

THE V4'S CORONAVIRUS INFODEMIC

A window of opportunity to spread distrust in the West

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Executive summary

- **Significant, unexpected events with long-lasting consequences provide a fertile soil to conspiracy theories and disinformation.** Consequently, the coronavirus-crisis created considerable demand for news about the epidemic, including deceptive claims that explain the events surrounding COVID-19. As the epidemic got more and more serious, the supply of disinformation narratives concerning it rose. Thus, a second wave of the virus will likely be accompanied with another peak in COVID-related manipulative articles. Additionally, economic uncertainty in the wake of the epidemic could also raise demand for geopolitical narratives highlighting the success of eastern regimes in contrast with the ailing West.
- **The crisis is an opportunity for various actors, such as geopolitical players (mainly Moscow and Beijing), local populist forces, disinformation sites and anti-vaxxers to advance their own agenda.** The Kremlin sees COVID-19 as a chance to boost its efforts to erode trust in the Western politico-economic system and institutions. Beijing wants to defer blame for the coronavirus epidemic to the US and portray itself as a reliable partner internationally. Local populist political actors use the pandemic to improve popular support for their policy initiatives (e.g., concerning the EU, international cooperation or migration), which are often in line with the goals of non-EU authoritarian actors. This does not always mean that these players openly support Moscow or Beijing.
- **The crisis might initially have challenged anti-vaxxers, but they will be more active than ever in discrediting any coronavirus vaccines.** This could be a fundamental threat to all nations affected by the pandemic, as it is impossible to reach herd immunity without adequate vaccination rates.
- **Most narratives spread internationally by geopolitical players, populists, conspiracy theorists and anti-science movements are prevalent in the media environments of Visegrád states as well.** The articles in our V4 sample can be categorized in five groups: (1) narratives concerning domestic politics that deepen political divisions; (2) those contrasting the failure of the EU in crisis management with the success of authoritarian regimes; (3) other geopolitical narratives, mostly concerning the origin of the virus; (4) conspiracy theories about global elites spreading the virus deliberately; and (5) public health related issues. The narratives spread by Russia and China have infiltrated the V4 media environments, just like others in Europe.
- **There is a strong, concentrated attack on the EU.** The basic underlying narratives concerning the Union were quite similar in the V4. The EU's initial slow reaction to the crisis and member states' unwillingness to help Italy opened a window of opportunity to disseminate anti-EU narratives. The articles in the V4 sample claim that the EU was idle during the crisis and even hindered the crisis management efforts of member states. This served as proof that globalization is over and nation-states are much more effective in dealing with problems than international institutions. In contrast, Russia, China and in, some cases, Cuba were depicted as nations delivering aid to virus-stricken countries in Europe. Several narratives about the coronavirus, including EU-related claims, are not new, but old claims repackaged into the context of COVID-19.
- **Coronavirus-related disinformation pose both long-term and short-term threats.** Narratives about the EU and authoritarian regimes, the virus's alleged American or Chinese origins seek to influence public opinion and will likely have considerable effects in the long-term. However, false news about actors deliberately spreading the virus, narratives minimizing the seriousness of COVID-19 and anti-vaccination claims might pose immediate public health

threats by potentially making people question the need for measures seeking to slow down the spread of the pandemic or halting progress towards herd immunity via vaccination.

- **More needs to be done against disinformation.** Even governments and institutions with the political will to counter disinformation have in many cases failed to implement effective measures. The coronavirus and the disinformation spread about it are a good indication that even more has to be done to step up against this phenomenon both on the European and national levels.

Policy recommendations

- **Legal steps against those who spread hoaxes is not an efficient, long-term solution.** Legal provisions against those who spread hoaxes should be formulated very clearly and only apply to very specific situations. The new Hungarian law on hoaxes spread during a state of emergency is, in contrast, vague and, as recent cases show, can be applied in almost any case. This has a very serious effect on the freedom of speech, which is not proportional to its efficiency in stopping the dissemination of disinformation. In any case, the legal approach is not a suitable long-term solution to the problem.
- **Strong, independent public media is essential to provide the broadest possible layer of citizens with accurate information.** Hungarian and Polish public media are under the government's control, and their contents follow the cabinet's narratives uncritically. However, one of the main pillars of combating disinformation should be a public broadcaster that disseminates the views of a wide range of political, economic and social actors and facilitates a debate between those views. This could not only improve the quality of political debates but also increase trust in public media.
- **Media outlets should also tackle the issue of disinformation directly, informing the population about deceptive narratives spreading about important events.** However, they should avoid "advertising" disinformation sites by including their names in their articles or links to their contents.
- **Authorities must inform the public clearly about any measures they are planning to take, even those that have a potentially negative effect for their own popularity.** Ineffective communication by particular actors – states, governments, institutions – and the underestimation of the messages carried by some of their trivial political actions, like showing up to welcome any Chinese deliveries of medical products, can open windows of opportunities to deceptive claims. In addition to traditional methods, messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Viber and Telegram are potentially useful avenues for sharing factual information. One good example is a Viber chatbot introduced by the WHO, which allows users to request the latest data about the pandemic, as well as healthcare advice.
- **Preparing students to navigate information is a crucial long-term solution.** The coronavirus did not change disinformation methods and narratives, they just received a new coat of paint. Thus, if there had been political will, most Western states – including Hungary – could have been better prepared to combat fake news with dangerous public health and potential political implications. Thus, states should think about implementing media literacy training into school curricula, which can prove to be a moderately effective long-term solution to disinformation.
- **Teaching students about the basic characteristics of liberal democracy and international organizations.** Numerous disinformation narratives build on a general lack of knowledge about the operation of democratic societies, the free press and international organizations such as the EU and NATO. Consequently, educating students on these issues in a non-partisan

manner can be an essential aspect in protecting the population against information manipulation.

- **It is important to improve cooperation with tech giants on the European level and implement regulations that help slow the spread of disinformation online without harming the freedom of speech.** European institutions will have to accelerate plans to regulate social media companies' efforts to combat misinformation. European rules should be aimed at pushing social media companies to tune their algorithms to avoid the creation of "information bubbles" and make people see opinions that differ from their own.
- **Facebook should find official fact-checking partners for every language.** Even though coronavirus-related disinformation poses more threats to societies than manipulative claims on other issues, deceptive articles and posts continue to be highly prevalent on the social media giants' platforms. This is especially true in smaller languages, for which Facebook has no official fact-checkers. While the company has made progress, for instance they have an official fact-checker in the Czech Republic, some languages, such as Hungarian, are still not covered.
- **The EU and member states should spend more on independent journalism.** The EU should offer more resources to independent journalists, partly to cover European affairs more closely, bringing it closer to citizens. Fact-checking initiatives should also be supported as a potential resource for experts and journalists. The EU did launch several initiatives in the wake of COVID-19, but these will have to be maintained even after the epidemic is dealt with. Member states need to pour more resources into the training of journalists, primarily because information has become an essential aspect of politics and national security.
- **Anti-populist actors need to develop positive counter-narratives and disseminate them effectively.** Anti-populist forces in the EU and member states (democratic politicians, NGOs, civic initiatives, youth activists, public intellectuals, scholars) need to create positive narratives on what the Union and NATO are doing to help countries struggling with the crisis. In contrast, the particularities of Eastern aid (e.g., it is paid, it is available there because that is where PPE is being manufactured, quality concerns) must not be forgotten either. These statements have to be kept basic and understandable. The narratives have to be disseminated to the broadest possible layer of the population.
- **Cybersecurity is important.** European, national and local decision-makers should all receive cybersecurity training to prevent their online accounts from being hacked. Thus, instances when stolen official documents are manipulated and then published in the frames of disinformation campaigns could be avoided. Moreover, it is also important to teach the general population about cyber security issues so they do not fall victim to phishing attacks, which have become very prevalent during the current epidemic.
- **Private companies must avoid advertising on disinformation portals.** It is the responsibility of large companies to avoid advertising on portals spreading manipulative content because it can taint their reputation. Moreover, the successes of Eurosceptic, populist actors generally supported by these sites could be detrimental to their profitability if they get to implement their agenda on the European or national level.

Uncertainty is a fertile soil for disinformation

The coronavirus epidemic changed the lives of millions in V4 countries essentially overnight. Information on the COVID-19 outbreak is scarce: we know little about the virus itself and it is uncertain how our lives will look exactly until an effective vaccine is developed. The economic fallout of the

epidemic is also affecting wide layers of the V4 population. **Significant, unexpected events with long-lasting consequences provide a fertile soil to conspiracy theories and disinformation.**¹

The coronavirus has generated significant public attention in all corners of the Earth and the Visegrád states are no different. The first confirmed cases surfaced in the V4 in early March, which was followed by the introduction of severe social distancing measures. Consequently, local media have been following developments related to the outbreak closely ever since January and this only intensified once the first cases were confirmed in these countries in early March. Considering the strong demand for information on the virus and that defending against it became practically the only issue in local politics for months, conspiratorial, disinformation and hyper-partisan websites also started reporting frequently on the pandemic. These sites regularly offer oversimplified, deceptive explanations concerning the virus.

In this project, Political Capital and its partners from other V4 states (the Prague Security Studies Institute from the Czech Republic, the Slovak Institute for Public Affairs – IVO and Polish researchers from Sastre Consulting) aimed at mapping coronavirus-related disinformation narratives in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland with the help of SentiOne, a social media listening software. Our goal, first of all, was to see what sort of deceptive coronavirus-related claims the local population might come across on Facebook in the Visegrád States. We were looking for similarities and differences between manipulative information disseminated in the four media environments. Moreover, we wanted to compare the narratives we found to those spread internationally.

