



## SUMMARY REPORT

Friday 29 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:

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Languages</b>
Armenia	Armenian
Bulgaria	Bulgarian
Czechia	Czech
Estonia	English, Estonian, Russian
Georgia	Georgian
Hungary	Hungarian
Latvia	English, Latvian, Russian
Lithuania	English, Lithuanian, Russian
Moldova	Romanian
Montenegro	Montenegrin, Serbian
North Macedonia	Albanian, Macedonian
Poland	Polish
Romania	Romanian
Serbia	Serbian
Slovakia	Slovak
Ukraine	Ukrainian, Russian



### **Country-by-country overview:**

Overview table indicating the presence of narratives, country-by country

1. [Armenia](#)
2. [Bulgaria](#)
3. [Czechia](#)
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### **Narrative analysis:**

Narratives observed, by theme

1. [Failing West](#)
2. [Conflict](#)
3. [Malign Global Elite](#)
4. [Moral Decline](#)
5. [Reframing Russia](#)
6. [Misinformation](#)
7. [Misc/Other](#)

### **Thematic Reports:**

1. [Hungary and Ärzte für Aufklärung \(Doctors for education\)](#)
2. [Romania: commentary on mask wearing](#)

### **Notes on terminology:**

Working definitions used by the CWG

List of narratives and sub-narratives used in CWG reports

[Methodology](#)

## **COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY OVERVIEW**



This table indicates the presence of narratives and sub-narratives across countries. Click [here](#) for a list of narrative and sub-narrative headings used in the CWG reports.

		AM	BG	CZ	EE	GE	HU	KO	LT	LV	MD	MO	NM	PL	RO	SB	SK	UA
<b><u>FAILING WEST</u></b>	EU collapse					X							X					
	EU failure			X		X			X	X	X		X		X		X	
	Incompetence	X		X	X		X								X			X
	Hypocrisy																X	
	Corruption			X										X	X			
	Exploitation						X			X								X
	<i>General/other</i>					X					X							X
<b><u>CONFLICT</u></b>	Bio-lab			X		X											X	
	NATO as vector																	
	COVID-19 war					X			X	X			X					
	<i>General/other</i>							X										X
<b><u>MALIGN ELITE</u></b>	Exploitation			X									X				X	
	Reshaping society	X		X		X		X			X	X		X	X		X	X
	<i>General/other</i>				X					X			X			X		
<b><u>MORAL DECLINE</u></b>	Divine protection																	
	Divine punishment																	
	Religious freedom					X												
	Failed values						X		X								X	
	<i>General/other</i>					X					X							
<b><u>REFRAMING RUSSIA</u></b>	Russian success		X															X
	Global leadership		X								X							
	Russophobia		X						X	X	X							X
	<i>General/other</i>																	
<b><u>MISINFORMATION</u></b>	Hoax	X		X						X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
	5G			X		X		X			X							
	Cure							X							X		X	X
	Expert advice	X		X						X						X	X	
	<i>General/other</i>				X													
<b><u>MISCELLANEOUS</u></b>			X		X									X		X		

**COUNTRIES**



The following country-by-country overview summarises developments by country, including new or shifting narratives and key cases. For Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Montenegro, 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.

For a note on the methodology used in this report, please see [here](#).

**Note:** “Interactions” refers to every time that a post was actively engaged with or responded to on a particular platform. For example, Facebook interactions encompass comments, shares, likes, and other reactions, and Twitter interactions encompass likes and re-tweets. The figures quoted in this report are the sum total of interactions across seven social media platforms.

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## ARMENIA

### Summary

During this reporting period, ‘Misinformation’ narratives were notable in Armenia, as were those pointing to alleged ‘Malign Global Elites’ (both narratives also featured in the previous report). This week, the blogger Hayk Kostanyan continued to promote conspiracy theories, going live on Facebook with others who share his views in order to criticise both Bill Gates and the Armenian Health Minister.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes



1. *Misinformation: Hoax; Expert Advice*

- ArmNews TV amplified the views of Doctor Hayk Manasyan who [suggests](#) that COVID-19 is no more dangerous than the common flu and that only old people and those with chronic diseases are at risk. The video of the interview has had more than 5,000 views on YouTube.
- Anti-mask content continues to circulate. A Facebook video shared this week [features](#) a politician from the party 'Bright Armenia' referring to mask packaging that apparently warns "Does not protect against COVID-19". The image of this packaging was previously shared by the 2018 Prime Ministerial candidate and conspiracy theory promoter Lusine Haroyan-Dallakyan (as mentioned previously in this report) (209 interactions).
- An article on the popular News.am website [suggests](#) that men with a longer ring finger have a lower likelihood of dying from COVID-19. The article cites a publication in the Early Human Development journal as one of its sources (235 interactions).

2. *Malign Global Elites: Reshaping Society (Also: Failing West: Incompetence)*

- Hayk Kostanyan (a blogger and conspiracy theory amplifier, who has featured previously in this report) went live on Facebook together with Karen Vardanyan (the CEO of the Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises) and Vardan Petrosyan (an academic) to [discuss](#) Bill Gates and his alleged role in orchestrating COVID-19. They suggested that the pandemic was planned in order to reduce the global population via vaccination, and also suggested that the Armenian Health Minister and the government in general are the 'puppets' of international organizations. The video has been shared 46,000 times (1,401 Shares, 46K Views).

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## BULGARIA

### Summary

Content promoting the 'Reframing Russia' narrative was especially notable during this reporting period. Claims included: that Russia has created the "first and most powerful drug" against COVID-19; that the Russian healthcare system is superior to others (and deeply resilient); that Russia will begin immunization against COVID-19 in the autumn; that "fake news" is being created to try to discredit Russia (and China).



## Dis-/Mis-information themes

### 1. *Reframing Russia: Global Leadership; Russian Success; Russophobia*

- The website Bgr.news-front.info confidently [reported](#) (3,100 interactions) that Russia has created the “first and most powerful” drug against COVID-19, and that this was achieved in just two months, with the first batch sent to hospitals producing effective results. According to the site, patients taking this drug recovered twice as fast as they otherwise would have.
- Bgr.news-front.info also ran an article quoting Vladimir Putin as saying “They destroyed the Soviet Union, but they failed to destroy the Soviet health care system”. The article – seemingly originating with and translated by a possibly Turkish outlet named ‘dikGAZETE’ – [praises \(100 interactions\)](#) the Russian approach to health and to combatting COVID-19 and suggests that the number of COVID-19-related deaths there is falling.
- In a short article, the news.bg website [reported](#) (3,300 interactions) “Russia begins mass immunization against COVID-19 in the fall”, attributing this announcement of the director of the Russian National Center for the Study of Epidemiology and Microbiology Alexander Ginsburg (who was quoted by Russia Today).
- Tsargrad.tv [reported](#) (0 interactions) that Senator Alexei Pushkov had spoken – in his Telegram channel – about campaigns that are being conducted to spread fake news against Russia. Pushkov suggests that the creators of such fake news seek to fight both Russia and China, and gives as one example of such “news” the claim that China might try to steal a vaccine created in the US.

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## CZECHIA

### Summary

During this reporting period, mis- and disinformation stories identified in Czechia fell under the themes of ‘Misinformation’ (with suggestions that COVID-19 is being overstated, that 5G may cause COVID-19, and that mask-wearing is absurd); ‘Conflict’ (with the suggestion that the virus may have been created to serve the goals of pharmaceutical companies, and the claim that US bio-lab activity should be regarded with suspicion); ‘Malign Global Elite’ (with the suggestion that the virus was genetically engineered or is being used to serve the ends of people such as Bill Gates).

### Dis-/Mis-information themes



1. *Misinformation: 5G; Hoax; Expert Advice (Also, Failing West: Incompetence).*

- An article on the 'Arfa' (Argumenty & Fakta) website claimed that whilst there is no proof that 5G *is* related to COVID-19, there is no proof that it is *not* related. The article suggests that it is perhaps no coincidence that one of the first places in the world to install 5G was the Chinese city of Wuhan. The piece reports: "The 5G network already has us: Five Czech experimental cities - the first has already revolted. "It will kill us all here!" the citizens of Jeseník are terrified. In the surrounding countries, arsonists are attacking the towers, and birds are said to be falling from the sky and bees are dying out" (4,791 interactions).
- The website Časopis Šifra asked when "the fight against an epidemic that never started" will end, claiming that there is no pandemic. The article suggests the criteria for this have not been met, and that an epidemic was never even declared – it was started by politicians and media constantly using the term (2,996 interactions).
- Another article, from the website Arfa, suggested that COVID-19 is not even that dangerous. Reporting that people are afraid of mandatory vaccines and that the "dangers of the alleged virus have not yet been proven", the author also speaks of censorship of social media and criticises the branding of content as "fake" or "conspiracy" news. The article also reported on protests in Germany, claiming that opposition to government action there to combat COVID-19 is growing. (In this sense, the content overlaps with the 'Failing West: Incompetence' sub-narrative.) (1,797 interactions)
- An article from the website Vlastenecké Noviny undermined and mocked the wearing of face masks, and suggested that even though there are in fact almost no new cases, the 'crisis' continues (996 interactions).

2. *Conflict: Bio-Lab*

- The Protiproud website featured content (similar to that found in Slovakia) suggesting that COVID-19 does not come from nature but was instead made in a lab. It offers a theory regarding US bio-labs surrounding China and Russia (i.e. in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia) and suggests that Ukraine and Georgia could be turned into "biological bombs". It also suggests that the labs researching viruses are subordinated to private companies that are financing the World Health Organization (606 interactions).
- An article on the website 'Arfa', claiming to report on the Czech Deputy Minister of Health Roman Prymula and his possible alleged conflicts of interest, also suggested that there is some evidence that COVID-19 was artificially created to serve the interests of pharmaceutical companies (213 interactions).



### 3. *Malign Global Elites: Reshaping Society*

- On the website 'Nwoo.org' ('New World Order Opposition') an article claimed to show the relationship between the Gates Foundation, the World Health Organization and the National Academy of Medicine. It included the suggestion that vaccines do not work, and the 'observation' that the National Academy of Medicine logo - a snake – includes the number '666' (24 interactions).
- An article posted by the Otevři svou mysl website claims (as also seen in Slovakia this week) that Bill Gates seeks to control the world population by creating an identification network of some sort through which he can then manipulate people. The suggestion is that people would have an 'ID' vaccinated into them via injection or perhaps through special plasters. The content feeds into the narrative suggesting that Bill Gates is pursuing COVID-19 vaccination for private nefarious ends (769 interactions).
- Similarly, an article from the Zvedavec site suggested that Bill Gates, the Rockefellers and 'Big Pharma' want to take control of people's health, because whoever controls health controls humanity (12 interactions).

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## ESTONIA

This data sheet (which is submitted separately) is also used to create a line chart depicting the volume of occurrences of each narrative in each country over the reporting period, with the total number of interactions for each narrative. This is done to compare the relative impact and popularity of each narrative over the reporting period.

### Summary

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

There was little overt disinformation in this reporting period. Hostile state media reported on the economic effect of the coronavirus as predicated by Swedbank, the number of Estonians still unable to get home due to travel restrictions, and Estonian politicians' reaction to the proposed EU pandemic bailout. Instances of disinformation in hostile state media criticised the US for using China as a scapegoat for its own





failures in combating the pandemic. HSA media also discussed how Estonia's refusal to cooperate with Russia economically flies in the face of common sense.

These stories were identified by Zinc's internal monitoring, bar the latter which was identified by the CWG partner organisation.

No discussion on social media around these articles was observed. Conversation on social media mostly linked to media sources regarded as reliable and the number of posts surrounding COVID-19 in general continues to fall. Popular posts concerned the calls for the headteacher of a Russian-language school to be fired as well as new lockdown rules for those entertain the country. The main instance of misinformation was a video claiming that a new law could lead to enforced vaccination.

No media reports focused on hostile state output or social media discussion identified by Zinc's social media monitoring. Reports instead focused on other content on social media spreading false information.

### **Dis-/Misinformation themes**

#### *1. Failing West: Incompetence*

One story was flagged by Zinc's media monitoring:

- Baltnews published an interview with Yang Chen, a at the Shanghai University of International Studies. In the interview, Chen accused the US of blaming China to hide their failed response to the pandemic and of using disinformation, while praising Chinese humanitarian efforts and the improvement in Sino-Russian relations (15 interactions).

One story was identified by the CWG partner organisation:

- RuBaltic [argued](#) that cooperation with Moscow could improve the economic outlook of the Baltic states, including Estonia, but the countries are more concerned with serving the interests of NATO than that of their own citizens. (58 Facebook interactions)

### **Wider social media conversation around COVID-19**

- Conversation on social media was mainly non-conspiratorial with minimal instances of dis- or misinformation, often linking to media sources regarded as accurate. The number of posts containing keywords related to COVID-19



continues to fall, suggesting conversation on the topic is less pronounced compared to previous reporting periods.

- Several groups criticised calls from Tallinn council politicians to fire the headteacher of a Russian-language school for his poor Estonian language skills, as reported by local new outlet Stolitsa. Groups criticised politicians for not focusing on the coronavirus crisis at hand. Several groups also shared information that foreign arrivals in Estonia must self-isolate for 14 days.
- Only one instance of misinformation was found in the form of a video published by За Будущее (For The Future), a Facebook page with 1,000 followers that is critical of the Estonian government's lockdown measures. The video claims that the Estonian government have passed a law whose vagueness allows authorities to infringe human rights, such as the ability to enforce vaccinations and section those who do not comply. The video was originally posted on 16 May and has gained over 13,000 views. The video was shared during the reporting on Кохтла-Ярве - Новая жизнь! (Kohkla-Järve – New Life!), a group with 1,200 followers, Новости Эстонии (News in Estonia), a group with 2,800 members, and Таллиннцы (People of Tallinn), a group with 14,900 members. The video has since been deleted from the latter two groups.

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Delfi reported on a video gaining popularity on Estonian social media, in which it was claimed that vaccines had caused a spike of autism in Vietnam (4 interactions).
- Postimees reported that a post was being shared on social media that quoted fabricated WHO statistics which proved that other diseases were far more lethal than COVID-19 (2 interactions).

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## GEORGIA

### Summary

During this reporting period, various mis- and disinformation stories were identified in Georgia. These fell under the theme of 'Failing West' (the EU is set to fail; Georgia is at risk of becoming a 'puppet' state); 'Misinformation' (a vast number of Georgians have already had COVID-19); 'Moral Decline' (western NGOs are in favour of restrictions, as these weaken the Orthodox church; COVID-19 will see a wave of attacks on the church); 'Conflict' (the virus was created in a lab; the Lugar Lab should



not be trusted in general; COVID-19 could lead to – and be part of a plan for – global war) and ‘Malign Global Elites’ (Bill and Melinda Gates, and the WHO, are complicit in COVID-19).

1. *Conflict: Bio-Lab (Also: COVID-19: War).*

- Sputnik Georgia published an article casting suspicion on the Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab, suggesting that it is serving the aims of the US Defense Department. According to an official statement from the Russian MFA, given on Independence Day in Georgia, the Kremlin is concerned about the Lab’s activities “close to the Russian border”; particular concern was expressed regarding insects used by the Lab to “test the most dangerous pathogens”. The statement follows Sergei Lavrov’s recent allegations regarding America’s “suspicious biological activities” close to Russia (36 interactions).
- Similarly, a 25 May article from the outlet Saqinform, headlined “Why the US-founded global lab network failed in fighting against COVID-19”, also targeted the Lugar Lab and other US-founded laboratories. The article reiterates the “predictions” made in March and April by Arno Khidirbegishvili, the editor-in-chief of Saqinformi (Khidirbegishvili claimed that COVID-19 was created artificially as a weapon to reduce the world population). The article also recalls the opinion of French novelist Luc Montagnier re: the alleged artificial origin of the virus. It insists that the global network of laboratories was created by the USA to invent deadly viruses and that the Lugar Lab is part of this scheme. The article’s opening sentence - “Coronavirus pandemic - an epidemic or a rehearsal for a new world war? - also places it under the sub-narrative of ‘Conflict: COVID-19 War’.
- On 27 May, pro-Kremlin website Geworld.ge published an interview with the priest Giorgi Razmadze, who suggested, amongst other things, that COVID-19 was created artificially, for the benefit of the ‘great powers’. Razmadze makes reference to 9/11, describing it as a moment when the USA used this tragedy to enter the Middle East and destroy everything there. The implication is that COVID-19 is being used in a similar way.

2. *Moral Decline: Religious Freedom*

- The above Geworld.ge interview with the priest Giorgi Razmadze is headlined “Father Giorgi (Razmadze): Be sure that there will be a second wave of attacks on the church”. In this sense, it also falls under the sub-heading of ‘Moral Decline: Religious Freedom’ (182 interactions).
- On 27 May, the pro-Russian outlet GeWorld published an article reviewing domestic political developments. According to its author, the West uses every



opportunity to attack and weaken the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has been done through western-funded NGOs advocating for restrictions on gatherings at churches. The article argues that NGOs are not interested in containing the outbreak; rather, their goal has been to (e.g.) prevent the Church from celebrating Easter. The article has been read 326 times.

### 3. *Failing West: Exploitation; EU Failure*

- On 27 May, GeWorld published an article in which, referring to the financial assistance that the EU and Georgia's western partners are providing during the pandemic and beyond, the head of Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, argued that all of this comes with a price tag. According to Lortkipanidze, in exchange for such help, Georgia accepts being a puppet state and colony of the West. The article was seen 318 times and shared via Facebook (with limited reach: 23 likes, 2 comments and 9 shares).
- On 27 May, GeWorld also published an article with the title - "European Union is not Europe, but a disgusting falsehood". The author claimed that the steps taken by EU bureaucrats during the crisis have been ineffective. The article is based on the ideas of Eurosceptics such as Marine Le Pen, and is translated from the Russian website fondsk.ru. The author suggests that the EU may disintegrate; Brexit and COVID-19 could cause a chain reaction, and Poland, Hungary, Italy, Greece, Germany or Austria might leave the union. The article was read 187 times.
- GeWorld also published an article entitled "The European Union is not Europe; it is a despicable fraud!" It contains statements from former German ministers of foreign affairs Joschka Fischer and Sigmar Gabriel who reportedly claim that the EU abandoned Italy and Spain without any assistance amidst COVID-19 and that the EU will soon disintegrate. The article also shares the views of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and French far-right politician Marine Le Pen regarding the instability of the EU (23 interactions).

