



Digital Democracy in CEE:

Things to Watch For in 2024 European Parliament Elections



CEE Digital
Democracy Watch

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Things to Watch For in 2024 European Parliament Elections

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European Parliament Elections 2024

In Times of War In Ukraine and Disinformation

With votes scheduled in as many as 70 countries and over 2.8 billion people eligible to vote, 2024 is set to be a significant election year.

Elections are integral to democratic governance. However, democracy itself is experiencing numerous challenges, in some instances shifting towards illiberal or even authoritarian practices. With their black-and-white solutions even to complex issues, populist parties attract voters, typically promising a way out of pressing matters and limiting civil liberties. A report by the Swedish V-Dem Institute monitoring modern democracies highlights a concerning trend – the number of democratic nations has decreased over recent decades. There has been a rise in the number of countries leaning towards various forms of autocracy. The researchers point to a distressing milestone: ‘For the first time in 20 years, there are more dictatorships than liberal democracies in the world.’ They further reveal that in 2022, 72% of the global population, or 5.7 billion people, were living under autocratic regimes; 28% (or 2.2 billion) in outright dictatorships and only as much as 13% (1 billion) enjoyed a fully democratic governance.

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Additional challenges for democracy arise from its reliance on new information and communication technologies, which have given rise to a new model known as electronic democracy, also referred to as cyber- or e-democracy. This evolution carries numerous risks: disinformation, increased fragmentation, synthetic content, and challenges in content moderation.

The democratic framework has been severely undermined by disinformation campaigns, exemplified by Russia's efforts to influence the outcomes of the US presidential elections in 2016 and 2020. Russian disinformation has also targeted Europe, aiming to destabilise the region. In July 2020, the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee released a revealing report on Russian interference in British politics. The report detailed interference in significant political events including the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 Brexit referendum. In France, Russian financial support to Marine Le Pen and her far-right party, National Unity, alongside official receptions in Russia, have strengthened her party at the expense of more democratic parties.

It is also important to note that the 2024 elections will take place in the shadow of the ongoing war in Ukraine, waged by Russia on 24 February 2022 and aimed at undermining Ukraine's independence and thwarting its potential accession to the European Union.

The European Parliament elections, which are scheduled for 6-9 June 2024, are and will remain susceptible to disinformation attacks, according to analyses from think tanks involved in countering disinformation.

The presidential election in Slovakia, which concluded on 6 April 2024 with a victory for Peter Pellegrini of the ruling Hlas party, adds complexity to the political situation ahead of the European Parliament elections in the Central and Eastern European region. Under Prime Minister Robert Fico, Slovakia aligned with Hungary in opposing support for Ukraine's independence. This has significantly strained the dynamics within the Visegrad Group, leading to a split into

two subgroups: Poland and the Czech Republic, which are in favour of supporting Ukraine, on one side, with Slovakia and Hungary on the other.

In Poland, our current election cycle has been quite unique. During the parliamentary elections on 15 October 2023, there was significant mobilisation within civil society, with substantial participation from young people and women, which culminated in a shift of power. Democratic and pro-European groups (the Civic Coalition, Third Way, and New Left) took over and formed the government on 13 December 2023, thus ending eight years of governance by the Law and Justice Party (PiS),

In addition to disinformation, politicians and voters are facing challenges such as growing fragmentation, the rise of synthetic content, and ambiguous content moderation practices. In response, the European Commission has taken steps to regulate political communication, particularly focusing on political campaigns. New regulations concerning online political advertising are set to be implemented.

Consequently, the ISM Department of Political Studies has accepted an invitation of the CEE Digital Democracy Watch and the Union of Employers and Entrepreneurs to organise a seminar titled *European Parliament Elections 2024: Challenges for Digital Democracy in the CEE Region*, it will be held on Monday, 22 April, at the Warsaw School of Economics.

The European Parliament elections are set for 9 June 2024. Given the unprecedented scale of online electoral campaigning this year, it is crucial for experts, researchers, academics, decision-makers, and voters to reflect on this new context and the associated risks.

Additionally, the event will feature the public presentation of the report *Digital Democracy in CEE: Things to Watch For in 2024 European Parliament Elections*, prepared by the team at CEE Digital Democracy Watch.

I am deeply convinced that only reliable information and knowledge allow us to undertake educational actions, which are the most effective method of counteracting malpractices in political campaigns. I look forward to engaging in discussion and dialogue with a diverse group of participants, to which you are cordially invited.

Please join us on 22 April 2024 at the Warsaw School of Economics.



Konrad Kiljan

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**Things to Watch For
in 2024 European Parliament Elections**

**Renewed
Participatory Energy
in Central and
Eastern Europe States**



MEPs from Eastern Europe have not been too often associated for taking initiative at the European level. This may shift soon as the region's strong fear of war results in expectation of active cooperation on continental level. Analyses of emotional tone and rhetoric of political discussions reveal that demands and mobilising potential in the region are stronger than in the West. At the same time, disinformation campaigns distort the digital discourse, underscoring the need for platform regulation.



- Eastern European countries' ambitions are growing, challenging their tradition of limited international cooperation.
- War and security emerge as primary concerns of the citizens, likely to dominate discussions around the upcoming elections.
- Russian propaganda continues to flood online platforms, necessitating regulation against bot farms and misinformation.

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Still looking up to the West?

The divisions between Eastern and Western Europe haven't disappeared uniformly in all aspects of social life. The past two decades have witnessed unprecedented economic advancement as the East has made significant strides in catching up with the West. Freedom of trade and convergence funds resulted in the prospect of Eastern wages meeting 90% of the EU average within the subsequent decade. Some cities and regions have already surpassed that level and once inconceivable stories of Budapest or Warsaw attracting young workers from Spain or Portugal became common.

In light of rapid economic development, discussions on the region's identity resurfaced with new energy. Joining the West remained a significant reference point, but the region also seeks its own agency while carrying postcolonial baggage. Already before the 2022 invasion, describing it with phrases such as "post-Soviet" was met with eye-rolling and disagreement. Currently, even Slavic Studies departments all over the world began to revise their Russian-dominated curricula and the region's museums try to prove that it was always European, presenting the 45 years behind the Iron Curtain as an unfortunate episode. Though brain drain remains a concern, low unemployment rate means that top talents are now more likely to migrate to the West than blue collar workers. Last decade's populist wave also questioned if the Western model of development should be copied and opened the discussions on the priorities for the political future.

Yet, there was little confidence that Easterners are capable of shaping Europe. Joining it was long considered a goal in itself, after which the future was supposed to be taken care not only with, but to some extent by more mature democracies. Consequently, European elections in the region mainly reflected national politics and were treated as an ultimate opinion poll before national election. The voters expected their politicians to secure European funding, and their effectiveness at its distribution was enough to ensure victories on a regional scale. Becoming a MEP was viewed as a reward for years of service in national political campaigns, former Prime Ministers being an overrepresented share of national delegations. Apart from Eurosceptics, few politicians proposed bold visions for the region's future. Step by step integration was seen as the default model. Easterners have been unwilling or unable to assert their own priorities, opting instead to align with general trends—a strategy that has proven adequate only in times of peace.

War changes everything

During the first phases of Covid crisis, a surge of criticism regarding Europe's perceived inactivity arose. The continent quickly demonstrated efficiency through cooperation funding international research, procuring large quantities of vaccines, and implementing recovery plans. A new consensus emerged, emphasising the necessity of increased collaboration on life-threatening matters.

Yet, determining what constitutes a life-threatening issue turned out not to be an easy task. While the Green Deal addresses climate change and aims to modernise the economy simultaneously, it may seem less pressing to the Eastern regions. This crisis seems less severe at its plains and lowlands with humid continental climate changes than in sun-dried temperate zones. With less innovative and globally-oriented economies, Eastern European countries don't perceive themselves as beneficiaries of new technology adaptation. As a result, support for green initiatives trails behind that in the West.

