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برلمان البحر الأبيض المتوسط

The impact of disinformation, misinformation, fake news and foreign interference on democratic systems

Disclaimer: this background note was prepared by PAM researchers in their personal capacity. The opinions expressed in the note are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM)

Context

1. War, climate, vaccines, migrants, political elections... Disinformation affects various areas of current affairs and pollutes the media ecosystem by feeding fake news and conspiracy theories. Completely fabricated, false or misleading news can be published with the intention of having strategic-political effects. Fake news can shape behaviours, including voting and taking a position on various public issues, by influencing opinions and changing the natural processes of public opinion formation. In the end, fake news encourages toxic narratives, disseminate uncertainty and confusion, and deepen social polarization, which has an impact on democratic decision-making to the point of undermining human rights. It can be used as tool for populism, antisemitism, xenophobia and other extreme political viewpoints.

2. The terminology of fake news and cyber-attacks is widely used to describe destabilization of democracies or to influence the political opinions of citizens through massive propaganda. This type of attack is largely motivated by geopolitical intentions. In recent years, these kinds of operations have been occurring more and more frequently, thanks in part to the spread of electronic voting methods and social media. Although, disinformation campaigns rely to a greater extent on national resources to create the impression of credibility, the mapping of these campaigns showed an increasing difficulty in tracing the actual source. In an age where more and more people inform themselves and share news from online sources, fake news can spread rapidly. This report aims to examine the causes of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda and their impact on democracies, human rights and electoral processes.

Misinformation, Disinformation, Fake news - A recent history

3. The term fake news has started to become commonly used since the 2016 US election campaign. On that occasion the Democratic Party was targeted by hackers. According to a confidential CIA report, the various hacks were the work of Russian hackers to help Republican nominate Donald Trump win. As it turned out, the election of Donald Trump to the White House would have guaranteed Russia a less interventionist and more inward-looking US. Indeed, already during the election campaign Donald Trump had promised less US involvement in NATO and that he would not interfere

between Russia and Ukraine on the Crimea issue. Moreover, in addition to having repeatedly expressed personal praise for Putin, the election of Donald Trump would have undermined one of the pillars of US foreign policy, namely the export of democracy and American values as a force for positive change in the world. According to Kremlin forecasts, the inexperience and the "illiberal hegemony"¹ that would soon promote the Republican-led White House would have resulted in the dilution of the credibility of the United States with its allies and on the international stage.

4. There were most notorious of incidents of interference by hackers in electoral processes of democratic countries. Election campaigns in other key European countries, such as France and Germany (2017), or Spain (2023) were marred by external interference attempts. In these cases, the main objective of the Russian hackers was to destabilize European countries by sponsoring nationalist and populist parties. On October 23, 2023, it came to light that the United States State Department communicated, through a diplomatic cable dispatched to over 100 countries following an examination of Russian information operations spanning from January 2020 to December 2022, its discovery that Moscow had actively undertaken a coordinated endeavor to erode public confidence in no fewer than 11 elections.²

5. On 8 December 2023, the UK government has accused the cyber-espionage group linked to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), known as Centre 18³. This group is alleged to have engaged in cyber-attacks since at least 2015, targeting individuals across the political spectrum, including politicians, civil servants, journalists, and academics. The UK has taken diplomatic steps by summoning the Russian ambassador and imposing sanctions on two individuals, one of which has been identified as an active FSB officer. Coordinated efforts with the US aim to expose the group's activities globally ahead of major elections. The FSB-linked group's focus on hacking email accounts to acquire vast amounts of data, used to undermine Western interests, prompts heightened cybersecurity awareness. While questions raised in the UK's House of Commons about mandatory cybersecurity training for MPs, officials emphasize the urgency of preventive measures. As the US gears up for its upcoming election, the collaborative efforts seek to disrupt the FSB group's operations and mitigate potential threats on the horizon. Despite the extensive data allegedly stolen, concerns linger about undisclosed information, reflecting the unpredictable nature of cyber-espionage⁴.

6. Shortly after his reelection, French President Emmanuel Macron forthrightly accused Russian state news outlets, including *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, of disseminating "fake news" and engaging in "propaganda" against him during the 2017 presidential election. He characterized these entities as "organs of influence and propaganda" and likened their operations to structures of government during a joint conference held with President Vladimir Putin in Versailles.

