

Sajjad Karim warns against Russian interference in 2019 European elections

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News

UK MEP Sajjad Karim has warned that next year's European elections are "at risk of Russian meddling" unless action is taken.



Sajjad Karim | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Speaking at a meeting in Parliament on Wednesday, the ECR group deputy claimed, "In a large number of recent Western elections, foul play in whatever capacity, from financial backing of extremist parties to fake news, can be traced back directly to the Kremlin."

He added, "Indeed, the next election in Russia's cross-hairs is fast approaching.

"The European elections are scheduled to take place 12 months from now, and if Europeans ignore

this threat to democracy and do not take firm, concrete action to address it right now, we are as good as surrendering our political stability, basic freedoms and European values to the whim of the Russian government.”

He said, “One of the most spectacular successes of Russian influence was, of course, the Brexit campaign in 2016, and the far-reaching and destabilising consequences of this still affect all of us in our day-to-day work.”

His warnings come in the week when Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was asked during a separate meeting in Parliament with political group leaders what his company and other social media platforms could do to prevent such “foreign interference” in the EU-wide poll, due to take place in May 2019.

Several political group leaders asked what measures Zuckerberg could take to combat Russia possibly trying to influence the outcome of this and other elections.

In his meeting, Zuckerberg declined to be drawn on the issue but said he would give a detailed explanation in a written answer to MEPs.

Karim’s warning comes as the European Parliament on Wednesday sounded the starting pistol on its one-year countdown to the polls.

Speaking at a conference on the threat Russian electoral interference in European democracies, Karim said, “Russian interference in democratic elections has reached new, unprecedented heights. Not since the Cold War have European and democratic states faced such disregard for democracy and the rule of law, backed by a sophisticated state-sponsored campaign of disinformation.

“In the past week there have been 11 proven cases of disinformation emanating from Russia, and in the past year, there have been almost a thousand cases. It would be naive to think that this problem will go away and that the next European elections are not a target for Russia.

“It wouldn’t take much for Russia to destabilise the European Parliament by helping to bolster the pro-Russian far right and far left in the parliament. Putin will take any opportunity to destabilise our institutions and weaken our will in standing up to his regime.

“Europe is worryingly vulnerable to state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. Technology has leapt far ahead of policy, and in an age where millions of people can be reached in seconds, our ability to respond to fake news and Russian bots is lagging behind.

“The Parliament risks being held to ransom by extremist parties after next year’s elections, essentially in a state of paralysis. If we do not take action now we will be surrendering our political stability and democratic values to the whim of the Russian government.”

The MEP added, “The UK will not be returning any MEPs in the next European election, but we are all at risk of Russian interference and must work together to defend our democracies. The West is being tested, every democratic state must show a united front or risk our way of life.”

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter for the Parliament Magazine

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Categories

[European elections](#) [2]

[International Relations](#) [3]



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- [Editorial Calendar](#)
- [Policy Events](#)
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