



Adopted at PES Presidency of 31/01/25

PES Presidency Declaration
Europe must defend democracy against social media manipulation
and foreign interference

The year 2025 marks a crucial crossroads for Europe and the world. Rarely in recent history have we faced such profound challenges and threats to our democratic foundations and social fabric. We face both internal and external challenges that vary from the ongoing Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and the dramatic situation in the Middle East that continue to cause immense human suffering, the climate crisis, the rapid development of digitalisation, the rise of far-right movements and a “reactionary international”, the power of tech giants which remains unchecked, and the undermining of the multilateral system. With Donald Trump’s return to the US presidency adding further dangers to democracy and international order, progressives must lead in ensuring that the EU remains a champion of human rights, democracy, rule of law, sustainability, and international cooperation. This demands a strong mobilisation of progressives and rapid collective action from the EU.

A new trend is particularly alarming: the weaponization of social media to undermine democracy. For years, we raised concerns regarding the functioning of social media, their role in the democratic debate, and the lack of transparency of their algorithms. In the last few years, hostile foreign actors and extremist groups have used social media platforms to influence elections and shape democratic debates. This was made possible by the failure of self-regulation of social media companies and the lack of transparency surrounding algorithms. Today, they have crossed a line, and it is time to take action. Disinformation and far-right propaganda are flooding digital platforms and actively undermining public trust. Social media platforms have dropped any pretence of caring about damages to society. We have reached a tipping point: We must set and enforce our rules for social platforms to safeguard our free, social, and democratic societies.

The unchecked power of tech oligarchs and their growing influence are posing significant challenges to democracy. Largely unaccountable, they hold disproportionate power. Some are now using their platforms, which they claim as neutral spaces of public discussion or entertainment, to promote their political agenda, amplify far-right ideologies, distort public discourse, influence elections, and spread fake news and disinformation.

We are deeply concerned about foreign interference in democratic elections. In Romania, recent allegations of Russian interference in the presidential elections highlight the dangers posed by external actors seeking to undermine our sovereignty, democracy and the integrity of the European project. In the face of this threat, we reaffirm our full solidarity and support to PSD Romania in the upcoming elections.

The next electoral battle is in Germany, where social media and tech oligarchs like Elon Musk are using their platforms and position to promote the far right and intervene in election campaigns. Here too, all democrats must unite to defend democratic values against rising extremism. The PES stands firmly with the SPD, Olaf Scholz, and all progressive forces committed to upholding the principles of justice, equality, and democracy.

Democracy thrives on informed debate, undistorted by disinformation, and equal participation, not on hate speech, propaganda, or algorithmic manipulation.

In the EU, we have a complete rulebook to protect our democracies and our citizens:

- with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the EU can do more to reduce the widespread personal data collection that allows for the exploitation of individual and societal vulnerabilities.
- with the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), we can force open the black boxes of algorithms and better understand how algorithms distribute disinformation and influence elections.
- with the Digital Services Act (DSA) that offers us strong investigative powers, and subsequent sanctions, to ensure the biggest players are up to their responsibility.
- with the Digital Markets Act (DMA), we can ensure fair competition and a level-playing field, giving chances to our companies to develop European alternatives to the current tech giants.

The rules are there, but now we must have the political will to act. The PES calls for decisive action:

- We urge the European Commission to fully implement and enforce the DSA and the DMA, and the AI Act to ensure accountability and transparency in the digital space, as well as to propose the Digital Fairness Act as soon as possible to ban addictive designs of online services and tackle unethical technical and communication practices by social media influencers.
- Launch full investigations under DSA of all platforms, but in particular X and TikTok, requesting access to data to fully understand the extent to which disinformation and other harmful content is allowed to roam free or, even worse, in the case of X, is promoted by the platform itself.
- Furthermore, the black box of algorithms must be opened for greater transparency. To this end, we must make full use of DSA provisions giving access to data to authorities and adequately fund the European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency.
- As Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez reiterated on 22 January 2025, social media CEOs must be held personally accountable for non-compliance with European law, just like any other business owner in Europe. The European Commission must prepare all measures to ban the non-compliant social media platforms, to ensure rapid action if a decision needs to be taken.
- We need to improve legislation to clearly define and tackle harmful online content. We need to push for strong action to counter online hate speech and the use of strategic disinformation to support far-right political propaganda.
- Authorities must have the means to trace people behind accounts that are spreading illegal or abusive content, and to protect children, including by securing functioning age limits. We will continue defending citizens' right to privacy. We must also be clear that this right cannot lead to impunity, nor open the way to abuse or the misuse of bots.
- To address competition challenges, it is important to implement the EU antitrust legislation to prevent monopolistic strategies by big tech platforms.
- We must ensure that those companies pay their fair share of taxes in the EU, fighting any avoidance scheme both at EU and national level.
- Similar to other critical sectors such as energy, transport or health, very large online platforms have a profound impact on issues of vital national and European interest. To protect the strategic autonomy of our Union, the European Commission must take action to introduce legal measures to ensure public oversight and to avoid conflicts of interest.

- We need to introduce new rules to ensure the political neutrality of very large online platforms (VLOPs) particularly during election periods. There must be full transparency on the use of economic resources for political communication and advertisement.
- The EU must take action to increase digital autonomy, invest in a European tech industry, secure its sovereignty and defend our values and interests. We want European digital alternatives, grounded on European values and rules. The EU must also fund the construction and reinforcement of data centres in European territory for the processing of European citizens' data.
- Fund more research into algorithmic manipulation.
- Strengthen traditional media against the waves of disinformation, respecting media freedom and in line with the European Media Act.

As it stands, the current social media landscape is fertile ground for those who preach hate and division. This is one of the many causes why we are witnessing the rise of authoritarian governments and the far right in Europe, who are testing our democratic institutions. Daily attacks against education, culture, media freedom, and civil society are part of a strategy to undermine the fundamentals of our democracy. In many countries, the EPP is enabling the access of the far right to power. In the EU, the EPP is seeking the far-right's support while actively supporting far-right positions in the European Parliament. In Austria the ÖVP is enabling a far-right chancellor. In Germany the CDU/CSU have pushed aside historical anchored democratic principle of not cooperating with the far right being the latest example. Once again, we urge all European democratic parties to firmly reject any links with the far right. It is the responsibility of all of us to protect the fundamental pillars of democracy that the far right wants to destroy.

We are alarmed by the systemic support that the Trump Administration is giving to far-right forces on our continent and globally. We will strengthen our ties with progressive partners in the US and worldwide for the promotion of economic justice, climate action, and a rules-based international order. We must:

- Provide additional support to the EEAS and its teams in identifying and countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in our neighbourhood, as their democracies are also at stake, and we can learn important lessons from their struggles
- Work with reliable allies and partners around the world to ensure the EU's digital rulebook remains the global standard

As progressives, we will keep fighting for a just society and we will do everything in our power to protect and promote democracy at all levels. History has shown that the role of social democracy has been essential for the construction of democracy itself. Without it, equality, justice, and solidarity - the very heart of democracy - cannot flourish. Facing this historic responsibility, we are ready to work together across party lines and political families on issues that affect the future of the European project.

We reaffirm our support to all citizens through this period of insecurity. We will defend women's rights, gender equality, and social justice. We will protect workers' rights and ensure a fair, green, and digital transition. We will stand against racism, xenophobia, sexism, LGBTI-phobia, and all forms of discrimination. We will take strong action against disinformation and safeguard independent media.

Our message to every European citizen is clear: you can count on us to defend democracy, uphold the rule of law, and protect your rights.