OPEN INFORMATION PARTNERSHIP
COVID-19 MONITORING & ANALYSIS

SUMMARY REPORT

Friday 05 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:

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

Country-by-country overview:

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

1. Armenia
2. Belarus
3. Bulgaria
4. Czechia
5. Estonia
6. Georgia
7. Hungary
   Topical report: Hungary: Sweden as a lesson in failed liberalism
8. Latvia
9. Lithuania
10. Moldova
11. Montenegro
12. North Macedonia
13. Poland
14. Romania
15. Serbia
16. Slovakia
17. Ukraine

Narrative analysis:

Narratives observed, by theme

1. Failing West
2. Conflict
3. Malign Global Elite
   Analysis: the claim that the WHO is working to overthrow Trump
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 Monday 1 June (00:00) - Wednesday 3rd June (23:59). 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	Poland	Romania	Serbia	Slovakia	Ukraine
FAILING WEST	EU collapse		X																
	EU failure															X		X	
	Incompetence		X		X			X		X		X				X		X	X
	Hypocrisy									X			X				X		X
	Corruption															X			
	Exploitation				X			X		X						X		X	X
	General/other																		
CONFLICT	Bio-lab	X			X													X	
	NATO as vector										X								
	COVID-19 war																		X
	General/other				X														
MALIGN ELITE	Exploitation						X											X	X
	Reshaping society						X				X	X		X	X	X		X	
	General/other																		
MORAL DECLINE	Divine protection						X												
	Divine punishment																		
	Religious freedom											X	X						
	Failed values				X													X	
	General/other																		
REFRAMING RUSSIA	Russian success			X			X					X		X			X		X
	Global leadership						X					X	X						
	Russophobia					x													
	General/other																		
MISINFORMATION	Hoax	X	X		X							X		X	X	X	X		
	5G		X				X												
	Cure	X		X												X	X		X
	Expert advice	X		X	X									X	X			X	
	General/other			X															
MISCELLANEOUS																			

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

ARMENIA

Summary

'Misinformation' narratives remain notable, with content continuing to challenge the utility of face masks and the real purpose of their promotion; influencers such as Doctor Marina Khachatryan continue to be active. However, there has otherwise been a slight decline in mis-/disinformation content. One further item was identified, in the category of 'Conflict: Bio-lab'.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

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

- Journalist Gohar Hakobyan posted on Facebook that “An effective means of combating coronavirus has been found in Armenia”, claiming that "Health Tone” - which appears to be a pill - not only prevents infection from coronavirus, but reduces the severity of symptoms. The pill is registered in Armenia as a dietary supplement (212 comments, 235 shares).
- In a press conference for Yerevan.today, Volodia Hovhannisyan, a veteran and political activist supporting Robert Kocharyan, the second president of Armenia, stated that the mandatory wearing of masks will benefit business controlled by Anna Hakobyan, the wife of the current PM, and Samvel Aleksanyan, a local businessman. This has had limited reach - 26 shares.
- In a press conference for Yerevan.today (seemingly the same one as that noted above), Doctor Marina Khachatryan – who appears regularly in these reports - claimed that mandatory mask-wearing is part of a ‘phase of research’, and urged people not to wear masks as they damage the lungs and because not wearing them may help people to build immunity. The video has had 22,100 views and 223 comments.

2. *Conflict: Bio-lab*

- On ArmNews TV, Stepan Shakaryan, a political scientist and columnist at irates.am, said that the Kremlin distrusts Armenia because of the presence of US-funded bio-labs there (3,538 views).

BELARUS

(NB: this entry covers the period of 27 May – 2 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: the panic around the pandemic is unjustified; the decision to hold a military parade in Belarus was the right one; due to lockdown, European countries are in a dire state and people are becoming increasingly frustrated; ‘liberal’ medical healthcare system is no match for Soviet healthcare in dealing with major challenges; and the West is losing its status in the eyes of the rest of the world.

On social media, public interest in COVID-19 is diminishing, with attention instead being paid to political developments such as the upcoming presidential elections in August. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has played a role in public discussions in the context of presidential elections; rumours are spreading that the Belarusian authorities are considering a backup plan to win the upcoming elections by announcing a state of emergency caused by pandemic.

Media coverage of disinformation concentrated on a study conducted in Russia that shows that around 30% of Russians do not believe in the dangers posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and well as debunking false cures.

Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *MISINFORMATION: Hoax, Cure*

- Tut.by reported on president Lukashenko saying that the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic is “half about the illness” and “half about the politics” (264 interactions).

2. *FAILING WEST: Incompetence, EU collapse*

- Russian state-owned Sputnik.by cited president Lukashenko as saing: “Thank God that we escaped this and did not close up [the borders]” pointing out that Western countries that imposed stricter lockdowns are now in dire straits. (7 interactions). This statement was mocked on social media, for example in the comments here on the anti-Lukashenko page Настоящая Беларусь (Real Belarus), which has 4,151 members.
- Sputnik.by also pointed out how Sweden’s decision not to impose a strict lockdown has led to disputes inside the EU. The article draws attention to instances of other European countries turning away from Sweden, and even blaming it for periodic spikes in COVID-19 in neighbouring countries (6 interactions).
- Pro-Kremlin blog IMHO Club wrote about how the pandemic had revealed the fading of the capitalistic world order and the incompetence of decentralised liberal medical healthcare systems. It also touched upon the reasons for the substantial difference in the COVID-19 lethality rate in Sweden and Belarus by claiming that the Belarusian healthcare system was better equipped to react to the challenge in a timely fashion. It also added that the Belarusian healthcare system has better experience in dealing with similar challenges, like the Chernobyl disaster (17 interactions).
- Belarusian state-owned news outlet Sovetskaya Belorussiya (Soviet Belarus) produced an article which claimed president Lukashenko was absolutely correct in his decision to hold a military parade despite COVID-19. In it, the author argues people die not from COVID-19 but from pneumonia. It was also argued that the pandemic has highlighted the perversity of Euro-American model of healthcare and the superiority of the Soviet one, which remains in Belarus (132 interactions).

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- There was substantial engagement with an article on TUT.by which wrote about how Lukashenko’s COVID-19 denialism would be the most important factor in the upcoming presidential elections in Belarus (645 likes, 222 comments, 110 shares).
- Belarusian screenwriter Andrey Kureychik expressed his suspicion that either Sweden or Belarus is lying about true number of death cases from COVID-19, due to the fact they have similar COVID-19 infection statistics, but radically different death numbers (117 likes,

46 comments, 30 shares). In another post, Kureychik directly points out that official Belarusian statistics manipulates real situation with pandemic in the country (57 likes).

- A post appeared on МОЙ РОДНЫ КУТ, ЯК ТЫ МНЕ МІЛЫ (My Native Corner, How Dear You Are To Me) public group (1.4K members) which amplified the words of scientist and Nobel laureate Michael Levitt, who stated that lockdown was a waste of time and could kill more than it saved. Despite Levitt not being an epidemiologist, the post presents his view as authoritative, and quotes him as saying that the real virus was simply a 'panic' (38 shares).
- Popular anonymous Telegram channel MINSKI (32K subscribers) posted a rumour that the Belarusian authorities are considering announcing a state of emergency in response to the pandemic to ensure victory in the upcoming presidential elections (10.6K views).

Coverage of dis/misinformation relating to COVID-19

- Independent outlet Belnovosti dispelled a myth about drinking hot water allegedly protecting one from getting COVID-19 (8 interactions). Belnovosti also dispelled a myth of healing properties of garlic against COVID-19 (5 interactions).
- News outlets 4esnok, Onliner, Pogovorim, and EJ engaged with a poll conducted in Russia that found out more than 30% of Russians do not believe in the danger of the COVID-19, study shows
- The Facebook page of Belsat TV station posted a note from an anonymous Belarusian doctor who claimed there is no trust in official state statistics on COVID-19 among medical personnel (109 likes, 98 comments, 5 shares).

BULGARIA

Summary

The 'Reframing Russia' narrative continues to be notable in Bulgaria (relative to other countries), though slightly less prominent in this reporting period. One story, noted elsewhere in the region, suggested that Russian scientists are developing and trialling a vaccine that can be ingested in the form of yoghurt. Misinformation was also present, with the claim that a person's finger length relates to their likelihood of having COVID-19. The themes of 'Malign Global Elites' and 'Failing West' were not notable, though 'Reframing Russia' narratives could be regarded as the flipside of the latter.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Reframing Russia: Russian Success (Also: Misinformation)*

- The Bulgarian bnr.bg news outlet stated that the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency reports (quoting TASS) that Russian scientists are developing a vaccine against COVID-19, which can be introduced into the body in yoghurt form. The agency quoted Vladimir Chekhonin, vice president of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and explained that

preparatory work is being carried out by the Institute of Experimental Medicine in St. Petersburg. Preclinical trials are underway, said Chekhonin (26 interactions).

- Volk.mk.ru reported that Rosatom has developed a new way to fight COVID-19, based on UV disinfection. Its aim is to disinfect patients' lungs using UV radiation. The article cites RIA Novosti and says that experts hope this method will help in the treatment of tuberculosis and other pathologies (3 interactions).

2. *Misinformation: Expert Advice/Other*

- Volk.mk.ru repeated the claim (noted in a previous report) that recent studies suggest that "biological advantage" protects some people from COVID-19. It cites research from the University of Swansea suggesting that there is a link between COVID-19 mortality and the length of a person's ring and index fingers. The piece cites the website it-time24.ru (1 interaction).
- The website Lenta.ru amplified comments made by Ekaterina Trifonova, director of the Department of Infectious Diseases at the Central Clinical Hospital, who - in a conversation with RIA Novosti - listed the factors behind the appearance of the second wave of coronavirus. Trifonova suggested that the main factor behind any second wave will be how hot or cold the summer is (23 interactions).

CZECHIA

Summary

Cases of mis- and disinformation fell under the themes of 'Misinformation'; 'Failing West', and 'Conflict' (with the suggestion that US bio-labs in the region are not to be trusted). One further item suggested that elites behind organisations such as the UN and the World Health Organization – which, it is claimed, have been revealed as weak due to COVID-19 - are facilitating the present protests in the US in order to undermine Donald Trump so that he loses power in November.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Misinformation: Expert Advice; Hoax;*

- An Otevři Svou Mysl article claimed (as also via Zem a Vek in Slovakia) that quarantine makes no sense. The piece cited an Irish scientist who claims that wearing masks is useless and that we should instead seek to improve our immunity. The scientist is also reported as saying that there is no 'second wave', and the article suggests that politicians simply want to create fear in people. An article from Novinky.cz (as also via Infovojna and Hlavne Spravy in Slovakia) similarly suggested that there would be no second wave, quoting Czech virologist Soňa Peková (3,346 interactions).

- An article on the website Nwoo.org ("New World Order Opposition") claimed that COVID-19 is similar to seasonal flu; that people who simply have a different opinion to the mainstream are being censored on YouTube; that the concept of social distancing was developed years ago by a fourteen-year-old in a school essay that George W. Bush discovered in a library; that the number of deaths is being falsely stated and that doctors are financially motivated to attribute deaths to the disease (including in the US) (97,844 interactions).
- Another Nwoo.org article offered a video about vaccines, suggesting that these cause diseases and that they include dangerous substances such as mercury (21 interactions). Similarly, an Otevri Svou Mysl article claimed that according to some research, the mortality caused by the flu vaccine is higher than that caused by COVID-19 (2,468 interactions).

2. *Failing West: Exploitation; Incompetence (Also: Moral Decline: Value Failure)*

- An article found on the Vlastenecké Noviny news site, entitled "The European Commission is leading us by the nose" discussed financial support from the EU to member states and suggested that it is simply trying to abuse the COVID-19 crisis in order to create a supranational state and secure funding for the Green Deal (996 interactions).
- An alarming article on iDnes (found also at the Infovojna website in Slovakia) reported on protests against anti-COVID-19 measures in Germany, in which people reportedly used Nazi symbolism in order to express opposition to mask-wearing and vaccination. Its title reads: "The Final Solution to the Coronavirus Question or Veils and Vaccinations will set you free: Germans wore Jewish stars as a parallel to Nazism in protests against quarantine" (3 interactions).

3. *Conflict: Bio-lab*

- An article from Literarni Noviny (also circulated by Infovojna in Slovakia) stated that the US is researching dangerous pathogens in bio-labs in Georgia, Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states. It reports that one of the US's military labs – Fort Detrick in the US – was closed twice last year due to the inappropriate handling of pathogens, and that Russia has called for an international reaction to the issue (5 interactions).

4. *Other:*

- A Nwoo.org article offered the opinion that COVID-19 has revealed the failure of the UN, NATO and the WHO – all organisations linked to neoconservatives – and that because of this, they are trying to harm Donald Trump via the organisation of protests and riots in the US (over the death in custody of George Floyd), so that he will lose power in November (4 interactions).

ESTONIA

Summary

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

There was little overt disinformation in this reporting period. Hostile state media either covered the progress of COVID-19 in Estonia in a neutral manner or turned their attention to other topics. The only example of disinformation came from Baltnews, who claimed that some members of the government are being Slavophobic in their pandemic immigration policy.

This story was identified by Zinc's internal monitoring. The narrative that the Estonian government is Russophobic or Slavophobic has been observed previously in Estonia.

The only instance of disinformation or misinformation observed on social media during the reporting period took the form of a RuBaltic article, which claimed that the Baltic states are deliberately sabotaging economic relations with Russia despite the benefits it would bring following the pandemic. Otherwise the majority of posts were non-conspiratorial and often linked to media sources regarded as accurate. The number of posts containing keywords related to COVID-19 continues to fall, suggesting conversation on the topic is less pronounced compared to earlier reporting periods.

The story was not discussed by mainstream media coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19. Instead, topics such as a Russian man accused of spreading fake news and myths surrounding the EU's role in the pandemic were reported.

Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *Reframing Russia: Russophobia*

One story was flagged by Zinc's Media Monitoring:

- In an interview with an Estonian politician, Baltnews claimed that the Estonian government was not allowing temporary workers from Ukraine into the country because members of the government are Slavophobic (16 interactions).

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Conversation on social media was mainly non-conspiratorial with minimal instances of disinformation or misinformation, often linking to media sources regarded as accurate. The number of posts containing keywords related to COVID-19 continues to fall, suggesting conversation on the topic is less pronounced compared to earlier reporting periods. The number of posts containing disinformation was also low. The only case that was identified was a RuBaltic article that promoted the idea that normalised relations with Russia would benefit the Baltic states after the pandemic.

- The main topic of conversation was that on 2 June no new COVID-19 cases were detected in Estonia for the first time since March. An ERR article on the announcement was widely shared by groups. Moreover, several Narva-based groups discussed when the border with Russia will be reopened, as many residents of the city are used to crossing the border on a regular basis.

