



SUMMARY REPORT

Tuesday 19 May 2020

This report has been produced with information provided by participating organisations within the OIP COVID-19 Working Group (CWG). Each organisation provides monitoring and analysis of evolving and emerging disinformation and misinformation regarding COVID-19. Additional insight and research have been provided by OIP partners, including Zinc Network and Bellingcat.

The following countries and languages are covered in this report:

Countries	Languages
Bulgaria	Bulgarian
Czechia	Czech
Estonia	Estonian, English, Russian
Georgia	Georgian
Hungary	Hungarian
Kosovo	Multiple
Latvia	Latvian, English, Russian
Lithuania	Lithuanian, English, Russian
Moldova	Romanian
North Macedonia	Macedonian, Albanian
Poland	Polish
Romania	Romanian
Serbia	Serbian
Slovakia	Slovak
Ukraine	Ukrainian, Russian



Countries

Country-by-country Overview

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Working Definitions

COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY OVERVIEW

This section summarises developments by country, including new or shifting narratives and key cases. For Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine, Zinc Network researchers contribute additional monitoring information, which takes three forms:

1. **Media Monitoring:** *Using NewsWhip to collate and summarise all articles containing keywords about coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19.*
2. **HSA Media Monitoring:** *Using NewsWhip to collate all articles on COVID-19 from outlets deemed to be funded by, formally or informally affiliated with, or reliably sympathetic to Hostile States.*
3. **Social Media Monitoring:** *Using open-source data collection tools and methods to monitor and analyse social media conversation about COVID-19 and disinformation around COVID-19, summarising prominent and emerging themes.*

The CWG and their partners aim to expand the scope of these monitoring practices to cover further countries and languages as the project builds.

“Interactions” refers to every time that a post was actively engaged with or responded to on a particular platform. For example, Facebook interactions refer to comments,



shares, likes, and other reactions, and Twitter interactions refer to likes and re-tweets. The figures quoted in this report are the sum total of interactions across seven social media platforms.

BULGARIA

Summary

This week, content identified as containing mis- and disinformation narratives fell under two main themes: global elites (e.g. Bill Gates) are complicit in COVID-19; Russia is rising and well positioned to assist its neighbours (it has also been unjustly attacked by western media). It was also claimed that some hospitals are paying people to permit relatives' deaths to be officially attributed to COVID-19.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Rising Russia: Serbia thankful for Russian assistance*

- The news section of the website 24chasa.bg reported on 15 May that Serbian president Vučić had talked by phone with President Putin and thanked him for “reaffirming” the strategic interests of the two countries by expressing concern for Serbia and providing it with medical assistance. The website cites Belgrade-based newspaper Politika as having reported this news. It appears that a conversation took place, but its reporting within Bulgaria forms part of the promotion of the 'rising Russia' narrative that implies that the country has been more generous than others towards European countries during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Tsargrad.tv reported on the appearance of Doctor Professor Oleg Zairatyants on the '60 Minutes' programme of the 'Russia 1' TV channel. Zairatyants, the article claims, assured the audience that his doctors act according to WHO recommendations and explained that allegations made by Western media (that the rates of COVID-19 deaths in Moscow are being concealed) are unfounded. Zairatyants suggested that doctors are working hard to unravel the secrets of COVID-19. (70 interactions.)

2. *Failing West: Britain cannot cope with COVID-19*



- The Bulgarian News Front portal reported on an interview that Russia Today conducted with a British doctor, Malcolm Kendrick, who is said to have told the network that Britain's health service is struggling with COVID-19. (1,039 interactions.)

3. *Global elites: Bill Gates is complicit in COVID-19*

- An article on the website Fort-russ.com with the headline "POPULATION REDUCTION: A Million Americans To Die Due To Bill Gates COVID-19 Lockdown Unemployment" claimed to offer an "in-depth analysis" of WHO and CDC studies on the economic impact of lockdown policy, offering as background the website's previous "reportage of the statistic" that for each 1% of unemployment in the US, 37,000 Americans will die. The piece itself draws on research from the US, including the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, and does not itself mention Bill Gates, beyond the alarming headline and the leading image, which is a picture of Gates. (920 interactions).

4. *Conspiracy: false attribution of deaths*

- A blog post on the site tiptopbg.com claimed that according to various sources in hospitals in different cities, relatives of deceased patients were paid money to agree that the deceased should be registered as having died from COVID-19. "Attention, the news is not so fake", claimed the piece. (10,731 interactions.)

CZECHIA

Summary

During this reporting period, disinformation stories identified in Czechia included the continued suggestion that the virus is being used to the benefit of global elites (e.g. Bill Gates); the suggestion that the EU is failing; the suggestion that the virus may in fact have originated in the US. Misinformation was also notably prevalent, on subjects including the value of face masks and the efficacy of tests.

Dis-/Mis-information themes



1. *EU failure: the EU is helping to spread COVID-19*

- In a piece with the headline ““Once again, it turns out that the EU is not helping, but harming! This demand from Brussels will lead to the spread of coronavirus, says Fiala”, Sputnik (and other outlets) quoted at length the Czech politician Radim Fiala and his criticism of the EU. Fiala was angry at the European Commission’s recommendations regarding the easing of lockdown restrictions, and accused the union of (de facto) spreading COVID-19 and sacrificing citizens’ health. He believes that the sooner the country leaves the EU, the better. (185 interactions).

2. *Global elites: Bill Gates is complicit in COVID-19*

- An article on otevrivoumysl.cz entitled “Bill Gates’ plan to inoculate the world” furthers conspiracy theories surrounding Bill Gates, including that vaccines he is involved in developing are harmful and dangerous, and that Gates is involved in a plan to control the global population. It features an embedded video claiming to shed light on this theory. (2,153 interactions).

3. *Conflict and Nihilism: the virus may have an American origin*

- The news portal AC24 featured a piece with the headline “China has linked the diseases of European athletes to the “American virus”!”, stating that according to French newspaper Le Monde, China believes that COVID-19 may in fact have an American origin.

4. *Misinformation: face masks are dangerous*

- A Pravy Prostor article claims that wearing masks is dangerous because people become unable to breathe correctly, and that there is no sense in wearing them. It also suggests that tests do not work as they should, and that the number of cases of people with COVID-19 is exaggerated. It suggests that since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been seeing many “meaningless” ideas that have nothing to do with science. It appears to be based on quotes from Dr. Russell Blaylock, described as “a prominent American neurosurgeon”. Blaylock has a history of expressing views without scientific basis. (2,266 interactions).



- A long article on the website 'Sifra' suggests that COVID-19 is essentially just a new commercial name for flu; the author of the piece is commenting on an “analysis” conducted by the controversial figure Pavel Kamas, and cites numerous conspiracy theories, including that the WHO is in hock to Bill Gates and that the latter is responsible for pandemics. The piece has had 420 shares on Facebook. (2,321 interactions).
- The website Lajkit.cz features a seemingly edited video claiming to show an American nurse claiming that tests for COVID-19 do not work properly, and encouraging people to question everything that they hear about the disease, and to seek alternative sources that are not based on fear. (383 interactions).
- An article from Svobodné noviny featured many conspiracy theories, including that people will be given microchips via vaccines; that 5G networks are removing oxygen from surrounding areas; that vaccines may be a tool for depopulation. The article also suggests that masks may be dangerous for us, and that billionaires from the “Good Club” (featuring Bill Gates and Warren Buffett) are seeking to decrease the world population. (79 interactions).

ESTONIA

Summary

Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified either by OIP groups, or through Zinc’s monitoring of COVID-19-related coverage as promoted by hostile state media and other outlets.

Hostile state media reported on the gradual lifting of lockdown restrictions, mostly producing non-biased reports of Estonia’s plans to reopen and protect its economy. Instances of disinformation promoted the removal of sanctions against Russia and aimed to discredit the work of the Estonian police and intelligence services.

These stories were identified by expert groups and Zinc’s internal monitoring. Both of the narratives identified in disinformation stories this week have previously been observed in Estonia. Little discussion on social media around these articles was observed, however two groups shared an article claiming that Estonia was turning into a police state.



These stories were not discussed by mainstream media coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19. Media reported on the “top ten COVID-19 disinformation stories”, conspiracy theories spread by hostile state media, and false claims that tests for COVID-19 are unreliable.

Conversation on social media was mainly factual, often linking to trusted media sources. Posts often concerned the gradual easing of lockdown and Victory Day celebrations in Latvia. There were significantly fewer posts containing false information, compared to previous reports.

Disinformation themes

1. Reframing Russia: Sanctions should be lifted

One story was flagged by Zinc’s media monitoring:

- A Baltnews article stated that COVID-19 had forced Russia and Europe “into the same boat”. The article called for greater cooperation, as had been witnessed in Italy, and suggested that sanctions were unfair and “useless” (18 interactions).

2. Democratic failure: Police overstepping the mark

One story was flagged by Zinc’s media monitoring:

- A Sputnik radio piece claimed that, under lockdown, the Estonian government has turned the country into a police state that spies unnecessarily on its citizens. It stated that Estonian intelligence services, as well as secret US and NATO units, “have literally flooded the small state and made life rather uncomfortable” (35 interactions).
- An opinion article in Baltnews claimed that an incident in which two men were prevented from setting off fireworks at the Victory Day monument in Tallinn was proof of the Estonian police’s longstanding reputation for “maliciously infringing” on human rights (0 interactions).

