The Many Faces Fighting Disinformation

Supporting Europe’s Counter-Disinformation Community

December 2021

Funded by:
2021 proved another pivotal year in Europe for our information ecosystems and our response to these challenges. In 2020, the European Commission released their roadmap strategies on democratic infrastructure and media sustainability, the European Democracy Action Plan and the European Media and Audiovisual Action Plan, and launched the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) for fact-checkers, academics, and disinformation experts. In 2021, the European institutions pushed forward on the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, regulatory packages to clarify the role and responsibilities of online platforms and increase accountability for online disinformation, alongside a much-needed update to the Code of Practice on Disinformation. During these efforts, the Facebook Papers sent waves across the counter-disinformation space, affirming the concerns of civil society, and motivating lawmakers to double down on their proposals.

As the Facebook Papers confirm, the challenge to European civil society is magnified by the fact that efforts of platforms remain focused on the English-language and the US context. Meanwhile, support for counter-disinformation activities comes largely from the US and the UK. Disinformation is a global challenge but with highly cultural, linguistic, and contextual elements. It must therefore be met by a thriving, resilient, and harmonised network of civil society actors. The research that follows is part of our effort at the EU DisinfoLab to support these organisations, initiatives, and individuals working to counter disinformation across Europe.

This research is a continuation of a panorama project we conducted in 2020, both supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Brussels. While the first project relied on interviews with 14 civil society actors, in this second phase, we consulted 94 actors across 23 EU Member States. Respondents were chosen to illustrate a variety of approaches to counter-disinformation, based on our insight from the first phase that counter-disinformation actors have very heterogeneous methodologies and structures, and even conceptions of the disinformation threat.

The actors surveyed represent a range of sophistication and capacity. Many are struggling simply to get off the ground, to win their first or second grant, or to transition from a volunteer project to a formal entity. Most are not well resourced: only 12 of the 94 respondents describe their current support as adequate. Across member states and methodologies, we find that operational support is deeply lacking: these pain points are shared and undeniable. We also find the counter-disinformation field to be a conflictual environment, often pitting small and nascent entities against well-resourced actors disseminating disinformation. Court cases, frivolous lawsuits and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) pose major difficulties for a growing number of actors. Many respondents experience backlash like doxxing and reputational attacks, both at the personal and organisational level, following visible activities like report launches.

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

*Across member states and methodologies, we find that operational support is deeply lacking.*

Our research shows that European civil society is rising to the disinformation challenge with new types of expertise - from public databases to digital forensics to media literacy experiments. However, it also shows that this network is nascent and fragile, and that its autonomy and impact are not guaranteed. We thank all respondents for their participation, and hope this project can help secure them the support they need and safeguard their role at this critical time.
INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The first phase of the Many Faces Fighting Disinformation initiative, implemented by EU DisinfoLab and supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, found that the actors countering the complex multidimensional phenomenon that is disinformation take multiple forms from journalists to educators to psychologists to media and advertising professionals. The previous report showcased the work of 14 actors from across this emerging field of civil society actors. In this second phase of the initiative, we built on the initial scoping by surveying over 90 counter-disinformation actors in order to research a representative sample across the European Union. The survey was followed by interviews with approximately 15 actors representing the diversity of organisations and actors in the field, across the sub-regions of the European Union. To complement the interviews, a second series of interviews were conducted with actors supporting counter-disinformation work both financially and in other capacities.

This phase of the research sought to dig deeply into the financial and non-financial support needs of the organisations and, in parallel, to produce an overview of the funding landscape (an online funding hub) for the counter-disinformation community. This report should serve as a tool to advocate to donors on the reality of the needs of counter-disinformation actors across Europe. It will also inform a wide variety of key actors on the barriers and enablers to creating maximal and sustainable impact.

B. THE RESEARCH TEAM

The project was led by the EU DisinfoLab and the research was conducted collaboratively with ODS and supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation. ODS is a cooperative consultancy based in Brussels with expertise in monitoring & evaluation, research, organisational development and strategic planning, working exclusively with nonprofit organisations.

Many Faces Fighting Disinformation Survey

A total of 94 responses were received. 22 responded in an individual capacity with 65 respondents identifying as organisations. The types of organisations included think tanks, companies, media outlets, research institutes and watchdogs in addition to CSOs, human rights organisations, government initiatives, voluntary projects, networks of experts and public databases. Responses were received from actors from 23 Member States. Respondents were identified through EU DisinfoLab’s network, complemented with desk research.
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The actors surveyed reflected on the multitude of approaches and tools they employ in their work. Digital communications platforms, particularly social media, are used by all stakeholders: the malign actors disseminating disinformation, the audience consuming and amplifying disinformation, and the counter-disinformation actors working to mitigate disinformation and publicise their efforts to do so. Their presence on these channels is necessary for their daily work, but also exposes them to certain risks. Advocacy capacity at the national, EU and UN level is diverse and largely depends on the size and age of the organisation, but also their geographic spread. The smaller, younger and more nationally focused an organisation, the more likely that they were less experienced in advocacy at the national, EU and UN level.

