P9_TA(2019)0031

Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes

European Parliament resolution of 10 October 2019 on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes (2019/2810(RSP))

(2021/C 202/06)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, notably Articles 7, 8, 11, 12, 39, 40, 47 and 52 thereof, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, notably Articles 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16 and 17 thereof, and the Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, notably Article 3 thereof,

— having regard to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 16 December 1966, notably Articles 2, 17, 19, 20 and 25 thereof,

— having regard to the Commission communication of 26 April 2018 entitled 'Tackling online disinformation: A European Approach' (COM(2018)0236),

— having regard to the joint Commission and VP/HR Action Plan against Disinformation of 5 December 2018 (JOIN(2018)0036) and the joint Commission and VP/HR report on the implementation of the Action Plan against Disinformation of 14 June 2019 (JOIN(2019)0012),

— having regard to the European Council conclusions of 18 October 2018,

— having regard to the study entitled 'Automated tackling of disinformation' published by the European Parliament's Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services on 15 March 2019 ([1]),

— having regard to its resolution of 12 March 2019 on security threats connected with the rising Chinese technological presence in the EU and possible action on the EU level to reduce them ([2]),

— having regard to its resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties ([3]),

— having regard to its recommendation of 13 March 2019 to the Council and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning taking stock of the follow-up taken by the EEAS two years after the European Parliament report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties ([4]),

— having regard to Directive 2002/58/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 2002 concerning the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector (Directive on privacy and electronic communications) ([5]) and the ongoing reform thereof,

— having regard to its resolution of 25 October 2018 on the use of Facebook users' data by Cambridge Analytica and the impact on data protection ([6]),

([1]) Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services, Scientific Foresight Unit, 15 March 2019.
([2]) Texts adopted, P8_TA(2019)0156.
([3]) OJ C 224, 27.6.2018, p. 58.
([4]) Texts adopted, P8_TA(2019)0187.
([5]) OJ L 201, 31.7.2002, p. 37.
([6]) Texts adopted, P8_TA(2018)0433.

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— having regard to its resolution of 12 December 2018 on the annual report on the implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy ([7]),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 24 July 2019 entitled 'Nineteenth Progress Report towards an effective and genuine Security Union' (COM(2019)0353),

— having regard to Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (the General Data Protection Regulation) ([8]),

— having regard to the Commission proposal of 6 June 2018 for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Digital Europe programme for the period 2021-2027 (COM(2018)0434),

— having regard to Rule 132(2) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas attempts by state and non-state actors from third countries to exert influence on decision-making 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;

B. whereas foreign interference can take a myriad of forms, including disinformation campaigns on social media to shape public opinion, cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure related to elections, and direct and indirect financial support of political actors;

C. whereas foreign electoral interference constitutes a major challenge as it poses serious risks for European democratic societies and institutions, fundamental rights and freedoms, the rule of law, security, economic wellbeing and, ultimately, Europe's sovereignty;

D. whereas the global interconnection of people and economies by digital means and new technologies has also been used and misused by states engaging in foreign interference; whereas the media, notably social platforms, can easily be exploited to spread disinformation;

E. whereas awareness needs to be raised about Russia's disinformation campaigns, as this constitutes the main source from which disinformation in Europe originates;

F. whereas state and non-state actors from third countries other than Russia are involved in malicious interference in European public debates;

G. whereas a preliminary analysis by the Commission in June 2019 has shown that the measures put in place to protect the integrity of European elections did contribute to limiting foreign state and non-state interference in the European Parliament elections of May 2019;

H. whereas the EU successfully implemented a number of measures to mitigate foreign influence on and preserve the integrity of the 2019 European Parliament elections, including a Code of Practice against Disinformation, a Rapid Alert System and a European Cooperation Network on Elections; whereas the Commission has announced its intention to take further action to address these issues;

I. whereas the EU is highly dependent on foreign technologies, software and infrastructure, which can make it more vulnerable to foreign electoral interference;

J. whereas the scale of acts of malicious interference requires a coordinated European response including several complementary strands;

K. whereas the responsibility for countering disinformation and foreign electoral interference lies not exclusively with public authorities but also with internet and social media companies, which should therefore cooperate in achieving this aim while not undermining freedom of speech or becoming privatised censorship bodies;

([7]) Texts adopted, P8_TA(2018)0514.
([8]) OJ L 119, 4.5.2016, p. 1

L. whereas several investigations have shown 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 non-profit organisations from third-country sources, notably from Russia;

M. whereas all reported incidents of foreign electoral interference represent a systematic pattern that has been recurring over recent years;

