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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — The role of local and regional authorities in countering disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference

(C/2023/247)

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Introduction

1. notes that disinformation through foreign information manipulation and interference is currently one of the biggest challenges facing authorities at all levels. The COVID-19 pandemic, Russian aggression against Ukraine, the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War and the related economic costs are just some of the issues that have recently been dominating political discourse. This has led to a situation where foreign state and non-state actors have seen a greater chance to achieve political, economic or social benefits by manipulating the European information space;
2. notes that this activity takes various forms with targeted campaigns, of which perpetrators are often more difficult to detect and trace, helping to achieve foreign objectives, which include weakening, destabilising, polarising and breaking down the unity of the European Union or undermining the values and principles that underpin it;
3. notes that promoters of foreign disinformation are increasingly making use of local actors, social problems and tensions and hate speech. Changes in disinformation tactics also mean that the perpetrators of local operations under foreign influence are harder to detect and trace. Exploiting divisions among regional and local communities in this way can lead to greater radicalisation, and tensions can move from the internet to the streets of the places where all of us live;
4. recognises the threats posed by the development of artificial intelligence (AI) which creates new challenges, but at the same time can be a tool to deal with different forms of online disinformation more quickly. The Committee therefore stresses the importance of fully implementing the ethics guidelines applicable to AI, including the obligation for full transparency of the algorithms used;

Actions at EU level

5. welcomes the fact that this growing problem has been reflected in key strategies and the work of EU institutions and bodies, including the Strategic Compass, recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation. In its final report, the Special Committee calls, among other things, for the involvement of local and regional decision-makers responsible for strategic decisions within their remits (e.g. infrastructure, cybersecurity, culture and education) and stresses that local and regional authorities can in many cases identify events at an early stage and that local knowledge is often necessary to identify and carry out appropriate countermeasures⁽¹⁾;
6. welcomes in particular the adoption and entry into force of the Digital Services Act and the Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation. These make up a kind of constitution for countering the relevant threats. They are important in the context of ensuring electoral transparency and limiting financial incentives to spread disinformation and to safeguard the transparency of political advertising online;

⁽¹⁾ European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (OJ C 347, 9.9.2022, p. 61).

7. appreciates the European External Action Service's extensive work to combat disinformation, particularly through its East StratCom Task Force and the EU vs Disinfo website;

8. recognising this problem, commissioned a handbook on good practice in countering disinformation at local and regional level. The examples therein can serve as a model, inspiration or broader source of solutions. Regions and cities with experience can act as mentors, while examples of national and international projects can also be used to obtain funding ^(?);

Proposals for actions at regional and local level

Increased funding

9. calls again for funding to be made available across Europe to increase the skills of local and regional authorities to counter disinformation and provide them with qualified staff and appropriate tools, especially in the external border regions of the EU, particularly those in geographical and geopolitical zones located outside Europe;

10. at the same time, notes that the lack of own resources can also be compensated through cooperation with civil society organisations and representatives, local media, research centres, individual journalists and fact-checkers;

11. believes that it is absolutely necessary for national and EU authorities to provide support through funding, programmes and initiatives to help local and regional authorities in their work to counter disinformation on the ground;

12. therefore encourages:

- a. regular and structured cooperation with local and regional organisations and representatives of civil society, researchers, educators, journalists and fact-checkers;
- b. setting up in a transparent manner local and regional funds, to be managed by public authorities, in order to counter disinformation and promote media education, by making use of private funds, including from actions related to corporate social responsibility;
- c. taking action to harness funds and opportunities under EU programmes such as CERV and Horizon Europe. The Committee will support local and regional authorities in this regard and calls for other EU and national institutions to provide them with support and guidance in this area;
- d. developing a network approach that, through ad hoc or sustained cooperation between regional and local authorities at home and abroad, could be beneficial for those with limited resources and address a lack of capacity and expertise;
- e. ongoing analysis of best practices and learning from each other, including examples referred to in the good practices handbook commissioned by the Committee;
- f. intensifying efforts to improve foresight capacity and resilience to cyberattacks through the deployment of appropriate cybersecurity tools that are interoperable at EU level for all local and regional authorities as well as strategic public and private services (such as those related to health, water, energy, etc.);

