

**Translation of the interview with Aura Salla, Head of EU Affairs at Facebook,  
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## **Facebook negotiator in Brussels: we want regulation, but we remain unheard**

Discussions have intensified in recent years in both the United States and the European Union on how major technology companies should be regulated, including Facebook Inc., a corporation that operates the social networks Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Questions are being raised about fair competition, data security, disinformation management, all of which have a huge impact on society and none of which have simple answers. Aura Salla, Facebook's head of public policy for the European Union, says the company is not really opposed to regulation; on the contrary, it is very keen on uniform rules that would make it easier to manoeuvre in the global market. But this comes with a caveat: if the requirements are too stringent, Europe will not have a chance to produce its own digital champions.

**-While preparing for this interview, I found a "translation" of your duties into a more understandable language as part of an online commentary. The aim was to show Brussels that Facebook is not the bad guy it is sometimes made out to be. Do you see your role that way, too?**

- Yes, you could say so (laughs). I've been working with Facebook for a little over a year, having previously worked for the European Commission for six years. When I was invited to work at Facebook, I thought about what a good opportunity it was. I sincerely believe in the European Union, in the integration of all 27 members. In Brussels, I lead a team that delves very deeply into technology issues: seeking an understanding of how technology companies actually work, how they worked in the past, how things have changed over the last few years in terms of data, information, disinformation, all day-to-day phenomena that we see with our own eyes. This is really very interesting, and that is why my message to all 27 EU countries is that we want to cooperate, we want to get involved. We are equally as important to smaller countries like Lithuania or Finland, where I come from, as to large EU members like France or Germany. Our company has a huge responsibility in each of these countries, and we are very much aware of this.

**- You talk about cooperation, you raise regulatory issues - but many would argue that companies like Facebook don't want to be regulated at all. You say that this is not the case?**

- We are actually very keen on regulation; we ask for it year after year, but this message is not really heard. Imagine elections, for example, where we try to ensure that things are done fairly, but with the added difficulty that each of the 27 countries has different rules and different regulations. Then there are all the other issues on top.

In Germany and France, for example, there are laws against hate speech; data protection rules vary from country to country, as do digital taxes... It is very difficult not only for large multinationals, but for small European companies to try to navigate the regulatory jungle we have in the EU. So, we are asking for regulation because we feel a huge responsibility to keep our platforms clean and safe for our users. For example, our users do not ever want to see hate speech, but this is an issue that we face every day. It would be much easier if we joined forces with regulators, democratically elected politicians, and policymakers to really be clear about what is against the law, what is legal. If we had uniform regulation, it would be better not only for us as a company, but also for consumers, businesses, and policymakers.

**- You mention hate speech and disinformation... People have very different understandings of what is meant by these terms. Those whose posts are blocked like to accuse Facebook of acting as the "truth police". Do you see ways to resolve this contradiction?**

- This is a very important issue. The first thing is to distinguish between disinformation and misinformation. When we talk about disinformation, this refers to strategic actions to achieve certain goals, to deliberately distribute misleading content. We see huge campaigns that strategically manipulate people by spreading the wrong information. This is an issue we are taking very seriously. We have just released a very detailed report containing all the information gathered from an analysis of more than 150 transactions since 2017. There, we can see the story of how trends have changed and how we have dealt with threats from different sources. We need to learn to recognise misleading content to effectively address those issues.

The main findings of the report show that it is not just the EU and the US that are suffering from this problem. In fact, it is a global problem: we analysed more than 30 countries and information in more than 30 different languages. We see wide-ranging campaigns in various countries - in Russia and Iran, of course, as well as in Myanmar, Ukraine, and China. We first try to understand where it comes from and how it works, then we look for ways we can counter it. We're really throwing everything we have at stopping disinformation, and we publish these reports so that the public and journalists can check what is going on our

platforms to address these issues.

Another important issue is misinformation. We do not allow hate speech, bullying, harassment, election interference or fake accounts: we aim to remove such content and we are now very successful in doing so. About 96 percent of content that doesn't meet our community standards is removed without people ever clicking on it. If we don't catch it immediately, we remove it when we receive notifications from the community. If something goes against the standards of our community, our way of dealing with it is pretty clear.

