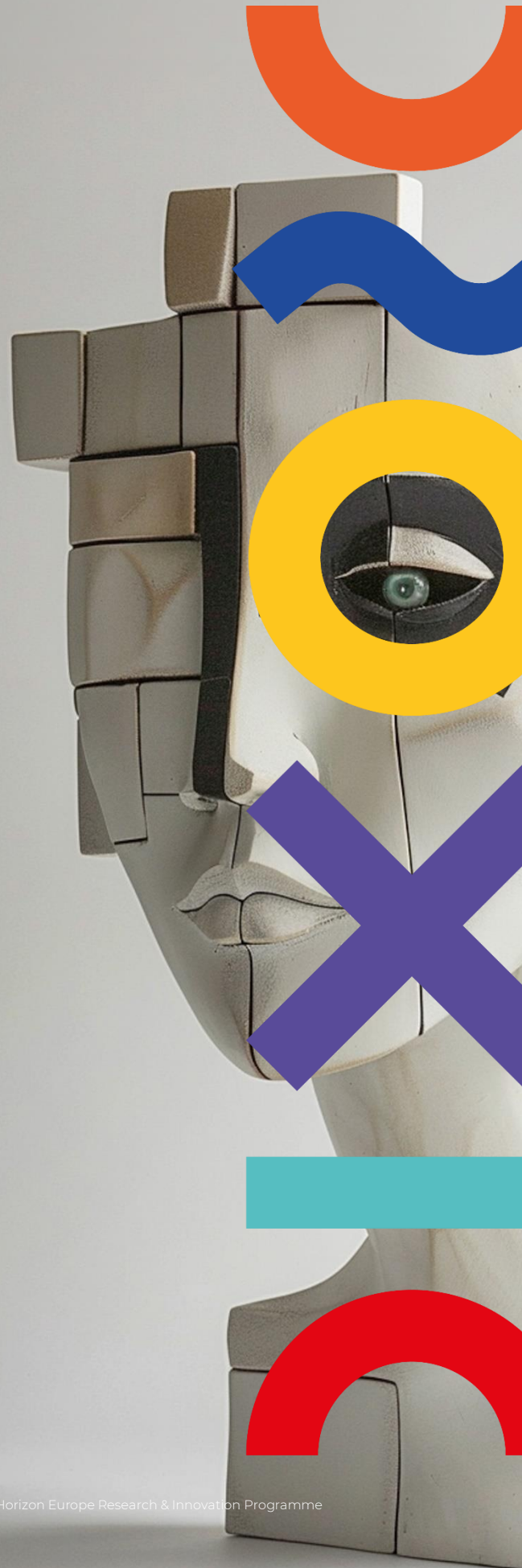




D3.4

Catalogue of Best Practices



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D3.4 Catalogue of Best Practices

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AUTHORS

Sorhna Perrot, Re-Imagine Europa
 Erika Staël von Holstein, Re-Imagine Europa

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE ENCODE PROJECT

The ENCODE project, titled "Unveiling Emotional Dimensions of Politics to Foster European Democracy," aims to explore and decode the role of emotions in political discourse and their impact on democratic processes. Recognizing that emotional appeals have significantly influenced political movements and voter behaviour, ENCODE seeks to understand the interplay between emotions, values, and identities. The project's primary goal is to create new positive narratives that can foster trust and engagement in European democratic processes, thereby counteracting the negative emotions that often dominate political discussions. Through innovative methodologies, including social media sentiment analysis, biometric research, and surveys, ENCODE aims to provide policymakers with tools and strategies to better incorporate the emotional needs of citizens into governance, ultimately enhancing democratic resilience and fostering a more inclusive political environment.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF DELIVERABLE

The objective of this deliverable is to translate the scientific findings generated throughout the ENCODE project into a structured catalogue of best practices that can support policymakers, platforms, civil society organisations and researchers in addressing the emotional drivers of disinformation and polarisation in digital environments. Building on the empirical analysis of social media narratives and the conceptual framework developed in previous work packages, the catalogue identifies concrete mechanisms through which emotions shape political communication online and provides practical approaches for mitigating emotionally manipulative narratives while preserving democratic pluralism and freedom of expression.

More specifically, the deliverable aims to bridge the gap between research and policy by proposing operational strategies that can be integrated into digital governance frameworks, public communication practices and societal resilience initiatives. By combining evidence-based analysis with actionable recommendations, the catalogue contributes to strengthening democratic resilience in Europe and supports the co-creation activities of WP6, the policy engagement work of WP7, and future research on emotion-centric harms in the digital public sphere.

1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

This catalogue is organised in a progressive structure that moves from conceptual understanding to practical implementation. The first sections establish the analytical foundations of the work by introducing the theoretical and policy context surrounding disinformation, narratives and emotions in the digital public sphere. Drawing on the research conducted within the ENCODE project, these sections outline the relationship between emotional dynamics, narrative construction and political behaviour online, and situate the analysis within the broader European regulatory framework addressing disinformation and platform governance.

Building on this foundation, the catalogue then presents a set of best practices designed to address emotionally driven disinformation from multiple perspectives. These include

approaches aimed at integrating citizens' emotions constructively into democratic processes, scientific and operational strategies for detecting and mitigating emotionally manipulative narratives, and safeguards designed to prevent unintended side-effects such as over moderation, free speech tensions or the misuse of emotional analytics. Each best practice follows a consistent structure to ensure clarity and usability for decision-makers, including an explanation of the problem addressed, the emotional mechanisms involved, the evidence base, potential risks and practical guidance for implementation.

The final section translates the insights generated throughout the catalogue into broader policy recommendations and future priorities. These recommendations focus on regulatory and governance measures, societal resilience and user behaviour, and research and innovation priorities. Together, they provide a forward-looking framework that connects the empirical findings of the ENCODE project with policy development, co-creation activities and future research needs aimed at strengthening democratic resilience in the evolving digital information ecosystem.

1.4 RELATION TO OTHER TASKS

This deliverable plays a central role in connecting the analytical work carried out in WP2 and WP3 with the co-creation and policy-oriented activities developed in subsequent work packages, in particular WP6 and WP7. Building on the theoretical framework of emotional politics (WP2) and the empirical findings generated through large-scale social media analysis (WP3), the Catalogue of Best Practices translates these insights into operational guidance that can inform both participatory processes and policymaking. In this sense, D3.4 functions as a bridging deliverable, ensuring that the understanding of emotional dynamics in digital political communication is effectively integrated into practical interventions and governance approaches.

In particular, D3.4 is directly relevant to the development of the co-design methodology under Task 6.1 and the subsequent co-creation activities carried out in Task 6.2. The catalogue provides a structured framework for identifying which emotional dynamics should be encouraged, mitigated or transformed within citizen innovation labs, as well as practical guidance on how to design emotionally aware narratives and engagement processes. Although the formal submission of D6.1 preceded that of this deliverable due to delays in data collection from social media platforms, both outputs have been closely aligned through continuous internal coordination within the consortium. Re-Imagine Europa has ensured coherence between the two by integrating the core insights and emerging best practices from D3.4 into the development of the co-creation methodology, allowing the two deliverables to remain conceptually and operationally consistent despite the adjusted timeline.

Beyond WP6, this deliverable also contributes to the activities of WP7, particularly in relation to foresight exercises, policy workshops and the development of governance recommendations. By providing a set of evidence-based practices grounded in both empirical analysis and theoretical insights, D3.4 supports the formulation of policy-relevant scenarios and strategic recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic resilience. The catalogue's focus on emotional dynamics, narrative structures and platform governance offers a concrete basis for informing discussions with policymakers and stakeholders at both European and national levels.

Overall, D3.4 ensures continuity across the project by translating analytical findings into actionable knowledge that can be tested, refined and scaled through co-creation and policy engagement activities. Its role is therefore not limited to documenting best practices but extends to shaping the practical implementation of the ENCODE project's objectives in real-world democratic and governance contexts.

1.5 HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This catalogue is designed as a practical reference tool for policymakers, regulators, digital platform actors, civil society organisations, researchers and other stakeholders involved in addressing disinformation and polarisation in the digital public sphere. Rather than prescribing a single policy solution, it offers a structured set of evidence-based practices that can be adapted to different institutional contexts, governance frameworks and societal environments. Decision-makers can use the catalogue to identify the emotional dynamics underlying disinformation and to design interventions that address not only the informational content of online narratives but also the emotional mechanisms that shape how those narratives are received and amplified.

Each best practice presented in the catalogue follows a common structure, making it possible for readers to quickly understand the problem addressed, the emotional mechanisms involved, the supporting evidence and the practical steps required for implementation. This format allows policymakers and practitioners to compare different approaches, assess their potential relevance to specific policy challenges and adapt them to ongoing initiatives at national, European or organisational levels. In this way, the catalogue can support both strategic policy design and the development of concrete initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic resilience against emotionally driven disinformation.

The catalogue is also intended to serve as a living resource that can inform future experimentation and collaboration. Many of the practices described here can be further refined through co-creation processes with stakeholders, pilot initiatives and interdisciplinary research. By providing a common analytical framework and a shared vocabulary around emotional dynamics in digital communication, the catalogue aims to facilitate dialogue between different actors and contribute to the development of more coordinated and effective responses to the evolving challenges of the digital information ecosystem.

2. ANALYTICAL & SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK

This catalogue is grounded in the theoretical framework of the ENCODE project, which positions emotional politics as a core dynamic of contemporary democracy. This perspective functions not only as an analytical lens but also as a normative guide for action. The framework provides three foundational principles that shape the analysis, guidelines and best practices presented in this deliverable.

Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe, the **framework rejects the notion of a conflict-free polity**. Democratic vitality depends on the capacity to transform destructive antagonism (where opponents are treated as enemies to be eliminated) into constructive agonism, where opponents are recognised as legitimate adversaries within a shared democratic space (D2.1 Nowakowski & Zieliński 2024).

The challenge posed by disinformation and affective polarisation is therefore not to suppress conflict but to redescribe it. The analysis of toxic narratives and affective polarisation patterns in this catalogue seeks to **identify where antagonistic dynamics prevail and how they may be re-channelled into forms of democratic contestation compatible with mutual tolerance**. The recommended communication and engagement practices are designed to support this transformation.

While contemporary emotional politics often produces affective polarisation, typically expressed through binary “us versus them” hostility, the ENCODE framework advances affective pluralisation as a constructive alternative. This implies cultivating a state of **emodiversity**, is defined as “the variety and relative abundance of the emotions that humans experience” (Quoidbach et al., 2014, p. 2057; D2.2 Nowakowski & Zieliński, 2024), and is **understood as a rich spectrum of shared emotional narratives that reflects the complexity and inclusiveness of democratic societies**. Therefore, it might be expected that emodiversity is instrumental in constructing functional narratives which can bring the positive emotional turn that ENCODE seeks.

Fact-checking alone is insufficient to address emotionally driven polarisation. The analytical approach adopted here therefore examines a broad emotional spectrum (including hope, fear, solidarity and resentment) in order to capture the full dynamics of political meaning-making. The practices identified in later sections prioritise approaches that strengthen emotional resilience and competence among citizens and institutions, enabling them to navigate political disagreement without reverting to hostile binaries.

The ENCODE framework recognises that, although political elites shape rhetoric and agenda-setting, **sustainable democratic resilience depends on addressing the psychological and emotional roots of polarisation at the citizen level**. Politics is understood as a process of collective choice shaped by emotional values, identities and shared perceptions.

Accordingly, this catalogue moves from diagnosing public emotional dynamics to outlining concrete ways of integrating citizens' emotions legitimately into democratic processes. The objective is to make emotions more legible and negotiable within the public sphere, empowering citizens as co-producers of political narratives rather than passive targets of disinformation or top-down messaging.

2.1 KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

To ensure analytical consistency across the catalogue, the following concepts, derived primarily from the theoretical work developed in WP2, guide the interpretation of the empirical findings and the formulation of best practices.

The distinction between affects and emotions is central to the ENCODE analytical approach. **Affect** refers to **embodied, pre-conscious and often non-specific intensities or bodily experiences**. It is less structured than emotion and captures raw, moment-to-moment feeling states that may not yet be directed towards a specific object. Affect theory has strong biological roots and emphasises visceral responses. **Emotion**, by contrast, is typically understood as **consciously experienced and cognitively appraised in relation to a particular object, event or narrative**. Emotions are socially and culturally shaped and involve interpretative processes. They are therefore more structured and communicable than affects. Maintaining this distinction allows the project to operationalise and analyse emotive mechanisms at different levels of political communication, from immediate affective

reactions on social media to more articulated emotional narratives in public discourse (D2.1 Nowakowski & Zieliński 2024).

While not always treated as separate theoretical constructs in WP2, these phenomena are addressed within the broader study of political communication, conspiracy narratives and emotional persuasion. In this catalogue:

- **Disinformation** refers to false or misleading information deliberately created and disseminated to cause harm or achieve strategic objectives.
- **Misinformation** refers to false or inaccurate information shared without the intent to deceive.
- **Fake news** is used as an umbrella term in public discourse to describe fabricated or misleading news-like content, often relying heavily on emotional amplification (European Commission, 2018).

Political communication research shows that emotional appeals in messaging can significantly increase the spread and persuasive power of such content, particularly in highly polarised environments (Nowak, et al. 2024; Brady et al., 2017; Chavalarias, 2022).

Narratives are structured stories or interpretative frameworks through which political events, identities and policies are made meaningful. They play a central role in shaping public perception and political behaviour (Staël von Holstein et al. 2024). Contemporary political communication increasingly relies on **emotionalisation**, meaning the strategic use of emotionally charged messaging to mobilise attention and engagement among citizens who already experience politics in affective terms. Key narrative dimensions include: **aestheticisation** (style, imagery and presentation); **emotionalisation** (affective framing and tone); and **cynicism** (discursive cues that encourage distrust towards institutions or actors). Understanding how these elements interact is essential for identifying how harmful narratives gain traction in digital environments.

Building on WP2 and D2.1, the concept of **emodiversity** refers to the **breadth and balance of emotional experiences available within a political community**. It is closely linked to: emotional resilience, emotional needs and the diversity of emotional repertoires associated with democratic citizenship. Within the ENCODE framework, **higher emodiversity is associated with healthier democratic engagement**, as it reflects the capacity of societies to process complexity without collapsing into binary hostility.

