European Democracy Shield

Public Consultation

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1. Summary

Founded in 1992, the **European Public Health Association (EUPHA)** is a leading umbrella organization connecting researchers, policymakers, and public health professionals across Europe. Operating in 53 WHO European Region countries, including all 27 EU Member States, EUPHA has 87 member organizations, organizes the **European Public Health Conference** (3,000+ professionals), coordinates the **European Public Health Week**, and publishes the **European Journal of Public Health**, a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

This position paper has been prepared with the **EUPHA Section on Health Literacy** in response to the European Commission's call for evidence on the European Democracy Shield. Established in 2024, the Section unites over 800 health literacy experts across Europe, working at the intersection of research, policy, and practice. Together, they are committed to advancing both the theoretical underpinnings and real-world applications of health literacy as a vital pillar of democratic resilience.

Health literacy, the ability to access, understand, appraise, and apply health information, is **far more than a public health** concern; it is a **democratic imperative**. The **pandemic, vaccine controversies,** and the parallel **rise of infodemics** have laid bare the **fragility of our information ecosystems**. They have shown how **health misinformation** can spread with viral speed, sowing confusion, eroding trust, and undermining the very **cohesion of our societies.** In an age where **hostile actors weaponize public health crises to polarize opinions and destabilize institutions, health-literate citizens are our first line of defense. Empowered with critical thinking skills and discernment, they are better equipped to resist manipulation and to participate fully and freely in democratic life. Strengthening health literacy is therefore not only about safeguarding individual well-being, it is about fortifying the foundations of democracy itself.**

To illustrate this contribution, we chose the iconic KU Leuven Library as it captures this message with poignant clarity. Burned to the ground by German forces in World War I, the library was resurrected through a wave of **transatlantic solidarity led by American universities,** whose names remain etched into its stonework as a testament to the shared values of truth, learning, and democratic freedom. Destroyed once again during World War II, it was painstakingly rebuilt brick by brick, a symbol of Leuven's enduring spirit. **Today, as democratic institutions and academic freedoms come under renewed attack**, the library stands as a living reminder: **knowledge can be threatened, but it must never be surrendered. In defending evidence, we defend democracy.**

Key recommendations

1. **Institutionalize health literacy** as a core element in EU and national strategies on democracy, societal resilience, and information integrity.

2. **Promote cross-sectoral collaboration** between public health, education, media, technology, and civil society to strengthen democratic safeguards.

3. **Include health literacy in digital and media education** across schools, universities, and vocational programs to enhance critical thinking and misinformation resistance.

4. **Create scenario-based training** for citizens, educators, and public officials to improve their ability to detect and counter health disinformation.

5. **Use AI and data analytics to detect emerging misinformation** threats and guide timely public communication responses.

6. **Target vulnerable and marginalized groups** with tailored health literacy measures that improve access, understanding, and protection from false information.

7. **Involve civil society and communities** in the design, implementation, and assessment of health literacy actions to build trust and ownership.

8. **Train public health, education, and policy professionals** across sectors to build institutional capacity and interdisciplinary exchange.

9. **Set up standardized monitoring systems and impact indicators** to measure progress and adjust health literacy efforts effectively.

10. **Fund research and innovation** on digital tools, community engagement, and evidence-based strategies to advance health literacy in a democratic context.

2. Countering disinformation and foreign interference

Health disinformation is no longer a peripheral issue; it is a central element of hybrid threat strategies designed to destabilize democratic systems. Hostile actors exploit health crises to erode trust in institutions, polarize public opinion, and sow confusion. In this context, countering health disinformation must be part of a broader EU strategy to detect and neutralize hybrid interference that targets democratic resilience.

We recommend the Commission to:

★ Create an EU-wide rapid response mechanism for health-related misinformation.

★ Mandate algorithmic transparency on platforms amplifying disinformation.

★ Supporting fact-checking networks and independent public health communicators.

★ Enforce accountability for digital platforms that systematically amplify health disinformation, through proportionate sanctions and coordinated EU oversight.

3. Strengthening civic engagement through health literacy

Civic participation depends on people's capacity to understand and act on complex information, especially in times of crisis. Health literacy equips citizens with critical thinking skills, enabling them to navigate uncertainty, evaluate competing claims, and make informed decisions that sustain democratic life. Embedding health literacy in democratic education is essential to foster resilient, active citizenship.

