

SUMMARY REPORT

Wednesday 22nd April 2020

This report has been produced with the 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 the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional insight and research has been provided by OIP partners, including Zinc Network and Bellingcat.

The following countries and languages are covered in this report:

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



Countries

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OVERVIEW

Key new or shifting narratives.

- (Armenia) Conspiracy theories continue, including claims the virus was created by the "global elite" and designed in a lab. A political activist with a Facebook page following of only 240 people posted a video claiming that the global elite's objective is to encourage vaccination; it acquired over 1,000 shares and 17,000 views. The video cites a US doctor (Shiva Ayyudurai) who has been seen in similar content in Lithuania (c/f OIP CWG Report 20/04/2020).
- 2. (Bulgaria) *Blitz.BG* reports that Chinese scientists are claiming that the virus has mutated in Europe and is more deadly there than in China. As this news is coming from sources controlled by the Chinese state, this may be an attempt to deflect the 'blame' that has been directed at China.
- 3. **(Czechia)** A video translated into Czech claims that Barack Obama and Anthony Fauci sent \$3.7 million to support the Wuhan lab, allegedly the source of the virus. The Czech language translation has acquired 45,000 views.
- (Estonia) In Estonia there appears to be a shift towards the idea that Baltics states have no choice but to seek financial support from the EU due to COVID-19. It's suggested that in return Baltic states will be expected to support criticisms directed at Russia and China in return.
- 5. (Georgia) As seen in Romania and Hungary, Georgia is beginning to witness nationalist narratives suggesting that Georgian ethnicity provides protection from COVID-19. Anxiety about US military presence in Tblisi biolabs mirrors NATO narratives in other countries. More colourful conspiracy theories also appear to be more prevalent, including conspiracies surrounding George Soros, the pandemic being entirely faked, and alt-right deep-state paedophilia conspiracies.
- 6. **(Hungary)** Ministers and pro-government media remain on the defensive about their controversial emergency laws, deflecting attention towards the EU's and its failure to act, ineptitude on the part of the opposition party mayor of Budapest



and painting Paris anti-lockdown riots as a consequence of loose immigration laws. "Planned pandemic" theories around Gates, Soros and a new world order continue to develop.

- 7. **(Latvia)** Alongside persistent criticism of NATO training ongoing in Latvia despite the crisis, an additional narrative has focused on the idea that COVID-19 is exposing a 'two-speed' Europe, split between communists and capitalists in their response to the virus.
- 8. (Lithuania) New narratives include suggestions that the pandemic is being used by the government to eliminate Alytus airport and to bankrupt small/medium businesses. It's believed that this is to the benefit of large companies such as retail chain *Maxima*, which supposedly influences the government. Focus on ex-president Dalia Grybauskaites' charitable foundations supposed illegality has increased. Some claims by certain media outlets (such as infa.lt) have implied that the current quarantine resembles soviet repressions.
- 9. (Moldova) Praise continues to be heaped on Russia, as well as China, for their provision of aid. Anxieties are prevalent in regard to the US using Moldovan laboratories to develop pathogens for military use, linked to conspiracies that the virus originating in America. Attribution to deep-state, Satanist and provaccination plots are also apparent.
- 10. **(North Macedonia)** The Bill Gates conspiracy continues. The conspiracy site *Horoskop Krajnicki* <u>claimed</u> that mass protests have broken out in Brazil, Romania, the USA and Germany against Gates's "plans". It also appears that claims by Nobel prize winner Luc Montagnier (seen earlier this week in the Caucasus) that the virus was created in a lab, have spread to North Macedonia.
- 11. (**Poland**) Narratives seeking to downplay the serious of the virus or to stoke fears about a Bill Gates-led forced vaccination programme gain popularity.
- 12. (Romania) President Iohannis is now accused of knowing about the pandemic in November 2019; many of the mainstream media are engaging in a hysterical and misinformed debate in reference to a potential lockdown extension. Criticism of the EU continues and deep-state conspiracies remain prevalent.
- 13. **(Russia)** Media outlets linked to the Ministry of Defence have pushed the narrative that the EU is collapsing in the face of COVID-19 restrictions, and that member-states "want to be free". It ignores any cases of mutual assistance between member-states, and the stimulus package.



