European Parliament

Online disinformation and the EU's response

The visibility of disinformation as a tool to undermine democracies increased in the context of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine. It gained notoriety as a global challenge during the UK referendum on EU membership as well as the United States presidential election campaign in 2016. The European Union and the European Parliament are stepping up efforts to tackle online disinformation ahead of the May 2019 European elections.

A global phenomenon with growing visibility

The phenomenon of false, misleading news stories is at least as old as the printing press. However, social media and their personalisation tools have accelerated the spread of rumours, hoaxes and conspiracy theories. The phenomenon gained global visibility during the 2016 US presidential election, when viral false news or 'junk news' across the political spectrum received more engagement on Facebook (FB) than real news. Research has shown that Russian accounts posted over 45 000 Brexit messages in the last 48 hours of the campaign. According to the Collins Dictionary, which chose 'fake news' as its word of the year for 2017, the term has seen an unprecedented increase in usage, of 365 % since 2016.

Online disinformation as an instrument of malign influence

When designed to deceive users for political purposes, digital gossip falls under 'disinformation' – the dissemination of verifiably false or misleading information which non-state and state actors can use to intentionally deceive the public and cause public harm. The Kremlin continues its disinformation campaigns in its ongoing hybrid war against Ukraine, and is applying them in its 'holistic' information warfare against the West. Pro-Kremlin information campaigns boost Moscow's narrative of a morally decayed EU on the brink of collapse, and seek to exploit divisions in Western societies. In November 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May accused Russia of 'weaponising information', and a February 2018 report by UK communications agency 89up.org found Russian pro-Brexit social media interference worth up to €4.6 million during the campaign. In August 2017, the US imposed fresh sanctions on Russia over its interference in the 2016 election. Following the nerve-gas attack on a former Russian spy, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter on UK soil in March 2018, the US imposed new sanctions, including on 16 Russian entities and individuals linked to the Internet Research Agency (a Russian 'troll factory' spreading disruptive content via social media) indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller for their role in election-meddling operations. The European Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) responded with a June 2018 joint communication on boosting resilience against hybrid threats, emphasising strategic communications as a priority.

Online platforms and their role in spreading disinformation

Whereas US tech giants had previously played down the volume of content purchased by Russian actors during the 2016 US presidential election campaign, FB, Google and Twitter told US lawmakers in November 2017 that pro-Kremlin actors bought and published divisive ads aimed at influencing both liberals and conservatives. FB said Russia-backed posts reached up to 126 million Americans during and after the 2016 election. The March 2018 disclosure that user data from 87 million FB users – including that of 2.7 million EU citizens – had been improperly shared with the controversial political consultancy company Cambridge Analytica (which used the data to micro-target and mobilise voters in the US and the UK) further increased the focus on the role of online platforms, not only in spreading, but also in monetising disinformation. In April 2018, FB CEO Mark Zuckerberg told the US Congress that tens of thousands of fake accounts were deleted to prevent election interference in 2017. He explained that Russian accounts primarily used ads to influence views on issues rather than promoting specific candidates or political messaging. In May 2018, Zuckerberg dodged questions about data protection, fake news and election security, posed by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in Brussels. Confidential emails from Zuckerberg, published in December 2018 – suggesting that FB secretly gave some companies access to users' friends' data – cast further doubt about FB's ethics.

This is a further updated edition of an 'at a glance' note published in May 2018.

Author: Naja Bentzen, Members' Research Service

PE 620.230 – February 2019

EU steps up anti-disinformation efforts to protect democracy

The FB data breach disclosure reignited the ongoing debate on the role of online platforms in the spread of conspiracy theories, disinformation and false news. In its June 2017 resolution on online platforms and the digital single market, the European Parliament had already called on the Commission to analyse the legal framework with regard to 'fake news', and to look into the possibility of legislative intervention to limit the dissemination of fake content. President Jean-Claude Juncker tasked Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society, to look into the democratic challenges that online platforms create as regards the spread of fake information, as well as to reflect on possible action at EU level. In October 2017, the Commission launched a public consultation on fake news and online disinformation. It also set up a high-level expert group (HLEG) representing academia, online platforms, news media and civil society. The Commission's April 2018 communication on 'Tackling online disinformation: a European approach' took recommendations of the HLEG into account and proposed an EU-wide Code of Practice – signed by the online platforms – to ensure transparency by explaining how algorithms select news, as well as improving the visibility and accessibility of reliable news. The communication also recommended support for an independent network of fact-checkers as well as actions to boost quality journalism and media literacy.

Coordinating the response to disinformation ahead of the European elections

Responding to the June 2018 call by the European Council to protect the EU's democratic systems and 'combat disinformation, including in the context of the upcoming European elections', the Commission and the HR in December 2018 presented an 'action plan against disinformation' with specific proposals for a coordinated European response. The action plan builds on existing Commission initiatives as well as the work of the East StratCom Task Force, set up in 2015 under the European External Action Service (EEAS, see below). The action plan focuses on four main areas:

Improved detection. Strategic Communication Task Forces and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell in the EEAS, as well as the EU delegations in the Neighbourhood countries will receive additional specialised staff and data analysis tools. The EEAS's budget for strategic communication to address and raise awareness about disinformation is planned to more than double, from €1.9 million in 2018 to €5 million in 2019.

Coordinated response. A dedicated Rapid Alert System will be set up among the EU institutions and Member States to facilitate data sharing and to provide alerts on disinformation threats in real time.

Online platforms and industry. The signatories of the EU-wide Code of Practice on Disinformation (signed on 26 September 2018) are urged to swiftly and effectively implement the commitments, focusing on actions that are urgent for the European elections. This includes deleting fake accounts, labelling messaging activities by 'bots' and cooperating with fact-checkers and researchers to detect disinformation and make fact-checked content more visible.

Raising awareness and empowering citizens. In addition to targeted awareness campaigns, the EU institutions and Member States will promote media literacy as well as support national teams of independent fact-checkers and researchers to detect and expose disinformation on social networks.

The EU's 'myth-busters' and the European Parliament

In 2015, the European Council asked the HR to prepare an action plan on strategic communication to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. As a first step, the East StratCom Task Force was set up in September 2015 under the EEAS. Since then, the team has collected more than 4 000 disinformation stories, which it has analysed, debunked and published on euvsdisinfo.eu as well as on its Twitter account, @EUvsDisinfo. The team also communicates EU policies in the Neighbourhood. Two other teams are focusing on the EU's Southern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. The European Parliament (EP), in its 23 November 2016 resolution on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda, called for the East StratCom Task Force to be reinforced. In January 2018, the task force received its first budget of €1.1 million, initiated by Parliament.

On 22 January 2019, the EP Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) adopted a draft recommendation to the Council and the Vice-President of the Commission/HR (rapporteur: Anna E. Fotyga, EPP, Poland) calling for strategic communication to become a matter of high priority in the EU. Highlighting the Cambridge Analytica breach, it calls for legislation to safeguard future election campaigns from undue influence. It also invites Member States which have not already done so to second national experts to the teams. Parliament is expected to vote during its March I 2019 plenary part-session.