

# GlobalFocus Center

## Report on COVID-19-related false information

A regional newsletter

of disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories in  
Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltics, Russia, the Eastern  
Partnership and Western Balkans

### Issue 2

This is a synthetic picture of the regional dis-/misinformation environment, resulting from the weekly monitoring of **17+ countries\*** by [GlobalFocus Center](#) and its regional partners within the Open Information Partnership COVID-19 Working Group (CWG). Each organisation provides monitoring and analysis of evolving and emerging disinformation and misinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional insight and research have been provided by OIP partners, including Zinc Network and Bellingcat.

**\*Countries covered:** Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia & Kosovo, Slovakia, Ukraine

The present document is part of a weekly newsletter produced by GlobalFocus Center, summarising the findings of the CWG and offered to its partners free of charge for their information, as part of its recently launched [Antidisinfo Regional Resource Hub](#).

If you are interested in obtaining **more detailed insight** into any of the countries or topics in the newsletter, please write to [rufin.zamfir@global-focus.eu](mailto:rufin.zamfir@global-focus.eu). If you are interested in **supporting this product**, or GlobalFocus Center's much wider activity in analysing and countering disinformation and malign interference, please write to [oana.popescu@global-focus.eu](mailto:oana.popescu@global-focus.eu).

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## Contact information



GlobalFocus Center is an independent international studies think-tank, which produces in-depth research and high quality analysis on foreign policy, security, European affairs, good governance and development.

The Center has developed the Propaganda Permeability Index, a qualitative and quantitative tool so far applied in 10 countries in the Black Sea region and the Western Balkans.

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### MAIN NARRATIVES:

‘International, Western values-based institutions working to secure their benefits from the crisis’. New disinformation narratives stating that the EU is leading a defamation campaign against Viktor Orban’s administration have surfaced in both traditional and social media in **Hungary**. Western powers are also presented as hindering the direct dialogue between **Georgia** and **Russia**, out of fear that Moscow “may have more to offer”

The pandemic is used as a means to advance the anti-technology/ anti-progress agenda. In **Romania**, the liberalisation of the energy market is presented in a distorted way as being an EU plan to make the poor states even poorer

‘The EU has failed, the West is only exporting decadence and disease’. Disinformation narratives in the **Baltics**, **Bulgaria** and the **Republic of Moldova** claim that more than half of Italians would vote to leave the EU. In **Georgia**, very influential Orthodox channels inform that US and UK sailors in the Black Sea (close to Russia’s borders) are infected with COVID-19 and that the US considers the Georgian Orthodox Church its enemy, while in **Armenia** the pandemic was created to disconnect people from God.

‘COVID-19 will lead to global conflict’ (and may indeed already be part of a “global civil war”), as a consequence of deteriorating relations between US and China. The narrative was present in the **Baltic** region but also in **Kosovo**;

**Estonia**’s reluctance to cut its defense budget during the pandemic is presented as an indication that it wants to “take up arms against Russia”;

The **Hungarian** government ‘would be re-elected tomorrow with 70% of the votes’, not least because of good management of the crisis.

The role of Russia as a saviour/victim is still trending. **Bulgarian** channels are parading “the super-human immunity” of Russian people in the face of COVID-19, while in **Georgia** and the **Baltics** Russia is presented as a much better manager of the crisis than the West.

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## EU narratives

**Hungarian** pro-government media and nationalist social media channels remain the biggest producers/disseminators of anti-EU narratives. Last week they claimed that the EU was using the pandemic to introduce mass surveillance (in relation to a plea that the EU made to Apple to lift technical obstacles so that digital health systems can be better connected), while disregarding the needs of the member states during the pandemic and forcing them to reach out to China and Turkey for help (as reported by government mouth-piece Origo). In another spin of the same narrative, the claim that 70% of Italians no longer trust the EU was pushed by the right-wing and pro-government media outlet 888.hu (a similar narrative is to be found in **Moldova** and **Slovakia**).

The quarrel between **Hungary** and the European Parliament, generated by the latter denying Hungary's Justice minister permission to represent PM Orban during a debate, stirred outrage among pro-government and government-backed media outlets, provoking a strong response. The claim is that such unfair treatment only proves that the EU is run by liberals and the Soros network, and that Hungary is under attack from the West and the liberals who are orchestrating a disinformation campaign against Budapest, by presenting government measures as authoritarian and inefficient in combating the epidemic.

An anti-EU disinformation narrative in **Georgia** is targeting the financial aid that the country received from Europe; the aid is presented as a way to make Georgia dependent on the EU, for generations to come. The story was published by the pro-Russian website geworld.ge, citing Levan Chachua, head of the political party 'Georgian Idea' who offered examples of "mistreatment" that member states Italy and Spain received from Brussels.

