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Setting up a special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, and defining its responsibilities, numerical strength and term of office

European Parliament decision of 18 June 2020 on setting up a special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, and defining its responsibilities, numerical strength and term of office (2020/2683(RSO))

(2021/C 362/41)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to the proposal from the Conference of Presidents,

— having regard to the Treaty on European Union (TEU),

— having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),

— having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and in particular Articles 7, 8, 11, 12, 39, 40, 47 and 52 thereof,

— having regard to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and in particular Articles 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16 and 17 thereof, and the Protocol to that Convention, and in particular Article 3 thereof,

— having regard to Rule 207 of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the outcome of the special committee set up by this decision should provide a common, holistic, long-term approach to addressing evidence of foreign interference in the democratic institutions and processes of the EU and its Member States, not only in the run-up to all major national and European elections but in a sustained manner across the EU, under a myriad of forms, including disinformation campaigns on traditional and social media to shape public opinion, cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure, direct and indirect financial support as well as economic coercion of political actors and civil society subversion;

B. whereas all reported incidents of foreign interference in democratic processes and institutions represent a systematic pattern that has been recurring over recent years;

C. whereas attempts by state actors from third countries and non-state actors to interfere in the functioning of democracy in the EU and its Member States, as well as putting pressure on the values enshrined in Article 2 of the TEU by means of malicious interference, are part of a wider trend experienced by democracies worldwide;

D. whereas foreign interference is used in combination with economic and military pressure to harm European unity;

1. Decides to set up a special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, vested with the following responsibilities:

(a) to conduct a thorough analysis of the investigations showing that crucial electoral rules have been breached or circumvented, in particular the existing provisions on the transparency of campaign financing, with allegations of political spending by various legal and illegal forms of conduits and straw donors from third-country sources;

(b) to identify possible areas which would require legislative and non-legislative actions which can result in intervention by social media platforms with the aim of labelling content shared by bots, reviewing algorithms in order to make them as transparent as possible in the factors which lead them to display, prioritise, share, de-rank, and remove content, and closing down accounts of persons engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour online or illegal activities aimed at the systematic undermining of democratic processes or at instigating hate speech, while not compromising on freedom of expression;

(c) to contribute to the ongoing debate on how to enhance the responsibility for countering foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, not exclusively by public authorities but also in cooperation with technology and social media companies and the private sector at large in order to raise awareness of the role, duty and responsibility that these have in countering foreign interference while not undermining freedom of expression;

(d) to assess national actions able to provide strict restrictions on the sources of political funding, since foreign actors have found legal and illegal ways to circumvent national legislations and have offered covert support to their allies by taking out loans with foreign banks, providing in-kind things of value, through purchase and commercial agreements, through shell companies, through non-profit organisations, through citizen straw donors, through emerging technologies offering anonymity, through online advertisements, through extremist online media outlets, and through the facilitation of financial activities; to identify possible areas which would require actions regarding the funding of political parties and political campaigns;

(e) to suggest coordinated action at EU level for tackling hybrid threats, including cyber-attacks on military and non-military targets, hack-and-leak operations targeting lawmakers, public officials, journalists, political parties and candidates, as well as cyber espionage for the purpose of corporate intellectual property theft and the theft of sensitive citizen data, since these threats can neither be addressed solely by national authorities working in isolation nor by pure self-regulation of the private sector, but require a coordinated multi-level, multi-stakeholder approach; to assess the security aspect of these threats, which can have severe political, economic and social implications for European citizens;

(f) to investigate on the EU's dependence on foreign technologies in critical infrastructure supply chains, including internet infrastructure, inter alia, hardware, software, applications and services, as well as on the required actions to strengthen the capabilities for countering the strategic communication of hostile third parties and to exchange information and best practice in this area; to support and encourage coordination between Member States on exchanging information, knowledge and good practices in order to counter threats and address current deficiencies;

(g) to identify, assess and propose ways to tackle security breaches inside the EU institutions;

(h) to counter information campaigns and strategic communication of malign third countries, including those through domestic European actors and organisations, that harm the goals of the European Union and that are created to influence European public opinion in order to make it harder to achieve an EU common position, including on CFSP and CSDP issues;

(i) to call upon all relevant services and institutions at the level of the EU and its Member States as it may deem relevant and effective in order to fulfil its mandate;

2. Stresses that the recommendation of the special committee shall be taken into consideration by the competent standing committees in their work;

3. Decides that the powers, staff and available resources of Parliament's standing committees with responsibility for matters concerning the adoption, monitoring and implementation of Union legislation relating to the area of responsibility of the special committee will not be affected or duplicated, and thus remain unchanged;

4. Decides that whenever the special committee work includes the hearing of evidence of a confidential nature, testimonies involving personal data, or exchanges of views or hearings with authorities and bodies on confidential information, including scientific studies or parts thereof granted confidentiality status under Article 63 of Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council [1], the meetings shall be held *in camera*; decides further that witnesses and experts shall have the right to make a statement or provide testimony *in camera*;

5. Decides that the list of people invited to public meetings, the list of those who attend them and the minutes of such meetings shall be made public;

6. Decides that confidential documents that have been received by the special committee shall be assessed in accordance with the procedure set out in Rule 221 of its Rules of Procedure; decides further that such information shall be used exclusively for the purposes of drawing up the final report of the special committee;

7. Decides that the special committee shall have 33 Members;

8. Decides that the term of office of the special committee shall be 12 months and that that term shall start running from the date of its constituent meeting;

9. Decides that the special committee may present to Parliament a mid-term report and that it shall present a final report containing factual findings and recommendations concerning the measures and initiatives to be taken, without prejudice to the competences of the standing committees in accordance with Annex VI to its Rules of Procedure.

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[1] Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 October 2009 concerning the placing of plant protection products on the market and repealing Council Directives 79/117/EEC and 91/414/EEC (OJ L 309, 24.11.2009, p. 1).