

EEAS SPECIAL REPORT UPDATE: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic

 euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic

April 1,
2020

News and analysis

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Note: The objective of this report is to provide a snapshot overview of the current trends and insights into disinformation activities related to COVID-19. It does not provide a comprehensive or complete overview and focusses primarily on the external dimension, in line with the EEAS mandate. The report was authored by the EEAS Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division, which contributes to the EU's efforts to counter disinformation, including through detection, analysis and exposure of disinformation campaigns. In addressing disinformation and identifying and analysing disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak, the EEAS is working closely with the European Commission and EU Member States. The EEAS also cooperates on this issue with international partners (G7, NATO and non-state actors). The results are regularly published on EUvsDisinfo.eu and social media channels. Insights are shared with EU institutions and EU Member States in real time, including through the Rapid Alert System on Disinformation.

Summary

Disinformation and misinformation around COVID-19 continue to proliferate around the world, with potentially harmful consequences for public health and effective crisis

communication. In the EU and elsewhere, coordinated disinformation messaging seeks to frame vulnerable minorities as the cause of the pandemic and to fuel distrust in the ability of democratic institutions to deliver effective responses. Some state and state-backed actors seek to exploit the public health crisis to advance geopolitical interests, often by directly challenging the credibility of the European Union and its partners.

- **Global:** Claims that the EU is disintegrating in the face of COVID-19 are trending on social media in all analyzed regions. Among COVID-19-related content published by RT and Sputnik, articles covering conspiracy narratives such as that “the virus was man-made” or intentionally spread, typically received more social engagement than other stories.
- **EU:** Disinformation and false health advice on COVID-19 continues to circulate on social media, in contradiction to the WHO’s official guidance and the internal policies of online platforms. For instance, Sputnik Deutschland promotes the claim on Facebook and Twitter that “washing hands does not help”. Evidence shows that online platforms continue to monetize COVID-related disinformation and conspiracy theories.
- **Africa:** Hate campaigns against social and ethnic groups are going viral in some countries. China’s proactive communication around support delivery creates reputational challenges for other donors.
- **China:** state media and government officials promote not proven theories about the origin of COVID-19. Chinese coverage highlights displays of gratitude by some European leaders in response to Chinese aid.
- **MENA:** Daesh encourages militants to exploit chaos and confusion around COVID-19, while framing the pandemic as a “painful torment” against “crusader nations”. The Syrian regime is using COVID-19 to attack EU sanctions. EU Member States are portrayed as unable to help each other or stealing resources meant for local use.
- **Russia:** More than 150 cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation on COVID-19 have been recorded in the EUvsDisinfo database (since January 22). Russian state-controlled media outlets have shifted their focus to highlight Russia’s preparedness to tackle the outbreak. Russian aid to Italy was extensively covered.
- **Turkey:** False and distorted health information continues to circulate widely in the social media, while COVID-19 is nurturing anti-EU discourses and criticism towards the EU, also more publicly.
- **Western Balkans:** conspiracy theories suggesting the virus is a US bioweapon or pretext for a foreign invasion continue trending. The COVID crisis is linked to the existing narrative that the EU is “turning its back” on the Western Balkans.

Terminology:

While some state actor-driven open-source activities can be easily evidenced, it is almost impossible to detect and attribute covert behaviour in the absence of more transparency and closer cooperation with the online platforms. The following is a taxonomy of informational challenges around the COVID-19 pandemic:

	Misinformation	Disinformation	Influence Operations	Foreign interference
Actor	Any, usually not foreign state	Any	Any, usually an organization	Foreign state or proxy
Behavior	No indicators	Intent to deceive	Coordination	Any
Content	Untrue, reasonable self-expression but may cause harm	Untrue	Any	Any, not reasonable self-expression
Distribution	Organic, may be boosted by others	Any	Any, usually at scale	Any
Effect	Any	Any	Any	Any, especially freedoms, election integrity & security

Credit: James Pamment, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

In detail: COVID-related disinformation and propaganda

(March 20 – 27)

Disinformation around COVID-19:

False health advice and misinformation continue to travel far on social media. In Turkey, fake cures such as “drinking pure alcohol” or the idea that “Turkish genes are immune to the virus” continue to circulate on online platforms. Fact-checkers in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans have reported unprecedented volumes of disinformation and conspiracy theories about the “man-made” virus and “miracle cures” with potentially devastating effects on public health and social cohesion. Such content continues to circulate widely in EU Member States, too. Via state and social media, the Kremlin’s spokesperson reiterated this week that “de facto there is no epidemic in Russia”, with independent Russian journalists expressing concern that authorities are downplaying the epidemic. An investigation by [ProPublica](#) revealed a network of **fake and hijacked Twitter accounts** originating from China that were used to spread disinformation about COVID-19.

