

14. May 2024

Ursula von der Leyen, the EPP lead candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission, delivered a speech at the Democracy Summit in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Prime Minister Frederiksen, dear Mette,
Dear former Prime Minister and NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen, Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be with you today at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit.

Dear Anders, I am sure every year all of your speakers say the same thing: that the Democracy Summit could not come at a better time. And while I will spare you that line, I do want to make the case for why this year it really is true. The first – and perhaps most obvious – reason is that we are coming up to some very important landmarks for our European democracy. Europeans will very soon start taking to the polls in what are perhaps the most important European elections ever.

I say that because what is at stake in this election will define the future of this Continent. Elections are never about one narrow issue. But they are about giving a clear sense of direction for our society.

So the question we all have to ask ourselves is: do we want a strong Europe that fights for our values and our democracy? Or, on the other hand, do we let our democracies be hijacked by the proxies and puppets of authoritarians? Do we let them erode and corrode everything we have built over more than 70 years?

To some, this may sound dramatic - or even a false dichotomy. But I believe it is the stark choice in front of us. So we need to show that democracy is not just a nice to have. But that it is the best and fairest way to deliver on the things that matter the most to people. And we need to build a strong coalition of the centre to fight for our values and our democracy.

And to put that into a wider perspective, I believe we can draw inspiration from an anniversary on the eve of the elections. Because the 5th of June will be another important landmark for our democracy. And I want to congratulate all of Denmark for



what will be the 175th anniversary of your Constitution. It will be a moment to reflect on the central premise and the central promise of the Constitutional Act.

The promise of freedom. The personal freedom to believe and think what you want. The freedom of speech to say what you want. Or the freedom to protest and demonstrate your views. These freedoms and the responsibilities that come with them are still some of the hallmarks of our modern democracies.

Which brings me to the second point on the timing of this Summit. Those core tenets of our democracy are under attack today like never before. What we once thought was for granted is now being openly threatened in so many different ways. And while this is true everywhere around the world, it is also an urgent issue here in Europe.

We are of course seeing this in Ukraine with Russia's brutal war of aggression. We should be under no illusions about what this war is for Putin. It is of course about wiping a free and independent Ukraine off the map. But it is also a war on the entire international rules-based system and an existential threat for Europe. And it is an existential threat to our freedoms and democracies.

I am particularly concerned about the rise of foreign interference and manipulation in our societies, our democracies and our elections. Just think what we have seen play out in the last few weeks across Europe.

We have seen swarms of negative disinformation targeting different issues and individual candidates. Like the fake video posted under the logo of Radio France Internationale falsely claiming an epidemic of tuberculosis was imminent because of Ukrainian soldiers in French hospitals.

But it is not just fakes or fabricated content. It is also buying influence and causing chaos. We have seen far-right politicians and lead candidates from AfD in Germany in the pockets of Russia. They are selling their souls on Russian propaganda outlets and videos.

A close collaborator of a far-right politician was even arrested - accused of spying for China and giving it information from the European Parliament.

We have also seen a huge spike in malicious cyber-attacks. Like the one on Danish energy infrastructure last year. Or again in the last weeks in Sweden, Germany, Lithuania, Czechia, Poland and others. My own campaign website was attacked by cyber bots just last week.

The aim of all this is to divide our societies from within. And it is this deeper impact on society which I am most concerned about. Because the point about this malign interference is not just what is being said or done in each individual case. It is about sowing division and fanning the flames of extremism.

It is about weakening our resilience or commitment to a cause like supporting Ukraine. It is about eroding trust in our institutions and elections. It is about confusing people so they don't know who to believe. Or if they can even believe anyone at all.

And it is about giving cover and encouragement to the more dangerous extremes in our societies. This leads to some of the shocking attacks and threats we have seen in this election which I utterly condemn.

And it leads to many promising young candidates that I speak to on this campaign wondering whether they should get involved in politics at all.

Ladies and Gentlemen

We cannot tolerate this. And we have to put a stop to it. The good news is we have done a lot over the last years on defence of democracy. We have regulated the digital platforms. And we have taken big steps on disinformation, media freedom or the rules for political parties. The point is not that disinformation or malign interference is new.

It is that the technology and the techniques used are currently moving faster than society can adapt and react to. So it is now time to take our action to the next level. We must be as ambitious as the threat is serious.

And this is why - if I am re-elected as President, the Commission will put forward a European Democracy Shield as one of the key priorities of the next Commission. This should be an ambitious European project that focuses on the biggest threats from foreign interference and manipulation.

Allow me to give you some of the first elements of the European Democracy Shield.

The first is about detecMon. Because nothing is as powerful as unveiling information manipulation. This requires first and foremost a free media.

In addition, we need to build up the public expertise in order to detect information manipulation. This means on one hand better information and threat intelligence sharing from the various agencies dealing with this at national level.

But it also means creating new common capabilities at European level. There are good examples on national level. Such as Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency or France's Viginum.

I believe Europe now needs its own dedicated structure on countering foreign interference. It will pool the necessary expertise and link up and coordinate with existing national agencies.

The second element is about treatment.

We have already made progress with the DSA.

So once we have detected malign information or propaganda, we need to ensure that it is swialy removed and blocked. This is the role of online platforms who now have a set of responsibilities. We must be vigilant and uncompromising when it comes to ensuring that is properly enforced. It is not just a moral responsibility but it is EU law!

Now – as things evolve, we have to assess if this is sufficient. AI now allows for the creation of incredibly realistic deepfakes – which can have a very destabilising role in electoral campaigns.

And we have already seen that in Europe.

This is why our AI Act has some transparency requirements built in. And I very much welcome that the political parties signed a voluntary code of conduct ahead of these elections, notably on the ethical use of AI campaign tools. But as we look ahead, we need to consider how to strengthen our approach to AI content and in particular deepfakes.



Finally, it takes resilience. As technology evolves, we need to build up societal immunity around information manipulation. Research has shown that pre-bunking is more successful than de-bunking. Pre-bunking is the opposite of de-bunking. In short, prevention is preferable to cure. Think of information manipulation as a virus.

Instead of treating an infection once it has taken hold, that's the de-bunking, it is better to vaccinate, so that our body is inoculated. Pre-bunking is the same approach. Because disinformation relies on people passing it on to others – it is essential that people know what malign information's influence is and what the techniques look like. As that knowledge goes up – our chances of being influenced goes down. And that builds up the societal resilience that we will need.

Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Europe's moment of truth in so many ways whether it be on Ukraine, defence, competitiveness or democracy.

This is the message I am hearing as I travel around Europe before the elections.

The challenges and the threats may appear daunting. And as I have mentioned the truth is that we do have a fight on our hands.

But we have shown in the last years that when we are united, Europe is stronger and much more resilient than we give it credit for.

So let's not fight the authoritarians or the extremes at their own game.

Let's fight them by offering a positive vision of the future.

One which protects what we hold dear – our democracy and our values.

One which builds a European Democracy Shield against foreign interference. One which steps up where and when it matters.

For our security, our prosperity and of course, for our democracy.

Long live Europe and long live European democracy.

**MORE THAN
A UNION** ★
OUR HOME ★

