



# **European Politics and Society: Václav Havel Joint Master Programme**

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## **The Polarizing Effect of Russian Disinformation in the European Parliament**

Master's Thesis

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# Table of Content

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Literature Review</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Commitment to Democratic Values in the European Parliament</i>	<b>6</b>
<i>Members of the European Parliament's voting behavior</i>	<b>8</b>
<i>Combating Disinformation in the European Parliament</i>	<b>10</b>
<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Relevance of the Research</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Research Design</b>	<b>16</b>
<i>Case Selection</i>	<b>16</b>
<i>Data Collection and Filtering</i>	<b>16</b>
<i>Methodology</i>	<b>17</b>
<b>Empirical Results</b>	<b>19</b>
<i>EU Leading Figures Promoting the Regulation</i>	<b>21</b>
<i>A Strong Coalition Advocating for the DSA</i>	<b>24</b>
<i>The Digital Services Act, an Attack on European Values?</i>	<b>26</b>
<i>Bridging Digital Regulatory Debates: From the DSA to the Kalniete Report and Beyond</i>	<b>28</b>
<b>Discussion and Conclusion</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>38</b>

# Abstract

The present research seeks to investigate how Russian disinformation campaigns contribute to the ideological polarization of the European Parliament. This research analyzes the debates surrounding the Digital Services Act (DSA) adopted in the European Parliament in July 2022. This landmark legislation was designed to impose new rules on digital service providers to protect users and consumers online, respecting the principle that what is illegal offline should also be illegal online. Additional debates on Russian interference and hybrid warfare will be subject to analysis in order to identify patterns of discourse, shifts in parliamentary alignments, and potential impact on EU policy-making. The qualitative method of Critical Discourse Analysis will be applied to speeches of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to uncover power dynamics and rhetorical strategies used by supporters and detractors of digital regulation, unveiling strong ideological divides and concerns about digital sovereignty, accountability, and the respect of democratic values. The findings indicate that a substantial majority of EU deputies are pleading to regulate the digital environment to ‘put an end to the Digital Wild West’ and ultimately protect EU democratic processes from foreign interference. Conversely, a minority of conservative and far-right MEPs defend freedom of expression from content regulation and firmly denounce an attack on pluralism and censorship.

# Introduction

In 2024, the share of Internet users exceeds 66% of the world's population, representing 5.35 billion people. While Internet use varies widely among its users, more than 5 billion of them are active social media users (Kemp, 2024). By promising to connect the world, give a voice to its users, and contract time and space between them, social media platforms were an integral part of the digital revolution witnessed over the last two decades. However, the golden age of online platforms might have reached its limit. In November 2021, the whistleblower Frances Haugen testified to the European Parliament as a warning - or a wake-up call - about the limitations and dangers of social media, based on her own experience as a former employee at Facebook. Her intervention before European lawmakers occurred at a crucial time, during the negotiations of the landmark European legislation for online services, the Digital Services Act (DSA). Supported by its rapporteur, Christel Schaldemose, the DSA was put to a vote by the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), as a legislation meant to ensure a fair and secure digital environment while imposing stricter conditions on tech giants.

This research will focus on the DSA objectives related to disinformation. By analyzing the debates in the European Parliament on the DSA and Russian disinformation, this research will seek to explore the different stances of MEPs and their European party groups (EPGs) on the issue of Russian disinformation and understand why there is no consensus among MEPs on the European approach to counter Russian disinformation in the EU. By focusing on the DSA, the following research question will be answered: How has Russian information interference polarized European Party Groups in the European Parliament? Based on the existing literature, the influence of EPGs' diverging ideologies may be expected to be the primary determinant of MEPs' opinion on the regulation of online platforms and Russian interference. This research will thus attempt to identify the contrasting opinions on the DSA expressed in the selected debates, through the use of critical discourse analysis on MEPs' speeches. The upcoming analysis will reveal a pronounced opposition between the various EPGs represented in the Parliament. While some MEPs denounce the harmful effects of the DSA on European values, such as freedom of expression, others justify the relevance of the DSA by the weaponization of information by Russia and condemn the proximity of certain members and national parties to the Kremlin.

This research takes place in a unique context: the run-up to the European Parliament election of June 2024 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the EU's doorstep. These key events have exposed the EU to foreign information manipulation, raising concerns about the integrity of its democratic processes. This sensitive context contributes to the distinctive nature of this research and emphasizes its societal relevance.

To introduce this research, the existing literature will first be reviewed on the topics of MEP's commitment to democratic values, their voting behavior, and finally, the European approach to counter disinformation. Then, speeches from selected debates will be analyzed using the qualitative method of critical discourse analysis. The empirical results of this research will discuss the diverging views of MEPs on the DSA. Complementary debates will provide relevant data to analyze in order to understand MEPs' position on Russian disinformation and interference, in the months preceding the 2024 EP election.

## Theoretical Framework

### Literature Review

Introducing our analysis, the existing literature will first be reviewed to unveil the current academic debates on MEPs' commitment to democracy, expected trends in their voting behavior, and, ultimately, their voting decisions on legislation targeting disinformation in the European Union (EU). By discussing the main scholarly arguments, this literature review seeks to uncover the determinants that could lead MEPs to reaffirm or contradict their commitment to European democratic principles and vote in favor or against disinformation measures within the European Parliament.

## **I. Commitment to Democratic Values in the European Parliament**

The first section of this literature review recalls the academic debate surrounding European democratic values, questioning MEPs' commitment to democratic principles and their practical application within the EP.

Since its earliest days, what has become the European Union has constantly expanded the areas of cooperation between its member states. In its long-standing integration process, the idea of a shared identity has emerged, unifying its member states around shared principles and values. Article 2 of the Treaty of European Union (TEU) clearly defines these principles: “[t]he Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.” Oshri et al. (2015) consider these values as a concrete policy of the EU and a proxy for European identity within and beyond its borders. Indeed, European values apply not only to its member states but also to third countries seeking to join the Union, thus referring to the Copenhagen Criteria (Dudley, 2020). The political pillar of the Copenhagen criteria aims to ensure that countries seeking EU accession adhere to European democratic values by requiring them to “establish stable democratic institutions, improve their human rights practices, and consolidate their democracies” (Dudley, 2020).

While a majority of scholars agree on the identification of these European democratic values, the implementation of these values and the ability of the EU to ensure and monitor compliance with them within its Member States have given rise to debate. In this regard, Article 7 TEU has particularly caught the attention of the academic community. The latter refers to the sanctions the European Union can take against any members who fail to respect its fundamental values. The controversy lies in its effectiveness. Initiated against Poland and Hungary, the "Article 7" mechanism has never been fully applied (Lequeux, 2024), which ultimately calls into question these values' very significance and legitimacy. As this mechanism enshrined in the TEU is rarely used, some scholars agree that the EU lacks the necessary tools to take effective action in its member states in case of a severe breach of democratic values (Müller, 2013; Scheppele and Kelemen; 2019).

Yet, these precise tools meant to ensure compliance with common democratic standards are more necessary than ever. As largely discussed in the existing literature, the EU has entered a period of democratic recession, often referred to as democratic backsliding. Various elements of definition can be found in the literature. Democratic backsliding can be understood as ‘the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy’ (Bermeo, 2016), or a series of actions lasting in time undermining at least one of the three fundamental principles of democracy, namely political rights, free and fair elections and the rule of law (Bakke and Sitter, 2020). Central European countries, notably Poland and Hungary, have often been reported as cases of democratic backsliding in Europe and extensively documented by scholars (Müller, 2013; Polyakova et al., 2019; Scheppele and Kelemen, 2019; Wolkenstein, 2021). Polyakova et al. (2019) refer to these EU members as illiberal states, “threatening democracy by targeting judicial oversight, pluralistic and fair political systems, independent media, and open civil society”. From another perspective, some authors interpret the crisis of liberal democracy as a crisis of democratic support. While democracy remains uncontested among European citizens, their commitment to democratic values appears less anchored, as a wind of disenchantment among voters (Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen 2020).

Facing the current decline of democracy, scholars also interrogate the position of MEPs. As MEPs are designated at the national level, the question here is whether the democratic decline observable within domestic political arenas is mirrored at the European level through their elected officials in the European Parliament. Part of the literature focuses explicitly on populist radical right (PRR) MEPs. Scholars attempt to determine if the transnational ground of the European Parliament allowed closer ideological proximity between these MEPs and if they ultimately had a clear impact on policy outcomes at the European level. Chiru and Wunsch (2023) sought to understand if national cases of democratic backsliding could be reflected at the European level through PRR parties and MEPs. They emphasize a general lack of coherence within the PRR camp, emphasizing that their ideological divergences prevented a formal collaboration. Thus, they conclude that democratic backsliding has not spurred greater formal collaboration among PRR parties within the European Parliament. While Chiru and Wunsch focused on PRR as an ideological grouping in the EP, Wolkenstein (2021) interrogates the role of European party groups in democratic backsliding. Wolkenstein looks explicitly at the legislative behavior of MEPs affiliated with the European People’s Party (EPP) and the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR). As already

emphasized by Kelemen (2017) and Kirchik (2013), the post-2010 period shows general support from the EPP to the Hungarian government in Parliament. The same scenario applies to the ECR, in which the Polish party PiS is the most prominent member. Claiming less European interference in Polish affairs, the ECR has opposed condemning the Polish government (Wolkenstein, 2021). Based on the Polish and Hungarian cases of democratic erosion, Wolkenstein's findings on EPP and ECR's MEPs demonstrate the crucial role of MEPs in supporting or weakening democratic principles at the European level.

In sum, after decades of efforts to promote the expansion and consolidation of democracy, the EU is witnessing a deterioration in the commitment to democratic values on the part of its member states and its citizens themselves. Scholars have thus studied the legislative behavior of ideological groups, European party groups, and ultimately MEPs within the European Parliament to assess their potential implication in democratic backsliding or their commitment to democracy. Beyond their commitment to democracy, the literature has also largely discussed the determinants of MEPs' voting behavior, providing insights into their decisions vis-à-vis counter-disinformation measures. The question now is whether the actual erosion of democratic principles in Europe can be observed at the level of the European Parliament, and whether this is reflected in the shaping of policies against disinformation.

## **II. Members of the European Parliament's voting behavior**

As European integration has progressed, the European Parliament has greatly increased its institutional power and legitimacy, making the voting behavior of its members a crucial object of study. Based on the existing literature, determinants of MEPs' decisions have been the subject of extensive academic contributions. When questioning MEPs' voting behavior, scholars often refer to the principal-agent problem, emphasizing the competing interests and incentives that may influence their decisions. This issue has sparked an academic debate, with scholars examining the complexities of representation and accountability within the European Parliament (Hix, Noury, and Roland, 2007). What is the main determinant of MEPs' voting behavior between their two different 'principals' - namely European party group affiliation and national identity?



European Parliament party groups have been traditionally identified as the main determinant of MEPs' voting behavior (Reichert, 2001; Hix, 2002; Bíró-Nagy, 2016; Cencig and Sabani, 2017; Meyerrose, 2017). Different approaches lead to this affirmation. Following the accession of new member states in the European Union (EU), Meyerrose (2017) distinguishes MEPs from 'less institutionalized domestic party systems' and 'mature domestic party systems'. Her findings demonstrate that the voting behavior of MEPs from the least institutionalized systems is more likely to align with their European party. This loyalty is explained in particular by the fact that members have more access to information relating to the vote through their European party than their national one. Secondly, the rational calculation of career advancement is done more quickly through their European party than their national party, whose party brand value is lower (Meyerrose 2017). Bíró-Nagy (2016) echoes this fragmentation between 'old and new' MEPs by studying the evolution of party cohesion in the European Parliament during the parliamentary terms following the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia in the EU in 2004. Observing two parliamentary cycles, Bíró-Nagy (2016) demonstrates how the EU enlargement had no negative consequences on party cohesion in the Parliament but, on the contrary, has strengthened it. This observation leads to the conclusion that the voting behavior of MEPs resulting from EU enlargement is more influenced by their European party than their national party, thus confirming Meyerrose's theory.

While European party groups have traditionally been recognized as the best predictor of MEPs' voting behavior, the influence of MEP's domestic party has also been recognized in the literature as a relevant determinant. This argument is supported first by the electoral system itself, since national parties nominate their candidate for the EP elections, and these candidates are elected by their national electorate. Candidates are therefore accountable to their domestic political sphere, including parties and voters (Bíró-Nagy, 2016). This position is shared by Hix (2002), who reaffirms the control of national parties on MEPs by the candidate selection process. Once elected, MEPs may maintain this close link to their national parties for various motives. Meyerrose (2017) defends that MEPs from mature or institutionalized party systems perceive their national party as a more powerful brand to advance their political career, thus relegating the European arena as a 'second-order election' (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Domestic parties also represent a significant source of information guiding MEPs' voting decisions (Meyerrose 2017).

From a different perspective, Censig and Sabani (2017) demonstrate that national interests may be reflected in MEPs' voting decisions and ultimately in policies voted in the EP. Their prediction applies explicitly to legislation linked to the fiscal discipline. Depending on country-level economic variables, such as the country's exposition to the economic crisis or its 'pre-existing fiscal position,' MEPs' national identity may play a higher role during the vote of fiscal legislation. In sum, national affiliation cannot be denied as a predictor for MEPs' vote, especially regarding the economic situation of the MEPs' country of origin (Censig and Sabani, 2017). This position echoes the view of Reichert (2001), which posits that, beyond the duality of principals opposing national parties to European party groups, the content of the legislation voted on is also a determining factor behind the vote of the members of parliament. Indeed, Reichert concludes that MEPs will align their voting behavior based on their national interests concerning distributive matters and ideologically align with their party groups on regulatory issues.

In a nutshell, the interaction of these variables against the backdrop of a complex institutional environment reveals the intricacy of elected officials' decision-making within the European Parliament, ultimately impacting legislative outcomes. The traditional and prevailing argument, claiming the influence of European party groups, will contribute to the forthcoming analysis. It contributes to the theoretical expectations that this precise determinant shapes MEPs' voting decisions vis à vis EU counter-disinformation policies, such as the recent Digital Services Act.

### **III. Combatting Disinformation in the European Parliament**

Based on the existing academic contributions, this final part of the literature review seeks to uncover how the fight against disinformation has become a prominent issue on the European agenda and the implications of such a struggle, primarily related to European democratic principles.

The concept of disinformation can be defined as "false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted intentionally to cause public harm or make a profit" (Colomina et al., 2021). While its definition is still largely debated, many scholars insist on distinction from similar concepts, such as fake news or misinformation (Lilkov, 2019). If

disinformation and fake news are often associated, the latter only simplifies the phenomenon, denying its complexity. Misinformation refers to false information that is not purposely propagated. The concept of disinformation differs from these related concepts by emphasizing the deliberate intention to spread misleading information (Tucker et al., 2018; Scheufele & Krause, 2019; Colomina et al., 2021). The evolving media environment has become a fertile ground for the spread of disinformation. The growing level of twisted or false information spread on online platforms created a growing concern at the European level. (Lilkov, 2019). With Russia and China identified as primary disinformation disseminators (Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués, 2022), foreign authoritarian influence in democratic processes through disinformation campaigns can even be referred to as a norm installed over the last decade (Pernik & Sazonov, 2019).

The implications of online disinformation have been largely discussed among the academic community. While the issue initially seemed to be far removed from the EU's usual scope of action (Casero-Ripollès et al., 2023), the consequences of such a phenomenon now require collective action. Scholars mainly justify the EU's action against disinformation because of its negative impact on human rights and democracy. Indeed, freedom of thought, the right to privacy, and the right to democratic participation have been identified in the literature as being threatened and compromised by disinformation (Johns, 2019; Colomina et al., 2021). The 2016 US Presidential elections have notably shed light on the significant impact of foreign interference and disinformation on electoral processes. Indeed, disinformation is seen as responsible for preventing citizens from making informed and enlightened choices as voters, and thus from participating freely in democratic debate (Hinds, 2019). By manipulating public opinion, the integrity of democratic processes is inevitably challenged. More than targeting Western citizens online with fake news, the massive use of disinformation in Europe and beyond has raised major security concerns. From a security approach, disinformation is also perceived as a modern military tool, as part of a recently emerged 'hybrid warfare'. Hybrid threats can be defined as "a mixture of military and civilian warfare by state and non-state actors such as covert military operations, intense propaganda and economic harassment" (Bendiek & Schulze, 2019). While disinformation can influence the outcome of an election in the short term, Russian influence operations also serve long-term objectives, aiming at destabilizing the West by creating social division, in a broader ideological conflict (Bendiek & Schulze, 2019).

The EU has therefore been forced to respond to disinformation and related foreign influence operations for ideological and security reasons. The European fight against disinformation started in 2015, with the creation of the East StratCom task force affiliated with the EU's External Action Service. In 2018, the EU sought to involve online platforms in its Code of Practice on disinformation, as they play a crucial role in the false information propagation chain. Through this initiative, the EU aimed to hold its signatories accountable for the information conveyed on their platforms, using a self-regulatory approach (Thompson, 2020). The code was followed in 2019 by the Action Plan against Disinformation, designed to improve detection, increase coordination, mobilize the private sector, raise awareness, and improve society's resilience. If there is no 'single bullet' to combat disinformation (Thompson, 2020), the EU's response to disinformation has led to many criticisms from scholars. Among other concerns, they denounce not only the inadequate funding of European initiatives but also their uneven implementation across the Member States.

