

Background note

Foreign interference around elections - Parliament's investigations, warnings and measures

Foreign interference in electoral processes represent a systematic pattern, MEPs warned already [in 2019](#). In 2020, Parliament [tasked a special committee](#) to investigate how foreign actors use disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure related to elections, and financial support to shape public opinion, put pressures on EU values and harm European Unity.

Since then, the EU has strengthened its defence against disinformation, adopting new laws and in other non-legislative ways strengthening the resilience against foreign interference.

Foreign interference and information manipulation is a real threat to democracy. In a year where major democracies in the world including the EU is voting, Europeans need to be prepared and informed.

EP president Roberta Metsola has throughout her mandate warned against interference and pushed for more powerful measures:

"This election will be the test of our system... We know how far other actors will go to try to disrupt our democratic processes. We are seeing attempts in many States to push disinformation, misinformation and propaganda which come from actors hostile to the European project. We cannot allow this destructive narrative, propaganda and disinformation to spread without countering it.", she [said at the European Council 21 March 2024](#).

Investigations and warnings during this legislature

Since the beginning of the legislature, MEPs have investigated the [evidence of interference in democratic processes](#). The special committee investigating foreign interference ([INGE](#)) listed [several tactics](#), including abuse of online platforms, cyberattacks and attacks on critical infrastructure, covert funding and elite capture and recommended a broad [set of actions](#), to make democracy more resilient.

The successor committee ([ING2](#)) stressed the urgent need to step up [this defence](#) against foreign interference to [protect the 2024 elections](#). MEPs named Russia and China as main actors, but also mention other actors such as [Qatar and Morocco](#).

In February 2024, MEPs expressed their [outrage](#) about the continuous efforts by Russia to undermine and ultimately destroy democracy in Europe, underlining that Putin's efforts to dismantle any form of democracy inside Russia is a warning sign and that it is a matter of extreme gravity to tackle the Russian interference attempts. Allegations regarding potential misconduct by a Member were referred to the Advisory committee on the code of conduct.

In addition, the European External Action Service studies foreign information manipulation and interference and has in a [special report about elections](#), warned about attacks on information consumption, citizens' ability to vote, political actors, trust in democracy and elections infrastructure during the months before and after elections.

MEPs [asked sanctions against Russian interference](#) in the EU by new Kremlin-backed media outlets spreading Russian disinformation, and condemned the targeted attack against the EP

by paying certain MEPs and candidates in the European elections to disseminate Russian propaganda (April 2024).

Measures taken

Following the above-mentioned analysis, the EU has strengthened its defence against foreign interference in democratic processes [many ways](#):

- MEPs have adopted legislation to ensure that online platforms take responsibility to protect citizens and society from disinformation. The 2022 [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#) includes obligations for online platforms to counter disinformation and the [Digital Markets Act \(DMA\)](#) establishes obligations for large online platforms acting as “gatekeepers” on the digital market to ensure they behave in a fair way.
- New [transparency rules for political advertising](#) help fight against disinformation and foreign interference and ban sponsoring ads from outside the EU ahead of elections.
- In March 2024, Parliament adopted [the world’s first comprehensive law on regulating artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#), which will protect fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law as well as counter disinformation.
- MEPs also adopted new rules to defend journalists and other critical voices from judicial intimidation ([anti-SLAPP](#), February 2024) and strengthened provisions to shield editorial freedom from political interference in the new [Media Freedom Act](#) (March 2024).
- To better protect the European Parliament, Parliament adopted [reforms to strengthen the integrity, independence and accountability in the European Parliament](#) and Members called for [effective monitoring and surveillance systems](#) to detect foreign interference in its activity (July 2023)
- To complement these new laws, the EU also has strengthened cooperation between [elections authorities](#), disinformation specialists (both working for [public administrations](#) and [independent professionals](#)), [with NATO](#) and stepped up its [diplomatic service’s specialised team on disinformation](#).
- The EP and EU also has several initiatives to support [teachers](#) (also [here](#)) or [interested citizens](#) who want [to learn more about disinformation](#) and how they [can contribute to the defence](#), or stay vigilant with the help of a [leaflet](#).

Elections

Elections are a key democratic moment and can be targeted to ensure an outcome favourable to anti-democratic actors.

“[D]isinformation and other information manipulation (...) can prevent citizens from making informed choices or discourage them from political participation altogether. (...) [O]n the eve of the 2024 European elections increased interference and information manipulation activity is expected. (...) [T]he democratic integrity of the Union must (...) be defended, including by preventing the spread of disinformation and undue foreign influence over European elections”, observed the [resolution](#) of European Parliament on foreign interference on 1 June 2023.

[Free and fair elections](#) need to be protected. EP works hands in hands with all national electoral authorities and other EU Institutions to ensure reliable information about the elections are available.

It encourages all citizens to [use their vote from 6-9 June 2024 European elections](#).