



May 2023

THE EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY IN THE ONLINE SPACE?

Jonah Clark

Summary

As a forum for human interaction, the internet possesses both pro- and anti-democratic potential. This paper identifies two areas where the internet has encouraged democratic erosion: the promotion of hate speech and extremism and the spread of disinformation online. Both issues will be presented with an overview of their current status in Czechia and the EU, as well as an outline of past and present efforts taken by national and international actors to curtail their impact. Finally, this paper discusses the preservation of democratic rights and freedoms relating to internet usage.

Introduction

Since its introduction to the public domain in 1993, the World Wide Web has permanently altered the way that humans communicate, exchange information, and engage with media and politics (“Birth of the Web”). Never before has such a vast repository of knowledge been readily available to the masses with such ease; at the click of a button, everyday citizens are able to access an unprecedented wealth of information, freely exchange ideas, and participate in the political processes in new and highly personal ways. In this sense, the internet seems to embody the values which a democratic society is founded upon. At the same time, the incredible capability of the internet to disseminate information to wider and wider audiences has proven to be somewhat of a poisoned chalice. As social media platforms, user-based forums, and mass media websites become permanent staples of modern life, their ability to spread misinformation, promote extremism, and erode trust in the democratic process has grown more and more concerning. Now, what once seemed like the greatest technological contribution to a democratic world has instead become one of the most concerning threats to democracy in Europe and around the globe.

The International Journal of Press/Politics has identified multiple ways in which the internet poses challenges to the democratic process in Europe (Miller & Vaccari, 2020). Among these issues are i) the spread of hate speech and extremism in the online space and ii) the spread of digital misinformation, both of which this policy brief will focus on. These issues have become especially pertinent since the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and continue to create significant challenges which require redress. At the same time, internet freedom by itself is a cornerstone of a free and democratic society, requiring any policy solutions to stay within the bounds of free expression and unrestricted access to information. In order to shed light on the topics of hate speech, extremism, misinformation, and internet freedom, this paper will briefly cover the status of these topics and will provide a short timeline of previous, current, and proposed policy solutions stemming from official, governmental and organizational sources related to the matter. If appropriate action can be taken by the relevant authorities on the issues surrounding online democratic erosion, the internet can still be salvaged as a tool that enables democracy rather than a weapon aimed at its downfall.

Online Hate Speech and Extremism

In a 2023 report by the Czech Ministry of the Interior, rising hate speech and political extremism were identified as two major threats currently confronting Czech society. According to the report, a significant number of politically disaffected Czech citizens have adopted ideologies that run counter to the country’s democratic foundations, such as xenophobic nationalism and orthodox Communism. (“Interior Ministry warns of rising threat of extremism to democracy in Czechia”, 2023). Commenting on the report, Radio Prague International indicated that a large number of these nascent extremists, particularly far-right nationalists, neo-Nazis, and potential lone-wolf terrorists, can be found in communities that exist online (Ibid). Although the Ministry’s threat level sits at one out of three, scholars like Miroslav Mareš have suggested that the recent size and prevalence of anti-government protests in the Czech public sphere could indicate that an even larger population of radicalized extremists may be dwelling underground on the internet (Ibid). As it stands, the number of so-called ‘radicals’ in the Czech Republic still occupy a minority in Czech society, sitting somewhere between 5-10% of the population (Mares.Ibid). Likewise, one should be careful not to classify all

anti-government actors as being inherently anti-democratic: in a healthy democracy, after all, a plurality of political views, including a robust opposition, are allowed to thrive and express their opinion in a public discourse. When discussing the online sphere of politics, it is important to distinguish between those who oppose the government peacefully and those who express an interest in violence, hate speech, and suppression.