Despite the evident imperative of combating disinformation, notably propagated by the Kremlin, support for counter-disinformation legislation at the EU level has not been uniform. As recalled by VÉriter (2024), this cleavage between EU member states was already visible when Russia invaded Crimea, with a sharp divide between states advocating for tough sanctions, such as Poland, Sweden, and the Baltics, and others willing to maintain a friendlier relationship with the Kremlin, as Southern European countries and Hungary. According to MacFarlane and Menon (2014), EU member states' diverse historical backgrounds, geographical proximity to Russia, and differing economic and security interests, have led to a broad spectrum of positions concerning their relationships with the Kremlin. This fracture among EU member states is equally reflected in their varying degrees of commitment to counter-disinformation policies, since Russia is known as a major disinformation producer. Understanding the sources of this variation is essential to grasping the complexities surrounding adopting policies in this area.

The different levels of exposure are significant indicators in terms of reactivity. A significant body of academic work delves into cross-national variations regarding exposure and resilience to Russian disinformation. Based on this literature, clusters of EU member states may be distinguished, considering historical, cultural, and geopolitical grounds. As part of the former Soviet sphere of influence, VÉriter (2024) focused her research on Baltic countries, particularly on Latvia. Latvia has endorsed a crucial role in EU security governance and is

considered a ‘primer mover’ on EU counter-disinformation policies. This high commitment is primarily due to security concerns, fearing the influence of Russia through its state media on its Russian-speaking population. As a result, Latvia opened the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence in Riga. It found support among influential EU member states to steer the EU agenda in favor of counter-disinformation measures (Vériter, 2024). In light of their historical ties to the Soviet Union, the Visegrad Four (V4) countries have also caught the attention of scholars in this regard. Composed of Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland, the V4 appears particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation (Benkova, 2018). Russian influence appears to have found support among governments and far-right parties in the region, with examples including Fidesz in Hungary, the former ruling party PiS in Poland, and pro-Russian rhetoric from figures like former Czech President Miloš Zeman, despite differing orientations towards the West in these countries (Benkova, 2018). Following theories previously mentioned in this literature review, MEPs from highly exposed countries may be expected to support counter-disinformation policies put to the votes in the EP, influenced by their country’s interests.

Besides security concerns, ideological considerations may be taken into account in the vote for counter-disinformation policies. A large body of literature discusses the issues at stake in European anti-disinformation regulation, particularly the damage caused to fundamental freedoms in Europe. Van Hoboken and Fathaigh (2021) refer to European disinformation regulation as ‘norms (a) formalized through hard and soft law, (b) produced by EU member states and in conjunction with EU bodies and networks that transcend EU nation-states, and (c) bodies (such as police) within multiple EU member states.’ From this conception, they emphasized the conflicting nature of the EU’s fight against disinformation with highly protected principles, such as freedom of expression, rights to privacy, and protection of personal data. They discuss how these European principles may be endangered by the growing need for transparency on the part of platforms, up to sharing personal data. While these tools are crucial to identifying disinformation and fighting it, increasing online activity monitoring may damage pluralism online, which is precisely the promise of social media - to give everyone a voice. These debates echo a persistent dilemma: Is there an effective way to regulate online platforms without resorting to censorship, ultimately altering the freedom of speech or the European vision of democracy? (Tucker et al., 2017; Mazur & Chochia, 2022). Debras (2018) argued that far-right parties would answer negatively to the latter. Indeed, they have long been claiming freedom of expression, in line with their liberal views, as a way to

protect and justify the propagation of controversial and harmful opinions. From a Millian consequentialist approach, the idea of harm is the precise limit to freedom of expression, which thus justifies a regulation to prevent violence and discrimination (Brown, 2008). This perspective is more likely to be defended by left-wing parties, which do not share the liberal and anti-intervention stance of right-wing parties. Therefore, it can be expected that MEPs' position on European regulation of the digital environment would be influenced by their affiliation with European party groups, following their respective position on the political spectrum and their related ideological stances.

In conclusion, disinformation clearly appears as a threat to democratic principles and human rights. Despite significant scholarly attention to the growing challenge of disinformation, there remains a distinct absence of comprehensive contributions investigating consensus or disagreements between MEPs on counter-disinformation policies targeting Russian influence operations. While extensive research has focused on Russia's influence strategies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet sphere of influence, the specific impact of Russian disinformation and interference on the legislative processes within the EU, especially concerning the Digital Services Act (DSA), has been subject to less academic contributions. Therefore, our research will analyze MEPs voting behavior on counter-disinformation policies, mainly based on the DSA debates, in order to understand their diverging stances on the issue of Russian disinformation.

## Hypotheses

The academic literature suggests that party group affiliation directly impacts MEPs' ideological stances, priorities, and ultimately their voting decisions. Given the dominant role of EPG influence in MEPs' voting decisions, this research expects to conclude with an ideological coherence between MEPs within each EPG. On the issue of disinformation, two main European values have been highlighted to defend: freedom of expression and freedom of information. On one side of the political spectrum, right-wing political parties often tend to prioritize freedom of expression and limit state or supranational intervention in line with their liberal position. On the other side, left-wing parties are expected to favor freedom of information and regulation to reduce disinformation's impact.

Based on the existing literature, the following hypotheses may be formulated:

H1: Right-wing European party groups are more likely to defend freedom of expression in their speeches and voting decisions to the European Parliament.

H2: Left-wing European party groups are more likely to defend content regulation in their speeches and voting decisions to the European Parliament.

## Relevance of the Research

The unique context of the rise of populism and the far right in Europe, the war in Ukraine, and the European elections in June 2024 makes disinformation a significant issue of the present time. In the run-up to a new mandate for the European Parliament, the Vice-President for Values and Transparency at the European Commission, Věra Jourová went on a ‘Democracy Tour’ across EU member states to meet with national elected officials and discuss EU strategy to defend European democracies against distorted information and foreign interference. Jourova’s initiative reveals the crucial need to raise awareness among EU member states on new digital challenges and Russian influence operations, which are being targeted and affected. As the European Parliament constitutes a significant player in the decision-making process for joint action against disinformation at the European level, it is relevant and necessary to uncover why MEPs and their EPGs struggle to reach a consensus on counter-disinformation policies. By analyzing speeches and ideological conflicts in the European Parliament on the issue of Russian disinformation, this research could offer insights into potential policy directions following the 2024 European elections.

# Research Design

## Case Selection

Adopted in the Parliament in 2022, the DSA aspires to become the new European ‘gold standard’ in digital policy and a historical landmark for European digital sovereignty. One of the DSA’s goals is to tackle disinformation and foreign interference, which has reached its culmination over the past few years. From the earliest European efforts to fight disinformation, the DSA stands out for its compelling approach, completing a broader toolbox meant to ensure European responsiveness and resilience to disinformation. Therefore, the DSA has been chosen as a relevant EU counter-disinformation legislation to investigate why MEPs, as EU decision-makers, do not speak with a united voice on the issue of disinformation. To do so, this research will use MEPs’ speeches delivered during plenary sessions in the European Parliament. Their analysis will uncover rhetorical strategies and reflect priorities and concerns expressed by different political factions and individual representatives. Supported by the analysis of roll call votes, this research aims to comprehensively understand the political and legislative dynamics that contributed to the DSA’s adoption.

Given that the DSA was first debated in the European Parliament in January 2022, this research will focus on a timeframe starting at that date and ending in April 2024, with the last selected debate. Recent debates were deemed relevant to this analysis since disinformation is still a prominent issue threatening the integrity of European democratic principles and legislative processes, notably in the context of the 2024 European Parliament election. This chosen timeframe is meant to capture the whole scope of discussion related to the DSA within the European Parliament and follow the evolution of discussions up to the European Parliament election.

## Data Collection and Filtering

The research process starts with the collection of data to uncover diverging stances and voting preferences on the DSA. The relevant data was retrieved on the European Parliament website, which allows public access to the transcription of debates taking place during the



plenary sessions. The debate on the 19th of January 2022 was first selected, as it marked the initial discussion among MEPs concerning the DSA. This first transcription has been complemented with the second DSA debate of the 4th of July 2022, preceding the final vote of the legislation in the Parliament. These two distinct debates constituted the first database necessary for this research, to unveil the conflicting views on the DSA among MEPs.

Since the DSA is not only meant to tackle disinformation but covers broader issues related to the digital, some additional debates were selected through the European Parliament's website to provide further data on the topic of Russian disinformation. These complementary debates were purposefully selected in a more recent timeframe, given the upcoming European Parliament elections, the recent allegations of interference in the Parliament by the Kremlin, and the omnipresent anti-EU propaganda spread by Russia in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. These debates may be referenced as 'topical debate', relating to pressing issues and urgent matters discussed in the European Parliament. Since they do not all directly mention the DSA, these transcriptions of debates were accessed and filtered, using the keyword 'disinformation', 'Russian disinformation' or 'Russian interference', within a timeframe from 2022 to 2024.

Once translated into English, these transcriptions were analyzed through a coding process. This system allowed the identification of patterns, recurring themes, priorities, and areas of conflict in the debate. From a primary overview of the speeches emerged several main themes: Objectives of Russian Disinformation, the EU Counter-Disinformation approach, European values through Freedom of Speech, and Russian Interference within the European Parliament

## Methodology

The selected debates previously mentioned constitute a substantial database to which a quantitative research method, critical discourse analysis, can be applied. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) merges critical social analysis with language studies and seeks to highlight the social, ideological, and political dimensions of discourse. As an approach, CDA does not only consider discourse as a pre-existing reality, but perceives it as something that actively shapes our perception of reality (Fairclough, 2013). Using CDA in the forthcoming analysis allows this research to reveal how different EPGs frame and contest issues related to the DSA

and disinformation. CDA will also help to identify underlying ideologies and assumptions, which are critical to understanding how MEPs perceive and respond to Russian disinformation.

The first step of the analysis focused on identifying the stances of various political groups towards the Digital Services Act (DSA). Through this process, the initial objective was to categorize MEPs and their respective EPG into those pleading in favor of the DSA and those expressing their opposition. With only one vote in favor during the final roll call vote for the DSA, the Identity and Democracy (ID) EPG has been recognized as the most hostile to the DSA. Their arguments were often found to be restated by the European Conservative and Reformists (ECR) group - although internally divided on the topic - and by the non-affiliated MEPs. However, MEPs who are not affiliated with any political group within the European Parliament have been deliberately excluded from the analysis since they do not provide any insight into the general opinion of one party group. To discern the EPGs defending the legislation, initial attention was paid to the speeches of its leading figures, such as its rapporteur, Christel Schaldemose, including as well other EU officials that are not part of the European Parliament, such as Thierry Breton, European Commissioner for Internal Market in the European Commission, and Vera Jourova, Vice-President for Values and Transparency in the European Commission. Their positions appear to be widely shared by MEPs affiliated with the Greens, Renew, the Socialists Democrats (S&D), and the European People's Party (EPP), as the most supportive groups of the DSA.

Once MEPs' speeches were categorized either in favor or against regulation, some quotations were extracted from these discourses. Quotations were selected depending on their relevance to the research question, their assertive character, and their representation of the general perspectives of EPGs to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the discursive strategies and underlying ideologies framing the debates<sup>1</sup>. These quotations were specifically referring to the main subtopics identified, i.e. the main themes addressed during the debates. This analysis has been conducted at the micro-level of political discourses, using Van Dijk's framework of analysis (Van Dijk, 1995). This framework provided tools of analysis, allowing the identification of power relations, diverging perspectives and priorities in the European Parliament. The forthcoming analysis aimed to unveil discursive strategies - as metaphors,

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<sup>1</sup> For the transcriptions of selected quotations, please refer to Appendix

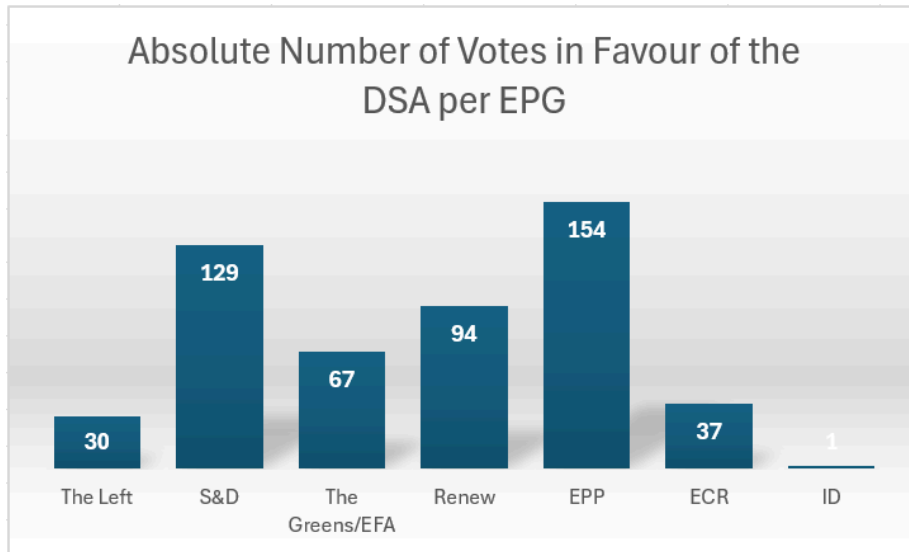
hyperboles, and negative comparisons - as part of a broader rhetoric toolbox. These rhetorical devices frame a discourse representing diverging perspectives and ideological stances among MEPs and their respective EPGs.

In the process of data collection and analysis, it is crucial to mention the translation process. For accessibility concerns, MEPs' speeches, mostly given in their respective native languages, had to be translated into English. The speeches were translated using DeepL and Google Translate, which are online translation platforms. The English translation of these debates, generated by automated translation tools to overcome the language barrier, might have affected certain nuances or linguistic specificities in MEPs' original speeches. The use of translation tools, therefore, constitutes a limitation of this research, as it fails to respect speeches' linguistic integrity.

## Empirical Results

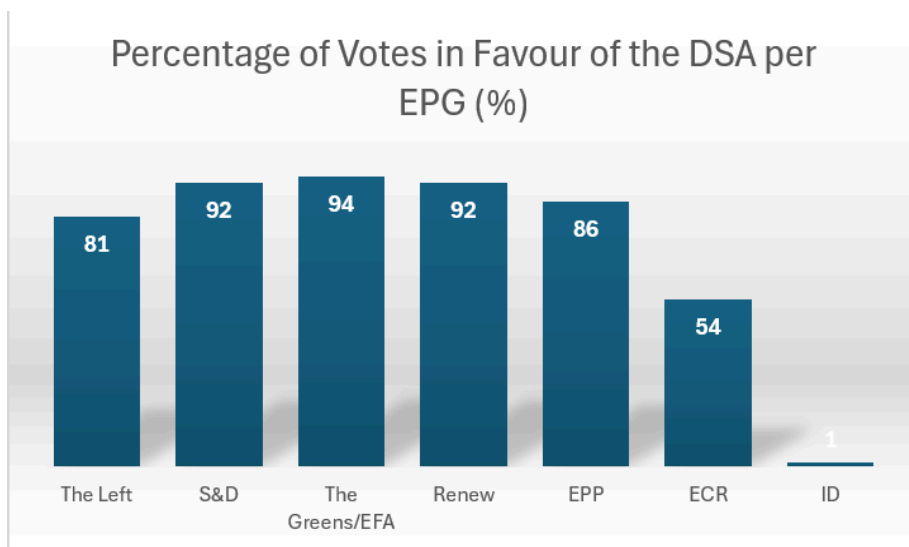
This section will delve into the selected speeches, focusing on relevant extracts, and discuss their interpretation using Critical Discourse Analysis, as a qualitative research method. Focusing on arguments in favor of the DSA, speeches of the DSA leading figures will first contribute to this analysis. The interventions of Christel Schaldemose, Thierry Breton, and Josep Borrell Fontelles will introduce this section by providing a comprehensive understanding of what the DSA is about: its stakes, goals, and challenges. The analysis of MEPs' speeches, expressing their support for the legislation, will also contribute to the empirical results by emphasizing which EPGs stand out for their support for the DSA. Contrasting views will then be pointed out, notably through the interventions of MEPs associated with the ID and ECR groups, as the most reluctant EPGs towards the DSA in the European Parliament. To provide a wider perspective on MEPs' polarization on Russian disinformation, this research will be concluded by the analysis of additional debates, in order to identify a consistency or a discontinuity in MEPs' opinion of digital regulation and Russian disinformation in the sensitive context of EP election.

