European elections: EU institutions prepared to counter disinformation

The EU institutions are playing their part in defending the European elections on 6-9 June against disinformation and information manipulation targeting European democracy.

The European elections are a flagship of European democracy. As documented by e.g. the European Digital Media Observatory, disinformation actors from inside and outside the EU seek to undermine the integrity of the electoral process, trust in democratic processes at large and sow division and polarisation in our societies. According to the Eurobarometer, 81% of EU citizens agree that news or information that misrepresents reality or is false is a problem for democracy.

Attempts to mislead citizens

Institutions, authorities, civil society actors and fact-checkers such as the European Digital Media Observatory, the European Fact-Checking Standards Network and EUvsDisinfo have detected and exposed numerous attempts to mislead voters with manipulated information in recent months.

Disinformation actors have pushed false information about how to vote, discouraged citizens from voting, or sought to sow division and polarisation ahead of the vote by hijacking high-profile or controversial topics. Sometimes these attempts to deceive consist of flooding the information space with an abundance of false and misleading information, all with the aim of hijacking the public debate. Often top politicians and leaders are targeted by information manipulation campaigns. Several European policies are often targets of disinformation: support to Ukraine, the European Green Deal, and migration.

Disinformation actors have also employed networks of fake accounts as well as fake or impersonated media outlets to manipulate the information environment. Recent revelations by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and national authorities of EU Member States include the False Facade, Portal Kombat and Doppelgänger operations.

Recently an investigative report called "Operation Overload" by Finnish software company Check First documented how suspicious accounts contacted more than 800 fact-checkers and media in over 75 countries - to overload them with false information, drain their resources and to try and convince them to spread this false information by way of debunking articles.
EU institutions: Increased efforts to protect the EU from information manipulation

While the threats are there, so are the EU’s collective responses. Based on a clear mandate from the political leadership, the EU institutions have been tackling the challenge stemming from foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation, for years.

These efforts take place in close collaboration and coordination between the institutions and with the involvement of a wide range of other stakeholders, such as EU Member States, media and fact-checkers and civil society, in order to share insights, exchange experiences and best practices and coordinate responses.

Being at the global forefront of addressing threats related to foreign information manipulation and interference, the EU is working in close cooperation with its like-minded partners outside of the EU via fora such as the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, among others. To raise resilience to external interference attempts, the EU has developed a dedicated toolbox to counter foreign information manipulation and interference, including a set of tools ranging from situational awareness and resilience building to legislation and diplomatic levers. All these efforts always take place in full respect of European fundamental values, such as freedom of expression and freedom of opinion.

Our comprehensive response to disinformation is centred around the following building blocks:

- developing policies to strengthen our democracies, making it more difficult for disinformation actors to misuse online platforms, and protect journalists and media pluralism;
- raising awareness about disinformation and our preparedness and response;
- building societal resilience against disinformation through media literacy and fact-checking;
- cooperating with other institutions, national authorities or third parties.

The EU institutions have been promoting several activities, including awareness-raising campaigns and media literacy initiatives, to raise societal resilience against disinformation and information manipulation. Examples include:

- the official European elections website with a section on “Free and fair elections”;
- a series of videos by the European Parliament (in 24 official EU languages) informing the public about the techniques used by disinformation actors to deceive people;
- a leaflet by the European Parliament with 10 tips on how to tackle disinformation;
- a toolkit for teachers by the European Commission on how to spot and fight disinformation;
- a joint campaign by the Commission and the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services with a video running on social media and broadcast around the EU, raising awareness of the risks of disinformation and information manipulation ahead of the European elections;
- A dedicated series of articles and insights on foreign information manipulation and interference on the EEAS’ EUvsDisinfo.

New EU legislation in place
In this mandate, important legislation was adopted by co-legislators, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), the AI Act and the Act on Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising. During the past mandate, the European Parliament’s Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (and its successor) also shone a spotlight on the issue of foreign interference, including disinformation, and recommended that all of society plays its part, also through non-legislative measures, to tackle them.

The DSA requires platforms to assess and mitigate risks related to the protection of electoral processes, such as disinformation, including through AI generated content. The DSA is already fully applicable and is being enforced by the Commission in relation to so called “very large online platforms” (i.e. those reaching at least 45 million users in the EU or 10% of the EU population). In this context, the Commission has already opened proceedings against X and Meta – for both Instagram and Facebook – on potential DSA violations related to election integrity. On the preventive side, in March 2024, the Commission adopted election guidelines, recalling the measures platforms need to adopt to ensure compliance. In April 2024, the Commission also organised a voluntary stress test with these designated platforms, civil society and national authorities. The Commission is in continuous dialogue with platforms to ensure effective implementation and compliance with the DSA.

For more information see background note.

Further information
European Parliament’s website about disinformation
European Commission’s website about disinformation
European External Action Service website and awareness raising project EUvsDisinfo
European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)
European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN)

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