**Topical Digest**

Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the EU, including Disinformation (INGE)

**March 2022**

Parliament’s research capacities within the Directorates-General for Parliamentary Research Services (EPRS), Internal Policies (IPOL) and External Policies (EXPO) support the work of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) and its Members.

**Russia’s war on Ukraine: The digital dimension**  
*Briefing by Tambiama Madiega, March 2022*

While Russia deploys cyber-warfare and disinformation strategies in its war on Ukraine, social platforms, and telecommunication, media and internet operators are playing an important role in relaying information on the war and shaping public opinion. The EU has taken a number of immediate, practical, measures to support Ukraine, and is contemplating further action to build the resilience of its communications infrastructure, strengthen cybersecurity and counter disinformation.

**Key social media risks to democracy: Risks from surveillance, personalisation, disinformation, moderation and microtargeting**  
*In-depth analysis by Costica Dumbrava, December 2021*

Whereas social media provide individuals with new opportunities to access information, express opinions, and participate in democratic processes, they can also undermine democracy by distorting information, promoting false stories and facilitating political manipulation. This paper provides an overview of the key risks social media pose to democracy, relating to surveillance, personalisation, disinformation, moderation and microtargeting. It also discusses key approaches to tackling social media risks to democracy in the context of EU policy.

**EU-China relations in challenging times**  
*Briefing by Ulrich Jochheim, October 2021*

This briefing describes the evolution of EU-China relations from the setting up of diplomatic ties in 1975 to today. During that time the relationship has become increasingly challenging. While the early policy of support to China’s economic policy has swiftly expanded the trade and investment relationship, results in other areas have been rather mixed. In recent years China has become much more assertive in the regional context, is fast improving its (offensive) military capabilities and has started to engage in global disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks, which have led to the EU changing its strategic approach.

**What if deepfakes made us doubt everything we see and hear?**  
*‘At a glance’ note by Philip Boucher, September 2021*

Deepfakes are hyper-realistic media products created through artificial intelligence (AI) techniques that manipulate how people look and the things that they appear to say or do. The deep-fake technology is perfectly legal, but its malicious uses are not. This paper looks at legal and technical measures that may be mobilised to limit their production and dissemination.
Regulation of the digital sector: EU-US Explainer
‘At a glance’ note by Naja Bentzen, July 2021
With online platforms and markets enmeshed in our societies and economies, the need to revisit and update existing digital regulations is becoming increasingly apparent. This paper gives an overview of the debate around these reforms in the US and the EU, which touches on fundamental questions of privacy, transparency and free speech and the complex dynamic between private firms and governmental oversight.

Tackling deepfakes in European policy
Study coordinated by Philip Boucher, July 2021
The emergence of a new generation of digitally manipulated media – also known as deepfakes – has generated substantial concerns about possible misuse. In response to these concerns, this study assesses the technical, societal and regulatory aspects of deepfakes. It identifies five dimensions of the deepfake lifecycle that policymakers could take into account to prevent and address the adverse impacts of deepfakes. The report includes policy options under each of the five dimensions, which could be incorporated into the AI legislative framework, the digital services act package and beyond.

Trump’s disinformation ’magaphone’: Consequences, first lessons and outlook
Briefing by Naja Bentzen, February 2021
The US presidential election and its aftermath, most notably the deadly insurrection at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, saw domestic disinformation emerging as a more visible immediate threat than disinformation from third countries. The crackdown by major social media platforms on Donald Trump and his supporters has prompted far-right groups to abandon the established information ecosystem to join right-wing social media. It could further accelerate the ongoing fragmentation of the US infosphere, cementing the trend towards separate realities. Against this backdrop, this briefing argues EU initiatives to counter disinformation may provide a basis for EU-US cooperation on boosting democracy at home and abroad.

The evolving consequences of the coronavirus 'infodemic': How viral false coronavirus-related information affects people and societies across the world
Briefing by Naja Bentzen with Thomas Smith, September 2020
Massive waves of information, including extensive amounts of false information have accompanied the coronavirus pandemic. Whether false information was spread for gain, our out of fear, it has impacted the ability of authorities to deal effectively with the pandemic, with the infodemic aggravating the spread of the virus itself.