N. whereas more than 50 presidential, national, local or regional elections are due to be held in Member States before the end of 2020;

1. Stresses that freedom of speech and expression, the protection of privacy and personal data and media pluralism, are at the core of resilient democratic societies, and provide the best safeguards against disinformation campaigns and hostile propaganda;

2. Stresses that, despite the multi-faceted nature of hostile interference and disinformation from abroad, interference in elections is part of a broader strategy of hybrid warfare and that responding to it therefore remains a core security and foreign policy issue;

3. Reiterates that foreign interference in elections undermines the right of people to have their say in the governance of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and that such interference by other states constitutes a violation of international law, even when there is no use of military force, threat to territorial integrity or threat to political independence;

4. Believes that free and fair elections are at the heart of the democratic process and therefore calls for the EU institutions and Member States to take decisive action on this issue, including in the upcoming process of reflection on the future of the EU;

5. Expresses deep concern about the fact that evidence of interference is continuously coming to light, often with indications of foreign influence, in the run-up to all major national and European elections, with much of this interference benefiting anti-EU, right-wing extremist and populist candidates and targeting specific minorities and vulnerable groups, including migrants, LGBTI people, religious groups, people with a Roma background and Muslims, or people perceived as Muslims, to serve the wider purpose of undermining the appeal of democratic and equal societies;

6. Acknowledges the worrying trend of global far-right groups using disinformation on social media platforms on a large scale; is concerned that such disinformation has influenced the backlash on gender equality and LGBTI rights;

7. Acknowledges that the overwhelming majority of Member States have full or partial bans on foreign donations to political parties and candidates; recalls with concern that even where laws place restrictions on the sources of political funding, foreign actors have found ways to circumvent them and have offered support to their allies by taking out loans with foreign banks, as in the case of the Front National in 2016, through purchase and commercial agreements, as in the case of the allegations reported by Der Spiegel and Süddeutsche Zeitung on 17 May 2019 against the Freedom Party of Austria and by Buzzfeed and L'Espresso on 10 July 2019 against Lega per Salvini Premier, and the facilitation of financial activities, as reported by the British press in relation to the Leave.eu campaign;

8. Expresses deep concern over the highly dangerous nature of Russian propaganda in particular, and calls on the Commission and the Council to put in place an effective and detailed strategy to counteract Russian disinformation strategies in a swift and robust manner;

9. Notes with concern that the number of disinformation cases attributed to Russian sources and documented by the East Strategic Communication Task Force since January 2019 (998 cases) is more than double that for the same period in 2018 (434 cases);

10. Strongly condemns, furthermore, the increasingly aggressive actions of state and non-state actors from third countries seeking to undermine or suspend the normative foundations and principles of European democracies and the sovereignty of all EU accession countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, as well as to influence elections and support extremist movements, taking into account the fact that the scale of cyber-attacks is constantly growing;

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11. Acknowledges the positive impact of the voluntary actions taken by service providers and platforms to counter disinformation, including new rules to increase the transparency of electoral advertising on social media in the Code of Practice, as well as the measures implemented by the Commission and the Member States in the last year, and reminds them of their joint responsibility when it comes to the fight against disinformation;

12. Recalls its resolution of 25 October 2018, in which it urged Facebook, following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, to implement various measures to prevent the use of the social platform for electoral interference; notes that Facebook has not followed up on most of these requests;

13. Considers that electoral interference in one Member State affects the EU as a whole insofar as it can have an impact on the composition of the EU institutions; believes that 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; considers that a legal framework for tackling hybrid threats, including cyber-attacks and disinformation, should be developed both at EU and international level, in order to enable a robust response by the EU;

14. Reiterates, however, that a strong common European policy needs to be developed in order to address effectively both foreign interferences and disinformation campaigns through robust EU communication with online platforms and service providers;

15. Calls on all actors involved to continue with their efforts to ensure that the democratic process, as well as elections, are protected from foreign state and non-state interference and manipulation; points in particular to the need to improve media literacy and civic education through culture and schooling from an early age in order to allow those targeted by disinformation campaigns to identify the information provided as biased; encourages the Member States, therefore, to include specific courses on media literacy in their school curricula, and to develop information campaigns targeted on the segments of the population that are more vulnerable to disinformation;

16. Is concerned about EU dependence on foreign technologies and hardware; underlines that the EU needs to strive to increase its own capabilities, as this will limit the opportunities for malicious electoral interference by foreign actors;

