

## GREECE

Over the past few years, computational propaganda and information manipulation online have swiftly moved into Greek public life. Given the politically and financially unstable situation of the country in the recent past, fake news and conspiracy online have found fertile ground in Greece. About 71% of Greek internet users are now using social media as their main source for news, followed by television (67%). Freedom House reports that Greece's parliamentary democracy is characterised by vigorous competition between political parties who are using social media for political campaigning. Recently, there have been several political controversies in Greece based on fake news. Some experts even claim that social media and fake news are so influential in Greece that they are starting to distort democracy.

The current media and disinformation environment in Greece must be viewed through the lens of the broader media ecosystem. Prime Minister Tsipras had pledged to support modern and independent news however many traditional media oligarchs are still in place. Some traditional media oligarchs have been accused by the SYRIZA party as being highly biased, and have taken strong positions against the government during the 2015 referendum in Greece. At the same time, new "Tsipras-era" media outlets are establishing themselves and continue to control the main media outlets. They have also been accused of co-opting national broadcasting to promote positions by appointing friendly journalists. In 2016 the government held auctions for television licenses, which were officially overseen by the independent National Council for Radio and Television. However, critics have accused the government of using the procedure to alter the media landscape in their favour. In 2016, the auction was declared unconstitutional, but the government has continued to pursue it.

Prior to the European elections, Greek media were worried about fake news interfering with the elections, as well as Russian trolling. While some European countries (e.g. Germany and France) passed domestic laws against fake news (which are not without controversy), Greece is keeping with EU coordinated measures such as National Election Networks to support the national election processes across the EU.

There is evidence to suggest that Greek political parties have used computational propaganda as part of their digital campaign strategy. Some reports have suggested that major parties have "dealing rooms" where people sit and coordinate the dispersal of news and texts to influence voters, order trolls and block certain news (Karaisaki, 2019). These activities mainly focus on individuals who are undecided and did not want to vote. One early example is the Truth Team (Ομάδα Αληθειας), which was set up in 2012 and was working as an informal communications machine for the right-wing government at the time and then opposition (New Democracy party).

Some evidence suggests that Greek parties have used bots to amplify the party position. Similarly, trolls and human-operated fake accounts have been active in Greece. During the Rhodes 2018 local elections, both politicians and private individuals were targeted with hate campaigns by trolls. While initially the trolls worked individually or in small units, they

quickly started coordinating and formed troll farms. Organisers created webpages where they would leave directions as to whom should be targeted and state political goals.

There is very limited work on the exact size and operation of cyber troops in Greece, or the impact computational propaganda has on public life and conversations about politics. One study by the Civic Information Office monitored conversations about Greek politics in the EU election (Papaevangelou 2019). Another study by Crisis Monitor analysed a total of 3.868 fake news mentions, which were published between 1-10 March 2019, with Twitter having the largest volume (figure 11). Thus, more people are using the language of “fake news” to discuss Greek politics. However more independent research needs to be done to understand the impact of computational propaganda in Greece.

Greek society has become increasingly polarized and these growing divisions have been key issues discussed in mis-and-disinformation, as well as conspiracy theory. Nationalist and religious groups in Greece are sometimes the source of conspiracy and disinformation. Issues pertaining to North Macedonia and territorial disputes with Turkey are also key issues. Corruption is also a major topic for mis-and-disinformation.

In addition to conversations in groups on Facebook or websites, media oligarchies are a source of misinformation. For example, To Vima – a previously well-respected media outlet – reported the US ambassador and the PM of North Macedonia were on a secret meeting in Halkidiki, a touristic northern part of Greece while in reality they were just on holidays in close by areas at the same time (ToBHMA 2019). Although the media outlet used a misleading headline, the body of the text included more factual information about the events. This story was also picked up by other media outlets including Vima.gr and in.gr.

