



### Questions and Answers: European Democracy Action Plan – making EU democracies stronger

Brussels, 3 December 2020

#### What is the European Democracy Action Plan?

The European Democracy Action Plan sets out specific measures to promote free and fair elections and strong democratic participation, to support free and independent media, and counter disinformation.

With this Action Plan, the Commission announces measures, both legislative and non-legislative to be delivered throughout this Commission's mandate that will strengthen the resilience of EU democracies. These measures will help address areas in which our democratic systems and citizens are most vulnerable.

The Action Plan will engage the EU institutions, national governments and parliaments - who have the primary responsibility for ensuring the sound functioning of democracy - as well as other national authorities, political parties, media and civil society, and online platforms.

The plan is structured around **three main areas**: protecting electoral integrity and promoting democratic participation, strengthening media freedom and media pluralism, and countering disinformation. Across the Action Plan, there is a strong emphasis on empowering citizens and civil society to counter the threats.

#### Why is the Commission putting forward this Action Plan?

There has been a recent resurgence of popular political engagement and increased turnout in elections, but as in many places around the world, democracy in the EU and its Member States is facing challenges: rising extremism and a perceived distance between people and their elected representatives.

The integrity of elections has also come under threat, the environment in which journalists and civil society operate has deteriorated, and we have witnessed concerted efforts to spread false and misleading information and manipulate voters, including by foreign actors. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these challenges into a new focus: the exceptional emergency measures taken to address the health crisis have affected the political process and in some places sparked concerns about the impact on democracy. Foreign actors and certain third countries have also engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 in the EU.

If fully implemented, the proposed Action Plan will ensure that Europe has a stronger democratic underpinning to take up the challenges of the unprecedented health, economic, and climate crises we face - in full respect for our common principles and values. The Commission will review the implementation of the Action Plan in 2023, a year ahead of the elections to the European Parliament, and reflect on whether further steps are required.

#### How will the European Democracy Action Plan help protecting the integrity of elections and promoting democratic participation?

Maintaining democracy requires more determined action to protect electoral processes and empowering citizens in an open democratic debate. There is a clear need to strengthen the EU rules to prevent external interference and to update safeguards in the light of new digital realities. Democracy is also about the richness of participatory practices, civic engagement and respect for democratic standards and the rule of law, applied throughout the electoral cycle and beyond.

Key actions in this area include:

- Proposing legislation to ensure **greater transparency** in the area of sponsored content in a political context ('**political advertising**'). This will be accompanied by support measures and guidance for political parties and Member States.
- Proposing a revision of the [Regulation on the funding of European political parties](#).

- Setting up a new **joint operational mechanism** through the European Cooperation Network on Elections to support the **deployment of joint expert teams** and to work closely with the NIS (security of information systems) Cooperation Group to counter threats to electoral processes. This comes in addition, to other measures to protect elections and electoral infrastructure against threats, including against cyber-attacks, and to support free and fair elections, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Funding**: Encourage the use of EU structural funds to **fund civil society** and build capacity and institutional/administrative infrastructure for deliberative civic engagement and political participation; use EU funds and opportunities under the **EU youth strategy**, citizenship education, the **Creative Europe Programme** and the equality agenda to foster access to democratic participation and trust in democracy.

### **How will the European Democracy Action Plan help strengthening media freedom and media pluralism?**

Free and pluralistic media are key to hold power to account and to help citizens make informed decisions. There is a clear need to improve the online and physical safety of journalists, and to provide them and other actors involved in protecting the public interest with tools against abusive litigation. More transparent public disclosure of information on media ownership and control as well as the transparent and fair distribution of state advertising plays a role in enhancing media pluralism.

Key actions in this area include:

- A **Recommendation on the safety of journalists to be presented by 2021** and taking into account new online threats faced in particular by female journalists. A structured dialogue under the European News Media Forum, with Member States, stakeholders and international organisations will be set up to prepare and implement the Recommendation.
- **Funding**: Providing sustainable funding for projects with a focus on legal and practical assistance to journalists in the EU and elsewhere, including safety and cybersecurity training for journalists and diplomatic support
- An initiative by 2021 to **protect journalists and civil society against abusive litigation** (strategic lawsuits against public participation - SLAPPs).
- Support EU cooperation between national media councils, other media self-regulatory bodies, independent media regulators and networks of journalists, and initiatives **promoting journalistic partnerships and standards**.
- Measures to support **media pluralism** include the setting up of a Media Ownership Monitor pilot project, guidance on the transparency of media ownership, promoting transparent and fair allocation of state advertising, fostering media diversity and a European approach on the prominence of audiovisual media services of general interest.