To conduct the research, we selected 15 disinformation and hyper-partisan Facebook portals in each V4 country. We aimed to pick a sample representative of local media outlets frequently spreading deceptive, manipulative information, disinformation or presenting facts in a highly bipartisan way. The local samples include a mix of government-controlled media, local populist politicians, sites backing the local opposition or populist actors, geopolitics-focused disinformation portals, conspiratorial sites, women's lifestyle pages and portals focusing on healthcare, vaccinations or esoteric content. **Due to the particularities of local media environments, such as the presence of mainstream government-controlled or dominated sites posting dubious content in Hungary and Poland, the quantitative data presented below is not directly comparable.** Mainstream portals, naturally, have considerably more resources than fringe sites, which enables the former to post considerably more frequently. **Regardless, the data can help us identify certain trends and draw a few important conclusions.**

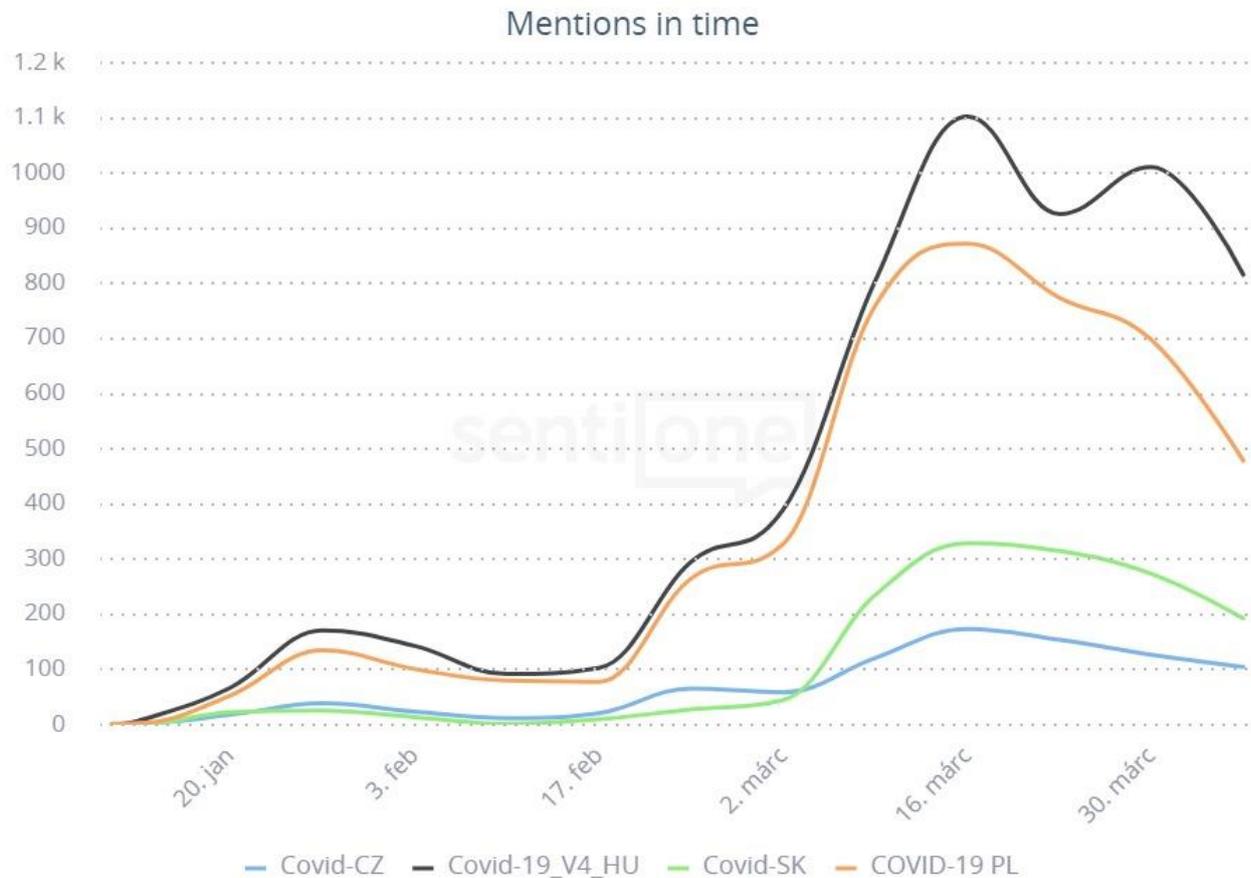
The social media listening software SentiOne was used to analyze the content published by these websites between 11 January, when Chinese researchers revealed the draft genome of the virus,² and 11 April. We used a set of keywords to restrict the results shown by the program to relevant content. The keyword combination we used was: (coronavirus* OR COVID OR epidemic OR ((China OR Wuhan)

¹ Szijjártó Rita, "Lelki szükséglet, hogy legyen egy globális terv a világ romba döntéséről," *24.hu*, April 4, 2020, <https://24.hu/kozelet/2020/04/04/koronavirus-osszeeskuves-elmelet-szocialpszichologia-konteo-kreko-peter/>.

² Jon Cohen, "Chinese Researchers Reveal Draft Genome of Virus Implicated in Wuhan Pneumonia Outbreak," *Science*, January 11, 2020, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/01/chinese-researchers-reveal-draft-genome-virus-implicated-wuhan-pneumonia-outbreak>.

AND virus).³ We restricted our search to Facebook posts, as the social media platform is generally a very important news source for the population in all Visegrád states.⁴

Moving with the demand

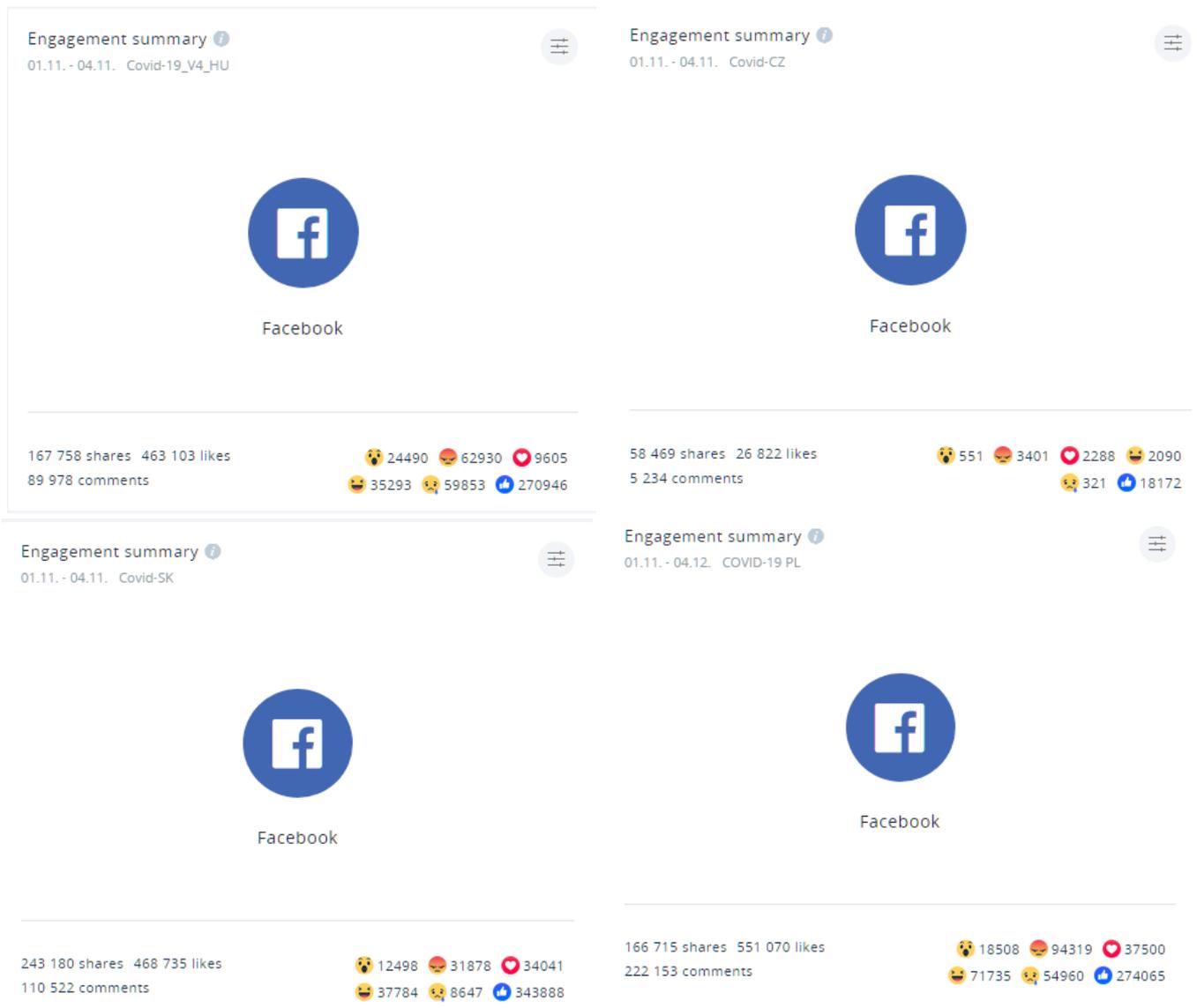


1. Figure Number of relevant FB posts over time in the V4 (weekly)

Figure 1 shows the number of FB posts published over time by the 15 portals in each V4 country. This confirms that in the two countries where government-influenced mainstream portals were selected (Hungary and Poland), the number of articles was considerably higher. The trends in terms of the number of weekly posts, however, show similarities. The first, smaller peak came in late January, when case numbers were growing rapidly in Wuhan, and then the number of posts skyrocketed once novel coronavirus cases were confirmed in the respective countries. Therefore, the number of articles moved with the perceived demand for COVID-related news. Consequently, the arrival of the second wave of the pandemic will likely prompt a large number of manipulative articles on the topic once again.

³ The asterisk after coronavirus was necessary to make the program show us the affixed forms of the word 'coronavirus' as well. The part ((China OR Wuhan) AND virus) was necessary because some sites referred to COVID-19 as the "China-virus" or the "Wuhan-virus". Some local specificities had to be taken into account as well: in Hungary, two spellings of Wuhan were used, so we had to add "Vuhan" to our keywords; in Slovakia, sites used the word 'pandemic' instead of 'epidemic' in general.

⁴ Nic Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019" (Reuters, 2019), https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf.



