



Call for Papers "Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?"

**THE EU AS THE GREAT INFLUENCER. FIGHTING DISINFORMATION DURING
THE COVID-19 INFODEMIA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has also generated an infodemic crisis as the world is being overwhelmed by information related to this new disease. It came upon an already battle scarred informational sector, affected by disinformation and fake news. The European Union was in a favourable position to counter it as it had already started a process of fighting disinformation just a couple of years ago. Yet the complexity of challenges ahead were sometimes hard to imagine. If the EU as a whole had some setbacks, the situation was maybe worse in some of the new Member States, many of them still new democracies. As the case of Romania proved, alongside the EU wide disinformation themes, some local ones were used (mistrust in the medical system and the authorities, etc.) in this battle. Although the situation is not dire yet, it requires a lot of focus and cooperation and a “whole-of-society approach” in order to counter the propaganda and disinformation.

Short bio

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The opinions expressed are those of the author only and should not be considered as representative of any organization she is affiliated to.



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1. Introduction. Methodological clarifications.

For years now the European Union has been gradually paying more attention to *the use of strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it* while using the same tool in order to *promote EU policies coherently and effectively*, internally as well as externally. This process requires the provision of tailored communications to specific regions, including access to information in local languages which has effects well beyond its borders (EP Resolution, 2016/2030 (INI)). Often the external impact of its strategic communication is much higher than expected and promotes the EU as a global actor, being an example on how a “soft power” can make even the greatest actors listen to its voice. In a world dominated by global competition and affected by the so-called “coronationalism” (Bouckaert, 2020) provoked by the pandemic, the EU needs to be reminded of the importance of the **resilience of Member States societies** in order to have an impact outside its borders.

In the past years the EU has been a target of the *Russian* as well as of *ISIL/Daesh’s disinformation and propaganda warfare*. These actions can be seen as **manifestations of a “sharp power”**, an in-between “hard” and “soft” power where authoritarian actors (such as **Russia and China**) “are surely seeking to manipulate their target audiences by **distorting the information** that reaches them.” (Walker & Ludwig, 2017a).

More recently following the COVID-19 pandemic **the EU has seen a rise of disinformation related to the outbreak** which convinced it to take more drastic measures, the actions taken for this being both supported by and also in contradiction with third countries actors. The purpose of this paper would thus be to **provide an overview of the EU responses to disinformation inside and outside the EU and the challenges it will confront in the future**.

The first part of the paper would have a *theoretical approach* (brief literature review, clarification of the key definitions to be used, and analyse the EU framework related to it). For the purposes of this research paper, I shall focus on four approaches in place: (1) *self-regulation*; (2) *co-regulation* (i.e. cooperation framework between EU-level and national-level authorities and other stakeholders); (3) *direct regulation* and (4) *audience-centred solutions* (i.e. fact-checking) (Durach, Bârgăoanu & Nastasiu, 2020, p. 8).

The paper would then become focused on **case studies / examples to show how the EU and some Member States (e.g. Romania) are fighting disinformation and using strategic communication** before but mostly during the current COVID-19 pandemic / infodemia.

The paper would end on a **very practical note** in order to present the perspectives and constraints of such policy while providing **possible policy recommendations regarding future evolutions**.

In order to reach the above mentioned objectives the paper would be the result of a **qualitative research methodology** based upon *desk - research and analysis of the available documents* from primary sources.

Fighting disinformation has become at the end of the day a security necessity and by the actions it takes **the EU can influence** the region and world we are living in and thus create a space where all the major democratic players need to work and collaborate in order to bring stability and coherence to the lives of ordinary citizens.



2. Key concepts. The general context.

Any discussion on the topic of disinformation must start from a clear definition, meant to ensure that all the parties involved understand the same thing. Given the references to the European Union of this document the concept of “*disinformation*” would have the following meaning: “Disinformation is understood as 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” (Action Plan against Disinformation, 2018).

Fighting fake news and disinformation is therefore something that the European Union was already undergoing in the last years as mentioned in the Introduction section of this paper. The cornerstone of this fight was based at the time on the *Action Plan Against disinformation* from 5 December 2018, which establishes an important link between the freedom of expression, as a core European value, and the need of the citizens to be correctly informed in order to form their own opinion. From the beginning this is the dialectical method approach that generates the tension between the need for verifiable information - and one could say the right of the other to have its own opinion or to be wrong, by other people's standards. It originates in a 2015 decision of the European Council meant to address the Russian backed disinformation campaigns when the East StratCom Task Force was created (EastStratCom Task Force, 2020). It had a holistic approach as it put into contact both public authorities, like was the case before, but also required “efforts to support education and media literacy, journalism, fact-checkers, researchers, and the civil society as a whole.” (Action Plan against Disinformation, 2018).

