

The Tip of the Iceberg

How we end up with governments we neither want nor deserve

Frances Cowell

An EU Parliament report shows that Brexit and Trump were but the tip of the iceberg. The European Network's Frances Cowell looks at some of its highlights.

Most of us knew that Brexit and Trump's election in 2016 both were the products of lies and many of us at least suspected foreign interference. Even so, a report for the EU Parliament by Sandra Kalniete, a Latvian MEP, is eye popping.

It is based on investigations throughout 2020 and 2021; the report names Russia and China as the main, but not the only culprits. No surprise there, nor is the role of social media and their inscrutable algorithms in amplifying their messages. More surprising is the extent of the meddling.

People and organisations will act in their own best interests, mostly within the law, but sometimes outside. Ms Kalniete notes that most of the activities she documented are legal within the EU or member states. That is exasperating, but means that much can be fixed by relatively simple tweaks to laws. Illegal activities demand tighter defences and countermeasures, starting with building awareness among MEPs, the general public and within existing education systems. Simply agreeing what is meant by political interference would help promote best practice throughout the EU and beyond.

The report notes that algorithms which platforms such as Alphabet, Meta and Apple use to maximise their advertising are opaque to outsiders, so it is next to impossible to validate claimed efforts to counter information manipulation and interference. Non English language content is especially vulnerable, being given less attention than English language material; Diasporas are especially juicy targets for political interference. Self regulation, the social media platforms' preferred solution, clearly has not worked.

Currently, much online media content would be illegal in offline media. A bit of coordination would thus remove this anachronism.

Transparency and independent scrutiny of social media algorithms, at least by regulators, would also address two other problems: that mainstream advertisers can become unwitting and unwilling supporters of extremist material. It would also explain why legal content is often arbitrarily removed from platforms. Simple due diligence in naming true authors of online content, in the same way that financial institutions identify the true beneficial owners of bank accounts, would be helpful.

Coupled with this Ms Kalniete recommends more scrutiny and control of what information is sold on the internet, especially of 'fake likes' that boost sites' apparent popularity, and of users' data, which she describes as a 'goldmine' for malicious actors. Users should be easily able to opt out of sharing data online, for

example, as well as to report abuse or suspected interference. This has been talked about for years. It is now urgent.

Many *netizens* make regular use of fact checking sites, such as those run by large news agencies. This is a laborious and expensive, but critical, public service that merits public funding to ensure that fact checkers themselves are not vulnerable to manipulation. A public repository of key information in all EU languages would give Europeans easy access to fact based information.

Free and independent news reporting is a key plank of democracy. It is why journalists can find themselves threatened, often with violence, for reporting malicious goings on. Pegasus is just one example of illegal surveillance journalists and their families can be subjected to. Strong protection is urgently needed for them and the community they serve.

Education is another plank, yet many universities depend on Chinese and other foreign students for their funding, exposing them and their students to manipulation.

Yet not all foreign interference involves any kind of media. Many of us raised an eyebrow when Gerhard Schröder, former German Chancellor, joined the board of directors, later became chairman, of Rosneft, Russia's giant, state controlled gas producer in 2005. The other eyebrow might have been raised when, in 2016, he also became chairman of NordStream II, a contentious pipeline from Russia to Germany (that Mr Schröder supported while in office) that would allow Russia to bypass Ukraine while continuing to profit from gas sales to Germany. He has now been nominated to join the board of Gazprom, Russia's other energy giant. You don't have to reflect for very long to spot the conflicts of interest.

Ms Kalniete terms this arrangement 'elite capture'. Schröder is the best known instance, but she names at least five others, including former prime ministers of Finland and France as well as former Austrian and Czech government ministers. It does not stop there, either: French presidential candidates Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the far left, the far right's Marine Le Pen and especially Éric Zemmour all argue for sympathy, or even alignment, with Putin's position in the Ukraine crisis.

That brings us to electoral funding. Many would balk at voting for someone or something that is funded by Putin's Russia or the Chinese Communist Party. Harmonisation of electoral funding laws throughout the EU, with full transparency about who pays for political campaigns, would allow Europeans to make better informed decisions when they head to the polls.

Just as the current crisis in Ukraine highlights the danger lurking in the NordStream II pipeline, Ms Kalniete laments the sale, forced on the Greek government as part of creditors' austerity demands, of the port of Piraeus to the Chinese, giving that government a foothold in key EU infrastructure. She proposes much more robust EU level scrutiny of all foreign direct investment, with particular attention to critical infrastructure and technology investment. Much stronger coordination and resourcing of the EU's cyber security capabilities is integral to this.

The lesson of this punchy report is that the EU and its members are hardly powerless. Certainly, democracy and openness can leave one exposed, but they also allow problems to be recognised and dealt with openly. In keeping with this, Ms Kalniete stresses that any solution must itself respect Europeans' fundamental rights and freedoms of expression and information.

Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation by Sandra Kalniete, MEP
EuroParl

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EU action needs to be adaptable to keep up with new threats

She underlines the importance of education also in raising awareness among young people who tend to be the heaviest users of social media, and so would benefit most from a better ability to distinguish lies from facts. Member states should share best practices.