

# 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 1

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 prefaces 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).

## Content

Page 2	Main analytical conclusions
Page 5	EU narratives
Page 6	NATO narratives
Page 7	Russia narratives
Page 9	Immigration narratives China narratives
Page 10	National government narratives
Page 11	Values narratives Social impact narratives
Page 13	Deep State and International Elites narratives



**This document is provided on a confidential basis  
and for the sole use of the addressee.**

**PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE!**

## 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.

[www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)  
[www.eastern-focus.eu](http://www.eastern-focus.eu)  
[office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)  
 +40 721 259 205

### MAIN ANALYTICAL CONCLUSIONS:

Monitoring of the COVID-19-related spread of false information across the region reveals a number of key features of the use of dis-/misinformation and conspiracy theories for the purposes of manipulation of public opinion:

Narratives, targets and vectors are adjusted to fit the local context. In Russia, where the focus is on opposing a 'strong' Russia to the 'weak' West, we see multiple narratives portraying Russia as much more competent in managing the pandemic, better equipped, even historically prepared in that sense (based on scientific knowledge and experience from the former USSR) than EU countries or the US and able to provide other countries with essential assistance. In Hungary, where the government has branded itself as the ideological leader of an illiberal world order, emphasis is placed on the demise of the West and of the EU, its hypocritical attacks on Hungary while being unable to provide the country with assistance. Pro-government or government-controlled media also attempt to link immigration, a key topic of Viktor Orbán's anti-EU crusade, to the pandemic. They also specifically and permanently target opponents: from George Soros to the opposition mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karacsony. In Georgia, a profoundly orthodox country, narratives are linked to restrictive measures being actually a conspiracy against Orthodoxy and traditional

values; vectors of influence are often orthodox leaders. values; vectors of influence are often orthodox leaders. As Tbilisi nurtures NATO and EU aspirations, another prevalent narrative is how its recent NATO membership has failed to benefit North Macedonia in the pandemic. Anti-NATO narratives can also be found in the Baltics, where they are shaped around both NATO failure to offer support and the continuation of military exercises, while NATO troops are allegedly carriers of the virus, thus increasing the risk to the local population (the stories being carried mostly by Russian-language media). In countries like Czechia, Romania, Slovakia, anti-EU and more generally anti-Western narratives are dominant.

There is seamless circulation of narratives across the region and 'successful' ones get recirculated in more and more countries. The 'conspiracy of global elites', led by Bill Gates, George Soros and others has had a long lifecycle, crossing borders from Armenia to Lithuania and Romania and not sparing a single country in-between. As the lack of trust in national governments and in the actual ability of the EU and Atlantic system to offer tangible benefits to members of the EU and NATO increases among the general population, the pandemic has offered a priceless opportunity to substantiate claims of the hypocrisy of the West, caused by an actual conspiracy from the shadows whose goals are the opposite of those publicly proclaimed. A new world order where Russia and China are key players is offered as an alternative.

Misinformation and disinformation are supported by conspiracy theories, the latter helping create useful fertile ground for the former. Conspiracy theories are rarely, unlike what they might seem, just the ramblings of ignorants, without a destabilising purpose. Often they help create fear, mistrust, apprehension that make the public even more prone to deliberately spread false information. At the same time, the large numbers of followers that conspiracy websites and social media accumulate make them valuable channels in spreading dis-/misinformation too.

The pandemic has not necessarily created new targets, narratives or channels of mis-/disinformation. It has, however, provided ample munition for the above, as all effective disinformation relies on some partial truths. The main victims of dis-/misinformation are likely to be the EU, NATO and the international institutions (UN, WHO), the pioneers of a Western-centric global order. The atmosphere of fear, the lack of transparency, the additional government powers to impose restrictions, the confusion about the virus and the partial and often flawed responses of Western states and international institutions have created a fatal mix that can be exaggerated manifold in the hands of able propagandists. The return on investment has thus increased significantly: the (manipulative) message is now easy for anyone to understand and adhere to, there is direct human interest, the actors in the pandemic are audience 'favourites' (Big Pharma, financiers like Soros, billionaires like Bill Gates), the emotional scenes are everywhere - such as in Romania, where one of the key narratives is that of a conspiracy between Berlin and president Iohannis and his liberal government to send Romanian workers to Germany for agriculture, despite mistreatment and risks to their health, as well as to the UK, which until recently rejected Romanian workers. The narrative is supported by fragments of truthful information: crowded buses with no sanitary precautions, abuses to Romanian workers in Germany, etc. The exercise alone has proven to hostile states ready to use stratcom as a weapon, whether Russia, China or others, that the method can win them important victories, both in front of favourable audiences from more like-minded states and in front of not-so-friendly audiences.

The role of far-right movements in disseminating disinformation has been underestimated, as well as their potential for being employed as 'useful idiots' by state actors, even by states that they would normally be ideologically opposed to, such as Russia or China. The unity of message among these groups in several countries is striking and potential connections among these might be a good thing to explore in the future.

## Highlights

The main targets of disinformation campaigns and the subject of the most spectacular conspiracies published in relation with the Covid19 pandemic remain the international, Western values-based organisations (NATO, EU) and the UN.

In an attempt to create dividing lines, Russian-language media in Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine presented North-Macedonia's NATO accession as a setback in its fight against COVID-19 and stated that the country could have made better use of the money it spent on membership.

Russian-language media in the Baltics (and even in Poland) disseminated the narrative that NATO troops in these countries were infected with COVID-19. Even though joint military exercises took place, another false story told us that Polish troops refused to take part.

(continued)

Orthodox groups have a lot of impact and reach; potentially more so than the actual Orthodox Church in countries with an orthodox majority. While the Church as an institution may have wider reach and through the orthodox faith it may offer the doctrinary basis, more toxic and often more radical messages come from fringe groups than from the mainstream clergy. In countries like Romania, with an 85% Orthodox population, the surprising reach and force of neoprottestant groups (including through members holding high office or significant positions in all political parties) is also worth noting, and possibly so far underestimated. Their message, often a variation of conservative ones originating in the US (in groups with close links to those in Romania), reaches well beyond those of the same confession (i.e. Nasul TV, for instance, which receives funding from evangelical groups in the US and Canada, has over 150,000 followers, among whom non-evangelical anti-vaxers, etc.)

The transformative impact of propaganda cannot be underestimated. While it may seem that the majority of citizens have a rational approach to social relations and political realities, the moment that marks the crossing of the threshold to 'critical mass' able to fundamentally influence a country's security and strategic environment is hard to anticipate or assess. A recent IRES poll in Romania shows that only 4 out of 10 people would vaccinate against coronavirus and that half of them believe the state and media are engaged in a conspiracy to limit their rights under the pretext of a pandemic. This is happening in a nominally European, pro-Western country, whose values have long shown however to diverge from European ones in significant ways, and partly so because of persistent mis-/disinformation that has tended to go under the radar. The impact of the crisis here and elsewhere is too early to assess – but it may be too late when we do.

## EU narratives

The main narrative that dominated the interval between April 13 and May 10 was that the EU would fail to mitigate the crisis triggered by COVID-19 and would thus expose its dysfunctionality more generally.

The ineffectiveness of the EU in fighting the pandemic and its failure to support member states continues to be the most prevalent disinformation narrative among all the analysed media. Significant peaks were registered in **Estonia**, **Lithuania** and **Latvia**, where pro-Russian sites are preaching the dissolution of the Union as a direct and immediate consequence of a financial crisis that will follow the pandemic.

The demise of the Schengen area is presented by the same media (rubaltic.ru) as a given, and justified with the opinions of so-called experts, or through the misinterpretation and bending of the data to fit the purpose. The same overly critical narrative was pushed in **Romania** not just by fringe media, but also by some known political players. Liviu Plesoianu (Social-Democrat MP, and the most cited political voice in Romania by Sputnik.md), Calin Popescu Tariceanu (former prime-minister and later president of the Senate) are among the political heads fuelling the narrative that the wealthier West will prey on the weaker East. In late April, a similar narrative appeared in **Estonia** and **Lithuania**, where the website rambler.ru advanced the idea that the pandemic would cause a split in the EU between stronger and weaker economies (North-South split). In **Bulgaria**, the narrative that the COVID-19 crisis is distracting from the collapse of the liberal order was substantiated by an interview on the BTV station (25% audience share) with a former diplomat and counter-terrorism expert, Professor Boyan Chukov. Ultimately, the narrative spread to EaP countries like **Georgia** and **Ukraine**, where it was ‘spiced up’ with news of the halting of Euro-Atlantic integration and financial assistance processes.

Another narrative that found traction mostly in **Romania** and **Latvia** appeared mid-April and is related to the “exploitation and reckless exposure to the virus” of seasonal workers by Germany and the UK. The main themes were ‘shady high-level agreements’ between governments to send labourers from these Eastern European countries to do agricultural work in the West these days, at high risk for their health; and the fact that the Romanian economy is being buried by the pandemic, while Germany, acting like a ‘colonial’ power, prospers thanks to cheap Romanian workforce. Former Minister of the Economy Ilie Serbanescu was cited claiming that the government banned attendance to Easter Mass to enforce social distancing, but

## Highlights

Attacks on liberal values take the form of a broad “horrors of life” campaign, whereby the West is portrayed as “a hostile place to live”; this time accompanied by the example of domestic violence exploding during the pandemic. In contrast, traditional, conservative Eastern values and Orthodox faith are presented as a shield against the pandemic. Moldovan politician Iurie Rosca thinks that the pandemic is divine punishment for abortion, a practice ‘so loosely advocated’ by the WHO.

Russia and China are presented as the saviours of European countries, and the champions of a new approach to international humanitarian aid: “one without hierarchy or conditionality”. Russian-language media alleged that Baltic countries also wanted to ask Russia for help in the crisis but were banned by their Western allies.

Conspiracy theories embroider ethnic exceptionalism with ancient knowledge, ‘only preserved in the East’. Russian media outlets are propagating a conspiracy theory present a month ago in the Romanian media sphere (“Romanians have anti-covid19 DNA”), only this time ‘the chosen people’ are in the Caucasus: the Armenians have a blood type that renders them invulnerable to the virus, while the Georgians’ blood contains no less than a cure to coronavirus.

(continued)

allowed workers to go to Germany, emphasising the prioritisation of Western demands over traditional values by leaders in Bucharest. A similar narrative gained traction in Latvia, where the government's perceived failure to financially support those left unemployed by the crisis was presented as part of a plan "to provide cheap labor" for Western EU member states, by leaving people with little choice but to emigrate for work. In both countries the underlying emphasis was on the ideological division between 'the rich' and 'the poor', powerful countries and 'second-hand' members within the EU.

A narrative of how the morally-bankrupt and incapacitated West is bested by the Russian government in times of pandemic comes from Russian media (TV channel Zvezda, linked to the Russian MOD). As Russia began recording its own cases, the narrative was then changed to the theory of 'containment' of Russia by the West. Addressing its **Lithuanian** and **Latvian** audiences, Russian media (nation-news.ru, RT) claimed that in its attempts to contain Russia, "Western countries are even ready to give up the fight against the coronavirus pandemic", based on a statement made by Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergei Lavrov that many "small" EU countries wish to ask Russia for aid but are banned from doing it by their Western allies, who continue to seek to contain Russia. This narrative was also echoed in the **Republic of Moldova**, where it was spread by Bogdan Țîrdea, a Moldovan MP, who said: "I want to ask the citizens: have you seen this help from the EU? Me neither. I've seen the help of China and Russia. The EU has given us zero!".

### **NATO narratives**

Russian-language media and some nationalistic, anti-Western media channels have been presenting NATO troops stationed abroad as a de facto biological weapon, since they are infected with COVID-19 and would infect local population, too. This was predominant in countries where Russian-speaking media is more present, like **Armenia** and **Georgia**.

Another relevant narrative during the same interval April 13 – May 10 revolved around the military exercise taking place in the Baltic countries. Pro-Russian media revelled in anti-NATO, anti-EU and anti-government messaging in their criticism of **Latvia** and **Lithuania's** refusal to cancel NATO training during the crisis. Moreover, rubaltic.ru - one of the most popular media outlets for Russian speakers in the Baltics - asserted that the US was forcing Lithuania to purchase COVID-19 tests made in the US. Another narrative, of "NATO failure" developed in Latvia, where Rossiyskaya Gazeta claimed that Spain had withdrawn its request to NATO for assistance and medical equipment in its fight against COVID-19 in March, after receiving only 10% of what had been asked for.