**Figure 1**



(Source: Author)

**Figure 2**



(Source: Author)

Based on the roll-call vote held in the European Parliament on the 5th of July 2022, graphs have been realized to illustrate the absolute number of votes in favor of the DSA per EPG (Figure 1) and the share of votes in favor of the DSA within each EPG (Figure 2)<sup>2</sup>. The votes from non-affiliated MEPs were not considered for elaborating these graphs, since they do not

<sup>2</sup> The graphs presented in Figures 1 and 2 present a minor error due to the omission of two votes in favour in the data. The expected number of yes votes in the roll call vote was not counted, leading to a discrepancy of two votes when compared to the official data retrieved from the European Parliament website.

provide any insight regarding the ideological coherence of EPGs. Based on Figure 2, a strong coalition in favor of the DSA emerges, bringing together MEPs from the Left, S&D, the Greens, Renew, and EPP. Conversely, ECR deputies seem internally divided in the matter, with 54% of votes in favor. Lastly, only one MEP affiliated with ID, Peter Kofod, voted to support the regulation, which reflects the strong opposition of far-right MEPs.

The high percentage of votes in favor of the DSA, among five different EPGs, could reflect a strong political will to regulate the digital environment in the EU. This broad coalition could be interpreted as a support for further regulations in the future. Minor variations in support between EPGs may suggest diverging priorities or legislative strategies. With the highest rate of yes votes, the Greens' significant support is in line with their plea for accountability, transparency and sustainability. From the S&D group, their support reflects their commitment to enhancing digital rights and consumer protection through digital regulation. Renew MEPs' approach to the market is reflected as well in the high share of votes in favour of the DSA, meant to guarantee the protection of consumers and the fairness of the digital market. The strong commitment of the EPP and the Left reveals that the project of the DSA transcends ideological divides and suggests that its broad appeal across the political spectrum may facilitate its negotiation and implementation. However, the Left demonstrates lower support, reflecting either a more critical approach to the legislation or a strategic positioning to push for a more compelling reform.

## I. EU Leading Figures Promoting the Regulation

In 2020, the European Commission shared a proposal to impose new rules on digital service providers to ensure their accountability for online content. The negotiations started for a landmark legislation, the Digital Services Act. This European initiative emerged in a changing climate, with the EU facing new societal challenges born with digital transformations. This proposal follows one catchphrase: what is illegal offline should also be illegal online. In 2020, national Parliaments' opinions were then interrogated through the Council of the EU for them to give their approval in November 2021. In the following weeks, the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) adopted Christel Schaldemose's report while proposing some amendments to key aspects of the legislation, such as content regulation or targeted advertising. It is only in January 2022 that the DSA

will finally be debated in plenary session for the first time, bringing together elected representatives from across the political spectrum to discuss the burning issue of digital regulation. Then referred back to the IMCO committee on the 20th of January 2022, a second debate in plenary session will occur in the Parliament on the 4th of July 2022, preceding the final vote and the adoption of the DSA. These debates will be considered as relevant data in the analysis of MEPs' diverging stances in the vote of the DSA.

As members of the Parliament or the Commission, the opening speeches given by EU officials appear relevant to exploring the initial goals and motivations behind the DSA proposal. On the 19th of January 2022, Christel Schaldemose opened the plenary session following the President. Besides her position as MEP affiliated with the S&D, Christel Schaldemose played a central role in the legislative process as the rapporteur, contributing significantly to the development and orientation of the adopted version of the DSA. According to its rapporteur, the DSA is a continuation of the e-commerce directive adopted in 2000, a much-needed change in a digital world where online service providers are immune from liability. With the DSA, Schaldemose claims to protect users and consumers by providing a safer environment for a transparent, reliable, and democratic digital economy. Her speech reveals a clear motivation: the idea of European leadership and digital sovereignty. Indeed, she refers to the DSA as a 'gold standard' in tech that transcends the EU and reaches the world. Making a comparison with the General Data Protection Regulation in force in the EU since 2018, she reinforces the idea of the EU as a pioneer in digital regulation. She underlines the need for such regulation by emphasizing the harmful evolution of the digital environment - referred to as the 'digital Wild West' - where illegal content and products flourish without barriers. The DSA intervenes in this, providing a legal framework to safeguard users and consumers online. The digital world has transformed over the last decades, and the EU legislation needs to evolve with it.

During the same debate, Thierry Breton gave a speech in his capacity as European Commissioner for the Internal Market. His speech is particularly relevant to analyse in this section since it provides a brief overview of the DSA's main objectives. The regulation can be summarized in four main ambitions. The DSA would first ensure the removal of illegal content, products, or services online. Its clear rules would expose very large online platforms (VLOPs) to new obligations and potential sanctions, under the authority of the Commission. The DSA is also meant to increase transparency in order to address issues linked in particular

to algorithms, thus tackling the adverse effects of targeted content and advertising. Lastly, the DSA is meant to be applied equally across Europe. Following Christel Schaldemose's intervention, Thierry Breton also emphasized the legislation's revolutionary aspect, marking it as a significant milestone. Echoing the rapporteur's words, he stressed the urgent need for the DSA, remembering the US Capitol attack of January 2021. By recalling this unprecedented event, Breton refers directly to the proliferation of "hate speech, incitement to violence, disinformation and destabilization strategies, spread unchecked on social networks". By doing so, Breton not only fosters a sense of urgency but qualifies the DSA as an imperative, calling for MEPs' support during the vote. Breton's speech ends by emphasizing the EU's proactive approach to regulating the digital space, recalling European leadership as the first continent ready to embark on such regulation.

The concerns addressed by the DSA have been discussed during other debates in the European Parliament. On the 8th of March 2022, MEPs debated foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU, with a particular emphasis on the challenges linked to disinformation. As High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell contributed to the discussions. In his speech to the Parliament, Borrell strongly condemns the "Russia propaganda's machine", which activity drastically increased following the Russian aggression on Ukraine in February 2022. Borrell denounces the weaponization of information by the Kremlin, targeting both Russian and European populations. Mentioning the situation in Ukraine, Borrell states that more than "bombing the houses, the infrastructure, the bodies of the people", Russian forces "bomb their minds, (...) their spirits". His sharp words are meant to reflect how the harmful nature of disinformation, being compared to lethal weapons. Facing such a security threat, Borrell recalls the European initiative designed to tackle foreign disinformation and notably the DSA, under negotiation at that time. Borrell's intervention is all the more impactful since it refers to the impact of disinformation on democracy. "Information is the fuel of democracy." Citizens' voting behavior highly depends on the information they receive. Biased information would undermine their ability to make an informed choice, and therefore undermine the quality and integrity of European democratic processes. Fighting disinformation is a priority to defend European democracy and freedom of information.

## II. A Strong Coalition Advocating for the DSA

As illustrated by Figures 1 and 2, a strong coalition of EPGs manifests echoing support for the regulation, following prominent EU officials' discourses. This coalition mostly comprises MEPs affiliated with the Greens/EFA, Renew, the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and the European People's Party (EPP). The regulation seems to unify MEPs across the political spectrum, as shown by the typical arguments and patterns found in their speeches.

The DSA's primary objective, to "put an end to the digital Wild West," has emerged as a frequently repeated slogan among MEPs expressing their support for the regulation. This repetition may be interpreted as an ideological strategy to represent the MEPs allied in favor of the DSA positively. This expression resonates meaningfully in the Parliament and unveils a major goal of the regulation: to take back power from large platforms and tech giants. Indeed, the business models of online service providers were referred to as a major issue several times, and depicted as harmful to users. For some MEPs, like Clare Daly for the Left, it is a matter of privacy, access to personal data, and, ultimately, surveillance. Kim Van Sparrentak, on behalf of the Greens, denounces the "pervasive tracking for ads online" as a manipulation strategy serving platforms' financial profit at the expense of users' rights and privacy. For others, like Alexandra Geese with the Greens, the risk relates to online content playing on emotions like anger and fear to generate interactions with users and eventually create financial benefits from them. It immediately refers to algorithms, often prioritizing divisive and sensational content, that are mentioned multiple times in MEPs' discourses as 'black boxes'. This metaphor serves a powerful rhetorical function since it stresses the opacity and the complexity of the issue. This discursive strategy thus puts a greater emphasis on the related risks, the need for transparency and accountability, and the end of arbitrariness and impunity.

Beyond targeting online platforms and denouncing their abusive practices, the DSA also aims to address the manipulative content created and spread by hostile external actors involved in information hybrid. Indeed, the DSA is designed as well as a counter-disinformation tool, taking action against online propaganda and foreign interference. The topic of the weaponization of information is a key argument employed by MEPs supporting the legislation. To illustrate the stakes and support their argument, Breton, Van Sparrentak, and



Geese all recalled the assault on the Capitol in Washington, D.C., one year earlier. As the result of massive disinformation campaigns around the US presidential elections of 2020, this event demonstrates to the audience the power of disinformation and how it can directly affect a democratic symbol as the Capitol. Tomislav Sokol, on behalf of the EPP, goes further and refers to the distribution of disinformation as a “weapon”, which “endangers people’s lives and health”, to justify the need for a new legal framework. This term will be used again by his EPP colleague Krzysztof Hetman, who insists on the importance of resistance and resilience to fake news and manipulation. Borrowing the same lexical field, Alex Agius Saliba on behalf of the S&D refers to a “disinformation war” for the same purpose. By using such powerful words, MEPs seek to provoke a striking effect and reflect the harmful nature of disinformation. Weaponized, disinformation became an inherent part of hybrid warfare and non-military operations, used by foreign powers like Russia aiming to weaken the West and its democratic model.

To promote the DSA in the European Parliament, the theme of “responsibility” is found to be recurrent in MEPs’ discourses. In the debate of the 19th of January 2022, the word “responsibility” was used twelve times in the speeches of MEPs from supportive EPGs, and its adjective, “responsible”, was used four times. However, MEPs’ speeches appear to offer different perspectives. MEPs like Dita Charanzová for Renew or Tom Vandenkendelaere from the EPP claim the argument of accountability, pleading for online platforms to be held responsible for the content shared online and their externalities. Others seek to invoke a sentiment of responsibility among their parliamentary colleagues. Responsibility should not be imputed to tech giants only but to the lawmakers themselves. This position is clearly expressed through Kim Van Sparrentak’s speech: “(...) we often hear that platforms need to take responsibility. But the internet shouldn’t be in the hands of a few companies that profit from the large spread of hate and disinformation. It’s up to us as politicians to take responsibility”. This argument is echoed in other discourses, from Sandro Gozi on behalf of Renew or Arba Kokalari from the EPP group. These speeches employ a common rhetorical device with the repeated use of the pronouns ‘our’ and ‘we’, meant to reinforce the sense of responsibility among EU elected officials. ‘Responsibility’ has also been linked to ‘vulnerability’, since the DSA promoters advocate protective regulation for populations at risk, such as minors.

### III. The Digital Services Act, an Attack on European Values?

To fulfill the objectives of Critical Discourse Analysis in identifying power dynamics, it is essential to this research to consider the discourses of the opposition. These speeches opposing the legislation are expressed to a large extent by MEPs affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists and the Identity and Democracy groups, as supported by the roll call vote illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. Since the DSA is promoted by prominent EU officials and has finally been adopted, these speeches may be attributed to the 'dominated group'. Their position on the DSA can be qualified as ultra-libertarian, as they defend free speech, are strongly opposed to content moderation, and demand less EU intervention. They preach an approach that guarantees pluralism, insisting on the founding values of the EU. The ECR deputies Jessica Stegrud and Adam Bielan reaffirm the firm stance on these issues from their EPG. Emphasizing the importance of freedom and openness on the Internet, they align with their EPG's liberal position. Their rhetorical choices suggest their opposition to any form of control restricting users' activity or public discourse online. Beyond criticizing the regulation put to the vote, their interventions are meant to promote an 'ideal Internet', which they oppose to the objectives of the DSA. They wish for an "open arena for thoughts, ideas, and exchanges of opinion" and support a digital space where "users can move around freely", which indicates a stance against regulatory measures that could be seen as limiting these freedoms, such as content moderation under the DSA.

Other concrete arguments can be found in MEPs' speeches to justify their opposition. Part of the DSA's opponents are structuring their speeches around a common narrative portraying online platforms as powerful players, abusing their control over information online. The concern about the concentration of power in the hands of tech giants has been expressed in both groups, supporters and detractors of the DSA. However, while MEPs pleading in favor of the DSA were advocating for transparency and accountability, ECR and ID MEPs mostly denounced a threat to free speech caused by online platforms themselves. Joachim Stanisław Brudziński, Beata Mazurek and Patryk Jaki, all Polish MEPs affiliated with the ECR, specifically highlighted the blocking of a social media page belonging to a Polish political party, as an abuse from online platforms restricting their freedom. By recalling this event, these MEPs are not only placing themselves in the position of victims condemning the abuse

of power and an attack on their freedom of expression, but are also implying that the position of online platforms such as social networks is not politically neutral. These arguments condemning the arbitrariness of online platforms' content removal are widely shared among MEPs from far-right EPGs. Geert Bourgeois, on behalf of ECR, states that "it is unacceptable that a few powerful private players are allowed to censor social debate on their own, that blind algorithms can silence citizens." Bourgeois attempts to justify his indignation and call to action, using hyperbole to amplify the severity of the situation. Isabella Tovaglieri from ID condemns as well the arbitrariness of content regulation. She seeks to alert her audience by claiming that platforms alone will be able to decide what is harmful, illegal, or not.

Some narratives targeting the EU itself are found to be largely employed by the opposition. Through their discourses, MEPs frame the EU as abusing excessive power and denying pluralism. Isabella Tovaglieri, on behalf of ID, resent the "excessive discretionary powers to the European Commission". Her ID colleague Alessandra Basso equally criticizes the "almost unlimited power" conferred to the EU, alluding to the possibility of the Commission declaring a state of emergency and imposing measures or sanctions on online platforms to regulate online content. These considerations lead to the central argument of the opposition, affirming that the EU is not only denying political pluralism but resorting to censorship. This is the central argument of Romain Haider, affiliated with ID. Haider's speech claims that censorship becomes a systematic tool aiming at suppressing diverging views, 'branded as hate speech or misinformation'. These narratives centered around censorship are all the more reinforced by the use of a rhetorical strategy employing negative comparisons to authoritarian regimes. Jorge Buxadé Villalba (ECR) draws a parallel between 'a Europe of freedoms' and 'a Soviet Pravda'. By using this vibrant picture of oppression, the conservative depute seeks to demonstrate a perceived erosion of freedom and democracy in Europe. Ivan David from ID recalls the Velvet Revolution, a turning point in history when Czechoslovakia transitioned from communist to democratic regime. Using this imagery, David plays with irony and contrasts the Parliament's past position as "harshly critical of totalitarian regimes" with the current debate that is "pushing for the introduction of censorship."

## IV. Bridging Digital Regulatory Debates: From the DSA to the Kalniete Report and Beyond

The fight against Russian information interference is entirely in the scope of the DSA, since the regulation aims at protecting the integrity and security of the European digital space. Additional debates held in the European Parliament have been selected to analyze MEPs' polarization on the issue of Russian disinformation. From these complementary debates, held in 2022 and 2024, this analysis seeks to find a continuity or a discontinuity based on MEPs' arguments formulated during the DSA's debates.

### The Kalniete Report

While the DSA was progressively going through the legislative process, the Latvian MEP Sandra Kalniete addressed in a report the issue of disinformation and foreign interference in the EU's information environment. The 'Kalniete Report' was subject to a debate titled 'Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU', held in the Parliament in March 2022 a few days after the Russian aggression of Ukraine. This debate concluded with a vote, which resulted in a significant majority of 552 votes in favor, 81 against, and 60 abstentions. Based on the results of this roll call vote, it can be assumed that the polarization observed among MEPs regarding Russian disinformation and the European approach to tackling it will be similar to the one observed during the DSA's debates.

Sandra Kalniete led the discussion by focusing on "the Kremlin's propaganda machinery". Its supporters in the Parliament were notably recalling the harmful nature of Russian interference, highlighting its aims and strategies. As claimed by Christel Schaldemose (S&D), "disinformation is a direct threat to our free and democratic world", evolving more and more in a security matter, as part of a broader hybrid warfare. Playing on emotions and divisive topics, disinformation attempts to disrupt society, weaken trust in institutions, and ultimately undermine Western democracies. Through their discourse, a majority of MEPs support Kalniete's position by emphasizing the emergency of the situation and justifying a common action. The context of conflict has been mentioned several times throughout the debate, as imposing itself on the EU as an injunction to act. Indeed, Vera Jourova emphasized the intensification of Russian disinformation since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014.

Javier Zarzalejos (EPP) shared in his speech how the 2022 Russian aggression of Ukraine served as a “wake-up call”, followed by Andreas Schieder (S&D) whose discourse reflected the recent realization of the threat that poses disinformation: “disinformation (...) is in fact, much bigger and more serious than we ever dared to believe.” Nathalie Loiseau further emphasized the danger of escalation, asserting that 'hybrid warfare leads to war at all,' citing Ukraine as a compelling example and echoing the DSA argument of weaponization of information. These discussions draw other striking parallels to debates surrounding the DSA and the Kalniete Report. Sandra Kalniete pleads for a proactive approach of online platforms in the combat against disinformation, by stopping the spread of manipulated content online. Using ethical appeal, she reinforces her argument by stating: “Any tech platform complying with Putin’s censorship request is an accomplice to Putin’s aggression.” This striking statement reveals the moral imperative for online platforms to act responsibly, echoing the broader consensus among MEPs on the emergency of tackling disinformation. Again, the issues of accountability, responsibility, and transparency played a central role in the debate, which was judged necessary for a safer digital environment and to protect democratic values. Besides regulating the digital space, raising awareness among EU citizens took a central part in this debate. MEPs emphasized the need to educate EU citizens on identifying disinformation, in order to increase general resistance. A whole-society approach was deemed crucial for the EU’s societal resilience against foreign interference. However, what distinguishes this debate from the previous ones observed is the fervor with which the MEPs accuse Russian corruption within the Parliament and the capture of the elites. The closeness of some MEPs to Russia seems to act as an admission of complicity, acting as a vector to promote Kremlin thinking in the European information environment.

