

Spain's PSOE-Podemos government imposes internet censorship

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The Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government has advanced plans to censor the internet across Spain.

The “Procedure for Intervention against Disinformation,” approved last month by Spain’s National Security Council (CSN) and published this month in the Official State Gazette (BOE), allows the state to monitor and suppress internet content under the pretext of combating “fake news” and “foreign intervention.”

The document makes legal provision for constant state surveillance of social media platforms and the media more broadly to detect “disinformation” and give a “political response” to such campaigns, including retaliatory measures if there is supposedly foreign involvement. The government will counter “disinformation” by pushing its own communication campaigns and also suppress oppositional views.

The new protocol is a dangerous attack on freedom of speech with grave implications for the democratic right to access and use the internet freely. It gives the Spanish state complete decision-making power to determine what does or does not constitute “fake news,” without any involvement from journalists or public oversight.

A Permanent Commission will operate the censorship apparatus; it will be coordinated by the Secretary of State for Communication and directed by the National Security Department, with the aim of “ensuring inter-ministerial coordination in the area of disinformation.” Members of the committee will come from the Foreign Ministry, the Finance Ministry and the Centro Nacional de Inteligencia (National Intelligence Agency, CNI), among others.

Podemos general secretary Pablo Iglesias sits on the board of the Intelligence Affairs Commission, which directs and supervises the activities of the CNI spy agency. The “left populist” Podemos party will thus play a leading role in implementing the attacks on democratic rights.

The protocol establishes four levels of activity for the system, ranging from monitoring the internet to detect, analyse and track the activity of disinformation campaigns at the lowest level, through to the launching of a “political response” by the CSN if the campaign can be attributed to a “third State.” Final stages could include diplomatic action against the foreign power, complaints filed with international bodies, or more aggressive retaliatory measures.

The new protocol bases itself on the claim that attempts by external forces to influence public opinion within a state constitute acts of aggression. This is particularly the case during election cycles, the document states, which are “ever more threatened by the deliberate, large-scale and systematic spread of disinformation that seeks to influence society with self-serving and spurious aims.”

Although the document does not name those who are supposedly guilty of conducting such disinformation campaigns, these charges of foreign election meddling are clearly aimed at Russia. This is only the latest attempt by the Spanish bourgeoisie to blame systemic political crises on “Russian meddling.” Similar claims of interference were made about the 2017 Catalan independence referendum.

Only last month, Spanish paramilitary police made ludicrous claims that Russia had planned to invade Catalonia in support of the secessionists, alleging without evidence that the Kremlin offered Carles Puigdemont—the former Catalan premier now living in exile in Belgium—ten thousand soldiers to deploy across the region.

El País, a daily closely aligned with the ruling PSOE, used false claims that Russian interference had been “proven” in the 2016 US presidential elections and the 2017 Brexit referendum in the UK to justify the Internet crackdown in Spain.

This continued peddling of anti-Russian propaganda by

the state, actively supported by bourgeois media, poses immense dangers to the working class. Claims of “Russian disinformation” will be used to discredit and suppress online content opposing the official narrative, as well as providing a potential *casus belli* for war with a nuclear-armed power in response to potentially imaginary acts of “aggression.”

The new protocol updates and makes public anti-disinformation legislation which has been in place since March 2019—passed under the premiership of PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez—the details of which were never shared publicly. These measures are based on an action plan put forward by the European Union in December 2018 and will be carried out in close collaboration with the EU.

The protocol gives a legal stamp of approval to censorship measures now underway in Spain for a number of years—particularly since the 2017 Catalan referendum, when Popular Party (PP) Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy’s government launched a vast campaign to monitor and censor social media in order to detect supposed secessionist “disinformation.”

While Podemos nominally opposed the PP’s attempts to enshrine these reactionary measures into law in 2018, accusing the then government of trying to create an Orwellian “Ministry of Truth,” two years later, they are at the forefront of attempts to suppress freedom of speech. At the end of October, the Spanish Congress of Deputies passed a motion, put forward by Podemos. It obliges the government to adopt measures to prevent the spread of “hate speech” on social media by imposing its monitoring and immediate removal.

Podemos’ proposal would put in place mechanisms to facilitate denunciations of this content by internet users and would require operators of internet platforms to remove posts which “incite hate” within 24 hours, or within one hour if the target is a minor. Internet operators would also be required to store this content and provide it to the authorities for investigation.

While Podemos tries to give its reactionary policies a progressive veneer of opposition to hate speech, the ultimate target of its moves to censor the internet is the working class. As unrest grows in Spain and internationally in response to governments’ homicidal handling on the COVID-19 pandemic—exacerbating unemployment, lack of access to health care, and poverty—Podemos is stepping up efforts to silence domestic political opposition. It aims to prevent the outbreak of mass demonstrations and strikes against its

own murderous policy.

Appearing before the Spanish congress, Podemos declared that the pandemic had created a “growing polarisation” in public opinion, reflected online.

Podemos claimed that the pandemic is being “instrumentalised for ideological purposes,” which poses the risk of digital “lynchings.” This implies that legitimate criticisms of Podemos itself and its coalition partner, the PSOE, for their criminal policies on the COVID-19 pandemic are in fact attempts to intimidate and “lynch” bourgeois politicians and should therefore be suppressed.

Global press organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemned the new protocol as an attack on freedom of expression. RSF Spain president Alfonso Armada said: “We deplore the fact that a such a loosely-worded document constitutes the basis of an initiative to combat disinformation. All over the world, we condemn laws that are supposed to combat fake news and which, in reality, are designed to erode press freedom by means of a deliberate ambiguity.”

In response to such criticisms, the Federation of Spanish Journalist Associations and the Madrid Press Association, as well as from right-wing parties fraudulently posturing as defenders of democratic rights, the PSOE-Podemos government issued a statement. It tried to cover over the reactionary nature of the PSOE-Podemos legislation.

It said: “The objective [of the protocol] is to avoid foreign interference in matters of national interest as well as to detect campaigns promoted from outside which could damage the national interest in our country.” It stressed the supposed necessity of increasing “electoral integrity” and claimed that the new measures do not target “fake news” but “disinformation campaigns.”

The distinction is bogus. In reality, this protocol is a part of a broader turn in the Spanish ruling class towards police-state rule. It exposes yet again the “left populist” parties of the affluent upper-middle class like Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and their affiliates across Europe, who, once in government, have enthusiastically implemented policies of austerity, militarism and attacks on democratic rights indistinguishable from those of the right-wing.



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