



SUMMARY REPORT

Tuesday 5th May 2020

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

The following countries and languages are covered in this report:

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



Countries

Country-by-country Overview

1. Armenia
2. Bulgaria
3. Czechia
4. Estonia
5. Georgia
6. Hungary
7. Latvia
8. Lithuania
9. Moldova
10. North Macedonia
11. Poland
12. Romania
13. Serbia
14. Slovakia
15. Ukraine

Narratives

Disinformation

1. Immigration
2. EU failure
3. Government incompetence
4. Russia as saviour or victim
5. Moral decay
6. Orthodox influencers

Statistics and Cures (Misinformation)

1. False statistics, causes and effects
2. False cures

Conspiracy Theories

1. The virus was created in a lab
2. Planned pandemic / Bill Gates conspiracy
3. 5G causes COVID-19
4. NATO
5. George Soros
6. Anti-vax
7. World Health Organisation
8. There is no virus



Additional

1. Response to Chinese and Russian aid
2. Domestic responses to COVID-19
3. Roma and ethnic minorities
4. 'Plan Q'
5. Boris Johnson

COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY OVERVIEW

This section summarises developments by country, including new or shifting narratives and key cases. For Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Serbia and Ukraine, Zinc Network researchers contribute additional monitoring information, which takes three forms:

1. **Media Monitoring:** *Utilising NewsWhip to collate and summarise all articles containing keywords about coverage of disinformation relating to COVID-19.*
2. **HSA Media Monitoring:** *Utilising NewsWhip to collate all articles on COVID-19 from outlets deemed to be funded by, formally or informally affiliated with, or reliably sympathetic to Hostile States.*
3. **Social Media Monitoring:** *Utilising open-source data collection tools and methods to monitor and analyse social media conversation about COVID-19 and disinformation around COVID-19, summarising prominent and emerging themes.*

The CWG and their partners aim to expand the scope of these monitoring practices to cover further countries and languages as the project builds.

1. **(Armenia)** Anxiety regarding the presence of US laboratories in the Caucasus and EAP continues, with new Facebook pages appearing specifically to promote conspiracy theories on this topic; as in previous reporting, high profile opinion-formers, including UATE CEO Karen Vardanyan and the former Chief of the Administrative Service, claim that the pandemic is a hoax planned by global elites, pointing to misattributed cause of death as proof, or mass vaccination as profit motive.
2. **(Bulgaria)** A notable narrative in this reporting period is that the USA is sinking into crisis whilst Russia is set to prevail. For example, articles suggested that the pandemic presents an opportunity for Russia and that "Russia will remain until the last day of this world"; that the West has clearly been unprepared for COVID-19 and that the world community will look notably different after the



crisis; that Europe cannot survive without Russia and may require its assistance.

3. **(Czechia)** Conspiracy theories were notable in this reporting period, including those suggesting that vaccination is dangerous and may entail the microchipping of populations. False cures and statistics were also promoted, including the suggestion that high frequency “vibrations” may help to combat COVID-19, and that COVID-19 deaths may have been overreported.
4. **(Estonia)** As VE day approaches, most narratives have focused on the importance of this to Russians in Estonia, and this has led to a drop off in engagement with COVID-19 stories. This may also be partly due to life gradually returning to normal in the country as lockdown is reduced, meaning that hostile actors are pursuing other narratives. However, continuing narratives include those suggesting that Estonia is Russophobic even during COVID-19, according to EADaily, and that COVID-19 is a bioweapon used by global elites to enforce population control, as claimed on Telegram.ee. Across the Baltics, claims have also been identified in the Baltics in Russian, which state that COVID-19 is creating hatred towards Slavs.

Social Media Monitoring

- A post on People of Tallinn, a group with 900 members, linked to a video by a US-based Russian vlogger, which suggests a link between 5G and COVID-19. The post has since been deleted from the group.
 - A post on News in Estonia, a group with 2,800 members, contained multiple incidences of false information. For example, the post claimed that in England, the COVID-19 had been removed from a list of dangerous diseases, and that in Italy 88% of deaths attributed to COVID-19 occurred for other reasons.
5. **(Georgia)** Existing narrative trends continue around experiments undertaken at the Lugar Lab, published in Sputnik Ossetia; that the virus is made up or a fraud according to the Youth Facebook page; that the vaccine is a form of population control as claimed by the Alia site and Kardu Facebook page; and republication of the Montagnier claims in GeWorld. An evolving narrative appears to be that the Lugar Lab is in some way standing in opposition to the Orthodox Church according to Saqinform, and that the world order (Pax Americana) is coming to an end because of COVID-19, discussed in a GeWorld op ed.



6. **(Hungary)** Pro-government media continues to discredit opposition parties and their criticism of the government's response to COVID-19; George Soros continues to be a focal point of some conspiracy theories, including the suggestion that he is behind the depreciation of Hungary's currency and is seeking to create a new world order; the suggestion that Bill Gates intends to microchip humanity via vaccination has also been further circulated.

