

COVID-19 foreign influence campaigns

Europe and the global battle of narratives

SUMMARY

The global health crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic – which is currently hitting EU Member States, not least Italy and Spain, particularly hard – raises concern that a combination of disinformation and heavily promoted health diplomacy, echoed by local proxies in Europe, could potentially pave the way for wider influence in other sectors in the wake of the crisis.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initially concealed information about the spread of the virus. Research suggests that they thereby delayed measures to alleviate the spread of the disease. At the same time, the CCP launched far-reaching efforts to silence domestic criticism.

The CCP's efforts to restore Beijing's tainted image both at home and abroad include attempts to export the blame for the virus via a wave of conspiracy theories, in a move that seems to be inspired by the Kremlin's well-known tactics. At the same time, Beijing has launched a highly visible global aid offensive, providing expertise, test kits and other essential medical equipment – not all of it for free, contrary to the CCP's media offensive – to a number of countries, including in Europe.

Both Moscow and Beijing seem to be driving parallel information campaigns, conveying the overall message that democratic state actors are failing and that European citizens cannot trust their health systems, whereas their authoritarian systems can save the world.

Meanwhile, the EU – which has taken significant steps to help citizens both in the EU and beyond – has acknowledged the geopolitical components in what has been dubbed the 'politics of generosity', and is preparing to protect Europe against the next stage in these influence operations.



In this Briefing

- A battle of narratives: Authoritarianism vs democracy?
- Information suppression and narrative control
- An increasingly aggressive battle of narratives
- From conspiracy theories to 'coronavirus diplomacy'
- From Russia with love? The Kremlin's coronavirus narratives
- Serbia's President plays 'China card'
- Role of the European Union and the European Parliament

A battle of narratives: Authoritarianism vs democracy?

The global health crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in Wuhan, China in late 2019 and is currently hitting EU Member States, with Italy and Spain particularly hard hit, raises concern that a combination of disinformation and heavily promoted health diplomacy, echoed by local proxies in Europe, could potentially pave the way for wider influence in other sectors in the wake of the crisis. Intense information suppression, narrative control and disinformation campaigns, in combination with highly visible, staged global health assistance, seem to be aimed at conveying the message that authoritarian nationalism is the most viable answer to the pandemic, and that societies must [choose](#) between security and freedom. However, democratic societies such as South Korea and Taiwan have so far shown that efficient democracies and sustainable health systems can successfully fight the virus.¹ Some studies indicate a close [correlation](#) between trust in governments and the same country's resilience against health threats. Meanwhile, as leaders are scrambling to present their responses to the outbreak as particularly efficient, the politicisation of data and information surrounding the response to the COVID-19 outbreak has the potential to affect the level of trust in governments across the world. The consequences are yet to be seen.

Information suppression and narrative control

When the COVID-19 epidemic broke out in China in late 2019, authorities initially [concealed](#) information about the spread of the virus. Research suggests that they thereby [delayed](#) measures to alleviate the spread of the disease. Thus, the epidemic exposed 'the [weaknesses](#) of centralised, top-down systems of authority', according to the Mercator Institute for China Studies. Doctor Li Wenliang, who tried to [warn](#) about the outbreak in Wuhan and was investigated for 'spreading rumours' before he died in February 2020, became a symbol for the health risk for medical staff in the epidemic, as well as of the far-reaching [efforts](#) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to control information and [silence criticism](#). [Chinese human rights defenders](#) have documented hundreds of cases of ordinary 'netizens' being detained, accused of spreading 'rumours'.

Beijing's weaknesses prompt calls for freedom of speech

After Li's death – which sparked significant anger against and mistrust in the Chinese government, prompting [calls](#) for freedom of speech in China, [which is at the bottom of the Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index](#)² – the propaganda department of the CCP took [control](#) of the coronavirus narrative. Some 300 media workers were sent to Wuhan to steer public opinion in favour of the CCP. According to official Chinese [statistics](#), new COVID-19 infections are now mainly imported, and China has 'defeated' the virus. Meanwhile, Chinese citizens are using Morse code, QR codes, ancient Chinese symbols and emojis to circumvent social media [censorship](#). At the same time, Beijing has expelled American journalists from renowned US media outlets, casting the move as a retaliation against the US decision to reduce the number of Chinese journalists in the United States of America (USA).