When full-scale war erupted, it made climate and other concerns secondary. Analyses have shown that unlike pandemic, the mobilising effect of war is unevenly distributed among European countries (Anghel & Jones, 2023). As in the East the crisis is seen as life-threatening, other issues pale in comparison. Eastern countries welcomed unprecedented numbers of refugees, and two years into the conflict, news of rockets entering airspace intensified at unpredictable intervals. Military experts appear in everyday media discussions, city mayors face criticism for inadequate evacuation preparations, and the youth contemplate their responses to possible reintroduction of army conscription.

Our recent studies confirm the existence of yet another divide between the West and East, revealing varying intensities of emotions in discussions about the war. In the East, more than 10% of all parliamentary speeches are dedicated to this topic, a significant figure considering the multitude of legislative matters. Eastern Politicians discuss war at least twice as often as Western ones. The emotional distinction is even more telling: in the East, appeals to anger and disgust (associated with mobilisation) are prevalent, while in the West, there's a tendency toward disgust and fear, with a preference for indirect confrontation and avoidance.

Instead of direct election interference, we see multiple false flag operations with the accounts responsible for spreading anti-vaccine propaganda now targeting Ukraine. Large numbers of comments expressing distrust towards public

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bodies and the European project create the impression that the public is aligned against them. The looming question is whether Europe will be prepared to withstand potential isolationist moves from the US after this year's election.

The Eastern countries sincerely believe that they currently face an existential threat and demand responsible action from the Union. The heated emotions surrounding the €500 million Act in Support of Ammunition Production highlight the urgency for the European defence industry to scale up. Once such grievous affairs enter the public, it becomes a minefield and no simple assurances suffice to calm down the anxious public.

As a consequence, support for European integration in the region will hinge on continuous demonstration that it remains committed to peace. Any hindrance to the development of military capabilities in the name of protecting one's industry will provoke a powerful negative response. The acknowledgments from Germany and Sweden that they should have paid more heed to the warnings about Russian aggression in the past decades met with positive response. Eastern politicians will be now expected to use the moment to actively influence the way for the EU to move forward.

Future directions

MEPs will continue to prioritise their own countries, there is now increased pressure to emphasise population protection through European cooperation. This could potentially foster broader support for building initiatives including cybersecurity, diplomacy or food security. Mainstream leaders can use this moment to demonstrate active leadership. For the first time, Eastern Europeans will not be satisfied with their representatives following the West, but demand initiative to ensure peace in the region. This might be a turning point for the future of the continent, as the experience of coalition building and agenda setting will boost Eastern agency permanently.

With online discussions inundated with Russian bots flooding every post with hundreds of comments, a false impression of anti-European sentiment among the public is created. There is much to learn from 2023 Lithuanian legislation on "automatically controlled" accounts. The effects can be analysed already and it can be viewed as a pilot for continent-wide legislation. Moderation practices must however account for region-specific sensitivities, as automated methods tend to neglect cultural and linguistic specifics.

As is the case with most crises, while some regions may be overwhelmed by the current one, other try to remain uninvolved. Ensuring cohesion of European political groups will play an even more important role. Any attempts to disrupt it will be heavily criticised and perceived as a violation of solidarity. The current thirst for political solutions created an unique opportunity for cooperation with new division of roles on the European political scene. Disregarding it would be a costly mistake, as trust lost in times of mortal danger cannot be easily regained.



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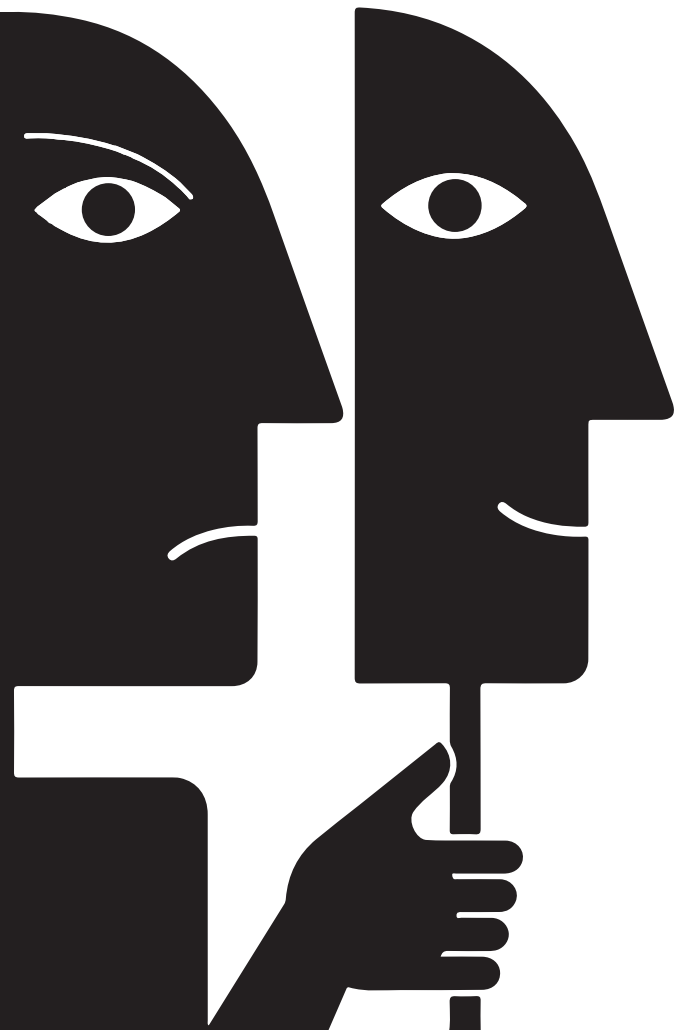


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Deepfakes Are Already Here

and Already Changing The Game



The misuses of AI-generated or AI-manipulated media are perceived as one of the particular threats to the democratic elections. The increasing quantity, quality and new forms of using deep fakes for political manipulation take these threats to the new level. In the super-election year of 2024 they require proactive measures from policymakers, regulators and digital platforms to protect citizens, who are the main target of manipulative campaigns. However, emerging regulatory frameworks may be insufficient to defend the integrity of electoral processes, if the social resilience is not significantly strengthened.

- The number of deep fakes is constantly growing and they are increasingly used for political purposes, including attempts to manipulate voters.
- The first cases of using deep fakes in election campaigns in the CEE countries should serve as a warning signal, whereas the campaign in Slovakia might be seen as a model example of an attack on the so-called decisional checkpoint.
- The occurrence of deep fakes in the information space consistently contributes to uncertainty and low trust in the media among the citizens.
- The emerging regulations will help to eliminate some of the harmful deep fakes, but without the immediate and definite involvement of digital platforms and strengthening the social resilience they may turn out to be toothless.

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Future scenarios are no longer speculative

Two days before the election, audio recording presenting the leader of one of the main political parties is shared on social media. He is conspiring with a famous journalist to rig the election result. As it turns out, the audio is generated by artificial intelligence (AI), that cloned the politician's voice, and used as a disinformation tool.

Just a few years ago, such a scenario was purely speculative in nature, but it has already played out in Slovakia in September 2023, on the eve of the parliamentary elections, and the victims of the manipulated recording were Michal Šimečka (leader of the liberal Progressive Slovakia) and journalist Monika Tódová. All this in the conditions of an extremely fierce competition, which Šimečka and his party ultimately lost (Meaker, 2023).

What happened in Slovakia is a perfect example of an attack on the so-called decisional checkpoint, "narrow window of time during which irrevocable decisions are made, and during which the circulation of false information therefore may have irremediable effects" (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Fortunately, this disinformation attack probably did not have a decisive impact on the election results in Slovakia. However, it showed the potential vulnerability of democratic systems and the readiness of malicious state and non-state actors to test the limits of exerting influence with the use of AI.