Affective polarisation describes the extent to which political actors and citizens view their opponents not merely as ideological competitors but as disliked and distrusted out-groups. It is characterised by animosity, social distance and emotionally charged hostility. Importantly, affective polarisation differs from issue polarisation. While issue polarisation concerns disagreement over policies, affective polarisation concerns emotional and identity-based divisions between groups. Its drivers operate at two levels:

- **top-down**, through elite rhetoric, media framing and political strategy
- **bottom-up**, through psychological processes, identity dynamics and social group formation

From a cognitive perspective, **affective polarisation often simplifies complex political judgments into basic like/dislike heuristics**, although cognitive reasoning continues to play a role. High levels of affective polarisation are associated with declining political tolerance, reduced trust and risks of democratic backsliding. For this reason, the present catalogue analyses anti-EU fake news and emotionally charged narratives specifically through the lens of antagonistic dynamics and deficits in emodiversity. This reflects WP2's reflections introducing the concept and theory of affective pluralism, offering a constructive alternative to affective polarisation (see D2.2 for more details). Affective pluralism seeks not to suppress emotions in politics but to reintegrate them into democratic dialogue in ways that encourage empathy, understanding, and coexistence. To foster open and inclusive conversations in the public sphere that encourage affective pluralism we must start with shared meanings. Terms like 'freedom' or 'security' evoke intense emotions among citizens in all countries, yet their meaning vary significantly among people in Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark or Poland. Addressing the current fragmentation of meaning is crucial to combatting polarisation and building affective pluralism.

The theoretical grounding developed in WP2 informs the entire analytical logic of this deliverable. The empirical analysis that follows therefore asks a central diagnostic question: *Which specific emotional dynamics are preventing the transformation from antagonism to agonism in contemporary digital political communication?* The best practices and policy recommendations presented later in the catalogue are explicitly designed to operationalise affective pluralisation, strengthen emotional resilience and enhance citizen agency in line with this framework.

2.2 NARRATIVE VECTOR OF EMOTIONALLY DRIVEN DISINFORMATION

Contemporary disinformation rarely circulates as isolated false claims. Rather, it **travels most effectively through narratives: coherent interpretative frames that organise facts, emotions and identities into persuasive storylines**. Within the ENCODE framework, narratives are understood as primary vehicles through which emotional dynamics shape political perception and behaviour. This section explains how narratives embed emotional triggers, how this mechanism is conceptualised in the ENCODE analytical model, and how the empirical evidence produced in Task 3.3 (including the LLM heatmaps developed for this deliverable) directly informs the identification of best practices presented later in the catalogue (D3.3 Ortega-Izquierdo et al. 2025).

Political narratives do more than simply transmit information; they organise meaning in ways that activate affective responses and shape how citizens interpret political events. In digitally mediated environments, this process often operates through a set of mutually reinforcing mechanisms that influence how narratives resonate with audiences and circulate across networks.

A first mechanism is **affective framing**, through which narratives selectively emphasise threats, injustices, losses or collective aspirations in order to evoke emotions such as fear, anger, resentment, pride or hope. These emotional cues frequently determine whether content is shared, believed or contested, as users are more likely to engage with information that resonates with their emotional state or perceived concerns.

A second mechanism involves **identity anchoring**, whereby narratives attach emotional meaning to particular social groups or collective identities. References to actors such as

“ordinary citizens”, “elites”, “Brussels” or “taxpayers” help translate policy debates into emotionally charged alignments between perceived in-groups and out-groups. Through this process, political disagreement becomes embedded in questions of belonging and identity, which can intensify affective polarisation and reinforce group-based interpretations of political issues.

Finally, emotionally powerful narratives often rely on **moral simplification**. Complex political realities are reduced to morally legible binaries, for example responsible versus irresponsible actors, sovereign versus controlled societies, or victims versus perpetrators. While such simplification can make political communication easier to understand and emotionally compelling, it also increases the likelihood of antagonistic dynamics and reduces openness to plural perspectives.

In high-velocity social media environments, these mechanisms interact with platform logics that reward emotionally engaging content. As a result, narrative-based emotional activation becomes a key driver of visibility and engagement, making it an important factor in the contemporary disinformation landscape.

The ENCODE framework conceptualises emotionally driven disinformation as the outcome of interactions between three layers:

1. **Narrative construction** (how stories frame political reality)
2. **Emotional activation** (which affects and emotions are triggers)
3. **Polarisation dynamics** (how audiences align, reject and radicalise)

Within this model, harmful information effects do not depend solely on factual inaccuracy. Content may be technically accurate yet still contribute to democratic harm if it systematically amplifies antagonistic emotional dynamics or erodes emodiversity. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from truth vs falsehood towards how emotional meaning is structured and mobilised. Accordingly, the present catalogue evaluated practices not only on their capacity to correct false information but also their ability to reduce antagonistic emotional spirals, increase emotional complexity and resilience, and support conditions for agonistic democratic contestation.

The empirical analysis conducted in WP3 (D3.2 Ortega-Izquierdo et al. 2024 & D3.3 Ortega-Izquierdo et al. 2025) provides systematic evidence of how emotional narratives operate across thematic domains and national contexts. Two complementary sources are particularly relevant for this catalogue. The LLM-assisted heatmaps developed for climate, mobility and public debt debates reveal consistent clustering of emotionally charged narrative patterns. Across domains, content associated with higher engagement and polarisation intensity tends to display strong negative emotional valence, particularly anger and distrust, clear identity positioning and simplified causal storytelling. These patterns provide quantitative support for the ENCODE assumption that emotional narrative structures are a key predictor of polarising dynamics.

The curated corpus of translated social media posts further illustrates how similar emotional logics manifest differently across national contexts. While linguistic and cultural framing varies, recurrent layers of polarisation can be observed, particularly where narratives personalize responsibility, invoke collective grievance, or frame EU-related issues through loss-of-control motifs. Together, these empirical components confirm that emotionally

structured narratives are a central transmission mechanism for both disinformation and broader democratic strain.

2.3 EMOTIONAL POLARISATION DYNAMICS AND USER RESPONSE PATTERNS

To operationalise the role of emotions in digitally mediated political communication, the ENCODE analysis conceptualises user interaction on X (formerly Twitter) through Re-Imagine Europa's **cycle of distrust** (Stael von Holstein et al 2024). This model captures how emotionally charged narratives, platform dynamics and socio-political reactions reinforce one another over time. Correlated with the quantitative framework developed in Task 3.3 and 3.2, the Cycle of Distrust provides a behavioural lens through which emotional amplification and distrust dynamics can be systematically analysed. It also serves as a diagnostic bridge between the narrative mechanisms discussed above and the identification of best practices presented later in this catalogue.

As illustrated in Figure X, the cycle of distrust describes a recursive process linking real-world pressures, emotional activation and digital amplification. The cycle unfolds across eight interrelated stages.

Periods of **heightened uncertainty** (such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine) generate **real societal concerns** related to security, economic stability and collective wellbeing. These contexts create fertile ground for **emotionally resonant political communication**, as citizens seek explanations and reassurance in moments of disruption. As public debate intensifies around these issues, discussions become increasingly infused with high-arousal emotions, particularly fear, anger, anxiety and resentment. These emotional signals are clearly visible in the WP3 sentiment analysis of X data, which shows a strong prevalence of negative emotional expression in political discourse online.

Sustained **exposure to emotionally polarised content** gradually contributes to a broader **crisis of trust**. As distrust toward institutions, media actors and political authorities grows, individuals become more receptive to alternative narratives, including those that may be misleading or unverified. In this environment, emotional mobilisation can translate into both online and offline forms of collective action. Protest movements and grievance-based narratives become more visible, often framed through oppositional identities and adversarial interpretations of political events.

Social media platforms play a crucial role in reinforcing these dynamics. Their affordances, particularly **algorithmic amplification and engagement-based visibility**, tend to reward emotionally intense content. The quantitative analysis presented in D3.3 confirms that posts expressing stronger affective signals generate higher levels of interaction, allowing **emotionally charged narratives** to circulate more widely. As these narratives spread, identity-based divisions deepen and users increasingly interpret political information through in-group versus out-group lenses.

Over time, these dynamics contribute to broader processes of **social fragmentation**. Polarised emotional environments reduce opportunities for dialogue across communities, weakening shared interpretative frameworks and diminishing the diversity of emotional perspectives within public debate. As antagonistic narratives become entrenched, constructive democratic contestation becomes more difficult. **Political stalemate** can emerge, reinforcing perceptions that institutions are unable to address the very real

problems that initially triggered public concern, thereby perpetuating a cycle of distrust, polarisation and unresolved grievances.

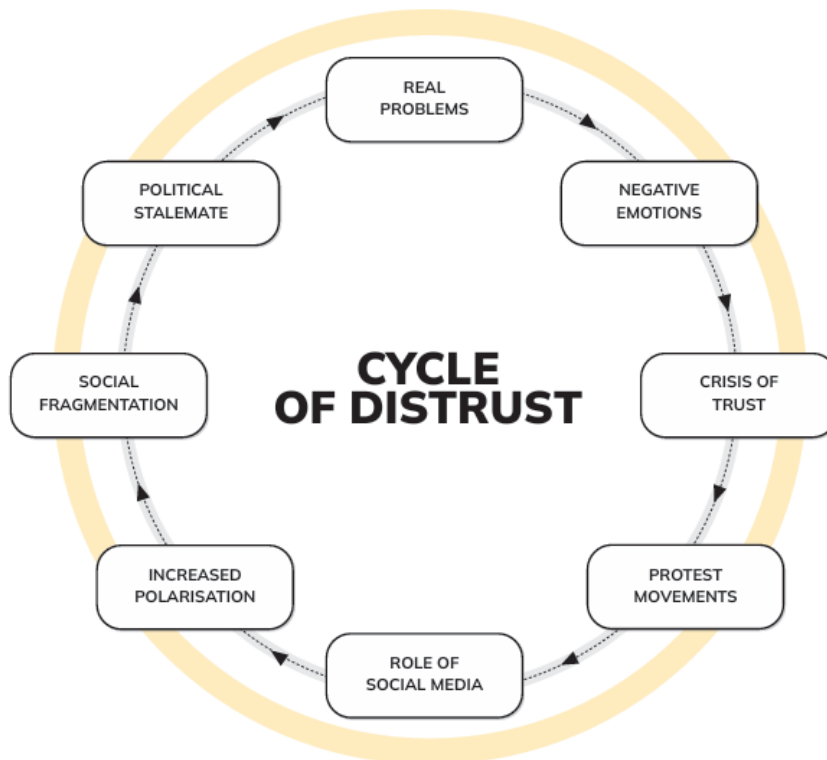


Figure 1- Cycle of Distrust

Three key hypotheses structured the investigation of the social media analysis in WP3, to ensure the alignment with WP2 theoretical grounding.

Drawing on theories of affective pluralisation and value–identity integration, the analysis assumes that political actors and citizens express emotions that align with their underlying value commitments and self-concepts. This is particularly relevant for the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine as both events intensified uncertainty and collective identity negotiation, foregrounding values such as security, solidarity and autonomy. D3.3 examine this relationship through the emotion-value correlation and the OLS regressions by user category. By comparing politicians, media actors and the general public, the analysis revealed distinct role-specific emotional regimes, supporting the ENCODE premise that emotional expression online is structured and identity-linked.

Another hypothesis tested in D3.3 builds on disinformation and affective framing theory, which suggests that untrustworthy media deploy heightened emotional and moral cues to capture attention and reinforce in-group alignment. In the context where Covid-19 disinformation and Ukraine-related propaganda provided paradigmatic cases of emotionally saturated digital narratives. This hypothesis was tested through media clustering and engagement analyses contrasting emotional and value profiles between more affect-driven and more neutral content. The findings indicate that emotionally

amplified communication environments exhibit **distinct emotional-value signatures**, confirming the centrality of affect in the circulation of problematic content.

Finally, D3.3 looked in details into determining which affects and emotions are most triggering in generating responses and reactions on social media. This question was anchored in emotional contagion and digital mobilization theory, while at the same time emphasizing the hypothesis that specific high-arousal emotions (especially anger and enthusiasm) are more likely to drive online interaction. This resonates particularly with the emotional mobilization that became a defining feature of digital political participation during Covid-19 and the Ukraine war. The analysis quantifies how both positive and negative emotions shape engagement dynamics across actors and political contexts.

The cycle of distrust, supported by the WP3 quantitative evidence, leads to a key operational conclusion: **emotionally driven engagement dynamics are structurally embedded in the contemporary social media ecosystem**. For this catalogue, this insight has direct methodological consequences. Effective responses must go beyond correcting falsehoods and instead target the emotional pathways through which polarisation and distrust are amplified. The following methodological section builds on this diagnostic foundation by outlining how the project systematically identified, assessed and selected the best practices included in this catalogue.

3. METHODOLOGY FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF BEST PRACTICES

3.1 DATA SOURCES

The identification of best practices in this catalogue is grounded in a mixed-method evidence base that combines large-scale computational analysis, qualitative narrative examination and targeted policy review. This triangulated approach ensures that the recommendations presented are both empirically robust and operationally relevant.

The methodology builds primarily on the sentiment and value detection work conducted in Task 3.3, as detailed in D3.2, and is complemented by additional analytical layers developed specifically for this deliverable.

3.1.1 LARGE-SCALE SENTIMENT AND VALUE ANALYSIS (D3.3)

The empirical foundation of this catalogue is grounded in the ENCODE social media analysis framework, which applies a comprehensive multi-step methodology to study emotional and value dynamics in online political communication. At its core, the framework relies on automated text classification using transformer-based large language models (LLMs), allowing researchers to analyse large volumes of social media data while maintaining a high level of analytical precision. This approach enables a systematic examination of how emotions and values circulate within digitally mediated political discourse across Europe.

The analysis begins with a structured process of **data collection and filtering**. Political social media content was gathered from X across six European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, North Macedonia, Poland, and Bosnia and Herzegovina). To ensure that the

dataset accurately reflected politically relevant online discussions, the corpus was filtered according to several criteria. These included geographic origin, language, political topics identified through keywords and hashtags, platform-specific characteristics and relevant political timeframes. This filtering process ensured that the resulting dataset captured politically salient discourse suitable for detailed analysis of emotional and value expressions.

Before analytical processing could begin, the collected material underwent a stage of **pre-processing and anonymisation**. All datasets were anonymised by replacing user-identifiable information with platform-provided codes. This step ensured full compliance with ethical standards and data protection regulations while allowing the analysis to focus exclusively on the dynamics of public discourse rather than individual users. Social media texts were tokenised to segment the content into processable units, retaining informal features commonly associated with online communication, such as spelling variations, emojis, and fragmented sentence structures, along with the emotional and contextual signals embedded in the content.

A central component of the methodology is the **automated tagging of emotions and values** within the collected content. This was carried out using transformer-based large language models that had been fine-tuned on manually annotated social media corpora. These models enable high-granularity classification of discrete emotional expressions (such as anger, fear, joy or hope) as well as associated value signals embedded within the narratives.

An important methodological principle underlying this framework is the **distinction between sentiment and emotion**. Traditional sentiment analysis typically categorises content as positive, negative or neutral, but this level of abstraction often fails to capture the specific emotional dynamics that drive online engagement. The ENCODE framework therefore prioritises discrete emotion detection, reflecting established research showing that different emotions spread differently across social networks and have distinct implications for political mobilisation, populist communication and the circulation of untrustworthy narratives.

