

# EEAS SPECIAL REPORT UPDATE: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19/Coronavirus Pandemic (Updated 2 – 22 April)

---

 [euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april)

April 24,  
2020

News and analysis

April 24, 2020



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/Coronavirus. It does not provide a comprehensive or complete overview and focusses primarily on the external dimension, in line with the European External Action Service (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

---

As outlined in the earlier reports, disinformation, myths and misinformation continue to proliferate around the world, with potentially harmful consequences for public security, health and effective crisis communications. In this context, it is important to distinguish the very different forms of mis- and disinformation, as well as other forms of information manipulation. Not all, but some of this activity is linked to intentional and coordinated activities, often carried out by state or state sponsored actors. For example, this includes:

- **Coordinated campaigns** have been running across EU Member States and neighbouring regions, promoting false health information and disinformation about the EU and its partners, including from foreign state-controlled media and social media channels.
- **Reports indicate** that there are continued efforts at deflecting blame for the outbreak of the pandemic, involving both overt and covert tactics.
- **Analysis** by EEAS Stratcom and external groups shows that highly harmful disinformation about COVID-19/Coronavirus is going particularly viral in smaller media markets within and outside the EU, where tech companies face lower incentives to take adequate counter-measures.

## In detail: COVID-19 related disinformation, propaganda and other activities

---

(April 2 – 22)

---

As in the previous reporting period, we saw a proliferation of different misinformation, disinformation incidents, and other forms of manipulation and distortions. **Despite their potentially grave impact on public health, official and state-backed sources from various governments, including Russia and – to a lesser extent – China, have continued to widely target conspiracy narratives and disinformation both at public audiences in the EU and the wider neighbourhood. This update provides additional elements which are neither covering the entire information space nor are they exhaustive. They are mainly as illustration and examples of the different activities that can be observed.**

Beyond targeted and sometimes state-backed campaigns, conspiracy theories and false or misleading content about COVID-19/Coronavirus continue to proliferate widely on social media platforms. In an analysis covering five European languages and Arabic, the NGO Avaaz found that “millions of Facebook users are still being put at risk of consuming harmful misinformation on coronavirus at a large scale”. Avaaz analysed sampled content, reportedly finding that it was shared over 1.7 million times on Facebook, and viewed an estimated 117 million times<sup>ii</sup>.

EEAS Stratcom conducted an additional analysis in nine other EU and non-EU languages, including Czech, German, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. In all languages, false or highly misleading content continues to go viral, even when it has been flagged by local fact-

checkers. While aggregate reach figures are impossible to calculate, it is safe to say that respective content is reaching millions of users across the analysed language areas.

Новини України та світу  
22 березня о 09:42 · 🌐

Молоко допомагає боротися із COVID-19 - інформують науковці та урядовці Китаю...

PRESENTNEWS.BIZ.UA

Молоко допомагає боротися із COVID-19 - інформують науковці та урядовці Китаю...

👍 🤩 ❤️ 288      83 коментарі 680 поширень

👍 Подобається    💬 Коментувати    ➦ Share

Post on a public page in Ukrainian claiming milk helps to fight COVID-19.

DER FEHLENDE PART

Alles Panikmache?

0:00 / 24:33

## **Kremlin-funded YouTube channel in German suggesting “the pandemic never happened” (almost 900.000 views and 5000 comments)**

There is also a growing body of evidence on the impact of COVID-19/Coronavirus-related disinformation and narratives on public health and official crisis communication:

- **One third of people** across 6 countries (Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK, and the US) say they have seen “a great deal” of false or misleading information about COVID-19 on social media and messaging applications in the last week (up to 15th of April)<sup>[iii]</sup>.
- **One third** of UK citizens believe that vodka can be used as hand sanitiser.
- **According to a BBC report**, in one Iranian province more people had died from drinking industrial-strength alcohol than from COVID-19, based on a false claim that it could protect you from the virus<sup>[iiii]</sup>.
- **Conspiracy theories** about 5G telecommunication masts allegedly facilitating the spread of COVID-19 led to vandalism and abuse of telecommunications staff in several locations in the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK<sup>[iv]</sup>.
- **Growing numbers** are regularly holding illegal rallies in Berlin to protest “vaccination terrorism” and claiming that COVID-19 is “nothing but a simple flu”<sup>[v]</sup>.
- **Italian polling firm SWG** finds that the share of respondents saying they considered China as friendly to Italy went up to 52 percent in March from 10 percent in January, while the share of respondents indicating they have trust in EU institutions went down to 27 percent in March from 42 percent in September<sup>[vi]</sup>.

