


POLICY BRIEF


Should we expect a Russian disinformation campaign during the 2019 European elections?

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1. Introduction

“Disinformation is understood as a verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and maybe cause public harm¹”. The EU elections are going to take place between 23-26 of May 2019 and the EU has already expressed its concerns about a possible disinformation campaign and spread of fake news by Russia². This concern is linked with the fact that Russia has been accused of alleged disinformation campaign during the latest elections in the USA and France, as well as the UK’s referendum on Brexit³. Now, it is time for the EU to secure the upcoming elections by investing millions of euros for this sensitive matter.

2. State of play

2.1 The concerns of the EU about a possible Russian disinformation campaign in the upcoming European elections

In 2015, the European Council addressed “the need to challenge Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaign⁴” and for this reason it asked the High Representative to present an Action Plan, with the cooperation of Member States and the European Institutions⁵. The EU Fusion Hybrid Cell has stated that “the disinformation from the Russian Federation poses the greatest threat to the EU⁶” and the same idea seems to be supported by Andrus Ansip, the Vice-President of the European Commission, who declared that “there is strong evidence pointing to Russia as the primary source of disinformation in Europe. Disinformation is part of Russia’s military doctrine and part of a strategy to divide and weaken the West⁷”. Therefore, the EU is preparing for possible disinformation campaigns that might arise as we get closer to the 2019 EU elections⁸. The European Commission’s Joint Communication ‘Action plan against disinformation’ bases the concerns on actual numbers:

“The East Strategic Communication Task Force has catalogued, analyzed and put the spotlight on over 4,500 examples of disinformation by the Russian Federation, uncovering numerous disinformation narratives, raising awareness of and exposing the tools, techniques and intentions of disinformation campaigns. Its focus is on the Eastern Partnership countries and on Russian domestic and international media and its approach

¹ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

² <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/european-elections-russia-and-fake-news-under-commission-s-scrutiny>

³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/how-france-successfully-countered-russian-interference-during-the-presidential-election/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/16/qa-russian-hackers-vladimir-putin-donald-trump-us-presidential-election>

⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2018/10/17/russian-iranian-twitter-trolls-sent-10-million-tweets-fake-news/>

⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21888/european-council-conclusions-19-20-march-2015-en.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21888/european-council-conclusions-19-20-march-2015-en.pdf>

⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine_el/54969/The%20EU%20steps%20up%20action%20against%20disinformation

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/05/eu-disinformation-war-russia-fake-news>

¹⁰ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

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is to expose, on the basis of the evidence collected, the trends, narratives, methods and channels used and raise awareness of them⁹”.

For this reason, the budget of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which engages in spotting misinformation campaigns, rose from EUR 1.9 million (2015) to EUR 5 million (2018)¹⁰.

2.2 What measures has the EU taken?

As ENISA, the EU Agency for Cyber Security, mentioned in its paper, the election process is divided into four stages; “the maintenance of the electoral register, the public political campaign process, the voting process and the delivery of the results¹¹”, so this means that the elections could be vulnerable during any stage of the process. In September 2018, the European Commission presented measures on transparency, data protection, cyber security, sanctions and cooperation aimed at securing the May 2019 elections:

It encouraged Member States to create a national cooperation election network of relevant authorities (cyber security, electoral, etc.) and set a contact point to participate in a European- level election cooperation network. In this way, authorities will have the chance to respond quicker if needed and share information with ease¹². This would happen with the support of the Rapid Alert System, a digital platform, where the EU Institutions and Member States can analyze and share data and respond coherently to disinformation¹³.

The European Commission suggested that political parties, campaign organizations and foundations should make their campaign expenditures known and state which political group is behind their advertisement/s. In case they don’t, then the Member States should impose electoral sanctions. Also, it proposed to make it harder to fund EU parties:

“The targeted change of the 2014 Regulation on party funding will make it possible to impose financial sanctions for breaching data protection rules in order to deliberately influence the outcome of the European elections. Sanctions would amount to 5% of the annual budget of the European political party or foundation concerned. The sanction will be enforced by the Authority for European political parties and European political foundations. In addition, those found to be in breach would not be able to apply for funding from the general budget of the European Union in the year in which the sanction is imposed¹⁴”.