In addition to emotional classification, the methodology incorporates **value detection**, drawing on established theoretical frameworks such as Schwartz's theory of universal values. Following the same approach as for emotions, a specific multilingual LLM is fine-tuned following a manually annotated corpus. This allows the analysis to explore how emotional expression intersects with political and cultural value signalling within online narratives. Through this lens, the framework can identify patterns in which particular emotions are associated with values such as security, nationalism, anti-elitism or social solidarity, offering deeper insight into how emotional narratives resonate with broader ideological and identity-based frameworks.

Taken together, these methodological components provide a scalable and theoretically grounded approach to mapping emotional and value dynamics within European digital political communication. By combining computational analysis with established social science frameworks, the ENCODE methodology enables a systematic understanding of how narratives, emotions and values interact to shape the contemporary digital information environment.

3.1.2 HEATMAP ANALYSIS OF EMOTIONALLY DRIVEN NARRATIVE PATTERNS

Building on the LLM-based classification pipeline, the project also developed **cross-domain heatmaps** designed to visualise how emotions are distributed and clustered within online political discourse. These visual analytical tools allow researchers to observe patterns in the interaction between emotional expression, narrative structures and signals commonly associated with potentially misleading or manipulative content. By translating complex data patterns into accessible visual representations, the heatmaps help identify where emotional dynamics are most strongly concentrated within the analysed dataset.

The heatmaps were generated using the emotions classification results from the LLMs trained on the **manually annotated social media corpus** and a set of keyword searches with embeddings to additionally classify the post following a set of preset topics. These include **the narrative structures through which political messages are framed, and types of content that are likely to trigger professional fact-checking scrutiny**. Heat maps are designed to capture correlations between several key elements of online communication. In this context, the analysis explored whether posts containing known fact-checking risk markers, such as moral absolutism, causal oversimplification, identity scapegoating or crisis amplification, also display distinctive emotional patterns.

The results suggest that such **content often shares identifiable emotional characteristics**. Posts structurally aligned with fact-checker warning signals tend to show higher levels of emotional intensity, a stronger negative emotional valence, particularly expressions of anger and distrust, and clearer forms of in-group versus out-group positioning. These features reinforce the observation that emotionally charged narratives frequently accompany communication patterns that simplify complex political issues and frame them through conflict-driven interpretations.

Within the ENCODE analytical framework, this heatmap layer therefore functions as an **early-warning analytical tool**. Rather than focusing exclusively on the factual accuracy of individual claims, it allows researchers to detect clusters of emotionally structured narratives that may contribute to polarisation dynamics even before formal fact-checking processes take place. This makes it possible to identify communication environments where emotionally manipulative narratives are gaining traction and where preventive interventions may be most relevant.

For the purposes of this catalogue, the heatmaps provide a quantitative foundation for prioritising best practices that address **emotional amplification pathways** in digital communication. By highlighting the relationship between emotional intensity and the structural features of potentially misleading narratives, the analysis supports a broader shift in counter-disinformation strategies. This approach considers not only whether information is accurate or inaccurate, but also how emotional dynamics shape its circulation, interpretation and political impact.

3.1.3 QUALITATIVE NARRATIVE CURATION FROM X (TWITTER)

To complement the large-scale modelling, manual annotators curated a targeted sample of posts from X (formerly Twitter) drawn from the annotated dataset. The objective was to

illustrate concrete narrative mechanisms associated with affective polarisation and distrust dynamics.

The curated material was analysed according to recurring discursive patterns previously identified from D3.3 and NODES (the first Narrative Observatory in Europe) findings (Nowak et al. 2024), including:

1. **Use of modified or derogatory naming**, for example, labels such as “Sleepy Joe” used to pre-judge or dehumanise political figures. In the Bosnian context, similar delegitimising framing appeared in references to High Representative Schmidt as a “German tourist”.
2. **“Us versus them” framing**, such as binary constructions positioning political or social groups as mutually opposed camps.
3. **Generalisation of negative speech**, namely the attribution of the alleged actions or traits of individuals to entire communities or groups.
4. **Sarcastic dismissal and ridicule**, often portrayed by the use of irony or mockery to undermine opponents without substantive counterargument, thereby lowering deliberative quality.
5. **Ideological cloaking in apolitical contexts**, which is particularly embedding political cues within seemingly neutral or lifestyle-oriented content in order to bypass scepticism and trigger affective alignment.
6. **Intensified confrontation in reply spaces**, which is particularly visible during national and European election periods, where conversational threads exhibit escalating emotional tone.
7. **Electoral narrative shifts**, observable transitions whereby actors previously mobilising primarily through anger reposition themselves during electoral periods as “credible alternatives”, often adopting messaging centred on hope, optimism and future-oriented enthusiasm.
8. **Dual affect amplification patterns**, precisely, the discursive configurations that simultaneously increase positive affect (e.g. enthusiasm) and perceived threat (e.g. fear and anxiety) while reducing overt antagonistic markers. These hybrid emotional strategies are particularly relevant for understanding more sophisticated forms of political persuasion.

This qualitative layer enables the project to move beyond aggregate metrics and identify **micro-level narrative techniques** that sustain the cycle of distrust described in Chapter 2.

3.1.4 POLICY AND REGULATORY LANDSCAPE REVIEW

The current EU policy and regulatory landscape addresses the risks associated with emotional polarisation and disinformation largely through indirect but increasingly coordinated instruments that target the structural conditions of digital communication rather than emotions per se. At the core of this architecture sits the **Digital Services Act (DSA)**, fully applicable since February 2024, which imposes legally binding obligations on online platforms – particularly very large online platforms (VLOPs) – to identify, assess and mitigate systemic risks affecting civic discourse, electoral processes and the dissemination of harmful content. By requiring greater transparency around recommender systems, risk mitigation measures and content moderation practices, the **DSA directly engages with the amplification infrastructures that ENCODE identifies as key drivers of emotionally charged polarisation**. Complementing this hard-law approach, the strengthened **Code of Practice on Disinformation** (2022), now operationalised as a DSA-aligned code of conduct, advances commitments on demonetisation, political advertising transparency, integrity of services, enhanced fact-checking and improved data access for researchers. Together, these

measures aim to curb the economic and algorithmic incentives that often reward high-arousal, polarising content.

Alongside platform regulation, the EU has reinforced the broader information ecosystem through the **European Media Freedom Act** (EMFA), which entered into force in 2024 and will apply largely from August 2025, strengthening media independence, pluralism and ownership transparency. These efforts build on the strategic direction set by the **European Democracy Action Plan** (EDAP) and the earlier 2018 **Action Plan against Disinformation**, which established coordination mechanisms, rapid alert systems and support for fact-checking and media literacy. More recently, **the Regulation on Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising** (applicable from October 2025) has introduced additional safeguards around microtargeted political persuasion, a key vector of emotionally tailored messaging. In parallel, the **AI Act** (entered into force in August 2024 with phased obligations through 2026–2027) begins to address risks linked to manipulative AI systems, general-purpose AI models and AI literacy, thereby extending EU oversight to the emerging synthetic content ecosystem that may further intensify emotional mobilisation online.

Operational and geopolitical dimensions are addressed through the **EEAS East StratCom Task Force** and the **EUvsDisinfo** initiative, which monitor and expose coordinated disinformation campaigns, particularly from foreign actors. Building on this trajectory, the emerging European Democracy Shield signals a shift towards a more integrated resilience and security posture, aiming to strengthen the Union's capacity to detect and counter information manipulation and hybrid threats at scale. Taken together, this evolving framework reflects a **growing recognition that the integrity of democratic discourse depends not only on factual accuracy but also on the governance of the emotional and algorithmic dynamics** that shape online political engagement. Within this context, ENCODE's empirical findings on emotional amplification, user response patterns and narrative polarisation provide a timely evidence base to assess how existing measures can be refined to support affective pluralisation and more resilient democratic contestation.

This quick review serves two purposes. First, it situates the identified risks and best practices within the current governance architecture, ensuring policy relevance and feasibility. Second, it allows the catalogue to assess where existing regulatory instruments sufficiently address emotionally driven harms and where important gaps remain, particularly regarding the emotional amplification mechanisms identified in the ENCODE analysis.

By integrating computational modelling, qualitative narrative diagnostics and policy analysis, the ENCODE evidence base provides a multi-layered understanding of how emotions, narratives and platform dynamics interact in contemporary digital political communication. This integrated approach directly informs the selection and prioritisation of best practices presented in the following sections, ensuring that the catalogue responds to empirically observed emotional pathways rather than relying solely on normative assumptions or isolated case studies.

3.2 SELECTION AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

To ensure methodological rigour and policy relevance, the identification of best practices in this catalogue followed a structured, criteria-based assessment process. Building on the empirical evidence presented in Section 3.1 and the analytical framework developed in WP2 and WP3, candidate practices were evaluated against a common set of dimensions reflecting both scientific robustness and operational applicability. The purpose of this

filtering step is twofold: first, to ensure that the catalogue prioritises interventions demonstrably capable of addressing emotionally driven polarisation dynamics; and second, to provide decision-makers with practices that are transferable, ethically sound and feasible within the current European regulatory environment.

Each candidate practice was assessed against six core criteria:

- **Relevance:** the extent to which the practice directly addresses emotionally mediated disinformation, affective polarisation, or trust erosion in digital political communication. Priority was given to practices that intervene along the emotional pathways identified in the ENCODE analysis (e.g. amplification loops, identity antagonism, engagement-driven outrage).
- **Evidence base:** the degree to which the practice is supported by empirical research, documented pilots, or measurable outcomes. Practices grounded in peer-reviewed studies, robust evaluations or large-scale implementations were rated more highly than purely conceptual proposals.
- **Effectiveness:** the demonstrated or strongly plausible capacity of the practice to reduce harmful emotional amplification, improve the quality of democratic discourse, or strengthen resilience against manipulative narratives. Where direct impact data were unavailable, effectiveness was assessed through theory-informed plausibility linked to ENCODE findings.
- **Transferability:** the potential for the practice to be adapted across different national, linguistic or platform contexts within the EU and the enlargement region. Practices requiring highly context-specific conditions or disproportionate resources were scored lower on this dimension.
- **Ethical and democratic compliance:** the alignment with EU fundamental rights, data protection standards and democratic safeguards. Particular attention was paid to avoiding practices that could enable covert manipulation, disproportionate content restriction, or discrimination against specific groups.
- **Operational usability:** the clarity and feasibility of implementation of the candidate practice for policymakers, platforms, civil society actors. Practices providing concrete implementation pathways, resource considerations and risk awareness were prioritised over abstract recommendations.

Importantly, practices were not developed in isolation from the project's empirical work. Practices were developed in light of core criteria such as relevance, effectiveness where they demonstrably addressed the emotional dynamics identified in the sentiment and value analysis (T3.3), the cycle of distrust and the narrative heatmap analysis. This ensured that the final selection responds directly to observed behavioural mechanisms (particularly emotional amplification, identity-based antagonism and engagement-driven visibility) rather than relying solely on generic anti-disinformation approaches.

3.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE ANALYSIS

While the ENCODE methodology combines advanced computational techniques with qualitative validation, several structural and methodological constraints must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings and the resulting catalogue of best practices.

A primary limitation concerns access to platform data. At the outset of WP3, the consortium envisaged a broader multi-platform analytical scope covering several major social media environments. However, the regulatory and commercial data access landscape evolved

significantly during the project period. In particular, changes introduced by Meta in 2024 substantially restricted third-party research access to Facebook and Instagram data, including through the closure or tightening of previously available research interfaces and increased legal and procedural barriers (Datta, 2025). These developments affected not only ENCODE but the wider research community, reducing the feasibility of large-scale, comparable cross-platform analysis within the project timeframe. As a result, the consortium progressively narrowed the operational data pipeline. TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) remained operationally viable options, but extended negotiations and procedural exchanges with platform representatives created further delays and uncertainty. In practice, **only the X data access application process was positively resolved within the project's temporal and resource constraints.**

This creates an important interpretative boundary. X is widely documented as exhibiting comparatively high levels of political contestation and polarised discourse. Consequently, emotional intensity and antagonistic dynamics observed in the dataset may represent an upper-bound scenario relative to the broader social media ecosystem. A more platform-diverse dataset could potentially reveal a wider distribution of emotional expressions, including more moderate or ambivalent patterns. The findings presented in this deliverable should therefore be understood as highly **informative regarding polarised political communication environments**, while future research would benefit from expanded cross-platform coverage.

The language selection and keyword architecture were designed to reflect the case study countries represented within the consortium and to align with the broader ENCODE comparative framework. This ensured strong contextual relevance and analytical depth within the selected national environments. However, the main limitation is not linguistic coverage in itself, since several languages were analysed, including multiple linguistic contexts within individual countries such as North Macedonia. Rather, the key constraint lies in the fact that the analysis covered only six countries. As a result, the **findings should be considered robust for the national cases examined, but not automatically generalisable to the EU as a whole without further validation across a broader set of member states and political contexts.** A further limitation relates to the human-in-the-loop architecture used to train and validate the LLM classifiers. Manual annotators played a critical role in labelling the training corpus, defining emotion and value categories, and validating narrative patterns. This approach constitutes a methodological strength in terms of contextual sensitivity and theoretical alignment. However, it also introduces potential sources of variability, for instance the annotation decisions inevitable involve interpretative judgement, cultural and linguistic nuance may affect labelling consistency and emerging or hybrid emotions and affects may not be fully captured by the preset emotions to annotate. The consortium mitigated these risks through detailed annotation guidelines and cross-checking procedures. Nevertheless, the results should be understood as **probabilistic and pattern-indicative rather than deterministically exhaustive** representations of emotional dynamics.

Finally, the analytical window coincides with an **unusually high-intensity geopolitical and public health context**, as the extracted dataset is from 2022 to 2024 this coincides notably with the COVID-19 aftermath and the war in Ukraine. These events are known to elevate emotional salience, threat perception and identity mobilisation in online discourse. Observed emotional amplification patterns may be partially context-dependent. While this strengthens the relevance of the findings for crisis and high-stakes political communication, longitudinal monitoring would be required to assess the persistence or attenuation of these dynamics over time.

Taken together, these limitations do not undermine the validity of the ENCODE analysis but rather delineate its scope. The evidence base is particularly strong in diagnosing emotional amplification and distrust dynamics in highly politicised digital environments. However, caution is warranted in extrapolating precise prevalence levels across all platforms, languages or political contexts. These constraints have been explicitly considered in the selection and formulation of best practices, favouring interventions that are robust across varying platform conditions and adaptable to evolving regulatory and technological environments.

4. EVIDENCE FROM SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

4.1. CROSS-DOMAIN NARRATIVE HEATMAPS

This section synthesises the heatmap evidence generated through the ENCODE WP3 data analysis pipeline in order to identify structural emotional patterns in online political discourse. The analysis directly informs the catalogue of best practices by highlighting where emotional amplification, narrative drift and polarisation risks are most likely to emerge across key policy domains. The findings presented here should be read in conjunction with the cycle of distrust (Section 2.4) and the sentiment modelling of Task 3.3, as they provide the empirical basis for prioritising interventions that target emotional dynamics rather than isolated instances of false information.