An increasingly aggressive battle of narratives

The CCP's efforts to restore Beijing's image both [at home](#) and abroad include attempts to export the blame for the virus via a wave of [conspiracy theories](#). Peddled by official, verified, Chinese government Twitter accounts (despite this platform being banned in China), Chinese embassies and pro-CCP media outlets, one such story alleges that the virus originated from a US military lab (echoing narratives spread by pro-Kremlin disinformants and alt-right US [conspiracy theorists](#)). Tweeted by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Zhao Lijian](#) on 12 March 2020 – adding 'US owe us an explanation!' – and amplified by official Chinese state media, it prompted the US State Department to summon China's ambassador in Washington. Russian state broadcaster Sputnik, has spread similar stories, including through its [Arab language service](#). Another theory, aired by the state-sponsored China Global Television Network CGTN (run by the national media organisation of

China, which is controlled by the Publicity Department of the CCP), [suggested](#) that the virus was circulating in Italy in November 2019, 'before people were aware of the outbreak in China'. Experts say the increasingly [aggressive](#) campaigns – in line with a recent [shift](#) towards Chinese diplomats' more [confrontational](#) conduct in seeking to protect Beijing's image abroad – is inspired by Moscow's tactics. The Kremlin is [known](#) to spread multiple conflicting conspiracy theories to confuse audiences, distract from facts and undermine trust in democratic institutions and mainstream media.

From conspiracy theories to 'coronavirus diplomacy'

The CCP's campaign is attempting to [shift the focus](#) and blame away from China as the origin of the new coronavirus – distracting from its systemic failures – to position itself as a responsible global health [leader](#). After a number of EU countries sent help to China during the Wuhan outbreak, Europe is currently preoccupied with the crisis in their own countries. Against this backdrop, as well as Washington's [disorganised response](#),³ which has diverted from the leading role it traditionally plays during international crises, such as the 2014 Ebola crisis, Beijing has launched a global [aid offensive](#), providing expertise, test kits and other essential medical equipment. The latter is sent either directly from the Chinese government or from big Chinese companies such as the Jack Ma Foundation, the Alibaba Foundation and [Huawei](#). China has not only beefed up its own production of essential equipment while restricting exports, but also sourced equipment abroad. On 25 March 2020, The Australian Medical Association called for the country to protect its supplies of facemasks and other protective equipment. That call followed [reports](#) that a Chinese government-backed company based in Sydney had been instructed by Beijing to source bulk supplies of essential medical items such as surgical masks, thermometers and gloves, with the aim of shipping it to China during the Wuhan outbreak. A whistleblower told [Australian media](#) that this was a global effort. After official data suggested that the outbreak was contained in China, equipment was shipped to the [USA](#), South America, Africa, Europe (including Serbia, [Belgium](#), Italy, [Spain](#), Germany and Denmark), accompanied by carefully [framed](#) positive media reports. However, some analysts caution that the Chinese 'coronavirus diplomacy', which has received much political and media attention, sparking [catchy headlines](#), is part of an effort to [whitewash](#) Beijing's responsibility for delaying the reaction to the outbreak and thus triggering a global pandemic.

From Russia with love? The Kremlin's coronavirus narratives

The aforementioned politics of distraction could become a welcome tool for the Kremlin as the coronavirus-related health crisis in Russia evolves. For a long time, Russian official data appeared to show a relatively low rate of infections and fatalities compared to other countries. Amid [reports](#) of wealthy Russians purchasing their own ventilators, 59 % of Russian respondents to a public opinion poll, [published](#) by independent Russian pollster Levada Center on 26 March 2020, indicated they do not believe the officially reported numbers. However, 38 % said they trust the authorities' information. A Russian health [expert](#) has claimed that Russia knows what medicine works, has sufficient supply and would be happy to share it with 'brotherly' Bulgaria (this medicine turned out to be an [antimalarial drug](#) created in the USA to replace chloroquine). The same expert also claimed that Russia had a vaccine that it could share with the world if the World Health Organization were to make a request. However, Russia has nevertheless received [assistance](#) from China, reciprocating [Russain aid](#) to Wuhan.

Managing narratives to pre-empt domestic Russian criticism?

Moscow sent a military convoy to Italy with equipment and 100 experts in an aid package dubbed '[from Russia with love](#)' on 22 March 2020. However, Italian [media reports](#) said most of the experts were bio and chemical war specialists, whose role in Italy is unclear, and cited high-level political sources saying that around 80 % of the Russian supplies are 'useless', calling the offensive a 'pretext' and accusing President Vladimir Putin of exploiting geopolitical and diplomatic opportunities.