Another important aspect was the continuous promotion of the *Code of Practice on Disinformation* agreed earlier in 2018, which is one of world's first self-regulatory document which sets as an objective to address the spread of disinformation and fake news and presents the best practices in that field of its main signatories – up to 16 signatories as of June 2020, amidst which Facebook, Google, Mozilla, Twitter, Microsoft and TikTok (Code of Practice on Disinformation, 2020)

It was followed by the operationalization of the Rapid Alert System (RAS) in March 2019 meant to “facilitate the sharing of insights related to disinformation campaigns and coordinate responses. The RAS is based on open-source information and will also draw upon insights from academia, fact-checkers, online platforms and international partners.” (Rapid Alert System, 2019)

Yet this ecosystem is not without flaws as a series of recent studies have shown that there are a series of shortcomings as regards the public conversation on disinformation in these stages that affect the way in which disinformation is fought. One being “the focus is on ad hoc / stand-alone disinformation instances (e.g. Russia's disinformation campaigns) or contexts (e.g. elections) at the expense of identifying big trends, especially related to the digital behaviour and the automated simulation of engagement” and the latter “too much responsibility is placed on journalism/mainstream media, and educating the public to recognize disinformation, whereas the locus of the current disinformation disorder lies in the functioning of the new digital ecosystem (which is platform, algorithm, big-data driven and, increasingly reliant on machine learning and Artificial Intelligence)” (Durach, Bărgăoanu & Nastasiu, 2020, p. 6). That being said the main interventions that are at the disposition of the EU as a whole are: 1) self-regulation (“actions undertaken on a voluntary basis by the digital platforms themselves”); 2) co-regulation approach (“focusing on building a cooperation framework between EU-level and national-level authorities, the internet platform companies, media organizations, researchers, and other stakeholders”); 3)



direct regulation against disinformation (“hard legal measures”) and 4) audience-centred solutions (fact-checking and media literacy initiatives contribute to building the citizens’ resilience to disinformation”) (Durach, Bârgăoanu & Nastasiu, 2020, p. 8).

It is against this background that the COVID-19 pandemic reached a soft spot and generated, besides the medical problems, another problem, this time a communicational one. On 24 January 2020, the first European case was reported in France followed on 28 January 2020 by Germany, related to persons who had travelled to China. On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared Covid-19 a “global pandemic” and by 25 March 2020 all EU countries were affected (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020)

As the virus spread throughout the European Union it “demonstrated how difficult European cooperation can be, especially in policy areas where the EU has only a legal competence to support member states.” In the first stage Europe was largely absent and the idea of solidarity remained only a text book ideal “as all member states were initially inward-looking in their reactions; they unilaterally closed borders and focused on crisis management at home.” Yet, step by step, the need for coordinated crisis management emerged, both on the financial side, the freedom of movement aspects and so on. However there was “a general perception that the EU’s response has been too little, too late” and that “the initial perception that third countries (mainly Russia and China) were more supportive than the EU and its member states continues to prevail, predominantly in Italy and Greece.” (Russack & Blockmans, 2020). This generated a breach in the public perception with often damaging effects as shown later on.

The fact that the medical emergency was not the only problem became obvious when the World Health Organization felt the need to introduce in its Situation Reports the mention of the “infomedia” from as early as February 2020. WHO spoke about infodemics and why we should tackle them. This new pandemic “was accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ - an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.” (WHO, Situation Report – 13, 2020)

Infodemics are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. “Infodemics can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumors during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people.” (WHO, Situation Report – 45, 2020)

It is worth noticing that the WHO Situation Report also mentions distinctively the case of misinformation, an issue that was not tackled by the European Union in its strategies as it focused mostly on fighting disinformation and fake news. There are also several definitions on what misinformation is and the meaning that I would use for this research is that of a “false and often harmful information, which is not shared with malicious intent.” (Tanner, 2020).

Several types of mis- and disinformation have been identified such as: satire or parody; misleading content; imposter content; fabricated content; false connection; false context and manipulated content. Each of that have various motivations, a list of these ‘Ps’ being for instance: poor journalism; to parody; to provoke or to “punk”; passion; partisanship; profit; political influence and propaganda (Wardle, 2017)

Why does it matter? It matters because in the case of a pandemic, the information environment has a critical impact as “the information spreading can strongly influence people’s behaviour and alter the effectiveness of the countermeasures deployed by governments.” (Cinelli et al., 2020).