The heatmaps examine the relationship between **policy concepts** (environment, mobility, public debt and no-topic discourse) and **dominant emotion** (anger, neutrality, fear/anxiety, happiness/enthusiasm and hate). Two complementary metrics are used: **Z-scores**, indicating statistical over- or under-representation relative to expected baselines; and **lift**, indicating the strength of association between topic and emotion. Together, these allow the analysis to distinguish between mere volume effects and structurally meaningful emotional concentration.

A key analytical dimension is the presence or absence of stakeholder references (identified through adapted list of key political actors per country and at European level), which functions as a proxy for discursive anchoring versus abstract or symbolic framing. In this first heatmap (Figure 2), stakeholders are absent and emotionally charged discourse tends to **avoid concrete policy anchoring** and instead exhibits more generalised emotional expression.

Several domain specific patterns emerge. First, environmental discussions without stakeholders skew towards anxiety-driven framing centred on risk and uncertainty rather than overt hostility or enthusiasm. Second, discourse around mobility (e.g migration, free movement within the EU) in stakeholder-absent contexts appears less angry than expected and more fragmented or informational in tone. Third, public debt debates display a distinctive pattern: hate is structurally over-represented relative to baseline expectations. This highlights that the public debt pattern is not simply a volume effect. As noted in the underlying analysis, **when no specific actors are mentioned, the discourse becomes more moralised and blame-oriented**, often targeting abstract “others” rather than institutional mechanisms.

These findings indicate that **emotionally polarising discourse is strongly associated with stakeholder abstraction**, where complex policy issues are reframed into symbolic or adversarial narratives. Best practices should therefore prioritise interventions that increase actor visibility, procedural clarity and issue-specific framing.

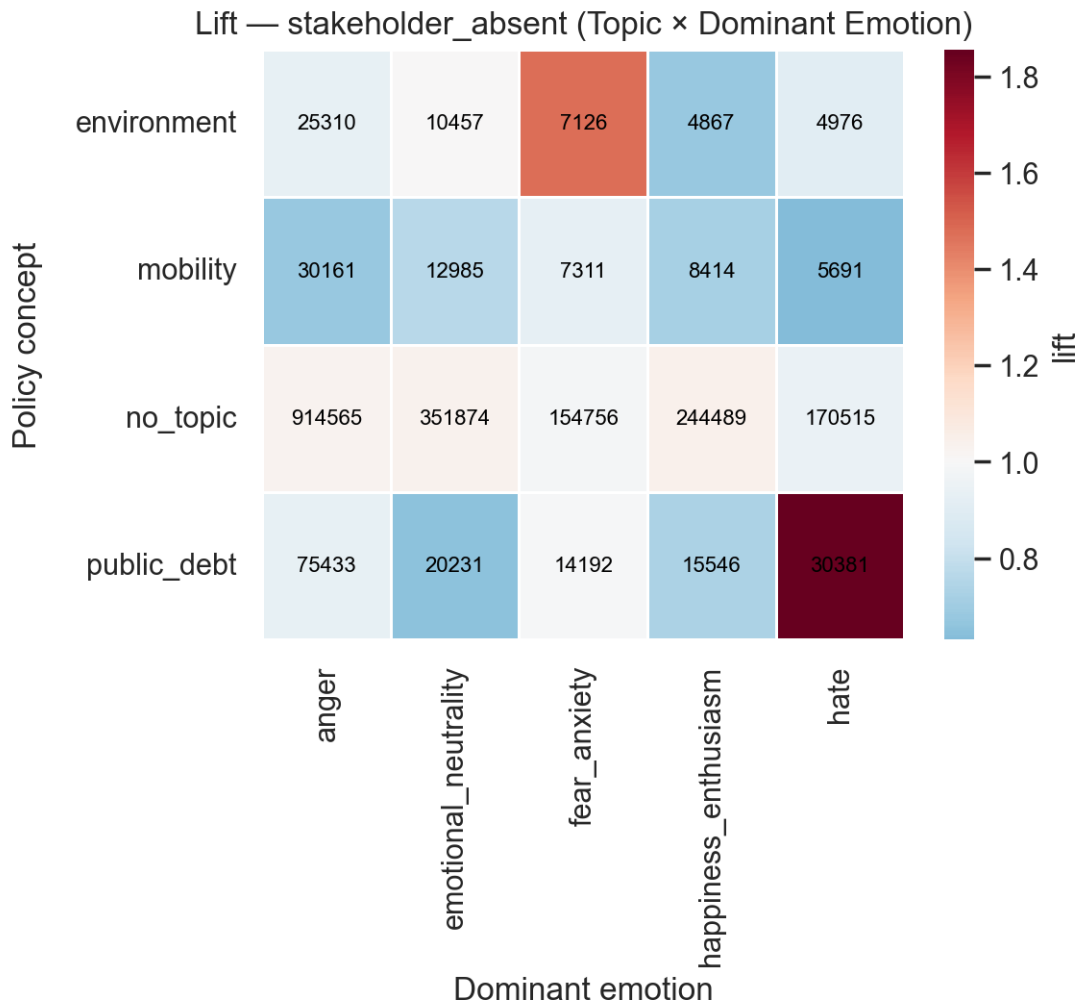
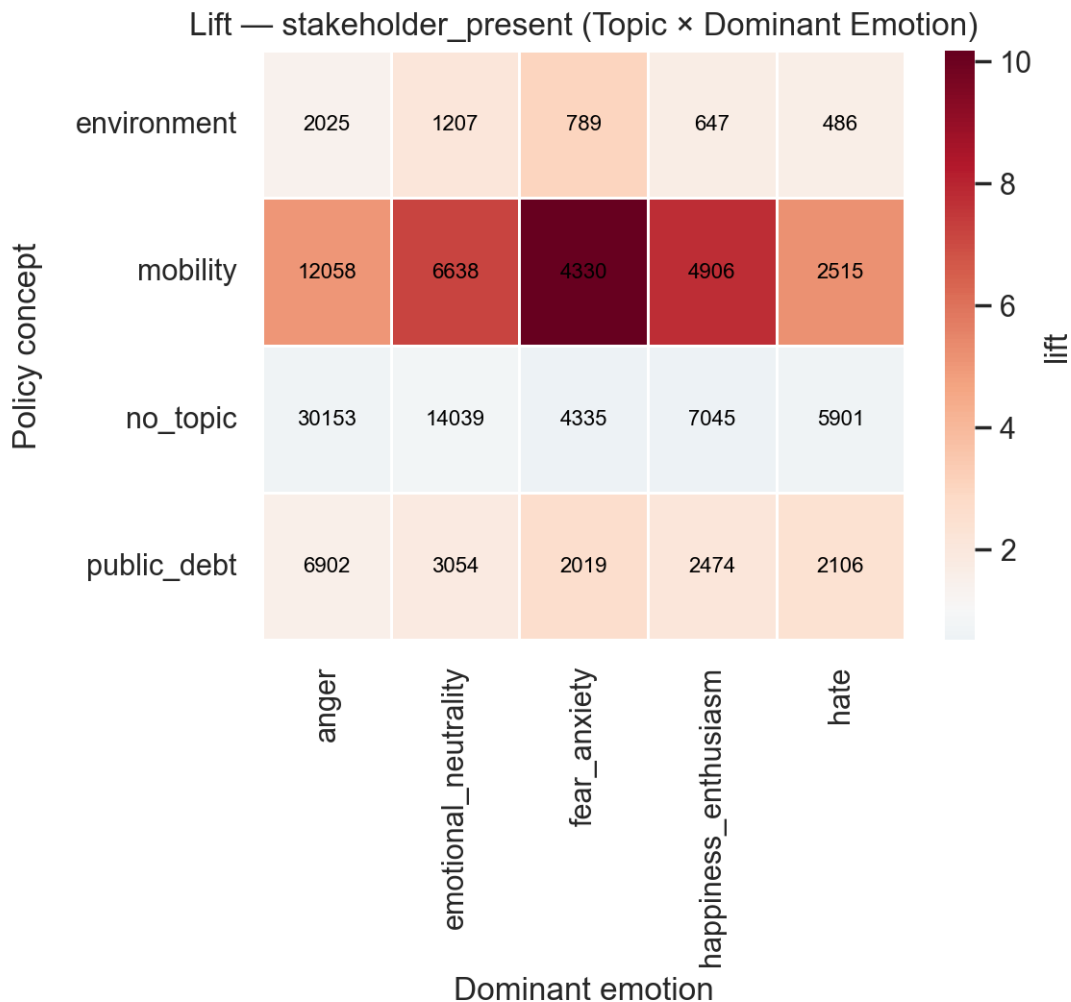


Figure 2 - Heatmap 1: Stakeholder absent (Lift)

The stakeholder-absent lift map highlights how emotional concentration varies by policy domain when discourse lacks explicit actor anchoring. The most pronounced pattern is the high lift between **public debt and hate**, indicating that this topic is disproportionately associated with hostile or antagonistic emotional expression when no stakeholder is named. This supports the interpretation that, in actor-absent contexts, public debt debates are more likely to shift towards moralised blame and symbolic enemy construction. In the **environment** category, **fear/anxiety** records the highest lift, suggesting that environmental narratives without stakeholder references are primarily organised around uncertainty and perceived threat rather than overt hostility. **Mobility**, by contrast, shows comparatively weaker and more even emotional associations, pointing to a less sharply polarised affective structure. Taken together, these findings suggest that the absence of stakeholders does not

simply reduce discursive clarity, but can also reshape emotional framing by encouraging abstract blame, diffuse threat construction and reduced institutional specificity.

This pattern suggests that interventions should prioritise **actor visibility and policy anchoring**, especially in debates on public debt, where the absence of stakeholders appears to create the strongest opening for hostile and blame-oriented emotional framing.



3 - Heatmap 2: Stakeholder present (Lift)

Across multiple maps, fear/anxiety emerges as the most consistently increasing emotional signal when policy tagging is present. The percentage-point heatmap shows sharp rises in fear/anxiety across tags, accompanied by declines in neutrality and, in some cases, happiness. However, this increase does not automatically translate into hostility. In the context of environmental discourse, the debate becomes anxiety-dominant but not hateful. For discourse around public debt, at the policy level it appears emotionally mixed rather than fear dominant, this take contrasts with the stakeholder-absent case. Overall, this suggests that fear in policy discourse often reflects risk-oriented problem framing rather than antagonistic mobilisation. This resonates with the stance that **interventions should avoid treating all negative emotions as harmful**, the evidence here indicates a need to distinguish

between a risk-oriented anxiety, which is potentially constructive, and antagonistic anger/hate, which holds a risk of polarisation.

The final analytical layer distinguishes between two rhetorical trigger families: amplification cues (urgency, absolutes, extreme quantifiers) and contagion cues (identity alignment, moral belonging language). This final combined heatmap shows that amplifiers increase emotional arousal, but do not systematically increase hate, while contagion language strengthens identity alignment and engagement. But when both co-occur, anger rises sharply while neutrality collapse, this produces a **structural polarisation even without explicit hate speech**. This provides quantitative support for the ENCODE proposition that contemporary polarisation often operates through **moralised anger and compulsory alignment**, rather than overt hate speech.

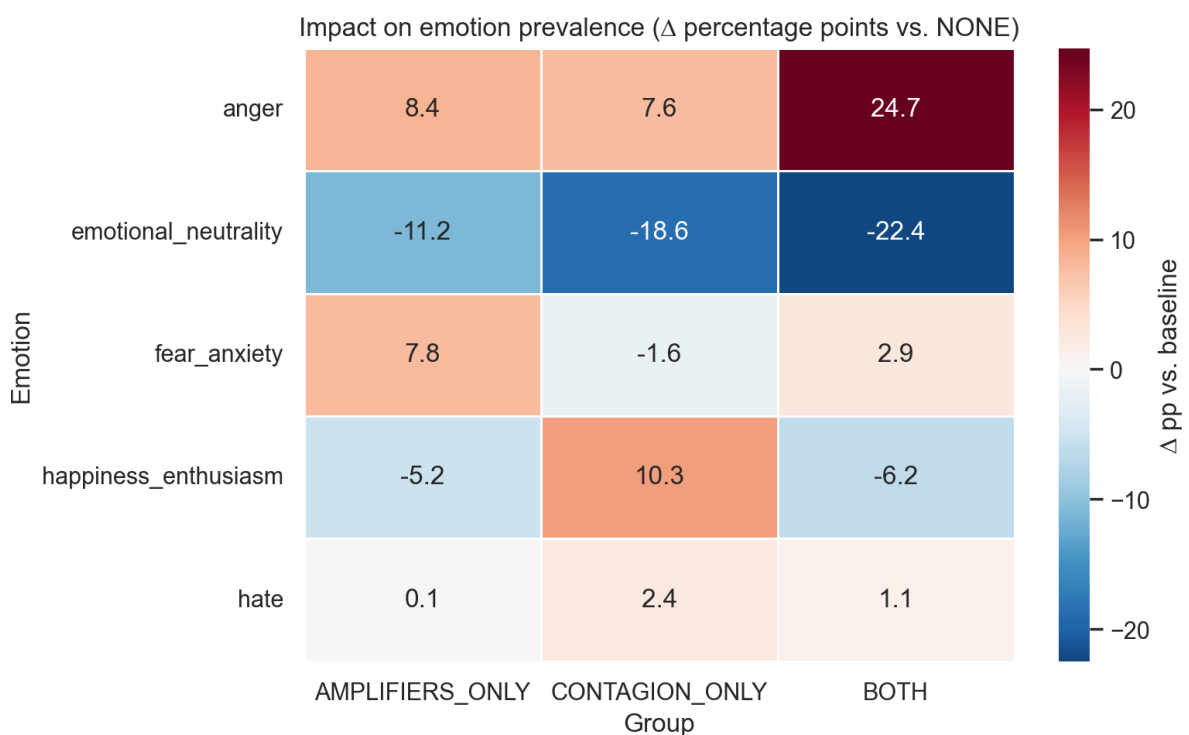


Figure 4 - Heatmap 3: Amplifiers & Contagion (%)

Taken together, the heatmap evidence highlights several mechanisms that directly guide the selection of best practices:

1. **Stakeholder visibility is protective:** practices that increase actor transparency, procedural clarity and institutional presence are likely to reduce symbolic enemy framing.
2. **Policy anchoring redistributes emotion:** effective interventions should not aim to eliminate emotion but to channel it into issue-specific, solution-oriented discourse.
3. **Fear is not inherently polarising:** distinguishing between risk-based concern and antagonistic mobilisation is essential for proportionate policy responses.

4. **Polarisation can emerge without hate speech:** monitoring and mitigation strategies must account for anger-driven alignment and urgency rhetoric, not only explicit hostility.
5. **Hybrid rhetorical strategies are high-risk:** the combination of amplification and contagion cues represents a priority zone for platform governance and media literacy interventions.

