Disinformation in Times of COVID-19: Reinforcing the Responses of the European Union and the United States

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Executive Summary

> Since at least the month of January 2020, both Russia and China have been trying to influence global narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic in efforts to undermine the credibility and reputation of both the EU and the US in the eyes of their citizens as well as partners around the world.

> They do so by creating and spreading disinformation campaigns on the internet as well as through state-backed traditional media.

> The EU and the United States have to react not only to prevent negative consequences in terms of public health impacts, but also to preserve their regional and global credibility.

> In the EU, the anti-disinformation policy put in place has been usefully implemented since the start of the pandemic but should be further strengthened taking into account lessons learned over the past few months.

> In the US, a limited response to COVID-19 disinformation has shown clear gaps in what is yet to become a counterstrategy. Developing a solid legislative foundation and raising awareness should be the priorities in this respect, especially in the run-up to the presidential elections.

> A joint global approach to disinformation can only be based on successful practices from both sides of the Atlantic, understanding of each other's differences and compromise.

The world-wide spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has provided ample opportunities for state actors, in particular from the major powers China and Russia, to spread disinformation about its origins, proliferation and the effectiveness of other actors' varying responses to the threat. This is consistent with previously observed efforts of these countries to use manipulation to distort political environments in democracies (Walker 2018).

According to reports from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), both the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) have found themselves in the middle of Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns, which also provided attractive content for conspiracy theorists and far-right extremists across the West. This is happening despite a number of legislative, investigative and other actions taken by the EU and the US in recent years to prevent third states from interfering in their internal affairs.

This policy brief discusses how the EU and US have responded to Russian and Chinese disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that it should be viewed as an opportunity to improve EU and US policies by adopting new or revising legislation and improving transatlantic cooperation based on mutual understanding, shared best practices and compromise. The argument is developed by, first, charting the Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 crisis. Against this backdrop, EU and US responses are analysed. Finally, the policy brief develops recommendations for improving anti-disinformation policies.

Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns

During the pandemic Russia and China have routinely resorted to spreading aggressive disinformation campaigns against the European Union and the United States.

Russia

Already in January 2020, the pro-Kremlin media, such as Russia Today and Sputnik, and a wider coordinated network of online bots and trolls, started to spread conspiracy theories linking the coronavirus to American weapons of mass destruction that originated in a US military lab (EEAS 2020a). In March, when the number of new infections began to escalate in Europe, the same media re-adopted their tried and tested techniques, previously deployed during the Brexit and Catalan referendums, of trying to undermine the confidence of

European citizens in their institutions and sow distrust. The pro-Kremlin outlets promoted narratives about the EU's collapse, caused by the inability to deal with the pandemic, betrayal of the EU's fundamental values, and maintained that Russia's and China's handling of the crisis was superior (EEAS 2020c). For example, Sputnik Italy claimed that "the EU stands idly by while COVID-19 causes mass slaughter and an economic tsunami which is about to overwhelm Europe", and the Russian state channel, Rossia 24, informed its viewers that the "Western human-centric system of values has collapsed" (EEAS 2020b).

Disinformation about the cures and treatment of COVID-19 and claims that the virus is a hoax and its dangerousness exaggerated may have been especially harmful, as they contributed to promoting forms of behaviour that put individual and public health in Western societies under a direct threat. Conspiracy theories around ineffectiveness and harm of vaccines, as well as false statements that mass vaccination and nano-chip implantation will be used by the governments for social control are widespread (EEAS 2020d.) This and other health-related disinformation has been disseminated in many languages, including German, English and Arabic, via local branches of Sputnik, RT and South Front (ibid.). Some of the false claims have been picked up by far-right extremists and populists on both sides of the Atlantic and shared on 4chan, Reddit, Facebook and Telegram (Scott/Overly 2020).

Following China's example, in March, Russia also sent medical supplies and teams to Italy in a mission called "From Russia with Love". Interestingly, both the populist Italian 5Star Movement and the far-right party Alternative for Germany have tried to take credit for enabling Russian aid. This 'humanitarian' mission was later used for propaganda and disinformation campaigns against the EU (EEAS 2020c).

