators in combating the spread of disinformation.** Among EU citizens, 85% believe politicians should take more action, while an even higher number (89%) call for increased efforts from platform operators. Furthermore, 82% of respondents agree with both statements. Only a small percentage (7%) disagrees with the idea that governments and platforms should intensify their efforts to counter disinformation. This strong demand for action is consistent across individual European countries. The lowest level of support for increased intervention by politicians is found in the Netherlands (83%), while the lowest level for platform intervention is in Belgium (87%). Notably, respondents were significantly more likely to "strongly agree" with the necessity for platforms to do more in combating disinformation (53% across Europe) than for governments to do the same (40%).

**The study allows us to infer the following four recommendations for action:** (1) [establish an effective system for monitoring disinformation both in Germany and across Europe](#); (2) [raise public awareness about the issue of disinformation](#); (3) [promote media literacy among people of all age groups](#); (4) [ensure consistent and transparent content creation on digital platforms](#).

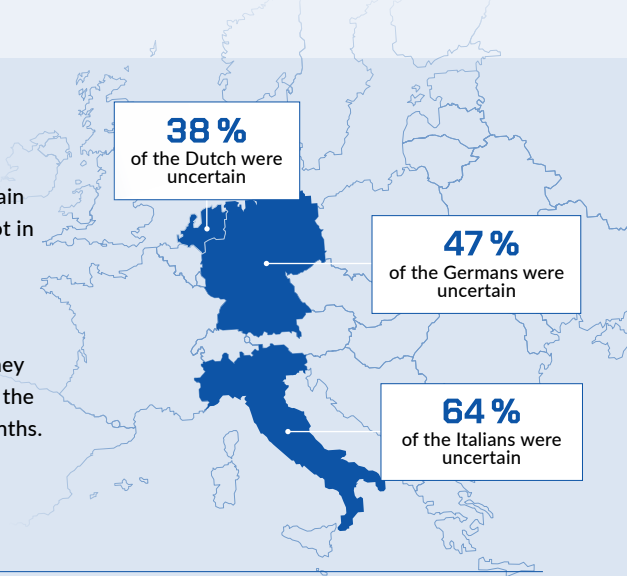
# Key Findings

What is disinformation? **Disinformation** refers to false information that is spread intentionally to manipulate and/or cause harm. **Misinformation**, however, refers to misleading content that is shared unknowingly or unintentionally. **Malinformation** takes facts out of context and is disseminated with the intent to cause harm.



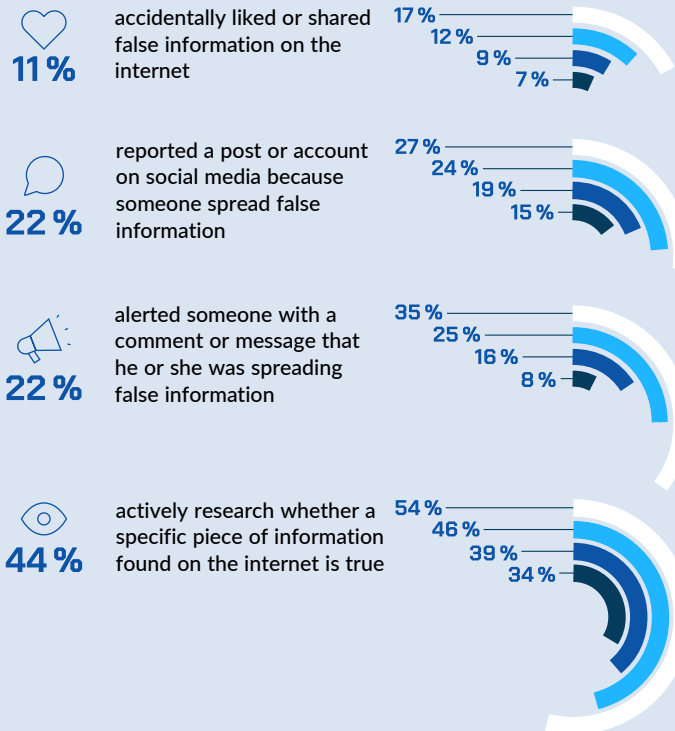
**54 %** of respondents across Europe were often or very often uncertain whether information on the Internet is true or not in the last few months.

**39 %** of respondents indicate that they encountered disinformation on the internet frequently or very frequently in the last few months.

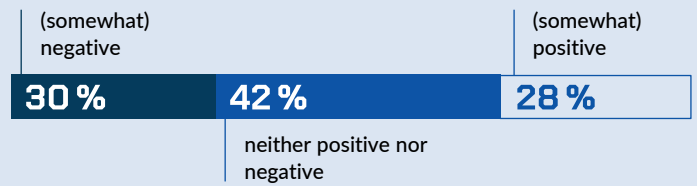


## Effect of age on responses

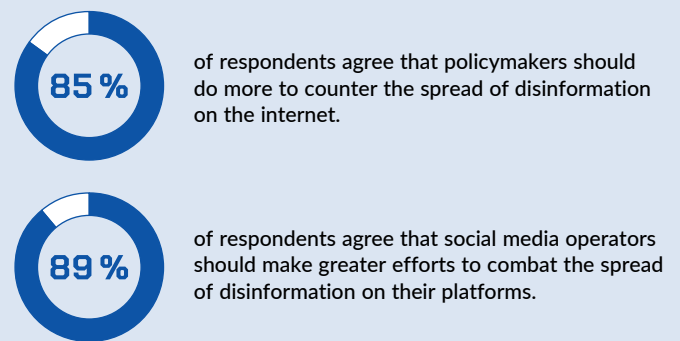
16-29 30-44 45-59 60+



## Impact of social media on democracy



## Demand to act against disinformation



## Recommended action



Establish a systematic means of monitoring the phenomenon of disinformation in Germany and Europe.



Foster widespread awareness of disinformation within the general population.



Cultivate media and news literacy across all generations.



Guarantee consistent and transparent content moderation on digital platforms.

## 2 Introduction

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In March 2023, an eye-catching image of Pope Francis caused quite a stir on social media. The image depicted the head of the Catholic Church walking outside the Vatican in a thick white puffer jacket with a silver cross hanging around his neck. Along with widespread discussions of the Pontiff's supposedly extravagant fashion preferences, the origin of the image itself became the subject of much debate across the globe. It quickly became clear, however, that the photo was a deceptively good fake created using artificial intelligence. In fact, anyone who had looked closely would have been able to find evidence of the image's artificial intelligence (AI) origins from the get-go: the Pope's ear was oddly blurred at its top edge, his right hand was only partially complete and there were obvious inconsistencies in the cross. Still, many of us simply did not catch these small, tell-tale errors.

Since the end of 2022, we have seen a boom in so-called generative AI, that is, in computer programs capable of generating images from specifications such as text templates. Midjourney is the name of the application that was most likely used to create the image of the Pope – at least the traces left by the image lead back to a so-called subreddit forum bearing the name of that app. The AI-generated pope is only one of many examples of spectacular photos and videos that have turned out to be either manipulated or completely fake in recent years. While some of these fakes are harmless gimmicks, many others are motivated by more menacing intentions, such as when one politician depict a competitor as uttering phrases they never said, or when an image or video intentionally fuels fears among the general public about political measures that were never actually intended to be carried out. It is important to note that these AI-generated fakes are only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, the internet has long since been a hotbed of false information, manipulated documents and dubious quotes and photos taken entirely out of context. Often the goal is not so much to spread a specific bit of false information, but rather to undermine trust in the veracity of information as a whole and to destabilize the standing of otherwise reliable sources of information.

In the present study, which draws on the findings of a recent Europe-wide survey, we seek to address the issue of disinformation, which we define as any kind of false information intentionally disseminated by its creators with the goal of causing damage. It must be noted here that disinformation differs from incorrect or misinformation in that the latter two – although they are just as false as disinformation – are not disseminated deliberately or with an intent to harm, but rather arise due to errors or slipshod research. Likewise, a distinction must also be made between disinformation and malinformation; while malinformation is indeed a form of information used to inflict harm, it is actually based in truth, while disinformation is not. In this short study, we shed light on the ways people in Europe perceive deliberately false information, how they navigate their way through this information and what expectations they have of politicians and social media platform operators. We are also interested in the empirical findings that relate to the European Union as a whole as well as the extent to which attitudes differ in our seven selected countries – Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands and Spain.

### 3 Widespread uncertainty and reported encounters with disinformation

Disinformation is by no means an entirely novel phenomenon, and its political and social relevance cannot be attributed entirely to the technological developments of recent months and years. On the contrary, disinformation has long been a key weapon in the arsenal of communication tools used to influence public opinion. For this reason, the first thing we sought to discover about our respondents was how they dealt with the information they encounter on the internet, regardless of which websites they visit or which apps they use. Our findings reveal that over half of Europeans (54%) frequently experienced uncertainty regarding the truthfulness of the information they came across on the internet in the months leading up to the study. Less than four percent were “not at all” unsure and 43% were “rarely” or “very rarely” unsure. Younger respondents demonstrated slightly less uncertainty compared to older respondents. Notably, significant differences were observed between individuals with varying levels of formal education. Among respondents with a university degree, 55% were often or very often unsure about the accuracy of information, whereas only 41% of those with no formal education expressed the same level of uncertainty. This suggests that a higher level of formal education results in a greater degree of skepticism when assessing the veracity of information on the internet.

**Figure 1: Uncertainty about the veracity of information and reported encounters with disinformation (EU total)**

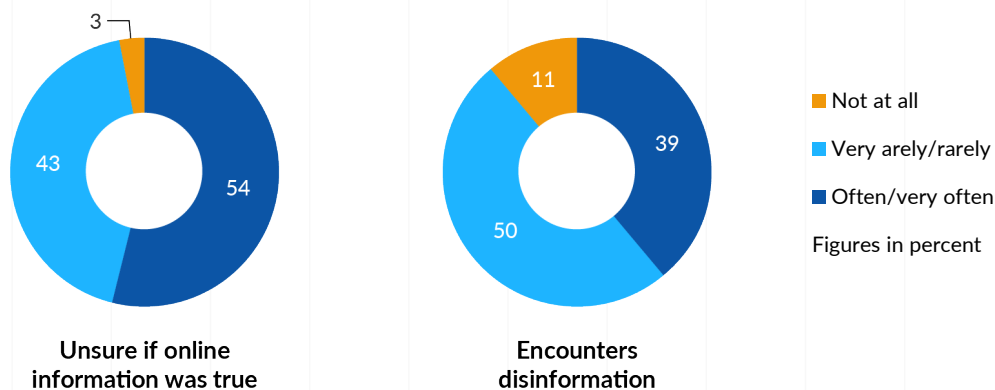


Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses to the two questions “In the last few months, how often were you unsure whether a piece of information you saw on the internet was true?” and “How often have you encountered disinformation on the internet in recent months that was intentionally spread to harm someone or cause uncertainty?” N= 13.270 individuals from all 27 EU states. Survey period: March 2023.

It should be noted here that not every piece information on the internet that prompts suspicion and uncertainty is actually false or a case of disinformation. For this reason, we wanted to draw more precise information from our survey respondents and inquire as to



whether they had already encountered disinformation online. To make sure that they understood exactly what we meant by disinformation, we inserted the following brief explanation before the questions: “The next questions are about disinformation. Disinformation refers to false information that is intentionally disseminated to cause harm or create uncertainty.” With this definition as a basis, the respondents were asked to classify their encounters with disinformation. Thirty-nine percent of Europeans reported having encountered disinformation often or very often in recent months. Ten percent reported encountering no disinformation whatsoever. This time, it was young respondents who reported encountering disinformation more often than older respondents. The tendency with regard to education levels, however, remained the same: not only do people with higher levels of education report a higher frequency of uncertainty when it comes to assessing the veracity of information; they report a higher frequency of encounters with disinformation. For example, 26 % of respondents with no formal education stated that they often or very often encountered disinformation, and 23 % claimed to have encountered no disinformation at all. Among those with a college degree, the figures are 42 % and 7 %, respectively.

When examined in conjunction with each other, the data for uncertainty and reported encounters with disinformation reveals a correlation between the frequency of a respondent’s uncertainty in evaluating information online and their perception of disinformation. In other words, respondents who state that they are often unsure about the veracity of information they come across are also more likely to report recognizing disinformation more frequently. But it remains unclear what came first, the chicken or the egg. The available data does not allow us to determine whether people who are more frequently uncertain tend to perceive information as disinformation, or conversely, whether a lack of certainty increases among those who tend to see more disinformation. In fact, it is possible that both effects occur simultaneously and serve to mutually reinforce each other.

