
COVID-19 Coronavirus: EU, “targeted disinformation campaigns by third countries, particularly Russia and China”

The coronavirus pandemic is also an “infodemic”. It is “accompanied by a massive wave” of disinformation and consumer fraud. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, said this in his remarks about the “Communication” against disinformation released by the European Commission in Brussels today. “Not only does disinformation undermine the credibility of our democracies - he explained -, but it also harms our citizens”. Commissioner Vera Jourova added: “Italy is among the countries that have been most affected by the infodemic”. And she cited Russia and China as sources of disinformation: “We have enough evidence to say it”. According to the document released by the Commission, the EU during the crisis “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, via a dedicated website, “has been rebutting myths around the coronavirus, which have been viewed more than 7 million times”. “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 East Stratcom Task Force “detected and exposed more than 550 disinformation narratives from pro-Kremlin sources on the EUvsDisinfo website”.

The Commission has also monitored the actions of online platforms. There is now 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”. Building on the work of the European Digital Media Observatory, the EU will “further strengthen its support to fact-checkers and researchers”. Also, of paramount importance is “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. Last but not least, the Commission is committed to “empowering citizens, raising citizens awareness and increasing societal resilience”. This means “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”. A “European Democracy Action Plan” and the “Digital Services Act” are currently being discussed in Brussels.

Marco Calvarese