Facing such arguments, common patterns of opposition can be identified. First, far-right MEPs affiliated with ID and ECR are again mostly constituting the opposition in this debate, as they did for the DSA. Then, focusing on their arguments, the disregard for freedom of expression is denounced numerous times. Referring to Orwell’s dystopia *1984*, the ID deputy Nicolaus Fest claims that “a Ministry of Truth is certainly not the solution”. Ladislav Ilčić (ECR) adds that the report undermines “the very foundations of democracy - the freedom of speech and expression.” It is relevant to note here that MEPs forming the opposition do acknowledge in their speeches the existence of Russian disinformation. The French ID deputy Gilles Lebreton declared: “Foreign disinformation, particularly from Russia and China, is a reality.” Clare Daly from the Left also takes a highly critical view, affirming that

all powerful states make use of propaganda and disinformation, characterizing the Kalniete Report as a “child’s version of political reality”. This last statement can be interpreted as a strategy to discredit Kalniete’s initiative, trivializing the issue by denying the threat and diverting attention.

## Russian Disinformation Targeting 2024 EP Elections

Russian disinformation greatly intensified ahead of the 2024 EP elections. Aware of the stakes and the danger, the Parliament largely debated the issue in the months preceding the election. On the 7th of February of 2024 was held the debate titled ‘The fight against hate speech and disinformation: responsibility of social platforms within the Digital Services Act’. A debate titled ‘New allegations of Russian interference in the European Parliament, in the upcoming EU elections and the impact on the Union’ took place later that year on the 10th of April 2024 during a plenary session. Common thematics identified earlier can be found in the analysis of these discussions.

The attack on freedom of expression remains a central argument evoked by the opposition. To this objection, Sandro Gozi declared on behalf of Renew: “Freedom of speech is not the same as the right to have false, violent or manipulated content go viral. Freedom of speech is not freedom of reach.” From an ideological stance, this statement captures the balance between personal liberty and social responsibility. The use of contrast in Gozi’s discourse aims at distinguish freedom of speech from freedom of amplifying distorted and harmful information. Gozi concludes his intervention by stating that DSA represents a first test for the DSA, recently implemented.

The legislative context plays a central role in these recent debates. 2024 marks a super-election year, as half of the population worldwide is called to vote. It is notably the case of European citizens, meant to choose a new composition of Eurodeputies for the European Parliament in June 2024. Since some member states have deplored destabilization through information manipulation during their domestic elections, the issue of disinformation is all the more problematic at the European level. Several MEPs shared their concerns on this subject and emphasized the crucial need to protect the integrity of democratic electoral processes from foreign interference, by countering hate speech and disinformation. Iratxe García Pérez, on behalf of S&D, expresses this emergency and denounces the multiplication

of Putin's 'espionage, disinformation and propaganda activities', two months before a decisive election for the future of the common European project.

More than mentioning Russian interference affairs like the election of Donald Trump in 2016, MEPs like Valérie Hayer and Nathalie Loiseau for Renew are all the more outraged by recent scandals of Russian corruption of MEPs revealed by Czech and German services. "We had noticed that on the far right of this Chamber, people were unashamedly acting as spokespeople for Vladimir Putin. (...) But that European elected representatives should have accepted money from a regime that is hostile to us is something else entirely, and we are astonished.", declared Nathalie Loiseau. Calling on ethical appeals, her speech seeks to marginalize her opponents and draw a binary opposition between 'internal enemies' and deputies of integrity. She dissociates MEPs targeted by allegations of corruption from MEPs respecting their commitment to democracy. Her argument will be reinforced by other MEPs, directly accusing far-right MEPs of complicity with the Kremlin. These accusations will be largely echoed, notably by Sergey Lagodinsky for the Greens and the socialists Raphaël Glucksmann and Héléne Fritzon. Jaak Madison on behalf of ID, answers these accusations by blaming their opponents, such as the Socialists. Using Eurosceptic and populist rhetoric, Madison recalls the figures of Schröder and Merkel, as an illustration of Russian influence in the EU. It is relevant to note here that Madison was the only ID deputy to intervene during the debate of April 2024 on Russian corruption, while most of the accusations expressed during this plenary session target MEPs affiliated with ID.

While the above-mentioned speeches are in line with the respective ideologies of the parties in favor and against the regulation of digital services, some of the speeches made during these recent debates show that ideological lines are often crossed, as illustrated by the 'dissident' speeches made by MEPs who do not echo the majority discourse of their European party. In the debate of February 2024, Adam Bielan is the only MEP affiliated with ECR to be in favor of 'clear and consistent standards for moderating speech'. While he still defends freedom of expression, his ECR colleagues all claim censorship, using negative comparisons. Jorge Buxadé Villalba on the contrary, follows his party's guiding line and denounces 'the worst dictatorships of thought', calling out a mainstream ideology that silences others.

# Discussion and Conclusion

During its last term of office, the European Parliament was the scene of numerous debates on the new challenges posed by digital technology, particularly online platforms. Since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, the multiplication of Russian influence operations targeting the EU has added a new degree of complexity to EP debates, creating more cleavages among EPGs and their MEPs. This research attempted to demonstrate how Russian disinformation has polarized the European Parliament through the qualitative analysis of MEPs' speeches during debates on the DSA and, more recently, on the issue of Russian interference.

Disinformation has been the subject of extensive debates, particularly during the negotiations for the DSA, notably because of its evident impact on the democratic principles defended by the EU and the integrity of democratic processes through the manipulation of public opinion. Widely decried within the Member States and beyond, Russian disinformation is becoming a transnational security issue on a European scale, denounced as a tool of interference. This analysis demonstrates that the challenge of disinformation has motivated broader debates on regulating the digital environment in order to protect European values and improve European resilience to foreign influence operations.

A major finding of this research directly refers to the formation of coalitions on the topic of Russian disinformation within the European Parliament. On one side, most MEPs plead for solid measures to tackle disinformation and protect democratic processes. They argue for a more compelling regulation of online platforms and call for collective action. These MEPs face a more minor but defensive opposition, denouncing an attack on freedom of expression and an abuse of power from European institutions. While a simplified view of the power relations at stake could lead this analysis only to consider a left/right divide to distinguish EPGs in favor or against, many factors add another dimension of complexity, undermining this theory. More than a bipolar division opposing left-wing to right-wing EPGs, the analyzed debates witnessed the emergence of an ideological division at the core of the investigated polarization. This divide can be explained by diverging interests and perspectives between EPGs on crucial issues such as freedom of speech, freedom of information, EU intervention, and, ultimately, the balance between civil liberties and security. These diverging ideological



views are all the more demonstrated in parliamentary debates on the regulation of the digital environment, against a backdrop of geopolitical tensions and information warfare. While this analysis focused on EPGs' ideologies, further research may be conducted on MEPs' country of origin as the determinant factor in their voting decision on Russian disinformation.

The use of Critical Discourse Analysis uncovered the use of several discursive strategies in MEPs' speeches. These rhetorical devices were used to rally support among MEPs, and reflected EPGs' priorities and ideological stances. The choice of specific words, comparisons and imagery only covered the values of EPGs and thus framed the debates in the European Parliament. The observed polarization among MEPs on the issue of Russian disinformation questions the European unity and the EU's ability to effectively tackle disinformation and interference within its borders.

The analyses of the DSA roll-call vote and MEPs' speeches in the European Parliament strongly support H1, since empirical results showed constant support for freedom of speech by MEPs affiliated with ID and ECR as a significant argument to justify their disagreement with the European initiative to regulate online environment notably against disinformation and interference. It can also be concluded that these results support H2 by emphasizing the commitment of left-wing parties against disinformation and interference, pleading thus for the right of EU citizens to make informed choices. However, the results also suggest a more nuanced reality, notably with dissident voices undermining the ideological cohesion of EPGs, but also with the support of centrists to right-center EPGs like Renew and EPP. Indeed, the vast support for digital regulation and the EU's efforts to tackle foreign interference transcended the left-right traditional divide of the political sphere and unified a large majority of MEPs across the political spectrum.

In conclusion, the polarization of European party groups within the European Parliament facing Russian disinformation only reflects the complexities of navigating the digital age within a diverse and politically charged context. This research attempted to capture the challenges related to disinformation in contemporary politics by examining rhetorical strategies, diverging ideological stances, and policy implications. In the long term, further research will be needed to examine DSA's implementation and effectiveness. Additionally, further investigation is required in light of recent media revelations about Russian corruption within the European Parliament, which could thus undermine the integrity of MEPs' speeches on the topic of Russian influence operations.

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# Appendix

## **Transcripts of speeches referenced in the Empirical Results**

### **Debate on the Digital Services Act - 19/01/2022**

Christel Schaldemose, rapporteur.

Mr President, Mr President. Now we are taking back control from the tech giants and bringing our digital EU legislation into the 21st century. We are building on the e-commerce directive that we adopted in 2000. Back then, the world looked very different. Facebook didn't exist, Mark Zuckerberg hadn't even had the idea, and Steve Jobs and Apple had yet to launch the iPod, let alone think about the iPhone. Amazon was still a loss-making business and the EU's trade with China was significantly smaller than today. So it's time for a fundamental update of our digital legislation.

The DSA could become the new gold standard for tech, not just in Europe, but worldwide. Big tech nations like the US and China are watching closely to see what we agree on next. Just like they did when we did GDPR. With the DSA, we're taking a fundamental stand against the Wild West that digital has evolved into. For too long, illegal products and content have proliferated online. Algorithms have promoted division and recommendation systems have destroyed young people's self-esteem. Digital has simultaneously shortened the distance between us, but dug the ditches deeper. You can write to people from all over the world, but judging by the debate on social media, it's all too easy to forget that you're writing to a human being. You can buy products from all corners of the world, but you can no longer be sure that the product you buy actually fulfils the rules we have in Europe. And as easy as it is to click the item into the virtual basket, it can be just as difficult to get hold of the seller if you experience problems. That's why we need strong new legislation. Legislation that ensures that what is illegal offline will also be illegal online in the future. We are now voting on this legislation today in the European Parliament.

The DSA contains many important and much-needed positive measures. I would like to emphasise that we are improving consumer safety, that we are putting a stop to endless data harvesting and that we are opening the black box of algorithms. Specifically, we are improving consumer safety in three areas: Firstly, we propose that consumers and citizens should be able to contact the intermediary service through a single point of contact. This will give social media users better opportunities to get in touch with the services if, for example, their content is removed illegally or if their account is blocked. At the same time, it will also allow consumers who have unknowingly purchased an illegal or dangerous product online to get in touch directly with the online marketplace and not just with some chat function. Secondly, we demand that online marketplaces do more to protect consumers from illegal products. They must quickly and efficiently remove the illegal products and contact the users who have managed to buy these illegal products before they were taken down. And thirdly, we are introducing a right to seek compensation directly from the platforms for both consumers and businesses if it is that the platforms do not live up to the rules we set in the DSA. This is a significant improvement for both consumers and the businesses that live off the platforms and use the platforms.

We are also curbing the platforms' use of our data with a number of new rules. No more targeted advertising to minors. Minors' data should not be harvested and used for commercial purposes. We are putting a stop to that in this Parliament. At the same time, it should be easier to withdraw your consent if you have given it for targeted advertising. In other words, it shouldn't be harder to say no than it is to say yes to them. And finally, we want to ban "dark patterns". No more designing a dialogue box so that people's choices are determined and influenced in a certain direction. All of this helps give us users more control over our own data.

Then we also open the black box of algorithms and let both the European Commission and the Digital Services Coordinator look at the reports on the impact of algorithms. In the future, social media will have to assess the impact of the changes they make to their algorithms. For example, does an algorithm promote eating disorders and self-harm? If it does, the platform needs to recognise this and correct the problem. The biggest platforms can no longer hide behind a veil of ignorance. They are now forced to face the consequences of their algorithms. This is really important. We are taking back control from the tech giants. With the European Parliament's proposal for a new gold standard for tech, we are sending a very, very strong signal to the Council. We insist on legislation with two main objectives: to protect users and consumers and to ensure that the digital economy can grow within a democratic, transparent and trustworthy framework.

I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved with this agreement in the European Parliament. Therefore, there are many people who deserve a big thank you. Firstly, I would like to say a big thank you to the shadow rapporteurs for the cooperation we have had in IMCO, also to the associated committees and to the coordinator colleagues. I would also like to thank all my colleagues in my own group and other colleagues here in Parliament who have contributed to proposals and discussions, because this is such an important area. It is good that you have been involved. I would also very much like to say a big thank you to the staff in the IMCO secretariat and in the S&D Group. Without their work, we would not have got this far. I would also like to thank the two Commissioners, Mrs Vestager and Mr Breton, for their incredibly good cooperation. Finally, I would also like to thank the Presidency, both the Portuguese, Slovenian and, for the time being, the French Presidency. We have had good cooperation so far and I am sure that it will be really good when we start the triologue negotiations shortly. I hope that we can do it relatively quickly. European citizens deserve that we quickly finalise this legislation so that we can have a safer and more secure internet. We all need that. Thank you very much!

Thierry Breton, Member of the Commission.

Mr President, Members of Parliament, I would like to say how delighted I am to be here before you today, before all of you, to debate a proposal that is very close to my heart, as it is to all of us, and which, as you know, has occupied me since the first day I took office as European Commissioner: obviously, this famous Digital Services Act.

Holding this debate in plenary, barely a year to the day after our 2020 proposal, clearly shows the absolutely extraordinary work that each and every one of you has put in. I'd like to start by expressing my deepest gratitude to you, and above all to Christel Schaldemose, who has done an absolutely outstanding job in getting us all here today to hold this debate.

With today's plenary session, and the vote that is about to take place, we are taking what I think can only be described as a historic step, and one that we all hope will put an end to what has come to be known as the Wild West that has dominated our information space.

Just a year ago, as everyone here remembers, we were struck by the images of demonstrators storming the American Congress on Capitol Hill, marking, I believe, a before and after in the role of digital platforms on our democracy, on our democracies. What we experienced was undoubtedly the culmination of years of unchecked hate speech, incitement to violence, disinformation and destabilisation strategies, spread unchecked on social networks and from which these networks have, it must be admitted, largely profited. It became clear to everyone that the absence of rules and controls, and in particular of democratic control, over the decisions of a handful of major platforms that have now become systemic public spaces, was no longer tolerable.

A few weeks before these incidents, the Commission had just presented the DSA and the DMA which, in response to the high expectations of our fellow citizens, proposed a complete reorganisation of our information space. Our fellow citizens expect Europe to send a strong message to the major platforms that are exerting a growing influence on our lives and our democracies.

We also had the opportunity to hear, for example, the testimony of Ms Frances Haugen, the digital giant whistleblower, whom I had the opportunity to meet personally with the rapporteur of the DSA, with Christel, and this was highlighted during these meetings which confirm that there is not only an urgent need to legislate, but also an imperative, and I repeat here, before all of you, not to lower our ambitions.

With the DSA, we have created an innovative system that I would like to summarise in four main points. Firstly, we are proposing clear rules, finally, for the removal of anything that is illegal online, whether it be products, services or content, with a simple principle, which has been reiterated: anything that is banned offline must be banned online.

We are also imposing new obligations on very large platforms, based on risk, to prevent abuse, as was done with the prudential rules for banks. Moreover, for these systemic platforms, the Commission will have very significant supervisory and sanctioning powers: fines of up to 6% of annual turnover, and even temporary exclusion from the internal market in the event of serious and repeated breaches.

The third point is that we are also opening up the black box of algorithms, by requiring platforms to take transparency measures so that we can finally understand the reasons why a particular citizen - we have all been subjected to it, often the victim - is targeted by certain content or advertising.

Finally, we are ensuring that all these rules are applied uniformly across Europe, throughout the European Union. And of course, these rules will apply to all players, whether European or not.

In just over a year, we have made remarkable progress with the European Parliament and the Council. I am convinced that we will be able to adopt these proposals together under the French Presidency - as the President of the French Republic pointed out a few moments ago in this Chamber - by the end of June.

The work of the European Parliament's Internal Market Committee shows that we share the same level of ambition and the same sense of urgency. Together, of course, we will remain extremely



vigilant, and I welcome the fact that, in this institution too, the increased lobbying efforts we witnessed were in vain. We will not allow corporate interests to interfere with the general interests of the people of Europe.

