



## SUMMARY REPORT

Friday 19 June 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
Belarus	Russian
Bulgaria	Bulgarian
Czechia	Czech
Estonia	English, Estonian, Russian
Georgia	Georgian
Hungary	Hungarian
Kosovo	Albanian, Serbian
Latvia	English, Latvian, Russian
Lithuania	English, Lithuanian, Russian
Moldova	Romanian
Montenegro	Montenegrin, Serbian
North Macedonia	Albanian, Macedonian
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. Belarus
3. Bulgaria
4. Czechia
5. Estonia
6. Georgia
7. Hungary
8. Kosovo
9. Latvia
10. Lithuania
11. Moldova
12. Montenegro
13. North Macedonia
14. Romania
15. Serbia
16. Slovakia
17. Ukraine

**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

**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, based on data from the reporting period of Thursday 11 June (00:00) - Wednesday 17 June (23:59), except where specified below. Click [here](#) for a list of narrative and sub-narrative headings used in the CWG reports.

		Armenia	Belarus	Bulgaria	Czechia	Estonia	Georgia	Hungary	Kosovo	Latvia	Lithuania	Moldova	Montenegro	N Macedonia	Romania	Serbia	Slovakia	Ukraine
FAILING WEST	EU collapse											X			X			
	EU failure				X										X		X	
	Incompetence	X		X						X			X		X		X	X
	Hypocrisy	X			X								X				X	
	Corruption	X		X	X		X	X			X			X	X		X	
	Exploitation						X						X					X
	<i>General/other</i>		X	X														
CONFLICT	Bio-lab	X			X		X				X		X	X			X	
	NATO as vector		X							X				X				
	COVID-19 war						X							X			X	
	<i>General/other</i>		X															
MALIGN ELITE	Exploitation		X		X		X	X						X			X	X
	Reshaping society		X		X			X				X		X			X	
	<i>General/other</i>																	
MORAL DECLINE	Divine protection																	
	Divine punishment																	
	Religious freedom																	
	Failed values						X						X					
	<i>General/other</i>																	
REFRAMING RUSSIA	Russian success		X	X			X					X		X		X	X	X
	Global leadership						X					X	X					
	Russophobia																X	X
	<i>General/other</i>																	
MISINFORMATION	Hoax				X		X	X									X	
	5G																	
	Cure	X			X													
	Expert advice	X			X		X							x			X	
	<i>General/other</i>		X															X
<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>					X													



## COUNTRIES

The following country-by-country overview summarises developments by country, including new or shifting narratives and key cases. For Belarus, 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 each 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.

---

## ARMENIA

### Summary

‘Misinformation’ content appears to have declined, with far less criticism of mask-wearing than in the previous period. The ‘Failing West’ narrative continues to be present, once again in the claim that the government is corrupt (and is essentially a puppet of the World Health Organization). Content regarding bio-labs has re-emerged, in the form of a Facebook post from a lawyer – amplified by various news sites – casting suspicion on US-funded bio-labs and reporting that he had filed a legal claim to demand that such labs cease their work.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Misinformation: Cure (Also: Failing West: Incompetence, Hypocrisy); Expert Advice*



- A Facebook post from Lusine Haroyan-Dallakyan, a 2018 Prime Ministerial candidate who has spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19, [stated](#) on Facebook that hot weather kills coronavirus and that wearing masks is unnecessary. She blamed the government for imposing the mandatory wearing of masks, and for causing the “genocide” of Armenian people. This received 49 Comments and 119 Shares.
- The website medmedia.am [reported](#) the opinion of Doctor Nune Avanesyan (also known as Nune Nersisyan, mentioned previously in these reports) that large gatherings do not lead to the spread of COVID-19 and that opposition protests had served as a distraction; if the government really cared about the pandemic, it would not have commenced the prosecution of oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan that had led to demonstrations amongst his supporters (2,109 interactions).

## 2. *Conflict: Bio-lab*

- On Facebook, a lawyer [claimed](#) that he had appealed to a court (unspecified) to stop the operation of US-funded bio-labs in Armenia, based on the claim that such labs create biological weapons. His post was republished by two news websites – livenews.am and 7or.am. The latter has around 85,000 visits per month. The post itself received 9 Comments and 15 Shares.

## 3. *Failing West: Corruption*

- Commenting on the Minister of Health’s apologies for possible mistakes made by the government re: COVID-19, an ‘Armnews TV’ morning news anchor [said](#) that although the government talks of sovereignty, it obeys everything that the World Health Organization (WHO) says. The anchor joked that the Ministry of Health was in fact a branch of the WHO, and suggested that government mistakes may not have been unintentional; rather, they could have been done on purpose for political reasons. This has had more than 1,300 views on YouTube.

---

## BELARUS

(NB: this entry covers the period of 10 – 17 June)

### Summary

Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified 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: Russia survives the pandemic with minimal losses; the pandemic is evidence that American hegemony is



drawing to a close; NATO is using Poland and the Baltics to prepare for war during the pandemic, which risks the further spread of infection; and the miracle of Soviet medicine.

A number of new narratives were identified: COVID-19 is losing its potency; a new coronavirus found in Beijing is more infectious than Wuhan one; people should be less worried about catching the virus through contact with different surfaces, but rather be wary of other people's breath.

COVID-19 is playing an ever-decreasing role in social media conversation. The major topic of discussion during this reporting period was the persecution and arrests leading up to presidential elections scheduled for August 2020. Nevertheless, when it comes to COVID-19, social media users in Belarus actively engaged with narratives that presented the deplorable COVID-19 situation in Belarus to be the sole responsibility of president Lukashenko. At the same time, social media users engaged with the president's claim that the Belarusian approach towards the pandemic has been internationally renowned and that World Bank is providing Belarus with a \$300 million loan to learn more about it.

Coverage of disinformation was identified from Belarus state-owned SP.BY and Belta, which wrote about warm weather having an unexpected effect on the severity of COVID-19 and refuted the idea that one can eat any specific fruit or vegetable and hope for protection against COVID-19, instead agitating for a more complex approach towards boosting immune system. At the same time, the Russian state-owned Aif.by did an important job of scrutinising the origin and idea behind conspiracy theories linking COVID-19 with 5G.

## Dis-/Misinformation themes

### 1. *Misinformation: general/other*

- Belarus state-owned Belta [reported](#) that Italian doctors are observing COVID-19 losing its potency. By the time of the publication of these articles it had been ten days since this claim was [refuted](#) by WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan, who said COVID-19 is still a 'killer virus', pointing out either lack of proper verification procedures from the aforementioned outlet, or deliberate intent to mislead (43 interactions)
- Belarus state-owned SB.BY [cited](#) a Russian doctor who said that COVID-19 'is not so tenacious on surfaces' and therefore people should be less worried about catching the virus through contact with different surfaces and instead be wary of the respiratory route of transmission (17 interactions)
- Sputnik.by [spoke](#) about a new outbreak of COVID-19 found in Beijing, claiming it to be a more infectious variation than Wuhan one (1832 interactions). The mainstream and privately-owned Belnovosti [spoke](#) of the 'new virus' from the Beijing outbreak in similar vein (56 interactions)

### 2. *Conflict: NATO as vector; general/other*

- A military analytical portal with [suspected links with the Kremlin](#) that featured on non-profit fact checking EUvsDisinfo on multiple times, [promoted](#) the narrative that NATO



is in Poland and the Baltics preparing for war during the pandemic, which poses a risk of further spread of infection, both among the military personnel themselves and among the civilian population (10 interactions)

- Belarus state-owned Minsk News [uploaded](#) a [video](#) in relation to protests in the US which claimed wearing masks during the pandemic has been imposed specifically to hide identity of those taking parts in violent pogroms (1.3K views)
- Regional outlet of interest Sozh.info [spoke](#) of protests taking place in the US from the perspective of mass acts of looting, and hooliganism. It argued that residents of southern American states, while being completely bored over quarantine, are now not averse to engage in violence (25 interactions)

### 3. *Reframing Russia: Russian success*

- Sputnik.by [referred](#) to Russian president Putin's claim that Russia has survived the pandemic with minimal losses (7 interactions)
- Belarus state-owned Belta [reported](#) on Belarus' minister of healthcare explaining the country's successful handling of the pandemic by pointing out to the fact that while '[...] the sanitary-epidemiological service was reduced all over the world, considering its maintenance economically unreasonable, in Belarus it was improved, developed [...]' (18 interactions)

### 4. *Failing West: general/other*

- RSO Sputnik.by [cited](#) Russian propagandist Yaakov Kedmi who said "American hegemony, which lasted from 1945, is drawing to a close. Phenomena such as coronavirus only underline this" (1583 views)

### 5. *Malign Global Elite: exploitation, reshaping society*

- Regional online media like Mogilew.by [copy-pasted](#) an article from the Russian [Fondsk.ru](#) ([with suspected links with the Kremlin](#)) titled "The global reversal from the "brave new world" to the totalitarian society "1984"". It presents the narrative that malign global elite are indulging their totalitarian tendencies as presented in George Orwell's '1984'. The outlet calls the way COVID-19 has been tackled and the amount of false information surrounding it a 'deliberate escalation of the situation' (51 interactions)

## Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Social media users comically [reacted](#) to the hilarious statement from Belarus' president alleging that 'World Bank is giving Belarus \$ 300 million in exchange for a lesson of incredible experience in the fight against COVID-19' (54K views)
- The Facebook page of Belarusian TV channel Belsat – a subsidiary of Polish Telewizja Polska – [spoke](#) about how the Belarusian authorities are lying when they say all first level contacts get tested for COVID-19 (68 likes + 9 comments + 23 shares)



- Social media users [reacted](#) to the news of president Lukashenko announcing he will take part in the military parade in Moscow in June, despite calling the epidemiologic situation in Russia as 'uneasy' (2,389 interactions)
- A [tweet](#) from Belarusian comedian Andrei Skorohod was favoured 421 times on Twitter. It predicted that the presidential elections will be cancelled by president Lukashenko out of fear, but under the pretext of COVID-19 (17 comments + 24 retweets + 421 likes)
- Anonymous online blog Standalone [compared](#) the way pandemic has been handled in the West and in Belarus and arrived at the conclusion that given strict lockdowns around Europe, the president of Belarus sees that he is 'the main liberal of Europe right now' (6 interactions)
- Belarusian screenwriter, and active opposer of Lukashenko's approach towards the pandemic, Andrey Kureychik [ridiculed](#) president's statement that the Belarusian experience with COVID-19 is a 'world heritage' and pointed out multiple cases of falsehood, falsification of statistics and substitution of diagnoses in death certificates (76 likes + 5 comments + 1 share)
- The most popular Belarusian speaking VK community МАЯ КРАІНА БЕЛАРУСЬ (My Country Belarus) [shared](#) a post from US-funded Radio Free Europe on VK that claimed it is the sole responsibility of president Lukashenko that Belarus is third place in Europe for new COVID-19 cases (80 likes + 39 comments + 21K views)

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

- Belarus state-owned SP.BY [produced](#) an article that argued warm weather is unlikely to downgrade the severity of COVID-19 (16 interactions)
- Belarus state-owned Beltaplus [published](#) an article that dispelled any idea that there can be any one fruit or vegetable capable of protecting one from COVID-19 (11 interactions)
- Russian-state owned Aif.by [analysed](#) the conspiracy theory linking COVID-19 to 5G and spoke about its origin.

---

## BULGARIA

### Summary





The 'Reframing Russia' narrative remains present, though not to a high degree. A 'Failing West' narrative was also observed, in the form of an article criticising the Prime Minister for seeking Bulgaria's inclusion in European vaccination plans.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

#### 1. *Reframing Russia: Russian Success*

- A Tsargrad.tv article [discussed](#) Russia's COVID-19 death toll, describing doctors who had died from the disease as "heroes in white coats" and adding the suggestion that a vaccine may be ready by September.

#### 2. *Failing West: Incompetence/Corruption*

- On the website Otopor.com, it was [reported](#) that Prime Minister Borissov has instructed the Health Minister to take all necessary actions to include Bulgaria in European plans to provide a vaccine for COVID-19. It was stated that Borissov wants to vaccinate citizens without them having the right to make an informed choice (7,124 interactions).

## CZECHIA

### Summary

A high number of cases of mis- and disinformation were identified. These fell under the themes of 'Misinformation' (including claims that the pandemic is a hoax, that alternative medicine can treat COVID-19 and that mainstream advice should be distrusted), 'Conflict' (with the continued circulation of a virologist's claim that the virus was probably man-made), 'Malign Global Elites' (with allegations made against the Rockefellers and the US more broadly), 'Failing West' (including criticism of states such as Romania and institutions such as the World Health Organization and the EU).

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

#### 1. *Misinformation: Cure; Hoax; Expert Advice*

- A Protiproud article [promoted](#) alternative medicines as treatments for COVID-19, giving examples from e.g. Russia, India and China where such medicine has worked. The article also raised fear around a "controversial vaccine", which it suggested could bring problems such as infertility and surveillance (95 interactions).
- The Arfa - "Argumenty & Fakty" - news site [featured](#) an article suggesting that according to statistics, there has been no pandemic in Czechia, and that there were fewer deaths this year than last; the media has spread fake news (756 interactions).
- Another Arfa article [quoted](#) a Czech doctor discussing COVID-19 and claiming that face masks are dangerous, that COVID-19 has not been a real pandemic and that



there will be no second wave unless “someone wants it”, implying that the pandemic is being used to serve business interests (11,566 interactions).

- The website Otevri Svou Mysl ('Open Your Mind') [provided](#) a transcript of a video interview in which it is claimed that a Dr. Andrew Kaufman (mentioned previously in these reports) lost his job because he spoke out about what the mainstream media does not say re: COVID-19. The article/video also suggests that face masks are dangerous; that social distancing is a way of dividing and controlling people; that vaccines do not necessarily work (632 interactions).

## 2. *Conflict: Bio-Lab*

- A video was [circulated](#) by 'Coolfeed', in which Czech virologist Soňa Peková questioned the origin of COVID-19 and suggested that the virus most probably came from a lab rather than from nature. This video – which is from 1 June but remains available to view - has received more than 128,000 views on YouTube.

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

- An article from Zvedavec (and Zem a Vek, in Slovakia) entitled “US plan: militarized population control”, [alleged](#) that the Rockefeller Foundation has a plan to “abuse” COVID-19 for its own gain. It begins: “The Rockefeller Foundation, which has historical ties to the US federal government, has submitted a national plan to control the coronavirus epidemic. The goal is to test 30 million people a day for state money and subject American citizens to strict military control” (27 interactions).

## 4. *Failing West: Corruption; EU Failure and Hypocrisy*

- An article at Parlamentni Listy (with similar text seen on the Zem a Vek site in Slovakia) [offered](#) various stories claiming that COVID-19 is serving corrupt interests worldwide. For example, it claims that relatives of a deceased man in Romania were offered 5000 euros to attribute his death to COVID-10, and that doctors are generally motivated to do this because they receive money for doing so. The article also claims that in Italy, for example, people resisting mainstream advice are being censored, fined or even psychiatrically isolated (4,186 interactions).
- An Otevri Svou Mysl article [suggested](#) that scientists and the World Health Organization (WHO) are lying to people, as indicated by their issuing of contradictory statements (e.g. on asymptomatic transmission), with the implication being that its guidance cannot be relied upon. The article also casts suspicion on people associated with the WHO, such as Anthony Fauci and Bill Gates (98 interactions)
- An article from Protiproud (with similar content also seen in Slovakia) [casts](#) suspicion on financial help that the EU plans to provide to member states, and suggests that the crisis could result in unwanted outcomes: a higher number of politicians being corrupted by Brussels; the rise of a liberal ecological utopia; the rise of feminism (227 interactions).



- Another Protiproud article cast doubt on EU financial aid towards member states, suggesting that states will simply become indebted and that the EU will take away their sovereignty. The article, authored by a Michal Semin, introduces an initiative “D.O.S.T” (“enough”), whose aim is to protect the sovereignty of Czechia (1139 interactions).
- Further content critical of the EU was found at the Arfa website, with an article reporting on its requirement that technology companies should report on disinformation (this was framed as a strengthening of EU censorship) (3,969 interactions).