7. More recently, Slovakia confronted a mounting crisis of online disinformation, notably in the run-up to the scheduled parliamentary elections on 30 September 2023. This disinformation onslaught, originating from both domestic and international sources, was predominantly linked to Russia⁵. In

¹ This term was coined to define Donald Trump's aggressive foreign policy. The United States continued to have a dominant position in the international arena in terms of military power and spheres of influence, but exercising it outside of the classic multilateral and liberal institutions, the cornerstones of US foreign policy up to that point.

² Starts, T. & Dimolfetta D. (2023), "Russia is undermining election integrity in democracies, cable warns". The Washington Post. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/10/23/russia-is-undermining-election-integrity-democracies-cable-warns/>

³ Correa, G., (2023), "Russia hacking: 'FSB in years-long cyber attacks on UK', says government". BBC. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-67647548>

⁴ Ivi.

⁵ Sauvage, G., (2023), "Slovakia Swamped by Disinformation Ahead of Parliamentary Elections", France24. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230928-disinformation-swamps-slovakia-ahead-of-parliamentary-elections>.

fact, as the election date drew near, Slovakia's disinformation ecosystem reached alarming heights. Peter Duboczi, the editor-in-chief at Infosecurity.sk, observed that disinformation in Slovakia peaked just ahead of the elections, presenting a considerable challenge for voters. By the same token, “Reset,” a London-based non-profit organization, reported an unsettling surge in election-related disinformation posts on Slovak social media platforms during the initial two weeks of September, surpassing 365,000 posts. These disinformation-laden posts, in clear violation of social media terms of service, garnered over five times the exposure of an average post.

8. A substantial portion of the circulating disinformation in Slovakia serves Russian interests. For instance, Prime Minister Robert Fico echoed a false narrative employed by Russian President Vladimir Putin to justify the invasion of Ukraine⁶. This underscored the alignment of certain Slovak politicians with Russian objectives. Additionally, Slovak National Party Chairman Andrej Danko also expressed views in line with Russia's stance on Ukrainian territories. These channels of Russian influence are not novel, given that many Slovak politicians have historical ties to the Communist era and have maintained connections since the Velvet Revolution of 1989⁷.

9. Following the Slovak elections, Poland held its elections on 15 October 2023. The moment was quite crucial, as the outcome may influence Russia's expectations on the war in Ukraine⁸. On 26 September 2023 European Commission Vice President Vera Jourova exhorted the main communication platforms such as Google, Meta and TikTok to improve the monitoring of Russian disinformation propaganda. These multi-tech, and other platforms as well, have helped thwart fake news by submitting data on their activities in the last six months⁹. In Jourová's opinion, Russia had been trying to spread the idea that “*democracy is no better than autocracy*”¹⁰.

10. In the third quarter of 2023, the frequency of misinformation related to the Ukraine war on Polish social media decreased, with domestic political topics taking the spotlight before the fall elections. In September, CEDMO fact-checking organizations published 98 Polish fact-checks. Only 10 of them were about Ukraine or its domestic events, while 25 concerned Polish politics, and 28 addressed healthcare-related topics. Despite the shift, disinformation about the Ukraine war persisted. False claims included a fake video suggesting a method of using fallen Ukrainian soldiers' bodies as agricultural fertilizer¹¹. False information also circulated regarding Ukrainian refugees in Poland, incorrectly claiming state funding for a drug program.

11. Additionally, in Poland, there was a concerning spread of false information about vaccines, such as claims that vaccines contain remotely controlled pathogens like Ebola and HIV, and that COVID-19 vaccines contain the SV40 virus causing “turbo cancer”¹². The study supporting the latter claim was unpublished, and the term “turbo cancer” lacks medical terminology. The topic of electric cars' environmental impact resurfaced, with social media posts wrongly suggesting they are 40% worse

⁶Ivi.

⁷Sauvage, (2023), *ibidem*.

⁸Goujard, C. , (2023), “Specter of Russian Interference Hangs Over Slovak Election, EU warns.” *Politico*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-union-slovakia-elections-russian-interference-disinformation/>

⁹Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, (2023), “Resist Russian Disinformation as Elections Loom, EU Tells Big Tech”. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-russian-disinformation-jourova-slovakia-elections/32609930.html>

¹⁰Goujard, C. , (2023), *ibidem*.

