

Press release – MEPs debate EEAS report on disinformation activities related to COVID-19



"This afternoon, the Foreign Affairs Committee held an important debate with EU High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell on the latest report by the European External Action Service on disinformation activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report reveals many troubling facts, for instance the significant number of coordinated disinformation campaigns by the Russian and Chinese governments to spread false health information in and around Europe, and conspiracy theories and claims that only authoritarian political systems – not democracies – are best suited to deal with the current crisis.

MEPs raised questions about the editing of this text, as there were media reports that the choice of words and the very content had allegedly been altered following requests from the Chinese government. I am pleased that Mr Borrell agreed to discuss this today with the members of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Just recently, the European Parliament emphasised that one thing is clear: the EU must stay free of undue political and economic influence from the outside. Democracy is not an empty word. I am convinced that an open debate about the actions being taken by European leaders is an asset, not an obstacle, as it helps us to make the right decisions. At the same time, there is no doubt that the EU must become better at strategically communicating all of its actions, in Europe and abroad, while continuing to fight external disinformation, fake news and cyberattacks.

In the [Parliament's latest resolution](#) of 17 April on the COVID-19 pandemic, we urged the European Commission to counter aggressive Russian and Chinese

propaganda efforts that are exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to undermine the EU and sow mistrust in the local population towards the European Union. To counter negative narratives, it is particularly important to communicate about the EU's financial, technical and medical support in response to the pandemic, both between EU countries and to our other partner, among them China. Most acts of solidarity, by organisations, professionals or individuals, take place far away from the gaze of cameras and reporters. But it would also be unfair to all the health workers, volunteers helping fellow citizens and people organising the transport of crucial equipment to let the lies about a lack of European solidarity spread without effectively challenging them."

The importance of an independent diplomatic service

In the debate with Vice President Borrell on Thursday, many MEPs stressed their support for the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its work on disinformation. However, they also voiced their concerns about recent media reports alleging that the latest special report by the EEAS on disinformation surrounding COVID-19, and the references to the state-backed actors pushing it, had been watered down following pressure from Chinese authorities. The EU High Representative rebuked those claims, underlining that the two compared documents are, in fact, different publications – one internal for experts and one for the broader public – and not two versions of the same publication.

MEPs quizzed EU High Representative Borrell on details about the editing process, Chinese pressure and how the EEAS had reacted to this pressure. They also asked how the EU can step up its efforts to strategically communicate about its concrete work, fight disinformation more effectively and also ensure enough funding for the EU's Strategic Communication Task Force

Some members stressed their deep concern over the media allegations, highlighting that the EEAS must clarify what kind of approaches were made by outside parties regarding the work on the latest report. Others said that the media reports appear to be "vastly overblown", pointing out that most of the critical issues remain intact in the text – such as the clear description of extensive Chinese and Russian disinformation attempts surrounding the origins of COVID-19 and the EU's attempts to combat them.

You can watch the interventions and all answers from High Representative Borrell again by clicking on the hyperlink below

<https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/news-footage>