- A RuBaltic article that was published on 27 May was shared on the group Новости Эстонии (News of Estonia), a group with 3,400 members. The article stated that normalising relations with Russia would benefit the Baltic states economically, but that the Baltic states prefer "to serve the interests of NATO regardless of their own […] interests". The piece referenced an article published on globalresearch.ca, a Canadian website that has been described as a conspiracy theory website.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Postimees reported that a Moscow-based man was facing a criminal trial for publishing fake news after he uploaded a video on YouTube claiming that the pandemic was being used to harvest organs from healthy citizens (9 interactions).

- Stolitsa interviewed MP Maria Jufereva-Skuratovski, who claimed that the idea that EU countries were not working together during the crisis was a myth (0 interactions).

GEORGIA

Summary

Cases fell under the themes of 'Moral Decline' (with a bishop claiming that people did not catch COVID-19 when taking holy communion with a shared non-disinfected spoon); 'Reframing Russia' (with the claim that the Soviet healthcare system helped to make the population resistant to COVID-19), 'Malign Global Elites' and 'Misinformation'. Notably, 'Conflict' narratives (including those that implicate the Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab in COVID-19) were not present.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Moral Decline: Divine Protection*

- In a rare instance of the 'Divine Protection' narrative, on 2 June, the bishop of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Nikoloz Pachuashvili, suggested on Mtavari TV that although scientists believe COVID-19 to be transmitted through saliva, this cannot be the case because there were no cases of COVID-19 infection where people were taking holy communion, and they did not disinfect the communion spoon (172 views).

2. *Reframing Russia: Russian Success and Leadership*

- On 2 June, Sputnik Abkhazia published an article (with video) entitled “Soviet miracle: the doctor explained the low-rate death with COVID-19 in post-soviet countries”, reporting that Aleksandr Miasnikov (a TV anchor and the director of Moscow clinical hospital N71), thinks that the low death rate from COVID-19 among the post-Soviet population stems from the wide implementation of the BCG vaccination programme in the Soviet era. Miasnikov also suggests that the previous spread of tuberculosis in the Soviet Union made the population's immune systems stronger and more resistant to COVID-19. He claims that Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians and Kazakhs have been far less likely to be victims of the disease than, for example, American, French or Italian people (21 interactions).

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

- On 3 June, the Facebook page “Georgia first” published a post (originally posted by Facebook user George Zardiashvili) claiming that Bill Gates is controlling the WHO and financed the Wuhan Laboratory in order to receive the virus from bats so that he could spread it and then provide an obligatory vaccination that would reduce the world population. The post also says that with this vaccine, created by Gates, almost 490,000 children were paralysed in India from 2000 to 2017. The author also implicates “Media Terrorists” (such as CNN, BBC, etc.) and insists that Georgia follows the steps of President Donald Trump and leaves the WHO (4 comments, 14 shares).
- On 1 June, TV Obieqtivi ran an interview with historian Tamar Kiknadze, who said that COVID-19 is a technology-related virus and that this process is controlled by the technological elite. Kiknadze claimed that increased online teaching and courses forces people to stay at home, and that this is done to increase unemployment (92 views)

4. *Misinformation: 5G.*

- The aforementioned post also opens with the words “Let's organize rallies in Georgia to immediately remove mobile transmitting antennas installed on the roofs of schools!” Claiming that these antennae are harmful for health, the author asks why the World Health Organization or the Ministry of Health of Georgia are not taking action. The post has had limited reach on Facebook (24 shares).

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.

There were no new or emerging narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic in the Hungarian press, which is currently more preoccupied with the Day of National Togetherness, the official centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Trianon on 4 June 1920 that ended the First World War and with it the Kingdom of Hungary. Pro-Kremlin communication has chosen to focus on this anniversary, and to emphasise the contentious elements of the treaty, especially the provisions that left significant Hungarian minority populations living outside Hungary's borders.

Compared to previous reports, George Soros was mentioned less, both in the press and on social media. Conspiracy theory pages continued to link Bill Gates to the pandemic. Interaction significantly decreased on COVID-19 related articles and posts.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

Zinc's media monitoring found the following relevant articles:

1. *Failing West: Incompetence; Exploitation*

- Origo.hu, the government's most vocal news outlet, continued to shame Sweden's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (86 interactions). The article cited a controversial academic, Yngve Gustafson, who said in an interview that the Swedish authorities have been euthanising elderly patients, instead of ventilating them. Note that a very similar article was published by RT in English.
- 888.hu, a right wing, strongly pro-government online news outlet, published an op-ed in which it argues that in the past few months, the opposition spread only lies in relation to the coronavirus law, proving their support for the pandemic rather than for the saving of lives. The article cites the more prominent critics of the government, calling them liars and puppets of George Soros. (1700 interactions)

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Doktor Gődény, a controversial medical influencer with over 100,000 followers on Facebook, has claimed that there is no pandemic. While sharing a Hungarian-subtitled video of a Stefano Montanari, another COVID-19-sceptic doctor from Italy, Gődény claimed that the health crisis is caused by a made-up virus. Among many other claims, Gődény also wrote that the yet-to-be-developed anti-coronavirus vaccine "will be a hoax" that will serve as a tool so that "anything could be injected" into people's bodies soon, as well as in the future. (2100 interactions, 146 comments, 2200 shares)
- Kimondott Igazságok (Outspoken truths), a fringe conspiracy portal, shared an article about the COVID-19-related claims of the popular British conspiracy theorist David Icke. The post quoted a banned YouTube interview with Icke from April, in which he suggested that the health crisis was created to provoke an economic crisis, and talked about possible connections between the virus and the 5G technology. The post was subsequently deleted.
- Additionally, Kimondott Igazságok referred to an earlier BBC interview with Bill Gates, in which Gates allegedly spoke about the possibility of "forced RNA injections" to treat the

coronavirus outbreak. In actuality, Gates only expressed his support towards making at least 7 billion COVID-19 vaccines, and never spoke of forced vaccinations. (115 interactions, 41 comments, 230 shares)

- Elég! (Enough!), a right wing, strongly pro-government platform, posted a picture of Donald Tusk saying that he reviled Hungary from Brussels, and did notdo anything to help stop the COVID-19 pandemic. The picture cited MEP Tamás Deutsch, of Fidesz, who said that "it is clear that [Tusk] is part of the problem and not part of the solution." (825 interactions, 69 comments and 130 shares)

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Independent media published the results of a Publicus survey which found that the majority of the Hungarian population says the government is shaping pandemic-related statistics for political gain. About 60% believe that the cabinet has used the much debated emergency COVID-19 law to push through legislation where it previously had been unable to do so. Nearly 60% of people believe that the government distorts pandemic statistics in line with its political interests. These results were not mentioned in any government-backed press nor on social media. (3500 interactions)

TOPICAL REPORT: Hungary: Sweden as a lesson in failed liberalism.

Analysis: Hungarian government media continues to vilify Sweden for its COVID-19 pandemic measures

The Hungarian government and its press allies continue to criticise Sweden's management of COVID-19 and compare it unfavourably to Hungary's success in managing the pandemic. Sweden has been a target of the Hungarian right since 2015, when Sweden opened its doors to asylum seekers and encouraged other European member states to follow suit, to the Hungarian government's consternation. Sweden's liberal LGBTQ+ policies have also made it a bogeyman for supporters of the Hungarian government.

Referring to the absence of COVID-19 lockdown policies in Sweden, pro-government media in Hungary claims that the liberal leadership chose the economy over saving lives. The press portrayed the situation in Sweden as a "catastrophe", saying that the government "sacrificed people older than 70 years old, to be able to care for its migrants, who are not even complying with the minimum safety requirements". In addition to the health aspects, the severity of the rise in unemployment (7-10%) was also exaggerated, saying that they "not only failed in caring for the sick but also didn't save the economy they wanted to protect".

Official government statements about Sweden on social media attract high levels of engagement and are then reported on in the government-backed media, including radio and television, the preferred media of Orbán's base.

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 output during the reporting period remained heavily critical of the Latvian government, promoting voices that claimed it had introduced lockdown unnecessarily and that it is enjoying the benefits of lockdown, as well claiming that decisions around the economic stimulus have been taken undemocratically.

These stories were identified by CWG partner organisations and Zinc's media monitoring. The narratives identified in disinformation stories this week have previously been observed in Latvia.

Social media conversation did not reference these narratives directly, although a post was identified which suggested that lockdowns had been a global "project" and thus unnecessary. Anti-vaccination narratives were also observed on social media. Otherwise, conversation on social media mainly linked to well-regarded media sources and was non-conspiratorial. The number of posts containing disinformation and misinformation was lower this reporting period, and engagement with these posts was insignificant.

These stories were not discussed in wider media coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19,. Media reports instead focused on a draft law to combat disinformation that has been submitted to parliament.

Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *FAILING WEST: Incompetence; Exploitation; Hypocrisy*

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

- Sputnik quoted People's Power Front leader Valentin Eremeev, who claimed that there "was no need whatsoever to introduce lockdown in Latvia", citing Belarus as an example where non lockdown measures had proven successful (286 interactions)

- Sputnik quoted Latvian MP and economist Viacheslav Dombrovskii, who claimed that the government is in no hurry to cancel lockdown as it is enjoying the unseen benefits that the lockdown period is bringing (261 interactions).

- Sputnik claimed that the decision to invest two billion dollars in the Latvian economy after the pandemic had been anti-democratic, as it was taken behind closed doors without the approval of the government or parliament (268 interactions).

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Conversation on social media was mainly non-conspiratorial, often linking to media sources regarded as accurate. A popular topic of conversation was Latvia's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. While it had been widely praised internationally, a press.lv article that quoted former president Valdis Zatlers, stating the government's handling of the pandemic was evidence that Latvia is a good place to live, was met with angry and sarcastic comments. A post containing a resident's complaints that bins had not been collected in her neighbourhood for the last five days due to the pandemic was also widely shared across groups.

- While some posts containing disinformation were identified, interaction with these posts were insignificant, with posts receiving fewer than 10 reactions.

- A post on САРАФАН. LV (официальная группа) (SARAFAN.LV (official group)) linked to an article published on x-true.info, an obscure Russian-language website. The article claimed that several countries were pulling out of the "coronavirus project", claiming that the pandemic had been exaggerated by the "global players" and that countries were now unwilling to take part in the "project" as their economies would not survive without the tourist season. The post has since been deleted from the group.

- A post on Наконец-то United Latvija! (Finally United Latvia!), group with 1,600 members, claimed that several attempts by governments and organisations to push through laws that would allow for forced vaccinations had failed. One instance highlighted by the post was an alleged lawsuit lost by Bill Gates that aimed to enforce vaccinations. The independent fact-checking service Infotagion found the claim to be false.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Diena, as well as LSM and Latvijas Avize, published an article on a draft law to combat disinformation. Diena conduced an interview with a legal advisor to the Ministry of the Interior, who claimed that the internet is highly saturated with disinformation (63 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 little overt disinformation in this reporting period. Hostile state media either published objective content about the progress of COVID-19 in Lithuania or turned their attention to other topics. Disinformation was observed in hostile state-aligned outlets Ekspertai.eu and RuBaltic; the former published an article on the supposed malign influence of the WHO, the latter a critical article on NATO carrying out exercises despite the pandemic.

Conversation on social media did not concern these topics and often linked to media sources widely considered trustworthy. The number of instances of dis- and misinformation were low and received little engagement. Posts containing dis- and misinformation mainly referenced well-known COVID-19 conspiracy theories, especially on the group UNFOLLOW 15min.lt.

The media reported on disinformation in the group UNFOLLOW 15min.lt, highlighting a post which suggested that the Health Ministry would give out iPhones in exchange for getting vaccinated.

Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *MALIGN GLOBAL ELITE: Reshaping society*

The following story was identified by a CWG partner organisation:

- Ekspertai.eu published an article on an interview with a Bulgarian political actor, who claimed that the WHO is run by the Rockefeller family and that leaders of all countries are forced to comply with WHO recommendations. (54 interactions)

2. *CONFLICT: NATO as a vector*

The following story was identified by a CWG partner organisation

- RuBaltic published an article that criticised NATO for carrying out exercises despite of the danger posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (865 interactions). This article was shared on Русская Литва (Russian Lithuania), a group with 15,700 members, where it attracted 58 interactions, 41 comments and 8 shares.

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- Conversation on social media mainly linked to media sources widely considered trustworthy. The main topics of conversation included the low levels of COVID-19 in the country, the decision to allow foreign nationals from countries with fewer than 25 cases per 100,000 people to enter the country as of July, and the possibility that the lockdown will be cancelled after 16 June.

- The number of posts containing disinformation and misinformation remain low during this reporting period, as well the overall number posts containing COVID-19-related

keywords. Posts containing dis- and misinformation also received low levels of interaction. Instances of dis- and misinformation mainly referenced conspiracy theories about the pandemic and were often found on one Facebook group.

- As observed in previous reports, several examples of content promoting conspiracy theories and misinformation were observed on the page UNFOLLOW 15min.lt. Examples include a video that claimed that a worldwide cult announced quarantine to destroy the economy and enforce chipping, and a post that claimed that the pandemic was part of a long term plan, citing the number of Hollywood movies about pandemics as evidence.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Delfi reported that a post on the Facebook group UNFOLLOW 15min.lt suggested that the Health Ministry would give out iPhones in exchange for getting vaccinated.

MOLDOVA

Summary

The 'Reframing Russia' narrative has reappeared, with articles from Sputnik suggesting that a new vaccine will soon emerge from Russia and that Russian doctors are leading the fight against the disease. Other narratives included 'Failing West' (with Flux.md amplifying criticism of the Romanian and Italian governments), 'Malign Global Elites' (with politician Iurie Rosca continuing to suggest that COVID-19 is being used to promote abortion) and 'Misinformation'.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Reframing Russia: Global Leadership; Success*

- Sputnik.md (4,530,000 views in the last six months according to SimilarWeb data) reported that Rosatom has announced the development of a new method for combating COVID-19. The text praises those who have worked to develop an unusual approach to treating COVID-19 by disinfecting the lungs with ultraviolet light, according to RIA Novosti. The article notes that this is an invention that belongs to the Russians; other states have not been able to develop such a thing.
- Another Sputnik article amplified the opinion of the retired medical service lieutenant, Boris Ghergokov, who says that the involvement of military virologists in testing the vaccine against COVID-19 will reduce the time for its development. The article highlights the role of Russian doctors in the fight against the disease. Again, RIA Novosti is cited (9 interactions).

