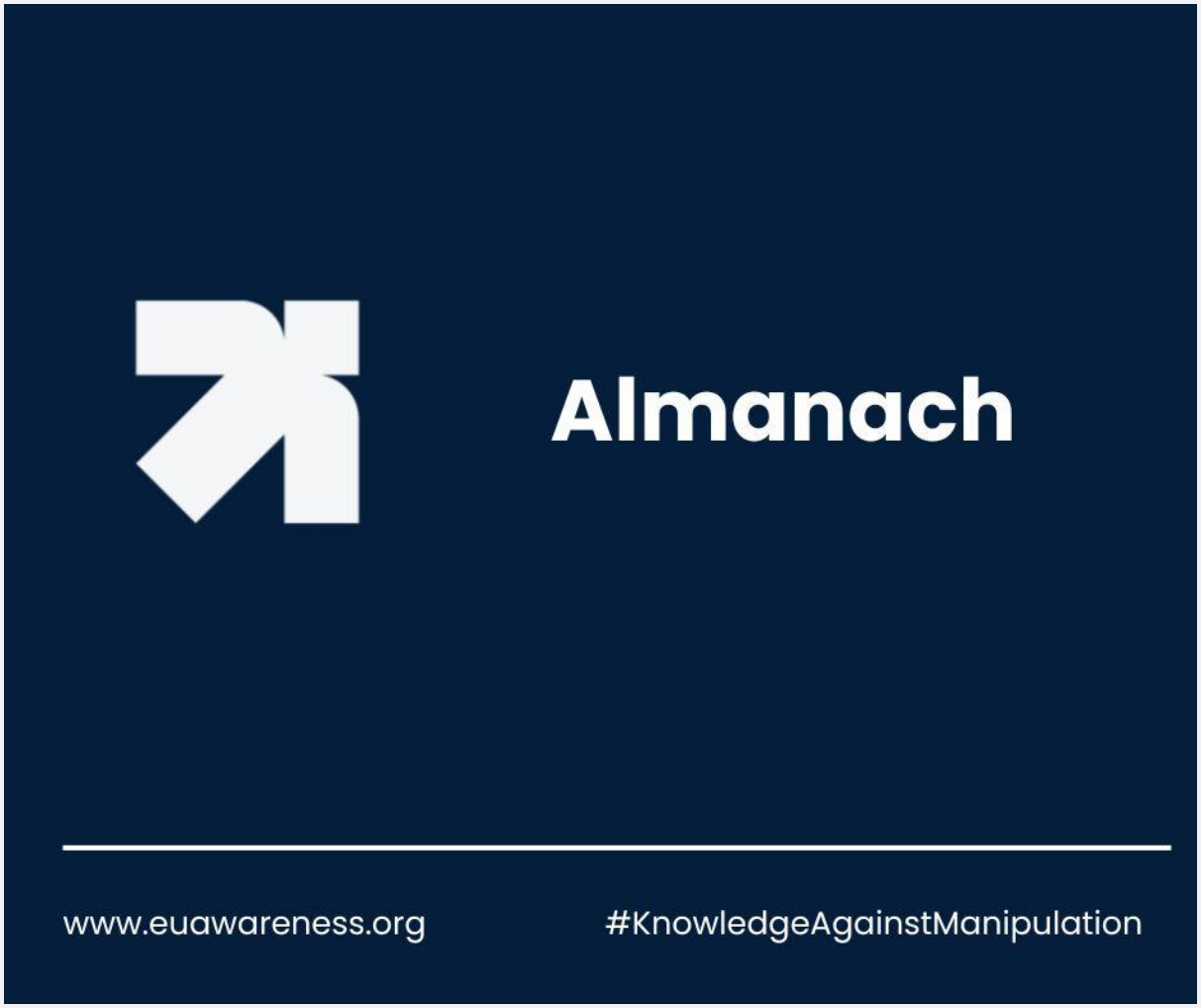


Almanach #15

Opinion paper by Zoe Gueli

Closing the Detection Gap: Why the EU Needs Critical Language Awareness for Disinformation Resilience and Citizen Agency

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9 November 2026

Closing the Detection Gap: Why the EU Needs Critical Language Awareness for Disinformation Resilience and Citizen Agency

The EU's disinformation strategy has built strong detection and institutional-response capacity, but it has left citizens' critical-thinking skills underdeveloped: citizens report awareness of disinformation without necessarily being equipped to recognise how it works. Drawing on Eurosceptic rhetoric in Italy, this brief argues that disinformation is part of a broader challenge – how political communication shapes public perceptions through strategic framing, blame attribution and narrative construction. Citizens therefore need to assess not only the factual accuracy of information, but also how and why it is framed, whose perspectives and interests it advances, and what political or social implications it carries. The brief recommends that the EU fund Critical Language Awareness education through Erasmus+, embedded in existing curricula, to strengthen citizens' independent capacity to evaluate political communication and recognise manipulative discourse.

Summary

The EU's FIMI counter-strategies have built strong threat-detection and institutional-response capacity, but have yet to translate "media and information literacy" into a systematic, citizen-facing curriculum. Citizens are therefore left without the means to assess independently not only whether information is accurate, but also how messages are framed and narratives constructed. This matters because the influence of political communication extends beyond true-or-false claims: through repeated framing, selective emphasis and the attribution of responsibility, it shapes which issues receive public attention and how citizens interpret them, even when misleading claims are recognised or rejected. Self-reported confidence in recognising disinformation does not measure actual ability, and fact-checking individual claims leaves these broader rhetorical strategies unexamined. This brief recommends that the EU fund Critical Language Awareness (CLA) education through Erasmus+, embedded in existing curricula and drawing on the University of Groningen-coordinated CLADES project, to complement rather than replace institutional fact-checking.