Better situational awareness and resilience building

13. in order to improve situational awareness, recommends:

- a. setting up a European working group to provide guidance to, or within a network of, local and regional authorities to exchange experiences on disinformation threats. This would allow for better identification of disinformation campaigns and incidents and possible links between local and regional incidents in different EU Member States;

^(?) 'Developing a handbook on good practice in countering disinformation at local and regional level', European Committee of the Regions.

- b. appointing expert and advisory bodies and social media advisers for countering disinformation risks, in Member States at the level of local government associations, while at the same time involving representatives of key groups of self-government and non-governmental organisations, security services, educators, journalists and psychologists;
 - c. expanding the scope of analyses of local and regional disinformation campaigns and incidents in the EU vs Disinfo database and adapting its filters for searching such events accordingly;
 - d. integrating the exchange of information, analyses and recommendations on local and regional disinformation campaigns and incidents in the EU's alert system (RAS);
 - e. introducing cyclical sessions of local government councils dedicated to debates on disinformation threats;
 - f. ongoing analysis of the local information space and 'online sentiment' using local activists, journalists, fact-checkers or volunteers;
14. in terms of resilience building, recommends:
- a. developing periodic (annual) action plans against disinformation in regions, counties and municipalities that take into account strategic communication principles, thus addressing cybersecurity issues;
 - b. establishing training programmes for elected representatives of local and regional authorities and officials as well as exercise, risk simulation and response programmes;
 - c. with the support of EU and national institutions, developing and launching a pilot model for systemic responses to disinformation campaigns and incidents in regions, counties and municipalities, especially those most exposed to disinformation;
 - d. testing commercially available mobile and AI-supported applications to counter disinformation;
 - e. translating available national and international anti-disinformation guides into all official EU languages;
 - f. translating the 'Learn' section of the EU vs Disinfo website into all official EU languages, providing a database of cases of disinformation, regular bulletins and reports and know-how in the field of campaigns to raise awareness of the dangers of disinformation;
 - g. making use of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) in Helsinki, its expertise and practice materials on countering disinformation;

More effective strategic communication

15. stresses the importance of strategic communication from local and regional authorities based on transparency, accountability and public participation, thus building public trust as a counterweight to disinformation activities;

16. notes that public trust is a key element and that building it should be a priority. To this end, public communication should be used to combat disinformation, deepening understanding of how disinformation is spread and working with recognised and respected institutions and experts to provide data and promote reliable information to debunk disinformation narratives;

17. considers it useful:

- a. for local and regional authorities to develop communication strategies aiming to build the trust of citizens and strengthen democratic values;
- b. for communication at the local and regional level to also take into account communities that speak other languages;

- c. for local and regional authorities to use tools enabling citizens to easily access information and participate in the exercise of official authority, which is an example of openness and accountability of authorities;
- d. to provide clear and regular information on the activities of local and regional authorities and provide tools for easy access and use of information and data;
- e. to organise participatory activities as a means to raise people's awareness of disinformation threats;
- f. to establish protocols for dealing with potential threats, including during election periods;
- g. to implement a practice of communication warning against disinformation, including in specially designed applications for local and regional authorities to communicate with residents as in the case for other threats such as severe weather;

Media education and critical thinking as a priority

18. notes that, where education is a sub-national competence, local and regional authorities should include media education and critical thinking in curricula, starting at primary school. They should also actively support such education by promoting the development of materials for teachers to adapt educational activities to local realities;

19. strongly emphasises that media literacy and education initiatives should reach as wide an audience as possible and be implemented both in cities and in rural areas. Also, LRAs can promote media literacy among citizens by providing education and resources on critical thinking, fact-checking, and verification skills to help citizens develop the skills to evaluate information and identify fake news.