Probably the most extensive narrative throughout April developed around North Macedonia's NATO accession. While the North Macedonian media sphere itself was subject to little manipulation (the most notable one being that NATO's newly formed Hybrid Threats Response force is the way in which the West will start controlling people's thoughts), the country's new status was used in disinformation in ex-Soviet countries with large Russian-speaking communities and aspirations for NATO membership (**Georgia** and **Ukraine**), or countries where Russia's influence over local media is strong (**Serbia**, **Bulgaria**). An implicit warning to the countries seeking accession, most of these narratives point to

(continued)

NATO's limitations or unresponsiveness. Such is the case of the allegations that the aid received by North Macedonia was a trifling amount and that the country could have bought medical supplies with the money it transferred to NATO for membership. Some of these narratives were distributed by Bulgarian media outlets (with one of them (Newsfront) also claiming that US biolabs are working close to the Russian border, and they may use their capabilities to attack it). A statement of the Russian MFA cited by the Bulgarian site Mni.bg claimed that North Macedonia's membership of NATO had made the response to COVID-19 harder, as it continues to create dividing lines: "To date, there is no justification for the need of the Republic of North Macedonia to join NATO. The local population was promised economic growth, increased investment and the rule of law. But such a thing does not require joining a military alliance at all. On the contrary, Skopje will now be required to increase defence and delivery costs for Western, mainly US, weapons and equipment. This is the price the Macedonian people will have to pay for giving up their sovereignty in the military-political sphere".

### Russia narratives

Depending on interest and opportunity, the most frequently encountered Russia-related disinformation narratives tend to fall into two categories: 'Russia, the saviour' and 'Russia, the victim'.

In the first half of April, narratives exported westwards from Russia were concentrated around 'Russia's superiority' versus 'the inability of the West', with an added spin of the moral and financial decay of western countries. This fits into the broader "horrors of life" framework that portrays the West as a hostile place to live. For instance, multiple TV channels and other media outlets in **Russia** increased their focus on the rise of domestic violence in the West because of lockdown measures and loose morals (while holding the lid on similar cases in Russia).

Each country received a different version of this message, in accordance with the specifics of each audience. In some cases (The **Republic of Moldova**, via Sputnik, **Slovakia**, via Slobodny Vysielac or **Lithuania**, via Rubaltic.ru), Russian and pro-Russian media have been spinning statements by Dmitry Peskov, Vladimir Putin's spokesperson, who portrayed Russia's aid to the West (Italy, Serbia) as evidence of a strong Russia, compared to the allegedly incapacitated Western states. **Latvia** saw Kremlin-friendly media (Sputnik, NewsFont, ImhoClub), later picked up also by former MEP of the Latvian Russian Union Miroslav Mitrofanov, putting pressure on Latvian elites to accept Russian support as other countries have. In **Bulgaria**, NewsFront spread the narrative that Europe "simply cannot survive without Russia, and that EU countries will soon be asking Putin's cabinet for help", citing Franz Klintsevich, a member of the Federation Council in Russia.

(continued)

Emphasis on Russia's 'superiority over the West' took a different turn in the second half of April, with the allegation that Russian scientists had created a vaccine/ cure. This narrative was also backed by official **Russian** sources, namely the Federal Medical and Biological Agency, whose representatives claimed that Mefloquine, a Russian-made medicine, could stop the development of the virus. The narrative is also present outside Russian borders, in **North Macedonia** and **Georgia**, where Russian-leaning media gave a nostalgic description of the moment when the USSR "defeated" a disease similar to the black plague, imported from India, in just 20 days.

As is often the case, disinformation narratives have been shaped by geopolitical stakes. The (pro-)Russian population in **Ukraine**, where Russian interests revolve around the Donbas conflict and undermining the Kiev government, is more susceptible to a "Russian rapprochement" narrative. Hence the comments of openly pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk from the Opposition Platform – For Life, arguing that rapprochement with Russia and the lifting of the economic blockade of Donbas are necessary in order to counter the COVID-19 crisis. **Poland** was accused of seeking to annex Kaliningrad, following the closure of EU borders with the region. The narrative was presented alongside the idea that the Suwalki region should vote to leave the country.

Another narrative which was disseminated in the second half of April in **Russia**, **Moldova** and **Ukraine** stated that the virus was created in US military laboratories located in Ukraine and that the country was set to become a "biological Chernobyl". This was distributed on a number of social media channels linked to the leader of the Opposition Platform – For Life, Viktor Medvedchuk, and was picked up by Russian TV channel Tsargrad, itself controlled by Russian oligarch and Kremlin insider Konstantin Malofeev. In Moldova the additional implication was that the virus would be used to exterminate minorities and impose compulsory vaccinations.

In the broader category of disinformation campaigns speculating particular windows of opportunity, the beginning of May brought forth a new narrative as Victory Day was approaching, set upon casting Russia as a victim. Its **Baltic** variety was that "Russophobia" was deliberately being spread in these countries, as well as discrimination, hate mail and threats to the Russian-speaking population/ Russian ethnics. In **Romania**, the same narrative was

spun by Sputnik claiming that western media was collaborating to present Russia as an evil actor. The **Ukraine** version recirculated the theory that Russian troops in Donbas are "imaginary".

## China narratives

The April-May interval saw several narratives involving China, either negating its implication in creating and spreading the virus worldwide, or lauding the assistance it provided to European states. It is worth mentioning the case of **Hungary**, where Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó praised China in the Hungarian National Assembly for providing PPE to Hungary, while downplaying the European aid. The same narrative was seen in **Moldova**, where president Igor Dodon gave thanks to Russia and China for their “timely” provision of aid. Sputnik.md published an article in which it praised Russia and China’s approach to international humanitarian aid: “without hierarchy or conditionality.”

Another narrative widely disseminated in Europe’s East, from **Czechia** and **Hungary** to **Georgia** and **Russia**, was that the US (namely Barack Obama and Dr. Anthony Fauci) had provided China with the resources (3.7 bln. USD) and the technology (‘created at Harvard by prof. Charles Lieberman’ – later allegedly arrested for it) to create the virus. The news was mainly disseminated by sites which were designed to resemble Western publications, including [bbcnews.ru](http://bbcnews.ru) and [abcnews.com.ge](http://abcnews.com.ge) but having IP addresses traceable back to locations in St. Petersburg. A similar narrative was seen in **Romania**, where it revolved around the idea that the West is making up reasons to blame China for the crisis, in order to extract vast reparations; that China is set to become the world’s uncontested superpower, whilst the West is in decline.

A more modestly spread narrative that did not get the same traction was that the virus mutated in Europe and that is why the virus is more deadly here. As the news is coming from sources in **Bulgaria** controlled by the Chinese state, this may be an attempt to deflect the blame that has been directed at China.

## Immigration narratives

The majority of immigration-related narratives identified in the last month were directed against the EU immigration policy, rather than being directed against the immigrants. The narrative of government helping migrants, to the detriment of the population, was used in **Hungary**, where a pro-government media outlet (Magyar Nemzet) claimed that the COVID-19 hotspots in Sweden are areas with high immigration, and that the Swedish government have supposedly ‘given up’ providing ICU beds to the elderly. The same outlet accused George Soros of supporting ‘pro-immigration’ mayors in Hungary and Italy, after the Open Society Foundation donated 1.1m EUR to Milan and Budapest to fight COVID-19. Moreover, the ruling Fidesz party praised the Hungarian authorities for deporting 11 Iranian citizens who allegedly broke quarantine rules and were violent while in medical isolation (a story not corroborated by other sources).

Different actors (in this case even a government!) are speculating the crisis in order to justify their actions or to denounce others’ discriminatory actions against them. In the second half of April, Hungary’s Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Péter Szijjártó accused Charles Michel (President of the European Council) and Didier Reynders (EU Commissioner for Justice) of taking an aggressive stance against Hungary because of its anti-immigration policy. He substantiated his claim by accusing EU institutions of taking their frustration out on Hungary as the UN’s global migration pact failed and he continued to link the spread of the disease to immigration.

Another example for the above-mentioned line of disinformation can be found in **Romania**, this time with regard to intra-EU migration, the narrative being that Romanian seasonal workers in Germany are held in abusive conditions, with no pay or food. This is a continuation of a previously seen story which has been prevalent in Romania and **Moldova** for several weeks.

## National Government narratives

The occurrence of anti-government narratives would probably be the easiest to anticipate during a crisis, especially if the situation involves restricting civil liberties. Unsurprisingly, in the April-May timeframe of the present report, the most prevalent narratives in all monitored states were those of government failure to tackle the epidemic, as well as multiple conspiracy theories regarding the reasons behind the toughness of the measures imposed.

The main line of attack in **Latvia** was that the government refused the help extended by Moscow, out of 'Russophobia'. The narrative continued throughout the first half of May, backed by a report released by the Latvian Constitution Protection Bureau that allegedly was dominated by anti-Russian positions.

In **Lithuania**, one of the main messages promoted by Russian-language media outlets was that the government was using the pandemic measures to raise taxes and destroy small businesses. The Lithuanian government is also accused of speculating the fact that everyone's attention is on the pandemic, so that it can cover for its illegal activities and selective justice (this was said in relation to the case of a foundation ran by former president Dalia Grybauskaitė).

The alleged misreporting of the true number of COVID-19 related deaths, or even concealment of real data by government institutions managing the crisis is another widely spread allegation. In the case of **Armenia**, fringe media sites are accusing the Ministry of Health of hiding the real number of infected people, to cover up for its own incompetence.

**Polish** anti-government narratives revolved around criticism over the allocation of government resources during the crisis (implicitly accusing the Polish government of not prioritising efforts to contain the pandemic, but rather pursuing its own political/business interests). Coming as a continuation of a wider campaign to undermine Polish-US relations in the lead-up to the planned

Defender Europe 2020 military exercises, one other story widely present in local social media was that US troops participating in a military exercise in the Baltics represented a potential hotbed of infection. The story culminated with the (untrue) allegation that some Polish troops even refused to take part in the drill.

**Romania** is amongst the countries with the highest number of anti-establishment narratives over the observed interval. The narrative that the government is using the crisis to censor/ control the media that criticise official measures against COVID-19 got notable attention, with national-coverage TV stations and fringe, anti-liberal channels alike re-distributing and fuelling it way beyond just raising legitimate doubts. Even Sputnik.md (which also covers Romania) had it on its front page for a couple of days. In this light, the reopening of the previously closed website justitiarul.ro was framed by the luj.ro website as implicit acknowledgment by the authorities that the closure had been unconstitutional, and that consequently all measures taken by the authorities (to shut down websites accused of publishing fake news on COVID-19) were illegal all along.

Another inflammatory narrative built on the firing of the Director of the Institute of Infectious Diseases, Dr. Streinu-Cercel, for his very controversial plan for lockdown easing. The President and Prime Minister were accused of opportunism and sacking medical professionals in order to cover for their own shortcomings in managing the crisis and to keep their public approval levels up, especially among the elderly. Other articles present public acquisitions of medical equipment used during the pandemic as overpriced and made through firms linked to proxies of the president/government party (unsurprisingly, the opposition Social-Democrat party is seeking to capitalise on this and hence amplifies the stories through its own social media accounts). One other hypothesis circulated in Romania was the fact that President Iohannis had known early on that the pandemic would happen, but had chosen to focus on his own political priorities.

## Values narratives

Narratives revolving around traditional values under threat from the decadent Western liberalism occupy an important place because they address a substantial part of the audience in the monitored region.

**Georgia** has been host to an impressive number of this type of narratives and amongst the ones that got most traction and are promoted by multiple media outlets are those that claim that God and Church provide far better protection than the health system. Additionally, as claimed by (excommunicated) orthodox clergyman Basil Mkalavishvili, ‘the pandemic was caused by worldwide sin’ and former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and Giga Bokeria (leader of the European Georgia opposition party) used George Soros money to control television media to force the Georgian government to close all orthodox churches for Easter celebrations. Also, the Georgian Orthodox Church made public that it intended to defy state emergency rules and hold the Vigil on 18th April 2020.

In the wake of this narrative, a pro-Russian magazine (‘Georgia and the World’) published an interview with influential orthodox priest Giorgi Razmadze, one of the most vocal religious voices speaking against Western values, who claimed that the church was under attack, and that the clergymen who called on believers to stay at home during the crisis were not real believers themselves. The narrative was picked up by other media outlets that expanded on it further by claiming that neoliberal movements had been fighting against the Orthodox Church in a war that began after WWII.

In **Romania**, the closing of churches also came under attack in different media outlets and on social media. The main target was Romanian president Klaus Iohannis (himself a Lutheran) who was accused of discriminating against orthodox Christians. Sputnik.md claimed the president was betraying the nation and disrespecting the orthodox Christian and went as far as calling him a “Nazi”, hinting at his German ethnicity. The article was spun by other media outlets and further developed to claim that the closure of churches for Easter is a product of the control exerted by Germany over Romania. Finally, the Romanian Orthodox Church, taking an anti-Western stance, presented itself as being “more generous than the United States”, arguing that it made donations of \$3million, compared to the \$800,000 given by the US to Romania.