These insights provide the empirical backbone for the best practices presented in Section 5, ensuring that recommended actions target the **actual emotional mechanics of online polarisation** identified through the ENCODE analytical pipeline.

4.2. CROSS-COUNTRY POLARISATION LAYERS

To complement the large-scale quantitative analysis, the ENCODE consortium conducted a qualitative cross-country examination of polarising discourse using a curated set of translated social media posts. This layer provides micro-level insight into how emotionally charged narratives materialise in practice across different national contexts and helps validate the rhetorical mechanisms identified in Task 3.3. The analysis presented here directly supports the catalogue of best practices by identifying recurring narrative techniques that sustain affective polarisation and by highlighting where country-specific nuances may require differentiated policy or communication responses.

The quotes analysed in this subsection were manually selected by trained annotators from the broader X dataset used in WP3. Annotators were instructed to identify posts that clearly exemplified **narrative structures previously flagged in the quantitative modelling as likely to trigger polarisation dynamics**.

The selection process followed three guiding principles:

- **Theoretical alignment:** posts had to reflect one or more of the rhetorical mechanisms identified in Task 3.3 (e.g. identity alignment, moral absolutism, antagonistic framing).
- **Cross-country coverage:** examples were drawn from the case-study countries represented in the consortium to enable comparative interpretation.
- **Analytical clarity:** posts were chosen for their discursive transparency rather than extremity alone, ensuring they illustrate mechanisms that may operate even in the absence of overt hate speech.

Selected posts were translated into English by the same annotators who performed the original labelling, ensuring contextual fidelity between the original discourse and the analytical categories. Importantly, the curated quotes are illustrative rather than statistically representative. Their purpose is to **surface narrative logics that help interpret the aggregate patterns observed in the heatmaps and regression analyses**.

The qualitative review confirms a consistent repertoire of polarisation mechanisms across countries. These patterns closely mirror the amplification and contagion dynamics identified in Section 4.1.

A recurring red flag across contexts is the construction of a virtuous **in-group versus out-group**. This narrative form binds together fear, belonging, resentment and moral certainty. It overrides deliberative reasoning by framing dissent as betrayal of the group. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, such framing often draws on ethno-political identity; in Denmark and Bulgaria, it more frequently targets ideological or cultural opponents. This structure is particularly powerful because it simplifies complex political disputes into binary moral categories, eliminating ambiguity and compromise.

Bosnia & Herzegovina

Bosniaks stay silent, but they do not hate. They stay silent, but they do not seek revenge. We still want to live with them, but they don't. They don't want our children to go to the same school. Some want to secede. They want to turn one people, who are the majority in BiH, into a minority and have no say at all.

Bulgaria

Many people ask: "Why didn't you implement measures to limit the grey economy?" This is an important question, and the answer is simple: we proposed them, but our votes were not enough to pass them, as almost everyone else voted "against".

Bulgaria

Today, the National Assembly, with the votes of GERB, BSP, ITN, Vazrazhdane, Velichie, and DPS, passed an absolutely unacceptable bill, made from texts taken from Wikipedia and a pro-Putin law. As a member of parliament, I feel obliged to explain. [GERB, BSP, ITN, VAzrazhdane, Velichie, DPS – political parties represented in the Bulgarian Parliament]

@user: Beneficial for whom? To pay out the € given for the war in Ukraine, and from our taxes to fund what we were forced to give. Then we will pay Ukraine's obligations to the EU, and afterwards our own development loans. This way, taxes and prices will rise!

North Macedonia

We RAISE OUR VOICE in the name of all disenfranchised Macedonians and all honest Macedonian citizens against the violence being committed against us by Albanian deranged chauvinists, regardless of which party they belong to!

Poland

Thousands of people at #ProtestRolników in #Warsaw! Rejecting the harmful ideas of the Brussels elite is our common cause! #PreczZielonymŁadem

Another recurrent pattern is the **generalisation of negative traits to entire communities** (“they are all corrupt”, “that whole group is dangerous”). This black-and-white framing functions cognitively by simplifying complexity and emotionally by offering a clear object of resentment. It fosters collective scapegoating and accelerates distrust cycles. Across Poland and Bulgaria, this mechanism was often directed at political elites or EU institutions; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it frequently operated along historical or communal fault lines.

Bosnia & Herzegovina

In Sarajevo, there is no place for Serbs, not even when they just want to take a walk. They say they stand for respecting rights, but they carry out injustice.

The struggle to defend #Srpska and its competencies has never been easy, but the Serbian people and the leadership of Srpska will not give up on that struggle.

The border exists!   

Denmark

Is there seriously no one today who dares to talk about the fact that the health problems among Muslims may be due to their being too close to their cousins?

☐ 😬

Bulgaria

The children of the Russophiles have long been living in the West, while their parents are fighting against the EU and NATO. What demagoguery!

@user reply: The children of the Russophiles want to revive the Europe that you destroyed, which is why we are in the West. You turned Europe into a ghetto. It resembles Baghdad, Islamabad, Mumbai, and Mogadishu, but with gay pride parades and pedophiles.

North Macedonia

“I DO NOT PLAN to pay electricity bills until the people from Arachinovo and Slupchane pay theirs to the last cent!!! And you?!? 🇲🇰 🇪🇺” @politician The cops and EVN aren't afraid of us, that's the problem. Their souls can't catch a break from the Šiptaraana.

Note: “Šiptaraana” is an ethnic slur, used in this context to imply that Albanians as a group refuse to pay their electricity bills.

Bulgaria

For Gen Z representatives, Europe is the right choice for Bulgaria – they approve of Bulgaria's EU membership, with support rising over the past year from 62% to 76%.

@user reply: And you, are you presenting yourself as a representative of the chromosomally defective, Kaneva?

The **use of modified or mocking names** operates as well as a framing shortcut, attaching negative emotional meaning before facts are considered. Loaded labels dehumanise opponents and reduce the space for rational engagement. This tactic bypasses critical thinking by instructing audiences how to feel rather than inviting evaluation. The persistence of derogatory nicknames across multiple country datasets confirms this as a cross-cultural mechanism rather than a country-specific anomaly.

Bosnia & Herzegovina

After cursing genocide, comes the cake for invertebrates. Has the dawn broken?

Bulgaria

Today, the European Parliament elected Ursula von der Leyen for a second term as head of the European Commission by secret ballot.

@user reply: Are we talking about the same Ursula who sided with Tikvun? [Tikvun - 'Pumpkin', derogatory for former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov?]

Poland

Confirmed! The World Organization of Gays has already obtained the Gender Stone, so with a single snap they can change the gender of half of all living things in the universe. As for non-binary and gender-fluid people, it's unclear, but they'll probably turn them into Stal Sosnowiec fans.

Poland

Jarosław Kaczyński, sick with hatred, refuses to allow criminal prosecution for violence against an activist, which is clearly unacceptable! The Duck will not decide on this, but the entire Sejm!

#BokserJarek
#TrzaskowskiTeam

North Macedonia

@politician user The Day of Independence of what, on which [day]? Have some guts and say the Day of Independence of the REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA. You didn't proclaim independence of "your stinking North." Until when, you ibrik, will you be sucking cock for the fagots — Greeks and Tatars? Be proud MACEDONIANS, not northerners like the Murtino bastard.

Bulgaria

Glavchev responded to me regarding Srebrenica: "Working options, 'hybrid attack'!..".

@user reply: They laundered Boko, ruled with him and Peevski for 10 months, appointed the "ladybug" Desa Atanasova as a constitutional judge, amended the constitution so that even caretaker governments could be aligned with Boyko, and finally, most disgracefully, begged on live TV for a coalition and to divide the country equally.

[Boko – a derogatory name of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov; ladybug – a person appointed to a high position for political reasons, without enough expertise or qualifications for the post; Desa – a mocking nickname of Desislava Atanasova]

Sarcasm replaces counterargument with ridicule, framing the target as socially inferior or intellectually unworthy. Importantly, anger is often expressed implicitly through irony rather than explicit aggression. This makes polarisation harder to detect algorithmically while

maintaining strong emotional charge. Sarcasm was visible across contexts, particularly in reply spaces.

Bulgaria

Miroslav Ivanov: “We insisted that a specific draft document be signed, which would set the framework for what follows”.

@user reply: Nonsense... The draft document - its purpose is for job placement and dividing... A veeeery important draft document, lol... You are unelectable

Denmark

Then there's news from Stine Bosse. We can "finely" take 7000 foreigners a year to Denmark, she says. Why not 10000? 15000? Plus family reunification. Crazy! The Moderates are the government party. Do Socdem and Kaare Dybvad agree? #dkpol

Bosnia & Herzegovina

Where is and what is the overstuffed economic “expert” and “analyst” Faruk Hadžić doing, to convince us that we’ve experienced an economic boom and are living in luxury and abundance ever since the Troika has been in power—from the Presidency down to the local community 😊

Bosnia & Herzegovina

U.S. Embassy statements are getting dumber and more nonsensical. I’m seriously worried about Murphy. Not even a dog would swallow this with butter.

The qualitative analysis confirms that **politicians frequently deploy a bimodal emotional strategy**: amplifying happiness/enthusiasm and fear/anxiety while suppressing overt anger and hate. This allows mobilisation without reputational cost. During electoral periods, this pattern intensifies: anger declines, happiness rises, and discourse shifts from protest framing to future-oriented optimism. Elections thus function as a distinct communicative regime, where actors pivot from adversarial critique to hopeful alternative-building (D3.3 Ortega-Izquierdo et al, 2025).

Denmark

The economy is in top shape and we are borrowing happily for the defense. At the same time, children, the elderly, the sick and the vulnerable do not get the help and care we should expect from a welfare state. And Mette wants us to go home from the assembly line later.

Bosnia & Herzegovina

Just 3 years ago, this is how SDA spoke, and 20 months ago, Salkić. What happened? Did they give up on RS? Did they make a deal with Dodik? Did they betray, or do they just not know what they're doing? Too fast for us—we are still thinking and negotiating!

Bulgaria

The PP-DB coalition must be preserved and developed, while listening to the demands, criticisms, and recommendations of the people. We need to have the strength to improve, because we are the only meaningful alternative. Malicious media twist my words, which shows great fear.

@user reply: That's great. Now, if they stop shifting the blame from the sick head to the healthy one, it would be a brilliant move. For example, not associating people like Kotsev (due to a questionable reputation, not that he is guilty) with people of impeccable reputation.

Bulgaria

I can give you many reasons to vote in these elections:

- because you can (and it hasn't always been that way in Bulgaria);
- to prevent the weight of the bought vote from replacing yours;
- because no matter how disappointed you are, you know that by not voting, you risk punishing yourself even more. 😬 This government is completely wrong! #dkpol

Across countries, polarisation was more pronounced in comment sections than in original posts. Comments concentrated anger and hate, often lacking structured value-based reasoning. In some cases, even moderate politicians used reply spaces to express aggressiveness that would be reputationally risky in official posts. This confirms the “cycle of distrust” dynamic: engagement spaces amplify antagonism more than original communicative content.

Despite contextual variation, three consistent cross-national findings emerge:

1. **Polarisation operates structurally rather than episodically**, it is embedded in narrative architecture (us/them, ridicule, generalisation), not only in overt hate speech.
2. **Emotion often precedes argument**, posts aim to trigger feeling before reflection, reinforcing group loyalty over objective evaluation.
3. **Electoral periods restructure emotion but do not eliminate polarisation**, anger declines, enthusiasm rises, and mobilisation becomes future-oriented, yet identity alignment remains central.

Country **contrasts** primarily concern tone and emphasis rather than mechanism. Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibits stronger identity-historical anchoring; Denmark more technocratic framing with implicit contestation; Bulgaria more visible use of derogatory naming and rhetorical confrontation; Poland more frequent moralised elite opposition narratives and North Macedonia, polarisation appears especially tied to identity-based antagonism and exclusionary national framing.

Several posts **mobilise collective identity through language emphasising unity, strength or historical continuity**. For example, references to national unity as a “guiding idea” or claims that a political community is “stronger than everything” illustrate how emotional alignment is constructed through belonging rather than explicit hostility. In some cases, polarisation operates through **anticipatory concern** about future generations or long-term national trajectories. These narratives often rely on anxiety and moral responsibility cues rather than direct antagonism, reinforcing the conclusion that **fear and concern can structure engagement without overt hate**. Additionally, posts discussing economic performance or public borrowing sometimes adopt an **apparently neutral or positive tone while implicitly positioning critics as misguided or alarmist**. This reflects a more subtle form of discursive boundary-making consistent with the “alignment without threat” pathway identified in the heatmap analysis.

The qualitative evidence reinforces key conclusions for intervention design, monitoring frameworks must detect implicit anger and ridicule, not only explicit hate; electoral period communication requires differentiated approaches acknowledging the strategic shift from protest to positive mobilisation, media literacy initiatives explicitly address rhetorical shortcuts such as loaded labels, sarcasm and binary framing and emotional regulation strategies must distinguish between mobilising enthusiasm and antagonistic hostility. By triangulating curated narrative examples with quantitative modelling, this section aims to strengthen the empirical foundation of the catalogue and ensures that recommended best practices address the lived rhetorical mechanics of cross-national emotional polarisation.

4.3. EMOTIONAL DRIVERS OF HARMFUL AND ANTI-EU NARRATIVES

Building on the heatmap analysis developed within this Catalogue’s framework, this section focuses specifically on the **emotional dynamics underpinning anti-EU narratives**, with particular attention to how these dynamics contribute to the spread and effectiveness of misleading or manipulative content. The analysis shows that anti-EU discourse is not only shaped by factual claims or misinformation, but by **recurring emotional configurations that structure how such narratives are perceived, amplified and legitimised** in digital environments.

Across the dataset, **high-arousal emotions**, that can be considered negatively charged, **dominate anti-EU narratives**, most notably anger, fear and anxiety. Among these, **distrust emerges as the central emotional driver**, consistently directed towards EU institutions, political elites and perceived “Brussels bureaucracies”. This is often coupled with **anger**, expressed through narratives of injustice, loss of sovereignty or perceived imposition of

Denmark

We cannot take our freedom rights for granted when ultra-conservative forces, especially from the USA, send money into Europe to limit them. It is enormously important that in Denmark we have gone the opposite way by expanding abortion rights. Remember that when you cast your vote for

external decisions. Fear and anxiety are frequently mobilised in relation to **economic uncertainty, migration, security or cultural identity**, reinforcing the perception of the EU as a source of risk rather than stability. These emotions rarely operate in isolation; instead, they co-occur and reinforce one another, creating a **self-sustaining emotional ecosystem of grievance and suspicion**.

