News Item

# 'Spreading like a virus': inside the EU's struggle to debunk Covid lies | The Guardian

By Alessio Perrone and Darren Loucaides

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> In April 2020, near the start of the global pandemic, Felix Kartte was working 14-hour shifts as an EU policy officer, struggling to monitor a barrage of coronavirus-linked disinformation.
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> Articles claiming that the pandemic was a hoax, that it was caused by 5G, that it could be cured by hydroxychloroquine or alternative medicine were going viral across the continent – part of a global phenomenon the World Health Organization warned was becoming an "infodemic." Kartte and colleagues in StratCom, the EU diplomatic service's strategic communications division, could detect what they say were patterns of Covid-denier and anti-vaxxer disinformation linked to Russia and to a lesser extent China, being disseminated in several languages across Europe.
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> They scrambled to flag the bogus reports on their monitoring database and wrote up internal reports. But problems arose when they produced a public assessment which said China was pushing false narratives to deflect any blame for the pandemic. Believing the report to be finalised, Kartte was surprised when the office of Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, paused its release for rewrites. In the document that was eventually published the criticisms of China appeared to have been softened.
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