



Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting

The role of social media in preventing electoral violence: Perspectives from civil society

Thursday 17 March 2022, Online

MEETING REPORT

This Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Policy Meeting (PM) brought together 16 civil society representatives, 14 officials from the European Commission (EC), the European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU Delegations, and 6 representatives of the United Nations. The overall objective of the meeting was for representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), the EU, the UN and other experts to (1) discuss the role of social media in preventing electoral violence; and (2) provide recommendations to the EU and other international actors on how they can engage and support efforts to harness the potentially positive impact of social media as means of preventing electoral violence.

As the meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule, the views expressed may not be attributed to any participating individual or institution nor do they necessarily represent the views of all of the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the co-organisers.

Civil society representatives raised the following issues and made the following recommendations:

Role of social media in inciting and preventing electoral violence

- As a general trend, there has been a shift in public perceptions of social media in the last 15 years: while social media used to be seen positively as supporting democratic processes and institutions, many now presume that social media will undermine elections.
 - Activity on social media in the context of elections has also increased with every electoral cycle in recent years.
- There are different types of disruptive activities on social media, such as: (1) polarisation of the public through disinformation and long-term interactions with communities to spread hate messages, and (2) targeted threats on politicians with ad-hoc reactions towards specific individuals or events. These different types may require different responses.

- While social media can be a vector for inciting violence, it can also be used as a channel for spreading peaceful messages and good faith. Millions of new voters each electoral cycle are on social media, and this could be an opportunity for proactive civic education and to promote the participation of young people.
 - Unfortunately, disinformation and hateful messages spread faster than reason and dialogue on social media, which is a major challenge in supporting peaceful messages and reliable information. This is in part due to confirmation biases that are amplified on social media.
- While social media does not necessarily create problems in itself, it may be exacerbating or speeding up pre-existing issues. Societies are more or less vulnerable to electoral violence incited on social media, depending on their history of violence and social cleavages. Social inequalities are reflected and exacerbated by social media, and vulnerability to various harms also reflect these social inequalities.
- Several participants highlighted the importance of tackling traditional media in conjunction with social media. Indeed, traditional media, such as radio and television stations that appeal to a particular political or ethnic group, can also be responsible for spreading disinformation or hate speech. Traditional media can also be used to amplify violence and lend legitimacy to disinformation that originated on social media.
- Popular individuals or ‘verified’ accounts can sometimes act as influencers for hire, meaning that they are directly or indirectly paid by political actors to push certain ideas.
- Various organisations foresee social media playing an important role in upcoming elections, and are therefore planning accordingly.

Activities to mitigate the negative role of social media

- Several organisations have set up or are supporting social media monitoring units to track and tackle hate speech.
- Codes of Conduct with provisions on social media, online campaigning and digital advertisement, have been useful tools to engage with various stakeholders during an election and establish a standard to which they can be held accountable.
 - Several participants highlighted the importance of establishing committees to monitor compliance with Codes of Conduct. It has been particularly useful in some contexts for the monitoring committees of Codes of Conduct to have a presence on social media and communicate directly to the public about their monitoring.
 - It is important to build local and individual buy-in for Codes of Conduct.
- Training citizen reporters can support the production of more reliable information. This information can then also be used for early warning purposes, and to proactively engage with risks of violence during electoral processes.
- In some cases, international organisations and platforms can help activists raise problems with national authorities, who may be unwilling to tackle detractors internally.

Challenges

- Many local authorities and governments have failed to prosecute breaches to Codes of Conduct or outright misconduct on social media, and in particular violence against women.
- It is particularly difficult to monitor disinformation and hateful messaging on messaging social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, which are important vectors for disruptive actors.
- There is an important challenge of scale: fact checking efforts have thus far not been sufficient to tackle the scale of disruptive actions on social media. Indeed, while disruptive actors have used innovative tools on social media, responses to these disruptions are not achieving the same level of technical sophistication.
- It has been difficult to engage with social media companies as their incentives are short-term and they are not likely to act proactively and ahead of time.
- The monitoring and evaluation of activities to tackle electoral violence on social media remains a key challenge for several organisations. It is thus difficult to judge the impact of activities in this field.
- There is a risk that recommendations to manage hate speech on social media are used as justification by governments to repress dissent and limit freedom of expression.
- It can be difficult to identify neutral media platforms, as many of them (including traditional media) are backed by political actors.

Recommendations

- Social media should be used to increase the public's knowledge about the elections and rules in place.
- Responses to disruptive effects of social media should take a multi-stakeholder approach, as various actors (such as social media companies, political parties, civil society organisations, and third governments) have different mandates and roles to play.
- Counter-messaging and debunking activities should tackle both messages on social and traditional media.
- Disinformation particularly flourishes where there is a lack of information. Accurate information should therefore be delivered proactively by credible actors.
- It is important to support financially and technically those organisations that work to counter hate speech and incitement to violence
- Further research should be conducted to better understand: the impact of Code of Conducts; why people lean towards violence; how various actors tackled disinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Research on social media could be diversified beyond analytics, including qualitative and psychological research.
- Discussions on social media and preventing electoral violence should go beyond electoral disputes, and should rather become regular dialogues between political actors.
- The EU could support the development of tools for monitoring and evaluation of activities on social media.
- The EU should exert more pressure on social media companies to influence their actions beyond the EU.
- The EU should implement its own principles, and hold social media companies accountable inside the EU as well.

List of publications and websites shared by participants during the meeting

- '[Countering Hate Speech in Elections: Strategies for Electoral Management Bodies](#)', white paper by Vasu Mohan and Catherine Barnes, IFES, January 2018
- '[Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech: Exploring the Relationship and Programming Interventions](#)', report by Lisa Reppell and Erica Shein, IFES, April 2019
- '[Handling Harmful Content Online: Cross-National Perspectives of Users Affected by Conflict](#)', report by the Institutional Learning Team, Search for Common Ground, April 2021
- '[Social Media and Conflict: Understanding Risks and Resilience](#)', research summary and policy brief, Mercy Corps, July 2021
- '[Social Media, Conflict, and Peacebuilding: Issues and Challenges](#)' discussion paper by Will Ferroggiaro, Adrienne Brooks and Lisa Inks, Mercy Corps, December 2021
- '[Toolkit for Identifying, Countering and Reporting Online Hate Speech](#)', Search for Common Ground, December 2021
- '[Electoral Processes: Navigating and Emerging from Crisis](#)', thematic paper by Sead Alihodžić et al., International IDEA, 2021
- '[Protecting Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age](#)', report by the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age, January 2022
- [swisspeace webpage for Digital Peacebuilding](#), accessed 17 March 2022
- '[A Social Media Analysis Toolkit for Mediators and Peacebuilders](#)', BuildUp and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, accessed 17 March 2022
- '[Sticking to the Facts, Building Trust: Our Cure for Disinformation](#)', report, Fondation Hirondelle, accessed 17 March 2022

Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fourth phase of the CSDN will last from 2020 to 2023. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).