7. **(Latvia)** Accusations of Russophobia continue, with the suggestion, for example, that anti-Russian narratives dominate a report released by the Latvian Constitution Protection Bureau, and that Russophobia is present in American media coverage of Russian food policy and protectionism. It has also been suggested that Latvia is failing to fight COVID-19 and is experiencing various disappointments, despite 16 years as a member of the European Union.

Media Monitoring

- TVNet published an article referencing Re:Baltica's fact checking effort, which had identified an article by pro-Kremlin outlet RuBaltica claiming that Latvia will have to cooperate with Russia if it is to survive economically. Delfi Latvia meanwhile noted that a post linking the pharmaceutical industry to the COVID-19 and the lockdown was circulating around Latvian Facebook.

Social Media Monitoring

- A post on Covid-19 Latvija, a group with 3,800 members, contained multiple instances of false information. It exaggerated WHO recommendations, stating that the organisation was recommending that people "throw away their businesses, become bankrupt" and "not go outside and get vitamin D". It claimed that the reaction to the virus was a "global deception", aimed at forcing people to get vaccination, and destroying small businesses in favour of large corporations. The post ended by encouraging people to ignore the media. A post with identical wording was also shared in Lithuanian groups.
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8. **(Lithuania)** "Russophobia" claims continue, in Baltics-wide coverage in the run-up to Victory Day, citing that COVID-19 will be used as an excuse by far-right elements in government and the military to cancel celebrations; financially-themed conspiracy theories claiming the government will use the crisis to raise taxes / destroy the economy / destroy the middle class are notable in blogs and on YouTube; the pro-Kremlin portal ekspertai.eu is a prominent source of



conspiratorial content, asserting the allegedly malign intentions of the WHO, Bill Gates, and George Soros.

Media Monitoring

- Sputnik Lithuania published an article reiterating the comments of MEP Viktor Uspaskich, that Lithuania prioritises addressing COVID-19, to the detriment of people with other conditions (380 interactions).

Social Media Monitoring

- Two identical posts on Russian Lithuania, a Facebook group with 14,000 members, and The Committee of Russian-speaking Klaipeda, a Facebook group with 1,100 members, contained multiple incidences of false information. It exaggerated WHO recommendations, stating that the organisation was recommending that people “throw away their businesses, become bankrupt” and “not go outside and get vitamin D”. It claimed that the reaction to the virus was a “global deception”, aimed at forcing people to get vaccinated and destroying small businesses in favour of large corporations. The post ended by encouraging people to ignore the media. A post with identical wording was also shared in Latvian groups.
 - A post on Russian-speaking Klaipeda, a group with 2,500 members, linked to a video containing a segment from Fox News claiming that the COVID-19 mortality rate was being exaggerated in the US, as doctors make a large commission from COVID-19-related deaths.
9. **(Moldova)** The most prominent pre-existing narrative has been pushed by dux.md, which claims that the virus is an old disease and that people are already immune. New narratives include the suggestion that feminists intentionally spread the virus in Spain, according to the religious website Aparatorul.MD; that Pope Francis is in league with globalists for promoting vaccines, as stated by a Christian Democrat politician; that abortions should be banned because they may spread the virus, according to Sputnik.MD; and that Transnistria is coping better than Chisinau in fighting the virus, even though the latter is supposedly interfering in the breakaway state’s efforts.
10. **(North Macedonia)** Narratives have developed around claims that Vladimir Putin is hiding in a bunker; that North Macedonia was forewarned about the virus through NATO but did nothing; and that the USA is preparing for war against China because of the virus (picked up via Serbian channels).



11. **(Poland)** The “I don’t believe in coronavirus” Facebook group now has more than 40,000 members and is continuing to push narratives around Bill Gates, anti-vax and microchipping. A fake article on “washingtontimes.com” seen in Lithuania last week has been picked up, claiming the pandemic is a media hoax. A claim that the virus is likely man-made, falsely attributed to Nobel Prize winning physiologist Tasuku Honjo has also been widely shared on social media.
12. **(Romania)** There appears to be a significant uptick in misinformation from outside Romania being republished in the country with significant coverage, including claims made by Mike Pompeo regarding the virus originating in a Chinese Lab, and a statement by French doctor Didier Raoult stating that a second wave of the virus is impossible. Pre-existing and ongoing narratives cover the role of the WHO during the pandemic, and a request by an opposition politician to close down a government website for pushing ‘fake news’ surrounding the virus.
13. **(Serbia)** The curfew continues to be the main narrative across media with regard to COVID-19, including claims that it is an abuse of power and doesn’t help to fight the virus.

Media Monitoring

- Coverage between 30th April and 4th May focused mostly on the EU report on disinformation. Articles discussed whether or not China is spreading disinformation and whether Chinese appeals to the EU caused the report to be changed in Beijing’s favour. The most engaged-with coverage was published by Blic.
- The opinion of Igor Rudan, a Croatian epidemiologist, on the Swedish approach to COVID-19 also received a lot of attention. The most engaged-with story was published by Blic, but the story was also picked up by Kurir and Informer.