## Social Impact narratives

Even though the narratives with high social impact differ from country to country, there are those that tread a common line in most countries. These are generally variations around the fact that COVID-19 was created in a laboratory and that the lockdown measures are not meant to keep the public healthy, but restrict basic rights.

**Romania** has seen many of these narratives, and amongst the most prevalent, one that claimed the virus was created in a lab in order to reduce the liberty of the population. The narrative was spread by two prominent Facebook disinformation platforms (“Gazeta de informatii” and “Departamentul de Informatii Romania”) and by the Romanian doctor Vasile Astarastoe, former president of the Romanian College of Physicians, known for his distribution of conspiracy theories. He also claims that the vaccine may be futile, as the virus has mutated multiple times, a thesis echoed by multiple online publications. Republications from international media mention the creation of the virus in a Chinese lab and the theory of doctor Didier Raoult, who stated that a second wave of infections was impossible. One of the most spectacular theories, which claimed that “Romanians have a particular gene that resists COVID-19” made it amply onto mainstream media, including televisions.

(continued)

The narrative that attracted the most social engagement in **Ukraine** was related to the vegetation fires around Chernobyl and the accusation that they were started by the government, who obeyed the orders of their “puppet masters” in the US. The narrative was backed by “experts” and pushed by pro-Kremlin media (PolitNavigator) who also claimed the government lacked the means to manage the incident. Part of the same “puppet master” framing, Ukrainian media pushed the story that claimed secret US labs were functioning within the country. Another narrative of social interest was one that claimed farmers were throwing away or dumping their crops as they could not sell them while markets remained closed.

**Armenia’s** main narratives in this category revolved around the science of COVID-19. One of these was that most Armenians had a blood type that rendered them less vulnerable to the virus. The narrative is believed to have appeared in Russia and was backed by ‘doctors’, activists, and anti-government opinion-leaders. This seems to be part of a regional ‘family’ of narratives, as in neighbouring **Georgia** we find a claim that Georgian blood contains a cure for the new coronavirus. Another narrative encountered in the Caucasian country to substantiate the unreality of the pandemic is that people are offered money to falsely register their relatives as having died of COVID-19, while the cause of death is actually different. The allegation that the pandemic is fake and the deaths recorded are listed as being caused by COVID-19 for financial gains from the EU, was also present in **Lithuania**. It was backed by “anonymous” testimonies of medical staff and pro-Russian media.

The same “there is no pandemic/ the pandemic is fake” message was circulated in **Hungary** and backed by the statements of József Tamasi, a high-profile Hungarian doctor. Another narrative, this

time used for political purposes, was that the opposition mayor of Budapest had been forging documents that detailed the situation of an elderly care home in the Hungarian capital, which was considered the only hot spot for positive COVID-19 cases. This was disseminated by Hungary’s leading pro-government news portal Origo. The article comes after multiple attempts from the pro-government media to discredit the Budapest mayor by blaming him for the rise of COVID-19 cases in the Hungarian capital, and alleging that there were no on-site doctors available – as required by Hungarian law.

**North Macedonia’s** main narrative was that 5G caused or helped spread the virus, a statement backed by the claims of a “German physicist” and pushed by multiple media outlets and social media.

The 5G narrative was heavily promoted in **Poland** as well, where one publication claimed that countries without 5G reported no cases. Furthermore, the installation of 5G was described as a step towards installing a “world government” and “mass control of the inhabitants of all developed countries.” Another narrative was that the Health Ministry planned to infect a large number of people in order to justify the implementation of a vaccination programme.

## **'Deep State' and International Elites narratives**

The narratives surrounding Bill Gates and George Soros attempting to install a new world order has been among the favourite and most enduring.

In **Georgia** it was presented under the guise of “Jewish dynasties” using the crisis to force microchipping on the population or of Bill Gates, in cahoots with the WHO, planning to use it to microchip the population (after having created the virus or at least known about it since 2015). This idea was promoted by anti-vax outlets, as well as other Russian and Georgian media and endorsed by Russian tennis player turned politician, Marat Safin.

Another ‘scandal’ in Georgia was the one that targeted the Richard Lugar Lab and Amiran Gamkrelidze (the head of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia). In multiple media outlets and social media the narrative was that the Lugar lab was being used by the U.S. to conduct experiments on Georgians; that the U.S. had done it before and was doing it again. A background story detailed how the lab previously developed Sovaldi, a medicine for the treatment of Hepatitis C, provided by the US government to Georgia as assistance (Igor Giorgadze, the former Minister of State Security of Georgia, first spread conspiracy theories about Sovaldi, which has the alternative name of Sofosbuvir). As the lab gained an ever-increasing role in the fight against COVID-19, different hostile state actors attempted to discredit it further.

The ‘Bill Gates is behind the outbreak’ narrative was wildly popular in **Slovakia** as well, where the microchipping theory was heavily disseminated. That the virus was created by or with the help of the CIA and that the cure exists but will be exploited by

Mr. Gates for his own financial gain was also published by local media outlets, as well as endorsed by one Slovak MP.

Ideas of ‘harmful 5G’ and ‘Bill Gates will implant microchips on the population’ were spun in **North Macedonia** too, and disseminated by Russian-language and pro-Russian media outlets, as well as endorsed by multiple ‘experts’. Messages also incited to mass protests at the end of the lockdown, probably seeking to create some mobilisation around the upcoming parliamentary elections. One narrative that was pushed by Elizabeta Chingarova Matevska, a member of the Russian Rodina Party, and which stands out is that COVID-19 is a conspiracy against North Macedonia and it will be used to erase its identity.

**Armenia’s** main propaganda focused on Bill Gates and George Soros who, connected to a “London-based deep state”, funded the development of COVID-19 in laboratories in the USA, Georgia and Ukraine in order to “cut the global population and microchip citizens via vaccination”. This was disseminated by multiple media outlets. One narrative that claimed that the pandemic was a creation of the media, that protests in the US were against Bill Gates and that protests will also bring the quarantine to an end in Armenia was started by Executive Director of the Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises of Armenia, Karen Vardanyan.

It is no surprise that **Hungary’s** main narrative would be concentrated around the conspiracy theories targeting George Soros and the EU. The narrative regarding Soros’s investment in a number of pharma companies pre-pandemic is cast as the indicator that the billionaire was aware of the way the situation would evolve. Another narrative also developed around media outlets and NGOs that had criticised the Hungarian government, like CNN’s Christian Amanpour or the ‘Civil Liberties Union for Europe’ Hungarian NGO, naming them as part of the “Soros network”. Pro-government media outlets are

(continued)

attempting to associate the U.S.-Hungarian billionaire with any criticism expressed by independent media, the opposition or human rights organisations of the Hungarian Government's management of the crisis. Soros was also linked by pro-government media to the depreciation of the national currency during the pandemic and to a plan for "financial debt dictatorship" triggered by the sale of bonds. The idea that Bill Gates would microchip everybody through a vaccine, even though secondary to the Soros focus, was also present in Hungarian media. One narrative suggested that the lockdown would last until 2022 and that restrictions could be part of a "new world order" for which people are being "trained".

Newsletter by: Bogdan Nedeia

Contributions by: Vlad Iaviță, Rufin Zamfir, Oana Popescu-Zamfir

# 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).

## Content

Page 2	Main narratives
Page 3	EU narratives NATO narratives
Page 4	Russia narratives National government narratives
Page 5	Immigration narratives Values narratives Deep State and International Elites narratives
Page 6	Social Impact narratives



**This document is provided on a confidential basis  
and for the sole use of the addressee.**

**PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE!**

## 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.

[www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)  
[www.eastern-focus.eu](http://www.eastern-focus.eu)  
[office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)  
 +40 721 259 205

### 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.

Newsletter by: Bogdan Nedea

Contributions by: Vlad Iaviță, Rufin Zamfir, Oana Popescu-Zamfir

## 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-Russia 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.

# 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 3

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).

## Content

Page 2	Main narratives
Page 3	EU narratives NATO narratives
Page 4	Russia narratives National government narratives
Page 5	Immigration narratives Values narratives Deep State and International Elites narratives
Page 6	Social Impact narratives



**This document is provided on a confidential basis  
and for the sole use of the addressee.**

**PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE!**

## 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.

[www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)  
[www.eastern-focus.eu](http://www.eastern-focus.eu)  
[office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)  
 +40 721 259 205

### MAIN NARRATIVES:

‘The EU is on the brink of disintegration, having **failed** to mitigate the effects of the pandemic for its members’, continued to be the prevalent narrative in countries like **Czechia, Bulgaria and Latvia**. Another narrative, of the EU mischievously providing aid to non-EU countries in order to gain extended access to their markets was disseminated in **Georgia**.

**NATO** military exercises in Europe were presented in **Latvia, Montenegro and Czechia** as being intentional provocations to Russia, seeking to force a “retaliatory aggression” .

While NATO is presented as a provocateur, Western-backed sanctions against **Russia** are presented as unfair and irrelevant in a post-pandemic world, in narratives in **Estonia, Moldova and Ukraine**.

**The Romanian** government allocation of 40mln euro funding for a public health campaign in the media is presented as a bribe to mainstream outlets to allow authorities control over the public narrative and spread panic, and eventually install a dictatorship. Meanwhile the country saw its first anti-lockdown protest, organised right after some of the restrictions were lifted.

The **Hungarian** government and its subservient media remain the biggest source of criticism for Brussels, claiming that the EU is brutally intervening in member states’ internal policy, coercing and deceiving members into accepting immigrants.

A trending narrative in **Romania, Ukraine, Georgia and Slovakia** is stating that the aggressiveness of the virus is overblown and the number of COVID-19 deaths greatly exaggerated in order to restrict the rights of the civilian population.

*Newsletter by: Bogdan Nedeia*

*Contributions by: Vlad Iaviță, Rufin Zamfir, Oana Popescu-Zamfir*

## EU narratives

The anti-EU messaging in **Czechia**, disseminated by pro-Russian media (Sputnik) continues, as far-right politician Radim Fiala criticised EU recommendations of easing lockdown restrictions, claiming that they would lead to the ‘sacrifice’ of Czech citizens and the spread of the virus. Moreover, local fringe media claimed that the EU was ineffective in combating the pandemic, and helping non-EU states only to access their markets. The article suggests that protests across Europe bear testimony to EU failure.

Dissemination of anti-EU narratives in **Hungary** this week has pro-government media praise Budapest’s anti-COVID-19 measures and attempt to discredit European leaders who took a stance against Viktor Orban’s illiberal policies. Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod (one of the five Foreign Ministers that signed the letter expressing concerns over democratic backsliding in Hungary) was described as immoral, therefore unfit to criticise Hungarian authorities.

In the broader ‘the West is failing’ narrative, **Bulgarian** pro-Russian media published the opinion of the chief coordinator of the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research in Turkey, who claims that the COVID-19 pandemic will end the American post-Cold War hegemony.

A narrative stating that the EU is preying on its neighbourhood developed in **Georgia**. Here pro-Russian media published a story claiming that biomaterial was being collected by the US-run Lugar biolaboratory from South-Ossetian citizens. To substantiate the claim, the article presents the photo of an EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) car, followed by an ambulance. A secondary narrative seems to develop around this topic as the South Ossetian KGB claims that **Georgia** is continuing the genocide of Ossetians using COVID-19 and spreading it intentionally.

The ‘EU will disintegrate after the pandemic’ narrative continues in **Latvia**, where pro-Russian media, citing a Latvian businessman, claims that the EU will dissolve, Latvia will be left bankrupt and then integrated into ‘a united Eurasian space’. Furthermore, the same media outlet (Sputnik) claims that larger EU countries will prevent the Union from supporting Latvia after the crisis and will look to protect themselves first.

## NATO narratives

**Latvian** Russian-language media continue to spread the idea that NATO “intends to provoke Moscow into retaliatory aggression” by holding military exercises despite the pandemic.

Similar narratives stating that NATO is ‘provoking Russia near its borders’ developed in **Czechia**, as well as in **Montenegro**, where pro-Russian media ran an article about NATO military manoeuvres close to the Russian border, amidst the pandemic.

Anti-NATO narratives in **Slovakia** continued with the story that the West uses the pandemic to discredit Russia. The story cites Maria Zakharova, Director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who claims that a Western media-led disinformation campaign against Russia is ongoing. Her comments are in response to those made by NATO’s Jens Stoltenberg, who suggested that Russia and China were spreading misinformation about COVID-19.

## Russia narratives

'A story presenting Russia as a saviour developed in **Bulgarian** media, where some outlets reported of a telephone call between Vladimir Putin and Serbian President Vučić, in which the latter expressed gratitude for Russia's medical assistance.