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Conversation on social media was mainly factual, often linking to trusted media sources. Posts mainly concerned the gradual lifting of lockdown measures, as well as Victory Day in Latvia, where there was controversy over the number of people who visited the Victory Day monument in Riga.



- The number of conversations containing disinformation was notably lower this reporting period. This suggests that as lockdown measures ease and the number of COVID-19 cases dwindle, the amount of disinformation has decreased.
- However, one disinformation article was found on two groups. A Radio Sputnik piece that was shared on Голос Русской Балтии. Эстония, Латвия, Литва (Voice of the Russian Baltics. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), a group with 1,800 members, and ЭСТОНИЯ, Таллин, Тарту, Нарва, Пярну, Кохтла-Ярве, Вильянди, Маарду, Валга (ESTONIA, Tallin, Tarty, Narva, Pärnu, Kohtla-Järve, Viljandi, Maardu, Valga), a group with 2,800 members, claimed that under lockdown by the Estonian government have turned the country into a police state that spies unnecessarily on its citizens.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Postimees named its top 10 COVID-19-related fake news stories. The top place was taken by a programme on Kanal 2, a private TV station in Estonia, which gave voice to many false health claims and conspiracy theories (264 interactions).
- Delfi and Postimees reported that the EU commission had established links between conspiracy theories and HSA media (76 interactions).
- Delfi reported that false claims that tests for COVID-19 are unreliable and produce false positives were spreading (43 interactions).
- Postimees reported that the New York Times and the Financial Times are being investigated in Russia for the possible spread of false information, after both publications claimed that the death toll in Russia could be far higher than official figures suggest (31 interactions).

GEORGIA

Summary

During this reporting period, various mis- and disinformation stories were identified in Georgia by the CWG. These fell under the following broad themes: global elites are complicit in COVID-19; COVID-19 is being misrepresented to the public; the West is failing (and undermining Russia).



Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Global elites*

- In the 11-17 May edition of the Asaval-Dasavali newspaper, analyst Aleksander Sukhitashvili furthered the narrative that suggests that COVID-19 is a global project to reduce the world population. He claims that the words “Novus Ordu Seclorum” (New world order) have long been written on the US dollar banknote; that COVID-19 was created by world rulers; that powerful people are working to alter the world population.
- On 18 May, progressnews.ge published an article based on the quotes of the member of the Italian Parliament, Sara Cunial, who reportedly develops a narrative suggesting that Bill Gates predicted the COVID-19 pandemic in 2018 and aims to reduce world population. Cunial also claims that the WHO is controlled by Gates, and mentions 5G antennae as a tool for control (635 interactions).
- On 18 May, the platform Saqinform published an interview with its editor Anro Khidirbeishvili, entitled “We condemned Stalin’s cult of personality and now we have a remote controller in Bill Gates’ hands”. Khidirbeishvili discusses the effects of 5G in Tbilisi (animals, allegedly, are dying) and suggests that the ‘World government’ wants to control people via microchips, with Gates being the “remote controller”.
- In a similar vein, the online portal News Front compiled Facebook posts to form a piece whose title suggests that “when Georgia was subordinated to Moscow” people were eating caviar; now, they “are afraid of coronavirus and Bill Gates”. The Facebook posts within contain various conspiracy theories, including against the Tbilisi-based Lugar Laboratory staff, and regarding the motives of those who work for the World Health Organisation (28 interactions).
- On 15 May, a post shared via the Facebook group ‘Stop 5G in Georgia’ claimed that Israel is using COVID-19 to cover up its project of microchipping children. The Facebook post shows a post circulated on this same subject by the outlet Russia Today (RT) UK (158 interactions).

2. *Misinformation: COVID-19 is being misrepresented to the public*



- A Facebook page whose name translates as ‘Youth’/Juvenile posted a video entitled ‘COVID-19 is written on the 5g microcircuit’. It shows a man talking in front of an antenna, claiming that the 5G microcircuit is inscribed with the words ‘COV 19’. The post has so far had more than 30 shares on Facebook, which has branded the video as “False information” (81 interactions).

3. *Rising Russia: Western media is undermining Russia*

- News Front published an article based on a statement by the Moscow Health Department, claiming that outlets such as the Financial Times and Radio Free Europe were being manipulative in suggesting that the COVID-19 death toll in Moscow is higher than previously understood. The article also suggests that Russia is coping with COVID-19 better than for example the UK or the US (28 interactions).

4. *Failing West:*

- On 16 May the website Marshallpress.ge (more than 455,000 visits in the past six months according to Similar Web) stated that the former president of Georgia and Head of the Executive Reform Committee of Ukraine, Mikheil Saakashvili was infected with COVID-19. The original source was understood to be the Ukrainian website Znaj.ua. which published information based on the Telegram channel, called “Dark Knight” (The post is not available). The authors of Vesti.ua wrote that the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Andriy Yermak, held a meeting with G7 ambassadors and that Saakashvili attended this meeting online. According to Vesti.ua, this provoked suspicion that Saakashvili was infected with COVID-19. The news was disseminated through Ukrainian and Russian websites and also published in several Georgian Facebook pages. On 16 May, the Ukrainian website NV.ua published the quotes of former MP, Sergey Leshenko, who said that the “news” about Saakashvili is fake (72 interactions).

HUNGARY

Summary

Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified either by OIP groups, or through Zinc’s monitoring of COVID-19-related coverage as promoted by hostile state media and other outlets.



During this reporting period, there were three relevant themes: Europe's unfair treatment of Hungary; migration as a great threat; Hungary as having won the battle against COVID-19.

In the recent reporting period, most of the analysed reports were factual and presented few distortions. However, as in the past, much energy was invested by the government-backed media into discrediting the mainstream/liberal media and Western countries.

The EU is still widely regarded as a foe to Hungary, particularly since PM Orban announced that he will return his emergency powers, invested in him by the recent controversial legislation, to parliament at the end of May. Most media reported that this move acquitted him of accusations of authoritarianism and that accusers should apologise for their actions. This comes after international outcry regarding the aforementioned emergency legislation and its scope.

Meanwhile, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that Hungary is illegally keeping migrants in custody, suffering inhumane conditions in so-called "transition camps". This again stirred outrage among pro-government voices claiming that the ECJ judgment was politically motivated by pressure from liberal forces in the EU.

In parallel, there was a surge of fearmongering stories about migrants, both in government-backed media and on conspiracy sites. These articles seem non-political and unrelated to recent events, but continue to feed into PM Orban's anti-migrant rhetoric.

Compared to the previous monitoring period there was less news about Bill Gates and treatment-/cure-related disinformation.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. Democratic failure: European liberals are treating Hungary unfairly

The CWG partner organisation in Hungary identified the following four stories:

- Index.hu, Hungary's leading independent news portal, reported that János Bencsik, an independent Hungarian opposition MP, shared an investigative video on his Facebook page in which an anonymous nurse of the Jahn Ferenc Hospital in Budapest revealed that a large number of medical supplies provided by China are faulty and essentially useless. The video has been watched by more than 600,000 Facebook users so far.



After Bencsik made the video public, Zsolt Ralovik, the director of the aforementioned hospital came out against the opposition MP, calling his statements falsehoods and questioning whether the anonymous nurse is indeed one of his employees in the hospital.

Responding to Ralovik and a number of online provocations from ruling party supporters on Facebook, Bencsik, referring to Hungary's controversial COVID-19 emergency legislation, reported himself to the police for spreading disinformation related the handling of the pandemic to prove his pro-government critics wrong.

- As reported, a Hungarian pensioner called András Kusinszki was briefly detained by the police on May 12 on the suspicion of fearmongering and spreading disinformation about the pandemic. Kusinszki was interrogated over a brief Facebook post in which he expressed fury towards the Hungarian government, arguing that deliberately timing the lifting of the nationwide curfew restrictions (4 May) to coincide with the peak of the pandemic, as expected by the government (3 May), could lead to mass infections and deaths.

Kusinszki was detained based on Hungary's controversial emergency legislation that allows law enforcement bodies to criminally prosecute those who are suspected of spreading falsehoods or distortions in relation to the ongoing outbreak or those publishing or distorting facts to interfere with the government's successful protection of the public.

Following widespread public outrage over detaining a private individual for sharing what is regarded as his opinion, rather than an attempt to block the successful handling of the COVID-19 situation, prosecutors did not file legal charges against Kusinszki and he was released on the day of his interrogation.

- Pro-government daily Lokál alleged that a recent decision of Sándor Szaniszló, the opposition mayor of Budapest's 18th district, to change the opening hours of a local market for residents with an age higher than 65 years, could lead to mass COVID-19 infections. Consequently, the district mayor reported the case to the police as spreading fake news, referring to the emergency legislation. Lokál claimed that the district mayor failed to inform senior residents about the changed opening hours, which led to large groupings of people descending on the local market in April.
- Fringe conspiracy theory homepages, which run favourable coverage of the Hungarian government and its COVID-19 response, attacked Danish Foreign



Minister Jeppe Kofod after he and the four other Northern European FMs came out in support of the Council of Europe's concerns over democratic backsliding in Hungary. In an attempt to discredit Kofod, he was criticised by these homepages for having sex with a 15-year-old girl in 2008 when he was at the age of 34. Denmark's age of consent is 15 and the homepages did not make false accusations of paedophilia; however, the posts were worded in a way to make Kofod appear as a person who is morally unfit to criticise the Hungarian government. Other pro-Kremlin homepages, using Russian state media sources, took aim at French President Emmanuel Macron as another ideological enemy of the Hungarian government; Macron has been confronted by desperate medical workers in French hospitals over the lack of supplies that had been present prior to the current health crisis.

