



Defence of Democracy – Commission proposes to shed light on covert foreign influence

Strasbourg, 12 December 2023

Today, the European Commission adopted a Defence of Democracy package, ahead of the 2024 European elections. The central piece of this package is a legislative proposal that will **enhance transparency and democratic accountability of interest representation activities on behalf of third countries** which are aimed at influencing policies, decision making and the democratic space. It also includes **two recommendations which aim to promote free, fair and resilient elections and the participation of citizens and civil society organisations to policy-making.**

The aim of this package is to tackle the threat of foreign interference with more transparency, while at the same time encouraging civic engagement and citizens' participation in our democracies.

A recent [Eurobarometer](#) survey shows that **81% of Europeans believe that foreign interference in our democratic systems is a serious problem** that needs to be addressed. It is high time to bring covert foreign influence to light.

Ensuring transparency of foreign interest representation

The EU is open to the world and actively engages with partners across the globe. Where third country governments use interest representation activities to promote their objectives and influence democratic processes in the EU, this needs to be made transparent. Today's **proposal for harmonised rules aims to ensure a common high level of transparency and democratic accountability** across the EU in relation to lobbying campaigns, as well as similar activities, performed by entities on behalf of a third country government.

The [proposal](#) foresees the following transparency requirements:

- **Registration in a Transparency Register:** entities carrying out interest representation activities on behalf of a third country will have to register in a transparency register. Member States will be asked to establish or adapt existing national registers for this purpose.
- **Public access:** key elements of the data on such interest representation activities will be publicly available, allowing for transparency and democratic accountability. This relates, for instance to the annual amounts received, the third countries concerned and the main goals of the activities.
- **Record keeping:** entities carrying out interest representation activities on behalf of a third country will be required to keep records of the key information or material related to the interest representation activity for a period of four years after the end of this activity.

The proposal **includes proportionate rules and safeguards** to avoid registration requirements being misused to limit fundamental rights, such as the freedoms of expression or of association, or to unduly restrict the civic space, namely:

- **Independent supervisory authorities** will be empowered to request limited records in duly justified cases only and in a proportionate manner;
- Authorities need to ensure that **no adverse consequences arise from registration;**
- **Possibility to derogate** from the publicity of information in duly justified cases;
- The full harmonisation under the proposal **prevents Member States from maintaining or introducing additional requirements and practices.**

With this proposal, the Commission seeks to contribute to setting standards, not only in the EU, but also on a global scale, on how to address foreign influence in a streamlined and proportionate way, fully respecting fundamental rights.

Strengthening electoral processes in the EU

Today's [Recommendation on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union and enhancing](#)

[the European nature and efficient conduct of the elections to the European Parliament](#) aims to promote high democratic standards for elections in the EU, supporting high voter turnouts, inclusive participation and making it easier to exercise one's electoral rights. The Recommendation also addresses the protection and cybersecurity of election-related infrastructure and proposes measures to minimise risks of interference from third countries through funding of political parties, political foundations, campaign organisations and candidates. A free and fair democratic debate relies on legality and fair play. The Recommendation stresses that surveillance tools should never be used to interfere with the democratic debate and deploying such tools to target political actors and journalists for political gain is unacceptable.

The recent [Eurobarometer](#), published on 6 December, shows that the main concerns for EU citizens in the context of the elections in Europe are related to people basing their voting decision on disinformation (78%), followed by elections being manipulated through cyberattacks (72%), foreign countries influencing elections covertly (70%) and people being pressured into voting in a particular way (65%).

Fostering inclusive participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making

The [Recommendation on promoting the engagement of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes](#) aims to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society organisations and human rights defenders, allowing them to effectively participate in democratic policy-making. It also encourages Member States to develop a structured approach to participation processes through predictable, accessible, transparent and inclusive frameworks. With a similar intention to enhance its framework for citizens' participation, the Commission, as a follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe, has now embedded European Citizens' Panels in its policy-making process. In early 2024, the Commission will launch a revamped Have Your Say portal, as a new online one-stop-shop for Citizens' Engagement.