### 4. *Malign Global Elites: Reshaping Society (Also: Moral Decline: Other).*

- On 27 May, the religious group "Orthodox Parents' Union" re-published a video statement on their Facebook page, blaming Bill and Melinda Gates (and other billionaires) for financing the creation of COVID-19, and suggesting that they plan to microchip mankind. The group also blamed the World Health Organization for artificially spreading COVID-19 and using it as a tool to support the formation of a new world order and world government, to be followed by the reign of an antichrist. The original video-post (with more than 700 likes) was



removed by Facebook. The re-published video has so far received some 140 likes, 3 comments, 70 shares and more than 4,000 views.

#### 5. *Misinformation: Other*

- On 27 May, News-Front published a news article, headlined - "Scandal - up to 370,000 people have already had coronavirus in Georgia, - states Tsertsvadze". This has been shared by Georgian Facebook groups, including the conspiracy group "Stop 5G in Georgia". However, the reported statistic is misleading. The article cites Tengiz Tsertsvadze, head of the coronavirus clinical management group, who, according to News-Front, claimed that 1,000 people were tested with rapid tests, revealing that 6-10% of them have already had the virus. News-Front then applied this percentage to the entire population of Georgia. However, later on, Tengiz Tsertsvadze explained that he had not said that the research was over. He also mentioned that he had made a mistake, in saying 6 to 10 percent, rather than 6 to 10 *people*. However, even after Tsertsvadze's mistake was known, News-Front did not take down the article, which has received 438 reactions, 381 comments and 105 shares (1461 interactions).

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## 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, two main themes were identified: continued attacks on opposition and liberal countries and the presence of a malicious elite (Bill Gates).

The main turning point in the narratives is that, on 26 May, the Hungarian government submitted two bills to end the country's state of emergency over the COVID-19 pandemic. The first bill would end the legal authority of the country's heavily criticized COVID-19 emergency legislation by June 20. The second discusses "temporary rules" on how to proceed in the future. It includes the possibility of calling for a so-called state of health emergency (on the proposal of the country's Chief Medical Officer and an official notice from the Minister of Human Capacities). This would essentially allow the government to rule by decree and suspend existing legislation for a period of six



months, with legal jurisdiction to ban the operation of several institutions, businesses and other instalments concerning travel, transport and traffic.

Press articles mostly focused on this latter development. The Hungarian government responded to criticism from anti-government media outlets by demanding the opposition nationally and internationally apologise and used it as proof of liberal malign intent.

Conspiracy theory pages were also fairly active during the reporting period. Bill Gates and the deep state or other malicious actors remained a very popular topic.

On social media, commentators often called out propaganda posts and articles however, there was animosity amongst commenters on both sides of the political spectrum.

### **Dis-/Mis-information themes**

#### *1. FAILING WEST: exploitation; incompetence*

The CWG partner organisation and Zinc's media monitoring flagged the following relevant stories:

- PestiSracok.hu [reported](#) (1100 interactions) that the European Commission proposed a rescue package of 750 billion euros for the post-COVID-19 crisis. Two-thirds of the amount would go to countries in the form of grants, the other 250 billion would be available in the form of loans. The European Commission intends to finance the package entirely from a loan from the capital market. The article asserts that these loans are actually the perpetual bonds that George Soros has been offering to the European Union in the past few weeks. Thus, the claim goes, the EU has been officially bought by Soros. However, his much-criticized proposal for the EU to issue perpetual bonds is not part of the Commission's plan.
- While the Hungarian government returns its emergency powers to Parliament, Origo.hu, most vocal pro-government portal, [published](#) (3400 interactions) an article that can be seen to discredit independent and opposition media, accusing them of spreading liberal lies and misinformation in relation to the COVID-19 law and the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pro-government online mouthpiece claimed that two opposition figures – Tímea Szabó, an MP from the green-leftist Párbeszéd party and Benedek Jávor, the head of Budapest's permanent representation to the EU – considered the government's defensive actions against the pandemic unnecessary. The article



came after Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on May 25 made a parliamentary address with the same message. To back up their claim, Origo pointed to an [online op-ed](#) from March written by Jávör in which the former MEP called the pandemic “a relatively non dangerous one”.

- These accusations were [mirrored](#) in the Facebook posts of government officials as well as the outlets’ official accounts. [Building on](#) (426 interactions) these accusations, the same portals [wrote](#) (459 interactions) about the effectiveness of the COVID-19 emergency law, saying that without it, thousands more people would have died.
- PestiSracok.hu, a right wing press portal, [reported](#) (385 interactions) on the Swedish Foreign Minister’s speech regarding recent border openings in the EU. While several European countries want to ease travel restrictions in early summer, there are concerns in the northern European region that letting Swedish tourists in could increase the risk of new infections. The article has a strong sarcastic undertone, suggesting the Minister’s statement was an ignorant approach.
- Most pro-government media outlets [published](#) (904 interactions) propaganda-like articles and TV [interviews](#) on the successful management of the COVID-19 crisis by the Hungarian government. Together with these reports, similar articles were published saying that over 70% of the population are satisfied with the measures and handling of the crisis. Therefore, they claim, proving that opposition media and the West were mistaken about the Hungarian government’s approach and in the future they should not involve themselves in Hungary’s internal matters, unless it is supportive. \

## 2. MORAL DECLINE: value failure

Zinc’s media monitoring flagged the following relevant stories:

- In a continued effort to discredit Western and liberal governments, right wing media issued further articles about how liberal governments failed at handling the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in comparison to Hungary’s success story. 888.hu [claims](#) (1800 interactions) that Sweden sacrificed the lives of 70 year olds and above, in favour of the economy.
- Additionally, Szazadveg published an opinion piece, which was then [shared](#) by most pro-government portals (Origo.hu, PestiSracok.hu, Hirado.hu) arguing that France, Spain and Italy failed in controlling the pandemic because of their liberal approach.



## Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

During this reporting period, social media posts were concerned with the same subjects as press coverage. There were several articles about an imminent second wave of the pandemic. These posts had rather sensationalist titles, but the content itself was presented relatively objectively without misinformation.

- Kimondott Igazságok (Outspoken truths) [promoted](#) a YouTube video (that has already been taken down), sharing 2005 footage in which Bill Gates was allegedly talking to CIA officers on how human population can be reduced on a global scale. Referring to Agenda 21, a popular conspiracy theory in the subject, Kimondott Igazságok hinted at the possibility of the CIA and the US billionaire teaming up for a social engineering project to reduce human population. In an unexpected update, the conspiracy theory homepage – pointing to Spokes, a fake news debunking website – corrected the article and said that the person seen on the video was not Gates.
- Conspiracy theory pages such as Uj Vilagtudat (New World Conscience) and Felhaborito Hírek (Outrageous News) [falsely claimed](#) that the WHO offered a \$20 million bribe to shut down the production and use of COVID-Organics, a local herbal remedy promoted as treatment for the virus in Madagascar. While the country's government did defend the controversial "cure" and pushed the treatment on its neighbours, its government never made such accusations.
- Popular social media posts include ones in which the government press, government officials, or [FIDESZ](#), the governing party itself, [continue to attack](#) the opposition for allegedly spreading false information internationally and nationally about the COVID-19 law. Commenters, however, often did not agree with the messages of these posts, pointing out that they have a strong propagandistic undertone. Origo.hu's [posts](#) have also been negatively received as commenters highlighted the shortcomings of the emergency measures. This included embezzlement, poor access to primary healthcare, and the silencing of medical staff in hospitals.
- Vilaghelyzete (Status of the world) [posted](#) a lengthy entry listing a long number of conspiracy theory articles around COVID-19. Most of the theories include a malicious elite pulling the strings, but also highlight claims about big tech, big pharma, Bill Gates, eugenics, and genocide. The posts mostly argue against mandatory vaccination, suggesting that the authorities use them as an excuse to implant a microchip into people to track them, or to reduce the population of the world.





- Kimondott Igazságok (Outspoken truths) [claimed](#) in a post on Facebook that the COVID-19 pandemic is the result of a cell culture experiment gone wrong in a lab in Wuhan, and that this was not recognised purely for political reasons.

## Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

CWG partner organisation flagged the following relevant story:

- Hungary's public news channel M1 [reported](#) it to be fake news that the government will increase the retirement age in the country by two years. The article was the 28<sup>th</sup> publication in M1's "Fake News Tracker", a section devoted to disinformation surrounding the pandemic. Thus, suggesting the "Tracker" maintains UpToDate even with non Covid-19 topics. As we previously reported, the "Tracker" itself included articles that are largely seen as disinformation or misinformation themselves.

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## 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.

HSA output during the reporting period was extremely critical of the government, noting flaws in its economic response to the crisis and criticising calls for an increase in defence spending.

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 the government's economic response to the pandemic was observed in a post by the Russian Union of Latvia, which claimed the government's poor response could lead to Latvia's collapse.

These stories were also not discussed by mainstream media coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19. Articles focused on the spread of health-related disinformation, the submission of a bill to combat disinformation, and the controversial awarding of government funds to outlets that spread pro-Kremlin disinformation.



Conversation on social media mainly linked to well-regarded media sources. The number of posts containing disinformation and misinformation was higher this reporting period, as well their engagement levels. Posts concerned criticism of the government's economic handling of the crisis, anti-vaccination narratives, and coronavirus conspiracy theories

### **Dis-/Misinformation themes**

#### *2. Failing West: Incompetence; EU Failure; Hypocrisy*

Two stories of interest were flagged by Zinc's media monitoring:

- An article by bb.lv, an outlet often described as pro-Kremlin, quoted an interview with inbox.lv founder Andris Grikis, in which he claimed that Latvians are leaving the country due to the government's inadequate response to the pandemic (128 interactions).
- Spuntik Latvia cited a Harmony politician who criticised Latvian Defence Minister Artis Pabriks' call to increase defence spending despite the ongoing pandemic (128 interactions).

The following stories were identified by our CWG partner organisation:

- RuBaltic, based on an article in Die Welt, predicted that the financial burden on supporting EU member states in the post-COVID-19 economic downturn will be borne by central and eastern European states, not Germany and France. (0 Facebook interactions)
- The new online Saeima has been criticised by Sputnik for its lack of democratic accountability and transparency, and for suppressing the involvement of the opposition in decision-making. (175 interactions)

#### *3. Reframing Russia: Russophobia*

One story was identified by our CWG partner organisation:

- RuBaltic reports on the hostility allegedly faced by east European migrant workers, especially Russians and Ukrainians, in Latvia and Estonia. According to the article, Latvians and Estonians offer east Europeans a choice, to go back home or to live as second-class citizens. (68 Facebook interactions)

#### *4. Conflict: COVID-19 War*



One story was identified by our CWG partner organisation:

- BELVPO reports that NATO has failed to abide by a moratorium on training exercises during the pandemic, and accuses it of acting selfishly. (2 Facebook interactions)

#### 5. *Malign Global Elites: Exploitation*

- According to IMHOclub, the Russian Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology is making great progress in a vaccine for COVID-19, but its efforts are being undermined by major multinational pharmaceutical companies, aided by the media, who wish to benefit from the vaccine themselves. (9 Facebook interactions)

#### **Wider social media conversation around COVID-19**

- Conversation on social media was mainly non-conspiratorial, often linking to media sources regarded as accurate.
- The key topic of conversation was how Latvia will reopen its economy. Several groups also shared a post that criticised so-called Latvian nationalists for their disapproval of publishing pandemic advice and communications in Russian. The post linked to photos of the Moscow metro, where information is being published in Uzbek, Tajik, English, and other languages.
- The number of posts containing disinformation and misinformation was higher this reporting period, as well their engagement levels. Posts concerned criticism of the government's economic handling of the crisis, anti-vaccination narratives, and coronavirus conspiracy theories. A video identified in a previous report was observed during this reporting period, once again showing that the same material is being repeatedly used to spread misinformation about the pandemic.
- Criticism towards the government came from a video posted on the Facebook page of Russian Union of Latvia, a political party that aims to represent Latvia's Russian population. The video strongly criticised the government's economic response to the pandemic, claiming that Latvians will be less willing to pay taxes after the government had provided limited support for struggling individuals and business while increasing the salaries of its employees. The video concluded by claiming that the lack of support may lead to the future dissolution of Latvia. The video has received over 250 interactions.



- An anti-vaccination video was posted on Наконец-то United Latvija! (Finally United Latvia!), a group with 1,500 members. The video consists of a clip from Joni Table Talk, a chat show on Daystar, an American evangelical Christian-based religious television network. In the video, guests, among them Robert F. Kennedy Jr, discuss the dangers of a coronavirus vaccine, claiming that rushed vaccine production could weaken people's ability to fight the virus and could result in a 20-30% death rate. The same video was also observed in various Lithuanian groups during the reporting period.
- Two prominent examples of conspiracy theory content were observed. A video posted on Covid-19 Latvija, a Facebook group with 3,800 members, compiled videos of 10 public figures "telling the truth" about COVID-19. Among them were tennis player Marat Safin, who claimed that the pandemic is a conspiracy to chip the world's population, and boxer Sergei Kovalev, who claimed that the virus is man-made. The same video was observed in a Lithuanian group during the reporting period. Moreover, a post on Русское Общество в Латвии (Russian Community in Latvia), linked to a video claiming that the coronavirus was a special operation initiated by Putin, Trump and Xi Jinping in order to eradicate the "secret world order". The same video was identified in a previous report (see 22 May).

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- La.lv published an article on various false health claims that have been spread on social media. The article's headline alludes to the fact that more than 700 people have died in Iran from drinking methanol because of rumours that it cures COVID-19 (318 interactions).
- Diena, as well as LSM and Delfi, reported on the submission of a bill to combat the spread of disinformation. The bill stipulates that the National Electronic Media Council has the right to revoke a broadcasting license or a retransmission license if a media outlet distributes false, misleading or distorted information (94 interactions).
- LSM, as well as Delfi, reported on government support given to the media. Several commentators expressed anger at the fact that funds had been given to outlets that spread pro-Kremlin disinformation (63 interactions).
- Apollo.lv, as well as Skaties, Delfi and TV Net, reported on the ongoing case involving Nik Endziņš, a Latvian man who called for the extermination of Chinese people and spread disinformation about the pandemic. Articles noted



that the prosecutor of the Riga District Court had filed a criminal case against Endziņš (27 interactions)

- Mixnews, as well as gorod.lv, quoted Latvia's Health Minister Ilze Viņķele, who dispelled myths that Latvia's COVID-19 tracking app will be used maliciously by the government (12 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.

No instances of disinformation were found in hostile state media during the reporting period. Baltnews and Sputnik mainly reported on developments in lockdown policy. Disinformation was observed in hostile state-aligned outlets RuBaltic, Ekspertai and Belvpo, which covered classic Baltic disinformation themes with a COVID-19 twist: Russophobia, military overspending, and the destructive failures both of the EU and the national government.

Conversation on social media often linked to media sources widely considered trustworthy. Posts often concerned the government's decision to extend lockdown until 16 June, as well as the construction of a medical goods factory in Visaginas. Posts containing disinformation and misinformation referenced anti-vaccination narratives, as well as well-known COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

Articles about COVID-19 disinformation in the Lithuanian media reported on the volumes of COVID-19 disinformation in Lithuania and accusations from Russia of US disinformation.

### Dis-/Misinformation themes

#### 1. *Conflict: COVID-19 War*

The following stories were identified by a CWG partner organisation:

- RuBaltic claims that some NATO members (including the Baltic states) are deliberately antagonising Russia, to make the rivalry with Moscow more salient and ensure that NATO continues to be funded during the pandemic.



## 2. *Reframing Russia: Russophobia*

The following stories were identified by a CWG partner organisation:

- BELVPO claims that Lithuania is using the pandemic as an excuse to continue overspending on its military, despite the absence of any Russian aggression. It claims that “for many years the authorities have not tired of persuading the Lithuanians that the invasion is about to begin and a new occupation will overtake Lithuania.” The article notes that none of the additional military spending announced by the government will be directed to fight the effects of COVID-19.

## 3. *Failing West: EU Failure*

The following stories were identified by a CWG partner organisation:

- RuBaltic argued that cooperation with Moscow could improve the economic outlook of the Baltic states, including Lithuania, but the countries are more concerned with serving the interests of NATO than that of their own citizens. (58 Facebook interactions)

## 4. *Moral Decline: Value Failure*

- Ekspertai claims that the Lithuanian government has used the COVID-19 crisis to enact laws allowing child protection services to take kids away from their parents. The author writes: “This action is clearly aimed at destroying [...] the constitutional basis of the nation's existence – the family.”

## **Wider social media conversation around COVID-19**

- Conversation on social media mainly linked to media sources widely considered trustworthy. The main topic of conversation was the government’s decision to extend lockdown to 16 June. In Visaginas-based groups, reports on the fast-paced construction of a medical goods factory, as reported by TTS News, received significant attention.
- Posts containing disinformation and misinformation referenced anti-vaccination theories, as well as conspiracy theories about the virus’ spread and creation. Posts received moderate levels of engagement.



- An anti-vaccination video was posted on several Visaginas-based groups; Real Висагинас (Real Visaginas), a group with 7,200 members, Висагинас За и Против (Visaginas For and Against), a group with 900 members, and Висагинас Сегодня / Visaginas Today, a group with 3,500 members. The video was shared by the same user on all groups. The video consists of a clip from Joni Table Talk, a chat show on Daystar, an American evangelical Christian-based religious television network. In the video, guests, among them Robert F. Kennedy Jr, discuss the dangers of a coronavirus vaccine, claiming that rushed vaccine production could weaken people's ability to fight the virus and could result in a 20-30% death rate. The same video was also observed in a Latvian group during the reporting period.
- Two prominent examples of conspiracy theory content were observed on UNFOLLOW 15min.lt, a group with 46,500 members. A video posted on the group compiled videos of 10 public figures "telling the truth" about COVID-19. Among them were tennis player Marat Safin, who claimed that the pandemic is a conspiracy to chip the world's population, and boxer Sergei Kovalev, who claimed that the virus is man-made. The same video was observed on a Latvian group during the reporting period. Another video on the group contained an interview with conspiracy theorist David Icke, who linked the pandemic's spread to 5G and claimed mass chipping will form part of the response to the crisis.
- The Russia-based YouTube channel Voice of Germany has produced a video that claims that Bill Gates has means to pressure world leaders to comply with his vision on global vaccination. It is claimed in the video that such vaccination will be mandatory and the entire population will be forced to comply. This has been observed circulating in conspiracy-minded groups in Lithuania. It has over 83,000 views worldwide.