Both the CWG partner organisation in Hungary and Zinc's media monitoring flagged the following:

- In an attempt to discredit international critics, the Hungarian government announced that it will submit a bill on 26 May to end the state of emergency in Hungary and disable the heavily criticized COVID-19 emergency legislation as early as June. Pro-government media and politicians, including Justice Minister Judit Varga, continued to hit back at international critics of the law, saying that it will be the Hungarian National Assembly (and the ruling parties' supermajority) that will end the state of emergency. Meanwhile, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said that (18200 interactions) it will be his decision to give back the emergency powers, de facto admitting that the National Assembly will not repeal the emergency powers by its own initiative.

Government media widely (2300 interactions) shared (1800 interactions) that PM Orbán expects (9400 interactions) the government to be able to return the special mandate to parliament. The articles all highlighted that once again all liberals and opposition actors, together with Soros, were wrong and he is in fact not a dictator but a responsible leader taking control of a difficult situation.

Additionally, in Zinc's media monitoring the following 11 stories were identified:

- PestiSracok.hu, a right wing pro-government outlet, published (5100 interactions) an opinion piece on the debate in the European Parliament (EP) around the emergency legislation on 14 May. The outlet alluded that the debate appeared to take the form of a lawsuit, rather than a fair discussion. It viciously commented on the so called "leftist liberalists", detailing how "they attacked Hungary like hyenas". It complained that Hungary was denied the opportunity to defend itself (when in reality PM Orbán Viktor declined the EP President's



request that he be present for the debate). It also claimed that the EP failed to acknowledge that the Hungarian parliament does have sittings, therefore by definition Hungary cannot be a dictatorship (however, it is worth mentioning that 2/3 of the Hungarian Parliament is occupied by Fidesz or affiliated to it). It also blamed Vera Jourova, European Justice Commissioner, for backpedalling on her statement last week, saying that Hungary did not de facto breach EU law, which was interpreted by government-backed media as a direct endorsement; in reality, she asserted that the direction in which the country is headed is grounds for concern. The text claims that this “change of heart” is due to pressure from Western liberals and the Soros network. The article also strongly condemned that the idea of the withdrawal of EU funds (in cases where the suspicion of corruption emerges) would be an anti-Hungarian measure, and that this is how they, the liberals, want to extort the Hungarian people. Other major government-friendly portals (888.hu, Hirado.hu, Origo.hu) expressed (1700 interactions) their opinions and comments on the debate in the EP, concluding that Hungary is the victim of a witch hunt.

- PestiSracok.hu condemned (3500 interactions) Szel Bernadett, independent MP, and Karacsony Gergely, Mayor of Budapest, for giving an interview to Das Erste, a German news portal, explaining the situation in Hungary regarding the poor handling of COVID-19. The article attempts to discredit the MP with claims that her statements are lies and do not reflect reality. This was also picked up by other (3200 interactions) government backed (2700 interactions) outlets and social media posts.
- Origo.hu, the Hungarian government’s mouthpiece, alleged (2400 interactions) that Greta Thunberg is being ordered speak as a “newfound coronavirus expert” on the “American fake news channel” CNN. Thunberg was part of a discussion on the COVID-19 pandemic. The article fully supports President Trump’s claims that CNN is a leftist fake news channel, as well as assertions that Greta Thunberg is simply a little girl who stirs mass hysteria and is controlled by Soros’ liberals. The article tries to discredit Thunberg by invoking her Asperger’s Syndrome and that she is not attending school. It also claims that the world is at best laughing at her or pities her because of her manipulation by leftist propaganda. Pestisracok.hu wrote a similar discrediting article about the topic.
- 888.hu published an opinion article entitled “Let’s laugh about Soros together!” It attacks and discredits Soros’ actions saying that he is incapable of truly influencing the world and whatever he does cannot bring down Hungary. The article tries to paint him as a pathetic power-hungry man who will not get his



way. The article also refers to Guy Verhofstadt, an alleged close ally and European enemy of PM Orban.

- Balázs Hidvéghi, Fidesz MEP told (1200 interactions) Kossuth Radio that the debate in the European Parliament about Hungary's COVID-19 law was “an astonishing low point in the history of the European Parliament”. He claimed that it was an unprecedented attack on Hungary based on false allegations and statements, and a transparently political action carried out by European left-wing factions, without giving Hungary the opportunity to present its position.
- According (12000 interactions) to PestiSracok.hu, the progressive Western press was shocked to find out that PM Orban would return the emergency mandate to the parliament at the end of the month. It argued that this proves that the PM is not a dictator and that it was an elaborate plan of the left-wing liberals to discredit Hungary internationally.
- 888.hu and Hirado.hu reported (1100 interactions) that the political and legal struggle in Brussels against Hungary's asylum regulations will likely continue. They refer to the European Court Of Justice's decision regarding Hungary's handling of transit camps and migrants arriving in the country. While the points of the judgment concerning legal remedies can be dealt with by amending the legislation, the judgement concerns the essential elements of the Hungarian asylum procedure, so by amending them Hungary would be overhauling its policy on asylum and illegal immigration. PM Orban did not welcome (1100 interactions) the decision and promised to fight against it as much as possible, adding: “we will not be deceived by those who want to bring in migrants at all costs”.
- Origo.hu and PestiSracok.hu shared an interactive map showing the “Soros-network” worldwide. (530 combined interactions).

2. *The Other: Migration, a threat once again*

Zinc flagged eight relevant stories in its media monitoring in relation to migration:

- Reports by independent media outlet 444.hu reported (10664 interactions) that the Foreign Affairs minister, following a phone conversation with the Maltese government, said in a video interview that a migration threat is not only present, but it is rapidly growing. He pointed out the “hypocritical and malicious European Union migration policies Hungary was fighting in the past 5 years”. This was largely shared and exaggerated by government-friendly outlets such as Origo.hu, 888.hu, pestisracok.hu, mandiner.hu.



- Migration was prioritised (4000 interactions) once again in government media, such as 888.hu after the European Court of Justice issued its decision that Hungary is holding migrants illegally in “transition camps”. The message of the articles suggests that the judgment confirms that the EU wants to continue to coerce Hungary to accept and admit migrants without control, which in the government’s view “is against the will of the Hungarian people and the Hungarian constitution.” Government supporter media outlets such as Origo.hu, pestisracok.hu, tutiblog.com (2600 interactions), widely shared it while stirring outrage.

Judit Varga also posted on social media condemning (3500 interactions) the judgement.

- In an interview (1100 interactions) with the M1 national TV channel, Gyorgy Bokondi, PM Orban’s defence advisor, said that the judgement from the European Court of Justice on Hungary’s migration policies was politically motivated to force Hungary into changing its policies. He highlighted that the “Soros NGOs”, the left-wing liberal parties and the apparatus of the European Union have been constantly seeking to allow people to pass through Hungary and to end border guarding.
- Strongly pro-government news portal, Hirado.hu, reported (1300 interactions) that a Hungarian NGO, Hungary Helps Program, helps with the restoration of churches destroyed by migrants in Greece.
- Origo.hu, upped (2100 interactions) the number of articles it published focusing on migration and reported that police officers and soldiers took action against 154 illegal migrants over the weekend, stopping them and taking them back to the border. Another story that can be read on Origo.hu talks (261 interactions) about how Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has assigned the Serbian army to the Serbian-Croatian border so that soldiers can protect the safety and property of the local population from illegal migrants, claiming that locals feel unsafe in their presence after migrants allegedly broke into a series of homes. Magyar Szo also reported (0 interactions) that 18 migrants needed to be taken back to the transition camp by the police and soldiers in Serbia, because locals were concerned about their safety and property. According to Serbian Radio and Television, about 2,000 migrants from 18 countries are staying in reception centres in the area, and some of the local population is concerned about their presence.



- Hirado.hu, a government media outlet, reported with fearmongering undertones that the number of migrants in Italy has increased tenfold.
- A particularly vivid and upsetting story was published (256 interactions) on Origo.hu and then shared on other likeminded pages, detailing the discovery of a missing Swedish girl's head in the home of a Kurdish migrant, who was then taken into custody. The article adds that this happens to many European women who become involved with a migrant.

Wider social media conversation

Activity on social media was largely in line with what Zinc found in its media monitoring. However, conspiracy theory pages were more active than in the previous reporting period. Government-related pages are largely pushing the narrative that Hungary has dealt with COVID-19 exceptionally well.

