Safeguarding national elections from foreign intervention

Empowering Future Generations: Cultivating Global
Literacy and Enlightenment

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Introduction

2024 was the year of many elections. This shed light on the power and importance of democracy, but also showed us the dangers our democracies face due to foreign interference in elections. We have seen media, money and brute force being used to either sway voters or otherwise influence election outcomes. This is a big threat to the sovereignty of states and fairness of democracies. This report will therefore outline the main aspects of the issue and ways to possibly combat them. It will talk about cyber threats, most representative ways to organise democracies and much more.

Definition of Key Terms

Foreign intervention/interference

Any form of influence on national elections carried out by another country, or organisations closely linked to a foreign country.

Disinformation

false information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media.

Cybersecurity

All measures being undertaken in order to safely protect user data, communications and electronic behaviour from criminals not authorized to access or use this data.

General Overview

Democratic integrity

First of all, it is important to understand that democracies can heavily suffer from foreign interference. At the end of the day, democracies should be perfectly representative of the wishes of their participants. This is clearly not the case if foreign actors interfere with the elections. Any form of media advertisements, hacking or spreading misinformation is at odds with this principle.

Sovereignty of states

The state's sovereignty is undermined by foreign influence in the elections. A sovereign state functions as a self-governing body, while foreign interference might lead to certain parties (not) being elected, which would benefit these foreign nations, instead of the state itself.

Public confidence

The public confidence in elections is the cornerstone our democracy is built on. If the citizens are distrusting the integrity of the electoral process, they might start losing trust in the system in general, which is already very low in many countries. Not only will fewer people go to vote, they will also more likely have a sceptic opinion of the electoral results. Democracies can become less representative and the political situation less stable. This is clearly an undesired outcome.

Disinformation

A common way of influencing foreign elections is through disinformation. In the recent American elections Bradley T. Smith, Treasury's acting undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said in a statement: "The governments of Iran and Russia have targeted our election processes and institutions and sought to divide the American people through targeted disinformation campaigns". Two groups from these countries have been sanctioned for stoking divisions among American people by spreading disinformation about.

The Russian organisation created deep fake videos of presidential candidates, and even paid American companies to spread pro-Russian content. The Iranian group stimulated pro Palestinian protests in the United States (note: this in itself is not disinformation, but it might undermine the sovereignty of the US democracy). There are also allegations that they hacked into computers of (former) high standing US officials, more on the dangers of this later.

Since disinformation is inherently false, it brings no good. Falsely informed people are often prone to extremism (as the disinformation is often extreme) and they can steer up unnecessary tensions in the country.

Foreign interests

Why did Russia, China and Iran try so hard to influence American elections? Because the outcome will determine their probability of successfully executing their plans for the coming years. Russia, for example, tried hard to make Trump win the elections, as he has been fond of president Putin in public many times, is extremely critical of the NATO alliance and has suggested cutting funds to Ukraine. For Russia, it was of utmost importance for Trump to win the elections, as it gives them more probability of succeeding on their campaign in Ukraine.

Iran, on the other hand, would have liked to see Harris win the elections. As a country, Iran is generally disliking President Trump, as his administration ordered the killing of General Qassem Soleimani, and more importantly ending the Nuclear Deal with Iran, and thereby restoring heavy sanctions on the country. They therefore tried to influence the outcome so that Harris would win instead of Trump.

Preventing future threats

Investing in election security is also a deterrent against future interference. It sends a clear message to adversaries that attempts to manipulate or disrupt elections will not succeed. This

resilience strengthens the nation's democratic institutions and sets a precedent that interference will be met with robust defenses and consequences.

As a convenient consequence, this might lead to new technologies being developed. For example software recognising deep fakes, or algorithms that can quickly check whether certain information is based on reasonable sources. Even the famous X (also known as twitter) community notes, have been introduced as a way to bring nuance to discussions and combat mis- and disinformation.

Cybersecurity

To build on the previous paragraph, it can be said that improvements to the issue are mostly cybersecurity related. Many aspects, such as regular penetration testing and ethical hacking might help improve cybersecurity, in order to prevent hacking from foreign governments, which can give them sensitive information, which can be used to manipulate important figures, or influence the public opinion. Solving this issue will also lead to better encryption within messaging, improving the lives of the users.

Furthermore, with an improved cybersecurity system, we can start voting via the web. Multiple countries have already started experimenting with various forms of electronic voting (so most often with a machine instead of a paper ballot), but very few have done so with voting via the internet. This is however an interesting technology to explore, as it will likely make counting votes more accurate and increase the voter turnout drastically. As soon as we can build a secure enough cyber system, we can start implementing this technology.

Conclusion

The issue is much broader than this report is intended to cover. Hopefully, it has been able to show you the importance of tackling this problem and figuring out solutions, not only to solve the existing problems, but also to deter future ones. And hopefully we will also manage to develop new technologies which might come in handy in future elections and aspects of our lives outside of elections. The report will now cover major parties and solutions to the issue.

Major Parties Involved

United States of America

The US has been targeted by foreign election interference many times. As a result, they have become a leading developer of technology to combat the spread of disinformation and a leading developer of cybertechnology. Many frameworks are developed by the US, which not only improves their own protection from foreign interference, but also gives a guide to lesser developed countries, who might not have the resources to collaborate with companies or establish institutions to build their own framework from scratch.

