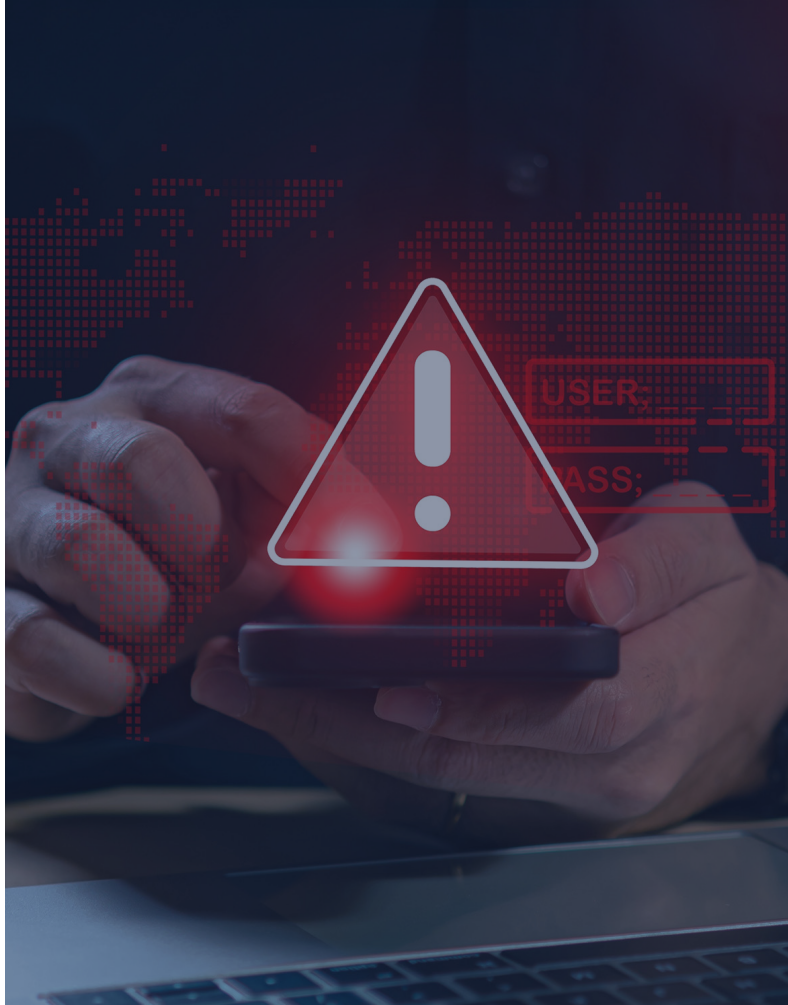




Foreign Interference in EU Elections: Universal Principle or Partisan Political?

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HIIA Perspective

Regular publication of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

Publisher:

© Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 2026.

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March 11, 2026

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FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN EU ELECTIONS: UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE OR PARTISAN POLITICAL?

This study questions whether the EU's approach to "foreign interference" in elections is based on consistent democratic principles or selective political judgments. It argues that current frameworks often treat coordinated online amplification as automatic evidence of foreign involvement, despite the possibility of domestic organization and funding. Using recent cases, the paper highlights inconsistencies in legal reasoning and evidentiary standards. It also raises concerns about double standards, particularly when actors opposing foreign influence have themselves received foreign funding. The study concludes that without clear definitions and universally applied rules, efforts to counter interference risk becoming politicized.

It has been reported that a court in Berlin has ordered that Elon Musk's X hand over data on the Hungarian election.¹ The court ruled in favor of the organization Democracy Reporting International (DRI), which hopes to use the data to detect "disinformation" and "foreign manipulation." The ruling is notable because DRI lost a similar case trying to get access to data for the German election.² The difference in the outcomes of the two cases was itself notable. In the case of the German election, the Berlin Regional Court granted the injunction, but X then challenged it in the Higher Regional Court and had the injunction overturned. In the case of the Hungarian election, the Berlin Regional Court refused the injunction, but DRI appealed it in the Higher Regional Court, which granted the appeal. Under German procedural law, when a Higher Regional Court issues a decision in an appeal against a denied injunction, it is often final and cannot be challenged in that interim proceeding.³ This unusual

1 Eliza Gkritsi, "Berlin Court Tells X to Hand over Data on Hungarian Election," *Politico*, February 28, 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/berlin-court-tells-x-to-hand-over-data-on-hungarian-election/>.

