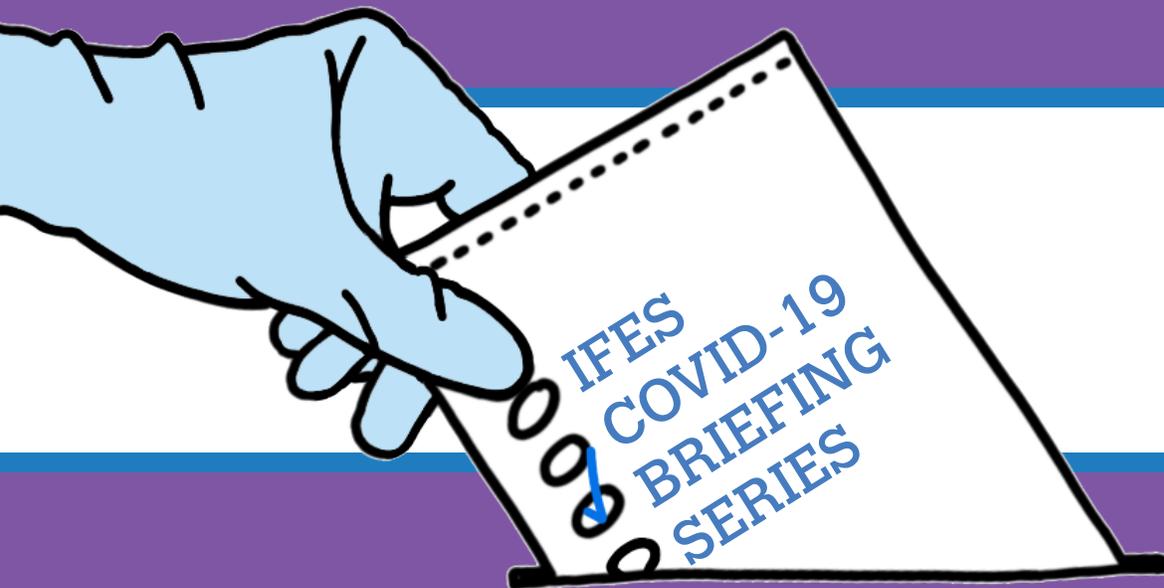




International Foundation  
for Electoral Systems

# Preserving Electoral Integrity During an Infodemic





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# Foreword

At a time when misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly and the COVID-19 crisis has impacted every sphere of our lives, this IFES brief on preserving electoral integrity during an infodemic provides an array of recommendations on how election management bodies (EMBs), civil society organizations, political parties, candidates, donors, technical assistance providers and social media platforms can address these issues. The brief highlights the relevance of disinformation programming for election stakeholders and underscores the value of crisis communication planning in battling misinformation and disinformation. As the COVID-19 pandemic has forced EMBs to change and adapt their operations, election authorities have also witnessed a rapid shift in the dynamics of communication, making voter information and media literacy of paramount importance. These efforts are based on an understanding that communication and cooperation have a strong impact on increasing transparency and protecting democracy.

Any attempt to undermine democracy is abhorrent, and efforts to exploit the current health crisis pose great challenges for elections. IFES has been at the forefront of developing thinking and programming for EMBs in this space. Efforts to this effect at this time of crisis and beyond are crucial, not only for election authorities, but for all election stakeholders. Sharing knowledge, information and experience is a foundation to further activities to combat disinformation and misinformation, and the majority of EMBs around the world have stressed the importance of having partners and networks to maintain resilience for electoral integrity.

**Honorable Irena Hadžiabdić**

IFES Board Member

Member of the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

As election authorities work to conduct elections safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, their efforts may be undermined if the information space around elections is inadequately defended. Viral misinformation, disinformation campaigns directed by anti-democratic and opportunistic actors and the amplification and weaponization of hate speech create immediate and long-term electoral integrity challenges for democracies. Changes to election procedures due to COVID-19 in particular may provide fertile ground for information manipulation that can disenfranchise or endanger voters. As challenges multiply, authoritarian actors looking to capitalize on the confusion will continue to push narratives to undermine confidence in democratic institutions and processes. This paper will focus on how viral misinformation, hate speech and disinformation-laced influence operations by domestic and foreign actors impact the information environment around COVID-19, with implications for electoral integrity, trust in democracy and the protection of fundamental human rights, including political rights.

## Defining the Problem

The proliferation of information about COVID-19 has created what the World Health Organization (WHO) terms an “infodemic,” in which individuals struggle to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it. While the overabundance and varying reliability of COVID-19 information has broad implications for public health, it also impacts the ability to conduct elections with integrity during these unprecedented times. Public safety necessitates a range of alterations to election processes and procedures, as discussed in depth in the first paper in this International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) COVID-19 Briefing Series, [Safeguarding Health and Elections](#).<sup>1</sup> The combination of significant changes to once-familiar voting processes and increased difficulty identifying reliable information create an environment vulnerable to misunderstanding and manipulation.

In the context of elections, the information challenges stemming from the proliferation of COVID-19 content are only adding to the preexisting challenges to mitigating misinformation, disinformation and hate speech. In addition to misinformation – which by definition is incorrect information generated without the intent to deceive – domestic and foreign actors are using COVID-19 disinformation and hate speech for political advantage and to amplify anti-democratic sentiment.

