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COVER NOTE

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HIGH REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE UNION FOR
FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND
SECURITY POLICY

Brussels, 5.12.2018
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**JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND
SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Action Plan against Disinformation

1. INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression is a core value of the European Union enshrined in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights and in the constitutions of Member States. Our open democratic societies depend on the ability of citizens to access a variety of verifiable information so that they can form a view on different political issues. In this way, citizens can participate in an informed way in public debates and express their will through free and fair political processes. These democratic processes are increasingly challenged by deliberate, large-scale, and systematic spreading of disinformation.

Disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm¹. Public harm includes threats to democratic processes as well as to public goods such as Union citizens' health, environment or security. Disinformation does not include inadvertent errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary. The actions contained in this Action Plan only target disinformation content that is legal under Union or national law. They are without prejudice to the laws of the Union or of any of the Member States that may be applicable, including rules on illegal content².

Following the Salisbury chemical attack and the related European Council conclusions³, the Commission and the High Representative presented a Joint Communication on bolstering resilience against hybrid threats⁴ that highlighted strategic communication as a priority field for further work. The European Council, then, invited the *"High Representative and the Commission to present, in cooperation with the Member States and in line with the March 2015 European Council conclusions, an action plan by December 2018 with specific proposals for a coordinated response to the challenge of disinformation, including appropriate mandates and sufficient resources for the relevant EEAS Strategic Communications teams"*⁵.

This Action Plan answers the European Council's call for measures to *"protect the Union's democratic systems and combat disinformation, including in the context of the upcoming European elections"*⁶. It builds on existing Commission initiatives and the work of the East Strategic Communication Task Force of the European External Action Service. It sets out actions to be taken by the Commission and the High Representative, with the assistance of the European External Action Service, in cooperation with Member States and the European Parliament. This Plan includes input received from Member States, including via discussions at Council⁷, in Permanent Representatives Committees I and II, the Political Security Committee, relevant Council working parties and meetings of strategic communication and political directors of Ministries of Foreign Affairs. It also takes into account the cooperation

¹ Communication on tackling on-line disinformation, COM(2018) 236.

² The Commission proposed targeted measures to address the spread of illegal content on-line, including the Recommendation on measures to effectively tackle illegal content online (C(2018) 1177). See also proposal for a Regulation on preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online COM(2018) 640 as well as the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive agreed on 6 November 2018.

³ European Council conclusions, 22 March 2018.

⁴ JOIN(2018) 16.

⁵ European Council conclusions, 28 June 2018.

⁶ European Council conclusions, 18 October 2018.

⁷ See policy debate on "Tackling the spread of disinformation online: Challenges for the media ecosystem" and Council conclusions of 27 November 2018.

with the Union's key partners, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Group of 7 (G7)⁸.

The Communication on tackling online disinformation (the April Communication) emphasised the key role played by civil society and the private sector (notably social media platforms) in tackling the problem of disinformation. As a follow-up, online platforms and the advertising industry agreed on a Code of Practice in September 2018 to increase online transparency and protect citizens, especially with a view to the 2019 European Parliament elections, but also in a more long-term perspective. It is now essential that these actors deliver on the objectives the Commission set out in April and fully comply with the Code of Practice⁹. In addition, an independent network of fact-checkers is being developed to increase the ability to detect and expose disinformation, and sustained efforts are being made at Union and national level to support media literacy.

This Action Plan is accompanied by a progress report on the April Communication¹⁰. This report sets out the progress achieved on the various actions, notably regarding the Code of Practice, fostering a secure, trust-worthy and accountable on-line ecosystem, activities linked to awareness raising and media literacy as well as support to independent media and quality journalism.

The European Council first recognised the threat of online disinformation campaigns in 2015 when it asked the High Representative to address the disinformation campaigns by Russia. The East Strategic Communication Task Force has been set up to address and raise awareness of this issue. In addition, the Joint Communication on Countering Hybrid Threats¹¹ set up the Hybrid Fusion Cell within the European External Action Service to act as a single focus for the analysis of hybrid threats. It also led to the setting up of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, which shares best practices and supports the activities of the Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in this field.