We recommend the Commission to:

★ Embed health literacy in national civic education programs.

★ Develop an EU-funded initiative under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) program to promote health rights as part of fundamental rights, with a focus on disinformation resilience.

★ Incentivize community-led forums and deliberative democracy models.

4. Protecting vulnerable populations

Vulnerable populations, including migrants, older adults, and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, are disproportionately exposed to and impacted by health disinformation. These groups often face systemic barriers to trustworthy information, leaving them more susceptible to manipulation and exclusion from democratic processes. Tailored approaches are required to ensure equitable access to health literacy resources.

We recommend the Commission to:

★ Create targeted digital health literacy campaigns for migrants, older adults, and youth.

★ Expand translation and accessibility tools in public communication.

★ Partner with grassroots organizations to tailor interventions

5. Building institutional resilience

Public institutions are key defenders of democratic values. However, without adequate training, inter-agency coordination, and crisis preparedness, they remain vulnerable to disinformation and operational paralysis. Strengthening institutional resilience means investing in the knowledge, tools, and culture needed to respond to evolving information threats and maintain public trust.

We recommend the Commission to:

★ Integrate health literacy modules into public service training.

★ Support inter-agency crisis simulation exercises.

★ Include public health indicators in EU democratic resilience monitoring.

6 Leveraging AI for real-time threat detection

The volume and velocity of disinformation demands agile, tech-enabled responses. Artificial intelligence and real-time analytics can play a transformative role in detecting emerging narratives, identifying coordinated attacks, and informing strategic communication. These tools must be deployed ethically and linked to public information systems at the EU level.

We recommend the Commission to:

- ★ Deploy AI tools to detect and analyze emerging trends.

- ★ Establish a dedicated observatory for health disinformation.

- ★ Linking detection tools with coordinated EU-level communications strategies.

7. Strengthening cross-sector collaboration

Disinformation is a systemic challenge that cuts across sectors—from public health to education, technology, and security. Effective responses require structured collaboration, not ad hoc alliances. Investing in cross-sector infrastructure and dialogue mechanisms will accelerate innovation and policy coherence, ensuring no sector is left to face complex threats alone.

We recommend the Commission to:

- ★ Set up permanent innovation clusters funded under EU4Health ; Horizon Europe or the Digital Europe Program that integrate health, education, and cybersecurity stakeholders, coordinated by national contact points in Member States.

- ★ Facilitate data sharing and coordination between health, education and security bodies

- ★ Host annual civil society and expert dialogues on information threats.

8. Monitoring, evaluation and impact indicators

Health literacy policies must be accompanied by robust monitoring systems to track progress and ensure accountability. Without consistent evaluation, investments in democratic resilience risk becoming symbolic rather than structural. The EU should work closely with Member States, statistical agencies, and research bodies to develop meaningful indicators and transparent reporting mechanisms.
We recommend the Commission to:

★ Define common impact indicators at EU and Member State level (e.g., inclusion of health literacy in school curricula, media literacy rates, engagement with public health communication).

★ Collaborate with the **Joint Research Centre (JRC)** and **Eurostat** to design, collect, and publish periodic data on health literacy and disinformation vulnerability.

★ Establish a **European Health Literacy Scoreboard** as part of the Democracy Shield to track national performance and promote mutual learning.

★ Fund research to evaluate the effectiveness of national strategies and pilot projects under the European Democracy Shield.

9. Conclusion

Health literacy is not just a health intervention; it is a foundation of democratic life. Empowering people to navigate complexity, discern fact from fiction, and make informed decisions strengthens both public health and political stability. As Europe confronts an era of hybrid threats and contested truths, EUPHA calls for bold action: to recognize health literacy as a democratic pillar, to invest in it with urgency, and to shield it from erosion. We stand ready to contribute our expertise to the European Democracy Shield and to help build a more informed, resilient, and democratic Europe.

The KU Leuven Library reminds us what is at stake. Burned, rebuilt, burned again, and rebuilt again: it embodies the idea that knowledge and democracy must be defended, again and again, by all of us.