



SUMMARY REPORT

Friday 24th April 2020

This report has been produced with the information provided by participating organisations within the OIP COVID-19 Working Group (CWG). Each organisation provides monitoring and analysis of evolving and emerging disinformation and misinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional insight and research has been provided by OIP partners, including Zinc Network and Bellingcat.

The following countries and languages are covered in this report:

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



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OVERVIEW

Key new or shifting narratives.

1. **(Armenia)** There is a continuing fascination with Bill Gates and his alleged involvement in the pandemic. Bad science and unsubstantiated claims around treatment and mitigation remain prevalent. One such example of Facebook hearsay claims that deaths are being misattributed to COVID-19 to exaggerate the crisis.
2. **(Bulgaria)** Hostile state aligned media has pushed the narrative, seen in multiple countries in these reports, that the USA knew about the virus in advance, and that it was created in a U.S. military lab during research into MERS and SARS.
4. **(Estonia)** A number of articles contain various anti-NATO, anti-U.S and anti-EU narratives, continuing claims that NATO troops are contributing to the spread of the virus and that the EU will not offer economic assistance to the Baltics.
5. **(Georgia)** Both the Bill Gates and 5G conspiracies continue to spread. An emerging narrative amongst illiberal sources is that the Georgian government only penalises ethnic Georgians if they violate the lockdown conditions and do not penalise violations committed by Azerbaijanis.
6. **(Hungary)** Following the attempts of pro-government media outlets to establish a link between George Soros and the ongoing health and economic crisis, several government-allied outlets singled out Hungarian human rights NGOs critical of the government's handling of the situation, with the aim of strengthening the narrative centred around the U.S.-Hungarian billionaire. There has also been a particularly vicious character assassination of a Green MP after she criticised the government's decision to donate medical supplies abroad.
7. **(Latvia)** As elsewhere in the Baltic states, narratives continue along anti-EU and anti-U.S. lines, including more direct claims that the U.S. (and the UK) may have had a hand in the pandemic or prior warning. Several opinion pieces look to the future of the EU and push West/East economic division narratives.



8. **(Lithuania)** Anti-NATO and anti-U.S. narratives continue, again implicating NATO soldiers in the virus' spread. As in Armenia, stories on social media are being widely shared where user's claim deaths are being intentionally misattributed to the virus.
9. **(North Macedonia)** A key new conspiracy has emerged (and spread to Romania) claiming that the pandemic was planned and 'announced' in the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games. This appears to be based on little other than the use of hospital beds in the opening ceremony. Those propagating it have followers in the 10s of thousands.
10. **(Poland)** Conspiracy theories around elites (Bill Gates) planning the pandemic continue. A new narrative has emerged in Russian language media, citing a made-up Polish expert who heavily criticises a key Polish infrastructure project as 'irrelevant' in the face of COVID-19.
11. **(Romania)** Dr Vasile Astarastoiaie, former president of the Romanian College of Physicians, [posted](#) on Facebook that amongst other things, the virus may have been created in a lab by a transnational occult organisation. This is an evolution of the previous 'made in a lab' narrative, and has been shared over 800 times on Facebook, as well as spreading to conspiracy sites such as *luju.ro*. Separately, the 'London 2012 Olympic games COVID-19 illuminati ritual' conspiracy has spread to Romania.
12. **(Russia)** Officials and the media have continued to use the crisis to pursue strategic foreign policy goals, calling for a humanitarian pause on sanctions (including, tacitly, those imposed on Russia).
13. **(Serbia)** Tennis player Novak Djokovic's anti-vax statements relating to COVID-19, and his chastisement by epidemiologist Predrag Kon, continues to attract attention on social media, which has resulted in an increase in the number of people criticising Kon.
14. **(Ukraine)** The Pro-Kremlin party *Opposition Platform – For Life* has received further coverage in Kremlin-aligned media, notably with its criticism of the government's lockdown measures and the promotion of its 'anti-crisis plan', which includes lifting sanctions on Russia and turning to Moscow for financial assistance.



