

# All “disinformation”?

## How the state interferes with freedom of expression and freedom of the press

by Dr Jonas Tögel\*



Jonas Tögel. (Picture jonastoegel.de)

*(CH-S) In the following article, Jonas Tögel describes the dramatic deterioration of freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Germany and the EU, and the methods being used to further destroy them. Most EU states today face accusations of treating their citizens in a despotic manner, patronising them and treating them as compliant subjects.*

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### 1. Cognitive warfare

When discussing the “engine room” of *cognitive warfare*, it is first necessary to explain what cognitive warfare is. As a detailed discussion of the topic would go beyond the scope of this article, a brief outline will suffice here: it is an official NATO programme that is an umbrella term for information warfare, psychological operations and psychological warfare, and has been increasingly promoted since 2020. The battle for people’s minds is thus being turned into a separate warfare technique, with the declared aim of making people themselves an independent, official NATO theatre of war. This means that every person is always at the centre of this state-of-the-art psychological warfare.

Neither the radical nature nor the comprehensiveness of this global programme, which is also being pursued by Russia, China and other countries under different names, can be ex-

plored in depth here. However, it is important to understand that control over the dominant narrative of societies is an essential component of cognitive warfare. In this context, NATO declares the fight against “disinformation” to be a key task to ensure the “cognitive security” of the population. A document states: “The most efficient way to defeat an opponent is to influence their thoughts and beliefs and thus turn them against themselves. Advances in research on disinformation and its impact on societies will lead to the development of new battle plans to repel these attacks.”

### 2. The narrative framework: the fight against “disinformation” and “Russian influence”

Since the battle for the minds and hearts of foreign and domestic populations is not legally possible without further ado, this statement by NATO strategists provides the interpretative framework that legitimises the advancement of cognitive warfare: the fight against disinformation or foreign influence.

It is therefore not surprising that at the *World Economic Forum* meeting in January 2025, this fight against “disinformation and misinformation” was at the top of the list of threats. Apparently, it was expected that “disinformation” could be effectively combated in the coming years, as the outlook for the next ten years moved this threat down to fifth place. The EU declared war on “disinformation” back in 2018, and together with the fight against “Russian influence”, it has been omnipresent since the development of cognitive warfare, if not before. As early as 2017, a study by the *Army War College* warned that “uncomfortable information could reveal details that undermine legitimate authority and destroy relations between governments and the governed.” The goal must therefore be to “manipulate perception” as comprehensively as possible – a technique that has been recognised as an official warfare tactic since the introduction of cognitive warfare at the latest and which also includes the fight against “disinformation” or “Russian propaganda”.

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In this context, the “Berliner Zeitung”, *Focus*, NDR and *NachDenkSeiten* recently found themselves accused of spreading “Russian narratives” by the *Bavarian Office for the Protection of the Constitution’s* so-called “doppelganger analysis”. After vehement criticism, for example from the editor-in-chief of the “Berliner Zeitung”, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution backtracked.

However, as is so often the case in propaganda research, the problem with terms such as “disinformation” or “misinformation” is that they are not sufficiently defined. Furthermore, the evidence for “Russian influence” often remains unclear.

*Susanne Lackner*, deputy chair of the *media regulatory authority* in Austria, recently explained this very weakness in the supposed fight against “disinformation”, for which, in her words, there is no “uniform legal concept”. Since “freedom of expression” already exists, criticism has been voiced that “censorship is taking place here”, but that is “not the point at all,” according to Lackner. The Federal Minister for Family Affairs, *Lisa Paus* of the *Green Party*, takes a similar view. She recently lamented: “Many enemies of democracy know exactly what still falls under freedom of expression” and consequently called for a fight against “hate and incitement.”

The supposed fight against “disinformation” and “Russian influence” thus forms a powerful narrative framework for the bitterly fought war for our minds and hearts. This article will focus on the mechanisms that have been created behind the scenes, often invisible to the population, to effectively implement these manipulative efforts.

Two concrete, particularly effective mechanisms stand out: The creation of a suitable legal framework in the form of the “Digital Services Act” and the establishment of a network of think tanks dedicated to information warfare.

### 3. Implementation: Think tanks

The fight against “Russian disinformation” is also dominating the 2025 federal election campaign: the “Correctiv” platform is certain that Russia is interfering in it. In this context, there has even been speculation that Russia could have something to do with the terrorist attacks in Aschaffenburg or Munich to strengthen nationalist parties.

However, a study published in 2021 by the *Left Group* in the European Parliament fundament-



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ally questions the interpretative framework of an alleged fight against “foreign influences”, usually from Russia or China. The authors described it instead as “a convenient source of imagined threats to European security” that serves to “justify new defence projects and initiatives.”

They further note: “A booming industry of NATO-affiliated think tanks and institutes has emerged that reinforces the political agenda of ‘foreign influence’. These are regularly invited to hearings of the special committee to contribute tailor-made expertise.” The goal, therefore, must be to closely examine the ramified network of Western think tanks that shape public opinion behind the scenes.