Similar scenarios were employed in 2024 in Bangladesh and on a smaller scale in the run-up to the New Hampshire primaries in the US, when fake robocalls with Joe Biden's voice tried to discourage voters from heading to the polls (Matza, 2024).

In all these cases deep fakes were used. They are defined as AI-generated or AI-manipulated image, audio or video content that resembles existing persons, objects, places or other entities or events and would falsely appear to a person to be authentic or truthful (European Commission, 2024). Since their appearance in 2017 they have been consistently considered a potential threat to the integrity of democratic elections, primarily due to the potential to discredit third parties, including politicians (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Farid & Schindler, 2020; Huijstee et al., 2021; Langa, 2021). Due to the development and dissemination of the technology, there has been a significant increase in the number of deep fakes circulating in the information space and a radical increase in

their quality. Currently, AI allows the creation of hyper-realistic deep fake content, which can be indistinguishable from the real one, even when specialised detection software is used (Krueger et al., 2023). These difficulties mean that a significant proportion of deep fakes may still remain undetected.

Fake recordings, real threats

The examples cited above are just the tip of the iceberg. For many years now we have been observing increasingly frequent election manipulation attempts based on the content generated or manipulated by AI. Only in 2023 and 2024, such attempts were undertaken in the USA, Turkey, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Argentina, Indonesia, or Nigeria. These are just selected countries where deep fakes have been weaponised to harm candidates. In the CEE countries, attempts to influence the election results with the use of deep fakes were registered in Poland, Bulgaria and Slovakia. In each case, a discrediting pattern was employed, however, it was more of a testing phase.

These negative phenomena observed around the world have significant potential to be replicated and transposed to other countries. It can be safely assumed that currently no elections can be completely safe from the influence of deep fakes, although the effectiveness of campaigns with the use of AI-altered media will be difficult to measure and quantify (Łabuz & Nehring, 2024). Deep fakes are just one of the elements of disinformation toolset and in many cases they are also used for manipulations of political nature unrelated to ongoing election campaigns (Brown, 2020; Kleemann, 2023), which may subsequently alter voter behavior. Gradually they are also gaining importance as a political advertising tool to change the image of politicians in order to make their messaging more attractive. In some cases, such actions may have positive consequences for democratic deliberation (Pawelec, 2022), i.e. allowing for increased public participation (e.g. by addressing the audience in languages the politician does not speak), but a major part of deep fakes applications is directly associated with their harmful misuses.

Targeting decisional checkpoints is probably the most important direct threat to election results, although its effectiveness will depend on the quality of execution and local conditions. However, direct attacks are just a part of the cascade of negative consequences related to the appearance of deep fakes in the information space (Huijstee et al., 2021). Many researchers associate deep fakes with the disruption

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of the epistemic value of audio and visual materials, arguing that due to the increasingly better quality, or even hyper-realism of recordings, distinguishing truth from falsehood is becoming more difficult, and in many cases impossible (Rini, 2020; Fallis, 2021), which disturbs the common sense that seeing means believing (Geddes, 2021).

Research indicates a decreasing level of trust in the media and growing uncertainty as to the authenticity of the content (Home Security Heroes, 2023; Twomey et al., 2023). Respondents regularly indicate that they are afraid of manipulation, which affects their sense of security. Such sentiments are confirmed by empirical observations – questioning the authenticity of recordings has already become an element of denying the credibility of inconvenient materials or evidence. This phenomenon has been called “liar’s dividend”, as liars are now able to imply the hypothetical possibility of falsification to disregard inconvenient facts (Chesney & Citron, 2019). These phenomena occurred on a massive scale during the conflict between Israel and Hamas, when the authenticity of photos illustrating war atrocities was questioned by observers (Maiberg, 2023). Additionally, press agencies struggled with the inflow of significant amounts of deep fake evidence (Lebovic, 2023), which further deepened the information chaos.

Are we heading towards deep fake democracy?

In such conditions, the integrity of elections and democratic processes is increasingly at risk. Even if so far we have not recorded any deep fakes that turned the elections upside down, it does not mean that their spread does not affect political processes and undermines one of the basic values of democracy – freedom of choice, freedom of elections and trust in their results.

Malicious actors use deep fakes as another element of disinformation campaigns to indirectly exert psychological pressure on society and undermine its right to make informed choices without coercion or deception (Łabuz & Nehring, 2024). Numerous surveys consistently confirm these negative trends. Lowered trust in the media and growing uncertainty among citizens encourage them to turn to alternative sources of information (Newman et al., 2023). These are indirect effects of disinformation enhanced by AI creations.

These phenomena are particularly important in 2024, due to a record number of elections worldwide. They will directly and indirectly affect CEE countries, which includes elections to the European Parliament or national elections in selected countries.

Are there any countermeasures?

Although pessimistic scenarios combining deep fakes and election interference were predicted by the experts a long time ago, no comprehensible regulatory frameworks that could provide adequate security have been developed so far. Among numerous countermeasures, legal, technological and social solutions are commonly indicated (Farid & Schindler, 2020). However, these are created with a delay, as a response to specific events, and not as a manifestation of anticipation.

The European Union’s regulatory framework for AI, which is currently being developed, might be an important first step towards defending democratic processes against the negative impact of AI. Deep fakes are described by the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act) as a threat to democratic processes and a tool of disinformation. The proposed solutions are mainly technological in nature and are based on a transparent disclosure. These rules are intended to make citizens more sensitive to manipulation and allow them to make informed choices. They will be strongly linked to the Digital Services Act (DSA), which already imposes specific obligations on digital platforms to identify and remove illegal content, including harmful deep fakes.

Therefore, the role of digital platforms will be crucial in this respect. Previous experience shows that detecting and removing deep fakes intended for political manipulation is difficult and requires greater expenditure of effort and resources. Combating deep fakes should be seen also as an element of Corporate Social Responsibility, though it has a definitely deeper dimension. A number of commitments from key technology companies working on authentication, watermarking and disclosure should be welcomed positively and complements further legal obligations introduced by the DSA and the AI Act (failure to comply with them will result in financial sanctions). Although the AI Election Accord (2024), signed in February 2024 by technology companies (Google, Meta, OpenAI, TikTok and X, among others), is a voluntary framework of principles and actions, it is intended to prevent the deceptive use of AI in 2024 elections and

