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The runup to the European election campaign began with claims of Russian interference in the vote. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said that Russia had approached members of the European Parliament and "had paid them to promote propaganda" on behalf of the Kremlin. And the Czech government sanctioned a news site called Voice of Europe, which according to Prague was part of pro-Russian influence operation. In November 2023, a study requested by the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations to look into possible foreign interference that might impact democratic processes in the European Union (EU) had already warned that the election to the European Parliament, consisting of 27 individual elections across the continent, "is particularly susceptible to external interference due to its complexity" and the potential for a single "successful attack in one country to cast doubt on the entire process". Given these circumstances, the European Commission announced the Defence of Democracy package of measures in December. Still under discussion, it includes a controversial legislative proposal for a register of representatives of foreign interests, according to which all organisations receiving foreign funding that carry out interest activities would have to be entered on an EU-wide transparency register.

All this reveals the level of geopolitical confrontation enveloping elections that are crucial for the future of the union. The ballot box has emerged as the clearest test of the vulnerabilities troubling European democratic systems, from the erosion of confidence in the institutions to the polarisation of debates and sympathies; from the technological capability to distort the truth to the impact of responses to disinformation as a social problem. It is ultimately a vulnerability made of many factors and a challenge that requires a sophisticated and multilevel response.

Prior weaknesses, online and offline

What was propaganda in the past, and now labelled disinformation – with an unprecedented capacity for dissemination thanks to technology push and a combination of diverse tactics, techniques and procedures – has become a "growing systematic pressure" for the European Union

(European Parliament, 2016). Disinformation is a geopolitical challenge and a social problem. It is an instrument of external interference but also of internal vulnerability.

That is why the European strategy to combat disinformation merges two different logics: (geo)political and media; the logic of security and the logic of social resilience. Disinformation aims to destabilise societies, directly attacking civilian spaces in order to foment polarisation and unrest, if not conflict (Freedman et al., 2021). But the spread of disinformation does not take place in a vacuum. Its capacity to enter the public debate, to confuse and undermine confidence in the institutions or electoral processes, for example, often draws on existing sociocultural divisions. It targets prior vulnerabilities and particular groups supposedly inclined to trust in certain sources or narratives who can contribute, voluntarily or not, to its dissemination.

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We are mired in a content-saturated media space marked by an excessive distrust of traditional sources of information. The gradual loss of journalistic authority (Carlson, 2017) and the weakness of the media systems in a good many EU countries has added to this confusion.

For one thing, the concentration of media ownership as a threat to media pluralism has hit very high-risk levels throughout the continent, particularly in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovenia[1]. For another, digital platforms exist alongside and interact with many other online and offline disinformation vehicles. The rhetoric of certain political elites or the programming of certain traditional media outlets have a greater capacity to influence and disseminate false narratives than some of the social media or "pseudo-media" outlets in the crosshairs of the lawmakers. There is a twin dilemma here. Television and the narratives circulating among "trustworthy community members" are highly influential in shaping people's beliefs and behaviours, while the growing number of digital platforms dilutes the effectiveness of any specific action that some of them might take to counter disinformation (Bateman and Jackson, 2024). Disinformation, then, is a social problem that far transcends the power of the digital giants and even the idea of foreign interference. Discourses online and offline feed off one another. And local media or individuals are among the greatest amplifiers of certain disinformation narratives.

European elections and regulatory acceleration

The elections to the European Parliament have served as a guiding thread in the EU's regulatory response to disinformation. One only need look at how electoral contexts have coincided in recent years with the rollout of measures and regulations the EU has been testing in its particular approach to the fight against fake news.

The breakout moment, the realisation, came in 2014: disinformation and hybrid interference entered the European debate tentatively and at the request of the Baltic republics, who were concerned about the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine and its impact on public opinion in their countries. Disinformation was understood then merely as

1. Data from the Media Pluralism Monitor, a research project of the European University Institute of Florence that assesses the health of media ecosystems in Europe.

an external threat from which some member states felt completely removed, resulting in a multispeed Europe in the face of disinformation, particularly from the point of view of legislation (Magallón, 2019).

