EU anti-“fake news” authority prepares mass censorship

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The European Union (EU) is launching the construction of an authority to monitor and censor so-called “fake news.” It is setting up a High-Level Expert Group on the issue and soliciting criticisms of “fake news” by media professionals and the public to decide what powers to give to this EU body, which is to begin operation next spring.

An examination of the EU’s announcement shows that it is preparing mass state censorship aimed not at false information, but at news reports or political views that encourage popular opposition to the European ruling class.

The term “fake news” is taken from the campaign in the United States promoting unsubstantiated accusations that Donald Trump’s victory was attributable to Russian manipulation of the 2016 US presidential elections that publicized material harmful to his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. This campaign has developed into ever more aggressive demands for censorship of the Internet to prevent the expression of critical views and social protests.

At one US Senate hearing on the issue, former FBI officer Clint Watts called for censorship in front of sympathetic US Senators, who denounced Russia for supposedly trying to “amplify racial and social divisions” in America. Watts said, “Civil wars don’t start with gunshots, they start with words. America’s war with itself has already begun. We all must act now on the social media battlefield to quell information rebellions that can quickly lead to violent confrontations and easily transform us into the Divided States of America.”

The EU’s anti-“fake news” censorship body serves the same basic political ends. It aims to create conditions where unelected authorities control what people can read or say online. “We live in an era where the flow of information and misinformation has become almost overwhelming,” EU Vice-President Frans Timmermans declared. He added that the EU’s task is to protect its citizens from “fake news” and to “manage the information they receive.”

According to an EU press release, the EU Commission, another unelected body, will select the High-Level Expert Group, which is “to start in January 2018 and will work over several months.” It will discuss “possible future actions to strengthen citizens’ access to reliable and verified information and prevent the spread of disinformation online.” Who will decide what views are “verified,” who is “reliable” and whose views are “disinformation” to be deleted from Facebook or removed from Google search results? The EU, of course.

As in the United States, the EU anti-“fake news” campaign flows out of operations against Russia and attempts to shield from criticism the ever more unpopular EU policies—in particular, the accelerating turn by the European bourgeoisie towards militarism and authoritarian rule.

According to its press release, the EU’s new initiative began with the establishment by the EU Council, in March 2015, of the “East Strategic Communication Task Force” (East Stratcom). This was shortly after Washington and Berlin successfully organized a regime change operation in February 2014 in Ukraine, via a putsch led by the pro-Nazi, anti-Russian Right Sector militia that toppled a pro-Russian government in Kiev. This led to a bitter civil war in Russian-speaking areas of eastern Ukraine that was still raging at the beginning of 2015.

The EU was well aware of the fascistic character of its Ukrainian allies. The EU Parliament had just voted in 2012 for a resolution formally denouncing one of the parties it put in power in Kiev, Svoboda. Stating that Svoboda's “racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic views go against the EU’s fundamental values,” the EU Parliament appealed to democratic political parties “not to associate with, endorse, or form coalitions with this party.”

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After US and European imperialism put Svoboda in power, however, European media denounced as a "supreme lie" criticism that the EU was working with neo-fascists, which it called "lying Russian propaganda."

These are the reactionary political roots of the anti-"fake news" campaign in Europe in general, and of East Stratcom in particular. According to the current EU press release, the agency was set up "to identify, analyse, and raise awareness of Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns on a daily basis." Its mission statement declares its top purpose is to ensure "Effective communication and promotion of EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood," that is, to promote the EU's aggressive policies and its links to neo-fascists in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, and beyond.

The situation emerging in Europe is a warning to the working class. A body set up to promote forces like Svoboda and the Right Sector, which glorifies the Ukrainian forces who participated in the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews in the USSR during World War II, is to lead a drive to censor the Internet and official public life in Europe. Police-state rule in Europe is actively being prepared.

This reflects a historic collapse of democratic forms of rule across the continent that has developed over decades. The quarter century since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the USSR has seen austerity at home and escalating NATO wars in the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe. European capitalism is bankrupt, and nearly a decade after the 2008 Wall Street crash, economic inequality is reaching levels incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

With tens of millions of unemployed and youth left with no future, social anger has reached explosive levels. The EU's Generation What poll earlier this year found that more than half of European youth would be willing to participate in a "mass uprising" against the existing order. The response of European imperialism is to prepare repression and authoritarian rule at home, while denouncing criticism of its policies as "fake news" and Russian propaganda.

Significantly, a key battleground of the EU "fake news" campaign is Spain. Last month, Madrid suspended Catalonia's elected government amid mass protests in Barcelona, after police assaulted peaceful voters in the October 1 Catalan independence referendum. Berlin, London and Paris all issued statements backing Madrid. Spanish General Fernando Alejandre threatened Catalonia with military intervention and hailed the Spanish army "of all epochs," implicitly including the 1939 invasion of Catalonia by fascist dictator Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War.

Predictably, European media, the Spanish government, and East Stratcom are launching a campaign to denounce criticism of Madrid's policies, and EU support for them, as "fake news." On Monday, the British *Guardian* reported, "Officials working at the East Stratcom taskforce in Brussels say they have seen an increase in disinformation linked to the Catalan referendum, in line with the explosion of media interest in the story."

To illustrate the alleged "upsurge in pro-Kremlin disinformation and false claims about the political crisis in Catalonia," the *Guardian* cited a Facebook post by Moldovan politician Bogdan ?îrdea that stated: "EU officials supported the violence in Catalonia."

As in Ukraine, the ruling elite attacks such statements as "fake news" and Russian propaganda not because they are false, but because they threaten to provoke political opposition at home.

Claims that Russia and its allies in Eastern Europe instigated the Catalan crisis or used it to smear the EU are lies refuted by Madrid's own statements. Over a week after the October 1 referendum, Madrid hailed Moscow's reactionary support for its internal repression. Spanish Ambassador to Russia Ignacio Ibanez Rubio said, "Spain endorses Russia's official stance. From the very beginning, Russia has recognized that this is an internal affair of our country… So we are very pleased with Russia's stand on the crisis in Catalonia."

The accelerating moves towards police-state rule in Europe and the media campaign against Russian "fake news" again underscore the significance of the *World Socialist Web Site's* reporting, its opposition to the EU, and its struggle against Google's attempts to censor it. It is emerging as the leading voice against the drive to legitimize authoritarian rule and far-right politics in Europe.

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