Of course, we don't remove all misinformation, because people are allowed to use humour and satire and to express their opinions. If someone believes in something, we need to give them freedom of speech. Moreover, our platform is not Wikipedia. We are from countries where we have freedom of speech, but we know neighbouring countries where there is no such freedom. We sometimes forget how important it is for people in some countries to be able to speak freely, because, for example, they will never have the right to do so in their own national media.

**-But here is where the issue becomes complicated. Let's imagine that during the US election, Facebook tries to restrict political communication and to ensure that social networks do not try to influence the election results, while at the same time social networks are virtually the only independent communication channel in Belarus or in other authoritarian countries. Doesn't the fact that Facebook gets to decide what communications are allowed in which country make it a political company?**

- Facebook's goal was never to become a political company. As Mark Zuckerberg has always said, our goal is to connect people, to give them the opportunity to express their opinions and to allow them to communicate with friends and family. That is what we do. We appreciate our enormous responsibility, but our platforms reflect a society in which there are both good and bad actors: that is just the nature of the world.

When it comes to electoral issues, that responsibility is even greater, which is why we devote a great deal of attention to them. We have more than 35 000 people working on security issues, because we understand how important it is for people to feel safe on our platforms. If my calculations are correct, in 2020 we had national elections in eight EU countries. Essentially, an election can be taking place in any part of the world at any time, and we are managing them as best we can. We hire independent fact verifiers to verify information in their native languages; we have different fact verification partners and different programs for that purpose; we do our best to remove incorrect information. And yes, at the same time, we understand how important it is for the opposition in Belarus or Russia to have the opportunity to express their thoughts, so we want to ensure that people have access to our platforms and can express different opinions, if it does not conflict with our community standards. Only when our standards are threatened, we do intervene.

**- You talk about fact-checking and cooperation with the media. The US has already announced independent news outlets set up by Facebook, and we can expect to see the same in Europe in the future. Is Facebook already a media company? M. Zuckerberg has been trying for years to deny that this is the case.**

- No, Facebook is not a media company. We don't edit any records as the media does; we don't have professional journalists. We are a platform that enables media companies to publish their content. We take media like *Delfi*, *The Financial Times* and *SPIEGEL* – with professional journalists who understand editorial processes – very seriously. We want them to be able to publish their content on our platforms in such a way that people recognise it as quality journalism. This is also very important for media literacy, which we strive to promote. As a result, we wanted to create separate editorial sections, which already exist in France and the United Kingdom and are now launching in Germany. There is simply a separate news feed on Facebook for media coverage.

We are now seeing cultural differences in the way they work, but it is very important to us that objective media is available everywhere. I think you, *Delfi*, also had to authenticate yourself as media and get a blue badge proving that you are a media organisation capable of publishing records. We establish contracts with different publishers because we want people to know that they can find news on our platforms from objective media and can trust those news sources. This is very important in our changing world. So, our message is very clear: we are not a media company; you, *Delfi*, are. But we enable the dissemination of facts and quality journalism.

**- Another important issue is fair competition in the digital economy. This is now a matter for both the EU and the US. Continuing with the media theme: the media has expressed outrage that Facebook raises a huge amount of money in the advertising market, which contributes to a reduction in the quality of media. What's your view on that? You said that Facebook is not a media tool, but it is still competing in the market for the same advertising money.**

- I look at it from the other side. What we've come to realise when working with news agencies and the media is that they get much more visibility for their news on our platforms: many of them post news to us for free, and if it is really interesting, people click on those news links. So, in fact, we have created platforms for news agencies, for the media, to spread their news more widely. This is the first part we tend to forget: that using our platforms is free. Of course, if you want to advertise your content for money, you can do so, but the same is true on all platforms. If you go to TV, radio, or outdoor advertising, you will have to pay for it: nobody shares their advertising space for free.

I think our platforms are very useful for the media. I myself follow a lot of great journalists and

see how they get involved, how they communicate with their readers; after all, this was not the case before, and it's a very interesting development. We are talking about it in the Brussels bubble, but I think it is also happening in Vilnius that previously faceless journalists are becoming influencers; they themselves are becoming the media. People are beginning to recognise journalists, and I think that social media is the reason for this.

