

**Committee: DISEC 2**

**Topic: The question of state election interference**

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## Summary

2024 is a year of worldwide elections, with 2 billion people across more than 60 countries and the European Union being eligible to vote. The United Nations has a duty in assisting nations to ensure the democratic process is unharmed. The current climate of cyber attacks and influence campaigns by nations such as China, Iran, and Russia, have decreased public confidence in the electoral process. Tactics such as disinformation campaigns, financial coercion, and hacking have been commonplace in recent elections. This matter needs to be urgently addressed in order to prevent greater societal effects to democracy as a governing system. Nations taking part in these unlawful activities must be held accountable, and a collaborative effort towards updating legislation, prevention efforts and law enforcement must be reached.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Free and fair elections** – Free and fair elections are the pillars of democracy. For elections to be free and fair, there must be freedom to register to vote and run for office, freedom of speech for candidates, freedom of assembly for political rallies, access to reliable information, secrecy of the vote, no voter intimidation, no voter fraud, accurate counting of ballots, and uncontested results.

**Hybrid threat** – This term represents strategies foreign governments use to exert influence on other nations. These tactics include disinformation and cyber attacks.

**Disinformation** – "false information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media," (Oxford Dictionary).

**Deep fake** – "a video of a person in which their face or body has been digitally altered so that they appear to be someone else, typically used maliciously or to spread false information," (Oxford Dictionary).

**Democracy** – "a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives," (Oxford Dictionary).

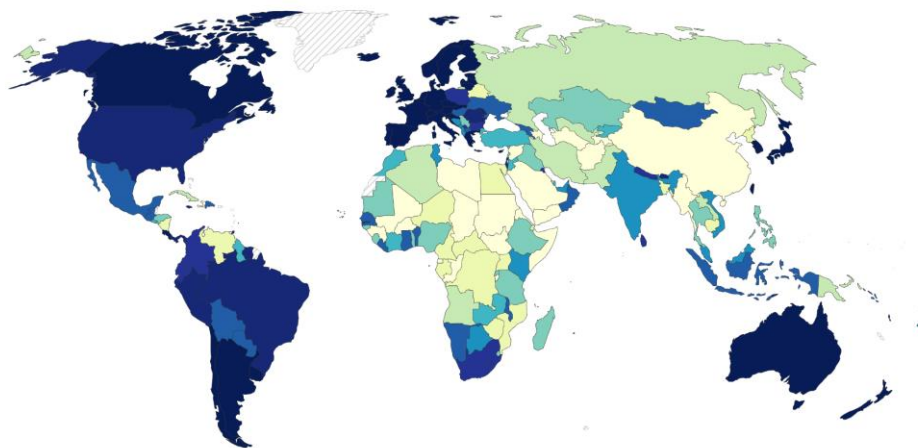
## Background Information

Democracy is one of the primary values of the United Nations. Elections are the basis of democracy, as they ensure the citizens of a nation have their needs represented by their government. The issue of election interference poses a considerable threat to our systems of democracy and international peace.

### Free and fair elections index, 2023



Based on the expert estimates and index by V-Dem<sup>1</sup>. It captures the extent to which election violence, government intimidation, fraud, large irregularities, and vote buying are absent. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most free and fair).



Data source: V-Dem (2024)

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1. V-Dem: The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project publishes data and research on democracy and human rights. It relies on evaluations by around 3,500 country experts and supplementary work by its own researchers to assess political institutions and the protection of rights. The project is managed by the V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Learn more: Democracy data: how do researchers measure democracy? The 'Varieties of Democracy' data: how do researchers measure democracy? The 'Varieties of Democracy' data: how do researchers measure human rights?

State election interference refers to actions by foreign governments, groups or individuals that attempt to influence the result of an election or decrease the public's confidence in the democratic process of voting. The past recent years have brought an unprecedented number of cyber attacks

targeting the legitimacy of elections all around the world. However, the history of election interference dates back to centuries before these events.

Before the digital age, election interference campaigns were often carried out through the printing press. In the late 18th century, revolutionary France and Great Britain fought for political control of the newly established independent nation of the United States. The 1796 United States presidential election, between Federalist John Adams, who wished to remain neutral in the French Revolution and strengthen ties with Britain, and Thomas Jefferson, who was sympathetic to it, and preferred to better relations with France, presented the perfect opportunity for interference that could further each country's national interests. French ambassador Pierre-Auguste Adet acted by publishing a series of letters that attempted to sway the public vote towards Jefferson, warning that by electing Adams, Americans would lead the country into a war with France. Jefferson was able to win the vote in every state the letters were published, although he lost the Electoral College vote by three votes.

The 1940 United States election once again presented an interventionist candidate versus a non-interventionist candidate. Nazi Germany engaged in efforts to influence the vote in favour of the isolationist Republican Party by distributing articles in newspapers and magazines and spreading propaganda and misinformation about Nazi and British activities in Europe. Britain, on the other hand, preferred Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt, and needed American intervention to prevent a possible occupation by the Nazis. British agents surveyed American governmental offices and published articles promoting America's relationship with Britain and intervention. The campaign even went as far as creating a public opinion organisation "Market Analysts, Inc.," which regularly produced polls that pictured high levels of approval in America for intervention in Europe.