¹¹CEDMO, (2023), “Special Brief on the Parliamentary Elections in Poland II”, Central European Digital Media Observatory. Available at: <https://cedmohub.eu/fact-checking/fact-checking-briefs/>

¹²Ivi.

for the environment than diesel cars. Existing studies, however, show electric vehicles reduce emissions compared to combustion engine cars¹³.

12. Furthermore, there were mutual accusations between the Polish government and the opposition regarding attempts to manipulate the 2023 parliamentary elections. False information alleged plans to rig the elections using Ukrainian refugees, claiming they could vote due to their PESEL numbers (Universal Electronic System for Registration of the Population). In reality, having a PESEL number does not grant voting rights¹⁴.

13. For several years, the Kremlin spread disinformation to justify its crimes in terms of foreign policy. For instance, it did so to illegally annex Crimea in 2014, as well as for motivating President Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Among the various aspects Russia tries to use disinformation for, there certainly is trying to avoid any leaks of what happens on the ground, (such as potential war crimes), dividing Ukrainians, weakening Ukraine support abroad, and trying to gain support for Russia. The Kremlin's main tools of disinformation spread are the state-funded media outlets, like *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, as well as social media platforms, and foreign broadcasting and think-tanks¹⁵. In order to counteract the Russian propaganda, the new EU Digital Services Act has dedicated a whole article (Article 35) to enacting codes of conduct and mitigating risks in case of disinformation campaigns¹⁶. Interestingly enough, between 24 and 25 August 2023, the European Commission took down a report stating that social media platforms were absolutely failing in counteracting Russian propaganda¹⁷. However, the reasons behind the Commission's decision of taking down such report, just a few hours after it was published are yet to be investigated. The latest disinformation propaganda related to Ukraine that surfaced after the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, is that it would have supplied NATO weapons to Hamas militants. However, according to many prominent fact-checkers¹⁸, there is no evidence of such allegations.

How disinformation manipulates the Hamas-Israel conflict

14. The Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 has surged the spread of a series of fake news that mainly concern what happens on the ground. The reports of the beheading of a young boy, and the kidnapping of dozens of Israeli young girls to be used as sex slaves by Hamas fighters are already proven to be false¹⁹. These fake news seem to be coming from the vast majority from Indian accounts²⁰. The correlation might be that, especially since the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), there has been an outburst of Islamophobia in India. For instance, seven out of ten X (formerly Twitter) accounts that shared the misinformation about the Israeli sex slaves

¹³Cedro (2023), *ibidem*.

¹⁴CEDMO (2023), *ibidem*.

¹⁵Government of Canada, "Canada's efforts to counter disinformation - Russian invasion of Ukraine". Available at: <https://incyber.org/en/social-media-fail-counter-russian-propaganda/>

¹⁶Tarnowski, S. , (2023), "Social media fail to counter Russian propaganda". *InCyber*. Available at: <https://incyber.org/en/social-media-fail-counter-russian-propaganda/>

¹⁷*Ivi*.

¹⁸Khatsenkova, S. (2023), "Fact-check: Has Ukraine supplied Hamas militants with NATO weapons?", *Euronews*. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/19/fact-check-has-ukraine-supplied-hamas-militants-with-nato-weapons>

¹⁹Jones, M.O., (2023), "Analysis: Why is so much anti-Palestinian disinformation coming from India?". *Al-Jazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/16/analysis-why-is-so-much-anti-palestinian-disinformation-coming-from-india>

²⁰*Ivi*.

were traced back to Indian profiles²¹. These seven tweets alone had 3 million impressions on X (formerly Twitter). Not only was the video from September, but it was a simple school trip in Jerusalem.

15. On 17 October 2023, a catastrophic blast struck Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza, killing more than 500 civilians. Immediately, Palestinian authorities blamed Israel for the attack. The public opinion in the Arab world appeared to take the side of Palestinians, condemning Israel of committing war crimes. However, the Israeli government firmly denied any involvement with the bombing, claiming that, for unknown reasons, Hamas struck its own hospital. According to the IDF's analysis of footages, the crater created by the blast would be too small to be caused by Israeli weapons. Moreover, the IDF released a conversation presumably between two Hamas militants in which they acknowledged to have stricken Al-Ahli hospital²².

