

## 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 challenge during the 2016 United States presidential election campaign. Ahead of the European elections in 2019, the EU is now stepping up its efforts to tackle 'fake news'.

### A global phenomenon with growing presence and impact

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, and the phenomenon gained global visibility during 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 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 dictionary argued that the term 'captures an interesting evolution in the creation of deceptive content as a way of herding people in a specific direction'. According to the Collins Dictionary, which chose 'fake news' as its [word of the year for 2017](#), the term saw an unprecedented increase in usage, of 365 % since 2016.

### Disinformation as an information warfare tool

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 students have difficulties in identifying 'fake news'. False news headlines seem tailored to trick users into sharing the stories, making them spread fast and far among like-minded users. When designed to deceive users for political purposes, digital [gossip](#) falls under '[disinformation](#)' – the dissemination of deliberately false information which non-state and state actors can use as a strategic tool to undermine adversaries.

The Kremlin continues to use [influence](#) operations in its ongoing [hybrid war](#) against Ukraine and is said to apply them in its '[holistic](#)' information warfare against the EU and the West. Pro-Kremlin information campaigns boost Moscow's [narrative](#) of a West in decline, including a 'morally decayed EU' on the brink of collapse. A declassified US intelligence [assessment](#) published in January 2017 said that the Kremlin used professional 'trolls' (internet warriors) and state media 'as part of its influence efforts'. In August 2017, the USA imposed [fresh sanctions](#) on Russia over Moscow's interference in the 2016 election, among other things. Whereas US tech giants had previously played down the volume of content purchased by Russian actors during the 2016 US presidential election campaign, Facebook, Google and Twitter told US lawmakers on 1 November 2017 that pro-Kremlin actors bought and published [divisive ads](#) aimed at influencing both liberals and conservatives. According to Facebook, Russia-backed posts reached up to 126 million Americans during and after the 2016 presidential election, whereas Twitter disclosed that it had found 2 752 accounts linked to Russian actors. [Reports](#) on Russian state investments in these firms have increased the focus on their societal and political role. EU Member States such as [Spain](#) and the [UK](#) have openly accused Russia of launching divisive influence campaigns. There is also [concern](#) that the 2019 European elections could be targeted.

So far, the Kremlin has dismissed allegations of interference in the US election campaign and in the UK referendum on EU membership. However, in February 2017 the Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu, acknowledged that a dedicated [information warfare force](#) had been established in 2013 within the Ministry of Defence. He added 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.

*This is a further updated version of an 'at a glance' note published in April 2017: [PE 599.384](#).*



## Growing European focus and pressure on social media companies

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'. Meanwhile, there is growing pressure, not only in the [USA](#) but also in Europe, on social media companies to assume greater responsibility for the content they spread. 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. A UK House of Commons [inquiry](#) was launched in January 2017, aiming to examine the role of social media, among other things, in the spread of 'fake news'.

## EU steps up anti-fake news efforts to protect democracy

In a 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', calling on online platforms to provide users with tools to denounce fake news, while at the same time highlighting the fundamental role of the free exchange of opinions, as well as the value of the free press as regards providing citizens with reliable information. On 13 November 2017, the Commission launched a public consultation on 'fake news and online disinformation' and set up a [high-level expert group](#) representing academics, online platforms, news media and civil society organisations. It is planning to publish a [communication](#) on fake news and disinformation in spring 2018. Speaking on 13 November, Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner responsible for Digital Economy and Society, stated that, in the face of fake news as 'a direct threat to the very foundations of our democratic society', the main goal was to defend citizens' right to quality information. Andrus Ansip, Vice-President for the Digital Single Market, acknowledged the need to strike a balance between the freedom of expression, media pluralism and citizens' right to access diverse and reliable information, arguing that online platforms and news media should 'play a part in the solution'. The public consultation runs until February 2018 and addresses content that is not *per se* illegal and therefore not covered by existing EU or national legislation. All stakeholders (including citizens, social media platforms, news organisations, researchers and public authorities) can contribute with views on the scope of the problem, assessments of already existing measures and ideas on possible future action. In addition to these steps, some Member States such as [Italy](#) and [Sweden](#) are introducing digital competence courses in schools to push back against 'fake news' and propaganda.

## Continued calls to boost EU 'myth-busting' team

In 2015, 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. 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 14 strong) has been working 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 it analyses, debunks and publishes in its weekly [newsletters](#). The team also explains and promotes the European Union's policies, not least in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

The European Parliament, in its [23 November 2016 resolution](#) on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda, called for the East StratCom task force to be reinforced, including through 'proper staffing and adequate budgetary resources'. Parliament's proposed [amendments](#) to the draft EU budget for 2018 include the [pilot project](#) 'StratCom Plus', aiming to increase capacity to fact-check disinformation in and beyond the EU.

In a March 2017 [open letter](#), a number of prominent European security experts, historians and lawmakers (including European Parliament Members) criticised Mogherini's allegedly 'irresponsibly weak' stance on Russia's 'brutally aggressive disinformation campaign'. The signatories called for a single figure budget in millions of euros for the EEAS StratCom team. On 20 October, in an [open letter](#) to Mogherini, eight Member States (the Czech Republic, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Sweden and the UK) urged the EEAS to 'further enhance the EU's StratCom capabilities'.

At a foreign ministers' meeting on 13 November, Mogherini called for additional resources for the StratCom team, not least to boost its capacities regarding the Western Balkans, which is being heavily targeted by Kremlin-backed [influence campaigns](#). The 17 Member States that addressed the issue at the foreign ministers' meeting, 'generally concurred that strategic communication is very important' and 'agreed on the need for more [human and financial] resources'. However, there still no consensus in all EU Member States about the approach to take.