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VĚRA JOUROVÁ

VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Brussels,

Dear Minister,

Protecting our democratic systems was never more urgent than during current times. We are witnessing numerous challenges on all fronts, from information war to real wars at our European borders.

As a core part of our democratic systems, elections are the ultimate form of political participation. But they are also vulnerable to different threats, so we need to remain vigilant. We are approaching the end of 2024 - the year of elections, with over 50 countries world-wide holding ballots. It is a good moment to take stock of what has happened – so we can be better prepared in the future.

Since the beginning of this year, I have engaged in a ‘Democracy Tour’ aimed at protecting the integrity of the electoral systems, especially before the European elections held in June. I visited more than half of the EU Member States to discuss their actions. I have met with key actors, including national authorities, enforcers, media and civil society and have repeatedly exchanged on the risks and urgency for solutions in the General Affairs Council.

Already in spring, we were seeing clear risks of information interference from malign actors such as Russia. We prepared ourselves through a series of measures, not least those presented in the Commission Recommendation on inclusive and resilient elections from 12 December 2023.

Mr Madis Timpson

Minister of Justice of Estonia

We have now gathered further intelligence into how information operations were carried out during the European elections. I would like to share with you some of the facts and insights we are aware of at this point in time. The Memo annexed to my letter details the four dimensions of information interference operations: disinformation, foreign interference, use of AI and cybercrime. It shows what is known today about the operations recorded during the elections for the European Parliament – but, of course, it does not show what we don’t know yet. We can, however, see that the risks are evolving, and so are the threat levels for the security of our future elections and the integrity of the informational space.

The elections for the European Parliament were successfully organised in all Member States, and the available data do not point to evidence to indicate clearly major incidents with a decisive impact on the election results. But the information interference operations conducted online were very much present. And their tools and tactics are rapidly evolving. They ring a loud and clear alarm bell that we should not be complacent. We still need to step up our vigilance and our actions; there is an urgent need to accelerate our preparedness.

Having discussed ahead of the elections with all the main actors involved in our collective defence, and having looked now at the aftermath of the elections, I also want to share my ‘lessons learned’ for the preparations of future election.

I cannot stress enough that this must be a ‘whole of society’ approach, that puts at the centre the critical and independent thinking of our citizens, with the full respect and protection of fundamental rights and freedom of expression and information. This is what differentiates us fundamentally from those opposing democratic systems, and what should make our strength.

It is a mission for the media, online platforms, civil society, educators, law enforcement and all institutions to take their responsibilities fully. It also needs to be a ‘whole-of-government’ approach, working across our justice, digital and cyber, foreign affairs, communication and media departments.

There are practical steps that we can take at the EU level, but also within the Member States, and by each actor in the ecosystem.

We need to enhance our situational awareness drastically. We have made great progress, not least by opening communication channels between networks of competent authorities and agencies, such as those in charge of digital, cyber, data protection and elections. We need to resource appropriately our capacity in these fields and keep the communication and cooperation channels open – not just during elections, but also before and after elections.

We need strategic communication at every step, from political leaders, to the institutions. We need to communicate clearly, pre-bunking facts that are likely to be misused in foreign interference and disinformation campaigns, and delivering straight-forward messages about the actions we take.

In Europe, we have the strongest digital regulation – enforcement should be a priority for the regulators, and we also rely on the dialogue and cooperation with civil society and industry.

We also need to invest in our informational resilience: protecting and supporting independent media, supporting fact-checkers, investing in the digital and AI literacy of our citizens.

And we are not alone, international cooperation with other democracies makes us stronger.

I am concluding the ‘Democracy tour’ with these reflections for the future and count on you for carrying on this vital mission for our democracies. At the European Commission, the work continues with the Democracy Shield announced by the President.

The Commission will also continue analysing the broader aspects of the EU elections, not least with respect to hybrid threats, corruption and elite capture. The Commission will come forward with a broader post-election report, as announced in the Defence of Democracy Package issued by the Commission in December 2023.

I would like to thank you for our engagement. Only through collective efforts we can be successful in defending the democratic systems and ensuring free, fair and resilient elections.

Your sincerely,

Věra Jourová

**Annex:** [Memo on known information interference operations in the European Parliament elections](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_24_5328)