When we took a closer look, however, we discover several differences. As part of this process, we combined the answers to the two questions with one another and identified four types (see **Table 1**). According to our findings, roughly 31 % of all respondents fall into the category of “often unsure and frequent encounters with disinformation.” On the other hand, 38 % fall into the category of “not at all/rarely unsure and none at all/rare encounters with disinformation.” In only roughly 9 % of cases did the respondent report experiencing frequent encounters with disinformation without also experiencing uncertainty. The more common variation among respondents was found in those who stated that although they rarely encounter disinformation, they are often unsure of the information’s accuracy (23 %).

**Table 1: Combined results for uncertainty and reported encounters with disinformation**

		Unsure whether a piece of information on the internet was true	
		Not at all/ (very) rarely	Often/ very often
Encounter with disinformation	Not at all/(very) rarely	<b>38</b>	<b>23</b>
	Often/ very often	<b>9</b>	<b>31</b>

The table shows the combined distribution of responses to the two questions “In the last few months, how often were you unsure whether a piece of information you saw on the internet was true?” and “How often have you encountered disinformation on the internet in recent months that was intentionally spread to harm someone or cause uncertainty?” N= 13.270 individuals from all 27 EU states. Survey period: March 2023. Figures in percent.

Upon analyzing these four types in the context of their sociodemographic characteristics, two key findings emerge: First, in the smallest group – those who rarely feel unsure despite reporting frequent encounters with disinformation – young respondents (up to 29 years of age) are noticeably overrepresented, while older respondents (60 years of age and older) are under-represented. Second, a slight gender effect is evident: Among those who rarely feel unsure despite reporting frequent encounters with disinformation, men are overrepresented and women are under-represented. The exact opposite is true among those who report fewer encounters with disinformation yet who are nevertheless unsure. One plausible explanation for this distribution is that some of the younger respondents may be more adept at evaluating internet information and thus better at recognizing disinformation. On the other hand, it is possible that members of this group – especially males – tend to overestimate their own abilities in this regard and are less inclined to question their own judgment.

The available dataset allows us to derive viable findings specific to seven European countries. When we look at the values for the different countries, we can see considerable differences. For instance, only 38 % of respondents in the Netherlands stated that they often or very often felt unsure when evaluating information on the internet. This figure is 16 percentage points lower than the average for all European countries and 26 percentage points lower than the highest rate, which was reported in Italy at 64 %. Uncertainty is more prevalent in Spain (57 % often/very often) and in France (55 %) compared to the European average (54 %). In contrast, Poland (53 %), Germany (47 %), and Belgium (44 %) scored below the European average.

The gap between different countries is somewhat narrower when it comes to reported encounters with disinformation. In this regard, respondents in Spain report the highest frequency (49 % often/very often), while those in the Netherlands once again report the lowest (29 %). Respondents in Italy report encountering disinformation more frequently, ranking second only to their counterparts in Spain (47 %). All other countries fall below the EU average.

A comprehensive view of both results reveals that Spain and Italy are clear standouts, experiencing more frequent uncertainty and reported encounters with disinformation compared to the other countries surveyed. On the other hand, the Netherlands stands out with the lowest values in terms of both uncertainty and encounters.

**Figure 2: Uncertainty about the veracity of information (country comparison)**

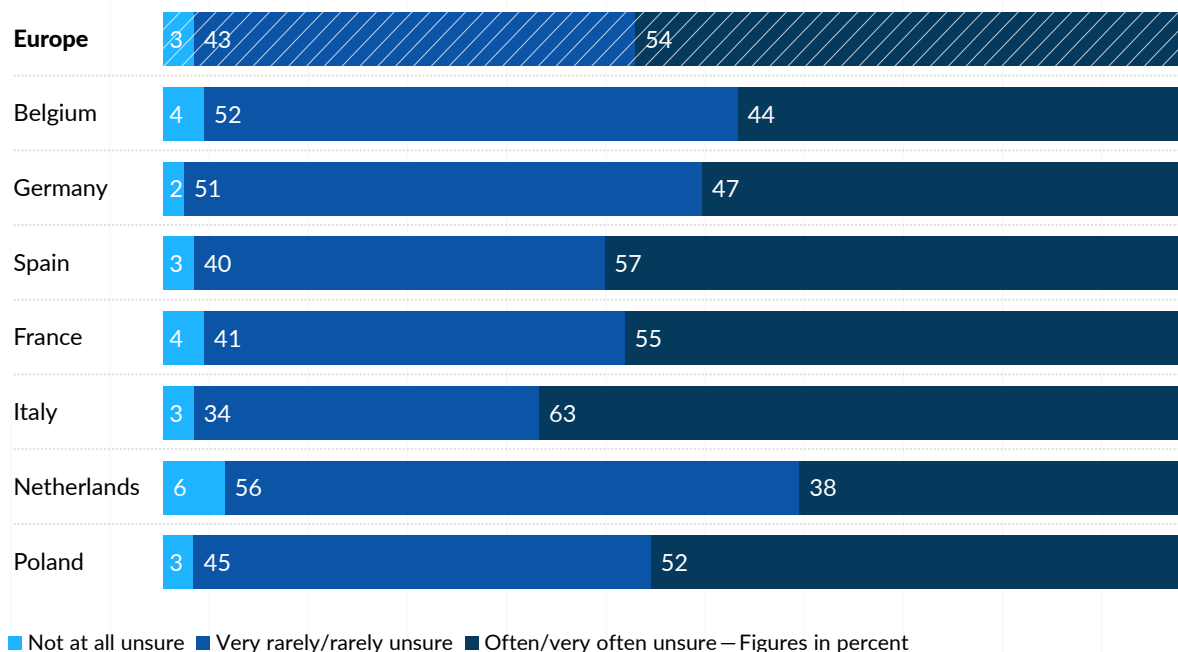


Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses to the question “In the last few months, how often were you unsure whether a piece of information you saw on the internet was true?” both for the EU as a whole as well as for seven selected countries. Survey period: March 2023.

**Figure 3: Frequency of reported encounters with disinformation (country comparison)**

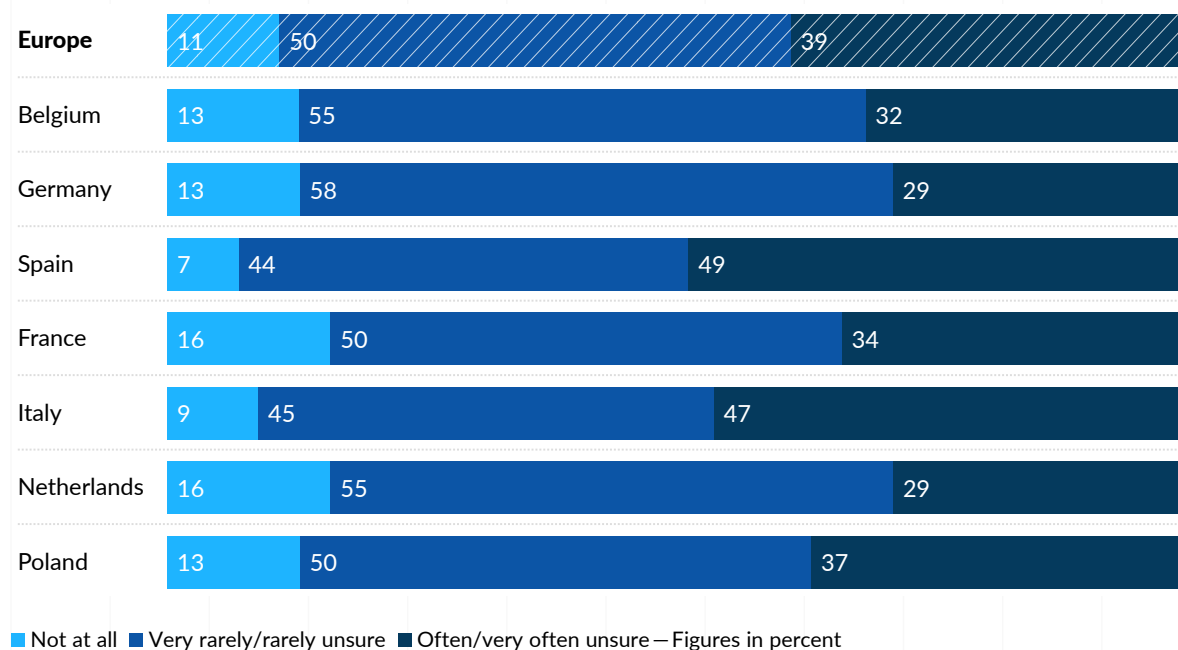


Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses to the question “How often have you encountered disinformation on the internet in recent months that was intentionally spread to harm someone or cause uncertainty?” both for the EU as a whole as well as for seven selected countries. Survey period: March 2023.

When comparing countries, examining the combined results provides even clearer insights into the different profiles. In the Netherlands (51%), Belgium (49%), and Germany (46%), the most common “type” of respondent is one who generally feels confident about the accuracy of information on the internet and reports rarely encountering disinformation. Conversely, in Italy (41%) and Spain (38%), the most frequent type is the person who reports frequently encountering disinformation and feels uncertain about its veracity. However, the group of those respondents who report fewer encounters with disinformation yet who are nevertheless unsure about the veracity of information is similarly sizable across all countries, ranging from 19% in Spain to 27% in France.

**Figure 4:** Combined results for uncertainty about the veracity of information and reported encounters with disinformation (country comparison)

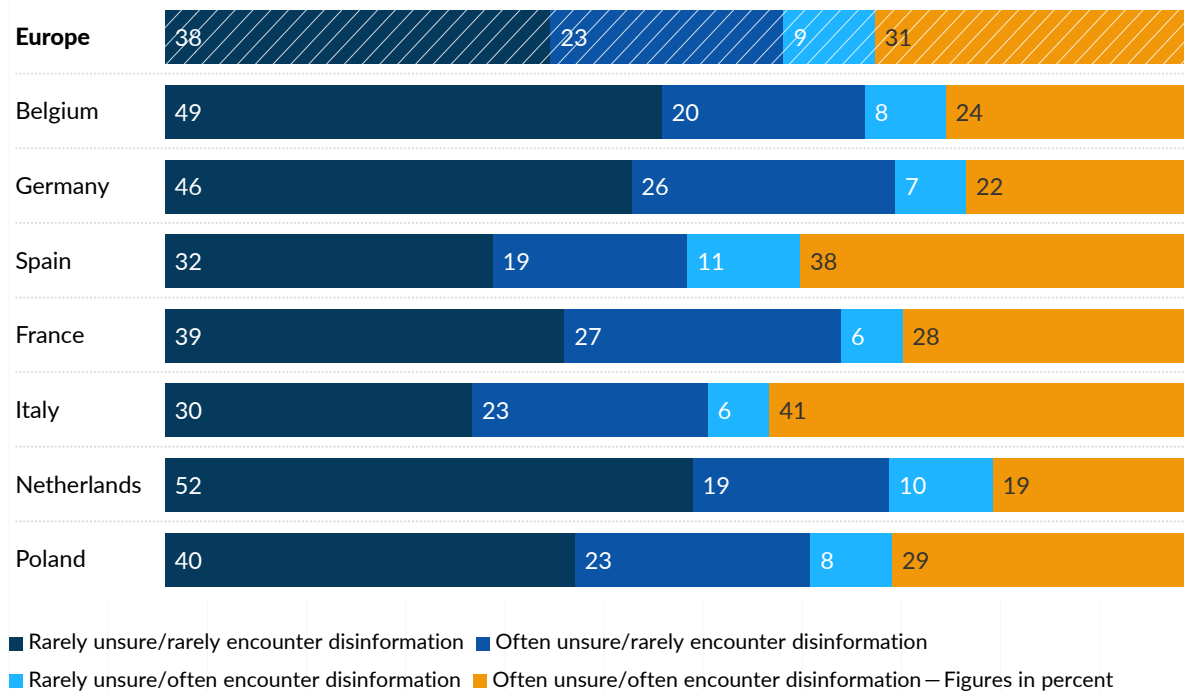


Figure 4 shows the combined distribution of responses to the two questions “In the last few months, how often were you unsure whether a piece of information you saw on the internet was true?” and “How often have you encountered disinformation on the internet in recent months that was intentionally spread to harm someone or cause uncertainty?” for the EU as a whole as well as for seven select countries. Survey period: March 2023.