But the complexity of the phenomenon soon produced a catalogue of political episodes – the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the US presidential elections of 2016, or during the election campaigns in France and Germany in 2017 – that made it necessary to take a longer view. It was a moment of diversification and acceleration. The High Level Expert Group released its report on fake news and online disinformation (2018), laying the first conceptual foundations of the phenomenon. A code of practice on disinformation was also approved, the first self-regulatory mechanism agreed between the European institutions and the big online platforms and social networks. The code saw the end of the large digital platforms' long-held defence that they were mere innocent intermediaries. Although from the point of view of responsibility for content, this strategy was interpreted as outsourcing the power to regulate online public discourse to private enterprise, with the political and social impact that brings (Colomina and Pérez-Soler, 2022).

The construction of this governance framework has taken a major leap forward with the approval of two significant legislative proposals. The first is the Digital Services Act (DSA), the primary tool and the first "strong" EU regulation. The second is the approval of the European regulation on artificial intelligence (AI Act).

By the time the 2019 European elections came around, the EU had laid the groundwork of its regulatory, geopolitical and conceptual strategy, and the platforms had begun to take measures. The European institutions improved the tools for protecting news and journalism with the launch of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which serves as a hub for fact checkers and academics to work together, while it encourages them to help improve media literacy. The COVID-19 pandemic escalated the impact of the phenomenon globally, and the need for coordination.

But the construction of this governance framework has taken a major leap forward ahead of the 2024 European elections with the approval of two significant legislative proposals. The first is the Digital Services Act (DSA), the primary tool and the first "strong" EU regulation, which came into effect in February. It marks a clear commitment to adopting mechanisms for the control, traceability and reporting of illicit activity or services that might be offered online and includes the power to impose penalties. The second is the approval of the European regulation on artificial intelligence (AI), which seeks to regulate the risks involved in the use of AI and imposes an ethical code of conduct backed by million-euro fines for companies that fail to comply. The EU, then, is the first jurisdiction to have specific legislation on the matter, although many questions remain unanswered.

But all this shows that as we head into the elections in June 2024 we find ourselves on new ground, with more tools but also with new fears, thanks to the rise of AI. There are some precedents. In the elections in Slovakia, held on September 30th, 2023, and the parliamentary elections in Poland on October 15th the campaigns were shaken by the emergence of alleged (AI-generated) recordings seeking to create distrust in the integrity of the electoral processes.

The EU cybersecurity agency (ENISA) has warned of the possible risks posed to the European Parliament elections by AI chatbots and audio and video deepfakes and "cheap fakes" (a term coined by Joan Donovan and

Britt Paris to describe basic video editing techniques to speed, slow, cut or recontextualise existing material to create hoaxes). In its 2023 report, ENISA said that the number of cases of disinformation and manipulation detected over the year had risen significantly compared to the previous 12 months, and content related to the Ukraine war was centre stage.

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Disinformation, mobilisation and results

Disinformation contributes to polarisation. It constructs narratives suitably tailored to appeal to our emotions. There is a clear relationship between the social media driving political polarisation and the prevalence of disinformation, which in turn potentially undermine democratic quality (Tucker et al., 2018). Polarisation has gradually shaped (and increasingly so) democratic competition throughout Europe and the political landscape that emerges from the ballot boxes.

The logic of confrontation, the identification of "enemies", be they tangible or symbolic, with which to establish a dynamic of opposition reinforces niches, stirs supporters and dominates the political and news agenda (Pira, 2019). This party polarisation has ambivalent consequences for democracies. While it is true that studies show it can have a mobilising effect on voters, they also indicate that this effect is driven by emotions (Ellger, 2023) and therefore they mobilise people negatively. By the same logic, exposure to disinformation can also help mobilise supporters and demobilise opponents. Polarisation spells the end of "permissive consensus" on central issues for the European construction.

Furthermore, the impact of disinformation on the public debate can have direct consequences for the political agenda, particularly on sensitive issues for public opinion such as climate commitments, military support for Ukraine or the reception of refugees (Marconi, 2023). And, from fear and geopolitical anxiety, a more insular European Union may emerge.

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