China

Whereas Russia is generally considered to have been the first country to launch disinformation campaigns in the West ever since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, China is believed to have started directly targeting Western audiences only during the Hong Kong protests in 2019 (Conge 2019). Since then, however, Beijing has continued using similar techniques in its dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, which seems to indicate that it is increasingly serious about trying to influence the global information environment beyond its borders and is ready to follow in Russia's footsteps. This view has been backed, for example, by a recent analysis of the Twitter ecosystem which found that accounts linked to the Chinese state were used to support anti-US and anti-Western content on Russian sites (Brandt/Schafer 2020).

However, China is not only learning from Russia but also developing its own techniques and narratives. China appears to be more interested than Russia in promoting a positive image of itself (rather than merely tainting that of others) and has

devoted more resources to it (ibid.). In Europe, it was quick to adopt 'masks diplomacy' by supplying large quantities of personal protective equipment to countries such as Italy, Spain, Poland and the Czech Republic. While such actions may have helped to lift some pressure on the national health systems (despite frequent reports of quality issues with the equipment), the fact that they were invariably accompanied by mass information campaigns on Chinese propaganda sites, and included narratives about failures of the Western democracies to adequately respond to the crisis (Pinna 2020), raises questions about Beijing's real motivations.

The Chinese disinformation against the US, on the other hand, is much more aggressive in tone, probably in response to the US President's (and other administration officials') statements since the outbreak of COVID-19. President Trump has regularly called its cause a 'Chinese virus', and reminded the world that the first outbreak occurred in Wuhan, something that China has been trying to deflect attention from. In this context, Beijing did not shy away from using official channels, such as China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to endorse and promote a particular conspiracy theory claiming that the virus was imported into the country by US soldiers. At the same time, President Trump has himself been a source of disinformation by contending that the virus was man-made in a Chinese lab alongside other unfounded claims related to sometimes outright harmful methods of treating COVID-19. This undoubtedly helped the Chinese side paint itself as the more credible one. The two countries are now engaged in what some have called a "titanic information war" (Wong et al. 2020).

The European Union's response

The EU's response to disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic has been guided by the 2018 'Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach' and 'Action Plan Against Disinformation' (European Commission 2018; European Commission/High Representative 2018). Its policy is based on four pillars: improving the capabilities of EU institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation; strengthening coordinated and joint responses; mobilising the private sector; and raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

Concerning the first pillar, the EEAS has so far played the most visible role in identifying and analysing disinformation in EU member states and neighbouring regions. It has provided regular Corona updates on the EUvsDisinfo website, through newsletters and Special Reports, which have been key in exposing the extent and depth of Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns against the EU and its members (EEAS 2020b). Much of this work is a continuation of the efforts of 'The East Strategic Communication Task Force' created in 2015 to address Russian disinformation campaigns. Its team put together an impressive database of 8,000 disinformation cases, analysed narratives and techniques, and established

cooperation with fact-checking organisations in the EU and its neighbourhood.

It was because of the COVID-19 pandemic that the EEAS for the first time seriously looked into Chinese disinformation, however. Its work has been overshadowed by the allegations, subsequently strongly denied, that due to China's pressure, the EEAS had watered down some of the critical language on China (Apuzzo 2020) in a report on disinformation (EEAS 2020d). Even if unconfirmed, these developments cast a shadow on the important work of this institution, and raise a broader question about the difficulty of implementing the EU's foreign policy when, in the case of China, some member states with close economic ties to Beijing indeed prefer a softer tone vis-à-vis the country.