Social Media Monitoring

- Social media posts in Serbia predominantly focused on the curfew currently in place and what it means for the public, as well the government’s reasons for imposing it and its faults. The curfew is widely considered an abuse of power, as it is seen to limit the freedoms of



ordinary people and benefit people in power, without helping the fight against COVID-19.

14. **(Slovakia)** Narratives include: the suggestion that the impact of COVID-19 may not be as severe as anticipated; the idea that the crisis is being used to force people to live under a totalitarian system; praise for Russia as a positive force for combatting COVID-19. The suggestion that sunlight may destroy COVID-19 was also shared, as was a video understood to have originated in China, whose content is critical of the American response to COVID-19.
15. **(Ukraine)** Various narratives persist: pro-Russian media and influencers maintain their focus on rapprochement with Russia, using COVID-19 as a pretext, whilst also calling for Victory Day celebrations to take place despite the existence of quarantine measures; the pro-Kremlin Strana.ua reports that the (de facto) “Donetsk People’s Republic” is introducing criminal punishment for “fakes about coronavirus”. This could be regarded as a way of further silencing dissidents.

Social Media Monitoring

- Discussion around COVID-19 in Ukraine was again centred around quarantine. In the centre of attention was the public defiance of Cherkasy mayor Anatoly Bondarenko, who decided to relax quarantine measures in the city for businesses, contrary to the national government’s instructions. Public attention was also focused on the controversy around humanitarian aid from Russia, after stories emerged reporting that Moscow had asked for a relaxation of EU sanctions in exchange for providing the aid. People in Ukraine also reflected on the government’s decision to ease social distancing rules for food markets, which are now allowed to operate again.

Media Monitoring

- Ukrainian mainstream media was quick to refute the claim that the army had entered Cherkasy to restore order. The Cherkasy Regional State Administration Facebook page denied the involvement of the military, which was then publicised by outlets such as Hromadske, Ukrinform, and others.
- StopFake debunked several COVID-19-related fakes that were spreading last week, including messages that COVID-19 does not exist, or that Ukrainian farmers are throwing away their crops in



despair because they cannot sell them while food markets are closed. StopFake also refuted the false narrative that the US has admitted to operating secret military bio laboratories on the territory of Ukraine.

- Outlets including Golos reported that COVID-19 cannot be compared to seasonal flu, despite popular belief, and Glavcom reported that the virus is not afraid of sunlight, as many wrongly believe.
- HSA-aligned media in Ukraine were supportive of the decision of the mayor of Cherkasy to loosen up quarantine restrictions for businesses. Politeka and Strana in particular also used the story to argue that the rule of law is fracturing in Ukraine, amplifying messages that the Ukrainian military is entering the city to restore order.
- HSA-aligned media also played on popular concerns around food prices. From-ua claimed that food sellers are stealing from people via high prices, and Strana reported that desperate Ukrainians are beginning to steal from grocery stores due to their lack of funds. From-ua also spread a fake story that Ukrainian farmers are unable to deliver their produce to market, due to quarantine, and have been forced to dump it in the open air.
- A Strana article on a looming 'medical Maidan' attracted over 3,600 Facebook interactions. It reports that Ukrainian doctors are so dissatisfied with underfunding and the attitude of the authorities that they are preparing to quit en masse.

DISINFORMATION

The CWG uses agreed-upon working definitions to identify and categorise potential disinformation. Cases are classified as disinformation if they meet any of the following criteria:

1. *False or misleading information spread **deliberately via HSAs or HS-aligned outlets**.*
2. *False or misleading information with unknown or unclear attribution, which **fits with known HS narratives, aims or activities**.*
3. *Content based on verifiable information which is unbalanced or skewed, amplifies or exaggerates certain elements for effect, or uses emotive or inflammatory language **to achieve effects that fit within known HS narratives, aims, or activities**.*



1. Immigration

None

2. EU Failure

None

3. Government Incompetence

- **(Bulgaria)** Commenting to News Front Bulgaria, the Russian political scientist Yuri Samonkin reflects on what the world community will look like after COVID-19. It is suggested that it is time to realise that the “aggression policy is no longer possible”, and that the World Health Organisation, and the health systems of the USA and the West in general, have turned out to be unprepared for COVID-19.
- **(Latvia)** An article for Sputnik Latvia entitled “16 years in the EU: Latvia's successes and missed opportunities” suggests that the country is failing to fight COVID-19, and that despite having been in the European Union for sixteen years, migration and recession are just some of the examples of disappointment being experienced by the Latvian people.
- **(Lithuania)** The Pro-Kremlin portal laisvaslaikrastis.lt published a blog-like piece which claims that the crisis will be used to deliberately raise taxes, as part of a plan by “ingenious machinists who manage the world’s finances”. This theory is also espoused by the controversial blogger Kazimieras Juraitis on YouTube, where he claims that COVID-19 is being used by the government to destroy the economy and the middle class. The video has been viewed over 15,000 times.
- **(Romania)** Heavy criticism of the President continues, with opposition MP Liviu Plesoianu now calling for the website of the President to be shut down after spreading ‘fake news’. The Post acquired close to 1000 likes, and was shared by several politicians and journalists associated with the opposition, including ALDE president Calin Popescu Tariceanu.
- **(Slovakia)** The website Hlavný Denník has posted an article featuring a video entitled ‘Once Upon a Virus’. The video appears to have been published by state-controlled media in China and was previously reported on and circulated by the far-right American website Breitbart. Its content suggests that the United