The foundation of the European approach to online extremism dates back as far as the year 2000, when the Council of Europe published its report on the “Threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe” (“Threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe,” 2000). Although the predominant political orientations of extremists in Europe have changed significantly over time, we can still understand extremism as a doctrine that is broadly and intrinsically “incompatible with democracy and human rights,” running counter to the values of equality and justice upon which liberal democracy is predicated. Hate speech and political extremism are harmful to healthy democratic processes because they cultivate a hostile and divisive climate that inevitably enables violence as a means of political resolution. At the time of the report, the most fringe political extremist groups also appeared to be the most adept at utilizing new technologies for recruitment and mobilization, including the internet. This prompted the Council to recommend independent legislative action on behalf of its member states that specifically targeted online radicalization and misinformation campaigns. As time has gone on, the overall strategy of independent, but also coordinated action has remained the same.

Extremism and hate speech have been in acceleration in the Czech Republic since 2015. Initially as a result of the European immigration crisis, these sentiments subsequently continued to spread and evolved during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the War in Ukraine, and the other contemporary economic struggles facing Czechia (Charvát, 2023). The 2008, *‘Strategy for Combating Extremism’*, which, according to the Czech Ministry of the Interior’s website, remains in force as the Ministry’s current and ongoing action plan for curbing the presence of domestic political extremism, states that “the internet represents a welcome means of communication between involved [extremist] groups having the same interest” (“Documents on the fight against extremism”; “Strategy for Combatting Extremism,” 2009). Per their strategy, the Ministry is focused on policy solutions that punish authors of extremist or hateful webpages and involve treaties with other countries that will allow these webpages, which are often hosted on foreign servers, to be shut down. Furthermore, the European Council “Strategic orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation for 2022-2023” emphasizes the need for cooperation between member states, internet service providers, and tech companies to effectively monitor and remove violent content online (“2022-2023 Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU Approach to Prevention of Radicalisation,” 2022). The 2022 EU “Regulation to Address the Dissemination of Terrorist Content Online,” which the Czech Republic adopted the same year, enables domestic authorities to order the removal of violent digital content by internet providers (“Terrorist Content Online”). This builds upon the work of the European Internet Forum EIF, established in 2015 to monitor and prevent the proliferation of hate speech through online communication channels (“2022-2023 Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU Approach to Prevention of Radicalization”; “European Union Internet Forum (EU-IF)”). Although important strides have clearly been made toward curtailing online hate speech and radicalization, the European Commission urges that additional measures be taken to understand “legal but harmful” content, and the role that such content plays in the radicalization of young adults and children on the internet (Ibid). Future policy measures should also focus on the misuse

of internet algorithms and video game technology as political tools that promote extremism (“Disinformation: A threat to democracy — Brochure”).

Digital Misinformation

The widespread proliferation of fake news and misinformation over the internet presents an array of challenges to democratic systems as well as national security in Europe. The European Commission considers misinformation to be “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm” (“Shaping Europe's digital future: Eurobarometer survey shows support for sustainability and data sharing,” 2020). Likewise, online disinformation presents a direct threat to healthy democratic norms: misinformation obstructs citizens’ abilities to make reasonably informed political decisions, erodes trust in democratic political processes by spreading conspiracies and creating a climate of doubt, and encourages hate speech and extremism by spreading false narratives about certain groups and individuals (“Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Tackling online disinformation: a European approach,” 2018). Unfortunately, the internet provides the perfect vessel for harmful misinformation to reach incredibly wide audiences. A special Eurobarometer poll from March 2020 revealed that 71% of respondents felt that they had encountered fake news at least once a month; in some countries, fake news was encountered as frequently as once a week by at least two thirds of respondents (“Shaping Europe's digital future: Eurobarometer survey shows support for sustainability and data sharing,” 2020). Furthermore, deliberate disinformation campaigns can be used by foreign governments to manipulate political affairs in other countries (Digital Society Project). For this reason, the Czech Ministry of the Interior considers digital misinformation as a weapon of hybrid warfare that requires immediate attention; the Ministry’s Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats began operation in 2017 for this purpose and continues to actively monitor the status of disinformation campaigns in the country (“Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats”). However, as is the case whenever a governmental entity should monitor political content and activity, the ability of the Ministry to remain unbiased and politically neutral has been met with skepticism. The Society for the Defense of Free Speech (SOSP), for example, has recently accused the Hybrid Threats Center of unfairly and dishonestly denouncing their activities (SOSP, 2023). In terms of domestic action, it is important that government agencies and private actors respect the rule of law and refrain from using misinformation as a justification for censoring dissenting opinions.

