

# Responding to the COVID-19 'infodemic' National counter- measures against information influence in Europe

Edited by Sophie L. Vériter, Monica Kaminska,  
Dennis Broeders, and Joachim Koops



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## **Design and methodology**

This research project investigates European responses to COVID-related disinformation, specifically the responses of France, Sweden, Germany, the United Kingdom, Serbia, and Hungary. The cases were selected to provide a variety of national perspectives from within and outside the European Union; and from countries with divergent diplomatic ties to Russia and China. The analysis in each report focuses on four areas: the state's geopolitical position (particularly towards China and Russia), its strategic communication policy, its position on the regulation of social media platforms, its experience of foreign COVID-related disinformation, and its record of 'mask diplomacy' and 'vaccine diplomacy.' The reports were prepared by country experts with local language abilities using a variety of sources, including government documents, reports, and websites; media articles; written parliamentary evidence; and social media posts.

# 1. Introduction

Sophie L. Vériter, Dennis Broeders, Monica Kaminska  
and Joachim Koops

The coronavirus pandemic has emphasised the crucial role that information flows play in safeguarding public order and the safety of individuals. With an increasingly volatile (social) media eco-system and an unprecedented climate of uncertainty, false reports and harmful campaigns have flourished, highlighting the disruptive intentions of some geopolitical actors on the global scene.<sup>1</sup>

This research project investigates how European states have responded to information influence operations related to COVID-19, particularly investigating the role of foreign sources of influence. Our objective has been to better understand the new challenges – both in practice and research – that have arisen from national experiences. The questions that guided our research project have been: How has the context of a pandemic impacted the way European states counter information influence? Which policy trends have emerged and which results have they yielded? Which issues generated divergence and/or convergence across Europe?

In the following sections of this introduction, we delve into five topics of debate that derived from our national reports on France, Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. First, we explore the international dimension of European responses to the ‘infodemic’ focusing on the UN processes in which disinformation is being discussed. Second, we examine the types of European responses countering disinformation: actor-centred, content-centred, and dissemination-focused measures. Third, we analyse the various national institutional set-ups and legal frameworks dealing with disinformation and what developments we might expect in the future. Fourth, we discuss national and European efforts to regulate online platforms, a contentious and hot topic in Europe. Fifth, we analyse the implications of counter-measures for democracy and individual rights and freedoms. Finally, we draw some conclusions on the issue of responding to information influence, before providing policy recommendations.

## *The international dimension of disinformation*

At the international level, ‘disinformation’ and information operations are increasingly seen as a political problem. European and more generally western states are however on the back foot when it comes to discussing disinformation at the United Nations (UN). As they have challenged the narrative of ‘information security’ championed by Russia and China for twenty years as a Trojan

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1 Vériter, Sophie L., Corneliu Bjola, and Joachim A. Koops (2020) “Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation: Internal and External Challenges for the European Union”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15 (4): 569-582; see also, World Health Organization (2020) *Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation* - joint statement by WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC; Council of the European Union (2020) *Council Conclusions on strengthening resilience and countering hybrid threats, including disinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic*, Brussels, 15 December.

horse for content control and human rights violations,<sup>2</sup> what language do they have to address disinformation? COVID-19 has amplified and democratized the discussion of disinformation in the UN – impacting all governments dealing with the public health crisis – but has not necessarily provided new solutions to the problem.

In foreign influence operations, the national and the international become intertwined in many ways. Influence operations are effective when target countries provide fertile ground in the sense of political and societal divisions that one can exploit with disinformation to influence opinions. As the examples in this report highlight, many western countries have proven vulnerable to external influence campaigns that exploit this weakness. In the digital realm, influence operations have been making a ‘comeback’ in recent years,<sup>3</sup> especially through interference in local and national elections and through COVID-related disinformation campaigns. To some countries, like Russia, disinformation is a relatively cheap and safe way to exercise power abroad. Other countries, like China, seem less intent on creating societal unrest but want to protect and promote their international reputation.<sup>4</sup> However, many states are analyzing the Russian playbook and have been taking notes.<sup>5</sup>

As targeted states are suffering the consequences of influence operations, they have also started to discuss the issue at the international level. Two developments are significant and reinforce each other. First, states have started addressing the issue in the UN Group of Governmental Experts (UN GGE) and the Open Ended Working Group (OEWG), the UN fora on responsible behavior in cyberspace. They do so especially indirectly through the issue of election interference,<sup>6</sup> but also directly by clearly stating the issue in the threats section of the 2021 UN GGE consensus report:

“Furthermore, the Group notes a worrying increase in States’ malicious use of ICT-enabled covert information campaigns to influence the processes, systems and overall stability of another State. These occurrences undermine trust, are potentially escalatory and can threaten international peace and security.”<sup>7</sup>

This is noteworthy because, for as long as states have been debating cyber security issues at the UN, one of the main divides has been between states wanting to address ‘information security’, i.e., the content or the ‘information sphere’ within a country, and those wanting to address ‘cyber security’, i.e., the security and resilience of the technical infrastructure. Western countries have always pushed back against the notion of information security but feel increasingly compelled to address it now that information operations have gained in traction. However, it will require caution to address this problem without infringing on fundamental rights such as free speech and

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2 Maurer, Tim (2020) “A Dose of Realism: The Contestation and Politics of Cyber Norms”, *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 12: 283–305, p. 286.

3 Rid, Thomas (2020) *Active Measures. The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. London: Profile Books; Jankowicz, Nina (2020) *How to Lose the Information War. Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict*. London: I.B. Tauris.

4 Creemers, Rogier (2020) “Chinese Disinformation: what should be done?” *Directions. Cyber Digital Europe*. 1 December.

5 Issie Lapowski (2018) “Iran’s New Facebook Trolls Are Using Russia’s Playbook”, *Wired*, 26 October; Jessica Brandt and Torrey Taussig (2020) “The Kremlin’s disinformation playbook goes to Beijing”, *Brookings blog*, 19 May.

6 Broeders, Dennis (2021) “The (im)possibilities of addressing election interference and the public core of the internet in the UN GGE and OEWG: a mid-process assessment”, *Journal of Cyber Policy*.

7 United Nations Group of Governmental Experts (2021) “Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Advancing responsible State behaviour in cyberspace in the context of international security” (advance copy), United Nations, 28 May, p. 7.

free press.<sup>8</sup> This aspect is one of the reasons why western states originally preferred to distance themselves from the concept of information security.

Furthermore, as evidenced throughout the case studies in this publication, foreign influence operations bring social media corporations into the regulatory sphere. The responsibility of social media companies for the content that is spread on their platforms is an ongoing regulatory concern, as exposed later in this introduction. Whether and to what extent platforms have editorial responsibility are difficult questions within national contexts but take on an even sharper edge in the international domain. In the negotiations of the OEWG many (autocratic) countries flagged the problem of (western) social media corporations and the spread of politically damaging information. Again, the issue of ‘information security’ intersects with a relatively recent wish of western countries to regulate social media to address disinformation and influence operations.<sup>9</sup> The trouble is that western states begin to see the need to address the problem of disinformation, and therefore content, while still resisting the language of ‘information security’ used by adversarial states to address the issue. To square the circle, they will need to connect information security with values and principles that are constitutive of democracy and freedom as a counterbalance to the instrumental use of the terminology of information security by authoritarian states.

### *New measures to counter disinformation*

The digital and borderless character of disinformation is precisely what makes it difficult to address. Whilst it is notoriously difficult to measure the effectiveness of influence and counter-influence operations,<sup>10</sup> debunking and fact-checking have proven to be clearly inefficient and sometimes counter-productive practices, as they often give more reach to problematic information.<sup>11</sup> European states have therefore expanded their policies to reflect the necessary comprehensiveness of responses. There are three broadly accepted ways of approaching counter-influence: (a) actor-centred measures, (b) content-centred measures, and (c) dissemination-focused measures.<sup>12</sup> European states’ responses to COVID-19-related disinformation have highlighted new trends in all three of these approaches.

First, actor-centred measures have mainly focused on Russia and China, still the leading foreign agents of disinformation in Europe. However, European states have grown to realise the increasingly large role of internal actors in the spread of disinformation. In the context of the pandemic, domestic individuals and groups have vastly relayed conspiracy theories and dubious health advice, whether they intended to harm their audience or not. In the United States, a report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) ascertained that the vast majority of anti-vaccine misinformation and conspiracy theories originated from just twelve people, which they

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8 Broeders, Dennis, Fabio Cristiano, and Daan Weggemans (2021) “Too Close for Comfort: Cyber Terrorism and Information Security across National Policies and International Diplomacy”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, p. 15.

9 Broeders, Cristiano and Weggemans, 2021: 15-17.

10 Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste Jeangène (2021) *Effective state practices against disinformation: Four country case studies*, Hybrid CoE Research Report 2.

11 Wittenberg, Chloe and Adam J. Berinsky (2020) “Misinformation and Its Correction”. In: *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, edited by Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker, Cambridge University Press.

12 François, Camille (2019) *Actors, Behaviours, Content: A Disinformation ABC – Highlighting Three Vectors of Viral Deception to Guide Industry & Regulatory Responses*, Graphika and Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, 20 September.

dubbed ‘the Disinformation Dozen’.<sup>13</sup> European states have therefore developed responses to both sources by designing measures in foreign *and* domestic ministerial cabinets. In the UK, for instance, the Home Office, the Cabinet Office, as well as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have recently created new units to tackle disinformation.

In sharp contrast to this, however, the British government failed to meaningfully address Russian interference in the Brexit referendum in 2016.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the British parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee’s report – long delayed and finally published in a heavily redacted manner in July 2020 – was uncharacteristically blunt about the fact that the government had not “sought evidence of successful interference in UK democratic processes or any activity that has had a material impact on an election”.<sup>15</sup> The report also criticised the fact that no intelligence assessment on Russian interference was provided to the committee and contrasted this lack of action “to the US handling of allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, where an intelligence community assessment was produced within two months of the vote”.<sup>16</sup> This highlights that the challenge of disinformation is not only one of interference by external powers, but also one of national political integrity.

Second, content-focused measures have continued to address anti-Western narratives (aimed at amplifying polarisation) with awareness-raising campaigns and support to quality journalism. While the context of a global pandemic is rather new for most actors, well-rehearsed narratives have circulated through COVID-19-related disinformation. Russia and China, particularly, have weaponised the pandemic to further the idea that the “West” is in decline because of internal divisions and ill-functioning liberal democracies, in comparison with a rising “East”, i.e., China. Both powers have spread disinformation about the virus with the intent to deepen political, racial, and economic divisions.<sup>17</sup> Some European governments, such as France, have thus developed new measures aimed at educating their population with the help of digital and media literacy campaigns, as well as enhanced support for high quality journalism. In Sweden, a new agency for psychological defense aiming to be operational in 2022 will work to strengthen the overall societal resilience to influence operations and disinformation.

Third, new dissemination-focused measures have focused on online platforms, in particular social media. The means and tactics of disinformation related to COVID-19 are still primarily deployed in the virtual sphere, a milieu that has gained traction during the last few years. Online platforms of all kinds have emerged or expanded, which increases the difficulty to monitor and counter disinformation. The advent of the metaverse, a 3D virtual reality version of the internet, promises to bring continued challenges in this sphere. European states have thus introduced new regulations to counter disinformation online. As the next sections will discuss, these legal frameworks are disconnected and will prove difficult to coordinate at the European level, given the rising divergences on the subject.

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13 Salam, Erum (2021) “Majority of Covid misinformation came from 12 people, report finds”, *The Guardian*, 17 July.

14 Mackinnon, Amy (2020) “4 Key Takeaways from the British Report on Russian Interference”, *Foreign Policy*, 21 July.

15 See: House of Commons, Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020) *Russia*: p. 13.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

17 Moy, Wesley and Kacper Gradon (2020) “COVID-19 Effects and Russian Disinformation”, *Homeland Security Affairs* 16, Article 8, December.



## *Legal frameworks and institutional set-ups*

With the rise of the policy challenge of countering targeted disinformation, policymakers have sought to address the issue at the national, regional, and international levels. Advances at the European level and within the UN context notwithstanding, most of the measures, policies, units, and legal frameworks still occur at the national level. As outlined in the country reports below, dedicated staff on disinformation mainly are in ministries of defence, foreign affairs, or the interior. What has been noteworthy at the national levels is the wave of new units created specifically to tackle disinformation. For example, after following a relatively low-key approach the French government has now decided to create a new, national agency tasked to tackle foreign disinformation campaigns and “foreign digital interference”.<sup>18</sup> This marks a clear departure from the previous French practice of seeking to outsource most tools to civil society organisations and underlines the growing alertness amongst national decision makers related to the growing threat of foreign disinformation operations. In the UK, flexible new units across the government – such as the Rapid Response Unit (RRU) created by the Cabinet Office in 2018 – were developed within existing structures close to the executive leader to tackle misinformation. During the pandemic, the RRU received additional funding to tackle COVID-19-related misinformation.

In addition to the creation of new institutional set-ups, national responses also included the adoption of new legislation and institutional tools. Countries like the UK and Sweden are aiming for a broad, whole-of-government strategy – there are eleven Swedish agencies involved in tackling disinformation – which adds a potential risk of bureaucratic infighting and a lack of a clear division of labor. The fact that foreign influence operations are often both foreign and domestic<sup>19</sup> makes the questions of mandates and the agencies involved a problematic one. For foreign threats, the involvement of intelligence agencies – or even the military – can be justified, but much less so for countering disinformation domestically. Bridging the foreign and the domestic and translating that into legitimate institutional mandates will require new thinking.

The different country reports reveal two other problems with the new counter-disinformation laws and mandates. Firstly, in some countries – Serbia and Hungary – counter-disinformation laws are used to silence critics of the government. Secondly, in many instances it is government officials themselves that are engaging in the spreading of disinformation and thereby either willingly or unwittingly amplify the negative impact of foreign influence campaigns. Crucially, there are currently no government agencies that have the mandate to hold domestic ministers or other political office holders to account on the issue of ‘truth’, which underlies the continued importance of free press and freedom of speech more generally.

A key feature has been the dominance of unilateral and national responses with limited multilateral or even bilateral cooperation. National governments deal with the issue of disinformation with their own approaches, leaving EU-wide attempts to play second (or in many cases, third) fiddle. Yet, important initiatives have been advanced at the European level, such as the Digital Services

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18 Benoit, Daphne and Didier Lauras (2021) “France creates agency to fight foreign disinformation”, *Yahoo News*, 2 June.

19 Ördén, Hedvig and James Pamment (2021) *What Is So Foreign About Foreign Influence Operations?* Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January.



Act (DSA) and the creation of a variety of strategic communication units to tackle *external* effects of disinformation. The institutional landscape thus remains fragmented and would benefit from more systematic cooperation, exchanges of best practices, and pooled resources.

### *Regulating social media platforms*

The regulation of technology companies remains a divisive issue in Europe: the reports paint a diverse picture of national approaches towards social media platforms. In Sweden, the country's strong historical record in ensuring press freedom generates an innate scepticism towards any involvement of the government in the regulation of content. France similarly prefers to leave more proactive counter-disinformation efforts to civil society, although during the pandemic it sought to coordinate its response to disinformation with major platforms and requested that they increase the visibility of factually verified information and government sources. Germany's central regulatory focus is hate speech, rather than disinformation per se, and famously was the first country to force platforms to take down hate speech within set time-frames by introducing the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) in 2017. The Act was recently expanded to obligate platforms to pass on details of infringements, including user data, directly to law enforcement, which sparked controversy over privacy infringements.<sup>20</sup>

The public and legal backlash over individual rights and freedoms in Europe also complicates responses to disinformation at the EU level – for example, with the adoption of the European Commission's ambitious regulatory proposals, the Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Market Act (DMA). The UK is also at the forefront of recent efforts to introduce laws that hold social media platforms accountable – most recently in the form of the Online Safety Bill, although this too has been criticised by free speech advocates for its potential to curtail freedom of expression.

On the other end of the spectrum are countries like Serbia and Hungary, where the authorities have increasingly used counter-disinformation arguments to cloak efforts to intentionally stifle free speech themselves. During the pandemic, Hungary made the spread of false information targeting the state of emergency or the authorities' handling of the pandemic a criminal offense. False information, as framed by Viktor Orbán's government, often includes legitimate criticism of the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Hungary thus emerged as one of the two distinctive cases in the project where government-endorsed information manipulation – often aligning with Russian and Chinese interests and reflecting the country's increasingly close relationship with those two states – is a greater problem than foreign influence operations, which essentially become unnecessary.

These differences makes a comprehensive and coherent EU response to disinformation even more difficult – as measures should not only be developed against external non-EU actors, but threats from within the EU and by EU member states' governments. Yet, the latter is also more difficult to address by EU institutions that depend on the support from and assent by its own member states. The second distinctive case was Serbia, where disinformation relating to alleged EU abandonment during the pandemic was amplified by pro-regime media. Like in Hungary, the spread of disinformation has been criminalised in Serbia and the law used to selectively target government critics.

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20 Delcker, Janosch (2020) "[Germany's balancing act: Fighting online hate while protecting free speech](#)", *Politico*, 1 October.

## *Implications for democracy and freedom of expression*

As research has shown that debunking and fact-checking only have limited (if not adverse) effects in fighting disinformation,<sup>21</sup> new measures are being developed to address information influence. Whether new measures will focus on actors, means of dissemination, or content, this has raised new questions on their implication for democracy and individual rights and freedoms.

First, actor-centred measures run the risk of focusing on external threats and factors fuelling information manipulation and neglecting internal determinants. As mentioned above, it is however crucial to counter disinformation in a way that considers how both foreign and domestic factors interact. Political actors may be tempted to point fingers at outsiders when seeking to increase the accountability of agents responsible for disinformation; however, that would undermine the system of internal checks and balances that characterises democracies. Moreover, European states and the EU have so far not directed any specific measures against foreign actors for information operations. Unlike the United States, that has indicted and sanctioned individuals and entities involved in information operations targeting elections.

Second, dissemination-centred measures, i.e., online platform regulations, may have serious negative implications for freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and democratic debate. Content moderation rules risk leading tech companies to over-censor content on their platforms due to concerns of legal liability. Such rules also risk being instrumentalised for political purposes, as the cases of Hungary and Serbia highlight. In addition, these regulations could incentivise users to use alternative platforms where content is less moderated and thus more dangerous. Finally, such new rules could amplify the narrative that governments and public institutions are seeking to increase their control of the information flow, which would only aggravate the current crisis of public trust and democracy.<sup>22</sup> However, without policy pressures or legal actions, social media are unlikely to make changes to their platforms, where algorithms prioritise sensationalist content such as disinformation. On social media, viral spread is not a bug, it is a feature of their business model.

Finally, narrative-centred measures, which would consist of policies aimed at raising education, media literacy, and high-quality journalism, also face a wide range of potential challenges. Whilst awareness-raising campaigns could increase public trust, they also risk being perceived as propaganda, as the line that separates it from public diplomacy has become increasingly blurred. Caution is advised in designing such content, which must be devoid of divisive narratives portraying a sense of “us vs. them”.

## *Conclusions and policy recommendations*

Overall, the conclusion that emerges from this study is that despite the numerous instances of election interference and experiences of damaging foreign campaigns intruding upon public debate, European states still struggle to address the problem of influence operations: their

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21 Persily, Nathaniel and Joshua A. Tucker, eds. (2020) *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, Cambridge University Press.