Foreign interference in democracies: Understanding the threat, and evolving responses
Briefing by Naja Bentzen, September 2020
The Covid-19 crisis has further exacerbated the systemic struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, prompting authoritarian actors – often under pressure to deflect blame for their own (mis-)handling of the outbreak – to deploy a broad range of overt and covert tools. This briefing gives an overview of key concepts and responses by like-minded democracies, as well as the role of the European Union, including the European Parliament.

The evolving consequences of the coronavirus ‘infodemic’
Briefing by Naja Bentzen with Thomas Smith, September 2020
The Covid-19 pandemic has been accompanied by massive waves of information, including mis- and disinformation. This briefing sheds light on the still evolving repercussions of this ‘infodemic’, that have already cost lives and impacted the ability of authorities to effectively deal with the pandemic, with some arguing that the infodemic is aggravating the spread of the virus itself.
Peace and Security in 2020: Overview of EU action and outlook for the future
Study by Elena Lazarou et al., September 2020
This study looks at the concept of peace and the changing nature of the geopolitical environment, in light of global shifts in power and of the impact of the coronavirus crisis. Each chapter of the study analyses a specific threat to peace and presents an overview of EU action to counter the related risks. One chapter focuses specifically on countering disinformation and foreign interference. Other areas discussed include violent conflict, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, cyber-attacks and terrorism.

Institutions and foreign interferences
Study coordinated by Alessandro Davoli, June 2020
This study assesses the EU responses to counter foreign interference. It examines in particular the effectiveness of the EU's action against foreign interference in the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Covid-19 crisis, and the issue of foreign donations to European political parties. The study concludes with specific policy recommendations to enhance the EU's responses in these matters.

The EU’s response to the coronavirus 'infodemic'
'At a glance' note by Naja Bentzen, June 2020
In parallel to the coronavirus pandemic, governments across the world are having to tackle a viral 'infodemic'; a wave of coronavirus-related information including hoaxes, conspiracy theories and disinformation by third parties. In many countries, the situation is hampering freedom of expression.

The use of artificial intelligence in the audiovisual sector
In-depth analysis by Katarzyna Anna Iskra, May 2020
This paper presents the current issues and potential challenges in particular as regards the automated detection of illegal content and deep fakes, and AI-based production of high quality content, as well as the misuse of AI for false news, misinformation and manipulation. It also proposes concrete recommendations on how the EU could shape appropriate policies in the sector.

Covid-19 foreign influence campaigns: Europe and the global battle of narratives
Briefing by Naja Bentzen, April 2020
The global health crisis sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic raises concern that a combination of disinformation and heavily promoted health diplomacy, echoed by local proxies in Europe, could potentially pave the way for wider influence in other sectors in the wake of the crisis. Both Russia and China seem to be driving parallel information campaigns, conveying the overall message that democratic state actors are failing and that European citizens cannot trust their health systems, whereas their authoritarian systems can save the world.

Countering the health ‘infodemic’
'At a glance' note by Naja Bentzen, April 2020
The dissemination of mis- and disinformation in traditional media and on social media has surged in recent years, with wide-ranging consequences in various policy areas – from elections to geopolitics to healthcare. The prevalence of false information regarding health issues threatens to undermine trust in official health advice and institutions responsible for countering threats to public health.
The sharp power of knowledge: Foreign authoritarian meddling in academia

‘At a glance’ note by Naja Bentzen, December 2019

The visibility of, and focus on, authoritarian hybrid threats – a mix of conventional and non-conventional hostile activities to undermine democracies – is increasing. In this context, ‘soft power’ exerted through academic institutions and universities can become a ‘sharp’ hybrid tool, undermining academic independence and further eroding trust in facts and science.

Science and scientific literacy as an educational challenge

Study coordinated by Pierre Heriard, March 2019

European societies are faced with emerging threats relating to the spread of disinformation and pseudo-science. In this context, fostering scientific literacy can provide people with tools to navigate and critically address the vast amounts of information exchanged in public debate, and support democratic processes. This study gives an overview of scientific literacy in the EU, and of potential education policy responses to better prepare scientifically literate citizens.

Polarisation and the use of technology in political campaigns and communication

Study coordinated by Philip Boucher, March 2019

Algorithms, automation, big data analytics and artificial intelligence are becoming increasingly embedded in everyday life in democratic societies. This study includes a chapter on ‘bots, fake news, and foreign influence campaigns’ and provides detailed analysis of the technological affordances that enhance and undermine political decision-making, both now and in the future.