Articles stating that Russia is handling the pandemic better than other countries continued to be disseminated in **Georgia**, where Russian-language media claimed European media was manipulating the number of deaths. In **Bulgaria** the same narrative was backed by the statements of the head of the Russian National Research Centre for Epidemiology and Microbiology, Alexander Gunzburg. Related stories that claimed Russia built 16 hospitals in just two months in response to the pandemic were published in **Montenegro**.

Narratives alleging that sanctions against Russia prevent it from offering aid to Western countries have been identified in **Estonia, Moldova** and **Ukraine**. The sanctions against Russia were presented by pro-Russian and fringe media as 'useless and unfair', especially in a post-pandemic world. The story quoted Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova who accused the Financial Times and the New York Times of producing "anti-Russian fakes" and demanded a retraction.

## National Government narratives

Discrediting its critics remains the main concern of the **Hungarian government** through its loyal media, after Prime-Minister (PM) Viktor Orban declared he would renounce his special mandate in early June. The information was used to fuel the message that the government is under siege by the 'Soros network'. While all government-backed media disseminated the narrative, Fidesz, through the

voice of its communication director Hollik Istvan, attacked the opposition claiming that a 'coup d'etat' was being prepared.

The ongoing narrative of the supposedly illegal foundation of former president Dalia Grybauskaitė, which is helping fight COVID-19, continued in **Lithuania**, with claims from fringe media that the prosecutors are delaying the start of an investigation.

The **Romanian** narrative that the state was attempting to bribe mainstream media by allotting 40 million euros for major media outlets has been ongoing since it surfaced two weeks ago. The funds would be directed at a massive public health campaign, but numerous fringe media interpreted it as a bribe so that the government can control the public narrative and further spread false and alarmist information.

The anti-lockdown narrative also continued, despite many restrictions being lifted starting May 15<sup>th</sup>. Criticism of the government for 'excessive restrictions', presented as an attempt to impose dictatorship, has also been growing. Immediately after the restrictions were lifted, **Romania** experienced its first anti-lockdown protest, where almost 200 people were present, rallied by influencers known for their religious, nationalist, anti-Western and anti-globalisation stances.

According to an official survey (IRES), **Romanians** have little trust in authorities, as well as in the scientific community, believing that the government has been withholding information about the pandemic and that the virus is not as dangerous as presented. As a result, the newly imposed measures corresponding to the state of alert instituted in the country have been harshly criticised, and illustrated with a viral video where police officers are apparently tackling two individuals who refused to have their temperature measured before entering a supermarket. The whole incident later turned out to have been staged. Nevertheless, the video was disseminated by an anti-Western influencer (Iulian Capsali), fringe media and other influencers (for instance prominent TV host Mircea Badea),

who pushed the narrative of a police-state being implemented.

Stories of the failing medical system resurfaced in **Ukraine**, where media reports presented the harsh realities of COVID-19 patients allegedly being asked to purchase their own medical supplies in the hospital. The narrative was disseminated by Vadim Rabinovich, from the Opposition Platform – For Life party, who stated that former deputy Health Minister Ulana Suprun has to be held personally responsible for the shortcomings of the medical system.

A new narrative surfacing in **Armenia** suggests that the policy making face masks in public spaces mandatory was adopted because the Prime Minister's family and oligarch Samvel Aleksanyan stand to financially gain from it.

The narrative that face masks are killing people as they weaken immune systems, and harm the respiratory tract, lungs and brain due to the lack of oxygen was disseminated in **Slovakia** by openly pro-Russian politician and former MP Peter Marček.

### Immigration narratives

The main anti-immigration narratives continue to be disseminated by **Hungarian** media outlets, which covered the decision of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) regarding Hungary's illegal detention of a number of migrants arriving in the country. The decision describing migrant transit zones as detention centres was deemed arbitrary and presented as an attempt by the EU to coerce and deceive members into accepting migrants "at all costs". Furthermore, Prime-Minister Orbán's defense advisor Gyorgy Bokondi claimed the ECJ decision was politically motivated in order to force a policy change in Hungary - also a plan of the "Soros NGOs network".

### Values narratives

As part of a recurrent narrative, stories claiming that COVID-19 is used to fight against the church (especially Orthodox) have been disseminated in **Georgia, Moldova and Montenegro**. In all three countries the claims were made by high representatives of the church and later spread by pro-Russian media. In **Romania**, fringe media presented the death of Archbishop Pimen, who tested positive for COVID-19 and later passed away, as false information disseminated in order to induce mass hysteria and keep people in their homes.

### Deep State and International Elites narratives

The 'deliberate population reduction' narrative continues in **Bulgaria**, supported with citations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) about the impact of the lockdown policy, claiming that, in the US, for each percentage point rise in unemployment, 37,000 Americans will die because of poverty. The idea of the depopulation planned by global elites was also prevalent in the **Czechia** and **Slovakia**, with additional claims that COVID-19 tests are contaminated, therefore misleading.

'New World Order', 5G's malignance and the perils of microchipping via vaccination (by Bill Gates) narratives continued to be disseminated in **Georgia, Armenia** and **North Macedonia**. Furthermore, North Macedonia saw the narrative of a second COVID-19 wave prepared by Satanists that want to introduce a "global-fascist media virus".

## **Social Impact narratives**

A new narrative developing in **Czechia** revolved around advice against wearing masks, saying that it might be hazardous and pointless, citing US neurosurgeon Russel Blaylock (who has a track record of putting out opinions without scientific backing). The narrative was reinforced by Czech singer Lou Fanánek Hagen who claims that wearing masks is not necessary, but an exercise of the elites to see if people will follow their directives. Meanwhile in **Moldova** the narrative that people with type-A blood are more susceptible to COVID-19 was pushed by pro-Russian media citing the head of the Russian Federal Biomedical Agency (FMBA), Veronika Skvortova.

The prevalent disinformation in **Romania** in the past week revolved around claims that the number of deaths from COVID-19 in the country was greatly exaggerated (as part of the government's actions to exaggerate the aggressiveness of the virus) and that people are getting paid in order to accept the virus as the cause of death for their relatives. The narrative was disseminated by multiple fringe media outlets, as well as mainstream media (Antena 3) and anti-Western influencers (Iulian Capsali). The same narrative was pushed in **Ukraine, Georgia and Slovakia**, where the number of COVID-19 deaths registered in Italy was challenged and deemed to have been purposely blown out of proportions, in order to impose "a dictatorship without consent" (as defined by Italian MP Vittorio Sgarbi).

Also, in **Ukraine**, praise was heaped on the decision by Belarusian President Lukashenko not to take any COVID-19 containment measures. The decision was presented as the right course of action given the low number of deaths the country reported. The story of a farmer who dumped tonnes of carrots on a field near Kyiv, unable to sell them due to harsh lockdown measures, has also registered significant traction. The story is part of a broader narrative claiming that farmers saw their merchandise rot because of the lockdown measures.

The **Moldovan Orthodox Church** released a public letter to state authorities that recycled a whole set of

conspiracy theories (5G technology engendered the virus, Bill Gates is microchipping the population and killing children in India, the virus is man-made, etc.) and ended with a call not to make vaccination mandatory. **Armenian** media reported on the story with a twist, adding that many European countries might reconsider mandatory vaccination as a result of the church position.

# 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 4

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).

## Content

Page 2	Main narratives
Page 3	EU narratives NATO narratives
Page 4	Russia narratives National government narratives
Page 5	Immigration narratives Values narratives Deep State and International Elites narratives
Page 6	Social Impact narratives



**This document is provided on a confidential basis  
and for the sole use of the addressee.**

**PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE!**

## 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.

[www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)  
[www.eastern-focus.eu](http://www.eastern-focus.eu)  
[office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)  
 +40 721 259 205

### MAIN NARRATIVES:

The forthcoming 'dissolution of the EU' as a result of failure to mitigate the impact of the pandemic remains one of the most distributed narratives throughout the analysed period. It was the prevalent disinformation/ misinformation theme in EU members **Czechia, Romania, Slovakia, Latvia** and non-EU members **Georgia, Moldova** and **North Macedonia**. Moreover, the idea that Brussels attempts to gain leverage in non-EU markets through financial assistance was revived, facilitated by the discussions around the EU financial aid package.

The idea that NATO provokes Russia during the pandemic in order to justify its own relevance continued to be disseminated in the **Baltic countries, North Macedonia, Georgia** and **Montenegro**.

The anti-establishment movements are using the opportunity offered by official actions during the pandemic to circulate a narrative accusing government of artificially imposing mandatory measures (the facemasks, the thermo-scanners)\*. Multiple high-ranking **Romanian** politicians joined the current and began circulating the idea that the National-Liberal government is using such measures to make shady deals that would profit them and their proxies.

A developing narrative in **Slovakia and Czechia** claims that Middle-Eastern migrants who tested positive with COVID-19 infections were transferred to Greece from Turkish camps in an "informal biological attack" that Turkey is orchestrating against its neighbouring country. Slovak fringe media outlet *Zem a Vek* is citing Greek *Proto Thema*, a far-right leaning media outlet.

*\*methodological clarification: we never assume that anti-government criticism per se represents mis-/disinformation. The same applies to alternative/ non-mainstream views expressed on any number of issues. Plurality and diversity of opinions represent the essence of free speech and public debate. However, mis-/disinformation often works by distorting partially truthful information, or by placing it in context that distorts its meaning; or by amplifying legitimate criticism to the point where it seeks to undermine the overall credibility of the target, i.e. getting from criticising the actions of the government, to questioning the value or performance of government in general; from criticising EU action, to sowing mistrust in the value of EU membership or principles altogether. Therefore, we do classify as mis-/disinformation cases such as those mentioned above, especially when they are part of a sustained campaign/ constant approach by specific media/ influencers, whereby they follow discernible manipulative goals.*

## EU narratives

The main anti-EU narratives revolved around the mismanagement of the pandemic and how that causes division amongst its leadership and will lead to the the imminent breakaway of some of its members (such as Italy). As part of the same message, the financial aid package proposed by Brussels was interpreted as a means to plunge member states into debt to have greater control over them. These narratives were heavily disseminated in **Czechia, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia**, and in **Georgia, Moldova** and **North Macedonia**. Moreover, the Moldovan version of the story included the fact that EU was seeking a monopoly, banning countries from seeking aid in Russia and China.

In **Georgia**, the head of Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre (an NGO) and former Member of Parliament Dimitri Lortkipanidze argued that the financial aid from the EU would transform Georgia into a puppet state. The story of the EU's ineffectiveness also continued in the country, backed by distorted, misleading versions of statements by former German ministers of foreign affairs Joschka Fischer and Sigmar Gabriel, who reportedly have claimed that the EU abandoned Italy and Spain without any assistance amidst the pandemic.

One of the stories published in **Latvia** by Sputnik claimed that the EU's disapproval of Baltic States opening their borders should be interpreted as a precursor to the dissolution of the EU, and the creation of a new association, "based on fundamentally different conditions".

**Hungary** remains one of the biggest disseminators of anti-EU narratives, especially through government subservient media. One of the most reported stories by pro-government outlets was the fact that the EU refused to apologise for their criticism of the Hungarian "Coronavirus Law" and continued to spread fake news about the Budapest leadership. All out attacks from the same outlets

stated that the EU had double standards as it failed to criticise the Swedish response to the pandemic, while heavily criticising the Hungarian one. The message that Italy, Spain and France failed in controlling the pandemic due to their liberal approach (as opposed to Hungary's 'successful' nationalistic-conservative approach), continued to be published. As part of the story, a part of the European financial aid package was presented as being in fact the 'perpetual bonds' offered by George Soros to the European Union in the past weeks (thus, the EU would have been officially 'bought' by Soros).

## NATO narratives

Content targeting NATO during the last week was not prevalent, but the 'pandemic leading to conflict' narrative was still present in **Estonia, Montenegro, North Macedonia** and **Georgia**.

The story that certain NATO members (especially the Baltics) are deliberately antagonising Russia in order to ensure the relevance (and funding) of the Alliance during the pandemic was disseminated in **Lithuania**. A related idea that was put forth claims that Lithuanian authorities used the pandemic to continue overspending on the military, despite the lack of any aggression and that funds could have been better used for fighting the virus.

## Russia narratives

'Russian supremacy' narratives claiming Moscow has created a COVID-19 cure and intends to start mass immunisation in autumn have resurfaced in **Bulgaria** and **Latvia**. The claims were attributed to the director of the Russian National Center for the Study of Epidemiology and Microbiology, Alexander Ginsburg, quoted by Russia Today.

The same articles claim the existence of a conspiracy orchestrated by 'Big Pharma' with the help of liberal media, to undermine Russian efforts in combating COVID-19.

Pro-Russian outlet RuBaltic argued that cooperation with Moscow would improve the economic outlook of the Baltic States, in an article published in both **Estonia** and **Lithuania**. The article also suggests that the Baltics are prioritising the interests of NATO over those of their own citizens.