## 4 Responses to false information

Encountering disinformation and grappling with the question of authenticity is a complex matter. How we choose to respond to this situation in our daily lives raises a completely different question. In this study, we are particularly interested in determining whether internet users, when faced with disinformation, take any action to counteract the spread thereof. To gain insight into behavior in this context, we listed four possible responses to false information and asked respondents if they had engaged in any of these reactions in recent months:



accidentally liked or shared false information on the internet



reported a post or account on social media because someone spread false information



alerted someone with a comment or message that he or she was spreading false information



actively research whether a specific piece of information found on the internet is true

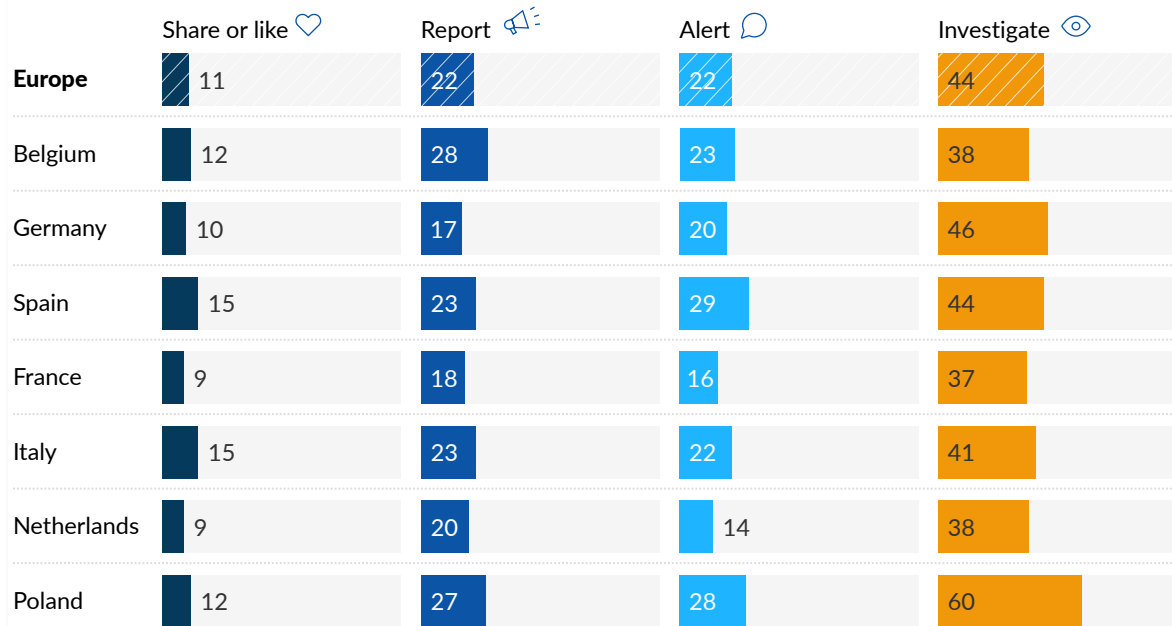
Our primary focus was to investigate the decisions made by respondents regarding specific actions. To achieve this, we formulated questions that revolve around false information and do not address the issue of potential malicious intent, which by definition belongs to the category of disinformation. This approach was designed to prevent respondents from getting too caught up in the potential motives of those who generate disinformation. For this reason, we chose to use the term “false information” in the four questions.

**Figure 5** shows the varied distribution of self-reported responses to information perceived to be disinformation. The unintentional sharing or liking of false information was the least-reported response among the four options listed. However, when interpreting this value, we should keep in mind that respondents answering this question in the affirmative need to admit to making an error in judgment, which is something many individuals find difficult to do. On average in Europe, only 11 % of respondents reported having engaged in this behavior at least once. Even fewer respondents in France and the Netherlands (9 % each), as well as in Germany (10 %), admitted to sharing or liking false information. The highest values were observed in Italy and Spain (15 %).

A larger number of respondents indicated that they had alerted someone by commenting or messaging that they were spreading false information. Twenty-two percent of respondents across Europe answered this question in the affirmative, which is a clear minority, but still a good one in five individuals. Notably high values were observed in Belgium (28 %) and

Poland (27%) for this question. However, Spain and Italy once again recorded values above the European average at 23% each, while the lowest figures were reported in France (18%) and Germany (17%).

**Figure 5: Responses to false information (EU-wide and by country)**



Figures in percent

Figure 5 shows the distribution of responses to the question “Please indicate which of the following statements applies to you. Multiple answers are possible. I have (a) accidentally liked or shared false information on the internet, (b) reported a post or account on social media because someone spread false information (c) alerted someone with a comment or message that he or she was spreading false information or (d) actively investigated whether a message on the internet is true.” Multiple answers were permitted. The data includes responses from the EU as a whole and seven selected countries. Survey period: March 2023.

A similar number of respondents indicated that they had alerted someone with a comment or message that he or she were spreading false information. Once again, 22% of respondents across the EU reported engaging in this type of behavior. Notably, Poland (28%) and Spain (29%) stood out with higher values, while the values in the Netherlands (14%), France (16%), and Germany (20%) are below the EU-wide average.

A significantly larger number of respondents reported actively investigating the veracity of a piece of information they encountered on the internet. The EU-wide figure for this response was 44%. The differences between EU countries in this regard were less pronounced compared to the other three listed responses (liking/sharing a post, reporting a post, alerting someone about a post). However, Poland stands out remarkably here, with 60% of respondents from that country reporting that they had sought to fact-check a piece of information. The values for the other EU countries on this ranged from 38% (Netherlands) to 46% (Germany).

Another significant finding is the absence of a strong correlation among the four listed responses surveyed. In other words, it is not always the same individuals who are doing the

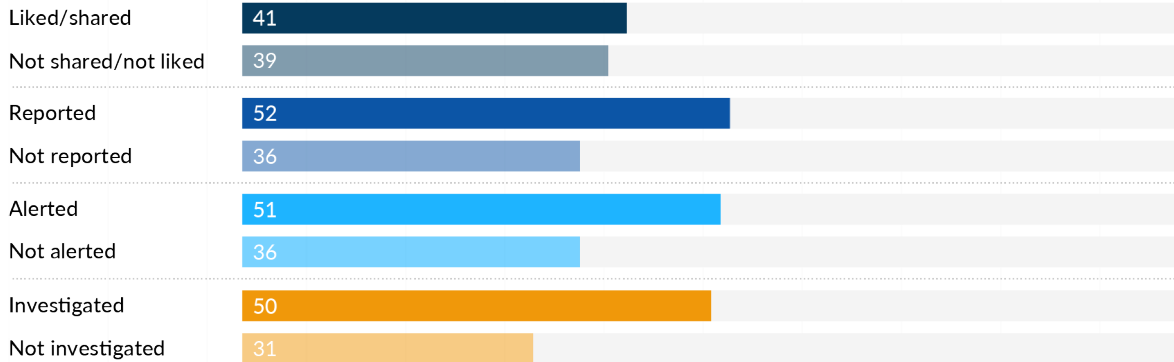
liking/sharing, reporting, alerting and investigating. Instead, for the most part, a varying group of respondents reports engaging in each of the individual responses. A total of 35 % of all respondents have not engaged in any of the four listed responses, while 41 % report engaging in just one. Only 17 % stated that they had engaged in two different responses, while six percent said they had engaged in three. Merely one percent reported having engaged in all four of the listed responses.

The distribution across countries for this combined indicator is similar to that observed with findings for specific responses: Poland, Italy, and Spain have the lowest share of respondents who have never shared/liked, reported, alerted or investigated a piece of information. These countries also feature the largest percentage of individuals who have engaged in two, three or four of the listed responses.

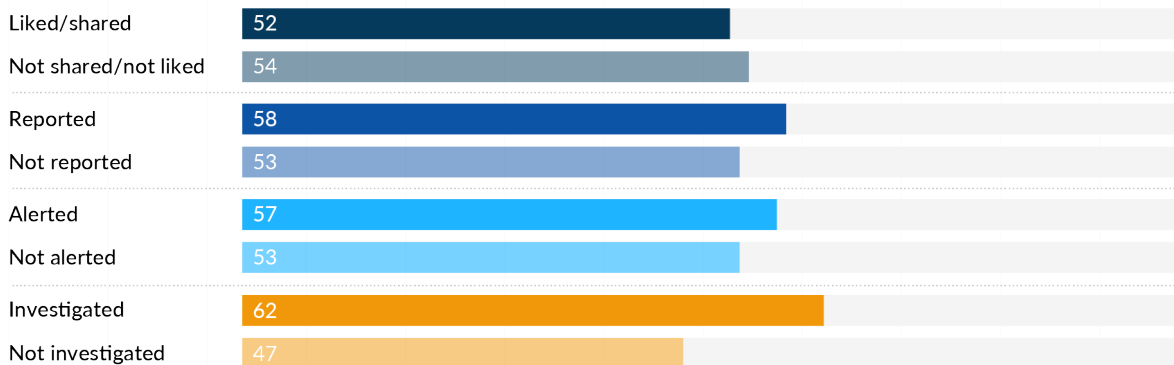
It comes as no surprise that the various responses that respondents chose to engage in are quite clearly related to the frequency with which these same individuals encountered disinformation and expressed uncertainty about its veracity. This does not apply, however, to the liking and sharing of disinformation, as shown by **Figure 6** (the two bars representing these responses are of near-equal height). When it comes to feelings of uncertainty about the veracity of information, the correlation is visibly lower than in the case of encountered disinformation. For instance, among respondents who reported an account due to false information, 52 % said they often or very often encounter disinformation “often” or “very often.” In contrast, among those who never reported an account, only 36 % said they often or very often encounter disinformation. Conversely, the two groups stated to roughly the same extent (58 % and 53 %, respectively) that they often or very often feel uncertain about the veracity of information seen on the internet.

**Figure 6: Correlation between reported frequency of encounters with disinformation or uncertainty and the four listed responses**

**Share of respondents who report encountering disinformation often/very often**



**Share of respondents who are often/very often uncertain about the veracity of information**



Figures in percent

Figure 6 shows the share of respondents who report encountering disinformation often (or very often) and are also often (or very often) uncertain about information they encounter. The data is presented in relation to whether they reported engaging in one of the four listed responses (like/share, report, alert, investigate). The data includes responses from the EU as a whole. Survey period: March 2023.

As illustrated by Figure 6, it appears that greater uncertainty about the veracity of information prompts an active response to false information only to a limited extent. This is understandable as feelings of uncertainty can make it challenging for individuals to make clear decisions about taking action. The situation is entirely different with regard to verifying information: nearly 62% of respondents who felt unsure about the veracity of a piece of information on the internet reported having undertaken their own investigation. This response is reasonable since conducting research can help mitigate uncertainty.

