



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The integrity of the 2024 worldwide elections is more at risk than ever before



We will probably wait a long time for a repeat of the situation we face in 2024, when around 2 billion people will go to the polls in as many as 50 countries.

Among them are autocracies, where elections do not play a significant role in political life, like Iran or Russia. Elections will be held next year in most developed democracies - in the entire EU and the US, for example.

The latter risk having their political climate distorted by online manipulations, which could lead to the election of a government whose legitimacy will be called into question.

Before embarking on detailed strategies to defend against the spread of disinformation and the creation of narratives for the rise of undemocratic policies, at least 2 factors have been causing a nightmare for the democracies holding elections next year.

First, the general political environment at global level has been significantly conflicted, and divisions are reaching their peak. Second, technological innovations, primarily AI, will have a world debut of their destructive side in 2024, for which there is still no globally accepted antidote.

The EU elections are one of the principal targets

This week, the EU published worrying monitoring results, showing that X (formerly Twitter) is the platform with the highest percentage of "disinformation actors" compared to regular users.

Close to 9% of X's users spread disinformation posts, followed closely by Meta's Facebook, Vera Jourova, the Vice President of the European Commission reported.

Elections for the European Parliament will be held in all 27 EU member states next spring, so each will be a potential victim of centres for spreading disinformation and fake news.

Given the likelihood of Russian aggression against Ukraine and its hostile attitude towards the EU as a whole and each of its members continuing, the electoral processes in European democracies will be most at risk from Russia, which historically has the most developed disinformation industry in cyberspace.

The UK, where parliamentary elections are also possible in 2024, even though the deadline is 28 January 2025, will be in the same position.

The EU still lacks effective mechanisms to counter malignant cyber influence on electoral processes.

Its anti-disinformation code brings together 44 large companies on a voluntary basis. Most are major digital platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Google, TikTok), but X, for example, withdrew from this coalition.

Big-tech is reducing capacity to fight disinformation

The lack of capacity (and willingness) of the largest communication platforms to oppose the spread of false content is one of the decisive factors threatening the democratic principles of election cycles for years.

"I'm worried about the fact that in 2024, platforms will have fewer resources in place than they did in 2022 or in 2018, and that what we're going to see is platforms, again, asleep at the wheel", said Yoel Roth, former head of Twitter's Trust and Safety team.

Platform X is just one of many, which, on a wave of downsizing, has drastically reduced its content control teams.

This has resulted in the reduction of their own ability to react against fake news, conspiracy theories or discrediting political actors with disinformation.

Perhaps this is also a conspiracy theory. However, those who spread fake content tend

to be more popular online than those who do not, making the networks they belong to more desirable and numerous.

According to EU monitoring, disinformation actors utilise networks and publish content more frequently than "regular" users, attracting more followers.

The impact of Chinese disinformation

The election process in India may come under attack from China's online offensive, given that authoritarian nations, or more specifically, their para-state agencies, are the ones that create online disinformation campaigns.

According to a recently published study by the US State Department's Global Engagement Centre, Beijing has been investing billions of dollars in expanding its network of propaganda and disinformation influence globally.

Last August, more than 300 accounts with a combined following of nearly 65 million were part of the network of official Chinese diplomatic and state-controlled media accounts on social media.

An army of bots "amplify" their daily posts by customising problematic content for each nation China is interested in interfering with.

Companies are the key to protecting the electoral process

Regulation regarding the suppression of disinformation has traditionally trotted behind the pace dictated by the development of technology and techniques for spreading manipulation and fake content.

Due to the malignant influence of foreign disinformation centres, several of the 50 states where elections will take place next year will greet the vote with extreme anxiety.

The biggest digital companies and their communication platforms will once again be at the centre of attention as the only hubs where it is possible to oppose the destruction of the integrity of democratic elections.

"The risks are particularly high in the context of elections. I therefore urge platforms to be vigilant and provide efficient safeguards for this in the context of elections", said Vera Jourova, the Vice President of the European Commission.

But this level of appeal to the conscience of big tech companies will probably not be enough to stop new interference in electoral processes in democratic states.

Given the highest possible stake - preserving the validity of the elections for the highest state offices - governments are obliged finally to make their regulatory mechanisms effective, even repressive, towards disinformation distributors, and protect the legitimacy of their democratic elections.