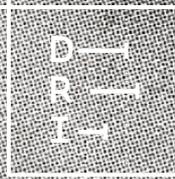




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COVID-19

DISINFORMATION

RESPONSE

INDEX

COVID-19
DISINFORMATION
RESPONSE
INDEX

ARMENIA
AZERBAIJAN
BELARUS
GEORGIA
MOLDOVA
ROMANIA
UKRAINE

KYIV, 2020

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Editor:
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COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index

Kyiv, 2020

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SUMMARY

CORONAVIRUS CRUSH

TEST: DISINFORMATION

RESILIENCE OF THE EAP

STATES AND ROMANIA

The study presents an overview of the COVID-19 related actions and communication strategies, as well as disinformation narratives in the six Eastern Partnership states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and Romania. This is a logical follow-up and topical addition to the Disinformation Resilience Index 2018, published by the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism.”

The aim of this research is to have a “crash-test” of some assumptions made in 2018 by the national experts and to analyze how the states’ resilience towards disinformation and misinformation evolves. The rampant flood of disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic turns out to be a test for state disinformation resilience. In addition, the study aims at raising awareness of broad audiences about possible threats of disinformation activities related to COVID-19 and state resilience.

While countries are obviously focused on managing humanitarian and healthcare issues related to the coronavirus outbreak, the information sphere is also under strain. As far as our analysis suggests, while sources of disinformation can be different (both domestic and foreign), their consequences are similar and could generate panic, distrust in governmental activities, and crisis mishandling.

The logical framework of the analysis is structured around **three main components: country chapters, disinformation narratives, and the Index**. The local experts in seven countries analyzed the actions, statements, and initiatives of both governmental and non-governmental institutions, including media and religious organizations, as well as narratives presented in the public and media discourse within a period of 6 months (February-July 2020).

The analysis showed that even if in the majority of countries, the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in March, the disinformation and conspiracy theories had been spreading since January-February. Those disinformation narratives were part of the global tendency and had mainly a geopolitical nature linked with China-US discourse or fear of the unknown.

The research results established that introduction of a state of emergency almost did not have any impact on the spread of disinformation. One of the main factors that influenced disinformation

flow was timely and sufficient, as well as the coordinated delivery of information by the appropriate governmental authorities. As soon as the media and public had open access to information, through regular briefings, official websites, etc., the information vacuum has been filled, leaving less space for gossips and manipulations.

Media played a serious role both in disinformation spread and debunking. Unfortunately, in some countries, media became a hostage of the political preferences of their owners, or, in the initial stage, of the lack of the specific knowledge necessary for covering pandemic stories. The situation was better in the countries with Code of Conduct and media self-regulation norms and concurrently was more challenging in those where media was predominantly controlled by a state.

All countries faced a problem of balancing between the necessity to prevent the spread of the disinformation, thus blocking some news or online resources circulating them, and a right for free speech and media activities. However, the level of governmental criticism was arguably correlated with a level of democracy in the respective countries and trust in governmental actions. For instance, in Azerbaijan and Belarus there have been numerous previous cases of misuse of power and use of blocking as a punishment for the opposition, so any new restrictions have been perceived through the lens of additional pressure. Whereas in Ukraine, the public accepted the necessity to block some Facebook pages by security services as a necessary step to prevent disinformation spread, as previously such actions have been predominantly connected with preventing Russian or separatist propaganda.

Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia ranked the highest in terms of resilience, society and governmental response, although still did not reach the top marks. Concurrently, **Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Moldova scored the lowest**. For government response, Georgia received the highest score (6 out of 9), followed by Ukraine (5 out of 9), while Moldova — the lowest (0). Media performance was the best in Romania (3 out of 4) and the worst in Belarus (1 out of 4). Civil society’s response was the most active in Ukraine and Romania (7 out of 8 for both countries) and the least active in Azerbaijan and Belarus (1 out of 8 for both countries).

As the study indicated, while the Russian narratives are steadily occupying public discourse, during the pandemic, the Russian Federation was not the only source of disinformation, leaving enough space for global and domestic narratives generation. Still, the Russian speaking population remained the most vulnerable to disinformation.

Most of the **disinformation narratives** circulated during the pandemic and identified in all the studied countries could be grouped as follows:

- **health related** (e.g., symptoms, diagnosis, cures);
- **geopolitically oriented** (e.g., actions or influence of the third states, those related to foreign policy, foreign assistance);
- **government related** (e.g., threats to democracy and human rights, 'failed' governments, political cleavages, etc.);
- **conspiracy theories** (e.g., 5G network, virus as a purposefully created bioweapon, virus invented by Bill Gates, etc.).

Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, disinformation campaigns had roots both at the global and national levels, while the authorities have largely mishandled the situation. Information from state-run media and research centers in Russia has remained the main source of COVID-19 disinformation with a Russian-speaking community as the most vulnerable group in the country. Independent media and civil society were immensely restricted due to the general political situation in the country. Strict restrictive measures imposed by the government have been highly criticized, and did not have any positive effect on Azerbaijan society resilience to disinformation. Despite the fact that high-level authorities were providing facts and basic information, they have lacked openness for questions from media and civil society, thus creating an information vacuum. The initial confusion regarding the conduct of religious gatherings did not result in information misleading the society. Religious communities, including their leaders, were active neither in information discourse, nor in spreading disinformation. The main narratives were changing with the development of pandemic, starting from the geopolitical ones (reports about the United States creating COVID-19 as a biological weapon and the European Union falling apart) to those, during a peak of the pandemic, appraising the so-called 'successes' of the government in handling the pandemic, claiming that 'Azerbaijani experience' of measures and fight against coronavirus are studied by the world.

Armenia witnessed a serious range of anti-governmental narratives connected with the general political competition in the country when disinformation was mostly spread by political opponents to undermine trust in the Armenian government. The government's initial response started with the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister as a central figure or a "point person," as well as with systematic updates provided by the Ministry of Health. Regular briefings had a positive effect for filling information vacuum. However, the issues of pandemic mishandling and data privacy shadowed an initial positive response. High politicization of media landscape in Armenia had its negative effect. In terms of social media, what had a significant effect are (former) doctors — bloggers, who used to mix politics and medicine and spread disinformation about the virus. Civil society had both positive and negative responses and was involved in both spreading and debunking disinformation. The main narratives popular in Armenia have been those criticizing masks and quarantine measures, building distrust for the government, addressing George Soros' role in virus spread.

Belarus case has its particularities, since it is the only country where quarantine and emergency state have not been introduced. In addition, the pandemic has been developing along with a very tense election campaign. Thus, the government and top officials themselves became one of the main sources of disinformation, together with the Russian information sources. At the first stage of pandemic spread, Minsk's information policy was largely focused on preventing panic among the population by publishing very limited data about the epidemiological situation and downplaying the risk of infection. President Lukashenko became the main newsmaker of false information. This resulted in an information vacuum and gossips spread about the real situation around COVID-19. Independent media and opposition politicians criticized the governmental actions and tried to present alternative sources of information. This was used as a reason for attacks against the opposition media. In the situation of no quarantine in Belarus, civil society organizations and groups have been more involved in advocating stricter measures of social distancing and supporting medical personnel and hospitals than in debunking activities. The main narratives were about denying the COVID-19 danger, geopolitical competition between China and the US as a reason of crisis, and gossips about high mortalities in different towns.

Georgia. The governmental response in Georgia was one of the most successful, resulting both in the best pandemic situation and in good communication strategies. However, the political crisis and expected parliamentary elections during the pandemic had a negative impact on the information environment. The biggest challenge for Georgia was communicating quarantine measures and other restrictions to the national minorities (Azerbaijani and Armenian communities) that led to a number of incidents. Establishing the Interagency Coordination Council by the Government of Georgia had its positive effect, given that important information was provided, daily briefings organized, special websites and a hotline created. In terms of media, the problem with Russian media and with the one at the occupied territories of Georgia that retranslated Russian disinformation could be observed. Most of this disinformation was connected with the fake news about US laboratories in Georgia that allegedly ‘had created COVID-19’. Anti-US, anti-liberal, anti-quarantine narratives have been the most popular.

Moldova. In Moldova, the pandemic response and its coverage in the media have been highly politicized. The general political competition in the country had its negative effect and led to an increased level of misinformation and manipulation with information. Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns and media influence have been noticed. Moldova’s Response Plan presented in March had a communication component that included media and social media, top officials briefings, hotlines, and websites. The communication about the COVID-19 situation in the country was conducted twice a day on behalf of the pandemic task force. However, the general low trust of the Moldovan population in their government and disconnection between the information provided and real facts on the ground led to the negative perception of the official information. In addition, the President and the Government provided contradicting information. In media, a significant presence of the Russian media content and Russian TV channels had a serious negative effect, which included both false news and propaganda. The church was one of the sources of disinformation, including spreading fakes about 5G and virus origin (most of the narratives were identical to those spread by the Russian Orthodox Church). The main

narratives in Moldova were about methods of treatment, fears about impossibility to recover, as well as conspiracy theories (population chipping, 5G, US laboratories). In addition, a geopolitical discourse was present, mainly the one stating ‘the death came from the West, and help comes from Russia and China’.

Romania. Faced with the prospect of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Romanian authorities managed to put together a patchwork of measures to prevent the spread of the virus and sought to inform the population about the increasing risk. Yet, the societal response was mixed, while the government’s response have had a puzzling effect on parts of the population. Against this background, the Romanian informational space has been hit by consecutive disinformation waves. Among the narratives, conspiracy theories have been the most popular in Romania, related to the origin of the virus and the malicious impact of the 5G network. One of the most visible sources of disinformation have been the websites originating in the Republic of Moldova. The research concluded that solely pointing at Russia for the current disinformation campaigns, which have hit Romania, would be too simplistic since domestic entities, with no clear links to the Russian Federation, might also be interested in distributing misinformation and alternative narratives for similar purposes: to weaken trust in institutions and sow panic.

Ukraine. Manipulated information, using a mix of emotionality and rationality, has become pervasive and dominant in Ukraine since 2014 and crystalized in the 2020 pandemic crisis. A relatively long experience of information war with Russia, as well as an existence of the number of debunking and information security NGOs, assured some sort of specific resilience of Ukrainians towards disinformation and fake news. The government response was satisfactory with daily information provided and special websites created. Security services were also involved in preventing disinformation spread, especially in social networks. Media appeared less resilient due to several factors: the politicization of the media landscape, lack of professional knowledge, Russian influence, and reference to unchecked unknown sources. At the same time, there were positive examples of media outlets creating special coverage to fill the information gaps and to debunk myths about COVID-19. Civil society in Ukraine became

the most resilient and prepared, worked actively in all directions: providing adequate information, debunking myths, fact-checking, etc. Disinformation spread in Ukraine differed depending on the situation. It has started with fake news and conspiracy theories due to the lack of knowledge, in addition to geopolitical narratives about foreign support in fighting a pandemic. The most popular disinformation was about virus origin (including 'US laboratories in Ukraine') and methods of treatment, as well as George Soros's role in causing pandemic.

The following **recommendations** have been developed by experts that can be applied not only in individual countries, but in the whole region.

1. Effective coordination between ministries and agencies in providing information to avoid misunderstanding and misleading news to increase trust.
2. Need to ensure at the state level that citizens receive complete, truthful, and timely information about the pandemic, with easy access to information both inside of the country and abroad, including the languages of national minorities.
3. Mutual trust is essential for ensuring cohesion and unity at the societal level. Conversely, lower levels of trust between state institutions and civil society affect the resilience of the state.
4. Professional fact-checking and debunking need to be encouraged in order to fight the disinformation, particularly in the online environment.
5. In addition to debunking the disinformation itself, the "name and shame" method should be used to address those who are spreading disinformation. The appropriate measures are needed to prevent future cases of disinformation.

** Methodology is elaborated by the research team*

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

The presented study offers an **overview of the COVID-19 related actions and communication strategies**, as well as some of the disinformation narratives identified in the six Eastern Partnership states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and Romania. This work is a logical follow-up and topical addition to the Disinformation Resilience Index 2018, published by the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism.”

The aim of this research is to conduct a “crash-test” of some assumptions made in 2018 by the national experts and to analyze how the states’ resilience towards the disinformation and misinformation evolves. The following study presents various actions, reactions, statements, news, etc. related to COVID-19 only. Furthermore, the authors have not analyzed all actions taken by the national governments in response to the pandemic, but only those related to how information and disinformation have spread.

Herewith, we refer to the COVID-19 related disinformation as to false content that might generate potentially damaging effects and/or negative impacts, create distrust, confusion, and fear.

The logical framework of the analysis is structured around **three main components – country chapters, disinformation narratives, and an Index**.

Country chapters draw upon a five-fold perspective and explore the actions aimed at disseminating information and analyze the response towards the spread of COVID-19 related disinformation by the government, media (including both state and independent media), social media, civil society (formal organizations and informal initiatives), and church. To this aim, the country chapters present the main efforts and actions undertaken by the government, media, civic society, and church, identify the quality and the timing of the responses, openness, readiness of the already existing infrastructure and flexibility to establish, if necessary, new up-to-date communication channels, relevant institutions, campaigns, etc.

Furthermore, **the sections on disinformation narratives** present the main **disinformation narratives** existing in each of the analyzed countries according to the following typology:

- health-related (e.g., symptoms, diagnosis, cures);
- geopolitically-oriented (e.g., actions of the third states, those related to foreign policy, foreign assistance);
- government-related (e.g., threats to democracy and human rights, unsuccessful governmental strategies, political cleavages, etc.);
- conspiracy theories (e.g., links between COVID-19 and the 5G networks, virus as a purposefully created bioweapon, virus invented by Bill Gates, etc.).

This typology is based on the review of the previously conducted international researches. It summarizes the already identified key themes, which are associated with COVID-19 related disinformation¹. The sections on disinformation narratives provide illustrative examples on how the disinformation narratives evolve in each country and via which specific channels are being disseminated. In order to select representative examples, the method of content analysis was used. Both official and unofficial narratives were analyzed in the corpus that included written texts available online, audio and video records in the national languages of the analyzed countries and in the Russian language².

The timeframe covered by our study spanned from February to July 2020.

Finally, our experts considered responses to counter COVID-19 related disinformation, which have been identified in several international

¹ For more details, please see, for instance, Posetti, J., and K. Bontcheva. Disinfodemic. Deciphering COVID-19 disinformation. Policy brief 1, https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_deciphering_covid19_disinformation.pdf and/or Covid-19 Disinformation: Narratives, Trends, and Strategies in Europe, <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/covid-19-disinformation-narratives-trends-and-strategies-in-europe> and/or Brennen, J.S., Simon, F., Howard, P.N., Nielsen, R.K. Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation#scale> and/or ISD Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing, no 1, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Briefing-Institute-for-Strategic-Dialogue-27th-March-2020.pdf>

² With the exception of Romania, where the sources were in the Romanian and English languages.

reports³ and which could improve resilience of the respective states. Against this backdrop, a COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index was developed. The list of indicators that constitute the Index does not claim to be either a fully conclusive or an exhaustive account of all the potential indicators, which could be included in the analysis. Nevertheless, we believe the proposed COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index could contribute to the data-based discussion on disinformation resilience and effectiveness of the countries' responses. In addition, it allows comparisons between the selected cases. The indicators (measures taken) differ from those of DRI-2018, therefore, the two indexes cannot be compared directly.

Thus, we have translated the existing governmental, media and societal responses into quantifiable indicators that allowed us to measure their significance for countering COVID-19 related disinformation ('0' for no action and '1' or '-1' for the undertaken action, depending on their positive or negative effects). The values of each indicator are shown in Table.

³ For instance, Coronavirus government response tracker, <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker> and/or Posetti, J., and K. Bontcheva. Disinfodemic. Deciphering COVID-19 disinformation. Policy brief 1, https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_deciphering_covid19_disinformation.pdf and/or Misinformation in the COVID-19 Infodemic, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmcmums/234/23402.htm?> and/or Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Tackling COVID-19 disinformation – Getting the facts right, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020JC0008>

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX: A DESIGN FOR CALCULATION

MEASURES UNDERTAKEN	YES	NO	COMMENT if necessary
A. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE (MAXIMUM 9 POINTS)			
Coordination center (already existing or newly established)	1	0	
Governmental spokesperson/persons (contact point to provide answers to journalists)	1	0	
Regular press-briefings of institutions in charge (e.g., Governmental Office, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Internal Affairs, etc.)	1	0	
Periodic press-conferences/press-briefings at the level of senior leadership (e.g., President or Prime Minister)	1	0	
Pre-recorded messages of senior leadership (e.g., President or Prime Minister)	1	0	
Establishing of special communication channels (Facebook pages, Telegram channels, chat-bots, original websites, etc.)	1	0	
Additional communication of regional authorities	1	0	
Cases of contradiction in messages at the national and regional levels	-1	0	
Cases of unjustified blocking/taking down the content of (dis) information from media by national bodies (the ones reported by international organizations)	-1	0	
Creating/empowering/changing focus of special governmental units to debunk disinformation	1	0	
Criminalizing the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official one	-1	0	
Cases of new legislation that criminalizes the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official	-1	0	
Additional restrictions of media freedom due to COVID-19 measures	-1	0	

Increasing state support for independent media (e.g., tax relieve, additional budgets allocated for the advertisement of the official information to support media, assistance to public broadcasters)

1 0

B. MEDIA RESPONSE (MAXIMUM 4 POINTS)

Investigative reports related to COVID-19 and response to pandemic

1 0

Counter disinformation campaigns related to COVID-19

1 0

Journalists' self-regulation and calls for reinforcing ethical conduct

1 0

Journalists' professional training on reporting about pandemic

1 0

C. SOCIETY RESPONSE (MAXIMUM 8 POINTS)

Fact-checking and digital debunking initiatives related to COVID-19

1 0

Investigative reports related to COVID-19

1 0

National fakes database related to COVID-19

1 0

Counter-disinformation campaigns related to COVID-19

1 0

Coordination of efforts with media

1 0

Joint communication campaigns and various cooperation between civil society actors

1 0

Exchanging experiences with foreign NGOs

1 0

Producing guidelines and recommendations related to COVID-19 for the general audience, not only for government

1 0

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX



Government Response (maximum 9)

Governmental activities on informing the public and media, fighting disinformation, cooperating with civil society that could either positively or negatively influence the spread of COVID-19 related disinformation.



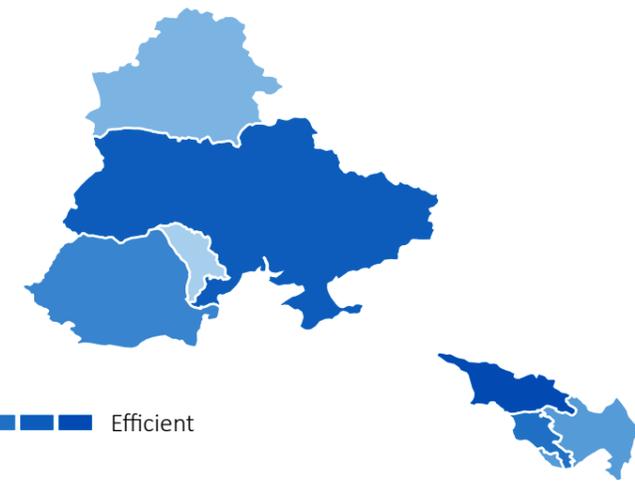
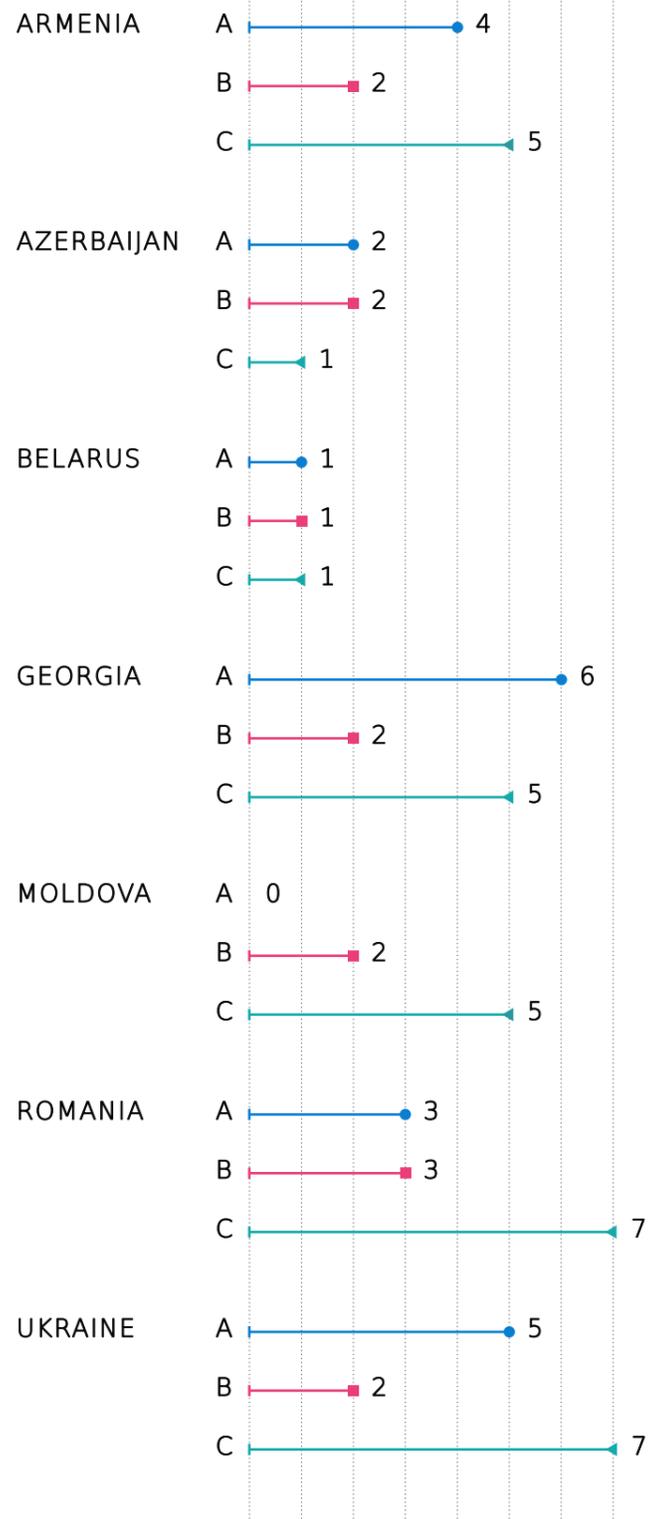
Media Response (maximum 4)

Measures taken by the state and independent media to counter COVID-19 related disinformation and ensure spread of evidence-backed information.



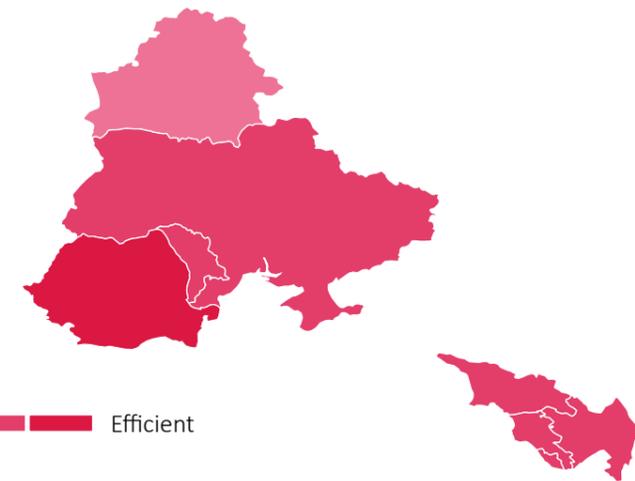
Society Response (maximum 8)

Actions by civil society (formal organizations and informal initiatives) to counter COVID-19 related disinformation, ensure spread of evidence-backed information



Poor Efficient

- A**
- Moldova
 - Belarus
 - Azerbaijan
 - Romania
 - Armenia
 - Ukraine
 - Georgia



Poor Efficient

- B**
- Belarus
 - Armenia
 - Azerbaijan
 - Georgia
 - Moldova
 - Ukraine
 - Romania



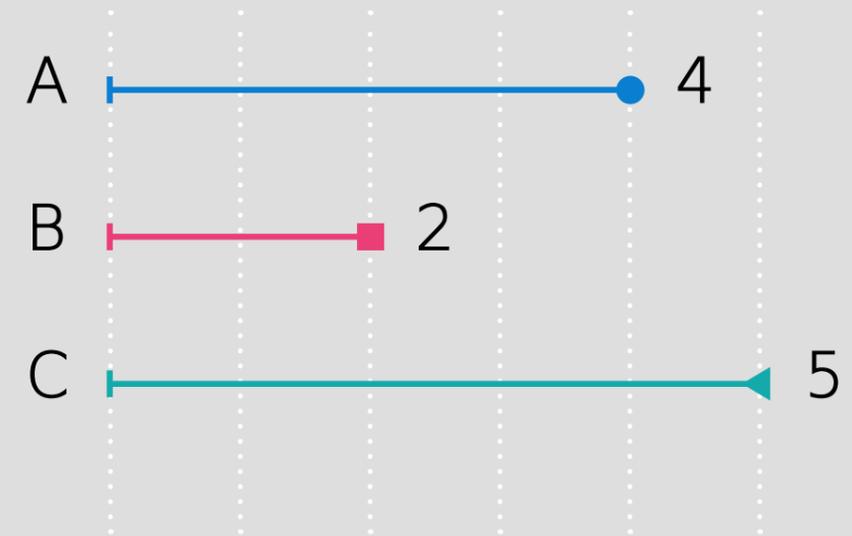
Poor Efficient

- C**
- Azerbaijan
 - Belarus
 - Armenia
 - Georgia
 - Moldova
 - Romania
 - Ukraine

RICHARD
GIRAGOSIAN,

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ARMENIA



INTRODUCTION

Disinformation has long been a problem in Armenia, especially given the closed media and limited press freedoms over the previous decades. The situation improved, however, as a result of the 2018 “Velvet Revolution,” when non-violent demonstrations forced an entrenched elite from power and ushered in a new, more democratic government after free and fair parliamentary elections in December 2018.

The challenge of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has exposed the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of many countries. For small countries like Armenia, both the intensity of the threat and the implications of the crisis are magnified. However, despite a fairly rapid and robust response to the pandemic, those early gains have been largely erased. Armenia has staggered and stumbled over a surge in cases after an overly ambitious decision to ease restrictions and reopen the economy had been taken.

Even though Armenia has already weathered severe threats to national security, ranging from a devastating earthquake to a destructive war over Nagorno Karabakh, the country now faces a very different threat from a very unexpected source. In some ways, the current public health crisis over managing the global COVID-19 pandemic poses an even more serious threat.¹

Before the onset of the coronavirus crisis, disinformation in Armenia was largely present as an instrument of a political attack by the country’s opposition as “weaponized information” against the government. This politicized disinformation was both constant and consistent in criticizing and confronting the Armenian government, utilizing a more open and liberal media environment that also featured three television stations and several online electronic media outlets owned and controlled by the political opposition and the former Armenian government officials.

Despite the relative frequency of these disinformation attacks against the government, which were greatly amplified by the opposition media, several factors limited the impact. First, there is a combination of the sustained popularity of the Armenian government and Prime

¹ For more, see: Giragosian, Richard, “Armenia staggers and stumbles through crisis,” *New Europe*, 5 June 2020. <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/armenia-staggers-and-stumbles-through-crisis/>

Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the discredited public view of the former ruling parties. A second factor that kept the disinformation within manageable bounds was the fact that the disinformation themes, such as accusations of “treason” over the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, were simply not resonating within the country’s political discourse. And third, such disinformation campaigns were the only active tool of the opposition, which was marginalized by its failure in the December 2018 parliament elections.

Against that backdrop, the COVID-19 crisis offered a new area of focus for disinformation. Over time, as the pandemic surged in the face of the government’s premature attempt to reopen the economy and ease restrictions, COVID-related disinformation became more widespread as growing numbers of the population embraced much of the negative messaging and even some of the incorrect or distorted facts of the disinformation.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

The first official case of COVID-19 in Armenia was registered on 1 March 2020. As additional cases began to rise, the country declared a 30-day state of emergency on 16 March. Under the terms of this state of emergency, restrictions were added on 24 March, with all public rallies and demonstrations prohibited, and any events involving more than 20 people banned outright. Any violations of these restrictive measures were met with significant monetary fines and police stricter patrol. The Ministry of Education then closed all schools and educational institutions with no reopening date specified, reverting instead to an online learning platform.² Thus, at this early stage of the pandemic, the Armenian government’s decisive reaction was marked by an impressively coherent and coordinated, unified crisis response.

The robust early response was implemented mainly by Health Minister Arsen Torosyan, but the prime minister led the policy discussion within

² Ayvazyan, Knarik and Armine Grigoryan, “Armenia: the dangers of lifting lockdown when R is still above 1,” *London School of Economics (LSE) and Political Science COVID-19 blog*, 1 July 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/07/01/armenia-the-dangers-of-lifting-lockdown-when-r-is-still-above-1/>

the cabinet and ensured coordination and crisis planning among several ministries. There was a degree of inter-agency and ministerial cooperation and coordination, including leadership by the Foreign Ministry that facilitated the return of several hundred Armenian citizens due to the health “lockdowns” and canceled flights. However, it is worth noting the absence of other key state institutions from both policy formulation and implementation, including the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the National Security Council (NSC), and even the Armenian parliament, which each played a relatively marginal role throughout the crisis.

