



Coronavirus: EU strengthens action to tackle disinformation

Brussels, 10 June 2020

Today, the Commission and the High Representative are assessing their steps to fight disinformation around the coronavirus pandemic and are proposing a way forward. This follows the tasking by European leaders in [March 2020](#) to resolutely counter disinformation and reinforce resilience of European societies. The coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by a massive wave of false or misleading information, including attempts by foreign actors to influence EU citizens and debates. The [Joint Communication](#) analyses the immediate response and proposes concrete action that can be quickly set in motion.

High Representative/Vice-President Josep **Borrell** said: "*Disinformation in times of the coronavirus can kill. We have a duty to protect our citizens by making them aware of false information, and expose the actors responsible for engaging in such practices. In today's technology-driven world, where warriors wield keyboards rather than swords and targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns are a recognised weapon of state and non-state actors, the European Union is increasing its activities and capacities in this fight.*"

Vice-President for Values and Transparency Věra **Jourová** said: "*Disinformation waves have hit Europe during the Coronavirus pandemic. They originated from within as well as outside the EU. To fight disinformation, we need to mobilise all relevant players from online platforms to public authorities, and support independent fact checkers and media. While online platforms have taken positive steps during the pandemic, they need to step up their efforts. Our actions are strongly embedded in fundamental rights, in particular freedom of expression and information.*"

The crisis has become a test case showing how the EU and its democratic societies deal with the disinformation challenge. The following aspects are key for a stronger and more resilient EU:

Understand: First, it is important to distinguish between illegal content and content that is harmful but not illegal. Then, there are blurred boundaries between the various forms of false or misleading content: from disinformation, which is defined as intentional, to misinformation, which can be unintentional. The motivation can range from targeted influence operations by foreign actors to purely economic motives. A calibrated response is needed to each of these challenges. Furthermore, there is a need to provide more data for public scrutiny and improve analytical capacities.

Communicate: During the crisis, the EU has been stepping up its work to inform citizens about the risks and to enhance cooperation with other international actors to tackle disinformation. The Commission has been rebutting [myths around the coronavirus](#), which have been viewed more than 7 million times. The European External Action Service, together with the Commission, enhanced strategic communication and public diplomacy in third countries, including the EU's neighbourhood. Foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighbourhood, and globally. For example, the EEAS East Stratcom Task Force detected and exposed more than 550 disinformation narratives from pro-Kremlin sources on the [EUvsDisinfo website](#).

Cooperation has been an important cornerstone of the fight against disinformation:

- **With the European Parliament and the Council and between EU institutions and Member States**, by using established channels, such as the [Rapid Alert System](#) and the [integrated political crisis response](#). These channels will be further developed to strengthen capacities, to improve risk analysis and vital reporting in times of crisis.
- With **international partners, including** the WHO, the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, NATO and others. This led to an increased sharing of information, activities and best practices. It should be intensified to better address foreign influence and disinformation.
- The EU will step up support and assistance to civil society actors, independent media and journalists in **third countries** as part of the 'Team Europe' package, and enhance support for monitoring violations of press freedom and advocacy for a safer media environment.

- Finally, many **consumers** were misled to buy overpriced, ineffective or potentially dangerous products, and platform have removed millions of misleading advertisements. The Commission will continue to cooperate with online platforms and support the [Consumer Protection Cooperation network](#) of national authorities to fight these practices that infringe consumer protection law.

Transparency: The Commission has closely monitored the actions of online platforms under the [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#). There is a need for additional efforts, increased transparency and greater accountability:

- Platforms should provide **monthly reports** that include more detailed data on their actions to promote authoritative content, improve users' awareness, and limit coronavirus disinformation and advertising related to it. They should also step up their cooperation with fact-checkers - in all Members States, for all languages - and researchers, and be more transparent about implementation of their policies to inform users that interact with disinformation.
- The Commission strongly encourages other relevant stakeholders that are not yet signatories to the Code to participate in this new monitoring programme.
- Building on the work of the newly established [European Digital Media Observatory](#), the EU will further strengthen its **support to fact-checkers and researchers**.

Ensuring freedom of expression and pluralistic democratic debate is central to our disinformation response. The Commission will continue monitoring the impact of emergency measures taken by Member States in the coronavirus context, on EU law and values. The crisis demonstrated the role of free and independent media as an essential service, providing citizens with reliable, fact-checked information, contributing to saving lives. The EU will strengthen its support to independent media and journalists in the EU and around the world. The Commission calls upon Member States to intensify efforts to ensure that journalists can work safely and to make the most of the [EU's economic response](#) and [recovery package](#) to support media heavily hit by the crisis, while respecting their independence.

Empowering citizens, raising citizens awareness and increasing societal resilience implies enabling citizens to participate in the democratic debate by preserving access to information and freedom of expression, promoting citizens' media and information literacy, including critical thinking and digital skills. This can be done through media literacy projects and support to civil society organisations.

Next steps

The actions proposed today will feed into future EU work on disinformation, notably the **European Democracy Action Plan** and the **Digital Services Act**.

Background

The European Union has been actively tackling disinformation since 2015. Following a decision of the [European Council in March 2015](#), the [East StratCom Task Force](#) in the European External Action Service (EEAS) was set up. In 2016, the [Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats](#) was adopted, followed by the [Joint Communication on increasing resilience and bolstering capabilities to address hybrid threats](#) in 2018.

The [Action Plan against Disinformation](#) of December 2018 outlined four pillars for the EU's fight against disinformation: 1) improving the capabilities to detect, analyse and expose disinformation; 2) strengthening coordinated and joint responses, i.a. through the Rapid Alert System; 3) mobilising the private sector to tackle disinformation; 4) raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

In October 2018, the [Code of Practice](#) was signed by Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla as well as trade associations representing online platforms, the advertising industry, and advertisers as a self-regulatory tool to tackle disinformation. Microsoft joined the Code in 2019. The signatories submitted [self-assessments](#) in October 2019. The Commission will publish a comprehensive assessment in the forthcoming weeks.

Finally, in a [Joint Communication of June 2019](#), the Commission and the High Representative concluded that while the European elections of May 2019 were not free from disinformation, the actions taken by the EU have contributed to narrow down the space for third-country influence as well as coordinated campaigns to manipulate public opinion.

For More Information

[Joint Communication – Tackling COVID-19 disinformation: getting the facts right](#)
[Factsheet](#)

[Coronavirus response website](#)

[Dedicated section on fighting disinformation during coronavirus pandemic](#)

[Advice to consumers and businesses on scams related to Covid-19](#)

[EU vs disinfo website](#) - <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/think-before-you-share/>

[2018 Action plan against disinformation](#)

[The Code of Practice against Disinformation](#)

[EU co-funded projects to support media freedom and pluralism](#)

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