



# STRENGTHENING PAN-EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY IN THE ERA OF AI

Last minute measures to protect  
the EU elections

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THINK-TANK  
**DIGITAL  
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## | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 European elections coincide with unprecedented challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and global election participation. Civil society, led by Make.org, convened experts to devise the Democratic Shield, an initiative aimed at fortifying electoral integrity.

This paper explores the Shield's measures on the basis of a workshop held on this topic at the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels. It provides a deep dive into the measures of reinforcing the quiet period, creating innovative tools to protect the electoral period, promoting citizen consensus debates as well as stakeholders pledges. It underscores the urgency of proactive collaboration between civil society and institutions to safeguard democracy.

As technology evolves, ongoing vigilance and adaptive strategies are essential. The paper offers insights into navigating AI's impact on elections, urging every segment of society to unite in raising a Democratic Shield.

# INTRODUCTION

The 2024 European elections arrive at a pivotal moment in history, marked by two simultaneous dynamics that elevate their significance to extremely high levels. On one hand, the unprecedented technological advancements and the ever-growing influence of Artificial Intelligence. The emergence of Generative AI poses a particularly concerning threat, empowering malicious entities to disrupt democratic processes with greater ease than ever before. On the other hand, 2024 will be a decisive year in terms of elections, with a combined population of about 49% of the world citizens casting their votes in national elections<sup>1</sup>.

**“We are at war. We can discuss whether we are at war as belligerents in Ukraine, but, in the informational field, we are definitely at war. An intense war. We are attacked, frequently, by stakeholders using the informational war to attack the legitimacy of the next European elections.”**

*Axel Dauchez, Co-Founder & President, Make.org*

These two dynamics have motivated civil society actors to participate in efforts to preserve the integrity of electoral processes. Within this context, on 4 March 2024, Make.org organised a workshop<sup>2</sup>, in the scope of the European Economic and Social Committee's Civil Society Week, gathering a panel of experts who discussed how to safeguard elections in the era of AI. The purpose of this workshop was to explore different strategies aimed at protecting democratic processes from the impacts of new technologies, focusing on initiatives currently under development for the upcoming 2024 European elections

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of this question, Make.org gathered speakers from various sectors of civil society, each offering unique insights and expertise. Among them were Vassilis Ntousas, Senior Manager for Europe and Fellow for the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy and offering insights from his research on European foreign policy. Julie Majerczak, representing Reporters Without Borders, contributed her expertise in press freedom advocacy, while Marilyn Neven from International IDEA, presented her work on a Code of Conduct for political parties. Additionally, Arno Pons, Director of Digital New Deal, provided perspectives on navigating the challenges posed by AI in electoral processes. The discussion was moderated by the journalist Souwie Buis, with Axel Dauchez, co-founder and President of Make.org, initiating the conversation.

<sup>1</sup> <https://time.com/6550920/world-elections-2024/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/securing-ballot-elections-times-ai-and-new-technological-changes>

The bespoke workshop was held in the context of the Democratic Shield<sup>3</sup> initiative: a set of short-term measures that can higher the level of security of the European elections (see below). This paper will draw on the experiences made during the workshop, the compilation and the promotion of the Democratic Shield and the discussions held with relevant stakeholders in the field, both institutional and with civil society. We will outline the Democratic Shield first, before deep-diving into a few, selected topics in more detail: The challenges that are posed by AI, and three measures in the Shield that were discussed during the workshop. In the end, we will conclude with an outlook on what is set to happen next, making reference to Arno Pons (Director, Digital New Deal) contribution to the conference and the exchanges held with various institutional actors.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://about.make.org/articles-en/raising-the-democratic-shield-safeguarding-the-2024-european-parliament-elections>

# THE DEMOCRATIC SHIELD

The Democratic Shield is led by Make.org alongside a task force of 12 high-level civil society organisations, academics and experts working in the fields of democracy and AI. It was conceived as a set of bold and necessary actions that should be implemented by European and national institutions, as well as civil society organisations in the lead-up to the European elections.