Europe is the first continent in the world to embark on a comprehensive reform of our digital space. With the DSA and the DMA, we are on the verge of reorganising our digital space within our large internal market, both for the societal aspects and for the economic aspects. A new framework that may well become a benchmark for democracies the world over. Today's debate is therefore extremely important for all of us, in Europe and beyond, and we are going to listen to it extremely carefully.

Clare Daly (The Left).

Mr President, I think the promise of the young internet wasn't just that it would connect us all together, but rather that it would enhance our access to knowledge, liberate information from monopolies, democratise our societies and move power from the centre into communities and the periphery. And I think the fact that we have this legislation is really signalling our recognition that we're very far removed from those Utopian ideals.

Because rather than decentralising, we've seen the growth of massive internet monopolies who amass unimaginable wealth by abusing their positions. Rather than empowering individuals and communities, we now live in a dystopian regime of state and corporate mass surveillance. And instead of fostering a healthy public sphere, our online activity takes place in privately owned spaces where users are manipulated by abusive search and advertising algorithms, and research and public discourse is distorted and polarised.

Now the Digital Services Act is a start in addressing these problems, but it's a really inadequate start. Real opportunities have been squandered here. A ban on targeted advertising is of paramount importance, and I encourage people to support the amendment in that regard. The privatisation of censorship is a mistake that our societies will be paying for well into the future.

We should be forcing the platforms to be interoperable to give power back to internet users, and the language on mandatory identification falls well short of what is necessary to respect the rights and online safety of sex workers.

So it's all very well in us trying to regulate some of the huge harms being generated by digital capitalism, but we've got to look at the root of the problem, which is a profit-at-all-costs business model, driven by the accumulation and trade in our personal data to sell products. Unless we address that, the problems will continue.

Kim Van Sparrentak (Verts/ALE).

Mr President, the storming of the Capitol after the widespread misinformation about elections, a surge in radicalisation and extremism driven by conspiracies, and a stark rise in threats against journalists and politicians in the Netherlands – even at night at their homes: while we watch the disastrous effects of the spread of hate and misinformation online slowly unfold and seep into real life, we often hear that platforms need to take responsibility. But the internet shouldn't be in the hands of a few

companies that profit from the large spread of hate and disinformation. It's up to us as politicians to take responsibility. And after 20 years without updates, we now have the chance to fundamentally change the rules on the internet.

Let's take back control from big tech and put it firmly back into the hands of the people. We need to break big tech's power over our information before it erodes our democracy. But for some colleagues, it seems a step too far to make the necessary fundamental changes. Yes, as the text stands there will be good improvements for users, and I'm happy to see that our proposals have been taken on board for strong notice and action procedures and a ban on manipulating people's choices online with dark patterns.

But a few months ago, when Frances Haugen was here, every Group in this house tried to have the loudest voice on how we would rein in big tech, and look at where we are now. The deal that was struck in the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) was warmly welcomed by the big tech lobby, and there's a strong call from them to not vote for any amendments. And to my colleagues in the EPP, S&D and Renew groups who want to hold on to this IMCO deal: profiting financially from the spread of hate and disinformation must stop.

Three simple solutions can change this fundamentally and protect our democracy. First of all, turn polarising, personalised algorithms based on clicks and interaction off by default. Secondly, ban pervasive tracking for ads online to stop these manipulative business models. And if we as Europe are serious about taking on big tech, let's look at the need for a European platform supervisor, because strong rules are nothing without enforcement.

These are proposals you can vote on today, and I call on you all to do so, because our democracy is too important to leave in the hands of large tech companies.

Alexandra Geese, on behalf of the Verts/ALE Group.

Mr President, the internet used to be a wonderful place: a place for sharing knowledge, discovering the world, meeting new people; a marketplace and a public square where everybody with a connection could take part in the conversation. What a marvellous invention.

Today, we're looking at the shambles of that marvellous world: the Rohingya genocide promoted on Facebook, teenage girls driven to anorexia by Instagram. The storm on Capitol Hill was the wake-up call. How will our democracy survive with social media spreading hate and lies?

Tomorrow we will be taking a very important step toward saving our democracy and free internet, because censorship can never be the solution in a free country. Neither governments nor platforms have the right to censor legal speech. And I would like to say to my colleague from the free right: this is exactly what the Digital Services Act is not doing. What the European Union is achieving with the DSA is to hold platforms accountable for what they do and not for what their users think.

So what do the platforms do? They collect data – their users' data or the citizens' data, because you don't even need to have a Google or Facebook account to be spied on. And then platforms use that data to build very comprehensive profiles of every one of us, which they use for two things: sell us ads and keep us on the platforms as long as possible, recommending us content that will make us interact as long as possible, to which we are vulnerable.

Unfortunately, psychological research shows that what makes us interact and stay on platforms are two emotions: anger and fear. And this is why content that arouses anger and fear goes viral in the internet: it increases platforms' profits. That's why the recommender systems disseminate hateful speech and disinformation at far higher speed than anything else. And it is not true that the internet is a perfect mirror of the real world. It's a completely distorted mirror, and the content is being distorted to increase platforms' profits.

So how does the DSA increase these challenges? It starts with very basic things. Orders by national authorities need to be respected. Users have clear rights. Complaint mechanisms, independent dispute settlement will be in place.

What do we do to protect citizens? We take a few steps, but we don't go far enough. We will ban surveillance advertising for our children, for minors, but not for adults. We should have and could have done more.

This week, Silicon Valley representative Anna Eshoo and others introduced a bill in the US House of Representatives to ban surveillance advertising. This is what we should have done. What we did do, and I'm very proud of this: we opened the black box that very large online platforms today represent, with risk assessments where platforms have to look into the risk their business model and their algorithms themselves present for human dignity, for example, with independent audits and with, above all, access to the data for independent research, for independent and NGOs to study and assess compliance.

This way we will finally be able to shed light on the platforms' practices, collect evidence and tell the stories of how targeting and engagement-based ranking tampers with democracies, and we will be able to build a better and freer internet.

The DSA is a first step, but it is the fundamental law for the digital world, and I am extremely proud that Europe is the first democratic continent to take this important step. It will shine. Its light will shine.

Tomislav Sokol (EPP)

Dear President, Commissioner, colleagues, the sale of dangerous products such as untested medicines, counterfeit products, but also the spread of illegal content such as that which violates intellectual property rights, terrorist content or illegal hate speech is a reality that we face every day on Internet.

Despite this, online sales have been continuously increasing in recent years, and in 2020, at the height of the pandemic, 71% of consumers shopped online. At the same time, it is estimated that 7% of European imports are counterfeit goods. In such circumstances, we must increase the level of consumer safety by establishing clear rules on the removal of illegal content from online platforms. The Digital Services Act will ensure a high level of protection for all European consumers, the highest in the world, and prevent the arbitrariness of large multinational companies. Consumers often complain to me that when they buy through intermediaries such as Ebay or Amazon, they do not know exactly who they are buying the product from. With this legislation, we oblige intermediaries to thoroughly check merchants before offering their products and services.

Furthermore, in addition to raising the level of consumer protection, we want to enable entrepreneurs to find new clients via the Internet, but not at the expense of the safety of minors. That is why we have banned targeted advertising towards this category of consumers. Finally, I would like to point out that the distribution of disinformation, especially about vaccination, has unfortunately become a weapon in the hands of the irresponsible and malicious. The spread of fake news endangers people's lives and health, and with this act we create a legal mechanism to combat such behavior.

On the other hand, the possibility of content censorship must not be left in any way, and in this sense this act represents the correct balance. In the era of ubiquitous digitization, it is the right time to make what is illegal outside the Internet illegal on it with new rules on digital services.

Dita Charanzová (Renew)

Mr President, the internet is a mirror; a mirror of the best and worst of our society. It mirrors the realities of our offline world. If the real offline world cannot be perfect, neither can the internet. But this does not mean that we should not try to make it a better and safer place, a place which respects freedom of speech while supporting our European businesses. This must be the goal of the Digital Services Act.

This is about creating a better system that will help us fight illegal content while giving citizens the right to challenge removals. It is about requiring the big giants to take a transparent look at themselves and to address the risks that are inherent within their systems. It is about making all providers, including marketplaces, understand that they have a social responsibility, and they must be honest and true in how they act towards us, their users. It is about protecting our children so they can avoid the worst of the internet.

At the same time, we create a system that will support the growth of e—commerce and digital innovation in Europe without unneeded over-regulation. We need start—ups, we need scale—ups in Europe, and a system that works for them.

Tom Vandenkendelaere (EPP)

Mr President, Commissioners and colleagues, many platforms such as Facebook actually operate like a windowless factory at the moment. No policy maker, no civil society organisation, let alone the individual citizen, actually knows exactly what goes on behind the walls of that factory. We cannot get a grip on the algorithms and we are unsuspectingly pushed in a certain direction. Abuse is either not prevented or too slowly and there is actually no clear legal framework. Everyone is treated somewhat on an arbitrary basis.

And that is why it is high time we put limits, make rules for tech companies. Companies need to be more responsible about the content we want to post. And we owe it to ourselves to take responsibility and make a clear legislative framework.

Colleagues, I myself have three children of four, two and a newborn. Already, the two eldest often watch videos on YouTube. Vlad and Niki will surely be familiar to young parents. Well, I am frankly worried about the moment when they realise that they actually have unlimited access to all the content

that comes online, and especially content distributed through the major platforms. Among other things, the steering algorithms or the sweeping personalised ads could be harmful to them.

I am therefore proud of the decision we want to take to better protect minors in the online world in the future. With a ban on commercially personalised advertising aimed at children and higher transparency requirements, such as a mandatory label on deepfakes, we are providing minors with a safe online environment. With the Digital Services Act and the previously adopted Digital Markets Act, we are going to set the gold standard globally. I am confident that this will lead to a better, safer online environment where fundamental rights of users are protected and where companies also clearly know their rights and obligations.

Big tech will no longer be able to run its course without rules and without accountability. Safety over economic profit.

Sandro Gozi (Renew)

Mr President, Madam Vice-President of the European Commission, Commissioner, two centuries on, the European Union is finally assuming its responsibilities in the face of the digital revolution. Yes, two centuries, ladies and gentlemen, since the last major text on e-commerce dates back to 2000 - and twenty years in the digital world is two centuries.

Digital technology is part of our lives and brings us many benefits and opportunities, but it also poses new threats to citizens and democracies. I'm talking here about counterfeit goods sold online, fake news, disinformation, hate speech, harassment and cyberthreats.

With the DSA, there is one imperative: in Europe, what is banned offline must also be banned online. This is the end of the Wild West, and I invite you to watch a video on Twitter that the Commissioner has just posted, which I find very effective in this respect. I am convinced that the DSA will make Europe an example to the rest of the world. Faced with the Chinese model, where the State controls everything, and the American model, which advocates laissez-faire, we are proposing a balanced text that will ensure fair competition for European businesses and better protection of citizens' rights.

With this text, we are forcing platforms to look reality in the face and assume all their responsibilities, a new system of sanctions will be put in place and, above all, we are opening up the black box of algorithms. We are introducing greater transparency with regard to algorithms. This is unprecedented legislation at global level, and the European Union is a pioneer in this field. I think we should be proud of it.

The DSA is a good basis for future negotiations. And as President Emmanuel Macron reminded us here this morning, the conclusion of these discussions under the French Presidency is possible and necessary. We must work to achieve this goal.

Arba Kokalari (EPP)

Mr President, today the European Parliament will send a strong signal that we want a digital market and an internet with clear rules for businesses and safety for users.

The internet has made our lives so much better. We can all stay in touch with friends and family, access information, shop online and participate in the public debate, and it will continue to revolutionise the world and humanity in ways we cannot even imagine right now.

However, our citizens must also feel safe online. Today, we are exposed to illegal content on websites with fraud, disinformation, foreign interference and dangerous products. I'm glad that we – as European lawmakers – have listened to these concerns, and I'm proud that we have been able to unite behind a strong proposal in the Digital Services Act – the DSA.

For me, as the negotiator for the largest political force in this House, three things are most important. Firstly, that we are now creating a framework to remove illegal content more quickly. This will put an end to the digital Wild West, where the biggest platforms are setting the rules and criminal content is going viral.

Secondly, we want to ensure that the internet remains an open space. The DSA will strengthen the rights for users, increase transparency online and protect freedom of speech. Platforms will no longer censor opinions or block accounts without any explanation, and users will be able to contest these decisions taken by the platforms.

Thirdly, we need a unified digital market where entrepreneurs and start-ups can easily compete, without trade barriers or massive bureaucracy. With the DSA, tech companies in the EU will follow one set of rules, not 27 sets of rules.

Right now, we are letting the US and China run the show in several areas, and it's time for Europe to take the lead in the global digital race. So let's make the DSA a worldwide example for a better digital future with safety, openness and innovation.

Jessica Stegrud (ECR)

Mr President, Commissioner, Facebook and Google have shown time and again that they want to turn the Internet into a forum for specially selected perspectives and opinions. As a Sweden Democrat, I want instead a free and open arena for thoughts, ideas and exchanges of opinion. That is the very basis of democracy and development.

The proposal we are voting on tomorrow has its points, but as a whole it unfortunately does more harm than good. I welcome proposals that promote law enforcement, transparency and consumer protection, but completely reject the idea of allowing opinion police and private companies to decide what constitutes harmful content online.

The line should be drawn at illegality, nowhere else. Freedom of expression is the basis for free thinking and problem solving. What is controversial today can be a matter of course tomorrow.

We need freedom of ideas and opinions, not censorship or centralised control, either from Silicon Valley or from Brussels.

Adam Bielan (ECR)

Mr President, the Digital Services Act is a key legislation of this term, changing the functioning of the digital market across the entire European Union.

First of all I would like to thank the rapporteur, Ms Schaldemose, for her hard work done on this important file during the last few months.

I would also like to express my support for the horizontal character of the text that we managed to maintain. My group was focused on preserving a robust and open digital economy in Europe that proved its importance to citizens and businesses during the COVID pandemic. This would not be possible without maintaining the key elements of the e—Commerce Directive, like the limited liability regime.

In my capacity as the shadow rapporteur in the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, I mainly focus on strengthening the freedom-of-speech safeguards, on protecting users' freedoms in the online world, and on removing the incentives that could cause hasty removal of content by platforms, which could consequently introduce soft internet censorship.

Indeed, the European Conservatives and Reformists support an open internet where users can move around freely, have content at their disposal and where their freedoms are respected. Consequently, we closed loopholes in the text which would have encouraged the excessive removal of content, just in case there was a suspicion of its illegality.

There was also a need to define when platforms should step in to tackle illegal content. There must be clarity so that users are preserved from the unilateral restriction of their freedom of expression.

In this context, it is worth pointing out that we have succeeded in introducing some provisions to challenge platform discussions on content moderation. Thanks to my Group's negotiations, the new tool will provide additional protection for users in the event of arbitrary decisions by websites.

In addition to the platform's internal complaints-handling system, users will be able to quickly and easily seek redress through the courts in their country of residence. It means that internet users will eventually gain access to robust tools, strengthening their position.

However, despite a very good final text, I still believe it requires further improvements, especially regarding the introduction of social media definition, which has been included in my plenary amendments. Member States cannot remain idle and inclusively rely on limited administrative capabilities, while very large social media platforms alter public discourse and arbitrarily influence the debate or are used for disinformation.

Joachim Stanisław Brudziński (ECR)

Mr President, everything which is legal offline must be legal online. "No to censorship on the Internet. Therefore, there is a need to ensure a balance between the protection of freedom of expression and the need to quickly remove illegal content from the Internet. There needs to be appropriate involvement of regulators from the Member States where the recipient of a service offered by an intermediary

service provider based in another Member State is located. It is also necessary to guarantee two-way communication channels between online platforms and authorities in all Member States.

Provisions should be retained in the text of the regulation that the DSA is without prejudice to the right of recipients of a service to challenge a decision before a court or administrative authority in the country in which they are established, in accordance with the applicable law of that country. Poland also calls for the addition of provisions that would explicitly prevent the deletion and blocking of accounts of legal - and I stress legal - political parties and protect political pluralism in the European Union.

Beata Mazurek (ECR)

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to congratulate the rapporteur on her work. Europe needs effective tools to regulate the digital services market. The digital services code is a challenge for our times, which will improve the operation of the single market, eliminate barriers to its proper functioning and ensure protection and security online for basic Internet users. Large Internet platforms often fail to respect the basic rights and principles of Internet users, unjustifiably removing content, pages or Internet profiles. Recently in Poland, a profile of a political party observed by almost 700 000 users on Facebook was blocked. In a democratic society, differences in opinion are natural. However, we cannot close the mouth of the other party just because it has a different opinion on various issues.

The Digital Markets Act is an opportunity to create an independent mechanism to oversee the decisions of platforms and effectively defend the interests of the smaller ones. The digital marketplace is not just about large online corporations. The backbone of the economy is made up of small and medium-sized enterprises, which in times of pandemic often owe their continued existence to the smooth operation of the online marketplace.

Ladies and gentlemen, the digital services code must be a future-proof solution for all users of the digital marketplace.