Africa: battleground for fake news and geopolitical influence

16. Russian propaganda has spread far beyond the boundaries of traditional zones of influence, particularly in Africa. In November 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron accused Russia of fuelling anti-French propaganda in Africa for “predatory purposes”²³. French influence in Africa has suffered a series of setbacks in recent years due to political and military failures. For these reasons, Putin's regime has tried to turn the situation to its advantage and extend its influence on the African continent²⁴. In conjunction with disinformation and propagandist stratagems, Russian involvement in Africa has manifested itself through the strategic deployment of mercenaries and paramilitary forces to project power. A notable illustration is the engagement of the private paramilitary entity, Warner Group, across various nations, such as the Central African Republic and Mali, with the explicit intent of undermining local institutions²⁵. The trajectory of developments in African nations reliant on Wagner forces is contingent upon Russia's foreign policy objectives, particularly in the aftermath of the demise of Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023.

17. Going backwards, since the 2019 Russia-Africa summit, Prigozhin has orchestrated a complex propaganda machinery aimed at reclaiming Russia's diplomatic influence in Africa, which waned after the disintegration of the USSR. This campaign's primary objectives are to spotlight Russian support for African nations' struggles for independence while sowing negative perceptions of European powers and the United States²⁶.

18. The Wagner Group has skilfully implemented this strategy to varying degrees in countries where it provides its services. Specifically, in Mali and the Central African Republic, Russian propaganda found fertile ground among populations characterized by strong Pan-African sentiments and deep-

²¹Jones, M.O., (2023), *ibidem*.

²²Brown, P. Et al., (2023), “Gaza Hospital; what video, pictures and other evidence tell us about Al-Ahli hospital blast”, *BBC*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67144061>

²³Reuters, (2022), “France's Macron accuses Russia ‘predatory’ influence in Africa”. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/frances-macron-accuses-russia-predatory-influence-africa-2022-11-20/>

²⁴Ivi.

²⁵Lyammouri, R. & Eddazi, Y., (2020). “Russian Interference in Africa: Disinformation and Mercenaries”. *Policy Center for the New South*. Available at: <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/russian-interference-africa-disinformation-and-mercenaries>

²⁶Le Cam, M., (2023), “How the Russian propaganda machine works in Africa”. *Le Monde*. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/07/31/how-the-russian-propaganda-machine-works-in-africa_6074552_4.html?random=1693086313

seated distrust of Western powers. To create a web of disinformation, entities like Africa Politology (sanctioned by the US Treasury) played a significant role, facilitating the dissemination of these ideas²⁷. The process typically involved using Russian influencers to propagate these narratives, and, at a later stage, leveraging African political figures, often taking advantage of fragile political situations such as coups and elections.

Russian Propaganda in Mali

19. One revealing example is Mali, where the second coup led by Assimi Goita in May 2021 prompted Prigozhin's men to deploy in the region. They approached several media outlets in Mali with incentives, such as financial compensation, to publish articles that advanced the interests of the Russian firm. Such practices often undermine journalistic integrity and independent reporting. This manipulation of narratives extends to cross-border influence. Notably, Malian activist "Ben le Cerveau" gained notoriety, even traveling to Burkina Faso, which also witnessed political upheaval in 2022. "Ben le Cerveau" and similar groups, like the Coalition des Patriotes Africains (COPA-BF), became known for organizing anti-French demonstrations, accusing France of complicity with jihadist groups. In the process, they have positioned themselves as supporters of coup leaders²⁸.

20. These disinformation operations also employ fabricated media outlets, exemplified by the fictitious "CCB News". Such outlets have played a role in disseminating false information, including allegations against foreign correspondents. Furthermore, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, connected to the US Defense Department, reported around 50 similar disinformation operations conducted by Russia in 16 African countries between 2014 and 2022. These disinformation campaigns, despite their diverse scales, remain a significant concern. They extend to financing protests and rallies to influence public opinion, as seen in budget allocations for events in the Central African Republic and Mali. For instance, "Yerewolo" protests in Mali have received financial backing from Russian sources to the tune of millions of CFA francs, aiming to push for France's withdrawal and promote Russia's involvement.

Russian Propaganda in Niger

21. Following the military coup in Niger in late July 2023, Russia's official and unofficial responses appeared contradictory. While the Kremlin's spokesperson called for the release of detained Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum and a return to order, Prigozhin offered to bring a new order through his mercenaries²⁹. Prigozhin posted a voice recording on Telegram commending the Niger junta, condemning former colonial power France, and disseminating disinformation. Notably, after Prigozhin's death in a plane crash on August 23, there has been a decrease in content related to Niger on Wagner's social media channels. The future role of the Wagner Group in Russian operations in Africa remains uncertain without its leader³⁰.

