KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG
MEDIA PROGRAMME SEE

"We should train the EU citizens to develop a sensitivity towards disinformation" says German MEP Michael Gahler

Martina Kazakova

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In the second interview of our series on the coming European elections, our Alumna Fellow Martina Kazakova discusses disinformation within the EU.

Encountering misleading information is a common occurrence for European citizens. According to a 2022 survey across all EU Member States, the highest presence of disinformation is in countries in South East Europe such as Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia. Moreover, in recent years we have also come across an evolved kind of disinformation generated with the help of AI technologies. Our guest this week is Michael Gahler, a German MEP from the EPP Group.

Gahler has been a Member of the European Parliament for 25 years now. During this time, he has held a number of different roles. These include foreign policy spokesman for the EPP Group, member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Head of the European Parliament Delegation to the Pan-African Parliament and Vice-President of the OACPS-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly. He is also a Member of the Executive Board of the EPP Group.

Mr. Gahler, what impact do foreign disinformation campaigns targeting the European elections in June have?

It has an impact on certain more vulnerable groups of the population - those who are not very firm in their political attitudes, those who notice that there is a lot going on, that there is a war in Europe, that there are many uncertainties, that there is a migration crisis. Those who are searching for simpler answers to complex issues may be especially vulnerable to news that come through Telegram, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook.

This is what I also personally note on my Facebook pages, that all of a sudden some of my friends are posting or sharing certain phrases that have no other purpose than to make people feel uneasy and unhappy about issues that are at first glance by no means related to the EU. They are national issues and they are just about to make people uneasy with the current government. This goes across a lot of EU countries and I am pretty sure it comes from troll factories in Russia or from those political parties who are close to Russia and are spreading it.

People like Putin are unideological, they do not care whether it is extreme right or extreme left, or extreme populism, they try to instrumentalise all those circles who are unhappy and try to get the people in an unfavourable mood towards those who are in charge.

What have been the most successful disinformation narratives in the 2024 European election campaign so far?

There are those who say how much money we spend on Ukraine. Other narratives have to do with migration, where they try to create the impression that the EU is not able to tackle the issues, that we are exposed to an uncontrolled migration, and as a consequence the crime rate is rising, women cannot go out at night on the streets because they are endangered by refugees. And in Germany, for instance, they try to make people feel uneasy because the Ukrainian refugees are treated like social welfare recipients, so they are not treated like asylum seekers. They have better rates, better treatment - they can work, they can get medical treatment, the kids can go to school. So, the narrative is: "Those Ukrainians come and they are getting everything. They are even getting a kindergarten place and I am not".

[According to an IPSOS](link) survey, only 9% of Europeans have taken part in learning programmes/courses on how to use online tools to distinguish true from false information online. How can voters identify the truth and avoid being misled if media literacy is still not widespread in Europe?

Indeed, this is a real challenge. But if you read something particularly strange online, I say: "Please, double check it. Not everything that surprises you should be taken for granted. Especially when it sounds quite strange and outrageous. Please, do not automatically believe it".

Against this background, what more should the EU, in particular the European Parliament, do to promote the importance of media literacy?

We have done some legislation that obliges Internet platforms to remove fake news. It is a huge challenge because sometimes it comes in a very subtle way. This obligation is part of the Digital Service Act. If everybody read every week from our East Stratcom (e.g. The Task Force was set up to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns) we would also be quite ahead, but that is definitely not something that we can expect. So, I am already happy if some of my colleagues read the East Stratcom update on Russian fake news every Thursday morning on their website. This is

something that could strengthen or alert policy makers and other multiplicators that we are aware of the fake news the EU citizens are faced with.

As you already have mentioned, the EU's main tool in the fight against disinformation is the Digital Services Act, which aims to improve the transparency and accountability of online services. What are the challenges of enforcing such regulations?

What we should do is to compare notes and to check best practices. In certain countries we have been more successful because this issue has been addressed in time. Finland is a very good example in this regard - they have shown quite a level of resilience against Russian attempts over many years to impress them in their direction. Such experience and practice should be spread around the EU, at national level, at regional level, in the schools and also among journalists. Perhaps journalists are key factors in ensuring that the truth is reported.

And then for the young ones who are watching TikTok - the policy makers and those in the educational sector should be at least as creative as the bad guys are. TikTok is the medium where the right-wing populists are the most active, while the mainstream parties are somehow almost helpless in reacting. So, perhaps we should have to take some more money in our hands and the most able people among our crowd who could respond and address that and contribute to a level playing field and not leave it to the extremists and the populists because we are simply too lazy, too complacent, too arrogant.

In recent years, disinformation has also been produced with the help of AI technologies - deepfakes, image manipulation, voice manipulation. What will be the main challenges for the EU in the next five years in terms of tackling this "evolved" form of disinformation?

Train the people to develop a sensitivity towards news that really seems to be unbelievable and outrageous. With all this Artificial Intelligence around us, let us work with our natural intelligence to become better again.