The COVID-19 pandemic, the ‘infodemic’, a difficult political environment and continued digitalisation are all consistently referred to by these actors as key contextual considerations. Related challenges include a lack of funding and resources, remote working limiting advocacy, the difficulty of keeping pace with disinformation, the lack of political will from key stakeholders, the prevalence of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and other forms of backlash against individuals and organisations.

The greatest needs of those counter-disinformation actors surveyed and interviewed included financial sustainability, visibility and legal support. Sustainable core funding is a major goal of these organisations. More visibility, according to respondents, would help them to gain funding, non-financial support, and increase their reach online and offline. Legal support is a major need for counter-disinformation actors facing SLAPPs due to the heavy financial and technical burden this brings. Other needs identified were related to organisational capacity for strategic planning and project management.

In terms of financial support, barriers to access were significant, with respondents indicating their limited capacity to apply for funding and the challenge of visibility; many organisations have experienced difficulty in accessing EU funding specifically. Respondents were less sure about the non-financial support they have received, with only 40% initially responding ‘yes’ to receiving it. When others were prompted in interviews, they reflected that they had actually received such support, but define this support differently or simply forget about its importance and value until prompted. This was an overarching trend and indicates that the value of non-financial support may be understated or deceptive.

Donors interviewed for this research highlight a major imbalance between the number of sources of disinformation and those working against it. Further, they reflect that the counter-disinformation movement lacks messengers in the face of a very vocal and fearless opposition. They also note the need for continuous research to keep up with the trends of disinformation and the importance of linking this research with policy to ensure it is useful and impactful.
SETTING THE SCENE
ORGANISATIONS FIGHTING DISINFORMATION ACROSS EUROPE

An overview of counter-disinformation actors across Europe can be characterised as diverse both in terms of structure and approach. The size of the organisations ranges from an individual operating alone on their passion project, to a counter-disinformation department situated within a large commercial enterprise. The organisations surveyed and interviewed included think-tanks, companies, research institutes, watchdogs and media outlets in addition to NGOs and CSOs. Other actors included temporary projects i.e., COVID-19 specific projects, governmental/public initiatives, public databases/tools, and bloggers. The following are a few examples of the organisations that responded to the survey, demonstrating the diversity of actors in the field.

A passion project

Butac (Bufale Un Tanto Al Chilo) is a national fact-checking actor founded in Italy in 2012 by Michelangelo Coltelli, with no particular niche, but focusing now on the pandemic. Michelangelo has built up a certain level of credibility within Italian circles and despite some ups and downs (being sued and experiencing extremely damaging technical problems), he is succeeding in raising awareness and increasing opportunities for educating the public about disinformation.

Education

Antibodies to Misinformation, based in Cyprus, is a project in which media education programmes are designed, developed and piloted in schools. Its central learning goal is the metacognitive skill of critically dealing with digitally disseminated (mis)information. They are a small team working full-time who struggle with resources, team availability and meeting exact donor requirements, but are doing well despite the challenges.
Fact-checking

Pravda Association, based in Poland, is a fact-checking organisation founded in 2020. Despite being entirely volunteer run and quite young, they are already establishing themselves quite prominently in the Polish counter-disinformation sphere. Their work focuses mainly on sharing their knowledge on social media, but they also run education campaigns for students in elementary school and are expanding to high schools.

Modern watchdog

Danes je nov dan, based in Slovenia, is a watchdog, albeit in a non-traditional sense. They were founded during the 2012 anti-establishment protests and are focused on (digital) political participation, transparency, and public oversight. They have five full-time staff members and six part-time staff. They make ‘hard to swallow’ issues more attractive and easier to interact with.

Consulting

Political Capital Institute (PCI), based in Hungary, is an independent policy research, analysis and consulting institute founded in 2001. Aiming to raise awareness about political issues that have an impact on citizens’ everyday lives (even if such impact is indirect) they contribute to and develop critical public discourse and policy making that is based on knowledge and evidence. Political Capital works on disinformation projects focusing on narratives of right-wing extremists across East and Central Europe, state sponsored disinformation in Hungary, and Russian and Chinese disinformation.
The various organisations surveyed and interviewed use a range of tools with varying levels of sophistication to assist with their work. This usually correlates with their funds and level of experience. Many tools help to accelerate otherwise lengthy processes, like analysis or the process of combing through large data sets. Other tools include those that support project management and general organisation. Others support the spread of information such as social media channels or newsletter software. By far, one of the most common tools is CrowdTangle, Facebook’s analytics tool. Google’s vast array of tools are also widely used, whether this is simply the search engine, Google Earth/Maps for location accuracy, or Google Images or reserve image search to determine if a photo is authentic or has been tampered with.
How do counter-disinformation actors communicate?