5. *Miscellaneous: COVID-19 and the right to own weapons in the USA*

- A Pravy Prostor article claimed that states are abusing the crisis to adopt measures that will not be abolished afterwards. Stating that politicians in the US want to take away people’s right to bear arms, the author expresses their view that COVID-19 has had one positive effect: people in the US are buying more weapons (3 interactions).

---

## ESTONIA

### Summary

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

Hostile state media output was minimal. When COVID-19 was discussed, it was either in reference to the latest infection figures as reported by the Latvian government or in reference to statements from state officials regarding cooperation between the Baltic states and Poland in the event of a second wave of infections. Neither of these eventualities offered any critical commentary, false information or manipulative narrative. This suggests that COVID-19 remains a non-priority for hostile state media in Estonia.

Social media conversation was muted and made minimal references to disinformation narratives. Anti-vaccination posts were identified, but these received less than 10 interactions each. Otherwise, social media discussion related to COVID-19 was non-conspiratorial and referred to reputable sources.

These stories were not covered in the wider media, which instead discussed press freedom in the context of disinformation, debunked common health misinformation found on Facebook and reported on the EU’s statements regarding hostile state media.

### Dis-/Misinformation themes



No disinformation articles were identified by Zinc's media monitoring or the CWG partner organisation.

### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Social media conversation was mostly non-conspiratorial with minimal instances of the spread of disinformation or misinformation. The number of posts discussing COVID-19 was extremely low, suggesting that interest in the topic continues to fall.
- Conversation was muted and generally referred to the knock-on effects of measures taken in order to combat the pandemic. The reopening of the outdoor market in Narva, closed during the national lockdown, was the subject of a video shared four times across three groups. The most engaged-with of these [received](#) 19 interactions. The second was a post shared by the United Left Party of Estonia, which claimed that the pandemic highlighted the advantages of transitioning to a socialist form of government. This [received](#) 26 interactions. The most enthusiasm came for a post in which a user celebrated the renovation of a hospital clinic in order to better protect against COVID-19. This post [earned](#) 244 interactions.
- There were two notable instances of disinformation, but both received less than 10 interactions.
- The page Coronavirus in Estonia (COVID-19), with 720 members, shared a post that linked to an article claiming that the WHO has declared the pandemic is not real. This [earned](#) 4 interactions, while both the post itself and the group are labelled by Facebook as containing vaccine-related disinformation. Another post from the group COVID-19 Estonia, with 1.319 members, linked to an article claiming that the company AstraZeneca had agreed to supply 400 million doses of an experimental COVID-19 vaccine to Europe. This also [earned](#) just 4 interactions. Interaction figures were fairly small.

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Postimees published two articles discussing disinformation. The first of these [explained](#) the EU's accusation of Russia and China that they are actively spreading COVID-19 disinformation. The second article republishes an article from Propostop that [disputes](#) Estonia's fall in RSF's press freedom index. RSF attribute the drop to the Estonian government's sanctioning of Sputnik Estonia, while Propostop asserts that a free press does not require allowing the unrestricted publication of false information. (15 and 0 interactions, respectively)
  - Delfi [published](#) an article identifying and debunking some common pieces of health misinformation seen on Facebook. (14 interactions)
-



## GEORGIA

### Summary

Cases fell under the themes of 'Malign Global Elites' (with allegations made against the Rockefeller family and Bill Gates), 'Failing West' (with claims that COVID-19 statistics in Georgia were aimed at receiving exploitative financial 'aid'), 'Reframing Russia' (including the suggestion that Russia-Georgia relations are harmonious), 'Conflict' (with further suspicion cast on the Lugar Laboratory), and 'Misinformation' (with claims undermining expert advice on face masks in particular, and dismissing the crisis as overexaggerated).

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

#### 1. *Malign Global Elites: Exploitation (Also: Failing West: Corruption)*

- On 14 June, the Facebook page "Georgia First" published a post from a user who combines various narratives spread during recent months. The author claims, for example, that a plan by the Rockefellers to fund and promote world government was created in 2010. According to this plan, the pandemic would begin in China and then spread to the whole world; smart cameras would be installed everywhere, and total control of the world population would be achieved. The author also claims that the Georgian government was adapted to fit this plan and that representatives of the Ministry of Health had several meetings with America's Dr. Anthony Fauci. The author also names Bill Gates as behind a mass microchipping plan to reduce the world population. The Lugar Lab and 5G also feature in the post (4 shares).
- On 15 June, on TV Obieqtivi, the head of Georgia Development Laboratory, Irakli Gogava suggested that the World Health Organization is ruled by Globalists, and that Bill Gates is financing it.
- The Facebook group 'STOP 5G GEORGIA!!!' continues to be active. On 18 June, a user shared a link, with a headline making allegations against Bill Gates, suggesting that all but 0.1% of the population in fact already have immunity (3 shares). Another offered different claims about Gates, alleging that he had conducted "genocides against humanity" by funding various laboratories (12 shares).

#### 2. *Failing West: Exploitation*

- On 10 June, in an interview with the TV Obieqtivi host Bondo Mdzinarashvili, Giorgi Lomia, a member of the Alliance of Patriots, said that what he regards as an artificial increase in the numbers of people infected with COVID-19 is aimed at receiving financial aid. He claims that such aid is in fact a loan, which will be paid for by the next generation. The show host supported this narrative.

#### 3. *Conflict: COVID-19 War; Bio-Lab*

- On 16 June, Georgian website Tvalsazrishi.ge published an interview with the military analyst Tristan Tselashvili (originally posted in Asaval-Dasavali newspaper), in which



Tsitelashvili claims that Russia suspects that Americans use the Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab to create biological weapons. Based on these suspicions, he claims that Russia is considering taking real measures and in order to prevent it, Tsitelashvili suggests letting Russian specialists enter the Lab to properly verify its activity. Tsitelashvili also alleges that strange things have been happening in the Lab during the curfew and lockdown, not least that Lab staff - without wearing masks or obeying social distance rules - planted trees and then took a joint photo. Myth Detector has debunked several fake news stories spread by Tsitelashvili (47 interactions).

- On 17 June, the pro-Kremlin website [Geworld.ge](#) published an article with the title “Several questions on [the] Lugar Laboratory” in which the editor-in-chief of the Patriot news agency, Giorgi Iremadze, asks questions about the Lab, including: for what purposes was it built? Are suspicious experiments conducted there? Who controls it? Why was it not verified by international organizations? His questions also link to conspiracy theories regarding Bill Gates (90 interactions).

#### 4. *Reframing Russia: Russian Success; Global Leadership*

- On 17 June, [Geworld.ge](#) published an interview with Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, the head of the pro-Kremlin Eurasian Institute. He says that while Georgia has been declared successful in its fight against COVID-19, in de-facto Abkhazia and South Ossetia very few cases of COVID-19-infected people have been observed. Rtskhiladze concludes that despite the occupied Georgian territories not having the Lugar Lab and other such opportunities, they are nonetheless resisting COVID-19 successfully, making them world champions when it comes to statehood.
- On 16 June, the pro-Kremlin site [Saqinform](#) published an interview with the editor-in-chief of Saqinform, Arno Khidirbegishvili. The interviewer claims that bad relations between Russia and Georgia are the result of western partners influencing the latter’s approach and perspective, but that despite the pandemic and other problems, Georgia-Russia relations are in fact harmonious, and humanitarian and economic cooperation is excellent.

#### 5. *Misinformation: Hoax; Expert Advice*

- In the 15-21 June edition of Tbiliselebi magazine, the microbiologist Levan Chkhikvadze claimed that COVID-19 is fake and has not been seen by anyone.
- On 13 and 15 June, the websites [Tinp.ge](#), [News.Mwvane.ge](#), [QartuliAzri](#), [Digest.Pia.ge](#) and the Facebook pages [Free soul](#), [Gogaggg.com](#), [Reportiori.ge](#), [Georgian Opinion](#), [Positive](#), [Stalin](#), and [Digest](#), published almost identical posts and articles claiming that there is no pandemic (13,668 interactions). The text contains quotes from the World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove appearing to suggest that the pandemic does not exist and that it is not necessary to use special measures against it (for example, there is no need for a vaccine, gloves or masks). Myth Detector checked this news using the CrowdTangle analytical tool and debunked it as disinformation. According to CrowdTangle, the article was shared on 9 Facebook pages with 255 total interactions as well as in 69 Facebook groups with 6,336 interactions.



- On 10 June, in an interview on TV Obieqtivi, Giorgi Lomia, a member of the Alliance of Patriots, said that not one of his relatives and peers had been infected with COVID-19. Based on this, he claimed that fears related to COVID-19 are exaggerated and are being used to increase fear among the population.
- On 11 June, on TV Obieqtivi's 'Night Studio', Tina Topuria, the head of the ecologists board, stated that President Donald Trump had tweeted that using masks is a recognition of slavery and social death, and offered research findings 'proving' that using masks does not protect people from viruses. Topuria claims that masks harm the immune system, change a person's blood, and damage brain functioning and respiratory systems.
- On the same date and the same show - TV Obieqtivi's 'Night Studio' - the aforementioned Tina Topuria also suggested that anti-COVID-19 vaccine testing will take a lot of time (up to 18 months) and claimed that a vaccine using genetic modification is now being tested on the African population. Topuria insists that although African doctors were opposed to this, their governments received money and so the process went ahead. Topuria has also suggested that testing will proceed in Ukraine and Georgia, but that the latter will resist this and that global movements with the slogan "I don't want to die" could be seen across the world.
- On 11 June, also on TV Obieqtivi, host Nino Ratishvili suggested that anti-COVID-19 vaccination will be obligatory. She claimed that Georgia, as a relatively poorer country, will be forced to provide such vaccination and that she is against conducting such experiments on herself and her relatives. This story was checked and debunked by Myth Detector (47 interactions).
- On Facebook, 'Pepper TV' offered an interview in which the guest claimed that making people use face masks may be against their human rights. This received 450 shares and 28,400 views.
- Social influencer Koba Kuprashvili, who considers the pandemic a fraud and COVID-19 less deadly than officials claim, continues his campaign against masks. One post in which he wrote that wearing a "slavish face mask" is a humiliation, received 498 reactions, 97 comments and 11 shares. (Note that the above post is from 10<sup>th</sup> June, but gained attention in this period).

#### 6. Moral Decline: Value Failure

- Valeri Kvaratskhelia, a TV anchor from the pro-Russian national media, featured on the site Geworld.ge, making the suggestion that the pandemic showed the inhumane face of US imperialism. The article – described as "The newspaper version of Valeri Kvaratskhelia's TV-author's program" - had limited reach: around 300 views and 7 Facebook interactions (7 interactions).

---

## HUNGARY

### Summary



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

On 16 June, the Hungarian National Assembly unanimously voted to end the state of emergency over the coronavirus pandemic. As the government moved to end the state of emergency, pro-government media outlets praised Prime Minister Orban's successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. These outlets also called on critics of the government to "apologize" for their criticism. Other main themes of press reports were debate around the end of the state of emergency, and the legislation on new transitional rules for epidemiological preparedness.

Social media posts were in line with the press, with overwhelmingly political posts. While fringe conspiracy pages continue to push previously identified theories, COVID-19 has become a secondary topic recently, with attention shifting to Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd.

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

The CWG partner organisation and Zinc's media monitoring found the following relevant articles:

#### *1. Failing West: Corruption*

- Pro-government media outlet Magyar Nemzet [accused](#) Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest and a leading opponent of Orban, of giving George Soros' \$1.5 million COVID-19 donation to medical companies that are owned by former high ranking government officials of Hungary's previous, socialist-liberal government (1200 interactions). This story was also covered by Origo.

The CWG partner organisation identified the following stories:

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

- Titkok Szigete (Island of secrets) [claimed](#) that Melinda Gates is also involved in secret depopulation scheme (34 interactions). While Gates is indeed supportive of birth control with the aim of reducing global poverty, Titkok szigete claimed that she advocates for a secret global scheme known as Agenda 21, the aim of which is to control human population levels.
- Titkok Szigete also pointed to a recent statement made by Tucker Carlson, a leading Fox News anchor, saying that people in the United States were deceived over the avirus since mass fatalities feared by (mostly Democratic) governors never happened. (Note that over 100,000 people have died in the United States, the highest death toll in the world). Carlson and Titkok szigete suggested a 'deep state' conspiracy behind the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic that undermines democracy and causes grave economic consequences.





- Kimondott Igazságok ('Spoken Truths') [said](#) that the media, together with “background powers”, invented the COVID-19 hoax to start/cover up an economic crisis and to gain more power. (3118 interactions)

### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

The CWG partner organisation identified the following stories on social media:

- [Citing](#) Gábor Kemenesi, a virologist from the University of Pécs, Kimondott Igazságok summarised what behaviour is advised and not advised in the upcoming months with respect to the pandemic. While the article factually summed up Kemenesi's suggestions, its title said that humanity “has zero chance” if a second COVID-19 wave emerges, misinterpreting his views. (152 interactions)

Additionally, Zinc's media monitoring flagged the following stories:

- Controversial influencer Doktor Godeny [continued](#) to attack mainstream reporting on the COVID-19 crisis, saying that the data that the media is presenting is insignificant and is misinterpreted on purpose to manipulate the masses. (2300 interactions)

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

Nothing was observed.

---

## KOSOVO

### Summary

This week, one case of misinformation was identified in Kosovo.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

#### 1. *Misinformation: Hoax*

- The singer Labinot Tahiri attracted social media attention for saying that COVID-19 does not exist and that everything has been done to destroy people's lives, the economy, and business, claiming “this virus is not by the hand of God, but by the hand of man”. The main Facebook post (official page) related to this has received more than 6,100 Likes and 113 shares; the [page](#) has 491,000 followers. Tahiri's posts have been followed by calls for protests demanding the reopening of business venues that host parties, weddings and other events.



## 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.

Hostile state media continued to be highly critical of the Latvian authorities and the identified examples of disinformation almost all promoted a narrative of government incompetence. Otherwise, coverage from hostile state outlets focused on disputed tax proposals or compared Latvian institutional racism to that of the United States. This selection of topics may suggest an eye towards the upcoming Riga City Council elections. There was also a single example accusing NATO of risking a second wave of infections due to irresponsibly continuing exercises in the region.

Social media conversation was largely non-conspiratorial, and the links shared were mostly from trustworthy sources. There were some cases of disinformation identified and these promoted a conspiracy that George Soros was taking advantage of the pandemic to spread his agenda, spread health-related misinformation including and claimed that a second novel coronavirus had been discovered in Beijing. All identified disinformation received very low levels of interaction.

Wider coverage of COVID-19 disinformation focused on calls for the European Commission to take a tougher stance on it, the potential prosecution of a young man for spreading false information and identifying and debunking common COVID-19-related health disinformation on social media. No article received significant interactions.

### Dis-/Misinformation themes

The following stories were identified by Zinc's media monitoring or a CWG partner organisation:

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

- Press LV [published](#) an article in which Rolands Repsha, a member of the Supreme Council of the Latvian SS, stressed that Latvia will face an existential crisis if migrant worker numbers do not rapidly recover. (83 interactions)
- A Baltijas Balss article [claimed](#) that the Latvian government is handling the easing of lockdown restriction incompetently. (2 interactions)
- A Sputnik article [asserted](#) that the building of a new concert hall in Riga is a waste of money at a time of crisis. Baltnews also published a report [expressing](#) the same opinion. (27 and 0 interactions)
- Rubaltic [reported](#) that the Latvian economy is failing and crime is rising during the COVID-19 pandemic. (2 interactions)



## 2. *Conflict: NATO as a vector*

- The Belarusian BELVPO [published](#) an article that claimed ongoing NATO exercises in Latvia will cause a second wave of COVID-19 infections. (7 interactions)

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

- Much of the conversation on social media was non-conspiratorial. The recent unveiling of a statue depicting a nurse in Riga, intended to celebrate the medical workers of Latvia, was a popular topic. The announcement of the construction of a lavish new concert hall received a negative response as many users felt that it was unnecessary and a superfluous use of money in the context of the pandemic.
- There were few examples of disinformation during this reporting period and those that were identified received extremely small levels of engagement.
- A post in Coronavirus Riga, with 5,585 members, linked to an article that [claimed](#) a new, more contagious coronavirus has appeared in Beijing and that this will both worsen the pandemic and complicate development of a vaccine. It received 24 interactions. The same group also hosted a post that shared an article claiming that the WHO had confirmed the pandemic to have been false, that a vaccination was not necessary and that asymptomatic carries cannot spread the virus. The post received 2 interactions and has since been [deleted](#).
- A member of Russian Society in Latvia, which has 2,753 members, shared a link to an article on a website called [коронавирус.ru](http://коронавирус.ru) (coronavirus.ru) that [claims](#) Georgia Soros is taking advantage of the pandemic to promote the abolition of “normal families” and replacing them with “queer-communes for perverts”. This post received 31 interactions.
- A blogger called Aivis Vasilevskis [shared](#) a post claiming that asymptomatic COVID-19 patients are not contagious. It received 1,141 interactions.