22 Lewsey, Fred (2020) “Global dissatisfaction with democracy at a record high”, Centre for the Future of Democracy, University of Cambridge.

approaches are disjointed, cautious, and significantly lagging behind the evolution of the operations themselves. Nor have they significantly adapted their approaches to COVID-19-related disinformation, leading to an “infodemic” existing alongside the pandemic.<sup>23</sup> The main policy trends centre on creating new domestic institutional structures, debating (and in some cases enacting) platform regulation, and rolling out media literacy programmes. Thus, despite important advances, it is not easy to identify any of the country cases included in this study as a clear success story or ideal model to be emulated. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, appears to have strongly stimulated research, scholarly debates and practical efforts related to disinformation and information influence more broadly. This is a notable step in the right direction, which must be supplemented by further coordination as well as more comprehensive research on the possibilities of using technology (including machine learning) to counter disinformation.<sup>24</sup> Twitter’s own recent research paper on the amplification effect of centre right news sources and *The Economist*’s findings that Twitter’s algorithm amplify ‘less-reliable news sources’ at the expense of more credible sources also serves as a reminder that disinformation must be tackled by a broad coalition that includes social media companies themselves.<sup>25</sup>

The major policy prescription that arises from this project, therefore, is the need for governments to be more coordinated, proactive, and assertive in countering influence campaigns. First and foremost, this means exposing the perpetrators of disinformation and better informing the public, including through media/digital literacy and high quality journalism. As researcher Ben Nimmo put it, “We have to successfully supplant the false or misleading narrative with another narrative, this one factual, by telling a good story ... The story behind the attack.”<sup>26</sup> Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, one of the authors of our country reports, points out that such a strategy worked in the case of the “Macron Leaks” campaign: the attention and outrage of the French domestic public was successfully diverted away from the information being propagated and towards the foreign perpetrators of the campaign.<sup>27</sup> Coordinated efforts at the European level can only increase the reach of such efforts. Secondly, this also means looking into the mirror and addressing internal sources and factors fuelling disinformation, such as political extremism, polarisation, and social inequalities.

In relation to this, the regulation of online platforms should focus not only on the origins of campaigns and the many third parties involved in their dissemination, but also on the business model in which they operate which structurally damages our societies by feeding on divisive and sensationalist content. Such regulations are all the more important given the increasing appetite for emulating Russian information tactics by other (state) actors.<sup>28</sup> As it is probably impossible to put disinformation back into Pandora’s box, governance will need to rely on more extensive data, which must be made widely accessible to researchers. The EU’s Code of Practice on Disinformation

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23 See, World Health Organisation (WHO) (n.d.) “[Infodemic](#)”.

24 See for example, William Marcellino et al. (2020) *Human-Machine Detection of online-based malign information*, Cambridge: RAND Corporation.

25 See, Ferenc Huszár et al. (2021) *Algorithmic Amplification of Politics on Twitter* and *The Economist* (2021) *Coming Clean: According to Twitter, Twitter’s algorithm favours conservatives*, 13 November, p. 77.

26 Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste Jeangène (2021) *Information Defense: Policy Measures Taken Against Foreign Information Manipulation*, Atlantic Council report: p. 28.

27 Ibid.

28 Lucas, Edward, Jake Morris and Corina Rebegea (2021) *Information Bedlam: Russian and Chinese Information Operations During Covid-19*, CEPA Report, March.

and proposed Digital Services Act (DSA) have the potential to be important regulatory measures in this regard: the Code of Practice calls on technology companies to “drastically improve the current situation characterised by an episodic and arbitrary provision of data, which does not respond to the full range of research needs” via self-regulation,<sup>29</sup> while the DSA’s Article 31 would give the European Commission and EU countries the ability to compel platforms to provide vetted academic researchers with expanded access to data.<sup>30</sup> However, European divergences on this topic and the overall deviating perspectives on information security and democracy lead to believe that disinformation will continue to pose an essential threat to Europe in the coming years.

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29 European Commission (2021) [“Guidance to strengthen the Code of Practice on Disinformation – Questions and Answers”](#).

30 European Commission (2020) [Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market For Digital Services \(Digital Services Act\) and amending Directive 2000/31/EC, 2020/0361 \(COD\)](#), 15 December; Engler, Alex (2021) [“Platform data access is a lynchpin of the EU’s Digital Services Act”](#), TechTank blog, Brookings Institute, 15 January.

## 2. France: A ‘light footprint’ approach to information manipulation

Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer

In terms of information and influence operations, the wake-up call for France has been the so-called ‘Macron Leaks’ operation, a coordinated attempt to undermine Emmanuel Macron’s candidacy during the 2017 French presidential election, which involved a disinformation campaign and a hack-and-leak operation.<sup>31</sup> The following year, the Foreign Ministry’s Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) and the Defence Ministry’s Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) published a report titled *Information Manipulation: A Challenge to our Democracies*;<sup>32</sup> and the Parliament passed a law against information manipulation.<sup>33</sup> Rather than using the term ‘disinformation’, France prefers talking about ‘information manipulation’, which the report described as involving a coordinated campaign, the diffusion of false information or information that is consciously distorted, and the political intention to cause harm.

The French response to information manipulation is characterised by a ‘light footprint’ approach, following the CAPS-IRSEM report recommending that states avoid heavy-handedness for the sake of their values but also out of a concern for effectiveness: civil society (journalists, the media, online platforms, and NGOs) must remain the first line of defense against information manipulation in liberal, democratic societies. In concrete terms, this means that the French approach is inclusive, civil-society-oriented, and that, compared to other states like the UK, Sweden, or Canada, the state communicates very little about what it has been doing on that front, in particular on its internal organisation.<sup>34</sup> That explains why this report is mostly based on internal sources, mostly focused on the relationship with civil society, and does not cover what *all* actors have been doing in this 2020-21 crisis, in particular measures taken by the Secretariat-General for National Defense and Security (SGDSN), the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Armed Forces.

The creation in July 2021 of a national agency dedicated to the fight against foreign digital interference called “Viginum”, was a significant step in this context, including in terms of communication. Of significant size, with a staff of 20 people in October 2021, and currently recruiting to reach around 40 people in 2022, it operates under the SGDSN, itself under the Prime Minister’s authority.<sup>35</sup> This initiative, for which the author has been advocating for since 2017 in internal memos and the CAPS-IRSEM report, is not a consequence of the pandemic and the new agency does not deal specifically with COVID-related disinformation.

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31 Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste Jeangene (2019) *The ‘Macron Leaks’ Operation: A Post-Mortem*, Atlantic Council/IRSEM.

32 Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste Jeangene, Alexandre Escorcía, Marine Guillaume and Janaina Herrera (2018) *Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies*, CAPS/IRSEM.

33 Guillaume, Marine (2019) *Combating the manipulation of information - a French case*, Strategic Analysis 2/2019, Hybrid CoE, Helsinki, 3 May.

34 Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste Jeangene (2021) *Effective State Practices Against Disinformation: Four country case studies*, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Helsinki, June, pp. 23-27.

35 Mathevon, Franck (2021) “Viginum, l’agence gouvernementale qui lutte contre les ingérences numériques étrangères entre en piste”, *FranceInter*, 15 October.

## COVID-related disinformation

Since 2020, the phenomenon of disinformation in France has taken on an unprecedented scale and is growing in volume and impact, according to the Government Information Service (SIG) under the Prime Minister.<sup>36</sup> This is due to several factors, including the pandemic, but also the approaching 2022 presidential election and the resurgence of the terrorist threat. COVID-related disinformation has been an important issue in France, where vaccine hesitancy is particularly high. France is regularly described as one of the most vaccine-skeptical nations in the world, and it has strong anti-vax movements (which can seem paradoxical, as France is also the birthplace of modern immunology since Louis Pasteur).<sup>37</sup> Many disinformation stories and conspiracy theories have been circulating on coronavirus vaccines, but also about institutions such as the National Institute of Health and medical Research (INSERM); drugs, in particular Chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine (at first presumed effective against the coronavirus, but later proved not to be);<sup>38</sup> and policy measures taken against the propagation of the virus, such as lockdown orders. The reality and the scale of the phenomenon is undisputed. The question is: to what extent is such disinformation of a foreign origin?

In the first months of 2020, France bought 126,000 tonnes of Chinese masks, for 5.9 billion euros. China supplied 84% of the imported masks.<sup>39</sup> In August 2020, the minister delegate for industry announced that France was not dependent on China anymore, as France was then producing 50 million masks per week (100 million per week by the end of the year).<sup>40</sup> China's mask diplomacy did not involve specific influence operations targeting France, and neither did Russia's and China's vaccine diplomacy impact France, as none of their vaccines had been authorized on the territory. As a matter of fact, China's propaganda efforts did not manage to improve China's image – not only because they are largely considered to be clumsy and unconvincing, but also because China's own 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' neutralized any potential reputation gain.<sup>41</sup> A study released in November on the French public opinion of China shows that 'the French public is decisively negative about China: 62% of those polled have a negative or very negative opinion', rendering China 'the second most negatively-perceived country in France' after North Korea.<sup>42</sup>

It is not always easy – indeed, sometimes even possible – to differentiate between 'external' and 'internal' acts of manipulation. However, as far as we are able to ascertain, it seems that COVID-related disinformation in France has little to do with foreign information and influence operations. Of course, Russian-state media and the Chinese embassy's Twitter account do not help, as they systematically relay and amplify bad news about France – but, to the knowledge of this author, very few COVID-related information and influence operations targeting France have been detected. The most significant one was an attempt in May 2021 by a Kremlin-linked

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36 Source: SIG internal memo.

37 Cracknell, Emma (2021) "Why are the French the most skeptical about COVID-19 vaccines in the EU?", *FleishmanHillard*, 7 April.

38 Sayare, Scott (2021) "He was a science star. Then he promoted a questionable cure for Covid-19", *The New York Times Magazine*, 12 May.

39 Grandin de l'Épervier, Jade (2021) "La France a acheté 5,3 milliards d'euros de masques chinois en 2020", *L'Opinion*, 5 February.

40 "Masques : la France ne dépend plus de la Chine, annonce Agnès Pannier-Runacher", *Capital*, 25 August 2020.

41 Charon, Paul and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer (2021) *Les opérations d'influence chinoises : un moment machiavélien*, Paris: IRSEM, September.

42 Julienne, Marc, Richard O. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík, Kristína Kironská and Renáta Sedláková (2020) *French public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: Political distrust trumps economic opportunities*, CEIAS – IFRI, November.



network of marketing companies to discredit the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, which has been the most widely used in France. Several French bloggers received emails from a marketing company named Fazze, offering them money to make videos denigrating the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on YouTube, Instagram and other platforms. Fazze has been traced back to a Moscow-based Russian businesswoman, Yulia Serebryanskaya, described as ‘active in pro-Kremlin political circles’ (she worked for one of Vladimir Putin’s election campaigns and for his party United Russia in the past).<sup>43</sup> If this is not enough to prove the involvement of the Russian state, the narrative of criticising western coronavirus vaccines has indeed been quite widespread on Russian (and Chinese) state media. In any case, that attempt does not seem to have had any impact, as the French bloggers did not accept the offer and instead, publicly denounced it. The Pfizer-BioNTech is still, and by far, the most injected, and the most trusted, vaccine in France.

The main source of COVID-related disinformation in France is not foreign but domestic. There has been an increase of domestic far-right, far-left, nationalistic, populist movements and political parties and candidates that effectively relay COVID-related disinformation and conspiracy theories. Such a movement benefited from a climate of mistrust, in particular vis-à-vis any form of instituted authority, governmental or scientific, that has been growing during the last years. There is a clear correlation between vaccination hesitancy and a lack of confidence in the government or what is perceived as ‘the system’.<sup>44</sup> That is why, for instance, disinformation against COVID-19 prevention measures or vaccines, like pro-authoritarian narratives praising China and/or Russia,<sup>45</sup> proved quite successful among the yellow vests movement.<sup>46</sup> The spread of COVID-related disinformation has been politicised and shared by several populist movements.<sup>47</sup> A study by the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) shows that one of the most active generators and transmitters of COVID-related disinformation on digital platforms, especially regarding the ‘health passes’ put in place by the government to encourage vaccination, is *Les Patriotes*, a far-right, nationalist and Eurosceptic political party founded by Florian Philippot, former vice president of the Front National, and candidate for presidency in the French 2022 election.<sup>48</sup> So, what has the response been?

### *The leading role of the Government Information Service (SIG)*

The SIG has been playing a leading role in countering COVID-19-related disinformation in France, in particular their information manipulation analysis unit. The SIG’s role has been to monitor and detect information manipulation via the following methods: keeping track of social networks; conducting surveys (particularly on vaccination hesitancy); using the feedback from the national toll-free telephone number which, for example, made it possible to identify certain narratives; and by focusing on certain foreign media to identify major trends and narratives.

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43 Krutov, Mark, Sergei Dobrynin, Mike Eckel and Carl Schreck (2021) “Exclusive: Meet The Murky Russian Network Behind An Anti-Pfizer Disinformation Drive In Europe”, RFE/RL, 27 May.

44 “La désinformation, écueil possible sur la route du vaccin”, *La Tribune*, 1 December 2020.

45 Boyer, Iris and Theophile Lenoir (2020) *Information Manipulations Around COVID-19: France Under Attack*, Institut Montaigne, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, July.

46 A populist protest movement started in October 2018. See Nossiter, Adam (2019) “‘Yellow Vest’ Anniversary Brings Fires, Tear Gas and Dwindled Crowds”, *The New York Times*, 16 November.

47 Lopez, Louis-Valentin (2020) “Une enquête pointe le poids écrasant des fausses informations sur Facebook en matière de santé”, *FranceInter*, 19 August.

48 Hanley, Hans (2021) “Misinformation regarding France’s COVID-19 ‘health passes’ spread on Twitter”, *DFRLab*, 4 August.



The main disinformation narratives in France are related to causes of COVID-19 (presumably related to 5G radio waves, or HIV), presumed cures (alcohol, chlorine, vitamin C, cocaine, etc.),<sup>49</sup> and vaccination (with the top five ‘fake news’ items being that COVID-19 vaccines will change recipients’ DNA, make women sterile, contain microchips, provoke HIV infections, and that ‘Mauricette’, the first vaccinated person in France, is dead).<sup>50</sup>

The SIG also coordinates and provides decision-making support to the whole-of-government effort. In April 2020, it was mandated to organize the response to the rise of COVID-related disinformation. To that end, they implemented analysis tools (Newswhip, Topic by Visibrain, Dashboard by Facebook, and Crowdtangle); linked ministers with platforms and social networks so they could work on maximising the impact of official information (Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok set up information modules linking to the government page; and a channel was opened with Google allowing the SIG to report false information detected on YouTube in order to speed up their moderation work); they also set up a daily barometer of disinformation on COVID-19 with Storizy, allowing to identify the main actors and narratives, as well as their levels of virality and impact; they produced internal memos on various topics (such as Chinese media, anti-vaccine movements, etc.) for the cross-departmental network on countering information manipulation.

The fight against COVID-related disinformation also benefits from permanent measures not specifically linked to the pandemic, like the SIG’s weekly newsletter (*#Désinfox*); its ability to structure and mobilize the inter-ministerial network of actors, in various ministries and agencies, to monitor the spread of false information in real time; and the sharing of information with fact-checkers in connection with the government spokesperson. The SIG ambition is also to strengthen confidence in government communication by implementing five guiding principles: responding to the real preoccupations of the French population; being transparent and evidence-based; being coherent (avoiding discordant discourses within the government and state services); being responsive; and reaching as many people as possible to ensure the visibility of official information on a daily basis.

That being said, the SIG is also very much aware of its limitations in terms of monitoring social media, and the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the lack of resources in the face of the scale of the disinformation campaigns: the SIG has limited access to Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), they do not have the tools to reliably detect coordinated inauthentic behaviours (they can only suspect it), they cannot monitor Facebook private groups or encrypted apps, and they cannot attribute a disinformation campaign to anyone (they see the effects of the campaign, not the source).

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49 Asselin, Christophe (2020) “Covid : les Fake News les plus répandues sur les médias sociaux en France”, *Digimind*, 20 July.

50 Asselin, Christophe (2021) “Vaccins et Covid : les Fake News les plus fréquentes sur les médias sociaux en France”, *Digimind*, 26 January.

Moreover, at least one of their initiatives backfired: the creation of a page called ‘Désinfox coronavirus’ on the French government website [gouvernement.fr](http://gouvernement.fr), launched on April 23, 2020. The page listed dozens of articles from French media, fact-checking information related to COVID-19. Widely disseminated a week later via a tweet from the government spokesperson (retweeted more than 2,600 times),<sup>51</sup> this initiative immediately sparked an outcry, in particular among journalists. One reason was that the media that were selected and referenced as good examples on the government website – including *Le Monde*, *Libération*, AFP, France Info and *20 Minutes* – were apparently unaware of it, and no explanation has been given on the criteria used to ‘select’ those examples over others. A couple of days later, in an op-ed titled ‘The state is not the arbiter of information’, the journalists and editors of numerous public and private French media ‘strongly denounced the government initiative’: invoking the ‘independence’ of the press, they explained that, ‘by distinguishing this or that article on its site, the government gives the impression of labelling the production of certain media’, implying that ‘the others would not be worthy of an imprimatur that the state has no legitimacy to issue’.<sup>52</sup> They requested the suppression of that webpage, with which the government complied a couple of days later.

### *A whole-of-government effort*

The SIG is not the only actor involved in this whole-of-government effort. On several occasions,<sup>53</sup> the Superior Audiovisual Council (*Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel*, CSA) – the French regulatory media authority – brought together the editorial directors of the major traditional media, asking them to share more information on the experts they invite. This request was for the Transparency Public Health Database, which makes accessible to everyone potential links of interest with actors of the health sector, like private companies.<sup>54</sup> The CSA also published research on the impact of COVID-19 on the media, for example a report on *The representation of women in the audiovisual media during the COVID-19 epidemic*, looking at whether the crisis increased inequalities.<sup>55</sup> Another study looked at the impact of the crisis on audiences, uses and advertising resources.<sup>56</sup>

In April 2020, the government spokesperson, the Secretary of State for the Digital Economy and the secretary of State for Child Protection organised at least two meetings with social media and digital platforms to coordinate the response against COVID-19 disinformation, asking Google and Facebook, in particular, to increase the visibility of contents debunking false information. They also ensured that the government website on the coronavirus ranked first in a Google.fr search on ‘COVID-19’.<sup>57</sup>

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51 Ndiaye, Sibeth [@SibethNdiaye] (2020) “Le crise du #COVID19 favorise la propagation de #fakenews. Plus que jamais, il est nécessaire de se fier à des sources d’informations sûres et vérifiées. C’est pourquoi le site du @gouvernementFR propose désormais un espace dédié.”, *Twitter*, 30 April.

52 “L’Etat n’est pas l’arbitre de l’information”, *Le Monde*, 3 May 2020.

53 Information provided by a source within CSA.

54 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2017) “Base Transparence-Santé”.

55 Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel (2020) *La représentation des femmes dans les médias audiovisuels pendant l’épidémie de Covid-19*, 23 June.

56 Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel (2021) *Baromètre des effets de la crise sanitaire sur le secteur audiovisuel: Impact sur les audiences, les usages et les ressources publicitaires*, 29 January.

57 “Le SIG affine sa stratégie sur les fake news”, *La Lettre A*, 24 April 2020.

Several ministries and public agencies also adapted their communication, in particular their websites. The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation created a new section on its website entitled ‘Detox: the word to science’, which aims to ‘fight against disinformation about the epidemic and put an end to fake news’ by decrypting false information and misconceptions related to the virus.<sup>58</sup> Several public health institutions, such as the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM)<sup>59</sup> and the Pasteur Institute,<sup>60</sup> undertook similar initiatives.