For many of these actors whose main method of spreading information is online, communication channels and how those communication channels operate is critical. Digital communications platforms, particularly social media, are in a sense the highways and roads that all stakeholders use: the malign actors disseminating disinformation, the audience consuming and amplifying disinformation, and the counter-disinformation actors working to mitigate disinformation and publicise their efforts. Their presence on these channels is necessary to their daily work, but also exposes them to certain risks.

Almost all major social media platforms are used by the counter-disinformation actors surveyed. It is clear that Twitter and Facebook are most commonly used, with LinkedIn and Instagram closely behind. Many actors are smaller and therefore may have started off solely on social media before creating their own website. Some respondents noted their social media pages had been reported or suspended.

Trolling, reporting and conspiracy theorists “invading” their social media channels are a major concern for these organisations.

Counter-disinformation and disinformation actors work on the same platforms and are often competing for end-users’ attention. As one actor interviewed pointed out: “security doesn’t sell.” This resonates with the body of research exploring the efficacy of ex-post content moderation approaches to disinformation, such as debunks and labels, which respond to information which has already had wide reach. Survey respondents reflected that it was difficult to reach stakeholders on social media and difficult to measure that reach. This is significant because often donors and others offering support ask for these kinds of metrics to determine who is deserving of support.

Some respondents also cite a moral conflict with the general operations and stances of the major social media platforms. They also note how difficult it is to find a platform on which to convene with their end-users that is not linked to Facebook.
The counter-disinformation actors surveyed were also asked about their capacity to advocate at the national, EU and UN levels. This received a **mixed response** which usually correlated with the size and age of the organisation, but also with their geographic presence. The **smaller, younger and more nationally focused** an organisation, the more likely it was less experienced in advocacy at national, EU and UN levels. Conversely, the **larger, older and more international** an organisation, the more likely it had more experience in advocacy at these three levels.

For those who noted their **weakness in advocacy**, the trends were overarchingly about a lack of knowledge of whom to contact and how and where to approach these contacts, as well as what exactly to demand. Many had not engaged in policy or political processes and expressed confusion at what activities may be considered as advocacy, for example whether launching research was itself considered advocating. If an organisation had worked in advocacy, it was more often at national level and in conjunction with another organisation in that country. One organisation expressed **interest in collaborating** with other counter-disinformation actors in their country but noted competition between actors and a sense of gatekeeping by more established actors as barriers to collaboration.

Many organisations expressed that a **lack of time, resources and knowledge were to blame** for their lack of EU advocacy, reflecting on the need to have a dedicated person in Brussels to focus solely on advocacy in order to have an impact. Many actors also expressed that some topics are only relevant to the national level and do not require advocacy at the EU level, and thus they do not consider making this investment. These topics include, for example, how a particular government combats disinformation about vaccine rollout in the country or how it legislates for minors using social media. However, others expressed that if one Member State is struggling with a particular kind of disinformation, the likelihood is that another Member State is facing the same struggle. Some actors expressed the sentiment that **EU/UN advocacy is not considered relevant** by their local supporters. It seems **too removed** or time consuming to pursue or is not interesting to their readers, and they want to keep their followers engaged.

Other actors noted how one can get **‘blacklisted’**, so to speak, by certain politicians (i.e., no longer invited to certain events and spaces where advocacy would be possible) if politicians disagree with what they have said. These actors felt they faced the hard choice of either catering to politicians and compromising the integrity of their mission or adhering to their mission at the risk of preventing or jeopardising relationships with politicians.

There also appears to be a thin line between lobbying and advocacy. Many actors noted how **EU tenders and grants forbid lobbying** to increase one’s chances of winning. At the same time, these organisations are aware of competitor organisations winning a grant because they were more ‘well known’. Therefore, there is a need for actors to learn how to navigate this system appropriately. Further, it may also be helpful for the **European Commission to facilitate the success of organisations** that are less well known in Brussels to avoid the same actors continually receiving EU funds due to their visibility in...
SUCCESS:
WHAT’S WORKING?

Survey respondents and interview participants reflected on a variety of different achievements they’ve made in recent years.

Successful investigations

Achievements for investigative journalists include uncovering disinformation campaigns led by the Russian state in countries such as Poland in addition to producing evidence on Russian state-backed attacks on activists. Further, respondents reflected on uncovering evidence of disinformation operations targeting Polish politicians, specifically related to Polish-Lithuanian relations.

Outreach to key actors

Organisations conducting research, including Democracy Reporting International, reflect on key achievements in getting background research and evidence in front of key policy makers and other stakeholders. This is facilitated by having key relationships with governments and high-level stakeholders who can ensure the results and research receive the deserved visibility in policymaking circles.
Relevant communication to audiences

For Danes je nov dan in Slovenia, using their digital marketing background has proven key in understanding what messaging to use on social media. They often take a humorous approach, presenting ideas that are normally complex and ‘hard to swallow’, in an easily interactive and attractive manner. Using Facebook Live to reach thousands of viewers is a key achievement for another organisation, while communicating on radio programmes was essential in reaching voters around election time for another. For others, it is about keeping up with trends by addressing disinformation on emerging or less-researched social media platforms, for instance reaching children through counter-disinformation campaigns on TikTok. Others are reaching audiences on YouTube through collaboration with influencers, while another won an award for their creation of a WhatsApp chatbot to fight disinformation.