Finally, it issued guidelines that would help national authorities, European and national parties to apply “the data protection obligations under EU law in the electoral context¹⁵”. It also proposed “to

⁹ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

¹⁰ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-6647_en.htm

¹¹ <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/enisa-position-papers-and-opinions/election-cybersecurity-challenges-and-opportunities>

¹² http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-5681_en.htm

¹³ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/ras_factsheet_march_2019_0.pdf

¹⁴ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-5681_en.htm

¹⁵ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-5681_en.htm

introduce financial penalties of 5% of the annual budget of the European party or political foundation concerned if they infringe the data protection rules in an attempt to influence the outcome of elections to the European Parliament¹⁶”.

Apart from the measures taken by the European Institutions and the Member States, the EU has also asked Facebook, Twitter, Mozilla and Google to aid its efforts to safeguard the elections from possible interference, by complying with the Code of Practice on Disinformation. As mentioned at the 29/1 European Commission’s Press Release, progress has been made by deleting fake accounts and narrowing the visibility of sites that encourage disinformation¹⁷. In the words of Věra **Jourová**, EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality “*With the launch of European election network with EU authorities last week and this report today, we are stepping up the pace on all fronts to ensure free and fair elections. I expect companies will fully follow up on their rhetoric and commitment. Time is short so we need to act now*¹⁸”. Indeed, from now on political advertisements on Facebook will include the label ‘paid for by’¹⁹.

Finally, the platform EU vs DISINFO, created to address disinformation campaign coming from Russia and run by the European External Action Service East StratCom Task Force, has published a guide that will help Europeans to identify disinformation campaigns and thus neither to fall for their messages nor to share it online. The platform explains that to recognize them, the readers should take into consideration the sources, the author, the images and the content when reading an article²⁰.

2.3 How could Russia be building a possible disinformation campaign?

The platform EU Vs DISINFO alleges that Russia’s interference takes place in four categories, which are information manipulation, extreme intervention, cyber disruption and political grooming and that they are carried out through ten different methods²¹:

- Disinformation, which is considered to be the most widespread tactic as well as the tactic that was allegedly used during Brexit, US and French elections²².
- Political advertising, which is the method of “Using a fake identity or non-attributable false-front account to purchase online political ads, primarily on social media sites, to propagate disinformation about certain political parties, candidates, issues, or public figures²³.”
- Sentiment amplification, which is done by fake accounts, trolls or automated bots²⁴.
- Identity falsification²⁵.
- Hack-and -leak operations, targeting at e-mails and documents²⁶.

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-factsheet-free-fair-elections_en.pdf

¹⁷ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-746_en.htm

¹⁸ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-746_en.htm

¹⁹ <https://euobserver.com/foreign/144537>

²⁰ <https://euvdisinfo.eu/what-can-you-do/>

²¹ <https://euvdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

²² <https://euvdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

²³ <https://euvdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

²⁴ <https://euvdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

²⁵ <https://euvdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

²⁶ <https://euvdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

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- Reconnaissance hacking, which is hacking state institutions, think-tanks, NGO's and media²⁷.
- Infrastructure attacks, meaning attacking IT networks related to the voting procedure²⁸.
- Elite co-optation, which is the creation of relations with specific elites of the public and the private sector ²⁹.
- Party or campaign financing³⁰.
- Extreme intervention, that means using hard power³¹.

2.4 What is Russia's answer?

In an article by Sputnik,³² it is stated that the country is blamed without any evidence and that the elections - apart from Estonia - will be implemented traditionally, which means that the vote will be on a paper ballot, as opposed to an electronic one, so in practice there wouldn't be any intervention in the elections. Furthermore, it expresses the belief that the measures taken by the EU and the disturbance created by the thought of such an intervention are emphasized in order to attract more voters and to potentially justify the rise of the Euroscepticism.

Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian Prime Minister, expressed his objection to the accusations, characterizing them as “aberrant paranoia³³”. He also stated that “the elections have not yet taken place and we are already suspected of meddling. What about the presumption of innocence? If after the elections European leaders can provide evidence that Russia interfered in the vote, then we'll look into it.³⁴”. Furthermore, Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, stated that the country is arbitrarily blamed³⁵.