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Delfi, as well as LRT, reported on the Lithuania Armed Forces' assertion that the flow of mis- and disinformation online is not disappearing and remains high (16 interactions).
- LRT, in reference to an article published by Radio Svoboda, reported that Russian MP Viacheslav Volodin had accused the US of spreading disinformation about Russia's handling of the coronavirus and the government's approval ratings (0 interactions)



## MOLDOVA

### Summary

This week, a number of narrative trends were identified, with themes including: 'Misinformation' (with the politician Iurie Rosca continuing to associate 5G with COVID-19); 'Failing West' (with content suggesting that COVID-19 has brought the long-simmering failure of the EU to light) and 'Malign Global Elites' (with content supporting the suggestion that vaccination is dangerous and that Bill Gates is working to nefarious ends). As in previous reporting periods, Sputnik.md, Flux.md and the politician Iurie Rosca continue to be prolific in spreading such claims. The 'Reframing Russia' narrative was also notably present this week, with Sputnik.md articles claiming that the US is seeking to discredit Russian efforts to combat COVID-19, and that Russia has been a significant saviour of others in this time of crisis.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

#### 1. *Failing West: EU Failure*

- The pro-Kremlin news outlet Sputnik.md (4,530,000 views in the last six months according to SimilarWeb data) continues to heavily promote the suggestion that the EU is failing. In an article entitled "The European Commission has learned its mind: it wants to stockpile medicines", it was suggested (2 interactions) that this apparent decision comes as a result of a medical crisis that has affected the Union in recent years, and which during COVID-19 has become even more dramatic, revealing it as utterly unprepared.

#### 2. *Misinformation: 5G*

- The politician Iurie Rosca stated (58 interactions) on Facebook that the radiation emitted by 5G could devastate human immunity and may enable the thriving of COVID-19. Rosca has been noted in previous reports for making similar claims. His post links to an English-language article from 4 May on the website gumshoenews.com, headlined "Radiation Dangers' Report on Study: Correlation Between 5G Networks and "Coronavirus" Outbreaks".

#### 3. *Malign Global Elites: Exploitation*

- The Flux.md website featured an article headlined "Here's a brief rundown of why the coronavirus "pandemic" is a scam", criticising (604 interactions) Bill





Gates and claiming – as reported previously – that he had admitted in an interview that an anti-COVID-19 vaccine could kill at least 700,000 people through side effects alone. The article has been shared on Facebook (414 likes).

#### 4. *Reframing Russia: Global Leadership/Russophobia*

- A Sputnik.md article headlined “Euro-Atlantic countries "play Monopoly" by banning the acceptance of Russian aid on Covid” denounces (44 interactions) the ban imposed by some Western states on seeking medical aid from Russia, and lists Russia and China as the main states rescuing others in the fight against COVID-19.
- A Sputnik.md article headlined “Moscow reacts to US grant to "fight fake news in Russia" claims (20 interactions) that a grant provided by the US State Department for "combating misinformation from the Russian health system" can be regarded as a direct order from Washington to discredit Russia's efforts to combat COVID-19.

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## MONTENEGRO

(NB: the reporting period for this entry was 20-26 May 2020)

### Summary

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

In this reporting period, Zinc identified one relevant disinformation narrative: malign global elite (reshaping society). The pro-Russian tabloid In4s published an article with an overview of the global outreach and influence of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, claiming that COVID-19 is the foundation’s property. The pro-Russian Borba picked up a story about the Serbian pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović who said he would not get vaccinated by a vaccine produced by Bill Gates’ company as it contains artificial substances, which is cause for concern.

On social media, users overwhelmingly focused on sharing and applauding the news that Montenegro is now officially the first European country to be free of COVID-19.



The most engaged-with tweets came mostly from official Twitter accounts for various organisations and NGOs.

Wider media coverage of disinformation around COVID-19 focused on sharing the news of the Speaker of the Russian Parliament claiming that America is spreading disinformation to disparage Russia, the plans of the European Commission to implement a plan to fight fake news and hate speech, and a local pop star using COVID-19 disinformation as inspiration for his music.

### **Dis-/Mis-information themes**

#### *1. Malign Global Elite: Reshaping Society*

- The most engaged-with article in the period of interest came from the pro-Russian In4s. It focuses on the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and their global work in raising awareness about pandemics and the threat of the virus. Alongside the development of the vaccine and all the investments they have made to date. The article expresses concern over the Foundation's intentions in light of its strong global influence and wide reach (243 interactions).
- The story of the Serbian pulmonologist commenting on the vaccine being developed by Bill Gates' company was picked up in Montenegro after being published widely in Serbia. The article by the pro-Russian Borba covers the TV interview with the pulmonologist Nestorović, in which he said he would not get vaccinated because the vaccine being developed by Bill Gates' company is bad, inefficient and contains artificial substances (27 interactions).

### **Wider social media conversation around COVID-19**

- The official account of Public Health Institute of Montenegro shared that Montenegro has no new cases of COVID-19 after 68 days.
- The official account of the Montenegrin Government posted that they have succeeded in stopping the spread of the virus completely without needing to implement a state of emergency or a curfew. The account added that Montenegro was the last European country to have a registered case of COVID-19, and the first to have no new cases.

### **Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19**

- The most engaged-with article in the period of interest came from the pro-Russian outlet In4s. It focused on the statement by Vyacheslav Volodin,



Speaker of the Russian Duma, who said that America is spreading disinformation to weaken Russia, referring to articles put out by Bloomberg.

- Another story relating to COVID-19 came from the entertainment section of the Café Del Montenegro portal, reporting on the story of how the local pop star Rambo Amadeus used COVID-19-related disinformation as inspiration for his lyrics, which according to him, ‘turns people’s consciousness into a dumpsite for idiocy’.
- UNICEF Montenegro shared a tweet saying that 7 out of 10 citizens think that media literacy is the most efficient way to fight disinformation, and shared an article on how to fact-check.

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## NORTH MACEDONIA

During this reporting period, notable content in North Macedonia perpetuated the narratives of ‘Failing West’ (with the continuation of the suggestion that the EU is set to fail, drawing on comments made by George Soros) and ‘Malign Global Elites’ (including the suggestion that Bill Gates bribed Nigerian politicians in an attempt to get them to pass a law on mandatory vaccination). Misinformation appeared to be relatively low this week, as did reported cases of the ‘Reframing Russia’ narrative.

### Dis-/Misinformation themes

#### 1. *Failing West: EU Collapse*

- The outlet Sloboden Svet misleadingly drew on George Soros’ recent comments regarding EU-Italy relations, in order to perpetuate (684 interactions) the suggestion that the EU is set to fail. It stated: “The billionaire and most exposed conspirator of globalism, George Soros, pointed out in [the] pentagon that the coronavirus pandemic was threatening the survival of the European Union”. The content was shared on three Facebook pages with around 27,000 followers.

#### 2. *Malign Global Elites: Exploitation/Reshaping Society*

- The website Kolozeg claimed (2788 Facebook interactions) that according to African media, Bill Gates offered a \$10m bribe to Nigerian MPs to get them to



secretly adopt a law on mandatory vaccination. The article has been shared on 14 Facebook pages with a total of approximately 90,000 followers.

- Also on the Kolozeg site, an article spreads (2835 Facebook interactions) the view of Sylvain LaForest from [orientalreview.org](http://orientalreview.org), in which he apparently claims that COVID-19 is fake and calls for the abolition of various institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the EU. The article suggests that the “New World Order” is facing “the two most powerful countries on the planet”, showing how desperate the people behind it are. Putin and Trump need to stop them. It states: “All empires are finally dying and we are in the terminal phase of the New World Order, which will not recover from the Russian game played by Vladimir Putin, who handed the globalists a full gun to pull the trigger”.

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## POLAND

### Summary

During this reporting period, misinformation continued to be especially notable in Poland, with content suggesting that the virus is not real and that expert advice should be dismissed. As before, much misinformation content also overlapped with the theme of ‘Malign Global Elites: Reshaping Society’. The theme of ‘Failing West’ was also present, with the group ‘I Don’t Believe in Coronavirus’ sharing imagery to imply that anti-COVID-19 measures are unjust. Content explicitly implicating Bill Gates continued to be relatively absent.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Misinformation: Hoax; Expert Advice (Also: Malign Global Elites: Reshaping Society)*
  - Content originally posted to the fringe website Killuminati (in the form of a translation of an article by a Dr. Henry Markow, suggesting that the virus is real but not dangerous and that it is a tool that serves to achieve certain geopolitical goals of e.g. Satantists), was shared by the popular Facebook Group “I Don’t Believe in Coronavirus” (89,000 members) (877 interactions).
  - Similarly, a YouTube video from Niezalezna Telewizja (Independent Television), seen more than 36,000 times, contains the suggestion that the virus is not dangerous and has been used by governments to help them to more heavily control their citizens. It suggests that people are “blind like sheep”.



- Various groups are planning protests on 6 June in opposition to obligatory vaccination. A Facebook post advertising the demonstrations has received 12,000 shares and 591 likes (but only four comments). It states: “With obligatory vaccination, governments and global elites are pushing on depopulation”, thus feeding into the suggestion that a malign global elite is promoting vaccination for nefarious ends (37,052 views).
- Content originally posted to the fringe blog ‘covid1984’ was also shared via Facebook. The article suggests that lockdown measures in fact help COVID-19 to spread. It cites a French study to support this claim; the study apparently found that lockdown may not be as effective as first thought, and may in fact accelerate the peak of infections, “inflating” the curve rather than flattening it (32 interactions).

## 2. *Failing West: Corrupt*

- A member of the aforementioned Facebook group ‘I Don't Believe in Coronavirus’ (89,000 members) posted content including an image of protestors with signs saying ‘there is no pandemic’ and ‘stop the corona-lie’. The imagery implies that measures taken by the government are unjust and potentially corrupt. It has been shared close to 200 times, and has received 392 comments and more than 2,000 ‘likes’.

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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.

The lifting of a number of restrictions under the current state of alert has created a relative shift in disinformation/misinformation narratives, moving away from relatively narrow ones (‘reporting’ on specific aspects of the pandemic) towards those that are more broadly defined, covering the efficiency of the measures so far and the nefarious intent of the authorities allegedly seeking to capitalise on the health crisis. Political players (relevant opposition ones, but marginal new ones too) posted numerous such analyses on social media. Under the new conditions, with some parts of life now



returning to normal, the number of disinformation/misinformation narratives seems to be steadily declining overall.

However, the situation should by no means be considered a return to normalcy; while the number of narratives might be decreasing, the highly important nature of the topics covered (state policies, international engagements) and the high profiles of those involved in spreading content about them (political leaders; well-known, trusted figures) means that the population remains vulnerable to manipulation.

Allegations concerning the effects of vaccines on the immune system and the deadly, uncharted effects of quarantine on the population continue to be found across fringe media. Additionally, the suggestion that there is a global conspiracy of business and finance leaders, controlling the United Nations and planning to implant remotely controllable microchips into people's bodies, has been extensively covered on fringe and conspiracy theory sites, and on social media.

During this monitoring period, cases fell into the following key themes: The EU is failing in its duty to help other states deal with COVID-19; Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is incompetent or corrupt; Global financial and political elites (including the deep state) are taking advantage of COVID-19 to exploit others or to reshape society. There was also misinformation about COVID-19, suggesting that it does not exist at all, or that its effects have been wildly exaggerated and/or that it can be cured through non-conventional methods.

Most of these cases were identified by both Zinc's media monitoring and CWG expert groups.

Some of the narratives identified in disinformation stories this monitoring period have previously been observed in Romania, such as the theory positing the existence of a planned pandemic and the supposed threat posed by an alleged malign global elite. There was social media commentary around some of these narratives, as well as around recent developments such as mandatory thermo-scanning at the entrances to shops and other public spaces.

Mainstream media covered two of the disinformation strands, focusing on debunking conspiracy theories shared on Romanian Facebook groups and in outlets that regularly publish disinformation stories. These included the alleged automatic diagnosis of COVID-19 for all deceased patients and attempts to bribe their relatives to corroborate this story in order to inflate the death toll (plus the alleged refusal to treat patients suffering from other ailments); the EU's alleged plot to enslave Romanian people by lending money to alleviate a potential economic crisis; Russian disinformation campaigns in Romania.



Other conversation on social media regarding COVID-19 focused on generic frustrations with restrictions and protection measures, plus some well-known conspiracy theories. See further detail in the below 'social media section'.

## Disinformation themes

### 1. *Failing West: EU failure; Corruption; Incompetence*

The following stories were identified by Zinc Network:

- An article published by Ziaristii claims that the EU is aiming to enslave poorer member states through the financial injection aimed at alleviating a potential economic crisis after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although most of the article details that this is a form of economic support which can be used in several sectors such as education, healthcare and infrastructure, there is a clear sense in which the author highlights that this is a loan with strings attached and that the EU intends to expand its control over poorer member states (404 interactions).
- Stiri pe Surse claims that the EU has failed in its response to COVID-19. Allegedly, there is now a consensus among European scientists that travel restrictions are useless in limiting the spread of the virus (190 interactions).
- Ziaristii claims that hospitals are bribing the relatives of deceased patients for them to be able to declare that the cause of death of COVID-19. This story has been reported in the outlets that we are following in the last two weeks. These outlets are claiming that there is a hidden agreement between the government and hospitals to inflate the death toll in order to prolong lockdown measures and restrictions. Allegedly, this scaremongering is a precursor to the establishment of a dictatorship (17,400 interactions).
- Stiri pe Surse published a supposed translation of a section from a recent essay by Giorgio Agamben; notably, the link to the original text at the end of the article only leads to the webpage of an Italian research institute. Supposedly, the well-known philosopher claims that online teaching on account of the COVID-19 pandemic is actually a sign of a virtual dictatorship, and that professors who comply are essentially fascist (427 interactions).
- Stiri pe Surse continues to promote Vasile Astrastoae, a controversial doctor, who claims that masks and thermo-scanning are useless as they would not offer protection against asymptomatic carriers. Furthermore, he hints that these



measures could be dangerous for health and that they are being imposed by the government as a means of gradually getting the population of Romania accustomed to authoritarian policies (2300 interactions).

- Stiri pe Surse claims that a cancer patient suspected of having COVID-19 died after being transported across several hospitals. Allegedly, hospitals refuse to treat patients who do not have COVID-19, which has resulted in several deaths. The author suggests that this incompetence stems from the general hysteria promoted by the Romanian government (2100 interactions).

The following stories were identified by the CWG partner organisation:

- Luju reports on the alleged statement of Michael Levitt, a biophysicist who won the Nobel Prize, suggesting that quarantine and self-isolation are useless in tackling the pandemic and that, in fact, they are dangerous because they lead to domestic abuse, alcoholism and divorce. Allegedly, he also claims that these measures are medieval and scientifically unwarranted, aimed at instilling fear in the general public. The article further claims that the number of deaths was grossly overestimated by state authorities unwilling to take responsibility in the event of the situation getting out of control. This story was identified by both Zinc's media monitoring and our expert groups (5400 interactions).
- Justitiarul.ro published a critical article on the subject of President Iohannis' political decisions during the pandemic, hinting at his alleged anti-Semitism and autocratic inclinations. Interestingly, the Romanian outlet supports its article by citing another one, published in Visegrad Post (537 interactions).

## 2. *Malign Global Elite: Exploitation; Reshaping Society*

The following stories were identified by Zinc Network:

- Stiri pe Surse published an interview with Vasile Astrastoae, a controversial Romanian doctor, in which he accuses the government of deliberately creating a COVID-19 'psychosis' by spreading fear and by imposing strict protection measures and restrictions. He also suggests that this is not only applicable to Romania, but also across Europe, as there is a global elite that is attempting to establish a 'medical dictatorship' (5903 interactions).
- Active News published an article on the opinions of a Romanian lawyer who claims that COVID-19 is a hoax pushed by global elites in a plot to enslave the population. He states that through this hoax, global elites are seeking to: establish medical terrorism, undermine freedom of belief and conscience,





control the population, annihilate freedom of expression and of speech, destroy public healthcare services, and force states to borrow money so that they become indebted to financial global elites (453 interactions).

- Sputnik.md published an article about a recent statement of the state Ombudsman regarding the legality of some of the restrictions. The statement is misleadingly framed to imesasures were illegal and the Ministry of Health acted knowingly in imposing them. Gheorghe Piperea, a well-known Romanian lawyer weighted in the matter, comparing the measure of mandatory quarantine with "illegal imprisonment". Sputnik.md added few by-lines of Piperea's in their article, as well (507 interactions).
- Stiri pe Surse continued to promote statements made by Vasile Astarastoea, a well-known doctor and professor who has been accused of corruption and abuse of power multiple times. He claims that COVID-19 has been blown out of proportion in order to undermine freedom and that there is no scientific reason to impose protection measures (6300 interactions).
- The leader of the ALDE political party is reported by Stiri pe Surse to have said that COVID-19 has been used to track people and gather their data through their smart phones. In his Facebook post, he claims that the current situation has been exploited for profit and political gain by the government (500 interactions).

The following stories were identified by the CWG partner organisation:

- An alleged 'New World Order', and UN plans to establish it through a secret plan ('The 2030 Agenda'), are 'unveiled' in an article published by the Justitiarul blog, a fringe media outlet. The international organisation, it suggests, is acting upon the orders of a group of business and finance/ banking leaders, with the purpose of creating an electronic database containing information on every single individual in the world (after implanting micro-chips, through vaccination campaigns), to be easily monetised in a subsequent phase and depending on the needs of the business-banking nexus (539 interactions).