The government’s initial response, including border closing, achieved an early containment and was also noteworthy for several reasons, including an impressive degree of inter-agency coordination between state ministries, the responsible handling of public awareness and transparency, and the recognition of this new, unusual and unexpected threat to national security, especially in unforeseen areas like public health. The government’s initial performance began with the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister Tigran Avinyan as the one central figure or a “point person,” acting in the capacity of “commandant” in charge of the crisis. He was the sole source of official information on state response and policy measures. At the same time, Minister of Health Arsen Torosyan was tasked only with providing daily statistical updates on the course of the pandemic.

With each providing regular press briefings, the government was able to maintain control over the messaging and release of information, which then helped to craft media coverage and contain the negative effect of disinformation. Equally important, the government launched a website (<https://ncdc.am/>) to offer a centralized, uniform source of government information and news related to COVID-19.

That early response, however, was quickly overwhelmed by an onset of cases.³ The situation of rising cases prompted the government to declare a 30-day state of emergency on 16 March that closed all schools and universities, followed with a “lockdown” of all public

³ Mkrtchyan, Gayane, “Վիրուսն արտասովոր է, շատ վտանգավոր, դավադիր, անկանխատեսելի” (“The virus is unusual, very dangerous, conspiratorial, unpredictable”), Media.am online news agency, 5 August 2020. <https://media.am/hy/viewpoint/2020/08/05/23534/>

gatherings and restrictions on movement on 24 March.⁴ Although bolstered by new measures to limit exposure, such as wearing masks, enforcing social distancing, and limiting travel, the lockdown was increasingly seen within the government as untenable, as many were worried about the negative economic impact from such a shutdown.⁵ This, in turn, prompted an easing of the measures by April.

Amid a record-setting spike in cases of infections of the coronavirus, the Armenian government defended its decision in late April to ease restrictions and reopen the economy, dismissing calls for a renewed “lockdown” to prevent the spread of the virus.⁶ They begin a partial and gradual reopening of the economy and a weakening of restrictive measures that were introduced in March. All businesses were allowed to reopen in the first week of May, although with precautions that include social distancing, compulsory masks, and other related preventive measures. This was followed by a sweeping move by the Armenian government to resume public transport, restart kindergartens, and restore access to shopping malls, indoor restaurants, and gyms.⁷

The decision coincided with a record-high number of new coronavirus cases, leading Health Minister Arsen Torosian to warn that with daily increases in cases over the past ten days, health officials were expecting to no longer be able to hospitalize or isolate all infected persons. This concern was rooted in recognition of the higher risk of the pandemic in potentially overwhelming the country’s health care system.

By early July, Armenia was rated as the worst-affected country in the South Caucasus region.⁸ Despite the worsening situation, however,

⁴ Ayvazyan, Knarik and Armine Grigoryan, “Armenia: the dangers of lifting lockdown when R is still above 1,” London School of Economics (LSE) and Political Science COVID-19 blog, 1 July 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/07/01/armenia-the-dangers-of-lifting-lockdown-when-r-is-still-above-1/>

⁵ Mejlumyan, Ani, “Armenian officials rule out new lockdown even as COVID worsens,” EurasiaNet, 30 June 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-officials-rule-out-new-lockdown-even-as-covid-worsens>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mejlumyan, Ani, “Armenian officials rule out new lockdown even as COVID worsens,” EurasiaNet, 30 June 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-officials-rule-out-new-lockdown-even-as-covid-worsens>

⁸ Ayvazyan, Knarik and Armine Grigoryan, “Armenia: the dangers of lifting lockdown when R is still above 1,” London School of Economics (LSE) and Political Science COVID-19 blog, 1 July 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/07/01/armenia-the-dangers-of-lifting-lockdown-when-r-is-still-above-1/>

Prime Minister Pashinyan has repeatedly vowed that his government has no plans to impose another lockdown and will continue to enforce social distancing and wear face masks in public instead.

Beyond the public health challenge, public awareness and education is an additional challenge, for both following prudent precautions as well as later treatment. This was evident in the findings of a May 2020 public opinion survey that found nearly one third (32 percent) of respondents indicating that they would refuse vaccination when the vaccine for COVID-19 is ready.⁹

➔ **THE PARLIAMENT APPROVED A MEASURE GRANTING THE GOVERNMENT BROAD POWER TO TRACK THE LOCATION AND CONTACTS OF RESIDENTS THROUGH THEIR TELEPHONES.**

There was also some further concern over data privacy and civil liberties, however, after the parliament approved a measure granting the government broad power to track the location and contacts of residents through their telephones. These powers for “contact tracing” were designed to tackle the spread of the virus and came from a plan by the Ministry of Justice presented on 30 March. The move was even more controversial as it failed in its first vote before being rushed through a second vote without any opposition MPs present. Concerns over privacy were somewhat offset, however, by additional stipulations that called for the destruction of all data “no later than a month after the state of emergency is revoked.”¹⁰

Concerns remained, however, as some prominent analysts, such as Samvel Martirosyan, warned that it was unclear how the collected data would improve the quarantining process, adding that “on the other hand this is a great tool for political control,” and argued that there was a “need to

⁹ “Survey shows 1/3 of Armenians will refuse vaccination against COVID-19,” Mediamax, 18 June 2020. <https://mediamax.am/en/news/society/38197/>

¹⁰ Bulghadarian, Naria, “Phone Tracking Needed to Fight Coronavirus, Insists Armenian Government,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenian Service, 1 April 2020. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30523860.html>

*establish public control of the data collection and its eventual deletion. We should not rely on the goodwill of the government in this matter.”*¹¹

Despite an initial temptation for the government to enact strict and sweeping legislation on the dissemination of “fake news” and unofficial reporting on the crisis, the move was quickly abandoned after a harsh outcry from civil society groups. A more moderate set of media restrictions were imposed as part of the “state of emergency.” The associated measures restricting media coverage of the disease, according to Justice Minister Rustam Badasyan, required media outlets to rely only on “information from official sources,” with any “information about people suspected of carrying the virus or information about their examinations, the number of cases, any content that can raise panic, will be banned.”¹²

Journalists and civil society representatives expressed concerns over these media restrictions and called on the government to “stop the censorship.” Two daily newspapers, Aravot and Hraparak, were forced to remove or edit their stories under penalty of fines between 500,000 and 800,000 drams (\$1,000-\$1,600). Daniel Ioannisyanyan, a representative of the Union of Informed Citizens NGO, criticized the media restrictions imposed under the state of emergency as “censorship,” which he warned would only decrease trust in the information provided by the government.¹³

MEDIA

Since the change of government in 2018, the Armenian media is generally more trusted than before, as demonstrated in public opinion surveys. For example, the study conducted in February-March 2020 by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) noting an increase

¹¹ Mejlumyan, Ani, “Armenia seeks to stem coronavirus spread by tracking phones,” EurasiaNet, 31 March 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-seeks-to-stem-coronavirus-spread-by-tracking-phones>

¹² Mejlumyan, Ani, “Armenia institutes COVID-19 state of emergency,” EurasiaNet, 16 March 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-institutes-covid-19-state-of-emergency>

¹³ Stepanyan, Ruzanna, “Armenian Media Deplore Restrictions on Pandemic Reporting,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenian Service, 19 March 2020. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30497220.html>

in the “trust” of the media. Overall, the survey revealed, “*significant progress has been made since the 2018 Velvet Revolution in overcoming deep historical distrust in state institutions among the Armenian general public.*”¹⁴ But the media in Armenia still faces a challenge in regaining more trust, as only 29% of Armenian respondents expressed “trust” in the media in 2020. That figure was some 7% higher than in 2017 when 22% indicated their trust in media. In addition, the challenge is revealed by the fact that 34% of respondents in the 2020 survey indicated that they “distrust” the media.

And in another recent survey, conducted in June 2020 by the International Republican Institute (IRI),¹⁵ which focused on “Perceptions of COVID-19 Response,” a significant 48% of respondents reported that they “*encounter information in the media (social media included) regarding coronavirus, that you believe is misleading or false*” daily, with another 14% reporting the same on a weekly basis.¹⁶ As the IRI survey showed, most Armenians rely on TV as their primary source of political news and information, with 64% listing TV as their primary source, but followed very closely by 62% reporting social media as their primary source for such news and information. This suggests that while the government’s efforts to block disinformation on the main Armenian TV networks may be somewhat successful and important for the majority of Armenians, disinformation has still been evident in smaller TV channels. And as the main thrust and prevalence of disinformation is seen in the Armenian social media platforms, the high number of Armenians relying on it as their main source for information and news only demonstrates the potential damage and very real power of disinformation.

Disinformation in Armenia is overwhelmingly political in content and domestic or internal in origins, with little examples of Russian disinformation. Although the opposition is largely discredited, several former officials from the previous government own media outlets

¹⁴ Dovich, Mark, “Two Years After Velvet Revolution, Armenia Sees Increased Public Trust in Institutions,” CivilNet, 7 July 2020. <https://www.civilnet.am/news/2020/07/07/Two-Years-After-Velvet-Revolution-Armenia-Sees-Increased-Public-Trust-in-Institutions/389341>

¹⁵ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia 2020,” International Republican Institute (IRI), June 2020. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/7.14.2020_armenia_survey_on_covid_19_response.pdf

¹⁶ Hakhverdyan, Nune, “Survey: 48% Of Armenians Encounter Misinformation and Misleading News Every Day,” Media.am, 20 July 2020. <https://media.am/en/newsroom/2020/07/20/23369/>

that amplify their messaging and attacks against the Pashinyan government.¹⁷ Though these media outlets are not significant in terms of audience or influence, they are useful in expanding and articulating their message, which was aimed at targeting the government and its actions in fighting COVID.

Disinformation in the traditional broadcast and print media was matched by an equally consistent campaign to distort facts in the alternative, online media of electronic news agencies and websites.

By late June 2020, Prime Minister Pashinyan was driven to attack such coverage in an address to parliament, complaining that “*a minimum of 3-4 TV channels from morning to evening*” were spreading falsehoods regarding the government’s handling of the coronavirus crisis, with what he said was a situation where “*so many political corpses are spreading an aura of stench all over the country.*”¹⁸

Prime Minister Pashinyan went on to argue that at the time of the introduction of the state of emergency in March 2020, initially there were restrictions to be placed on the press regarding information about the coronavirus, but that the government, heeding the calls of the opposition, NGOs, and the Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman), lifted those restrictions. He added that the lifting of restrictions was one of the main mistakes of the government, since, according to him, the main reason for the spread of the epidemic in the country has been the dissemination of false news about the pandemic.¹⁹

➔ **DISINFORMATION IN ARMENIA IS OVERWHELMINGLY POLITICAL IN CONTENT AND DOMESTIC OR INTERNAL IN ORIGINS, WITH LITTLE EXAMPLES OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION.**

The disinformation elements in the media coverage also had some limited success, especially when targeting the government and its

¹⁷ Ghukasyan, Seda, “Pashinyan in Parliament,” Hetq, 25 June 2020. <https://hetq.am/en/article/118706>

¹⁸ Ghukasyan, Seda, “Pashinyan in Parliament,” Hetq, 25 June 2020. <https://hetq.am/en/article/118706>

¹⁹ Ibid.

officials. For example, for the period of late July 2020, articles in the online media related to Minister of Health Arsen Torosyan were highly negative, with 35 leading domestic news websites monitored by the “Media Defender Initiative” that found that out of 276 articles in that period, 95 were negative, 34 positive, and 147 neutral.²⁰ Although this monitoring established that Minister of Health Torosyan was “among the most criticized politicians,” the much greater extent of neutral coverage only demonstrated the limited effect of the disinformation campaign.²¹

SOCIAL MEDIA

As noted, public opinion surveys, including one conducted in June 2020 by the IRI²² focused on “Perceptions of COVID-19 Response,” found that a majority of Armenians, estimated at 62%, rely on social media platforms as their main source of political news and information. And with 62% of respondents reporting that they “encounter information in the media (social media included) regarding coronavirus, that you believe is misleading or false” on a daily or weekly basis, the danger is very real.²³ This danger is also heightened by the fact that the dominance of disinformation is most often seen on the Armenian social media platforms.

➔ **IN THE DIMENSION OF SOCIAL MEDIA, THE DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN OUTPACED THE COMPARABLE CASES FOUND IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA.**

According to the “Digital 2020: Armenia” report from February 2020, there were 1.50 million social media users in Armenia as of January

²⁰ “Արսեն Թորոսյանը մտում է ամենաքննադատվող քաղաքական գործիչների շարքում. Մեդիա պաշտպան” (“Arsen Torosyan remains among the most criticized politicians. Media Defender”), Tert.am online news agency, 5 August 2020. <https://www.tert.am/am/news/2020/08/05/Media-advocate/3362640>

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia 2020,” International Republican Institute (IRI), June 2020. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/7.14.2020_armenia_survey_on_covid_19_response.pdf

²³ Hakhverdyan, Nune, “Survey: 48% Of Armenians Encounter Misinformation and Misleading News Every Day,” Media.am, 20 July 2020. <https://media.am/en/newsroom/2020/07/20/23369/>

2020, representing an increase of 10% of new users since April 2019, with an overall rate of social media penetration of 51% in Armenia as of January 2020.²⁴ Among all social media platforms, Facebook held the largest share of users, accounting for more than 75% of all social media in Armenia from July 2019-July 2020.²⁵

Moreover, in the dimension of social media, the disinformation campaign outpaced the comparable cases found in the mainstream media. Most notably, as some analysts, who have tracked disinformation in social media, have found, “the coronavirus epidemic in Armenia has been a political matter from the very start, and this brought with it myths and false news.”

Although the best thing to do in these conditions is to follow the advice of doctors, there were several medical workers in Armenia who have been actively spreading misinformation about the infection using the social media platform of Facebook.²⁶ Media analysis by Media.am for example, followed the activities of several such doctors and found out that their health advice on Covid-19 is often combined with a very strong political position, with the following assessment:

Gastroenterologist Hayk Manasyan has always been active in the media field. He hosted a program on “Boon TV,” an online scientific-professional television channel, spoke about various diseases on social networks and gave interviews. His Facebook live videos covered not only health but also political topics. During the days of the coronavirus contagion, Manasyan’s live videos began to garner tens of thousands, sometimes over hundreds of thousands of views. Manasyan speaks in a figurative and emotional language. For example, in his latest live video, he called the Ministry of Health a “caricature,” arguing that if artificial respiration was not needed, the coronavirus could be treated on the street, “under a tent.” He also said that the coronavirus was “good luck” for Armenia because “if it weren’t for this disease, more people would have died.” He does not bring any specific calculations, sources, or other justifications to the table, he simply makes assumptions.²⁷

²⁴ Kemp, Simon, “Digital 2020: Armenia,” 17 February 2020. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-armenia>

²⁵ Social Media Stats Armenia, July 2019-July 2020. <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/armenia>

²⁶ Ghazaryan, Karine, “Politics vs Health: When Doctors Are Misleading,” Media Initiatives Center, 11 June 2020 <https://media.am/en/verified/2020/06/11/22056/>

²⁷ Ibid.

And as a monitor of disinformation, Zarine Kharazian, has reported on her Twitter account, a *“new anti-vaxx (anti-vaccination) Facebook page in Armenia is recruiting ‘active participants’ for a ‘counter-propaganda’ action over Facebook. So far, it has platformed a conspiracy theorist in scrubs in a viral video, a model that’s been used to great effect in the OVID disinfo campaigns everywhere.”*²⁸

The same analysis also identified a second prolific abuser of information, Nune Nersisyan, the former director of Masis Medical Center. In the Media.am report, Nersisyan was noted to be *“a strict critic of the Ministry of Health”* with her criticism, *“often accompanied by false news and manipulative theses.”*

The extent of disinformation on social media platforms also triggered an outburst by Prime Minister Pashinyan, who lashed out at a cabinet meeting in late June 2020 by protesting that *“the hybrid war of spreading false information about the coronavirus continues.”*²⁹

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

According to the Media Initiatives Center, a prominent media monitoring group engaged in the monitoring of COVID-19 disinformation, the scale, and scope of the virus-related attacks on the government have been relatively prolific, but largely lacking in credibility.³⁰ More specifically, media monitoring reported that conspiracy theories and other unsubstantiated claims seriously undermined the efficacy of such attacks. The findings also indicated that the sporadic frequency and limited popularity of the COVID-19 reports were further limited by the lack of reprints or rebroadcasting by more mainstream media outlets.

²⁸ See the original Twitter post by Zarine Kharazian: <https://twitter.com/zkharazian/status/1293242582051495937>

²⁹ “Prime Minister: Some people who once said that the coronavirus is fake are now waiting to be hospitalized and they’re now asking if they are not being hospitalized for being part of the opposition,” Aravot daily newspaper, 25 June 2020. <https://www.aravot-en.am/2020/06/25/258628/>

³⁰ For more on the Media Initiatives Center “fact tests” of the virus-related coverage, see: <https://media.am/hy/critique/2020/06/22/22275/>

The reports were able to garner some credibility, however, as several medical workers and doctors *“have been actively spreading misinformation about the infection,”* according to the media monitoring reports, coronavirus diminished their reputations by contending that the coronavirus *“is no more dangerous than the common flu.”*³¹

Although the damage to the political and public discourse in Armenia from disinformation and “fake news” is widely recognized, a recent investigation by OpenDemocracy.Net has uncovered an especially dangerous example of the spread of disinformation regarding the COVID-19 crisis. More disturbing, the online platform promoting this disinformation has been found to have received funding from the U.S. Embassy. The website has irresponsibly promoted and published articles that have defined COVID-19 as a “fake pandemic” and has dangerously opposed vaccines, as well as expressing intolerant and, at times, abusive views.³²

According to Tatev Hovhannisyan, a long-time civil society activist who regularly monitors disinformation, this particular website, Medmedia.am, was first launched in 2019 *“amid a mushrooming of new ultra-conservative groups following Armenia’s 2018 ‘velvet revolution’ by an NGO led by a locally well-known doctor with anti-LGBT views and far-right connections.”*³³ Hovhannisyan also found that in May 2020, the website’s *“most-read page called on Armenians to ‘refuse all potential [COVID-19] vaccination programs’* and more disturbing garnered some *“131,000 views and 28,000 social media likes (big numbers in a country with a population of less than 3 million).”* The second most popular piece claimed, incorrectly, that a morgue offered 100,000 AMD (\$205) to a dead patient’s relatives to sign a document saying the death was caused by COVID-19, with other recent pieces describing COVID-19 as a “fake pandemic.”³⁴

³¹ Ghazaryan, Karine, “Politics vs Health: When Doctors Are Misleading,” Media Initiatives Center, 11 June 2020 <https://media.am/en/verified/2020/06/11/22056/>

³² Hovhannisyan, Tatev, “Revealed: US-funded website spreading COVID misinformation in Armenia,” OpenDemocracy, 28 May 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/us-money-armenia-misinformation-covid-vaccines/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

An important civil society effort was initiated by the “Informed Citizens Association” NGO, led by Daniel Ioannisyan. through a unique project termed “SUT.am” that seeks to “*reveal the false information published by the officials, the official bodies, and the media*” in order to monitor, expose and disclose “*false information concerning Armenia and the Armenian society*” by countering disinformation through “*official information and conducting research.*”³⁵

CHURCH

Unlike some other countries, the Armenian Church handling of the pandemic was in line with government policy and the majority of Church leaders endorsed the restrictions imposed on the population. As the Armenian Apostolic Church is the major religious institution in the country, there was little dissent and even less division within Armenian society.

The minority Yazidi community also followed the restrictions, and the marginal Russian Orthodox Church was completely silent on the issue. This was helpful for the government in encouraging and enforcing greater public conformity with pandemic restrictions. The positive role of the Church was also in large part due to the fact that the Armenian Church has no record of political activity and has usually stayed away from policy debate or discussion, other than the sole exception of education.

³⁵ “Disinformation is Already Revealed and Prevented in Armenia,” Media Center, 14 November 2019. <http://www.media-center.am/en/1479284206>

CORRELATION TO DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX-2018

In contrast to the findings of the “Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI) 2018” report,³⁶ the situation in Armenia regarding disinformation has changed considerably, largely due to the change of government in 2018. For some notable examples, the media landscape has greatly improved, with a marked improvement in press freedom and higher tolerance. While this is most evident in the active, and even sometimes excessive attacks against the government by the opposition media, it is matched by the government’s rejection of state media as platforms for pro-government propaganda. As Prime Minister Pashinyan is himself a former journalist, the commitment to media freedom is generally unchallenged.

Nevertheless, Armenia has some of the same vulnerabilities as in 2018. This is ironically rooted in the very same press freedom and “open space” of a more open and tolerated media arena, which can be used for disseminating disinformation and “fake news,” often directed against the government itself. Yet overall, Armenia has neither any significant ethnic Russian minority nor any serious pro-Russian groups, and there are no pro-Russian parties or Moscow-directed politicians in Armenia.

Rather, Russian policy to pressure the Armenian government, which has increased since the Velvet Revolution, is invested in leverage from its economic influence and power over Armenia and its use of the unresolved Nagorno Karabakh conflict for exerting security pressure on Armenia, but with little attention in Russian soft power or disinformation directly. Against that backdrop, however, Russia has a limited capacity for implementing effective disinformation campaigns in Armenia, and with such little Russian engagement in the pandemic crisis in Armenia, the real threat from COVID-19 disinformation is limited to an internal, domestic context.

³⁶ Disinformation Resilience Index (DRI) 2018, Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, Kyiv, 2018. http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The analysis of the narrative of the COVID-19 crisis in Armenia, from an initially robust and rapid response to a more disastrous premature move to reopen the economy, reveals a daunting and challenging course of crisis management. From this perspective, there are four distinct periods comprising the pandemic narrative:

1. the onset of the crisis and a rapid and robust initial response (1 March- late April/early May 2020);
2. a premature decision to reopen the economy and begin easing restrictions (4 May- June 2020);
3. a subsequent surge in cases in response to that premature reopening (late June- mid-July 2020);
4. a decline in cases and a more gradual return to economic activity, plans to reopen schools, and a general easing of restrictions (early August- present).

In terms of the narrative content of the pandemic-related disinformation, it was overwhelmingly defined and driven by a politicized context that relied on COVID-19 disinformation to attack the government more than to distort public health facts. There were some rare cases of disinformation in this area of refuting medical facts and advice, especially through an attempt to discourage trust in vaccinations, but mostly marginal and ineffective. For example, the Media.am report mentions doctor Nersisyan, who largely criticized the government and claimed that COVID-19 is an artificial virus, spreading the conspiracy theory revolving around Bill Gates. Nersisyan also spread misinformation that people are being offered money in morgues in order to mark the cause of death as having been the coronavirus." Moreover, *"taking advantage of her status as a doctor, Nersisyan urges citizens not to wear masks and claims that the coronavirus is part of a scheme to cancel the constitutional referendum. Nersisyan also makes a political statement, as well as characterizes the government as "Sorosians," repeating the conspiracy theory about George Soros."*³⁷

The geopolitical context was also notably absent from the narrative of disinformation, with the focus on the Armenian government in a domestic and internal rather than an external dimension.

³⁷ Ibid.

The second most common theme, far behind the political context of using the pandemic to attack and criticize the government, is the exaggeration of COVID-19 restrictions as threats to civil liberties and personal choice. This is most commonly seen in the disinformation that the pandemic is a political crisis and less of a real public health emergency.

Additional examples of disinformation in this context are related to the required wearing of face masks, with some cases of commentary and articles arguing that it is a violation of personal or individual freedom

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the rather unique, but still challenging plague of disinformation in Armenia, there are several recommendations necessary to combat and contain the impact of such irresponsible reporting and abuse of media freedoms. While overall, there has been no external context of Russian interference or manipulation, such a scenario can not be readily dismissed or neglected. Thus, the following are some basic recommendations:

1. **"Name and Shame."** In a country as small as Armenia, the most effective method of countering disinformation is to expose and refute such examples publicly. This involves a "name and shame" effort that identifies and thereby discourages through humiliating embarrassment, the more prolific of these offenders, especially so-called medical professionals and doctors engaging in politicized disinformation campaigns.
2. **Institutional Safeguards.** In terms of institutional safeguards against disinformation, durable resiliency requires greater media monitoring and oversight, by the relevant state regulators and the Armenian parliament in order to police and enforce existing rules and regulations against disinformation and especially targeting negative aspects of disinformation, such as hate speech, but also broadened to cover bias and subjective 'fake news' reporting.
3. **Monitoring External/Foreign Media.** A second measure would be more comprehensive but legally sound monitoring of disinformation by Russian media outlets rebroadcast into Armenia that includes the capacity to impose punitive measures, when and if the coverage was found to be an example of disinformation.

4. **Legislative Attention.** Legislatively, a fresh review of laws on mass media and the freedom of information is one of the more basic defenses against disinformation. They have been weak in terms of poor enforcement and implementation, focused on the regulation of disinformation in ‘new media’ (electronic media especially) or even ‘playing field’ for an open and transparent media environment.
5. **Regulatory Measures.** Additional measures are also necessary as the country has a new parliamentary form of government, thereby necessitating legislative changes and initiatives in several aspects of broadcasting regulators and regulations:
- Introducing and safeguarding a higher level of independence of members of regulatory bodies;
 - Modernizing licensing procedures to decisions of purely technical or commercial character to avoid unwarranted political bias or interference;
 - Strengthening of authority and resources of Armenia’s sole independent regulatory authority for telecommunications, the Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC).

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX 2020: ARMENIA

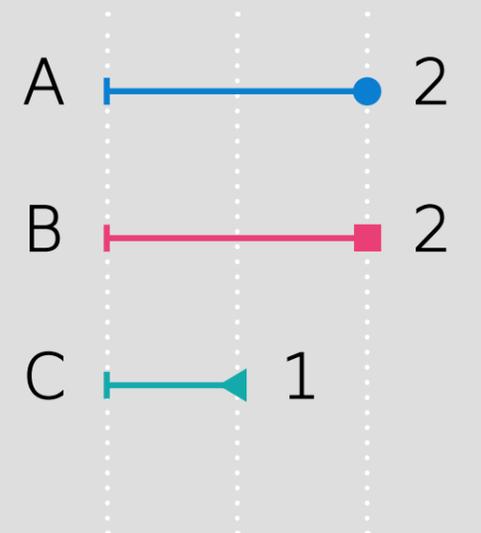
MEASURES TAKEN	YES	NO	COMMENT
A GOVERNMENT RESPONSE			
Coordination center (existing or new)	1		Yes, with inter-agency coordination
Governmental spokesperson/people (contact point to provide answers to journalists)	1		
Regular Press-briefings of Responsible Institutions (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, etc.)	1		Health Ministry
Periodic press-conferences/press-briefings by senior leadership (Prime Minister)	1		Deputy Prime Minister as appointed point person & Prime Minister
Pre-recorded messages of the senior officials (Prime Minister)	1		Video messages
Establishing special communication channels (Facebook pages, telegram channels, Viber channels, chat-bots, special websites)	1		Yes, unified website
Additional communication of regional authorities		0	
Cases of contradiction in messages on national and regional level		0	occasionally
Cases of unjustified blocking/taking down content of disinformation from media by national bodies (reported by international organizations)		0	
Creating/empowering/changing focus of special governmental units to debunk disinformation	1		Yes, through unified website
Criminalizing the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official	-1		Yes, but only with the imposition of fines

**NAJMIN
KAMILSOY,**

Charles University

Cases of applying changes to the legislation that criminalize the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official	-1		Yes, through financial penalties
Restrictions of media freedom added	-1		Yes, although moderate and not often imposed
Increasing state support for independent media (explain) (Tax relief, Additional budgets for advertisement for official information to support media, Assistance to public broadcasters)		0	
B MEDIA			
Investigative reports	1		
Counter disinformation campaigns	1		
Journalists' self-regulation and calls for reinforcing ethical conduct		0	Absent or not evident
Journalists' professional training on reporting about pandemic		0	
C CIVIL SOCIETY			
Fact-checking and digital debunking initiatives	1		
Investigative reports	1		
National fakes data base		0	not evident
Counter-disinformation campaigns	1		Yes, but limited
Coordination of efforts with media	1		limited
Joint communication campaigns of civil society actors/ Cooperation between civic society initiatives	1		At times yes
Exchanging experiences with foreign NGOs		0	
Producing guidelines and recommendations for general audience, not only for government		0	

AZERBAIJAN



INTRODUCTION

Azerbaijani society has been hit hard by COVID-19 pandemic, not only in terms of its public health, social and economic repercussions but also by disinformation campaigns, which had roots at the global and at the national level, while the authorities have largely mishandled the situation.

The government failed to introduce effective counter-disinformation measures, both at the policy-making level and in practice. Instead, the ruling elite used law enforcement agencies to target independent reporters and social media activists, who would challenge official narratives. The country's population has remained vulnerable to disinformation flows during the COVID-19 outbreak, as the authorities continued to take advantage of disinformation tools for its agenda to gain public approval.

Information from state-run media and research centers in Russia have continued to be the main source of COVID-19 disinformation, according to the results of this monitoring. The most vulnerable group to the Russian influence is a Russian-speaking community in Azerbaijan, who remained exposed to Russian-language disinformation. However, during the COVID-19 outbreak, there has not been a significant difference between Azerbaijani and Russian language online content that promoted disinformation. Globally spread disinformation and conspiracy theories related to the coronavirus were the most popular. A big portion of COVID-19 disinformation came from the state-controlled or pro-government media in Azerbaijani.