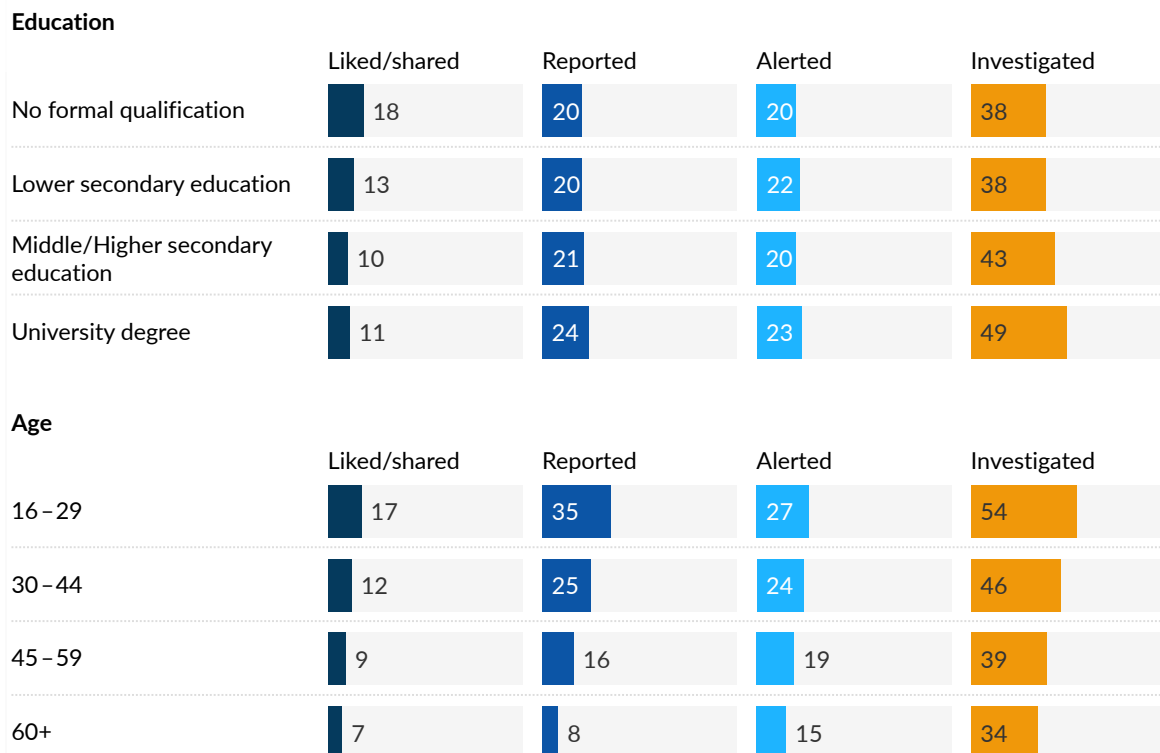
On the other hand, a respondent's subjective impression of having encountered disinformation more frequently seems to lead to a greater willingness to take action to counteract it. This hypothesis is confirmed when we look at the number of reported responses differentiated by the combined indicator of encounters with disinformation and uncertainty introduced above. Once again, the two groups that report encountering disinformation more frequently also report engaging in significantly more activities, despite no differences in the frequency of uncertainty they felt. Similarly, both certain and uncertain respondents who report encountering disinformation less often also report engaging in one of the listed responses to roughly the



same extent. In other words, uncertainty alone does not prompt a response; it is the specific identification of disinformation that triggers one of the listed responses.

Finally, we examined the response to false information in relation to sociodemographic factors. The data suggests a correlation between media usage behavior, the ability to identify false information and respond accordingly on the one hand, and age and level of formal education on the other.

**Figure 7: Influence of age and education levels on responses**



Figures in percent

Figure 7 shows the share of respondents who engaged in one of the four listed responses (like/share, report, alert, research) based on age group and level of formal education. The data includes responses from the EU as a whole. Survey period: March 2023.

The results clearly indicate that younger respondents are more likely to report having engaged in all four of the listed responses, with these values decreasing as individuals get older. This could be attributed, at least in part, to higher levels of media literacy among younger respondents. Indeed, they are likely to be more adept at utilizing various tools available on different platforms, which also corresponds to the findings in which young respondents state that they more frequently encounter disinformation (see above).

Conversely, the impact of education is less distinct in this case. The higher the level of formal education, the higher the share of individuals who actively investigate information themselves. In contrast, individuals with less formal education were more likely to report having shared or liked false information. Apart from these observations, the survey findings yield only weak conclusions.

## 5 Social media use and dealing with disinformation

Each social media platform has its own communication culture and strategies to combat disinformation. It is therefore worthwhile to examine the platforms our respondents use, as this can potentially influence their responses to the survey questions related to disinformation. By understanding their usage behavior on these platforms, we can gain valuable insights into their perceptions and attitudes towards disinformation

**Figure 8:** Use of different social media platforms and messengers (multiple answers possible)

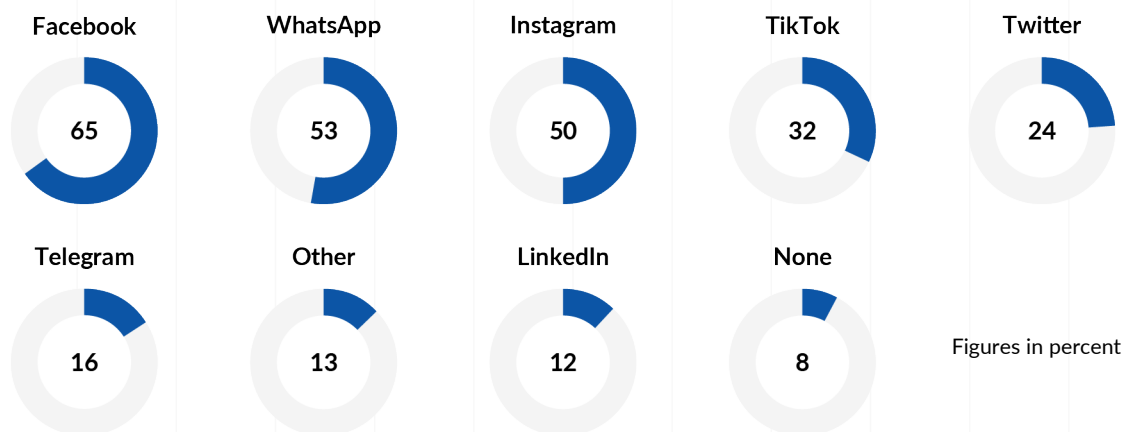


Figure 8 displays the percentage of respondents using different social media platforms. Data is presented for the EU as a whole. Survey period: March 2023.

Our survey reveals a clear hierarchy in platform usage (see **Figure 8**): Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram are the most popular, with more than half of the respondents using each (65%, 53% and 50% respectively). TikTok and Twitter follow with usage rates of 32% and 24%. Telegram and LinkedIn are used by 16% and 12% of respondents, respectively. Thirteen percent reported using another platform, while only 8% stated they do not use any platform. However, we must interpret the data with caution, as the survey was conducted online, which may lead to an underrepresentation of individuals who are less active on the internet or more reserved in their online activity.

In terms of sociodemographics, the survey results align with expectations: Instagram and TikTok are particularly popular among the youngest age group (16 to 29 years), while Facebook is preferred by those aged 30 to 44 and 45 to 59 years. Other platforms also see higher usage by younger respondents, whereas older participants (above 60 years) are overrepresented among those who do not use any platforms. In terms of educational attainment, we observe only a few minor differences: Twitter and LinkedIn usage increases with higher education levels.

Additionally, there are variations in platform preferences based on gender, with women being more active on Facebook and Instagram, while men tend to use Telegram and Twitter more frequently.

Moreover, distinct patterns of platform use are evident across the surveyed countries. For example, Poland shows a significantly high Facebook usage rate of 85%, while Germany shows relatively lower usage at 51%.

**Figure 9: Platform use in the surveyed countries (multiple answers possible)**

	Belgium	Germany	Spain	France	Italy	Netherlands	Poland
Facebook	63	51	62	63	63	61	85
Instagram	46	46	58	45	56	46	60
LinkedIn	17	10	13	12	11	20	10
Telegram	14	15	24	8	29	12	11
TikTok	35	30	40	28	31	30	40
Twitter	29	22	32	19	19	28	27
WhatsApp	43	60	77	38	74	64	40
Other	12	18	7	15	11	14	12
None	12	12	5	11	6	8	4

■ Highest value among countries up to □ lowest value – Figures in percent

Figure 9 shows the percentage distribution of platform users across seven selected countries. Multiple answers were possible. Survey period: March 2023. Color indicates the intensity of use of the respective platform in one country in comparison to the other countries.

Spain and Italy often demonstrate diverging values and are characterized by a heightened uncertainty about the accuracy of information and a high rate of reported encounters with disinformation. Survey respondents in both countries also reported a higher incidence of sharing or “liking” false information. Interestingly, platform use in these countries is also high. Spain stands out with remarkably high usage rates for five out of the seven platforms surveyed – Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, Twitter and WhatsApp. Similarly, Italy falls within the upper range of usage for Instagram, Telegram and WhatsApp, but records the lowest value for Twitter among the surveyed countries. In contrast, Germany consistently shows average to lower usage figures, with respondents from Germany leading in the categories of “no usage” and “other platforms.”

The heavy use of social media in Spain and Italy becomes even more apparent when considering the number of platforms individuals use. On average, 8% of respondents across Europe do not use any platforms at all (neither those mentioned nor any other platform), while approximately one-fifth report using one, two, or three channels associated with a platform. And another one-fourth of respondents use four to five channels. However, respondents in Spain and Italy are active on significantly more platforms, with nearly 40% of respondents from Spain using four or more channels, and in Italy, this proportion exceeds 37%.

**Figure 10: Number of platforms used (by country)**

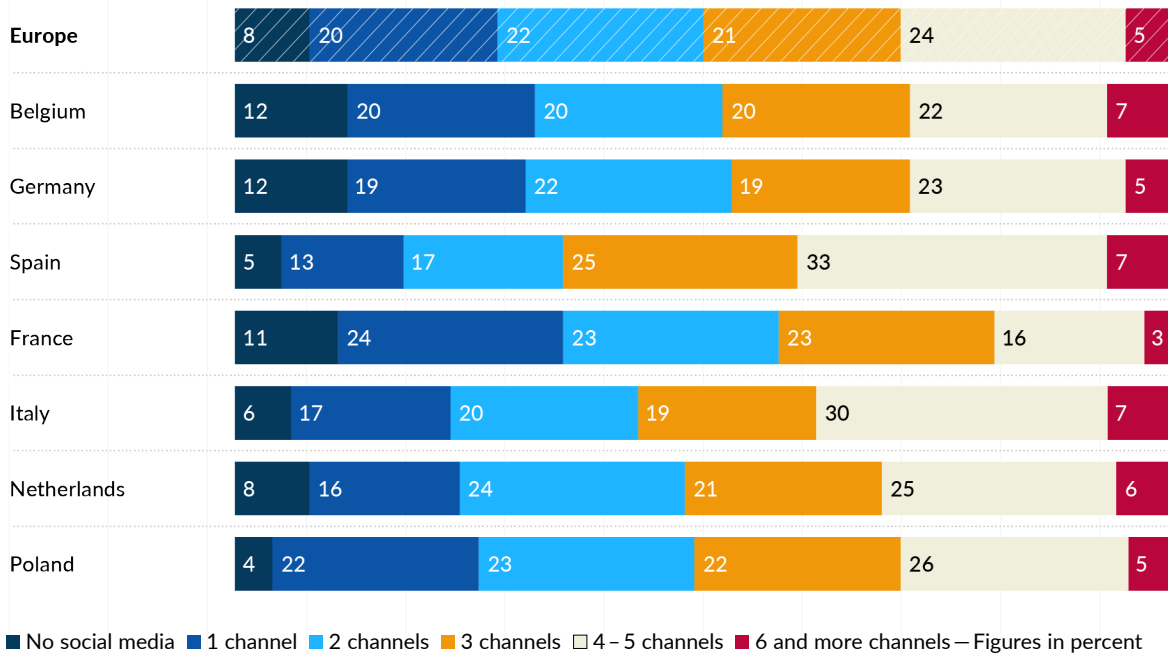


Figure 10 shows the distribution of respondents based on the number of social media platforms they use and draws on aggregate values for the aforementioned social media platforms. Data is provided for the entire EU and selected countries. Survey period: March 2023.

We see a clear correlation between the number of platforms used and the frequency of reported encounters with disinformation. As the number of platforms used increases, so does the share of respondents reporting instances of disinformation.