2. Figure Engagement summaries for Hungary (top left), Czech Republic (top right), Slovakia (bottom left) and the Poland (bottom right)

The total number of articles in the sample was 5,931 in Hungary, 4,628 in Poland, 1,556 in Slovakia and 923 in the Czech Republic. **This is a clear indication that in countries where a number of mainstream media outlets are involved in disseminating deceptive information, the supply side of disinformation can be considerably higher.**

It must be noted that not all of the articles in the sample contained disinformation; the vast majority of these articles were factual. **Only about 30% of the Hungarian sample, 7-8% of Slovak articles and about 20% in the Czech sample contained any misleading statements.** This could be explained by multiple reasons. First, some sites might have no interest in falsifying official data. Second, the (potentially) improved trust in authorities and science could deter some portals from spreading disinformation about the epidemic. According to an Ipsos poll in Hungary, scientists and the World Health Organization (WHO) enjoyed the trust of over 50% of the population, although the values fell from a higher base, by 5 and 11 percentage points, respectively, compared to April. In April, trust in local health authorities, governmental websites and the government was all over 40%, falling to 41,

39 and 32%, respectively, in May.⁵ Slovak polls have also shown a high level of trust in local authorities. Opinion polls in Slovakia indicated that the majority of the population expressed quite high level of trust in the ability of public institutions in combatting the coronavirus and massively supported all quarantine-type measures introduced by authorities. In a survey conducted in March 2020 by the MNFORCE company and the communication agency Seesame in cooperation with the Institute of Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Social Communication Research of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, trust in public institutions in the context of the coronavirus crisis was examined. The results showed that respondents trusted the health care system the most (almost three-quarters of respondents), almost two-thirds of respondents trusted scientific institutions, the military (62%) and the central crisis staff (62%). Almost half of the respondents trusted the government and the prime minister in the context of the corona-crisis.⁶ According to a survey conducted by the Slovak Actly polling agency in March 2020, there was strong public support for governmental measures related to health: the prevention of the spread of the disease (73%), measures to protect the elderly (66%), the functioning of health care (60%). The plan for the gradual relaxation of restrictions was supported by 59% of respondents.⁷

There is one potential reason specific to Hungary, where the police have investigated people spreading hoaxes about the virus – including some highly concerning examples. For instance, a 64-year-old man was detained for a government-critical Facebook post, saying that the government timed the easing of lockdown measures deliberately to a day after the peak of the epidemic.⁸ A local opposition politician in Gyula was detained for stating that over a thousand beds were freed in the local hospital. His post was reported to the police by the Fidesz-affiliated Gyula mayor.⁹ Both cases were closed swiftly without further action taken, but they could still encourage self-censorship among the general population. The law could have forced some Hungarian pages to take more caution regarding COVID-19 to avoid possibly losing their ad revenues, but it seemingly failed to have a detrimental effect on several others. The decision could also be the reason why some Hungarian portals (e.g., *Kimondott Igazságok*, *A Világ Titkai*) deleted conspiratorial articles on the coronavirus that they had posted in January and February.

Figure 2 shows the number of total engagements the articles received in the four countries. **The charts indicate that Slovak Facebook pages were the most successful in engaging their audience.** Despite the fact that the Slovak sample is less than one-third of the Hungarian one, the former generated more likes, shares and comments than Hungarian articles.

Looking at individual portals, it is clear that having more resources does not mean that a site can create engaging content. The number of engagements (likes, shares and comments) on the posts are important because they help the given message reach a wider audience on Facebook. Analyzing the total number of engagements per post on the selected sites supports this claim. In Hungary, the

⁵ "Tartósan megváltoztatta a járvány a mindennapjainkat, ezt mutatja az Ipsos felmérése," Infostart.hu, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://infostart.hu/belfold/2020/05/06/tartos-valtozast-hozott-a-jarvany-a-mindennapjainkban-ezt-mutatja-az-ipsos-felmerese>.

⁶ "Ako sa máte, Slovensko? Zdravotníctvu veríme, o očkovaní nie sme presvedčení." (sociologia.sav.sk, 2020), http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/cms/uploaded/3133_attach_TS_ASMS_April2020_2.pdf.

⁷ "BAROMETER POSTOJOV, SKÚSENOSTÍ A STRATÉGIÍ ĽUDÍ V ČASE PANDÉMIE" (Actly, 2020), http://www.actly.sk/uploads/Slovakia_Barometer_Pandemics_Wave1_01042020_Actly.pdf.

⁸ Zrt HVG Kiadó, "Reggel hatkor vitték el a rendőrök a 64 éves szerencsi facebookozót," hvg.hu, May 12, 2020, 6,

https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200512_Reggel_hatkor_mentek_a_rendorok_a_64_eves_szerencsi_facebookozoert.

⁹ plankog, "A Fideszes Polgármester Jelentette Fel a Gyulai Ellenzékit Rémhírterjesztés Miatt," 444, May 18, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/05/18/a-fideszes-polgarmester-jelentette-fel-a-gyulai-ellenzekit-remhirterjesztes-miatt>.

government-controlled Origo generated only 77.5 engagements per post, while several other pro-government pages¹⁰ and fringe websites achieved a better result, between 100 and 550. In Poland, the public broadcaster TVP achieved a very good result in comparison with other local sites, but the anti-vaccination page STOP NOP proved to be the most engaging with 961 total reactions per post. In Slovakia, extremist politicians' pages (far-left MP Ľuboš Blaha and far-right MEP Milan Uhrík), whose posts almost exclusively contained disinformation, generated by far the most reactions. In the Czech Republic, the four most popular websites were responsible for 75% of total engagements, and most of their individual posts, on average, were very engaging as well. It must be highlighted that – naturally – not all engagements, can be considered as a sign of support for the views stated in the given article.

In terms of publishing engaging posts, official Kremlin- and Beijing-backed sites did not do extraordinarily well. In Hungary, News Front – a site with presumed official connections to the Kremlin¹¹ – and China Radio International only generated 5,3 and 9,3 engagements per post, respectively. Meanwhile, the pro-Russian “Orosz Hírek” portal received almost 550 reactions per article. In Poland, neither Sputnik Poland, nor the local branch of China Radio International did well (22 and 11,9 engagements, respectively). Sputnik Czech Republic can be considered more successful (199,1 per post), but they were overtaken by several, often less popular portals. One of the reasons for the latter's relative success can be that Sputnik CZ is also aimed at informing the Slovak audience.

Overall, while more popular pages, naturally, reach more people and thus generate more total engagement in general, popularity, resources or topics covered do not seem to predict how engaging their individual posts can be. **There is one important conclusion that can be drawn: the narratives of foreign authoritarian actors, when spread directly, generate relatively low interest. However, local players ranging from conspiracy theorists through populist political forces to the local allies of Moscow and Beijing are much more successful in spreading narratives aligned with Russian and Chinese interests.**

The Kremlin, Beijing, populists, anti-vaxxers are all aboard the COVID-19 train

Before focusing on narratives in the V4, we must summarize the disinformation narratives spread internationally about the coronavirus by geopolitical actors, populist politicians and anti-vaccination groups.

Geopolitical chess: blaming the West

The East Stratcom Task Force of the European External Action Service has called attention to state sponsored coronavirus-related disinformation spread by Kremlin-backed media and Chinese actors ever since the early days of the crisis. The EEAS found that the number of articles published by the sites monitored by them jumped considerably in March, which matches the trends seen in the V4. The Task Force identified five highly popular narratives in the international context: (1) the US created the virus, (2) the EU failed to respond to the crisis, (3) the coronavirus is not serious, (4) the Covid-19 epidemic is a secret plan implemented by the global elites and (5) the coronavirus was made by

¹⁰ A distinction has to be made between government-controlled and pro-government pages in Hungary. Government-controlled pages belong to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) and are rumored to receive instructions on what to report on and how to approach these issues from the central administration. Pro-government portals are separate from KESMA but unequivocally back the government.

¹¹ Patrick Beuth et al., “Fake News: War without blood,” *Die Zeit*, February 26, 2017, sec. Digital, <https://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2017-02/bundestag-elections-fake-news-manipulation-russia-hacker-cyberwar/komplettansicht>.

NATO.¹² Reports of the task force indicate that the media outlets monitored by them started returning to their pre-COVID topics in mid-to-late May.

Russia sees the Covid-19 epidemic as another opportunity to sow discord in Western societies and erode trust in the Western institutional system and organizations, including liberal democracy, globalization, NATO and the EU. **The Kremlin also sees the crisis as a pretext to lobby for lifting sanctions against Russia.** Moscow is not subtle about the latter: a resolution proposed by Russia to the UN General Assembly called for abandoning unilateral sanctions without approval from the UN Security Council¹³ – and the international sanctions against Moscow have, in fact, not been approved by the Council. The Kremlin might also be hoping that the leaders of EU member states Russia delivered aid to would be more inclined to veto the sanctions policy implemented by Brussels in response to Russian activities in Ukraine.¹⁴

Beijing is not sitting idly either. An EP briefing notes that even Chinese officials are spreading misleading claims pinning the blame for the virus on the US or allegations that the epidemic was already in Italy in November 2019, before it surfaced in China. **China seeks to stop any actor from tying the coronavirus to the country and divert attention from the fact that they suppressed information about COVID-19 in the early stages of the outbreak. Moreover, the communist regime is trying to use the crisis to improve its lobbying power in EU institutions and member states**, proven by the fact that they seem to have been successful in forcing the EEAS to soften the language in one of their reports.¹⁵

The EU quickly became one of the main targets of the Kremlin. The window of opportunity to do this was created by the relatively slow reaction of European institutions and EU member states to the epidemic, not to mention the fact that initially European nation states were unwilling to coordinate and cooperate with each other to help Italy.¹⁶ Regardless of the fact that later the EU and its member states started playing an active role in combatting the crisis,¹⁷ pro-Kremlin narratives revealed by the EEAS continue to claim that the EU is not doing anything against the virus and thus the European population does not even need Brussels.¹⁸ Parallely, aid delivered by Russia, China or even Cuba to EU member states are praised regularly. The authoritarian states, allegedly, are helping where the Union failed for humanitarian reasons.¹⁹ Pro-Russian portals rarely report on issues with the quality

¹² "Repeating A Lie Does Not Make It True," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), April 9, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/repeating-a-lie-does-not-make-it-true/>.

¹³ "UN Calls for Scaling Up All Efforts to Confront Pandemic," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/04/20/world/europe/ap-un-virus-outbreak-un-resolution.html>.

¹⁴ Nicola Biondo, "Mosca Presenta Il Conto: Vuole Che l'Italia Le Dia Una Mano a Togliere Le Sanzioni," accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.linkiesta.it/2020/05/aiuti-russia-italia-coronavirus/amp/>.

¹⁵ "China Put Pressure on EU to Soften Coronavirus Disinformation Report," *POLITICO*, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/25/china-put-pressure-on-eu-to-soften-coronavirus-disinformation-report-207797>.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Braw, "The EU Is Abandoning Italy in Its Hour of Need," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/14/coronavirus-eu-abandoning-italy-china-aid/>.

¹⁷ "Overview of the Commission's Response," Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed April 29, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/overview-commissions-response_en.

¹⁸ "The European Project Is Dead, EU Is Incapable of Handling the Coronavirus Crisis," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/european-project-is-dead-eu-is-incapable-of-handling-the-coronavirus-crisis/>.

