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## **EU WARNS TECH GIANTS ON RUSSIAN FAKE NEWS**

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The EU commission plans to boost the fight against Russian disinformation before the European elections next May, according to proposals rolled out on Wednesday (5 December).

The EU executive wants tech giants, such as Facebook, Twitter and Google to provide monthly reports from January until the election on any such disinformation campaigns.

The commission expects tech companies to publish how they place political adverts, and how many "bot accounts" and fake accounts they identified and deleted.

The EU executive also said that if progress on pushing back against disinformation spread by social platforms was not made, the commission could resort to regulating the tech giants.

"We believe the platforms can and need to do it now. No excuses, no more foot-dragging, because the risks are real. We need to see urgent improvement in how adverts are placed \* and fake accounts rapidly and effectively need to be identified and deleted," security commissioner Julian King told journalists.

"They've got to get serious about this stuff," he said.

Tech companies signed up to a code of practice previously, that commits online platforms and advertisers to take steps to keep fake news from being disseminated.

King highlighted that there are 60-90m fake accounts on Facebook, and that 80 percent of Twitter accounts that spread disinformation during the 2016 US elections were still active today - and publishing more than a million tweets a day.

He also said "bots", i.e. robots, should not be allowed to disseminate political content on the platforms.

The EU's efforts are explicitly aimed at combatting Russia.

Commission vice president Andrus Ansip said, "there is strong evidence pointing to Russia as a primary source of disinformation in Europe."

"This is part of its [Russia's] military doctrine and its strategy to divide and weaken the west," he said.

## €5m vs €1.1bn?

The EU commission also plans to boost funding for the bloc's efforts to identify and fight disinformation, from €1.9m in 2018 to €5m next year.

Ansip pointed out that Russia spends       purely on pro-Kremlin media such as Sputnik or Russia Today annually, and maintains a troll factory in St Petersburg with a 1,000-strong staff managing fake accounts and spreading fake news.

Justice commissioner Vera Jourova said it was simplistic to compare the EU and Russia's budgets for the information war, because - she argued - it is a collective effort with member states. Ansip also said this is not an effort by the EU to create European propaganda.

The commission plans to set up a "rapid alert" system, to warn governments if their country is under sustained disinformation attack so they can defend themselves.

"We would like to detect the disinformation, and understand where is it coming from, who is behind, debunk it using facts to expose lies," Ansip said.

Facebook disclosed last year that Russians with fake names used its platform to try to influence US voters during the 2016 election by writing on inflammatory subjects, setting up events and counter-events and buying ads.

The company has been criticised for being too slow in tackling the spread of disinformation.

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