AT A GLANCE

Plenary – October I 2021

European Parliament

EU cyber-defence capabilities

Cyberspace has become the fifth domain of warfare alongside the traditional sea, land, air and space. As societies digitalise and become more technologically connected, cyber risks and vulnerabilities increase. The European Union (EU) has been highly active in strengthening cyber capabilities and coordination frameworks through a collection of initiatives and proposals, notably since 2017. The European Parliament will debate recent as well as future measures during the October I 2021 plenary session, with a focus on cyber-defence capabilities, the subject of a report discussed and voted in the Foreign Affairs (AFET) Committee in July 2021.

Background

The diversity of cyber threats has increased over time, ranging from outright cyber conflict or warfare to cyber sabotage and espionage. Malicious cyber actors, from lone wolves to professional criminals and to state and non-state actors, exploit the anonymity and affordability of cyberspace. Coordinated cyber-attacks alongside economic pressure, disinformation and armed warfare are testing the resilience of democratic states and institutions, directly targeting peace and security in the EU. The World Economic Forum has placed cyber-attacks in its top 10 global risks for several years in a row. Their data suggest that the number of countries experiencing such attacks increased by 150 % between 2017 and 2019. Attacks targeting Europe show no sign of slowing down. The EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) reports that the most targeted sectors are digital services, government administration and the technology industry.

European Union action

In 2017, over eight in ten (87 %) Europeans saw cybercrime as an important challenge. Cybersecurity mainly refers to civilian activities relating to information and network security, while cyber defence tends to refer to the military sphere, including the protection of key assets. In 2017, the European Commission proposed a comprehensive cybersecurity package, including a permanent mandate for ENISA and overall improvements in rapid response and deterrence. An EU Cybersecurity Competence Centre was set up in Romania in 2020. The European Commission adopted an EU cybersecurity strategy in December 2020, describing how 'the EU can harness and strengthen all its tools and resources to be technologically sovereign' while cooperating with like-minded partners. Cooperation is supported by the EU's cyber-diplomacy toolbox, adopted in 2017. One such partner is NATO, with whom cooperation on cyber defence is a recognised mutual interest. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced in her 2021 State of the Union address the need for a European cyber-defence policy and for a cyber-resilience act. These are necessary, argues European Commissioner for the Internal Market, Thierry Breton, for Europe to become 'a leader in cybersecurity' that is able to 'protect, detect, defend and deter'. He estimates up to €4.5 billion of investments in the development and deployment of cybersecurity technologies between 2021 and 2027.

European Parliament position

Parliament's AFET committee adopted its report on the state of EU's cyber-defence capabilities on 1 July 2021. The report stresses the need to strengthen cyber-defence capabilities and notes that this will require intensified cooperation among all relevant EU bodies and agencies and with NATO. It welcomes the work of the European Defence Agency in this field and notes the potential of EU defence capability development initiatives for improving preparedness, rapid response and cooperation in the cyber domain. The EU's Strategic Compass reflection process is seen as an opportunity to deepen the 'strategic culture in the cyber domain' and to reduce the fragmentation in the EU's cyber architecture.

Own-initiative report: 2020/2256(INI); Committee responsible: AFET; Rapporteur: Urmas Paet (Renew, Estonia).

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