Independent media and civil society remained immensely restrictive, as a result of a systematic crackdown that had deeper roots than a pandemic. Thus, media and civil society groups could not become instrumental in the fight against COVID-19 related disinformation.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

The government body responsible for COVID-19 issues coordination and communication is the Cabinet of Ministers and its Operational Headquarters, which was established on 27 February 2020. The Operational Headquarters consists of senior officials of different ministries and government agencies and led personally by the Prime Minister. However, a full list of the representatives of the Operational Headquarters has still not been shared with the public, which caused public concerns over the qualifications of the group members in handling the public health crisis caused by the pandemic, and in identifying the most effective tools to inform the society.

The Operational Headquarters under the Cabinet of Ministers determines and announces the COVID-19 related policies and trends. The Spokesperson of the Cabinet of Ministers serves as the main speaker of the Operational Headquarters. At each press briefing, the spokesperson is accompanied by representatives of state institutions relevant to the topic of the briefing (i.e., the Chairman of Management Union of Medical Territorial Units, the press secretary of the MFA, the Minister of Education, etc.). In their speeches, representatives of relevant authorities usually describe implemented and planned activities. At every press briefing, numbers of COVID-19 cases, fatalities, and recoveries are indicated. In several instances, there have been discrepancies in the statements made by the officials during the briefings.³⁸

The press briefings of the Operational Headquarters have been held regularly since March, albeit not daily. Twenty briefings were conducted in May-June. During the briefings, following official statements, the speakers receive questions from the journalists that are present in the room. In the earlier stages, journalists were allowed to participate in the briefings without accreditation. However, in the following briefings, journalists were required to be accredited by the press service of the Operational Headquarters, which impedes participation of independent journalists without registered media affiliation, who may potentially ask critical questions.

³⁸ Such discrepancies were noted in the statements related to the number of hospital beds, re-opening of kindergartens, and reinstatement of weddings.

Briefings are aired by several TV channels, including AzTV, Ictimai (Public) TV, and live broadcasted by news agencies, including Report and APA on Facebook and YouTube. The majority of online media outlets, TV channels, and newspapers report about them.

Although different government figures, including the President, ministers, heads of state agencies, and members of the parliament, made statements related to the pandemic, the briefings of the Operational Headquarters remained the primary source of government information related to the pandemic.

While in many other countries, the minister of health has a leading position in the development of anti-pandemic policy and informing the public regarding relevant policies and updates, Azerbaijani Minister of Health had very limited media visibility during the COVID-19 outbreak. He communicated only to the state press on a few occasions. 70-years-old minister Shiraliyev did not appear in front of the journalists and remained absent in the press briefings, while the head of the apparatus mainly represented the ministry.

In exceptional instances, the Prime Minister Ali Asadov has been making public statements, such as on 4 June, when he addressed the nation regarding a significant increase in COVID-19 positive cases and declared stricter quarantine measures. However, his statement was pre-recorded, as he never appeared in the briefings with journalists.³⁹

A centralized website, koronavirusinfo.az, was created on 21 March. The website contains updated statistical data on COVID-19 cases as well as educational information on personal and public protection measures. The decisions of the Operational Headquarters are timely uploaded on the website as a reference point for the media, but it would be difficult to say that the website turned to be popular among the general public because of its official format.⁴⁰

According to the official information shared on the websites of regional authorities (City or District executive power), operational headquarters were established in each administrative region, and all

of them have adjusted their activities as well as informational policy to the Operational Headquarters under the Cabinet of Ministers, mainly by republishing on their websites and communicating same information to the public.⁴¹

TV channels and the majority of news agencies controlled by the government, hold the central place in the informational policy of the authorities related to COVID-19. At the same time, social media was not covered by an official discourse.

➔ DOZENS OF OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS, WHO HAVE BEEN VOCAL IN A CRITIQUE OF THE GOVERNMENT, WERE DETAINED OR IMPRISONED OVER POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CHARGES, INCLUDING HOOLIGANISM, VIOLATING QUARANTINE MEASURES, AND EVEN TERRORISM.

The government has made significant decisions regarding the pandemic, including long and strict lockdown measures, without any consultations with other political groups that could formally challenge those policies. It is because of a lack of pluralistic political environment in Azerbaijan, as opposition political parties have been marginalized for a long time by systematic repression and elimination from the policy-making process. Social media platforms and critical online TVs have been the sole resource for the opposition political figures to express their critical voice over governmental policies during the pandemic.

On 19 March, President Ilham Aliyev spoke warning that the opposition, which he named as *'anti-Azerbaijan forces,' 'enemies of the state,'* and *'fifth column,'* are using social media to spread panic and to initiate provocations.⁴² Following his speech, dozens of opposition activists, who have been vocal in a critique of the government, were detained or imprisoned over politically motivated charges, including hooliganism,

³⁹ Baş Nazir Əli Əsədov vətəndaşlara müraciət etdi. June 4, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPIT1p-y-hc>

⁴⁰ <https://koronavirusinfo.az/az>

⁴¹ Lənkəranda karanPn rejiminin vəziyyəP ilə bağlı reyD keçirilib. March 7, 20202. <http://lenkeran-ih.gov.az/news/1239.html>

⁴² <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijani-president-aliyev-threatens-fifth-column-with-state-of-emergency/>

violating quarantine measures, and even terrorism. Internet and mobile connection of the leader of opposition Popular Front Party, Ali Karimli, was blocked since mid-April.⁴³

Various government figures have also used state-controlled news agencies to attack the opposition leaders. For instance, the deputy chairman of the New Azerbaijan Party was quoted by the government-controlled Report News Agency, accusing the chairman of the Popular Front Party of using dirty ways to undermine the government's so-called successful efforts to fight against the pandemic.⁴⁴

On 17 March, the Parliament of Azerbaijan amended the law on information without any public discussion. According to the introduced changes, an online information resource holder is forbidden to publish any kind of officially prohibited information that would lead to damage to life, public health, and safety of people, to violation of public security, etc.⁴⁵ Local experts believe that such an amendment is open for different interpretations that can be used by the government to target independent information providers. The OSCE Media Freedom Representative expressed his concerns stating that the amendment should not obstruct the activities of journalists whose duties include keeping the public informed and fighting disinformation.⁴⁶

While blocking websites is a practice that Azerbaijani government has used since 2017 against independent and critical media outlets, including exile-based Meydan TV and Azadliq newspaper website,⁴⁷ no source has reportedly been blocked for COVID-19 related disinformation. Despite an abundance of misleading online content

⁴³ COVID-19: PACE monitors warn Azerbaijani authorities against abuse of pandemic to crack down on opposition. May 15, 2020. <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=7888&lang=2&cat=3>

⁴⁴ Əli Əhmədov: "Hökumət koronavirusa, Əli Kərimli virusu Azərbaycana qarşı mübarizə aparır". March 23, 2020. <https://report.az/daxili-siyaset/bas-nazirin-muavini-eli-kerimli-azerbaycana-qarsi-mubarize-aparir/>

⁴⁵ İnformasiya, informasiyalarda və informasiyanın mühafizəsi haqqında. AZƏRBAYCAN RESPUBLİKASININ QANUNU. <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/3525>

⁴⁶ Coronavirus response should not curb freedom of the press in Azerbaijan, says OSCE Media Freedom Representative. March 25, 2020. <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/449146>

⁴⁷ Azeri court supports block on several media websites. May 12, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-azerbaijan-media/azeri-court-supports-block-on-several-media-websites-idUSKBN1882NT>

regarding the pandemic, no state action has been taken against those websites. However, there are reports that social media users who shared disinformation through their online resources have been identified, and several of them were subjected to administrative proceedings.⁴⁸

There have been no instances recorded publicly regarding any source being blocked by Facebook or Twitter for COVID-19 related disinformation in Azerbaijan.

MEDIA

The government of Azerbaijan exercises substantial formal and informal control over the media landscape in the country. No broadcast TV, radio companies or newspapers serve as independent information providers. A limited number of online media outlets, mainly those, which are based in Western countries, conduct professional and critical reporting. However, those media outlets face persecution, cyberattacks, blockage, and their journalists operate in a seriously hostile environment.⁴⁹

Reporters without Borders ranked Azerbaijan #168 in the World Press Freedom Index 2020. According to the group of human rights defenders, there are four journalists currently behind bars on political grounds. Amnesty International stated that the government had started a new wave of crackdown on journalists and activists during the COVID-19 outbreak. Meanwhile, at least four more journalists have been detained or imprisoned for their reporting during the quarantine.⁵⁰ Experts believe that the crackdown on journalists was part of government attempts to hinder the work of journalists in exposing the failure of the state in managing the COVID-19 crisis.⁵¹

⁴⁸ DİN: Dezinformasiya yayarı 3 nəfər həbs edilib. March 27, 2020. <https://report.az/daxili-siyaset/i-ase-obyektleri-cerime-edilib/>

⁴⁹ Threats to media freedom and journalists' security in Europe. January 28, 2020. <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=28508&lang=en>

⁵⁰ Azerbaijani Authorities Must Halt Crackdown On Dissent And Incarceration Of Activists In Conditions Prone To The Spread Of Covid-19. May 27, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR5524122020ENGLISH.pdf>

⁵¹ Azərbaycan mətbuatının durumu: Helsinki Komissiyasının hesabatı və reaksiyalar. May 5, 2020. <https://toplum.tv/azerbaycan-metbuatinin-durumu-helsinki-komissiyasinin-hesabat-ve-reaksiyalar/#.XxnF1Z4zY2w>

According to the author's media monitoring (100 sources), the primary sources of COVID-19 related disinformation in Azerbaijan are Russian and Turkish websites, some of which referred to Chinese sources. Azerbaijani media is vulnerable to fake news coming from Russian and Turkish media, particularly on global issues, mainly due to language-related reasons.

In the earlier stages of the spread of coronavirus, there was a significant skepticism in the society about its existence and risks. Such doubt was prompted by the authorities and media, which followed their statements. In late February, the Chief Epidemiologist of the Ministry of Health claimed that a coronavirus had not existed in Azerbaijan, and there is no need to exercise protective measures, such as wearing masks.⁵² BBC local service later questioned his statements in an interview with him.⁵³

➔ **THE PRIMARY SOURCES OF COVID-19 RELATED DISINFORMATION IN AZERBAIJAN ARE RUSSIAN AND TURKISH WEBSITES, SOME OF WHICH REFERRED TO CHINESE SOURCES.**

Kremlin-led media, particularly Sputnik Azerbaijan, has been instrumental in advancing skepticism towards the pandemic, with claims such as COVID-19 is a man-made virus developed in the labs, which remained to be widespread misinformation that is believed.⁵⁴

In the later stages, when public perceptions of coronavirus threat increased, global conspiracy theories, such as a 5G technology causing coronavirus spread over Azerbaijani social media.⁵⁵

⁵² Baş epidemioloq: "Ölkədə koronavirus epidemiyasının olması haqda iddialar əsassızdır". February 28, 2020. <https://ona.az/az/sosial/bas-epidemioloq-olkede-koronavirus-epidemiyasinin-olmasi-haqda-iddalar-esassizdir-19978>

⁵³ "Öpüşməyin!" Baş epidemioloq İbadulla Ağayev koronavirusa yoluxmamağın yollarını izah edir. February 28, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/51683210>

⁵⁴ <https://sputnik.az/health/20200418/423692243/nobel-mukafaP-laureaP-koronavirusun-laboratoriyada-yaradildigini-deyir.html>

⁵⁵ <https://www.xural.com/koronavirus-haqqinda-5g-peyv%C9%99ndl%C9%99r-v%C9%99r%C9%99q%C9%99msal-kol%C9%99lik/>

Although there was limited or no official response to such rumors, independent fact-checking groups actively fought against similar fake media reports.⁵⁶

Azerbaijani state TV, as well as private TV channels, which have ties to the government, have also been instrumental in sharing disinformation related to the pandemic. For instance, state-controlled national television AzTV reported on 17 March that a vaccine for coronavirus is discovered.⁵⁷ Another channel Space TV said on 11 April that a Turkish pharmaceutical company had created pills that cure coronavirus, and it had already been approved by the US and other countries' health authorities.⁵⁸ However, these disinformation news were also checked and confirmed wrong by a fact-checking group.⁵⁹

The pro-government news website, Haqqin.az, which is the most popular Russian-language media in the country, has also continuously published disinformation, such as "*Russian scientists are creating an anti-coronavirus vaccine in the form of yogurt.*"⁶⁰ The most popular news websites with Russian language versions, such as Oxu.az, Milli.az, Axar.az, Yeni Musavat, InterAz, Moderator.az have published numerous reports consisting of disinformation. Most of such reports indicate flawed methods to reduce risks of coronavirus or ungrounded findings by so-called experts, and the main reference points of such news are predominantly Russian sources, including RT.⁶¹ Historical Russian presence in the region as well as language use, combined with a low level of local expertise and lack of national response to disinformation are likely to be the main reasons for the extensive reproduction of the

⁵⁶ – Fakt-Yoxla: <https://www.faktyoxla.info/video/Koronavirusun-yayilmasini-5G-suretlendirir-Teyit.org-Azərbaycan:https://az.teyit.org/5g-il-koronavirus-arasinda?fbclid=IwAR2fnJ6JrSzZS-G7RpV24hnqnCZY-upX7wjbmuTVLv27ONPOG-VzRkCEZU>

⁵⁷ Koronavirusun vaksini tapıldı. March 17, 2020. <http://www.aztv.az/az/news/5985/koronavirusun-vaksini-tapildi-markilk-sinagi-kecirildimark>

⁵⁸ <https://spacetv.az/sevindirici-x%C9%99b%C9%99r-covid-19-u-sagaldan-d%C9%99rmanin-istehsalina-baslanildi/>

⁵⁹ COVID-19-un peyvəndi tapılıbmı? April 19, 2020. <https://www.faktyoxla.info/video/COVID-19-un-peyvendi-yaxin-zamanda-tapilacaqmi>

⁶⁰ Российские ученые создадут вакцину от коронавируса в виде йогурта. June 2, 2020. <https://haqqin.az/news/179885>

⁶¹ Koronavirusun ən təhlükəli əlaməti açıqlanıb. March 21, 2020. https://musavat.com/news/koronavirusun-en-tehlukeli-elameP-aciqlanib_688171.html

Russian disinformation in Azerbaijan. Latter reasons also contribute to the rapid nationwide spread of fake news.

Independent media professionals, as well as regional services of Western media agencies such as BBC, RFERL, and several local news websites have continuously discussed the issue of coronavirus disinformation and suggested methods of checking the information validity.⁶² However, the main sources of information for the population, such as TVs, radios, and news agencies, have failed to support fight against fake news.

The Code of Conduct for journalists, which was adopted in 2003, requires examination of authenticity and informative value of information before being disseminated. This principle is not strictly followed by a vast majority of media. The Press Council, which is believed to be controlled by the government, has been ineffective in monitoring whether the media act in line with the Code of Conduct during the COVID-19.⁶³

Amendments that were made to the legislation during the pandemic had limited or no impact on the media landscape in terms of the spread of disinformation. Despite relevant regulations indicated in the laws, there is no mechanism to enforce them, while discriminatory use of the law by the authorities against independent media is observed. Although reports exist that the authorities have tracked misleading social media content related to coronavirus, no media has so far been targeted for disinformation.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the government has formally and informally prohibited independent and freelance journalists from exercising their profession. On 19 June, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted a new decision requiring journalists to register in a special system [icaze.e-gov.az](https://www.icaze.e-gov.az), where their badge information should be included, to obtain permission for free movement for work reasons in the cities where lockdown was introduced.⁶⁴ The new decision ultimately banned the free movement of freelance journalists. Thus, freelance journalists

⁶² Koronavirusla bağlı saxta xəbərlər yaymayın! Bunun üçün nə edə bilərsiniz? April 8, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/internaPonal-52182590>

⁶³ Səhvin strategiyası, March 28, 2020. <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2018/3/free/analyPcs/az/119066.htm>

⁶⁴ e-gov.az is electronic government platform. "Icaze" translates to permission.

without media affiliation could not apply to register in order to do their work under quarantine (no official badge to be registered). According to media experts, the new restriction was against the law on mass media and could be applied only during the state of emergency, which is not declared in the country.⁶⁵ Discriminatory practices against journalists continued with the online government permission platform, as the reporter of an independent news agency was denied registration without any justification on 20 June.⁶⁶

Many journalists have complained about police interventions while reporting in the streets, mainly in Baku. Experts believe that the primary intention of the authorities was preventing the flow of alternative information in the media that would be critical or contradicting official discourse.

SOCIAL MEDIA

According to some of the numbers, around 80% of the Azerbaijani population use the internet. Facebook remains the most popular social media platform, however, in recent years, there has been significant growth in the number of YouTube users.⁶⁷

➔ DURING MARCH, SEVERAL SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISTS WERE SUMMONED TO POLICE STATIONS WHERE THEIR POSTS CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT WERE DELETED, AND THEY RECEIVED THE WARNING.

Despite its efforts, even involving the creation of a troll army, the Azerbaijani government has not been able to dominate the public

⁶⁵ Jurnalistlərin sərbəst hərəkətinə icazə verilməlidir. June 20, 2020. <https://www.meydan.tv/az/arPcle/jurnalistlerin-serbest-herekePne-icaze-verilmelidir/?ref=homepage-news>

⁶⁶ <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2020/6/free/politics%20news/az/125071.htm>

⁶⁷ Social Media Stats Azerbaijan July 2019-uly 2020. <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/azerbaijan>

discourse on social media.⁶⁸ People who are not satisfied with the government's informational policies turn their face to social media to find alternative sources of information. For the time being, social media platforms have remained a unique space for the opposition as well as civil society groups to challenge government narratives and to articulate against disinformation.

Individual civil society activists have extensively used social media platforms, mainly Facebook and YouTube, to fill the information gap that was emerged, to educate the society, and to fight against disinformation waves. Most of the information was aimed to raise awareness about quarantine necessity, social distancing, and to decrease a level of skepticism.

During March, several social media activists were summoned to police stations where their posts critical of the government were deleted, and they received the warning. The Ministry of Interior argued that it was an attempt to prevent the spread of disinformation on social media.⁶⁹

Facebook has recently stated that it has deleted hundreds of pages and accounts for disinformation campaigns that are managed from Russia through Sputnik, targeting several countries including Azerbaijan, however, the Facebook pages connected to the Azerbaijani service of Sputnik remain active.⁷⁰

A limited number of fact-checking social media pages exist in the Azerbaijani segment of Facebook.⁷¹

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

Azerbaijani civil society remained weak in response to the pandemic due to two main reasons. Firstly, the existing restrictive legislative framework severely hinders the functioning of independent civil

⁶⁸ In the crosshairs of Azerbaijan's patriotic trolls. November 22, 2016 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/azerbaijan-patriotic-trolls/>

⁶⁹ Azərbaycanca koronavirusla bağlı status yazanlar polisə çağrılıb. 24 March 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan-52022897>

⁷⁰ Facebook IdenPfiles Russia-Linked MisinformaPon Campaign. July 17, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/business/facebook-misinformaPon-russia.html>

⁷¹ <https://www.facebook.com/TeZish>

society groups, particularly those who run campaigns on human rights, transparency, and media freedom. Apart from legal issues, the government implements discriminatory practices and repressive measures against those CSOs, which tends to be critical of the existing policies. There was no genuine government-civil society cooperation to reduce risks caused by the COVID-19.

Secondly, because of extreme lockdown measures, freedom of movement and association has been strictly restricted.

While suppressing the offline space, the security services also targeted civil society activists with cyber-attacks in the online platforms.⁷² As a result, though individual initiatives existed, there has not been systematic and coordinated efforts in civil society against pandemic disinformation.

There were several initiatives in support of government policies done by GoNGO, but they were very similar to pro-government media efforts.

CIVICUS Monitor, which marked civic space as CLOSED in Azerbaijan for years, has included the country in its watch list in July because of the "rapid decline in fundamental freedoms in recent months."⁷³

CHURCH

In Azerbaijan, all religious affairs and information is strictly contained by the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations and Caucasus Muslims' Board. Although in the earlier stages of a pandemic, there was a general confusion regarding the conduct of religious gatherings and travels, it did not turn into information misleading society. Religious communities, including their leaders, were not active in any information discourse, neither spreading disinformation.

On 5 March, Caucasus Muslims' Board organized a meeting with leaders of religious communities, where they were asked to be

⁷² AcPvists Say Hacking Accounts on Social Network. July 9, 2020 <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2020/7/free/Social/en/125573.htm>

⁷³ Civicus Monitor Watch List Updated-29 June 2020. <https://monitor.civicus.org/watch-list/>

cautious regarding coronavirus outbreak, to slow down mass religious activities, and to comply with epidemiological measures taken by the authorities.⁷⁴ Mosques and other religious spaces were closed as soon as the quarantine measures were introduced, and there was no heated debate about it in society.

CORRELATION TO DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX-2018

DRI-2018 report identified the Russian-speaking community in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani nationals migrated to Russia as the main vulnerable groups to Russian influence, also as communities instrumental in exchanging disinformation. According to the report, however, the main challenge for Russian influence in the country was the frail reputation of Russia for its ambiguous stance on the territorial conflict between neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan. During the pandemic, Russia's position in Azerbaijan has further weakened due to hostile treatment against Azerbaijanis, who were stuck in the border in Dagestan while intending to return to their country because of lack of jobs.⁷⁵

On the other hand, Russian state-sponsored media, mainly Sputnik, which was established in Azerbaijan in 2015, have expanded its audience throughout five years. Its Facebook page has already reached over 50 thousand subscribers.⁷⁶ It was also confirmed during the pandemic, as suggested in the DRI-2018 report that the primary goal of the Russian media outlets in Azerbaijan is to boost the positive image of Russia.

⁷⁴ Dövlət Komitəsi koronavirusa görə məscidlərin bağlanması haqda yayılan xəbərlərə münasibət bildirib. March 7, 2020.
<https://apa.az/az/dini-xeberler/Dovlt-Komitsi-koronavirusa-gor-mscidlrin-baglanmasi-haqda-yayilan-xbrlr-munasibt-bildirib-575462>

⁷⁵ Following closure of borders between Russia and Azerbaijan, after the outbreak of COVID-19, several hundreds of Azerbaijanis headed back to their countries, however, they were held in the border, where they spent days in poor conditions. Tensions escalated after several days, with Azerbaijanis starting a protest, which met Russian police violence. Dozens of citizens were injured and detained by the police. <https://eurasianet.org/hundreds-of-azerbaijanis-languish-on-russian-border>

⁷⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/SputnikAze>

There were several reasons why the situation of media became more severe during the pandemic. Socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic, combined with a failure of the authorities to initiate effective social assistance programs, have made a significant negative contribution to reporters' living standards, which was already very low, according to the DRI-2018 report. Weak social position, as well as restricted freedoms of journalists, particularly during the quarantine, continued to reveal the fact that independent and vibrant media trade union is non-existent in Azerbaijan. Therefore, the country's media landscape remained exposed to external influence by financial means.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

In this research, three stages of a spread of COVID-19 related disinformation and four main narratives are identified. Although all four narratives continued to exist since the pandemic has started to present, some of them were more dominant during specific timeframes. In the case of Azerbaijan, COVID-19 situation developed in the following order:

1. Pre-pandemic – from the beginning of February till the 24 March, when the government introduced a special quarantine regime due to the increased number of COVID-19 cases.
2. A special quarantine regime – from 24 March to 19 June, during which restrictive measures were introduced and started to be softened in the latter days.
3. Introduction of stricter quarantine measures and a lockdown – from 19 June, following a significant increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, when the government officially stated that softening of quarantine measures had not been a right decision. Thus, strict lockdown measures would continue in a large part of the country, at least until the beginning of August, including its capital Baku.

In the media landscape section, the main narratives of COVID-19 related disinformation in Azerbaijan were outlined. They can be categorized as following: health-related, government-related, geopolitically based, and conspiracy theories. Below, some features of these narratives are analyzed based on the timeframes.

PRE-PANDEMIC GEOPOLITICALLY BASED NARRATIVES AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The first COVID-19 case in Azerbaijan was recorded on 27 February. However, within the early weeks, while the number of officially reported cases remained relatively low, the dominant opinion in the society concerning a coronavirus was primarily shaped by globally widespread conspiracy theories and geopolitically based narratives. With limited comprehension of what COVID-19 actually is about, how it had emerged, how quickly it can spread, etc., most of the media, including the most popular ones, have shared different versions related to the coronavirus without checking the basic facts.⁷⁷

Main geopolitically based narratives involved reports about the United States creating COVID-19 as a biological weapon, the European Union falling apart, and its economy collapsing due to a failure to respond to the coronavirus, etc. Speculations regarding Russia's leading role in developing vaccines against COVID-19 remained to be an important part of geopolitically based narratives in Azerbaijan.⁷⁸

The most popular conspiracy theories that circulated in the society and went viral on social media were a 5G network as a transmitter of the COVID-19, and speculations regarding microchips to be installed in humans in order to track them.

QUARANTINE TIME GOVERNMENT-RELATED AND HEALTH-RELATED NARRATIVES

Particularly during the earlier quarantine period, state-controlled and pro-government TVs and news agencies presented an abundance of disinformation to the society appraising the so-called 'successes' of the government in handling the pandemic. AZERTAC, APA, REPORT, TREND news agencies published numerous analytical articles, interviews with government officials, experts' opinions claiming that 'Azerbaijani experience' of measures and fight against a coronavirus

⁷⁷ Koronavirusun bioloji silah effekP. February 2, 2020. https://musavat.com/news/koronavirusun-bioloji-silah-effekP-cin-bioloji-savasa-meruz-qalmis-veziyyetdedir_675946.html?~clid=lwAR2mb9sqaQIRIA5a1WrMmoKPwdyp4-yHZb9iOXvt4bQJCyYT7KuwwikfTng

⁷⁸ Rusiya alimləri koronavirusa qarşı vaksin hazırladılar. May 22, 2020. <https://teleqraf.com/news/dunya/248608.html>

is learned by the world and the government has received requests from various countries to share their experiences.⁷⁹ Such reports slowed down in June after the government introduced stricter lockdown measures due to a rapidly growing number of COVID-19 cases, as previous policies worsened the situation, contrary to the official statements

While global conspiracy theories continued to circulate, as the numbers of the COVID-19 cases started rapidly increase in May, the skepticism towards a coronavirus declined at the societal level. However, misinformation regarding alternative treatment and prevention methods turned out to be widely exploited. Observations prove that a scale of online reports regarding unknown sources is much bigger than the ones referring to the WHO or state healthcare bodies. Smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, having hot showers, eating onions and garlic, taking antibiotics or other pills are some of the 'pieces of advice,' that were actively shared on the media, in the battle against coronavirus.

LOCKDOWN TIME PUBLIC HEALTH-RELATED NARRATIVES AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

As the pandemic-related situation has not developed optimistically in Azerbaijan, extreme lockdown measures continued to be applied at least till the end of July and public health-related misleading pieces of information as well as conspiracy theories regained popularity in the public discourse. Meanwhile, manipulated information regarding 'the end of the pandemic,' exact time of the vaccines' creation, development of homemade COVID-19 tests, places that are safe from COVID-19 (such as beaches), and many other similar narratives were employed in media and social networks. Particularly, in order to increase public engagement with the content, the majority of news websites presented misleading information as sensational facts, mainly regarding how the world will look like following the pandemic.

⁷⁹ Koronavirusla mübarizədə Azərbaycan təcrübəsi: Hansı ölkələr isPfadə edir? April 2, 2020. https://apa.az/az/siyasi_xeberler/Koronavirusla-mubarizd-Azrbaycan-tcrubsi-Hansi-olklr-isPfad-edir-colorredTHLlLcolor-579536

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are aimed at the executive governmental agencies:

1. Take necessary steps to ensure independence and **professionalism of media regulatory bodies**;
2. **Cooperate with independent media regulatory bodies** to develop effective mechanisms to guide according to the Code of Conduct for the media, which can significantly reduce the dissemination of disinformation;
3. **Lift legislative restrictions** over the media landscape and stop discriminatory practices against independent and professional media platforms;
4. Take necessary steps for timely and effective investigations of attacks against journalists while exercising their profession;
5. Particularly during the quarantine or lockdown measures applied, ensure that the **work of journalists is not obscured**;
6. Democratize NGO legislation and cease discriminatory practices against civil society organizations, so they can register, receive funding, and operate freely;
7. **Involve independent civil society organizations** in the anti-disinformation policy-making process;
8. Cooperate with international institutions such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the UN to implement relevant recommendations in order to fill the gaps of anti-discrimination legislation and practices.

