[Questions and Answers – The EU steps up action against disinformation](#)

What has the EU done so far to counter disinformation?

Disinformation– i.e. verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public – distorts public debate, undermines citizens' trust in institutions and media, and even destabilises democratic processes such as elections. 73% of internet users in the EU are concerned about disinformation in pre-election periods. Given its cross-border dimension, the adverse effects of disinformation in the European Union require a coordinated and long-term approach to respond to the challenge at both EU and national level.

In 2015, after the [European Council](#)'s call to address the ongoing disinformation campaigns by Russia, the [East Stratcom Task Force](#) was created in the European External Action Service (EEAS). To date, the Task Force has catalogued, analysed and raised awareness of over 4,500 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation, and significantly improved understanding of the tools, techniques and intentions of disinformation by Russian sources. In close cooperation with European Commission services, it has also substantially improved the effectiveness of EU communications in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

In 2016, the [Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats](#) was adopted, followed by the Joint Communication on [increasing resilience and bolstering capabilities to address hybrid threats](#) in 2018. As part of the measures foreseen in this context, the Hybrid Fusion Cell was created in the EEAS in 2016 to act as a single focus for the analysis of hybrid threats for EU institutions, and in 2017 the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats was established in Helsinki.

The Commission put forward a European approach for tackling online disinformation in its [Communication of April 2018](#), seeking to promote a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online environment. The Communication proposed measures to tackle disinformation online, including a self-regulatory EU-wide Code of Practice on Disinformation, signed by large online platforms and the advertising industry, as well as support for an independent network of fact-checkers. The Communication also stressed the need to ensure secure and resilient election processes, to foster education and media literacy, and to support quality journalism. The Commission also called for a strengthening of strategic communications.

On 12 September 2018, the Commission set out [measures to secure free and fair European elections](#), including greater transparency in online political advertisements and the possibility to impose sanctions for the illegal use of personal data in order to deliberately influence the outcome of the European elections.

Building on these efforts, the EU has today presented an Action Plan with additional measures to counter disinformation and is reporting on the progress so far in tackling online disinformation.

1. Action Plan against Disinformation

What does this Action Plan propose and why? How does it complement existing initiatives?

The [Action Plan](#) proposes a set of actions that should further enable a joint and coordinated EU approach to addressing disinformation.

To step up the EU's response to disinformation, the Action Plan focuses on four pillars:

1. **Improving the capabilities** of the Union's institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation;
2. **Strengthening coordinated and joint responses** by EU institutions and Member States to disinformation;
3. **Mobilising the private sector to tackle disinformation**; and
4. **Raising awareness** about disinformation, and improving societal resilience.

The European Commission and the High Representative will develop and implement these actions, in close cooperation with Member States and the European Parliament.

With six months left before the European elections, how timely is the Action Plan?

Very timely. The Action Plan sets out a number of concrete actions and all actors are expected to coordinate and work together as a matter of priority to maximise the EU's preparedness ahead of the European elections in May 2019. In that sense, it complements the actions the Commission announced in the September 2018 with its [Communication on Securing free and fair European elections](#) and the [April 2018 Communication on Tackling online disinformation](#). The EU institutions have already built an internal network against disinformation and are in parallel working on strengthening their strategic communication capacities.

What resources does the Commission plan to allocate for the implementation of these actions?

The EEAS' strategic communication budget to address disinformation and raise awareness about its adverse impact is expected to more than double, from €1.9 million in 2018 to €5 million in 2019. This will also be accompanied by a reinforcement of staff (an increase of 50-55 staff member is planned over the next two years).

This represents an important step, as the [East Stratcom Task Force](#) of the EEAS, while created in 2015, received dedicated resources only in 2018 when a budget of €1.1 million was allocated under the 2018 Preparatory Action: 'StratCom Plus', proposed by the European Parliament. In addition, €800,000

were allocated to the EEAS for strategic communication.

This first dedicated budget for the disinformation work allows for a more professional and technical monitoring of the information space in the Eastern Partnership countries and of Russian media (operating in Russia and beyond). Combining a qualitative approach with a quantitative one in detecting emerging trends in relation to the EU and its policies, the Action provides: wider geographic and language coverage of media monitoring; systematic data monitoring and analysis; and inputs from experts on disinformation in the Eastern Partnership region.

In addition, in its proposal for Horizon Europe programme (2021-2027), the Commission has foreseen funding for the development of new tools to combat online disinformation; to better understand the role of journalistic standards and user-generated content; and to support next generation internet applications and services including immersive and trustworthy media, social media and social networking. So far around €40 million have been invested in EU projects in the area.

The Commission also proposed a dedicated budget of €61 million under the next Creative Europe programme to support journalism, media freedom, media pluralism and media literacy.

What role does the Action Plan envisage for the EU Member States?

The Action Plan sets out key actions to tackle disinformation in a coordinated approach among the EU institutions and in cooperation with the Member States. The Plan calls for the strengthening of cooperation in detecting, analysing and exposing disinformation campaigns, and in raising awareness about the negative impact of disinformation. Among others, it includes proposals that Member States designate national contact points that would participate in the Rapid Alert System. The Rapid Alert System would facilitate common situational awareness and a coordinated response. Complementary to EU institutions' efforts, Member States should raise awareness of the negative impact of disinformation and support the work of independent media, fact-checkers and investigative journalists, including through the creation of multidisciplinary teams with specific knowledge about local information environments.

What is the Rapid Alert System and how will it work?