The analysis further shows that anti-EU narratives rely on **specific narrative structures that systematically amplify these emotions**. Central among these is **identity-based framing**, in which the EU is positioned as an external or antagonistic actor in opposition to a national or cultural “us”. This is often accompanied by **simplified causal narratives**, attributing complex socio-economic issues directly to EU decisions or policies, and by **scapegoating mechanisms**

Denmark

Today I am on the island of Lampedusa. Last year, over 100,000 migrants arrived on the island, and they are streaming up through Europe, which we absolutely must not allow! That is why we in the Danmarksdemokraterne believe that border control at the Danish borders is absolutely essential!

that concentrate blame on institutions or political actors associated with the EU. In many cases, these narratives exhibit features commonly associated with misleading or false content, including **causal oversimplification, selective use of information and generalisation**, even when not explicitly factually incorrect. This blurring of boundaries between opinion,

Poland

We are going to the European Parliament, we want to win these elections to change this bad government, which does not serve Poles, does not serve Europeans, and leads to the European community becoming increasingly weak and less secure. We want the opposite to happen, we are determined, we have an excellent team. The entire Law and Justice team wants to stop the Green Deal and prepare solutions and projects that will serve the European economy, that will primarily serve Europeans and be good for Europeans.

interpretation and misinformation increases their resilience to traditional fact-checking approaches.

The heatmap analysis indicates that **the highest-risk anti-EU narratives emerge where three elements converge**: strong negative emotional intensity, clear identity anchoring and narrative simplification. These conditions are particularly visible during moments of political contestation, such as elections or policy debates, and around highly salient issues including public debt, migration, mobility and geopolitical tensions. In such contexts, anti-EU narratives are more likely to achieve high levels of engagement and visibility, contributing to polarisation and distrust even in the absence of verifiable falsehoods.

At the same time, the analysis highlights the strategic use of **hybrid emotional configurations** within anti-EU discourse. Certain narratives combine negative emotions such as fear or grievance with elements of hope, pride or restoration, positioning alternative political actors as solutions to perceived EU-related problems. This combination allows for **sustained emotional mobilisation**, reinforcing both rejection of the EU and identification with proposed alternatives.

Overall, these findings confirm that the effectiveness of anti-EU narratives lies not only in the presence of misinformation, but in their ability to **activate and structure emotional responses in ways that reinforce distrust, simplify complex realities and polarise public debate**. For the purposes of this catalogue, this section provides a targeted evidence base for identifying best practices that address these dynamics. By clarifying how anti-EU

North Macedonia

For liberals, Kiyev is 'Kyiv', but Solun is 'Thessaloniki'. They eagerly defend others' interests while selling out our own, just for a meaningless pat on the back from Brussels. Just so we're aware of what kind of FIFTH COLUMN structure we're dealing with.

narratives mobilise emotions and where risks are most concentrated, the analysis directly informs the design of interventions aimed at **reducing distrust amplification, countering identity-based polarisation, introducing friction in high-intensity engagement environments and promoting more nuanced and evidence-based narratives about the European Union**.

5. CATALOGUE OF BEST PRACTICES

5.1 INTEGRATING CITIZENS' EMOTIONS INTO DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

Citizen-Centred Emotional Integration for Democratic Resilience

This best practice emerges directly from the empirical findings in WP3 and the theoretical grounding in WP2. The social media analysis demonstrated that emotions act as both filters and catalysts in digital political communication, shaping how citizens interpret information and engage online. The evidence shows that anger, fear and anxiety dominate high-engagement environments, while positive emotions linked to benevolence and social harmony remain under-leveraged in democratic communication. These dynamics, combined with the observed affective polarisation in reply spaces and the strategic emotional repositioning during electoral periods, justify the need for structured mechanisms that make citizens' emotional perspectives visible, legible and constructively channelled.

Current **democratic and policy processes insufficiently account for the emotional dimension of political behaviour**. As documented in the ENCODE analysis, emotionally charged narratives—particularly those activating fear and anger—are systematically amplified in digital environments, contributing to distrust, antagonistic group dynamics and fragmented meaning spaces. Traditional counter-disinformation approaches centred on fact-checking alone come short to address the underlying emotional drivers of polarisation. This creates a structural gap between institutional communication and citizens' lived emotional experiences, weakening trust and democratic legitimacy.

This practice targets three interrelated mechanisms identified in the analysis:

- affective polarisation driven by in-group/out-group emotional alignment;
- emotional amplification loops that privilege high-arousal negative content;
- the disconnect between institutional discourse and citizens' emotional meaning-making.

By formally integrating citizens' emotional signals into deliberative and policy processes (e.g. through Citizen Innovation Labs, structured consultations, or participatory narrative mapping), the intervention seeks to foster affective pluralisation and reduce antagonistic emotional clustering.

Evidence from WP3 indicates that emotional dynamics are neither random nor uniformly distributed. The dataset shows: a systematic predominance of anger and fear in high-engagement content; a measurable co-occurrence between fear/anxiety and security values (22% above chance); significantly higher engagement rates for emotionally charged media content; and a strategic "bimodal" emotional communication pattern among political actors.

Together, these findings demonstrate that **emotional climates can be mapped, anticipated and influenced**. Complementary insights from NODES further suggest that much polarisation stems from misaligned emotional interpretations rather than irreconcilable ideological positions. This supports the feasibility of interventions aimed at emotional reframing and participatory meaning-making.

Within contextual adaptation, the **transferability** of this best practice is high. It relies on the underlying emotional mechanisms (fear–security linkage, anger-driven engagement, reply-space antagonism) appear consistently across countries analysed. However, implementation formats must be adapted to national political cultures, platform ecosystems and levels of institutional trust. By particularly being strong in EU and national participatory processes, citizen assemblies and deliberative forums, digital civic engagement platforms, and finally media literacy and public communication initiatives. Scalability is supported by the growing availability of emotion-detection tools and structured participatory methodologies.

Alternately, several **safeguards** are essential. In order to prevent manipulation risk, emotional data must not be used for micro-targeting or behavioural steering. Similarly, any emotional analytics must comply entirely with GDPR, and AI Act frameworks. This catalogue would also like to highlight that the emotional integration should complement, not replace, substantive policy debate, ensuring to not over-psychologise politics. A final ethical consideration is that citizens must clearly understand how their emotional input is used. These several points ensure a human-centred, transparent and rights-based approach.

To operationalise this best practice, policymakers and democratic institutions should:

1. **Establish structured emotional listening mechanisms** by integrating qualitative and quantitative emotional mapping into public consultations, citizen panels and digital participation platforms.
2. **Deploy Citizen Innovation Labs or equivalent formats** by creating moderated spaces where citizens can articulate concerns, values and emotional drivers behind policy preferences(see D6.1).
3. **Embed emotional literacy in democratic engagement** to train moderators, public communicators and civil servants to recognise emotional dynamics in public discourse.
4. **Link emotional insights to policy feedback loops** by ensuring that identified emotional concerns (e.g. security anxiety, loss of control, distrust) are visibly addressed in policy communication.
5. **Monitor impact using mixed indicators** by combining engagement metrics, sentiment/emotion tracking and qualitative feedback to assess whether interventions reduce antagonistic dynamics.

5.2. SCIENTIFIC AND OPERATIONAL APPROACHES TO COUNTER-DISINFORMATION

Integrated Detection, Mitigation, Narrative Reframing and Platform Governance

This best practice builds on the empirical findings of the ENCODE WP3 social media analysis and the theoretical framework developed in WP2, which together demonstrate that **disinformation spreads not simply through factual inaccuracies but through emotionally resonant narrative structures**. The research conducted across six European countries shows that manipulative content often relies on emotional triggers such as fear, anger and

perceived threat, frequently embedded within narrative frames such as “us versus them”, derogatory labelling, sarcasm, and generalisations about entire social groups. These findings confirm that **emotionally charged narratives operate as powerful vectors of disinformation and polarisation in digital environments**. The operational recommendations outlined here therefore derive directly from the patterns identified in the analysis: the prevalence of negative emotional triggers, the amplification of polarising content through platform algorithms, and the strategic use of emotional framing by different actors in online discourse.

Current responses to disinformation often focus primarily on correcting factual inaccuracies after they have circulated widely. However, the ENCODE analysis demonstrates that emotionally driven narratives spread faster and engage users more strongly than neutral informational content. Manipulative communication tactics exploit emotional reactions to provoke rapid engagement, often bypassing rational evaluation. As a result, reactive fact-checking alone is insufficient. Effective responses must combine early detection of emotional manipulation, mitigation strategies within platform governance structures, and narrative reframing approaches capable of redirecting emotional engagement toward constructive democratic discourse.

This practice addresses several emotional mechanisms identified in the analysis:

- **Emotional amplification:** high-arousal emotions such as anger, fear and indignation drive engagement and algorithmic visibility.
- **Identity-based emotional framing:** narratives that activate in-group and out-group identities intensify affective polarisation.
- **Narrative plausibility bias:** users are more likely to accept emotionally congruent narratives that align with their existing experiences and identity frameworks.
- **Emotional contagion in networked environments:** emotional responses propagate rapidly across digital networks, reinforcing collective perceptions of conflict or threat.

By targeting these mechanisms simultaneously, the proposed approach seeks to reduce the emotional incentives that allow disinformation to flourish.

The ENCODE’s catalogue analysis provides several empirical insights supporting this approach:

- Negative emotions, particularly anger and fear, were the most prevalent across the dataset of analysed political posts.
- Emotionally charged media content generated substantially higher engagement than neutral content.
- A strong correlation between fear and security-oriented values indicates that emotional framing plays a central role in shaping political perception and decision-making.

- Reply spaces on social media platforms displayed significantly higher levels of antagonistic emotional expression than original posts, demonstrating how emotional amplification occurs within networked interactions.

These findings suggest that **interventions must operate not only at the level of individual messages but also within the broader digital communication architecture that amplifies emotional responses.**

The assessment of **transferability** criterion for this practice is high with platforms and contextual adaptation. This is particularly true for the emotional mechanisms identified in the analysis appear consistently across the different countries and political contexts studied. However, operational implementation must consider factors such as linguistics and cultural variation in emotional expression, differences in platform architecture and moderation practices and varying levels of institutional trust across national contexts. Nevertheless, this approach is particularly transferable to digital platforms governance frameworks, EU-level regulatory initiatives such as the DSA, civil society initiatives addressing digital literacy or narrative resilience and research initiatives analysing online political communication.

In contrast, several risks must be considered when implementing mitigation strategies. Automated detection systems may incorrectly flag legitimate political speech or satire, similarly machine learning systems trained on limited datasets may reproduce cultural or linguistic biases. Likewise, excessive content removal may undermine open democratic debate. Equally, users must understand why certain content is moderated or de-prioritised. To address these risks, **governance mechanisms should prioritise transparency, human oversight and clear appeal processes.** Altogether, to address these risks, governance mechanisms should prioritise transparency, human oversight and clear appeal processes.

Additionally, platforms and researchers should deploy advanced analytical tools capable of identifying narrative structures and emotional cues associated with manipulation. This includes detection of sarcasm, derogatory naming practices, binary “us versus them” framing, and emotionally charged imagery. Explicitly, detection models should integrate both linguistic and contextual signals to identify emerging polarisation dynamics before they escalate.

This practice also highlights how mitigation strategies should focus on reducing algorithmic amplification of highly polarising content. This may include adjustments to recommendation systems that prioritise extreme emotional reactions, the introduction of slow down mechanisms before sharing emotionally charged content, and improved transparency regarding moderation decisions. Rather than focusing solely on removing harmful content, communication strategies should actively promote narratives grounded in shared democratic values such as solidarity, cooperation and collective resilience. By redirecting emotional engagement toward constructive narratives, policymakers and communicators can counterbalance polarising discourse without suppressing political expression.

Digital platforms play a central role in shaping the emotional dynamics of online discourse. Governance frameworks should therefore require transparent reporting on algorithmic amplification patterns; meaningful user control over recommendation systems; independent researcher access to platform data; systematic risk assessments addressing emotional manipulation and polarisation. Though it is important to note these measures align with existing European regulatory frameworks that increasingly recognise emotional manipulation as a systemic risk within digital information ecosystems.

5.3. SAFEGUARDS AGAINST NEGATIVE SIDE-EFFECTS

Safeguarding Democratic Integrity: Managing the Risks of Counter-Disinformation Interventions

This best practice emerges from the ENCODE empirical findings on emotional manipulation and platform dynamics, as well as from the policy and governance recommendations developed in the previous sections of this catalogue. The social media analysis demonstrated that emotional signals and narrative framing are central to how political content spreads and how users respond online. However, the same mechanisms that enable the detection and mitigation of emotionally manipulative narratives can also produce unintended consequences if implemented without safeguards. As highlighted in the analysis, digital platforms amplify emotional content through engagement-driven algorithms, while moderation systems increasingly rely on automated detection of emotional and narrative patterns. When such systems are deployed to combat disinformation or polarisation, they may **inadvertently generate new forms of bias, restrict legitimate political expression, or intensify distrust toward institutions**. This section therefore outlines safeguards designed to minimise the negative side-effects of counter-disinformation strategies while preserving democratic freedoms.

This practice addresses the efforts to combat disinformation and emotional manipulation online can produce several **unintended side-effects** if they are implemented without clear ethical and governance frameworks. These include the risk of excessive moderation of legitimate political speech, the misuse of emotional analytics to influence users' behaviour, and the erosion of public trust if moderation practices are perceived as opaque or politically biased. Moreover, interventions designed to **limit emotionally manipulative content may inadvertently reinforce the very dynamics they seek to mitigate**. For example, the perception that platforms or institutions suppress certain narratives can itself become a powerful emotional driver of distrust, feeding into conspiracy narratives or reinforcing polarisation between groups. This best practice therefore addresses the need to ensure that counter-disinformation strategies strengthen democratic resilience without undermining the openness, pluralism, and freedom of expression that characterise democratic societies.

The safeguard measures outlined here aim to mitigate several emotional dynamics identified in the analysis which can trigger distrust and resentment towards democratic institutions or platforms, along with reactive emotional backlash where users respond to moderation decisions with anger or suspicion. Safeguarding democratic integrity also entails **mitigating narrative victimisation dynamics in which actor portray themselves as censored or marginalised in order to mobilise supporters**. Finally, the mitigation answers to manipulative emotional targeting where emotional insights derived from analysis are used strategically to influence behaviour rather than strengthen democratic discourse. By recognising these mechanisms, the safeguards aim to ensure that interventions remain aligned with democratic norms and public trust.

The ENCODE research highlights how emotional dynamics shape both the spread of disinformation and public reactions to institutional interventions. Several observations support the need for safeguards:

- Comment sections on social media platforms often contain significantly higher levels of antagonistic emotional expression than original posts, indicating that reactive emotional responses can escalate rapidly.

- Algorithmic systems that prioritise engagement tend to amplify emotionally intense content, which can distort perceptions of public opinion and political conflict.