Given the limited scope of this paper I would only present one example of mismanagement of information disclosure that happened in Italy. As the quarantine plans for Northern Italy were leaked to the media, a massive exodus of the population towards Southern Italy took place. It was an important exodus, often disorganized that caught the authorities by surprise. The leak of the quarantine generated only panic, as it was an uncontrolled disclosure that was estimated to have a negative effect. As Roberto Burioni, a professor of microbiology and virology at Milan's Vita-Salute San Raffaele University stated in a press article: “What happened with the news leak has caused many people to try to escape, causing the opposite effect of what the decree is trying to achieve. [...] Unfortunately some of those who fled will be infected with the disease.” (Baker, 2020)

3. The EU response to the infodemics

Based on its past experiences with fighting disinformation, the European Union, after a rather modicum beginning when the COVID-19 reached the EU Member States started to address the question of disinformation and how to fight it. The “rallying cry” was given on 26 March 2020 when a Joint statement of the Members of the European Council mentioned that “We will resolutely counter disinformation with transparent, timely and fact-based communication on what we are doing and thus reinforce the resilience of our societies. The Commission and the High Representative will be fully involved and will report on our joint efforts to the Council.” (Joint Statement, 2020)

The key document that regulates the EU fight against disinformation in the context of the Covid-19 is the Joint Communication of the European Commission *Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right* of 10 June 2020 which proposes a series of concrete actions to be taken by the European Commission and the High Representative in order to fight the infodemics. The main challenge is to act against disinformation and misinformation while respecting the freedom of expression and the fundamental rights and democratic values. It is a collaborative, all-encompassing document that underlines the need for a “whole-of-society approach”: “calls for action through the EU’s existing tools, as well as with Member States’ competent authorities, civil society, social media platforms and international cooperation, enhancing citizens’ resilience.” (Joint Communication on Fighting Covid-19 Disinformation, 2020)

Given the importance of the topic, the European Commission dedicated early on a special webpage to the topic of tackling coronavirus disinformation where it puts together all the resources available as well as inventory of the actions taken, of the results obtained and of all the relevant documents (Tackling coronavirus disinformation, 2020 and Fighting disinformation, 2020).



Table 1 Non-exhaustive list of examples that illustrates the complexity of the situation experienced during the COVID-19 crisis and possible solutions (Joint Communication, 2020)

Example	Not Illegal / Illegal	Actors to be involved
Information circulating includes dangerous hoaxes and misleading healthcare information, with false claims (such as ‘it does not help to wash your hands’ or ‘the Coronavirus is only a danger to the elderly’)	Not Illegal	public authorities, media, journalists, online platforms, fact-checkers and civil society to make available and easily visible authoritative health-related content. to increase citizens’ ability to recognise and react to such disinformation
	Illegal	the competent authorities in line with applicable legal norms.
Conspiracy theories that may endanger human health, harm the cohesion of our societies and may lead to public violence and create social unrest (for example conspiracies and myths about 5G installations spreading COVID-19 and leading to attacks on masts, or about a particular ethnic or religious group being at the origin of the spread of COVID-19, such as the worrying rise in COVID-19 related anti-Semitic content)	Not Illegal	competent authorities, media, journalists, fact-checkers, civil society and online platforms, and include for example prompt debunking, demotion, possible removal or action against accounts.
hate speech (for example as a result of disinformation about a particular ethnic or religious group being blamed for the spread of COVID-19, such as the worrying rise in COVID-19 related racist and xenophobic content)	Illegal	subject to the rules on taking down illegal content by platforms and authorities and to action by competent authorities under the criminal laws of the Member States
Consumer fraud (for example selling of ‘miracle products’ with unsupported health claims)	Illegal	consumer protection authorities and online platforms
Cybercrime (such as hacking/phishing using COVID-19 related links to spread malware)	Illegal	direct action by law enforcement authorities as well as citizen awareness-raising campaigns
Foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 in the EU, its neighbourhood and globally, seeking to undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarisation, and improve their own image in the COVID-19 context.	Not Illegal / Illegal	Depending on the context