## Major Findings and Recommendations

This paper focuses on identifying the implications of information integrity challenges related to COVID-19 on the electoral cycle, including the campaign period, electoral administration and operations, and the post-electoral period. Lessons learned from the ways in which misinformation, disinformation and hate speech have played out in previous electoral contexts are used to anticipate how COVID-19 may alter and heighten these harms. Though longer-term interventions are essential to building resilience to information integrity challenges, this paper tries to anticipate and address immediate challenges stemming from COVID-19.

- **Implications for the Integrity of the Campaign Period:** With limited avenues for campaigning during the pandemic, parties and candidates are likely to move online to

reach and mobilize voters. As a result, ongoing efforts to expand social media monitoring and oversight have taken on new urgency.

- **Implications for the Integrity of Electoral Administration and Operations:** Fundamental changes to established election processes will require voters to learn new information. In this environment, traditional voter suppression tactics may become harder for voters to discern. Mistakes and irregularities in election administration, which are likely to increase due to new procedures, may spawn narratives of widespread fraud. Additionally, bad actors may stoke COVID-19 fears to disrupt voter registration, turnout or election processes.
- **Implications for the Post-Electoral Period:** Disinformation about heightened infection rates after an election could create perceptions elsewhere that elections cannot be conducted safely. Additionally, misinformation or disinformation that capitalizes on mistakes due to changing procedures to amplify narratives of fraud could lead to politically motivated attempts to undermine electoral integrity, delegitimize results or launch frivolous legal challenges.
- **Implications for Democratic Integrity:** Governments have passed a number of restrictive laws to curb misinformation, disinformation and hate speech related to COVID-19. These laws are an extension of an existing global trend of heavy-handed legislating, in which policymakers seek to criminalize problematic content in ways that undermine freedoms of expression and the press. These laws are often applied in a partisan manner that politically advantages incumbent parties and politicians.

In light of these challenges, this paper identifies a number of overarching recommendations.

**Election management bodies (EMBs)** should focus on protecting voter participation and inclusion through proactive communication strategies that publicly share accurate, timely information and increase voters' understanding of new processes and procedures. EMBs should also develop crisis communication plans and consider linking traditional and social media communication channels with public health authorities.

**Civil society organizations (CSOs)** should increase their monitoring activities to enhance transparency and accountability of public officials and institutions and to counter hate-speech messaging and disinformation.

**Political parties and candidates** should commit to running campaigns free of hate speech and disinformation, proactively comply with disclosure requirements for political advertising on social media and campaign finance rules and build messaging responsive to COVID-19 into their voter outreach plans.

**International donors and technical assistance providers** should discourage legislation or regulations that criminalize misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in ways that disproportionately threaten freedoms of expression and the press, while supporting legal and regulatory reforms that protect marginalized groups and promote inclusion.

**Social media platforms** should ensure that content constituting election interference and hate speech, as defined in their community standards and guidelines, is prioritized for review and effective action. They should also continuously integrate diverse feedback into how these violations are defined. Platforms should continue working with EMBs and public health authorities to widely disseminate trusted public health and election information.

Learn more by visiting the full collection of papers in the [IFES COVID-19 Briefing Series](#).<sup>2</sup>  
Find more resources at IFES' [COVID-19 Survival Guide for Democracies](#).<sup>3</sup>

# Introduction

Individuals in search of information are flooded with content as they try to understand the progression of COVID-19 around the world and on their doorsteps. While TV and radio remain important sources of information,<sup>4</sup> many individuals are seeking additional answers online. Social media platforms note global increases in usage,<sup>5</sup> search engines report surges in COVID-19 queries,<sup>6</sup> and online news outlets are seeing considerably higher than normal traffic.<sup>7</sup> In the early days of the health crisis, the WHO coined the term “infodemic” to characterize the “over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”<sup>8</sup> While the implications of this information overload are multifaceted, this brief will focus on how viral misinformation, hate speech and disinformation-laced influence operations by foreign and domestic actors impact the information environment around COVID-19, with implications for electoral integrity, trust in democracy and the protection of fundamental human rights, including political rights.

Even as election authorities work to mitigate public health challenges to conduct elections safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, gains will be diminished absent sustained efforts to ensure voters have accurate and actionable information. The spring of 2020 brought daily announcements of postponed elections,<sup>9</sup> and election administrators that proceeded with polls quickly adopted a range of procedural changes that altered how, where and when voters cast their ballots.<sup>10</sup> Given these rapid shifts, it is imperative that voters receive reliable guidance on how to register to vote and cast their ballots safely. Prospective poll workers need similarly reliable information to make decisions on whether and how to contribute safely to the electoral process. The combination of an overabundance of information and rapid changes to once-familiar processes creates an information landscape ripe for potential misunderstanding and malfeasance that could have serious implications for electoral integrity. In turn, erosions of electoral integrity can reduce public confidence in the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and thus directly threaten democratic governance.

There are multiple layers contributing to the infodemic. First, the public is confronted with an enormous volume of information from a range of sources. The difficulties navigating this deluge are magnified by the lack of knowledge and consensus about the virus and its transmission, even among authoritative public health sources. Some individuals further pollute the information space by generating and amplifying viral misinformation and hate speech in accordance with their own world views and biases.

These interrelated challenges are a vulnerability in democratic societies that anti-democratic actors are already seeking to exploit. There is ample evidence,

**Disinformation** is false or misleading information that is created or disseminated with the intent to cause harm or to benefit the perpetrator. The intent to cause harm may be directed toward individuals, groups, institutions or processes.

**Misinformation** is false or misleading information that is shared without the intent to cause harm or realization that it is incorrect. In some cases, actors may unknowingly perpetuate the spread of disinformation by sharing content they believe to be accurate among their networks.