Other efforts have also been undertaken on the European level to curb the prevalence of misinformation in member states of the European Union. The European Commission’s 2018 “Action Plan Against Disinformation” is one such initiative that is aimed at immediately confronting the challenges to democracy and national security presented by internet disinformation in European states. Specifically, the action plan outlines a unified European response to disinformation comprising four pillars:

- “(i) improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation;
- (ii) strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation;
- (iii) mobilizing private sector to tackle disinformation;

(iv) raising awareness and improving societal resilience” (“EU action plan against disinformation,” 2022).

By collectively monitoring and reporting on disinformation activities in real time through a ‘Rapid Alert System’, communicating closely with non-EU actors in the European neighborhood, holding the private sector to a strict Code of Practice, improving media literacy among member state populations, and expanding the capabilities of independent fact-checkers, the 2018 action plan establishes a myriad of structural and legislative systems for tackling disinformation. Crucially, the action plan emphasizes the need for highly coordinated joint action between participating countries. Because disinformation threats in member states can emanate from domestic sources or abroad, countries must rely on one another to stamp out perpetrators that lie beyond their own individual jurisdictions. Cooperation with private internet providers and tech companies, as well as ‘InterPol’, are also vital aspects of the 2018 action plan.

Protecting Internet Freedom

So far, many of the strategies aimed at remedying internet misuse against democracy have focused on identifying and removing hate speech or misinformation that appears online, and silencing authors of antidemocratic content. However, when discussing the topic of democratic erosion online, it is important to balance the need for curbing harmful behaviors with the need to preserve online free speech, the free flow of digital information, and uninhibited access to the internet for everyday citizens. Otherwise, efforts that are intended to protect democracy end up further eroding democratic values in the online space.

For this reason, domestic efforts in the Czech Republic to curtail online hate speech and disinformation have been met with controversy in the past. The establishment of the Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats in 2017 came under criticism from the sitting president, Milos Zeman, for apparently threatening free speech (“Czech 'hybrid threats' center under fire from country's own president,” 2017). In response, the center has maintained that it does not possess the ability to censor media outlets, remove content from the internet, press charges against content creators, or control access to the use of the internet for civilians (“Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats”). The Ministry’s 2023 action plan against misinformation was also reversed following a wave of criticism from both the government and the opposition (Gosling, 2023; Zemánek, 2023). Critics of the plan were wary that “disinformation” could be used to erroneously label and suppress any online narratives with which the ruling coalition disagreed (Ibid). The Czech Republic has already come under public scrutiny for taking legal action against pro-Russian segments of the population, a move which The Spectator has condemned as a blatant assault against free speech (Natrass, 2023). Efforts to fund independent media were also scrutinized as a potential mechanism for government corruption (Gosling, 2023; Zemánek, 2023).

The UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner has emphasized the inherent difficulty of regulating internet usage without infringing on integral human rights and has identified three main areas that should be protected whenever new regulations are considered (Bachelet, 2022). They are: i) the right to participate in the online space, especially for civil society actors and journalists; ii) the right to free expression, both online and offline; and iii) the right to digital privacy and freedom from invasive surveillance by the state and private sector. The UN emphasizes

that mechanisms must always be in place to hold state agencies and private sector agents accountable when regulations infringe on these rights.

