

European Citizens' Initiative for the establishment of a European public social network

We, the undersigned citizens of the European Union, call on the European Commission to propose a legislative act which leads to the establishment of a European public online social network.

We propose this action because we fear that the current social media environment suffers from serious shortcomings that undermine the fundamental principles on which European democracies are based. There is no public social network on the European market, and citizens are thus forced to rely on predominantly non-European social media platforms that are privately owned.

Users on private social media platforms are exposed to disinformation, misinformation and malinformation that cause fear and twist social reality [1]. Furthermore, such harmful information can be published by fake accounts, number of which reaches billions on the largest platforms [2]. Users cannot even rely on the existence of the people they communicate with, and can therefore easily become victims of online fraud. This danger is further intensified by the rapid spread of artificial intelligence (AI). Another issue is that users' private data is often shared by social networks with third parties, something which the user seemingly agrees to in the endless terms and conditions [3; 4; 5; 6; 7]. Private information, which is often sensitive in nature, must be protected and never be sold.

The current situation also threatens European democracy itself. Misinformation spread on social networks is gaining such reach that it is destroying faith in democratic institutions and processes. Algorithms subsequently lock users into information bubbles that distort reality and lead to the spread of hatred and radicalization [8]. Third parties exploit inadequately protected or even deliberately provided user data for manipulative or influential activities. An example can be the case of Cambridge Analytica, which misused the data of tens of millions of Facebook users and influenced elections in several countries [9; 10]. Another common example is the use of social media by foreign powers to spread propaganda [11].

We are aware of the responsibility that a public social network will bear, and therefore its operation must be governed by democratic and legal principles. Above all, we emphasize that it must operate impartially and must never be misused by any specific group or ideology. The platform will also give users the freedom to choose their display algorithm, thereby preventing unconscious radicalization and limiting the creation of information bubbles. The goal of the hereby proposed public social network is to promote public dialogue, protect the human rights of all individuals without distinction and build a safe online space where even the more endangered groups like children or the elderly can be in contact with the online world but still be protected from its dangerous content. Similarly, user privacy must be a priority, which, together with the financial independence of the platform, will prevent the sale or leakage of sensitive user data. Furthermore, the platform will limit intrusive advertising, which will significantly reduce fraudulent ads. It will be possible to supplement false information with context and warnings about its falsity, which will reduce its harmfulness without the need of deleting it. A transparent way of identity verification will prevent the existence of fake profiles, thereby limiting the influence of third parties.

We call for the adoption of a legislative act leading to the creation of a European public online social media platform, following the steps taken in this area, led by the EU legislation already adopted and in line with the values enshrined in the founding treaties of the European Union. We welcome the adoption of the Digital Services Act [12], which contributes significantly to a fairer environment of online platforms. Yet we argue that the regulation of private social networks alone is not sufficient to create a safe, free, and transparent digital space and that a comprehensive solution is needed.

For these and the above-mentioned reasons, we call on the European Commission to adopt legislative act in order to create, as a new EU body, a public online social network which allows citizens, businesses, journalists, and other actors to share and consume graphic content and information at the wide-European level, with regard to:

1. Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union, which states that *“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”* [13].
2. The European Union's long-standing efforts to protect the private data of every individual, based, among other things, on Article 8 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states that *“Everyone has the right to the protection of personal data concerning him or her.”* and *“Such data must be processed fairly for specified purposes and on the basis of the consent of the person concerned or some other legitimate basis laid down by law. Everyone has the right of access to data which has been collected concerning him or her, and the right to have it rectified.”* [14].
3. European Media Freedom Act (hereinafter MFA) and its Article 4 of the preamble which warns that *“...the internal market for media services is insufficiently integrated and suffers from a number of market failures that have increased due to digitalisation. Firstly, global online platforms act as gateways to media content, with business models that tend to disintermediate access to media services and amplify polarising content and disinformation...”* [15] and also presents more problems which the online world is facing.
4. Council conclusions on increasing the availability and competitiveness of European audiovisual and media content (2021/C 501 I/02), which *“Recognises that: ... In order to achieve this goal, targeted sectorial and horizontal policy measures should ensure adequate prominence of European audiovisual works and media content and stimulate new sources of financing and models of distribution in view of growing presence of global audiovisual and media content service providers and platforms.”* [16].
5. Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (hereinafter TFEU), which states that *“Citizenship of the Union is hereby established. Every person holding the nationality of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union...”* [13] because, despite the existence of social networks enabling cross-border communication, European citizens do not have a widely available means of communicating without an intermediary primarily originating from outside the EU, which makes it difficult to communicate without security risks and to create a common European identity.