Because the US is so often the target of foreign interference, they have been an example to the rest of the world on how to deal with intervention in elections and how dangerous it can be. This way, other countries are urged to resolve the issue.

But the United States is not only the target, but also known for meddling in other countries' elections. It needs to be said that this does not happen as often as before, for example during the cold war. However, if you look at recent years, the US has been involved in regime changes and has been influencing other countries heavily. The most prominent example is the US interference in Iraqi politics. They overthrew the government and helped capture Saddam Hussein, without conclusive evidence of him having connections to Al-Qaeda.

But not only the government, but also billionaires play a big role in foreign elections. Elon Musk for example, stirs up chaos in Germany by speaking out in support of the AfD party. He had also called for Nigel Farage to be replaced as the Reform UK leader and for King Charles to dissolve the parliament. Rupert Murdoch (founder of Fox News) is another billionaire who heavily influences the news by controlling media outlets such as the Times, Sunday Times, and The Sun. Although he is the owner of these papers, which is allowed, he still drove the UK and Australia to the right during his time. It might be wise to ask ourselves not whether this is allowed, but whether it should be.

Russia

Many Russian companies, hacker groups, or organisations, with the semi-secret support from the government, work to spread malware, spread disinformation and acquire sensitive information. This has made Russia one of the main adversaries and fears to many countries holding elections. When in 2016 they leaked sensitive e-mails from higher ups from the democratic party, it had a great impact on the elections, creating much polarization and discussion.

Russia is also known for financing certain parties that represent their interests. This is highly undemocratic, as parties should not be promoted through foreign investments, as if they are stocks on the stock market. Russia often provides this support to parties on the far left or right of the political spectrum, in order to weaken the central alliance, which will generally be opposed to many of Russia's policies.

UNDP

The United Nations Development Program is a leading agency in assisting electoral management bodies (EMBs) in conducting elections. They have supported educational campaigns and helped digitalize voter registration in Afghanistan in 2019. They thus strengthen the democracies and trust in the system among civilians. It also ensures transparency about the voting process and counting of votes in many countries. The UNDP does many other things, such as educating people and providing resources to recognise fake news.

OSCE

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe monitors fairness and transparency of its 57 member states. It also writes reports and lets countries know what to improve in their democratic process. A very useful organisation, though it mostly concerns itself with more or less developed countries. It has 0 African members, although these countries are most prone to influence from other countries.

Timeline of Events

27/10/2005	The UN and other international organizations adopted the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation to establish guidelines for impartial and transparent election observation.
23/06/2016	The Brexit referendum is alleged to be influenced by Russian media and disinformation.
08/11/2016	Russia has leaked sensitive e-mails of higher ups in the democratic party, heavily damaging Hillary Clinton's reputation.
07/05/2017	Russian-backed groups were accused of hacking Macron's campaign emails and leaked sensitive information to undermine his candidacy.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

GEIN

The Global Electoral Integrity Network was created by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to foster international collaboration on electoral integrity. The body acted as a mediator of knowledge sharing between countries and also gave technical assistance to strengthen cybersecurity and transparency in elections.

European Union's Action Plan Against Disinformation

The EU launched this plan to combat disinformation campaigns, particularly those targeting its democratic institutions, including elections. This plan has led to a good preparedness to combat false information. Additionally, is made social media companies create stronger surveillance of fake accounts and improve content moderation. This plan mitigates the spread of fake news. This was extremely helpful during the past two European Parliament elections.

The U.S. Foreign Interference Task Force

The U.S. Foreign Interference Task Force is a critical initiative addressing the issue of foreign interference in elections. Its relevance lies in its mission to detect, mitigate, and counteract efforts by foreign actors to influence U.S. democratic processes. FITT consolidates intelligence from federal agencies, coordinates responses to cyber threats targeting election infrastructure, and investigates disinformation campaigns aimed at manipulating voter perception.

The task force played a pivotal role in addressing threats during the 2018 midterms and the 2020 Presidential Election, including combating Russian, Chinese, and Iranian interference efforts. By collaborating with private tech companies, FITT also aids in identifying and removing malicious online activity, such as fake accounts and coordinated disinformation. Its efforts exemplify how robust institutional measures can enhance election security, safeguard public trust, and serve as a model for other nations facing similar challenges

Possible solutions

Improving cubersecurity

As stated many times, cybersecurity is a key aspect of this issue. In order to improve cybersecurity governments can take measures such as regular testing, ethical hacking, research towards new encryption methods and establishing multi-factor authentication for all digital platforms. These are just a few of the measure that can be taken in order to ensure a safer cyber network.

Regulating (social) media

Media is a key stakeholder in the issue, as much of the fake news and disinformation is spread via the media. In order to better control this spread, the governments can mandate

transperency in advertising via media (which would lead to parties having to let know whether they have been sponsored by foreign countries), create regultions to combat fake accounts, and establish organisations that counter false information.

Education

Education about the fact that elections are being influenced by foreign countries and/or organisation, how and why this happens, will make children, tomorrow's future, more alert and cutious of the things they encounter on the internet. What might help with this is being more open about what went wrong in previous elections, and how this could be improved. This alerts the community and brings awareness to the issue.

Useful documents

OSCE Copenhagen Document (1990)

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 58/4: United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) (2003)

United Nations Resolution 68/164: Promoting and Protecting the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression (2013)

United Nations Resolution 73/195: Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (2018)

European Union Action Plan Against Disinformation (2018)

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