2 "DSA in Court: What We Learned from Suing X," Democracy Reporting International, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://democracy-reporting.org/en/office/global/news/dsa-in-court-what-we-learned-from-suing-x>.

3 "Success against X: Platform Must Provide Research Data," Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://freiheitsrechte.org/en/themen/freiheit-im-digitalen-zeitalter/x>.

maneuvering raises the question of why the Berlin Regional Court granted the injunction in the case of the German election but allowed DRI to take it to the Higher Regional Court in the case of the Hungarian election.

DRI has previously released extensive studies and policy research on disinformation and foreign influence on elections in the European Union. In one of their recent papers, they cite the example of the recent Romanian election as an instance of foreign influence. The authors write:

Coordinated and inauthentic online behaviour represents a key tactic within broader influence operations designed to shape public debate and perception. Such activities lie at the core of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), which refers to effort by foreign actors to covertly influence audiences and manipulate information ecosystems for strategic advantage. A notable example emerged during the Romanian presidential elections, where repeated alerts about the unusual amplification of networks supporting the lesser-known candidate Călin Georgescu led intelligence services to confirm the foreign origin of the activity, showing patterns, narratives, and cyber tactics consistent with Russian-coordinated operations observed in the region.⁴

What is striking about this assessment is that it equates “amplification of networks” with “Foreign Information Manipulation.” The assumption seems to be that if a network of accounts is found to be amplifying the candidacy of one party, this can be taken as *de facto* evidence that the amplification is coming from a foreign actor. The evidence that the rest of the paper deploys seems to be in keeping with this methodology. It is not clear why such a conclusion should be drawn. Social media campaigns are often not enormously expensive. It seems just as likely, if not more likely, that networks amplifying one candidate over another could simply be domestic backers of that candidate.

The primary backer of Georgescu has since been revealed to be Bogdan Peschir, a Romanian businessman and cryptocurrency enthusiast. According to the latest reports, Peschir spent around \$900,000 on the social media campaign. It is, of course, possible that Peschir received this money from a foreign government—although he has not yet been charged with this crime in Romania—but given that \$900,000 is not a lot of money it is also possible that he simply backed Georgescu using his own resources. When Peschir was arrested

4 “Access or Exit Democracy? Elections and Digital Trends in the EU, 2023-2025,” Democracy Reporting International, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://democracyreporting.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/images/690b2bf805951.pdf>.

by the authorities, they seized cryptocurrency and other financial assets worth around \$7 million from his electronic wallets.⁵ It has also been reported that he lived a lavish lifestyle and owned a variety of luxury cars including a Porsche and a BMW. It is perfectly credible that Peschir was in fact a crypto enthusiast who decided to use a fraction of his assets to back an insurgent politician, possibly in the hope that he could use the political connection established in the future to further his business interests, one of which was apparently a desire to create a network of crypto ATMs.⁶ Even if Peschir proves to be an agent of a government, however, simply assuming that any insurgent campaign that uses social media to drive a candidate is foreign backed is completely illogical. The EU has so few tools to differentiate between domestic political actors, intelligence agencies or secret services, and other foreign agents involved that there is no clear evidence regarding the affair.

This dubious methodology also raises the question of implicit support for various political parties in Europe by foreign powers generally. In almost every election, foreign countries have an opinion on the outcome. Typically, they will not publicize this opinion out of respect for diplomatic norms, but it nevertheless exists and will shape the messaging of that government and of the media platforms that support that government. Is this to be taken as an act of “foreign manipulation”? If a European citizen can access Russian news websites like TASS or Chinese news websites like Global Times and these websites prefer one candidate in a European election over another, does this count as “foreign interference”?

There is no doubt that “foreign interference” does exist. In the past, however, European Union authorities were sufficiently self-confident that they did not pay much attention to it. The Russian television network Russia Today, for example, began broadcasting its English-language channel in 2005⁷ and continued broadcasting right up until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.⁸ It is

5 “Romania Seizes \$7M from Crypto Entrepreneur Linked to Călin Georgescu,” *Protos*, December 10, 2024, <https://protos.com/romania-seizes-7m-from-crypto-entrepreneur-linked-to-calin-georgescu-campaign/>.