In the recent [Eurobarometer](#), almost 9 in 10 respondents saw civil society as important in promoting and protecting democracy and common values.

Next steps

The Commission looks forward to the full engagement of the European Parliament and the Council to make decisive progress on all legislative proposals in the democracy area before the European parliamentary elections; and for the wide circle of national actors involved, public and private, to ensure the implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan and of this new Defence of Democracy package.

In the run-up to the 2024 European elections, the Commission will foster **pre-election dialogues** and collaboration with online platforms and other signatories of the Code of Practice on Disinformation, building on existing commitments to transparency of political advertising and cooperation among signatories, whilst exploring further ways to address the harmful potential of new AI-powered tools when it comes to disinformation.

Background

In the European Union, citizens can freely express their views and participate in democratic life, choose their political representatives and have a say on their future. We celebrate European elections and are looking forward to 2024. Democracy and the rights and freedoms associated with it are at the core of our open and transparent societies. But democracy also has its enemies. Authoritarian regimes see it as a threat. Some regimes have made attempts to exploit societal division and stoke mistrust of established institutions. They spread disinformation to weaken the democratic voice of citizens and civil society and to distort election campaigns.

The Defence of Democracy package builds on previous Commission initiatives to safeguard European democracy, including the [European Democracy Action Plan](#). Three years after its adoption, the implementation of the [European Democracy Action Plan](#) is in full swing. The EU promotes free and fair elections and strong democratic participation, supports free and independent media and counters disinformation inside and outside the EU.

Other Commission initiatives to protect our democracy are the annual Rule of Law Report Cycle, recent anti-corruption and ethics initiatives, as well as the 2022 report on the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights focused on the civic space.

Today's Defence of Democracy package includes a [Directive on transparency of interest representation on behalf of third countries](#), a [Communication reviewing the work done under the European Democracy Action Plan](#), a [Recommendation on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union and enhancing the European nature and efficient conduct of the elections to the European](#)

Parliament, and a [Recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes](#). The Commission also published today the results of a complementary [Eurobarometer survey on Democracy](#).

For more information

[Defence of Democracy – Questions and Answers](#)

[Defence of Democracy – Factsheet](#)

[Communication on Defence of Democracy](#)

[Proposal for a Directive establishing harmonised requirements in the internal market on transparency of interest representation carried out on behalf of third countries](#)

[Recommendation on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union and enhancing the European nature and efficient conduct of the elections to the European Parliament](#)

[Recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes](#)

[Defence of Democracy - website](#)

[Democracy and electoral rights – website](#)

[Code of Practice on disinformation - website](#)

[Media Freedom Act - website](#)

[Rule of Law Mechanism - website](#)

[European Citizens' Panels - website](#)

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Quotes:

Europe is proud of being an open democracy. But it would be naïve to think that democracy does not need any protection. In today's world it is quite the opposite. And we should not let Putin or any other autocrat covertly interfere in our democratic process. We will tackle the threat of foreign interference by a new law mandating transparency. And, ahead of the European Parliament elections next year, we will strengthen the integrity of elections, offline and online, together with the Member States.
Věra Jourová, Vice-President for Values and Transparency - 12/12/2023

Our greatest allies in a democracy are our citizens. The beauty of this package lies in its diversity, with legislative and non-legislative tools. It keeps our open society open! With today's package the Commission is putting forward a Recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes. We are creating opportunities for citizens at different levels of governance to voice their opinions and contribute to policymaking. Innovative deliberative practices reinforce representative democracy by increasing trust and bridging the existing gaps between citizens and democratic institutions. Some try to undermine democracy at its roots, we are taking care of these roots.
Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President for Democracy and Demography - 12/12/2023

Democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights are the EU's founding values and underpin its achievements. Today's instruments will defend our democratic systems from outside interests, contribute to the promotion of free and fair elections, fight against disinformation and foster the participation of citizens and civil society organisations. By enhancing transparency and accountability, the Directive will promote institutional trust and democratic values in the EU.
Didier Reynders, Commissioner for Justice - 12/12/2023

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