In view of the 2019 European Parliament elections and more than 50 presidential, national or local/regional elections being held in Member States by 2020, it is urgent to step up efforts to secure free and fair democratic processes. Threats affecting democracy in any Member State can harm the Union as a whole. Moreover, disinformation often targets European institutions and their representatives and aims at undermining the European project itself in general. On 12 September 2018, the Commission adopted measures¹² to secure free and fair European elections and recommended the use of sanctions where appropriate,

⁸ In the Charlevoix Commitment on Defending Democracy from Foreign Threats, G7 Leaders committed to take concerted action to respond to foreign actors who seek to undermine our democratic societies and institutions, our electoral processes, our sovereignty and our security.

⁹ See also Council conclusions of 27 November 2018.

¹⁰ COM(2018) 794.

¹¹ While definitions of hybrid threats vary and need to remain flexible to respond to their evolving nature, the concept captures the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare. There is usually an emphasis on exploiting the vulnerabilities of the target and on generating ambiguity to hinder decision-making processes. Massive disinformation campaigns, using social media to control the political narrative or to radicalise, recruit and direct proxy actors can be vehicles for hybrid threats. See JOIN(2016) 18.

¹² For a full overview of measures, see the Communication on Securing free and fair European elections, COM(2018) 637 final.

including for the illegal use of personal data to influence the outcome of the elections¹³. In addition, it is urgent that Member States take the steps needed to preserve the integrity of their electoral systems and infrastructure and test them ahead of the European elections.

Disinformation campaigns, in particular by third countries, are often part of hybrid warfare¹⁴, involving cyber-attacks and hacking of networks¹⁵. Evidence shows that foreign state actors are increasingly deploying disinformation strategies to influence societal debates, create divisions and interfere in democratic decision-making. These strategies target not only Member States but also partner countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood as well as in the Southern Neighbourhood, Middle East and Africa.

Disinformation produced and/or spread by Russian sources has been reported in the context of several elections and referenda in the EU¹⁶. Disinformation campaigns related to the war in Syria¹⁷, to the downing of the MH-17 aircraft in the East of Ukraine¹⁸ and to the use of chemical weapons in Salisbury attack¹⁹ have been well documented.

2. DISINFORMATION: UNDERSTANDING THE THREATS AND STRENGTHENING THE EUROPEAN RESPONSE

Disinformation is an evolving threat which requires continuous efforts to address the relevant actors, vectors, tools, methods, prioritised targets and impact. Some forms, especially state-driven disinformation, are analysed by the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, in cooperation with the Strategic Communication Task Forces of the European External Action Service and with the support of Member States' services.

The actors behind disinformation may be internal, within Member States, or external, including state (or government sponsored) and non-state actors. According to reports²⁰, more than 30 countries are using disinformation and influencing activities in different forms, including in their own countries. The use of disinformation by actors within Member States is an increasing source of concern across the Union. Cases of disinformation driven by non-state actors have also been reported in the Union, for example related to vaccination²¹. As regards

¹³ These sanctions are in addition to the ones provided by the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation 2016/679).

¹⁴ Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats: a European Union response, JOIN(2016) 18 final.

¹⁵ These cyberattacks may include targeted intrusions to collect sensitive information as a precursor to leaks or tainted leaks, take-over of social media accounts, social media accounts driven by bots, and disruption of information technology systems of, for instance, broadcasting companies or electoral commissions.

¹⁶ See for example the report by the Policy Planning Staff and the Institute for Strategic Research of France: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/information_manipulation_rvb_cle838736.pdf.

¹⁷ Joint statement by 17 member countries of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on chemical attacks in Douma, Syria:

<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/manipulation-of-information/article/syria-chemical-attacks-in-douma-7-april-joint-statement-by-france-and-16-other>.

¹⁸ On the disinformation campaign on MH-17, see the East Strategic Communication Task Force: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/mh17-time-is-running-out-for-disinformation/> and <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/flight-mh-17-three-years-on-getting-the-truth-out-of-eastern-ukraine/> as well as the statement from the Joint Investigation Team: <https://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/mh17-crash/@104053/reaction-jit-to/>.

¹⁹ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/timeline-how-russia-built-two-major-disinformation-campaigns/>

On the Russian cyber operation targeting the OPCW in the Hague, see: <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2018/10/04/netherlands-defence-intelligence-and-security-service-disrupts-russian-cyber-operation-targeting-opcw>.

²⁰ See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2017>.

²¹ See COM(2018) 245 and COM(2018) 244.

external actors, the evidence is strong in the case of the Russian Federation. However, other third countries also deploy disinformation strategies, quickly learning from the methods of the Russian Federation.