A story claiming that the US is attempting to discredit the Russian healthcare system was disseminated in **Moldova** by Sputnik. The article refers to a grant to civil society provided by the US State Department through its embassy in Chisinau for combating misinformation originating from Russia and is interpreted as a direct order from Washington.

## National Government narratives

Measures undertaken to stop the spread of COVID-19 continued to be heavily criticised in **Czechia**, **Latvia** and **Lithuania**, where the main narratives claimed that governments lied to the population in order to impose a form of dictatorship or cover up their inability to manage the crisis. As part of the same message, pro-Russian fringe media claimed that the **Lithuanian government** not only discriminated against the elderly by not encouraging

them to avoid public places, but also failed to look after its population during the pandemic by refusing basic needs to the poverty-stricken.

Anti-establishment manipulation in **Romania** gained new traction with statements coming from the opposition that were then recirculated by propaganda outlets such as Sputnik.md: liberal-democrat senator Varujan Vosgianian was quoted to say that the lockdown was exaggerated and used by the government to funnel public funds to their proxies (in particular through the purchase of masks). A similar message was used by the chairman of the Social-Democrat Party Marcel Ciolacu, who claimed that the liberal government sought to maintain restrictions for as long as possible in order to embezzle public money through cronies. He also revived the idea that the government was bribing mainstream media into discretionary reporting of the necessity of protection measures. A similar idea was promoted by the president of the fringe far-right New Romania Party Sebastian Popescu, who claims that the government is trying to impose a "dictatorship of fear" and take advantage of the pandemic to curtail rights and liberties and to "enrich their cronies by facilitating them discretionary access to public money". Moreover, Calin Popescu Tariceanu, the leader of ALDE, a liberal-democrat party in opposition, claimed that the government exploited the situation to increase its powers and intended to track people via smartphones, using the pandemic as an excuse.

The main narrative developing in **Ukraine** revolves around the former acting Health Minister Ulana Suprun (who holds a dual citizenship, American and Ukrainian) who, according to fringe pro-Russian media, is promoting the US agenda in the country. One of the messages heavily circulated is that Washington is pressuring president Zelensky to reinstate her in her official position to "continue the medical genocide" (Suprun's medical reforms were heavily criticised during her mandate).

### Immigration narratives

According to the narrative developing in **Estonia** and **Latvia**, the governments in Tallinn and Riga are throwing the agriculture of these two countries into chaos, by refusing the admission of seasonal workers from Ukraine and Russia. This is said to be happening despite pleas from farmers, who have been traditionally relying on such labour force. The articles avoid naming the actual reason for restrictions, which is the high number of infections in both Ukraine and Russia.

The subject of seasonal workers was also presented in **Ukraine**, but in a totally different manner: there were articles claiming that workers were being treated as cheap labour force and sent to work despite being sick with COVID-19. On the same topic, one article in Russian media in **Latvia** described how migrants coming from outside Europe thrive, while Europeans struggle, condemning the immigration policies of the European Union.

The anti-immigration message was disseminated in **Slovakia** and **Czechia** as well: an article initially published by a far-right media outlet in Greece was cited by the fringe outlet *Zem a Vek*, claiming that Turkey was deliberately sending infected migrants to Greece, in what can be regarded as an “informal biological attack”.

### Values narratives

The ‘war on the Church’ narrative continued in **Georgia**, where the claim is that the West uses every opportunity to attack the weakened Georgian Orthodox Church, which is the promoter of natural, traditional values. Hence the restrictive measures imposed were not actually meant to contain the virus, but to discourage believers from celebrating Easter, by not allowing them to go to church.

A developing story in **Lithuania** claims that the

government used the pandemic and lockdown to promote legislation that allows child protection services to take away kids from their parents more easily. The article suggests that the main goal is to destroy the family, as the foundation of society.

### Deep State and International Elites narratives

The anti-lockdown and negationist narratives continued to develop in **Armenia, Czechia, North Macedonia, Poland** and **Moldova**, with claims that masks are useless and that the virus - either artificially created, or a hoax - is used to reduce world population. These came with assorted stories of Bill Gates being behind the pandemic in order to impose mandatory vaccination and microchipping, and of the negative effects of 5G on the spread of the virus.

The claim that the virus was created in a US lab was prevalent in **Slovakia, Czechia** and **Georgia**, where biolabs around the borders of Russia and China were indicated as the origin of COVID-19. In countries that are just developing this narrative, like **Slovakia** and **Czechia**, the articles claim that the laboratories are situated in Ukraine, which is to become a biological bomb in order to further infect Russia. In **Georgia**, where the US biolab narrative has been running for a few weeks, it continued with more claims that the Lugar Lab is used for US Military research. The same stories also suggest that the labs that do research into viruses are subordinated to private companies that finance the World Health Organisation.

The ongoing narrative of the number of deaths being ‘inflated as part of a conspiracy’, which has been developing for weeks in other countries, has reached **Romania** and **Poland**. The story claims that doctors and nurses have been intimidated/banned from practising or (as per claims in other countries) paid

to make public statements that toe the line of the World Health Organisation. The main idea is that the higher the numbers of the deceased due to COVID-19, the more governments stand to gain financially from prolonged lockdown measures.

### Social Impact narratives

In **Georgia**, the inability to secure the necessary amount of wheat due to restrictions on exports, which Russia and other Eurasian countries have adopted as a consequence of the pandemic, is presented as a vulnerability speculated by the US. The latter, who have offered to supply Georgia with the necessary amount of wheat, would provide genetically modified grains carrying potentially deadly diseases and even COVID-19.

The statements of renowned lawyer Gheorghe Piperea from **Romania**, who claims that temperature checks are illegal and abusive, were abundantly distributed by fringe media. The same idea was promoted by the controversial doctor Vasile Astarastoe, who claims that masks and thermal scanning are useless in the case of asymptomatic carriers. He also claims that the government is intentionally creating a psychosis around COVID-19. The same narrative is encountered in **Czechia**, where wearing masks is resisted and ridiculed, while in **Poland** a protest against wearing masks and mandatory vaccination was announced.

*Newsletter by: Bogdan Nedeia*

*Contributions by: Vlad Iaviță, Rufin Zamfir, Oana Popescu-Zamfir*

# 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 5

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).

## Content

Page 2	Main narratives
Page 3	EU narratives NATO narratives
Page 4	Russia narratives National government narratives
Page 5	Immigration narratives Values narratives
Page 6	Deep State and International Elites narratives Social Impact narratives



**This document is provided on a confidential basis  
and for the sole use of the addressee.**

**PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE!**

## 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](#).

[www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)  
[www.eastern-focus.eu](http://www.eastern-focus.eu)  
[office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)  
 +40 721 259 205

### MAIN NARRATIVES:

Attempts to discredit the EU continued, with further nuances in **Czechia and Estonia**, but also in **Moldova and Ukraine**, with claims that the European Commission seeks increased supranational control over member states and wants to extract funding for its Green Deal. Meanwhile, in **Czechia, Romania, Slovakia** and again **Moldova and Ukraine**, the narrative of the imminent collapse of the EU is repeated this week, in association with bashing of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Germany is a particular target.

**Russia** is once again said to be close to creating a vaccine, this time in the form of dairy, while Russian experts have allegedly found a way to radiate UV in patients' lungs in order to kill COVID-19. At the end of the pandemic, in the new world order that emerges, it is claimed that Russia will have to assume the role of peacekeeper.

The narrative that identifies the source of the virus in 'US biolabs around Russian borders' has quickly spread from **Georgia and Ukraine** to **Slovakia, Armenia and Czechia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland and Kazakhstan**, with some help from politicians.

The pro-government media outlets in **Hungary** continue to praise the 'unmatched leadership' of Premier Orbán during the pandemic, and to inflate his already very high approval ratings.

*\*Methodological clarification: we never assume that anti-government criticism per se represents mis-/disinformation. The same applies to alternative/non-mainstream views expressed on any number of issues. Plurality and diversity of opinions represent the essence of free speech and public debate. However, mis-/disinformation often works by distorting partially truthful information, or by placing it in context that distorts its meaning; or by amplifying legitimate criticism to the point where it seeks to undermine the overall credibility of the target, i.e. getting from criticising the actions of the government, to questioning the value or performance of government in general; from criticising EU action, to sowing mistrust in the value of EU membership or principles altogether. Therefore, we do classify as mis-/disinformation cases such as those mentioned above, especially when they are part of a sustained campaign/ constant approach by specific media/influencers, whereby they follow discernible manipulative goals.*

## EU narratives

Discrediting the EU remains one of the preferred avenues of fringe media outlets, which of late have taken a more nuanced approach. The European Commission was accused of misleading member states with the Financial Aid package, while in fact intending to create new supranational control structures and seeking to secure funding for the Green Deal. The story also claims that the EU response will lead to regional disputes and increased competition for resources. The message was disseminated in member states **Czechia and Estonia**, and also in EU associated states **Moldova and Ukraine**. The main claim was that richer countries would not agree to give money to the others, highlighting dissensions amongst member states.

The imminent ‘collapse of the EU’ continues to be one of the main anti-EU narratives. The anti-lockdown protests in Rome were blown out of proportion and presented as an indicator of the breakaway of Italy. Along with it, ‘EU failure’ in tackling the pandemic still makes headlines in the disinformation environment of **Czechia, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and Belarus**, backed by claims made by George Soros that were taken out of context. A new element over the monitoring period is the association between the EU and the WHO, both of which allegedly failed to take a stricter stance on China and allowed citizens from Wuhan to travel and thereby spread the disease. Along a similar line of discourse, according to fringe media in **Romania and Moldova, Germany** in particular not only greatly exaggerated the impact of the pandemic, inducing mass hysteria, which caused suicides amongst the population, but also separates children without a COVID-19 health certificate from their families, “effectively abducting” them.

Indirect anti-EU narratives also developed, by comparison with **Belarus**; president Lukashenko’s decision not to impose a lockdown was praised by Western Balkans media, quoting Russian outlets. The incompetence of the decentralised medical

healthcare systems in liberal countries was emphasised, in contrast with the centralised Belarusian healthcare system, better equipped to react to the challenge and far more experienced in dealing with major crises because of the Chernobyl experience. Claims were made that Sweden’s decision not to impose a lockdown created disputes inside the EU and even epidemic spikes in neighbouring countries.

One of the biggest producers of anti-EU content remains the Hungarian pro-government media, which repeated the narrative that the EU Financial Aid package would result in “debt slavery” and **Hungary** should not accept it. The claim was made in the context of Prime-Minister Orban’s call for a public consultation regarding the restarting of the economy. Messaging against member states continued, with claims that Sweden expects an economic drop of 7-10% and an unemployment rate of 10% as a result of the failure to counter the pandemic. Despite his leaving office at the end of last year, former President of the European Council Donald Tusk - who had become a symbol of EU action against Hungary’s democratic backsliding - was inexplicably attacked by right-wing, pro-government fringe media citing Fidesz European Parliament Member (MEP) Tamás Deutsch, as being “part of the problem and not part of the solution”.

## NATO narratives

The Baltic states, namely **Estonia and Lithuania** continued to be the main targets of the anti-NATO narratives disseminated by Russian-language and Russian media outlets. The story that these states prefer to ‘serve the interests of NATO above those of their own citizens’, and that normalising the relation with Russia instead would bring economic benefits continued to be prevalent. Also, once more, pro-Russian media in Lithuania bashed the Alliance for continuing to carry out planned exercises despite the pandemic and thus potentially being a vector for spreading the disease.

## Russia narratives

The ‘Russian superiority’ narrative continues to be the prevalent one in **Bulgaria, Moldova, North Macedonia** and **Serbia**, with the story that Russia is close to developing a vaccine that can be consumed in the form of a dairy product. The narrative was disseminated by mainstream media, as well as fringe media, citing different sources – the vice-president of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vladimir Chekhonin, as well as unrevealed sources from within the Russian Ministry of Defence. As part of the same narrative, the story that Rosatom developed a new way to fight COVID-19 by using UV radiation to disinfect the lungs, was distributed in **Bulgaria** and **Moldova**.

Stories that portray Russia as a saviour continue to have traction in pro-Russian media in **Latvia, North Macedonia** and **Montenegro**, the main messaging vector being that national economies in the respective countries will suffer unless cooperation with Russia is restored. Quoted by Russian media outlet The Global Times, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov claimed that different countries, especially the Baltics, were prevented from requesting aid from Russia by their western allies and that after the pandemic a new world order would arise in which Russia should assume the role of peace-keeper. Another claim made by Lavrov was that western states use the pandemic to punish countries they dislike.

A story exclusive to **Latvia** claimed that the Latvian government was “killing” its own ports and economy by refusing coal imports from Russia and that the country’s commitment to the EU’s Green Deal, which involves reducing coal usage, would only create more hardship.