1. Immigration

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

None

2. Failure of the EU

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

- **(Estonia)** *Rubaltic* [quotes](#) doctor of economic science Nikolai Mezhevich's claims that the Schengen zone has collapsed and that EU support for the Baltic states will be modest post-pandemic. He cites the Baltics' anti-Russian politics as an impediment to economic recovery in the future. Elsewhere *Rubaltic* [predicts](#) that the Western EU states are planning to recover from the crisis by taking advantage of labour and resources from Eastern states and the EAP.
- **(Latvia / Baltics)** Russian language media *Baltnews* [features](#) an article misrepresenting European Parliament deputy Robert Zile, with the headline: "Robert Zile doubts that Europe will be able to maintain unity after the coronavirus pandemic."
- **(Lithuania)** *Rubaltic* [suggests](#) that the crisis will cause the permanent closure of EU internal borders, as well as putting a halt to plans to integrate Ukraine and Georgia.
- **(North Macedonia)** There was a major backlash against the news that the EU would be providing, amongst other aid, blankets for migrants. Various articles were published which mocked the phrase "EU for You" using the word "blanket", as in Macedonian this rhymes.
- **(Romania)** Journalist Sorina Matei shared an [article](#) on her Facebook page where she claims that Romanian seasonal workers in Germany are quarantined in abusive conditions, with no pay or food. This is a continuation of a previously seen narrative which has been prevalent in Romania and Moldova for several weeks. The article acquired 115 comments and 73 shares.

3. Incompetence



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

- **(Estonia)** Investigative debunking organisation *Propastop* have identified Kremlin ties to a new Facebook group called *Za Budushee* (“For The Future”). The page released a poll on whether the lockdown in Estonia should be lifted, also claiming that the idea that most Estonians agree with lockdown measures is government propaganda. Stanislav Pupkevitch, a United Left activist with pro-Kremlin views and a history of disseminating disinformation via social media, has been engaging with the new page.
- **(Georgia)** In a Facebook [post](#) shared on April 22nd, pro-Kremlin Facebook page *Stalin* made a link between novel coronavirus and liberalism, stating:

“The safety measures are not for the coronavirus, but for the libervirus”

The page has 10,000 followers, though this particular post seems to have received little attention, with only 20 likes and 5 shares.

- **(Hungary)** Doubling down on a [previous article](#) from *PestiSrácok*, Hungary's leading pro-government news portal *Origo* [accused](#) Budapest's opposition Mayor and his administration of forging documents that detailed the situation of an elderly care home in the Hungarian capital, which is considered the only hot spot for positive COVID-19 cases. While the portal said it was Zoltán Gál, a member of Karácsony's cabinet, who wrote a letter in the name of the care home to the Government Administration of Budapest explaining the situation, the letter was sent by József Skultéti, the head of the care home itself.

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. The reason for involving Zoltán Gál in the anti-Karácsony coverage was that he previously served in the government of former socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány, a popular target in pro-government communications.

- **(Hungary)** An anonymous op-ed in the pro-government daily *Magyar Nemzet* attempted a character assassination on Tímea Szabó, a green-leftist MP after she criticised the Hungarian government for donating protective masks abroad while Hungary faces a potential lack of medical supplies.



“Tímea Szabó was created in an illegal laboratory on a secret island from the DNA of a tick and Ildikó Lendvai [former chair of MSZP, the Hungarian Socialist Party]. First, she was kept in a heat-resistant, sterile glass jar for a while, then MSZP hauled her into the Hungarian parliament.

