The coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by a massive wave of false and misleading information, attempts by foreign actors to influence domestic debates in the EU, breeding on the fertile ground of people’s most basic anxieties and the rapidly changing news cycle. Misleading healthcare information, dangerous hoaxes with false claims conspiracy theories and consumer fraud endanger public health.

The European Union and its Member States are determined to counter efforts by actors who try to exploit the crisis and put citizens’ lives at risk, or who spread propaganda or hatred. Building on the 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation, this calls for more coordinated action, in line with our democratic values.

The crisis has become a test case showing how the EU and its democratic societies deal with the disinformation challenge. In a Joint Communication, the European Commission and the High Representative propose concrete actions for a stronger and more resilient EU. They will feed into future EU work on disinformation, notably the European Democracy Action Plan, as well as the Digital Services Act.

The crisis has become a test case showing how the EU and its democratic societies deal with the disinformation challenge. Several aspects are key for a stronger and more resilient EU:

### Understand

False or misleading information around coronavirus can damage societal cohesion, but above all, it remains a threat to public health. False or misleading narratives come in different forms that require different responses.

- Content may not be illegal as defined by law, but still harmful.
- It can range from disinformation (defined as intentional) to misinformation.
- It can include misleading healthcare information, consumer fraud, cyber-crime, illegal hate speech as well as targeted influence operations by foreign actors.
- The motivation behind it can range from economic gain (online scams) to deceive and cause public harm.
- Foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighbourhood, and globally.

The Commission and the European External Action Service will keep monitoring false or misleading narratives and influence operations by foreign actors.
The European Commission is working with its partners across the globe and within the EU.

- **Within the EU** by using established channels such as the Rapid Alert System. A special section will be created to facilitate the sharing of coronavirus-related communication materials between EU institutions and Member States. The Commission will further deepen the cooperation with the European Parliament.
- Enhancing cooperation with international partners, including the WHO, the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, or NATO.
- The EU will also increase support and assistance to civil society actors and independent media in third countries, including in the neighbourhood.
- Cooperation with platforms and **Consumer Protection Cooperation network** by screening and taking down overpriced, ineffective or potentially dangerous products.

The Commission has closely monitored the actions of **online platforms** under the Code of Practice on Disinformation. There is a need for more efforts, transparency and accountability:

- Signatories of this Code are encouraged to report monthly on their actions to fight coronavirus related disinformation and to promote authoritative content.
- Relevant stakeholders that are not yet signatories of the Code are strongly encouraged to participate.
- Building on the work of the newly established European Digital Media Observatory, the EU will further step up its support to **fact-checkers and researchers**. For example, WeVerify.eu is used by tens of thousands of journalists worldwide.
Ensuring freedom of expression and pluralistic democratic debate

The EU’s approach to fight disinformation is embedded in the respect of fundamental rights. The coronavirus cannot be used as a pretext to undermine freedom of expression, reduce the accountability of public authorities, unduly limit access to information and transparency. The crisis has demonstrated the essential role of journalists, providing citizens with reliable, fact-checked information, contributing to saving lives.

• The Commission has been closely monitoring the impact of emergency measures taken by Member States on EU law and values and will continue to do so until all measures are phased out.

• The Commission calls on Member States to intensify efforts to ensure that journalists can work safely, in the right conditions, and make the most of the EU’s coronavirus economic response and recovery package to support media while respecting their independence.

• The EU will further enhance support to civil society, independent media and journalists around the world and step up actions to increase protection of freedom of expression and ensure a safer media environment.

Empowering citizens, raising citizens awareness and increasing societal resilience

The EU needs to empower citizens, raise awareness and increase societal resilience.

• The EU will share best practices on resilience-building measures in the coronavirus context.

• The Commission will support and promote media literacy projects, critical thinking and digital skills, as well as civil society organisations. It will strengthen coordination among institutions, networks and Member States to share awareness-raising material and best practices. The Commission will pay particular attention to vulnerable groups, in particular children and young people, who face a higher risk of being misled.