

The EU's response to the coronavirus 'infodemic'

In parallel to the coronavirus pandemic, governments across the world are having to tackle a viral 'infodemic'; a wave of coronavirus-related information including hoaxes, conspiracy theories and disinformation by third parties. In many countries, the situation is hampering freedom of expression. During the June plenary session, the European Commission and the Council are scheduled to make statements on the fight against disinformation campaigns during the Covid-19 crisis and the impact on freedom of expression.

Background

In February 2020, the World Health Organization [warned](#) that the '2019-nCoV [novel coronavirus] outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive 'infodemic' – an over-abundance of information, some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it'. This has required [efforts](#) to combat disinformation and misinformation campaigns regarding the virus – including campaigns that can spark fear, incite violence or trigger unrest. The [East StratCom Task Force](#) under the European External Action Service (EEAS) has collected over [500](#) examples of pro-Kremlin coronavirus disinformation so far. At the same time, media freedom [proponents across the world](#) have warned that some governments are using the pandemic as a [pretext](#) for implementing new, draconian restrictions on free expression. The [European Union](#) – including the [European Parliament](#) – has been vocal in stressing the importance of maintaining media freedom and democracy throughout the crisis.

The coronavirus infodemic and the EU's response

Against this backdrop, and in response to the call of the members of the European Council and EU Foreign Affairs Ministers, as well as to the concerns of the European Parliament, the European Commission and High Representative on 10 June 2020 published a joint communication on [Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right](#). Building on the 2018 [Action Plan against Disinformation](#), the new communication calls for 'more coordinated action to address the risks for open societies', in line with the EU's democratic values. It aims to further boost the EU's efforts to counter disinformation, adapt to evolving manipulations, while at the same time supporting free and independent media. The immediate response to coronavirus disinformation includes work already under way, and concrete actions which can be launched quickly using already existing resources. The EU will further increase support for fact-checkers and researchers, building on the new [European Digital Media Observatory](#). Key online platforms are urged to report monthly on their efforts to counter Covid-19 disinformation and promote authoritative content. Moreover, fundamental challenges highlighted by the crisis will be assessed, feeding into the efforts to strengthen democracy. By the end of 2020, the Commission will propose action to boost media freedom and pluralism as part of the [Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024](#). It will present an audiovisual and media action plan, supporting the digital transformation and competitiveness of these sectors.

European Parliament position

In its [consistent push](#) for a coordinated European response to disinformation, Parliament has in recent years used a mix of tools: non-legislative resolutions and hearings, as well as its budgetary power. The latter was instrumental in the allocation of the first real budget to the [East StratCom Task Force](#). In a [resolution](#) adopted on 17 April 2020, Members stressed that disinformation about Covid-19 is a major public health problem, that all people should have access to accurate and verified information, and that a free, independent and sufficiently funded media is necessary for democracy. A [report](#) on 'strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate Speech, disinformation and the role of platforms' is currently being prepared by the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs.

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