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Research shows: large disinformation networks influenced European elections

Many thousands of accounts actively influenced public opinion on X (formerly Twitter) during the campaign for the European elections. Organised networks were active in France and Germany, but voters in the Netherlands, Italy and the English-speaking public were also influenced by the troll networks, which are of likely Russian origin. This is the outcome of an independent study commissioned by the Social Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) together the Dutch delegation GroenLinks-PvdA.

Member of the European Parliament, Thijs Reuten (S&D, GroenLinks-PvdA), is astonished by the results. "We commissioned this independent study as we were curious about the extent of online foreign interference and how measurable it is - especially because this sometimes seems so hard to ascertain. This study has shown that significant influence took place during the European elections. Troll armies managed to make topics trending and at the same time make certain news reports less visible. This clearly shows our democracy is vulnerable and that foreign powers are willing to spend a lot of money and effort to sow division in our population. We need to defend ourselves better against such organised attempts of foreign interference. I expect the European Commission and the intelligence services to be on top of this. Our open society is in danger if troll armies are able to manipulate social media and, therefore, the public debate".

In the months leading up to the elections, the Dutch research agency Trollrensics analysed traffic on X and demonstrated with absolute certainty that large networks of fake disinformation accounts were active. Trollrensics' data analysis shows, among other examples, at least 20% of all tweets about the French far-right politician Zemour came from this troll network. However, the research company estimates the actual percentage is even significant higher. This allowed those controlling the networks to manipulate the algorithm of X in such a way that the specific themes were amplified and thus reached a much larger.

The research also displays German political party AfD managed to get a big boost online thanks to the troll army. At least 10.7% of the tweets about the AfD came from the disinformation network. Again, the researchers consider it likely the real percentage is significantly higher. In addition, the network focused mainly on spreading pro-Russian propaganda, messages about anti-vaxxers with anti-vaccination narratives and anti-LGBTIQ+ messages.