17. Reiterates its call on the Commission and the Member States to create an innovation-friendly environment, based on the principles of the market economy and the protection of fundamental rights, in order to allow European businesses to realise their full potential and utilise the protection of these rights as a competitive advantage;

18. Calls for national and European funding to strengthen the capabilities for countering the strategic communication of hostile third parties and to exchange information and best practice in this area, including under both the current and the post-2020 multiannual financial framework, among other things through the Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programmes; underlines that such programmes should include adequate safeguards to ensure strict compliance with international law and human rights, especially when funding third countries;

19. Stresses the need to continue supporting and fostering responsible journalism and editorial responsibility in both the traditional and the new media in facing the challenge of non-verified or one-sided tendentious information undermining citizens' trust in independent media;

20. Emphasises that it is essential to support public service media which do not rely financially on private financing sources and can therefore provide high-quality and impartial information to the general public, while at the same time ensuring and maintaining their independence from political interference;

21. Reiterates its support for the valuable work of the European Endowment for Democracy in supporting organisations fighting fake news and disinformation;

22. Considers that the EU should work towards practical solutions to support and strengthen democratic, independent and diverse media in the countries of the EU neighbourhood and in the countries in the Western Balkans which are candidates for EU accession;

23. Calls for an upgrade of the EU East StratCom Task Force to a permanent structure within the European External Action Service with significantly higher financing and staffing levels than hitherto;

24. Points out that, by reason of the complexity of the risks posed by online electoral interference and disinformation campaigns, the detection and management of these risks requires cross-sectoral cooperation involving the competent authorities and stakeholders;

25. Calls on the Commission to classify electoral equipment as critical infrastructure so as to ensure that in the event of a breach NIS Directive ([9]) responses can be applied;

26. Recalls that a significant proportion of these malicious acts of interference constitute a breach of European data protection and privacy rules; calls on the national data protection authorities to make full use of their powers to investigate data protection infringements and to impose deterrent sanctions and penalties;

27. Reiterates its call for investigations into alleged illegal use of the online political space by foreign forces to be carried out by Member States with the support of Eurojust;

28. Calls on the Commission to continue its monitoring of the impact of foreign interference across Europe and to fulfil the commitment solemnly entered into by its president-elect Ursula von der Leyen to 'address the threats of external intervention in our European elections' ([10]);

29. Calls on the next Vice-President of the Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to make the fight against disinformation a central foreign policy objective;

30. Calls on the Commission to evaluate possible legislative and non-legislative actions which can result in intervention by social media platforms with the aim of systematically labelling content shared by bots, reviewing algorithms in order to make them as unbiased as possible, and closing down accounts of persons engaging in illegal activities aimed at the disruption of democratic processes or at instigating hate speech, while not compromising on freedom of expression;

31. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to support public institutions, think-tanks, NGOs, and grassroots cyberactivists that are working on issues of propaganda and disinformation, and to make funding and support available for public awareness-raising campaigns aimed at increasing the resilience of EU citizens to disinformation;

32. Recalls the important role of whistle-blowers as a safeguard of democracy and governance when disclosing information in the public interest; calls on the authorities of the Council of Europe member states to establish and disseminate a policy on whistle-blowing, on the basis of respect for the 20 principles set out in Recommendation CM/Rec (2014)6; recalls the recently adopted directive on the protection of whistle-blowers;

33. Recalls that the EU is making EUR 4 175 million available for actions aimed at supporting media freedom and investigative journalism, including a response mechanism for violations of press and media freedom and the tangible protection of journalists;

34. Considers that only by thinking holistically about foreign, authoritarian interference, and tackling the vulnerabilities in all aspects of democratic governance and institutions, including European political parties, can the EU safeguard its democratic processes;

([9]) Directive (EU) 2016/1148 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 July 2016 concerning measures for a high common level of security of network and information systems across the Union, OJ L 194, 19.7.2016, p. 1.

([10]) 'A Union that strives for more: My agenda for Europe', by Ursula von der Leyen — Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024 (2019), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf — p. 21.

35. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to engage in discussions with stakeholders, as well as international partners, including in international fora, with a view to stepping up their actions to counter hybrid threats;

36. Emphasises that NATO and its centres of excellence are an essential tool in enabling Europe to strengthen the transatlantic link and for increasing both Europe's and North America's resistance to disinformation;

37. Calls on the Commission to address the question of foreign funding of European political parties and foundations without impeding the creation of a European public space going beyond the European Union, and to launch a discussion with the Member States to address these issues in relation to their domestic political parties and foundations;

38. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Commission, the Council and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.