States has responded incompetently to COVID-19. The article says that the video is “the latest effort of Beijing’s disinformation campaign to cover their responsibility for spreading the coronavirus throughout the world”.

4. Russia as saviour or victim

- **(Bulgaria)** An article on the website pogled.info suggests that the pandemic presents an opportunity for Russia. Presenting the views of historian and diplomat Alexander Notin, the piece suggests that the USA is experiencing unprecedented crisis, but states that “Russia will remain until the last day of this world”.
- **(Bulgaria)** An article on the Bulgarian News Front website suggests that Europe simply cannot survive without Russia, and that EU countries will soon be asking Putin’s cabinet for help. It cites the views of individuals including Franz Klintsevich, a member of the Council of the Federation of Russia.
- **(Estonia)** Eadaily has pushed the narrative that Estonians continue to be Russophobic even during the crisis. They highlight the supposed harassment of a delegation from the Russian embassy on 30th April by Estonian police. The delegation was opening an updated Bronze Soldier monument, and were criticised by the police for failing to enforce social distancing measures.
- **(Latvia)** An RuBaltic article suggests that Russophobia continues to exist, despite COVID-19. It suggests that the latest annual report released by the Latvian Constitution Protection Bureau is dominated by anti-Russian narratives, and that Latvian Russophobia has been affecting the treatment of Russian diplomats.
- **(Latvia)** A Sputnik Latvia article shared 75 times suggested that Russophobia persists, and criticised American media coverage of Russian food protectionism, whilst defending Russian policy as in fact reasonable.
- **(Lithuania)** An article in Russian-language portal fondsk.ru claims that the pandemic will be used as a pretext to cancel Victory Day celebrations on 9 May and that this is being welcomed by various high-profile individuals amongst Baltic authorities and military, including Army Colonel Auksė Ūsienė who is said to be “an extremely popular person among Lithuanian neo-Nazis”.
- **(North Macedonia)** Conspiracists claim that Vladimir Putin is hiding in an underground bunker. These stories also highlight the dramatic increase in



cases in Russia and seem to be [sourced](#) from Republika.MK. This was shared on 5 Facebook pages with around half a million followers.

- **(Slovakia)** An article on the Hlavny Dennik website [expresses](#) a positive stance towards the Russian Federation for its activity in the United Nations regarding COVID-19, and praises Russia's suggestion that lifting sanctions might better help those countries most affected by the crisis. The article is critical of the World Health Organisation, Bill Gates and the EU, whom the author suggests ultimately make decisions about everything.
- **(Ukraine)** The official website of political party 'Opposition Platform – For Life' features an article [reporting](#) the comments of politician Viktor Medvedchuk, arguing that rapprochement with Russia is necessary in order to counter the COVID-19 crisis. Medvedchuk says: ““We need to lift the economic blockade of Donbas...It is necessary to restore beneficial economic relations. Not the politically acceptable ones, as with the EU, which have destroyed Ukrainian economy in the last 5 years, but with Asian and Pacific region and missions of different countries, restore relations with Russia”. Medvedchuk's comments are also featured on his YouTube channel.

5. Moral decay

- **(Georgia)** Pro-Kremlin website Geworld.ge published a story, based on an article on the Russian site, *fondsk.ru*, claiming that COVID-19 shows the time of NATO, the EU and the *pax Americana* has ended. He cites the example of Ukrainian citizens being expelled from Germany to reinforce claims that the virus is more reliable than the right to travel freely across Europe, and emphasises that people are [burning](#) 5G towers in the UK, potentially inferring that the situation is worse than it is. 326 views.
- **(Moldova)** The religious portal Aparatorul.md has [claimed](#) that a group of feminists in Spain spread COVID-19 whilst protesting, which apparently explains why Spain has the most cases. 27 likes on Facebook.
- **(Romania)** A Gandeste.org website article on the “world war” against COVID-19 [suggested](#) that Germany is the de-facto ruler of the EU; that the West is inventing grounds on which 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.

