European Union Efforts to Counter Disinformation

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Related Authors

- [Vincent L. Morelli](#)

- [Kristin Archick](#)

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Vincent L. Morelli, Section Research Manager (vmorelli@crs.loc.gov, 7-8051)
Kristin Archick, Specialist in European Affairs (karchick@crs.loc.gov, 7-2668)

The European Union (EU) is increasingly concerned about the use of propaganda by both state and non-state actors and has sought to devise new strategies to combat disinformation. On November 23, the European Parliament (EP) adopted a resolution entitled "[EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Anti-EU Propaganda by Third Parties](#)." In passing this non-binding resolution (by a vote of 304 to 179, with 208 abstentions), the EP added its support to European Union efforts to counter what Brussels believes are propaganda and disinformation campaigns against the EU and its member states by Russia and non-state actors such as the Islamic State terrorist organization.

In adopting the resolution, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) expressed the view that propaganda and disinformation campaigns seek to distort the truth, incite fear, provoke doubt, discredit the EU institutions, divide the EU and its North American partners, and paralyze decision-making. According to the main author of the resolution, MEP Anna Fotyga (from Poland), even the preparation of the text was a [target of hostile propaganda](#).

The resolution asserts that the Kremlin employs a wide-range of tools and instruments, such as TV stations, pseudo-news agencies, social media, and Internet trolls, to challenge Europe's democratic values and institutions. The resolution also contends that the Russian government is "funding political parties and other organizations within the EU" with the intent of undermining support for the EU and condemns "Russian backing of anti-EU forces" such as extreme-right parties and populist movements. To counter the Russian government's anti-EU efforts and the propaganda of the Islamic State and other radical movements, the MEPs underlined the importance of raising awareness, education, and improving online media and information literacy in the EU and neighboring countries in order to empower citizens to analyze media content critically.

Although the use of disinformation—particularly emanating from Moscow—is not new, the EU contends that since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its subsequent role in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin has accelerated its efforts to distort information being received throughout Europe. Over the last few years, the Russian government has upgraded its international television news channel (RT), established a new global news agency (Sputnik), and reportedly targeted hundreds of European news outlets in an attempt to spread its disinformation.

A recent "Brief" prepared by the European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) notes that disinformation activity appears to be a frequent tactic of the Russian government and that the presidential administration of Vladimir Putin, in particular, appears to coordinate all state media efforts. The EPRS study cites, as examples, Russian disinformation efforts related to the Scottish independence referendum, the Dutch referendum on an EU free trade agreement with Ukraine, and a rape case in Germany involving newly arrived migrants. According to some EU diplomats, fake news during the UK's Brexit campaign was employed by Russia-based social media. Many experts in Europe and the United States have also expressed concern that Russia attempted to influence the U.S. presidential election.

Russia's disinformation activity was initially addressed by the EU with the establishment in September 2015 of a small unit within the European External Action Service (EEAS) designed to raise awareness of Russian disinformation and highlight examples. This unit, now staffed by around 10 communications professionals from the EU institutions or the EU member states, is known as the EU East StratCom Task Force. A key purpose of the Task Force is to identify and compile what it believes to be false or distorted information or fake news and to alert media outlets, Internet users, and the general public of such disinformation. The Task Force also provides assistance to journalists and others to better identify such information. Each week the Task Force publishes two reports. One, the *Disinformation Review,* collects examples of pro-Russian disinformation all around Europe and exposes the breadth of the effort, including the countries and languages targeted. The second, the *Disinformation Digest,* analyzes how Russian media sees the world and follows key trends on Russian social media.

In adopting its resolution, the European Parliament urged that the EU's Task Force be reinforced and given additional financial resources to carry out what the EP considers a critically important function. The EP's resolution also calls upon the EU to deepen its cooperation with NATO on strategic communications.

In addition, the EP's resolution further supports the EU and its member states' efforts to address propaganda and disinformation from the Islamic State and other groups such as Al Qaeda. Such terrorist organizations have used disinformation to recruit European fighters for the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and to radicalize sympathizers who live in Europe. The EU has been working to counter terrorist ideologies, especially online, and to detect and remove Internet content that promotes terrorism or violent extremism. Measures include the launch in July 2015 of the EU's Internet Referral Unit (IRU) within Europol (the EU's agency for police cooperation) to monitor terrorist content on the Internet and social media platforms and to work with service providers to flag and remove such content. According to a July 2016 report, the IRU has assessed and referred for removal over 11,000 messages across 31 online platforms, and providers have removed over 91% of this content.