¹⁹ "The US and EU Put Profit before Health, Unlike the Socialist Countries That Are Helping Italy," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-us-and-eu-put-profit-before-health-unlike-the-socialist-countries-that-are-helping-italy/>.

of Russian²⁰ or Chinese²¹ aid, and when they do, they simply attack those who did raise such concerns, for instance by accusing them of “Russophobia.”²²



3. Figure "China, Cuba, Russia: human solidarity." Source: <https://twitter.com/timand2037/status/1242735522780524544/photo/1>

Allegations spread by Chinese officials are also repeated by international pro-Kremlin media. They claim, for instance, that the virus was developed and released by the United States:²³ the epidemic could have been started by the USAID²⁴ or the US military at the Military World Games in Wuhan.²⁵

²⁰ The Moscow Times, “80% of Russia’s Coronavirus Aid to Italy ‘Useless’ – La Stampa,” The Moscow Times, March 26, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/26/80-of-russias-coronavirus-aid-to-italy-useless-la-stampa-a69756>.

²¹ Keith Bradsher, “China Delays Mask and Ventilator Exports After Quality Complaints,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2020, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/business/china-mask-exports-coronavirus.html>.

²² “The Italian Newspaper ‘La Stampa’ Spreads Russophobic Fake News on Russian Coronavirus Aid to Italy,” *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-italian-newspaper-la-stampa-spreads-russophobic-fake-news-on-russian-coronavirus-aid-to-italy/>.

²³ “Coronavirus Is an American Instrument of Biological War,” *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-is-an-american-virus-that-got-out-of-hands/>.

²⁴ “USAID Is a CIA-Affiliated Terror Group That Created the Coronavirus,” *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/usaid-is-a-cia-affiliated-terror-group-that-created-the-coronavirus/>.

²⁵ “Coronavirus Is Definitely an Act of American Warfare,” *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-definitely-an-american-warfare/>.

Washington's alleged goal was to weaken China²⁶ and mobilize NATO against Russia.²⁷ Bill Gates,²⁸ gay marriage,²⁹ the media and big pharma,³⁰ and the global elites were also blamed for the virus, who, among others, wanted to introduce "total societal control" with the virus.³¹ While some of these narratives described the coronavirus as a serious threat, others claimed that it is a fake designed to force vaccination and dictatorship³² on people. Several articles claimed that there are easily accessible treatments for the virus, such as vitamin C or zinc, instead of special antivirus medicine or vaccination.³³

While the EU has very limited healthcare competences, it will be able to play a key role in economic recovery after the pandemic. In this regard, the swift agreement in the European Council on the next Multiannual Financial Framework and the Next Generation EU package was a crucial step, although the process is not finished yet, as it needs the consent of the European Parliament and national legislatures. Another important aspect of the recovery process will be how nation states will utilize European funding. A failure to help boost the European economy would open new gates to foreign and domestic disinformation efforts, and potentially make the local population and political forces turn increasingly to the East, particularly China, to help counter the economic effects of the pandemic.

New arguments against migration

The migration crisis that has thematized the European public discourse since 2015 contrasted humanitarian and national security related considerations. COVID-19 added public health concerns into the equation. Anti-immigration political forces that had focused on arguments strictly restricted to national security now include public health concerns as a reason for rejecting immigration. French activists have been demanding that non-white populations are sent back to their "home" in light of the crisis, while Marine Le Pen lashed out on Mosques for allegedly "taking advantage of the confinement orders."³⁴

The case in Italy is similar. Since January, former Italian Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini has been demanding since January to seal the country's borders because immigrants could spread the disease

²⁶ "The Washington Establishment Attacked China with the Coronavirus: Russia Is the next Target," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-washington-establishment-attacked-china-with-the-coronavirus-russia-is-the-next-target/>.

²⁷ "NATO Uses COVID-19 to Mobilise Western Military Forces against Russia," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-uses-the-covid-19-to-mobilize-western-military-forces-against-russia/>.

²⁸ "Covid-19 Vaccines Are a Big Pharma Fraud Led by Bill Gates," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), 19, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-vaccines-big-pharma-fraud-bill-gates/>.

²⁹ "One Cause of Coronavirus: Gay Marriage," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/one-cause-of-coronavirus-gay-marriage/>.

³⁰ "Coronavirus: Western Media in Cahoots with Big Pharma Ignore Successful Treatment with Vitamin C in China," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-western-media-in-cahoots-with-big-pharma-ignore-successful-treatment-with-vitamin-c-in-china/>.

³¹ "Governments Are Fiddling with the Numbers to Exaggerate the Death Toll of the Coronavirus," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/governments-are-fiddling-with-the-numbers-to-exaggerate-the-death-toll-of-the-coronavirus/>.

³² "Force Vaccination, Forcing Brain Debilitating Agents, Will Be Introduced as the Coronavirus Pandemic Is Declared," *EU vs DISINFORMATION* (blog), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/force-vaccination-forcing-brain-debilitating-agents-will-be-introduced-as-the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-declared/>.

³³ "Zinc Could Help Kill Coronavirus" (EU East Stratcom Task Force, n.d.), <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=zinc&date=>.

³⁴ "Conspiracy Bingo': Transatlantic Extremists Seize on the Pandemic," *POLITICO*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/far-right-conspiracy-theorists-coronavirus-covid19-pandemic-lockdown-protests/>.

there. He even demanded that Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte resigns because he allowed a ship with asylum-seekers on board to dock in the country. Salvini said that it is irresponsible to let migrants enter Europe because there were active cases in Africa, although it was only a single case at the time.³⁵ Some anti-migration attacks are now directed towards the Chinese, as numerous far-right sites blame China for deliberately starting the epidemic.³⁶

How does it affect anti-vaxxers?

Anti-vaccination movements have been in the crosshairs since the start of the epidemic. US President Donald Trump, a vaccine skeptic, has been very hopeful that the coronavirus vaccine is ready as soon as possible. Celebrities or politicians who continue to spread anti-vaccination views are criticized by their followers. Anti-vaccination movements reacted to the crisis by minimizing the seriousness of the virus: the Oregonians for Healthcare Choice group argued that the goal of hysteria concerning the pandemic is to take away people's right to reject vaccinations, while an article of Greed Med Info even questions the existence of the virus. The Weston A. Price Foundation claimed hygiene-related recommendations are "bad."³⁷

The virus has had a potentially negative effect on anti-vaccination movements in some countries so far; it seems to have made some anti-vaxxers question their views. France 24 compared two polls:³⁸ in 2018, one-third of French respondents said vaccinations were unsafe, but a recent survey showed that only 18% of the population would reject a vaccine for COVID-19. In Italy, according to virologist Dr. Roberto Burioni, the anti-vax movement "essentially disappeared."

However, this is not the case elsewhere. In the US, numerous anti-lockdown protests had connections to anti-vaccination groups, like the Freedom Angels Foundation.³⁹ Additionally, a US survey found that only 38% of vaccine sceptics and 56% of self-identified vaccination opponents would get a COVID-19 vaccine, compared to 77% of all Americans. Researchers say that if enough citizens forego administering the vaccine, herd immunity would not be reached. Thus, anti-vaccination views will continue to pose a public health threat. A new group, the so-called "anti-maskers" emerged, who are using very similar tactics to anti-vax groups, threatening public health efforts.⁴⁰

Even if it was harmed initially by the pandemic in some places, the anti-vaccination movement will be more active than ever in trying to discredit any coronavirus vaccine. **The Russian coronavirus vaccine, the first registered, could even strengthen their cause.** The vaccine has not been tested properly, and if it proves to be inefficient or cause serious side-effects, it could be a blessing in disguise for anti-vaxxers.

³⁵ Lorenzo Tondo, "Salvini Attacks Italy PM over Coronavirus and Links to Rescue Ship," *The Guardian*, February 24, 2020, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/24/salvini-attacks-italy-pm-over-coronavirus-and-links-to-rescue-ship>.

³⁶ "Conspiracy Bingo."

³⁷ Kiera Butler, "'A Fake Pandemic': Anti-Vaxxers Are Spreading Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories.," *Mother Jones* (blog), accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/03/a-fake-pandemic-antivaxxers-are-spreading-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories/>.

³⁸ "Covid-19 Pandemic Gives 'Anti-Vaxxers' Pause," France 24, April 11, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200411-covid-19-pandemic-gives-anti-vaxxers-pause>.

³⁹ Olivia Goldhill, "Coronavirus Hasn't Killed the Anti-Vax Movement," Quartz, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://qz.com/1850409/coronavirus-hasnt-killed-the-anti-vax-movement/>.

⁴⁰ Nicole Irel, "Anti-Masking Groups Draw from Anti-Vaccination Playbook to Spread Misinformation | CBC News," CBC, July 27, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/anti-masking-group-tied-to-anti-vaccination-covid-19-1.5661790>.

Similar tunes are played in the V4

The selected portals in the V4 have covered a wide range of issues related to the coronavirus epidemic, most of which are prevalent internationally as well. The narratives they disseminate can be categorized in the following groups: (1) domestic political debates concerning crisis management; (2) the failure of the EU to handle the crisis and the success of the East; (3) geopolitical issues, primarily concerning the origins of the virus; (4) conspiracy theories about the global elites; (5) public health.

Deepening societal divisions

Domestic political debates were mainly prevalent in Hungary and Poland, where the sample included government-influenced and pro-opposition portals. In Hungary, the early debates focused on whether migration would play a part in spreading the crisis, as the first cases in Hungary involved Iranian students returning from home. Hungarian MEP Donáth Anna told ATV she could not believe PM Orbán's luck when it was revealed that the first cases were not Hungarian citizens. She was promptly labelled as "anti-Hungarian."⁴¹ The Hungarian government emphasized regularly in early March that protecting the border is more important than ever, as illegal immigrants – most of whom allegedly pass through Iran on the way to the EU – could carry COVID-19 into the continent.

Debates in Hungary then moved onto the government's authorization law allowing the government to rule by decree in certain policy fields and crisis management efforts. Pro- and anti-government sites provided a black-and-white view of the situation, only supporting their own side and the other "tribe" could never get anything right. The Hungarian opposition was consistently labelled as "traitors," stating that – as Speaker of the House László Kövér put it – "this opposition is not part of the Hungarian nation."⁴² Portals backing the ruling party also continued spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories concerning George Soros, who is allegedly behind (almost) all international and domestic critiques of Budapest. Soros continued to be portrayed as someone with deep influence among European officials and a person who also controls the domestic opposition. Parallely, left-wing opinion portals, while formulating legitimate criticism, added highly emotional, unfounded comments to their articles, such as calling for pro-government politicians to answer in The Hague for allocating HUF 1.95 billion for the International Eucharistic Conference during the crisis.⁴³

⁴¹ "Azért Ez Így Erős.," accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/593694810822277/posts/1346088182249599>.