## **Narratives and activities targeting and related to the EU**

---

In previous reports, we have listed a number of the most recurring narratives and activities. Many of these activities are continuing. For example, in the period covered by this report, it was confirmed that pro-Kremlin sources and Russian state media continue running a coordinated campaign with the twofold aim of undermining the EU and its crisis response, and to sow confusion about the origins and health implications of COVID-19/Coronavirus. Kremlin-backed disinformation on COVID-19/Coronavirus continues to proliferate widely on social media, even if it contradicts official WHO guidance and the content policies of social media companies. There is also evidence of a coordinated push by official Chinese sources to deflect any blame for the outbreak of the pandemic<sup>[vii]</sup> and publicising announcements and deliveries of bilateral assistance, with polls in certain countries showing China being perceived as more helpful in fighting the pandemic than the EU<sup>[viii]</sup>.

Additional information can be found on [www.euvsdisinfo.eu](http://www.euvsdisinfo.eu)

## ***International dimension***

---

State-controlled sources targeting audiences in the EU, Eastern Partnership countries, the Western Balkans and the MENA region continue to portray the EU and its partners as ineffective, divided and cynical in their response to the COVID-19. As such, the pandemic

is repeatedly presented as a weakness of democratic systems to effectively deal with the crisis. A coordinated disinformation from Russia and the Syrian regime is conducted to discredit the latest OPCW report, while blaming the US for the lack of medical assistance to Syrian refugees in the camps of Al Rukban and Al Hol, claiming that the US are diverting the UN aid from Syrian refugees to terrorist groups.

At the same time, we see continued and coordinated push by some actors, including Chinese sources, to deflect any blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and highlighting bilateral assistance. Many reports confirm a high level of coordination between different parts of the Chinese system in messaging and amplification of messages across different languages and communication channels, including the use of overt and covert tactics[ix].

**Many actors, including pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets, continue to share misleading and deceptive health information around COVID-19/Coronavirus with international audiences.** Much of this disinformation directly contradicts the WHO's official guidance, as well as the content policies of online platforms.

We see similar exploitative efforts around the COVID-19/Coronavirus crisis to push false messages about vaccines. **These often involve extreme conspiracy theories alleging that governments will impose forced mass vaccination and nano-chip implantation to establish social control, or that vaccines are either ineffective or outright harmful.** Bill Gates is a common target in these narratives. Here are some examples:

- COVID-19 can be cured with traditional medicine instead of vaccines, but the corporate-controlled internet says otherwise (NewsFront)
- After the pandemic, a global vaccination program with toxins and DNA-altering proteins may be forced upon the surviving population (Journal of New Eastern Outlook)
- The coronavirus pandemic may be used to introduce absolute social control through a vaccine (Strategic Culture Foundation)
- Vaccines don't heal; their production is part of the agenda for a New World Order (South Front)
- COVID-19 will allow total control of the population through forced vaccination and chips (NewsFront Spanish)

A particularly concerning and malicious category of disinformation pertains to claims about fake cures or treatments for COVID-19/Coronavirus. Examples:

- Frequent hand washing does not protect you from COVID-19 (Sputnik Germany, RT German)
- We have nothing to lose by using hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 without testing (RT English)
- Zinc could help to kill coronavirus (RT Arabic)
- Western media in cahoots with Big Pharma ignore successful treatment of COVID-19 with vitamin C in China (South Front)

One category of health-related disinformation attempts to downplay the pandemic and suggest that it is a hoax, for example by saying that the mortality rate is exaggerated. These messages frequently focus on attempting to undermine trust in institutions and governments by alleging that they are using the pandemic as an excuse to exert undue power and control over their citizens. Examples:

- [Coronavirus pandemic is exaggerated in order to turn countries into fascist hygiene dictatorships](#) (Sputnik Germany)
- [Governments are fiddling with the numbers to exaggerate the death toll of the coronavirus](#) (One World)
- [The COVID-19 crisis is manufactured by media](#) (South Front)
- [It is too early to tell whether any extra people will die because of COVID-19](#) (RT English)
- [Coronavirus mortality figures are insignificant](#) (Sputnik Czech)

### ***Other selected activities that are reported***

---

Chinese officials and state media try to curtail any mentions of Wuhan as the origin of COVID-19<sup>[x]</sup>, with new domestic restrictions on publishing COVID-19 related research in China<sup>[xi]</sup>. Some state-controlled social media channels continue to spread the theory of the outbreak in Wuhan being linked to US military representatives, indicating a continued intent to spread confusion about the origin of the virus<sup>[xii]</sup>.