## National Government narratives

The anti-establishment narrative in **Armenia** continued this week, with claims from fringe media and political influencer (and doctor) Marina Khachatryan that the mandatory mask-wearing measure imposed by the government directly benefits the Prime Minister, his family and proxies, as they control such businesses.

The pro-government messaging continues in **Hungary**, where PM Viktor Orban was praised by government media (Origo.hu and 888.hu) for his successful approach to the pandemic, while the opposition is described as being a factor in the worsening of the epidemiological situation, through its irresponsible criticism of the “Coronavirus law”. Pro-government media have also inflated the Orban government (already high) approval rates. A similar narrative was disseminated in Moldova, where Orban was described by Sputnik as an inclusive leader, who consults the people on measures meant to revive the economy.

In **Romania**, Luba.ro (an offshoot of Luju.ro - a news portal that brands itself as an anticorruption outlet, but in fact is designed to promote the interests of a handful of corrupt business people and politicians) published an article authored by Ilan Laufer, former Minister for the Business Environment in the Social Democrat government, who makes unsubstantiated claims that more than 25% of Romanian companies are effectively bankrupt, because of the lack of financial support from the government during the pandemic. In a different story, statements by Romanian Health Minister Nelu Tataru that he does not plan to enforce mandatory COVID-19 vaccination when it becomes available but only recommend it, have been twisted by fringe media, which report that he supports mandatory vaccination. Claims that President Iohannis has known about the crisis ever since January 6<sup>th</sup>, but failed to act, as he was preoccupied with his political war with the Social-

Democrat Party, have been recycled by some outlets, although this is an old story.

**Latvia's** director of the Cooperation Council of the Latvian Agricultural Organisations, Guntis Vilnitis claimed the government declared a lockdown in order to harm small and medium agricultural businesses, to the benefit of larger corporations. His anti-lockdown statements are echoed by the leader of the People's Power Front, Valentin Eremeev, who stated that there was no clear need for a lockdown, citing Belarus as an example of a successful alternative approach.

Analysing the yet unpublished text of the stand-by agreement between the IMF and **Ukraine** to help address the COVID-19 pandemic, Strana, a major amplifier of Russian disinformation narratives, claimed that the conditions of the deal would make life harder for Ukrainians. The story mentions among these conditions raising the retirement age, an increased tax burden, more expensive medicine, fewer schools, and higher utility payments. The message was picked up by opposition politicians, who demanded the release of the text and claimed that the memorandum contained provisions under which all sovereign interests of Ukraine were surrendered.

A separate narrative that begins to develop in **Ukraine** describes alleged shortages in the country's emergency stock, which are said to have been revealed by an internal audit.

### Immigration narratives

Allegations of 'Slavophobia' continue in **Estonia** and **Latvia**, where pro-Russian media claim governments deny access to temporary workers from Ukraine based on ethnicity. Meanwhile,

according to Russian media in **Lithuania**, the country is preparing for another wave of emigration, as thousands of unemployed Lithuanians prepare to leave the country.

### Values narratives

The same narrative appeared in both **Georgia** and **Romania** without any apparent connection, in which bishops of the Orthodox Church defended the traditional way of giving communion to all churchgoers with the same single spoon. They claimed that even though COVID-19 is transmitted through saliva, there was no case of parishioners getting infected that way, even though the spoon was not disinfected.

The story that claims there is a 'war on the church' was revived in **Moldova**, where an article citing Romanian actor and ultraconservative, nationalist influencer Dan Puric claims that measures taken by the government in Bucharest have prevented Romanians from properly practising their faith, while politician Iurie Rosca demonises abortion, stating that during the pandemic, some doctors encourage it by offering advice over telephone to pregnant women trying to terminate the pregnancies at home. A similar narrative gained traction in Slovakia, where pro-Russian fringe media Zem a Vek published an article that reiterates the old story of Bill Gates controlling the WHO, and says that both have a common goal: to reduce the population, including through planned parenthood.

A similar narrative of 'religious persecution' appeared in **Montenegro**, where an article quoting Greek MP Rachil Makri claimed that if the quarantine were to be reintroduced, it would be better to "die from the flu than to live according to the orders of the enemies of Christ". Her comments related to the banning of Easter celebrations.

### Deep State and International Elites narratives

Claims that protection measures are useless and excessive, as well as negationist narratives further developed in **Armenia, Czechia, Poland** and **Romania**, claiming either that the virus is not all that dangerous (much like seasonal flu), contagious, or that quarantine is pointless. As a peculiarity to Romania, mainstream media reported the claim that asymptomatic carriers are not contagious and this could lead to a decrease in hospitalisations for those who test positive for COVID-19 but do not display any symptoms.

Conspiracy theories continued to gain traction in **Czechia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia** and **Poland**. Examples include: 'Bill Gates controls the WHO', 'the global elites have planned the pandemic' either for the purpose of "directed economic collapse" (as stated by Ilie Șerbănescu, a Romanian economist and former Minister of Reform) population control, or as a method of surveillance (tracing). Ideas of global elites having organised the pandemic in order to impose mandatory vaccination and digital tracking, as well as of the negative effects of 5G in correlation with the virus were also mentioned. Aside from the general narratives, which can also be identified in **Romania**, a new story appeared by Daniel Roxin, a high-profile anti-establishment influencer and conspiracy theory-promoter, claiming that measures introduced after lockdown aim to collect the data of those going to restaurants and terraces.

The narrative of 'US-funded biolabs' around the borders of Russia and China, allegedly being used to produce the COVID-19 virus and later use it against these two countries, began to develop in **Georgia** as early as March, revolving around the US Lugar Lab, which later became involved in fighting against COVID-19 in the country. The story spread to **Ukraine**, which quickly became a presumed location for such a lab or multiple labs, and slowly gained traction in **Slovakia, Armenia** and **Czechia**. It has enjoyed significant reach in the past two weeks, reaching **Moldova, North Macedonia** and **Poland**.

A new alleged location of such a lab was introduced: **Kazakhstan**, where – some media in Georgia and Czechia claim - a spike in meningitis cases in 2018 was deliberately generated to test its efficiency. Once it gained sufficient notoriety, the biolabs story was picked up by high-ranking politicians, such as the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, who has stated that the US has biological weapons labs in several countries.

### Social Impact narratives

The ongoing narrative in **Czechia, Slovakia** and **Serbia**, claiming that the number of COVID-19-related deaths is grossly exaggerated, was recirculated with the added detail that 92% of deaths were in fact caused by other causes. The story was first disseminated as such by fringe media outlets in Czechia, and then spread to Slovakia and Serbia.

*Newsletter by: Bogdan Nedeia*

*Contributions by: Vlad Iaviță, Rufin Zamfir, Oana Popescu-Zamfir*

# 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 6

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).

## Content

Page 2	Main narratives
Page 3	EU narratives NATO narratives
Page 4	Russia narratives National government narratives
Page 5	Immigration narratives Values narratives Deep State and International Elites narratives
Page 6	Social Impact narratives



**This document is provided on a confidential basis  
and for the sole use of the addressee.**

**PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE!**

## 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.

[www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)  
[www.eastern-focus.eu](http://www.eastern-focus.eu)  
[office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)  
 +40 721 259 205

### MAIN NARRATIVES:

NATO continues to be presented as an aggressor in the **Baltic States** for not postponing military exercises there, while in smaller member states, like **Montenegro**, fringe media presents the Alliance as an unreliable partner in times of crisis.

The Financial Aid Package proposed by the European Union remains one of the main themes used in disinformation articles by fringe media in **Slovakia, Czechia, Latvia, Romania** and **Hungary**, where it is claimed that the EU will “enslave” the respective countries through financial debt.

The narrative of ‘Russian supremacy’ in the scientific race to fight the coronavirus continues to develop in **Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Moldova** and **Georgia**, with the story that Russian scientists have invented a vaccine and a cure (Avifavir) for COVID-19.

The messaging according to which the EU intends to take in and redistribute more immigrants at the end of the crisis was resumed in **Slovakia**. Meanwhile, the narrative of a ‘government war on the church’ continues to be disseminated in **Slovakia, Montenegro, Serbia** and **Romania**.

*\*Methodological clarification: we never assume that anti-government criticism per se represents mis-/disinformation. The same applies to alternative/non-mainstream views expressed on any number of issues. Plurality and diversity of opinions represent the essence of free speech and public debate. However, mis-/disinformation often works by distorting partially truthful information, or by placing it in context that distorts its meaning; or by amplifying legitimate criticism to the point where it seeks to undermine the overall credibility of the target, i.e. getting from criticising the actions of the government, to questioning the value or performance of government in general; from criticising EU action, to sowing mistrust in the value of EU membership or principles altogether. Therefore, we do classify as mis-/disinformation cases such as those mentioned above, especially when they are part of a sustained campaign/ constant approach by specific media/influencers, whereby they follow discernible manipulative goals.*

*Newsletter by: Bogdan Nedeia*

*Contributions by: Vlad Iaviță, Rufin Zamfir, Oana Popescu-Zamfir*

## EU narratives

Narratives that have been suggesting the failure of the EU continued to be prevalent in **Georgia, Latvia, Hungary** and **North Macedonia**, showcasing marginal protests in Italy as representative for country-wide dissatisfaction with belated help from Brussels. In **North Macedonia** a story was circulated that the EU had tried to impose mandatory vaccination in 2018 and failed, and is now using the pandemic to make it happen.

The old narrative claiming that the EU Financial Aid Package aimed to plunge recipient states into debt further developed in **Slovakia, Czechia, Latvia, Romania** and **Hungary**. The story that the EU does not plan to help farmers in the wake of the pandemic was disseminated by **Czech** Member of European Parliament (MEP) and former Minister of Health Ivan David, while fringe media in Slovakia accused Angela Merkel of 'stealing' medical aid intended for Czechia. In **Latvia**, the idea that the EU will not aid the Baltic Countries, as it has 'lost interest in them', was disseminated by Russian media (Sputnik). The same topic figured in **Romanian** fringe media outlets, which claimed that the EU aid package was an enslaving deal for the country, aimed at robbing it of its resources and transforming its population into a consumerist society to which foreign corporations can sell low-quality products.

**Hungarian** pro-government media was again amongst the highest producers of anti-EU narratives, claiming that George Soros would be the main beneficiary of the EU recovery package. Furthermore, a right-wing pro-government outlet states that larger member states like Italy and Spain mismanage the generous EU funds they receive, including from the contribution of Hungary to the common budget, so Budapest ends up being a net contributor, rather than a beneficiary of the EU recovery package. A widespread narrative, which portrays the Orbán government's approach to the pandemic as much more successful than that of liberal countries was repeated this time by Justice Minister Judit Varga, in a meeting with the EU ambassadors in Budapest.

## NATO narratives

NATO continues to be portrayed as an aggressor in the Baltic States, predominantly in **Latvia**, where pro-Russian media, citing an unnamed Russian MP, called allied exercises in the Baltics "anti-Russian", claiming that the alliance endangers lives, as NATO troops are a potential vector for the spread of the pandemic.

NATO's aid during the pandemic was questioned in **Montenegro**. A tweet by President Milo Đukanović, expressing thanks for allied recognition of his country as a serious and dependable partner, was criticised by fringe media outlets, which claimed that if NATO had taken Montenegro seriously, they would have sent more than 'several thousand bars of soap, towels and sheets to their equal'.

## Russia narratives

As part of the narrative on Russian 'scientific supremacy' in the fight against COVID-19, stories were circulated in **Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Moldova** and **Georgia** about an alleged vaccine invented by Russian scientists, which is about to go into clinical trials. There were also multiple claims in the same countries that a cure to COVID-19, a medicine called Avifavir, is ready and will be distributed to Russians at no charge. A lot of attention was given to the statements of Dmitri Peskov, the spokesperson for the Russian administration, who claimed that the Kremlin did not consider Russia's apparently low mortality rate from COVID-19 to be "unusual" (a label used previously by World Health Organisation Emergency Programme director Michael Ryan, in the context of underlying WHO and EU suspicions that Russia's mortality rate is much higher and that Moscow is not reporting the true number of deaths). The story was disseminated in **Bulgaria, Montenegro** and **Ukraine**.

**Slovak** pro-Russian media published an article citing Russian media and Russian sources, in which it claims that the West (namely the US) is waging a hybrid war on the Russian Federation. The article also suggests limiting the activities of western NGOs in Russia and closer monitoring of the online environment.

A type of messaging that has been promoted for almost two months now is now being revived in **Lithuania**, where Sputnik amplified a statement by the Russian Embassy that the West accuses Russia of spreading disinformation, without providing evidence and based on one-sided views.

