

Disinformation, 'fake news' and the EU's response

The impact of the online spread of mis- and disinformation – including false news posing as factual stories – became increasingly visible in the context of the crisis in Ukraine, and gained notoriety as a global phenomenon during the 2016 presidential election campaign in the United States. Ahead of the European elections in 2019, the EU's answers to these challenges are still only tentative.

A global phenomenon with political impact

The phenomenon of false, misleading news stories is at least as [old](#) as the printing press. However, it gained momentum and global visibility during the final months of the 2016 US presidential election, when viral 'fake news' (or '[junk news](#)', as some researchers prefer to call it) across the political spectrum received more [engagement](#) on Facebook than real news. The Australian Macquarie Dictionary (AMD) chose 'fake news' as its [word of the year for 2016](#), defining it as 'disinformation and hoaxes published on websites for political purposes or to drive web traffic, the incorrect information being passed along by social media'. Explaining the choice, the AMD argued that the term 'captures an interesting evolution in the creation of deceptive content as a way of herding people in a specific direction'. Social media and their personalisation [tools](#) have accelerated the spread of 'fake news'. A growing number of EU citizens (46 % on average in 2016) follow [news on social media](#); six out of ten news items shared are passed on [without](#) being read first; and US [research](#) has shown that most young, digital-savvy school and college students have difficulties in identifying 'fake news'.

Disinformation as an information warfare tool

False news headlines seem tailored to trick users into sharing the stories, making them spread fast and far amongst like-minded users. Sometimes the aim is simply to generate traffic ('[clickbait](#)'). However, when designed to deceive users for political purposes, the digital [gossip](#) falls under '[disinformation](#)'; dissemination of deliberately false information which is part of a strategic tool kit that non-state and state actors can use to undermine adversaries. The Kremlin continues to use information [operations](#) in its ongoing [hybrid war](#) against Ukraine, and is applying it in its '[holistic](#)' information warfare against the EU and the West. A declassified US intelligence [assessment](#) published in January 2017 said that the Kremlin used professional 'trolls' (internet warriors) and Russian state broadcaster RT 'as part of its influence efforts'. Whereas tech giants Facebook and Twitter had previously played down the extent of content purchased by Russian actors during the 2016 US presidential election campaign, they told US lawmakers on 1 November 2017 that pro-Kremlin actors bought and published [divisive ads](#) aimed at influencing both liberals and conservatives during the campaign. Facebook said that Russia-backed posts reached up to 126 million Americans on their platform during and after the 2016 presidential election, whereas Twitter disclosed that it had found 2 752 accounts linked to Russian actors. Meanwhile, [reports](#) on Russian state institutions' investments in Facebook and Twitter have further increased focus on these firms' role in Western societal and political developments.

The Kremlin acknowledges its information warfare capabilities and intentions

Pro-Kremlin information campaigns boost Moscow's [narrative](#) of a West in decline, including a 'weak and morally decayed EU' about to collapse. So far, the Kremlin has denied all allegations of interference in the US election. However, on 22 February 2017, Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu, announced that 'information operations forces have been established that are expected to be a far more effective tool than all we used before', arguing that Moscow's 'propaganda needs to be clever, smart and efficient'. Security [analysts](#) say that Shoigu's announcement indicates that Moscow can no longer deny propaganda activities. At the same time, Russia's foreign ministry itself began to publish 'materials that contain false information about Russia' on its [website](#). There is also [concern](#) that the 2019 European elections could be targeted.

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International media watchdogs warn against threats to media

Information freedom watchdog, Reporters Without Borders [warned](#) in January 2017 that incoming US President Donald Trump's remarks about mainstream media [news](#) outlets that he appears to dislike as '[fake news](#)', 'dishonest', an '[enemy of the people](#)' and 'the [opposition](#)', could set a 'dangerous example for the world's press freedom predators', who see the notion of 'fake news' as justification to criminalise critical media. The United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, the OSCE representative on freedom of the media, and other international monitors issued a [joint declaration](#) on 'fake news', disinformation and propaganda. They expressed alarm at 'instances in which public authorities denigrate, intimidate and threaten the media, including by stating that the media is "the opposition" or is "lying"', thus undermining public trust and confidence in journalism as a public watchdog, risking misleading the public by 'blurring the lines between disinformation and media products containing independently verifiable facts'.

Growing concern raises European pressure on social media companies

In the EU, reflecting the increased concern over 'fake news', the European Parliament's then-President, Martin Schulz, called for a [European solution](#) to the problem in December 2016. Andrus Ansip, European Commission Vice-President in charge of the digital single market, urged Facebook and other social media firms to boost their [efforts](#) to counter 'fake news' in January 2017, adding that self-regulatory measures in the sector could be complemented by 'some kind of clarification' from the EU. In August 2017, Mariya Gabriel, EU Commissioner in charge of the digital economy and society, announced [plans](#) to launch a public consultation and set up a high-level expert group to advise on fake news, adding that it was 'premature' to talk about legislation. However, Gabriel said that online platforms 'have a duty of care', meaning that tech giants such as Facebook and Twitter would need to take action to monitor content posted by their users.

In June 2017, the German Parliament passed the [Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks](#). It enables authorities to issue fines of up to €50 million on social media companies who fail to remove hate speech, incitements to violence and defamation within 24 hours. Although social media platforms have resisted being labelled as publishers, both [Facebook](#) and [Google](#) have launched fact-checking features, and on 26 October 2017, Twitter banned ads from Russian state media companies RT and Sputnik, citing their [attempts](#) to interfere with the US election 'on behalf of the Russian government'. At the same time, independent [fact-checking websites](#) are mushrooming in [Europe](#), not least in the context of national elections. Such initiatives include the pan-European fact-checking coalition [CrossCheck](#), as well as [national initiatives](#).

Continued calls to boost EU 'myth-busting' team

The [European Council](#) asked the EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini, to submit an action plan on strategic communication to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns in 2015. As a result, the [East StratCom task force](#) was set up in September 2015 under the European External Action Service (EEAS). Since then, the team (now comprising 14 people) works without its own budget, drawing on the existing EU strategic communication budget and seconded staff. It relies on a network of volunteers to collect the disinformation [stories](#) (more than 3 300 [examples](#) in 18 languages since 2015), which, among other tasks, it debunks in its weekly [newsletters](#).

The European Parliament (EP), in its [23 November 2016 resolution](#) on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda, warned against Russian anti-EU propaganda, and called for reinforcement of the East StratCom task force, including through 'proper staffing and adequate budgetary resources'. In a March 2017 [open letter](#), a number of prominent European security experts, historians and lawmakers (including EP Members) criticised Mogherini's allegedly 'irresponsibly weak' stance on Russia's 'brutally aggressive disinformation campaign' (boosted by over €1 billion in state funds). The signatories called for a budget in single million euros for the East Stratcom task force.

The EP's proposed [amendments](#) to the draft EU budget for 2018 include the [pilot project](#) 'StratCom Plus', aiming to increase capacity for fact-checking disinformation within and outside the EU. On 25 October, the Council [announced](#) that it cannot accept all the EP amendments; a compromise is expected by 20 November 2017.

In the June 2017 resolution on online platforms and the digital single market ([2016/2276\(INI\)](#)), MEPs stressed the 'importance of taking action against the dissemination of fake news; calls on the online platforms to provide users with tools to denounce fake news', while at the same time highlighting the fundamental role of free exchange of opinions, as well as the value of the free press as regards to providing citizens with reliable information. MEPs also called on the Commission to analyse the current situation and legal framework with regard to fake news, and to verify the possibility of legislative intervention to limit the dissemination and spreading of fake content.