6. Orthodox Influencers



- **(Georgia)** On 3 May, Georgian Facebook page “Georgia First” published a quote by far-right activist Guram Kartvelishvili, who has claimed the only religious figure who has resisted the ‘world globalist movement’ was the Patriarch of Georgian Orthodox Church. In particular, Kartvelishvili claims that the church stands against 5G and the microchips that will supposedly follow, blending multiple conspiracy theories identified in this report over the previous weeks – elites against the church, 5G spreading COVID-19, microchips as part of the vaccine. This post acquired 350 likes on Facebook.
- **(Georgia)** The weekly newspaper Asaval-Dasavali shared via Facebook a Youtube video in which a Greek priest criticises the authorities for imposing strict rules and not allowing parishioners to participate in a religious ceremony. The Facebook post has had 52 likes and 53 shares, plus around 34,000 shares on YouTube itself.
- **(Moldova)** Christian Democrat politician Iurie Rosca has claimed that globalist elites are behind the virus, and that Pope Francis is promoting ‘their’ vaccine. 61 likes on Facebook. Rosca has been positioning himself as a defender of traditional values, and advocates closer ties with Russia and Romania, but not the EU.

Statistics and Cures (Misinformation)

1. False statistics, causes and effects

- **(Armenia)** Various outlets carry claims that the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention has identified five skin conditions that may be symptoms of coronavirus infection. This appears to be a misattribution of a study conducted at the Spanish Academy of Dermatology, whose findings are not yet confirmed.
- **(Czechia)** The AC24.cz website has published a short article with embedded video content, reporting a speech by Italian MP Vittorio Scarbi in which he claims that it is not true that 25,000 people in Italy have died due to COVID-19. The politician suggests that the data has been misinterpreted and used for the purpose of undermining Italy.
- **(Czechia)** An article on the AC24.cz website suggests that the number of COVID-19 cases has not been decreasing, because testing equipment has been contaminated with the virus: “The people are most probably constantly being infected by COVID-19 testing tools”, it suggests, citing a report in the British newspaper The Telegraph from late March regarding COVID-19 being



found in coronavirus test kits. The article also criticises Bill Gates and accuses him of bribing the World Health Organisation, and mentions the conspiracy theory concerning the possibility of microchips being included in the vaccine.

- **(Hungary)** The fringe conspiracy homepage Kimondott Igazságok misreported information from an article by left-of-centre independent daily Népszava, to claim that – as the country’s healthcare system looks to gradually reopen – the coronavirus tests required to access services in healthcare institutions will cost up to 180 euros. Kimondott Igazságok has approximately 14,700 followers.
- **(Moldova)** Dux.MD has published a story citing a ‘well known’ German virologist, who claims that the virus is old and that people are already immune to it. 3 likes and 17 comments on Facebook.
- **(Moldova)** Sputnik Moldova has published a story citing the Russian Orthodox Patriarch’s call for abortions to be banned because they may spread COVID-19. 95 views.
- **(Poland)** A video which claims that a type of coronavirus test has been withdrawn from production after testing positive on a goat has been widely shared and viewed (over 21,000 times on YouTube) – though this is as likely to be for its comedic value as much as its (lack of) veracity.
- **(Romania)** Romania.TV, amongst others, published claims by French doctor Didier Raoult that there cannot be a second wave of infections. He stated that pandemics only have one peak, and that they can stop with ‘no apparent reason’. Raoult is controversial, and has previously promoted hydroxychloroquine.
- **(Slovakia)** In a piece with the headline “Dr. Fauci suggests that the mortality rate on COVID-19 may be up to 10 times lower than officially reported” Badatel.net reports the claims of Dr. Anthony Fauci (who has advised President Donald Trump on COVID-19) that the death rate from the pandemic could be lower than expected, comparing it to flu.

2. False cures

- **(Czechia)** A long post on the Facebook page of ‘I love Dusek’ (which has had almost 1000 likes and 500 shares, and has been shared by one Facebook page with 45,000 likes) has suggested that the virus responsible for COVID-19 dies at vibrations higher than 25.5HZ. The author suggests that a person’s vibrations



vary depending on their particular character traits, and that vibrations can also be altered by e.g. fear, pain, or higher temperatures.

- **(Czechia)** An article from pravdyprostor.cz, with the [headline](#) “Coronavirus - the dangers of compulsory vaccination, microchips and eugenics”, combines various conspiracy theories: vaccines are dangerous (and may even cause COVID-19); face masks can cause disease; elites want to decrease the global population; 5G networks may serve to “remove oxygen” from the surrounding territory, leaving people dead.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