## National Government narratives

In some of the monitored countries, as restrictions have begun to ease, the focus of manipulative stories has shifted from accusations of excessive (a.k.a. autocratic) government control, to suspicions of

corruption in acquisitions of medical materials or the disbursement of economic assistance. Anti-establishment accusations were echoed on social media in **Armenia, Czechia, Slovakia, Ukraine** and **Romania**. In **Armenia**, the Health Minister, Arsen Torosyan, was accused by Karen Vardanyan, Chief Executive Officer at the Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises-UATE, of mishandling funds that were meant for fighting the pandemic, but also, more notably, of hiding the true number of deaths. A similar story ran in Czechia, where Roman Prymula, a leading figure in the Czech government team working to fight COVID-19 is demonised as part of the 'Big Pharma' lobby and a promoter of compulsory vaccination.

A developing narrative in **Poland** (disseminated by fringe outlets and on social media) repeats claims that the government is trying to gain undemocratic control through crisis measures and also that it falsifies the number of deaths, but goes beyond this to add that Polish authorities have 'intentionally created the pandemic in order to devalue Polish mines' and privatise them later at a lower value.

**Latvian** Russian-language media outlet Baltnews continues to accuse the country's government of failing to support the population and businesses.

The stand-by agreement between the IMF and **Ukraine** continues to be challenged by fringe pro-Russian media with claims that it will "enslave the country". In order to make the accord more disagreeable, pro-Russian NewsOne TV station (owned by Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian oligarch) featured a talk-show in which the host claimed that the IMF was demanding, among other things, the reinstatement of controversial former Health Minister of Ukraine Ulana Suprun (who also has American citizenship).

**Romanian** narratives about the alleged suppression of civil liberties by the government continued, disseminated by both fringe media and political actors. Multiple media outlets (Stiri pe Surse,

Luju.ro) published articles that claimed the government concealed the true number of deaths in order to continue imposing lockdown measures for political and financial gain. The message was repeated by Varujan Vosganian, a fringe liberal MP, now in opposition. He claims that public spending is driven by the need to syphon money to a clique of business interests who will return these funds as “donations” during the next electoral campaign.

### Immigration narratives

The anti-immigration narratives seem to be making a comeback as public attention shifts away from the pandemic. Such messaging resurfaced in **Slovakia**, where multiple fringe media outlets picked it up once more, claiming that after the crisis Brussels would again open the EU's borders to immigrants, taking into consideration their redistribution amongst member states and that Germany would accept those coming in through Malta and Italy. This may be a trending issue in the weeks to come in disinformation media across the region.

### Values narratives

The spread of the thesis of a ‘government war against the Church’, developing across monitored countries in the past months, seems to have subsided after the Easter period, but new stories along the same lines continue to appear nevertheless. **Slovak** media sources have quoted Catholic archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano’s letter to president Trump, which claims that social engineers, ‘deep state’ and the ‘deep church’ (i.e. groups of interest within the Vatican) are responsible for both the pandemic and the US riots, as part of a massive showdown between the forces of good and evil. Meanwhile, a **Montenegrin** Orthodox bishop cited by pro-Russian fringe media claims that the banning of religious processions was an attack on the Church and that Montenegro did not even have coronavirus

cases until only after that decision was made. The same story was also disseminated in **Serbia**.

**Romanian** narratives saw the dissemination of statements by the President of the Baptist Union in Romania, Viorel Iuga, who claims that the government's lack of clarity as to when churches might open again is a violation of religious freedom. The same line is taken by ultraconservative influencer Adrian Papahagi, who claims that the government seeks to introduce “perpetual quarantine” in order to facilitate indoctrination and, finally, the replacement of true, traditional values.

### Deep State and International Elites narratives

Narratives that have been ongoing from almost the beginning of the pandemic continue to be present in most of the monitored countries. They still converge on three major themes: the pointlessness/ excessive character of protection measures (wearing masks or having the temperature taken); negating the pandemic (claiming that the virus is not real or that it has made fewer victims than was publicly announced); and an alleged plan by global elites to vaccinate/microchip the population for occult reasons and/or to impose a new world order (sometimes mentioned in combination with usage of 5G technology to that end). In the past week, these stories were prevalent in **Armenia, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine**.

Another major narrative with a more regional/targeted dissemination focuses on the biolabs that have allegedly helped create or disseminate COVID-19. As their location is claimed to be in some former Soviet republics, where the messaging is easily controlled by Russia, the ownership of such biolabs is attributed to the US. This narrative is still encountered in **Georgia, Ukraine and Czechia**.

A related story that is being slowly revived surfaced in **Czechia, Slovakia** and **Georgia**, claiming that the new coronavirus leaked from a Wuhan laboratory whilst scientists were experimenting with bats. The initial source of this allegation is Russia Today, which attributes this statement to former head of MI6 Sir Richard Dearlove.

The narrative that countries that used to be behind the Iron Curtain have had a low number of infections because of the BCG vaccine administered against tuberculosis, which gave some form of immunity, made headlines in late March but the WHO showed that there was no evidence to substantiate the claims. It is now reiterated in **Latvia, Georgia** and **Belarus**, whose president, Aleksandr Lukashenko linked it to the countries' success in fighting the epidemic. The same narrative was present in **Romania, Moldova** and **Ukraine**, when it first appeared. A Serb anti-vaxxer Facebook group reportedly quoted the same Lukashenko calling the WHO a "criminal organisation", while praising the orthodox ties of brotherhood between Belarus and Serbia.

### Social Impact narratives

**Hungarian** fringe media referring to a New York Times opinion editorial about global inequality, claimed that transnational corporations are using the pandemic as a cover to gain exclusive dominance over natural resources such as drinking water, fertile lands, and vegetables and fruits.

In Slovakia and Czechia there have been multiple dismissals of the possibility of a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, citing the opinions of known influencers who base their opinions on pseudo-science and/or challenge the natural origins of the virus in particular.

Russian media in **Belarus** misreported the WHO guidelines on mask-wearing as an obligation to be "worn by everyone, everywhere". Same media reported the opinion of a Belarusian doctor who claims that the May 9<sup>th</sup> parade in Minsk, that did not

lead to a spike in cases, proves that the pandemic is exaggerated. A similar story was picked up by **Serbian** pro-government media which, citing Belarusian president Lukashenko, claims that global elites are still making billions while the rest of the world is struggling.

# 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 7

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).

## Content

Page 2	Main narratives
Page 3	EU narratives NATO narratives
Page 4	Russia narratives National government narratives
Page 5	Values narratives
Page 6	Deep State and International Elites narratives Social Impact narratives



**This document is provided on a confidential basis  
and for the sole use of the addressee.**

**PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE!**

## 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.

[www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)  
[www.eastern-focus.eu](http://www.eastern-focus.eu)  
[office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)  
 +40 721 259 205

### SELECTED NARRATIVES:

NATO came more into focus, as multiple fringe media outlets in **Belarus**, **Latvia** and **North Macedonia** claimed alliance troops are a vector for spreading the disease.

A new narrative developing in **Georgia** claims that the bad relations between Moscow and Tbilisi are an effect of the malign influence of western partners on the latter, and that in reality the bilateral relation between the two is “harmonious”.

An incipient narrative in **Latvia** claims that George Soros is aiming at ‘abolishing’ normal families and replacing them with ‘queer communes for perverts’.

A narrative published in **Czechia** and **Slovakia**, but not **Romania** claims that the relatives of a deceased man in Romania were offered 5000 euros to agree to attribute his death to COVID-19, and that doctors are motivated to do this because they receive money themselves for COVID-19 patients.

*\*Methodological clarification: we never assume that anti-government criticism per se represents mis-/disinformation. The same applies to alternative/non-mainstream views expressed on any number of issues. Plurality and diversity of opinions represent the essence of free speech and public debate. However, mis-/disinformation often works by distorting partially truthful information, or by placing it in context that distorts its meaning; or by amplifying legitimate criticism to the point where it seeks to undermine the overall credibility of the target, i.e. getting from criticising the actions of the government, to questioning the value or performance of government in general; from criticising EU action, to sowing mistrust in the value of EU membership or principles altogether. Therefore, we do classify as mis-/disinformation cases such as those mentioned above, especially when they are part of a sustained campaign/ constant approach by specific media/influencers, whereby they follow discernible manipulative goals.*

*Newsletter by: Bogdan Nedea*

*Contributions by: Vlad Iaviță, Rufin Zamfir, Oana Popescu-Zamfir*

### EU narratives

The targeting of the European Union's Financial Aid Package remains the most prevalent narrative published by fringe media and continues to receive high engagement from the public. In **Czechia** and **Slovakia** the stories revolved around the presumed loss of sovereignty as a result of the financial aid, as well as other unwanted outcomes, such as, according to Protiproud.cz, a higher number of politicians being corrupted by Brussels, the rise of a liberal ecological utopia, the rise of feminism and multiculturalism. Furthermore, in **Czechia**, the news that the EU requested technology companies to report on misinformation was framed by fringe media as an indicator of growing censorship within member states.

A similar message can be found in **Romania**, where claims were made that in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union was on the brink of collapse: an alleged videoconference that took place on April 7<sup>th</sup>, in which Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Christine Lagarde pledged funds, was the only way to a compromise. Along the same line, in **Moldova**, an article of Sputnik.md claimed that Angela Merkel acknowledged that the pandemic revealed the fragility of the European project.

### NATO narratives

The narrative that presents NATO troops as a vector for further spreading the disease was picked up again this week.

The story that claimed NATO troops stationed in Poland and the Baltics are preparing for war during the pandemic, thus increasing the risk of infection to the population and military personnel, was promoted in **Belarus** and later by **Latvian** media outlets. Contributing to the 'NATO warmongering' narrative, a fringe media outlet in **North Macedonia** reported about Kremlin's spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stating that NATO's decision to recognise Ukraine as a "partner with great potential" would not contribute to stability and security in Europe.

Criticism of NATO's belated aid to **Montenegro** continued to be disseminated in an article that made the comparison to Russia's prompt assistance of Serbia. The key of the article was that blind obedience to US and NATO policies is harmful to the interests of Western Balkans.

## Russia narratives

In **Georgia**, an article of the pro-Russian magazine Saqinform claimed that bad relations between Russia and Georgia are a result of the malign influence of western partners on the latter and that in reality, relations between the two countries are in fact “harmonious”. In a similar note, **Slovak** fringe media claimed that the pandemic is a form of hybrid war waged by the United States against Russia and that Moscow should not play by US rules.

Russian website Russia Beyond in **North Macedonia** quoted president Vladimir Putin saying that Russia is emerging “confidently and with minimal losses” from the pandemic, while in **Serbia** an article in Vecernje Novosti (quoting Moscow-based Ria Novosti) claimed that Putin managed to stay safe with the help of a disinfection tunnel leading to his office. Quoting high-profile politicians to make narratives more believable continues to be a practice. One such example is **Ukraine**, where privately-owned, pro-Russian outlet Hvylya.net produced an article around Dmitry Medvedev’s critique of the United Nations General Assembly decision in April not lift sanctions against nations hardest hit by the pandemic.

## National Government narratives

The decision of the **Bulgarian** Prime Minister Boiko Borisov, who instructed the Health Minister to take all necessary steps to include the country in the European initiative to support the discovery of a vaccine for COVID-19, was framed by fringe media as an attempt at forced vaccination without offering an informed choice.

The fight against any government opposition continues in **Hungary**, where multiple media outlets promoted a story that accused Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest (a leading opponent of Viktor Orban) of giving the \$1.5 million COVID-19 donation from George Soros to medical companies owned by former high ranking government officials of Hungary’s previous government.

Government criticism in **Latvia** continued with claims that while the economy is failing and crime is rising, building a new concert hall in Riga is a waste of public funds. Lithuania’s former president Dalia Grybauskaite once again came into focus, as an article published by eksoertai.eu claimed that the foundation she had set up to fight the effects of the epidemic was operating and raising funds illegally.

An article published by pro-Russian media in **Montenegro** accused the government of double standards as the president of the right-wing New Serb Democracy and one of the leaders of the Democratic Front (a right-wing populist and socially conservative opposition political alliance) was denied entry to Montenegro. This was framed as selective implementation of quarantine measures for political reasons and it was compared to president Djukanovic’s visits to Brussels and the Baltics, after which he was not quarantined or even tested. Montenegro

was accused of hypocrisy by Serbian president Aleksandr Vucic, as the country declared itself 'corona free' without having testing capabilities and, according to claims, not reporting the real number of infections.

**Romanian** authorities continue to be accused of spreading mass hysteria and fear in order to maintain power. Anti-establishment influencer Sorina Matei claimed that the government is influencing public opinion through bribing the media, a reference to the funds allocated for the public awareness campaigns.

**Ukraine's** stand-by accord with the IMF continues to be the prevalent subject of fringe media outlets and opposition politicians who claim that the debt will have direct implications for the population, through "deprivation of housing, huge fines and increase of tariffs" (Ukraina.ru). Moreover, the leader of pro-Russian party Opposition Platform – For Life, Vadim Rabinovich, claimed that the Ukrainian government plans to use the pandemic to disrupt local elections scheduled for October 2020, in order to avoid a crushing defeat.