**Hate Speech** is “Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.” (United Nations)

explored in the following section, that foreign and state-linked influence operations are using COVID-19 disinformation and propaganda to promote anti-democratic political and geopolitical goals. Domestic and foreign actors are also using fear and confusion around COVID-19 to manipulate societal prejudices and hatred for political purposes often by using deceptive techniques to amplify divisive and polarizing narratives.

The widespread sharing and uptake of hate speech, misinformation and disinformation in the pandemic context are fueled by the same systemic and cognitive challenges that existed prior to COVID-19. For example:

- If journalists cannot operate independently or safely, or if they do not conduct rigorous investigations, the public may be more likely to turn to dubious information sources or be unable to distinguish good from bad actors.
- Digital and media literacy levels impact whether individuals are able to discern credible information from misinformation or disinformation.
- Lack of campaign finance or anti-corruption regulations and oversight pertaining to domestic political actors' use of social media allows the use of disinformation and hate speech tactics with impunity.
- Financial incentives to conduct disinformation campaigns that reach large audiences further muddy the information space.
- Preexisting social cleavages create easy targets for exploitation by politically and ideologically driven actors.

IFES designed an initiative to strengthen the digital literacy of educators and students in response to disinformation and false narratives around COVID-19. In April, IFES organized a two-part webinar titled, "[Disinformation and Pandemic: How to Protect Yourself From Manipulation on the Internet](#)," for its network of 30 partner universities throughout Ukraine. The webinar provided educators with an understanding of current models of digital content dissemination and consumption, as well as the instruments used to manipulate public opinion. It prepared educators with practical tips to identify false narratives and disinformation during the pandemic.

All of these factors continue to operate during the pandemic, and COVID-19 may in fact amplify them. During the pandemic, newsrooms have laid off and furloughed large numbers of journalists due to financial strain that many media outlets were already facing before the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Opportunistic actors have also built social media audiences by peddling COVID-19 disinformation to profit from paid advertising.<sup>12</sup>

This paper will briefly discuss the different layers of information integrity challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will first examine individually perpetuated viral misinformation and hate speech. It will then turn to domestic influence operations, examining how state-linked actors are using the pandemic to political advantage by directing disinformation toward their own populations and spinning narratives that perpetuate intercommunal division. The paper will then analyze how foreign actors are using COVID-19 to open a new front in their information warfare directed at democratic rivals. In light of this background, the paper will outline key findings that draw connections between disinformation, COVID-19 and elections before providing recommendations to mitigate potential harms.

## Viral Misinformation and Hate Speech

COVID-19 misinformation spreading through social media is a well-documented phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, have all adopted new policies as they contend with the spread of inaccurate and misleading COVID-19 material on their platforms.<sup>14</sup> In the same way that misinformation about the health aspects of COVID-19 is spreading through information ecosystems – often gaining widespread reach through social media – misinformation is all but certain to materialize for elections as well. As users share content out of a mix of motivations – fear, ideology, prejudice, a desire to be helpful – their decisions on what to amplify and give voice to in relation to voting in elections during the time of COVID-19 are subject to the same impulses.

“As users share content out of a mix of motivations – fear, ideology, prejudice, a desire to be helpful – their decisions on what to amplify and give voice to in relation to voting in elections during the time of COVID-19 are subject to the same impulses.”

COVID-19 misinformation in Somalia and Niger, for example, has forced electoral authorities to make public clarifying statements. In Somalia, the national EMB took to Twitter to deny claims that it had delayed elections due to COVID-19.<sup>15</sup> By the time they issued this clarification, reports to this effect had already begun circulating in online media sources.<sup>16</sup> In Niger, though the origins of this narrative were unclear, the national EMB issued an official communication reporting that malign actors faked an announcement by electoral authorities that voter registration processes had been suspended in certain regions.<sup>17</sup>

While hate speech and incitement are often weaponized in large-scale domestic or foreign influence operations, as discussed in the following sections, individually perpetuated hate speech is also deeply problematic. In the context of elections, hate speech has the potential to undermine electoral integrity by impacting different communities' ability to participate, resulting in an erosion of their fundamental political rights and the skewing of democratic outcomes. Actors have used COVID-19 to generate new hate narratives and exploit existing ones in ways that could intimidate candidates, voters, election administrators, civil society and journalists, particularly in countries with histories of intercommunal or electoral conflict. For liberal democracies working to build an inclusive, human rights-centered polity, hate speech poses a fundamental challenge as it creates, amplifies or entrenches a sense of “otherness.” For example, incidents of anti-Asian hate speech and harassment in online and offline spaces have proliferated in countries across the world in the wake of COVID-19.<sup>18</sup> Some African immigrants in China are being evicted and subjected to arbitrary quarantine and testing as fears of the virus' resurgence reignite entrenched xenophobia.<sup>19</sup> As online audiences increase with large numbers of people under stay-at-home orders, transnational white supremacist audiences on Telegram, an encrypted messaging platform, have also grown, using COVID-19 as a recruitment narrative.<sup>20</sup>

Gender inequality and misogyny are adding to these challenges. It is well documented that domestic gender-based violence increases during natural disasters as women may be confined with their abusers for extended periods of time.<sup>21</sup> COVID-19 is no different. For example, France and Lithuania have reported a 32 percent and 20 percent increase in violence against women, respectively.<sup>22</sup> In an environment where individuals are spending more time online, social media and websites that promote sexual harassment and violence as entertainment for men contribute to this unsafe environment for women. IFES, in its violence against women in elections (VAWE) work, has established an adverse connection between domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual violence – online and offline – and women's political participation.<sup>23</sup> In many countries, women also have lower literacy<sup>24</sup> and more limited digital access,<sup>25</sup>

limiting their ability to get accurate information. The next paper in this series will cover COVID-19 implications for democratic inclusion.