In the Chinese information space, there are attempts to suggest for instance that it was brought to Wuhan by US military personnel, or that it may have **originated in Italy**. In Montenegro, the government’s emergency measures were framed by actors as being directed at the **Serbian Orthodox Church**.

Narratives targeting the European Union:

“The EU is failing to deal with the pandemic; the Union is about to collapse”:

narrative is promoted by pro-Kremlin sources, several domestic networks/sources in EU Member States, Eastern Partnership countries, the MENA region, the Western Balkans, and African countries. In the MENA region, for instance, the idea that the EU is “dismantling” in the face of COVID-19 is widely propagated.

“The EU is selfish and betrays its own values”: promoted by pro-Kremlin sources, several domestic networks/sources in EU Member States, Eastern Partnership countries, the MENA region, the Western Balkans, and African countries. In Ukraine, for instance, catastrophic messages about the EU’s imminent collapse were combined with the portrayal of Ukraine as a “failed state” that was “abandoned by its European allies”.

“Russia and China are responsible powers”: pro-Kremlin media particularly focused on Russian aid delivered to Italy, proclaiming that “Russia is helping Italy and the EU is not”. The message appears to resonate with domestic audiences: several videos are circulating on Instagram in Italian showing individuals swapping the EU flag for the Russian flag, or displaying Russian military vehicles on Italian streets. State-controlled Rossiya 1 TV channel reported with a measure of sarcasm that a Russian military convoy travelled on “NATO roads”. Pro-Kremlin sources also depicted the Chinese “global project” as superior to the EU. Chinese state-controlled media and social media channels strongly promoted the idea that the Chinese model is superior in tackling COVID-19, while highlighting global expressions of gratitude for Chinese aid delivery, including in Italy. Many experts argue that besides crafting a better international image, China’s overall goal is to maintain social stability at home.

“The EU is exploiting the crisis to advance its own interest”: This narrative was less prominent, but still promoted in several of the regions under analysis. In Georgia, sources allegedly quoting the “South Ossetia KGB” claimed that under the guise of the pandemic, Tbilisi is violating the “border” with South Ossetia with the help of the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia. In Syria, the regime promoted the idea that by holding on to sanctions, the EU and US are undermining humanitarian and medical responses to COVID-19. Similarly, RT claimed that the White Helmets (a prominent target of pro-Kremlin disinformation) are using the pandemic to further the US coalition’s regime change agenda in Syria. In Kosovo, the notion that “the crisis reveals the EU’s pro-Serbian bias” gained traction.

Online platforms

All platforms have continued their efforts to increase the visibility of the WHO and other authoritative health content on their services. In an unprecedented move, all major platforms have also adjusted their content policies in response to COVID-19. Facebook, for instance, announced it would now take down “claims that are designed to discourage treatment or taking appropriate precautions”. Yet, there are several fundamental

challenges about the new content restrictions, in particular as regards the transparency of the reasoning and the enforcement of the rules. In addition, the major platforms continue to monetise disinformation and harmful content on the pandemic (including pro-Kremlin disinformation sites), e.g. by hosting online ads on pages that misrepresent migrants as the cause of the virus, promote fake cures or spread conspiracy theories about the virus.

Media freedom

- Turkey has launched legal proceedings against 316 social media users, charging them with inciting hatred and enmity by spreading concern about COVID-19.
- The Kremlin is ordering internet platforms in the country to remove COVID-19 “fake news”. This follows previous Kremlin efforts to crack down on independent internet sites and statements by President Putin that Russia is being targeted with fake news from abroad.
- The Guardian’s correspondent in Egypt was forced to leave the country, after she reported on a scientific study indicating the government figures on COVID-19 were inaccurate.
- Chinese authorities continue to control the narrative about the pandemic. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has assessed that without the “control and censorship imposed by the authorities the Chinese media would have informed the public much earlier of the seriousness of the epidemic, saving thousands of lives and possibly avoiding the current pandemic.