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Why Is Elon Musk destabilising UK and EU politics?

*Elon Musk's recent interest in disrupting EU and UK politics can seem a bit of mystery. But as **Damian Tambini** argues, what lies behind it is the same reason Musk has formed an alliance with Donald Trump: not some deep-seated ideological affinity but blatant economic interest.*

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Why on earth are British, German and European politics suddenly so important to the world's richest man? Elon may be consumed with worry about migration, "wokeness" and the virtues of "Western civilization", topics that feature increasingly prominently in [his tweets](#). But it is personal economic interest that explains why Musk seems determined to [destabilise Germany](#) in order to undermine the EU, and undermine the UK Government.

In a move that will be familiar to historians of some newspapers, Elon Musk bought a loss-making communications enterprise – Twitter – and transformed it into a [propaganda tool](#). He went on to trade the propaganda power of this new megaphone with political entrepreneurs, and the president elect in particular, in exchange for benefits to his other investments. Those investments – in space, low orbit satellites, as well as in AI – depend on state patronage and regulation and thus require closeness to political power, which in turn is facilitated by propaganda power.

In the light of that vicious cycle, it becomes clear why it is necessary for Elon Musk to disrupt the EU. The whole house of cards may collapse if the foundation, X, is undermined. Which is just what the new paradigm of EU and UK regulation threatens to do. Musk is doing all he can to undermine EU regulation, which is perhaps a sign that it is likely to be effective. Last Friday the European Commission issued a [Retention Order](#), asking X to retain and share internal documentation relating to its recommendation systems and any recent changes made to them. The Commission is using powers under the [Digital Services Act](#) to ensure that social media do not create systemic risks for

Europe, including risks to democracy. It is fundamental to his business to install leaders in Europe that align with his and Trump's worldview.



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This is not just about seeking to disrupt social media regulation. Musk has valuable first mover advantage in his satellite business, but if he fails to lock in his advantages and deal with competitors he will find his businesses increasingly subject to competition. It is fundamental to his business to install leaders in Europe that align with his and Trump's worldview.

How new regulation threatens Musk's X

If we examine the current state of regulation in the EU and the UK, the erratic political meddling of the US entrepreneur, and his "heroic" stand on free speech, seem more rational. Musk is on an all-out campaign to undermine EU regulation: by undermining the political balances of the EU, and by questioning the very definition of free speech.

The uncomfortable fact is that collaboration with factcheckers – which Musk rejected and has now enlisted Meta to campaign against – is what platforms must do under the new EU regime. In 2023, the EU Parliament passed the **Digital Services Act** into law. Under the Act, which is coming into force in stages this year, providers of search and social media have a number of new obligations to clean up their platforms and reduce harm. Across the EU, the largest platforms have to carry out detailed risk assessments, for example to maintain effective complaints systems and also collaborate with third parties such as the fabled fact checkers, and reduce not only harms to children but what is referred to as "systemic risks", including the risk of disinformation.



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Online Safety Act.



The United Kingdom, like many other countries outside the EU, is implementing a similar framework under the **Online Safety Act**. This is partly because the general approach to regulation is strongly influenced by the work of UK scholars of regulation, such as **Will Perrin and Lorna Woods**.

Currently, Elon Musk's communication platform is strongly resisting regulation under the Digital Services Act or the UK Online Safety Act. X has been asked to submit risk assessments by the European Union and has publicly denounced fact-checking and the content moderation frameworks which are required under the legislation.

Mark Zuckerberg described the requirements of the Digital Services Act as a form of an EU tariff on US companies operating within the economic block. EU policymakers will of course be unable to separate the economic aspect of this regulation from the geopolitical: ever since Edward Snowden revealed the various back doors through which the surveillance capitalism of social media platforms is merged with the surveillance state, which of course has been rejected across the BRICS and in particular Brazil and South Africa, the question of social media platform regulation has been not only a question of protecting citizens and children from harmful content, it has been a question of digital sovereignty.



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How rejecting regulation benefits Musk and Zuckerberg

It is difficult to estimate the value to Elon Musk of reversing the Digital Services Act and the UK Online Safety Act: it is important to understand not only the direct benefits to Musk, but the indirect ones as well. One reason why Mark Zuckerberg's recent volte-face on social media regulation was a no brainer is that it results in an immediate, significant reduction of costs: not only the in-house

content moderation, which is one of the most human intensive things that META does, but also the expensive contracts with third-party fact-checkers who seek to offer “independent” views on veracity of posts. This is like Mazda being told that they no longer have to fit seatbelts or airbags in their cars, nor do they have to meet smog safety standards. Safety liberalisation immediately reduces cost for Facebook, just as it does for X. While there is some evidence that it also leads to some users leaving the platform, **switching costs are high**, and looser regulation also gives platform operators more scope to distribute sticky and engaging content, including party propaganda.

But the indirect benefits of removing legislation, which requires platform operators to design their products for safety, are arguably much more important to the likes of Elon Musk. Musk has built his communication platform into a powerful and almost entirely opaque propaganda platform, which will shortly be at the disposal of the American president. Complying with the Online Safety Act would require Musk to blunt this propaganda tool and open it up to public scrutiny and accountability. Posing as a free speech defender has also carried him favour with Trump – who was nearly jailed for incitement after all – and thus given him access to political power.

Musk and Zuckerberg are promoting a version of free expression that defines censorship purely in terms of state action and is highly tolerant of censorship by private actors – for example by Musk’s own engineers who reportedly tweak algorithms to **increase the visibility of Musk’s own posts**. As I showed in my **recent book**, this is an approach which has deep historical roots in the US, but such a **philosophy of free speech** is contested even there. It is also deeply antagonistic with an approach to free speech in the EU which permits various forms of speech regulation as long as it is independent from the state and subject to proper checks and balances.

It is unlikely that any legal challenge to the Digital Services Act would be successful on free speech grounds, and as my more recent work is exploring, a more regulation-permissive philosophy of communication and the media has deep historical and constitutional roots in all European countries. This is why the political settlement that delivered it has – in the view of Elon Musk – to be undone.

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