## Domestic Influence Operations

Domestic and foreign actors are becoming increasingly adept at using disinformation, hate speech and propaganda to exploit existing societal fears and fissures to further their anti-democratic aims. They may accomplish these aims by creating content that reflects their narrative, or by amplifying false narratives already in circulation.

For domestic political actors, the incentives to perpetuate false or misleading information about COVID-19 may be linked to political calculations – either wanting to look prepared, exaggerating the level of effort being put into public health measures around elections or misunderstanding the scope or nature of the crisis. A Brazilian fact-checking agency, for example, has identified multiple messages that advance a partisan narrative about the positive contributions of prominent government supporters in the fight against COVID-19, including messages that make false health claims.<sup>26</sup> In some instances, state propaganda uses disinformation about government success battling COVID-19 to bolster the strength and legitimacy of the regime in power. In Egypt, for example, state propaganda spread a narrative that COVID-19 was a Western plot that was thwarted by Egyptian intelligence services and that an Egyptian-developed cure was being shared with China and Italy.<sup>27</sup>

Political actors may also calculate that they can solidify power or drive up turnout for their party or candidate by using disinformation to downplay the crisis or expedite elections before the economic hardships stemming from the pandemic undermine their popularity. For example, the ruling party in Poland was forced to change track after insisting until days before the presidential election scheduled for May 10, 2020, that it would proceed. With a desire to hold elections as early as possible, the ruling party initially downplayed the public health risks and then attempted to hastily adopt countrywide mail-in balloting before finally postponing the election. Additionally, some analysts posit that Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is carrying out a concerted disinformation campaign to dissociate himself from the economic impact of COVID-19.<sup>28</sup>

Political calculations that lead domestic actors to create or perpetuate inaccurate narratives about the public health situation and electoral preparedness for the sake of perceived political advantage is a tension that will continue to play out as election dates approach. In all cases, there is a careful balance to be struck between the importance of elections on the one hand and legitimate public health concerns on the other. Decisions should be structured and consultative, rather than being made in an ad hoc and politically motivated manner.

Political actors looking to deflect blame or play to the worst impulses of their majoritarian bases may also deliberately deploy a mix of hate speech and disinformation to heighten interethnic or intercommunity tensions. In India, a gathering at an Islamic event center in mid-March was blamed for the spread of COVID-19, even as other religious congregations also failed to cancel large gatherings or implement other safety measures during that time period. As the number of cases attributed to the gathering increased, the hashtag #CoronaJihad began trending on social media along with messages blaming the entire Muslim community for the spread of the virus. The hashtag appeared nearly 300,000 times and was potentially seen by more than 300 million people.<sup>29</sup> This polarizing rhetoric, which was amplified by traditional media, has further entrenched the prejudice against an already-beleaguered minority community.<sup>30</sup> As a human rights activist conveyed to the authors, “we are being attacked by two viruses; COVID will eventually be cured. But the more dangerous one is the communal virus. It will take a much longer time to be vanquished.” Hate speech could easily lead to intercommunal tensions and create

fertile ground for the continuation of violence once the lockdown is lifted. The political exploitation of these narratives during future electoral campaigns could make minority communities potential targets for electoral violence.

**“ We are being attacked by two viruses; COVID will eventually be cured. But the more dangerous one is the communal virus. It will take a much longer time to be vanquished.”**

The life and death implications of COVID-19 add fuel to existing societal divisions. In Sri Lanka, end-of-life practices have been politicized along communal lines; specious public health justifications have been used to mandate cremation, even for religious communities that place great importance on the burial of their dead. Minority community leaders have expressed anguish resulting from this rule, which is not rooted in the guidance of the WHO or other credible international health agencies. This step has been seen as a move to shore up majority community support ahead of parliamentary elections, which have been postponed temporarily in light of the pandemic.<sup>31</sup>

In the Asia-Pacific region, IFES is working with civil society groups to build their capacity to counter misinformation, disinformation and hate speech arising out of the COVID-19 crisis. IFES has trained more than 100 organizations and 300 activists on how to access accurate information, cross-reference sources to verify accuracy and think critically and detect biases in reporting. These scenario-based trainings have also addressed how to counter hate speech against and blame ascribed to marginalized or vilified communities and be an ally for those being attacked online. Ongoing engagement with this network of trained organizations has also included focus on the long-term impact of COVID-19 disinformation and hate speech as well as campaigns on social cohesion and inclusion.

## Foreign Influence Operations

Russia and China have been visibly integrating COVID-19 into their foreign influence operations.<sup>32</sup> With the advent of the pandemic, this threat has expanded to include disinformation and propaganda instrumentalizing the health crisis in the service of geopolitical and anti-democratic agendas, with some analysts warning that it will be used to disrupt or discredit elections.<sup>33</sup>

There is a significant concern, for example, that the Russian government will seek to replicate its well-documented election interference efforts, this time factoring in the COVID-19 crisis to create a narrative that democratic societies cannot adequately cope with the crisis or conduct elections safely. This tactic was displayed in France, with Russian media amplifying stories of French poll workers being infected by COVID-19 during the country's March election.<sup>34</sup> Multiple analysts believe that Russia's government will seek to amplify false narratives already circulating among domestic audiences.<sup>35</sup> Past tactics used by Russia would suggest that a multifaceted campaign about the pandemic may use official news outlets, as well as informal networks of trolls, bots and blogs to spread and amplify disinformation about the pandemic.