According to the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, disinformation by the Russian Federation²² poses the greatest threat to the EU. It is systematic, well-resourced, and on a different scale to other countries. In terms of coordination, levels of targeting and strategic implications, Russia's disinformation constitutes part of a wider hybrid threat that uses a number of tools, levers, and also non-state actors.

Constant targeted disinformation campaigns against the Union, its institutions and policies are likely to increase in the run up to the 2019 European Parliament elections. **This calls for urgent and immediate action to protect the Union, its institutions and its citizens against disinformation.**

Social media have become important means of spreading disinformation, including in some cases, like Cambridge Analytica, to target the delivery of disinformation content to specific users, who are identified by the unauthorised access and use of personal data, with the ultimate goal of influencing the election results. Recent evidence shows that private messaging services are increasingly used to spread disinformation²³. Techniques include video manipulation (deep-fakes) and falsification of official documents; the use of internet automated software (bots) to spread and amplify divisive content and debates on social media; troll attacks on social media profiles and information theft. At the same time, more traditional methods such as television, newspapers, websites and chain emails continue to play an important role in many regions. The tools and techniques used are changing fast - **the response needs to evolve just as rapidly.**

In addition to taking action within Member states and Union-wide, the Union has a significant interest in working with partners in three priority regions – the Union's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans. Exposing disinformation in countries neighbouring the Union is complementary to tackling the problem within the Union.

The European External Action Service has set up specific strategic communication task forces consisting of experts with relevant language and knowledge skills, to address the issue and develop response strategies. They are working closely with Commission services to ensure a coordinated and consistent communication approach in the regions.

Based on the Action Plan on Strategic Communication, adopted on 22 June 2015, the mandate of the East Strategic Communication Task Force comprises three strands of action: (i) Effective communication and promotion of Union policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood; (ii) Strengthening the overall media environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood and in Member States, including support for media freedom and strengthening independent media and (iii) Improved Union capacity to forecast, address and respond to disinformation activities by the Russian Federation. In response to the Council conclusions in December 2015 and June 2017, the European External Action Service set up

²² Russian military doctrine explicitly recognises information warfare as one of its domains: <https://www.rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>.

²³ According to Oxford University, direct messaging platforms have hosted disinformation campaigns in at least 10 countries this year.

two additional task forces: the Western Balkans Task Force²⁴ for the corresponding region and the Task Force South²⁵ for the countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa and the Gulf region.

Since it was established, the East Strategic Communication Task Force has effectively communicated on the policies of the Union in the Union's Eastern neighbourhood mainly through a campaigns-led approach. In addition, the East Strategic Communication Task Force has catalogued, analysed and put the spotlight on over 4,500 examples of disinformation by the Russian Federation, uncovering numerous disinformation narratives, raising awareness of and exposing the tools, techniques and intentions of disinformation campaigns. Its focus is on the Eastern Partnership countries and on Russian domestic and international media and its approach is to expose, on the basis of the evidence collected, the trends, narratives, methods and channels used and raise awareness of them.

The mandate of the East Strategic Communication Task Force should therefore be maintained and the mandate of the other two Strategic Communications Task Forces (Western Balkan and South) should be reviewed in the light of the growing scale and importance of disinformation activities in those regions and the need to raise awareness of the adverse impact of disinformation.

3. ACTIONS FOR A COORDINATED UNION RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION

Addressing disinformation requires political determination and unified action, mobilising all parts of governments (including counter-hybrid, cybersecurity, intelligence and strategic communication communities, data protection, electoral, law enforcement and media authorities). This should be done in close cooperation with like-minded partners across the globe. It requires close cooperation between Union institutions, Member States, civil society and the private sector, especially online platforms.

The coordinated response to disinformation presented in this Action Plan is based on four pillars:

- (i) improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation;
- (ii) strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation;
- (iii) mobilising private sector to tackle disinformation;
- (iv) raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

PILLAR 1: IMPROVING THE CAPABILITIES OF UNION INSTITUTIONS TO DETECT, ANALYSE AND EXPOSE DISINFORMATION

To address effectively the threat of disinformation, it is necessary to reinforce the Strategic Communication Task Forces of the European External Action Service, the Union Delegations and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell by providing them with additional specialised staff, such as experts in data mining and analysis to process the relevant data. It is also important to contract additional media monitoring services to cover a wider range of sources and languages and additional research and studies on the reach and impact of

²⁴ The Council conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process of 15 December 2015.