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX 2020: AZERBAIJAN

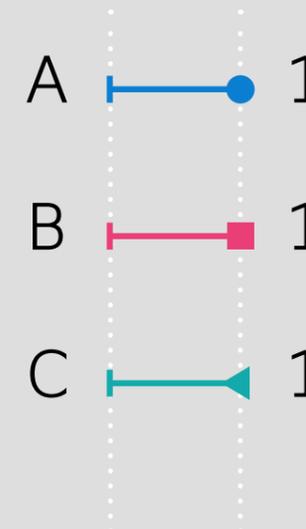
MEASURES TAKEN	YES	NO	COMMENT
A GOVERNMENT RESPONSE			
Coordination center (existing or new)	1		
Governmental spokesperson/people (contact point to provide answers to journalists)	1		
Regular Press-briefings of Responsible Institutions (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, etc.)	1		
Periodic press-conferences/press-briefings by senior leadership (President or Prime Minister)		0	
Pre-recorded messages of the senior officials (President or Prime Minister)	1		
Establishing special communication channels (Facebook pages, telegram channels, Viber channels, chat-bots, special websites)	1		
Additional communication of regional authorities		0	
Cases of contradiction in messages on national and regional level		0	
Cases of unjustified blocking/taking down content of disinformation form media by national bodies (reported by international organizations)		0	
Creating/empowering/changing focus of special governmental units to debunk disinformation		0	
Criminalizing the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official	-1		
Cases of applying changes to the legislation that criminalize the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official	-1		

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Restrictions of media freedom added	-1		
Increasing state support for independent media (explain) (Tax relieve, Additional budgets for advertisement for official information to support media, Assistance to public broadcasters)		0	
B MEDIA			
Investigative reports	1		
Counter disinformation campaigns		0	
Journalists' self-regulation and calls for reinforcing ethical conduct	1		
Journalists' professional training on reporting about pandemic		0	
C CIVIL SOCIETY			
Fact-checking and digital debunking initiatives		0	
Investigative reports		0	
National fakes data base		0	
Counter-disinformation campaigns		0	
Coordination of efforts with media		0	
Joint communication campaigns of civil society actors/ Cooperation between civic society initiatives		0	
Exchanging experiences with foreign NGOs		0	
Producing guidelines and recommendations for general audience, not only for government	1		

BELARUS



INTRODUCTION

Belarus differs among the EaP countries in terms of its approach to coronavirus pandemic response. While all neighboring countries closed their borders and introduced strict quarantine, the Belarusian authorities saw such measures as a risk for the economy and public health, bigger than a threat emanating from COVID-19. Much of Minsk's information policy at the first stage of pandemic spread was focused on preventing panic among the population. The tactic was chosen to publish very limited data about the epidemiologic situation and to downplay the risk of infection. This caused the waves of rumors and critical materials in independent media. From the methodological point of view, these processes could be viewed at least partially as domestic disinformation actions by the government and state-owned media. On the other hand, the government has also perceived foreign and domestic media publications regarding the COVID-19 situation in Belarus as well as Minsk's attitude to quarantine as disinformation and reacted accordingly. In general, as the authorities have not been interested in securitizing the pandemic, while independent media and civil society lacked robust and reliable data on the situation, there were no strong and coordinated counter-disinformation campaigns in Belarus.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

Though the attitude of the Belarusian government towards the COVID-19 pandemic had been changing as the situation evolved, at the very beginning of the epidemic, the Belarus authorities chose publicly to downplay⁸⁰ a threat from the virus and to criticize⁸¹ European countries and Russia for the strict measures of isolation. The government strategy was officially motivated by the necessity to maintain economic stability and employment as direct and indirect costs of full-fledge quarantine measures could potentially ruin the county's economy and end up with an even higher death toll than

⁸⁰ Лукашенко о коронавирусе: белорусы не находятся в той ситуации, чтобы принимать драконовские меры. March 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/34N7oYr>

⁸¹ Лукашенко прокомментировал развитие ситуации с коронавирусом. March 16, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3jvm56y>

the pandemic itself. Among unannounced motives can also be named an intention to minimize budget expenditures on anti-crisis aid for businesses and population that were hit by the quarantine consequences. Above all these calculations, there was a context of the upcoming presidential elections and its campaign (the elections were held on August 9).

Thus, the specificity of Belarus's strategy of response to the pandemic made the government itself to present at least some disinformation about the COVID-19 and an epidemiologic situation in the country in order to contain panic and to defend its policies and measures, which were not in line with the WHO and the rest of the world. On the other hand, the authorities had to respond to disinformation on the COVID-19 both from inside of the country and from abroad.

The official communicator in Belarus for COVID-19 is the Ministry of Health and, personally, its Minister Uladzimir Karanik. But in fact, the main newsmaker on the topic has been President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who became famous for labeling a COVID-19 pandemic as a "*coronapsychosis*" and advocating light measures in containing the disease. Ministry of Foreign Affairs mainly informed the public on the situation with Belarusian tourists being evacuated back to Belarus from abroad; it also commented on some cases of foreign countries' activities when it comes to COVID-19 as well as foreign disinformation on the epidemic situation in Belarus.

Since the detection of coronavirus in Belarus on February 28, authorities emphasized the readiness of the healthcare system to prevent its uncontrolled spread. In March, state-owned media's attention was mainly focused on an "imported" origin of the virus, which, as authorities assured, made it possible to localize individual outbreaks of the infection efficiently. At the same time, risks of the medical consequences of coronavirus infection, primarily from the point of view of mortality, were assessed⁸² as low, comparable to the parameters of usual seasonal SARS. At that stage, the number one priority was to prevent panic.

On March 19, President Lukashenka noted that "*To date, the World Health Organization has proclaimed the pandemic. However, for Belarus,*

⁸² Самая страшная эпидемия — это паника. March 19, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2YMtMh2>

this does not matter”. He added that “*we can suffer more from panic than from the virus itself.*”

But with the growth of the pandemic, the term “*coronapsychosis*” gradually disappeared from the official discourse.

➔ **THE SPECIFICITY OF BELARUS’S STRATEGY OF RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC MADE THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF TO PRESENT AT LEAST SOME DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE COVID-19 AND AN EPIDEMIOLOGIC SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY.**

A growing number of the infected made the authorities to take prophylactic and regulating measures that demanded an explanation. In particular, this concerned conditions of access to testing and accurate diagnostics, mandatory isolation for those who were contacts of the first and second levels, as well as self-isolation, symptoms for hospitalization, etc. On the other hand, the goal of preventing panic remained in place. At first, the rejection of quarantine was justified by its anti-epidemic inefficiency, and a similar response tactic in Sweden was given⁸³ as an example. Then the economic background began to be emphasized. At a meeting with the government on April 7, Lukashenko said⁸⁴ that quarantine in Belarus could be introduced within 24 hours, “*but what would we eat?*» As a result, the authorities introduced restrictions on disclosure and distribution of any medical information by healthcare institutions, as well as by representatives of regional authorities. A rigid centralized official information system has been formed, in which the Ministry of Health has become the only source of relevant information on the situation with the COVID-19.

Initially, regular press conferences were held with the participation of the Minister of Health, other medical specialists, and officials. Then, the Ministry of Health switched to the formats of online briefings and streams from the National Press Center with the broadest access

⁸³ Лукашенко обсудил с Караником готовность к возможной второй волне пандемии с учетом избранного Беларусь пути. June 11, 2020. <https://bit.ly/32CBWK2>

⁸⁴ Лукашенко о карантине: Жрать что будем? April 7, 20220. <https://bit.ly/34L7MXz>

for state and non-state media, as well as network users. On April 17, the Ministry of Health held the last briefing, at which questions from journalists were accepted, and on April 24, a final briefing took place, at which a short statement on the current epidemic situation was made.

After that, the daily report of the Ministry of Health has remained the basic information format, which includes only the current number of infected, discharged from hospitals, and lethal cases, as well as the number of tests performed. Moreover, from the mid-April, data on the number of patients connected to mechanical ventilation devices (disaggregated by COVID-19 and pneumonia), as well as self-insulated first-level contacts, are excluded from this report. As before, there is no information on a regional breakdown.

Thus, there is a shortage of complete and objective information. Such approaches to official information make it difficult for citizens to assess the epidemiological situation and the risks associated with it and disorient when choosing behaviors in public places, as well as personal preventive and protective measures. All these led to waves of alarmist rumors within the society and increased vulnerability to external disinformation attempts.

On April 6, the Ministry of Information of Belarus issued an official warning to the owner of ‘Media-Palesie’ website because of their publication about COVID-19 epidemic development in the region. The Ministry of Information noted⁸⁵ that ‘it was found during the inspection, which had been conducted jointly with the Brest Regional Executive Committee, that the publication contained inaccurate information about a patient’s death, and that the spread of this information could harm the state and public interests.’

According to the Belarusian Journalists Association⁸⁶, a few days later, a police inspector of Luninets District Department of Internal Affairs initiated administrative proceedings on this case. He accused the ‘Media-Palesie’ editorial of publishing information on the website that caused damage to the national interests of the Republic of Belarus and ‘contributed to the escalation of social tensions and panic

⁸⁵ Власти вынесли предупреждение сайту “Медиа-Полесье». April 6, 2020.

⁸⁶ Mass Media In Belarus. E-Newsletter. Mass Media During Covid-19 Pandemic. June 3, 2020. <https://bit.ly/31GrAte>

in the society as well as led to mass disinformation of the population.’ On May 13, Luninets District Court fined the ‘Media-Palessie’ for the amount that equals around EUR 1 250. The media outlet was charged for ‘Dissemination of information by the media, which is banned for dissemination in the media’ (article 22.9, part 3-1 of Belarus’ Administrative Code). It was the first case when the legal norm was applied since it had been introduced to the Code of Administrative Offenses in 2018.

In July, the Ministry of Interior started⁸⁷ to counter disinformation on the internet (not only in regards to COVID-19) in its official Telegram channel. An important motivating factor for this is not just the number of fakes about coronavirus but the upcoming presidential elections (August 9), which overshadow the COVID-19 pandemic both for the media and for the authorities.

Opposition and loyalist political parties chose different approaches towards the pandemic and government’s policies of combating COVID-19. While loyalist parties almost completely supported the government’s measures, the opposition demanded to ban public gatherings and introduce a strict quarantine. Sometimes these demands were delivered together with alarmist ungrounded information on the situation with COVID-19 in the country. For instance, the head of a right-wing opposition Conservative Christian Party (KHP-BNF) Zianon Pazniak claimed⁸⁸ that in May 2020, the death toll of the pandemic in Belarus had already reached nearly 3 thousand people (officially – less than 200).

According to the public opinion poll conducted by SATIO and BEROC in April, 88% of the Belarusians watched the news about the pandemic. Choosing between the two main most widespread approaches, the majority of respondents said that they were in favor of restricting social contacts. 74% of Belarusians supported a ban for all public events and gatherings, 71% needed more information about the epidemic situation; 52% thought it was necessary to close all educational establishments for a quarantine. At the same time, only 26% wanted to close all shops and restaurants (except the most vital).

⁸⁷ МВД начало опровергать фейки в Telegram. June 2, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3hKXLxo>

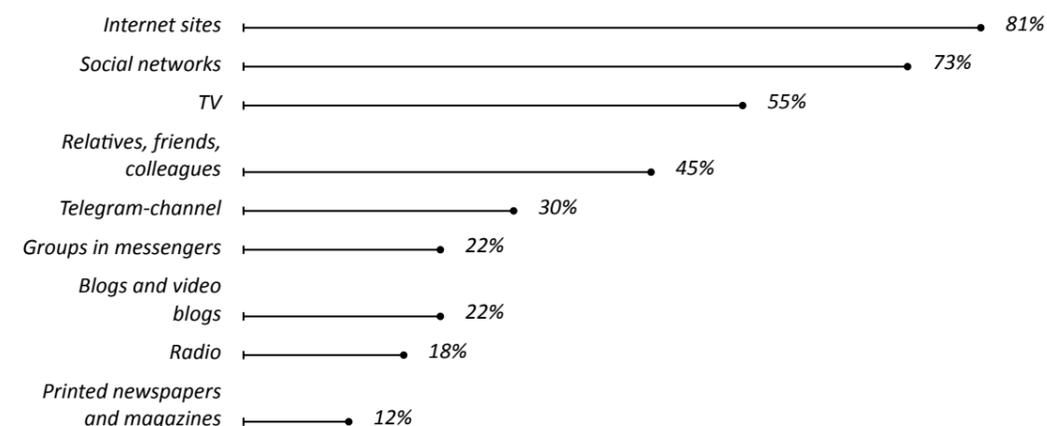
⁸⁸ Зенон Позняк: Будут десятки тысяч смертей. May 18, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2EHLISW>

MEDIA

In Belarus, television remains the primary source of information for the population. According to the Information-Analytical center under the Presidential Administration, in 2018, 72% of Belarusians named TV as a “source of the necessary information about life in Belarus and abroad.”⁸⁹ All nationwide TV channels in Belarus are de-facto state-owned. The most popular format is TV-series and entertainment shows. Only 14% of the audience watch news and political shows (2018).

A 2018 survey⁹⁰ placed Belarusians’ level of confidence in Russian media at 24%, and the second-highest-ranking is after Belarusian state media (29.4%). Belarusian non-governmental media ranked third (10.7%), while Belarusians have even less trust in Western media (8.2%).

The above-mentioned study by SATIO and BEROC of April 2020 revealed the following sources of information about COVID-19:



Belarusian state television and radio channels mainly broadcast news and entertainment content produced in Russia. In 2016, Igor Buzovsky, then Deputy Head of the Belarusian Presidential Administration,

⁸⁹ Республика Беларусь в зеркале социологии: сборник материалов социологических исследований / Информационно-аналитический центр при Администрации Президента Республики Беларусь. – Минск: 2018

⁹⁰ Опрос: Белорусские госСМИ пользуются наибольшим доверием белорусов. November 18, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3lzkD4Y>

acknowledged that the share of Russian content on Belarusian radio and television had reached 65%.⁹¹ Nevertheless, Belarus has censored Russian programs that openly criticize the Belarusian leadership and government's policies.⁹²

When it comes to COVID-19 situation, the Russian media (especially this is true for Telegram-channels) covered it with much skepticism, presenting Belarus as a dangerous focus of infection. In early May, Minsk revoked the accreditation of Russian Channel One correspondent Alexei Kruchinin and ordered him to leave the country. The reason for the expulsion of Kruchinin was his video on the outbreak of COVID-19 in the regional center of Stoubtsy. The expulsion of the Russian correspondent was accompanied by an information campaign in the state media of Belarus. On the air of the TV channel Belarus 1, they said that Channel One became a *"leader in terms of the number of lies,"* and there were at least seven fakes in the Kruchinin's material from Stoubtsy. Aliaksandr Lukashenka also personally attacked the Russian media. He accused Channel One of *"lying"* while covering the situation with COVID-19 in Belarus and called on the Russian leadership to pay attention to what was happening *"in their own home."*

This is not the first time that Lukashenko was publicly outraged by the way Russian media cover the coronavirus epidemic in Belarus. However, earlier, he mainly focused on the activities of anonymous Telegram channels, which *"hid in Moscow."* Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei also advised the Russians to *"see what is being done in their own country"* and called it unacceptable when dirt poured into Belarus in Russian media.

⁹¹ Russian content makes up 65% of the content in the Belarusian media. Marketing.by. (<http://marketing.by/novosti-rynka/65-kontenta-v-belorusskikh-smi-rossiyskiy/>)

⁹² For example, the Russian talk show "Meeting point" broadcast on "NTV-Belarus" was blocked after criticizing Belarus's foreign policy, <https://gazetaby.com/post/v-belarusi-zablokirovali-rossijskoe-tok-shou-mesto-vstrechi-gde-nashu-stranu-nazvali-gulyashhej-zhe/133006/>

➔ THE SHARE OF RUSSIAN CONTENT ON BELARUSIAN RADIO AND TELEVISION HAD REACHED 65%. NEVERTHELESS, BELARUS HAS CENSORED RUSSIAN PROGRAMS THAT OPENLY CRITICIZE THE BELARUSIAN LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES.

Not only Russian media disseminated ungrounded information about COVID-19 in Belarus. In late March, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius named Belarus's policy of tackling COVID-19 as ineffective, and the President of Lithuania Gitanas Nauseda claimed⁹³ that one could not trust the official information about coronavirus in Belarus and informed about some foci of infection on Belarusian territory as well as deaths, which were not included into official statistics. As a response, the Belarusian MFA demanded that any statements of this kind should be based on reliable data and facts but not on rumors and speculations; and asked the Lithuanian side to provide Belarus with the data on COVID-19 in Belarus that they referred to. Interestingly, that after the telephone conversation with President Lukashenka on April 23, Nauseda changed his opinion and said⁹⁴ that he had no reason not to believe Belarusian statistics.

Since the Belarusian authorities release only limited information about COVID-19 situation in the country, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, together with a number of independent media outlets, published⁹⁵ an appeal to the Ministry of Health requesting to provide timely and reliable information on the COVID-19 epidemic.

⁹³ Президент Литвы: нельзя доверять официальной информации Беларуси о коронавирусе. April 1, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2QBXXmr>

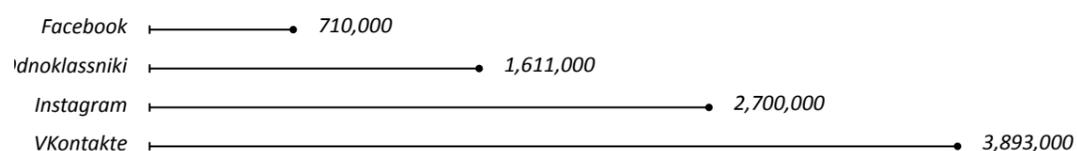
⁹⁴ Президент Литвы: Лукашенко не выразил желания получить помощь в связи с коронавирусом. April 24, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3jw9H6D>

⁹⁵ БАЖ призвала власти ежедневно предоставлять информацию о ситуации с COVID-19 в Беларуси. March 3, 2020. <https://interfax.by/news/policy/raznoe/1273779/>

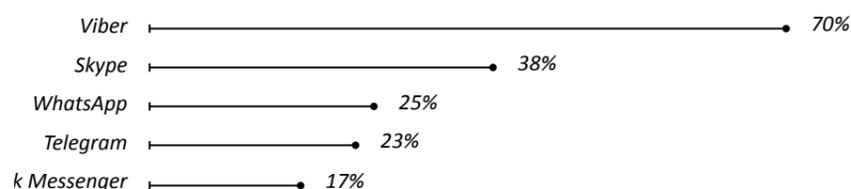
SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is one of the most important sources of information about coronavirus in Belarus, especially among the younger generation.

An approximate number of accounts from Belarus in social networks, February 2020⁹⁶:



According to #DB3 study⁹⁷, top-5 internet messengers in 2020 distributes as follows:



As of the end of August 2020, there was no information about blocking of accounts in social networks or chats in messengers because of COVID-19 disinformation.

During the pandemic, several new Telegram channels have been created. Some of them have gained substantial popularity. The official Health Ministry's channel⁹⁶ reached almost 45,000 subscribers. The channel gives daily statistics on the coronavirus.

Telegram channels DrHeroBelarus⁹⁷ (595 members), which helps doctors to find premises in order to isolate them from relatives; and the VIRUS Belarus Live⁹⁸ (more than 53,000 subscribers), which posts information about the pandemic, were created.

⁹⁶ <https://t.me/s/minzdravbelarus>

⁹⁷ <https://t.me/DrHeroBelarus>

⁹⁸ <https://t.me/virusbelarus>

Social networks also became a source of rumors and fakes about the COVID situation in the country. The most popular stories were: overflowed morgues, a considerable number of deaths, shortage of food and other products, closure of Vitsebsk because of quarantine.

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

In the situation of no quarantine in Belarus, civil society organizations and groups have been more involved in advocating stricter measures of social distancing and supporting medical personnel and hospitals than in debunking activities. For instance, on March 12, an online petition demanding to introduce quarantine at educational establishments was launched.

Nevertheless, some independent experts and journalists' teams (e.g., the Belarusian Association of Journalists⁹⁹, Press Club Belarus¹⁰⁰, EAST Center¹⁰¹, etc.) produced materials focusing on the analysis of disinformation about COVID-19 (mostly from the Belarusian government and state-owned media).

CHURCH

Hierarchs of both Orthodox and Catholic churches in Belarus took COVID-19 risk seriously and introduced at least some measures of social distancing. Archbishop Kandrusевич has called on the Roman Catholics of Belarus to spend Easter at home when possible. Catholic churches organized online broadcasts of worship and postponed the all-Belarus pilgrimage to Rome that had been previously planned for May 17. At the same time, according to Kandrusевич¹⁰², the Roman Catholic Church was not receiving meaningful responses regarding the coronavirus situation from Belarusian officials.

⁹⁹ <https://baj.by/ru/content/covid-19>

¹⁰⁰ <https://mediaiq.by/>

¹⁰¹ https://east-center.org/coronavirus_scenarios_belarus/

¹⁰² Roman Catholic bishop wants more info about COVID-19 from Belarus officials. April 7, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2YKM95K>

Orthodox Metropolitan Pavel of Minsk and Zaslavl, Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus, had also called upon the faithful not to attend church services during Easter amid the novel coronavirus pandemic. He also asked people not to visit cemeteries on Radunitsa, the day to commemorate the dead relatives. Nevertheless, most of the Orthodox churches remained open (except few in which the infection had been detected), and many people ignored the Metropolitan's call to stay home. There were also examples of abbots of monasteries to belittle of COVID-19 risks saying that *"a person who comes to a temple would never get thick with anything bad"* and refrain from introducing anti-epidemic measures.

In April 2020, the Ministry of Health asked religious organizations to conduct worship outdoors if possible and to introduce basic anti-COVID-19 measures. According¹⁰³ to Deputy Minister Alena Bohdan, *"full mutual understanding was found."*

CORRELATION TO THE DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX – 2018

It is difficult to find correlations with the Disinformation resilience Index-2018 report, as it was focused mainly on resilience to external sources of disinformation while this study shows that often disinformation about COVID-19 was initiated by state institutions themselves and only in less degree – from outside the country.

¹⁰³ Минздрав просит церковь проводить все богослужения на улице. April 10, 2020. [https:// bit.ly/32FXDJO](https://bit.ly/32FXDJO)

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Since the official Belarusian strategy to combat COVID-19 differs significantly from the approach adopted by most countries of the region and the world, narratives on the pandemic also have marked some distinctions.

Typologically, these narratives can be conventionally divided into official state narratives and those that have dominated independent media and social networks.

Chronologically, we can distinguish two main periods in the spread of these narratives: the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (from the first case of infection at the end of February to approximately mid-April) and an active phase of the pandemic (from the second half of April to approximately mid-June, when the focus was almost completely shifted from the coronavirus towards the upcoming presidential elections).

During the initial phase of the pandemic, the official discourse was dominated by the denial of the danger of COVID-19, and the state media even ridiculed the lockdown arrangements imposed in Western Europe, but generally tried to avoid this topic. President Lukashenka achieved notoriety in the global media due to his extravagant recommendations to fight the virus: vodka, baths, and tractors. The strict quarantine instituted in neighboring countries was referred to almost exclusively as lunacy.

As morbidity increased and the first deaths were reported, the rhetoric of the Belarusian officials gradually changed. Starting in the second half of April, representatives of the healthcare system and personally President Lukashenka began speaking about COVID-19 as a serious challenge, as well as about the importance of preventive measures to curb the incidence rate. On April 23, Aliaksandr Lukashenka told a meeting focusing on priority measures to ensure the sustainable operation of the economy and the social sector in conditions of the global pandemic that Belarus would not ignore the WHO recommendations, but act according to the situation.

In the meantime, narratives connecting the COVID-19 response and economic development were circulating in the state media. The lack of lockdown measures in Belarus was attributed to the need to sustain the manufacturing sector and the working economy; otherwise, it could have collapsed, which, the country's leadership believed, would have had graver consequences than the aftermath of the pandemic.

The coronavirus-centered narratives that were promoted by the state propaganda notably included the geopolitical narrative, which described the COVID-19 pandemic as a tool for the great powers to put in place a new redivision of the world. What is implied here is the global competition between the United States and China. Such versions were disseminated at the highest state level, including the president.

When it comes to the narratives adopted by the independent media, they were built on the opposition to the official anti-COVID-19 policy, and the dominating discourse (generally shared by social networks) suggested that the authorities understated the real danger of the coronavirus and suppressed information about the real epidemic situation. Demands were continuously voiced that strict quarantine measures similar to those imposed in other countries should be introduced in Belarus. These narratives were reinforced by the Western and Russian media, which pointed to the threatening situation with the coronavirus in Belarus and issued reports about alleged COVID-19 outbreaks in some parts of the country.

The information vacuum regarding the real situation with the disease that resulted from the lack of updates by the Ministry of Healthcare encouraged apocalyptic narratives in social networks. One example of such a narrative is the dissemination of reports of packed mortuaries in various cities of the country and the lockdown in Viciebsk following a coronavirus outbreak. Such narratives waned over time as soon as citizens became convinced from their personal experience that the healthcare system as a whole was coping with the pandemic, and the catastrophic scenario was avoided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Based on Belarus's experience, the most important recommendation is the need to **ensure at the state level that citizens receive complete, truthful, and timely information** about the epidemic and arrangements put in place by the state to combat the virus. The lack of information and communication with society was not only the cause of numerous leaks of false information and rumors but also led to growing discontent in society, which was one of the reasons for mass protests during the presidential elections.
2. More **effective coordination between ministries** and agencies (Ministry of Health, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Information, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) is called for in order to avoid duplication of reports and conflicting messages. In general, the vertical of power should make more efforts at all levels to clarify preventive measures against the coronavirus in conditions when no quarantine measures are applied.
3. State and private media should **adhere to their respective codes of ethics** in covering the situation with COVID-19 and refrain from using propaganda and counterpropaganda instruments in their materials. This information struggle within the same state disorients the public and paves the way for external information influence and manipulations.

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX 2020: BELARUS

MEASURES TAKEN	YES	NO	COMMENT
A. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE			
Coordination center (existing or new)		0	
Governmental spokesperson/people (contact point to provide answers to journalists)	1		Minister of Health and his deputy
Regular Press-briefings of Responsible Institutions (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, etc.)		0	The Ministry of Health organized regular briefings on the first stage, but later change this practice for just issuing of press releases
Periodic press-conferences/press-briefings by senior leadership (President or Prime Minister)		0	
Pre-recorded messages of the senior officials (President or Prime Minister)		0	
Establishing special communication channels (Facebook pages, telegram channels, Viber channels, chat-bots, special websites)	1		http://stopcovid.belta.by
Additional communication of regional authorities		0	
Cases of contradiction in messages on national and regional level		0	

Cases of unjustified blocking/taking down content of disinformation form media by national bodies (reported by international organizations)	-1		
Creating/empowering/changing focus of special governmental units to debunk disinformation	1		
Criminalizing the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official		0	
Cases of applying changes to the legislation that criminalize the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official		0	
Restrictions of media freedom added	-1		
Increasing state support for independent media (explain) (Tax relieve, Additional budgets for advertisement for official information to support media, Assistance to public broadcasters)		0	
B MEDIA			
Investigative reports	1		
Counter disinformation campaigns		0	
Journalists' self-regulation and calls for reinforcing ethical conduct		0	
Journalists' professional training on reporting about pandemic		0	

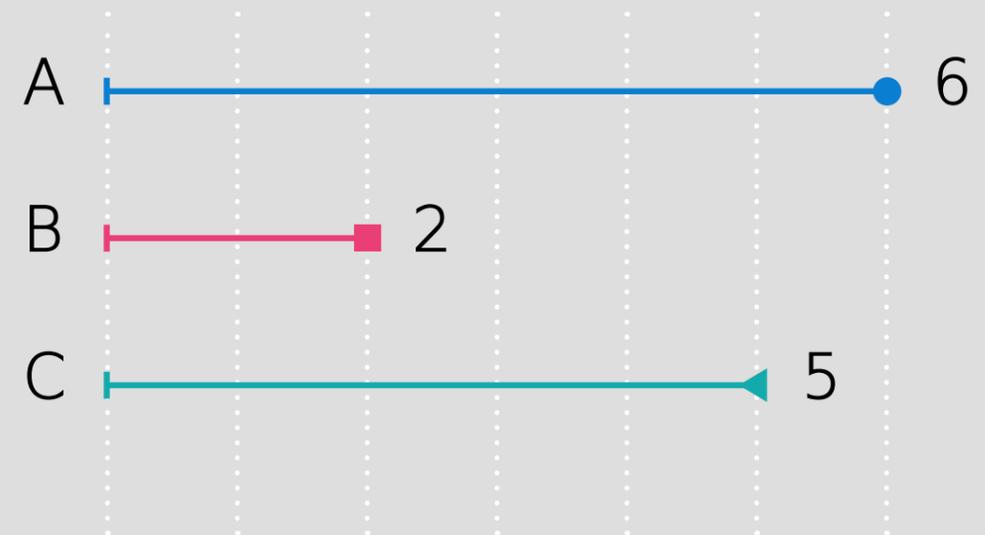
C CIVIL SOCIETY

Fact-checking and digital debunking initiatives		0
Investigative reports	1	
National fakes data base		0
Counter-disinformation campaigns		0
Coordination of efforts with media		0
Joint communication campaigns of civil society actors/Cooperation between civic society initiatives		0
Exchanging experiences with foreign NGOs		0
Producing guidelines and recommendations for general audience, not only for government		0

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GEORGIA



INTRODUCTION

The pandemic, which encircled the globe several months ago, has posed a significant challenge also for Georgia. From a medical perspective, the country has been able to deal with the crisis quite well. By the end of June 2020, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Georgia amounted to 908, of whom 761 had recovered, and 14 have died. However, the pandemic has revealed problems seriously challenging the implementation of democratic reforms in the country.

Xenophobic, sometimes aggravated nationalist attitudes of the right-wing radicals towards minorities have been observed, anti-secular attitudes have been demonstrated, as well as hybrid challenges stemming from the Kremlin's aggressive policy have been exacerbated. All these had a negative impact on the country's resilience towards disinformation, including that one connected with the COVID-19 crisis. Anti-liberal pro-Russian media outlets have been very active, mainly claiming that COVID-19 is a product created by the liberal West, and ultimately directed against nations based on traditional values, that is, aiming their destruction and subjugation. All of this served to aggravate anti-Western sentiments in Georgia and modify the pro-Western course of the country.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

The Interagency Coordination Council had been established by the Government of Georgia (GoG) on 28 January 2020, approximately one month before the first case of the coronavirus was confirmed in the country. The Council is comprised of members of the government, parliament, the Administration of the President, and healthcare professionals. Four priority areas and persons responsible for them were determined, namely Healthcare, Economy, Safety, Supplies and Logistics. Public awareness was also included in the Ordinance, which established priorities. One of the goals outlined herein has been *“to continuously ensure the public and media engagement and proper awareness-raising.”* Such an approach, in particular, proactive

information policy, has positively influenced a resilience towards fake news from the very beginning.

