European Commission

European Commission contribution to the European Council

Action Plan against Disinformation

5 December 2018

**JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND
SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Action Plan against Disinformation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression is a core value of the European Union enshrined in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights and in the constitutions of Member States. Our open democratic societies depend on the ability of citizens to access a variety of verifiable information so that they can form a view on different political issues. In this way, citizens can participate in an informed way in public debates and express their will through free and fair political processes. These democratic processes are increasingly challenged by deliberate, large-scale, and systematic spreading of disinformation.

Disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm[1]. Public harm includes threats to democratic processes as well as to public goods such as Union citizens' health, environment or security. Disinformation does not include inadvertent errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary. The actions contained in this Action Plan only target disinformation content that is legal under Union or national law. They are without prejudice to the laws of the Union or of any of the Member States that may be applicable, including rules on illegal content[2].

Following the Salisbury chemical attack and the related European Council conclusions[3], the Commission and the High Representative presented a Joint Communication on bolstering resilience against hybrid threats[4] that highlighted strategic communication as a priority field for further work. The European Council, then, invited the *"High Representative and the Commission to present, in cooperation with the Member States and in line with the March 2015 European Council conclusions, an action plan by December 2018 with specific proposals for a coordinated response to the challenge of disinformation, including appropriate mandates and sufficient resources for the relevant EEAS Strategic Communications teams"[5].*

This Action Plan answers the European Council's call for measures to *"protect the Union's democratic systems and combat disinformation, including in the context of the upcoming European elections"[6].* It builds on existing Commission initiatives and the work of the East Strategic Communication Task Force of the European External Action Service. It sets out actions to be taken by the Commission and the High Representative, with the assistance of the European External Action Service, in cooperation with Member States and the European Parliament. This Plan includes input received from Member States, including via discussions at Council[7], in Permanent Representatives Committees I and II, the Political Security Committee, relevant Council working parties and meetings of strategic communication and political directors of Ministries of Foreign Affairs. It also takes into account the cooperation

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[1] Communication on tackling on-line disinformation, COM(2018) 236.

[2] The Commission proposed targeted measures to address the spread of illegal content on-line, including the Recommendation on measures to effectively tackle illegal content online (C(2018) 1177). See also proposal for a Regulation on preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online COM(2018) 640 as well as the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive agreed on 6 November 2018.

[3] European Council conclusions, 22 March 2018.

[4] JOIN(2018) 16.

[5] European Council conclusions, 28 June 2018.

[6] European Council conclusions, 18 October 2018.

[7] See policy debate on "Tackling the spread of disinformation online: Challenges for the media ecosystem" and Council conclusions of 27 November 2018.

with the Union's key partners, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Group of 7 (G7)[8].

The Communication on tackling online disinformation (the April Communication) emphasised the key role played by civil society and the private sector (notably social media platforms) in tackling the problem of disinformation. As a follow-up, online platforms and the advertising industry agreed on a Code of Practice in September 2018 to increase online transparency and protect citizens, especially with a view to the 2019 European Parliament elections, but also in a more long-term perspective. It is now essential that these actors deliver on the objectives the Commission set out in April and fully comply with the Code of Practice[9]. In addition, an independent network of fact-checkers is being developed to increase the ability to detect and expose disinformation, and sustained efforts are being made at Union and national level to support media literacy.

This Action Plan is accompanied by a progress report on the April Communication[10]. This report sets out the progress achieved on the various actions, notably regarding the Code of Practice, fostering a secure, trust-worthy and accountable on-line ecosystem, activities linked to awareness raising and media literacy as well as support to independent media and quality journalism.

The European Council first recognised the threat of online disinformation campaigns in 2015 when it asked the High Representative to address the disinformation campaigns by Russia. The East Strategic Communication Task Force has been set up to address and raise awareness of this issue. In addition, the Joint Communication on Countering Hybrid Threats[11] set up the Hybrid Fusion Cell within the European External Action Service to act as a single focus for the analysis of hybrid threats. It also led to the setting up of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, which shares best practices and supports the activities of the Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in this field.

In view of the 2019 European Parliament elections and more than 50 presidential, national or local/regional elections being held in Member States by 2020, it is urgent to step up efforts to secure free and fair democratic processes. Threats affecting democracy in any Member State can harm the Union as a whole. Moreover, disinformation often targets European institutions and their representatives and aims at undermining the European project itself in general. On 12 September 2018, the Commission adopted measures[12] to secure free and fair European elections and recommended the use of sanctions where appropriate,

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8   In the Charlevoix Commitment on Defending Democracy from Foreign Threats, G7 Leaders committed to take concerted action to respond to foreign actors who seek to undermine our democratic societies and institutions, our electoral processes, our sovereignty and our security.
9   See also Council conclusions of 27 November 2018.
10   COM(2018) 794.
11   While definitions of hybrid threats vary and need to remain flexible to respond to their evolving nature, the concept captures the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare. There is usually an emphasis on exploiting the vulnerabilities of the target and on generating ambiguity to hinder decision-making processes. Massive disinformation campaigns, using social media to control the political narrative or to radicalise, recruit and direct proxy actors can be vehicles for hybrid threats. See JOIN(2016) 18.
12   For a full overview of measures, see the Communication on Securing free and fair European elections, COM(2018) 637 final.

including for the illegal use of personal data to influence the outcome of the elections[13]. In addition, it is urgent that Member States take the steps needed to preserve the integrity of their electoral systems and infrastructure and test them ahead of the European elections.

Disinformation campaigns, in particular by third countries, are often part of hybrid warfare[14], involving cyber-attacks and hacking of networks[15]. Evidence shows that foreign state actors are increasingly deploying disinformation strategies to influence societal debates, create divisions and interfere in democratic decision-making. These strategies target not only Member States but also partner countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood as well as in the Southern Neighbourhood, Middle East and Africa.

Disinformation produced and/or spread by Russian sources has been reported in the context of several elections and referenda in the EU[16]. Disinformation campaigns related to the war in Syria[17], to the downing of the MH-17 aircraft in the East of Ukraine[18] and to the use of chemical weapons in Salisbury attack[19] have been well documented.

2. DISINFORMATION: UNDERSTANDING THE THREATS AND STRENGTHENING THE EUROPEAN RESPONSE

Disinformation is an evolving threat which requires continuous efforts to address the relevant actors, vectors, tools, methods, prioritised targets and impact. Some forms, especially state-driven disinformation, are analysed by the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, in cooperation with the Strategic Communication Task Forces of the European External Action Service and with the support of Member States' services.

The actors behind disinformation may be internal, within Member States, or external, including state (or government sponsored) and non-state actors. According to reports[20], more than 30 countries are using disinformation and influencing activities in different forms, including in their own countries. The use of disinformation by actors within Member States is an increasing source of concern across the Union. Cases of disinformation driven by non-state actors have also been reported in the Union, for example related to vaccination[21]. As regards

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[13] These sanctions are in addition to the ones provided by the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation 2016/679).

[14] Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats: a European Union response, JOIN(2016) 18 final.