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

- Delfi [published](#) an article detailing and debunking some common COVID-19 health disinformation found on Facebook. (32 interactions)
- NRA.lv, Skaties, LSM.lv, Diena, Apollo, TVNET and LVportal all [published](#) articles claiming that the national police are urging the prosecution of a young man for deliberately spreading false COVID-19-related information. (13, 8, 5, 5, 5, 4 and 0 interactions, respectively)
- TVNET [published](#) an article reporting that the European media are asking the European Commission to take a tougher stance on online disinformation in light of its prevalence during the COVID-19 pandemic. (0 interactions)



## 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.

There was minimal disinformation identified in this reporting period from hostile state media. The majority of COVID-19-related reporting detailed the objective progress of the pandemic and shared figures and statements from government officials. The alleged corruption of a failing West and the origin of COVID-19 as a bioweapon were mentioned in a single article each. Otherwise, hostile state media focused on other topics and appear to be losing interest in COVID-19-related narratives.

Social media conversation was mostly non-conspiratorial and the number of posts across the reporting period was relatively small. The majority of discussion was inspired by Lithuania's exit from lockdown on June 17<sup>th</sup>. While there were minimal examples of disinformation, those that were identified were disproportionately shared by the UNFOLLOW 15 min'lt group discussed in previous reports. The narratives promoted by these posts include anti-vaccination theories, microchipping conspiracies and the claim that the pandemic is a creation of the global elite. Overall, however, COVID-19 groups are seeing lower engagement every day and are mostly sharing articles from trusted media sources.

Wider coverage in the media did not touch upon any of these narratives or stories, instead reporting on recently published research that illuminates recent disinformation-based hostile state actor activity. No article received more than a single interaction.

### Dis-/Misinformation themes

The following stories were identified by a CWG partner organisation:

#### 1. *Failing West: Corruption*

- An article published by [eksoertai.eu](https://eksoertai.eu) claims that the foundation set up to combat the impact of COVID-19, set up by former president Dalia Grybauskaite, was operating and fundraising illegally. (134 interactions)

#### 2. *Conflict: Biolab*

- A Lithuanian MP [suggested](#) that COVID-19 is a biological weapon create in order to destabilise society. (0 interactions)



### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- The majority of social media conversation was in response to Lithuania's exit from lockdown on June 17<sup>th</sup> and avoided reference to disinformation narratives or conspiratorial claims. Posts such as this one from UNFOLLOW 15 min.lt, with 51,067 members, [express](#) frustration at a perception of lack of clarity from the government regarding post-lockdown rules. This post received 203 interactions and demonstrates the tone and content of much of the other conversation.
- Some posts containing disinformation were identified, but they received minimal levels of interaction. These posts propagated anti-vaccination disinformation, conspiracies that the virus is a creation of the global elite and the claim that symptomless COVID-19 cases cannot spread the disease.
- A video claiming that it is a lie that those infected with COVID-19 but show no symptoms can spread the disease was shared across several groups. It [received](#) the most interactions on UNFOLLOW 15 min.lt, with 33. The video asserts that these claims are a scam propagated by the global elite in or to subjugate the world population.
- UNFOLLOW 15 min'lt remains the biggest source of COVID-19 disinformation identified on Lithuanian social media. Other claims propagated by the group [include](#) anti-vaccination, microchipping and global elite conspiracies but engagement remains mostly low. An exception to this is a post [quoting](#) a scientist who claims COVID-19 to have been manufactured in a laboratory. The post's author suggests that the pandemic has compromised the integrity of both medicine and journalism. The post itself received 315 interactions.
- The well-known blogger Kazimieras Juraitis [posted](#) an interview with a member of LTanon in which the interviewee claimed that the pandemic was a deep-state plot to force compulsory vaccinations and microchipping. The video received 42,189 interactions.
- An event on Facebook is [urging](#) people to protest COVID-19 restrictions and claims that the pandemic is being used to distraction the public from more important issues. 70 users have registered as interested in attending.

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- LRT and Delfi [published](#) an article detailing the Australian Foreign Ministry report linking Russia and China to COVID-19 disinformation. (1 interactions)
- Delfi [published](#) another piece detailing how to distinguish true and false information regarding COVID-19. (0 interactions)



- LRT [published](#) an article reporting on Graphika's recent research publication exploring the "Secondary Infection" project of secretive Russian inauthentic social media activity. LRT pointed out the research's renewed relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic. (0 interactions)
- 

## MOLDOVA

### Summary

The 'Reframing Russia' narrative persists, with Sputnik reporting Russia's rejection of the suggestion that it and China were taking advantage of COVID-19 in order to spread fake news. Other narratives identified included 'Failing West' (with Sputnik using quotes from German's Angela Merkel to suggest that the EU project is deeply vulnerable), and 'Malign Global Elites' (with Flux.md amplifying claims regarding the malicious activity of Bill Gates, US technology personalities, and others).

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

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

- An article from Sputnik.md (4,530,000 visits in the past six months according to SimilarWeb data) [reported](#) that Moscow had rejected allegations that Russia and China were taking advantage of the pandemic in order to spread fake news, criticising Britain's Dominic Raab for suggesting this to Sky News.

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

- An article from Sputnik.md, headlined "Merkel: Pandemic on the shores of the EU vulnerability" [stated](#) that the Chancellor of Germany had acknowledged that the pandemic had revealed how fragile the European project is, and that she regretted the way in which the pandemic had been responded to.

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

- The prolific disinformation amplifier Flux.md [posted](#) an article whose stated source is 'ortodoxinfo.ro'(513 interactions). Discussing H1N1, COVID-19 and "the big pharma vaccination campaign", it promotes various conspiracy theories, and says that Bill Gates has benefited from the pandemic. A further Flux.md article (citing the same ortodoxinfo.ro source) [suggests](#) that Bill Gates plans to use the 5G network to introduce microchips via vaccination (188 interactions). The article also refers to transhumanism and mentions individuals such as Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and Google's Ray Kurzweil.
- Flux.md, posted an article whose original source is 'ortodoxinfo.ro', [claiming](#) that Bill Gates seeks to microchip people in part to ensure birth control: "Gates will even control



your body, bedroom, medicine cabinet, and even women's menstrual and ovulation cycles” (383 interactions).

---

## MONTENEGRO

(NB: this entry covers the period of 10<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> June)

### Montenegro

#### 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.

Zinc identified five relevant disinformation narratives: Failing West (Exploitation), with In4s covering the Episcopal Council in Montenegro’s criticism of the government for using the pandemic to promote their own interests and to implement unconstitutional law; Failing West (Hypocrisy), with Borba running an article on the inconsistent implementation of measures for entering Montenegro, plus another article on Serbia’s President Vučić branding Montenegro as incompetent for declaring to be ‘Corona-free’ but apparently not having testing facilities available; Failing West (Incompetence) and Reframing Russia (Global Leadership), with an article on how Russia had helped Serbia immediately, compared to NATO who took a month to deliberate when Montenegro asked for assistance; Conflict (Bio-lab) with an In4s article offering an overview of recent conspiracy theories and of the way in which the world has reacted to the pandemic, drawing on a Telegraph article discussing Sir Richard Dearlove’s reported suggestion that the virus was man-made.

On social media, users focused on the end of the pandemic in Montenegro and wondered why more measures weren’t being taken to prevent the virus from spreading again, spurred by football matches being played in Serbia with stalls full of spectators. This situation was compared to that of big football clubs such as Barcelona and Real Madrid, who are playing without audiences. Other users reflected on religious processions, and on what the way of life and social trends emerging after the pandemic are showing.

Wider media coverage of disinformation around COVID-19 focused mainly on what the crisis has looked like worldwide, and on whether there’s an end in sight, in addition to reporting on appeals from media organisations for social media platforms to strengthen their measures to fight disinformation.

#### Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Failing West: Exploitation (Also: Moral Decline: Value Failure)*



- The pro-Russian [In4s](#) ran a story covering a message issued by the Orthodox Episcopal Council, which was read out in front of the Cathedral of Christ's Resurrection in Podgorica. The main point raised was that the authorities in Montenegro are using COVID-19 to promote a more dangerous 'virus' - love of power - and that the selective application of protective measures against the virus has rendered the measures meaningless. This came with criticism of the government on the issue of the implementation of the law passed in December, according to which the state has the right to confiscate Church property, which the Church deems unconstitutional (523 interactions).

## 2. *Failing West: Hypocrisy*

- The pro-Russian outlet [Borba](#) ran an article covering a recent incident whereby Andrija Mandić, the president of the New Serb Democracy (a Serb right-wing political party in Montenegro) and one of the leaders of the Democratic Front (a right-wing populist and social conservative opposition political alliance in Montenegro) was denied entry to Montenegro. This was seen as yet another example of the selective implementation of safety and quarantine measures for political gain, and was compared to the fact that the Montenegrin President was not held to the same standard when he travelled around the Baltics and to and from Brussels, and was not subjected to testing or quarantine on either occasion (395 interactions).
- In an article by the pro-Russian [Borba](#), the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić commented on Montenegro declaring itself 'corona-free' without there being any testing facilities, and on Montenegro trying to 'show [Serbia] how it's done'. He presented this as hypocritical, and said that Serbia is silly for being fair because the country has been studiously testing everybody and reporting the exact figures (79 interactions).

## 3. *Failing West: Incompetence (and Reframing Russia: Global Leadership)*

- The pro-government [In4s](#) published an article comparing the prompt assistance provided to Serbia by Russia with the request made to NATO by Montenegro, which NATO contemplated for a month before sending help. The article points out that the situation regarding the fight against COVID-19 has yet again shown that blind monitoring and obedience to the policies of the US and NATO harms the interests of the Western Balkans (109 interactions).

## 4. *Conflict: Bio-lab*

- An article run by [In4s](#) outlined recent claims that the virus was man-made. The original story came from the British [Telegraph](#) and covered the analysis offered by Sir Richard Dearlove, who said that a new scientific report suggests that some key elements of the virus were artificially inserted into its code. The former MI6 boss reportedly said that the virus began 'as an accident' in a Chinese lab, which was suggested in a scientific paper published by a Norwegian-British research team (14 interactions).





### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- The most engaged-with [Tweet](#) came from the Public Health Institute in Montenegro, in which it laid out the latest updates and announced the results of testing conducted in Herceg Novi (101 interactions).
- Some private users wondered why the spectator stalls were so full at football matches when COVID-19 cases in Serbia are on the rise (23 interactions). One football fan wondered the same thing, contrasting the situation in Serbia with that of big football clubs such as Barcelona and Real Madrid, who have been playing without an audience (15 interactions).
- The ME4EU organisation, whose purpose is to keep everyone updated on the latest accession plans and steps for Montenegro to enter the EU, [shared](#) an article by the journalist Tamara Klikovac reflecting on how Montenegro is the first country that, thanks to a donation from the EC, ensured the reliability of the results of testing citizens for coronavirus (6 interactions).
- Consultant and analyst Ljubomir Filipović [shared](#) screenshots from social media in which people have been increasingly looking to trade in their vehicles for cattle and horses, which might be an indication of future trends of going 'back to basics' and traditional ways of life due to deprivation after the present pandemic.
- Savo Kentera, the President & CEO of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro, wondered in a [tweet](#) whether there is any reason to use COVID-19 as an excuse to prohibit the religious processions in Montenegro, as they have nothing to do with religion anymore, but are politicised. He supports the view that there is no reason to justify the attempts to keep the state stable in these times when a lot of people are against it (5 interactions). [tweet](#) whether there is any reason to use COVID-19 as an excuse to prohibit religious processions in Montenegro, as they have nothing to do with religion anymore, but are politicised. He supports the view that there is no reason to justify attempts to keep the state stable in these times when a lot of people are against it (5 interactions).

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- The independent daily [Vijesti](#) ran a story about appeals from different media organisations asking the EU for stricter measures against disinformation on Internet platforms. The article stated that “the signatories said they were alarmed by the rise in online disinformation during the pandemic which, as stated, ‘had a devastating impact on public health efforts’” (0 interactions).



## NORTH MACEDONIA

### Summary

'Reframing Russia' narratives seemed especially notable (with content pointing to the health and resilience of President Putin, the Kremlin's alertness to NATO activity, and the Russian pursuit of a vaccine). Other narratives observed included 'Failing West' (with the repetition of the Belarusian President's claim that certain elites have been enriched by COVID-19), 'Malign Global Elites' (with conspiracy theories referring to Bill Gates and 'Agenda 21') and 'Conflict: Bio-Lab'.

### Dis-/Misinformation themes

#### 1. *Reframing Russia: COVID-19 War, NATO as vector; Russian Success*

- On the website plusinfo.mk, it was reported that Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov had said that NATO's decision to recognise Ukraine as a "partner with great potential" would not contribute to stability and security in Europe; the article suggested that the Kremlin "is vigilantly watching" when NATO approaches the Russian border. This was shared on a Facebook page with around 57,000 followers (1 interaction).
- The news website Press 24 ran a piece with the headline "Putin is protected from the coronavirus - To visit him you have to go through a special tunnel". The piece cites a RIA Novosti video, and has been shared on two Facebook pages with around 338,000 followers (4 interactions).
- A Plusinfo.mk article circulated, in which Russian clinical trials for a COVID-19 vaccine were discussed. The article claims that soldiers will be amongst those who are part of this trial, and cites TASS news agency (13 interactions).
- The website 'Russia Beyond' quoted President Putin as saying that Russia is emerging from the pandemic "confidently and with minimal losses". This was shared on a Facebook page with around 60,000 followers (13 interactions).

#### 2. *Failing West: Exploitation and Corruption*

- An article on the Republika site reported the Belarusian President's claim that the world elite has been financially enriched by COVID-19. Headlined "Lukashenko accuses secular elite of making billions of dollars [from] coronavirus", this was shared on five Facebook groups with a total of around 550,000 followers (16 interactions).

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

- The Popara website featured an article whose headline stated "The virus is the perfect tool for achieving the main objective of Agenda 21!", referring to a conspiracy theory re: elite plans for world government, the subjugation of nations, and population reduction (etc.). The text does cite a report that is critical of the conspiracy theory, but this is not indicated by the headline or its provocative imagery. It also features an embedded video from 'Real Stories' entitled 'Was David Icke Right?'



- An article on the Točka site reported that one in five Bulgarians believes that COVID-19 was caused by Bill Gates in order to control people via vaccination and microchipping (7 interactions).
- Sloboden Svet posted an article featuring the conspiracy that COVID-19 is an excuse for collecting people's DNA for nefarious purposes. The text suggests that America's Dr. Anthony Fauci is on the payroll of Bill Gates ("psychopath Kill Bill) and that in Macedonia, massive testing is being advocated; people are not aware that they live under a kind of fascism. This was shared on Facebook pages/groups with around 34,000 followers.