- **14. (Serbia)** The focus of much of the media covering COVID-19 in Serbia has been focussed on the anti-vaccine comments made by tennis player Novak Djokovic's.
- 15. **(Slovakia)** Alongside pre-existing conspiracy theories that have been circulating, two of the more interesting narratives include that the inference that UN is going to force vaccination upon the world, and that ventilation kills people rather than helping them.
- 16. (Ukraine) The Pro-Kremlin party Opposition Platform For Life has reinforced conspiracy theories that US biowarfare labs in Ukraine are linked to the virus via the media channels owned by its leader, Medvedchuk. This was further disseminated in Russia by channels aligned to Kremlin insider Konstantin Malofveev, which also portray Medvedchuk as the only real opposition in Ukraine. Separately, Kremlin aligned media have also been simultaneously claiming that the government's lockdown measures are both too strict and too lax.

DISINFORMATION

1. Immigration

Illegal immigration is accelerating the spread of COVID-19 as migrants and ethnic minorities carry the virus.

- **(Hungary)** In an article covering the riots in Paris on 18th April, pro-government portal *PestiSrácok* <u>claimed</u> that "anarchy is dominating certain French areas" and declared that the neighbourhood where the riots took place, Villeneuve-la-Garenne, is a no-go zone due to immigration.
- (Hungary) Hungary's Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Péter Szijjártó took to Facebook to <u>accuse</u> Charles Michel (President of the European Council) and Didier Reynders (EU Commissioner for Justice) of crusading against Hungary because of its stance on migration. He claims their 'failure' over the UN's global migration pact has led to them taking their frustration out on Hungary. Szijjártó attempts to connect migration to the pandemic. His comments were largely echoed by most pro-government media outlets.

2. Failure of the EU

Failure to respond to the pandemic and disunity amongst member states.



• **(Estonia)** Kremlin-aligned *RuBaltic* published a <u>podcast</u> where the guests discussed, amongst other things, the idea that Baltic countries have to toe the NATO/US line when it comes to Russia and China because they are reliant on them for financial support, not least due to COVID-19.

(Georgia) Georgian website *Saqinformi* <u>published</u> an article which discusses how the pandemic will "accelerate [the] creation of [the] Great 3 – Moscow, Washington, Beijing". The author claims the EU is suffering an identity crisis as it realises its future is not aligned with the US and it does not have a global view.

- (Hungary) Online pro-government news site Origo <u>alleged</u> that the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control could have saved the lives of thousands if it had not failed to declare COVID-19 as a real threat as cases in Italy and Spain accelerated. The EU has little jurisdiction on health policy as it is deemed a national-level issue.
- (Latvia) Kremlin-aligned Rubaltic claimed that the negotiations between EU countries regarding financial assistance is highlighting a fissure between capitalists and communists in the bloc. BaltNews pushes a similar theme, with the idea that the EU is not fighting the virus, and criticises the US response whilst praising that of China.
- (Moldova) Sputnik Moldova <u>published</u> an article claiming the EU needs €1.5 trillion euros to avoid the breakdown of the single market.
- (Romania) Narratives highlighting the EU's inability to manage the crisis continue to be prevalent in some news portals and blogs, <u>focusing</u> on the 'hypocrisy' of wealthier member states and lack of support for those with weaker economies. The EU's stability and even existence is presented as at threat.
- (Russia) The Youtube site of TV channel, Zvezda (officially linked with the Ministry of Defence) reinforced the idea that the EU is collapsing in the face of restrictions due to COVID-19, and that member-states "want to be free". The video has been seen close to 5,000 times. Any cases of EU mutual support are routinely ignored in these types of posts.