[15] These cyberattacks may include targeted intrusions to collect sensitive information as a precursor to leaks or tainted leaks, take-over of social media accounts, social media accounts driven by bots, and disruption of information technology systems of, for instance, broadcasting companies or electoral commissions.

[16] See for example the report by the Policy Planning Staff and the Institute for Strategic Research of France: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/information_manipulation_rvb_cle838736.pdf.

[17] Joint statement by 17 member countries of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on chemical attacks in Douma, Syria: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/manipulation-of-information/article/syria-chemical-attacks-in-douma-7-april-joint-statement-by-france-and-16-other.

[18] On the disinformation campaign on MH-17, see the East Strategic Communication Task Force: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/mh17-time-is-running-out-for-disinformation/ and https://euvsdisinfo.eu/flight-mh-17-three-years-on-getting-the-truth-out-of-eastern-ukraine/ as well as the statement from the Joint Investigation Team: https://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/mh17-crash/@104053/reaction-jit-to/.

[19] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/timeline-how-russia-built-two-major-disinformation-campaigns/
On the Russian cyber operation targeting the OPCW in the Hague, see: https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2018/10/04/netherlands-defence-intelligence-and-security-service-disrupts-russian-cyber-operation-targeting-opcw.

[20] See https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2017.

[21] See COM(2018) 245 and COM(2018) 244.

external actors, the evidence is strong in the case of the Russian Federation. However, other third countries also deploy disinformation strategies, quickly learning from the methods of the Russian Federation.

According to the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, disinformation by the Russian Federation[22] poses the greatest threat to the EU. It is systematic, well-resourced, and on a different scale to other countries. In terms of coordination, levels of targeting and strategic implications, Russia's disinformation constitutes part of a wider hybrid threat that uses a number of tools, levers, and also non-state actors.

Constant targeted disinformation campaigns against the Union, its institutions and policies are likely to increase in the run up to the 2019 European Parliament elections. **This calls for urgent and immediate action to protect the Union, its institutions and its citizens against disinformation.**

Social media have become important means of spreading disinformation, including in some cases, like Cambridge Analytica, to target the delivery of disinformation content to specific users, who are identified by the unauthorised access and use of personal data, with the ultimate goal of influencing the election results. Recent evidence shows that private messaging services are increasingly used to spread disinformation[23]. Techniques include video manipulation (deep-fakes) and falsification of official documents; the use of internet automated software (bots) to spread and amplify divisive content and debates on social media; troll attacks on social media profiles and information theft. At the same time, more traditional methods such as television, newspapers, websites and chain emails continue to play an important role in many regions. The tools and techniques used are changing fast - the **response needs to evolve just as rapidly.**

In addition to taking action within Member states and Union-wide, the Union has a significant interest in working with partners in three priority regions – the Union's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans. Exposing disinformation in countries neighbouring the Union is complementary to tackling the problem within the Union.

The European External Action Service has set up specific strategic communication task forces consisting of experts with relevant language and knowledge skills, to address the issue and develop response strategies. They are working closely with Commission services to ensure a coordinated and consistent communication approach in the regions.

Based on the Action Plan on Strategic Communication, adopted on 22 June 2015, the mandate of the East Strategic Communication Task Force comprises three strands of action: (i) Effective communication and promotion of Union policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood; (ii) Strengthening the overall media environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood and in Member States, including support for media freedom and strengthening independent media and (iii) Improved Union capacity to forecast, address and respond to disinformation activities by the Russian Federation. In response to the Council conclusions in December 2015 and June 2017, the European External Action Service set up

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[22] Russian military doctrine explicitly recognises information warfare as one of its domains: https://www.rusemb.org.uk/press/2029.

[23] According to Oxford University, direct messaging platforms have hosted disinformation campaigns in at least 10 countries this year.

two additional task forces: the Western Balkans Task Force[24] for the corresponding region and the Task Force South[25] for the countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa and the Gulf region.

Since it was established, the East Strategic Communication Task Force has effectively communicated on the policies of the Union in the Union's Eastern neighbourhood mainly through a campaigns-led approach. In addition, the East Strategic Communication Task Force has catalogued, analysed and put the spotlight on over 4,500 examples of disinformation by the Russian Federation, uncovering numerous disinformation narratives, raising awareness of and exposing the tools, techniques and intentions of disinformation campaigns. Its focus is on the Eastern Partnership countries and on Russian domestic and international media and its approach is to expose, on the basis of the evidence collected, the trends, narratives, methods and channels used and raise awareness of them.

The mandate of the East Strategic Communication Task Force should therefore be maintained and the mandate of the other two Strategic Communications Task Forces (Western Balkan and South) should be reviewed in the light of the growing scale and importance of disinformation activities in those regions and the need to raise awareness of the adverse impact of disinformation.

3. ACTIONS FOR A COORDINATED UNION RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION

Addressing disinformation requires political determination and unified action, mobilising all parts of governments (including counter-hybrid, cybersecurity, intelligence and strategic communication communities, data protection, electoral, law enforcement and media authorities). This should be done in close cooperation with like-minded partners across the globe. It requires close cooperation between Union institutions, Member States, civil society and the private sector, especially online platforms.

The coordinated response to disinformation presented in this Action Plan is based on four pillars:
- (i) improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation;
- (ii) strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation;
- (iii) mobilising private sector to tackle disinformation;
- (iv) raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

PILLAR 1: IMPROVING THE CAPABILITIES OF UNION INSTITUTIONS TO DETECT, ANALYSE AND EXPOSE DISINFORMATION

To address effectively the threat of disinformation, it is necessary to reinforce the Strategic Communication Task Forces of the European External Action Service, the Union Delegations and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell by providing them with additional specialised staff, such as experts in data mining and analysis to process the relevant data. It is also important to contract additional media monitoring services to cover a wider range of sources and languages and additional research and studies on the reach and impact of

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[24] The Council conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process of 15 December 2015.
[25] The Council conclusions on Counter-Terrorism adopted on 19 June 2017.

disinformation. In addition, there is a need to invest in analytical tools such as dedicated software to mine, organise and aggregate vast amounts of digital data.

The reinforcement of the strategic communication teams of the European External Action Service will be done in two steps.

In the short term, the budget for strategic communication is expected to more than double[26] in 2019 and this will be accompanied by a reinforcement of at least 11 positions ahead of the European elections. In the medium term[27], additional positions of permanent officials will be requested in the strategic communication teams and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell in the headquarters, as well as new posts in delegations in the neighbourhood, to reach a total increase of 50-55 staff members over the next two years.

Further synergies will take place between the Commission's services and the European External Action Service, for example on sharing tools or designing communication campaigns.

Threat analyses and intelligence assessments are the basis for the work on disinformation. The expertise of the Intelligence and Situation Centre should be fully utilised to analyse the evolving nature of disinformation campaigns.

The Strategic Communication Task Forces will work closely with the relevant Union delegations and the Commission to tackle disinformation. In particular, they will cooperate with the internal Network against Disinformation of the Commission, set up following the April Communication[28].

Member States should complement and support the actions of the Union institutions by increasing their national capabilities and by supporting the necessary increases in resources for the Union institutions.