The President himself adapted his communication. In an effort to target a younger audience, known to be vaccine-reluctant or sceptical (because they erroneously feel that they are not at risk, or at least less so), President Macron, ‘in selfie and T-shirt mode’, answered questions on the vaccination campaign live on Instagram and Tik Tok. ‘I know that many of you are still wondering, are afraid, many are hearing false information, false rumours, sometimes complete rubbish – it must be said – so I have decided to answer your questions directly. Go ahead, ask me and I will try to be as direct and clear as possible,’ he stated.<sup>61</sup>

As for media and digital literacy in schools, an important actor has been the Liaison Centre for Education and Media Information (CLEMI), an agency of the Ministry of Education in charge of media education. They adapted their pedagogical material by designing activities for students about ‘scientific disinformation’, including questionnaires for high-school students on the stages of a scientific process, the distinction between sciences and pseudo-sciences, and how to understand mechanisms of disinformation.<sup>62</sup> They also monitored COVID-related disinformation and made resources available to teachers, such as educational sheets or a selection of newspaper articles.<sup>63</sup> In the family section of its website, CLEMI also aims at the parent, with advice, examples, references, and a podcast – all for detecting and countering COVID-related disinformation.<sup>64</sup>

The media, in particular Radio France, the public service radio broadcaster, also played an important role in educating the public, with two daily scientific programmes,<sup>65</sup> which regularly covered COVID-related disinformation issues. More generally, Radio France was careful not to invite controversial and unreliable experts like Professor Didier Raoult,<sup>66</sup> who was all over the place on other antennas, so this really is a specificity of the public service. One of those public service radios, France Info, has a ‘counter-disinformation cell’ composed of six people which, in coordination with the ‘Sciences’ service, devoted the vast majority of its work to COVID-related disinformation.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, their permanent correspondents abroad, in particular in Moscow and

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58 Ministère de l’Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche et de l’Innovation (n.d.) “[Désintox: la parole à la science](#)”.

59 Inserm (n.d.) “[Canal Détox, la série qui lute contre les fausses informations](#)”.

60 Institut Pasteur (2020) “[Coronavirus: Attention aux fausses informations sur la COVID-19 circulant sur les reseaux sociaux](#)”, 22 October.

61 “[French president uses social media to counter ‘false information’ about vaccines](#)”, *RFI*, 2 August 2021.

62 CLEMI (n.d.) “[La désinformation scientifique](#)”.

63 “[Comment lutter contre l’épidémie d’infox?](#)”, *PearlTrees*, 6 April 2020.

64 CLEMI (n.d.) “[Cinq gestes barrières contre l’infodémie](#)”.

65 “La tête au carré” by Mathieu Vidard on *France Inter* and “La méthode scientifique” by Nicolas Martin on *France Culture*.

66 Marshall, Michael (2020) “French scientist Didier Raoult given Rusty Razor Award for pseudoscience”, *The Skeptic*, 19 November.

67 Source: a Radio France manager.

Beijing, extensively covered the political narratives deployed by Russia and China in this crisis. On TV, the state-owned television network France 24 also developed its fact-checking capacities, and debunked a great number of false COVID-related stories.

The Parliament also contributed to raising awareness. In April 2020, two senators from the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces published a report on *Disinformation, Cyberattacks and Cybermalevolence: 'The other COVID-19 War'* in which they explain that 'The COVID-19 crisis shows more worryingly the deployment of ambiguous, even aggressive strategies of influence by foreign powers like China' and they propose the creation of a task force dedicated to 'responding to false information in the public health sector'.<sup>68</sup> This has not been created yet, however, there is a plan to establish a new system to counter the proliferation of public health mis/disinformation. Currently being drafted by the Ministry of Solidarity and Health, it will involve the creation of a new unit doing monitoring and analysis, as well as a dedicated space on the website Sante.fr, which will provide educational material and other information debunking false, health-related information.<sup>69</sup>

Last but not least, the ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs also played a role when it determined that China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy' had gone too far. On April 12, 2020, the Chinese embassy in Paris put on its website a statement titled 'Restoring distorted facts – Observations of a Chinese diplomat in office in Paris', in French and in Chinese, which violently attacked France and spread false information. The author notably wrote that the 'healthcare personnel of the EHPAD [établissements d'hébergement pour personnes âgées dépendantes] (nursing homes) abandoned their duties overnight, collectively deserted [their posts], leaving residents to die from hunger and illness'.<sup>70</sup> This is typical of the 'russianisation' of Chinese operations, already noted before the pandemic.<sup>71</sup> Chinese agents are not only promoting China (through positive narratives), they are also attacking others (through negative narratives) and working on dividing our societies. This article was strongly criticised, particularly by researcher Antoine Bondaz, who regularly denounces the lies spread by the embassy's Twitter account.<sup>72</sup> On April 14, the ambassador was urgently summoned by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, expressing his disapprobation.<sup>73</sup> The embassy subsequently removed the incriminated text from its website, but neither the ambassador nor the embassy apologized to the French people. This brief episode has been the most significant COVID-related example of a Chinese information operation in France and, as already mentioned in the introduction, the only impact it had has been to contribute to the deterioration of China's image in the French public opinion.

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68 Sénat – République Française (2020) "Desinformation, Cyberattaques et Cybermalveillance: 'l'Autre Guerre du COVID 19'", April.

69 Source: internal memo from the Delegate to the Public Health Information Service of the Ministry of Solidarity and Health.

70 "Rétablir des faits distordus' Observations d'un diplomate chinois en poste à Paris", *Ambassade de la République populaire de Chine en République française*, 12 April 2020.

71 Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste Jeangene and Paul Charon (2020) "Russia as a hurricane, China as climate change: different ways of information warfare", *War on the Rocks*, 21 January.

72 Bondaz, Antoine [@AntoineBondaz] (2020) "Ce texte de @AmbassadeChine est, une nouvelle fois, une honte. La rumeur, la désinformation, l'insulte, tout y est present. Ne pas réagir, ne pas le dénoncer, c'est cautionner qu'une Ambassade peut, sans le moindre respect, se comporter de façon indigne.", *Twitter*, 13 April.

73 Lemaître, Frédéric (2020) "Coronavirus : la France convoque l'ambassadeur de Chine pour lui exprimer son mécontentement", *Le Monde*, 15 April.

# 3. United Kingdom: Business as usual

Corneliu Bjola

## *Strategic communication policy, including government narrative related to the COVID-19 pandemic*

The UK was strongly affected by the first stage of the pandemic and by June 2020 the country had the highest cumulative excess mortality rate in Europe, at 6.7% across all age groups.<sup>74</sup> The result owed much to the confusing way the crisis was initially managed. The government's position shifted from early attempts to build 'herd immunity' to efforts seeking to contain the virus and finally to suppress it via lockdowns and vaccinations. The communication strategy involved low-key communicational responses in the initial stage (Jan-March 2020) followed by more vigorous forms of public messaging, including efforts to counter mis/disinformation, as the pandemic intensified.<sup>75</sup>

The first communication campaign, which the UK government launched in March 2020 ('Stay home, Protect the NHS, Save lives') was highly successful. About 90% of citizens (aligned to all political parties and across age groups) believed that the UK government communications on what to do in response to the coronavirus were clear. This clear understanding of the rules was associated with strong adherence to them. By the end of March, the number of people avoiding leaving the house rose from 50% to 79%.<sup>76</sup>

However, by October 2020, when the three-tier system (medium, high, very high) was introduced in England with increasing restrictions depending on the designated alert level,<sup>77</sup> the trend of public support reversed. Approval for the government's response to COVID-19 was at a record low of 29%, with 50% disapproving. Regarding adherence, the percentage of people flouting the rules has increased e.g., from 10% to 17% in the 18-34 age group, and 10% to 18% in the 35-44 group.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to declining levels of trust in the government, the 'action gap' between the government's advice on measures necessary to counter the threat of COVID-19 and the behaviour of a significant minority of the population was attributed to several reasons, including lack of message potency (i.e., credibility and congruence), inflexible/habitual behaviour patterns, prevailing beliefs (i.e., vulnerability to, and seriousness of COVID-19), and individuals valuing personal concerns above general public health.<sup>79</sup>

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74 Iacobucci, Gareth (2021) "Covid-19: UK had one of Europe's highest excess death rates in under 65s last year", *The BMJ*, 372: n799.

75 Sanders, Karen B. (2020) "British Government Communication during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic: Learning from High Reliability Organizations", *Church, Communication and Culture* 5 (3): 356–77. assessing how it aligns to the communicational characteristics of high reliability organizations (HROs)

76 SAGE (2020) "UK Government Messaging and Its Association with Public Understanding and Adherence to COVID-19 Mitigations", *Report 22*, 3.

77 "Tier 1, 2 or 3? England's Covid lockdown rules explained", *The Guardian*, 15 October 2020.

78 SAGE (2020), p. 5.

79 Dagnall, Neil, Kenneth Graham Drinkwater, Andrew Denovan and R. Stephen Walsh (2020) "Bridging the Gap Between UK Government Strategic Narratives and Public Opinion/Behavior: Lessons From COVID-19", *Frontiers in Communication* 5, article 71, 17 September.



Disinformation was a critical issue during the COVID-19 crisis. At the height of the crisis, around half of UK adults said that they had seen content that they identified as false or misleading information in the previous week. Themes of disinformation and misinformation included 5G conspiracies and quack remedies. Conspiracy theories also referred to the creation of COVID-19 by malign states and that the lockdown was being used for state takeover.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to the Media Monitoring Unit (MMU) covering traditional media (TV, newspapers), the UK government also relied on the Rapid Response Unit (RRU), established by the Cabinet Office in 2018,<sup>81</sup> to identify and respond to misleading narratives and content appearing online related to the pandemic. The RRU unit is part of a network of governmental agencies feeding into the wider Counter Disinformation Cell led by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS), which includes experts from across the government and in the technology sector.<sup>82</sup>

Throughout the peak of the crisis, RRU identified and responded to up to 70 incidents per week using the 'FACT' model already tested during the Syrian crisis<sup>83</sup> (find misleading stories, assess risk, create content, target the public). Tech companies also assisted governmental efforts by removing harmful content and ensuring that public health campaigns were promoted through reliable sources.

In an example of a direct response to disinformation, the Government Communication Service (GCS) partnered with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the National Poisons Information Centre to monitor content about fake COVID-19 'cures' circulating more actively in BAME communities (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic). The campaign recruited trusted influencers on Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok to create inspiring content that would encourage compliance with the government's COVID guidance among young people aged 18-24. The approach was considered effective, resulting in a total of 4.8 million active engagements, including 4.5 million video views, and a positive sentiment rate of 97%.<sup>84</sup>

### *Experience of COVID-19-related disinformation vis-à-vis foreign actors*

Taking note of the harm caused by misinformation to individual and public health, critical national infrastructure and frontline workers, the UK Parliamentary Subcommittee on Online Harms and Disinformation observed that the causes of the 'infodemic' were multifaceted.<sup>85</sup> Financial gains (through rough scams or quack cures) and even well-meaning intentions seeking to fill information gaps played a key role, along with foreign actors, in undermining public trust in institutions during the pandemic. The most severe form of disinformation in the early stage of the pandemic, the 5G conspiracy, was domestically driven. It led to 80 attacks across sites operated by all UK mobile networks, with 19 occurring near critical infrastructure such as fire, police, and ambulance stations.<sup>86</sup>

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80 Government Communication Service (GCS) (2020) "COVID-19 Communications Advisory Panel Report", p. 20.

81 GCS (2018) "Alex Aiken introduces the Rapid Response Unit", 19 July. [[Link on WebArchive](#)].

82 GCS (2020), p. 20.

83 Bartosch, Fiona (2018) "How the Rapid Response Unit actually works (and why it's important)", *PRWeek*, 17 October.

84 GCS (2020), pp. 18-19.

85 House of Commons, Committee of Culture, Media and Sport (2020) "Misinformation in the COVID-19 Infodemic", 21 July.

86 [Written evidence submitted by BT to the Online Harms Committee](#).

That being said, foreign actors, especially Russia and to a lesser extent China, were considered responsible for spreading disinformation about COVID-19 in order to create confusion, sow discord, and foster social instability.<sup>87</sup> As mentioned above, the task of countering domestic (dis) misinformation related to the pandemic has primarily been accomplished by the MMU, RRU and the GCS. The role of countering hybrid and state-sponsored disinformation has been delegated to a slightly different sub-network of governmental agencies and units. The network includes the HMG's Russia Unit, based in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the National Security Communications Team (NSCT) – a dedicated national security unit to combat state-led disinformation campaigns based in the Cabinet Office and established in 2018.<sup>88, 89</sup>

The strategy aligns well with the whole-of-government approach mandated by the national security 'Fusion Doctrine', which has recommended the formation of 'stronger partnerships across government'<sup>90</sup> and a move away from a 'federated system' of policy delivery towards genuine 'teamwork'.<sup>91</sup> Three of the most discussed cases of state-driven disinformation circulating in the UK during the pandemic referred to:

***Coronavirus 'weaponisation':*** Pro-Kremlin media actively promoted the narrative that the US was responsible for the outbreak of COVID-19 or that COVID-19 was being weaponised by the West/NATO/EU. In another variant, COVID-19 was allegedly created by a secretive global elite to introduce military rule and tyranny. Chinese media also claimed that a British study proved that the genetic origins of COVID-19 are concentrated in the US, implying an American source for the pathogen, whereas the research made no such inference.<sup>92</sup>

***The 'Monkey Vaccine':*** Russia reportedly launched a covert disinformation campaign in 2020 designed to target and discredit the AstraZeneca/Oxford University vaccine. The campaign used pictures, memes and video clips suggesting the vaccine could turn people into monkeys because it used a chimpanzee virus as a vector.<sup>93</sup> The matter was considered sufficiently important by the UK government for it to instruct GCHQ to disrupt anti-vaccine propaganda spread by hostile states using the toolkit developed to tackle disinformation and recruitment material peddled by Daesh (e.g., denying online services, disrupting a specific online activity, deterring an individual or a group, or even destroying equipment and networks).<sup>94</sup>

***Anti-vax disinformation:*** It was also reported that the 77th Brigade had been deployed to tackle anti-vaccine propaganda ahead of the coronavirus vaccine rollout. Its role was to investigate online activities from hostile states, including Russia, the impact of these

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87 Allegretti, Aubrey (2020) "[Coronavirus: Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab accuses Russia of trying to 'exploit' pandemic](#)", *SkyNews*, 18 June.

88 Lomas, Natasha (2018) "[UK to set up security unit to combat state disinformation campaigns](#)", *TechCrunch*, 24 January.

89 Miller, Carl (2018) "[Inside the British Army's secret information warfare machine](#)", *Wired*, 14 November.

90 HM Government (2018) "[National Security Capability Review](#)", p. 10.

91 UK Parliament (2019) "[Revisiting the UK's national security strategy: The National Security Capability Review and the Modernising Defence Programme](#)", 21 July.

92 Written evidence submitted by the Henry Jackson Society, pp. 4-6.

93 Rana, Manveen and Sean O'Neill (2020) "[Russians Spread Fake News over Oxford Coronavirus Vaccine](#)", *The Times*.

94 Fisher, Lucy and Chris Smyth (2020) "[GCHQ in Cyberwar on Anti-Vaccine Propaganda](#)", *The Times*; Afifi-Sabet, Keumars (2018) "[GCHQ reveals ISIS was the target of its first major cyber attack](#)", *ITPro*, 13 April.



activities on U.K.'s cyber networks and whether British citizens were targeted online.<sup>95</sup> No further information has since been made public about the nature of the 77th Brigade's anti-vax online operations, but the UK Ministry of Defence has provided reassurance that the 77th Brigade members 'do not, and have never, conducted any kind of action against British citizens' and would not interact with UK nationals involved in posting disinformation.<sup>96</sup>

While some studies have noted that Russia and China are increasingly finding common cause as their interests align on several issues and in strategic regions,<sup>97</sup> there is no evidence at the moment to suggest that the two countries have tried to coordinate their information operations in the UK or Europe during the pandemic. Beijing has spread some COVID-19 rumours, but Chinese leaders appear wary of fully following Moscow's path of outright trolling.<sup>98</sup> This situation may change in the future so it is important that the evolving relationship between Russia and China with respect to the conduct of influence operations will continue to be monitored.

### *Experience of 'mask' and 'vaccine' diplomacy vis-à-vis foreign actors*

The UK has engaged in 'mask diplomacy' both as a recipient and donor. When China struggled to contain the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, the UK sent protective equipment to China and it did so rather discreetly.<sup>99</sup> As the pandemic started to hit the UK in March 2020, the direction changed. 22 million pieces of protective equipment and more than 1000 ventilators were donated to the UK by Chinese organisations, including the Bank of China.<sup>100</sup> It now appears that Chinese donations of medical supplies to European governments have generally had strong economic incentives.<sup>101</sup>

However, in the case of the UK, these motivations were not clear cut. In his phone call to the UK Prime Minister in February 2020, the Chinese President insisted that the pandemic would require the two countries to enhance their collaboration on multiple levels.<sup>102</sup> The decision taken soon thereafter by the UK government to review Huawei's role in the UK 5G rollout contradicted these expectations.<sup>103</sup> The UK government later decided that all Huawei equipment would have to be removed from Britain's 5G network by the end of 2027, a decision strongly criticised by the Chinese government, but followed by no concrete retaliation measures.<sup>104</sup>

Facing PPE domestic shortages, the UK discontinued exports of medical supplies to other countries for most of the duration of the pandemic. It instead offered £200m in aid to help developing

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95 Pogrud, Gabriel and Tim Ripley (2020) "Army spies to take on antivax militants", *The Times*, 29 November.

96 Warrell, Helen (2020) "UK on high alert for anti-vaccine disinformation from hostile states", *Financial Times*, 11 December.

97 Kliman, Daniel et al. (2020) *Dangerous Synergies: Countering Chinese and Russian Digital Influence Operations*, Center for a New American Security.

98 Kurlantzick, Joshua (2020) "How China Ramped Up Disinformation Efforts During the Pandemic", *Council for Foreign Relations*.

99 Wintle, Thomas (2020) "UK government defends sending protective equipment to China", *CGTN*, 29 April.

100 UK Government (2020) "Over 22 million pieces of protective equipment shipped to UK from China", 29 April.

101 Soula, Etienne, Franziska Luetge, Melissa Ladner and Manisha Reuter (2020) *Masks Off: Chinese Coronavirus Assistance in Europe*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, no. 9, July.

102 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2020) "President Xi Jinping Speaks with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on the Phone", 18 February.

103 Corera, Gordon (2020) "Coronavirus: Huawei urges UK not to make 5G U-turn after pandemic", *BBC*, 13 April.

104 Dettmer, Jamie (2020) "Britain's Huawei Ban Resets Relations With China", *VOA*, 14 July.

nations battle the corona virus, especially those in the Commonwealth network. Of the £200m in funding, £130m went to United Nations agencies, including £65m for the World Health Organization, which co-ordinated the global response to the pandemic. The remaining funds were offered to the Red Cross (£50m) to boost their efforts to reach areas such as those affected by armed conflict, and to non-government organisations, including UK charities (£20m).<sup>105</sup>

UK has also committed £548m to the global COVAX initiative (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility), which is expected to help 92 developing countries gain fair and early access to COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>106</sup> As the countries' response to the pandemic evolved, 'vaccine diplomacy' has moved to the centre of the foreign policy agenda, including for the UK. The UK has thus promised to donate five million vaccine doses by the end of September 2021, with a further 95 million doses to be supplied within the next 12 months, including 25 million by the end of 2021.<sup>107</sup>

### *Position on social platforms regulation*

The Government is in the process of introducing new legislation this year, the Online Safety Bill, which seeks to protect users from harmful, illegal terrorist and child abuse content through a new statutory 'duty of care' to be applied to internet companies, including social media platforms, that have 'links with the United Kingdom' (e.g., they have a significant number of users in the UK, or if there are reasonable grounds to believe that the content posted online may lead to significant harm to individuals in the UK).<sup>108</sup>

An independent regulator (the Office of Communications, aka OFCOM, which is the government-approved regulatory and competition authority for communications services) is expected to oversee and enforce the new framework. Its role will include issuing codes of practice describing the recommended steps for the purpose of compliance with the safety duties about illegal content specified in the Bill, thus setting out what companies would need to do to comply with the duty of care. It will also have powers to act against companies that fail to meet their responsibilities by imposing service restrictions, applying fines of up to £18m or 10% of global annual turnover, and/or imposing criminal sanctions on senior managers who fail to comply with information requests from the regulator.

The bill will also cover issues related to disinformation and misinformation that could cause 'significant physical or psychological harm' to individuals, such as anti-vaccination content. Internet companies are already expected to remove illegal content, for example where this contains any direct incitement to violence. The new bill goes a step further and demands companies to set out what content is not acceptable in their terms of service, including many types of misinformation and disinformation, such as anti-vaccination content and falsehoods about COVID-19. Companies must also specify how they comply with the 'safety duties' outlined in the Bill.