The EU's 'Code of Practice Against Disinformation' belongs to the third pillar of the EU's policy. It is a voluntary framework created to reduce online disinformation that was signed by major tech giants, among which Facebook, Google and Twitter. In preparation of the 2019 European Parliament elections, the signatories managed to achieve some limited progress by improving the transparency of advertisement, fact-checking and using AI to remove fake accounts (European Commission 2019). Since the outbreak, additional positive developments can be observed. Facebook and YouTube, for example, labelled or removed many (but not all) posts rated as false by independent fact-checkers in a sample analysed by the researchers from the University of Oxford (Brennen et al. 2020). Facebook has also promoted official advice of the World Health Organisation, an action that has been supported by the EU, and provided some access, yet still arbitrary and episodic, to researchers to help create better models for anticipating the spread of the coronavirus. Twitter broadened its policy to include harmful content that goes against authoritative sources of global and local public health information, but failed to label and remove most of this content from its platform (ibid.). The next report by the European Commission on the progress made by the platforms is due sometime this year and should look closely at the strengths and weaknesses of the big tech's response to COVID-19.

The EU has also tried to improve communication vis-à-vis its citizens and to strengthen coordination between the member states and third partners (pillars 2 and 4). A dedicated website in all EU languages was created, where myths are debunked and online resources and tools are presented (European Commission 2020). The website includes a video address by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, trying to raise awareness by stressing that "disinformation can cost lives" and asking social media companies to share data with fact-checking organisations. Other EU institutions, such as the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, have also created pages to help keep people informed. However, the fact that the video of the European Commission's President was viewed only

5111 times on YouTube (on 22 May) clearly shows that the communication efforts of the European institutions are by far not enough, particularly in comparison with the thousands of fake news websites and outlets peddling harmful advice.

Instead, the EU's existing policy of supporting fact-checkers, researchers and local media to help expose disinformation campaigns seems considerably more promising in generating public awareness of the problem.

The Rapid Alert System (RAS), the second pillar of the EU's policy, was created pre-COVID-19 to help member states flag and share fake news and coordinate strategic communication efforts and has been deployed during the outbreak (Stolton 2020). The RAS had been criticised, however, for the lack of common standards on what information to share and of a clear roadmap for analysing the collected material (Apuzzo 2019). It is not clear whether and to what extent this criticism has been addressed. Still, contrary to earlier concerns by some officials that the system would soon become obsolete, it has been handy during the pandemic. This time it is used to share information not only between the member states but also with partners in the G7, which is an example of the EU's efforts to engage on this topic, including with the US.

The US response

Unlike the EU, the US does not yet have a comprehensive policy on disinformation, in part due to its sweeping, constitutionally anchored conception of free speech. It is falling behind its transatlantic partner not only in terms of conceptual framing but also lacks the impetus on the highest level of government to address the challenge (Polyakova/Fried 2019). The only exception is the 2019 'National Defence Authorization Act', a piece of legislation that recognised, among others, the importance of countering disinformation.

At the same time, different US governmental agencies have, in recent years, acquired significant technical expertise and understanding of disinformation campaigns during and following the investigation into Russian interference with the 2016 US Presidential elections. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is one of these agencies. It is in charge of investigating foreign influence operations, defined as "covert actions by foreign governments to influence U.S. political sentiment or public discourse", and since 2017 has a dedicated Foreign Interference Task Force. There is not a lot of open-access information on the work of this Task Force and since the start of the pandemic, it did not issue any statements. However, in cooperation with the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the FBI made a public announcement warning US organisations conducting COVID-19-related research to be aware of China-affiliated cyber actors who are trying to collect intellectual property and public health data related to vaccines, treatments, and testing, and advised these organisations to take steps to improve their cyber security (FBI/CISA 2020).

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Another actor that is closely involved in countering state-sponsored disinformation is the Global Engagement Center (GEC) inside the State Department. Operational since 2017, the Center has a budget of $120 million and three teams are focusing on Russian, Chinese and Iranian disinformation. GEC has raised alarm about disinformation operations during the pandemic in its briefings to the State Department leadership, partners of the US as well as to the wider public through fact-checkers in Agence France Presse and coordination with different technology platforms (Gabrielle 2020). However, as the recent refusal by Twitter to remove almost 250,000 accounts – identified by GEC to be part of an automated, China-run bot network – suggests, the Center's work still relies heavily on the goodwill of the tech giants.