**Figure 11: Frequency of reported encounters with disinformation as a function of the number of platforms used**

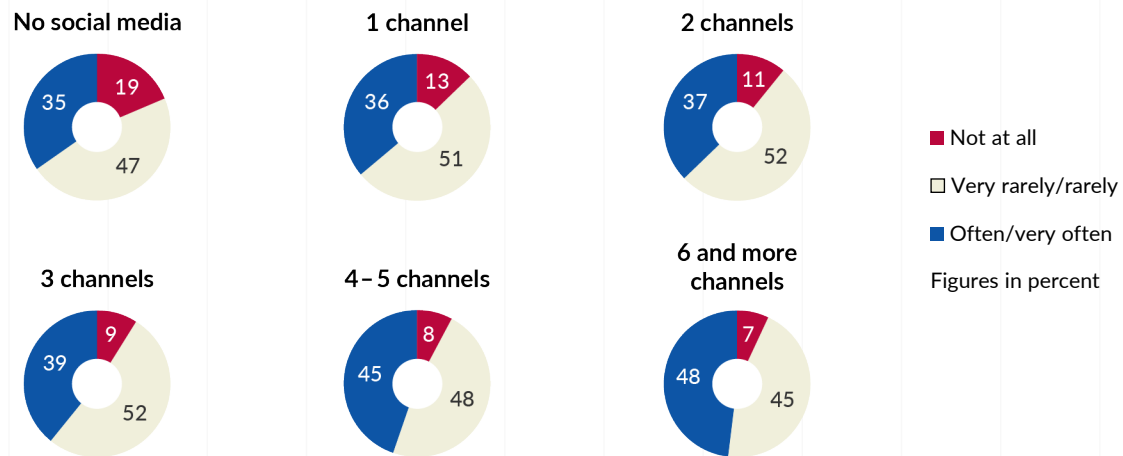
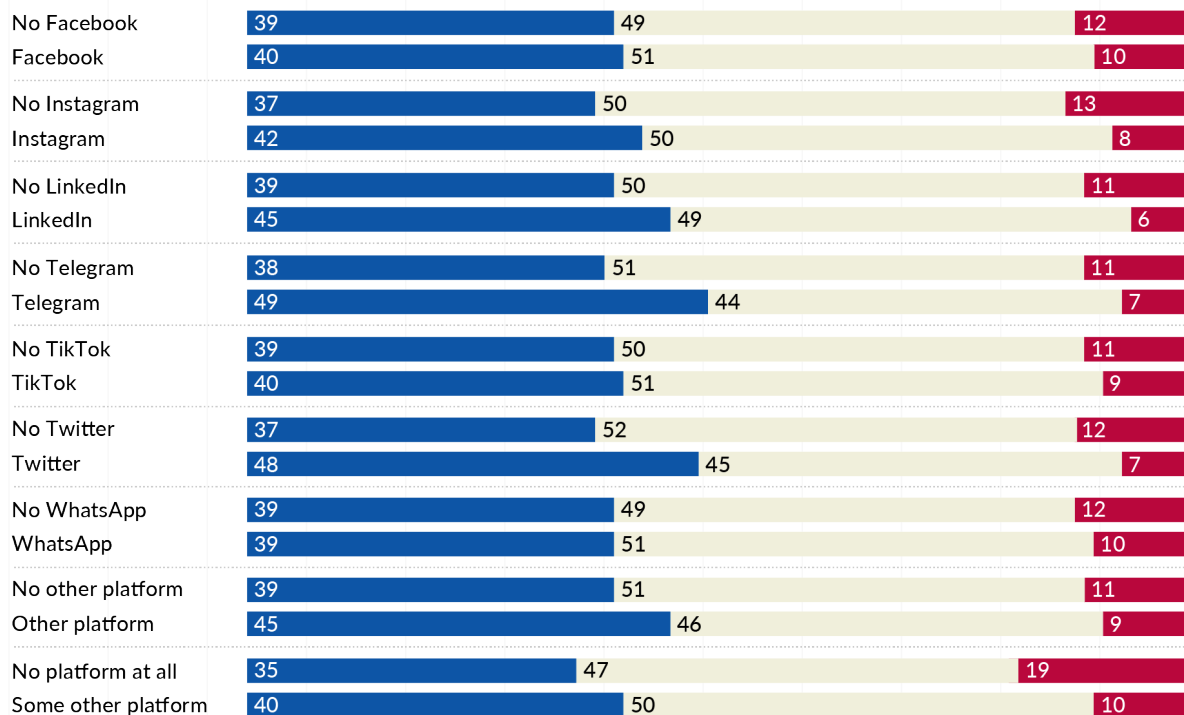


Figure 11 presents respondents' self-reported frequency of encountered disinformation, depending on the number of social media platforms they use. Data is provided for the entire EU. Survey period: March 2023.

The number of platforms used by individuals can serve as an indication of their overall internet activity. Those who use more platforms are likely to spend more time online, and consequently, they may encounter instances of disinformation more frequently. However, there is no significant correlation between the frequency of used platforms and the uncertainty about the veracity of information.

Of particular interest is whether specific platforms, in addition to the total number, influence perceptions of disinformation. To determine this, we examine below how the frequency data for this issue differs depending on whether a respondent uses a particular platform or not. In **Figure 12**, we see that there are minimal differences in reported encounters with disinformation based on whether respondents use Facebook, TikTok, or WhatsApp. However, there are clear effects for Telegram and Twitter (both +11 percentage points), along with somewhat weaker effects for LinkedIn (+7 percentage points) and Instagram (+5 percentage points). Users of “other platforms” also report more encounters with disinformation (+5 percentage points).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 12: Reported frequency of encounters with disinformation by platform use**



■ Often/very often □ Rarely/very rarely ■ Not at all – Figures in percent

Figure 12 shows respondents' self-reported frequency of encountering disinformation in relation to their use of the listed platforms. Data is provided for the entire EU. Survey period: March 2023.

Unlike encounters with disinformation, uncertainty about the veracity of information is not significantly associated with platform use.

1 Overall, differences in user behavior account for only a small portion of the variations in individual encounters with disinformation.

In this section, we focus on the relationship between platform use and the actions individuals take in response to false information. To do this, we calculate the proportion of users on each platform who engage in actions such as liking/sharing, reporting, pointing out, or investigating false information. We then compare this to the overall percentage of all respondents who use at least one platform. In other words, we exclude those who are not active on any platform from this analysis.

**Figure 13: Active users by platform relative to total active social media users overall**

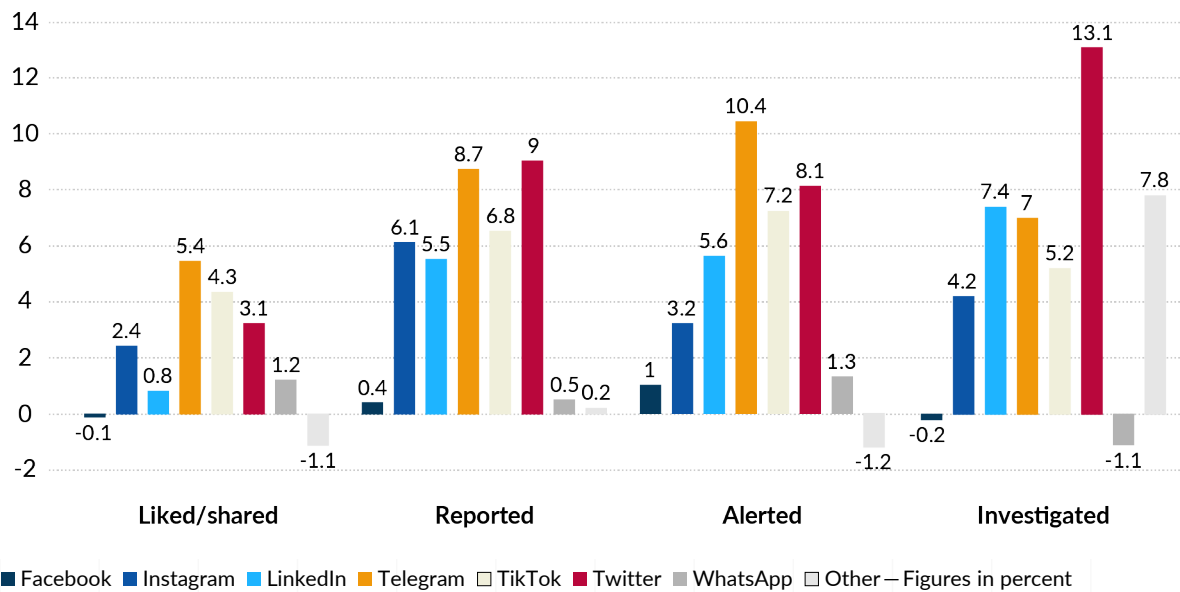


Figure 13 displays how much users of a specific platform deviate (in percentage points) from the average score of all other users concerning four different courses of action. Each bar represents a comparative value in relation to all other aggregate values. As respondents could give multiple answers, there is some overlap in the data.

Facebook and WhatsApp users, who constitute a significant proportion of the overall group, show minimal deviation from the average. In contrast, respondents using Telegram stand out, as they frequently report unintentionally “liking” or sharing false information themselves. Additionally, both Telegram and Twitter users are more likely to report encountering false information, and Telegram users slightly surpass others when it comes to pointing out the spread of false information. A similar, though less pronounced, trend is observed among Twitter and TikTok users. Twitter users, in particular, stand out as they are more inclined to conduct their own research to verify the truthfulness of information. For the first time, users of other platforms also display variations similar to those observed with LinkedIn and Telegram. Overall, these results confirm the distinct roles played by both Telegram and Twitter.

The rise of social media is increasingly associated with changes in political debates, growing polarization, conflicts, and mounting evidence of democracies in crisis. To gain insights into public perceptions, we asked respondents to assess the impact of social media on democracy in their own country. Among EU citizens, critical and positive assessments are largely balanced, with 30% seeing negative effects, 28% considering positive effects predominant, and the majority (42%) being ambivalent on the matter. However, this pattern does not apply uniformly across all countries. In France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, respondents are

particularly critical, with a significantly higher share of negative assessments in some cases. For instance, 43% of French respondents hold particularly critical views, while only 19% see things in a more positive light. In Germany, the corresponding ratio is 35% to 24%. On the other hand, Polish respondents express considerably more positive sentiments, with only 18% perceiving predominantly negative effects, while 39% identify a positive influence on democracy.

**Figure 14: Impact of social media on democracy**

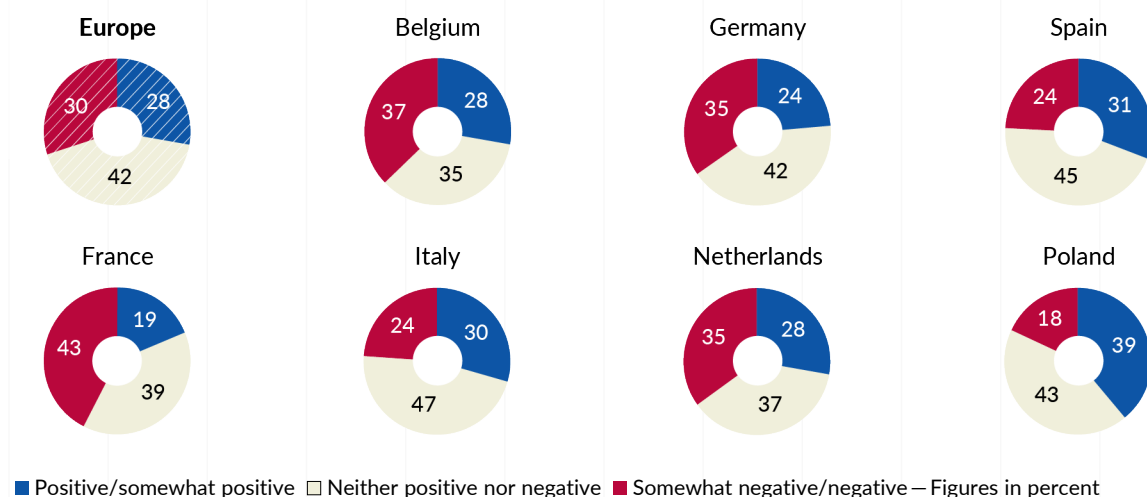


Figure 14 shows the share of responses to the question “Do you think social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, have a positive or negative impact on democracy in your country?” Data is provided for the entire EU and seven selected countries. Survey period: March 2023.

Overall, younger respondents tend to assess the effects of social media somewhat more positively than older respondents, and higher education is associated with a slightly more critical perspective.

## 6 Trust in media

One key hypothesis concerning the impact of disinformation is its potential to undermine people’s trust in specific sources of information and, more broadly, in information overall. For this reason, we sought to examine trust in media as part of our survey. To do this, we asked a general question about the extent to which respondents placed trust in the information they encounter in daily newspapers, television and radio, as well as in social media. Respondents were provided a response scale that ranged from 0 (do not trust at all) to 10 (trust completely).

For the data presented in **Figure 15**, we combined values 0 to 4 (indicating a low level of trust) and 6 to 10 (indicating a high level of trust). A number of things catch the eye immediately. For instance, a majority of individuals across Europe perceive information from daily newspapers, television and radio as untrustworthy. Particularly low levels of trust are evident in Spain. The exception is Germany, where a majority of people have at least a moderate level of trust in these traditional sources of information. In the case of social media, the situation is almost reversed, with a narrow majority of individuals across Europe having at least a moderate level of trust in this medium. Trust in social media is notably high in France, followed closely by Spain and Italy. Conversely, in Germany, trust in social media is significantly lower compared to the rest of Europe.