²⁷Ivi.

²⁸Le Cam, M. (2023), Ibidem.

²⁹ADF, (2023), "Russia Exploiting Niger Coup on Social Media". Africa Defense Forum. Available at: <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/09/russia-exploiting-niger-coup-on-social-media/>

³⁰Ivi.

22. There have been signs that Russia is leveraging both traditional and social media channels to exploit the situation in Niger³¹. Using the Wagner Group as a proxy for its foreign policy goals, the Kremlin continues to engage in hybrid warfare in Africa, fuelling instability. Consequently, Niger has witnessed waves of anti-French and pro-Russian propaganda since the coup, much like its Sahelian neighbors Burkina Faso and Mali, which turned towards Moscow after their recent coups.

23. Reports indicate a surge in content about Niger on 45 Telegram channels affiliated with the Wagner Group or the Russian state, with a remarkable increase of 6,645% in the month following the coup. Some of these channels claimed that the coup leaders had connections to Wagner, and a Russian military blogger suggested the group would receive an invitation from a "free" Niger. Additionally, a video circulated depicting a Russian military plane landing in Niger's capital, but *BBC Verify* revealed that the footage was from 2006, showing a plane landing in Sudan's capital³².

Counter-measures to combat the threat of disinformation

24. Globally, there have been numerous attempts to legislate the counteraction of disinformation. The responses of individual governments are shaped according to their political tradition. For instance, the US-based Poynter Institute has published a guide to anti-disinformation actions around the world, mapping the different responses³³. In this regard, in 2018, the G7 established the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) at the initiative of Canada. The (RRM) originated from the "Charlevoix Commitment on Defending Democracies from Foreign Threats," as documented in the provided source, with the overarching objective of coordinating the exchange of information and responses to 'malign and evolving threats to G7 democracies'³⁴. Notably, the scope of the RRM extends beyond disinformation, encompassing a broader spectrum of challenges to democratic principles. The report by Poynter underscores that the ambiguous delineation of fake news impedes governmental efforts to implement tangible measures, potentially affording authoritarian regimes the latitude to enact measures that infringe upon fundamental liberties, such as freedom of expression and the press³⁵. Numerous scholarly inquiries have indicated that the legal imposition of content restrictions may, in fact, pose a greater threat to democracy than the phenomenon of disinformation itself.

25. The countermeasures taken by governments have mainly focused on how to prevent any kind of external political interference in the electoral process and to raise public awareness of disinformation. For instance, the Spanish government relied on the efforts of the National Cybersecurity Institute to counter cyber-attacks and the spread of fake news. The Spanish case is particularly interesting because of the massive cyber interference during the Catalan independence referendum in 2017, and because of the activism of Vox, a far-right party that relies on the use of social bots and the spread of fake news. In Germany, following interference from Russia, all political parties agreed on a 'gentleman's agreement' not to rely on social media bots and leaked information. In addition, Facebook offered to train political parties on basic cyber hygiene and Google developed a 'Protect Your Election package' for each electoral force. Finally, after the end of the 2017 elections, the

³¹ADF, (2023), *ibidem*.

³²*Ivi*.

³³Flunke D. & Flamini D., (2023), "A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world", Poynter. Available at: <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/>

³⁴Government of Canada, "G7 Rapid Response Mechanism Annual Report 2021". Available at: <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/rapid-response-mechanism-mecanisme-reponse-rapide/2021-annual-report-rapport-annuel.aspx?lang=eng>

³⁵*Ivi*.

government passed the German Social Network Enforcement Act. This measure obliges social networks to remove reported 'illegal content' within twenty-four hours or, at the latest, within one week.

26. The decentralized and horizontally structured discourse emerging on social media platforms eludes conventional oversight and regulatory frameworks typically applied to traditional media. Although social networks have guaranteed access to information and the participation of people who were previously excluded from public debate, the regulatory vacuum that has existed for several years is quite noteworthy. In this vacuum, commercial and, above all, political interests move freely, taking advantage of the few limitations encountered in terms of publishing content. The fears and anxieties of the under-represented classes in the traditional media are thus addressed and politically exploited in new virtual spaces that are difficult to control. Attempts to legislate in this regard must therefore be directed primarily at the architecture of this new 'global village', the data traffic and the algorithms behind it.