Action 1: With a view to the 2019 European Parliament elections in particular, but also with a longer-term perspective, the High Representative, in cooperation with the Member States, will strengthen the Strategic Communication Task Forces and Union Delegations through additional staff and new tools which are necessary to detect, analyse and expose disinformation activities. Member States should, where appropriate, also upgrade their national capacity in this area, and support the necessary increase in resources for the Strategic Communication Task Forces and Union delegations.

Action 2: The High Representative will review the mandates of the Strategic Communications Task Forces for Western Balkans and South to enable them to address disinformation effectively in these regions.

PILLAR 2: STRENGTHENING COORDINATED AND JOINT RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION

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[26] Current discussions on the 2019 budget foresee an increase from EUR 1.9 million in 2018 to 5 million in 2019.

[27] Through amendments of the 2019 budget and/or the proposal for the 2020 budget.

[28] This network includes the representatives of Directorates-General of the Commission and its Representations. The Commission has also recently set up a working group with the European External Action Service and the European Parliament on tackling disinformation ahead of the European elections.

The first hours after disinformation is released are critical for detecting, analysing and responding to it. Consequently, **a Rapid Alert System will be set up to provide alerts on disinformation campaigns in real-time** through a dedicated technological infrastructure. This will facilitate sharing of data and assessment, to enable common situational awareness, coordinated attribution and response and ensure time and resource efficiency.

In view of the creation of the Rapid Alert System, **each Member States should designate, in line with its institutional setup, a contact point, ideally positioned within strategic communications departments**. This contact point would share the alerts and ensure coordination with all other relevant national authorities as well as with the Commission and the European External Action Service. This is without prejudice to existing competences of national authorities under Union and/or national law or under other parts of this Action Plan. Where disinformation concerns elections or the functioning of democratic institutions in the Member States, national contact points should closely cooperate with the national election networks[29]. In this case, the outcome of the work of the Rapid Alert System should be shared with the European cooperation election network[30], in particular to exchange information on threats relevant to elections and support the possible application of sanctions. Online platforms should cooperate with the contact points underpinning the Rapid Alert System, in particular during election periods, to provide relevant and timely information.

The Rapid Alert System should be closely linked to existing 24/7 capabilities such as the Emergency Response Coordination Centre[31] and the Situation Room of the European External Action Service[32]. The EU Hybrid Fusion Cell of the Intelligence and Situation Centre as well as the relevant Council Working Parties could also be used as channels for sharing information. The Commission and the High Representative will ensure regular exchange of information and best practices with key partners, including within the G7 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Prompt reaction via fact-based and effective communication is essential to counter and deter disinformation, including in cases of disinformation concerning Union matters and policies. This is important to foster an open, democratic debate free from manipulation, including in the context of the forthcoming European elections. Union institutions[33] and Member States need to improve their ability to react and communicate effectively. The Commission has already increased its funding for better communication activities, implemented through its regional communication programmes, including in the Union's neighbourhood, and Union Delegations. Union institutions are all active in communicating about European action and policies in the Union, in particular Commission Representations

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29 See Recommendation C(2018) 5949 on election cooperation networks, online transparency, protection against cybersecurity incidents and fighting disinformation campaigns in the context of elections to the European Parliament. These networks will bring together national election authorities, audio-visual media regulators, cybersecurity and data protection authorities as well as relevant expert groups, for example on media literacy. They constitute, together with the Union institutions, the European election network. The European election network will be convened for the first time in January 2019.

30 Set up pursuant to the Recommendation issued on 12 September 2018.

31 The Emergency Response Coordination Centre is set up under Article 7 of Decision 1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

32 The Situation Room is a permanent stand-by body of the European External Action Service that provides worldwide monitoring and current situation awareness. It is part of EU Intelligence and Situation Centre and acts as a situation information hub for all relevant stakeholders from the European institutions.

33 In the Commission, Members of the College of Commissioners, the Spokesperson's Service and Commission Representations would maintain their key role of stepping in to ensure rebuttals whenever there are errors in media reports.

and European Parliament liaison offices in the Member States play a key role to provide locally-tailored messaging, including specific tools to counter myths and disseminate facts[34].

Cooperation between Member States and Union institutions should be further strengthened, especially as regards information-sharing, common learning, awareness-raising, pro-active messaging and research. More intelligence sharing between Member States and Union institutions is needed to improve situational awareness and their respective response capacities. Pro-active and objective communication on Union values and policies is particularly effective when carried out directly by Member States. To this end, the Commission and the High Representative call on Member States to intensify their communication efforts and to defend the Union and its institutions against disinformation campaigns.

Action 3: By March 2019, the Commission and the High Representative, in cooperation with Member States, will establish a Rapid Alert System for addressing disinformation campaigns, working closely with existing networks, the European Parliament as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and G7's Rapid Response Mechanism.

Action 4: With a view to the upcoming European elections, the Commission, in cooperation with the European Parliament, will step up its communication efforts on Union values and policies. Member States should significantly strengthen their own communication efforts on Union values and policies.

Action 5: The Commission and the High Representative, in cooperation with Member States, will strengthen strategic communications in the Union's neighbourhood.

PILLAR 3:   MOBILISING PRIVATE SECTOR TO TACKLE DISINFORMATION

Online platforms, advertisers and the advertising industry have a crucial role to play in tackling the disinformation problem, as its scale is directly related to the platforms' ability to amplify, target and spread disinformation messages of malicious actors. Given their past failures to act appropriately to tackle this problem, the Commission urged them in April 2018 to step up their efforts. Against this background, the Code of Practice on Disinformation was published on 26 September 2018[35]. The main online platforms which signed the Code of Practice committed to specific actions to be carried out before the 2019 European Parliament elections.

The Commission calls upon all signatories of the Code of Practice to implement the actions and procedures identified in the Code swiftly and effectively on an EU-wide basis, focusing on actions that are urgent and relevant for ensuring the integrity of 2019 European elections. In particular, large online platforms should immediately (i) ensure scrutiny of ad

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[34]   Several Commission Representations have developed locally adapted tools to debunk disinformation, like Les Décodeurs de l'Europe in France, UE Vero Falso in Italy, Euromyty.sk in Slovakia and EU myth-busting cartoon competition in Austria and cartoon series in Romania.

[35]   https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation. On 16 October, the Code's initial signatories provided their formal subscriptions to the Code, identifying the commitments each signatory will adhere to and a table listing relevant company best practices as well as milestones for the overall implementation of the Code in the EU. The initial signatories include the main online platforms (Facebook, Google, Youtube, Twitter), providers of software (Mozilla), advertisers as well as a number of trade associations representing online platforms and the advertising industry. The Code of Practice should create a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem and protect users from disinformation.

placement and transparency of political advertising, based on effective due diligence checks of the identity of the sponsors, (ii) close down fake accounts active on their services and (iii) identify automated bots and label them accordingly. Online platforms should also cooperate with the national audio-visual regulators and with independent fact-checkers and researchers to detect and flag disinformation campaigns in particular during election periods and to make fact-checked content more visible and widespread.