3. Incompetence



Failure / predicted collapse of Western Governments, progressive regimes, opposition parties and lockdown measures representing the states' attack upon personal freedom.

- (Hungary) An article published on prominent pro-government news site Origo has accused Budapest's opposition mayor Gergely Karácsony of lying about the employment of an on-site doctor at an elderly care home in the city, which has become a hotspot for COVID-19 cases. Documents posted on social media by the mayor purporting to prove the existence of a doctor are said to be falsified. The story has been picked up by numerous pro-Fidesz outlets. This includes national TV channels *M1* and *TV2* which forms part of a wider media campaign to frame Karácsony as responsible for the rise in cases and for lacking action. This is despite the mayor publishing correspondence which proves his office sent multiple warnings and requests for assistance to the government.
- (North Macedonia) *Infomax.MK* has republished a Slovenian <u>article</u> claiming that North Macedonia is currently in a state of anarchy.
- (Romania) Website *Luju.ro* <u>published</u> an article claiming that President Klaus Iohannis knew about the pandemic in November 2019, via CIA briefings.
- (Romania) Former presidential candidate Alexandru Cumpanasu <u>posted</u> to Facebook criticising the hypothetical lockdown, using inflammatory language and referencing the Holocaust. He has 400,000 followers and the post has been shared over 700 times.
- (Ukraine) News portal *Hvylya.net* <u>disseminated</u> an announcement by Andrii Palchevsky, a former Russian politician whose business interests lie in Ukraine and who is linked to the GRU, which urges Ukrainians to protest against quarantine measures imposed by the government. This was also covered by channels linked to or owned by V Medvedchuk, leader of the pro-Russian opposition, as well as pro-Kremlin websites such as *Politeka.net*.

4. Russia as "saviour"

Russia will find a cure, bringing aid to the worst-hit countries, minimal impact felt in Russia, Russia is a victim of Russophobia and Russians living in other countries face discrimination.



- (Latvia) Kremlin-aligned *BaltNews* presented an interview with a doctor working at an Italian medical facility, <u>emphasising</u> how useful Russia's support has been.
- (North Macedonia) Following on from claims in North Macedonia that Russia has a Siberian Lab that will solve the problem, *Vesnik.com* has <u>stated</u> that Russia has built a COVID-19 medical tank to evacuate victims and ventilate them.
- (Romania) An article in *Presa Curata* praises Russia's preparation for the pandemic, having built two fully-equipped hospitals in a matter of weeks.

5. Moral decay

The crisis typifies the moral decay or defeat of the West and/or democratic values.

- (Lithuania) Disinformation from Kremlin-aligned Lithuanian media outlets such as <u>www.laisvaslaikrastis.lt</u> and <u>www.ekspertai.eu</u> focused mostly on expresident Dalia Grybauskaites's foundation to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The media outlets <u>claimed that the foundation is illegal</u> and commented on the state's unwillingness or even inability to investigate the matter. *Laisvaslaikrastis.lt* also stated that the pandemic is being used as a cover in order to quietly exonerate judges currently suspected on counts of corruption.
- (Ukraine) Pro-Kremlin site *Strana.UA* <u>published</u> a piece that aims to reinforce the idea that Ukraine is a "Nazi state", where the far-right constitutes a significant problem. It focuses on alleged attempts by the far-right to make money during the quarantine through illegal activities. *Strana.UA* had approximately 48 million visits in March 2020.

6. Orthodox influencers

• (Romania) The Romanian Orthodox Church presents itself as being "more generous than the United States", having made donations of \$3million compared to the \$800,000 given by the US to Romania.

Statistics and Cures



1. False statistics, causes and effects

Misquotes, incorrect statistics, hyperbole, inciting panic.

