

## Online disinformation and the EU's response

The proliferation of disinformation – including false news posing as factual stories – became visible in the context of the crisis in Ukraine, gaining notoriety as a global challenge during the 2016 United States presidential election campaign. While the European Union and the European Parliament are stepping up efforts to tackle online disinformation ahead of the European elections in 2019, the EU's myth-busting team has been under pressure.

### A global phenomenon with growing visibility

The phenomenon of false, misleading news stories is at least as [old](#) as the printing press. However, social media and their personalisation [tools](#) have accelerated the spread of rumours, hoaxes and conspiracy theories. The phenomenon gained global visibility during the 2016 US presidential election, when viral false news or '[junk news](#)' across the political spectrum received more [engagement](#) on Facebook than real news. According to the Collins Dictionary, which chose 'fake news' as its [word of the year for 2017](#), the term saw an unprecedented increase in usage, of 365 % since 2016.

### Online disinformation as an instrument of political influence

When designed to deceive users for political purposes, digital [gossip](#) falls under '[disinformation](#)' – the dissemination of deliberately false information which non-state and state actors can use to undermine adversaries. The Kremlin continues its [disinformation campaigns](#) in its ongoing [hybrid war](#) against Ukraine, and is applying them in its '[holistic](#)' information warfare against the West. Pro-Kremlin information campaigns boost Moscow's [narrative](#) of a morally decayed EU on the brink of collapse, and seek to exploit divisions in Western societies. In November 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May accused Russia of '[weaponising information](#)', and a February 2018 report by UK communications agency 89up.org found Russian pro-Brexit social media interference worth up to [€4.6 million](#) during the campaign. In August 2017, the USA imposed [fresh sanctions](#) on Russia over its interference in the 2016 election. Following the nerve-gas attack on a former Russian spy, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter on UK soil in March 2018, the US imposed [new sanctions](#), including on 16 Russian entities and individuals linked to the Internet Research Agency (a Russian '[troll factory](#)' spreading disruptive content via social media) indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller in February for their [role](#) in operations to interfere with elections and political processes.

#### *Online platforms and their role in spreading disinformation*

Whereas US tech giants had previously played down the volume of content purchased by Russian actors during the 2016 US presidential election campaign, Facebook, Google and Twitter told US lawmakers in November 2017 that pro-Kremlin actors bought and published [divisive ads](#) aimed at influencing both liberals and conservatives. Facebook said Russia-backed posts reached up to 126 million Americans during and after the 2016 presidential election. The March 2018 [disclosure](#) that user data from 87 million Facebook users – including that of [2.7 million](#) EU citizens – were improperly shared with the controversial political consultancy company Cambridge Analytica (which used the data to micro-target and mobilise voters in the United States and the United Kingdom) further increased the focus on the role of online platforms in spreading divisive content. In April 2018 hearings, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg told the US Congress that tens of thousands of fake accounts were deleted to prevent election interference in 2017. He explained that Russian accounts primarily used ads to influence views on issues rather than promoting specific candidates or political messaging.

#### *The Kremlin denies interfering, but admits setting up information warfare force*

So far, the Kremlin has dismissed allegations of interference in the US election campaign and in the UK referendum on EU membership. However, in February 2017 the Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu, acknowledged that a dedicated [information warfare force](#) had been established in 2013 within the Ministry of Defence. He added that Moscow's 'propaganda needs to be clever, smart and efficient'. Security analysts say that Shoigu's announcement indicates that Moscow can no longer deny propaganda activities.

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## EU steps up anti-disinformation efforts to protect democracy

The Facebook data breach disclosure reignited the ongoing [debate](#) on the role of online platforms in the spread of [conspiracy theories](#), [disinformation](#) and false news. In its June 2017 [resolution](#) on online platforms and the digital single market, the European Parliament had already called on the Commission to analyse the legal framework with regard to 'fake news', and to look into the possibility of legislative intervention to limit the dissemination of fake content. President Jean-Claude Juncker [tasked](#) Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society, to look into the democratic challenges that online platforms create as regards the spread of fake information, as well as to reflect on possible action at EU level. In October 2017, the Commission launched a public consultation on 'fake news and online disinformation'. It also set up a high-level expert group ([HLEG](#)) representing academia, online platforms, news media and civil society organisations. The [recommendations](#) of the HLEG, published in March 2018, included the introduction of a code of principles for online platforms and social networks, including ensuring transparency by explaining how algorithms select news, as well as improving the visibility of reliable, trustworthy news and facilitating users' access to it. The Commission's communication on 'Tackling online disinformation: a European approach' ([COM\(2018\) 236 final](#)), published on 26 April 2018, proposed an EU-wide Code of Practice on Disinformation, to be published by July 2018 and aiming for measurable impact by October 2018. In addition, the communication recommends support for an independent network of fact-checkers as well as a series of actions to stimulate quality journalism and promote media literacy. By December 2018, the Commission will report on the progress made and examine the need for further action.

### *European elections 2019: the next disinformation target?*

In a January 2018 [debate](#) on the influence of Russian propaganda on EU countries, Members of the European Parliament warned that the upcoming EU elections in May 2019 are likely to be the next big target for Russian disinformation. On the same occasion, Julian King, the Commissioner in charge of the Security Union characterised the on-going pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign as 'an [orchestrated strategy](#)'. Also in January, Parliament created a special unit to respond to fake and incorrect information about the Parliament, as an increase in this sort of disinformation is expected in the run-up to the European elections.

## EU 'myth-busting' team: pressure and praise

In 2015, the [European Council](#) asked EU High Representative/Vice-President, Federica Mogherini, to submit an action plan on strategic communication to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. As a result, the [East StratCom task force](#) was set up in September 2015 under the European External Action Service. Since then, the (now 14-strong) team has been working without its own budget, drawing on the existing EU strategic communication budget and mostly seconded staff. It relies on volunteers to collect the disinformation [stories](#) (more than 3 800 [examples](#) in 18 languages so far), which it analyses, debunks and publishes in its weekly [newsletter](#), the Disinformation Review. The team also explains and promotes EU policies in the Neighbourhood. The European Parliament, in its [23 November 2016 resolution](#) on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda, called for the East StratCom task force to be reinforced, including through 'proper staffing and adequate budgetary resources'. In January 2018, the Task Force received its first budget of €1.1 million, which was [initiated](#) by the European Parliament. The main aim with the budget, according to the team itself, is to professionalise the network in the field, make the data input more solid, more robust, more balanced and more professional.

In March 2018, the Dutch parliament called for the East StratCom Task Force's website EUvsDisinfo to close down because it had wrongly listed articles published by Dutch media in its collection of cases conveying a 'partial, distorted or false view or interpretation and/or spreading key pro-Kremlin messaging'. The task force removed the articles, and the case was withdrawn. A [complaint](#) filed with the EU Ombudsman in March 2018, alleging that the Disinformation Review violates the freedom of expression, was deemed inadmissible by the Ombudsman.

There seems to be overwhelming support for the East StratCom Task Force from experts in the field. [Keir Giles](#) (Chatham House) has called East StratCom '[critically important](#)' for responding to threats to democracy and our institutions, adding that the team is 'scandalously under-resourced and under-empowered'. A March 2018 [report](#) published by the Atlantic Council recommended that the EU require all Member States to provide a seconded national expert to boost the East StratCom taskforce. The report also urged continued financial and political support for the task force, adding that it should have 'autonomy to act within its charter'.