During the Cold War, foreign interference in elections was at an all-time high, due to the battle between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union regarding the spread of communism. Both countries carried out dozens of election interference campaigns supporting parties that stood for their preferred systems of government all around the world, through funding, aid, advice, media, and open endorsement. These operations were more often than not covert and intentionally hidden by the parties taking part in them.

In the present, due to the exponential growth of the digital sector, more sophisticated, unpredictable, and harmful methods of election interference have come to light. Election interference campaigns are frequently carried out through social media, through cyber attacks, hacking, or the active spread of disinformation. These attacks target not only the results of the election itself, but also voter turnout and the way the outcome is received by the public.

Interference incidents in the 2016 and 2020 American presidential elections have caused prominent public distrust of the electoral process. United States Congress investigations found that Russian intelligence operatives led a troll farm named the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which spread

disinformation and pro-Trump propaganda throughout social media as early as 2014. The IRA also worked to increase political divisions and decrease confidence in the American democracy. Iranian operatives also led troll farms similar to the IRA, although against Trump's re-election. In another incident the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Army (GRU) obtained and spread damaging data to the Clinton campaign by hacking the email accounts of Clinton staff and the Democratic National Committee.

There have been notable Russian election interference incidents during recent European elections. In the Dutch 2017 elections and the Brexit referendum, Russian agents and bots were guilty of spreading disinformation. During the French presidential election of 2017, candidate and current president Emmanuel Macron and his team's email accounts were hacked. Russian agents sent phishing emails to gain passwords and data and uploaded 9 gigabytes of stolen files and 21 thousand emails to the platform Pastebin just one and a half days before the final vote. Additionally, Macron's opponent, Marine Le Pen, received direct financial assistance from Kremlin associated banks.

Another country often cited as a major contributor to election interference campaigns around the world is China. In Australia, Chinese agents have directly attempted to influence and economically coerce politicians and spread disinformation on social media. Australian-Chinese politicians have received large donations from the Chinese Communist Party to be used in attempts to soften the China policy of Australian political parties. However, China's main target of election meddling has consistently been Taiwan. China has been interfering in Taiwanese elections since 1996, through methods such as military intimidation, economic incentives, and influence operations in the media and political groups. The nation has also been found to have interfered in elections in Malaysia, Thailand, Canada, and the United States.

Election interference campaigns heavily destabilise our societies by decreasing the public's trust in democratic institutions. Measures to prevent such occurrences must be refined along with the development of new meddling techniques. A particularly scary possibility is the use of deep fakes to mislead voters, a technique used by China to influence Taiwanese elections. International cooperation is needed to tackle this problem and update international legislation.

## Major Countries and Organisations Involved

**United States of America** – The United States has experienced several instances of election interference since the time of its founding as a sovereign state. Most recently, investigations carried out by the US Congress have found that Russia actively interfered with the 2016 presidential election and

attempted to do the same in the 2020 election, likely in an effort to sway the vote in favour of Donald Trump, the less interventionist candidate. However, the United States has famously undergone countless election interference campaigns abroad, including more than eighty between 1946 and 2000, sometimes covertly and sometimes openly. The goal of these operations, especially during the Cold War, was to prevent communist or socialist parties from gaining power by any means required. In the present, US efforts have mostly consisted of open support and funding for civic, pro-democracy organisations.

**Russian Federation** – Russia carried out 40 election interference operations between 1946 and 2000 and has spent at least 300 million dollars in interference attempts through donations to foreign political parties since 2014. In more recent times, Russia has found to have interfered with several elections, including the Dutch 2017 general elections, the French 2017 presidential election, the British snap election called by Theresa May in 2017, and more events referred to in the Timeline of Events.

**People's Republic of China** – China has been accused of taking part in several election interference projects, including recently in Taiwan, Australia, and the United States.

**Islamic Republic of Iran** – Iranian groups and individuals have been found to have interfered with the United States 2016 and 2020 presidential elections and have consequently received sanctions.

**United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD)** – The UNEAD is a sub-division of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. It deals with matters regarding assisting nations to carry out free and fair elections.

**International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)** – The IDEA is an intergovernmental organisation that works to support sustainable democracy. This organisation assesses the credibility of elections and supports electoral processes in 20 countries.