Yet, the COVID-19 situation is changing quickly and may impact how such disinformation campaigns spread and whether they gain traction. As of May 2020, Russia has become the epicenter of COVID-19 in Europe<sup>36</sup> and has one of the highest numbers of confirmed cases globally.<sup>37</sup> These soaring numbers and the COVID-19-related hospitalization of key individuals close to Putin may alter the way in which the Kremlin approaches COVID-19 disinformation in the coming months.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the initial gambit was not heartening. In January 2020, the Russian government pushed COVID-19 disinformation among audiences in Eastern Europe, seeking to discredit the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)<sup>39</sup> and Lithuania;<sup>40</sup> experts believed the Russian authorities were behind false information that a U.S. NATO soldier in Lithuania tested positive for COVID-19. In March, pro-Russian news sources in the country also touted that the public health crisis was leading Lithuanian authorities to shut down pro-Russian media outlets.<sup>41</sup>

Russia is also suspected of pushing false narratives that seek to incite violence and exploit societal fault lines. In Ukraine, late February saw the spread of disinformation, allegedly from the Ukrainian Ministry of Health, about returning refugees having COVID-19, leading to a riot in the town of Novi Sanzhary that resulted in the injury of citizens and police.<sup>42</sup> Belgium's state security service (VSSE) has warned that extremist organizations in Belgium are leveraging disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric about the pandemic to turn populations against each other. The VSSE report points to conspiracy theories about COVID-19 spreading via social media that focus on anti-immigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> The report goes on to say that these COVID-19 related disinformation campaigns were being orchestrated from Russia, aimed at "sow[ing] discord" with the aim of "deblitat[ing] the West" and that far-right groups "active throughout Europe were pumping pro-Russian content and disinformation into social media."<sup>44</sup>

The tactics of China's global influence operation also evolved as the pandemic spread. At first, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was engaging in disinformation campaigns about the origins and scale of COVID-19's spread, mimicking Russian strategies of creating confusion and discord in the information space. This effort used diplomatic platforms, the Chinese government's social media accounts and other media channels to push conspiracy theories and conflicting narratives.<sup>45</sup> The assertions of a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson that U.S. military representatives brought COVID-19 to China was one widely publicized example.<sup>46</sup>

The CCP has also used more familiar tactics. "Chinese information operations typically aim to uphold a single immutable narrative that casts the Chinese Communist Party in a positive light. ... The goal isn't to destabilize the information environment, but rather to make Beijing appear unassailably good."<sup>47</sup> Narratives have shifted to the superiority of China's authoritarian system in enabling the successful containment of the problem<sup>48</sup> as well as the medical aid that China is offering to other countries. China's enormous force of state media and social media networks are amplifying this narrative, which is likely to be echoed by authoritarian rulers and parties in other countries to cast doubt on the democratic system of governance. Given the extent of China's attempted interference in Taiwanese elections, one cannot rule out the possibility that the CCP might use COVID-19 disinformation in election contexts, especially in countries where China has a geopolitical interest.<sup>49</sup>

In addition, China's economic and political power ensures that the CCP's portrayal of itself as a global benefactor is finding a receptive audience in Europe and elsewhere, particularly given a perceived lack of U.S. leadership.<sup>50</sup> Euroskeptic leaders in Hungary, Serbia and Italy have embraced Chinese aid and lavished high-profile praise on China for its provision of health supplies.<sup>51</sup> In April, the New York Times reported that due to Chinese government pressure, the European Union revised its report on COVID-19 disinformation to be softer on China.<sup>52</sup> At the time of this writing, however, the European Commission has reversed its stance, publicly naming China as a source of disinformation that undermines European democracy and the response to COVID-19.<sup>53</sup>

The United States government, most notably senior voices in the Trump administration, are also attempting to influence the global narrative to further geopolitical goals, branding COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus" or "Wuhan Virus" in official statements and advancing the theory that the virus originated in a lab in Wuhan, despite highly inconclusive evidence.<sup>54</sup> The rise of this rhetoric has caused opposition lawmakers and others to warn that hate crimes directed toward Asian Americans are likely to increase.<sup>55</sup>

# Major Findings

A wide array of analysis has explored the broader implications of COVID-19 and information integrity challenges for democracy. The focus of this brief is to identify the specific implications for the electoral cycle – such as the potential impacts on confidence in electoral results and trust in political and electoral processes and procedures – including during the pre-electoral and post-electoral periods.

At the time of this writing, relatively few elections have taken place since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. The findings outlined here draw on lessons learned from how hate speech, misinformation and disinformation have impacted past elections

## Implications for the Integrity of the Campaign Period

As other avenues for campaigning are limited during the pandemic, parties and candidates are likely to increasingly turn to online campaigning and protest to reach voters through social media. Given that regulations on the use of social media in campaign periods are nascent in most countries and that monitoring and oversight of political advertising on social media are limited as well, the opportunities for parties and candidates to abuse these channels of communication may increase as a larger share of campaigning happens online. Varying degrees of oversight means that there are few *de jure* or *de facto* restrictions on how much can be spent on political advertising on social media and whether these expenditures need to be reported or will be audited for accuracy.

