EUROPEAN POLICY BLUEPRINT FOR COUNTERING AUTHORITARIAN INTERFERENCE IN DEMOCRACIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, European democracy has been shaken by internal and external events. European nations and institutions are confronting numerous challenges like migration, nationalist extremism, and discontent with the political status quo. They also face challenges from a revanchist Russia that seeks to reestablish influence it lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union and to weaken democracy across the continent, and from a rising China that aims to export its model of authoritarianism across the globe. The European Union and NATO have expanded their membership, bringing more European citizens into the Euro-Atlantic community, and yet a polarized European society remains ever more susceptible to interference from foreign authoritarian regimes' attempts to undermine Europe's stability, unity, and prosperity.

The overall security threat to Europe has evolved. Europe's adversaries are less likely to use conventional military power to fight today's geopolitical battles and more likely to employ asymmetric tools to compensate for conventional military weaknesses—cyberattacks, information operations, malign financial influence, the subversion of political and social organizations, and strategic economic coercion. Regimes like Vladimir Putin's Russia amplify divisive narratives to undermine public trust in democracy using a combination of state-controlled media outlets, government-sponsored online trolls masquerading as European citizens, and a network of sympathetic social media agitators. Authoritarian actors bring money into Europe licitly and illicitly to corrupt European leaders and peddle their influence in European politics and society. They use state assets as leverage to create economic dependencies that further authoritarian interests in Europe and advance their corroding influence across the continent. Finally, these regimes disrupt democracies' ability to govern and function by conducting cyberattacks against government institutions, businesses, and media.

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Elections are a prime target of authoritarian attacks on democracy. The Russian government has interfered in elections and referendums in several European nations, and initial assessments of the May 2019 European Parliament elections revealed that Russian disinformation campaigns "covered a broad range of topics" to attack the EU, amplify localized polarizing content to influence public opinion, and attempt to suppress voter turnout.[1] But undermining elections is not the only goal. Authoritarian incursions into the daily lives of Europeans have increased since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, and they will grow by an order of magnitude as technologies evolve and

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1 High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation," European Commission, June 14, 2019.

more actors adopt these tools. By using these tools to exploit existing cleavages in democratic societies and vulnerabilities in democratic governments, authoritarian regimes are trying to weaken and distract Europe and its transatlantic partners in the United States and Canada from their regional and global responsibilities, and to diminish confidence in democracy as a viable form of government.

A New Strategic Approach for Europe

Europe has been a leader in addressing the authoritarian interference threat. Long before the United States acknowledged the threat, European institutions and several European governments had already mobilized to defend against it. The EU and NATO launched task forces and centers of excellence that analyze authoritarian tools and tactics; nations like Sweden assigned responsibility in coordinating efforts to respond to this challenge to a particular government agency; and civil society initiatives all over Europe emerged to monitor and analyze foreign interference operations in their own countries. Yet vulnerabilities to authoritarian interference persist across the continent—in governments, institutions, and society. Despite a burgeoning of initiatives to confront this challenge, many are hampered by a lack of resources, coordination, and top-level political support. Some nations have hardly dealt with their vulnerabilities at all, and just as troubling is the courtship of authoritarian actors by some national leaders for their own political gain. The interaction between governments and other key players in democracy, particularly civil society and the private sector, has been limited.

For Europe to succeed, it needs continent-wide buy-in on a new strategic approach to tackling the authoritarian interference challenge—one that involves whole-of-government and whole-of-society efforts. Working with transatlantic and other democratic partners around the globe, European nations and institutions must harness their combined political weight to identify and develop defensive measures against foreign interference, and to raise the cost of conducting operations against their citizens. Tech and social media companies, whose platforms authoritarian regimes exploit to the detriment of democracy, must improve transparency, information sharing, and their corporate policies to secure the digital information space. Traditional media organizations should adopt norms and guidelines for ethical reporting in the disinformation era, and independent and local journalism must be better supported. And civil society should continue to raise awareness about the foreign interference challenge and develop tools to build resilience in society, including media and digital literacy programs.

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Recommendations

This report identifies specific, actionable recommendations for EU institutions, NATO, national governments, the private sector, the media, and civil society to defend against the authoritarian interference challenge in a more coordinated, sustained, and strategic manner. The recommendations build toward the following ten main principles.

1. Improve coordination to develop collective responses to foreign interference operations

There are many efforts underway nationally and at the EU and NATO to defend against authoritarian interference. However, some efforts are not well coordinated organizationally and do not always feed into decision-making structures. National governments should centralize mechanisms for tracking and analyzing threats and developing policy responses. The EU should institute a senior-level coordinator for interference issues to oversee various efforts across EU institutions and facilitate the sharing of best practices by member states.