The goal of the Democratic Shield is to promote both new and established ideas aimed at safeguarding upcoming elections from malicious actors seeking to delegitimize or undermine democratic systems. This initiative falls within the spectrum of the latest developments in European Union law, including the recently introduced EU AI Act<sup>4</sup> and the Defense of Democracy package<sup>5</sup> which already aim to enhance the resilience of European democratic systems. The European Commissions' "Guidelines under the DSA for the mitigation of systemic risks online for elections"<sup>6</sup> (published on 26 March 2024) do indeed answer many elements that were brought into the debate by the Democratic Shield.

The effectiveness of the Democratic Shield relied heavily on public institutions recognising the imminent threat posed by new technologies to the upcoming elections. They must prove their readiness to act to preserve democracy, even if it requires bold, politically courageous measures and challenging their established relationships with citizens and interest groups. This is why, over the last months, extensive exchanges with the institutions were held on the Democratic Shield to explore how the bespoke measures can be introduced best. Finally, fully safeguarding the elections will not be feasible if the institutions are not prepared to allocate substantial resources to protect electoral processes ensuring their integrity and resilience.

The strength of the Democratic Shield Task is the strong Task Force at its core. It is supported by a coalition of stakeholders deeply involved in the fields of democracy and AI. This coalition includes esteemed academic partners like Sciences Po, pioneering technology companies such as Mozilla and Sopra Steria, public institutions like France Digitale and Télécom Paris, and a multitude of influential civil society organisations including Reporters Without Borders, ACTE, Alliance4Europe, EU Disinfo Lab, Fondation Robert Schuman, Digital New Deal, and CEE Digital Democracy Watch.

<sup>4</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5662-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_6453](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6453)

<sup>6</sup> <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/guidelines-providers-vlops-and-vloses-mitigation-systemic-risks-electoral-processes>

# THE 10 PROPOSED MEASURES OF THE SHIELD

1. **European Council Agenda:** The Belgian Presidency should add an alert on electoral security to the agenda of the European Council, unifying and strengthening the European commitment to electoral security.
2. **Reinforcement of the quiet period:** Reinforcing a quiet period and making it enforceable on social media platforms (social networks, messaging apps, search tools), for example, by referring to articles 34-36 of the DSA to regulate virality on social media in the event of a massive attack.
3. **Promotion of citizen consensus debates:** Engaging institutions and media to actively encourage and promote public debate focusing on citizen consensus rather than controversies.
4. **Political Parties Code of Conduct:** Establishing a Code of Conduct for political parties and candidates, defining boundaries for their behaviour before and during the elections.
5. **Traditional Medias Code of Conduct:** Expanding the traditional media's Code of Conduct, particularly governing their behaviour regarding AI content and social media usage, in accordance with the Paris Charter for AI and journalism.
6. **Large Influencers Code of Conduct:** Consider large influencers (based on the number of followers) as media entities and enforce a Code of Conduct on AI-generated content.
7. **Improve civil society resilience to attacks:** Enabling cross-sector analysis by building a resilient cohort of civil society organisations and webinars ahead of the 2024 EU elections. Setting up an alert mechanism which notifies influencers and media of suspicions of attack and strengthening the EU Rapid Alert System (RAS).
8. **Trusted Flaggers Support:** Ensuring trusted flaggers have the necessary resources and community support and are heard, starting from February 2024.
9. **AI Generated Content Detector:** Developing and deploying an AI-generated content detection service for media and establishing a blockchain content certification system.
10. **Reference Hub of Candidates' Voices and verified electoral information:** Providing verified information about the European elections and developing an AI-accessible database containing all content spoken by candidates (in meetings, media, posts on X, etc.) as a reference to identify manipulative content, for use by citizens and media (piloted in one EU member state).