27. In order to preserve the protection of democratic and European values, the European Union is addressing the problem of the spread of disinformation, as well as online information with various initiatives. Guidelines for the obligations and responsibility of online platforms are contained in the European Democracy Action Plan. In 2018, through the Code of Conduct on Disinformation, the industry agreed on self-regulatory standards to combat disinformation.

28. This instrument aimed to achieve the goals set by the Commission's Communication presented in April 2018³⁶. The Code of Conduct was further strengthened in June 2022. The signatories of the Code, during the Covid-19 pandemic, also implemented a disinformation monitoring programme on the topic, which acted as a transparency measure to ensure the transparency of online platforms during the emergency³⁷

29. Finally, the Commission presented two legislative initiatives to update the rules governing digital services in the EU: the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA). In both cases, political agreement was reached in the first half of 2022. Together they form a single set of new rules that will be applicable across the EU to create a more secure and open digital space, achievable through a partnership between the public and private sector.

30. In fact, the European Union's efforts to decrease the amount of disinformation and illegal content after the exacerbation of the Israel-Hamas conflict have been largely supported by the Digital Services Act (DSA)³⁸. Indeed, the inability of international tech companies to protect users may result in fines (up to 6% of the annual global revenue), according to the DSA. The DSA stands as a fundamental pillar of the European Union's digital strategy, establishing an unparalleled benchmark for ensuring the responsibility of online platforms in addressing issues like disinformation, illegal content such as hate speech, and various societal risks. It incorporates overarching principles and strong assurances to safeguard freedom of expression and the rights of other users³⁹. In this regard, the European Commission asked X, Meta and TikTok to inform their users about the further measures taken to

³⁶European Commission, (2023) "Shaping Europe's Digital Future". Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation>

³⁷Ivi.

³⁸European Commission, (2023), "The Commission sends request for information to X under the Digital Services Act". Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_4953

³⁹Ivi.

thwart disinformation spread and violent contents⁴⁰. On the other hand, the Digital Markets Act (DMA) is one of the first comprehensive regulatory tools to found clear objective criteria to identify gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are those digital platforms that provide platform services that need to conform to the DMA's regulations, which involve both obligations and prohibitions⁴¹.

31. Thierry Breton, European Commissioner for Internal Market, claimed that he already warned these platforms about the possibility of explicitly violent contents, as Hamas has stated that he would have broadcasting hostages' executions⁴². In this regard, Meta has improved its resources upon the spread of the conflict, generating a special operations center with Hebrew and Arabic speakers, in order to mitigate these risks during the conflict. Meta also cooperates with third-party fact-checkers to promptly block any fake news in the realm of conflicts. TikTok and Meta now have time until 30 November to respond to the Commission's questions respectively regarding child safety and election integrity. According to their responses, the Commission might decide to fine them for incorrect, incomplete, or misleading information⁴³. Concurrently, European Commission's President Von der Leyen had already affirmed that the anti-Semitic hate-speeches spreading on X are to be condemned, as the EU has the duty "to protect Jewish life in Europe."⁴⁴ Therefore, her executive opened an investigation on the platform to monitor how it handles misinformation and violent content.

32. On 13 December 2023, the European Commission has unveiled a proposed law in Strasbourg, requiring the 27 EU countries to mandate organisations and individuals lobbying for non-EU nations to disclose their activities and funding in a public register.⁴⁵ Despite criticism from NGOs concerned about potential suppression of critical voices, EC Vice-President Věra Jourová emphasized that the law avoids criminal sanctions or bans on activities, positioning it differently from foreign agent laws. The legislation targets various entities, such as think-tanks, PR firms, and media, aiming to influence EU policy or public life. Sanctions for non-compliance are capped at 1% of annual turnover for companies and €100 for individuals.⁴⁶ The move aligns with similar laws in Australia and the U.S., reflecting global concerns about electoral interference. The proposed measures come amid heightened fears of cyberattacks and disinformation impacting the 2024 European elections, with 81% of EU citizens expressing concerns about foreign interference. Additionally, the Commission presented recommendations to fortify electoral processes, including cybersecurity measures and combating propaganda.⁴⁷

33. In January 2024, American singer Taylor Swift was faced with a major violation of her image with the widespread distribution of suggestive pictures generated by AI, sparking concerns by fans and legislators about the vulnerability of public figures and women in the public eye in particular.

