EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE

Strategic Communications Division



Brussels, 20/04/2020 EEAS **SG.AFFGEN.7**/LG

DISINFORMATION ON COVID-19 – INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT ASSESSMENT

Key findings

- COVID-19-related disinformation continues to proliferate widely on social media, with increasing numbers of reports highlighting direct harm to the health of citizens and public security.
- Russian official sources and state-controlled media and social media channels have been running a coordinated campaign across EU Member States and neighbouring regions promoting false health information and disinformation about the EU and its partners
- Reports indicate that China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame
 for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image. Both overt and covert tactics
 have been observed.
- Disinformation networks linked to the Iranian Government have been exploiting the pandemic to frame "the West" and attack international sanctions.
- Analysis by EEAS Stratcom and external groups shows that highly harmful disinformation about COVID-19 is going particularly viral in smaller media markets within and outside the EU, where tech companies face lower incentives to take adequate counter-measures.
- The EU working with international partners, both inside the EU and globally, to step up its response to malign influence campaigns and COVID-19-related disinformation, including in the context of the EU Rapid Alert System.

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1. Impact assessment

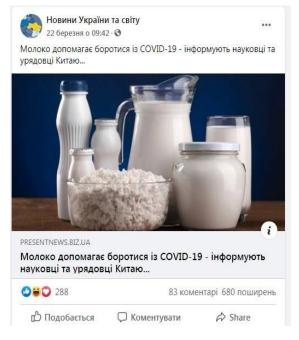
Despite their potentially grave impact on public health, official and state-backed sources from Russia and – to a lesser extent – China have continued to widely target both conspiracy narratives both at public audiences in the EU and the wider Neighbourhood.

A growing body of evidence suggests that Covid-related disinformation can have direct impact on public health and security.

Fresh scientific research by the University of Mainz shows how Covid-related conspiracy theories and disinformation can adversely impact individual health behaviourⁱ. According to the study, beliefs that the virus is a "hoax" strongly predicates people to ignore official health advice (such as on hand-washing and social distancing), whereas the belief that the virus was created "purposefully by sinister forces" is associated with "overreactions" such as hoarding.

More generally, conspiracy theories and false or misleading content about Covid-19 continue to proliferate widely on social media platforms. In an analysis covering five European languages and Arabic, Avaaz found that "millions of Facebook users are still being put at risk of consuming harmful misinformation on coronavirus at a large scale". Avaaz analysed sampled content, reportedly finding that it was shared over 1.7 million times on Facebook, and viewed an estimated 117 million timesⁱⁱ.

EEAS Stratcom conducted an additional analysis in 9 other EU and non-EU languages, including Czech, German, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. In all languages, false or highly misleading content continues to go viral, even when it has been flagged by local fact-checkers. While aggregate reach figures are impossible to calculate, it is safe to say that respective content is reaching millions of users across the analysed language areas (content samples in Annex 1).



Post on a public page in Ukrainian claiming "milk helps to fight COVID" (3373 Interactions, 250 comments, 1583 shares)

Kremlin-funded YouTube channel in German suggesting that "the pandemic never happened" (almost 900.000 views and 5000 comments)



New evidence on the harmful impact of Covid-related disinformation on public health and official crisis communication:

- One third of people across 6 countries (Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK, and the US) say they have seen "a great deal" of false or misleading information about COVID-19 on social media and messaging applications in the last week (up to 15th of April)ⁱⁱⁱ.
- One third of UK citizens believe that Vodka can be used as hand sanitiser, while one fifth think the virus think the virus originated in a lab, according to a YouGov survey dated March 30^{iv}.
- According to a BBC report, in one Iranian province more people had died from drinking industrial-strength alcohol than from COVID-19, based on a false claim that it could protect you from the virus^v.
- A new survey by Pew Research Center, conducted from 10-16 March 2020, has found that nearly a third of Americans (29%) believe that COVID-19 was "most likely" produced in a laboratory^{vi}.
- Conspiracy theories about 5G telecommunication masts allegedly facilitating the spread of COVID-19 led to vandalism and abuse of telecommunications staff in several locations in the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK^{vii}.
- Growing numbers are regularly holding illegal rallies in Berlin to protest "vaccination terrorism" and claiming that COVID-19 is "nothing but a simple flu"viii.
- According to a poll published by Slovak paper Denník N, 67 percent of Slovak respondent say China is helping Slovakia fight COVID-19, while less than 20 percent say the same about the European Union (conducted March 25 26)^{ix}.
- Italian polling firm SWG finds that the share of respondents saying they considered China as friendly to Italy went up to 52 percent in March from 10 percent in January, while the share of respondents indicating they have trust in EU institutions went down to 27 percent in March from 42 percent in September^x.