# A CLOSER LOOK

Based on the Democratic Shield and the definition of the referred measures, the initiative was presented to a wide range of stakeholders, including institutional actors on the European level, as well as national governments. In that context, the bespoke workshop "Securing the Ballot" was organised as part of the European Civil Society Week in the European Economic and Social Committee. This chapter will highlight the most important points that were shared during the workshop and provide them in a concise and short way. First, this is covering the most important points on the problem analysis as such, before deep diving into some measures in more detail, notably measure 3 (Citizen Consensus Debate), measure 4 (Code of Conduct for political parties) and measure 5 (Code of conduct for Media).

## THE CHALLENGE AHEAD: AI AND DEMOCRACY<sup>7</sup>

First of all, it must be highlighted that the 2024 European elections, with 350 million voters across Europe, represent a significant democratic exercise. Yet, the diversity of the electoral system in 27 member states comes with a unique vulnerability. And,

**"These elections will be the target of tremendous systematic efforts by bad actors to undermine our democracy, the election integrity and the trust that citizens have in the process and of course the infrastructure underpinning everything."**

Vassilis Ntousas, *German Marshall Fund*

Besides, elections have become lucrative targets for malicious actors due to their consequential nature. The outcomes of elections not only shape domestic politics but also influence international relations. As a result, "bad actors" are increasingly motivated to interfere with the electoral process.

All of this must be set in a context of the rising power of generative AI. The introduction of AI, as accessible as it is now, has widened and deepened the aperture of threats. AI's capacity to automate the creation and dissemination of disinformation amplifies the potential harm it can cause to democratic processes.

**"This micrografting of messages can really mean that a campaign by a bad actor can reach each citizen, exploit their particular, unique vulnerability, their biases, can sway their visions, their emotions and ultimately their vote."**

Vassilis Ntousas, *German Marshall Fund*

One must underscore the vulnerability of election infrastructure to disinformation attacks facilitated by AI. From public election websites to voting systems and result tabulation processes, every aspect of the electoral infrastructure is potentially susceptible to manipulation.

In that context, it is important to highlight that solutions are on the table. Namely, the ASD AI Election Security Handbook<sup>8</sup> provides guidance and strategies to overcome the outlined challenges. Four relevant points must be underlined, following Vassilis Ntousas<sup>9</sup>:

<sup>7</sup> This paragraph is based on the contributions made by Vassilis Ntousas during the "Securing the Ballot" Conference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS5U1BxOKG8&t=527s>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gmfus.org/news/asd-ai-election-security-handbook>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/securing-ballot-elections-times-ai-and-new-technological-changes>



1. Content Authenticity Technologies: tools that show how content was created, including the life cycle of the content.
2. Integration of External Cyber and AI Expertise: namely for the people that are involved in carrying out the election process.
3. Simulation Exercises for Election Officials: conduction of simulation exercises to train election officials in detecting and responding to threats in a safe environment.
4. Pressure on Political Leadership and Big Tech: with the goal to match the urgency of the matter with action.

Overall, one must emphasise the need for proactive measures, collaborative efforts, and a balanced approach in leveraging technology to safeguard democratic processes against emerging threats.

### Measure 3: Promotion of the citizen consensus debate

Not only identifying but also promoting commonalities among Europeans lies at the heart of this initiative. Make.org plays a significant role in these efforts through the EurHope project.

**“It is unprecedented: EurHope united 1.5 million voices on Make.org’s participation platform to ascertain the priorities of young Europeans leading up to the European elections,”**

*Alicia Combaz, Co-Founder & CEO, Make.org*

In collaboration with JEF Europe, Make.org initiated the project to enhance youth participation prior to the European elections and amplify their voices. EurHope is endorsed by the European Parliament, the European Committee of the Regions, and the European Economic and Social Committee. It garnered the support of European Commission Vice President for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica. Additionally, over 50 civil society organisations across Europe partnered to bolster EurHope, along with more than 10,000 JEF volunteers.