Scaling-up

Some organisations have managed to scale-up their work despite the many contextual challenges. A case in point is Lie Detectors, a non-profit that, inter alia, helps teenagers and pre-teens learn how to spot and resist the growing volume of manipulative media crowding their Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat accounts. Lie Detectors have recently managed to scale their work by expanding to four countries (Belgium, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland).

Working across languages

Actors surveyed reflected on the need for more research on disinformation in languages other than English, French and Spanish, in order to reach further audiences and build resilience across society, not just amongst select groups. Achievements in this area include research conducted on disinformation patterns in Lithuanian society amongst Russian and Polish speaking groups regarding the acceptance of certain narratives related to domestic and foreign issues and historical memory issues - issues which might be exploited by those spreading disinformation. Similarly, the creation of a francophone observatory of the initiatives fighting against disinformation (ODIL) reflects a concerted effort to organise counter-disinformation actors working in non-anglophone languages.
Psychological resilience

Some actors in the field identify the sustainable solution to tackling disinformation as understanding the psychological and behavioural tendencies in how people consume and process information. For De Facto National Training Center (NTCenter) in Bulgaria, this is highly important in understanding (one of the) roots of disinformation and is the rationale behind their research in applied cognitive science. De Facto NTCenter have produced a science-based toolbox which aims to deliver sustainable results by shielding teachers and students from disinformation. Other survey respondents discussed similar achievements relating to training young people, minority groups and unemployed people on digital and social media literacy skills.

Contributing to legislative discussions and election integrity

Organisations list achievements related to influencing policies and legislation, for example regulation in Czechia related to digital advertising, fact-checking during the Dutch national elections, or presentation analysis of Bulgarian parliamentary elections to citizens.

Combatting COVID-19 related disinformation and vaccine hesitancy

For many organisations, in particular fact-checking organisations, the focus has been on combating COVID-19 related disinformation.
Advertising industry interventions

Various examples of interventions focused on the demonetisation of disinformation have yielded positive results. Konspiratori, which provides a public list of disinforming websites and Google Ads script, is one example of such an initiative, focused mainly on the Slovak and Czech contexts. Konspiratori supports advertisers and companies in their awareness of where their ads are being displayed, the potential impact on their reputation and brand value and how they can take back some control over the placement of their ads.

Working with a cross-section of stakeholders to improve threat awareness

Many survey respondents indicated achievements related to creating linkages between different counter-disinformation entities. For example, one respondent reflected on the establishment of an inter-institutional dialogue on hybrid threats including CSOs, governmental agencies, academia, and press representatives, in a common effort to acquire a “level playing field” in understanding, assessing and combating the threats posed by disinformation. Others reflected on the creation of a network of contributors at the regional level across Central and Eastern Europe as a key achievement.

What do these achievements mean for the sector?

Actors working across this diverse field perceive success differently, but it is clear that a combination of both preventative and responsive work is needed - with organisations working on the root causes of disinformation and those responding to attacks. Most fact-checking organisations believe that due to the strength of disinformation outlets, there must be a stronger effort to continually counter and react to the actions which are affecting people now. However, other organisations believe there should be more focus on understanding the impact of disinformation in order to have greater success in tackling the issues. Other stakeholders discuss the need for a stronger evidence base in the field to continually provide evidence for policy and legislative change. Another key factor in creating impact
is the need for strengthened communication, outreach capacity and visibility. This would enable them not only to reach the general public but also to benefit from funding. From these findings, it is clear that efforts are being made to reach new audiences and strengthen the counter-disinformation. However, key challenges prevent either the achievement of aims or the sustainability of the achievements.

**Greatest needs: what does your organisation need help with?**

**Financial sustainability** was certainly the most common need amongst organisations surveyed. Sustainable, core funding is a major goal of these organisations. Core funding would enable actors to effectively re-allocate time to high impact or long-term activities that is currently dedicated to applying for projects. Currently, actors with less capacity in the first instance lack capacity to support or expand their activities through grants. As far as collaboration with donors is concerned, actors expressed the most effective collaboration as that which balances donor project management with actors’ autonomy. Donor support in community building among actors and donor support in the scaling up of actors’ research in terms of reach and relevance were also considered key to financial sustainability. Support in grant-writing to secure core funding was also expressed as important.

The need for help with **strategic planning and project management** was also quite common. Organisations find it difficult to plan with the uncertainty around funding and the resulting uncertainty around retaining staff. Time constraints and staff turnover are the main barriers to the implementation of ideas in organisations. Many organisations also want to transition from a small, start-up like organisation to a legitimate operation and often it is this jump which is the hardest to make.

More **visibility** helps with gaining funding, non-financial support, and increasing their online audience to reach more communities. It is, however, a double edged sword, as increased visibility can in some cases lead to increased risk of cyber-attacks and trolling, which in turn requires appropriate resources and protection.