This includes, for example, the “Institute for Strategic Dialogues” (ISD), founded in 2006, which, according to research by *Public*, is also a NATO (front) organisation. “NGOs funded by NATO and governments are working with government agencies to influence elections in Germany,” *Public* criticises ISD. The institute’s task is to “bring the German population into line with the goals of American foreign policy and to undermine the European peace movement.”

The two authors therefore offer harsh criticism: “Groups such as the ISD serve as important channels for military and state propaganda.”

This accusation also applies to NATO’s 28 so-called “centres of excellence”, two of which are highlighted as examples: the “Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence”, based in Estonia and founded in 2008, and the “Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence” in Latvia, founded in 2014. Both are dedicated to intensive research and development of increasingly modern propaganda techniques, as the *Left Group* study found.

Similarly influential is the “East StratCom Task Force”, founded in 2015, which, like the “Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats”, is a joint project of the EU and NATO.

The former task force runs the blog “EU vs. Disinfo”, which recently warned of Russian influence on the German federal elections. Key narratives spread by the Kremlin and thus to be combated include, for example, “elites vs. the people, lost sovereignty” or “impending collapse”.

The “Centre Against Hybrid Threats” is also dedicated to combating “disinformation campaigns by the Kremlin”, among other things.

#### **4. Implementation: The “Digital Services Act”**

In addition to this extensive network of think tanks, the creation of (censorship) laws is another key tool for shaping opinion in the engine room of cognitive warfare.

First and foremost, among these is the *Digital Services Act*, which has been in force since 16 November 2022. This very comprehensive and complex law replaces the 2018 “Network Enforcement Act” in Germany, which was criticised by *Human Rights Watch* for potentially leading to “unjustified censorship”.

The DSA is primarily aimed at digital search engines and platforms and obliges them, under threat of severe penalties, to monitor, downgrade and, if necessary, delete their content, which is controlled by the EU Commission and monitored by state coordinators and civil society whistleblowers.

The main focus is on combating the vague concept of “disinformation”, including in connection with elections, as Susanne Lackner emphasises: “There is disinformation, which is when there is an intention behind it, i.e. to spread misleading content. There is also the influencing of information, which of course brings us into the realm of foreign and security policy and foreign interference. [...] The other thing is, of course, interference, and everyone is now aware, in the wake of the elections and election preparations, that there are serious dangers on the internet. [...] In other words, disinformation is a means of warfare.”

The high penalties are particularly effective, causing a certain amount of fear among platform operators – after all, they can cost them “up to six per cent of their global turnover” if they violate the DSA.

Civil society whistleblowers also include so-called “trusted flaggers”. Since October 2024, the reporting office in Germany has been *REspect!*.

While the DSA and REspect! effectively enable the implementation of cognitive warfare, there is loud criticism of their compatibility with fundamental principles of the rule of law. For example, “Die Welt” criticises REspect! as the “nice new censorship authority” and says its actions are “in open contradiction to the rule of law”.

In his analysis of the DSA, long-standing judge *Manfred Kölsch* writes: “In doing so, they are undermining the constitutionally enshrined freedom of expression and information and promoting this endeavour through a Europe-wide surveillance system.”

#### **5. Conclusion: concrete examples**

Since the DSA and the numerous think tanks in the engine room of manipulation operate unnoticed in the background, the question arises as to where their influence can be observed in concrete terms.

One possibility is to report undesirable content with the help of “trusted flaggers” and force its deletion or, even more efficiently and almost impossible to verify, a downgrading of its visibility: in this way, unpopular content disappears into the depths of the internet, receiving little attention or becoming completely invisible, a practice also known as shadow banning.

During a meeting with Home Secretary *Nancy Faeser* on 22 January at the Federal Ministry of the Interior, “representatives of social media companies” were already prepared to respond appropriately to “the spread of criminal internet content and disinformation in connection with the federal elections”.

Another equally important aspect that many think tanks are working on with great vigour is telling their own (NATO) story. As *Joshua Rahtz* impressively demonstrates in his article “The Storytellers of NATO,” the proposals are extremely ambitious and make it clear how many areas of society are now permeated by cognitive warfare. Referring to proposals from the think tank “Globsec”, Rahtz argues that, among other things, the entire infotainment industry, such as online games and fiction, should be integrated into NATO’s storytelling. “Popular Hollywood films and online streaming services” should also be included. “NATO should also seek to attract

more appealing influencers, both inside and outside the NATO bubble, to promote its own storytelling”, according to Globsec.

Such an all-encompassing production of propaganda, deep from the engine room of cognitive warfare, can only be countered by continuous education about how it works and the

deeply undemocratic foundations on which it is based.

Source: <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/open-source/alles-desinformation-wie-der-staat-in-die-meinungs-und-pressefreiheit-ingreift-li.2301069>, 22 February 2025.  
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