- *Democratic failure: Western / liberal governments are hypocritical:*
Fidesz' Facebook page (307,000 likes on Facebook), and other government-related social media accounts, posted that PM Orban will cease his rights to rule by decree, given to him by the emergency legislation. He will renounce this special authority by the end of May. Following this, the government demands and expects apologies from his critics who accused him of being a dictator. HirTV (261,000 likes on Facebook) and other (356,000 likes) government-backed (34,700 likes) news outlets shared these messages on their Facebook pages.
- *Planned pandemic: COVID-19 was deliberately created by Bill Gates:*
According to Titok Terminal (Secret Terminal - 50,744 likes on Facebook), a fringe conspiracy theory page, which posted an article on Facebook citing a show on the Rossiya 24 TV channel. The article claims that Bill Gates is not really developing a vaccine against COVID-19, but a microchip that can be implanted in the skin to bring all of humanity under control and then solve the growing problem of overpopulation with a well-targeted genocide. This was also picked up by Kimondott Igazságok (Outspoken Truths), another conspiracy page (16,864 likes)
- *Planned pandemic: COVID-19 was deliberately created by global elites / COVID-19 was deliberately created by Bill Gates:*
VNTV's Facebook page (31,214 likes on Facebook) posted a video, which reached over 84000 views, talking about a 'supranational financial elite' who are influencing policies and de facto rule over the world. The narrative of the video combines several conspiracy theories claiming that COVID-19 was



artificially created, that the banks were also behind it and stand to benefit from it, that Bill Gates has malicious plans for the population and that the pandemic is a form of a biological world war coordinated by the 'elite'.

- *Democratic failure: Non-liberal governments are handling the crisis better than liberal democracies:*

Fidesz' Facebook page has been posting materials, such as propaganda posters, promoting how well Hungary has curbed the pandemic and that the economy is still growing. It claims that: "the Hungarian economy performs among the best in the EU. This also means that the coronavirus epidemic has hit the Hungarian economy on an emerging stage. We are now working to get the Hungarian economy out of the crisis stronger." Other outlets, like Origo also talked about it on social media, saying that the Hungarian economy is expected to suffer the second smallest loss in Europe, after Malta, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

- *Miscellaneous:*

Vilaghelyzete.com (Status of the World) (9,682 likes on Facebook), a pro-government conspiracy site, posted a critical and sarcastic piece on Greta Thunberg's appearance on a COVID-19 expert panel on CNN. The blog entry pointed to her tweet before the meeting, in which she says that she has never claimed to be an expert, that she is an 'activist' and would use the panel to discuss her campaign supporting UNICEF. The article argues that this didn't stop the CNN guest bookers cashing in on her profile. The article attacks her persona as well as her comment that 'people are starting to realise that we are actually depending on science and that we need to listen to scientists and experts,' suggesting that experts and scientist are not to be trusted.

- *Planned pandemic: Silencing those who could be of help:*

Kimondott Igzasagok (Outspoken Truths) (16,854 likes on Facebook) has posted on Facebook linking the death of a German virologist working on the SARS vaccine to a plot in which Chancellor Angela Merkel and the US administration conspired against the expert for hindering their way to world domination.

- *Planned Pandemic: COVID-19 was deliberately created by Bill Gates:*

Titok Terminal (Secret Terminal) (50,744 likes on Facebook) referenced a recent interview with the Hungarian Foreign Affairs Minister about the coronavirus situation. The interviewer asked about his opinion on the common conspiracy theories, specifically about the vaccine and microchipping; the Minister clearly disagreed warned that these theories are dangerous and should not be listened to. The article, however, turns his words around, saying



that he disagrees with the idea of having microchips implanted into the Hungarian people, unlike Bill Gates.

- *Miscellaneous:*
Titok terminal (Secret Terminal), one of the most read conspiracy theory pages, also posted a theory that the virus has been around in the population for years, like a Trojan horse, but it has only activated now. Supposedly approximately 80% of the population is already infected, 5-6 billion people.
- *Planned pandemic: COVID-19 is an excuse to restrict individual liberty:*
Titkok Szigete (The Island of Secrets) wrote an opinion piece about how Silicon Valley leads the world's cognitive conscious map and that the COVID-19 pandemic provides the perfect cover to increase control, just in time for the 2020 elections. It also speculates that neoliberalism provided the perfect cover for the oligarchs to start ideological warfare to protect the billions of dollars that has been reallocated to them from taxpayers.
- *Planned pandemic: Turning Europe into a sect / COVID-19 is an excuse to restrict individual liberty.*
The Kimondott Igazságok (Spoken Truths) conspiracy site argued in a blogpost, without explicitly naming the coronavirus pandemic, that "certain central powers in Brussels" are exploiting the current health crisis to create a new religion on the end of the world to create a new world order. This new world order is allegedly based on the so-called Kalergi Plan, a far-right conspiracy theory associated with Austrian-Japanese politician Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi who allegedly had a secret plot to mix white Europeans with other races through immigration. Referring to the Kalergi theory, the homepage alleges that the secret EU plot, whose leader is German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is ultimately aimed at creating a United States of Europe in which Europeans will be "forced" to mix with non-whites.
- *Democratic failure: Western states are taking advantage of Eastern states.*
Titok Terminal published a blogpost about how Western societies targeted the 1000 year-old Hungarian state and their sole purpose is to diminish the Hungarian population. It talks about five stages of a historical anti-Hungarian conspiracy, starting with the Versailles treaty when Hungary lost most of its territories and then arriving to the conclusion that the EU is the latest attack on Hungarian identity, and how Hungary is losing its sovereignty and is becoming only a colony of the EU.
- György Gődény, a COVID-19-sceptic medical influencer, who previously launched a petition to protest the compulsory wearing of protective face masks



in public, continued to downplay the impact of COVID-19 and invited his followers to join a new Facebook group and continue advocating for “giving people their lives’ back. The Facebook group will most likely serve as a platform for conspiracy theories related to the pandemic.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Kimondott Igazságok (Outspoken truths), fringe conspiracy homepage with 16,854 likes on facebook, pointed to a recently introduced program of Microsoft and Adaptive Biotechnologies, a Seattle-based biotech firm according to which the two companies are inviting coronavirus-exposed, -infected and –recovered people to provide blood samples for financial reward, the conspiracy theory homepage alleges that the research is yet another secret move of Bill Gates to genetically engineer a kind of chose race within the global elites. While the conspiracy theory says that Microsoft collects DNA samples to run a genetical selection program for the elites, the research was launched to examine how the immune system fights COVID-19 with the aim of support scientific research programmes in their fight against the novel coronavirus.
- After discussing how Bill Gates is interested in global vaccination development and production, Valóság amit tudnod kell (‘Reality that you ought to know’ – a fringe conspiracy page with 74,912 likes on Facebook) claims that Gates does not want the authorities to investigate people, organizations or countries that are most likely to have produced the coronavirus outbreak.
- In an article, PestiSracok.hu cited (4800 interactions) an opposition party leader who claimed that the coronavirus did not begin with bats and the international media has misinformed the public. He also agreed with the government not to accept the perpetual bonds that George Soros was suggesting to Europe in order to better mitigate the subsequent financial crisis.

KOSOVO

Summary

This week, mis- and disinformation stories in Kosovo fell under the following themes: global elites are complicit in COVID-19; conflict will ensue from the crisis (Russia has plans to divide Kosovo); misinformation (5G is linked to COVID-19; garlic may help to cure the disease).



Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Conflict and nihilism: Russia plans to divide Kosovo*

- An article from the popular online news portal Bota Sot featured the headline “Russia’s plan for Kosovo to take Trepca and divide Kosovo”, [suggesting](#) that Russia has secret plans to divide Kosovo politically and to gain control of natural resources in the north. The article itself, however, does not sufficiently substantiate this claim, and the sense of a Russian plot having been “uncovered” appears misleading. (217 interactions).

2. *Global Elites: complicit in COVID-19*

- A blog post from “Lajmi I Fundit” [features](#) the comments of an Italian nanopathologist and doctor who, the article says, has long stated that the pandemic is a “media fraud”. The post claims that the doctor believes COVID-19 is a conspiracy to collapse the global economy so that elites can buy companies cheaply and sell vaccines to everyone. (386 interactions).

3. *Misinformation: false cures and 5G association*

- A blog post on the website Blue TV/Lajme nga Bota [featured](#) the headline “Albanian surprises Americans and the world: he discovers the cure for coronavirus in Kosovo”, and cites a writer from Kosovo who has mentioned garlic as potentially capable of curing COVID-19. The post has been shared on a Facebook page with 130,000 followers. (73 interactions).
- On social media, a video was posted showing an individual unboxing electronic equipment supposedly part of 5G tower technology and showing elements marked with the word ‘COV-19’. The video – which was widely shared - has been branded by Facebook as “False Information”.

LATVIA

Summary



Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified either by OIP groups, or through Zinc's monitoring of COVID-19-related coverage as promoted by hostile state media and other outlets.

Victory Day remained a focus for hostile state outlets this week, criticising the government's actions and using reactions to the holiday to highlight the issue of Russophobia in Latvia. In its COVID-19 coverage, Sputnik criticised Western media coverage of the pandemic in Russia, while pro-Kremlin outlet topwar.ru criticised NATO's continuing activity.

These stories were identified by expert groups and Zinc's internal monitoring. The narratives identified in disinformation stories this week have previously been observed in Latvia. Social media conversation around these articles was not observed.

These stories were not discussed by mainstream media coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19. Articles focused on other narratives spread by hostile state media, the conspiracy theory that the virus was created in a Wuhan lab, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's claims that China and Russia are using the pandemic to spread disinformation.

Conversation on social media was mainly factual, often linking to trusted media sources. Posts often concerned Victory Day in Latvia or expressed confusion over the government's lockdown relaxations. Posts containing disinformation often referenced conspiracy theories, and/or claims that the pandemic had been exaggerated.