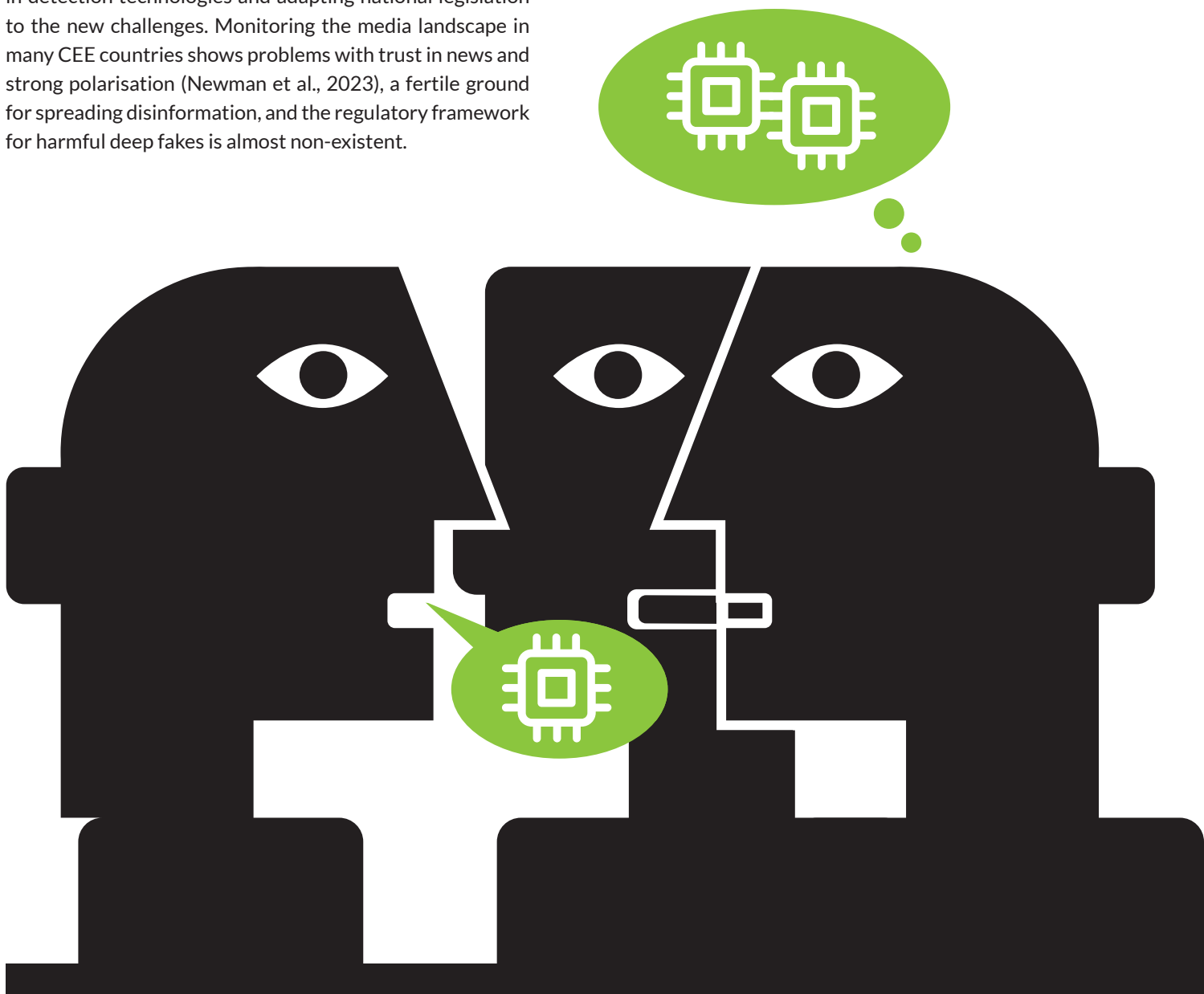
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gives hope for creating stronger safeguards. The year 2024 will be an important test of voluntary commitments, their implementation and effectiveness, especially since similar solutions brought only moderate results in the past.

However, these will not be fully effective without efforts to strengthen public awareness. And in this case, the responsibility also rests with the technology companies. However, without the involvement of the government and non-government sectors, building social resilience, which is one of the basic barriers against the manipulation, will not be possible.

Much remains to be done in this respect. There is a necessity to invest in social capital, perhaps also to change the school curriculum towards strengthening media and cyberliteracy, consistently informing the public about threats, strengthening the credibility of traditional media, but also investing in detection technologies and adapting national legislation to the new challenges. Monitoring the media landscape in many CEE countries shows problems with trust in news and strong polarisation (Newman et al., 2023), a fertile ground for spreading disinformation, and the regulatory framework for harmful deep fakes is almost non-existent.

Protecting elections as a key element of democracy must be one of the priorities, in addition to other activities aimed at protecting citizens against the misuses of deep fakes. Too little has been done in the last seven years, and 2024 could be a make-or-break year, especially if something happens that ultimately undermines our collective confidence in the integrity of electoral processes. Waiting for this moment would be an example of recklessness and disregard of the numerous signs indicating that democracy may be replaced by deep fake democracy.





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How Disinformation Actors Try to Impact the European Parliament Election in CEE



Disinformation is perceived as a crucial threat to Europe's democracies. It is indeed putting a "systemic pressure" on electoral stability (European Parliament, 2019). In the upcoming weeks, both traditional and social media will become flooded with an influx of information - and within that the fake narratives will appear. Together with the decrease of trust in public institutions and the media, one could assume that the upcoming European Parliament election is indeed a test for the European Union's resilience to online threats.

- European Parliament election is especially prone to disinformation as disinformation efforts can directly influence voting decisions and thus influence the European Union's policy.
- Information gap - high demand for information about the election with not enough reliable and understandable data - can pose a further risk to the integrity of the EP election in regards to the online threats, especially that citizens might not understand the specifics of the EU institutions fully.
- Disinformation targeting the EP election will be focused on both the EU policies (ie. the European Green Deal) but also the specifics of the voting process.
- Election disinformation can affect not only current elections but many of the upcoming ones. The history of one election might later be used to target the upcoming votes. That's the real challenge.

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The decisional checkpoint. A gateway to the real-life effects

The very definition of disinformation emphasises that its aim is to influence the public opinion. The 2024 super-election year is unique as disinformation efforts can have an unparalleled effect on the public as it can directly affect the voting decisions and thus influence European Union's policy for years to come. Disinformation actors are very well aware of it (Marconi, 2023). Disinformation currently targets the European Parliament electoral process through long-, medium- and short-term. It focuses on the general narratives about the European Union (long-term), crucial policies (medium-term) as well as the election itself (short-term). The aim is a "decisional checkpoint" - a moment defined as "a narrow window of time during which irrevocable decisions are made, and during which the circulation of false information (...) may have irremediable effects" (Chesney&Citron, 2019).

What makes elections more vulnerable to disinformation efforts is not only the fact that voting enables the real-life effects in the form of voters' decisions.

Information gap. An opportunity for disinformation to emerge

With the upcoming election, citizens - in the case of the European Parliament election, the citizens of the EU member states - demand knowledge. The need includes both the news, information about the candidates, the political parties, and the information on the election process itself. This is completely understandable. Part of the problem occurs when there is high demand for information about a topic, but the supply of accurate and reliable information is inadequate to meet that demand. The resulting information gap creates opportunities for misinformation to emerge and spread (Shane & Noel, 2020). This is particularly true in the case of the European Parliament elections, even more so

than in other types of elections, as due to the EU's nature it may be more difficult for the voters to understand both the very EU as well as the role of the EP election (Brosius, Elsas & Vreese, 2019).

During different elections, different information gaps were discovered. The COVID-19 pandemic could serve as a great example. In 2020, in the US, a major election information gap developed when numerous states decided to introduce or expand the possibility of voting via mail. "Inadequate public knowledge about the process left room for disinformation mongers to spread false claims that mail voting would lead to widespread fraud" (Brennan Center, 2022). A similar situation happened in Poland during the 2020 presidential elections (Szczyrbowski, 2022). In May 2020, the presidential election was supposed to be carried out solely via mail form. Due to a variety of reasons, it didn't happen - they were postponed until July 2020 and happened, as per usual, on a hybrid basis (Musiał-Karg, 2022). This is not to say that postal voting is ineffective. Rather on the contrary, research proves that voting by post is an important aspect of the Polish electoral system and the strengthening of universality of elections (Musiał-Karg, 2022). However, the lack of understanding of what exactly is happening and what is the procedure could definitely lead to an increase in the levels of election disinformation. It is happening in the US where the argument of electoral fraud has risen to the highest levels with three-quarters of Trump voters incorrectly believing that he did win the election (Pew Research Center, 2019). It is happening in Poland where the number of false narratives concerning the electoral process increases (Bezpieczne Wybory, 2023).

Do we understand the EU?

With the European Parliament election, the knowledge gap concerns not a singular topic (ie. health risks) but might cover the whole institution itself. Indeed, in the elections to the European Parliament, procedures differ from one EU Member State to another. On the one hand, therefore, we are talking about the same elections. On the other hand, they will work differently in different countries: with different election law, differently-looking ballots as well as different methods of converting votes into seats. That, combined with the insufficient level of knowledge about the EU and the low trust to the European institutions, may leave space for disinformation actors to work on (Clark, 2013).