2. *Failing West: Incompetence (Also: Moral Decline: Religious Freedom)*

- The prolific Flux.md (which features in almost every report on Moldova) shared the views of Romanian actor Dan Puric, who criticised the Romanian authorities for

mishandling COVID-19. Puric mentioned that measures taken by the government have been against the faith of the Romanian people, and against the country's honour. The article features a video of Puric (4 interactions).

- Another Flux.md article (with embedded video) reported that thousands of protestors gathered in Rome shouting "Liberta!" ("Freedom!") in protest against the way in which the Conte government has handled COVID-19, but also in protest against restrictions, the obligation to wear masks and compulsory vaccination. This had limited reach on Facebook (7 interactions).

3. *Malign Global Elites: Reshaping Society*

- On Flux.md the politician Iurie Rosca continues to suggest that abortion is being especially promoted during the COVID-19 crisis. He claims that the press seeks to maintain a state of psychosis and fear amongst people on the subject of abortion, and brands doctors who promote abortion amidst the pandemic as murderers and Satanists. The article features a video of Rosca, and is headlined "The confessions of a Christian optimist - 03.06.2020 The murderers of babies and their accomplices" (6 interactions).

4. *Misinformation: Hoax*

- In an article shared on Flux.md, it is suggested that COVID-19 is being used to promote 'directed' economic collapse and that the disease is in fact not as dangerous as other infections such as swine flu. Such statements are attributed to Ilie Şerbănescu, a Romanian economist., who was the Minister of Reform under Prime Minister Victor Ciorbea in the 1990s. The article cites as its source the website romanialibera.ro (3 interactions).
- Separately, further content on Flux.md suggested that COVID-19 is a fake pandemic, in an article (with just 26 shares) using text taken from an Orthodox blog in which it is claimed that a team of Australian researchers seeking a vaccine for COVID-19 discovered that the Sars-Cov-2 virus appears to have been specially designed and optimised to infect humans. At the same time, the article promotes the notion that the pandemic is fake. It also casts suspicion on Bill Gates and Anthony Fauci, suggesting that they are linked to COVID-19 and that such people and associations should be further investigated. The article source is cited as ortodoxinfo.ro (2 interactions).

MONTENEGRO

(NB: this entry covers the period of 27 May – 2 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 three relevant disinformation narratives: Moral decline (religious freedom), Reframing Russia (global leadership) and Failing West (hypocrisy).

The pro-Russian tabloid In4s published several articles of interest, including one featuring a Greek MP's statement that it would be better to die than to endure another lockdown during the Christmas holidays, as this hinders the freedom to celebrate a religious holiday. Another story in In4s focused on Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's statement that Western countries want to use the pandemic to punish governments that they do not like, and forbid countries affected by COVID-19 from turning to Russia for help.

On social media, users overwhelmingly focused on the official proclamation of the end of the pandemic in Montenegro, with some private users commenting on the failure of the US to handle the virus and reflected on the spread of conspiracy theories. The short documentary film Plandemic was also mentioned as it was analysed by the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje.

Wider media coverage of disinformation around COVID-19 reported that disinformation about 5G has been increasingly spreading in Montenegro.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. *Moral Decline: Religious Freedom*

- The pro-Kremlin In4s ran a story about the Greek MP Rachil Makri who stated that in the event of the quarantine being reintroduced, it would be better to 'die from the flu than to live according to the orders of the enemies of Christ'. Her grievances are related to the lockdown which prevented people from celebrating Easter and if the virus comes back later in the year, this might put a stop to Christmas religious celebrations (173 interactions).

2. *Reframing Russia: Global Leadership*

- In4s ran a story covering Russian foreign minister Lavrov's statement for the Chinese newspaper 'Global Times'. According to Lavrov, Western countries want to use the pandemic to punish governments they do not like and forbid countries affected by COVID-19 from turning to Russia for help (102 interactions).

3. *Failing West: Hypocrisy*

- In4s published an article reflecting on the Montenegrin government's reaction to the crisis in comparison to the rest of the world. The Montenegrin prime minister is depicted as having sided with the West, as opposed to Serbia or Russia (210 interactions).

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- There was commentary on the way the US has been handling the pandemic; especially in light of the ongoing protests for justice for George Floyd. One private user tweeted that Trump is purposefully adding fuel to the fire to help him win the November election because he's hoping that the protests will take the focus away from the catastrophic way he and his government have been handling the COVID-19 crisis.

- Many users speculated about whether or not the government would officially announce the end of the pandemic in Montenegro from June 1.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- News aggregator Café del Montenegro set out the findings of the Montenegrin Digital Forensic Centre (a portal/organisation dedicated to investigating and countering disinformation) which has found that there has been an increase in the spread of disinformation about 5G in Montenegro, as well as a rise in the number of online petitions. This has followed false reports that 5G has had negative health effects and has played a role in the spread of COVID-19.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Summary

Notable content perpetuated the narratives of 'Misinformation' (in an article and video regarding German doctors who are seeking to declare the "truth" about COVID-19), 'Reframing Russia' (in the suggestion that Russia is on the verge of discovering a dairy-based vaccine), and 'Malign Global Elites' (in the claim that Bill Gates and Microsoft seek to microchip people so that bodies can be placed under surveillance in exchange for cryptocurrency). 'Failing West' narratives were not present.

Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *Reframing Russia: Russian Success*

- An article on the Mkdpress WordPress site misleadingly suggested that Russia is on the verge of discovering a vaccine against COVID-19; the vaccine would be consumed orally as a dairy product. However, no evidence was offered to support this claim (24 interactions).

2. *Misinformation: Hoax; Expert Advice*

- An article (with video) on the 'Reporter' website claimed that a group of German doctors has established an organisation with the aim of announcing the truth about

COVID-19. According to these doctors, as reported here, the virus simply appears every year and measures against it are useless; the panic is planned and fraudulent, facilitated by the media. The article (with video) has been shared on three Facebook groups with a total of approximately 100,000 followers (3,677 interactions).

3. Malign Global Elites: Exploitation/Reshaping Society

- Also on the 'Reporter' site, it was claimed that Bill Gates and Microsoft have a patent (numbered 060606) for a microchip to be inserted into human bodies, placing them under surveillance in exchange for cryptocurrency. This has been shared on a Facebook page with a total of around 80,000 followers (414 interactions).

POLAND

Summary

'Misinformation' narratives continued to be notable, with content often amplified or shared by the Facebook group 'I Don't Believe in Coronavirus', which now has around 90,000 followers. The 'Malign Global Elites' narrative was also present, in content implicating Bill Gates and George Soros in COVID-19. Notably, video content appears to be especially prominent. The narrative of 'Failing West' was not present in this reporting period.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

1. Misinformation: Hoax; Expert Advice

- An outlet not seen before by the group offered a blog-style website post, shared also on Facebook (in a closed group of around 87,000 members), declaring that it is time for the truth to be known about COVID-19. It suggests that the information shared by official media is in contradiction to the view of scientists, and compiles the views of interviews with "German doctors" who do not believe in COVID-19, presenting this in a newsletter format (8,001 interactions).
- A video of what appears to be a news item from Media Narodowe was posted to the Facebook group "I Don't Believe in Coronavirus" (around 90,000 followers). The video has had more than 200,000 views on YouTube, and features an interview with a doctor who argues that the pandemic is not a pandemic (or even an epidemic) and that tests may be fake. Though subtle, her claims overlap somewhat with various disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories (359,323 views).
- A post on the WordPress site covid1984.pl advertised a book by Dr. Karina Reiss and Dr. Sucharit Bhakdi entitled 'Corona False Alarm?', claiming that the lockdown was a mistake and was implemented in order to control people. It has been shared by a Facebook group with around 90,000 members.
- The "I Don't Believe in Coronavirus" Facebook group (90,000 members) continues to be active. This week, for example, it shared a video from the TV channel 'wRealu24'

arguing against vaccination and claiming that governments are reducing civil rights, with societies being intentionally misled by mainstream media, funded by people such as Bill Gates and George Soros (15,706 views).

2. Malign Global Elites: Reshaping Society

- A video from Niezalezna TV (Independent TV) pointed to the 'luciferian and occultistic sources of globalism' and argued that COVID-19 was brought to us by Bill Gates, George Soros and others. It also reportedly suggested that Gates and his father are cooperating with Nazis to reduce the population. The video has been posted to numerous Facebook groups, and the NTV channel has 283,000 subscribers (9,175 views).

ROMANIA

Summary

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

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

The systematic dissemination of disinformation and misinformation has continued both in traditional and social media. However, it appeared that following the emergence of topics of interest that are not related to the ongoing pandemic (such as the ongoing protests and social tensions in the US or the vote in the Romanian Parliament on a law implementing sexual education in schools), disinformation on the topic of the COVID-19 epidemic in Romania has at least temporarily lost its position as the main focus of fringe media outlets.

Out of the narratives that circulate on the topic of the epidemic in Romania, the most notable are the ones on the alleged benefit of neoliberal global elites from the pandemic, the incompetence of the government in taking early action and subsequently offering support for businesses during the lockdown, and the alleged increase in popularity of Eurosceptic parties in Europe.

During this period, these stories broadly fell into four key themes: the Romanian State's response to COVID-19 is incompetent or corrupt; the EU has failed in its duty to help member states; global financial and political elites are taking advantage of COVID-19 to reshape society; and general misinformation about COVID-19.

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

Some of the narratives identified in disinformation stories this monitoring period have previously been observed in Romania, such as Euroscepticism, the theory concerning a planned pandemic and the threat posed by an alleged malign global elite.

Other conversation on social media around COVID-19 focused on the posts of political figures and anti-vaccination influencers, and some well-known conspiracy theories. See further detail in our 'social media section'.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

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

The following stories were identified by the CWG partner organisation and Zinc's media monitoring:

- Luju claims that the Romanian president, Klaus Iohnnis, had been informed about the danger of COVID-19 very early on, on 6 January. The article accuses Iohannis of failing to take action, as he was allegedly more preoccupied with his political war against PSD, the main opposition party (257 interactions). This story was identified both by Zinc and by the expert groups.
- Sputnik published an article where it presents the Eurosceptic parties in Italy as gaining a strong momentum following the failure of the present government in managing the coronavirus crisis. The article described the protest organised by Eurosceptic opposition parties in Rome on 2 June as being "huge". In reality the increase in support for the main Eurosceptic opposition parties has been modest (88 interactions).

The following stories were identified by Zinc's media monitoring:

- Active News reports on the protests held in Italy denouncing the way in which the Conte government handled the COVID-19 crisis. The article highlights quotes from the movement leaders who claim that the pandemic is hoax and that it was exploited to suppress their liberties. (2600 interactions)
- Stiri pe Surse claims that the WHO based its recommendations on research carried out by a fictitious company, without verifiable methodology or sources. It is claimed that the researchers commissioned by WHO do not have a background in science, that it has a poor web presence which undermines its credibility, and that one of its lead researchers has been accused of malpractice in the past. (5100 interactions)
- Stiri pe Surse claims that the European Commission has admitted that COVID-19 is not as dangerous as it previously stated, particularly with respect to its spread in workplaces. However, the article does not refer to an official statement, but to a comment made by an employee of the European Commission. It is implied that this will make European countries backtrack on harsh restrictions and the statement is framed as an admission of incompetence and guilt. (406 interactions)
- Stiri pe Surse reports on a statement by the Association for Chronic Diseases in Romania, which claims that the state of alert and regulations concerning Romanian hospitals are undermining the rights of patients. The examples include parents who

are unable to hold their newborn unless they take a COVID-19 test, and the denial of treatment for patients with lung conditions in COVID-19 hospitals. (128 interactions)

2. *Malign Global Elite (reshaping society)*

The following stories were identified by Zinc's media monitoring:

- Luba, a news website, published an article claiming that lockdown measures have killed Romanian companies, as the government did not support them during the crisis. The article, penned by the former Social Democrat Minister of the Economy, Ilan Laufer, makes a series of unsubstantiated claims and accusations towards an alleged total lack of economic support provided by the government for struggling Romanian businesses. He suggests that more than 25% of the Romanian companies are effectively bankrupt, because of the lack of any financial support from the state. (705 interactions)

3. *Misinformation (hoax, cure)*

- Active News claims that the Romanian Minister for Health, Nelu Tataru, supports mandatory vaccination. In fact this is largely a distortion, as Tataru explicitly said that he does not want to enforce mandatory COVID-19 vaccination when this is available, but only that he would it recommend it to the population, much like he would recommend the flu jab (644 interactions). On social media, Olivia Steer, a controversial anti-vaccination advocate, has criticized the alleged support of Tataru for vaccination. She also cites a study that allegedly shows that flu jabs cause COVID-19. In the comment section, there is overwhelming approval, with users claiming that people were given flu jabs to spread COVID-19.
- Active News continues to report on the German governmental adviser who allegedly exposed the COVID-19 pandemic as a false alarm. The adviser alleged that the pandemic has been greatly exaggerated in order to cause mass hysteria and that the German government has handled the crisis in an inadequate manner which instead of preventing deaths has cause more victims by leading people to become depressed or even commit suicide. The article further claims that the German state has spread fake news in order to maintain its control over the population. (2600 interactions)
- Stiri pe Surse reports on the weekly YouTube series of political analysis created by Dana Budeanu, a celebrity and author. In this week's edition, Budeanu claims that the government is maintaining the state of emergency and all of its protection measures for profit and political gain. She claims that the virus no longer exists and compares the pandemic to climate change and pollution, which she also deems to be fake news. (1100 interactions)
- Stiri pe Surse reports that a British research team has shown that ibuprofen can cure COVID-19. The article does not cite an official study, and highlights the idea that breathing difficulties caused by COVID-19 could be treated with a very cheap, easily available drug which would allegedly go against Big Pharma’s interests. (96 interactions)

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.
- In a post on his Facebook page, Romanian senator Calin Popescu Tariceanu presents some documents relating to the communication between the Romanian embassy in Beijing and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accusing the President and his government of inaction towards the prospect of an incoming pandemic. Although the documents are genuine and there was indeed an exchange of information regarding the situation in China, the documents do not highlight any information with regards to an imminent threat to Romania in the earlier period of the epidemic. Romania acted in a similar manner to most other EU member states.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- eBihoreanul published an op-ed that addresses the spread of misinformation in Romania and how this has led to the spreading of COVID-19, because people did not take protections measures. The author outlines and seeks to debunk the main conspiracy theories, including those linked to Bill Gates, 5G, a planned pandemic or COVID-19 as a hoax.
- Romania TV reported on the statement of Raed Arafat, in charge of planning the response to the pandemic, denouncing misinformation in Romania. Arafat states that the spread of fake news which diminishes the severity of the pandemic will lead to more infections by making people believe that protection measures are unnecessary.
- On 2 June 2020, the document for the National Strategy of Defense for the period of 2020-2024 was approved and was sent to the Chamber of Deputies to be voted upon. It placed an emphasis, among other things, on the threat to national security posed by the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation online, including around COVID-19.

