

Spain's ruling PSOE, Podemos use “anti-disinformation” tool for internet spying

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More details have emerged on the censorship apparatus operated by Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government. A new cyber-monitoring tool, known as ELISA, has been rolled out across the country, which will scour the internet for supposed instances of “disinformation” and report them to Spain's central government for further action.

According to the daily *El País*, which is closely linked to the PSOE, ELISA began by monitoring only a few dozen web pages. However, its surveillance operation has now expanded to around 350 sites. It has been described as a “Digital Observatory,” designed to “facilitate the monitoring of open sources, as well as the profiling of media and social networks,” according to the National Cryptological Centre (CCN), which developed and runs the program under the aegis of Spain's National Intelligence Centre (CNI) spy agency.

To avoid any judicial oversight, ELISA will supposedly only monitor open source data, rather than private communications. It will nonetheless mine vast quantities of information on online sources, social media usage, news platforms and other internet content.

According to *El País*, quoting a CCN source, ELISA's aim is to detect “systematic and malicious campaigns to distribute disinformation which aims to generate polarisation and to destabilise society, exacerbating its conflicts and taking advantage of its vulnerabilities for the benefit of a foreign state.”

ELISA's development and implementation is the latest in a series of internet-monitoring and censorship measures recently made public in Spain. As unrest grows in Spain and internationally at governments' criminal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Spanish ruling elite is intensifying efforts to crack down on domestic political opposition and denounce foreign states—particularly Russia.

Revelations about the CCN's ELISA tool come hot on

the heels of a new protocol, the “ Procedure for Intervention against Disinformation ,” approved by Spain's National Security Council (CSN) in October. Details of this document were made public in November in the Official State Gazette (BOE). It allows the state to monitor and suppress internet content, under the pretext of combatting “fake news” and “disinformation.”

This gives the Spanish government full decision-making power to determine what is or is not fake news, and makes legal provision for constant state surveillance of social media platforms and the media more broadly to detect “disinformation” and formulate a “political response.”

The ELISA tool will expand on this spying framework. The CCN will report on ELISA's findings fortnightly to the Permanent Commission against Disinformation, a body set up to operate the censorship apparatus detailed in October's protocol.

The Permanent Commission is coordinated by the Secretary of State for Communication and directed by the National Security Department. Members of the committee will come from the Foreign Ministry, the Finance Ministry and the CNI spy agency, among others. The CCN's reports on ELISA findings are thus received and studied at the highest levels of the Spanish state.

Podemos general secretary Pablo Iglesias sits on the board of the Intelligence Affairs Commission, which supervises the CNI and thus its subordinate body, the CCN. The “left populist” Podemos party will therefore directly oversee the operations of the CCN and ELISA, receiving the fortnightly spying reports.

Information on the exact functioning of the ELISA tool is limited. While it was designed at the end of 2019, according to the CCN, it appears to have become operational as of April this year, during the first wave of the pandemic in Spain.

According to an initial report published online by the

CCN, between April and September this year, 1,808 items of “anti-globalist” content were detected by ELISA across 157 different online platforms. The CCN report states that these “anti-globalist” narratives have an “anti-system character, [and are] against democratic institutions and can pose a direct threat to social cohesion [and to] stability, including to the country’s health.”

“The Covid-19 crisis has facilitated a large growth in these narratives,” the report continues, “as well as in the digital sources which have disseminated this type of content.” The CCN makes clear that the rollout of ELISA was intended in no small part to combat the massive popular opposition to the government’s murderous handling of the pandemic, and prevent strikes and protests against it.

The CCN tries to obscure the main targets of its surveillance operations with references to the alleged anti-Semitic content published by “anti-globalist” sites, which include far-right web pages like *El Correo de España*, *Alerta Digital* and *Mpr21*, according to online newspaper *El Confidencial*. These sites “systematically link hidden interests to the ‘Jewish Lobby’ (George Soros or the Rothschild family and including Bill Gates),” the report states.

While no doubt anti-Semitism proliferates on the far-right websites cited by the CCN, these are by no means the only sites being monitored, and the objective of the ELISA spying tool is not to eradicate fascist sentiment online. Anti-Semitic content is only a small part of the vast array of material flagged as “potentially malicious” by the CCN, which seeks to detect and criminalise any perspective challenging the rule of the bourgeoisie. Ultimately the target of this censorship operation is the working class, including various religious minorities.

According to *El País*, of the sites monitored by ELISA thus far, around 25 percent were pro-Russia, with a third based in Russia and another third in Spain. Thirty-five percent were anti-system websites in Spanish, 22 percent were far-right pages and 18 percent were far-left. These web pages were located both on Spanish servers and on foreign ones, including in other European countries, in Latin America and in the United States.

“[The] main nucleus [of the anti-globalist content],” the CCN report states, “consists of stating that democracies do not obey the needs of citizens, but are at the service of hidden elites who make the decisions, beyond the will [of a country’s citizens].” In a world where a handful of multi-billionaires control more resources and wealth than the vast majority of the world’s population, this is hardly

an unpopular opinion.

Other viewpoints marked as online “disinformation” include opposition to “the legitimacy of States” and the “market economy,” lack of trust in “traditional media,” and opposition to “multilateral organisms” like NATO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

In a PowerPoint presentation on the “Characteristics of disinformation narratives and media,” the CCN lists the following as possible signs of disinformation: the “dissemination of an image of the State as violent and/or corrupt”; “support for organisations that reveal state secrets like WikiLeaks”; “denial of the official, proven and judged version of terrorist attacks or great crimes”; and “theories about reverting to the gold standard [or about] the corruption of the capitalist system.”

ELISA is only one of a number of cyber-monitoring tools developed by the CCN, with others including ANA, CARMEN and MONICA, most of which were developed and rolled out in 2019. In total, the CCN uses around 20 different tools, each bearing a woman’s name.

The new ELISA framework creates an ideological dragnet for criminalising an exceptionally broad range of viewpoints commonly held by the left, under the pretext that these are “disinformation” or “potentially malicious.” These anti-democratic measures are only the thin end of the wedge. Monitoring and reporting on oppositional viewpoints prepares the censoring and prosecution of those who espouse them.

The working class most oppose these authoritarian moves, beginning by opposing those who are ramming them through: the “left populist” Podemos party and similar pseudo-left organisations across the world.



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