

THE EU'S RESPONSE TO FOREIGN DISINFORMATION

As foreign actors' disinformation campaigns continue to increase, it is now more important than ever to ensure factual information is not only available to, but also reaches citizens. In 2015, in response to this emerging threat, the East StratCom Task Force was established under the European External Action Service. By detecting, analyzing, and exposing malign influence operations—especially Russia's manipulative interferences—the Task Force has been countering disinformation and supporting EU's wider communication efforts in its Eastern neighborhood. This article sheds light on the Task Force's responses in the cases of Ukraine and Belarus, while underlining the vital role of democracies and democratic institutions in addressing the threat of foreign disinformation.

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On 11 March 2020, the WHO announced COVID-19 a pandemic: “We have never before seen a pandemic sparked by a coronavirus...And we have never before seen a pandemic that can be controlled, at the same time,” Director-General of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said.¹

Already much earlier, actors engaged in spreading distorted information, with the aim to manipulate public debate and stoke fear, had sensed the potential to exploit a deep health crisis that was moving from country to country. Among others, both Russian and Chinese sources² questioned the origin of the virus, sometimes even claiming that the virus is a biological weapon brought to China by the US or other Western actors. Both Russia and China also conducted traditional influence campaigns about authoritarian countries providing the most efficient support to struggling nations. For example, during the Spring, pro-Kremlin media particularly focused on Russian aid delivered to Italy, proclaiming that “Russia is helping Italy and the EU is not.”³ The message appeared to resonate with domestic audiences: several videos circulated on Instagram in Italian showing individuals swapping the EU flag for the Russian flag, or displaying Russian military vehicles on Italian streets. Chinese state-controlled media and social media channels strongly promoted the idea of the Chinese model’s superiority in tackling COVID-19, while highlighting global expressions of gratitude for Chinese aid delivery, including in Italy.

The WHO described this overabundance of information as a massive “infodemic”⁴ that has been preventing the public to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when needed.

The EU’s, like other organizations’, response to disinformation was put to the test. As a result, the EU committed to:

- Strengthening strategic communication within and outside the EU
- Cooperating better inside the Union as well as with international partners
- Achieving greater transparency and identification of disinformation and influence operations on online platforms
- Empowering and raising citizens’ awareness
- Protecting public health and consumer rights

¹ “WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19,” *WHO*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

² “EEAS Special Report: Disinformation on the Coronavirus – Short Assessment of the Information Environment,” *EUvsDisinfo.eu*, 19 March 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-disinformation-on-the-coronavirus-short-assessment-of-the-information-environment/>

³ “EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *EUvsDisinfo.eu*, 1 April 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

⁴ WHO, “Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report – 13,” 2 February 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>

The response and the further steps are described in the EU's Communication on Disinformation of June 2020.⁵

Countering Disinformation: The East StratCom Task Force

The EU's response to disinformation stems from changes in the security environment of its immediate surroundings. A growing awareness of the role of disinformation—"verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm"⁶—in the illegal annexation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine, and the downing of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 above eastern Ukraine in 2014 led to the creation of the East StratCom Task Force. The Task Force specializes in responding to Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns.

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At the same time, the EU is developing wider approaches to address emerging threats and other foreign state and non-state actors engaging in manipulative interference. It has established international cooperation with partners like the G7 and NATO, and created a Rapid Alert System to exchange views and coordinate with the EU Member States on issues related to disinformation and foreign interference.

The East StratCom Task Force's work on countering disinformation goes hand-in-hand with developing and improving the EU's own communication and support to independent media in its Eastern neighborhood—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The results of its work together with the European Commission and the EU Delegations in these countries are clearly visible: In an annual survey, the EU was considered the most trusted international institution and the only one trusted by the majority (60 percent) of citizens in the Eastern Partnership countries this year.⁷ Intensive efforts to communicate the EU's efforts in fighting COVID-19 highlight how long-term investments in strategic

⁵ European Commission, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right,” 10 June 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0008>

⁶ European Commission, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Action Plan against Disinformation,” 5 December 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

⁷ EU Neighbours east project, “Opinion Survey 2020: Regional Overview,” 16 June 2020, <https://euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/opinion-survey-2020-regional-overview>

communication help address influence campaigns and provide factual messages about the EU's role in the response to COVID-19.

The Case of Ukraine

Let us zoom in on the Task Force's efforts around Ukraine. In a survey at the beginning of April 2020, 34 percent of Ukrainian respondents considered China the greatest hope to help Ukraine fight the coronavirus pandemic. The EU's score at that time was 10 percent.⁸

After six weeks, during which the EU emergency support package (190 million euros) was announced and the nation-wide campaign #BeatCovid was conducted, the results were reversed: 32 percent of Ukrainians thought that the EU was helping the most in the response to COVID-19, while 10 percent held that view about China.⁹

The Case of Belarus

At the same time, disinformation targeting the ongoing civic protests in Belarus is also widespread, provoking fear and conspiracy theories to legitimize local authorities' violence and decisions. In addition, employees of Russian state-controlled media companies arrived in Minsk to replace the journalists that resigned from the Belarusian state media, and have been working on influencing public broadcasters in Belarus to create the image that Belarus is under siege by the West, and that the only way forward is the Union State with Russia.