**-Elsewhere, issues of fair competition have also been raised. The European Commission has recently launched an inquiry into Facebook's use of advertising data to ensure that it does not infringe competition rules by favouring its own e-marketplace, the Facebook Marketplace. What is Facebook's position on the competition rules you would like to see in the European Union?**

- This is a very good question that is now being worked on in the European Parliament and the Council of Europe. But what's interesting about this debate is that we all want Europe to be at the forefront of digital issues, to be a digital champion. I grew up in a country where everyone was proud of Nokia, and we all saw how things changed; we don't want that to happen again. What the European Commission is now saying is that if you expand like Amazon, Google or Facebook, we will break you up because you have become a 'gatekeeper' (a company that controls who enters the market - *Ed.*). I understand where this comes from, but it's a controversial issue. How will Europe become a champion if companies know that when they grow too big, they will be broken up?

After all, you can't create laws for one, two, three or four companies - the law is the same for everyone, so policymakers need to think about how to set rules that don't undermine the potential of companies to become digital champions. Another thing is that we fully understand our responsibilities in this area. We have millions of companies in Europe that use our platform, and we help this entire network of companies by giving them access to our data, which allows many of them to operate in Europe as well as in other markets. We need to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities to grow, but without establishing the kind of harmful regulation that would prevent a company from becoming as big as Facebook.

My last observation on this is that we still do not have a digital single market. If a Lithuanian company wants to grow its business in all EU countries, it must still grapple with 27 different sets of regulations. This is harmful and needs to be a current focus. We need to make sure our home market works. The Facebook home market is in the US and enables our companies, and we need the same for European companies.

**- You say you can't have a law for just one company. This is true, but antitrust laws do exist; for example, in Lithuania it is considered a violation of competition if one company controls more than 40 percent of the market. In the US, we are seeing questions about Facebook's monopoly position; the Federal Trade Commission has sued Facebook, and the proposed measures include the division of the company. How will**

**this work in Europe? There will probably be a move towards this kind of action as well.**

- This is also a very important issue. Yes, this type of law already exists in Europe, the most famous case in recent years being Siemens and Alstom, where the European Commission did not allow a merger due to excessive monopoly power. As such, the EU has market competition rules, but the new regulation represents a fundamental shift in mindset where we don't look at markets, at how they work, but at individual companies and how they function. For example, we, Facebook, compete with Twitter and TikTok regarding news traffic, but we also have Facebook Marketplace and our financial services, where we compete with Amazon and PayPal. From under one roof, we operate in different markets and compete with different companies. As such, we need to look at the market - whether we're talking about e-commerce platforms, or news flow, or any other area - and focus on the functioning of the market, not on single companies. Modern companies are not set up such that we only produce steel or another single product; we work across a range of very different fields.

**- When it comes to globally harmonised regulation, what the US authorities are saying, what Joe Biden is saying publicly, gives the impression that the US does not want to allow Europe to regulate its companies. Don't you see it that way?**

- No. I work with EU regulators and we respect the regulators here.

**- To sum up: what kind of future do you see for Facebook? What will the company look like in ten years, for example?**

- I've seen how much has changed over the last decade. We have already taken on much more responsibility for what is happening on our platforms; it's very important to acknowledge and be aware of that. Another thing is that as the world is changing, so is our company. If we look at what is going on, the trends in our company - we're seeing that people are using Instagram more and for very different reasons. We see micro companies, start-ups, and larger companies as well as influencers. I myself follow a lot of influencers, including Lithuanians, and that's a great thing, because how else are we supposed to see what trends are prevalent in which countries? When it comes to innovation, we pay a lot of attention to everything related to virtual and augmented reality - we see a big future in this segment. We also want new technologies to be more accessible to all people. We work with Oculus virtual reality glasses; we're preparing to introduce a smart watch; we're developing artificial intelligence.

Of course, we will continue to develop all our platforms - WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. We're also involved with financial services: we've introduced a digital wallet for the world of cryptocurrencies. It's very interesting to see how things are changing, and for me as a policy maker even more so, because I think these changes reflect societal changes - not just in terms of regulation, but also in terms of consumers and what they want from us. In ten years, who knows how things will have changed? We at Facebook are not so old - the company is now in

its teens, so in ten years, the world and the company will be very different.