At first, Tímea Szabó just hid in the gaps between the parliamentary wooden cassettes and floorboards, then slowly crawled into the council-chamber. When the swarming time came, Tímea Szabó asked to speak and dashed her bacteria all around. According to some researchers, the organism called Tímea Szabó is not in the Hungarian parliament to represent her voters, she just wants to poison everything. Szabó is member of a non-existing party, and is the biological weapon of a very much existing background power”

- **(Poland)** Kremlin aligned propaganda has begun attacking investment in the Crossing of the Vistula Spit, a key infrastructure project for the Polish government, as irrelevant in the face of COVID-19. A Polish language article from Business Insider has been manipulated in Russian media, citing an imaginary Polish expert to whom these opinions are attributed. OIP has a screenshot on file.
- **(Poland)** Phil Konieczny (99.5k followers) has accused various governments of manipulating the data around COVID-19 to incite panic, and claims that inflation in Poland is one of the highest in the world (there appears to be no data that would confirm this available). This video has been seen almost 2,000,000 times.
- **(Romania)** Journalist Mircea Badea posted a series of highly critical, vitriolic [posts](#) on Facebook criticising President Iohannis and the Government for their stance towards the (fired) director of the National Institute for Infectious Diseases. He has also accused the mainstream media for spreading fake-news with regards to the initial lockdown lifting plan.

Former PM Victor Ponta (over 800,000 followers on Facebook) likewise [claimed](#) that the sacking of the Director was an attempt by both the President and Prime Minister to cover up their own failings with regards to the COVID-19 response. This post acquired 2.4k reactions, 677 comments and 316 shares.

- **(Ukraine)** *Ukraina.ru*, who are amongst the leading openly Pro-Kremlin news platforms, issued a video [highlighting](#) the ‘dissatisfaction’ of populations in Western states about the lockdown measures. The video has around 7,400



views. Similar protests in Vladikavkaz, Russia, appear to be ignored by the same media.

Interestingly, some of the contributors including Rostislav Ishchenko have been previously linked to Alexey Chesnakov, Head of the “Center of Current Policy” in Russia, known for his proximity to one of the architects of Russian hybrid aggression Vladislav Surkov.

- **(Ukraine)** Yurii Boiko, one of the leaders of *Opposition Platform – For Life* (OPFL) party, criticised the extension of quarantine in Ukraine until 11th May, and the Ukrainian government as a whole for “pointless havoc”. His arguments against the decision are rooted in the economic hardships inflicted on business due to isolation measures.

While the Ukrainian economy, as well as many others, has indeed faced serious challenges due to COVID-19, the main danger in Boiko’s position is the suggested solution to the problem. He promotes the “Anti-crisis plan”, developed by OPFL, which includes turning to Moscow for financial aid and lifting sanctions from Russia. Unsurprisingly, his message was picked up by pro-Russian resources such as Strana.ua.

4. Russia as saviour or victim

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

- **(Estonia)** *RuBaltic* covered a video conference between Ukraine MFA Dmitry Kuleba and his counterparts from EU states. The article [depicts](#) Estonian MFA Urmas Reinsalu as being obsessed with “Russian aggression” in Ukraine, accusing him and the Baltics in general stating that: “no coronavirus can become an obstacle in their historical mission: to drive a wedge between Russia and other post-Soviet states.”
- **(Russia)** On *Tsargrad TV* Sergei Mikheev, known for his anti-western statements, [claimed](#) the virus is a “European one”, and one of all of those “who spat on U.S., on Russia, from over there, and badmouthed U.S. in every way possible”. He also rails against the domestic opposition in a similar vein. The video has 14,673 views as of April 24th.



- **(Ukraine)** Russian expert Vladimir Kornilov, invited to an [interview](#) with *Ukraina.ru*, has supported the growing tension between the USA and People's Republic of China in regard to the pandemic, claiming:

“You know, I’m very pleased: finally, after long last, years during which Russia and Russians were blamed for everything, finally all their aggressive attention is turned to China and Chinese; we will have at least some breathing room. Of course, they don’t forget about U.S., coming up with various bogus stories and what not, but still the major priority is now China”.

This way, Kornilov reiterates the idea that all the concerns repeatedly expressed by the Western states regarding Russian aggressive foreign policy, electoral meddling etc should be dismissed, legitimizing Kremlin’s policies. The video has around 3,000 views.