2. State-backed influence campaigns

EEAS Stratcom continues to work with researchers, civil society and international partners to collect evidence of state-backed disinformation campaigns around COVID-

19. All evidence is inevitably incomplete. More transparency and information-sharing by large social media companies would help improve awareness of operations targeting the EU and its partners.

Russia

EEAS Stratcom has assessed evidence that indicates the following:

- Official Russian sources and state media continue running a coordinated campaign with the twofold aim of undermining in the EU and its crisis response, and to sow confusion about the origins health implications of COVID-19.
- The campaign mostly builds on open source media and social media channels, with some indications of covert behaviour.
- The campaign exposes coordination across EU Member States and the wider Neighbourhood.
- Kremlin-backed disinformation on covid-19 continues to proliferate widely on social media even if it contradicts official WHO guidance and the content policies of social media companies.
- Potential harm is assessed to be high, as conspiracy theories and false health information have been proven to negatively impact health behaviour.

Targeting the EU

• State-controlled sources targeting audiences in the EU, Eastern Partnership countries, the Western Balkans and the MENA region continue to portray the EU and its partners as ineffective, divided and cynical in their response to the COVID-19. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic is repeatedly presented as a bringing about the "death of Schengen" and an impending collapse of the EU:

Lack of solidarity may cause the end of the EU, shocking to see that Germany, France, Netherlands, Austria did not help Italy (RT Spanish)

The EU is dead, only Russia, China and Cuba help Italy (RT France)

EU pillars of integration, including Schengen are crumbling (Sputnik Italy)

White Helmets use COVID-19 to further US coalition regime change agenda in Syria (RT international)

 HRVP Borrell's remarks about Russia and China using COVID-19 to advance their interests were presented by RT Russian as an attempt to justify EU's ineffective response to the crisis.

- Pro-Kremlin actors strongly reacted to an article by La Stampa raising questions about the Russian aid to Italy. The spokesperson of Russia's Ministry of Defence lashed out at La Stampa journalists with thinly veiled threats.
- A co-ordinated disinformation campaign from Russia and the Syrian regime is conducted
 to discredit the latest OPCW report, while blaming the US for the lack of medical
 assistance to Syrian refugees in the camps of Al Rukban and Al Hol, claiming that the US
 are diverting the UN aid from Syrian refugees to terrorist groups.
- According to findings by our research partners, disinformation actors supporting pro-Kremlin narratives are creating blogs on Western-owned servers with false information in English, which is subsequently reprinted in Russian on news portals controlled by the Kremlin.

Health-related disinformation

Russian state-sponsored media and related outlets continue to share **misleading and deceptive health information around COVID-19 with international audiences.** Much of this disinformation directly contradicts the WHO's official guidance, as well as the content policies of online platforms. Nonetheless, most of the health-endangering content EEAS Stratcom identified continues to proliferate widely on social media services such as Twitter and Facebook. Google and other ads-delivery services continue to monetise and incentivise harmful health disinformation by hosting paid ads on respective websites.

Disinformation around disease prevention:

The Kremlin's disinformation efforts have a long track record $\frac{x_i}{x_i}$ of amplifying the debate about vaccine safety and promoting anti-vaccine messages. We see similar exploitative efforts around the COVID-19 crisis to push false messages about vaccines. These often involve extreme conspiracy theories alleging that governments will impose forced mass vaccination and nano-chip implantation to establish social control, or that vaccines are either ineffective or outright harmful. Bill Gates is a common target in these narratives.