The outcome of the consultation is the “Agenda of Hope”<sup>10</sup>, a comprehensive list of 15 ideas representing the expectations of young Europeans for the European Parliament’s upcoming mandate (2024-2029). This agenda was disseminated to all pertinent European political parties and served as a blueprint for shaping their campaigns ahead of the elections

**“In doing so, we directly brought the aspirations of young people to the attention of political parties, enabling them to integrate these ideas into their programs and campaigns”**

*Alicia Combaz, Co-Founder & CEO, Make.org*

Moreover, European political parties responded to the Agenda of Hope, ensuring transparency by making their stances on contemporary issues public. The credibility of these responses is paramount, as information is sourced firsthand.

<sup>10</sup> <https://eurhope.org/en>

#### Measure 4: Code of conduct for European political parties

The role of European political parties in the upcoming elections requires further emphasis. They serve as the primary vehicles for democratic representation and are the organisations mainly in charge of political advertising and online campaigning. Though beneficial for voter engagement, these methods face growing concern due to potential misuse, such as online platforms compromising privacy through extensive data collection and foreign funding threatening election integrity.

Discussion on how to prevent these risks have led to the initiative of developing a code of conduct for European political parties. It appears as a tool to uphold the integrity and fairness of the electoral process. It would serve as a guiding principle, ensuring that political actors adhere to established norms and ethical standards in their campaign activities. A similar code of conduct had been developed by International IDEA during the 2021 Dutch parliamentary elections<sup>11</sup> and had shown promising results as a tool to rebuild trust between citizens and parties.

The functioning of a code of conduct is particularly challenging, as its compliance for signatories is not enforceable. It purely relies on the parties' own responsibility and will. It is, however, a strong signal sent from a party to the others and to citizens in general, that there is an ethical and right way to lead a (online) campaign.

**"A Code of conduct is not a legislation and does not intend to replace it. It is about doing something about fairplay, in areas where legislation is too slow or where technology develops too quickly."**

Marilyn Neven, *International IDEA*

The movement of setting up a code of conduct for the 2024 European elections has been promoted by civil society organisations, such as International IDEA<sup>12</sup>. In fact, some very specific positions were already part of the European Commission's recommendations on inclusive and resilient electoral processes<sup>13</sup>, published in December 2023. This momentum is particularly important, in a year like 2024 where many European countries also have national elections, and could benefit from an European initiative such as the code of conduct. This explains why the EU seems to have stretched its reach on this matter, as regulating political parties is usually a national competence<sup>14</sup>.

**"We see an opportunity for European political parties to lead by example, on establishing campaign integrity in Europe. The Commission's recommendations have paved the way for that, so we hope this will be a meaningful sign for citizens."**

Marilyn Neven, *International IDEA*

#### Measure 5: Code of conduct for Media

In an era marked by growing mistrust towards traditional media and journalists, urgent measures are needed to restore trust and create favourable conditions for its recovery, especially in electoral periods. The development of social media platforms has led to the amplification of extremes, the spread of fake news, AI-created content and disinformation, further marginalising fact-based journalism and transparency.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/news/news-pdfs/Dutch-Code-of-Conduct-transparency-online-political-advertisements-EN.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.idea.int/>

<sup>13</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L\\_202302829](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202302829)

<sup>14</sup> This paragraph is based on the contributions made by Marilyn Neven during the "Securing the Ballot" Conference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS5U1BxOKG8&t=527s>

This unequal playing field has intensified the erosion of trust and credibility in traditional media outlets. Hence, establishing a standard for reliable and trustworthy journalism is imperative to safeguard democracy. This idea of the Democratic Shield therefore requires the expansion of the traditional media's Code of Conduct to encompass considerations for the utilisation of AI-generated content and social media platforms.