These dynamics demonstrate that counter-disinformation measures must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing emotional antagonism or undermining trust in democratic institutions. This practice demonstrates a very high potential for **transferability**, as safeguards against negative side-effects can be applied across a wide range of platforms, regulatory frameworks and democratic institutions. Ensuring that counter-disinformation measures do not generate unintended consequences is a fundamental requirement for any governance approach addressing online disinformation and polarisation. Safeguards therefore play a critical role in maintaining the balance between effective intervention and the protection of democratic principles such as freedom of expression and pluralism.

In practice, these safeguards are particularly relevant in several areas. They can inform the design of digital platform governance and moderation systems, support the implementation of European regulatory frameworks such as the DSA and the AI Act, guide civil society initiatives aimed at improving the quality of online public discourse, and contribute to research projects analysing the dynamics of digital political communication. Because the risks they address stem from the structural characteristics of digital communication environments and from broader questions of democratic legitimacy, these safeguards are broadly transferable across national contexts. Their relevance therefore extends beyond specific platforms or policy settings, making them a foundational element of responsible governance strategies in the digital public sphere.

The safeguards proposed in this catalogue address several important risks that may arise when counter-disinformation measures are implemented without adequate oversight or transparency. One of the most significant concerns relates to **over-moderation**. Automated detection systems designed to identify emotionally manipulative or misleading content may incorrectly flag legitimate political expression, satire or critical debate. When moderation practices become excessively restrictive, they can limit pluralism and weaken the openness of democratic discussion.

A related challenge concerns **tensions surrounding freedom of expression**. Policies intended to reduce polarisation or curb manipulative narratives may be interpreted by some actors as attempts to regulate political opinions or ideological positions. Without clear transparency, accountability mechanisms and consistent enforcement, such interventions risk being perceived as politically biased, thereby undermining public confidence in governance measures.

Another potential risk involves the **misuse of emotional analysis tools**. Insights derived from the study of emotional dynamics in digital communication could be used not only for identifying manipulation but also for behavioural targeting or strategic persuasion, particularly within political campaigns or advertising environments. In such cases, the same analytical tools designed to strengthen democratic resilience could instead be employed to influence citizens' behaviour in ethically problematic ways.

Technical challenges must also be considered. **Algorithmic bias** may arise when machine learning models trained on specific linguistic or cultural datasets attempt to interpret emotional signals in different contexts. Variations in language, cultural references or humour can lead to misclassification, potentially resulting in uneven or inconsistent moderation outcomes across countries or communities.

Finally, the risk of **erosion of public trust** remains a critical concern. If counter-disinformation measures are perceived as opaque, selectively applied or politically motivated, they may inadvertently reinforce narratives of institutional manipulation. Such perceptions can deepen distrust toward public authorities and digital platforms, ultimately undermining the legitimacy of the very measures intended to protect democratic discourse.

In view to minimise unintended side-effects, policymakers, platforms, and researchers should ensure the following recommendations are taken into account when considering the safeguards. First, platforms should provide clear explanations for moderation decisions, including the criteria used to identify emotionally manipulative or misleading content. Second, transparent reporting mechanisms can help reduce perceptions of bias and strengthen user trust. Third, while automated detection tools are valuable for analysing large volumes of data, final moderation decisions should involve human review to account for contextual nuance and cultural variation. Fourth, interventions should prioritise proportional responses such as labelling, contextualisation, or reduced algorithmic amplification rather than automatic removal of content whenever possible. Fifth, independent researchers and regulatory bodies should have access to relevant platform data in order to evaluate the effectiveness and fairness of moderation practices. Finally, emotional detection tools should not be used for behavioural manipulation or targeted political persuasion. Governance frameworks should clearly restrict such practices. Educational initiatives can help users understand how emotional manipulation operates online and why certain moderation measures are necessary to maintain healthy democratic discourse.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION-MAKERS

Addressing disinformation in contemporary digital environments requires more than reactive moderation or isolated technical interventions. As demonstrated throughout this catalogue, **disinformation** (including fake news) **spreads and gains traction primarily through emotional narratives that resonate with citizens' values, identities, and perceptions of social reality**. The ENCODE analysis shows that emotions such as fear, anger, and perceived threat play a decisive role in shaping engagement dynamics online, while platform architectures and algorithmic systems amplify these emotional signals across networks. Consequently, effective policy responses must address not only the informational dimension of disinformation but also the emotional and narrative mechanisms through which it circulates and influences public opinion.

For decision-makers, this implies adopting a **holistic governance approach** that integrates regulatory frameworks, platform accountability, research access, and societal resilience strategies. The European Union has already begun constructing such a framework through instruments such as the DSA, the AI Act, the Code of Practice on Disinformation, and the European Democracy Action Plan. However, the ENCODE findings suggest that these **instruments must increasingly incorporate an explicit awareness of emotional manipulation and affective polarisation as systemic risks within digital communication ecosystems**. Strengthening democratic resilience therefore requires policies that simultaneously enhance transparency in digital platforms, support independent research and monitoring,

promote emotionally intelligent public communication, and safeguard fundamental rights such as freedom of expression.

The following recommendations translate the empirical findings and analytical insights of this catalogue into actionable policy directions for decision-makers. They aim to support the development of governance mechanisms capable of mitigating emotionally driven disinformation while preserving open democratic debate. Structured around key areas of intervention (including platform governance, transparency and data access, public communication strategies, and research and innovation) the recommendations seek to provide a coherent policy toolkit for strengthening democratic resilience in an increasingly emotional and networked information environment.

6.1 REGULATORY AND GOVERNANCE MEASURES

Embedding Emotional Risk Governance in Digital Platform Regulation

This practice aims to strengthen democratic resilience by integrating the assessment and mitigation of emotionally manipulative dynamics within existing digital governance frameworks, ensuring that platform regulation addresses not only informational harms but also the emotional mechanisms that amplify polarisation and disinformation.

The findings presented in this catalogue demonstrate that disinformation rarely spreads solely through factual inaccuracies. Rather, it circulates through emotionally resonant narratives that activate identity, fear, anger, and perceived threat. These emotional signals are then amplified by digital platform architectures designed to prioritise engagement. As a result, regulatory responses that focus exclusively on content moderation or fact-checking risk overlooking the systemic drivers of polarisation embedded within platform design and algorithmic amplification. European regulatory initiatives (including the DSA, the AI Act, and the evolving policy framework surrounding the European Democracy Shield) have begun to recognise systemic risks within digital ecosystems. However, these frameworks can be further strengthened by explicitly incorporating emotional manipulation and affective polarisation as measurable dimensions of systemic risk. **Integrating emotional risk awareness into digital governance** would allow regulators and platforms to better identify and mitigate the dynamics through which disinformation destabilises democratic discourse.

A central regulatory innovation recommended by this catalogue is the introduction of **Emotional Impact Assessments (EIAs)** for large-scale digital platforms and AI-driven communication systems. Similar to environmental or human-rights impact assessments, EIAs would **evaluate how platform design choices and algorithmic systems influence emotional dynamics within public discourse**.

These assessments would analyse indicators such as:

- the amplification of high-arousal emotional content (e.g. anger, fear, outrage);
- patterns of emotional contagion and escalation in comment or reply spaces;
- algorithmic promotion of polarising narratives or identity-based conflict frames;
- the visibility and reach of emotionally manipulative communication strategies.

Such assessments could be integrated into the **systemic risk assessment obligations already required under the DSA**, which mandates VLOPs to identify and mitigate risks to democratic processes. Expanding these assessments to include emotional dynamics would allow regulators to evaluate how platform infrastructures shape the emotional climate of online discourse.

Importantly, EIAs would not aim to regulate emotions themselves – an impossible and undesirable objective – but rather to **identify structural conditions that disproportionately amplify harmful emotional dynamics at scale**.

The proposed **European Democracy Shield**, currently under development as part of the EU's broader strategy to strengthen democratic resilience, provides an opportunity to embed emotional risk awareness within a coordinated governance framework addressing foreign information manipulation, disinformation campaigns, and hybrid threats.

Within this framework, the findings of the ENCODE project suggest several areas of alignment:

First, the Democracy Shield could **incorporate emotional risk indicators into its monitoring of information manipulation campaigns**. Disinformation operations frequently rely on emotionally charged narratives (particularly those activating fear, anger, and distrust) to destabilise democratic debate. Monitoring emotional patterns alongside informational content would therefore improve the detection of coordinated manipulation efforts.

Second, the initiative could strengthen cooperation between EU institutions, platforms, and independent researchers by **supporting shared analytical tools capable of mapping emotional amplification patterns across platforms and countries**. Such tools would enable early identification of emerging polarisation dynamics and narrative escalation.

Third, the Democracy Shield could promote **common standards for transparency regarding algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged content**. This would complement existing transparency requirements under the DSA while ensuring that the emotional dimensions of platform influence are considered within broader democratic risk assessments.

6.2 SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AND USER BEHAVIOUR

Strengthening Democratic Resilience through Slow Scrolling and Emotional Literacy

This practice aims to reduce citizens' vulnerability to emotionally manipulative content by supporting behavioural and educational interventions that encourage reflection, improve emotional awareness, and strengthen the capacity to engage critically with digital political communication.

The findings of this catalogue show that disinformation and polarising narratives do not spread only because they are false or misleading, but because they are emotionally effective. They capture attention quickly, trigger immediate reactions, and encourage impulsive forms of engagement such as sharing, replying or endorsing content before it has been fully assessed. In digital environments shaped by speed, virality and constant exposure, users are often encouraged to react before they reflect. This creates favourable conditions for emotional contagion, distrust and the rapid circulation of divisive narratives.

For this reason, strengthening democratic resilience cannot rely solely on platform regulation or content moderation. It must also address how citizens encounter, interpret and respond to information in everyday digital life. The ENCODE analysis suggests that two complementary approaches are particularly relevant in this regard: first, promoting **slow scrolling** as a behavioural norm that encourages reflection before interaction; and second, integrating **emotional literacy** into media literacy frameworks so that citizens are better equipped to recognise how emotions shape both online content and their own reactions to it. Together, these measures help move the policy focus from purely reactive harm reduction towards long-term democratic resilience.

A first recommendation is to support public-interest campaigns that encourage what may be described as **slow scrolling**: a more deliberate and reflective approach to consuming online content. In practice, this means encouraging users to pause before sharing, commenting on, or emotionally engaging with posts that provoke strong reactions. This approach is particularly important because, as shown throughout this catalogue, highly engaging content often relies on emotional triggers such as outrage, fear, humiliation or identity threat. When users are encouraged to slow down, they are more likely to notice these triggers, question the framing of the content, and distinguish between immediate emotional response and considered judgement. From a policy perspective, slow scrolling should not be understood as an individual moral appeal alone. It can be supported through public communication campaigns, digital education initiatives, and user-interface measures that create moments of friction before impulsive engagement. Examples may include prompts to read an article before sharing it, reminders encouraging users to verify emotionally charged claims, or awareness campaigns that explain how outrage-driven content spreads. The broader value of slow scrolling lies in its capacity to interrupt the cycle of distrust described earlier in this catalogue. By slowing the pace of emotional reaction, it becomes possible to reduce the automatic amplification of divisive narratives and create more space for reflection, nuance and democratic judgement.

A second and equally important recommendation is to expand existing media literacy frameworks to include **emotional literacy**. Traditional media literacy often focuses on source evaluation, fact-checking, or identifying misleading information. While these remain essential skills, they are not sufficient on their own. Much manipulative content does not persuade because it is believed as fact in a narrow sense, but because it feels plausible, emotionally congruent, or socially validating. Emotional literacy addresses this gap by helping citizens recognise how content is designed to make them feel, why certain emotions are being activated, and how those emotions may influence judgement and behaviour. It also helps individuals become more aware of their own emotional responses when navigating political communication online. In the context of this catalogue, emotional literacy is particularly relevant because the analysis shows that manipulative narratives often rely on subtle cues rather than overt hate speech alone. Sarcasm, ridicule, derogatory labels, identity-based framing, and narratives of threat or humiliation can all provoke emotional reactions without appearing obviously false or extreme. Without emotional literacy, these forms of influence may remain difficult to detect. For this reason, media literacy policy should evolve beyond the question of “Is this true?” to include questions such as: “What is this content asking me to feel?”, “Why is this emotion being activated?”, and “How might this affect the way I judge other people, institutions or political issues?” This shift is essential if democratic societies are to respond effectively to emotionally driven manipulation.

Slow scrolling and emotional literacy are mutually reinforcing. Slow scrolling creates the behavioural conditions for reflection, while emotional literacy provides the interpretative tools needed to understand what is happening in that reflective pause. Together, they can

strengthen democratic resilience in at least three ways. First, they **reduce the likelihood of impulsive engagement with manipulative content**. This matters because the speed of online reaction is one of the main channels through which emotional narratives gain reach and visibility. Second, they **help citizens better understand the relationship between emotions, identity and political meaning-making**. This is particularly important in environments where affective polarisation is driven less by detailed ideological disagreement than by accumulated feelings of distrust, grievance or perceived exclusion. Third, **they support a more plural and resilient public sphere**. Citizens who are better able to identify emotional manipulation are also more likely to resist false dichotomies, scapegoating narratives and outrage-based mobilisation. In this sense, emotional literacy is not only a defensive tool but also a democratic competence.

For policymakers, the key implication is that societal resilience must be treated as a central pillar of anti-disinformation strategy, not as a secondary educational add-on. This means that public institutions, education systems, civil society organisations and media actors should be supported in developing initiatives that explicitly address the emotional dimension of digital communication. In practical terms, decision-makers should consider:

- supporting public campaigns that normalise reflective online behaviour and discourage impulsive sharing of emotionally charged content;
- integrating emotional literacy into school curricula, adult education, civic education and digital literacy programmes;
- funding pilot initiatives that test behaviour-based interventions such as reflective prompts, pre-sharing friction, or citizen-facing awareness tools;
- encouraging cooperation between educators, psychologists, media literacy experts and digital policy actors in the design of resilience programmes.

These measures are especially relevant during periods of heightened vulnerability, such as elections, geopolitical crises or public emergencies, when emotional intensity tends to rise and manipulative narratives gain greater traction.

In essence, if properly implemented, slow scrolling campaigns and emotional literacy measures can make a meaningful contribution to democratic resilience. They are unlikely to eliminate polarisation or disinformation on their own, but they can **reduce the speed, intensity and reach of emotionally manipulative content by changing how users engage with it**. More importantly, they help reframe citizens not only as potential targets of manipulation but as **active agents capable of recognising, interpreting and resisting emotionally exploitative communication**. In this sense, these measures support the broader objective of this catalogue: not to remove emotions from politics, but to strengthen the conditions under which emotions can be integrated into democratic life in more reflective, plural and constructive ways.

6.3 RESEARCH AND INNOVATION PRIORITIES

Advancing Research and Cross-Sector Innovation to Address Emotion-Centric Harms

A final layer of policy should aim to strengthen the European capacity to understand and address emotionally driven disinformation and polarisation by prioritising research on

emotion-centric harms and fostering collaboration between academic, technological, policy and civil society actors.