**Figure 15: Trust in information from various sources (country comparison)**

### Daily newspapers



### Television and radio



### Social media



■ High level of trust (6 – 10) □ Moderate level of trust (5) ■ Low level of trust (0 – 4) – Figures in percent

Figure 15 shows the distribution of responses to the question “How much do you trust information (a) you read in daily newspapers, (b) reported on television or radio, (c) shared on social media?” Respondents were asked to respond on a scale from 0 (do not trust at all) to 10 (trust completely). Values were combined for the depiction here. The data includes responses from the EU as a whole and seven selected countries. Survey period: March 2023.



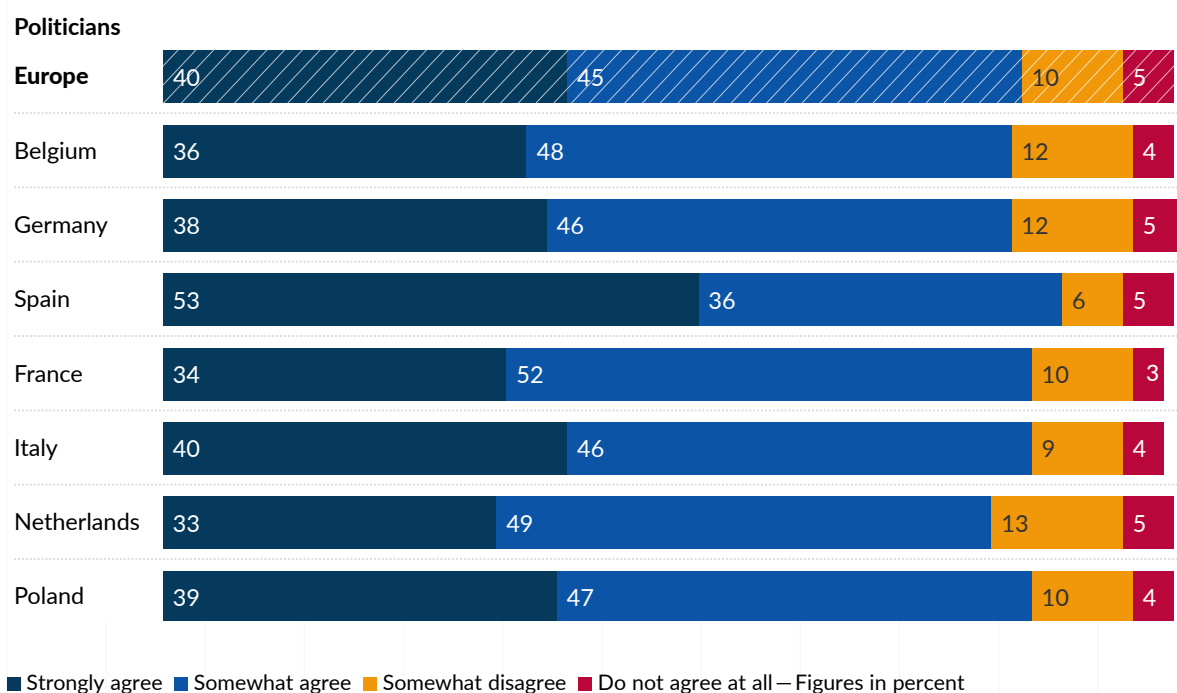
This data supports the hypothesis that individuals who report encountering information more frequently also tend to trust the media to a lesser extent. Respondents who reported encountering disinformation very frequently showed slightly lower levels of trust compared to the overall average. On a scale of 0 to 10 for all respondents in Europe, the average values for trust in information from daily newspapers, television, and radio were 4.61, 4.62, and 4.66, respectively. However, among respondents who report encountering disinformation very often, the trust in information values for each media were 4.10, 4.11, and 4.24, respectively. Values among all other subgroups fell between the range of 4.58 and 4.76.

Regarding social media usage, we found no noticeable distinctions between the different media. However, we did observe a noteworthy but small difference regarding the number of media used. Respondents who stated they do not use social media at all show a low level of trust in information on social media, with an average value of 3.92. The larger the number of media used by a respondent – that is, the more intense their use – the higher their level of trust in media. The highest values were found among respondents who used three media (4.80). Only those respondents who used six or more media showed slightly lower levels of trust (4.53).

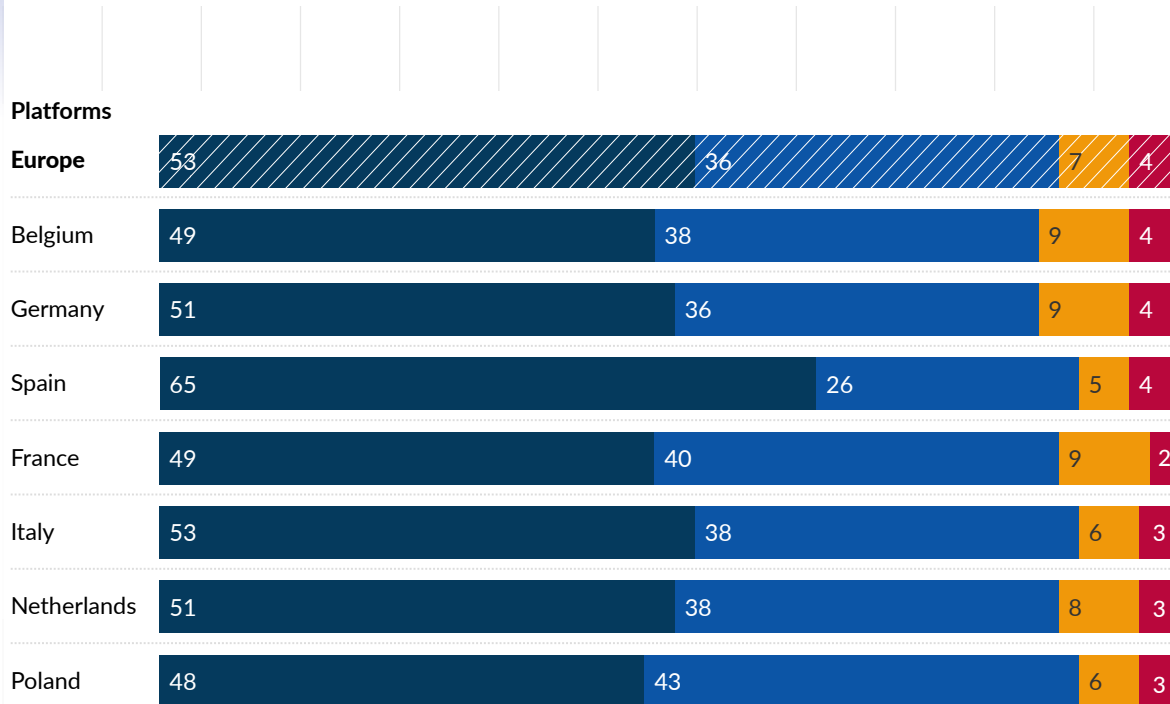
## 7 Measures to combat disinformation

Should politicians and platform operators be doing more to combat the spread of disinformation? According to the findings of our study, the answer is a resounding yes. The vast majority of respondents support, in principle, the implementation of measures to combat disinformation and call for intensified efforts in this regard. In the EU as a whole, 85% of respondents believe that politicians should take further action against disinformation, while 89% demand greater efforts from platform operators (combined values for “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree”). This support for more decisive action on the part of both actors is consistently salient across a variety of countries. The Netherlands exhibits the lowest level of support for increased intervention by politicians (83%), while Belgium shows the lowest level of support for platform operators (87%). Notably, respondents are more likely to “strongly agree” that platforms should take action (53% in Europe as a whole), but are somewhat less likely to “strongly agree” that politicians should do more (40%). Significant differences in this aspect exist between countries. In Spain, for example, more than 53% of respondents “strongly agree” that politicians should take more action against disinformation, while 65% express the same level of agreement regarding platform operators. The lowest level of “full agreement” for increased action by platform operators is observed in Poland (48%), and for stronger engagement by politicians in France (34%).

**Figure 16:** Responses to whether politicians and platform operators should do more to combat disinformation



## Upgrade Democracy Disinformation: A Challenge for Democracy



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Do not agree at all – Figures in percent

Figure 16 shows the percentage of respondents who express agreement with the statements “Politicians should do more to combat the spread of disinformation on the internet” and “Social media operators, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, should make greater efforts to combat the spread of disinformation on their platform.” The data includes responses from the EU as a whole and seven selected countries.

The results clearly show that the vast majority of Europeans believe both politicians and platforms have an obligation to take more action against the spread of disinformation. Overall, 82% of all respondents agree with both statements, while only 7% believe that neither governments nor platforms need to take action.

**Figure 17: Taking action against disinformation – combined results**

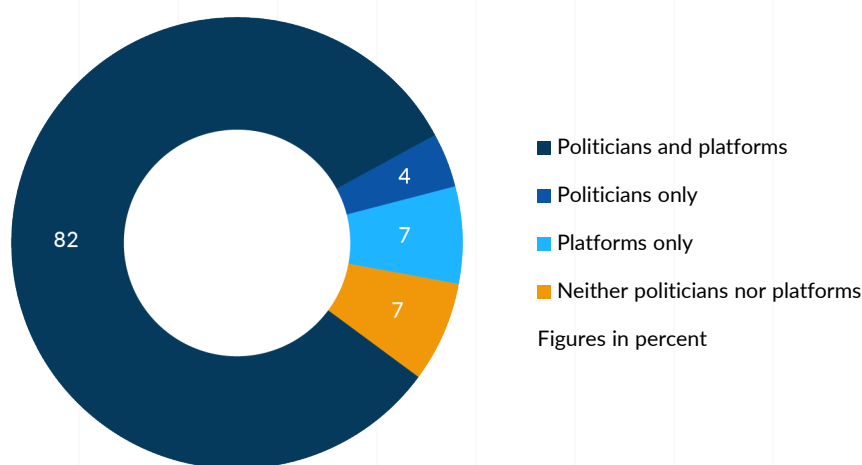


Figure 17 shows the combined results for respondents expressing agreement with the two statements featured in Figure 16.

## 8 Political attitudes and stances toward disinformation

Disinformation has always been one of the instruments of political contestation. However, the rise of digital media has significantly expanded the range of opportunities to influence opinions. For example, extremist and populist actors utilize disinformation with the specific aim of manipulating public opinion. Accordingly, accusations of spreading disinformation are additionally part of the public political discourse. It is therefore reasonable to assume that political attitudes also have an influence on the way people respond to disinformation. We collected data on this topic as well, and examined it for correlations with the surveyed attitudes toward disinformation.

In doing so, we initially took a closer look at levels of satisfaction with democracy in Europe. Based on the responses in this area, three groups can be identified (see **Figure 18**): those who are satisfied with democracy both in their own country and in the European Union more generally (“satisfied”), those who are dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in both cases (“dissatisfied”), and those who are satisfied in one case and dissatisfied in the other (“ambivalent”). Across Europe, the “satisfied” predominate with a relative majority of 42%, with 35% of respondents falling into the “dissatisfied” group, and another 24% into the “ambivalent” category. In Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, more than half of the respondents fall into the “satisfied” group, while in Poland, Italy and France only between 29% and 34% are satisfied both with democracy in their own country and the EU.