5. Moral decay

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

- **(Lithuania)** Attacks on the foundation headed by ex-President Grybauskaite have persisted but with lower intensity. This article in *ekspertai.eu* [demands](#) a response from the Lithuanian Prime Minister and President on the issue.
- **(Russia)** *Russia 24 TV* posted a [video](#) on Youtube of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov calling for a pause to the “dramatic damage” inflicted during the crisis by “one sided” pre-existing sanctions imposed on countries such as Iran and Syria. Tacitly, this is also a call to pause sanctions on Russia. The video has 12,641 views as of April 24th.

6. Orthodox influencers

- **(Georgia)** Facebook page *Stalin* (10,000 followers), referenced in previous reports, continues to make [claims](#) that the virus was made artificially, and now supposedly that it was spread originally as tuberculosis – it is claimed that in part this is to exert control and wrestle it away from the Georgian Orthodox church.



- **(Georgia)** The last [issue](#) of the pro-Russian newspaper *Georgia and the World* published an interview with clergyman Giorgi Razmadze. Razmadze promoted the narrative that the church was under attack, and that the clergymen who called on believers to stay at home during the crisis weren't real believers themselves.

Statistics and Cures

1. False statistics, causes and effects

Misquotes, incorrect statistics, hyperbole, inciting panic.

2. False cures

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

- **(Armenia)** In an interview with *Armtimes.com*, Doctor Vahan Vardapertyan (a gynaecologist) [shares](#) his detailed thoughts on the potential mitigation and treatment of the virus, citing multiple unsubstantiated claims as fact or official guidance.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

1. The virus was created in a lab

- **(Bulgaria)** *News Front Bulgaria* contains an article [claiming](#) that the U.S. knew in advance about the danger of COVID-19 and that the virus was created in a U.S. military lab, during research into the strains of MERS and SARS viruses.
- **(Georgia)** On April 21st, Kremlin website *News-Front* [published](#) an article with the headline "Paata Imnadze realized that he knows nothing about Covid-19". The author of the article says that the head of the Lugar Laboratory (itself a target of claims about having created the virus) Paata Imnadze knows nothing about COVID-19. The author claims that some military laboratories know everything about Covid-19, but nobody will inform Imnadze and the Lugar Laboratory about this.
- **(Georgia)** On April 20th, Georgian language website *Saqinformi* [wrote](#) that its editor-in-chief, Arno Khidirbegishvili was right when he told *Saqinformi* and (kremlin-allied) *News-front*, that COVID-19 and AIDS were created in military



laboratories as a biological weapon. The author of the article says that Arno Khidirbegishvili's sensational conclusion was proved by the words of French Nobel prize winner Luc Montagnier, who claimed that COVID-19 was created artificially. Per previous Working Group reports, Montagnier's claims have formed the basis of many conspiracy theories and disinformation efforts recently.

- **(Latvia)** Military-political analyst Aleksandr Tihanskiy is [platformed](#) in the online portal/blog IMHO Club, discussing the idea that COVID-19 shares characteristics with biological weapons. He claims the U.S. tested biological weapons on its own population in the 1950s, that the virus probably originated from the Wuhan virology laboratory and that the U.S. has collected samples of "biomaterials" from Russians for decades. He also treats the progress made by U.S. and UK scientists in the search for a vaccine as evidence "they had prepared for the drug in advance."
- **(Romania)** Dr Vasile Astarastoiaie, former president of the Romanian College of Physicians, [posted](#) on Facebook that, amongst other things the virus may have been created in a lab by a transnational occult organisation. This is an evolution of the previous 'made in a lab' narrative, and has been shared over 800 times on Facebook, and has spread to conspiracy sites such as *luju.ro*. He also claimed that the government may be using the virus to curtail civil liberties (something [echoed](#) by *Activenews.RO*).