**"Without reliable journalist information, democracy is in danger and the elections' legitimacy can be put into question"**

*Julie Majerczak, Reporters Without Borders*

Addressing this challenge, the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI)<sup>15</sup> proposes an international mechanism that rewards ethical journalistic practices. Developed as an ISO standard under the guidance of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN), the JTI aims to recognize trustworthy journalism and adherence to professional norms. With over 1000 media outlets in more than 80 countries involved, the JTI seeks to tackle the imbalance between journalism and the spread of misinformation online, ensuring that quality journalism remains competitive in the digital landscape. By empowering trustworthy news sources with a competitive advantage through transparent and verifiable standards, the JTI aims to reinstate public trust in journalism and uphold the essential role of factual discourse in democracy.

**"The JTI is not focused on content, but on the process of making information. The standard does not say 'this content is true', it says 'this source of information is trustworthy' ".**

*Julie Majerczak, Reporters Without Borders*

Generative AI opens doors for journalism, offering exciting possibilities, as it fundamentally alters how information is gathered, verified, and disseminated. However, it's crucial to ensure that its integration into traditional media is characterised by transparency and responsibility, safeguarding the integrity of information dissemination. The 2023 Paris Charter on AI and Journalism, promoted by RSF and a coalition of 16 partners, has been developed in order to answer this question. The Charter defines ten key principles to safeguard the integrity of information and to preserve journalism's social role. This initiative has already gained traction, evident in the commitment<sup>16</sup> made by 20 leading technology companies during the Munich Security Conference in February 2024 to detect and counter harmful AI content in the upcoming 2024 Elections. However, the work is far from over, and the main concern now lies in ensuring that platforms honour their commitments and adhere to the law<sup>17</sup>.

**"The challenges are many, and they are as much technical as they are economical and political. For RSF, the solution lies in the rule of law. Platforms do not have to be gently convinced, they must carry out their activities in compliance with the laws that require them to provide guarantees to the protection of the right to information."**

*Julie Majerczak, Reporters Without Borders*

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.journalismtrustinitiative.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://securityconference.org/en/aielectionaccord/accord/>

<sup>17</sup> This paragraph is based on the contributions made by Julie Majerczak during the "Securing the Ballot" Conference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS5U1BxOKG8&t=527s>

# CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is relevant to stress that the process of securing the European elections is still ongoing. The European elections are approaching at the horizon and some measles may or will still be taken over the next few weeks<sup>18</sup>. Yet, we must also acknowledge that such a short-notice fix will not be sustainable for our democracies in the long run, it needs to be transformed into more long term policies. As Arno Pons, (Director, Digital New Deal), concluded during the workshop, there are six main points to consider, when drawing the linkages between AI, elections and democracy:

1. **AI's Destabilising Potential:** its potential to destabilise democracy, especially through cyber interference.
2. **Concerns with Generative AI:** generative AI exacerbating processes like power centralization and fake news proliferation.
3. **Threats to Civil Society:** algorithmic manipulation undermining civil society's role in safeguarding democracy.
4. **Journalists' Challenges:** challenges faced by journalists amidst truth manipulation in politics.
5. **Digital Tech for Solutions:** using digital technology, including AI, to combat misinformation and enhance cybersecurity.
6. **Need for Regulation:** Stresses the importance of regulating advertising algorithms for transparency and accountability.

On the last point, Arno Pons called for particular attention to be given to the issue of advertising algorithms, led by social networks. Their responsibility for amplifying fake news, thereby becoming de facto allies in destabilisation campaigns must be taken more serious. Arno Pons outlined that such algorithms should be the first to be subject to this principle of responsibility, based on the AI Act. He even went further by proposing to classify them as "high-risk AI" (in order to benefit from the obligations of the AI Act: transparency and compliance).

**"We are at a turning point. A turning point, because technology is giving the enemies of democracy unprecedented resources of destabilisation. Mastering AI means mastering social media and therefore influencing elections"**

*Arno Pons, Digital New Deal*

<sup>18</sup> as of April 2024

### Classifying advertising algorithms as “high-risk AI”

The AI Act has adopted a risk-based approach by classifying AI into 4 levels of risk:

- Minimal risk (e.g. video games),
- Limited risk (e.g. deepfake),
- High risk (e.g. magistrate's decision, or recruitment)
- and Unacceptable risk (e.g. social credit).

