

European Parliament elections: The Disinformation Challenge

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The aim of the current In Brief is to explore the possible disinformation threats in view of the European elections in May 2019. European voters are exposed to similar negative narratives and strategic disinformation campaigns which managed to influence a large number of citizens in the run-up of the US Presidential election and UK European Union membership referendum in 2016. The analysis also explores ways to tackle future malign information operations by proposing specific policy recommendations for strengthening the European and national institutional capacity and also obliging digital companies to improve their efforts in the fight against disinformation.

Background

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, especially when we think about politics. From the fabricated narratives which aimed to ruin political careers in ancient Rome to the *active measure* campaigns of the Russian security services

to discredit Western democracies, disinformation has been an ever-present tool for manipulation and influence. What has changed in recent years has been the drastically increased levels of untrue or twisted information online which is directly accessible to billions of users. The mass shift of printed news stories to social media feeds has created a completely new media environment, with growing opportunities for personalised targeting and tailored-made information content for individual users. Such an unregulated medium with no objective editing standards and growing number of misleading items has been particularly damaging to democratic elections and the political media discourse. Exposure to such misleading content in the run-up to elections can sway voters as many of them believe them to be true.

For many people disinformation and 'fake news' became key words in the aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential election and the UK European Union membership referendum. A series of journalistic investigations, public hearings and official reports confirmed the malign involvement of external actors, most notably Russia, throughout both electoral campaigns. The Brit-

ish Prime Minister has directly accused the Russian government of [‘weaponising information’](#) by meddling in internal affairs and sowing political discord. Additionally, Facebook [confirmed](#) that close to 80 000 posts on the social network were published by Russia-based operatives which have been seen by about 126 million Americans between 2015-2017.

It would be wrong to assume that these were one-off operations which were directed solely at these high-stakes election campaigns. In the last several years, a series of state and non-state actors have continuously put pressure on a number of electoral campaigns globally with the aim of swaying election results in different continents. In France there was a massive leak of e-mails aiming to sow doubt and disinformation just days before the closing of the 2017 Presidential campaign. Both India and Brazil have suffered from continuous misinformation campaigns on the instant messaging service Whatsapp (owned by Facebook) which has caused misleading or hate-inducing content to be spread to millions of users. Such malicious material contributed not only to political deception but also to physical violence and even manslaughter. The Irish abortion referendum of early 2018 was also targeted by a series of disinformation efforts through an extensive use of personalised political ads.

An important point of clarification is that disinformation should not be understood only as *‘fake news’*. Such one-dimensional labelling oversimplifies the phenomenon of malign information operations which are often varied and subtle in their approach. In some cases, the disinformation campaigns do not share fake content per se but promote particular stories from trustworthy media sources in order to contribute to a specific narrative. Other involve the triggering of strong emotions in users or the spread

of general mistrust towards parties or the political system in general. All of this dynamic happens in a highly populated online information space which is moderated exclusively by private companies which often struggle to impose consistent rules and keep up with the ever-changing disinformation tactics.

[Disinformation threats in the run-up to the European Parliament elections](#)

Coordinated spread of polarising narratives

A substantial threat to consider is the artificial fuelling of polarising political narratives and societal division. This is usually based on a pre-existing social cleavage which is additionally magnified by intentionally inaccurate reporting and manipulated photo or video content. It is easier for disinformation campaigns to tap into already present political controversies rather invest resources into creating new narratives which may not achieve the intended effect.

A case in point is the recent [investigation](#) that showed how fabricated content related with the Yellow Vests movement in France has generated more than 100 million views globally. The manipulated images and videos on Facebook and YouTube were generated mostly by Russia Today (RT). The misleading content showed made-up ‘proof’ for police brutality and governmental censorship of the *Gilet jaunes* movement with the aim to discredit the French authorities. Russia’s state media and affiliated online groups managed to dominate the debate and generated over twice as many views as the mainstream outlets *Le Monde*, *L’Obs*, *Le Huffington Post* and *Le Figaro* combined. The continuous and highly effective disinformation campaign against the French government directly favoured Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, which is a contender for the top spot in the

French EP elections. The involvement of Russia's state media in French politics comes as no surprise after previous [investigations](#) of Russian financial loans to the French far-right party and the traditionally positive attitude of Marine Le Pen towards the Kremlin.

The artificial fuelling of polarising issues continues on several pan-European divisive topics such as migration. The UN global compact for migration, for example, was effectively [hijacked](#) by the coordinated efforts of online groups which portrayed the non-binding document as a threat to European societies. These organised efforts manage to boost the aggressive and [xenophobic](#) online discourse and provide direct support for anti-migrant parties. A [study](#) of the Oxford Internet Institute conducted in the month preceding the elections demonstrated that the most successful disinformation content tends to revolve around populist themes such as anti-migration and Islamophobic sentiment.