When democracy in one Member State is under attack, European democracy as a whole is under attack. A strong European response requires Member States and EU institutions to work together much more closely, and to help each other understand and confront the threat. The Rapid Alert System will build on a secure digital platform, where Member States can share information on ongoing foreign disinformation campaigns with one another, and coordinate responses. The Rapid Alert System will be based on open-source and unclassified information only, and will exclusively focus on coordinated attempts by foreign actors to manipulate free and open debate. In view of setting up the Rapid Alert System by March 2019, each Member State should designate a contact point, ideally positioned within strategic communication departments.

Does the EU plan to coordinate its actions with international actors or fora, for example NATO or G7?

Cooperation on threat analysis and situational awareness with NATO is ongoing. G7 partners are in the process of establishing a Rapid Response Mechanism to reinforce the defences of democracies. The Commission and the High Representative will continue regular exchanges of information with key partners in the framework of ongoing staff-to-staff cooperation. This will also be used to promote information exchange and best practices.

What will the Commission do to improve the media literacy of online users?

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 to the public. The Action Plan also calls upon Member States to ensure a rapid and effective implementation of the provisions of the Audio-visual Media Services Directive concerning media literacy.

What are the Action plan and the EU doing to support the media?

The Commission supports quality news media and journalism as an essential element of a democratic society. As confirmed in the [progress report](#), the Commission wants to enhance transparency and predictability of State aid rules for the media sector; it also launched [a call](#) of about €1.9 million for production and dissemination of quality news content, which is still ongoing. To favour quality journalism, media freedom, media literacy and media pluralism, the Commission proposed a dedicated budget in the [2021-2027 Creative Europe](#), addressing the structural changes faced by the media sector. Finally, the Commission co-funds, together with initiatives of the European Parliament, independent projects in the field of media freedom and pluralism. These projects, among other actions, monitor risks to media pluralism across Europe, map violations to media freedom, fund cross-border investigative journalism and support journalists under threat.

What is the role of the European network of fact-checkers in tackling online disinformation?

Fact-checkers are essential in tackling disinformation. They verify and assess the veracity of content based on facts and evidence thus helping the information ecosystem to be cleaner and more robust. The Commission aims to foster the cooperation between European fact-checkers and therefore supports the creation of a network of European fact-checkers. The fact-checking community will define the prerequisites for membership in the coming months. The network will be editorially independent. Regarding the online platform to connect fact-checkers and researchers, an initial funding of €2.5 million under the Connected Europe Facility instrument (CEF) is foreseen.

As a first step, the Commission will offer online tools to fact-checkers to enable their collaboration. As a second step, the Commission will deploy a secure European online platform on disinformation. This will offer cross-

border data collection, analysis tools and access to EU-wide data, in support of cooperation between the fact-checking community and academics working on the problem of online disinformation.

2. Code of Practice

What is the role foreseen for the industry, e.g. social media platforms, advertisers or the advertising industry?

Industry has a very important role to play in effectively tackling this problem, mainly due to the use of new technologies and social media to spread, target and amplify disinformation. In October, main online companies (Google, Facebook, Twitter and Mozilla) signed a [Code of Practice](#) committing themselves to a number of actions ahead of European elections. The Action Plan underlines that they should immediately ensure the transparency of political advertising, take decisive action against fake accounts and identify automated bots and label them accordingly. The Action Plan also urges the platforms to cooperate with national contact points on disinformation and with fact checkers to help effectively fight disinformation. Their full commitment to the Code of Practice and the swift and effective implementation of key measures is important for granting safe and fair elections and secure a more transparent online environment.

How will the Commission monitor the implementation of the Code of Practice signed by online platforms and adverting sector?

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 and will publish this information in January 2019. Moreover, beginning in January, 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. In the autumn, the Commission will carry out a targeted monitoring of the implementation of the Code on a monthly basis. The Commission will seek the assistance of the European Regulators Group for Audio-visual Media Services, the independent network of audio-visual regulators under the [Audio-visual Media Services Directive](#), in monitoring the implementation of the Code in the various Member States.

Why does the Commission think that self-regulation for online platforms is the right approach to tackle the issue?

Online disinformation is a new, multi-faceted and fast developing issue that requires immediate action. Therefore, self-regulation, if correctly implemented, is an appropriate way for online platforms to take swift action to tackle this problem. By comparison, a regulatory approach would take longer to prepare and implement. Should the self-regulatory approach fail, the Commission may propose further actions, including regulatory ones.

What are platforms doing to avoid disinformation in the run up to the EU elections?

The online platforms which have signed the Code of Practice have provided

individual roadmaps detailing the key tools and policies they will apply in all EU Member States ahead of the elections. These include, for example, transparency tools for political advertising, so that online political advertising distributed through social media is clearly marked as such and is distinguishable from other types of sponsored content.

The roadmaps detail each company's policies to implement the Code of Practice, structured around five themes: advertising policies; political advertising; service integrity; empowering consumers and empowering the research community.

Does the Commission trust the platforms to implement the Code?
Subscription to the Code is voluntary. However, there are growing expectations that online platforms should not only comply with legal obligations under EU and national laws, but also act with appropriate responsibility to protect users from disinformation.
The Commission expects the signatories to implement the Code on a full, effective and timely basis. To this end, the Commission will closely monitor implementation and assess the effectiveness of the Code. 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 their commitments. The Commission will publish this information in January 2019. The Commission will then make a first assessment of the implementation of the Code at the end of the year.

For More Information