Experts [assess](#) that the Kremlin's current information campaign claiming that the EU is unable to cope and is falling apart, aims both at convincing EU audiences that they cannot trust their own health systems and leaders and at signalling to Russian audiences – ahead of a now postponed [vote](#) on major constitutional changes that could allow him to remain in power until 2036 – that Putin's system works better than liberal democracies. Moreover, such managed narratives could also serve to pre-empt domestic criticism of the official Russian response, which [some say](#) has been too slow. Russian [state media](#) had previously claimed that the coronavirus only affects Asian people (in addition to the expected potpourri of conspiracy theories blaming 'the elites', Bill Gates, George Soros, etc.). Pro-Kremlin outlets publish stories about EU Member States' struggle against the outbreak in several languages, highlighting the aid from Russia, China and Cuba and the closure of the Schengen area.

Potential benefits?

In a 30 March 2020 phone conversation with US President Donald Trump, Putin offered Russian aid to alleviate the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. The next day, Russian media [reported](#) that a Russian military transport plane loaded with medical equipment was en route to Washington. A US intelligence source [expects](#) that Beijing and Moscow will attempt to undermine US strategic partnerships and alliances 'by providing essential medical equipment, PPE [personal protective equipment], and tests to countries with underdeveloped or overwhelmed medical systems, while pointing out that the United States is unable to respond due to their own incompetence and inability to handle a pandemic'. Sending the message that authoritarian nationalism is the most viable answer to the pandemic, nurturing and catering to the public's [preference](#) for security over freedom.

President Putin also [asked](#) for a moratorium on sanctions as a 'matter of life and death' during the global coronavirus outbreak, in a G20 conference call on 26 March 2020. On 30 March 2020, President Trump said that he [expects](#) Putin to request the lifting of US sanctions during an upcoming phone call. Meanwhile, in an [open letter](#) of 2 April 2020, Andrius Kubilius, MEP, Chair of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, and other Members of the European Parliament warned Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, HR/VP Josep Borrell and Commissioner for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, against revising sanctions on Russia over its actions in Ukraine, including its illegal annexation of Crimea.

Serbia's President plays 'China card'

Internal criticism of the EU's response is being used by third-party actors to challenge the EU's position as a global leader for democracy and multilateralism, instead promoting their own system as the best solution in times of crisis. For example, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic [played the China card](#) on 22 March 2020, kissing the Chinese flag and praising China for its medical assistance and Chinese President Xi Jinping for being a 'true friend and a brother of the Serbian people', whilst calling European solidarity a 'fairytale' and accusing the Union of hypocrisy. Vucic's performance was immediately disseminated by Chinese state media outlets, such as [CGTN](#), targeting Western audiences. It sent the [message](#) that European democracy is weak, while (Chinese [high-tech](#)) authoritarianism provides answers. Vucic's Serbia has been backsliding on democracy and human rights in recent years and is Europe's fourth-biggest recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment. Vucic did not mention that Serbia can benefit from the EU's March 2020 stockpile of medical equipment, that the EU's €93 million aid package for Serbia includes €15 million for medical equipment, or that the EU has played a [key role](#) in modernising Serbia's health sector over the past 20 years. The EU has donated €200 million and loaned €250 million to Serbia, equipped hospitals and provided over 250 emergency medical vehicles, including 122 with ventilators.

Role of the European Union and the European Parliament

These influence operations, endorsed by some European proxies, lead some experts to warn of the potential consequences, asking how it will shape the common EU position on the choice of 5G suppliers, or future [Chinese](#) or Russian investments in the Union [after the corona crisis](#), if governments or populations in some Member States feel morally indebted.

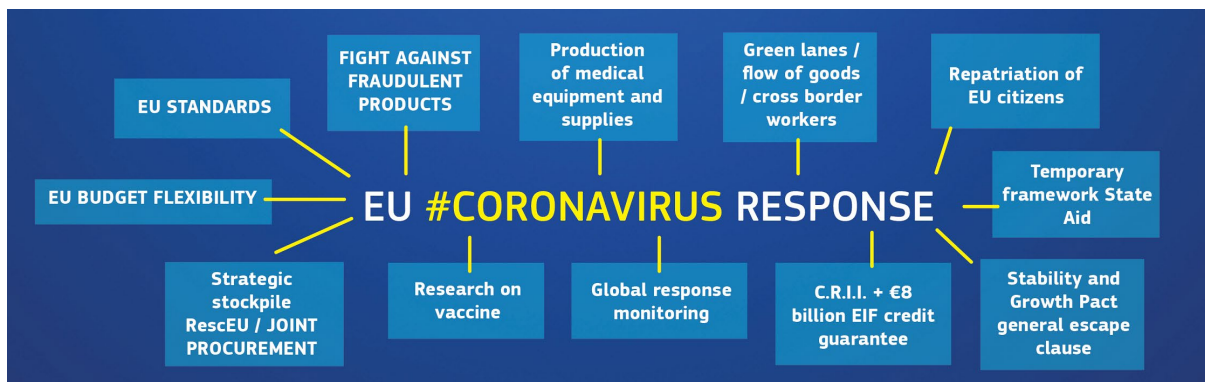
EU Vice President/High Representative Joseph Borrell [addressed](#) the ongoing 'battle of narratives' on 23 March 2020, saying that 'we must be aware there is a geopolitical component, including a struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity'. He specified that 'China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the USA, it is a responsible and reliable partner'. Borrell's statement prompted Huawei to [scale down](#) its European mask donations, to avoid becoming associated with geopolitical tensions.