### 3. *Misinformation: Hoax; Cure*

The following stories were identified by Zinc Network:

- Luju reports on the alleged statement of Adrien Hill, an Oxford researcher who is currently working towards developing a COVID-19 vaccine; the claim is that there is only a 50% possibility that the vaccine will be created and that even



then, it will take a very long time for it to be available to the public. Luju appears to distort this message, with the author suggesting that Professor Hill is actually complaining that all of his work on the development of the vaccine will be in vain because the virus will disappear very quickly on its own. Further, it is claimed that the pandemic is the result of a global deceit by elites (1061 interactions).

- Justitiarul, a blog that criticizes the Romanian government's response to the pandemic, continues to push narratives about COVID-19 being a hoax promoted by malign global elites. This lengthy blog post lists various pieces of evidence for these claims, many of which are unverified or come from propaganda outlets. For example, claims that COVID-19 is not the cause of death despite official death tolls, but rather that people died of old age or other pre-existing conditions; that the WHO is using wrong modelling techniques and as such are unable to predict the spread of the virus; that COVID-19 test kits are inaccurate or have already been tainted with the virus in order to show a positive result; that the virus has been bio-engineered in a lab, allegedly according to Nobel Prize winners; that there are already drugs that can cure the virus, such as a plant tonic from Madagascar or malaria drugs, but that these are not being officially approved because that would go against Big Pharma interests (4200 interactions).
- Stiri pe Surse claims that a medical research institute from Timisoara, Romania, has successfully produced a COVID-19 vaccine and is partnering up with other researchers in order to ensure public distribution (425 interactions).
- Stiri pe Surse cites a controversial Romanian doctor who claims that COVID-19 can be cured with salted water (254 interactions).

#### 4. *Miscellaneous*

The following stories were identified by Zinc Network:

- Stiri pe Surse reports that the World Health Organization allegedly claimed that a second COVID-19 wave is highly improbable. Notably this was not an official statement, but a claim made by a Romanian who works for WHO while on air for Spanish radio programme; this aspect is being downplayed by the author of the news story. The article hints that restriction measures have been exaggerated and that people should shield themselves against scaremongering (3300 interactions).

The following stories were identified by the CWG partner organisation:



- Fringe media published an article 'indicating' "the disastrous effects of vaccines". The article is citing Dr. Judy Mikovits, biochemist and immunologist (known for her unfounded claims about COVID-19) (139 interactions).

### **Wider social media conversation**

- The majority of posts relating to COVID-19 were linked to trusted local and international media sources.
- Many people 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.
- Many seem to believe that masks and thermo-scanning are useless as they do not offer protection against asymptomatic carriers. There is also a widespread belief that useless as they are, these measures are being imposed by the government as a means of gradually getting the population of Romania accustomed to authoritarian policies; this is believed to be a precursor to the establishment of a so-called 'medical-technological dictatorship'. On that point, there are two further scenarios which are being anticipated by the media and social media users in groups that we are currently following. First, there seem to be concerns about the Romanian government becoming more corrupt and moving towards a pre-1989 authoritarian state. Second, some claim that the Romanian government is not acting in isolation, but is rather a cog in a malign elite, often described as a globalist New World Order, that aims to undermine civil rights and core liberties on a global stage. This links to other popular conspiracy theories that identify figures such as Bill Gates or George Soros as the leaders of this supposed New World Order.
- A notoriously controversial doctor, Adina Alberts, gave contradictory advice to the public, stating that they should wear masks but that these protection measures could actually be fatal to people with ailments that affect their breathing (5293 interactions).
- Marcel Ciolacu, leader of the main opposition party PSD, is accusing the National Liberal government for purposefully acting to maintain for as long as possible the restrictive measures so that it can allocate public money for their cronies. The post (linking also to an op-ed Ciolacu published on anti-West leaning outlet evz.ro) is also resuscitating the theme that "the government



bribing the media into discretionary reporting on the effectiveness of protection measures" (1688 interactions).

- The president of New Romania Party, a far-right/nationalistic non-parliamentary party, issued a press release accusing the government of an attempt to impose a "dictatorship of fear". The government is accused of taking advantage of the pandemic to curtail rights and liberties and to "enrich their cronies by facilitating them discretionary access to public money for the so-called pandemic containment measures" (5000 views).

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Ziaristii reports on a survey conducted by IRES according to which the majority of Romanians are wearing face masks and following social distancing measures. According to the article, this demonstrates that Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns about the supposed exaggeration of COVID-19 have not been successful in Romania.
- Universul published an article on the statement made by Marcel Velea, the Romanian Minister for Internal Affairs, on the subject of disinformation in Romania. He states that there is an ongoing virtual war that aims to destabilize Romanian society and the government through the spreading of fake news and propaganda.
- Ziaristii published an article about the Russian disinformation campaign in Romania. Specifically, it claims that several orthodox outlets and webpages with links to the Republic of Moldova and Russia are pushing conspiracy theories that originate in Kremlin. Some of the key disinformation agents are Moldovan priests, some which were allegedly part of the KGB.
- Magna News picked up the story that hospitals are bribing the relatives of the deceased in order to convince them to falsely declare that the patients died of COVID-19. The outlet claims this is fake news, particularly since relatives have no power with respect to filling out the death certificate. The outlet states that the source of this disinformation story comes from Liviu Dragnea, former leader of PSD, the main opposition party.
- B1 publishes an article on the main conspiracy theories currently circulating in Romania. These include stories on: thermo-scanning as a way of stealing personal data and altering the function of the brain, that Bill Gates received a list with the temperatures of the Romanians who were thermo-scanned, that



face masks make people sick, and that hospitals are bribing people to inflate the COVID-19 death toll.

- Several outlets have reported that Twitter deleted Donald Trump's tweet, as it deemed it fake news.

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## SERBIA

### Summary

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

In this reporting period, Zinc identified one relevant disinformation narrative: misinformation (5G). The pro-Russian Sputnik reported on a story of 5G posts across the UK being vandalised, this has been happening increasingly often as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, as people believe that the technology helps spread the virus.

On social media, users mostly focused on reporting the latest current events, COVID-19 data and questioning the truth of what the authorities have been putting out.

Wider media coverage of disinformation around COVID-19 focused largely on the narrative featuring doctor Danica Grujičić and pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović, who have been suggesting that the virus is man-made and is a form of biological weapon.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

#### 1. *Misinformation: 5G*

- The most engaged-with article in the period of interest came from the Russian state-backed Sputnik. It covers the story of the increasing number of 5G posts being vandalised across the UK for fear it might help transmit the virus more rapidly (182 interactions).

### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Independent journalist and founder of the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia, Sena Todorović, wondered what the real truth about the state of the pandemic is, as the government has been saying that COVID-19 is



nearing its end. However, another train full of medical aid arrived in Serbia a few days ago.

- The official Twitter account of state news agency Tanjug tweeted an update on the borders with Hungary reopening.
- The official account of Slobodna TV picked up and shared statements made by Saša Radulović, the founder of the centre-right opposition movement Dosta je bilo (Enough is enough). Radulović called for an explanation for the state of emergency implemented in Serbia during the lockdown, which he described as unconstitutional and ridiculous.
- Users shared articles on different statements from Serbian authorities and wondered about whether or not it made sense to boycott the elections. Links between 5G and a COVID-19 vaccine were widely dismissed by social media users.

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- The most engaged-with article in the period of interest came from the privately owned outlet Happy TV. It covers a TV interview with doctor Danica Grujičić, who explained her view that the virus is spreading too fast for it not to be man-made. (186 interactions).

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## SLOVAKIA

### Summary

During this reporting period, mis- and disinformation content in Slovakia highlighted by the CWG fell under the following themes: 'Misinformation' (with multiple suggestions that mask-wearing is merely a symbol of submission, and that statistics are not to be trusted); 'Malign Global Elite' (with the suggestion that Bill Gates seeks to control the global population via vaccination); 'Failing West' (with the suggestion that Europe is failing and hypocritical, and that Brussels is using COVID-19 as a pretext to broaden its powers), 'Conflict' (with one article casting further suspicion on US bio-labs).

### Dis-/Mis-information themes



1. *Misinformation: Hoax; Expert advice (Also: Failing West: EU Failure)*

- In a piece-to-camera video, the artist Martin Jakubec suggests that coronavirus is simply a 'virtual' virus comparable to seasonal flu. The video has been seen 11,000 times on YouTube (posted on Jakubec's channel and by the outlet Infvojna).
- A Hlavný Denník article suggested that face masks do not work, suggesting that they are merely a 'symbol' of obedience – proving that citizens respect 'Big Brother' - and have zero value from an epidemiological perspective. This claim comes at the end of the piece, in which the author also reflects on the European economy and suggests that the European Union is heavily in debt and trying to hide this. The headline reads "The EU is closer to disintegration than ever before, says Šichtařová" (thus also placing the article in the category of 'Failing West: EU Failure') (139 interactions).
- Similarly, in a different video – also shared by Infvojna - Miloslav Ludvík, a director of the Motol University Hospital, questions the COVID-19 death rate and the use of face masks, and suggests that COVID-19 is "a media virus, panic feeding itself". An article from the 'Denník S' website went on to repeat Ludvík's claims (332 interactions).
- A Zem a Vek article accused the media of practising manipulation amidst the COVID-19 crisis, suggesting that it has been feeding people fear and panic. The article repeats the aforementioned suggestion that the face mask is a symbol of subordination, and that the number of reported deaths may have been overstated (654 interactions).
- Similarly, an Infvojna article offering various graphs and 'scientific' insight claims that it is not good health care systems that have helped to keep COVID-19 in check, but genetics; epidemiologists know that they have made a mistake says the article, but cannot admit it (716 interactions).

2. *Malign Global Elite: Exploitation/Reshaping Society*

- An article posted by the outlet Infvojna claims that Bill Gates seeks to control the world population by creating an identification network of some sort, through which he can then manipulate people. The suggestion is that people would have some kind of 'ID' vaccinated into them via injection or perhaps through special plasters. The content feeds into the narrative suggesting that Bill Gates is pursuing COVID-19 vaccination for nefarious ends (95 interactions).

3. *Failing West: EU Failure/Hypocrisy*



- An article from 'Konzerativny web' claims that whilst EU citizens are struggling amidst COVID-19, migrants in Europe are doing well. It offers examples from countries such as Italy, Spain, the UK and France, and implicitly condemns European states' approach to immigration. " Coronavirus: House arrest for Europeans, amnesty for illegal immigrants", reads the headline (149 interactions).
- An Infovojna article attacks the EU and the Slovakian government, and labels the shared liability of EU states as a "crime of bureaucracy", alleging that Brussels is seeking to increase its jurisdiction as a result of COVID-19. The article suggests that a war is essentially underway, regarding state(s) and statehood (395 interactions).

#### 4. *Conflict: Bio-Lab*

- Infovojna featured an article suggesting that COVID-19 was made in a lab. It offers a theory regarding US bio-labs surrounding China and Russia (i.e. in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia) and suggests that Ukraine and Georgia could be turned into "biological bombs". It also suggests that the labs researching viruses are subordinated to private companies that are financing the World Health Organization (184 interactions).

#### 5. *Other:*

- A Hlavný Denník article considers the failure of computer modelling regarding COVID-19 and draws comparisons with those on climate change, suggesting that the worst case scenarios are simply "fantasies"; in both cases, it is suggested, the dangers have been exaggerated. It begins "The computer modelling of the coronavirus was completely wrong! Isn't that the case with climate change models?" (28 interactions).

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## 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, concerning the cost of living in Ukraine, the future viability of the Ukrainian state; the existence of secret bacteriological laboratories in Ukraine; possible cures, corruption, and a number of recurring conspiracy theories.

A number of newly occurring narratives were also identified: that quarantine in Ukraine is enforced in violation of the law; that Russia might find the pandemic a favourable time to attack Ukraine again; that Ukrainian doctors treat COVID-19 patients with American medicines that lead to a 45% rise in mortality; and that the IMF wants to assume absolute control over the Ukrainian judiciary system amid the pandemic.

Social media conversation focused on news around the re-opening of underground transportation in major Ukrainian cities, speculations over a second wave of COVID-19 and predictions that the pandemic's peak will fall around autumn. Popular social media groups and pages engaged with a recent report prepared by UNICEF in which the pandemic is presented as having harsh consequences on Ukrainian poverty.

On social media, users were found engaging with recurring conspiracy theories that have already been highlighted and debunked by major Ukrainian fact-checking organisations. This includes, for example, COVID-19 being a project instigated by global elites, and that people die not of COVID-19 but of blood clots caused but the virus.

Media coverage of disinformation concentrated on Oxford university sociologist Philip N. Howard, who said that Russia and China are responsible for 92% of COVID-19 related fake news worldwide. It was picked up by outlets including 5.ua, Ukrinform, Censor, Zik and Online.ua, but not covered by pro-Kremlin outlets. The most engaged with individual article from this reporting period (131 interactions) comes from independent fact checking organisation StopFake, that dispelled widespread misconceptions about vaccines affecting human genetics.

## **Dis-/Misinformation themes**

### *1. Misinformation: Cure*

Zinc's media monitoring observed the following stories:

- Strana [referred](#) to a non peer-reviewed medical publication that claimed tuberculosis vaccination helps to protect one from getting COVID-19 (258 interactions).

### *2. Conflict: Other*



Zinc's media monitoring observed the following stories:

- Politeka [made](#) a reference to [The Jamestown Foundation](#) that entertained the possibility of Russia launching a military strike against Ukraine due to a water shortage in Crimea, counting on 'the rest of the world being distracted by the coronavirus pandemic' (148 interactions).
- Strana [reported](#) on journalists from TSN getting access to an American bacteriological laboratory in Ukraine. Strana called the operation of such laboratories 'secret' and under the patronage of the Pentagon (291 interactions). However, as pointed out by [EUvDisinfo](#), the operation of the laboratories in question is based on an agreement between the Department of Defence of the United States of America and the Ministry of Health of Ukraine, which stipulates the role and purpose of operation of such laboratories.

### 3. *Falling West: Incompetence, Exploitation*

Zinc's media monitoring observed the following stories:

- Politeka [wrote](#) about a "worrying" rise in COVID-19 cases in Odessa, Ukraine, which is not confirmed by the data Politeka includes in the body of the text, which shows a flat, gradual rise (91 interactions).
- From-ua [continues](#) to direct the reader's attention to the possible interruptions of social security benefits in Ukraine caused by COVID-19 disruptions (1431 interactions).
- From-ua [cited](#) Alla Mironenko, Ukrainian professor and virologist, who warned about the peak of the pandemic in Ukraine falling around autumn. From-ua, however, titled the article: "Coronavirus hell in Ukraine will begin later" (661 FB interactions).
- From-ua [came up](#) groundlessly accused Ukraine's chief medical officer of appropriation of foreign funds in the fight against HIV in Ukraine (81 interactions).
- Strana [talked](#) about how Ukrainian medics treat COVID-19 patients with American medications that are criticised by the WHO and lead to a 45% increase in mortality (822 interactions).



- The YouTube channel of the pro-Kremlin News-Front [uploaded](#) a video featuring political commentator Anton Rozenvain who described the crisis caused by COVID-19 as exemplifying the systemic failure of the US and made the point that Ukraine's bright future depends on convergence with Russia (401 views). Note that the YouTube account associated with this video has been closed.
- News aggregator Znaj.ua drew attention to the failure of the Ukrainian medical system to competently deal with COVID-19 patients. An article from 26 May [speaks](#) about a widow from Ternopil who accuses doctors of culpability in the death of her husband, diagnosed with COVID-19 (320 interactions). Another article [speaks](#) about how an elderly woman 'died a gruesome death' while waiting in line for a Doctor (41 interactions).
- From-ua [referred](#) to a Ukrainian parliamentarian from the right-wing Svoboda political party, who has claimed that quarantine in Ukraine was too strict and is being used to enrich government officials (190 interactions).

#### 4. *Malign Global Elite: Exploitation; Reshaping Society*

Zinc's media monitoring observed the following stories:

- Strana [covered](#) the story of Ukrainian migrant workers flying to Europe and being treated as a cheap labour force, with the compulsory 14 day quarantine rules not applying to such individuals. It also spoke of some migrant workers being infected with COVID-19 and still being sent off to work fruit-picking (441 interactions)
- Strana [covered](#) the recent 'New Stand-By Arrangement to Help Address COVID-19 Pandemic', an accord between the IMF and the Ukrainian government, as an attempt by the IMF to assume absolute control over the Ukrainian judiciary system (709 interactions).

CWG partner organisations flagged the following relevant story:

- Strana also [spoke](#) about how certain foreign elites want to replace the current Minister of Health out of loyalty to his predecessor, the US-born Ulyana Suprun, who was a target of enormous criticism by pro-Kremlin and anti-Zelensky media while in office. (234 interactions). Similarly, from-ua [amplified](#) the views of Borys Todurov, who speculated that Suprun's medical reforms were initiated with a view to eliminating Ukraine's national system of medical care and to invite international medical corporations to take it over (120 interactions). This



message was also [popularised](#) by an anonymous and popular pro-Russian Telegram channel (54k views).

### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- News on re-opening underground transport in major cities of Ukraine has caught social media attention. Many pointed out non-compliance with new COVID-19-related security regulations on visiting the metro.
- Ukrainian attorney Sergey Gula [uploaded](#) a video in which he talks about COVID-19 as a deliberate, planned pandemic, during which Bill Gates is among the most lucrative beneficiaries (47K views). Ukrainian independent [Vox Check](#) has been quick to label these videos as untrue.
- A popular [post](#) was made on Україна в НАТО (Ukraine in NATO) public group (368K members) in which public activist Yuriy Romanyuk questioned where all the funds on the fight against COVID-19 went, pointing out the fact that a lot of medical facilities did not get them in the end (271 likes + 299 shares).
- Information about COVID-19 found within a group of Ukrainian migrant workers who flew to Europe exposed dozen of different narratives, including; "[Nobody cares about Ukrainian slaves who even with COVID-19 were sent cherry-picking straight from the plane](#)" (421 likes + 685 comments + 89 shares).
- A recurring [narrative](#) that Ukrainian doctors are forced to diagnose healthy patients with COVID-19 found its place in online discussion again this reporting period (157 likes + 112 shares).
- A [post](#) appeared on Мы Для України (We are for Ukraine) public group which summarised the first year of president Zelensky as being a fatal failure in which all Zelensky does is write it off as a result of the pandemic (175 likes + 43 shares).
- Hundreds of thousands broken COVID-19 test-kits were purchased by president's office, according to the [post](#) on Не Будь Байдужим (Don't be Indifferent) public group (168K members) that attracted 426 likes + 604 comments + 52 shares.
- Previously refuted by independent Vox Check narrative that people die not of COVID-19 but of blood clots that are causes and that Aspirin helps to prevent infection [re-appeared](#) again (839 shares).



