Dealing with far-right radicalisation and disinformation

EVENT REPORT

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A new online architecture to combat disinformation?

Speakers at the Friends of Europe policy insight event, entitled 'Dealing with far-right radicalisation and disinformation', on 12 September proposed several solutions to combatting an issue that has increased exponentially since the COVID-19 pandemic.

"If the internet suddenly disappeared, would right-wing radical groups still exist in any significant form?" asked moderator **Jamie Shea**, Senior Fellow for Peace, Security and Defence at Friends of Europe and former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for emerging security challenges at NATO. He posed a number of questions to be addressed during the session: "What is the role of disinformation in helping the process of radicalisation? What is the scale of the problem? What are the lessons learned in terms of strategies?"

Wholesale transformation over the past decade

"Over the past decade we [have] seen a wholesale transformation in the extremist ecosystem and threat

explained **Sasha Havlicek**, Co-Founder and CEO of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).

"What were once disparate parochial grouplets have transformed into transnational, tech-savvy, large-scale, online subcultures able to effectively translate digital mobilisation into offline action, often coordinating around common political objectives," she said.

Listing Facebook statistics, Havlicek said that conspiracy content increased by 160% in March 2020 alone and hate speech increased by 80% during the various lockdown periods. Antisemitism also showed a 13-fold increase in German-language online content during the pandemic.

Russia exploiting disinformation to destabilise democracy

Rita Schwarzelühr-Sutter, German Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, stated how radicalisers are now "actively looking for new issues to mobilise others" and mentioned how the socio-economic problems over the coming winter could be a hook.

She added how conspiracy theorists are using the war in Ukraine and the corresponding sanctions against Russia to scaremonger about increasing energy prices.

"This information can be a catalyst, and Russia is using this to polarise society in Germany and destabilise democracy," she said.

This is not just a problem with disinformation, according to **Maria Muñiz de Urquiza**, Political Advisor for the Socialists & Democrats Group in the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation of the European Parliament and former member of the European Parliament.

She referenced the previous day's election in Sweden where the "extreme right received 20% of the vote" and also highlighted the strong showing of the group in Italy.

"In every region of the world, democracy is under attack from extremist groups, which reject pluralism and cast distrust towards the democratic institutions

she said.

"This is a political battleground."

"It is a problem of the impoverished middle class, who are afraid of what is happening regarding the economic crisis and democratic institutions," she explained.

"Extreme-right groups take advantage of that to disinform and launch messages that damage democracy and institutions," she commented. "We need a solution for the deep roots of the crisis."

"We need to understand the formation of these ecosystems and tackle the perception that these people are evil people," said **Fadi Quran**, Campaign Director at Avaaz and 2017 MENA Young Leader.

He asserted that these are "mainly people who feel disenfranchised and need a narrative to help them understand what's happening in their lives".

Redesigning the architecture of social media

Quran offered up a number of solutions. "We need to ensure that social media platforms engage fairly across any actor that spreads disinformation and ensure that the policies imposed on far-right and far-left actors are equal," he said.

He also mentioned the importance of finding "other means to purvey information and create empowered social media websites or independent social media websites that can share counter-narratives".

Quran called for social media platforms to "open up their black boxes of social media algorithms" to disrupt and remove users from the "bubble of narratives" for extended periods of time.

"This is about redesigning the architecture of social media

he asserted.

Quran advocated for a closer examination of the "broader systems" and to consider how to change them to "rebuild trust in society".

He supports a general redesign of social media platforms, the identification of "bad actors", and also underlined the need to "figure out ways to stop them from doing harm". Like all other speakers, Quran stressed how the EU's Digital Services Act could contribute to tackling this phenomenon.

Political education and building infrastructure offline

Schwarzelühr-Sutter emphasised the importance of political education. "Different companies and authorities must be alerted to relevant disinformation and assess them quickly," she said.

Havlicek stressed the importance of "building infrastructure offline within society to identify and intervene". She emphasised the role of friends, family and schools, and said these need to be "equipped with care" to deal with the problem.

"How we regulate this space will determine the shape of the battle," she continued, explaining how whilst censorship "is the response of authoritarian states", democratic states cannot be seen to censor "grey" content.

" **What we need to see is regulated accountability and transparency**

she said.

"We are in a geopolitical struggle between liberal democracy and authoritarian nationalism," concluded Havlicek who likened the spread of disinformation to "emptying democracy of its meaning"

Recommendations

— We need a renaissance for democracy.

— A redesign of the architecture for social media could:

- ensure that social media platforms engage fairly with any actor that spreads disinformation and that the policies imposed on far-right and far-left actors are equal;

- create empowered social media websites or independent social media websites that can share counter-narratives; and

- oblige social media platforms to "open up their black boxes of social media algorithms" to disrupt and remove users from the "bubble of narratives" for extended periods of time.

— National governments should invest in political education for a faster identification of disinformation and a swifter intervention.

— National governments should build infrastructure offline, both within households and broadly in society, and provide families and schools with better equipment and resources to deal with disinformation-based radicalisation.