1. The virus was created in a lab

- **(Armenia)** A Facebook page entitled “Say No to American Virus Laboratories” (created 28 April) [posted](#) a claim which linked US biolabs in Armenia to the outbreak of coronavirus. The author says authorities are likely bribed to allow US labs to be built and argues that if such laboratories are too unsafe to have in the US, they should also be banned in Armenia. The post has been shared 51 times as of 5 May.
- **(Georgia)** The Lugar Lab continues to be a prominent target – it appears because its role in fighting the virus has increased, and so hostile actors are trying to discredit it - with the Facebook Page ‘Stalin’ [publishing](#) a film by Bulgarian film maker Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, who is affiliated with pro-Moscow web portal Zero Hedge, South Front and TV Zvezda, the latter of which is owned by the Russian Ministry of Defence. The film is about the lab, but was made in 2019. The post acquired 10 likes and 1 share, but the [GeWorld page](#) in links to had around 20,000 views.
- **(Georgia)** Separately, on the *Sputnik Ossetia* site, [cited](#) Yuri Vazagov of the de-factor Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian-occupied South Ossetia region, who claimed that the Lugar Lab has been experimenting on bats since 2014. Viewed 410 times.
- **(Georgia)** On the 2nd of May, Georgian Facebook page Kardhu [posted](#) a video of famous Georgian astrologer Mikheil Tsagareli, where he claims that the spread of COVID-19 is managed artificially to reduce world population from 7 billion to 1 billion. He also adds that people will be chipped and they will be



transformed into robots to create a new world. This post acquired 85 likes and 35 shares.

- **(Georgia)** The pro-Kremlin news portal GeWorld.ge (over 116k visits in the past six months) published an article quoting the claim by scientist Luc Montagnier (the Nobel Prize winner who co-discovered HIV) that COVID-19 was created in a lab by biologists working on an AIDS vaccine. Whilst it appears that the Montagnier did make this claim, there is no evidence that it is true – Montagnier’s narrative has been noted in a number of countries in previous working group reports. The article has been read almost 550 times on the GeWorld webpage.
- **(Slovakia)** The website Zem a Vek reports on a study that claims that sunlight can destroy COVID-19. According to the study, ultraviolet rays strongly affect the COVID-19 pathogen, both on surfaces and in the air. The headline states: “According to new research, sunlight destroys the coronavirus”, and says that the research was conducted at the “National Center for Biological Analysis and Countermeasures” in Maryland.
- **(Romania)** Epoch Times Romania has focused on Mike Pompeo’s claims that the virus started in a lab in Wuhan. The post was shared 44 times on Facebook, and whilst other more popular sites have also published this they have not shared it on their social media.
- **(Ukraine)** Obozrevatel, a formerly reliable outlet that has increasingly run unsourced and sensationalised stories, reported that confirmed that the US had confirmed that COVID-19 had been artificially created in a Chinese laboratory, citing the comments by Mike Pompeo. Obozrevatel’s Facebook page is followed by 674k people.

2. Planned pandemic / Bill Gates conspiracy

- **(Armenia)** Karen Vardanyan, the CEO of the Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises (UATE) continues to spread a conspiracy theory about COVID-19 being planned by global elites, including pharmaceutical conglomerates who fund the WHO, as a way of profiting from the sale of vaccines. He also says the ‘Deep State’ aim to reduce the world population through vaccination programmes. Vardanyan voices these claims in an interview with 1in.am, which has been viewed on YouTube over 3,164 times. The Armenian Minister for Health, Arsen Torosyan, has taken to Facebook to dismiss Vardanyan’s “preposterous claims”.



- **(Estonia)** Telegram.ee has claimed that “this artificial panic is created by the powers who rule from behind the scenes to reduce the population and to gain political and economic control.
- **(Georgia)** The Bill Gates narrative continues to be popular, most recently spotted in ProgressNews.ge’s interview with prominent Russian director Nikita Mikhailov, who claims that Gates plans to cause a world apocalypse to implant microchips and control everyday lives. It cites Vladimir Kvachkov, a Russian General, who gives four reasons for the ‘powers’ to create the pandemic – religious, political, financial and economic. This has been shared over 1000 times.
- **(Georgia)** On 29th of April, the leader of pro-Kremlin Georgian party, *Alliance of Patriots*, Giorgi Lomia gave an interview to TV Obieqtivi. He developed the narrative that COVID-19 is being used to destroy the economies of different countries. He claims that the USA in particular benefits from this pandemic - FED allocated more than 3 trillion Dollars with high interest rates to fight against the novel coronavirus - supposedly, the huge income from these rates will be transferred to the rich people to gain more money. In contrast to this, pro-Kremlin site *Georgia and the World* has claimed that the “World ruling elites” have neither resources nor the ideas to fight COVID-19.
- **(Hungary)** The fringe pro-Kremlin website Vilaghelyzete.com (more than 37,000 followers on Facebook) suggested on Facebook that Bill Gates wants to “microchip-vaccinate” humanity. Citing a conspiracy theory that has been reported by the Russian state media channel RT, it suggested that a new patent developed by Gates would be used to microchip humans so that “elites” could track their movements.
- **(Poland)** A false statement purportedly made by Tasuku Honjo, recipient of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physiology, in which he is said to have claimed coronavirus is “not natural”, has been widely shared on Facebook in Poland. The post argues (as Honjo) that a natural (i.e. not man-made) virus would only be found in a specific temperate zone, and not be transmissible all over the world. Widely spread by individual users and previously identified trolls, this content constitutes a ‘Facebook chain’ of misinformation.
- **(Poland)** A Facebook group highlighted in a previous WG report, *‘I don’t believe in coronavirus’*, continues to post content that bundles various strands of conspiracy, including that Bill Gates wants to microchip the world’s citizenry through mass vaccination. The group now has over 40,000 members and posts regularly receive over 100 shares.



