

Welcome note

Countering fake news and improving democratic narratives

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues and friends,

A warm welcome to this conference on Fake News, a highly topical issue that is increasingly discussed as a political challenge for Europe. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation has invited you together with two partners, the Sofia Security Forum and the Foundation Media Democracy. It is not a coincidence that we debate this topic both with media specialists and security experts. As vital as good journalism is for the opinion-making in a democracy, as much can false facts damage the trust of people in our political model and our open societies.

Propaganda is nothing new, you may object. It existed even before mass-media. But current forms of disinformation have new characteristics.

- Fake news can be defined as made up facts, professionally disguised as serious journalism. The internet and social networks are the breeding ground for them.
- Fake news nowadays require the active participation of recipients, for instance by liking and sharing online.
- Spreading is easy because people trust Facebook friends more than professional media, and social media are faster than traditional media.
- Fake news can be an integral part of a wider propaganda strategy, uniting narratives of political institutions, controlled mainstream media, civil society organisations, domestic and foreign audiences.
- Last but not least, for the first time in history, it is possible to earn serious money with propaganda thanks to online advertising revenue. One of the best examples are the Macedonian teenagers who ran 'fake media' websites during the US election campaign.

In the French election campaign, the team of the winner, Emmanuel Macron, has been victim of a cyberattack, combining the leaking of internal data and the spreading of fake news. The German Bundestag and other political institutions, including KAS, have been targets of hackers with political motives, and our government is alarmed that the federal election campaign could be threatened by cyberattacks and disinformation.

If we look at Bulgaria, a large majority of citizens are confronted with fake news in media. Together with the renowned institute Alpha Research, we have conducted a representative opinion poll in this matter – Boriana Dimitrova will present the results before our discussions.

The results of our survey also show that Bulgarians have relatively little trust in major players in the field of national security. If it comes to the perception of international stakeholders in general, the EU enjoys the highest confidence in Bulgaria. How Bulgarians see NATO, Russia and Germany, will also be part of our presentation. Afterwards, we will discuss disinformation and security issues with some of the best experts in this field – from Bulgaria, Germany, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Montenegro, and NATO. There will be Q&A sessions to include your questions.

Many countries in South East and Eastern Europe still have to make fundamental decisions: More or less EU integration? Pro-Western, pro-Russian or other options? Liberal democracy or strong state? In this regard, I wish us all a fruitful, fact-based debate – with strong opinions and also with respect. Let us identify new approaches how to counter fake news and how to improve the narrative of European democratic values.

Thank you very much for your attention.