Georgia was quite well-prepared for the pandemic, but hardly anyone could imagine its devastating impact. As soon as the first case was confirmed (a Georgian national, who was returning from Iran via Azerbaijan on 26 February), the Interagency Coordination Council (ICC) chaired by Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia held a meeting. As a result, GoG and the ICC were tasked to provide information to the general public.

Due to the high level of political polarization in the country, pressure from the opposition and civil society, government activity was crucial in terms of informing the public to ensure the smooth functioning of strategic public communication.

The Council actually began operating in an emergency mode from the very first day of its creation:

Daily briefings were held. They were open to the media. Journalists were allowed to ask questions. The briefings were broadcasted live. A number of briefings were held by the Prime Minister or Prime Minister's Press Speaker. Ministers, healthcare professionals, and representatives of law enforcement agencies participated in these briefings.

Important information on COVID-19 was posted on a special website – www.StopCov.ge. Recommendations provided by the WHO and the Disease Control National Center (NCDC) became available on the website. FAQs have been published. StopCov.ge is available in the Georgian language and languages of ethnic minorities: Armenian, Azerbaijani, Ossetian, and Abkhazian languages, as well as in English.

Informational materials prepared by the Georgian Government were distributed continuously through traditional and online media. Information on local as well as international experience was provided in the articles.

The Georgian Government's unified hotline was established to provide information.

The Legislative Herald of Georgia included all public and individual legal acts adopted by the Government and the Parliament concerning COVID-19 to increase public access to legal information.

Mobile operators were engaged in informing the population. During the state of emergency, people were regularly informed by SMSs and provided with existential information regarding COVID-19 and imposed legal restrictions.

In order to ensure efficient, coordinated, accurate, and regular information sharing with media, each agency appointed a press speaker (including the personnel of the clinics involved in the COVID combat).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia has been providing information to the Georgian citizens abroad.

The system consisting of the aforementioned elements have worked, although there were some challenges. For example, in interviews, ethnic minorities' representatives often mentioned the lack of information on different decisions. Hereby it has to be noted that COVID-19 caused the need for increased dynamics of informational flow, first and foremost aimed at informing the public about imposed official measures amid rapidly evolving situation with a pandemic, while the translation of information into minority languages and its further communication to the respective societal groups was time-consuming and lag behind in time from information disseminated in the Georgian language. Therefore, in case of breaking the rules during the state of emergency, representatives of ethnic minorities stated that they knew nothing about the government decisions. It is noteworthy to mention that, for example, the residents didn't know about a decision to lock-down Marneuli town due to the threat of a coronavirus outbreak, which led to a conflict with law enforcement agencies, who did not allow them to leave the city on 23 March 2020. In response to the challenge above, the government added translations to Armenian and Azerbaijani languages, as well as a sign language at their briefings.

Also, some complaints were from citizens who couldn't reach unified hotline – 144, or those, who stranded abroad and were not able to return to Georgia. The latter complained about Georgian Embassies and Consulates with accusations in indifference, negligence, and sometimes rude treatment.

The Operational Headquarters on the Management of the State of Emergency was created with the participation of the representatives

of all relevant agencies in order to ensure the effective coordination of the enforcement of the measures envisaged by the state of emergency. Within the framework of the Operational Headquarters, the Office of the National Security Council developed a management scheme at central and regional levels. According to the plan, headquarters operating on a local level were established in ten regions of Georgia. They were headed by Prime Minister's Regional Representatives, state representatives (governors).

In cases of epidemics (pandemics), Georgian legislation introduces a state of emergency across the entire territory or in any part of the country. The situation is regulated by the Constitution of Georgia and the Law of Georgia on the State of Emergency.

→ THE TRANSLATION OF INFORMATION INTO MINORITY LANGUAGES AND ITS FURTHER COMMUNICATION TO THE RESPECTIVE SOCIETAL GROUPS LAG BEHIND IN TIME FROM INFORMATION DISSEMINATED IN THE GEORGIAN LANGUAGE.

The parliamentary elections are expected in Georgia in October, so this had a serious effect on debates during the emergency state. The main leitmotifs of the debates were how much the government cared about the people, how right it was not to carry out a total virus or antibody testing that would have allowed to see a number of infected.

The parliamentary opposition did not support the extension of the state of emergency for the next month. They demanded the opening of the economy. The state of emergency continued, but the government quickly lifted major barriers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right individuals became more active. Some of them even posted fascist statements on Facebook. Members of different ethnic groups were targeted. The public post of Zaza Abashidze, Director of the National Center of Manuscripts, has attracted a lot of attention, as he said that people, who did not obey the law, must have been physically abused. These words did not go unanswered either by the civil sector or politicians and obviously, the Azerbaijani community was very upset. Abashidze corrected his post

on the same day, although he later apologized. Various people, bots, xenophobic pages, traditional media outlets, and politicians often confronted each other, although the voices of public organizations, pro-Western media or politicians were also heard among them. It clearly shows that xenophobic attitudes are still demonstrated, which are especially dangerous in case of crisis.

MEDIA

Rights to freedom of opinion, information, mass media, and the internet are guaranteed in Article 17 of the Constitution of Georgia. The restriction of these rights may be allowed in case of a state of emergency, although the President of Georgia has not requested the restriction of these rights during COVID-19. Media representatives were allowed to move during the curfew with the relevant registration.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the disinformation narrative, that was actively supported by the pro-Russian forces was an activity of the so-called Lugar Research Laboratory, that became an example of the Georgian cooperation with the West.

➔ **MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES WERE ALLOWED TO MOVE DURING THE CURFEW WITH THE RELEVANT REGISTRATION.**

Information against this laboratory has been published not only in the Russian media but also in the territories occupied by Russia. For example, the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetian media was implementing campaign against the Lugar laboratory. Their media relied on information received from the local security services (KGB). According to these sources, the Georgian special services, together with the US special services, tried to create a biological weapon that could be used against the Ossetians. For this purpose, they collected human biological samples. On 20 May 2020, Sputnik-Ossetia published an article claiming that based on the KGB's information: *"American Lugar Laboratory of biological research operating in Georgia attempts*

to collect biological samples from the citizens of South Ossetia." The KGB called these attempts *"direct continuation of the South Ossetian genocide policy at the present stage."* A similar article has been recently posted on the Sputnik-Ossetia: *"Lugar Laboratory of biological research operating in Georgia creates the preconditions for the deliberate infection of South Ossetian citizens with a coronavirus,"* stated South Ossetian State Security Committee's Press Service.

The Lugar Laboratory is intensively covered by Russian and non-Russian media outlets oriented on Russia's interests. The main messages are that experiments are performed on humans, biological weapons may be made, high tech is used, various diseases have spread suspiciously, which, of course, in their opinion is the fault of a Georgian puppet state (both, in the past and present) and aggressive Americans. The Lugar Laboratory is so actively considered within the context of the threat to Russia that we can assume that in the future, a new Russian aggressive policy against Georgia will be built on this issue.

SOCIAL MEDIA

In April 2020, Facebook removed 943 pages, profiles, groups, and Instagram accounts as part of a domestic-focused network engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior that originated in Georgia. Most of these pages were used for the circulation of fakes, including about COVID-19.

Meanwhile, on 30 April, Facebook removed from its platform two Kremlin's propaganda outlets – News Front and South Front. Facebook stated that a total of 49 pages, 91 Facebook accounts, two groups, and 1 Instagram account linked to News Front and South Front were removed. Facebook explained that these outlets implemented inauthentic activity connected to the broad spectrum of disinformation and conspiracy theories, including about COVID-19.

According to ISFED, *"News-Front Georgia's Facebook page and its administrator, together with inauthentic accounts, were disseminating targeted information in a selective manner, directed toward instigating antagonism and aggression among Georgian Facebook users, dividing the society and creating political polarization. News-Front and inauthentic*

accounts that acted in coordination with News Front were employing a range of tactics to spread anti-Western, pro-Russian messages and create inauthentic interaction in order to mislead Facebook audiences.” “During the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, News-Front was intentionally spreading disinformation and covertly undermining trust towards preventive measures taken by the state against the virus, including the state of emergency. With its disinformation articles, News-Front attacked the Lugar Research Laboratory and its head Paata Imnadze as well.”

➔ **IN APRIL 2020, FACEBOOK REMOVED 943 PAGES, PROFILES, GROUPS, AND INSTAGRAM ACCOUNTS AS PART OF A DOMESTIC-FOCUSED NETWORK ENGAGED IN COORDINATED INAUTHENTIC BEHAVIOR THAT ORIGINATED IN GEORGIA.**

ISFED discovered 12 inauthentic accounts connected to News Front. The agency made false interactions through fake accounts, thus creating an illusion that the public was interested in the issues. The target audience was wide, representing different political or public groups. Anti-Western and pro-Russian information (disinformation) has been discovered by various organizations, such as the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics.

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

Civil society representatives have quite actively responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic. They reacted sharply when a wave of xenophobia swept through various media outlets. It is noteworthy to mention the statement made by the Civil Platform “No to Phobia!” where the Platform expresses its concern about the wave of xenophobia following the events that had taken place in Marneuli described above. The Platform called upon media, politicians, and public figures to promote correct, reliable, and non-discriminatory information and to play an active role in the integration process of ethnic Azeri co-citizens.

Also, the EaP CSF Georgian National Platform criticized the government for its “compromise decision,” which made an exception and allowed to break the curfew and attend the Easter service in churches.

Meanwhile, there were certain formats of holding consultation meetings between the executive branch and the civil society at the governmental level. “For efficient communication with NGOs and International Organizations, the Government of Georgia set up several coordination platforms, enabling these organizations to pose their views, recommendations, and questions. They were provided detailed information on the Georgian Governmental decisions and plans. In order to exchange the Georgian Government’s visions on economic recovery during and in the post-crisis period, meetings were held with economic consultative organizations. Their views and recommendations were included in the anti-crisis economic plan.”

CHURCH

The 2019 survey carried out by the NDI, which was published in January 2020, assessed trust in and performance of state and non-state institutions. The survey results demonstrated that the Georgian Orthodox Church’s performance appeared declining by 14%. That is largely caused by the set of scandals around the Church in 2019, starting with the priest’s trial for attempted murder, ending with the moral scandals of the high hierarchy. But still, 50% of respondents rated its performance as “good.”

➔ **DURING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY, PERHAPS FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE GEORGIA REGAINED INDEPENDENCE, THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH DID NOT OPENLY OBEY THE WILL OF THE STATE.**

During the state of emergency, perhaps for the first time since Georgia regained independence, the Georgian Orthodox Church did not openly obey the will of the state. The Church refused to adhere to pandemic

restrictions and put up serious resistance to the government, which was against holding Easter services in churches. The reason was clear: mass gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to a widespread outbreak of the virus. Although the Prime Minister paid a visit to the Orthodox Patriarchate office along with other ministers, the church did not back down. He stated that despite the curfew, parishioners would be allowed to attend the service. At the official briefing, all members of the government said that they were not going to attend the religious service, but watch it on TV. As a result, the Georgian Orthodox Church made a small compromise – only large temples were left open to the faithful.

After Easter, some influential clerics addressed the parishioners from the ambon, who highlighted the issue of holding a new referendum to decide if Georgia still supported Euro-Atlantic integration.

CORRELATION TO THE DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX-2018

It can be said that despite the different circumstances amid the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus in 2020, the findings of the study are somewhat consistent with the DRI-2018. In terms of sources of disinformation, the difference was reflected in the significant increase in the number of social and online media sources that actively disseminated fakes. It should also be noted that there has been no drastic change in the target groups. In particular, the non-Georgian population of the country can still be considered as one of the most vulnerable to disinformation social groups.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The typology of disinformation narratives in Georgia can be conditionally divided into three periods following the spread of the coronavirus in the country.

The first, pre-pandemic period, captures the period from January through February 2020 when the first case of the COVID-19 was confirmed in Georgia.

The second one covers the period from 2 March to 24 April 2020. It complies with the introduction of strict measures by the Georgian Government, including the state of emergency, to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The third period lasting from 24 April till July 2020 and includes easing of the restrictive measures.

By the nature of its content, disinformation correlates with international trends and can be grouped into the three closely intertwined categories:

- a. Health-related;
- b. Geopolitically based;
- c. Government-related.

At the very beginning, the main target of disinformation was the U.S. and its related interests, including those regarding Georgia. Various websites, alongside conventional anti-Western media, have reported that the virus was created as a bio-weapon in the United States and then “exported” to China to disrupt its economy. Russian television RenTV has accused Georgia in producing this weapon in Lugar Laboratory on the outskirts of Tbilisi.

Furthermore, various rumors were circulated in social networks according to which the Coronavirus is a common flu, as well as dozens of other ridiculous stories, including the ones advising to use laundry bleach to cure COVID-19, etc.

At this stage, the **anti-liberal narratives** come into play, which then rooted in and accompanied the disinformation flow throughout the whole period. Already in February, one could find media reports

according to which the spread of the pandemic is a result of liberals' conspiracy against the world, bringing as an example George Soros being "guilty" of all sins, as usual.

Health-related disinformation often aimed to distort official statistics. For example, the Kremlin-linked media source "News Front Georgia" reported about "the scandal in Georgia because around 370 thousand people have already contracted the coronavirus." The title of the article differed from its content. It referred to Tengiz Tsertsvadze, Director General of the Infectious Diseases, AIDS and Clinical Immunology Research Center, who reported on the testing of the population for COVID-19 in order to determine how many people have already had this disease. The "News Front" reports that according to Tsertsvadze, it turned out that from 6 to 10% out of 1,000 healthy people tested for coronavirus, have antibodies. Based on this statement, the "News Front" concludes that overall, about 370 thousand people in the country should have had coronavirus. Given article is manipulative, while the headline announcing that according to Tsertsvadze, up to 370 thousand people in Georgia have already contracted the coronavirus is nothing but disinformation.

At the next stage, the leitmotiv of disinformation narratives shifted to the absence of the need for imposing strict measures and that **harsh Governmental actions** aim to control the opposition-minded constituencies.

This period coincided with Easter, which opened a window for the strengthening of **anti-secular sentiments** in Georgia. Sometimes the virus was seen as a means for enhancing the morality in people. For example, some media reported that the virus had stopped migration and a depraved lifestyle.

Another flow of disinformation included the spread of news about the **uniqueness of Georgians**. On 20 April, the online edition alternews.ge posted an article titled "*Georgian blood is unique. It could be used to fight COVID-19.*" According to this article, Dr. Dick Longballs from the Virology Research Center in the city of Hartford, Connecticut, the USA, who is involved in the development of a vaccine against COVID-19, discovered that Georgian blood contains special particles. This information was found to be false and served the strengthening of ultra-right forces who seek to pursue an anti-establishment attitude

by enhancing the ultranationalist narratives among Georgians. At this stage, the target of disinformation was still the West and its "agents" in Georgia.

In the last, a mitigation phase, a special place was occupied by the leveling of **the Western aid**, and in some cases, even declaring it as being dangerous. After Russia banned wheat exports under the COVID-19 regulation until 1 July, the United States sent 27,000 tons of wheat to help Georgia during the pandemic. The issue was followed by statements from actors with anti-American sentiments that the US aid serves the harmful interests, while American wheat contains toxins.

To conclude, the conspiracy based narratives circulated in Georgia are mostly of **anti-liberal, anti-Western, anti-clerical character**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In the case of the second wave of COVID-19, the executive authorities should **make greater effort to reach out to ethnic minority** constituencies and ensure access to information in understandable for them languages promptly to prevent the outbreak of the disease.
1. The Government, in conjunction with international donors, should **support local media**, among others, by implying the creation of grant schemes for media to inform citizens on the ground better.
1. The media should **better portray Western support**, both financial and technical.
1. To mitigate the impact of disinformation, international donors should **fund media literacy** capacity-building programs targeting conventional and social media representatives as well as bloggers.
2. If necessary, the Government should tighten measures, including those aimed at bringing into the common legal space individuals attending religious services by violating the curfew. Furthermore, the Government should not refrain from either imposing strict measures or from disclosing the type of observed violations of the law, as well as genuine informing the public about existing threats.
3. Improving teaching of Georgian language and civic education, especially in non-Georgian language schools is necessary.

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX 2020: GEORGIA

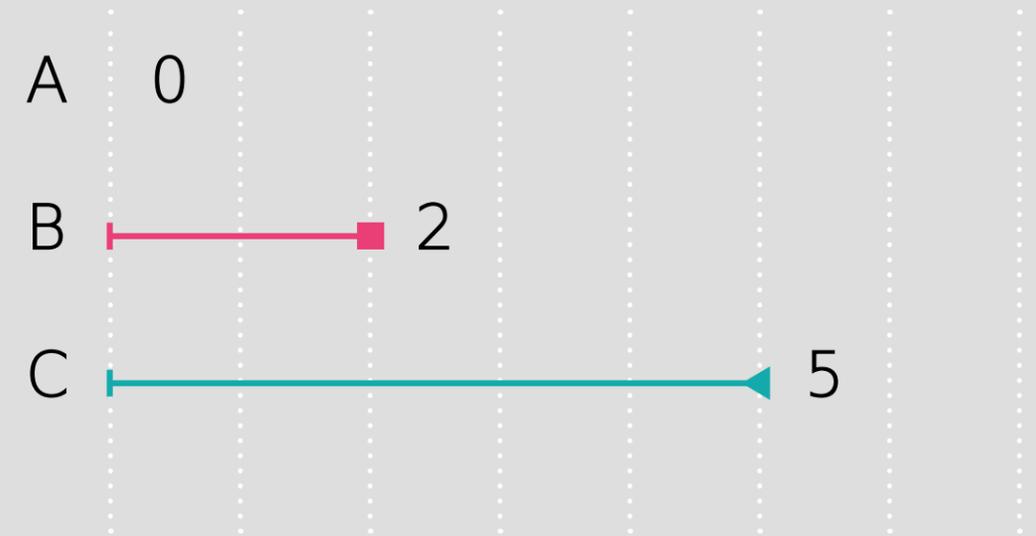
MEASURES TAKEN	YES	NO	COMMENT
A. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE			
Coordination center (existing or new)	1		
Governmental spokesperson/people (contact point to provide answers to journalists)	1		
Regular Press-briefings of Responsible Institutions (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, etc.)	1		
Periodic press-conferences/press-briefings by senior leadership (President or Prime Minister)	1		
Pre-recorded messages of the senior officials (President or Prime Minister)		0	
Establishing special communication channels (Facebook pages, telegram channels, Viber channels, chat-bots, special websites)	1		
Additional communication of regional authorities	1		
Cases of contradiction in messages on national and regional level		0	
Cases of unjustified blocking/taking down content of disinformation form media by national bodies (reported by international organizations)		0	
Creating/empowering/changing focus of special governmental units to debunk disinformation		0	
Criminalizing the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official		0	
Cases of applying changes to the legislation that criminalize the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official		0	

Restrictions of media freedom added		0	
Increasing state support for independent media (explain) (Tax relieve, Additional budgets for advertisement for official information to support media, Assistance to public broadcasters)		0	
B MEDIA			
Investigative reports	1		
Counter disinformation campaigns	1		
Journalists' self-regulation and calls for reinforcing ethical conduct		0	
Journalists' professional training on reporting about pandemic		0	
C CIVIL SOCIETY			
Fact-checking and digital debunking initiatives	1		
Investigative reports		0	
National fakes data base	1		
Counter-disinformation campaigns	1		
Coordination of efforts with media		0	
Joint communication campaigns of civil society actors/ Cooperation between civic society initiatives		0	
Exchanging experiences with foreign NGOs	1		
Producing guidelines and recommendations for general audience, not only for government	1		

NATALIA
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MOLDOVA



INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Moldova is a multicultural country with political environments having a contradicting geopolitical orientation that makes it more vulnerable towards external influence, manipulation, propaganda, and disinformation. Challenges it is facing during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis will have a profound impact on human rights, freedom of expression, independent media, as well as on transparency in the decision-making process.

The contradiction of geopolitical interests makes the internal socio-political situation in Moldova extremely difficult. The Russian information resources continue to exert an apparent manipulative influence in the region. The most exposed groups to manipulation are ethnic minorities (the loyal users of the Russian media products), the Orthodox churchgoers, and the older generation. The tsunami of dis- and misinformation, conspiracy theories and fake news that has flooded the Moldovan media space in general and the online platforms in particular generated a chaotic information environment. This phenomenon inspires violent and discriminatory behavior, confusion, fear, and long-term social harm.

The main impact of COVID-19 disinformation is divided into the following categories: the politicization of the national awareness campaign, political manipulations, and inaccurate information; freedom of expression and freedom to access information; misleading information about COVID-19 in Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns as an external influence on the Moldovan citizens; types of false information, categorized by intention and subject; impact on data protection, privacy, human dignity, and autonomy. This report does not cover the Transnistrian region, where the model and structure of the media landscape is strongly oriented towards pro-Kremlin narratives.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

The Republic of Moldova has been facing unprecedented challenges and consequences because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the public expectation from the Moldovan leadership is extremely demanding. To contribute to a decrease and prevention of the coronavirus spread, the authorities conducted various community alertness and raising awareness activities, sharing accurate information on COVID-19 in line with the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Social Protection measures.

Moldova's Response Plan for the new type coronavirus infection was approved by the Government on 13 March and covered all important areas for readiness and response. According to the Plan, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Social Protection is designated to coordinate the communication actions in the field of health (intra- and interinstitutional) and with other central public authorities for the implementation of response measures at the national level. The national communication team, including representatives of the Presidency, Government, ministries, departments, and services concerned, are involved in communicating with the media about the COVID-19.

The Plan envisaged that comprehensive communication should be provided through media, public authorities' web pages, social networks, and the hotline phone communication with the population based on standard operational procedures for communication of risks in public health emergencies. In the framework of this national information campaign, the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Health, Labor, and Social Protection appealed to the population; press conferences and briefings have been regularly held, press releases have been constantly updated.

Along with the management of epidemiological situations in the country, one of the goals of the governmental communication has been to raise awareness about the risks of misinformation around COVID-19 and to encourage the population to double-check information with trusted sources such as the WHO and national health authorities. However, some measures provided by the Response Plan have not been achieved.

The multilevel national task force was established on 17 March. The healthcare issue was covered by a focus group managed by the Minister of Health. The Prime Minister led the Extraordinary National Commission on Public Health. The Minister of Health was in charge of debriefing about the current state of the pandemic in the country. However, it is noteworthy that no medical or epidemiological professional was part of this commission.

The communication about the COVID-19 situation in the country is conducted twice a day on behalf of the pandemic task force. Each morning, the medical group is presenting their briefings. In the second part of the day, the national task force¹⁰⁴ is communicating about their decisions.

There are few online web platforms developed concerning the pandemic outbreak, including those providing statistical information¹⁰⁵, support for different categories of vulnerable people, information about a disease, self-hygiene, and psychological support. However, the possibility of questioning during the live briefings is extremely limited, resulting in the one-way communication flows. The majority of healthcare professionals do not accept any interview requests without the permission of the Ministry of Health. This fact indirectly discloses the limitation for open two-way communication during this pandemic outbreak in the medical system.

In most democratic countries, political leaders are responsible for explaining a very complicated situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and communicating the best available public health guidance to the population, thereby demonstrating control in handling the pandemic crisis. In Moldova, the process is the opposite. It is much harder for the Moldovan citizens to trust their political leaders, when, for example, after the statements that all medical institutions are well equipped with all necessary medical staff and kit, Moldova had a huge number of infected among healthcare workers (in total on 20 June – 2098).

The poorly equipped hospitals, insufficient protection of doctors, and the absence of measures to identify persons infected with COVID-19

¹⁰⁴ MOLDOVA: Healthcare System (HC) readiness and COVID-19 pandemic response evaluation. April, 2020. <https://bit.ly/32CW0KF>

¹⁰⁵ <https://bit.ly/3jtF9m0>

at the entrance to the country brought the RM in the current situation. The narratives of the local authorities based on disinformation triggered criticism from the health workers, civil society, and political opposition¹⁰⁶.

Another example of misleading information undermining public trust is the President's statements, which contradict the Extraordinary National Commission's Order¹⁰⁷, adopted by the Government on 20 March. According to the Commission's Order, it was forbidden to enter public places, parks, forests, sports fields, children's playgrounds, etc. However, President Dodon declared¹⁰⁸ in one of his public statements that nobody prohibited walking in parks.

➔ **THE NARRATIVES OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES BASED ON DISINFORMATION TRIGGERED CRITICISM FROM THE HEALTH WORKERS, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND POLITICAL OPPOSITION.**

The dissonance between a Commission's regulation and President's statements misled the majority of the Moldovan citizens. For non-compliance with the provisions of the Emergency Commission (EC), fines of – 22 500 MDL (1140 Euro) were provided for individuals. In total, more than 1700 fines have been issued for individuals and legal entities amounted to 36 million¹⁰⁹ MDL (1 821 094 Euro). Out of these, more than 900 fines were for individuals. Representatives of some political parties have proposed to cancel the fines issued to citizens during the quarantine, on the ground that fines are illegal and the amount of fines is disproportionate with citizens' earnings. However, the President stated that citizens, who have violated the quarantine or a self-isolation regime, must pay the fines. It looked like the citizens had been deliberately misinformed and misled in order to replenish the budget of the state treasury.

¹⁰⁶ Maia Sandu: Entire hospitals turned into hotbeds of COVID-19. April 16, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2EfrYzI>

¹⁰⁷ Comisia pentru Situații Excepționale a Republicii Moldova. March 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/32z08wK>

¹⁰⁸ Додон заявил, что в парках никто не запрещал гулять. April 22, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=540257756679017>

¹⁰⁹ <https://bit.ly/3hHzOGV>

There are many inaccuracies and violations of human rights happening under cover of the fighting pandemic. For example, the President of Moldova revealed in public the personal health data¹¹⁰ of few people infected with COVID-19. Even though the public disclosure of information about private health data is a direct violation of laws of the highest order, it was done so under the allegedly of the COVID-19 crisis response.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova regularly publishes information on COVID-19 travel alert aimed to prevent misinformation about charter flights organized for repatriation of the Moldovan citizens from the countries affected by COVID-19.

However, cases of misinformation have taken place. An eloquent example was when on 31 March, more than two hundred Moldovans were stuck at Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport¹¹¹. The Passengers were fraudulently misled, i.e., misinformed by both the Civil Aviation Authority of Moldova and the Extraordinary National Commission. As a response to the disinformation, the Moldovan authorities are paying attention that up-to-date legal information on charter flights authorized can be found only on the official website of the Civil Aviation Authority of the Republic of Moldova¹¹²(AAAC) and on the AAAC Facebook page.¹¹³

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Moldova is in charge of the regulation of the provisions of the EC (from 17 March to 23 April the Commission has issued more than 23 orders since the State of Emergency established) and compliance with organizational and legal forms of various activities. The main objective is to preserve the rule of law, raise public awareness, and prevent misinformation.

The Ministry of Finance has launched a fundraising campaign aiming to raise donations to combat the coronavirus and regularly updates information on state budget receipts in the form of donations. In spite of it, the question about the transparent distribution of these donations is very sensitive for the Moldovan civil society representatives.

¹¹⁰ Igor Dodon a dezvăluit numele pacientei infectată cu COVID-19. March 9, 2020. <https://bit.ly/34NIsO>

¹¹¹ 220 de cetățeni moldoveni au rămas blocați aseară în aeroportul "Charles de Gaulle". March 31, 2020. <https://bit.ly/34NIsO>

¹¹² <http://www.caa.md/rom/news/>

¹¹³ <https://bit.ly/3b9QLHB>

The Border Police, in order to raise public awareness and prevent misinformation, regularly provides information on the Moldovan border crossings and the number of vehicles/citizens entering the Republic of Moldova daily.

Although in recent months, the Moldovan Government has presented a range of different measures to prevent the influence and spread of the external disinformation regarding the COVID-19, the political authorities' failure to control the false information becomes more evident. Moreover, disinformation, as a powerful tool for political manipulation, is widely used by state actors. The high media activity of Moldovan leadership in social networks during the state of emergency is an additional point for increasing their positive media rating. However, a widespread awareness campaign of the Government in the current pandemic crisis is extremely politicized.

MEDIA

Moldova in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index¹¹⁴ ranked 91th, falling 11 places compared to 2017. The biggest issue of the Moldovan media landscape is the domination of Russia's broadcasts. The prevalence of Russian TV content creates additional possibilities for the spread of Russian disinformation. The foreign influence campaigns have been the subject of close political and media attention, due to the use of fake news, propaganda, disinformation, and fake documents. These campaigns are conducted aiming at polarizing societies on sensitive issues. The Republic of Moldova faces concentrated attacks destabilizing the internal situation.