Disinformation themes

1. Reframing Russia: Russia is handling its own epidemic well

One story of interest was flagged by Zinc's internal monitoring:

- Sputnik Latvia lambasted Western media for suggesting that Russia has manipulated COVID-19 figures, calling the claims discriminatory (128 interactions).

2. Miscellaneous: NATO's aggression continues

One story of interest was flagged by the CWG partner organisation:

- Topwar.ru reported that NATO exercises will continue despite the pandemic. It claimed that the main aim of the exercises was "to provoke Moscow into retaliatory aggression" (0 interactions).



Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Conversation on social media was mainly factual, often linking to trusted media sources. Conversation around Victory Day remained; however, it was significantly lower compared to the last reporting period. Conversation also turned to lockdown easing, with several posts expressing confusion over whether or not Latvian residents had to wear masks on public transport.
- Posts containing disinformation referencing conspiracy theories, and claims that the pandemic has been falsified, were notably present.
- Once again, content identified in previous reports was found in this reporting period, showing that the same content is being used to spread false claims about the virus.
- Posts on two groups claimed that the pandemic had been falsified or exaggerated. A post on Latvia 2.0., a Facebook page with 11,000 followers, referenced an article by Euronews RU, which stated that PACE (the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) had confirmed there had been no pandemic. The article is in fact 10 years old and refers to the influenza A virus subtype H1N1 (A/H1N1), which was declared a pandemic by the WHO in 2009, then disputed by PACE. Moreover, a post on Covid-19 Latvija, a group with 3,900 members, claimed that the reaction to the virus was a “global deception”, aimed at forcing people to get vaccinated and destroying small businesses in favour of large corporations. This post had been identified in previous reports (see 12 May report).
- Posts on two groups referenced well-known conspiracy theories. A post on Наконец-то United Latvija! (Finally, United Latvia!), a group with 1,500 members, contained a Facebook video claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic is linked to ID2020, Bill Gates, Elon Musk and the WHO, in order to fulfil their desire to chip the human race. Moreover, a video shared on the group Covid-19 Latvija suggested that it was still too early to determine whether the virus appeared naturally or was created in a lab.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Delfi named and debunked two narratives about Latvia that are disseminated by Kremlin-backed media, including that regarding Latvia’s alleged inability to cope with the COVID-19 crisis (60 interactions).



- Jauns published a video of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, noting the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was created in one of their labs (42 interactions).
 - LSM published a lengthy piece about how disinformation can be created and spread successfully (32 interactions).
 - Delfi published an interview with a sociologist on why human beings spread lies (30 interactions).
 - Press.lv reported that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had accused Russia and China of using the pandemic to spread disinformation and further destabilise the West (30 interactions).
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LITHUANIA

Summary

Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified either by OIP groups, or through Zinc's monitoring of COVID-19-related coverage as promoted by hostile state media and other outlets.

Hostile state media reported mainly on the easing of lockdown restrictions, publishing no articles that were deemed as disinformation. Misleading articles were identified in the generally pro-Kremlin weekly *Laisvas Laikraštis*, which claimed that the former president Dalia Grybauskaitė's COVID-19 foundation is fraudulent and that the government is destroying the healthcare system in its response to the pandemic.

These stories were all identified by expert groups. The narratives identified in disinformation stories this week have previously been observed in Lithuania. There was no social media conversation identified that specifically concerned these narratives.

Disinformation stories picked up by the media focused on international instances of disinformation. 15min reported that Facebook's moderators will use AI to combat disinformation, while infa.lt relayed NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's claim that Russia and China are using the pandemic to destabilise the West.

Conversation on social media was mainly truthful, often linking to trusted media sources. Posts often concerned the lockdown relaxations announced by the



Lithuanian government and the opening of borders with Estonia and Latvia. The number of posts containing disinformation was lower compared to previous reporting period, but some posts referenced familiar COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

Disinformation themes

1. *Democratic failure: Government incompetence*

Two stories of interest were flagged by the CWG partner organisation in Lithuania:

- Laisvas Laikraštis claimed that the Lithuanian government was “teaching” citizens how to commit fraud by not initiating an investigation into a supposedly illegal foundation to fight COVID-19 founded by former president Dalia Grybauskaitė (Interaction data unavailable).
- Laisvas Laikraštis also claimed that the Lithuanian government is “destroying” the healthcare system by limiting medical services due to COVID-19 (Interaction data unavailable).

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Conversation on social media was mainly factual, often linking to trusted media sources. Posts often concerned the lockdown relaxations announced by the government and the opening of borders with Estonia and Latvia.
- The number of conversations containing disinformation was notably lower this reporting period. This suggests that as lockdown measures ease and the number of COVID-19 dwindle, the amount of disinformation has decreased. Posts containing disinformation linked to COVID-19 conspiracy theories.
- Once again, content identified in previous reports was found in this reporting period, showing that the same content is being used to spread false claims about the virus.
- Posts linking COVID-19 to mass microchipping were found on two groups. Posts in Русская Литва (Russian Lithuania) and in Real Висагинас (Real Visaginas), a group with 7,000 members, linked to a clip of Nikita Mikhailkov, in which he claimed Microsoft wanted to place microchips in people bodies that could control them in exchange for cryptocurrency. Videos of Mikhailkov have been identified across several Baltic Facebook groups in previous reporting periods.



- Posts linking 5G to the spread of COVID-19 were also found on several groups. One group shared an interview from the channel 'A Yesli Chestno' with a military signalman who claimed that 5G and microchipping formed part of the pandemic. The video was found on several Latvian groups in the previous reporting period (see 15 May report). Moreover, a post on UNFOLLOW 15min.lt, a group with 42,000 members, urged people to gather in protest against quarantine restrictions, the implementation of 5G and mandatory vaccination.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- 15min reported that Facebook's moderators will start using AI to detect misinformation, which is on the rise following COVID-19 (62 interactions).

Infa.lt reported on NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's statement that Russia and China were using the pandemic to destabilise the West by "spreading misinformation en masse" (0 interactions).

MOLDOVA

Summary

This week, a number of narrative trends have been identified, with themes including: conflict and nihilism (Lavrov accuses the US of a lack of transparency regarding biolabs, implying also a 'rising Russia' narrative); global elites are complicit in COVID-19, in particular via vaccination and microchipping and the alleged activity of Bill Gates (a narrative that continues to be supported by the Flux.md portal); EU failure (COVID-19 has weakened solidarity in the Union).

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Conflict and Nihilism: US biological laboratories*
 - A short article on Sputnik.md reported that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has accused the US of refusing to be transparent about military-biological activities. Lavrov stated that the US does not want to support a new mechanism for ensuring such transparency, and that it is creating biolabs "scattered around the world". The article headline reads: "Lavrov: Russia supports strict control of military-biological activities" and includes a video of Lavrov talking (24 interactions).



2. *EU failure: COVID-19 has weakened the Union*

- A Sputnik.md article with the headline “France criticizes Italy for unilateral plan to reopen borders for tourists” reported that France had criticised its neighbour for undermining the idea of European solidarity with its moves to allow European tourists into the country. The article has been viewed almost 300 times.

3. *Global elites: microchipping is a globalist conspiracy (and a real plan)*

- An article on the Flux.md site claimed that the new COVID-19 vaccine will be used as a means of population reduction, and suggested that Bill Gates will use the vaccine for this end. The article comes with alarming imagery of Bill Gates holding a needle and wearing a WHO badge. On Facebook, the post has received around 160 shares (1,331 interactions).
- A post on the website Aparatorul.md, which presents itself as “The leaflet of the Moldovan orthodox jurists' movement”, suggested that the implantation of humans with microchips will be mandatory and that this condition has been imposed by globalists who want to control the world. It insists that this is not an obsession of conspiracy theories, but is in fact true, and that Sweden will be the first country where such chipping will be introduced en masse (355 interactions).

4. *Misinformation: particular blood groups may be more prone to COVID-19; 5G is linked to COVID-19*

- A Sputnik.md article reported that the head of the Russian Federal Biomedical Agency (FMBA), Veronika Skvortova, had announced that people with Type A blood have a higher risk of suffering from COVID-19. Whilst it was suggested that more research was needed, the claim does not appear so far to have been supported by the WHO (88 interactions).



NORTH MACEDONIA

Summary

During this reporting period, mis- and disinformation stories in North Macedonia fell broadly into the following themes: Russia is rising (and may soon have a vaccine); global elites should be suspected for being complicit in COVID-19 and alleged plans for global control; government incompetence (European states are rising up against restrictions). All of these themes were present in the previous reporting period. Misinformation also persists.

Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *Misinformation: 5G is a weapon of mass destruction*

- Online news outlet Sloboden Svet presented what it says are the claims of an American scientist, Dr. Katherine Horton, who, the article says, suggests that 5G is a powerful weapon of mass destruction. This content has been shared on 13 Facebook pages with approximately 190,000 followers (7,865 interactions).

2. *Rising Russia: a vaccine may be imminent*

- The suggestion that Russia is on the brink of developing a vaccine against COVID-19 continued in this report. The website Vesnik said that according to Alexander Gunzberg, the director of the National Research Centre for Epidemiology and Microbiology, Russia may be ready to register this vaccine in August. Gunzberg was speaking to Russia 1 TV, according to TASS (17 interactions).