#### 4. *Conflict: Bio-Lab (Also: Misinformation: Expert Advice)*

- The Republika website repeated the claim (seen in previous CWG reports) that a British and Norwegian scientist have found that the virus was in fact created in a lab. The article also shares information dismissing the utility of wearing masks. This was shared on a Facebook page with around 6,000 followers (6 interactions).
- The Točka site posted an article entitled "New theory of coronavirus placement: A deadly shipment arrived in Wuhan from Canada, and it is responsible for everything". The text suggests that a shipment containing Ebola and Henipah viruses was sent from the National lab of microbiology in Canada to China at the start of 2019, prior to COVID-19. It states "While the Chinese authorities allegedly explained that shipments of the Ebola and Henipavirus viruses to China were not linked to the coronavirus outbreak, an epidemiologist described the development of the settlements as alarming" (4 interactions).

---

## ROMANIA

### Summary

Disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories are identified through Zinc's monitoring of COVID-19-related coverage as promoted by hostile state media and other outlets. During this monitoring period, we identified a range of disinformation stories in Romania. Disinformation stories are identified through monitoring coverage of COVID-19 in hostile state media outlets.

Following further relaxations of the restriction measures, there continues to be a decreasing number of COVID-19 stories in the media. Nevertheless, some of the outlets that Zinc is monitoring have continued to publish articles promoting attacks against the governing party, which were amplified by a decision to prolong the state of alert. A series of influencers, opposition politicians and public figures have continued to exploit public frustrations by attacking Romanian or European Union institutions as a part of a wider campaign strategy, in the light of the coming elections in Romania.



One narrative that has received significant publicity is a report claiming an enormous number of undeclared COVID-19 deaths in Romania, disseminated by a previously largely unknown website. The narrative has come to be known to the wider public following its denouncement by the Government's Strategic Communication Group and by mainstream media outlets as being Russian-originated disinformation.

During this monitoring period, these stories broadly fell into two key themes: Western states are failing, through incompetence or corruption; and the EU is either on the brink of collapse or it is failing its member states.

The wider media covered two of the disinformation strands identified by Zinc: the disinformation story spread by PSD, the main opposition party, that the government has been artificially inflating the number of new cases for political gain; and the debunking of conspiracy theories which gained traction in Romania. COVID-19 related posts on social media were published mostly by conspiracy theory pages and groups. Most of them part of an old narrative suggesting that a malign global elite is aiming to control and reshape society.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

#### 1. *Failing West (incompetence; corruption; EU collapse; EU failure)*

The following articles were identified by Zinc Network:

- Active News [continues](#) to report that Romanian hospitals do not treat patients because they are required to focus on identifying COVID-19 cases. In this case, a 21-year old man with pancreatitis passed away while waiting for his COVID-19 test results, which eventually came out negative. (3500 interactions)
- Active News [published](#) a blog post written by Ioan Cristoiu, a Romanian journalist, in which he criticizes the government for stalling the re-opening of the economy. He claims that Romania has fallen behind in Europe with regards to relaxation measures and allowing all businesses to go back to normal, hinting that this may be motivated by the government's desire to stay in power. (417 interactions)
- Stiri pe Surse [published](#) a lengthy statement of the National Force Party, which demands that the current government resigns, that Romania withdraws from the WHO and that referenda are held to decide whether the country should participate in other global organizations. This statement accuses the President and Prime Minister of incompetence and corruption and claims that the restriction measures that they imposed have harmed the population and have undermine the freedom of religion. (325 interactions)
- Ziaristii [reports](#) that in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union was on the brink of collapse. Allegedly, on the evening of the 7th of April, a video-conference took place to discuss the potential economic decline caused by the pandemic and had it not been for Angela Merkel, Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Christine Lagarde pledging funds, a compromise would have been impossible to reach. (466 interactions)



- Antena 3 [continued](#) to publish articles claiming that COVID-19 is no more serious than the common cold and that the governing authorities have spread fear and hysteria. In this case two doctors are cited as saying that the pandemic has been blown out of proportion by hospitals and by the Ministry of Health, and that this constitutes a hindrance for the Romanian healthcare system, which is unable to provide treatment for patients with other ailments. (3300 interactions)

The following articles were identified by the CWG partner organisation:

- An article published by Luju [comments](#) on the contents of a letter signed by 'tens of Romanian intellectuals'. On the top of the list presented is Doctor Vasile Astarastoe, known to have previously launched misinformation and conspiracy theories in his declarations. The demands come as Romania is one of the few states still demanding asymptomatic COVID-19 to be hospitalised, which is seen by the signatories of this letter as a grave infringement upon people's freedoms. (264 interactions)
- A previously largely unknown website, 'antenanews.xyz', [published](#) a disinformation article claiming that the epidemic in Romania is no longer under control and that the number of deaths has surged to unmanageable levels (story removed). To illustrate the alleged storage of bodies in refrigerator trucks, the authors of the article have used pictures of homicide victims being stored in lorries in Guadalajara, Mexico in 2018.

### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

The majority of posts relating to the coronavirus were factual and linked to trusted local and international media sources.

- Several posts [promote](#) the disinformation story that the President and Prime Minister have [extended](#) the national state of alert by artificially inflating the number of new COVID-19 cases and by lying about the emergence of a second wave. Most users in the comment sections appear to believe this story, accusing the government of manipulation and stating that the pandemic is a hoax. Another related post [claims](#) that the diaspora will commence legal action against Iohannis, the Romanian President for crimes against humanity.
- A new wave of anti-vaccination posts have started being [shared](#). Many are directed against Bill Gates, [depicting](#) him as Satan, and claiming that he will impose compulsory vaccination. Many demand that Gates be tried for genocide in the comments section.
- Journalist Sorina Matei [writes](#) a Facebook post where she reiterates the narrative arguing that funds allocated for public awareness campaigns represent an attempt to manipulate public opinion. Additionally, she is presenting the findings of an article from Pagina de Media that [accounts](#) for the exact funds received by each organisation. In reality, the official purpose of the funds allocated is to pay for the distribution of content informing the public about individual health and safety measures amid the relaxation of the lockdown.



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

- Digi24 [reports](#) on the political offensive of PSD, the main opposition party, accusing them of spreading false information. In this case the article attacks their claim that the government artificially inflated the number of COVID-19 cases.
- Educatie Privata [published](#) an interview with a Romanian doctor fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and who states that the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories is detrimental to medical efforts to stop the spread of the virus. He claims that most of the patients who died of COVID-19 believed that the virus was a hoax and that they behaved recklessly, infecting others.
- The Moise blog [posted](#) an article on the second wave of COVID-19, in the context of a recent increase in new cases. The author argues that many Romanians fall prey to conspiracy theories because they need certainties and they more readily agree with opinions which are close their own, especially when these are expressed by public figures.
- Following the dismissal of the piece on the alleged lorries full of dead bodies as 'Russian-originated disinformation' by the Government's Centre of Strategic Communication, many mainstream outlets have [written](#) articles rising awareness on this instance. Two days after the official labelling of an article as Russian-originated disinformation, the Embassy of Russia in Romania has [reacted](#) with a Facebook post. The post, later [referred](#) to by a Sputnik article, was claiming that following verifications, the IP address of the website in question ('antennanews.xyz') is located in the US, and that the official reaction labelling the article as Russian disinformation is just another example of the wave of unsubstantiated international accusations against Russia.

---

## SERBIA

(The below entry covers the period of 15 – 17 June)

### 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.

Zinc identified one relevant disinformation narrative: Reframing Russia (Russian success) with a story from Večernje Novosti on Putin's 'disinfection tunnel' which, it claims, is how the Russian leader has been able to successfully lead his nation through the crisis without any risk. It is worth noting that the pro-government [Kurir](#) ran a story on the decline of Putin's



personal approval ratings in recent weeks. This is a rare example of such an outlet reporting a story that paints Putin in a less than favourable light.

On social media, users mostly shared articles with updates on the situation in Serbia and the new wave of the virus spiking in Beijing. Several posts in Facebook groups shared a YouTube video explaining the possibility that the US government knew about the pandemic before it happened.

Wider media coverage of disinformation around COVID-19 included updates on the opening of Greece to Serbian tourists, and a story on how the pandemic has spurred cases of fraud around the world.

### Dis-/Mis-information themes

#### 1. Reframing Russia: Russian success

- The pro-government outlet [Večernje Novosti](#) ran a story on how Vladimir Putin has been handling the crisis from his headquarters and keeping safe, namely that he has had a Russian-made disinfection tunnel installed, which is now being promoted by the manufacturers. According to the article, the tunnel is part of the reason that Putin has been able to stay on top of everything and stay safe, and it's important for Russia to succeed in managing the virus (11 interactions).

### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- A YouTube [video](#) (10,523 views) was widely shared in the group [Stop prisilnoj KORONA vakcinaciji I globalizaciji](#) ('Stop forced coronavirus vaccination and globalization'). The video, which originates in the US, repeats the 'pandemic' conspiracy that the US government knew about the virus before it was officially acknowledged. Many comments below the video agreed that aspects of the US government's response did not make sense, and some people commented that this shouldn't be a surprise because of President Trump's erratic behaviour. The general atmosphere in the comment section was that people are tired of being lied to.

### Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- The most engaged with story came from [Telegraf](#), which discussed restrictions on Serbian citizens entering Greece via Bulgaria. According to the article, a lot of misinformation has been appearing in the media due to the impatience of tourists to go to the seaside as soon as possible (78 interactions).
- The news aggregator [Naslovi](#) reported on a story originally run by the portal [Nova Ekonomija](#) about how criminals have exploited the pandemic. Among other things, according to Axios (an American news website), fraudsters are filing false claims for unemployment benefits on behalf of real people who have not lost their jobs (8 interactions on Nova Ekonomija).



## SLOVAKIA

### Summary

There was a significant amount of mis- and disinformation content observed. This fell under the themes of: 'Conflict' (with the suggestion that the US is waging 'hybrid war' on Russia, and the repetition of a virologist's claim that the virus came from a lab), 'Misinformation' (with claims that the virus is a hoax or that expert advice should be dismissed; the latter sometimes combined with conspiracy theories re: Bill Gates, or with the suggestion that COVID-19 is being used to create a herd mentality), 'Reframing Russia' (with the claim that Russians have a special kind of immunity), 'Failing West' (with allegations made against doctors in countries such as Romania, and fears raised regarding EU imposition in the wake of COVID-19), and 'Malign Global Elites' (with some content linking COVID-19 to plans to psychologically manipulate populations).

### Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *Conflict: COVID-19 War (Also: Reframing Russia: Russophobia); Bio-Lab*
  - A Hlavný Denník article, [republishing](#) content from the portal Tsargrad.tv, claimed that COVID-19 is a part of a hybrid war being waged by the US, and that Russia should not play according to US rules. It also states that the latter is trying to blame China for the virus, in order to cover up its own domestic crisis (8 interactions).
  - The Czech virologist Soňa Peková once again featured in Slovakian media, with Infovojna and Hlavné Spravy [reporting](#) on - and sharing - a video in which she questions the origin of the virus and suggests that it most probably comes from a lab. The video itself has received more than 70,000 views on YouTube (442 interactions).
2. *Misinformation: Hoax; Expert Advice (Also: Failing West: Incompetence)*
  - A Zem a Vek article entitled "A corona-pandemic solution or a global experiment?" [claimed](#) that a vaccine against COVID-19 is not needed because it is simply a respiratory disease that appears at certain times of year. The article suggests that vaccination has always been a business, and that Bill Gates is looking forward to making a profit (196 interactions).
  - Two websites – Infovojna and 24hod – [featured](#) a Slovak doctor's claim that there will be no second wave of COVID-19 and that wearing masks may damage the immune system. The doctor also expressed concern that people lack critical thinking. The headline reads: "Coronavirus caused more panic and media hysteria than real health problems, says a doctor from the Bratislava Trauma Clinic" (414 interactions).
  - In Zem a Vek, it was [claimed](#) that an individual named Miroslav Sagan had asked the Slovak authorities to provide him with certain information about peer-reviewed studies and World Health Organization recommendations, and had asked whether the Slovak





government took these into account. Sagan was apparently told that measures were adopted based on other conclusions. The article therefore suggests that action taken in Slovakia regarding COVID-19 has not been based on expert advice, and frames the Prime Minister's measures as "arbitrary" (197 interactions).

### 3. *Reframing Russia: Russian Success*

- A Hlavny Dennik article, citing another published by Russia Today, claimed that Russians have high immunity against COVID-19 and that many – in particular, young people - are therefore immune and "safe" (40 interactions).

### 4. *Failing West: Corruption; EU Failure and Hypocrisy*

- A Zem a Vek article offered various stories claiming that COVID-19 is serving corrupt interests worldwide. For example, it claims that relatives of a deceased man in Romania were offered 5000 euros to attribute his death to COVID-10, and that doctors are generally motivated to do this because they receive money for doing so. The article also claims that in Italy, for example, people resisting mainstream advice are being censored, fined or even psychiatrically isolated (95 interactions).
- An article from Infovojna criticises financial help that the EU plans to provide to member states, and suggests that the crisis could result in unwanted outcomes, such as: a higher number of politicians being corrupted by Brussels, the rise of a liberal ecological utopia, multiculturalism and grants for minorities (565 interactions).

### 5. *Malign Global Elites: Exploitation/Reshaping Society (Also: Misinformation: Hoax)*

- Both Hlavne Spravy and Zem a Vek made the suggestion that COVID-19 is not dissimilar to a bad cold and that the number of cases has been artificially increased. It was asserted that there is no doubt as to whether COVID-19 was artificially manipulated, and was suggested that after the "next wave" we will see whether people end up being free, or being microchipped as a herd that lacks liberty.
- An article from Zem a Vek made allegations against the Rockefeller Foundation, claiming that it has a plan to "abuse" COVID-19 for its own gain (94 interactions). It begins: "The Rockefeller Foundation, which has historical ties to the US federal government, has submitted a national plan to control the coronavirus epidemic. The goal is to test 30 million people a day for state money and subject American citizens to strict military control." Content from Infovojna made similar claims (95 interactions).
- Zem a Vek also shared a video from Slovak conspiracy theorist Tibor Rostas, in which he suggests that certain measures currently being used to fight COVID-19 were mentioned years ago in a study by the Rockefeller Foundation and the GBN think tank, with such techniques helping states to better control people: "the agenda of corporate fascism has never ended, it continues in new and more refined variants". The video suggests that COVID-19 is a tool for essentially creating prison states, and has had more than 2,600 views on YouTube (4 interactions).
- A Hlavne Spravy article (the blog of Boris Mesar) repeated the usual conspiracy theories about COVID-19 but also suggested that given that most people have already



uncovered the fact that it is really just a giant psychological operation conducted by elites, a new psychological operation was needed: anti-racism protests in the USA. The title reads "Covid is exhausted, so we'll deploy Operation "Racial Riots" (18 interactions).

---

## UKRAINE

### Summary

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

This report sees a continuation of a number of previously-identified narratives: the Chinese and Russian governing systems have been the most effective against pandemic; the IMF exploits Ukraine; the pandemic testifies to the end of American hegemony.

A number of newly occurring narratives were identified: the president's wife, Olena Zelenska, who recently contracted COVID-19, will recover with the help of Russian medication; the Ukrainian government plans to use the pandemic to disrupt local elections scheduled for October 2020; the Beijing COVID-19 outbreak is more infectious than that detected in the Wuhan wet market.

On social media, users reacted to the development of the story about the president's wife, who required hospitalisation. Accounts of interests pushed the narrative that Zelenska required ventilation, which she did not. Separately, the social media space in Ukraine is pervaded with COVID-19 related disinformation narratives from previous reporting periods, including the ones that a "serious diagnostic error" in COVID-19 treatment has been made; that the panic around COVID-19 is a "false global alarm"; and that cannabis is an effective COVID-19 treatment.

Media coverage of disinformation concentrated on debunking COVID-19 fakes which potentially can lead to detrimental health consequences. Ukrainian media also covered a publication from Agora, an international human rights NGO, that reported Russian authorities have drawn up at least 157 charges against perpetrators of online COVID-19 disinformation since the beginning of the pandemic.