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105 "Coronavirus: UK gives £200m in aid to developing nations", *BBC*, 12 April 2020.

106 UK Government (2021) "UK meets £250m match aid target into COVAX, the global vaccines facility", 10 January.

107 Wintour, Patrick and Sarah Boseley (2021) "UK to give 100m Covid vaccine doses to poorer countries within a year", *The Guardian*, 10 June.

108 Home Office (2020) *Online Harms White Paper*, 15 December.

Following criticism from stakeholders and civil society groups that the threshold to trigger the duty of care remains vague, that the Bill will create significant red tape and bureaucratic burden on service providers and OFCOM, and that the scope of the regulation may affect the freedom of expression,<sup>109</sup> the government promised to introduce additional provisions targeted at building understanding and driving action to tackle disinformation and misinformation. These provisions include the establishment of an expert working group, measures to improve transparency in how companies deal with disinformation, and renewed efforts to promote media literacy. This last one will build on Ofcom's existing expertise in the field (e.g., by developing public awareness and understanding of the processes by which the content is made available on electronic media and the impact it may have on the behaviour of those who receive it).<sup>110</sup>

## Foreign policy and geopolitical stakes in Europe

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased frictions between the UK and the European Union, inviting questions about the direction of the relationship in the post-Brexit period. Determined to avoid domestic and international embarrassment, the UK government sought to secure millions of doses of vaccines, mainly from Astra Zeneca, and to deliver them to UK residents as quickly as possible. The strategy worked well domestically, but it soon put UK on a collision course with the EU, which accused the UK of importing 25 million doses from Europe without any vaccines going the other way.<sup>111</sup> The dispute intensified to the point that it even threatened to unravel the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement signed in Dec 2020.<sup>112</sup> The row with the EU and the broader goals pursued by the UK through its vaccine's diplomacy has renewed fears concerning the tenuous trajectory the EU-UK relationship may follow in the post-Brexit context.

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) has strained the relationship between the two parties, a tendency that is likely to persist or even escalate in the short and medium term. The implementation of the 2019 Withdrawal Agreement (WA) has generated trade disruptions<sup>113</sup> and diplomatic frictions,<sup>114</sup> which do not bode well for the future. Brexit-driven pressure for Irish unification and Scottish independence could intensify tensions between the EU and UK, especially if the economic costs of Brexit continue to accumulate.

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109 Woodhouse, John (2021) *Regulating online harms*, House of Commons, Briefing Paper no 8743, 22 January; Harbinja, Edina (2021) "U.K.'s Online Safety Bill: Not That Safe, After All?", *Lawfare*, 8 July.

110 Home Office, *Online Harms White Paper* (2020).

111 "Covid vaccine: Why is the EU suing AstraZeneca?", *BBC*, 30 April 2021.

112 "After outcry, EU reverses plan to restrict vaccine exports through Irish border", *Reuters*, 30 January 2021.

113 Arnold, Martin (2021) "UK-EU Trade Falls Sharply as Brexit Disruption Starts to Bite", *Financial Times*.

114 Foster, Peter and Jim Brusden (2021) "Diplomatic Mission Spat Increases UK-EU Tensions", *Financial Times*; Stewart, Heather (2021) "UK Diplomacy Masks Private Fury in Covid Vaccine Row with EU", *The Guardian*; O'Carroll, Lisa (2021) "EU could shelve Brexit trade deal if UK triggers article 16", *The Guardian*, 7 November.

From a security and foreign policy perspective, no formal agreement has been negotiated between the UK and the EU thus far, and there are few expectations that one will be pursued in the short term. The 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IRSDDFP) restates UK's commitment to European security, but it also makes clear that the UK intends to follow a 'different economic and political path' than the EU and to pursue 'a distinctive approach to foreign policy'.<sup>115</sup>

Outside the EU, the UK will not be involved in the EU cyber security policy, nor in the industrial policy linked to cyber, but cooperation between national intelligence agencies is not expected to be directly affected by Brexit.<sup>116</sup> At the same time, in line with provisions of the Withdrawal Agreement, the UK will maintain a working relationship with the main EU-wide law enforcement agencies, Europol and Eurojust, which provide platforms for sharing information, mounting joint investigations, operations and prosecutions.<sup>117</sup>

The UK's geopolitical trajectory in the post-Brexit period, especially its relationship with China and Russia, is also likely to be affected by how intensely the UK will seek to distance itself diplomatically from the EU. Russia is perceived by the UK as the 'most acute threat'<sup>118</sup> to its security, including through its information operations. This should create opportunities for collaboration between the UK and the EU, possibly in the E3 format (France, Germany, UK),<sup>119</sup> although this format is not particularly favoured by the EU insofar as it may undermine the coherence of its foreign policy. The UK's first preference, however, is to deter Russia through NATO, in close partnership with the United States, as well as by working together with national governments especially from Eastern Europe, which are rather wary of the occasional conciliatory signals sent by France and Germany towards Russia.

The new 'Global Britain' agenda seeks to deepen UK's foreign policy and security engagement in the Indo-Pacific by supporting defence partnerships with key Commonwealth members in the region (Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore) and working with organisations such as ASEAN and the Pacific Island Forum. The security partnership recently agreed by the leaders of the UK, the United States and Australia, the "AUKUS Alliance", represents another important component of the UK's strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. It aims to foster deeper integration of security and defence-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains between the three members of the alliance,<sup>120</sup> but it should be noted the alliance has further strained UK's relationship with France and the EU. Following the recent sail of the Queen Elizabeth aircraft

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115 HM Government (2021) *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IRSDDFP)*.

116 King, Julian (2020) "Cybersecurity after Brexit", *UK in a Changing Europe*, November.

117 King, Julian and John Scarlett (2021) "The Future of UK-EU Security Cooperation", RUSI, January.

118 IRSDDFP (2021), p. 18.

119 Lehne, Stefan (2021) "Rivals or Partners? The EU-UK Foreign Policy Relationship After Brexit", Carnegie Europe, 30 March.

120 UK Government (2021) "UK, US AND Australia launch new security partnership", 15 September.

carrier and a few escort ships (including a Dutch frigate) to Japan, the UK announced plans to permanently deploy two warships in Asian waters.<sup>121</sup> This suggests that its strategy is not only to contain Chinese influence in the region, but to actively challenge China's attempts to draw unilateral 'lines in the sea' beyond those permitted by UNCLOS.<sup>122</sup>

The UK's strategy complements well the EU's strategic approach to the region, which has a more pronounced geo-economic profile<sup>123</sup> and which is also increasingly focused on supporting the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, a key node of global trade.<sup>124</sup> Both UK and EU see China as a 'systemic competitor' with an increasingly problematic track record on human rights, but a likely partner for trading, investment and for tackling transnational challenges such as climate change. UK considers China to be the 'biggest state-based threat' to its economic security<sup>125</sup> and views its international assertiveness, including by technological advancement, to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s.<sup>126</sup>

That being said, UK's withdrawal from the EU also means that its growing trade relationship with China might act as a constraint on its geopolitical ambitions. While the UK's total trade in goods – which includes imports and exports – with EU countries fell by 23.1% in the first three months of 2021, goods imports from China to the UK have increased by 66% since 2018. Moreover, China has replaced Germany in 2021 as the UK's biggest single import market for the first time on record.<sup>127</sup> While the trend needs to be confirmed in the coming years, it is safe to assume that a growing economic dependency on China might complicate the UK's strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific region.

In sum, the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy objectives towards Russia and China are likely to suffer from its weakened political and economic relationship with the EU, but the UK's ability to project its power regionally and globally remains significant. From a security perspective, Eastern European countries might be particularly interested in partnering with the UK to contain and neutralise Russia's cyber activities and influence operations against them. The UK-EU cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region is likely to focus on preventing violations of international law in the South China Sea and on ensuring free passage and maritime safety in the area, with France and Germany already taking steps in this direction.<sup>128</sup>

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121 Kelly, Tim and Irene Wang (2021) "Britain to permanently deploy two warships in Asian waters", *Reuters*, 21 July.

122 Hayton, Bill (2021) "The Carrier Strike Group in the South China Sea", *Council on Geostrategy*, 27 July.

123 European Parliament (2021) "Prospects for EU-Asia Connectivity: The 'European Way to Connectivity'", Briefing.

124 Pugliese, Giulio (2021) "Europe's Naval Engagement in the South China Sea", *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 12 June.

125 IRSDDFP (2021), p. 62.

126 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

127 Partington, Richard (2021) "China replaces Germany as UK's biggest import market", *The Guardian*, 25 May.

128 Pugliese (2021).



## Conclusions

Considering the high rate of vaccination that the UK has achieved thus far (68.85% in the total population, out of which 55.66% are fully vaccinated),<sup>129</sup> one may conclude that the campaign against anti-vax disinformation, including that promoted by Russia (the ‘monkey vaccine’), has been quite successful. The conclusion must be qualified, however, by the fact that the UK has benefited from a strong political consensus across all major parties regarding the importance of accelerating vaccination efforts as a tactic for defeating the pandemic. In the absence of independently validated data, it also remains unclear how effective the reactions of the Rapid Response Unit and especially of the 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade have been in containing anti-vax disinformation.

The prevalence of conspiracy theories in the early stage of the pandemic, especially of the 5G conspiracy and of the virus being a bioweapon developed in a foreign lab,<sup>130</sup> suggests that the reaction of the UK stratcomm units was initially fairly muted. As discussed elsewhere, conspiracies are embraced by the public not for their factual value but for their ability to provide a false sense of reassurance in times of great uncertainty and anxiety. In the case of pandemics, conspiracy theories are particularly dangerous. They amplify social instability by promoting distrust in public health guidelines and more generally, in public institutions and authorities.<sup>131</sup> As it is difficult for governmental agencies to keep track and react to all conspiracy theories in real time, stronger cooperation with social media platforms is needed so that harmful content can be promptly removed before it goes viral. The new Online Safety Bill to be discussed by the UK Parliament later this year seeks to put pressure on tech companies to take the issue seriously.

The uneasy relationship between the UK and the EU in the post-Brexit period does not bode well for the future of their collaboration in areas such as countering disinformation and foiling influence campaigns. The UK-EU spat over the Astra-Zeneca vaccines earlier this year has shown that tensions between the two parties can degrade rapidly, further eroding the already declining levels of trust between the two parties. At the moment, the UK feels confident that its stratcomm and cyber capabilities will allow it to handle well any future hybrid threats originating from hostile countries such as Russia and possibly China. These capabilities also provide a good platform for developing ad-hoc alliances with European governments, especially from Eastern Europe, which are particularly exposed to Russian disinformation. In the long term, however, the UK’s self-isolation from European cyber-security and counter-disinformation projects may come at a steep price.

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129 As of 28 July 2021 – according to OurWordinData, “[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Vaccinations](#)”.

130 Studies show that 37% of respondents had heard about the 5G conspiracy theory and almost a third of those found it credible; for details see, UK Government (2020) [Covid-19: How hateful extremists are exploiting the pandemic](#), Commission for Countering Extremism, July, p. 7.

131 Vériter, Sophie L., Corneliu Bjola and Joachim A. Koops (2020) “[Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation: Internal and External Challenges for the European Union](#)”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15 (4): 569-582, p. 573.

# 4. Germany: Much ado about little

Martin Fertmann and Matthias C. Kettemann

## Introduction

Throughout the pandemic, Germany has taken a careful stance in responding to influence operations. Historically, it is not disinformation but hate speech that has taken the front and center position in the German platform regulation discourse.<sup>132</sup> The notion that the process of political opinion formation is supposed to be free from state intervention (*Staatsferne des Meinungsbildungsprozesses*) is valued as a key element of Germany's constitutional order, coupled with clear rules against specific types of serious antisemitic and other qualified hate speech and dehumanising expressions.<sup>133</sup> Outside of illegal expressions, too large an influence of domestic authorities on the process of negotiating the rules of information behaviour is viewed as an even greater risk to the country's liberal democracy than the risks associated with foreign influence operations.

Nonetheless, the concern that influence operations can harm the country's democratic process is visible in the discourse of both politicians and popular opinion. In June 2021, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas issued a statement highlighting that 'players and states' exist that 'are using deceitful methods to interfere in democratic processes as well as election campaigns in other countries.'<sup>134</sup> Similarly, in a *Forsa* Study for the State Media Authority North Rhine-Westphalia, 82 per cent of respondents agree ('completely' or 'somewhat') that political disinformation threatens Germany's democracy.<sup>135</sup> Likewise, 82 per cent of respondents say – even without any evidence of actual dangers – that they are 'concerned' that influence campaigns can manipulate election results. In terms of political consequences, these concerns cannot easily be remedied through laws, but rather through awareness-raising campaigns and information literacy programmes throughout the cycle of education.<sup>136</sup>

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132 See also Bundestag Scientific Service (2019) "[Initiativen gegen die Beeinflussung der Meinungsbildung durch ausländische Medien](#)", WD 10-3000-27/19, 15 May, p. 6.

133 Established principle in the jurisdiction of the Bundesverfassungsgericht, see BVerfGE 12, 205 ("Adenauer-Fernsehen") and BVerfGE 20, 56 ("Parteienfinanzierung I").

134 German Foreign Ministry (2021) [Foreign Minister Maas on the threat to democratic processes posed by cyber-attacks](#), 19 June.

135 "[Die Angst vor Desinformation und Manipulation steigt angesichts des digitalen Wahlkampfs](#)", Landesanstalt für Medien NRW, published on 27 July 2021.

136 For an overview of existing laws tackling disinformation in Germany, see Ferreau, Frederik (2020) "[Desinformation aus rechtswissenschaftlicher Perspektive](#)", in: Möller, Judith, Michael Hameleers and Frederik Ferreau, *Typen von Desinformation und Misinformation, die medienanstalten* - ALM GbR, published in September; for future regulatory options in Germany see Dreyer, Stephan et al. (forthcoming) „Desinformation: Risiken für rechtliche Schutzziele, Regulierungslücken und zieladäquate Gegenmaßnahmen“, Gutachten im Auftrag der Landesanstalt für Medien NRW.



On a pre-normative level, platforms are given substantial leeway to act against disinformation, with courts regularly confirming their right to introduce content governance measures that go far beyond what the government could constitutionally mandate.<sup>137</sup> Countermeasures by the platforms on which such operations unfold are, however, left to voluntary platform's self-regulation, albeit in a form that is increasingly 'encouraged' through political pressure and looming threats of regulation,<sup>138</sup> like through drafts of the Digital Services and Digital Market Acts.

The spread of COVID-19-related disinformation has highlighted the importance of the challenge. While politicians such as Federal Minister of Health Jens Spahn acknowledge that *'[e]specially in social media, there are many people with their own interests at stake who want to unsettle citizens' who '(..) want to disintegrate us in our debate, in our society'*,<sup>139</sup> no additional policy proposals on disinformation were proposed. Illustrating the difficulty, Minister of Justice of the State of Saxony-Anhalt, Anne-Marie Keding, argued that *'it is wrong to introduce an additional criminal offence for fake news now. [...] That would be practically impossible to implement. [...].'*<sup>140</sup>

### *Foreign policy and geopolitical stakes in Europe vis-à-vis China and Russia*

In the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, many German politicians have significantly changed their perspective on Russia, abandoning the cold-war *Ostpolitik* doctrine of change through rapprochement ('Wandel durch Annäherung') towards a new, more robust Russia policy at the national as well as the EU level.<sup>141</sup> Increasing economic ties (especially in the energy sector and in joint projects such as the *Nord Stream 2* pipeline) require Germany to balance its national economic interests with the need for a united EU response to Russia's violations of international law (like the invasion in Crimea or human rights violations in the prosecution of opposition politicians and activists in Russia). Angela Merkel's current administration, due to be replaced in the autumn of 2021 (mostly) consistently condemned violations of international law, while trying to minimise economic downsides for ongoing projects. This may change with a new administration, as candidates such as Anna-Lena Baerbock of the Greens have heavily criticised the rapprochement strategy in the run-up to the election.<sup>142</sup>

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137 Kettemann, Matthais C. and Torben Klaus (2021) "Regulating Online Speech: Ze German Way", *Lawfare*, 20 September.

138 Cf. Kettemann, Matthias C. and Martin Fertmann (eds.) (2020) *Viral Information: How States and Platforms Deal with Covid-19-related Disinformation: an Exploratory Study of 20 Countries*, GDHRNet Working Paper #1, Hamburg: Verlag Hans-Bredow-Institut.

139 Voss, Oliver (2020) "Falschmeldungen und Verschwörungstheorien verstärken die Angst", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 3 February.

140 Anne-Marie Keding interviewed by Maria Kurth: "Keding gegen Strafverfolgung von Fake News", *Volksstimme*, 20 March 2020.

141 Togh, Tony van der (2021) "The Role of EU Member States and the Future of EU-Russia Relations: Disentangling the role of Germany and the Netherlands in EU Decision-Making on Relations with Russia since the Ukraine Crisis", in: *Principled Pragmatism in Practice*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | Nijhoff, p. 42 et seq.

142 Baerbock, Annalena (2020) "Deutschland darf dieses korrupte Regime nicht weiter unterstützen", *Der Spiegel*, 4 September, interview by Valeria Höhne; the move of course also falls into the larger picture of the implications of Germany's energy transition for German-Russian relations, see Westphal, Kirsten (2021) "German-Russian Gas Relations in Face of the Energy Transition", *Russian Journal of Economics* (Moskva) 6 (4): 406–23.

The already substantial political and economic relations between Germany and China have further deepened, with politicians recognising China as an important (economic) partner, especially during the alienation caused by the Trump presidency in the U.S. This is also documented by the recently established Asia-Pacific department of the Federal Foreign Office. While the increase of Chinese investments is viewed skeptically by the majority of the population and news media,<sup>143</sup> both countries maintained close political relations throughout the pandemic. Among others, high-ranking representatives from both countries regularly coordinate their views in circa 80 dialogue mechanisms on trade, investment, the environment, culture and science. On top of that, German-Chinese government consultations with members of the cabinets have been taking place since 2011. During the sixth (and first virtual) edition of the consultations in April 2021, Chancellor Merkel reviewed the internationally challenging year since the outbreak of the Corona crisis and stressed that *'We can only contain this pandemic together - China and Germany can play important roles.'*<sup>144</sup> Additionally, Angela Merkel called for open and transparent discussions about vaccine production and the possibility of the mutual recognition of vaccines – at least by the World Health Organization.<sup>145</sup>

### *Strategic communication policy, including government narrative related to the COVID-19 pandemic*

Germany's explicit strategic communication policies are integrated into international networks. The foreign office and its Strategic Communications Steering Group is consequentially a key player, coordinating responses within the EU, the G7 states and NATO. This includes initiatives at the European level such as the EEAS East Stratcom Task Force,<sup>146</sup> its debunking-website 'EU vs Disinfo'<sup>147</sup> and the EU action plan against disinformation. Within the latter, the pandemic was a first stress test for the EU Rapid Alert System (RAS).<sup>148</sup> As regards these projects, Simon Kreye, head of the Steering Group, asserted that *'[t]he joint assessment and coordinated response to fake news are extremely helpful.'* In addition, the Federal Foreign Office cooperates with independent fact-checkers, academics and social network operators, with the aim of revealing the dynamics and actors behind disinformation present in the German media ecosystem.

The political coalition agreement of the last Merkel government held that strategic communications and, in particular, cooperation with the German Deutsche Welle were to be stepped up.<sup>149</sup> These measures were initially implemented with the aim to 'promote a realistic image of Germany'<sup>150</sup> to would-be refugees, for example with an awareness campaign in countries of origin and transit of refugees that featured a website and billboards on 'Rumours about Germany'.<sup>151</sup> There were no direct links to Corona-related communication. Later, the Task Force coordinated projects to counter the digital propaganda of the IS terrorist group with reliable

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143 Cf. Leithäuser, Johannes (2021) "[Deutschland entsendet Fregatte in ostasiatische Gewässer](#)", FAZ, 2 March.