⁴² "Kövér László „megfejtette”: az ellenzék nem a magyar nemzet része « Mérce," Mérce, April 29, 2020, <https://merce.hu/2020/04/29/kover-laszlo-megfejtette-az-ellenzek-nem-a-magyar-nemzet-resze/>.

⁴³ It is unclear who the post refers to exactly, but either PM Viktor Orbán or Deputy PM Zsolt Semjén.

In Poland, much of the domestic political coverage by pro-PiS (*TVP, wSieci*) and anti-PiS (*Nie Lubię PiS-u, Mam Dość PiS-u*) media focused on attacking each other ahead of the planned presidential election. Pro-PiS pages emphasized the government's successes in handling the crisis, sometimes with manipulative data. For instance, on one chart they showed Poland as the country with the highest number of tests conducted, but failing to disclose that they use different reference dates for different countries (18 March for Belgium and 29 March for Poland).



4. Figure The misleading data presented by TVP

Anti-PiS pages, which often disseminate content from the popular news site *Crodmmedia.pl* that has a clear anti-government bias, did not publish clearly manipulative narratives, but aimed at weaponizing the crisis. Their posts criticized the PiS leaders for defying lockdown measures to attend a ceremony commemorating the Smolensk crash and the government for taking excessive powers.

The claims made by pro- and anti-government portals in Hungary and Poland are concerning because they only serve to deepen societal divisions that had already been present before the epidemic, and which are often generated artificially by local political actors. However, there is a potentially more concerning "strain" among domestic political narratives, which could raise doubts about necessary measures to maintain social distancing.

The Polish conspiratorial page *Starożytni Kosmici* and the anti-vaccination page *STOP NOP* published 13 articles claiming that the government's emergency powers are proof that COVID-19 is a pretext for elites to impose total control over society. Polish-language conspiratorial sites on one occasion claimed that Italians are setting fire to 5G masts to get rid of the coronavirus, while the PiS is installing them as people are sitting at home. In the Czech Republic, articles questioning the severity and impact of COVID-19 were also used to criticize the government's restrictions.



5. Figure 'Italians are fighting Coronavirus, getting rid of 5G towers! PiS installs 5G and says: "stay at home!"'

It is simple: The EU failed; the East succeeded

Contrasting the EU's and Western governments' actions in managing the crisis with those of Eastern authoritarian regimes was a prevalent topic in all four Visegrád states.

The basic underlying narratives concerning the EU were quite similar in the V4. The EU's initial slow reaction to the crisis and member states' unwillingness to help Italy opened a window of opportunity to disseminate anti-EU narratives. The articles in the V4 sample claim that the EU is idle in the crisis and even hindered crisis management efforts of member states. This served as proof that globalization is over and nation-states are much more effective in dealing with problems than international institutions.

Hungarian portals said that the European Center for Disease Control's (ECDC) report on 14 February, in which it stated that there is a low risk of contracting the coronavirus in Europe, showed the EU's lack of preparedness. Another text quoted Marine Le Pen, who said the EU gave "deadly instructions." EPP chairman Donald Tusk was attacked because he "admitted" that the EU acted slowly but wanted to "punish" everyone who said so.⁴⁴ Portals in the country were upset at Brussels for deciding to monitor the Orbán government's authorization law and because it did not provide Hungary with any financial assistance. While the Hungarian government's anti-EU narratives served the purpose of making a scapegoat out of the Union for the population's upcoming economic hardships, the Polish ruling party attacked the EU to mobilize its electorate for the presidential elections. Hungarian pro-government media also actively spread claims that Western states, and in particular Sweden, are

⁴⁴ "Akik Arról Mernek Beszélni, Hogy Az EU Nem Tesz Semmit, Még Akkor Is Ha Ez Így van, Azok Meg Lesznek Büntetve! Világos? Azé! Az EU-t Csak Szeretni Lehet. Na!," accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/593694810822277/posts/1357840201074397>.

mishandling the coronavirus epidemic, while Eastern European countries and non-EU authoritarian regimes are doing a good job at it.

In Slovakia, one of the main anti-European actors was ĽSNS MEP Milan Uhrík, publishing several articles on his FB profile, in *Hlavné správy* and *Extra Plus*. In one of his posts, he called the EU's response a "shame" and stated that "The EU is doing nothing again! While in China they built a hospital 10 days, here in Brussel they just poured another coffee into a cup in that time"⁴⁵ The MEP said Brussels was "crazy" because it wanted to resettle migrants from Greece to other EU member states, while Europeans cannot even move in their own cities.⁴⁶ The *Slobodný výber* raised doubts about EU cooperation by alleging that German police confiscated a truck with medical supplies bound for Prague.⁴⁷ In the Czech Republic, articles argued that member states are better equipped to deal with the crisis, implying that Prague would be better off outside of the European Union.

These claims were in stark contrast to narratives about the generous help of Russia and China, but in some instances even Cuba. Most portals in the V4 sample focused on the delivery of protective medical equipment by Russia to Italy, as well as national acquisitions of such products. Multiple posts summarized the contrast created by these two parallel narratives in simple sentences: "China and Russia helped, Brussels did not"⁴⁸ or "Apart from Russia, Italy was supported by China and Cuba. And what about EU member states?"⁴⁹ – they claimed. The Hungarian government uses this narrative to justify its pro-East foreign policy orientation, and several pro-government portals are reporting on every single shipment arriving to Hungary from China and Turkic Council members. The fact that Budapest actually paid for the Chinese equipment never came up in these reports, making Beijing look more like a charity than a business partner. In Poland, Moscow-backed media argued against anti-Russia sanctions, which exacerbated the current economic crisis, so they should be lifted to allow countries to cope with the pandemic more effectively.

⁴⁵ *KORONAVÍRUS: Hanba EÚ, ktorá nekoná, len tára*, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/193258414360612/posts/1090093254677119>.

⁴⁶ "BRUSEL IDE DÁVAŤ VRECKOVÉ A PLATIŤ HOTELY IMIGRANTOM. A ČO PÔVODNÍ EURÓPANIA?!", accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/193258414360612/posts/1108445949508516>.

⁴⁷ "Nemecko Aktuálne 'Grajflo' Ochranné Pomôcky Aj Českej Republike...", accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/137730750182495/posts/565014224120810>.

⁴⁸ "Köszönjük! És Az EU? Nem Segít Semmit!", accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/290353684405462/posts/2835947883179350>.

⁴⁹ "Oprócz Rosji, #Włochy Wsparty Także #Chiny i #Kuba. A Co z Państwami #UE?," accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/998778393644558/posts/1336385536550507>.



6. Figure "Thank you! And the EU? It is not helping at all"

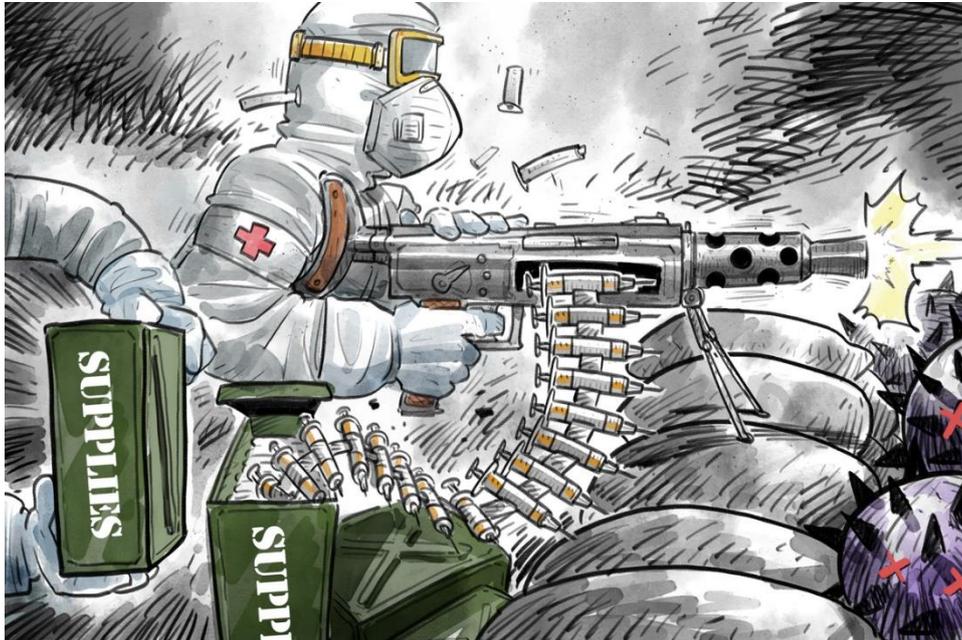
In Slovakia, Milan Uhrík asked what those “bad” Russians are doing, answering his own question by praising Moscow for sending aid to Italy – which will only be rewarded by the EU by maintaining the “nonsensical” sanctions against the country.⁵⁰ Far-left actors in Slovakia, meanwhile, were active in praising China for its successful handling of the crisis and aid to Europe. They quickly declared the “communist miracle’s” victory over the coronavirus. Former Slovak Communist Party vice-chair Karol Ondriaš mocked the “dilettantism” of democratically elected leaders in responding to the coronavirus despite that they had had all the necessary data from China. *Hlavné správy* even said that the West would “sacrifice” their older population.⁵¹ Another far-left politician, *Ľuboš Blaha* accused Slovak politicians criticizing China of “treason,” adding that it is the US that treats Europe as an enemy, while China helps. The same narratives were present in the Czech Republic, where it was also mentioned that Bratislava successfully acquired medical support from Moscow, while Prague could not.

Official Chinese media in Hungary and Poland were active in promoting Chinese assistance to Europe and other countries and praising its own responses to the crisis. The Hungarian branch once mentioned that European political systems were less effective in responding to COVID-19 than that of China. CRI Poland declared Beijing a global leader in responding to the crisis. However, in general,

⁵⁰ “Aha, Čo Robia Tí ‘Zlí’ Rusi!?” accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/193258414360612/posts/1100480770305034>.

⁵¹ Heureka Evolution, “Dva diametrálne odlišné prístupy v čelení koronavírusu v Európe. Dva rozdielne výsledky. Zvládnu ľudia ich brutálny dopad?,” *Hlavné správy*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/dva-diametralne-pristupy-celeni-koronavirusu-europe-dva-rozdielne-vysledky-zvladnu-ludia-brutalny-dopad/2088530>.