**Figure 18: Satisfaction with democracy (country comparison)**

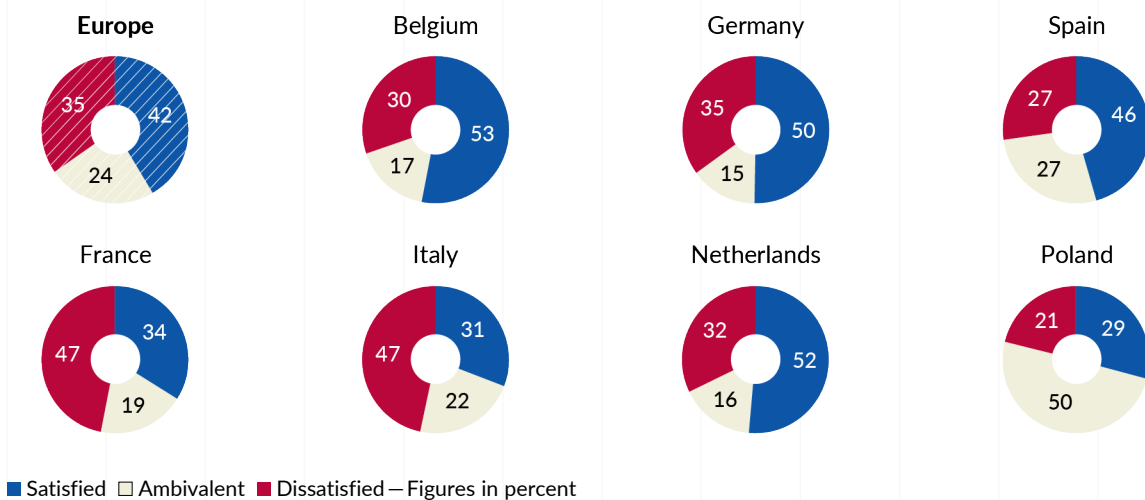


Figure 18 depicts the proportions of “satisfied,” “dissatisfied” and “ambivalent” respondents with respect to their feelings about democracy in their own country and in the EU. This reflects answers to the questions, “How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country?” and “How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the European Union?” Survey period: March 2023.

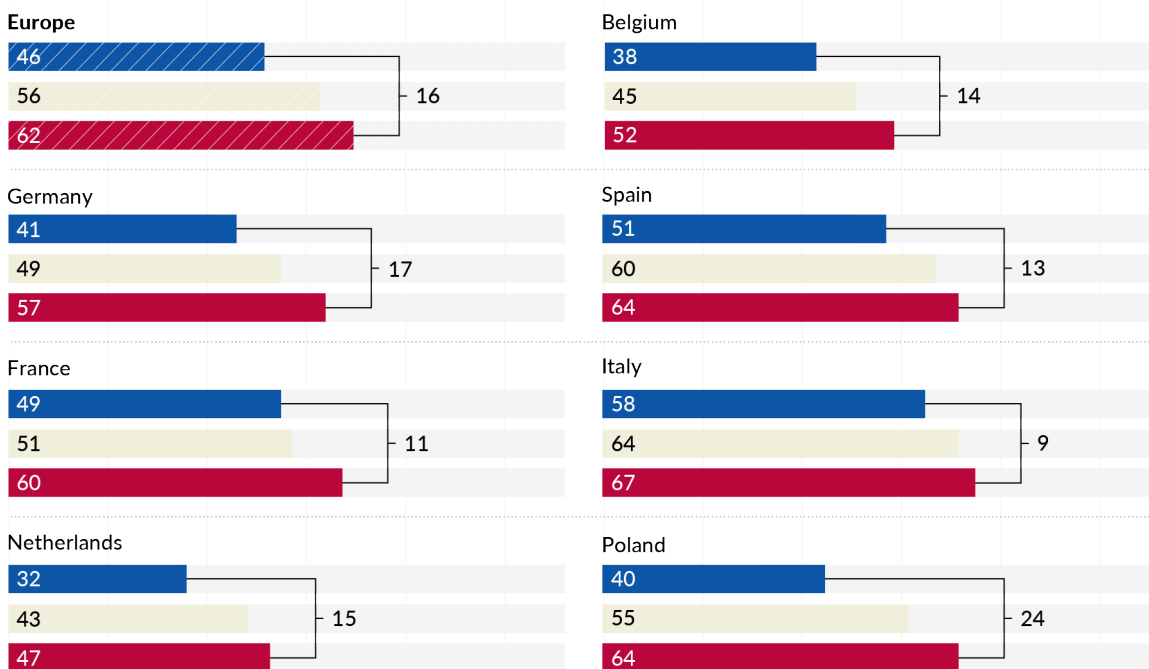
There is a clear correlation between satisfaction with democracy and the assessment of and reaction to information and possible disinformation on the internet: Those who are satisfied with democracy are less uncertain about the veracity of internet information and less likely to say they have encountered disinformation. However, they are simultaneously more likely to be in favor of platforms and governments making greater efforts to combat the spread of disinformation. The attitudes of the “dissatisfied” differ significantly from this. Across all European countries, this group is most likely to be unsure about the veracity of information on the internet, while reporting that they have encountered the most disinformation. Nonetheless, they are less in favor of stronger regulation on the part of governments or even platforms.

This can be interpreted as an indication that those who are dissatisfied with democracy, who might be seen as having a particular interest in seeing something done about the disinformation they believe they are encountering, do not trust the state or platforms sufficiently to take on this task. Those who are satisfied with democracy are also more likely to trust its institutions – as well as economic actors – to engage in regulation. A different result can be found in Italy: Here, the “unsatisfied” trust the platforms (but not the governments) more than the other groups do to take action against disinformation. Presumably, as in other countries, the fact that government statements are themselves suspected of being disinformation also plays a role here.

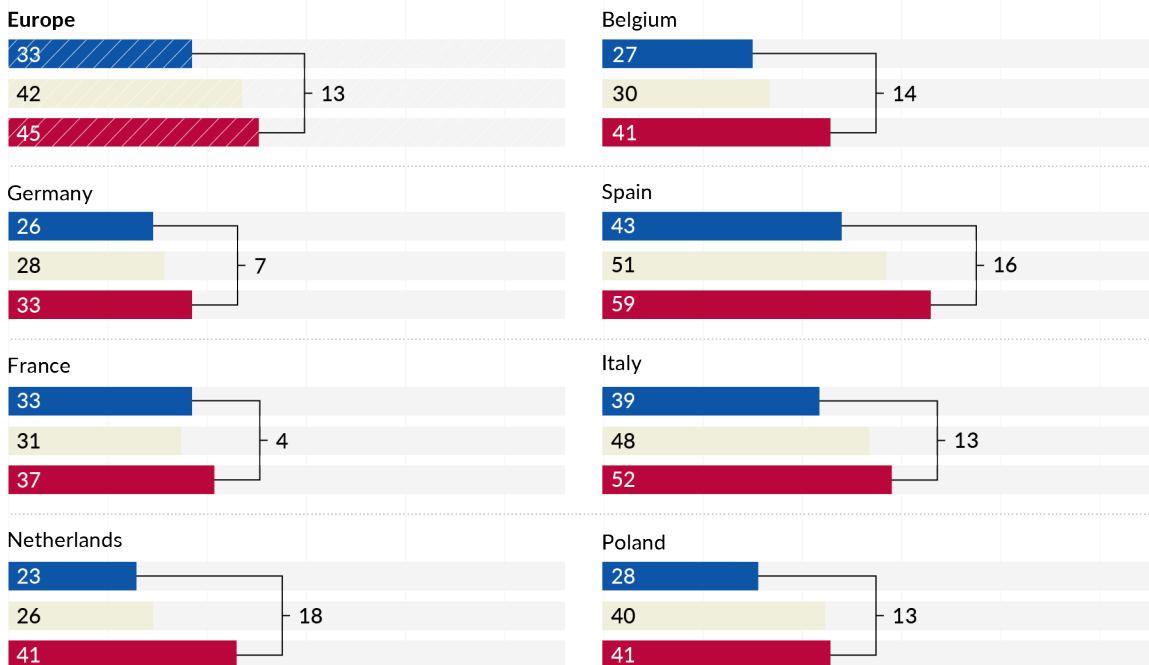
Next we have a look on the differences in responses between the “satisfied” and the “dissatisfied” in the different countries. In Poland, for example, the two groups’ perceptions diverge significantly regarding their uncertainty about the veracity of information, and with respect to efforts to combat disinformation by platforms and the government. In Germany too, the gaps between these two groups are of above average size (17 and 21 percentage points, respectively) on the question of combating disinformation. The other countries tend to be close to the European average, or deviate from it only on individual issues. In Spain and the Netherlands, for example, the differences between the “satisfied” and the “dissatisfied” are more pronounced than in the other countries (16 and 18 percentage points, respectively) with respect to the self-reported frequency of encountering disinformation.

**Figure 19: Differences in attitudes toward disinformation by level of satisfaction with democracy**

Unsure (often, very often)



Reported encounters with disinformation (often, very often)

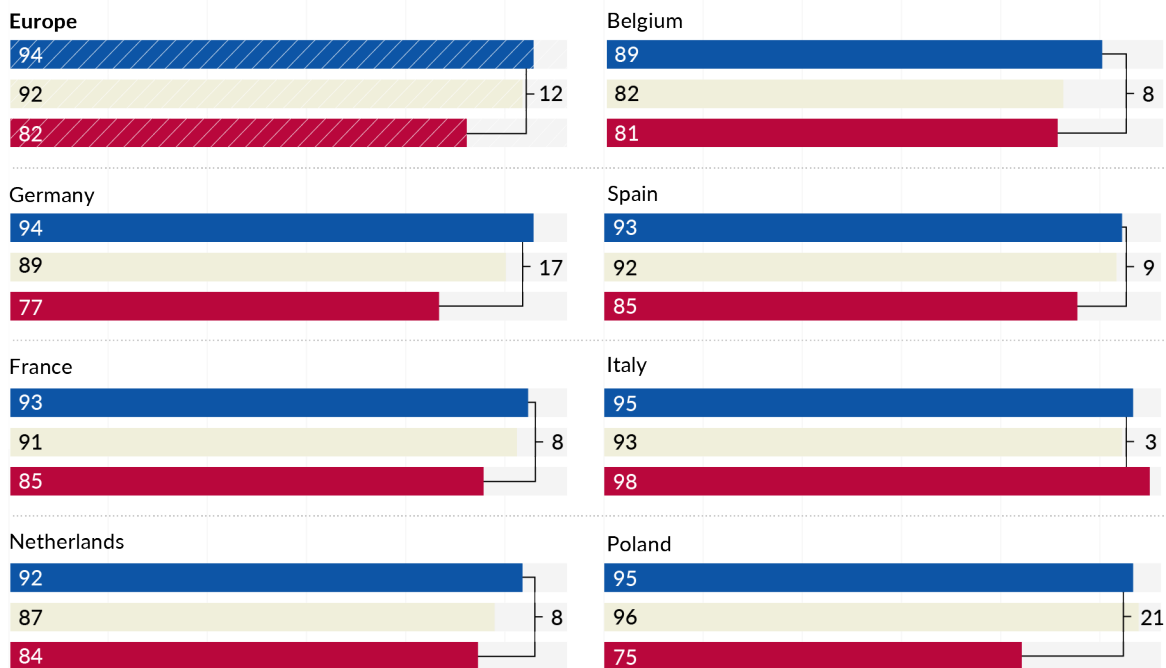


■ Satisfied □ Ambivalent ■ Dissatisfied – Figures in percent

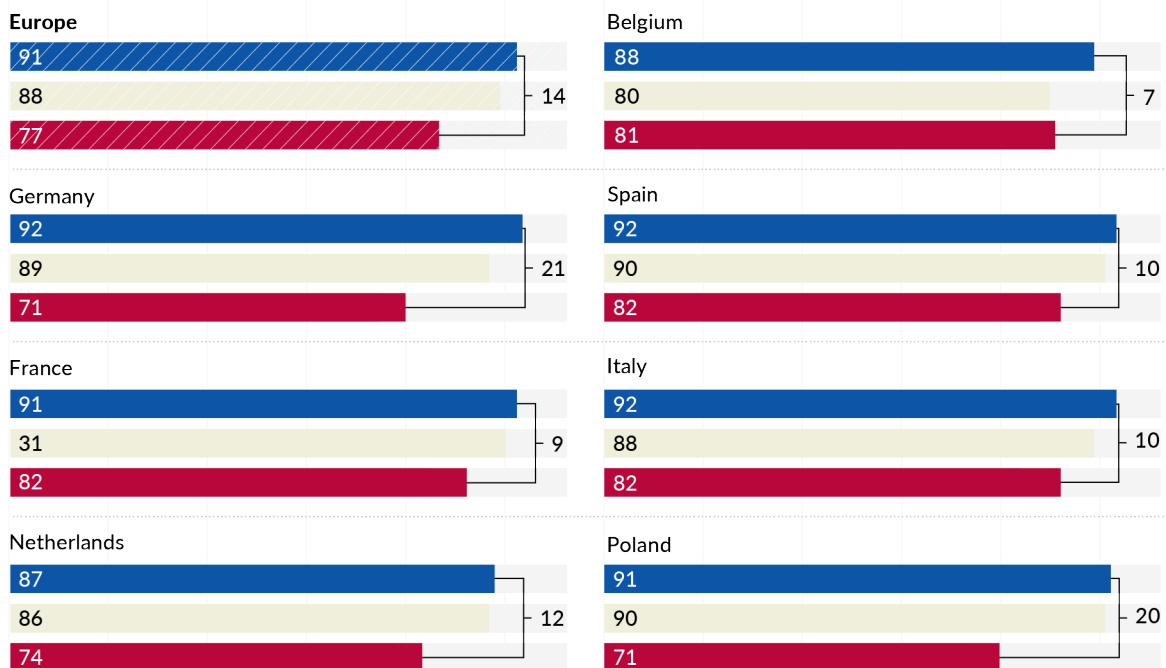
# Upgrade Democracy

## Disinformation: A Challenge for Democracy

### Agree that platforms should combat disinformation



### Agree that politicians should combat disinformation



■ Satisfied □ Ambivalent ■ Dissatisfied – Figures in percent

Figure 19 depicts the distribution of respondents according to how satisfied they are with democracy in their own country and in the European Union.