### Dis-/Misinformation themes

#### 1. *Misinformation: Other*

Zinc's media monitoring identified the following:

- Politeka [misleadingly suggested](#) the president's wife Olena Zelenska required mechanical ventilation while she was hospitalised for COVID-19, just as Russian state-



backed disinformation outlets had previously claimed about UK prime minister Boris Johnson (557 interactions).

- From-ua [wrote](#) that Beijing COVID-19 outbreak is more infectious than that detected in Wuhan's Huanan seafood market (744 interactions).

## 2. *Failing West: Incompetence, Exploitation*

Zinc's media monitoring identified the following:

- Junk news outlet From-ua [referred](#) to a doctor of medical sciences, Tatyana Bakhteeva, who claimed that medical provision is better in occupied Donetsk than in government-controlled Ukraine (85 interactions).
- Strana, a major amplifier of Russian disinformation narratives in Ukraine, [wrote](#) that the pandemic will hasten the impending collapse of the American dollar (306 interactions).
- Russian state-owned outlet Ukraina.ru [referred](#) to the leader of pro-Russian party Opposition Platform – For Life, Vadim Rabinovich, who claimed the Ukrainian government is using the pandemic to disrupt local elections scheduled on October 2020. According to Rabinovich, it is done by manipulating official COVID-19 data, with the purpose of avoiding a severe electoral loss (117 interactions).

## 3. *Reframing Russia: Russian success, Russophobia*

Zinc's media monitoring identified the following:

- Ukraina.ru [featured](#) an interview with Russian political scientist Sergey Markov, who claimed that the Chinese and Russian governing systems have been the most effective against the pandemic. Markov also pointed out that the US, while was generally viewed as world hegemon, has experienced 'such a colossal failure of its system' (64 interactions).
- Donbas separatist-linked outlet Antifascist [wrote](#) the president's wife Olena Zelenska, who recently contracted COVID-19, will recover with the help of Russian medication (1,363 interactions, 892 likes + 360 comments + 111 shares).
- Ukrainian privately-owned news outlet Hvylya [produced](#) an article about Dmitry Medvedev's comments attacking the decision to refuse to lift sanctions against nations hardest hit by COVID-19. Medvedev stressed that the decision by Ukraine to block this initiative was immoral and irresponsible (635 interactions).

## 4. *Malign Global Elite: Exploitation*

Zinc's media monitoring identified the following:

- Ukraina.ru [described](#) the recent IMF arrangement for Ukraine, negotiated in response to COVID-19, as having severe consequences for ordinary Ukrainians: it 'directly implies the likelihood of deprivation of housing, huge fines and a further increase in tariffs' (117 interactions).



- The YouTube channel of pro-Russian Medvedchuk-owned outlet NewsOne [featured](#) a video in which member of pro-Russian party Opposition Platform — For Life, Valeriy Hnatenko, argued that the only way to pay back money taken under the IMF's plan is to sell Ukrainian land, which Ukrainian authorities plan to do (1,723 views).

### Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- There was widespread social media engagement with the alleged leak of a German government report purportedly confirming that COVID-19 is a hoax. The story on Greenpost was posted over 160 times on Facebook and shared over 17,000 times. Pages sharing it include Однокласники/[Classmates](#) public group and the public page [News Time](#).
- The leader of pro-Russian party Opposition Platform – For Life, Yuriy Boyko, [wrote](#) that chaotic, incompetent actions taken by the current Ukrainian government has done more damage to the Ukrainian economy than COVID-19 pandemic itself. This was widely engaged with on social media (1,168 likes + 131 comments + 208 shares).
- Dmytro Chekalkin , a flamboyant diplomat and satirist, and Petro Poroshenko supporter, [claimed](#) in a Facebook post that Zelensky's are involved in COVID-19 related corruption (3,293 likes + 791 shares).

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

- Independent fact-checking organisation StopFake [referred](#) to Agora, the international human rights group, that reported Russian authorities have drawn up at least 157 charges against disseminators of fake COVID-19 information online, of whom 46 have already been sentenced (49 interactions).
- A piece by Ukrainian journalist Anatoly Velimovsky [appeared](#) on news outlet Glavcom that argued COVID-19 exists and urged everyone to be careful of online fakes related to it (45 interactions).
- Well-regarded outlet Liga.net [produced](#) an article where it studied the factors that contribute towards the proliferation of COVID-19 related fakes and analysed why it is so difficult sometimes to find the truth (23 interactions)
- The official government gazette [wrote](#) that the pandemic has been accompanied by a massive wave of false or misleading information and argued attentiveness and vigilance will protect citizens from potentially hazardous disinformation related to COVID-19.

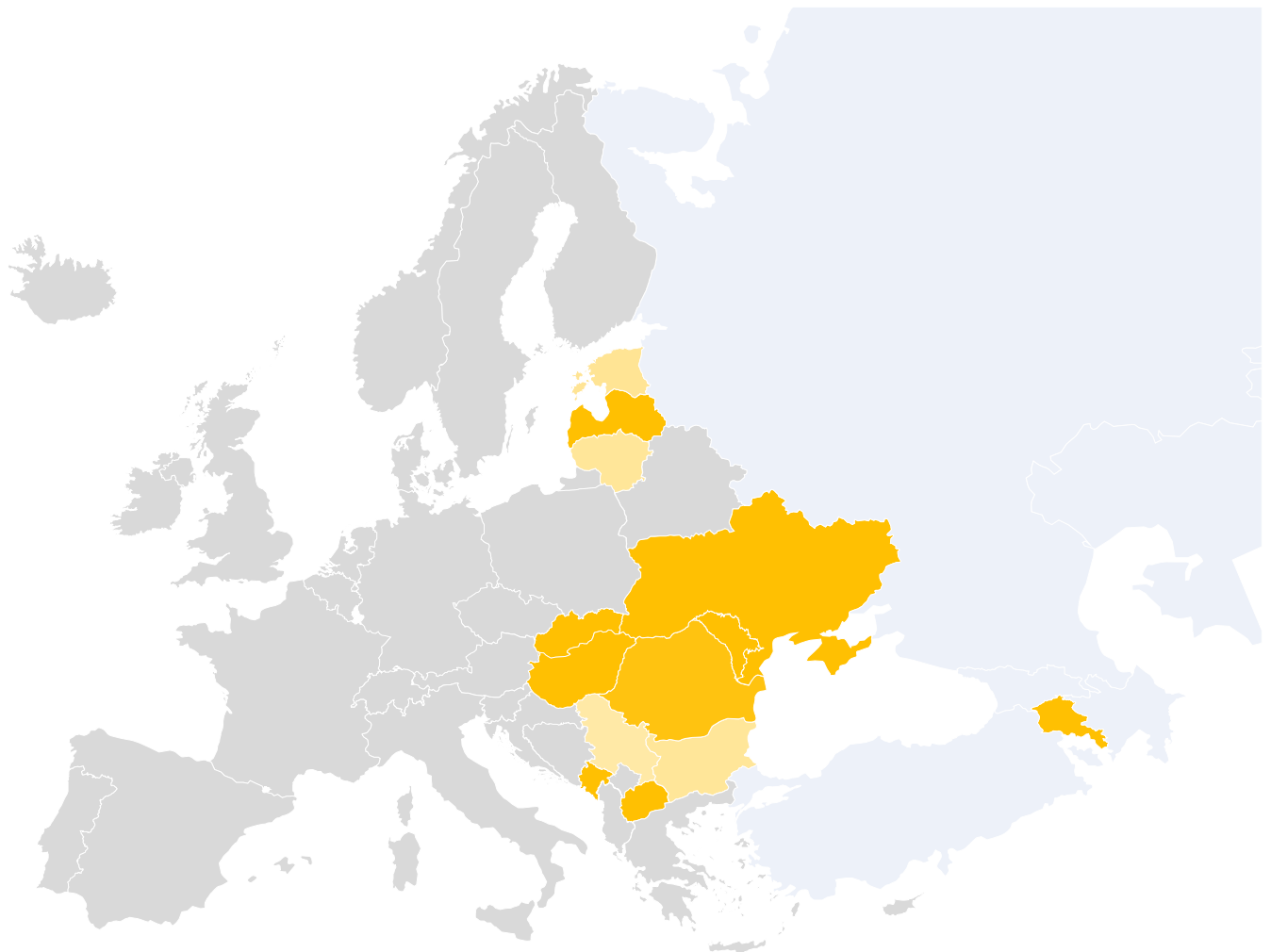


## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

### 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 Friday 12 June and Tuesday 16 June. Note that the latter covered only Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine.

### 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.

### *Comparison of narratives across countries*

The claim that the West is failing and dealing badly with COVID-19 is the most 'popular' narrative theme, and continues to be observed in most countries - **Armenia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine**. Its absence from Czechia appears to be an anomaly, as the narrative is normally observed there.

'Failing West' content continued to make reference to Black Lives Matter protests in the USA and beyond, though with less frequency than in the previous reporting period. The tendency for allegations of incompetence to be levelled at domestic governments far more than at institutions also persisted (though organizations such as the World Health Organization and the EU certainly continue to be targeted). Meanwhile, Hungarian self-praise was observed in social media conversation, but less so in content produced by more official outlets.

### *EU Failure (and exploitation via financial assistance)*

The suggestion that the EU is failing or collapsing continues to be less common than the suggestion that individual states and governments are failing or (for example) incompetent. However, claims of EU failure - particularly, its alleged financial exploitation of others – were observed.

**Hungary** was the main site of such content. There, the pro-government portal 888.hu reported on EU finance ministers' discussions re: the European Commission's €750bn financial stimulus proposal, and suggested that states such as Spain and Italy mismanage their funds and that the Hungarian state will pay for this (975 interactions). The same site also amplified criticism of the European Commission from Fidesz MEP Tamas Deutsch. Separately, Origo.hu, the government's main outlet, reported on an interview with Viktor Orban in which he said that whilst Hungary is generally positive about the EU's proposal for a recovery fund, there is a lot of work to be done and that the plan partly discriminates against Hungary. Also in Hungary, the news outlet Hirado.hu presented an M1 TV interview with a security policy expert who claimed that the EU had failed to handle the pandemic, just as it had failed to address the 2008 financial crisis and the migration crisis also. He added that one of the fundamental goals of the EU is to divide the Visegrad Four.



Content elsewhere also framed the European Union as deeply split and characterised by inequality and exploitation: in **Latvia**, it was claimed in a [Sputnik](#) article that the EU has lost interest in the Baltics and that those states therefore cannot rely on it post-COVID-19; in **North Macedonia**, the news outlet [Tocka](#) [used](#) a misleading headline to suggest that the EU knew in advance about COVID-19 but failed to act; in **Moldova**, the disinformation amplifier Flux.md [posted](#) an article criticising the EU for failing to manage COVID-19, alleging that some countries had manipulated their data. Separately, in **Ukraine**, Strana.ua [cited](#) Black Lives Matter protests in Europe in order to support the claim that European society is deeply divided, not least due to economic hardships linked to anti-COVID-19 measures (734 interactions).

#### *Beyond the EU: NATO, the WHO and the IMF*

Whilst the EU remains a key institution targeted by ‘Failing West’ content, other organizations were also mentioned. NATO, for example, was criticised in **Bulgaria** and **Montenegro**. In the former, [Baltnews](#) [published](#) an article calling upcoming NATO activity “provocative”, pointing out that the organisation is proceeding despite continued bans on mass gatherings. In the latter, the pro-government outlet [In4s](#) published an article mocking a tweet sent by the Montenegrin president Milo Đukanović, in which it had been asserted that NATO recognises Montenegro as a serious partner. The article argued that in fact, NATO does not take its obligations to Montenegro seriously, given that it has recently sent soap, towels and sheets to the country, rather than serious aid (189 interactions).

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) continues to face criticism (note that much of this, where associated with Bill Gates, can be found in the ‘Malign Global Elites’ section of this report). In **Moldova**, for example, Flux.md published content from [stiripesurse.ro](#), [presenting](#) the WHO as incompetent by suggesting that it and the governments of some states have changed policies and treatments for COVID-19 based on erroneous data provided by a little-known US testing firm (28 interactions).

Separately, the IMF was also criticised in content found in Ukraine, where the YouTube channel of pro-Russian outlet NewsOne [uploaded](#) a video in which journalist Olena Bondarenko argued that the IMF’s standby arrangement to help Ukraine will enslave the country, and that there was no known precedent that cooperation with the IMF is beneficial for the country (53,000 views).

#### *Domestic Incompetence, Corruption and Hypocrisy*

There continues to be a high number of allegations re: the incompetence, corruption or hypocrisy of national-level governments. Their frequency far outstrips that of cases where institutions are framed as failed.

Allegations of corruption were found in **Armenia** (where, in an interview with 168.am, viewed around 18,000 times, the producer Armen Grigoryan [repeated](#) his claim that the government is using the pandemic to earn money, and claimed that hospitals are in fact semi-empty), **Slovakia** (where a Zem a Vek piece [challenged](#) the government for allegedly purchasing



expensive COVID-19 tests when a Czech lab had apparently offered them for free), **Lithuania** (where Sputnik suggested that the President, through the provision of COVID-19-related funding to media outlets, seeks to take over independent media ahead of upcoming elections), and **Romania**.

Indeed, anti-government content was notably frequent in the latter. For example, Stiri pe Surse reported on a Facebook post from a well-known businessman who has criticised the government's handling of COVID-19 and claims that it is seeking to entrench a dictatorship of sorts; the same site reported on a statement made by the interim leader of the main opposition party, accusing the government of gross incompetence regarding the administration of funds. Meanwhile, Luju.ro similarly amplified a lawyer's allegation that the President is concealing gross mismanagement of COVID-19; the Gandeste blog published an accusation that the government has misused funds and handled COVID-19 terribly, and in a separate article further criticised the President; Active News published an article on the statement of a journalist who claims that the government is trying to bribe the press to stop it from reporting freely on government incompetence during the pandemic; Stiri pe Surse released a video and article sharing a doctor's claim that hospitals are falsely attributing deaths to COVID-19. The latter outlet also claimed, amongst other things, that the government is seeking to prolong the state of emergency (and distorting statistics) in order to cling to power and infringe civil liberties. This was also the reported view of opposition politician Marcel Ciolacu.

Beyond Romania, domestic governments were criticised in **Slovakia** (an Infovojna article republished text from a Facebook post by pro-Russian opposition MP Ľuboš Blaha, comparing the government to Nazis and Fascists - 1,100 shares), **Ukraine** (where from-ua published an article citing an epidemiologist's claim that the state has failed to fight COVID-19, and that the healthcare system would have collapsed if not for volunteers and international organisations, and where Strana claimed that the number of tests performed in the country remains one of the lowest in the world), and **Montenegro** (where the pro-Russian 112.ua uploaded a video in which Russian-Ukrainian entrepreneur Andriy Palchevsky claimed that Ukrainians believe that their government violated the constitution by imposing quarantine – 133,000 views). In Ukraine, allegations of corruption were implicit where Politeka referred to an interview with political commentator Andriy Palchevsky who said that low COVID-19 mortality rates among Ukrainian politicians suggests that they are treated differently from ordinary people (428 interactions). Targeted criticism of health professionals was less notable compared to the previous period.

#### *The Incompetence of other Governments: beyond the US and Germany*

In the previous report, it was noted that criticism of other governments (and the number of other governments under scrutiny) appeared to have increased, with notable content being critical of not only Germany and the USA but also Sweden, for example.

This week, Sweden did not appear to be a target; instead, there was some implicit criticism made of the Netherlands and Montenegro. In **Bulgaria**, News Front reported that more Bulgarians infected with COVID-19 have returned from the Netherlands (but that the Bulgarian authorities dealt well with the matter). In **Serbia**, Kurir covered the upheaval over a student bringing COVID-19 to the country from Montenegro after the latter had proclaimed itself





'corona-free'. This was covered in Serbian media such as pro-government Alo and Večernje Novosti (405 interactions).

### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

There was a lot of engagement with 'failing west' content, with much of it amplifying criticism of national governments rather than supranational institutions (a notable exception being criticism of the WHO that circulated in Ukraine, where a Facebook page promoting alternative medicine posted a video branding the organisation a 'mental institute' coordinated by psychopaths - 53,000 views).