China Radio International did not attack the European Union directly, it rather focused on depicting itself as a reliable partner for European institutions and its member states. In contrast, the US is attacked regularly for exacerbating the situation, for instance by suspending funding to the WHO, and for focusing on blaming the epidemic on China instead of managing the crisis.



7. Figure "Countering the global agony of COVID-19. Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/13/WS5e6aeb2ca31012821727ed3c.html>

Playing the blame game

Geopolitical narratives were more divergent in the V4. That said, the question of the virus's origins was an important issue in almost all countries from the very beginning of the reporting period. There are two competing narratives in this regard: one set of articles suggests that COVID-19 is a US-made biological weapon, while another claims it is something that escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan. Later, in some articles, it was noted that the Wuhan lab had some connections to the United States or Bill Gates.



8. Figure Post promoting the theory that COVID-19 is from a Chinese laboratory

In Hungary, several articles claiming that the US attacked China with the virus to crush its economy or stating that it escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan surfaced in January and February. However, most of these articles were deleted, which might be the consequence of police action taken against COVID-19 related fake news. However, the narratives did not disappear: Pro-Russian sites and China Radio International continued spreading such claims, stating that the virus was developed by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR). The virus was then released in the frames of Washington's hybrid war on China.⁵² The "zero patient" was allegedly in the US because Robert Redfield, head of the Center for Disease Control, told Congress that the cause of death of some earlier flu patients was re-diagnosed as COVID-19.⁵³

Some pro-government and pro-Russian portals reported on Ukraine in the context of the coronavirus. They highlighted that Ukrainians – due to a fake letter released in the name of the Ministry of Health, which they forgot to mention – attacked their compatriots taken home from China.⁵⁴ Kyiv was criticized for allegedly intensifying its military activities in the Donbas.⁵⁵ One text connected well-known COVID-19 and anti-Ukraine narratives: Ukrainian authorities arrested a woman and accused

⁵² Sándor Csikós, "ENSZ-szakértő: a COVID-19 koronavírus egy amerikai „boszorkánykonyhán” készült," *Orosz Hírek* (blog), March 26, 2020, <https://oroszhirek.hu/2020/03/26/ensz-szakerto-a-covid-19-koronavirus-egy-amerikai-boszorkanykonyhan-keszult/>.

⁵³ Sándor.

⁵⁴ "Az Ukránok Kicsit Érzékenyebbek a Majdan Évfordulójának Idején," accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/593694810822277/posts/1328986897293061>.

⁵⁵ "Kijev a közeljövőben megpróbálja visszaszerezni a Donbasszt," Tájékoztató ügynökség, April 13, 2020, <https://hu.news-front.info/2020/04/14/kijev-a-kozeljovoben-megprobalja-visszaszerezni-a-donbasszt/>.

her of separatism because she claimed that the virus was a US biological weapon.⁵⁶ Some Polish sites in the sample portrayed Ukraine as a country pushed into a deep crisis in the wake of the corona-crisis.

Polish-language Facebook pages, mainly state-sponsored Russian and Chinese media, focused on economic issues, mainly the drop in oil prices and raising unemployment. One Sputnik story blames the US for falling oil prices, describing it as political blackmail.⁵⁷ These narratives suggest that Russia is trying to shape the discourse to deflect its responsibility in the oil price war with Saudi Arabia.

Sputnik Poland and some local conspiracy channels took aim at NATO and Western security. Sputnik presented the possibility of COVID-19 preventing the Defender Europe 20 military exercise from taking place as a sign of NATO's weakness. Slovak MEP Milan Uhrík criticized the US for wanting to organize the "most massive" military exercise amidst the epidemic.⁵⁸ A few articles tried to present NATO troops as a public health threat because they allegedly spread the coronavirus. Moreover, Sputnik speculated that Poland would decide against going through with its purchase of F-35 jets due to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

⁵⁶ "Ukrajnában egy szót se az amerikai gyártmányú koronavírusról!," Tájékoztató ügynökség, March 25, 2020, <https://hu.news-front.info/2020/03/25/ukrajnaban-egy-szot-se-az-amerikai-gyartmanyu-koronavirusrol/>.

⁵⁷ "Międzynarodowi ekonomiści przewidują zwycięstwo Rosji w wojnie naftowej," accessed May 13, 2020, <https://pl.sputniknews.com/opinie/2020031012066336-miedzynarodowi-ekonomisci-przewiduja-zwyciestwo-rosji-w-wojnie-naftowej-sputnik/>.

⁵⁸ "Aha, Čo Robia Tí 'Zlí' Rusi!?"



Milan Uhrík - europoslanec

Március 23. · 🌐

Aha, čo robia tí "zlí" Rusi!? Posielajú do európskych štátov zdravotnícku pomoc, hoci by nemuseli, a hoci vedia, že únia sa im za to odvráči zase len nezmyselnými sankciami. Čína tiež posielala lekárske tímy a vybavenie, hoci západ sa jej neskôr zase odvráči len kritikou o "nedodržiavanie ľudských práv". A čo robia tí "dobrí", naši akože spojenci? Brusel kritizuje uzatváranie hraníc medzi členskými štátmi, Nemci doslova kradnú menším krajinám zdravotnícky materiál a USA si tu chceli ešte pred pár dňami organizovať najmasívnejšie vojenské cvičenie Defender 2020. Neschopnosť rozmazaného západu zvládnuť akúkoľvek krízu (demografickú, imigračnú, kultúrnu, vírusovú) je proste šokujúca. Aj preto som presvedčený, že súčasné západné štáty v dlhodobom horizonte jednoducho nemajú šancu prežiť...

Fordítás megtekintése



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9. Figure Oh, what are those "bad" Russians doing!? Source:
<https://www.facebook.com/193258414360612/posts/1100480770305034>

In Slovakia, as in Hungary, the alleged US origins of the virus was the dominant topic within this group. Slovak MP *Luboš Blaha* claimed that wherever the Western media discourse is not dominant, there is a serious discussion about Washington being responsible for the epidemic. *Zem a Vek* presented "evidence" that the virus originates from the US: "the United States is the only country in the world where all five types of the virus have been discovered. In Chinese Wuhan only one of these types has

been discovered.” This allegedly indicates that “the coronavirus does not originate in China, but in the US.”⁵⁹

Czech portals in the sample, as well as one Polish article, claimed on several occasions that the virus was to blame on Western states, mainly Germany, because they contributed to its spread by disregarding health risks and enforcing their ideologically-driven migration policy.

A virus to create a new world order

Other COVID-19 related conspiracy theories also started from the assumption that the virus was created artificially. They generally claimed that certain groups, such as the global elite, the remnants of the ancient Turkic people called the Khazars,⁶⁰ financial institutions or big pharma released the virus to build a new world order, establish total control over societies or gain huge profits. The pandemic, they say, is a logical product of globalization and, thus, the consequence of the actions of the global elite and their agents.

In Hungary, several of such conspiracies were being disseminated in January and February, but most of these posts have been deleted, potentially due to the fact that Hungarian authorities took legal steps against coronavirus-related disinformation as early as February. Nevertheless, such claims did not disappear completely. One narrative, which started spreading in late March, essentially merged all well-known conspiracies into one: they noted that Angela Merkel visited Wuhan in October 2019, which the “global media” did not report on, the laboratory from which the virus started is owned by the US, the Gates foundation was also involved in the work of that laboratory, a simulation was held in New York modelling the spread of a virus causing pneumonia, and Netflix published its series entitled ‘Pandemic’ in January 2020. 5G was singled out as something that could help the spread of the virus, proven by the fact – among others – that Wuhan was a city used to test such networks.

⁵⁹ “ĎALŠIE DÔKAZY, ŽE VÍRUS VZNIKOL V USA,” accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/169743946509938/posts/1628209147330070>.

⁶⁰ In several cases, the use of the word “Khazar” can be attributed to anti-Semites, who use the term for contemporary Jews to put in doubt in connection with Palestine. One example for this is the Slovak Zem a Vek. Thus, the Turkic origins of this group might be irrelevant in numerous cases.



10. Figure Shocking coincidences surrounding the coronavirus: do we really believe it? Source: <https://www.facebook.com/167654416661674/posts/2901684096592012>

In Poland, despite the fact that such narratives were being disseminated by niche conspiratorial pages, similar conspiracy theories generated considerable engagement, especially when lockdown measures were being tightened. The narratives in this group are not based on facts, instead, they are built on each other, connected chaotically through invented theories. One page claimed that Bill Gates and other members of the global elite wanted to use the crisis to implant people with mind-controlling chips. Event 201 was also cited as evidence that Gates had something to do with the coronavirus. 5G-related theories played an important role in Poland. These theories hold that 5G will be used to control the global population through chips implanted into people, to make them “similar to computer terminals.”⁶¹ Another page discussed the involvement of Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who will allegedly ensure that citizens only travel to government-sanctioned destinations in electric cars. 5G was also singled out for playing a role in spreading the virus by influencing human cells.

⁶¹ “KONSPIRACYJNOŚĆ CORONAVIRUSA: JAK COVID-19 WYKORZYSTUJE TWOJE PRAWA I ZNISZCZY NASZĄ GOSPODARKE,” accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/957673550987957/posts/2793789057376388>.



11. Figure Post claiming that "Italians are fighting Coronavirus, getting rid of 5G towers! PiS installs 5G and says 'stay at home'"

In Slovakia, *Zem a Vek* was very active in spreading conspiracy theories about the virus, saying that it is an artificial phenomenon and will stop when the media will stop to inform about it. According to the magazine, the coronavirus validates their previous warnings about the insidious intentions of the global elite. They also quoted David Icke, who argued that "the ultimate goal is to implement the system predicted by George Orwell in the famous novel of 1984."⁶² Bill Gates was a target as well, resulting in claims that Bill and Melinda Gates are financing vaccine research and want to make money off compulsory global vaccination or they want to microchip people with their vaccines. Moreover, the pair allegedly have considerable influence over the WHO, which they used to make the institution declare a coronavirus pandemic. Czech articles claimed that total societal control will be realized through increasing internet usage, which allows for a more effective way to manipulate people. Bill Gates was also targeted by Czech-language content, saying he wants to capitalize on the virus through his connections with the pharmaceutical industry.

Healthcare-related narratives: a new public health threat?