There is also significant evidence of **covert Chinese operations** on social media. ProPublica uncovered a network on Twitter involved in a coordinated influence campaign with ties to the Chinese government<sup>[xiii]</sup>. The Daily Telegraph found Chinese state media circumventing social media platforms' political ad rules and buying advertising that praised China's handling of the COVID-19/Coronavirus crisis and attacked the US<sup>[xiv]</sup>. According to the Daily Telegraph, "the ads are part of a worldwide propaganda campaign, coordinated across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and traditional media, attempting to depict China as a global leader in the fight against Covid-19 and drown out accusations that it made the crisis worse by trying to cover up its own outbreak."

Formiche has found a coordinated operation of Twitter bots in Italy amplifying messages of the Chinese embassy and attacking the EU<sup>[xv]</sup>. Thousands of tweets with pro-China hashtags published in a two-week period in March came from bots.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has found in their analysis of COVID-19 /Coronavirus disinformation<sup>[xvi]</sup> that "elements of China's diplomatic and state media messaging continue to demonstrate disinformation tactics more familiar to coordinated and persistent Russian state-sponsored disinformation. Chinese state efforts to contest the information domain are supported by coordinated, although not necessarily inauthentic, pro-China patriotic trolling".

In the Middle East region, the **Syrian regime** is using the COVID-19/Coronavirus crisis to keep on advancing its disinformation narrative against the EU claiming that the EU is perpetuating an “economic war” against Syria and the Syrian people with the EU sanctions crippling the health sector.

False cures continue to be a fertile ground for disinformation with **Iranian authorities** publicising a new device able to detect COVID-19/Coronavirus, widely mocked as a rebirth of the ‘complete cure device’ narrative inspired from Egypt’s case in 2014.

Also, Journalists and activists have been arrested in some countries, while the access to some independent online media has been blocked on the ground of ‘foreign funding’; in others, licences were revoked or journalists expelled.

---

[ii] [https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/facebook\\_coronavirus\\_misinformation/](https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/facebook_coronavirus_misinformation/)

[iii] [https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Navigating-the-Coronavirus-infodemic.pdf?utm\\_source=POLITICO.EU&utm\\_campaign=66ec24c50f-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2020\\_04\\_15\\_05\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_10959edeb5-66ec24c50f-190134993](https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Navigating-the-Coronavirus-infodemic.pdf?utm_source=POLITICO.EU&utm_campaign=66ec24c50f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_04_15_05_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_10959edeb5-66ec24c50f-190134993)

[iiii] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-51984399/page/3>

[iv] <https://www.ft.com/content/1eedb71-d9dc-4b13-9b45-fcb7898ae9e1?desktop=true&segmentId=7c8f09b9-9b61-4fbb-9430-9208a9e233c8#myft:notification:daily-email:content>

[v] [https://amp.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/kritik-an-corona-massnahmen-das-steckt-hinter-der-querfrontdemonstration-in-berlin/25752958.html?twitter\\_impression=true](https://amp.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/kritik-an-corona-massnahmen-das-steckt-hinter-der-querfrontdemonstration-in-berlin/25752958.html?twitter_impression=true)

[vi] <https://formiche.net/2020/04/cina-usa-sondaggio-swg-casini-ventura/>

[vii] <https://www.recordedfuture.com/covid-19-chinese-media-influence/>

[viii] <https://dennikn.sk/1830536/fakty-vs-dojmy-ako-slovensku-realne-pomahaju-ruskocina-a-europska-unia/?ref=mpm>

[ix] <https://freedomhouse.org/article/beijings-coronavirus-propaganda-has-both-foreign-and-domestic-targets>

[x] <https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1241559268190343168?lang=en>

[xi] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/china-clamping-down-on-coronavirus-research-deleted-pages-suggest>  
<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/12/asia/china-coronavirus-research-restrictions-intl-hnk/index.html>

[xii] [CGTN Arabic](#)

<sup>[xiii]</sup> <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-china-built-a-twitter-propaganda-machine-then-let-it-loose-on-coronavirus>

<sup>[xiv]</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2020/04/05/china-floods-facebook-instagram-undeclared-coronavirus-propaganda/>

<sup>[xv]</sup> <https://formiche.net/2020/03/china-unleashed-twitter-bots-covid19-propaganda-italy/>

<sup>[xvi]</sup> <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/covid-19-disinformation>