As mentioned earlier in the document, the question of external influences in the way in which the COVID-19 story is narrated in the EU Member States has raised the interest of third party states, mostly Russia (see Annex 1) and China (see Annex 2). Russia has been a long-time “trespasser” while China may be defined as the “new child in the block” as regards disinformation. Both countries act in what can be described at best as very assertive actors, being categorized by some scholars as “sharp powers” who try to influence the democratic world. They do not want necessarily to conduct a “charm offensive” but their “authoritarian influence is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centres on distraction and manipulation.” They want to sow discontent and use the internal tensions in vulnerable democracies to promote their agenda (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b)

Their early influence in the topic of COVID-19 was obvious ever since January 2020 when, for pro-Kremlin media, “the coronavirus is [was] beginning to look like a disinformation gold-mine” as “a mysterious disease that jumped the species barrier from animals to humans with potentially lethal consequences ticks all the “fit-for-conspiracy” boxes: the subject is alarming, highly complex and so far entails more questions than answers.” (EUvsDiSiNFO, January 2020).

As the pandemic expanded throughout the EU Member States and the world, the subject caught the attention of the specialized bodies of the EU and, as early as of March 2020, an EEAS Special Report was published, titled: “Disinformation on the Coronavirus – a Short Assessment of the Information Environment.” This initial Report counted over 110 corona-related disinformation cases, linked to pro-Kremlin media meant to “to amplify divisions, sow distrust and chaos, and exacerbate crisis situations and issues of public concern.” (EEAS Special Report, March 2020)

The trend has continued and one of the publicly available EEAS Special Report of May 2020 mentioned approximately 500 examples of COVID-19-related pro-Kremlin disinformation. One can already identify several communication lines specific to each country of interest: “pro-Kremlin sources, are still involved in spreading disinformation, including by amplifying existing conspiracy theories, which link the COVID-19 pandemic to biological warfare, 5G technology and fuel anti-vaccination sentiment” while China has a more soft approach: “the efforts of state actors like China to deflect blame, to use the pandemic to promote their own governmental system and enhance their image abroad continues”. The Report underlines the efforts of the independent media and fact-checkers and of social media companies’ efforts to detect and counter misinformation and disinformation. (EEAS Special Report, May 2020)

The latest publicly available EEAS SPECIAL REPORT UPDATE of December 2020 mentioned that “[...] COVID-19 related online mis- and disinformation decreased and shifted focus towards vaccines [...]” and that “State actors like China and Russia are maximising the effect of the so-called “vaccine diplomacy” in their communication efforts, most likely with the intent to enhance their reputation and economic position abroad. They are leveraging diplomatic channels, state-controlled media and networks of supportive and alternative media outlets and social media to distribute their messages.” (EEAS Special Report update, December 2020)



4. Member States efforts. Case study: Romania

As Romania faced its first Coronavirus cases in the spring of 2020, besides the medical emergency, the need for a strong voice to manage the communication in times of crisis became obvious. Thus the Romanian authorities decided to create a Strategic Communication Group coordinated by the Emergency Situations Department that would assemble representatives from all the institutions with responsibilities in the area (National Committee for Emergency Special Situations, 24.02.2020).

From the beginning, it had a rather controversial structure. One of the main questions that surrounded it was about its members, often shrouded in confidentiality, under the pretext of respecting the GDPR rules. The Group lacked a proper interface and a public figure that would assume the role of “spokesperson” of the Group.

However, despite these setbacks, the Group started early on to try to regulate the online sector, often through direct actions. For instance on 18 March 2020, the first website closed based on the arguments that it had constantly published fake news in order to misinform and create panic (Press Statement, 18 March 2020). The case was followed days later by a similar decision. Moreover, an additional argument brought by the Group in support of its decision was that it was a website originating from outside Romania with no known representatives. Add to this, the group obtained the first deletion of an article which proved to be promoting fake news (Press Statement, 25 March 2020)

One of the important elements of regulation that this Group brought to the Romanian internet landscape is that it forces a series of websites to have a public identity, with the publication of the contact details and of the name of the person/persons who manage the website. (Press Statement, 30 April 2020)

The situation in Romania is in many ways similar to that from other Member States. An important percentage of the population believes in conspiracy theories. For instance a survey published in April 2020 showed that approx. 40% of the respondents believed the Coronavirus “is a biological weapon built by the USA to dominate the world”. The percentage varies in accordance with the level of education, genre and residence place yet it is above 30% in all the cases. As regards the trust in institutions approx. 78% of the respondents have a high level of trust in the persons from the medical system, followed by the trust in WHO (approx.. 74%) and the Romanian government’s Department for Emergency Situations (approx. 69%), who’s head Raed Arafat is one of Romania's top civil servants involved in the response to the pandemic. A high level of trust was also placed in the European institutions (approx. 45%) much higher than for instance the trust placed in the Romanian Government (approx. 33%). The research has shown an increased media consumption as well as the fact that the trust in institutions is reduced by the increase of the volume of fake news. (Eurocomunic@re, 2020).