There are 117 radio and television stations operating in Moldova. However, most of them do not follow the variety principle (freedom of speech, professional journalism, a plurality of news sources, and so on). As pluralism of opinions has not improved despite the diversity of media outlets, the score for this characteristic has been decreasing according to the Media Sustainability Index¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁴ https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table

¹¹⁵ Media Sustainability Index. 2019. <https://bit.ly/2EN1ATY>

According to a survey¹¹⁶ “Popular Covid-19 fake news in Moldova and people’s (dis)information sources,” conducted in May by the *WatchDog.MD* think-tank, in cooperation with CBS Research, respondents claimed that they find out what is new in pandemic time by watching TV (77.2%) and accessing web pages (42.2%). Out of 1003 respondents, only one denied all false or manipulating statements. 16.3% of survey participants said it is rather hard or very hard for them to understand what information was accurate and whether the information presented was true or not.

The media outlets are combating coronavirus mis- and disinformation, but unfortunately, fake content of the narratives and informational manipulations are part of the significant number of media products in the Moldovan media environment. The “Monitoring Report of the Independent Journalism Center”¹¹⁷ clearly reflects some media outlets, which used fake news during the state emergency (*Accent TV, Unimedia.info, Sputnik.md, Kp.md*). Some other media outlets had recourse to change accents in news/event content, which led to a certain discrepancy of information by favoring and/or disapproving a political entity (*NTV Moldova, Accent TV, and Kp.md*).

Many of the monitored media outlets have politicized the topics by presenting them from the perspective of political preferences. Thus, the TV stations like *Prime TV* and *Publika TV* broadcasted mainly the same content, giving preference to the parliamentary group Pro Moldova and its representatives. On the other hand, *NTV Moldova, Ren TV Moldova, Accent TV, Primul in Moldova, Sputnik.md, Kp.md, point.md* had a pro-PSRM approach in their news stories and favored President Igor Dodon.

Examples of biased media outlets:

- *Accent TV* admitted fake information when it said that, according to Moldovan Parliament Speaker Zinaida Greceanii, the draft law on the state of emergency was voted “unanimously,” although at least one of the representatives of the PAS party had not voted for it. The same happened with *Unimedia.info*.

¹¹⁶ Popular COVID-19 fake news in Moldova and people’s (dis)information sources. May 27, 2020. <https://bit.ly/34YT3bR>

¹¹⁷ <http://media-azi.md/en/content-finder/disinformation>

- *Primul in Moldova* and *Prime TV* committed manipulation using video and a mixture of facts with opinions. *Point.md* – a mix of facts with opinions and *Kp.md* delivered a combination of facts with opinions, lack of the right to reply, irony, change of accents, and labeling.
- *Sputnik.md* also published six news stories on this topic. In one of the news stories was mentioned: “the Parliament’s decision was adopted with the vote of all MPs present in the plenary meetings room” – incorrect information because at least one MP abstained from the vote. *Sputnik.md* committed such violations as a mixture of facts with opinions, lack of the right to reply, fakes, generalization, and reference to sources that cannot be verified;

Examples of more neutral media outlets:

- *Jurnal TV, RTR Moldova, Ren TV Moldova, and Moldova 1* presented information neutrally and impartially, without deontological violations and disinformation techniques.
- The national television *Moldova 1* and *Unimedia.info* presented information generally neutrally and impartially, and both outlets showed slight favoring of President Igor Dodon;

Based on the Monitoring Report data, the main problems of Moldovan media outlets, which require attention on behalf of the Audiovisual Council and more attention to the content of the media products can be highlighted. The legislative framework and particularly the Code of Audiovisual Media Services of the Republic of Moldova must be respected.

The most significant problem was a number of online sources considered to spread fake news, which have been blocked by the authorities. Following the Extraordinary National Commission’ Decision (No.3, dated 23 March 2020), providers of publicly available electronic communications services by the decision of National Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Information Technology, based on the list of online sources that Moldovan Security and Intelligence Service (SIS)¹¹⁸ published, have to block immediately online sources spreading fake news about the COVID-19. On 19 March, SIS ordered to block 52 anonymous sites that allegedly disseminate

¹¹⁸ Sources spreading fake news about covid 19. <https://bit.ly/2QD2Mfo>

fake news about the coronavirus pandemic. These measures were valid during the period of the state of emergency, declared by the authorities until 15 May. Therefore, they blocked such portals and sites as *stopfals.com*, *pamphlets.com*, *acasaebine.site*, *moldovandream.com*, *ziaruldeazi.info*, *jurnal-stiri.site*, *news-romania24h.xyz*, *brick.news.blog*, *ziarulmoldovei.site*, *antenanews.xyz*.

➔ ON 19 MARCH, MOLDOVAN SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE SERVICE (SIS) ORDERED TO BLOCK 52 ANONYMOUS SITES THAT ALLEGEDLY DISSEMINATE FAKE NEWS ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC.

Nevertheless, such measures are highly controversial and ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a fight against misinformation, and SIS must react and act appropriately. However, blocking the internet portals and sites is an irrational approach since many media outlets, including social media platforms, spread fake news too. Moreover, according to IT experts, the blocking method used by some internet operators is vulnerable because it allows blocking sites only when using DNS servers provided by internet operators. In other cases, the websites can be accessed and their content – distributed. Therefore, there is a need for proper regulatory actions and joint efforts to combat the spread of fake news. On the other hand, it is a violation of the freedom of speech and media rights in pandemic time, diversity of expression, and choice. In addition, we should not forget about the political component of this issue. Freedom of speech, access to information, and quality news coverage are essential to face the pandemic.

Moldova's Constitution guarantees freedom of speech through dozens of supportive laws. The country's media legislation is mostly in line with international standards; however, it was utterly deteriorated. The legal and social protection of free speech still exists but is weakened. In the pandemic crisis, some free-speech indicators have fallen significantly.

Taking into account that the spread of fake news has increased, the *Stopfals.md* portal launched the "Chronicle of Fake News Sites"¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Lista site-urilor de știri false. <https://stopfals.md/ro/category/21>

that weekly presented fakes published by Moldovan sites. Among them are 12 active and 46 inactive sites from the period of 26 March – 30 May 2020.

The other important issue is the point-to-point communication between media representatives and authorities. The representatives of media emphasize the need of the state institutions to communicate directly with journalists in the current pandemic situation. A joint request to the Ministry of Health was sent on 13 April, signed by 25 civil society organizations and media institutions. As a result, the Ministry agreed to hold extended conferences once a week, which has not happened yet.

There were also accusations on behalf of the authorities against the media. The Prime Minister accused the media owners indirectly for promoting unfair and inappropriate information¹²⁰. The fact that a high official has thrown a message that represents a law infringement is also an encroachment upon the democratic values and principles of the country, which is to be followed according to the law and publicly condemned. At the same time, the communication adviser to Prime Minister Ion Chicu undermined the role of journalists in a statement made for the newspaper *Ziarul de Garda*, saying that the Government did not need media to debunk fake information. "*We communicate with the citizens without you because we don't believe you at all.*"¹²¹ 10 media centers and associations supported the media petition to stop spreading unsubstantiated accusations and denigrating information.

The current outbreak situation updated the whole spectrum of the substantial questions, which motivated the news agency IPN to launch the public debate series. The top issues were:

- the Moldovan society and pandemic lessons, which included different aspects of the problem, such as health problems, lifestyle in self-isolation, recommendations of WHO, problems of health insurance policy,
- the economic effects of the state of emergency, and human rights;
- the political "colors" of international assistance in times of pandemic.

¹²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/ionchicu.md/posts/170402357765946>

¹²¹ Media NGOs Condemn the Assaults of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, Ion Chicu, Against the Media. May 4, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3hIVFmm>

The problem resides not in the origin of this assistance or donations during the pandemic, but in the fraudulent and non-transparent way in which this international assistance and humanitarian aid have been distributed within the central state bodies.

SOCIAL MEDIA

According to the abovementioned survey conducted by the *WatchDog.MD*, 35.7% of respondents claimed that they find out what was new in pandemic time on various social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Odnoklasniki*, *Instagram*, and *Vkontakte*, 12.7% talked to family members and 15.1% to friends and neighbors by using those social networks.

In COVID-19 time, social media is a boundless way for individuals and communities to stay socially connected while physically distanced. At the same time, there are five primary roles that social platforms are playing during the pandemic outbreak in Moldova: to combat disinformation on coronavirus; to influence the public response to the outbreak; to provide support and assistance for vulnerable social categories affected by the pandemic through the creation of the special groups¹²² (for example: “Coronavirus Moldova: mutual help,” “We support local business in Moldova”); to keep accountable and to watchdog decision-makers.

The social media networks in Moldova have influenced public opinion in the following issues: a social distancing and home quarantine, an epidemiological situation in Moldova and protection measures against COVID-19, a pandemic threat, and fake news.

In order to spread awareness about the Russian manipulative campaign against Western countries, Moldova’s social media has provided regularly updated information about Russia’s disinformation. Analyses conducted by local media outlets emphasized that fake news labs in the Russian Federation have used various untruthful information about the COVID-19 pandemic, which is circulated on social media, to launch a

¹²² Lista celor mai utile grupuri pe Facebook-ul din Moldova XX: comunități care se ajută în contextul COVID-19. April 4, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3jt2TXj>

wide-scale disinformation campaign directed against the US and the EU, that have influenced the Republic of Moldova.

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

The civil society also has a vital role to play in monitoring the situation during the state of emergency. Civil society organizations and informal civil initiatives are focused on supporting and protecting health workers through:

- promoting principles of transparency and efficiency in public money use (*IDIS “Viitorul,” WatchDog.MD*, and *Transparency International Moldova*);
- observing the rule of law and human rights respect, including in the Transnistrian region (*Promo-Lex*, *Amnesty International Moldova*);
- analyzing the proportionality and legality of governmental measures taken in this critical period (*IPRE*, *Legal Resources Centre from Moldova*, *IREX Moldova*);
- calling the authorities for urgent measures aiming to support the business environment under the pandemic expansion (*the Alliance of Small Enterprises from Moldova*, *the Association of Women Entrepreneurs from Moldova*, *the National Association of Restaurants and Leisure Centre*).

A contribution of the media organizations in response to the COVID-19 disinformation is truly significant. Several media NGOs (*Center for Independent Journalism*, *Association of Independent Press*, *Center for Journalistic Investigations*, *Electronic Press Association*, *Access-info Center*, *Press Freedom Committee*, *Independent Television Association*, *Independent Journalists Association RISE Moldova*, *the Association of Environmental Journalists and Ecological Tourism of the Republic of Moldova*) and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum National Platform of Moldova came up with an open public letter, criticizing the Audiovisual Council of Moldova, who had stated¹²³ that journalists have to give up personal opinions and use only the credible

¹²³ The Audiovisual Council has invalidated its decision. “In order to calm the spirits, I cancel the disposition”. March 27, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3gEJqRt>

information, which was published by the national authorities. Media NGOs characterized it as “abuse” and “censorship” of the regulatory authority in the field of audiovisual media services in the Republic of Moldova. Consequently, this decision was canceled.

The Moldovan NGO Stop Fals compiled a list of disinformation news articles¹²⁴ related to COVID-19 and has monitored the situation to ensure proper and accurate information spread. The indexes of cites with fake news were elaborated, and main narratives about COVID-19 disinformation were presented.

The Independent Journalism Center elaborated on the Standards for proactive publication of information during the COVID-19 crisis¹²⁵. The main idea is that both public institutions and public authorities should publish more information on their websites to facilitate journalists’, civil society members’, and citizens’ access to the data of public interest, aiming to provide comprehensive and timely information.

CHURCH

The Metropolitan Church of Moldova is an autonomous one but operates under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church. Given the fact that 90%¹²⁶ of the total population follows Orthodoxy, the Church is considered as a credible source of information for many religious people in Moldova. However, during the quarantine, the Church has deliberately spread dangerous myths and fakes that could have serious consequences.

In light of the seriousness of the threat posed by COVID-19, on 13 March, the Moldovan leadership announced that all religious ceremonies have to be ceased for a period of 14 days. Nevertheless, the Moldovan Metropolitan Church encouraged the local churches’

¹²⁴ Ediție specială: CRONICA SITE-URILOR DE ȘTIRI FALSE DESPRE COVID-19. March 19, 2020. <https://bit.ly/32G0qBY>

¹²⁵ What Types of Information Should the Authorities Publish during the COVID-19 Crisis? May 14, 2020. <https://bit.ly/34NnMIM>

¹²⁶ Biserica Ortodoxă între cultură și politică în Republica Moldova. June 17, 2020. <https://www.platzforma.md/arhive/386512>

representatives from all over the country to continue their activity¹²⁷. Later, the National Extraordinary Public Health Commission established that religious ceremonies would continue to be held in churchyards, keeping social distance, until 30 June. However, one of the church’s message, referred to the restriction imposed on the churches’ activity, was: “*We have been looking forward to lifting more restrictions, and that postponement is outrageous, disgusting, and even embarrassing.*”¹²⁸

➔ THE METROPOLITAN CHURCH OF MOLDOVA STARTED DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN SPREADING THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON THE COVID-19’S ORIGIN AND POSSIBLE THREATENING CONSEQUENCES OF THE VACCINATION.

The Metropolitan Church of Moldova started disinformation campaign after the Russian Patriarch Kirill’s statement¹²⁹ about the need to check the conspiracy theories on the COVID-19’s origin and possible threatening consequences of the vaccination: “*Vaccination introduces nanoparticles into the body that react to the waves transmitted by 5G technology and allow the system to control humans remotely.*”¹³⁰

After the Prime Minister Ion Chicu stated that: “*Moldovan Church’s claims about 5G and coronavirus vaccine are fake news and nonsense*”¹³¹, the Metropolitan Church of Moldova addressed the Government with an open letter, claiming that a denigration campaign had been launched against the Church, as in the officials’ messages addressed to the population such expressions describing churches as “*outbreaks of infection,*” “*unsanitary spaces,*” “*medieval practices*” were used .

¹²⁷ Moldova Struggles to Secure Church Respect for Coronavirus Restrictions. April 20, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/20/moldova-struggles-to-secure-church-respect-for-coronavirus-restrictions/>

¹²⁸ În cadrul lucrărilor Sinodului BOM au fost semnate două adresări importante către autoritățile statului. May 19, 2020. <https://bit.ly/311DT8x>

¹²⁹ Возглавляемый патриархом Кириллом центр попросил проверить конспирологические теории о возникновении COVID-19. May 18, 2020. <https://bit.ly/34LDm7B>

¹³⁰ Moldovan Church Denounces COVID Vaccine as Anti-Christian Plot. May 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/32GOVfk>

¹³¹ Moldovan Church’s claims about 5G and coronavirus vaccine are fake news and nonsense: Ion Chicu. May 22, 2020. <https://bit.ly/32CGKz4>

Ultimately, the Church representatives requested to participate in the decision-making process. Thus, their actions represent a direct interference in politics, while spreading disinformation and fake news concerning the pandemic.

CORRELATION TO DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX-2018

There are many well-known problems affecting the Moldovan media landscape. The main trouble points remain the same, but the pandemic crisis has demonstrated their vulnerability. The Moldovan media landscape remains diversified and yet polarized. The editorial policy of a number of media outlets continues to depend to a great extent on the interest of their owners or politically affiliated groups. The lack of the independence of the broadcasting regulatory authority remains a concerning issue that undermines the quality of media products and information resilience.

Both in 2018 and 2020, content identical with Russian information can be distinguished in the case of at least four TV channels – *Prime TV, NTV Moldova, RTR Moldova, Ren TV Moldova*; four TV stations with national coverage – *Moldova 1, Primul in Moldova, Publica TV, Jurnal TV*; three news websites – *point.md, sputnik.md, Kp.md*.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation, the question of information filters became a stringent need and emergency. Checking the credibility of the information presents a challenge in this area and more than ever requires an effective mechanism for improving fact-checking services and credibility index in the media environment.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Crises are fertile ground for disinformation, fake news, propaganda, and manipulations. In the Republic of Moldova, there are many examples of this destructive tendency during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Among the narratives observed, two main categories of disinformation can be defined:

HEALTH FEARS

This category of disinformation was one of the first appeared in the media space of Moldova, aiming to deepen fear and panic in society over the virus.

The first fake news in Moldova began to be disseminated in February, i.e., before the WHO assessed that the COVID-19 situation is a pandemic one (11 March 2020). After 17 March, when the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova adopted Decision № 55¹³² that instituted the State of Emergency, the wave of misinformation began to intensify. The peak of misinformation was observed at the end of May – the middle of June after lifting the state of emergency (15 May).

Examples of the narratives:

At the end of February, in various *groups on social media*, the most popular narrative was *that the outbreak of the virus is very serious, and it is impossible to recover after infection*.

In April, the religious website *Aparatorul.md*¹³³ published an article entitled: *“The recommendations of Orthodox physicians to prevent and cure cases of Covid-19 infection”* describing the treatment of the new coronavirus infection. The unsafe recommendations and advice provided by this portal were totally opposite to the WHO recommendations, which could endanger human life and health.

In June, the online news portal *flux.md* admitted a fake with the following narrative: *The chipping of the population begins in October 2020*.

¹³² HOTĂRÎRE Nr. 55 din 17-03-2020.
https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=120817&lang=ro

¹³³ Дезинформация и опасные советы по лечению инфекции COVID-19, опубликованные на религиозном портале. <https://bit.ly/3hHZMu9>

Many of Moldovan's news websites Știri.md, Zugo.md Emedicina.md, PROTV Chișinău, NordNews.md, News.24.md, Realitatea.md, Basarabia Literară, and Jurnal.md have fallen into the trap of the disinformation by distributing the news about a report allegedly made by the German Ministry of Interior, stating that *Coronavirus is a "false alarm"*. The abbreviated version of the 93-page document had not been issued by the German Ministry of Interior, and no ministry unit participated in its drafting¹³⁴. The document represented only the personal opinion of Stephan Kohn – an eccentric political scientist, employed by the German Ministry of Interior within the KM4 department specializing in the protection of critical infrastructure.

THE GEOPOLITICAL PREFERENCES, POLARIZATION, AND POLITICAL MANIPULATIONS

The narratives of this category of disinformation during the pandemic are not coming up in a vacuum, but are exploiting the preceding tensions in the society. In Moldova, the main socio-political driver behind the pro-Kremlin discussions is a feeling of insecurity, which is based on the current international situation and geopolitical contradictions between East and West.

The 2020 Global Peace Index Report¹³⁵ showed that the Republic of Moldova is among the top five countries in the world when it comes to the militarization while being positioned in the middle of the list for social safety and security, as well as for ongoing domestic and international conflicts. The Russian disinformation campaign in Moldova aims at exploiting the drivers/triggers of insecurity and inferiority by questioning the advantages of being a member of the European family. The Russian strategy regarding Moldova is to enhance the anti-Western views and promoting an idea of the Eastern geopolitical shift. During the pandemic, the Russian ability to influence perceptions through active disinformation measures by manipulating the Moldovan governmental institutions and public discourse has been

¹³⁴ Coronavirus „alarmă falsă” – un fake-news internațional care a prins în România și R.Moldova. <https://bit.ly/3ltVCit>

¹³⁵ 2020 Global Peace Index Report. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GPI_2020_web.pdf

felt. The myth that authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China are dealing with COVID-19 much better than democracies is repeated again and continuously.

Examples of the Kremlin's disinformation narratives in Moldova:

On 26 March, on the online news portal, *Bloknot Moldova* fake news was published with the following narrative: *The death came from the West, and help – from Russia and China: the coronavirus proved, who Moldova's friends are. The assistance was not delivered to the Republic of Moldova by those who are considered in the past three decades as "development partners" and with whom Moldova holds an "integration path," not by the EU and the US. But by Russia and China – those who were collectively cursed all these years by various "euro-integrators."*

This message is part of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign around the Coronavirus pandemic.¹³⁶ It promotes a narrative of the EU's failing efforts in fighting the pandemic unlikeness to the successful Russian outbreak management. Russia has donated 10 thousand tests for coronavirus detection. And China has provided Moldova with 2,500 tests and 3 tons of medicines, materials, and medical equipment needed to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus, including 100 thousand protective respirators. In comparison, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced that it would provide to Moldova USD 1.2 million financial assistance for the healthcare system. Also, on 30 March 2020, the European Commission decided to reallocate 140 million euros to the urgent needs of the six countries from the Eastern Partnership, including Moldova, in the context of combating the COVID-19.

On 22 April, *Kp.md*, *eho.md*, *a-tv.md* disseminated the same fake information that the EU's aid to Moldova will not be used for pensions and health but will go to NGOs. The misleading narrative: *The financial assistance of 87 million Euros from the EU allocated to Moldova will not get into the state budget, but will be delivered to various NGOs.*

The amounts of the 87 million Euros are available for Moldova from projects that are either ongoing or planned.¹³⁷ The financial assistance

¹³⁶ Disinfo: Moldova Is Helped Only By China And Russia In The Fight With Covid-19. <https://bit.ly/2Gctfyr>

¹³⁷ Disinfo: Eu Aid To Moldova Will Not Be Used For Pensions And Health But Will Go To NGOs. <https://bit.ly/3gGcbbO>

will support the urgent and short-term emergency crisis response and humanitaian needs, as well to provide assistance to overcome the economic and social consequences. These resources are intended to help the Moldovan citizens directly in overcoming the challenges, aimed at long-term improvement of people’s lives via economic and social development. Such assistance does not represent a direct transfer of funds into the budget of the Republic of Moldova. It is there to provide the necessary tools to improve the situation created by COVID-19, from health, social, and economic perspective.

The information manipulation campaigns about COVID-19 comprise messages, which are presented in ranging formats to reach a target audience, including news pieces, blog posts, and comments on articles or under the social media posts, fake profiles of influencers, TV reports, documentation, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube videos and others. In most cases, their content is entirely deliberately created or slightly manipulated; they feature false connections or are entirely genuine but provided in the wrong context. Russia and China very effectively promote online coronavirus conspiracy narratives¹³⁸.

On 29 April, the *Jadorputereadragostei.blogspot.com* published the article with a fake narrative: *The European Union member states have decided to ban non-citizens from entering the EU for two years.* Until now, no state of the European Community has announced such a decision. Only temporary restrictions were introduced during the state of emergency.

Examples of the manipulative political narratives:

On 10 May, *Ziarulmoldovei.site* admitted fake information with manipulation narrative: *The municipals’ services will rise by 30% to reimburse the “Russian credit.”* It refers to a Russian loan of 200 million euros, the approval of which was annulled by the Constitutional Court¹³⁹ because of the unconstitutionality of some of its provisions. The coronavirus pandemic hit the Moldovan economy very hard. Without external financial support and assistance, it is impossible for Moldova to combat pandemic consequences. This question is

politicized from a geopolitical point of view, as can be seen in this manipulative political narrative.

On 15 May, *Ntv.md* and *Noi.md* published articles with the misinformation narrative: *The President stated: “the Socialists Party of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) is the only parliamentary party that has completely drop the state subventions allocated to political parties and has donated money to fight COVID-19”.* The *Stopfals.md* portal checked Igor Dodon’s claims. In an official response, the Ministry of Finance explained: “The donations were made in fact by two political parties. The Action and Solidarity Party, which on 27 March 2020, listed the sum of 300,000 MDL, and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, which on 22 April 2020 donated the sum of 1.024.302.78 MDL.”

¹³⁸ Russia and China promote coronavirus ‘conspiracy narratives’ online, says EU agency. April 21, 2020. <https://politi.co/3bbDdM4>

¹³⁹ <http://www.constcourt.md/ccdocview.php?tip=decizii&docid=786&l=ro>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above-made assessment on the demand-side causes of the disinformation phenomenon in the Republic of Moldova, certain steps are required to be undertaken, which might be useful for public institutions to push back against disinformation:

1. The **public health authorities** should be more involved in providing evidence-based information to the public for better understanding the COVID-19 pandemic and its public health implications. It is important to improve guidance on strategies and policies for effective preparedness and response efforts taking into account the whole spectrum of difficulties encountered.
2. A wide-ranging **awareness campaign** of the governmental institutions should not represent an integral part of the political PR. The national awareness campaign should focus on the problems faced by the citizens of the Republic of Moldova to overcome this difficult period. The leadership institutions should review their position and have a transparent and efficient communication campaign with a well-defined Action Plan in the nearest future. Particular attention should be paid to improving communication with the representatives of media outlets to lift restrictions for open two-way communication.
3. The governmental institutions should take a strong, determined, and transparent **solidarity position with the EaP countries and the EU** to counter narratives and to prevent the dissemination of fake news. Given the current threat environment, there is a need to elaborate a new approach to tackle the Russian disinformation and hybrid threats. To ensure the efficiency of this approach, all stakeholders – governmental bodies, policymakers, legislative bodies, civil society, and media should be involved.
4. Any **long-term** policy initiative should address both disinformation and aggressive informational practices to cause purposeful social harm. Disinformation and misinformation are elements of deeper structural problems of the Moldovan society and the media environment. The existing problems demonstrate the need to strengthen democratic

resilience and to adopt media policies through regulation of political and public issue advertising, data protection, strengthening pillars of political trust in government institutions, and confidence in the media accuracy.

5. **Civil society should be a key factor** in decision-making processes related to COVID-19, as the measures adopted must respond to actual needs and create more confidence and compliance in order to protect health and lives. Civil society might contribute to building trust in political leaders and institutions; that is why civil society's trust should be enhanced through open public consultations. Then confidence in government structures will increase, and questions about proportionality and legality of the governmental measures will not be rise. The lessons learned from this pandemic is important to consider so to address the underlying human rights concerns, compliance with the principle of transparency, equality, and non-discrimination and respect of the rule of law.
6. The **free flow of information** is more essential than ever in amid of COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring open dialogue and the exchange of reliable information. It is necessary to respect and guarantee provisions of the Constitution and relevant laws concerning freedom of speech and media without violations and suppression. Leadership, as well as media and IT technology companies, need to counter misinformation with accurate, clear, and evidence-based proofs. The lack of the media sector sustainability demands the elaboration of an Action Plan on disinformation with concrete media-points about media checking and diversifying media models. Moldova's legislative framework needs to be adjusted to the emerging threats related to information security and provide raging mechanisms of control to ensure adequate countermeasures in this field. Media companies should invest more in fact-checking, and the most important social media platforms should have certified fact-checkers. It is necessary to support a strong quality media and digital environment, to develop media literacy and innovative forms of journalism.

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX 2020: MOLDOVA

MEASURES TAKEN	YES	NO	COMMENT
A GOVERNMENT RESPONSE			
Coordination center (existing or new)		0	The Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection as a coordinator of communication actions
Governmental spokesperson/people (contact point to provide answers to journalists)	1		Representatives of the Presidency, Government, Ministries, agencies/ departments and services
Regular Press-briefings of Responsible Institutions (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, etc.)	1		
Periodic press-conferences/press-briefings by senior leadership (President or Prime Minister)	1		
Pre-recorded messages of the senior officials (President or Prime Minister)		0	
Establishing special communication channels (Facebook pages, telegram channels, Viber channels, chat-bots, special websites)		0	Facebook pages of: the Presidency, the Government, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection Telegram: Covid-19 Moldova
Additional communication of regional authorities		0	
Cases of contradiction in messages on national and regional level	-1		

Cases of unjustified blocking/taking down content of disinformation form media by national bodies (reported by international organizations)	-1		
Creating/empowering/changing focus of special governmental units to debunk disinformation		0	Special attention of the Prime Minister and Moldovan Security and Intelligence Service (SIS)
Criminalizing the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official		0	
Cases of applying changes to the legislation that criminalize the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official		0	
Restrictions of media freedom added	-1		The Security and Intelligence Service blocks online sources that spread fake news about Covid-19
Increasing state support for independent media (explain) (Tax relieve, Additional budgets for advertisement for official information to support media, Assistance to public broadcasters)		0	On the contrary, the President proposed measures to penalize the media, which publish fake news and disinformation.
B MEDIA			
Investigative reports		0	Monitoring report and surveys
Counter disinformation campaigns	1		
Journalists' self-regulation and calls for reinforcing ethical conduct	1		
Journalists' professional training on reporting about pandemic		0	

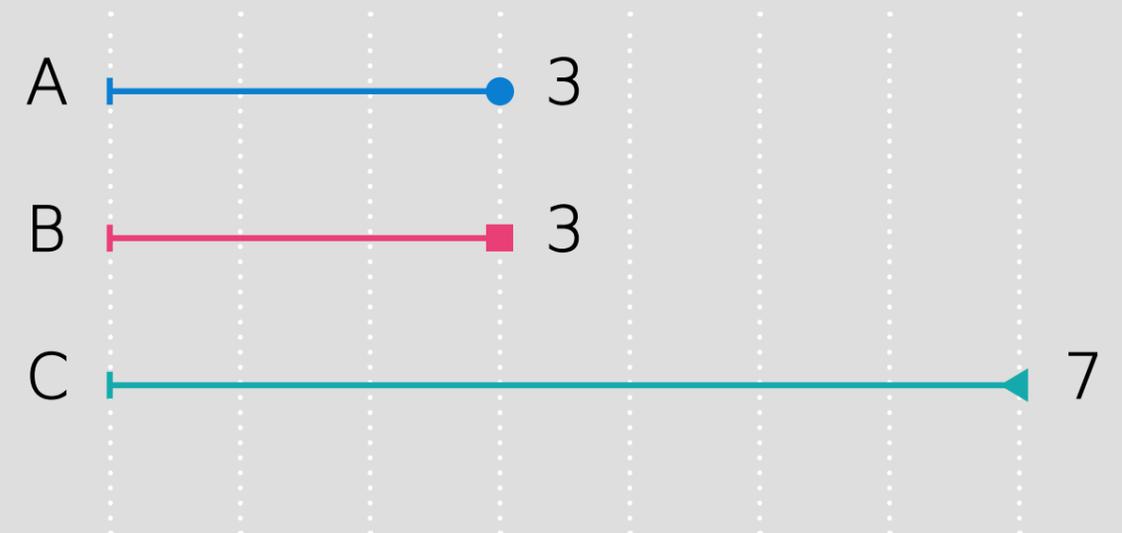
C CIVIL SOCIETY

Fact-checking and digital debunking initiatives	1		
Investigative reports		0	
National fakes data base		0	The Moldovan NGO Stop Fals compiles a list of disinformation news articles
Counter-disinformation campaigns	1		
Coordination of efforts with media		0	Common initiatives, petitions
Joint communication campaigns of civil society actors/Cooperation between civic society initiatives	1		
Exchanging experiences with foreign NGOs	1		
Producing guidelines and recommendations for general audience, not only for government	1		

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INTRODUCTION

Romania reported its first COVID-19 infection on 26 February 2020. Ever since that day, the number of cases has been steadily growing, with a daily rate fluctuating 300-400 infected. After reaching a plateau in May, the country experienced a worrisome trend again at the end of June, with new coronavirus cases even exceeding 400 daily. As of 26.06.2020, 25.697 persons were tested positive on the territory of Romania, whereas nearly 1600 deaths across the country were registered¹⁴⁰. Shortages at the level of healthcare infrastructure and the limited availability of medical personnel and appropriate equipment have often been indicated (at least in the initial phase of the pandemic¹⁴¹) as the main challenges in countering the spread of the virus.