²⁵ The Council conclusions on Counter-Terrorism adopted on 19 June 2017.

disinformation. In addition, there is a need to invest in analytical tools such as dedicated software to mine, organise and aggregate vast amounts of digital data.

The reinforcement of the strategic communication teams of the European External Action Service will be done in two steps.

In the short term, the budget for strategic communication is expected to more than double²⁶ in 2019 and this will be accompanied by a reinforcement of at least 11 positions ahead of the European elections. In the medium term²⁷, additional positions of permanent officials will be requested in the strategic communication teams and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell in the headquarters, as well as new posts in delegations in the neighbourhood, to reach a total increase of 50-55 staff members over the next two years.

Further synergies will take place between the Commission's services and the European External Action Service, for example on sharing tools or designing communication campaigns.

Threat analyses and intelligence assessments are the basis for the work on disinformation. The expertise of the Intelligence and Situation Centre should be fully utilised to analyse the evolving nature of disinformation campaigns.

The Strategic Communication Task Forces will work closely with the relevant Union delegations and the Commission to tackle disinformation. In particular, they will cooperate with the internal Network against Disinformation of the Commission, set up following the April Communication²⁸.

Member States should complement and support the actions of the Union institutions by increasing their national capabilities and by supporting the necessary increases in resources for the Union institutions.

Action 1: With a view to the 2019 European Parliament elections in particular, but also with a longer-term perspective, the High Representative, in cooperation with the Member States, will strengthen the Strategic Communication Task Forces and Union Delegations through additional staff and new tools which are necessary to detect, analyse and expose disinformation activities. Member States should, where appropriate, also upgrade their national capacity in this area, and support the necessary increase in resources for the Strategic Communication Task Forces and Union delegations.

Action 2: The High Representative will review the mandates of the Strategic Communications Task Forces for Western Balkans and South to enable them to address disinformation effectively in these regions.

PILLAR 2: STRENGTHENING COORDINATED AND JOINT RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION

²⁶ Current discussions on the 2019 budget foresee an increase from EUR 1.9 million in 2018 to 5 million in 2019.

²⁷ Through amendments of the 2019 budget and/or the proposal for the 2020 budget.

²⁸ This network includes the representatives of Directorates-General of the Commission and its Representations. The Commission has also recently set up a working group with the European External Action Service and the European Parliament on tackling disinformation ahead of the European elections.

The first hours after disinformation is released are critical for detecting, analysing and responding to it. Consequently, **a Rapid Alert System will be set up to provide alerts on disinformation campaigns in real-time** through a dedicated technological infrastructure. This will facilitate sharing of data and assessment, to enable common situational awareness, coordinated attribution and response and ensure time and resource efficiency.

In view of the creation of the Rapid Alert System, **each Member States should designate, in line with its institutional setup, a contact point, ideally positioned within strategic communications departments.** This contact point would share the alerts and ensure coordination with all other relevant national authorities as well as with the Commission and the European External Action Service. This is without prejudice to existing competences of national authorities under Union and/or national law or under other parts of this Action Plan. Where disinformation concerns elections or the functioning of democratic institutions in the Member States, national contact points should closely cooperate with the national election networks²⁹. In this case, the outcome of the work of the Rapid Alert System should be shared with the European cooperation election network³⁰, in particular to exchange information on threats relevant to elections and support the possible application of sanctions. Online platforms should cooperate with the contact points underpinning the Rapid Alert System, in particular during election periods, to provide relevant and timely information.

The Rapid Alert System should be closely linked to existing 24/7 capabilities such as the Emergency Response Coordination Centre³¹ and the Situation Room of the European External Action Service³². The EU Hybrid Fusion Cell of the Intelligence and Situation Centre as well as the relevant Council Working Parties could also be used as channels for sharing information. The Commission and the High Representative will ensure regular exchange of information and best practices with key partners, including within the G7 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Prompt reaction via fact-based and effective communication is essential to counter and deter disinformation, including in cases of disinformation concerning Union matters and policies. This is important to foster an open, democratic debate free from manipulation, including in the context of the forthcoming European elections. Union institutions³³ and Member States need to improve their ability to react and communicate effectively. The Commission has already increased its funding for better communication activities, implemented through its regional communication programmes, including in the Union's neighbourhood, and Union Delegations. Union institutions are all active in communicating about European action and policies in the Union, in particular Commission Representations

²⁹ See Recommendation C(2018) 5949 on election cooperation networks, online transparency, protection against cybersecurity incidents and fighting disinformation campaigns in the context of elections to the European Parliament. These networks will bring together national election authorities, audio-visual media regulators, cybersecurity and data protection authorities as well as relevant expert groups, for example on media literacy. They constitute, together with the Union institutions, the European election network. The European election network will be convened for the first time in January 2019.