There were a wide range of healthcare-related claims in all V4 states, mostly concerning the severity of the virus, vaccinations and other treatments.

In Hungary, left-wing opinion blogs tried to exploit the Hungarian population's concerns about the healthcare sector. They claimed, among others, that the Hungarian healthcare system would collapse if the virus hit Hungary hard or that the government's inaction meant that 12.5% of COVID-19 cases in Hungary are healthcare workers. However, in the first case, the claim made was more of an

⁶² "David Icke: Koronavírus Je Podvod Elít," accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/169743946509938/posts/1631781670306151>.

emotional statement of opinion rather than something factual, while in the second case, no context was given to explain that this value is not particularly high in an international comparison.

Other Hungarian portals were focusing on making claims that the virus is not really worse than the common flu, while the food industry is selling foodstuffs that are real “silent killers.”⁶³ A portal advocating “natural treatments” to a wide range of health problems said people should not panic because more people die in cardiac arrest than in the virus, but – nonetheless – as a supplementary option to help fight the coronavirus, they should drink “virus killer” mixes.⁶⁴ Some wild claims circulated about other coronavirus treatments as well, including news about a modified sugar molecule being able to stop the virus or that there is already a medicine that could stop it, but it might not be in the interest of the pharmaceutical lobby to allow its use. News Front joined in with Ramzan Kadyrov’s advice of eating garlic and drinking water with lemon and honey, which is supposedly an effective way to protect oneself against COVID-19.⁶⁵ Other sites promoted vitamins as a factor that could help protecting ourselves from the virus, referring to the opinion of Dr. Lenkei,⁶⁶ who is actually selling his ‘Dr. Lenkei’ vitamins on his own website. Anti-vaccination narratives generally focused on claims that the epidemic is used to introduce forced vaccination or microchip people, but claims openly debating the effectiveness or necessity of COVID-19 vaccination are not prevalent in our sample. Nevertheless, the narratives discrediting the intentions of those who manufacture the vaccines can also have a very negative effect on the perception of the vaccine, potentially prompting citizens to refrain from getting vaccinated. The importance of Vitamin C in preventing the virus was an important topic on various sites, including the government-controlled *Origo*.⁶⁷

Claims that the coronavirus does not exist were popular in Poland. *STOP NOP* quoted a German doctor as saying that the pandemic is fake, while other articles discussed a cover-up. Various texts suggested that the virus is not worse than a common flu.

⁶³ Figyelő Világ, “Sokkal nagyobb veszély fenyegeti a Magyar nemzetet mint a koronavírus: az agy csendes gyilkosai már rég az élelmiszerekben vannak?!” *Vírus Figyelő* (blog), March 5, 2020, <https://vilagfigyelo.com/elbutitjak-a-nemzetet-az-agy-csendes-gyilkosai-mar-reg-az-elelmiszerekben-vannak/>.

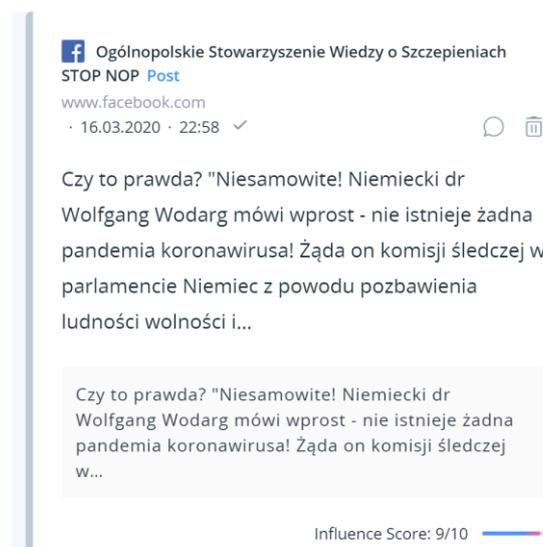
⁶⁴ “Vírusölő Gyógynövények És Fűszerek Az Ájurvédában...,” accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/504538486240821/posts/3238357302858912>.

⁶⁵ “Fejezzétek be a pánikolást! Igyatok citromos vizet mézzel, meg egyetek fokhagymát! – fakadt ki a csecsenek vezére,” Tájékoztató ügynökség, March 15, 2020, <https://hu.news-front.info/2020/03/15/fejezzetek-be-a-panikolast-igyatok-citromos-vizet-mezzel-meg-egyetek-fokhagymat-fakadt-ki-a-csecsenek-vezere/>.

⁶⁶ “A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Professzora Is Kiállt a Vitaminok Fontossága Mellett a Koronavírus Elleni Küzdelemben...,” accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/106949797465562/posts/143864107107464>.

⁶⁷ Origo, “Elfeledkezünk róla, hogy így is harcolhatunk a járvány ellen,” <https://www.origo.hu/>, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.origo.hu/tafelpicc/20200409-zolseg-es-gyumlcsfogyasztással-megerositheto-az-immunrendszer.html>.

Top mentions ⓘ
11.01 - 12.04 COVID-19 PL



12. Figure "Is it true? 'Amazing! German Dr. Wolfgang Wodarg says simply - there is no coronavirus pandemic! He demands a committee of inquire in the German Parliament for depriving people of their freedom"

In Slovakia, the anti-vaccination online platform *Sloboda v očkovaní* presented the situation in the context of the global movement against compulsory vaccination. The platform theorizes that it might not be a coincidence that the pandemic came precisely at the moment when an anti-vaccination protest was to be organized in Munich. The outlet concludes that "It is undeniable that the coronavirus epidemic came on stage at a crucial time when people around the world opposed to the power of international financial institutions and multinational pharmaceutical companies, which – and this is no longer a secret – held by the governments of the nation-states in mortal embracement."⁶⁸ Several Slovak portals revealed "information" about various COVID-19 treatment. They claimed that Vitamin C was highly important in preventing the illness, and it was very important that Wuhan received a humanitarian shipment of "L-ascorbic acid."⁶⁹ Articles criticize the "Western pharmaceutical system" for suppressing information on safe, cheap drugs used to treat coronavirus patients. One of such drugs is Vitamin C, which was described as a "credible, clinically demonstrated" method to treat acute respiratory syndrome or pneumonia.

In the Czech Republic, several pages continued to downplay the impact of the severity of the virus even after the extent of the problems caused by it became crystal clear.

Kremlin narratives have infiltrated the media space of V4 states

Based on our research, there are numerous similarities between basic narratives spreading in local V4 media environments, although their potential impact differs due to the different structure of their media markets.

In Hungary and Poland, where numerous popular pro-government portals are spreading deceptive or biased claims about public affairs, citizens are more likely to meet disinformation narratives, at least certain ones, than citizens in countries where manipulative narratives are largely restricted to fringe

⁶⁸ "Slúži Pandémia Koronavírusu Plánom Totalitnej Svetovlády? Zdravotnícke Úrady Sú Ticho o Účinnej Liečbe CoVID-19," accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/283346272019044/posts/1117539785266351>.

⁶⁹ "Vitamín C a Koronavírus," accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/283346272019044/posts/1120333144987015>.

sites. The situation is especially concerning in Hungary, as media under the umbrella of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) and the public broadcaster are both de facto controlled by the central administration. These government-controlled sites can reach a vast layer of the audience and have a monopoly over the radio and regional daily markets in the country. Pro-Kremlin geopolitical portals in the Hungarian media space are almost irrelevant, as most deceptive claims reach the population via the vastly more popular government-controlled sites. Thus, geopolitical, conspiratorial and other portals focus on topics generally not touched upon by KESMA media. The purpose of government-influenced portals in both Hungary and Poland is to amplify the cabinet's messages, create a majority behind their own public policy proposals and deepen faultlines between government and opposition supporters, and this is only aggravated by media with a clear anti-government bias. In these two countries, but especially in Hungary, the governments themselves have become important sources of disinformation, primarily on domestic political competition, European affairs and migration. The situation did not change during the pandemic either, most anti-EU narratives came from these sources.

Deceptive portals in the individual V4 media markets also differ on what aspects of the crisis they emphasize. For instance, attacks on NATO were seemingly more prevalent in Poland and Slovakia, while such narratives were almost completely missing in Hungary. Public health related narratives are the most prominent in Slovakia, while Polish portals discussed the effects of 5G the most – as they had done before the crisis.

Regardless of the above-mentioned differences, the narratives spread internationally by Moscow, Beijing, as well as other actors – including populist forces and local allies of the Kremlin and China – are present in all four media environments. Anti-EU narratives both internationally and in the V4 advocate for a weaker European Union with less competencies and unanimous decision-making, which is often described as the “Europe of Nations” concept, emphasizing the importance of nation states over international institutions. Descriptions of the EU as an inefficient, politically motivated bureaucracy is not a new phenomenon, these claims simply received a coat of coronavirus paint. There will certainly be debates about the European Union's future once the pandemic disappears, and Kremlin allies, as well as the Hungarian and Polish governments want to position themselves as advocates for a Europe encompassing stronger nation states, whose “opponents” will presumably be the alleged liberals and globalists who want to broaden EU competencies – for instance in healthcare – despite Brussels's “apparent” failure to handle the migration and coronavirus crises. Consequently, the manipulative claims spread by Russia-backed portals matches those disseminated by otherwise fervently anti-Russian politicians affiliated with the Polish ruling party. However, the case of Poland also shows that not all forces advocating for a weaker Europe are aligned with the Kremlin.

Anti-US and – in some V4 states – anti-NATO narratives are also highly prevalent. **Claims about the US or NATO creating and spreading the virus serve the purpose of deteriorating trust in European countries in the utility of alliance with the United States, weakening a bond that has already suffered due to the Trump administration hostile stance towards its own allies.** Moreover, numerous articles refer to Washington's allegations that China is to blame for the virus because it escaped a laboratory in Wuhan. This actually strengthens anti-US narratives in two ways. First, it gives substance to claims that COVID-19 is artificial, not natural. Second, it allows disinformation portals to revisit well-known narratives about the US being a world police that uses any methods possible to crush its competitors. While Beijing-backed portals have very little impact in the V4, pro-Russian and conspiratorial sites reciting Chinese claims reach a wider layer of local audiences.

Various conspiracy theories spread by Kremlin-backed portals are also present in the media domain of Visegrád states, including completely made-up accusations about the elites wanting to extend social

control, microchip people or create a world government. These allegations could deteriorate trust in the Western institutional system and democratic life in the West, and showing that these elites do not care about democratic ideals, just force their will on people.

