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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Summary of discussions at the informal videoconference of the members of the Working Party on Information of 18 February 2021

Delegations will find attached the summary of discussions at the informal videoconference of the members of the Working Party on Information of 18 February 2021.

Summary of discussions at the informal videoconference of the members of the Working Party on Information on 18 February 2021

The meeting addressed the topic of mis- and disinformation on Covid-19 vaccination, looking at present and upcoming risks in this respect and practical ways to tackle them from a communication point of view in Member States and at the EU level. It was called as a follow-up to the WPI meeting of 19 January 2021 on communication regarding Covid-19 vaccination, where many delegations identified disinformation as one of the main challenges to successful communication accompanying the roll-out of vaccination campaigns.

1. Adoption of the agenda

The WPI adopted the agenda as set out in document CM 1705/21

2. Presentation by the Portuguese Presidency on communication priorities

The meeting opened with a presentation from the Portuguese Presidency of the Council on their priorities for communication in this period, acknowledging the ongoing need to constantly adapt the foreseen programme due to difficulties caused by the pandemic.

3. Disinformation on Covid-19 vaccination

- Presentation by guest speaker Prof. Ana Santos Rutschman

Then the main topic of the meeting was addressed, beginning with a presentation by Ana Santos Rutschman, Advisor to the Biden Campaign COVID-19 Innovation Committee concerning vaccines and disinformation. Ms. Rutschmann shared some insights on how widespread disinformation on vaccination is tackled in the United States and drew parallels with the situation in the EU. Her presentation ended with some practical advice on how to fight disinformation in the next period in Member States, from a communication point of view.

- *Presentation by the EEAS*

Next, the EEAS, represented by Jurgis Vilcinskis, Deputy Head of Division Strategic Communications and Information Analysis at the EEAS, presented some of the trending narratives and strategies behind the communications of the two main external actors responsible for spreading disinformation in the EU (presentation slides available as WK 2413/2021). It concluded by outlining the role and capabilities of EEAS in this area, drawing attention to the work and materials being produced and made available to Member States.

- *Presentation by the Commission*

A presentation by the European Commission followed, in which Lene Naesager, Director of Strategy and Corporate Communication, DG COMM, discussed observed misinformation narratives, highlighted the work of the Commission in the fight against disinformation, and urged Member States to make use of all existing communication channels with EU institutions and agencies.

- *Presentation by the Chair of the Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats*

The Chair of the Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats - HWP ERCHT (Maria do Rosário Penedos) outlined the Working Party's work on disinformation, from the perspective that anti-vaccination disinformation is one part of a wider hybrid strategy to win geopolitical advantages of various kinds and discredit the EU.

- *Exchange of views*

In the ensuing exchange of views, many delegations acknowledged and underlined the importance of combatting mis- and disinformation. Several of them welcomed work done in this area by the EU institutions and agencies and other international organisations.

As far as sources of disinformation are concerned, several delegations identified at the national level the same challenges as those presented by the EEAS. Internal actors were also identified, especially some minority voices in the scientific community amplified by the anti-vaccination community. Concerns on the major role of social media platforms were

shared by many delegations, with one call to the European Commission to be more proactive in this area. The issue of closed groups was pointed out by several delegations as a matter of great concern, as they are not easy to monitor. In terms of audiences most likely to be affected by disinformation, links to political opinions were mentioned, and features of different age groups when it comes to appetite for conspiracy theories. One delegation remarked that misinformation followed different stages, with narratives changing from one month to the next, following the deployment of vaccinations.

In terms of upcoming risks, eventual side effects of vaccines and safety events were flagged as possible reasons for misinformation, the immediate reaction of governments being very important in this context. Also supply difficulties could be further built on to spread false narratives, discrediting the health system, national and EU authorities. Some delegations foresee further attempts to polarise and divide the society by malicious actors.

Regarding ways to tackle disinformation, several ideas were shared by Member States, based on national experience:

- continuously exchanging information with EU actors, while taking advantage of current networks and platforms and avoiding duplication of work
- also tackling fake news on EU's action towards third countries
- supporting EU partners in the neighbourhood area in fighting disinformation from foreign actors
- promoting the expertise of the institutions to solve the crisis
- building synergies between people with experience in communication and those tackling disinformation on a daily basis
- building media literacy skills, starting early in childhood
- strengthening the mental resistance of the public
- tailoring messages to different groups with doubts
- replying to messages and questions from citizens directly, via call centres, e-mail, roadshows
- being transparent, even if this sometimes means the open confession of some mistakes made

- fact-checking and debunking myths as early as possible, using materials from health authorities and the EU
- involving local celebrities
- working with experts and members of the medical community

4. AOB

- *Europe Day – information to delegates*

Under any other business, firstly the General Secretariat of the Council and the Commission presented their plans for an inter-institutional fully online event. EU institutions count on Member States to amplify communication efforts and contribute to the event. The GSC asked for each Head of Permanent Representation to be recorded on video saying "Happy Europe Day" in their national language(s) (more details on this will be sent later to delegations).

- *Free French language courses offered to Permanent Representations in view of the upcoming French Presidency*

Then the French delegation informed about the possibility to subscribe to free French language courses in view of the upcoming French Presidency.

- *Other follow-up points regarding the implementation of the report on Covid-19 vaccination communication*

Finally, the Chair mentioned that he was invited to present the report "Communication regarding Covid-19 vaccination - options for further coordination", produced after the WPI meeting in January, at the IPCR roundtable on 8 February. The report was also sent to Coreper for information as an I item on the agenda of the Coreper meeting of 10 February.

The Chair concluded by informing delegations that the points raised during the meeting would be analysed and that they would be kept informed about next steps.