European Union steps up Internet censorship in the name of opposing “disinformation”

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The European Union (EU) summit on October 18 resolved to further tighten the censorship of the Internet. It also threatened with sanctions and penalties any party that diverges from the prescribed political line in the 2019 European election campaign. This is the response of European governments to growing opposition to militarism, social cuts and right-wing extremism.

In the summit’s official conclusions, the European Council calls for “measures to combat cyber and cyber-enabled illegal and malicious activities and build strong cybersecurity.” The EU should be empowered to “respond to and deter cyber-attacks through EU restrictive measures.”

These measures are justified not only by the supposed need to ward off hacking attacks, but also to “combat disinformation, including in the context of the upcoming European elections.” For this purpose, the EU Commission has proposed measures that, according to the Council’s conclusions, deserve “rapid examination.” These include “fighting disinformation campaigns,” “tightening the rules on European political party funding” and “operational follow-up by the competent authorities.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel already announced this in her policy statement to the *Bundestag* on October 17. Among other things, she threatened parties “whose campaigns actively engage in disinformation” with financial sanctions. “Anyone who does not abide by the democratic rules-of-the-game in Europe cannot expect to receive party financing funds from the European Union.”

Neither Merkel nor the European Council elaborated on what they mean by “disinformation campaigns.” However, it is clear what it is all about. The established media, parties, and Internet corporations label all who deviate from the standard line with terms such as “fake news,” “disinformation,” or “cyber-attack.” This is targeted first and foremost against left and progressive websites and organisations.

For example, earlier this month, Facebook deleted numerous popular left-wing accounts—including organisations fighting against war and police violence—in the name of the fight against “fake news.” In Germany, since the entry into force of the so-called Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), tens of thousands of contributions have been deleted using the same justification. For a year and a half, Google has been cooperating closely with German government circles in the censorship of left-wing and progressive websites, most notably the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Wikileaks founder Julian Assange has been trapped in the Ecuadorian embassy in London for more than six years after Wikileaks exposed the war crimes of the US government. He faces extradition to the US and a potential death sentence if he leaves the embassy.

In Germany, the latest report by the domestic intelligence agency, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), uses the term “disinformation” to denounce any left-wing opposition to official government policies. “Internationally broadcasted TV, radio and internet channels operate targeted propaganda and disinformation campaigns,” the report claims. The BfV goes on to boasts that “preventative measures” have “contributed to a high level of attention towards possible disinformation and has led to increased protective measures.”

The stated goal of the BfV, which works closely with the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD), is the persecution of socialist parties. Thus, its report lists the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) as a “left-wing extremist party.” Justification for the surveillance is not based on

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violations of law or violent acts, but rather the public advocacy of a socialist programme "directed against the existing state and social order, as a generalised disparagement of 'capitalism,' against the EU, against alleged nationalism, imperialism and militarism."

The SGP will officially announce its participation in the European elections in the coming days. The party recognises the plans of the European Council as a direct threat. Merkel and the other European leaders must disclose the details of their clandestine preparations. What exactly do they mean by "operational follow-up" to be initiated by the "competent authorities"? Will this be similar to those "operations" carried out last week against political opposition parties in France?

On October 16, heavily armed policemen raided the private residence of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the Unsubmissive France (LFI) movement. The police were dressed in bulletproof vests and armed with assault rifles. Fifteen more assault teams broke into the homes of other LFI leaders and occupied the party headquarters. They confiscated material, downloaded data from computers, and unlawfully prevented Mélenchon and other party members from entering their own party headquarters.

Despite its political differences with Mélenchon, the *World Socialist Web Site* has sharply condemned this attack, calling it an "unmistakable threat to masses of people in France, across Europe and beyond. A decade after the Wall Street crash of 2008, the ruling elites are aware that their grotesque wealth and policies of austerity and war are overwhelmingly unpopular. Weak governments take desperate measures, and they aim to use ruthlessly the police-state powers built up during the 'war on terror' against political opposition."

It is in this context that one has to understand the conclusions of the EU summit. The ruling class is reacting with authoritarian methods to the increase in mass demonstrations and strikes across Europe. Despite fierce conflicts, European governments are joining ranks in suppressing growing popular opposition. The whole document of the European Council reads like a blueprint for the speedy development of a European police state.

The summit agreed to "provide Member States' law enforcement authorities, Europol and Eurojust with adequate resources." This will be further strengthened by "partnerships with the private sector" as well as improved cooperation and access to data. Security and law enforcement agencies should thus be able to respond to "new challenges posed by technological developments and the evolving security threat landscape."

Among other things, a pan-European data system giving police and the law access to the data of millions of people is planned. To this end, the "interoperability of information systems and databases" should be improved, "in particular through a common identity repository." All "measures needed," according to the summit, should be given "the highest priority."

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