The above-mentioned groups mostly consist of narratives already known from before the crisis, but placed in the context of COVID-19. **These seek to manipulate public opinion, mostly via sowing information discord in societies or influence local populations' views on various policies.** It must be added that while the Kremlin rarely praises its own decisions openly, in the case of its "aid" delivered to Europe, it does so regularly, emphasizing Moscow's humanitarian approach to crisis. In the case of the Hungarian and Polish governments, they are generally trying to convince the population directly about their policy choices being right and their opponents' proposals being against national interests. Thus, state-sponsored disinformation by these two cabinets creates a more clear-cut, black and white picture of domestic politics and the world than Kremlin-backed narratives. The effects of the narratives listed above will likely show their impact only in the long-term.

In contrast, some narratives pose serious, immediate public health threats. **Deceptive claims about the artificial nature of the virus, the involvement of global elites in spreading or releasing COVID-19 and attacks on the pharmaceutical industry are especially dangerous in the current situation.** Such false statements might decrease the effectiveness of measures aimed at slowing down and defeating the epidemic. This is because people might be less likely to adhere to measures designed to slow the spread of the virus if they believe the virus was started artificially and those "someones" could just start another epidemic whenever they want. Making people believe that the virus is not serious at all or vaccines are dangerous could also have the same effect. **Anti-vaxxers will primarily be focusing on the COVID-19 vaccine, possibly halting the progress towards herd immunity via vaccination.**

[The anatomy of manipulation did not change with COVID-19](#)

A wide range of disinformation narratives are being spread in the Visegrád states by a variety of actors with a different set of motivations. The list includes pro-government and pro-opposition portals, far-right and far-left populist political actors, the official channels of Moscow and Beijing, local portals backing the Kremlin, conspiratorial sites, and healthcare- and lifestyle-focused portals. Some of them are spreading disinformation in the frames of more or less centrally-coordinated campaigns, such as government-controlled (Origo in Hungary, TVP in Poland) and official authoritarian state-sponsored sites (e.g., local branches of Sputnik, China Radio International and News Front Hungary), as well as some of those tied to political forces. A second group is likely made up of actors who do not receive central instructions but spread a particular agenda that matches their own views. Other actors, like several conspiratorial sites, are likely indifferent to the veracity of the claims they make and do not seek to promote any particular agenda, only to increase their income through generating ad revenues.

The goals of disinformation samples vary based on their motivations to spread manipulative narratives. Portals taking part in centrally-coordinated campaign seek to advance the agendas of actors behind them. This includes supporting local or external political actors in creating a favorable public opinion climate for them or against undesired elements (e.g., the opposition, the EU, NATO). Moreover, they can aim to sow discord among the population to deteriorate trust in the targeted institutions, for instance liberal democracy or the free press. The second group of "useful idiots" mainly repeat or share all arguments that are in line with their beliefs. Their main goal is to justify the views they personally hold, which is often in line with populist or extremist political forces. Portals "working" for ad revenues will generally post anything that they believe would increase the number of their visitors and engagement levels with their contents, and do not care about the effects of their

work. However, we know very little about public support for the various narratives listed in this study. One Slovak survey found that 40.6% of Slovaks believed the virus was created artificially and then spread intentionally. The poll also showed that only 22% of the Slovak population thinks the EU helps the fight against COVID-19 in the country, while 67.3% thinks the same about China, 45.4% about the Czech Republic and 24.9% about Russia. According to an April 2020 poll by the Centre for the Study of Democracy, 45% of Poles believe “some foreign forces or countries internationally spread the coronavirus.”⁷⁰ A poll commissioned by the European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR) pointed out that only 32% of Poles agreed the EU lived up to its responsibilities during the pandemic.⁷¹ A Hungarian poll by Publicus found that 22% of Hungarians believe the virus was created in China and 13% said it was manufactured by the United States. 20% of respondents claimed the virus was likely created to get rid of the older population.⁷² These values indicate that there is considerable demand for some of the disinformation narratives uncovered in this research.

The portals in the sample used several well-known methods to mislead the population. **Many of the articles found in the V4 sample are built partially on facts, which were then manipulated and distorted through additional personal opinions or other forms of manipulation.** The inclusion of facts in narratives helps make them more believable and accepted.

One commonly used method in the sample can be called **selective reporting** or **lack of contextualization**. For instance, European institutions could legitimately be criticized for its slow reaction to the crisis. However, portals pushing anti-EU narratives rarely reported on other important elements of the story, such as (1) the Union’s lack of healthcare competences, (2) member states’ initial slow reactions to the crisis and reluctance to help Italy, (3) various EU efforts to mitigate the crisis such as joint protective equipment procurement tenders and displays of solidarity by member states, (4) Brussels’ decision to help member states through increased financial flexibility. In the case of Eastern “aid,” the selected portals rarely mentioned that member states often purchase those products, so they cannot be called aid, and raise concerns about the quality of Chinese and Russian goods brought to Europe. They also failed to mention that Russian nationals offered cash to Italians to film themselves thanking Russia for the coronavirus equipment delivered to the country.⁷³ This method makes such manipulation the hardest to debunk, as the disseminators can point out the factuality of their articles and refer to editorial freedom as to why they do not report on other aspects of the question at hand.

⁷⁰ “THE VIRUS OF HATE AND STEVE BANNON’S DECLARATION OF WAR,” “NEVER AGAIN” ASSOCIATION, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.nigdywiecej.org/en/our-news/183-articles-from-2020/4369-the-virus-of-hate-and-steve-bannon-s-declaration-of-war>.

⁷¹ *Europe’s Pandemic Politics: How the Virus Has Changed the Public’s Worldview*, accessed July 29, 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview.

⁷² “A koronavírus anyagilag is megviselte a lakosságot,” *Népszava*, accessed July 29, 2020, https://nepszava.hu/3083964_a-koronavirus-anyagilag-is-megviselte-a-lakossagot.

⁷³ “Italians Offered Cash to Film ‘Thank You Russia’ Videos for Coronavirus Aid – Reports,” *The Moscow Times*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/14/italians-offered-cash-to-film-thank-you-russia-videos-for-coronavirus-aid-reports-a69974>.



13. Figure Czech post promoting the vice chair of the Italian Parliament taking down the EU flag. It also promotes Czexit.

In other cases, misleading narratives relied on **facts mixed with clearly false information**. Event 201 is a good case in point. The event was organized by Johns Hopkins University and partially funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, but – as the organizers themselves made it clear – it did not simulate a COVID-19 outbreak at all and was in no way preparation for the upcoming crisis.⁷⁴ Regardless, the event is used as proof that Bill Gates knew in advance that the coronavirus is coming. Sometimes, **the context of factual information is changed**. For instance, Robert Redfield did say that some deaths that had been diagnosed as influenza was reclassified as COVID-19 deaths, but he never mentioned when these deaths occurred,⁷⁵ so it cannot be proof that the “zero patient” was in the United States.

⁷⁴ JHCHS website designer, “Event 201, a Pandemic Exercise to Illustrate Preparedness Efforts,” Even 201, 201, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/>.

⁷⁵ CDC Director Says Some COVID-19 Deaths Diagnosed as Flu-Related in U.S., accessed May 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_dU2RCqWs4.

Creating false connections between unrelated events and facts is another commonly used practice. For instance, while there are locations where there is a 5G network and the coronavirus is spreading rapidly, there are also locations where the virus is spreading but has no 5G network at all.⁷⁶

Finally, several conspiracy theories were spreading with **no factual basis at all**, such as claims about the Polish government keeping citizens at home so they can install 5G masts.

The four states follow vastly different methods in terms of protecting themselves against disinformation in general and coronavirus-related manipulation in particular. The Hungarian cabinet, which generally does not step up against disinformation, chose to extend the scope of its anti-hoax legislation to disinformation spread during the state of emergency. This might have led to some results, as it might have made some portals more cautious and did manage to remove a large disinformation network from the internet, but its negative effects are disproportionately more severe. There are numerous anti-disinformation initiatives running in Hungary, but these are not supported by authorities, so their effect remains limited. However, the legislation – as some cases show – might threaten the free press and the freedom of speech. The Polish government did not take extra steps to protect the population against manipulative narratives either, but the AFP press agency is operating a fact-checking service in the local language,⁷⁷ which could be an important source for citizens, experts and journalists.

There are serious Slovak initiatives aimed at countering disinformation run by FB pages, NGOs and critical media. They have been able to achieve considerable results even before the crisis. For instance, before the 2020 parliamentary elections various FB pages spreading the propaganda of the right-wing extremist LSNS were shut down.⁷⁸ In the case of Slovakia, authorities are also involved to some degree, as the FB page “Hoaxes and frauds” are backed by the Slovak police, receiving almost 20,000 new (as of 23 March 2020) fans since the start of the corona-crisis.⁷⁹

In the case of the Czech Republic, state authorities are also aware of the potential damage that COVID-19 related disinformation can cause. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš highlighted the risks of conspiracy theories on his Facebook page. A special unit at the Ministry of Interior, which has been dealing with disinformation for years, published a list of conspiracy theories and manipulative narratives that are being spread in the information space.

⁷⁶ “Fact Check: 5G Technology Is Not Linked to Coronavirus,” usatoday, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/04/23/fact-check-5-g-technology-not-linked-coronavirus/3006152001/>.

⁷⁷ “Nie, Włosi nie podpalili maszty 5G. Spłonęły nadajniki starej generacji,” Sprawdzam, April 14, 2020, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/nie-wlosi-nie-podpalili-maszty-5g-splonely-nadajniki-starej-generacji>.

⁷⁸ “Facebook Zrušil Kulturblog a Ďalších 6 Stránok, Ktoré Propagovali Kotlebovcov,” accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.omeiach.com/hoaxy/17255-facebook-zrusil-kulturblog-a-dalsich-6-stranok-ktore-propagovali-kotlebovcov>.

⁷⁹ “ĎAKUJEME!,” accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/hoaxPZ/posts/665921867569017>.

Conclusions

Effective measures against coronavirus-related disinformation could contribute to maintaining popular support for governments and institutions even amidst severe restrictions on social life, preventing harm caused by alternative medicine promoted by dubious online healers, and preventing acts of violence, such as attacks on 5G masts in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it is too early to tell whether coronavirus-related theories will have more severe impact in the long-term, as the end of the pandemic is not yet in sight, and the serious socio-economic consequences are only now starting to affect vast layers of the population. As far as protective measures against the spread of the virus are concerned, EU member states are in better shape today than at the beginning of the first wave. However, they might still not be ready to effectively combat manipulative claims related to COVID-19.