And based on:

1. Article 114 TFEU, which states that *“The European Parliament and the Council shall, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee, adopt the measures for the approximation of the provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States which have as their object the establishment and functioning of the internal market.”* [13] and CJEU Judgement C-217/04, [17] according to which, on the basis of Article 114, a new EU body aimed at harmonizing legislation may be created, because:
 - a. The internal market for communication platforms suffers from a number of failures that lead to the poor functioning of the media services market, undermining their independence and objectivity.
 - b. These failures can also create a biased view of the state of the country, including the state of democracy, the rule of law, and the economy, which limits citizens' ability to make informed decisions.
 - c. The creation of an internally equivalent European social network will make it possible to reduce the risk of further deepening the differences between Member States' national regulations on media plurality and freedom in the online environment, which are also mentioned in Article 7 of the preamble to the MFA, [15] thus enabling the internal market to function more easily and effectively in this area.
 - d. The harmonious functioning of the internal market is currently exposed to the risk of interference by non-EU actors who may influence the free movement of information and services for example by using the algorithm non-transparency.
2. Article 174 TFEU, which states that *“In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion. In particular, the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions.”*, [13] and the Article 175 TFEU which states that: *“Member States shall conduct their economic policies and coordinate them in such a way as to attain the objectives set out in Article 174. The formulation and implementation of the Union's policies and actions and the development of the internal market shall take into account the objectives set out in Article 174 and contribute to their achievement. ... If specific actions prove necessary outside the Funds and without prejudice to the measures decided upon within the framework of the other Union policies, such actions may be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.”* [13] because:
 - a. The free dissemination of innovations and examples of good practice among citizens leads to the equalization of the socio-economic level of development of regions and communities across the Union. This process is made difficult by the current fragmentation of the communication space of European citizens.
 - b. Misinformation often exploits and exacerbates socio-economic inequalities between individual EU regions, thus contributing to envy and a refusal to cooperate. This directly undermines the objectives of the EU and the purpose of Article 174 TFEU [13].
 - c. The current situation leads to the possibility of third parties influencing public opinion with a goal to undermine the territorial and social cohesion of the Union and the economic activity of the Union. A public social network would prevent this risk by using comprehensive security measures.

- d. The lack of transparency of algorithms used on social networks may, in addition to the aforementioned negative consequences for society, contribute, particularly given the varying levels of media literacy, to the deepening of existing inequalities and the socio-economic disadvantage of certain citizens,
- e. A public social network can offer job opportunities to individuals across the Union and build links between users, thereby promoting the social and territorial cohesion of the Union.

The impartiality of the European public social network must be ensured for it to function properly; therefore, it is necessary to set up independent supervisory bodies elected by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. Within this body appropriate entities like companies or universities together create the public social media network. Financial independence from political pressures will be made possible through indirect financing by European citizens and through guarantees embedded in the EU budget. The full costs for the development and functioning of the platform divided among all EU citizens using internet connection would be around EUR 1 yearly (just €0.08 monthly), an amount that should not be materially damaging to anyone and affordable for the Union and its member states. Through this system the social network would achieve true independence and would thus become an important politically impartial institution beneficial to all citizens of the European Union.

Sources

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