Counter-disinformation actors **also struggle with human resources.** It is difficult to acquire and retain staff when resources dwindle or there is no guarantee of the organisation’s future. Meanwhile skill development, cyber security resources/training, technological...
support and software for large scale data processing would also be greatly appreciated. Support to improve advocacy reach and general communications is also widely desired.

**Legal support** is needed by actors when they face lawsuits from malign or oppositional actors. They also need legal support generally to know within which parameters to remain to prevent legal liability, or simply to be sure that they are sharing the correct information at all times. Legal support is expensive, but many counter-disinformation actors benefit from pro bono legal support.

**Respondents need help with:**

- Legal support
- Cyber security resources/training
- Planning/strategic planning (internal processes)
- Project management
- Psycho-social support
- Solidarity
- Communication/outreach
- Internal processes
- Financial sustainability
- Visibility
- Access to journalism
- Skill development
- Grant writing
- Other
What challenges do they face?

The COVID-19 pandemic, the ‘infodemic’, a difficult political environment and continued digitalisation are all consistently referred to by these actors as key contextual considerations. Related challenges include a lack of funding and resources, remote working limiting advocacy, the difficulty of keeping pace with disinformation, the lack of political will from key stakeholders, the prevalence of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and other forms of backlash against individuals and organisations.

Contextual challenges

Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic had and continues to have an enormous impact on the counter-disinformation field, the most obvious being the increased levels of medical and vaccine disinformation. In some ways, however, the pandemic has had positive effects as it has boosted interest in their counter-disinformation work. The public is becoming aware of the vast array of disinformation vectors—which can include government, media or individuals with a large following on social media, for example. Audiences are learning which sources they can trust and are more actively turning to them for their news and information. However, the ‘infodemic’ led an influx of actors in the space competing for resources and grants, which was not necessarily followed by an increase in resources.

Organisations struggle with the speed and intensity of disinformation rolled out by well-resourced organisations as it takes time to research and debunk disinformation online, and in the meantime audiences forget about the content due to the frequency of such scandals. The saturation of audiences with stories about disinformation can hinder the activities of counter disinformation actors.

The political environment also has a major impact on counter-disinformation actors’ work. Many respondents reflect on the uninformed public debates in politics and media, political agendas which work against them, populist governments, Russian state propaganda (which was a common concern for over a quarter of survey respondents in addition to a number of interviewees, particularly in the Baltic states), polarisation, politically owned media and lack of media freedom, and the thin line between free speech and harmful discourse. In many countries, disinformation is produced and supported by key
political parties, or else there may be a lack of political will to combat disinformation. These contextual challenges are further complicated by the lack of support from major social media platforms to mitigate and reduce disinformation on their services.

Another challenge voiced by many is the disbalanced focus of counter-disinformation initiatives and donors on media and fact-checking, rather than education and science-based solutions.

Counter-disinformation organisations also face other forms of backlash like doxing and reputational attacks. Recently, in response to research conducted by Danes je nov dan, the opposition published staff members’ home addresses on Twitter. While these were deleted, the damage was already done. Further, the organisation faces regular articles discrediting them online, with members vilified and mocked. Delfi, based in Lithuania also reflected on similar backlash. After the launch of a research report naming and shaming disinformation influencers, the influencers came to their offices to criticise and

Court cases, frivolous lawsuits and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) brought by both individuals and organisations, are causing major difficulties for a growing number of counter-disinformation organisations. The counter-disinformation field is a conflictual environment, often pitting small players fighting disinformation against well-resourced actors disseminating disinformation. SLAPPs can have major implications for counter-disinformation actors, who are generally unprepared for such attacks, and the time spent responding to a legal case is time not spent on programming. Organisations are often afraid to fight back against a legal case due to the uncertainty of the result. SLAPPs require organisations to create funding reserves, as even if they win a lawsuit, there is still a significant financial loss.
Of the 93 respondents surveyed, 59 receive either financial or non-financial support. Approximately 63% of those 59 respondents, receive financial support in the form of grants (37 organisations/actors) while only 40% receive non-financial support. Here, we dig deeper into the experience of counter-disinformation actors in terms of the access, adequacy and sustainability of such support.

Access to financial support

One of the most common challenges is finding donors that will support the work, with respondents reflecting that often because of the nature of the work, bigger donors shy away. During interviews it was clear that many organisations were not fully aware of which donors support their work, due to limited capacity for such research, but also since many donors do not make their funding streams visible. Some international donors actively reach out to potential grantees, but they do not provide a channel for potential grantees to proactively get in touch with them. Others feel that funding is most allocated to fact-checking work and the development of analytical tools, and less towards programmes focusing on the root causes and impact of disinformation, and cognitive-behavioural aspects.

Capacity to apply for funding, which can require a significant amount of time and resources, is also a key challenge, especially for small and nascent organisations. Respondents reflected that they are often considered too small for donors funding counter-disinformation work, with limited financial management and fundraising capacity. Interestingly, some respondents also reflected that they would like to remain small and agile in order to react to the ever-changing context, despite the associated challenges in accessing certain donors.