- **(Slovakia)** On the website Hlavný Denník, an article entitled “Seven Steps from a Pandemic to Totalitarianism” suggested that COVID-19 is being used to force people into living under a totalitarian system, via a seven-step process. The author of the piece claims that in the final stages, we will witness false death rates, drugs, and vaccines that may be untested. In the seventh step, states will try to maintain an atmosphere of fear.

3. 5G causes COVID-19

- **(Armenia)** Dr. Marina Khachatryan, an opposition activist who regularly spreads conspiracy theories, posted video content on Facebook Live and YouTube insisting there is already 5G installed in Armenia. The screenshot provided as evidence is unverifiable. She says she plans to later discuss microchipping through vaccination. On Facebook, the content was viewed over 2,000 times; on YouTube over 823 times.

4. NATO

- **(North Macedonia)** Horoskop Krjnikcki has picked up a story from a Serbian portal, and claimed that the US is planning to start a war with China due to COVID-19.
- **(Poland)** The frequent channel for Kremlin-backed disinformation, dziennik-polityczny.com, published an article online entitled “PANIC among Polish soldiers”, which claimed that a division of Polish soldiers refused to take part in joint training with US soldiers, citing fear of infection. This case forms part of a wider campaign to undermine Polish-US relations in the lead up to planned Defender Europe 2020 military exercises.

5. George Soros

- **(Hungary)** The news portal Magyar Nemzet reported claims by pro-government economist Imre Boros, that “George Soros and his circle” are behind the depreciation of Hungary’s national currency. Boros suggests that there has been a large-scale and politically-motivated international attempt to depreciate the forint and, indirectly, to weaken the Hungarian government.
- **(Hungary)** Citing an analysis from pro-government think tank the Századvég Institute, the Origo news portal suggested that Hungarian opposition parties are using COVID-19 to attack the government, possibly with support from



international actors, with the aim of bringing down nation states, as – it alleges – is envisaged by the “open society of George Soros”. The article portrays Hungarian opposition actors as the domestic agents and financial beneficiaries of foreign elites directed by Soros.

- **(Hungary)** Conspiracy homepage Kimondott Igazságok suggested that George Soros is using the pandemic to create a new world order by establishing a financial dictatorship in the EU. The piece was responding to a recent op-ed written by Soros for the German publication Der Spiegel.
- **(Lithuania)** In a strange autobiographical piece published on pro-Kremlin news portal ekspertai.eu, the author of an article from the previous report (1 May), in which he claimed the virus was being deliberately spread by medical staff, now asserts that his home in England was invaded by “blacks” , in an incident he believes was a planned response from Soros-controlled mainstream media for his spreading the ‘truth’.

6. Anti-vax

- **(Bulgaria)** A Facebook petition is in circulation, urging against compulsory vaccination against COVID-19. The text suggests: “if this vaccine/ COVID-19 is imposed on us, it will be with Nano particles to directly control our bodies.”
- **(Lithuania)** An article claiming that governments are intentionally withholding studies on the harm of vaccination and banning films that expose “the scams of global vaccination” has been published on the pro-Kremlin news portal ekspertai.eu. The piece concludes that censorship of “undesirable” journalism and documentaries is common in Lithuania.

7. World Health Organization

- **(Lithuania)** In the pro-Kremlin news outlet ekspertai.eu, a video has been shared where a Russian publicist claims that the WHO is artificially overstating the effects of COVID-19, and that it is being run and funded by global elites including Bill Gates. Ekspertai.eu received over 1million visits in the past six months.
- **(Romania)** The Facebook page of Gazeta de Informatii published a story with dual narratives; the first is that the WHO is inefficient and run by a former member of the Ethiopian Communist Party (Dr. Ghebeyasus has been a member of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front), and as such Donald Trump is right to reduce



its funding. They describe it as ‘the largest criminal organization in the history of the world’. The second is that the public information campaign around COVID-19 in Romania is causing ‘public hysteria’. 12k views on the website.

8. There is no virus

- **(Armenia)** Referring to the pandemic as the “global fake terror”, Gevorg Atsemyan, the former Chief of Administrative Service, posted on Facebook about an elderly woman he knew whose death was listed as coronavirus despite her being hospitalised for six months with other serious illnesses. This has been picked up by numerous outlets, including, hayeli.am, hraparak.am, 168.am, asekose.am, and yerevanblog.am. The original post has been shared 21 times.
- **(Poland)** A fake article reported in Lithuanian media in the previous report (1 May), found on “washingtontimes.com” has now been picked up by pch24.pl in Poland. Designed to be confused with the US daily Washington Post, the article claims that the pandemic is in fact a “huge hoax perpetrated by media” who encourage hysteria over death rates which are no greater than seasonal flu.