For election authorities or government oversight bodies that currently lack capacity or a mandate to monitor social media and track candidates' spending on online advertising, it is likely unrealistic that such measures can be implemented in the near term. While public oversight agencies must continue to move forward in their thinking about how to regulate and enforce measures to oversee campaign spending on social media, civil society and investigative journalists should help to fill this gap where appropriate.

This task is made more or less difficult by the differing availability of social media transparency tools. The comprehensiveness of tools such as the Facebook Ad Library<sup>56</sup> and the Google Transparency Report<sup>57</sup> vary among countries, and as resources within social media companies have been redirected toward COVID-19 activities, the expansion of political ad transparency features has also been delayed.<sup>58</sup> Social media companies should keep pushing forward on ad transparency as it is even more important during the pandemic. Where these tools are or will soon be available, local actors are not necessarily aware of or using them. Facebook and Google, in partnership with international partners and local stakeholders, should proactively raise awareness about the functionality of these tools and train civil society, journalists and oversight agencies on how to use them, particularly in countries that will soon resume elections.

## Implications for the Integrity of Electoral Administration and Operations

As elections in many countries have been postponed due to COVID-19, legislators are debating if and how to alter election processes to ensure public safety. IFES discusses many of these changes in the first paper of this series on [Safeguarding Health in Elections](#),<sup>59</sup> and their legal and constitutional implications in the second paper, [Legal Considerations When Delaying or Adapting Elections](#).<sup>60</sup> Many of the solutions being suggested and adopted mark a fundamental shift from how elections have been

planned and conducted previously, including moves to expand mail-in balloting and public debates about the feasibility of online or app-based voting. Changes to the dates of elections, the hours and locations for polling or other procedural shifts also all require voters to assimilate new information about how to cast their ballots.

At the same time, conflicting messages from different institutions in the same country can generate misinformation, confusion and fear. This type of chaos was on display in the U.S. state of Wisconsin, which held elections on April 7, 2020. After failing to obtain legislative approval to postpone the election, the governor issued an executive order instead. The opposition-held state legislature then challenged that order in court, resulting in a last-minute judicial ruling that cleared the way for elections to be held.<sup>61</sup> This series of events left voters, poll workers and election officials with little guidance on how to proceed because it was unclear until the day before the election whether it would take place at all.

The unprecedented nature of these logistical changes to fundamental – and once-familiar – election procedures may increase confusion among voters and other electoral stakeholders. Malign actors are likely to exploit this confusion to circulate incorrect information and undermine voter registration and turnout. Traditional voter suppression tactics – such as sharing wrong dates or times for polling or specious guidance on how to or where to cast a ballot – may become harder for voters to discern in this context. For example, when voters are aware that voting procedures have changed but lack a firm understanding of new procedures, social media posts that falsely advise them to text in their vote – a tactic Russia used during 2016 U.S. elections<sup>62</sup> – may be more believable. As direct messaging via social media, digital messaging applications and text messaging become increasingly integrated into the tactics of foreign and state-linked influence operations,<sup>63</sup> these messages could be received by voters through private channels that make their detection or removal very difficult. Segments of the population who have limited or no internet access are especially vulnerable to being misled and left behind.

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Changes in voting procedures also heighten the possibility that mistakes and irregularities – which are likely to increase due to new procedures – will be described as fraud. Though unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic, this phenomenon was illustrated clearly during the U.S. Democratic Party’s caucus in Iowa in February 2020 when the failure of an untested app-based results reporting system spawned a wealth of conspiracy theories.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, isolated incidents of fraud might be amplified to allege widespread abuse. These fraud narratives can, in turn, spread quickly across social media, eroding faith in electoral results and the integrity of electoral processes.

Though changes to voting processes on their own will provide ample material to sow confusion, all of these concerns will multiply when combined with misleading election narratives specific to COVID-19. Fears about the safety of voting in the midst of the pandemic are ripe for exploitation with misinformation and disinformation as voters seek guidance on public health measures that will be taken at polling stations. Recent virtual training programs developed for campaign and election officials in all 50 U.S. states are preparing for such scenarios: “Russian hackers could target election officials working from home. Adversaries could spread rumors about coronavirus outbreaks at polling sites to deter people from showing up on Election Day. Or they could launch disinformation campaigns claiming elections have been delayed or canceled entirely because of the virus.”<sup>65</sup>

In this environment, credible information for poll workers is even more imperative. As voting procedures change, particularly if those changes happen close to Election Day, poll workers may lack sufficient training to implement new procedures correctly. Misinformation or disinformation that leaves poll workers feeling unempowered and at risk could increase rates of absenteeism. What is more, poll workers who inadequately understand changes in procedures may become vectors of misinformation themselves as they spread potentially inaccurate information to voters.

In light of these information integrity challenges, voter outreach planning that accounts for COVID-19 is highly critical for election authorities, civil society and political parties. Even before rescheduled election dates are determined, all electoral stakeholders who have a stake in providing voter information should be securing resources and proactively planning their communication strategies to ensure credible information reaches voters, and that these efforts can go into effect as soon as there is clarity on when and how elections will proceed. These communication efforts should seek to reach voters in general, but also likely poll workers to assuage fears and build confidence that adequate steps are being taken to ensure their safety and that they have the information they need to do their jobs on Election Day.

In addition to strategic and proactive communication planning, election authorities should develop crisis communication plans to enable them to respond appropriately if false or misleading narratives begin to circulate. These plans should outline their channels of internal communication, how they will coordinate with other government agencies and electoral stakeholders, as well as how and to whom they will report problematic content where relevant.<sup>66</sup> Training scenarios for poll workers and election authorities should incorporate challenges that may arise from COVID-19 misinformation, disinformation and hate speech – with an emphasis on which scenarios are most likely and which would be most damaging if they were to take place.

In authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states that hold elections, disinformation directed at domestic audiences might be created with the intent to secure electoral victories in ways that may endanger voters' health. The Election Commission of Bangladesh pushed ahead with a by-election in late March 2020, resulting in a win for the ruling-party candidate with a voter turnout rate of only 5 percent amid fears of COVID-19 transmission and allegations of opposition intimidation.<sup>67</sup> While Poland has since postponed its elections and Russia's soaring coronavirus infection rates make it no longer possible for the government to deny the scope of the pandemic, these governments' initial push for elections-as-usual in the early days of the pandemic illustrate the political incentives for domestic actors – particularly incumbents looking to cement their power – to downplay the extent of the crisis.

With few precedents to emulate, dialogue and exchange among EMBs are particularly important to enable election authorities to learn from peers who are making similarly difficult decisions and adjustments.

IFES' Regional Europe program has established a working group for EMBs dedicated to tackling the challenges presented by social media and disinformation in elections – many of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The virtual launch of the working group in May 2020 gathered nearly 50 election officials from 13 countries in the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans and provided a forum to discuss, among other topics, the challenge of misinformation and disinformation for elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. The working group will provide EMBs with a platform for continued peer learning, skill-building and developing good practices.

Surges in social media usage and COVID-19 misinformation have also tested the capacity of social media platforms to expeditiously review content on their platforms that is not related to COVID-19. Content moderators were sent home as their workplaces became unsafe, and the work of content moderation had to be redistributed across remote workforces and rely more heavily on less effective algorithmic monitoring methods.<sup>68</sup> Given the lower level of capacity, content moderators are focusing on COVID-19 rather than on removing voter suppression and election interference content as well as hate speech. Though the vast majority of elections taking place after the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11 were postponed – lessening the immediate urgency of monitoring election-related content – these dates are now being rescheduled, and this capacity must be ramped up again.

Researchers at the Stanford Internet Observatory have proposed a number of additional actions that platforms could take to create friction for China and other actors that push disinformation and propaganda to foreign audiences via social media. These recommendations include banning paid political advertisements from media outlets registered under the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act, which would limit the ability of Chinese state media to use paid advertising to deliver propaganda to foreign audiences. The Internet Observatory also recommends disabling the capacity of official blue-checked diplomatic or state media accounts to block the accounts of critics, who would otherwise provide critical responses and context that would be observable to other users. They also recommend that technology platforms “consider banning state media and government-representative accounts run by countries that block their own citizens from accessing these platforms,” which allows “state media to take advantage of freedom of expression to push Beijing’s narratives to the world, while not allowing its own citizens to see criticism or counter-narratives.”<sup>69</sup> Facebook has recently adopted a policy that moves in this direction by labeling content that comes from state-linked media outlets and plans to block ads from these outlets in advance of U.S elections in 2020.<sup>70</sup> These measures should be expanded and applied globally.

## **Implications for the Post-Electoral Period**

The period immediately following Election Day is also a high-risk period for the spread of false and misleading information. If, for example, narratives of fraud or malpractice in polling, counting or results transmission leave citizens feeling disenfranchised, this may undermine public acceptance of the results or increase the chance of post-electoral violence. Narratives specific to COVID-19 can heighten this risk. The potential for disinformation about increased infection rates after an election – particularly in the first crop of elections during the pandemic – could make voters and election workers increasingly afraid to participate in other elections. Similarly, as described above, disinformation that considers mistakes to be fraud could delegitimize results or give rise to legal challenges to annul results in certain constituencies or nationwide. While these harms are largely theoretical at present, identifying them is important for taking appropriate mitigation steps.

Election authorities and other actors with a role in the democratic process – including social media platforms – must consider the potential for post-electoral misinformation and disinformation in their planning processes. Both strategic communication and crisis communication planning by EMBs, as described in the previous section on electoral administration and operations, should include provisions for the post-electoral period. To avoid communication gaps, planning is of particular importance if public messaging responsibilities that previously rested with the EMB are shifted to another institution or agency following Election Day. Depending on the national context, scenario training should also include planning for instances of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation that fuel post-electoral legal challenges or post-electoral violence. Social media platforms’ community guidelines and standards should also consider election interference efforts that take place in the post-electoral period.

## Implications for Democratic Integrity

The many implications of COVID-19 for democratic integrity are explored in detail throughout this IFES briefing series, including in [Legal Considerations When Delaying or Adapting Elections](#)<sup>71</sup> and a forthcoming paper on Preserving Independent and Accountable Institutions. While the broader array of implications of COVID-19 on democratic integrity are beyond the scope of this paper, we are focusing here on how the criminalization of the creation and sharing of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation might impact democracy.

Governments have passed a number of restrictive and emergency laws in the name of curbing COVID-related misinformation and disinformation, with implications for the campaign period and for democratic integrity more broadly.<sup>72</sup> As in-person gatherings are restricted for legitimate public health reasons, restrictive laws that further inhibit the rights to assemble and to free expression in online environments limit the ability of opposition voices and civil society to challenge government narratives and ensure transparency and accountability of election campaigns. These laws also undermine media efforts to publish critical or investigative pieces.