Visibility to donors is also a key challenge,
with 18 organisations reflecting on their difficulties. Becoming well known by donors requires not only an investment in strategic communications to show the impact of your work, but also a significant effort in networking in the funding field, often requiring a staff member dedicated to fundraising. During interviews, it was evident that many organisations were not clear on how to become visible to a donor, especially those donors with very structured application processes such as the European Commission. A related issue is the discrepancy between external image and organisational reality, with some organisations presenting a strong reputation in the field which may lead to an assumption that they have significant funding while in reality this is not the case.

Approximately 15% of respondents stated that they do not want funds or support from some donors as they dilute the mission in the sense that they are not in line with the organisation’s values. This is both a values related issue but also a programming related issue: interviewees reflected that many donors have their own idea of what they think is needed to tackle disinformation, and require grantees to fit into this vision. Some organisations reflect that they are searching for new income sources, but they will only apply for funds that do not affect their independence to conduct the activities they know are addressing what they perceive as the real issues.

The story of EU funding

EU funding is seen by the majority of respondents as difficult to access, highly bureaucratic, with extensive reporting requirements and documentation. Many organisations feel they would have to adapt their activities to the EU’s focus, which would not necessarily solve the most prominent issues related to disinformation.

Respondents reflected on the challenging process of applying to EU funding: with tough competition, many have received negative responses to their applications and see this support as very difficult to access. Organisations are often further frustrated by the lack of feedback on their application, beyond getting a score out of 100, that would help them to improve. PCI Hungary reflects on the continual bad luck they have had in accessing EU funds, which they fear is due to the difficult and polarised nature of Hungarian society, and the nature of their work being critical of the government, however this is only speculation due to the lack of feedback and continual difficulty in accessing funding. Other organisations reflect that EU funding is somewhat a mystery as they do not have the capacity to do research on the various funding streams, although they have heard about the complex administrative and reporting requirements which intimidate them from approaching an application process. For small research organisations working on counter-disinformation, it is often difficult to access EU funding which mostly comes from Horizon 2020/Horizon...
Europe in very large projects aimed at larger research organisations such as academic institutions.

The nature of EU funding often doesn’t align with the nature of counter-disinformation work. Respondents reflect that the requirement to plan all activities up front often a year or more in advance does not align with the volatile and constantly changing nature of counter-disinformation work, which necessitates organisations to be agile and responsive. For Danes je nov dan in Slovenia, propaganda technologies constantly develop and the response time is crucial, therefore planning work in advance and adjusting activities in response to these activities is very important. De Facto NTCenter in Bulgaria reflects that the strict timeframes for EU funding periods can be difficult to adhere to, with the need to modify milestones if results are not met while in reality more time is often needed to achieve results.

For Savoir*Devenir in France, the need to remain agile does not align with the nature of EU funding – “if you would like to be involved in EU funding, it requires you to become bigger as you need to apply for funding often, in some programmes every year, requiring dedicated personnel for this task that also implies reporting”, remarked Divina Frau Meigs, the organisation’s founder. While Savoir*Devenir has successfully applied for EU funding, since they believe it is an important way to build competencies across Europe, and to remain independent from private sector funding, they note that they are limited by the need to find complementary funding (sometimes up to 40%) and the need to find dedicated expert personnel devoted to the application process and its follow-up.

Sources of funding

Respondents receive funding from a variety of sources including public sources such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the UN, governments and embassies, private international donors and private national donors. Other sources of funding include companies such as Facebook and Google. The most common EU sources of funding include Erasmus, Horizon 2020/Horizon Europe, the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST), the European Research Council, the Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT), and Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). The most common conditions for funding include the requirement of legal registration, specific budgetary limitations, organisational audits and specific types of organisational structures and approaches to work.
Most organisations note that the current level of funding is not sufficient to address the issue of disinformation and to counter a well-resourced opposition. The majority of survey respondents reflect that funding is largely project-based and is therefore sufficient to conduct a set of agreed activities, but is not sustainable for the organisation or sufficient to scale-up activities.

Counter-disinformation actors surveyed reflect on the uncertainty around future funding which reduces their capacity to understand how to become a sustainable organisation. There is a high dependence on project funding, and it is often not possible to sustain activities once projects end. Many actors reflect on the impact of a lack of core-funding in that they can only hire staff on short contracts which leads to a high turnover and a loss of momentum.

Income generation from activities is an important part of ensuring organisational sustainability. Bellingcat has a mixed funding model to support their sustainability. While they depend partly on foundations and individual donors, they also generate income from workshops they conduct which contribute greatly to sustain their organisation.

Crowdfunding and crowdsourcing

Some organisations seek support from their community to sustain their activities, often depending on subscriptions and/or donations from their communities. Datadista has a community-based model with an emphasis on getting their audiences to be active participants in their work. This has involved crowdfunding, which supported their
initial launch while the pandemic reduced their ability to conduct outreach; they are now planning to increase engagement and continue asking for support from their community. Bellingcat conducts crowdfunding through their Patreon account. Others have attempted crowdfunding campaigns, however it proved difficult as either they have a reputation of being a well-funded organisation or they struggle to get donations due to their limited reach and/or lack of visibility. Others still reflect that while they see potential to get further support through crowdfunding, they do not have the time to research how to do this effectively.