At the same time, the European Commission issued [guidelines](#) on 25 March, to ensure a strong EU-wide approach to foreign investment screening amid the public health crisis and related economic vulnerability. This move aims to preserve EU companies and critical assets in areas such as health, medical research, biotechnology and infrastructures that are key for security and public order.⁴

Internal criticism often ignores EU action

The EU does not have competence in the health area, but has nevertheless been accused of failing to respond adequately to the crisis. Internal [criticism](#) has often ignored EU [measures](#) such as repatriation of, so far, more than 12 000 EU citizens abroad (including from [Wuhan](#)), support for research on vaccines, diagnostics and treatment of COVID-19, the most flexible State aid rules ever introduced to save jobs and companies, ensuring supply of medical equipment in joint [procurement](#), amongst other actions. In addition, severely ill patients from France and Italy have received [treatment](#) in Germany. Several [EU countries](#) (including Austria, France and Germany), have sent facemasks to Italy. France and Germany alone have donated more masks to Italy than China.

Since February 2020, the EU has launched a string of wide-reaching [measures](#) to alleviate the crisis, including in its neighbourhood.



Source: [European Commission](#).

European Parliament adopts three urgent proposals

At an extraordinary plenary session held on 26 March 2020, Members of the European Parliament called for strong EU solidarity to help citizens. As part of the EU's joint response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Parliament adopted three urgent [proposals](#) to help people and businesses amid the crisis:

- The Corona Response Investment Initiative, to channel €37 billion of available EU funds as soon as possible to citizens, regions and countries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The extension of the EU Solidarity Fund to cover public health emergencies. The measures will make up to €800 million available for European countries in 2020.

- Temporary suspension of rules on airport slots, to stop carriers from operating empty 'ghost flights' during the pandemic. The 'use it or lose it' rule will be waived until 24 October 2020.

Early assistance to China and aid to Iran

The EU reacted quickly to the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, coordinating and co-financing the [delivery](#) of emergency medical supplies through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. More than 56 tonnes of personal protective equipment (protective clothing, disinfectant and medical masks) were provided by France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Estonia, Austria, Czechia, Hungary and Slovenia and delivered to China. In turn, Beijing has shipped medical equipment to the most hard-hit EU Member States.

On 23 March 2020, the European Union announced that it will send €20 million in humanitarian aid to Iran, the worst hit country in the Middle East, and subject to US sanctions, to help the country cope with COVID-19.