- (Armenia) Further to Lurer.com's translation of Russian doctor Alexander Edger's claims that COVID-19 does not cause pneumonia (as outlined in the OIP CWG report 20/04/2020) <u>168.am</u> cited a claim by a US-based doctor that COVID-19 does not cause pneumonia, and the complication we observe is of another nature.
- (Bulgaria) *Blitz.BG* reports that Chinese scientists are claiming that the virus has mutated in Europe and is more deadly there than in China. As this news is coming from sources controlled by the Chinese state, this may be an attempt to deflect the 'blame' that has been assigned to China by, amongst others, the USA.
- (Czechia) Conspiracy outlet Otevris Voumysl published a translated version of an American YouTube video, which alleges that former President Obama and current NIAD Director Anthony Fauci sent several million dollars to support the Wuhan lab in 2014. The version of the video translated in Czech has more than 45,000 views.
- **(Estonia)** Russian language *Woman's Look* <u>published</u> an article espousing a number of conspiracy theories, notably backed by Russian scientists, including that the death rate from COVID-19 is zero and that the pandemic is a fake.
- **(Slovakia)** A self-proclaimed bioethicist <u>published</u> an op-ed in conspiracy outlet *Zem a Vek,* which combines a number of conspiracy theories about the virus, including that it is an ordinary flu and that it was created in the US. Additionally, they go so far as to say that ventilation actually kills people.
- (Lithuania) One notable <u>video</u> which spread widely across social media was spotted in which a taxi driver claimed to have talked to a Santariškės clinic employee who informed him that medical staff have been instructed to misdiagnose deaths and present them as COVID-19 victims in order to receive additional EU funding. The video was shared over 8,000 times.

2. False cures

Increased risk of exposure / serious illness, false strategies for protection.



- **(Georgia)** A 'news' website (registered on 4th April) has <u>published</u> an article claiming an American Doctor ("Dick Longballs") is working on a vaccine at the University of Connecticut and has discovered that Georgian blood contains "unique particles" also discovered on the Turin Shroud; "I always knew that Georgians would play an important part in saving the world."
- (Georgia) Georgian website *Marshal Press* <u>published</u> an article about a Facebook <u>post</u> made by 'analyst' Soso Manjavidze, in which he claims that Britain's failure to undertake mass testing for COVID-19 was in fact a lucky escape, as the testing material had been infected with the virus. He concludes that aggressive testing programmes are ineffective and dangerous.
- (Poland) Tomasz Dorniak, a member of the management board of rural parliamentary party PSL has made a <u>request</u> to Prime Minister Morawiecki to be infected with COVID-19, to prove his claim to have developed a cure to the virus using seaweed, water and silver.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

- 1. The virus was created in a lab
 - (Armenia) Astrologist Nina Borisova <u>claimed</u> that the virus was created artificially, and that the danger associated with COVID-19 has been inflated. The article was republished in <u>analitik.am</u> as well as in some clickbait websites (<u>blognews.am</u>, <u>bavnews.am</u>, <u>ipress.am</u>).
 - (**Czechia**) Conspiracy site *CeskoAktualne.CZ* <u>published</u> photographs of the Wuhan Lab as a potential source of the virus that were shared 35 times.
 - (Georgia) Several Georgian clickbait websites <u>published</u> a story which claims that an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in a Wuhan laboratory has begun. An article in tabloid portal *TVM* <u>links</u> this into a deeper alt-right conspiracy theory about Trump using the pandemic as cover to rescue children kept in underground bunkers by a deep-state Satanist syndicate involving Hollywood celebrities, the Democrats, the Pope and the Queen.
 - (Moldova) Pro-Kremlin media (particularly *fondsk.md*) continue to disseminate narratives that suggested COVID-19 was created in a lab namely, US laboratories. It infers various motivations for this, including to <u>exterminate</u> minority populations, impose compulsory vaccinations or as part of a deepstate plan to <u>prevent</u> the re-election of Donald Trump.



