

Institutions and foreign interferences¹

ABSTRACT

This study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the AFCO Committee, assesses the EU responses to counter foreign interferences. It examines in particular the effectiveness of the EU action against foreign interferences 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.

Foreign interferences represent a huge challenge for democratic government and society. The 2016 US Presidential elections, the 2016 referendum on EU membership in the UK, the 2017 French presidential elections are prominent illustrations of a more general and dangerous trend. While foreign interferences – which can be conceptualised as those activities carried out by, or on behalf of, a foreign actor, through a variety of means, to undermine the interests of another country – have existed for a long time, the internet and social media have provided new, fertile ground for their pursuit. Social platforms have been used effectively to wage large-scale disinformation campaigns by countries such as China or Russia, particularly ahead of new elections, with social media enabling them to cover their actions behind automated accounts or bots.

Disinformation campaigns – and narrative warfare more broadly – are widely perceived as a threat to free and fair elections both in the US and Europe. Based on the polling conducted by a Special Eurobarometer on 'Democracy and Elections', for instance, a large majority of EU-based internet users are worried or deeply worried about disinformation and misinformation, microtargeting and political advertising. At the same time, however, the same survey also shows that a majority of them are concerned about restrictions and censorship of political debates before elections. This vividly illustrates the tension between shielding elections from disinformation and the danger of hampering freedom of speech and media pluralism, as well as the difficult balance that policy makers and regulators have to strike.

Disinformation is a prominent, but not the only type of foreign interference. The funding of political parties or campaign organisations by foreign states may be another disruptive factor for democracies. Here again, there are several examples of mainly far-right populist political parties supported by foreign funding. From the Leave.EU campaign organisation in the Brexit referendum to the League in Italy, financial resources from abroad have allegedly been used, often exploiting 'grey areas' in the national legislation on party financing. A notable recent development, even in countries with more liberal traditions on party funding, is the tendency

¹ Full study in English: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655290/IPOL_STU\(2020\)655290_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655290/IPOL_STU(2020)655290_EN.pdf)



to strengthen regulations and limit or ban funding from abroad.

The EU has developed its policies and tools to tackle foreign interferences considerably. As Russian action vis-à-vis Ukraine and the Eastern region became more aggressive in 2014, the EU stepped up its efforts to counter hybrid threats, disinformation and election interferences. The protection of the 2019 European Parliament elections – which took place in an already difficult context for the EU, with the surge of Eurosceptic and anti-EU forces – became paramount, with several actions implemented to improve coordination with the Member States and cooperation with NATO.

The outbreak of the covid-19 epidemic dramatically showcased the importance of an effective and prompt response by the EU to narrative warfare and alternative information campaigns waged by countries like Russia or China, set-up with the purpose of undermining the trust of European citizens in their democratic systems and in the EU.

Aim

The study aims to provide background information, map the institutional and policy responses, and assess the performance of the actions and tools set up to tackle the challenge of foreign interferences in the EU.

Chapters 1 and 2 conceptualise foreign interferences, discuss their impact on democratic processes and, describing the EU's responses, prepare the ground for the empirical chapters. Chapter 1 of the study provides the general background to understand the nature and different types of foreign interferences and the challenge that they pose to, and for, liberal democracies. A specific focus will be placed on Russia and hybrid warfare. The strategies endorsed by international organisations and other democratic states to tackle foreign interferences are also discussed.

Chapter 2 maps the strategic positions and actions taken by the EU institutions - the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Commission and the European Parliament - to tackle foreign interferences. It places its analytical focus mainly on hybrid threats, disinformation and strategic communication. It also provides a state-of-the-art presentation of the current agenda and reforms based on the strategic agenda of the von der Leyen's Commission and the 2019 resolution of the EP on foreign interferences.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with two critical cases to empirically assess the capacity of the EU to respond to foreign interferences and disinformation specifically. Chapter 3 analyses the 2019 EP elections. It takes an in-depth look at the election package of the European Commission, the Code of Practice on Disinformation, the monitoring activity and communication strategy of the StratCom Task Forces and the new Cooperation Network on Elections. Based on a wide array of sources - reports by the EU institutions, think-tanks and academic studies - the chapter attempts an evaluation of the performance of these instruments in the run-up to the May EP elections.

Chapter 4 deals with the timely case of the COVID-19 epidemic. Based on the reports of the EUvsDisinfo project of the EU East StratCom Task Force and other independent sources, the chapter maps the narratives spread by foreign states and actors. The chapter reviews and provides an early assessment of the responses of the EU.

Chapter 5 moves the focus to political parties and foreign interferences. It provides background information on recent cases of parties or campaign organisations receiving financial resources from abroad. It also reviews the national regulations on party funding with respect to foreign donations. Finally, the chapter moves to the EU-level and discusses the recent reforms in the regulation on party statutes and funding.

Chapter 6 concludes with specific policy recommendations emerging from the analysis. An effective strategy to counter foreign interferences should be comprehensive, focusing both on strategic communication and institutional responses, and on social development. Private and public, economic, political and social, national, sub-national and international actors should all be involved and should contribute to its successful implementation.

Disclaimer and copyright. The opinions expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the European Parliament. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy. © European Union, 2020.

External Authors: Edoardo BRESSANELLI, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa (Principal Investigator); Anna DI PALMA, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa; Gaetano INGLESE, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa; Sofia MARINI, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa; Eric REPETTO, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa

Research Administrator responsible: Alessandro DAVOLI Editorial assistant: Ginka TSONEVA

Contact: poldep-citizens@europarl.europa.eu

This document is available on the internet at: www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses

PE 655.290

IP/C/AFCO/IC/2020-035

Print ISBN 978-92-846-7037-6 | doi:10.2861/399710 | QA-02-20-648-EN-C

PDF ISBN 978-92-846-7039-0 | doi:10.2861/4525 | QA-02-20-648-EN-N