Context

The digital information environment has made disinformation a persistent challenge across the EU, as political actors, media outlets and foreign interests increasingly compete to shape public narratives. In response, the EU has developed FIMI counter-strategies and democratic resilience infrastructure, focused primarily on threat detection, strategic communication and institutional capacity-building. Although media literacy and citizens' critical thinking skills are repeatedly recognised as important within this framework, their development into systematic, citizen-facing educational initiatives remains limited and requires more targeted attention.

Analysis

The Council of the European Union's own research identifies the psychological, social and technological drivers of conspiracy belief and disinformation susceptibility in detail. It closes with a call for improved public understanding of manipulation and stronger critical thinking, but does not specify a pedagogical model to build them. The EEAS's operational FIMI strategy names "digital media and information literacy" as one of four resilience-building activities, but delivers it primarily through journalist training, conferences and civil-society capacity-building rather than a systematic, citizen-facing curriculum. According to the European Parliament's Social Media Survey 2025 (Flash Eurobarometer FL014EP), 61% of respondents feel confident in their ability to recognise

disinformation. This figure, however, is self-reported and does not measure actual ability; confidence should therefore not be taken as evidence of demonstrated detection skills.

Italy illustrates why citizens need to look beyond the factual accuracy of political messages. Despite the sustained Eurosceptic rhetoric of Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Standard Eurobarometer data (2018, 2022, 2025) shows that Italian attitudes towards the EU have remained relatively stable and mildly positive. This suggests the rhetoric serves purposes beyond reflecting prevailing public opinion. FdI's Eurosceptic discourse can instead function as a strategy of domestic political positioning: by framing Brussels as a source of grievance and presenting itself as the defender of Italian interests, the party can redirect responsibility for the country's problems towards EU institutions while reinforcing its anti-establishment stance.

The example shows how political communication can shape public perceptions through strategic framing and the selective attribution of responsibility, even without relying on explicitly false claims. Citizens therefore need to examine not only what political statements say, but what they seek to achieve: why particular issues are framed in certain ways, how word choices construct political responsibility, and what purposes these narratives serve.

This points to a specific role for Critical Language Awareness (CLA) within existing media-literacy efforts. By teaching citizens to analyse framing, word choice, narrative structure, and the construction of political identities, CLA can extend resilience beyond recognising isolated false claims to understanding how political messages shape interpretation. The aim is not for CLA to replace fact-checking, but to strengthen citizens' capacity to evaluate how information is presented, how political narratives are constructed and what purposes they serve, alongside assessing the factual accuracy of individual claims. In this sense, CLA complements institutional fact-checking by building citizen-level resilience that operates across different narratives, actors and information environments.

Recommendation

The EEAS's current FIMI strategy relies on awareness-raising, capacity-building and threat-analysis frameworks, but stops short of systematically developing citizens' ability to assess how information and political messages are constructed and framed.

The EU should fund CLA education through Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships (Key Action 2), which already prioritise disinformation, media literacy and critical thinking. CLA should be embedded within existing secondary-level language and civics curricula rather than introduced as a standalone subject, drawing on the University of Groningen-coordinated CLADES project as an existing educational framework and implementation reference.

A Council Recommendation, following the precedent of the Council of the European Union's 2016 conclusions on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training, would formally endorse CLA as a reference framework. It would respect Member States' competence over curriculum content under Article 165 TFEU while incentivising adoption through EU funding. Prioritising teacher training over direct-to-student programming would allow the model to scale across national education systems without requiring curriculum harmonisation.

Unlike general awareness campaigns, CLA teaches citizens to recognise and examine the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms through which communication shapes interpretation. These skills apply to political discourse, news media and public communication alike. In politics, they enable citizens to assess strategic framing – from populist Eurosceptic rhetoric to conspiracy narratives – by examining not only the factual claims made, but also how issues are presented, whose interests particular

narratives serve and what purposes they fulfil. By developing this independent analytical capacity, CLA complements rather than replaces institutional fact-checking, strengthening individual agency and contributing to longer-term democratic resilience.

Implementation and Evaluation Framework

Assess the intervention's effectiveness and scale through measurable learning and implementation indicators.

First, assess students' ability to identify and analyse rhetorical strategies, framing, and the communicative purposes and potential effects of discourse before CLA training, immediately afterwards, and, where feasible, at a later follow-up point to test whether they retain these skills. CLA and educational-assessment specialists should develop assessments that measure changes in students' ability to recognise framing, persuasive strategies, narrative structures, and how language constructs political meaning and responsibility. Where feasible, the programme should also compare students who have received CLA training with comparable students who have not, so it can measure the added effect of CLA education.

Second, monitor implementation and reach through the number of teachers who complete official CLA training, the number of students who participate in or complete CLA education, and the number of secondary schools implementing CLA in their curricula. Reporting these indicators over time would allow policymakers to assess the programme's scale and uptake across Member States, identify differences in implementation, and pinpoint areas needing additional support.



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