EU-NATO cooperation on hybrid threats should be strengthened by having more formal consultations at the heads of state and government level, and by implementing thoroughly agreed measures from EU-NATO joint declarations.

2. Protect the principles and institutions of democracy, remembering that our democracy is only as strong as we make it

European citizens have a responsibility to protect themselves and their societies from interference by holding governments and businesses accountable, and actively participating in political processes and civil society. Whole-of society resilience is critical as evolving technology is expected to enable an already growing number of foreign authoritarian actors to engage in increasingly sophisticated manners of interference. Maintaining the rule of law, protecting the freedom of speech, and fighting corruption at all levels is paramount to inoculating society against authoritarian incursions.

3. Raise the cost of interference in Europe

Authoritarian governments that engage in interference operations must know that the repercussions for doing so will be costly and sustained. European states should maintain intra-European as well as transatlantic unity on existing sanctions and expand them if malign foreign actors further target European democracies, and they should adopt other financial and reputational countermeasures as necessary. NATO should further articulate what hybrid activity it considers a threat to the national security of allies and clarify publicly how it intends to harness alliance capabilities to defend allies from these attacks.

4. Continue to push for transparency and accountability in the information and technology sectors

The efforts of tech platforms to counter foreign interference operations have at times been opaque and their policies inconsistently applied. European governments and institutions should keep working with the platforms to encourage maximum transparency about their policies to protect rights to user data and stymie malicious actors. At the

same time, they must be careful not to impair user anonymity, which can protect democratic actors. Social media companies should improve the transparency of political ad funding and targeting, ensure that government-sponsored content and accounts are labeled properly, define and label social bots, and increase information sharing with independent researchers, governments, and among each other regarding removed accounts and specific threats.

5. Build more constructive public-private partnerships to identify and address evolving digital threats

Threats in the online information space and in cyberspace evolve constantly. European governments, media, and the private sector need to work together to share best practices and tools for building better media literacy, detecting hostile information operations, identifying bad actors and false content, and communicating threats to the public. The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation is an ambitious initial approach that needs to be enhanced by addressing smaller platforms, encouraging cross-platform information sharing, and ensuring that signatories thoroughly deliver and meaningfully report on progress against disinformation as they pledged.

6. Tackle entrenched vulnerabilities in the financial sector that authoritarian actors exploit

Abetted by local enablers, authoritarian regimes and their agents launder the proceeds of their corruption and facilitate interference operations through the European financial sector. Establishing a central European anti-money laundering authority and fully implementing existing EU-wide anti-money laundering legislation would enable more effective supervision and policing of the European financial sector. In addition, existing supervisory authorities should impose more severe fines on European entities that facilitate authoritarian regimes' malign financial activity.

7. Develop effective responses to investments by authoritarian countries and their proxies in Europe's strategic sectors

Companies, funds and individuals affiliated with authoritarian regimes have invested heavily in critical sectors of European economies, gaining these regimes access to sensitive intellectual property and infrastructure, and increasing their influence on the continent. The new EU-wide foreign investment-screening mechanism is a first step in addressing this vulnerability but should be strengthened by adding enforcement measures and enhancing the European Commission's information-gathering capabilities. Member states should also adopt screening mechanisms that follow the EU's minimum requirements and expand their own foreign investment information collection.

8. Support local and independent media

Local and independent journalism is crucial to keeping citizens involved in the political life of democracies. But its market is shrinking as funding is decreasing. In regions vulnerable to Russian disinformation, like the Western Balkans, local media often turn to Russian news outlets for content, spreading narratives damaging to Europe. European philanthropies and governments should better support local and independent media so they can endure.

9. Identify the right messengers for raising awareness about foreign interference

Efforts to explain foreign interference—and the measures countries are taking to address the challenge—should reach citizens beyond policymaking communities in capitals. Partnerships between the public sector, the private sector, and civil society should identify trusted voices in local communities to raise awareness about the foreign interference threat in a depoliticized manner and in a way that reaches the most vulnerable parts of the population.

10. Depoliticize efforts to counter foreign interference and embrace non-partisan approaches

Trust indexes show that in many countries, the public's average trust in institutions has been declining. Across the transatlantic space, the public debate on foreign interference is highly polarized. Often, facts pertaining to foreign interference are met with skepticism from the public, especially when they come from official sources. Civil society organizations are uniquely well-placed to bridge this trust gap. National governments, the EU, and philanthropic funds should better support their efforts to educate citizens and build resilience in society to this challenge.