



## EUROPEAN UNION

### **Reconciling Democratic Principles and the Fight Against Foreign Interference: The EU Must Show the Way Forward**

In the sphere of news and information, foreign interference can take many forms, including cyberattacks, transforming public media into state-controlled media, recruiting journalists to promote propaganda, acquiring stakes in foreign media outlets with malicious intent, making “turnkey” reports or articles available to journalists and disseminating false information on social media.

In Europe, foreign interference is mainly conducted by two countries: Russia, which harbors troll factories and where state media is controlled by the Kremlin, and China, which intimidates foreign media, broadcasts its propaganda abroad, and recruits influencers on various platforms, among other tactics. It is important to note, however, that other countries (such as Azerbaijan, Qatar and Turkey) also conduct interference and destabilisation operations in European democracies.

The methods of combating foreign interference currently in place have two main limitations: the potential to fall into their adversary's democracy-destroying trap by censoring their malicious content, and employing a response that shows naivety or weakness.

The European Union is not blameless in this respect. The decision to ban the broadcasting of the Russian media outlets *Sputnik* and *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), while justified, is not a satisfactory solution in practice as it allows the Kremlin to ban European media on the grounds of reciprocity.

If the European Union wants to effectively combat malicious foreign interference in the sphere of news and information without compromising its democratic principles, it must increase its support for reliable and independent journalism and implement measures to protect its information space.

The existing legislative framework is inadequate. The EU needs to go further. Its passive retaliatory strategy of exposing malicious interference (debunking) is useful but insufficient. The EU must move up a gear and adopt proactive measures.

To this end, RSF offers **five key recommendations**:

## **1) Set up an obligation for digital platforms to promote reliable sources of information**

Instead of asking the major digital platforms to block or remove search results for content identified as disinformation – which carries a risk for free speech and media freedom – the EU must require them to promote reliable sources of news and information, that is to say, sources whose methods comply with journalistic ethics requirements.

To identify these sources, these platforms could use the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI) standard. Pioneered and deployed by RSF, the JTI is the first and only international ISO-type standard for news and information reliability. The JTI provides a transparent mechanism for reducing disinformation and concretely rewarding respect for ethical and professional journalism. So far, over 1,500 media outlets in 85 countries have used the JTI to evaluate their practices, including their editorial methods, and 250 of them have already published their JTI transparency reports.

Setting a “due prominence” obligation for these platforms would complement existing EU legislation, namely the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). It is necessary to steer the public towards sourced, verified and independent reporting, in order to deflect the disinformation campaigns orchestrated by malicious foreign governments.

## **2) Restore equal treatment for all broadcast media accessible within the EU**

Regardless of their transmission method (satellite, terrestrial etc.) and their country of origin (including outside the EU), all broadcast media accessible in the EU should be subject to the same regulations, in particular those regarding accurate, independent and pluralistic news coverage.

The EU must therefore end the double standards currently in force. To do this, it must apply European law to all media broadcast within the EU and ensure that they all operate in the internal market under at least a national regulator's supervision.

## **3) Establish a system to protect the European information space based on the principle of reciprocity**

The EU must stop passively enduring waves of disinformation and propaganda from malevolent foreign governments. Its economic power and political influence give it the ability to impose a condition of reciprocity on access to its information space. If a third country censors independent media domestically and does not allow European media to broadcast within its territory, there is no reason for the EU to grant access to state media or other propaganda outlets from that country.

This system of protection must not be exclusively reactive. It must be implemented on the basis of a permanent and objective assessment of the degree of openness, independence and pluralism in the third countries concerned. Furthermore, it must offer the possibility of a political dialogue aimed at reducing imbalances in media treatment and promoting the development of reliable and independent reporting. Finally, if restrictive measures are necessary, they must be adopted in accordance with a fair, transparent and democratic procedure by entrusting them to an independent regulator whose decisions are subject to appeal.

## **4) Help exiled journalists to both resettle and resume their journalism**

Far from posing a threat to the European information space, foreign journalists and media who flee abroad to escape threats at home in connection with their journalism are a formidable media force that should be supported. As their means of action are limited due to their exile status, it is essential that the EU do whatever it can to help them flee safely, resettle in the EU, and resume their journalistic work.

RSF calls on the European Union to create a new fund dedicated to financing the installation of regional hubs to receive journalists fleeing their countries and help them to resume their journalistic activities.

## **5) Make reliable news sources available to more people in authoritarian countries**

To reverse the effects of propaganda, the EU must also increase the ability of independent exile media to broadcast their content to their countries of origin.

This is the aim of the *Svoboda* (“Freedom”) satellite package that RSF launched on 5 March 2024. This package is currently broadcasting ten radio and TV channels by satellite to Russian speakers in Europe, including western Russia, Belarus and Ukraine’s occupied territories, the Middle East and North Africa. As a result, 4.5 million homes in Russia alone now have access to reliable and independent reporting in their native language.

The European Commission must do more to ensure the economic sustainability of reliable news media with audiences outside the EU. This includes increasing funding for journalism under the Creative Europe programme.