As demonstrated throughout this catalogue, emotions play a central role in shaping how political information is interpreted, shared and contested in digital environments. Fear, anger, resentment and perceived threat often act as catalysts for engagement, allowing polarising narratives to spread rapidly across networks. Yet despite growing recognition of the emotional dimensions of disinformation, research and policy frameworks addressing these dynamics remain fragmented. Much of the existing research ecosystem continues to focus primarily on factual misinformation, platform governance or technical detection tools. While these areas are important, the ENCODE findings highlight that emotionally driven manipulation operates at a deeper level of narrative formation, identity dynamics and behavioural response. **Understanding these processes requires interdisciplinary research combining political science, psychology, communication studies, data science, behavioural economics and digital platform analysis.** For this reason, strengthening democratic resilience requires sustained investment in research and innovation programmes that explicitly address emotion-centric harms within digital communication ecosystems. At the same time, these efforts must be supported by stronger collaboration between sectors that traditionally operate separately: academic researchers, policymakers, technology companies, civil society organisations, educators and media professionals.

A first priority is to **expand research funding** dedicated to analysing how emotions interact with digital communication infrastructures and influence political behaviour. This includes research examining how emotional narratives shape perceptions of legitimacy, trust and identity, as well as how algorithmic systems amplify or transform emotional signals within online networks. Such research is essential because emotionally manipulative narratives often operate through subtle cues rather than overt disinformation. As shown in the analysis presented earlier in this catalogue, tactics such as sarcasm, derogatory labelling, identity-based framing and “us versus them” narratives can trigger strong emotional responses even when the informational content appears ambiguous or indirect. These mechanisms remain difficult to capture through traditional misinformation detection frameworks. Funding programmes should therefore encourage interdisciplinary projects capable of exploring the relationship between emotional dynamics, platform architecture and democratic discourse. This includes both large-scale quantitative analysis of digital communication patterns and qualitative research examining how citizens interpret emotionally charged narratives in different social and cultural contexts.

Research priorities may include, for example:

- understanding the emotional triggers that drive engagement with polarising narratives
- analysing how emotional amplification interacts with algorithmic recommendation systems
- identifying early indicators of emotional escalation within online communities
- examining how emotional narratives evolve across platforms and across national contexts

- developing ethical frameworks for analysing emotional signals in digital communication.

Supporting this type of research will allow policymakers to better understand the systemic drivers of disinformation and polarisation rather than responding only to individual cases or isolated campaigns. A second priority is to strengthen collaboration between sectors that hold different pieces of the knowledge required to address emotion-centric harms. Academic research alone cannot fully capture the complexity of digital communication ecosystems, while policymakers and platforms often lack the independent analytical capacity needed to interpret emerging risks. For this reason, the development of **cross-sector research coalitions** is essential. These coalitions would bring together **researchers, technology companies, regulators, civil society organisations and media actors to share knowledge, data and methodological expertise**. By combining different perspectives, such collaborations can generate more comprehensive insights into how emotional manipulation operates and how it might be mitigated. In practice, this could take the form of European research networks, observatories or innovation hubs dedicated to studying the emotional dynamics of digital communication. Existing initiatives such as digital media observatories or platform transparency frameworks could serve as starting points for such cooperation, but their mandates could be expanded to include the systematic study of emotional amplification and narrative polarisation. Cross-sector coalitions also play an important role in translating research findings into practical tools and policy interventions. Researchers may develop analytical frameworks and methodologies, while platforms and civil society organisations can test how these insights operate in real-world communication environments.

Another important aspect of research and innovation priorities is **ensuring that insights generated through academic research are effectively translated into policy and technological solutions**. Too often, research findings remain confined to academic publications without influencing platform design, regulatory frameworks or public communication strategies. To address this gap, funding programmes should prioritise projects that combine research with practical experimentation and policy engagement. This could include pilot initiatives testing new tools for identifying emotional manipulation, behavioural interventions designed to reduce impulsive engagement with polarising content, or educational programmes aimed at strengthening emotional literacy among citizens. Innovation programmes can also support the development of analytical tools capable of identifying patterns of emotional amplification across digital platforms. Such tools could help researchers and policymakers detect emerging polarisation dynamics earlier, allowing for more proactive responses to disinformation campaigns or coordinated manipulation efforts. Importantly, these innovation efforts must operate within clear ethical frameworks that respect privacy, freedom of expression and democratic pluralism. The goal is not to regulate emotions themselves, but to understand how digital infrastructures shape emotional dynamics and how those dynamics affect democratic discourse.

For decision-makers, the central implication is that research and innovation must be recognised as a strategic component of democratic resilience policy. Addressing emotionally driven disinformation requires knowledge infrastructures capable of monitoring emerging risks, analysing communication dynamics and testing effective interventions. Policymakers should therefore consider:

- prioritising research on emotion-centric harms within European research funding programmes;

- supporting interdisciplinary research initiatives that combine social sciences, behavioural sciences and computational methods;
- fostering cross-sector coalitions that enable collaboration between academia, technology companies, regulators and civil society organisations;
- creating funding mechanisms for pilot projects that translate research insights into practical policy tools;
- ensuring that research infrastructures have secure and ethical access to relevant platform data.

Overall, by **strengthening research and innovation capacities in this field can significantly improve Europe’s ability to understand and address the emotional drivers of disinformation and polarisation**. Over time, these efforts can contribute to the development of new analytical tools, governance frameworks and educational initiatives that support a healthier digital public sphere. Equally important, sustained research collaboration can help bridge the gap between scientific insight and democratic practice. By connecting research, policy and innovation ecosystems, decision-makers can ensure that responses to digital manipulation remain informed by evidence while remaining aligned with democratic values and fundamental rights.

6.4 TIME HORIZON FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In order to ensure that the recommendations outlined in this catalogue translate into actionable policy measures, it is central to situate them within a realistic implementation timeline. Addressing emotion-driven disinformation and polarisation requires both immediate interventions and long-term structural investment. Some measures—particularly those related to transparency and governance—can be implemented relatively quickly within existing regulatory frameworks. Others, such as educational reforms and interdisciplinary research programmes, require longer-term coordination and sustained funding. This section allows decision-makers to integrate emotion-aware governance into ongoing EU initiatives while progressively strengthening societal resilience and research capacity.

In the short term (1-2 years), policy action should **focus on measures that can be integrated into existing regulatory frameworks and institutional initiatives**. Many of these actions build directly on ongoing EU policy instruments such as the Digital Services Act and the emerging European Democracy Shield. Priority actions include:

- **Integrating emotional risk indicators into systemic risk assessments** required from large online platforms under the DSA.
- **Developing methodological guidelines for Emotional Impact Assessments**, enabling regulators and platforms to evaluate how digital infrastructures amplify polarisation dynamics.
- **Supporting pilot slow-scrolling awareness campaigns** encouraging reflective engagement with emotionally charged online content.

- **Expanding media literacy programmes to include emotional literacy**, particularly through public awareness initiatives and civil society partnerships.
- **Establishing initial cross-sector research working groups** bringing together researchers, regulators, civil society organisations and platforms to coordinate knowledge sharing on emotion-centric harms.

These measures would allow policymakers to begin addressing emotional manipulation within digital ecosystems without requiring extensive structural reforms.

In the medium term (3-5 years), the focus should shift **toward institutionalising the approaches** described in this catalogue and expanding their reach across the European digital governance landscape. Priority actions include:

- **Embedding emotional impact assessments within regulatory compliance processes**, particularly for large digital platforms and AI systems involved in political communication or recommendation systems.
- **Integrating emotional literacy into formal education and digital citizenship curricula**, ensuring that future generations are equipped with the skills needed to recognise manipulative emotional narratives.
- **Scaling behavioural interventions such as slow scrolling prompts and reflective engagement tools** through cooperation between public institutions and platforms.
- **Funding interdisciplinary research programmes dedicated to emotion-centric harms**, particularly through European research frameworks such as Horizon Europe and future research funding instruments.
- **Establishing permanent cross-sector observatories or research coalitions** dedicated to monitoring emotional amplification and polarisation dynamics across platforms and countries.

These measures would strengthen coordination between policy, research and innovation ecosystems while expanding the tools available to address emotionally driven disinformation.

In the long term (5-10 years), the objective should be to embed emotional awareness into the broader architecture of digital governance and democratic communication.

Priority actions include:

- **Developing advanced monitoring systems capable of identifying emerging emotional manipulation patterns across platforms and languages.**
- **Establishing permanent European research infrastructures dedicated to studying digital narratives, emotional dynamics and democratic resilience.**
- **Integrating emotional risk analysis into platform design and algorithm governance**, ensuring that future technologies are developed with democratic safeguards from the outset.

- **Strengthening international cooperation** on emotional manipulation and information integrity, recognising that disinformation campaigns increasingly operate across borders.
- **Embedding emotional literacy within lifelong learning frameworks**, ensuring that citizens continuously develop the skills required to navigate evolving digital environments.

By this stage, the goal is not simply to mitigate individual disinformation campaigns but to foster a digital public sphere that is structurally more resilient to emotionally manipulative communication. Taken together, these three phases reflect a shift from **reactive counter-disinformation policies** toward **proactive democratic resilience strategies**. In the short term, the emphasis lies on governance adjustments and awareness-building. In the medium term, the priority becomes institutional coordination and educational investment. In the long term, the objective is to reshape the digital communication environment so that emotionally manipulative narratives encounter stronger societal and institutional resistance.

7. CONCLUSION

The rapid transformation of the digital public sphere has profoundly reshaped how citizens encounter information, form political opinions and engage with democratic processes. As this catalogue has shown, **disinformation and polarisation cannot be understood solely as problems of inaccurate or misleading information**. Rather, they are deeply embedded in the emotional and narrative dynamics through which individuals interpret reality, construct meaning and relate to one another within digital communication environments.

The ENCODE analysis confirms that **emotions act as powerful drivers of engagement and belief formation**. Fear, anger, resentment and perceived threat often function as catalysts that accelerate the spread of narratives across digital networks. At the same time, **platform architectures and algorithmic systems tend to amplify emotionally charged content**, creating feedback loops in which emotionally intense narratives gain visibility and influence. These dynamics contribute to the **fragmentation of shared meaning, the erosion of trust in institutions and the emergence of increasingly polarised online communities**.

Against this backdrop, the Catalogue of Best Practices has sought to translate the scientific insights generated by the ENCODE project into **practical guidance for policymakers, platforms, civil society organisations and researchers**. By combining empirical analysis of online discourse with conceptual work on narratives, emotions and democratic communication, the catalogue proposes a set of approaches designed to strengthen resilience against emotionally driven disinformation while safeguarding democratic values.

A central contribution of this work is to highlight that addressing disinformation (and fake news) effectively requires a **multidimensional strategy**. Technical detection tools and regulatory frameworks remain essential, but they must be complemented by measures that acknowledge the emotional and behavioural dimensions of digital communication. The best practices presented in this catalogue therefore cover a broad spectrum of interventions, including approaches that integrate citizens' emotions into democratic deliberation, strategies for detecting and mitigating emotionally manipulative narratives, safeguards against unintended side-effects such as overmoderation or free speech tensions, and policy recommendations aimed at strengthening governance, societal resilience and research capacity.

Importantly, the catalogue does not frame emotions as a problem to be eliminated from democratic life. Emotions are an inherent part of political communication and collective identity formation. **The challenge lies in understanding how they operate within digital environments and ensuring that they contribute to constructive democratic engagement rather than manipulation and division.** The concept of affective pluralism, developed within the ENCODE framework, offers a constructive perspective in this regard: rather than suppressing emotional expression, democratic institutions and communication systems should aim to create conditions in which diverse emotional experiences can coexist without degenerating into antagonism and distrust.

Beyond its analytical and policy contributions, this catalogue also plays an important role within the broader architecture of the ENCODE project. The best practices and recommendations presented here provide a conceptual and practical foundation for the co-creation activities developed in WP6. By identifying concrete mechanisms through which emotional narratives shape digital communication, the **catalogue helps structure participatory workshops (T6.2) with citizens but also provides the framework to engage further collaborative design processes involving policymakers, civil society actors, researchers and platform representatives.** These co-creation activities allow stakeholders to refine, test and adapt the proposed approaches in real-world contexts, ensuring that the insights generated by the research phase are translated into practical solutions that reflect the needs and experiences of different communities.

At the same time, the catalogue directly informs the policy engagement and governance work carried out in Work Package 7. The regulatory and policy recommendations outlined in Section 6 provide a **structured set of proposals that can be integrated into European policy debates on digital governance, platform accountability and democratic resilience.** By linking empirical findings to ongoing EU initiatives such as the Digital Services Act, the AI Act and the emerging European Democracy Shield, the catalogue contributes to bridging the gap between academic research and policy development. In doing so, it supports decision-makers in identifying actionable strategies that address the systemic drivers of disinformation and polarisation.

The insights generated through this work also highlight important directions for future research. While the ENCODE project has made significant progress in analysing emotional dynamics within online political communication, many questions remain open. Further research will be necessary to **better understand how emotional narratives evolve across different platforms and cultural contexts, how algorithmic systems shape the emotional climate of public discourse, and how citizens interpret emotionally charged content in their everyday digital practices.** Continued investment in interdisciplinary research on emotion-centric harms, behavioural interventions and narrative dynamics will therefore be essential to keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital information ecosystem.

Looking ahead, strengthening democratic resilience will require sustained collaboration between policymakers, researchers, technology companies, educators and civil society organisations. **No single actor can address the challenges posed by emotionally driven disinformation alone.** The approaches outlined in this catalogue emphasise the importance of cross-sector cooperation, transparent governance frameworks and citizen empowerment through education and digital literacy.

Ultimately, the objective of this work is not simply to counter individual instances of disinformation, but to contribute to a healthier and more resilient democratic communication environment. By recognising the central role of emotions in shaping

political meaning and by integrating this understanding into governance, research and public engagement strategies, democratic societies can move towards a digital public sphere that is more reflective, inclusive and resistant to manipulation.

In this sense, the Catalogue of Best Practices represents both **a synthesis of the knowledge generated within the ENCODE project and a starting point for future work**. It provides a foundation upon which policymakers, researchers and practitioners can continue to develop innovative responses to the evolving challenges of digital communication, ensuring that democratic dialogue remains robust in an increasingly complex and emotionally mediated information landscape.

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ACRONYM	FULL NAME
AI	Artificial Intelligence
API	Application Programming Interface
DSA	Digital Services Act
EDAP	European Democracy Action Plan
EDMO	European Digital Media Observatory
EEAS	European External Action Service
EIA	Emotional Impact Assessments
EMFA	European Media Freedom Act
ENCODE	Unveiling Emotional Dimensions of Politics to Foster European Democracy
EPRI	Emotion Polarisation Risk Indicator
GPAI	General-Purpose AI
LLM	Large Learning Language Models
NODES	Narrative Observatory to combat Disinformation in Europe Systematically
PTS	Platform Transparency Standard
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VLOP	Very Large Online Platform