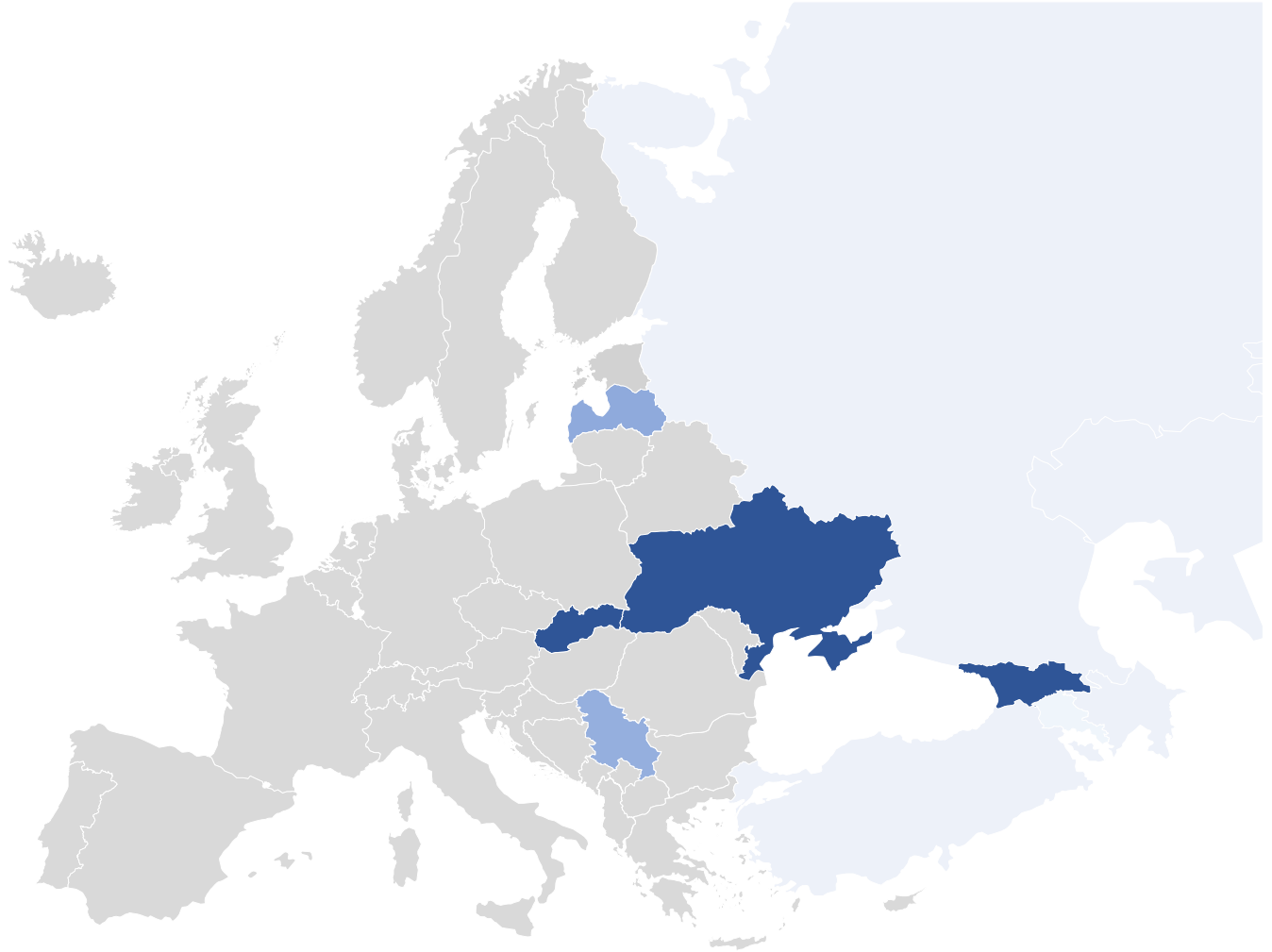
In Romania, users discussed an upcoming vote on whether to extend protective measures (many expressed frustration at the prospect), sharing articles suggesting that the government is trying to artificially inflate case numbers. Social media posts also focused on the supposed jump in new cases, with users seeming to agree that the government is inflating new case numbers so as to retain political power. Users also interacted (1,200 times) with a post from lawyer and influencer Gheorghe Piperea, who claimed that the hospitalisation of asymptomatic COVID-19 patients is illegal and represents an abuse of power. Criticism of hospitals also circulated in Lithuania (where a Facebook user's claim that non-COVID-19 patients are being refused care was shared by a number of groups such as 'Q-ANON Lithuania' and Pilietinis judėjimas "Už Laisvę!" (Civic Movement "For Freedom!"). A petition also circulated via some Facebook groups, demanding that the state shows proof that COVID-19 exists and stating that people such as the President and Minister for Health should be tried for genocide (1,355 interactions).


Elsewhere, governments were similarly accused of being incompetent and corrupt. In Ukraine, for example, the pro-Russian media figure Anatolii Shariy uploaded a video featuring Denis Pushylin stating that Ukraine is concealing the truth about the statistics on COVID-19, and that Ukrainian authorities should not be trusted. This had 574,000 views. In Montenegro meanwhile, users mocked the news that Serbia had experienced a notable drop in cases virtually overnight, branding Vučić the country's "lead epidemiologist".


Although protests in the US were also discussed on social media in this period, mentions appeared to be less frequent.



## 2. CONFLICT



 Narrative is present in this report

 Narrative is present in this and 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 three were present.

*Comparison across countries*



'Conflict' narratives were identified in **Georgia, Slovakia, Latvia, Ukraine and Serbia**. 'Bio-lab' and 'COVID-19' war remain the most dominant of the above sub-narratives. The slight decline in the former persists, and cases are decreasingly focused on the Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab alone, instead pointing more generally to suspicious US activity in the region, for example.

#### *Bio-Lab*

The claim that COVID-19 was created in a lab continues to circulate, though at a lesser volume and frequency than in recent weeks (there was no noted content in this period that cast aspersions specifically upon the activity of the Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab in Georgia). The content that was identified did, however, cast suspicion upon US activity more generally. In **Slovakia**, an article from the prolific outlet Zem a Vek, attacking the US and President Donald Trump, suggested that COVID-19 comes from a lab, adding that the pandemic has been in the interests of the US. In **Ukraine**, the pro-Russian News-Front agency copy-pasted an article from the small website odnarodyna.org attempting to connect US bacteriological labs on Ukrainian territory with a number of cases of fatal viral pneumonia prior to COVID-19 (315 interactions).

Other content was vaguer, claiming that the virus was made artificially but not pointing to any specific actor or location. In **Georgia**, the website Alia published an article entitled "COVID-19 was created in the laboratory", citing content from Forbes. According to the article, research conducted by Norwegian and British scientists has proven that the virus was created artificially (the article claimed that this conclusion is supported by Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6; this latter claim was observed in the previous report also, in Czechia and Slovakia). In **Serbia**, the same claim regarding Norwegian and British scientists' 'discovery' was circulated by the outlet Kurir (this had 440 interactions). Note that further content re: US bio-lab activity is listed below, beneath the heading of 'COVID-19 War'.

#### *NATO*

The suggestion that NATO is being used to spread COVID-19 remains near-absent. However, overlapping somewhat with the 'Russophobia' sub-narrative, content found in the Baltic states continues to suggest that NATO is demonstrating skewed priorities by continuing to train in the region despite being in the middle of a pandemic. In **Latvia**, for example, Baltnews published an article critical of NATO's upcoming training exercises. It quoted a Russian MP who called the exercises "anti-Russian" and stated that it was too early to carry out exercises as countries had not fully dealt with COVID-19.

#### *COVID-19 War*

As in the previous period, the claim that COVID-19 may lead to (or is being used to create) war appeared notably absent from the Baltics.

However, it was noted in **Georgia** (where Sputnik Ossetia reported the claim that the US has asked the Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab to create a biological weapon against the South Ossetian



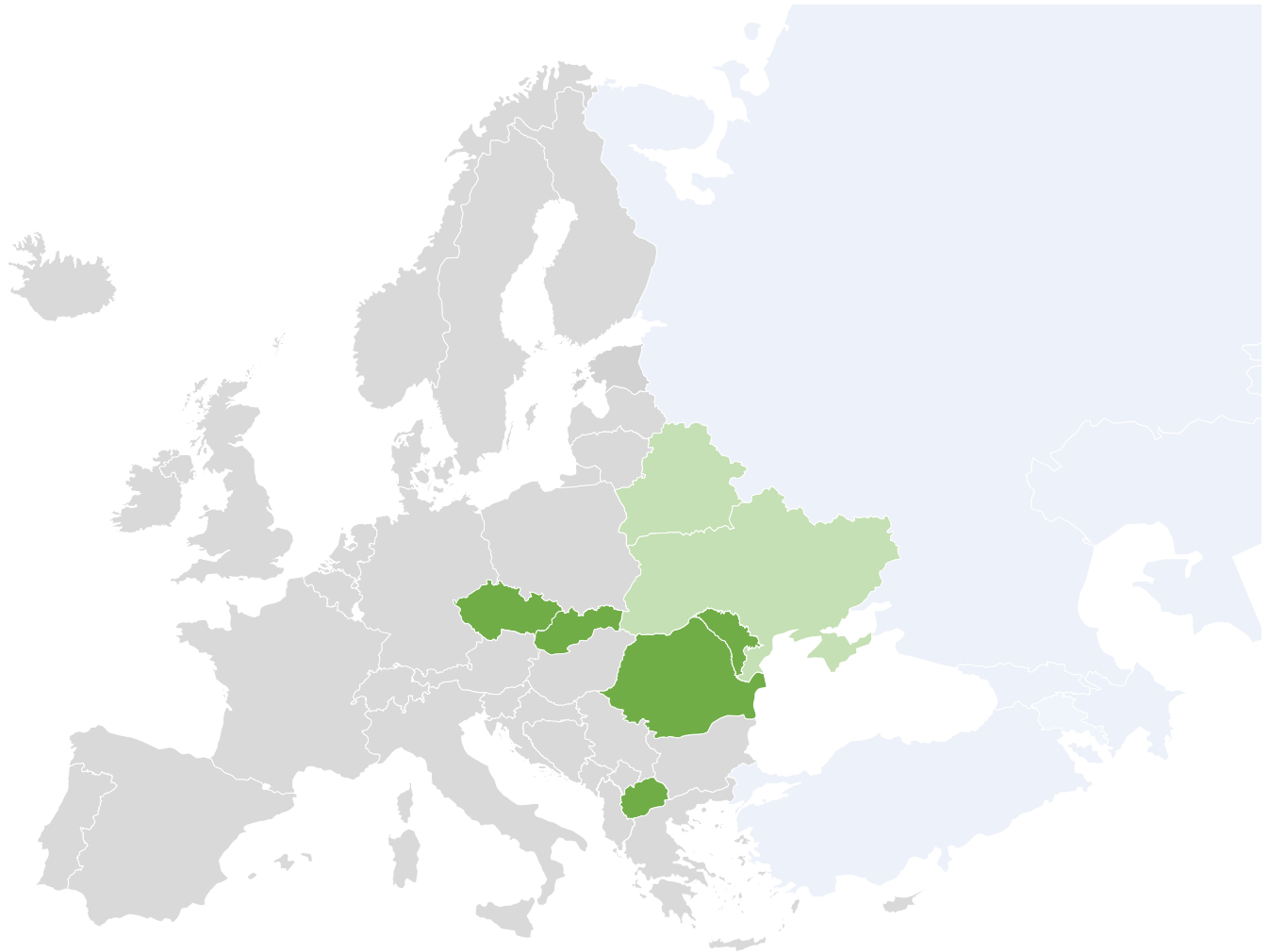
population and to collect information about viruses and other infections from the territory) and **Slovakia** (where a Hlavny Dennik piece authored by a writer from Life.ru stressed that the virus was not made in China and predicted that the US will become divided into “Covid loyalists” and “Covid opponents”, ominously observing that constitutions and revolutions have typically been written in blood and that new era will be no different). In **Ukraine** meanwhile, Ukraina.ru cited Israeli-Soviet statesperson Yaakov Kedmi’s claim that American bacteriological laboratories close to Russian borders, are far from being peaceful in nature (104 interactions). The same site - Ukrainia.ru - was also noted in last week’s report as a producer of content promoting the ‘COVID-19 War’ narrative.

#### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

Conflict narratives do not appear to gain significant amplification and engagement on social media. However, there were some notable cases. In **Latvia**, for example, a post on the group Русское Общество в Латвии (Russian Society in Latvia), which has 2,700 members, linked to an article suggesting that COVID-19 is a weapon of biological warfare. In **Ukraine**, a post appeared on a public group in support of the Russian propagandist Yaakov Kedmi, containing a link to a fringe website that speculated that Russian plans to conquer remaining parts of Ukraine have been spoiled by the pandemic (1,737 webpage interactions).



### 3. MALIGN GLOBAL ELITE



Narrative is present in this report



Narrative is present in this and the previous report

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 sub-narratives were present.



### *Comparison of narratives across countries*

The claim that COVID-19 is being used (or was created) by malign global financial and political elites, so as to either exploit or reshape society, remains strong, and was identified in **Belarus, Czechia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Slovakia, Ukraine and Romania**. The 'Malign Global Elites' narrative remains relatively absent from the Baltic region.

Although Bill Gates continues to be a key target (via the same related conspiracy theories regarding population control and microchipping), the volume of material focussed explicitly on Gates appears to have declined (although social media conversation around him appeared to be high in some places). George Soros is also mentioned less than in previous weeks, with the same being true of the Rockefeller family. 'New World Order' claims also appear to have declined, though arguably continue implicitly in allegations of exploitation, authoritarian control and governance through fear.

### *Exploitation and control*

The narrative of 'exploitation', suggesting that elites are using the crisis to exploit others, was manifest in various ways. Sometimes, this narrative was present through allusion. In **Belarus**, for example, the state-owned outlet Belta by covered president Lukashenko's speech in which he hinted that 'somebody is behind' COVID-19 and that powerful countries wanted to take advantage of the situation, so as to 'change the world' (46 interactions). Lukashenko's comments were also covered by pro-government Kurir in **Serbia** (which reported his view that global elites are making billions while the rest of the world struggles).

Other content pointed more explicitly at specific actors. For example, in **North Macedonia**, a Sloboden Svet article stated that the World Macedonian Congress had demanded that the government rejects the application for the country's accession to the initiative for enhancing primary health protection, established in 2015 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Health Organization (WHO). The author alleged that after all, the US has pressed charges against Gates, as his companies profit from vaccines. This was shared on Facebook pages/groups with around 34,000 followers, and had close to 1,000 interactions.

### *Bill Gates and those associated with him*

Although content targeting Bill Gates has reduced, it remains notable in comparison to that targeting e.g. George Soros. The claim that Gates seeks to reduce the world population was found in **Czechia** (where an article with 1,444 interactions, from the website Otevři svou mysl - "Open Your Mind" - claimed that some vaccines contain a substance that can cause infertility), **Moldova** (where content on Flux.md claimed that Gates and Rockefeller "prophesised" the pandemic - with the goal of global dictatorship – and that the "globalist banking mafia" is seeking a "total war of governments...against their own peoples to pave the way for the...new world order") and **Slovakia** (where Zem a Vek cast suspicion on Gates, quoting Russian political scientist Nikolaj Starikov and suggesting that Gates wants to reduce the world population and that his vaccines kill people, in e.g. Africa and India).



### *Reshaping Society: Beyond Bill Gates*

Not all content alleging that COVID-19 is being used (or was planned) to reshape society made reference mainly to Bill Gates. Some, for example, pointed to alleged plans to microchip the population, but did not especially highlight Gates. In **Moldova**, a Flux.md piece (originating at [infocrestin.com](https://infocrestin.com)) claimed that the US government has signed a contract for the production of microchip syringes that are ready to inject COVID-19 vaccines, and that this would enable the tracking of those who have been injected (4,058 interactions). In **North Macedonia**, meanwhile, it was reported that Gennady Zyuganov, leader of Russia's Communist Party, believes that an eventual vaccine is part of a capitalist plot to implant microchips into humans and ensure their "digital enslavement". In **Ukraine**, the pro-Kremlin outlet Rusvesna suggested that the primary beneficiaries of world in lockdown (and of the digital slavery that it creates) are the world's big tech companies.