³⁰ Set up pursuant to the Recommendation issued on 12 September 2018.

³¹ The Emergency Response Coordination Centre is set up under Article 7 of Decision 1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

³² The Situation Room is a permanent stand-by body of the European External Action Service that provides worldwide monitoring and current situation awareness. It is part of EU Intelligence and Situation Centre and acts as a situation information hub for all relevant stakeholders from the European institutions.

³³ In the Commission, Members of the College of Commissioners, the Spokesperson's Service and Commission Representations would maintain their key role of stepping in to ensure rebuttals whenever there are errors in media reports.

and European Parliament liaison offices in the Member States play a key role to provide locally-tailored messaging, including specific tools to counter myths and disseminate facts³⁴.

Cooperation between Member States and Union institutions should be further strengthened, especially as regards information-sharing, common learning, awareness-raising, pro-active messaging and research. More intelligence sharing between Member States and Union institutions is needed to improve situational awareness and their respective response capacities. Pro-active and objective communication on Union values and policies is particularly effective when carried out directly by Member States. To this end, the Commission and the High Representative call on Member States to intensify their communication efforts and to defend the Union and its institutions against disinformation campaigns.

Action 3: By March 2019, the Commission and the High Representative, in cooperation with Member States, will establish a Rapid Alert System for addressing disinformation campaigns, working closely with existing networks, the European Parliament as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and G7's Rapid Response Mechanism.

Action 4: With a view to the upcoming European elections, the Commission, in cooperation with the European Parliament, will step up its communication efforts on Union values and policies. Member States should significantly strengthen their own communication efforts on Union values and policies.

Action 5: The Commission and the High Representative, in cooperation with Member States, will strengthen strategic communications in the Union's neighbourhood.

PILLAR 3: MOBILISING PRIVATE SECTOR TO TACKLE DISINFORMATION

Online platforms, advertisers and the advertising industry have a crucial role to play in tackling the disinformation problem, as its scale is directly related to the platforms' ability to amplify, target and spread disinformation messages of malicious actors. Given their past failures to act appropriately to tackle this problem, the Commission urged them in April 2018 to step up their efforts. Against this background, the Code of Practice on Disinformation was published on 26 September 2018³⁵. The main online platforms which signed the Code of Practice committed to specific actions to be carried out before the 2019 European Parliament elections.

The Commission calls upon all signatories of the Code of Practice to implement the actions and procedures identified in the Code swiftly and effectively on an EU-wide basis, focusing on actions that are urgent and relevant for ensuring the integrity of 2019 European elections. In particular, large online platforms should immediately (i) ensure scrutiny of ad

³⁴ Several Commission Representations have developed locally adapted tools to debunk disinformation, like Les Décodeurs de l'Europe in France, UE Vero Falso in Italy, Euromyty.sk in Slovakia and EU myth-busting cartoon competition in Austria and cartoon series in Romania.

³⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>. On 16 October, the Code's initial signatories provided their formal subscriptions to the Code, identifying the commitments each signatory will adhere to and a table listing relevant company best practices as well as milestones for the overall implementation of the Code in the EU. The initial signatories include the main online platforms (Facebook, Google, Youtube, Twitter), providers of software (Mozilla), advertisers as well as a number of trade associations representing online platforms and the advertising industry. The Code of Practice should create a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem and protect users from disinformation.

placement and transparency of political advertising, based on effective due diligence checks of the identity of the sponsors, (ii) close down fake accounts active on their services and (iii) identify automated bots and label them accordingly. Online platforms should also cooperate with the national audio-visual regulators and with independent fact-checkers and researchers to detect and flag disinformation campaigns in particular during election periods and to make fact-checked content more visible and widespread.