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It is especially dangerous nowadays, as a report by the Brennan Center proves. Election denialism in 2022 makes it harder to defend against misinformation resulting from information gaps (Brennan Center, 2022). In 2020, the denial of the US election result led to attacks on the election process itself. Election denialism, however, is an issue concerning not only the US, but the EU as well, especially that there is still an insufficient level of knowledge on how the EU works (Stoeckel, 2019). EU citizens do not fully understand the way European institutions work, not to mention the role of the elections - this lack of understanding results in relatively low turnout levels. While this is happening, disinformation actors want to portray the European Union as a system that is illogical and thus impossible to understand. That, combined, makes the task of providing voters accurate information more urgent but also more challenging.

What are the things that can happen

As noted previously, election disinformation may be divided into three categories: long-, medium-, and short-term. Sometimes, they are, of course, intertwined. A narrative that might have targeted the elections only short-term may later on lead to long-term effects, as it happened in the US. However, it seems as if the medium- and short-term strategies are most often used to target the elections. This is probably due to the fact that it is easier to adjust them to the election campaign calendar; some of the disinformation campaigns are thoroughly planned with very clear targets.

During the election campaign, numerous incidents may happen. Disinformation actors may try to discredit campaigns of certain candidates or whole political parties. They may use divisive narratives and hate speech, more often than in other periods. Moreover, information aimed at confusing the voters may be often shared. The incidents expected during the EP election include:

- Targeting information consumption;
- Targeting citizens' ability to vote;
- Targeting political parties and candidates;
- Targeting trust in democracy;
- Targeting election-related infrastructure (EEAS, 2024).

The election day (and a few days before) is absolutely crucial for the disinformation efforts. It is then that the gravest at-

tempts to suppress votes from specific groups might happen (via disinformation or hate speech); narratives might arise that create confusion on electoral information.

As crucial elections happened in Poland and Slovakia in 2023, they seem to be good examples of what could be a threat during the EP election.

In Poland, numerous narratives arose during the election weekend. They, in general, concerned three things. First, they focused on the very electoral process, arguing that the election commissions were intentionally issuing ballots without valid stamps or that completed ballots were issued. Second, they tried to convince the public that even though the elections were fair, the government would never accept the results - and they would introduce martial law. To convince the audience that this is already happening, disinformation actors used photos from Warsaw's military parades, as well as footage from Gaza. Third, narratives focused on Ukraine arguing that the Ukrainians illegally took part in Poland's vote (Bezpieczne Wybory, 2019).

In Slovakia, on the other hand, the recording was released within a 48-hour pre-election silent period, its aim was to compromise politicians running in the parliamentary elections. On it were two voices: Michal Šimečka, leader of the liberal Progressive Slovakia party, and Monika Tódová from the daily newspaper Denník N. They appeared to be discussing how to rig the election, by buying votes from members of Slovakia's marginalised Roma minority. AI Incident Database states that the deep fake allegedly might have influenced the election.

Dis- and encouraging the voters

Election disinformation is aimed specifically at discouraging the voters. That's why the narratives that will appear in the infosphere in the upcoming weeks will do everything to make EU citizens stay at home - instead of using their right to vote.

They may thus present the elections as irrelevant - a mere act of democracy that is only symbolic and brings no change to the political landscape. They may try to discourage the voters indirectly by emphasising the narratives that do target certain EU policies or the European Union itself.

The European Union may be presented as a failed institution. The notion that the European governments want to rig

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the upcoming elections may be introduced. Everything with one goal of declining the voters' confidence in fair elections.

Interestingly, during the European Parliament election, contrary to the general disinformation trend, some campaigns may actually convince the voters to go vote for the candidates that are openly anti-EU and that do share conspiracy theories themselves; a move that could internally weaken the European Union. They would try to present the EU as an internally damaged institution that is doing everything in its power to impoverish its own citizens. Some narratives may look like classic fake news; others - as real conspiracy theories, linking the EU to theories about the so-called "world government" or even the "plandemic".

It seems however that on the very election day narratives are really focused on the electoral process. What can happen then?

- False claims of voter fraud. There's a risk of disinformation campaigns falsely alleging widespread voter fraud, such as claims that certain groups are attempting to vote multiple times or that non-citizens are participating in the election. It is especially probable as different systems look differently in the EU member states - a situation happening in country A, can lead to disinformation narrative in country B.
- Deceptive information on Voter ID requirements. Disinformation might spread about identification requirements at polling stations, leading some voters to believe they need documents they don't actually require, thus deterring them from voting. Again, the EU argument may be used here, ie. to suggest that the EU requires a certain document from the voters.
- Fraudulent absentee ballot instructions. Disinformation may provide fraudulent instructions on how to submit absentee ballots, potentially leading voters to unknowingly invalidate their votes. Different instructions from different EU Member States may be used here, too.

- Impersonation scams. Disinformation might encourage voters to provide personal information, such as Social Security numbers or banking details, under the guise of verifying their registration or eligibility to vote, leading to identity theft or other fraudulent activities.
- Language and accessibility barriers. Disinformation may spread more easily in languages other than the official languages of the European Union, making it difficult for some communities to access accurate information about voting procedures.

As confidence in fair elections declines, new narratives emerge

The false narratives targeting the EP election have two goals: to lower confidence in the EU and in the fairness of the European Parliament vote. As history proves, election disinformation leads to real effects where citizens lose their trust in public institutions and do not believe in the real results. That was the case in the US and that is surely a risk for the EU. When thinking of disinformation, one needs to focus on its possible real-life effects which may be grave. Moreover, election disinformation can affect not only current elections but many of the upcoming ones. The history of one election might later be used to target the upcoming votes. That's the real challenge. Will the EU emerge victorious from this fight? With the Digital Services Act in power and national efforts to counter the upcoming online threats - possibly, yes. However the question remains if these countermeasures are enough for the disinformation flood that Europe is facing.



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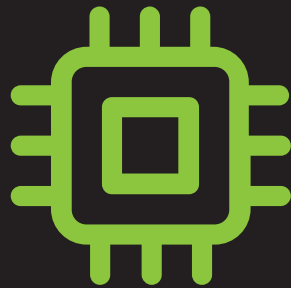
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New Architecture of Digital Political Advertising



In 2024, Europe marks a year of in-depth reform of the digital political advertising system. European legislators, frustrated with foreign interference and misuse of social networks, have passed legislation that will change the scene, mainly impacting good-faith actors. These efforts are amplified by the Commission's guidelines on elections and the Digital Services Act. The impact of the new setup is yet to be seen.

- In the European Parliament elections, advertisers will be allowed to promote messages across national borders, potentially interfering with national election laws.
- The platforms have been given a unified definition of political advertising but need to work out how to implement the new rules and face a wave of new phenomena and areas of regulation.
- Commission guidelines propose new definitions for deep-fakes, demonetisation of disinformation, and vitality stoppers. This will shape the agenda in the new Commission's digital mandate.

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European Union stepped up on digital advertising regulation

The European Union stepped up on digital advertising regulation during the 2019-2024 mandate. The main focus was on the Digital Services Act, deemed the new constitution of the internet, serving as the main framework for managing online content.

One of the arguments for the regulatory push was growing mistrust towards the platforms' impact on democratic processes. It was not surprising — the political world was shaken by the Cambridge Analytica scandals, and the online political advertising market in Europe was estimated at 100 million euros (European Parliament, 2022). In response, the European Democracy Action Plan was proposed, and its key element materialised in the form of Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising Regulation.

The discussion on defining the limits of political advertising was turbulent but niche (only 10 consultation entries were shared) (European Commission, 2021). Engaged watchdogs were afraid of the impact on freedom of speech, business advertising, and the potential decline in the ability to mobilise a younger voter base. Some NGOs were looking to be given guarantees of access to campaigning across Europe at the same level as political parties (Patera, 2019).