Patryk Jaki (ECR)

Mr President, every day in this Chamber, one can hear that the most important things are the rule of law and democracy. The only problem is that there is no democracy without freedom of speech. And when you look from the position of the social monopolies, from the social media, you can theoretically say anything, unless it is about abortion, unless it is about gender, unless it is about vaccinations, unless it is about gender reassignment, and so on. In Poland, in general, large social media accounts are blocked for these very reasons, including the account of one political party.

Now it goes like this: "I don't agree with what you say, but I'll give my life so that you have the right to say it". We are in France, and this is Voltaire. That is why I appeal to you, I appeal to you to vote for freedom of speech, to vote against censorship, so that these values are not just spoken values, but actual values. Today you will have that power in your buttons. And I appeal to you very heartily and very loudly for this, let us be in favour of freedom of speech today, and we can make the monopolies take care of this not only in word, but also in deed.



Geert Bourgeois (ECR)

Mr President, there is much good in the Digital Services Act. There will be greater transparency, better consumer protection and uniform rules for the digital single market. But I am very concerned about freedom of expression, a fundamental right. Any exception must be limited and it is unacceptable that a few powerful private players are allowed to censor social debate on their own, that blind algorithms can silence citizens.

The big Internet platforms are the mail and mailboxes of the twenty-first century and a universal service obligation must be imposed on them. Everyone should have the right to post messages and receive messages. And the major platforms should only be allowed to remove well-defined, manifestly illegal content. Any other discussion of free speech falls to the courts in a constitutional state.

I come from a state where the constitution prohibits censorship. Let this be a guide for the European Union.

Isabella Tovaglieri (ID)

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, when we surf the web we feel free: free to inform ourselves, free to use new services, free to meet each other virtually and to share experiences and opinions.

This freedom, however, can become an illusion or worse a trap when it is not guaranteed and protected by a system of certain and shared rules. For this reason, the primary purpose of a European law on digital services must be to protect users, especially those most exposed to the pitfalls of the web: women, minors, the disabled, the elderly, affected by hateful phenomena such as revenge porn, cyberbullying, child pornography, and online scams.

Thanks to the amendments tabled by the League, there will be greater protection for the most fragile individuals and also for small and medium-sized enterprises active on the web, but without this entailing new bureaucratic requirements, which would further hinder their investments in cybersecurity at a time of great vulnerability of the system.

I therefore thank my colleague Alessandra Basso for the great work she has done in committee to improve this measure, which nevertheless remains inadequate in many respects.

These undoubtedly include the attribution of excessive discretionary powers to the European Commission and the digital platforms. The majority of this House has in fact decided that the Commission should continue to have enormous power over supervision, investigations, monitoring of large platforms, and the possibility of imposing sanctions, despite the fact that the Digital Services Act has provided for the creation of a control system in each individual Member State.

As for platforms, they will be able to decide which harmful but not illegal content can be removed, themselves determining the borderline between freedom of expression and the right to information.

Anything that could threaten freedom of expression, democracy and the autonomy of states must, in our opinion, be thoroughly investigated and rediscussed.

Jorge Buxadé Villalba (ECR)

Mr President, there is no limit to the voracity of the Commission and Parliament. Today they are bringing us a so-called Digital Services Act', but the European Union does not pass laws. Even in the name of the rules they want to usurp the competence of the Member States.

We are talking about a regulation that recognises that their verification agencies, those censorship bodies that seem more like the Soviet Pravda than a Europe of freedoms, private companies censoring freedom of opinion, expression and thought with public money under the tutelage of the European Digital Services Board, another body that they have created for their new normality: that of Agenda 2030, that of Davos, that of the mega-billionaires kneeling before Xi Jinping, that Soviet dictator turned spiritual leader of the service providers and the service providers' verification agencies.

Every day, more and more Europeans realise what they are up to and say no. A wave of freedom is growing across Europe and they will not be in time to stop it. We crave freedom and we are not prepared to give it away and we are not prepared to give the power that belongs to sovereign states to their subsidised companies to tell us what we can do or say. We will not allow them to cancel freedom and civilisation.

Ivan David (ID)

Real censorship, suppression and prosecution of people who expressed an opinion other than the approved one. Officially, the system called itself a socialist democracy. There was a joke that there was about as much difference between democracy and socialist democracy as between a straitjacket and a straitjacket. English jacket and straightjacket.

One of the main slogans after the so-called Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia was "We want democracy without attributes". And the newly elected President of this Parliament reminded us of our former President Václav Havel. Thirty years have passed, and this Parliament, which has been so harshly critical of totalitarian regimes, is pushing for the introduction of censorship. This afternoon, one of the Members used the term 'modern democracy' in that context. It is just a new version of socialist democracy with the suppression of the basic democratic right of freedom of expression. She said it is a fight for human rights against hate speech and disinformation. But I have rarely seen so much hate speech and misinformation as from the human rights activists here, who replace rationality with ideology and bigoted slogans.

Modern technology allows the free exchange of information and opinions on social media, but I guess that's okay. The new totalitarianism wants a monopoly on its own disinformation, lying and promoting bizarre views. Censorship is called content moderation and revocation is virtually impossible. A Democrat has to tolerate dissent and unpleasant information. We have laws against deception, humiliation, and spreading alarmist news, and we have courts to judge. Censorship is unacceptable in a democracy, whether it is carried out by the state, by digital service providers or even by non-profit organisations, as is being proposed. These are called 'trusted whistleblowers'. Every totalitarian regime wants to have a monopoly on influencing people's consciousness, just like the totalitarian regime you are building.

You are behaving with the tolerance of the Church Inquisition, which burned the rector of the University of Prague, Jan Hus, for criticizing the immorality of the Church, which today would be judged as spreading hatred towards a group of people. Or Giordano Bruno for misinformation about the movement of the planets. I hope you don't burn yet, but already they are fining, judging, firing, as in the days of socialist democracy. In the European Parliament, you're declaring a cordon sanitaire. Your ... (the President interrupted the speaker).

## **Debate on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU - 08/03/2022**

Sandra Kalniete, rapporteur.

Mr President, today, Europe faces two major, transformative crises which will shape our future for many years to come – the COVID—19 pandemic and Russia's unprovoked, brutal war against Ukraine.

There is one crucial, dark, vicious common denominator for both – the widespread, coordinated and systematic spread of hostile and targeted disinformation.

Since we have discussed several times the consequences of COVID—19 disinformation campaigns, today I will concentrate more on the Kremlin's propaganda machinery working in overdrive to justify Putin's unprovoked act of aggression, shredding of international law and sending thousands of Russian people to an irrational and deadly war.

And let's call a spade a spade. Putin's propaganda machinery was not 'turned on' only on February 24th, it has been working in Europe for decades already, attempting to poison and divide our societies.

With all this in mind, we have arrived at the moment of truth to ask a frank question – how did the democratic world get to this point? And how we can prevent it in the future? This is exactly the task of our report, which will be voted today, and I invite everyone to appreciate the great urgency of the moment.

Dear members of the House, the report identifies and maps the threat of foreign interference in all of its forms, including disinformation, manipulation of social media platforms and advertising systems, cyber-attacks, threats against and the harassment of journalists, covert political funding and elite capture and co-optation. In other words, this report both provides the diagnosis of the EU's vulnerabilities and prescribes the medication for strengthening the EU's resilience.

A few words about platforms and data markets. We have to shed light on the black box of social media platforms: we need truly binding EU rules for algorithms for accountability and transparency, particularly when it comes to the demonetisation of harmful content and data accountability.

Today, while the war is ongoing in Europe, online platforms and tech companies need to take a stand by proactively suspending accounts engaged in denying, glorifying and justifying aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity. They have to reinforce content in Russian and Ukrainian

languages to resist the pressure from Russian government's disinformation. In short, any tech platform complying with Putin's censorship request is an accomplice to Putin's aggression.

I would also like to highlight the need for data market accountability and transparency, including binding EU rules to limit the amount of data platforms can harvest, store and sell. It is completely unacceptable that loosely, regulated commercial entities can sell data of Europeans, me, you, all of us to the same authoritarian regimes that are trying to tear us apart.

About resilience, we see that the Kremlin is attempting to insulate, wall off the Russian information space, by imposing new censorship rules. This shows that Putin is threatened by any independent media and narrative. This is a clear signal that we should double, triple and quadruple our support for quality and independent media, including in the EU's neighbourhood.

The Kremlin is also operating with extensive cyber warfare tools. That's why we need to step up cybersecurity assistance to Ukraine, deploying their cyber rapid response team experts and using the EU cyber sanctions regime against individuals, entities and bodies responsible or involved in the various cyber—attacks targeting Ukraine.

The resilience of our societies is absolutely key here. We must not allow any malicious actor to exploit our freedoms. Therefore, resilience, awareness and media literacy must be built up as our protective shields.

Another factor weakening our resilience is foreign covert funding, elite capture and co—optation. For decades, we have watched former high—ranking European officials and politicians take up prominent positions on Russian energy companies, while we were channelling hundreds of millions into Putin's coffers and providing safe haven for his cronies and oligarchs. Look where that has gotten us.

We, with our euros, have effectively built and financed Putin's war machine, which is now being used to slaughter innocent Ukrainians. If we don't turn off the flow of gas and oil 'golden river' now, then we deserve the full consequences of our greed and sorry stupidity.

And to conclude, dear colleagues, I was harsh, but I am convinced that we across the political groups, together with the Member States and the Commission, can move forward towards implementation of the report's recommendations with utmost urgency. And I would like warmly to thank all my shadows, chair of the Committee and Secretariat and our councillors.

Josep Borrell Fontelles, Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, on behalf of the Council.

Mr President, dear members of the committee, dear Members of the European Parliament attending this debate, we are witnessing how the Russian assault on Ukraine continues, and this assault painfully highlights why we need to pay more attention to foreign interference and, in particular, to foreign disinformation and information manipulation.

This poses a clear threat to our democracy, to our stability, to our security, and we need to address it. So I therefore much welcome your report and the work of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference.

Information manipulation and interference is something that Russia's propaganda machine is actively using. Accompanying their military campaign in Ukraine, Russia is spreading false information among their own population about why this invasion has taken place and which is the situation in Ukraine.

Over weeks, much before the invasion started, the Kremlin outlets had been preparing the ground by reversing the cause and consequences of this aggression and portraying Russia and Russian people as a kind of a victim, saying 'Ukraine is committing genocide', 'Zelenskyy is a criminal, is a puppet on the hands of the Western people', and when they come to Kyiv, they will do a second Nuremberg in order to clean Ukraine of the Nazis who are committing genocide against the Russian people.

These are the kind of things that they are systematically spreading far and wide, undermining the legitimacy of the democratically elected Ukrainian Government, presenting them as a result of a coup d'état. It came to power, not through elections, but through a coup d'état. He's a criminal, is a war criminal, is a Nazi, is a dictator and also distorting historical facts.

Well, history can be interpreted in very different ways. But to consider that Zelenskyy is a war criminal, a Nazi who is committing genocide against the Russian people, is not a matter of historical interpretation.

The Kremlin and its outlets are systematically lying about the situation, about the military situation and about the suffering of the Ukrainian population. They claim systematically that the Ukrainian authorities are bombing their own citizens or provoking nuclear incidents in order to blame Russia systematically. This kind of news is widespread.

Also, the alleged Russia-phobia that the state-affiliated media report is another thing that people in Russia listen to. Let me say once again, that measures are against the Russian leadership, not against the Russian people and the current situation is a result of President Putin's actions. And, if he wants, he can solve it by just stopping the war.

The state media and the ecosystem around them are being used as an instrument to push this narrative, to manipulate and mislead, and they are an integral part of the aggression. It's not just bombing the houses, the infrastructure, the bodies of the people. they are bombing their minds, they are bombing their spirits. And the Russian leadership is cracking down on independent media, on civil society, it has banned Twitter, it has banned Facebook and a number of foreign media from operating in Russia.

The Kremlin has introduced a law criminalising what they call 'fake information' about the war in Ukraine. It can cause you 15 years' jail, targeting also international journalists, which are doing their vital work in Russia.

As a consequence it has deprived of Russian citizens of any access to independent media, independent information about what's happening in Ukraine and how the Russian armed forces are behaving. So Russia is moving towards complete isolation of its citizens from information coming from the outside world. They are putting them in a bubble, isolating in order not to allow them to know what's happening.

The international community has come together in response to President Putin's senseless war in a coordinated and active manner, and I am very proud to see that the European Union has been able to show its capacity to deliver on this file also, and we have been able to do that because we are not

coming from scratch, it comes to 2015 when leaders of the European Union recognised the threat, offering information and misinformation streaming from Russia.

2015 is seven years ago. And then they specifically tasked the High Representative to address this challenge. And we created in the External Action Service teams of people, capacities and expertise that have been developed in the last seven years, allowing us to take today's decisive steps to tackle this issue.

We have built a strong StratCom team, which is doing, I think, an excellent work – you will judge it – has been praised in your report, thank you for that. We have been strengthening our proactive public communication to provide actual information, not least through our European Union versus disinformation website, which exposes the Kremlin narrative.

Go to this website, use our EU versus disinformation website and you will find there registered hundreds of misinformation cases in countries, European, in Germany, in the UK, in France, in Italy and Spain, targeting a variety of issues like elections, vaccines, about Brexit or about the secessionist movement in some European Member States.

We have increased our cooperation with partners like NATO and the G7 to understand how the Kremlin destabilises and manipulates information, weakening Ukraine and our Western resolve. We have a rapid-alert system that has proven its importance, allowing to swiftly share with European Union institutions, with my colleagues from the Commission – with whom we are working closely and positively, thank you – with our Member States and also partners, finding analysis and debunking material.

I insist, please, widespread existence of this web where hundreds of cases can be found. We have intensified our work to help our partners in the region to tackle the issue of interference and information manipulation, especially in the Western Balkans, which are currently being targeted systematically by these campaigns.

And most importantly, we have imposed costs on the perpetrators, including through banning Russia Today and Sputnik from broadcasting in the European Union because they are not independent media. They are assets. They are weapons in the Kremlin's manipulation ecosystem.

And I want to stop here because there has been criticism saying that we are attempting against the freedom of information. Let's consider what is information and what these outlets are. Let me take a moment to underline the essence of this issue.

We are not trying to decide what is true and what is false. I am not the minister of the truth. We don't have ministers of the truth. What we have to focus on is foreign actors who intentionally, in a coordinated manner, try to manipulate that information environment, to advance their own purposes and to harm us.

Allow me to say that in Spanish because it will be more direct to your mind.

Democracy is a system that functions on the basis of information. Information is the fuel of democracy. Citizens act as citizens based on the information they receive. Based on what they know, they interpret reality, judge their rulers and decide how to vote.

Democracy is a system whose fuel is information. If information is bad, democracy is bad. If information is systematically biased and contaminated by lies, citizens cannot have a full understanding of reality and their political judgement is biased.

That is why we have to defend information as a protected good.

When you go to buy meat in a supermarket, you have guarantees about the quality of that product to prevent it from making you ill. There must also be some kind of guarantee so that information is not an element that contaminates minds.

Democracy works on information and that is why Russia has created Sputnik. Sputnik is not an innocent medium that has a certain view of reality.

Sputnik is not a media that understands things, in a way. Sputnik was created by a Russian presidential decree with the aim to report on the state policy of Russia abroad. And according to its editor-in-chief, Russia Today is capable of conducting an information war against the whole Western world, and both channels facilitate and engage in cyber-facilitated influence operations, including those that have been attributed to the Russian military intelligence – the famous GRU.

And to be able to respond equally with quick and decisive action in the future, I will propose a new mechanism that will allow us to sanction those malign disinformation actors. This will be part of a broader toolbox that we are currently working on to further enhance our capacity to act. This toolbox will be structured across four cross-cutting dimensions improving our situational awareness.

First, to build up our resilience and our partners by stepping up support to independent media and civil society in third countries, and bolstering the strategic communication capacities of our delegations. Being that a tool of foreign policy, I am always talking about third countries. It is my colleagues from the Commission who are working inside the European Union territories, but there is a lot of work to do in order to support our partners around the world.

Second, to ensure disruption of malign activities and regulatory responses to them, the code of practice and the Digital Services Act, on which Vice-President Jourová will say more, are crucial elements in this regard. I am not going to go deeper on this code of practice and digital services because Vice-President Jourová knows more than I do about them.

And last but not least, a continuing diplomatic response and instruments within the common foreign and security policy. Within our foreign policy, we have to introduce the battle about information since the beginning of the pandemic. I coined the sentence ‘battle of narrative’, and this battle of narrative is every day more important. Look what’s happening in Africa, what do you think? People are influenced by what they have been told. And at the end, it goes up to the political scale, and finally it converts into votes on the international institutions.

This brings me to the report by the Special Committee for foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU, including disinformation (INGE), which I welcome so much.

This report shows appreciation of the work that my service has been doing and constantly expanding since we received this mandate from the Council in 2015. And I want to assure you that we take your recommendations very much into account, including your proposal for new structures to make our work even more efficient and sustainable. I thank you a lot for your support.

You have been very much supporting our strategic communication teams devoted to the Balkans, devoted to the eastern border, and now, unhappily, they are so much in the news. Thank you for your support. We work together. This is a critical battle for democracy.