## Coverage of dis/misinformation relating to COVID-19

- Independent fact-checking organisation StopFake [debunked](#) widespread misconception about vaccines that it affect human genetics (131 interactions).
- StopFake also [refuted](#) the popular claim about Bill Gates, that his involvement in vaccine development has led to hundreds of Indian children being paralysed (119 interactions).
- Replyua, a privately owned news portal, [published](#) an article by a famous Ukrainian doctor demystifying the purported ‘effectiveness’ of popular traditional medicines in protecting against COVID-19 (32 interactions).
- Oxford university sociologist Philip N. Howard has said that Russia and China are responsible for 92% of COVID-19 related fake news. This story was [picked up](#) by many Ukrainian resources, including 5.ua, Ukrinform, Censor, Zik and Online.ua (28 interactions).
- Independent media monitoring organisation Detector Media produced a [piece](#) that spoke about how many Ukrainians have been penalised for sharing false COVID-19 related information (16 interactions), and [another piece](#) on how Russian politician Vyacheslav Volodin blames the US for trying to partition Russia when Washington publicly doubts Russia’s official COVID-19 figures (5 interactions).

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## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

### Narratives Observed

The summaries in the following section are based on content noted in the country-by-country overviews of the [previous](#) two reports; those of 22 and 26 May.

### 1. FAILING WEST





Narrative is present in this report



Narrative is present in this and the previous report

Sub-narratives that constitute this narrative:

- a. EU collapse: The EU is collapsing due to COVID-19**
- b. EU failure: The EU is failing in its duty to help other states deal with COVID-19**
- c. Incompetence: Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is incompetent**
- d. Hypocrisy: Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is hypocritical**
- e. Corruption: Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is corrupt**
- f. Exploitation: States and global institutions are taking advantage of COVID-19 to exploit others**

All of the above were present in this reporting period.

### **Comparison of narratives across countries**

Narratives suggesting that the West is failing and dealing inadequately with COVID-19 continue to be observed in most countries. In this reporting period, cases suggesting that the EU is failing and/or working to nefarious ends were notable in



Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Slovakia and Ukraine. Meanwhile, cases pointing at the alleged incompetence or malign behaviour of national-level governments (and therefore captured in the sub-narratives of incompetence, hypocrisy and/or corruption) were notable in Armenia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania.

### *EU failure and collapse*

A high amount of content continues to suggest EU failure and collapse. In Czechia, an article circulated, discussing protests taking place across the continent and suggesting that the EU was ineffective and insufficient. Another, sharing the views of conspiracy theorist and former judge Stefan Harabin, presented the European Commission as failed. In Hungary meanwhile, outlets suggested that the EU was failing, with some drawing misleadingly on recent comments made by George Soros and others criticizing European institutions (e.g. the European Court of Justice, the European Commission) for their stance on migration and criticism of Hungary. Indeed, various outlets there (PestiSracok.hu, Origo.hu and others) have attacked Brussels for refusing to apologise for criticising Hungary's handling of COVID-19.

Other content suggesting EU failure and collapse was noted in Moldova, where Sputnik suggested that Europe was more divided than ever and that e.g. Italy may soon leave the EU. This suggestion was also made by the outlet Infomax in North Macedonia, echoed also by Sputnik. In Latvia, Sputnik was an especially notable proponent of anti-EU perspectives, with content suggesting that large EU countries will prevent the Union from supporting Latvia, and care only for themselves; that the EU will split; that the EU's disapproval of Baltic states' decision to open borders is a precursor to its collapse. Similarly, in Ukraine, the Telegram channel of the Russian state-owned Ukraina.ru used an old Soviet poster ridiculing Western 'unity' to portray such states as backstabbing. In Slovakia, meanwhile, one article quoted MEP Milan Uhrík suggesting that any help that Brussels provides is merely due to self-interest.

### *Beyond the EU: targeting values and institutions*

Some content targeted not only the EU but the broader perceived value system that stands behind it. In Ukraine, Ukraina.ru published an article featuring a prominent Russian propagandist suggesting that the liberal world order is ending. Similarly, a Zem a Vek article in Slovakia claimed that COVID-19 has reduced modern democracies to the level of totalitarian China.

Meanwhile, other content targeted non-EU institutions, such as the World Health Organization (as was the case with Sputnik in Moldova, and News Front in Bulgaria). In Georgia, content was especially critical of the Lugar Lab, with articles suggesting that the institution is no good for the country.



*Domestic Incompetence: criticism of health professionals*

There continues to be a significant amount of content alleging that national-level governments are undeserving of trust. In many cases (e.g. Armenia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania) content pointed at the government of the same country in which that content was circulating. Some outlets specifically targeted health ministers and "experts".

In Armenia, for example, a critic of the Ministry of Health suggested that the Ministry was banning non-governmental labs from testing for COVID-19 (which does not appear to be true), whilst an article on the popular Politik.am suggested that the government had made masks mandatory only because this benefited various elites. Further criticism of the Ministry of Health came in the form of a Facebook post from doctor and activist Marina Khachatryan (mentioned previously in these reports), claiming that warnings about the "new normal" (as made, apparently, by the Minister of Health) are a sign of globalist elites preparing for the New World Order. Czechia also saw criticism of establishment figures such as the medical professional Roman Prymula, presented by the Arfa website as the Dr. Fauci of Czechia and as having ulterior motives. In Ukraine, From-ua challenged the motives of chief medical officer Viktor Lyashko.

*Domestic Incompetence: general criticism of national governments*

In many countries, criticism of anti-COVID-19 measures implied the alleged corrupt or unjust activity of domestic governments (with cases overlapping somewhat with the 'misinformation' sub-narrative in which expert advice is undermined). In Romania, the comments of a well-known lawyer and government critic circulated, amplifying the suggestion that anti-COVID-19 restrictions were undermining freedoms (a notable theme in Romania). In the same country, Sputnik claimed that police were being brutal towards people who refused to have their temperature taken, and – separately – suggested that the government had used the pandemic to pursue dubious business deals.

Meanwhile, in Ukraine, pro-Russian outlets framed quarantine as politically motivated. In Czechia too, it was suggested that the virus "exists" simply so that people can be controlled. The suggestion that quarantine measures were illegal or unjust was also found in (e.g.) Lithuania and North Macedonia, where mask-wearing was associated with manipulation and population control.

*Criticism of other governments*





Some content – especially in Hungary – sought to undermine authorities in *other* countries. For example, in Hungary, Origo.hu condemned Paris’ handling of COVID-19 (and criticised Italy on Facebook); PestiSracok.hu was also twice critical of Sweden’s response to COVID-19. The same website suggested that the Austrian Minister of the Interior fears a second wave of COVID-19 infections and presented a conservative approach to crisis management as preferable over a social-democratic one. In Moldova, Sputnik implied criticism of the British and Italian Prime Ministers. In Macedonia, the same outlet misleadingly covered anti-lockdown protests in Germany, implying that they were larger and more volatile than they were.

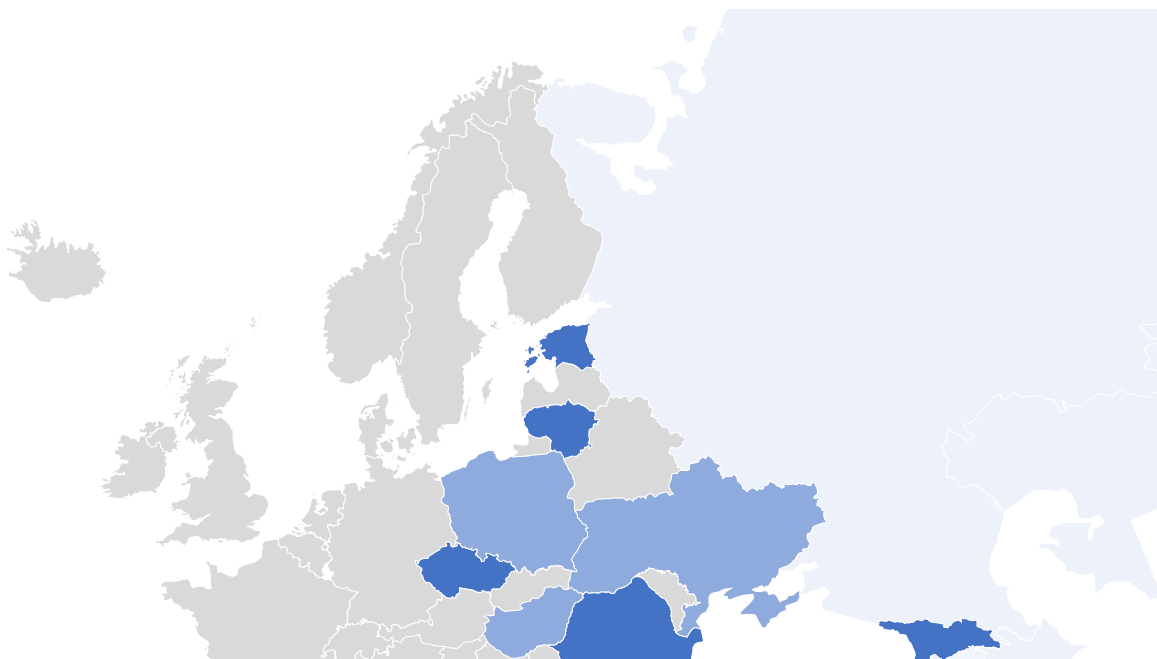
### *Self-praise*

Finally, various outlets made attempts not only to criticise others, but to *bolster* their own reputations. For example, in Hungary, the government-backed outlet Origo.hu celebrated government spending on combatting COVID-19 and dismissed opposition criticism. A video from Fidesz’ communication director (in which he criticized opposition figures and demanded that they apologise for speaking against the government) was also shared, as were the findings of a survey ‘suggesting’ that most Hungarians believed the “state of emergency” to be necessary.

### *Social Media*

‘Failing West’ content seems to be relatively less amenable to social media amplification than content categorised as falling under the headings of ‘Malign Global Elite’ or ‘Misinformation’, for example. However, people and outlets critical of their government’s handling of COVID-19 – such as journalist Sorina Matei in Romania - are using platforms such as Facebook to amplify their opinions. Matei has published several posts criticising ‘lockdown’ and has recently suggested that the government is bribing the press.

## 2. CONFLICT





Narrative is present in this report



Narrative is present in this and the previous report

Sub-narratives that constitute this narrative:

- a. Bio-lab: A state or global institution created COVID-19 in a laboratory**
- b. NATO as vector: NATO soldiers are spreading COVID-19**
- c. COVID-19 War: COVID-19 will be used to provoke or justify military aggression**

All of the above were present in this reporting period.

### **Comparison of narratives across countries**

Content falling within the ‘conflict’ theme was identified in a number of countries covered by the CWG. The ‘bio-lab’ sub-narrative persists in Georgia (where, content directly associated the Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab to COVID-19 but was also more generally critical of institution), but was also notable in Romania, Czechia, Hungary and Poland. Notably, some content on social media (in Romania and Poland) specifically implicated America – and American actors – in the creation of COVID-19. Meanwhile, content targeting NATO remains low, though one article shared in Czechia did imply that NATO had skewed priorities in conducting exercises near the Russian border in a time of public health crisis. Finally, content suggesting that COVID-19 may lead to war tended to once again be found in smaller countries – with the exception being Ukraine – such as Estonia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Georgia.

#### *Bio-Lab*



Georgia continues to be the locus of the sub-narrative that suggests that COVID-19 was made in – or spread from - a lab. Various content in this period targeted the Lugar Lab. The newspaper Asaval-Dasavali, for example, quoted Jeffrey Silverman (an American journalist and the Georgian Bureau Chief for Russia-affiliated Veterans Today) as suggesting that the Lab contains notably deadly pathogens (relative to those in the USA) and that some of its staff once had to be hospitalised. News Front also cast doubt on the Lab, claiming that Russia has suspected it right from the start. As noted elsewhere in this report, various articles from Georgia falling within the ‘Failing West’ theme also subtly implied that the virus may have been made in a lab, or that the Lugar Lab may at least be working for malicious ends. For example, Saqinform asked “How efficient [is the] Lugar Laboratory for Georgia?”, and one News Front piece posed the question: “How effective is the Lugar Center for the needs of Georgia?”, arguing that it is probably being used for “American military research”. Tangentially, Sputnik Ossetia also suggested that the Lab is collecting biomaterial from South Ossetian citizens, and reported the claim that Georgia is conducting a genocide of Ossetians by intentionally spreading COVID-19.

### *Beyond the Lugar Lab*

Content suggesting that the virus was made in a lab was also notable in Romania, Czechia, Hungary, and Poland. In Romania, Ziaristii reported that China is opposed to an investigation into the origins and spread of COVID-19, implying that the virus may have been made in Wuhan. In Czechia, the Epoch Times also supported the suggestion that COVID-19 may have come from Wuhan, citing research from the University of British Columbia, MIT and Harvard and offering the headline: “Virus NOT from Animals in Wuhan Market; 62 Nations Call for Investigations”. In Poland, the fringe outlet Warszawska Gazeta suggested that COVID-19 was created by humans, drawing on an interview with “journalist and writer” Witold Gadowski. Separately, conspiracy theory websites in Hungary (such as Kimondott Igazságok - ‘Outspoken Truths’) amplified the claim that the virus was planned by China – and therefore, implicitly, made there - because there is “evidence” that the virus acts more aggressively in the West than it did in that state.

In a different vein, the Hungarian conspiracy theorist János Drábik (19867 likes on Facebook) [said](#) in a YouTube video that COVID-19 is an engineered virus that was artificially developed in the United States, most likely in Ford Detrick, a US Army medical command in Maryland.

### *NATO*

There was little to no content suggesting that NATO soldiers are spreading COVID-19. However, some articles did implicate NATO in the crisis more generally. For



example, in Czechia, the website Prvni Zpravy claimed that NATO is provoking Moscow with exercises near the Russian border – despite COVID-19 (thus implying that NATO cares little for public health and prioritises provoking Russia).

### *COVID-19 War*

The sub-narrative suggesting that COVID-19 will lead to war continues to be found mainly in relatively small countries (it remains notably absent in Hungary). In both Estonia and Montenegro, Baltnews and the pro-Russian outlet i4ns, respectively, claimed that national and NATO concerns over Russian “aggression” persisted despite COVID-19 (with the implication being that such paranoia indicates skewed values). In North Macedonia, the Popara website was somewhat misleading in offering the headline “A new war against/between China and America: It will be like a Nuclear Bomb!”, whilst in Georgia, a Saqinform article reiterated criticism of US bio-labs but also suggested that the pandemic may be a rehearsal for a new world war.

Bucking the trend for smaller states to be the main loci of ‘war’ narratives, Zinc’s media monitoring in Ukraine observed that in the Russian state-owned Ukraina.ru, political scientist Mykhailo Pohrebynskyi predicted that COVID-19 could cause conflict. On the same site, academic Alexander Kniazhev suggested that a rise in conflicts in Central Asia, caused by tensions arising from COVID-19, is possible.

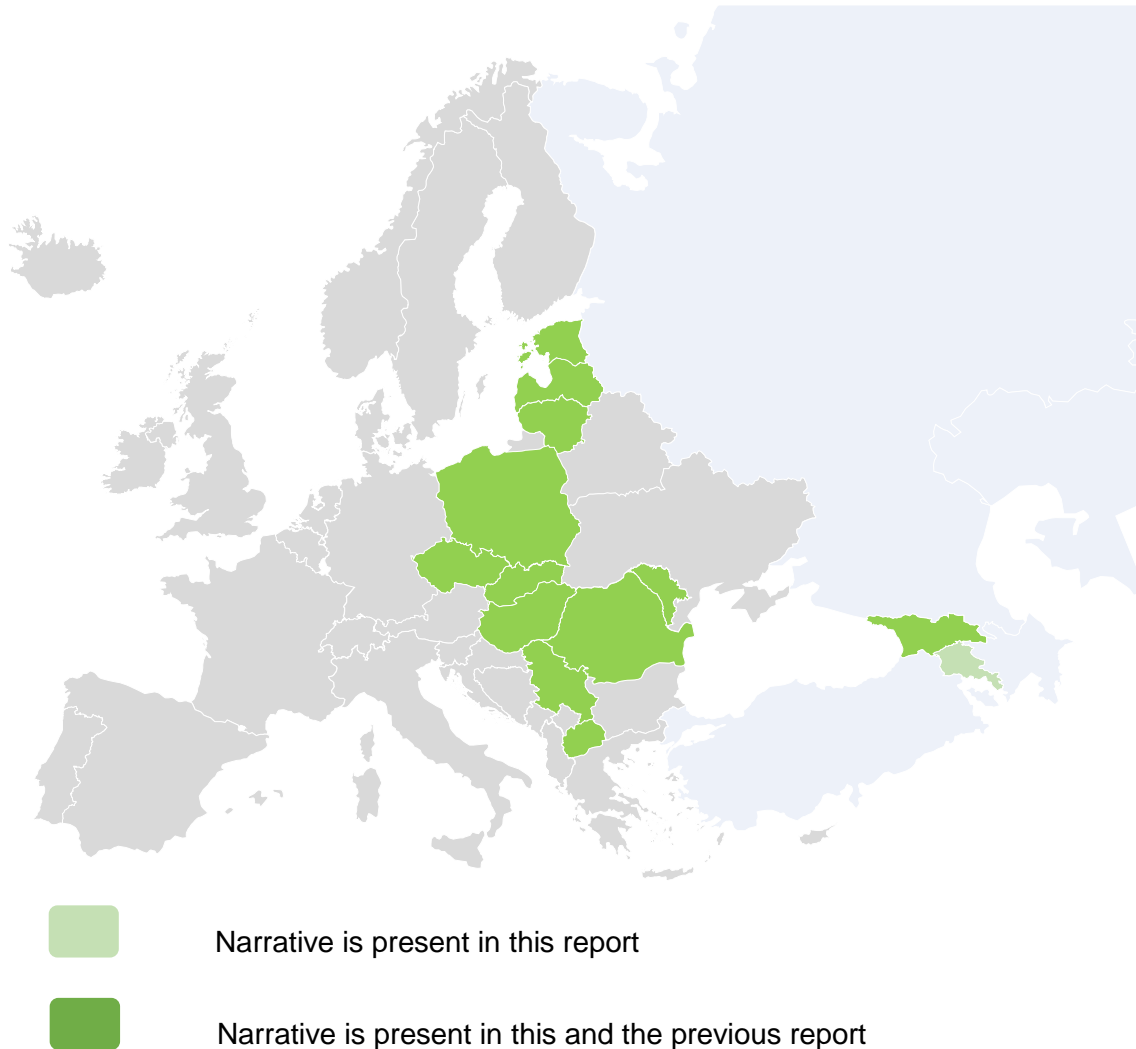
### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

This week, social media saw some discussion of subjects that fall within the ‘conflict’ theme, focussed on the suggestion that the virus was made in a lab. In Romania, for example, a YouTube video (15,000 views) from influencer and former MP Metin Cerchez offered various disinformation narratives, including the suggestion that COVID-19 originated in a Wuhan lab financed by the American Dr. Anthony Fauci. In Lithuania meanwhile, ‘Russian Lithuania’ [linked](#) to a video of Sergei Kurginyan, the leader of the Russian nationalist movement ‘Essence of Time’, in which Kurginyan claims that the virus could have originated in Fort Detrick, USA. The same video was also seen in a Latvian group during this reporting period.