The final text of the Regulation was approved in early 2024, just in time for the upcoming European Parliament election, even though only a partial rollout will take place for the upcoming campaign. The platforms will receive a clear definition of what constitutes a political advertisement, something that was a source of confusion for campaigners and political parties as the rules for political advertising varied considerably between platforms. Additionally, the advertisers will not be able to target groups of voters based on sensitive data, including sexual orientation or health.

One of the main risks of the new wave of regulation is the impact on both unpaid content and content shared by accounts with a high number of followers. Those issues were skipped in the final text of the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising Regulation but returned in the Digital Services Act (DSA) guidelines on the integrity of electoral processes guidelines.

The guidelines introduce new categories of oversight, including the proposed approach to deep-fakes, demonetisation of content containing disinformation, transparency for political influencers, or proactive platform interference in what is going viral. Even though they are not binding legislation, they will have an impact on the platforms' moderation policy. The risk of breaching the Digital Services Act rules may lead to fines up to 6% of the global turnover of the very large online platform. The enforcement team in the Commission is in full swing with requests for information about targeted advertising and the impact of generative AI issued to LinkedIn and other platforms (European Commission, 2024).

The new system is not without faults

The impact of the new system spans broader than paid political advertising. One example of this is that anxiety around moderating and managing political content is leading to platforms limiting access to controversial topics in general. European legislation that is focused mainly on the risks of online distribution of political or cause-based content is being implemented in the global context of a proposed ban on TikTok in the United States and Meta's new default settings to limit the visibility of politics. Meta's decision was met with outrage from content creators and non-governmental organisations, seeing it as the "latest abdication of its responsibility to uphold open and safe online platforms for expression, discussion, education, and advocacy" (Griffin, 2024).

New challenges arise with the development of advertising systems offered by the platforms. Meta has just announced that political advertisers will not be able to use the new AI-enhanced system of ads planning and distribution (Paul, 2023). We are still in the dark about the way of implementing that policy. This seems especially worrying in the light of an AI Forensics report claiming that a major share of the political advertising on Meta platforms is not labeled as such (Goujard, 2024), and what follows — is not moderated appropriately.

The Brussels unifying take on the system also seems to confuse national actors who are used to treating election policy as an internal responsibility. This is even deepened by the responsibility for various sections of the election integrity being diffused between organs responsible for digitisation, foreign affairs, and election commissions. The organs that will become national Digital Services Act coordinators often lack experience and expertise in this specific matter.

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Legislation is not the end to challenges

The 2024 European Parliament elections will show us if the aspirations of getting rid of the misuse of platforms by political actors were realistic at all. In the best-case scenario, citizens and researchers will get better transparency and improved moderation of low-quality content. In the worst of the options – a new batch of problems will arise with limited access to campaigning by NGOs, a defective pan-European political ads market, and platforms giving up on politics at all.



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Authoritarian Influence Online: How China and Russia Want to Impact Your Vote

In today's interconnected world, security extends beyond traditional defence strategies. New challenges like foreign interference in democratic processes, especially elections, has become major concern. This shift is driven by technological advancements, making it easier for malicious actors to spread false information and sway public opinion. While Russia has long been active in this realm, China's growing assertiveness, coupled with investments in AI, poses a rising issue. The consequences of such interference extend beyond election outcomes, eroding citizens' trust in democratic institutions and their ability to make well-informed decisions about their countries' futures. Addressing these challenges requires sustained vigilance, collective action, and international cooperation to safeguard democratic integrity and public trust.

- Foreign interference in democratic processes poses a serious threat, exploiting weaknesses in electoral systems globally through tactics such as disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks.
- Russia and China stand out as major players in this arena, employing sophisticated strategies to manipulate public opinion and undermine electoral integrity. However, it is Beijing's increasing assertiveness and investments in AI that raise particular concerns.
- Efforts by the EU to counter malicious impact through initiatives like the Rapid Alert System and the Digital Services Act face obstacles due to disparities among member states and social media platforms' reluctance to fully cooperate.
- By promoting critical thinking, holding social media platforms accountable, and enforcing existing regulations, Europe can effectively confront foreign interference and safeguard its democratic processes, ensuring the protection of electoral integrity and democratic values.

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What's the problem?

In today's world, security extends beyond traditional defences. Among these concerns, foreign interference in democratic processes, characterised by spreading misleading information and manipulating public opinion, poses a threat to electoral integrity worldwide.

Key figures like Josep Borrell, along with MEPs and organisations like The World Economic Forum, have identified foreign interference as a significant risk for the super-election year of 2024 (Brzozowski, 2024). Such malicious impact exploits democratic systems, undermining fundamental principles like fair elections and the right to self-determination. Elections, being predictable, recurring, and constrained by time, are particularly vulnerable targets, allowing careful planning for interference (Karásková, Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Němečková, 2023). While the direct impact on election outcomes may be debated, even minor influence could be decisive; for instance, in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the difference between candidates was just 80,000 votes. (Ohlin, 2021). Beyond this, the primary aim often lies in undermining democratic institutions and eroding public trust in the electoral process.

Foreign interference has long been a part of international relations. However, recent geopolitical dynamics, technological advancements, and global events have amplified its impact. The widespread use of social media has expanded the avenues for foreign impact, accelerating the spread of misinformation and blurring the lines between fact and fiction, making it low-cost with high potential impact. Malicious interference degrades political discourse by amplifying divisive debates or promoting hate speech (European Parliament, 2022). Tactics include presenting distorted facts, fabricating stories, disseminating conspiracy theories, or decontextualising truths to advance particular agendas or ideologies through fake news, manipulated videos, and slanderous comments (Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, 2018).

Who's the problem?

While over 80 countries are involved in spreading disinformation via social media, Russia and China emerge as the most concerning actors (Bradshaw, Bailey, Howard, 2018). Moscow alone is responsible for 61% of documented attempts to manipulate information from 2015 to 2023, closely followed by Beijing (Karásková, Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Němečková, 2023). These authoritarian regimes, alongside others, have invested over \$300 million in 33 countries to interfere in democratic processes (European Parliament, 2022). While Russia has historically dominated the European arena in terms of interference, China's growing assertiveness, coupled with its investments in AI capabilities, poses a new and potentially more dangerous challenge.

The objectives of two actors differ in their actions (Karásková, Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Němečková, 2023). Kremlin seeks to influence the political landscape, shape public opinion, undermine trust in democratic processes. Instances of interference orchestrated by non-state actors on behalf of Russia, have been observed in events such as the 2017 French presidential elections or the 2019 European Parliament elections (European Parliament, 2022). Given its diplomatic situation, Moscow may escalate its attacks further.

In the past, China mostly endeavoured to bolster its image among Europeans by disseminating pro-Beijing propaganda regarding, e.g., the Uyghurs issue (Kashgarian, 2022). Additionally, Zhongnanhai aimed to tarnish the image of the United States in Europe and divide the transatlantic partnership. However, with escalating geopolitical tensions Beijing now undertakes tactics more similar to Russia (Scott, 2024). China may pivot towards EU countries' internal affairs; the chief of Lithuania's counter-intelligence could not rule out such interference due to the country's Taiwan-related policies (Sytas, 2024). China's electoral interventions have already targeted no fewer than 10 elections in seven distinct countries, primarily concentrated within the Asia-Pacific region (Karásková, Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Němečková, 2023).

Central and Eastern European countries have long been targets of Russian interference (Vinocur, Johecová, 2023). Moreover, it's not just state actors that are targeted; media outlets, consultants, NGOs, journalists, and academics are also at risk. For instance, in 2019, attacks targeted employees accounts belonging to NGOs working on topics related to democracy, electoral integrity and public policy in Belgium, France, Germany or Romania (Microsoft, 2019).

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How's it done?

