Resolution on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes

2019/2810(RSP) - 10/10/2019 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 469 votes to 143, with 47 abstentions, a resolution on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes.

Parliament reiterated that foreign interference in elections, by compromising citizens' right to participate in their country's government, was part of a broader strategy of hybrid warfare, and that addressing it therefore remained a core security and foreign policy issue. It recalled that free and fair elections were at the heart of the democratic process and called on the EU institutions and Member States to take decisive action on this point.

Worrying trend

Highlighting the global trend of far-right groups using large-scale disinformation on social media platforms, Members expressed concern that evidence of interference, often with indications of foreign influence, is constantly being uncovered in the run-up to all major national and European elections, with much of this interference benefiting anti-EU, right-wing extremist and populist candidates and targeting specific minorities and vulnerable groups, including migrants, LGBTI people, religious groups, people with a Roma background and Muslims, or people perceived as Muslims, to serve the wider purpose of undermining the appeal of democratic and equal societies.

Although the vast majority of Member States have full or partial bans on foreign donations to political parties and candidates, foreign actors have found ways to circumvent them and have offered support to their allies through loans from foreign banks (Front National in 2016), purchase agreements (allegations reported by Der Spiegel and Süddeutsche Zeitung against the Freedom Party of Austria, and by Buzzfeed and L'Espresso against the Lega per Salvini Premier party), as well as by facilitating financial activities, as reported in the British press in the context of the Leave campaign.had.

Russian Propaganda

Parliament noted with concern that the number of cases of disinformation attributed to Russian sources and documented by the East Strategic Communication Task Force since January 2019 (998 cases) is more than double that for the same period in 2018 (434 cases). It asked the Commission and the Council to put in place an effective and detailed strategy to counteract Russian disinformation strategies. It also condemned the increasingly aggressive actions of third country state and non-state actors seeking to undermine the foundations of European democracies and the sovereignty of all EU accession countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries.

Need for a coordinated approach

Members stressed that threats of interference can neither be addressed solely by national authorities working in isolation nor by pure self-regulation of the private sector but require a coordinated multi-level, multi-stakeholder approach. They proposed that a legal framework for tackling hybrid threats, including cyber-attacks and disinformation, should be developed both at EU and international level, in order to enable a robust response by the EU.

In this context, Parliament stressed, in particular, the need to improve media and civic education through culture and school education from an early age and the need for the European Union to seek to increase its own technological capacities to limit the possibilities of malicious electoral interference by foreign actors.

Parliament stressed the importance of:

- supporting responsible journalism and editorial responsibility in the media in facing the challenge of non-verified or biased information;

- supporting public service media, which do not rely financially on private funding sources and can therefore provide high-quality and impartial information to the general public;

- strengthening the EU's East Stratcom task force into a permanent structure within the European External Action Service, with significantly higher funding and staff than hitherto.

The Commission was invited to:

- monitor the impact of foreign interference across Europe and fulfil the solemn commitment made by its President-elect Ursula von der Leyen to ‘address the threats of external intervention in our European elections’;

- assess legislative and non-legislative measures which can result in intervention by social media platforms with the aim of systematically labelling content shared by bots, reviewing algorithms in order to make them as unbiased as possible, and closing down accounts of persons engaging in illegal activities aimed at the disruption of democratic processes or at instigating hate speech, while not compromising on freedom of expression;

- provide funding and support for public awareness campaigns to increase the resilience of European citizens to disinformation.

Calling for a global reflection on foreign interference, Parliament called for a discussion with Member States to address the issue of foreign funding of European political parties and foundations.