Finally, Maria Zakharova, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, has responded to the allegations by French officials and journalists, stating that Russian journalists have faced discrimination in France and that the sense of mistrust towards the Russian media in Western Europe is the result of propaganda:

“The situation surrounding our media in France continues to deteriorate. We have repeatedly stressed that Elysee Palace has consistently and systematically taken discriminatory steps against Russian journalists that are accredited in that country. Moreover, such a policy is accompanied by public statements of a hostile nature addressed to them by French officials, including President Macron himself, who recently proposed creating an agency for protecting democracy in order to combat external

²⁷ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

²⁸ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

²⁹ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

³⁰ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

³¹ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>

³² <https://ru.sputnik.md/columnists/20190312/25122292/Vybory-2019-evropejskij-elity-uzhe-gotovy-obvinit-Moskvu-v-svoem-porazhenii.html>

³³ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1097083/eu-news-russia-interfere-european-elections-moscow-dmitry-medvedev>

³⁴ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1097083/eu-news-russia-interfere-european-elections-moscow-dmitry-medvedev>

³⁵ <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/609926-evropa-vmeshatelstvo-vybory-rossiya>

information interference in the EU coming, primarily, and allegedly, from Moscow. All this has created an atmosphere of distrust and toxicity around Russian media. This is part of the propaganda, which, unfortunately, is gaining momentum in Western Europe and in France in particular³⁶”.

She additionally declared that “This looks like an institutional campaign against Russian media outlets in France. It is impossible to fight fakes and misinformation with one hand and harass media outlets with the other hand. This just doesn’t happen³⁷”.

3. Conclusion

This is not the first time that measures against a possible disinformation campaign are being taken by the EU Member States. For the general elections in March 2017, the Netherlands banned the electronic counting of ballots³⁸, while in the same year the UK’s National Cyber Security Center organized seminars, provided guidance material and offered to help political parties with possible cyber problems that might come up³⁹. Finally, in the same year, France created a “system to feed the attackers with bogus information to preemptively degrade the value that might be derived from leaked campaign documents⁴⁰”.

It seems that the EU is taking a large number of measures to ensure that the May 2019 EU elections will be held without any intervention from third parties. As Julian **King**, Commissioner for the Security Union said: “Given the proximity of the European elections, any progress made in the fight against disinformation is welcome. But we need to go further and faster before May. We don’t want to wake up the day after the elections and realise we should have done more⁴¹”. Indeed, the best way to tackle a possible disinformation and misinformation campaign, is to take into consideration all the parameters, specify the problem, cooperate with possible third actors (NATO) and then propose sustainable solutions to secure one’s position.

The European Parliament’s Recommendation of 13 March 2019⁴², proves that the EU is interested not only in the upcoming elections, but it aims at taking measures against such phenomena in the future and for the neighbouring countries as well. This suggests that the concerns of the EU can be the stimulus that will motivate it to further develop its cyber security policies and to strengthen its capacity to deal with any possible threats.

³⁶ http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3592727

³⁷ http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news//asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3562173 #5

³⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/02/dutch-will-count-all-election-ballots-by-hand-to-thwart-cyber-hacking>

³⁹ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/23/russian-election-interference-europe-s-counter-to-fake-news-and-cyber-attacks-pub-76435>

⁴⁰ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/23/russian-election-interference-europe-s-counter-to-fake-news-and-cyber-attacks-pub-76435>

⁴¹ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-746_en.htm

⁴² <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2019-0187+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>

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We can conclude that the measures taken by the EU for the upcoming elections are not meant to condemn Russia without apparent evidence, but to strengthen its own policy and security against any possible threat. Besides, in the European Parliament's Recommendation there are more countries mentioned as possible sources of a potential disinformation campaign, e.g. at part (l):

“[The EP]strongly condemns the increasingly aggressive actions of Russia, China, Iran, North Korea and others in this context, which seek to undermine or suspend the normative foundations and principles of European democracies and the sovereignty of all Eastern Partnership countries, as well as influence elections and support extremist movements, taking into account that the scale of cyberattacks is constantly growing⁴³”.

The actions taken by the EU offer a good chance to prove that cooperation, coordination and resolute decision-making exist and can prevent any possible threat, as well as that the population of the Member States can have objective and unbiased information to decide with whom to choose to express its opinion, when it comes to elected representatives.

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⁴³ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2019-0187+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>