The Commission will, with the help of the European Regulators Group for Audio-visual Media Services (ERGA)[36], monitor the implementation of the commitments by the signatories of the Code of Practice and will regularly inform on whether and to what extent individual platforms are meeting these commitments. To allow effective and comprehensive monitoring, the platforms should by the end of this year provide the Commission with up-to-date and complete information on the actions they have taken to comply with these commitments. The Commission will publish this information in January 2019. The platforms should also provide complete information, including by replying to Commission's specific requests, on how they are implementing the commitments on a regular basis starting in January 2019 in order to enable a targeted monitoring of the compliance with the Code ahead of the European Parliament elections. This information will also be published.

In addition, the Code of Practice envisages that the signatories will provide a full report after twelve months. These reports should include complete data and information to enable a thorough assessment by the Commission. On this basis, the **Commission, assisted by independent expertise and with the help of the ERGA, will assess the overall effectiveness of the Code of Practice**. The Commission may also seek the assistance of the European audio-visual observatory.

The Commission notes that the overall effectiveness of the Code depends upon the widest possible participation of online platforms and the online advertising sector. It therefore calls upon additional relevant stakeholders to adhere to the Code.

Action 6: The Commission will ensure a close and continuous monitoring of the implementation of the Code of Practice. Where needed and in particular in view of the European elections, the Commission will push for rapid and effective compliance. The Commission will carry out a comprehensive assessment at the conclusion of the Code's initial 12-month period of application. Should the implementation and the impact of the Code of Practice prove unsatisfactory, the Commission may propose further actions, including actions of a regulatory nature.

PILLAR 4:   RAISING AWARENESS AND IMPROVING SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Greater public awareness is essential for improving societal resilience against the threat that disinformation poses. The starting point is a better understanding of the sources of disinformation and of the intentions, tools and objectives behind disinformation, but also of our own vulnerability. A sound scientific methodology could help identify key vulnerabilities

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[36]   The European Regulators Group for Audio-visual Media Services comprises all the relevant regulators of all the Member States. It provides technical advice to the Commission in a number of fields related to the application of the Directive, facilitates cooperation among the national regulatory authorities and/or bodies, and between the national regulatory authorities and/or bodies and the Commission. The revised Audio-visual Media Service Directive further strengthened the role of this Group in particular in relation also to video sharing platforms.

across Member States[37]. It is essential to understand how and why citizens, and sometimes entire communities, are drawn to disinformation narratives and define a comprehensive answer to this phenomenon.

Building resilience also includes specialised trainings, public conferences and debates as well as other forms of common learning for the media. It also involves empowering all sectors of society and, in particular, improving citizens' media literacy to understand how to spot and fend off disinformation.

A comprehensive response to disinformation requires active participation by civil society. **The Communication and the Recommendation**[38]**, that are part of the set of measures on securing free and fair European elections (the Elections Package) called on Member States to engage with media, online platforms, information technology providers and others,** in awareness raising activities to increase the transparency of elections and build trust in the electoral processes. Member States' active engagement and follow-up in this context is needed in the run-up to the European elections.

Independent fact-checkers and researchers play a key role in furthering the understanding of the structures that sustain disinformation and the mechanisms that shape how it is disseminated online. Moreover, through their activities, they raise awareness of various types of disinformation threats and can contribute to mitigating their negative impact. It is necessary to strengthen their capacity to identify and expose disinformation threats and facilitate cross-border cooperation. Building on the actions outlined in the April Communication, it is necessary to scale up national multidisciplinary teams of independent fact-checkers and academic researchers with specific knowledge about local information environments. This requires the support and the cooperation of Member States in order to facilitate the functioning of the European network of fact checkers, in full respect of the independence of the fact-checking and research activities. Under the Connecting Europe Facility programme[39], the Commission will finance a digital platform which will network together the independent national multidisciplinary teams.

To increase public awareness and resilience, the Commission will further step up its commitment and current activities in relation to media literacy to empower Union citizens to better identify and deal with disinformation[40]. Member States should rapidly implement the provision of the revised Audio-visual Media Service Directive requiring them to promote and develop media literacy skills[41].

The Commission has proposed funding for the development of new tools to better understand and combat online disinformation in its proposal for Horizon Europe programme[42]. The

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[37] This could be further explored as part of the work of the Media Pluralism Monitor, a project co-funded by the European Union and carried out by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom in Florence.

[38] See Commission Recommendation on election cooperation networks, online transparency, protection against cybersecurity incidents and fighting disinformation campaigns in the context of elections to the European Parliament, C(2018) 5949.

[39] Regulation (EU) No 1316/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Connecting Europe Facility, amending Regulation (EU) No 913/2010 and repealing Regulations (EC) No 680/2007 and (EC) No 67/2010.

[40] Such activities will include a Union online media literacy library and learning centre as well as other media literacy tools.

[41] Article 33a of the revised Audiovisual Media Service Directive.

[42] COM(2018) 435.

Commission will also support, where appropriate, information campaigns to raise users' awareness of the most recent technologies (e.g. deep fakes).

The work of independent media is essential for the functioning of a democratic society. The Commission[43] will therefore continue to support independent media and investigative journalists, as they contribute to the exposure of disinformation. In addition, the Commission will continue to carry out specific programmes related to media support, including with financial support, and professionalisation in its neighbourhood[44].

Action 7: With a view especially to the 2019 European elections, but also to the longer term, the Commission and the High Representative, in cooperation with the Member States, will organise targeted campaigns for the public and trainings for media and public opinion shapers in the Union and its neighbourhood to raise awareness of the negative effects of disinformation. Efforts to support the work of independent media and quality journalism as well as the research into disinformation will be continued in order to provide a comprehensive response to this phenomenon.

Action 8: Member States, in cooperation with the Commission, should support the creation of teams of multi-disciplinary independent fact-checkers and researchers with specific knowledge of local information environments to detect and expose disinformation campaigns across different social networks and digital media.

Action 9: As part of the Media Literacy Week in March 2019, in cooperation with the Member States, the Commission will support cross-border cooperation amongst media literacy practitioners as well as the launch of practical tools for the promotion of media literacy for the public. Member States should also rapidly implement the provisions of the Audio-visual Media Services Directive, which deal with media literacy.

Action 10: In view of the upcoming 2019 European elections, Member States should ensure effective follow-up of the Elections Package, notably the Recommendation. The Commission will closely monitor how the Package is implemented and where appropriate, provide relevant support and advice.

4.   CONCLUSIONS

Disinformation is a major challenge for European democracies and societies, and the Union needs to address it while being true to European values and freedoms. Disinformation undermines the trust of citizens in democracy and democratic institutions. Disinformation also contributes to the polarisation of public views and interferes in the democratic decision-making processes. It can also be used to undermine the European project. This can have

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[43]   The Creative Europe programme, if adopted, will help reinforce Europe's news media sector, diversity and pluralism of journalistic content, as well as a critical approach to media content through media literacy, COM (2018) 438.

[44]   The Commission funds the project "openmediahub" to: (i) provide journalists in the neighbourhood with the necessary skills for independent and objective reporting; (ii) improve the skills of the editorial staff and (iii) reinforce the network of media professionals and journalists in the neighbourhood. As regards the Western Balkans, the Commission is providing financial support for the setting up of a network of journalistic associations, the building of trust in media, and the reinforcing of judiciary systems to defend freedom of expression. In this area the Commission also supports public service media, new independent media outlets, and the improvement of quality and professionalism in journalism.

considerable adverse effects on society across the Union, in particular in the run up to the 2019 European Parliament elections.