Bolivia, for example, has taken the extraordinary measure of criminalizing disinformation with a presidential decree that holds those that “misinform” or “cause uncertainty” over government COVID-19 measures to be criminally liable.<sup>73</sup> The Hungarian Parliament introduced emergency decree powers for the government in March. Though Parliament voted to end the state of emergency in mid-June, they left in place a number of measures that concentrate additional powers in the hands of President Viktor Orbán.<sup>74</sup> The government has also imposed potential five-year jail terms for individuals found guilty of spreading false information about COVID-19.<sup>75</sup> In Russia, legislation has been passed that penalizes spreading false information with three- to five-year jail terms.<sup>76</sup> Such laws open the door to abuse as governments selectively enforce them to silence opposition voices. These laws are an extension of a global trend observed before COVID-19, in which legislators sought to criminalize hate speech, misinformation and disinformation in ways that undermine freedom of expression and freedom of the press.<sup>77</sup>

CSOs, journalists and – where appropriate and productive – international actors need to shine a light on and resist these waves of legislation. States that are looking to adopt such measures may be doing so from a variety of motivations – ranging from a desire to justify extraconstitutional accumulations of power to a belief that such measures are proportional and justified given the current conditions. For actors adopting legislation in good faith, that impulse should be acknowledged while finding less damaging ways to channel that intent. Where appropriate, donors and technical assistance providers can share comparative examples and best practices on other approaches.

The second-order implications of changes that platforms are making to their content moderation policies in response to COVID-19 are also worth serious consideration. Though building on established content moderation policies in place before the pandemic, rapid adaptations to keep up with COVID-19 have introduced new policies that may have far-reaching ramifications. For example, Facebook has removed or downranked content that calls for public protests against stay-at-home orders, on the grounds that those protests contravene government health orders.<sup>78</sup> If not carefully nuanced, this standard – that government-banned protests should be subject to content moderation policies – sets a potentially problematic precedent for the right to assemble and protest in general.

# Recommendations

The focus of the recommendations in this brief is alterations specific to COVID-19 that democratic stakeholders should consider to promote a more credible information environment. For recommendations on countering hate speech, misinformation and disinformation more broadly, please see IFES' papers on [Countering Hate Speech in Elections: Strategies for Electoral Management Bodies](#)<sup>79</sup> and [Social Media, Disinformation and Electoral Integrity](#).<sup>80</sup> A range of interventions essential to building societal resilience to countering hate speech, misinformation and disinformation are for the long term, such as civic education and building intercommunal solidarity. These efforts should continue during these times, but this paper focuses on mitigating the more acute and immediate challenges.

## Recommendations for Election Management Bodies

1. EMBs should focus on **proactive communication strategies** to effectively counter disinformation objectives, not to counter individual narratives, given the likely volume. They should comprehensively emphasize steps taken to increase public health measures, which could also involve setting up hotlines – including on social media – to field public inquiries. Such measures should be staffed and publicized appropriately.
2. EMBs should **increase voters' understanding** of what to expect at all election stages through focused voter education campaigns. Such campaigns should be inclusive of underrepresented groups and include the steps to be taken to ensure public health during elections, relevant rule changes, good practices for protection during voting and the availability of alternative voting channels.
3. Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech can go viral quickly and damaging narratives may require an informed and expeditious response from election authorities. EMBs should thus **focus on crisis communication planning**, even before rescheduled election dates are known. Lines of communication should be clarified, coordination strategies developed with other agencies and trusted individuals identified to amplify messages to at-risk communities.
4. EMBs could consider **linking communication channels** with those of public health officials, and other relevant state institutions and agencies, where they are reputable and trusted by citizens. This could involve cobranded content across various media (including TV, radio, print and social media).

## Recommendations for Civil Society Organizations

5. In this environment, CSOs should **increase their monitoring functions** to enhance transparency, accountability and inclusion. As online campaigning increases in importance, there is a role for CSOs to bring attention to the abuse of state resources, discrimination, disinformation and hate speech, and raise public awareness about abuses.
6. CSOs should **counter hate-speech messaging** and better inform and educate communities of the benefits of tolerance and social cohesion. This could involve targeted programs addressing violence in elections, especially violence directed at women, and dispelling blame ascribed to minorities.

## Recommendations for Political Parties and Candidates

7. Independently or in compliance with local laws, regulations and codes of conduct, political parties and candidates should **commit to running campaigns free of hate speech and disinformation**.
8. Political parties and candidates should advocate for and comply with **political advertising disclosure and campaign finance requirements** and hold their counterparts in other political parties to the same standard.
9. Political parties and candidates should proactively provide voter information and share changes to the voting process by building **public health messaging responsive to COVID-19** into their voter outreach plans.

## Recommendations for International Donors and Technical Assistance Providers

10. International actors should provide comparative perspective and, where appropriate, exert diplomatic pressure to **discourage the adoption of legislation and regulations that criminalize misinformation, disinformation and hate speech** in ways that disproportionately threaten freedoms of expression and the press, while supporting legal and regulatory reform efforts that protect marginalized groups and promote inclusion.

## Recommendations for Social Media Platforms

11. Social media platforms should **ensure that election interference and hate speech that violate their community standards are prioritized for reporting and effective action**, especially as content moderation efforts are disrupted due to surges in COVID-19 content and staffing issues at content moderation centers.
12. Platforms should continuously **integrate diverse feedback into how election interference and hate speech violations are defined** in their community standards and guidelines, including feedback on how to protect the integrity of the post-electoral period.
13. Platforms should **continue working with EMBs and public health authorities to widely disseminate trusted public health and election information**. This should include stepping up efforts to verify official accounts and supporting individuals and groups that expose misinformation and disinformation.

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