144 Federal Chancellor (2021) "[Virtuelle deutsch-chinesische Regierungskonsultationen](#)", 28 April.

145 *Ibid.*

146 European Union External Action (2021) "[Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force](#)", 28 April.

147 European Union External Action (n.d.) "[EU vs DiSiNFO](#)".

148 European Union External Action (2019) "[Rapid Alert System](#)", March.

149 [Coalition agreement between CDU, CSU and SPD](#), 12 March 2018, p. 146.

150 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

151 Federal Foreign Office (n.d.) "[Rumours About Germany Facts For Migrants](#)".

information and background information, especially on the web and in social media. Recently, in response to Russian disinformation, there are now targeted educational initiatives.<sup>152</sup> In all of these projects, the Foreign Ministry works with partners such as Deutsche Welle, and continues to focus on foreign, rather than domestic communication. The tools used, however, could have been leveraged to act against disinformation in national discourses, as well.

In terms of reach, strategic communication by those in charge of coordinating emergency response at the sub-national level is in the foreground. Due to German federalism, the lion's share of information, explanation and justification of public health rules and suggestions during the pandemic was taken over by local and regional (Länder) governments. This includes the social media presences of the Minister-Presidents of the four most populous states Armin Laschet (North Rhine-Westphalia),<sup>153</sup> Markus Söder (Bavaria),<sup>154</sup> Winfried Kretschmann (Baden-Wuerttemberg)<sup>155</sup>, and Stephan Weil (Lower Saxony).<sup>156</sup>

Next to this adapted use of preexisting channels and profiles, authorities made use of new measures globally rolled out by platforms, such as free ad space for health authorities that featured context-specific links to official information sources, or 'information centers' on COVID-19 with, inter alia, collections of official communication on the situation. As noted in the introduction, such cooperation has met with significant political and legal resistance in Germany. For example, an initiative by the Federal Ministry of Health to fill 'Google Knowledge Panels' (displayed prominently when searching for health-related issues) with its own fact-checked content relating to COVID-19 and other illnesses was coined as a 'breach of a regulatory taboo' by press representatives<sup>157</sup> and had to be stopped after a court ruled that this violated German competition law,<sup>158</sup> shortly after an (independent) media regulator opened an investigation into the cooperation.<sup>159</sup>

### *Position on regulation of social media platforms*

The State Media Treaty (Medienstaatsvertrag, MStV) only targets *media producers* participating in influence campaigns or other cases of disinformation dissemination, not the platforms on which these activities take place. Regulatory tools in use include labelling obligations relating to bot use and (political) advertisements as well as a – controversial – 'quality control' by media authorities when users/content creators evoke a journalistic impression and corresponding recipient trust, a legal basis that may soon become relevant for German-language channels of

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152 Federal Foreign Office (2020) "[Feature: Strategische Kommunikation](#)", October.

153 Laschet, Armin (2020) [Facebook post](#), 23 March, accessed 16 August 2021.

154 Söder, Markus (2020) [Facebook post](#), 16 June, accessed 16 August 2021.

155 Kretschmann, Winfried (2020) [Facebook post](#), 2 May, accessed 16 August 2021.

156 Weil, Stephan [@MpStephanWeil] (2020) "[Ich freue mich darauf, dass ich mit meiner Frau wieder essen gehen kann und auf leckere Cannelloni bei unserem Stadtteil-Italiener](#)", *Twitter*, 10 May.

157 Bundesverband Digitalpublisher und Zeitungsverleger (2020) "[BDZV-Präsident Mathias Döpfner: Zusammenarbeit des Bundes mit Google ist ordnungspolitischer Tabubruch](#)", 8 December.

158 District Court München I (2021), Az. 37 O 15721/20 (NetDoktor.de GmbH ./ Bundesrepublik Deutschland), LG München I, Beschluss vom 10.02.2021, Az. 17520/20 (NetDoktor.de GmbH ./ Google Ireland Ltd.).

159 Fertmann, Martin, Wolfgang Schulz and Stephan Dreyer (2020) "[Landesmedienanstalt gegen gesundheitsbezogene Google Knowledge-Panels](#)", *Telemedicus*, 28 December.

foreign state-sponsored media like ‘RT Deutsch’ or ‘Sputnik News’.<sup>160</sup> The President of the Federal Domestic Intelligence Agency, the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, asserted that ‘*Russian media disseminate disinformation and propaganda on the COVID-19 situation in Germany through their German channels*’. Under the State Media Treaty, channels like ‘Russia Today’, which has been accused of spreading disinformation for years, may thus face stronger regulatory surveillance.

In line with the previous situation on the European level,<sup>161</sup> countermeasures such as fact-checking are undertaken voluntarily by platforms. Absent legal duties, soft/political pressure to take aforesaid measures is strongly in evidence, as e.g. demanded by Federal Minister of Justice, Christine Lambrecht: ‘(..) *I expect social networks to live up to their responsibility: they must clearly prioritise trustworthy and relevant information, quickly identify and delete fake news and block accounts that spread it.*’

### *Experience of COVID-19-related disinformation vis-à-vis foreign actors*

COVID-19 appears to have boosted existing prejudices. Although there are no comprehensive scientific studies yet, media reports show that the virus has been included in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories<sup>162</sup> and has reinforced racist discrimination in Germany, particularly against people of Asian descent at the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>163</sup> Another prominent myth is the involvement of Bill and Melinda Gates in the creation of the virus.<sup>164</sup>

Sources that have been identified as key disseminators of disinformation before the pandemic remain decisive when it comes to COVID-19-related disinformation. The top three of these types of sources are Russian (‘RT Deutsch’, ‘Sputnik News’ and ‘Newsfront’).<sup>165</sup> Stereotypical disinformation narratives include the alleged unsafety of European and American companies’ vaccines, the alleged inefficacy of infection prevention measures such as masks and disinformation regarding the extent of protests against such measures as well as authorities’ reactions to them.<sup>166</sup>

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160 On Disinformation on these channels, see below Variable D.

161 Most prominently of course the Code of Practice on Disinformation, which is supposed to be transposed from a self-regulatory to a co-regulatory Regime; see European Action Plan for Democracy, COM(2020) 790 final, p. 22 et seq.

162 Leister, Annika (2020) “Schämt ihr euch nicht, ihr Juden?: 75 antisemitische Vorfälle mit Corona-Bezug in Berlin”, Berliner Zeitung, 8 September; Röhm, Joseph and Sabina Wolf, BR (2020) “Alte Feinbilder zurechtgebogen”, Tagesschau.de, 9 April.

163 Klaus, Julia (2020) “100 Übergriffe: Die Sündenböcke der Pandemie”, ZDFheute, 23 May; Meisner, Matthias (2020) “Bundesregierung ignoriert Corona-Rassismus”, Der Tagesspiegel, 4 May.

164 Thomaser, Sonja (2020) “Bill Gates und das Coronavirus - was steckt hinter der Verschwörungstheorie?”, Frankfurter Rundschau, 14 May.

165 Based on a commissioned ranking by the service NewsGuard: Heigl, Jana (2021) “‘Infodemie’: Das sind die Treiber der Fake News zu Corona”, Bayerischer Rundfunk, 29 January.

166 *Ibid.*

## *Experience of ‘mask’ and ‘vaccine’ diplomacy vis-à-vis foreign actors*

Chinese mask-diplomacy efforts accompanying these imports are widely seen as having failed in Germany,<sup>167</sup> especially due to inquiries into the reportedly low quality of many of the masks.<sup>168</sup> Scandals relating to the procurement and dissemination of deficient masks by authorities have put significant pressure on leading politicians, including Federal Ministers Andreas Scheuer (Transport)<sup>169</sup> and Jens Spahn (Health).<sup>170</sup> The assessment of the failure of Chinese mask-diplomacy in Germany is backed by public opinion: according to an ECFR survey, 48% of Germans reported their view of China had worsened during the pandemic, while it improved for only 7%. Chinese and Russian mask and vaccine diplomacy efforts in other countries are eyed skeptically as well in Germany, and at least partially considered to underscore the need for more competing German and European initiatives.<sup>171</sup>

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167 See Koch et al. (2021) “Diplomatie mit der Spritze: Wie sich China durch Impfungen als Weltretter inszenieren will”, *Handelsblatt*, 8 February.

168 Böge, Friederike and Thomas Gutschker (2020) “Die Tücken der chinesischen Maskendiplomatie”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 30 March.

169 Becker, Sven et al. (2020) “Elf Millionen Masken, alle Schrott”, *Der Spiegel*, 24 April.

170 Malcher, Ingo et al. (2021) “Corona-Masken, Die vom Bund waren besonders beschissen”, *Zeit Online*, 2 June.

171 See Moritz, Rudolf (2021) “China’s Health Diplomacy during Covid-19”, SWP Comment 2021/C 09, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 26 January, p. 6.

# 5. Hungary: No need to preach to the choir

Tamás Peragovics and Péter Kállai

## *Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Stakes vis-à-vis China and Russia*

Hungary enjoys close economic and political relations with Russia. A major area of cooperation is the energy sector. The Orbán administration has an agreement with Moscow on the construction of two new units at the Paks nuclear power station.<sup>172</sup> Eighty per cent of the costs of the project are to be financed from a 30-year loan from Russia, amounting to EUR 10 billion.<sup>173</sup> Following Russia's invasion of Crimea, while Hungary joined other EU member states in sanctioning Moscow, its government maintains that the EU is 'shooting itself in the foot' with its policy.<sup>174</sup> Most recently, Hungary supported Russia by refusing to sign a joint EU statement condemning Moscow's violent suppression of domestic protests in January 2021.<sup>175</sup>

The Orbán administration is committed to China as well. Hungary was the first European country in 2015 to sign China's 'Belt and Road' initiative.<sup>176</sup> More recently, it entered into a strategic cooperation agreement with Fudan University to establish a campus in Budapest.<sup>177</sup> The administration has shown its support for China by going against the EU consensus in numerous controversial affairs.<sup>178</sup> In April 2021, Hungary blocked an EU statement that would have criticised China for its new national security law applicable to Hong Kong.<sup>179</sup> The EU adopted sanctions against China in March 2021, though Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó called them 'meaningless and harmful virtue-signalling'.<sup>180</sup>

Hungary has welcomed Chinese companies, including those the West is watching with growing suspicion. The administration signed a strategic partnership with Huawei in 2013.<sup>181</sup> The Chinese company launched the first private 5G network in January 2021 at its Europe Supply Center in

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172 Hungarian Parliament (2014) T/13628. számú törvényjavaslat a Magyarország Kormánya és az Oroszországi Föderáció Kormánya közötti nukleáris energia békés célú felhasználása terén folytatandó együttműködésről szóló Egyezmény kihirdetéséről. Magyarország Kormánya, January.

173 Hungarian Parliament (2014) T/140. számú törvényjavaslat az Oroszországi Föderáció Kormánya és Magyarország Kormánya között a Magyarország Kormányának a magyarországi atomerőmű építésének finanszírozásához nyújtandó állami hitel folyósításáról szóló megállapodás kihirdetéséről. Magyarország Kormánya, May.

174 "Hungary PM Orban Condemns EU Sanctions on Russia", *BBC News*, 15 August 2014; Baczynska, Gabriela and John Chalmers (2020) "Hungary's Orban Says EU Should Reverse Russia Sanctions, Not Push Cyprus on Belarus", *Reuters*, 25 September.

175 "Joint Statement on Recent Widespread Protests in the Russian Federation", Norway and the OSCE, 28 January 2021.

176 "Hungary First European Country to Sign up for China Silk Road Plan", *Reuters*, 7 June 2015.

177 Strategic Cooperation Agreement Between the Government of Hungary and Fudan University.

178 Prasad, Ravi (2018) "EU Ambassadors Condemn China's Belt and Road Initiative", *The Diplomat*, 23 April.

179 Emmott, Robin and John Chalmers (2021) "Hungary Blocks EU Statement Criticising China over Hong Kong, Diplomats Say", *Reuters*, 16 April.

180 "Szijjártó ellenzi azokat a Kína elleni szankciókat, amiket jóváhagyott", *Euronews*, 22 March 2021.

181 Peragovics, Tamás (2019) "Brothers in Arms? Recent Developments in Hungary-Huawei Relations in the Context of Global Huawei Phobia", *A Világ gazdasági Intézet blogja*, 27 February.



Páty.<sup>182</sup> Hungary is anticipating economic benefits in exchange for its political and diplomatic support, but the record shows a mixed picture. Chinese FDI in Hungary amounts to 2.4% of the total FDI stock, and, though modest, the figure indicates a Chinese investment presence more robust than in the rest of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region.<sup>183</sup> A key deliverable of the relationship is the Budapest–Belgrade railway project, to be realised within the framework of the BRI. Its construction is expected to cost Hungary approximately EUR 2.1 billion, 85% of which is to be financed from Chinese loans.<sup>184</sup>

Hungary’s official documents scarcely refer to China and Russia. The National Security Strategy emphasises close cooperation with Russia in political and economic matters.<sup>185</sup> Regarding China, the strategy mentions vulnerability connected to Chinese investment in critical infrastructure, a warning disconnected from the reality of Hungary’s strategic partnership with Huawei. Though adopted in April 2020, the document does not speak of any security challenges related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Information warfare appears in the Cyber Security Strategy as a general security challenge.<sup>186</sup> Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Orbán administration has not taken any new security measures to protect against malicious foreign propaganda. The Hungarian discourse is largely in sync with the interests of the narratives of China and Russia. This overlap implies that influence operations from these countries are mostly unnecessary.<sup>187</sup>

## *Government Narrative, Response Measures, and Data Handling During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

### **Government Narrative**

The Hungarian government established an operational body in early 2020 with the objective of centralising epidemic response management and informing the public of new measures through daily press conferences. These briefings have been held online since September 2020, and representatives of the body are not pressed to respond to queries submitted by the press beforehand. This setting allows the government to put forward claims that enter public discourse unscrutinised in the absence of independent media outlets. The press conferences were discontinued on 11 June 2021, after the pandemic’s third wave had been pronounced over in Hungary.<sup>188</sup> They have not been resumed despite the ongoing fourth wave of the pandemic in November 2021.

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182 “Felavatta Magyarország első ipari 5G magánhálózatát a Huawei”, *Telex.hu*, 14 January 2021.

183 “Hungary – an Assessment of Chinese-Hungarian Economic Relations”, Comparative Analysis of the Approach Towards China: V4+ and One Belt One Road.

184 “Aláírták a Budapest-Belgrád vasútvonalról szóló hitelszerződést”, *Kormányzat*, 24 April 2020.

185 1163/2020. (IV. 21.) Korm. határozat Magyarország Nemzeti Biztonsági Stratégiájáról. English version [available here](#).

186 1139/2013. (III. 21.) Korm. határozat Magyarország Nemzeti Kiberbiztonsági Stratégiájáról. English version [available here](#).

187 An interesting example is that RT, the Russian, state-controlled television network, shut down its website after a study was published on how it influences pro-governmental media. Furthermore, RT planned to open an office in Hungary, but later dropped the idea due to the friendly tone of pro-governmental media. See the research: “The impact of Russia’s state-run propaganda apparatus on online media in Hungary – 2010-2017”, Corruption Research Center Hungary; Szicherle, Patrik and Péter Krekó (2021) “Disinformation in Hungary: From fabricated news to discriminatory legislation”, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 7 June.

188 “Operatív törzs: megszűnik az operatív törzs sajtótájékoztatója”, 11 June 2021.



A webpage, [koronavirus.gov.hu](https://koronavirus.gov.hu), was launched to inform citizens and to encourage them to register for vaccination. The data published is, however, often misleading and ill-suited for longitudinal analysis,<sup>189</sup> leading independent media outlets to collect, analyse, and disseminate accurate information.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, the National Public Health Centre publishes guidance on responsible behaviour during a pandemic on its website,<sup>191</sup> but it does not mention social media or online pandemic discourse.

The government's narrative first focused on linking the viral threat to migration. In March 2020, Orbán claimed that 'the historical challenge remains migration,' later adding that 'the epidemic was brought to Hungary by foreigners.'<sup>192</sup> When news broke out of an African strain of the virus (Beta), Orbán stressed the importance of not letting 'people go to Africa lest they bring home the new mutation.'<sup>193</sup> Later, however, he used no such language to issue warnings about the Alpha (then called British) variant.

The domestic discourse changes according to announcements via Orbán's Facebook page or during his regular public radio interviews. On 4 September 2020, Orbán announced that 'Hungary measures the success (of the defence) in human lives.'<sup>194</sup> This performance metric disappeared from communication after the number of deaths skyrocketed during the second and the third waves. The government-friendly media has also kept silent about it.<sup>195</sup> These media outlets praise the authorities' measures and are found to be reporting data selectively to make the government's performance look better than it is.

The Chinese view of the pandemic makes frequent appearances in Hungarian domestic discourse. Chinese Ambassador to Hungary Duan Jielong published a number of articles in *Magyar Nemzet*, an influential right-wing daily newspaper. In February 2020, the Chinese ambassador wrote of his conviction that 'China will be able to defeat the virus,' lauding his country's initial response to the outbreak and thanking Hungary for its assistance already at the early stage of the outbreak.<sup>196</sup> He published another piece titled 'The lies of the American ambassador'<sup>197</sup> in July 2020, criticising Washington's management of the pandemic and its 'relentless provocations against the Chinese people.' That *Magyar Nemzet* allows the ambassador to voice his concerns is indicative of the Orbán regime's tacit endorsement of the Chinese narrative.

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189 Haszán, Zoltán (2020) "A kormány a járványról szinte semmit nem árul el, de legalább megtanítja a matematika használatára a magyarokat", 444, 13 October; Danó, Anna (2020) "Koronavírus: sűrűsödik az adatköd", *Népszava*, 1 December. (There is no English version of [koronavirus.gov.hu](https://koronavirus.gov.hu), it simply links to the government's 'blog' published by the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister: <https://abouthungary.hu/>.)

190 24.hu and telex.hu have their own sections regarding Covid-29, and 444.hu established its own special page particularly for Covid-19 data: <https://444.hu/koronavirus-covid-19-jarvany-data>.

191 [Tanácsok, tájékoztatók](#).

192 Biró, Marianna (2020) "Orbán: A járványt Magyarországra a külföldiek hozták be", *Index*, 13 March.

193 Czinkóczi, Sándor (2021) "Orbán: Ha most kiengedjük az embereket afrikába, és hazahozzák az új mutánsokat, akkor kész vagyunk", 444, 2 March.

194 "Orbán: állig felfegyverkezve várjuk a vírus második hullámát", [Koronavirus.gov.hu](https://koronavirus.gov.hu), 4 September 2020; "Coronavirus – Orbán: Hungary 'in Full Armour' before 2nd Wave", *Hungary Today*, 14 September 2020.

195 On how the Hungarian government controls most of the media in Hungary, see the following short articles: Fábrián, Tamás (2021) "Orbán's influence on the media is without rival in Hungary", *Telex.hu*, 23 March; Kállai, Péter (2019) "Media situation in Hungary", *V4 Human Rights Review*, 1 (2), pp. 20-22.

196 Duan, Jielong (2020) "Kína képes leküzdeni a járványt", *Magyar Nemzet*, 14 February.

197 Duan, Jielong (2020) "Az amerikai nagykövet hazugságai", *Magyar Nemzet*, 30 July.

## Response Measures Taken

To allow rule by decree, Parliament adopted the so-called ‘Enabling Acts’ in March and in June 2020. Such a legislative solution raised the question of constitutionality, not least because it allows the government to inaugurate a state of emergency practically at will.<sup>198</sup> Opposition parties rejected the ‘Enabling Acts’, drawing criticism from the government for obstructing its epidemic management efforts. In actuality, the Acts seemed somewhat unnecessary. Parliament had been in session all along despite the pandemic situation, and the ruling Fidesz party enjoys a constitutional majority, which makes its legislative power close to limitless.

