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Press release

# Publication of the final report of the Online Election Integrity Watch Group

## Elections 2022: the French information ecosystem put to the test

*Disinformation was a major concern during the French 2022 elections. We have gathered for the first time in France a group of researchers to monitor information manipulation and prevent online attempts at influencing the election. The Online Election Integrity Watch Group is publishing its conclusions on June, 28th, 2022.*

## The group observed worrying trends during the elections

Attempts to challenge the democratic process or the legitimacy of opinion polls have been persistent online. These have led, for example, to the setting up of initiatives for citizen control of the vote count. They have also been the subject of communication strategies within highly structured online communities. These narratives could, in the long run, influence the results of future elections.

Several studies have also shown the persistence of highly toxic content and its prevalence among communities supporting extreme candidates. This phenomenon parasites the construction of a pluralist democratic debate and once again calls into question the effectiveness of moderation policies by platforms.

The Online Election Integrity Watch Group Integrity also highlights the inconsistencies in the categorization of online advertisements in a French electoral context that is highly regulated, but which is not always well suited for the digital sphere.

## Despite these threats, the French ecosystem seems resilient

The group puts forward several hypotheses that could explain the relative resilience of the French information ecosystem during the presidential and legislative elections of 2022:

- ▶ The banning of Russian media outlets Sputnik and Russia Today, as well as the focus of Russian efforts on the war in Ukraine, has weakened influential capabilities in France and diverted them from the French presidential campaign.
- ▶ The institutional pressure due to the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, as well as the determination of the French government to tackle disinformation (for example with the creation of new agency Viginum), has led to platforms being more alert.
- ▶ The particularities of the conduct and regulation of French elections are safeguards against disinformation and foster a form of political deontology.
- ▶ The centrality of the traditional media, still very influential on the media agenda and respectful of institutions, limited the circulation of massive disinformation. But this centrality is also contested by groups of the extreme left and right and therefore raises questions about its sustainability.

The report concludes with technical recommendations to ensure the proper functioning of the French information ecosystem:

- ▶ Include the need to audit the recommendation algorithms used by online platforms in the European Union's Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act.
- ▶ Support the development of research capabilities to monitor private messaging groups and continue to demand better access to data.
- ▶ Prepare for the implementation of articles 26 and 27 of the DSA by requiring online platforms to assess the risks their systems pose to society, and the effectiveness of measures taken to mitigate those risks.

For more information, please see the full report of the Online Election Integrity Watch Group.

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