Recent steps toward safeguarding digital rights in Europe include the 2022 EU Digital Services Act and Digital Marketing Act, which came into force this month. As the European Commission reports, both acts “aim to create a safer digital space where the fundamental rights of users are protected and to establish a level playing field for businesses,” allowing for accountability and fair regulation of the online space in the future (“The Digital Services Act package”). In the end, the end goal of any regulations related to hate speech, political extremism, and misinformation on the internet should be to preserve democratic values and human rights rather than erode them. Because hate speech and disinformation actively deprive others’ human rights and their ability to fully participate in a fair democratic system, regulations which remove such content and punish relevant authors cannot be considered inherently anti-democratic (“Action Plan against Disinformation,” 2018). Nevertheless, safeguards should always be present to prevent overstep by the relevant authorities, including government agencies as well as private sector actors. A robust civil society, a healthy public discourse, and responsive, democratically mandated government officials are key pillars for this degree of accountability.

Conclusion

Both in Europe and the Czech Republic, significant organizational steps have been taken to prevent misuse of the internet by anti-democratic actors. So far, strategies have focused on eliminating online hate speech, curbing online radicalization and extremist networks, and monitoring the presence of digital disinformation. The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic is focused on identifying and curtailing threats domestically with an independent action plan and a center focused on Hybrid Threats established in 2017. Meanwhile the European Commission has published its own protocols for preventing disinformation (2018; 2022-2023) and radicalization (2022-2023) over the internet. The main policy initiatives so far have prioritized coordinated action between European member states, internet service providers, tech companies, and international authorities in order to monitor, identify, and remove dangerous content on the Web by utilizing appropriate legislation. Future action should consider how to approach harmful online content that is not explicitly violent or dangerous, as well as the capabilities of new technologies such as advanced personal algorithms. Likewise, any regulations that police online content should have robust safeguards in place to protect human rights such as privacy, free speech, and access to the internet. Programs adopted by governments or initiated by private actors should not unfairly target certain political groups or opinions and should respect rule of law.

The past and present development of democratic society in the online space challenges us to consider several key questions going forward. How much jurisdiction should government or international agencies have to monitor and police online content? What mechanism can ensure these agencies are politically neutral? Should private tech companies and service providers have free reign to police the content they platform? How can governments monitor harmful online content without overstepping the boundaries of rule of law and human rights? Are more or less aggressive actions needed in Europe?

References

Bachelet, Michelle. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. "Human rights and democracy in the digital age." UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Delivered April 25, 2022. Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/04/human-rights-and-democracy-digital-age>

"Birth of the Web." CERN. Accessed May 6, 2023. URL: <https://home.cern/science/computing/birth-web#:~:text=On%2030%20April%201993%2C%20CERN,software%20in%20the%20public%20domain>

Charvát, Jan. "Radicalization of Czech society: a new phenomenon, or the result of long-term developments?" Heinrich Böll Stiftung. Accessed May 6, 2023, <https://cz.boell.org/en/2023/01/03/radikalizace-ceske-spolecnosti-novy-fenomen-nebo-vysledek-dlouhodobeho-vyvoje>

Digital Society Project. Accessed May 6, 2023, <http://digitalsocietyproject.org/>

"Documents on the fight against extremism." Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://www.mvcr.cz/mvcren/article/documents-on-the-fight-against-extremism.aspx>

European Commission. "Action Plan against Disinformation." December 5, 2018. Accessed May 6, 2023 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/action-plan-against-disinformation>

European Commission. "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Tackling online disinformation: a European approach, COM(2018) 236 final." European Commission. Accessed May 6, 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0236>

European Commission. "Disinformation: A threat to democracy — Brochure." European Commission. Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/fr/node/1503/printable/pdf>

European Commission, "European Union Internet Forum (EU-IF)," European Commission - Migration and Home Affairs, accessed May 6, 2023, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-union-internet-forum-euif_en

European Commission. "Shaping Europe's digital future: Eurobarometer survey shows support for sustainability and data sharing." European Commission. Last modified March 5, 2020. Accessed May 6, 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_383

European Commission. "Terrorist Content Online." European Commission - Migration and Home Affairs. Accessed May 6, 2023. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/prevention-radicalisation/terrorist-content-online_en