Harsh penalties were introduced for scaremongering. The spreading of false information to ‘undermine the effort to protect the country in a state of emergency’ is a criminal act punishable with up to five years of imprisonment. No charges are filed in most such cases, but arrests and investigations alone are enough to induce a ‘chilling effect’ on public discourse.<sup>199</sup> Another problem is that the distinction between actual disinformation and legitimate criticism is essentially meaningless in the Orbán administration’s perspective. The label ‘fake news’ is systematically deployed against anyone, primarily opposition politicians, who challenges the official handling of the epidemic.

Nonetheless, there are positive examples of state action aimed to curtail genuinely malicious disinformation related to the pandemic.<sup>200</sup> Protests organised by virus-denier György Gődény were broken up. After having been detained in December 2020, Gődény was formally charged with scaremongering in June 2021.<sup>201</sup> In September, he was handed a 1-year prison sentence suspended for two years as a first instance judgement.<sup>202</sup> Paradoxically, Gődény’s personal Facebook and webpage, full of content openly sceptical about the virus and the government’s protection measures, is still regularly updated and remains publicly accessible.<sup>203</sup> However, his anti-virus and anti-vax Facebook group and YouTube page have been deleted.

In February 2021, the government posted a one-minute video on Facebook to dispel conspiracy theories. The video features infectologist János Szlávik rejecting claims that the vaccines are harmful, contain microchips, or cause infertility in women, as baseless.<sup>204</sup> Beyond this minor intervention, however, there is no indication that the government is concerned about fake news spread by foreign actors online. Minister of Justice Judit Varga announced in January 2021 that the government is working on a bill to regulate social media. Its intended purpose is not to fight disinformation, but to deal with what the government alleges to be suppression of conservative

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198 See: Halmi, Gábor, Gábor Mészáros and Scheppele Kim Lane (2020) “From Emergency to Disaster”, *Verfassungsblog*, 30 May.

199 For details with proper examples see the Freedom on the Net 2020 report of Freedom House on Hungary.

200 See for example: A man stated online that people died after being vaccinated – “Operatív törzs: rémhírtérjesztéssel gyanúsítanak egy, a vakcinákról valótlanúságot posztoló férfit”, [koronavirus.gov.hu](https://www.koronavirus.gov.hu), 13 May 2021.

201 “Vádat emeltek Gődény György ellen”, [hvg.hu](https://www.hvg.hu), 21 June 2021.

202 “György Gődény received a suspended prison sentence”, *Newsweek.com*, 21 September 2021.

203 Website of Doktor Gődény.

204 “VAKCINAINFO – Van-e chip a vakcinákban?”, *Magyarország Kormánya*, 12 February 2021.

opinions by large tech companies.<sup>205</sup> This is a key matter, as the Orbán administration prefers to communicate with its supporters via Facebook. The bill is on hold as the government awaits EU regulation on this question.<sup>206</sup>

## Governmental Data Handling and Manipulation

Access to COVID-19-related public information is actively obstructed by the authorities. Ruling by decree has allowed the government to extend the deadlines it has to meet when responding to public interest data requests. Ministries and government agencies answer to requests in 90 days instead of the 15-day deadline under normal circumstances. The justification for such an extension is that the release of COVID-19-related information would set back defensive measures against the pandemic,<sup>207</sup> though the real reason seems to be the Orbán administration's preference for obscurity over transparency. Furthermore, independent media organisations are not allowed to report from hospitals, nor are health care workers free to make public statements.

The authorities demonstrably manipulated information on vaccine effectiveness. A chart was published on [koronavirus.gov.hu](http://koronavirus.gov.hu) in April 2021, which depicts the Chinese Sinopharm and the Russian Sputnik-V as more effective than Pfizer and Moderna. Critics including Hungarian biochemist Katalin Karikó pointed out that the chart directly compared the number of deaths that occurred per 100 thousand people for each vaccine used in Hungary, even though such a comparison is meaningless without control groups or consideration of the number of deaths occurring in the non-vaccinated population.<sup>208</sup> Not only was the chart deceptive, its message that Eastern vaccines are better than Western ones is contradicted by the government's preference for the Pfizer vaccine, which is set aside for chronic patients, the elderly, pregnant women and children under 18.<sup>209</sup>

## Vaccine Procurement, Vaccination Strategy and Discourse

Hungary was the first country in the EU to approve the Sputnik-V vaccine on 21 January,<sup>210</sup> and Sinopharm on 24 February.<sup>211</sup> Notwithstanding the absence of evidence on the safety and efficacy of these vaccines, the government decided to rely on them, and thereby on its Eastern partners, for its domestic vaccination program. The primary objective behind this move was to build popular support in the run-up to the 2022 parliamentary elections by showcasing competence through the government's ability to vaccinate the Hungarian people at a much faster rate than those EU countries employing only Western vaccines. The share of the Hungarian population fully vaccinated stands at 60%, which is below the EU average.<sup>212</sup>

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205 See: "[Making Fidesz hip, no matter the cost](#)", *Telex.hu*, 10 November 2020.

206 "[Gov't Decides to Wait for Joint EU Regulation on Social Media Giants](#)", *Hungary Today*, 15 April 2021.

207 According to the Decision of the Constitutional Court in case IV/100/2021, justifications for extending the deadline to 90 days should be detailed.

208 See [Katalin Karikó's Facebook post](#) on the issue.

209 "[Opposition Slams Gov't for 'Trying to Undermine Trust' in Western Vaccines](#)", *Hungary Today*, 28 April 2021.

210 Thorpe, Nick (2021) "[Coronavirus: Hungary First in EU to Approve Russian Vaccine](#)", *BBC News*, 21 January.

211 "[Hungary First EU Nation to Use China's Sinopharm Vaccine against COVID](#)", *euronews*, 26 February 2021.

212 "[Central Europe struggles with new Covid-19 wave](#)", *EUobserver*, 18 November 2021.

The approval of Sinopharm is telling of the extent to which political considerations tend to overwhelm other concerns. The Chinese vaccine was greenlit after a legal amendment made it possible to sideline the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition (OGYÉI), which is the Hungarian national regulator tasked with vaccine approval. The amendment allows for a vaccine to be used in Hungary if at least one million people had already received it in an EU member state or a candidate member state.<sup>213</sup> Serbia, an EU candidate country and a close friend of China, received its first batch of Sinopharm in mid-January, and inoculated more than one million of its citizens by the time of the amendment. The legal modification in Hungary served to clear the path for Sinopharm and to bypass OGYÉI in the process.<sup>214</sup>

The Orbán administration is heavily critical towards the EU, particularly vis-à-vis the sluggishness of Brussels' vaccine acquisition program. In March 2021, Orbán said that the EU 'messed up' the vaccine purchase,<sup>215</sup> despite the fact that Hungary received more vaccines from the West than from the East.<sup>216</sup> Furthermore, the EU itself does not procure vaccines. It entered into advanced purchase agreements with manufacturers only to guarantee that EU member states of varying bargaining power and financial resources be able to obtain vaccines.<sup>217</sup> In November 2021, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó announced Hungary has no intention to procure more Sinopharm and Sputnik vaccines, and that 80% of the 10 million doses currently in stock in Hungary are Western vaccines.<sup>218</sup>

In another instance, government-friendly media accused EU Commissioner Stella Kyriakides in May 2021 of refusing the authorisation of Eastern vaccines because of a 4-million-euro bribe.<sup>219</sup> In actuality, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) did not authorise Eastern vaccines because the pharmaceutical companies did not apply for the authorisation at the agency. Currently, two Eastern vaccines, the Sputnik and the Sinovac, are under a rolling review by EMA.<sup>220</sup>

Orbán also criticised Western manufacturers in February 2021 for the delay in vaccine delivery. The accusation was politically motivated, again, as he never mentioned that Russia only supplied 25% of the 600 thousand vaccines it was contracted to provide during its first phase of transfer. In March, Fidesz MP János Lázár went further by claiming that the Eastern vaccines helped save the lives of 600 thousand Hungarians, while the slow rollout of Western vaccines led to the death of 20 thousand Hungarians.<sup>221</sup> Another Fidesz politician claimed that the Eastern vaccines allowed for COVID-19 restrictions to be lifted in April, made possible the re-launch of the economy,

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213 A Kormány 19/2021. (I. 28.) Korm. rendelete a biztonságos veszélyhelyzeti gyógyszerellátáshoz szükséges egyes intézkedésekről szóló 488/2020. (XI. 11.) Korm. rendelet módosításáról. *Magyar Közlöny*, 2021/13. p. 301.

214 "Itt a kormányrendelet, amellyel az OGYÉI-t megkerülve engedélyezhetik az egyik kínai vakcinát Magyarországon", *Portfolio.hu*, 28 January 2021.

215 "Orbán Viktor: Brüsszel elszúrta a vakcinabeszerezéseket", *Koronavírus.gov.hu*, 14 March 2021; "Gov't Slams EU Again for 'Scandalously Slow' Rollout of Covid Vaccines, Turns to China", *Hungary Today*, 17 January 2021; "Foreign Ministry Blames Brussels for Slow Vaccine Rollout", *Hungary Today*, 8 January 2021.

216 "Magyarországra érkezett vakcinák típusa és mennyisége", *Koronavírus*, 20 April 2021.

217 European Commission (2021) "EU Vaccines Strategy", 11 May.

218 "Szijjártó Péter: Magyarország nem vesz több keleti vakcinát", *Portfolio.hu*, 22 November 2021.

219 "Visszautasítja Az Európai Bizottság a Ciprusi Biztosról a Magyar Kormány médiában Keringő Álhíreket", *newsbeezer.com*, 7 May 2021.

220 European Medicines Agency (n.d.) "COVID-19 vaccines: under evaluation".

221 Mázsar, Tamás (2021) "Lázár: A keleti vakcinák 600 ezer magyart mentettek meg, a nyugati vakcinák hiánya miatt 20 ezer magyar vesztette életét", *24.hu*, 30 March.

and helped to avert a further economic loss of HUF 500 billion.<sup>222</sup> Besides supporting Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy, these politically skewed statements exonerate the government from its failure to protect the lives of more than 33,700 Hungarians. This is a tragically high figure that puts Hungary fifth in global COVID-19 casualties per million inhabitants.<sup>223</sup>

The Orbán administration is adamant that its reliance on Eastern vaccines was an epidemiologically sound decision, despite mounting evidence to the contrary.<sup>224</sup> It did not publicly address the Chinese vaccine's poor performance. Pro-government media called out Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony, who initiated an antibody testing campaign in the capital in July 2021, 'for spreading disinformation.'<sup>225</sup> The accusation demonstrated, yet again, the weaponisation of fake news to delegitimise concerns raised by the opposition. On 23 July, it was announced that a third dose of the vaccine would be available from 1 August for those who had already received the requisite two doses. The authorities made this option available in response to the fourth wave of the pandemic spreading in Western Europe,<sup>226</sup> but the real concern is the vulnerable segment of the population that is unprotected despite being vaccinated. Sinopharm was administered to 500 thousand elderly citizens in Hungary, despite the fact that its efficacy in those aged 60 and above was known to be questionable in the absence of sufficient testing.<sup>227</sup> Emphasising the uniqueness in Europe of a third dose, the Orbán administration claims to have triumphed over the EU once more. In reality, it is merely trying to fix a domestic problem of its own making.

Viktor Orbán ruled out the possibility of making vaccination against COVID-19 mandatory in Hungary. In October 2021, the government has given employers the right to make it compulsory for employees to be vaccinated. The measure was justified by the fact that the number of deaths started rising again, showing that Hungary is entering a fourth wave despite predictions to the contrary.<sup>228</sup> The government announced a one-week vaccination campaign in November. It is meant primarily to incentivize the unvaccinated to pick up their first doses without prior registration, but the campaign seems more successful among those looking to get their booster shots.

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222 "Menczer: a keleti vakcinák nélkül 500 milliárd forintot vesztett volna Magyarország", [koronavirus.gov.hu](https://koronavirus.gov.hu), 20 May 2021.

223 On 26 November 2021, Hungary ranked fifth globally, with 3,449 deaths per one million people.

224 Results of a COVID-19 antibody examination published on 13 July 2021 showed the underwhelming performance of Sinopharm compared with other vaccines used in Hungary (AstraZeneca, Janssen, Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech, Sputnik-V). 1760 Hungarian citizens above the age of 60 participated in the study, and 23.9% of those who received the Chinese vaccine lacked adequate levels of anti-body protection: "A Fővárosi Önkormányzat által szervezett antitestvizsgálat első eredményei", [Budapest.hu](https://budapest.hu), 13 July 2021. An article written by two Hungarian researchers later confirmed these findings: a sufficient antibody response was missing in around 25% of subjects aged 60, which increased to a staggering 50% for those that were 80 years old. See Ferenci, Tamás and Balázs Sarkadi (2021) "Virus neutralizing antibody responses after two doses of BBIBP-CorV (Sinopharm, Beijing CNBG) vaccine", *Medrxiv*, 29 July.

225 "Újrakezdte a kínai vakcina elleni kampányát az oltásellenes ellenzék", [hirado.hu](https://hirado.hu), 15 July 2021.

226 "Orbán Viktor: Európában elsőként Magyarországon érhető el a harmadik oltás", *Origo*, 23 July 2021.

227 "Új magyar kutatás érkezett a Sinopharmról: gyengén védi az időseket a kínai oltás", *Portfolio.hu*, 20 July 2021.

228 "Where vaccination is as high as in Hungary, there will be no fourth wave," Béla Merkely, rector of Semmelweis University, member of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's epidemiological team of experts: "Practically all unvaccinated people will get infected by coronavirus", *Portfolio.hu*, 7 October 2021.



Authorities issue so-called immunity certificates for people who have recovered from the virus or have been vaccinated. During the third wave, the holders of such a card were allowed to participate in various services and social events within Hungary. Later on, the government began stressing that the vaccine is the only effective measure, and it makes other measures unnecessary. The worsening of the fourth wave contradicted this belief, and the government reinstated the mandatory mask wearing in closed places and the use of immunity certificates for certain activities. These certificates are not as useful for moving across EU countries though, as travel is authorised only for individuals having received a vaccine approved by EMA. Following the introduction of the EU Digital COVID Certificate, Péter Szijjártó rushed to negotiate bilateral agreements allowing travel for Hungarians regardless of vaccine type. Until the end of November 2021, only 24 countries recognised the Hungarian vaccine passport, six of them EU member states.<sup>229</sup>

The Orbán administration not only prohibited free choice between vaccines, it failed to disclose that a probable consequence of inoculating Hungarian citizens with vaccines unapproved by EMA is that they are practically barred from traveling in the EU. The Orbán administration erroneously expected that economic and other considerations would speed up EMA approval processes. Gergely Gulyás, Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, spoke of the need to abolish the EU's discriminatory practice. He reasoned that if a Chinese tourist is welcome in the EU, then citizens of the bloc inoculated with an Eastern vaccine should likewise be free to travel.<sup>230</sup> It seems the third dose may offer a way out of this conundrum. Data shows that only 2% of the booster jabs in Hungary are from Eastern vaccines. With most people receiving a Western vaccine on top of the first two doses, the expectation is that this may allow them to travel more freely in the EU.

### *Pandemic-Related Investments, Vaccine Diplomacy, and Ventilator Diplomacy*

A key investment made in connection to the pandemic is the National Vaccine Plant under construction in Debrecen and expected to start producing a Hungarian vaccine by the end of 2022.<sup>231</sup> The idea of a vaccine factory has been in the pipeline for years, but the pandemic provided added impetus to accelerate the process. Another investment concerns the purchase of a mask-sewing machine from China at a nominal capacity of 2.8 million masks per month.<sup>232</sup> The face masks are made by prisoners in the Sátoraljaújhely prison, and in August 2020 the prison reported an output of a meagre 900 thousand masks over two months.<sup>233</sup> In response, opposition politicians allege that the government overpaid ten-fold for the machine that cost taxpayers EUR 600 thousand.<sup>234</sup> The police is investigating whether the procurement reflects a case of misappropriation of funds.<sup>235</sup>

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229 "Utazás a védettségi igazolvánnyal", Konzuli Tájékoztató, 23 July 2021.

230 "Ezért utazhatunk majd keleti vakcinákkal, így okoskodik a kormány", *Forbes*, 4 May 2021.

231 "Construction of Vaccine Plant to Begin in 100 Days in Debrecen", *MTI-Hungary Today*, 17 May 2021.

232 "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán viewed production of face masks in Sátoraljaújhely prison", Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister/MTI, 5 April 2020.

233 "Az ígért maszkok töredékét gyártotta le a Magyarországra hozott kínai masina", *24.hu*, 2 August 2020.

234 "Opposition Politicians Claim Mask Sewing Machine Purchased by Gov't Four Times Overpriced", *Hungary Today*, 5 October 2021.

235 "Töredékéért vásárolhattuk volna meg a kínai maszkgyártó gépet", *168 óra*, 13 May 2021.



The Orbán administration purchased more than 16,000 ventilator machines from China for a total of HUF 300 billion,<sup>236</sup> however, barely 1,000 of the 16,000 were installed in Hungarian hospitals<sup>237</sup> due to a shortage in trained personnel capable of operating the machines. The rest are being sold or given away for free to countries in need.<sup>238</sup> Taking advantage of its large stock of vaccines, Hungary also donated and lent to countries in need.<sup>239</sup>

## Conclusion

There is no evidence that China and Russia are employing influence campaigns to manipulate Hungarian discourse in accordance with their respective interests. As the Chinese and Russian perspectives are integral to the Orbán administration's ongoing narrative, which emphasises Eastern excellence in vaccination and pandemic management, these efforts are unnecessary. Whatever distortions appear in Hungarian discourse are authored by the government itself. These manipulations are informed by a self-serving logic that seeks to legitimise the reliance on Eastern vaccines by attacking the EU for its alleged slowness and incompetence. As the 2022 elections draw closer, the Orbán administration is likely to further politicise the pandemic and continue its abusive rhetoric towards the West.

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236 Haszán, Zoltán (2020) "Kezd kirajzolódni, hogyan rendelte jelentősen túl magát lélegeztetőgépekből Magyarország", *444.hu*, 26 August.

237 "Ezer lélegeztetőgép sem került ki a kórházakba a beszerzett 17 ezerből", *hvg.hu*, 30 November 2020.

238 Exercising ventilator diplomacy, the Hungarian government donated the following numbers of ventilators: to the Czech Republic (150), Serbia (100), Slovakia (27), Mongolia (33), Palestine (7), Ukraine (50), Lebanon (20), Jordan (10), Tunisia (10), Moldova (20), Kyrgyzstan (20), Transylvania (50), and Uganda (18): "Itt vannak a hivatalos adatok: Csehországnak 3,6 milliárd forint értékű lélegeztetőgépet ajándékoztunk", *hvg.hu*, 13 May 2021; "Most Mongóliának adunk 33 lélegeztetőgépet", *24.hu*, 29 July 2021.

239 These include Bosnia-Herzegovina (Sinopharm, 200K), Montenegro (Sinopharm, 200K), Czech Republic (Pfizer, 200K), Slovenia (AstraZeneca, 300K), Cape Verde (AstraZeneca, 100K), and North Macedonia (AstraZeneca, 6K): "Kétszáz ezer Covid-vakcinát adományoz Magyarország Bosznia-Hercegovinának", TRT, 25 June 2021; "Szijjártó: az eddigi legnagyobb vakcinaadományt kapta Montenegró Magyarországtól", *koronavirus.gov.hu*, 5 July 2021; "Magyarország több mint 200 ezer Pfizer-vakcinát ad Csehországnak kölcsönbe", *24.hu*, 16 July 2021; "Háromszázezer adag AstraZeneca-vakcinát ad Magyarország Szlovéniának", *VilágGazdaság*, 2 June 2021; "Szijjártó: Magyarország 100 ezer adag vakcinát ad a Zöld-foki Köztársaságnak", *koronavirus.gov.hu*, 27 May 2021; "Adunk 6 ezer adag AstraZeneca-vakcinát Észak-Macedóniának", *Privátbankár.hu*, 12 May 2021. See the summarizing article of *Atlatzso.hu*: "Hungary donated coronavirus vaccines and ventilators worth HUF 19 billion abroad", *Atlatzso.hu*, 18 November 2021.

