Safeguarding Europe's 2024 Elections: a Checklist for Robust Enforcement of the DSA

Democracy is in crisis and 2024 will be its biggest test yet. With critical elections due to take place across the world amid the wrecking ball of viral disinformation and deepening polarisation, the choices made by social media companies – and those who regulate them – will have profound consequences for years to come.

As Europe faces our own crucial elections, and alarmed by the backward slide of our democracies, 56 organisations are urgently calling on European leaders to meet this challenge head on. We ask you to take decisive action to safeguard the integrity of the election information environment, protect people's rights as voters and set a global standard that others may follow.

The critical first step is for the European Commission to use its new powers under the Digital Services Act to require Big Tech companies to publish robust and comprehensive election plans - outlining publicly how they intend to mitigate "systemic risks" in the context of upcoming national and EU elections.

As a minimum, election plans must include meaningful transparency and mitigation measures to:

1. Deamplify disinformation and hate
Tech platforms have shown they can switch on measures to make content less viral at critical moments. They must, as a matter of course:
- Make their recommender systems safe-by-design, by default and all the time (not just during election periods), including measures to suppress the algorithmic reach and visibility of disinformation and hate-spreading content, groups and accounts.
- Implement meaningful user control features, including giving users clear options to choose over which types of data are used for ranking and recommending content and the ability to optimise their feeds for values other than engagement.

2. Ensure effective content moderation in every European language
The tragic impacts of viral hate speech in Ethiopia, Myanmar and countless other places show content moderation is worthless if not properly and equitably resourced. Tech platforms must:
- Properly resource moderation teams in all languages, including both cultural and linguistic competency
- Make content moderation rules public, and apply them consistently and transparently
- Pay moderators a decent wage, and provide them with psychological support

3. Stop microtargeting users
The potential to exploit and manipulate voters with finely targeted election disinformation is an existential danger for democracy. The solution is to:
- End processing of all observed and inferred data for political ads, including sensitive categories of data, for both targeting and amplification.Targeting on the basis of contextual data would still be permitted.

- Enforce the ban on using sensitive categories of personal data, including data voluntarily provided by the user, for both targeting and amplification.

4. Build in transparency
Elections are for the people, not social media companies. Tech platforms must not be allowed to shape the fate of elections behind closed doors – instead, they must:
- Be fully transparent about all measures related to political content and advertisements, including explanations of national variations in the measures they put in place, technical documentation about the algorithms used to recommend content, publication of ad libraries and their functionality (as well as ad financing) and full disclosure of content moderation policies and enforcement including notice, review and appeal mechanisms.
- Allow researchers and wider civil society to independently monitor the spread of dis/misinformation and potential manipulation of the information space by sharing real-time, cross-platform data, including: content meta-data; information on content that is demoted, promoted and recommended and tools to analyse data.
- Provide training for researchers, civil society, independent media and election monitors to monitor activity on the platforms.
- Facilitate independent audits on the effectiveness of mitigation measures adopted in the context of elections and publish their results.

5. Increase and strengthen partnerships
Companies are not experts in elections. They must work with those who are.
- Companies must meaningfully engage with partners such as fact-checkers, independent media, civil society and other bodies that protect electoral integrity, taking into account partners' independence and reporting on their engagement in a standardised format.

Alongside the European elections, over 50 other countries will be going to the polls in 2024 – and even in the remainder of this year several crucial elections are due to take place. Very large online platforms pose significant global risks if they fail to safeguard people and elections in the coming year. In making full use of its powers, the European Commission has a critical opportunity to lead the way globally in demonstrating that platforms can bring their operations in line with democracy and human rights.

Signed, the following organisations active in Europe,

1. AI Forensics
2. AlgorithmWatch
3. Alliance 4 Europe
4. Association for International Affairs (AMO) in Prague
5. Avaaz Foundation
6. Centre for Peace Studies
7. Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO)
8. Checkfirst
9. Coalition For Women In Journalism (CFWIJ)
10. Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO)
11. Cyber Rights Organization
12. CyberPeace Institute

13. Defend Democracy
14. Delfi Lithuania
15. Democracy Reporting International gGmbH
16. digiQ
17. Digital Action
18. Donegal Intercultural Platform
19. Doras
20. Ekō
21. Eticas
22. EU DisinfoLab
23. European Digital Rights (EDRi)
24. Federación de Consumidores y Usuarios (CECU)
25. Global Witness
26. Gong
27. HateAid
28. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)
29. Irish Council for Civil Liberties
30. Kempelen Institute of Intelligent Technologies
31. LGBT Ireland
32. NEVER AGAIN' Association
33. Panoptykon Foundation
34. Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre
35. SUPERRR Lab
36. The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation
37. The Rowan Trust
38. Transparency International EU
39. Uplift
40. Waag Futurelab
41. #jesuisla
42. #ShePersisted
43. Epicenter.works
44. European Federation of Public Services Unions (EPSU)

Endorsed by the following global organisations;
45. Accountable Tech
46. ANDA - Agência de Notícias de Direitos Animais
47. Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO)
48. Fair Vote UK
49. Full Fact
50. Global Action Plan
51. Legal Resources Centre
52. Open Britain
53. Rede Nacional de Combate à Desinformação-RNCD BRASIL
54. Tech4Peace
55. The London Story
56. Women In Journalism Institute, Canada