

Persistence of “Partner” and “Interloper” as Responses to the EU Delegation to the Philippines’ Facebook Posts on Human Rights in the Post-Duterte Administration

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Abstract:

Between 2016 and 2022, the Philippines was under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. During the six year period, diplomatic relations between the Philippines and the European Union (EU) had been strained. The key issue of contention between the two was the implementation of a so-called “war on drugs”, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Filipinos at the hands of policemen or vigilantes. Those killed were suspected of being either users or small-scale dealers of methamphetamines (Berehulak, 2016; Iyengar, 2016). Early in the Duterte presidency, the European Parliament issued a resolution expressing concern over the “extraordinarily high numbers killed...in the context of an intensified anticrime and anti-drug campaign targeting drug dealers and users” (Official Journal of the European Union 2016, p.3). Days later, Duterte delivered an expletive-laden speech attacking the EU (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2016).

One week after the President’s speech, the EU’s Ambassador to the Philippines published a post on social media clarifying that the European bloc would continue to cooperate despite that had arisen. Although the transmission was intended to clarify the EU’s position, a high number of comments were written in response. The flood of online reactions could be understood as part of a broader trend of online political activity that had intensified in the Philippines during the Duterte administration. The Philippine government was found to have weaponized the internet through its use of “cyber troops” or keyboard mercenaries who created the appearance of massive support for Duterte’s policies, while simultaneously harassing critics and opponents. By expressing opposition to the drug war, the EU became a target of pro-government operatives online.