Once again, allow me to say democracy is a system that works on the basis of the information that citizens have, that's why we have to protect the freedom of information and to fight against disinformation.

Věra Jourová, Vice-President of the Commission.

Mr President, honourable Members, first of all, I would like to thank Mrs Kalniete and the INTA Committee members for their important work throughout the last year and a half, as well as their comprehensive report.

Our hearts and minds are in Ukraine, watching the war unfold before our eyes. We know that this disinformation and foreign interference has been part of Russia's military doctrine for decades. In fact, Russia was systematically preparing all of us for this to happen. Also, all the attacks through disinformation against Ukraine, which Josep described here, were preparing public opinion for this aggression.

We can also see that the playbook is not all new, and those of you who remember the times of the Soviet Union, like I do, know that the truth was the greatest enemy of this oppressive regime. Now we see the laws from 4 March – 15 years of prison for telling people the truth or for delivering objective facts. President Putin wants his nation to be blind and deaf. More than that, President Putin, I think, would like the Russian people to be apathetic. That's why I am so glad that yesterday Netflix decided to withdraw from the country because President Putin wants the people to be entertained, not to pay attention to what's happening. My response is that I welcome this decision by Netflix, because it would not be right to see Russians being entertained and, next door, Ukrainians being killed.

So we have to look at the situation in its complexity and be able to act. We have to act on several different fronts. We are working with Joseph Borrell on the issue of disinformation. He has increased the capacities of East StratCom and experts are now working day and night on detecting the disinformation coming from the Russian side. This is not new. We have seen this already for a long time. In fact, the intensity of the Russian disinformation increased rapidly after the annexation of Crimea.

As part of our response to the Russian invasion, we must be united on this front, on working together, all of us – governments, citizens and the private sector, including the big-tech companies, which are also covered in the report.

The only response to Putin's aggression is unity. Yesterday, I visited the Council of Ministers of Culture and Media with Thierry Breton, and there is a very strong agreement to join forces to fight disinformation and to support independent media. We listened to a very strong speech by Oleksandr Tkachenko, who is the Minister of Culture of Ukraine, with a strong call to action and we received a to-do list on how to react, and we should follow this. We should react.



Also, last week, we spoke with the CEOs of YouTube and Google – I was with Thierry Breton – and I’m glad that the big-tech companies want to be on the right side of history. This is my feeling from my talks with them, but they have to do more.

Extreme times require dedicated answers. This is why we took temporary, restrictive measures to immediately restrict the access to Russian broadcasting services – Russia Today and Sputnik, in the European Union – and Josep was very clear, explaining why: these outlets are part of a concerted campaign of information manipulation and disinformation, being tools in bringing forward and supporting Russia’s aggression.

It is more important than ever to reach the Russian people and provide them with information. Every possible channel should be used. If you have a chance to use such a channel, if you have some people-to-people contact, let’s use them. It was very impressive when the Nobel Prize winner, Svetlana Alexievich, called at the weekend on all the people who speak Russian to try their channels, to speak, to address the Russian people and to get them out of this apathetic situation.

Our strategic approach outlined in the European Democracy Action Plan is designed to tackle these issues and to minimise the impact of disinformation and other negative factors on the strengths of our democracy and our system. For the first time at European level, we have created a comprehensive agenda to strengthen the resilience of our democracies, ensure fair and free elections, support the media sector and defend against disinformation in order to also make our societies more resilient and better prepared for the challenges of the future.

The Plan builds on tangible measures and structures, notably through the first Code of Practice on Disinformation, the Rapid Alert System and the European Digital Media Observatory, and we now move to another gear. This includes the upgraded Code of Practice against disinformation. We are finishing the work with the signatories. We have very high requests, or demanding requests, as to what should be in the Code. We have also adopted new legislation on the transparency of political advertising and measures to support media, including through the Media Freedom Act. As Josep has explained, there is also a toolbox for countering foreign interference, with instruments to impose costs on perpetrators, on which we are intensely working closely together.

Also, EU Member States have invested heavily in their own framework and structures to respond to this threat, working closely with European institutions. Here I have to say that the Baltic Sea countries are always at the forefront, trying to convince the rest of Europe that there is something serious happening because they feel first-hand that Russian disinformation can have the potential to destroy our society and our peaceful coexistence in our community. So let’s listen to those who have experience and who have good instincts. This is not the time to underestimate these things.

The Member States are on the case. I really see increased activity in all the Member States, not only in those of Central and Eastern Europe. Let me emphasise a point stressed in the report: independent media and journalists are a key pillar of a functioning democracy. Dmitry Muratov, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and the Editor-in-chief of Novaya Gazeta, said that journalists are the antidote against tyranny. We need strong and independent media in Europe, and we see that there is a negative trend. They are under economic pressure, so we need to introduce measures on how to protect media freedom and pluralism better in Europe. That’s why I am now working on the Anti-SLAPP legislation to be adopted by the Commission at the end of April and on the already—mentioned Media Freedom Act to be adopted by – probably – the end of June. We have a lot of work ahead of us because I hear

voices from the Member States that the EU should not regulate on media. I am of the opposite opinion.

Also, I welcome that the report highlights the importance of having an effective oversight and control mechanism for online platforms, putting emphasis on the need to address raising issues related to disinformation on their services quickly and efficiently.

So, we see that the Digital Services Act is now at full speed in the legislative process, and also the Code of Practice. We will want to have a strong and robust framework for the Digital Services Act, as legally binding rules, and the Code of Practice as a complementary voluntary measure.

The Code of Practice is the voluntary measure, and self-regulatory instrument which is the first ever in the world to fight disinformation. It has proven to be a useful instrument, but the one we came up with in 2018 was not strong and sufficient enough, and that's why we are upgrading it now. We are in regular contact with the signatories and I can assure you that intensive work is ongoing. I will personally want to be sure that the platforms support these objectives with commitments backed by the highest level of management. Just imagine what we want from the platforms. We want them to do a proper job: steps against disinformation in all Member States, understanding all Member States' languages and all Member States' historical context. This will require capacities and money, and this is what we want them to do.

Finally, another key initiative is the proposed regulation on transparency and targeting of political advertising. I count on your support and I believe that the European Parliament will engage quickly in the work on all these proposals, including this new one on political advertising.

Madam Kalniete, honourable Members, let me thank you once again for the comprehensive report. It will provide policymakers with important recommendations on how to strengthen the EU's capability and capacities to tackle the threat of foreign information, manipulation and interference, as well as disinformation. I am convinced that our joint work and your dedication will make our response to disinformation much stronger and effective.

Javier Zarzalejos (EPP)

Mr President, hybrid war is war, and it is in the light of the war that Russia has declared that we have to read this report.

As Russian tanks roll into Ukrainian territory, let's not forget that the invasion has been paid by disinformation, interference and cyber-attacks. This report, which has been brilliantly produced by Sandra Kalniete, is a major and timely contribution to the protection of democratic institutions. It is based on conclusions and findings of experts and researchers but it is a political document demanding political action.

The invasion of Ukraine is a wake-up call, and we need to raise awareness of the challenge of a structural confrontation with Russia as the main threat to our security. We simply cannot tolerate the extension of Russian influence, and this report shows how to prevent it.

We have enemies. The European Union has been targeted. We know that Russia, whatever the concrete attribution might be, is always there ready to destabilise, be it in Brexit or in the secessionist move by Catalan nationalists or COVID-19.

So funding of populist and extremist parties did capture anti-European narratives. The state-owned media, which by no means deserve to be called journalism, are components of a reality that we have to face up to. And it is high time to act, stepping up the efforts and the shared commitment of Member States and European institutions.

Andreas Schieder (S&D)

Mr President, Madam Vice-President, Mr Vice-President and High Representative. I would like to start by thanking our rapporteur, the shadow rapporteurs and the members of the committee, as well as the Chairman, Raphaël Glucksmann, who has worked intensively with all of us for two years.

When the committee was set up, we all realised that disinformation was a problem. But as the work of the committee began, we realised more and more with each hour of work just how big the problem is and that it is in fact much, much bigger and more serious than we ever dared to believe. And the timing of the discussion today and the reporting shows once again how extremely important this issue is and how urgent it is.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict - or Russia's invasion of Ukraine - is only the end point of a months-long, years-long information war waged by Russia against Ukraine. And in the weeks and months leading up to the invasion, we have also seen how disinformation attacks on the internet have increased massively.

We must therefore not take disinformation and disinformation attacks on our democracy lightly. These attacks also go hand in hand with the brutal restriction of media freedom, for example in Russia. The laws that were passed last week alone show this.

But the committee, the two years of intensive work, have also shown that there are attacks from abroad. It's not just about Russia. Other players are also active here: China, Turkey and other countries are also taking part in this information war.

There is support from within, from within the European Union. Right-wing extremist parties and politicians in particular are heavily involved here with statements, but often also with the financing of their political campaigns by foreign forces. We have also taken a very critical look at the role of social media platforms, because the fight against disinformation must not be left to the social media platforms themselves. Anyone who believes that self-regulation will solve the problem is mistaken.

The algorithms in combination with the opposing influence of disinformation and the acceptance of the negative effects on society, as well as the fact that this also creates added value, i.e. the profit of the social media platforms, already show how serious the problem is. And here we must continue to focus more strongly on regulation and strict measures.

But we also need to close the loopholes that, for example in party funding, allow parties in Europe to be financed from abroad, which then also bring the disinformation attacks and interests of foreign countries into the European Union.

And we must also make our infrastructure more capable in this challenge. Vice-President Borrell has already announced many measures. We must realise in all institutions how serious the problem is. I therefore also welcome the fact that the work of this committee will continue in the near future.

We are not at the end of the road with this report. The report makes many things clear, and very, very clearly: the involvement of European far-right parties, the involvement of individual European former politicians, the holes in our party funding as well as the social media platforms.

But what all this is really about is this: We must protect our democracy, our model of living in an open society, our system of freedom of expression - protect it against disinformation.

Christel Schaldemose (S&D)

Madam President. Madam President, the fight against disinformation and fake news has never been more important. We are seeing right now how Putin's propaganda machine is an active party in the war in Ukraine. Disinformation is a direct threat to our free and democratic world and has become the favourite tool of authoritarian regimes to undermine election results, citizens' decisions and trust in society. We must not turn a blind eye to this. That is why I welcome the many good proposals in the INGE report. As rapporteur for the DSA, I am particularly pleased with the report's focus on the role of social media in the spread of disinformation. For too long, social media algorithms have spread hate, division and fake news. Instead of removing or minimising problematic content and the accounts that spread it, social media has created an algorithmic megaphone that gets the content out to even more people. And at the same time, they've monetised this business model of spreading the harmful algorithms. It has to stop now.

Many of the good proposals in the report I am fighting to get included in the final DSA legislation: algorithms must be made transparent, platforms must be accountable, we must remove dark patterns, and we must put clear labelling on "deep fake" and online advertising. We need to ban targeted advertising to minors and we need to look at the business models of the platforms, because they are responsible for part of the problem we have. Better today than tomorrow.

Nathalie Loiseau (Renew)

Mr President, as Ukraine has shown us, hybrid warfare leads to war at all. For years, Russia has been pouring torrents of disinformation on Kiev. It has bribed politicians and harassed the country with countless cyber attacks. And then it went on the offensive.

It is because Ukraine is a democracy that it is under attack. Today, all democracies are the target of foreign interference and all must understand the threat they face. We must also realise that it is all authoritarian states that are using these influence operations to try to weaken us, divide us and discredit democracy. Russia is certainly the first, but it is not the only one.

The report on which we are about to vote has one great merit. It names things. We will no longer be able to say that we did not know. We will no longer be able to ignore how anti-vaccine campaigners were manipulated. We will have understood that, from Brexit to the American elections and Catalonia, polls have been exploited from foreign capitals in an attempt to fracture our democracies. We can no

longer turn a blind eye to the useful idiots who recite propaganda dictated by dictatorships, nor can we pretend not to see that there are a few of them in this House.

The report we are about to vote on also makes recommendations. They are addressed to governments, the European Union, digital platforms, the media and universities. The first requirement is for transparency in algorithms, in the funding of political parties, and in the affiliations of certain leaders or former leaders. The second requirement is that we all mobilise. The Ukrainian people are fighting today for freedom. Let's not wait for that to happen before... (The President cut the speaker off)

Nicolaus Fest (ID)

Madam President, Commissioner. I was just about to say something nice about Mr Borrell, and then he leaves. That's just the way it is. But, Mr Borrell - I can still see you up there - you are right: correct information is the raw material of democracy.

However, unlike many on the INGE Committee, I worked as a journalist for a long time and therefore know that yes, there is misinformation, by mistake, from lies, when people lie to you, but also when people try to instrumentalise you. And the main source of this misinformation is usually either the economy or politics. As Mr Glucksmann said, the main source of information for pro-Putin propaganda for years was Mr Schröder, but then also Mrs Merkel, who supported and promoted all the gas supply contracts with Mr Schröder, incidentally always with the cooperation of the current EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who also ruined the German armed forces at the same time.

So there is always misinformation and propaganda. We also saw this in the Iraq war and the refugee crisis, and the antidote to misinformation and propaganda is good journalism. And that is precisely where the problem lies. Today - at least in Germany - we have editors-in-chief who are no longer interested in the truth, but in the attitude of journalists, in other words their ideological stance. The media as the fourth estate has largely ceased to exist, which is why there is no controlling authority to clarify what is propaganda and what is truth. We have seen this in numerous media scandals in Germany, especially at Der Spiegel under Claas Relotius.

The problem is also that the media have less and less funding and can therefore hardly afford good journalism that really investigates. I don't know how to solve this problem, but a Ministry of Truth is certainly not the solution. Mr Borrell said that he does not want a Ministry of Truth. But the recommendations made here by the INGE Committee are actually heading in precisely this direction. They want to set up fact-checkers and the like. But fact-checkers are also people who usually have an agenda and are paid by someone, in this case in case of doubt by the EU. And that means that they are not independent and neutral either, but have a specific objective.

There are no algorithms that can check the truth. That is why we can only say that if journalism ceases to be a source of truth and we no longer allow the free exchange of opinions - including opinions that we may not like, opinions that may be wrong, opinions that may be financed by foreign powers - then we will have a society that is dominated by censorship, we will have a society that actually resembles Orwell's 1984.

We are seeing this in Russia right now. Russia has passed a disinformation law. Basically, this is exactly the model for what is threatening here. As a result, many media have stopped their work because working in Russia is becoming too dangerous for freelance journalists at the moment. That is also exactly what will happen here if we impose severe penalties for false information.

In this respect, Mrs Jourová, I do not agree with you. INGE is not important. INGE is not only superfluous, it is downright dangerous, because with INGE we are walking into a censorship state.

Ladislav Ilčić (ECR)

Dear Speaker, dear colleagues, I condemn any external interference by third countries, but also the interference of one member state in the democratic processes of another member state. But as often happens in this House, the positive front page of a report is overshadowed by some side agenda that is bad and makes the report unacceptable.

Thus, this report wants to put religious communities under control and supervision, and this report equates all reflections that are not on the track of the LGBT agenda with the spread of misinformation or even with hate speech. This intention strikes at the very foundations of democracy - freedom of speech and expression.

Religious communities are not foreign factors. They are communities of believers, citizens, and the Christian worldview is legal and should be acceptable in every society, especially in the European Union, which was created on the basis of European, Christian values. Please accept this and do not deny us our basic rights and freedoms.

Gilles Lebreton (ID)

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, the Kalniete report has the merit of denouncing foreign interference in the European Union's democratic processes, particularly through disinformation. This in itself is a good thing, because foreign disinformation, particularly from Russia and China, is a reality.

The report also has the merit of giving an acceptable definition of disinformation, which it presents as misleading information, intentionally disseminated with the aim of destabilising society. It thus distinguishes it from misinformation, which it defines as false information divulged in good faith, with no intention to harm. He wisely notes, and I quote from his recital (V), that there is a fine line between freedom of expression and misinformation and that it must not be crossed. This is the best part of this long report, which is as sad as a day without bread.

The rest of the report sinks into defamation of the opponents of European federalists. In his recital (X), he attacks the parties in power in Poland and Hungary, accusing them of having received, and I quote, millions of euros in foreign funding to promote traditional or conservative values. Even more brutally, it accuses the Rassemblement National and the Lega, without any proof, of being prepared to accept political funding from Russia.

If we want to find French politicians with proven financial links to foreign states, we should not look to the leaders of the Rassemblement National. Instead, let's look at former prime ministers Jean-Pierre Raffarin and François Fillon, who were hired by Chinese and Russian companies respectively. But obviously, the report prefers to create a diversion, as the first of the two is a supporter of President Macron.

In the end, we may well wonder whether it is not the Kalniete report itself that constitutes the finest example of foreign interference, since it suspiciously insists on increasing European funding for NGOs, which is already enormous, on the pretext of enabling them to combat foreign influence. But NGOs are often financed by non-European capital, like that of the American billionaire George Soros. And they destabilise our European societies just as much as certain foreign states, particularly when they organise the flood of immigrants into our countries. The report should therefore have condemned these bodies of foreign interference, and I am condemning them in its place, from this rostrum.