The **Republic of Moldova** saw a continuation in

anti-EU narratives, the only novelty being that the pandemic is presented as the demise of the EU. **Estonia** and **Lithuania** saw the same narrative, taken from Russian-language media.

Disinformation targeting the EU is most prevalent also in **Romania**, where Sputnik.md claims that the population, already debilitated by measures against the pandemic, will pay higher energy bills – a consequence of Brussels policy to impoverish the East and make it more easily to control.

The narrative of 'the West preying on the poorer East' was illustrated – again - with the case of Romanian workers being exploited on vegetable farms in Germany and getting infected with COVID-19. At the same time Germany is presented as using EU funds to invest in its national companies and gain an unfair advantage over other EU countries. A ramification of the same narrative claims that Angela Merkel is offering financial aid to EU countries under the provision that they buy Germany's exports later. The story was published by pro-Russian media outlets Sputnik and Flux.

## NATO narratives

The Victory Day anniversary was speculated to frame COVID-19 disinformation in the **Baltics** in a regional security key. In this context, Russian-language media presented NATO as an obsolete and unnecessary alliance.

Another narrative revolved around Estonia's unwillingness to cut its defense budget during the pandemic, claiming that the country "was taking up arms against Russia".

## Russia narratives

'Russia the saviour' continues to be trending in a number of states. Its generosity in distributing aid (as per Sputnik **Moldova**), or its efficiency in combating COVID-19 effects (as per similar news stories in **Bulgaria** and the **Baltics**) should impose Russia as the preferred partner for combating the pandemic. Pro-Russian media outlets in **North Macedonia** reported that Russia would have a vaccine ready by the end of the year, ahead of any other country.

Narratives indirectly benefitting Russia by creating distrust in engagement with the West continued to be spread in the analysed media. In **Georgian** media space, the US and UK military vessels sailing in the Black Sea are presented as potential sources of outbreak of COVID-19. The same disinformation was identified in **Poland** and the **Baltic** countries. Pro-Russian media outlets in Georgia are also suggesting that Western powers (especially Germany, but NATO as a whole too) are hindering direct dialogue between Georgia and Russia. The narrative implies that Russia may have more to offer than the West and that is what NATO fears.

## National Government narratives

Anti-government protests in **Bulgaria** and **Romania**, generated by the restrictions imposed on the population during the pandemic, are presented as being in reality outbursts of frustration against pro-Western (in Romania and Bulgaria) and Russophobic (only in Bulgaria – counterintuitively, as they are completely lacking!) government policies.

As criticism against Viktor Orban was rendered virtually impossible in **Hungary** by the autocratic measures taken at the beginning of the crisis, its

place was taken by narratives constantly presenting high approval rates for the government. A poll showing that Fidesz would earn 70% of the vote in a virtual next-week election was widely spread by pro-government media and presented as proof of the efficient handling of the pandemic (allegedly, even Japan has congratulated PM Orban on his handling of the crisis).

The strict lockdown measures in **Romania** were presented as harsher than anywhere in Europe. The extension of the state of emergency a few weeks ago and then again of some of these during the state of alert was presented as an intention to establish a dictatorship. The alleged acquisition by Romanian police of face-recognition technology has been interpreted as an assault on privacy and a way of taking more money away from people through fines.

Government-related disinformation in **Ukraine** includes allegations of total control of the West (through its institutions - IMF in this case) over the country. A number of opposition political figures (Vadym Rabinovych, Ilya Kiva) are fueling this discussion. At the same time, the government was accused of totalitarian practices (closing parks to achieve a certain psychological impact on the population).

Another narrative disseminated in Ukraine relates to the breakaway Donbas republic, praised by pro-Russian media for its measures, which are portrayed as effective but not exaggerated, as opposed to those taken by the national government. The intended contrast is aimed at deepening the anti-government sentiment among Ukrainians and portraying occupying authorities as indeed highly autonomous and effective.

### Immigration narratives

**Hungarian** media outlets have kept flagging the looming danger of immigration, with multiple outlets claiming that once the pandemic ends, waves of migrants would ensue. Moreover, one of the pro-government outlets claims that insufficient medical equipment, as well as severe economic downturns will trigger mass migration once the crisis is over.

### Values narratives

The presentation of Christian values and of the Church as being under attack by the liberal, decadent order remains the main story of conservative and nationalist media in the region, when it comes to values-related disinformation and misinformation. Narratives such as one about the US regarding the **Georgian** Orthodox Church as being its main enemy in the country, or one (advanced by Bishop Saba) asking that people should denounce vaccines as weapons in the hands of the devil, were heavily pushed not just in Georgia, but in **Armenia** too (here, the virus 'has been artificially created to disconnect people from God').

