European Parliament

Foreign interference in EU democratic processes: Second report

The European Parliament is due to vote in May II on the second report on external attempts to influence elections and other democratic processes in EU countries. The report, prepared by the second Special Committee on Foreign Interference (ING2), follows up on the work of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE), and makes recommendations to address institutional and normative gaps identified in the run-up to the 2024 European elections.

Background

Foreign interference and manipulation, including disinformation, have been identified as a rapidly growing political and security challenge for the European Union and its immediate neighbourhood (Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries) as well as for global security and stability.

In the absence of a commonly agreed EU definition, foreign interference in the EU is broadly understood to mean any illegitimate interference by foreign powers in the democratic and political processes of the EU and Member States. This means influencing their decision-making at any level, and negatively impacting values, procedures and the legitimacy of political processes. It includes, according to a Chatham House study, 'covert or coercive interference by a foreign power in the political or governmental system from within, such as politicians and officials who are working for or under the influence of overseas regimes; influence on the political system from without, such as abuse of the lobbying system, corruption, espionage, cyber-attacks; and manipulative influence on public engagement or views, through online disinformation and manipulation campaigns'. Foreign interference can be conducted by state or non-state actors, and operates in the interface between legality and illegality, exploiting the blurring lines between domestic and foreign actors.

While foreign interference operations have always been part of the geopolitical playbook, new technologies and the internet culture have reshaped their scale, nature and potential reach, becoming a risk even for mature democracies – as the 2016 US elections, 2017 elections in France and the COVID 'infodemic' demonstrated. Recent ground-breaking artificial intelligence (AI) developments in large language models (LLMs), such as Chat GPT, will likely further increment the reach and effectiveness of foreign interference operations in an exponential – and as yet unknown – manner.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the subsequent polarisation of the geopolitical landscape, has raised the stakes – and the level of threat to democratic processes in the EU and beyond. The 'weaponisation of everything' – food, energy, migration, human rights, science and historic memory – has been transposed to and exploited in the information sphere, becoming part of the toolkit of foreign interference. 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 intentionally and systematically through social media, and non-state actors such as the Russian paramilitary Wagner group also play a significant role in foreign interference and disinformation (in particular in Africa).

EU and Member States' measures to counter foreign interference

In recent years, the EU has stepped up its efforts to counter disinformation (foreign information manipulation and interference – FIMI). In September 2015, the East StratCom Task Force (ESTF) was set up under the EEAS, to raise awareness about pro-Kremlin disinformation, information manipulation and interference, exposing attacks on the EU, its Member States and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. To date, the Task Force has collected, analysed and debunked over 15 000 disinformation stories in its EUvsDisinfo database. The EEAS later added two further task forces – Western Balkans, and South (focused on the Middle East and North Africa, and the Persian Gulf region) – in charge of shaping strategic communication with

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Author: Anna Caprile, Members' Research Service
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neighbouring countries. The EU has also set up a network of EU-anti-disinformation hubs covering all 27 EU Member States, as part of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), an independent platform addressing disinformation in Europe. The Digital Services Act (DSA) entered into force on 16 November 2022, imposing a range of obligations on online intermediary services, including search engines and social media platforms, to ensure transparency, accountability and responsibility for their actions. The Code of Practice on Disinformation, strengthened in 2022, includes additional voluntary commitments by its 34 signatories, to date. The Commission plans to put forward a defence of democracy package in June 2023, including a legislative proposal designed to strengthen the resilience of the EU democratic space to foreign interference (to curb the influence exerted through covert interest representation services paid for or directed from outside the EU) and other non-legislative support measures. A number of civil society organisations have however raised concerns regarding the potential negative impact of the planned legislative initiative on the restriction of the civic space in the EU and beyond.

The 2022 Strategic Compass identified a wide range of existing and possible new EU tools, to be brought together within a common EU hybrid toolbox, to offer a coordinated framework for the EU response to hybrid threats, including the Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity (SIAC), the rapid alert system (RAS), the deployment of EU hybrid rapid response teams and the development of an EU cyber-defence policy.

European Parliament position

INGE special committee

The European Parliament too has become part of the fight against foreign interference and disinformation: with its decision of 18 June 2020, Parliament established the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE), tasked with drawing up a report of factual findings and recommendations for measures and initiatives to be taken to counter foreign interference and disinformation. After 18 months, including 50 hearings with over 130 invitees, including 5 Commissioners, the final resolution was adopted on 9 March 2022, just days after the Russian Federation began its unprovoked and unjustified war on Ukraine. The resolution identified and mapped the threat of foreign interference in all its forms, including disinformation, manipulation of social media platforms and advertising systems, cyber-attacks, threats against and the harassment of journalists, covert political funding, and elite capture and co-optation. It provided both a diagnosis of the EU's vulnerabilities and recommendations for strengthening the EU's resilience, such as a specific sanctions regime against foreign interference and disinformation campaigns.

ING2 special committee

On 10 March 2022, Parliament decided to set up a new Special Committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (ING2), with the task, in particular, of following up on the previous INGE report, identifying 'the appropriate legal basis for any necessary legal acts' and preparing the ground for 'permanent EU institutional solutions to address foreign malicious interference and disinformation', not least in the run-up to the 2024 European elections. On 14 February 2023, following the alleged cases of corruption and foreign interference affecting some Members of the European Parliament, still under investigation, it was decided to give the ING2 committee a new responsibility and rename it the 'Special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, and the strengthening of integrity, transparency and accountability in the European Parliament'. Since its constitutive meeting, ING2 has focused predominantly on Russian and Chinese interference in third countries.

The final report, adopted by ING2 Members on 26 April 2023 (with 27 votes for, 1 against and 1 abstention), includes recommendations and updates on the EU's coordinated strategy; resilience-building; foreign interference; cybersecurity; interference during electoral processes; covert funding of political activities by foreign actors and donors; deterrence, attribution and collective countermeasures, including sanctions; and neighbourhood policy, global cooperation, and multilateralism. Among other recommendations, it calls on the Commission to develop an effective defence of democracy package, taking into account the final proposals of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Own-initiative report: (2022/2075(INI)); Committee responsible: ING2; Rapporteur: Sandra Kalniete, EPP, Latvia