Others pointed more generally to the use of COVID-19 to reshape society. For example, in **Slovakia**, Infovojna quoted archbishop Viganò's letter to President Trump, in which he says that Trump represents the "good" side, but that evil forces have revealed their plans, and that COVID-19 is a crisis created by social engineers who want to control mankind. The article was headlined: "Archbishop Viganò wrote in a letter to Trump that the spread of coronavirus and unrest in the United States is part of a massive spiritual struggle between the forces of good and evil" (505 interactions).

In **Romania**, the opinion of Bernard-Henri Lévy continues to circulate after having last week been shared by Smart Radio. This week, the French philosopher's opinions were shared by Active News, which reported his view that COVID-19 has seen a pandemic of fear, with scaremongering leading people to give up their freedom and become complacent about challenging their governments (520 interactions).

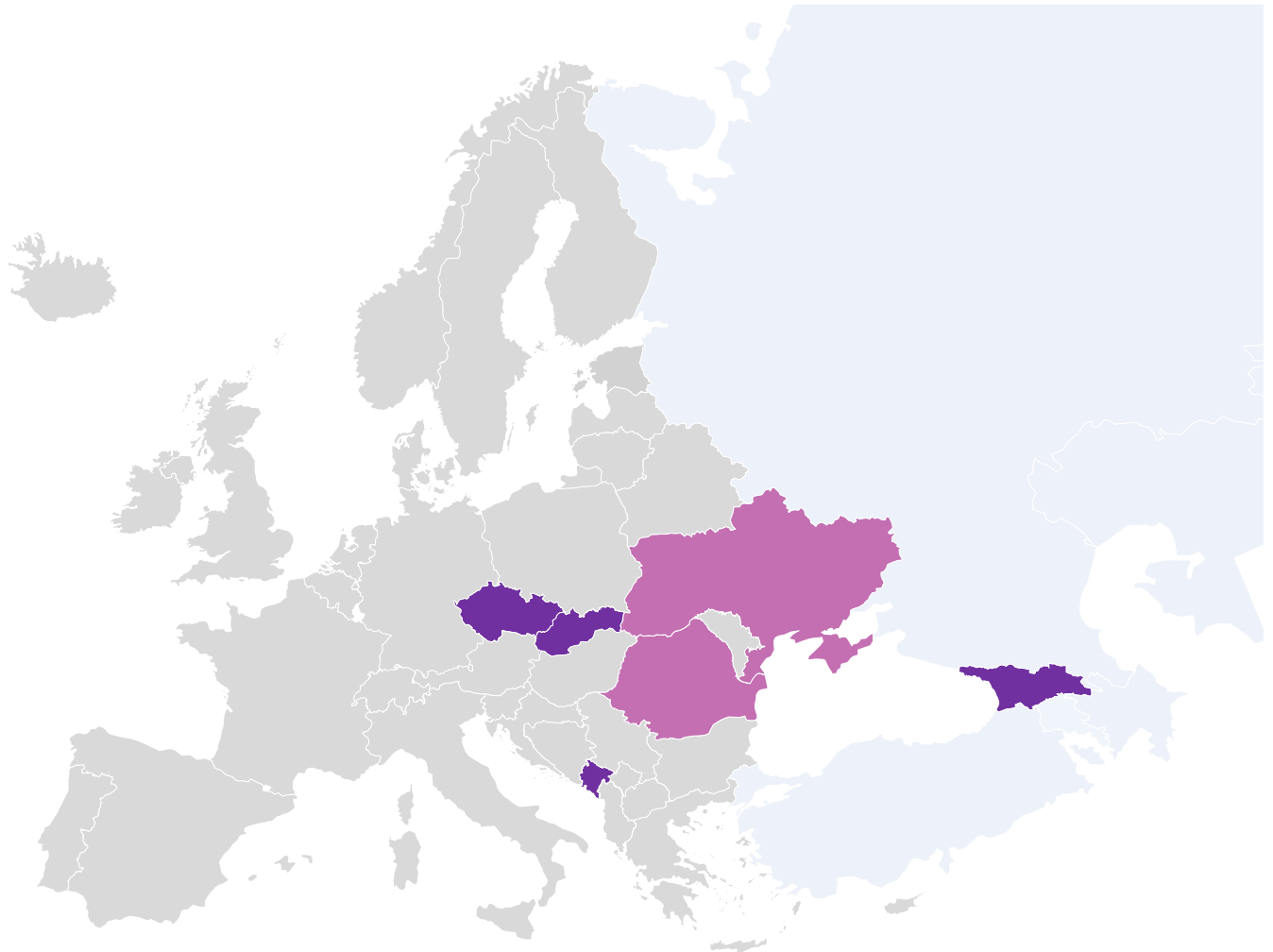
### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

Social media continues to aid the amplification of the 'malign global elites' narrative, with a significant amount of such activity observed in **Hungary**. For example, Titkok Szigete posted a blog citing claims by the aforementioned Vatican Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò that the pandemic is essentially a hoax; the same blog posted an article accusing Bill Gates and other "rich families" of having created or used the pandemic to gain more power; the same blog, plus one other, also misused a Wall Street Journal interview with Bill Gates to claim that Gates had taken responsibility for the pandemic. Meanwhile, the prolific fringe conspiracy page Kimondott Igazságok (Outspoken truths), reposted a video of a BBC interview in which Gates spoke of the possibilities of an RNA vaccine, with text suggesting that he seeks to manipulate the masses; the same blog also speculated that Gates wishes to microchip people for the purpose of mass surveillance. Interactions for such posts were typically in the hundreds at most, rather than in the thousands.

Engagement with mis-/disinformation continues to be relatively low in the Baltics, though one case was noted in Estonia, where a post on Таллинцы (People of Tallinn) linked to an article from an obscure Russian website, referencing multiple conspiracy theories.



#### 4. MORAL DECLINE



Narrative is present in this report



Narrative is present in this and the previous report

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**

All but the second sub-narrative were observed.

*Comparison of narratives across countries*





'Moral decline' sub-narratives continued to be marginal, but were identified in **Czechia, Montenegro, Georgia, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine**. The claims that religious freedom is under attack and that COVID-19 has exposed the obsolescence of western values were the most dominant.

#### *Divine Protection*

**Georgia** continues to be a key site for the identification of 'moral decline' and 'divine protection' narratives (in the previous period, for example, the CWG noted one bishop's suggestion that COVID-19 could not be transmitted by saliva as no one taking communion with an undisinfected spoon had caught the disease). In this reporting period, the pro-Kremlin site Saqinform published an interview with its editor-in-chief, Arno Khidirbegishvili (originally published by the Russian version of News Front), in which Khidirbegishvili claimed, amongst other things, that the low number of COVID-19-infected people and casualties was a signal sent by God, and that Georgia has been unique as a country in which churches remained open and yet people remained uninfected.

#### *Religious Freedom*

This week, the suggestion that anti-COVID-19 measures were serving to curb religious freedom continued to be noted in **Montenegro**, and was also found in **Romania**. In **Montenegro**, pro-Russian outlet [In4s](#) covered the claims of a Montenegrin Orthodox bishop who said that banning religious processions was an attack on the centuries-old order of the Church, adding that the virus came to Montenegro after processions were suspended (243 interactions). Similarly, in **Romania**, Stiri pe Surse [published](#) an article on the statement of the President of the Baptist Union in Romania, who claims that people accepted anti-COVID-19 restrictions too easily, and that the government is making it increasingly hard for them to exercise religious freedom. This statement was made in response to the government's uncertainty as to when churches might be able to reopen (1100 interactions).

#### *Value Failure*

The suggestion that COVID-19 has revealed western values to be obsolete was noted in **Czechia** and **Slovakia**. In the former, an Arfa ("Argumenty & Fakta") article [discussed](#) the Czech movement 'Million Moments for Democracy', suggesting that its activists may be responsible for physically spreading COVID-19 (i.e. through demonstrations) (287 interactions). In a different vein, an Infovojna article in **Slovakia** [quoted](#) archbishop Viganò's aforementioned letter to President Trump, in which he stated that Trump represents the "good" side, and that COVID-19 is a crisis created by evil social engineers. Viganò spoke of both the "deep state" and the "deep church" and reportedly framed the "spread of coronavirus and unrest in the United States [as] part of a massive spiritual struggle between the forces of good and evil" (505 interactions). In **Ukraine**, Vladimir Putin was [cited](#) as saying that unlike Russia, the US is struggling to manage the pandemic, because it values political partisanship over the interests of the people.

#### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

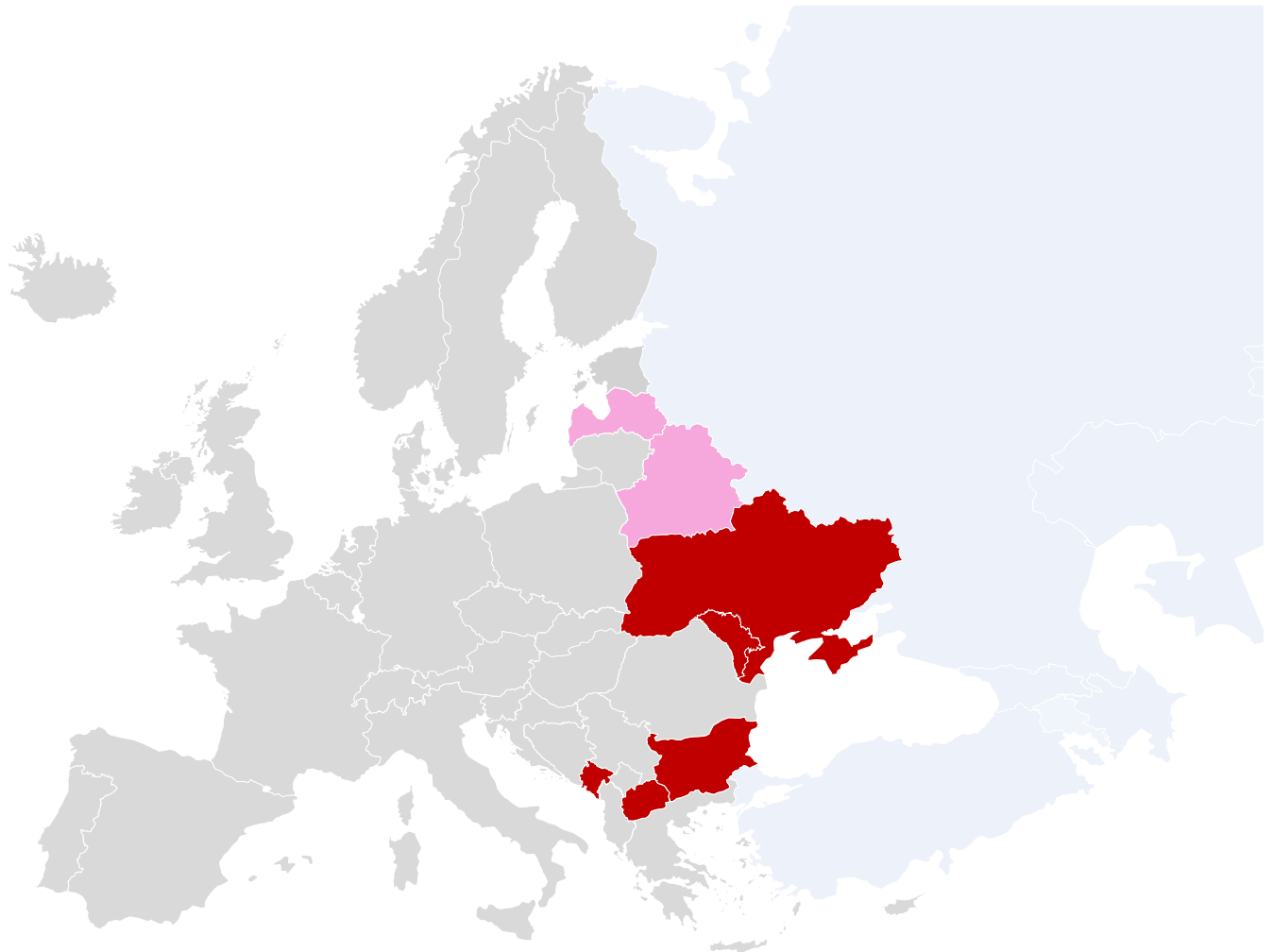


'Moral Decline' narratives continue to gain little traction on social media. However, this period saw more activity than usual. The views of religious influencers and public figures were shared in countries such as **Serbia** (where one group shared a YouTube video of an Orthodox priest announcing – amongst other things – the continuation of religious processions; the video had 66,931 views and comments were largely supportive), **Montenegro** (where a journalist shared an article covering the aforementioned Bishop Vigano's letter to President Trump), and **Ukraine** (where the Christian Facebook page Слово Божие (Word of God), which has 147,000 followers, promoted the idea that a person's DNA is the language of God and that is therefore wrong to interfere with it when seeking a COVID-19 cure; 1,185 shares). In **Romania**, one religious influencer penned a Facebook post claiming that an international group of powerful individuals animated by socialist and secular convictions is subjugating people by infiltrating international organisations and governments, implying that this included the Romanian government, where traditional values are under threat. This latter post had 563 interactions.

Separately, religious figures were called upon to rally against the government in **Belarus**, where opposition politician Pavel Sevyarynets posted an open letter to priests calling for solidarity in protest against the government, citing its handling of the pandemic which has led to a 'mass infection of Belarusians with coronavirus' (62 likes, 1,000 views).



## 5. REFRAMING RUSSIA



Narrative present in this report



Narrative is present in this and the previous report

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**

The first two were present.

*Comparison of narratives across countries*



'Reframing Russia' narratives continue to be present in **Bulgaria** and were also identified in **Belarus, Latvia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Ukraine**. The 'Russian success' sub-narrative remains most dominant, with content continuing to highlight Russian efforts to develop a vaccine for COVID-19 and continuing to offer praise for the Russian health system (often in the context of highlighting its resilient Soviet origins). 'Russophobia' narratives meanwhile remain marginal, though they can occasionally also be discerned within cases grouped under the categories of 'Failing West' or 'Conflict'.

### *Global Leadership*

Once again, only a few cases were observed in which Russia was presented as a saviour of other states. In **Bulgaria**, News Front reported that the mayor of Buenos Aires has asked Russia for help in fighting COVID-19. The Russian Ambassador to that city, Dmitry Feoktsov, was reported as saying that the application is being considered (1,015 interactions). Meanwhile, in **Latvia**, Sputnik published an article on a survey in which more than half of those Latvians questioned apparently agreed that is necessary to attract Russian investment to the country. Whilst the article referenced the survey truthfully, it failed to mention that the number supporting Russian investment had dropped since the previous survey. The article also emphasised Latvia's economic reliance on Russia, especially in the post-pandemic transit sector.

### *Success: vaccine development and health systems*

Praise persists for Russia's work to develop a vaccine, and for its health systems more broadly. Examples of the former were found in **Moldova** (where Sputnik reported that the first batch of Avifavir had arrived in hospitals in the Russian Federation) and **North Macedonia** (where on the website Za Se, an article with a misleading headline stated that "Russian scientists have found a cure for COVID-19", despite going on to clarify that the drug only mitigates various symptoms. This was shared on Facebook pages/groups with a total of around 310,000 followers, but had just 76 interactions).