As noted above, conspiracy theory pages in Hungary appeared to be especially active in circulating the suggestion that the virus was planned – and perhaps made – in China. Such pages included Kimondott igazságok (Outspoken truth) (17,043 likes on Facebook), Titok terminal (Secret Terminal) (50,000 likes on Facebook) and Világ helyzete (Status of the World) (37,000 likes on Facebook).



### 3. MALIGN GLOBAL ELITE



Sub-narratives that constitute this narrative:

**a. Exploitation: Global financial and political elites (including the deep state) are taking advantage of COVID-19 to exploit others**

**b. Reshaping society: Global financial and political elites (including the deep state) are taking advantage of COVID-19 to reshape society**

Both of these narratives were significant during this reporting period.

#### **Comparison of narratives across countries**

The narrative suggesting that COVID-19 is being used (or was created) by malign global financial and political elites in order to either exploit or reshape society remains



particularly strong, and was identified in the majority of countries covered by the CWG. Bill Gates continues to be a significant target of content propagating this narrative, whilst that targeting Soros appears slightly less strong. 'New world order' claims are also notable this week.

### *Exploitation*

Whilst most incidences of this narrative pointed to elites' 'reshaping' of society through COVID-19, some content appeared to explicitly suggest that COVID-19 was being used by elites to exploit others. In Hungary, for example, the fringe pro-Kremlin homepages 'A VilágHelyzete' (1700 likes on Facebook) and 'Valóság amit tudnod kell' (75000 likes), both 'analysed' content from Elon Musk, describing it as a "truthbomb" proving that COVID-19 was being used to manipulate people. In the same country, Origo.hu interviewed two economists regarding George Soros' proposals for post-pandemic economic relief, suggesting that such a plan would force a usury-based credit bond into the European Union, and casting suspicion on the groups behind it. Also suggesting financial exploitation, the Polish 'independenttrader.pl' featured a post – shared by various Facebook groups – suggesting that countries that are/were in deep economic crisis (such as China, the US, or Germany) may have created the pandemic in order to break the world economy and therefore consolidate financial markets.

Exploitation narratives also explicitly implicated Bill Gates. In Moldova, Flux.md stated that Gates is preparing a vaccine that he himself admits could lead to people being injured or killed. In North Macedonia, it was even suggested that Gates "patented" the virus itself in 2018 and subsequently built himself a financial role in "resolving" the ensuing crisis. In Czechia, an article on the website Arfa claimed that some people who are assisting Donald Trump in fighting COVID-19 are in fact working for Gates, and seek to vaccinate the global population. Further anti-Gates content was also found in Slovakia.

### *Reshaping society*

Content claiming that COVID-19 is being used to reshape society was more prevalent than that pointing to exploitation. Many cases suggested that the pandemic is being used to usher in a new world order. In Armenia, one Facebook Live user suggested this in a video shared more than 4,000 times (the video also suggests that the crisis is being used to microchip people). Similar content was found in Estonia (in the claim that present "illiberal measures" against COVID-19 are a prelude to world government), Moldova (in a Flux.md article offering the view of a Russian Orthodox thinker who believes that global elites seek to curb the population and create a world government), Poland (in a post suggesting that the media is collaborating with bankers



and others to control people) and Romania (in the reporting of comments apparently made on Facebook by the MP Liviu Pleasoianu, suggesting that measures to curb COVID-19 are part of a plan by a global occult organisation that manipulates governments with the aim of world domination). Slovakia also saw such 'new world order' claims. In the former, an article attacking the PM and government suggested that COVID-19 is part of the 'Deep State's' attempt to practice "demokratúra" (democracy + dictatorship). In Latvia, a post on the group 'Rodina.lv - Russian Latvian Forum' (4,300 members) linked to a video claiming that COVID-19 was part of a plan initiated by Putin, Trump and Xi Jinping.

### *Reshaping Society: Bill Gates*

A high number of cases implicated Bill Gates in COVID-19, with claims including: that he is facing criminal charges in Italy and Nigeria, for alleged crimes against humanity (reported in Estonia); that Gates and Zuckerberg seek to "robotize" humanity and reduce the population via vaccination (reported in Georgia where public figures such as Archpriest Saba and singer Soso Pavliashvili have echoed such claims); that Gates' organization purchased the blood of recovered patients in order to create a so-called "new man" and eventually restart humanity (this was claimed in Hungary, by the conspiracy Facebook page Kimondott Igazságok - 'Outspoken Truths').

Other content suggesting that Bill Gates and others are promoting vaccination for the purpose of (maliciously) reshaping society was notable in Moldova, North Macedonia (in the amplification of the views of Italian MP Sara Cunial), Slovakia (where Cunial's views were amplified by the outlet Hlavný Denník), Serbia (again amplifying Cunial's views and the claim that Gates has harmed millions of people in Africa and India for the aim of "turning people into slaves").

### *Reshaping Society: Soros, Satanism, Other*

In North Macedonia, online news outlet Sloboden Svet featured an article by "eminent" Russian political scientist Leonid Savin connecting COVID-19 to Bill Gates, vaccination, microchipping and Satanism (shared on four Facebook pages/groups with up to approximately 30,000 followers). In the same country, the Facebook page 'Macedonia and Russia Orthodox Union' also suggested that Satanists are implicated in COVID-19 and media activity around the crisis. In Moldova, other content implicated George Soros, with Flux.md claiming that people working at 'OpenDemocracy' are using the crisis to push their "anti-family agenda".

### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

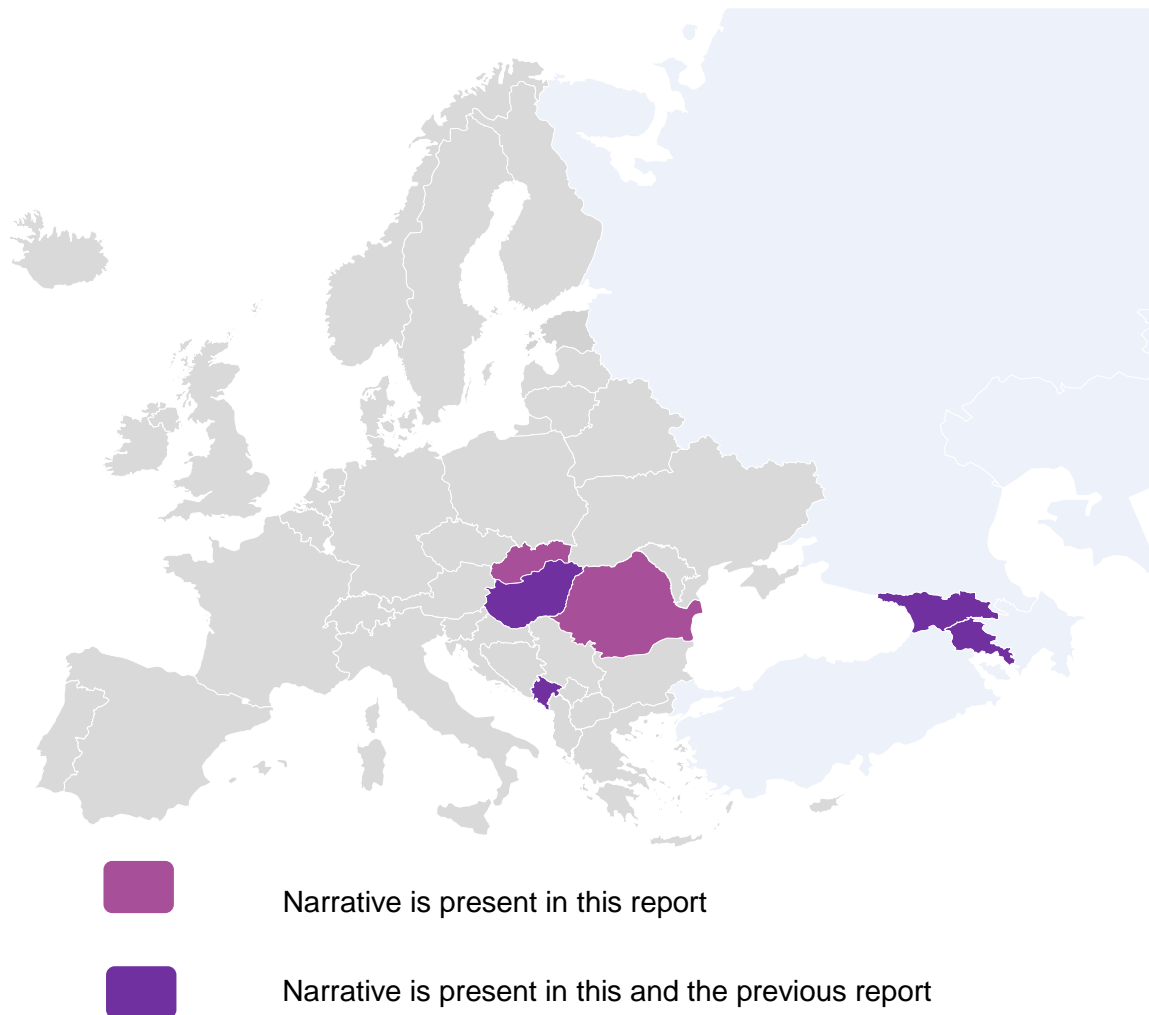


Social media continues to be a fertile site for the circulation of the ‘malign global elites’ narrative, with the aforementioned opinions of Italian MP Sara Cunial being shared not only through online articles but subsequently via social media platforms such as Facebook in a number of countries (as noted above). Further notable examples of this narrative being amplified via social media include: in Lithuania, a video shared by ‘UNFOLLOW 15min.lt’ - a group with 46,500 members, claimed that a cult of elites in the US were behind lockdown measures; in Estonia, the group ‘Voice of the Russian Baltics. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania’ offered a translated article suggesting that the pandemic was created by the WHO to allow Gates and others to microchip the world. In Hungary, conspiracy theory Facebook pages seem especially active. Kimondott Igazságok (Outspoken Truths), seems particularly noteworthy as a proponent of conspiracy theories regarding, e.g. the Wuhan Lab (17,000 likes on Facebook) and Bill Gates. As is evident from the above, conspiracy theories appear to receive significant amplification via social media compared to e.g. content that falls under the heading of ‘moral decline’.





#### 4. MORAL DECLINE



Sub-narratives that constitute this narrative:

- a. **Divine protection: Only God can protect us from COVID-19**
- b. **Divine punishment: COVID-19 is a punishment from God**
- c. **Religious freedom: Emergency measures against COVID-19 are an attack on religious freedom**
- d. **Value failure: COVID-19 has revealed that Western values are obsolete**

#### Comparison of narratives across countries

There were few cases of 'moral decline' narratives in this reporting period, with the theme being almost entirely absent in the report of 26 May. Narratives that did fall



within the CWG's working definition of moral decline were notable in Georgia and Montenegro (with fewer cases from Romania). As noted in last week's 'narratives' report, the most common sub-narrative was that which suggests that emergency measures taken against COVID-19 are an attack on the church and/or religious freedom.

### *Religious Freedom*

In Georgia, Orthodox influencers' perspectives continue to be amplified by sites such as [Geworld.ge](#). On 20 May, the pro-Kremlin site published an interview with an archpriest of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Guram Gamtsemlidze, who suggested that COVID-19 is being used to change the world order and fight the Orthodox Church. Gamtsemlidze claims that this anti-church movement is ruled by liberal forces and that organizations such as the IMF are trying to control the country.

In Montenegro meanwhile, the Pro-Russian outlet [Borba](#) ran a story suggesting that the government is using COVID-19 as a pretext to 'crack down' on the Church and its followers. The accusations covered within the article were made by the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who condemned the detention of Joanikije Mićović (detained the previous day for participating in a procession to celebrate St Vasilije Ostroški's Day). Pro-Russian outlet [in4s](#) also covered the protests against Bishop Joanikije's arrest, in a highly engaged-with story from this period (8,342 interactions).

### *Value Failure*

There was no content explicitly coded as exhibiting the sub-narrative of 'value failure'. However, some content categorised within the 'Failing West' theme did also suggest that COVID-19 has revealed the obsolescence of Western values. For example, in **Slovakia**, [Zem a Vek](#) suggested that COVID-19 had reduced modern democracies to the level of totalitarian China, and that Europe was facing chaos.

### *Orthodox Influencers*

Although not categorised under the heading of moral decline, there were various incidences of Orthodox figures speaking publicly about COVID-19. In Georgia, for example, archpriest Saba Chikaidze reportedly suggested that COVID-19 vaccines will be used by billionaires and masons to reduce the world population. In Moldova, [Flux.md](#) provided the text of an interview with the "Russian Orthodox thinker and economist, V.Yu. Katasonova for the YouTube channel of the Book World publishing house", containing the suggestion that there is no such thing as COVID-19 and that the crisis has been promoted by global elites with nefarious aims.

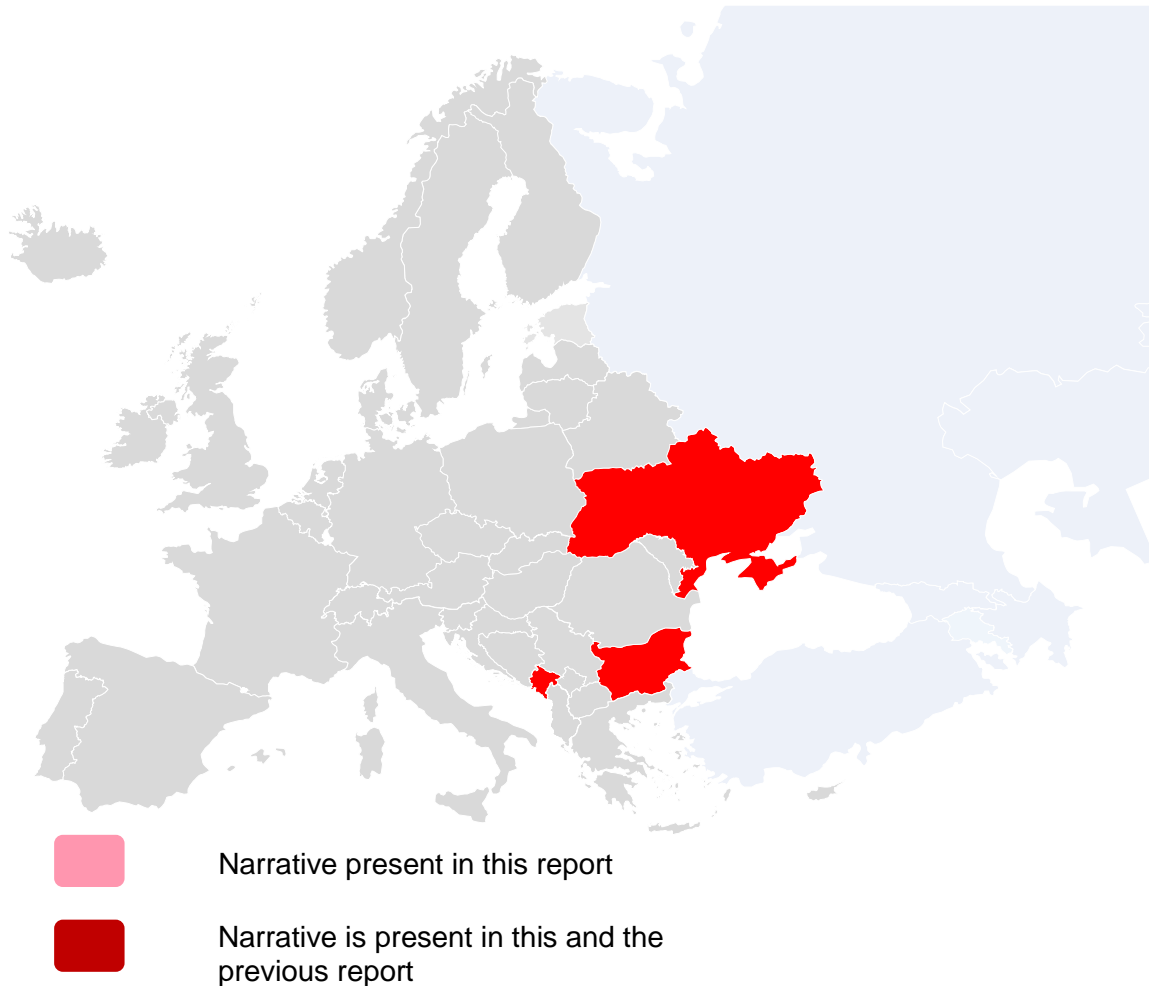
### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*



In Montenegro, the aforementioned protest against the arrest of Bishop Joanikije was discussed online by pro-Kremlin media. Romania meanwhile saw continued social media conversation regarding the omission of churches from the list of places allowed to re-open after the lockdown is lifted. This topic has been discussed on several groups and orthodox influencer pages on Facebook, with people commenting that being denied entry to such places of worship is a breach of their freedom of conscience and religion.