2. Planned pandemic / Bill Gates conspiracy

- **(Armenia)** Executive Director of the *Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises of Armenia* (UATE) Karen Vardanyan gave an interview to *Lratvakan Radio* in which he [claimed](#) the crisis is only a "media pandemic". He said protests had begun in the U.S. against Bill Gates and that protests will also bring the quarantine to an end in Armenia. Vardanyan is a frequent guest on this station amongst other news outlets.
- **(Armenia)** An article in *Analitik.am* [covers](#) Bill Gates' purchase of a \$43million estate in California; the headline calls it "the perfect home to protect him from the coronavirus."



- **(Georgia)** On April 21st, Georgian website *TVM.ge* [published](#) an article about conspiracy related to Bill Gates. The author claims that billionaire Bill Gates is planning to implant chips in people en masse to fight against COVID-19, as an extension of the disinformation campaign that has been spreading for several weeks against him.
- **(Hungary)** *Vilaghelyzete.com*, a fringe pro-Kremlin and conspiracy theory homepage with 35 thousand plus followers, [claimed](#) that Microsoft developed a new type of nanotechnology device to implant digital chips to humans with a “nanotech vaccine.” The wording of the post ultimately suggested that the tech company, owned by Bill Gates, is using the COVID-19 pandemic to create a global surveillance network. While the tech giant did publish a similar patent, the technology was established for a cryptocurrency system using body activity data. The post referred to infamous U.S. conspiracy theorist and radio host Alex Jones as its source.
- **(Hungary)** In a post that was [also shared](#) by Alternatív Hírek, a smaller conspiracy Facebook page with two thousand followers, *Vilaghelyzete.com* [echoed](#) unsubstantiated claims from Chinese state media that “the COVID-19 virus originates from an American military laboratory and this is probably from where the virus got to China.” Another conspiracy homepage with 30,000+ followers, *Titkok Szigete*, [claimed](#) that the COVID-19 outbreak is a “test-tube-made crisis” that was spread by “private elites” to reshape the global economy.
- **(North Macedonia)** A [column](#) by Elizabeta Chingarova Matevska, a member of the *Rodina Party*, claims that COVID-19 is a conspiracy against North Macedonia, and that in part it will be used to erase their identity. Separately, the Bill Gates conspiracy continues to be propagated by the likes of Igor Panarin, a Russian geopolitical analyst (in a [video](#) watched over 1000 times).
- **(North Macedonia)** Several [videos](#) (Pavel Satev, 20,000 followers) and [posts](#) (Milenko nedelovski, 60,000 followers) on Facebook have been published recently claiming that COVID-19 was planned as early as 2012, and was “announced” at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.
- **(Romania)** *ActiveNews.RO* has also pushed a similar [narrative](#), claiming that the 2012 Olympic Games opening ceremony in London was some form of illuminati ritual related to COVID-19.



3. 5G caused COVID-19

- **(Georgia)** On April 21st, Georgian Facebook page *Georgia First* (14,000 followers) [posted](#) the words of activist Guram Kartvelishvili who is affiliated with pro-Kremlin online portal Georgia and World. In it he states that the Georgian government and opposition managed to lock down the country using COVID-19, and this lockdown was used to test 5G technology. He also claims that 5G technology is a weapon to control people and slowly kill them.

4. NATO

- **(Baltics)** Russian-language media sources continue to focus on combat activities across Baltic states again suggesting that NATO troops are exacerbating the spread of the virus. An example of this can be seen here [here](#) in *Rusvesna.su*.

5. George Soros

- **(Hungary)** “The Soros organizations are taking the fight to the next level, [and] many of them are against the anti-pandemic measures,” [reads](#) the headline of an article published by pro-government weekly *Magyar Hírlap*. The article targets multiple civil society groups that came out against some governmental restructuring measures needed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Among others, the piece slammed *Társaság a Szabadságjogokért* (TASZ; Hungarian Civil Liberties Union), a well-known Hungarian not-for-profit NGO providing legal support for those in need after the organization published a “call for clients” to support patients of the Hungarian healthcare system who were sent away from hospitals in a move to free hospital beds in preparation for the spread of COVID-19.