Strong commitment and swift actions are necessary to preserve the democratic process and the trust of citizens in public institutions at both national and Union level. The present Action Plan sets out key actions to tackle disinformation in a coordinated approach of the Union institutions and the Member States. It also highlights measures to be taken as a matter of priority by different actors ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections. Member States should step up their solidarity and defend the Union against hybrid attacks, including attacks using disinformation.

At the same time, and in the long-term, the objective is for the Union and its neighbourhood to become more resilient against disinformation. This requires continuous and sustained efforts to support education and media literacy, journalism, fact-checkers, researchers, and the civil society as a whole.

The Commission and the High Representative therefore:

- recall that joint action is required by all relevant institutional actors as well as by the private sector, in particular online platforms, and civil society as a whole to tackle effectively all the different aspects of the disinformation threat;

- call on the European Council to endorse the present Action Plan;

- call on Member States to cooperate in carrying out the actions set out in this Action Plan;

- as a matter of priority, call on all relevant actors to implement those actions which are urgent and relevant in the run up to the upcoming European elections in May 2019.

REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION

TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

on the implementation of the Communication

"Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach"

1. INTRODUCTION

On 26 April 2018, the Commission adopted its Communication on "*Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach*" (Communication)[1]. The Communication delineates the challenges online disinformation present to our democracies and outlines five clusters of actions for private and public stakeholders that respond to these challenges.

This Report accompanies the Joint Communication "Action Plan against Disinformation"[2]. It sets out the Commission's assessment of the progress made in the implementation of the actions set out in the April Communication.

2. STATUS OF ACTIONS

2.1 A more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem

2.1.1 Online platforms to act swiftly and effectively to protect users from disinformation

The first set of actions aims at creating a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem. The outlined actions include the development of a self-regulatory code of practice on disinformation for online platforms and the advertising industry in order to increase transparency and better protect users; the creation of an independent European network of fact-checkers to establish common working methods, exchange best practices and achieve the broadest possible coverage across the EU; the promotion of voluntary online identification systems to improve the traceability and identification of suppliers of information; and the use of the EU research and innovation programme (Horizon 2020) to mobilise new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, block chain and cognitive algorithms.

In May 2018 the Commission convened the Multistakeholder Forum on Disinformation (Forum) to draft a self-regulatory Code of Practice on Disinformation (Code)[3]. The Forum consisted of a "Working Group" composed of the major online platforms, and representatives of the advertising industry and major advertisers, as well as a "Sounding Board" composed of representatives of the media, academia and civil society. The Working Group was tasked with drafting the Code, and the Sounding Board was tasked with providing advice and issuing an Opinion on the Code. The Code was published on 26 September, along with the Opinion of the Sounding Board[4].

The Code comprises a Preamble, a statement of Purposes, and a set of 15 Commitments prefaced by explanatory comments that reference the Communication's objectives, detail the commitments' scope and purposes, and provide context. The commitments are organised under five fields:

1. Scrutiny of ad placements
2. Political advertising and issue-based advertising
3. Integrity of services
4. Empowering consumers
5. Empowering the research community

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[1] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach, 26.4.2018, COM (2018) 236 final, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=51804.

[2] JOIN(2018) 36.

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/meeting-multistakeholder-forum-disinformation.

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation.

Signatories to the Code are required to identify which of these commitments they will adhere to, in light of their relevance to the products or services they provide. The Code includes, as an integral part, annexes that identify the specific policies and actions signatories will pursue to implement the Code.

The Code establishes additional commitments requiring signatories to report on and assess the Code's implementation, functioning and effectiveness, based on annual self-assessment reports that will be reviewed by an objective Third-Party Organisation selected by the signatories. The signatories also commit to cooperating with Commission in assessing the Code, including providing information upon request and responding to questions.

On 16 October, the Code's initial signatories provided their formal subscriptions to the Code identifying the commitments each signatory will adhere to and a table listing relevant company best practices as well as milestones for the overall implementation of the Code in the EU[5]. The initial signatories are: Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla as well as the trade association representing online platforms (EDIMA) and trade associations representing the advertising industry and advertisers (EACA, IAB Europe, WFA and UBA)[6].

In addition, Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla have outlined a number of specific activities they will carry out with a view to, and in advance of, the European elections of spring 2019, focusing on the security and integrity of elections.

The Commission considers that the Code provides an appropriate framework for pursuing the objectives for the Code set out in the Communication. It also considers that the Code is consistent with the Commission's Principles for Better Self-and Co-Regulation. Its initial signatories represent a large share of the online news distribution sector.

The Commission emphasises that the Code's completion should be viewed as a first step. Signatories must now work to ensure the robust implementation, scale-up and enforcement of policies and actions they have identified. The Commission takes the view that its implementation should be carried out on a full, effective and timely basis.

The Commission will ask the signatories for up-to-date information about measures taken towards the implementation of the Code by the end of 2018. The Commission intends to publish this information in January 2019.

Moreover, between January and May 2019, the Commission will carry out a targeted monitoring of the Code to verify that effective policies with particular pertinence to the integrity of the electoral processes are in place before the European elections, more specifically compliance with key parameters in the Code (scrutiny of ad placement, transparency of political advertising, closure of fake accounts and marking systems for automated bots). The platforms should provide complete information, including by replying to Commission's specific requests, on how are they are implementing the commitments on a monthly basis. This information will also be published.

By the end of 2019, the Commission will carry out a comprehensive assessment at the end of the Code's initial 12-month period. Should the results prove unsatisfactory, the Commission may propose further actions, including of a regulatory nature.

The Commission will seek the assistance of ERGA, the independent network of audio-visual regulators under the Audio-visual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), in monitoring the implementation of the Code in the various Member States. ERGA is uniquely placed to carry

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[5]   https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/online-platforms-advertisers-and-advertising-industry-present-commissioner-mariya-gabriel.

[6]   Under the Code, the trade association signatories, while not entering into obligations on behalf of their members, have committed to make their members fully aware of the Code and to encourage them to join it or respect its principles, as appropriate.

out this task given the expertise and competence of its members. The Commission may also seek the assistance of the European audio-visual observatory.