## 5. REFRAMING RUSSIA



Sub-narratives that constitute this narrative:

- a. Russian success: Russia is dealing well with COVID-19**
- b. Global leadership: Russia is helping other states deal with COVID-19**
- c. Russophobia: Russia is being victimised in relation to COVID-19 YES**

The first and third of these sub-narratives were significant during this reporting period.

### Comparison of narratives across countries

'Reframing Russia' narratives were not especially explicit in this reporting period (although subtle manifestations of such narratives can be found within the category of 'Failing West', for example where pro-Russian outlets present western and liberal actors as incompetent, thereby implicitly framing Russia as relatively superior). This



week, narratives of success were identified in content circulating within Bulgaria, Montenegro and Ukraine. Russophobia was only explicitly identified in one piece of content in Ukraine. Meanwhile, content that appeared to have the predominant aim of highlighting Russian assistance to others (or Russia's ability to provide such assistance) appeared to have diminished.

### *Success*

Content suggesting Russian success implied prowess at both a technical and demographic level. One example of the latter came from Bulgaria's News Front, where an article entitled "Learning: Russians have higher population immunity than Europeans and Westerners" claimed that the number of deaths in Russia is far lower than in other countries (a claim attributed to an interview conducted by Russia 24 with the head of the National Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology).

In Montenegro, the pro-Russian outlet [in4s](#) earlier reported on how Russia built 16 hospitals in just two months, in response to COVID-19. In Ukraine, the Russian state-owned outlet [Ukraina.ru](#) produced an article by the Russian journalist Vitaly Tretyakov who suggested that given how well Russia is handling the pandemic, there can be no discussion of a bi-polar world, in which the US and China are the two superpowers, but rather of a tri-polar world, with Russia alongside them.

In a different vein, some content positioned Russia as successful by pointing to the alleged failure of others. For example, [Ukraina.ru](#) warned that Russia might have to find a way to deal with the flow of infected refugees from Ukraine. Vladimir Kornilov, the source of this story, stated that due to a 'complete lack of proper COVID-19 testing in Ukraine' it would be hard to determine the health of people intending to cross the border with Russia.

### *Russophobia*

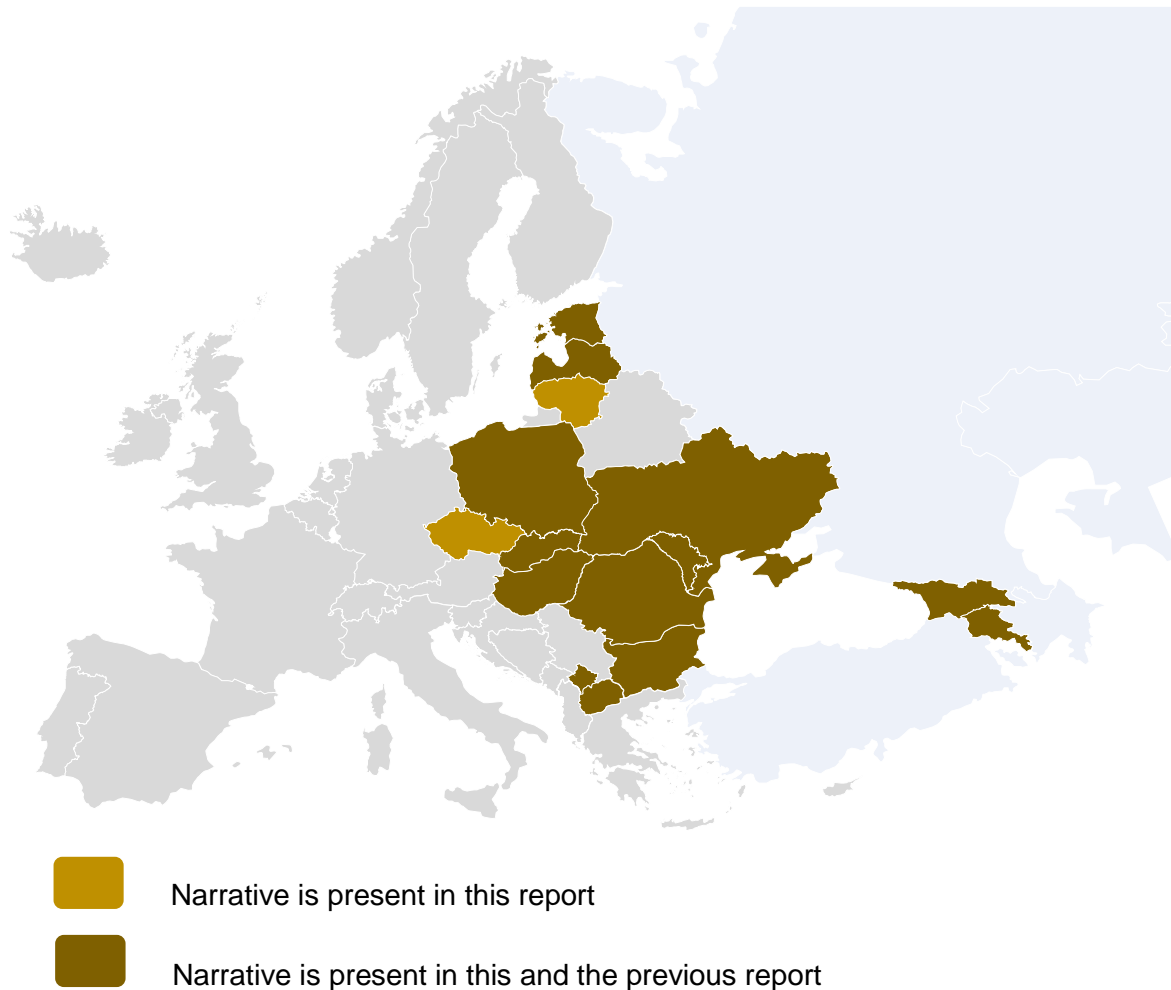
As noted, content alleging Russophobia appears relatively low (perhaps due to a possible peak in such content earlier in May at the time of Victory Day celebrations). In Ukraine, however, it was noted that occupying authorities in Crimea had pushed for the lifting of sanctions. Radio Sputnik's Telegram channel (more than 9,000 followers), cited Crimea's governor Sergey Aksyonov, who spoke of the pointlessness of sanctions in a post-pandemic world.

The above content did not appear to be particularly amplified via social media (when compared to the role of social media in amplifying narratives surrounding e.g. misinformation and conspiracy theories). Compared to the previous report, there was less notable 'Reframing Russia' content identified in Georgia; the narrative of 'global leadership' was also less present.





## 6. MISINFORMATION



Sub-narratives that constitute this narrative

- a. **Hoax: COVID-19 does not exist, or its effects have been wildly exaggerated**
- b. **5G: COVID-19 is spread through 5G mobile technology**
- c. **Cure: COVID-19 can be cured or prevented through non-conventional means**
- d. **Expert advice: Official medical and scientific advice about COVID-19 should be ignored**

Comparison of narratives across countries



Narratives that fall within the CWG's working definition of misinformation were identified during this reporting period in Armenia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Kosovo, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. Misinformation was recorded as being relatively low in Latvia. It also appeared not to be especially prominent in Serbia or Montenegro.

### *Hoax*

Content suggesting that COVID-19 is a hoax or has been overstated was identified in Bulgaria, Czechia, Georgia, Poland, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine and Slovakia. Content equating COVID-19 to mere flu was found in Moldova, Ukraine, and Slovakia (in the latter, the far-right MEP Milan Uhrík spread this opinion on Facebook). In Czechia, the website Vlastenecké Noviny suggested that statistics show that there is no pandemic in Czechia and that the PM and his team are therefore liars, who should be punished. In Georgia and Lithuania, content similarly suggested that COVID-19-related deaths have been exaggerated (in the former, this claim came in part via the Facebook group STOP 5G in GEORGIA). In Poland, the Facebook group 'I Don't Believe in Coronavirus' (close to 68,000 members) continues to be active. In Romania also, Stiri pe Surse [published](#) an article regarding a Romanian doctor's Facebook post in which he claims that COVID-19 has been overstated and that the mortality rate is lower than reported.

Meanwhile, the common claim that medics are falsely diagnosing COVID-19 (or citing it a cause of death) was identified in Slovakia (via two outlets: Zem a Vek and Infovojna), Czechia, Ukraine (where claims that a doctor had been compelled to diagnose a healthy patient with COVID-19 were [posted](#) on the Facebook page of 'News of Ukraine', which has 1,500,000 followers), Lithuania (where 'UNFOLLOW 15min.lt', a group with 46,500 members, shared a screenshot claiming that funeral homes were forcing relatives to attribute deaths to COVID-19), and Poland (where, on national TV, a famous windsurfer challenged a doctor, claiming that doctors in the US, for example, are paid to falsely diagnose patients). Also in Poland, the Facebook group "I Don't Believe in Coronavirus" (approx 69,000 members) featured content originally [posted](#) to a blog where it was claimed that medics are being prevented from speaking out beyond the "WHO line". In Romania, the aforementioned doctor who claimed that COVID-19 has been overstated also suggested that doctors may be being bribed to conceal the truth.

### *5G*

Narratives linking 5G to COVID-19 were present in Armenia, Czechia, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, with much content shared via Facebook. In





Armenia, for example, the doctor and activist Marina Khachatryan has been posting imagery claiming to show that 5G is present and dangerous in Yerevan (and suggesting that quarantine has been used to keep people away while the government installs antennae). In Czechia, there were numerous cases of content critical of 5G, including from Zpravy D24 (which suggested that 5G caused people in Wuhan to die) and Nwoo.org (“New World Order Opposition”). In Georgia, the Facebook group ‘STOP 5G IN GEORGIA’ persists, and has called for an investigation into public health officials. Also in that country, the influencer Koba Kuprashvili linked the high death toll from COVID-19 in Sao Paulo to 5G in that city.

Moreover, in Moldova, an article from kp.md claimed to present the findings of a survey reporting that at least half of Moldovans think that COVID-19 is linked to 5G. Politician Iurie Rosca also used Facebook to share a video suggesting the same. In North Macedonia, the claim – seen previously – that the motherboards of 5G antennae contain the word ‘COV 19’ also circulated, as did a theory claiming that the Australian \$10 banknote is somehow proof that the pandemic was planned; the article alleges that COVID-19 is being transmitted via 5G to serve the aims of billionaires. Conspiracy content re: 5G was also notable in Poland, where – as elsewhere – incidences of the ‘Misinformation: 5G’ sub-narrative occasionally overlapped with those also found under the heading of ‘Malign Global Elites’.

### *Cure*

The suggestion that COVID-19 can be cured or prevented through non-conventional means was relatively weak in this reporting period. However, there remained notable cases in Estonia, Georgia, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine. In Georgia, the Alia outlet reported that phytomedicine specialist, Avtandil Kurdgelashvili, claims to possess a medicine to help combat and prevent COVID-19. In Ukraine, Strana - a disinformation amplifier - [reported](#) on the potential of cannabis to cure COVID-19.

Meanwhile, in Slovakia, the prolific outlet Zem a Vek reported that Madagascar has developed a cure for COVID-19 (which the WHO attempted to sabotage). In Romania, it was reported that a Chinese team is on course to produce a drug that could cure COVID-19 and immunize people, thus foregoing the need for a vaccine.

Social media conversation in Estonia also featured false suggestions regarding COVID-19 cures. A post on Коронавирус в Эстонии (Coronavirus in Estonia), a group with 700 members, even suggested that Kundalini yoga could be a cure.

### *Expert Advice: masks and vaccination*

The suggestion that official advice should be ignored was notable in content found in Armenia, Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland and Romania.



Much content was critical of mask-wearing. In Armenia, Lusine Haroyan-Dallakyan (a 2018 Prime Ministerial candidate) and Hrayr Kostanyan (a blogger) used Facebook to promote the view that masks are useless and to imply that the mandatory wearing of masks serves aims other than those of public health. Kostanyan's post has received more than 49,000 views. Similarly, in Czechia, Sputnik promoted the opinion of singer Lou Fanánek Hagen, who thinks that mask-wearing is an attempt by elites to discover the extent to which people can be told what to do. In the same country, the outlet Pravy Prostor suggested that face masks are dangerous (as are vaccines), whilst in Slovakia, anti-mask content was promoted by the website Picus Capital. In some cases, it was suggested that asking people to wear masks is unlawful. In Poland, for example, the fringe outlet wiesci24.pl, suggested this, in content that was then shared by the Facebook group "I Don't Believe in Coronavirus".

Anti-vaccination content was also present. In Lithuania for example, an activist used YouTube to call on people to resist vaccinations (2,636 views). Vaccination was also dismissed as dangerous (and/or as serving the nefarious ends of global elites) in North Macedonia, Slovakia, and Armenia. Meanwhile, in Romania, the Facebook page of Lujor.ro [shared](#) an article from the website of the same name featuring the view of a lawyer who claims that temperature checks are "illegal and abusive" and that people should challenge them. In Estonia, a post from the group Ravimite ja vaktsiinide kõrvaltoimed (Side effects of medicines and vaccines), which has 10,000 members, linked to an article claiming that vaccines may alter people's DNA.

### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

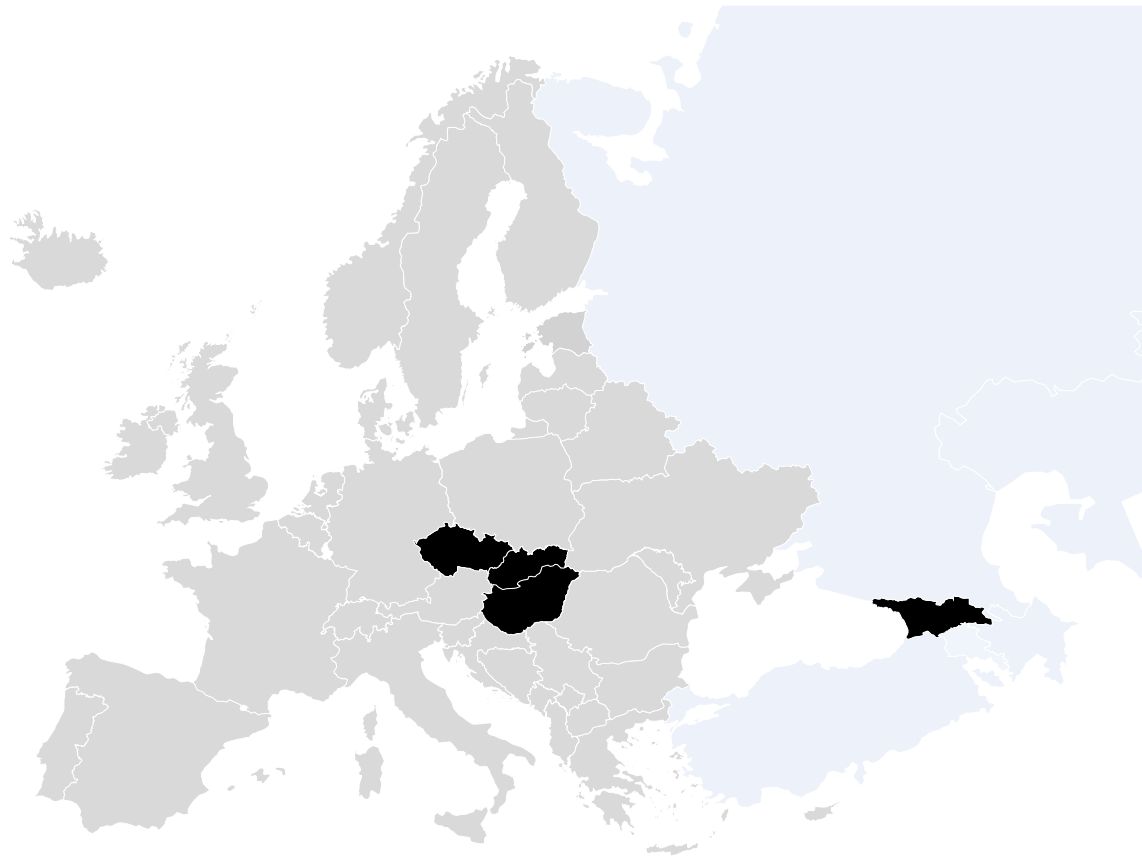
Of all of the narrative categories covered by this report, misinformation is especially amplified via social media. As noted, a significant amount of 5G-related content circulates in this way – notably, via Facebook and YouTube. In Poland for example, one YouTube video was [posted](#) to a number of Facebook groups (46,944 views) suggesting that 5G aids the spread of COVID-19. Another, suggesting that a 5G nanochip may be hidden in a future vaccine, received around 51,000 views. Other examples of notable social media reach include Georgia (where groups such as 'STOP 5G in GEORGIA' are active), Ukraine (where the Facebook page Meteopa (Meteor), which has 124,000 followers, posted a video – shared more than 5,590 times - in which conspiracy theorist David Icke draws a parallel 5G and COVID-19 in Wuhan) and Lithuania, where a video in which activist Astra Astrauskaite condemns the rollout of 5G and brands mandatory vaccination as unconstitutional, was shared on Facebook (251 shares). As noted above, Armenia has also seen social media activity re: 5G and COVID-19, including in the posts of doctor and activist Marina Khachatryan.



Social media has also been a key location and medium for the spreading of anti-vaccination narratives, and for the amplification of the notion that COVID-19 is a hoax or is overstated. In Hungary, for example, various Facebook pages, including that of medical influencer György Gődény, and the page ‘Oltáskritikus Életvédők Szövetsége’ (Vaccine Critics Life Protection Assoc’), which has 6,000 followers, were among those to dismiss the threat posed by COVID-19, with some drawing on a video of a German group of doctors who criticised lockdown restrictions in Germany.



## 7. MISC/ADDITIONAL



Narrative is present in this report

During this reporting period, content relating to immigration (noted in this section of the CWG report of 22 May) appeared to diminish somewhat. There were no notable emerging new narratives. However, whilst the following cases did not fall within the main narrative headings, they nonetheless appear noteworthy.