The article also took aim at the *Helsinki Committee*, the Hungarian branch of the international rights NGO, the Hungarian office of Amnesty International and *Pedagógusok Demokratikus Szakszervezete* (PDSZ; Democratic Trade Union of Teachers), labelling them as members of the “Soros network” for criticising the implementation of crisis measures such as allowing high school exams to take place on May 4th when the Hungarian government expects the pandemic to peak on May 3rd.



- **(Lithuania)** *Ekspertai.eu* published an article which claims George Soros is seeking to indebt the EU by taking advantage of the crisis, using perpetual funds. The commenting author states that the EU (and Lithuania) will thus be “forever in debt to the benefactor George Soros” and he will have “infinite power” to dictate EU policy.

6. Anti-vax

None

7. World Health Organization

- **(Georgia)** Georgian public influencer Koba Kuprashvili recently published a [video](#) in which he claims that the Georgian people are deceived by the lies of WHO on how deadly COVID-19 really is. According to him, COVID-19 is only dangerous for elderly people, and certain countries are manipulating the statistics for their own gain - China wants to buy up stock, Italy and Spain want to get more money from the EU, and the Gates family wants to make a fortune by selling the vaccine. The video has more than 4,000 reactions, 1,700 comments, more than 15,000 shares and 490,000 views
- **(Poland)** The fan page of Mateusz Grzesiak, who claims to be an “entrepreneur, international speaker, trainer and consultant” and holding “two doctorates” [posted](#) a quote by him stating:

*“I want to be treated by doctors, not businessmen. I expect reliability from an agency like WHO, **and I don't believe in it at all.** I am worried about the growing surveillance of the government in my life and **I do not believe** in his intentions of ‘taking care of security’. **I do not trust Gates**, who positions himself as a savior healing the world, but in **doing so he earns colossal money for himself** and does not accept alternative points of view.”*

8. There is no virus

- **(Armenia)** A well-known photographer and restaurant owner [posted](#) on Facebook to claim that an unnamed individual had told him that they were offered \$400 by an employee at a morgue to let COVID-19 be given as the cause of death. The comments include users claiming to have heard of similar cases, though no one cites any direct source or evidence. An MP also commented asking the original poster to provide details and report this as a



crime, but this has not been responded to. The post has received 52 comments and 1 share.

ADDITIONAL

1. Response to Chinese and Russian aid

- **(Hungary)** While praising China following the arrival of a new package of COVID-19-related medical supplies from Beijing, Hungary's Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Péter Szijjártó once again [said](#) that assistance is provided through an uninterrupted airlift between China and Hungary.

2. Domestic responses to COVID-19

- **(Romania)** The government continues to come under heavy criticism from a number of sources since the Director of the Institute of Infectious Diseases was fired – this was after he had issued a lockdown exit strategy that itself was highly criticised.
- **(Romania)** *Gazeta de Informatii* (7,000 followers) has [pushed](#) the pre-existing narrative that the Romanian government is using the state of emergency to censor sites that disagree with the 'false' information it provides around COVID-19. *Sputnik Romania*, for example, issued a lengthy [op ed](#) exploiting the confusion around the putative lockdown exist strategy, claiming that President Ioannis expressed his opposition to it because it would endear him to the elderly population.

3. Roma and ethnic minorities

- **(Georgia)** On April 22nd, the ethnic Azerbaijani population of Marneuli held an anti-government demonstration demanding the locked Marneuli Municipality be reopened. The Georgian government locked this municipality due to the fast spread of COVID-19 there. Georgian antiliberal Facebook page *Antiparadox* (c. 30,000 followers) [posted](#) xenophobic messages claiming that ethnic Azerbaijanis weren't penalized for violations of regulations imposed by the government. The page claims that only ethnic Georgians are penalised and oppressed by the Georgian government.



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COVID-19 MONITORING & ANALYSIS