In monitoring the implementation of the Code, the Commission envisages to collect the following information from the signatories:

A. Scrutiny of ad placements	
1. Deploy policies and processes to disrupt advertising and monetisation incentives for relevant behaviours	- Number of accounts removed for violation of platform advertising policies (e.g. policies against misrepresentation) - Policies put in place to demote sites or accounts that distribute disinformation or inauthentic information (e.g., click-bait) - Percentage of contracts between advertisers and ad network operators with brand safety stipulations against placement of ads on disinformation websites - Number of websites blocked for duplicating or "scraping" content produced by other websites
B. Political advertising and issue-based advertising	
2. All advertisements should be clearly distinguishable from editorial content	- Ads properly labelled as political advertising as a % of overall political ads - Actions taken to ensure all political ads are properly labelled - Number of political or issue-based ads taken down for failure to comply with platform guidelines on the transparency of political advertising
3. Enable public disclosure of political advertising	- Number of records added to public disclosure repositories - Information on amounts received from political parties, candidates, campaigns and foundations for political or issue-based advertising - Policies to verify the identity of political ads providers
4. Devising approaches to publicly disclose "issue-based advertising"	Information on progress on this commitment
C. Integrity of services	
5. Put in place clear policies regarding identity and the misuse of automated bots on their services	- Number of identified active fake accounts - Number of identified active fake accounts disabled for violation of platform policies - Information on measures to ensure all bots are clearly labelled as such. - Number of posts, images, videos or comments acted against for violation

	of platform policies on the misuse of automated bots
6. Put in place policies on what constitutes impermissible use of automated systems	• Information on policies about the misuse of bots, including information about such bot-driven interactions • Number of bots disabled for malicious activities violating the platforms' policies
D. Empowering consumers	
7. Invest in products, technologies and programs […] to help people make informed decisions when they encounter online news that may be false	• Information on investments made in such tools or other progress towards this commitment • Information on actual use of such tools by consumers • Information on collaborations with media organisations and fact-checkers to carry out this commitment, including development of indicators of trustworthiness • Information on measures to make fact-checked content more visible and widespread.
8. Invest in technological means to prioritise relevant, authentic and authoritative information where appropriate in search, feeds, or other automatically ranked distribution channels.	• Information on progress on this commitment • Information on collaborations with media organisations and fact-checkers to carry out this commitment , including the development of indicators of trustworthiness
9. Invest in features and tools that make it easier for people to find diverse perspectives about topics of public interest	• Information on investments made in such tools or other progress towards this commitment • Information on availability of such tools and use of such tools by consumers
10. Partner with civil society, governments, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to support efforts aimed at improving critical thinking and digital media literacy	• Information about initiatives carried out or planned by signatories, including degree of coverage across Member States
11. Encourage market uptake of tools that help consumers understand why they are seeing particular advertisements	• Information on actual uptake of such tools and use by consumers
E. Empowering the research community	
12. Support good faith independent efforts to track Disinformation and understand its impact	• Information on collaborations with fact-checkers and researchers, including records shared
13. Not to prohibit or discourage good faith research into Disinformation and political advertising on their platforms	• Information on policies implementing this commitment
14. Encourage research into Disinformation and political advertising	• Information on policies implementing this commitment

15. Convene an annual event to foster discussions within academia, the fact-checking community and members of the value chain	• Report on the annual event

This information should be provided on an individual Member State basis in order enable the assessment of gaps and variations in the Code's implementation and impact across the Union.

The Commission recognises, as the Code states, that "*because the various Signatories operate differently, with different purposes, technologies and audiences, the Code allows for different approaches to accomplishing the spirit of the provisions herein*". The information the signatories provide should therefore reflect the particularities of their respective services.

It is also important to strike a balance between the right to freedom of expression and the need for citizens to be properly informed. In this context, it must be borne in mind that disinformation very often does not qualify as illegal content; where it does qualify (e.g. as defamation or hate speech), it will also be subject to specific remedies under Union or national law (e.g., take-down of content), the effectiveness of which may be quantifiable. The Code addresses an array of objectives related to disinformation, some of which can be quantified, such as transparency of political ads or measures to reduce the number of fake accounts, while others, such as consumer empowerment, can be implemented in ways that are not always quantifiable. For these reasons, the overall assessment of the Code will necessarily comprise both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis as appropriate.

2.1.2 Strengthening fact checking, collective knowledge, and monitoring capacity on disinformation

The Commission committed, as a first step, to support the creation of an independent European network of fact-checkers. As a second step, the Commission committed to launch a secure European online platform on disinformation, offering analytical tools and cross-border data collection, including Union-wide open data and online platforms usage data, to support detection and analysis of disinformation sources and dissemination patterns.

The Commission organised a series of technical workshops with representatives of the fact-checking community in 2018. It selected relevant projects under the research and innovation programme Horizon 2020. Furthermore, the Commission, in cooperation with the European Parliament, organised a fact-checking conference in view of the European elections.[7]

These actions have contributed to:
- mapping and networking together independent fact-checking organisations in the Member States;
- ascertaining which tools and services are essential and can improve fact-checking activities and their impact (e.g. access to EUROSTAT data, translation tools, automated stream of fact-checks produced by the relevant fact-checking organisations);
- Identifying professional and ethical standards for independent fact-checking; and
- Providing tools and infrastructural support to fact-checking organisations.

In particular, a support action **SOMA** (Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis)[8], was selected under the Horizon 2020 programme to create a

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[7] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180920IPR14065/fact-checking-in-the-eu.
[8] www.disinfobservatory.org.

multidisciplinary community, including fact-checkers and academic researchers, to enhance detection as well as analytical capabilities and better understand various types of disinformation threats. To this end, SOMA, which was launched on 1 November 2018, will provide an IT pilot infrastructure.

To prepare the second step, the Commission proposed, under the Connecting Europe Facility work programme 2019, the creation of a new digital service infrastructure for the establishment of a European Platform on Disinformation. The digital service infrastructure should scale up the collaboration between fact-checkers and academic researchers in order to ensure full coverage of the Union territory and facilitate the build-up and interconnection of relevant national organisations.

The actions taken by the Commission have increased interest in fact-checking activities in Europe. Online platforms, media outlets, and fact-checkers are planning projects with a view to European elections.

For instance, the International Fact-checking Network (IFCN) is creating an alliance of European fact-checkers that should contribute to a project focused on European Parliament elections. A similar project is planned by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which represents public service media organisations. Online platforms, such as Google and Facebook, have expressed their interest in collaborating with such projects. The support action SOMA should promote cooperation among these initiatives and boost their efficiency and impact.

The project should operate according to established and recognised professional standards (e.g., IFCN principles, ethical research, and journalistic standards). Moreover, participants should operate with full independence, free from public interference and based on governance rules set out by the participant organisations.

However, current fact-checking efforts do not offer sufficient geographical coverage or have the capacity to keep abreast of the increasing volumes of online news content. For instance, the IFCN network currently covers only 12 Member States. The EBU's fact-checking network, while having Europe-wide coverage, only provides services to EBU members. Moreover, fact-checking activities are very often limited to the verification of online content, without analysis of disinformation sources and patterns.

While the digital service infrastructure financed under the Connecting Europe Facility programme should provide infrastructure to facilitate networking and cross-border exchange of information between fact-checkers and academic researchers, an efficient and effective response to disinformation threats requires the strengthening of detection and analytical capabilities based on specific knowledge of local information environments. Therefore, there is a need to develop multidisciplinary communities of fact-checkers and academic researchers at national level, which will require the active cooperation of Member States.

2.1.3. Fostering online accountability

With a view to increasing trust and accountability online, the Commission committed to promote the use of voluntary online systems allowing the identification of suppliers of information based on trustworthy electronic identification and authentication means.

To this end, the Commission has mobilised the Cooperation Network set up under the electronic Identification and Authentication Service Regulation (eIDAS) and launched

discussions on how to achieve progress in this area at the 10th Cooperation Network meeting on 11 July 2018.