COVID-19 can be cured with traditional medicine instead of vaccines, but the corporate-controlled internet says otherwise (NewsFront)

After the pandemic, a global vaccination program with toxins and DNA-altering proteins may be forced upon the surviving population (Journal of New Eastern Outlook)

The coronavirus pandemic may be used to introduce absolute social control through a vaccine (Strategic Culture Foundation)

Vaccines don't heal; their production is part of the agenda for a New World Order (South Front)

COVID-19 will allow total control of the population through forced vaccination and chips (NewsFront Spanish)

Disinformation around COVID-19 cures:

A particularly concerning and malicious category of disinformation pertains to claims about fake cures or treatments for COVID-19. These claims constitute a minority of the

Covid-related disinformation output by Kremlin-linked sources, but their potential to inflict tangible harm on people's health should not be underestimated. Examples:

<u>Frequent hand washing does not protect you from COVID-19</u> (Sputnik Germany, RT German)

We have nothing to lose by using hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 without testing (RT English)

Zinc kills coronavirus (RT Arabic)

Western media in cahoots with Big Pharma ignore successful treatment of COVID-19 with vitamin C in China (South Front)

Disinformation seeking to downplay the pandemic:

A final category of health-related disinformation attempts to downplay the pandemic and suggest that it is a hoax, for example by saying that the mortality rate is exaggerated. These messages frequently focus on attempting to undermine trust in institutions and governments by alleging that they are using the pandemic as an excuse to exert undue power and control over their citizens. Examples:

Coronavirus pandemic is exaggerated in order to turn countries into fascist hygiene dictatorships (Sputnik Germany)

Governments are fiddling with the numbers to exaggerate the death toll of the coronavirus (One World)

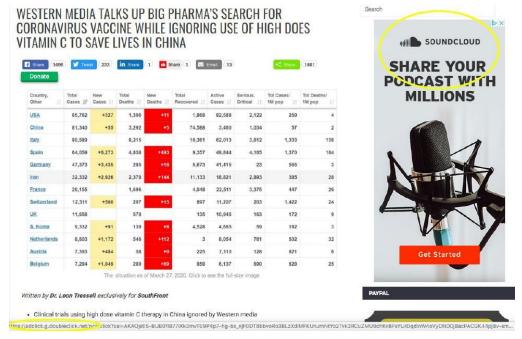
The COVID-19 crisis is manufactured by media (South Front)

It is too early to tell whether any extra people will die because of COVID-19 (RT English)

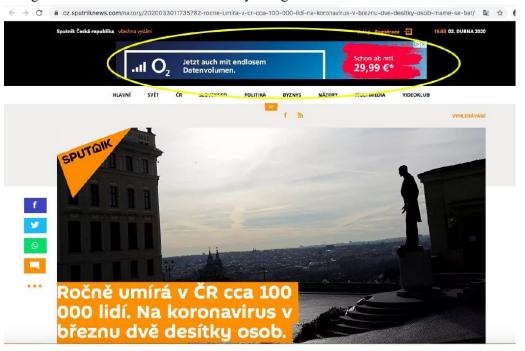
Coronavirus mortality figures are insignificant (Sputnik Czech)

Examples of Google ads on Kremlin-linked disinformation websites

Pro-Kremlin disinformation website claiming that "vitamin c saves lives" with a Soundcloud ad delivered by Google (analysis by the Global Disinformation Index).



Kremlin-controlled outlet Sputnik Czech claiming that COVID mortality figures are "insignificant" with an O2 ad delivered by Google.



China

EEAS Stratcom has assessed evidence that indicates the following:

- Continued and coordinated push by official Chinese sources to deflect any blame for the outbreak of the pandemic
- High level of coordination between different parts of the Chinese system in messaging and amplification of messages across different languages and communication channels
- Use of both overt and covert tactics
- Continued assertiveness by Chinese officials, including direct targeting of the French Government with disinformation messages
- New domestic restrictions on COVID-19 related research in China
- Potential harm is assessed as medium, as the larger share of Chinese propaganda and disinformation efforts has received scrutiny in international media. However, polls in certain countries show China is perceived as more helpful in fighting the pandemic than the EU.

