

## EUROPE

# U.K. Lawmakers Ask Facebook About Russian Influence in Brexit Vote

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK OCT. 24, 2017

LONDON — Parliament is asking Facebook, Twitter and other internet companies for information about Russian efforts to use social media to influence the British vote to leave the European Union, expanding on several parallel American congressional investigations around the election of President Trump.

The British inquiry adds to the mounting pressure for more disclosure from the internet giants, which have already acknowledged broad Russian efforts to influence national elections in both the United States and France.

Any indication of Russian meddling in the British vote last year to leave the European Union could raise doubts about the integrity of the outcome, further complicating the already vexed domestic politics surrounding the departure, commonly called Brexit.

The Kremlin, which has long viewed the European Union as a threat, had a strong interest in promoting the groups that favored Britain's leaving the bloc. And the most visible tools of Russian propaganda, like the English-language broadcaster RT and the news agency Sputnik, heavily supported the initiative. The leave camp won with 52 percent of ballots cast, about 1.3 million more votes than the remain side drew.

“Any interference in the democratic process of the United Kingdom by people acting illegitimately is a serious matter,” Damian Collins, a Conservative who heads a parliamentary committee leading an inquiry into “fake news,” wrote in a letter released on Tuesday that requested information from Twitter.

Mr. Collins sent a similar letter to Mark Zuckerberg, the chief executive of Facebook. Both letters were dated Oct. 19. A member of Mr. Collins’s staff said the committee was also in contact with Google, but no company has responded.

A spokesman for Facebook said the company would respond “once we have had the opportunity to review the request.”

A spokesman for Twitter declined to comment, but said in an email that the company was adapting to “patterns of malicious activity” and now catches more than 3.2 million suspicious accounts each week. The company says that is more than twice what it detected each week last year, in the period before the Brexit referendum. It was unclear how much of that difference was attributable to better detection and how much to a growing number of suspect accounts.

A recent academic study found 13,493 suspected “bot” accounts that appeared to send out automated messages related to the referendum in the run-up to the vote but were removed in its immediate aftermath. But the Twitter spokesman cited other research suggesting that the company’s improving detection made bots less common.

Facebook has acknowledged that Russian agents covertly bought advertising on its platform in an effort to swing the 2016 presidential election in favor of Mr. Trump. The company said in September that it was turning over more than 3,000 Russian-linked ads to congressional committees investigating interference in the race. Some of the Russian-linked content sought to influence the election obliquely, by inflaming social issues or racial tensions.

Facebook disclosed earlier that month that a Russian company had spent \$100,000 on ads connected to 470 bogus accounts. The company also said it had removed as many as 30,000 fake accounts seeking to influence the French election. That has led some involved in the congressional investigations to believe the number

of fake accounts active in the United States was probably far higher than the 470 detected.

In an online video statement, Mr. Zuckerberg of Facebook acknowledged in September that social media companies were grappling with an unforeseen problem.

“It is a new challenge for internet communities to deal with nation-states attempting to subvert elections,” he said, adding, “We are committed to rising to the occasion.”

The British inquiries were a reasonable next step, Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Tuesday. “Russian active measures didn’t begin, or end, with the American presidential election,” he said. “America’s allies all need to be on guard against Russian propaganda and misinformation.”

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