# 6. Serbia: New pandemic, old tricks

Semir Dzebo

## *Serbia's balancing foreign policy*

Serbia's current foreign policy is reminiscent of Yugoslavia's during the heyday of the Non-aligned movement. The acting president and leader of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka – SNS*), Aleksandar Vučić, maintains that EU membership is a strategic priority for Serbia.<sup>240</sup> However, Serbia's traditional cooperation with Russia and increasingly closer relations with China coupled with the illiberal inclinations of the current regime raise concerns that Vučić's commitment to EU membership for Serbia is just a façade used as leverage in the country's foreign policy.

Vučić's authoritarian tendencies are best reflected by his control of the media landscape and eroding electoral integrity, which caused the opposition to boycott the 2020 parliamentary elections.<sup>241</sup> These traits indicate that he does not identify with EU's normative values, and instead, favours illiberalism. For the first time since 2003, Freedom House categorised the country as a hybrid regime and not a democracy.<sup>242</sup> If Serbia were ever to join the EU, Vučić would have to relinquish a carefully crafted autocratic regime in which he holds a firm grip on power.<sup>243</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that Serbia did not open any new chapters in its accession talks with the EU in 2020.

Serbia is also Russia's closest ally in Europe, with the two countries sharing Slavic and Orthodox attributes. It has traditionally relied on Russian veto in the UN Security Council to prevent any decision contrary to its interests, such as Kosovo joining the UN. In turn, as this allows Russia to exert a significant degree of influence in Serbia, the former is content with the status quo on the Kosovo issue. Consequently, even if Vučić were to strike a deal regarding Kosovo, he would have to obtain the blessing of Putin, the most popular foreign leader in Serbia. This would be difficult, however, as the resolution of this conflict would likely weaken Russia's ability to exercise geopolitical influence in the Western Balkans.

Lastly, the country is building increasingly closer relations with China, especially during the pandemic. Before China employed highly successful mask and vaccine diplomacy efforts in Serbia, it had already invested \$4 billion in the country by 2019 as part of the Belt and Road initiative and pledged an additional \$5 billion more in loans and ongoing infrastructure projects.<sup>244</sup> Investments from China, unlike those from the EU, largely come without normative conditionality, making them appealing to the ruling elite in Serbia. The lack of transparency

240 "Vučić: Članstvo u EU prioritet za Srbiju", *Nova.rs*, 13 April 2021.

241 Alizada, Nazifa et al. (2021) "Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021", V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, March.

242 Csaky, Zselyke (2020) "Nations in Transit: Dropping the Democratic Façade", Freedom House.

243 Eror, Aleks (2020) "The EU Needs a New Balkan Strategy", *Foreign Policy* (blog), 13 July.

244 Vuksanovic, Vuk (2020) "China Has Its Eyes on Serbia", *Foreign Policy* (blog), 8 April; Vasovic, Aleksandar (2019) "Serbia Wants Billions in Foreign Loans to Invest in Infrastructure: Minister", *Reuters*, 12 July, Business News section.

associated with PRC investments allows the ruling elites to control economic development and bolster patronage networks. Moreover, the PRC-backed projects are flexible in the sense that they may not be driven by market demand and can be timed to coincide with election cycles, thereby providing a boost to the ruling parties' images as skilled politicians able to attract foreign investments and reduce unemployment.

However, what could be a roadblock in Serbia's relationship with China is the fact that as part of the Washington agreement on the normalisation of economic relations between Serbia and Kosovo, Serbia has pledged that it would not use 5G equipment from 'untrusted vendors'. This puts it in a precarious position of potentially having to back-pedal on the informal understanding it had with China that Huawei would build its 5G infrastructure.<sup>245</sup>

### *Strategic communication policy and government narrative related to the COVID-19 pandemic*

While taking the necessary steps to prepare the country for the pandemic in late February 2020, the tone of the Serbian president and certain members of the pandemic crisis staff indicated dismissal of the seriousness of the situation. In the early stages of the pandemic, President Vučić joked that 'coronavirus does not grow where you put alcohol'.<sup>246</sup> At the same press conference, Dr. Branimir Nestorović, who eventually became known for spreading disinformation related to the pandemic and was a member of the country's ad-hoc crisis staff for the suppression of infectious diseases, described the virus as the 'funniest virus in the history of humanity'.<sup>247</sup> However, the tone changed drastically on March 15th when Vučić introduced a state of emergency, proclaiming that the country was at 'war against an invisible enemy' and threatening up to three years in jail for anyone breaking quarantine rules.<sup>248</sup> Nonetheless, critics questioned the formation of the new crisis staff despite the existence of the Republic Expert Commission for Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases which, according to the law, should be the institution in charge of managing the pandemic. Apart from the confusion resulting from having two parallel institutions managing the pandemic, the fact that the crisis staff was a government body made it harder for media to gain access to information of public significance due to the particularities of the Serbian law.<sup>249</sup>

From then on, the government's official narrative was aimed at aggrandising the president's efforts in procuring medical equipment and vaccines. In the pro-government media, he was depicted as a capable statesman fighting what he described as a global 'war' for vaccines and medical equipment.<sup>250</sup> Vučić was also portrayed as a selfless, tirelessly working, and diplomatically savvy

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245 Vladislavljev, Stefan and Majda Ruge (2020) "Serbia's 5G Deal with Washington: The Art of Muddling through – European Council on Foreign Relations"; ECFR (blog), 22 September; Đurđević, Mila (2020) "Šta odlaže uvođenje 5G u Srbiji?", *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 29 December.

246 Janković, Marija (2020) "Alkohol gde stavite, tu korona virus ne raste' - koliko su tačne izjave političara i lekara iz Srbije", *BBC News na srpskom*, 3 March.

247 Ibid.

248 "U Srbiji uvedeno vanredno stanje zbog korona virusa", *BBC News na srpskom*, 15 March 2020.

249 Đurđević, Mila (2020) "Srbija sa dva paralelna stručna tela za suzbijanje pandemije", *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 31 July.

250 "Vučić za RTS: Vlada rat za vakcine, u maju i novembru po 30 evra svima, penzionerima još 50 evra", *Radio Televizija Srbije*, 26 January 2021.

leader, due to the shroud of secrecy around purchasing medical equipment and vaccines<sup>251</sup> coupled with the amplification of his personal connections and diplomatic efforts, particularly those with China.

When it came to communication projects, the government launched a COVID-19 section on its official website with government regulations, statistics, and links to e-services where they could schedule PCR tests and express interest in getting vaccinated.<sup>252</sup> Eventually, the government inaugurated a standalone website solely dedicated to informing its citizens about the vaccination process in the country.<sup>253</sup> There were also attempts to centralise the dissemination of information. A short-lived decree came into effect on 31 March, 2020, stipulating that the head of the crisis staff, a position held by the Serbian PM, was the only relevant authority in charge of informing the public on pandemic-related developments.<sup>254</sup> The decree was revoked a few days later following an international outcry over the arrest of a journalist who published a story on the alleged chaotic state and chronic lack of supplies in a hospital in Novi Sad, the administrative centre of Serbia's Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.<sup>255</sup>

### *Position on social platform regulation*

Section 343 of the criminal law of the Republic of Serbia provides the foundation on which the government based its fight against disinformation during the pandemic.<sup>256</sup> This section criminalises the creation and/or dissemination of fake news and disinformation, which consequently causes panic, serious disturbance of the public order, or significantly impedes the implementation of decisions made by relevant authorities, proscribing three months to three years of imprisonment and a fine if found guilty. Furthermore, if such false claims are made via the media or similar means of information dissemination (including social media), then this implies that a more serious form of this crime has been committed and it recommends a sentence of six months to five years of imprisonment if found guilty.

While no official statistics are available on the total number of arrests, indictments or verdicts connected to the aforementioned law, there were many reports of individuals being arrested for spreading disinformation on social media.<sup>257</sup> The most high-profile case related to this law and its application during the pandemic occurred on April 1, 2020 when the Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime brought in four people for questioning. Among them was Dr. Jovana Stojković,

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251 Jelovac, Jelena (2021) "[Vakcine, respiratori, spomenik: Sve Vučićeve tajne nabavke](#)", NOVA portal, 26 January 2021.

252 Serbian Government's [COVID-19 website](#).

253 Serbian Government's [vaccinations website](#).

254 "[Zaključak \(Vlade o Informisanju Stanovništva o Stanju i Posledicama Zarazne Bolesti COVID-19 Izazvane Virusom SARS-CoV-2\) : 48/2020-8](#)", Pravno Informacioni Sistem Republike Srbije, 28 March 2020.

255 "[Serbia to Revoke Coronavirus Information Control Decree after Criticism](#)", *Reuters*, 2 April 2020; Lalić, Ana (2020) "[KC Vojvodine pred pucanjem: Bez zaštite za medicinske sestre](#)", NOVA portal, 1 April.

256 The intentional dissemination of disinformation was defined as a criminal act in Section 218 of the 1977 Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, which, at the time, was one of the six constituent republics of Yugoslavia. This criminal act slightly changed its form in 2006 when it was defined in the abovementioned Section 343. To see the respective versions, please see "[Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia \(1977, Amended 2003\)](#)", accessed 31 July 2021; and "[Krivični Zakonik Republike Srbije](#)", accessed 14 May 2021.

257 "[Uhapšen zbog širenja dezinformacija na Facebooku](#)", *NI*, 17 March 2020; Savatović, Mladen (2020) "[U zatvoru 50 dana zbog širenja panike i vređanja SNS](#)", *NI*, 9 May 2020; "[Krivična prijava zbog izazivanja panike i nereda](#)", Ministarstvo Unutrašnjih Poslova Republike Srbije, 20 March 2020.

the president of the far-right 'Živim za Srbiju' (I live for Serbia) movement, known in public for her anti-vaccination and anti-mask stances.<sup>258</sup> The same day she was brought in for questioning, the Facebook page of her movement 'Pokret Živim za Srbiju – Dr. Jovana Stojković' featured a post with the logo of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs, stating that the page was now 'confiscated'.<sup>259</sup>

In conclusion, it is clear that the government was very willing to use an existing law that criminalised the spread of disinformation to regulate social media. Time will show whether arrests made in relation to this law and the pandemic will result in indictments and convictions, as one legal expert cautions that the allegations are hard to prove in the court of law due to the disturbance of public order and hindrance of implementation of decision and measure by relevant authorities not having an easily verifiable legal standard.<sup>260</sup> Another concern is the extent to which the government was using this law and the pandemic to selectively target those who were critical of its approach, while not applying the same standards towards the pro-regime media.<sup>261</sup>

### *New pandemic – old geopolitical disinformation narratives*

Observing the pandemic-related disinformation in Serbia via geopolitical lenses, one can conclude that the pre-existing foreign policy worldviews were adapted to this new context. A Bosnian and Herzegovinian fact-checking portal, Raskrinkavanje.ba, conducted an analysis of the geopolitical narratives present in disinformation spread in the Western Balkans (with a particular focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) in which they conclude that these contained 'a strong anti-Western sentiment'.<sup>262</sup> The EU and USA were portrayed as 'weak, unprepared, and lacking solidarity' while Russia and China were praised for their capabilities and generosity in providing aid.<sup>263</sup> A disinformation-laden narrative of EU abandonment, first of Italy and eventually of Serbia, was promoted with false claims of the EU not allowing Russian planes to deliver humanitarian aid and disappointed Italians replacing EU flags with those of China and Russia.<sup>264</sup> On the other hand, disinformation that featured Russia and China in primary roles painted a positive image of them even in cases when they were allegedly engaging in 'authoritarian and dishonest behaviour'.<sup>265</sup> Non-existent draconian measures ascribed to Russian president Vladimir Putin were written about with approval while China's purported use of the pandemic to gain an upper hand in the stock market was considered ingenious.<sup>266</sup> These anti-EU, anti-Western, pro-Russian, and pro-Chinese disinformation narratives already existed and were consistent before the pandemic and were thus simply adapted to fit this new context.<sup>267</sup>

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258 Bogdanović, Nevena (2020) "Kakve kazne prete antivakserima u Srbiji?", *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 2 April.

259 Facebook post by Živim Za Srbiju, archived 15 May 2021.

260 Bogdanović (2020).

261 *Ibid.*

262 Cvjetičanin, Tijana et al. (2020) "Međunarodna Politika Kroz Prizmu Dezinformacija", Udruženje građana 'Zašto ne', November.

263 *Ibid.*

264 *Ibid.*; Lakić, Mladen (2020) "Članice EU Nisu Zabranile Let Ruskog Humanitarnog Aviona", *Raskrinkavanje.ba*, 28 March; Lakić, Mladen (2020) "Ne, Italijani Ne Skidaju Masovno EU Zastave Niti Je Pomoć EU Za Italiju Izostala", *Raskrinkavanje.ba*, 1 April.

265 Cvjetičanin, Tijana (2020) "Fact-Checking in the Balkans While the Sky Is Falling", *DigiComNet on Medium*, 9 August.

266 *Ibid.*

267 Cvjetičanin et al. (2020, "Međunarodna Politika").

The government did almost nothing to combat these geopolitical disinformation narratives. On the contrary, the disinformation sphere in Serbia is dominated by domestic pro-regime media.<sup>268</sup> While these outlets are primarily used by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and its allies to discredit and attack the opposition, they also promote geopolitical narratives favoured by the current regime and the Serbian public at large.<sup>269</sup> Russia and its leader Vladimir Putin are almost universally popular, among both the ruling regime and the opposition. Being associated with them benefits the politicians; the disinformation pieces they publish, which portray Putin and Russia positively, are well received by the readership of the aforementioned pro-government media outlets. Moreover, the state-owned media, as well as media owned by individuals close to the ruling regime, is intensely promoting a positive image of China in Serbia and this process occasionally relies on disinformation to achieve its ends. In this aim, they are also helped by Twitter bots. One study of 30,000 tweets containing the words ‘Serbia’ and ‘China’ found that 71.9% of them came from bots which praised the two countries and criticised the EU.<sup>270</sup> As long as the EU does not pressure Serbia into more decisively choosing its foreign policy course and allows it to play all sides, it will likely remain the loser in the disinformation narratives in the country.

### *Some sources of help more lauded than others*

China has successfully used the pandemic to increase its influence in Serbia via so-called ‘mask’ and ‘vaccine’ diplomacy, bringing the two countries closer than ever. In mid-March 2020, the president of Serbia was very critical of the EU following the European Commission’s decision to tighten the rules regulating the export of medical supplies to non-EU countries, labelling the idea of European solidarity as a ‘fairy tale on paper’.<sup>271</sup> Instead, he appealed for help from his ‘brother and friend’, Chinese president Xi Jinping.<sup>272</sup> A week later, China sent a team of medical experts together with test kits and protective equipment. Serbia’s president greeted the experts at the airport and kissed the Chinese flag in a gesture of gratitude.<sup>273</sup> The EU reacted by announcing an aid package worth 93 million Euros to help Serbia.<sup>274</sup> Soon after, Russia sent 11 planes filled with protective equipment and military personnel as well.<sup>275</sup>

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268 Greene, Samuel et al. (2021) “[Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them](#)”, European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs.

269 *Ibid.*; Burazer, Nikola (2021) “[Between geopolitics and state capture: Disinformation in the Western Balkans – USA-UE](#)”, accessed 15 May 2021.

270 “[A Bot Network Arrived in Serbia along with Coronavirus](#)”, Digital Forensic Center, 13 April 2020; for other uses of Twitter bots on behalf of the ruling party in Serbia, see Bush, Daniel (2020) “[‘Fighting Like a Lion for Serbia’: An Analysis of Government-Linked Influence Operations in Serbia \(TAKEDOWN\)](#)”, 2 April.

271 “[President Vučić Declares the State of Emergency on the Entire Territory of Serbia](#)”, The President of the Republic of Serbia, 15 March 2020; “[China, on Virus PR Offensive, Sends Masks and Experts Abroad](#)”, *AP NEWS*, 21 March 2020.

272 *AP NEWS* (2020, “[China, on Virus PR Offensive](#)”).

273 “[Serbia Sets the Stage for Beijing’s Mask Diplomacy](#)”, *France 24*, 2 April 2020.

274 “[The European Union Announces 93 Million Euros to Serbia to Fight Coronavirus](#)”, The Delegation of the European Union (EU) to the Republic of Serbia, 26 March 2020.

275 “[Russia Sends Medical Aid to Serbia to Fight Coronavirus](#)”, *Reuters*, 3 April 2020.



Serbia remained true to its unaligned foreign policy in the latter stages of the pandemic, as well. The country's leadership was proactive in acquiring supply deals with vaccine manufacturers, first securing a deal with Pfizer, followed quickly by deals for the Russian Sputnik V vaccine and Chinese Sinopharm. Consequently, Serbia was the first country in Europe to use the Sinopharm vaccine while also, alongside Belarus and Russia, the first to use the Sputnik V.<sup>276</sup> In the end, the country's successful efforts put the citizens of Serbia in a unique position to choose which vaccine they would like to be inoculated with: Pfizer, Sputnik V, Sinopharm, AstraZeneca, or Moderna.<sup>277</sup> Moreover, Serbia's array of vaccines enabled it to engage in its own vaccine diplomacy efforts vis-à-vis neighbouring countries, all the while taking jabs at the EU for delaying the delivery of vaccines ordered via the COVAX scheme.<sup>278</sup>

There are two important observations to note regarding the abovementioned events. The first is that the EU, pandemic or not, faces an uphill battle in winning the hearts and minds of Serbia's citizens. Despite the fact that the EU has been the country's biggest donor and lender for years<sup>279</sup>, a 2019 survey showed that only 28% of the Serbian population think the EU is its biggest donor, compared to 27% who think it is Russia and 20% who believe it is China.<sup>280</sup> Hence, it is unsurprising that even after allocating 93 million Euro in aid and having assisted the Serbian health care sector for the last 20 years<sup>281</sup>, the display of gratitude towards the EU from Serbian leadership was not as spectacular as the one that China got. In addition, *Informer*, a leading pro-government tabloid and a major player in the disinformation landscape in the Western Balkans<sup>282</sup>, paid for billboards in Belgrade boasting an image of Xi Jinping with the text 'Thank you, brother Xi' ('*Hvala, brate Si*').<sup>283</sup> The second important development to note is the fact that the Chinese aid was lauded more than the Russian, which could be a signal that Serbia is increasingly turning towards Beijing, looking for additional leverage in its relationship with the EU.<sup>284</sup>

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276 "Serbia Starts Inoculations With Russia's Sputnik-V Vaccine", *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 6 January 2021; "Serbia Becomes First European Nation To Use China's Sinopharm Vaccine", *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 20 January 2021.

277 These were the options offered on 15 April 2021 and could change in the future.

278 Kovacevic, Danijel (2021) "Serbia's Vucic Delivers COVID-19 Vaccines to Bosnia", *Balkan Insight* (blog), 2 March.

279 Vuksanovic, Vuk (2020) "From Russia With Love? Serbia's Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and Its Geopolitical Implications", *Medium*, 26 June.

280 "Western Balkans Regional Poll", International Republican Institute - Center for Insights in Survey Research, March 2020.

281 Ruge, Majda (2020) "Serbia's Coronavirus Diplomacy Unmasked – European Council on Foreign Relations", ECFR (blog), 26 March.

282 Dzebo, Semir (2020) "The Business of Misinformation - Serbia: Misinformation Inc.", Budapest: Center for Media, Data, and Society | CEU School of Public Policy, March; Cvjetičanin, Tijana et al. (2019) "Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH", Citizens' Association 'Why Not', April.