### **How will the European Democracy Action Plan counter disinformation and foreign interference?**

The EU's work in this area will continue to be firmly rooted in European values and principles. It will also fully safeguard people's right to express opinions and access legal content. The actions aim to improve the EU and Member State capacity to address disinformation, introduce more obligations and accountability for online platforms and empower citizens to make informed decisions. The Action Plan aims to increase transparency, curb manipulative techniques and reduce economic incentives for spreading disinformation. This includes stepping up deterrence by imposing costs on actors engaged in influence operations and foreign interference.

Key actions include:

- Developing the EU's toolbox for countering foreign influence operations and interference, including new instruments that allow for **the imposing of costs on perpetrators** and putting in place a new protocol to strengthen existing cooperation structures to fight disinformation.
- **Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation** by issuing **clear guidance to platforms** on how to step up their measures against disinformation, and setting up a robust framework for its monitoring.
- **Funding** will support new innovative projects to fight disinformation and promote media literacy under various EU programmes, in particular by civil society organisations and higher education institutions, within and outside the EU.

### **How does the European Democracy Action Plan relate to the Digital Services Act?**

The initiatives foreseen under the European Democracy Action Plan, in particular the guidance on strengthening the Code of practice on disinformation and legislation to ensure greater transparency in the area of sponsored content in a political context are complementary to the measures that will be proposed under the Digital Services Act.

The Digital Services Act is a legislative proposal, which will set out a horizontal framework for regulatory oversight, accountability and transparency of the online space in response to the emerging risks. It will propose rules to ensure greater accountability on how platforms moderate content, on advertising and on algorithmic processes. Very large platforms will be obliged to assess the risks their systems pose not only as regards illegal content and products but also as regards systemic risks to the protection of public interests and fundamental rights, public health and security.

The Digital Services Act will also establish a **co-regulatory backstop** for the measures, which would be included in a revised and strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation. Based on this co-regulatory approach, the Commission will steer efforts with targeted actions addressing issues specific to disinformation on three pillars:

- the Commission will issue guidance setting out how platforms should step up their measures to address the shortcomings identified in the assessment of the Code of Practice on Disinformation;
- the Commission will call upon signatories and relevant stakeholders to strengthen the Code of Practice according to the guidance;
- the Commission will also set up a more robust framework for recurrent monitoring of the strengthened Code of Practice, building on the experience of the COVID-19 disinformation monitoring exercise.

### **Who was consulted in the process of drawing up this Action Plan?**

The Commission launched a public consultation, which was running from 15 July to 18 September 2020. The consultation received a total of 338 responses, 208 (61%) of which were submitted by individuals and 130 (38%) by public authorities, NGOs, academia, businesses associations, companies and trade unions. Contributions were received from major online platforms, public authorities, civil society organisations and professional associations. The public consultation demonstrated wide recognition of the risks of interference in EU democracy and the need for targeted action, both online and offline.

### **Does the Action Plan take the COVID-19 pandemic into account?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought some challenges into a new focus. The exceptional emergency measures taken to address the health crisis have affected the political process and in some places sparked concerns about the impact on democracy. From mid-March, the Commission has been monitoring measures in the Member States, which have had an impact on the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights. Whereas the pandemic is still ongoing and emergency measures are still in place in a number of Member States, the [2020 Rule of Law Report](#) already pointed to some of the issues that have arisen in the national debates and the legal and political response to the crisis. The Commission has also been working with Member States in the framework of the European Cooperation Network on Elections to promote good practices and adaptations to help ensure that free and fair elections can continue in the current context.

The pandemic has also demonstrated the importance of a continuous monitoring programme regarding the efforts made by platforms and relevant industry associations to limit online disinformation related to COVID-19. The results of such monitoring will provide relevant input for the creation of a more robust framework.

### **How does the Action Plan relate to other recent EU initiatives on the rule of law and fundamental rights?**

This European Democracy Action Plan is one element of a broader endeavour at EU level to strengthen democracy, equality, and respect for human rights. With the new European rule of law mechanism, the new Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as the measures put forward to promote and protect equality across the EU, the European Democracy Action Plan will be a key driver for the new push for European democracy. It will help Europe face the challenges of the digital age. The commitment to democracy is also embedded in the EU's external action, and a central pillar of its work with accession and neighbourhood countries.

### **For further information**

European Democracy Action Plan – [Press release](#)

European Democracy Action Plan – [Factsheet](#)

European Democracy Action Plan – [Website](#)

QANDA/20/2251

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