Clare Daly (the Left)

Mr President, while enjoying working with colleagues on the report, we have made no secret that we are resolutely opposed to the majority position of the committee and, obviously, this report is no different. Our minority report, which is attached, I think, makes the reasons why very clear.

And it isn't that we don't think that foreign interference and disinformation are serious social harms deserving of special attention. We do, and they are. It isn't that we don't think that Russia and China do propaganda and disinformation. Of course they do. All powerful states do.

It is because throughout the work of this committee, the focus has been selective. The report is silent on the most consequential sources of disinformation and interference in European democracy: that of large concentrations of capital, foreign and European, exercising massive influence over law-making and policy formation in the EU and Member States through private media ownership, corporate lobbying and political funding.

The report makes no mention of the defence industry and how it has corrupted European policy, to drive up weapons-spending and escalation. An industry needs an enemy, and the report gives it one or two, and I think the section on elite capture shows this point very well.

The report is very strong on condemning those who go to work in the Russian industry companies, and fair point, but our motion on having the similar condemnation of those who go and join American finance companies is voted down.

So instead of tackling interference in democracy, the committee has actually had a one-track mind focusing on China and Russia to the exclusion of everything else. It poses a child's version of political reality. The world is divided into democracies and authoritarian regimes: goodies and baddies. The baddies tell only lies, the goodies never utter an untrue word. And in the middle of all of this, the European Union is an innocent victim of all of this geopolitical aggression and propaganda, not a geopolitical actor itself with its own agenda.

So, instead of fighting propaganda, the committee has actually become a platform for it. We had a litany of NATO-funded think-tanks all coming from the same hymn sheet to inform us. Is it any

wonder that we're left with the report the way it is, it is in their interest to spread this hysteria? And the consequence of this is insidious, it means mainstream political parties don't have to take account of their own actions. They can blame the foreigners, the foreign interference, for that.

So our concern all along has been that this poses a threat to fundamental freedoms and civil society in Europe. And it might point out that a number of the measures we're voting for here are in direct contradiction with measures that we'll be voting on later on to protect civil society in a LIBE Committee report, because it is calling for a 'whole of society' approach.

Criticism of European mainstream politics has to be seen as disinformation debunked by state-funded fact-checking organisations. The correct version of reality, including EU foreign policy, has to be promoted by strategically state-funded strategic communication centres – George Orwell's 1984 springs to mind.

Social media companies have to be brought to heel and pressure to censor anybody who has a different view of the official version of the truth. Political parties and politicians sceptical to NATO and EU narratives have to be placed under suspicion of being proxies of foreign powers.

But you know what? Avoiding conflict and de-escalation tensions means listening to your opponent, listening to their concerns, taking them seriously, however fraught the disagreement, and looking for compromises. But the function of this committee has been the opposite. It should make them be disinformation and condemn them as such.

Strong democracies tolerate internal dissent but this actually is textbook McCarthyism designed to stigmatise dissent, incite the public against internal critics, eradicate common sense and make all opposition unacceptable. It is a deliberate impairment of our society's ability to think of extra-critical importance in these times of horrendous war. I and we absolutely reject it utterly.

## **Debate on the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act - 04/07/2022**

Krzysztof Hetman (EPP)

Mr President, Commissioners, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to begin by thanking you for your kind words. I admit that I am speaking today with an exceptional sense of a truly historic event. For with the adoption of both the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act, the European Union is the first in the world to put an end to the 'Wild West' of Internet giants and is embarking on the path of a precise and transparent regulatory framework, where the rights of Internet users are protected, the needs of businesses are respected, and economic growth and competitiveness in the single market are facilitated. And at the same time, Big Tech is held accountable for its actions.

From my point of view, I consider particularly important the issues related to the fight against disinformation, which is an extremely powerful weapon in the modern world. I am counting on the crisis response mechanism to enable us to better resist fake news and manipulation. It also means, among other things, safer online shopping through better identification of sellers or control of the products being sold.



Alex Agius Saliba (S&D)

Mr President, both the DSA and the DMA are the first of their kind: unique instruments to regulate big tech companies. The new rules will force tech giants to play fair and put an end to their abuse of power and their ability to profit from the digital economy while harming our societies and our citizens.

We will finally move from a purely advertising-focused, surveillance-based model to rules that focus on people's interests in accessing and sharing high quality content, high quality information. More than ever, in the wake of the propaganda fight and also the disinformation war, we will need the democratic tools to regulate user safety, protect our consumers, fight targeted advertising, end user surveillance and safeguard transparency and accountability.

At the beginning of the mandate, we have put in place the framework to ensure that what is illegal offline is also illegal online. I must say that the new rules have fully met our expectations to empower people and take back control of the internet. Once again, Europe has been the champion and the forger of a better global digital world.

Alessandra Basso (ID)

Mr President, Commissioners, ladies and gentlemen, we have reached the epilogue of a complicated piece of work on ASD, which represents a missed opportunity for us to contribute to online safety and the protection of fundamental rights.

I note with regret two aspects: firstly, the presence of trusted alerts, professional alerts, whose alerts will take precedence over the alerts of an ordinary citizen; secondly, the Commission's introduction, almost on a razor's edge, of the crisis response mechanism, a proposal introduced without any real democratic process, given that we were already in the middle of a Covid crisis in 2020.

The Commission would have liked to have almost unlimited power to declare a state of emergency and require platforms to take mitigating measures to control freedom of expression. We had just taken off our masks and the Commission wanted to impose new baggage on us, this time our ideas. Despite the short time we had, we managed to limit this power.

Roman Haider (ID)

Mr President, the Digital Services Act is a very good example of the increasing restriction of freedom of expression and freedom of the press in the EU. Critical opinions are branded as hate speech or misinformation, and under this pretext a relic from times gone by is now being revived - censorship.

It is precisely where resistance to the EU's anti-citizen policies is on the rise that the EU now wants to censor and suppress these unwelcome opinions. This applies to criticism of unchecked mass immigration, increasing centralisation and climate policy. And to make it clear: the only limit to freedom of opinion is criminal law. We do not need any additional EU censorship.

The many correct and important approaches of this Digital Services Act are unfortunately devalued by this attempt to introduce censorship through the back door. The EU therefore does not need to point a finger at the East. There is enough dirt to clean up on its own doorstep, and the increasing restriction of freedom of expression is undoubtedly one of them.

### **Topical debate on the fight against hate speech and disinformation: responsibility of social platforms within the Digital Services Act - 07/02/2024**

Sandro Gozi (Renew)

Mr President, Minister, Commissioner, in 2024, all the indicators are clear: disinformation, false information and hyper-bullying are likely to increase exponentially in Europe and the rest of the world. In our fight against online disinformation, unregulated social networks represent a major danger, as shown by recent examples in Ukraine, Gaza and the various elections in Europe.

With the regulation on digital services, we are putting an end to digital anarchy and forcing platforms to finally assume all their responsibilities. Interference and manipulation of our democratic processes are unacceptable, and even one vote manipulated in an election is one vote too many.

We need to ensure very strict enforcement and sufficient resources for content moderation measures and algorithm transparency. It is high time that platforms changed their business model to respect our principles and values.

For greater transparency and better protection of personal data, we will also be adopting more effective rules on online political advertising at the end of the month. Our aim is clear. Freedom of speech does not mean the right to viral content that is false, violent or manipulated. Freedom of speech is not freedom of reach. We want greater transparency for all players capable of having an influence on an election, on a democratic process, whether they be candidates, influencers, political parties, associations, companies or others.

The European elections represent the first test for all of us. We must pass it.

Adam Bielan (ECR)

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, we live in an era of extremely rapid development of digital technology and, above all, of the Internet, from which most citizens, and certainly the vast majority of young people, obtain their information today. We are living in an era of extremely rapid development of digital technology and, above all, of the Internet, from which most citizens, and certainly the vast majority of young people, obtain their information today. This means there are major challenges ahead of us, above all with regard to disinformation in the Internet space.

I appreciate these risks. Exactly one year ago, on 9 February, in this House, I organised a major conference on Putinist, Russian disinformation, together with digital ministers from Poland and Ukraine.

But in fighting pathologies, we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. I appeal to remember that the foundation of democracy is, after all, freedom of speech. Freedom of speech must be

accompanied by responsibility. Hence the great need to educate our citizens. But we must not lead to unjustified censorship or restrictions on freedom of expression.

I am in favour of clear and consistent standards for moderating speech. As co-rapporteur of the Digital Services Act, the so-called DSA, I fought to create a safer, more transparent internet, so as not to give internet platforms, big internet platforms, social media, pretexts to remove content.

I urge you not to use what good we have enacted in the DSA against freedom of expression. I am concerned about some of the ideas to take away the anonymity of internet users. Such ideas are being considered by some of the political factions. I think this could lead to very dangerous censorship. And freedom of speech, I repeat, is a great value on the internet and a great value in a democracy.

### **Debate on New allegations of Russian interference in the European Parliament, in the upcoming EU elections and the impact on the Union - 10/04/2024**

Iratxe García Pérez (S&D)

Mr President, two months before the European Parliament elections, Putin's regime is stepping up its espionage, disinformation and propaganda activities, as well as its reprisals against dissidents and deserters.

In this respect, we should send a request to President Metsola because, now that we are no longer dealing with mere suspicions but with real certainties, a thorough investigation into Russian interference should be launched, as this plenary of Parliament requested last February. Because we had already been warned about these issues, the need for an investigation had already been raised, and it was only later that we became aware of all the information relating to this interference.

We cannot allow a blow to be dealt to the credibility of the European Parliament in the run-up to elections that will be decisive for the future of the European project and for supporting Ukraine in its fight for survival in the face of Putin's tyranny.

We know that interfering in elections is one of the main objectives of the Russian secret services, as demonstrated by Trump's arrival in the United States and the Brexit referendum. We also know that Putin's target is the far right of Le Pen, Orbán, Wilders, Salvini and Weidel. In the face of all this double threat, one question must be asked, that of the coherence of the attitude of those who normalise the far right and open the door to it, and who then claim to be here to defend other issues.

You can't claim to be the standard-bearer of freedoms in Europe and make a pact with a far right that is silent in the face of the imprisonment, torture, exile and death of any opponent who does not accept Putin's authority. How can the People's Party, for example, demand more military capabilities to defend Ukraine when its far-right partners remain silent in the face of Putin's massacre of the Ukrainian people? How can we mourn Navalni's death while our far-right allies look the other way when he is arrested and murdered? These questions should be asked by those who normalise and ally themselves with Putin's far-right allies.

Ladies and gentlemen, our duty is to ensure that citizens freely elect their MEPs. And the people of Europe need to know clearly what is at stake on 9 June: the Europe of autocrats, which is going backwards and allowing itself to be locked in its past, or the Europe of democrats, which is moving forward and making its future its own.

Nathalie Loiseau (Renew)

Mr President, at the moment, to find out what is going on in our Parliament, you have to read the press. It says that the Czech services have dismantled a network of Russian influence in Europe. "One more, you say? Well, not quite. We learn from the Belgian Prime Minister, speaking before his Parliament, that (and I quote): "Russia approached European parliamentarians, but also paid them to promote Russian propaganda. These are parliamentarians who are receiving money." The Belgian Prime Minister refers to his country's state security and does not use the conditional tense or any kind of language precautions.

We have seen that on the far right of this Chamber, people are shamelessly acting as spokesmen for Vladimir Putin. That several of its elected representatives collaborated with an obscure media belonging to a very close friend of Vladimir Putin and specialising in disinformation, we discovered and were astonished. But that European elected representatives should have accepted money from a regime that is hostile to us is something else entirely, and we are astonished.

Mrs Metsola must tell us everything she knows. The departments must make public everything they know. In two months' time, our fellow citizens will be called upon to renew this Parliament: they have the right to know whether they are voting for honest candidates or bought ones; they have the right to know which of us is acting out of conviction and which is giving in to corruption.

Valérie Hayer (Renew)

Mr President, Commissioner, ladies and gentlemen, I am outraged to learn that members of this House and candidates in the European elections have allegedly been paid by the Russian government and its agents to spread Kremlin propaganda and to work against the interests of those who elected them. This is why we, Renew, demand names, names and figures. Who paid? Which party? Through which intermediary? For what purpose? And for how much? This information is absolutely essential, because it is an attack on our European vision of the world, on our Parliament, on the democratic mandates of all of us here.

Yes, we are talking about a new form of interference. But it is also, and above all, a betrayal. A betrayal on the part of hypocritical MEPs and candidates, MEPs and candidates who have no desire, in their heart of hearts, to act on behalf of Europeans, MEPs and candidates who in reality have only two obsessions: making easy money and serving Putin.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is an urgent need for the identities of those involved to be communicated as soon as possible, so that our institution can cooperate fully with the investigation and take the necessary measures and sanctions. This is a matter of urgency, because in two months' time the European elections will be held, and Europeans need to know who they are voting for; because the best weapon for kicking out for good the Putin supporters who populate this Chamber, let's face it, is the ballot papers in June.

Sergey Lagodinsky (the Greens/EFA)

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I am very surprised by the situation in Ukraine. I often talk to people who are fleeing Russia, but also, of course, Ukraine, and they are astonished. They ask me - and many of you too - how is it that we fled Putin's propaganda and yet we end up with Putin's propaganda? Not just anywhere, but in Germany, in Europe. What is happening here is not an isolated case. Nor is it a coincidence. It is not an isolated slip-up by a single Member of Parliament.

No, it is a natural, ideological proximity to a government that has declared that we - Europe - and our democracies are the enemy. It is this closeness that poses a problem. This closeness exists on the left in an isolated way, and this closeness exists a lot on the right, among the right-wing radicals present in this room.

When Russia started this war - the latest to date - I wrote: We must not only defend Ukraine, but also deputinise ourselves. It's time to de-putinise ourselves - and the greatest responsibility and opportunity to do so lies with the people when they are elected.

Dear citizens, by your decisions, by your choices, you can help to ensure that next time the enemies of democracy no longer sit in this Parliament, but only friends of democracy - from different parties, but democratic and anti-Putin parties. This is your chance.

Raphaël Glucksmann (S&D)

Mr President, Madam Vice-President, ladies and gentlemen, Putin's war did not begin on 24 February 2022 and it is not limited to the borders of Ukraine. This war, in its hybrid form, has been targeting our democracies for too many years now.

And in this war, Vladimir Putin has found relays within our very institutions, starting with members of the far right and European nationalist leaders. They claim to be nationalists, they claim to be the defenders of our nations, when in reality they have been working for years for a foreign tyranny, hostile to the principles and interests of Europe. I chaired this Parliament's special committee on foreign interference for more than three years and I can tell you that corruption is, along with information manipulation and cyber attacks, a central element of this hybrid war.

With two months to go before the European elections, Russia is stepping up its attacks with one aim in mind: to destabilise our democracies and ensure the triumph of the henchmen of the Rassemblement National in France and the AFD in Germany. We must stand firm against such interference. There are times in history when showing the slightest weakness is criminal. This is one of those times.

Helène Fritzon (S&D)

Mr President! Yes, the next European elections will not be like the previous ones. Revelation after revelation, the links between Mr Putin and the far-right and right-wing populist parties are coming to light. The intentions are clear: to undermine support for Ukraine, weaken our democracy and divide our continent. The security of Europe as a whole is at stake. We must not let Russia influence this election. So let me be crystal clear.

We Social Democrats demand decisive action. We urgently need answers about the people and parties involved and the nature of contacts with Russia. It is clear to me that the people involved must be suspended. Ultimately, this is about safeguarding our democratic institutions and our democracy.

Jaak Madison (ID)

Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen. We are speaking in Estonian, and most of you are speaking in your mother tongue. First of all, I don't think anyone doubts that, if you have 705 Members of Parliament, it's obvious that some of them, maybe even a few dozen, are either conscious agents who are prepared to sell their souls to Satan for relatively little money. And the other group of people are useful idiots who do it for beliefs, for values, for an ideology or for some other reason, and there are people like that, there's no denying it. But the problem, I think, is much broader, this influence of people, because the souls of politicians are unfortunately very easy to sell. When the President of the Spanish Socialist Party talked a lot about the fear of the far right and called on people to make an informed choice in two months' time, he unfortunately left the Chamber and is probably not very interested in the rest of the debate. I would have liked to say to him directly, but surely this speech can be listened to and his officials can also do their job, that if the Spanish Socialist was so passionate about what he was doing and wanted to help Ukraine - which he must - Spain would have supported Ukraine to the tune of just over €600 million, the same small amount that France gave. Maybe these mainstream politicians can make great speeches, but they don't really take action. It is then pointed out that Trump was allegedly supported by Russian agents during the election campaign, which is an outright lie and a slander. Investigations were conducted for several years and no facts were uncovered. But what happened was that Trump being Trump, Russia, at least, didn't dare launch new attacks for four years. So, in my opinion, let's not mix all this up like mush and cabbage, but let's focus on the real facts and, of course, let's deal with the Russian agents who are sitting among us here and who have sat in the European Commission and in Germany, like Schröder or Merkel and all the others. This is a real problem for us.