Non-financial support

Approximately 40% of the organisations surveyed initially answered ‘yes’ to whether or not they receive non-financial support. However, when prompted at interview stage, every organisation who had answered ‘no’ was able to recount in some detail some form of non-financial support they receive and so, in reality, the percentage is much higher than 40%. The general trend seemed to be that organisations define non-financial support differently or simply forget about its importance and value until prompted. This trend suggests its value may be understated or deceptive. The category of non-financial support is very broad and hard to define as a result.

What type of non-financial support do you receive?
Volunteer support and networking were amongst the most common non-financial support named, along with legal support, skill development, solidarity and communications. Skill development was at times mentioned in relation to cyber security training to ensure actors can protect themselves online. Solidarity could be other counter-disinformation actors standing up for their colleagues in the face of accusations whether this be with an online post or organisations linking peers with other contacts who can provide further support in the name of solidarity. Communications support could include a volunteer social media manager or strategic press coverage. Other types of support that actors mentioned included organisational development, premises to work from, and in-kind technical support i.e., free use of online tools and website maintenance. There was no apparent trend in the types of organisations who receive or do not receive non-financial support.

In terms of non-financial support that organisations would like to receive more of, capacity building and networking were the most frequent responses. It was quite common to hear that networking support in particular would lead to increased support in other areas i.e. financial.

**Best practices**

Respondents reflect on the innovative funding methods used by some donors which include a high-level of flexibility, and stepping beyond direct grant giving to also promote relationship building and experience sharing between grantees. Especially during the pandemic but also due to the nature of the disinformation field, respondents have appreciated the flexibility that some donors have shown in adapting to the context. Private funders, according to some respondents, are easiest to interact with and often provide insights from their experience with other grantees. Respondents feel that these donors are invested in ensuring the work is successful, and they provide the support to ensure success. This includes following up on reports and providing technical support and advice. On the other hand, other donors, mostly bureaucratic institutions, do not seem to spend time discussing with their grantees what genuine impact could look like.

**US funding model is perceived as more flexible and efficient**

Organisations in Latvia, Cyprus, Hungary and Slovakia mentioned that US donors, both embassies (mostly in Central/Eastern Europe) and private organisations, are present in the region and are more active in reaching out to organisations working on disinformation. According to respondents the European Commission is a donor that requires much more administrative work than US embassies. While respondents reflected that it is difficult to communicate with the European Commission, it is easier to create personal relations with US embassies supporting their work in Eastern and Central Europe. Respondents discussed how it is difficult to tailor work in line with the needs of the European Commission when they do not receive feedback from the Commission. Respondents noted that US-based organisations and embassies are more focused on activities tackling disinformation from Russia and China.
Donor profiles

The donor profiles below showcase some of the key donors in the field. Unfortunately, the institutional perspective is not well represented due to the timing of the research and the availability of representatives.

Civitates

A pooled fund with over 20 foundations working on different themes, Civitates’ main focus is on democracy in Europe; fostering a healthy digital sphere and countering disinformation is part of this. The grants provided seek to strengthen civil society, enhance civic space, identify the drivers behind the challenges to democracy and the health of digital space, and support independent journalism. Support provided to counter-disinformation projects is aimed at researching the issue and creating solutions on how to tackle it, either through policy change or other practical solutions. Through open calls, Civitates provides grants for a 1-2 year period, in addition to ‘top-up’ grants to address topics that go beyond the initial programme proposal, showing a significant level of flexibility. Grants to support journalism are core flexible funding and can cover 3+ year periods. Civitates believes it is crucial to build awareness around disinformation and how it travels, how it is consumed and how it affects people, which can be very uneven across Europe.

Open Society Foundations

A prominent donor in the social justice field, OSF funds counter-disinformation activities in Europe through both technical and geographic programme areas. The main tool of support is through grant making in addition to convenings on specific issues. Grants focus on general or core support after an initial project grant. The average period of support is approximately 2 years. OSF sees it as important to provide core funding in addition to support focused around specific events. They also try to work with the grantee to outline clearly what the reality of the work will entail and what can be achieved within the timeframe, and attempt to align the activities to the larger aim of the organisation to ensure sustainability. OSF reflects that while the donor field is developing, there is a need for long-term donor investment on this issue that would combine building partner’s organisational capacity with advocacy and policy-influencing opportunities.
Reset Tech

A hybrid organisation, Reset Tech is a donor while also engaging in programmatic work focused on the artificial amplification of disinformation and hate speech, among other issues. As a relatively new donor in the field, Reset Tech provides project funding and works operationally with several grantees. This can include partner support through policy advice, technology support, media amplification, writing and editing support, identifying gaps and opportunities for impact, helping make connections and introductions, etc. Some grants are experimental and are designed in discussion with the grantees to understand what activities would be most impactful. As grants are currently largely project-based, sustainability is not a major discussion point, though it is not neglected.
What do the donors think of the movement?