As regards the disinformation topics, which circulated in the Romanian media, they were similar to those from other European areas, with some local specificities, such as the topics related to the closure of churches, in order to uphold a “new age” agenda. They came up on an already fertile ground of mistrust in the authorities, in governance, in an area dominated by anti-institutional ethos and fight with the authorities. (Bârgăonu, 2020)

There is a connection, at least partial, in accordance to some Romanian officials between the spike



in the coronavirus cases and disinformation. According to Raed Arafat as cited by Roșca (2020) in Romania “We have had several types of disinformation campaigns [...] These campaigns range from online articles and social media posts, to attacking any person, including officials who publicly wrote any information to warn the population about what to do [...] We also had very well-financed campaigns from some who wanted to appear publicly to defy our recommendations, targeting young people to convince them to stop wearing masks. [...] Some people appeared in the mass-media with opinions that lacked scientific basis, including doctors who are not specialized in COVID-related fields, arguing against preventive measures.” (Roșca, 2020). A good example of a disinformation case is related to the question of wearing masks and their “supposed” negative effects (see Annex 3).

Later on a series of local experts spoke about the three main vulnerabilities to disinformation from the local scene that added a local touch: the mistrust in the medical sector; the mistrust in authorities and the local Church, as there is a dispute between the support of the Church and the increased laical status of the Romanian state. The disinformation and misinformation got a wider audience as they are exploiting the emotions, especially the negative ones (Popescu, 2020).

At the time when this material is written (November – December 2020) the response of the Romanian authorities is a mixed one, as the measures taken throughout 2020 have minimised the risks generated by disinformation, while there are still large portions of the populations who tend more to trust rumours and conspiracy theories rather than scientific facts. Some sources of disinformation originated outside Romania’s borders but the disinformation is not solely foreign but also domestic. For instance according to Moga, as cited by Chyzhova (2020), “solely pointing at Russia for the current disinformation campaigns, which have hit Romania, would be too simplistic since domestic entities, with no clear links to the Russian Federation, might also be interested in distributing misinformation and alternative narratives for similar purposes: to weaken trust in institutions and sow panic.” (Chyzhova, 2020)

5. Conclusions and policy recommendations

As the infomedia is raging one across the European Union, a series of preliminary conclusions and recommendations can be drawn, based upon the above mentioned examples. Thus some policy recommendations can be drawn:

A) The Member States and the European Union must realize that fighting disinformation / misinformation is a whole-of-society effort, but this effort is not one-size-fits-all, but rather a customized one.

When we are dealing with these processes we must have in mind the different peculiarities of each of the actors involved. Although the greater good is the same, each of the actors involved (scientists, social activists, journalists, online platforms, etc.) have their own specificities and needs. We must ensure that each is involved in accordance with its abilities and competences and that they do not overlap nor have contradictory approaches. In order to have an effective response we must have a comprehensive dialogue and coordination at all the levels.

B) Debunking works and needs to be done professionally by the EU and its Member States

We need to have a coordinated EU / national level expert debunk, evidence based and not to be



left in the hands of the “amateurs”.

C) The official communicators of the EU and its Member States must use a reason based approach that is complemented by an appeal to emotions is maybe the right mixture.

As disinformation and fake news seem to thrive on negative emotions, adopting an attitude of “I told you so” or “I am an expert and I know better” is not recommended. Simply saying that the opposite positions are mere “propaganda” does not help, it reduces the public debates and even legitimates the disinformation as its authors can proclaim censorship.

D) Transparency as a tool at EU and Member States level.

The EU and its Member States must adopt a coherent legislation that would impose a transparent ownership of the websites and profiles that promote various points of view. Having a transparent financing also helps. Who pays the Facebook advertising of a news or a certain website may prove a good step in the right direction.

E) EU must support professional and scientific journalism and fact-checkers.

Journalism needs to be reshuffled and the value of expertise must increase. We need to trust our journalists as we must realize that journalists with a solid academic background are key in fighting disinformation. Also we need to revitalize the scientific journals and the scientific press as a way to promote to the general audience sound scientific arguments. Also efforts should be done to support small media outlets and a more responsible digital communication sphere.

F) The EU and its Member States must provide financial support to mass-media

Providing financial support in time of crisis to media outlets might be a good way to ensure that the market is not overwhelmed by rather untested new information sources.