Detail:

• Chinese officials and state media try to curtail any mentions of Wuhan as the origin of COVID-19. In March, Chinese diplomats, officials and state media promoted a conspiracy theory that tied the beginning of the outbreak in Wuhan to US military representatives. While senior officials and diplomats seem to have stopped actively spreading that theory^{xii}, at least some of the material promoting

- the conspiracy is still present on state-controlled social media channels, indicating a continued intent to spread confusion about the origin of the virus^{xiii}.
- Reports show that China has imposed restrictions on the publication of COVID- 19 research. Publication of academic research on the origin of the virus now requires central government approval^{xiv}.
- Taiwan's Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau has claimed that over 70% of the 271 fake news cases it has investigated originated from China^{xv}.
- There is significant evidence of covert Chinese operations on social media. ProPublica uncovered a disinformation network on Twitter involved in a coordinated influence campaign with ties to the Chinese government^{xvi}. The Telegraph found Chinese state media circumventing social media platforms' political ad rules and buying advertising that praised China's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and attacked the US^{xvii}. According to the Telegraph, "the ads are part of a worldwide propaganda campaign, coordinated across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and traditional media, attempting to depict China as a global leader in the fight against Covid-19 and drown out accusations that it made the crisis worse by trying to cover up its own outbreak."
- Formiche has found a coordinated operation of Twitter bots in Italy amplifying messages of Chinese embassy and attacking the EUxviii. Thousands of tweets with pro-China hashtags published in a two-week period in March came from bots.
- The Digital Forensics Center has discovered a Serbian pro-government bot network praising Chinese aid and Serbian-Chinese friendship on Twitter^{xix}.
- A long-running Iranian disinformation network on social media has been promoting strongly pro-China line in recent weeks according to a report by Graphika^{xx}.
- The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has found in their analysis of COVID-19 disinformation^{xxi} that "elements of China's diplomatic and state media messaging continue to demonstrate disinformation tactics more familiar to coordinated and persistent Russian state-sponsored disinformation. Chinese state efforts to contest the information domain are supported by coordinated, although not necessarily inauthentic, pro-China patriotic trolling".
- On its website, the Chinese Embassy in France criticised France's response to the virus. One of the posts^{xxii} included made-up allegations that French parliamentarians, together with Taiwanese officials, used racist slurs against WHO Director Tedros^{xxiii}.
- Opinion polls in Ukraine and Slovakia have shown that China is perceived as more helpful in the fight against COVID-19 than the EU^{xxiv}. A poll in Italy has shown that for the first time Italians look more to China than to the United States as a potential international partner^{xxv}.
- China's state-owned media are stepping up their efforts in the Arabic language, pushing their narrative and even disinformation against the US.

3. Regional and country updates

MENA and Iran

- A long-running Iranian disinformation and influence actor (known as "IUVM" "International Union of Virtual Media") has used the COVID-19 crisis to spread messages blaming the US for their sanctions on Iran and praising the role of the Iranian regime and China^{xxvi}.
- There is a trilateral convergence of disinformation narratives between Iran, Russia and China that are being multiplied in a co-ordinated manner, particularly on the origins of the virus ("it is a biological weapon created in the US to bring their opponents down") and on the response ("we are doing much better than the West"). On sanctions, Iranian leaders –amplified by Russian media– continue calling for the lifting of US sanctions against Iran claiming that they are undermining the country's humanitarian and medical response to Covid-19. This is part of a wider Russian, Iranian and Chinese convergence calling for a lifting of sanctions worldwide (Russia, Iran, Syria, Venezuela). In the case of Syria, Covid-19 is used to reinforce an anti-EU narrative that claims the EU is perpetrating an "economic war" on Syria.
- Information warfare and the use of spyware are increasing with actors in the MENA region using Covid-19 to launch information operations against their rivals (IR/US; UAE/MO) and impose legally or not spyware technologies on their citizens (EG, SY). Beyond MENA actors, China's state-owned media are stepping up their efforts in the Arabic language, pushing their narrative and even disinformation against the US.
- Anti-sanction narratives (IR, SY) are gaining traction: in Iran, with a harsher tone vis-à-vis the US; in Syria, with the regime mobilising 'civil society' and international pro-Assad multipliers for a more emotional tone.
- Journalists and activists have been continuously targeted across the region (DZ, KSA, JO, IQ, EG): in Algeria, with continued arrests of journalists, Hirak activists and blocked access to independent online media (RadioM, Maghreb Emergent, Interlignes) on alleged grounds from authorities of 'foreign funding'; in KSA, with blocked access to Turkish media (Anadolu Agency and TRT Arabic); in Jordan, with TV presenters arrested for reporting on lack of jobs and money in households under curfew; in Iraq, with the licence of the Reuters news agency being suspended after it published a story saying the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases in the country was higher than the official numbers, which echoes the case of the Guardian reporter who was expelled last month from Egypt after a similar story.
- False cures continue to be a fertile ground for disinformation with Iranian authorities publicising a new device able to detect Covid-19.