An important aspect to highlight is the fact that such tactics can be pursued not only by foreign actors but by domestic ones as well. Domestic political and non-political individuals or organisations are also employing strategies for polarising the electorate with the aim of discrediting opponents or incumbent governments.

Suppression of voter turn-out

One of the vulnerabilities for European Parliament elections is the potential suppression of voters. This tactic was actively used in the months before the 2016 US Presidential elections, where a flurry of malign online groups and fake activists made coordinated efforts to [disincentivise](#) specific groups of voters on election day. On a basic level, this strategy entails the spread of incorrect online information about voting procedures and registration deadlines. More advanced nefarious efforts involve targeting undecided voters with specially designed

posts, opinion pieces or visual images which reinforce the notion that voting doesn't make any difference or that voter abstention should be lauded as an effective protest against the political establishment.

Voter turnout in European Parliament elections is historically low with 2014 continuing the trend of reduced citizen interest – only 42.6 % of eligible EU citizens voted. A third of the member states had electoral turnout lower than 35 %. In such a setting, the mobilization of core party electorates is key since many undecided or swing voters prefer not to vote at all. As a result, political groups with anti-European sentiment or radical political views can be overrepresented due to the substantially lower number of votes required for an EP mandate.

Malign foreign actors can exploit these trends by further suppressing voter turn-out with the aim to destabilise pro-European majorities in a number of member states. This is a substantial risk especially in Central and Eastern European countries where citizens register the lowest appetite to vote in EP elections. A downward spiral of low turnout in the EP elections also reaffirms their status of 'second order' elections and can serve as justification to question the institutions legitimacy of the legislature.

Spread of disinformation through digital platforms

Most of the global disinformation efforts in the last several years were made via digital platforms that facilitated the rapid large-scale spread of malign content. The attention-based business model of these platforms promotes divisive and emotionally charged debates which often confirm pre-existing biases or nudge users to succumb to specific political narratives. All of this contributes to a [polarised and fragmented](#) online information space which can

benefit actors who want to exploit these divisions.

The business model of all of the ‘free’ online services heavily relies on the selling of advertisement which appears directly into the user’s feeds. Intricate algorithms for micro-targeting of smaller groups of users based on their interests or individual characteristics make this process extremely accurate. The European Commission has identified this as a core problem and through a self-regulatory [Code](#) of Practice it has made clear that online platforms have to disrupt the advertisement revenues from accounts which spread disinfo.

The additional problem is that a lot of the misleading content is shared organically (nonsponsored) from actual users, fake profiles or automated bots. Several years after it became known that disinformation on online platforms can potentially sway elections, private companies are still struggling to cope with this phenomenon. A recent [report](#) made the disturbing suggestion that up to 241 million users in the EU may have been exposed to divisive digital content which was posted and amplified by ‘malicious online actors’.

Over-representation of fringe parties and conspiracy theories online

Social media platform algorithms usually give additional visibility to content which generates strong user engagement and numerous comments. An unintended consequence of this is the amplification of provocative or divisive opinions which can be further fuelled by automated bots or users who are paid to keep such extreme discussions going. As a result, radical or divisive content becomes over-represented and creates the impression that such opinions are shared by a sizeable part of society.

In early 2019 a small group of hyper-active online users (less than 0.1 % of users in Germany, France, Italy and Poland) who are associated with far-right/fringe political groups have [generated](#) more than 10 % of the social media content related to European politics. This very small number of users managed to generate a huge number of posts, comments and reactions through troll farms or automated bots. Unsurprisingly, the likes of Alternative for Germany (AfD) or Le Pen’s National Rally in France have disproportionate online audience.

The boosted visibility of fringe political content online also coincides with the substantial increase of the popularity of conspiracy theories on various social media platforms. A [study](#) by Demos on behalf of the Martens Centre provided a comparative analysis of a group of conspiracy-oriented Twitter accounts in Spain, Germany and Poland. The study found a thematic alignment between conspiracy circles and populist parties in those countries who share similar positions not only on unorthodox theories but also on political issues. A particular close alignment was found on topics related to migration, Islam and overall mistrust to the government.

Populist parties across the EU directly benefit from conspiracy theories and the increased feeling of scepticism towards the political system. Poisoning the information environment for political gain is beneficial for specific political actors but with lasting negative societal impact. The online anti-vax movement is a telling example. Growing mistrust of vaccines among Europeans has led to the record [increase](#) of measles in the last three years according to the World Health Organization. Unsurprisingly, there are [suggestions](#) that there could be a direct link between the support of populist parties and the percentage of people who mistrust vaccines in a number of Western European countries.