- (Moldova) Online portal *ehomd.info* <u>published</u> an article focusing on Moldova becoming the epicentre of a "biological Chernobyl", as US laboratories are set up to develop military-grade pathogens.
- (Ukraine) Pro-Kremlin opposition party Opposition Platform For Life called for the government to release information about supposed US military biological labs in Ukraine linked to COVID-19. This was distributed on three channels linked to the party leader, Medvudchuk, and was <u>picked up</u> by Russian TV channel *Tsargrad*, itself controlled by Russian oligarch and Kremlin insider Konstantin Malofveev.

2. Planned pandemic / Bill Gates conspiracy

- (Armenia) Founder of the *Hovik Studio* national dance academy, Ishkan Gasparyan told Iravunk.AM that he believes global elites planned the pandemic.
- (Hungary) The pro-government *Tűzfalcsoport* blog <u>published</u> an article listing COVID-19 "coincidences", including comments made by Gates about preparing for a pandemic, the World Bank's introduction of pandemic bonds for developing countries in 2017, the death of a Canadian scientist who was studying novel coronaviruses in 2013 and George Soros' investment in a number of pharmaceutical companies. The article fuels the theory that billionaires will benefit from the pandemic and may have conceived its outbreak; it was later picked up by pro-government print outlet Magyar Nemzet.
- **(Hungary)** Conspiracy Facebook page *"Kimondott Igazságok",* with 14,000 followers, "<u>quoted</u>" a CNN interview with Bill Gates in which the billionaire is alleged to have said "the advantage of new vaccines is that they depopulate the world". Gates was referring to the impact lower death rates have on high birth rates in developing countries.
- **(Hungary)** *Titkok Szigete*, a fringe pro-Kremlin page with 30,000 followers, cited a projection from Harvard researches which suggested that lockdown-like restrictions could last into 2022. The page <u>claims</u> that such restrictions could be part of a "new world order" for which people are being "trained".
- (North Macedonia) *Skopje Global* posted an article <u>suggesting</u> that claims by Luc Montagnier (Nobel prize winner mentioned in the previous report) that the virus was created in a lab have spread to North Macedonia.



- (Poland) A since deleted post on Facebook claimed that Bill Gates wants to reduce the world population by enforced vaccination. (CEPA have provided OIP with a print-screen of the original post).
- (Romania) Two Facebook pages designed to look like official platforms ("Gazeta de informatii" and "Departamentul deInformatii Romania") published an identical post, framing lockdown measures as a plot by 'globalists' to reduce people's liberty an expansion of a narrative which claims the lockdown has been engineered by the Democrats in the US to create economic havoc and impede Trump's re-election bid. The pages have 7,000 and 83,000 followers respectively.

3. 5G caused COVID-19

None

4. NATO

• (Latvia) Baltic Voice has <u>highlighted</u> that NATO training is still ongoing in Latvia (a narrative that has been ongoing for some time) and that some of the soldiers are infected.

5. George Soros

• (Georgia) Kremlin-backed website *Sputnik Ossetia* covered a briefing by Russian MFA Maria Zakharova in which she <u>claimed</u> the US-Georgian Richard Lugar Public Health Centre in a suburb of Tblisi is being expanded for studies into 'bioterrorism', including manipulating pathogens for military capabilities.

6. Anti-vax

 (Armenia) Political activist Hrayr Nersesi Kostanyan <u>posted</u> a Russianlanguage video montage from different interviews where experts claim the danger has been inflated, and the aim is to promote vaccination. Despite the page having only 240 followers, the video has achieved 17,000 views and almost 1000 shares. The video contained, among others, a clip from doctor Shiva Ayyadurai stating the pharmaceutical giants advocating for vaccines force the scientists "to lie about coronavirus".



- (Moldova) Leader of the Christian Democratic People's Party of Moldova (CDPP) lurie Rosca has <u>posted</u> on Facebook referencing a developing narrative that COVID-19 is part of a Satanist plot to impose mandatory vaccination.
- **(Serbia)** Hostile state aligned media (such as *Informer.RS*) have <u>focused</u> on the rebuttals by a health professional to tennis player Novak Djokovic's comments, whereby he has stated that he would refuse to get vaccinated to protect himself against the virus.
- (Slovakia) *Hlavne spravy*, one of the most influential disinformation outlets, took a strong <u>anti-Vax line</u> in an article claiming that the UN has adopted a resolution that will require vaccination against COVID-19 (presumably, when a vaccine is available).