6 Luke Allnutt et al., “Romania’s ‘King Of TikTok’ Tied To Alleged Scheme Boosting Far-Right Presidential Candidate,” *Radio Free Europe*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-election-scandal-tik-tok-bogdan-peschir-georgescu/33229674.html>.

7 “20th Anniversary of RT TV Channel,” President of Russia, accessed February 17, 2026, <http://en.krem-lin.ru/events/president/news/78241>.

8 “EU Imposes Sanctions on State-Owned Outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik’s Broadcasting in the EU,” Council of the European Union, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rtrussia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>.

not so much that the existence of “foreign interference” via foreign-backed media has changed but rather that European authorities have become more sensitive to what they perceive to be “foreign interference,” even if the evidence for this is sometimes wanting. This raises the possibility that European authorities may be projecting their own insecurities outward. When Russia Today started broadcasting in 2005, the European establishment was powerful, confident, and secure. Today, on the other hand, they are deeply unpopular and feel their grasp on power slipping. On this reading, the obsession with “foreign interference” could be a move toward increasing authoritarianism in Europe.

There is also the question of what foreign involvement in European politics is allowed and what is disallowed. DRI itself has had extensive foreign backing in the past. LobbyFacts.EU shows that DRI received a €25,585 contribution from USAID in 2024.⁹ USAID no longer exists. It was shut down by the Trump administration in 2025. But it is quite obviously a funding arm of a foreign government—in this case, the government of the United States of America. How does DRI and others who claim to be countering Foreign Information Manipulation judge between “acceptable” foreign funding and “unacceptable” foreign funding?

The executive director of DRI, Michael Meyer-Resende recently wrote an article for *Internationale Politik* in which he claims that “the U.S. government is mainly fighting for European public opinion” and calls on the Europeans to “openly discuss issues with the Trump administration and get them tangled up in their own contradictions,” after which he lists a number of statements by Vice President JD Vance that he disagrees with.¹⁰ What standard is being applied here? Less than two years ago, according to public records, DRI was willing to accept foreign money from the United States government. Now that there is a new administration, the same organization rails against what it sees as American interference in European politics. One would be forgiven for thinking that this is simply a political battle masking itself as a regulatory battle.

Hungary has had extensive problems with foreign money flowing into the country to change public opinion. Take the example of the website VSquare, which regularly publishes sensationalist stories that it claims expose corruption

9 “Democracy Reporting International,” LobbyFacts, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://www.lobbyfacts.eu/datacard/democracy-reporting-international?rid=769286939357-35>.

10 Michael Meyer-Resende, “Kulturkampf statt Meinungsfreiheit” [Culture War Instead of Freedom of Expression], *Internationale Politik*, October 27, 2025, <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/kulturkampf-statt-meinungsfreiheit>.

in Central Europe with a special focus on Hungary. In the section on the origins of the website, the curators state that “support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) helped to kick off the project.”¹¹ NED is, of course, an arm of the United States government and funded by American taxpayers. If DRI is investigating foreign influence in Hungarian media, will it investigate VSquare? If not, why not? Once again, the reasoning here seems to be party political rather than based on universal principles.

If Europe wants to oppose foreign interference in European politics, this must be a universal principle if it wants to be taken seriously. Therefore, these arguments cannot be credibly put forward by organizations who have, in the very recent past, availed themselves of money given to them by governments outside of Europe. Nor can these arguments be taken seriously if they are applied selectively. If we agree that it is unacceptable that foreign powers interfere in European elections, we cannot ignore outlets like VSquare, which are explicit about their foreign support while clamping down on social media campaigns simply because they have the appearance of foreign support. If Europe is concerned about “foreign interference,” it must first define clearly, in proper legal terms, what this entails and what it does not. If the EU does not want a fully closed information space, some foreign media will be allowed, and the EU will need to define what this means.

11 “Who We Are,” VSquare, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260131190404/https://vsquare.org/about-us/>.



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