Finally, we examine two particularly politically contentious issues that are often associated with disinformation: the war in Ukraine and the fight against climate change. Using these two substantive questions as a basis, we want to find out more about what kind of disinformation respondents may have had in mind when they answered the questions.

Here, we find that those who believe that the attack on Ukraine is also an attack on all of Europe are less likely to be unsure about the veracity of information, and are less likely to report having encountered disinformation than those who believe otherwise. The same respondents are more likely to think that both governments and platforms need to do something to combat disinformation. The situation is somewhat different with regard to the issue of climate protection. Respondents who think the EU is not doing enough to combat climate change are more likely to feel unsure about the veracity of information, and to report having encountered more disinformation. However, this group also tends to think that the government and platform operators should do more to combat disinformation.

It can be assumed that respondents with a rather critical attitude toward Ukraine and the actions of the West perceive the official news and information as being distorted, and suspect both the state and platforms of engaging in manipulation. The opposite is true on the issue of climate change. Those who see a need for greater action here more often feel they have spotted attempts to discredit climate protection measures through disinformation, and therefore want more active intervention by the state and platforms.

**Figure 20:** Relationship between attitudes toward climate protection and the Ukrainian war, and perceptions of having encountered disinformation/feelings about anti-disinformation efforts.

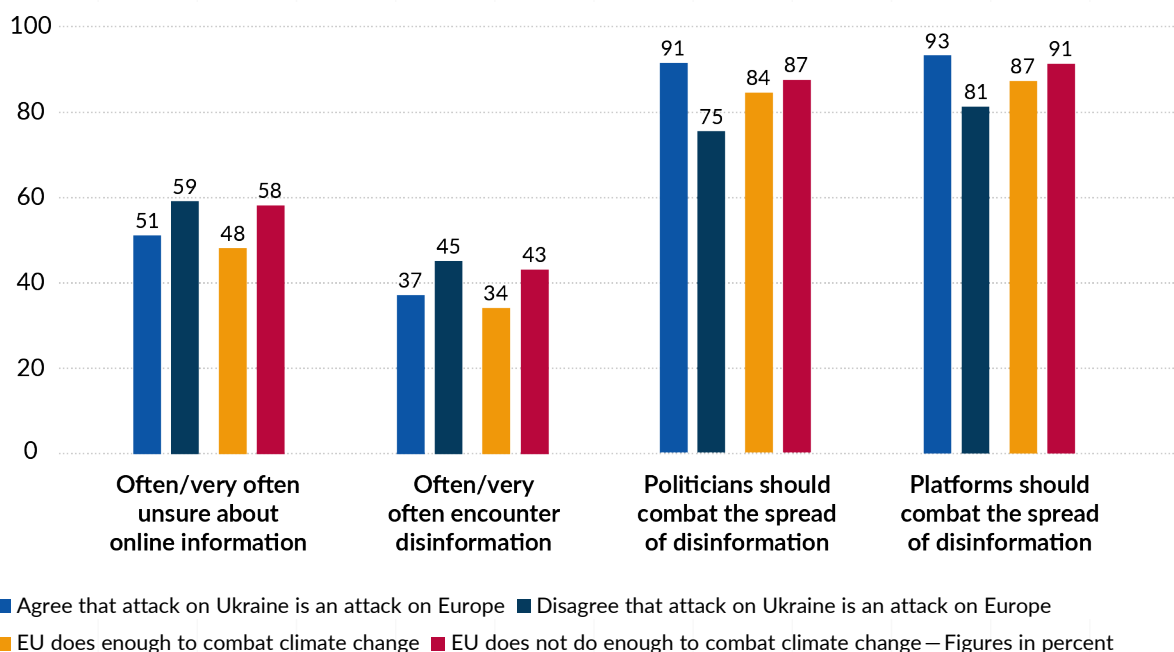


Figure 20 depicts the differences between those who agreed or disagreed with the statements "Russia's attack on Ukraine is an attack on all of Europe" and "Do you think the EU is doing enough to fight climate change?" in terms of their uncertainty regarding the veracity of information online, their perceptions of having encountered disinformation, and their attitudes toward efforts by governments and platforms to combat disinformation.



The finding that those in favor of measures combating disinformation tend to be somewhat further to the political left than those who reject such measures also fits in with this picture. This is true both for government interventions and efforts by platforms to combat disinformation.

## 9 Conclusion

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It wasn't long ago that many of us looked on in disbelief at the United States, where a tweet-happy incumbent president, Donald Trump, flagrantly sought to manipulate public opinion to his advantage. Today, the astonishing power of artificial intelligence makes it increasingly difficult to determine authenticity, that is, whether the content we are engaging with is real or fake. How can I know when something is true, what or whom can I trust? No longer merely a philosophical issue, the question of trust now influences how most Europeans' consume their daily news, as our study clearly demonstrates. Our study shows just how widespread uncertainty about the veracity of information and reported encounters with disinformation are across Europe. These findings are disconcerting, particularly given that a well-functioning democracy and thus effective social cohesion depend on the availability of reliable information and trust in both media and politics. If we want to gain insight into the factors influencing trust in democracy and the rising tide of democratic disillusionment, we need to examine how people use and experience media.

But where do we need to take action? Our research has shown that despite widespread uncertainty, there is a limited willingness to actively fact-check information. While just over 60% of those who stated that they recently felt uncertain about the veracity of online information attempted to verify it, nearly 40% remained inactive. Even less prevalent in this group is the willingness to actively counter false information. Uncertainty thus narrows the scope of options we have to respond, primarily because it involves not being able to know what's true. The perception of information as disinformation operates through a different mechanism. It can indicate both a thoughtful and well-informed approach to handling information, as well as a profound mistrust in media and societal institutions. In other words, individuals may perceive certain information as disinformation based on their considered analysis or due to their underlying skepticism towards established sources. Our research on perceptions regarding the Ukraine conflict and climate change provides clear evidence of this phenomenon.

If we want to maintain the essence of an open society in today's increasingly tech-driven public sphere, we will need to strengthen media literacy. One key aspect to consider here is the impact of age and education levels. Younger generations, being more accustomed to how social media works, tend to approach information with greater skepticism and are less likely to unquestioningly accept what they encounter on its platforms. Very few younger people have been socialized with newspapers and televised news like their older counterparts. This distinguishes them from older individuals who, despite their experience with traditional media, feel less at ease navigating social media. It is therefore imperative that we develop tailored and accessible media education and awareness programs for this younger demographic as well as for those individuals with lower levels of education. If nearly a quarter of those without formal education are not recognizing disinformation, the potential for manipulation among these individuals is high. Both domestic and foreign actors are likely to exploit this situation for political gain unless we establish proper regulatory frameworks able to mitigate this manipulation.

At the same time, we will need to continue to develop media literacy programs in schools if we are to keep up with rapidly evolving technological possibilities and students' ever-changing media consumption habits. Achieving these goals involves ensuring that teacher training and upskilling programs remain up-to-date and responsive to the fast-paced developments in the field.

Our research clearly shows that EU citizens want to see more robust measures taken to combat disinformation. Governments and platform operators are the addressees here, with a slightly stronger sense of accountability directed at the latter. The European Union's recently adopted Digital Services Act (DSA) is thus a timely instrument with an appropriate focus on platform accountability. Among other things, platforms are now required to disclose their algorithms and establish a process for users to report illegal content online. As of February 2024, the law will be in effect in all EU member states. Moving ahead, it will be crucial for EU member states to ensure consistent implementation and verify that platforms fulfill their obligations. Among the platforms we've studied, Twitter and Telegram stand out in relation to disinformation. Following its acquisition by Elon Musk, Twitter has undergone a notable transformation. The dismantling of its content moderation unit, the commercialization of its once-coveted "blue checkmark" verification, and its decision to withdraw from the EU agreement against disinformation signify significant shifts. In our data analysis, Telegram also emerges as a distinctive platform due to the frequency with which users report inadvertently pass on false information by liking or sharing it. Unlike other platforms, Telegram operates outside the scope of the regulations for Very Large Online Platforms (VLoPs) outlined in the DSA, thus evading more stringent requirements. This situation presents a challenging concern that warrants continuous observation and attention.

Social media are not inherently malevolent. In fact, they bear the potential to facilitate democratic exchange and foster networks among like-minded individuals. However, realizing this potential involves establishing clear rules, ensuring transparency about how they function, and granting users the autonomy to interact with these platforms. To explore the civil society potentials of social media, a closer analysis of the situation in Poland could prove valuable. Throughout our study, Poland stood out in various respects. The country shows a significantly large number of active users who report investigating, sharing and reporting false information. In addition, the impact of social media on democracy is perceived more favorably in Poland than in other European states, with 39 % expressing positive views compared to an average of 28 % across Europe.

Looking ahead, we will need to clarify precisely what information people actually perceive as disinformation. This is a challenging issue, one that our experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic and other politically contentious crises, such as the war in Ukraine and human-induced climate change, have highlighted. Truths and falsehoods are not always immediately apparent. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that fostering social cohesion requires that we agree on fundamental standards that facilitate mutual understanding. This includes, for example, applying scientific standards to the verification and contextualization of information. But if trust in the institution of science is weak, a broad consensus among scientists will not be sufficient to persuade the broader public.

Information about politics and trust in politics go hand-in-hand. Given this mutual interdependence, it is imperative that we address the crisis of trust in our society head on and do more to ensure everyone can help shape the transformative processes we face. When aligned with people's emotions and able to tap into existing fears, disinformation becomes exceedingly difficult to combat. As many studies have shown, strengthening literacy and public information campaigns have only limited impact. We therefore need a comprehensive policy that addresses all segments of society, effectively instilling a sense of security and trust. By minimizing uncertainty, we create an environment in which disinformation struggles to take root.

## 10 Recommended action

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This study sheds light on how people in Europe perceive the issue of disinformation, offering the following data-driven recommendations for action:

- **Establish a systematic means of monitoring the phenomenon of disinformation in Germany and Europe.** Disinformation is a pervasive issue that has yet to be fully explored. In addition, we anticipate the growing prevalence of AI-generated or manipulated texts, images and videos in the near to medium-term future. Reliable and competent bodies and institutions must spearhead comprehensive monitoring to accurately gauge the true extent and impact of disinformation.
- **Foster widespread awareness of disinformation within the general population.** The study highlights substantial levels of uncertainty among the public regarding disinformation. Drawing attention to the topic and providing the means for citizens to access reliable information are of utmost importance.
- **Cultivate media and news literacy across all generations.** Evolving media landscapes offer both opportunities and challenges. The ability to discern trustworthy sources from suspicious ones, distinguish between opinions and facts, and identify potentially false or distorted information are indispensable skills that should be embraced by as many individuals as possible.
- **Guarantee consistent and transparent content moderation on digital platforms.** Operators of these platforms shoulder a special responsibility. Detecting, marking and – ideally – correcting or removing false information, along with ensuring easy access to reliable information during critical discussions, constitute central tasks.

## Notes on methodology

The data for this “Upgrade Democracy” study was collected through the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Eupinions project. Four times a year, the team at Latana conducts an online survey on behalf of Bertelsmann in all 27 EU member states. The survey data used in this study was collected in March 2023 and involved 13.270 EU citizens aged between 16 and 70. Data is weighted by gender, age and region. The results are representative for the entire European Union. However, due to the structure of the sample, additional separate values can only be shown for seven countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

### **11** — Legal notice

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