On 16 March, Romania declared a state of emergency for 30 days to rein in the outbreak. The decree establishing the state of emergency was reinforced the next days by several Military Ordinances resulting in a national lockdown, whereby the military was called to support police and gendarmerie forces to put into effect the new restrictions. A curfew from 10 p.m. to 6 a. m. was imposed (all shops were closed, except for the sale of food, veterinary, or pharmaceutical products), while affidavits were required from the population to justify the reason(s) for leaving home. Foreign citizens were not allowed to enter the country, while a travel ban on international flights to and from Romania was put in place. People over 65 were only permitted two hours-leave from their homes between 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

On 16 April, the increasing number of cases led to a one-month extension of the state of emergency. On 14 May, a thirty-day state of alert was decreed, aimed at replacing the state of emergency. Under the present state of alert, a gradual relaxation of restrictions took place, whereby shopping malls and restaurants with outdoor service facilities were reopened. Church services were allowed to resume outdoors only by abiding by a set of health-related instructions¹⁴².

¹⁴⁰ Covid-19 Official News, <https://stirioficiale.ro/informatii>

¹⁴¹ Euronews, March 30, 2020. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/30/covid-19-and-romania-s-healthcare-brain-drain-could-be-perfect-storm>

¹⁴² Romanian Orthodox Church guidelines for priests and faithful during state of alert. May 15, 2020. <https://basilica.ro/en/romanian-orthodox-churchs-guidelines-for-priests-and-faithful-during-state-of-alert/>

However, wearing masks indoors and complying with social distancing measures remained compulsory.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

Romania National Committee for Special Emergency Situations (RNCSES)¹⁴³ is an institution in charge of coordinating the country's national crisis response to the Covid-19 viral outbreak. Established in 2014, RNCSES is an inter-ministerial body within the national emergency management system, under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister for National Security. The members are the Minister of Internal Affairs, other ministers, and heads of central public institutions, who are directly responsible for ensuring the emergency response.

In addition, the Romanian President and Prime Minister have been reinforcing the official communication of the aforementioned body by their media appearances and announcements (both live and recorded) whenever necessary.

Moreover, within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there is a Department for Emergency Situations (DES)¹⁴⁴ coordinating all activities of prevention and management of emergency situations at the national level. During these months, DES has continuously contributed to the overall effort of countering the pandemic. For instance, a Covid-19 24h/7 national telephone line was set-up for the latest information and advice on COVID-19. Since 17 March, the hotline has scaled-up its capacities to 60 lines and has relocated to the press-room of the National Arena, the largest football stadium in Romania.¹⁴⁵

In fact, the dissemination of accurate, official information has been a challenge for the Romanian authorities since the very beginning of the outbreak, considering the massive information flux around this pandemic. In this regard, on 24 February, a special unit dedicated to public communication was created – the Group for Strategic

¹⁴³ RNCSES, <https://www.cnssu.ro/>

¹⁴⁴ DES, <http://www.dsu.mai.gov.ro/atributiile-dsu/>

¹⁴⁵ COVID-19 hotline in Romania provides up-to-date public advice with WHO support. World Health Organization. April 8, 2020. <https://www.euro.who.int/en/countries/romania/news/news/2020/4/covid-19-hotline-in-romania-provides-up-to-date-public-advice-with-who-support>

Communication (GSC) – aimed at managing the official information flow linked to the coronavirus. The GSC is under the direct supervision of the DES. It includes expertise from various institutions in a joint effort to fight the virus: Romanian Government, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Transport, Romanian Police, Romanian Gendarmerie, and the Special Telecommunications Service. The GSC centralizes all-country data arriving from the prefectures (government representations across the territory of Romania) in all 41 counties¹⁴⁶.

➔ **THE DISSEMINATION OF ACCURATE, OFFICIAL INFORMATION HAS BEEN A CHALLENGE FOR THE ROMANIAN AUTHORITIES SINCE THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE OUTBREAK, CONSIDERING THE MASSIVE INFORMATION FLUX AROUND THIS PANDEMIC**

To support the activity of the GSC, a specially-dedicated website (stirioficiale.ro) was set up voluntarily by Code for Romania Task Force, an independent and apolitical NGO, which provides updated information on the pandemic-related developments based on the official data released by the Romanian Government and the DES. This website is, in fact, the main official source of information (daily reports, statistics, number of infections across the country, etc.) for the general public and mass media. It includes recommendations on how to maintain a safe sanitary/hygienic behavior (e.g., how to correctly wear a mask), how people should best protect themselves against the virus, what actions to take in case someone suspects he/she has been infected with Covid-19, what to do in case someone is abroad and needs support, etc. The website even tackles social problems (e.g., how to overcome the social stigma provided someone gets infected). It acts as an intermediary platform for the organizations actively involved in limiting the effects of the pandemic. Specifically, it identifies organizations, which operate in different regions of the country, and channels resources (financial aid, medical equipment, volunteers, etc.) to the respective places and organizations requesting support.

¹⁴⁶ Romania is organized in 41 administrative divisions called ‘counties’ (NUTS-3 level).

Besides its immediate purpose, the primary justification for launching such a website has been the threat of disinformation, which has grown significantly during these months of the Covid-19 outbreak. According to stirioficiale.ro¹⁴⁷, “*out of panic and/or lack of knowledge, users, who have either good or bad intentions, can spread erroneous information in online or traditional media (print, radio or TV, etc.). In emergencies, this can lead to wrongdoing and increase the level of fear and uncertainty among the population. Social networks can contribute to the spread of false information since people do not know the official channels of information, and it is a lack of protocols for disseminating information from media groups. It is expected that, in crisis situations, the phenomenon of disseminating information from unofficial sources will increase as a result of the panic.*” In fact, the website debunks many ‘myths about coronavirus’ in a detailed Q&A section.

MEDIA

The challenges identified in the informational environment are very much linked to the communication channels existing in Romania. The mass-media landscape is very diverse, with television as the primary and most popular source of information and entertainment¹⁴⁸. During the current Covid-19 outbreak, all media channels have extensively focused on the topic of the pandemic, which ultimately produced a ‘cocktail’ of available information. In this context, the National Audiovisual Council (NAC), the official regulator for the traditional audio-visual sector (namely, TV&radio) in Romania, issued on 25 June a recommendation for the media services providers to abide by journalistic deontology and tackle all Covid-19 related information responsibly in order to avoid the dissemination of false messages and conspiracy theories to the broader public¹⁴⁹.

Yet, the challenge remains in the online media segment, where regulatory bodies, such as NAC, have no actual jurisdiction. In the vibrant digital market, obscure news websites share phony and manipulative messages, which usually feed a wide range of ‘alternative

¹⁴⁷ Covid-19 Official News, <https://stirioficiale.ro/despre>

¹⁴⁸ Disinformation Resilience Index: Romania, http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

¹⁴⁹ NAC, http://www.cna.ro/IMG/pdf/INSTRUCTIUNEA_nr._4_din_25.06.2020-informare_corecta_Covid-19.pdf

narratives' (i.e., conspiracy theories). Eventually, such alternative narratives entertain a constant flux of comments on the websites themselves and/or on social networks and chat applications (most popular in Romania being Facebook and WhatsApp), where they become easily amplified.

➔ **NO LESS THAN 16 DECISIONS WERE ISSUED BY THE NATIONAL AUTHORITY FOR MANAGEMENT AND REGULATION IN COMMUNICATIONS (NAMRC) AGAINST SEVERAL WEBSITES PUBLISHING FRAUDULENT CONTENT.**

In a controversial attempt to block the spread of disinformation during the state of emergency, GSC has indicated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs some of the websites, which purposefully disseminated fake news and COVID-19-related conspiracy theories in order to generate panic and fear among the population. In this regard, the Ministry of Internal Affairs authorized the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications (NAMRC) to take down specific news posts, considered malicious, or even entire websites. Thus, no less than 16 decisions were issued by the NAMRC against several websites publishing fraudulent content¹⁵⁰. Yet, most of these decisions to block the websites were lifted after 15 May, when the state of emergency officially ended, which meant the websites could return to their usual activity. The GSC came under criticism for this move. For instance, the Romanian-based media monitoring organization, Active Watch, which intensively militates for free communication for the public interest, has scorned GSC's actions as discriminatory and argued that censorship is harmful to the freedom of expression, and could bring about an adverse ("boomerang") effect, legitimizing some of the conspiracy theories¹⁵¹. The Romanian government was also criticized by the Council of Europe for its restrictions on press freedom during the state of emergency.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ NAMRC, https://www.ancom.ro/en/decizii-decret-stare-de-urgenta_6253

¹⁵¹ Adrian Vasilache, Hotnews Romania. May 11, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3lwcZZ8>

¹⁵² Council of Europe. April 3, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2YO8G1B>

Enhancing media literacy appears the only viable alternative to any kind of restrictions put in place by the authorities. Yet, the level of media literacy in Romania is relatively low, while the public is generally susceptible to fake news¹⁵³. In this sense, Romania National Television (TVR) launched on 14 June a weekly TV-show, entitled "Breaking Fake News,"¹⁵⁴ aimed at combating disinformation, in general, and at raising awareness about Coronavirus-related conspiracy theories, in particular.

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

Civil society response has been rather limited so far. Apart from the NGO "Code for Romania Task Force," which works closely with the Romanian authorities, another active online debunking team specialized in exposing and combating disinformation circulating on both traditional and digital media (including social media networks) is Funky Citizens¹⁵⁵. Their website www.factual.ro has been the first fact-checking website in Romania, which has recently dedicated a section to fighting the COVID-19 'infodemic'. The website hosts regular live talks under the "Fake News Bulletin" series, where established journalists and experts in the disinformation field debunk conspiracy narratives.

An initiative to improve media literacy skills has been recently launched by the Expert Forum, a Romanian think-tank specialized in public policy and administrative reform. For example, they developed a so-called 'Working Kit on COVID-19-related disinformation and fake news', which is a set of teaching materials (reading lists, interactive games, and hands-on activities), which can be used by teachers during their classes to strengthen resilience against false news and misinformation among students.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Disinformation Resilience Index: Romania, http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

¹⁵⁴ Breaking Fake News, TVR Romania, http://tvr1.tvr.ro/emisiuni/breaking-fake-news_28102.html

¹⁵⁵ Funky Citizens, <https://funky.org/>

¹⁵⁶ Expert Forum, <https://expertforum.ro/scoalapentrudemocratie/fise-de-lucru-dezinformare-si-fake-news/>

CHURCH

Following consultation with the Romanian government, the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) supported the official decisions of the government and encouraged parishioners to abide by the measures put in place. For instance, during the state of emergency, the ROC did not organize any religious service, which meant that Romanians were not allowed to leave their homes to receive the Holy Fire on Easter night (19 April). President Klaus Iohannis appealed to Romanians to give up the traditional family gatherings during the Easter celebrations, in order to prevent the spread of the virus.¹⁵⁷

CORRELATION TO THE DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX-2018

In spite of the fresh context, marked by the spread of the Covid-19 virus, some recurrent patterns could be identified in both DRI-2018 and DRI-2020.

First, whereas in DRI-2018 the West (namely, Romania's Western allies in the EU and NATO), and particularly, the United States are pinpointed as the supreme malicious forces ruling over Romania, whereby the American philanthropist, George Soros, is the main puppeteer, in DRI-2020, the pandemic is shown as instrumental in a well-coordinated plan to subject the planet (including Romania). Yet, this time the role of George Soros has been replaced by Bill Gates, who purposefully weaponized the virus.

Second, whilst in the DRI-2018 disinformation appeared to chiefly target internal political infighting and sow distrust in the country's political institutions, in DRI-2020 these attempts to sap the credibility of the state in front of the Romanian citizens have even increased.

¹⁵⁷ Coronavirus: Orthodox Easter weekend marked under lockdown. BBC News, April 19, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52339183>

Third, it is interesting to note that in both DRI-2018 and DRI-2020 much of generated disinformation is mostly produced domestically, by local sources, which seek to exploit the vulnerabilities existing at the level of the Romanian state.

DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

The sudden spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a very favorable background for the proliferation of false claims and conspiracy theories. Throughout the recent months, 'alternative narratives' have been circulated worldwide, including in Romania. The remainder of this study looks at some of the most frequent narratives, which have been distributed in the Romanian information space for an interval spanning five months, from February to June 2020. Covering a 5-month timeframe is significant for this study since it sheds light on some of the most popular forms of disinformation and also provides analytical continuity throughout this period, which begins with the month of February, roughly around the time the first COVID-19 infection was reported in Romania.

A first observation that can be made is that Romanians have been exposed to a high level of disinformation and false beliefs imported from abroad. For instance, none of the narratives disseminated across the EU member states has circumvented Romania. On the contrary, it was interesting to notice a recurrence of similar disinformation patterns across both the international and the Romanian informational environment. Thus, fake news and distorted claims found fertile ground in Romania and were easily propagated, particularly online (sometimes adapted to match the national audience).

A quick look on the EUvsDisinfo website, the investigative project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force, for the February 1-June 30 period, shows some of the narratives, which have been diffused in the Romanian online environment via websites originating in Romania and (mostly) in the Republic of Moldova. These include narratives on **the origin of the virus**, which unanimously tend to claim that the appearance of the virus is neither accidental, nor

animal-human transmitted, but purposefully created as a biological weapon by state actors (such as the U.S.¹⁵⁸).

The second set of narratives are **health-related**, which either recommend miraculous cures for the coronavirus (such as, the intravenous injection of Vitamin C) or claim that a remedy has already been found (albeit still not distributed)¹⁵⁹. Other health-related narratives deny the existence of the virus altogether¹⁶⁰. Based on such a narrative, there is no need to abide by any protection measures since the COVID-19 is just a ‘myth,’¹⁶¹ and the reported deaths actually occur because of other medical causes¹⁶².

The third group of narratives is less straightforward and includes complex ‘**conspiracy theories**,’ which postulate that the virus is, in reality, a hoax aimed at establishing a new (controlled) world order and at reducing the global population¹⁶³. In other words, the respective narratives seek to show that the pandemic is ultimately a ‘pLademic.’¹⁶⁴ In the case of Romania, the elderly people, the pensioners, were indicated as the ‘expendable’ targets, for which the virus has been created¹⁶⁵.

➔ **ROMANIANS HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO A HIGH LEVEL OF DISINFORMATION AND FALSE BELIEFS IMPORTED FROM ABROAD.**

¹⁵⁸ Disinfo: Us Military Biological Laboratories Encircle Russia. East StratCom Task Force, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/us-military-biological-laboratories-encircle-russia>

¹⁵⁹ Disinfo: Vitamin C Administered Intravenously Treats Patients With Coronavirus, A Finding Censored So Far. East StratCom Task Force. <https://bit.ly/2QCeHKr>

¹⁶⁰ Nașu’, mașina de împrôșcat conspirații și acuzații. Și are destule! A mai bifat și o amendă. Radu Bambu, Pagina de Media Romania. July 1, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3lvSID9>

¹⁶¹ Protest în Piața Victoriei, susținut de antivacciniști și persoane promovate intens de propaganda rusă. Hotnews Romania. May 15, 2020. <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-coronavirus-23998858-video-protest-piata-victoriei-antivaccinisti-propaganda-rusa.htm>

¹⁶² Asociația drepturilor deținutului Liviu Dragnea a lansat operațiunea “decese fictive de COVID”. Codruța Simina, PressOne Romania. <https://bit.ly/3lySBa3>

¹⁶³ East StratCom Task Force, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-just-a-pretext-for-reducing-population-growth-then-reducing-the-population/>; Flux.md Republic of Moldova, <https://bit.ly/31GmD3H>

¹⁶⁴ Cătălin Gomboș & Marian Voicu, Hotnews Romania, <https://bit.ly/2YJRNvJ>

¹⁶⁵ Lavinia Popa, Aktual 24 Romania, <https://bit.ly/3lzIO3h>

Inextricably linked to this purpose is the support of the 5G-technology or the anti-coronavirus vaccines (so far inexistent) concocted in the laboratories belonging to Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.¹⁶⁶ In fact, in Romania, both the anti-5G campaigners¹⁶⁷ and the anti-vaxxers¹⁶⁸ have been particularly active during these months.

Another frequent claim is that the ‘fabrication’ of the virus serves merely mercantile purposes, whereby the big winners are the pharmaceutical companies¹⁶⁹. In other cases, the pandemic is perceived as being instrumentalized to assist a covert geopolitical plan, which usually takes the shape of a ‘zero-sum’ game, whereby the U.S./EU losses might be equivalent with Russia/China’s gains or vice versa. In any case, the coronavirus is seen as a weapon created by state X to undermine state Y¹⁷⁰ and thus aimed at amplifying a state’s geostrategic clout in international affairs. For example, a narrative heavily spilled-over in Romania has targeted the EU, predicting the collapse of the organization and highlighting its alleged inability to help member states in their fight against the pandemic¹⁷¹.

A second remark is that Romanians are particularly susceptible to disinformation campaigns and conspiracies.¹⁷² In particular, the dissemination of online disinformation appears to be difficult to counter. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that the consumption of disinformation has been high in Romania. According to the European Commission Flash Barometer 464¹⁷³ published in April 2018, Romanians are among the respondents in the EU who do not exhibit high trust in either printed or online newspapers and press magazines, preferring instead alternative sources of information, which usually

¹⁶⁶ East StratCom Task Force, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/bill-gates-vaccination-leaves-496000-children-paralyzed-in-india/>

¹⁶⁷ Stop5G Romania, <http://stop5gromania.ro/>, <https://www.facebook.com/stop5gromania/>

¹⁶⁸ Octavian Coman, PressOne Romania, <https://pressone.ro/cine-sunt-si-ce-vor-medicii-din-romania-care-au-semnat-o-scrisoare-impotriva-legii-vaccinarii>

¹⁶⁹ Alina Bârgăoanu & Loredana Radu, LSE Blogs, <https://bit.ly/31GCxLx>

¹⁷⁰ George Scutaru, The Warsaw Institute Review, <https://warsawinstitute.review/interviews/romania-a-struggle-with-coronavirus-and-russian-disinformation/>

¹⁷¹ East StratCom Task Force, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/eu-has-been-unable-to-support-its-most-affected-members/>

¹⁷² Alina Bârgăoanu & Loredana Radu, LSE Blogs, <https://bit.ly/31GCxLx>

¹⁷³ European Commission 2018, Flash Eurobarometer 464 “Fake news and disinformation online”.

do not undergo solid fact-checking. Romania, together with Hungary, are the EU countries that display a higher level of confidence in online social networks and messaging apps than in traditional news outlets. A particular vulnerability identified by this study deals with Romanians' trust in the national institutions. According to the latest (2019) INSCOP national survey, the Government and Parliament are the least trusted institutions in Romania¹⁷⁴.

➔ **ROMANIANS ARE PARTICULARLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS AND CONSPIRACIES.**

Although in March 2020, the majority of Romanians supported the measures taken by the national authorities to limit the spread of the infection (including the state of emergency)¹⁷⁵, a new type of fake news has lately appeared to diffuse, **aimed explicitly at sowing distrust in the state**¹⁷⁶. Following the prolongation of the lockdown and the grim economic perspectives looming ahead, societal perceptions have started to grow increasingly wary. Social confinement, coupled with constant messages to abide by social distancing rules (including temperature-checks for customers entering stores) have been widely speculated by conspiracy theorists, who used this 'opportunity' to accuse the state of committing abuses or to link the ongoing restrictions with a deliberate move to control the population (for more details, please see the 'Kaufland affair'¹⁷⁷).

The latest poll, conducted in May 2020, by IRES Romania, which was aimed at reflecting societal perceptions at the end of the state of emergency, shows a worrying trend among Romanians: 49% think that the gravity of the pandemic was exaggerated, while a similar percentage believes the state has hidden important information about the outbreak or considers that between the state and mass

¹⁷⁴ Romania Insider, <https://www.romania-insider.com/government-parliament-least-trusted>

¹⁷⁵ Iulian Bîrzo, Adevarul Romania. <https://bit.ly/2YMjFJ3>

¹⁷⁶ George Scutaru, The Warsaw Institute Review, <https://warsawinstitute.review/interviews/romania-a-struggle-with-coronavirus-and-russian-disinformation/>

¹⁷⁷ Ramona Roşulescu, PressHub Romania. <https://bit.ly/2Evb32H>

media there is a covert agreement to conceal or to limit COVID-19-related evidence. In any case, 62% are not willing to entrust the state with their confidence after this crisis ends. Moreover, 50% of the respondents consider that the Romanian society would come out of this pandemic less united. Finally, 49% think the virus is less dangerous than generally believed, whereas 33% would reject vaccination, provided a remedy is found.¹⁷⁸

➔ **ROMANIA IS POTENTIALLY AT RISK OF FACING WIDE-REACHING DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS INITIATED BY FOREIGN AND/OR DOMESTIC ACTORS SEEKING TO UNDERMINE THE CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY OF THE NATIONAL OR EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS**

A third observation is related to the question of whether in this context of polarized debates on the COVID-19 pandemic, Romania is potentially at risk of facing wide-reaching disinformation campaigns initiated by foreign and/or domestic actors seeking to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the national or European institutions. According to various studies (EUvsDisinfo.eu¹⁷⁹, CEPA Infowar Report on Romania 2016-2018¹⁸⁰, Kremlin Watch 2020¹⁸¹, and the Resilience Disinformation Index: Romania 2018¹⁸²), Romania had been in the focus of the disinformation activity stemming from Russia even before the viral outbreak erupted. The GSC has recently warned the population about a considerable influx of fake news aimed at generating anxiety, which are distributed in Romania from websites hosted in Russia.¹⁸³ Similar threats have been reported by the experts of the Romanian Cyber Influence Assessment and Strategies Centre,

¹⁷⁸ IRES Romania. <https://bit.ly/3gCV1R3>

¹⁷⁹ East StratCom Task Force, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

¹⁸⁰ CEPA U.S., <http://infowar.cepa.org/Countries/Romania>

¹⁸¹ Kremlin Watch, Czech Republic, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/romania/>

¹⁸² Disinformation Resilience Index: Romania, http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

¹⁸³ Euractiv Romania, <https://www.euractiv.ro/facts-not-fake/stiri-false-rusia-19525>

a research center gathering experts from the Government's General Secretariat. The experts pointed out that Russia had intensified the misinformation campaigns during the pandemic aiming at sowing distrust in the national and international institutions Romania belongs to (the EU and NATO) and stir up social unrest and polarization.¹⁸⁴ For example, the fake news identified by the EUvsDisinfo.eu are indicating the presence of the U.S. secret laboratories in the proximity of Russia has been later on posted on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Bucharest.¹⁸⁵

Yet, solely pointing at Russia for the current disinformation campaigns, which have hit Romania would be too simplistic, since domestic entities, with no clear links to the Russian Federation, might also be interested in distributing misinformation and alternative narratives for similar purposes (namely, to weaken trust in institutions and sow panic – see for instance reference 12 for the list of websites considered controversial by NAMRC) or merely for clickbait, ultimately used to generate profits¹⁸⁶.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Crises generally cause national authorities and international institutions to react slowly. Gaps in knowledge and lack of a prompt national/global response to a crisis almost always generate a communication void, which can be easily speculated. Moreover, when people lose control of the events and feel physically threatened, they are easily inclined to conspiratorial, emotional stories in which they eventually come to believe. In this context, the COVID-19 has been an ideal breeding ground for a new wave of fake news and disinformation, which has also impacted Romania.
2. To counter the diffusion of alarmist messages aimed at generating confusion and vulnerabilities at the societal level, the first preoccupation in Romania should concern **the state-citizen relationship**, which has been so far dysfunctional. Rebuilding mutual trust is essential for ensuring cohesion and unity at a level of the population. Conversely, lower levels of trust affect the resilience of the state against hybrid threats and damage the social fiber of the nation.
3. Secondly, **professional fact-checking and debunking** need to be encouraged in order to fight the malevolent content of the information, particularly in the online environment. The Romanian authorities, in cooperation with the EU and NATO, should step up their efforts and come up with a comprehensive policy to address disinformation and also provide resources to NGOs, fact-checkers, and researchers willing to tackle the flow of fake news.
4. Last but not least, **increasing awareness** about the growing threat posed by fake news and disinformation activities across the Romanian information space should be an immediate objective for both national authorities and civil society. Devoting additional resources to the development of media literacy skills at the public level (including the ability to recognize and react to disinformation) and of a responsible approach, when disseminating online content, should be top priorities for the near future.

¹⁸⁴ G4media Romania. <https://bit.ly/3hHIZZh>

¹⁸⁵ Defense Romania. <https://bit.ly/2Da7nm2>

¹⁸⁶ Codruța Simina, PressOne. <https://bit.ly/3jrYqnB>

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX 2020: ROMANIA

MEASURES TAKEN	YES	NO	COMMENT
A GOVERNMENT RESPONSE			
Coordination center (existing or new)	1		
Governmental spokesperson/people (contact point to provide answers to journalists)	1		
Regular Press-briefings of Responsible Institutions (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, etc.)	1		
Periodic press-conferences/press-briefings by senior leadership (President or Prime Minister)	1		
Pre-recorded messages of the senior officials (President or Prime Minister)	1		
Establishing special communication channels (Facebook pages, telegram channels, Viber channels, chat-bots, special websites)	1		
Additional communication of regional authorities		0	
Cases of contradiction in messages on national and regional level		0	
Cases of unjustified blocking/taking down content of disinformation from media by national bodies (reported by international organizations)	-1		
Creating/empowering/changing focus of special governmental units to debunk disinformation	1		
Criminalizing the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official	-1		
Cases of applying changes to the legislation that criminalize the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official	-1		
Restrictions of media freedom added	-1		

Increasing state support for independent media (explain) (Tax relieve, Additional budgets for advertisement for official information to support media, Assistance to public broadcasters) 0

B MEDIA

Investigative reports	1		
Counter disinformation campaigns	1		
Journalists' self-regulation and calls for reinforcing ethical conduct	1		
Journalists' professional training on reporting about pandemic		0	

C CIVIL SOCIETY

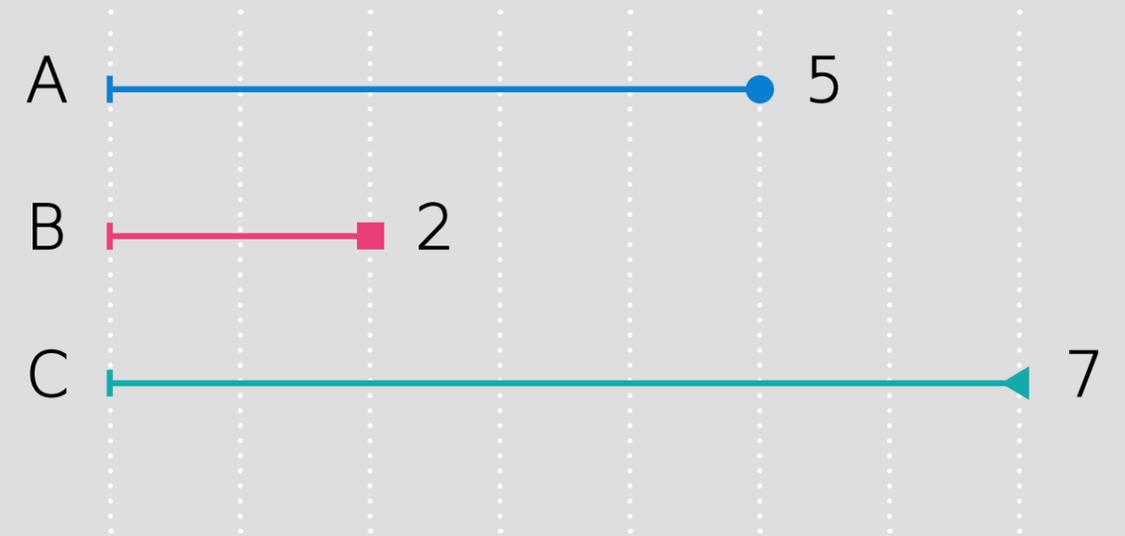
Fact-checking and digital debunking initiatives	1		
Investigative reports	1		
National fakes data base		0	
Counter-disinformation campaigns	1		
Coordination of efforts with media	1		
Joint communication campaigns of civil society actors/Cooperation between civic society initiatives	1		
Exchanging experiences with foreign NGOs	1		
Producing guidelines and recommendations for general audience, not only for government	1		

SERGIY
GERASYMCHUK,

OLEKSANDR
KRAIEV,

*Foreign Policy Council
"Ukrainian Prism"*

UKRAINE



INTRODUCTION

Manipulated information, using a mix of emotionality and rationality, has become pervasive and dominant in Ukraine since the attempted annexation of Crimea and Russian military engagement in the East of Ukraine, thus having a much longer history of the application. Constructing false reality is one of the instruments of Russian hybrid aggression. Disinformation spreads exponentially fast by exploiting vulnerabilities of social media and a lack of critical thinking of the audience. Indeed, relatively long experience of information war with Russia assured some sort of specific resilience of Ukrainians towards disinformation and fake news. Russian media attacks have inspired Ukrainians, among others, to create organizations like StopFake or Crisis Media Center to combat such actions.