7. World Health Organization

• (Armenia) *The Iravunk* ("Rights") print and digital news outlet (14,000 views per month) has <u>published</u> an article which claims that 32% of WHO funding comes directly from Bill Gates and that Gates (along with other big pharma companies) has huge influence over the organisation. The authors depict Gates "as a fanatic" who is dedicated to cutting the global population and microchipping citizens via vaccination. The article goes on to criticise the Armenian Ministry of Health for cooperating with WHO and for previously implementing vaccination programmes such as Gardasil / HPV.

8. There is no virus

• (Georgia) Georgian website *Marshal Press* has <u>published</u> a story from a mysterious economics website, *ArmstrongEconomics.com* (available in English and Chinese). Both articles claim a GP in Switzerland ("Dr Thomas Binter") has been arrested by a Swiss "SWAT" team for speaking out against the "coronavirus fraud" stating that this is evidence of a "secret agenda". The Armstrong article <u>defines</u> this agenda as: "preparation for a new monetary system because they know this is collapsing".

ADDITIONAL

1. Response to Chinese and Russian aid



- (Moldova) Sputnik Moldova published an article which <u>lauds</u> how Russia and China are promoting a new kind of political world order in their approach to international humanitarian aid, "without hierarchy or conditionality."
- (Moldova) Online portal actualitati.md published an article quoting Moldovan President Igor Dodon, as he gave thanks to Russia and China for their "timely" provision of aid. According to the website, he went on to meet a Chinese cargo plane as it landed to deliver supplies. Elsewhere the website bloknotmoldova.md claimed that the government has purchased the "best tests" for COVID-19 from China, heaping more praise upon both China and Russia as the only states helping less-equipped countries in the fight against COVID-19. The US and EU are criticised for their failures.
- (Poland) A false claim <u>appeared</u> in an otherwise fairly neutral interview with a doctor published in gazetakrakowska.pl (online and in print), quoting 'pathomorphologists' as saying they are not encountering any cases of coronavirus deaths; "in terms of medicine, coronavirus is not a pandemic."
- (Poland) On Facebook, a video of an informal conversation between Fox News White House correspondent John Roberts and NYT photographer Doug Mills has been <u>shared</u> over 7,000 times. In the footage, they joke that the pandemic is a "hoax" and that "everyone here has already been vaccinated." Roberts made a statement later to Associated Press explaining their exchange was "sardonic black humour" and they take the pandemic seriously.

2. Domestic responses to COVID-19

- (Armenia) The COVID-19 Armenia Facebook group announced that the Ministry of Health is hiding the true number of infected people. The group is linked to the far-right, and has spread disinformation before. This was published in <u>Tert</u>, as well as <u>news.am</u>, and <u>irates.am</u>.
- (Hungary) In an op-ed piece published by pro-government daily Magyay Nemzet, Tamás Fricz (Fidesz-aligned) praised how Hungarian Justice Minister Judit Varga hit back at international criticism of Hungary's state of emergency COVID-19 law. Varga labelled criticism from international media and EU officials as 'fake news' and associated critics with liberalism.
- (Lithuania) Ekspertai.EU has claimed that the pandemic is being used by the government to <u>eliminate Alytus airport</u>, which also feeds into the narrative that it is being used to <u>bankrupt small/medium businesses</u> to the presumed benefit



of large companies such as retail chain *Maxima*, which supposedly influences the government.

• **(Ukraine)** Pro-Kremlin platform *From.UA* has begun criticising the government for both being too lax, in <u>allowing</u> churches to open for Easter (150 interactions), and too strict, for <u>preventing</u> farmers from working.

3. Roma

• None