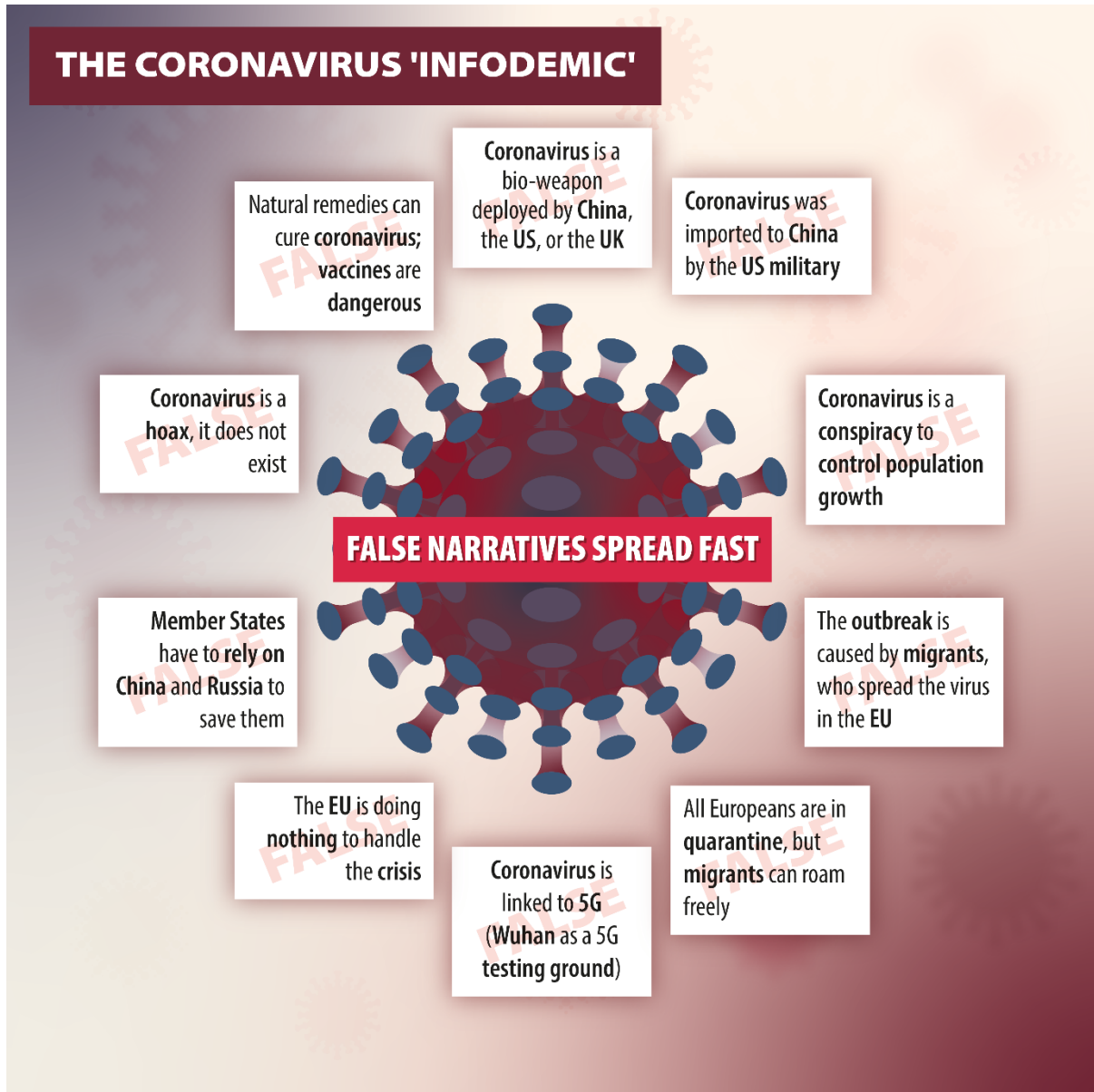
Monitoring and analysing disinformation

The East StratCom Task Force is collecting, analysing and raising awareness about manipulated news and narratives related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since January 2020, the team, working under the External Action Service, has collected over [150 examples](#) in different languages (notably Russian, English, German, Arabic and Spanish), of pro-Kremlin disinformation about COVID 19. In addition, Parliament's communication department is analysing the disinformation attempts and helping Parliament and EU authorities and other actors to warn citizens about the dangers of disinformation. Parliament is also promoting correct information about the EU's role in the fight against the pandemic, as well as trusted sources of information on health aspects and the precautionary measures to be respected.

Set up by Parliament's Science and Technology Options Panel, the European Science-Media Hub is collecting and publishing a regular coronavirus [update](#) providing a curated selection of the most relevant information provided by EU institutions and other European and global actors.

The Commission has launched a [webpage](#) dedicated to fighting disinformation about the coronavirus crisis, with key facts, and [another](#) providing online learning resources for teachers, educators and learners during the outbreak. Moreover, the Commission is cooperating closely with online platforms, encouraging them to promote authoritative sources, demote content that is verifiably false or misleading, and take down illegal content or content that could cause physical harm. The EU's Rapid Alert System for monitoring serious disinformation campaigns, initially created ahead of the 2019 European elections, has also been utilised in recent weeks to counter disinformation efforts regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling Member States to share knowledge on such disinformation efforts.

Figure 1 – Examples of false narratives trending on social media



Source: [EUvsDisinfo](https://www.euvsdisinfo.com/).

ENDNOTES

¹ Moreover, Taiwan, has appeared to be particularly resilient to Chinese disinformation.

² Less than 90 minutes after his death on a Friday morning, the hashtag [#IWantFreedomofSpeech](#) was trending on the popular Chinese microblogging-website Weibo, one of the biggest social media platforms in the country, with nearly two million posts. The hashtag was censored, and the posts were gone by the next morning.

³ Critics say that the leadership US President Donald Trump's [missteps](#) during the crisis have discredited liberal democracies and created a leadership vacuum.

⁴ The move followed a reported [attempt](#) by the Trump administration to obtain exclusive access to a coronavirus vaccine developed by a Germany company.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2020.

Photo credits: © metamorworks / Shutterstock.

ep@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