**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)** – The OSCE is an intergovernmental organisation of observer status at the United Nations with member states in Europe, North America and Asia. It observes elections and provides assistance to improve both legislative and administrative framework throughout member states in order to ensure elections apply to international standards.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description
1960	– The United States and Thailand conducted a covert financial operation supporting the Committee for the Defence of National Interests and bribing their opponents to withdraw from the 1960 Laotian parliamentary election. This eventually contributed to the 1960 Laotian coups.
1964	– Both the Soviet Union and the United States were found to have interfered with the Chilean elections, by financially supporting the communist and anti-communist candidates, respectively.
1966	– The United States supported candidate Joaquin Balaguer in the Dominican presidential elections through financial support, advice, media coverage, and more, intentionally attempting to make it so that "United States sponsorship cannot be proven in any way".
1975	– The Soviet Union funded the Communist Party of Denmark during the Danish general election.
1992	– In the Albanian elections of 1992, the United States funded and aided anti-socialist political groups, publicly supported the Democratic Party of Albania, and threatened to take away aid it had been providing to the nation if the Socialist Party of Albania were to win the election.
2007	– Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi gave 50 million euros to the French presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, twice the French limit for campaign donations.
2016	– Russian and Iranian agents were found to have interfered with the American presidential election to support the candidacy of Donald Trump.
2017	– Russian agents hacked Emmanuel Macron's email account and uploaded 9 gigabytes of stolen files and 21,000 emails, one and a half days before the French presidential election.
2017	– Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called the German political parties CDU, SPD, and the Green Party "enemies of Turkey", and called for his "countrymen" to vote against them in the German federal election.
2020	– Russian state interference took place more than once during the United States presidential election, negatively affecting Biden's campaign and decreasing the public's trust in the election process. Iran also interfered with the election, but against Trump's re-election. Biden consequently authorised sanctions against guilty parties.

**2021** – Albanian president Ilir Meta accuses the United States of meddling in the country's elections.

**2021** – During the 2021 Canadian federal election, the Chinese Communist Party was found to have carried out disinformation campaigns discouraging the election of the Conservative Party of Canada.

**2023** – On December 12th, Hungary passed a law aiming to protect its national sovereignty, banning political parties from receiving foreign funding.

**2024** – On May 9th, Latvia criminalised the use of deep fake technology that could influence the results of an election.

**2024** – China carried out a disinformation campaign against former Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te, the presidential candidate from her party.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

**General Assembly Resolution on Non-Interference in Electoral Processes (1993)** – This General Assembly resolution emphasises member states' right to national sovereignty and their people's rights to self-determination. It also calls upon member states to refrain from supporting foreign political parties both openly and covertly in any way and threatening elected governments.

**The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (2003)** – The UNCAC is a legally binding convention that consists of 71 articles covering important anti-corruption measures for member states. It is composed of four parts. The first part deals with prevention, the second with criminalisation and law enforcement, the third with international cooperation, and the fourth with asset recovery. This convention does not directly combat election interference; however, it addresses forms of corruption that can lead to it.

**United Nations Handbook on the Legal, Technical and Human Rights Aspects of Elections (1994)** – This handbook by the Centre for Human Rights outlines the specific standards member states should adhere to in order to preserve free and fair elections.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

**Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity (2021)** – The GNSEI is a forum established in 2021 by the American governmental agency USAID in collaboration with several international bodies. This concept was created as a response to the increasingly complex threats to democracy posed in the digital age. It strives to bring together nations in order to "develop, advance, and promote adherence to norms, guiding principles, and codes of conduct that address emerging and long-term threats to electoral integrity".

**European Democracy Action Plan (2020)** – This plan was initially created by the European Commission to advance areas of the electoral process recognised following the 2019 European elections as needing improvement. Since its establishment in 2020, the plan has significantly advanced the status of democracy in Europe. For example, legislation on the transparency of political advertisement and party funding has been revised and an operation to address disinformation and cyber-related threats to elections has been put in place.

**Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (2018)** – The FITS was put in place by the Australian government to increase transparency regarding foreign influence on the Australian government. It requires the registration of all political activities carried out on behalf of a foreign "principal" (government, political organisation, and related entities or individuals).

**Banning Electronic Voting (2007)** – The Netherlands banned electronic voting in order to increase the public's confidence in the results of their elections. The nation also banned the electronic counting of ballots and the use of USB flash drives and email for Dutch election officials.

## Possible Solutions

**Push for the Accountability of Media Platforms** – Collaboration between government and media platforms is essential to prevent disinformation spread to skew election results. First, it would be essential to define what kind of and in what situations platforms would be accountable for disinformation spread within their channels. It might also be helpful for media platforms to be legally mandated to fact-check information that is detrimental to a political candidate's reputation or that arises doubts about the trustworthiness of the electoral process, and to be punished for allowing or actively contributing to the spread of disinformation. This could be controversial, as social media platforms, for example, are forums



for conversation between users, and there is no clear precedent establishing a line between what should be the responsibility of the company and what should solely be the fault of the individual.

**Joint Initiatives** – International cooperation is necessary when tackling foreign interference in elections. Nations should take collaborative measures when carrying out investigations or capacity-building, and come together to craft international legislation, especially against digital threats to democracy.

**Incident Response Plans** – When disruptions to the democratic process occur, there should be a concrete plan outlining exactly what steps need to be taken in order to prevent societal upheaval or conspiracies and restore trust in electoral proceedings.

**Punishment and Law Enforcement** – Entities or individuals found to be carrying out election interference campaigns should be appropriately investigated and punished in order to discourage these activities. It is important to consider equal punishment throughout nations, as countries with more power and influence in the world stage might take advantage of their status.

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