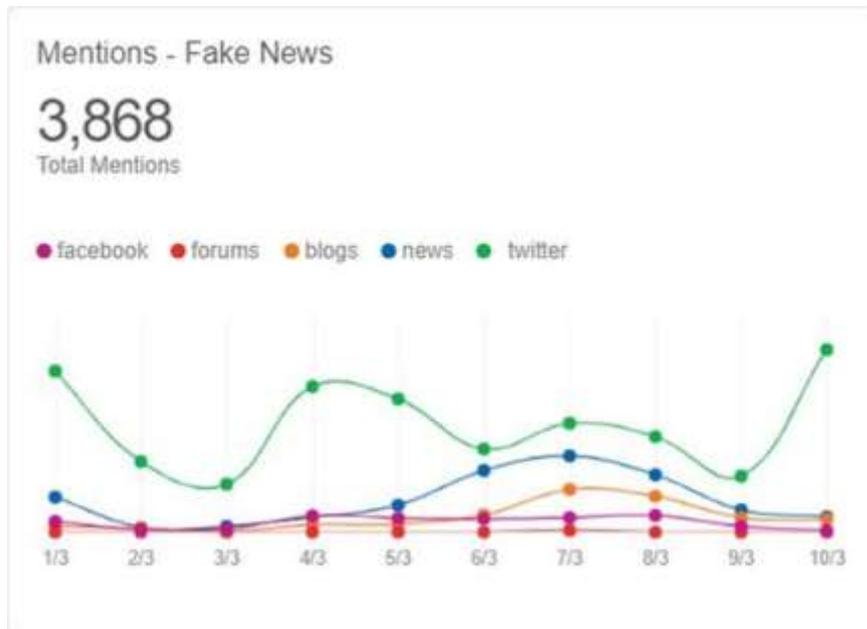
In other cases, politicians and parties are a source of mis-and-disinformation. For example, the leader of the new populist party – the Greek Solution – has claimed to have hand written letters from Jesus Christ. In 2018, a former SYRIZA communication group member was appointed as General Secretary of Information and Communication. The party’s communication group was engaged in spreading false news and carrying out personal attacks on social media, targeting political opponents and producing fake news during the 2012 national election.

There have been efforts by public broadcasters to reduce the amount of hate and hate speech in Greek media. On national level, public broadcasters announced in April 2019 that they would no longer feature materials from the right wing, Nazi ideology party Golden Dawn. In an open letter the labour union of Hellenic radio and television, ΠΟΣΠΕΡΤ, stated that if the public broadcaster ERT were to include Golden Dawn content they would transform themselves “into a means of spreading an ideology that has as its core the racist and mischievous proposal of Nazism”.

Finally, Greece is preparing for national elections in 2019, however, it is not clear if and when they will be held. Latest reports say the election will happen in October 2019. In the meantime, Greece is preparing for messy campaigning. National issues, political controversies and personal vendettas are rapidly taking on uncontrollable dimensions as

the elections are nearing. These issues are further amplified and complicated by the spread of computational propaganda.

Figure 11: Fake news mentions per platform



Source: Crisis Monitor, 12/03/2019, <https://www.crisismonitor.gr/2019/03/12/analytics-ekloges-plisiazoy-n-fake-news-bots-kai-trolls-sto-proskinio/>

## HUNGARY

Hungary, whose government is currently lead by Prime Minister Victor Orbán, is considered to be the only partly free democracy in the European Union. Orbán commands a majority parliament through the Fidesz–KDNP coalition, which has been criticized for dismantling Hungary’s democratic institutions as well as its independent media (Freedom House – Hungary, 2019). During Orbán’s nine-year rule, there has been a decline in the number of independent media outlets; for instance, 2016 saw the closure of *Népszabadság*, the largest, independent daily newspaper (Freedom House – Hungary, 2019). Many national, regional and local media have either closed or come to be controlled by oligarchs with ties to Orbán. The most striking development was the consolidation of 476 media outlets in the Central European Press and Media Foundation, whose chairman was formerly a legislator in the Fidesz party (Besser, 2019; Bognar, 2019). Critics have dubbed the Central European Press and Media Foundation a pro-government media conglomerate, controlling various newspapers, radio stations and websites. One critic, Ms Komuves, characterized it as a “media empire” and argued that “fake news and misinformation is coming from the state-sponsored media itself” (Besser, 2019).

While many still get their news via television (65%), more get their news online (85%), mostly on computers (63%) and smartphones (59%), according to the 2019 Reuters *Digital News Report*. The report details that the political climate negatively affects trust in news, which is very low (28%) and therefore online news outlets and social media networks are