Cooperation of major tech companies with the government and their important role in reducing the public's exposure to disinformation online is part of a larger discussion on regulation. Currently, there is no agreement in the US on what kind of legislation, if any, needs to be adopted with regard to transparency of advertisement, data privacy, and criteria for identifying, labelling or removing false and misleading content, etc. Some companies have, as seen, started to take action even without such legislation in the US, either in anticipation of future legislation or to comply with the existing EU legislation. However, not all are making sufficient progress. To help address this, Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff, the Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, sent letters to Twitter, Alphabet and YouTube asking them to be more proactive and inform users who engage with harmful coronavirus-related misinformation and to direct them to authoritative and medically accurate resources (Schiff 2020). Nonetheless, such initiatives of Congress(wo)men cannot replace a comprehensive legislation.

Another element of the US response to COVID-19 disinformation has been an attempt to cooperate with its partners in the framework of the G7, currently under the presidency of the US. This, however, did not produce positive results because of a questionable strategy adopted by the US leadership. During the G7 meeting in March, where disinformation by China was a prominent topic, Secretary of State Pompeo tried to convince his European counterparts to refer to COVID-19 as the "Wuhan virus" in their joint statement, a wording that was viewed as too confrontational by some of the partners. Therefore, unlike the finance ministers and central bankers of G7 member states, foreign affairs ministers did not manage to issue a joint communiqué after their meeting.

Conclusion: policy recommendations for the EU and the US

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested responses of the EU and the US in the fight against disinformation, exposing both strengths and weakness of domestic approaches and a lack of cooperation between the partners in this area.

The homework that the EU has done in recent years on putting together an anti-disinformation policy has proven useful during the pandemic. It should be further reinforced taking into account the COVID-19 experience. The European Commission's most recent communication on countering disinformation amid COVID-19 contains some welcome further steps, including improving support of fact-checkers and researchers, giving clear expectations about transparency to online platforms, strengthening strategic communication and cooperation with partners such as NATO (Jourová 2020). Three additional recommendations can be proposed:

- The EEAS should improve internal management processes to exclude any potential third-state interference in their important work.
- If, after a thorough review of digital platforms' performance during the pandemic, the EU finds insufficient response by a majority of them, it should drop the voluntary character of the 'Code of Practice' and move to a binding regulation.
- A new element of EU policy could be the imposition of high costs, e.g. via individual or other sanctions against media outlets that produce or promote disinformation.

When it comes to the US, the response to COVID-19 disinformation has revealed clear gaps in what is yet to become a true US strategy. The upcoming presidential elections only adds urgency to the cause of consolidating this strategy. However, since President Trump is unlikely to lead on this matter, having himself been a source of disinformation in the past, the Congress is better suited for the task.

- For a start, Congress should mobilise bipartisan support to adopt already existing bills, such as the 'Honest Ads Act', which would make political advertisement more transparent, as well as the 'Defending American Security from Kremlin Aggression Act', which introduces individual sanctions for disinformation activities.
- Furthermore, the American public needs to be better informed and aware of disinformation campaigns. Civil society, media and fact-checkers all have an important role to play in this, and supporting them should be at the heart of any future policy.

Finally, a better coordination of responses between the EU and the US as well as its partners in forums like the G7 is vital for the development of a joint global approach, which should be based on successful practices from across the Atlantic. However, for now, this cooperation is strained in large part due to unwillingness of the current US leadership to compromise and adopt a more forward-looking strategy as well as President's Trump personal harmful rhetoric. Nonetheless, the EU and its member states should continue to try and engage with the US government on this topic, bilaterally as well as multilaterally, as this is potentially an area of a significant shared interest, a scarce commodity today.

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She previously worked as Junior Project Coordinator at the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in Ukraine (2016-17) and as Research and Communication Officer at the Ukrainian Think Tanks Liaison Office in Brussels (2014-16). Her professional background also includes a traineeship at the European Committee of the Regions, Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (Brussels, 2016).