3. *Failing West: lockdown is inviting resistance*

- An article on the popara.mk site featuring tweets and videos from around Europe (including from the UK's Evening Standard newspaper) reported on protests against lockdown measures in countries such as Germany, the UK and Poland. The article itself appears reasonably conventional in its news reporting, though the framing somewhat feeds the narrative that European governments cannot cope with lockdown and that populations are rising up against it. The content has been shared on 3 Facebook pages/groups with around 134,000 followers.



4. *Global elites:*

- An antisemitic article from Sloboden Svet suggested that the question of whether COVID-19 is artificial or not is redundant; it is “perfectly clear”, claimed the author, that behind the crisis lies a “Talmud-Zionist banking elite”, and that Bill Gates is a puppet of this group (89 interactions).
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POLAND

Summary

During this reporting period, misinformation was notable. Narratives included: the military may be poisoning people (as ‘evidenced’ by flight information); vaccination is harmful.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Misinformation: the crisis is false or over-stated*

- YouTube channel ‘Suwerenny PL’ (84,800 subscribers) posted a video claiming to offer an analysis of flight information from which the author offers the conclusion that the military may be intentionally poisoning people and protecting others. The video has had close to 52,000 views on Facebook and YouTube, and implies that COVID-19 is being used as a premise for the execution of covert ends (3,700 interactions).
 - The Facebook group ‘I Don’t Believe in Coronavirus’ (which has close to 65,000 members) continues to perpetuate misinformation. This includes the opinion posted by one individual opposed to vaccination, who suggests that the vaccine could include biomaterial from human foetuses. Separately, a graphic shared by a private individual on another COVID-19-related Facebook group suggested that the WHO has already killed thousands of people in Pakistan and India through vaccination.
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ROMANIA



Summary

Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified either by OIP groups, or through Zinc's monitoring of COVID-19-related coverage as promoted by hostile state media and other outlets.

During this monitoring period, we identified a range of disinformation stories in Romania. Disinformation stories are identified either through our groups flagging them or through monitoring coverage of COVID-19 in hostile state media outlets.

Although 18 May was the day that many of the restrictions were lifted, the main continuing and growing narrative trends referred to the alleged submission of the press to the government, and the authorities' attempt to impose a dictatorship through unreasonably harsh restrictions that cannot be justified by COVID-19.

An opinion survey conducted by IRES, a Bucharest-based polling organisation, has shown that Romanians show little trust towards the authorities and the scientific community, with only 4 in 10 people stating that they would accept being vaccinated with a new COVID-19 vaccine, while 5 in 10 believe that the authorities have concealed information regarding the pandemic in Romania. Almost half of the respondents believe that the new coronavirus is not as dangerous as presented.

Romania has experienced its first protest against the lockdown measures and the country's general approach towards controlling the pandemic in Romania. A little over 200 people have gathered in the Victoria Square in the first day the restrictions were eased, being rallied by influencers known for their religious, nationalist, anti-Western and anti-globalisation stances.

Many of the lockdown restrictions were lifted on 15 May, but until 18 May a legal vacuum has permitted the organisation of protests, despite the nominal interdiction for people gathering in groups larger than three individuals.

During this monitoring period, stories broadly fell into four key themes: that the pandemic was planned or a hoax; that the measures taken to contain the spread are exaggerated in order to establish a dictatorship; conspiracy theories (relating to a New World Order, the alleged harm of vaccines, and the notion of Bill Gates as a criminal); and Orthodox influencers claiming that international organizations such as the UN are misusing funds designated for fighting COVID-19 to instead promote abortion.

Most of these stories were identified by both Zinc's media monitoring and expert CWG partner groups. Some of the narratives identified in disinformation stories within this



monitoring period have previously been observed in Romania, such as Orthodox influencers acting as agitators, plus the ‘planned pandemic’ and anti-vaccination stances. There was social media commentary around some of these narratives.

Mainstream media covered two of the disinformation strands, focusing on exposing Russian disinformation tactics, the automatic diagnosis of COVID-19 for all patients, and, relatedly, the refusal to treat patients suffering from other ailments.

Other conversation on social media around COVID-19 focused on generic frustrations with lockdown and some well-known conspiracy theories. See further detail in the ‘social media section’.

Disinformation themes

1. *Planned pandemic*

These stories were identified by Zinc’s media monitoring:

- Puterea reports on the Facebook live sessions of a former TV presenter, Florin Calinescu, in which he claims that the pandemic was planned as a global experiment to deprive people of their liberties. (79,000 interactions)
- The Justitiarul blog claims that the President of Madagascar is being silenced by WHO for trying to promote a plant-based tonic which allegedly cures COVID-19. (91,600 interactions)

2. *COVID-19 is a hoax*

This story was identified by both Zinc’s media monitoring and the CWG partner organisation:

- Antena3 has shared some new statements from doctor Vasile Astarastoe, that has come to be known for his sceptical stance towards the current lockdown measures and his support for certain conspiracy theories. Although it does mention that the declarations may be “controversial”, the media outlet is presenting Dr. Astarastoe as a reputable expert and is dedicating a whole article to his view on the allegedly insignificant infection caused by the novel coronavirus. (2,900 interactions)

These stories were identified by Zinc’s media monitoring:



- Conservative outlets such as Stiri pe Surse and Active News continued to report on the experiment conducted by Viorel Catarama, a Romanian businessman, who set out to deliberately infect himself to prove that COVID-19 is a hoax. (3,200 interactions)
- Conservative news website Lujū published an article on two American doctors supposedly exposing COVID-19 as a hoax in order to deprive people of civil liberties and to spread propaganda. (1,900 interactions)
- Lujū also reported that fewer Romanians died during the same period in 2019 and 2018, hinting that the pandemic is a hoax. (1,300 interactions)
- Widely-read blog Gandeste continued to post op-eds claiming that COVID-19 is a hoax and that people are being falsely diagnosed in order to keep up figures for new cases and the death toll. (1,078 interactions)
- TV channel Antena3 published an article about a Facebook post penned by a lawyer who claims that the next of kin of the recently deceased are being offered money in exchange for them to publicly declare that the cause of death was COVID-19. (21,861 interactions)

3. *Religion and moral decay*

These stories were identified by Zinc media monitoring:

- Active News claims that the UN is misusing funds it received for tackling the spread of COVID-19 for funding and promoting abortion. (91,600 interactions)
- Ziaristii reported on the decision made by the Church of Romania to continue performing Holy Communion using the same cup and spoon for thousands of churchgoers, citing that these are the Orthodox rules. (1600 interactions)

4. *Democratic failure*

This story was identified by both Zinc's media monitoring and the CWG partner organisation:

- Numerous fringe media outlets have propagated a narrative that has surfaced for the first time more than two weeks ago, when the Government of Romania has agreed to pay the majority of the media outlets in Romania a sum of 40 million euros with the aim of undertaking a large public health information campaign. Right-wing outlets have been widely interpreting these transfers as



a bribe to the “mainstream media” so that the government could manage to control the narrative in the public space, thus being able to spread allegedly false, alarmist information. (6239 interactions)

These stories were identified by Zinc’s media monitoring:

- Vestea claims that scanning people’s temperature when they enter shops and public buildings is illegal and unconstitutional. (50,500 interactions)
- Several outlets published articles in which they praise protesters around the world who oppose the supposed infringement of their freedoms through COVID-19 restriction measures. (25,600 interactions)

5. *Miscellaneous*

These stories were identified by Zinc’s media monitoring:

- EVZ reported on the vitriolic accusations against Bill Gates made by an Italian politician. She claims that Gates is a criminal and should be arrested for planning to fund and impose compulsory vaccination and for spreading fake news.
- An article posted by dcbusiness.ro is misleadingly stating that a COVID-19 vaccine will be ready to be widely distributed to the population from September. In fact, this is a very optimistic prediction, as the mass distribution of this vaccine is strictly conditional on the success of the ongoing human clinical trials that are yet to yield any results. (77 interactions)

Wider social media conversation

- The majority of posts relating to COVID-19 were factual and linked to trusted local and international media sources.
- Many continue to interact with posts or stories claiming that the pandemic was planned or a hoax. On some highly populated groups, Facebook users seemed to agree, referring to various cases in which death certificates had allegedly been falsified to cite COVID-19 as the cause of death.
- The most commonly shared posts are related to protests against quarantine measures around the world, which aim to mobilize Romanians to follow suit. For example, a Sputnik article about protests in France received almost 120,000 interactions.



- A highly vitriolic anti-government Facebook group shared a satirical article claiming that not only will the government stop the re-opening of churches but it will demolish them altogether. The source is a well-known satire publication that does not report on real news; nevertheless, this article was perceived by many as true and it appeared to inflame anti-government attitudes, receiving nearly 78,000 interactions.
- A post written by journalist Sorina Matei, a voice regularly distributing disinformation and criticizing the government's lockdown strategy, attracted widespread engagement; the Facebook post is linked to an article from her own news outlet, where she insists that the fundamental constitutional right to protest that is infringed upon by the government using the coronavirus pandemic as an excuse to repress dissenting voices. (600 interactions)
- A post written by Iulian Capsali, a conservative influencer from Romania regularly posting misinformation on the subject of COVID-19. His message contains several disinformation narratives, from the idea that deaths are overreported as a strategy to scare the population, to the notion that the lockdown measures are used to control the population in accordance with a "globalist experiment". (1100 interactions)

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Ziaristii published an article claiming that Romania has been the target of Russian disinformation during the pandemic that is aimed at manipulating people and weakening Romania.
- Doar Romania published an article about the declarations of Raed Arafat, the coordinator of emergency medical situations in Romania, in which he claims that Romanians have been targeted by fake news on social networks.
- G4 Media claims that there had been a report in April on Russia's plan to spread disinformation stories in order to exploit social and political tensions in Romania during COVID-19.
- Conspiracy theories regarding Bill Gates' efforts to promote mass-vaccination continue to be present, and have recently started to emerge in mainstream outlets as well.