Future policy recommendations

Improved cooperation and responsibility of social media companies

The adopted self-regulatory EU Code of Practice on Disinformation is a positive step but more is to be desired from platforms such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram in terms of actual implementation. Digital companies should stop accepting ads which spread disinformation and also make sure that this content is downgraded by their algorithms. A wider network of fact-checkers should be employed by the platforms, especially in CEE countries and which are fluent in less widely spoken European languages.

More importantly, independent researchers should have access to private company data of past disinformation attempts in order to study the phenomenon and examine how they beat company's algorithms and virally spread intentionally misleading content. The European Commission has reported that private platforms continue to remain opaque and do not provide sufficiently detailed data when it comes to reporting of their efforts against disinformation. If this continues to be the case and the self-regulatory approach fails, the Commission has to follow-up on its commitment to propose binding legislation on digital platforms.

Enhanced national and EU-level response on tackling disinformation threats

The main source of external disinformation campaigns stems from the Kremlin and its proxies such as Russia Today or the Internet Research Agency (IRA). Even though Russia wrote the instruction manual on disinformation, these tactics are also deployed by state and non-state actors related with China, Iran and North Korea. National and EU-level legislation in Europe has

to be adopted as a direct response to hybrid threats and allow for adequate counter-measures and increased targeted sanctions against foreign actors.

Additionally, much is left to be desired with regard to member state cooperation in disinformation response and exchange of information. Lack of political will and institutional hesitance severely delayed the adoption of the EU Action plan against disinformation which was a proper first step but needs a serious [follow-up](#). The establishment of a Rapid Alert System and improved information-sharing among the EU-27 are still works in progress and should not come too little, too late. The new European Commission will also have the key task of continuing these efforts and making sure that the measures in the Action plan are properly achieved and hopefully, even surpassed in terms of ambition.

Expanding the East StratCom Task Force

The East StratCom was created in 2015 by European member states with the aim of tackling Russian disinformation efforts but has received inadequate funding and the extremely [lukewarm](#) support by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs. Unfortunately, HR/VP Federica Mogherini has [continuously](#) undermined the work of this strategic team. Reportedly, Russia [spends](#) more than 1 billion euro annually on pro-Kremlin propaganda. The East StratCom allocated funding to address Russia's disinformation was just over 1 million euro in 2018. This is an embarrassingly little sum given the size of the EU budget and the seriousness of the threat coming from the Kremlin and its proxies.

The EU Action plan against disinformation finally addressed this issue with steps for increased resources for strategic communication. This is a good starting point but there has to be

a stronger commitment when it comes to personnel resources, regional expertise and stronger visibility of the work of the East Strat-Com Task Force. It has to be upgraded to a fully-fledged unit within the External Action Service so it can more effectively cope with foreign disinformation efforts.

Review and update of national electoral laws

National authorities in every member state should consider a thorough review and update of national electoral laws. There have been calls from national election authorities on the importance of updating electoral legislation –the UK Electoral Commission has been [flagging](#) this important issue for over a decade. Digital ads, digital campaigns and funding should be more transparent and fall under the same rules which apply for radio, print and TV advertisement. More accountability and oversight is needed on sponsored online content especially during election campaigns.

The massive shift of campaign funding to digital ads demands an increase of transparency when it comes to identification of buyers of online ads and the source of provided funding. Election campaigns have moved beyond billboards and paper leaflets - electoral rules should be updated to fit the digital reality.

Building immunity and societal resilience in the long-run

Dealing with disinformation and its many shapes and forms is not straightforward and will remain a complex challenge for European democracies long after the 2019 elections. All institutional efforts or political endeavours against online propaganda have their limits. It would be wrong to assume that only top-down initiatives and strategic documents would counter such a shape-shifting phenomenon. Journalistic campaigns and consistent efforts by civil

society in a number of member states have built effective tools and communication campaigns in order to boost societal resilience. The [Baltics](#) are already providing a template for other EU member states on how governments, NGOs and local volunteers can successfully punch above their weight against the Kremlin's efforts.

The inevitable costs of disinformation to European societies is an ever-growing lack of trust to public institutions/liberal democracy which can become a downward spiral. The fight against this dangerous phenomenon relies on a combined effort between governments, private companies, media, civil society, educational institutions and family structures. The digital information space will undoubtedly have a huge impact on politics and policy-making in the future. Only a comprehensive effort to build societal resilience can inoculate Europeans against hostile disinformation operations in the long-run.

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