Turkey

- Anti-EU narratives have been instrumentalised by pro-government media, politicians and opinion makers to cluster nationalist feelings and to amplify the government narrative/ campaign of "We don't need anybody".
- Pro-government media and actors dedicated disproportionate attention to minor events in the European actuality to increase the idea of a weak and disintegrating EU, against the background of a strong Turkey, where the crisis is much better handled and where there is even room to provide solidarity to other countries in the world (notably the Western Balkans, the EU and other countries like Armenia, Israel...)
- All this happened in a context of a strong dominance of pro-government outlets in the media and information environment. Both restrictive measures to silence critical voices and peer-copying in an environment where pro-government voices dominate outlets, facilitated a wider reception of pro-government narratives, which attempted to downplay concerns and fears on the impact of COVID-19 in Turkey.

Russia

• As the COVID-19 situation on the ground becomes worse in Russia, reporting on state-controlled media is generally getting more sober. Nevertheless there are still occasional examples of conspiracy theories aired, e.g. that COVID-19 is a US tool to control the world (state TV Rossiya 1, April 6). Overall, the Kremlin is experiencing the shortcomings of its own disinformation ecosystem, which normally supported its policies. As Russia is affected by the pandemic, domestic audiences cannot be easily fed distracting disinformation as in previous cases (MH17; Skripal poisoning).

China / world

• Research by the NCRI^{xxvii} documented a growth of conspiracy theories presenting COVID-19 as China's biological weapon, and weaponisation of these narratives to fuel Sinophobia. Sinophobic and COVID-19 related memes are circulating on 4Chan, where derogative English language terms for the Chinese have been used increasingly in tandem with the word "virus". Conspiracies explicitly linking Sinophobic sentiment and COVID-19 are surfacing on other social media platforms as well, such as Twitter and Reddit, suggesting that weaponised information moves from marginal into mainstream communities.

Western Balkans

• The COVID-19 pandemic dominated the information space, both when it came to factual info and disinformation. The governments of Montenegro and North Macedonia were accused in media of using coronavirus-related restrictions to undermine the Orthodox Church. Tense relations between Montenegro and Serbia were also much in evidence in pandemic-related content. 5G conspiracy theories

- found a fertile ground in the Western Balkans, where on social media and online news portals disinformation was spread that the 5G networks have caused the coronavirus.
- It is assessed that negative narratives framing the understanding of the EU and EU-WB relations will continue to appear, although factual reporting about the arrival of EU assistance has acted as a counterweight to anti/negative EU narratives across the region, in Serbia and BiH included, despite strong presence of pro China and to a less extent pro Russia narratives in Serbia. Specifically for Montenegro, controversy over the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church is expected to continue as a topic attracting elements of disinformation.

Annex 1: Examples of health-related disinformation on Facebook and YouTube

Czechia

Post on a public Facebook page claiming Bill Gates and globalists use coronavirus to "compulsively vaccinate and microchip people". We must not allow vaccination against COVID-19 to be mandatory and must be avoided at all costs. It's a way to chip and watch us all. Bill Gates has been trying to do this for a long time and that is the reason why he donated so much money to develop the vaccine.