SERBIA

Summary

Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified through Zinc's monitoring of COVID-19-related coverage in selected media outlets.

During the reporting period, no articles that could be termed disinformation were identified. HSA and pro-Kremlin outlets reported on the possibility of a second wave of the virus in Serbia, the upcoming elections, and a new virus epicentre emerging in Vranje.

On social media, users mostly focused on testing and the number of cases in Serbia. There was also some criticism of the government's plans to hold elections in June.

Wider media coverage included the rise in false information in COVID-19 YouTube videos and speculations on the ties between COVID-19 and 5G.

Disinformation themes

There was no overt disinformation observed in HSA or pro-Kremlin media in Serbia during the reporting period. Most coverage dealt with the possibility of a second wave of the virus in Serbia, the upcoming elections in light of the rise in cases and a new virus epicentre emerging in Vranje.

Wider social media conversation

Social media posts in Serbia during the reporting period predominantly focused on testing and the number of cases in Serbia, with the number rising since lockdown measures have been relaxed. There was also some criticism of the fact that the government is still planning to hold elections in June.

- The fact that the government is still planning to hold parliamentary elections in June was mentioned by several users, especially given that new cases of COVID-19 are still emerging in Serbia. Janko Veselinović, an academic and president of the PREOKRET (Change) movement, tweeted that the election should not take place after 114 new cases were identified. Boris Jovanović from sports news outlet Sportske Novosti posted a sarcastic tweet saying that the prime minister will be shocked when she discovers that the coronavirus will not wait for the election to be over and that she will end up writing the virus a strongly worded letter, alluding to her hands-off style of dealing with problems.



- The number of tests and cases is being debated, as some people mentioned that they have not seen nor are they aware of any testing being done. The official account of the CINS (Centre for Investigative Journalism of Serbia) shared an article from the independent daily newspaper Danas, which claimed that the number of cases was actually higher than the official statistics suggest.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Danas reported on a BBC Serbian article which claimed that disinformation videos on YouTube are receiving millions of views, explaining that more than a quarter of the most-watched videos about COVID-19 on YouTube worldwide contain misleading or imprecise information (1 interaction). This was covered by a number of portals such as news aggregator Srbija Danas, sensationalist tabloid Telegraf, and Q21, a radio station in Novi Sad.
- Pro-government tabloid Espresso covered a statement by Denis Kuskov from Telecom Daily, who said that 5G technology functions in accordance with norms set out by individual countries, and has nothing to do with people's health or COVID-19 (6 interactions).

SLOVAKIA

Summary

During this reporting period, mis- and disinformation content in Slovakia highlighted by the CWG fell under the following themes: Russia is rising (and is the target of a disinformation campaign from the West); conflict and nihilism (tests used in Slovakia may have been developed with US army assistance); misinformation (in the form of the amplification of claims made by an Italian MP that the number of deaths has been overstated); global elites are complicit in COVID-19. This last narrative appears to be especially prevalent, perpetuated by outlets such as Hlavny Dennik and Zem a Vek, with Bill Gates again being a target.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Misinformation: false cures, severity, and statistics*



- The news portal Hlavne Spravy (on a page with the subtitle “conservative diary”) featured an article with the headline: “Italian MP: “The 25,000 victims did not die of the coronavirus. It is not truth. It’s a way to establish a dictatorship here without consent. ” The piece reports on comments made by the Italian MP Vittorio Sgarbi, who “recently questioned the officially reported number” of COVID-19 victims, challenging the suggestion that 25,000 people may have died from the disease in that country (5,478 interactions).
2. *Conflict and Nihilism: tests may have been developed with US Army help*
- A Facebook post from the online outlet Zem a Vek that has received 188 shares on Facebook contains the conspiracy theory suggesting that tests for coronavirus in Slovakia may have been developed with assistance from the US army. The post’s title is “SLOVAK TESTS FOR CORONAVIRUS ARE FROM A COMPANY LOCATED IN THE AREA OF THE AMERICAN MILITARY BASE FORT DETRICK.” The article also contains the theory that COVID-19 was made in a lab (215 interactions).
3. *Rising Russia: the west is undermining Russia*
- An article from online portal Hlavny Dennik entitled “The West also uses the coronavirus to discredit Russia” quotes Maria Zacharova from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accusing the West of starting a disinformation campaign against Russia. Her comments are in part a response to those recently made by NATO’s Jens Stoltenberg, suggesting that Russia and China are spreading misinformation about COVID-19 (20 interactions).
4. *Global elites: complicit in COVID-19*
- A Hlavny Dennik article included the conspiracy theory that shutting down the economy amidst COVID-19 was a decision secretly made at Davos in January 2020. It also suggests that Bill Gates is overly influential in the World Health Organisation and that tests are often misleading and even contaminated. The image is of Bill Gates in a lab coat, injecting planet earth (101 interactions).
 - On Facebook, the website Zem a Vek posted a video of a speech by the Italian politician Sara Cunial, speaking about COVID-19, vaccination, Bill Gates and other subjects. The video suggests that Gates is responsible for the spread of



polio amongst children in India, and suggests that COVID-19 is part of a plan to take control of people (218 interactions).

- An article posted by the Infovojna website contains conspiracy theories about Bill Gates, including that he is complicit in nefarious vaccine-development plans. The article is entitled “VIDEO: Bill Gates' plan to inoculate the world and how his foundation is linked to pharmaceutical companies” and contains a video on this topic, claiming to answer the questions: “What is Bill Gates' vaccine plan? How is his foundation connected to pharmaceutical companies and efforts to distribute vaccines?” (398 interactions)
- A Hlavny Dennik article quotes an interview by RT with Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters, in which he apparently claims that COVID-19 has shown us how people need to cooperate, which is impossible when politicians serve corporate interests. Rogers is reportedly critical in the interview of figures such as Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg. The article’s framing appears to be somewhat misleading, hinting at deeper conspiracy theories behind Waters’ words (501 interactions)

UKRAINE

Summary

Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified either by OIP groups, or through Zinc’s monitoring of COVID-19-related coverage as promoted by hostile state media and other outlets.

This report sees a continuation of a number of previously-identified narratives. Narratives of interest include: Ukrainian farmers are unable to sell products, and forced to dump them open air; Ukrainians with COVID-19 receive no promised help from the government; Criticisms of health reform in Ukraine; the Russian governance model is handling the pandemic better than liberal democratic ones; and COVID-19 is a hoax.

Social media conversation focused on the decision to roll out mass vaccination against influenza (during summer) and mass testing on COVID-19 (in the coming weeks). Negative commentary was observed around the alleged story that officials from the Central Election Committee received total monthly payments higher than the 47,000 UAH (1,700\$) allowed for government officials until the end of quarantine. Ukrainian social media users were also attracted to posts from public activists or local medical personnel referencing a range of conspiracy theories.



Wider coverage of disinformation concentrated on comments from Peter Stano, the European Commission's lead spokesperson for foreign affairs and security policy, accusing Russian media of spreading false news about the pandemic with the aim of undermining the 'credibility of the EU and its members'. Other coverage was once again dedicated to countering conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and debunking narratives around the Swedish approach to the pandemic.

Disinformation themes

1. *Western / liberal governments face economic collapse: Ukrainian farmers are unable to sell products and are being forced to dispose of them*

Zinc's media monitoring identified the following stories:

- [From-ua](#) (728 FB interactions) and [Politeka](#) (486), outlets that are known for controversial output, engaged with the story of a Ukrainian farmer near Kyiv dumping 'tonnes of carrot' after being unable to sell them due to harsh lockdown measures. The story is based on evidence from a [social media post](#), in which a user assumed what he saw to be a result of quarantine. These outlets have spread similar messages about Ukrainian farmers, some of which were subsequently debunked by independent fact checking organisation StopFake.

2. *Western / liberal governments are incompetent:*

Zinc's media monitoring identified the following stories:

- From-ua was published several articles describing the harsh realities of those infected with COVID-19 in Ukraine, drawing attention to instances of the Ukrainian government failing to guarantee free medical treatment. The most popular article [claimed](#) that patients are asked to bring medical supplies with them to hospital.

CWG partner organisation identified the following stories:

- Vadim Rabinovich, of the Opposition Platform – For Life party, [stated](#) that former deputy Health Minister Ulana Suprun has to personally 'answer for all the lawlessness, for what she has done with Ukrainian healthcare, with Ukrainian people' (167 likes).
- Antifashist. a website that is banned in Ukraine for being a Russian propaganda mouthpiece, featured an article by Olena Lukash, a former Minister of Justice



under Viktor Yanukovych, who [criticised](#) the quarantine measures, wrapping them into a familiar “failed state” narrative.

3. *COVID-19 is a hoax*

Zinc’s media monitoring identified the following stories:

- Strana [reported](#) on a Facebook post by medical worker from Rivne, who made an emotional appeal claiming COVID-19 does not qualify as a severely hazardous infection and insisted that panic around the pandemic is a well thought through experiment (370 interactions).

