



## Being cautious with attribution: Foreign interference & COVID-19 disinformation

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During the last days, many articles have been published across Europe about the role of pro-Kremlin disinformation in COVID19, relaying the findings of the EEAS Stratcom. Yesterday, a tweet by Euronews distorted the words of the Vice-President of the European Commission Vera Jourová by writing that the EU had identified pro-Kremlin sources as the “architects” of COVID-19 disinformation.

While there is no doubt that pro-Kremlin media have in some instances shared biased information, there is absolutely no evidence that these outlets are the “architects” of the massive disinformation around the coronavirus. Additionally, we strongly believe that the European Commission has put too much emphasis on pro-Kremlin disinformation in this context. While we appreciate the work of the EEAS and EUvsDisinfo and believe this work is necessary, it should be made clear that their mandate is to look into pro-Kremlin disinformation, and when only looking at it, the conclusions drawn can be biased and cannot be taken as reflective of the global picture of disinformation. Exposing malicious disinformation campaigns from state actors is a very important task, but this shouldn’t dominate our perception of the fight against disinformation, which is a far wider issue requiring multiple responses. Uncovering malicious behaviour from state actors is only one facet of disinformation.

While some disinformation can be attributed to non-EU states, sometimes disseminated directly via their political leaders (e.g. China, USA, Brazil), an overwhelming majority of the disinformation and misinformation we are observing is intra-EU and intra-member state, with different motives such as politics and money-making to name a few, which has been acknowledged on several occasions by Vice-President Jourová. Soon, we will publish more information about the varieties of disinformation.

If we seriously want to tackle disinformation, we deeply believe that we should look at it as it is, not as we think it could be. Attributing disinformation without sufficient evidence, or with a restricted lens, can cause more harm than good, and we should not be blinded by the current blame game between countries and institutions. Such incomplete coverage is, in fact, fuelling pro-Kremlin disinformation. We would also not be surprised to see this op-ed covered and distorted by pro-Kremlin media in the next days. Only a few days ago, research by Reframing Russia was then captured by RT to dismiss any kind of pro-Kremlin disinformation, using the title of “No Covid-19 fake news on RT, EU accusations are ‘problematic’ – UK watchdog”.

We therefore invite everyone in the EU institutions – and the media covering them – to be extremely cautious with attributing disinformation in order to avoid fuelling counter-narratives which are often more impactful – even more so when (partly) justified.

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