As the regulation provides for the classification to be modified, our think-tank Digital New Deal believe it is desirable to request that the algorithms used by the advertising department of these social media major platforms be moved from limited risk to high risk, given their societal and political impact.

The opacity of these AIs is responsible for the overexposure of content likely to generate a risk for society and the democracy and should therefore be subject to the AI-related requirements of strict transparency, compliance and certification (as opposed to limited-risk systems where it is possible to develop codes of conduct on a voluntary basis).

By doing this, we attack this injustice of allowing platforms to attract advertising budgets to damage our democracy:

- Damage by feeding algorithmic bubbles with their advertising AI
- Damage by reducing classic media advertising revenue and therefore the ability to pay journalists

In the end, the actions taken by the European institutions must be recognised and supported. Initiatives such as the DSA guidelines published by the Commission in March 2024<sup>19</sup> hold the key to secure democratic processes in the long run, wielding the power of legislation to preserve the fine line between reality-based facts and AI-generated content.

Indeed, the interlocutors on the institutional level were not only very interested in the Democratic Shield and the related measures, but also supported their implementation - in the respective capacities at hand. In short, the Democratic Shield served as an alarm bell to further strengthen the acknowledgement of risk that we are facing ahead of the European elections in June 2024 and beyond, and bring concrete measures into the debate.

As the experience of the Democratic Shield shows, the preservation of democracy relies upon the continued mobilisation and vigilance of civil society, ensuring that institutions remain accountable and responsive to citizens' needs.

<sup>19</sup> <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/guidelines-providers-vlops-and-vloses-mitigation-systemic-risks-electoral-processes>

*Make.org is a leading independent and non-partisan European civic tech advocating for democracy, amplifying citizen voices in transformative actions for a better tomorrow. Through massive online consultations, advocacy and projects at various levels, Make.org engages millions of citizens to drive change and positively transform society.*

## AXEL DAUCHEZ

Axel Dauchez is the president and co-founder of Make.org. He is a graduate of Ecole Polytechnique and started his career in marketing at Procter & Gamble before becoming President of BDDP & Tequila Interactive, France's first digital agency, in 1998. He then served as CEO of Deezer from 2010 to 2014, overseeing its transformation into a global streaming leader with 5 million subscribers in over 180 countries. In 2014, he assumed the presidency of Publicis France, where he pioneered initiatives like Viva Technology. Dauchez then started Make.org, a platform mobilising civil society for collective action and societal change.



## HENDRIK NAHR

Hendrik Nahr is the Head of European Affairs at Make.org. His background is in Social Sciences and European Studies. He worked in European Affairs for the institutional side, the private sector and the NGO sector before joining Make.org in 2022. Throughout his different experiences, Hendrik has a great track record in citizenship education, participation and digital democracy.



# DIGITAL NEW DEAL

## THE THINK-TANK OF THE NEW DEAL

Digital New Deal accompanies private and public decision-makers in the creation of an Internet of the Enlightenment, European and humanistic. We are convinced that we can offer a 3rd digital way by aiming at a double objective: to defend our values by proposing a new regulation against the centralization of powers; and to defend our interests by creating the conditions of cooperation against the capture of value by the "Big Tech".

The purpose of our publication activity is to shed as much light as possible on the developments at work within the issues of "digital sovereignty", in the broadest sense of the term, and to develop concrete courses of action, even operative via the Do Tank, for economic and political organizations.

### THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Olivier Sichel (founding president) and Arno Pons (general delegate), steer the strategic orientations of the think-tank under the supervision of the board of directors.

Strengthened by their common interest in digital issues, the members of the Board of Directors have decided to deepen their debates by formalizing a framework for production and publication within which the complementarity of their experiences can be put at the service of public and political debate. They are personally involved in the life of Digital New Deal, especially in the choice of reports and their editors. They are the guarantors of our academic and economic independence.



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