SERBIA

Summary

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

Zinc identified four relevant disinformation narratives: Failing West (hypocrisy), with the Montenegrin government being accused of being hypocritical for reopening its border to other countries but not Serbia; Misinformation (hoax) with a story in the pro-government Kurir covering a German doctor calling the pandemic a 'mafia trick'; Reframing Russia (Russian success) with Sputnik reporting on Russia's plans to test a vaccine on soldiers soon; and Misinformation (cure) with the pro-government Informer reporting on the claims of the high-

profile pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović's that Serbia has long been trying retroviral drugs, intended for other illnesses, to treat coronavirus symptoms.

On social media, users mostly shared links to articles relating to statements by Nestorović, who has been in the headlines consistently with various scandalous statements. Most recently he has claimed that Serbia's COVID-19 crisis headquarters has falsified the number of recorded deaths and cases.

Wider media coverage of disinformation around COVID-19 focused largely on debunking false information and reporting research into mistaken beliefs about the pandemic.

Dis-/Mis-information themes

4. *Failing West: Hypocrisy*

- The most engaged-with article in the period of interest came from the pro-government Informer. It covers the statements made by pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović, who has accused the Montenegrin government of falsely claiming they are 'Corona-free' and doctoring their case figures the tourist season will soon be starting. According to Nestorović, Montenegro does not have sufficient laboratory capacity to have carried out sophisticated tests. His explanation goes against the official statements and case numbers put out by the Montenegrin government earlier in the week (721 interactions).
- In light of the Montenegrin borders reopening, the pro-government Kurir ran a story which included statements by the Serbian foreign minister, who believes that Montenegro continues to blacklist Serbia for political reasons and this, not COVID-19, is why they are not letting Serbians into Montenegro yet (269 interactions).

5. *Misinformation: hoax*

- The pro-government Kurir covered the press conference of the group of German doctors, Ärzte für Aufklärung (Doctors for Education; see the report of 28 May) in which one of their number explains that the apparent pandemic is a 'mafia trick' because coronaviruses simply appear at certain times of the year, meaning that the anti-pandemic measures implemented to date have no impact on the virus (695 interactions).

6. *Reframing Russia: Russian success*

- The Russian state-funded outlet Sputnik reported statements by the Russian Ministry of Defence announcing that a vaccine for the virus will soon be tested soon on 50 soldiers, five of whom are women (22 interactions).

7. *Misinformation: cure*

- The pro-government Informer reported on a statement made by Dr Nestorović in which he discussed the possible benefit of using existing medicines in treating the virus. He

explained that Serbia has been using various locally-produced antiretroviral drugs to treat COVID-19 symptoms (63 interactions).

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- The most engaged-with post in the period of interest came from the Facebook group Stop prisilnoj KORONA vakcinaciji i globalizaciji (Let's put a stop to forceful Coronavirus vaccination and globalisation). The post shared an article from an online outlet Srpska Reč, reporting on the statement by Nestorović who reportedly 'admitted to the crisis headquarters in Serbia inflating the number of cases'. He said that it's questionable whether all the people who were reported to have died of COVID-19 really have, as in some cases it was not clear and there was no testing performed (132 Comments, 292 Shares). Users who engaged in discussion of the post praised the pulmonologist for speaking out, others said that they are not surprised that the numbers were fabricated because everyone, including Bill Gates, wants to make people get vaccinated.

Coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19

- Startit, a movement which promotes critical thinking and open information sharing, published an article with an overview of some of the most-spread disinformation stories and lies involving COVID-19 that cost people their lives around the world (12 interactions).

- The independent daily Danas covered an analysis done by BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network) who reported on there being more than 150 instances of violating people's digital rights during the COVID-19 pandemic in Central and South-East Europe related to spreading disinformation, propaganda and misinformation.

- The aggregate portal Vesti ran a story originating from b92 about how a one quarter of Russian citizens believe that the virus has been made up for someone's personal interest, which was discovered in an independent research done by the Moscow Higher School of Economics.

- The BBC's article with an overview of fake news, misinformation and hacker attacks from Serbia and the BBC region for the past week was widely covered by the aggregate portal Naslovi, pro-government Telegraf and the local portal 021 based in Vojvodina.

SLOVAKIA

Summary

Mis- and disinformation content highlighted by the CWG again fell under the themes of **'**Misinformation' (with anti-mask and anti-quarantine discourse continuing, alongside assertions that there will be no second wave); 'Conflict' (with one article amplifying suspicion surrounding US bio-labs); 'Malign Global Elites' (with multiple suggestions that the pandemic is being used to increase population control and surveillance); 'Failing West' (with the World Health Organization amongst the institutions being framed as exploitative and failed).

Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *Misinformation: Expert Advice*

- A Hlavny Spravy article suggested that warnings about a second wave of COVID-19 are creating fear and are groundless; the virus is losing strength. The article headline suggests that this is the view of Italian doctors specifically, but the piece also quotes a Czech microbiologist, Václava Adamková, and says that an increasing number of experts believe the panic to be unfounded (59 interactions).
- In Zem a Vek, it was claimed that quarantine makes no sense. The piece cited an Irish scientist who claims that wearing masks is useless and that we should instead seek to improve immunity. The scientist is also reported as saying that there is no 'second wave', and the article suggests that politicians simply want to create fear in people (1,548 interactions). Articles from Hlavne Spravy (2,903 interactions) and Infovojna (6,410 interactions) also insisted that there will be no second wave, quoting virologist Soňa Peková.
- An article from Badatel.net claimed that vaccines can cause autism, citing statistics on boys in Ireland and saying that the crisis of vaccine-induced autism is worse than COVID-19 but that nobody cares (224 interactions).

2. *Conflict: Bio-lab*

- An Infovojna article stated that the US is researching dangerous pathogens in bio-labs in Georgia, Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states. It reports that one of the US's military labs – Fort Detrick in the USA – was closed twice last year due to the inappropriate handling of pathogens, and that Russia has called for an international response to the issue (112 interactions).

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

- A video posted on the Zem a Vek site offered various conspiracy theories; it quotes the aforementioned Dr. Soňa Peková, who claims that the virus was probably created artificially; it suggests that Bill Gates and the Rockefeller Foundation are creating tools for population control; claims that pro-American Slovak media are spreading fear; suggests that the virus is being abused for the creation of total surveillance (18 interactions). It has received 6,400 views on YouTube.
- Also suggesting exploitation, an article on Badatel.net listed the ten steps needed to create a pandemic and abuse it for the creation of a police state (1,815 interactions).

- A Zem a Vek article headlined "Summer 2020. The last season of non-totalitarian tourism?" suggested that elites are abusing the crisis in order to control the population, and that this summer might be the last one that is 'free'; whilst people are happy that they can go on holiday, elites are concerned that this means that people are leaving the electronic monitoring web and living spontaneously. The elites will therefore aim to influence next year's summer season to make it more regulated and digitised (199 interactions).

4. *Moral Decline: Value Failure*

- A Hlavny Dennik article – from Russia Today – entitled "Does coronavirus bring an end to liberalism and a triumph of authoritarianism?" - discussed measures taken against COVID-19 by various democracies and authoritarian regimes. It suggested that COVID-19 has shown that democracies may not be as liberal as they seem and that they care about winning people's approval just as much as authoritarian regimes do; ideally, the world needs a balance of democracy and autocracy (17 interactions).

5. *Failing West: Incompetence; EU failure; Exploitation (Also: Malign Global Elites; Moral Decline)*

- An article on the website Extraplus quoted Russian politician Aleksey Pushkov suggesting that the US is starting to fall apart; it cannot handle the pandemic nor help its European allies; its strength is also weakening in Syria and Afghanistan. Whilst this is an expression of opinion, the fact that Pushkov's comments are circulating in Slovakia amidst the pandemic is notable (84 interactions).
- A Zem a Vek article suggested that the World Health Organization (WHO) is a puppet of pharmaceutical companies and Bill Gates, who orchestrated things so that the organisation's Tedros Ghebreyesus would be in the spotlight. The article also repeats the conspiracy theory regarding population reduction and suggests that Gates is trying to mask this with the term 'planned parenthood' (122 interactions).
- An alarming article from Infovojna reported on protests against anti-COVID-19 measures in Germany, in which people reportedly used Nazi symbolism in order to express opposition to mask-wearing and vaccination. Its title reads: "The Final Solution to the Coronavirus Question or Veils and Vaccinations will set you free: Germans wore Jewish stars as a parallel to Nazism in protests against quarantine" (139 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 previously-identified narratives, in stories and claims such as: small businesses are dying amidst COVID-19, as the government opted to support big business only; Ukraine has signed up for the exploitative IMF's stand-by arrangement to help to address COVID-19; relatively positive statistics on COVID-19 in Ukraine should not give rise to excessive optimism; the development of a COVID-19 vaccine is pervaded with commercial interests.

A number of new narratives were identified, in stories and claims such as: protests over the death of George Floyd in the US are caused by economic hardship and extensive lockdown; Ukraine's State Reserves are exhausted; Ukraine has spent the money from the national COVID-19 fund in vain; bacteriological laboratories in Ukraine are under American extraterritorial jurisdiction; there is a high risk of new regional conflicts due to a sharp drop in living standards in the poorest countries and increased competition for resources caused by the pandemic.

Zinc identified the diminishing presence of COVID-19 in social media conversation. Whilst recurring COVID-19-related disinformation narratives did circulate, their engagement numbers were comparatively low. Zinc observed the failure of the government to effectively refute the popular disinformation narrative from previous reporting period, in which it was claimed that the IMF's stand-by arrangement to help the country to combat COVID-19 is exploitative.

Media coverage of disinformation concentrated on a publication from the Security Service of Ukraine, reporting that it systematically exposes new pro-Russian agitators who create panic during the time of quarantine.

Dis-/Misinformation themes

1. *Reframing Russia: Russian success*

Zinc's media monitoring observed:

- Russian state-owned outlet Ukraina.ru conducted an interview with political philosopher Sergey Ivannikov who compared Russia's and Ukraine's handling of the pandemic. In Ivannikov's opinion, Ukraine's relatively positive statistics on COVID-19 should not give rise to excessive optimism. Whilst Russia's potential to steer out of crisis was emphasised, Ukraine was portrayed as having a real chance of being transformed into merely a donor for transnational corporations. (0 interactions)

2. *Malign Global Elite: Exploitation*

Zinc's media monitoring observed:

- The junk online outlet 'from-ua' referred to a doctor of medical sciences, Tatyana Bakhteeva (from Donetsk, Ukraine) who is agitating against COVID-19 vaccinations by claiming that vaccination is pervaded with business interests, rather than medical considerations (2,714 interactions).

- RSO Ukraina.ru published an interview with Soviet-Ukrainian composer Vladimir Bystryakov, who said that COVID-19 probably has an artificial origin, and stressed the 'planned' nature of the pandemic. "It is possible that a pandemic is an element of a global economic warfare" added Mr. Bystryakov (9 interactions)

3. *Failing West: Exploitation, Incompetence, Hypocrisy*

Zinc's media monitoring observed:

- Ukraina.ru featured an article in which its most prominent author Rostislav Ishchenko expressed the idea that Ukraine does not possess any control over bio labs on its territory and claimed that the labs are under American extraterritorial jurisdiction (80 interactions).
- Ukraina.ru portrayed the situation regarding shortcomings in tonnes of grain in Ukraine as revealed by the audit service to mean that there is practically no provision at all left in Ukraine in case of emergency (142 interactions).
- Ukraina.ru described protests over the death of George Floyd in the USA as the 'American Maidan' and as the result of systemic crisis integral to the American economy, only exacerbated by COVID-19. In the case of its failure to deal with the pandemic, the article reads, president Trump, in order to win upcoming elections, has found a way to escalate domestic political tension (326 interactions).
- The Russian disinformation amplifier, Strana, covering social unrest in the US triggered by George Floyd's death, concentrated on the massive 'explosion of rage', which it says was caused "not by racist problems, but by a prolonged lockdown due to coronavirus and mass unemployment" (318 interactions).
- The website of PRM, former president Poroshenko's TV channel, produced an article in which a member of the Ukrainian parliament, Oleh Syniutka, proclaimed that he did not understand where all the money from the national COVID-19 fund of 64 billion UAH had gone (26,762 interactions, 19,271 likes + 3,330 comments + 4,161 shares). Only 20% of the funds have been spent so far. Syniutka's speech, however, has led to many Facebook pages and groups to speculate over the ineffectiveness of 60bn UAH being spent on COVID-19 (1,305 shares).
- Ukraina.ru paid attention to the way in which American mass media allegedly demonstrate the 'wonders of media manipulation' by portraying the US as great, Russia and China as bad, and the WHO as in need of reform (20 interactions)
- Ukraina.ru spoke about drug addiction and drunkenness in the Ukrainian army, suggesting that these have become a more dangerous pandemic than COVID-19 (38 interactions).

4. *Conflict: COVID-19 War*

Zinc's media monitoring observed the following:

- Ukraina.ru published an article which claimed that the pandemic has revealed that the EU is in crisis and needs to be reformed: "previous dialogue within the association does not exist, countries cannot and do not want to help each other, borders are

closed". It was also added that with the pandemic progressing, there is "a high risk of new regional conflicts due to a sharp drop in living standards in the poorest countries and increased competition for resources".

- Ukraina.ru produced an interview with political expert Alexander Asafov who said that "after the pandemic, local wars and new alliances await us" (6 interactions).
- Outlet of interest 'From-ua' referred to a publication by mainstream *Obozrevatel* that cited the Facebook page of a Ukrainian Joint Forces Operation that claimed Russian-backed forces on the temporary occupied territories of Donbas have been building up armaments and preventing free access for OSCE monitoring missions on the grounds of fears of spreading COVID-19 (177 interactions).

5. *Misinformation: Cure*

CWG partner organisations observed the following:

- The website Homeopat Kiev promoted homeopathic treatment for COVID-19 (8 interactions). The author appeared to equate COVID-19 with flu.