EUvsDisinfo, which has focused its disinformation monitoring on the protests in Belarus, exposed more than 120 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation, reached out to Belarusian audiences with regular analytical updates in Russian language—including a video¹⁰ highlighting violent attacks against journalists in Belarus—and briefed dozens of journalists on disinformation exploiting the Belarus protests.

In reaction to the repressions and state violence following the 2020 presidential election, the EU has stepped up targeted assistance to civil society in Belarus and prepared a support package, including support to victims of repression and independent media (3.7 million euros).¹¹ In October, the EU imposed sanctions—travel bans and asset freezing—on 40 individuals responsible for repression and intimidation

⁸ Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "Assessing the Success of the Government and Society's Response to Events Related to the Coronavirus Epidemic," 2 April 2020, <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=928&page=1>

⁹ Representation of the European Union in Ukraine, "EU assistance for Ukraine's reconstruction during the COVID-19 pandemic is targeted at the sectors most in need - survey results," 5 June 2020, https://ceas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/80479/node/80479_uk

¹⁰ "EUvsDisinfo: Belarusian authorities continue to attack, detain and obstruct journalists covering the protests. Meanwhile, Russian 'specialists' are taking their place," *Facebook*, 22 September 2020, <https://fb.watch/1mAtXTruVg/>

¹¹ European Commission, "Belarus," https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/belarus_en

against peaceful demonstrators, opposition members, and journalists in Belarus.¹²

Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Campaigns

Another important strand of work is detecting, analyzing, and exposing pro-Kremlin disinformation through the “EUvsDisinfo.eu” campaign. The website offers a daily analysis of current trends, methods, and techniques behind disinformation campaigns, a weekly Disinformation Review which summarizes the main pro-Kremlin disinformation trends observed across various languages, and a unique searchable database of around 10,000 pro-Kremlin disinformation messages, which is used by researchers, data analysts, journalists, government officials, and ordinary citizens. Every week, more than 60 new disinformation messages are registered in the database on average. In addition, the campaign provides advice on how to protect yourself from and how to respond to disinformation. During COVID-19, new efforts have been made to reach out to new audiences, with content now being published in French, German, Italian, and Spanish, in addition to English and Russian.

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During the past years, malign actors who use disinformation as a tactic in influence operations have become more advanced in their activities, as well as more sophisticated in hiding their fingerprints and adopting new platforms on which to operate. In October 2020, Graphika reported about a Russian operation targeting American far-right users on social networks such as Gab and Parler,¹³ yet another example of this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the fundamentals have not changed. We can see pro-Kremlin actors using the same playbook now around the poisoning of the Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny with Novichok nerve agent, as was used after the poisoning of Russian ex-agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, UK. And disinformation remains successful: In the German language space, articles by Russian government-funded RT Deutsch were the second most-shared articles on German social media in the

¹² European Council, “Belarus: EU imposes sanctions for repression and election falsification,” 2 October 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/02/belarus-eu-imposes-sanctions-for-repression-and-election-falsification/>

¹³ Graphika, “Step into My Parler- Suspected Russian Operation Targeted Far-Right American Users on Platforms Including Gab and Parler, Resembled Recent IRA-Linked Operation that Targeted Progressives,” October 2020, https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_step_into_my_parler.pdf

aftermath of the Navalny poisoning. Both Russia Today and Sputnik managed to rank within the top 15 of social media posts with the highest engagement.¹⁴ The Kremlin continues to increase the funding of the channels it controls.¹⁵

Next Steps

Despite the power of disinformation and the complexity of an infodemic, democratic institutions and societies are not helpless. It forces us, as democracies, to create new strategies against malign influence, step up our support to fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, and develop better ways to ensure that fact-based communication is not only available, but also reaches citizens, and clarifies the crucial role of independent, reliable, and trustworthy media in a healthy public debate.

Building on the EU's Action Plan against Disinformation,¹⁶ the next steps in strengthening the EU's response to disinformation will be developed in the upcoming European Democracy Action Plan,¹⁷ which will focus on protecting European democracy against manipulation and interference—including external interference—across the areas of election security, media freedom and pluralism, and disinformation. The Digital Services Act¹⁸ will modernize the existing legal framework for digital services, protect users' rights, and set fair rules for large on-line platforms. Both of these initiatives will shape the debate on how to best protect democracies against disinformation—not only inside the EU, but also across the globe.

¹⁴“Navalny Poisoning: Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Outlets Top German Social Media,” *EUvsDisinfo.eu*, 17 September 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/navalny-poisoning-pro-kremlin-disinformation-outlets-top-german-social-media/>

¹⁵ “Figure of the Week: 1.11 billion euros,” *EUvsDisinfo.eu*, 29 September 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/figure-of-the-week-1-11-billion-euros/>

¹⁶ European Commission, “Action Plan against Disinformation.”

¹⁷ European Commission, “Protecting European Democracy From Interference and Manipulation- European Democracy Action Plan,” <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12506-European-Democracy-Action-Plan>

¹⁸ European Commission, “The Digital Services Act Package,” 22 June 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/digital-services-act-package>