

## Call for strong action against the spread of disinformation on social media about the invasion of Ukraine

*Brussels, 10th of March 2022*

Dear President Von der Leyen,  
Dear High Representative/Vice-President Borrell  
Dear Vice-President Vestager,  
Dear Vice-President Jourova,  
Dear Commissioner Breton,

The invasion of Ukraine has made trustworthy information more important than ever: it is a question of life and death. Putin will continue his information war, both in Ukraine to spread confusion, terror and break their morale, and in the EU too to break our unity, divide our societies and erode our democracies.

This means we, as EU lawmakers, must act. We must protect our society and make ourselves more resilient to the spread of disinformation, both with crisis measures and structural measures. **Free speech and pluralism of ideas remain cornerstones of democracy. If we want to protect our freedom of expression, access to a plurality of opinions and free press, we need to tackle the large-scale spread and promotion of disinformation online.**

The Commission and Member States have now banned Russia Today and Sputnik stop the spread of war propaganda in the EU. We understand this as a temporary crisis measure. **Still, social media platforms' personalised recommender algorithms actively promote and spread content that induces anger, such as disinformation, clickbait and hate.**

The fact that this happens in a personalised way pushes those vulnerable to misinformation to further engage with more extreme content. **This system poses a threat to our democracies, our security and leaves our societies vulnerable for hybrid threats and interference from abroad.** Although information on recommendations, views and the spread of information on online platforms is lacking, the testimony of Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen gives us a strong indication that their algorithms work similarly everywhere in the world.

**While state channels as Russia Today and Sputnik are a clear source of disinformation, a large part of disinformation and comes from more covert online networks.** Think of indirectly Russian-backed disinformation online, campaigns through networks of bots spreading disinformation and false narratives or influencers reproducing disinformation about the invasion. At the same time, this sort of shocking, emotion fuelling or controversial content is often the content that goes *viral* online, reaching tens of thousands of people on social media.

Therefore, we urge the EU to take a strong and common response in this crisis, not only focusing on the state media as the clear source of disinformation, but focusing on

measures to tackle the viral spread of disinformation. **Attention-grabbing content must no longer spread faster than more nuanced information on social media.**

For years, social media have actively contributed to the spread of disinformation. Whistle-blower Frances Haugen explained in our house, that despite knowing the effects, platforms structurally choose “profit over people”. We can no longer delegate measures to counter disinformation to private companies. **We need to move beyond voluntary measures, step up as legislators and set basic rules to ensure neutral and free access to information.** We even have legislation currently on the table.

Despite repeated calls from whistle-blowers, media and civil society, we have not yet fundamentally tackled this manipulative and divisive system. It is crucial to tackle this structurally, but also as an urgent measure to counter Russian disinformation in the midst of an invasion of Ukraine.

This is why EU lawmakers must now step up and set clear rules, both as crisis measures and, where relevant, (re)consider these points in trilogues in the DSA for a structural approach to disinformation:

- **Turn off personalised algorithms based on interaction by default. These systems are known to promote disinformation, so ensure chronological order of posts becomes the standard**
- **Map the spread of information, algorithmic promotion, networks spreading disinformation on social media, and make it mandatory to share this data with researchers, NGO’s and governments**
- **Posts with a large reach or that go ‘viral’ must be thoroughly fact-checked by independent fact checkers as soon as possible**
- **Demonetise disinformation: ensure that the large scale spread of disinformation, clickbait and ‘viral’ posts contain false information does not bring financial benefits**
- **Demote information coming from sources that are known to be Russian state-backed**
- **Support the independent media and free press that have now been banned from Russia financially and logistically**

**Undersigned,**

MEP Kim van Sparrentak (Greens/EFA)

MEP Michal Šimečka (Renew)

MEP Raphaël Glucksmann (S&D)

MEP Pernando Barrena (The Left)

MEP Ivan Štefanec (EPP)

MEP Sergey Lagodinsky (Greens/EFA)

MEP Anna Donath (Renew Europe)

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