Wider social media conversation around COVID-19

- On 2 June, news about a shortage of grain intended to cover Ukrainian demand in case of emergency was identified by the audit service. Social media in Ukraine has seen strong engagement numbers in reaction to this. 185 public posts on Facebook were identified on the topic by Crowdrange software, with a total interaction number of 82,766 from 1-3 June.
- There was a trending post on Facebook from a user based in Chernivtsi, Ukraine, who claimed that she had been infected with COVID-19 twice (1,371 likes + 291 comments + 465 shares).
- The Колесо Событий (Wheel of Events) public page and an amplifier to junk outlet From-ua shared an article in which the idea was pursued that a COVID-19 vaccine, when it becomes available, is pervaded with business interests, rather than medical considerations, collecting 860 likes + 127 comments + 825 shares.
- A widely shared post by Facebook public pages and groups of interest described the protests taking place in the US as "another Maidan" and implied that their existence proved the virus was fraudulent, asking "after the beginning of the Maidan in the USA, where did the coronavirus go?" (459 shares).
- The Одноклассники (Classmates) public group (186K members) shared a recurring disinformation narrative from previous reporting periods that quarantine in Ukraine is going to be in place for at least two years (344 likes + 202 comments + 189 shares).
- During this reporting period we observed plenty of posts alleging that a boy foresaw COVID-19 long before the start of the pandemic (46 shares).
- Facebook page of interest Persona.LIVE (122K followers) posted a message claiming that until now, Ukrainian medics were completely wrong when making COVID-19 diagnoses, and, apparently, the real number of COVID-19 cases is much higher (92 likes + 136 comments + 26 shares)

Coverage of dis/misinformation relating to COVID-19

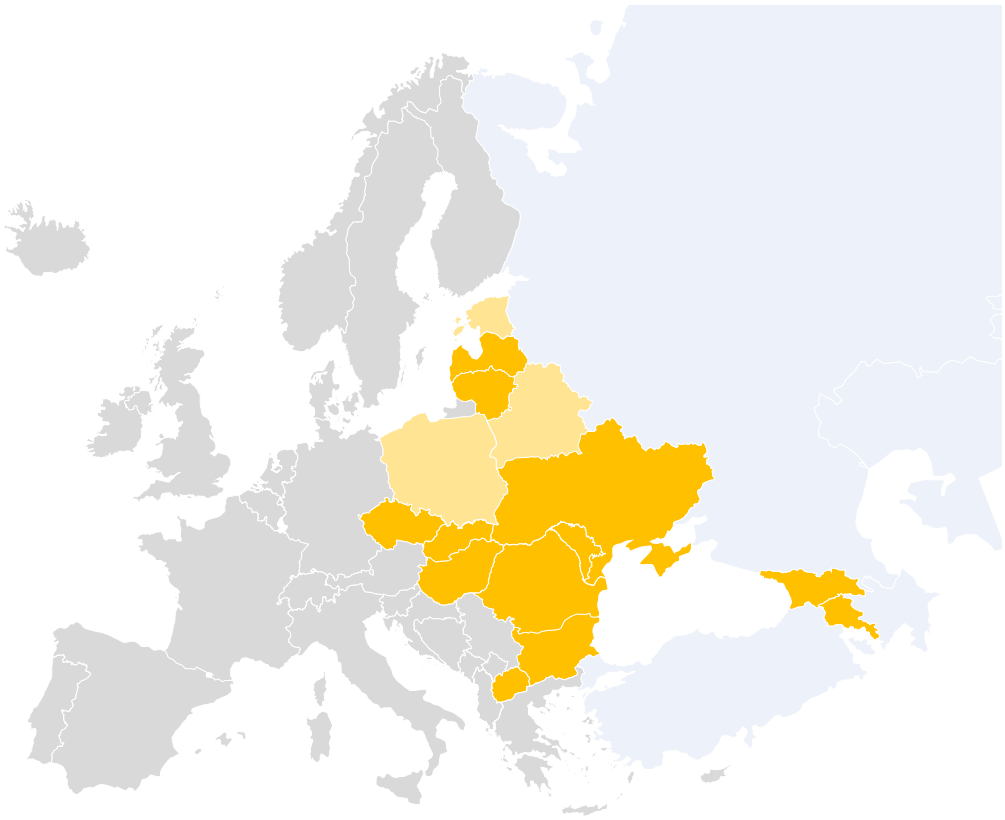
- Major Ukrainian outlets engaged with the story of the Security Service of Ukraine reporting that it has uncovered hundreds of online COVID-19 fake agitators since the beginning of quarantine, 18 of which were active under command from Russia.
- Regional Ukrainian outlet MV.ua wrote about the type of COVID-19-related fake stories that people are charged with spreading in Ukraine (3 interactions).
- Ukrainian Pravda produced an explanatory analysis of how fakes are getting traction on social media. It used factors such as social media algorithms, activity of bot farms, echo chambers and so on to claim that the infodemic is as dangerous as the pandemic (744 interactions).
- Independent fact-checking organisation StopFake debunked several COVID-19-related fake stories, including that the world is preparing for a dangerous anti-coronavirus vaccination, and that after vaccination against coronavirus, the world's population will be divided into two camps (139 and 39 interactions respectively).

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 29 May and 02 June.

1. FAILING WEST



Narrative is present in this report

Narrative is present in this and the previous report

Sub-narratives that constitute this narrative:

a. **EU collapse: The EU is collapsing due to COVID-19**
b. **EU failure: The EU is failing in its duty to help other states deal with COVID-19**
c. **Incompetence: Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is incompetent**

d. Hypocrisy: Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is hypocritical
e. Corruption: Western/liberal actors' response to COVID-19 is corrupt
f. Exploitation: States and global institutions are taking advantage of COVID-19 to exploit others

All of the above were present in this reporting period.

Comparison of narratives across countries

The suggestion that the West is failing and dealing poorly with COVID-19 continues to be observed in most countries covered by the CWG, but seems relatively quiet in Bulgaria and Poland, and not noteworthy in Montenegro and Serbia. **Hungary** continues to be notable for self-praise in particular, and for the role of social media in both spreading and engaging with 'Failing West' disinformation.

EU Failure and Collapse

In the previous report, content suggesting that the EU is failing and/or working to nefarious ends was noted in Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Slovakia and Ukraine. This week, such content was less present in **Czechia** but slightly more present in **Estonia** and **Lithuania**.

Articles suggesting that the EU will soon disintegrate were notable in **Georgia** (where GeWorld quoted former German ministers of foreign affairs, who reportedly claim that the EU abandoned Italy and Spain amidst COVID-19 and will soon collapse, and also shared the views of Italian Prime Minister Guiseppe Conte and French far-right politician Marine Le Pen regarding the EU), **Moldova** (where Sputnik reported that anger against the EU in Italy has increased, and drew also on comments from George Soros to suggest that the EU is failing, due to it being too unwieldy to tackle a crisis such as COVID-19), **North Macedonia** (where the outlet Sloboden Svet also quoted Soros in order to suggest that the EU is failing) and **Slovakia** (where a Hlavny Dennik piece, "The EU is closer to disintegration than ever before...", claimed that the Union is heavily in debt but hiding this).

Separately, content suggesting that the EU is failing to assist others amidst COVID-19 was notably promoted by outlets such as RuBaltic and Sputnik across the Baltic states and in Moldova. RuBaltic articles featured the suggestion (in **Estonia**) that the Baltics will get at best minimal support from the EU's COVID-19 fund and the prediction (in **Lithuania**) that the financial burden of supporting EU member states post-COVID-19 will be borne by central and eastern European states. Meanwhile, in **Moldova**, Sputnik suggested that the EU has been facing a medical crisis for years (revealed by COVID-19) and lacks a clear COVID-19 recovery plan, compared to Russia, China and Cuba.

Other countries in which the narrative of EU Failure was noted include **Romania** (where the prolific outlet Stiri pe Purse claimed that the EU has failed regarding COVID-19 and that European scientists agree that travel restrictions are useless), **Slovakia** (where it was claimed

that as EU citizens struggle on amidst COVID-19, migrants in Europe are faring well: "Coronavirus: House arrest for Europeans, amnesty for illegal immigrants") and **Ukraine.**

Exploitation via Financial Assistance

Whilst the above cases sometimes implied a narrative of 'exploitation', content primarily alleging that states and global institutions are taking advantage of COVID-19 to exploit others was found in **Belarus, Georgia, Hungary** and **Romania.** In Georgia, for example, GeWorld suggested that financial help from the EU comes at a price (that of being a puppet state and colony of the West). A similar claim was made in Romania on the Ziaristi website, where it was argued that the EU seeks to enslave poor member states through financial aid.

Beyond the EU: Targeting Values and Institutions

In the previous report, it was observed that some outlets (Sputnik in Moldova and News Front in Bulgaria) focused their criticism on the World Health Organization. This week, such content was notable in **Czechia** and **Slovakia**, where – via AC24 in the former, and Zem a Vek and Hlavny Spravy in the latter – it was suggested that the WHO had supported China in allowing Wuhan citizens to travel, thus spreading the disease. This was presented in the context of President Trump declaring the end of the US relationship with the WHO.

Note that content regarding the WHO is also found in the 'Malign Global Elites' and 'Misinformation' sections of this report.

Domestic Incompetence, Corruption and Hypocrisy

Compared to the previous reporting period, content explicitly targeting health professionals (e.g. criticism of the Armenian Ministry of Health, or of Czechia's Roman Prymula) appears to have lessened. However, allegations continue to circulate regarding the incompetence, corruption or hypocrisy of national-level governments.

Some content targeted government officials. In **Armenia**, the doctor and activist Marina Khachatryan (a regular feature of these reports) repeated the claim that the Prime Minister's family has its own mask production business, in a video seen more than 7,000 times. In Bulgaria, an article with more than 23,000 interactions misreported the 'news' that the head of the National Crisis HQ had suggested that those who refuse to be vaccinated against COVID-19 should be fined and imprisoned for up to five years. In Romania, the suggestion persisted that there is a hidden agreement, between hospitals and the government, to falsely attribute deaths to COVID-19. Other content in that country similarly criticised its health system (and websites such as Luju.ro and Justitiarul.ro criticised President Iohannis himself, branding him as – amongst other things - an autocrat, anti-semite, and as having undermined people's right to life by denying those with chronic conditions the right to good healthcare). In **Ukraine**, too, news aggregator Znaj.ua argued that the medical system there had failed to help COVID-19 patients, whilst Strana claimed that Ukraine is treating such patients with US drugs that increase mortality. In **Poland**, members of the Facebook group "I Don't Believe in Coronavirus'

(89,000 members) continued to suggest that the crisis is a lie and that government measures are unjust.

Meanwhile, in the Baltics, some governments were framed as incompetent for failing to orientate themselves more towards *Russia*. In **Estonia** and **Lithuania**, for example, RuBaltic argued that cooperation with Moscow could improve the Baltics' economic outlook, but that those countries are too preoccupied with serving NATO. In **Latvia**, Baltnews claimed a similar thing, and called the threat of Russian aggression "a myth". There, Sputnik also shared criticism of the Defence Minister's call to increase spending.

The Incompetence of other Governments

Some outlets targeted governments not of their 'own' countries, but others. In **Belarus**, for example, Sputnik amplified a Russian senator's view that US attempts to blame China for COVID-19 come from its desire to distract attention from its own failure. In **Estonia**, Baltnews published an interview with a Chinese academic accusing the US of essentially doing the same. In **Ukraine**, the YouTube channel of the pro-Kremlin News-Front uploaded a video featuring commentator Anton Rozenvain describing COVID-19 as exemplifying US failure and suggesting that Ukraine's future depends on convergence with Russia. Elsewhere, content targeted Germany (in **Belarus**, the newspaper Brestskiy Kurier claimed that Berlin's anti-lockdown demonstrations saw some people 'dreaming about asylum in Belarus'; in **Czechia**, German protests were also highlighted), and the UK.

Self-praise and Praise of Others

Hungarian self-praise continues, promoted by outlets such as Origo.hu - a vocal pro-government portal – which, for example, published an article accusing opposition media of spreading disinformation in relation to COVID-19-related law and the government's handling of the crisis. The Facebook posts of government officials mirrored such claims. Meanwhile, TV channel M1 – and its written counterpart Hirado.hu - claimed that most people are satisfied with the government's approach, but that fake news continues to mislead people.

In **Moldova**, Sputnik praised Hungary's Viktor Orban for his approach to COVID-19. In **North Macedonia**, meanwhile, Press 24 amplified Belarusian pride, quoting President Lukashenko's self-praise regarding his country's handling of COVID-19 (e.g. its decision not to halt production). The article was shared on Facebook pages/groups with approximately 400,000 followers, but had few interactions.

Impact and Engagement

Whilst 'Failing West' narratives are found on - and shared via - social media, this reporting period did not see a wealth of engagement with such stories. However, there were some notable cases of social media being used to amplify or share disinformation.

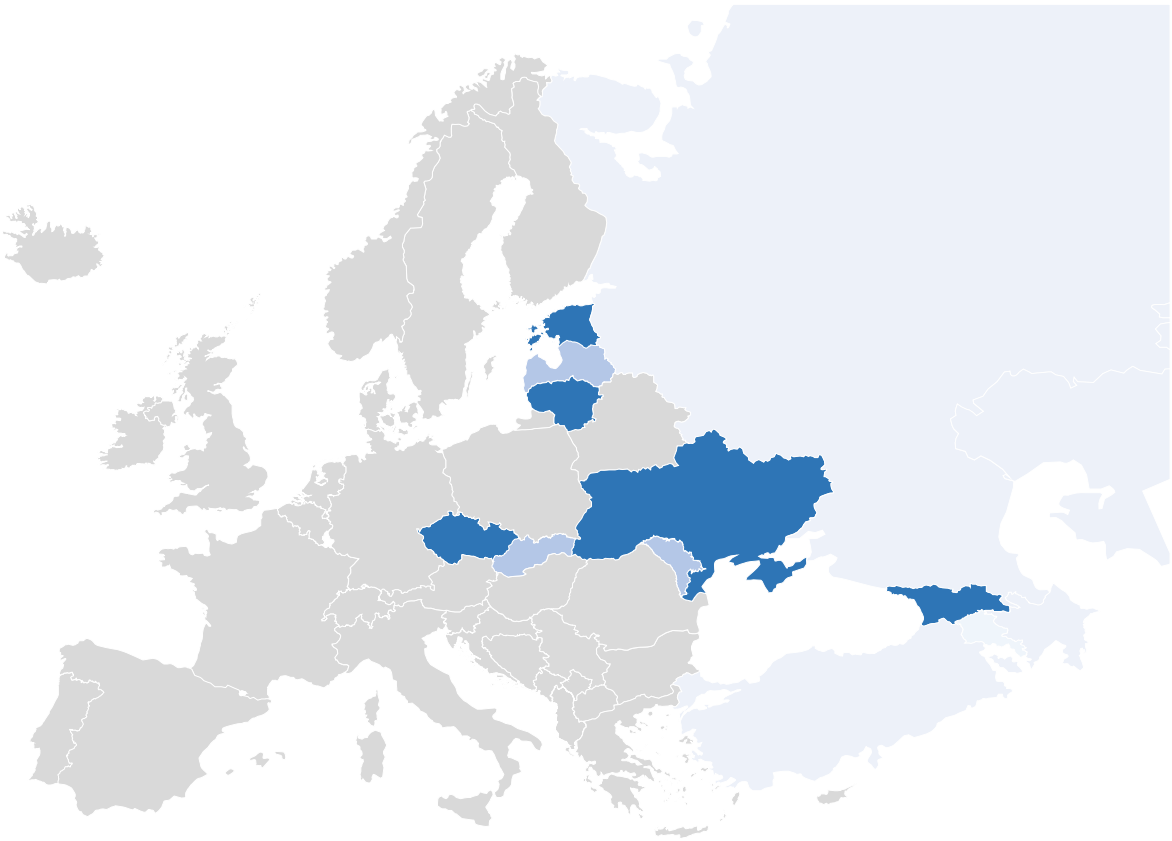
For example, in **Belarus**, the pro-government page Telescope expressed the view that the EU will not assist the country financially in fighting COVID-19, because the IMF is opposed to

it. Meanwhile, a post on the group 'Настоящая Беларусь (Real Belarus)', which has 4,000 members, claimed that the authorities were making doctors sign papers stating that new cases were the result of medical negligence, so as to prevent them from getting money from the government (115 likes).