Regulating disinformation with artificial intelligence

Study coordinated by Mihalis Kritikos, March 2019

This study examines the consequences of the increasingly prevalent use of artificial intelligence (AI) disinformation initiatives on freedom of expression, pluralism and the functioning of a democratic polity. In this context, the study maps the regulatory options (from self-regulation to legislation) against four types of disinformation (public, private, electoral and foreign).

Disinformation and propaganda – Impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States

Study coordinated by Marion Schmid-Drüner, February 2019

This study assesses the impact of disinformation and strategic political propaganda disseminated through online social media sites. It examines effects on the functioning of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights in the EU and its Member States. The study formulates recommendations on how to tackle this threat to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It specifically addresses the role of social media platform providers in this regard.

Support for democracy through EU external policy: New tools for growing challenges

Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, February 2021

This briefing touches upon disinformation in the context of taking a more strategic and autonomous approach to supporting democracy worldwide, to combat the crisis of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism across the globe. Since the start of the current parliamentary term, the EU has reviewed its political guidance on democracy and human rights. Digital challenges and the narrowing space for civil society are among the priorities to be addressed. Accordingly, disinformation is mentioned because it intends to undermine democratic systems and the idea of democracy itself.
Digital services act
‘EU Legislation in progress’ briefing by Tambiama Madiega, March 2021
The rules governing the provision of digital services in the EU have remained largely unchanged since the adoption of the e-Commerce Directive in 2000, while digital technologies and business models continue to evolve rapidly, and new societal challenges are emerging, such as the spread of counterfeit goods, hate speech and disinformation online. Against this backdrop, in December 2020, the European Commission tabled a new legislative proposal on a digital services act to amend the e-Commerce Directive and set higher standards of transparency and accountability to govern the way platform service providers moderate content, on advertising and on algorithmic processes.

Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them
Study coordinated by the Policy Department for External Affairs, February 2021
Disinformation is an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception. A mapping of the disinformation and counter-disinformation landscapes in the region in the period from 2018 to 2020 reveals three key disinformation challenges: external challenges to EU credibility; disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic; and the impact of disinformation on elections and referenda. While foreign actors feature prominently – chiefly Russia, but also China, Turkey, and other countries in and near the region – the bulk of disinformation in the Western Balkans is produced and disseminated by domestic actors for domestic purposes. Further, disinformation is a symptom of social and political disorder, rather than the cause. As a result, the European Union should focus on the role that it can play in bolstering the quality of democracy and governance in the Western Balkans, as the most powerful potential bulwark against disinformation.

Further reading
Towards a more resilient Europe post-coronavirus: Options to enhance the EU’s resilience to structural risks, Study, April 2021
Democratic scrutiny of social media platforms and protection of fundamental rights, ‘At a glance’ note by Tambiama Madiega, February 2021
Online platforms: Economic and societal effects, Study coordinated by Mihalis Kritikos, March 2021
The geopolitical implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, Study coordinated by the Policy Department for External Affairs, September 2020
Disruption by technology: Impacts on politics, economics and society, In-depth analysis by Philip Boucher, Naja Bentzen, Tania Lațici, Tambiama Madiega, Leopold Schmertzing and Marcin Szczepański, September 2020
Foreign influence operations in the EU, Briefing by Naja Bentzen, July 2018
Countering terrorist narratives, Study coordinated by Kristiina Milt, November 2017
Russia’s information war: Propaganda or counter-propaganda?, Briefing by Martin Russell, October 2016
US strategic communication to counter foreign propaganda, Briefing by Naja Bentzen, October 2016
Canada’s strategic communication to counter foreign propaganda, Briefing by Naja Bentzen, October 2016
NATO strategic communications – An evolving battle of narratives, Briefing by Naja Bentzen, July 2016
Russia’s information war: Propaganda or counter-propaganda?, Briefing by Martin Russell, October 2016
Further online resources
'How to spot when news is fake'-package with 1-pager in 24 languages, animated infographic (downloadable in all EU languages), video 'Disinformation and democracy' with subtitles in 24 languages

What Europe does for me: People worried about false coronavirus news, People who worry about fake news, Fact-checkers, Amateur fact-checkers, EU response to coronavirus crisis

European Science-Media Hub (ESMH): Tackling Covid-19 Infodemic: fact-checking and debunking initiatives, disinformation-related articles

Graphic
Information disorder (sharing or developing of false information with or without the intent of harming)

Source: EPRS based on Council of Europe.

Or by scanning the QR code