



## Press Release

Luxembourg, 3 June 2021

# EU needs to step up its efforts to tame disinformation

Disinformation is a serious and increasing problem across the EU. In 2018, the EU issued an action plan to combat disinformation. This plan was relevant at the time it was first drawn up, but it is incomplete. Its implementation is broadly on track, but it is still being outpaced by emerging threats. This is the conclusion of a special report published by the European Court of Auditors (ECA). The auditors found that more coordination is needed at EU level, and that Member States need to step up their involvement, for instance in the rapid alert system. There is also a need to improve the monitoring and accountability of online platforms, and to include disinformation in a coherent EU media-literacy strategy, a strategy which is currently lacking.

*“Any attempt to maliciously and intentionally undermine or manipulate public opinion represents a grave threat to the EU itself. At the same time, fighting disinformation represents a major challenge: the EU needs to avoid infringing upon its fundamental values, such as the freedom of opinion and expression, when it is doing so”* said Baudilio Tomé Muguruza, the member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. *“The EU’s action plan against disinformation was relevant when it was drawn up, but it remains incomplete. We recommend that the EU’s response to disinformation should be stepped up, and that its coordination be improved.”*

The EU’s action plan against disinformation has triggered positive developments, but it has not lived up to all of its promises, according to the auditors. The plan contained relevant measures – for example, debunking and reducing the visibility of misleading content – but it has not been updated or reviewed since 2018, even though disinformation tactics, actors and technology are constantly evolving. In December 2020, the Commission published the European Democracy Action Plan, which includes anti-disinformation measures, without clarifying exactly how it relates to the 2018 action plan against disinformation. The auditors warn that pursuing similar objectives through different initiatives makes coordination more complex, and increases the risk of inefficiencies.

The EU’s action plan against disinformation also did not include comprehensive arrangements to ensure that the EU’s response to disinformation was well coordinated, effective and proportionate to the type and scale of the threat. One of its strategic measures was the setup of a rapid alert system to coordinate responses and joint actions among Member States, EU institutions and other

*The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors’ special report. The full report is available at [eca.europa.eu](https://eca.europa.eu).*

## ECA Press

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organisations, such as NATO and the G7. The auditors have found that the system has facilitated information-sharing, but has not brought coordinated common attributions and responses as initially envisaged. Member States are not using it to its full potential.

The auditors have looked at the European External Action Service's (EEAS's) strategic communications division and its three task forces – StratCom East, Western Balkans and South – and found that they have improved the EU's capacity to forecast and respond to disinformation in neighbouring countries. However, the auditors consider that the mandates and resourcing of these task forces should be reviewed in the light of new emerging threats. The EUvsDisinfo database, which is the East task force's main product, has helped raise awareness about Russian disinformation. However, the auditors raise some questions about its independence and ultimate purpose, as it could be perceived as representing the EU's official position.

The EU action plan has also targeted the private sector and civil society in the joint fight against disinformation. The European Commission established a code of practice for engagement with online platforms, consisting of voluntary measures. For example, during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the code of practice led the platforms to give greater prominence to information from authoritative sources. This was a pioneering approach. But the auditors found that it has been unsuccessful in holding online platforms accountable for their actions, and in inducing them to play a greater role in actively tackling disinformation. The goal of raising awareness and improving social resilience was also not achieved, the auditors say. They highlight the absence of a media-literacy strategy that includes tackling disinformation, and the fragmentation of policy and actions to increase people's capacity to access, understand and interact with media and communications. The auditors also see a risk that the newly created European Digital Media Observatory may not achieve its objectives.

### **Background information**

Responsibility for combating disinformation lies primarily with the Member States. There is no EU legal framework governing disinformation apart from Article 11 of the Charter on Fundamental Rights, dealing with freedom of expression and information, and a series of policy initiatives.

Special report 09/2021: "*Disinformation affecting the EU: tackled but not tamed*" is available on the ECA website ([eca.europa.eu](https://eca.europa.eu)) in 23 languages.

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