Foreign interference in EU democratic processes

The European Parliament is expected to vote in March on a report on external attempts to influence elections and other democratic processes in EU countries. The report, prepared by the Special Committee on Foreign Interference (INGE), summarises the EU’s main vulnerabilities and recommends steps to address them.

Background

The 2016 US presidential election highlighted the risks of foreign interference even in mature democracies. There is also evidence that Russia has tried to influence democratic processes in Europe, for example the 2017 French presidential election, the 2019 European elections, and the UK’s 2016 Brexit referendum. Disinformation is spread by broadcast media such as Russia’s RT and China’s CGTN, and on social media. Armies of trolls post content under fake profiles, which is further amplified on platforms such as Twitter via automated ‘bot’ accounts. In elections, disinformation can be used to promote candidates and outcomes perceived as favourable to the interests of a foreign state. However, it also serves the more general purpose of destabilising democratic societies through inflammatory content on terrorism, separatism, migration, Covid-19 vaccination, and other polarising issues.

Foreign influence operations combine disinformation with other online activities. At least two attempted attacks on German Bundestag computers have been attributed to Russian hackers, as was a hack and leak operation against the Macron campaign in 2017. Such activities aim to manipulate public opinion, steal confidential information, and cause disruption (for example, a massive 2007 attack on Estonia).

Russia, a key perpetrator of foreign interference operations, cultivates ties with several political parties in Europe, particularly on the far right. For such parties, Moscow is a provider of political and practical support. Mainstream politicians are also at risk of being co-opted. Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his Finnish counterpart Paavo Lipponen both now work for Gazprom. Confucius Institutes and Beijing-sponsored Chinese language classes at European universities are another vector of foreign influence.

While Russia and China are the best known sources of foreign interference, they are not the only ones; over 80 countries are known to spread disinformation through social media, and non-state actors such as the so-called Islamic State also play a significant role.

EU and Member States’ measures to counter foreign interference

EU task forces such as East StratCom, launched in 2015, monitor and raise awareness of foreign disinformation. In 2018, the EU drew up a code of practice for social media platforms and advertisers. After reviewing the impact of the code, the European Commission is working on a revised version to address its main shortcomings. Furthermore, once adopted, the proposed digital services act will bring binding rules in this field. Media literacy training, and support for high-quality independent journalism, can help to build resilience.

The INGE report

The report outlines some of the EU’s main vulnerabilities, calling for more resources to be devoted to the issue. A comprehensive EU strategy is needed to develop resilience across all sectors of society, starting with greater awareness of the problem. This will mean continuation of existing efforts (such as the EEAS task forces) but also a range of new initiatives. The latter include a media literacy strategy, efforts to close legal loopholes to foreign financing of political parties, closer cooperation with democratic countries facing similar challenges, and more sanctions against foreign actors responsible for interference.

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