20. underscores that media literacy presupposes critical thinking, which is crucial for the evaluation of the veracity and reliability of information. Rebuilding trust in scientific evidence and enabling equitable access to reliable and factual information are an effective tool to counter disinformation and conspiracy theories;

21. encourages:

- a. with the support of local and regional authorities and media experts, developing exercise worksheets on digital education and media literacy that could be downloaded and printed by teachers. It is also very important to provide support to local media, including through funds and other measures, to strengthen their capacity to fight information manipulation.
- b. organising 'back to school' initiatives that would enable journalists to talk about their work, the role of the media and threats related to disinformation;
- c. running supplementary training programmes on media literacy for schoolchildren and senior citizens through educators and the facilities of libraries, cultural centres, NGOs and local media;
- d. creating dedicated expert pilot programmes on media education and training for schoolchildren by specialised educational organisations, including on a commercial basis, with support from EU and national budgets;
- e. translating textbooks supporting the development of media literacy activities in school, developed at the request of the European Commission and the Council of Europe⁽³⁾, into all official EU languages;
- f. translating the resources of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which serves as a repository of information and resources related to disinformation and media literacy, into all official EU languages;
- g. using cross-border twinning partnerships between local and regional authorities that have specific knowledge and experience in media education for training purposes;

⁽³⁾ *Teaching Media Literacy and fighting Disinformation with eTwinning*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union (<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b851cd16-3d1c-11ec-89db-01aa75ed71a1>), 'Digital citizenship education handbook', Council of Europe (<https://rm.coe.int/16809382f9>).

Support for local media

22. notes that local media are particularly important for debunking disinformation and providing context to national news at local level. It is therefore necessary to effectively carry out the obligation and responsibility of Member States to guarantee media pluralism and to ensure respect for the principles of independent media that is free from political oversight;

23. therefore calls for:

- a. increasing financial support from EU and national budgets and regional and local funds given to local media and journalists to protect media pluralism and to support fact-checking organisations and media literacy initiatives, while ensuring transparency, impartiality and independence of these actors;
- b. providing guidance to local and regional media to develop their online presence, e.g. by carrying out a study based on experiences in EU countries and examples of media that have achieved media and market success;

More transparent elections

24. appreciates that the European Commission has set up and is managing the European Cooperation Network on Elections and stresses again that concern for free and democratic elections should apply in equal measure to European, national, regional and local elections;

25. therefore recommends:

- a. involving representatives of local and regional authorities as much as possible in the work of the above-mentioned network;
- b. improving election transparency monitoring, building on the experience of existing organisations and projects⁽⁴⁾;
- c. banning foreign funding by non-EU countries of political parties and setting common EU rules on political campaigning and political party funding. This applies not only to national elections, but also regional and local ones;
- d. using trained local volunteers to monitor the transparency of election campaigns, including online funding;

Coordination between all levels of government

26. stresses the need:

- a. for national authorities to support local and regional authorities by creating a contact point to provide those authorities with regular information on the latest disinformation trends and narratives. This contact point could also act as a bridge with social media companies;
- b. to provide information on the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA) and other EU and national legislation related to countering disinformation;
- c. to consider the participation of local government representatives in advisory or consultative bodies of national digital service coordinators, if such bodies are created;

Conclusion

27. in conclusion, calls for further efforts at EU level to protect European rights and values that are under threat now more than ever from foreign interests taking advantage of the unprecedented power of digital and social media campaigns as a propaganda tool, including by involving a strong sub-national component in these efforts; stresses that local and regional authorities are a key element of the European democratic structure.

Brussels, 5 July 2023.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*

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⁽⁴⁾ E.g. 'Who Targets Me' (<https://whotargets.me/en/>); Memo 98 (<https://memo98.sk/>).