Georgia

Post in a Facebook group claiming that 5G causes COVID-19 (800 engagements, 350 shares)



Post and link on a public page suggesting that apple vinegar and iodine can cure the virus (1200 interactions)



Germany

Kremlin-funded Youtube channel in German suggesting that "the pandemic never happened" (almost 900.000 views and 5000 comments)

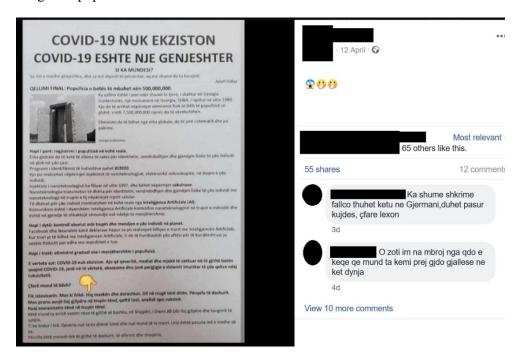


Post and link by Kremlin-owned Sputnik Deutschland suggesting that washing hands is ineffective to prevent infection (119 Interactions, 38 Comments, 120 Shares)



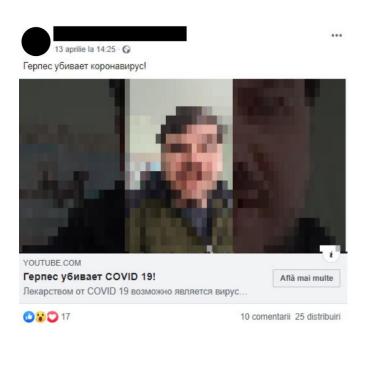
Kosovo

Post on a public page claiming that the pandemic is part of a three-stage process aimed to reduce the global population to under 500 million.



Moldova

YouTube video distributed on a public Facebook page claiming that herpes kills COVID-19.



Post on a public page claiming that covid-19 is a pretext to secretly installing 5G networks (when people are "at home")

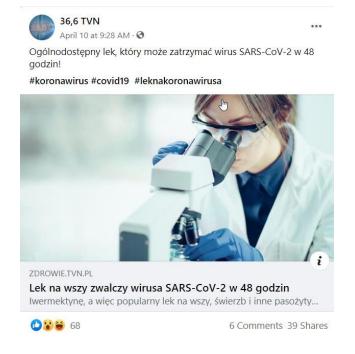


Poland

Public post claiming covid-19 is a bioweapon, just like HIV and SARS

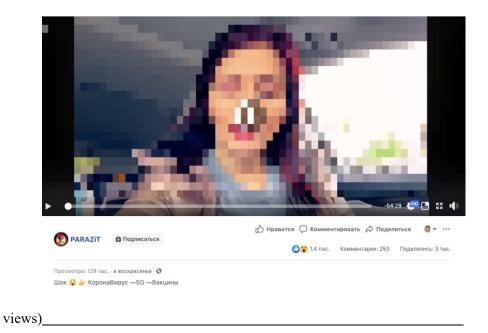


Public post and link promoting a "widely available medicine" that can "cure covid in 48 hours"



Russia

Public video claiming that 5G caused the covid pandemoic (130 000



Public post sharing a link to an article spreading a conspiracy theory that Bill Gates is developing a vaccine against COVID-19 with the aim of establishing global "biological programming" (584)



Serbia

Public post in Serbian claiming that Covid is "the biggest lie in history" (700.000 views)

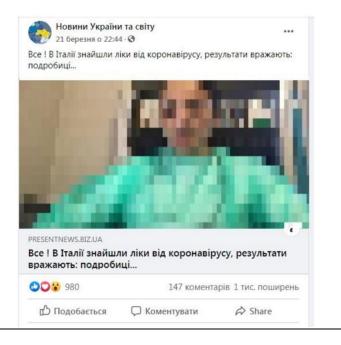


Ukraine

Post on a public page claiming that Covid-19 can be cured with lemon and baking soda and that in Israel there are no deaths caused by the virus, thanks to this recipe.