Donors contributing to this research reflect that there is a major imbalance between the number of sources spreading disinformation and those working against it. There is a need for more resources to strengthen current organisations and build the movement in the face of this strong opposition. In doing so, funders need to take risks: instead of being concerned that new and innovative approaches may fail, they need to focus on the possibility that they will succeed.

According to donors, the counter-disinformation movement has very few messengers, which affects the visibility of the field, while the opposition continues to be very vocal. However, they note the fallacy of control involved: the more counter-disinformation organisations 'raise their hand' the more they become a victim of disinformation or of SLAPPs.

Donors believe that counter-disinformation organisations need to work on building their internal capacity, focusing on fundraising, especially investing time in building relationships with donors even when they don’t need money. Further, organisations need to communicate better on why they are doing what they are doing and what they are trying to achieve in the long-term, which will help them to show donors the value in their work. It is important to note that counter-disinformation actors, like other social justice organisations, find it difficult to measure impact and success.

Some note that there is excellent research done by counter-disinformation organisations, however, there is a discrepancy between the quality of the research and how organisations are sharing it and telling the story - they note that there is a difficulty in translating the issues into messages that the average person can relate to. Others reflect on the need to fund more research to keep up with the trends of disinformation, advancing the conversation with faster and fresher evidence from actors working in a variety of locations and fields. Further, there is a need to link research with policy and understand how to make sure that research will make a difference and get in front of key stakeholders.

To strengthen the field, they feel there is a need to improve cooperation between actors including increasing best practice sharing. By speaking more as one, it will create a more powerful platform and force policy makers and other key stakeholders to listen. This cooperation should take place between the diversity of actors in the field including fact-checkers, social media researchers and others outside the traditional scope, like women’s rights organisations and environmental organisations, depending on the focus of the work.

Finally, there is also a need for more donor collaboration to support the field. Largely it seems that European governments, the EU, private donors and US institutional donors are supporting the field in silos. There may be space to share experiences despite the key differences between these funders, as is being done in other fields, for example between private and institutional donors on the issue of migration.
The research has highlighted the acute support needs of a variety of key counter-disinformation actors across Europe. It has also discussed the discrepancies between these needs and the support currently provided by donors. Below are a few suggestions for both organisations and donors to strengthen the European counter-disinformation movement.

...donors... could...

01 Design funding streams with the nature of counter-disinformation work in mind

For EU funding, discussions should be opened with counter-disinformation actors to understand their needs. For example, by providing smaller grants, support can be more effective to improve autonomy and visibility and to remain agile to evolve in the face of new threats and trends, rather than large grants that require the organisations to change their organisational models. The funding vision should have sustainability and the collective goal of the counter-disinformation movement or the ‘community of practice’ at its core.

02 Redesign application processes to be less bureaucratic and burdensome

This would decrease the amount of time spent on applications but also ensure that applications are accessible for a variety of organisations. The EU specifically could consider establishing a training grant for new organisations to help them enter what can be a competitive and exigent funding environment.

03 Invest in grantees

In order to further promote the sustainability of the organisations, donors should provide core and multiannual funding.
Provide tailored support

Counter disinformation actors take on many forms, and no single type of support will work for them all. Donors should consider tailoring their support in line with the activities, size, capacity and needs of each actor.

Share experiences and collaborate

In order to learn more about what works and what doesn’t and to identify gaps in funding, different donors should share insights and collaborate to strengthen their support for the field. This is essential to supporting a movement and a counter-disinformation community of practice.

Prioritise fundraising

Do the research, focus on visibility and work to build relationships with donors even if there is not an immediate possibility of funding.

Focus on messaging

Work on understanding the longer-term aim of the activities and how to communicate this outwardly. Invest in storytelling and understanding how to disseminate work. Communicate your strengths to make it clear that donors need to work with you.

Consider non-financial support

Do not underestimate the added value of non-financial support. If you do not succeed in obtaining financial support, think about specific needs and see if you can receive non-financial support in relation to these.

Work bilaterally

Join forces, collaborate and share experiences on what actually works with other counter-disinformation actors, even those working in different locations or on seemingly removed issues.
Partner with organisations outside of the field

Counter-disinformation overlaps with many other fields: increase cooperation with different actors from adjacent sectors including environmental organisations, women’s rights organisations, migrants’ rights organisations, and other defenders in the wider field of human rights and digital threats to democracy.
In addition to this magazine, you can visit the website dedicated to this project. Visit disinfo.eu/manyfaces to find out more about the actors and initiatives featured here. You can also find other materials related to this project, including our recommendations for how different stakeholders can help foster a resilient, decentralized and harmonized civil society ecosystem.

Want to know more?

This research project was conducted collaboratively with ODS, Organisation Development Support, a cooperative consultancy based in Brussels.