283 N.I (2020) "ČELIČNO PRIJATELJSTVO ZA SVA VREMENA! Hvala Kini i sa bilborda! (VIDEO)", *Informer*, 30 March.

284 Vuksanovic (2020, "From Russia With Love?").

# 7. Sweden: Exceptionalism in an infodemic?

Elsa Hedling

## *Swedish foreign policy and relations with Russia and China*

Swedish foreign policy is anchored in international cooperation on various fronts and with varying implications for participation. Russia is the historical adversary in Sweden and remains a perceived threat and therefore a motivating factor for Sweden's close cooperation with NATO. Sweden is not a formal member of NATO (a topic of perennial debate) but enjoys a special relationship with NATO.<sup>285</sup> Sweden cooperates with NATO in peace-support operations, military exercises and through information exchange. Sweden's close ties to NATO have been negatively perceived in Russia, and the prospect of NATO membership has been met by threats. Sweden has also opposed Russia's efforts of expanding its sphere of influence (most notably in Ukraine) through an active role in EU foreign policy.<sup>286</sup> Sweden first proposed the Eastern Partnership (EaP) together with Poland in 2008 and the initiative was launched during Sweden's European Council presidency in 2009. Sweden, seen as one of the EaP's key defenders in its early years, was deemed an important stakeholder as an 'old member state'.<sup>287</sup> The EaP was perceived by Russia as an intrusion into its sphere of influence.<sup>288</sup> The subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 was seen as a 'wake-up call', and Sweden has since increased its defence spending and reinstated military conscription (since 2017). In the foreign policy declaration of 2015, the government declared that 'digital propaganda wars' are the 'new security threats' that 'must be fought'.<sup>289</sup> Moreover, the launch of Sweden's feminist foreign policy since 2014 has been projected as a contestation of the Russian traditional values doctrine.<sup>290</sup> The feminist foreign policy has also been targeted by Russian disinformation. For example, the EU's disinformation database (EUvsDisinfo) includes several examples of how the Swedish feminist foreign policy is described as 'totalitarian', 'bullying of men' and a contradiction to Swedish migration policy in Russian media outlets (e.g., Berestje News, Geopolitica.ru and Katehon.com).<sup>291</sup>

Compared to Russia, China is a more recent concern in Swedish foreign policy. Sweden-China relations have deteriorated since 2016. A series of diplomatic crises, among them a series of hostile interactions, were sparked by the imprisonment of a Swedish book publisher (who had criticised Beijing). The Chinese embassy in Stockholm has conducted a campaign on public criticism of

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285 Simons, Greg, Andrey Manoylo and Philipp Trunov (2019) "Sweden and the NATO debate: views from Sweden and Russia", *Global Affairs* 5 (4-5): 335-345.

286 Hedling, Elsa and Douglas Brommesson (2017) "Security through European Integration or Flexible Autonomy: Ambivalence in Sweden's Position on the Eastern Partnership?", *Global Affairs* 3 (3): 237-250.

287 Copsey, Nathaniel and Karolina Pomorska (2014) "The Influence of Newer Member States in the European Union: The Case of Poland and the Eastern Partnership", *Europe-Asia Studies* 66 (3): 421-443.

288 Gahler, Michael (2021) "Boosting the EU's Soft Power in Eastern Partnership Countries?", *European View* 20 (1): 14-22.

289 Government Offices of Sweden (2015) "Foreign Policy Declaration".

290 Rothschild, Nathalie (2014) "Swedish Women vs. Vladimir Putin", *Foreign Policy* 5.

291 European External Action Service (2021) "Sweden' + 'feminist'", *Euvsdisinfo database*, accessed 2 August 2021.

media outlets, journalists, scholars, human rights activists, political parties and authorities.<sup>292</sup> There is also growing awareness of – and great concern about – the multitude of Chinese influence operations in Sweden. In 2020, Sweden was the first European country to close down the last of its Confucius Institutes (Beijing-funded programmes that teach Chinese language and culture).<sup>293</sup> In the same year, Sweden blocked two Chinese companies, Huawei and ZTE, from supplying core 5G infrastructure (after a risk analysis by the Armed Forces and the Security Police).<sup>294</sup> Huawei appealed Sweden’s decision to be excluded from 5G networks but the appeal was denied in June 2021, after the court reaffirmed that Huawei products could pose a threat to Swedish national security.<sup>295</sup> Sweden also joined other European governments in introducing legislation to prevent foreign takeovers of sensitive companies (the EU framework for screening of foreign direct investment), a move that has been regarded as a further effort to limit Chinese influence. Moreover, Sweden established a new national knowledge centre on China in 2021 which made headlines when its director, Björn Jerdén was individually targeted by Chinese sanctions (following EU sanctions against China over its abuses against the Muslim minority in Xinjiang).

### *Strategic communication policy in Sweden*

In similarity with other European countries and EU institutions, official political communication has undergone several waves of professionalisation in the last few decades.<sup>296</sup> In recent years, growing awareness of change in the international information environment has led Sweden to strengthen its frameworks and practices of strategic communication. Specifically, there was concern for foreign interference during the 2018 election which led to efforts to raise awareness among voters. Analyses found an increase in digital disinformation during the election period (especially through political bots), but did not deem this to have had significant impact on the election results.<sup>297</sup>

A number of government initiatives have been launched to strengthen Sweden’s societal resilience since 2018. The government established an inquiry on disinformation, propaganda, and online hate speech in 2018 that recommended the adoption of a national strategy for strengthened resilience in 2020 (yet to be adopted).<sup>298</sup> As a result of the report of another public inquiry investigating how Sweden should improve its psychological defence adapted to current challenges, the government is in the process of establishing a new governmental agency. The report concluded that the agency should establish new ways of identifying disinformation as well as coordinate and provide support for other government agencies facing these challenges. The agency for psychological defence, set to be operational in 2022, will be officially tasked with countering disinformation as well as to ‘identify, analyse and confront influencing operations’ and ‘to

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292 Jerdén, Björn and Viking Bohman (2019) *China’s Propaganda Campaign in Sweden, 2018–2019*, Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI).

293 Nyberg, Micke (2019) “Klart: Luleå kommun säger upp kritiserat avtal med Kina”, *SVT Nyheter*, 2 December.

294 Duxbury, Charlie, Stuart Lau and Laurens Cerulus (2021) “The EU’s Front Line with China: Stockholm”, *Politico*, 10 February.

295 “Förbudet mot produkter från Huawei i svenska 5G-nät står fast”, Swedish courts, accessed 16 August 2021.

296 Hedling, Elsa (2021) “Transforming practices of diplomacy: the European External Action Service and digital disinformation”, *International Affairs* 97 (3): 841-859.

297 “Säkerhetspolisens årsbok 2018”, SÄPO Swedish Security Police, accessed 16 August 2021.

298 Government Official Reports Series (2020) “Det demokratiska samtalet i en digital tid - Så stärker vi motståndskraften mot disinformation, propaganda och näthat”, edited by Ministry of Culture.

strengthen the overall societal resilience'.<sup>299</sup> The more precise tactics to be used are currently being investigated.

The Swedish government also engages in efforts to safeguard Sweden's image abroad through practices of digital diplomacy and online nation branding.<sup>300</sup> These practices are mostly coordinated by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Institute (the state-funded public diplomacy agency that promotes interest and trust in Sweden abroad). The Swedish Institute also monitors and analyses the image of Sweden through studies and annual reports.<sup>301</sup>

The government narrative during the pandemic has centred around trust in science and expertise and an analysis of the Swedish context. The liberal approach without lockdowns and enforced regulation has been framed as an expert-led strategy as opposed to a politicised strategy. The liberal approach that favours self-regulation has been determined suitable to the Swedish context of high levels of trust between the state and the citizens and between the government and its expert public agencies.<sup>302</sup> The Swedish narrative has therefore been focused on Swedish exceptionalism. In accordance with this framing, the Public Health Agency of Sweden and the state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell have been central figures in the crisis communication narrative.<sup>303</sup> Crisis communication has been projected through the Public Health Agency websites and press conferences held by Tegnell, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven and other representatives of the government and expert public agencies. The press conferences have continuously underlined the importance of the role that citizens play in stopping the spread of the virus and thereby the ability to avoid measures to enhance law enforcement that would restrict citizens' rights.<sup>304</sup>

Sweden's efforts in crisis communication were not initiated until the 19 March 2020 when the government tasked MSB (the Civil Contingencies Agency) to build crisis resilience and reduce vulnerabilities on a whole-of-society basis. MSB has since developed targeted efforts to increase local crisis communication and dialogue with vulnerable groups, most notably through training of communicators and more targeted information campaigns (for instance towards minority groups in vulnerable areas).<sup>305</sup>

### *Social platform regulation*

Sweden was a pioneer in abolishing censorship (in 1766) and takes pride in its history of press freedom legislation. Sweden is also a long-time supporter of Internet freedom and digital rights. Like elsewhere, the increasing power and reach of social media companies have been debated in

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299 Löfvén, Stefan (2018) "Sveriges Säkerhet I En Ny Värld", News release from the Swedish Government, 14 January.

300 Aggestam, Karin, Annika Bergman Rosamond and Elsa Hedling (2021) "Feminist digital diplomacy and foreign policy change in Sweden", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*.

301 See *Swedish Institute on 'communicating Sweden'*, accessed 16 August 2021.

302 Lindström, Martin (2021) "Covid-19-pandemin och den Svenska strategin", *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 123 (5): 93- 124.

303 Bergman Rosamond, Annika and Elsa Hedling (2021) "Celebrity diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic? The chief state epidemiologist as "the face of the Swedish experiment", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*.

304 Giritli Nygren, Katarina and Anna Olofsson (2021) "Swedish Exceptionalism, Herd Immunity and the Welfare State: A Media Analysis of Struggles over the Nature and Legitimacy of the Covid-19 Pandemic Strategy in Sweden", *Current Sociology* 69 (4): 529-546.

305 Svenonius, Ola (2020) "Perspektiv på pandemin - Inledande analys och diskussion av beredskapsfrågor i ljuset av Coronakrisen", in *Perspektiv på pandemin*, edited by Eva Mittermaier, Niklas Granholm och Ester Veibäck, Stockholm: FOI, Swedish Defence Research Agency.

Sweden. There is broad consensus around the safeguarding of freedoms of expression but also awareness of the need to strengthen Internet governance. The government narrative on social platform regulation has been centred on efforts to enhance the transparency and increase the legal responsibilities of social media companies. The Swedish government has supported the EU Commission in the process of developing the Digital Services Act (DSA). A main concern concerning the DSA in Sweden has been the perceived risk of engaging in censorship by introducing a state agency to monitor illegal content. The government has initiated a consultation process with stakeholders in Sweden to establish the implications of the DSA.<sup>306</sup>

### *The distinctive Swedish approach and COVID-19 related disinformation*

Sweden's distinctive approach to the pandemic based on liberal voluntary recommendations and nudging, as opposed to a strict lockdown of society, has influenced the debate about and the mapping of COVID-19-related disinformation. The government has to a large extent based its policy on the Public Health Agency recommendations of physical distancing rather than on laws and regulations issued by the cabinet and legislature. This approach, which stands out internationally, has been critiqued both inside and outside Sweden, and is often blamed for Sweden's high death toll.<sup>307</sup>

The Swedish approach has caused COVID-19-related disinformation to take on two distinctive forms: 1. disinformation about the virus (including its origin, its spread, its mortality, and the vaccines) and 2. disinformation about the Swedish approach (its political motivation, its implementation, and its results). In the latter category, the Swedish approach has been depicted as the 'odd one out' and reflective of domestic turmoil, potentially harming Sweden's international reputation.<sup>308</sup> There are also correlating factors between the two: the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) has identified the liberal approach as a potential 'stressor' for the susceptibility to disinformation about the virus. Uncertainty in the absence of clear directives can cause certain audiences to actively look for alternative sources of information and 'truths'.<sup>309</sup> In addition, the outlier strategy has led Sweden to become a topic in disinformation narratives in foreign states.<sup>310</sup>

Disinformation about the virus in Sweden has mirrored the global 'infodemic' including stories of the intentional spread of a 'plandemic' by foreign actors (China, the US, global elites or corporate interests such as big pharma).<sup>311</sup> The 5G conspiracy theory gained some traction in Sweden and a number of incidents of sabotaged antennas have been reported. There has also been a number of disinformation narratives related to the spread of the disease, its 'actual' mortality, and strategies to avoid getting infected. Disinformation about the virus have mainly been spread through social media most commonly through Tiktok, Instagram and Facebook.<sup>312</sup> Disinformation narratives

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306 Davidsson, Maria (2021) "Ygeman: vill ha tydligare reglering av techjättar", *NyTeknik*, 25 January, accessed 16 August 2021.

307 Claeson, Mariam and Stefan Hanson (2021) "Covid-19 and the Swedish Enigma", *The Lancet* 397 (10271): 259-261.

308 Hellman, Maria (2021) "Infodemin under pandemin: Rysk informationspåverkan mot Sverige", *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 123 (5): 451-474.

309 Svenonius (2020), p. 46.

310 Hellman (2021).

311 Ricknell, Emma (2021) "Smittan som spred sig snabbare än coronaviruset. Falsk och vilseledande information under coronakrisen 2020", *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 123 (5): 475-490.

312 Önnersfors, Andreas (2021) "Konspirationsteorier och Covid-19: Mekanismerna bakom en snabbväxande samhällsutmaning", MSB (Swedish Civil Contingency Agency).



about the vaccines have also circulated and the government has attempted to counter false information through enhanced communication efforts, especially after the growing concerns resulting from reports of fatal side effects related to the AstraZeneca vaccine (AZN-L).<sup>313</sup>

Disinformation about the Swedish approach is a highly politicised matter. The Swedish approach has been both defended and critiqued within Sweden, causing loosely coordinated advocacy groups to form. Some of these groups have incited debate by actively seeking to change the Swedish policy by influencing foreign opinion (through strategies discussed in closed Facebook groups, most notably one called ‘Mediawatchdogs Sweden’ and a group of scientists known as ‘the 22’). In February 2021, Swedish public radio aired an investigative report uncovering the activities of the above-mentioned group, such as their efforts to influence foreign governments to intervene in Sweden and potentially harming the image of Sweden abroad by spreading false information.<sup>314</sup> The radio segment caused a public debate in Sweden about the difficulty in drawing a line between criticism and disinformation.<sup>315</sup>

International media have published a large volume of negative stories about the Swedish approach described as ‘the herd immunity strategy’ and ‘risky experiment’. Some of these stories are results of convergence between domestic advocacy and foreign influence campaigns. For instance, both Chinese- and Russian-owned publications (the Global Times, RiaFan.ru) have suggested that the international community should intervene in Sweden.<sup>316</sup> The Swedish strategy has also been used by protesters to resist government regulations and lockdowns in other countries.<sup>317</sup> Political divides and a polarised debate have therefore led to both sides blaming the other for engaging in disinformation about the Swedish approach. For instance, critics of the Swedish approach have accused the government and the Public Health Agency of deliberately misleading the public (through selective information) of the effectiveness of the strategy. Mediawatchdogs Sweden and other prominent critics of the Swedish approach have been accused of spreading lies about active efforts to spread the virus, about a silenced opposition, about ‘sacrificing elderlies’ and about violations of human rights. The Swedish public service has also been critiqued for an unbalanced reporting of these divides, which has further politicised the approach.<sup>318</sup>

### *Absence of mask or vaccine diplomacy*

Sweden was not able to contribute to the EU’s joint delivery of protective equipment to China in the beginning of the pandemic due to national shortages, nor did Sweden later actively participate in efforts of mask diplomacy. A key debate in relation to the Swedish approach to the COVID-19 pandemic has been the role of mask wearing to stop the spread. The Public Health Agency did not

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313 Haglund, Anja (2021) “Rysk desinformation angriper vaccin”, *Hallandsposten*, 21 March, accessed 16 August 2021.

314 Janzon, Beatrice and Ulrika Björkstén (2021) “Dold Facebookgrupp Försöker Påverka Svenska Intressen Utomlands”, *Radio Sweden*, 9 February.

315 Carlsson Tenitskaja, Alexandra (2021) “Facebookgruppens Medlemmar Träder Fram: ‘Vi Svartmålas’”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 16 February.

316 Jerdén, Björn (2020) “Sweden”, in: *Covid-19 and Europe-China Relations a Country-Level Analysis*, edited by John Seaman, European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC): 68-70.

317 Svenonius (2020).

318 Pamment, James (2021) “Does Public Diplomacy Need a Theory of Disruption? The Role of Nonstate Actors in Counter-branding the Swedish COVID-19 Response”, *Journal of Public Diplomacy* 1 (1): 80-110.



recommend the use of masks outside the health industry and even questioned their usefulness in containing the pandemic. Arguments used to question the use of masks have revolved around the risk of installing a false sense of security and a lapse in social distancing (identified as more important). In December 2020 when reported cases peaked in Sweden, the government changed its recommendations and issued a statement to recommend the use of masks on public transportation during rush hours, but only for those over 18 without a reserved seat. There were then reports of poor compliance with these recommendations. As a result of the relative absence of strict regulations, mask wearing has been far less adopted in Sweden than elsewhere and there is no broad audience for mask diplomacy. The question of mask wearing has, however, been widely debated in Sweden and is a key subject of criticism in international media.

Early on, Sweden did experience a shortage of masks in the health sector. China offered to facilitate Sweden's purchases of medical supplies from China but there are no reports on donations of supplies.<sup>319</sup> Some private companies communicated that they donated masks to the Swedish health sector 'with the help of Chinese distributors', but there was no report of these donations in the news media.<sup>320</sup> The Swedish foreign minister commented on China's mask diplomacy as efforts to improve its reputation and the Swedish news media discussed it as a strategy to change the narrative of China's blame in the pandemic.<sup>321</sup>

Sweden did not purchase vaccines from actors outside the framework of the EU vaccine strategy. Sweden has thus far experienced a relatively high level of vaccine compliance, but there have been reports of vaccine hesitancy and of people refusing the AZN-L vaccine after negative news stories of fatal side effects (Sweden initially paused the AZN-L and then resumed to use it only for persons over 65).<sup>322</sup>

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319 Jerdén (2020), p. 68.

320 "Mio Donerar 15.200 Ansiktsmasker Till Sjukvården", Mio news release, 21 April 2020, accessed 16 August 2021.

321 Sundén, Jesper (2020) "Det kommer inte att gå tillbaka till det normala", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 2 July.

322 "Fortsatt stor vilja att vaccinera sig mot Covid-19", Folkhälsomyndigheten (Public Health Agency), accessed 16 August 2021.

# Authors

**Corneliu Bjola** is Associate Professor in Diplomatic Studies at the University of Oxford, and Head of the Oxford Digital Diplomacy Research Group.

**Dennis Broeders** is Full Professor of Global Security and Technology and Senior Fellow of The Hague Program for Cyber Norms at Institute of Security and Global Affairs of Leiden University.

**Semir Dzebo** is a doctoral candidate at the Department of International Relations at Central European University in Vienna and a researcher at Raskrinkavanje.ba, a fact-checking organization in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Martin Fertmann** is junior researcher for content moderation and international law at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans-Bredow-Institut and fellow at the Centre for Law in the Digital Transformation and the Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy Graduate School of Law at the University of Hamburg.

**Elsa Hedling** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Political Science, Lund University and an Associate Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm, Sweden.

**Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer** is the director of the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) at the French Ministry of the Armed Forces, and the author of several reports on hybrid threats and information manipulation.

**Péter Kállai** is an assistant professor at Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Social Sciences. He holds a PhD in the Interdisciplinary Program in Sociology, his research focuses on minority rights.

**Monica Kaminska** is a postdoctoral researcher at The Hague Program for Cyber Norms at Leiden University – Institute of Security and Global Affairs.

**Matthias C. Kettemann** is Professor of Innovation, Theory and Philosophy of Law at the University of Innsbruck and leads research groups and programs at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research, Hans-Bredow-Institut, and the Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society.

**Joachim A. Koops** is Chair of Security Studies and Scientific Director (WD) of the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University's campus in The Hague.

**Tamás Peragovics** is PhD candidate at Central European University, a junior research fellow at the Institute of World Economics, and a lecturer at ELTE University Budapest, Hungary.

**Sophie L. Vèriter** is a doctoral researcher at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA), Leiden University.

# Contact information

E-mail: [info@thehaguecybern norms.nl](mailto:info@thehaguecybern norms.nl)

Website: <https://www.thehaguecybern norms.nl>

 @HagueCyberNorms

## Address

The Hague Program for Cyber Norms

Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs

Leiden University

Hague Campus

Turfmarkt 99

2511 DP The Hague

**Colofon**

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