



Session 2: Disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic

Janis Sarts, Director of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Riga, Latvia, opened the webinar by introducing the speakers, who shared their experiences on combatting disinformation and misinformation by raising awareness on their risks, detecting and analysing false narratives, and communicating facts and positive messages in order to counteract them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by an ‘infodemic’ that created an unprecedented situation and challenges for public institutions. The crisis has provided a fertile soil for the spread of false narratives that can be harmful to people’s health, as well as a threat to democracies.

At the question of Janis Sarts as part of an audience poll, participants answered that the country from which most of the disinformation originated was Russia in their opinion, followed by the USA and China. To the question of what the most common channels of fake news were, participants of the meeting voted “online”.

Delphine Colard, Head of European Parliament Spokesperson’s unit, Directorate-General for Communication, shared that the spread of disinformation had a risk to weaken the trust in authorities and science, which can also be a threat to people’s health.

In April, there was a large debate on this matter, specific paragraphs were adopted declaring disinformation on COVID-19 as a major health risk. A special committee was created and it was decided that the EU should be ready to fight these false narratives coming from external sources.

There was a large campaign to discredit the EU and the ability of democratic societies to respond to the crisis and deliver solidarity. It advocated that authoritarian states had dealt with the crisis better.

While a quick fix of banning all false narratives might seem attractive, there are various elements to consider when fighting disinformation:

- Disinformation touches very core fundamental values, such as the freedom of speech, therefore one has to be very careful when counteracting it.

- There is a difference between dis- and misinformation, the first being intentionally spread false narratives, while the second can be created innocently.
- Emotions play a very strong part during the pandemic. Most of the disinformation is shared innocently by people who really just want to help their friends and family.

Delphine Colard shared that to tackle the issue, the European Parliament placed emphasis on raising awareness on media literacy and the risks of disinformation and misinformation. They provided a lot of content, press seminars, materials for teachers. They placed a very strong emphasis on the media, supporting fact checkers and investigative journalists.

The second strand was positive communication and spreading the facts, which is key in tackling disinformation. They worked jointly with the Commission and the EEAS to detect narratives, used Rapid Alert System to alert and inform Member States.

Selecting target groups is a challenge as well, as some of the most likely spreaders of disinformation turn a deaf ear to anything that comes from official sources. The European Parliament targeted pro-European citizens with their communication, encouraging them to talk about it to friends and spread the positive messages via a ground approach. They placed a focus on the very critical younger generation as well, cooperated with influencers on social media and supported journalists.

Raimonda Miglinaite, Information and Communication Officer, European External Action Service (EEAS), shared that while the COVID-19 infodemic tested all its abilities and vulnerabilities, the EU faced this unprecedented situation with certain experience and procedures already in place, allowing it to tackle this challenge successfully.

The COVID-19 infodemic exploits vulnerabilities in healthcare and in our own cognition as well, the pandemic provided a fertile soil for the spread of disinformation. There was a gap of knowledge that was exploited by disinformation actors, among them foreign actors like Russia and China that used this crisis to undermine trust in authorities in order to improve their international image.

Raimonda Miglinaite shared that the EEAS has task forces for different external countries. She shared that the first example of COVID-19-related disinformation came from pro-Kremlin Sputnik in January. It was a conspiracy theory that the virus was created in the US as a biological weapon.

The second large theme of disinformation detected was on the EU failing to respond to the crisis, along with gloomy messages of upcoming collapse of EU, implying that democracies are not able to cope with such a crisis, while autocratic systems are.

The most alarming theme was the health-related disinformation, recommending bogus miracle cures to people or implying that coronavirus is a hoax and governments are using it to increase their power over citizens.

In April, a global activist network of EEAS sampled disinformation on social media and found that it was shared 1.7 million times. However, the EU already had certain experience in tackling disinformation from 2015, when the East StratCom Task Force was created to tackle Russia's ongoing disinformation campaign with a focus on the EU's Eastern neighbourhood.

The Task Force works in three main strands:

1. Communicating EU policies in the Eastern countries,
2. Strengthening media environment,

3. Exposing and analysing pro-Kremlin disinformation, making them publicly available in their database.

This, and the plan against disinformation adopted in 2018 was very useful for the EEAS when the pandemic hit. The Rapid Alert System (RAS) was created to exchange information among the Member States.

To tackle disinformation, the EEAS focused on monitoring disinformation, published four reports, created a dedicated section on their website to COVID-19, among other actions. They also ran awareness raising campaigns, encouraging people to think before they share content online.