In **Romania**, orthodox influencers presented the President's omission of churches from the list of public spaces where access would be permitted from May 15<sup>th</sup> as an attack on freedom of conscience and of religion for the Romanian Orthodox (85% of the population). The narrative was further fuelled by a statement of the Romanian Orthodox Church that claimed it would take legal measures to protect religious practice in the country.

### Deep State and International Elites narratives

The notoriety the 'Plandemic' documentary (pointing to the role of important actors from the shadows to 'subjugate the world' – in fact a video presenting undigested COVID-19-related conspiracies, together with half-truths and unfounded accusations), with millions of interactions and views to date across the region, was unmatched in the current reporting interval by any other disinformation/misinformation or conspiracy.

**Armenian** false information revolved around the conspiracy theory that the virus was made in a laboratory and that it was used as a weapon by the US in order to hinder China's economic development. Another narrative was that some people, believed to have died of COVID-19, actually died because of experiments conducted in a secret biolab in Armenia, funded by Bill Gates and George Soros.

In **Czechia**, measures adopted internationally against COVID-19 are presented as a fascist coup d'état put in place by the New World Order, which entails eco-fascism, forced vaccination and surveillance (the same narrative appeared in **Hungary**, with 'New World Order' being replaced by the 'Illuminati'). Some conspiracy accounts maintain that while Europeans are quarantined, vast numbers of US troops are being moved to Germany, and from there across Europe to tackle any riots and protests against the New World Order.

In **Georgian** pro-Russian media, the United States are presented as developing biological laboratories around Russian borders, especially in former Soviet countries. The narrative is supported with the statements of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who referenced the Lugar Lab in Tbilisi.

(continued)

George Soros is presented in many of the analysed countries as being the one to blame for most of the harm that the pandemic has brought. In **Hungarian** fringe media, he is to blame for the depreciation of the forint, and even for the Freedom House Report that degraded Hungary from a democracy to a hybrid regime.

**Kosovar** narratives fit into the broader profile of the region, with multiple accounts of how the pandemic is fake and the vaccine aims to insert microchips in people's bodies in order to track them via the 5G networks (a narrative also seen in **Moldova**, where it received a boost from the former Deputy Prime Minister Iurie Rosca).

In **Romania**, although the internationally-circulated story that Bill Gates was arrested by the FBI was mostly recognised as fake, there were significant social media interactions demanding that Gates should be tried for crimes against humanity and even sentenced to death.

### Social Impact narratives

A story in the **Kosovar** media space suggests that World War III is imminent, and that the pandemic might be a fabricated pretext used by China and the US. In the meantime, Albania may become the safest place to live, because of its large number of bunkers.

A narrative that was prevalent in **Armenia** last month has reached **Bulgaria**, claiming that Russia has 'supermen' with immunity to the virus who will save the rest of the world (in an unspecified manner).

**Czech Republic** false information continues to revolve around the conspiracy theories that the virus was created by Big Pharma and that vaccines and masks are ineffective against it, and that the world elites know where the COVID-19 story will end and whose interests it will serve.

A social impact narrative in **Georgia** in the past week relates to the testimony of a Russian doctor who claims COVID-19 may be cured by wearing a mask soaked with vodka, as the virus would be killed by the fumes.

A narrative that gained notoriety in **Hungary** relates to the creation of a medicine that cures COVID-19. The origins of the information are in some statements made by official representatives, claiming that the drug is a Hungarian invention (in reality the drug already exists and will only be approved and potentially manufactured in Hungary from September 2020).

**Latvian** fringe media are reporting that the World Health Organisation ('heavily sponsored by Bill Gates') has recommended that people "throw away their businesses, become bankrupt" and "not go outside" and "get vitamin D", while in **North Macedonia** there were claims that sarin gas is the real reason for the lockdown (the gas allegedly leaked from a laboratory in Afghanistan).

Starting from president Trump's suggestion of ingesting disinfectant as a potentially valid treatment, **Romanian** alternative-medicine channels on facebook presented Methylene Blue as a potential cure for the virus.

**Slovak** disinformation channels included multiple accounts of how the masks are ineffective and can even cause allergies, while claiming that sunlight and temperatures over 30 degrees weaken the virus.

One narrative suggested that Chile had developed a test that can identify whether a person is infected based simply on their sense of smell.

Anti-vaccination movements are tapping into the COVID-related conversation, stating that a vaccine would "destroy the population's adaptive ability to the virus, resulting in more dangerous strains" and that a vaccine is more dangerous and will kill more people than the virus itself.