### *Big Tech Censorship*

In Slovakia, a Hlavny Dennik article [claimed](#) that Big Tech companies such as YouTube are censoring alternative opinions regarding COVID-19, removing everything that differs from the recommendations of the World Health Organisation. Similarly, in Hungary two Facebook pages - Vilaghelyzete (Status of the World, 9,700 likes) and Alternativ Hirek (Alternative News, 2,100 likes) - claimed that Google is planning to access personal accounts in order to delete the documentary 'Plandemic'.



The text stirred outrage in the comment sections and links to 'Plandemic' were re-shared.

*'The Other': Islam and COVID-19; migrants and COVID-19*

Two notable articles implied an association between COVID-19 and the perceived 'Other'. In Czechia, an article from Vlastenecké Noviny, headlined "The virtual pandemic has pushed aside the risk of bestial Islam" suggested that the present crisis has pushed various "problems" into the background, overshadowing the "fact" that freedom is waning as Islam allegedly strengthens. It draws our attention, claims the author, to how easily we allow ourselves to be deprived of our liberty.

Separately, in Slovakia, a Zem a Vek article headlined "Migrants from Turkish camps have tested positive for coronavirus in Greece" suggested that Turkey could have been sending infected migrants to Greece to spread COVID-19, in what could be regarded as an informal biological attack. Another Zem a Vek article (noted elsewhere in this report) suggested that COVID-19 has reduced modern democracies to the level of totalitarianism and that Europe is awaiting chaos and collapse, in part due to the stress of 'Afro-Asian' migration.

*Georgia and wheat imports*

In the 18-24 May edition of Alia newspaper, it was stated that previously, wheat was heavily imported to Georgia from Russia and other Eurasian countries, but that due to COVID-19, these countries banned this import. As a response, the US decided to provide wheat to Georgia. The author suggests that this wheat should be checked, as it may be genetically modified and cause deadly disease. The article thus appears to somewhat imply that wheat imports and COVID-19 could be linked, or that the latter could come from the US, whose imports should not be trusted.



## **THEMATIC REPORT 1: Hungary and Ärzte für Aufklärung (Doctors for education):**

**Analysis:** Ärzte für Aufklärung (Doctors for education), a group of German doctors, claims that the risk of COVID-19 has been greatly exaggerated.

**Date observed:** 26/05/2020

**Source:** [Vírusmentesítés, Titkok és talányok, György Gődény, Hungarian Association of Anti-Vaccination and Life Protection, Hihetetlen Magazin](#)

### **Rationale for selection**

Ärzte für Aufklärung (Doctors for education) is a recently established organisation based in Germany. It is led by five doctors and claims to have over 1000 endorsements from the medical community. Its [YouTube channel](#), launched 17 May has over 2,300 subscribers.

Ärzte für Aufklärung recently came to prominence for speaking out against measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. [In a recent press conference](#), they claimed that COVID-19 is nothing more than a seasonal flu and the restrictions introduced in Germany were unnecessary and driven by a ‘mafia-like organisation’, implying high-level conspiracy. The doctors also allege that the recording of COVID-19 deaths and cases has been exaggerated and are not representative of reality. The video in which they make these claims has been viewed over 19,000 times.

The group also promotes stories likely to appeal to the anti-vaccination movement, about vaccinations gone wrong, or purposefully sabotaged by the WHO, UNICEF, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In the press conference, they also speak against any potential COVID-19 vaccine, suggesting that there is no way to know what will be “sneaked” into it. They referenced a case in Kenya, where girls and women were vaccinated against tetanus, but allegedly sterilised without their consent by the same procedure.

They suggest, in their video as well as on their [website](#), that Bill Gates, the WHO, and national governments are behind the pandemic. It is also suggested that their good intentions should always be questioned because of the many humanitarian actions that have proved to be disguises for malicious activities.

The video has been picked up by many conspiracy theory pages and particularly appeals to the anti-vaccine community.



*Narrative alignment: How the narrative fits into HSA objectives in country.*

This story fits into a narrative theme Zinc Network has previously identified in hostile state-backed media coverage of COVID-19, namely the idea that a malign global elite is taking advantage of the pandemic to either exploit those weaker than them or reshape societies in a particular way.

The press conference comes in a period when easing of lockdown measures have begun in many European countries and talks about vaccine development increase. With lockdown fatigue also setting in, and public unrest against lockdown on the increase in Germany and elsewhere, a seemingly legitimate source from a generally trustworthy country appears to give vulnerable audiences a strong rationale for supporting the easing of restrictions.

While the doctors in the video do not state that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax, they nonetheless downplay the severity of the situation and the disease itself. They also advise against following expert advice on containment measures, and vaccine use, once one is available. This anti-establishment, anti-expertise position, combined with the nods towards opaque organisations with a purportedly malign agenda, like the WHO and the Gates Foundation, fits hostile state strategic objectives throughout the European Union and beyond. If believed, the video appears likely to undermine trust in authorities, governments and the independent press.

*Commentary on provenance:*

A number of Facebook groups and pages shared this video. It now has nearly 250,000 total views according to open-source social listening tools.

It first appeared in Hungary on a page called [Virusmentesítés](#) (Virus disinfection) on 21 May 2020. The post gained 1000 interactions, 1500 shares and 126 overwhelmingly supportive comments. This was then picked up by a number of other Facebook pages like [Hihetetlen Magazin](#) (Unbelievable Magazine), a conspiracy theory page mainly focusing on aliens, where the video got 2500 interactions, 9400 shares and 454 comments.

Below are the biggest public Facebook pages sharing the video. These groups and pages have a significant aggregated number of followers and it is likely that the video has now reached a much wider audience. Note too that there are many other similar closed or private groups with much larger following.

Engagement figures: [Virusmentesítés](#) (Virus disinfection) — 6,283 subscribers



Facebook Interactions	1100
Facebook Shares	5400
Facebook Comments	131

Engagement figures: [Hihetetlen Magazin](#) (Unbelievable Magazine)— 64,366 subscribers

Facebook Interactions	2500
Facebook Shares	9400
Facebook Comments	454

Engagement figures: [Apaszív Egyesület](#) (Father Heart Association) — 14,064 subscribers

Facebook Interactions	1200
Facebook Shares	0
Facebook Comments	173

Engagement figures: [Amiről a tudomány nem beszél](#) (What science doesn't talk about) — 5,800 subscribers

Facebook Interactions	61
Facebook Shares	50
Facebook Comments	4

Engagement figures: [Tények és talányok](#) (Facts and findings) — 5,800 subscribers

Facebook Interactions	45
Facebook Shares	26
Facebook Comments	0

Engagement figures: [RTL Klub Híradó II](#) (RTL Klub News II) — 26,100 subscribers

Facebook Interactions	14
Facebook Shares	10
Facebook Comments	0

Engagement figures: [Koronavírus STOP](#) — 5,700 subscribers

Facebook Interactions	3
Facebook Shares	1
Facebook Comments	0

Engagement figures: [Oltáskritikus Életevédők Szövetsége – Vaccine Critics Life Protection Association](#) — 6,721 subscribers

Facebook Interactions	55
Facebook Shares	23





Facebook Comments
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10
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### Conversation around the topic:

There were sceptical statements and movements around the pandemic and measures that aim to contain it even before this video appeared. This however, seemed somewhat more official, coming from a group of doctors, who claim the additional authority of being endorsed by more than 1000 of their medical colleagues in German speaking countries.

The video stirred outrage and a lot of conversation on social media about an “elite” who uses the government-imposed lockdown measures to control the population and potentially benefit from it. However, this “elite” is never consistently defined: for different social media users it means many different things: big tech, big pharma, Bill Gates, governments, liberals in general, and “the West”, to name but a few, are all blamed.

Another theory that came up often in the comments is that this “elite” engineered a fraudulent pandemic panic, and there is no deadly virus, or in any case it is not worse than the flu. Many users were outraged that the media is not reporting on this theory and speculate that it must be because the media is in the hands of this “elite”.

A third major concern of social media users regarded vaccination. A large portion of commenters were highly reluctant to be vaccinated. They were very vocal against any COVID-19 vaccine, particularly if it would come from a Western country. Population control and genocide by vaccines, coordinated by the Gates Foundation or the Rockefeller Foundation, were common (and complementary) theories in the comment sections.

The overall sentiment around the video was concern, anger, outrage, and a determination to hold leaders accountable for the allegedly unnecessary measures. Users showed strong aversion towards mandatory vaccinations once one becomes available for COVID-19.



## **THEMATIC REPORT 2: Romania: Commentary on Mask Wearing**

**Analysis:** Rogue doctors claim wearing a mask is detrimental to health and may even be fatal.

**Date observed:** 26/05/2020

**Source:** [Active News](#)

### **Rationale for selection:**

Public attitudes towards the measures recommended by the World Health Organisation and implemented by the Romanian government, have been negative. Many social media users believe that the pandemic is either a hoax or blown out of proportion in order to establish a 'medical dictatorship' based on population control. These social tensions have been inflamed by activists, many of them with links to the Orthodox Church, who have been particularly critical of the closing of churches. Some of this group have linked COVID-19 to the New World Order, the alleged secret world government.

The Romanian government mandates the wearing of masks in public and enforces temperature-taking when citizens enter public spaces such as shops and administrative buildings. These measures have provoked a backlash. A vocal minority of users on social media platforms insist that these compulsory measures have no medical value but have instead been imposed to get people gradually accustomed to authoritarianism, as a precursor to the supposed establishment of a medical and technological dictatorship.

These public reactions have been fuelled by factually dubious news stories and statements from public figures, who have claimed that not only are these measures unconstitutional but also harmful to people's health and even potentially fatal.

Most notably these statements have been made by Vasile Astărăstoae, a doctor, professor and former president of the Romanian Medical College, who has become a controversial figure having been [accused](#) of corruption and abuse of power on numerous occasions. From the beginning of the pandemic, Astărăstoae has promoted the narrative of a malign global elite which aims to establish a global dictatorship by blowing the pandemic out of proportion and implementing what he deems to be dangerous protection measures, without any medical grounds. He [claimed](#) that wearing protection masks is dangerous for health and hints at the possibility that thermo-scanning guns may lead to the development of serious chronic conditions.



Another notoriously controversial doctor, Adina Alberts, [gave](#) contradictory advice to the public, stating that they should wear masks but that these protection measures could actually be fatal to people with ailments that affect their breathing. Several news outlets are publishing articles on statements or studies conducted by foreign sciences which allegedly show the harmful and potentially fatal effects of wearing a mask for [blood circulation](#) and the [skin](#).

*Narrative alignment: How the narrative fits into HSA objectives in country.*

This story aligns with several narratives that Zinc has previously identified

**Failing West**

- Corruption: Western/liberal actors’ response to COVID-19 is corrupt
- Exploitation: States and global institutions are taking advantage of COVID-19 to exploit others

**Malign Global Elite**

- Reshaping society: Global financial and political elites (including the deep state) are taking advantage of COVID-19 to reshape society

**Misinformation**

- Hoax: COVID-19 does not exist at all, or its effects have been wildly exaggerated
- Expert advice: Official medical and scientific advice about COVID-19 should be ignored

*Social Media*

Engagement figures: [ActiveNews](#) — 81,213 followers

Facebook Likes	2000
Facebook Shares	1100
Facebook Comments	123
Twitter Shares	0

**Groups sharing content:**

Below are the biggest public Facebook pages sharing the content on the dangers of wearing masks. The table below concerns not only the Active News article, but also publications from other outlets that push this sub-narrative.



Group name	URL	Type	# of members / subscribers
Opinia Publica	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/1414229612173477/permalink/2690808381182254">https://www.facebook.com/groups/1414229612173477/permalink/2690808381182254</a>	Public page	80,925
Doar Romania	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/905187566350829/permalink/1443230875879826">https://www.facebook.com/groups/905187566350829/permalink/1443230875879826</a>	Public group	6,129
Nationalism Romanesc	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/1547640988851210/permalink/2679302962351668">https://www.facebook.com/groups/1547640988851210/permalink/2679302962351668</a>	Public group	3,094
Stiri pe Surse	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/stiripesurse.ro/posts/3231763253512983">https://www.facebook.com/stiripesurse.ro/posts/3231763253512983</a>	Public page	451,686
Justitie, dreptate si adevar	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/595308737237054/permalink/2569067493194492">https://www.facebook.com/groups/595308737237054/permalink/2569067493194492</a>	Public group	115,754

### Conversation around the topic

In these related articles and social media response, several themes emerged:

Many seem to believe that masks and thermo-scanning are useless as they would not offer protection against asymptomatic carriers. There is also a widespread belief that useless as they are, these measures are being imposed by the government as a means of gradually getting the population of Romania accustomed to authoritarian policies; this is believed to be a precursor to the establishment of a so-called 'medical-technological dictatorship'.

On that point, there are two further scenarios which are being anticipated by the media and social media users in groups that we are currently following. First, there seem to be concerns about the Romanian government becoming more corrupt and moving towards a pre-1989 authoritarian state. Secondly, some claim that the Romanian government is not acting in isolation, but is rather a cog in the machinations of a malign elite, often described as a globalist New World Order, that aims to undermine civil rights and liberties on a global stage. This links to other



popular conspiracy theories which identify figures such as Bill Gates or George Soros as the leaders of this New World Order.

Another related strand of this narrative consists of claims that both face masks and frequent thermo-scanning lead to the emergence or exacerbation of chronic illnesses. These claims have been popularized by well-known doctors in Romania or with reference to controversial foreign studies. This view appears to chime with another narrative that has been observed recently, that a malign global elite is exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic in order to profit. Some social media users believe that compulsory protection measures which are allegedly harmful have been imposed in order to promote the interests of Big Pharma, both through the sale of masks and protective equipment and through drugs which might be necessary for treating the resulting illnesses.

Additionally, there seem to be concerns about profiteering at a national level as well, with stories and social media rumours that key figures from both the governing and the main opposition parties are selling face masks at extortionate prices through their private businesses.

Some popular medical experts have also expressed a distinct concern that thermo-scanning might undermine the rights and liberties of certain categories of people who may have a higher temperature at a given point in time. These include, cancer patients, women who are pregnant or experiencing menopause, and people with syndromes and chronic illnesses.



## NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

### 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 through 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.



## List of Narrative and Sub-Narrative Headings

### 1. FAILING WEST

- a. **EU collapse:** The EU is collapsing due to COVID-19
- b. **EU failure:** The EU is failing in its duty to help other states deal with COVID-19
- c. **Incompetence:** Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is incompetent
- d. **Hypocrisy:** Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is hypocritical
- e. **Corruption:** Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is corrupt
- f. **Exploitation:** States and global institutions are taking advantage of COVID-19 to exploit others

### 2. CONFLICT

- a. **Bio-lab:** A state or global institution created COVID-19 in a laboratory
- b. **NATO as vector:** NATO soldiers are spreading COVID-19
- c. **COVID-19 war:** COVID-19 will be used to provoke or justify military aggression

### 3. MALIGN GLOBAL ELITE

- a. **Exploitation:** Global financial and political elites (including the deep state) are taking advantage of COVID-19 to exploit others
- b. **Reshaping society:** Global financial and political elites (including the deep state) are taking advantage of COVID-19 to reshape society

### 4. MORAL DECLINE

- a. **Divine protection:** Only God can protect us from COVID-19





- b. Divine punishment:** COVID-19 is a punishment from God
- c. Religious freedom:** Emergency measures against COVID-19 are an attack on religious freedom
- d. Value failure:** COVID-19 has revealed that Western values are obsolete

## 5. REFRAMING RUSSIA

- a. Russian success:** Russia is dealing well with COVID-19
- b. Global leadership:** Russia is helping other states deal with COVID-19
- c. Russophobia:** Russia is being victimised in relation to COVID-19 YES

## 6. MISINFORMATION

- a. Hoax:** COVID-19 does not exist, or its effects have been wildly exaggerated
- b. 5G:** COVID-19 is spread through 5G mobile technology
- c. Cure:** COVID-19 can be cured or prevented through non-conventional means
- d. Expert advice:** Official medical and scientific advice about COVID-19 should be ignored

## 7. MISCELLANEOUS / OTHER



## **METHODOLOGY**

Zinc Network researchers draw on three different sorts of material for consideration in the country reports: first, instances of COVID-19 coverage in selected media outlets; second, social media discussion around COVID-19; and third, coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19.

The first kind is identified by using open-source media monitoring software. Zinc researchers apply a list of keywords relating to COVID-19 to a list of pre-identified media outlets, selected because they are either Hostile State-backed or routinely sympathetic to Hostile States or their strategic objectives. This data is then exported, and the top 25 stories by engagement are then tagged according to a narrative code frame – there are seven narratives, including ‘miscellaneous’, plus one for ‘not disinformation’. This is done for the purposes of identifying how Hostile State-backed or Hostile State-friendly media selects and frames its coverage.

This data sheet (which is submitted separately) is also used to create a line chart depicting the volume of occurrences of each narrative in each country over the reporting period, with the total number of interactions for each narrative. This is done to compare the relative impact and popularity of each narrative over the reporting period.

The second type of content, social media conversation, is identified using two different social listening tools, one for analysing Facebook, the other for a variety of other social media platforms. Through a combination of keyword searches and monitoring of selected groups and pages, chosen to be representative of the wider population, researchers outline the major themes being discussed around COVID-19 on social media. The relative attention given to Facebook or other platforms depends on their usage in the market under investigation. This is done to understand as far as possible how citizens in each market view disinformation, especially in the context of any narratives identified above.

The third variety of material, like the first, is identified by using open-source media monitoring software. Researchers combine the COVID-19 keyword list with another keyword list of terms relating to disinformation (‘fake news’, ‘hoax’, ‘propaganda’, etc.), and apply it to all media outlets in the country under investigation. This returns all instances of reporting about disinformation, and is done to understand to what extent disinformation is being recognised as such in the wider media environment.

If the country in question is one where a partner organisation is also operating, the Zinc researcher compares their findings with those of the partner group, and collates them accordingly into one unified report. This is finally summarised in an overview,



with similarities and differences between the material found in each sub-section noted and discussed.