ADDITIONAL

1. Response to Chinese and Russian aid

None.

2. Domestic responses to COVID-19

- **(Hungary)** The country’s public TV station, M1 (the main state TV channel, with a reach of approximately 200,000 viewers a day) dismissed a recent critical Facebook post by the Hungarian opposition MEP Anna Donáth as “fake news”. Donáth had stated that Hungary’s controversial COVID-19 legislation, which has been subject to massive domestic and international criticism, allows for “unlimited power for an indefinite period.”
- **(Moldova)** Russian news site PGTRK claims that the WHO is ‘interested’ in finding out why the breakaway state of Transnistria is doing better than Moldova in tackling the virus, despite Chisinau’s ‘interference’ in its efforts.



- **(North Macedonia)** Infomax has [cited](#) a WHO official's praise for Sweden, claiming that domestic measures are too harsh and that Belarus, for example, is doing the right thing. Shared on 2 Facebook pages with 130,000 followers.
- **(North Macedonia)** Infomax has also [claimed](#) that North Macedonia was warned, via NATO, about the pandemic in 2019, but the domestic authorities did nothing about it.
- **(Romania)** The Website of the Romanian Presidency has published an inaccurate description of the results of a study made by the Pasteur Institute in Paris. Thus, it erroneously claimed that the experimental reopening of a high school in Crépy-en-Valois, France has resulted in dozens of students getting ill. [In reality](#), the study has indeed concerned the high school in question, but the institution has not been reopened since the beginning of the lockdown. This inaccuracy was quickly exploited by politicians and journalists affiliated with the opposition, that called [the website](#) and the President "source of fake news".
- **(Romania)** the Facebook page of Luju.ro, which frequently criticises the President, has claimed that Ioannis will not ease the lockdown because of fear of public unrest. Quote: *"The German is afraid for the mamaliga not to explode due to the growing discontent of people confined at home, forced into unemployment and fined continuously, president Klaus Iohannis will not extend the state of emergency"*. the site has c. 30,000 followers on Facebook.
- **(Serbia)** The curfew has continued to be at the top of Serbian citizens' list of grievances. Along with the curfew being seen as pointless, the police were also [criticised](#) by journalist Dragan Gulić for not being consistent in carrying out the rules, after they did not disperse football ultras who had gathered for a pro-government rally in Belgrade. The ruling SNS party has been plausibly [accused](#) of organising these rallies. Boško Obradović, leader of the right-wing opposition party Dveri, [tweeted](#) that as long as SNS supporters can wander around free during the curfew, the curfew is no longer valid in his eyes.
- **(Ukraine)** [Messages](#) about rapidly increasing prices were observed across social media in relation to food markets opening in Ukraine, including on the page [Ukrainian Realities](#) (137 shares). Relatedly, one post from Planet-Life [predicts](#) prices to skyrocket after quarantine in Ukraine is over. Identical message was observed on [News World](#) page, and [Bronze](#) (all clickbait fringe pages).
- **(Ukraine)** Patriotnews [stated](#) that 'new Maidan' protests are imminent, demanding that the quarantine be eased (157 shares), while Persona VIP (88k followers) page [predicted](#) that it will be the quarantine that will bring down



Zelensky, who – according to a widely-shared post from Obozrevatel – brings bad luck. In addition, the Facebook page Vichenet (568K followers) claimed that protesters were outside Zelensky’s home, because businesses can no longer endure quarantine.

- **(Ukraine)** In a post on its website, the pro-Russian political party “Opposition Platform – For Life” has reported calls by politician Vadim Rabinovich for Victory Day celebrations to go ahead, despite quarantine measures currently being in place due to COVID-19. The piece, entitled “Vadim Rabinovich: Neither the authorities nor the quarantine can cancel the Victory Day” features video content of Rabinovich speaking with TV channel ZIK. The “Opposition Platform – For Life” site had 57,000 views in March 2020, according to SimilarWeb.
- **(Ukraine)** Pro-Kremlin online news outlet Strana.ua (48m visits in the past 6 months, according to SimilarWeb) reports that the (de facto) “Donetsk People’s Republic” (“DPR”) is introducing criminal punishment for what it calls “fakes about coronavirus”. However, this could be regarded as a way of increasing censorship amidst the pandemic.

3. Roma and ethnic minorities

None.

4. ‘Plan Q’

None.

5. Boris Johnson

- **(Armenia)** Sensationalist online portal iravunk.com suggests that British PM Boris Johnson’s recent hospitalisation could be a “bluff” to distract from allegations that the “coronavirus was carried out in the final stage in British laboratories”. The outlet receives 14,000 visits per month according to SimilarWeb.