The Commission will, with the help of the European Regulators Group for Audio-visual Media Services (ERGA)³⁶, monitor the implementation of the commitments by the signatories of the Code of Practice and will regularly inform on whether and to what extent individual platforms are meeting these commitments. To allow effective and comprehensive monitoring, the platforms should by the end of this year provide the Commission with up-to-date and complete information on the actions they have taken to comply with these commitments. The Commission will publish this information in January 2019. The platforms should also provide complete information, including by replying to Commission's specific requests, on how they are implementing the commitments on a regular basis starting in January 2019 in order to enable a targeted monitoring of the compliance with the Code ahead of the European Parliament elections. This information will also be published.

In addition, the Code of Practice envisages that the signatories will provide a full report after twelve months. These reports should include complete data and information to enable a thorough assessment by the Commission. On this basis, the **Commission, assisted by independent expertise and with the help of the ERGA, will assess the overall effectiveness of the Code of Practice.** The Commission may also seek the assistance of the European audio-visual observatory.

The Commission notes that the overall effectiveness of the Code depends upon the widest possible participation of online platforms and the online advertising sector. It therefore calls upon additional relevant stakeholders to adhere to the Code.

Action 6: The Commission will ensure a close and continuous monitoring of the implementation of the Code of Practice. Where needed and in particular in view of the European elections, the Commission will push for rapid and effective compliance. The Commission will carry out a comprehensive assessment at the conclusion of the Code's initial 12-month period of application. Should the implementation and the impact of the Code of Practice prove unsatisfactory, the Commission may propose further actions, including actions of a regulatory nature.

PILLAR 4: RAISING AWARENESS AND IMPROVING SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Greater public awareness is essential for improving societal resilience against the threat that disinformation poses. The starting point is a better understanding of the sources of disinformation and of the intentions, tools and objectives behind disinformation, but also of our own vulnerability. A sound scientific methodology could help identify key vulnerabilities

³⁶ The European Regulators Group for Audio-visual Media Services comprises all the relevant regulators of all the Member States. It provides technical advice to the Commission in a number of fields related to the application of the Directive, facilitates cooperation among the national regulatory authorities and/or bodies, and between the national regulatory authorities and/or bodies and the Commission. The revised Audio-visual Media Service Directive further strengthened the role of this Group in particular in relation also to video sharing platforms.

across Member States³⁷. It is essential to understand how and why citizens, and sometimes entire communities, are drawn to disinformation narratives and define a comprehensive answer to this phenomenon.

Building resilience also includes specialised trainings, public conferences and debates as well as other forms of common learning for the media. It also involves empowering all sectors of society and, in particular, improving citizens' media literacy to understand how to spot and fend off disinformation.

A comprehensive response to disinformation requires active participation by civil society. **The Communication and the Recommendation³⁸, that are part of the set of measures on securing free and fair European elections (the Elections Package) called on Member States to engage with media, online platforms, information technology providers and others,** in awareness raising activities to increase the transparency of elections and build trust in the electoral processes. Member States' active engagement and follow-up in this context is needed in the run-up to the European elections.

Independent fact-checkers and researchers play a key role in furthering the understanding of the structures that sustain disinformation and the mechanisms that shape how it is disseminated online. Moreover, through their activities, they raise awareness of various types of disinformation threats and can contribute to mitigating their negative impact. It is necessary to strengthen their capacity to identify and expose disinformation threats and facilitate cross-border cooperation. Building on the actions outlined in the April Communication, it is necessary to scale up national multidisciplinary teams of independent fact-checkers and academic researchers with specific knowledge about local information environments. This requires the support and the cooperation of Member States in order to facilitate the functioning of the European network of fact checkers, in full respect of the independence of the fact-checking and research activities. Under the Connecting Europe Facility programme³⁹, the Commission will finance a digital platform which will network together the independent national multidisciplinary teams.

To increase public awareness and resilience, the Commission will further step up its commitment and current activities in relation to media literacy to empower Union citizens to better identify and deal with disinformation⁴⁰. Member States should rapidly implement the provision of the revised Audio-visual Media Service Directive requiring them to promote and develop media literacy skills⁴¹.

The Commission has proposed funding for the development of new tools to better understand and combat online disinformation in its proposal for Horizon Europe programme⁴². The

³⁷ This could be further explored as part of the work of the Media Pluralism Monitor, a project co-funded by the European Union and carried out by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom in Florence.