⁴⁰ Chan, K., (2023), "EU demands Meta and TikTok detail efforts to curb disinformation from Israel-Hamas war", AP. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/meta-tiktok-eu-europe-digital-services-act-81c682d25bd2bd62333ba64564dde9e5#>

⁴¹ European Commission, "The Digital Markets Act (DMA)", Available at: https://digital-markets-act.ec.europa.eu/index_en

⁴² Chan, K., (2023), *ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ivi*.

⁴⁴ Liboreiro, J., (2023), Ursula von der Leyen defends trip to Israel and says civilians must be protected from 'fury of war'. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/18/ursula-von-der-leyen-defends-trip-to-israel-and-says-civilians-must-be-protected-from-fury>

⁴⁵ Jones, M. G., (2023), "Planned EU foreign influence law will not criminalise or discriminate, Brussels says". *Euronews*. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/12/planned-eu-foreign-influence-law-will-not-criminalise-or-discriminate-brussels-says>

⁴⁶ *Ivi*.

⁴⁷ Jones, (2023), *ibidem*.

The singer was able to have these pictures removed from social media platforms (X, Tik Tok) not until they had garnered millions of views.⁴⁸ While, in the USA, some states have imposed restrictions on deep-fakes, particularly in pornographic and political contexts, the lack of a comprehensive federal regulatory framework has hampered the effectiveness of these measures. This regulatory void underscores the need for a robust legislative framework to tackle the evolving challenges posed by deep-fake technology. In fact, the danger lies in their capacity to be employed for blackmailing prominent figures, especially politicians, which could result in the denigration and destruction of public images.⁴⁹ The risk that generative AI could serve the purpose of disinformation, misinformation and fake news in the realm of politics is very concrete.

34. PAM has embarked on a proactive mission to significantly contribute to the field of AI research even before the spread of ChatGPT with a report on “Protecting Human Rights in an increasingly automatized world: Artificial Intelligence, opportunities for parliamentarians” published in 2021. PAM has focused even further on this phenomenon during the last year, due to the strong impact that AI is having on a global level by participating in international events organised by the OECD and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly (CPA) for example.

35. Moreover, the UN Security Council CTED has commissioned PAM to study the malicious use of generative AI. The PAM newly established Center for Global Studies (CGS) will provide a substantial contribution, addressing the intricate global risks entailed by the rapid evolution of this cutting-edge technological landscape, in particular in the political realm

Conclusions

36. Autocratic countries exploit the characteristic weaknesses of democratic systems by means of interference strategies through disinformation and cyber-attacks. The ultimate goal is to weaken democratic institutions by undermining their internal cohesion, and piloting public opinion. The debate is steered towards polarisation and citizens invited to take sides. This type of operation makes extensive use of social media, which algorithms knowingly favour the most divisive and polarising content. Digital users undergo a continual reinforcement process of their entrenched worldviews, devoid of exposure to information counter to their pre-existing beliefs. These mechanisms contribute to a sociopolitical landscape where perspectives polarise and radicalise, diverging from the envisioned synthesis of a healthy confrontation process. Leveraging marketing mechanisms, social networks, propelled by vast data and sophisticated algorithms, shape information, presenting ostensibly credible yet potentially false narratives, consequently fostering societies marked by escalating conflict and diminishing adherence to democratic principles. The imperative for regulation in this domain confronts the imperative to safeguard fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of the press, speech, and expression. The EU DSA and DMA will likely have a strong impact on disinformation and fake news, as international platforms are already making a further effort to mitigate the impact that fake news may have on the geopolitical sphere. For instance, Meta has already developed a crisis management plan specifically to counteract disinformation and violent content spread regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict. Thus, other platforms will have to conform to the new regulations as well. Will it be enough for the EU alone to lead changes? But more importantly, will

⁴⁸ Conger, K., & Yoon, J., (2024), “Explicit Deepfake Images of Taylor Swift Elude Safeguards and Swamp Social Media”. The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/26/arts/music/taylor-swift-ai-fake-images.html>

⁴⁹ Conger, K., & Yoon, J., (2024), *ibidem*.

social media platforms be able to mitigate disinformation risks and violent content in a promptly, and efficient manner?

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