COVID-19 pandemic and global panic related to it have added to the existing trends. Already traditional disinformation campaigns, inspired and financed by Russia, were fueled with new disinformation messages that contained biased half-truths, global and regionally tailored conspiracy theories, and outright lies. The emotions caused by pandemic – uncertainty and fear – empowered disinformation messages and enabled them to go viral. Troll farms, bots, and fake news are being used to change politics and to polarize society. The narratives propelled by Russia mostly have multifaceted goals. First, they confuse the very nature of coronavirus, its impact, and its origin. Also, they promote an idea of state weakness and an inability to elaborate adequate measures to combat. Further, they put under the question international solidarity that results in an underestimation of the European support in dealing with the crisis. Finally, these narratives promote both global viral conspiracy theories as well as those that blame Ukraine for being directly or indirectly engaged in the creation of a virus.

Response to the new trends is vitally important. Elaboration of new creative and asymmetric tools to combat disinformation (considering previous experience and knowledge in the field) is crucial.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

The National Security and Defense Council took first actions at the governmental level. It was closely working with the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine – specifically the Ministry of Healthcare. During the first weeks of the COVID-19 related international travel ban, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also been actively participating in the evacuation process of Ukrainians from abroad and on ensuring working communications with partner states and international organizations. Arguably, the intention was shaping the narrative of the responsible state’s approach towards citizens abroad trapped by quarantine restrictions. To this end, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduced a specific program “Zakhyst” (“Protection”)¹⁸⁷, in order to ensure the state’s swift response to the needs of Ukrainian citizens abroad.

➔ **SECURITY SERVICES OF UKRAINE BROUGHT TO LIGHT 207 PERSONS GUILTY OF SPREADING MISINFORMATION/ DISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 AND BLOCKED MORE THAN 2000 SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS.**

As for now, two central bodies remain crucial in the governmental activities: the Ministry of Healthcare and the Ministry of Interior. The leading voice of the Ukrainian response to coronavirus is the Ministry of Healthcare. Minister Maksym Stepanov acts as an ex-officio spokesperson for the government, giving daily press briefings. Additionally to that, the MH website is updated each day. However, it occasionally lacks some pieces of important information – for example, the number of conducted tests (the data which contributes to a better understanding of statistics). Second in position is Deputy Minister of Healthcare and Chief State Sanitary Doctor of Ukraine Viktor Liashko, who is also engaged with the press relations surrounding quarantine and actively supports activities and public appearances of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

¹⁸⁷ <https://bit.ly/2GbNU5L>

Regional administrations' communication echoed that of central bodies. However, it is worth noticing that in particular situations – like one with the mayor of Cherkasy¹⁸⁸ – new quarantine restrictions and new regulations were met with sheer resistance and erupted in a political confrontation.¹⁸⁹

Each party is concerned with the novel coronavirus pandemic, and after several COVID-19 cases among MPs, none of them is trying to deny its gravity, which is a more positive trend. However, political parties are engaged in a typical charity game, battling in providing different goods and services for medical facilities and people in need. Every such activity was presented as a voluntary donation, and in some cases, it was more of a volunteer contest to impress voters¹⁹⁰ ahead of upcoming local elections this autumn.

On the part of legislation changes, there are two dominant vectors. The first one is an introduction and prolongation of the quarantine regime. The second one is a budget and monetary adjustments with the necessary additional market and industrial regulations aimed at preserving economic stability. However, no other bills were passed as to countering disinformation on coronavirus – such functions were put, among other things, on security services.

During the pandemic, there were two notable cases of direct counter-fake news actions by governmental and security bodies, with the direct involvement of the Security Services of Ukraine (SSU) in both cases. In April, SSU brought to light¹⁹¹ 207 persons guilty of spreading misinformation/disinformation about COVID-19 and blocked more than 2000 social media groups. In another instance, SSU, together with Kyiv local authorities and the Ministry of Healthcare, debunked that a special sanitizer would be sprayed from helicopters in Kyiv at night.

¹⁸⁸ Invoking Cossack resistance, Ukrainian mayor defies lockdown measures. May 5, 2020. <https://reut.rs/3blUqCB>

¹⁸⁹ After numerous appeals from businesses, Cherkasy mayor Anatoliy Bondarenko decided to open shops, hairdressers, and restaurants on 30 April. This decision prompted police to launch criminal proceedings against the Cherkasy authorities and summon the mayor for questioning. President Zelenskyy accused Bondarenko of trying to enhance his popularity at the expense of citizens' lives.

¹⁹⁰ Коронавірус це серйозно, найбільша волонтерська допомога йде від партії Порошенка – соціологи опитали киян. May 27, 2020. <https://bit.ly/31HymN>

¹⁹¹ Більше 200 агітаторів поширювали фейки — СБУ. April 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3hlspar>

MEDIA

According to the Internews-USAID survey¹⁹² released in 2019, television had lost its role as the most popular source of information in Ukraine. Only 66% of the population was using it to check the latest news, comparing to 77% in 2018. Instead, social media were growing popular – the number of those who were using them for checking news increased to 68% in comparison to 53% in 2018. The third position belongs to webportals – 59%.

The top-3 TV-channels according to Internews-USAID's survey are 1+1 (63%), Inter (41%), and ICTV (32%). The most popular news websites, according to the mentioned research, are 1plus1.ua (12%), fakty.ua (7%), and obozrevatel.com (6%). The leading positions in both Internet-news and TV-channels belong to the 1+1 group.

Ukraine is still facing significant Russian media influence. Despite all legislative restrictions, 85%¹⁹³ of Ukrainians who are using satellite TV technically can receive a signal from about a dozen Russian TV-channels directly or indirectly connected to Kremlin. That increases the Ukrainian audience's vulnerability to the narratives and propaganda aimed by Russian media at the neighboring countries, including Russian attempts to blame the EU countries or the USA for creating COVID-19 (e.g., it is a sort of biological weapon designed for sterilizing the population, or there are US biological labs in Ukraine, etc.).

It is a model often used for a spread of the manipulative information: an anonymous source is spreading the information (usually via social media such as Telegram-channels some of which were noticed¹⁹⁴ for spreading fake news back in February 2020). Then the information is republished by low profile news websites and further disseminated via other media with reference to the abstract "mass-media." Such a model assures certain legitimization of disinformation and makes it look more reliable. For such

¹⁹² Онлайн медіа та соціальні мережі перехопили лідерство у телебачення за популярністю в Україні. October 22, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3gLmb8u>

¹⁹³ Інфікування інформацією, або Про коронавірус як об'єкт російської пропаганди. April 5, 2020. <http://khp.org/index.php?id=1588600091>.

¹⁹⁴ В Telegram распространяют фейки о коронавирусе в Украине- Скалецкая. February 27, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3gKHUgK>

purposes, usually, low-profile websites are frequently used. They are listed by fake news debunking initiatives¹⁹⁵.

However, in some cases, even popular media with wide coverage lack responsibility. For example, Ukrainian TV channel 1+1 was noticed in spreading unreliable coronavirus related information. One of the cases¹⁹⁶ that scandalized the international community was the program related to 15 secret US labs in Ukraine, which could have been used for creating COVID-19. This “news,” first released by “Opposition Platform – For Life” political party, was later aired by 1+1 TV-channel, and further re-broadcasted by TV-channels “ZIK” and “112” known for being under the control of Viktor Medvedchuk – a Ukrainian politician close to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The information was also spread by UNIAN – a media-source allegedly belonging to Ihor Kolomoysky (same owner as 1+1). Further, these accusations have been convincingly refuted by the US State Department officials¹⁹⁷.

➔ **SOCIAL MEDIA WERE GROWING POPULAR — THE NUMBER OF THOSE WHO WERE USING THEM FOR CHECKING NEWS INCREASED TO 68% IN COMPARISON TO 53% IN 2018.**

There is a chance that such misconduct of media could have been avoided if there is any Media Conduct Code related to spreading information about the pandemic being in place in Ukraine. However, there is no such a Code except for a rather generalized and non-binding Code of Ethics of Ukrainian Journalist¹⁹⁸.

Luckily, there is also some positive experience in this regard. The website Fakty (ICTV group) started cooperation with the UN, including

¹⁹⁵ Список сайтів з фейковими новинами, жовта преса. <https://www.stopfake.online/p/blog-page.html>

¹⁹⁶ “1+1” поширив російський фейк про “американські біолабораторії” в Україні. May 2, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2G4DrJa>

¹⁹⁷ Держдеп: Медведчук і “1+1” поширили російський фейк про коронавірус. May 7, 2020. <https://glavcom.ua/news/derzhdep-medvedchuk-i-11-poshirili-rosiyskiy-feyk-pro-koronavirus--678320.html>

¹⁹⁸ Кодекс етики українського журналіста. <http://www.cje.org.ua/ua/code>

WHO¹⁹⁹. The series of joint publications have aimed at debunking myths, conspiracy theories, and other COVID-19 related fakes. The publications also include recommendations on preventing the spread of COVID-19 and the most up-to-date information checked by the respective UN bodies. All these materials are labeled with the UN logo to prove that the information has been reviewed.

Besides, most of the web-media avoid emotionally marking their news. According to the Institute of Mass Information²⁰⁰, only 5% of them applied emotional headlines, and 38% of COVID-19 related news was based on the data provided by the official sources.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The popularity of social media platforms is growing in Ukraine. The top-3 popular social media in Ukraine, at the beginning of the crisis, were Facebook (58%), YouTube (41%), and Instagram (28%). Besides, Internet-traffic growth reached 25%²⁰¹ during the quarantine period.

➔ **STOPFAKE.ORG HAS COME TO AN AGREEMENT WITH FACEBOOK, AND, SINCE MARCH, THE ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN PROVIDING FACT-CHECKING SERVICES FOR THE SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANY.**

It is worth mentioning that Stopfake.org has come to an agreement with Facebook²⁰², and, since March, the organization has been providing fact-checking services for the social media company. That is

¹⁹⁹ Сайт “Фактов” ictv и ООН будут развенчивать фейки о коронавирусе. April 4, 2020. <https://telekritika.ua/sajt-faktov-ictv-i-oon-budut-razvenchivat-fejki-o-koronaviruse/>

²⁰⁰ Як онлайн-медіа висвітлюють covid-19. моніторинг ІМІ. March 23, 2020. <https://bit.ly/32H7oqv>

²⁰¹ Інфодемія COVID-19: дезінформація поширюється так само швидко, як і коронавірус. April 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/32EZGwR>

²⁰² Як у Facebook шукають фейки про коронавірус: досвід Stopfake. Une 12, 2020. [https:// bit.ly/34KxRG6](https://bit.ly/34KxRG6)

a good supplement of the Platform's activities²⁰³ aimed at removing accounts, pages, and groups engaged in domestic-focused coordinated inauthentic behavior in Ukraine – the people behind this activity use fake accounts to manage groups and a number of pages, some of which change their names over time. They also tried to increase engagement, disseminate content, and drive people to off-platform sites posing as news outlets.

Meanwhile, YouTube is applying universal rules²⁰⁴ and blocks accounts systematically spreading false coronavirus-related information.

The related activities of the security authorities in Ukraine are described in Section 2 (Governmental Actions).

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

In response to the pandemic disinformation wave, many civil society organizations started to provide volunteering and open fact-checking on crucial matters concerning COVID-19 and the quarantine. Some prominent examples include VoxCheck Ukraine, ArmyInform, Stopfake.org, and Euromaidanpress. The mentioned organizations had been notable fact-checking platforms from before the pandemic times and tailored their activities during the quarantine. Each of these organizations is an example of effective anti-fake campaigns during corona-crisis that have been conducted on multiple social media platforms simultaneously. If talking about joint actions of the civil society organizations in combating coronavirus fakes, the most prominent platform is "On the other side of the pandemic." This is a joint venture of several informational agencies, media outlets, and expert groups aimed at fact-checking and preventing the spread of fake news and disinformation. Additionally, they provide information from verified sources, such as WHO, MH of Ukraine, Centre for Public Health, etc.

²⁰³ Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Iraq and Ukraine. <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-iraq-and-ukraine/>

²⁰⁴ Правила щодо поширення оманливої медичної інформації про COVID-19. <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9891785?hl=uk>

At the same time, a specific set of activities was focused on providing additional training and expertise for journalists who work with pandemic issues. Such a project, called Anticovid, was implemented via a collaboration of civil society and expert organizations, it provides a step-by-step guide for journalists, a plethora of informational materials, and legal advice for journalists' activities. This is a bright example of inter-organizational cooperation in combating misinformation. Such organizations as VoxCheck Ukraine and Stopfake.org, also participate in international cooperation by being active affiliates of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

CHURCH

The situation with churches' reaction to novel coronavirus pandemic differs dramatically. In some cases, we can even witness a divergence in positions of spiritual leaders within one specific denomination. However, it is also worth noting that the overall attitude of Ukraine's churches and religious leaders – with little exceptions, can be described as responsible and balanced. Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO), despite some minor issues ahead of the Orthodox Easter, has been aligned with governmental pandemic policies. Some measures, including gathering limitations and worship restrictions, were even discussed in multilateral forums²⁰⁵ between UCCRO and the government.

To reflect the positions of major religious communities, it would be reasonable to group the following information into sub-categories (presented in alphabetical order) and to illustrate accordingly with specific examples.

Christian community. It is crucially important to diversify between different branches. Predominantly all Christian denominations in Ukraine adhere to the general line of keeping their believers safe and upholding quarantine rules. Some of them additionally took actions in various social and humanitarian activities. For example, the Orthodox

²⁰⁵ Рада Церков надала уряду пропозиції щодо забезпечення свободи віросповідання під час карантину. April 8, 2020. <https://bit.ly/31EHjJa>

Church of Ukraine (OCU) supplied sanitizers and food packages²⁰⁶ to those in need, and Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church proposed to use their cathedrals and churches as additional hospital spaces²⁰⁷.

At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, regarding itself as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchy, denied a threat of a virus²⁰⁸ and has continued services in violation of the state-imposed restrictions. In several cases, that led to severe outbreaks in Kyiv and Pochaiv. Such obscurity was echoed by the Honorary Patriarch of OCU Filaret, who proclaimed that²⁰⁹ COVID-19 is a ‘punishment for homosexuality.’

➔ **THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN UKRAINE DENIED A THREAT OF A VIRUS AND HAS CONTINUED SERVICES IN VIOLATION OF THE STATE-IMPOSED RESTRICTIONS**

Muslim community. Muslims in Ukraine are exceptionally coherent in quarantine. Additional measures were implemented during the holy month of Ramadan (23 April – 23 May). Some preachers used their voice during this month to call on their congregation to be responsible in times of crisis and to adhere to all imposed government rules and quarantine regulations²¹⁰. Religious services were brought on-line – for example, the obligatory donation of Zakat al-Fitr during Ramadan.

Jewish community. The Jewish community also demonstrated cohesion in the times of pandemic. Additionally to stopping all worshiping and gatherings in synagogues, the community also offered additional assistance to the governmental institutions and private entities. According to the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, the

²⁰⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3HbqDZJaEw>

²⁰⁷ Глава УГКЦ Блаженніший Святослав готовий надати Церкви та монастирі під шпиталі. March 22, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maYqps6bwKs>

²⁰⁸ Звернення Блаженнішого Митрополита Онуфрія до пастви у Страсну седмицю. April 14, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbO8W6nFvYo&feature=emb_logo

²⁰⁹ LGBT+ group sues Ukraine religious figure linking coronavirus to gay marriage. April 13, 2020. <https://news.trust.org/item/20200413191406-79wt9/>

²¹⁰ Звернення думи “умма” до мусульман України. April 23, 2020. <https://umma.in.ua/ua/node/2693>

Jewish community provided special protective gear²¹¹ for several Ukrainian hospitals, created a special hotline for psychological support, and performed other supplementary projects. However, some misinformation was also spread – for example, concerning the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine.

CORRELATION TO THE DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE INDEX-2018

The comparison with DRI-2018²¹² proves that Russian methods have not changed significantly. Russia still seeds disinformation and ensures that its lies are emotionally engaging. According to the recent poll²¹³ of Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, people with higher education remain slightly more resilient towards disinformation, myths, and fakes related to COVID-19. That also corresponds with the results reflected in DRI-2018.

Concerning the media spreading disinformation, in DRI-2018, Strana.UA was named among the websites transmitting Russian narratives the most. In 2020, Strana.UA is mentioned among the websites with one of the highest numbers of emotionally marked news (16%), although a leader is Znaj.ua (38%).

The trends noticed back in 2018 remain valid but nowadays are supplemented with the new approaches both at the global and at the national level. COVID-19 became a trigger, which can be both instrumentalized for spreading more fakes and conspiracy theories, and also for defining actors and media, which are manipulating the audiences (in particular bearing in mind that COVID-19 related propaganda became a global wake-up call and has mobilized efforts and resources for combating it globally).

²¹¹ <https://bit.ly/2QDLJK>

²¹² Disinformation Resilience Index 2019. http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

²¹³ Думки і погляди населення України щодо походження коронавірусу і його поширення у світі: травень-червень 2020 року. <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=952&page=1>

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The research of the COVID-19 related narratives typology leads to a necessity to highlight three periods. The dynamics of the pandemic had its impact on both content and intensity of promotion of different narratives:

1. A pre-pandemic period (January – mid-March 2020, when the disease had its outburst in China mostly);
2. An official announcement of the pandemic and the first weeks of the quarantine – introducing quarantine measures (12 March 2020– 22 May 2020);
3. Softening of restrictive measures (since 22 May 2020).

Generally, the narratives spread by traditional and social media echoed global trends and can be split into the following groups:

- a) Health-related issues;
- b) Geopolitically based storylines;
- c) Government-related news stories (threats to democracy and human rights, failed gov's, distrust spreading, etc.);
- d) Conspiracy theories.

However, besides the above, in Ukraine, there are certain specifics of such narratives: there are no clear types, rather a mixture of types can be observed (see below).

PRE-PANDEMIC HEALTH-RELATED NARRATIVES AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

This period can be characterized by the disinformation/misinformation mostly rooted in a deficit of knowledge about the disease, desire to broadcast news that can go viral and cause hype. At that time, the Ministry of Healthcare had not yet started its informational campaign and, in most cases, echoed messages of the WHO and other proofed global sources.

The main actors of this information influx were local media outlets and individual bloggers. Many examples can be found in local news

websites – like those of Sumy²¹⁴ and Vinnytsia²¹⁵, which were found spreading misinformation from non-proofed sources. Further, the model of 'news republishing,' described in Section 3, "Media," was partly applied. Legitimization of disinformation/misinformation was assured by re-broadcasting it by traditional media.

Hypothetically, at that moment, external actors still had not elaborated their strategy on weaponizing COVID-19 related fakes and their use for geopolitical purposes or for labeling the national government as incompetent and unable to handle the problem.

Probably the only exception was a Novi Sanzhary's²¹⁶ case (place defined for observation of Ukrainians coming from China). A lack of official information combined with the locally driven fakes, myths, and disinformation resulted in disappointment in the governmental activities, popular unrest, and clashes with security forces. However, it created a precedent of weaponizing COVID-19 related disinformation against the government by mostly internal actors, which further was applied for the destabilization of Ukraine by Russia.

QUARANTINE PERIOD: HEALTH-RELATED AND GOVERNMENT-RELATED CONSPIRACY

Since the beginning of quarantine, the health-related narratives were supplemented with the government-related narratives aimed at demonstrating the governmental weakness, inability to handle the problem promptly and adequately, the inefficiency of the measures undertaken by the government. Such a combination was appealing to an anxious society and thus was instrumentalized by Russia. It corresponds with the general trend of labeling Ukraine as an inefficient state with the attributes of 'failed state.' Such a message was targeted at both Ukrainian audience and foreign partners of

²¹⁴ Лікар з Уханя: є тільки один спосіб захиститись від коронавірусу. March 6, 2020. [https:// bit.ly/31DTGW3](https://bit.ly/31DTGW3)

²¹⁵ У Вінниці 25-річну дівчину госпіталізували з підозрою на коронавірус. March 13, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2GcxfPt>

²¹⁶ Майстри паніки. Як проросійська мережа в Україні організувала бунт в Нових Санжарах. February 28, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2QzPr7H>

Ukraine. The disinformation waves were propelled by Russian media²¹⁷ and pro-Russian media in Ukraine. Legitimization of disinformation/misinformation by re-broadcasting it by traditional media was preserved, and there are some glues that Russian propaganda started to use this mechanism by financing troll factories (some of which had been discovered by the security services of Ukraine as mentioned in Section 2 “Government Actions”).

QUARANTINE PERIOD: GEOPOLITICAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES

In contrast to the previous narrative, this one exclusively concerns global players and their presumed role in the creation, usage, and spread of COVID-19. Here we witness such informational ‘bombshells’ as American or Chinese plans to curtail the global population and/or to produce a powerful blow to the world economy.

Such messages were mostly fueled through the Russian media and Ukrainian pro-Russian media agencies. In various cases, it was obviously used as a part of the broader anti-Western narratives used in the framework of the aggressive Russian information policy. In the Ukrainian case, one specific example was notable (likewise in some other countries of the region) – fake news concerning ‘US bio-labs’ located in Ukraine that was said to be a birthplace of SARS-CoV-2. This fake was quickly brought on by Russian media and even by information channels of the so-called “L(D)PR.”

SOFTENING QUARANTINE PERIOD: GOVERNMENT-RELATED AND GEOPOLITICAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The relative success of the Ukrainian government in containing coronavirus and a decision to soften the quarantine measures has eliminated preconditions for the further spreading of the narratives negatively labeling the government. Instead of trolls, pro-Russian media in Ukraine switched to promoting globally applied fake-news and disinformation narratives, which have been successfully

probated in other parts of the world. Geopolitical conspiracy became a dominant trend.

When speaking of the periodization, we can summarize that conspiracy frameworks can be applied to all periods and all media channels. In contrast, the intensity of health-related, governmental-related, and geopolitics-related narratives varies depending on the period. If at the beginning of the pandemic, health-related narratives and the respective manipulations, fake news, and misinformation-disinformation were dominant, then at the period of softening of quarantine, a decline in this domain can be noticed. Arguably, that is a result of the national and global efforts aimed at an explanation of the key threats caused by coronavirus and respective statistics.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of the increase in government-related and geopolitics related narratives. Regarding the government, the tailored approach, grounded on the weak sides of the governmental decisions, was elaborated, whereas, in the case of geopolitical narratives, global patterns were applied.

Presumably, initially, the waves of fake news were not designed and emerged mostly spontaneously. Russia started instrumentalizing such trends by promoting its agenda in Ukraine and globally. At the current stage, perhaps, most of the Russian resources are aimed at fostering desirable and beneficial for Russia global narratives.

Regarding the topic framework, in Ukraine, all disinformation/misinformation trends of the narratives mentioned above presented in this text can be divided into three main categories:

- Outright aggressive Russian propaganda;
- Pro-Russian activities of local media outlets;
- Local and national Ukrainian media misunderstanding of coronavirus pandemic.

The main narratives of the Russian propaganda refer to an inadequate reaction of the Ukrainian authorities, their lack of capabilities and resources to combat the pandemic, weakness of the Ukrainian state bodies, and government. Therefore, their obvious target was creating political and social instability during the quarantine to ensure constant

²¹⁷ Russian fake news show their photos for Ukrainian realities. May 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/>

restraints on the Ukrainian reform process and to hinder trust between the people and the government.

➔ PRESUMABLY, INITIALLY, THE WAVES OF FAKE NEWS WERE NOT DESIGNED AND EMERGED MOSTLY SPONTANEOUSLY. RUSSIA STARTED INSTRUMENTALIZING SUCH TRENDS BY PROMOTING ITS AGENDA IN UKRAINE AND GLOBALLY.

Ukrainian pro-Russian media and bloggers are mainly focused on providing fake news concerning health-related issues and geopolitical conspiracies. Often we hear such notions as a ‘Soros project,’ ‘Chinese virus,’ and a ‘bio-weapon’ from this specific informational segment.

Misinformation, spread by Ukrainian local and state media, which has been caused by a sheer misunderstanding of the situation, was mostly harmless for the integrity and security of the Ukrainian information sphere. A large portion of such narratives should be attributed to common journalistic lust for sensation and ratings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Judging from the Ukrainian experience, few recommendations are worth to be considered:

1. At the governmental level, **coordination between the institutions** has to be assured. In particular, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Healthcare, and Ministry of Interior have to coordinate their activities, to avoid contradictory statements and to ensure prompt and accurate informing delivery about the crisis-related developments;
2. The **information provided has to be full**, well-proved, and professional, otherwise, existing gaps can be filled with fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories;
3. It is necessary to keep in mind that any restrictive measures applied by the government cause anxiety of society. To neutralize them and to avoid manipulations and speculations, **decisions of the government are to be taken transparently**. Related fake news are to be debunked by professionals.
4. The governmental response to the crisis invigorates external actors (Russia in particular) to weaponize the government’s mistakes or lack of transparency. Therefore, in such periods (e.g., quarantine), **monitoring of troll factories’** activities has to be strengthened, and respective measures against them to be taken;
5. The growing popularity of the web-sources makes Internet-segment a key battlefield, and, thus, more **specialists should be trained**, who can discover and debunk fake news on the Internet. Additionally, it is necessary to keep in mind that debunking fake news is costly and often inefficient. Thus, additional actions on ensuring media literacy can be a solution.
6. The fact that fake news, produced by individual bloggers and anonymous sources, are often legitimized via traditional media, it leads to the necessity of elaborating the **Code of Conduct** for journalists to abolish such practice. Coalitions of media with the international bodies, social platforms, and civil society institutions, and creation of the ‘clearing mechanisms’ can be a remedy to the problem;

7. The access to the data regarding the owners of the media is a must since assures proper answer to the question who is interested in fueling fake news;
8. **Cooperation with religious communities** in the time of pandemic is essential. Governmental dialogue with the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations can be assessed as a positive practice;
9. The analysis of the narratives proves that while the globally applied fakes and conspiracy theories can be debunked by joint global actions, regionally tailored information operations should belong to the competence of the national governments. At the same time, it is vitally important to use that **international experience** in combating fake news on the national level, as their narratives are often identical.

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION RESPONSE INDEX 2020: UKRAINE

MEASURES TAKEN	YES	NO	COMMENT
A GOVERNMENT RESPONSE			
Coordination center (existing or new)	1		MHC
Governmental spokesperson/people (contact point to provide answers to journalists)	1		De-facto, V. Liashko and M. Stepanov play this role
Regular Press-briefings of Responsible Institutions (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, etc.)	1		Both V. Liashko and M. Stepanov
Periodic press-conferences/press-briefings by senior leadership (President or Prime Minister)		0	Presidential PC were in place during 1st month
Pre-recorded messages of the senior officials (President or Prime Minister)	1		Regular videos from President
Establishing special communication channels (Facebook pages, telegram channels, Viber channels, chat-bots, special websites)	1		Usage of most communication channels (TG, Viber, FB, websites)
Additional communication of regional authorities	1		Depends on each region (see Cherkasy, Kyiv)
Cases of contradiction in messages on national and regional level	1		see Cherkasy, Kyiv, etc.
Cases of unjustified blocking/taking down content of disinformation form media by national bodies (reported by international organizations)		0	None
Creating/empowering/changing focus of special governmental units to debunk disinformation		0	None
Criminalizing the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official		0	None
Cases of applying changes to the legislation that criminalize the spread of COVID-19 disinformation or information contradicting official		0	None
Restrictions of media freedom added		0	None
Increasing state support for independent media (explain) (Tax relieve, Additional budgets for advertisement for official information to support media, Assistance to public broadcasters)		0	None

B MEDIA		
Investigative reports	0	None
Counter disinformation campaigns	0	None
Journalists' self-regulation and calls for reinforcing ethical conduct	1	Several ongoing projects
Journalists' professional training on reporting about pandemic	1	Projects by private initiatives (e.g. Anticovid)

C CIVIL SOCIETY		
Fact-checking and digital debunking initiatives	1	VoxCheck Ukraine, ArmyInform and Stopfake.org
Investigative reports	1	VoxCheck Ukraine as a prime example
National fakes database	1	MHC to a particular extent
Counter-disinformation campaigns	1	see "On the other side of the pandemic"
Coordination of efforts with media	0	Few and far between
Joint communication campaigns of civil society actors/Cooperation between civic society initiatives	1	see "On the other side of the pandemic"
Exchanging experiences with foreign NGOs	1	Few examples among prominent expert groups
Producing guidelines and recommendations for general audience, not only for government	1	A lot of similar materials

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The Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism",

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