G) The EU and the Member states must address their perceived weaknesses.

Often the disinformation uses the weaknesses of the EU and its Member States to build upon. These must not be left unchecked and if they are correctly identified they must be corrected. If you ignore these critics you can only fuel the dissent.

H) The EU must be more harmonized and inclusive.

According to Romanian experts, such as Radu Magdin (2020) the EU and its Member States must “harmonize, at the level of the European Council, the central narratives that the heads of state and government will use in their respective countries, with regard to the European dimension versus the national one. [...]”. Also the “EU Institutions should be more inclusive with the topics regarded as being of strategic concern for all its Member States [...]” (Magdin, 2020)

In the end the fight against dis- misinformation is a fight that also must be fought at the individual level. We must all strive to do our best, try not to spread harmful rumours, and be more informed about what is happening, as disinformation is here to stay and would not disappear easily.



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Annex 1. Example of disinformation case related to Russia.

Disinfo: The reasons for the West's criticism of Sputnik V vaccine are political (EUvsDisinfo, 2020)

Summary	Disproof
<p>“The Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine is the first of its kind to be registered. Until now, the West has tried to criticise the development of Russian scientists, accusing them of haste. The reasons for such statements were political.”</p>	<p>“This is part of a pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign on the Russian coronavirus vaccine called “Sputnik V”, which was met with scepticism and criticism, even by Russian specialists.</p> <p>Reservations about the Russian Sputnik V vaccine are caused by the fact that Russia didn't complete the large trials which WHO insists that a vaccine must undergo involving thorough testing to examine the vaccine's safety and efficacy before it is released. Rolling out an inadequately vetted vaccine could endanger the people receiving it.</p> <p>In fact, there is evidence that Russia has at all times perceived the development of a coronavirus vaccine mainly in terms of geopolitical and economic. [...]”</p>



Annex 2. Example of disinformation case related to China.

Disinfo: China is victim of propaganda as it saved its economy and the lives of its citizens (EUvsDisinfo, 2020)

Summary	Disproof
<p>“China is a communist country that is why it is a victim of propaganda in the West on the Uyghurs’ issue and its alleged imperialism.</p> <p>But reality is different, thanks to communism, China saved its economy. It is the only industrial country to have a positive growth in 2020 (+ 1.8% according to the previsions of the OECD). At the same time, it coped very well with the health crisis and didn’t let its elderly die from coronavirus.</p> <p>The West did the exact opposite, not only did it let the old people die but it also suffers an unprecedented recession.</p> <p>But instead of realising that communism is the only solution, Western countries increase the anti-Chinese propaganda that only an abominable regime is capable of such a performance.”</p>	<p>“Recurrent disinformation narrative alleging that authoritarian regimes are better at coping with coronavirus pandemic, than democracies.</p> <p>It is too early to assess the impact on the economy or health of both the health and economic crises as they are still ongoing. [...]</p> <p>The communist economic system is not necessarily the explanation for good sanitary crisis management. Experience in fighting infectious diseases offers a more convincing explanation. Moreover, in the early stages of the epidemics the repression against medical whistle-blowers in China increased the risks of a pandemic.</p> <p>On the economic side, Chinese superiority is not proved either even for RT's economists: public spending is not always well used, the environmental consequences are high as is the cost for individual freedoms.</p> <p>It is probably to early to tell, but the fact that the other successful countries in fighting Covid mentioned above, seems to indicate that economic consequences of Covid are a function of the success in repressing the epidemic: countries that have managed to protect their population’s health in the pandemic have generally also protected their economy too.”</p>



Annex 3. Example of disinformation case targeting Romania and the Republic of Moldova

Disinfo: Imposing the wearing of masks is a crime against humanity and an abuse against children (EUvsDisinfo, 2020)

Summary	Disproof
<p>“Imposing the wearing of masks, allegedly to reduce contamination with Covid 19, is a crime against humanity and an abuse against children. Breathing our exhaled air will undoubtedly create an oxygen deficiency and an influx of carbon dioxide.”</p>	<p>“It is a conspiracy theory promoted intensely since the beginning of the pandemic.</p> <p>The Stopfals.md portal talked to several doctors in Moldova who have to wear masks all day, not only during the pandemic. These specialists deny the speculation that the mask would damage the brain or respiratory organs and urge people to follow the rules of protection.</p> <p>The World Health Organization (WHO) dismantles the myth that prolonged use of medical masks causes oxygen deficiency.”</p>