The Commission has also engaged with the Horizon 2020 project **Co-inform,** whose objective is to create a user-friendly technological tool, using the co-creation methodology, to make sure that policymakers, fact-checkers and citizens are involved in improving the efficiency of disinformation-detection technology. The project involves academic researchers, technology companies and fact-checkers from different Member States. It should explore the use of trustworthy identification and authentication means, aligned with the eIDAS Regulation, for the identification of suppliers of information, with the aim to pilot this approach in their tools.

The project should support the Cooperation Network in its endeavour to promote the voluntary adoption of the eIDAS tools and services for the secure identification and authentication of suppliers of information (websites, natural and legal entities).

The dialogue between the Commission and Member States in 2018 raised awareness on how eIDAS tools and services could be relied upon to tackle disinformation by increasing accountability and encouraging more responsible behaviour online. The Commission will continue working with the Cooperation Network and platform providers on fostering the development and the voluntary use of systems for the secure identification of suppliers of information based on the highest security and privacy standards, including the possible use of verified pseudonyms.

2.1.4. Harnessing new technologies

The Commission committed to make full use of the Horizon 2020 framework programme to mobilise new technologies and to explore the possibility of additional support for tools that combat disinformation, accelerating time-to-market of high-impact innovation activities, and encouraging the partnering of researchers and businesses.

In 2013 the Commission started financing the first research and innovation actions focused on the development of new technologies to help assessing the veracity of content posted online. Projects like **SocialSensor** and **Reveal** have been pioneers in this field and have devolved tools now used by large news organisation and non-governmental organisations.

Currently, under the European Research Council (ERC) and Horizon 2020, there are several actions aimed at improving the understanding of online disinformation and developing new tools for content verification. The ERC projects **Comprop** and the **Botfind** are studying how automated systems for spreading and targeting propaganda impact public discourse in Europe. The ERC project **Debunker** is studying, from a theoretical point of view, the problem of misperceptions around societal issues within the European population and possible strategies to reduce their impact.

The Horizon 2020 project **Invid** focuses on developing tools to verify audiovisual content. These tools are essential considering that technologies to tamper with video and create "deep fakes" are increasingly easy to access and use. Another Horizon 2020 project, **Fandango**, looks at solutions that help traditional media to better detect false narratives online.

Since information technology and the phenomenon of online disinformation are evolving rapidly, the Commission has decided to step up efforts. It has selected four new research and innovation actions, for about 10 MEUR of Union contribution. The selected actions are: Eunomia (open source solution to identify sources of information), SocialTruth (distributed ecosystem that allows easy access to various verification services), Provenance (intermediary-

free solution for digital content verification) and WeVerify (content verification challenges through a participatory verification approach). These new projects aim at developing services for communities active in fighting online disinformation.

Furthermore, in the proposal for Horizon Europe programme[9], the Commission has proposed to dedicate efforts to:

- safeguard democratic and economic stability though the development of new tools to combat online disinformation;
- better understand the role of journalistic standards and user-generated content in a hyper-connected society; and
- support next generation Internet application and services including immersive and trustworthy media, social media and social networking.

2.2 Secure and resilient election processes

The second set of actions addresses manipulation and disinformation tactics employed during electoral processes. In order to enable secure and resilient election processes, the Communication proposed to initiate a continuous dialogue to support Member States in the management of risks to democratic electoral process from cyber-attacks and disinformation, particularly in view of European elections in 2019.

To this end, the Commission started in 2018 a constructive dialogue with Member States. This included a first exchange at the conference on electoral best practices held on 25-26 April 2018, which also involved representatives of the Networks and Information Security (NIS) Cooperation Group and electoral committees.

Based on the contributions of authorities responsible for the implementation of the NIS Directive[10] and the support provided by Commission and European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA), the NIS Cooperation Group delivered a Compendium on cyber security of election technology[11] in July 2018. The Compendium is a practical document that looks at specific threats and provides useful examples to electoral committees on how to manage the risks posed to the cybersecurity of elections.

The High-level conference "Election Interference in the Digital Age: Building Resilience to Cyber-Enabled Threats"[12] took place on 15-16 October 2018 in Brussels. The Conference allowed participants to acquire a better understanding of the issues related to cybersecurity of elections and enabled NIS competent authorities and electoral committees to discuss possible next steps for the implementation of relevant security measures regarding the next European elections.

The Commission convened a range of stakeholders to discuss democracy in Europe, including resilient electoral process and open democratic debate, at its annual Colloquium on fundamental rights, held on 26-27 November in Brussels. Several hundred stakeholders attended, including national and European policymakers, international organisations, civil society organisations, media and social media representatives, the world of business and

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[9]   COM(2018) 435.
[10]   Directive (EU) 2016/1148 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 July 2016 concerning measures for a high common level of security of network and information systems across the Union.
[11]   CG Publication 03/2018 - Compendium on cyber security of election technology. Available here: http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=53645.
[12]   https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/events/election-interference-digital-age-building-resilience-cyber-enabled-threats_en.

education, and identified new avenues to foster free, open and healthy democratic participation.

The Commission will follow up on the conclusions of the colloquium[13], including through the work of the national and European election cooperation networks, currently being established in the framework of the Commission's election package of September 2018[14]. The national election networks will bring together authorities with responsibility for elections with other authorities including media regulators, and data protection and cyber security authorities. The European cooperation network will support the exchange of information and best practices among Member States and Union bodies, and will meet for the first time in January 2019.

Commission activities during 2018 have consolidated the dialogue between the Commission and Member States, raising awareness and strengthening capacities to manage risks to democratic electoral process presented by cyber-attacks and disinformation.

2.3 Fostering education and media literacy

The third set of actions focus on fostering education and media literacy. The life-long development of critical and digital competences is crucial to reinforce the resilience of our societies to disinformation. The Communication proposed new actions to this end, including: supporting the provision of educational materials by independent fact-checkers and civil society organisations to schools and educators; organising a European Week of Media Literacy; exploring the possibility of adding media literacy to the criteria used by the OECD in its comparative reports on international student assessment; and further encouraging the implementation of ongoing initiatives on digital skills, education and traineeship.

Following the adoption of the Communication, signatories to the Code of Practice on Disinformation have committed to collaborate with civil society, governments, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to support efforts aimed at improving critical thinking and digital media literacy, including training actions and the provision of tools to help users identify disinformation.

In June 2018, the Commission discussed with national authorities and stakeholders within the Media Literacy Expert Group, possible options for the organisation of a European Week of Media Literacy (EUMLW) in 2019 to raise awareness around disinformation. The EUMLW should combine events and initiatives at Union level with events taking place at national level (workshops, open door sessions in newsrooms and practical training courses on social media use) to benefit from a multiplying effect. It should also seek the involvement of stakeholders belonging to the 'Safer Internet' and 'Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition' communities in order to ensure synergies with these initiatives. The week should have an important focus on the challenge to counter disinformation in view of the upcoming 2019 European elections.

The Commission co-funded Safer Internet Centres in Member States to act as multipliers of the #SaferInternet4EU Campaign, which aims at raising awareness about media literacy, informing parents and professionals of the opportunities and risks online and promoting a

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[13] Follow up will focus on actions around which a consensus emerged, which could include, for example, an evaluation of the sufficiency in the online context of existing national rules on the transparency of political advertising.