Foreign interference in cyberspace takes on various forms, like cyberattacks such as hacking into voter registration databases spreading malware to disrupt voting machines, or launching distributed denial-of-service attacks to overwhelm election websites. However, the most prevalent method employed by malign foreign actors is information manipulation, primarily through social media platforms.

Their algorithms contribute to the problem by creating “echo chambers” reinforcing users’ existing viewpoints and perpetuate polarisation (Azzimonti, Fernandes, 2021). Mark Zuckerberg admitted platforms often prioritise disinformation over factual content due to its higher engagement rates, driven partly by profit from targeted advertisements (Kovacs, 2024). For instance, Meta earned millions from campaigns linked to right-wing media groups and allowed Russian state-linked actors to target specific populations with disinformation during the 2016 US elections (ABC News, 2017). X is also implicated in selling verification badges to terrorists and misinformation spreaders (Kovacs, 2024). These platforms inadvertently amplify misinformation by allowing it to reach large audiences rapidly, especially through automated programs known as bots. In Poland, over 50% of traffic is generated by bots (Mierzyńska, 2019).

Posts typically target sensitive issues polarising society. Kremlin-based operatives focus on topics like race, religion, or history, using slogans such as the EU being “the new version of the Soviet Union” (Tatlow, Rácz, 2021). In the European setting, Beijing propaganda has yet to learn these nuances. However, in US it addresses issues like corruption, racial injustice or police brutality (Insikt Group, 2022).

Deceptive tactics, such as mimicking popular news outlets or citing sources from Russian and Chinese state-affiliated media, are used to make disinformation appear authentic. For example, in Poland, articles posted on websites resembling popular news outlets were shared by Russian bots (Mierzyńska, 2019). Zhongnanhai narratives are spread through “paperwall” websites mixing stolen content and propaganda in at least 16 EU countries (Fittarelli, 2024). These sites are usually recognised as disinformation sources due to awkward grammar or wording, particularly evident in member states’ languages. However, with advancements in AI platforms like ChatGPT or Bard, their sophistication may improve (Karásková, Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Němečková, 2023).

Engaging nationals helps overcome language barriers. To support propaganda activities, Chi-na Global Television Network has launched a “talent search” among young Eu-

ropeans, offering financial prizes for candidates who create content worldwide (Tatlow, Rácz, 2021). CGTN has a network of foreigners known as “global stringers,” who produce disinformation on controversial international issues by uploading videos on YouTube promoting narratives aligned with Chinese interests, but not labeled as state-affiliated media (Tatlow, Rácz, 2021). CCTV lists 744 global stringers, including 201 from European region, among them EU citizens from countries like Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, or France (Global Stringers, CGTN, 2024).

Another emerging threat comes from TikTok, owned by Chinese ByteDance, which faces EU proceedings regarding risk management of addictive design, harmful content, or advertising transparency (European Commission, 2024). TikTok spreads pro-China and Russia narratives, as well as negative content on US (Vicente, 2024). For example, account “Pacific Dialogue”, linked to the Communist Party of China, uploads compilations of news segments, talk shows and interviews criticising the US system of governance (Insikt Group, 2022). Content is then often reposted to other platforms.

Despite cybersecurity concerns leading to its ban from corporate devices by EU institutions last year, the European Parliament plans to use TikTok during the upcoming election campaign (Vasques, 2024). This demonstrates the dilemma of social media: dangerous, but popular among young voters, so politicians feel compelled to use it.

Is our protection adequate?

The EU acknowledges foreign interference threats and develops counter mechanisms focusing on data protection, transparency in online political ads, cybersecurity, collaboration, and sanctions enforcement (European Parliament, 2022). However, existing frameworks have significant shortcomings.

At a fundamental level, many member states fail to recognise foreign interference as a national security threat, as a result of either a lack of awareness among policymakers and citizens or political pressure to limit support for such initiatives (Pamment, 2020). The current policy framework addressing disinformation lack terminological clarity, legal foundations, evidence, and are a fragmented array of instruments that have evolved in an ad hoc manner (Pamment, 2020). Consequently, the success of initiatives is limited due to a lack of political will and motivation to take stronger actions.

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The example of thoughtful initiative is the Rapid Alert System (RAS), enabling real-time communication on disinformation campaigns. RAS unsuccessfully tried to integrate with existing monitoring capabilities, such as the Emergency Response Coordination Centre or EEAS Situation Room. Differences in how member states see the disinformation threat make it hard to share information through the RAS, leading to low engagement and trust.

The EU has also sought to combat disinformation on social media through initiatives like the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation and subsequent 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation. This voluntary framework engages leading online platforms and advertisers (such as Adobe, Google, Microsoft, Meta, TikTok, Twitch) to self-regulate, cooperate with fact-checkers and researchers, demonetise the dissemination of disinformation.

The 2022 Digital Services Act strengthens these efforts and introduces tougher actions, such as fines for non-compliance of up to 6% of companies' annual turnover, with repeated non-cooperation potentially leading to a ban on operating in the EU. However, the efficacy of regulations depends largely on the effective implementation of these rules by companies. Reports presented by companies often do not present the impact measurements of undertaken actions, and therefore lack usefulness to researchers (Lai, Yadav, 2023). Despite assurances from companies like Meta and TikTok to combat disinformation during elections, skepticism also persists given their profit motives in disseminating such content (Chee, 2024).

What's next?

International cooperation is crucial in addressing foreign interference in European elections, necessitating collaborative efforts due to its multifaceted nature. However, such teamwork among the 27 member states poses challenges, as each may interpret and respond to foreign impact differently. To enhance clarity and coordination, a unified definition and methodology for analysing interference should be established.

Disinformation in social media remains the biggest challenge, as the EU believes platforms fail to fully fulfil their responsibility (European Parliament, 2023). Given the significant role of social media in spreading disinformation, they must be held accountable for their involvement in each foreign interference case, underscoring the EU's seriousness. As social media companies prioritise profit, stricter control over disinformation dissemination can be expected only if it proves detrimental to their interests.

Education and awareness play vital roles in combating malicious impact, equipping citizens with critical thinking skills to discern false information. Sweden's distribution of informative booklets to every household in 2018 exemplifies this approach (Berzina, Soula, 2020). Furthermore, engaging with international partners like Taiwan, Australia, or Canada to learn techniques for countering specific forms of disinformation, such as Chinese interference, could prove beneficial.

In conclusion, addressing foreign interference demands ongoing vigilance, coordination, and collective action. The EU must prioritise protecting electoral processes and democratic values from external manipulation. By implementing comprehensive strategies, fostering international partnerships, and holding platforms accountable, Europe can bolster its resilience against evolving threats and uphold the integrity of its democratic institutions.




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Role of Tech Companies in Safeguarding Voter Trust

Disinformation supported by the latest advancements in AI technology is currently the biggest threat to the integrity of democratic elections. Misinformation campaigns and deepfakes are targeting various communities with the aim of creating suspicion, swaying voters' opinions, and potentially jeopardising their representation in the voting process. To address this issue, organisations responsible for managing elections must focus on building and sustaining public confidence in the fairness of the voting process. Technology companies can play an essential role in helping to achieve this goal.

- The emergence of content generated by artificial intelligence has sparked significant worries regarding disinformation in the context of elections, especially with major global electoral events on the horizon.
- Around 64 countries are gearing up for elections this year, with many taking place in Europe. These include the all-important European Parliament elections in June, which come at a time when the Old Continent faces significant challenges in areas such as defence, expansion, migration, and internal reforms. In light of this, digital platforms and tech companies have pledged to combat misinformation.
- They are taking several measures such as complying with content moderation law Digital Services Act, increasing transparency, collaborating with academic institutions and non-profit organisations, and promoting media literacy.
- However, for these efforts to be effective, tech firms must be adaptable and work closely with government agencies and international civic organisations. This will help them prepare for future elections in which more than half of the global population is expected to participate.