European Commission. "The Digital Services Act package." Accessed May 6, 2023, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>

European Commission. "2022-2023 Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU Approach to Prevention of Radicalisation." (Brussels: European Commission, 2022). <https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/2022->

[2023%20Strategic%20orientations%20on%20a%20coordinated%20EU%20approach%20to%20prevention%20of%20radicalisation_en.pdf](#)

European Court of Auditors. "EU action plan against disinformation." European Court of Auditors. March, 2020. Accessed May 6, 2023. https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/ap20_04/ap_disinformation_en.pdf

Expats.cz. "Czechia Passes Law to Stop Spreading Terrorist Content Online." Expats.cz. Last modified February 23, 2023. Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://www.expats.cz/czech-news/article/czechia-passes-law-to-stop-spreading-terrorist-content-online>

Gosling, Tim. "Czech Republic: Efforts to fight disinformation grind to a halt," International Press Institute, April 20, 2023, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://ipi.media/czech-republic-efforts-to-fight-disinformation-grind-to-a-halt/>

"Interior Ministry warns of rising threat of extremism to democracy in Czechia." Radio Prague International. Accessed May 6, 2023, <https://english.radio.cz/interior-ministry-warns-rising-threat-extremism-democracy-czechia-8774371>

Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. "Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats." Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/centre-against-terrorism-and-hybrid-threats.aspx>

Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. "Strategy For Combating Extremism." (Prague, Czech Republic 2009). <https://www.mvcr.cz/mvcren/article/documents-on-the-fight-against-extremism.aspx>

Miller, Michael L., and Cristian Vaccari, "Digital Threats to Democracy: Comparative Lessons and Possible Remedies," The International Journal of Press/Politics, vol. 25, no. 3 (2020): 1-24. doi:10.1177/1940161220922323

Natras, William. "It Has Become Illegal to Support Russia in the Czech Republic." The Spectator. April 11, 2023. Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/it-has-become-illegal-to-support-russia-in-the-czech-republic/>

Reuters staff. "Czech 'hybrid threats' center under fire from country's own president." Reuters. January 4, 2017. Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-czech-security-hybrid-idUSKBN14O227>

SOSP, "We asked the Center Against Hybrid Threats to clarify the statements about SOSP. What did they answer us?" Czech Society for the Defense of Free Speech, May 12, 2023, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.sosp.cz/>

"Threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe," Council of Europe Political Affairs Committee, January 3, 2000, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=8818&lang=EN>

Zemánek, Ladislav. "Countering Disinformation and Hybrid Threats: Recent Policies & Measures." China-CEE Institute. April 2023. Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://china-cee.eu/2023/04/19/czech-republic-political-briefing-countering-disinformation-and-hybrid-threats-recent-policies-measures/>



AUTHOR: JONAH CLARK

Jonah Clark is a fourth-year undergraduate student studying Political Science and History at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Originally from Providence, Rhode Island, Jonah moved to Prague in January to complete a semester with CET Academic Programs, where he shifted his scholarly focus toward Central European Studies. From February to May, Jonah acted as a research and analytics intern with the Institute for Politics and Society in Prague, where he was pleased to assist with the organization of this year's Digital Czech Republic conference.

He will be continuing his scholarly work on Central Europe over the next year by completing a bachelor's thesis on religious mobilization in the Visegrad Group.



INSTITUTE FOR POLITICS AND SOCIETY

The mission of the Institute is to cultivate the Czech political and public sphere through professional and open discussion. We aim to create a living platform that defines problems, analyzes them, and offers recipes for their solution in the form of cooperation with experts, politicians, international conferences, seminars, public discussions, and political and social analysis available to the whole of Czech society. We believe that open discussion with experts and the recognition of the causes of problems is a necessary presumption for any successful solution to the political and social problems facing society today.



Martinská 2, 110 00 Praha 1



+420 602 502 674



www.politikaspolecnost.cz



office@politikaspolecnost.cz