[14] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-cybersecurity-elections-recommendation-5949_en.pdf.

positive use of media among children and young people. In particular, this campaign contributes to empower online users to recognise possible bias, spin or misinformation[15].

Moreover, the forthcoming revised AVMSD, already approved by the Council, on 6 November 2018 recognises the importance of media literacy and introduces a legal obligation for Member States to "promote and take measures for the development of media literacy skills" (Article 33a). In addition, in view of the central role played by video-sharing platforms in giving access to audiovisual content and the resulting societal responsibility, the revised AVMSD obliges them to provide "for effective media literacy measures and tools and rais[e] users' awareness of these measures and tools" (Article 28b(3)(j)). These provisions introduce rules for Member States and video-sharing platforms on media literacy, and establish a co-regulatory system with reinforced cooperation between industry, civil society, Member States and regulators.

Under that Directive, Member States will have to report to the Commission on the implementation of their media literacy plans. The Commission, in consultation with the Contact Committee, will issue guidelines on the scope of this reporting obligation.

National audio-visual regulatory authorities have also carried out work within ERGA (the Commission expert group of audio-visual regulators) on media plurality, covering issues such as balanced and impartial media coverage during elections, opinion polls and political campaigns.

In addition, the Commission continued its discussion in 2018 with the OECD on the possibility of adding media literacy to the criteria used by the organisation in its comparative reports, focusing on the forthcoming questionnaire for the Programme of international student assessment (PISA) 2021. To this end, the OECD was open to the Commission's suggestion to cover online disinformation and fake news as part of the ICT familiarity questionnaire, which should feed into the review of the PISA assessment criteria. The OECD is currently in the process of refining the questionnaire with draft questions that should be tested in 2019.

With regards to digital skills, 23 National Coalitions, which have been created since the launch of the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition in December 2016, offered a large number of activities such as training on-line and face to face, awareness raising campaigns and certifications for Europeans to improve their digital skills.

In October 2018, the Governing Board of the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition, set up in September 2017, presented its priorities for the coming months which include promoting and leveraging existing tools to support the acquisition of digital skills for all and expanding EU Code Week[16] to reach at least 50% of all schools in the Union by 2020.

2.4. Support for quality journalism as an essential element of a democratic society

The fourth set of actions aims to support quality journalism as an essential element of a democratic society. Quality news media and journalism can uncover and dilute disinformation, providing citizens high-quality and diverse information. The Communication proposed to enhance the transparency and predictability of State aid rules for the media sector

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[15]   Regular updates, resources, and list of safer internet events in Member States can be found on the portal: www.betterinternetforkids.eu.

[16]   EU Code Week is a grassroots initiative, which aims to bring coding and digital literacy to everybody in a fun and engaging way. https://codeweek.eu/.

by making available an online repository of decisions. The Communication also proposed to launch a call in 2018 for the production and dissemination of quality news content on Union affairs through data-driven news media and to explore increased funding opportunities to support initiatives promoting media freedom and pluralism, and modernisation of news rooms.

Following the Communication, the Commission made available an online repository on the applicable State aid rules and relevant precedent cases on its website[17]. It references applicable State aid rules and relevant Commission decisions on State aid to public service broadcasting and State aid to the press, and provides links to relevant commentary from the Commission's Competition Policy Newsletter. Updated information on aid granted by Member States in these domains is accessible on the transparency register[18].

Furthermore, on 26 June 2018, the Commission launched a call, of about EUR 1.9 million, for the production and dissemination of quality news content on Union affairs through data-driven news media. The call closed on 25 September, having resulted in four project proposals. Evaluation of the proposals is ongoing, and it is envisioned that projects awarded grants will start in the first quarter of 2019.

In addition to the R&D projects presented in section 2.1.4, the 2020 work programme under Horizon 2020 will cater for additional investments in innovation projects with a view to selecting, launching and incubating ideas for innovative services and tools fostering the modernisation of newsrooms.

To stabilise actions in favour of quality journalism, media freedom, media pluralism and media literacy, the Commission is proposing a dedicated budget in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027, Creative Europe, Cross sectorial strand). This should allow addressing the structural changes faced by the media sector by promoting and monitoring a diverse and pluralistic media environment.

About the promotion of media freedom, quality news media and journalism, the Commission co-funded the activities of the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)[19]. In 2018, the main task of ECPMF was to support investigative journalists, via the allocation of grants for investigative cross-border journalistic work. In June 2018, an independent jury has selected 12 investigative journalism projects for funding under the inaugural round of the IJ4EU fund.

Moreover, pursuant to funding by the European Parliament, three calls for pilot projects are being launched to support projects in the following areas:
- An exchange programme for media practitioners;
- An internship programme for journalists working in minority language media;
- A project to map and support Media Councils.

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[17] http://ec.europa.eu/competition/sectors/media/overview_en.html#disinformation.
[18] https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/competition/transparency/public/search/home?lang=en.
[19] Based in Leipzig, the ECPMF's main aim is to unite Europe's fragmented media freedom community and to address media freedom violations in EU Member States and beyond. The Centre provides practical help to journalists in need and works with partners to raise awareness on media freedom issues in the EU and Candidate Countries. Partners of the ECPMF are supporting and monitoring media freedom in the EU and Candidate Countries.

Finally, the Fundamental Rights Agency continued its development work on a toolkit for media professionals, which is a web-based capacity building platform with content developed by private media stakeholders to support journalists in producing quality news.

2.5 Countering internal and external disinformation threats through strategic communication

In line with the April communication, the European Commission worked to ensure the internal coordination of its communication activities aiming at tackling disinformation. In this context, it created an internal Network against Disinformation the primary purpose of which is to enable its services to better detect harmful narratives, support a culture of fact-checking, provide fast responses and strengthen more effective positive messaging[20]. The Commission reinforced cooperation with the European Parliament and East Strategic Communication Task Force through a tripartite forum that aims to operationalise the institutions' respective efforts in countering disinformation ahead of the 2019 European elections.

3. SUMMARY

Overall, the actions outlined in the Communication have been accomplished or launched during 2018. Online platforms and the advertising industry have agreed on a Code of Practice to increase online transparency and protect consumers, with a particular view to the European elections in 2019. A network of fact checkers is being created that will strengthen capabilities to detect and debunk false narratives. The Commission will facilitate their work by providing the necessary infrastructure without interfering in their tasks. Stakeholders should be able to benefit from a number of research and innovation tools to identify and tackle disinformation, while consumers should benefit from better online accountability of suppliers of information. Awareness has increased across Member States about the need to protect democratic processes from cyber threats. This goes hand in hand with sustained efforts, at EU and national level, to raise the level of media literacy and empower users, especially the younger generations, and improve critical thinking. Support to quality journalism should also contribute to dilute disinformation and provide citizens with high quality and diverse information.

The Commission will closely monitor the implementation of ongoing actions addressed in this Report, in particular the Code of Practice on Disinformation, and continue to evaluate whether further actions, including measures of regulatory nature, are necessary.

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[20] This network includes also the Commission representations in the Member States.