Latvia also saw anti-government criticism shared via social media, in the form of a video posted on Facebook by the political party 'Russian Union of Latvia', criticising the government's economic response to COVID-19 (250 interactions). RuBaltic also posted a video criticising the government. Similarly, **Romania** saw anti-government content spread via social media, including when the president of the New Romania Party (a far-right/nationalistic non-parliamentary party), issued a press release via Facebook, accusing the government of trying to impose a "dictatorship of fear" (5,000 views).

In Hungary, popular social media posts were those in which pro-government press, officials, or the governing party FIDESZ, continued to attack the opposition for allegedly spreading false information about the country's COVID-19 law. However, not all users agreed with such messages, with some pointing out their 'propaganda' tone.

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

Whilst 'Bio-lab' and 'War' narratives were present, that suggesting that NATO soldiers are spreading COVID-19 was absent (though some content nonetheless suggested that NATO was, in general, acting aggressively and therefore selfishly amidst the pandemic).

Comparison across countries

Content falling within the 'conflict' theme was identified in a number of countries. The 'bio-lab' sub-narrative remains the strongest, and persists in **Georgia** (where content targeted the

Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab in particular), but was also observed in **Czechia, Moldova, Slovakia** and **Ukraine.** Last week, content targeting NATO was minimal; this week, none at all was observed. Meanwhile, content suggesting that COVID-19 may lead to war was once again observed mainly in smaller countries – **Lithuania, Latvia** and **Georgia**. However, some content from **Ukraine** did suggest that Russia may launch a military strike on Ukraine.

Bio-Lab

As previously, **Georgia** is the focal point of the claim that COVID-19 was made in – or spread from - a lab. Various content targeted the Tbilisi-based Lugar Lab (for example, Sputnik suggested that it serves the aims of the US Defense Department and reported Kremlin concerns regarding insect-testing there; the same outlet published an article claiming that in 2018, the number of people infected with meningitis in Kazakhstan increased dramatically and that this may have been an intentional outcome of American bio-weapons tests in Almaty). Interestingly, the usual Georgian propagators of bio-lab theories (such as GeWorld and the newspaper Asaval-Dasavali) seemed relatively quiet.

Czechia was also a site for the circulation of 'bio-lab' claims. This week, Protiproud speculated about US bio-labs surrounding China and Russia and suggested that Ukraine and Georgia could be turned into "biological bombs"; an article on the website 'Arfa' suggested that COVID-19 may have been created to serve the interests of pharmaceutical companies; the website Prvni Zpravy repeated the suggestion that US bio-labs are dangerous, stating "The US has eight laboratories in Ukraine with dangerous infections!".

Other notable content was found in **Moldova** (in a Sputnik article quoting Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, claiming that biological weapons are being created in US bio-labs in the region), **Slovakia** (Infovojna considered the theory that Ukraine and Georgia could be turned into "biological bombs" due to the presence of bio-labs) and **Ukraine** (where the Russian state-funded outlet Ukraina.ru produced a video in which author Rostislav Ishchenko expressed the idea that American bio-labs there that process dangerous viruses do not differ much from those working on bacteriological weapons - 39,000 views on YouTube).

COVID-19 War

Again, the suggestion that COVID-19 may lead to (or is being used to create) war was found in relatively smaller countries, including the **Baltic states** (with Ukraine being an exception). In Latvia, it was reported that NATO has failed to adhere to a moratorium on training exercises and has therefore acted selfishly. Similarly, in Lithuania, RuBaltic expressed the view that some NATO members (including the Baltic states) are antagonising Russia so as to make the rivalry with Moscow more salient and ensure that NATO continues to be funded during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, in **Georgia**, the outlet Saqinform focussed on US bio-labs and the Lugar Lab, positing that the global network of bio-labs was created by the US in order to invent deadly viruses. The article headline suggests that the pandemic is a "rehearsal for a new world war". Separately, the pro-Kremlin GeWorld.ge published an interview with priest Giorgi Razmadze,

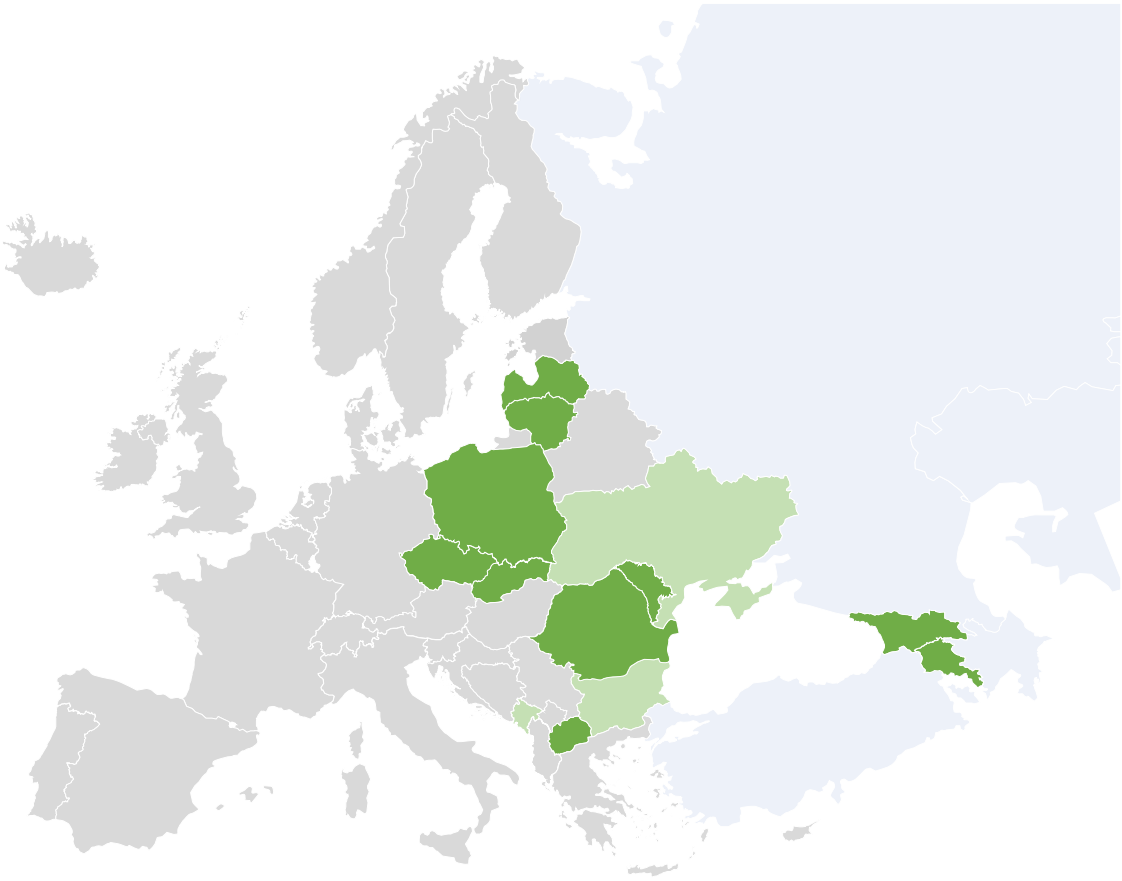
who suggested that COVID-19 was created for the benefit of the 'great powers' and drew comparisons to 9/11.

Finally, in Ukraine, one website made reference to the possibility that Russia might launch a military strike against Ukraine due to a water shortage in Crimea, and that if so, it would be counting on 'the rest of the world being distracted by the coronavirus pandemic'.

Social Media: Impact and Engagement

This week, there was relatively little social media engagement with the 'bio-lab' sub-narrative, though in Hungary, the prolific conspiracy page Kimondott Igazsagok (Outspoken truths) claimed on Facebook that COVID-19 is the result of a cell culture experiment gone wrong in Wuhan. In general, however, 'conflict' narratives do not appear to have much mileage on social media.

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 narratives were present. As before, the 'Reshaping Society' sub-narrative appeared the most common of the two.

Comparison of narratives across countries

The narrative suggesting 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 most countries covered by the CWG, excluding Belarus and the Baltic States. Bill Gates continues to be a key target of content propagating this narrative (with references to him often linked to allegations that the World Health Organization has sinister and undeclared goals). Meanwhile, content targeting George Soros has waned, and coverage of the opinions of Italian MP Sara Cunial have declined significantly.

Further names cited in conspiracy content this week include Madonna, Oprah Winfrey and Henry Kissinger. The Rockefellers receive multiple mentions. 'New world order' claims persist.

Exploitation

The suggestion that elites are using the crisis to exploit others was manifest in various ways. Claims suggesting that the crisis is being used to achieve financial and political gains appeared in **Georgia** (where GeWorld published the view that COVID-19 was created to enrich elites), **Ukraine** (where Strana framed a recent accord between the government and the IMF as a bid by the latter to control the country's judiciary) and **Armenia** (where News Front alleged the existence of an operation with the goal of controlling populations via military-style techniques, aided by big tech companies and promoted by the Rockefellers).

Indeed, the Rockefellers received numerous mentions. In **Poland**, a blog suggested that they knew in advance about the pandemic and that the decision regarding global "closure" (allegedly aimed at the collapse of the world economy) was taken in Davos back in January. The post was shared with Facebook groups, one of which has around 90,000 members. **Czechia** also saw anti-Rockefeller content, with one article suggesting that Gates, the Rockefellers and big pharma seek to control health, so as to control humanity.

Other content meanwhile claimed that particular actors were pushing a vaccine for their own self-interested ends (though not explicitly in order to reshape society). Examples were found in **Latvia**, **Moldova** (where Flux.md claimed that Gates had admitted that a vaccine would kill people) and **North Macedonia** (in the website Kolozeg's claim that Gates had tried to bribe Nigerian MPs to get them to adopt a law on mandatory vaccination).

Elsewhere we saw the suggestion that vaccination is being pursued as a means of population control and exploitation. Examples were found in **Romania**, and **Slovakia**, where Infovojna claimed that Gates seeks to control people's identities, transactions and bodies, and – separately - seeks to control the population by implanting people with 'ID'. In **Poland**, dziennik-polityczny.com reported that a clairvoyant had taken part in a musical challenge and – through song - revealed "the terrifying truth" that COVID-19 was planned by elites so as to control societies.

Content perpetuating the sub-narrative of 'Malign Global Elites: Exploitation' was not notably present in Hungary, compared to the previous period. Content suggesting that Soros is exploiting the crisis also appears to have waned.

Reshaping Society: Bill Gates and Depopulation

Gates, and organisations associated with him (such as the World Health Organization), continues to be a key target of disinformation. This week, notable examples were found in **Armenia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro** and **Poland**.

The suggestion that Gates is promoting vaccination as a means for population reduction was amplified in **Armenia** (by the blogger and conspiracy theory Hayk Kostanyan, who has featured previously in this report and used Facebook Live to discuss his views with others who share them; the video has been viewed 46,000 times), and for example **Czechia** (where the article "Who is Bill Gates? Revealing the Dark Agenda and Ideology", featured a video and text containing conspiracy content).

Further content casting suspicion on Gates was found in **Poland** and **Montenegro**, where the pro-Russian In4s raised concern over the Gates Foundation's intentions and the pro-Russian outlet Borba reported on a TV interview with a controversial pulmonologist who stated that he would not accept a vaccine developed by Gates.

World Health Organization (WHO)

Also, in **Czechia** in particular, articles linked allegations against Gates to those also alleging that the WHO should not be trusted. For example, the Arfa website promoted an article alleging that when President Trump says that China controls the WHO, this means that Gates controls it, as Gates works with China. In the same country, the website 'Nwoo.org' ('New World Order Opposition') claimed to reveal a sinister relationship between the Gates Foundation, the WHO and the National Academy of Medicine, suggesting that the latter's logo contains the number '666'. **Georgia** also saw content against Gates and the WHO, when the "Orthodox Parents' Union" re-published a video on Facebook, alleging that Gates and his wife (amongst others) financed COVID-19's creation, and that the WHO spread the disease, in order to support the rise of a new world order, to be followed by an antichrist.

The 'New World Order'

Indeed, much content mentioning Gates also implies – or explicitly expresses - the view that COVID-19 is being used to instil a 'New World Order' for the benefit of global elites. For example, in **Czechia**, the aforementioned Nwoo.org shared a theory implicating the WHO, Gates and others in the pandemic, and suggesting that the UN created an NGO named 'GPMB' that asked national governments to give them more money and control.

Elsewhere, content that does not focus on Gates nonetheless still suggests that a 'New World Order' is in store. In **Poland**, fringe outlet Gazeta Warszawska suggested that COVID-19 does not exist; rather, people are dying due to 5G, whose introduction helps to install world government. In **Romania**, Active News published an article covering one lawyer's view that COVID-19 is a hoax pushed by global elites seeking to enslave the population and – amongst other things - force states to become indebted to financial elites.

New names

Whilst most content in the 'Malign Global Elites' category alleges that COVID-19 is being used to achieve depopulation, financial gain and/or a new world order, some pointed to the pursuit of specific values. In **Moldova**, the prolific Flux.md claimed that the crisis is being used to promote abortion, as agreed secretly by a group of "globalists". The article names not only e.g. Gates, Soros, and David Rockefeller, but also (e.g.) Oprah Winfrey and Michael Bloomberg.

In addition to the appearance of such new names, plus some notable mentions of the Rockefeller family, other celebrity mentions this week included Madonna (in North **Macedonia**, a Freeglobe.mk article, shared on Facebook, suggested that the singer's 2019 Eurovision performance revealed COVID-19 as an occult ritual) and Henry Kissinger (a Bulgarian article mentioning Gates also alleged that Kissinger is part of a group that – thanks to Gates' efforts – seeks to control and manage microchipped people).

