Taking stock of the follow-up taken by the EEAS two years after the EP Report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties. Recommendation to the Vice President/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and to the Council

2018/2115(INI) - 28/01/2019 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Anna Elbieta FOTYGA (ECR, PL) on a European Parliament recommendation to the Council and the Vice President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning taking stock of the follow-up taken by the EEAS two years after the EP report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties.

State of play 2018 - Tackling hybrid warfare

Members stressed that freedom of speech and expression as well as media pluralism are at the heart of resilient democratic societies, and provide the best safeguards against disinformation campaigns and hostile propaganda.

They considered developing a legal framework both at EU and international level for tackling hybrid threats, including cyber and information warfare, that would allow for a robust response by the Union, also covering targeted sanctions against those responsible for orchestrating and implementing these campaigns, the need for which was demonstrated in particular by the hostile actions of state and non-state actors in these areas.

The VP/HR and the Commission are called on to become more closely involved in this area by preparing a thorough assessment of the new regulations, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the upcoming e-Privacy Regulation, as a safeguard against malicious use of social platforms.

Member States are called on to:

- invest proactively in educational measures that explain the different ways of producing and disseminating disinformation in order to improve citizens' ability to detect and respond to disinformation;

- ensure an effective exchange of information between all of their relevant authorities for tackling propaganda, manipulation and disinformation, including the cyber and information warfare.

Misinformation, disinformation and propaganda targeting the EU and its neighbours

Members recommend adapting the EU's and Member States' response to the continuously growing sophistication of the tools used to create and to spread disinformation, including the new ways of spreading propaganda by using multiple low-level websites, private messaging apps, search engine optimisation, online news portals and TV stations to disseminate the main narratives.

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

Industry and social media

While acknowledging a new investment of effort by social media companies to tackle disinformation, Members stressed that special attention should be paid to the effective implementation of the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, while also inviting EU neighbour and partner countries to sign up to the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation. They recommended regulating the actions of social media companies, messenger services and search engine providers and ensure their full transparency and, in particular, accountability, adopting an EU-wide approach, and making it possible to uncover the identity and location not only of the authors, but also of the sponsors of the submitted political content.

Member States, candidate countries and associated countries are urged to adopt effective and clear legislation that ensures the transparency of media ownership.

Safeguarding elections from hostile propaganda

Members strongly condemned the interference of third parties of any kind, including private companies, in elections and referenda, and the malicious use of bots, algorithms, artificial intelligence, trolls, deep fakes and fake accounts in political campaigns and to call on the affected Member States to urgently conduct, with the support of Eurojust if necessary, thorough investigations into these hostile campaigns.

They are concerned about recent developments in the algorithms of large social networks and their potentially harmful role in highlighting content containing false information or hate speech. They invited Member States to ensure that electoral laws take into account possible threats stemming from disinformation campaigns, cyber attacks, cybercrimes and violations of freedom of expression when voting. These laws should be adequately amended to enable Member States to effectively and proactively counteract such threats.

The report called for legislation to address data use in election campaigning, following the exposure of data misuse by Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 UK referendum campaign, in order to further safeguard future election campaigns from undue influence.