³⁸ See Commission Recommendation on election cooperation networks, online transparency, protection against cybersecurity incidents and fighting disinformation campaigns in the context of elections to the European Parliament, C(2018) 5949.

³⁹ Regulation (EU) No 1316/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Connecting Europe Facility, amending Regulation (EU) No 913/2010 and repealing Regulations (EC) No 680/2007 and (EC) No 67/2010.

⁴⁰ Such activities will include a Union online media literacy library and learning centre as well as other media literacy tools.

⁴¹ Article 33a of the revised Audiovisual Media Service Directive.

⁴² COM(2018) 435.

Commission will also support, where appropriate, information campaigns to raise users' awareness of the most recent technologies (e.g. deep fakes).

The work of independent media is essential for the functioning of a democratic society. The Commission⁴³ will therefore continue to support independent media and investigative journalists, as they contribute to the exposure of disinformation. In addition, the Commission will continue to carry out specific programmes related to media support, including with financial support, and professionalisation in its neighbourhood⁴⁴.

Action 7: With a view especially to the 2019 European elections, but also to the longer term, the Commission and the High Representative, in cooperation with the Member States, will organise targeted campaigns for the public and trainings for media and public opinion shapers in the Union and its neighbourhood to raise awareness of the negative effects of disinformation. Efforts to support the work of independent media and quality journalism as well as the research into disinformation will be continued in order to provide a comprehensive response to this phenomenon.

Action 8: Member States, in cooperation with the Commission, should support the creation of teams of multi-disciplinary independent fact-checkers and researchers with specific knowledge of local information environments to detect and expose disinformation campaigns across different social networks and digital media.

Action 9: As part of the Media Literacy Week in March 2019, in cooperation with the Member States, the Commission will support cross-border cooperation amongst media literacy practitioners as well as the launch of practical tools for the promotion of media literacy for the public. Member States should also rapidly implement the provisions of the Audio-visual Media Services Directive, which deal with media literacy.

Action 10: In view of the upcoming 2019 European elections, Member States should ensure effective follow-up of the Elections Package, notably the Recommendation. The Commission will closely monitor how the Package is implemented and where appropriate, provide relevant support and advice.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Disinformation is a major challenge for European democracies and societies, and the Union needs to address it while being true to European values and freedoms. Disinformation undermines the trust of citizens in democracy and democratic institutions. Disinformation also contributes to the polarisation of public views and interferes in the democratic decision-making processes. It can also be used to undermine the European project. This can have

⁴³ The Creative Europe programme, if adopted, will help reinforce Europe's news media sector, diversity and pluralism of journalistic content, as well as a critical approach to media content through media literacy, COM (2018) 438.

⁴⁴ The Commission funds the project "openmediahub" to: (i) provide journalists in the neighbourhood with the necessary skills for independent and objective reporting; (ii) improve the skills of the editorial staff and (iii) reinforce the network of media professionals and journalists in the neighbourhood. As regards the Western Balkans, the Commission is providing financial support for the setting up of a network of journalistic associations, the building of trust in media, and the reinforcing of judiciary systems to defend freedom of expression. In this area the Commission also supports public service media, new independent media outlets, and the improvement of quality and professionalism in journalism.

considerable adverse effects on society across the Union, in particular in the run up to the 2019 European Parliament elections.

Strong commitment and swift actions are necessary to preserve the democratic process and the trust of citizens in public institutions at both national and Union level. The present Action Plan sets out key actions to tackle disinformation in a coordinated approach of the Union institutions and the Member States. It also highlights measures to be taken as a matter of priority by different actors ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections. Member States should step up their solidarity and defend the Union against hybrid attacks, including attacks using disinformation.

At the same time, and in the long-term, the objective is for the Union and its neighbourhood to become more resilient against disinformation. This requires continuous and sustained efforts to support education and media literacy, journalism, fact-checkers, researchers, and the civil society as a whole.

The Commission and the High Representative therefore:

- recall that joint action is required by all relevant institutional actors as well as by the private sector, in particular online platforms, and civil society as a whole to tackle effectively all the different aspects of the disinformation threat;
- call on the European Council to endorse the present Action Plan;
- call on Member States to cooperate in carrying out the actions set out in this Action Plan;
- as a matter of priority, call on all relevant actors to implement those actions which are urgent and relevant in the run up to the upcoming European elections in May 2019.