4. *Reframing Russia / the USSR: Soviet medical system was better equipped to counter pandemics*

Zinc’s media monitoring identified the following stories:

- [Politeka](#) reported on a statement by Yevheniy Shevchenko, member the Servant of The People party, who stated Soviet medical system is better than current Ukrainian medical system (606 interactions).

5. *Reframing Russia: Russophobia is a real issue and ridiculous during the crisis*

The CWG partner organisation identified the following story:

- Russian MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused the Financial Times and the New York Times of producing “anti-Russian fakes” and demanded a retraction. [Weekly news with Dmitriy Kiselyov](#), a programme on the *Russia 24* channel, attacked the US and the UK for being unable to accept that Russia is dealing with the crisis well.

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

Common themes in social media conversation included a story of Ukrainian officials receiving large payments, despite new legislation capping officials’ salaries at 47,000 UAH (1,700\$) till the end of quarantine, reactions to plans for mass testing and vaccinations, and whether COVID-19 will ever be eradicated.

Planned pandemic

- The idea that countries relaxed lockdown restrictions and “exited the COVID-19 project was found in several Facebook groups, with narrative observed in



posted on the groups *Цинник* (Cynic), public group with 52K members, *Не Будь Байдушим* (Don't be indifferent), a public group with 167K members, and Телеканал Інтер (Inter TV channel)¹, public group with 34K followers

- *Горячие новости Украины* (Breaking news of Ukraine), a public group with 63K members, contained a post made on 15 May which claimed that COVID-19 is banal, less dangerous than seasonal flu and nothing else but a special operation designed to enslave people..
- A post that appeared on *ЕЛЕНА ЛУКАШ ПОРТНОВ УКРАИНА* (*Olena Lukash Portnov Ukraine*), a public group with 32K members, contained what looks like a Google translate of a text which claims COVID-19 is not a name to a virus but a code name for international plot to control and limit the size of human population that originated during the latest WEF conference in Davos. The post has since been [removed](#) from the group.

Lukashenko was right:

- Since 9 May, messages have been spreading that Belarusian president Lukashenko's decision to reject any significant steps to contain the pandemic was the right course of action. A video with the caption: "President Lukashenko was right? COVID-19 can be defeated without quarantine, did he prove it?" proliferated and was found on [Зелена Україна](#) (Green Ukraine) public group (69K members) from where it was shared 42 times, and on [Мы для України!](#) (We belong to Ukraine) Public group (30K members) where it was liked 19 times. Originally, the video was posted on May 9 on a Facebook page administered from Spain that posts in both Russian and Spanish. [The original post](#) has received more than 29,000 shares to date. It is interesting to note that the page the video was originally posted, *Știri Mondiale/COVID-19/Situații excepționale*, has an odd followers to likes ratio: 8,077 followers but only 782 page likes.

Conspiracy theories:

- A [post](#) made on [Мы для України!](#) (We belong to Ukraine) public Facebook group (30K members) attaches a link to a [YouTube video](#) with over 300K views from 6 May, in which a former military officer from Russia speaks of 5G cell towers being installed with the hidden agenda to install microchips in humans, and that 5G technology distorts normal functioning of human beings in the same way as if they were placed inside of a microwave oven.

¹ This is **not** an official Facebook group of popular Ukrainian channel "Inter"



- The Facebook page of the major Ukrainian outlet, Obozrevatel (674K followers), which does not hesitate lately to engage with unverifiable, suspicious information on COVID-19, [posted](#) a message (91 FB interactions) in which it states that scientists have established where COVID-19 originated from. In the body of the text the post refers to, however, there is no such proof, instead referring to a Daily Mail (UK) story that cast doubt on whether the virus originated in bats and asks whether Chinese authorities were incompetent.

COVID-19 is a business:

- A [post](#) made by Ukrainian public activist and a lawyer Oleksandr Gumirov about his personal views on COVID-19 attracted 1,290 likes, 420 comments and 720 shares. In the post, Mr. Gumirov expresses his opinion that test kits and vaccines are all about business and that he does not want to be tested nor vaccinated. Mr. Gurimov opines that the hype around COVID-19 is good for Bill Gates, who owns manufacturing units that produce vaccines. In the post, he supports the idea that COVID-19 should not be viewed differently from seasonal flu.
- Another [post](#) with 274 shares engages with the story of Madagascar's president ostensibly accusing WHO of a 20 million dollar bribe to prevent him sharing a COVID-19 herbal remedy. The post also says Burundi's president has expelled a WHO team in response. The same page [disseminated](#) a [YouTube video](#) with over 130K views titled "Dr. Rashid Buttar exposes fake pandemic numbers as the economy collapses". (This is a copy of a video previously removed from YouTube for violation of community guidelines). In the video, Dr. Buttar, who often appears in viral videos spreading conspiracy narratives, blames Bill Gates for orchestrating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unconfirmed medical claims:

- According to a [post](#) on Колесо Событий (Wheel of Events) public page (838K followers), German scientist Christian Drosten has discovered people with COVID-19 are most contagious one day before symptoms reveal themselves.
- The official Facebook page of Ukrainian journal Фокус (Focus) (63K followers) [posted](#) about an analysis conducted by Sorrento Therapeutics who scrutinised billions of antibodies to find the only one capable of cure COVID-19 with 100% positive outcomes. The message received 80 likes and was shared 20 times by 18 May. Same message [appeared](#) on a page of newspaper Korrespondent



(167K followers) where 57 likes + 20 comments + 14 shares were made, and where users refused to take the story seriously.

Coverage of dis/misinformation relating to COVID-19

- A European Commission foreign policy spokesperson declared that Russia was responsible for spreading COVID-19 fakes and conspiracy theories with the aim of undermining public trust in EU institutions. This message has been shared by Ukrainian [ZN.UA](#) (23 FB interactions), 24 Kanal, the Ukrainian edition of [Deutsche Welle](#) (13 FB interactions), Gazeta, and others.
- StopFake fact-checking organisation devoted two Facebook posts to counter two contrasting disinformation narratives related to COVID-19 and Sweden. On a [post from 14 May](#), which received 50 likes, StopFake refuted the claim from Russian journalist Dmitry Kiselyov that Swedish 'liberal' system of countering the COVID-19 pandemic has failed. On the [post from 15 May](#), with 49 likes, StopFake demonstrated that it is not true that Sweden has done nothing to contain the coronavirus and therefore claims that its approach proves COVID-19 is less dangerous than perceived are false.
- StopFake also [refuted](#) the narrative disseminated throughout the period of over two months that USA and Bill Gates in particular have vested interests in the pandemic that are manifested in their fraudulent vaccine operations. The article received 76 FB engagements. Related to Bill Gates, Ukrainian Liga [published an article](#) (55 FB interactions) in which Roman Sheremeta, an academic philosopher, demonstrates how to detect fake news using the example of the disinformation narratives around Bill Gates.
- According to [Amazing Ukraine](#), based on a publication from the WHO, disinfecting the streets might be less effective than believed. Another popular belief that strict lockdowns around the world will result in population growth was refuted by [e-news.com](#) that relied on a publication from the *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynecology*.

WORKING DEFINITIONS

The CWG uses agreed-upon working definitions to identify and categorise potential disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories. Cases are classified against the following criteria:

Disinformation



1. *False or misleading information spread **deliberately via HSAs or HS-aligned outlets**.*
2. *False or misleading information with unknown or unclear attribution, which **fits with known HS narratives**, aims or activities.*
3. *Content based on verifiable information which is unbalanced or skewed, amplifies or exaggerates certain elements for effect, or uses emotive or inflammatory language **to achieve effects that fit within known HS narratives, aims, or activities**.*

Misinformation

1. **False information related to SARS-CoV-2** including, but not limited to, its spread, how it is contracted or transmitted, and the symptoms, treatment and potential cures for COVID-19.
 - *This information may be deliberately spread, as part of HS MIO, lone pranksters, copycats, trolls or organically as a result of human ignorance and uncertainty during the crisis.*
2. **Incorrect statistics related to the pandemic**, which may include rates of contraction, transmission, mortality and death; figures on PPE, ICU/hospital capacity, or ill-informed predictions for future developments.
 - *This information may be deliberately spread via HS-aligned media, or accidentally though poor journalistic standards.*
3. *Claims and opinions (from influencers with existing platforms, or widely shared examples from relatively unknown individuals) which refute current scientific understanding of the virus and/or official recommendations.*
4. *Deliberate or no, the prevalence of this misinformation **negatively impacts public health, social cohesion or political stability**, for example by affecting the clarity of official messaging, or eroding public trust in institutions.*

Conspiracy theories

1. **Alternative explanations** for the pandemic – including its origin, how it is transmitted and contracted, or claiming that it does not exist at all.
 - *This may involve claims of **orchestrated, malign or accidental actions by global elites** (governments, billionaires, the ‘Deep-State’ etc.), the “truth” of which is being **kept from the public**.*
2. **Evolutions of existing conspiracy theories** and the online communities who believe them – including from within the far-right, alt-right, religious fundamentalism, and the anti-vaccination and anti-5G ‘activist’ movements.
3. **New conspiracy theories**, from HSA, trolls, or other unknown or organic sources, which may arise in response to COVID-19 related news.