Meanwhile, praise for Russia's health system was noted in **Bulgaria** (where Ren.tv reported Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov's insistence that the apparently low mortality rate from COVID-19 in Russia was not "unusual", despite being previously branded as such by a WHO representative), **Montenegro** (where pro-government outlet In4s ran a story covering Peskov's aforementioned statement to CNN, in which he denied accusations that COVID-19 statistics are being manipulated in Russia and stressed that Russia simply has a better system) and **Belarus** (where regional outlet Grodno Daily copy-pasted a Sputnik article that had praised the 'miracle of Soviet medicine' and shared a doctor's suggestion that the BCG vaccine - widely administered in the Soviet Union for tuberculosis - was a key reason as to why former Soviet countries had not been as affected by COVID-19).

More generally, in **Ukraine**, the Russian ethos was presented as superior to that of the west when Ukraina.ru cited Vladimir Putin as saying that unlike Russia, the US is struggling to handle the pandemic, as it values political partisanship more than the interests of people.



### *Russophobia*

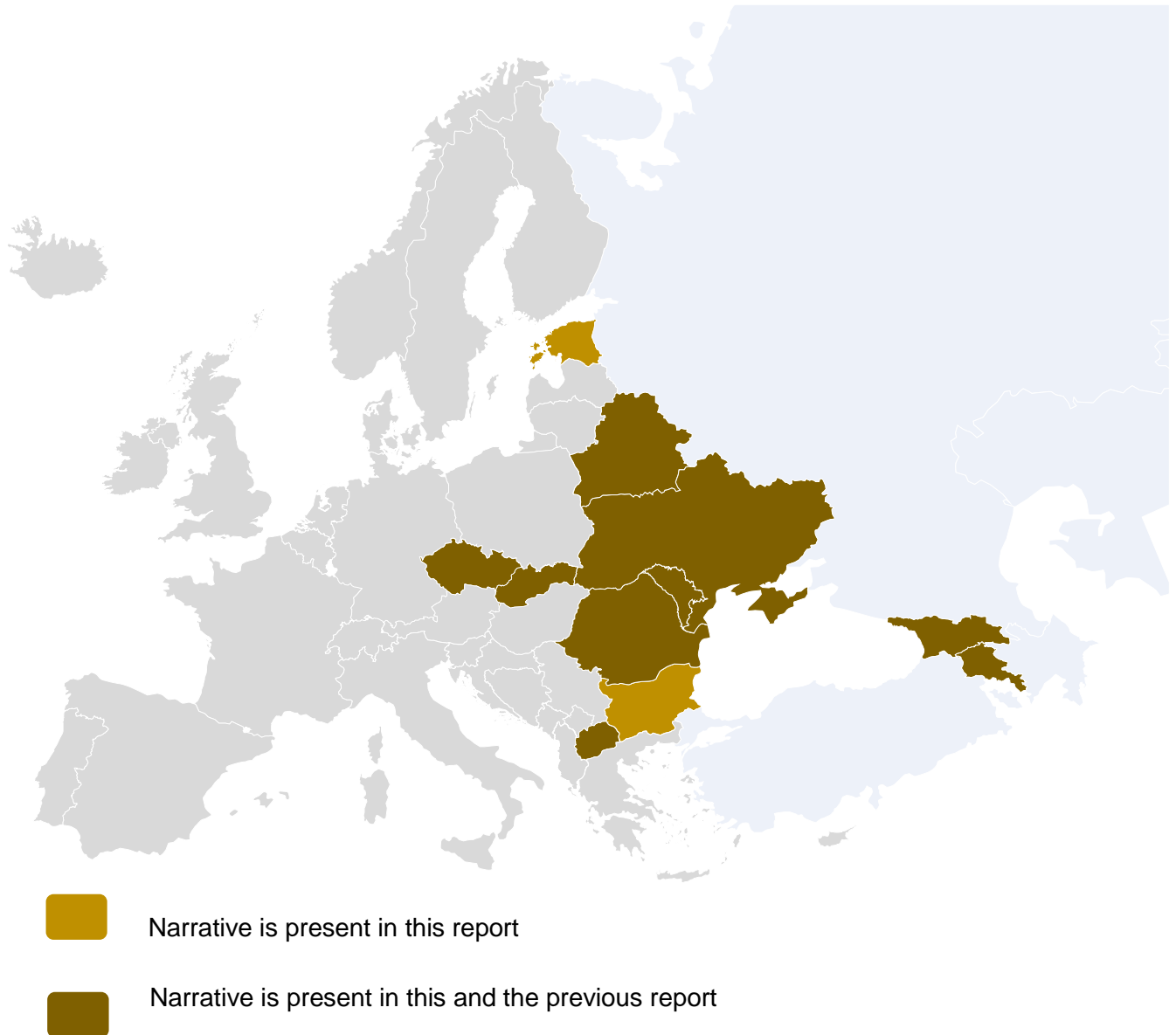
There were no notable allegations of Russophobia.

### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

As noted in previous reports, 'Reframing Russia' narratives do not appear to be especially amplified or engaged with via social media, with most articles having few interactions. However, it was noted that in Latvia, a post praising a group of young Russian-speaking volunteers who had helped vulnerable people during the lockdown appeared on multiple groups and received significant engagement.



## 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**



All of these narratives were observed.

### *Comparison of narratives across countries*

As in previous reports, misinformation narratives as defined by the CWG were identified in most countries – **Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine** (and were not observed in Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro or Serbia). Armenia continues to be a hub of anti-mask activity. This week, dismissals of a ‘second wave’ continued in Czechia and Slovakia – albeit at a very low level. Notably, claims regarding alternative cures appear to have declined, though continued to circulate via social media in Ukraine, for example.

### *Hoax*

The suggestion that COVID-19 is not real or has been exaggerated was found in **Belarus** (where state-owned outlet SP.BY repeated comments from the sociologist Andrey Goncharov who); **North Macedonia** (where Sloboden Svet alleged that a leaked report from Germany had described the panic as a “false global alarm”; Greenpost.press reported the same in Ukraine, in an article that had more than 40,000 interactions), and **Estonia** (where fringe outlet Telegram.ee made reference to an interview with a Dr Andrew Kaufmann for alternative media outlet London Live, in which Kaufmann apparently questioned the validity of COVID-19 data and claimed that the virus does not cause illness). In **Bulgaria** meanwhile, it was implied that events are being manipulated, when the istinskitenovini.bg ‘news’ site claimed that a family (unnamed) was paid BGN 10,000 to be infected with COVID-19; ““There are many such cases across the country. But we no longer want to participate in this manipulation of the people”, the father apparently said (31,389 interactions). In **Romania**, the common claim that hospitals are falsely attributing deaths to COVID-19 was also repeated by Stiri pe Surse, in a video since removed.

The claim that COVID-19 is no worse than seasonal flu – previously observed as sometimes overlapping with claims that the pandemic is a pretext to manipulate people - also continued to circulate (e.g. in **Romania**, where Active News amplified this claim by reporting that YouTube had censored an interview with a doctor who took this view), but appeared less common than in previous reports.

Interestingly, coverage of the group of German doctors who challenge expert opinion on COVID-19 appears to have waned. However, this week instead saw various outlets reporting on a supposed German report that allegedly described COVID-19 as a false alarm, as discussed elsewhere in this report.

### *5G*

Content identified as predominantly about 5G and its alleged association with COVID-19 was not observed in this period (however, note that Armenia and Georgia did not feature in the report of 16 June; both countries, amongst others, often feature cases of anti-5G activity). The



claim that the motherboards of 5G antennae contain the words 'COV 19' remains quiet, as do claims that 5G imagery can be discerned on bank notes.

#### *Cure*

Claims re: false or unproven cures for COVID-19 persist, but continue to be a marginal strand of misinformation. There was one notable in case in **Czechia**, where drugs such as Oxycyclin, Ivermectin, Avifavir and Hydroxychloroquine, were listed by nwoo.org as possible COVID-19 cures, alongside home remedies such as milk and garlic.

#### *Expert Advice: Masks, Vaccination, Quarantine and the 'Second Wave'*

Misinformation continued to undermine mask-wearing, vaccination and established science. Some content also dismissed the idea of a 'second wave'.

#### *Masks:*

Anti-mask activism - ostensibly led by a handful of social media influencers – continues to be significant in **Armenia**. On Facebook, historian Armen Ayvazyan reacted to the World Health Organization's (WHO's) announcement on asymptomatic patients, saying that it "confirms once again that the forced compulsion to wear a mask and gloves is a mass medical-political crime" (98 Shares, 16,350 interactions); on Facebook Live, doctor Gevorg Grigoryan suggested that mask wearing has demographic risks (population decline due to lack of intimacy and affection) and criticised the "new normal" (20,000 views); at a 'press conference', doctor Nune Nersisyan (mentioned in previous reports) claimed that masks have caused fungal pneumonia to increase (195 Comments, 397 Shares); the nationalist activist Hrayr Kostanyan again took to Facebook to criticise masks and other guidance, claiming to cite WHO findings on the asymptomatic spread of coronavirus and stating that people should "breathe freely".

In **Slovakia** meanwhile, Zem a Vek misused the words of America's Dr. Anthony Fauci to claim that he had branded mask wearing merely "symbolic", when he had in fact said that he wears a mask to protect his family and to indicate to others what it is necessary to do.

#### *Quarantine:*

Whilst conspiracy theories surrounding quarantine overlap with those found in the 'Failing West' and 'Malign Global Elites' categories, some misinformation content specifically undermined the scientific basis for 'lockdown' measures. In **Romania**, Stiri pe Surse reported on a Facebook post by doctor Adina Alberts, who attacked the Minister for Health and the WHO for contradictory statements regarding asymptomatic carriers and used this to suggest that there are no grounds for many restrictions in place in the country. Similarly, in **Slovakia**, a Hlavny Dennik article challenged restrictive measures adopted worldwide to prevent the spread of COVID-19, stating that scientists believe that these have been ineffective; in **Ukraine**, Newsone shared a video in which Oleksandr Okhrimenko - often cited by Russian state-owned media - said that European countries are participating in a "comedy" regarding quarantine measures (this had more than 12,315 views). **Czechia** also saw quarantine dismissed as ineffective and bad for national economies.





The claim observed in last week's report – that social distancing was invented by a teenage girl in the US and is therefore unscientific – was not notable in this period.

#### *Vaccines:*

Anti-vaccination content continues at a similar level to that seen in the previous report. Claims that vaccination causes infertility were observed in **Czechia** (where this claim was made by an article on the website Otevři svou mysl ("Open Your Mind"), which suggested that this is linked to Bill Gates' alleged plans to reduce the world population) and **Georgia** (where Tvalsazrisi.ge, its Facebook page, and the clickbait site Abcnews.com.ge published quotes from an astrologer who is opposed to COVID-19 vaccination and believes that it will cause infertility and is aimed at reducing the population). The 1-7 June edition of the Alia newspaper also featured a painter's claim that vaccination can be dangerous.

The suggestion that vaccination is being used to reduce the world population was also observed in **Moldova**, where politician Iurie Rosca alleged that at an event on 04 June in London – the World Alliance Summit for vaccines and immunizations – plans were made to reduce the population via vaccination, and that COVID-19 is a pretext to do so). Also in Moldova, Flux.md shared content from the 'infocrestin' website claiming that the US has signed a contract for the production of "microchip syringes" so that it can "track the location" of those who receive the vaccine (905 shares via Facebook, and 4,058 interactions).

#### *Testing:*

Elsewhere, suspicion was cast upon testing. In **Romania**, Active News reported that flight passengers who had tested negative for COVID-19 when boarding a plane all tested positive upon landing, thus implying that tests are unreliable. Meanwhile, **Armenian** sites (e.g. armblog.info, ipress.am and yerevanblog.am) amplified a video posted in April by the Russian-language YouTube channel "Chelovek" (which appears to be located in Germany), featuring the claim that tests infect people. The video has received close to 17,000 views.

#### *Second Wave:*

Dismissals of a possible second wave of COVID-19 continued to be found in **Czechia** and **Slovakia**. In the former, a Vlastenecké Noviny article repeated this claim (noted also in last week's report) and quoted virologist Soňa Peková (996 interactions). In the latter, a Zem a Vek Zem article claimed "Fauci turned. He now claims that the second wave of COVID-19 is not necessary and that wearing masks is only symbolic", misleadingly citing comments made by America's Dr. Anthony Fauci.

#### *Social Media: Impact and Engagement*

Misinformation remains especially amenable to amplification via social media. Though Hungary remains a key site for this, misinformation was also notably amplified in countries such as Ukraine, Romania, Serbia and the Baltic states.

The suggestion that there is no pandemic – or that the pandemic is over or overexaggerated – was shared in Estonia (through posts from the group Коронавирус в Эстонии (COVID-19) (Coronavirus in Estonia (COVID-19)), which has 700 members, and the group Таллиннцы



(People of Tallinn), which has 15,000 members), with similar content also found on Latvian groups such as Наконец-то United Latvija! (Finally United Latvia! 1,600 members) and Lithuanian groups such as Русскоговорящая Клайпеда (Russian speaking Klaipeda, 2,600 members) and UNFOLLOW 15 min.lt (51,000 members). A post from the latter also referenced an article claiming that German government documents had called the pandemic a “false alarm”, while another shared an article about Bill and Melinda Gates, giving credence to the theory that they want to vaccinate and microchip the world’s population.

The suggestion that COVID-19 is overexaggerated or a hoax was also found in posts shared in Serbia (where the group whose name translates as ‘Let’s put a stop to forceful Coronavirus vaccination and globalisation’ shared an article covering a statement by a German doctor and member of “Doctors for Enlightenment”, according to whom the virus is a ‘mafia scam’), Ukraine (where the Facebook page Persona.Live posted a link to an RT video in which a Russian virologist described the effects of COVID-19 as exaggerated - 91,000 views) and Hungary (where medical influencer Doktor Gődény posted a widely shared graphic suggesting that there is no pandemic and that the virus does not kill). Gődény has urged his followers to join his new Facebook group “Normalis elethez ragaszzkodok” (People who want to stick to a normal life) which now has 33,000 members.

There was notable misinformation in Ukraine regarding false cures and causes, with users sharing suggestions that COVID-19 can be transmitted through air conditioning (607 likes, 77,000 views); that Vitamin C may help to treat COVID-19; that COVID-19 is actually pulmonary thrombosis. The latter was posted on Спілка медичних працівників України (Union of medical workers of Ukraine), a Facebook group with 47,000 members, and linked to an article from 20 May. In Hungary, the Titkok Szigete (Island of Secrets) conspiracy page also claimed that Hungarians are more resilient to COVID-19 partly due to their “survivor” genetics, and partly due to the BCG vaccine (658 interactions).

Finally, anti-vaccination content was engaged with in Estonia (where a post – now removed - claimed that cancer genes are found in British and American vaccines) and Serbia, where the Facebook group Stop prisilnoj KORONA vakcinaciji i globalizaciji (Let’s put a stop to forceful Coronavirus vaccination and globalisation) shared an article from news aggregator Espresso about a podcast interview with tennis player Novak Djokovic in which he commented on the controversy surrounding his statements about potentially refusing vaccination if it was required in order for him to return to the tennis court. This story was shared and reported upon by other outlets, with users being largely supportive of Djokovic, saying – for example - that whatever he says, they know he loves his country and that he has earned the right to say what he wants.



## 7. MISC/ADDITIONAL

### *Overview*

There was no pattern observed within content coded as 'miscellaneous' in this reporting period. There were also no newly emerging narratives. However, the following case was noteworthy:

### *Montenegro: suspicion of Serbian statistics*

A story in the pro-government In4s explored the overnight 'transformation' of Serbia's COVID-19 data, which saw a transformation in the stated number of people cured of the disease (4,125 patients were said to have recovered within 24 hours, according to the statistics). The epidemiologist Zoran Radovanović weighed in on the issue joking that the patients were "healed ... by decree and an administrative decision" in order for Serbia to meet the epidemiological standards imposed by the Montenegrin government to reopen borders (42 interactions).



## 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

#### 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

CWG partner organisations report on disinformation in Armenia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. Zinc Network's own researchers augment these reports for Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Ukraine, and make additional reports for Belarus, Montenegro and Serbia, where there is no CWG partner organisation.

Zinc Network researchers draw on three different sorts of material for consideration in internally-authored reports, in addition to what is provided by CWG partner organisations. 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 codeframe – 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.