Social Media: Impact and Engagement

Social media continues to aid the circulation and amplification of the 'malign global elites' narrative, given its overlap with conspiracy theory content. In Hungary, conspiracy theory Facebook pages remain active. **Kimondott Igazságok** (Outspoken Truths), for example, promoted a YouTube video (now removed), sharing 2005 footage in which Gates allegedly talked to CIA officers about how the global population might be reduced. In Ukraine, Gates was also targeted via Facebook, when the **Meteora page** (70,000 members) said that members of the Italian government have urged for Gates arrest (1,584 shares).

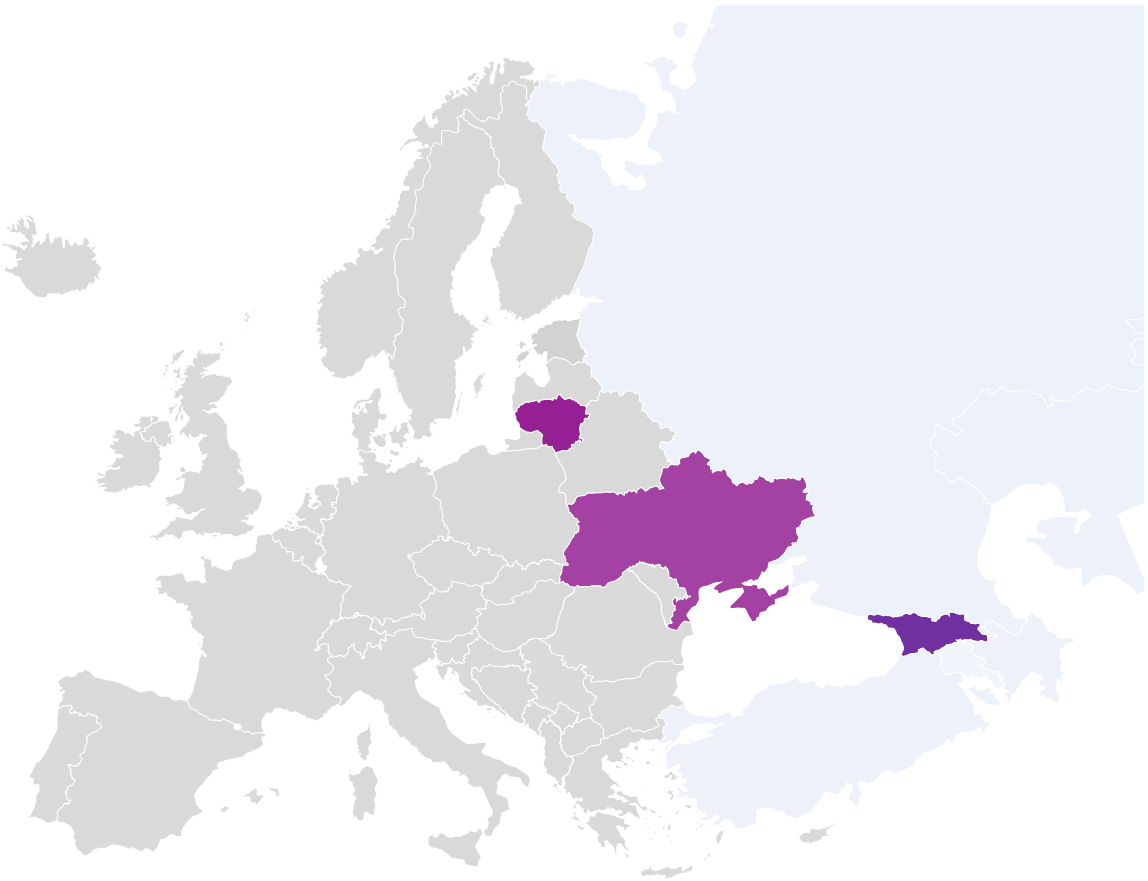
In **Latvia**, a video on the Facebook group COVID-19 Latvija (3,800 members), showed public figures "telling the truth". Among them were tennis player Marat Safin, who appeared to claim that that the pandemic is a conspiracy to microchip the world's population. The same video was observed in a Lithuanian group. Also in **Lithuania**, the Russia-based YouTube channel 'Voice of Germany' shared a video claiming that Gates has the means to pressure world leaders to comply with his vision on vaccination. This has had more than 83,000 views worldwide. Similarly, in **Ukraine**, attorney Sergey Gula uploaded a video presenting COVID-19 as planned, and Gates as a beneficiary (47,000 views).

Analysis: The WHO is working to overthrow Trump

The story suggesting that the World Health Organisation (WHO) is working to overthrow Trump started gaining traction immediately after President Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the organisation. Although articles seeking to discredit the WHO had been circulating for some time, these accusations resurfaced as a reaction to Trump's decision, highlighting the supposedly covert reasons behind it. Beyond the explicit criticism of the way in which the WHO handled the pandemic, disinformation stories in pro-HSA outlets claim that this withdrawal is in response to a supposed deep-state plot concocted by neo-Marxists and globalists to overthrow Trump and to establish a liberal world government that will lead to moral decline. This narrative has appeared regularly in Russian state-owned media, such as Sputnik.

According to broader conspiracy theories, Tedros and the WHO are only puppets of a New World Order, purportedly led by Gates, George Soros and other global elites, who are seeking to control and brainwash the population through microchip vaccines and the promotion of liberal values and rights such as abortion and marriage equality. This strand of the New World Order conspiracy does not focus on a totalitarian deep state, but rather on the ideological imperialist motivations of a liberal global elite. Trump's presidency is framed as the last conservative bastion in a morally declining world, partly exemplified by his unwillingness to impose harsh COVID-19 measures.

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

Only the third and fourth were present.

Comparison of narratives across countries

There were few cases of 'moral decline' narratives, with the theme being almost entirely absent from the report of 2 June.

In the previous reporting period, moral decline narratives were notable in Georgia, Montenegro and Moldova. This week, however, such narratives persisted only strongly in **Georgia** – the loci of 'moral decline' claims – and more subtly in **Lithuania** and **Ukraine**. The suggestion that religious freedom is under attack continues to be the most dominant.

Religious Freedom

In Ukraine, the Union of Orthodox Journalists, previously suspected by the Ministry of Culture of fomenting inter-confessional enmity, suggested via Facebook that restrictions on visiting churches during COVID-19 have been a test of faith for believers. The post linked to an article in Russian from an outlet named spzh.news, entitled "What does the theology of coronavirus lead to?" It had limited reach, however (21 shares).

In Georgia, the pro-Russian outlet GeWorld continues to amplify the views of Orthodox figures. This week, it published an interview with priest Giorgi Razmadze, headlined "Father Giorgi (Razmadze): Be sure that there will be a second wave of attacks on the church". Another article from the same outlet claimed that the West uses every opportunity to weaken the Church, and suggested that western-funded NGOs have been happy to advocate for restrictions on gatherings at churches. The article was read around 320 times.

The above is somewhat similar to the case reported in Montenegro last week, where the Pro-Russian outlet Borba cited the view of the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church that the government is using COVID-19 as a pretext to 'crack down' on the Church and its followers. However, this week, there were no reported similar cases from Montenegro, and the furore over the detention of Bishop Joanikije Mićović appears to have died down.

Value Failure

This continues to be a marginal sub-narrative, with only one reported case this week: in Lithuania, the website Ekspertai claimed that the government has used COVID-19 to enact laws allowing protection services to take children from their parents. The author suggests that this action is aimed at destroying the family - the basis of the nation's existence.

Orthodox Influencers

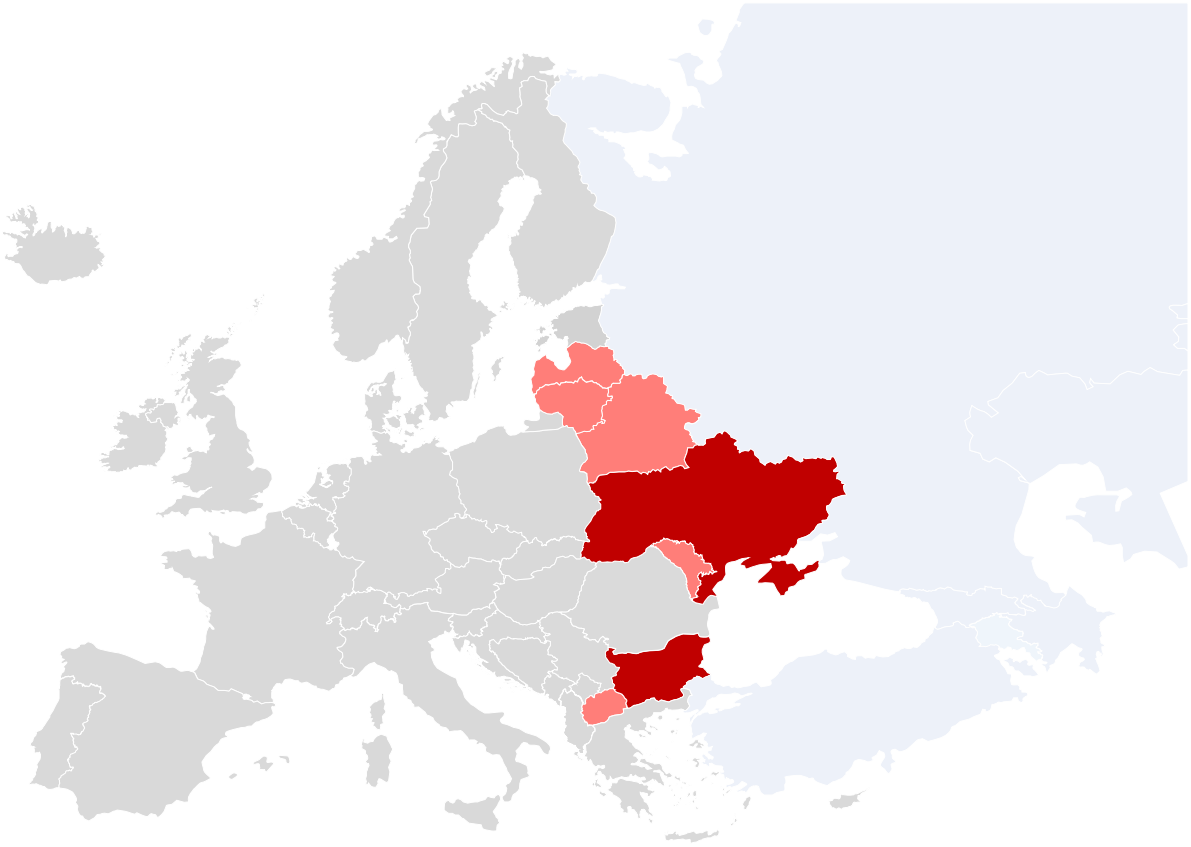
Whilst not categorised under the heading of moral decline, there continued to be cases of Orthodox figures speaking publicly about COVID-19. For example, on 25 May, an Orthodox deacon expressed his opinion that vaccination is harmful, speaking on a TV Mtavari talk show (13,895 views on YouTube). In the same country, the religious group "Orthodox Parents' Union" re-published a video statement on Facebook, alleging that Bill and Melinda Gates (and other billionaires) financed the creation of COVID-19, and suggesting that they plan to

microchip mankind. The group also blamed the WHO for spreading COVID-19 and using it as a tool to support the formation of a new world order, to be followed by the reign of an anti-christ. The original video-post (more than 700 likes) was removed by Facebook but its re-published version had more than 4,000 views.

Impact and Engagement

As noted above, social media conversation in Montenegro regarding the arrest of Bishop Joanikije appears to have waned, as has discussion in Romania regarding the omission of churches from the list of places allowed to re-open after ‘lockdown’.

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

All three sub-narratives were present.

Comparison of narratives across countries

The Reframing Russia narrative was present in **Belarus, Bulgaria, Moldova, North Macedonia, Latvia, Lithuania** and **Ukraine**. It was most prevalent in Bulgaria, perpetuated

by outlets such as 'News Front' and Vz.ru, with claims including: that Russia has created the "first and most powerful drug" against COVID-19; that the Russian healthcare system is superior (and deeply resilient); that Russia will begin immunisation against COVID-19 in the autumn and has developed an anti-COVID-19 drug; that "fake news" is being created to discredit Russia (and China); that a Japanese citizen was pleasantly surprised at medical treatment received in Russia; that outlets such as the Financial Times and the New York Times have exhibited Russophobia (as noted elsewhere in previous reports).

This week, content alleging Russophobia was less prevalent than that claiming Russian success and global leadership. Again, 'Reframing Russia' narratives overlapped somewhat with those found within the category of 'Failing West'.

Global Leadership

This sub-narrative was found in **Belarus, Moldova, North Macedonia** and **Ukraine**. Various articles suggested that Russia should or would be central to the post-COVID-19 world. In Belarus, Rubaltic.ru produced an article claiming that the pandemic would accelerate the decline of the West and suggesting that it would be expedient for post-Soviet countries to unite around Russia. Similarly, in North Macedonia, one site featured comments from the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs Ryabkov, expressing the view that after the pandemic, Russia should be the defender of world peace, and guarantee the sovereignty of small countries.

In Moldova, Sputnik continues to promote the narrative of Russian global leadership. In one article, stating that "The European Commission's economic recovery plan calls for investment in green energy and is to Russia's advantage", the EU was criticised for not having clear solutions for emerging from COVID-19, whilst China, Russia and Cuba were praised. In another, some Western states' ban on seeking medical aid from Russia was denounced; Russia and China were named as the main states saving others in the fight against COVID-19.

As seen in Sputnik content circulating in Moldova, claims of Russian global leadership often imply the failure of European leadership. This was seen in Ukraine this week, where a Ukraina.ru article presented the pandemic as having undermined trust amongst EU member states. Russia, meanwhile, was portrayed as a country with the potential to foster international cooperation and neighbourliness in a time of crisis.

Success

This sub-narrative was strong in Bulgaria, where reports that Russia has created the first and most successful drug against COVID-19 continue to circulate: the website Vz.ru reported that Avifavir had received approval from the Ministry of Health; News.bg reported that "Russia begins mass immunization against COVID-19 in the fall"; Bgr.news-front.info confidently reported that Russia has created the "first and most powerful" drug against COVID-19. The same site also praised the Russian healthcare system, in an article (seemingly originating from a Turkish outlet) quoting Putin as saying "They destroyed the Soviet Union, but they failed to destroy the Soviet health care system". In a different vein, Vz.ru also reported that a

Japanese citizen was pleasantly surprised at the treatment that she received in a Moscow hospital, in an article headlined “A patient from Japan revealed the secret of low mortality from coronavirus in Russia”.