### Values narratives

Narratives that promote the 'fight for traditional values' resurfaced in **Latvia** as an obscure website claimed George Soros is using the pandemic to abolish 'normal families' and replace them with 'queer-communes for perverts'.

The narrative of governments using the pandemic to oppress the Church was revived in **Montenegro** as a message issued by the Orthodox Episcopal Council was read out in front of the Cathedral of Christ's Resurrection in Podgorica. The statement claims the government promotes a more dangerous virus, 'the love of power', and it criticises the presumed selective protective measures, a reference to religious service which is still prohibited. The message was also a criticism of the implementation of the law passed in December, according to which the state has the right to confiscate Church property.

## Deep State and International Elites narratives

Conspiracy theories such as ‘the pandemic is a hoax’ or it was ‘created by the global elite in order to impose vaccination’, ‘lockdown and restriction measures are useless’, ‘masks are dangerous’ and ‘the number of deaths is inflated/hidden to serve hidden agendas’ continued as the most prevalent narratives in **Czechia, Slovakia, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia** and **Romania**. The theory of alleged virus-producing US biolabs around Russia’s borders continues to be extensively promoted in **Georgia**, where multiple messaging lines claim that the US-funded Lugar Lab is a biological weapons factory that helped spread the disease rather than mitigate its effects. A similar narrative is pushed in **Armenia**, where a lawyer claimed on social media that he asked a court (unspecified) to issue a cease and desist order for all Armenian US-funded biolabs.

After the Bill Gates narrative was especially successful in **Czechia, Slovakia** and **Georgia**, now, all of these countries are seeing a developing message that involves the Rockefeller family and the Rockefeller Foundation, with claims similar to those made previously about Bill Gates: previous knowledge of the pandemic, intent of population control, mass monitoring/tracking and establishing a global government. The stories often link the Rockefellers to the US government.

Another example of a regional narrative can be found in the same **Czechia** and **Slovakia**, where an article promoted in multiple fringe media outlets claimed that the relatives of a deceased man in Romania were offered 5000 euros to agree to attribute his death to COVID-19, and that doctors are motivated to do this because they receive money themselves for COVID-19

patients. The story never ran in Romania.

Another similar example of reports on alleged news from another country was seen in **North Macedonia**, where a story claimed that one in five Bulgarians believes that COVID-19 was caused by Bill Gates in order to control people via vaccination and microchipping. Same as above, the story was never published in Bulgaria.

## Social Impact narratives

A new narrative developing in **Belarus** links to the statement of President Aleksandr Lukashenko that the World Bank is giving Belarus \$300 million to learn from the country’s successful experience in the fight against COVID-19.

**Montenegrin** football fans took to social media to ask how come stalls are full at football matches in Serbia, whereas their own government has been less efficient in stopping the spread of the pandemic.

A previously largely unknown website, ‘antenanews.xyz’, published a disinformation article claiming that the epidemic in **Romania** is no longer under control and that the number of deaths has surged to unmanageable levels. To illustrate the alleged storage of bodies in refrigerator trucks, the authors of the article has used pictures of homicide victims being stored in lorries in Guadalajara, Mexico in 2018.

# 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 8

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).

## Content

- Page 2 Methodological clarification and... summer break!
- Page 3 EU narratives  
Russia narratives
- Page 4 National government narratives
- Page 5 Immigration narratives
- Page 6 Deep State and International Elites narratives



**This document is provided on a confidential basis  
and for the sole use of the addressee.**

**PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE!**

## 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.



[www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)  
[www.eastern-focus.eu](http://www.eastern-focus.eu)  
[office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)  
+40 721 259 205

The regional newsletter on COVID-19-related false information is going on a short summer break starting next week, before returning with more details of dis-/misinformation trends in the region.

*\*Methodological clarification: we never assume that anti-government criticism per se represents mis-/disinformation. The same applies to alternative/non-mainstream views expressed on any number of issues. Plurality and diversity of opinions represent the essence of free speech and public debate. However, mis-/disinformation often works by distorting partially truthful information, or by placing it in context that distorts its meaning; or by amplifying legitimate criticism to the point where it seeks to undermine the overall credibility of the target, i.e. getting from criticising the actions of the government, to questioning the value or performance of government in general; from criticising EU action, to sowing mistrust in the value of EU membership or principles altogether. Therefore, we do classify as mis-/disinformation cases such as those mentioned above, especially when they are part of a sustained campaign/ constant approach by specific media/influencers, whereby they follow discernible manipulative goals.*

*Newsletter by: Bogdan Nedeia*

*Contributions by: Vlad Iaviță, Rufin Zamfir, Oana Popescu-Zamfir*

### EU narratives

**Hungarian** pro-government media continues to be the main producer and disseminator of anti-EU narratives from within the EU. An article from Magyar Hirlap, a pro-government and right-wing newspaper quoting Fidesz MEP Tamas Deutsch accuses the EU, domestic opposition parties, George Soros and liberals in general, of organising an orchestrated attack against the Hungarian government, including its handling of COVID-19.

As part of the same theme, Sputnik **Moldova** quoted Viktor Orban's declarations on Hungarian state-owned Radio Kossuth that his country's response to COVID-19 was a "great success", while criticising Brussels for not knowing how to handle the pandemic.

As part of an ongoing narrative attempting to sway public opinion in favour of Moscow, a story published by **Slovak** Hlavný Denník reported on the poor state of the Ukrainian industry. The article claims that that this is not a result of the pandemic or quarantine, but of the choice of economic partners, and argues that the West will not help Ukraine and the only option left is cooperation with the Russian Federation. This type of narrative is also common in other countries that have irreconcilable differences with Russia, like Georgia and Moldova.

Meanwhile, in **Ukraine**, a sociologist cited by pro-Russian media (form-ua.com) claimed that President Zelensky is losing support because of his pro-European orientation, which the public are unhappy with. To complete this narrative, the same outlet presented as facts a speculation that starting July 1<sup>st</sup>, Ukrainians will be banned from entering the EU because of the deteriorating epidemiological situation.

### Russia narratives

The narrative of Russian 'medical superiority' continues to be the prevalent story regionally with the latest developments regarding alleged clinical trials of a Russian anti-Covid-19 vaccine, presented as the only relevant product out there, in opposition to 'EU inefficiency' in coming up with a vaccine. Multiple pro-Russian and fringe media outlets in **Belarus, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Moldova** and **Romania** cited Alexander Ginzburg, director of the Moscow Gamalei National Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology, who reportedly claimed the vaccine his institute was developing along with the Russian Defence ministry would be capable of protecting the population for at least two years. At the same time, the so-called successful intervention of the Russian authorities against the pandemic, with positive results not just on public health, but on Russian economy too, was praised in **Lithuania** in a Sputnik article that quoted President Putin.

### National Government narratives

Old narratives that have been promoted ever since the beginning of the pandemic are being given nuances that bring them back to the centre of attention. One such example is **Armenia**, where fringe media, different opposition politicians and ‘experts’ have been accusing the government of intentionally worsening the COVID-19 problem by sending contradictory messages to population regarding mask-wearing. An article claiming that Azerbaijan funds the World Health Organisation’s Plaquenil clinical trials in countries like Armenia, despite harmful side effects, was suggesting that Azerbaijan is “ordering the death of Armenians” through the sway it has over the WHO.

**Belarus’s** Sputnik.by and state-owned Belta.by quoted President Lukashenko claiming that the country’s pandemic measures were superior to the rest of Europe’s. The president also presented Minsk’s strategy of not imposing lockdown measures and keeping open its network of infectious disease hospitals as a success against the pandemic, praised by the entire population. The outcome of these measures will mean the absence of a second wave in Belarus, as opposed to the rest of Europe.

A replica of a story that was previously (falsely) reported by Czech and Slovak media as happening in Romania is now developing in **Georgia**. Mtavari TV, the largest opposition TV channel in the country, aired a story in which it claimed that Georgian government representatives and medical staff had offered money to the families of the deceased to accept COVID-19 as the cause of death. In the meantime, pro-Russian media claimed that Prime-Minister Giorgi Gakharia had signed a

secret agreement, along with 60 other countries, during the Global Vaccine Summit, through which Georgia committed to compulsory vaccination.

The **Latvian** government continues to be criticised by pro-Russian media, who claimed that out of all the Baltic countries, Latvia invested the least in citizens and their protection during the pandemic. Baltnews criticises President Levits’ speech to Parliament in which he praised his country’s strategy to counter the epidemic. The same media outlet gave Belarus as a successful example.

The blame-game between **Montenegro** and Serbia that timidly started a few weeks ago is developing as Russian-language media in Montenegro, Borba, claimed the virus returned to the country after Montenegrin football fans came back from Belgrade, infected after the Red Star-Partizan game. The story alludes to the high number of cases in Serbia, as opposed to Montenegro. At the other end, a right-wing opposition MP, Milan Knežević, called the Montenegrin government hypocritical and accused them of being involved in the global cocaine trade, in response to the accusations presented above.

Criticism of government-imposed restrictions in **Romania** continues, despite the rise in the number of cases. Former Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta accused the government of artificially inflating the number of cases for political gain, despite recent statistics showing that Romania had the third most infections per 100,000 people in Europe. Additionally, news

websites such as Luju.ro framed the ruling of the Constitutional Court of Romania that declared quarantine measures unconstitutional as a rational counter-measure to the President's alleged dictatorial tendencies.

The narrative that targeted former health minister Ulana Suprun continued in **Ukraine**, as some media linked the latest protests organised by medical personnel against the cutting of funds with the reforms initiated by the US-born former minister. Moreover, multiple pro-Russian outlets are claiming that President Zelensky's support is dropping fast as a result of failed policies (especially medical) and his handling of the epidemic.

### **Immigration narratives**

A narrative developed in **Czech** pro-Russian media (protiprud.cz) is beginning to gain notoriety. The story refers to the Muslim-dominated areas in France, or the so-called 'no-go zones' dominated by radical imams and/or gangs, which, as opposed to the rest of the population, did not follow quarantine rules. Moreover, it is implied that the French authorities have lost control over the immigrants in these areas and the French law does not apply there.

**Hungarian** pro-government media returns to one of its favorite pre-pandemic topics: immigration. The tone is set by the Hungarian foreign minister, who argued that a new wave of illegal migration, triggered by COVID-19, would pose significant health, and economic risks.

Pro-Russian media in **Latvia** are promoting a new narrative claiming that the Russians in the country had faced discrimination during the quarantine, as they were unable to receive health advice in their own language (this is despite the fact that the Latvian government had published advice in both Latvian and Russian) and that schoolchildren were unable to learn in Russian. The story cites the Russian Human Rights Ombudsman Tatiana Moskalkova.

## Deep State and International Elites narratives

Narratives such as negationism of the pandemic, global elite (Bill Gates, George Soros, the Rockefellers etc.) plans to force vaccination or control the population, fake numbers of casualties publicised by governments for alleged political gains and the 'hidden interests of the WHO', continue to be prevalent in **Czechia, Georgia, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia** and **Ukraine**. One special mention of a trending narrative is about the 'Good Club', a gathering of billionaire philanthropists started by George Soros, Bill Gates and David Rockefeller with the actual aim of population reduction, that is framed as a 'council of evil' that advances their own agenda throughout the world.

The topic of US biolabs in former Soviet Union countries like Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine continues to be present. In **Armenia**, an interview with military-political expert Igor Korotchenko claimed that Armenian-Russian bilateral relations have been worsened by US-funded bio-labs on his country's territory, to which Russians have no access. Prime-Minister Pashinyan's cancelled Victory Day parade trip to Moscow was quoted as an indication of worsening Armenian-Russian relations. The narrative was also entertained by the deputy head of the Security Council of Russia, Dmitri Medvedev, who was cited by **Georgian** pro-Russian media (1tv.ge), saying that US-built laboratories, situated across the world, must be more transparent. He claims the lack of transparency causes suspicion about the possible spread of new viruses from these laboratories. Meanwhile, **Ukraine's** pro-Kremlin media continues to promote the narrative of lawsuits being filed in order to verify the

existence of US-funded military biolabs.

On the same topic, Georgian pro-Russian media (geworld.ge) published an interview with Russian biologist Irina Ermakova who claims that COVID-19 could be man-made, and links it to the Synthia bacterium, which was invented to clean the Gulf of Mexico from oil pollution. Ermakova insists that Synthia cleaned the Gulf but that it spread to animals and human beings and has similar properties/symptoms to COVID-19.

One piece of reporting from **Romania's** popular TV channel Antena 3 claims that a woman whose husband had passed after being diagnosed with COVID-19, expressed her doubts about the diagnostic and believed her husband was killed by the state so they shouldn't have to pay his pension.