Post and link on a public page claiming that a cure for Covid-19 has been found in Italy (3983 interactions, 281 comments, 1754 shares.)



Annex 2: Examples of health-related disinformation by Kremlin-linked sources on Facebook, Twitter and Google

Collection of health-related claims indicating whether they have been present on social media platforms (TW=Twitter, FB=Facebook, Rdd=Reddit) on 19 April 2020. If at least one post linking to the original link of the claim was found on 19 April 2020, it is marked with a "1" in this table, otherwise it is marked with a "0". If the original link of the claim also featured ads served by Google, it is also marked in the table with a "1", otherwise a "0".

id	Article	original link	TW	FB	Rdd	Google ads
1	After the pandemic, a global vaccination program with toxins and DNA-altering proteins may be forced upon the surviving population (Journal of New Eastern Outlook) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/bill-gates-rockefeller-and-co-aspire-to-a-population-reduction-the-survivors-will-be-poisoned-with-vaccines/	journal- neo.org/2020/04 /06/corona-the- aftermath	1	1	0	0
2	The coronavirus pandemic may be used to introduce absolute social control through a vaccine (Strategic Culture Foundation) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/is-the-pandemic-used-to-introduce-absolute-social-control/	www.strategic- culture.org/news /2020/04/02/gro und-control- planet- lockdown-only- test	1	1	1	0
3	COVID-19 vaccines will lead to full spectrum dominance by the deep state (NewsFront Spanish) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/covid-19-vaccines-will-lead-full-spectrum-dominance-deep-dark-state/ COVID-19 vaccines are a big pharma fraud led by Bill Gates (NewsFront Spanish) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-vaccines-big-pharma-fraud-bill-gates/ COVID-19 can be cured with traditional medicine instead of vaccines, but the corporate-controlled internet says otherwise (NewsFront) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/traditional-medicine-heal-coronavirus-corporate-controlled-internet-wont-let-you-know/	https://es.news-front.info/2020/03/25/coronavirus-covid-19-la-lucha-por-una-cura-una-gigantesca-estafa-farmaceutica-de-occidente/	0	1	0	1
5	Vaccines don't heal; their production is part of the agenda for a New World Order (South Front) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/vaccines-dont-heal-their-production-is-part-of-the-agenda-for-a-new-world-order/	https://southfron t.org/covid-19- the-fight-for-a- cure-one- gigantic- western- pharma-rip-off	1	1	0	1
6	COVID-19 will allow total control of the population through forced vaccination and chips (NewsFront Spanish) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/covid-19-will-allow-	https://es.news- front.info/2020/ 03/13/la- pandemia-del-	1	1	0	1

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1 2	Western media in cahoots with Big Pharma ignore successful treatment of COVID-19 with vitamin C in China (South Front) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-western-media-in-cahoots-with-big-pharma-ignore-successful-treatment-with-vitamin-c-in-china/	https://southfron t.org/western- media-talks-up- big-pharmas- search-for- coronavirus- vaccine-while- ignoring-use-of- high-does- vitamin-c-to- save-lives-in- china/	1	1	0	1
1 3	Coronavirus pandemic is exaggerated in order to turn countries into fascist hygiene dictatorships (Sputnik Germany) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-pandemic-is-exaggerated-in-order-to-turn-countries-into-fascist-hygiene-dictatorships/	https://de.sputni knews.com/gese llschaft/2020041 0326866829- corona-krise- medien-kritik- medizinjournalis t/	1	1	0	1
1 4	The campaign predicting hundreds of thousands of deaths by COVID-19 is a lie (South Front) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-campaign-predicting-hundreds-of-thousands-of-deaths-by-covid-19-is-a-lie/	https://southfron t.org/fake- coronavirus- data-fear- campaign- spread-of-the- covid-19- infection/	1	1	0	1
1 5	Governments are fiddling with the numbers to exaggerate the death toll of the coronavirus (One World) https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/governments-are-fiddling-with-the-numbers-to-exaggerate-the-death-toll-of-the-coronavirus/	http://oneworld. press/?module= articles&action= view&id=1388	1	1	0	0
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		total	16	17	2	13

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