Russophobia

There was a possible increase in content alleging Russophobia. In Bulgaria, Tsargard.tv reported that Senator Alexei Pushkov had spoken via Telegram about campaigns being conducted to spread fake news against Russia and China. The outlet also considered a Foreign Affairs article on Russia’s fight against COVID-19, interpreting its framing as more favourable towards Russia than recent coverage from the Financial Times and New York Times. In Moldova, Sputnik also addressed Russophobia, in an article headlined “Moscow reacts to US grant to "fight fake news in Russia", claiming that Washington was seeking to discredit Russian efforts to fight COVID-19.

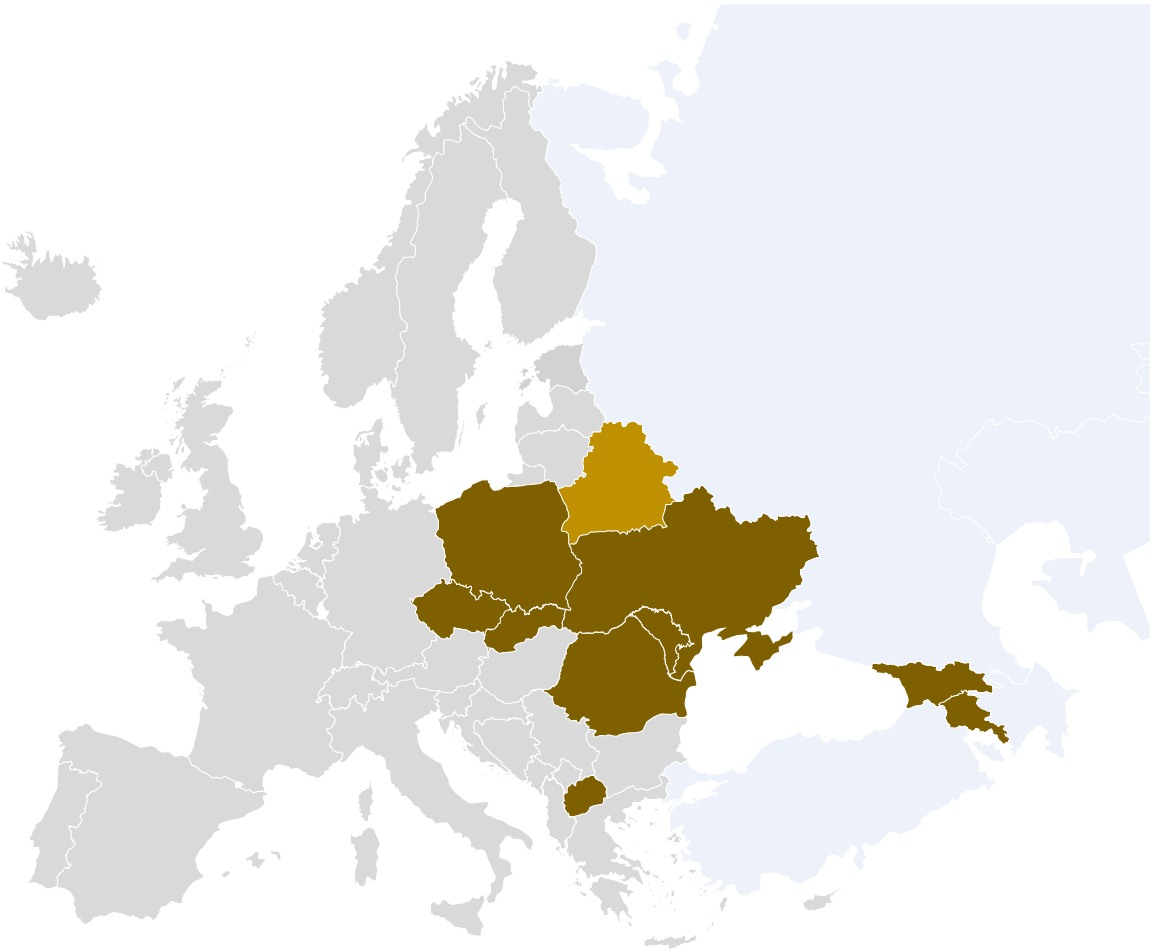
In Latvia and Lithuania, Russophobia was raised in the context of discussions of migrant worker treatment and military activity, respectively. In Latvia, RuBaltic reported on the hostility allegedly faced by migrant workers, especially Russians and Ukrainians, in Latvia and Estonia. In Lithuania, it was claimed that the country is using the pandemic as an excuse to continue overspending on its military, despite the absence of Russian aggression.

Impact and Engagement

As previously, 'Reframing Russia’ narratives did not appear to be particularly amplified or engaged with via social media, with most articles having relatively few interactions.

However, Latvia and Belarus saw some engagement. In the former, a video from the pro-Kremlin outlet RuBaltic, criticising the government’s action on Russian imports, was shared; various groups also shared a post criticising Latvian ‘nationalists’ for disapproving of publishing COVID-19 information in Russian. In Belarus, there was some discussion about citizens being entitled to free COVID-19 treatment in Russia (though with low engagement).

6. MISINFORMATION



Narrative is present in this report

Narrative is present in this and the previous report

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

Narratives that fall within the CWG's working definition of misinformation were identified in most countries. As before, misinformation appears to be relatively absent – or at least quiet - in Hungary, perhaps due to the dominance of other narratives (e.g. 'Failing West').

Hoax: COVID-19 akin to common flu – and encouraging herd behaviour

Some content, as with that undermining mask-wearing (below), presents COVID-19 not only as a hoax but as a means of controlling populations and encouraging herd behaviour. Such content was noted in **Poland** (where a YouTube video from Niezalezna Telewizja - Independent Television - seen more than 36,000 times, suggested that the virus has been used by governments to control their citizens, and that people are "blind like sheep"), and from outlets such as Zem a Vek and Infovojna in **Slovakia**, where the latter suggested that COVID-19 is not so dangerous and that "When you want to control people, force them to listen, or make money out of them, fear works best. COVID-19 [is] the best example".

The claim that medics are falsely diagnosing COVID-19 (and have an incentive to do so) was noted, but appears less prevalent than in the previous reporting period.

5G

As previously, anti-5G content continues to be amplified via Facebook in countries such as **Georgia** (notably, by the group 'Stop 5G in Georgia'), and **Moldova** (where politician Iurie Rosca continues to spread disinformation, this time suggesting that radiation from 5G could enable COVID-19 to thrive). However, online outlets also perpetuated such narratives. For example, in **Czechia**, an 'Arfa' (Argumenty & Fakta) article claimed that it is no coincidence that one of the first places to install 5G was the Chinese city of Wuhan. In **North Macedonia,** meanwhile, the website Mexpress shared a video of birds attacking a 5G tower in Australia, shared on one Facebook page with around 140,000 followers. The piece cited the Daily Mail, and notes that this is the view of "some conspirators", but nonetheless associates COVID-19 with 5G.

The micro conspiracy theory claiming that the motherboards 5G antennae contain the words 'COV 19' appears to have quietened, as have claims that 5G imagery can be discerned on various bank notes.

Cure

Claims regarding false or unproven cures for COVID-19 continue to circulate, though these do not constitute the bulk of misinformation. Claims this week include: that a Timisoara research institute has successfully produced a vaccine (reported by the outlet Stiri pe Surse, in **Romania**); that a Romanian doctor claims that the disease can be cured with salt water (also from Stiri pe Surse); that Serbian pulmonologist Branimir Nestorovic wishes to acquire pancreatic medicine from Japan, as it has been found to help to treat COVID-19 (reported by the Republika website in **North Macedonia**, but shared on Facebook pages with more than 500,000 followers in total); that hydroxychloroquine is effective against COVID-19 (claimed by

Badatel.net in **Slovakia**); that a herbalist has created a successful cure for COVID-19 (shared in **Georgia** by the Facebook group 'Stop 5G in Georgia!!!'); that sunlight counters COVID-19 (noted in **Ukraine**, though with very little reach).

Expert Advice: Masks, Vaccination and Quarantine

Some content explicitly challenged mask-wearing, vaccination and established science. Anti-mask content was notable in **Armenia** (where discussion of mask packaging labelled 'Does not protect against COVID-19' continues to circulate, and blogger Hayk Kostanyan – mentioned previously – posted a montage of statements by doctors, world leaders and WHO employees appearing to discredit mask-wearing), **Czechia,** and **Slovakia** (where prolific outlets Hlavny Dennik and Zem a Vek both presented mask-wearing as a symbol of obedience and a means of encouraging subordination).

Content challenging expert advice on vaccination, meanwhile, was notable in **Georgia**, **Poland, Armenia, Czechia and Slovakia**. In the latter two (via Otevři svou mysl and Infovojna, respectively), a video described as "Robert Kennedy Jr. and Dr. Andrew Kaufman talk about the dangers of vaccines and new vaccine technology that affects the genetic makeup of our cells" was shared, suggesting that vaccines are dangerous and being made mandatory in order to benefit large companies (and Bill Gates). Meanwhile, in Georgia, a Deacon of the Orthodox Church discussed the alleged harm of vaccination on a TV Mtavari talk-show, seen almost 14,000 times on YouTube, and in Poland, it was noted that various groups are planning anti-vaccination protests on 6 June (promoted via a Facebook post with more than 37,000 views and 12,000 shares).

Other content targeted the use of lockdown measures. In **Poland**, an article shared via Facebook cited a French study to claim that such measures facilitate the spread of COVID-19. Meanwhile, in **Armenia**, it was claimed that Norway found quarantine to be useless.

Other: pseudo-science and prevention

Some content made unsound claims about e.g. the susceptibility of different groups to COVID-19: in **Armenia**, it was claimed that men with a long ring finger have a lower likelihood of dying from it; in **Belarus**, Minsknews.by reported that the dementia gene raises the risk of COVID-19; in **Ukraine**, Strana referred to a non-peer-reviewed publication claiming that the tuberculosis vaccination helps to prevent COVID-19; in **Slovakia**, it was suggested that genetics – rather than good health systems – keeps COVID-19 at bay.

Separately, the claim that COVID-19 is in any case going to disappear or become harmless was noted in **Armenia** and **North Macedonia**, where it was claimed, respectively, that COVID-19 will disappear within a month and – according to a former Russian doctor – will "lose strength" in the autumn. The latter was shared on nine Facebook groups/pages with a total of approximately 1,000,000 followers.

Social Media: Impact and Engagement

Misinformation seems especially amenable to amplification via social media. False cures shared this way in **Ukraine**, included the suggestion – shared 839 times - that people die not of COVID-19 but of blood clots.

In Romania, people continue to interact with posts or stories claiming that the pandemic was planned or is a hoax. On some highly populated groups, Facebook users referred to cases in which death certificates had allegedly been falsified to state COVID-19 as the cause of death. Many also seem to believe that masks and thermo-scanning are useless and are merely a means of accustoming people to authoritarian control. In Estonia, social media users were similarly critical of government measures, with a video published by the Facebook page За Будущее (For the Future), claiming that the government has passed a law that allows authorities to infringe human rights (13,000+ views). Misinformation also circulated via social media in the other Baltic states, with anti-vaccination and anti-5G content being especially notable in Latvia and Lithuania, promoted by groups such as 'Covid-19 Latvija' (3,900 members), and 'Комитет "Русскоговорящая Клайпеда' (The Committee For Russian-speaking Klaipeda, 1,200 members).

However, social media is also a medium through which disinformation is countered. In Serbia, claims that 5G and COVID-19 are related were dismissed by users. Similarly, in Latvia, a Delfi article (29,000 interactions) stating that most Italians who died from COVID-19 had other underlying illnesses, appeared in several groups but was also ridiculed for pointing out something that many already knew.

7. **MISC/ADDITIONAL**

Overview

Content relating to immigration (first highlighted in this section of the CWG report of 22 May) was once again relatively absent, including from disinformation content highlighted in Hungary. Limited mention of migration was however noted in Slovakia (where, as reported elsewhere in this report, a 'Konzeravatívny web' article claimed that whilst EU citizens struggle on amidst COVID-19, migrants in Europe are doing well - 149 interactions) and Ukraine, where Strana reported on Ukrainian migrant workers flying to Europe and being treated as a cheap labour force, exempt from compulsory 14-day quarantine. The same article also suggested that some such workers infected with COVID-19 are still being sent to work fruit-picking (441 interactions).

There were no notable emerging new narratives, and those noted last week (big tech censorship; Islam and COVID-19; wheat imports and COVID-19) were no longer observed. However, the following case is noteworthy:

Serbia: the controversial pulmonologist

A notable amount of content in Serbia addressed the scandal surrounding the pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović, who has been a high-profile media figure throughout the pandemic, and now faces losing his medical license. This story was covered widely, with the most engaged-with article coming from the pro-government Informer (4,577 interactions). The story was also covered by the Sputnik outlet, and the pro-government tabloid Kurir. The request to review Nestorović's medical license came from the Serbian Medical Chamber after they deemed his repeated statements in the media (reported elsewhere in this report as containing disinformation) to be unethical and inappropriate.

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 though poor journalistic standards.*
3. *Claims and opinions (from influencers with existing platforms, or widely shared examples from relatively unknown individuals) which refute current scientific understanding of the virus and/or official recommendations.*
4. *Deliberate or no, the prevalence of this misinformation **negatively impacts public health, social cohesion or political stability**, for example by affecting the clarity of official messaging, or eroding public trust in institutions.*

Conspiracy theories

1. ***Alternative explanations** for the pandemic – including its origin, how it is transmitted and contracted, or claiming that it does not exist at all.*
   - *This may involve claims of **orchestrated, malign or accidental actions by global elites** (governments, billionaires, the 'Deep-State' etc.), the "truth" of which is being **kept from the public.***
2. ***Evolutions of existing conspiracy theories** and the online communities who believe them – including from within the far-right, alt-right, religious fundamentalism, and the anti-vaccination and anti-5G 'activist' movements.*

3. ***New conspiracy theories****, from HSA, trolls, or other unknown or organic sources, which may arise in response to COVID-19 related news.*

List of Narrative and Sub-Narrative Headings

1. FAILING WEST

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

2. CONFLICT

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

3. MALIGN GLOBAL ELITE

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

4. MORAL DECLINE

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

5. REFRAMING RUSSIA

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

6. MISINFORMATION

a. Hoax: COVID-19 does not exist, or its effects have been wildly exaggerated

b. 5G: COVID-19 is spread through 5G mobile technology
c. Cure: COVID-19 can be cured or prevented through non-conventional means
d. Expert advice: Official medical and scientific advice about COVID-19 should be ignored

7. MISCELLANEOUS / OTHER

Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

If the country in question is one where a partner organisation is also operating, the Zinc researcher compares their findings with those of the partner group, and collates them

accordingly into one unified report. This is finally summarised in an overview, with similarities and differences between the material found in each sub-section noted and discussed.