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Disinformation – new election tool

Technology has had a significant impact on elections worldwide since the introduction of the internet in politics in 1996. The influence of digital technology and technology firms on electoral integrity is a critical area of concern in modern politics. Campaigning has shifted from traditional mediums to the digital realm over the past two decades, with the 2008 Obama campaign being a pivotal moment in leveraging social media for electoral advantage (Aaker and Chang, 2009).

This set a precedent for digital mobilisation strategies that have evolved significantly since then. Social media platforms have democratised access to political discourse, making information and discussions about elections more accessible to wider segments of society. However, this transition has also led to a surge in disinformation campaigns that threaten the very fabric of democratic processes. Since the 2016 US presidential race, the issue of misinformation in elections has become significant, with Russian entities discovering cost-effective methods to disseminate false information through social networks. The open economy has made it easier for “troll farms” and other harmful entities to trade and spread false information internationally. They take advantage of areas with weak regulations and insufficient protections. In 2021, researchers estimated that over \$60 million has been spent on outsourced digital propaganda since 2009 (Bradshaw, Bailey and Howard, 2021). And the war in Ukraine raises the stakes even higher. It is expected that Russia will use the upcoming European elections as a sort of testing ground to assess the effectiveness of their strategies and tactics of disinformation and “troll farms” in elections more broadly, swaying public opinion in favour of the Kremlin and undermining support for Ukraine.

Today, the swift advancement of AI has heightened concerns even further. And the upcoming elections will be a tsunami of AI-generated disinformation, posing a significant challenge to electoral integrity. Commissioner Thierry Breton urges companies to “spare no effort” to counter the spread of misinformation, while the World Economic Forum targets AI-generated disinformation as a major threat in the upcoming European elections (Li, 2024). The threat is real, and the examples prove it. In the past years, deep fakes have surged, with 900% more online content in 2020 than in 2019 (World Economic Forum, 2023).

In recent times, there have been instances where artificial intelligence (AI) has been used to create fake audio and video clips to mislead people in political campaigns. For example, an AI-generated audio clip of a fake Joe Biden was cre-

ated to discourage voters in the New Hampshire primaries, while a manipulated video of Muhammad Basharat Raja, a participant in Pakistan’s elections, was altered to urge voters to abstain from voting (Adami, 2024). These incidents highlight the potential dangers of AI technology being misused for political propaganda and disinformation.

Joint efforts

The spread of false information has become the biggest obstacle to maintaining the trustworthiness of European Parliament elections in June. This has altered the fundamental responsibilities of those overseeing elections. It is no longer enough to simply ensure that elections are technically sound, open, and fair. Instead, the main objective has shifted towards emerging focus on disinformation that targets and has a clear focus in undermining the idea of election integrity (Neubert, 2024). The duty to tackle this issue goes beyond just the election authorities. Lawmakers, political parties, contenders, news outlets, and non-governmental organisations all have crucial roles to fulfil. Similarly, tech companies are essential participants in this shared mission.

To address this challenge, it is essential to adopt a multi-faceted strategy that integrates legislative action, civic education, and technological interventions. One notable effort in this regard is the European Commission’s action plan against disinformation, launched in December 2018. The Action Plan recommends engaging the private sector to combat disinformation. In September 2018, significant online platforms, social media services, and advertising firms made a landmark move by endorsing a self-regulatory Code of Practice on Disinformation (Cabrera Blázquez, Cappello, Talavera Milla and Valais, 2022). The Code intends to achieve the Commission’s goals, as outlined in its 2018 Communication, by carrying out a comprehensive range of commitments. These commitments involve enhancing transparency in political advertising, terminating fake accounts, and putting an end to revenue streams for those who spread false information. The overhaul of its revision commenced in June 2021, and following the formal endorsement and unveiling of the updated Code on 16 June 2022, the new CoP is set to integrate into a more expansive regulatory landscape. This integration will occur alongside legislation pertaining to the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising and the Digital Services Act (Jackson, Adler, Dougall and Jain, 2023).

Two reports from CoP-affiliated online platforms present the initial assessments of the initiative. In January 2023, Adobe, Google, Microsoft, Meta, TikTok, Twitch, Twitter (which later exited the CoP in May 2023), and Vimeo submitted the first round of reports. By July 2023, Google,

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Meta, Microsoft, and TikTok had all submitted follow-up reports (Lai and Yadav, 2023). A database was created to track the occurrence of interventions, the reporting of actions, the impressions made, and the impact of each intervention, and to suggest potential impact metrics for future reports.

Some platforms shared specific metrics that detailed the impact of their anti-disinformation efforts. Google and Microsoft presented data on click-through rates and the financial consequences for pages and domains that had been demonetised, highlighting the economic effects of policy violations. These insights represented important steps in quantifying the impact of interventions on user behaviour.

Reports faced criticism for not providing sufficient data to compare across platforms and offering information of minimal utility. Going forward, there's an emphasis on fostering cooperation between corporations and policymakers to standardise reporting practices.

However, these actions highlight the significance of a collaborative approach involving all stakeholders in the democratic process to combat misinformation. It is imperative to guarantee that citizens have access to reliable and trustworthy information, that media and civil society institutions are empowered to detect and address disinformation, and that online platforms and advertisers are responsible for their conduct. This way, we can establish a truthful, transparent, and reliable information system that is indispensable for the integrity of elections and the operation of democratic societies.

Pledge to prevent AI election interference

Another crucial aspect of the collaboration lies in the companies' willingness to pledge commitments and align with policies related to technology and democracy. Online platforms companies are often misused by malicious individuals to spread false information. However, it is reassuring to know that some of these corporations have acknowledged their responsibility in addressing this problem. They have set up special teams for elections and have voluntarily pledged to limit the dissemination of AI-generated disinformation content pertaining to the 2024 elections.

In February 2024, twenty major technology firms came together under the 'A Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections' initiative to show their commitment

to fight against AI-generated misinformation during electoral processes. Their primary focus is on deepfakes - manipulated audio, visuals, and images that falsely represent important figures in democratic elections or disseminate incorrect voting details (Cerulus, Roussi and Volpicelli, 2024). The signatories of this agreement include renowned names such as Microsoft, Meta, Google, Amazon, IBM, Adobe, and the chip designer Arm. Along with these, AI startups such as OpenAI have also joined the initiative.

Even the biggest technology companies cannot handle every aspect of the technological infrastructure involved in creating AI-generated content. However, the Tech Accord initiative illustrates how platforms can enhance openness regarding their interactions with governments, thereby rebuilding public trust in efforts to counter disinformation during elections. Platforms need not delay for governmental transparency reforms, instead, they can proactively reveal discussions related to content, similar to the way they currently disclose government requests for access to personal data, and they are doing so.

Ecosystem of enforcement structures

The European Union has recently released new guidelines to mitigate the risks associated with elections, such as the spread of false information and coordinated campaigns by Russian bots or fake media. These guidelines include a robust set of protective measures that start with the Digital Services Act's explicit due diligence regulations. These guidelines require stringent measures against the spread of falsehoods, with potential fines up to 6% of a company's global revenue for non-compliance. The DSA's requirements include transparent political advertising, clear labeling of AI-generated content, and the establishment of specialised teams to monitor threats.

The EU has gained over five years of experience in collaboration with platforms through the Code of Practice Against Disinformation. Additionally, upcoming regulations under the AI Act will introduce transparency labelling and AI model marking rules. But even with adequate surveillance and regulations, tracking electoral misinformation online proves difficult. As we navigate the complexities of AI-generated disinformation, collaborative efforts between technology companies and policymakers must also enhance public awareness, promote digital literacy, and media education.

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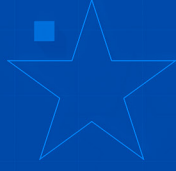
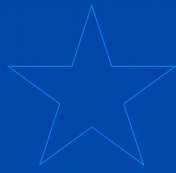
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